

**INTERROGATION OF CONSCIENCE AND AUDIENCE**  
**IN SHAKESPEARE'S EARLY PLAYS**

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**ABSTRACT**

**Interrogation of Conscience and Audience**

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Interrogation scenes, in which a character confronts and questions himself, or in which inquisitors question a character in a dramatic dialogue, are dramatizations of confrontational interrogatory discourse. This thesis explores the relation between

such scenes in Shakespeare's early plays and other types of Elizabethan interrogatory discourse—particularly political and religious interrogations, which make public spectacle of the questioning of the accused, and moral and casuistical tracts—with special emphasis on the reactions of both onstage audiences and playgoers to the spectacle of the staged interrogations. This study gives special attention to the concentric spheres of spectators, including the play's characters, the acting troupe, the playgoers, the individual conscience—known as “God's spy”—and the omniscient divine sphere. The study describes the restructuring of these spheres through the interrogational process.

Chapter Two discusses interrogation of accused heretics and traitors as described in martyrological books and pamphlets. The chapter also briefly considers casuistical tracts that advocate internal interrogation of the conscience. Chapter Three considers interrogation scenes in the *Henry VI* plays and their relation to staged public interrogations of martyrs. Chapter Four discusses both the questioning of Clarence by Richard's henchmen and Richard's internal interrogation before the battle of Bosworth in *Richard III*. Portia's grotesque courtroom interrogation of Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice*, discussed in Chapter Five, raises questions about the process of interrogation. Chapter Six explores *Hamlet*, a play comprised almost entirely of interrogation scenes, focusing on the mousetrap scene and on Hamlet's interrogation of Gertrude and considering Shakespeare's interrogation of the connection between dramatic interrogation and the playgoers' conscience. The study notes the disruptive power of Shakespeare's interrogation scenes, which often disturb and transform the relations between the concentric spheres of spectators.

## INTRODUCTION

Shakespeare's interrogation scenes—in which an individual under duress answers the interrogation of surrounding adversaries—implicate the audience emotionally and intellectually. The adversaries onstage who surround and interrogate the victim comprise the first in a series of concentric spheres of spectators. The first circle embraces the characters onstage, and then those offstage. The next circle is of the acting troupe, including the author, Shakespeare himself. A still larger circle surrounds the playgoers, all of whom are in some sense critics about to report their opinions to a still wider sphere. As "God's spy," the conscience—located within the body—communicates directly with the divine sphere, the most encompassing of all. The moment of confession or epiphany within the play is a disruption, an experience of potential dramatic reversal or recognition that re-forms the relation of these spheres to one another, and is also an interface through which the playwright probes and instructs the audience—a time of instability in which the audience's perspective oscillates rapidly between the "nutshell" of concentrated introspection and the "majestical roof" of global awareness.

The milieu in which Shakespeare created and presented his own interrogation scenes comprised political and religious interrogations which made public spectacle of the questioning of the accused; secular and religious theatrical performances, in which players simulated the procedures or rituals of such spectacles; emblematic and iconographic representations of interrogation; written

histories and descriptions (classical, biblical, etc.) of interrogation; moral and casuistical tracts; and even the interrogation of playwrights and actors by state censors. Shakespeare's productions, entangled with the preceding genres, competed with them to catch the audience's conscience, which was itself integral with this milieu.

## 1: INTERROGATING THE SELF AND OTHERS

Casuistical treatises by Shakespeare's contemporaries illustrate an important parallel between examination of conscience and examination of civil criminals. There is a close relation between the institutional and dramatic processes of questioning others and the internal dialogue of the conscience, according to sixteenth-century pamphleteers such as Andreius Hyperius. Recent experiments indicate that correspondences indeed exist between the neural processing of information related to self-awareness and inferences about the mental states of others (Platek). The experimental data support a theoretical model

developed over two decades ago by Gallup . . . that posits that self-awareness and mental state attribution are part of a shared neurocognitive suite of processing and that neural architecture implicated in processing knowledge about the self is called upon when inferring knowledge in others. (Platek)

The study "measured blood oxygen level-dependent (BOLD) activity when viewing self-faces and when thinking about the mental states of others" (Platek). After comparing areas activated by self-face recognition with a control of familiar or famous face recognition, the study found that self-face recognition and mental state attribution were "colocalized to the middle and superior frontal gyri in the right

hemisphere,” which others have previously considered to be the center for processing awareness of the self (Platek).

Related research concerning “mirror neurons” is of particular relevance to spectacle and dramatic performance. Human facial expressions are universal, and their activation directly influences emotional experience: Smiling can stimulate or intensify happy feelings, and so on (Pinel 470). A recent study provides evidence that “there may be a right hemisphere mirroring system that could provide a neural substrate for empathy” (Leslie), supporting theorists who believe that contemplating the mental states of other people relates directly to considering and understanding the self. The findings “suggest that the nervous system is capable of mapping the observed actions of others onto the premotor cortex of the self” (Leslie). The authors hypothesize “a common cortical imitation circuit for both face and hand imitation.” The circuit “consists of Broca's area, bilateral dorsal and ventral premotor areas, right superior temporal gyrus (STG), supplementary motor area, posterior temporo-occipital cortex, and cerebellar areas” (Leslie). Shakespeare's *Winter's Tale* depicts the expressive transmission of emotion from one person to another:

Your changed complexions are to me a mirror  
 Which shows me mine changed too; for I must be  
 A party in this alteration, finding  
 Myself thus alter'd with 't.

The lines, spoken by Polixenes, compare his empathy with Camillo with the correspondence of substance and reflected image. Human expressions of suffering—real or dramatized—could thus stimulate the experience and expression of sorrow in an observer. The victims of interrogation—on Shakespeare's stage or

on the scaffold—are the foci of potentially explosive emotional impact, as evidence from the period reveals.

Although scientists “still do not know why people have better memories for upsetting events than for neutral events,” powerful emotional experiences often produce vivid and enduring “flashbulb” memories. The interaction of the amygdala, a center for emotion processing, with the adjacent hippocampus (Byrnes 112), which is “critical for learning and memory” is a possible explanation (Gluck and Myers 418). The emotionally traumatic nature of public interrogation and execution spectacles in the Elizabethan era made them vividly memorable. Contemporary sources record that the audiences of Shakespeare’s plays also responded emotionally to dramatizations of traumatic scenes (see Salgado 16 and 30).

The state and the theater also interacted behind the scenes in Renaissance England, where state officials regularly interrogated actors and playwrights. The authorities interrogated Thomas Kyd, for example, because of his association with Christopher Marlowe. Shakespeare’s company came under official scrutiny for playing *Richard II* on the eve of the failed Essex rebellion of 1598: A performance “at the request of several members of the conspiracy” (Frye 10). The state examined several members of the Lord Chamberlain’s Men, who explained that they had performed the play because “promised . . . 40 s[hillings] more than their ordinary, to do so” (Frye 11). State officials also interviewed and interrogated actors and playwrights on a regular basis as part of an ongoing program of official censorship that required state approval of all scripts and performances (Frye 12). Shakespeare dramatizes an interview of this sort in *Hamlet* when the prince interrogates the players before their performance at Elsinore (Frye 12), and Claudius

follows up by asking the Prince if he can attest that the play will not give “offence” (3.2.221) to the privileged audience.

Shakespeare in turn dramatizes the theatrical interrogation of the state when Hamlet contrives to “catch the conscience of the King” in the mousetrap scene. The playwright’s contemporaries believed that drama had an inexorable power to activate the processes of the conscience, as discussed in detail below. As for contemporary models of those processes, Camille Slight, exploring English Renaissance conceptions of the conscience in *The Casuistical Tradition*, writes, “conscience is composed of two parts: the *synteresis*, the storehouse of truth or moral law, and the *conscientia* or *syneidesis*, the judge that applies this law . . . either excusing and absolving or accusing and condemning” (11). Shakespeare’s contemporaries often ascribed to the conscience the judicial role of judging actions. William Perkins, for example, says in 1612, “conscience . . . determines or gives sentence of things done, by saying unto us this was done, this was not done, this . . . was well done, this was ill done” (qtd. in Slight 11). Citing Paul in Romans 2:15, Martin Luther argues that the conscience’s purpose “is not to do, but to pass judgment on what has been done and what should be done” (qtd. in Kiefer 65).

In a work published in 1587, Andreus Hyperius makes explicit the comparison between the self-interrogation of the conscience and judicial interrogation, admonishing the reader, “he is to bee understoode, rightly, duely, and truly to examine himselfe, which . . . strictly enditeth and iudicially arraigneth [his actions] at the Barre, as before a most severe iudge” (2). The prescribed examination is dramatic as well as judicial, and demands that the individual play several roles: prosecutor, defendant, judge, and spectator. Catholic treatises such as Hyperius’s, and Vincenzo Bruno’s treatise of 1597, recommend practicing self-

interrogation before confessing: mentally *rehearsing for a performance* whose success depends on sincerity rather than verisimilitude. In fact, several tracts, including those of Bruno and Erasmus, warn against counterfeiting sins to tell at confession. The performance must have a special authenticity not expected of theatrical drama. A relation between the function of the conscience, legal procedures, and drama also exists in Protestant works. In *Protestant Poetics*, Barbara Lewalski cites an apposite example of the *mélange* of theatrical and judicial metaphors used in the early seventeenth century in describing the spiritual role of the conscience:

Isaac Ambrose recommends the careful keeping of a diary or day-book of actions, and daily and monthly meditation upon it as “a kinde of judiciary proceeding, in which a man keepeth private Sessions at home, passing a Sentence on his Thoughts, Words, and Actions.” . . . he especially urges the soliloquy or dramatic questioning of the heart: “Heart, how dost thou? How is it with thee for thy Spiritual state?”  
(Lewalski 159)

Ambrose’s pamphlet thus advocates enacting an internal drama of self-interrogation.

Internal interrogation of the conscience is a cognitive mechanism intertwined with external structures of control. The early seventeenth-century Puritan Jeremiah Dyke states that “conscience is placed in the soule as Gods spy, and man’s superiour and overseer” (qtd. in Wilks 36). The conscience is paradoxically imbedded within the soul and ensconced above man as a panoptic “overseer.” The second murderer in *Richard III* describes the conscience in similar terms: “A man cannot steal but it accuseth him. A man cannot lie with his neighbour’s wife but it detects him . . .” (1.4.132-4). Dyke’s general metaphor for the conscience relates

closely to the dramatic model of interrogation in Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*: The Duke, disguised as a Friar, makes trial of Angelo—acting simultaneously as sovereign, spy, and “power divine.” The playgoers become accessories to the Duke's espionage in that they know the Friar's identity, although Angelo does not.

Deceptive and disguised interrogations such as the Duke's exposure of Angelo were not the exclusive sphere of the theater, but authorities used them then, as now, in the course of criminal interrogations. Katherine Craik recounts the story of Anne Wells, who allegedly murdered her husband: “Wells and her lover, John Parker, are overheard arguing about the murder by ‘some that revealed it to the maiestrates’” (11). The authorities, unable to compel her to confess, employ deception: “‘In the ende shee was made to believe that Parker had bewrayed the matter, hereupon she confessed the fact’” (11). A Pamphlet entitled “The Apprehension, Arraignment, and execution of Elizabeth Abbot” describes another case in which the authorities' attempts to elicit confession fail until they instigate a disguised interrogation in which “a group of women trick Abbot into admitting she had the acquaintance of [the victim]” (Craik 11). In an even more remarkable case cited by Hanson in *Discovering the Subject in Renaissance Culture*, a Justice himself donned a devil's costume in order to interrogate a small child, playing the roles of both a religious and secular official (42). In Shakespeare's theater, the Duke's disguising himself as a friar in *Measure for Measure* dramatizes a similar conflation of judicial and religious interrogation.

“Official” deceptive interrogations clearly have theatrical elements. That people purchased for entertainment pamphlets describing episodes of such official use of dramatic interrogation further blurs its distinction from dramatizations of

official interrogation. The pamphlets typically cost about a penny, the same price as the pamphlets detailing methods of religious self-interrogation as discussed above, or the price of general admission to the Globe, where one might watch dramatized interrogations of Joan Pucell, Angelo, or Shylock. Also in competition with these histrionic and textual entertainments were sermons, which were generally more popular than the playhouses, and public tortures and executions, which made spectacle of the hostile interrogation and confession of the condemned. Craik emphasizes that the division between the legal and the religious in prisoners' confessions was indistinct: "The legal and spiritual functions of the confession were closely linked, for admissions of guilt were understood both to confirm the sentence and to save the soul of the accused" (7).

Many of those who suffered public interrogation, torture, and execution in Renaissance England perished because they disputed official religious doctrine. Elizabeth and James charged religious dissenters with treason, but a fierce debate raged over the precedence of duty to secular authorities versus duty to conscience. Recusant pamphlets argued that doctrinal dispute was an issue of conscience, *not* of treason against the state. Accordingly, the state competed not only for audience attendance at public executions, but also for the political loyalty and for the consciences of the audience. Under Elizabeth's rule, the state usually portrayed the condemned as "traitors" rather than as "obstinate heretics," as Mary's and Henry VIII's regimes had done during the persecution of Protestants in the early and mid-sixteenth century (See Allen 135, 138; Foxe *passim*). The state attempted—not always with success—to choreograph public interrogations and executions in order to justify their violence, and to prevent martyrs from using their position as objects of fascination to express dissent.

Foxe, recounting the martyrdom of George Marsh, writes, “he began to speak to the people showing the cause of his death, and would have exhorted them to stick unto Christ, but one of the sheriffs prevented him” (Chapter 16). The sheriff, by suppressing Marsh’s speech, attempts to control the message the spectacle communicates to the audience. William Allen, a Catholic martyrologist writing in 1567, charged Elizabeth’s agents with “falshood & forgerie,” and “altering in the sight of the simple the causes of [the martyrs] death & punishment, & making their lives & actions odious to the world” (Chapter 16) Allen claims to be correcting the record and reporting their cause accurately. Despite the authorities’ best efforts, Allen’s complaints indicate that they could neither predict nor control the spectators’ reactions, making the spectacles potentially dangerous for the state to use as propaganda. *Julius Caesar* dramatizes the danger of using a mutilated body as a prop for rhetorical dogma, representing the volatility of a mass audience and its susceptibility to cooption when Antony addresses the Roman people after Caesar’s murder. Antony, like the sixteenth-century martyrologists, hopes to win his audience by extolling the life and *res gestae* of the victim.

Protestant and Catholic martyrologists emphasize the reactions of the audience to the sufferings of the victims. Allen, describing the martyrdom of the Catholic M. Paine in 1582, writes, “no man seemed in countenance to mislike with him, but much sorrowed and lamented his death, who most constantly, catholically and meekely died to rise triumphantly his innocency known to al the world” (*Briefe* 136). Foxe similarly describes audience reactions throughout his *Book of Martyrs*. Consider, for example, the following interrogation and execution of Dr. Ridley and Master Latimer: “They lifted up both their hands and eyes to heaven, as it were calling to witness of the truth: the which countenance they made in many other

places of [the Catholic chaplain's] sermon, where as they thought he spake amiss" (Chapter 16). The martyrs' gesture of appeal to divine power is simultaneously a theatrical appeal to the human audience, much like the repertoire of gestures used by actors in Shakespeare's time (for which see Gurr). The description of their suffering in Foxe implores the *readers'* sympathy for one of the martyrs:

Some said, that before he was like to fall from the stake, he desired them to hold him to it with their bills. However it was, surely it moved hundreds to tears, in beholding the horrible sight; for I think there was none that had not clean exiled all humanity and mercy which would not have lamented to behold the fury of the fire so to rage upon their bodies. Signs there were of sorrow on every side. . . . (Chapter 16)

The spectators *present* at such scenes were only the innermost circle of an immense, fiercely contested audience accessible through oral report and the distribution and sale of publications like Allen's and Foxe's books. These reports influenced readers through their depiction of spectator reactions at the scene. Shakespeare, we shall see, similarly influences the reaction of his playgoers through the actions of characters onstage.

The accused traitors and heretics struggled with their interrogators not only to retain control of their own conscience while suffering agonies, physical and psychological, but also to reach the conscience of the audience—including their interrogators. The stymied religious authorities who examined Anne Askew, a Protestant martyr, sent a group of her friends to interrogate her about what troubled her conscience in the hope of obtaining evidence of her heretical beliefs, but she repeatedly insisted that her conscience was at ease (Askew 21). Askew used

various techniques to frustrate her inquisitors, including reversing control of the interrogation:

Then I asked him if hee were sure that it was true what he had spoken. And he sayd he knew wel, the booke was of John Frithes making. Then I asked him, if he were not ashamed to iudge of the booke before he saw it within or knew the truth thereof? (20)

According to her journal, Askew then opens the book for him, and when he can find no harm in it, she reproves him and he leaves. The marginalia of the text label the inquisitor, simply, “a lyar” (20). The marginalia are textual asides that direct the readers’ interpretation of the events in the narrative much as Shakespeare directs the playgoers’ sympathies with dramatic asides.

Askew’s interrogators of course return, and she again mocks their questions with questions of her own: “I would not answer (I sayd) til such time as they assoyed me this question of mine. Wherefore was Steven stoned . . .they sayde they knew not. Then said I againe no more would I tell them what it was” (23). Askew later reveals a selective memory to her interrogators. She also responds to an inquisitor’s (marginalia: “a tempter”) repeated questions about the sacrament with repetitious ambiguity, telling him she “believes as the scripture instructs her” (24). Such dialogues make a farce of official inquisitions, and are therefore particularly favored in the martyr book. Foxe reports line for line one such dialogue:

Matthew Plaise, weaver, a sincere and shrewd Christian, of Stone, Kent, was brought before Thomas, bishop of Dover, and other inquisitors, whom he ingeniously teased by his indirect answers, of which the following is a specimen.

Dr. Harpsfield: Christ called the bread His body; what dost thou say it is?

Plaise: I do believe it was that which He gave them.

Dr. H: What was that?

P: That which He brake.

Dr. H: What did He brake?

P: That which He took.

Dr. H: What did He take?

P: I say, what He gave them, that did they eat indeed.

Dr. H: Well, then, thou sayest it was but bread which the disciples did eat.

P: I say, what He gave them, that did they eat indeed.

A very long disputation followed, in which Plaise was desired to humble himself to the bishop; but this he refused. (Chapter 16 "Persecutions in the diocese of Canterbury")

In the excerpt above, Plaise, of lower social status than the Bishop and other members of the inquest, uses "indirect answers" to make a mockery of the sham proceedings. Shakespeare is also fond of interrogation scenes in which lower-class characters rhetorically best their socio-economic betters, such as the two murderers' interrogation of Clarence in *Richard III* and Hamlet's interrogation of the gravedigger.

When, despite (or perhaps because of) her clever tactics, Anne Askew stands condemned at the stake, she refuses to follow the authorities' script; when they ask why she is of so few words she replies, "Salomon sayth, that a woman of few words is a gift of God" (25). Askew's use of humor demonstrates her composure, her

knowledge of scripture, and her contempt of the secular authority that has condemned her. The joke also perforates the aura of seriousness with which the state invests the spectacle by directly stimulating the laughter of the audience. Suddenly, the interrogators are victims, fixed targets of the surrounding spectators' laughter. Offered the king's pardon if she should recant, she answers that she "did not come hither to refuse her Lord and Master" (Foxe Chapter 16). The ambiguity of her answer accomplishes several effects, the first of which is to again make her interrogators the public butts of her wit. She also avoids explicitly *refusing* the pardon, thus stepping outside of the state's script for the spectacle, which offers the accused two choices: the promise of life according to the crown's religious dictates, or immolation. If the victim chooses life, it is a propaganda coup for the authorities; if she refuses the pardon, she plays a stock character in the state's dumbshow, dramatically confirming before the spectators her "obstinate" role and symbolically "choosing" the horrifying ending of the spectacle. The offer of the pardon exemplifies a strategy typical of hostile interrogation: The authorities offer limited choices, each a cul-de-sac. *Which* decision the accused makes is irrelevant, but the correspondence of the process with official ritual is crucial. Askew creates an option outside the script, abiding by her conscience and leaving the guilt for her execution in the state's hands.

Askew's retort that she will not refuse her "Lord and Master" reverses the relative positions of the interrogators and the victim. Instead of accepting or refusing the choice offered by the officials, she instead baits the officials with a choice of two semantic traps. If they take her words, "Lord and Master" to signify King Henry VIII, they must pardon her, though she has not recanted; yet, if they take her words as referring to the "Lord of Lords," then suddenly the aura of the state's power, which

had encapsulated the victim, is itself encompassed within a broader, celestial sphere; the King no longer supreme ruler, his agents no longer acting under the aegis of absolute power. Shakespeare dramatizes—in a more rhetorical and less oracular dialogue—a similar confrontation in *Richard III* when Clarence answers the two murderers sent by Richard:

First M: What we will do, we do upon command.

Second M: And he that hath commanded is our king.

Clarence: Erroneous vassals, the great King of Kings

Hath in the table of his law commanded

that thou shalt do no murder. Will you then

Spurn at his edict, and fulfill a man's? (1.4.188-93)

Clarence, like Askew, turns a question of treason and secular loyalty into a question of religious duty: If the interrogators follow Richard's orders, they break the First Commandment.

Askew, by forcing the King's minions to *choose* between ambiguous meanings, makes them accountable for their actions to their own consciences, before the volatile audience of spectators, and before God. She embeds within their conscience, and that of the audience, a scruple—the key to her insistent ambiguity—a question as to why they are burning a human being: they do so *not* because she has espoused a heretic doctrine; is it not because she has refused to provide an answer in accord with their terms? Did her question provoke doubt? Roland Frye documents that both Luther and Perkins agree; in Perkins words, “whatsoever thing is done with a doubting conscience is a sin” (180-81). Askew confesses, in the moments before her incineration, her belief in the Christian God and gospel. How

would the spectators, how would the readers judge? Upon her martyrdom the marginalia pronounce a laconic judgment: “No heretike” (35).

Regardless of the spectators’ understanding of the lack of evidence against Anne Askew, recent studies show that “moral judgment is more a matter of emotion and affective intuition than deliberate reasoning”—although “reasoning can play a restricted but significant role.” As mentioned above, the spectators at the interrogations and executions of martyrs usually “wept,” according to Foxe and other martyrologists. The combination of the emotionally traumatic atmosphere and the frequent inability of the authorities to extract confessions of guilt made the public pre-execution interrogations a double-edged sword for the state, which ironically sought to use the spectacles as propaganda.

The audiences present at the spectacles, and the readers who witnessed them through the filter of the martyrological tracts, took intense interest in the experience of the sufferer, mentally projecting themselves into the martyrs’ roles. Foxe repeatedly characterizes the martyrs in his work as “good examples.” In one case,

Mr. Hauke’s friends, terrified by the sharpness of the punishment he was going to suffer, privately desired that in the midst of the flames he should show them some token, whether the pains of burning ere so great that a man might not collectedly endure it. This he promised to do; and it was agreed that if the rage of the pain might be suffered, then he

should lift up his hands above his head. (Chapter 16 “Thomas Haukes”)

The interest in the experience of the martyrs was in part practical, considering the bureaucracy of inquisition, interrogation, torture, imprisonment, and execution. Even those on the state’s side of the ideological divide could not count on continuity of official policy: plots, rebellions, and assassination attempts—whether real, staged, or symptoms of political paranoia—contributed to uncertainty, as did the question of succession. The circular emphasis on these themes in the *Henry VI* plays suggests the duration of the reversals in religious policy during the early and mid-sixteenth century, and their accompanying persecutions, in collective memory.

Further, many were undecided as to which side to take, and, as we have seen, zealots waged war for their consciences in public sermons and published pamphlets. Because conscience occupied a liminal zone between the mundane and the divine, parties of diverse ideology showed acute interest in witnessing trials of conscience in others: Were their convictions true? Would a sign manifest of the sufferer’s righteousness? The state’s interrogation of the martyr became an interrogation of the individual viewer and reader, who related the martyr’s suffering to personal convictions, stimulating an internal dialogue of questioning the self. The playgoers in the English Renaissance were, in these respects, particularly attuned to translating the spectacle or drama of interrogation into self-interrogation.

Interrogation scenes occur in Shakespeare in varied and overlapping forms and contexts. Some are interpersonal, such as Portia's interrogation of Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice*; some interior, such as Hamlet's soliloquy; and others, such as the interrogation of Clarence in *Richard III*, integrate aspects of both. Although it is possible to define specific settings for some of the scenes—whether legal, religious, or dramatic—such settings are rarely exclusive. Interrogation scenes that formally resemble official/religious interrogations and executions appear in the *Henry VI* histories, but the scenes also resemble, and may simultaneously allude to, dramatic, biblical, and iconographic depictions that the audience would have found equally engaging. Even bear-baiting events provide obvious parallels. The following analysis of the interrogation of martyr-figures in the *Henry VI* histories begins to explore the interaction of spectacle with spectators, interrogation with conscience in performance.

## 2: HENRY VI

### *Sympathetic Martyrs*

In *III Henry VI* act one, scene four Margaret, Clifford, and Northumberland capture the Duke of York, who has rebelled against Henry in an attempt to claim the throne. Northumberland baits York, mocking him as the Duke resists his captors: "So doth the cony struggle in the net," (63). The simile suggests physical envelopment, a recurrent theme in Shakespearean interrogation scenes. It also alludes to illicit game hunting, which, though widely practiced, carried severe penalties, and to the "cony-catching" pamphlets that recounted crimes, interrogations, confessions and punishments of petty larcenists.

When Margaret adds a symbolic religious and political dimension to York's physical and metaphoric envelopment by encircling his head with a crown of paper in scorn of his desire to usurp the crown from Henry, the scene becomes conspicuously metadramatic. By staging the mock-crowning, a scene familiar in religious drama, Margaret casts herself in the role of Jesus's tormentors.

Marg: Why art thou patient , man? Thou shouldst be mad,

Stamp, rave, and fret, that I may sing and dance.

Thou wouldst be fee'd, I see, to make me sport.

York cannot speak unless he wear a crown.

A crown for York, and, lords, bow low to him. (90-95)

The scene, which takes place on a molehill, contains several major elements that recur in later Shakespearean interrogations and have clear relations to the interrogation of traitors and heretics discussed above: physical bonds or

compulsion, the individual surrounded and interrogated by hostile adversaries, physical and or mental torture. It is also not inconceivable that theatrical spectators would sense here an affinity to the bears next door, tied to the stake and attacked by dogs. In addition, more subtle themes occur in the molehill scene that find repeated expression in similar Shakespearean dramatizations: Conflicted loyalties; the power of the “patient” sufferer as protagonist of spectacle; the sensory or expressive deprivation of the victim; the ironic exchange of tokens, and the incongruity of such tokens with characters’ expectations. In the molehill scene, for example, York sought to wear the crown as King of England, and Margaret mocks him by crowning him with a paper coronet.

The conflation of political, religious, and dramatic spectacle is also evident: York is a traitor, although he has legitimate claim to the throne. His mockery is, in one sense, a public pre-execution spectacle such as those recounted by the martyrologists. As is obvious, the scene also alludes to the Crowning with Thorns—an ironic representation in which York plays the role of Jesus. Emrys Jones notes that the history of York’s capture and mocking alludes to the baiting of Christ before his crucifixion, and Jones finds dramatic precedents for the scene in “The second *Trial before Pilate* continued; the *Judgement of Jesus*,” a scene from the York plays, and in *The Buffeting (Coliphizacio)* in the Townley Plays. In *The Buffeting*, Caiaphas “indulges himself in a long diatribe against Jesus, who keeps silent” (“Passion” 335). York remains “patient” (90) in the first part of the molehill scene, despite Margaret’s taunts. The purpose of her interrogation is to provoke him to speak. The martyrological works make repeated references to the “patience” of the martyrs—a quality essential to their beatific depiction. Further, Margaret’s reference to being “fee’d to make [her] sport” (93) may allude to bearbaiting, and makes explicit

metatheater of the molehill scene. The disjunction between the bestial (a cony caught in a net or a tied bear) and the patient, suffering Son of God—renders York human. Such conflation of the bestial and the sublime characterizes Shakespeare's depiction of interrogation victims in other plays and seems essential to his ambivalent representation of the human being as "paragon of animals."

York is and is not a beast or the anointed: *II Henry VI* dramatizes his ambition for power, his treason, and his cruelty and pride. In act three, scene one he speaks the following soliloquy:

Faster than springtime showers comes thought on thought,  
 And not a thought but thinks on dignity.  
 My brain, more busy than the labouring spider,  
 Weaves tedious snares to trap mine enemies.  
 Well, nobles, well: 'tis politicly done  
 To send me packing with an host of men.  
 I fear me you but warm the starved snake,  
 Who, cherished in your breasts, will sting your hearts.  
 'Twas men I lacked, and you will give them me.  
 I take it kindly. Yet be well assured  
 You put sharp weapons in a madman's hands. (331-47)

Here York seems a mad scheming villain, comparing himself to a spider and a snake. As the soliloquy continues, the audience hears a frightening York say he will "stir up in England some black storm / Shall blow ten thousand souls to heaven or hell" (349-350). He instigates Cade, who resembles John Mortimer, "to make commotion, as full well he can" (358). He intends to make trial of his support by fomenting a rebellion that will result in massive slaughter. In *III Henry VI*, he breaks,

in scene two of the first act, the oath that he took in the first scene of the play to let Henry “quietly reign” (15).

At the same time, York fights with attractive bravery for the right of kingship that he believes he holds. Before he is captured he describes the battle: “And when the hardiest warriors did retire, / Richard cried, ‘Charge and give no foot of ground!’ . . . we charged again—but out, alas— / We bodged again” (1.4.14-21). The spectators have heard the arguments in support of York’s claim to be rightful King of England (1.1.120-151) and perhaps recognize the complexity and moral ambiguity of Henry’s and York’s competing claims to legitimacy of title. In fact, with a touch of comedy, Shakespeare problematizes the succession in *II Henry VI* (2.1.9-52) by intentionally confusing, in an ostensibly logical way, the moral ramifications of the power struggle, which are more intricate and difficult to disentangle than the genealogical lineage of York and the historical saga of Lancaster and Plantagenet—or, metaphorically, the conflicts in Elizabethan England between obedience to civil authorities and obedience to conscience. In an aside to the audience in act one, scene one, Henry himself acknowledges, “my title’s weak” (135), and he agrees to disinherit his own son. York’s crowning evokes the young playwright’s metatheatrical awareness of dramaturgy, specifically of costuming, of roles, and of representation, particularly as designed to implicate audiences.

Margaret’s interrogation and jokes, from her own perspective, confine York to caricatured and diminutive instances of his desires (most concretely, the molehill and the paper crown). The audience, however, is situated physically and epistemically outside, or rather beyond, the frame of the stage. The process of interrogation in the play calls forth memories of interrogations in other contexts—particularly the interrogation of martyrs. At this point the sphere of the stage-world becomes

particularly permeable, and the process on stage may infiltrate the minds of the spectators, allowing them to see the pattern to which Margaret's interrogation belongs and the role that she is playing. The dissolution of this barrier begins at lines 151 and following when Northumberland, himself a bitter enemy of York, says, "Beshrew me, but his passions move me so / That hardly can I check my eyes from tears." The other members of the onstage audience—Clifford and Margaret—are contemptuous or spitefully merry, and Northumberland's words are a jolt that shatters the growing tension between the emotions of the interrogators and the sympathy of the playgoers for the suffering York. When Margaret asks, "what—weeping-ripe?" (173) the question applies as much to the playgoers as it applies to Northumberland, to whom it is addressed.

The pity of Northumberland is particularly moving because of the intensity of his hatred for York. In act one, scene one when York takes the chair of state in the Parliament, Henry reminds Northumberland to hold to his vow to take vengeance on York for his murder of Northumberland's father (53-55). Northumberland says, "if I be not [revenged on York], heavens be revenged on me" (57). When Clifford suggests, "my gracious lord, here in the Parliament / Let us assail the family of York" (64-65), Northumberland is ready to act: "Well hast thou spoken, cousin, be it so" (66). Henry prevents him from making "a shambles of the Parliament House" though (71), and negotiates with York. When Henry disinherits his own son to make peace with York, Northumberland contemns him, "be thou a prey unto the house of York, / And die in bands for this unmanly deed" (186-87).

In *I Henry VI*, it is *York* who plays the role of inquisitor, interrogating and mocking Joan Pucell. The scene is familiar in many of its elements: When Joan begs for a stay of execution, claiming she is with child, York jokes that the maiden's

conception is a miracle, alluding to the divine conception and thus casting himself as Herod: “Now heaven forbend—the holy maid with child?” (5.6.65) and “forsooth she is a virgin pure!” (5.6.83). This is a parody of St. Joseph’s response to Mary’s pregnancy. York also calls Joan “strumpet” (5.6.84), whereby we again see Shakespeare juxtaposing the base with the sublime, whore with Virgin, just as he juxtaposes cony with Christ in *III Henry VI*. York’s cruelty to Joan in destroying both her and, possibly, her unborn child is a reflection of the scene in which York plays the role of victim, and Margaret—in some senses a doppelganger of Joan Pucell—the role of inquisitor. York and Warwick make sport of interrogating Joan about the identity of her unborn child’s father, and Shakespeare specifically mentions René, the father of Margaret, as the possible father of Joan’s unborn child (5.6.78). According to Renaissance conceptions of kinship, Margaret would be consanguineous with Joan if René had intercourse with Pucell. York condemns the child to remain enveloped in Joan’s womb, thus consigning it to execution with its mother, rather than stay her execution, as required by law.

Joan is an enemy of the English, and Shakespeare depicts a scene in which she conjures “fiends” (5.3). She may be a traitor, a heretic, or both. York’s joke about her promiscuity, “why, here’s a girl; I think she knows not well— / There were so many—whom she may accuse” (80-81), may have provoked some laughter. Joan routs the English and even fights with Talbot, though, in act one, scene seven:

Talbot: A woman clad in armour chaseth men.

*Enter Joan la Pucelle*

Here, here she comes. (*To Joan*) I’ll have a bout with thee . . .

Joan: Come, come, ‘tis only I that must disgrace thee.

*Here they fight*

Talbot: Heavens, can you suffer hell so to prevail? (3-9)

The skirmish ends in a draw. The audience might have admired a character who could match the heroic Talbot in hand-to-hand combat. York's interrogation of Joan is an indeterminate struggle between the two for the spectators' identification.

Although York plays a Herod-figure, Joan is something between a caricature of a heretic and a holy martyr.

In *III Henry VI*, Margaret, the alter ego of Joan, plays the role of victim when York's son Richard murders Margaret's child, the Prince Edward. The scene mirrors that of York's baiting, and includes references to the murder of Rutland (for example, Clarence's line, "untutored lad thou art too malapert") (5.5.32). The allusions to Rutland's murder remind the playgoers of Margaret's viciousness to York in the molehill scene, when she throws York a handkerchief dipped in his young son's blood. Audiences might sense that she is a parody of St. Veronica, the woman wiping the brow of Christ:

. . . where is your darling Rutland?  
 Look, York, I stained this napkin with the blood  
 That valiant Clifford with his rapier's point  
 Made issue from the bosom of thy boy.  
 And if thine eyes can water for his death,  
 I give thee this to dry thy cheeks withal.  
 Alas, poor York. . . . (79-85)

Margaret is certainly not a virgin-figure, and her tormentors specifically allude to her implied affair with Suffolk. However, her lament for Edward renders her not only the

figure of the pietà, but the archetype of mother. Despite her viciousness, Shakespeare evokes pity for her:

[Caesar] was a man—this, in respect, a child;  
 And men ne'er spend their fury on a child.  
 What's worse than murderer that I may name it?  
 No, no, my heart will burst an if I speak;  
 And I will speak that so my heart may burst. (5.5.55-59)

When Margaret begs that her captors kill her, Edward prevents Richard from carrying out her wish: “Hold Richard, hold, for we have done too much” (5.5.42). When she faints, Edward even orders that attendants “use means for her recovery” (5.5.44). Although Edward refuses to kill Margaret because he believes it would be excessive and possibly pities her, Clarence refuses to do so out of cruelty: “By heaven, I will not do thee so much ease” (5.5.70). Thus Shakespeare presents a variety of responses among the characters in the onstage audience, creating uncertainty and questions in the minds of the playgoers about actions in their own lives as well as those represented onstage.

The martyrologists emphasize the intense emotional reactions of the spectators at public interrogations and executions, and we have mentioned the power of such spectacles to move the conscience of the audience and to create “flashbulb” memories. Shakespeare’s playgoers, “highly responsive in sentiment,” also wept at his plays (Gurr 226). In a 1592 pamphlet, Thomas Nashe reports, “ten thousand spectators at least, (at several times)” wept at performances of *I Henry VI* (qtd. in Salgado 16). Henry Jackson, in a letter dated 1610 describing a performance of *Othello*, writes, “non solum dicendo, sed etiam faciendo quaedam lachrymas movebant. At vero Desdemona . . . cum in lecto decumbens spectantium

misericordiam ipso vultu imploraret.” [some things—not only by speech, but also by action—compelled tears. In fact, Desdemona . . . when lying down on the bed implored the sympathy of the audience with her very face.] (qtd. in Salgado 30). The actor’s facial expression of misery sends a shockwave of pathos through the audience. The ambivalent portrayal of the characters involved—both interrogators and victims—and the varied responses of the audience onstage evoke in the playgoers interrogation regarding their own responses.

In the *Henry VI* plays, Shakespeare uses the interrogation scene as a mirror, in which he reflects the images of three different characters in the same role: Joan of Arc, York, and Margaret. The cycle of wrong and revenge continues because the lead interrogators do not learn from watching the suffering of their victims, but understand suffering only when they experience it themselves—a point not lost on anyone who watches these scenes in the theater. The dramatic interrogations of Joan, York, and Edward/Margaret meld with the playgoers’ experiences with official interrogations and executions staged for the public. They also connect with the martyrological pamphlets, religious dramatizations of the interrogation and martyrdom of Christ, and visual art of various genres.<sup>1</sup>

Shakespeare uses the interrogation scenes discussed above as structural axes of great emotional power around which the plots of vengeance and reversal turn. The interrogation of Joan marks the end of the wars in France; the

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<sup>1</sup> Maerten van Heemskerck’s *Christ Crowned with Thorns* (figure 1) depicts graphically the “patience” of Christ enduring his interrogation and torture. Woodcuts similarly portray the powerful serenity of the sixteenth-century martyrs. Consider the scene of Thomas Cranmer’s immolation (figure 2) in which the Archbishop, his face resolute, holds his hand in the fire “wher With he subscribed before” to a spurious confession in an attempt to save his life (Haller 121). The stained-glass windows of cathedrals also depicted, in translucent images that painted the stone floors with ethereal light, the passion of Christ or the martyrdom of St. Peter (Pevsner 358).

interrogation and crowning of York, the victory of Lancaster; and the interrogation of Margaret and young Edward, the triumph of the Yorkists. In each of the scenes, the interrogator will later play the role of victim. Richard of Gloucester, the lead interrogator at the conclusion of the *Henry VI* series, endures interrogation and censure from his own mother in *Richard III*, just as he will later endure the torment of those he has wronged in the dream-scene before the battle at Boswell.

Each interrogation in the tetralogy is a dangerous dialogue in that it marks the zenith of one character's fortunes and the nadir of the other's; yet the roles remain in contention, indeterminate. The triumphing character fails to learn from the spectacle of the victim's suffering, and instead learns only through *playing* the victim's role. The characters involved in the interrogation scenes adumbrate the future reversal of roles: The sufferer suggests that the interrogator will one day stand in the victim's place, whereas the interrogator avoids direct understanding of the victim's suffering—a contrast that some spectators note and inevitably reflect upon.

The correspondence of the scenes gives them extended meanings when considered in relation to one another. Joan begs York in vain to spare her and her unborn, and Margaret mocks York and taunts him with the loss of his innocent son, Rutland. Similarly, Margaret learns how terrible it is to lose a child, not through witnessing York's suffering, but only when Richard of Gloucester murders her own son, Edward, before her eyes. The scene is a meme that Shakespeare repeats again and again, with subtle variations, in the War of the Roses plays: the interrogator questions the victim, but only in order to define his or her own role and power by way of contrast or difference.

The audiences onstage show varying degrees of sympathy for the interrogated victim. The onstage audience shows no sympathy at the interrogation

and martyrdom of Joan, the French enemy of the English. At York's interrogation, although Margaret and Clifford are hostile to the captured Duke, Northumberland weeps for him, eliciting the playgoers' sympathy with his own: "Beshrew me, but his passions move me so / That hardly can I keep my eyes from tears" (1.4.151-52). When Edward and Richard interrogate and kill the young Prince Edward at Tewksbury, King Edward prevents Richard from killing Margaret, and Margaret, as we have seen, mourns for her son in an intensely moving speech.

The interrogation scenes discussed above depict the reversal of roles and the moment of realization—the instant that a character experiences an unexpected answer to a momentous question. The interrogation spectacles are archetypal to the time, and, as the martyrological pamphlets suggest, contemporary audiences possessed particularly developed faculties for mapping the interrogations of the protagonists of spectacle onto the dialogic processes of the conscience.

#### *Defining Questions*

In *III Henry VI* 3.1, after the victory of Edward, Henry VI is apprehended by keepers of a deer park. The First Keeper refers to Henry as a deer in a metaphor similar to Norfolk's comparison of York to the cony caught in the net: "here's a deer whose skin's a keeper's fee: / This is the quondam king—let's seize upon him" (22-23). To the Keeper's demand, "say, what art thou that talk'st of kings and queens?" (55), Henry answers equivocally with a riddle and a confrontational question:

More than I seem, and less than I was born to:

A man at least, for less I should not be;

And men may talk of kings, and why not I? (56-59)

The Keepers further interrogate Henry about his crown: "But, if thou be a king, where is thy crown?" (61) He answers, again in riddle form, that his crown is "content" (64).

Dramatically, the scene begins a contest of wits that Henry wins, yet his captors nevertheless arrest him:

Well, if you be a king crown'd with content,  
 Your crown content and you must be contented  
 To go along with us; for as we think,  
 You are the king King Edward hath deposed;  
 And we his subjects sworn in all allegiance  
 Will apprehend you as his enemy. (66-71)

In the stichomythia that follows, Henry appeals first to the Keepers' consciences: "But did you never swear, and break an oath?" The Second Keeper answers equivocally, "never such an oath" (73), a claim Henry refutes by reminding the men that they were his own sworn subjects when he reigned as King of England. "And tell me, then," he says, "have you not broke your oaths?" (79), the First Keeper answers Henry's casuistic question from a practical perspective: "No; / For we were subjects but while you were king" (80).

At one level, the interrogation is a contest for Henry's safety in which he appeals to the conscience of his interlocutors with questions that, as we have seen, had immediate social relevance. At another level, the dialogue is a contest for the playgoers' goodwill: Henry and the two Keepers exchange jokes, each verbally maneuvering to make the other the butt of the playgoers' laughter. The appeal to the keepers' conscience is a simultaneous appeal to the audience's conscience: Can secular mandates contravene sacred duties? Is it necessary to ferret out those, such as the Jesuit priests during Elizabeth's reign, who are hiding from the authorities? Is the earthly reward of a "keepers ransom" for informing worth the flesh of a human being? We have seen the relevance of such questions, and the stakes

involved for dissenters. Shakespeare drills these questions into the playgoers' minds and hearts through the humorous repartee between Henry and his interrogators.

Henry wins the moral contest rhetorically by revealing his interrogators' hypocrisy: Although they claim the moral justification of their oaths of loyalty to King Edward, they have already violated a similar oath to Henry. However, a legitimate ambiguity remains: The keepers' retort that Edward's kingship absolves them of their oaths to the deposed king has a certain ironic validity. Henry VI himself had held the throne because his grandfather had usurped it. The scene creates an indeterminacy between practical self-interest, lofty moral sentiment, and traditional primogeniture: an indeterminate zone in which both parties appear to be deceiving themselves, or at least finding moral justification for their own material interests. To whom do the subjects owe allegiance? Although Henry is in many ways a sympathetic character, the scene does not necessarily answer these questions, but it interrogates the playgoers, challenging them to reach views on the characters' verbal struggle.

Henry responds passionately and dramatically to the First Keeper's matter-of-fact rejoinder that Edward, not Henry, is the de facto king: "Ah, simple men, you know not what you swear!" (82). The self-righteous allusion to Jesus's words of forgiveness for his executioners is an appeal for the sympathy of the keepers and playgoers: Henry is playing the role of Jesus. Unable to escape his captors physically, he stages a drama in which he casts himself as holy martyr: "But do not break your oaths; for of that sin / My mild entreaty shall not make you guilty" (89-90). The ploy is not effective with the spectators onstage, who repeat their profession of loyalty to King Edward. Although Henry is generally a sympathetic character, his

exasperated eruption, disdainful of “you common men” (88), reveals not only pride but also lack of appreciation for the precariousness of his own claims to legitimacy.

Both the interrogators and the respondent in the scene use the same verbal tactics: direct questioning, equivocation, humor. Both also answer moral questions with practical questions, and vice versa, inextricably entangling the two. Henry’s promise to “humbly yield unto” (100) the keepers and King Edward is one of his most sympathetic moments, although the necessity of his obedience and his first reaction of contempt for his captors bring into question the sincerity of his humility.

Henry’s attempt to play the role of Jesus fits with many of the play’s themes and emphases of plot: Henry is a king more spiritual than his warrior father, and not as suited to the practical requirements of governing in the worldly realm. He was born a king, yet there is in his lineage the taint of a transgression—which he confesses in 1.1.135—that his blood in some way expiates. At the same time, he seems oblivious to the hypocrisy of his own self-serving moralizing, which audiences can both shun and personally sympathize with. The scene is similar to the scene of York’s capture in that both men play roles that situate them in the familiar human territory between captured beasts and martyred saints. The necessity of Henry’s acquiescence to his captors is perhaps a moment of understanding for him, in which the relationship between the practical and the spiritual becomes clear.

Although the characters compete for the audience’s sympathies, their struggle is a dramatization of a question the playwright demands of the audience. The more ambiguous the struggle and the more doubt the dialogue creates, the more the playgoers become involved with asking themselves the same questions. The playgoers may then internalize the irresolution on stage as questions of conscience.

The scene with the game-keepers defines an important question of the plays, although it does not arrive at an answer. Rather, it interrogates the audience by dramatizing a dispute in a way that invites further consideration of the dilemma: What duties do citizens have to their sovereigns? Are practical and religious obligations separable, or are they inextricably intertwined? The scene provokes serious consideration by empowering the game-keepers, who are intermediaries between the playgoers and King Henry. The two “common” keepers have power over the fate of the King and the course of the play, and their lengthy dispute with the monarch draws the audience into consideration of the justice of the men’s actions.

Although the interactions of the characters in the *Henry VI* scenes reveal psychological aspects of the protagonists, they do not dramatize internal states of mind. In contrast, *Richard III* presents scenes in which the interrogation onstage dramatizes the internal processes of the conscience.

### 3: RICHARD III

#### *Clarence's Dream*

In act one, scene four of *Richard III*, Clarence tells his warder about a terrible dream from which he has just awakened. The dream, whose imagery prefigures that of Ariel's song in the *Tempest*, is an illusion in which Clarence is forcibly submerged underwater, feels his lungs bursting, and journeys to further torment in the afterlife—a premonition of the following scene in which Richard's assassin stabs Clarence and holds him in the butt of malmsey. As Harold Brooks notes, Shakespeare “had not, as he had for the fact though not the substance of Richard's fearful dream on the eve of Bosworth, any warrant in his historical sources” (145) for Clarence's dream, which is a proleptic psychological depiction of the murder scene that follows.

Clarence dreams that the spirits of those he has wronged confront and interrogate him: “What scourge for perjury / Can this dark monarchy afford false Clarence?”<sup>2</sup> (50-51), demands Warwick, Clarence's father-in-law, whom he betrayed at the battle of Barnet.

Bain Tate Stewart explains the dream according to principles of Renaissance psychology:

In dreaming, the imagination is moved to activity by a variety of secondary causes, in accordance with which dreams may be divided

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<sup>2</sup> There is a dramatic precedent for Clarence's dream-journey in the *Octavia* lines 100-131, (Brooks 146) although no interrogation occurs in Octavia's dream. In Clarence's dream, Warwick's question has religious, dramatic, psychological, and official connotations.

into two types: first, those which arise from within the dreamer himself, from the physical constitution of his body—often from the dominant humor—or from the thoughts and desires of the waking mind; and second, those dreams which arise from the action upon the human imagination of external, supernatural forces, either divine or demonic.

(199)

Clarence's dream contains both natural and supernatural elements, situating it in an indeterminate zone in respect to this dichotomy. The functions of the conscience, as "God's spy" situate in "man's bosom," similarly take place in a zone that is both divine or supernatural and practical, in the most literal sense of the word, because it relates to judging action. The scene reveals how Shakespeare manipulates the interrogation scene to represent the internal processes of the conscience. The retelling of the dream does not, however, directly probe the audience as effectively as does the encounter between Clarence and the assassins.

In the murder scene that follows the dream-ekphrasis, two murderers sent by Richard debate the merits of conscience. When the first murderer expresses his fear of being "damned for killing him, from the which no warrant can defend me" (107-109), the second murderer threatens him with Richard's retribution, reminds him of their promised financial remuneration, and interrogates him about his resolve—"Where's thy conscience now?" (123)—to which the first replies, "in the Duke of Gloucester's purse." The second murderer calls conscience "a blushing, shamefaced spirit, that mutinies in a man's bosom" (75-77), and the first murderer eventually succumbs to his arguments. Their grotesquely amusing disputation dramatizes the internal psychological struggle of conscience experienced by the hesitating criminals.

Shakespeare's dramatization of the scene resembles a mini-morality play, and when the murderers stop to "reason with" (158) Clarence, against Richard's express instructions—thus providing a moment of comic relief—the resulting interrogation is suspenseful and complex. The two hired men confound Clarence by pointing out that they are doing to him what he has done to others. In summary, the assassins decide that all of Clarence's arguments against his execution are accusations against him; that every word he utters against the injustice of murder affirms the parity of his execution in reciprocation for his own crimes.<sup>3</sup>

The second murderer, however, who argued so adamantly against conscience at the beginning of the scene, realizes that although Clarence has convicted himself in action and word, "if God will be avenged for the deed, / . . . He needs no indirect or lawless course / To cut off those that have offended him" (211-14). He calls out to warn Clarence when the first murderer is about to stab him, but the warning comes too late to save the Duke. The confusion of the fledgling criminals creates some confusion for the playgoers, who must speculate about why the two assassins switch roles. Their ineptitude imparts to the playgoers a sense of superiority, which in one sense implicates them in the murderers' crime: They fluctuate back and forth between sympathy for Clarence and voyeuristic interest in seeing the crime performed. The first murderer physically submerges Clarence in the butt of Malmsey, enveloping him in the reality of the nightmare dream-sequence recounted at the beginning of the scene. Shakespeare in this way juxtaposes the dramatized interrogation with a fantastic psychological depiction of tormented conscience.

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<sup>3</sup> For a detailed analysis of interpersonal interrogation contests, see the section on *The Merchant of Venice* below.

The first murderer then confronts his supposed partner: "What mean'st thou, that thou help'st me not? By heaven, the Duke shall know how slack you have been" (268-70). Threatened with dire consequences in the earthly sphere, the second murderer answers, "I would he knew that I had saved his brother. / Take thou the fee, and tell him what I say, / For I repent me that the Duke is slain" (271-3). In renouncing the fee and accepting Richard's potential retribution, the second murderer makes a true repentance for his role in the crime. Ironically, though, his arguments convinced the first murderer to go through with it. Clarence's guilt, which plagues him in the dream-sequence, the humor of the two murderers, the confusion of their roles, and the fact that Richard ordered them to murder Clarence make it difficult to centralize responsibility for the crime. The playgoers, observing the scene and vacillating between different responses to it, become somewhat complicit in its outcome.

The scene involves the playgoers and questions their consciences by dramatizing two different and fluctuating responses to a moral and practical dilemma. Although the assassins interrogate Clarence, he interrogates them as well, and his questions represent the internal questions of their doubting consciences. One man carries out the crime, the other repents. The juxtaposition of the two characters onstage engages the audience in the moral dilemma of the situation and demands that they judge what is more important: financial compensation and obedience to a secular ruler or obedience to conscience? The different responses of the two murderers allow the audience to simultaneously condemn and enjoy Clarence's murder.

Shakespeare dramatizes the processes of Clarence's conscience first in the rhetorical ekphrasis of his dream, then in the disputation between Clarence and the

assassins sent by Richard. Clarence's physical submersion in the Malmsey mirrors his psychological submersion in his tormented conscience. The murderers dispute the justice of their intention to kill Clarence among themselves and with the imprisoned Duke himself because of their doubts about its righteousness. The interpersonal and oneiric interrogations in the scene thus dramatize the internal interrogational process of both Clarence's and the assassins' consciences: the internal syntax of the psyche takes corporeal form on the stage, the epicenter of its transmission. The surrounding playgoers translate the doubts and vicissitudes of the characters into their own uncomfortable enjoyment of the play.

### *Richard's Dream*

In act five Richard's dream is a daring experiment, the first independent scene in which Shakespeare dramatizes a character's conscience as an interrogation. Although we have seen that Clarence's dream-scene operates on almost precisely the same model, it depends upon, or at least functions closely with, the dramatized interrogation and murder of Richard's brother Clarence. Exploring the dramatic potential of dramatizing a character's thoughts, Shakespeare returns to the liminal world between sleep, consciousness, the supernatural, and the physical that constituted Clarence's dream. Shakespeare found precedent for the dream in his historical sources but "gave the dream itself an entirely new content" (Jones, "Bosworth" 342). The scene is remarkable because it is inessential to the plot: Richard does not lose because his mind disintegrates. Instead, the scene presents the audience with a psychological model for the interaction of witnessing,

interrogating, confessing, and struggling—nevertheless continuing a process every spectator has sometimes experienced in the world outside of the theater.

In Richard's dream, the spirits of his family and friends, whom he has betrayed, return to haunt him. The vision of Richard's dream is vivid and terrifying, as is the dream of Clarence, and the imagery and themes are closely related.

Richard cries out, "Give me another horse! Bind up my wounds!" (5.5.131).

Shakespeare imagines the battlefield as a vast ocean of men, or of souls—in the nightmare world of the vision, they are interchangeable: Richard rides on horseback, just above the melee. Unhorsed, he is physically submerged in a maelstrom of steel and blood. He trades his own kingdom for the "dark monarchy" to which Clarence journeys in his dream, instead of the Kingdom of Heaven. Richard wakes with the cry of "have mercy, Iesu" (5.5.132), a confession and prayer.

Richard then interrogates himself, his consciousness dividing into multiple voices that alternately accuse, defend, and judge him:

What do I fear? Myself? There's none else by  
 Richard loves Richard; that is, I am I  
 Is there a murderer here? No. Yes, I am.  
 Then fly! What, from myself? Great reason. Why?  
 Lest I revenge. Myself upon myself? (5.5.136-142)

The voices contradict each other and offer conflicting interpretations and advice. The second part of the speech loses its direct interrogative force and becomes rhetorical description of Richard's crisis of conscience:

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!  
 All several sins, all used in each degree,  
 Throng to the bar, crying all, 'Guilty, guilty!' (5.5.147-53)

Richard's description of the processes of his conscience as a proceeding at the bar accords with the casuistical tracts discussed in the introduction. He conflates legal proceeding with religious confession in his invocation "have mercy, Iesu!" at the beginning of the soliloquy. Richard is also acting, performing a spectacle for himself and for the playgoers. The parallel between Richard's dream and Richmond's, which occurs in the same scene, allows the audience to savor the thrill of Richard's terror yet identify with his adversary.

For several reasons, the nightmare interrogation engages the audience much more immediately than does Clarence's dream. Richard, the eponymous protagonist of the play, is a much more developed character. In addition, despite Richard's acknowledgment of his depravity, he "seeks to seduce the audience" (Berry 17), building an uneasy rapport from the beginning of the play. Richard's soliloquies and frequent asides to the audience make the playgoer his confidant.<sup>4</sup> Richard jests about his crimes, perhaps provoking some nervous laughter; the spectator becomes a vicarious participant in Richard's crimes. When the ghosts haunt Richard, they also raise questions in the minds of the audience: How far have the playgoers followed, or in their fantasies anticipated, Richard? How culpable are they for indulging him in their thoughts, flattering him with their laughter? God knows! Like all of Richard's friends in the play, Richard has led the audience astray,

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<sup>4</sup> For a detailed enumeration and summary of Richard's asides and jokes to the audience and a commentary on his seduction of the playgoers, see Berry 17-26.

and his expression of despair resonates with those who fear their own several sins may similarly be beyond redemption.

In the dream scene, Shakespeare dramatizes the internal action of a troubled conscience onstage. The reappearance of the characters Richard has wronged recalls, with a powerful intensity, the numerous scenes in which Richard, with a flourish and a pun, committed heinous crimes as entertainment for his spectators. When Richard interrogates himself, he comes to a sudden and psychologically overwhelming understanding of himself, confessing, "I myself / Find in myself no pity to myself" (5.5.156-57).

## 4: MERCHANT OF VENICE

### *Questioning Interrogation*

We have seen that interpersonal interrogations, such as that of Clarence in *Richard III*, may represent or parallel internal processes of the conscience and interface with the consciences of the playgoers, thus influencing their own mental processes. The courtroom interrogation in *The Merchant of Venice* dramatizes the danger of reversal in interrogation, and, although it too intertwines with the mentality of the playgoers in ways that demand notice, this analysis focuses first on the dynamics of interpersonal struggle in the scene.

In the courtroom drama, Portia, disguised as a legal scholar, begins her interrogation with Antonio: "You stand within his danger, do you not?" (4.1.177). "Ay, so he says," Antonio answers (178). As security for a loan of three thousand ducats, Antonio has pledged a pound of his own flesh to Shylock, the Jewish moneylender whose portrayal in the play is notoriously anti-Semitic. Antonio borrowed the money to help his friend, Bassanio, woo Portia. "Do you confess to the bond?" (178), she asks, to which Antonio responds, "I do" (179). "Then," Portia says, "must the Jew be merciful" (179). The audience onstage—the Duke, Graziano, Bassanio, Salerio, Nerissa (also in disguise) and the magnificoes—observe the proceedings as witnesses to the trial. All of the speaking characters

have clear partisanship for Antonio, but no one objects when Portia gives judgment. The playgoers must have believed it would be wrong to see Shylock prevail, and their concern for Antonio's fate also becomes an internal question: why does no one speak up? A similar anxiety about the implied consent of spectators occurs in *King Lear*, when Cornwall is blinding Gloucester—a tension that culminates when a servant stabs Cornwall.

Shylock counters Portia's plea for mercy by co-opting the interrogation: "On what compulsion must I?" (180). The scene becomes a verbal contest in which Shylock and Portia vie in questioning one another, struggling for the *role* of interrogator and struggling to win the attention, if not the support, of the playgoers. The interrogator, when questioning, holds power over the interlocutor, and the two characters in this scene contest the role by repeatedly challenging one another with inquiries in a dialogue whose structure resembles a riddle contest. Although the interrogator has the advantage of attack, the possibility that the interlocutor may answer the riddle makes playing the role of interrogator both empowering and dangerous. When two individuals contend for the role, each must continue to ask questions, constantly wary of asking a riddle that the other can answer. The challenge is either to provide a decisive answer that destroys the need for further questioning—to deliver an unexpected and devastating reply that wins the audience—or to ask a question that the interlocutor cannot answer without destroying his or her argument.

Portia entices Shylock to place his trust in her and to insist without compromise on obtaining the letter of the law. Portia asks Shylock if he has a scale to weigh the flesh. When Shylock answers that he does and produces the prop, he believes he has won. He casts himself in the role of Justice, standing on the stage

in a situation that mirrors Portia's. While she is a woman dressed as a man (although played by a boy) impersonating a judge, an arbiter of justice. Shylock is a man casting himself in the role of a female figure—Justice—holding high the scale of justice in one arm, a blade in the other. John Doeblner notes, “in the probable source, *Il Pecorone*, the Jew brings no more than a razor” (56). Shylock does not realize that Portia is manipulating him into becoming a close caricature of Justice—and like Justice, Shylock is in a sense blindfolded. Shylock believes that by producing the scale, the physical apparatus requisite to literally make flesh the letter of the bond's script, he will assume the role of power. The visual cues, according to Doeblner's argument, encourage the audience to identify the scene as a variation on Justice versus Mercy.<sup>5</sup> The shifting implications of Portia's words, however, make it difficult to identify her definitively with Mercy: At one moment she tells Antonio to “lay bare” his bosom, at the next she implores Shylock's charity. Why does she mentally torture Antonio? Is someone going to intervene on his behalf? What about his friend Bassanio, who got him into this situation? More importantly, the spectators are trying to figure out where Portia is going, how she plans to trick Shylock; who will prevail? The spectacle raises such questions of moral and practical discrimination for the playgoers.

Bassanio finally does get off his chair and tell Antonio, “life itself, my wife, and all the world” (281-82) he would “sacrifice . . . / Here to this devil, to deliver you” (284-85). Yet Portia's aside immediately undercuts the emotional effect of Bassanio's words on the playgoers: “Your wife would give you little thanks for that” (285-86). Graziano offers to throw in his wife gratis to sweeten the deal, turning a

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<sup>5</sup> For a summary of other sources discussing *The Merchant of Venice* as “an *exemplum* in modern dress,” (Coghill in Bryant 72) see J.A. Bryant, Jr.'s article on the play in *Shakespeare's Christian Dimension*.

supposedly serious judicial proceeding into a farce, and Shylock responds with contempt: “These be the Christian husbands. I have a daughter. / Would any of the stock of Barabbas / Had been her husband rather than a Christian” (292-295).

Shylock’s agelastic remarks are perhaps moving, considering that Lorenzo has recently absconded with Shylock’s daughter—but also, ironically, funny. At this point many of the spectators may have experienced internal emotional conflicts about the scene: anxiety, compassion, humor, doubt. Having witnessed Bassanio profess a love for Antonio that exceeds that for his wife, how will Portia settle the trial? When she declares definitively, “a pound of that same merchant’s flesh is thine” (296), the tension builds. Although there is probably little doubt that Portia will turn the tables on Shylock, there is nothing about her that suggests to the playgoers the figure of Mercy.

When Portia does turn the tables, she uses the scale against Shylock: “if you take more or less. . . .” With her language, Portia reappropriates the scale. In the first part of the scene, Shylock refuses to show mercy (204-5); refuses to accept three times his money because he has sworn an oath to have his bond (225-27); and refuses to provide a surgeon to staunch Antonio’s wounds (259). Portia confounds Shylock by decreeing,

This bond doth give thee here no jot of blood.

The words expressly are ‘a pound of flesh’.

Take then thy bond. Take thou thy pound of flesh.

But in the cutting it, if thou dost shed

One drop of Christian blood, thy lands and goods

Are by the laws of Venice confiscate. (303-308)

The reaction of the onstage audience makes Shylock the target of the playgoers' laughter. Graziano mocks Shylock's words: "O upright judge! / Mark, Jew! O learned judge!" (309-10). When Portia refuses to let him accept three times the bond, Graziano repeats his taunt twice more (315; 320). How many of the Elizabethan playgoers still find the joke funny? The iterative comic interruptions contrast with the serious conflict of the trial and challenge the audience to decide whether or not the context is appropriate for laughter. The comic sphere and the serious sphere coexist, contracting and expanding with the rapid alterations of tone.

Bassanio models a different reaction to the judgment, first trying to give Shylock three times the bond (317), then to return merely the principal (334). As the potential consequences for Shylock become more dangerous, do the playgoers become concerned with or sympathetic toward him? When Portia tells Shylock he stands in danger of his life, is she the figure of either Mercy or Justice?

Prepare thee to cut off the flesh.

Shed thou no blood, nor cut thou less nor more

But just a pound of flesh. If thou tak'st more

Or less than a just pound, be it so much

As makes it light or heavy in the substance

Or the division of the twentieth part

Of one poor scruple—nay, if the scale do turn

But in the estimation of a hair,

Thou diest, and all thy goods are confiscate. (321-29)

As Portia uses Shylock's answers to show that he contrived against the life of a Venetian citizen (355-59); that he refused, in open court, three times his money (335-36); and that he insisted upon having the bond (336), Graziano repeats his

parody of Shylock's words twice more (330; 336): "A second Daniel, a Daniel, Jew!" (330). Are any of the playgoers laughing? Regardless of the playgoers' feelings toward Shylock, the *process* of the trial has become grotesque. Portia answers Shylock's insistence on obtaining the letter of the law with a deviously literal interpretation of the law which she continues to refashion.

After Shylock forfeits the bond, Portia further persecutes him, judging that although he made no incision and renounced the bond, half of his goods are nonetheless confiscate to Antonio, the other half to the state, and "the offender's life lies in the mercy / Of the Duke only" (352-53). How do the playgoers feel at this point? If they expected a dramatization of Justice versus Mercy, Portia now seems as much a caricature of Mercy as Shylock seems a caricature of Justice. Although the anti-Semitic biases of Elizabethan culture make it difficult to ascertain the audience's feelings about Shylock, the legal process of the court has itself become a target of ridicule. We have seen the commonplace comparison between the court and the conscience in the casuistical tracts, and the play, by interrogating the processes of the court, simultaneously questions the internal procedures of the conscience. When Portia orders Shylock, "down, therefore, and beg mercy of the Duke" (360), her official decree differs little from Graziano's sarcastic reaction: "Beg that thou mayst have leave to hang thyself" (361). The irony of the correspondence between the words of the justice and the words of the jester invite speculation about the other ironies: Portia's telling Shylock to remember the Redeemer, not to mention the transvestite costume she uses, makes her a caricature of Justice.

The scene combines three interrogations, or three interrogational functions, into one interrogational contest: one in which the characters implore Shylock's mercy; another, in which Shylock questions the specifics of the bond; and a third, in

which Portia and the others compel him to accept their terms. Instead of depicting a series of interrogation scenes in which characters play the role of interrogator and then victim, as in the *Henry VI* plays, Shakespeare makes the scene dynamic by portraying the moment of reversal—by depicting the apparent ascendancy of Shylock as a set-up crafted by Portia in order to have him play judge to himself. Shylock, who believes he holds a “bond” (204, etc.) and that Antonio stands “within” his danger (177), finds that “the law hath . . . [a] hold” on him (344). The language depicts a sudden spatial and conceptual reversal that transforms Shylock from subject to object of possession. Shakespeare dramatizes for the audience the collapsibility of the characters’ spheres of epistemic power, their plasticity and variability. Which sphere is most encompassing? As Joan Pucell says in *I Henry VI*, “glory is like a circle in the water that never ceaseth to enlarge itself, ‘til by broad spreading it disperse to naught.” Shylock’s sphere first seems to engulf those of Portia and Antonio, then, overly distended, pops.<sup>6</sup>

The process by which characters onstage compel other characters to judge themselves parallels the process Shakespeare uses to trick the playgoers into judging *themselves*: to have them pass judgment on characters, only to realize their own affinities with those characters. In this regard, Shylock’s famous interrogation of Salerio and of the playgoers implores the audience to recognize their shared humanity: “Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions,

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<sup>6</sup> Shakespeare refers to the pound of flesh as bait for fish within the play (3.1.49). The significance of the metaphor becomes clear in the courtroom scene when Portia uses Antonio’s flesh as bait to ensnare Shylock. In turn, Shylock becomes bait for larger fish—namely the theatergoers.

The analogy of bait and fishing also relates to the three boxes in the scenes, the suitors soliloquize about the contents of the boxes. They believe that they have the answer “contained,” whereas the answer actually confines them to their bond. Only Bassanio ignores the bait to correctly select the lead box.

senses, affections, passions . . .” (3.1.52-54). In the same speech, Shylock points out that he has learned the ethic of revenge from Christians (3.1.65-70): “The villainy you teach me I will execute” (3.1.68).

Returning to the courtroom scene, the play stimulates the playgoers’ response to Portia’s judgment through the responses of the characters onstage.

The Duke is aloof and contemptuous:

That thou shalt see the difference of our spirit,  
I pardon thee thy life before thou ask it.  
For half thy wealth, it is Antonio’s.  
The other half comes to the general state,  
Which humbleness may drive unto a fine. (465-9)

Shylock’s reply is brief but sympathetic:

Nay take my life and all, pardon not that.  
You take my house when you do take the prop  
What doth sustain my house; you take my life  
When you do take the means whereby I live. (371-74)

When Portia asks, “what mercy can you render him, Antonio?” Graziano again mocks Shylock, “a halter gratis” (376). Regardless of whether the playgoers found Graziano’s repetitive jokes funny, the juxtaposition of Shylock’s suffering with malicious clowning provokes uncertainty.

How would the courtroom scene have affected the playgoers? Questions about flesh and blood, and their relation to text, pertain to controversies about the sacrament that would have resonated with the audience. Anne Askew, discussed in the first chapter, went to the stake because she refused to render an answer that

satisfied her interrogators as to whether or not the sacrament was literally the body of Christ. The humorous banter of Mathew Plaise relates to the same issue. The topic of forced conversion clearly would have been relevant as well. The scene takes place in a law court, yet evinces aspects of religious drama, and certainly pertains to religious matters. The 1594 trials and execution of Roderigo Lopez (see figure three), a Portuguese immigrant of Jewish family and physician to the Queen, may have given the play particular significance. Camden records the following in reference to the case:

Caeteri pro se nihil, Lopezium subinde corarguerentes. Singuli  
condemnati, et post tres menses supplicio ad Tiburnas furcas affecti,  
Lopezio profitente se adamare reginam perinde ac Iesum Christum,  
quod a Iudaicae professionis homine non sine risu exceptum.

[The rest spake nothing for themselves, many times accusing Lopez. They were all of them condemned, and after three months put to death at Tiburne, Lopez affirming that he had loved the Queene as hee loved Jesus Christ, which from a man of the Jewish profession was heard not without laughter.]

(1594 14)

*The Jew of Malta* was a hit play at the time; perhaps the Duke's sparing of Shylock's life would have disappointed a crowd expecting Shylock to suffer the same fate as Barabbas. Although such an audience would have identified with Portia and hated Shylock, it would ironically be aligning itself with Shylock's worldview in thirsting for his suffering.

Although some claim that *The Merchant of Venice* is a dramatization of Justice vs. Mercy, the play interrogates this simplification.<sup>7</sup> As Lawrence Danson writes, “the ‘mercy’ that Antonio is able to render Shylock is unpalatable” (90). Many playgoers would have been particularly sensitive to, or uncomfortable with, the forced conversion. A.D. Nuttall writes that although the courtroom scene “recalls the medieval *Processus Belial*, as has often been observed, in which the Virgin Mary defends Man against the Devil who lays legal claim to his soul . . . Shakespeare himself darkens the pristine clarity of these ethical oppositions” (283).

The verbal *agon* between Shylock and Portia and its outcome are problematic, particularly in consideration of the case of Lopez, who, accused, prosecuted, and judged by his political rival Essex, received neither justice nor mercy from the English court. The so-called mercy that Shylock receives—they do not execute him, they “allow” him to keep half of what is his, they force him to change his religion against his conscience—surely this is just as much a caricature of Mercy as Shylock, scales and knife in hand, is a caricature of Justice? Was anti-Semitic bias at the time too strong to allow for the appreciation—or at the very least, the comprehension—of this irony, or that of Shylock’s resigned acceptance of the court’s terms when he says, “I am content?” (4.1.391). What sort of judicial process makes one party’s advocate judge, and how do the proceedings of such a kangaroo court reflect upon the state?

Oscillation between these sentiments creates a dissonance that resists resolution. The interrogation scene is a point of departure for the playgoers, a shifting region of instability that continually demands reassessment. The resulting

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<sup>7</sup> J.A. Bryant, Jr. summarizes the work of Israel Gollancz, Benjamin Nelson, and Nevill Coghill relevant to this interpretation. Coghill “describes the play as ‘an *exemplum* in modern dress’ on the theme of Justice and Mercy, the Old Law and the New.”

internal dialogue combines and reevaluates the crucial concepts of the interrogation, but is not able to reconcile them satisfactorily. The dialogue of the interrogatory struggle onstage becomes an interior dialogue of conscience for the playgoers. It is a challenge and interrogation of the processes of interrogation, represented in the form of the legal process. Although the play interrogates the playgoers in part through the caricature of roles, the doubts it raises question the process as much as they question the characters.

## 5: HAMLET

*Hamlet* is a play involving the simultaneous infiltration and envelopment of the conscience of a character (Claudius), as well as a play about infiltrating the conscience of the audience. The mousetrap scene reveals, and revels in, the metatheatricality of the concentric dimension of entrapment in order to engage the playgoers' consciences. The play explores the metatheatrical aspects of the connection and relation between drama and the minds of the audience. Shakespeare is fascinated by the power of spectacle to affect emotion and the ability of drama to virtually bridge the gap between observation and experience. In the recitation scene, for example, Hamlet has a player perform the passage he remembers about Hecuba. "What's Hecuba to him, or he to Hecuba / That he should weep for her?" (2.2.561-62). The subject of Hamlet's soliloquy after the recitation is a self-interrogation as to why, although an actor weeps for the mythic sufferings of a fictional character, he himself, though possessing "cause, and will, and strength, and means" (4.4.), is not able to take action against Claudius.

In the mousetrap scene (act three, scene two), Claudius believes he is the observer of the spectacle, that his surreptitious inquiries into the source of Hamlet's aberrant behavior, and his manipulative ploys to control it through his lackeys, have

succeeded, and that he will now witness the fruition of his plans. In act three, scene one he tells Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to encourage Hamlet's preoccupation with the play, to "give him a further edge, and drive his purpose on to these delights" (27-28). Claudius expects to sit and observe the players, confined to their prescribed roles, as they represent the source of Hamlet's melancholy, while the stage circumscribes and the drama diffuses Hamlet's potential malevolence, transmuting political action to play acting.

Shakespeare concentrates the reversal in one powerful scene—for the play does not unfold as Claudius anticipates. Instead of being the interrogator, the voyeur into Hamlet's mind, he finds that he already knows, all too well, the source of the prince's woes. Claudius is not only the interrogator, the subject controlling the spectacle, but also the object of observation: Hamlet and Horatio observe his reaction to the performance, and he realizes that the answer to his anxiety about Hamlet lies not within Hamlet, but within himself.

The metatheatricality of the scene reflects the multiple layers of interrogation. The interrogation scene is a disruption that emanates through and reconfigures several concentric spheres: the mousetrap play, in which the player king interrogates his wife; the onstage audience, including Claudius; Hamlet and Horatio, who are observing and interrogating Claudius; and the audience of theater-goers. One might argue that the playwright himself is also situated in a separate sphere, observing the audience reaction to his play.

The mousetrap scene (act three, scene two) stimulates the audience to interrogate Claudius: Hamlet's insistence that Horatio give Claudius "a heedful note" (82) during the play alerts the playgoers to do the same during the presentation of the play. When the players act the dumbshow, Claudius does not react. Perhaps he

does not see the show; Ophelia's puzzlement about the mime—"will a tell us what this show meant?" (136)—if genuine, creates doubt as to whether or not Claudius can interpret it. The dumbshow creates tension by focusing the playgoers' attention on Claudius in expectation of a reaction that does not occur, and Claudius's impassivity raises doubts for the playgoers about Hamlet's plan.

The dialogue between Claudius, Gertrude, Hamlet, and Ophelia during the play alternates between moments of tension and humor. Claudius asks Hamlet, "have you heard the argument? Is there no offence in't?" (221-22). Claudius responds to Hamlet's dramatic interrogation with a verbal interrogation of Hamlet. The playgoers, in suspense about who will win the interrogation and what will happen next, consider both Hamlet's and Claudius's states of mind. When Hamlet explains the play to Claudius (225-31), anxiety about the confrontation builds, interrupted by Ophelia's dialogue with Hamlet:

Ophelia: You are as good as a chorus, my lord.

Hamlet: I could interpret between you and your love if I could see the puppets dallying. (233-235)

Hamlet loses patience with the play and expresses the possible frustration of the actual playgoers: "Begin, murderer. Pox, leave thy damnable faces and begin" (239-40). When Claudius rises to leave, it is unclear whether he does so because of the show onstage or because of Hamlet's verbal explanation, which includes details not shown in the performance: "A poisons him i'th' garden for 's estate. His name's Gonzago. . . . You shall see anon how the murderer gets the love of Gonzago's wife" (249-52). The playgoers must question why Claudius calls for lights and leaves the performance—is it what he sees onstage or the words that Hamlet says to him?

The same scene contains Rosencranz and Guildenstern's second interrogation of Hamlet, which, following Hamlet's inability to "keep counsel" about his trap for Claudius, presents the danger that he will "reveal all" to Claudius's spies. Rosencranz, frustrated with Hamlet's sarcastic evasiveness, asks Hamlet, "good my lord, what is your cause of distemper? You do freely bar the door of your own liberty if you deny your griefs to your friend" (325-326). Hamlet replies, "sir, I lack advancement" (327). Hamlet's jokes confine Rosencranz and Guildenstern within a sphere of knowledge accessible to the Prince and playgoers but not to Hamlet's two schoolfellows. Rosencranz continues to press him: "How can that be . . .?" (328). Because the playgoers already know the main cause of Hamlet's distemper and have seen that Rosencranz and Guildenstern are spies for Claudius, they may feel anxiety that Hamlet will betray himself to them. However, curiosity about Hamlet's plans—which he does not reveal even to Horatio (259-79)—undercut fears that Rosencranz and Guildenstern will trick him into confessing. The tension in the scene is not only between the actors onstage, though. As agents of Claudius, Rosencranz and Guildenstern suggest his controlling presence. Although he is not visible onstage, might he not be lurking behind an arras? Rosencranz and Guildenstern are only two of Claudius's agents, and the earlier espionage in the play creates a lingering insecurity that all conversations are being observed, particularly considering the parallel of the play within a play.

When Polonius takes the stage, Hamlet makes short work of him by anticipating his interrogation, seizing the role of interrogator before Polonius begins to question him: "Do you see yonder cloud that's almost in the shape of a camel?" (365). An accompanying gesture may have helped divert the attention of Polonius, as well as the attention of the playgoers, to the "majestical roof" visible through the

open ceiling of the Globe. Both the play within a play and Claudius's interrogation of Hamlet take place through intermediaries or actors.<sup>8</sup> When Hamlet successfully dodges their questions, he banishes the unseen presence of Claudius, which broods over the second part of the scene, and confesses to the audience—an incomplete confession that is also a question about Hamlet's emotional stability and intentions.

The repeated frustrations of the characters' attempts to interrogate each other intrigue the playgoers, compelling them to speculate about Hamlet's and Claudius's thoughts and motives.

The process of the drama engrafts itself with the individual consciousness and conscience, embedding itself inside the viewer's cognitive processes. The interrogation becomes involuted, so that the virtual world of the play envelops the playgoer. It is as if the playgoer becomes hypnotized by watching the swirling patterns within a small bead of glass, in which a reflection of the surrounding world appears.

The religious aspect of this metadramatic interrogation is manifest in Claudius's confession following his interruption of the play. The play induces the confession, but it is a confession without repentance, an expression of despair: Claudius interrogates himself, despairing that he cannot repent when he still possesses the effects of his murder: his crown, his ambition, and Gertrude (3.3.55). He asks himself, "what rests? / Try what repentance can? What can it not? / Yet what can it when one cannot repent?" (3.3.64-66). Shakespeare portrays a complex of links between the spectacle of the theater, the religious world, and the

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<sup>8</sup> Polonius tells Hamlet that he was an actor at the university and played the role of Julius Caesar (100); he repeatedly instigates deceptive "plays," using himself, Ophelia, and Gertrude as actors. Hamlet, frustrated and punning on Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's "play" (339), puts an end to their interrogation by telling them, "though you can fret me, you cannot play me" (359).

psychological world of the conscience. Claudius wants to play the role of repentant sinner, yet realizes the futility of insincere spectacle before an omniscient deity: “there is no shuffling . . .” (3.3.62). The audience, which during Hamlet’s interrogation by Polonius and Hamlet’s schoolmates felt the lurking presence of panoptic observation, now experiences the reversal of this scheme and feels superior enjoying its empowerment of observing and judging Claudius, whose watchfulness of Hamlet they recently noted and probably feared.

Yet, the more deeply the playgoers penetrate Claudius’s condition, the more vertiginous the transition that envelops them. Claudius’s words reveal great suffering and spiritual torment. Although the scope of his crimes is vast, the despair he faces would have been comprehensible. Many playgoers may have felt occasional despair about their own sins. The inescapable omniscience of “God’s spy,” the conscience, reasserts the claustrophobic impression of panoptic scrutiny that presided over the interrogations of Hamlet in the first part of the scene.

That drama could so affect the conscience—that witnessing actions on the stage could stimulate an ineluctable process of self-accusation and conviction that resulted in the “discovery” of sin—was in fact one of the presuppositions and arguments used to defend the morality and suitability of the stage against anti-theatric pundits. Heywood, in an early seventeenth-century defense of actors, writes,

What can sooner print modesty in the soules of the wanton, then by discovering unto them the monstrousnesse of their sin? It followes that we prove these exercises to have beene the discoverers of many notorious murders, long concealed from the eyes of the world. (29)

Heywood proceeds to recount the story of an alleged murderess watching a play

in which a character commits a similar crime. In the performance, the ghost

at divers times in her most solitary and private contemplations, in most horrid and fearfull shapes, appeared, and stood before [the wife in the play]. As this was acted, a townes-woman (till then of good estimation and report) finding her conscience (at the presentment) extremely troubled, suddenly skritch'd and cry'd out Oh my husband, my husband! I see the ghost of my husband fiercely threatening and menacing me. At which shrill and unexpected out-cry, the people about her, mov'd to a strange amazement, inquired the reason of her clamour, when presently un-urged, she told them, that seven yeares ago, she, to be possest of such a Gentleman (meaning him) had poisoned her husband. (31)

The play is an interface that activates a mental process within the spectators. Heywood's metaphor of "print[ing] in the soul" relates to impressing wax and to printing type, each of which involves the transfer of a physical pattern into a different medium. Type becomes text—as the letter blocks become the text of pamphlets—and may then disperse to a wide audience where their patterns make mental impressions. Heywood sees in the action of drama a translational process analogous to the production of physical tokens such as seals and text. The mousetrap scene, however, emphasizes the variability and unpredictability of any audience's responses and the bi-directional nature of the dialogue of conscience between audience and drama.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Roland Frye relates that a performance of *Hamlet* enacted by the King's Men for James I—not of course the premiere of the play,

Hamlet, like Claudius, confesses only to the audience, and his confession is actually a question to bait their interest and sustain suspense. “O heart!” he says, “let not ever the soul of Nero enter into this firm bosom” (3.2.383). If Claudius’s reaction to the play confirms the Ghost’s word and affirms Hamlet’s purpose of revenge, why is he visiting his mother instead of seeking out the King? And what will happen when he, perturbed and harried by the interrogations of Claudius’s spies, confronts her?

The mousetrap scene—Hamlet’s interrogation of Claudius by presenting a dramatization of the king’s fratricide—achieves uncertain results. Although Claudius believes he is interrogating Hamlet through his suborned lackeys, Rosencranz and Guildenstern, Hamlet intentionally shocks the King in order to observe his reaction. In doing so, however, he reveals as much to Claudius as Claudius reveals to him: Claudius does not publicly confess to murdering his brother, but he does determine

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held the mirror up to the present moment in an striking manner . . . King Claudius and Queen Gertrude sit in their State at the rear of the trestle stage and watch a Player King and Player Queen perform for them in the Great Hall of the palace of Elsinore. Directly facing Claudius and Gertrude, in a perfect mirror arrangement, King James and Queen Anne sat in their State in the Great Hall of Hampton Court watching, down the aisle formed by trestle seats on both sides of the hall, the King’s Men perform Hamlet. (32)

The virtual, contained world of the play and the physical enclosure of the audience compete for dominance, the processes of the play infiltrating the cognitive procedures of the spectators.

The details of the plot had particular relevance to King James and his family history, and many playgoers would have compared the conformation of this Scottish history, well known in sixteenth-century England, with the play. Mary Queen of Scots, James’s mother, reputedly had an affair with David Riccio. Mary’s incensed husband, the Lord Darnley, murdered Riccio and threatened the Queen. Darnley himself fell victim to assassination in 1567, when “Darnley’s body was found unclad, lying *in horto* . . . strangled” (Frye 38). Suspicion fell upon the Earl of Bothwell, whom Mary wed three months later. She “was hastily condemned by pope and kings alike” (Frye 39). Mary fled the open insurrection of her subjects to England, where Elizabeth imprisoned her, and “a succession of substitute fathers, stern guardians and demanding tutors” raised James as a Protestant (Frye 39).

to send Hamlet to England as quickly as possible. After the mousetrap play Claudius interrogates himself, but he is not able to make a confession that will lead to salvation. The scene prolongs the anxiety of the playgoers about the outcome of the scene: Will Hamlet reveal his plan first, or will Claudius confess?

An equally complex reversal occurs in the closet scene (act three, scene four) when Hamlet and Gertrude interrogate each other. The audience of playgoers expects the queen to interrogate Hamlet in accordance with the instructions of Polonius, who conceals himself behind the arras. Hamlet immediately reverses her intended interrogation, probing his mother's conscience about the murder of Hamlet's father. Frye notes that both Catholic and Protestant sources advocate the practice of "shriving," or assisting in "bringing sinners to repentance" as Hamlet does in the closet scene (158). Before Hamlet can take Gertrude to task, however, Polonius cries for help and Hamlet slays him, thus eliminating Claudius's agent of espionage. Hamlet's sudden violence creates a jolt of terror among the playgoers, a fear that the Prince will harm his mother, especially given his apprehension of doing so in act three, scene two.

The numerous reversals and frustrations of the onstage characters' attempts to "play" upon each other, themselves, and God through interrogation result in increasing dramatic uncertainty. Throughout the play Hamlet repeatedly frustrates the attempts of Claudius to learn the secret of his changed behavior through the King's agents or pawns, Polonius, Rosencrantz, Guildenstern—even Ophelia and Gertrude. Ironically, Hamlet reveals most about the cause of his distemper to Claudius during the enactment of the very device he believes will ensnare the King. He comes closer to confessing to Claudius than Claudius does to confessing to him. As for Claudius's reaction, it is more than a "blanch," but far from proof beyond a

reasonable doubt. Hamlet's dramatic interrogation of the state in the person of Claudius thus proves double edged. Claudius's interrogation of himself is similarly frustrating because the King realizes that he cannot "shuffle" his way around an omniscient deity. The interrogations provoke audience reactions that oscillate between amusement at Hamlet's sarcastic evasiveness and anxiety about his safety; between repugnance at Claudius's despair and a spectator's sense of hopelessness of receiving pardon for his own sins.

The interrogation between Gertrude and Hamlet results in similar reversals and complications. Hamlet expects to shrive Gertrude for her sins, yet he himself murders Polonius during the interrogation. He literally has blood on his hands when he reviles Claudius for killing his father. Similarly, Gertrude, who expects to question Hamlet, must endure an interrogation that turns her gaze to the "inmost part" of her. The emotionally intense scene may also have caused playgoers to interrogate themselves, fearing the consequences of their own sins.

Of course *Hamlet* features many other interpersonal, internal, and mixed interrogation scenes, a list of which would include almost every scene in the play: Gertrude's interrogation of Hamlet, Polonius's interrogation of Laertes through his man Reynaldo, Claudius's interrogation of Laertes, Hamlet's repeated interrogations of himself, etc. The complex and unpredictable responses of the characters in *Hamlet* to interpersonal and self-interrogation increase the playgoers' interest in the characters' mental states. By creating uncertainty about the characters' intentions, the play interrogates the playgoers, challenging them to understand the mental and moral state of several characters simultaneously. Each interrogation is also an opportunity to create interest as the audience questions why characters will interpret and respond as they do to new and changing observations for which several

interpretations are valid. The repeated emotional reversals destabilize the playgoers, causing anxiety about the characters and questions and fears about their own sins and prospects of salvation.

## 6: RECONSIDERATION

Conscience, according to Renaissance conceptions, was a dialogue—a self-interrogation and internal process of control—and, as such, a process for whose control various discourses—political, religious, dramatic, and economic—competed. The phenomenon of dramatic interrogation in sixteenth-century England exemplifies a nexus of such discourses and human cognitive processes. State and religious institutions could not control what every individual believed, but they did influence the issues of contention and the processes of the dialogue. The penitent zealously examining his conscience brought his actions to trial not in the virtual law court of Demosthenes or Matlock, but at “the Barre.” The threat of burning at the stake did not compel Foxe’s or Allen’s martyrs to recant; yet, the public interrogation of martyrs at their executions defined the *questions* that the audiences asked each other and themselves about their beliefs. The staged interrogations produced an outward ripple effect—in the form of polemic pamphlets, publications, and sermons—which itself resulted from the *inner* infiltration of the authors’ consciousness.

If institutions could broadly program a mode of examination and decide the terms of contention, they depended on agents to implement and disseminate the processes through interrogational spectacles. Such spectacles were dangerous in that they required interpersonal contests staged before emotionally volatile spectators, who focused intently on understanding the beliefs and righteousness of the accused as matters of great consequence to their own decisions and actions.

on understanding the beliefs and righteousness of the accused as matters of great consequence to their own decisions and actions.

The staged and scripted nature of the spectacles nevertheless allowed room for improvisation, and, in consequence, potential reversals. As stated above, Anne Askew punctured the aura of the state's authority by transposing the frame of reference of her interrogation at the stake from the secular to the divine sphere.

Shakespeare's interrogation scenes dramatize, and in some cases satirize, the process of interrogation and the interaction of interrogators, victims, and spectators. In order to be effective, the drama must engage the audience's emotions, connect with their world and concerns; must therefore stimulate an expansion of perspective that transcends the drama on the stage. The drama interrogates the audience, thus stimulating the audience to interrogate the protagonist and the play. In the *Henry VI* plays, Shakespeare portrays the varied reactions of audiences onstage to the interrogation and torture of victims. The complexity of the victims—who are simultaneously flawed and sympathetic—and the changing emotions of the characters onstage provoke the playgoers to question the act and relate it to similar interrogation scenes within the play, the series, and the broader sphere of other media.

In *Richard III* Shakespeare dramatizes the internal processes of the conscience. The onstage portrayal of the interior processes of Richard's mind infiltrates the minds of the playgoers, subtly involving them in Richard's crimes through humorous asides. Vicariously implicated in Richard's spree of atrocities, the audience interweaves the form of Richard's tortured self-interrogation with its own bad conscience.

The courtroom scene in *Merchant of Venice* creates suspicion about the process of interrogative discourse. Even in consideration of the anti-Semitic prejudices of Renaissance England, if the scene is meant as a dramatization of Justice versus Mercy,

neither prevails in the procedure. Portia is a disguised advocate for Antonio and defeats Shylock by exploiting gaps in the written text of the law. Regardless of the contemporary audience's satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the *outcome* of the trial, the scene encourages spectators to realize ways in which the process is a farce and encourages a satiric perspective of distance.

In *Hamlet*, interrogation scenes are junctions where dramatized interrogation and psychological contemplation coalesce. The mousetrap scene and the interpersonal interrogations in which Rosencranz, Guildenstern, and Polonius question Hamlet, dramatize a competition between Claudius and Hamlet to understand one another's minds. The interrogation in Gertrude's closet dramatizes the enlargement of her moral comprehension and realignment of her moral perspective. The dramatic models of interrogation, epiphany, and confession depict constantly shifting models of human thought: placing characters in confrontational situations, such as the interrogation in Gertrude's closet, is a crucial factor in imagining how the characters react, in creating their virtual psychologies. The scenes, in turn, stimulate the audience of playgoers to consider the minds of the characters on stage.

Shakespeare continues to portray interrogation scenes throughout his career, often changing the specifics and underlying models. *Troilus and Cressida* contains a scene in which Troilus, Ulysses, and Thersites spy on Diomedes's interrogation of Cressida. The element of espionage recalls Ophelia's interrogation of Hamlet, but the hidden observers speak to each other during Cressida's and Diomedes's dialogue. Troilus's emotional reaction to the scene, in juxtaposition to Ulysses' circumspection and Thersites's jokes, creates a dissonance of emotions in the

spectators. Consider the following excerpt, in which Thersites's asides contrast with Troilus's raving denial:

Ulysses: What hath she done, Prince, that can soil our mothers?

Troilus: Nothing at all, unless that this were she.

Thersites: (*aside*) Will a swagger himself out on's own eyes?

Troilus: This, she? No, this is Diomed's Cressida.

If beauty have a soul, this is not she.

If soul's guide vows . . . (5.2.136-142)

The perspective fluctuates between that of Troilus, who extends the consequences of Cressida's crime to encompass all women, and Thersites's, who steps outside Troilus's sphere of understanding by addressing the playgoers directly.

The interrogation of Paroles in *All's Well* is unusual in many of its particulars: The Lords Dumaine and Bertram stage a mock capture of the braggart soldier (4.1), who has promised to retrieve a drum from enemy territory (3.6). They blindfold Paroles and use counterfeit accents to convince him they are foreigners. The capture scene begins with Paroles interrogating himself about why he has vowed to recover the drum,

being not ignorant of the impossibility, and knowing I had no such purpose? I must give myself some hurts, and say I got them in exploit. Yet slight ones will not carry it. They will say, 'came you off with so little?' and great ones I dare not give. Wherefore, what's the instance?  
(4.1.35-39)

Although the scene is unique, other scenes include both internal and interpersonal interrogation, as occurs, for instance, in *Richard III* and *Hamlet*.

*Measure for Measure* is a study of interrogation in disguise, which relates, as we have seen, directly to Renaissance conceptions about the conscience as “God’s spy.” Roy Battenhouse relates the play to the Atonement story, in which “a sovereign disguises himself in order to visit his people and reform them” (172). A similar model occurs in *Henry V*, when the disguised King interrogates his subjects on the eve before the battle of Crecy.

*Othello* dramatizes, in addition to the courtroom interrogation of Desdemona and several interpersonal interrogations between Iago and Othello, Desdemona and Othello, Roderigo and Iago, and others, the internal interrogation of Othello in act five, scene two. The entire play can in fact be seen as an internal interrogation and struggle within Othello’s conscience. Several internal interrogations occur in other plays, most notably perhaps in *Hamlet*. Othello’s internal interrogation is a self-trial and condemnation of conscience between, as in a morality play, the interrogating angel and devil of mankind.

*King Lear* includes several interrogation scenes, a few of which are particularly powerful in their ability to affect audiences. Lear’s interrogation of the disguised Edgar in act three, scene four is noteworthy in that Lear attributes all of Edgar’s miseries to afflictions that pertain to Lear: the cruelty of his daughters. In act three, scene six of *The History of King Lear*, the King stages a mock-trial of Regan and Goneril. In this scene, Edgar’s aside provides a cue for audience reaction: “My tears begin to take his part so much / They’ll mar my counterfeiting” (54-55). Edgar, despite the compulsion to restrain his tears in order to prevent the others from seeing through his Bedlam beggar disguise, nevertheless weeps for the King’s misery. In act three, scene seven Cornwall interrogates Gloucester before tearing out one of his eyes. The cruelty of Cornwall and Regan interrogates the

conscience of the audience onstage and of the playgoers. The servant who takes action and stabs Cornwall out of sympathy for Gloucester allows the playgoers to see an onstage character intervene.

In act three, scene two of *Winter's Tale*, Shakespeare stages a judicial interrogation in which the accuser and judge are the same person. The model is familiar from *Merchant of Venice*, and recurs in *Henry VIII*, when the King tries Katherine. In *Winter's Tale* Leontes's interrogation of the divine sphere through consultation of the oracle of Apollo parallels his interrogation of his wife. The oracle's exoneration of Hermione contrasts markedly with Leontes's unjust condemnation, making the playgoers aware of the discrepancy between the two spheres and creating questions about their relation to one another. In act two, scene four of *Henry VIII* Katherine interrogates Henry, who has staged a trial to which she has been called. By questioning the King and refusing to participate in the process of the trial, she literally walks out of the confines of its circle.

Interrogation in Shakespeare is an interface between concentric layers of interlocutors and audiences. The interaction of these spheres of awareness and of values transforms their relation to one another, often with dizzying results. The questions are disruptions that ripple through the spheres they contain and those which contain them. Often Shakespeare conjures in the innermost sphere a reflection of the majestic roof which reverses its scope, enveloping the globe within a nutshell and provoking doubt about which one contains the other. The fluctuations of the model lead one to speculate whether Shakespeare does in fact create these concentric spheres for the purpose of building tensions within and between them? Does the disruption and destabilization of uncertainty then perforate them all? And,

if so, how does the dissolution of the spheres then open an unbounded dimension of elusive questions?

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