

Shakespeare's Plays of Deranged Authority: The King's Three Bodies

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Shakespeare and Critical Social Theory

William Shakespeare wrote potent literary productions that reflected declining feudalism and emerging capitalism with uncanny veracity. Shakespeare's history plays are propelled by storylines that not only narrate sequences of historical events but also recognize the social ontology of the threshold of capitalism. The protagonists in Shakespeare are rarely one-dimensional characters, but complex individuals with subtle, essentially modern psychological structures who have become representative types in Western thought. This article focuses on one of Shakespeare's least-performed history plays, *John, King of England*, here referenced by the shorter title, *King John*, probably written and first performed about 1595.¹ Shakespeare frequently dramatized infighting among warring factions of privileged aristocrats and royals, but he also depicted the rising commons, an emergent bourgeois order of walled towns and cities, and the displacement of honorific statecraft with a new "politics of commodity," a concept featured prominently in *King John*. Shakespeare identified the central structures of both fading feudalism and rising capitalism, mapping the relationship between universal values, individual lives, and the mediating structures of social particularity. He was, in short, an early and remarkably fine sociologist. Shakespeare's phrasings, metaphors, characters, and sequences of action were so well crafted that they leapt off the stage to circulate widely through modern culture. Shakespeare's plays were not only performed but were published and read as literature. His audiences and readers were exposed to synthetic images that captured and preserved the feudal order as it disappeared and was canceled into emergent modern capitalism. Shakespeare depicted early modern social dynamics with such clarity and dramatic power that he made capitalist society comprehensible to itself. Modern society became aware of its own tragic potentiality in the mirror of Shakespeare's plays.²

Social Theory and Shakespeare's Hamlet: Studies in Deranged Subjectivity

Shakespeare played a pivotal role in the formation of German post-idealist philosophy, including movements of thought that culminated in critical social theory (Paulin 2003). *Hamlet* received an unusual amount of analytic attention during the 19th and early 20th centuries (Paulin 2003: 436-466; Jones 1949). *Hamlet* depicted an empire (Danish) in the midst of a political and economic crisis after Hamlet's father defeated Fortinbra's Norwegians, thereby securing tenuous colonial tribute. Upon the death of Hamlet's father, succession did not proceed to Hamlet (the oldest son under primogeniture) but passed to Hamlet's uncle, Claudius, under tanistry, in which the "worthiest" are elected to positions of high authority (Fischer 1989: 693-4). Under **tanistry**, the death of a sovereign necessarily generated a succession crisis until a charismatically qualified warlord was selected. Such participative procedures of election by co-equals was common to Danelaw England (Fischer 1989: 793) and in Nordic booty capitalism (Veblen 1919), where constant Viking warfare privileged leadership by charismatic warriors. While Denmark's economy was rooted in pre-capitalist extraction of tribute from client states, the play mentions contact with burgher capitalism in

the Rhineland, bringing individualistic capitalism into conflict with the fading but still dominant aristocratic honor system. Economic difficulties caused by England's slow remittance of tribute payments to Denmark hover in the background of the play, while an emerging market economy operates as an anomic force, threatening to upend the warrior tribute economy while destabilizing status orders by the rise of non-nobles. Hamlet remarks that the "age is grown so picked that the toe of the peasant comes so near the heel of the courtier he galls his kibe" (Ham.5.1.135-7). In *Hamlet* and the history plays, the language of town, trade, and profit frequently appear. Hamlet expresses his depressed mood in economic terms: "O God, O God, How weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable seem to me all the uses of this world!" (Ham.1.2.132-4). Hamlet criticizes his mother's over-quick marriage to Claudius as a result of business calculation: "Thrift, thrift, Horatio. The funeral baked meats did coldly furnish forth the marriage tables" (Ham.1.2.179-80). The merchant Polonius famously advises his son to dress as a sober burgher: "Costly thy habit as thy purse can buy, rich not gaudy; For the apparel oft proclaims the man" (Ham.1.3.70-2). Polonius further warns against debt: "Neither a borrower nor a lender be, for loan oft loses both itself and friend, and borrowing dulls the edge of husbandry" (Ham.1.3.75-7). Despite these intimations of burgherly conduct (Hamlet attended school in Wittenberg), aristocratic status honor dominates the education, life experiences, and heroic action in *Hamlet* and Shakespeare's history plays.

Beginning with Freud, psychoanalysts developed an extensive "Hamletology" as a primary way to comprehend problems of modern subjectivity. Freud's collected works contain hundreds of references to Shakespeare and his account of the Oedipus complex is based at least as much upon Hamlet as upon Sophocles' play. Ernest Jones (1910) developed Freud's treatment of Hamlet into a book-length study that documented a century of intense, mostly German, inquiry into the "mystery of Hamlet" by Goethe, Schlegel, Coleridge, and Herder. All were fascinated by Hamlet's vacillating character, overdeveloped introspection, infinite deliberation, and reflection that froze him in "melancholic inaction." Hamlet was no action-hero, but he made a fair archetype for Durkheim's Stoic-Egoist. Lacan's sixth seminar on Desire (1958-9) notes Hamlet's emotional impact upon readers and playgoers, especially in English and Schlegel's German. To all of these thinkers, there was something psychoanalytically representative about Hamlet, who prefigured Freud's aim-inhibited patients in his blocked desire, a man neurotically unable to act while remaining stalled in self-reproach. By almost any measure, the neurotic Hamlet would have made a rotten king, worse than the hysterical Richard II. Neurotic kings have difficulty fulfilling their symbolic mandate or exercising traditional authority. Kings who doubt their absolute position of authority or who attempt to act "ethically" upon the query of a sublime Big Other, who become mere tools of a higher authority, can neither reign nor rule. Hamlet, like Shakespeare's King John (below), Hamlet was not fit to be king.

Shakespeare's King John: Derangements of Authority

While Hamlet's deranged psyche inspired philosophers and psychoanalysts, King John, the Henriad, and many of Shakespeare's tragedies exhibit profound derangements of social order and disturbances of authority. Something is amiss with Shakespearean kings and fathers, protagonists perpetually searching for legitimate authority that they rarely, if ever, obtain in pure, unadulterated form. Derangements of authority in Shakespeare can be clarified through comparison with Max Weber's (1978) famous delineation of three pure types of authority: **legal authority**, traditional authority, and charismatic authority. The legal authority in pure form is based upon rational grounds and "belief in the legality of enacted rules and the right of those elevated to authority under such rules to issue commands" (1978: 215). **Traditional authority**, in contrast, is rooted in "established belief in the sanctity of immemorial traditions and the legitimacy of those exercising authority under them" (1978: 215). **Charismatic authority** is grounded upon "devotion to the exceptional sanctity, heroism, or exemplary character of an individual person, and of the normative patterns or order revealed or ordained by him" (1978: 215). Legal authority is impersonal, associated with a formal office whose orders command obedience by "virtue of the formal legality ... within the scope of authority of office" (1978: 215-6). Both of the other forms of authority are personal. Obedience to the commands of a person occupying traditional authority is literally based upon the "sanctity of age-old rules and powers" that do not bind the traditional figure by "enacted rules" (1978: 216). Obedience to a person possessing charismatic authority is rooted in "personal trust in his revelation, his heroism, or his exemplary qualities" (1978: 216)

Clearly, all of Shakespeare's monarchs possess traditional forms of authority, and the irrationality of such authority lies on the surface of Shakespeare's history plays. King John, Richard II, Richard III, Henry VI are all

characterologically flawed, ineffectual or destructive monarchs who acquired sovereign power based solely upon primogeniture, rules of kingly succession that grant priority by a series of rather irrational and arcane rules to royal blood and symbolic legitimacy. Kings must be “right-born” to a lawfully wedded queen to legitimately rule as king. Illegitimate “base-born” sons of kings were barred from succession to the crown. Shakespeare’s plays were written during a period of enormous religious tension and revolution, when the rising commons and a new politics of commodity were openly challenging the privilege and unchecked prerogatives of the aristocracy. Hence, most of his sovereigns supplement traditional power with legal and/or charismatic authority.

In Shakespeare’s *Henriad* and *King John*, traditional crowns are contested from the moment they are placed upon royal heads, inspiring Kantorowicz’s analysis of the political theology associated with the “king’s two bodies,” which was based largely upon his reading of *Richard II* (1997: 24-41). To Kantorowicz, the corporeal body of short-lived traditional kings is distinct from the sovereign’s (social) sublime body that reigns without ceasing as sacred, collective representation of the state: “The King is dead, long live the King!” In *King John*, Shakespeare’s most profound play of deranged authority, authority is split, as Lacan would predict, into a triad. Here, the sovereign power of kings is fractured into three bodies: corpo-“real,” imaginary, and symbolic.³ Divided and animated by different characters, the king’s three bodies map onto and combine in complex forms with Weber’s three modes of legitimate domination: corpo-real bodies and their irrational rules of succession are bound with traditional authority, imaginary bodies of reigning and warfare correspond with charismatic authority, and the symbolic bodies of ruling, judging, and lawgiving relate to legal authority. In *King John*, two contenders for the throne -- King John and Prince Arthur -- struggle over the traditional power borne by corpo-real bodies. The “imaginary” body of the king – the character most capable of acting with noble warrior honor expected of Kings – is the charismatic “Bastard” who can never ascend to symbolic legitimacy. Finally, the papal legate, Cardinal Pandolf, personifies pure symbolic power associated with impersonal, rule-bound, office-holding, legal authority.

In the play, *King John* is not the play’s emotional point of identification nor its dramatic, action-hero: these positions are clearly occupied by his nephew, the bastard son of King Richard the Lion-Hearted (**Coeur-de-Lion**).⁴ At dramatic turning points in the play, the Bastard stands out as the sole character who fully embodies the (second) imaginary body of kings, the collective representation who reigns with nobility and fights with a charismatic power. In the play’s second act, only the Bastard maintains honorific dignity, desires heroic fighting, seeks vengeance for King Richard’s death, and resists debasement and compromise. King John, in contrast, weakly accepts a truce brokered by citizens of a burgher town, vacillates meekly during invasion, and kneels in submission before the papal legate. The Bastard wants the glory of war rather than dishonorable peace, a painful fight to the death rather than long life in dishonored comfort.

The Bastard is clearly charismatic in Weber’s sense: his authority does not derive from an office nor from traditional possession of symbolic legitimacy. Instead, he is obeyed because he exhibits a “certain quality ... by virtue of which he is considered extraordinary and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities” (Weber 1978: 241). Shakespeare’s fracturing of authority animated by three distinct characters -- the corpo-real King John-Prince Arthur dyad, the imaginary charismatic Bastard, and the symbolic-legal Cardinal Pandolf -- not only sheds light upon early modern sovereignty but upon contemporary derangements of authority.

Bastardy and the Two Bodies of Traditional Authority

King John opens with a French ambassador insulting King John’s “borrowed majesty” to his face, alleging (correctly as it is soon revealed) that he sits upon a throne usurped from “thy deceased brother Geoffrey’s son, Arthur Plantagenet... [the] right royal sovereign” (1.1.8-15). King John’s mother, Queen Eleanor, acknowledges that John possesses the throne without the clear right to it: his reign is not supported by traditional rules of primogeniture, and therefore Arthur, not John, is the rightful bearer of the king’s first corpo-real body. Without clear authority recognized by proper title, war (the fight to the death) is the only traditional mechanism to settle sovereignty, and King John calls for “war for war, and blood for blood, controlment for controlment” (1.1.19-20). Queen Eleanor’s full awareness of the improper symbolic hold reminds John that success in war (strong possession) is the only means to secure the throne:

KING JOHN: Our strong possession and our right for us.

QUEEN ELEANOR: Your strong possession much more than your right,
 or else it must go wrong with you and me:
 so much my conscience whispers in my ear
 Which none but heaven and you shall hear. (1.1.39-41)

The Bastard and his half-brother enter seeking the king's judgment regarding inheritance of the estate of their legal father, Lord Falconbridge. This entire scene plays as a discourse upon inheritance, bastardy, and legitimate possession of the first corpo-real body of authority. The Bastard, knowing that traditional rules of primogeniture may not hold if it is proven he is illegitimate, states: "Heaven guard my mother's honor, and my land!" (1.1.70). The younger but true-born brother seeks to disinherit his elder but base-born sibling, leading the Bastard to complain that his brother has "slandered... [him with] with bastardy" and while not "true begot" he was surely "well begot," declaring: "fair fall the bones that took the pains for me" (1.1.75-80). Queen Eleanor recognizes the Bastard as Richard's illegitimate son:

QUEEN ELEANOR: He has a trick of **Coeur-de-lion's** face;
 The accent of his tongue affecteth him.
 Do you not read some token of my son
 In the large composition of this man?"
 KING JOHN: Mine eye hath well examined his parts,
 and finds them perfect Richard." (1.1, 85-89)

Falconbridge's father on his deathbed revealed that "my mother's son was none of his" and seeks to void the Bastard's legacy. King John, knowing the law, rules in favor of the Bastard: "Sirrah, your brother is legitimate. Your father's wife did after wedlock bear him, and if she did play false, the fault was hers, which fault lies on the hazards of all husbands that marry wives" (1.1.116-119). King John acknowledges that Richard impregnated the Bastard's mother (likened to a calf "bred from his cow") and his summary judgment is harsh: "My mother's son did get your father's heir; your father's heir must have your father's land" (1.1.128-30).

At this point, Queen Eleanor offers the Bastard a knighthood if he agrees to give up his land and join her retinue, to which he agrees. King John performs a simple dubbing ceremony, transforming "good old Sir Robert's wife's eldest son" into "Sir Richard and Plantagenet" (1.1.158-160). This new name and title do not stick, however, and he is not addressed this way again during the duration of the play, instead referenced by his bastard status in myriad degrading nicknames. Shakespeare makes clear that illegitimacy bars even the noblest character from full aristocratic recognition. After a brief meeting with his mother who confirms that he is indeed the illegitimate son of Richard **Coeur-de-lion**, and after repetitive, overdrawn, joking references to his bastard status, such as "Sir Robert might have eat his part in me upon Good Friday, and ne'er broke his fast" (1.1.234-5), he embraces his status as the illegitimate offspring of a powerful warrior king. The Bastard, in full possession of the imaginary qualities of character, appearance, and charismatic courage of his noble father, nevertheless will be denied opportunity to possess the traditional throne or acquire symbolic authority.

Act 2 opens at the closed gates of the walled town of Angers, where two war camps are formed. One is composed of King Phillip of France, protector of England's Prince Arthur and his mother Lady Constance, who seeks to defend young Arthur's claims to the English throne and its dominions. Among King Phillip's retinue is the Duke of Austria, who wears a lion skin taken off **Coeur-de-lion's** body after he was killed by the Duke. The second war party is comprised of an English invasion party, including King John, Queen Eleanor, and the Bastard. The burgher citizens of Angers, faced with two claimants to the English throne, refuse to lower the town gates to admit either party. King Phillip of France threatens the town: "Our cannon shall be bent against the brows of this resisting town" (2.1.37-42). In contrast to Major (1980: 163-4), who views the commons as a weak part of the European polity, impotent and servile in the face of aristocratic domination, Shakespeare's burgher-citizens assume sovereignty while forcing the two kings to fight to the death for recognition, promising to open the town to the victor. Eventually, the two camps engage in battle, and the resulting struggle to the death is short-circuited through a process that the Bastard calls the politics of commodity: self-interested avoidance of the sacrifice to honor. The resistance of this burgher town and its capacity to order kings about indicates the rising power of the urban bourgeois against the knightly aristocratic order. The effectiveness of the town's defenses exceeded the offensive capability of either claimant.

The derangement of authority is manifest in the dialogue between the opposing camps. France's King Phillip

argues that King John “hast underwrought his lawful king, cut off the sequence of posterity, outfaced infant state, and done a rape upon the maiden virtue of the crown” (2.1.95-8). Phillip overlays the first corpo-real body of the young Prince onto a picture image of the state, so that Arthur’s physical resemblance to his father is emphasized: “this little abstract doth contain that large which died in Geoffrey” (2.1.101). The action in this scene is framed by battle over legitimate authority, “the blots and stains of right” (2.1.113), with King Phillip claiming to draw authority from “that supernal judge that stirs good thoughts” (2.1.112).

Each claimant accuses the other of usurping authority and makes claims about the legitimacy of the first corpo-real body of Prince Arthur. Queen Eleanor directly accuses Constance of infidelity and Arthur of being an illegitimate bastard: “Thy bastards shall be king that thou mayst be a queen and check the world” (2.1.122-3). For her part, Constance defends the legitimacy of Arthur’s corpo-real body by asserting the physical similarity of father and son: “my bed was ever to thy son... [who is] liker in feature to his father” (2.1.123-4). Corporeal likeness of father and son serves as evidence against symbolic bastardy: the real resemblance guarantees traditional authority. In the end, what one sees in this scene is less a contest over usurpation than the fracking of authority itself, its devolution into three components. After the death of Richard, a crisis of succession occurred, such that authority itself was deranged in thirds, only one of which (traditional authority of the corpo-real body) is in contest.

During this dispute over traditional legitimacy, the Bastard focuses single-mindedly upon avenging his father’s death through combat with the Duke of Austria. The Bastard is the imaginary carrier of charismatic authority who remains above law and outside tradition, and unable to attain recognized symbolic status. He nevertheless fills the vacuum of power in scene after scene as the ineffectual King John stalls and concedes. The two parties -- King John-Queen Eleanor and Prince Arthur-King Phillip of France -- remain in contention for sublime authority in the sense of Kantorowicz’s *The King’s Two Bodies* (1997), but it is entirely rooted in claims surrounding legitimacy of each claimant’s traditional corporeal body. At the moment when the natural body of King Richard fell to the Duke of Austria, the second sublime body of the king – the king that “never dies,” the “mystic body of his subjects and nation” (1997, 32) detached in search of its next bearer (“The King is Dead, Long Live the King”). John and Eleanor seized the moment and forced a coronation while Arthur and Constance fled to France. Either natural “base” body, John’s or Arthur’s, could serve to bear the sublime majesty of kingship. Since neither party yielded to the other’s claims, warfare was needed to determine legitimacy. Warfare is needed for resolution. To avoid war, King Phillip ridiculously turns to the “men of Angers” to settle the disputed sovereignty: “Let us hear them speak whose title they admit, Arthur’s or John’s” (2.1.199-200), setting up a struggle for recognition of authority. In a bizarre Weberian inversion of power, the burgher citizenry of a walled town are given the power to determine royal sovereignty: the citizens refuse to recognize either corporeal body as sovereign, and while both natural bodies are present, both are potential bearers of the sublime second body, and until the dispute is resolved, sovereignty itself has been usurped by the town. The citizen spokesman for the town argues that “he that proves the king, to him will we prove loyal; until that time have we rammed up our gates against the world” (2.1.273-6).

And so, the battle ensues between the forces of King John and King Phillip. Such that Honor itself was wasted before the self-interest of a town that refused to recognize the illegitimate bearer of the sublime body of the king. A lull in the fighting led the combatants to appeal once more to the town to declare a winner, which the town refused to do:

CITIZEN: Heralds, from of our towers we might behold
 From first to last the onset and retire of both your armies,
 Whose equality by our best eyes cannot be censured
 Strength matched with strength and power confronted power.
 Both are alike, and both alike we like.
 One must prove greatest, While they weigh so even,
 We hold our town for neither, yet for both.” (2.1.325-332)

Without recognition by the town, and without a battle to the death, sovereignty is here literally suspended, proving Schmitt’s famous dictum: “Sovereign is he who decides on the exception” (Schmitt 1985: 5). The power to suspend the law, to declare a state of exception, generates sovereignty. In this sense, the citizens of Angers temporarily usurped power and functioned as sovereign authority. The town’s defensive wall (a symbolic crown) prevents successful attack by either adversary. The town will admit, recognize, and submit only to the winner of a struggle to the death. So, yielding to the town, the two king’s prepare to remount their attack upon each other. Until, that is, the Bastard derives a better plan.

The Bastard's Soliloquy on Commodity

The charismatic Bastard filled the power vacuum created by the contest of kings by convincing them to temporarily suspend their enmity in order to combine forces against the town: “be friends awhile, and both conjointly bend your sharpest deeds of malice on this town...till their soul-fearing clamours have brawled down the flinty ribs of this contemptuous city” (2.1.379-84). The kings agree to cooperate and “lay this Angers to the ground... this peevish town [with] saucy walls... that we have dashed them to the ground” (2.1.403-7). This further derangement of authority leads the town's citizens, who fear their imminent destruction, to deploy their burgher values and barter a marriage between King John's niece, Lady Blanche, and King Phillip's son, Louis. Rather than fight to the death (dying into traditional honorific values), the town engages in haggling, bargaining, and market discourse to seek material advantage in compromise for the mutual gain of all. Rather than die into values, the town encourages the kings to live with enhanced value.

A long scene of debased higgling ensues: eventually all parties accept the proposed marriage to secure material gain. King John, recognizing that this marriage will secure his crown from young Arthur, sweetens the deal by giving an exceptionally large dowry to Louis, and with hands joined, the now-peaceful parties enter the town to attend the brokered wedding ceremony. Only the Bastard resists, and disgusted by the display of “love so vile,” launches into the famous commodity soliloquy:

BASTARD: Mad world, mad kings, mad composition!
 ...France, whose armour conscience buckled on,
 Whom zeal and charity brought to the field
 As God's own soldier, rounded in the ear
 With that same purpose-changer, that sly devil,
 That broker that still breaks the pate of faith,
 That daily break-vow, he that wins of all,
 Of kings, of beggars, old men, young men, maids, --
 Who having no external thing to lose
 But the word 'maid', cheats the poor maid of that --
 That smooth-faced gentleman, tickling commodity;
 Commodity, the bias of the world,
 ...this advantage, this vile-drawing bias,
 This sway of motion, this commodity...
 This commodity,
 This bawd, this broker, this all-changing word,
 ...resolved and honourable war,
 To a most base and vile-concluded peace.
 ...Since kings break faith upon commodity,
 Gain, be my lord, for I will worship thee. (2.2.562-599)

Traditional honor and warrior zeal were abandoned in debased, transactional dealing. In the Bastard's view, only death in battle, the full struggle to the death affirmed and energized values by sending warriors to the fall (vale) of death. In the town, and in aristocratic society touched by the town, traditional warrior gods were brought down by commodity while gain (profit) was worshipped.

He that Holds His Kingdom Holds the Law

In Act 3.1, a new player emerges on the scene: Cardinal Pandolf, the papal legate who represents the third division of the king's body, and the third of Weber's triad of power. Kantorowicz's distinction between the first, natural body of the king (the frail perishable corpse) and the second, sublime body of the king splits a third time. The natural body (the real body) remains, but the sublime body splits into the symbolic sovereign (the occupants of law who rules) And the imaginary body capable of fulfilling -- fleshing out -- the reign and warfare necessary to sovereignty. We have then:

- The first “real body” as the bearer of traditional sovereignty
- The second “imaginary body” who charismatically reigns and fights as a collective representation

- The third “symbolic body” ruling impersonally as an office-holding, legal sovereign

In the person of Cardinal Pandolf, a papal emissary sent by the pope to constrain King John, the law as Big Other, as abstract symbolic order of language and law devoid of personal, imaginary, or real supplement enters into the play's narrative. Pandolf initiates a long discourse on sovereignty, and the proper ordering of power such that the symbolic laws of the international church assume priority over the territorial power represented in the traditional authority of King John. Cardinal Pandolf embodies purely symbolic legal authority and orders King John to install Stephen Langton, the Pope's choice, as the Archbishop of Canterbury. King John's answer was famously quoted by Kantorwicz as an instance of the sublime body of the king:

KING JOHN: What earthy name to interrogatories
Can task the free breath of a sacred king?
... no Italian priest
Shall tithe or toll in our dominions;
But as we, under God, are supreme head,
So, under him, that great supremacy
Where we do reign we will alone uphold
Without th'assistance of a mortal hand.” (3,1.74-84)

King Phillip labels John's answer “blasphemy” leading John to answer in a blistering critique of the papacy that echoes Luther and other protestant reformers:

KING JOHN: Though you and all the kings of Christendom
Are led so grossly by this meddling priest,
Dreading the curse that money may buy out,
And by the merit of vile gold, dross, dust,
Purchase corrupted pardon of a man,
Who in that sale sells pardon from himself;
Though you and all the rest so grossly led
This juggling witchcraft with revenue cherish;
Yet I alone, alone do me oppose
Against the Pope...” (3.1.88-97)

Pandolf then deploys the Papacy's ultimate weapon: excommunication.

PANDOLF: Then by the lawful power that I have
Thou shalt stand cursed and excommunicate;
And blessed shall he be that doth revolt
From his allegiance to an heretic;
And meritorious shall that hand be called,
Canonized and worshipped as a saint,
That takes away by any secret course
Thy hateful life.” (3.1.98-104)

The Law of Christendom is enforced not only by legal but lethal power: anyone venturing to assassinate King John will be canonized, making John **Homo Sacer** in Agamben's sense. King Phillip and other territorial monarchs who hold power under papal authority are charged by Pandolf with the obligation to go to war against the offending English king. Pandolf orders King Phillip “on peril of a curse” to “raise the power of France upon his head, Unless he do submit himself to Rome” (3.1.119-120), to become a “champion of our church” (3.1.182).

After this further derangement of authority, an extended discourse on law unfolds, revealing that the standoff between King John and the Pope has generated a state of exception. After Pandolf declares that there is “law and warrant” for his curse upon John, Constance declaims that the “law itself is perfect wrong” because “When law can do no right Let it be lawful that law bar no wrong. Law cannot give my child his kingdom here, For he that holds his kingdom holds the law” (3.1.111-115). Constance here anticipates Carl Schmitt's state of exception by three centuries: when the Big Other fades or vanishes, “he that holds the kingdom holds the law.”

As the tension mounts, while King Phillip of France and King John of England stand side by side holding hands in political and military union, various characters weigh in on Phillip's pending decision, each giving reasons in support or defiance of the order to submit to Rome. The Papal Authority in Rome with the entire magical

apparatus of Mother Church (including the rampant Mariolatry that had spread throughout Christendom prior to the Reformation) appears not as the Lacanian patriarchal “Big Other” but as the maternal superego that dominates subjects without the limits of the law. Pandolf states that: “All form is formless, order orderless, Save what is opposite to England’s love. Therefore to arms, be champion of our Church, or let the Church, our mother, breathe her curse, a mother’s curse, on her revolting son” (3.1.179-183). Pandolf invokes the limitless, unconstrained, extra-legal powers of the maternal superego that punishes beyond the bounds of law: “France, though mayst hold a serpent by the tongue, a crazed lion by the mortal paw, a fasting tiger safer by the tooth” than contravene a papal order (3.1.184-6). Such a maternal superego does not carefully uphold law while respecting rational procedure but operates with an excess of fanaticism and vengeance. Pandolf ventures a theory of political theology by labeling this excess over and above the law **religion**: “It is religion that doth make vows kept; But thou has sworn against religion; By what though swear’st, against the thing though swear’st, And mak’st an oath the surety for thy troth: Against an oath, the truth.” (3.1.205-208).

A three-way contest plays out between 1) the territorial, traditional authority of England’s King John, 2) the transcendent, symbolic, and legal authority of the papacy as paternal superego that determines trans-territorial law and trans-local language, augmented by the surplus maternal (religious) superego propping up the law, and 3) charismatic power displayed and exercised by the Bastard. The charismatic Bastard, though physically present, remains aloof from the ongoing discussion, a split-off presence above and beyond the reach of tradition and law. The Duke of Austria, the man who had killed the Bastard’s father, was offended by Lady Constance’s suggestion that he should “doff” the lion-skin he wears as a trophy of combat, and instead shamefully “hang a calf’s-skin on those recreant limbs” (3.1.54-5). These are clearly fighting words, so the Bastard challenges the Duke to interpersonal combat by engaging in a character contest, delivering the line repeatedly to the Duke to egg him on into combat. The Bastard delivers five variants of the line, “hang a calf’s-skin on those recreant limbs,” interrupting and negating the Duke’s contribution to the unfolding discourse, disturbing the proceedings, while literally filling in the vacuum of power in this “state of exception” with demands for immediate, unconstrained, warfare. The charismatic Bastard, not quite the legitimate child of law or tradition, seeks direct access and immediate proof of power through combat.

King Phillip eventually relents, drops King John’s hand, and pledges warfare against England in the name of the pope. John, in response to this betrayal, speaks the language of charismatic authority “France, I am burned up with inflaming wrath, a rage whose heat hath this condition: that nothing can allay, nothing but blood, the blood, and dearest-valued blood, of France...to arms let’s hie!” (3.1.266-274). However, it is the Bastard who embodies the inflamed otherworldly fire of charismatic authority and is dispatched to lead the battle. Act 3, Scene 2 opens with the proof of the Bastard’s charisma: he enters carrying the severed head of the Duke, thus avenging his father’s death and in so doing, by killing his father’s killer, proving superior charismatic qualifications than **Coeur-de-Lion**.

King John dispatches the Bastard to “shake the bags of hoarding abbots” (3.3.7-9), in other words, to seize the assets of the church to pay for England’s war against France. The Bastard does not question the legality or traditional support for this move but says simply: “Bell, book, and candle shall not drive me back when gold and silver beckons me to come on” (3.3.12-13). The Bastard simply follows the charismatic line (first spoken by the Duke of Austria) that “courage mounteth with the occasion”. Pandolf describes these actions thus: “Bastard Falconbridge is now in England, ransacking the Church, offending charity” (3.4.172-3).

King John recognizes that the still-thriving body of Prince Arthur, a legitimate contender to his throne, poses a threat to him. He calls the “yon young boy...a very serpent in my way” (3.3.60-3) and orders Hubert, the guardian of Prince Arthur, to eliminate his rival for the corpo-real body of sovereignty. Pandolf, the papal legate functions less as a neutral patriarchal bearer of language and law, but as a rather nasty partisan willing to cut deals, act ruthlessly, and pervert the law in advance of victory. He recognizes and anticipates King John’s move to assassinate Prince Arthur. He does not act to prevent the murder, but gleefully anticipates the negative consequences: “This act, so vilely born, shall cool the hearts of all his people, and freeze up their zeal” (3.4.149-152). Pandolph anticipates that King John’s actions will drain away his follower’s collective effervescence and lead them to abandon him.

■ Gilding the Lily

In the next scene, King John attempts to secure his hold upon his traditional authority by restaging his own coronation. In a kind of renewal of vows, John forces the barons to witness the pomp and ceremony of an empty

ritual. The second coronation in which John is “recrowned” in a “superfluous” ceremony, angers the barons:

PEMBROKE: ... You were crowned before,
 And that high royalty was ne'er plucked off,
 The faiths of men ne'er stained with revolt;
 Fresh expectation troubled not the land...
 SALISBURY: Therefore to be possessed with double pomp,
 To guard a title that was rich before,
 To gild refined gold, to paint the lily
 ... is wasteful and ridiculous excess.” (4.2.4-16)

The second coronation had the opposite effect from John's intent: rather than strengthen his hold upon the crown, he weakened it. Salisbury remarks that: “It makes the course of thoughts to fetch about, startles and frights consideration, makes sound opinion sick, and truth suspected for putting on so new a fashioned robe” (4.2.24-7). By “making sound opinion sick” John's actions revealed that he was weak, afraid, and not legitimate. When the barons abandon him, and he learns that his mother, Queen Eleanor, has died, King John seriously falters and is unable to act with decision. The Bastard again charismatically fills the void of power, his courage again “mounteth with the occasion” and takes in hand the defense of England against the pending invasion of France with the disloyal nobles.

The concept of borrowed sovereignty, introduced at the beginning of the play, reappears when King John makes a desperate gamble: he submits to the pope. In a remarkable ceremony, King John hands his crown and traditional sovereignty to Pandolf, who hands it back again saying, “Take again from this my hand, as holding of the Pope, your sovereign greatness and authority” (5.1.3-5). John believes that the pope's symbolic-legal authority can be borrowed to fill in the void in his corpo-real traditional authority. In return for his submission, Pandolf promises to call off the invasion, saying: “It was my breath that blew this tempest up... but since you are a gentle covertite, my tongue shall hush again this storm of war” (5.1.17-20).

Courage Mounteth with the Occasion

John's traditional authority collapses in ineffectual doubt, leading the Bastard to swell with charismatic power, filling the void while attempting to stiffen the spine of the King by reminding him of nobility and sovereignty:

BASTARD: But wherefore do you droop? Why look you sad?
 Be great in act as you have been in thought.
 Let not the world see fear and sad distrust
 Govern the motion of a kingly eye.
 Be stirring as the time, be fire with fire;
 Threaten the threat'ner, and outface the brow
 Of bragging horror. So shall inferior eyes,
 That borrow their behaviours from the great,
 Grow great by your example, and put on
 The dauntless spirit of resolution. (5.1.43-52)

The Bastard tells John that he should be more like himself: “glisten like the god of war ... show boldness and aspiring confidence” (5.1.54-6). When the Bastard learns that John has bowed down to the pope in return for the end of the war, the Bastard's charisma pours forth. John is completely unable to rise to the occasion and hands effective rule over to the Bastard: “Have thou the ordering of this present time” (5.1.77). Pandolf was unable to stop the war, leaving the Bastard, not John, as the effective sovereign during the state of exception of the invasion. The Bastard becomes a Schmittian sovereign dictator making decisions and leading the state (Schmitt 2014).

The derangements of authority continue until the very end of the play after King John is poisoned by a monk and dies in the company of the Bastard. The charismatic Bastard was in the position to usurp sovereignty, to continue the state of exception and hold onto power. However, at King John's death, his son Prince Henry magically appears

on stage, and the Bastard knelt before him in submission, saying simply “Let it be so...I do bequeath my faithful services and true subjection everlastingly” (5.7.97-105). The Bastard has the last words of the play, as his charisma fades, as the state of exception ends, as traditional order is restored and the corpo-real body of the king assumes sovereign power, he espouses the honorific sentiments worthy of a king: “This England never did, nor never shall, Lie at the proud foot of a conqueror But when it first did help to wound itself.” (5.7.112-114)

Deranged Authority under Trumpism

The outcome of recent elections in the United States, England, France, Italy, and elsewhere signals a derangement of authority similar to that present in Shakespeare’s *King John*. Like *King John*, Donald Trump’s legitimacy as a sovereign has been in question from the beginning. Questions surrounding Trump include: the role of Russia in tipping the election scales, his loss of the popular vote, the suppression of his income taxes, payments to an actress in pornographic film, alleged ties to oligarchs, his unwillingness to divest his business interests, as well as his ongoing violation of the emoluments clause of the constitution. The Trump administration has been staffed with inept functionaries, many of whom remain unconfirmed, and are committed to the detriment of the very agencies they run. Like *King John*, Trump has been a divisive figure who has failed to unify the nation, while labeling as enemies the press, democratic opponents, and many categories of American citizens.

In terms of Weber’s three types of legitimate authority, it is clear that Trumpism and related authoritarian movements in the West have all but abandoned the legal authority and the bureaucratic apparatus of office-holding experts associated with it. While there is a strong element of traditional authority in Trumpism, rooted in arcane and time-worn usages of personal obedience to a leader, Trumpism has primarily based power on charismatic claims. Because, charismatic qualifications depend upon ongoing proof of extraordinary ability and power, charisma is an exceptionally unstable form of authority. A charismatic leader, like the Bastard, does not occupy an office nor uphold traditional power resting upon long-standing custom. Instead, the charismatic leader holds power personally only so long as their charisma is proven. The Bastard repeatedly proved his charisma through military success and could have seized the crown but instead submitted to the new king, reducing the derangement of authority while unifying sovereignty under a single, legitimate head. A charismatic leader who experiences personal weaknesses, political losses, economic declines, military defeats, and other obvious failures quickly dissipate the willingness of followers to obey their commands. The charismatic Bastard was capable of delivering the goods: organizing warfare, defeating enemies, securing church assets, and Trumpism has been sustained on similar successes, including a relatively strong economy, a booming stock market, and symbolic gestures toward delivery of campaign promises. However, the moment that Trump and his counterparts elsewhere fail to deliver the “goods,” when prosperity fades and problems mount, the unstable form of authority known as charisma shall vanish. Because they are rooted in a state of exception, authoritarian movements like Trumpism are insufficiently grounded in tradition or law to hold legitimate authority without the charismatic supplement. It is at the moment when proof of charisma vanishes that Trumpism will likely lose its hold upon power.

Endnotes

1. In the fall of 2017, critical social theorists from a variety of disciplines gathered at Iowa State University to contribute to a Symposium on New Directions in Critical Social Theory. The subject of the symposium was “The Threshold of Capitalism: Shakespeare, Goethe and Critical Social Theory.” Participants examined and critiqued capital as reflected in the mirror of great literature. This article was originally delivered at this symposium and I would like to thank the participants for their comments and helpful suggestions. I would also

like to especially thank David Arditti for his help and encouragement.

2. The Shakespeare secondary literature is impossibly large, even when confined to works relevant to Marxism and critical social theory. A very abbreviated list of works consulted for this article include a) edited collections of essays at the intersection of Marxism, broadly conceived, and Shakespeare studies include Dollimore and Sinfield 1985; Kamps 1995. b) Works

on social ontology, capitalism, politics, or religion and Shakespeare include Smirnov 1936, Dollimore 1984, Barber 1958, Mack 1993, Tennehouse 1986.

3. In a related remapping of Kantorowicz's categories, Santner (2011) transfers the two bodies of traditional authority onto modern democratic societies who possess the "people's two bodies."

4. King John is unusual among Shakespeare's English history plays. It is not temporally connected with the Henriad, and though popular through the 19th century

due to the spectacle and pageantry which predominate on stage, it fell out of favor in the 20th as audiences preferred the inner drama of deranged psychology as in Hamlet, Richard III, etc. In this sense, King John is the anti-Hamlet. Yet, King John like Hamlet himself, is a man who never should have been king.

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