

## Reflections in Response to Sandra Billington, *Mock Kings in Medieval Society and Renaissance Drama*

CLIFFORD DAVIDSON

While Renaissance drama has frequently been analyzed in terms of its connection in both form and content with late-medieval theatrical practice, Sandra Billington's *Mock Kings in Medieval Society and Renaissance Drama*<sup>1</sup> usefully demonstrates how a certain class of "games" that are not in fact fully developed drama—games which elevate a commoner to the status of a "king" or "queen" for the duration of a secular festival—are part of the heritage available to the playwrights of the age of Shakespeare. Such earlier popular forms could be extremely hardy and long lasting, and their structures also were, as Dr. Billington argues, of immense importance in forming certain features of design to be observed in Renaissance drama. There is, however, a further side to this chapter in theater history that I believe is worth careful analysis, and this involves opposition to the King Game as symptomatic of a frequent attitude of distrust of the actor and his craft—an anti-theatricalism that Shakespeare, for example, uses to good theatrical purpose in his art.<sup>2</sup>

In spite of a problem with terminology—the terms 'game' and 'play' were not distinguished from each other very clearly<sup>3</sup>—we may agree that the King Game stood somewhere between what today is considered pure game and full-scale drama. The popularity of this genre, as Dr. Billington proves, made people accustomed to seeing the establishment of a player king and/or queen who might pretend to power of rule over festivities or sports contests, and, as recent research for Records of Early English Drama has shown, such spectacles or events seem to have been widely popular in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. At the same time, it is not surprising that moralists were suspicious of the mimetic element in popular entertainments of this kind, especially those which elevated a Lord of Misrule, while we learn also that the less obviously subversive

---

For debates inspired by this article, please check the Connotations website at <<https://www.connotations.de/debate/sandra-billingtons-mock-kings-in-medieval-society-and-renaissance-drama/>>.

Summer Lord or Lady was likewise on occasion regarded with suspicion. Dr. Billington (57) cites Robert of Brunne's *Handlyng Synne* for an early condemnation of festivities specifically involving the Summer Queen as "a gaderyng for lecherye." At a later date, zealous Protestant reformers saw these customs, even in their more benign manifestations, as quite dangerous indeed, and there is no question that in many cases the Mock King or Lady tended to attract some hostility to himself or herself. Not surprisingly, therefore, leaders of rebellions would be seen in terms of Mock Kings, especially if they appeared to be motivated by pride and were believed to be attempting to substitute their own tyranny for the perceived or actual tyranny of the established ruler.<sup>4</sup>

Mock kings and rebels were both seen in some sense as *players*—the equivalent of actors whose profession was impersonation on stage—lacking in the authority of actual rulers but nevertheless superficially like them in appearance and gesture. On the Renaissance stage a prime example of a direct connection between a Mock King and a rebellious tyrant was Shakespeare's Macbeth, who is only mentioned (120) and not discussed by Dr. Billington. The play of *Macbeth* was created during the months immediately following the Gunpowder Plot when King James I appears to have enjoyed a brief period of genuine popularity; the drama itself is indicative of anxiety concerning the possibility of a *coup d'état* that might result in a ruling tyrant with all the characteristics of a Mock King at his worst. Like Holbein's drawing of the king wearing ill-fitting clothing in Erasmus' *Moriae Encomium* of 1515 (see Billington's fig. 12), Macbeth's royal clothes—emblematic of the royal authority to which he is a pretender—seem not to fit his body. Having stolen the accouterments of rule, he will "feel his title / Hang loose about him, like a giant's robe / Upon a dwarfish thief," and yet he must be feared because of his tyrannical power, which of course will ultimately be shown to be hollow. The principal achievement of his reign is to bring himself to despair—the "sickness unto death" of which Søren Kierkegaard was to write so perceptively in the nineteenth century—and to bring the kingdom to a diseased condition. Extending a metaphor favored by King James, Shakespeare depicts the spread to the *body* of the state of the infection or pollution that Macbeth has brought on himself as its *head*. In contrast with the health of England, which is ruled

by a legitimate and holy monarch, Edward the Confessor, Scotland becomes a topsy-turvy nation in which "Fair is foul, and foul is fair"—a projection of the evil represented by the weird sisters—and hence is a place identifiable in terms of the *world upside down* since the normal order of things has been overturned. Macbeth's rebellion, like the rule of a Mock King, is temporary, and his ascendancy is symbolically associated with darkness. The darkness will be dispelled at the conclusion of the play when real power reverts to the divinely chosen royal line.

Instead of representing class conflict insisted upon by Marxist critics (and inherited in modified form by many New Historicists) between peasants and aristocracy, between commoners and crown,<sup>5</sup> *Macbeth* is illustrative of a genuine urge to identify with the true king, who is understood as vital to the political health of the state. At the end of the play, the Mock King and agent of misrule thus will be overthrown; and his successor is depicted by Shakespeare as morally superior and as a genuine king who will return "wholesome days" to Scotland. Oddly, many critics have been sympathetic to Macbeth to the end beyond what the text warrants; in staging the play, I still believe that the original intent of the playwright (if we can still invoke such a concept) was to provoke the audience to change sides at the point where Macbeth becomes revealed as a mad killer who sends out his death squads to murder children—an echo also of Herod, a mad butcher and archetypal Mock King, whose boasting and homicidal acts against children in the Coventry Corpus Christi plays Shakespeare had presumably witnessed as a boy. The conclusion of the play seems to me to invoke the proverbial "sigh of relief" at the fall of the tyrant, under whom no thoughtful person would want to be subject.<sup>6</sup> In the final act of the play, Macbeth is depicted as a king who is effectively deserted, and those who continue to serve him do so only because of fear. The disease that he represents is like the bubonic plague, and hence as a source of pollution his power resides only in the *destructive* touch of his hand (in contrast to the *healing* hand of King Edward in England).<sup>7</sup> When transformed into a head of state, the Mock King becomes the embodiment of the very principle of subversion.

Macbeth is thus at once a representative of false kingship and a character who fails to achieve credibility even as a player king. This

Mock King reminds us of the Puritan William Prynne's identification of players, including of course player kings, as symbolic of insincerity, which is one of the symptoms of the presence of evil in Shakespeare's play. The term 'hypocrite,' Prynne insisted, signified 'stage player' in antiquity. Condemning the face painting and disguise of actors, Prynne insisted that God "enjoines all men at all times, to *be such in shew, as they are in truth: to seeme that outwardly which they are inwardly*; to act themselves, not others. . . ."<sup>8</sup> Dramatic spectacle must in his view be understood to be symbolic of human pride and of the desire to be what we are not. *Play*, which had been regarded as a symptom of the Fall of Man even in children by the Wycliffite treatise against the playing of miracles—"childres pleyinge witnessith ther fadirs sinnes before hem and ther owne original sinnes befrom and ther owne defaute of wisdum whanne they pleyen"<sup>9</sup>—would for Puritans like Prynne be seen as a source of pollution in the realm.

Yet it must be admitted that when actual players depict kings on stage, whether or not incompetent like Macbeth, they are of necessity not the "real thing." They thus share with the Mock King of medieval tradition a hollow core that may be imaginatively ignored or exploited for dramatic effect. While the Lord of Misrule, engaging in abusive behavior and encouraging acts regarded normally as inappropriate or wrong, appeared to those in authority as singularly subversive—a mock ruler whose false power claimed to sponsor the inversion of order—so too a hero-villain such as Macbeth was regarded as a representation of a character type whose outward show would only serve as a mask for hidden inward motives. Macbeth hence gathers to himself all of the suspicion that had attached itself to game and play in the centuries prior to Shakespeare's time.

Shakespeare, a professional man of the theater, thus harnessed antitheatrical prejudice, which he chose in the case of Macbeth to adapt in order to undermine his "Mock King," while at the same time he organized his dramatic material so that other kings in the play are guaranteed a different and positive audience response. It is also important to realize that Shakespeare and his contemporaries were much closer to actual examples of the King Game than we in the twentieth century can be.

We therefore know much less about the Mock King in the King Game or the Lord of Misrule than we know about the depiction of player kings that represent the usurpation of power or rule in the drama of the Renaissance. Late medieval and early modern folklore, including the so-called mummers' plays, is shrouded in considerable mystery, though on the basis of the evidence we can assume a large degree of differentiation with regard to customs in the various cities and villages of England. Whatever they were, such plays and games were not always appreciated. In 1634 Bishop Bridgeman's Visitation Articles included the question "whether hath your Church or Chappell, Church-yard, or Chappel-yard beene abused or profaned by any fighting, quarelling, chiding, brawling, or by any Plaies, Lords of Mis-rule, Summer Lords, Morris-dancers, Pedlers, Bowlers, Beare-wards, Feasts, Schooles, Temporall Courts, or Leets, Laie Juries, Musters, or other profane usage whatsoever?"<sup>10</sup> The concern here is with the desecration of the church and churchyard, not with utterly suppressing game and play, but when taking place in proscribed space—and, often, at proscribed times, during church services—these activities were proclaimed to be of the devil. Further, because he was inwardly not what he outwardly appeared to be and because he actively encouraged behavior otherwise regarded as inappropriate or wrong, the Lord of Misrule must have been regarded by some as singularly subversive and a threat to civic order. To the hostile Puritan William Prynne, however, all players, including of course player kings, are symbolic of insincerity, which is a symptom of the presence of evil.

The story which Dr. Billington tells thus may be linked to the progress of the antitheatricalism defined by Jonas Barish,<sup>11</sup> popular entertainments, rebellions led by leaders that commentators find reminiscent of Mock Kings, and roles such as that of Macbeth all point to attitudes which eventually in 1642 would achieve the closing of the London theaters. It is a sign of Shakespeare's genius that he could turn the antitheatrical prejudice to use as a playwright and could create a play as penetrating in its analysis of pride and tyranny as *Macbeth*.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Oxford: Clarendon P, 1991.

<sup>2</sup>For the standard survey of anti-theatricalism, see Jonas Barish, *The Antitheatrical Prejudice* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1981).

<sup>3</sup>See John C. Coldewey, "Plays and 'Play' in Early English Drama," *Research Opportunities in Renaissance Drama* 28 (1985): 181-88.

<sup>4</sup>Quite remarkably, the leaders of urban gangs in decaying American cities display many of the same characteristics described as associated with tyranny and misrule in the late medieval and early modern periods.

<sup>5</sup>This is not to deny class differentiation in English municipalities—differentiation that could be extremely rigid and sustained by play and ceremonial, which also served simultaneously as a unifying ritual. See Charles Phythian-Adams, "Ceremony and the Citizen: The Communal Year at Coventry 1450-1550," in *Crisis and Order in English Towns 1500-1700*, eds. Peter Clark and Paul Slack (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1972) 57-85, and Mervyn James, "Ritual, Drama and Social Body in the Late Medieval English Town," *Past and Present* 98 (1983): 1-29.

<sup>6</sup>The point is one that I made more than two decades ago in *The Primrose Way: A Study of Shakespeare's Macbeth* (Conesville, Iowa: John Westburg and Associates, 1970); while I find my methodology in this earlier study to be flawed in many ways, I still find myself in agreement with my initial opinion concerning sympathy for Macbeth at the end of the drama.

<sup>7</sup>The hero-villain bears some resemblance to the person in the children's games which are related to Tag; the child who is "It" must be avoided by the other children and hence that person has power over the others. In games of this family, the person who is tagged by "It" exchanges roles and thus becomes "It." The pollution is transferred from the person who was "It" to the new child, who now must attempt to pass it on to another.

<sup>8</sup>William Prynne, *Histriomastix* (London, 1633) 159.

<sup>9</sup>*A Tretise of Miraclis Pleyinge*, ed. Clifford Davidson (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, forthcoming) 113.

<sup>10</sup>David George, ed., *Lancaster, Records of Early English Drama* (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1992) 216.

<sup>11</sup>See Barish, *The Antitheatrical Prejudice*, *passim*.