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Elizabethan Construction of Kingship

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Abstract

This paper is about how the image of Elizabethan monarch was constructed as a sacred figure and how this was conducted by purely ideological means that extended to employ art and literature and how state ideological institutions were the source of power for the monarch. It attempts to examine how art and literature were very much ideological and political whereby they were channelled to serve the intended purpose. It also sheds some light on a possible echoing of this image in a few contemporary Shakespearean and Marlovian plays.
Keywords: Elizabethan image of Kingship, Falstaff, Tamburlaine.

Looking at an illustration (Figure No.1) used to teach school children, in Britain, about the dynasties of kingship in England invites one to remark certain characteristics within which to the way a monarch is regarded. With the exception of the time when the monarchy was absent from England, when the "Commonwealth" is depicted as lacking a solid base and pedestal as well as the lofty top, the illustration presents the English kings and queens as pillars. It is worth remarking the way those monarchs are presented as varying in heights and width according to their reigns but yet having in common one single identity: being all "columns", thus pinpointing precisely the significance of portraying a monarch as a pillar. If the image of kingship is still pedagogically so high in a country where the figure of the queen is sometimes reduced to a T.V." spitting image" and the need for a monarch is debated between Labour and Tory parties, how about the figure of the monarch then at a time when kingship was at its peak in shaping the politics of the country? How about the monarch after whom the early modern period was named?

The view about the right to rule legitimated hierarchical social structure throughout the Middle Ages, namely that God has placed people in their social position at birth. It would be, therefore, contrary to the will of God to attempt to move from one's position in order to change or reverse the situation. This view derives from the doctrine of the "Great Chain of Being". The concept is drawn from the writings of Dionysius the Areopagite[1] in the 5th century A.D., which although they were later shown to be unauthentic were influential in the Middle Ages. An important derivative of this view refers to the monarch whose position was considered to be ordained by God in exactly the same way.

Nevertheless, the idea that the king was nominated by God was very much shaken on a number of occasions, most notoriously when King Richard I, "Lion Heart", who led a crusade and fought his way victoriously to the Holy Land was captured in Vienna in 1192 on his way back to England. The significance of which is that the king is vulnerable like any other man, disregarding the mystical characteristics and rights with which he is endowed. Despite the changes in the sixteenth century, this view of the Middle Ages was still current amongst the mass of the people, and the notion of the divine right of kings was used even much later by Charles I as a justification of his right to rule[2]. According to J.N.Figgis in the theory of *The Divine Right of Kings* (1896)[3] Chapter V, this principle gained credibility after the English Reformation because it was necessary to justify obedience to the king rather than to the Pope. The Pope claimed the right to depose kings by divine authority and indeed excommunicated Elizabeth I. It was necessary, therefore, to claim divine authority for the monarch's right to rule to counteract this. The issue was complicated at the time of Elizabeth, however, by the controversy surrounding her hereditary status.

The accession of Queen Elizabeth I to the throne provoked two legal problems concerning her claim. Firstly, her being considered as an illegitimate offspring of Henry VIII., secondly, her being a woman. The annulment of the marriage of Henry VIII to Catherine of Aragon was considered by many to have no legal basis. This made Henry's subsequent marriages bigamous and the children of these marriages illegitimate. If Elizabeth was illegitimate, she could not succeed to the throne and the next in line of succession was Mary Stuart (Mary, Queen of Scots) who was a Catholic. The Tudor myth was a helpful means to support Elizabeth's claim to the throne. It was developed by the writers of chronicles of the 16th century as an interpretation of recent history. It maintained

[1]. See Colm Luibheid, (transl.), *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, Paulist Press (Classics of Western Spirituality), New York, 1987.
[2] See Richard Cust, *Charles I: a political life* (Longman Pearson, 2005), see also Kevin Sharpe, *The Personal Rule of Charles I* (Yale University Press, 1992).
[3] See J.N.Figgis, *The Divine Rights of Kings*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1914).

that the Tudor dynasty was the historical solvent of the problems in English society springing from the War of the Roses between the two houses of Lancaster and York over the right for succession to the English throne from 1455 till 1485. The abdication and killing of King Richard II was presented in the influential chronicles as the historical guilt of the English people, which generated civil war and culminated in the bloody tyranny of Richard III. According to this perception, the first Tudor mona2rch Henry VII led the nation into the Golden Age, the culmination of which was the reign of Elizabeth.[1] An example of Elizabeth's use of this myth was her being presented by artists and poets as Oriana, Astraea, the goddess of Justice who lived upon the earth during the Golden Age, Albion shining sun, or Judith or Deborah.[2]

The problem concerning Elizabeth's claim to the crown as a woman led the Tudor jurists and state institutions to invoke ideological legitimization to deal with the issue. The old metaphor of the realm portrayed as a body shaped by too many men as its torso and topped by the huge crowned head of the king to unify in one single image the concept of the "King's two Bodies" (figure 2) was thereby a substantial point for Tudor jurists to start with. In his "Study in Medieval Political Theory", Ernst Kantorowic demonstrated how specific "ciphers" such as crown, dignity, patria etc. were brought to the foreground and promulgated as the basic interests of the nation.[3] According to Edmund Plowden:

> "The King has in him two Bodies, viz ., a Body natural, and a Body politic. His Body natural (if it be considered in itself) is a body mortal, subject to all Infirmities that come by Nature or Accident, to the Imbecility of Infancy or old Age, and to the like Defects that happen to natural Bodies of other People. But his Body politic is a Body that cannot be seen or handled, consisting of Policy and Government, and constituted for the Direction of the People."[4]

Whereas the king's body physical is apt to change, his body politics remains unchangeable; what matters is the continuation of the position and the function of the king rather than the actual person who occupies this position, be that a king or a queen. Still, Elizabeth had to negate her sex to secure herself as a ruler, in 1588 she wrote: "I know I have the body of a weak and feeble woman, but I have got n the heart and stomach of a king, and of a king of England too."[5]

Women in Elizabethan England, as it has been often demonstrated, can be classified under two main categories. "high women" and "low women". The category "high women" can be divided into two standards: virgins on the one hand and wives, widows, mothers on the other hand. To put it more bluntly, the second standard, i.e. wives and widows, could be framed as an identity shaped only in connection to men. This connection marks them as polluted women and agents of pollution as well. Counterparting this connection is the chivalric idea of virginity, purity, chastity etc. which places women remotely and without carnal involvement as objects of worship like the Virgin Mary. Queen Elizabeth and her authorities reiterated the tune of virginity with amplification. Elizabeth stated to her Parliament: "And in the end, this shall be for me sufficient, that a marble stone shall declare that a Queen, having reigned such a time, lived and died a virgin."[6] A return to the dichotomization of "high women" as "virgins" and "wives, widows, mothers" will be necessary to classify them in turn as untouched "classical" bodies and touched" grotesque "bodies and to ask a rhetorical question: Which category did Queen Elizabeth belong to? In fact the conceptual idealization of the Virgin Queen included even her corporeal body. We will postulate with *Jacques* Lacan (1901-1981) that sexual identity is constructed through linguistic discourses. Elizabeth described herself publicly and was described by her apparatuses (such as church, court and other institutions)[7] as a woman in terms which rest on her body politic rather than on her body biological, therefore she

[1] Elizabeth I (7 September 1533 – 24 March 1603) became the queen of England and Ireland on 17 November 1558.
[2] On Elizabeth I biography and portraits, see Edward Spencer Beesly, *Queen Elizabeth* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1892.), The Faces of Elizabeth I, *Portraits of Queen Elizabeth I* (http://www.luminarium.org/renlit/elizface.htm).
[3] Ernst H. Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Medieval Political Theology* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957,1998).
[4] Edmund Plowden quoted in Ernst H. Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Medieval Political Theology* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957,1998), p.7.
[5] See Patrick Collinson, "Elizabeth I" in. *The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. (2004),. Retrieved on November 14, 2008, see also J. E. Neale, *Elizabeth I and Her Parliaments, 1559-1581* (1952) and *Elizabeth I and Her Parliaments, 1584-1601* (1957).
[6] Kate Aughterson (Editor),*The English Renaissance: An Anthology of Sources and Documents* (Routledge: 1998), p.102.
[7] On the question of institutions being state apparatuses see, Althusser, Louis, AIdeology and Ideological State Apparatuses, in Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (Bristol: Western Printing Services, 1971), pp. 23-73.

is the "mother" of the" land" and the "mother" of the "nation", a description which would not recall the graphic script or the image of the "grotesque" body of the mother in the Bakhtinian sense which recalls the processes involved: sexual intercourse, pregnancy, a swollen belly, birth-giving, open orifices, breast-feeding. Queen Elizabeth's maternity is rather of a different kind (and this is my point of departure from what is ogten said about the “mother of the nation”), it is a sort of systematic fluctuation to bring about the nation, the land integrated with the figure of the Queen to form an indispensable conception surmounting the minds of her subjects with the land and the worries associated with land, with the nation and aspiration. To this extent, Queen Elizabeth is conceptually neither a man nor a woman, rather (as we have pointed above) a divine figure. Indeed, by virtue of all her institutions, Queen Elizabeth was portrayed as a holy figure: she was St. George (figure No. 3), the title page of the Bible, Astraea, Gloriana, Diana, Cynthia, and the Virgin Queen. This was the side that was technically ritualized by Elizabeth and her court, whereas the other side of her life was privatized, an issue which remains outside the latitude within which we channel our investigation today.[1] Nevertheless, as Louis Adrian Montrose has shown, Elizabeth shaped the fantasies of her male subjects by her sexual identity.[2]

Queen Elizabeth's power swung between using violence as an exercise of power and/or maintaining power as ideology. She was "a ruler without a standing army, without a highly developed bureaucracy, without an extensive police force, a ruler whose power is constituted in theatrical celebrations of glory and theatrical violence visited upon the enemies of that glory."[3] Indeed, Elizabeth's claim to the crown and holding on to power was accompanied by investing art as an ideological means. If Elizabethan visual art ostensibly registered political loyalty to the queen, theatre, which is a public activity and, in Greenblatt word's, a "social event ",[4] handled the issue in question with complexity. Obviously, the theatre had been of a great concern to Elizabethan authorities because of its popularity on the one hand, and the necessity, on the other hand, to ensure that sensitive matters would not be referred to on the stage. The Proclamation of 16 May 1559 prohibited plays dealing with religious issues as well as the "gouernaunce of the estate of the Commonweale". Religion and government, the Proclamation stated, were "no meete matters to be wrytten or treated vpon, but by menne of aucthoritie, lerning and wisdome, nor could be shown before any audience, but grave and discreete persons."[5] Nevertheless, this prohibition would not prevent the theatre from presenting the problems related to rulership in their highest complications. The Inn's plays coded "dangerous" matters in a way that would eliminate suspicion about the loyalty to the monarch so that they were able to question the validity of the monarch's right. Whereas kingship embodied a fulfilment of specific mysticism in connection to the right to rule, drama appropriated and subverted that. According to Franco Moretti, "Elizabethan and Jacobean tragedy was in fact one of the decisive influences in the creation of a ' public' that for the first time in history assumed the right to bring a king to justice."[6]

Marlowe's *Tamburlaine* demonstrates that kingship is constructed by conventions, like an onion is shaped by its layers. If the layers of conventions are stripped one after another, one reaches simply nowhere and nothing. From this nowhere and nothingness comes or rather materializes a Scythian shepherd who builds up layers of conventions to emerge as a king or a "king of kings". These conventions are mainly the exercise of power, be it theatrical violence or ideological discourse. Therefore, Tamburlaine is not only the unchallengeable and undefeated war machine but also the eloquent monarch whose "high astounding speech(es) "roaring higher than any of the kings he defeats and supersedes. Greenblatt's account that Tamburlaine fashions himself with these high speeches, which are "picked up and overheard",[7] and speaks a different language from the commoners recalls Elizabeth II's declaration in Latin some years ago that the year for her as queen was "Annus Horribilis "(although Latin is not the language she could speak as her biographers pointed out). If historical kings presented their crowns as divine, Tamburlaine is very much aware that such ideological tenet is dogmatic. Therefore, he seeks "the sweet fruition of an earthly crown" which he actually achieves by enslaving other kings whom he

[1] For an examination of the passionate love Queen Elizabeth I felt for specific men during her reign - including g some who were young enough to be her grandsons, see A. N. Wilson, *The Elizabethans* (UK: Hutchinson, 2011, republished by Arrow Books, 2012).
[2] See Louis Adrian Montrose, "'Shaping Fantasies': Figurations of Gender and Power in Elizabethan Culture" in *Representing the English Renaissance,* Stephen Greenblatt, ed. (Berkeley, 1988), pp.31-64.
[3] Stephen Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), p.64**.**
[4] Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations*. P.46
[5] From Proclamation 509 by the Queen (1559), in E.K. Chambers, *Elizabethan Stage Vol. IV,* 1923 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1923), pp. 263 – 4.
[6]Franco Moretti, “The Great Eclipse” in *Signs Taken for Wonders: Essays in the Sociology of Literary Form* (London: Verso, 1983), p. 42.
[7] Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 1980), p.213.

mocks for being not powerful enough: "Holla ye pamper'd jades of Asia!/ What, can ye draw but twenty miles a day?"[1] This statement is reiterated by the comic character Pistol in *II Henry IV* (II,iv,161). What is the conception of kingship then in Henry IV?

The will to absolute power marks the character of Prince Hal. In order to achieve his aim, Hal fights on two levels: militarily with Hotspur and ideologically with Falstaff. While preparing himself to be a king, Hal studies the power strategies of Falstaff. To Falstaff, "this world is given to lying" (I H. IV,V,iv,144-5), therefore he dies and rises again by virtue of lying. If Falstaff's tactic is" cunning" to survive exigent situations, Hal's strategy is shaped instrumentally for the effective exercise of power. In the multi-dimensional scene where Falstaff plays the king (I. H.I VII, iv), the reverse of roles functions in two different ways. Whereas to Hal the outcome of the scene is to acquaint himself with the way Falstaff regards kingship, to Falstaff it is a carnivalesque reversal of hierarchy. The insignias of the carnivalesque king Falstaff, "This chair will be my state, this dagger my sceptre, and this cushion my crown" (line 373), draw attention to the fact that kingship is a role. Hal immediately responds to this by maintaining that the genuine insignias have got intrinsic qualities that cannot be invoked by stage props, thus insisting on the point that kingship is more than just conventions. Falstaff uses the licence of the carnival king to disrobe the illusion of the princely status by reminding Hal of the robbery in which they both took part. In an earlier scene, he even mocks the actual queen, Elizabeth, by presenting her, in her fictional identity of the virgin goddess Diana, as a patroness of robbers:"...let us be Diana's foresters, gentle men of the shade, minions of the moon; and let men say we be men of good government, being governed as the sea is, by our noble and chaste mistress the moon." (IH IV,I,ii,23-27) For Falstaff, kingship is fashioned by eloquent words: "If thou dost it half so gravely, so majestically, both in word and matter..." (IH. IV,II,iv,429-30). Indeed, Falstaff proves his linguistic superiority in both roles, as king and as prince, and Hal cannot compete with him at this stage in the field of eloquence. Therefore, Hal has to put an end to this play by using authoritarian speech: "I do. I will" (line 475), promising that he will banish Falstaff once he is the king. Like Queen Elizabeth I who was always afraid of Catholic plots, Henry IV and his son fear rebellion. Hal cannot accept rivals: "Two stars keep not their motion in one sphere,/Nor can one England brook a double reign." (IH.IV,V,iv,64-5) Hotspur is depicted as more threatening than Falstaff for whom Hal "could have better spared a better man" (line 103). The threat posed by Hotspur can be resolved only by killing the rival, while Hal's victory over Falstaff is simply the dismissal of the "old man", whose strategy Hal reveals as deception: "Thou art not what thou seem'st" (136).

Research has revealed Falstaff's "feminine" qualities: his grotesque body, flesh, excessive eating, cowardice.[2](16)In his long speech (lines 440-453) in the carnivalesque scene, Hal sneers at Falstaff's grotesque body features. Closeness to women according to Elizabethan perception would effeminate men; hence Hal's dismissal of Falstaff is a consolidation of maleness required as an B adherence to the position of the king. In order to evaluate Hal's capabilities as a king, we will have to juxtapose f them with the weakness of other kings in Elizabethan drama. Richard II's frailty was his lack of determination, a defect which resulted in rebellion and an unsettled state; therefore a firm king is needed to remedy a sick state. It had been discussed that the actual political implication of the play is the issue in which Richard II's success was inherently a dangerous subject because of the potential for "infamous analogy".[3] Because Queen Elizabeth was criticized for ruling by favourites, she identified herself with Richard and Essex with Bolingbroke.

Edward II's homosexuality was not the main reason to rebel against him, rather the social identity of the homosexual partner as lower in status was considered as the king's weakness to which the nobility objected.[4] Therefore, kingship embodies a split between the king and subjects of low status. This is another reason for Hal to dismiss Falstaff in the end. Falstaff's propensity is not overtly malignant, nor does he stand as a military rebel in the play; rather Falstaff is the pragmatic figure that falsifies matters in order to politicize. Yet, his exact placement, it could be argued, is between the nobles and the commons.[5]His playing the king is a scrutinization of the monarchy, nevertheless, it is permissible by the king to be. The reversal of hierarchy is the play's transgression, its subversion through transgression, but the transgression is temporal and immediately roles are de-reversed. To view a scene in isolation from a play is to ignore the dialectic within which the politics of the

[1] Christopher Marlowe, *Tamburlaine The Great II* (Published 1587), (IV. iii. 1-2).
[2] Valerie Traub, *Desire and Anxiety: Circulation of Sexuality in Shakespearean Drama* (London: Routledge, 1992), pp.56 ff.

[3] On this issue, see David Bevington, Introduction to *Richard II*, *The complete Works of Shakespeare*, Updated 4th ed. (New York: Longman, 1997).
[4] On the objection to the identity of Edward's sexual partner, see, for example, Roger Sales, *Christopher Marlowe* (London: Macmillan, 1991), pp. 118 -129.
[5]See Barbara Hodgdon, *Henry IV, Part Two*, Part 2 (UK: Manchester University Press, 1993), p.87.

play operates. Instead, the scene with Falstaff playing the king functions only in connection to the whole tetralogy of the Henriad. It is, one can argue, the point where a deteriorated image of the king should be diametrically changed; the significance of which is the reminder of the need for a powerful king who restores a lost identity. Identity weakened and identity restored seem to shape the ideological propagation of the tetralogy and its Shakespearean happy ending culminating in crowning the righteous powerful king. Indeed, the crown finally rests on the head that brings the country to a settled state and leads the nation to territorial expansion and conquests, a conception that is not exotic to Elizabethan England, rather it is very much in line with Queen Elizabeth defeating her rebels internally and leading the nation to the victory over the Spanish Armada and to colonial expansions externally.

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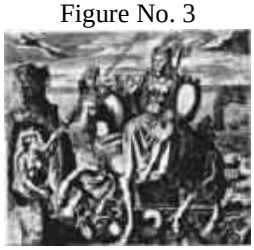
Figures

Figure No. 1.

Figure No. 2

Figure No. 3



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