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The Crafting of Political Mythology in Shakespeare's Second Tetralogy: Biblical Allusions As  
Central to the Deification of the English Monarch

Shakespeare's Second Tetralogy consists of a series of historical plays that showcase theater and public storytelling as artforms through which ideology can be created. Notably, early modern England employed the divine-right theory of kingship, which functioned as both a political and religious doctrine of legitimacy; not only was the king an embodiment of God's will, he also gained royal and political authority by way of his connection to the divine.<sup>1</sup> Under the reign of Richard II, the English monarchy was considered to be a sacred institution and the king to be a sacred figure. However, upon Henry Bolingbroke's return from exile and the outbreak of the rebellion against King Richard's rule, the question of whether the monarchy is indubitably sacred in nature is brought to the forefront of these four plays. Not only does the Second Tetralogy display the decline of the English monarchy's sacred character, *Richard II*, *Henry IV part 1*, and *Henry V* invite the audience to witness the degradation of the mythology surrounding the king. The idea that the monarch is emblematic of God's majesty is a piece of political rhetoric and the differing ways in which biblical allusions are invoked in each play signifies how that political ideology has been constructed and, subsequently, broken down.

In order to uphold the existing ideology that an act against the king is an act against God, Richard II vigorously emphasizes his sacred status as an anointed king and, conversely,

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<sup>1</sup> William Shakespeare, "Introduction," in *The Tragedy of King Richard the Second*, ed. Frances E. Dolan (New York: Penguin Books, 2017), xxviii - xlili.

condemns the rebellion against him as sacrilegious and treasonous. Northumberland insists that Richard read the charges that the rebellion has brought against him, to which he refuses and subsequently declares “...some of you, with Pilate, wash your hands,/Showing an outward pity, yet you Pilates/Have here delivered me to my sour cross,/And water cannot wash away your sin” (4.1.239-242). Richard II likens the rebels to Pilate — the official who ordered the crucifixion of Jesus.<sup>2</sup> To compare the rebels to Ponticus Pilate effectively condemns and accuses them of the most evil act imaginable — killing God and subjecting him to public humiliation. This comparison also enables Richard to establish himself as a martyr by equating himself to Jesus. In addition, the assertion that “water cannot wash away your sin” alludes to the Christian practice of baptism, which involves the immersion of an individual in holy water so as to wash away original sin and welcome them into the Church pure and renewed.<sup>3</sup> The way Richard is invoking the symbolism of baptism suggests that in this instance, the holy water has been rendered powerless due to the impossibility of redemption after committing such a crime against one’s king. Richard II further states that “...I have given here my soul’s consent/T’ undock the pompous body of a king;/Made glory base, a sovereignty a slave,/Proud majesty a subject, state a peasant” (4.1.250-252), which effectively establishes a distinction between himself as a sacred king and his successor as something other than a sanctified monarch.

The Bishop of Carlisle also invokes biblical allusions to reinforce the sacred status of Richard II, which illustrates that he is participating in the construction of political ideology and is aware that such ideology requires public consensus in order to be effective. In the company of Bolingbroke and numerous lords, the Bishop of Carlisle speaks out against the rebels’ campaign

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<sup>2</sup> “Mark,” in *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, ed. Bruce M. Metzger and Roland E. Murphy (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 47-76.

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and proclaims that although he is not an authority figure in the presence of such noble men, his faith compels him to publicly condemn this act of heresy (4.1.115-116). Carlisle proceeds to prophesize the internal divisions that will plague England if King Richard II is in fact deposed — “O, if you raise this house against this house,/It will the woofullest division prove/That ever fell upon this cursed earth” (4.1.145-147). This assertion contrasts John of Gaunt’s statement in the beginning of the play of Britain as “This other Eden, demi-paradise,/... This blessed plot, this earth, this realm, this England” (2.1.42-50). Carlisle furthers the image of the English monarchy as a prelapsarian kind of state by describing King Richard II as the incarnation of God’s majesty (4.1.125-127). Carlisle is a devoutly religious figure, yet there is rhetorical intentionality behind his condemnation of a subject passing judgment upon their king (4.1.121-122). He attempts to use his authority as a Church official to convince the rebels that deposing an anointed king will condemn them, as well as future generations of England, in God’s court (4.1.140-144). By asserting that Bolingbroke’s rebellion will irrevocably sever the connection between the English monarchy and God’s divine realm, the Bishop of Carlisle continues to craft the biblical mythology that accompanies an English monarch.

As the Second Tetralogy progresses, the contrast between Richard II and King Henry IV becomes more apparent through the changing applications and implications of biblical allusions. At the conclusion of *Richard II*, the recently crowned King Henry IV proclaims “I’ll make a voyage to the Holy Land/To wash this blood off from my guilty hand” (5.6.49-50). In this instance, King Henry IV directly admits that he has committed a crime against Richard II. Such an acknowledgment of guilt and wrongdoing is not said again by the King until *Henry IV part 2* when he is on his deathbed — “How I came by the crown, O God forgive,/And grant it may with thee in true peace live” (4.5.218-219). Moreover, the anxiety that plagues King Henry IV’s reign,

which culminates in him begging for God's forgiveness, perhaps signifies that Richard's religiously infused rhetoric has succeeded in imbuing doubt into Henry IV as to the legitimacy of his own rule. King Henry IV's resolve to travel to the Holy Land to atone for his sins carries the implication that he is genuinely interested in righting wrongs and establishing himself as a moral, Christian king. However, this reference to the Holy Land could be another instance of carefully designed rhetoric intended to restore his connection to God's power. The different ways in which biblical allusions are invoked throughout the Second Tetralogy is one lens through which Shakespeare invites his audience to understand and interpret the English monarchy.

Following the deposition and murder of Richard II, King Henry IV now presides over a world that has fallen from grace; *Henry IV part 1* illustrates that transition via the use of biblical allusions in pro-war rhetoric, rather than in relation to monarchical authority. A year has passed since the end of *Richard II* and the beginning of *Henry IV part 1* (1H4 1.1.28), during which time civil wars have broken out between the English and the Scottish and Welsh rebels. These conflicts have forced King Henry IV to further delay his long-awaited plan to fight in the Crusades (1.1.47-48). He implores the lords in his company to see that "As far as to the sepulcher of Christ [Jerusalem]—/Whose soldier now, under whose blessed cross/We are impressed and engaged to fight —/Forthwith a power of English shall we levy" (1.1.19-22). The voyage to the Holy Land that King Henry IV previously framed as an effort to atone for the wrongful deposition and murder of Richard II is now described as a military campaign. Henry IV uses the royal "we" to assert that his desires are synonymous with those of the people and vice versa.<sup>4</sup> Further, the King's use of the word *impresséd*, which means conscripted in this case, conveys the message that the English army must fight in the Crusades because as Christians, it is

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<sup>4</sup> Claire McEachern, ed. *The First Part of King Henry the Fourth* (New York: Penguin Books, 2017), 2.

their religious obligation to defend and uphold Christianity.<sup>5</sup> These religious wars in Jerusalem have been converted into a rallying cry for England which, as evidenced by King Henry IV's final advice to his son, is considered to be an effective way to avoid or subdue internal disputes. On his deathbed, King Henry IV instructs Hal — soon to be King Henry V — “Be it thy course to busy giddy minds/With foreign quarrels...” (*2H4* 4.5.213-214). Such advice demonstrates King Henry IV's conviction that if people are consumed with foreign conquest, less attention is paid to domestic problems. Therefore, from the onset of *Henry IV part 1*, Shakespeare displays to the audience that representing the Holy Land as the place for atonement is rhetorical language. King Henry IV implores the imagery and religiously powerful connotation of the Holy Land to compensate for the sacrilegious crime he has admitted to committing.

The final play in the Second Tetralogy showcases King Henry's attempt to restore the sacred character and legitimacy of the monarchy; the question of whether past wrongs can be amended in the present remains at the forefront. The devaluation of that which is sacred — a process that first began in *Richard II* — comes to a culmination when the Archbishop of Canterbury proclaims that the divine is no longer the realm from which legitimacy and truth are derived. In the beginning of *Henry V*, Canterbury declares that “...miracles are ceased/And therefore we must needs admit the means/How things are perfected” (1.1.67-69). A supposedly devout religious figure like the Archbishop asserting that the natural world — “the means” — is the source of truth in this England represents a fundamental inversion of the hierarchy that was in place during Richard II's reign.<sup>6</sup> Canterbury's statement directly contrasts the Bishop of Carlisle's; Carlisle condemned the rebellion's acts of treason and heresy (*RII* 4.1.115-116), whereas Canterbury observes no religious foundation for King Henry V's rule. The crown was

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<sup>5</sup> “impress, v.2” OED Online. December 2021. Oxford University Press.  
<https://www-oed-com.oqa.ucsc.edu/view/Entry/92716?rskey=dTA2eN&result=2> (accessed February 26, 2022).

<sup>6</sup> Claire McEachern, ed. *The Life of King Henry the Fifth* (New York: Penguin Books, 2017), 7.

once a sacred office, but it has now become a piece of private property in that it can be passed down according to the owner's preference and anyone can make a claim to it. The traditional order of succession from the sovereign to their eldest son is still in place, but the argument remains that Henry IV was an illegitimate king and thus so too would Henry V.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, Henry V refers to himself as a "Christian king" (1.2.242), but never as a sacred king; the throne is no longer described as a sacred position and the monarch is no longer likened to God.

The divine mythology of the monarch has been progressively stripped down and while the previous two monarchs have been anguished by the collapse of their political rhetoric, King Henry V embraces the man underneath the crown and strives to be a transparent leader. On the eve of the Battle of Agincourt, King Henry V prays for God to bestow courage in the hearts of English soldiers and to believe in the sincerity of his efforts to atone for his father's sins; Henry V has given Richard a proper burial (4.1.287) and has built chantries in this anointed king's honor (4.1.293). Henry V is committed to the process of atonement and in doing so, he demonstrates his resolve to be a better king than both Richard and his father ever were. Moreover, the act of prayer signifies that Henry V, like all other Christians, is one of God's subjects; the king is not the embodiment or mortal manifestation of God, he is instead at the mercy of God. This moment of reckoning parallels what Richard II endured when confronted with the gravity of Bolingbroke's rebellion. In light of this immediate threat to his kingship, Richard II questions what it means to be king (*RII* 3.2.177); the sovereignty of death makes even the king a subject, epitomized by the imagery of the hollow crown (*RII* 3.2.160). In the aforementioned scene that depicts the final moments before Richard's deposition, King Richard II admits that "...my wretchedness doth bait [torment] myself" (*RII* 4.1.238)—he is plagued by

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<sup>7</sup> William Shakespeare, "Introduction," in *The Life of King Henry the Fifth*, ed. Claire McEachern (New York: Penguin Books, 2017), xxviii - xxxiv.

his own shortcomings upon the realization that he is mortal and therefore vulnerable. In this sense, the king becomes a man once again, rather than an image in God's likeness. While Richard II is tormented by the debasement of his hallowed status, Henry V uses this realization as a reminder to bring humanity into his rule. Henry V's pursuit of war in France has placed the lives of thousands of Englishmen into his hands — he is responsible should these people die, which motivates him to consider his position as separate from his own ego (4.1.222-224). Not only are biblical allusions no longer used to assert the sacred character of the monarchy, the association between the monarch and God has collapsed entirely over the course of the Second Tetralogy. The disintegration of the mythology surrounding the king began with Richard's questioning of what makes the king any different from his subjects and culminates with Henry V's notion that "...the king is but a man..." (4.1.99).

Shakespeare reveals that the connection between the monarchy and the divine is a political project designed to reinforce authority and establish legitimacy — it is a fiction; but the task of those in power is to convince the masses that this fiction is worth believing in. Ultimately, the English monarchy is unable to maintain their mythology and the association between the monarch and God fades throughout the course of the Second Tetralogy. King Richard II's description of his deposition as a fall from grace begins the unraveling of the monarchy's sacred character, and Henry V completes this trajectory with his realization that the king is no different from the men he governs. By bringing the monarchy into the theater, Shakespeare accentuates the similarities between these two institutions. The audience is encountering these historical figures through a fictionalized medium; in other words, the audience is seeing the personas these characters perform. Shakespeare exposes the theatricality of political and cultural ideology by showcasing the notion that the king is divinely anointed as a piece of rhetoric.