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# **We thought ourself thy lawful king**

## **The representation of royal legitimacy in Shakespeare's History Plays**

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## Abstract:

Legitimacy has been a key concept in political philosophy since Plato's *Republic*. In this degree project I examine the way in which Shakespeare portrays royal legitimacy in seven of his History plays: *Richard II*, *Henry IV parts I-II*, *Henry V* and *Henry VI parts I-III*. The objective is to examine the representation of two aspects of royal legitimacy and how they relate to each other: the inheritance within the royal family and the question of political competence. Typically, in these plays a conflict arises between these two aspects. Richard II can be seen as legitimate in the sense that he has inherited the crown as the oldest living son of the Black Prince, the son of Edward III. However, he is defeated by the much more politically competent usurper Henry Bolingbroke who, as Henry IV, has to face the problem that he and his son are not regarded as the rightful heirs to the English throne. After the reign of Henry V, during which the question of legitimacy is settled through sheer success, this pattern repeats itself when the legitimacy of the highly incompetent Henry VI is challenged by Richard, Duke of York. After an introduction to the subject, some historical context as well as some basic ideas relevant to royal legitimacy are presented in the second chapter. This is followed by the analysis of the plays and, finally, by a conclusion in which Shakespeare's remarkable ability to relate individual character traits to harsh political power struggles is emphasised and the claim that Shakespeare should be understood as an apologist for kings is put into question.

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# 1. Introduction: kings and their legitimacy

Two things have always helped kings to appear legitimate: being competent and being related to the last king. All around the globe, divine appointment also turned out to be an effective way to solidify royal legitimacy. In Mesopotamia, the king received his authority from the Gods and in Egypt, the Pharaoh was not just appointed by the gods, he was believed actually to be one of them. The idea of divine appointment was also prominent in the Judeo-Christian tradition. The ancient Greeks, on the other hand, had no such ideas and the Athenian democracy defined itself in opposition to monarchy on the constitutional spectrum. Later on, the Roman Republic showed a peculiar hatred for kings and even the Roman emperors, kings in all but name, knew better than to use that title.

Even though, in the modern age, kings have practically disappeared from the political scene, the figure of the “strong man” in politics and the question of his legitimacy have recently had an unsuspected and global revival. The old questions surrounding the political legitimacy of the monarch are still relevant.

In the early 1590s, William Shakespeare wrote and had some of his first plays performed; among these were the three parts of *Henry VI* and *Richard III*, now often referred to as the first tetralogy. In these plays, Shakespeare tells the story of the War of the Roses and how Henry VII finally won the crown and, indirectly, how the Tudor dynasty saved England.

Shakespeare and his company performed frequently at the court, during the reign of Elisabeth as well as that of James I. Kernan (1995:95) calls Shakespeare “the leading apologist for kings in his or any other time” and compares his role as James’s official playwright to that of Racine’s relationship to Louis XIV, as they both provided, under the guise of theatrical entertainment, a powerful defence of absolute monarchy. In this thesis, I will question this claim, since I do not think it is fair to say that Shakespeare defends the absolutist view of kingship. In any case, I agree with Kernan when he explains that Shakespeare’s History plays “offer Western culture’s most extensive narrative of the age of kingship”, constituting “a remarkable and varied portrait gallery of Renaissance kingcraft” (ibid.).

The constant political flux in the History plays raises fundamental questions about political legitimacy. Who has the right to rule a state? How do political leaders acquire legitimacy? How

do they lose it? In this thesis I am interested specifically in the way the playwright represents the intricate relation between two elements connected to royal legitimacy: 1) the idea of the right of inheritance passing from father to son; and 2) the tension between, on one hand, political competence, including the power of force, and, on the other hand, political incompetence and personal weakness on the other.

My objective is to analyse these elements in seven of Shakespeare's History plays: *Henry VI parts I-III*, *Henry IV parts I & II*, *Henry V* and *Richard II*.<sup>1</sup> This might seem an excessive amount of works for an essay of this kind, especially considering the abundance of critical literature available. However, I will only analyse a small number of scenes; those that I deem to be critical to the understanding of this specific theme. The first and fundamental question I will examine in the texts is: How are the two elements of royal legitimacy mentioned above represented in Shakespeare's History plays? The answer to this question will hopefully lead to the second question: is a characterization of Shakespeare as an apologist for kings reasonable?

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<sup>1</sup> Due to the limited format of this essay, I regretfully have to exclude *Richard III*, even though I realize that this play is highly relevant as it deals with the legitimacy of the Tudor monarch during whose reign Shakespeare wrote it. Although I haven't included them in the essay, it should also be said that there are many other plays by Shakespeare about kings, e.g. *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, *Macbeth* and *Cymbeline*. There are also two (or possibly even three) additional History plays about English kings: *King John*, *Henry VIII* and *Edward III*. The authorship of the latter, a play published in 1596, is highly disputed but has in recent years been included in both the New Cambridge edition and the Arden edition of Shakespeare's plays. It should also be added that many other of Shakespeare's plays are concerned with legitimacy: *Measure for Measure*, *The Tempest*, etc.

## 2. Shakespeare and the king: historical context

In this part of my essay I will address the philosophical context of the History plays. However, it is necessary to start by considering the sources for these seven plays and the history they narrate.

### 2.1. The History behind the History Plays

Even though other sources were surely used by Shakespeare when he wrote his History Plays, the works of two renaissance historians stand out: *The Vnion of the Two Noble and Illustre Famelies of Lancastre and York* (1548), by Edward Hall, and the 1587 version of Raphael Holinshed's *Chronicles of England, Scotland and Ireland*. Preparing to write *Richard II*, Shakespeare might also have used a translation of the *Croniques* by the great 14<sup>th</sup>-century French historian Jean Froissart (Norwich 2018: 4-5). Although it is easy to find historical inaccuracies in these plays, Shakespeare gives a surprisingly correct version of a very complicated period of British history. As historian John Julius Norwich explains:

He was, after all, a playwright – first, last and always. To him the cause of the drama was of infinitely greater importance than the slavish observance of historical truth. He was young and inexperienced [...] and the challenge of moulding what is still today one of the most turbulent periods of English history into a coherent series was a formidable one indeed. No wonder he took liberties; no wonder he frequently combined two or three different events, which in fact occurred months or even years apart, into a single scene. The miracle is that he was able to stick as closely to the truth as he did. (Norwich 2018:5-6)

Something also needs to be said about the chronology of these plays. The first tetralogy, dealing with the War of the Roses during the reign of Henry VI and Richard III all date from the years 1591-1593. In other words, they are among the earliest plays that Shakespeare wrote. The second tetralogy, describing a slightly earlier period of English history, were written between 1595 and 1599, *Richard II* being the earliest and *Henry V* the last to be written. Critics have varied greatly about whether these two tetralogies were composed with any degree of premeditated design or merely written one after the other without a clear outline from the start. Moreover, these works have been seen by some as a response to the fervent patriotism of the post-Armada years and, by others, as a way to capitalise on a vogue for serialised plays (Greene 2002: 7-12).

Taken as a whole, the three parts of *Henry VI* have the greatest historical timeframe. Part one begins with the death of Henry V in 1422; part two begins with the arrival of Margaret of Anjou to England in 1445 and ends with the first battle of the War of the Roses at St. Albans in 1455; and part three ends with the defeat of the Lancastrians at the battle of Tewkesbury in 1471. *Richard III* takes up the story from the restoration of Edward IV to the throne in that same year, deals with the ascension of Richard as king, and ends with the death of Richard at the battle of Bosworth Field in 1485 and the coronation of the Earl of Richmond as king Henry VII. The first tetralogy, then, deals with no less than 63 years of English history.

The second tetralogy, sometimes referred to as the *Henriad*, begins with the play *Richard II*, which only spans two years. It uses as its starting point the quarrel between the said king's cousin, Henry Bolingbroke, the Duke of Hereford, and Thomas Mowbray. Historically, this conflict took place in 1398. The play ends with Henry's usurpation of the throne and the imprisoned Richard's death in 1400.

*Henry IV* Part One takes up the story two years later with the victory of Hotspur over Douglas at the battle of Homildon. The play ends with the king's victory over Hotspur and the other rebels in 1403, with the young Hal at his side. Part Two takes up the story where it left off and when the old king is dies at the end of the play, Hal is crowned king. Historically, the prince succeeded his father in the year 1413.

The final chapter of the *Henriad* is *Henry V*. It deals primarily with Henry's invasion of France in 1415 and culminates with the victory at Agincourt. It ends, however, with the Treaty of Troyes, which was signed in 1420 and the scene in which Henry woos his future wife, the French princess Catherine. The play thus ties in beautifully with the previous tetralogy, which, as I said, begins in 1422. In eight plays, then, Shakespeare makes us marvel at the twists and turns of the fates of six English kings during a period of 87 years, from 1398 to 1485.

## 2.2. The cultural-historical context of the History Plays

One of the most basic questions in political philosophy is: *who ought to rule?* Another way of looking at this problem is asking: *what legitimates political power?* Or perhaps: *what constitutes political competence?* During the time Shakespeare wrote the History plays, i.e. between 1591-99, the question of royal succession was a deeply pressing political problem. Queen Elizabeth, who at this time was in her sixties, had yet to designate an heir, and a civil war over who should succeed the queen was not an unlikely political possibility. Craig sees the idea of political legitimacy as having two fundamental components: one subjective, consisting

of “the *recognition* in the minds of the Ruled that their Rulers have a right to rule”, and the other one objective, “being whatever qualities rational analysis discloses are required for a ruler to rule *well*, to be a *good* ruler” (Craig 2015: 31).<sup>2</sup> The first component can be understood as the way in which a king is considered legitimate, for example because he is the son and heir of the old king. The second has to do with specific virtues needed to be an effective monarch. Reese suggests that in Shakespeare’s world, kings were meant to have four basic qualities: a just ambition, patriotism, dedication and humanity or what the playwright would have called ‘love’ (1961: 146-157).

However, there are two ways to understand the problem of *who ought to rule*. Many political philosophers have interpreted the question of *who ought to rule* as meaning “who should be *obliged* to rule, as if ruling were a burden that one would personally prefer to avoid”. Non-philosophers have adopted the opposite view, i.e. *who ought to rule* means “who *deserves* the *privilege* of ruling” (ibid. 2015: 31-32). One could see the history of political philosophy as a debate moving back and forth between these two views: one objective and theoretical, the other subjective and pragmatic. The most representative text of the first view is Plato’s *Republic* which suggests that, in order to produce happiness and prosperity, societies should be ruled by philosopher kings, taking on the burdensome responsibility of being in charge. However, despite the great timespan that has passed since Plato wrote his masterpiece, the world has produced few of these ideal rulers.

Niccolò Machiavelli’s infamous political treatise *The Prince* (1513) can be seen as the first great breaking point from the Platonic tradition and from a Medieval tradition which understood divine right to confer not just legitimacy but competence as well. Machiavelli distinguishes between two possible senses of ‘good’: moral goodness and efficiency. For the first time, power was seen as most people see it: as a desirable good in itself. The book became known in England around 1534 and in Shakespeare’s time there was hardly any writer who was not subject to the influence of the Florentine (Reese 1961: 95). Machiavelli’s ideas are well known and there is no need to linger on the subject here. Suffice it to say that, according to the philosopher, in order to create political stability, there has to be an effective ruler. Such a man must in fact disregard religious virtue and ethics. Although law and religion can be useful to the Prince, he must rely on a combination of fraud and force to subjugate his people and defeat his rivals. A prince must be able to be ruthless and cruel, or else he is *de facto* not effective and will eventually be replaced by someone who is. The idea of royal legitimacy is thus reduced to a

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<sup>2</sup> The emphasis is in the original if not stated otherwise.



question of *quality*, but the quality is not decided by the happiness of his people but rather by the pure ability of the ruler to stay in power. Machiavelli also puts great emphasis on the turning wheel of the goddess Fortune, where one ruler rises to power as the previous one falls from glory. Although Fortune or Chance cannot be controlled fully, a prince can “rule” her at least in part by sheer slyness and political competence.

Machiavelli and Plato are both preoccupied with political competence. According to both views, it is part of the monarch’s competence and responsibility to impose his authority on his subjects, forcing them to obey him (Reese 1961: 119-127). However, to understand royal legitimacy, one must consider not just the *quality* of the leadership of the king but also the *right* to *inherit* the throne. It is useful to think about the right of inheritance as a “virtuous circle” that reinforces the claim to legitimacy of the members of a royal dynasty as time progresses: “the longer they are in place and serve their purpose tolerably well, the more solidly will they become established in people’s minds as ‘right and proper’” (Craig 2015: 186-87). This reinforcing cycle is further strengthened by physical forms such as “ceremonies, manners, symbols, modes of respectful address, and engagements of personal honour (pledges of allegiance, oaths of obedience” (ibid).

Fundamental to the idea of royal legitimacy in Shakespeare’s time is the image of the Chain of Being. In *Troilus and Cressida*, Shakespeare has Ulysses make a speech that squares perfectly with this notion of the intimate correspondence and unity of God’s creation. Shakespeare and his contemporaries understood the universe as a place where everything has its natural degree and place, which must not be altered: “The heavens themselves, the planets and this centre / Observe degree, priority and place” (1.3.88-9). Ulysses then continues with a warning about the risks of civil war if this order is disturbed: “Take but degree away, untune that string, / And, hark, what discord follows!” (1.3.112-13).

This Great Chain was thought to connect everything in the universe, placing all on a scale ranging from God and his angels as the highest point to the stones and plants at the lowest end of creation. Kenneth Muir explains that the order of the Chain of Being is highly relevant in Shakespeare’s History Plays. He even describes it as “a dramatic necessity, since all are concerned with the evils of civil war”: wars in which this chain is constantly broken (1964: 72).

In this scale of beings of different degree, men were above women just as the King was above his subjects. The modern reader has to struggle not only with this notion but also with another idea that the modern world has rejected. Today, one’s identity is generally seen as being

a result of individual choices or as a role we chose to perform. In Shakespeare's England, identity was much more a question of genes. More than anything else, you were the son or daughter of your parents, and especially of your father. Robert N. Watson emphasises the patriarchal worldview that Shakespeare lived in and writes that according to the value-system represented in the History plays, lineality and succession from father to son have a direct link to religion. To usurp the throne can be seen as a parallel to rebelling against one's own father and, albeit on a larger scale, against God (Watson 1984: 14-15).

### 3. Analysis of the History Plays

Although we are dealing with no less than seven plays, I will divide the following analysis into four chapters. The two parts of Henry IV and the three parts of Henry VI will be discussed in one chapter each. I will not analyse the History Plays in the order in which they were published, but rather in the chronological order of the historical kings, starting with *Richard II* and ending with the three parts of *Henry VI*.

#### 3.1. *Richard II*: the mask of the legitimacy

It is fitting that the first play we shall consider in this essay about royal legitimacy is *Richard II* because, as Craig explains, the main issue of the play is “nothing less than the question of what ‘legitimates’, not just political authority in England, but political authority as such: what set of rational criteria (such as would satisfy a political philosopher) does, or should, constitute an *objective* basis of a *right* to rule” (2015: 2).

*Richard II* begins with a conflict between two noblemen: Henry Bolingbroke and Thomas Mowbray. They wish their dispute to be decided by single combat. King Richard grants them their wish and Shakespeare emphasises the idea that God will decide the victor when the Lord Marshal tells Bolingbroke: “Receive thy lance; and God defend the right” (1.3.101). However, at the very last moment, Richard changes his mind and instead banishes them both. This cancelled duel can be seen as a clear indicator of Richard’s arbitrary decision-making as a king, but it is also a foreshadowing of the main conflict in the play, i.e. the rebellion of Bolingbroke against king Richard since, as Craig suggests, to rebel against one’s king “is in effect an unauthorized trial by combat on a grand scale, but based on the same presumption: that God determines the outcome” (2015: 35-36).

It is helpful to consider Richard’s behaviour as king from the perspective of Machiavelli’s idea of the prince as a figure who combines the strength of the lion and the cunning of a fox. In chapter 18 of *The Prince*, the Italian philosopher says that, in order to succeed and stay in power, the prince “needs to be a fox to recognise snares and a lion to frighten the wolves. Those who stay simply with the lion do not understand this” (quoted in Craig 2015: 28). In the play, Richard compares himself with a lion when he says to Mowbray “Lions make leopards tame” (1.1.176) and the Craig sees a clear parallel between this image and the failure of Richard as king at the beginning of the play:

While basking in the status and privileges of his inherited kingship, Richard speaks as if he were a lion [...], but is hardly credible in the role. His spiritual frailty in adversity is pitiful, being so wholly reliant upon his followers, [...] to stiffen his moral spine [...]. Moreover, his spiritual weakness is in no way compensated for by foxlike cunning. For instance, he makes no effort [...] to colour with a cosmetic legitimacy his most politically damaging crime (confiscating the Lancastrian estates). (Craig 2015: 28)

In other words, Richard's problem is that he does not feel the need to act like a fox, since he takes his royal legitimacy of divine right for granted, seeing himself as: "God's substitute, / His deputy anointed in His sight" (1.2.37-38). At one moment, he exclaims: "We were not born to sue but to command" (1.1.198), and indeed, he shows no insight into the fact that his authority as king is not a natural law but rather is based on other people's acceptance of his legitimacy. He surrounds himself with yes-men and he is shocked when the dying John of Gaunt tells him the hard truths about his reign:

Thy death-bed is no lesser than thy land  
Wherein thou liest in reputation sick;  
[...]  
A thousand flatterers sit within thy crown,  
Whose compass is no bigger than thy head; (2.1.95-101)

Richard is incapable of rejecting Gaunt's accusations and instead threatens the old man with cutting off his head. Later, when John of Gaunt is dead, the king seizes his lands, which rightly should go to his exiled son, Henry Bolingbroke. This blatant crime upsets the nobles. Edmund of Langley asks Richard directly "How long shall I be patient? Oh, how long / Shall tender duty make me suffer wrong?" (2.1.163-64), and then reminds Richard of the Chain of Being and the fact that by taking Henry's land he is undermining his own right as king:

Take Hereford's rights away, and take from Time  
His charters and his customary rights;  
Let not to-morrow then ensue to-day;  
Be not thyself; for how art thou a king  
But by fair sequence and succession? (2.1.197-201)

Watson (1984: 37) notices the analogy in this passage between the natural world and legal inheritance of property: “the cycle of day and night is not more natural, and the very business of being oneself depends on sustaining an interwoven set of successions”. By refusing to concede to Bolingbroke his rightful inheritance, Richard is breaking the great Chain of Being and opens a Pandora’s box of rebellion against his royal legitimacy. Even in the same scene, the wheels of rebellion start to turn as Northumberland tells Lord Ross: “The king is not himself, but basely led / By flatterers” (2.1.243-44).

One way to get around the problem of rising up against a legitimate king is of course to claim that the rebellion is not primarily aimed against the king, but rather against the individuals who have poisoned his mind. As soon as Henry Bolingbroke finds out about his father’s death, he returns to England to claim his lands, and becomes the leader of the revolt against Richard. The king, however, is in Ireland and has to hurry back. When he lands on the Welsh coast, he knows that many lords have turned their backs on him but he is expecting reinforcements from Wales. Richard at first seems to be full of confidence as he pronounces, talking to his native soil: “This earth shall have a feeling and these stones / Prove armed soldiers ere her native king / Shall falter under foul rebellion’s arms” (3.2.24-26). With his majestic rhetoric, he adds:

Not all the water in the rough rude sea  
Can wash the balm off from an anointed king;  
The breath of worldly men cannot depose  
The deputy elected by the Lord.  
For every man that Bolingbroke hath press’d  
To lift shrewd steel against our golden crown,  
God for his Richard hath in heavenly pay  
A glorious angel. (3.2.54-61)

Reese reminds us that this powerful statement is “flawed by the personal weakness of the speaker but dignified by the office that he holds” and he continues: “The emptiness of these words is exposed by Carlisle’s sharp reminder to Richard that [...] heaven first helps those who help themselves” (1961: 131). It is interesting that Shakespeare reuses the image of the balm when Richard is later commenting on his own dethronement: “With mine own tears I wash away my balm. / With mine own hands I give away my crown. With mine own tongue deny my sacred state. (4.1.210-212). He seems to accept the idea that, if nothing else can, the tears of the king himself can actually wash away the royal balm.

When he is informed that his Welsh reinforcements have abandoned him, Richard is at first distressed, but the Duke of Aumerle asks him to remember who he is. Richard lightens up and exclaims: “I had forgot myself; am I not king? [...] / Is not the king’s name twenty thousand names?” (3.2.83-85). Indeed, he even says jokingly: “Say, is my kingdom lost? Why t’was my care / And what loss is it to be rid of care? (3.2.95-96). This word is repeated in an interesting fashion later on when Bolingbroke, making Richard hand over his crown, tells him: “Part of your cares you give me with your crown” and Richard replies: “Your cares set up do not pluck my cares down” (4.1.197-98). Here we see the idea of kingship as a responsibility, a burden or a “care”. But Shakespeare makes Richard go further, as he presents the role of king as a lonely and tragic one:

[...] for within the hollow crown  
That rounds the mortal temples of a king  
Keeps Death his court and there the antic sits,  
Scoffing his state and grinning at his pomp,  
Allowing him a breath, a little scene,  
To monarchize, be fear’d and kill with looks,  
[...], and humour’d thus  
Comes at the last and with a little pin  
Bores through his castle wall, and farewell king! (3.2.160-70)

Realising that he is utterly abandoned, Richard for a moment lets the mask of kingship fall as he tells his followers:

[...] you have mistook me all this while.  
I live with bread like you, feel want,  
Taste grief, need friends. Subjected thus,  
How can you say to me I am a king? (3.2.171-77)

The scene ends with a couplet expressing Richard’s distress. As if he were a leper, he tells his still faithful followers to abandon him in order not to share his fate: “Discharge my followers; let them hence away / From Richard’s night to Bolingbroke’s fair day” (3.2.219-220). There is a deeply tragic note here, but Richard is at the same time too in love with his own tragedy to be completely believable. An example of this is his way of comparing himself to Christ. In the

same scene, he comes to believe that three of his close friends have gone over to the enemy's side and immediately cries out: "Three Judaces, each one thrice worse than Judas" (3.2.132). Later in the play, when standing in front of Bolingbroke and his once loyal nobles, he claims to be worse off than Jesus: "Did they not sometime cry 'all hail!' to me? / So Judas did to Christ: but he in twelve / Found truth in all but one: I, in twelve thousand, none" (4.1.72-73). After renouncing the throne to Bolingbroke, Richard is made to confess his "crimes", and he again turns to the image of the betrayal of Christ: "you Pilates / Have here delivered me to my sour cross, / And water cannot wash away your sin" (4.1.243-46).

Alone and desperate at Flint Castle, Richard addresses the hostile army with the only two weapons he has left: the image of his reign as divinely sanctioned and his masterful command of the English language. In an act of desperate daring, Richard warns them of the fatal consequences of going against God's appointed monarch. He singles out Northumberland, asking him why he does not kneel and through him he addresses his enemies:

Because we thought ourself thy lawful king:  
And if we be, how dare thy joints forget  
To pay their awful duty to our presence?  
[...] well we know, no hand of blood and bone  
Can gripe the sacred handle of our sceptre,  
Unless he do profane, steal, or usurp.  
And though you think that all, as you have done,  
Have torn their souls by turning them from us,  
And we are barren and bereft of friends;  
Yet know, my master, God omnipotent,  
Is mustering in his clouds on our behalf  
Armies of pestilence; and they shall strike  
Your children yet unborn and unbegot,  
That lift your vassal hands against my head  
And threat the glory of my precious crown. (3.3.76-92)

Richard makes the most that he can of the idea that his kingship is divinely sanctioned. This, however, is not the only perspective on royal legitimacy that Richard uses in the play. At Flint

Castle, when Bolingbroke gracefully allows him to keep his crown, the king makes the following ironical comment:

Cousin, I am too young to be your father,  
Though you are old enough to be my heir.  
What you will have, I'll give, and willing too;  
For do we must what force will have us do. (3.3.209-212)

As Craig explains (2015: 41), Richard turns here to the other great doctrine of royal legitimacy except divine appointment: the right of conquest, or, more broadly, Nature. That this Machiavellian perspective on who ought to rule is bound to lead to further civil strife is something that Richard points out to Bolingbroke once it is clear that he will usurp the crown. Addressing the duke of Northumberland, Henry's friend and ally, Richard points to the fact that all those near the king will sooner or later think of usurping the crown themselves:

Northumberland, thou ladder wherewithal  
The mounting Bolingbroke ascends my throne,  
The time shall not be many hours of age  
More than it is ere foul sin gathering head  
Shalt break into corruption: thou shalt think,  
Though he divide the realm and give thee half,  
It is too little, helping him to all;  
And he shall think that thou, which know'st the way  
To plant unrightful kings, wilt know again,  
Being ne'er so little urged, another way  
To pluck him headlong from the usurped throne. (5.1.55-65)

With these words of insight into human nature, Richard shows himself tragically aware of the fragility of royal legitimacy. If it rests on divine appointment, God may at any moment desert you for any indiscernible reason. If, on the other hand, it rests on natural strength alone, this is even more unpredictable and precarious. Surely, these two doctrines could be said to be one and the same, if Nature and everything that happens in it is understood to be a direct reflection of God's inscrutable will.



At the end of the play, Richard, in his prison cell in Pomfret Castle, is spending his final hours soliloquizing on his identity. Craig (2015: 43) sees in this scene a meditation on Plato's *Republic*. In fact, Shakespeare gives us a clue to this right from the very first lines, mirroring the famous allegory of the prisoners in the cave: "I have been studying how I may compare / This prison where I live unto the world" (5.5.1-2). Craig (ibid: 43-44) cites several other references, but the most important one has to do with the inseparability of politics and ethics, or the soul, as Plato would put it. When Richard suddenly hears the sound of music in his dungeon cell, he exclaims: "how sour sweet music is / When time is broke and no proportions kept! / So it is in the music of men's lives" (5.5.42-44). According to Craig, Shakespeare is here pointing to "the *Republic*'s teaching about justice, that its natural ground is the harmonious soul, with its three major parts", working together like harmonious notes of music (ibid:45). It can even be said, as Craig does (ibid: 43), that the real tragedy of the play consists in the fact that it takes a fall from the throne to the dungeon to make Richard understand this deeper nature of political ethics, and when he realises it, it is already too late.

### 3.2. *Henry IV Parts I-II*: the tragedy of being a successful usurper

If Richard is a failed Machiavellian prince, being neither a lion nor a fox, Henry IV Bolingbroke proves to be highly successful at combining the use of lion-like strength and fox-like cunning. He can muster and lead armies, but he also relies heavily "on the skilful use of language all along the way, and especially on false or misleading language" (Craig 2015: 29). He manipulates his enemies as well as crushes them on the battle field. But brute force and cunning use of language are not the only methods that distinguish him from Richard. Henry's most important asset as king is his Machiavellian understanding of political reality: "Richard II is unable to comprehend that the social order which supports him is not an eternal and immutable fact of nature, but a usurper like Henry IV sees with the clear-sightedness of Machiavelli that in the end the exercise of power comes to the ruthless use of force" (Kernan 1995: 95-96). One example of this is when, in Part Two, the dying Henry tells prince Hal that the nobles that he has managed to appease will soon rebel against the new king. Therefore, the prince must start a war abroad in order to solidify his own dynasty: "Be it thy course to busy giddy minds / With foreign quarrels; that action, hence borne out, / May waste the memory of the former days" (4.5.343-45).

In Part One, Henry also shows his Machiavellian wisdom by making striking political analogies. Scolding his son for his unworthy living among the dregs of society, Henry implies

that the young Percy, known as Hotspur, one of the nobles who have rebelled against him, is a new version of his younger and rebellious self, while Hal is acting the role of the naïve and decadent king Richard:

As thou art to this hour was Richard then  
When I from France set foot at Ravenspurgh,  
And even as I was then is Percy now.  
Now, by my sceptre and my soul to boot,  
He hath more worthy interest to the state  
Than thou the shadow of succession (3.2.94-99)

Not only is Henry conscious of his own lack of royal legitimacy and of his son's precarious situation, he is also thoroughly aware of his public image and the need to use it to his own advantage in order to counterbalance the fact that he is a usurper. When Henry chides prince Hal, he mentions that he, contrary to Richard, has consciously withdrawn himself from public view in order to appear more regal:

By being seldom seen, I could not stir  
But like a comet I was wonder'd at;  
And then I stole all courtesy from heaven,  
And dress'd myself in such humility  
That I did pluck allegiance from men's hearts,  
[...]  
Thus did I keep my person fresh and new;  
My presence, like a robe pontifical,  
Ne'er seen but wonder'd at: and so my state,  
Seldom but sumptuous, showed like a feast  
And won by rareness such solemnity.  
The skipping king, [...]  
Mingled his royalty with capering fools,  
Had his great name profaned with their scorns (3.2.46-64)

Henry reveals that he is aware of the fact that “the kingship gained by replacing a natural identity with an artificial one, replacing a person with a garment, can only be maintained by his remaining a polished costume rather than an authentic human being” (Watson 1984: 56).

These examples of Henry’s hard-earned political experience and wisdom make his vision of kingship, not as a prize to be enjoyed, but as a burdensome responsibility, quite credible. In Part Two, Henry complains of having to stay up at night to do the long hours of a king: “How many thousand of my poorest subjects / Are at this hour asleep?” (3.1.4-5). He addresses the god of sleep, asking him why he prefers the company of the sleeping ship-boy at the top of the mast in a stormy sea to that of the king in a calm and comfortable palace:

Canst thou, O partial sleep, give thy repose  
To the wet sea-boy in an hour so rude,  
And in the calmest and most stillest night,  
With all appliances and means to boot,  
Deny it to a king? Then happy low, lie down!  
Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown. (3.1.26-31)

This can of course be interpreted as royalist propaganda on the part of Shakespeare, making brilliant poetry out of the idea that the subjects should be glad that they do not have to bear the awful responsibility of those who rule over them. However, this is just one way of reading the play. Henry’s words should rather be read as a soliloquy perfectly integrated into the character of this particular king and not as a political statement about kingship in general.

### 3.3. *Henry V*: legitimacy successfully fabricated

In Part One of *Henry IV*, Prince Hal tells his friend Poins that he is a “sworn brother to a leash of drawers and can call them all by their Christian names, as Tom, Dick and Francis” and he assures him that they “take it already, upon their salvation, that [...] when I am King of England I shall command all the good lads in Eastcheap”. He goes on to explain: “I am so good a proficient in one quarter of an hour that I can drink with any tinker in his own language during my life” (2.4.8-19). Craig comments on this passage:

In short, Hal has been learning ‘the common touch’ in the only way in can be learned: by extensive companionship with common people [...]. For Shakespeare’s Prince Henry is every bit as aware as is his

father that, practically speaking, the *legitimacy* of his future hold on the Crown hangs precariously in the balance. He will not be able to rely on a widespread belief that he rules as God's 'chosen' simply by virtue of his *lineage*, his father's manner of gaining the Crown, and the chronic instability of his reign, have compromised beyond remedy the credibility of that view. If Hal is to be accepted as the legitimate king in the eyes of God [...] it will have to be on some basis other than simply grace (*charisma*) supposedly conveyed by blood. He will have to *prove* that he enjoys divine approval and protection by *deeds* that can be plausibly interpreted as primarily God's doing. (Craig 2015:109-110)

Henry in *Henry V* deals with precisely this challenge: to prove by his deeds and his competence that he, and no one else, is the legitimate king of England. As Craig points out, despite being the son of a king, "Henry never expressly claims the right to rule on this basis" (2015: 162). Already from the start, it is clear that he will have to do it by emulating the warrior-king tradition handed down by his ancestor Edward III and his son the Black Prince who won famous victories in France in the 14<sup>th</sup> century. Evoking them, Bishop Ely tells him: "Awake remembrance of these valiant dead, / And with your puissant arm renew their feats. / You are their heir, you sit upon their throne" (1.2.138-140).

To Machiavelli, the ideal Prince is necessarily a soldier. In fact, the Florentine philosopher claims that "a Prince should have no other object, nor any other thought, nor take anything else as his art but the art of war and its orders and its discipline" (cited in Craig 2015: 166). Again and again, Henry himself emphasises his martial character. He tells the Governor of Harfleur that if he does not surrender the city, he will destroy it as surely "as I am a soldier / A name that in my thoughts become me best" (3.3.5-6). Likewise, when he is alone with princess Catherine at the end of the play, he characterises himself as "a plain soldier" (5.2.150) and urges her: "take me, take me, take a soldier, take a soldier" (5.2.166). What really consolidates Henry's legitimacy, though, is not so much his martial prowess but rather the love and loyalty that he is able to inspire in his soldiers, making them believe that he is one of them. Before that battle of Agincourt, the Chorus lets the audience know that the whole army has the privilege of beholding "A little touch of Harry in the night" (4.0.47):

For forth he goes and visits all his host,  
Bids them good morrow with a modest smile,  
And calls them brothers, friends and countrymen.  
[...]

That every wretch, pining and pale before,  
Beholding him, plucks comfort from his looks: (4.0.32-42)

The most famous moment of this ‘common touch’ of king Henry is when he calls out to his troops right before the battle, identifying himself as well as them as: “We few, we happy few, we band of brothers” (4.3.60). As Craig points out, this is not the royal “we” we have seen used by Richard II in phrases such as “We thought ourself thy lawful king”. Rather, it is “the ordinary ‘we’, referring to an undifferentiated plurality of persons” (Craig 2015: 171-172). This is no mere publicity stunt to manipulate his subjects into accepting his rule. Henry V is personally convinced that all the pomp and ceremony connected to his kingship is but a charade, albeit a necessary one. Alone before the battle, he soliloquises:

O ceremony, show me but thy worth!  
What is thy soul of adoration?  
Art thou aught else but place, degree and form,  
Creating awe and fear in other men? (4.1.223-26)

Like his father, Henry V embodies the idea of competent kingship seen as a burden of almost intolerable responsibility. In the same soliloquy, the fate of England is portrayed as Henry’s personal cross to bear:

Upon the king! Let us our lives, our souls,  
Our debts, our careful wives,  
Our children and our sins lay on the king!  
We must bear all. (4.1.210-213)

We have already seen how Henry IV told young Hal that being king is essentially a role he will have to play, pretending to be something he is not, again expressing a clearly Machiavellian view on kingship. Here the son puts the same idea to different use: “The notion that the kingship is merely a garment that belongs to a man who is naturally no more exalted than others, [...] becomes a way for Henry V to elicit the courage and sympathy of his troops on the eve of battle” (Watson 1984: 80-81). When he finally wins his great victory at Agincourt, Henry has in fact solved the problem of royal legitimacy, at least for his own reign. In the final words of the Chorus, however, we are told what will happen to England during the reign of his son,

implying that without the firm rule of a strong monarch, England will always collapse into civil strife:

Henry the Sixth, in infant bands crown'd King  
Of France and England, did this king succeed;  
Whose state so many had the managing,  
That they lost France and made his England bleed: (5.2.141-44)

### 3.4. *Henry VI Parts I-III*: the ramifications of meekness

Henry VI might be viewed as a perfect example of what can happen if a king is good in the sense of personal morality but not in the Machiavellian sense of being efficient as a ruler. The first time Henry VI appears on stage, he immediately signals weakness and lack of control. In front of him his two uncles, Gloucester and the Bishop of Winchester are quarrelling. Instead of imposing his will, as he is expected to do, he pleads with them as if they were his superiors: "I would prevail, if prayers might prevail / To join your hearts in love and amity" (3.1.71-72). Henry has in fact never ceased to be a child. Although physically an adult, Henry allows Gloucester, his Lord Protector, to make all the decisions for him. When Henry proves unable to act against an obvious case of treason, Richard, Duke of York, exclaims:

King did I call thee? No, thou art not king,  
Not fit to govern and rule multitudes,  
Which darest not, no, nor canst not rule a traitor.  
That head of thine doth not become a crown;  
Thy hand is made to grasp a palmer's staff,  
And not to grace an awful princely sceptre. (5.1.94-99)

The reference to the palmer's staff is significant. One of the problems with Henry is his piousness. In Part Two, Queen Margaret complains about the character of her royal husband.

[...] all his mind is bent to holiness,  
To number Ave-Maries on his beads;  
His champions are the prophets and apostles,  
His weapons holy saws of sacred writ,

His study is his tilt-yard, and his loves  
Are brazen images of canonized saints. (1.3.52-57)

His religious zeal perhaps would not have been a problem if Henry had not been incapable of violence as well. In the first act of the Third Part, when Richard, Duke of York, has broken into the Parliament House at Westminster, Henry, arriving with his party of nobles, who are all ready to murder the duke who is now sitting in the king's throne, holds them back, explaining that "frowns, words and threats / Shall be war that Henry means to use" (1.1.73-74). This he does, but his words fall flat when Richard is not the least intimidated by his pathetic tirade.

After yielding to Warwick and York, making the latter his heir instead of his son, Henry is chided by Margaret who was not present during this act of Parliament. When she asks for an explanation, Henry says that they forced him, and his wife replies:

Enforced thee! art thou king, and wilt be forced?  
I shame to hear thee speak. Ah, timorous wretch!  
[...]  
Had I been there, which am a silly woman,  
The soldiers should have toss'd me on their pikes  
Before I would have granted to that act.  
But thou preferrest thy life before thine honour: (1.1.247-263)

We have seen how the Machiavellian Henry IV understood the importance of controlling his public image. His gullible grandson has no such understanding. In Part Three, Henry VI is still unable to see why he, in spite of all his pious virtues, is not loved by his people:

My pity hath been balm to heal their wounds,  
My mildness hath allay'd their swelling griefs,  
My mercy dried their water-flowing tears;  
I have not been desirous of their wealth;  
Nor much oppress'd them with great subsidies,  
Nor forward of revenge, though they much err'd.  
Then why should they love Edward more than me? (4.8.38-44)

Henry has in fact shown such feebleness and incompetence that none of these virtues has come to any good for anyone in his kingdom. However, it is also true, as Reese points out, that in this statement, “Henry offers a recognisable ideal of kingship at which no one else in the trilogy has even hinted” (1961: 202). In other words, in a perfect world, Henry would have been the perfect king, but as things are, he is nothing short of a disaster. The dying Clifford compares Henry to the young Phaeton who, being unable to steer it properly, borrows Phoebus’s sun-chariot, but who, being unable to steer it properly, wreaks havoc through his incompetence:

O Phoebus, hadst thou never given consent  
That Phaethon should cheque thy fiery steeds,  
Thy burning car never had scorch’d the earth!  
And, Henry, hadst thou sway’d as kings should do,  
[...]  
I and ten thousand in this luckless realm  
Had left no mourning widows for our death;  
And thou this day hadst kept thy chair in peace.  
For what doth cherish weeds but gentle air?  
And what makes robbers bold but too much lenity? (2.6.11-22)

As ridiculous as he may be portrayed to be in Part One and Two, Henry regains much of the viewer’s esteem in Part Three in which his tragic Christ-like goodness shine through. Seeing York’s head on a pike, he tells the queen and Clifford that the sight irks his very soul. When Clifford tells him that he should think of his son, who will now again be the rightful heir to the throne, Henry reminds him of the bad consequences that immoral actions often have:

But Clifford, tell me, didst thou never hear  
That things ill-got had ever bad success.  
[...]  
I’ll leave my son my virtuous deeds behind;  
And would my father had left me no more!” (2.2.45-50).

Henry has now clearly left his royal identity behind him. This becomes even more clear after the battle of Towton, when Henry wanders off and meets two keepers in the forest. As he’s not wearing his crown, they have no idea of who he is. When they observe that he speaks as if he



were king, he makes an interesting reply: “Why, so I am, in mind; and that’s enough” (3.1.60). He continues:

My crown is in my heart, not on my head;  
Not deck’d with diamonds and Indian stones,  
Not to be seen: my crown is called content;  
A crown it is that seldom kings enjoy. (3.1.62-65)

Having finally lost all power, Henry paradoxically and for the first time shows real strength and self-confidence. Like a religious archetype, he has ascended by going down and gained power by losing it. He de facto resigns all power, making Warwick and Clarence protectors of the land: “While I myself will lead a private life / And in devotion spend my latter days, / To sin’s rebuke and my Creator’s praise” (4.6.42-44). As Reese observes, this transformation makes Henry unique in Shakespeare’s History plays: “Outwardly the least fortunate of his kings, he is the only one who is able to say that he is content. Hallowed by suffering and his calm acceptance of it as his worldly lot, no one henceforth can harm him. Self-knowledge has set him free” (Reese 1961: 201).

## 4. Conclusion

In my analysis I have shown some of the complexities of Shakespeare's representation of royal legitimacy, and in particular the notion of the right of inheritance passing from father to son and the tension between competence and incompetence in the figure of the king. We have seen that of the four kings, only the Machiavellian Henry IV and his heroic son can be seen as competent rulers, deserving legitimacy by their ability to rule. The other two, do not have to struggle to appear legitimate but fail utterly as kings. This paradox seems to contain the essence of the two-sided nature of royal legitimacy: inheritance and tradition on the one hand, and political competence on the other. The other side to this paradox is that the loss of kingship corresponds to a gain in moral integrity. Both Richard II and Henry VI are examples of this tendency. Henry IV, on the other hand, moves in the opposite moral direction: becoming king has a very negative effect on his moral character. Here we clearly see the two sides to the idea of being a "good" king. A king in the Platonic and Christian tradition would be good if he was morally 'good', while in the Machiavellian tradition, a king's moral character is irrelevant; what matters is 'the greater good' and his ability to rule and enforce political stability.

With regards to the second question, i.e. if the characterization of Shakespeare as an apologist for kings is reasonable, it should first be said that other poets, such as Ben Jonson, were keener to please the monarch than was Shakespeare: "While Jonson was quick to respond to James's accession with panegyric that responded to royal publications, Shakespeare, as far as we know, did not write an accession poem at all. He did not produce an elegy on Elizabeth's death either, despite expectation that he should" (Rickard 2015:211-212).

According to Reese (1961: 165-66), the History plays are first and foremost didactic in purpose and offer "a straightforward moralising of the Tudor pattern of history", in which Providence, after the sin of deposing Richard II has been paid in sufficient amount of blood and suffering by the English people, makes Henry Tudor's final victory historically necessary. Reese goes one to say that the plays "embody the standard Tudor warning against rebellion, and Shakespeare insists that, however bad or weak the ruler, he must be obeyed" (Reese 1961:168).

"Insists" is a strong word and I would rather argue that what James Shapiro's says about *Henry V* is also true for all his plays: "Those seeking to pinpoint Shakespeare's political views

[...] will always be disappointed. The play is not a political manifesto. Shakespeare resists revelling either in reflective patriotism or in a critique of nationalistic wars, though the play contains elements of both” (Shapiro 2005: 104). In fact, Shakespeare does not tell us which is worst, an incompetent ruler or a rebellious subject, or which is most important: legitimacy through inheritance or through competence. He rather shows us how the complexities of politics can never fully be understood except as part of the intricacies of the human heart.

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