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Dangerous Fictions in Shakespeare's Richard II

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In Shakespeare's *Richard II,* King Richard's reign ends when no man responds "amen" to his dismal cry "God save the king!" (4.1.181). As the soon to be deposed, "plume-plucked Richard" stands before his court of betrayers, the sacred power as described by the Bishop Carlisle while comforting Richard earlier in the play, "Fear not, my lord. That power that made you king / Hath power to keep you king in spite of all" (3.2.27-28), exposes the fiction of sacral authority in kingship as dangerous. In *Richard II,* Shakespeare demonstrates that kings are spiritually powerless and that complete reliance on holy authority leaves them politically impotent. Further, Shakespeare responds to the "man-made irreality" (Kantorowicz 5) of the popular medieval political theologies of his time, namely the concept of the king's two bodies, defined by Ernst Kantorowicz as the "twin-born majesty," of kingship, as well as the divine right of kings, exposing the various problems within what Victoria Kahn, in expanding upon Kantorowicz's claims, describes as "the abstract legal fiction." Kahn provides further analysis into the message of Kantorowicz in her essay "Political Theology and Fiction in the King's Two Bodies," as she explains how "Shakespeare imaginatively anticipated the unraveling of the fiction of the king's two bodies," and that he attributes to Shakespeare, "a unique ability to effect such unraveling to reveal the "fiction" of the king's two bodies as just that" (86). While Kantorowicz himself acknowledges that the "concept of The King's Two Bodies," is indeed "ludicrous, and in many respects awkward" (Kantorowicz 5), he neglects to address the immense danger in what Kahn deems "the appropriation of theological concepts for political purposes" (83). Richard's reliance on theological political power leads him to call on angels to

replace soldiers, believe he could command the earth through his “royal hands” to “throw death upon they sovereign’s, enemies” (3.2.22), and that he was “the deputy elected by the Lord” (3.2.58). When none of Richard’s holy commands are answered, the fiction indeed becomes dangerous; his friends are killed, he is removed as the head of the body politic of England, his kingdom lost. Therefore, *Richard II* becomes a revolutionary play that advocates further dispersal of sovereignty within the power structure of English monarchy, pulling the king down from “the heavens over our heads” (3.3.18) and placing legitimate power with the baronial majority appointed King Henry IV. Thus, King Richard in *Richard II* becomes a type for that which is dangerous within the fiction of the king’s two bodies and a structure that assumed absolute sacred sovereignty in kingship.

Begging his betrayers bring him a mirror to observe his changed countenance after parting with his royal endowment, Richard is left disconcerted by his unaltered appearance and becomes aware of his solitary identity as Man, no longer King. As the mirror tumbles from the deposed monarch’s hands, kingship shatters at his feet and shards of sovereignty disperse among the nobility. As the barons withdraw their support and “pluck” Richard from the throne, they successfully redefine kingship as a privilege of their majority support, stepping towards a more constitutionalist government in accordance with the body politic of Ernst Kantorowicz’s *The King’s Two Bodies.* Therefore, in her essay “Imagining Justice,” Lorna Hutson correctly asserts that the concept of the king’s two bodies acted as a legal fiction and not as a reality, but is incorrect in assuming that king’s body natural deserves more attention than the body politic because, while Shakespeare exposes the fiction of kingship and divine right to rule in *Richard II,* he also critiques the popular political theology of his time by exposing the negative political

repercussions of an ill-defined body politic. What Hutson and Kantorowicz overlook and fail to do is provide a concrete definition of the body politic and while Richard assumes it is his mystical second self, Shakespeare seems to argue that it is in fact the corporation of the barons and in *Richard II,* Shakespeare defines the body politic as the corporate body of the barons. Thus, the concept of the king's two bodies is not inherently dangerous, but the ambiguity within the structure of the body politic is detrimental to a functioning fiction, which proves dangerous and detrimental for King Richard because he misunderstands the body politic. Therefore, like royal prerogative, because of a lack of clarity in defining the body politic, the king's two bodies becomes a dangerous fiction as well.

Under the belief of royal prerogative in monarchy, Richard was the true, divine king of England both secularly and religiously. As Kantorowicz notes, the concept of "twin-born majesty" is more prominent in the "religious sphere than in the allegedly sober and realistic realms of law" (5). Being raised to believe himself a sacred being, treated as a divine overlord, it is no wonder Richard eventually attempts to raise himself to the level of Christ. Richard's actions demonstrate that the body politic, contrary to Kantorowicz's claims, frequently fails to do the cultural work it is alleged to in covering the body natural's defects, which are largely the result of the application of Carl Schmitt's definition of sovereignty as outlined in his book *Political Theology*. The more that Richard attempts to "decide on the exception" (Schmitt 8) and assume a dictator-like governance, the less the barons—members of the body politic—allow Richard's fictional sacrality to govern their actions. Therefore, in reading *Richard II*, it can be seen that Shakespeare also did not agree that "the body politic wipes away every imperfection of the other body" (Kantorowicz 11) and that the "concept of the king's two bodies," is indeed "ludicrous,

and in many respects awkward" (Kantorowicz 5) because of the quality of ambiguity in defining the body politic. In *Richard II,* Shakespeare thus dismantles and critiques political theology, royal prerogative, and exposes the political ramifications of an ill-defined body politic, and the danger within the fiction of the king's two bodies. While, Kantorowicz proposes that Richard's inability to retain kingship is because he does not understand the difference between his body natural and the body politic, continually confusing his two identities, I argue that Richard's folly is in his misinterpretation of the body politic and believing that he has the ability to act as he wishes. Beyond Richard's fatal mistake of committing crimes against the barons, many of the actions taken by Richard expose the inability of the body politic to remove the imperfections of his body natural, which further exposes the fiction of the king's two bodies and the incongruity challenges the validity of the body politic being capable of such a power at all.

Richard justifies his crimes because of a tradition of treating kingship as a holy position elevated above the law—a sovereignty as defined by Schmitt, who explains that historically "as an aftereffect of monarchical public law," the people "identified the theistic God with the king" (39). The crimes committed by Richard in his body natural also assume a Schmitt-like interpretation of power as "he who decides on the exception" (Schmitt 6). Therefore, as Richard suspends the law by interrupting the lineal inheritance of Bolingbroke to support his wars abroad, Richard's Schmitt-like actions play a critical role in the outcome of his eventual deposition and death, and also demonstrate Shakespeare's critique of kingship as theological, Christological, and all-powerful.

With the exception of Bolingbroke, who from the beginning indirectly accuses Richard of the murder of Gloucester, resisting the notion that Richard's actions are perfect or that his body

natural holds absolute power or is absolute sovereign over the body politic, various nobles continue to esteem King Richard as a sacred being, thus maintaining the dangerous fiction of sacral monarchy. York in particular continually refers to King Richard as "sacred" (3.3.9) and warns Bolingbroke, "Take not, good cousin, further than you should / Lest you mistake. The heavens are over our heads" (3.3.17-18), referring to Richard in the castle as a heavenly being above them. But, when Richard commits treason against the barons by seizing Gaunt's fortune to fund his wars, Richard commits a grave error by misunderstanding his role as one of a Schmittian sovereign and assuming that he has the power to decide on the exception by disrupting the lineal inheritance of Bolingbroke. Thus, the body politic proves incapable of swallowing up the errors of the body natural, giving birth to a pattern of constitutional sovereignty—sovereignty that derives from a deliberate baronial insurrection. In *Richard II,* sovereignty is redefined as he who has the ability to muster the most support and the cycle begins with the abandonment of the barons as a response to Richard's Schmittian crime. Monarchy thus seems correlative with Schmittian attributes because by deciding that King Richard can be removed from his kingly position, the barons in turn assume a Schmitt-like mode of sovereignty as well. But, the removal of Richard by Henry, the only man who disregards his sacred identity, further demonstrates the danger of Richard's reliance on his fictional spiritual capacity as king.

In her article "With mine own tears I wash away my balm," Sélima Lejri argues that Shakespeare does not regard kingship as completely void of sacred authority, but instead asserts that "Shakespeare does question the disproportionate height to which the king's mystical body was taken during his age" (52). As Lejri suggests, it is discernible that Shakespeare felt some

spiritual admiration for his country, penning some of the most elegant verse in Gaunt's deathbed speech in which he describes England as "this other Eden," and this "blessed plot," but Shakespeare refutes notions of kingship as inherently sacred by constantly pulling Richard from high places to low and Gaunt's vocal discontent provides insight into whether kingship is portrayed as somewhat sacred as Lejri suggests, or barren of divinity altogether.

As members of the body politic within the concept of the king's two bodies, each of the most prominent barons are initially mindful to always address Richard as the royal monarch and the head of the body politic of England. Throughout Act 1, Gaunt is precise in always referring to Richard as "my liege," or "king." The terminology places Richard in an elevated kingly position, precisely as the head. But, outraged by Richard's murder of his brother, during Gaunt's deathbed disapproval and vocal chastisement of Richard in Act 2 scene 1, his devotion dwindles and the prominent duke verbally pulls Richard down to the same level of nobility as himself, Henry, and the other English nobles. Even after Richard threatens to "run [his] head from his irreverent shoulders" (2.1.130), Gaunt replies "O, spare me not my brother Edward's son," referring to Richard—not as a king—but as nothing more than his nephew. Henry does the same in Act 2 identifying Richard as his "cousin king" (2.3.127), and later in Act 4, addressing the king as his "fair cousin." The deposed Richard realizes too late the danger of being aligned with the barons, exclaiming, "Fair cousin? I am greater than a king" (4.1.317-18). In word, Richard may be king, mighty and powerful, but through Gaunt and Henry, Shakespeare subtly pulls King Richard down from his divine throne, and places him on the same level as his uncle and cousin—classifying Richard as merely an inflated baron and further defining the body politic as the corporate body of the barons. The exalted position of kingship is only sustained as long as the

barons grant the king elevated status, giving nuance to York's later description of Henry as "Great Duke," and Richard as "plume-plucked" in Act 4 (4.1.113-14). The bringing down and descent of Richard from the throne and decapitation as the body politic is further illustrated in later passages and results in Shakespeare further defining the body politic as the baronial body.

Upon his return from Ireland, Richard reaches down, touching the soil, stating, "Dear earth, I do salute thee with my hand" (3.2.6). The scene is profoundly symbolic, for as he lowers himself, kneeling upon the ground, Richard is notified of the loss of his Welsh forces—reinforcing the image of his absolute descent. As Aumerle announces that Henry, "Grows strong and great in substance and in power" (3.2.15), Richard begins to comprehend that he will be unable to triumph over the duke. Lacking military force and the baronial backing of the body politic, Richard is void of power, ready to face his lonely descent. Shortly after, Richard is leveled again with the barons as he comes down from the high walls of the castle to meet Henry face to face, a symbol of his defeat. Richard's decline is further reiterated through his statement, "Down, down I come like glist'ring Phaethon" (3.3.177). Unable to control the chariot of his father, Phaethon, the son of the Greek god Helios, was struck down by Zeus to keep him from destroying the earth. As Richard references the Greek myth, the symbolism suggests that, like Phaethon, Richard will soon be unable to maintain control, his throne, toppled by the barons, precisely because the supposedly divine power that he yields is wholly fictional and because he misinterprets the body politic. As a response to Richard's actions, the barons run his head from the body politic.

Shakespeare also pulls Richard from high positions to low ones to demonstrate a king's equality with the commoners and the state, endorsing a constitutionalist view of government and

a dispersal of power. The downward motion of kingship and of Richard's physical, natural body, is finalized in the scene of deposition when Richard grabs hold of Bolingbroke over the crown, describing a bucket descending into a well, "Now is this golden crown like a deep well / That owes two buckets, filling one another, / The emptier ever dancing in the air, / The other down, unseen, and full of water" (4.1.191-95). Thus, Shakespeare further exposes the fiction of the body politic in raising up the king after all of his misdeeds and also the divine right of kings. In the scene of deposition, Richard is also brought down and places the crown in the hands of Henry because the barons and the body corporate elect him through their majority support. The ultimate bringing down of Richard can further be viewed as Shakespeare's critique of the concept of the king's two bodies and the inability of the body politic to reconcile with a body natural that is not willing to play by the rules. With the deposition of gaudy King Richard through Bolingbroke's baronial support, Shakespeare seemingly mocks Richard as a sacred monarch, criticizing the farce of kingship and the notion of royalty as something inherently sacred. Through the outcome of *Richard II*, Shakespeare endorses, at least to some degree, the importance of constitutionalism in England's monarchy.

Even during the period of King Richard II, the monarchy had embraced minor democratic principles and with the influence of the Magna Carta, had developed a parliament. As referred to by Kantorowicz, the historically prominent metaphor of "the state as a human body, a Corporation, whereof the king is the head and the subjects are the members" (15), is important in understanding the true nature of the body politic as a constitutional entity. Therefore in confusing his dual identity and acting autocratically, by continually offending the barons, Richard confuses the role of the nobles and his statesmen as part of "the politico-ecclesiological theory of the

corpus mysticism" (15), and that "he and his subjects together compose the corporation" (13), thus forming part of his identity as King. The body politic is not a power that lies within Richard alone, but is a cumulative body of his court and statesmen. As the "head" of the body or "Corporation," it can be argued that Richard's political failure starts from the very beginning of the play when he secretly murders the baron Gloucester—a member of the body politic. The ambiguity of the body politic begins to unravel as Richard's actions become bolder and bolder. Are Richard's actions made by his body natural, or as the head of the body politic? The action is an instance of a crime committed against the body politic—an action of Schmitt-like sovereignty perpetrated by King Richard. Once more, the all-powerful body politic is unable to right the wrong committed by Richard, but reacts as Henry—also part of the body politic—indirectly exposes Richard's sin, acting as physician, warning that the head of the body politic is diseased.

Shakespeare illustrates the body politic as a living, biological entity, which is demonstrated with the banishment of Mowbray and Bolingbroke, when in a kingly manner, Richard refers to the barons in terms of life-giving blood; "Wrath-kindled gentlemen, be ruled by me. / Let's purge this choler without letting blood" (1.1.156-57). Though still the head, the body politic communicates with Richard through the barons, notifying him that he acts contrary to the well-being of the body politic. Speaking as part of the body politic, Gaunt appropriately uses blood as a metaphor when speaking with Richard, "That blood, already like the pelican, / Hast thou tapped out and drunkenly caroused" (2.1.133-34), and "Thou respect'st not spilling Edward's blood" (2.1.138). Using blood to illustrate the crimes of Richard helps emphasize his harming of the body of his kingship, and in spilling the baron's blood, Richard wounds himself. By killing and offending the barons, Richard commits political suicide and the disconnect

between Richard's body natural is expounded as he steals Henry's inheritance. The body politic again attempts to right the wrong as York explains that his misdeed ails the body, referring to a vital bodily organ, "You lose a thousand well-disposed hearts" (2.1.215) and the metaphor of the body politic as an actual body continues with the return of Henry.

By the end of Act 3, the body corporate of the barons decide it necessary to cut off the infectious head and replace it with a healthier member and the judgement is solidified with the decision of York to accompany Bolingbroke. In pivotal instances such as this, the ambiguity of the body politic becomes truly "mystical" and "awkward." By continually demonstrating Richard's lowliness and placing Richard on the level of the barons, while Richard was the king and head of the body politic, Richard is wrong to assume that his actions will be supported by the "mystical second body," because the mystical second body of Richard is mystical in that it is fictional and dangerous because as Shakespeare demonstrates, it has no power to wash away the sins of Richard. As the barons bring the king down to their level, ceasing to prop up the fiction of the king's two bodies and the divine right of kings, the body politic turns out to be not so mystical after all, simply the corporate body of the barons—Richard merely an inflated baron after all. As the body politic becomes increasingly weaker because of Richard's actions, Bolingbroke presents himself as the powerful Duke of Lancaster, and York is persuaded to accompany him. York recognizes the power of Bolingbroke and refers to him as coming to "Be his own carver, and cut out his way" (2.3.148), preparing to carve out Richard as the head. Within the same conversation, York shifts from confidence in King Richard's power, notifying Henry, "Why foolish boy, the king is left behind / And in my royal bosom lies his power" (2.3.101-02), to admitting the sickly state of Richard's kingship to the Duke, "Well, well.

I see the issue of these arms. / I cannot mend its I must needs confess, / Because my power is weak and ill-left" (2.3.156-58). Incapable of "wiping away every imperfection of the other body" (Kantorowicz 11), and righting the wrongs of Richard's natural body, the barons cut off their infectious head, replacing it with the Duke of Lancaster. Richard's confidence in his kingship and assumption that he is God's elect because of his lineage is demonstrated in Act 1 when he regards himself so holy that rather than swear by God, he swears by himself, "Now, by my sceptre's awe, I make a vow / Such neighbour nearness to our sacred blood / Should nothing privilege him nor partialize / The unstooping firmness of my upright soul" (1.1.122-125). Richard's belief that as king he is all-powerful and can disregard the body corporate of the barons is what ultimately leads to his demise and Shakespeare comments on kingship by continually bringing Richard down to the level of those he believes he is above.

Throughout *Richard II,* the body politic fails to atone for Richard's sins, alluding to an overarching, absolute fiction of sacrality within politics, that is shaken and exposed by the political cunning of Bolingbroke. Richard's eventual dethronement and death are the barons direct response to his flagrant offenses against their country and their rights and a further demonstration of the supremacy of majority over monarch. Through shifting allegiances, the barons bestow kingship on Henry—confirming that the support of a baronial majority—the body politic—supersedes the fiction of sacred sovereignty. As the barons depose kingship, Shakespeare deposes the idea of monarchy and as Jan Kott expresses in *Shakespeare Our Contemporary,* "The King has become a man, the crown has been torn off the head of the Lord's Anointed. But the world has not been shaken in its foundations, and nothing has changed, not even his own face. So the crown was no more than sham" (8). Stripped of his fictional Godliness,

Richard, the inflated baron and decapitated body politic, is lowered into the well to drown in kingly Death. Shakespeare seals his critique of kingship when, following his deposition, Richard begins to experience moments of clarity and sincere emotion and begins to speak with honorable insight. His developing virtue continues through Act 5 as he reflects, "But for the concord of my state and time/ Had not an ear to hear my true time broke/ I wasted time, and now time doth waste me" (5.5.47-50). Nearing his ultimate "demise," Richard's final speech is not meant to impress anyone and his admittance of guilt and semblance of repentance appears genuine. Alone in his cell, Richard's awakening further unfastens the fiction of kingship and moments before his death, his solemn self-reflection demonstrates remarkable conscientiousness of the artificiality of kingship as nothing more than a title. Stripped of title, privilege, and the dangerous fictions of kingship, Richard's body natural becomes whole.

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