

Public Abstract

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Shakespeare and Questions of the Conscience in Richard, Duke of York and Richard III

This master's thesis investigates William Shakespeare's development and treatment of the conscience in plays Richard, Duke of York and Richard III. This study and investigation derive from a point of academic contention with claims made in Sandra Bonetto's essay "Coward Conscience and Bad Conscience in Shakespeare and Nietzsche." Bonetto links the character Richard of Gloucester to Frederick Nietzsche's development of a Machiavellian conscience, and claims the tragedy of the play lies in Richard's inability to maintain his Machiavellian ethos. This thesis investigates the influence of theological studies, political philosophy, dramatic trends, and post Reformation discourse between the Catholic and Protestant churches which each helped shape Shakespeare's perception of the conscience at the time of his writing. This thesis attempts to arrive at some conclusions by looking at works produced prominent figures from each of these traditions. These figures include theologian John Calvin, political theorist Niccolo Machiavelli, playwright Christopher Marlowe, Protestant martyrologist John Foxe, and philosopher Frederick Nietzsche, among others. Though these authors assume critical points in the discussion of conscience nevertheless their work cannot be regarded as conclusive by any means. The discussion of conscience engaged (and continues to engage) incredibly diverse fields of art and thought and had done so for hundreds of years.

In examining Shakespeare's development of the conscience, this thesis also engages with what writers from Nietzsche to Bonetto have, in various terms, identified as Shakespeare's "dialectical impulse." Shakespeare's investigation of the conscience resists easy answers and moralizing. Rather, his drama juxtaposes and amplifies characters and ideas, placing them in dialogue with each other so that the reader or audience member discovers an occasion to enter critically into the dialogue.