

Introduction: Thus Conscience

Scenes from Shakespeare

In early modern discussions of conscience, today's reader will find a seemingly endless recourse to metaphor. Time and again, and with notable creativity, writers leave literal language behind in their attempt to capture the workings of conscience. The most common metaphor is pricking, as conscience is said to, in Alexander Hume's words, "torment man with terribil pricks, with fearfull terrors, and intollerable paine" (*ATC* 21). And there are the related images of stings, thorns, and stabs, creating a wounded conscience, so that William Perkins says that "he that goes on to sinne against his conscience, stabbes and wounds it often in the same place" (*DC* Epistle). Also prevalent is the witness, taken from Romans 2:15, where the gentiles have "the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness." So it becomes proverbial to say that conscience "is in steede of a thousand witnesses," as John Woolton has it (*OC* A1v). Or, in Joseph Hall's exponential description, "I can doe nothing without a million of witnesses: the conscience is as a thousand witnesses; and God is as a thousand consciences."¹ Stranger is the metaphor of the worm: "the worme of conscience that never dieth, which wil in a lingering maner waste the conscience" (*DC* 167).² The worm, and the conscience itself, tend to gnaw and bite repeatedly, a metaphor captured in "remorse," which literally means biting again or intensely: "The gude Conscience will remord and bite: that is to say, it

¹ Hall, *Meditations and Vows*, 366–7. Also see Tilley, *A Dictionary of the Proverbs*, s.v. "conscience."

² See *Richard 3*: "The worm of conscience still begnaw thy soul!" I.iii.221, or *Much Ado About Nothing*: "Don Worm (his conscience)," V.ii.84. The metaphor comes from Isaiah 66.24, and is associated with conscience by Philip the Chancellor, *Summa de bono*, in Potts, *Conscience in Medieval Philosophy*, 106.

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will oftimes call to remembrance the sinnes which man has committed, and will accuse, and prick him with an inward pain thairfor" (*ATC* 22).³

Contemporary speech feels thin, even impoverished, in comparison. William Perkins, in the single text *A Discourse of Conscience* (1596), describes the faculty as an arbitrator, a notary, the master of a prison, a little god within, a little hell within, a continual feast, a guide on a pilgrimage, a book, the Lord's sergeant, a paradise upon earth, the human eye, and a ship (*DC* 5, 8, 9, 10, 161, 89, 90, 154, 165, 166, 171, 173). Such flights of metaphor suggest a concerted effort at description. But they also suggest, since the theorists keep trying, that these descriptions consistently fall short. Perkins gives concerted attention in *A Discourse* to conveying what conscience is and how it feels to be within its operations. He is meticulous and systematic, employing a vocabulary rich with terminology inherited from scholastic theology. But theological categories and literal language somehow fail to capture what is really happening. Conscience is felt to escape existing understandings, and so Perkins, and his many contemporaries, turn to the dynamic and imaginative realms of figurative language. The theologian must increasingly reach for the tools of poetry.

If theology turns toward the poetic, then early modern poetry meets it halfway. Look at the detail supplied by Richard III as he finds himself in the grip of conscience. Shakespeare stockpiles metaphors in a remarkable effort to capture how it is with Richard:

My conscience hath a thousand several tongues,
 And every tongue brings in a several tale,
 And every tale condemns me for a villain.
(V.iii.193–5)

Prying open the metaphor of a thousand witnesses, Richard finds a thousand tongues, each with its own damning story. Then, expanding into another common metaphoric association with courts and trials, these witnesses go on to form a clamorous courtroom session:

Perjury, perjury, in the highest degree;
 Murther, stern murther, in the direst degree;
 All several sins, all us'd in each degree,
 Throng to the bar, crying all, "Guilty! guilty!"
(V.iii.196–9)

³ The metaphor received a Middle English translation as "ayenbite," as in the fourteenth-century confessional text, Dan Michel's *Ayenbite of Inwyt*.

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The metaphors would have felt very familiar to Shakespeare's audience, although Richard's desperation mutates them into a poetic scene that is overcrowded and overwhelming. To be in the grip of conscience at this moment is much more than a neat movement from vehicle to tenor. It is to be immersed in a space filled with shouts and insistent accusations, teeming with repeated words and repeated rhymes, at risk of the sudden appearance of grotesquely multiplying tongues and tales and sins. Shakespeare is reinvigorating central but commonplace figures, lodging conscience within the textures of a most dynamic poetics. And the very moving effect is that the poetry begins to capture a psychological dimension – what it feels like for Richard to experience conscience.

The intensity of the poetry pushes toward dramatization, presenting conscience as if in real time. Such a scene of conscience, one actually taking place in Richard's experience and before the audience's eyes, is first rehearsed in Richard's dream, as one by one the ghosts of his victims appear to condemn him (V.iii.118–76).⁴ When Richard wakes, the play shifts from the ghostly tableau to soliloquy, but the overriding quality is still one of acting out a case of conscience in the moment:

Soft, I did but dream.
 O coward conscience, how dost thou afflict me!
 The lights burn blue. It is now dead midnight.
 Cold fearful drops stand on my trembling flesh.
 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. What, myself upon myself?
 Alack, I love myself. Wherefore? For any good
 That I myself have done unto myself?
 O, no! Alas, I rather hate myself
 For hateful deeds committed by myself.
 I am a villain; yet I lie, I am not.
 Fool, of thyself speak well; fool, do not flatter:
 My conscience hath a thousand several tongues . . .
(V.iii.178–93)

Repeatedly, the poetry hinges around the strangeness of Richard's entering into relations with himself – he fears, loves, and hates himself, and

⁴ This is a scene of interest to the theorist of conscience John Woolton, who discusses the historical Richard's dream as revealing the compunctions of conscience, *OC* F11.

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contemplates the absurd possibility of flying from himself. Most of these lines are broken by commanding caesurae that each mark a turn, and often two turns, of thought, as in, “Then fly. What, from myself? Great reason why.” These turns richly attract our attention because they are moments of thinking, internal debates that are actually performed on stage. In a drama of self-reflection, the turns split and double the speaking voice, creating a play between two Richards who meet each other on either side of each caesura. More dialogue than soliloquy, the faculty unfolds in real time. The audience hears and feels the back and forth and back again of the scene of conscience when Richard laments, “I am a villain; yet I lie, I am not./ Fool, of thyself speak well; fool, do not flatter.”

In *The Merchant of Venice*, two years later, a cowardly conscience again takes the stage, and again it is a scene dramatized in real time. As Launcelot Gobbo considers leaving the service of Shylock, the problem takes the form of a debate:

Certainly my conscience will serve me to run from this Jew my master. The fiend is at mine elbow and tempts me, saying to me, “Gobbo, Launcelot Gobbo, good Launcelot,” or “good Gobbo,” or “good Launcelot Gobbo, use your legs, take the start, run away.” My conscience says, “No; take heed, honest Launcelot, take heed, honest Gobbo,” or, as aforesaid, “honest Launcelot Gobbo, do not run, scorn running with thy heels.”

(II.ii.1–9)

The debate continues at length, and by the end Launcelot decides to take the fiend’s advice and run. Once again we are watching a character as he is experiencing conscience, but this time in a psychomachia that sets the faculty at a distance. It is an argument between two personifications, the Fiend and Conscience, which are clearly rhetorical figures. We are not invited into an overwhelming poetic experience, as in the confrontation of self with self performed by Richard, but instead see conscience working as a figural set piece, and so we view it as if from the outside.

This sense of distance fits the comic mood of the play. The clownish Launcelot reports a very stupid debate, in which the experience of conscience is like listening to Dogberry or Elbow:

Well the most courageous fiend bids me pack. “*Fie!*” says the fiend; “away!” says the fiend; “for the heavens, rouse up a brave mind,” says the fiend, “and run.” Well, my conscience, hanging about the neck of my heart, says very wisely to me, “My honest friend Launcelot, being an honest man’s son” – or rather an honest woman’s son, for, indeed, my father did something smack, something grow to, he had a kind of

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taste – well, my conscience says “Launcelot, bouge not.” “Bouge,” says the fiend. “Bouge not,” says my conscience.

(II.ii.13–20)

Conscience here has none of the theological rigor, high rationality, or frightening power that we might expect of it. It is non-serious, hanging catachrestically on the heart’s neck, and spoiling for a fight like a tavern brawler – “Bouge”; “Bouge not.” This clownish conscience is funny because Launcelot’s unmistakable voice pokes through the personifications. He calls them conscience and fiend, but they sure sound like Launcelot, which undermines the rhetorical effect of the personification. If no distinction can be made between Launcelot Gobbo, the fiend, and conscience, then the debate itself is a mere figure of speech, even a clownish view of the conscience and the self.

Launcelot’s psychomachia would be familiar to Elizabethans from several interludes, including *The Conflict of Conscience* (1581), or from the prominent personification of Conscience in *Piers Plouman*. But this is a tradition which Shakespeare’s Richard, and later Hamlet, was in the process of making obsolete. Coming from Launcelot, the psychomachia feels blatantly fictional, like an archaic approach that a current thinker might hardly believe in. Richard’s conscience has a challenging freshness about it, a sense that the poetry is exploring new and modern terrain as it attempts to set up a view of the inside of Richard’s thoughts. But the clown presents conscience, to use the phrase again, as if from the outside. And this external approach is tinged with a sense of irony that marks it as a comic and backward conception, an old-fashioned story that can no longer persuade. Not surprisingly, this comic conscience loses the case:

Certainly the Jew is the very devil incarnation, and, in my conscience, my conscience is but a kind of hard conscience, to offer to counsel me to stay with the Jew. The fiend gives the more friendly counsel: I will run, fiend; my heels are at your commandment; I will run.

(II.ii.27–32)

In this closing moment, as conscience fails, the faculty undergoes a kind of disintegration. It falls away from the coherence of the allegorical voice, toward Richard’s inward struggle. When Launcelot says that “in my conscience, my conscience is but a kind of hard conscience,” the voice of conscience itself becomes the object of an ethical calculation.

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The personified Conscience that has been debating with the fiend is submitted to the judgment of another thing, also called conscience. What is this new conscience? It is something more fundamental than the personified Conscience, and seems to possess more authority, clinching the argument for running. And it is recognizably psychological, functioning by a certain kind of reflexivity: “in my conscience, my conscience is . . .” shows the faculty reflecting back on itself, much as Richard’s does. The poetry pushes past the rhetorical figure, past voice and debate, and brings us to a faculty which finds authenticity in deep inwardness.

In this way, Shakespeare reaches toward a conscience that is both more important than before, and more inchoate. It rules the day, but it also escapes articulation, knowable not by personification or voice, but only by the one word “conscience.” With both Launcelot and Richard, conscience recedes from the scene’s ability to capture it in language. Richard’s turns of thought perform a self-reflection that fascinates. But thoughts are proverbially quicker than action, and the pace of Richard’s turns are perpetually incommensurate with what they are meant to represent. So as the caesura breaks the poetic line, it also marks how we do not quite get at the real workings of conscience. Such inwardness and self-reflection must resist the more external dramatic structures of personification and soliloquy – in fact, these structures’ failures are what tell us that inwardness is there. Similarly, when Launcelot’s voice pokes through the personification, the ridiculousness of the rhetorical figure points to a more authentic, inward conscience. A disintegrating conscience is knowable by our failure to capture it in language.

But if language fails to capture conscience perfectly, the theater very successfully dramatizes the failure. These scenes insist upon a conscience that escapes our ability to conceive and portray, and Shakespeare insists on putting the whole mess on stage. The faculty is the center of attention, but simultaneously resistant to that attention, slipping away while making a show of slipping away. So we know conscience not as a completed trope or a closed system, but as an imperfect and ongoing experience. As an incomplete process, as an experience, it has an inchoate structure which must be enacted rather than described or summarized. So Shakespeare’s scenes of conscience dramatize the faculty in real time.

Real-time staging is given greatest scope in *Hamlet*, which has at its center a play performed in pursuit of conscience. “The play’s the thing,” Hamlet decides, “Wherein I’ll catch the conscience of the King” (II.ii.604–5). And he is right: the *Murder of Gonzago* does activate the King’s conscience, so that his experience of watching theater is also

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the experience of undergoing the pangs of a guilty conscience. Of course, Hamlet's play still cannot fully capture conscience, which must be enacted in a larger tableau. The King watches the play, while at the same time Hamlet watches the King, while at the same time the audience watches Hamlet – so what is really staged is the workings of conscience together with the ineluctably reflective effort of observing those workings. After the play, Hamlet feels certain that he has observed Claudius's guilt. But the King's inability to pray suggests that his conscience, however caught out by the play, remains ineffective. The King's conscience recedes from Hamlet's understanding, and from ours. The tableau, as with Richard and Launcelot, is of a faculty that is central but inaccessibly inward, and that is experienced as a self-conscious effort to study and understand that inwardness.

Dramatizing such a conscience is arguably the goal of the entirety of *Hamlet*, in which the word appears no less than eight times. It is at the center of the play's most famous problem, whether Hamlet will take action or delay. The Ghost's commands are initially delivered as a problem of conscience:

But howsoever thou pursues this act,
 Taint not thy mind, nor let thy soul contrive
 Against thy mother aught. Leave her to heaven,
 And to those thorns that in her bosom lodge
 To prick and sting her.

(I.v.85–8)

Picking up on the common metaphor of the prick in the heart, the Ghost is telling Hamlet not to engage in the business of his mother's conscience. The command to avenge, but not “taint” his own mind, in contrast, is an order for Hamlet to proceed in such a way as to keep his own conscience clean. But the problem is that, for most of the play, and preeminently in the third soliloquy, conscience makes Hamlet not the avenger his father demands, but a coward:

Thus conscience does make cowards of us all.
 And thus the native hue of resolution
 Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought.

(III.i.82–4)

Hamlet avoids a tainted mind only at the expense of the pale cast of thought. His inaction issues from the ongoing experience of his own uncertain conscience.

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As with Richard's coward conscience, Hamlet's is self-reflective. "Thus" in "Thus conscience" points back to what Hamlet has just been thinking, framing what has come before as example. So we come to understand that in Hamlet's iconic musings in the "To be or not to be" soliloquy, we have actually been observing, on stage and in real time, the workings of his conscience. Moreover, "thus" marks the beginning of a commentary on what has just been said, and so is a reflexive turn, as Hamlet thinks about his previous conscientious thoughts. Appropriately for Shakespeare's most self-aware character, Hamlet's conscience works by means of a thinking about conscience – as a consciousness of conscience. Indeed, Hamlet's "Thus conscience" has presented a crux to generations of readers, who have disagreed over whether to read "conscience" as the moral faculty, or as mere awareness.⁵ In early modern English the word conveys both the modern sense of "the moral conscience," and what modernity calls "consciousness." With the two meanings blending regularly in the period, deciding between them, as editors sometimes do, is to miss the most interesting part of the poetry, that conscience here is indistinguishable from the inner landscapes of Hamlet's mind.

The Theorists of Conscience

With this complexity, Hamlet's "Thus conscience" carries Shakespeare well into the realm of religious speculation, to a point where, in the effort to capture the dynamic experience of conscience, early modern poetry and theology make common cause. Indeed, William Perkins's key theorization of conscience reads as a theological counterpart to both Hamlet's and Richard's soliloquies. Attempting, in the opening pages of *A Discourse of Conscience*, to capture how it feels to be an individual in the throes of conscience, Perkins conceives of the faculty in notably dramatic and reflexive terms.

In the first chapter, "What conscience is," Perkins pays particular attention to the etymology of the word, which, as Aquinas and many others had noticed, combines the Latin "con" with "scire," implying a knowing with some other. Perkins asserts that the *knowing with* takes place between the individual and God: "God knowes perfectly all the doings of man, though they be never so hid and concealed: and man by a gifte given him of God, knows together with God, the same things

⁵ Belsey, "The Case of Hamlet's Conscience," 127–48. Hannah Arendt sees the same double meaning in Shakespeare's Richard III, *The Life of the Mind*, 189–90.

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of himself: and this gift is named Conscience” (DC 5). The faculty becomes the location in which takes place the Reformation ideal of private relations with the divine, marking the centrality of conscience to Protestant theology. Further, the shared knowledge is in a dynamic present tense. Conscience is not a static or complete insight, but specifically knowledge which is in the process of being shared and worked out as an ongoing experience.

While Perkins’s conscience is a *knowing with* God, it is also lodged in the inner life of the individual, who “knows together with God, the same things of himself.” So conscience also becomes a knowledge about oneself. Perkins clearly does not dismiss God, but as he proceeds in his opening description, it is self-knowledge which dominates. Describing how conscience “beares witnes of our secret thoughts” (DC 6), he returns to the etymology. The process turns inward, and soon conscience emerges, in a remarkable passage, as synonymous with the process of self-reflection:

For there must be two actions of the understanding, the one is simple, which barely conceiveth or thinketh this or that: the other is a *reflecting* or doubling of the former, whereby a man conceives and thinkes with himselfe what he thinks. And this action properly pertaines to the conscience. The minde thinks a thought, now conscience goes beyond the minde, and knowes what the minde thinks: so as if a man would go about to hide his sinnefull thoughts from God, his conscience as an other person within him, shall discover all. By meanes of this second action conscience may beare witnes even of thoughts, and from hence also it seemes to borrow his name, because conscience is a *science* or knowledge ioyned with an other knowledge: for by it I conceive and know what I know.

(DC 6–7)

This description of the functioning of conscience posits a shifting and dynamic faculty, built out of the instantaneous movements of thinking, and of thinking about thinking. Conscience becomes a “reflecting” – a metaphor which captures the sudden multiplying of images which mirrors initiate. Compared to the static and structural conceptions of the scholastics, which will be discussed in Chapter 1, Perkins’s reflexive conscience represents a profound shift toward an active process, and one that, in its resistance to structure, escapes summary. When “a man conceives and thinkes with himselfe what he thinks,” or when “The minde thinks a thought, now conscience goes beyond the minde, and knowes what the minde thinks,” the faculty becomes very hard to pin down. Self-reflection makes for a flashing and quickly multiplying mental experience, like the strange turns of thought in Richard’s conscience.

A reflection in a glass also creates self-knowledge, and conscience here becomes recognizably psychological, leaning forward toward modernity. When Perkins describes it as a “doubling,” and then “as an other person within him,” he draws near to the Freudian uncanny. And the sense of conscience as self-reflection is exactly what Judith Butler, writing about nineteenth-century theorists, has identified as an origin of modern subjectivity.⁶ Perkins and the theorists of conscience, like *Hamlet*, anticipate such modernity; conscience offers an historically specific framework for understanding early modern subjectivity.

This is felt especially in the fact that “conscience” in early modern English, as seen with Hamlet’s “Thus conscience,” also means consciousness. In some instances, the word makes no reference to the moral faculty, as a modern reader would expect, but means merely inward knowledge or awareness. The *Oxford English Dictionary* gathers many examples, illustrating a long period in which both concepts, inner awareness and the moral faculty, existed in the single word, were often used interchangeably, and shaded into each other in subtle ways. So in one of the *OED*’s examples of conscience as consciousness, Thomas More can write in a letter to Cromwell of “the conscience of mine own true faithful hart and devocion.” As More’s awareness is of inward convictions, it can be felt to be rather near to the moral faculty, though it makes no direct claim on theological valences. Several times in the same letter, meanwhile, More uses “conscience” clearly in its moral sense, including the important claim that Henry “declared unto me that he wold in no wise that I shold other thing do or say therein, than uppon that that I shold perceive myn awne conscience shold serve me, and that I shold fyrst loke unto God and after God unto hym.”⁷ The most interesting thing here is not so much the concepts’ former cohabitation, since that is still to be found in Romance languages, but their separation over the course of the seventeenth century.⁸ The breaking away of consciousness from conscience takes place gradually, but one can point to John Locke’s *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* as a key moment, when Locke articulates a concept of consciousness that is secular. In Locke’s understanding, consciousness becomes a building block of human subjectivity, distinct

⁶ “Conscience is the means by which a subject becomes an object for itself, reflecting on itself, establishing itself as reflective and reflexive.” Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power*, 22.

⁷ *OED*, s.v. “conscience,” def. 7a. *Correspondence of More*, Letter 199, 495.

⁸ For an etymological discussion of conscience and consciousness in several languages, see Engelberg, *The Unknown Distance*, 8–39.