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Religion as a Discursive Weapon in *Richard III*

Abstract

The paper examines the use of religious language in Shakespeare's *Richard III*. More precisely, it analyses how faith is invoked as a means of self-protection, but also to threaten and commit violence. Utterances by various secondary characters are used as examples to point to the diverse and specific ways Shakespeare utilizes the discourse of faith in *Richard III*. However, the majority of the paper focuses on the Duke of Gloucester (later crowned Richard III) as the character who shows the greatest skill in using religion as a discursive weapon, and his sudden inability to publicly proclaim his piety is highlighted as the culminating point of the play.

Keywords

faith, language, Shakespeare, theatre

In *Fools of Time: Studies in Shakespearean Tragedy*, Frye compares Greek and Elizabethan theatre with regard to the importance of gods and religious teachings:

“... Social and political situations have a much more important place in Elizabethan than in Greek tragedy. In Greek tragedy catastrophe is referred primarily to the gods: crimes are offences against them, which is why purely ritual themes, such as leaving a body unburied, are so prominent. Royal figures are certainly important, but their subordination to the gods is always emphasized. Elizabethan tragedy not only had no gods but was also a *secular form avoiding the explicit use of Christian conceptions of deity*... For the Elizabethans, the royal figure or a human ruler tended to become the mythical centre of the action.”¹

¹ Northrop Frye, *Fools of time: studies in Shakespearean tragedy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996), 13, emphasis mine.

While it is certainly true that Shakespeare's *Richard III* shares with his other histories a substantial preoccupation with its royal protagonist as "the mythical centre of action" (evident in the very titles of the plays), the way it utilizes religious imagery and language seems to contradict the idea of "secular avoidance". Quite on the contrary, *Richard III* is a play with a very high word-frequency of the terms such as "God" (150 times) and grace (85 times), even when compared to Shakespeare's other histories and tragedies.² Of course, mere numbers do not mean all that much when talking about a play, where other factors surrounding speech acts are often more telling than the utterances themselves. As Ewbank pointedly reminds us, "Structure is crucial, and *where* in that structure something is said may be as important as *what* is said.... Again, in a play it crucially matters *who* is speaking, and *to whom*."³ The purpose of this paper is therefore to point out the distinct contexts and usages of religious language in *Richard III*, emphasizing the way it is utilized earnestly by some characters and manipulatively by others, and how this disparity contributes to the overall structure and tone of the play. It is important to note that the paper does not view *Richard III* in isolation. Rather, the author's intention is to remark on the play's position in contemporary discourse on religion and its representation in literature. In the words of Stephen Greenblatt, the founder of new historicism, "if an exploration of a particular culture will lead to a heightened understanding of a work of literature produced within that culture, so too a careful reading of a work of literature will lead to a heightened understanding of the culture within which it was produced".⁴ Thus, an analysis of the intricacies of religious discourse in *Richard III* should hopefully produce findings of not only literary, but also historiographic value.

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"GLOUCESTER. *Simple, plain Clarence, I love thee so
That I will shortly send thy soul to heaven,
If heaven take the present at our hands.*"⁵

"GLOUCESTER. Now, by Saint John, that news is
bad indeed.

.....
*God take king Edward to his mercy,
And leave the world for me to bustle in!*"⁶

² Hugh M. Richmond, "Richard III' and the Reformation," *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 83/4 (1984): 511.

³ Inga-Stina Ewbank, "Close reading," in *Shakespeare: An Oxford Guide*, ed. Stanley Wells and Lena Cowen Orlin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 393.

⁴ Greenblatt, Stephen. "Culture," in *The Greenblatt Reader*, ed. Michael Payne (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 13.

⁵ William Shakespeare, *Richard III*, edited by J. Dover Wilson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1961), I.i. 118-120, emphasis mine.

⁶ Ibid. I. i. 137-138; 151-152 emphasis mine.

From the very first scene of the first act, the reader sees a pattern as it begins to form – Richard, Duke of Gloucester (soon to be king Richard III) uses faith and religious motifs differently when alone (marked in italics) – that is, alone with the spectators – than when with other characters (in this case, responding to news, brought by Hastings, that king Edward IV is unwell). This, of course, does not come as a surprise from a character that Frye describes as the epitome of “genuine hypocrisy”.⁷ The pattern itself will only become more evident in later scenes, slowly beginning to seem as a staple of Richard’s character. What particularly captures the reader’s (or the audience’s) attention, however, is his tone. A variety of scholars have proposed the interpretation of Richard as the character of Vice in morality plays, a figure recognisable by and enjoyed for his snide, irreverent remarks. Kott points out that Richard represents “a clear inheritance from the old Vice of the Moralities: part symbol of evil, part comic devil, and chiefly, on the stage, the generator of roars of laughter at wickedness (whether of deed or word) which the audience would immediately condemn in real life”.⁸ Rossiter corroborates this view, claiming that,

“On the face of it, he is the demon-Prince, the cacodemon born of hell, the misshapen toad, etc. (all things ugly and ill). But through *his prowess as actor* and his embodiment of the comic Vice and impish-to-fiendish humour, he offers the false as more attractive than the true (the actor’s function), and the ugly and evil as admirable and amusing (the clown’s game of value-reversals). You can say, ‘We don’t take him seriously.’ I reply, ‘That’s exactly what gets most of his acquaintances into Hell: just what the devil-clown relies on.’”⁹

Using religious sentiments as a means to ridicule and dupe his opponents (but, significantly, not the spectators) is intertwined not only with his proposed connection to the character of Vice from medieval morality plays (emphasized in the play itself, “Thus, like the formal Vice, Iniquity, / I moralize two meanings with one word”)¹⁰, but with the unique relationship Richard cultivates with the audience: “This relationship between Richard and the audience is given a special emphasis because ... he alone is given the morality address, he alone has any direct contact with the audience at all.”¹¹ It seems especially significant that religious motifs, so ubiquitously employed by various characters throughout the play in the form of vehement, caustic curses, common platitudes, sly political manoeuvring or earnest calls to arms, so clearly emerge in the opening act as a signifier of difference. Richard differs from other characters by his mocking, jocular disregard of God, but he also differs from himself – that is, the various forms of self that he presents to other characters. As Knights writes, “inwardness ... is not only the probing of character and motive, it involves the

⁷ Frye, *Fools of Time*, 84.

⁸ Jan Kott, *Shakespeare, our contemporary* (New York, London: W. W. Norton, 1974), 15.

⁹ Arthur Percival Rossiter, *Angel with horns: and other Shakespeare lectures* (London: Longmans, 1961), 20, emphasis mine.

¹⁰ Shakespeare, *Richard III*, III. i., 82-83

¹¹ Nicholas Brooke, *Shakespeare’s early tragedies* (London: Routledge, 1968), 57.

observer.”¹² And it is the observers alone who are in the know – to all other characters, the “proud, subtle, sly and bloody”¹³ Richard offers a multitude of personalities, and with them, a plethora of different ways in which he utilises faith and religious language. Ewbank proposes that this performative outlook on language is something Shakespeare excels at: “His interest in words is functional, and sometimes their function is to point to their own slipperiness, to the gap between language and truth.”¹⁴ This “gap between language and truth” is nowhere as evident as it is with Richard’s many performances, as the reader witnesses the rapid exchange of “the real” Richard as presented in his soliloquies and asides, and his (very successful) habit of using religious imagery as a discursive weapon when trying to best, entice or persuade other characters. As long as Richard is ahead of the game, he is able to maintain his act – and with it, his singular use of religious symbols and utterances to his advantage:

“GLOUCESTER. But then I sigh and, with a piece of Scripture,
Tell them God bids us to good for evil.
And thus I clothe my naked villainy
With odd old ends stol’n forth of holy writ,
And seem a saint when most I play the devil.”¹⁵

However, when he starts losing grip on his hard-won (or, hard-acted) position, his ability to use religion as a weapon (be it accusatory, satirical, or amorous in nature) begins to slip. By the end of the play, the readers witness a reversal of Richard’s rhetorical patterns, as he transforms from a masterful actor, or the figure of irreverent Vice, into that of the guilt-stricken sinner.

The Cambridge English Dictionary defines the word discursive as “involving discussion”, and “talking about or dealing with subjects that are only slightly connected with the main subject for longer than necessary”.¹⁶ Both of the meanings of this word seem strangely appropriate when one tries to describe how characters in *Richard III* utilize religious language. On the one hand, it is indubitably used heavily in discussion. Be it curses, blessings or oaths, it appears no altercation can pass without at least one of the characters invoking God. However, faith is also often used to obfuscate, divert attention, deceive. Knowing what one does of the characters in *Richard III*, it is not hard to see who among them is especially apt at “moralizing two meanings with one word”.¹⁷ That is not to suggest that characters other than Richard do not (attempt to) use religious language to save their skins, further their causes, or best their opponents. It is merely that no other character in *Richard III* consi-

¹² Lionel Charles Knights, *William Shakespeare, the Histories: Richard III, King John, Richard II, Henry V* (Harlow: Longmans, Green and Co., 1962), 17.

¹³ Shakespeare, *Richard III*, IV. iv. 172.

¹⁴ Ewbank, “Close Reading,” 397.

¹⁵ Shakespeare, *Richard III*, I. iii., 340-344.

¹⁶ Cambridge Dictionary, s.v. “Discursive.”

¹⁷ Shakespeare, *Richard III*, III. i., 83.

stently uses religion as if it were a stage prop – something to be employed in one performance and then quickly reshaped and painted over, so as to be used in the next one. As Knights describes him, “He is a master of hypocrisy, delighting to embarrass his enemies by *playing* on those Christian values which he nevertheless intends to repudiate. He swears constantly by Saint Paul. Those surrounding the hero certainly seem nonentities in comparison.”¹⁸ However, the particular ways in which these “nonentities” use faith as a discursive weapon serve to illuminate some of the underlying mechanisms of the play, all the while accentuating their difference from the protagonist.

The “simple, plain Clarence”¹⁹ appears from the onset as an obvious example of someone who uses religious language earnestly and guilelessly. However, his honest proclamations ought not be interpreted as something inherent to his nature. Rather, they are a way for the author to lay out a frame of reference for several important recurring motifs in the play – namely, guilt, conscience, “the rigid Tudor schema of retributive justice”²⁰, and the permissible agency of men set on revenge. Firstly, his nightmare, retold in the beginning of I. iv., foreshadows not only his demise, but also Richard’s ghost-infested dream in V. iii. Moreover, the scenes are connected through the preoccupation of these recently awakened men with their sins, and their troubled consciences:

“CLARENCE. Ah, Keeper, Keeper, I have done
These things,
That now give evidence against my soul.”²¹
“KING RICHARD. My conscience hath a thousand several
tongues,
And every tongue brings in a several tale,
And every tale condemns me for a villain.”²²

On a slightly different note, in *Shakespeare’s “Histories”: Mirrors of Elizabethan Policy* and *Shakespeare’s Tragic Heroes: Slaves of Passion*, Campbell writes extensively on the contemporary set of beliefs on the mechanisms of divine retribution:

“... *Richard III* also shares with other Shakespearean tragedies a deep concern with the problem of revenge. The contemporary discussion on revenge, as I have shown elsewhere, was built upon the Biblical authority for a jealous God who had said ‘Vengeance is mine.’ Three kinds of vengeance were posited on the basis of this Biblical authority: God’s vengeance for sin; public vengeance executed by the ruler or his representative acting as the agent of God in administering justice and punishing sin; and private vengeance which usurps the authority of God and is, therefore, forbidden.”²³

¹⁸ Knights, *William Shakespeare, the Histories*, 21, emphasis mine.

¹⁹ Shakespeare, *Richard III*, I. i., 118.

²⁰ Rossiter, *Angel with Horns*, 2.

²¹ Shakespeare, *Richard III*, I. iv. 66-68.

²² *Ibid.*, V. iii. 205-207.

²³ Lily B. Campbell, *Shakespeare’s History: Mirrors of Elizabethan Policy* (London: Routledge, 1964), 310.

“God will Himself execute justice through calamity visited upon the sinner, or through justice executed by magistrates as His agents, or through the troubled heart and uneasy conscience which are the penalty of sin. It is the lesson we hear in the great cry of Clarence in *Richard the Third*:

‘If God will be avenged for the deed,
O, know you yet, He doth it publicly.
Take not the quarrel from his powerful arm;
He needs no indirect or lawless course
To cut off those who have offended Him’ (*Richard III* I. iv.
221-5).”²⁴

The explanation Campbell provides for the religious mechanisms underlying revenge tragedies (illustrated further by Clarence’s speech from I. iv.) gives the reader a good understanding of the ways in which Shakespeare uses Clarence and his discussion with his murderers to lay out the ideas which informed the contemporary spectators’ expectations of revenge plots. Moreover, by having Clarence be the vessel for proclaiming the generally accepted views on revenge, Shakespeare can emphasise the untenability of such a position, as it is precisely Clarence who is the first of Richard’s victims we see murdered on stage.

“The orthodox Tudor myth made history God-controlled, divinely prescribed and dispensed, to move things towards a God-ordained perfection: Tudor England. Such was the *frame* that Shakespeare took. But the total effect of Shakespeare’s ‘plot’ has ... a very different meaning. (...) Contemporary ‘order’-thought spoke as if naïve faith saw true: God was above God’s Englishmen and ruled with justice – which meant summary vengeance. This historic myth offered absolutes, certainties. Shakespeare in the Histories always leaves us with relatives, ambiguities, irony, a process thoroughly dialectical.”²⁵

These ambiguities are shown even more clearly in Richard’s discursive practices. Although he spends most of the play mocking various notions related to religion, we later find out he does not (or, perhaps, is not able to) completely exclude himself (as exemplified by his soliloquy upon waking from the dream he shares with Richmond in V. iii.) from this narrative Clarence is so wholly immersed in. Even after the bloodshed and treachery he himself had committed in the service of his brother, king Edward IV, Clarence still retains and reiterates the belief that there must be some higher mechanism of justice. Richard, on the other hand, is a character whose every action seems to disprove this view. However, it is not only his jocular disregard of reverent religious proclamations that set him apart from Clarence’s views and rhetorical patterns:

“It is Richard’s role which ensures the overpowering frequencies of such terms as ‘soul-s’ (exceeding even *Hamlet*), coupled with such ominous words as ‘fall’, ‘guilt’, ‘despair’, ‘Hell-’, ‘remorse-’, all of which indicate Richard’s intense awareness of the total depravity of fallen human nature. This despairing

²⁴ Lily B. Campbell, *Shakespeare’s tragic heroes: slaves of passion* (Cambridge: CUP Archive, 1930), 24.

²⁵ Rossiter, *Angel with Horns*, 20-22.

insight is what gives him psychological ascendancy in any dialogue, since his interlocutors (initially, at least) share a naïve faith in conventional humane values and good intentions. By contrast, Richard consistently thinks and acts on Saint Paul's assumption of universal wickedness, as in *Romans* 3:10: "There is none righteous, no not one... They have all gone out of the way:... there is none that doeth good."²⁶

Or, in the words of the pessimistic (or perhaps merely realistic) Third citizen: "All may be well; but, if God sort it so, / 'Tis more than we deserve, or I expect."²⁷

Standing as a bridge between Richard and Clarence are two unlikely philosophical and theological mediators – the two murderers Richard hired to kill Clarence, providing the reader with "a low-life variation on the main theme."²⁸ On the one hand, they bring a dose of Richard-esque levity to an extremely serious situation.

FIRST MURDERER. How dost thou feel thyself now?

SECOND MURDERER. Faith, some certain dregs of conscience are yet within me.

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

SECOND MURDERER. Zounds, he dies. I had forgot the reward.

FIRST MURDERER. Where's thy conscience now?

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

FIRST MURDERER. When he opens his purse to give us our reward, thy conscience flies out."²⁹

In this humorous exchange, we see mirrored what Rossiter characterizes as the core of the appeal of Richard's discursive practices:

"Richard's sense of humour, his function as clown, his comic irreverences and sarcastic or sardonic appropriations of things to (at any rate) his occasions: all those act as underminers of our assumed naïve and proper Tudor principles; and we are on his side much rather because he makes us (as the Second Murderer put it) 'take the devil in our mind,' than for any 'historical-philosophical-Christian-retributinal' sort of motive."³⁰

On the other hand, the murders' discussion with Clarence reminds the reader that Clarence, God-fearing as he may be, is far from guiltless ("FIRST MURDERER. How canst thou urge God's dreadful law to us, / When thou hast broke it in such dear degree?")³¹. Richard may be the villain of the play,

²⁶ Richmond, "Richard III' and the Reformation," 516-517.

²⁷ Shakespeare, *Richard III*, II. Iii. 36-37.

²⁸ Knights, *William Shakespeare, the Histories*, 21.

²⁹ Shakespeare, *Richard III*, I. iv., 121-130.

³⁰ Rossiter, *Angel with Horns*, 15.

³¹ Shakespeare, *Richard III*, I. iv., 209-210.

but, as Rossiter reminds us, “He inhabits a world where everyone deserves everything he can do to them... If we forget to pity them awhile (and he does his best to help us), then his impish spirit urges us toward a positive reversal of ‘Christian charity’”³²

The occasion in which Richard’s “reversal” of Christian language and symbols is perhaps the most striking (and achieves the greatest ironic effect) is his attempt at the character of the pious “Christian prince”³³ near the end of act III. His act is all the more effective for the fact that the whole set-up is (to the audience, at least) ridiculously transparent. After all, the readers and spectators have by this point become acquainted with both Richard’s true, scheming nature, and with his prowess as an actor. But where up to this point his calls upon God’s favour have mostly been implemented together with other rhetorical devices (for instance, as, Heilman points out, his victorious wooing of Anne in I. vi. was filled with religious language as much as it was with Petrarchan extolling of her beauty)³⁴, his performance in III. vii. completely relies on his own (and his accomplices’) ability to successfully sell Richard Plantagenet as a deeply devout man. This premise brings the readers and the audience in the position of wide-eyed disbelief and mirth, because surely a scheme cannot contain *that* level of tongue-in-cheek overtiness? Apparently, and to the great delight of the audience, it can. The artifice and playacting aspect of the whole episode are, as Williamson emphasises, reinforced by the linguistic choices of Richard’s accomplices:

“MAYOR OF LONDON. See where His Grace stands
between two clergymen.
BUCKINGHAM. Two props of virtue for a Christian
prince,
To stay him from the fall of vanity;
And see, a book of prayer in his hand
True ornaments to know a holy man.’ (III. vii. 95-99)

This exchange explicitly highlights the tokens or ‘ornaments’ that are crucial for the success of the deception, reminding the playgoers that the book is an accessory and the bishops are – quite literally – ‘props.’³⁵

From Catesby’s opening protestations on how the Duke of Gloucester could not possibly join the mayor and the citizens as he is in the middle of “holy exercise”, to Gloucester’s closing remark to his “two props of virtue” (“GLOUCESTER. Come, let us to our holy work again”)³⁶, Shakespeare gives

³² Rossiter, *Angel with Horns*, 16.

³³ Shakespeare, *Richard III*, III. vii., 96.

³⁴ Robert B. Heilman, “Satiety and conscience: Aspects of Richard III,” *The Anti-och Review* 24/1 (1964): 61.

³⁵ Elizabeth Williamson, “The Uses and Abuses of Prayer Book Properties in Hamlet, Richard III, and Arden of Faversham,” *English Literary Renaissance* 39/2 (2009): 384.

³⁶ Shakespeare, *Richard III*, III. vi., 250.

the readers almost 200 lines of Richard playing coy and hiding behind religious protestations in the most obvious way possible, further establishing him as a true “artist in evil”.³⁷

Being an artist in evil, however, does not mean to suggest that Richard is the only one among the characters who dabbles in it, merely that he is the one who does so with most skill. It takes a particularly talented actor to excel in a variety of contexts and roles, but perhaps there is something to be said of the kind of character who only thrives in the atmosphere of ruin and decay it consistently shrouds itself in. In *Richard III*, such an apparition can be found in the character of Queen Margaret, characterized by Brooke as “the only antagonist comparable to Richard himself”³⁸:

“It is a conflict between a spirit and a ghost: between Richard, the spirit of ruthless will, of daemonic pride, energy and self-sufficiency, of devilish gusto and *Schadenfreude* (he enjoys wickedness even when it is of no practical advantage to his ambitions or to securing himself by murder: it may be only wickedness in words, but the spirit revealed is no less evilly exultant for that); and the ghost, as I call her – for what else is Margaret ... but the living ghost of Lancaster, the walking dead, memorializing the long, cruel, treacherous, bloody conflict of the years of civil strife and pitiless butchery?”³⁹

Thus, Richard and Margaret are presented as polar opposites – the spirit of everything that is unreliable, joyously treacherous, and false, faced with the ghost of relentless revenge, near-death stillness, and earnest desire for destruction. Wheeler emphasizes another difference between Richard and Margaret, and claims that Richard’s murderous ascent to the throne represents the “scourge of God” clearing the world of sinners (by way of another, even greater, sinner), while Margaret’s relentless curses are a conscious effort to be the “agent of God’s will”.⁴⁰ However, he goes on to point out that “She tarnishes the purity of the sacred, for she serves God only as she serves her own gluttonous revenge: ‘I am hungry for revenge, / And now I cloy me with beholding it’ (IV. iv. 61-62)”⁴¹ Margaret’s villainy is, therefore, contained in her abuse of religion – she regularly, almost ritualistically, reverts to “curses, a dubious form of prayer”.⁴² Her chosen discursive weapon (wielded indiscriminately against anyone who contributed to the fall of her family, or stood by and let it happen) is all the more dubious as she, unlike Richard, uses religion completely earnestly – not to delay her demise and agonise over her mistakes, like Clarence did, but to, through divine intervention, cause harm to those who have hurt her. And, as her goal differs from those of Clarence and Richard, so does her rhetoric. Far from Clarence’s structured pleading or Richard’s chameleon-like

³⁷ Rossiter, *Angel with Horns*, 17.

³⁸ Brooke, *Shakespeare’s early tragedies*, 55.

³⁹ Rossiter, *Angel with Horns*, 13-14.

⁴⁰ Richard P. Wheeler, “History, Character and Conscience in “Richard III”,” *Comparative Drama* 5/4 (1971): 305-306.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 306.

⁴² Brooke, *Shakespeare’s early tragedies*, 61.

appropriation of religious imagery, Margaret's strength lies in "the sing-song litany, the general accumulation of death"⁴³:

"I had an Edward, till a Richard kill'd him;
I had a Harry, till a Richard kill'd him:
Thou hadst an Edward, till a Richard kill'd him;
Thou hadst a Richard, till a Richard kill'd him' (IV. iv. 40-43)

... The names roll on in a ritualized accumulation until their whole weight is laid on the single focus, Richard... The ritual repetition piles up the roll of the accusing dead in *unparticularized* accumulation to convert Richard from his natural state of man into that of a sub-human figure of evil."⁴⁴

Ironically, it is precisely Margaret's extremely uncharitable use of faith that, according to Brooke, most closely resembles the kind of language used in Christian religious services: "This technical device clinches the function of language... it is to generalize and de-humanize the sense of events... Just as the litany of the church overwhelms us with the *number* of evils from which the good Lord should deliver us, rather than call our attention to their separate identities."⁴⁵ The endless repetitions of "Richards" and "Edwards", therefore, are not there to confuse the reader with the sheer lack of diversity among male names in this particular historical period, but to drive home Margaret's underlying point – it does not matter whose Richard, Edward or Harry has just died, for they already lie on a pile of bodies of someone else's brothers, husbands and fathers. As Clemen points out, "In the great laments these parallelisms and reiterations do not appear inappropriate or unnatural, because it corresponds to the nature of a lamentation to repeat the same thing over and over again."⁴⁶ Her curses serve to lay out the pattern of the characters about to receive their just deserts throughout the play, and in this respect, she can be considered a prophetic, almost supernatural figure, but, as Brooke emphasises, "not a divine one."⁴⁷ This is further underlined by the fact that, "strictly speaking it is not Margaret and her pupils who destroy Richard, it is Richmond; and Richmond is something they decidedly are not, an unequivocally 'good' character."⁴⁸

"The advocates of the supernatural insisted either that ghosts were spirits released temporarily from purgatory, or that ghosts and all the subtleties of witchcraft were manifestations of God and the good angels or Satan and the evil angels."⁴⁹ If the reader adopts the views of contemporary believers in

⁴³ Ibid., 51.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 51-52.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 51.

⁴⁶ Wolfgang Clemen, *The development of Shakespeare's imagery* (London: Routledge, 1951), 49.

⁴⁷ Brooke, *Shakespeare's early tragedies*, 62.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 52.

⁴⁹ Campbell, *Tragic Heroes*, 84.

the supernatural, then the ghosts that appear to Richard and Richmond in V. iii. can be interpreted as religious imagery, and with religious imagery comes religious language.⁵⁰ The difference between Richard's and Richmond's experience of the dream is therefore not only in what the ghosts tell them, but in the way it informs their subsequent speech patterns. Upon waking from his disturbing dream, Richard's soliloquy is full of religious sentiments, from direct invocation ("Have mercy, Jesu!")⁵¹ to a sudden acknowledgement of his wrongdoings:

"KING RICHARD. 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!'"⁵²

His later address to his troops, however, contains not a single religious message. Richard reverts to a different tactic, trying to rouse hatred and disdain for his opponents on very profane grounds, describing them as "A sort of vagabonds, rascals, and runaways, / A scum of Bretons, and base lackey peasants."⁵³ The reader witnesses the reversal of Richard's usual discursive pattern – that is, a religious public act as opposed to impious private thoughts. As Targoff states, reminding the readers of Richard's effortless performance in III. vii., "Unlike the earlier scene with Richard and the citizens, no fraudulent or hollow speech acts are performed at the end of the play."⁵⁴ It may be that Richard has arrived at the breaking point, in which his act is no longer viable. As Knight points out,

"His victims compare him to beasts: ugly, reptilian, and dangerous. He is called a dog, a 'bottled spider', a 'poisonous bunch-back'd toad', 'an elvish-mark'd, abortive, rooting hog' (I. iii.), 'a hell-hound that doth hunt us all to death' (IV. iv.), a 'cocademon' (I. iii.). Such inhuman evil is regularly opposed by Shakespeare's England. The central symbolism to which Shakespeare's English warriors appeal before battle is Saint George, the dragon-vanquisher... In *Richard III* both Richard and Richmond do the same; both lay claim to Saint George's protection. Once earlier, when he swore by his 'George', 'garter', and 'crown', his interlocutor answered crisply, 'Profaned, dishonour'd, and the third usurp'd' (IV. iv.). Whatever courage he may show, Richard cannot with reason appeal to Saint George."⁵⁵

⁵⁰ For an in-depth consideration of the religious implications of ghosts in Shakespeare, consult Stephen Greenblatt's *Hamlet in Purgatory* (2001).

⁵¹ Shakespeare, *Richard III*, V. iii., 178.

⁵² *Ibid.*, V. iii., 196-199.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, V. iii. 316-317.

⁵⁴ Ramie Targoff, "'Dirty' Amens: Devotion, Applause, and Consent in 'Richard III'" *Renaissance Drama* 31 (2002): 79.

⁵⁵ G. Wilson Knight, *The Sovereign Flower: On Shakespeare as the Poet of Royalism, Together with Related Essays and Indexes to Earlier Volumes* (Meuthen: Meuthen, 1958), 23.

Richmond, on the other hand, uses his call to arms to capitalise on the curses and blessings expressed by the ghosts in the dream. In *Fools of Time: Studies in Shakespearean Tragedy*, Frye establishes the state of affairs at the end of a tragedy: “Tragedy often ends with the survivors forming, or about to form, a secondary of social contract, a relation among *ordinary men* which will achieve enough working justice or equity to minimize further tragedy.”⁵⁶ But in the case of *Richard III*, the man stepping into Richard’s place is, at least in this respect, not so ordinary after all. Quite on the contrary, the dream posits Richmond as the direct opposite to Richard, and one of the areas in which their differences are most glaringly obvious is the way they use (or fail to use) religious language to their advantage in the crucial moments before the battle of Bosworth. Where, throughout the course of the play, Richard blatantly uses faith as he does people – as a means to an end – Richmond seems to be genuinely devout (as shown in his solitary prayer in V. iii.), but also able to (although, perhaps guilelessly) utilize religion to his advantage. He addresses his soldiers full of noble sentiments and Christian urgings, verbally mirroring the imagery from the dream he and Richard shared. Frye describes how “the social contract that forms at the end of a tragedy ... usually expresses some limiting or falling away of perspective after the great heroic voices have been silenced”.⁵⁷ Through most of the play, Richard was talented enough of an actor to fool everyone and triumph over his opponents, but it is Richmond who shapes the new paradigm, “minimizing further tragedy” by maximising his oppositeness to the tragic protagonist – and he does this through his use of religious imagery and language:

“RICHMOND. God and our good cause fight at our side;
 The prayers of holy saints and wronged souls

 One that hath ever been God’s enemy.
 Then, if you fight against God’s enemy,
 God will in justice ward you as his soldiers

 God and Saint George! Richmond and victory!”⁵⁸

In establishing a clear “us versus them” dichotomy by using God’s favour as the indicator of difference, Richmond may simply be utilizing some of the same artful strategies Richard employed to gain the crown. But somehow, that seems unlikely. After all, there is a reason Richmond is not the protagonist. Victorious over Richard he may be, but in terms of sheer power of character, Richmond falls far behind. As Knights writes in *Shakespeare: The Histories*, “It is the energy with which Richard plays his part – forthright wooer, plain blunt man, reluctant king (‘O! Do not swear, my lord Buckingham’), satirical commentator on the world’s affairs and Machiavellian schemer – it is

⁵⁶ Frye, *Fools of Time*, 5-6, emphasis mine.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 6.

⁵⁸ Shakespeare, *Richard III*, V. iii., 240-270.

this that makes him into a commanding figure.”⁵⁹ The spectator may be pleased to see good triumph over evil but is nevertheless glad that the good only prevailed after four acts of the convoluted artistry of Richard’s schemes. Frye explains this by stating that “Richard divides the sympathies of the audience in the same way that he divides his own mind. Our attention is turned toward the play, where Richard is a lively, even an exhilarating, source of dramatic action, but we have deep moral reservations about what he is doing....”⁶⁰ Or, in Knight’s words, “Though wicked, he remains great”⁶¹

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In *Close Reading*, Inga-Stina Ewbank writes: “...Shakespeare developed a unique art of making iterative images not only create the dominant mood of the play but also form a kind of subtext of signs and their meanings, whereby the emotive texture and the intellectual structure of the play is sustained and enriched”.⁶² Use of religion, not just as a symbol, but as a discursive weapon, is indubitably one of the many factors which “create the dominant mood of the play”, informing the internal structure of *Richard III*, as well as the way it resonates with readers and spectators. One cannot help but feel it is perhaps *the* factor – for what else can convey Richard’s deviousness and brilliance quite as well as his aptness at irreverent playacting at the one thing the rest of the characters take so seriously? And what else can be a better illustration of his decline than a sudden and complete rupture in his act as the Vice? *Richard III*, however, is not merely a tale of one man’s rise and fall (however successfully he kept the audience in thrall of his unapologetic wickedness). The other characters in the play, far from being just someone for Richard to trick, are necessary for the reader (and spectator) to truly appreciate the sheer number of ways in which religious sentiments can guide the utterances of everyone from a revenge-bent queen dowager to hired assassins. Employed for pleading, curses, accusations, or wooing, the language of faith enables the speaker to *assert* himself in any discussion as truthful and just – whether he really is truthful and just is another matter entirely. It is precisely the assumed legitimacy which such utterances lend to the speaker that the play so conspicuously subverts. Even though by the end of act V there seems to have emerged a worthy, earnest, devout king to ascend the English throne, the spectator cannot help but have his reservations. After all, if the audience is left with one certainty after five acts of observing Richard masterfully use religion as a discursive weapon, it is that, as Kott grimly points out, “The King is no Lord’s Anointed, and politics is only an art aiming at capturing and securing power”.⁶³

⁵⁹ Knights, *William Shakespeare, the Histories*, 23.

⁶⁰ Frye, *Fools of Time*, 85.

⁶¹ Knight, *The Sovereign Flower*, 23.

⁶² Ewbank, “Close Reading,” 401.

⁶³ Kott, *Shakespeare, Our Contemporary*, 40.

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