

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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ABSTRACT

This master's thesis investigates William Shakespeare's development and treatment of the conscience in his plays *Richard, Duke of York* and *Richard III*. This study and investigation derive from a point of academic contention with claims made in Sandra Bonetto's essay "Coward Conscience and Bad Conscience in Shakespeare and Nietzsche." This thesis investigates the influence of theological studies, political philosophy, dramatic trends, and post Reformation discourse between the Catholic and Protestant churches which helped shape Shakespeare's perception of the conscience at the time of his writing. This thesis attempts to arrive at conclusions by looking at the works of figures like theologian John Calvin, political theorist Niccolo Machiavelli, playwright Christopher Marlowe, and Protestant martyrologist John Foxe, among others. Though these authors assume critical points in the discussion of conscience, but their work cannot be regarded as conclusive by any means. The discussion of conscience engages incredibly diverse fields of thought and had done so for hundreds of years.

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