Shakespeare’s Macbeth
An insight into politics, religion, and the King’s Touch

‘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 swoln 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 benediction. With this strange virtue
He hath a heavenly gift of prophecy,
And sundry blessings hang about his throne
That speak him full of grace.

—Macbeth, Act IV, Scene III

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The year is 1606, and William Shakespeare has written Macbeth, which warns against excessive ambitions to power. Through Macbeth, Shakespeare shows that he is a savvy interpreter of the political, religious, and even medical sentiments of the time.

This passage from Macbeth alludes to the concept of a divine political order and describes the centuries-old English practice of the “King’s Touch,” a ceremonial laying on of hands through which English monarchs offered benediction and healing of the “evil” disease scrofula. The King’s Touch provided evidence that the monarch served as God’s agent on Earth, thus affirming his or her Divine Right to rule. The concept of Divine Right would continue to be significant throughout the reign of James I.

In 1533, King Henry VIII (1491–1547) broke with the papacy in Rome and founded the Church of England so that he could marry his pregnant mistress, Anne Boleyn, in hopes of securing a male heir. Over the ensuing years, a zealous and often bloody tug-of-war between Protestant and Catholic denominations and their royal representatives plagued England. Between Henry VIII and James I, three of Henry’s children held the throne, including Edward VI (1537–1553), the Catholic Queen “Bloody” Mary I (1551–1558), and the Protestant Queen Elizabeth I (1533–1603).

Before Elizabeth I died in 1603, she refused to name an heir. The Scottish King James VI was the heir by the usual
rules of primogeniture, and though foreign-born, he had support across the religious spectrum with his Protestant upbringing and Catholic mother. James thus became King James I of all Great Britain (1566–1625).

James I ascended the throne in a time of political and religious tensions. A year after his coronation, a group of Catholic revolutionaries attempted to blow up the English House of Lords in the Gunpowder Plot of 1605. Guy Fawkes attempted to assassinate James, his family, and all of Parliament.

William Shakespeare (1564–1616) quite surely, and rather shrewdly, wrote *Macbeth* with James I in mind. The tragic play serves as an allegory to illustrate that greedy attempts to imbalance the natural order of power would be met with a gruesome fate.

Today, scrofula is better known as tuberculous cervical lymphadenitis, which presents as a slowly progressive swelling of a single group of cervical lymph nodes. It is caused by infection with *Mycobacterium tuberculosis* or other nontuberculous mycobacteria. Lymphadenitis is one of the most frequent extrapulmonary manifestations of tuberculosis and may be complicated by ulceration, draining sinuses, or abscess formation. The disease is curable and typically responds to treatment with a multidrug regimen of rifampicin, isoniazid, ethambutol, and pyrazinamide.

Prior to the twentieth century, scrofula followed its natural course, which involved a painstakingly slow but eventual recovery, or, rarely, worsening disease and death. This condition lent itself to the miraculous, as spontaneous remission could easily give the illusion of the individual having been cured. Through the King’s Touch, the royal personage laid claim to a hereditary and exclusive ability to cure the disease, professing divine power and authority over the common people.

The origins of Divine Right can be traced back to the time of Charlemagne (circa 742–814). Charlemagne, referred to by some as the father of Europe, equally used warfare and religious conversion to achieve his vision of a unified Christian kingdom spanning most of present-day Western Europe. When Charlemagne was a boy, Pope Stephen II (died 757) anointed his father, Pippin III (714–768), King of the Franks, and Charlemagne was anointed heir to the new dynasty. From that time, the Christian God was the explicit source of royal authority in Europe. On December 25, 800, Pope Leo III (died 816) crowned Charlemagne emperor of the Romans, creating an alliance that would strengthen the position of both Charlemagne and the Christian church.

By the late 800s, Charlemagne’s empire had dissolved, but he had succeeded in establishing Christianity in Western Europe. From the ninth century onward, kings of England and France were anointed with holy oil, then crowned.

As Christianity became accepted within the regions of present-day England and France, the historical precedent that governments ruled through the will of God became well established. In the Bible, Jesus, in addition to healing sin, also performed miraculous acts of physical healing. On seven of these occasions, he healed by touch. In Mark 2:17, Jesus stated, “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.” The Bible states that after Jesus’ death and resurrection, he returned to the eleven apostles and told them, “Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved... And these signs will accompany those who believe... they will place their hands on sick people, and they will get well” (Mark 16:16–18).

Which European monarch first instituted the King’s Touch is unclear. Some scholars contend that Robert the Pious (circa 970–1031), King of France, was the first to
cure scrofulous patients with his touch, but others suggest the practice originated in England with Edward the Confessor (circa 1003–1066). Regardless of the originator, it is clear that medieval medicine was often more deadly than the disease itself. Treatments ranged from continued practice of the Greek four humours, in which imbalances of black bile, yellow bile, phlegm, and blood were corrected through practices such as induced bleeding or vomiting, to injurious behavior, such as the use of a hot iron to cure a headache.

Many physicians at the time believed that scrofula resulted from gluttony and a careless diet. Therefore, the first step toward curing it was a restrictive diet and avoidance of “all things that fill the head with fumes,” such as garlic and onions, strong wine, shouting, worry, and anger. Medicinal treatment consisted of a plaster of lily root, unripe figs, bean flour, and nettle seed. Attempts were made to rupture the lesions with the help of blister beetles. Surgery consisted of an incision of the scrofulous node, scraping away and clamping the flesh overlying it, and removing any attached nodes. The procedure could take days if bleeding was heavy.

Those with scrofula often fared better with the King’s Touch of the English and French monarchs than the practices of medieval physicians. Early recipients of the royal benediction fared well, with care taken to provide food, shelter, and rest until cured. Despite these early successes, the practice was retired until Henry II of England (1133–1189) instituted the benedictions with great fervor. He claimed that his healing acumen was given to him from Edward the Confessor on his mother’s side. Further, he was married to Eleanor of Aquitaine (1122–1204), the former wife of the French King Louis VII (1120–1180), who had practiced the King’s Touch.

Over the next several centuries, the English and French monarchies continued to evolve the practice of the King’s Touch. Henry II instituted the gift of a holy medallion to those with scrofula, and Henry VII (1457–1509) innovated the pomp of a ceremony and the gift of an angel, called a “touch-piece.”

Even with the religious schism of the Reformation, the healing rite continued in England; however, the practice was never instituted in Scotland. Edward VI performed the act despite his inclinations to rid the state of Catholic customs, and both Mary I and Elizabeth I instituted the Queen’s Touch.

Upon his ascension to the English throne, James I faced a difficult decision mired in centuries of tradition, religion, and politics: continue a practice he despised, a tradition steeped in Catholic sacrilege, idolatry, and superstition; or break an ancient custom that the common people embraced as lending divine authority to his throne. James I was devoutly religious, and in the year 1611 would authorize the English translation of the Bible, known as the King James Version. He believed that God sanctioned his rule.

It is impossible to discern whether Shakespeare believed in the healing powers of the King’s Touch, but several passages in Macbeth may be subtle jabs from a skeptic. Also, the scene of the drunken porter, in Act II, Scene III, may be a reproach to James I for his excessive drinking habits, and the general aristocratic excess of Macbeth might reflect upon James’ exorbitant spending habits.

James I continued to practice the King’s Touch, despite expressing great distaste for it. The ritual sprang from deep Catholic traditions, but the King did not believe that he, or any other king, had the power to cure scrofula—only God could perform such miracles. Despite his concerns
over the idolatry of gold medallions and touch-pieces, he recognized their importance for the promotion of allegiance to the English monarchy. He altered the ritual to exclude as many papist elements as possible, and changed the medallion's motto to “A DOMINO FACTUM EST ISTVD” (This was the Lord’s doing).

The practice continued and reached its peak in England with Charles II (1630–1685), who had touched one hundred thousand individuals by the end of his twenty-five-year reign. Charles' healing was so popular that he scheduled healing sessions by proclamation, and required that those seeking a cure procure a certificate testifying that the individual had not sought the King's Touch previously.

The last English monarch to carry out the practice was Queen Anne (1665–1714). The King's Touch ended entirely with Charles X of France (1757–1836), who issued the last touch in 1825.

Monarchs who practiced the King's Touch enjoyed enormous strengthening of their positions that came with divine sanction of their power. While James I ultimately continued the practice, we may never know if Shakespeare espoused support of the monarch as divine ruler, or subtly mocked the concept of Divine Right. That such a wide interpretation exists is a true testament to Shakespeare's genius—not only as a literary master, but as a critical analyst of his time.

References