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THE POWER AND THE IMAGINATION: THE ENGIMATIC STATE IN SHAKESPEARE'S ENGLISH HISTORY PLAYS

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LEGITIMATION AND IMAGINATION

The king is running out of money for his war in Ireland. So he confiscates Henry Bolingbroke's estate. Richard II's expropriation and exile of Bolingbroke proves a turning point in the history of the English state. The events that flow from it transform the nature of British political history in deep-going and unexpected ways.

The banishment of Bolingbroke brings about the downfall of Richard II and his murder at the hands of Henry's agents. Few mourn his passing. He was a despot. Those who do mourn are bereft for themselves, not for Richard. His murder weakens their claim on power. More importantly, though, it will unleash forces beyond any one's control. For when Richard is assassinated, the centre of power is destabilized. This triggers a calamitous tussle between the houses of York and Lancaster for control of the English throne.

The struggle lasts a century. It is the epic theme of Shakespeare's English history plays. The struggle is only resolved when Henry Tudor, with his part-Welsh ancestry, accedes to the throne. Even then, the larger implications of Richard's murder continue to reverberate through successive English dynasties. The enduring meaning of the killing of Richard II is that no English power thereafter is fully legitimate.

This is because Richard's assassination was a private deed rather than a public duty. It was the doing of an ambitious usurper, not the crowning act of a statesman. The murder brought into question the legitimacy of Bolingbroke, no matter what he then did. He was invested as Richard's successor, King Henry IV. But, as Winston Churchill observed, the succession was forever tainted. Richard II was the last English king with a clear hereditary right to the throne.[1] In the short run, the Lancastrians would vie with the York camp. Both would claim to be the *rightful* rulers of England. In the longer run, all English dynasties faced questions about their legitimacy. Whether it was Elizabeth or Mary, James or George, resistance that contested their right to rule became an enduring theme of English politics right through to the rebellion of the American colonies.

The principle significance of this is not that dynasties rose or fell, or that rebellions succeeded or failed, but that the British state endured and prospered in the

midst of it all. Even in the age of the Wars of the Roses, when the English ruling class cannibalized itself, Britain never became a vile wolverine state. One of the chief reasons is that the British state learnt to carry on through legitimacy crises. I do not mean that 'might replaced right'. This was no Hobbesian nightmare. Rather the English people learnt two things: how to debate legitimacy and how to turn away from the issue altogether, as if in the end it didn't matter. What the English did was to override the question of the legitimacy of power with the luminous authority of imagination. Simply put, 'light replaced right'.

Shakespeare did not invent the power of imagination. Imagination, after all, is a generic human capacity. But he grasped it in a most extraordinary manner. His work epitomizes and eulogizes it. This is true especially of the way that Shakespeare compares, contrasts, conciliates and unites the most immense range of opposites in the existential, social and celestial realms.

The claim of imagination appears right at the beginning of Shakespeare's epic of English history, an epic that stretches from Richard II's slap down of Henry Bolingbroke to the demise of the arch-criminal Richard III. A couple of scenes into *Richard II*, we have already learnt of the king's decision to exile Bolingbroke and the attempt by Henry's father, John Gaunt, to get his son to make the best of the situation. Gaunt tries to persuade Henry:

*Think not the **king did banish** thee,*

*But **thou the king**…*

Note the repeated dazzling interweaving of oppositions in this speech, so typical of Shakespeare. These shuttle-cock contraries are the matter, energy and order of the imagination. They fuel it and drive it. They structure it and broker its beauty and its economy:

*Go, say I sent thee forth to purchase **honor**,*

*And not, the king **exiled** thee; or suppose*

*Devouring **pestilence** hangs in our air*

*And thou art flying to a **fresher clime**.*

Look what thy soul holds dear, imagine it

*To lie that way **thou goest**, not whence **thou com'st**.*

When Gaunt advises his son, he does not speak the language of right and wrong in defiance of a despotic king. He does not talk about the morality or fairness of what has happened to his son. He does not invoke title or entitlement. He does not prattle about rights. He does not speak about what is valid or legitimate. Rather he appeals to the act of imagination.

Bolingbroke resists his father's suggestions, and yet does so using the same kind of imaginative thinking that Gaunt has recommended and that the son, on the surface of things, seems to reject.

*O, who can hold a **fire** in his hand*
*By thinking on the **frosty** Caucasus?*
*Or cloy the **hungry** edge of appetite*
*By bare imagination of a **feast**?*
*Or wallow naked in **December snow***
*By thinking on fantastic **summer's heat**?*[2]

Bolingbroke rejects his father's words by summoning the same contrary forces of the imagination that the old man relies on. This is a beautiful example of the paradoxes that lie at the heart of the human imagination when it is fired up.

Precocious acts of imagination populate Shakespeare's work. They have many functions. They are aesthetic and existential as well as political and historical. Yet they are not political or historical in the same way that claims of legitimacy are. Legitimacy claims, some strong, some patently fraudulent, fuel the English dynastic struggles. Almost everyone feels a need to clothe their ambition in 'what is right'. But Gaunt is different. Though he has spent his life at the centre of power, he confronts power and its wielders and all their wiles not with claims of entitlement but leaps of imagination.

The totality of Shakespeare's work foreshadows a kind of power, a superior and richer kind of power, based on the imagination. It conjures a state erected not just on legitimacy but on the peculiar and extraordinary human capacity to unite opposites in the imagination. The union of opposites in the imagination is the human act of creation at its most soaring and most enigmatic. Shakespeare writes passage after passage in this mode. It does not matter whether these passages are about politics or love or life—they all exemplify the imagination at work.

This is true not least of the English history plays. These incessantly raise the question of 'who has the right of succession?' The legitimacy question plagued successive English dynasties for generations. The drama of the history plays is propelled by a particular kind of political struggle. This is the struggle that follows when a number of contenders can plausibly claim that they are the rightful heir to the throne. The struggle is compounded when they confront still other hopefuls who invent non traditional ideas of legitimacy. Heirs fight heirs who fight those who dismiss inheritance.

Through the cycle of Shakespeare's English history plays, monarchs, their usurpers, their rivals and supporters, all debate the question of legitimacy in the most intense and subtle terms. Yet this is not the most important thing that Shakespeare does, even if he does it at rich and remarkable length. While the result of his forensic examination of legitimacy claims is encyclopedic, his art soars above the whole warrant-ridden realm of justification. His final vaulting ambition is to help us comprehend, and more than this, to *show* how the act of validation is superceded by the act of imagination.

In the larger sweep of English history, Shakespeare is a key to understanding how the power of imagination begins to displace claims of legitimation. The overcoming of validation by imagination is important. It points to an unusual state form. This is not one in which legitimation is irrelevant—but whatever relevance it has is secondary to that of the imagination. This way of arranging things is the condition of a handful of enormously influential states in history. These states are all enigmatic. Their enigmatic character arises from a power that is rooted in imagination. Where traditional and modern validity claims are discursive, enigmatic power rests on the non-discursive logic of the imagination. That is what Shakespeare does line after line, scene after scene. He remorselessly and unendingly shows us the imagination at work.

CLAIMS OF LEGITIMACY

In the English history plays, Shakespeare explores at least twenty distinct claims to legitimacy. Not one of them goes unchallenged. Each one of them is disputed, sometimes violently, and each one of them comes up wanting.

Birth One of the most traditional entitlements to power is birth. Some Shakespearean characters take birth-right for granted. Yet others think the unthinkable. They are ready to disinherit rightful heirs in the blink of an eye. Some of course are opportunists. But in the case of others, the story is more complicated. The traditional patrimonial social order is waning, and birth's capacity to validate power is starting to slip away. What Shakespeare understands is that in the late medieval world in which the English history plays are set, the nature of social nature is increasingly up for grabs. Traditional certainty is beginning to give way to modern contingency.

With the denial of birth-right, the unnatural bursts onto the stage of English history. Nowhere is this more strikingly illustrated than in the case of Henry VI who disinherits his son to save his throne.

Ah, wretched man! would I had died a maid
And never seen thee, never borne thee son,
Seeing thou hast proved so unnatural a father
Hath he deserved to lose his birthright thus?[3]

Queen Margaret's riposte to her hopeless husband is spot on. Henry the moralist king is a weak moral character. For all his principled prattle, he cannot manage to fulfill the most elementary moral duty to his own son. Yet this is not just moral incontinence. Henry's behavior is also a sign that the natural law of birth-right is a declining force in late medieval England. The impossible is happening. What is natural is changing, and the constancy of nature is coming under pressure.

Kinship Related to birth but not identical with it is the legitimacy derived from belonging to a great household. The Wars of the Roses is a struggle between the aristocratic houses of York and Lancaster over who should control the throne. The actors in this struggle rely on their extended kin to legitimate their claim on power. In *2 Henry VI*, Richard Plantagenet, the third Duke of York, explains to Warwick in eye-glazing detail the slender extended thread of kinship that makes the throne rightfully his:

Edward the Third, my lords, had seven sons:
The first, Edward the Black Prince, Prince of Wales;
The second, William of Hatfield, and the third,
Lionel Duke of Clarence: next to whom

Was John of Gaunt, the Duke of Lancaster;

The fifth was Edmund Langley, Duke of York…

…and so on 'Till Henry Bolingbroke, Duke of Lancaster… Seized on the realm, deposed the rightful king' and 'Harmless Richard was murder'd traitorously'.[4] For their efforts though, they 'thus got the house of Lancaster the crown'—as Warwick is quick to point out to York. But not *legitimately*, Richard Plantagenet retorts. The Lancastrians have it

…by force and not by right

For Richard, the first son's heir, being dead,

The issue of the next son should have reign'd.

That was William of Hatfield. But he had no issue, which was fortunate for the Duke of York whose claim on the throne came from the third in line to Edward III's throne:

The third son, Duke of Clarence, ***from whose line***

I claimed the crown*, had issue, Philippe, a daughter,*

Who married Edmund Mortimer, Earl of March:

Edmund had issue, Roger Earl of March;

Roger had issue, Edmund, Anne and Eleanor…

His eldest sister, Anne,

My mother, being heir unto the crown

Married Richard Earl of Cambridge; who was son

To Edmund Langley, Edward the Third's fifth son.

By her I claim the kingdom: she was heir

To Roger Earl of March, who was the son

Of Edmund Mortimer, who married Philippe,

Sole daughter unto Lionel Duke of Clarence:

So, if the issue of the elder son

Succeed before the younger, I am king.[5]

So there! Warwick responds to this tortuous soap-opera explanation of Plantagenet's claim with a wonderfully cynical line: 'What plain proceeding is more plain than this?' The wryness of Warwick is a concession not just of the ridiculous nature of this baroque family-tree legitimacy, but also of its declining power. Such an arch-contrivance might

have had the credulous medieval minds in awe but modernity is approaching, and this pageant of worthy names now is starting to sound ever so slightly laughable.

Blood Family lines are not just convoluted, they are also ambivalent. Blood, and blood relationships, may be a warrant for power, but they are also a cause of blood shed as those who are related to each other, and who share powerful forbears in common, fight for the ultimate prize—the throne. Thus Northumberland can recommend Bolingbroke's loyalty to Richard II:

Harry Bolingbroke, doth humbly kiss thy hand;
And by the honourable tomb he swears
That stands upon your royal grandsire's bones,
And by the royalties of both your bloods,
Currents that spring from one most gracious head…

And yet the very terms in which Northumberland defends Bolingbroke's faithfulness are the very reasons that propel Bolingbroke into faithlessness. The character of these royal blood lines is Janus in nature.

Faith Shakespeare has a great respect for constancy yet a great skepticism about where it is to be found, if faith is to be found at all. Faith, the faith in things that abide, the faith that sustains things that last, legitimates human creation. Yet faith is rare. Human nature is inconstant, and there are signs of the spring tide of modernity even in the late medieval world. Social nature is becoming more inconstant, and while Shakespeare's own era, the Renaissance, looks back to the marvels of Antiquity, in doing so, it is full-bent on the creation of modernity. Shakespeare's Roman plays are a nod to the durable assets of antiquity. But Shakespeare also struggles with the problem of what exactly is permanent. He alludes often to nature and faith. Both are emblematic of the imperishable, and yet both prove so often malleable and inconstant—and not just prudently flexible but flabby and incontinent.

Cosmos Strikingly even the cosmos in Shakespeare is inconstant. As Prince Hal remarks to Falstaff

… the fortune of us
that are the moon's men doth ebb and flow like the sea…[6]

In a darker vein still, the Welsh rebel Owen Glendower recalls that

At my nativity

The front of heaven was full of fiery shapes,

Of burning cressets; and at my birth

The frame and huge foundation of the earth

Shaked like a coward.[7]

In a rueful exchange with the rebellious Hotspur, Prince Hal tells his uppity enemy that the royal world is not big enough for both of them:

Two stars keep not their motion in one sphere;

Nor can one England brook a double reign,

Of Harry Percy and the Prince of Wales.[8]

Shakespeare does not like rebellion. He has a view that there is a natural or cosmic order to be followed in human affairs. There is a 'celestial grace' and 'a pattern of celestial peace'.[9] Rebels defy this order, and so do tyrants. Both are illegitimate.

Prophecy Yet while the cosmos may be graceful, it is also full of brooding portents. Comets signal 'the change of times and states', and for those disfavored by a bad moon rising,[10]

What, shall we curse the planets of mishap

That plotted thus our glory's overthrow?[11]

Superstition is a form of legitimation. Many courts, including those of Stalin, Hitler and Mao, have employed soothsayers to validate their rule and predict the course of future events. Exeter speaks for superstitious power wielders everywhere:

And now I fear that fatal prophecy.

Which in the time of Henry nam'd the Fifth

Was in the mouth of every sucking babe:

That Henry born at Monmouth should win all,

And Henry born at Windsor should lose all.[12]

Prophecy is what is foreordained. It is the attempt to make a prediction about what is unpredictable in the human realm. Human beings want to know what will come to pass, as if human events were like the rotating of celestial orbs.

Permanence The desire for predictability in human affairs and the love of what is permanent and enduring in those affairs are akin to each other. They are not exactly the

same, though. Prediction and prophecy want to turn what is surprising into what is familiar. What is permanent, on the other hand, does not have any necessary connection to what is surprising, although it may perfectly well exist alongside everything that is fresh and original in human experience. Through the character of Henry IV, Shakespeare casts a disapproving eye on those

fickle changelings and poor discontents,
Which gape and rub the elbow at the news
Of hurlyburly innovation…[13]

In politics, faith is essential if often missing. Even the rebellious York bemoans Henry VI's lack of faith.

False king, why hast thou broken faith with me,
Knowing how hardly I can brook abuse?
King did I call thee? No, thou art not king…[14]

Part of what is at issue here in this accusation is Henry VI's lack of character. His wife, Queen Margaret, will end up saying almost exactly the same thing about him. He breaks his oaths. Even if his enemies extort commitments from him, that is less their fault than the ease at which Henry bends under pressure.

Still faithlessness is not simply the unfortunate effect of a weak personality. For the faith and permanence that Shakespeare hankers after amidst the cut and thrust of political life has a social, and even cosmological, dimension as well. It is about nature, and what is implied by the idea of nature: a thread of constancy that runs through all things. Concepts of faith and permanence echo this.

History Shakespeare asks: does anything endure? Is there anything constant in human life? To which one answer is: history.

Yet it is obvious that history is also about changes: the changes of dynasties and states, in the first instance. Shakespeare's history plays re-tell the story of these changes, some of them tumultuous. But those plays also suggest that history is a source of continuity as well. A re-telling of anything is a species of continuity. Even the most radical interpretation of the past is deeply conservative.

Warwick, in *2 Henry IV*, captures beautifully the paradoxical sense of the permanency of history within the dynamic of history:

There is a history in all men's lives,
Figuring the nature of the times deceased;
The which observed, a man may prophesy,
With a near aim, of the main chance of things
As yet not come to life, which in their seeds
And weak beginnings lie intreasured.
Such things become the hatch and brood of time…[15]

To which Henry IV replies with an interesting slight equivocal skepticism: 'Are these things then necessities?' […pause…] 'Then let us meet them like necessities.' In a flash, Henry moves from hesitant contingency to firm resolve. The twist, unexpected as it is, undoes, in a snap, all of Henry's prior doubt. Such that even if predictions do not necessarily come true, even if the social and existential world is not like nature, even if nature is not like nature, we, human beings, shall still act like nature—we will meet whatever it is that we are confronted by as if our action was driven by necessity.

Thus we are our own necessity. Even if it is true that in modernity all things solid melt into air, even if it is true that predictions are superstitions, and nature is malign, and history is inconstant, and our allies are unfaithful—even if all that is true, and every modern person is a Machiavellian soul whose fortune is their virtue—even if all that is true, and maybe it is, then we can still meet that fortune with a necessity that is of our own making. Here I stand, and I cannot do otherwise.

Feudal Morality Just as modernity appears on the horizon, and all manner of manners begin to change, and change itself becomes a source of legitimacy—just as that happens, a certain idealized feudalism asserts itself. The further removed in time that historical characters are from medieval reality, the more noble the medieval past seems to be. For that reason the Victorians, ever the great industrial innovators, could still manage to dream endlessly of knights and ladies-in-waiting. How paradoxical the human imagination. Every *topos* and time produces its own utopia and rhyme. Shakespeare's late medieval characters can rebel in the name of this idealized time and its chivalric value. Thus Douglas can reassure the rebellious Hotspur 'Thou art the king of honour.'[16] Accordingly the anointed king might reign but the authentic rebel represents true old-fashioned virtue. Yet Hotspur's nemesis, Prince Hal, the one who will strike down the

rebel, thinks much the same thing of himself. Hal, the delinquent prince, will redeem himself on the battlefield as the Prince of Wales. To do so he has first to admit to himself and to others that 'I have been a truant to chivalry.'[17]

Existential Morality Richard II, in contrast, learns the hard way that chivalry and tradition are fantasy. He realizes at a late point that he is defeated. Bushy, Green and the Earl of Wiltshire are dead, and it is now time to 'make dust our paper, and with rainy eyes/Write sorrow on the bosom of the earth.'[18] Part of Richard's realism is that he understands that a king on the verge of defeat stands before his followers naked. No more can he be clothed in the garments of honor and tradition—they ridicule the bare existential essentials of the self:

Cover your heads, and mock not flesh and blood
With solemn reverence; throw away respect,
Tradition, form, and ceremonious duty;
For you have but 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?

It is difficult to imagine a character from the gothic or early medieval world being given lines like these. The very notion that the king is just like everyone else is an intensely modern idea. Richard II is not offering an existential reason for power—for power is slipping away from his hands. But the idea that a powerful person is just like you or I nonetheless becomes one of the tropes of modern power. The rationale of existential power is that I, the person of power, 'feel want, taste grief, need friends' like you.[19] The one who is powerful under the surface is just the same as all of you who are not powerful.

Divine Election That, though, was not always the view of Richard II. In headier times, and long before he is brought face-to-face with defeat, he justifies his power with religion:

Not all the water 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.[20]

Richard finds that this is not true, though. The divine sanction of power is no more certain than any other. And no matter how much Richard insists that revolting subjects are faithless, that they 'break their faith to God', nothing will save him from the usurper—not even God.[21]

Still, the usurper in turn experiences the same. The rebel Hotspur invokes the memory of Richard II and the sanction of clerics, and 'turns insurrection to religion'.

And doth enlarge his rising with the blood
Of fair King Richard, scraped from Pomfret stones;
Derives from heaven his quarrel and his cause…[22]

But the divine right of rebellion, no less than the divine right to rule, ends in defeat. Hotspur will be skewered.

Crusade That, though, does not finish us with the religious question. Religion is many-sided and divine election is not the only kind of religious legitimation. There is political religion and moralizing religion to consider also.

Religious war is of one of the principal kinds of political religion. When Henry Bolingbroke becomes Henry IV, he knows that his reign lacks legitimacy. He also thinks that he knows how he can fix this. His plan is to go on a religious crusade to the Holy Land. He tells his errant but now reformed son, Hal, the future Henry V, that

Yet, though thou stand'st more sure than I could do,
Thou art not firm enough, since griefs are green;
And all my friends, which thou must make thy friends,
Have but their stings and teeth newly ta'en out…[23]

Henry IV had figured out that a crusade would be a way of shoring up the Lancastrians's shaky legitimacy. His intent was 'To lead out many to the Holy Land'. But he was never been able to do that, and now time has caught up with him. He is dying. The closest that he will come to the Holy Land is the Jerusalem of his bed chamber.

Empire So Henry IV advises his son, the soon-to-be Henry V, that when he inherits the throne, he should start foreign wars to distract attention at home:

Be it thy course to busy giddy minds
With foreign quarrels; that action, hence borne out,
May waste the memory of the former days.[24]

Henry V will become England's great warrior king, and its exemplary patriot. He will do exactly what his father advises. He will go to war with France, and he will win a brilliant victory at Agincourt, and for a time, but only for a time, he will quiet doubts about the legitimacy of the Lancastrians. These doubts will return, with a vengeance, during the reign of Henry VI.

Patriotism Canterbury tells the peers of Henry V that they owe themselves, their lives and services to the king's 'imperial throne'.[25] But what is memorable about Henry V's reign is not the land he conquers, or the confection of claims on French territory that minions like Canterbury concoct. Rather it is the ability of Henry V to inspire greatness in his countrymen. Even if as only a dramatic character, he is one of England's great war-time leaders. Churchill aside, Shakespeare's Henry V defines the sentiment of patriotism—its capacity to rouse, in the face of overwhelming odds, a people under siege or an army outnumbered.

Moralism How different, then, the reign of Henry VI—Henry V's son is one of the worst of the English kings. He is a moralizing prig who is temperamentally unsuited to politics—an intellectual who displays all the vices of intellectuals in politics, and a moralist of weak moral character who caves into the pressure of his enemies and friends alike.

Queen Meg, a formidable figure, who vastly outshines her wretched husband, is frequently left open-mouthed at his behavior. 'What are you made of? You'll nor fight nor fly…'[26] Henry sinks so very low as to disinherit his son in order to save his own pathetic backside on the throne. He protests he was forced to. Meg storms:

Enforc'd thee! art thou king, and wilt be

forc'd?

I shame to hear thee speak. Ah, timorous wretch!

Henry has 'soft courage' that makes his followers 'faint'.[27] He is full of prattle about goodness and godliness. But he entirely lacks a back bone. He is the classic intellectual moralist in politics. He prefers 'my study and my books' to a political marriage.[28] And his wife comes to understand this weakness perfectly:

But 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.[29]

The judgment of his enemy, York, is spot on: Henry's 'bookish rule hath pull'd fair England down'.[30]

While Henry is advised against 'too much lenity and harmful pity', this is to no avail for he sincerely believes in the power of impotence.[31] 'What stronger breastplate than a heart untainted!' he proclaims.[32] And so he becomes a tawdry pawn in the power plays of his enemies and friends alike. His inability to act is worse, much worse, than any conceivable action that he might have taken to stop the slide of the English state into chaos.

Form If smug and priggish morals are a disaster in politics, and yet if immoral monsters are to be stopped from ruling states, then how is such a thing possible?

Shakespeare cuts the Gordian knot that binds together the politically correct and the moral appalling—the insidious tie that routinely unites pious saints and murderous devils. Shakespeare tries many different scissors to make this cut. His sharpest slicing instrument is the idea of form—or more exactly a cluster of notions that include form, proportion, economy, and gardening. Form resists the excesses of both the pity-drenched intellectual and the blood-drenched criminal in politics. The sanctimonious thinker and the political criminal breed off each other, and excuse each other. We see this in the way that the bedlam of Henry VI's reign set the scene for the crimes of Richard III.

The brilliant exchange between the servant and the gardener in *Richard the Second* tells us something of Shakespeare's view of the whole unfolding mess of the Wars of the Roses. The servant, perhaps in resignation, or perhaps because he has been seduced by the onset of chaos in England, asks:

Why should we in the compass of a pale
Keep law and form and due proportion,
Showing, as in a model, our firm estate,
When our sea-walled garden, the whole land,
Is full of weeds, her fairest flowers choked up,

Her fruit-trees all upturned, her hedges ruin'd,

Her knots disorder'd and her wholesome herbs

Swarming with caterpillars?[33]

The gardener replies that the cause of the problem, 'he that hath suffer'd this disorder'd spring'—viz., Richard II—'Hath now himself met with the fall of leaf'. Richard has been deposed by Henry Bolingbroke.

Yet the gardener then pauses, one of those invisible beats in Shakespeare, the doubt about Bolingbroke pregnant:

….O, what pity is it

That he had not so trimm'd and dress'd his land

As we this garden!

In this doubt, we see Shakespeare's politics revealed. It is the doubt of the political gardener, the trimmer of hedges and the puller of weeds. Gardens serve as a model of just economy and fair proportion in Shakespeare. They hold a promise of decent order and attractive beauty that politics and history can deliver, but only if they can escape the self-righteous warrants of legitimacy and the specious chatter of morality for something that lies beneath the surface words of politicians and playwrights alike.

Music There is a world beyond discourse and its discords where decent quiet refined order is to be found. It is the world of the willowy garden where the darling buds of May bloom. It is a world set in motion by the mute speech of music whose melodies and rhythms mark out a special luminous kind of time in the world.

Only when all is lost, and he is a doomed man, Richard II senses something of this. In a moment of insight, this king with whom the English legitimacy crisis began sees a refracted glimmer of the way in which the country's chronic condition might be cured. He glimpses something beyond all of the airy claims of self-serving legitimacy and right-sounding moralism. It is the poor fated Richard II, abandoned to his prison in Promfret Castle, who wonders aloud:

Music do I hear?

Music

Ha, ha! keep time: how sour sweet music is,

When time is broke and no proportion kept!

Next comes a bolt of realization, followed by a note of regret:

So is it in the music of men's lives.
And here have I the daintiness of ear
To cheque time broke in a disorder'd string;
But for the concord of my state and time
Had not an ear to hear my true time broke.[34]

Richard, it seems, has a musical ear. He recognizes the discordant sound of a string out of tune. But it is not till it is too late that he bothers to pay attention to the discordant cracked sound of his own state and its time. His dilatory ear proves fatal.

For the time of politics, like the time of history, is governed by a musical time. It is subject to powerful rhythmic beats, soaring harmonies and insistent melodies. This is a silent music, yet it roars in the background all the same.

Too late, Richard II realizes that it is not legitimacy but an 'English music' that governs the English state.

THEORIES OF LEGITIMACY

Shakespeare's English history plays test an astonishing range of theories of legitimacy. All the theories come up short. In the case of Richard II, the claim of the king to legitimately rule is brought into question on the very day of his accession to the throne.

The simplest kind of legitimacy is hereditary right. In this case, the validity of the ruler's power, the thing that legitimates it in the eyes of others, is the act inheritance. What is inherited is right. Richard II's reign begins in a state of suspended legitimacy. He is ten years old when his father, Edward, the Black Prince, dies. The child inherits the Crown, and yet not fully. Cliques of barons and lords seek to control the young king. Some plot to destroy him. John Gaunt, the father of Henry Bolingbroke, is one of these preemptory guardians, yet Gaunt also saves Richard's life from the aristocratic vultures who want to destroy the young king. Eventually at the age of twenty three, Richard asserts his own authority against that of his minders. But the fate of the English state is already sealed.

In some ways, this fate is bloody. Wars, notably the debilitating Wars of the Roses, will spring up from the underlying chronic crisis of legitimacy of the state. Some of the actors who appear on this historical stage will have no legitimacy whatsoever. Others will contend their own and debate others legitimacy. The more skeptically-minded will wonder if there is a legitimate kind of legitimacy—an infinite regress that only makes things worse. In other ways, though, the fate of the English state is remarkable. We know this because we know how the story turns out. However we care to measure it, England becomes one of the world's great states. It emerges much greater in the end than its ongoing crises of legitimacy and dynastic chess-board struggles would imply. How come this is so?

There is an argument to be made that England never completely resolved its legitimacy crisis. In a normal state this would have been a disaster. But England, or Britain, or the United Kingdom of Great Britain as it was to become, was not, and is not, a normal state. It is an enigmatic state. England belongs to a small but important class of enigmatic states. These are all states in which the legitimacy question is handled in an unusual manner.

To understand this, it is important to understand what is implied by the idea of legitimacy. Legitimacy is a title or warrant to rule. It is the validation of the ultimate authority in the state. Authority that is legitimate rests on right not might. Right is a moral or normative quality. Right does not preclude the use of force. But a ruler who is legitimate relies as much on the power of norms as on the force of arms to remain in office. Legitimacy implies that the ruler's authority is in some way true, right or moral, and thus worthy of recognition, adherence or obedience.

The most famous theory of legitimate power proposed in the twentieth century was devised by Max Weber. The elements of Weber's theory were drummed into every enrolling social science student in the second half of the century. The authority of rulers, so the mantra went, is based on one of the following: the charisma or exceptional qualities of the ruler, the ruler's adherence to rationalized procedure or law, or else the ruler's following of traditional (e.g. patrimonial) rules. Weber had in mind three types of state: the heroic state, the bureaucratic state, and the household state.

As we have already seen though, Shakespeare produced a far richer account of legitimacy than Weber. Yet the importance of Shakespeare does not stop with that. It is not simply that Shakespeare has insight into a galaxy of claims to legitimate rule. He also understands the limit of *all* of these claims. He has observed their operation in English history. He knows that none of them are adequate to practice. All of them fall over in the end.

If legitimacy does not fully sustain a state, if validity does not completely support authority, then what makes good their defaults? This question is implicitly posed by Shakespeare as he moves in his plays dispassionately from one legitimacy claim to another. He doesn't take sides. He doesn't advocate for religion or country or morality or any of the others. He simply watches them come to power and wither in power. The question that he thereby implicitly poses is also answered by the dramaturgical structuring of the human imagination that Shakespeare more than anyone else lays bare so beautifully. Imagination epitomizes an act of political foundation that lies beyond legitimacy.

KISS ME KATE

Shakespeare's work illustrates how the moral sense of entitlement or rightness may be displaced in politics by the enigmatic act of imagination. Under some, though certainly not all, circumstances, the act of imagination can replace claims of normative validity. A state anchored in the imagination is a state in which contradiction and opposition, and most importantly of all their artful cohabitation, is second nature. This can be thought of as a 'comic' state. I don't mean that such a state is a laughing stock. Rather I mean that imaginative wit plays a central role in the conduct of politics.

If we take the English state as an example, from Falstaff to *Yes, Minister*, comedy has been an essential ingredient of national culture. Being funny is a serious matter. This is especially true in matters of state. For the essence of wit—the artful combination of opposites—is the nub of great politics. Comic states possess the quality of imagination. Imagination binds opposites. Wit is one of the chief ways of achieving this. It is not the

only way, but it is a very important way. It is unsurprising then that in Shakespeare even the history plays and tragedies have powerful comic elements.

Henry the Fifth is a remarkable example of this. It is Shakespeare's great patriotic play. Henry V's St. Crispian Day speech is the greatest call to arms ever recorded with the possible exception of Winston Churchill's 4 June 1940 speech to the House of Commons. Often, though, what's not commented on are the final scenes of *Henry the Fifth*, after all the fighting is over. These scenes are comic. I don't mean that they are funny, although they do raise a wry smile here and there. Rather they conclude the immortal war play with a proposal of marriage. As in a comedy, the warring opposites are united in the end in happy matrimony.[35] Henry V has defeated the French at Agincourt. This was a surprising, and for the French a devastating, defeat. Henry, secure in his triumph, however, turns to the French not as a conqueror but as a suitor.

What Shakespeare makes of this is extraordinary. Through the words of Henry, he explains the strange non-discursive logic of the imagination. He uses the comedy of royal courtship to show us how the trains and claims of reason turn into the rotating rhymes of the imagination.

Henry woos Katherine, the daughter of the French king. He declares himself to be a plain king and a plainer soldier. This simplicity extends to his tongue. 'I know no ways to mince it in love but to directly say "I love you".'[36] To Henry's way of thinking, much more persuasive than plain speaking is right action. He explains to his royal Kate that a simple fellow like himself 'perforce must do thee right'—for he has no fancy words to wrong his beloved. The royal plaintiff prefers unadorned action to mellifluous speech. Discourse, he thinks, is not very trustworthy. That is especially true of the discourses of love.

Henry decries the inconstant, unreliable charms of smarmy speakers. 'For these fellows of infinite tongue that can **rhyme** themselves into ladies' favors, they do always **reason** themselves out again.' And yet Henry's own plain speaking is deliriously eloquent. Is he, then, just another silver-tongued devil who hides his own scheming by drawing attention to it? After all, what is more hidden than that which is most visible?

Henry is right to be wary of words. The bookish rule of his son, Henry VI, illustrates the point very neatly. Henry VI is the first in a long line of intellectuals in

politics whose rule is an unmitigated disaster. Intellectuals are terrible in politics, just as fluent charmers are in love. Words may be the staple of love and politics, but they are not much chop. They are inconstant. No-one can rely on them, unlike a simple good heart.

> *… a speaker is but a prater, a Ryme is*
> *but a Ballad; a good Legge will fall, a strait Backe will*
> *stoope, a blacke Beard will turne white, a curl'd Pate will*
> *grow bald, a faire Face will wither, a full Eye will wax*
> *hollow: but a good Heart, Kate, is the Sunne and the*
> *Moone, or rather the Sunne, and not the Moone; for it*
> *shines bright, and neuer changes, but keepes his course*
> *truly …*

Still it is a speaker, Henry V, who says this. It is a speaker who fingers speech by means of speech. It makes you wonder then whether a speaker can really evade the failings of speech-making. If speech in general is inconstant is the plain speaker necessarily any less inconstant than any other speaker? Is Shakespeare's Henry being disingenuous? Or is there a mute speech, a layer of imagination that under-girds the facile facility of speech, that resists its inconstancy and its sometimes terrible inconstancy?

The distinction that Shakespeare draws between ***rhyme*** and ***reason*** is crucial to help us understand why Henry's words are not just another speech act from yet another faker. To the extent that they embody the silent speech of rhyme they are acts of imagination that resist the shallow charms of ordinary persuasive speech. These charms are certainly to be avoided. It is so easy for speech-makers to reason white into black. The dictators of the twentieth century did this all the time and politically naïve people repeatedly fell for it. Millions, including many highly-educated people, believed the words of Stalin and Hitler. How easily, how cheaply, how effortlessly they were duped. People are readily persuaded of ridiculous claims and lethal propositions. How else do we account for the popularity of Islamic nihilism in the twenty-first century, not least amongst intellectuals? Words seamlessly turn to murder. Shakespeare knew this very well. His ultimate villain, Richard III, is an eloquent snake. Richard has no difficulty whatsoever inciting his cronies to murder.

If the best do the worst under the spell of words, then why should we put any faith in those words? When anything can be argued for, why should we listen to an argument? Even more so, why would we consider rhyme to be any different? I don't mean literal rhyme, 'Mary, Mary quite contrary', but the 'thing-in-itself' that rhyme represents—the non-discursive, mute dimension of discourse. When the speaker invokes the 'full eye that waxes hollow', we have in play both the spiritual material of speech and the antipodal forms of the imagination. Intellectually that might be interesting, but politically it makes no difference whatsoever. The dialectic play of full and hollow might be imaginative, but that does not stop criminal kings conjuring their gulags in such terms. Richard III has some of Shakespeare's best lines. Straight-stooped, black-white, curled-bald might just as well be the political 'yes' that means 'no', or the 'I love you' that means 'sleep with me'.

Yet, for all of that, though, there *is* a difference between rhyme and reason. The difference stems from what they share in common. Both speech and imagination can turn one thing into another. That is their great conjuring trick. Both can turn white into black, and black into white. Both can transform the terrible into the beautiful, and the beautiful into the terrible. But not though in the same way; for where speech or discourse moves in one direction, the imagination goes in two directions.

There is something ineffably ambidextrous about the imagination. Or to put it another way: ***rhyme is revolutionary***. Beauty may turn poetically into terror, but it also always turns back. Fullness does not just become hollow. It is rather coupled in unison and in perpetuity with hollow. Where reason always wants to take us somewhere, rhyme always wants to take us back. Reason progresses while rhyme revolves. Rhyme moves forward away from its point of departure, like reason does; but, unlike reason, it also always moves back toward the point from whence it has come. Thus rhyme's well-spring of inconstancy is matched rhythmically with the well-sprung constancy of its eternal return.

There is both reason and rhyme in what we do. Reasons of state, like the reasons of the heart, are inconstant. They surprise us, and sometimes those surprises are not very pleasant. Rhymes also surprise us but their surprise is leavened by familiarity. In rhyme fullness does not simply turn into hollowness but rather is united in an imperishable pair with it. The comedy of politics and the comedic romances of the heart—both of them

love these odd couplings. Nothing pleases comic intuition more than the union of the full-eyed and the hollow-cheeked. Such couplings, especially the least likely ones, often prove in the end to be the most durable of all.

That is the enigma of love. It is also the enigma of great states.

Kate embodies this enigma. She speaks broken English, but her voice is music. The music of rhyme trumps the discourse of reason. It is not what you say but the way you say it. Straight-stooped is like two notes in a chord. In the right key they sound in unison. Such music or such rhyme unites states.

Is it possible that I should love the enemy of France, Kate asks? To which Henry replies, beautifully:

> ***No, it is not possible you should love the enemy of France, Kate. But, in loving me, you should love the friend of France, for I love France so well that I will not part with a village of it. I will have it all mine. And, Kate, when France is mine and I am yours, then yours is France and you are mine.***

This is the 'logic' of the imagination. It is the 'logic' of great love. It is also the 'logic' of great politics. Henry's words present an argument, a persuasion. It is not a classroom argument, and it is not a syllogism, though. It is a paradox: *love thine enemy*. It 'persuades' because *your enemy is your friend*. That is how the imagination works. In the imagination, opposites are transposed into identities—black is white, enemies are friends, time is space, and energy is matter.

Of course, enemies are not always friends, and enemies are not always to be loved. To love one's enemies always, in all circumstances, is possible only in the mush-brained world of Henry VI. In that world there are only friends, and no enemies. This is not a political world. The admonition then to 'love thine enemy' is pious clap trap. It is also dangerous. It is no act of the imagination to do as Henry VI did—to prattle about good works while all around him his kingdom is burning. That is stupid, and stupidity is the antithesis of the imagination. In contrast, Henry V's appeal to Kate to love her enemy is a daring act of the imagination. In it, or through it, things that have been set apart are to be united, first of all in thought, paradoxically. Henry *is* France's enemy. He has

conquered France. But he is also France's friend, for he loves France, and the love of an enemy for his enemy makes possible the love of Henry for Kate, and thus of Kate for Henry.

But what brought Henry to that point? The English king who wages a brilliant campaign against the French is also the English king who has affection for France. Kate is the switch who can unite these poles. In her and through her the paradoxical union of being victorious in war and vanquished in love is played out. Here war and love combine as one. It is this combination that gives the lovers' erotic its edge. This ambidextrous quality endows love with its heightened power of attraction. Before any great love can be consummated, it must first be imagined.

But how then does the imagination imagine what it imagines? Interestingly, Shakespeare rejects the idea that Henry 'sees' this love before he pursues it. Love 'before it loves' is blind. Henry tells us this himself. As in love, so in politics. Henry tells the King of France that many think that he, Henry, is politically blind. Love has made him blind to the profit of sacking French cities.

> *and you may, some of you, thank love for my blindness,*
> *who cannot see many a fair French city for one fair French maid*
> *that stands in my way.*

The King of France, of course, is pleased that love's blindness will save France's cities from the invading army. But he also understands that this blindness is a way of seeing. For blindness is the vision of the imagination.

The French king makes this clear when he says to Henry: 'Yes, my lord, you see them perspectively, the cities turned into a maid…' The sight that is blind is the source of metaphor. It gives us cities that are maids—and such metaphors have real effects in the world. For if the English king thinks of the cities of France as maidens, he is duty-bound to protect their innocence, 'for they are all girdled with maiden walls that war hath never entered.'

Love that is blind sees the cities that are maidens with hymens that are ramparts. That is the power of the imagination.

Loving your enemy—triumphing over them and, yet, allying with them, defeating them and embracing them, dominating them and then marrying them. That is the enigma of politics.

This essay is dedicated to Agnes Heller and her love of the imperishable Shakespeare.

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Notes

[1] Winston Churchill, *A History of the English Speaking Peoples* (London: Cassell, 2000), p. 169.
[2] *Richard II*, I.3
[3] *3 Henry VI*, I.1
[4] *2 Henry VI*, II.2.
[5] *2 Henry VI*, II.2.
[6] *1 Henry IV*, I.2
[7] *1 Henry IV*, III.1
[8] *1 Henry IV*, V.4
[9] *1 Henry VI*, V.4, V.5.
[10] *1 Henry VI*, I.1
[11] *1 Henry VI*, I.1
[12] *1 Henry VI*, III.1
[13] *1 Henry IV*, V.1
[14] *2 Henry VI*, V.1
[15] *2 Henry IV*, III.1
[16] *1 Henry IV*, IV.1
[17] *1 Henry IV*, V.1
[18] *Richard II*, III.2
[19] *Richard II*, III.2
[20] *Richard II*, III.2
[21] *Richard II*, III.2
[22] *2 Henry IV*, I.1
[23] *2 Henry IV*, IV.V
[24] *2 Henry IV*, IV.V
[25] *Henry V*, I.2
[26] *2 Henry VI*, V.2
[27] *3 Henry VI*, II.2
[28] *1 Henry VI*, V.1
[29] *2 Henry VI*, I.3
[30] *2 Henry VI*, I.1
[31] *3 Henry VI*, II.2
[32] *2 Henry VI*, III.2
[33] *Richard II*, III.4
[34] *Richard II*, V.5
[35] On the role of warring pairs and their union in marriage, see Agnes Heller's landmark study of comedy, *Immortal Comedy: The Comic Phenomenon in Art, Literature and Life* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005).
[36] *Henry V*, V.2