PROFANE, STEAL, OR USURP:
Kingship, Divine Right, and Regicide in Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and *Richard II*

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A year ago Rachael Hencher was a student in my Shakespeare class (English 2214X/Y). The term paper she wrote in the second term was the first draft of the essay she presents here under the title, "Profane, Steal, or Usurp." Those three words by themselves are a clever indication of the problem Rachael has identified, namely, how do you change the government in a society accustomed to monarchy, and where monarchs believe (or at least say they believe) they are anointed by God and rule by divine right? Rachael shows with great subtlety how and why this question is troublesome when we're interpreting a tragedy like *Macbeth* or a history play like *Richard II.* The essay she has written speaks for itself, and all I can do here is recommend it to you. And I can add, with admiration, that Rachael remains firmly aware of the *differences* which separate the two texts she is studying. "In *Macbeth*," she writes in her final paragraph, "the audience sees a man of certain ambition rise to the greatest heights of power by compromising his conscience, only to be torn down due to his illegitimate claim"; in *Richard II*, by contrast, we witness a struggle between "a legitimate king who is a weak ruler, and an illegitimate usurper who is a strong leader." What Rachael's analysis offers us is an appreciation of Shakespeare's willingness to wrestle with these ambiguities.

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In Shakespeare's 1595 history, *Richard II*, and 1603 tragedy, *Macbeth*, the audience is introduced to five kings: Richard II, Henry Bolingbroke (or Henry IV as he would soon become), Duncan, Macbeth, and Malcolm. Of the five kings, two survive to the end of their respective plays and three are murdered. Given this overabundance of monarchs and murders, the notion of kingship – what it means to be a king, and what it means to kill a king – must surely arise among the mire of true monarchs, tyrants, fools, and pretenders to the thrones of England and Scotland. Although *Richard II* is ostensibly a history, and *Macbeth* is based upon some historical truth, both plays can be considered more tragedy than history. Even so, the notions of kingship, regicide, and Divine Right contained in these two plays, written nearly a decade apart, speak strongly of the apprehensions and philosophies of the contemporary monarchs of Shakespeare's day. By examining these two plays, *Richard II* and *Macbeth*, within their historical context, the ideology behind kingship, usurpation, and regicide becomes clear, especially as these ideas come into contact with belief in the Divine Right of Kings and the difference

between a legitimate monarch and a tyrant or usurper.

Before understanding what it is to kill a king, one must understand what it is to be a king. While in the twenty-first century Western world, monarchs have been more or less reduced to figureheads, a monarch played a much more pivotal role in Shakespeare's Early Modern world – not only as a functioning member of government and leader of state, but as a symbol central to the identity of the nation. In his article, "History and Nation in Richard II and Henry IV," Derek Cohen describes the king as defining "the entity we call the nation. He transcends in his person the complexities and ambiguities of geography, ethnicity, and even civility—in both the technical and political senses of the word. He is the nation, and, thus he and his body civil must be preserved" (296). Cohen further contends that the office of the monarch must be preserved and that "the passionate anxiety of all engaged in preserving, protecting, restoring, or replacing the monarchy testifies to the continuous presence of a fear of its demise" (296). In *Macbeth*, the anxiety of "preserving, protecting, restoring, or replacing" the monarchy is certainly plain. The uprising

against Macbeth, an unnatural king and a tyrant, proves the care taken by the people to keep those who are legitimate or most meritorious on the throne. Though Macduff despairs of Malcolm when the prince declares he is not fit for the title of King, when Malcolm *is* made king, Macduff exalts him with a "Hail, King, for so thou art" (*Macbeth* 5.11.20). Despite Malcolm's original resistance to the office, he is the rightful king and thus a certain balance has been restored.

In *Richard II*, it is plain through the speeches of Richard that he is heavily invested in this idea of kingship. Richard sees his place as divinely sanctioned. Though the idea of Divine Right pervades both *Macbeth* and *Richard II*, it is most obvious in the latter and Dorothea Kehler claims that Richard's conviction that he is immune to the rebellion of Bolingbroke and his followers stems from his very state of being king, which has prolonged a "solipsistic childhood, has shielded him from recognition of his own mortality. Is he not semi-divine, God's substitute on earth?" (Kehler 10). The king rules by Divine Right as God's chosen one, and he cannot be deposed except by God; Richard powerfully declares this to Bolingbroke's troops, saying: "We

thought ourselves thy lawful king / ...If we be not, show us the hand of God / That hath dismissed us from our stewardship" (*Richard II* 3.3.72-76). Despite his various disillusions, Richard *is* the anointed king, as was Duncan, whom Macbeth wrongfully deposed. According to John W. Draper in his article "Political Themes in Shakespeare's Later Plays,"

> legitimate monarchy was essential to peace and happiness; and any break in the divinely appointed succession, an interregnum, partial abdication, or the division of rule, must bring sorrow to all concerned. (80)

With all of this in mind, especially with the notion of Divine Right to rule bearing heavily down upon these crowned heads, regicide must be considered among the very direst of acts.

James I, who came to the English throne in 1603 and whose mother and father were both violently murdered, naturally and ardently opposed the notion of regicide. James was a prolific writer on the office of king, and Draper notes that he

> was especially severe against this 'most detestable parricide acted upon the sacred person of a king;' one of his bitterest charges against the Jesuits was that they allowed as 'lawful, or rather meritorious, ... to murther Princes. (75)

With *Macbeth* written – or at least revised – around the time of James's accession, it is little wonder that the Scottish play takes regicide as a subject in order to condemn it. In fact, Draper adds that

> the King had recommended to his son the study of chronicle history as a useful guide in statecraft; and such plays as *Hamlet*, *Lear*, and *Macbeth* revised or written about the time of his accession, might be described as chronicle material dramatised to illustrate the royal theories and principles of government. (75)

The audience can have no doubt that Duncan is a good king. Even Macbeth has no doubt of this and is, until his encounter with the Weird Sisters and the goading of his wife, a loyal vassal. Macbeth says to Duncan:

> The service and the loyalty I owe,
> In doing it, pays itself. Your highness' part
> Is to receive our duties and our duties
> Are to your throne and state children and

> servants
> Which do but what they should by doing
> everything
> Safe toward your love and honour. (1.4.22-27).

Macbeth is aware of the grievous nature of king-slaying and when Lady Macbeth eagerly wishes to discuss the prophecy given to her husband, he merely says, "[w]e will speak further" (1.5.68). Macbeth is rightfully hesitant to murder his lord, not only because of his own overwhelming anxieties and doubts, but because Duncan is the anointed king, Macbeth's kinsman, and a guest in Macbeth's castle. In his soliloquy at the end of Act One, Macbeth struggles with these very ideas as he states:

> He's here in double trust:
> First, as I am his kinsman and his subject,
> Strong both against the deed; then, as his host,
> Who should against his murderer shut the door,
> Not bear the knife myself. Besides, this Duncan
> Hath borne his faculties so meek, hath been
> So clear in his great office, that his virtues
> Will plead like angels, trumpet-tongued against
> The deep damnation of his taking-off. (1.7.10-18)

Macbeth identifies not only his own obligations to Duncan – which ought to make

him his guardian and not his murderer – but the fact that Duncan, as a king, is worthy, great, and undeserving of such an end. Draper cites one of Shakespeare's own sources, stating that

> in Holinshead, Macbeth's accession to the crown, though achieved by assassination, seems rather to be excused by Duncan's weakness. In Shakespeare, there is no excuse [. . .] Shakespeare has made Duncan a benevolent autocrat, the ideal ruler by Divine Right. (77)

Though Duncan does not seem as close to the idea of the Divine Right of Kings as Richard II, the fact that he is the lawful king, and that he is a *good* king is obvious, especially when compared to Macbeth after his usurpation. When the deed is done, Macbeth is stricken with fear and paranoia that characterizes the rest of the play. Macbeth even envies the dead Duncan, whose worldly cares were lifted – albeit in an untimely manner – by Macbeth's own hand.

In *Richard II*, there is still a great deal of concern for usurpation and the killing of kings, yet it does not come from Bolingbroke – at least, not until the final scene – but rather from Richard himself. As previously mentioned,

Richard believes he is immune to rebellion and death, and spends a great deal of time discussing his right to rule. When discussing Bolingbroke's crimes against him, Richard says that

> his treasons will sit blushing in his face
> Not able to endure the sight of day,
> But, self-affrighted, tremble at his sin.
> Not all the waters in the rough rude sea
> Can wash the balm from an anointed king.
> The breath of worldly men cannot depose
> The deputy elected by the lord. (3.2.47-53)

The great difference between Richard and Duncan, however, is that Duncan is an objectively good king, beloved of his people and just in his actions, whereas Richard lacks a great deal of the qualities of a good king. Though a brilliant actor and orator, Richard is shown as weak, effeminate, and even at times cruel and arbitrary. Bolingbroke surely exemplifies the manly vigour necessary for the office of king, and yet despite this, regicide and usurpation still cannot be justified. Good king or not, Richard was chosen by God and Anointed by him to rule over England; to challenge this is a crime against God, and to kill the king is even worse. Though

Bolingbroke might be right in a practical sense to remove Richard from the throne (though essentially Richard removes *himself* from the throne), the act is an abomination against God; as Draper says, according to James I, "even the most justifiable tyrannicide was hardly to be condoned" (75). When kings are deposed or killed, then, the results must be very dire.

By examining the two plays, it can be generally said that upon overthrowing a legitimate ruler, the reign of the usurper will be characterised by fear, strife, and perhaps even tyranny. The same is true even outside the two plays examined in this essay: *Richard III* and *Hamlet* exhibit this same general truth. Macbeth becomes a murderous tyrant upon ascending the throne and Bolingbroke is seen to feel the guilt of usurpation even to the end of his reign in *Henry IV*. Returning to the writings of James I, Draper shows the monarch as having a highly formed distinction between tyrants and kings. Draper writes that

> a usurper, moreover, knowing that his right was always liable to contest, could not but be a tyrant; and thus once 'who by forth commeth to the Monarchy against the will of the people, breaketh laws already made at his pleasure, maketh other without advise and consent of the

> people, and regardeth not the wealth of his commons but the advancement of him selfe, his faction, & kindred,' and this selfishness gives him 'a vicious and cruell appetite; without respect of God, or right or of law.' (78)

Tyranny, then, is the inevitable outcome of usurpation and regicide. Macbeth is explicitly called a tyrant by Macduff, who makes a plain argument against Macbeth's reign when he calls him "an untitled tyrant bloody-sceptered" (*Macbeth* 4.3.105). This presents the problem with Macbeth's reign in a single line: he is untitled – and therefore illegitimate – as a sovereign, made a tyrant by his fear and paranoia, and "blood-sceptered" due to the fact that he wins the throne through murder of the good King Duncan. The regicide of Duncan weighs heavy on Macbeth, who laments that

> Duncan is in his grave.
> After life's fitful fever he sleeps well.
> Treason has done his worst. Nor steel nor
> poison,
> Malice domestic, foreign levy, nothing
> Can touch him further. (3.2.24-28)

The play ends – as it necessarily must if it is to please the somewhat paranoid James I and the audience who knows the villain must die –

with the death of the usurper and the placement of the legitimate heir on the throne. Though Malcolm shows some *recusatio potestatis* early in the play when he claims he is unworthy of the throne, he is, nevertheless, the legitimate and thus divinely ordained heir to his father's crown. He begins his new monarchy with benevolent gestures rather than murders, declaring that

> what's more to do
> Which would be planted newly with the time,
> As calling home our exiled friends abroad,
> That fled the snares of wrathful tyranny,
> Producing forth the cruel ministers
> Of this dead butcher and his fiend-like queen. (5.11.31-35)

Macbeth's tyranny is at an end and his regicide repaid with tyrannicide. With Malcolm on the throne, the balance is restored.

It is less plain whether or not a rightful balance has been restored at the end of *Richard II*. Though there can be little doubt in the mind of the audience that the newly-appointed Henry IV is a good man and possesses the qualities that will make him a good king, by the end of the final act he seems to be full of remorse and self-doubt. After Richard's body

is produced before him, he laments to Exton: "thou has wrought / A deed of slander with thy fatal hand / Upon my head an all this famous land" (*Richard II* 5.6.34-36). Though Henry admits that he "did wish him [Richard II] dead" (5.6.39) – for Bolingbroke could never be secure in his kingship while Richard remained alive – he recognises the act as regicide, as the killing of an anointed king, and sees himself as the guilty party. He regrets that "blood should sprinkle to make [him] grow" (5.6.45) and declares that he shall "make a voyage to the Holy Land / To wash this blood off from my guilty hand" (5.6.49-50). Kehler claims that the new king laments because he sees himself in the old king. She writes:

> As he looks upon the play's final image, the coffin dominating the stage he looks on *his* end. Wordlessly, Richard tells him that the coffin, like the crown, is in reversion his, that the conqueror must join the conquered. The new king may hope to wash the blood off his hands, but he cannot wash off the fragility of flesh the blood. (Kehler 17)

Thus while one play ends with the death of a tyrant and the accession of a legitimate heir, the other ends with the death of the legitimate

king and the accession of an usurper, however meritorious he may be. This is somewhat problematic – especially in light of James I's hatred of tyrants and usurpers – but the rise of Bolingbroke accounts for the rise of the Lancastrians; thus it is a necessary end to the play, as it accounts for the rise of the Tudors and the eventual assent of James I. However, an usurper never has an easy conscience, and Henry is seen to always be plagued by the memory of the regicide that made him king throughout *Henry IV*.

With so many kings with such very different claims to power in Shakespeare's *Richard II* and *Macbeth*, it is necessary to examine the philosophy behind the throne and to examine why a king may or may not have a legitimate claim. In *Macbeth*, the audience sees a man of certain ambition rise to the greatest heights of power by compromising his conscience, only to be torn down due to his illegitimate claim and violent means of attaining the throne. In *Richard II* the audience is given a much different picture: a legitimate king who is a weak ruler, and an illegitimate usurper who is a strong leader. Though the death of Richard is necessary for Henry IV to flourish, it is, nevertheless, a difficult cross for the new king

to bear because he knows the dead Richard to have been an anointed king and one who ruled with Divine Right. Though Shakespeare may never have read any of James I's treatises, he was still undoubtedly familiar with contemporary attitudes towards kings, tyrants, usurpers, Divine Right, and regicide. In many ways, *Macbeth* and *Richard II*, along with several other plays which feature the rise and fall of monarchs, illuminate to a twenty-first century audience the precepts of sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century kingship and right to rule.

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