The Deranged Metaphor of the King’s Body Politic in Marlowe’s *Edward II*

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Christopher Marlowe’s *Edward II* (1594) exposes the contradictions inherent in the Tudor paradigm of the sovereign’s two bodies, a theory which viewed monarchy as transcendent.¹ The metaphor of the body politic as distinct from the king’s natural body, implicit in so many Renaissance plays, suggested harmony between the one and the many. The distortion of the metaphor of the two bodies by both Edward II and the politicians who execute him demonstrates how a potentially dualizing paradox such as this one could be cruelly misused by unimaginative, unstable, power-hungry, and vindictive leaders to make a weapon of an essentially imaginative theory.²

Several different but related Tudor beliefs on kingship such as the sovereign’s mystic body, divine right, inherited right, and the relation of the king to the law are tested and to some extent caricatured through the rhetorical style of the unreliable and self-destructive monarch Edward II. In his characterization of Edward II, and in the depiction of the confusion of his court with its perplexed queen and corrupt courtiers, Marlowe reveals the gap between Tudor political theories and their application to real life.

Edward’s speeches are inconsistent, varying from immature temper tantrums to extremes of misplaced persuasion, even seduction. Edward perverts images and myths in his speeches, and his unstable, ranting style deludes no one...
except himself. Edward’s abuse of government, of political
talk, and of the passions is to a great extent paralleled in
his abuse of rhetoric. By focusing upon Edward’s narrowly
legalistic and magical view of kingship in his speeches,
Marlowe draws our attention to the limitations of the Tudor
concept of the king’s two bodies.

Recently, scholars have examined the use of the metaphor
of the king’s two bodies in Renaissance plays both in terms
of the wholeness of the sovereign and his subjects, and in the
context of Elizabethan property laws. Robert Ornstein and
others have stressed the traditional, monistic nature of the
body politic metaphor:

Whatever role the Prince may play—magus or scape-
goat—the King’s Body is the living presence of the
nation and his royal We a communion of multitudes.
He is the Host upon which a people feed, in whose veins
flows the blood of twenty thousand or a hundred
thousand men, and whose illnesses infect his meanest
subject. His sacred right is a mystery of blood that raises
the throne above the gross purchase of political ambition
but makes the common weal subject to accidents of birth
and death. (30)

In Edward II, the literal-minded king and his people try to
live out the metaphor of the two bodies, thereby exagger-
ating the duality only potential in this doctrine. The
problems of Edward’s reign arise because the king never
comprehends that he could not love only a few of his
subjects at the expense of the many whose collective life he
symbolized.

The studies of Ernst Kantorowicz and Marie Axton also
investigate the presence of the doctrine of the body politic in
dramatic works. One source of the body politic metaphor
can be traced to St. Paul. Axton writes that “Paul’s language
settled easily over the king’s mysterious second body—tailor
made”: 