

The Motif of the Royal Touch in Shakespeare's „Macbeth” as a Symbol of Political Power

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Abstract

The article analysis the phenomenon of the royal healing touch present in English culture of the Middle Ages and Early Modern period. It shows its development from the religious practice to the means of asserting political power and also engages in the discussion as to the role of the royal healing scene included in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*.

On the 27th of April 1340, Brother Francis, of the Order of Preachers, Bishop of Bisaccia in the province of Naples, chaplain to King Robert Anjou and for the time being ambassador of Edward III King of England, appeared before the Doge of Venice. He had been commissioned to lead an diplomatic mission which would ensure the support of the Venetians for his king. All of this was happening at the time of great tension and dynastic struggles between England and France that resulted in the Hundred Years War. Hostilities and military action had already started but both parties were still frantically seeking alliances all over Europe. Brother Francis eloquently depicted his master as the one ardently seeking a peaceful solution to the conflict¹. He diligently listed all the methods Edward III had proposed to his oponent

¹ M. Bloch, *The Royal Touch. Sacred Monarchy and Scrofula in England and France*, [place of publication not identified] 2015, p. 1.

to avoid open military conflict and a tragic loss of innocent Christian lives. Among others there were suggestions of the following trials:

If Philip of Valois is – as he affirms – the true king of France, let him prove the fact by exposing himself to hungry lions; for lions never attack a true king; or let him perform the miraculous healing of the sick, as all other true kings are wont to do [...]. If he should fail, he would own himself to be unworthy of the kingdom².

As Marc Bloch points out it is insignificant whether Edward III had ever really put forward these proposals or they were entirely imagined by the Bishop of Bisaccia, in his desperate attempt to impress the Venetians, as it was simply a diplomatic formality. Nevertheless, this situation epitomizes the fact that in the fourteenth century hardly anyone would have doubted that every true king of France or England was capable of administrating miraculous cures³.

In the Middle Ages and Early Modern period the picture of royalty was very much different from the one in our times. Monarchs were considered sacred and cherished the divine right of kings which asserted that they derived their authority from God. They were also held to possess miraculous powers of healing. For centuries kings of France and England, to use the common expression of the time, „touched for scrofula”. It was widely believed that they had medicinal powers to cure their subjects from this disease simply by touch⁴.

At this point of the article it is necessary to refer to medical issues and explain the nature of this health condition. Scrofula is caused by the bacterium *Mycobacterium tuberculosis* and is a form of tuberculosis that occurs outside of the lungs. In the Middle Ages and Early Modern times it was also called struma or the king's evil. It swelled up the necks and throats of afflicted persons and was often accompanied by skin lesions or broken sores on the skin. Some patients also suffered lesions in the armpit or in the breast. Physicians and surgeons were powerless in such cases and found the disease incurable. Sufferers, however, could get relief from the sacred touch of the anointed monarch⁵.

² Qtd in ibidem, pp.1-2.

³ Ibidem, p.3.

⁴ Ibidem

⁵ S. Iyengar, *Shakespeare's Medical Language*, London, New Dehli, New York and Sydney 2014, p. 123.

The royal ceremony of touching patients for the king's evil persisted in England until the eighteenth century⁶. The origin of the custom is attributed to Edward the Confessor (1003-1066). Scholars have, however, shown that king Edward did not perform the ceremony of the royal touch but he was the first English sovereign recorded as having cured a single person of that malady⁷. William of Malmesbury (1090-1143) included an incident in *Gesta Regum Anglorum*, a young woman afflicted with protruding glands came to the king, who healed her by washing and rubbing the sore parts, which caused them to open, drain and finally subside. As a result she fully recovered within a week. William of Malmesbury insisted that it was the result of the king's personal sanctity – a saint's miracle.

The power to heal was soon associated with the ritual of anointing kings at their coronation ceremony and so other English kings also began to cure scrofula⁸. William of Ockham (c. 1285-1347), one of the most prominent figures in the history of philosophy during the Late Middle Ages along with Thomas Aquinas, argued in his treatise *Octo Quaestiones de Potestate Papae* that through unction kings receive spiritual gifts and referred to the power of English kings to cure scrofula as evidence⁹. The healing power of the royal touch is mentioned in the *Rosa Anglica*, a fascinating text as a standard of medieval medical practice, believed to have been written in 1314 by John of Gaddesden (c. 1280-1361)¹⁰.

In Tudor times, the royal healing became an approved and recognized element of the very fabric of English life. The touching for scrofula ceremony was frequently practised, as evidence shows, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Under the reign of Henry VIII Andrew Boorde (1490-1549), who had studied and practised medicine in Glasgow, in his *The Fyrst Bok of the Introduction of Knowledge* completed before 1542, passionately advocated that for the king's evil or *morbis regius* there is only one possible remedy and that is the royal touch¹¹. The library of the Westminster Cathedral is in the possession of Mary Tudor's missal where a miniature picture is included

⁶ F.D. Hoeniger, *Medicine and Shakespeare in the English Renaissance*, Newark, London and Toronto 1992, p. 277.

⁷ S. Brogan, *The Royal Touch in Early Modern England. Politics, Medicine and Sin*, Rochester 2015, p. 31.

⁸ J.F. Turrell, *The Ritual of Royal Healing in Early Modern England: Scrofula, Liturgy, and Politics*, „Anglican and Episcopal History” 1999, vol. 68 (1), p. 6; F.D. Hoeniger claims that the ritual of the royal touch originated in France and was adopted in England by Henry II in the twelfth century see: op. cit., p. 277.

⁹ J.F. Turrell, op. cit., 1999, p. 7.

¹⁰ F.D. Hoeniger, op. cit., p. 282.

¹¹ Ibidem, p. 284.

showing the queen sitting in her chapel and touching a boy kneeling in front of her with her hands on both sides of his neck¹². The description of such a ceremony may be found in a letter of 1556 by the Venetian M.A. Faitta, who came to England with as part of the Cardinal Pole's suite¹³.

Dr. William Tooker (c. 1557-1621), queen Elizabeth's own chaplain, recorded in his writing with exaltation the story of a patient who recovered from his illness only five months after being touched by her¹⁴. In 1597, Dr. Tooker noted that the queen performed the service of healing frequently and her therapeutic abilities by far exceeded those of her „brother, sister, father and grandfather”¹⁵ but with years she often the healing ceremonies became too exhausting¹⁶. It was under Elizabeth's reign that the first books devoted to the royal touch were published what greatly contributed to the understanding of the ceremony and its principles. One entitled *Charisma: Sive Donum Sanationis* (1597) authored by William Tooker, another one under the title *A right fruitful and approved treatise for the artificial cure of that malady called in Latin struma* (1602) also written by a surgeon, William Clowes (c.1543/4 – 1604)¹⁷.

There was a whole, highly codified ritual, which allowed those afflicted with scrofula to access the monarch's healing touch. Firstly, they had to acquire a certificate from the minister of their parish stating that they suffer from scrofula and not from pox with which it was often mistaken and additionally that they had not been touched before¹⁸. Then, they had to travel to London or other places where the ceremony was to take place and upon arrival were further examined by the royal physician. Interestingly, the poor who could not afford the services of doctors were admitted directly whereas wealthier people were obliged to provide evidence that they had attempted professional treatment but without success¹⁹. Those who passed the medical assessment were given a special token which allowed admission to the next ceremony. It was held in the morning, so people had to arrive early at the right place. Prior to attending, the monarch would have fasted, participated in a mass and taken communion. All of these rituals were performed to show the need to be purified before „acting as a conduit for God's grace” and healing the sick²⁰. The monarch would be seated on a throne and the ceremony

¹² Ibidem, p. 279.

¹³ Ibidem, p. 280.

¹⁴ M. Bloch, op. cit., p. 241

¹⁵ S. Brogan, op. cit., p. 55

¹⁶ F.D. Hoeniger, op. cit., p.278

¹⁷ S. Brogan, op. cit., p. 59,60.

¹⁸ Ibidem, p. 3.

¹⁹ F.D. Hoeniger, op. cit., p. 282.

²⁰ S. Brogan, op. cit., p. 3.

would begin with recitation of prayers and passages from the New Testament. Patients were led one by one by the surgeon to the monarch. They knelt compliantly and in great reverence in front of the sovereign who placed both hands to touch and stroke the scrofulous sores on the sick person's neck and face. Then the ill person was led aside to wait and the proces continued until everyone had been touched. When this had happened, the sufferers were presented to the monarch for the second time so they could receive their commemorative gold medal²¹ which was hung around each person's neck by the monarch as a passages was read from St. John's Gospel²².

Under Mary Tudor, Elizabeth I and James I the royal touch ceremonies were held indoors, usually in a chapel, and the sovereign was approached by a relatively small numer of patients on a single occassion. Extant records inform us that in July 1575 at Kenilworth Castle, queen Elizabeth I touched nine people; at Westminster on Good Friday 1597 or 1598, thirty eight; and James I in 1617 performed healing ceremonies on two successive days at Lincoln Cathedral which were attended by 103 people²³. Over the years, hundreds if not thousands of scrofulous patients gained access to their monarch for treatment, especially, when the practice of fixed sessions was discontinued under the reign of Elizabeth I and royal touch ceremonies were organised on occasions when she felt inclined or was urged by her religious advisors to do so. Another change that the Protestant queen introduced was to discard all the references to Virgin Mary and the saints²⁴.

One of James I's requests on his accession was that he should not perform the ceremony of the royal touch, as his Scottish Calvinist ministers had stigmatized the office of royal healer as superstitious²⁵. His English advisers, however, warned him that to abandon the tradition might deprive the crown of some of its dignity. James I felt uncomfortable performing the ceremony for the first time, which was dutifully noted by a papal spy in a letter from London to Rome dated 8 October 1603²⁶. When the king succeeded in „Prot-
estantising” the ceremony by shifting the focus on prayers and Gospel read-

²¹ The giving of a gold coin originated with Henry VII see: J.F. Turrell, op. cit., 1999, p.12. The coin became a kind of amulet possessing its own intrinsic medical powers. Patients were warned not to take it of, or by no means sell for profit as that would cause the disease to recur with even greater severity. See: F.D. Hoeniger, op.cit., p. 280.

²² S. Brogan, op. cit., p.3.

²³ Henry VIII touched just 65 people. See: ibidem, p. 2.

²⁴ F.D. Hoeniger, op. cit., p. 278, 280.

²⁵ G.R. Asch, *Sacral Kingship Between Disenchantment and Re-enchantment. The French and English Monarchies 1587-1688*, London 2014, p. 50.

²⁶ F.D. Hoeniger, op. cit., p. 281.

ings, the king became less uncomfortable. He still touched the patients with his hands and hung a gold coin around their necks like his predecessors, but he refused to make the sign of the cross over the affected parts²⁷.

When James I ascended the English throne in 1603 and within two weeks of his arrival in London he gave his patronage to Shakespeare's company, and so the Lord Chamberlain's Men became the King's Men, forming a special relationship with their monarch. *Macbeth* is the Shakespeare play that most clearly reflects this relationship²⁸. The play was probably first performed in 1606. Shakespeare's primary source was Holinshed's account of the reigns of Duncan and Macbeth supplemented with material borrowed from elsewhere in Holinshed's history of Scotland²⁹.

Without doubt, it is Shakespeare's most intense tragedy, and at the same time certainly his most Jacobean. With its interest in Scotland, witches, and the Stuart ancestor Banquo, it is certainly in keeping with the tastes of the new patron³⁰. James regarded the courageous and noble Banquo, Macbeth's companion at the start of the play, as his direct ancestor; eight Stuart kings were said to have preceded James, just as in the play Banquo refers to eight kings and their descendants, and in the play the English king (historically Edward the Confessor) is praised for the ability to heal scrofula a ritual which James also frequently performed³¹.

In Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, Malcolm, Duncan's son and the rightful heir to the Scottish throne finds refuge at the court of the English king Edward the Confessor, who extends his hospitality as far as providing a commander and ten thousand troops for the invasion of Scotland. A loyal thane of Duncan, Macduff, finds Malcolm there and urges him to take vengeance on the treacherous usurper, Macbeth. Just as they are lamenting the ghastly state of affairs in Scotland in IV.iii, they are interrupted by Edward's chief physician, who comes in to inform them that the king has been delayed in offering his welcome as he is engaged in a healing ritual. By palcing his sanctified hands on his subjects, „a crew of wretched souls/That stay his cure"³², Edward treats

²⁷ S. Brogan, *The Royal Touch as Adapted by James I*, [in:] „History Today” 2011, vol. 61 (2), p. 46.

²⁸ J. Bate and R. Jackson. eds., *The Oxford Illustrated History of Shakespeare on Stage*, Oxford 2001, p. 23.

²⁹ M. Dobson and S. Wells, eds., *The Oxford Companion to Shakespeare*, Oxford 2001, p. 271.

³⁰ S. Wells and G. Taylor, *The Oxford Shakespeare. The Complete Works*, Oxford 1994, p. 975.

³¹ Ibidem.

³² W. Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, [in:] *The Oxford Shakespeare. The Complete Works*, eds. S. Wells and G. Taylor, Oxford 1994, IV.iii.142-143.

them from a disease against which medical skills of physicians are absolutely powerless and it is „but at his touch, Such sanctity hath heaven given his hand, They presently amend”³³. The doctor leaves immediately and it is Malcolm who reveals to curious Macduff the nature of the illness, namely scrofula or the king’s evil and provides further details of „A most miraculous work”³⁴.

MACDUFF

What’s the disease he means?

MALCOLM ’Tis called the evil:

A most miraculous work in this good king,
Which often since my here-remain in England
I have seen him do. How he solicits heaven
Himself best knows, but strangely visited people
All swoll’n and ulcerous, pitiful to the eye,
The mere despair of surgery, he cures,
Hanging a golden stamp about their necks,
Put on with holy prayers; and, ’tis spoken,
To the succeeding royalty he leaves
The healing benediction³⁵.

Shakespeare chose a doctor for that small and seemingly unimportant part rather than ordinary messenger purposefully. First of all, while performing the ceremony of curing the sick from the scrofula a king was attended only by a priest and his own chief physician. Next, a doctor coming with the news that a king is performing a healing ritual gives special weight to king’s cure and puts him in the position of a holy physician³⁶. Traister in her article, „*Note Her a Little Farther*”: *Doctors and Healers in the Drama of Shakespeare* claims that the character of the doctor functions purely as an authenticator of Edward’s royal healing powers³⁷.

This is, however, only partly true because as Bloch, Brogan and Turrell showed in their writings in Tudor and Jacobean times the royal healing rite gained much more importance as it asserted the divine right and political power of monarchs. Although it was tightly tied to the medieval Catholic Church, it survived the religious reformation of the sixteenth century and even flourish despite the Protestants’ suspicion of healing rites and other sacramentals of the church. Elizabeth I, in spite of her initial reluctance to

³³ Ibidem, IV.iii.144-145.

³⁴ Ibidem, IV.iii.148

³⁵ Ibidem, IV.iii. 147-157.

³⁶ F.D. Hoeniger, op. cit., p.276.

³⁷ B.Traister, „*Note Her a Little Farther*”: *Doctors and Healers in the Drama of Shakespeare*, [in:] *Disease, Diagnosis, and Cure on the Early Modern Stage*, eds. S. Moss and K. Peterson, Aldershot and Burlington 2004, p. 46.

continue the royal healing, adhered to the tradition but more for political reasons than the assertion of her own piety or sanctity. In 1570 the papal bull was released which excommunicated Elizabeth I. Papists raised charges that due to her apostasy from Rome, God withdrew the gift of healing from her. Similarly, James I resorted to the same strategy, for him, especially after the Gun Powder plot of the 5th of November 1605, the royal healing was a means to assert his royal power and a sign of divine favour. The inclusion of the royal touch motif in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, even if it was intended as Turrell claims³⁸ just to reflect James I's interests and please him as a patron, quite unintentionally goes much beyond. Theatre, a popular form of entertainment in the Early Modern period, seems to be engaged in propagating if not in a way legitimizing the king's right to the throne.

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³⁸ J.F. Turrell, op. cit., 1999, p. 12.