

György E. Szönyi

Concepts and Representations of Sovereignty on the English Renaissance Emblematic Stage

One of the most complex cultural representational systems of the early modern period was the English Renaissance stage. It not only reflected on the world picture, the politics, and ethics of the age, but also fused representational traditions, such as allegorism, emblematicism, and naturalism, in a unique multimedial way. Recent scholarship has increasingly focussed on the mediality and representational logic of this theatrical practice, including research in emblem studies, theatricality, the politics of images, the carnivalesque, etc. This text discusses the theories of rulership (the king's two bodies, the medieval patriarchal view, Machiavelli's *Realpolitik*), the emblematic representations of power in the early modern period and representations of power *in bonam partem* and *in malam partem* in some plays of Shakespeare. The representation of sovereignty was always important in the English Renaissance theatre but the real importance and universality of such representations could only be apparent on the emblematic stage. This kind of theatre was characterised by Glynne Wickham as follows: "[it] aimed at achieving dramatic illusion by figurative representation, concerned with man's relations to God and society." In such a visual context emblematic properties, such as a crown or a throne carried weighty symbolic meaning and the action presented had also be interpreted in relation to moral, philosophical, or political emblems. As we know from Ernst Kantorowicz's classic study, the Middle Ages approached rulership in a complex way, and the different interpretations – Christ-centred kingship, Law-centred kingship, Polity-centred kingship, and Man-centred kingship – resulted in various and characteristic representations. Kantorowicz's central example for "the king's two bodies" is Shakespeare's *Richard II* which analyses the body politic as well as the body natural. A good visual parallel to Shakespeare's play is *The Wilton Diptych* (1395-9) which shows Richard still in full glory as if illustrating Shakespeare's text: "God for his Richard hath in heavenly pay / A glorious angel: then, if angels fight, / Weak men must fall, for heaven still guards the right." The king soon falls into disrepute and gets deposed by his cousin, Henry Bolingbroke – Shakespeare marked this change by subverting traditional emblematic images related to kingship, comparing Richard to the setting sun or sun dimmed by clouds. A similar technique was used to characterise Henry VI when before his defeat he is

told to sit on a molehill – the situation ironically highlighting the lack of the throne, the fundamental requisite of the ruler.

There were various theories of kingship available in Shakespeare's time, especially that of the medieval concept of sacred office and Machiavelli's *Realpolitik*. According to these two, king should be both legitimate and personally fit for the task. Among Shakespeare's historical characters Henry V seems to be the best embodiment of these criteria. A good way to examine these ambiguities is to compare two famous filmic representations of *Henry V* that of Laurence Olivier (1944) and Kenneth Branagh (1989).