

## Introduction

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They that are glorious must needs be factious. . . . Honour that is gained and broken upon another hath the quickest reflection; like diamond cut with facets. Bacon *Essays*

Whether we fall by ambition, blood, or lust,  
 Like diamonds, we are cut with our own dust. Webster *The White Devil*

The act of resentment is the touchstone of honour.  
Pitt-Rivers "Honour and Social Status"

In this study I investigate the recurrent fascination of early modern English drama with certain moments of self-construction or identification which I shall call "seizures of the will." I deploy this phrase as a programmatic pun, with multiple elements. I mean to point both to appropriation, the act of grasping, of taking, of violating, of seizing control, and to ecstasy, the thrill or spasm or fit of emotion, of transcendent feeling, that often accompanies the gesture in the plays of early modern England.<sup>1</sup> There is also a subject-object binary: one seizes something else, an external thing, another being, the self as made. I enter upon a construction of these elements because, I believe, historicist analysis must engage the conscious and concrete utility of the category of the *will* for early modern England. This venture is pursued in concert with a more general reappropriation of the category in contemporary social theory generally.

Much of great value has been done in literary studies in recent years to foreground external determinations of individual life in early modern England, but the men and women who lived out their complex lives then used the notion of personal will quite energetically to construe those lives. In endlessly debated matters of religion (free will and predestination), social order (obedience and rebellion, social mobility and subversion, crime and punishment), gender ideology (women's willfulness, the sexual will), and family structure (parental authority, infidelities), the category of individual will played a central role. Whether imputed

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polemically, as recalcitrance or perversion, or used to mark the moralized givens of structure and commitment, the notion of will was accorded enormous explanatory force in the early modern world.

In recent work in early modern studies this term has been subject to much deconstruction. Postwar criticism of English Renaissance literature frequently consisted in blaming willful early modern victims in the name of an “order and disorder” hermeneutic. Such a stance, as Raymond Williams has taught us, generated an authoritative or authoritarian Tradition by selection, for needs specific to the analysts’ own historical situation.<sup>2</sup> More recently, in reaction, many have turned to various categories of large external determination as a way of rescuing early modern oppositionalities from a condescending and obsolescent humanist moralism still at work at four centuries’ remove. (This too, of course, is a practice specific to the conflicts of our own time.) Now that this work is in place it seems desirable to reconsider early modern willing subjects. Those subjects’ sense, itself historical, of their own autonomy demands attention. I have been guided in such attention by what has come to be called “practice theory,” a kind of analysis exemplified by such writers as Pierre Bourdieu and Anthony Giddens. Giddens sees himself as heir to a multi-voiced stream of European social theory whose schools of thought,

with notable exceptions, such as structuralism and ‘post-structuralism’ – emphasize the active, reflexive character of human conduct. That is to say, they are unified in their rejection of the tendency of the orthodox consensus to see human behaviour as the result of forces that actors neither control nor comprehend. In addition (and this does include both structuralism and ‘post-structuralism’), they accord a fundamental role to language and to cognitive faculties in the explication of social life. Language use is embedded in the concrete activities of day-to-day life and is in some sense partly constitutive of those activities.<sup>3</sup>

Regarding such active reflexivity in the conduct of language use and social life, many different kinds of difficult questions can be raised. Much new-historical analysis has been conducted significantly under the sign of poststructuralist thinking, which also problematizes our capacity to achieve “real” historical knowledge (however that might be construed), knowledge of the intentions of others, or of the self. That is to say, much of the productive energy of new-historical demystification sits uneasily with poststructuralist questions of epistemological impasse. Setting aside most of these large questions, I propose to enter the conversation at a relatively concrete level, on the following basis:

The main concern of social theory is the same as that of the social sciences in general: the illumination of concrete processes of social life. To hold that

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philosophical debates can contribute to this concern is not to suppose that such debates need to be resolved conclusively before worthwhile social research can be initiated. On the contrary, the prosecution of social research can in principle cast light on philosophical controversies just as much as the reverse. In particular, I think it wrong to slant social theory too unequivocally towards abstract and highly generalized questions of epistemology, as if any significant developments in social science had to await a clear-cut solution to these.<sup>4</sup>

To see the subject as complexly constructed is not to evacuate it, but to fill it, it seems to me. I propose to watch for the filling of the subject, both *naturata* and *naturans*, as it were: the dialectic of mutual determination between patterns of social construction and the appropriation and reconstruction of those patterns by individual actors, be they playwrights, stage-players, staged characters, or social actors.

In the following pages I will argue, as I did in *Ambition and Privilege: The Social Tropes of Elizabethan Courtesy Theory*, that the struggle to gain or constitute or achieve personal identity was a central concern of early modern England. But my earlier book was on the whole a story of subjection, of what I called, following Kenneth Burke, the performer–audience dialectic. Any attempt to control the courtly audience’s interpretive legitimation of the status of the proffered self, I argued, was doomed conceptually to bow to that audience’s capacity to withhold such legitimation; the ambitious would-be courtier must forever, as it were, submit, subject, the self for approval. Since the courtier seeks to claim a specifically ontological position, as a born (that is, non-made) courtier, his actions may always themselves count (or be counted against him) as demonstrating his need for social transformation. Action here is self-defeating by definition. He who strives to prove himself static, absolute, given, must fail.

In the drama things are somewhat different. The struggle for culturally coded identity certainly remains a central matter, and on stage much emphasis still falls, in epilogues for instance, on submission to audience approval. But I suggest that there is originary force in the conceptually cognate status of identity as made on stage and its upsurge as made on the world’s stage. Giddens has recently argued that the project of self-construction of identity – institutional, social, personal – is itself a central formative moment of late modernity at large. “The self is not a passive entity, determined by external influences; in forging their self-identities, no matter how local their specific contexts of action, individuals contribute to and directly promote social influences that are global in their consequences and implications.”<sup>5</sup> I think we can observe a conscious

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inception of this social project in early modernity, on the early modern English stage.

Located in a London that itself presents, for most English men and women born in traditional rural society, a many-layered spectacle of social variety and change, the dramatic world on stage and the institution of the theater itself epitomize what Giddens calls “disembedding mechanisms”: “mechanisms which prise social relations free from the hold of specific locales, recombining them across wide time–space distances. . . . [such mechanisms] radicalise and globalise pre-established institutional traits of modernity; and they act to transform the content and nature of day-to-day social life” (2).<sup>6</sup> Indeed, to some degree this radicalizing power derives precisely from the freedom of the professional actors from full dominance by a censoring State, from the access to a deniability that comes with speaking words *as* dramatic characters.

Enabled by such inordinate freedom, early modern dramatic characters also often attempt to escape or deny the enclosure of the performer–audience dialectic, in a struggle for identity. As fantasy vehicles for audience skepticism and wish-fulfillment, they consciously embrace achievement, not ascription, as their mode and goal. They attempt to seize access to personal power, not derivative hierarchical permissions. These characters, performing the work of “disembedding,” thus function not only to release (or, under the sign of loss, to disorient or disenchant or maroon), but also, to adapt Göran Therbörn, to qualify.

The formation of humans by every ideology, conservative or revolutionary, oppressive or emancipatory, according to whatever criteria, involves a process simultaneously of subjection and of qualification. The amorphous libido and manifold potentialities of human infants are subjected to a particular order that allows or favours certain drives and capabilities and prohibits or disfavours others. At the same time, through the same process, new members become qualified to take up and perform (a particular part of) the repertoire of roles given in the society into which they are born, including the role of possible agents of social change. The ambiguity of the words “qualify” and “qualification” should also be noted. Although qualified by ideological interpellations, subjects also become qualified to “qualify” these in return, in the sense of specifying them and modifying their range of application.<sup>7</sup>

This is to say, I think, that the early modern theater functioned not only to reinforce dominant ideological frames, but to release the emergent in both subversive and constitutive forms. The spectacle of social roles performed on stage equipped auditors to edit and improvise social roles off stage – roles of all kinds, dominant and subjected alike. And frequently the apparent stance or vector of such edits was less important than the exhibition of improvisation, seen equally in Prince Hal and Iago.

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In this book I will examine a certain characteristic strategy of qualification. The acts of seizure examined below aim less, as the courtier did, to do something *before* others, striving to please an audience, than to do something *to* another, to write oneself man or woman upon the slate of another, to strive to become “the deed’s creature.” This is not to be captured by it, as Middleton and Rowley’s Beatrice was by her suborned murder of her fiancé, but to achieve it, to attempt to secure self-creation. Francis Bacon says that “they that are glorious must needs be factious. . . Honour that is gained and broken upon another hath the quickest reflection; like diamond cut with facets.”<sup>8</sup> Such actions are, all too often, not earning but taking, not persuasion but assault. In short, seizure. *Ecce signum*.

So the orbit of “seizure” embraces not only the actor but the Burkean scene into which he transforms his antagonist, the ripe taking but also being taken, Iago gazing raptly on the loaded bed, and epileptic Othello foaming.<sup>9</sup> And negations of many kinds, both Lear’s potlatch dowries and his banishing divestitures of self and other loved ones, find ready places in the term’s embrace.<sup>10</sup> An ultimate density can be glimpsed in Marlowe’s Faustus, whose final goal or conquest involves more than just selling his soul. For another term that works like seizure is his fetish of ravishment. “Sweet Analytics, ’tis thou has ravished me!” he cries.<sup>11</sup> His own dominations, both achieved and desired, he experiences as ravishing, as one may seem to do when, “aroused” “by” another, he archly says “you look ravishing tonight.”<sup>12</sup> (The notion of rapture, sharing a root with *rape* and *raptor*, conveys something of the same density of subject-object doubling.) The dream of conquest is sometimes experienced as, given voice as, the desire for loss, of self, autonomy, control. Perhaps this is finally aimed at something like Freud’s “oceanic feeling,” at a fantasy of original union, of the subsuming and filling return to enclosure or loss of boundaries signaled by Marlowe’s favorite transcendental orality, “sweet.”<sup>13</sup> Subject and object are to be annihilated.

Normally, however, seizure comes into view in binary interpersonal transactions which aim to transform individuals, and to mark them as who they are. Most of these collisions entail interdependent cathexes of conservative socialized authority and licentious seizure: each investment arouses its opposite and ups the ante, creating a feeling of hyperbolic investment, tending to produce a shift from linkages and alternatives to oppositions, to the seizures that form the plays’ reservoirs of energy. The origins and surplus magnitude of these varied acts of conflict often participate in a complex relation between power and love, implicit in W. H. Auden’s brilliant analysis of practical joking.

Auden speaks of the *lack* that fuels the practical joker, “a feeling of

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self-insufficiency, of a self lacking in authentic feelings and desires of its own.”<sup>14</sup> This lack is often found in the insecure early modern aristocrat, aghast at risk from below at the hands of his structural inferiors. He often degradingly objectified his inferiors in order to gut them of the secure identity they possessed (frequently self-determined by just such acts of resistance and rebellion and imitation), both to deprive them and to appropriate that security for himself. While we no longer speak so readily of “authentic” feelings, Auden’s hypothesis can help unpack the operations of destabilized interpellations, supplies of self or identity from without. These no longer feel doxic, as Bourdieu would say; no longer given, secured, as natural and self-evident.<sup>15</sup> Instead they have become commodities that must be consciously earned, demonstrated – in a word, seized. The insecure joker’s mentality came *from* somewhere: Auden’s pattern need not be simply individual and psychological (that is, ontological), nor the result of victimization by, as it were, another joker, another “individual.” It can also describe a mental space of transindividual origin, typical of the collective early modern “crisis of the aristocracy,” the uneven but widespread loss of confidence in the ruling account of social relations and identities.<sup>16</sup> This shift eventually helped to problematize *everyone’s* senses, collective and individual, of social and personal identity and its constituent origins and grounds of being. This problematic was experienced differently from different social placements, but was, however differently, still experienced as loss, of a kind richly assimilable to Auden’s analysis. Very generally speaking, I suggest, willful gestures of seizure derive from this felt experience of absence or evacuation.

Such actions tend to be read under the sign of a courtly will to power, seen as both origin and end of analysis, and as the inevitable tenor of the scenes of Elizabethan and Jacobean social tragedy. I wish to work somewhat past the opacity of this will to power by deriving acts of seizure from Auden’s originary absence, and entertaining a dialectic of power and love. Auden’s Lack seems to have the inverse shape of an absent or deficient loving Other, an absent presence taking many forms on the stage, whether social, personal, erotic, or parental. Address to this Other was a common early modern reply to the widespread feeling of insecure identity, as endless clamorous references attest, to loving gods and princes and parents and children and lovers and followers, present or absent. Such referents are in fact the normal sources for the provision of identity. But to achieve such ratification or substantiation, to secure such identity, one must cede power to this Other.

I suggest that the recurrent dramatic engagement with the issue of control rests on this correlative foundation of insecurity. The embrace of

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a relationality capable of funding one's ontology seems for many characters in Renaissance plays to have meant a voicing or revealing or acknowledgment of need, experienced as intolerable self-subjecting disabling vulnerability. Such characters seem not to have been able to tolerate anything to be experienced as love, which requires the endurance, indeed perpetuation, of vulnerability. Instead they often strove to seize such funding, by dominating another's will. Jean-Paul Sartre's fascinating exploration of sadism and masochism is useful for exploring such actions.<sup>17</sup> These positions entail either total dominance of or total submission to the other's will: wishing to be the absolute horizon of the other's freedom to choose (to arouse the response, "I can't help loving you") or equating the reality of love with the other's unbounded possession of that freedom (the other's love must rest on free choosing). Early modern drama in the line of Kyd often seems to deal obsessively with this dialectic: not with Sartre's ultimate conclusion, that these positions are irreducibly immiscible and thus that love is impossible, but with complex states of prior struggle.

These struggles foreground mobile states of seizure – possession, imposition, loss – of control. All versions seem extremely threatening. Frequently the openness, the vulnerability, the trust, the "love" that I have proposed as the ground to Auden's figural lacuna, is itself originally felt as loss. Think of Webster's Duke of Brachiano, "fallen" (as we say) for Vittoria: he broaches his predicament to her brother with the words, "Quite lost, Flamineo" (*The White Devil* 1.2.3). Such desire is subjection: opening the self to (and like) a woman is somehow equated to or threatens or produces loss of the masculine self where Brachiano lodges his essence. (Flamineo's comforting response trivializes the threat: "I must not have your lordship thus unwisely amorous" [1.2.38].) Many other male characters are unable to bear even this experience, and choose instead a manipulative isolation, as reserving, securing, and substantiating. For Iago the openly honest are absurd knaves, to be whipped; only those trimmed in forms and visages have some soul. Richard III, oxymoronic lover mocked from birth, is himself alone. Webster's Duke Ferdinand scorns all connections as hard as he can, but cannot completely repress the drive to relation. Kyd's Lorenzo is the original model: of his closest agents he decides, "I'll trust myself, myself shall be my friend, / For die they shall, slaves are ordained to no other end" (3.2.118–19). Trusting others entails vulnerability, so the trusted must be destroyed. Some few others try moving from one position to the other. Hamlet's paralyzing obsession with avoiding even epistemological subjection is relinquished at sea, when he comes to submit to a provident Other in the open and receiving spirit of readiness. Bastard Edmund ends his life of

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retributory string-pulling violations with the plaintive, aggrandizing cry, as his lovers murder each other for him, “Yet Edmund was beloved.”

Of so many of these oscillations of desire we might say what Middleton and Rowley’s Alsemero says to Beatrice, of DeFlores: “There’s scarce a thing but is both loved and loathed” (*The Changeling* 1.1.126). Hunger for the welcoming embrace of positive relationality is intolerable to fill; trust cannot be given, however deeply desired. Those who can’t stand love can settle for control. So many of these characters can only stand to take, to seize control and attempt to extract or extort or force the ratification, the acknowledgment of identity, that so often gets called “love.” They reject the self-opening submissiveness of the courtier, but their strategies of domination are equally doomed to failure. Like Hegel’s Master, they attempt to guarantee such authentication by enslaving it. However,

the master was actually dependent on the slave for his status as master; both in the general society and in the eyes of the slave, the master was recognized as such only because he controlled slaves. What is worse, the master could not achieve the recognition he originally fought for in this relationship because he was recognized only by a slave, by someone he regards as sub-human . . . He needed an autonomous person to recognize his desire as human, but instead of free recognition, he received only the servile, dependent recognition of the slave (13).<sup>18</sup>

Such attempts at self-substantiation in early modern English tragedy vary enormously in details, but a great many of them are, I believe, to be recovered and construed by means of a hungry anger at the self-defeating contradiction within this cultural strategy, of domination felt as an alternative to the loving embrace of an Other.

Such seizures come in many forms, which can help construe the preoccupying material of the analyses to follow. They tend to be marked by subjecting instrumentalizations; they are structured by relation to boundaries, usually though not always through transgression; they trigger major spikes of emotion, for actor, victim, and audience; and they overlap and interact elaborately.

Most of these categories of thrilling seizure of identity are familiar from Shakespeare as well as from the plays examined below. We can begin with gestures of *transgressive sexuality*, invasive or coercive: Claudius’ incest, Othello’s marriage, the Duchess of Malfi’s forcible wooing of her steward husband, Don Andrea’s gloating “in secret I possess a worthy dame” (1.1.10).<sup>19</sup> Closely related, though not always coded sexually, are achievements of *promotion, election, acknowledgment*: Black Will’s ecstatic dispensation of hospitality with the stolen half ox;



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Arden of Faversham's self-hugging ownership of monastic lands; Lorenzo's disdainful "I'll trust myself, myself shall be my friend" (3.2.118), Clare Harcop's hard-wrought betrothal. Another category, what might generally be called *abjections*, personal and structural, is similarly varied: bullying, tortures, subjections to witting or unwitting agency, judgments, the specular dominations of voyeurism.<sup>20</sup> Here we find innumerable specimens: Hieronymo's originary inset play; the mocking staged marriage of Alice and Mosby (with Arden cast as unwitting priest); Lorenzo's stooping friendship with Balthazar, and their repellent specular voyeurism in the arbor scene; Hamlet's stratagems with mousetrap and signet-ring; Iago's smooth managements of Roderigo; Bosola and Ferdinand's masque of madmen; and the Scarborough Butler's enjoyable rescue of the disinherited younger Scarborrows from beggary and whoredom by means of outlawry and trick marriage.

Harsher forms follow. *Humiliations* are often risible, such as the joking death of Pedringano or Black Will's repeated failures to kill Arden; they are also often agonized, as in Horatio's grotesque practical-joke hanging, Scarborough's enforced marriage, and the Husband's inflamed gambler's poverty in *A Yorkshire Tragedy*. Often more essentializing, of both actor and victim, are the many *betrayals of relation*, of trust: acts of repudiation or disbonding, experiences of divestiture, banishment, abandonment. Lear's self-stripping is perhaps the most famous, but the plays to follow offer many variations: the several betrayals by and of Pedringano; the accounting of the vagrancy of Black Will and Shakebag as an experience of expulsion, loss of place; Scarborough's enforced betrayal of his betrothal, and his resultant systemic curse on his family, whom he blames for the enforced marriage; Ferdinand's masterly "neglect" of Bosola; Antonio's flight from his family for safety; and the wide range of adulteries, incestuous gestures, and exogamous sexualities throughout the drama.

*Physical violation* often results (if not itself constituting the humiliation or betrayal). Occasionally we find muted forms, of military conquest or physical supremacy in a crisis of honor, as with Horatio's conquest of Balthazar, the *Yorkshire Tragedy* Gentleman's thorough beating of the Husband, or even Scarborough's threatened pissing in his Guardian's path and drawing on his uncle. Women often suffer physical outrage: Bel-imperia's gagging and imprisonment, the Duchess's torments by madmen. The complex symbolic act of suicide sometimes follows, as for Bel-imperia and Isabella and Clare. Even Hieronymo's vicious biting out of his tongue belongs here somewhere. The most directly criminal forms, purer and more frightening violations, occur more frequently: ultimately in the strong form of murders, often by relations, of children (Horatio, the *Yorkshire Tragedy* children), siblings (Michael's elder brother, Ferdi-

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nand's Duchess), masters or husbands and other superiors (Castile, Arden, Ferdinand), friends and allies (perhaps Don Andrea, certainly Serberine, Antonio, Bosola). The result so often is *revenge*: Bel-imperia's, Hieronymo's, Arden's, Alice's, Mosby's, Scarborrow's, the Husband's, Bosola's.

As this baroque catalogue suggests, *Seizures of the will* looks beyond interrogations and transgressions of the boundaries of social rank. In what follows I will seek to unpack the plays in light of the continuous mutual interactions of four separable ranges of structured and structuring practice, each of which was currently subjected to radical challenge and put to contradictory uses in early modern England. In addition to questions of *social rank* (which remain central), I address intersecting systemic challenges or transformations or deployments of *gender*, *kinship*, and *service relations*.

The ideological struggle over models of social rank in early modern England is now a familiar matter. The land dispersion attendant upon the dissolution of the monasteries, interacting with a variety of other factors, generated an increasingly disturbing sense that status previously constructed as absolute and God-given could in fact be acquired by various kinds of human effort. Conservative control mechanisms such as injunctive courtesy theory proved unreliable strategies, being often appropriated for the counter-movement of increasing change.<sup>21</sup> Linear, "ladder" conceptions of rank competed with the older, clearer (and often nostalgically fictional) essentialist binary structures of aristocratic and subject ranks. Variety began to be typical. Keith Wrightson suggests that

local patterns of social relations would emerge from a particular accommodation between the forces of social *identification* – as kinsmen, friends, neighbours, patron and client, co-religionists, fellow countrymen – and the forces of social *differentiation* – as landlord and tenant, master and man, governor and governed, rich and poor. Both dimensions of social relations would be constantly present as everyday realities. The particular balance between them, however, would vary.<sup>22</sup>

The complex of self-defining vertical and horizontal allegiances (to superiors, inferiors, factional and status allies) had become ever more fluid and confused, varying greatly by context and over time, a ready general field for drift, evasion, opportunity, betrayal, uncertainty, rebellion. And new dramatic instantiations of this turmoil arose: gallants, upstarts, actors, well-dressed students.<sup>23</sup>

Second, the same sort of tectonic shift began to disrupt that most "naturally" grounded of ascriptions, gender. The binary of ascribed and achieved began to disturb the collective sense of proper limits, of the proper shape of the hierarchy of male and female (and related comple-