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a cura di Monica Centanni e Fabrizio Lollini

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Castello 6634 | 30122 Venezia
edizioni@engramma.it

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+39 041 257 14 61

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Sommario

Explicit tragoedia. The Undressing of the King's Body

Xerxes, Constantine XI Palaeologus, Richard II

Monica Centanni*

0. The King and the Angel, *monstra* from God's Bestiary

The king is a bastard: his body has a dualistic nature, making him a *mixta persona*, a *monstrum* originating from the mingling of human and divine genes. The king is thus an inner twin, but he is also *christomimétes* and is thus anointed, like Christ, making him the son of God. His divinity is tainted by the defect of earthly existence, condemned by paternal mandate to live here, vulnerable in the nakedness of his own humanity (Kantorowicz 1957, 42-86). However, the king also has a mortal body upon which the anointing has conferred the guise of incorrupt eternity.

In the medieval theory that Kantorowicz traces in his exploration of medieval political theology, the influence of Christian theology on political conceptions of sovereignty produces the image of the king's two bodies. This image is simultaneously ritualistic, juridical and iconographic: the king has two divided and discrete bodies, one that is vulnerable to death, illness and corruption and another that has been anointed, bathed in the sacred oil that preserves it from the accidents of humanity, as an incorruptible garment of eternity. Therefore, the second body is a divine one. The royal garments that mark kingship conceal the mytheme of an immortal body of which the physical body can divest itself: 'Le roi ne meurt jamais'. The theoretical framework of medieval reflection on the problem of kingship – that which Kantorowicz suggestively and lucidly retraces, whose philosophical, juridical and iconographic output is a concrete splitting of the two royal bodies – demands an in-depth analysis. In a certain sense, the king, 'like the angels', is a monstrous creature. For angels, however, their crossed nature signifies their irremediable uprooting from both the earthly and the celestial worlds; it is the stigma of an infecund childhood, of the animality marked by the *tremendum* of an irrevocable decision (Kantorowicz 1957, 8). For angels, however, their crossed nature signifies their irremediable uprooting from both from the earthly and the celestial worlds; it is the stigma of an infecund childhood, of the animality marked by the tremendum of an irrevocable decision.

The divine gift of an extraordinary genetic code imbues the king with a powerful aura of superhuman presence. Meanwhile, for the other *monstrum* of God's bestiary – the angel – that gift signifies a choice, the result of that 'ruthless freedom' that God sought to offer as a cruel gift to the race closest to him among all his creatures (thus following the great Western theoretical

tradition on the figure of the angel: see Cacciari 1986, 55 ff., 133 ff.). The mingling of the bastard genomes of divinity and humanity in the king's body is the source of his worldly power, the foundation that authenticates his *kràtos*. Unlike the angel, however, the king does not leave the genetically complex and miraculous knot of his dual nature unresolved: the *monstrum* of the royal person may be resolved into two split bodies, representable in two figures. The king consists of his two materially and iconically distinct bodies. However, beneath the reconstruction of the different expressions of Kantorowicz's idea runs a question that disturbs his hypothesis itself, throughout *The King's Two Bodies*, up to the *Epilogue*, in which that problem is explicated: is the idea of the King's two bodies medieval or can it be traced back to classical antiquity? Is it inherently Christian or 'pagan'? The answer that Kantorowicz offers seems plain and decisive:

> Notwithstanding, therefore, some similarities with disconnected pagan concepts, the king's two bodies is an offshoot of Christian theological thought and consequently stands as a landmark of Christian political theology (Kantorowicz 1957, 506).

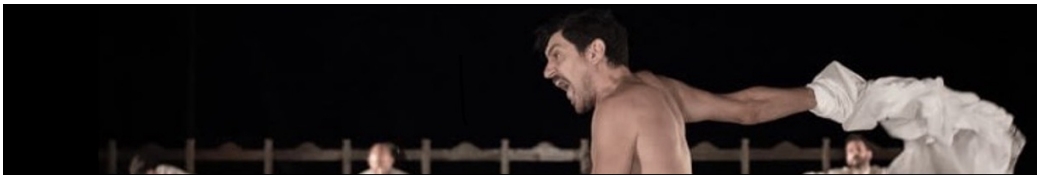
Therefore, the Christian theological–political speculation theorises and concretely produces the splitting of the figure: moreover, the two-body theory is a theoretical limit ('a landmark'), a distinguishing mark that is proper to the political theological thought of medieval Christendom. Nonetheless, Kantorowicz himself, in presenting the irrefutable conclusions of his research, expresses a challenging doubt:

> There are indeed certain features suggesting that the dichotomous concept of rulership might have had roots in classical Antiquity. The doctrine of capacities (that is plain distinction between a man and his office (or offices) was certainly not beyond the imagination of classical thinkers. We do not have to look far such extreme cases as might be detected in the monarchies of the ancient Near East. It will suffice here to recall Alexander the Great [...] (Kantorowicz 1957, 497-498).

Furthermore, Kantorowicz adds in a footnote:

> It is beyond the scope of this study and the competence of its author to review in any detail the classical parallels. But my brief notes might be a stimulant to others to pursue the problem more successfully (Kantorowicz 1957, 497, n. 5).

The complexity of the problem certainly does not bode well for the major successes that Kantorowicz promises in stimulating the continuation of his own research; nonetheless, the challenge must be taken up.



Argyris Xafis as Xerses in *Persians*, directed by Dimitri Lignadi (Theatre of Epidaurus, July 2020).

I. Xerses, the first undressing scene

In the second chapter of *The King's Two Bodies*, Kantorowicz introduces an analysis of Shakespeare's *Richard II*: the play is defined as "the tragedy of the King's two bodies" (Kantorowicz 1957, 24-41). However, as Kantorowicz himself suggests, the genealogy of Richard's double kingly body is rooted in ancient history: a key turning point is the evidence of Alexander's body embalmed in Babylon that seals, in an emblematic figure, the end of the Greek hero's body. Alexander had taken upon himself the investiture of oriental kingship, including in a material sense – the insignia and garments for which he claimed *prosk ýnesis* from his soldiers. So, he thus betrays the ephemeral light of his hero's body, destined to be consumed and dissolved in the heroic pyre, and reverses the sign of mortality necessarily inscribed in the heroic figure in the mummy of an Egyptian pharaoh. Alexander's mummified remains will be forever preserved in Alexandria in the 'Soma', the monument of the 'King's Body'. Even before this, however, the unmasking and defeat of monarchy had already been performed in the theatre of Dionysus in Athens, when the figure of the king appeared in the deprived mask of his poor mortal body – naked, insulted and humiliated, as Xerxes in Aeschylus' *Persians* performed the same tragedy that Shakespeare would go on stage in his *Richard II* – the loss of the royal body and the suicide of majesty.

The figure of the King of Kings had advanced from the East, unfamiliar and threatening: it was splendid, haughty, divine. The power of the King of Kings derives directly from the Zoroastrian deity Ahura Mazda: the God on earth to whom his subjects owe ritual worship. The Persian king is invisible to all: even on the day of the banquet, a linen curtain separates the king from the selected group of nobles, who are permitted inside the palace hall, while everyone else outside the palace drinks and eats in honour of the divine sovereign, on whom their gaze may not fall (Olmstead 1948, 182-183).

Ten thousand 'Immortals' surround and protect the king's divine person: these are the guard of the royal body, made up of nobles, splendidly attired (as represented in the relief sculptures of the Persepolis *apadana*, now in the Louvre Museum in Paris, and on the enamelled bricks in the Pergamon Museum in Berlin). These guards are 'Immortals' because their number is promptly restored when one of the Ten Thousand falls. They are immortal, like the royal body they are called upon to protect: they spend their individual mortality in this service, in which the transient humanity of the individual members becomes wholly negligible. None of the Ten Thousand can boast a name or title of individual glory: rather, their title is collective, and the immortal glory pertains collectively to the royal guard.

The immortality of the Ten Thousand is a halo that circumscribes and reflects the imperishable endurance of the guarded royal body. In their service lies the redemption of eternity from the singular death of bodies (that are 'immortal' in the inexhaustibility of their number). Hence the Ten Thousand constitute the figural and concrete projection of the unconsummated, perennial continuity of the king's body that they enclose and surround. The garments that adorn the king's skin further qualify his identity: the tiara, the purple *kandi*s woven in gold, the white breeches edged in purple, the blue and gold babouches. So, the Ten Thousand are the last garment of royal body, the outer layer that confirms and guarantees the incorruptibility of the royal person. Darius first, followed by his son Xerxes, was splendid because of these attributes and garments: in this form they advance towards the West in an immense procession led by the two royal chariots, one heavy with the king's body, the other empty, reserved for the divine hypostasis of kingship – the invisible but present father, Ahura Mazda (Olmstead 1948, 275-276).

Xerxes is rendered perfect and beautiful by the signs of his royalty: Aeschylus' *Persians* is a drama built on the anticipation of the appearance in the *orchéstra* of that splendid, unknown royal body. The Athenian spectators, fighters at Salamis, Marathon, and Plataea, who had defeated the king and his armies but had never seen him, anticipate a glimpse of his divine (and, by Greek standards, hubristic and impious) majesty. However, from the tragedy's opening verses, it is understood that the king will not display the signs of his majesty on stage: from the choral parodos, we know that the tragic drama – in which the objective truth of the historical judgement on the proportions of that defeat is betrayed and sublimated – will unfold along a path characterised by the diminishing of hope and boasts of the destruction of the garments of the royal person[1]. In the interim that separates the tragedy's opening song from Xerxes' appearance in the final choral song of the exodos – the interim wherein the entire tragedy unfolds – the scene is filled with ghosts. This insubstantial scenic action, consists of those ghosts, as *phantásmata* loom over the drama's characters of the drama and the scenic time – the present – is expropriated of emergence and meaning, projected into the mythical 'before' – the era of Darius, evoked as a happier time, before defeat – and into the ruinous near future that the tragedy presages – the defeat and deaths of all Persia's men, as Darius' *èidolon* announces. The anxieties, expectations and hopes soon doomed to disappointment, the very words and songs of which the drama is composed, cohere around Xerxes' physical absence. Anxieties, expectations and disappointed hopes frame the absence of the central character as an empty space at the heart of the dramatic construction that Xerxes is late in occupying, and that is repeatedly usurped throughout the tragedy. Until the end, the king's body shirks from performing but summons the absent protagonist to theatrical existence from a distance, producing other insubstantial figures as a substitute for the mask: first, the Messenger appears on the scene, pronouncing the words of the war bulletin, the descriptive narration of the naval disaster; next, the ghost of Xerxes' father in Hades is evoked, the dead Darius who fills the wait – the source of theatrical suspense – with 'just words', wise interpretations and shrewd advice for the real and living royal body. Evanescent and incorporeal apparitions, shadows

that screen the absence of the awaited: Xerxes' body impresses the scene with his stand-ins, so that he can escape from the vision until the end. In the *Persian*s, Aeschylus thus stages a theory of absence in which Xerxes, before his (unexpected) final appearance, embodies the same figurations of sovereignty that Kantorowicz reads in Shakespeare's *Richard II*: the King, the God, the Fool.

ἄναξ Ξέρξης βασιλεύς, "Lord and king" – thus Xerxes is described in the parodos (*Pers.*, at l. 5). He is the Great King, and all kings of the earth are subjects and slaves to him. He stands at the head of his formidable procession, which assembles people from all quarters of Asia. Xerxes is a God, χρυσογόνου γενεᾶς, "of the lineage of gold" (at ll. 79-80): he is divine, with a lineage that may be traced to Zeus, who impregnated Danae, the mother of Perseus, the progenitor of the Persian lineage, in the form of a golden rain[2]. Indeed, he is "born of the seed of gold", and therefore, although mortal (φώς), he is "equal to the gods" (ἰσόθεος). However, Xerxes is also a fool: θούριος ἄρχων, "a raging lord" (at l. 74), he has the unconscious fury of Ares raging in battle (at l. 86). γνώμης δέ πού τις δαιμόνων ξυνήψατο, "a demon touched his mind" (at l. 724), and he thus had the audacity to put a yoke on the neck of the sea, to clasp and bind the opposite shores of the Hellespont, to whip and treat as a slave the Bosphorus' 'sacred stream', thus behaving hubristically towards Poseidon. It was a demon that drove Xerxes to madness and all Persians to ruin. Xerxes – king, god and fool, just as Richard will be.

Persia's Queen lies in wait, and a double anxiety grips her heart (διπλῆ μέριμνα ἄφραστός ἐστιν φρεσίν, at l. 165). The Queen's mind is troubled by bad omens. First, she recounts a dream in which two women, representing Persia and Greece, were harnessed to King Xerxes' chariot. Both were beautiful, sisters by blood and yet so different: the first docile and 'proud of her reins', the second haughty and recalcitrant. Yearning to free herself from the reins, she overturns the royal chariot. In the Queen's nightmare, the rebellious Greece breaks the yoke and disrupts the chariot, causing Xerxes to be hurled to the ground:

> χἢ μὲν τῇδ᾽ ἐπυργοῦτο στολῇ / ἐν ἡνίαισί τ᾽ εἶχεν εὔαρκτον στόμα, / ἡ δ᾽ ἐσφάδαιζε, καὶ χεροῖν ἔντη δίφρου / διασπαράσσει καὶ ξυναρπάζει βίᾳ / ἄνευ χαλινῶν καὶ ζυγὸν θραύει μέσον. / πίπτει δ᾽ ἐμὸς παῖς, καὶ πατὴρ παρίσταται / Δαρεῖος οἰκτίρων σφε· τὸν δ᾽ ὅπως ὁρᾷ / Ξέρξης, πέπλους ῥήγνυσιν ἀμφὶ σώματι (*Pers.*, 192-199).
>
> One bore herself proudly in these trappings and kept her mouth obedient to the rein; the other struggled. Now… with her hands she tore apart the harness of the car; now, she dragged it violently along with her and snapped the yoke in two. My son was hurled to the ground, and his father Darius stood by his side filled with pity. But Xerxes, catching sight of him, tore the garments covering his body.

The young king's humiliation is aggravated by the fact that his father witnessed the scene. Following the Queen's recounting of her dream – and another anguished choral ode – the Messenger arrives to report the news of the actual Persian defeat in the battle of Salamis: the Persian army, immense and extremely powerful, has been surprisingly defeated by a small number of agile Athenian triremes, and all the noble leaders and their men have been killed:

"The flower of the Persians lies on the ground, cut down" (at l. 252). We are told that Persia and all the countries of the east will now be empty of men, deprived of defence, and that the beds of young brides will be forever void. Moreover, we are told, Xerxes, who had placed himself on a hilltop to watch the spectacle of the naval battle – seated on his throne as though attending the theatre – burst into tears at the sight of the catastrophic outcome and, as the Queen had predicted in her dream, tore his clothes:

> Ξέρξης δ᾽ ἀνώμωξεν κακῶν ὁρῶν βάθος· / ἔδραν γὰρ εἶχε παντὸς εὐαγῆ στρατοῦ, / ὑψηλὸν ὄχθον ἄγχι πελαγίας ἁλός· / ῥήξας δὲ πέπλους κἀνακωκύσας λιγύ, / πεζῷ παραγγείλας ἄφαρ στρατεύματι, / ἵησ᾽ ἀκόσμῳ ξὺν φυγῇ. τοιάνδε σοι / πρὸς τῇ πάροιθε συμφορὰν πάρα στένειν (*Pers.*, 465-470).
>
> Xerxes groaned aloud when he beheld the extent of the disaster, for he occupied a seat commanding a clear view of the entire army – a lofty headland by the open sea. Tearing his robes and uttering a loud cry, he straightaway gave orders to his force on land and dismissed them in disorderly flight. This, besides the one already told, is the disaster you must bewail.

The tragedy thus evokes for a second time the heartbreak of the royal garment, now no longer restricted to the Queen's prophetic nightmare. The king's body, deprived of its robes, is devoid of majesty and no longer recognisable as unique and sovereign. Among all the present and future misfortunes that threaten the Persian peoples, this is the most grave, as the divestment of the royal body corresponds to the breaking of the yoke of power that held the peoples tight under Xerxes' empire:

> τοὶ δ᾽ ἀνὰ γᾶν Ἀσίαν δὴν /οὐκέτι περσονομοῦνται,/ οὐδ᾽ ἔτι δασμοφοροῦσιν / δεσποσύνοισιν ἀνάγκαις, / οὐδ᾽ ἐς γᾶν προπίτνοντες / ἄζονται· βασιλεία / γὰρ διόλωλεν ἰσχύς. / οὐδ᾽ ἔτι γλῶσσα βροτοῖσιν ἐν φυλακαῖς· / λέλυται γὰρ λαὸς ἐλεύθερα βάζειν, / ὡς ἐλύθη ζυγὸν ἀλκᾶς. / αἱμαχθεῖσα δ᾽ ἄρουραν / Αἴαντος περικλύστα / νᾶσος ἔχει τὰ Περσᾶν (*Pers.*, 584-597).
>
> Not now for long will those who dwell throughout the length and breadth of Asia abide under the sway of the Persians, nor will they pay further tribute at the compulsion of their lord, nor will they prostrate themselves to the earth and do him reverence; for the royal power has perished utterly.

Invoked by the Chorus and by the Queen through a necromantic rite, the Phantom of Darius appears. He is also the *èidolon* of an idea of absolute kingship: although he appears as a material residue destined to vanish, he preserves the memory of that form of perfect dignitas. On concluding his re-enactment of the ancient kingship that he himself embodied, presented as 'invincible' (despite the re-enactment of the defeat at Marathon), Darius' ghost advises the Queen to restore kosmos to her son, who has lost it through his arrogance:

> Δαρεῖος
> σὺ δ᾽, ὦ γεραιὰ μῆτερ ἡ Ξέρξου φίλη, / ἐλθοῦσ᾽ ἐς οἴκους κόσμον ὅστις εὐπρεπὴς / λαβοῦσ᾽ ὑπαντίαζε παιδί. πάντα γὰρ / κακῶν ὑπ᾽ ἄλγους λακίδες ἀμφὶ σώματι / στημορραγοῦσι ποικίλων ἐσθημάτων (*Pers.*, 832-836).
>
> And as for you, beloved and venerable mother of Xerxes, withdraw to the palace and bring from there clothing which is suitable for him, and prepare to meet your son. For through grief at his misfortunes, the embroidered apparel which he was wearing has been torn into tattered shreds.

The Queen answers, showing herself to be in perfect agreement with Darius' concern for the King's garments:

> ὦ δαῖμον, ὡς με πόλλ᾽ ἐσέρχεται κακὰ / ἄλγη, μάλιστα δ᾽ ἥδε συμφορὰ δάκνει, / ἀτιμίαν γε παιδὸς ἀμφὶ σώματι / ἐσθημάτων κλύουσαν, ἥ νιν ἀμπέχει. / ἀλλ᾽ εἶμι, καὶ λαβοῦσα κόσμον ἐκ δόμων / ὑπαντιάζειν παιδί μου πειράσομαι. / οὐ γὰρ τὰ φίλτατ᾽ ἐν κακοῖς προδώσομεν (*Pers.*, 845-851).
>
> O daemon! How much grief assails me! But most of all this sorrow wounds me, to hear of the shameful clothes which are now worn by my son. But I will depart, and when I have brought appropriate garments from the palace, I will make attempt to meet my son; for I will not forsake him whom I love so well in his affliction.

Many are the misfortunes that the demon has inflicted on the Persians, but the greatest misfortune – according to the Queen – is the ravaging of the King's body: the tattered garments that hang in shreds over Xerxes' body belie his royal dignity. This is the unrealistic image that the tragedy presents to us: the Queen, amid Persia's grief at the deaths of all its commanders and good men and the announcements of so many grave misfortunes, is most distressed by the loss of the *kosmos* that designates and guarantees kingship, the garments, the decus in which sovereignty endures. Her care will be to clothe her son's body again with the royal robe, to restore that lost dignity.

This is the third time – after the dream and the Messenger's report – that Xerxes' torn garments are evoked. Finally, in the exodus, the king unexpectedly emerges to sing of his sorrow, the funereal *thrénos* for his people but also a funeral song for his lost majesty. His robes hang in tatters, his flesh visible; he enters the scene on foot for he no longer has a chariot or retinue. He is bereft of everything, as the Chorus sings, 'I cannot believe that there is no one following the tent drawn by wheels' (at ll. 1000-1001).

Like a shade out of Hades, Darius had emerged from the top of the mound of his tomb, clad head to toe in the marks of kingship, from the tiara to the saffron-dyed sandals (the king's garments are described by the Chorus). In the figure of the dead king is preserved a persistent image, an *èidolon* of the fully adorned royal body. Xerxes, by contrast, is stripped of everything:

> Ξέρξης | ὁρᾷς τὸ λοιπὸν τόδε τᾶς ἐμᾶς στολᾶς;
> Χορός | ὁρῶ ὁρῶ.
> [...]
> Ξέρξης | πέπλον δ᾽ ἐπέρρηξ᾽ ἐπὶ συμφορᾷ κακοῦ.
> [...]
> γυμνός εἰμι προπομπῶν (*Pers.*, 1016-1036).
>
> XERXES
> Do you see this remnant of my royal robe?
>
> CHORUS
> Yes, I do indeed!
> [...]
> XERXES

And I tore my robe at the sight of such a disastrous event
[...]
I am naked now: I lack my followers!

The king is naked, γυμνός. His body, once both splendid and invisible, is now a broken mannequin, supported only by the shreds of majesty's garments. After the king's tattered robes have been evoked three times, Xerxes now enters, and that body clad in those tattered robes is visible to all. Xerxes' own voice forms no words but can only sing, a property unique to him among all characters in the extant tragedies. In singing, however, he is the master of the ritual mourning performed by the Chorus. So, Xerxes teaches the gestures, sounds and verses of the funeral lamentation: the Chorus shouts, responding to the King's cry; they beat their heads with their hands and tear their hair and beards, and the ceremonial king also orders the Chorus to tear their garments, so that they fall in shreds on the bodies of the old Persians just as they fall in shreds on his own body (at l. 1060 πέπλον δ᾽ ἔρεικε κολπίαν ἀκμῇ χερῶν). The funeral procession of Xerxes' kingship collapses into a rite marking the end of Persian majesty, as the very land of Persia can no longer support the king and his people (at l. 1070: Περσὶς αἶα δύσβατος).

Aeschylus' *Persians* is a tragedy that consists of anticipation for the appearance of the king's body, returned from the campaign to the West "where the last rays of our Lord the Sun set" (at l. 232). When Xerxes' body finally enters the scene, the hope and anguish of his vision have been distracted by tales, by facts, by distant and senseless words conveyed by messengers and ghosts and the anticipation, dissipated and dispersed in too many words, perhaps no longer awaits satisfaction. Xerxes appears when everything has already been said – when there is no more waiting, no more anguish, no more hope – to mourn the death of the royal majesty that has been sacrificed because of his impious *hybris*. Finally, the spectators at the theatre of Dionysus in Athens – Athenians, Spartans, Thebans, and the inhabitants of the other towns that had fought at Marathon, at Salamis, at Plataea – can see the body of the Persian king who for decades had cast his long and menacing shadow over the Greek cities' claims to independence and freedom. However, they also submit to the fascination of his gloomy and terrible glow, auratic and dreadful. Aeschylus, precisely because he is aware of the seductive lure that the figure of the Persian king exerted on the Greeks, plays with the audience's expectations by means of theatrical invention and with clear political intention, before staging on scene a mere miserable residue of that dazzling royal profile[3].

In the *Persians*, the figure of the king first appears in the evanescent form of Darius' ghost. However, this is followed by the defeated body of Xerxes, the tragic embodiment of kingship who embodies only betrayal and degradation in the carnality of his mask; Xerxes simultaneously exhibits the nakedness of the king's body and the unresolved complexity of royal corporeality – naked, yet mindful of his robe, double and now reduced to one. There will not be, as the Queen announces, a new kosmos to clothe herself with; there is no extra-dramatic time and no further acts will follow in this tragedy. The perfect and essential form of Persian

The Purple Boots. Detail from Piero della Francesca, *The Archangel Michael*, 1454-1469, mixed technik on wood, 133x59.5 cm, London, National Gallery[4]

kingship – invisible and splendid – is rendered irretrievable by Xerxes' physical appearance in Aeschylus' tragedy.

III. Constantine XI Palaeologus, the death of the last Roman emperor

The fall of Constantinople had been foretold by a series of ominous signs and prophecies. On the night of 22 May 1453, the sky had been darkened by an eclipse of the moon; so notes Nicolò Barbaro in his *Journal of the Siege of Constantinople*, a chronicle of events recorded by the doctor aboard a Venetian galley stationed in the imperial city from 2 March 1451 to 29 May 1453[5]:

> In questo zorno de vintido de mazo, a una hora de la note el parse un mirabel signal in zielo, el qual segno fo quello che dè ad intender a Constantin degno imperador de Costantinopoli che el suo degno imperio sì se approximva al finimento suo come con efeto è stato (ed. Pertusi 1976, 26).
>
> On this day of 22 May, at the first hour of the night, an admirable sign appeared in the sky, and it was that sign that gave the great emperor of Constantinople Constantine to understand that his great empire was thus approaching its end, as indeed it was.

Barbaro himself reports that on 25 May, during a procession through the city centre to invoke the Virgin Mary's help for the besieged city, the icon of Mary had accidentally fallen to the ground. However, the most impressive and baleful prophecy is that reported by various and diverse sources, which hangs over the name 'Constantine'. The adage "By Constantine it was founded and with Constantine it will end" is well known. Again, Nicolò Barbaro, in two different passages of his *Journal*, reports the prophecy thus:

> El nostro mixericordioxo misser Jesù Cristo [...] volse longare el termine, perché la propetia avesse suo luogo, zoè quella esser adlimpita, la qual propetia profetizò san Costantin, fio de santa, Lena fo imperador de Costantinopoli [...]. [La] profetia [...] dixe quando che el se troverà uno imperador che abia nome Costantin, fio d'Elena, soelo imperio el se perderà Costantinopoli (ed. Pertusi 1976, 16; 29-30).
>
> Our merciful Lord Jesus Christ [...] wished to lengthen the term so that the prophecy might be fulfilled, which prophecy was made by Constantine, son of the saint, Elena, who was emperor of

> Constantinople. […] The prophecy […] says that when there will be an emperor named Constantine, and he is the son of Helena, under his empire Constantinople will be lost.

The prophetic sentence was certainly widespread, according to a range of witnesses who provide information about it: for example, the prophecy is also mentioned in the Russian text of the *Tale of Constantinople* by Nestor Iskender, who was taken prisoner by the Turks at a young age and who, having converted, participated in the siege of Constantinople[6]. According to the prophecy, therefore, the last emperor of Constantinople would bear the same name as the first – Constantine – and would be the son of a 'Helena'. This is a duplicate of the legend that, as is known, had also arisen around the name of Romulus Augustulus, who had died in 476 and who was already considered the last Roman emperor of the Western Empire in the historiography of the Middle Ages: his name simultaneously evoked Rome's mythical founder and the first princeps. A similar taboo linking the ruin of a city or empire to the repetition of the founder's fatal name is also inscribed in the medieval legend about the name of the last pope with which Malachi's prophecy closes: "In persecutione extrema Sanctae Romanae Ecclesiae sedebit Petrus Romanus, qui pascet oves in multis tribulationibus, quibus transactis, civitas septis collis diruetur, et Judex tremendus iudicabit populum suum". The Holy Roman Church will collapse and the "tremendous judge will judge its people" under the last pontificate of a Peter II.

In 1449, as the Turkish threat loomed ever more urgent and pressing, a "Constantine son of Helena" succeeded John VIII on the throne of Constantinople: Constantine XI Dragas, former Despot of Morea. His mother did not, however, invest too much faith in the superstitious prophecies that warned against the Helena/Constantine genealogy: records show that Helena Dragas had already assigned the name 'Constantine' to another of her sons who had died at birth or at an early age[7].

The years between 1451 and 1453 saw the definitive crisis that led to the collapse of Constantinople and the Roman empire, now territorially confined to an enclave in Ottoman territory and almost coinciding with the wide perimeter of the Theodosian walls surrounding the cities and Byzantine territories in Greece (Athens and the Morea). From 3 February 1451, the ambitious young Muhammad II, who succeeded his father Murad II, was at the head of the Ottoman Empire and his first desire was the conquest of Constantinople. Muhammad's desire for the city was part of a wide-ranging strategic and geopolitical project, but for the young and ambitious sultan, it also became a nagging obsession that left him with no respite: a page of Doukas' *History* shows him awake at night, making plans for the assault and "drawing with pen and ink the circuit of the city walls"[8]. His passion for the conquest adopts a para-erotic turn: the historian Tursun Beg, who was likely part of Muhammad's retinue during the city's conquest, reports in his *History of the Lord of the Conquest*[9] on the phases of the encirclement and siege, with the language and features of a veritable passionate courtship that the sultan reserved for the city as though it were his "novel fiancée":

> In order to marry the novel fiancée - the conquest of Constantinople - he ordered that all the necessary tools be set up to open the fortress [...]. He spent that winter [1452-1453] in tormenting uncertainty with his thoughts turned to the idol he wooed (Tursun Beg and Ibn Kemal, *History of the Lord of Conquest*, ed. Pertusi 1976, 313).

The repeated appeals of the *basilèus* Constantine to the European sovereigns (Spain, France, Hungary), to the Italian powers (Venice, Genoa, Florence, Milan) and to the Pope to form a united force capable of countering the Turkish threat were to prove fruitless. During the summer of 1452, after having completed the construction of the Rumeli-Hissan fortress, which was to play an important strategic role in the siege of Constantinople, Muhammad declared war on Constantine, who, despite his increasingly urgent and desperate pleas for help, had not yet obtained concrete aid from his Western allies. In January 1453, the first contingents from the West began to arrive, but they were wholly inadequate when faced with the size of the army that was being concentrated and organised under Muhammad's leadership. In the spring, the walls of Constantinople were reinforced, and maritime access to the city was blocked by a chain from the Golden Horn. A papal contingent, led by Isidore, bishop of Kiev, and a few Venetian ships arrived, but in the meantime, the walls were heavily damaged by bombardments. Muhammad, also at the cutting edge of technology, made extensive use of firearms – in particular, gigantic cannons, forged thanks to the collaboration between Orban, a Hungarian transfugee engineer, and the Ottomans: the unexpected form that the war had taken exerted a decisive impact not only on a military level but also on a psychological level. The new weapons terrorised the citizens, who perceived the apocalyptic prophecies about the end of the city as having been fatally fulfilled by the incendiary bombs raining from the sky. The idea of a 'divine wrath' befalling the city, provoked by the fact that the two Churches had not reached a true agreement, recurs in various authoritative sources; for example, in a letter to Pope Nicholas V in August 1453, Leonardo di Chio wrote the following[10]:

> Non ergo unio facta, sed unio ficta ad fatale urbem trahebat excidium: quo divinam iram, maturatam in hosce dies, venisse cognovimus (Leonardo di Chio, *Epistola ad Nicolaum papam*, ed. Pertusi 1976, 128).

The decisive attack was launched on 29 May and the city fell. All sources recount, with some variations, the desperate and courageous defence of Constantine Palaeologus and his men[11]. Multiple versions of the end of Constantine Palaeologus survive, but all converge in describing the last emperor's abnegation, courage and heroism. Following the ignominious retreat of Giustiniani, the commander of the Genoese contingent, Leonardo di Chio recounts in his lofty and inspired style the emperor's final words: "Iam perdita urbe me vivere non licet". In a move that implies awareness of the splitting between the king's two bodies, Constantine thus asks that his person to be suppressed so that his majesty might survive ('ne maiestas [...] succumbat mea'[12]).

Nicholas Sagundinus offers another version of the same scene: in announcing the emperor's heroic death to Alfonso of Aragon[13], he reports the news of a possibility of escape by sea that some dignitaries are said to have suggested to the emperor, hearing in reply: '[. ..] si qui ad-

versi contingeret, regno iam extincto sibi amplius non esse vivendum, quin cum ipsa patria moriendum'[13]. Once the reign is over, the king has no possible existence. The first idea is to commit suicide or give orders to one of his few surviving companions to kill him; but no one dares to commit such a crime on the king's sacred body, and, in any case, that body would not have escaped capture. At this point, Constantine strips himself of his imperial insignia and throws himself into the fray:

> Imperatoriis insignibus depositis et abiectis, ne hostibus notas fieret, privatum se gerens, stricto ense in aciem irruit fortiterque pugnando, ne inultus abiret, princeps immortalitate dignus, hostili manu tandem est interremptus ruinisque urbis ac regni casui regium immiscuit cadaver[14] .

The emperor, who was supposed to be immortal, is now indistinguishable in the melee of other bodies. Into that mingling of bodies with the ruins of the conquered city and the dying empire, Constantine mixes his own royal corpse. Constantine divests himself of his royal insignia with the precise aim of rescuing not his own person but the majesty of the king's body from capture by the enemy. Thus, no longer wearing his royal robes and purple shoes, the corpse of the basilèus, confused in the mass of many other corpses, would have been untraceable and thus would not have fallen into enemy hands: shot in the back by a Turk, he falls dead, but 'the Turks did not know that he was the emperor and so, having killed him, believing him to be an ordinary soldier, they left his body there'[15]. His act of undressing guarantees that his figure will fade: the sources agree that the search for Constantine's body, urged by Muhammad, would eventually procure the sultan a head identified as that of the last emperor only by the trace of a faint resemblance. Constantine of Ostrovica, who claims to have been present at the events, gives us the name of the janissary, Sarielles, who is said to have identified the emperor among the melee of corpses and cut off the head and brought it to the sultan in return for a rich reward[16]. Muhammad must have been uncertain that this was indeed the head of the *basilèus* if, as the same sources report, he called on the Greek prisoners – among them members of the court who had been close to the emperor – to confirm the identification 'asking them to tell him the truth [...]. And they, seized with fear, said to him: "Yes, it is indeed the head of the emperor"'[17].

For symbolic and propagandistic reasons, Muhammad is said to have chosen to believe the identification and hastened to have the king's head embalmed and displayed as a trophy, skewered on a pike, in the Augusteion[18] and then taken around, first to the camps of the Turkish army and then to all the quarters of the empire. According to some, he ultimately gifted it to the king of Egypt[19]. According to the testimony of Nestor Iskender, however, after kissing it, he would send it 'to the patriarch, so that he might cover it with gold and silver and guard it, as he knew. The patriarch placed the head in a golden silver casket and hid it in the Great Church, under the altar'[20]. Isidore of Kiev, meanwhile, reports a completely opposite attitude: Muhammad is said to have outraged and insulted the head of his enemy before sending it around the empire as a trophy[21]; Nestor adds: 'We have learned from others that some survivors, who were with the emperor near the Golden Gate, that same night stole the head and took it to Galata and kept it there'[22].

David Tennant as Richard in *Richard II*, directed by Gregory Doran, Royal Shakespeare Company (London 2013-2020).

The story of the uncertain identification and wanderings of the severed head of the last emperor of Byzantium would have given rise to the legendary and popular version according to which not only was the head preserved from the victors' outrage but Constantine himself escaped the slaughter: as in the legend of Barbarossa (and of other first or last kings of the world), his body was miraculously rescued from the battle by an angel who would have transformed him into a statue, or transported to a secret cave near the Golden Gate where he would wait before being reawakened to reconquer his city[23]. It is precisely the multiplicity of versions of Constantine's end and their proliferation in the mouths of Greeks and Westerners as well as Ottomans that confirm that the move with which Constantine played out the death of his kingly body was not a vain rhetorical act dictated by a narcissistically heroic impulse but was rather a conscious and extreme gesture: the King managed to evade the sentence of checkmate to attain victory on the symbolic chessboard, prolonging the aura of his image in the historical light. The splendour of kingship becomes epiphany in the instant in which it implodes, in the last glow of its end.

III. *Richard II*: Succession to the throne is impossibile

In the second chapter of *The King's Two Bodies*, Kantorowicz analyses William Shakespeare's *Richard II*, the play that stages 'the tragedy of the King's two bodies' (Kantorowicz 1957, 24-41). It is useful to read *Richard II*, and particularly the passages concerning the staging of the crisis of kingship on which Kantorowicz insists, in comparison with Aeschylus' *Persians*, recalling some passages on which we have dwelt above. In Aeschylus' drama, Xerxes' body is shielded, until the exodus of the tragedy, by evanescent and incorporeal apparitions – the vision in the Queen's nightmare, the phantom of his father Darius. These shadows compensate for the absence of the awaited: Xerxes' body impresses the scene with its stand-ins, so that it evades that scene, until it appears at the end as an unexpected character on stage. By contrast, Richard's body fills the scene of Shakespeare's play from the outset. The main character is physically present in his multiple versions: king on the Welsh coast, fool in Flint Castle, god in Westminster: 'The Universal named "kingship" begins to disintegrate; his transcendental "Reality", his objective truth and God-like existence, so brilliant shortly before, pales into a nothing, into a *nomen*' (Kantorowicz 1957, 29).

As the Queen in *Persian*s stood waiting, anguished and troubled by omens of misfortune that would not be long in coming (*Persian*s, at ll. 160-165), so Richard's Queen stands waiting, troubled by dark omens and the anguish of bad news that looms on the horizon:

> QUEEN | It may be so; but yet my inward soul / Persuades me it is otherwise: howe'er it be, / I cannot but be sad; so heavy sad / As, though on thinking on no thought I think, / Makes me with heavy nothing faint and shrink.
> BUSHY | 'Tis nothing but conceit, my gracious lady.
> QUEEN | 'Tis nothing less: conceit is still derived / From some forefather grief; mine is not so, / For nothing had begot my something grief; / Or something hath the nothing that I grieve: / 'Tis in reversion that I do possess; / But what it is, that is not yet known; what / I cannot name; 'tis nameless woe, I wot (*Richard II*, II, 2,2).

'Tis nameless woe' – the sorrow that grips the Queen's heart is nameless, and that sorrow overlaps and reflects, like a distant echo, the mournful omens that 'bite into the heart' of the Queen enacted by Aeschylus. Just as the Messenger soon arrives at Susa to announce the grim reality of the bloody defeat ('A vast sea of woes erupts upon the Persians': *Persians*, at l.433), so too 'A tide of woes' will come upon the English king's mournful land (*Richard II*, II, 2).

'A king, woe's slave, shall kingly woe obey' (*Richard II*, II, 3, 2): the king is reduced to slavery. In the *Persian*s the Phantom of Darius, after the Messenger's bulletin, foreshadowed the macabre vision of the Persian people reduced to a heap of corpses ('This shall be the blood-drenched offering to the land of Plataea, [...] corpses in heaps, until the third generation', *Pers.* at ll. 816-818). Carlisle to Bolingbroke, who announces his impious usurpation of Richard's throne, thus prophesies: 'The blood of English shall manure the ground, / And future ages groan for this foul act'.

In the *Persians*, the Queen stated that, among so many deaths and misfortunes, the greatest misfortune was the destruction of the king's body in its tattered garments. So, Shakespeare stages the divestment and undoing of kingship, at which Richard, like Xerxes before him, officiates. Richard initially appears to accept Bolingbroke's replacement in the King's body and appears to leave the field to his cousin Bolingbroke, who will be the new King Henry:

> RICHARD | God save the king! Will no man say amen? / Am I both priest and clerk? well then, amen. / God save the king! although I be not he; / And yet, amen, if heaven do think him me. / To do what service am I sent for hither?
> YORK | To do that office of thine own good will / Which tired majesty did make thee offer, / The resignation of thy state and crown / To Henry Bolingbroke.
> RICHARD | Give me the crown. Here, cousin, seize the crown; / Here cousin: / On this side my hand, and on that side yours. / Now is this golden crown like a deep well / That owes two buckets, filling one another, / The emptier ever dancing in the air, / The other down, unseen and full of water: / That bucket down and full of tears am I, / Drinking my griefs, whilst you mount up on high (*Richard II*, II, 4,1).

While he initially appears to exhibit calm acceptance of the changeover, Richard suddenly recovers and begins to undress:

> BOLINGBROKE | Are you contented to resign the crown?
> RICHARD | Ay, no; no, ay; for I must nothing be; / Therefore no no, for I resign to thee. / Now mark me, how I will undo myself; / I give this heavy weight from off my head / And this unwieldy sceptre from my hand, / The pride of kingly sway from out my heart; / With mine own tears I wash away my balm, / With mine own hands I give away my crown, / With mine own tongue deny my sacred state, / With mine own breath release all duty's rites: / All pomp and majesty I do forswear; / My manors, rents, revenues I forego; / My acts, decrees, and statutes I deny. / God pardon all oaths that are broke to me! / God keep all vows unbroke that swear to thee! / Make me, that nothing have, with nothing grieved, / And thou with all pleased, that hast all achieved! / Long mayst thou live in Richard's seat to sit, / And soon lie Richard in an earthly pit! / God save King Harry, unking'd Richard says, / And send him many years of sunshine days! / What more remains? (*Richard II*, II, 4,1).

It is an act whose symbolic and actual significance Riccardo understands only by performing it live; gradually the undressing appears as irreversible:

> Mine eyes are full of tears, I cannot see: / And yet salt water blinds them not so much / But they can see a sort of traitors here. / Nay, if I turn mine eyes upon myself, / I find myself a traitor with the rest;
> For I have given here my soul's consent / To undeck the pompous body of a king, / Made glory base and sovereignty a slave, / Proud majesty a subject, state a peasant (*Richard II*, II, 4,1).

Richard has committed a sacrilege that, as such, is irreversible. The King's voluntary resignation from his majesty, the renunciation of his status, seals the disintegration – complete, irremediable and final – of kingship itself: by renouncing his royal robe, by committing suicide, the king puts himself in check. It is not a succession; it is 'the bankrupt of Majesty':

> NORTHUMBERLAND | My lord …
> RICHARD | No lord of thine, thou haught insulting man, / Nor no man's lord; I have no name, no title, / No, not that name was given me at the font, / But 'tis usurp'd: alack the heavy day, / That I have worn so many winters out, / And know not now what name to call myself! / O that I were a mockery king of snow, / Standing before the sun of Bolingbroke, / To melt myself away in waterdrops! / Good king, great king, and yet not greatly good, / An if my word be sterling yet in England, / Let it command a mirror hither straight, / That it may show me what a face I have, / Since it is bankrupt of his majesty. (*Riccardo II*, II, 4,1)

Richard has killed his own name and with the suppression of his title 'his majesty is bankrupt'. In the mirror that he provokes Bolingbroke to bring, he no longer recognises his own face because he does not see in his own image the marks of what he has done:

> Give me the glass, and therein will I read. / No deeper wrinkles yet? hath sorrow struck / So many blows upon this face of mine, / And made no deeper wounds? O flattering glass, / Like to my followers in prosperity, / Thou dost beguile me! Was this face the face / That every day under his household roof / Did keep ten thousand men? was this the face / That, like the sun, did make beholders wink? / Was this the face that faced so many follies, / And was at last out-faced by

> Bolingbroke? / A brittle glory shineth in this face, / As brittle as the glory is the face; / For there it is, crack'd in a hundred shivers. / Mark, silent king, the moral of this sport, / How soon my sorrow hath destroy'd my face (*Richard II*, II, 4,1).

Royalty is thus dissolved, like snow under the new sun, and Richard breaks the mirror to shatter his face now that his role no longer exists. However, this is not sufficient; a violent blow is required to finish off the king's body:

> RICHARD | How now! what means death in this rude assault? / [...] / That hand shall burn in never-quenching fire / That staggers thus my person. / Exton, thy fierce hand / Hath with the king's blood stain'd the king's own land. / Mount, mount, my soul! thy seat is up on high; / Whilst my gross flesh sinks downward, here to die.
> EXTON | As full of valour as of royal blood: / Both have I spill'd; O would the deed were good! / For now the devil, that told me I did well, / Says that this deed is chronicled in hell. / This dead king to the living king I''ll bear (*Richard II*, II, 5,6)

'The king is dead. Long live the King'. However, it is not the mechanism of succession that has seized up; what is consummated is the funeral of kingship:

> EXTON | Great king, within this coffin I present / Thy buried fear: herein all breathless lies / The mightiest of thy greatest enemies, / Richard of Bordeaux, by me hither brought.
> HENRY BOLINGBROKE | Exton, I thank thee not; for thou hast wrought / A deed of slander with thy fatal hand / Upon my head and all this famous land.
> EXTON | From your own mouth, my lord, did I this deed (*Richard II*, II, 5,6).

Henry, the new king, cannot admit to having been the instigator of and the person responsible for Richard's death; he cannot accept the king's physical death at the hands of Exton because he cannot accept the symbolic suicide of kingship that the sovereign himself committed:

> HENRY BOLINGBROKE | They love not poison that do poison need, / Nor do I thee: though I did wish him dead, / I hate the murderer, love him murdered. / The guilt of conscience take thou for thy labour,
> But neither my good word nor princely favour. / With Cain go wander through shades of night, / And never show thy head by day nor light (*Richard II*, II, 5,6).

In Shakespeare's play, the King began his mourning from the outset, from the moment he had called upon his own name as King in defence of his body, threatened by the usurper. Now, the king must incarnate himself in a new body: Bolingbroke. Now, Henry, the new king, should recompose upon himself the royal body deposed by Richard, proclaiming, 'The king is dead! Long live the King'. The new king, as Kantorowicz underlines, according to what the ceremony requires, should not attend the deceased king's funeral. Rather, Henry (like Xerxes in the Persians) stands at the head of the funeral procession and sings the mourning song. In the finale of Shakespeare's play, two kings' bodies occupy the stage: the dead – and therefore mortal – body of Richard and, at the same time, the body of the living king, Bolingbroke/Henry. The new king, in preparing the funeral procession for Richard, causes a short circuit and thus finds himself conducting not the funeral of his predecessor but the funeral of kingship itself:

> Lords, I protest, my soul is full of woe, / That blood should sprinkle me to make me grow. / Come, mourn with me for that I do lament, / And put on sullen black incontinent: / I'll make a voyage to the Holy Land, / To wash this blood off from my guilty hand. / March sadly after; grace my mournings here; / In weeping after this untimely bier (*Richard II*, V, 6).

The pilgrimage to the Holy Land will not be enough: there is no atonement for this mourning. Elizabeth was keenly aware of this. She reacted with annoyance to the first performance of Shakespeare's tragedy in 1599 and demanded that the final act be expunged. The Earl of Essex was also keenly aware of this: in 1601, he promoted a staging of the tragedy at the Globe Theatre to support his rebellion against the Queen herself, and after Essex's execution, Elizabeth declared, 'I am Richard the Second, know ye not that?'. Charles I too was aware: he was to be beheaded on 30 January 1649, and in a poem in verse is said to have paraphrased the verses of Richard's self-deposition: 'With my own power my majesty they wound, / In the King's name the king himself uncrowned. / So does the dust destroy the diamond'; Charles II was very aware: at the end of the 17th century, he prohibited the staging of the play[24].

There is no Henry who can succeed Richard: with the funeral procession that closes his play, Shakespeare stages the death – last and final – of the king.

IV. *Explicit tragoedia.* The King is naked, Monarchy is dead

Three pictures, three personae – Xerxes, Constantine XI Palaeologus, Richard the Second – enact three divestments of the royal body: three times, on the 'augmented reality' of the tragic theatre in Athens in 472 B.C., in London in 1599, and on 29 May 1453 in Constantinople, in the final, theatrical act of the last Byzantine emperor, the king strips himself naked and, deprived of his double, showcases the end of royalty in an icastic way. Three times, the monarchy ends. Indeed, the battle of Salamis, in the tragic representation that Aeschylus invents, is presented (anti-historically, but that is not what matters here) as the absolute end of the Persian monarchy. It was not merely a battle won against the powerful Persian enemy: Aeschylus sets his tragedy in one of the Persian kingdoms to demonstrate that the sovereign's body is no longer protected by the shield of the robe, by the divine aura, by the physical body of the Ten Thousand Immortals. Irrespective of how far-fetched and anti-historical the representation is – what Aeschylus presents on stage is the end of Persian monarchic power ('no one obeys the Sovereign any more [...] all Persia is buried'). The Queen will not return to the scene, as she had promised, to return the new robe to her son: Xerxes is naked.

The death of Constantine XI sanctions the end of the Second Rome and of the millenary empire of Rome. Kingship had been the unexpected form that the decline of power in the eastern part of the empire took, linguistically and culturally Hellenophonic and ready, after Alexander and the Hellenistic monarchies, to become monarchical and – only at that price – to succeed in making Rome last for another millennium. Constantine Palaeologus recognised the importance of the symbolic struggle and, on the last day in Constantinople, staged the figurative death of the King's divine body.

βασιλεία γὰρ διόλωλεν ἰσχύς / 'The royal power is over' (*Persians,* at ll. 589/590); *regni casui regium immiscuit cadaver* / 'he mixed the King's corpse with the fall of the kingdom'; 'It is bankrupt of his majesty' (*Richard II*, II, 4.1). Richard II, with his divestment punctuated by perfectly ceremonial gestures and formulas, stages the inverted ritual of kingship. Three times, Western theatre – tragic and historical – blatantly stages the death of the king's divine body and the end of kingship itself. However, that is not enough: the ghosts of royalty can return from the past and the future, near or remote, to perturb the world – the *èidolon* of Darius, the legend of the Byzantine emperor who sleeps for centuries awaiting his awakening and the surrogate figure of Henry Bolingbroke.

The death of the king's divine body and the end of monarchy demand to be continually presented and performed, because the glow of kingship is resilient. Aeschylus, Shakespeare and the scenario of the last day of Constantinople aptly present the attraction and danger of royalty, flashing the glare of that splendour. It is necessary, now and in perpetuity, to invoke Mnemosyne, the goddess of memory, and to remember that, at every turning point in history, the words of the thought of political freedom must resound as a reversal of the ritual formula, 'The King is not dead. Death to the King'.

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- In this paper I have assembled, rewriting them in a different form and within a different frame of meaning, material from my previously published works: paragraphs 0, I, III take up themes and ideas dealt with, in a different form and wording, in Centanni 1990; paragraph II re-proposes the sources on the end of Constantine XI that I have proposed in Centanni 2017, 19-26; I have already wrote on the figure of the Queen in *Persians* in Centanni 2020, 23-29.

Notes

1 |On the metric-rhythmic composition of the *Persian's parodo*s in which the tone of the funeral march prevails over the words of pride and boasting of the triumphal parade evoked by the Chorus, I wrote in Centanni 2012.
2 | On the lines Δαναής τε γόνου / τὸ παρωνύμιον γένος ἡμέτερον (*Pers.,* 144-146), I refer to Centanni 2021.
3 | On the attraction of the Persians to Greek imagery, see Hall 1989 and Giordano 2019, with bibliographical update.
4 | For the identification of the character with Thomas Palaeologus, see Centanni 2017, 263-265, and the recent Farinelli 2021 and Dessì 2022.
5 | The text of the Chronicle of Nicolò Barbaro, autograph of the author preserved Ms. Marc., Ital. Suppl. VIII 746, is partially edited in Pertusi 1976, vol. I, 5-38.
6 | The text of Nestor Iskender, *The Tale of Constantinople*, is edited in Pertusi 1976, vol. I, 261-298, with a note on the work and the author's biography..
7 | Djuric [1989] 20093,. 30-31; the source is the Chronicon of George Sphrantzes, a general, protovestiary and historian of Emperor Constantine Palaeologus, later in the service of Thomas Palaeologus in Morea, author of the *Chronicon* (now commonly referred to as *Chronicon minus*) and a direct witness to the events of the period around the fall of Constantinople.
8 | Doukas, *Historia turco-byzantina*, XXXV, 6: "Τὰς πάσας οὖν νύκτας ἐκείνας οὐκ ἔλιπε διανυκτερεύων καὶ

μεριμνῶν τὰ κατὰ τῆς Πόλεως, λαμβάνων ἐν χερσὶν χάρτην καὶ μέλανα καὶ τὴν περιοχὴν σκιαγραφῶν τῆς Πόλεως [. ...]'; a partial edition of the text in Pertusi 1976, vol. II, 160-193 (the sentence here quoted is on p. 164).
9 | Tursun Beg and Ibn Kemal, *History of the Lord of Conque*st, partial Italian translation of the text in Pertusi 1976, vol. I, 302-331.
10 | Leonardo di Chio, *Epistola [...] ad Nicolaum papam* [...] (August 16th, 1453), edition in Pertusi 1976, 120-171.
11 | There are various sources on Constantine's courage: see, *e.g.* Isidore of Kiev, *Epistola composita per ser Pasium de Bertipalia (6 July 1453)*, edition in Pertusi 1976, vol. I, 58-65.
12 | Leonardo of Chios, *Epistola ad Nicolaum papam*, ed. Pertusi 1976, 162-164,
13 | |Nicola Sagundino, *Ad serenissimum principem [...] Alfonsum [...] oratio (25 January 1454*), edition in Pertusi 1976, vol. II, 126-141 (see in particular pp. 134-135).
14 | Nicola Sagundino, *Ad serenissimum principem [...] Alfonsum [...] oratio*, ed. Pertusi 1976, vol. II, 136.
15 | Doukas, *Historia turco-byzantina*, XXXIX, 13: τῶν ὄπισθεν δ΄ἕτερος καιρὶαν δοῦς πληγήν, ἔπεσε κατὰ γῆς- οὐ γὰρ ᾔδεσαν ὅτι ὁ βασιλεὺς ἐστιν ἀλλ΄ὡς κοινὸν στρατιώτην τοῦτον θανατώσαντες ἀφήκαν (ed. Pertusi 1976, 176).
16 | The source is *Memoirs of a Janissary*, by Constantine of Ostrovikas, who after having fought on the side of the Ottomans in the capture of Constantinople as a member of the new Janissary corps (composed of Christian renegades), in the 60s of XV Century, allegedly switched sides to Matthias Corvinus and returned to the Christian religion (edition and biographical notes in Pertusi 1976, vol. I, 254-260). According to Constantine of Ostrovica in *Memoirs of a Janissary*, Muhammad appealed to a certain''Andreas'; according to Nestor Iskender, the he appealed "Greek boyars and strategists" (Pertusi 1976, vol. II, 288); according to another Ottoman source, Constantine, while attempting to flee, was killed by a dying soldier on whom he had cowardly lashed out but who, with the help of "Allah, giver of all Wishes" miraculously regained his strength, mortally wounded and finally beheaded the king.
17 | Nestor Iskender, *The Tale of Constantinople*, in Pertusi 1976, vol. I, 296. A version of the story very close to this is given by Laonicus Chalcocondyles, *Exposition of the Histories*, book VIII (edition in Pertusi 1976, vol. II, 194-227, 220). The same version of the late recovery of the head and identification by witnesses in Doukas, *Historia turco-byzantina*, in Pertusi 1976, vol. II, 190.
18 | Doukas, Historia turco-biyzantina, in Pertusi 1976, II, 190.
19 | Nicholas Sagundinus, *Ad serenissimum principem [...] Alfonsum [...] oratio, (25 January 1454*), in Pertusi 1976, vol. II, 136
20 | Nestor Iskender, *The Tale of Constantinople*, in Pertusi 1976, vol. I, 296.
21 | On the treatment of the Emperor's head, see Pertusi 1976, vol. I, 448.
22 | Un update on the sources on the fall of Constantinople, with attention also to the Ottoman versions of the end of Constantine, is in Phoiba 2010.
23 | The first source reporting the legend of the appearance of an angel (but without reference to Constantine's body) is, to my knowledge, Doukas, *Historia turco-byzantina*, in Pertusi 1976, II, 180.
24 | So Kantorowicz [1957] 1989, 41, with sources and references. On the political echoes of Shakespeare's play, see Catà 2013, with bibliography.

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Abstract

Three pictures, three personae – Xerxes, Constantine XI Palaeologus, Richard the Second – staging three divestments of the royal body: three times, on the augmented stage of the tragic theatre in Athens in 472

BC; in London in 1599; and on 29 May, 1453, in Constantinople, in the last theatrical act of the last Byzantine emperor, in which the monarch strips himself naked and, deprived of his double, icastically shows the end of royalty. The monarchy thus ends three times. The battle of Salamis, in Aeschylus' *Persian*s, is presented (anti-historically, but that does not matter here) as the absolute end of the Persian monarchy. No matter how far-fetched and anti-historical the representation is, what Aeschylus presents on stage is the end of Persian monarchic power ("no one obeys the Sovereign any more [...] all Persia is buried"). The queen breaks her promise and does not appear onstage again to return her son-king the new robe: Xerxes is naked. The death of Constantine XI sanctions the end of the Second Rome and of the millennial Roman empire: Constantine Palaeologus understands the importance of the symbolic struggle and, on his last day in Constantinople, stages the figurative death of the monarch's divine body. Richard II, with his divestment emphasised by perfect ceremonial gestures and formulas, stages the inverted ritual of kingship: "It is bankrupt of his majesty" (*Richard II*). For three times, Western theatre – both tragic and historical – blatantly stages the death of the king's divine body and the end of kingship itself. Yet the ghosts of royalty can return to disturb the world, from past and future, from near and far. The death of the king's divine body and the end of monarchy demand to be continually presented and performed, as the glow of kingship is resilient. Aeschylus, Shakespeare, and the scenario of the last day of Constantinople aptly present the allure and danger of royalty: the splendour of kingship becomes epiphany in the instant in which it implodes, in the last glow of its end.

keywords | Ernst Kantorowicz; Aeschylus' *Persians*; Constantinople Fall; Skakespeare's *King Richard II*.

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