

Let Your Conscience Be Your Guide: Or Else
Shakespeare and Questions of the Conscience in *Richard, Duke of York* and
Richard III

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by
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The undersigned, appointed by the dean of the Graduate School, have examined
the [thesis The undersigned, appointed by the dean of the Graduate School, have
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Richard III

presented by Phillip Aijian,

a candidate for the degree of master of arts,

and hereby certify that, in their opinion, it is worthy of acceptance.

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I

Spanning the whole of Shakespeare's literary and thetic universe, few themes receive more attention and development than the question of conscience. Especially when looking at the history plays, the staging of conscience creates and locates characters within overlapping hierarchies of social, political, natural, and spiritual consequence. Though the nature of the connection between these categories inspires significant debate, the power of heaven and nature ultimately appear to combine under the judgment of the Christian God. Characters in Shakespeare's universe face with the psychic weight of sin and salvation, considering the authority and power of God who demands moral righteousness and has the power to prosecute moral failings in both the temporal and eternal realms. The word "conscience" appears nearly seventy times in the course of Shakespeare's nine history plays,¹ and his interest in this theme provided him the opportunity to put hard questions to his audience about the nature of personhood and identity—about mankind's agency in the universe, and how the universe might be ordered. Such questions work magnificently in the context of Shakespeare's stage, for they animate every manner of character—from the nameless citizen to the king—with unpredictable vitality. In *Richard III*, for example, two murderers debate killing George of Clarence, and their discussion invites the audience to feel the gravity of their concern, for Shakespeare renders their plight with compelling drama. In a fashion that anticipated the psychologically rich fiction of writers like Dostoevsky, Shakespeare often "not in thoughts, but in points of view, consciousnesses, voices. He tried to perceive and formulate each thought in such a way that a

¹ Ghurye, G.S. *Shakespeare on Conscience and Justice*. G.R. Bhatkal. Bombay, India, 1965. 23.

whole person was expressed and began to sound in it...”² The points of view and voices which struggle with the implications of moral choices offered Shakespeare significant dramatic wealth, for the staging of a conflicted conscience offers such immediate access to “the necessarily fragile nature of the perfected self in Shakespeare’s conception of psychic unity: its inherent instability and its capacity for sudden transformation.”³ This dual tendency toward transformation and instability energizes plays like *Richard, Duke of York* and *Richard III* in a fashion that can simultaneously entrance an audience while encouraging them to digest weighty philosophical matters.

While the theme of conscience emerges often throughout Shakespeare’s plays, *Richard III* occupies a particularly poignant position in the history plays because he doesn’t merely position the psychology and the soul of characters against God, but sets Richard, and other characters struggle against the very *idea* and nature of conscience. This struggle occurs both on a local level—revealed in asides to the audience or in dialogue—and also engages the entire cosmological order of the world. As an introduction, I suggest perhaps the most telling moment highlighting Shakespeare’s concern with the function of conscience occurs in the second act.

SECOND CITIZEN Truly the hearts of men are full of fear.

You cannot reason almost with a man

That looks not heavily and full of dread.

THIRD CITIZEN Before the days of change still is it so.

By a divine instinct men’s minds mistrust

Ensuing danger, as by proof we see

The water swell before a boist’rous storm.

But leave it all to God. Whither away?⁴

² Bahktin, Mikhail. *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*. (Ed. by Caryl Emerson). University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis. 1984. 93.

³ McAlindon, T. *Shakespeare’s Tragic Cosmos*. Cambridge University Press. Cambridge, Great Britain. 1991. 20.

⁴ Shakespeare, William. *Richard III*. in *The Norton Shakespeare: Based on the Oxford Edition*, edited by Stephen Greenblatt (W.W. Norton and Company: The United States of America,

In this scene we witness a conversation among three individuals who, in being named with the ambiguity of mere “citizen” could refer to the “every man” of popular morality plays. These citizens offer a conventional/popular regard for the conscience by placing its function in a hierarchy of signs and events of nature governed by divine will. At the same time, however, the third citizen articulates one of the “problems” of the conscience and its link to the divine. While this citizen demonstrates some capacity to read the signs of the times—“the boist’rous storm”—he seems to abdicate any responsibility to exercise discrimination and wisdom with his knowledge in saying “But leave it all to God.” To “leave it all to God,” in effect, chooses inaction, or blindness, in hopes that God will do the hard work, sorting between the just and wicked without requiring men to exercise any judgment of character. This abdication of an active conscience comprises the mistake of many characters throughout *Richard III*, providing Richard with nearly ideal conditions for his Machiavellian rise to the throne. As these citizens assume that something is wrong in England as indicated by the bad weather, numerous characters assume Richard possesses a character of integrity because he so persuasively presents “the proper signs;” he convincingly “clothes his villainy” with the visage of piety. Those who trust the outward show of such signs, and “leave it to God,” earn a fool’s death. Perhaps worse, Shakespeare simultaneously portrays a universe where failure to heed the instruction of the conscience not only results in suffering, but where a man like Richard may *embody* the collective sins of an England sullied by the strife of the Wars of the Roses—a generation’s iniquity incarnate.

1997.)II.iii.38-45. Hereafter all Titles by Shakespeare will be referred to by name, title, and scene only.

II

My present interest in *Richard III*, both as play and as a character, comes by way of the work of Sandra Bonetto. In one of her essays she suggests that Richard's refutation of conscience foresees Nietzsche both in his attitudes concerning conscience as a spiritual faculty, and his attitudes toward the Christian religion and God in general. She agrees with George Bernard Shaw's suggestion that all of Nietzsche can be summarized in three lines from Richard—"Conscience is but a word that cowards used / Devised at first to keep the strong in awe / Our strong arms be our conscience; swords our law."⁵ Bonetto links these terms of spiritual economics in a general sense to the tenor maintained in iconic Christian invocations like the "Lord's Prayer" as found in the Gospel of St. Luke which includes the phrase "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us" before synthesizing Nietzsche's understanding of conscience in the realm of Christianity. Nietzsche, Bonetto argues, posits "the basis for the bad conscience and guilt...is cruelty, a natural human disposition that is displayed unabashedly in punishment. Bad conscience, he argues, is cruelty turned inward and essentially amounts to self-punishment or 'psychical cruelty'—a form of subliminal suffering we impose on ourselves."⁶ Nietzsche proposes the instinct toward such cruelty proceeds from the elemental search for pleasure. The struggle with conscience, which seeks to repress such inclinations, perverts what *he* considers essential to the human condition. This sort of claim helps establish important connections between Nietzsche and Richard, for both the character and the philosopher defy the moral economics prescribed by Christian authority (or nature), as well as notions which link any inherent and universal human conditions to God as a moral authority.

⁵ Ibid. V.vi.39-41.

⁶ Ibid. 513.

Bonetto goes on to claim that “Shakespeare’s coward conscience anticipates Nietzsche’s understanding of the bad conscience as the ‘consciousness of guilt’, including its involvement with the notions of debt, sin, punishment, and God.”⁷

Her article methodically explores Richard as a proto-Nietzschean figure surrounded by characters that subscribe to the stipulations of the Christian conscience. These subscriptions, however, vary in degree of sincerity, and are often undertaken more as a tool of psychological manipulation than exercises in piety. Bonetto notes, “Many of the *dramatis personae* in *Richard III* are guilty of murder and thus equally “sinful” of breaking God’s law.”⁸ And no one proves more guilty of “breaking God’s law,” while using conscience as a tool of manipulation, than Richard. Indeed, Richard’s rebellion against God’s moral economy and his attempt to move beyond it, according to Bonetto, provides the essence of the play’s tragedy.

Nietzsche urged us to “come clean”—“God is dead,” so let’s move on and create better values than the ones we have long discarded. Richard’s tragedy is that he sets out on a course that he is incapable of seeing through, because he begins to believe in guilt and sinfulness—“the bite of conscience—a sign that the character is no match for the deed.”⁹

I agree that Richard sets out on a course he cannot ultimately follow, and moreover that his failure belongs to his eventual succumbing to his belief in guilt and sinfulness, but I disagree that his failure to achieve a condition “beyond good and evil” constitutes the play’s tragedy. With this suggestion Bonetto implies that Shakespeare meant to celebrate the post-Christian morals and value systems (at least in Richard’s dramatic story arc) that Nietzsche would articulate centuries later, even if Richard’s ideological defeat and death render such a goal quixotic.

⁷ Bontetto, Sandra. “Coward Conscience and Bad Conscience in Shakespeare and Nietzsche.” *Philosophy and Literature*, October 2006; 30. 2. 512.

⁸ Ibid. 519-520.

⁹ Ibid. 526.

We should, perhaps, not be surprised at the inclination to believe Shakespeare sympathizes with Richard as a tragic hero given the degree to which Richard charismatically enacts Nietzschean ideals. Shakespeare imbues Richard with such vitality and boldness that he seduces the trust of even those who initially count themselves his sworn enemies. May not an audience fall prey to the same wiles? Writing Richard's character with an honest portrayal does not necessitate that Shakespeare subscribe to Richard's proclaimed credos, but does illumine a facet of Shakespeare's prevailing popularity. Solomon and Higgins suggest Nietzsche esteemed Shakespeare's "willingness to probe the full range of human character without compromising his vision to pacify moral sensibilities. In this respect, Nietzsche identifies with Shakespeare, whom we took to share many of his own insights about the tragic dimension of human experience."¹⁰ Certainly we find throughout *Richard III* this willingness to probe and test the full range of human character—in ways that continue to inspire awe, and even incredulity. What sort of man attempts to woo a widow whose husband he just slew, especially a man so hideously deformed as Richard proclaims himself to be? Moreover, Shakespeare not only refuses to pacify the moral sensibilities of his audience but occasionally flouts them. The religious establishment of Christianity in *Richard III* falls prey to Richard's cunning wiles and exits the play with a black eye. These themes and their expressions, according to T. McLindon, have proven popular in the 20th century and, as evidenced by Bonetto's reading of *Richard III*, remain so.

The various manifestations of philosophical skepticism in twentieth century thought—culminating in the poststructuralist revival of Nietzschean perspectivism ('Facts there are not...only interpretations')—have exercised a substantial influence in Shakespearian criticism...the plays are praised because they offer no conclusions but rather a heightened awareness of problems; because they are 'ambivalent', 'open-ended', 'complementary', 'disjunctive', 'dialogic', 'polyphonic,'...it can still be said that the kind

¹⁰ Solomon, Robert C, and Higgins, Kathleen M. *What Nietzsche Really Said*. Schocken Books, New York. 2000. 16.

of interpretation which has done most to emphasize and illuminate this aspect of the plays stems from the old New Criticism, with its privileging of ambiguity and ambivalence.¹¹

For McLindon, these descriptions and praises ultimately stand to serve what John Lawlor identifies as the “dialectical habit... the greatest single factor in forming the Shakespearian outlook.”¹²

Bonetto’s reading of Shakespeare’s ambivalence and “dialectical habit” ultimately serve as the basis for her claim that Richard’s tragedy constitutes one of failed Nietzschean ideals. But this provides only one reading of Shakespeare’s deployment of characters and themes which, per McLindon’s descriptions, require a bit of decoding. Shakespeare certainly employs ambiguity and ambivalence—the evidence seems almost incontrovertible. But these tactics—in their exploration of human character—operating as Shakespeare’s confirmation of the importance of conscience, even as a faculty which occasionally produces sensations of guilt or moral debt. I should stress, however, that this claim does not operate against what Solomon and Higgins see in Shakespeare as the refusal to “pacify moral sensibilities.” I propose, rather, that through the characters and plot of *Richard III*, Shakespeare advocates for an ideal conscience which enables its owner to live in fellowship with his community and in harmony with nature and its hierarchies. Shakespeare’s method of doing this, however, may seem initially anti-Christian because he embarrasses and criticizes Christian authority in the play. Moreover, Shakespeare likewise deploys an advocation of the conscience which often appears ambivalent and even apophatic—insofar as it represents the dialogue between God and man—resisting the temptation to offer a singular or “simple” definition.

¹¹ McAlindon, T. *Shakespeare’s Tragic Cosmos*. Cambridge University Press. Cambridge, Great Britain. 1991. 11.

¹² Lawlor, John. *The Tragic Sense in Shakespeare*. Chatto & Windus. New York. 1960. 13-14.

This ambivalence does not necessarily indicate a refutation of the ideals and moral codes espoused by Protestant or Catholic theologies of post-Reformation England, but rather that Shakespeare perceived that the institution of the Church and its leadership could both preach the critical function of the conscience and *fail* to abide by the spiritual tenets their theologies prescribed. Indeed, Shakespeare highlights this paradox by punctuating *Richard III* with numerous moments where characters invoke the conscience only to fantastically fail to abide by their understanding of its function. Richard's ally, Buckingham, persuades a weak-minded cardinal to overturn the policy of sanctuary (whereby fugitives could seek safety in the sacred space of the Church) by mocking the rule as old-fashioned. King Edward immoderately condemns himself for the death of his brother, Clarence, when Richard should bear the guilt and feels nothing. Lady Anne, conversely, resists the clamoring of her conscience—embodied in the bleeding corpse of her murdered husband, Henry VI—and allows Richard to somehow seduce her.

Moments such as these throughout the play serve to establish dialogue with the audience in order to emphasize not only the importance of conscience, but to also discuss the fashion in which individuals maintain the conscience as a psychological and spiritual faculty. Richard's famous speech in the opening scene offers a critical dramatic lens to these other scenes, for he declares to the audience and to the heavens how he intends to conduct himself, and his intentions help shape almost every occasion of conscience following. His speech introduces some of these psychological and spiritual questions, offering a local and cosmological glimpse of Richard's antagonism toward conventions of conscience and traditionally essential human traits. The play opens with Richard ruminating with rancor on his circumstances. Though the house of York has emerged victorious from battle against the Lancastrians (recounted in *Richard, Duke of York*)

Richard reflects with bitterness on his inability to enjoy the spoils of victory as his friends and family do.

GLOUCESTER:

But I, that am not shaped for sportive tricks,
Nor made to court an amorous looking-glass;
I, that am rudely stamp'd, and want love's majesty
To strut before a wanton ambling nymph;
I, that am curtail'd of this fair proportion,
Cheated of feature by dissembling nature,
Deformed, unfinish'd, sent before my time
Into this breathing world, scarce half made up,
And that so lamely and unfashionable
That dogs bark at me as I halt by them;
Why, I, in this weak piping time of peace,
Have no delight to pass away the time,
Unless to spy my shadow in the sun
And descant on mine own deformity:
And therefore, since I cannot prove a lover,
To entertain these fair well-spoken days,
I am determined to prove a villain
And hate the idle pleasures of these days.¹³

Richard here blames his inability to enjoy “sportive tricks” and other such festivities on his physical deformity and appearance, and further blames his physical condition on “dissembling nature.” His perception of his own ugliness steels his resolve to retaliate against the cruelty of nature by adopting a behavior and character “fitting” his appearance—that of a villain. But his intention belies not merely a choice undertaken under duress, as if he had been cornered by bad luck. With the phrase “descant on mine own deformity” he determines to excel in his iniquity the way an artist or musician excels in the acts of performance and creation. Richard’s speech presents us with some interesting questions. He attributes his distaste for pleasure and “love’s majesty” to his physical deformity—being “rudely stamp’d”—and to disavow interest in pleasure and love proclaims a departure from desires that the audience and other characters of

¹³ Shakespeare, William. *Richard III*. I.i.14-31.

the play might regard as essential to the human condition. But only a few moments later he announces his intent to play the part of an artist with his ugliness as his theme, and determines to “prove a villain.”

That Richard determines anything at all about such actions and character features suggests he believes he possesses a degree of agency in the formation of his identity and nature, and perhaps that conditions commonly thought essential to the human experience might, in his case, prove pliable. Moreover, that he employs the description “villain” indicates he perceives and understands the moral polarities of his world and his orientation to them. Such enthusiastic vitriol might earn a “normal person” the accusation of acting merely dramatic, and letting out some steam. But Richard’s trajectory throughout this play proves him faithful to his declarations, and he continues blaming nature and God for his physical condition while determining to follow courses of action which he continually judges as morally reprehensible in the same fashion that he judges himself a villain.

Given such events, the play asks pointed and difficult questions. What is the nature of conscience? Is it an essentially human faculty which operates in the same capacity for all people, and if so, does it indicate a spiritual union between man and God as a moral compass? Or is it merely a byproduct of a conflicted psychology at odds with societal expectations? If the conscience is an essentially human faculty, how does it operate, and can it be dulled or sharpened in response to the degree its owner responds to its promptings? To what degree do physical signs like appearance and visage—which do not initially result from choice—prescribe psychological and spiritual realities? And, ever the popular question, where is Shakespeare in all this, and what did he believe about such questions? For what might be true of his characters (requiring no small labor of deduction) does not necessarily ring true for him. We can often only

speculate about the man behind the plays who is, paradoxically, incredibly present through his vast body of work, yet simultaneously shrouded in mystery behind his characters and the curtains of metaphor. Certainly we may surmise that his daring explorations of religious and political issues could have spelled certain peril if presented indelicately to authorities. Given the tensions inspired by Catholic and Protestant divisions in Renaissance England, we can hardly be surprised he adopts masterful ambiguity amid presenting thorny issues. At the same time, however, he may have also simply delighted in leaving his audience guessing—sufficiently entertained, yes, but more, contemplative and thoughtful.

Before offering a thorough examination of the conscience *Richard III*, however, I need to discuss some of the historical context from which Shakespeare's concept of the conscience emerges. He draws critical inspiration from several sources, but for the purposes of this study, I will examine some key influences derived from drama, political philosophy, and theology. For the first two categories, I will focus on the influence of playwright Christopher Marlow and his morality play, *Doctor Faustus* and move on to the political theories propounded by Niccoló Machiavelli in his seminal work, *The Prince*. My examination of Renaissance theology and its influence on conscience must needs be more diverse, as I will attempt to account for some of the complexities created by Protestant and Catholic tensions. In addition, the realms of theology and ecclesial law branch far and wide in relation to their influences on the conscience touching both on politics and philosophy, especially as related to the discussion of natural law.

Richard III owes some of its inspiration and dramatic presentation to the work of Christopher Marlowe who wrote the play *Doctor Faustus* as early as 1589 with the first performances following immediately after—nearly a decade before the publication of *Richard III*.

in quarto form.¹⁴ *Doctor Faustus* capitalizes on popular themes from morality plays to portray the story of a scholar who sells his soul to the devil for a score of years when demons attend his every whim and pleasure. Though the precise nature of influence remains difficult to qualify, similarities not only of themes but in between certain lines of dialogue suggest Marlowe's influence on Shakespeare. For example, we read in *Doctor Faustus* from Act II

EVIL ANGEL

Thou art a spirit, God cannot pity thee.

FAUSTUS

Who buzzeth in mine ears I am a spirit?

Be a devil, yet God may pity me.

Ay, God will pity me if I repent.¹⁵

Michael Keefer notes that these lines bear similarity to Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* IV. iv. 6-7: "these disturbers of our peace / Buzz in the people's ears." These lines don't overtly refer to conscience, but Faustus' exchange with the evil angel suggests the faculty has been activated, and Marlowe presents its operation with a traditional Christian schematic. For Faustus to say "Be a devil, yet God may pity me" indicates his recognition of God as a moral authority with the power to pity and forgive, even for transgressions so dire they essentialize an identity—as with "a devil." But he continues and asserts that, ultimately, his repentance conditions whether or not God will pity him. Repentance, however, implies not merely an admission of guilt, but intention to turn, to reconsider, or revise.

Marlowe's presentation of themes concerning conscience and morality in the character of Dr. Faustus occupy a largely symmetrical development throughout the five acts. His moods rise and fall with some regularity. Faustus repeatedly approaches the extremes of despair and

¹⁴ Marlowe, Christopher. *Doctor Faustus* (Ed. Michael Keefer). Broadview Books, Canada. 2007. 60.

¹⁵Ibid. II.iii.12-16

moments later flirts with the prospect of repentance—but only for a moment—before hell’s emissaries persuade him otherwise and he once again dives back into “sin” and feverishly professes his loyalties to damnation. By “symmetrical,” I mean that Marlowe renders these moments of moral deliberation by referring to Faustus’ inner state—as revealed in his dialogue—as well as external markers signaling to the audience the refrain-like return to a theme. These visual markers often present as the good angel and evil angel that appear onstage while Faustus considers his actions and their consequences. Their physical presence underscores the exploration of the moral dilemma by personifying “good” and “evil” thoughts, transforming Faustus’ monological musing into something of a dialogue between conflicted parts of the self. In the lines from Act II previously quoted, Faustus speaks aloud, trying to persuade himself to pursue the path of Christian righteousness. For Faustus to wonder “who buzzeth in my ears” indicates that though the good and evil angel can communicate with him, their influence acts upon Faustus alone, just as the back and forth of conflicting thoughts stirred up by a troubled conscience, and none but the self perceives them. The verb “buzzeth” suggests the presence of something small and irritating, like a fly or mosquito—something large enough to annoy, but small enough to discount and brush away.

These angels appear at numerous points throughout Faustus’ plunge into the devil’s territory of sorcery and other dark arts—even before he sells his soul. They appear in I.i, II.i, and twice in II.iii after which they disappear. Their arguments balance each other in tone and delivery, even down to placement of sentiment. The good angel offers the hope of salvation conditional upon the willingness to repent, and the Evil angel straightway refutes the possibility. They maintain this balanced narrative to highlight Faustus’ losing deliberation. When they disappear in the middle of Act II, we might conclude that Faustus has passed beyond the

influence the good angel can provide—something indicated, perhaps, by his celebration of the seven deadly sins paraded before him at the end of the act.

The exit of the good and evil angels does not end the symmetrical development of Faustus' moral descent. The use of doubling repeats elsewhere—two jesters also provide comic relief and insight. From a thetic point of view, again, the strategy of doubling both jesters and angels provides the audience with visual cues that help indicate important moments of transition while emphasis of different themes. For example, the constant appearing and disappearing act of the two angels mirrors Faustus in his attempt to free his mind from the anxieties earned by embracing the devil and his contract—he can only keep his worries at bay for so long before they return to plague him. This difficulty offers Marlowe the opportunity to insert some of his play's most compelling character development, showing that Faustus doesn't succeed in swearing off his religious loyalties to God with one fell swoop. He oscillates between the polarities of spiritual possibility, at once considering the prospect of repentance and all the consequences such an action would take, and throwing himself utterly into the trappings the barter of his soul provides him. At times, this tension between the two spiritual forces at play offers both humor and pathos.

FAUSTUS:

Now Faustus must thou needs be damn'd,
And canst thou not be sav'd.
What boots it then to think of God or heaven?
Away with such vain fancies, and despair,
Despair in God, and trust in Belzebub.
Now go not backward: No Faustus, be resolute.
Why waverest thou?¹⁶

From within the context of the play's narrative, Faustus' musings at once encapsulate one of the central themes of morality, and articulate to whom Faustus shall dedicate his allegiance. He

¹⁶ Ibid. II.i.1-7

indicates his comprehension of the stakes using words of opposing value systems like “damn’d” and “saved” as well as naming God and Belzebub as the agents to whom such actions belong. Simultaneously, the audience has an opportunity to consider his dilemma while observing the ridiculously thetic scene of a grown man and scholar chiding himself, as if the irresolute Faustus were a student in need of a stern lecture. Indeed, with phrases like “Why waverest thou” Faustus essentially interrogates himself, his psychological turmoil perhaps anticipating the pains of damnation he and other characters of the play constantly anticipate.

Marlowe’s development of dramatic and comic psychological turmoil as a feature resident to the conscience anticipates Shakespeare’s development of conscience in *Richard III*, particularly when Richard experiences a psychological break in the fifth act which I will examine later in greater detail. Another facet of Marlowe’s writing, however, anticipates *Richard III* in a noteworthy fashion. Faustus’ exchange with the good and evil angels, and his own “dialogues” with himself as examined above, also fulfill the “dialectical habit” for which Shakespeare’s plays earn praise according to their ambiguities. Marlowe’s staging of the conscience using titles like “Good Angel” and “Evil Angel” might be seen as an attempt to guide the audience in making value judgments congruent with the moral codes of Christianity. But, of course, the experience of one’s conscience doesn’t manifest in such clear extremes or titles assigned to categories of thought. And it is with this dialectical personification of conscience that Marlowe too anticipates Nietzsche philosophy and Richard’s character.

GOOD ANGEL

Sweet Faustus, leave that execrable art.

FAUSTUS

 C_{on}trition, prayer, repentance: what of them?

GOOD ANGEL

 O, they are a means to bring thee unto heaven.

EVIL ANGEL

 Rather illusions, fruits of lunacy,

That makes men foolish who do trust them most.¹⁷

If we read the good and evil angels as the players of Faustus' dramatized interior dilemma, then the recommendations of "contrition, prayer, repentance" evince the suggestions of a conscience burdened by guilt, and seeking to alleviate not only the burden on the mind, but also to amend one's moral and spiritual orientation to God. The evil angel's dismissal of such notions as "illusions and fruits of lunacy" recalls Nietzsche's suggestion that bad conscience and guilt do not suggest a relationship with a disapproving God, but rather "anger directed against the self,"¹⁸ and that the conscience "is not 'the voice of God in man'—it is rather the instinct of cruelty that turns back after it can no longer discharge itself externally."¹⁹ Nietzsche's assessment of the conscience matches with the Evil Angel—anger directed at the self and the internalization of the cruelty instinct likely possess the power to produce "fruits of lunacy" and turn their practitioners into fools. Between Marlow and Nietzsche, Shakespeare writes Richard expressing the same contempt for conscience. "Let not our babbling dreams affright our souls. / Conscience is but a word that cowards use²⁰..." Richard's reference to "babbling dreams" here parallels the Evil Angel's phrase "fruits of lunacy," denigrating the idea that the conscience might be anything more than a complex and vivid experience of fear. Richard's reference to dreams here should strike the audience as particularly poignant, and even ironic, for all dreams in *Richard III* act as warnings, foreshadowing potential disaster to befall those who dream. These dreams, like the good and evil angels in *Doctor Faustus*, dramatize and embody the experience of the conscience

¹⁷ Marlowe, Christopher. *Doctor Faustus* (Ed. Michael Keefer). Broadview Books, Canada. 2007. II.i.15-19

¹⁸ Nietzsche, Friederich. *On the Genealogy of Morals.* (with *Ecce Homo*), trans. Walter Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale. New York: Vintage, 1989. 45

¹⁹ Ibid. 312.

²⁰ Shakespeare, William. *Richard III.* V.vi.39-39.

for key figures who, as I will investigate further, systematically ignore or misunderstand the portents such experiences provide, usually resulting in their deaths.

While both Shakespeare and Marlowe undertake plays which dramatically stage conscience, Shakespeare's methods of doing so mark a firm departure from the structural prescriptions of *Doctor Faustus*. Marlowe's play employs more clearly articulated moral distinctions—as in the naming of the good and evil angel—particularly reinforced by his use of the chorus, most notably in the epilogue. The chorus delivers the moral of the story and condemns Faustus for daring to do more than “wonder at unlawful things / whose deepness doth entice such forward wits / To practice more than heavenly power permits.”²¹ Through the chorus, Marlowe reinforces the value of the conscience as the spiritual faculty which cautions the soul against “trespassing” beyond the realm of wonder into practice. Though Shakespeare uses a chorus in other history plays, he employs none here and abandons devices which reinforce moral expectations. Still, we can detect the influence. Shakespeare's presentation of the conscience proves as potent and entertaining as Marlowe's, animating characters with volatile and vibrant emotions—fear, hope, despair, and guilt. Shakespeare's development of the conscience at once recalls Marlowe's concerns and techniques, but moves away from them in crucial fashions. Shakespeare deploys his own symmetries and patterns of themes and character development and audiences perhaps accustomed to the structure of morality plays might have found Richard's character development and journey toward power somewhat destabilizing without the same visual cues Marlowe uses to announce key themes.

While both *Doctor Faustus* and *Richard III* explore the conscience and its psychological turmoil in response to moral and spiritual realities, the stakes for Richard seem much higher.

²¹ Marlowe, Christopher. *Doctor*. VI.i.6-8.

Marlow presents Faustus as a scholar guilty of maintaining what his culture deemed “taboo interests.” But even when the powers of hell fulfill his desires, his goals seldom approach the pinnacles and costs that Richard’s do. Faustus trades his soul for seemingly cheap fare—knowledge of the cosmos, a chance to sleep with beautiful women, the ability to humiliate his detractors and to impress other powerful people and earn their admiration. Perhaps as a scholar, his ambitions could have been no higher than craving the admiration and respect of important people after a lifetime of leafing through books. But Richard’s ambitions seem boundless—he orchestrates murders and schemes his way through four acts of the play, only mildly struggling with guilt in comparison to Dr. Faustus. Then suddenly, in the fifth act, eleven ghosts—Richard’s victims—appear successively in a single night, each condemning Richard with variations on the curse “Despair and die!” To withhold the narrative function of the ghosts for so long before introducing them would likely prove an incredible spectacle on the stage. The delay of ghosts as visual cues to the struggle of conscience might suggest to an audience that Richard largely rids himself of the guilt and psychological turmoil one would expect in exchange for his deeds.

Though Shakespeare may have enjoyed the opportunity to play on audience expectations, his development of conscience throughout *Richard III* seems to have more driving it than a mere interest in destabilizing the theoric conventions of the morality play. Through Richard, Shakespeare interrogates the nature of conscience and its manifestations not merely as a moral compass, but as a psychological version of the Achilles heel, which Richard exploits for his own ends, and with enormous success. Richard’s ability to wage war as a soldier and, more importantly, as a rhetorician, functions as an understudy to Machiavelli’s political theories—theories which call for the calculated cunning and foresight Richard displays. That Shakespeare

places his characters in dialogue with Machiavelli requires less detective work—we have the benefit of Richard proclaiming his determination to exceed the Machiavellian archetype, though we must look to another play to do so.

RICHARD OF GLOUCESTER

Why, I can smile, and murder whiles I smile,
And cry ‘Content!’ to all which grieves my heart,
And wet my cheeks with artificial tears,
And frame my face to all occasions.
I’ll drown more sailors than the mermaid shall;
I’ll slay more gazers than the basilisk;
I’ll play the orator as well as Nestor.
Deceive more slyly than Ulysses could,
and, like a Sinon, take another Troy.
I can add colors to the chameleon,
Change shapes with Proteus for advantages,
And set the murderous Machiavel to school
Can I do this, and cannot get a crown?
Tut, were it farther off, I’ll pluck it down.²²

These lines conclude one of Richard’s longer speeches, made as a declarative monologue to the audience, and it echoes themes from the one at the beginning of *Richard III*. He precedes his list of archetypal figures by apposing genuine grief to artificial grief, a tool in his arsenal of manipulation. That he must “cry ‘Content!’ to all which grieves him” indicates, even so, that Richard possesses an identity at war with itself. He does not name here what grieves his heart, but names the refutation of his heart as a symbol of pathos, certain desires—perhaps for “sportive tricks” and “love’s majesty” which so many of his peers enjoy. Like Dr. Faustus in a moment of doubt, feeling his weakness, Richard barrels ahead, barely acknowledging his grief or its causes and rushes in to claiming the fashions in which he shall excel figures of deception, cunning, and martial strategy. While most of figures invoked are human, or humanoid, Richard doesn’t hesitate to refer to mythical creatures and monsters. The mermaid, basilisk, and

²² Shakespeare, William. *Richard, Duke of York*. III.ii.182-195.

chameleon also inform Richard's construction of an identity which he willingly, even gleefully, dehumanizes in order to match his ambitions.

Machiavelli's work *The Prince* helps provide specific insight into the ways Shakespeare crafts Richard's ambition to destabilize and interrogate conventional mores of the conscience. Writing to Lorenzo de Medici circa 1513, Niccoló Machiavelli opens his decisive political theory with prefatory remarks on the nature of princes saying, "And truly it is a very natural and ordinary thing to desire to acquire, and always, when men do it who can, they will be praised or not blamed..."²³ Machiavelli spends much of his work describing how princes should conduct themselves in order to acquire thrall and assets, looking to the examples of historical leaders in order to anticipate the challenges which accompany such ambition. Shakespeare's crafting of Richard's character and actions reveal numerous similarities to Machiavelli's ideal prince, most notably, an insatiable acquisitiveness. His listing of determinations and mythical figures, after all, culminates in his declaration "Can I do this, and cannot get a crown? / Tut, were it farther off, I'll pluck it down." This acquisitiveness arms Richard, as it should arm the prince, to adopt all manner of actions and public personas in order to facilitate his goals, placing Richard in between the clear cut sense of right and wrong featured in *Dr. Faustus* and Nietzsche's superman, who succeeds in escaping guilt altogether.

We see in *Richard III* that characters struggle with the question of guilt and conscience not only in response to unlawful deeds or transgressions, but in response to *perceived* wrongs which often have less to do with a clearly articulated moral system than a volatile emotional and psychological state—a state that creates ideal conditions for Richard's Machiavellian tendencies. Shakespeare perhaps recognized that those who display the signs of a troubled conscience

²³ Machiavelli, Niccolò. *The Prince* (trans. Harvey C. Mansfield). University of Chicago Press. Chicago and London, 1998. 14.

indicate to their community their perceived placement within a hierarchy—political, spiritual or moral—where they stand charged or guilty of offense. If moral or spiritual, then such a perception of offense helps create a public persona suggestive of piety, or the attempt to achieve piety. Someone possessing the proper amount of charisma, ambition, and acting skills could persuade their peers with a dramatic display that God had afflicted their soul with guilt and, as such, might earn the reputation for being concerned with virtue. The successful creation of such a public persona allows Richard to take advantage of those whom have let down their guard.

Harvey Mansfield notes,

But professions of good could not accompany moral actions in isolation from each other; they would have to be elaborated so that the moral actions would be consistent with each other and the life of the moral person would form a whole. Such elaboration requires an effort of imagination, since the consistency we see tells us only of the presence of outward conformity, and the elaboration extends over a society...²⁴

Richard need only satisfy the imaginations of those around him by offering a convincing display of piety which could render the apparent difference between him and a genuinely “holy” person indistinguishable. Shakespeare’s construction of Richard’s character as a cunning snake-in-the-grass who can feign piety invites the audience to consider the possibility that the conscience is all a show, a social construct enforced even by religious institutions in their own Machiavellian ambitions. Richard’s dexterity with “artificial tears” and other forms of duplicity help defuse concerns that he could be capable of treachery.

The trust Richard earns from others provides him with the collateral and flexibility needed to deploy his schemes so effectively that his victims don’t suspect him until they cannot escape. His secret machinations adhere to some of Machiavelli’s critical suggestions for acquiring and maintaining political power in a state. Machiavelli suggests, “And whoever them

²⁴ Ibid. xi.

[states], if he wants to hold them, must have two concerns: one, that the bloodline of their ancient prince be eliminated; the other, not to alter either their laws or their taxes: so that in a very short time it becomes one whole body with their ancient principality.”²⁵ Thus Richard systematically works to eliminate those who could ascend to the throne, disregarding any affection or loyalty he might feel for his family members. Moreover, Richard aims to neutralize nobles and figures who don’t necessarily have stake in the claim to the throne, but who remain loyal to rightful heirs.

Machiavelli writes,

...The contrary occurs with kingdoms governed like France, because you can easily enter there, having won over to yourself some baron of the kingdom; for malcontents and those who desire to innovate are always to be found. For the reasons given, they can open the way for you into that state and facilitate victory for you...Nor is it enough for you to eliminate the bloodline of the prince, because lords remain there who put themselves at the head of new changes; and since you can neither content them, nor eliminate them, you lose that state whenever their opportunity comes.²⁶

Richard sets his sights not only on the royal family, but on their followers, like Lord William Hastings, whom Richard’s men kill at the end of scene III.iv. Richard owes much of his success to the cooperation of his co-conspirator and confidant, Buckingham. Buckingham conditions his allegiance to Richard, like the hired murderers, upon the expectation of reward—an earldom. But Richard’s acquisitiveness makes him reluctant to part with such payment, a reluctance which costs him a powerful ally.

KING RICHARD But what's o'clock?
BUCKINGHAM Upon the stroke of ten.
KING RICHARD Well, let it strike!
BUCKINGHAM Why 'let it strike?'
KING RICHARD Because that, like a jack, thou keep'st the stroke
 Betwixt thy begging and my meditation.
 I am not in the giving vein today.
BUCKINGHAM Why then resolve me, whe'er you will or no?
KING RICHARD Thou troublest me. I am not in the vein.

²⁵ Ibid. 9.

²⁶ Ibid. 18.

Exit [RICHARD, followed by all but BUCKINGHAM]

BUCKINGHAM And is it thus? Repays he my deep service
With such contempt? Made I him king for this?
O let me think on Hastings, and be gone
To Brecon, while my fearful head is on.²⁷

Richard's reluctance to give the earldom induces a moment of offense mixed with retrospection for Buckingham. He sees himself as Richard's kingmaker, deserving of reward equal to his effort. But he then exercises thoughtfulness uncharacteristic of most players in *Richard III*, and, knowing Richard's character, determines that escaping with his life may offer the greatest, and only reward.

Richard's failure to maintain Buckingham's loyalty echoes his failure to fully embrace the scope of Machiavellian strategies. Richard proclaims that he can "set the murderous Machiavel to school" but Machiavelli prescribes more than murder. Throughout *The Prince* Machiavelli addresses his insights not only to the acquisition of a state, but the steps and attitudes necessary to *hold* them. Indeed, he opens one of his chapters entitled "Of Avoiding Contempt and Hatred" and writes,

...the prince, as was said above in part, should think how to avoid those things that make him hateful and contemptible. When he avoids them, he will have done his part and will find no danger in his other infamies. What makes him hated above all, as I said, is to be rapacious and a usurper of the property and the women of his subjects...He should contrive that greatness, spiritedness, gravity, and strength are recognized in his actions, and he should insist that his judgments in the private concerns of his subjects be irrevocable. And he should maintain such an opinion of himself that no one thinks either of deceiving him or of getting around him.²⁸

Machiavelli's advice here offers prescriptions for maintaining political alliances and an authoritative public figure which Richard doesn't care to embrace. Buckingham was happy to

²⁷ Shakespeare, William. *Richard III*. IV.iii.113-125.

²⁸ Machiavelli, Niccolo. *The Prince* (trans. Harvey C. Mansfield). University of Chicago Press. Chicago and London, 1998. 71-72.

help Richard usurp the throne insofar as such a venture afforded him some of the spoils of victory. But Richard withholds the earldom from his Buckingham, who regards the lack of payment as poisonously as theft. Buckingham's loss proves a critical event in Richard's ultimate undoing, for up until this point he helps Richard fashion a public persona of "greatness, spiritedness, gravity, and strength." He demonstrates his value as a kingmaker particularly in scene III.vii where he and some of Richard's other cronies incite a crowd and public officials into demanding that Richard should accept the offer of the throne. Buckingham and Richard stage the exchange brilliantly—Richard feigns the coy piety of a man bound to religious devotion and Buckingham plays the desperate advocate looking for a political savior.

I should hasten to add that, while Machiavelli provides a framework for describing Richard's character and impulses, Shakespeare's inspiration for rendering his villain go beyond his reading of *The Prince*. Much of it reads like a compendium concerning historical figures and their martial intrigues from which Machiavelli distills certain maxims and strategies. R.W. Chambers suggests that Shakespeare's crafting of Richard's character owes as much to Thomas More as to Machiavelli. More too wrote a work entitled *Richard III*, which, Chambers claims, bears significant similarity to his *Utopia*.

In *Richard III*, he [More] looks back to the Greek and Latin historians, and initiates modern English historical writing. *Richard III* remained the pattern for historians. Sixteenth-Century English authors from time to time give it that position, and confess that no later writer has been able to equal it...*Richard III* is an attack on the non-moral stagecraft of the early Sixteenth Century, exactly as *Utopia* is...A comparison of Shakespeare's *Richard III* and More's leaves one astonished at the debt.²⁹

Chambers goes on to explain that Shakespeare not only owes some of Richard's character to More, but also part of his cultivation as a tragic poet. Channeling the Latin and the Greeks, More's *Richard III* offered Shakespeare access to a history of an English king rendered as a

²⁹ Chambers, R.W. *Thomas More*. The Newman Press. Great Britain, 1935. 117.

Greek drama, particularly with “the feeling of fate hanging over blind men who can see what is happening to others but are unconscious of their own danger. ‘The vain surety of man’s mind, so near his death’—that is the moral of More’s *Richard III*.³⁰ I hesitate to make as definitive a claim for Shakespeare’s *Richard*, but certainly he imports the “feeling of fate hanging over blind men” to heighten his drama. His development of conscience helps define the extent to which characters senselessly wander toward their doom in Richard’s traps and, conversely, Richard’s own blindness in the face of surmounting odds.

Having discussed some of Shakespeare’s theoretic and philosophic inheritance in his cultivation of the conscience, I need to explore of the some religious and theological influences, which vary in nature and scope. Shakespeare’s religious education in Renaissance England featured a host of sources which he received starting when he was young and on throughout this professional career. When I say “religious education” however, I don’t mean he undertook specifically religious instruction as a monk or catechumen, but as a citizen of a culture replete with religious dialogue which he absorbed from multiple and sundry sources. I shall not attempt to establish a hierarchy of these sources to determine their comparative levels of influence, but rather explore them in a fashion moving from local influence—indigenous to England and his upbringing, for example—to broader, more international influences, like the Reformation’s effect on the doctrines concerning the Catholic conception of Purgatory.

There can be little doubt that most discussions concerning the nature of the conscience during the Renaissance—and certainly at the time Shakespeare published *Richard III*—identified it as a spiritual faculty, and many writers referred to Scripture, in its evolving forms, as a cornerstone of reference. Examining the plays of the first folio, Richmond Noble suggests that though

³⁰ Ibid. 117.

little evidence suggests Shakespeare studied Scripture with any academic scrutiny,³¹ his plays “contain allusions to at least 42 books of the Bible (18 each from the Old and New Testaments and six from the Apocrypha).”³² Noble goes on to suggest that Shakespeare likely read the Bible, and even different versions such as the Genevan and the Bishops’ (1560, 1568 respectively), in addition to the Book of Common Prayer.³³ But much of Shakespeare’s access to conversations concerning the conscience comes by way of secondary sources—theatrical presentations, political tracts, recorded testimonies, and theological works—inspired by different versions of the Bible.

Though Shakespeare may not have had a formal religious education in his youth, Rowland Wymer’s suggests that mystery play cycles, as theatrical and social events, exerted significant influence on Shakespeare’s own writing, and in ways his contemporary playwrights arguably couldn’t receive.

Shakespeare’s much more intimate acquaintance with the cycles is at one level simply an accident of geography. The earlier suppression of the Corpus Christi plays in London and the south put them beyond the direct experience of his major contemporaries and, in the decade following the Northern Rising of 1569, most of the performances in the Midlands and the North were also terminated.³⁴

Wymer’s claims that these mystery plays may have inspired the broad themes of “rebellion, punishment, and redemption” which animate his historic tetralogy plays.³⁵ Wymer hesitates to endorse this notion, but points to more specific and local moments of influence. For example,

³¹ Noble wrote this in 1935, so more current scholarship may suggest contrasting views concerning Shakespeare’s academic skills and habits.

³² Noble, Richard. *Shakespeare’s Biblical Knowledge and Use of the Book of Common Prayer*. The Macmillan Company. New York, 1935. 20.

³³ Ibid. 58.

³⁴ Wymer, Roland. “Shakespeare and the Mystery Cycles.” *English Literary Renaissance, Blackwell Publishing Ltd.* Malden, MA, USA. 2004. 269.

³⁵ Ibid. 274.

two versions of “Abraham and Isaac”³⁶ —a play depicting an Old Testament story of sacrifice and covenant—“come nearest to what Shakespeare does in *King John*.³⁷ Wymer further notes that in one of versions of “Abraham and Isaac,” “Abraham’s internal conflict is expressed through a large number of asides to the audience, meaning that there is more use of this device in these two episodes than anywhere else in the cycles.” Though Wymer ties the influence of the play to *King John* in mind, the expression of internal conflict via an aside to the audience remains a thetic tool Shakespeare employs heavily in *Richard III*. Throughout the play characters express remorse, guilt, or reveal true intentions through similar asides as when Richard makes turns to the audience and casts himself as a traditional Vice character in the opening scene of Act III.

Wymer acknowledges the difficulty of accounting for these plays’ level of influence on Shakespeare given the steady decline of performances as he grew up. Insofar as mystery/morality plays could be viewed as Catholic allegories, such forms of entertainment faced the discouragement of Protestant hostilities with James I on the throne. Despite Protestant crackdowns on such forms of Catholic theatricality in popular British entertainment, Wymer agrees with other critics who posit that such plays remained a “vital cultural memory” and, in Shakespeare’s case, sometimes exerted more influence than the Geneva Bible.

The conception of conscience as a particularly individual faculty received further definition from religious persecutions stemming from Catholic and Protestant hostilities. Susannah Brietz Monta points to martyrologies and the popular works of martyr anthologist John Foxe as helping shape the conception of conscience. Jesse Lander has suggested

³⁶ The Chester and the Brome MSS.

³⁷ Ibid. 276.

...the vast compendium known as Foxe's *Book of Martyrs* is routinely, and no doubt appropriately, invoked by modern scholars as one of the central documents of Elizabethan Protestant culture. It was, in John R. Knott's phrase, 'an inescapable text' ...the usual tendency has been to see Foxe as providing a unifying narrative for protestant England.³⁸

Monta traces the influence of such literature to themes and character development in Shakespeare's *Henry VIII*, where she sees his treatment of conscience connected to his rendering of characters as martyrs. Shakespeare's "ambivalence about conscience produces an ambivalent historiography as it stages the cultural negotiation of the term 'conscience' both in contemporary martyrological controversies and in the conflicting English histories which opposed camps of martyrological consciences dictate."³⁹ Such ambivalence reflects not only the firestorm of opposing Catholic and Protestant theologies, but also the frenzy of writing and publication connected to the term "martyr" as a contested public identity.

Monta suggests martyrs played an important role in England's sociopolitical arena because the title carries a weight of distinction and honor defined by dying for one's faith, and the spectacle of martyrdom stages the dramatic personification of the conscience unyielding to political authority. Protestant apologist John Foxe led the charge both in recognizing martyrs as well as defining the role that their consciences played in informing their actions. Such martyrs created a focal point of controversy and discussion because Catholic authorities attempted to invalidate the title and any distinction it provided by claiming that "executed Protestants" were executed not for their religion, but for sedition and treachery against the crown. Monta notes,

³⁸ Lander, Jesse. "Foxe's *Book of Martyrs*: printing and popularizing the *Acts and Monuments*," in *Religion and Culture in Renaissance England*, edited by Claire McEachern and Debora Shuger. Cambridge University Press. United Kingdom, 1997. 70.

³⁹ Monta, Susannah Brietz. "Thou falls't a blessed martyr": Shakespeare's *Henry VIII* and the Polemics of Conscience." *English Literary Renaissance*. Vol. 30, Issue 2. 13 November, 2008. 265.

“The concept of conscience is undeniably central to Protestant thought; for example, several of Foxe’s theological writings argue for Protestantism’s doctrine of predestination as a relief for the consciences made anxious by Catholic systems of self-scrutiny and penance.”⁴⁰ Foxe’s articulation of a conscience, however, does not preclude the practices of self-scrutiny, nor even penance, but seeks to define a spiritual condition which exists outside the Catholic ecclesial power structure. Foxe’s record of Protestant trials links the conscience to both God’s activity on a supernatural plane, as well as to Scripture and “biblical primacy.” Though *Henry VIII* was written perhaps a good decade after *Richard III*, Foxe was publishing his martyrologies before 1583, a decade before Shakespeare likely wrote *Richard III*, during which time his exposure to the conversation between opposing religious camps likely occurred.

Moving from local influences to broader political and religious arenas of philosophy, the contemporary discussion of natural law intersects with *Richard III* in making claims about the essential nature of man, of conscience, and how its prescriptions for conscience dictates disobedience to civil authority in certain circumstances. David VanDrunen suggests the discussion animated the political and theological landscape of post-Reformation England (and indeed Europe) as some writers advocated for occasionally honoring God over temporal monarchs. Unsurprisingly, such ideology and theology proved inflammatory in a country struggling between a Protestant and Catholic allegiances, and obligated some of its proponents to flee from England. Van Drunen deploys a multi-pronged investigation and assesses the work of six individuals emerging from different ethnic, educational, and political backgrounds whom he sees united in political philosophy along the lines of natural law. These writers include John Knox, John Ponet, Christopher Goodman (Marian exiles) and Theodore Beza, Francois Hotman

⁴⁰ Ibid. 265.

and the pseudonymous author of *Vindiciae contra Tyrannos* (Huguenots).⁴¹ The language of natural law provided an opportunity for citizens of sufficient moral conviction to justify acts of sedition as “loyalty to the higher power of God” — precisely the kind of argument that Lancastrians and Yorkists employ throughout Shakespeare’s histories depicting the Wars of the Roses. For most of these Marians and Huguenots, their writings attempt to “coordinate the precepts of natural law and Scripture” to provide a schematic outlining guiding principles for who may be king, under what circumstances such kings are to be obeyed, and under what circumstances a higher loyalty to God and natural law permit, even behoove, rebellion against the temporal authorities.⁴²

VanDrunen suggests these six authors maintained broad views concerning the definition and character of natural law. Placed within the context of “early reformed theology” natural law prescribed “general principles of morality and justice” as well as “various remedies against tyrants”—a set of precepts drawn, VanDrunen suggests, from *Romans 2:14-15*. Conscience intersects with natural law where these authors suggest that “all beasts” have been “imprinted” with these moral bearings. “Ponet writes of the natural law as ‘planted and grafted’ on the human mind at creation.” Similarly “Goodman writes of God’s ‘holie Lawes and preceptes’ which people have ‘ingrafted naturally in their hartes’.” And Beza adds that these “principles of nature …linger in man after the fall however corrupt.” VanDrunen further goes on to emphasize that these writers were clear in stating that the conception of natural law and its application in the human experience not only resulted in inherent knowledge, but that “the natural law is ordained and implanted by God.” These expressions of the conscience as a faculty indigenous to the soul

⁴¹ VanDrunen, David. “The Use of Natural Law in Early Calvinist Resistance Theory.” *Journal of Law and Religion*, Vol 21, No.1 (2005/2006). 147-152.

⁴² Ibid. 143.

operate on the use of critical verbs which portray God's relationship to the soul not merely as creator, but also in the specific roles of author and botanist. "Imprinted," "planted" and "grafted" each suggest the soul exists as a space of potential, fertile to God's action—respectively, as a type of "tablula rasa," a field before seeding, and a tree or other plant life which God amends to bear specific fruit.

VanDrunen traces the theme of describing the conscience in terms of God's action upon the soul back to the work of Calvin—a theologian with whose work the Marian exiles, Huguenots, and Shakespeare maintained dialogue. He notes, "One of John Calvin's most common ways of speaking of natural law was in terms of the testimony of conscience and as the law written upon the human heart. Most of the early Calvinist resistance writers explicitly adopted this sort of idea..."⁴³ Ponet and Goodman, as indicated above, likely draw further stylistic inspiration from Calvin in his use of botanical metaphors to describe the operation of the conscience. But Margaret's cursing of Richard in I.iii especially suggests Calvin's influence on Shakespeare. Margaret, the last Lancastrian matriarch, maintains a unique position in *Richard III* as one of the few characters whom Richard cannot deceive. Making a surprise appearance in the York-controlled royal court, she unleashes a volley of invective against Richard, who earned her hatred in killing her husband, Henry VI.⁴⁴ In a venomous crescendo, she snarls,

QUEEN MARGARET If heaven have any grievous plague in store
Exceeding those that I can wish upon thee,
O let them keep it till thy sins be ripe,
And then hurl down their indignation
On thee, the troubler of the poor world's peace.
The worm of conscience still begnaw thy soul.⁴⁵

⁴³ Ibid. 155.

⁴⁴ Shakespeare, William. *Richard Duke of York*. V.vi.55-70.

⁴⁵ Shakespeare, William. *Richard III*. I.iii.214-219.

Margaret's curse artfully develops botanical metaphor within her curse, beginning with the phrase "thy sins be ripe," rendering Richard's iniquities as fruits like apples which spoils via the "worm of conscience." Adrian Streete contends that Margaret's curse draws its influence from the following passage of Calvin's *Institutes*.

Although Dirigoras and such other do iest and laugh at al that hath in all ages ben
beleud concerning religion: although Dyonisius do scoffe at the heauenly iudgement: yet
that is but a laughter from the teeth forward, because inwardly the worm of conscience
gnaweth them much more sharply than all whote [sic] searing irons.⁴⁶

Streete explains,

[T]he lexical order of Calvin's phrase ('the worm of conscience gnaweth them') is [close] to Margaret's imprecation ('The worm of conscience still begnaw thy soul')...It is also suggestive that Calvin is speaking in this passage about those who mock religion. Throughout Shakespeare's play, as is well known, Richard is represented as a diabolical figure who appears to bypass the dictates of conventional religious morality.⁴⁷

Margaret's curse, borrowed from Calvin, transforms the nature of the conscience from an inner voice of warning in harmony between the soul and God, as indicated by Ponet and Goodman, to an alien and aggressive agent within the malefactor, turning against its possessor. Shakespeare's staging of this showdown between Margaret and Richard embodies the opposing philosophies of conscience—Margaret and Richard stand in for John Calvin and the advocates of natural law against Nietzsche.

Moving to still broader conversations, the Catholic practice of penance additionally helped define the operation of the conscience, especially where the experience of guilt could indicate transgression and the need for repentance, though Debora Shuger suggests the

⁴⁶ Calvin, John. *The Institvtion of Christian Religion, written in Latine By masiter Iohn Caluine, and translated into English according to the Authors last edition, by T.N.* London. 1562. STC 4416, sig. A3^r.

⁴⁷ Streete, Adrian. "Chrystostom, Calvin, and Conscience: More on *King Richard III*, I.iii.222." Notes and Queries (50:1). 2003. 21-22.

Reformation helped change the understanding and practice of penance as a feature of Christian spirituality. Up through the late medieval period, the Catholic Church advocated penance as necessary to ensuring salvation.⁴⁸ Failure to engage in sufficient penance, even for those who identified themselves as Christian in the Western tradition, resulted in going to purgatory instead of heaven. Fear of God's judgment against sin plays a significant role throughout *Richard III* where characters like the 2nd Murderer as well as Clarence experience profound psychological turmoil anticipating the potential judgment which awaits them as a result of their failure to demonstrate sufficient penance to offset off their sins, as if making payments on a significant debt.

Shuger's analysis of the Catholic system of penance emerges from her exploration of William Allen's *Defense of Purgatory* published in 1565. Shuger proposes that the Catholic penitential system rests on three specific elements: retribution for violations of divine justice, "satisfaction" owed to God in a spiritual economy (wherein payments can be made both in this life and in the next), and thirdly, that the "object of punishment is the specific sinful act." Shuger suggests this mode of thinking about sin and satisfaction in economic terms doesn't reflect just medieval Christianity, but indeed extends to pre-Socratic thinking and value-systems. Thus, even amidst the Reformation and Lutheran calls to banish actions of penance tied to conditions necessary for eternal salvation, sensations of debt and guilt for spiritual failures would remain embedded in the English cultural consciousness.⁴⁹ Richard repeatedly preys on these fears of divine retribution—amplified sensations of guilt weakens resolve to take action and

⁴⁸ Shuger, Debora. "The Reformation of Penance." *The Huntington Library Quarterly*. San Marino: 2008. Vol. 71, Iss. 4. 561.

⁴⁹ Ibid. 562.

distracts characters from scrutinizing his words and actions closely enough to detect his duplicity and threat.

The intersection of penance and conscience invokes not only the spiritual economics prescribed in the Catholic doctrines of purgatory, but a type of legal code and legislation for the spiritual life. Stephen Greenblatt has suggested the Protestant impulse to individualize faith and remove penance from actions necessary for one's salvation, (as well as the doctrinal attack upon purgatory) began to banish the "dead" from among the living—a "psychic loss" resulting in the effective segregation of the living and the faithfully departed.⁵⁰ Lorna Hutson agrees somewhat that the Reformation's strike against purgatory effectively helped dispel the "communion of the saints," but she sets her sights wider. Purgatory offered Shakespeare, and indeed all his contemporary dramatists, not merely a "repository for the dead" but an entire system by which to evaluate the eternal self as if in a legal system. She suggests that "the earthly legal and penal system from which the doctrine of Purgatory was inseparable was inimical to the dramatic imagination insofar as it positioned the juridical subject—and so, by analogy, that subject's dramatic representation—as already fully transparent and knowable to God, and consequently, through sacerdotal meditation, transparent and knowable to his or her judge here on earth, the Church."⁵¹ Certainly we can observe that Shakespeare takes significant advantage of the theatrical possibilities connected with the fears of Purgatory. Such dramatic opportunities prove versatile and rich in Shakespeare plays precisely because the notion of Purgatory animates both the imagination of the represented characters and the imagination of the audience. After Richard's encounter with 11 ghosts in V.v. he admits to himself, and to the audience, that he

⁵⁰ Greenblatt, Stephen. *Hamlet in Purgatory*. Princeton University Press. Princeton, New Jersey. 2001. 4.

⁵¹ Hutson, Sarah. "From Penitent to Suspect: Law, Purgatory, and Renaissance Drama." *The Huntington Library Quarterly*. Vol. 65, No. 3/4. 2002. 296-297.

fears shadows more than he fears a whole troop of armored soldiers, perhaps exactly because like purgatory, the potential threat remains concealed. The shadow, in concealing potential threat, anticipates Hamlet who speaks of death as “the undiscovered country”⁵² from which no one has ever returned. Shakespeare’s staging of Purgatory in this fashion succeeds so wildly because fear of the unknown remains perhaps one of the most essential features of human psychology.

III

In *Richard III*, Shakespeare determines to investigate the nature of conscience and places his discussion between two polarities represented by the Second Citizen in II.iii, and by Richard. One holds the conscience to be an essential faculty of man bestowed by God with such agency and craft that no caution or discernment need be exercised at all. He concludes “But leave it all to God.” The other, Richard, announces to the audience with his first speech that if God and nature possess any agency in the creation of man, he too yet has the power to shape identity—or to misshape it in reflection of his gruesome physical form. And his determination to dissemble his identity and essence sets him on a wild trajectory of Machiavellian scheming which he largely embraces without remorse while, paradoxically, judging his own actions as wicked. These two figures at first indicate a binary choice—an either/or type of decision the audience (and Shakespeare) might make about the nature of conscience. On the one hand, as writers/theologians like Calvin propose, the conscience belongs indelibly to the soul by virtue of its creation and operates systematically to keep the soul in harmony with the moral and spiritual hierarchy of God. On the other hand, as Nietzsche has suggested (and, indeed, as the evil angel and Richard suggest), “conscience” is a mere word, a “fruit of lunacy”—“devised at first to keep

⁵² Shakespeare, William. *Hamlet*. III.i.78

the strong in awe.” A thorough examination of conscience in *Richard III* reveals that though Shakespeare refers to these binaries, and even draws them in caricature at times, his characters repeatedly destabilize both the Calvinist *and* Nietzschean ideals, inviting earnest curiosity and careful consideration.

Richard of Gloucester (later King Richard) serves as Shakespeare’s primary catalyst of destabilization. We might surmise as much from the fact that Shakespeare names the play after him, but Shakespeare draws attention to his unique agency in the play with repeatedly overt gestures in Richard’s speech, action, and his relationship with the cosmological order of England. Richard’s monologues declare to the audience how abnormal we should find him, and how abnormal he further intends to grow. Two of these monologues I have already discussed somewhat—the long speech in scene III.ii from *Richard, Duke of York*, as well as Richard’s speech from the opening of *Richard III*. Between these speeches, if one evaluates Richard’s universe from a chronological perspective, we see that Shakespeare sets Richard apart from the time of his birth with portentous terms. In combat, Richard slays King Henry and cuts his death speech short, saying

RICHARD OF GLOUCESTER

I’ll hear no more. Die, prophet, in thy speech
he stabs him

For this, amongst the rest, was I ordained.

KING HENRY Ay, and for much more slaughter after this.

O, God, forgive my sins, and pardon thee...

RICHARD OF GLOUCESTER

I that have neither pity, love, nor fear.
Indeed, ‘tis true that Henry told me of
For I have heard my mother say
I came into the world with my legs forward.
Had I not reason, think ye, to make haste,
And seek their ruin that usurped our right?
The midwife wondered and the women cried
‘O, Jesus bless us, he is born with teeth!—
And so I was, which plainly signified

That I should snarl and bite and play the dog.⁵³

Richard makes no apology and offers no justification for his actions, but exults in his victory over Henry. As ineffable forces of nature have mutated Richard's physical form, Richard mutates language in a fashion which maintains rhetorical strength but changes meaning. We read, for example, that Richard uses the word "ordained" as if to indicate he regards his prowess and actions with the same strength of commitment that men and women should feel when the Church formally recognizes and authorizes them to carry out religious work; but, of course Richard has no sincere intentions of adopting any of the characteristics expected of clergy. Foreshadowing things to come, Henry doesn't contradict or curse him, but strangely agrees that Richard has indeed been "ordained" and suggests that "much more slaughter" will follow, leaving the audience to wonder whose slaughter Richard will enact, and if perhaps other forces than Richard's wicked glee propel his "ordination" and Machiavellian ministry. Following Henry's death, Richard enumerates a list of signs like being born with this feet forward and with a full set of teeth as if reciting a metaphysical pedigree that destines him for such purposes. Which purposes Richard envisions here depends on how one translates "and seek their ruin that usurped our right." Given the context, the simplest explanation, perhaps, is that Richard refers to the right of the House of York and the Wars of the Roses, stemming from the deposition of Richard II by Henry of Bolingbroke (Henry IV) as staged in Shakespeare's play *Richard II*. But his use of "our" could also refer to the royal "we," and what right he imagines himself entitled to here remains more uncertain. Richard continues,

RICHARD OF GLOUCESTER

Then, since the heavens have shaped my body so,
Let hell make crooked my mind to answer it.
I had no father, I am like no father;

⁵³ Shakespeare, William. *Richard, Duke of York*. V.vi.57-60, 67-77.

I have no brother, I am like no brother;
and this word, ‘love’ which the greybeards call divine,
Be resident in mine like one another
And not in me—I am myself alone.
Clarence, beware; thou kep’st me from the light—
But I will sort a pitchy day for thee.
For I will buzz abroad such prophecies
That Edward shall be fearful for his life,
And then, to purge his fear, I’ll be thy death.⁵⁴

Richard’s sense of his antagonistic relationship with the heavens here anticipates his opening speech in *Richard III*—he assigns blame to the heavens and nature for the formation of his deformity and determines to respond by “returning the favor” with an interior state to match the outer. Though Richard invokes the power of hell to help deform his mind, his tone suggests that he is less interested in awarding his loyalties to Satan or other dark minions as he is in spiting the authority and order of the heavens, which we see elsewhere he conflates with nature and God.

This determination to spite heaven informs all of Richard’s actions ranging from his mutated wordplay to his actions. As his speech continues, we see his determination to defy heaven and the moral hierarchy of God in his casual abandonment of close family ties. He begins generally by distancing himself from the bonds of family and the loyalty such bonds might prescribe in his declaration that he has no father, is like no father; has no brother, and is like no brother. The union he sees between father and son or brothers he sees as love—a divine condition and act—and this too, he defies. Richard’s connection in these lines of love to divinity suggests that his repudiation of love and God function as identical gestures. Richard then moves from the general disassociation with traditional family hierarchies to anticipating his specific attack on his own family members standing between him and the crown. While Richard here may demonize only the kind of love that exists between family members (filial), he nonetheless

⁵⁴ Ibid. V.vi.78-88.

expresses the same contempt for other forms of love as we see in his opening speech in *Richard III*, where he complains of being ill-shaped for “sportive tricks” and lacking the features needed to “strut before a wanton ambling nymph.” These displays of love tend closer to erotic expressions of love, but these too he forswears.

Richard’s speeches here thus indicate two different sets of motivations. Initially, Richard claims an ambition to the crown, and this seems most clear when he declares he can “set the murderous Machiavel to school / Can I do this, and cannot get a crown? Tut, were it farther off, I’ll pluck it down.”⁵⁵ Underneath this motivation, however, Richard’s insistence on connecting “love,” in any form, to the divine indicates his goal not only the throne of England, but some type of quixotic war of attrition against the heavens, in retribution for his rudely shaped body. These two motivations arm Richard’s Machiavellian path to the throne, and make him an ideal figure to interrogate and destabilize the notion of conscience.

In the opening of *Richard III*, we see Richard’s schemes have already taken effect—he has set a “pitchy day” for Clarence with prophecies buzzed abroad, and King Edward IV heeds them, sending Clarence to the Tower under guard.

RICHARD OF GLOUCESTER

Belike his majesty hath some intent
That you should be new-christened to the Tower.
But what’s the matter, Clarence? May I know?

CLARENCE Yeah, Richard, when I know—for I protest
As yet I do not. But as I can learn
He hearkens after prophecies and dreams,
And from the cross-row plucks the letter ‘G’
And says a wizard told him that by ‘G’
His issue disinherited should be.
And for my name of George begins with ‘G’,
It follows in his thought that I am he.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ Shakespeare, William. *Richard, Duke of York*. III.ii.182-195.

⁵⁶ Shakespeare, William. *Richard III*. I.i.49-59.

Clarence's attempt at an explanation for his predicament reveals the genius of Richard's plan—he has engineered prophecies using only the letter “G”—just enough to arouse suspicion and doubt so that in fear, King Edward's imagination has filled in the blanks and created a plausible story with which he justifies sending Clarence to the Tower. Richard's strategic ambiguity here highlights a human condition which Shakespeare suggests may be more universal than conscience—the fear of the unknown. Shakespeare places such fear as bookends at both sides of his play, and perhaps most overtly represents it, ironically, in Richard after his dream sequence.

“By the Apostle Paul, shadows tonight/ Have struck more terror to the soul of Richard / Than can the substance of ten thousand soldiers / Arméd in proof and led by shallow Richmond.”⁵⁷

Richard here would rather face insurmountable odds—as long as he knows what he's up against—than face an enemy as awful as his imagination can supply. His communication of the prophecy as well as the ambiguous nature of the prophecy helps ensure Clarence will go to prison. Though Michael Keefer suggests Marlowe's influence on Shakespeare by pointing to line similarities between *Doctor Faustus* and *Titus Andronicus*, Richard's use of the word “buzz” also recalls the staged dialogue of conscience between Dr. Faustus and the good and evil angels. As the evil angel infects Dr. Faustus' imagination, buzzing in his ears that God cannot pity him, so too Richard infects the conscience and imagination of Edward IV with his vague prophecy of a dangerous “G.”

Edward's reaction to the prophecies of “G” highlights a recurring trend in Shakespeare's treatment of conscience throughout *Richard III*. Characters ranging from King Edward to hired thugs confront psychological distress to the degree their consciences *perceive* a moral lapse or danger, and the strength of such encounters sometimes proves sufficient to change a course of

⁵⁷ Ibid. V.vi.170-173.

action, or else inspire regret for not having acted differently. We see an example of this in the first act during a conversation between two murderers hired by Richard to kill his brother, George, Duke of Clarence. We may adduce by their lack of names and use of prose—as opposed to verse—that they are commoners.

SECOND MURDERER: What, shall I stab him as he sleeps?

FIRST MURDERER: No. He'll say 'twas done cowardly when he wakes.

SECOND MURDERER: Why, he shall never wake until the great judgment day.

FIRST MURDERER: Why, then he'll say we stabbed him sleeping.

SECOND MURDERER: The urging of that word 'judgment' hath bred a kind of remorse in me.

FIRST MURDERER: What, art thou afraid?

SECOND MURDERER: Not to kill him, having warrant, but to be damned for killing him, from the which no warrant can defend me.

FIRST MURDERER: I thought thou hads't been resolute.

SECOND MURDERER: So I am—to let him live.

FIRST MURDERER: I'll back to the Duke of Gloucester and tell him so.

SECOND MURDERER: Nay, I pray thee. Stay a little. I hope this passionate humor of mine will change. It was wont to hold me but while on tells twenty.

[He counts to twenty]

FIRST MURDERER: How dost thou feel thyself now?

SECOND MURDERER: Some certain dregs of conscience are yet within me.

FIRST MURDERER: Remember our reward when the deed's done.

SECOND MURDERER: 'Swounds, he dies. I had forgot the reward.

FIRST MURDRER: Where's thy conscience now?

SECOND MURDERER: O, in the Duke of Gloucester's purse.⁵⁸

The appearance of conscience here comes in a moment of black humor, offering a compression of much of the philosophical territory the rest of the play explores, traversing the comical to the pensive. At one end of the spectrum, the second murder dismisses conscience as a mere psychological foible activated by imbalance of humours, suggesting he need but count to twenty and he should be fine, as if trying to ward off some post-lunch heartburn. But what begins as

⁵⁸ Ibid. I.iv.96-121.

heartburn culminates in a serious consideration that God does have the power to prosecute sinners for immorality, according to its severity. The second murderer introduces a ridiculous concern in response the proposition of stabbing Clarence while he sleeps—that Clarence might awake from such a “rude provocation” and accuse them of being cowards. The first murderer, perhaps more experienced in his work, dismisses his friend’s concern. But his invocation of “the great judgment day” has unexpected consequences. The second murderer finds himself situated uncomfortably between numerous points of fear and motivation—his ego, his wallet, Richard, and God. While Richard has given them a warrant to perform the task, he equips them merely with financial payment in exchange for being the agent of his fratricide. He cannot provide them with the comfort provided by moral authority and the just cause needed to kill with impunity. The fear of divine wrath becomes so profound, even before George has had a chance to plead for his life, that the second murderer momentarily determines to repent in his course of action.

The rest of the conversation between the two murderers maintains this oscillating dynamic where the second murderer tries to persuade himself that he does, in fact, want to kill Clarence—trying to justify his intent, while blaming his humors for agitating his conscience. The amount of turmoil the second murderer endures grows so profound that the crime he came to commit—which could have been accomplished silently in a matter of moments as Clarence was sleeping—instead extends for 175 lines in which he repeatedly attempts to hurdle the obstacles of his conscience. He laments,

I'll not meddle with it [conscience]. It makes a man a coward. A man cannot steal but it accuseth him. A man cannot swear but it checks him. A man cannot lie with this neighbour's wife but it detects him. 'Tis a blushing, shamefaced spirit, that mutinies in a man's bosom. It fills a man full of obstacles. It made me once restore a purse of gold that by chance I found. It beggars any man that keeps it. It is turned out of towns and

cities for a dangerous thing, and every man that means to live well endeavours to trust to himself and live without it.⁵⁹

The second murderer's complaint parallels Nietzsche's prognosis of the Christian conscience—that it represses instinct toward cruelty and turns it back upon its owner. More, the second murderer reveals his conscience antagonizes him even when he has not violated any clear moral law, as indicated with the purse he found by chance. With such an overactive conscience, we may wonder at how he felt guilty enough to return money which could rightfully have been his, but had no scruples against being paid to murder—at least when Richard first hired him. He claims "I'll not meddle with it" as if he had the freedom to engage or ignore his conscience, but his speech and actions indicate that his conscience truly masters him, for the weight of conviction overwhelms him when Clarence wakes up and expresses disbelief that Richard wants him dead.

CLARENCE: It cannot be, for he bewept my fortune,
And hugged me in his arms, and swore with sobs
That he would labour my delivery.

FIRST MURDERER: Why, so he doth, when he delivers you
From this earth's thraldom to the joys of heaven.

SECOND MURDERER: Make peace with God, for you must die, my lord.

CLARENCE: Have you that holy feeling in your souls
To counsel me to make my peace with God.
And are you yet to your own souls so blind
That you will war with God by murd'ring me?
O sirs, consider: they that set you on
To do this deed will hate you for the deed.

SECOND MURDERER [*to FIRST*]: What shall we do?⁶⁰

The second murderer's war with his conscience here reaches such strain that he implores Clarence that to make peace with God. Clarence, though certainly anxious, eloquently points out the irony of being urged to get right with God when the occasion of his need to do so will almost

⁵⁹ Ibid. I.iv.127-135.

⁶⁰ Ibid, I.iv.232-243.

certainly damn those who pretend to care for his piety. To finish his supplication, George points out that anyone possessing intent to kill that takes the effort to hire another party to carry out the deed would almost certainly shift blame onto the two murderers and distance himself from such actions. If found guilty, the two murderers could be confronted with both temporal and eternal anguish. All these considerations prove too much for the second murderer and, perceiving the safety of his soul at stake, he flees the scene, leaving his partner all of Richard's money, and the lion's share of the consequences.⁶¹

Thomas Aquinas' discussion of fear as related to the conscience helps diagnose the type of psychological and emotional distress felt by the second murderer. Like Calvin, Aquinas portrays the relationship between conscience and moral virtue within a metaphysical hierarchy where sin activates fear or guilt in anticipation of divine retribution. Shakespeare biographer John Pearce suggests, "Shakespeare did not merely condemn each of the seven deadly sins; he ordered them in conformity to the teaching of the Catholic Church, as reflected in the work of St. Thomas Aquinas and as echoed by Dante in his Thomistic masterpiece, *The Divine Comedy*."⁶² For Aquinas, fear plays an important part in the spiritual life of a pious Christian and cooperates with the conscience to warn against moral lapse. Stephen Loughlin examines Aquinas' extensive work, the *Summa Theologiae*, and writes, "...fear is necessary to the Christian's life, not only here on earth, as it is propaedeutic to the Christian way of living, but also, and surprisingly, in the life to come."⁶³ Loughlin continues, "Although fear is primarily described in terms of the withdrawal or shrinking from a thing judged as bad or evil for oneself, Aquinas notes that fear is

⁶¹ Shakespeare, William. *Richard III*. I.iv.266.

⁶² Pearce, John. *The Quest for Shakespeare*, Ignatius Press. The United States of America, 2008. 22.

⁶³ Loughlin, Stephen. "Timor in Aquinas' Summa Theologiae," in *Fear and its Representations in the Middle Ages and Renaissance*. Brepols, Cheltenham, 2002. 2.

also concerned with the good, albeit indirectly, namely as it considers that which is to be protected from harm and loss...”⁶⁴ If Shakespeare intended to systematically arrange and oppose the seven deadly sins,⁶⁵ evaluating such designs probably requires a larger scope than the context of *Richard III*. But certainly Shakespeare seems to engage with Christian articulations of fear through the actions and concerns of his characters, for many of them grapple with these considerations of good, harm, and loss in the midst of ethical quandaries.

Though the second murderer occupies a position of power compared to Clarence and is likely armed with instruments befitting his profession, he experiences not just one, but numerous fears at the same time, each of them proceeding from different sources. He doesn’t fear of Clarence, but potential ridicule from others and a sense of shame for not going through with an action to which he had committed. By turns he is also afraid presumably, of being poor, since he has been paid, and he also has a healthy fear of Richard. Each of these fears motivates him to kill Clarence. But their combined strength is eclipsed in might by his greatest, insuppressible fear—eternal damnation. Thus we see him shrinking away not from Clarence, but from the harm he believes he would do himself by following Richard’s orders, and he acts according to this conviction to protect himself from such threat.

Shakespeare indicates, however, the strength of fear cannot necessarily indicate level of guilt. While the second murderer accurately links his sensation of fear with his potential act of murder, King Edward demonstrates how easily exterior factors can manipulate the sensation of conscience. Richard’s prophecy incites Edward to put Clarence in prison, and this action lays the foundation not only for Clarence’s death, but for Edward’s as well. Richard effectively exploits the consciences of Edward and his court in what amounts to brilliant psychological

⁶⁴ Ibid, 9.

⁶⁵ Wrath, greed, sloth, pride, lust, envy, and gluttony.

guerrilla warfare, and does so in a fashion which transfers suspicion from him to the court members, compromising their union.

KING EDWARD Is Clarence dead? The order was reversed.

RICHARD GLOUCESTER But he, poor man, by your first order died,
And that a wingéd Mercury did bear;
Some tardy cripple bore the countermand,
That came too lag to see him buriéd.
God grant that some, less noble and less loyal,
Nearer in bloody thoughts, but not in blood,
Deserve not worse than wretched Clarence did,
And yet go current from suspicion.⁶⁶

Richard's presents himself in the position of a mourning brother, helpless to take any action but report the sad events of two messengers, and his feigned sorrow soon transforms into a dramatically smoldering resentment of "some" who deserve equal fates as the one Clarence suffered.

Richard here again proves masterful with his use of ambiguity. By suggesting that some of the court are "nearer in bloody thoughts, but not in blood" he casts just enough suspicion while refusing to go so far as accusing anyone in particular, he stokes imaginations into distrust, just as he did with the letter "G." King Edward, for his part, takes the guilt which should be Richard's upon himself instead.

KING EDWARD Have I a tongue to doom my brother's death
And shall that tongue give pardon to a slave?
My brother slew no man; his fault was thought;
And yet his punishment is bitter death.
Who sued to me for him? Who in my wrath
Kneeled at my feet, and bid me be advised?
Who spoke of brotherhood? Who spoke of love?⁶⁷

⁶⁶ Shakespeare, William. *Richard III*. II.i.87-95.

⁶⁷ Ibid. II.i.103-109.

What Richard feigns Edward feels sincerely—a combination of sorrow and anger, and with them he condemns his court of friends for failing to offer voices of conscience when his was not guiding him clearly. His speech continues in lamenting their silence and he concludes

KING EDWARD Yet none of you would once beg for his life.
O God, I fear thy justice will take hold
On me—and you, and mine, and yours, for this.—
Come, Hastings, help me to my closet.
Ah, poor Clarence.⁶⁸

Like the second murderer, Edward's perception of transgression guides his thoughts toward God and his moral authority to prosecute the wicked. His anticipation of God's justice proves so strong he imagines divine punishment touching not only him, but with the phrase "and you, and mine, and yours"—a justice satisfied only in exacting payment from those who would not voice their consciences, and their families and friends. Guilt so afflicts Edward's conscience here he feels ill at the end of his speech and needs help getting to his room. This psychological affliction never leaves him, but grows so powerful he never again appears in the play and dies by scene II.iii.

Yet Richard proves just as adept at inspiring people to ignore their consciences as he is in conjuring guilt from thin air. One particularly notable example of this occurs early in the play when Richard woos Lady Anne, the widow of Henry VI—the king whom Richard had only recently murdered. He accosts her *on the way to bury her husband*, setting the stage of the most ridiculous exchange audiences might ever behold. Even before Richard arrives, Lady Anne expresses pure animosity for him as she stands observing her husband's fatal wounds

LADY ANNE O cursed be the hand that made these holes
Cursed the blood that let this blood from hence,
Cursed the heart that had the heart to do it...
If he ever have a child, abortive be it,

⁶⁸ Ibid. II.i131-135.

Prodigious, and untimely brought to light,
Whose ugly and unnatural aspect
may fright the hopeful mother at the view.⁶⁹

Lady Anne curses Richard, and curses his potential progeny, and all of his relationships, striking out at the family and joy such relationships might provide as Richard has struck at her family. When Richard approaches, she steely identifies him as the “devil” and the “minister of hell.” But Richard, unphased, claims he slew Henry IV out of jealousy; out of love for Lady Anne. Against high odds, she begins to warm to Richard, and eventually agrees to stay with him.

RICHARD OF GLOUCESTER That it may please you leave these sad designs
To him that hath most cause to be a mourner,
And presently repair to Crosby House,
Where—after I have solemnly interred
At Chertsey monast’ry this noble king,
And wet his grave with my repentant tears—
I will with all expedient duty see you.
For divers unknown reasons, I beseech you
Grant me this boon.

LADY ANNE With all my heart—and much it joys me too,
To see you are become so penitent.⁷⁰

Richard’s request simultaneously tries to occupy two opposing positions—that he slew Henry VI out of love for Lady Anne, yet now wants her to give up her mourning so that he can do so instead, now apparently feeling the sting of sorrow for his actions. Lady Anne doesn’t pause to reflect on the fact that if he actually feels remorse for killing Henry, that remorse conflicts with the jealousy by which he purportedly fought to secure their union.

This dialogue confirms the potency of Richard’s perhaps deadliest weapon—his power of rhetoric combined with unflinching charisma. Lady Anne makes the same mistake the second murderer makes—she deliberates instead of taking action. She might have left or refused to

⁶⁹ Ibid. I.ii.14-24

⁷⁰ Ibid. I.ii.198-207.

listen or, better, stabbed him when he offered his own sword to her. Instead, out of a perverse curiosity, she entertains his calculated bravado. He makes the ultimate wager using the most ridiculous and audacious tactic, and succeeds. The one person who should have been able to resist Richard, who has the most the reason to hate, and is even armed by Richard with the agency to kill him cannot follow through, in spite of the overwhelming evidence against him. Henry's body bleeds in Richard's presence—a detail Shakespeare invokes to remind the audience that Richard indeed is the guilty party. Richard's success with Anne, though intended, remains surprising for him. He marvels to himself,

RICHARD OF GLOUCESTER Was ever woman in this humour wooed
Was ever woman in this humour won?
I'll have her, but I will not keep her long.
What, I that killed her husband and his father,
To take her in her heart's extremest hate,
With curses in her mouth, tears in her eyes,
The bleeding witness of my hatred by
Having God, her conscience, and these bars against me,
And I no friends to back my suit withal
But the plain devil and dissembling looks—
and yet to win her, all the world to nothing? Ha!"⁷¹

Lady Anne has no reason to trust Richard—in fact, she has several significant reasons to despise and suspect him, and Richard lists every one—he knows what the odds were, and can't believe his luck. As Henry's bleeding corpse embodies Lady Anne's conscience, testifying against Richard, Richard's halting of the funeral procession, banishment of Lady Anne's mourning—her "sad designs"—and possession and redirection of the body from Chertsey to Blackfriars⁷² embodies his systematic halting, banishing, possessing, and redirection of her conscience according to his pleasure. Richard's speech creates an apposition of God and conscience, ("Having God, her conscience, and these bars against me...) placing moral authority and a

⁷¹ Ibid. I.ii.215-225

⁷² Ibid. I.ii.213-214.

psychological/spiritual faculty within the same odds his venture reckons against. That Richard considers conscience and God to be, perhaps, united in nature and effort doesn't necessarily indicate Shakespeare believed it so. But it creates an interesting moment of reflection for the audience by giving them a vantage point into Richard's expectations about the psychological and spiritual condition of those around him.

Richard's seduction of Lady Anne presents but one of the occasions where Shakespeare portrays the improper resignation of conscience, and he highlights this failure through figures who defy conventional expectations about the relationship between maturity and wisdom. We see an example of this in act three, beginning with Richard's startlingly profound conversation with young Prince Edward, heir to the throne and son of Edward IV. Richard employs the same strategy he used to try dividing Edward's court by casting suspicion on Prince Edward's two uncles.

RICHARD OF GLOUCESTER Sweet Prince, the untainted virtue of your years
Hath not dived into the world's deceit
No more can you distinguish of a man
Than his outward show, which God he knows
Seldom or never jumpeth with the heart.
Those uncles which you want were dangerous
Your grace attended to their sugared words,
But looked not on the poison of their hearts
God keep you from them, and such false friends.⁷³

Richard's conversation with Prince Edward offers the audience one of the more ironic exchanges in the play because it pits the most cunning and dangerous character of Richard against a child whom we expect, as Richard expects, to be naïve and clueless about the nuances of man's depravity and capacity for deceit. Shakespeare even opens the scene with gestures to Prince Edward's vulnerability and need for protection when he describes his journey as "tedious,

⁷³ Ibid. III.i.7-15.

worrisome, and heavy” and that he “want[s] more uncles [there] to welcome [him].”⁷⁴ Richard gambles on the luck of his previous success, guessing that he can so sugar his own words that Prince Edward won’t realize that Richard argument logically implies *he* shouldn’t be trusted either.

But Prince Edward proves wise and thoughtful beyond his years and certainly beyond his citizens who entrust all character judgments to God in II.iii. He indicates his uncanny wisdom when he says, “Methinks the truth should love from age to age/ as ‘twere retailed to all posterity/ Even to the general all-ending day.” Though Edward’s suggestion about the maintenance of history specifically applies to the history of the Tower of London, the general rule of his idea also requests people to remember history in general; to remember character and conduct. The “all-ending day” suggests that Edward imagines God will remember everything that has transpired in history, and that perhaps there might be some wisdom trying to do the same on a smaller scale, both for civil leaders, and those who serve them. This idea surprises and threatens Richard, and he indicates as much when he says “So wise so young, the say, do/ never live long.”⁷⁵

If anyone were to take Edward seriously, they might be inspired to consider Richard’s history, and his conduct in the Wars of the Roses (as in *Richard, Duke of York*) where he proves himself bloodthirsty and ambitious character. Waging war against his own history, Richard strives to invalidate knowledge of his character with fantastic deception, as with Lady Anne, or by simply asking people to *forget* what he has done—to let bygones be bygones. He does so with Queen Elizabeth, trying to persuade her to woo her daughter (also named Elizabeth) in his favor. He behooves, “So in the Lethe of thy angry soul / Thou drown the sad remembrance of

⁷⁴ Ibid. III.i.5-6.

⁷⁵ Ibid. III.i.78-79

those wrongs, / which thou supposest I have done to thee.”⁷⁶ Even with the word “supposest” Richard attempts to invalidate Elizabeth’s memory of his character and actions.

Shakespeare heightens the theatrical effect of Prince Edward’s stunning wisdom by juxtaposing his connection between historical knowledge and conscience with a cardinal—a religious leader—who allows Buckingham to bypass an ancient Catholic tradition with a pathetic argument. Of all the characters in the play who could have represented traditional images of Christian conscience, the cardinal offers the most stereotypical choice, and proves even less formidable in his moral fortitude than Lady Anne. He barely puts up a fight. Fearing the political chaos and Richard’s accelerating machinations, the Duchess of York, and her son Richard—Prince Edward’s mother and brother—flee to the church and plead for sanctuary. Their flight puts them momentarily beyond Richard and Buckingham’s reach, and Buckingham complains,

BUCKINGHAM Fie, what an indirect and peevish course
Is this of hers!—Lord Cardinal, will your grace
Persuade the Queen to send the Duke of York
Until his princely brother presently?
If she deny, Lord Hastings, go with him,
And from her jealous arms pluck him perforce.

CARDINAL My lord of Buckingham, if my weak oratory
Can from his mother win the Duke of York,
Anon expect him. But if she be obdurate
To mild entreaties, God in heaven forbid
We should infringe on the sacred privilege
Of blessed sanctuary. Not for all this land
Would I be guilty of so deep a sin.⁷⁷

Buckingham gives the Cardinal an opportunity to comply his designs on securing Prince Richard along with his brother, but indicates in clear terms he won’t hesitate to have Hastings forcibly

⁷⁶ Ibid. IV.iv.237-239.

⁷⁷ Ibid. III.i.31-43.

take him. The Cardinal briefly holds to the rule of his order, stressing that sanctuary offers the sacred privilege of protection to fugitives from the law, and to revoke it or allow Buckingham would constitute a grave sin for which no price could recompense its commission. The Cardinal has good reason to balk at Buckingham's request. The policy of sanctuary dates back to some of the oldest Anglo-Saxon legislation and at the time of Shakespeare's writing, was nearly one thousand years old. Norman MaClaren Trenholme observes,

Soon after his conversion and baptism in 597 A.D., Ethelbert of Kent drew up a series or code of laws, the earliest known Anglo-Saxon code, and in the first of these laws is the enactment that the penalty for violation of church *frith* is to be twice that exacted for an ordinary breach of the peace. Although brief, this reference to the sanctity of churches is important, as showing how quickly they came to be recognized as inviolable.⁷⁸

MaClaren goes on to explain that subsequent Saxon kings developed these seedling codes into more developed and specific laws which extended the policy of sanctuary for numerous monasteries and churches. By the 16th century, however, power struggles between the Church and the crown diminished the freedoms afforded to fugitives, and strict rules were imposed. A papal bull signed in 1467 by Pope Innocent VIII limited the policy of sanctuary to protection of a person's physical body, but not their possessions, and they were obligated to reside within the premises of the church to which they fled. Leaving the church, they would risk apprehension and prosecution. Additionally, sanctuary laws passed by Henry VIII in 1534 and 1546 rejected the claim to sanctuary by "all persons accused or suspected of high treason" and all other petitioners were obligated to wear a "distinctive badge or mark on their upper garments" indicating their status.⁷⁹

⁷⁸ Trenholme, Norman MaClaren. "The Right of Sanctuary in England: A Study in Institutional History," in *The University of Missouri Studies*, edited by Frank Thilly. University of Missouri. Missouri, 1903. 11.

⁷⁹ Ibid. 29-30.

But neither the Duchess of York nor Richard, Duke of York, have been accused of treason, and the extensive history of sanctuary prompts the Cardinal to make a defense for them, and for the authority of the Church. Buckingham views sanctuary dimly and retorts

BUCKINGHAM You are too senseless-obstinate, my lord,
Too ceremonious and traditional
Weigh it not with the grossness of this age.
You break not sanctuary in seizing him.
The benefit thereof is always granted
To those whose dealings have deserved the place,
And those who have the wit to claim the place.
This prince hath neither claimed it nor deserved it,
and therefore, in my mind, he cannot have it.
Then taking him from thence that ‘longs not there,
You break thereby no privilege nor charter.
Oft have I heard of ‘sanctuary men’,
But ‘sanctuary children’ ne’er till now.

CARDINAL My lord, you shall o’errule my mind for once.—
Come on, Lord Hastings, will you go with me?⁸⁰

Buckingham’s protest essentially accuses the cardinal, like the policy of sanctuary, as “Too ceremonious and traditional”—which is an odd accusation to make of the church because it’s one of the oldest institutions of English culture. To call it “ceremonious and traditional” sounds almost as ludicrous as cursing the season of Spring for its rain and sun. Buckingham further nitpicks with the terminology describing sanctuary, suggesting that it serves men and women, but not children, offering an interpretation of the policy that suits his ends. The cardinal folds under the silly badgering, declaring “you shall o’errule my mind for once.”

This scene mocks the Catholic Church’s authority by staging the cardinal’s easy surrender to poor argument. Cardinals aren’t just lowly pawns of the church like regular monks—they were well educated, and supposed to be men of discriminating faculties and unflinching piety, and certainly in touch with their consciences, and this cardinal is none of

⁸⁰ Shakespeare, William. *Richard III*. III.i.44-58.

those. The cardinal's failure to abide by his conscience and uphold a policy designed to protect the Duchess of York and her son stands in as symbolic of the failure of contemporary religious figures and institutions to a) abide by the moral codes they championed so vigorously and b) use their influence to protect people in genuine need. I do not suggest, however, that the cardinal stands in for all of Christendom. Through this pitiful exchange, Shakespeare simultaneously criticizes Catholic failure, while also urging reclamation its traditional role precisely through the use of presenting a shameful image of Catholic authority. Such a move could inspire any religious figures in the audience to a bevy of reactions including indignation and resentment, but perhaps also guilt and the determination to reform.

Shakespeare's interrogation and destabilization of the conscience in *Richard III* also invokes the cosmological order of the universe portrayed in England, where dreams and supernatural phenomena offer corollary narratives which heighten the drama of characters' personal narratives. Shakespeare's use of dreams and cosmology help amplify Chambers' description of fate as "hanging over blind men who can see what is happening to others but are unconscious of their own danger" because as with King Edward's misreading of Richard's buzzed prophecy, characters frequently misinterpret or discount the import of their dreams or the phenomena which surrounds them. Ironically, the same citizen who abdicates the need to exercise judgment and scrutiny when evaluating someone's character observes, "By a divine instinct men's minds mistrust/ Ensuing danger, as by proof we see / The water swell before a boist'rous storm."⁸¹ Shakespeare frequently confronts characters with their own swelling waters to indicate present "boist'rous storms" but like the third citizen, such warnings go improperly heeded.

⁸¹ Ibid. II.iv.42-44.

Perhaps one of the most stunning misreadings of warning which occurs in *Richard III* comes when Clarence dreams just moments before his murder in the Tower of London. He awakes with a start, and describes a dream-sequence that provides a lush if not haunting and morbid vision of a conscience afflicted with guilt and incapable of properly apprehending the actual danger.

CLARENCE

Methoughts that I had broken from the Tower,
And was embark'd to cross to Burgundy;
And, in my company, my brother Gloucester;
Who from my cabin tempted me to walk
Upon the hatches: thence we looked toward England,
And cited up a thousand fearful times,
During the wars of York and Lancaster
That had befall'n us. As we paced along
Upon the giddy footing of the hatches,
Methought that Gloucester stumbled; and, in falling,
Struck me, that thought to stay him, overboard,
Into the tumbling billows of the main.⁸²

Clarence's dream situates him in the midst of a nautical journey with his brother, Richard, commiserating on their past exploits during the wars of the Roses. But then Richard seems to trip and accidentally knocks Clarence overboard. The word "Methought" suggests Clarence knows how to read Richard's action with less certainty than other details of his dream. But Richard's action in the dream neatly parallels his behavior and action in the reality of his play, for tripping appears an action born of accident, whereas deliberate tripping reveals active intention. Richard constantly disguises his actions and words, attempting to dispel any suspicions which might tend his way.

⁸² Ibid. I.iv.9-20.

Clarence continues describing his dream from the vantage point of one drowning, and the narrative of his vision unifies images which began to conjure the same type of psychological turmoil that the Catholic conscience might associate with thoughts of Purgatory.

CLARENCE Lord, Lord! methought, what pain it was to drown!
What dreadful noise of waters in mine ears!
What ugly sights of death within mine eyes!
Methought I saw a thousand fearful wrecks;
Ten thousand men that fishes gnaw'd upon;
Wedges of gold, great anchors, heaps of pearl,
Inestimable stones, unvalued jewels,
All scatter'd in the bottom of the sea:
Some lay in dead men's skulls; and, in those holes
Where eyes did once inhabit, there were crept,
As 'twere in scorn of eyes, reflecting gems,
Which woo'd the slimy bottom of the deep,
And mock'd the dead bones that lay scatter'd by.⁸³

Despite the pain of drowning, Clarence maintains his wits in his dream, and describes a haunting scene. These thousand fearful indicate perhaps the tens of thousands of souls who came to untimely and unexpected death, and who, in being hidden at the bottom of the ocean, cannot offer warning to anyone. Shakespeare places gems within the eye sockets of skulls, suggesting that ambition for riches and exploits, represented by the jewels, so conditioned the vision of these former souls they could not see or know to look beyond the narrow scope of their ambitions until the opportunity to avoid doom had passed.

What vision could have blinded Clarence to danger becomes apparent as he continues describing the horrors of his dream, where he encounters people he has murdered in trying to secure the throne for the house of York.

CLARENCE O, then began the tempest to my soul,
Who pass'd, methought, the melancholy flood,
With that grim ferryman which poets write of,
Unto the kingdom of perpetual night.

⁸³ Ibid. I.iv.21-33.

The first that there did greet my stranger soul,
Was my great father-in-law, renowned Warwick;
Who cried aloud, 'What scourge for perjury
Can this dark monarchy afford false Clarence?'
And so he vanish'd: then came wandering by
A shadow like an angel, with bright hair
Dabbled in blood; and he squeak'd out aloud,
'Clarence is come; false, fleeting, perjured Clarence,
That stabb'd me in the field by Tewksbury;
Seize on him, Furies, take him to your torments!'
With that, methoughts, a legion of foul fiends
Environ'd me about, and howled in mine ears
Such hideous cries, that with the very noise
I trembling waked, and for a season after
Could not believe but that I was in hell,
Such terrible impression made the dream.⁸⁴

In the dream, Clarence's father-in-law, Warick, confronts him for his treachery and pronounces judgment upon him which a shadow-like angel enacts by calling out for "Furies" and a "legion of foul fiends" to usher him into torment. Shakespeare amplifies the psychological distress Clarence feels here not only by confronting him with Warwick, but by painting a vision of the afterlife which invokes both Christian conceptions of the afterlife as well as figures from Greek mythology and tragedy like the ferryman and the Furies.

While Clarence misreads Richard's action and motive in his dream, other characters simply discount the warnings of their dreams and run headlong into danger, like Lord Hastings. Hastings' friend, Lord Stanley has a dream which affrights him for Hastings' safety he dispatches a messenger in the middle of the night to carry the warning. Though the dream is short, the meaning and danger present without much need for decoding. "He dreamt the boar⁸⁵

⁸⁴ Ibid. I.iv.44-63.

⁸⁵ Richard's emblem.

had razed off [Hastings'] helm.”⁸⁶ But Hastings takes the news of his impending decapitation rather coolly, and responds

HASTINGS Go, fellow, go, return unto thy lord;
Bid him not fear the separated councils
His honour and myself are at the one,
And at the other is my servant Catesby
Where nothing can proceed that toucheth us
Whereof I shall not have intelligence.
Tell him his fears are shallow, wanting instance:
And for his dreams, I wonder he is so fond
To trust the mockery of unquiet slumbers
To fly the boar before the boar pursues,
Were to incense the boar to follow us
And make pursuit where he did mean no chase.
Go, bid thy master rise and come to me
And we will both together to the Tower,
Where, he shall see, the boar will use us kindly.⁸⁷

Like the second murderer who blames his agitated conscience on physiological factors, Hastings tries to invalidate the function of Stanley's conscience by blaming the dream on the physiological troubles of poor sleep—a bumpy mattress or flat pillow, perhaps. He tries to justify his foolish bravado by suggesting that taking flight would only incite Richard's fury. Shakespeare highlights Hastings' foolishness by juxtaposing his bold declaration with a conversation he has with Catesby, seeking his support for Richard's candidacy to “wear the garland of the realm.” With courage equal to his defiance of Stanley's dream, he declares to Catesby, “I'll have this crown of mine cut from shoulders / Before I'll see the crown so foul misplaced.”⁸⁸

Hastings here provides another poignant example of Shakespeare's dramatization of the classic themes of tragedy and fate—for in declaring he'd sooner lose his head than see Richard

⁸⁶ Ibid. III.ii.8.

⁸⁷ Ibid. III.ii.16-30

⁸⁸ Ibid. III.ii.41-42.

wear the crown, he effectively curses himself to the precise form of death Stanley's dream communicated. This death comes just two scenes later in his confrontation with Richard and his supporters. As Catesby forcibly escorts Hastings' to the Tower to lose his head, Hastings' laments

HASTINGS Woe, woe for England! not a whit for me;
For I, too fond, might have prevented this.
Stanley did dream the boar did raze his helm;
But I disdain'd it, and did scorn to fly:
Three times to-day my foot-cloth horse did stumble,
And startled, when he look'd upon the Tower,
As loath to bear me to the slaughter-house.
O, now I want the priest that spake to me:
I now repent I told the pursuivant
As 'twere triumphing at mine enemies,
How they at Pomfret bloodily were butcher'd,
And I myself secure in grace and favour.
O Margaret, Margaret, now thy heavy curse
Is lighted on poor Hastings' wretched head!

RATCLIFF

Dispatch, my lord; the duke would be at dinner:
Make a short shrift; he longs to see your head.

HASTINGS

O momentary grace of mortal men,
Which we more hunt for than the grace of God!
Who builds his hopes in air of your good looks,
Lives like a drunken sailor on a mast,
Ready, with every nod, to tumble down
Into the fatal bowels of the deep.⁸⁹

Hastings here realizes the degree to which he foolishly fell prey to the common but deadly trap of vanity. He estimated himself capable of dealing with Richard, and the same vanity suggested to him that Stanley's dream was effervescent nonsense; that Richard offered not danger but friendship. If Stanley's dream wasn't warning enough, Shakespeare amplifies the sense of danger Hastings refuses to see with his horse stumbling three times in sighting the Tower—cosmological indicators of ensuing danger. Like Clarence, turning poetic in the moments before

⁸⁹ Ibid. III.iv.80-93

his death, Hastings suggests that men build their hope in the “air of good looks,” investing their security and trust in the most fleeting and invisible of elements. Air, wind, and breath provide no stability, little permanence, and offer no medium but for the passage of words—Richard’s words, in which Hastings placed his trust. His musing leads him to the interesting and bombastic metaphor of a drunken sailor atop a precarious position poised over certain doom. Shakespeare neatly uses these images to remind the audience of Clarence’s dream. The ending of Hastings’ rumination especially—“fatal bowels of the deep”—recalls the horror of the sunken wrecks of the dead with their gem-stoned eyes. The same fate, perhaps, awaits Hastings.

Lady Anne, Hastings and Clarence provide remarkable and intimate portraits of Richard’s ability to pervert or corrupt the function of conscience on a small scale, but Shakespeare also takes pains to demonstrate that these individuals signal a defect in England as a whole, where Richard’s Machiavellian designs successfully disarms the conscience of a nation. The refusal of the three citizens to exercise discernment in Act III systematically grows like a cancer until, when Buckingham goes on a public relations tour for Richard; the silence has infected the entire populace.

BUCKINGHAM I bid them that did love their country's good
Cry 'God save Richard, England's royal king!'

GLOUCESTER

Ah! and did they so?

BUCKINGHAM

No, so God help me, they spake not a word;
But, like dumb statues or breathing stones,
Gazed each on other, and look'd deadly pale.⁹⁰

The deadly pale countenance of the people assembled suggests they see through Buckingham’s charade, but even in their superior numbers cannot summon the courage to defy him. They maintain their “dumb statue” or “breathing stone” expressions not out of blindness, but fear,

⁹⁰ Ibid. III.vii.21-26.

embodying a scrivener's dangerous observation one scene earlier. "Who is so gross/ That cannot see this palpable device? / Yet who so bold but says he sees it not?" The scrivener, whose title affords him a measure of anonymity, voices the obvious truth that audience has arrived upon, watching Richard lie and cheat his way to the throne. His question drives home the reality of Richard's power. No one dares say, "the emperor has no clothes" in fear that he might set his sights on them, and with this fear Richard nearly immolates the moral bearings of his country. When Buckingham tries to rally Richard's support from the public, they say nothing because they know the truth, but none dare speak it.

These failures of conscience in *Richard III* don't solely represent Richard's abilities in rhetorical and psychological warfare, however; they also result from curses that characters level against each other, and even against themselves. Hastings punctuates his death speech invoking Margaret, the grief-wisened Lancastrian matriarch, and her curse against him, which she pronounces against him and other members of the York royal court—including Richard—in scene I.iii.

MARGARET Rivers and Dorset, you were standers by,
And so wast thou, Lord Hastings, when my son
Was stabb'd with bloody daggers: God, I pray him,
That none of you may live your natural age,
But by some unlooked accident cut off!⁹¹

Margaret's curse to Hastings condemns him to unexpected death, especially with the phrase "by some unlooked accident cut off"—implying that his fate will sneak up on him without his ability to recognize them. Her curses against Hastings, Richard, and indeed against all the others present at the royal court, don't merely call for their physical suffering, but for the summit of psychological suffering, activated in conditions like guilt, grief, shame, and fear. In fact, it is

⁹¹ Ibid. I.iii.207-211.

grief in particular, distilled into rage, which arms her to level these curses against Richard and company, for she invokes the murder of her son in the same breath by which she calls for the untimely deaths of Rivers, Dorset, and Hastings. Her curses here provide something of an anchor point for the psychological turmoil many of these characters go on to experience in the play, and they all look back on this occasion and attribute their suffering to the efficacy of her curses.

This scene poignantly addresses the question conscience and its connection to divine agency. Throughout the play, as indicated with the two murderers, a sufficiently activated conscience or sense of guilt can take a person from a condition of activity to stasis, or change the nature of one's activity altogether. Both Margaret and Richard attempt to exploit the conscience in order to weaken their enemies or to induce psychological suffering. That Queen Elizabeth, Richard, and others experience the doom she prophesies doesn't necessarily indicate that she functions in the classical role of a prophet, where heaven awards judgment upon her invoking, but that the normal human psychological condition offers a frail target to well chosen and vehement words. The faculties of imagination and memory, in certain circumstances, lead characters to attribute their suffering to Margaret as a divine agent though they don't refer to any moments of irrefutable proof linking her agency to divine will. But the failure to identify Margaret as a divine agent doesn't exclude the possibilities that she either *does* have agency to effect divine will, or at least has access to God's intentions.

Richard, by contrast, maintains a consistent skepticism towards the notion that conscience might be more than a word, and the extent to which he disregards any power it might possess in connection to divine agency provides a both comic and disquieting juxtaposition to the

startling fashion in which Margaret's curses operate with seemingly divine agency. His skepticism emerges flamboyantly in his conversation with Elizabeth.

RICHARD

As I intend to prosper and repent,
So thrive I in my dangerous attempt
Of hostile arms! myself myself confound!
Heaven and fortune bar me happy hours!
Day, yield me not thy light; nor, night, thy rest!⁹²

Richard demonstrates his willingness to curse himself in attempting to secure Queen Elizabeth's cooperation, and uses some of the same language that Margaret does when she curses him in the first act. Such a casual attitude toward inviting the antagonism of heaven suggests he places little stock in the likelihood of such curses ever coming about. The power Richard has exercised up unto this point in the play has been, primarily, the power of rhetoric, and he knows how to calculate the effect of words insofar as they relate to the imagination and general psychology. He thus anticipates that these words will be persuasive to Elizabeth, but clearly thinks of them as "merely" words—incapable of effecting the consequences he calls upon himself, like being the author of his own demise, being barred from happiness by heaven, or being incapable of sleep. The contrast between Richard's expectations of rhetoric and the fulfillment of various curses asks the audience to what extent language can effect spiritual consequences beyond the more obvious agency of language to prey upon a guilty conscience.

Such questions particularly come to a head during Richard's dream sequence. His encounter with the ghosts of his victims offers perhaps the most engaging example of Shakespeare's investigation of the link between divine agency, and conscience. The degree to which Richard fulfills the specifics of Margaret's curse problematizes the notion that her curses constitute merely impassioned rhetoric. Her curse to Richard runs

⁹² Ibid. IV.iv.328-332.

QUEEN MARGARET

And leave out thee? stay, dog, for thou shalt hear me.
If heaven have any grievous plague in store
Exceeding those that I can wish upon thee,
O, let them keep it till thy sins be ripe,
And then hurl down their indignation
On thee, the troubler of the poor world's peace!
The worm of conscience still begnaw thy soul!
Thy friends suspect for traitors while thou livest,
And take deep traitors for thy dearest friends!
No sleep close up that deadly eye of thine,
Unless it be whilst some tormenting dream
Affrights thee with a hell of ugly devils!⁹³

Margaret issues a four-point curse here which Richard not only fulfills, but in the order that Margaret calls out for ills to afflict him, beginning with “thy friends suspect for traitors” and ending with the “tormenting dream.” This dream comes in scene V.v. where eleven ghosts visit both Richmond and Richard in the night before their battle.

The appearances of these ghosts precipitates a mental breakdown for Richard that initially presents with the same signs of distress felt by the second murderer—anxiety and frustration arising from the sense of conscience as cowardice.

RICHARD *starteth up out of a dream*
KING RICHARD: Give me another horse! Bind up my wounds!
Have mercy, Jesu!—Soft, I did but dream.
O coward conscience, how dost thou afflict me?
The lights burn blue. It is now dead midnight.
Cold fearful drops stand on my trembling flesh.⁹⁴

Shakespeare indicates Richard’s level of distress even with his stage directions, writing “Richard starteth up out of a dream” to signify how violently Richard’s dead visitors assail him in spirit. The level of his immersion in the dream proves so strong it crosses over from the narrative of his

⁹³ Ibid. I.iii.213-224.

⁹⁴ Ibid., V.v.131-135.

subconscious to his waking, as if he had been in the midst of battle with more combat to follow. His cry for mercy can be read two ways—either as an oath in response to his anxiety, or as a last-moment plea made to God, whom he has heretofore largely defied. His question, “how dost thou afflict me” implies he had up until this point successfully ignored his conscience, and is perhaps surprised at its sudden encroachment.

That Richard sustains both the question and answer parts of this soliloquy points to the strength of his emerging conscience—to divide Richard against himself, compromising the inner unity of his ambition and villainous nature and fulfilling the his own curse—“myself myself confound.” His speech becomes increasingly schizophrenic in nature as his growing distress prompts him into undertake a conversation of question and answer with himself in a tone of interrogation. As Richard continues, his conscience renders him as both perpetrator and victim.

What do I fear? Myself? There's none else by.
Richard loves Richard; that is, I am I.
Is there a murderer her? No. Yes, I am
Then fly! What, from myself? Great reason. Why?
Alack, I love myself. Wherefore? For any good
That I myself have done unto myself?
O no, alas, I rather hate myself
For hateful deeds committed by myself.
I am a villain. Yet I lie: I am not.
Fool, of thyself speak well.—Fool, do not flatter.
My conscience hath a thousand several tongues,
And every tongue brings in a several tale,
And every tale condemns me for a villain.
Perjury, perjury, in the high'st degree!
Murder, stern murder, in the dir'st degree,
Throng to the bar, crying all, ‘Guilty, guilty!’⁹⁵

Richard's distress here strangely combines the pathetic, disturbed, and comical. He would like to flee from himself, oscillating between the polarities of self-love and self-hatred because of

⁹⁵ Ibid. V.v.136-153

newfound guilt which recognizes and reviles his evil. Shakespeare portrays the increasingly schizophrenic tension in Richard by couching his speech in legal language where Richard plays both defendant and prosecutor. This speech stands in stark contrast to his opening speech, where the choice of diction and vocabulary alone portray a much more assured and confident Richard. But having been visited by eleven ghosts, Margaret's curses begin to bear their fruition and we see Richard's demeanor transform into a nervous and unstable character. Even the insipidly dull 1982 BBC version of *Richard III* maintains this dynamic shift. Playing Richard, Ron Cook can't muster much vitality between the two speeches, but at least manages to indicate a psyche coming apart at the seams. In the back and forth animosity of lines like "For hateful deeds committed by myself. / I am a villain. Yet I lie: I am not," Cook alters the tone of voice and his body language to try enacting the two sides of Richard's conflicted character.⁹⁶

As Richard's speech continues, Richard strangely turns to remorse over the fact that no one loves him, though in both this play and in *Richard, Duke of York*, Richard regards love as he regards the divine—with hostility and resistance.

I shall despair. There is no creature loves me,
And if I die no soul will pity me.
Nay, wherefore should they?—Since that I myself
Find in myself no pity to myself.
Methought the souls of all I had murdered
Came to my tent, and everyone did threat
Tomorrow's vengeance on the head of Richard.⁹⁷

As Margaret's curse beget the curses of the ghosts, their curses beget Richard's loss of the battle, and the loss of his life,⁹⁸ and what may be the greatest wound—that he discovers a desire to be loved, and is denied by all, even himself, and this realization engenders despair. This desire may

⁹⁶ *The Dramatic Works of William Shakespeare: Richard III*, DVD. Directed by Jane Howell. 1982: New York, NY. Ambrose Video Publishing, 2000.

⁹⁷ Shakespeare, William. *Richard III*. V.v.154-160.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.* *Richard III*, V.vii-viii.

constitute what Margaret refers to in the beginning of her curse with the lines “If heaven have any grievous plague in store / Exceeding those that I can wish upon thee / o let them keep it till thy sins be ripe.”⁹⁹ Margaret prefaces her curse with an invitation for God, or heaven, to invent afflictions beyond the ones she names. If, as I have suggested earlier, Richard’s ascent to the throne coincides with his war of retribution against heaven, then perhaps fewer actions could so undo Richard as the transformation of his character from a gleeful hatred of heaven and God into a sense of poverty at his lack of love and, moreover, inability to even generate the feeling or affection for himself or others. The progression of his speech seems to link a sense of remorse for his loveless condition with a dawning concern with the gravity of his actions, indicated when he proceeds from his lack of self-pity to considering the souls of those whom he “murdered.”

Shakespeare’s fusion of justice to spiritual morality demonstrates Lorna Hutson’s analysis of purgatory and the legal/economic terms used with the doctrines stipulating conditions of spiritual and moral debt. While the second murderer had to deal with a few voices of fear, a thousand tongues of witness emerging from some spiritual void to condemn Richard. While the number of tongues could be an exaggerated figure selected out of heightened anxiety (perhaps similar to his invocation of Jesu), one thousand is, at the same time, a “just” number. Ghurye notes, “With Richard, a greater villain with a variety and large number of villainies to his credit, his conscience accosted or castigated him with thousand tongues, i.e. in many different words, taunts, or abuses.”¹⁰⁰ Richard’s word choice—perjury, bar, guilty—suggests that his manifold conscience takes him “to court” and will enact the beginnings of the justice according to God’s stipulations. The one thousand tongues of accusation also presents the corollary to Oxford’s

⁹⁹ Ibid. I.iii.214-216.

¹⁰⁰ Ghurye, G.S. *Shakespeare on Conscience and Justice*. G.R. Bhatkal. Bombay, India, 1965.112.

description of conscience a few scenes earlier, when he declares, “Every man’s conscience is a thousand swords / To fight against this guilty homicide.”¹⁰¹ Oxford offers a miniature motivational speech, but in many ways it feels like too little, too late. The very occasion of war with Richard owes itself, at least in part, to the fact that countless people ignored their consciences or had been terrorized into silence until Richard and his forces were too powerful to oppose.

Richard attempts to conceal the effects of his dream and makes one final pitch to his followers to seize victory once more, bringing out to his most Nietzschean and Machiavellian timbres. “Conscience is but a word that cowards use / devised at first to keep the strong in awe. / Our strong arms be our conscience; swords, our law.”¹⁰² Here Richard lays all his cards on the table—to call conscience a “word that cowards use to keep the strong in awe” doesn’t necessarily indicate disbelief in the nature or conscience, nor even in the power that might keep the strong in awe. Richard’s conception of a coward here points to the silent citizens who know the truth but “leave it all to God” and refuse to take action, and throughout the play he charts his bloody trajectory maintaining critical expectations. He believes that he can silence the voice of conscience that opposes him, or else use people’s consciences against them to his advantage, and that God’s providence won’t interfere with his plans. He indicates as much when he cries out “Slave, I have set my life upon a cast, / and I will stand the hazard of the die.”¹⁰³

Richard’s successes help add boldness to skill—as when he marvels at his ability to sway Lady Anne, for example. He reasons that if he has come so far riding on the wave of ambition and deceit, why not risk it all for the ultimate victory? He wagers on the possibility that God will

¹⁰¹ Shakespeare, William. *Richard III*. V.ii.17-19.

¹⁰² Ibid. V.vi.39-41.

¹⁰³ Ibid. V.vii.9-10.

allow him free reign as God has allowed him free reign up until this point. Richard might have asked himself “Where was God when I murdered all these other people, or had my hand in their deaths.”

But what appears like a disassociation of heaven’s judgment from Richard neatly coincides with Margaret’s curse: “If heaven have any grievous plague in store / Exceeding those that I can wish upon thee / o let them keep it till thy sins be ripe.”¹⁰⁴ These curses are indeed “stored up” for him, loosed upon him quickly within the final scenes. But unlike the other characters Margaret curses, Richard never has a moment of remembering Margaret’s curses. If he had, his finally speeches might have been different, and he might have seen his dramatic trajectory through the lens of her prophecy the way Hastings experiences his tragic epiphany. That Richard never says anything about Margaret’s curse indicates either a willed denial and of her agency, or else he simply fails to recognize that what she foretold occurs. The second of these options seems the more likely, for in his asides or moments alone, Richard proves honest and transparent. If he dares admit to playing the Vice character,¹⁰⁵ or reveal the psycho-spiritual tumult brought on by his encounter with the eleven ghosts, why wouldn’t he admit wondering whether or not Margaret was right; that he had fallen prey to her powers, or that she had prophesied accurately?

Another possibility remains for consideration given Richard’s lapse of memory concerning Margaret’s curses—that like the sudden onset of despair and grief over his poverty of love, divine forces have suppressed Richard’s cognizance of these details, ensuring that he should ignore the signs of his doom and run headlong into battle. We may well wonder if this

¹⁰⁴ Ibid. I.iii.214-216.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid. III.i.81-83.

might be the case, for from Richard's battle with Richmond and his followers results a new era in the political and social landscape of England—the creation of the Tudor line.

RICHMOND We will unite the white rose and the red:

Smile heaven upon this fair conjunction,
That long have frown'd upon their enmity!
What traitor hears me, and says not amen?
England hath long been mad, and scarr'd herself;
The brother blindly shed the brother's blood,
The father rashly slaughter'd his own son,
The son, compell'd, been butcher to the sire:
All this divided York and Lancaster,
Divided in their dire division,
O, now, let Richmond and Elizabeth,
The true succeeders of each royal house,
By God's fair ordinance conjoin together!¹⁰⁶

Richmond's speech summons a knowledge of long history; a history of strife and battle, treachery and deception—the same that punctuates Clarence's dream, and represents the collectively guilty royal conscience tracing back to Richard II's deposition at the force of Henry IV. The marriage of Richmond to Elizabeth promises peace to the warring factions, but perhaps only because so little remains of either faction to fight. Richard may have maintained no such intentions, but his trail of carnage toward the throne effectively neutralizes the heirs and loyalists of the “old guard.” His actions ensure that the peace Richmond and Elizabeth attempt to forge in their marriage might have a fighting chance to endure unmolested by other Yorkists motivated by the dangerous combination of feeling both entitled and disenfranchised.

Richmond's use of the phrase “God's fair ordinance” hints at the providence of God's plan, and also recalls Richard's snarling response to Henry VI in the midst of the murder act “For this, amongst the rest, was I ordained”¹⁰⁷ to which Henry agrees. Such words and occasions indicate the possibility that Shakespeare wrote Richard as a character *fated* by God with

¹⁰⁶ Ibid. V.8.19-31.

¹⁰⁷ Shakespeare, William. *Richard, Duke of York*. V.vi.58.

Machiavellian inclinations in order to provide a definitive “clean-up” to the rift between the houses of York and Lancaster. Reckoning with the question of Richard’s agency in a divinely ordered universe depends, in part, on how one reads Shakespeare’s representation of cosmological order. T. McAlindon suggests, “The phenomenon of psychic and interpersonal chaos is magnified by the hero’s intense emotional distress and reflected in society at large, which is torn by civil strife if not civil war; it is also reflected in external nature, where terrible storms and other more ‘unnatural’ disorders prevail.”¹⁰⁸

Certainly in *Richard III* Shakespeare juxtaposes psychic chaos next to other unnatural orders, but with the ending of the play and Richmond’s invocation of the Wars of the Roses, decoding the gravity of psychic chaos invites us to consider a broader scope than *Richard III* alone provides, standing parallel to pre-modern conceptions of cosmological unity. Briefly summarized, these opposing models claimed that the universe operated according to hierarchy, or to chaos.

McAlindon suggests,

The idea of the universe as a hierarchical system of corresponding planes where everything has its appointed place and identity suggests a fundamental stability and rationality in things and induces a mood of metaphysical confidence in every attempt to interpret the facts of experience. But the notion of the universe as a tense system of interacting, interdependent opposites reminds us that every pattern of harmonious order, every structure of identity, is of its very nature susceptible to violent transformation.¹⁰⁹

McAlindon suggests Shakespeare fashions his universe somewhere between hierarchy and chaos, perhaps similar to the way searching for the definition and nature of conscience occurs between the moral polarities of Calvin and Nietzsche; between the static third citizen and the exuberant Richard.

¹⁰⁸ McAlindon, T. *Shakespeare’s Tragic Cosmos*. Cambridge University Press. Cambridge, Great Britain. 1991. 2.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid. 7.

If Shakespeare constructs a universe that operates both upon principles of hierarchy and those of chaos, Richard embodies not, as he suggests, the cruel designs of heaven, but perhaps the cruelty of man—of his peers and those who proceed him. Richard, both in his physical deformity and Machiavellian prowess, stands as an arbiter between a world of order and a world of chaos, and he seems to have moments where he understands his unique position. On numerous occasions he both blames heaven and the cosmos for his condition, yet makes choices he perceives within a morally structured hierarchy. Richard's ambivalence about his position in the universe as well as the level of his agency perhaps embody Shakespeare's ambivalence conscience and the function of conscience within a universe with definite but mysterious order. One of the most notable aspects of Shakespeare's development of conscience manifests in his restraint; the limit he places on its sway in the narrative. Only one of the murderers feels any remorse and leaves. The other carries out the job for which he was hired. He never appears again, but one cannot help but wonder what happens to him, what kind of consequences he faces and when. The limits imposed on conscience are the same limits imposed on our perception of justice. Shakespeare portrays a world where good and evil exist, and procure physical, psychological, emotional, and spiritual consequences. While we see some of these consequences, many of them remain hidden, and seem rooted in factors and events antecedent to Richard's determination to "descant on his own deformity."

Moreover, if indeed God's providence ordained Richard to some bloodletting ministry that results in the peaceful formation of the house of Tudor, then the question of conscience maintains poignant ramifications for Richard II and Henry VI. To what extent do Richard's forbears and their actions condition him, even curse him, to a loveless life and Machiavellian campaign resulting in his death? If they bear any responsibility at all, then the tragedy of

Richard III cannot be, as Bonetto suggests, that Richard fails to achieve the Nietzschean ideal, but that those preceding him failed to heed their consciences, and the consequences of their decisions and actions perhaps fatally doom him to a life of enmity with his family, his county, and with God. In his physical deformity, in his divided and warring selves, in his ability to look the saint and play the sinner, Richard embodies England at war with itself—a generation's history of civil unrest. The tragedy is that the national lapse of England's conscience in the Wars of the Roses perhaps critically contributes to Richard's character, almost ensuring that he play the Machiavel in order to ultimately restore order to England. Shakespeare portrays a universe where the consequences of actions, even words, remain unseen and far-reaching, affecting realities even after death. If the choices of Richard II, Henry VI, and each person leading up to Richard could have such dire consequences, then so much the worse for citizens who refuse to exercise any wisdom with their actions.

Shakespeare's writing of Richard occurs precisely at the crossroads of two models of the universe, each of them distinct, and there may be some inclination to scrutinize the plays and Shakespeare's history closely in order to determine to which model he subscribes. Certainly, any reading of Richard's character and actions transforms depending on which model—hierarchy or chaos—one chooses to favor. And indeed, Shakespeare may have secretly maintained belief in a structured universe as opposed to one of chaos. But his presentation and dramatization of the conscience in *Richard III* chooses both—the prerogative of an artist—which returns to what critics have identified as his ambivalent, dialectical ethos. This ethos posits a universe where both models operate; where God both fates Richard to act as a violent catalyst of civil purification *and* exhibits the tensions of individual willpower in the midst of moral quagmires. This combination of universes and ideologies in Richard and in other characters offers incredible

dramatic riches. These riches help generate actual dialogue wherein Shakespeare perhaps argues we ought to exercise grave caution with our choices and not just leave our fate as individuals, or members of society, to God

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