Claude Opus 4.6
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Prompt: I would like you to write me a report on the historiography of kingship that has been based on Ernst Kantorowicz's book The King's Two Bodies: a Study in Mediaeval Political Theology. I would like you to generally trace how scholarship has incorporated the Kantorowicz's insights since 1957. I then would like you to provide me with specific journal articles and academic monographs in kingship studies in the last 25 years that innovate on Kantorowicz's work. Any connection to disability studies would be an excellent addition.

The King's Two Bodies and Its Afterlives

A Historiographical Report on the Legacy of Ernst H. Kantorowicz (1957)

Prepared February 2026

Introduction

Ernst H. Kantorowicz's The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Mediaeval Political Theology, published by Princeton University Press in 1957, is among the most influential works of twentieth-century medieval scholarship. Written during Kantorowicz's years at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton—where he had taken refuge after refusing loyalty oaths at both a German university under the Nazi regime and later the University of California, Berkeley, during the McCarthyist controversies—the book traces the development of a "political theology" of kingship from the Middle Ages into the early modern period. Its central analytical framework is derived from the reports of the Elizabethan jurist Edmund Plowden, whose accounts of Tudor legal cases articulate the doctrine that the monarch possesses two bodies: a "body natural," which is mortal, fallible, and subject to all the infirmities of the flesh, and a "body politic," an incorporeal, perfect, and immortal entity that transcends any individual king's lifespan.

Kantorowicz demonstrated that this legal fiction was not a Tudor invention but the culmination of centuries of theological, juridical, and political thought. Moving through what he identified as "Christ-centered kingship," "Law-centered kingship," and "Polity-centered kingship," the book traces how medieval thinkers—drawing on Christological doctrines, canonistic reasoning, Roman law, and the organological metaphors of the corpus mysticum—developed increasingly sophisticated means of separating the office from the officeholder, thus enabling the continuity of political authority across mortal generations. The result, famously summarized in the formula "The king is dead. Long live the king," was a symbolic apparatus that allowed medieval and early modern commonwealths to establish sovereignty by "defeating death" and "extending bodily existence far beyond carnal boundaries."

In the nearly seven decades since its publication, The King's Two Bodies has exerted an extraordinary influence not only on medieval studies but also on early modern literary criticism, political philosophy, art history, and critical theory. This report traces the historiographical arc of that influence, attending to three broad periods of reception: the initial decades following publication (1957–c. 1980), the reinvigoration of the work through continental critical theory (c. 1975–c. 2000), and the ongoing engagement of scholars in the last twenty-five years (c. 2000–present), including new intersections with disability studies.

I. Initial Reception and Early Influence, 1957–c. 1980

The King's Two Bodies was recognized immediately upon publication as a landmark of medievalist erudition. P. N. Riesenberg, writing in the American Political Science Review, called it "perhaps the most important work in the history of medieval political thought, surely the most spectacular, of the past several generations." B. Chrimes praised it in the Law Quarterly Review as "a monumental work of superb scholarship and profound learning." The book received the Haskins Medal from the Medieval Academy of America, and its reputation grew steadily within the fields of medieval intellectual history, legal history, and liturgical studies.

In its first two decades, the work was primarily engaged by specialists in medieval political thought and constitutional history. Scholars such as Walter Ullmann, who was independently developing theories of descending (theocratic) and ascending (populist) conceptions of medieval governance, found Kantorowicz's analysis a rich interlocutor. The book's accounts of the Norman Anonymous, the juristic traditions of Baldus de Ubaldis and Lucas de Penna, and the development of the concept of dignitas non moritur all became standard reference points for scholars working on the intersection of medieval theology and law. Percy Ernst Schramm's parallel research on medieval coronation rituals and royal insignia likewise provided a comparative framework that both reinforced and complicated Kantorowicz's arguments about the symbolic constitution of monarchical authority.

At the same time, the book's methodology attracted cautious criticism. Some medievalists found Kantorowicz's associative, almost aesthetic approach to intellectual history—linking far-flung sources across centuries and national traditions—to be more suggestive than demonstrative. One later scholar characterized the work's method as "free-minded and unsystematic." The influence of Kantorowicz's early career in the Stefan George circle, with its emphasis on cultural aestheticism and the almost mystical significance of historical forms, was never far from the surface. Nevertheless, the sheer breadth of the archival evidence marshalled—from liturgical manuscripts and iconographic programs to legal commentaries and Dante's political philosophy—ensured that the book remained indispensable even for those who disagreed with its interpretive leaps.

II. Foucault, Greenblatt, and the Theoretical Turn, c. 1975–c. 2000

The most consequential phase in the afterlife of The King's Two Bodies began with its appropriation by continental critical theorists, most notably Michel Foucault. In Discipline and Punish (1975), Foucault opened his analysis of the transformation of penal power with the spectacular execution of the regicide Damiens in 1757—a scene in which the sovereign's vengeance was inscribed directly upon the body of the criminal. For Foucault, the pre-modern regime of sovereignty operated precisely through the logic that Kantorowicz had described: the king's body was a locus of both sacred and juridical power, and violence against the sovereign's body (even metaphorically) was met with retribution enacted upon the offender's flesh. Foucault's thesis that modern disciplinary power replaced this older "sovereign" model of power gave Kantorowicz's medieval analysis a renewed urgency for scholars of modernity who wanted to understand what had been superseded. The King's Two Bodies thus became a foundational text not only for medieval historians but for anyone working on the genealogy of the modern state.

In the Anglophone world, the New Historicist movement of the 1980s and 1990s brought Kantorowicz's work to the center of early modern literary criticism. Stephen Greenblatt, who described The King's Two Bodies as "a remarkably vital, generous, and generative work," drew on its framework in his influential readings of Shakespeare's English history plays. Kantorowicz himself had devoted a chapter of the book to Shakespeare's Richard II, interpreting the deposition scene as a ritual dismemberment of the royal body politic. Greenblatt and other New Historicists extended this line of analysis, examining how Tudor and Stuart literary culture negotiated the tensions between the mystical body of the sovereign and the vulnerable, mortal body of the individual ruler. The "two bodies" framework became a powerful heuristic for reading the political dramas of early modern England, from Christopher Marlowe's Edward II to the Jacobean masque traditions.

This period also saw the reissue of The King's Two Bodies with a new preface by William Chester Jordan in 1997, which attested to the book's enduring relevance. Jordan observed that citation indices showed the work consistently outperforming other mid-century historical classics, including Lawrence Stone's Crisis of the Aristocracy (1965), and approaching the citation frequency of Braudel's La Méditerranée. A subsequent

Princeton Classics edition (2016), with a new introduction by Conrad Leyser, further cemented the book's status in the scholarly canon. Leyser identified the core question animating Kantorowicz's inquiry as fundamentally one about the "Myth of the State"—that is, the question of how rulers, who are humans like everyone else, are able to hold sway over others, and what fictions must be in place to enable this.

III. Agamben, Biopolitics, and Political Theology After Kantorowicz

If Foucault initiated the theoretical appropriation of The King's Two Bodies, Giorgio Agamben extended it most systematically. In his Homo Sacer project (beginning with Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life in 1995, and continuing through State of Exception in 2003 and The Kingdom and the Glory in 2007), Agamben drew directly on Kantorowicz's analysis of the funus imaginarium—the practice of creating a wax effigy of the dead sovereign to maintain the fiction of the body politic's continuity—to argue that sovereign power has always operated through the capture of "bare life." For Agamben, the tradition of the sovereign's two deaths (as an ordinary human and then in effigy) revealed that the sovereign was in control of both forms of life, and this insight underpinned his larger arguments about the biopolitical structure of Western sovereignty from antiquity to the modern state of exception.

Agamben's engagement with Kantorowicz also opened renewed interest in the relationship between The King's Two Bodies and the political theology of Carl Schmitt, who had famously argued in 1922 that all significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts. Although Kantorowicz never cited Schmitt directly, scholars such as Victoria Kahn and Bernhard Jussen have argued that the book can be read as an implicit dialogue with Schmittian political theology—one that historicizes and complicates Schmitt's more schematic claims about secularization by demonstrating the manifold and often contradictory paths by which theological categories migrated into political thought. This line of scholarship has produced important work on the relationship between medieval corporational thought and modern concepts of sovereignty, the state, and the exception.

More recent interventions in political theology have continued to refine this conversation. A 2023 special issue of the journal Political Theology, devoted to "The

Political Imaginarium," included essays by Paul Monod, Antonio Cerella, and Montserrat Herrero that explicitly extended Kantorowicz's framework. Monod's essay explored how older modes of representing the body politic, centered on the monarch, were transformed with the transition to democratic republics—arguing that popular sovereignty represented only a partial break with older representational strategies. Cerella's essay on royal regalia in Madagascar used Kantorowicz's insights about the "duality" of power to challenge the Western-centric genealogies of sovereignty favored by Agamben. And Herrero traced the extension of Kantorowicz's argument through Louis Marin's Le portrait du roi (1981), which proposed that the absolutist king had not two but three bodies: the historical, the semiotic-sacramental, and the juridical.

IV. Recent Scholarship: Kingship Studies in the Last Twenty-Five Years

The last quarter-century has witnessed a remarkable efflorescence of scholarship on medieval and early modern kingship that engages, extends, and sometimes challenges Kantorowicz's insights. This section surveys some of the most significant contributions, organized thematically.

Gender, Sexuality, and the Gendered Body Politic

One of the most productive critiques of The King's Two Bodies has centered on its implicit assumption that the sovereign is always male and heterosexual. As recent graduate scholarship has noted, Kantorowicz's framework is "oddly genderless"—the king is always presumed to be a man, and the body politic is analyzed without sustained attention to how gender complicates the relationship between the natural and political bodies. A generation of scholars has worked to remedy this.

Lois Huneycutt's Matilda of Scotland: A Study in Medieval Queenship (2003) and Theresa Earenfight's Queenship in Medieval Europe (2013) both interrogated how the metaphysics of the two bodies functioned—or failed to function—when applied to female rulers and consorts. Earenfight argued for a model of "rulership" that moved beyond the king-centered frameworks of Kantorowicz and Schramm to encompass the cooperative exercise of authority by royal couples and the independent political agency of queens. Zita Eva Rohr's Yolande of Aragon (1381–1442) Family and Power: The Reverse of the

Tapestry (2016) similarly demonstrated how a queen regnant's exercise of authority challenged the neat distinctions between body natural and body politic.

Katherine J. Lewis's essay "Becoming a Virgin King: Richard II and Edward the Confessor," published in Gender and Holiness: Men, Women and Saints in Late Medieval Europe (2002), made an important intervention by examining how Richard II's cultivation of a saintly, virginal royal identity drew on Kantorowicz's "Christ-centered kingship" in ways that complicated normative assumptions about monarchical masculinity. More recently, the emerging field of queer medieval studies has begun to read the "two bodies" framework through the lens of non-normative gender and sexuality. W. Mark Ormrod's work on Edward II and his court, culminating in Edward III (2011), explored how the perceived "failure" of certain kings to perform normative masculine kingship was expressed as a collapse of the distinction between the two bodies—the body natural's desires intruding upon and contaminating the body politic.

Ritual, Representation, and Material Culture

Kantorowicz's attention to the material dimensions of political theology—effigies, coronation regalia, funeral ceremonies—has inspired a rich body of work in art history and cultural history. Paul Binski's Westminster Abbey and the Plantagenets, 1200–1400: Kingship and the Representation of Power (1995) and his subsequent Gothic Wonder: Art, Artifice, and the Decorated Style, 1290–1350 (2014) drew extensively on Kantorowicz's analysis to interpret how the built environment, sculptural programs, and tomb monuments of English kings functioned as materializations of the body politic. Ralph Giesey's earlier work on French royal funeral ceremonies, The Royal Funeral Ceremony in Renaissance France (1960), had already extended Kantorowicz's analysis of the funus imaginarium into early modern France, and subsequent scholars including Sergio Bertelli (The King's Body, 2001) continued to develop the anthropological dimensions of this inquiry.

More recently, Joanna Huntington's work on the cult of Edward the Confessor and the royal touch has explored how hagiographic representations of sacral kingship intersected with the Kantorowiczian framework of Christ-centered royal authority. Francis Oakley's Kingship: The Politics of Enchantment (2006) offered a broad comparative synthesis that situated Kantorowicz's arguments within a global framework

of sacred monarchy, arguing that the European pattern was one variant of a near-universal phenomenon.

The Crown, Corporation, and Constitutional Thought

Kantorowicz's analysis of the development of the Crown as a quasi-corporate entity—distinct from both the individual monarch and the realm itself—has been particularly influential in the study of medieval English constitutional history. Andrew M. Spencer's Nobility and Kingship in Medieval England: The Earls and Edward I, 1272–1307 (2014) revisited the relationship between Crown and magnates in ways deeply informed by Kantorowicz's conceptual framework, arguing that Edward I's kingship was more collaborative and managerial than the traditional image of masterfulness suggested.

David Kantorowicz's analysis has also shaped the study of deposition and abdication. The way medieval polities handled the removal of kings—most dramatically in the depositions of Edward II in 1327 and Richard II in 1399—tested the limits of the two-bodies doctrine. Christopher Given-Wilson's Edward II: The Terrors of Kingship (2016) and his broader scholarship on the Ricardian period explored how the "terrors of kingship" were intimately bound up with the problem Kantorowicz had identified: when the body natural proved incapable of sustaining the body politic, how did the political community respond? These questions have remained central to the study of late medieval English political culture.

V. Disability Studies and the King's Two Bodies

One of the most intellectually exciting recent developments in the reception of Kantorowicz's work has been its intersection with disability studies. The connection is, in retrospect, almost self-evident: the original Plowden formulation that Kantorowicz placed at the center of his analysis explicitly defined the body politic as "utterly void of Infancy, and old Age, and other natural Defects and Imbecilities" to which the body natural was subject, and stated that "what the King does in his Body politic cannot be invalidated or frustrated by any Disability in his natural Body." The very language of the doctrine invites analysis through the lens of disability.

The foundational work of Irina Metzler—particularly Disability in Medieval Europe: Thinking about Physical Impairment during the High Middle Ages, c. 1100–1400

(2006) and A Social History of Disability in the Middle Ages: Cultural Considerations of Physical Impairment (2013)—established the field of medieval disability history and created the conditions for scholars to think systematically about how bodily impairment intersected with medieval political and social structures. Metzler's subsequent Fools and Idiots? Intellectual Disability in the Middle Ages (2016) extended this work into the domain of cognitive difference. While Metzler's studies did not engage extensively with Kantorowicz, they provided essential groundwork for subsequent scholars who would bring disability studies and the history of political theology into dialogue.

Richard Godden and Jonathan Hsy's "Analytical Survey: Encountering Disability in the Middle Ages," published in New Medieval Literatures 15 (2013), offered an important state-of-the-field overview that charted the growth of medieval disability studies as a coherent scholarly enterprise. Hsy's own work, including his essay "Distemporality: Richard III's Body and the Car Park" (Upstart, 2013)—written in response to the archaeological discovery of Richard III's skeleton in Leicester in 2012—demonstrated how the materiality of a king's disabled body could challenge and reconfigure the ideological frameworks of monarchical authority.

The most sustained engagement between Kantorowicz's framework and disability studies can be found in Jeffrey R. Wilson's Richard III's Bodies from Medieval England to Modernity: Shakespeare and Disability History (2022). Published by Temple University Press, Wilson's monograph explicitly invokes Kantorowicz's thesis to track how the meaning of Richard III's disabled body has changed over five hundred years—from Richard's own manuscripts and early Tudor propaganda through Shakespeare's dramatic representations and into modern psychoanalytic, sociological, and disability-rights readings. Wilson demonstrates that the shifting interpretations of Richard's body constitute a kind of reception history of the two-bodies problem itself: each era's understanding of the relationship between the physical body and political authority shapes how it reads the disabled king. The book has been praised as "a vital resource for anyone studying disability history, stigmatized bodies, and the historiography of monarchy."

Allison P. Hobgood's Beholding Disability in Renaissance England (2021), published by the University of Michigan Press as part of its Corporealities: Discourses of Disability series, similarly explored how early modern English culture understood the relationship

between bodily difference and political subjecthood. While not exclusively focused on kingship, Hobgood's work demonstrates how the body-politic metaphor—with its insistence that the political body was free from "natural Defects and Imbecilities"—functioned as a normativizing discourse that defined impairment as politically disqualifying.

Elizabeth B. Bearden's Monstrous Kinds: Body, Space, and Narrative in Renaissance Representations of Disability (2019) took up related questions, examining how Renaissance texts and visual culture represented disabled bodies as threats to the coherence of the body politic. Tory V. Pearman's Disability and Knighthood in Malory's Morte Darthur (2019) analyzed the intersection of disability and chivalric masculinity, demonstrating that the bodies of Arthurian knights operated in a cyclical pattern of ability and disability that was central to the text's political imaginary.

Most recently, Mikaela Warner's doctoral dissertation "Henry VIII and Disability Studies" (University of Georgia) has brought the Kantorowiczian framework directly into conversation with disability theory, analyzing how Henry VIII's body politic was constituted in relation to—and often in tension with—his increasingly impaired body natural. Warner demonstrates that Henry's Tudor lawyers used the body-politic doctrine precisely in the way Kantorowicz described, to insulate royal authority from the king's physical decline, and she argues that the Reformation itself can be understood in part as an effort to reconstruct the symbolic apparatus of sacral kingship in response to the challenge posed by the king's disabled body. The study of Charles VI of France's well-documented mental illness has similarly benefited from this intersection, with scholars exploring how the "corporeal body politic tore itself apart" during the king's episodes of madness, collapsing the distinction that Kantorowicz theorized and precipitating political crisis.

Ninon Dubourg's Disabled Clerics in the Late Middle Ages: Un/suitable for Divine Service? (Amsterdam University Press, 2023)—which received the 2024 Lone Medievalist Prize for Scholarship—offers another important contribution by examining how the medieval papacy handled bodily impairment among clergy through dispensations. While Dubourg's focus is ecclesiastical rather than royal, her analysis of how institutional authority accommodated or excluded impaired bodies extends the Kantorowiczian problematic into the parallel domain of sacerdotal authority, where the

relationship between the person and the office was similarly theorized in terms of dual embodiment.

VI. Continuing Challenges and Future Directions

Despite its extraordinary generativity, Kantorowicz's framework continues to attract productive criticism. Medievalists have questioned whether the "two bodies" doctrine was as central to medieval political thought as Kantorowicz implied, noting that the Plowden reports are Elizabethan texts and that the doctrine may have had a narrower currency in the Middle Ages proper than the book suggests. Historians of regions outside England and France have noted the Anglocentric and Francophone bias of Kantorowicz's source base, and scholars of Iberian, Scandinavian, and Eastern European monarchies have explored whether the two-bodies framework adequately captures the varieties of sacral and political kingship across medieval Christendom.

The intersections with postcolonial and global history remain underdeveloped but promising. Antonio Cerella's work on Malagasy royal regalia, mentioned above, points toward possibilities for a genuinely comparative study of the relationship between sovereign bodies and material culture outside the European context. Kristina Richardson's Difference and Disability in the Medieval Islamic World: Blighted Bodies (2012) and Sara Scalenghe's Disability in the Ottoman Arab World, 1500–1800 (2014) suggest that disability history, in particular, offers a fruitful point of comparison for testing whether the Kantorowiczian body natural/body politic distinction has analogues in non-Christian political theologies.

The emerging field of medieval disability history—mapped in the recent special issue of the journal History ("Medieval Histories of Disability and Emotions," 2025) and in the new Palgrave Handbook of Disability History—promises to deepen the conversation still further. The recognition that disability was, as one recent overview argues, "an intersectional node of identity" in the Middle Ages—one that sat beneath the dominant identity category of "Christian"—opens new questions about how Kantorowicz's political theology intersected with lived experiences of bodily difference, including among rulers themselves.

Conclusion

Ernst Kantorowicz's The King's Two Bodies remains, nearly seventy years after its publication, an astonishingly productive work of historical scholarship. Its influence has radiated outward from its origins in medieval political theology into literary criticism, political philosophy, art history, critical theory, and—most recently—disability studies. Each generation of scholars has found in the book new questions to ask and new frameworks to extend, from Foucault's genealogy of sovereign power to Agamben's biopolitical theory, from the New Historicist reading of Shakespeare to the disability-studies analysis of Richard III's body.

What unites these diverse engagements is a shared recognition that Kantorowicz identified something fundamental about the relationship between bodies and political power—something that was not merely a medieval curiosity but a problem that persists wherever political authority is vested in human persons. The tension between the natural body and the political body, between the mortal individual and the immortal office, between the imperfect flesh and the perfect fiction, is a tension that continues to animate political life and political thought. As long as it does, The King's Two Bodies will continue to find new readers and new interlocutors.

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