



**Models of Kingship:
 Shakespeare's Depictions of the Relationship between
 the Sovereign and the Realm in Henry V and Macbeth**

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In the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries Britain experienced a period of uncertainty regarding the future of its sovereign. The ageing Queen Elizabeth I had not named an heir to the throne and the possibility that a Scot, James Stuart, would succeed was realised in 1603. This era also saw a marked development in contemporary political theory, as the writings of figures such as Italian Renaissance philosopher Niccolò Machiavelli and James himself began to displace medieval theoretical models. It was in this socio-historical context that William Shakespeare wrote *Henry V* and *Macbeth*. This essay will examine the depictions of the relationship between the sovereign and the realm in each of the texts, in accordance with three prominent contemporary political theoretical models: the medieval concept of the king's two bodies, James' political philosophy and Machiavellianism. In doing so, it will demonstrate that Shakespeare did not favour one mode of rule, but depicted a multi-faceted approach to sovereignty.

The dominant paradigm of virtuous rule in medieval political philosophy was that of the king's two bodies: the mystical and the natural. The natural body referred to the corporeality of the king – he was physically a man alike any other – but in his mystical body, the king was conceived of as the head and conscience of the realm, and served to demonstrate the 'oneness of private and public, duty and interest'.¹ Shakespeare's *Henry V* is well aware of this distinction, and the responsibility it implies. His ability to subject his private passions to his reason and reconcile his mystical and natural bodies is noted by the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Bishop of Ely, who describe Henry's transformation from rowdy and unpromising youth to articulate and capable king, 'full of grace and fair regard' (1.1.23). Canterbury emphasises the abruptness of the evolution of the monarch, stating that: 'The breath no sooner left his father's body [...] Consideration like an angel came | And whipped th'offending Adam out of him' (1.1.26-30). This observation implies that the accession itself compelled Henry to introspect on the aspects of his lifestyle and personality that were sinful, and shaped him as a virtuous king and ideal head of the body politic. Henry's respect for his position, and appreciation of the responsibility it entails, is reinforced by his monologue in act four. He laments the accountability he has for the lives, souls, debts, families and sins of his subjects and asks 'what have kings that privates have not too, | Save ceremony, save general ceremony?' (4.1.219-27) Henry's view of kingship implies a mutually dependent relationship between sovereign and realm – the people are reliant on their king to bear the burden of their problems, but Henry defines himself in relation to his role as head of the body politic, and without the pomp of ceremony he is just another man.

¹ Kevin Sharpe, 'Private Conscience and Public Duty in the Writings of James VI and I', in *Public Duty and Private Conscience in Seventeenth-Century England: Essays Presented to G.E. Aylmer*, ed. by J. Morrill et al (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), pp. 77-100 (p. 80).

This view of kingship resonates with the one presented by James in *The True Lawe of Free Monarchies*. James' treatise on kingship was first published in Scotland in 1598, one year prior to the first performances of *Henry V*. He outlined the 'true groundes of the mutuall duetie and alleagance betwixt a free and absolute *Monarche*, and his people'², comparing the relationship between a king and his subjects to that of a father and son. In emphasising the importance of the filial duties of the monarch, James said: 'As the Fathers wrath and correction vppon any of his children, that offendeth, ought to be by fatherly chastizement seasoned with pittie, as long as there is any hope of amendement in them: So ought the King to-/wardes any of his lieges that offendes in that measure.'³ Henry's ability to exercise pity where warranted is exemplified in act two, where he pardons a man who had previously railed against him, for it 'was excess of wine that set him on' (2.2.42). This act of mercy is juxtaposed by Henry's sentencing the traitors Cambridge, Scrope and Grey to death in the same scene. He claims that his judgement is not motivated by a desire to exact personal revenge, but because 'we our kingdom's safety must so tender, | Whose ruin you have sought' (2.2.172-3). Henry's concern for his kingdom again emphasises his understanding of the fact that he must suppress his own feelings and passions to fulfil his mystical role as the reason and conscience of the realm. This presentation of Henry as a merciful king who retains the ability to fiercely enforce the laws of his kingdom to ensure civil order is highly appropriate to the political climate of late sixteenth century Britain. Many of Elizabeth's courtiers were preparing for the accession of James to the English throne, and Shakespeare's presentation of Henry as an idealised monarch in accordance with both the notion of the king's two bodies and James' own take on this model is indicative of this anticipation.

By the early seventeenth century, the previously maligned political ideas of Machiavelli had begun to gain some acceptance in England. Barbara Riebling suggests that *Macbeth*, first performed in 1606, 'participates in this shift in political consciousness'.⁴ In the course of the short play, Shakespeare presents three diverse portraits of kingship in Scotland, and each can be judged according to Machiavellian standards of conduct. In Holinshed's *Chronicles*, Shakespeare's primary source for the play, Duncan is depicted as 'soft and gentle' and although his reign was at first peaceful, it is emphasised that the realm began to descend into disorder due to Duncan's negligence in punishing offenders.⁵ His fatally trusting nature is foregrounded in the opening scenes of *Macbeth*. Immediately after learning of the Thane of Cawdor's treachery, Duncan asserts that 'No more that Thane of Cawdor shall deceive | Our bosom interest' (1.2.64-5) and that 'What he hath lost, noble Macbeth hath won.' (1.2.68) His ironic blindness to Macbeth's potential betrayal is reinforced two scenes later, when he states that 'There's no art | To find the mind's construction in the face' (1.4.11-2). Riebling suggests that, although he is characterised as a symbol of Christian virtue, Duncan is ultimately portrayed as an unsuccessful Machiavellian king because of his naivety, and his murder at the hands of the ambitious Macbeth reflects this.⁶ This condemnation would be equally appropriate if his reign were judged in accordance with the notion of the king's two bodies or James' political philosophy. Duncan failed to harmonise his private virtuous nature with an effective policy for dealing with offenders, as Henry proved himself able to, and this led to rebellion by successive Thanes of Cawdor and the demise of his realm.

² James VI, King of Scotland, *The True Lawe of Free Monarchies*, in *Minor Prose Works of James VI and I*, ed. by James Craigie (Edinburgh: Scottish Text Society, 1982), pp. 57-82 (p. 60).

³ *The True Lawe of Free Monarchies*, p. 62.

⁴ Barbara Riebling, 'Virtue's Sacrifice: A Machiavellian Reading of *Macbeth*', *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, 31 (1991), 273-86 (p. 274).

⁵ Raphael Holinshed, *Chronicles of England, Scotland and Ireland*, ed. by Henry Ellis, 6 vols (London, 1807-1808), V (1808), p. 265.

⁶ Riebling, p. 274.

Macbeth's presentation as a king is more overtly negative than Duncan's. Although Holinshed notes that his reign was initially successful, and describes his administration of the realm as being full of 'woorthie dooings and princelie acts'⁷, Shakespeare omits these details from the play and characterises him as an oppressive ruler. During his discussion with Lennox, another Lord explicitly labels Macbeth a 'tyrant', and hopes that his deposition would 'Give to our tables meat, sleep to our nights, | Free from our feasts and banquets bloody knives' (3.6.34-5). Lennox concurs, describing Scotland as 'our suffering country' (3.6.49). This discussion of Scotland's suffering suggests that Macbeth is an unsuccessful king both by Machiavellian standards and when judged according to the body politic model, since both philosophies describe how best to act for the good of the realm. Unlike Henry, who rejects his old addictions to 'courses vain' (1.1.56) and flourishes as king, Macbeth is consumed by ambition once he hears the three witches prophesy his ascent to the throne. He immediately considers the possibility of having to murder Duncan to become king, although the witches did not mention this in their prophecy: 'My thought, whose murder yet is but fantastical, | Shakes so my single state of man' (1.3.140-1). After killing the king, Macbeth shows a callous disregard for the lives of his own subjects: he first attempts to secure his crown from the threat of Banquo's descendents by having his former friend murdered, and does the same to the 'unfortunate souls' (4.1.67) who count Macduff as a relative after the witches warn him to beware the Thane. This is an unambiguous denial of the filial relationship which James asserted a king should have with his subjects, and further illustrates the dysfunction of Macbeth's reign. If Henry views kingship as an office that binds him to his kingdom, implying 'not privilege but responsibility'⁸, then Macbeth is certainly guilty of the opposite and it is this weakness that ultimately makes him an unsuccessful ruler.

Riebling argues that Malcolm is depicted as an ideal Machiavellian king. His false admission of a series of personal and political vices as a means to test Macduff's loyalty in act four demonstrates that he does not share the same naivety as his father.⁹ Although Riebling identifies this prudence as a Machiavellian virtue, it is Macduff's responses to Malcolm's invented list of ills that offer a glimpse of the relationship between the sovereign and the realm in *Macbeth*. When Malcolm claims that he is licentious, Macduff replies that Scotland has 'willing dames enough' to satisfy his desires (4.3.73), and then answers Malcolm's admission of avarice by saying that 'Scotland hath foisons to fill up your will | Of your mere own. All these are portable, | With other graces weighed.' (4.3.88-90) It is not until Malcolm claims that he is devoid of any of the 'king-becoming graces', which include justice, verity and mercy, that Macduff rejects him as a potential ruler: 'Fit to govern? | No, not to live.' (4.3.102-3) From Macduff's perspective, Scotland would be willing to accommodate a morally questionable king, because, as Ross remarks, Malcolm's presence would 'create soldiers, make our women fight, | To doff their dire distresses.' (4.3.186-7) However, an inability to enforce justice or rule with verity and mercy would condemn the kingdom to ruin, as evidenced by the reigns of Duncan and Macbeth respectively. This depiction of sovereignty implies that a successful king need not be a virtuous figure, able to set an example of the 'oneness of private and public, duty and interest', as Sharpe puts it, but must simply be a figurehead, willing to promote an appearance of morally upright conduct in the interests of the smooth function of the realm.

As was the case with *Henry V*, many of the issues surrounding kingship raised in *Macbeth* create an interesting dialogue with James' political philosophy. Principal among these is the notion of the right to rule. In *The True Law of Free Monarchies*, James

⁷ Holinshed, p. 270.

⁸ Terrell L. Tebbetts, 'Shakespeare's Henry V: Politics and the Family', *South Central Review*, 7 (1990), 8-19 (p. 9).

⁹ Riebling, p. 277.

vigorously rejected the notion that the deposition of a king was ever a legitimate course of action; hence a usurper was no legitimate king.¹⁰ James acceded as king of England three years before the first performance of *Macbeth*, and this perhaps influenced Shakespeare's depiction of usurpation, which strongly concurs with James' position. Andrew King draws attention to a Royalist reading of the play, whereby Macbeth is constructed as 'the author of an act that violates the natural order' and his expulsion from the throne by Malcolm, the rightful heir, is the logical resolution.¹¹ This reading is supported by the anonymous Lord's assertion that Macbeth holds from Malcolm the 'due of birth' (3.6.25), and by Shakespeare's characterisation of Scotland as a dark, unnatural realm during the course of the play. In contrast with James' belief that kings 'sit upon God his throne in the earth, and have the count of their administration to give unto him'¹², Macbeth communicates with, and is influenced by, the three witches. The rebuttal of God in favour of supernatural phenomena reinforces his illegitimacy, and this is accentuated by the depiction of England and Edward. Whilst Macbeth is a tyrant and usurper, emphatically not ordained by God, Edward is described as 'pious' (3.6.27) and can spare ten thousand soldiers, led by Seyward – the best soldier in 'Christendom' (4.3.190-1) – to help restore order to Scotland. Scotland's demise is highlighted by Ross and an old man, who discuss a series of bizarre recent events, including news of Duncan's horses eating each other, immediately after Macbeth kills Duncan (2.4.17). These events suggest that order has deserted Scotland on the eve of the crowning of a king who is not God's lieutenant, and imply that the fortunes and character of the realm are inextricably linked to that of its sovereign.

Whilst the depiction of sovereignty in *Macbeth* appears to ally itself with James' ideas about legitimate rule, the evidence in *Henry V* supports a very different reading. Henry's father was a usurper, and so, by extension, Henry's own claim to the English throne is invalid. He is aware of this, and prays that God will not punish his soldiers for his father's crime: 'Not today, O Lord, | O not today, think not upon the fault | My father made in compassing the crown.' (4.1.280-2) Despite this, Henry is presented as a successful king – he is described in the epilogue as a 'star of England' (6) – which suggests that even an illegitimate king can be an effective monarch and head of the body politic if he acts in the best interests of the realm. Although Shakespeare's depiction of Henry is often ambivalent in this respect, the king's actions generally register favourably when he is judged according to the notion of the king's two bodies, James' political theory or Machiavellianism.

Henry's penchant for attributing the blame for the consequences of his own actions to others appears problematic, given that he presents himself as the conscience of the realm. At the siege of Harfleur, he famously implores the governor of the town to surrender by threatening them with violent and merciless destruction if they refuse. He asks: 'Will you yield, and this avoid? | Or, guilty in defence, be thus destroyed?' (3.3.122-3) Henry's deferral of responsibility for the potential destruction of Harfleur seems absurd, since he himself would have to give the command for his soldiers to resume their attacks and '[mow] like grass | Your fresh fair virgins and your flow'ring infants' (3.3.93-4) – a blatant act of unwarranted aggression. Cedric Watts proposes that these grandiose acts of shifting blame are a 'habitual way of coping with the psychological pressures and stresses of kingship'.¹³ If that were the case, it would necessarily entail a criticism of Henry's weakness as a king,

¹⁰ *The True Lawe of Free Monarchies*, pp. 73-7.

¹¹ Andrew King, 'Dead Butchers and Fiend-Like Queens: Literary and Political History in *The Misfortunes of Arthur* and *Macbeth*', in *The Scots and Medieval Arthurian Legend*, ed. by Rhiannon Purdie and Nicola Royan (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2005), pp. 121-34 (p. 130).

¹² *The True Lawe of Free Monarchies*, p. 61.

¹³ Cedric Watts, 'Henry V's Claim to France: Valid or Invalid?', in *Henry V, War Criminal?: And Other Shakespeare Puzzles*, John Sutherland and Cedric Watts (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 117-25 (p. 118).

unable to bear the responsibility that his office requires. However, Tebbetts observes that the Harfleur episode merely highlights Henry's prodigious skill as an orator.¹⁴ He avoids further bloodshed in Harfleur, explicitly instructing the Earl of Exeter to 'use mercy to them all' (3.3.138). He then imposes laws against looting, which he enforces ruthlessly against his former friend Bardolph. Henry's refusal to allow sentiment to cloud his judgement, and willingness to punish offenders to the full extent of the law, is congruent with James' ideas regarding just legislation: 'certainelie a King, that governs not by his lawe, can neither be countable to God for his administration, nor have a happy & established reigne.'¹⁵ Henry administers justice in the best interests of his kingdom; he acts mercifully to petty criminals, demonstrated by his pardon of the man who railed against him in act two, but makes an example of serious offenders even when they are old friends. This makes Henry a stronger ruler than Duncan and shows that he can be a prudential ruler and potentially good Machiavellian king.

The depiction of Henry as a Machiavel is more prominently shown by his apparent willingness to deny the mutual responsibility between himself and his realm when it suits him – an aspect of his character that has stimulated much critical debate. Claire McEachern cites Henry's impassioned speech before Agincourt as a particularly salient example, claiming that it 'explicitly suspends social distinctions in a fantasy of filial harmony'¹⁶:

KING HENRY We few, we happy few, we band of brothers.
 For he today that sheds his blood with me
 Shall be my brother, be he ne'er so vile,
 This day shall gentle his condition.
 (4.3.60-3)

In the aftermath of the battle Henry withdraws the promise of brotherhood, and subverts his earlier suspension of social hierarchy by listing the names of the dead English soldiers in rank order: 'Edward the Duke of York, the Earl of Suffolk, | Sir Richard Keighley, Davy Gam Esquire; | None else of name' (4.8.101-3). This undeniably reflects poorly upon Henry, but whilst McEachern reads Henry's explicit rejection of the importance of the untitled soldiers as a rejection of his responsibility to them, she overlooks the fact that the rousing speech acts as a catalyst to a glorious and improbable victory for the English army. Henry makes the speech as a response to the Earl of Warwick's despairing plea for reinforcements but by the end of the speech, the Duke of York presents himself to Henry and states: 'My lord, most humbly on my knee I beg | The leading of the vanguard.' (4.4.130-1) This reaction reinforces Henry's ability as an orator, in this instance motivating his heavily outnumbered army to defeat the French. Just as Shakespeare constructs Malcolm as a rallying figure for the Scots, who would inspire their women to fight, he constructs Henry as a source of inspiration for his soldiers. Whilst Henry's apparent rejection of the untitled dead presents a morally troubling side of his character, this can be accommodated within the Machiavellian model of kingship where the king must sometimes 'cultivate an appearance of virtue while being willing to practice its opposite.'¹⁷

Like Henry, Malcolm's character is also somewhat ambiguous. Riebling's suggestion that his dialogue with Macduff highlights his qualities as a Machiavellian king fails to take into account Malcolm's actions after the testing scene. Immediately after Macduff proves himself loyal to Scotland, Malcolm renounces his false confessions to immorality, and

¹⁴ Tebbetts, p. 11.

¹⁵ *The True Lawe of Free Monarchies*, p. 72.

¹⁶ Claire McEachern, 'Henry V and the Paradox of the Body Politic', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 45 (1994), 33-56 (p. 45).

¹⁷ Riebling, p. 275.

claims: 'What I am truly | Is thine, and my poor country's to command' (4.3.131-2). He clearly aligns himself with the medieval tradition of mutual dependency between sovereign and realm here. As shown by Shakespeare's depiction of Henry, the two modes of rule are not necessarily exclusive of each other, but Malcolm's actions later in the play hint that he may be seduced by the power of kingship and forget the lessons of his predecessors' mistakes. Once Macbeth has been defeated, Malcolm quickly seizes power, and bestows the title of earl upon his Thanes and kinsmen. (5.7.92-4) As Kinney notes, it was Duncan's propensity for handing out titles rashly that initiated Macbeth's betrayal – first by naming Macbeth the Thane of Cawdor, and then by naming Malcolm the Prince of Cumberland.¹⁸ As if to underline the fact that he has learned nothing from the problems encountered by his predecessors, Malcolm says, in his final line, that he will now be crowned at Scone – as Macbeth had been earlier in the play (5.7.106). In the *Chronicles*, Malcolm's brother would return to attack him, but Shakespeare chooses not to include this in *Macbeth*. Given the long, digressive discourse on the issue of just rule between Malcolm and Macduff in act four (in a play otherwise noted for its remarkable brevity) it is likely that Malcolm's capabilities as a ruler were not a primary concern for Shakespeare. The notion that Scotland would be prepared to accommodate, and indeed needed, a morally ambiguous king in place of the tyrant Macbeth would appear to be a more important message.

Both *Henry V* and *Macbeth* form a compelling dialogue with the evolving political thought of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Shakespeare does not appear to openly favour one model of virtuous kingship, and indeed does not present any of the kings previously discussed as perfectly idealised figures. However, he does consistently depict the successful king as a figurehead for the realm. Henry presents himself as the conscience of his kingdom, and asserts the mutual responsibility between him and it, but he is prepared to rule as a Machiavellian king in the interests of the realm. It is difficult to qualify the depiction of Malcolm; he is certainly not portrayed as the conscience of the realm, and Shakespeare does not offer a picture of his reign as king. The conversation between Malcolm and Macduff is far more telling: it suggests that the realm is dependent on the unifying presence of its sovereign as a figurehead, but that the king need not be traditionally virtuous.

¹⁸ Arthur F. Kinney, 'Scottish History, the Union of the Crowns and the Issue of Right Rule: The Case of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*', in *Renaissance Culture in Context: Theory and Practice*, ed. by J. R. Brink and W. F. Gentrup (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1993), pp. 18-53 (p. 51).

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