

“My Reformation, Glittering O’er My Fault”: The Evolution Toward Shakespeare’s Ideal Prince

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Modern interpretations of Shakespeare’s Lancastrian Trilogy are shaded by modern morality and understanding of kingship or leadership. This article places the tetralogy within the historical context of Shakespeare’s audience and considers the analogies Shakespeare’s kings represent as deviations from their historical counterparts. Contrary to modern opinion, Henry V (Prince Hal) embodies the ideal morals and executions of the duties of kingship contemporary to the writing of the plays and seeks to present the author’s ideal concept of kingship.

Key Terms: Lancastrian Trilogy; Kingship; Machiavelli; Ethic of office; Self; Divine Right of Kings

While there are chronological interruptions in the writing and production of the plays which comprise the Lancastrian tetralogy,¹ the plays share a common theme: that of the proper performance of the role of kingship. Within the thematic element of the plays, Shakespeare shows the successes and failures of three very different types of rulers and, based on both the treatment of kingship as character and the creative license Shakespeare used in his interpretation of available historic accounts and these plays present a commentary on the ethical dimensions of kingship.

Clearly, the tetralogy presents its audience with three markedly different rulers, but these kings were not only representative of the historic kings.² Through the vehicle of

¹ *Richard II*, *Henry IV 1&2*, and *Henry V* were separated by the writing of other plays as elaborated by Bissett. The chronology is: *Richard II*, *Romeo & Juliet*, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, *The Life and Death of King John*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *Henry IV part 1*, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, *Henry IV part 2*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, *Henry V*. This chronology is based on the *Oxford Shakespeare* chronology. Consequently, the plays have different forms which is made much of by Bissett.

² Healy makes the point that Shakespeare must have been experiencing some commercial success with these types of historical tragedies because he produced so many. Representations of historical kings were frequent and, therefore, the theatre-going audience must have been interested in the subject in

the plays, Shakespeare shows a progression toward his ideal ruler. This begins with Richard II, a classical king; moves to Henry IV, a Machiavellian king; and ends with Henry V, the modern and amalgam king. While Richard II and Henry IV have documented ties to both history and rulers in Shakespeare’s time (Elizabeth I and James I), Henry V has only the historical tie though he has the longest appearance in the tetralogy³. Because of the prominence of Henry V and the license taken with the historical account, he serves to define Shakespeare’s ideal king.

I. Discourse

There is a wealth of criticism which takes Shakespeare out of the context of the English Renaissance and the Middle Age understanding of the purpose of the theater and the “ethics of office⁴. ” These authors try to make a place for the plays within a modern understanding of the democracy of

the 1600s. This assumption can be coupled with the conflation of the historic War of the Roses and the reign of the lineage of Tudors.

³ Henry V or Prince Hal appears in three of the four plays and has more stage time than his father Bolingbroke/Henry IV (the other figure who appears in three of the four).

⁴ This is the idea that morality is defined by fulfillment of a specific role within society. Directly opposed to the modern concept of morality as coming from either divinity or from fulfillment of the self.

governance and morality, complicated by the impulse to interpret Shakespeare’s characters as “Selves,” or psychologically rich humanist constructs. Interpreting the plays in this way forces a modern morality of the individual onto the characters⁵. Also, modern morality tries to confine these “people” as having moral agency or individual integrity.

Modern scholars like Condren are making an attempt to reconcile Shakespeare to the morality of his contemporaries and the ethical and political conversation taking place at the time. This connection is integral, not only to understanding the creative portrayal of the Lancastrian kings but, to appreciating the veiled criticism of the Tudor reign inherent in *Richard II*⁶. It is necessary to understand, also, that 16th century theater audiences were looking for subtext⁷ in plays (Healy 52).

Shakespeare’s tetralogy seeks to define the terms of kingship and the ethics of an evolving concept of popular governance. This reinterprets the ideas of the “two bodies of the king,” the place of common morality or religion in kingship, and the roles of pageantry and divine right in the plays and in the office of king. Richard II, Henry IV,

and Henry V⁸ are exemplars of Shakespeare’s ideas on monarchy, an evolution on Machiavelli’s Italian “Prince” in the more modern rule of Henry V, and the writer’s conceptualization of the ideal monarch.

In order to properly frame my interpretation, it is important to put this argument within the context of 17th century morality. This is primarily referred to as the “morality of office.” As elaborated upon by Condren, individuals contemporary to Shakespeare were not considered to have moral utility as a “Self” but morality was defined by performance of an office, the function which gave a person a specific social responsibility. In this sense, a king was good or bad, but the man was not. In her article, Condren gives the examples of Prospero and King Lear as immoral individuals in their neglect of the duties of their office but states that the opposite could be true as well. Angelo’s actions in *Measure for Measure* are considered immoral because he takes the responsibilities of office to the extreme by neglecting subjectivity, similarly the actions of Macbeth, Tamora, Richard II, and Richard III would be immoral because they ignore the rights taken from others and the damage done by their actions (Condren 197). The application of self-awareness and humanist morality leads the modern reader to interpret the characters⁹ as independent

⁵ According to dramatic scholarship of the period, the characters in the plays were understood by Shakespeare and his contemporaries to be only dramatic constructs and not dimensional representations of people.

⁶ This idea is bolstered by the indictment and testimony of members of the Lord Chamberlain’s Men at the 1601 trial of the Essex conspirators. (Healy, 49)

⁷ Shakespeare is known for relying heavily on wordplay and for presenting duplicitous characters through language. These were vigilant spectators whose interpretation of the plays were integral to the included themes. McDonald specifically cites Richard II as employing wordplay to enhance characterization (Healy 46).

⁸I will follow the prevailing mode of referring to the characters by the names Henry IV and Henry V when referring to their kingship and Bolingbroke and Prince Hal when referring to their prior actions or status (ethically or otherwise) as common men.

⁹It is important to note that part of this slippage is the impulse to interpret characters in the plays as representative of people which is anachronistic. Shakespeare’s intent, and the understanding of his audience, was that these were dramatic constructs or vehicles for ideas and arguments. To harness these characters with a psychological or personal motivation is to mislead oneself into an overcomplication, and sometimes a warping, of the

figures instead of interdependent "officers" in a medieval society.

Within this same historical period the debate about the source of a king's power, as well as his fitness for office, was distinctly divisive. James VI and his tutor, George Buchanan, set their opposing viewpoints to paper in, respectively, the *Basilikon Doron* and *De Jure Regni Apud Scotos (The Powers of the Crown in Scotland)*. The scholarship of political "mirrors" included treatises by the likes of Sir John Strangeways¹⁰ and Erasmus, whose medical, gardening, and theatrical imagery echoes those of *Richard II*. These mirrors sought to obliquely and artfully inform "princes" of their rights and responsibilities to their office and to their subjects. The debate then rose to encompass the legitimacy and efficacy of the reign of Elizabeth as well as the potential succession of James VI in the absence of legitimate heirs of the "virgin Queen." Upon this discursive "stage" appears the loose allegory of the tetralogy; Richard II, a frivolous and bankrupt monarch, with lineal ties to Elizabeth, faces usurpation by Bolingbroke, a disinherited and politically popular duke, within the genealogy of the Earl of Essex. It becomes clear why the performance of the, then antiquated, story of Richard by the Lord Chamberlain's Men on the eve of the attempted rebellion was an important dimension in the trial of the conspirators¹¹.

purpose of the players and actions presented. (Condren and Healy)

¹⁰"We maintayne that the king is king by inhererent birth-right, they say his kingly power is an office upon trust." (Healy 59)

¹¹The analogy had been associated with the play, probably inherent to its creation, but had been somehow overlooked by the court of Elizabeth. This may have had something to do with the censoring of the deposition scene in its original performances but this interpretation was enforced by subtle wordplay and duplicity within the characters on-stage for which

Within this political and philosophical construct, Shakespeare posits three types of monarchs. The best way to view the writer's critique is to individually assess the kingly characters, their successes and failures, within the moral and political systems in place in the time they were written. These analyses will also take into consideration some of the popular characterizations of these same figures in deference to the discourse of the political body of the Bard.

II. Richard II

At the opening of the tetralogy, we are in the reign of Richard II, chronologically just before his historic deposition in 1399. In the play, Richard is the rightful king by birth and seats himself firmly within the divine right of kings. He frequently references himself as a divinity and is reaffirmed by the Bishop of Carlisle who assures Richard that God has made him King and will maintain his rule (RIII, ii, 27-28).

Richard II represents a monarch of the old tradition; he is firmly tied to the concept of divine rule and frequently uses religious argument and parallel to assert his authority. This is a view reflected in James II treatise *Basilikon Doron*. In the *Basilikon Doron*, James draws a clear parallel between following the will of the king as faithful subject and practicing faithful Christianity. The first book defines the correct practices of religion (for the king and, indirectly, for his people) where the second book relates the appropriate way to honor and obey the king as God's vassal.

While Richard is ideologically linked to James I, the audience in the time of Shakespeare would have seen allusions to Elizabeth. These link are strengthened by

¹⁶th century audiences were more attuned to seeking. (Healy 49-50)

Shakespeare's additions to the available information on the historical King Richard II. The charges against Richard of pillaging the country to wage foreign war are reflective of the accusations against Elizabeth. Another connection is available in the symbolism of the lapsed garden and the failure of Elizabeth to produce an heir.

In history and in the diegesis, Richard is the rightful ruler of England. He is the last in the medieval lineage of English kings and, as such, believes that his right to rule rests in the will of God. Within the medieval conceptualization of kingship, the laws of rule are of the utmost importance.¹² It can be extrapolated that a king who does not respect the law of his office invalidates the law of the land for his people. In this understanding of kingship, Bolingbroke has no right to depose him because his "office" is that of subject whose morality is based upon his responsibility to fulfill the will of the king.

For every man that Bolingbroke hath pressed
To lift shrewd steel against our golden crown,
God for His Richard hath in heavenly pay
A glorious angel. Then, if angels fight,
Weak men must fall, for heaven still guard the
right. (RIII, ii, 58-62)

Here, Richard denigrates the forces Bolingbroke has raised because this band has no right to subvert the will of God. Richard makes it clear that he expects the efforts of God on his behalf because of the religious nature of his station. This passage also acknowledges Bolingbroke's popularity among the people.

Despite Richard correlating himself with the Sun and Christ, the audience sees that he is a morally bankrupt monarch, willing to usurp

the goods and moneys of his people (and even his closest advisors and family) to finance his extravagance and his interests in the Irish conflict. In the text of the play, Richard does not consider himself a tyrant, instead frequently aligning himself with the embodiment of an earthly God, famously stating "we were not born to sue but to command" (RI, i, 10) and characterizing himself as the lion that tames leopards. He is the Sun king and he invokes a spiritual understanding of his own power:

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. (RIII, ii, 54-57)

In this first half of this quotation, Richard makes it clear that there is no earthly force that can "unking" him because his is a divine right. His expansive understanding of the divine right of kings shows him no limits. This interpretation is reaffirmed in the interpretation of Richard II in the film adaptation, *The Hollow Crown*. Richard appears backlit when he wears the crown, his surroundings are white and evocative of heaven, and he frequently employs an open-armed "crucifixion" posture. He is able to see his people as subject to his whims and as service to his licentiousness.

His is a rule that relies on grandeur and pomp instead of justness. As Gaunt puts it, "Landlord of England art thou now, not king" (RII, i) and, in Scene II, Richard is implicated in the crimes of which Mowbray stands accused. If he appears in ministration of the law in the first scene, it is in service to maintaining a façade of impartiality (Healy 53) When he has emptied the coffers of the kingdom, he charges his court with procuring funds from the people by, essentially, any means they can conceive. This plan isn't enacted because the king is interrupted with the news that Gaunt is dying whereupon he plots to take his uncle's

¹²Bissett elaborates on this point saying that the rules of kingship are more important "than either to win or lose it" going on to state that the form of rule was more important than the substance of the king. (Bissett 213)

money and goods in the absence (banishment) of his rightful heir. This usurpation of Bolingbroke's patrimony not only signifies the revelation of Richard's foibles but it also shows the king breaking the implied contract of the social order of which the patrimony is part.

Richard's tyranny isn't necessarily malicious but more selfish; the only needs and desires for which this king cares are his own. While it can be found many times in the text, it is most expressly seen after the death of Gaunt, "Think what you will, we seize into our hands/ His plate, his goods, his money and his lands." (RII, I, 35) Though Richard has already been admonished for his demands by York, he insists and expressly lets York know that his judgment is unimportant in the face of the king. The only argument that is made in the play for the continued rule of Richard is that he is the divine ruler and is God's representative on earth. The conflict is perfectly outlined by the parable of the gardener in Act III Scene IV. If the monarch doesn't protect the people from the blight of "caterpillars" what reason do the people have to maintain the kingdom (Healy 54 & 57).

Importantly, in his breach of the social contract of Bolingbroke's inheritance¹³, the king creates legitimacy for his own deposition (Philips 167). If the laws of

inheritance do not apply to a king, then the genealogical perpetuation of kingship is of no significance. It is far before his famous speech in Act 4 of the play, therefore, that he rescinds his right to the crown. Bolingbroke, as part of the king's own lineage, has a similar familial claim to the throne but, more importantly, he is popular among the people. It is this "courtship to the common people" that Richard sneers earlier in the play which, ultimately, allow his return from exile and the popular support he garners in his campaign to regain his matrimonial rights. Philips makes the case that, in all likelihood, it is not simply Bolingbroke's public popularity which gains him support but the probability that the majority of the kingdom had been victim to Richard's seizures and failings by this point in his rule (Philips 167).

In the absence of King Richard, the Duke of York is interim leader. He sympathizes with Bolingbroke and does not prosecute him on the return of the latter because of both familial bonds and his ability to see the unjustness of the king's actions. This is an instance in the play in which we can see what Machiavelli would constitute as a failing of a "prince." York is a ruler who relies on popular support of the members of court, a prince of "the great" and is at the mercy of the masses (Machiavelli 99-100). York's conflict between the rights of kings and the rights of the people is that of the audience as well.

The more Richard loses his ability to identify as the "God-King," the more he relies on the symbols of office. In the latter half of the play he refers frequently to the power of the crown and this connection becomes clear in the deposition scene. As Richard extends the crown to Bolingbroke, symbolizing his willing abdication, he in turn withdraws it and places it on his own

¹³"But when it is necessary for him to proceed against the life of someone, he must do it on proper justification and for manifest cause, but above all things he must keep his hands off the property of others, because men more quickly forget the death of their father than the loss of their patrimony. Besides, pretexts for taking away the property are never wanting; for he who has once begun to live by robbery will always find pretexts for seizing what belongs to others; but reasons for taking life, on the contrary, are more difficult to find and sooner lapse." (Machiavelli 92)

head. This scene is also rife with Christ images as he refers to the court as Judases or Pilates in turn. His selfishness and identity of self simply as king leaves him as "a shadow" of himself. The image of shadows is first seen in Act II Scene II. The conversation between the queen and Bushy declares the difference between Richard the man, the queen's husband, and Richard the king as he performs the duties of war.

Mirrors and reflections are one of the many complex and recurrent themes in the play. The mirror functions both as a device by which Richard explores his own nature in the deposition scene and an allusion to the proliferation of political "mirrors" as instructions for rulers in the time of Shakespeare. Machiavelli is part of this canon but the debate between Elyot and Moore in Europe explored the dichotomy between the physical, human body of the king and the divine identity of the role of king (Healy 60-61). Richard himself explores the boundaries of the two concepts during his brief imprisonment and he concludes: "Hath with the king's blood stain'd the king's own land./Mount, mount, my soul! thy seat is up on high;/Whilst my gross flesh sinks downward, here to die." (RV,v, 112) Essentially, the soul represents the office of kingship as divine but the physical body is that of a man.

III. Henry IV

Henry IV represents a Machiavellian prince. He has come to rule because of his greater strength and popularity with the masses and he maintains his rule by intimidating his court. He is a prince in command of his army and well-practiced in war. In the movie, he is rarely presented without the symbols of kingship. Henry IV holds tight to his symbols of authority: the scepter, his crown, and is frequently seated upon the throne. He closely monitors his court, wary

of dissent, and worries about the fitness of Prince Hal for his eventual rule. Because his rule is the result of usurpation, whether justified or not, Henry IV maintains a fraught grasp on the crown of England. Not only is his kingship arguably legal but he also inherits the kingdom of the unkempt garden as it is characterized:

...When our sea-walled garden, the whole
land, Is full of weeds, her fairest flowers
choked up, Her fruit trees all unpruned, her
hedges ruined, Her knows disordered, and her
wholesome herbs Swarming with caterpillars.
(RIII, iv, 40-47)

This section of the parable of the gardener from the end of *King Richard II* presents England as the "sea-walled garden" and unkempt state of the fruit trees, untended weeds, and caterpillars represent the ills and factions within the kingdom. This state of decay was begun by Richard II, as we learn from the dying words of Gaunt (RII, i, 33). The parallels of poetic language here make the similarity even more apparent¹⁴. He is also marred by the instigation of Richard's murder, as well as the quasi-legitimate executions of Bushy and Greene¹⁵.

Extrapolating from Richard II's allusion to Elizabeth, it is the failure of the "garden" of England that historically leads to the reign of James I. The ruler had released his *Basilikon Doron* to cement his connection to the Tudor line and reaffirm his legitimate succession to the English throne. To the people of England at the time, he was holding tight to the symbols of kingship because he wasn't their true king.

In Henry IV, the voice of the people is represented by the Chorus or the character

¹⁴The device of repetition, here in the words "our" and "her," as in the use of "this" in Gaunt's soliloquy show a sort of classical lament of the land.

¹⁵ The implication being that this constitutes the removal of "caterpillars" from the kingdom (Baines 28).

of Rumor (*Henry IV Part 2*). This is evocative of the “lords of misrule,” a common element of festivities in the 16th century. These were common people dressed in the trappings of monarchy, paraded through town, and serving to mock the rulers. Henry IV clung to his symbols of office and held them forward to support his artificial rule in much the same way that the English felt that James I wore the crown. These characterizations are indirect and carefully hidden in the text of the play but support for this theory can be found in the gap between the historical reference text and the action of the plays. Shakespeare added details which are not found or are sometimes completely contradicted by the histories. (Healy 72-77)

True to Machiavelli’s “The Prince,” Henry must strive constantly to maintain the crown because he is not a natural-born king, nor divinely inspired. Henry IV became ruler with the aid of others in his court, something against which Machiavelli specifically warns:

...for men change their rulers willingly, hoping to better themselves, and this hope induces them to take up arms against him who rules... you are not able to keep those friends who put you there because of your not being able to satisfy them in the way they expected, and you cannot take strong measures against them, feeling bound to them (Machiavelli, 43).

This passage outlines the situation through which Henry IV became king. He is supported by titled men who feel they have been disadvantaged by Richard and it warns that the new king has to be vigilant against those people who supported his advance. This also explains the two types of people against whom the king should be prepared. Members of Richard’s court will be displaced by this new king (sometimes by execution) and those who assisted his seizure of the crown will perceive that they are owed by the new ruler.

Henry IV is also a king with a religious prerogative which is never realized. Beginning with the killing of Richard, Henry proposes a quest to the Holy Land to “wash this blood off from my guilty hand” (RV, vi, 49-50). This mission arises again in the beginning of *Henry IV* but is interrupted by the dealings of Harry Percy. The king dies without ever having made his pilgrimage, coming closest by his death in a room named “Jerusalem.” Henry comes to power by force of his own volition, puts on the pretense of common morality, is careful of his allies, and maintains his closeness with the people; in short, Henry IV is Shakespeare’s conception of Machiavelli’s prince. I interpret this failure as a separation between Henry IV and God because of his overthrow of the “divine ruler.” He is also removed from the divine because of his role in the death of Richard, even though it was not by his hand but by his word (RV, vi, 114).

Despite all of Henry’s effort to maintain and strengthen his rule, he sees weakness in Prince Hal. Hal’s patronage of Eastcheap and his debauchery are reminiscent of the excesses in the reign of Richard. He is covetous of his rival’s son (Percy) and the age of war and unrest prophesied by the spared Bishop has come to pass. Henry IV becomes the physical embodiment of the illness within the kingdom:

Then you perceive the body of our kingdom
How foul it is; what rank diseases grow
And with what danger, near the heart of it.
(2III, I)

Here, Henry is characterized as the physical body of the kingdom, suffering with dissent. The disease within the kingdom is the ongoing war; the king suffers from both bodily disease and a “dis-ease” of the mind in his conflicts with himself and with his son. The audience sees Henry as the actor-king; he behaves as a king should behave

but, by birth, is just a man wearing the symbols of office: a hollow body—just as the shadow Richard became.

The connection between Henry’s physical illness and the unrest in the kingdom symbolize his attempt to join his human body, his existence as man, with his political body as king. He has internalized the conflict within the kingdom and his disappointments as king (his son Hal, the continued unrest among the people, the escalating war) causing the increase of his physical frailty. His illness shows a king with a tenuous hold on the crown, unsure of the legacy and legitimacy his son will receive with the crown of England.

IV. Henry V

Henry V, once the fashionable and frivolous (and criminal cohort) Prince Hal, comes to the crown upon the death of his father. This makes Henry V a legitimate successor to the throne, though on the basis of his father’s deposition of the king, and a king of the people because of his education at Eastcheap. Henry V has political alacrity and adeptness and, because of this, modern critics are quick to condemn him as a nefarious prince or as a manipulator. Many of these arguments hinge on the actions of the young Henry at Agincourt against the French prisoners. Henry V must strictly ascribe to the laws of kingship and he interprets this charge in both the responsibility of maintaining and enlarging his kingdom as well as his role as steward of the people¹⁶. An alternative argument would

¹⁶“...If office is a realm of moral responsibility, a division of mankind ‘in divers functions’ (*Henry V*, 1,2,184), the offices Henry assumes, and the specific roles played under their auspices involve him in displaying an acute understanding of prudence and circumscribed responsibility; for in ignorance or abuse of the scope of responsibility lies tyranny.”(Condren 200)

have been that of James VI/I; King Henry, as direct subject to God, has a different standard of morality than that of his subjects. More specifically: if vengeance in heaven is reserved to God (Romans 12:19) and the rightful king is God’s vessel on earth, therefore vengeance and judgment on earth are reserved for the king¹⁷.

Here, the pattern of Shakespeare’s contemporary political allusions break down. There is no ruler to parallel Henry V. The construct of the play’s Henry V must, however, be taken seriously because, just like the other rulers, there are details within the play that are not found in the histories about the Lancastrian lineage. Therefore, the modern reader (instead of seeing a king who represents the worst of both the previous rulers) should see the idealized definition Shakespeare created for the office of king. As king, Henry V makes fair and balanced decisions¹⁸ and to show his advancement beyond his childish indulgence, he executes Falstaff (described Henry IV Part 2 Act II Scene iii) and Bardolf (*Henry V*, III, vi). Henry V’s trueness to the duties of the office of king, opposed as it is to the kings played before him, characterizes him as a man who plays a king. By this, I imply a unity between the two traditional bodies of

¹⁷ John of Salisbury, in a parallel still current in the 16th century, stated that “the king is to God as tyrants are to Satan” resulting in the assumption that revenge was the specific prerogative of the king citing the same biblical reference. (Condren 203)

¹⁸ Henry, in disguise, discusses the morality of his actions by Williams. The soldier feels that the war is unjustly endangering the lives of the soldiers and that the king is being reckless with the well-being of his people. Henry counters that the king has no more responsibility for these deaths than for the health of a “beggar’s knee” that is asked to bend. Just as Henry V has to fulfill his role of king and ascribe to the morals inherent to it, Williams has to fulfill his role as subject. In asking Williams to fulfill his “office,” Henry has no complicity in the result. (Condren 200-201)

kingship. Prince Hal's youthful education among the people has come to inform the just fulfillment of the body politic (alternately referred to as the role or office of king) as King Henry V. This is what makes him Shakespeare's ideal prince.

Henry V fulfills his duties as the custodian of the English people. This is symbolized in the execution of the French prisoners. When the French violate the rules (or office) of war and murder the porters, Henry seeks justice for the least of his kingdom¹⁹. He has a duty to protect the boys which he has failed so he exacts justice in the same way that a parent (God the father) might. Henry V has inherited a kingdom of plague and war and he is a warrior king. Within such constraints, his other executions can all be linked to his performance of office.

V. Synthesis

The plays, at the time of their performance and production, were heavily censored by the crown. Often this occurred to such a degree that *Richard II* completely omitted the deposition scene. The connection and parallel between the tetralogy and the Tudor monarchs was so heavily perceived that when *Richard II* was performed on the eve of the Essex Rebellion, the players were called to testify at the hearing, though none were ultimately sentenced (James & Rubenstein 144).

¹⁹ This is in direct contrast to Richard II who Gaunt characterizes as a greedy cormorant (RII, i, 30). The symbolism here is partially lost on a modern audience because, during the Renaissance, the monarchs were aligned with the symbol of the pelican. The pelican was depicted as tearing chunks of their own bodies off to feed their young so Gaunt is implying that Richard is a perversion of the role of king (Healy 57).

The tetralogy, then, is both history and current events to Shakespeare's contemporaries. Shakespeare uses the character-constructs in the plays in order to comment, somewhat covertly, on the existent monarchy and ridicule their attempts to legitimize their rule with these same histories. The writer portrays Elizabeth (Richard II), a ruler who anchors her/his role in divinity and tries to assimilate the physical body into the masculine/divine role of king; James I (Henry IV), a pretender to the throne grasping tightly to the symbols and traditions of kingship by exercise of power; and, finally, Henry V. This is the monarch without a parallel in Shakespeare's time who exhibits the duties and responsibilities of the traditional monarch while maintaining power through battle and support of the masses: the ideally modern monarch.

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