

SHAKESPEARE

AND

THE CONTRADICTIONS OF HONOUR

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This thesis is dedicated  
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## ABSTRACT

This study explores the concept of honour as it enters into several Shakespearean plays. It presents an historical definition of honour in the light of which Shakespeare's treatment of the concept can be seen as a response to the complex ethical inheritance of the sixteenth century.

Chapter 1 studies the main classical and medieval traditions of honour and the reception by the Renaissance of this plurality of ideas. The first section explores honour in the context of the pagan concept of social virtue and identifies it as an unstable secular formulation of virtue which defines the aristocratic public function. The second section examines the two principal medieval responses to this secular ethic: the Augustinian denial of the human capacity for virtue and the scholastic compromise tradition, which grants man a limited power for well-doing and, in integrating secular virtue into the structure of creation, provides the framework for chivalric honour. The third section presents honour in the Renaissance as an expression of this diverse classical and Christian heritage. It identifies three traditions - the chivalric, the humanist and the Calvinist - that reflect an age of divided ethical allegiances in which Shakespeare was led to explore honour as a problematic and ultimately tragic concept.

Chapter 4 discusses Shakespeare's treatment of the chivalric tradition in Henry V and Troilus and Cressida. It argues that both plays, though in very different ways, interrogate that tradition and its claim to incorporate honour within the system of natural law - Henry V by exposing its weakness as an historical model, Troilus and Cressida by showing its connection to an individualistic honour.

Chapter 5 examines honour in Hamlet in the context of the revenge ethic. It suggests that the protagonist's contradictory task - the virtuous cause that is a mandate to exact private vengeance - enacts the self-defeating tensions in honour, and that this tragic conflict is played out within a Christian universe which offers the possibility of the transcendence of honour.

Chapter 6 explores Shakespeare's treatment of the pagan concept of public service in Julius Caesar and Coriolanus. It attempts to show that Shakespeare portrays this concept as tragically flawed because reliant for social order on an aristocratic honour which makes individual excellence inseparable from self-assertion.

## ABBREVIATIONS

<u>CentR</u>	<u>The Centennial Review of Arts and Sciences</u>
<u>EIC</u>	<u>Essays in Criticism</u>
<u>ELH</u>	<u>A Journal of English Literary History</u>
<u>ELR</u>	<u>English Literary Renaissance</u>
<u>HudR</u>	<u>Hudson Review</u>
<u>JHI</u>	<u>The Journal of the History of Ideas</u>
<u>JMRS</u>	<u>The Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies</u>
<u>JWCI</u>	<u>Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes</u>
<u>MLR</u>	<u>Modern Language Review</u>

<u>MP</u>	<u>Modern Philology</u>
<u>PMLA</u>	<u>Publications of the Modern Language Association of America</u>
<u>RES, ns</u>	<u>Review of English Studies.</u> new series
<u>SEL</u>	<u>Studies in English Literature 1500-1900</u>
<u>ShS</u>	<u>Shakespeare Survey</u>
<u>SP</u>	<u>Studies in Philology</u>
<u>SQ</u>	<u>Shakespeare Quarterly</u>
<u>UnivR</u>	<u>University Review</u>
<u>UTQ</u>	<u>University of Toronto Quarterly</u>
<u>YR</u>	<u>Yale Review</u>

## INTRODUCTION

The Oxford English Dictionary offers two main definitions of the word 'honour': 1) High respect, esteem, or reverence, accorded to exalted worth or rank; deferential admiration or approbation; 2) Personal title to high respect or esteem; honourableness; 'nobleness of mind, scorn of meanness, magnanimity' (J); a fine sense of and strict allegiance to what is due or right (also, to what is due according to some conventional or fashionable standard of conduct). Honour, it would seem, has a double sense, one internal and one external to the self. It involves both the way one is seen by others and the way one sees oneself; both the esteem in which one is held and the moral (or conventional) principles on which one bases one's actions. The wording of the two definitions establishes an integral link between them: high respect rewards exalted worth which in turn is the title to high respect. The semantic duality of honour, which one might designate in the simplest terms as 'virtue' and 'reputation', appears with varying emphases in many critical studies of the concept in the plays of Shakespeare. Alice Shalvi, in her essay '"Honor" in Troilus and Cressida', sets up a distinction between the Renaissance concept of honour as virtuous activity in accordance with the rational principles of moral law and a rival code of honour which was focussed on reputation to the detriment of moral dictates.<sup>1</sup> According to Shalvi, it is this

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1. Alice Shalvi, '"Honor" in Troilus and Cressida', SEL, V (1965), 283-302.

latter 'mistaken conception of honor', based on pride and the desire for personal glory, that Shakespeare criticises in Troilus and Cressida and places in opposition to the 'true honor' which seeks to implement a rational standard of virtue.<sup>2</sup> Thus, Shalvi posits conflict rather than correlation between the two meanings of honour.

Although the Trojan debate certainly exhibits the kind of antithesis between virtue and vainglory on which Shalvi bases her reading, the play also suggests that the relation between them is more complex than her simple dichotomy would allow. In Ulysses's speech to Achilles on the 'strange fellow' he is reading,<sup>3</sup> virtue and reputation are presented as interdependent:

no man is the lord of anything,  
Though in and of him there be much consisting,  
Till he communicate his parts to others;  
Nor doth he of himself know them for aught,  
Till he behold them form'd in the applause  
Where th'are extended; who, like an arch,  
    reverb'rate  
The voice again. . . . T&C, III.3.115-21.

Although Ulysses has his own managerial motives here, he is nevertheless attempting to persuade plausibly, and his argument, whatever strategy it serves, carries enough conviction to make us take it seriously. It claims that there is a connection between individual virtue and reputation; that the honourable man who performs virtuous deeds relies on the

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2. Ibid.. pp.285,289.

3. All quotations are from The Arden Shakespeare: Troilus and Cressida, ed. Kenneth Palmer (London and New York: Methuen, 1982).

social esteem which authenticates them, and hence cannot possibly aspire to virtue without also aspiring to reputation and respect. It is thus not sufficient simply to dichotomise virtue and reputation as a 'true' and a 'mistaken' honour when the play arguably demonstrates that the tension between the two is a tension within interdependence.

Martin Dodsworth, in Hamlet Closely Observed, his book-length study of the role of honour in the play, identifies honour as an aristocratic concept, bound up with the exalted rank and social privilege of a superior class. He places his work within a social context by tracing the tension that existed in Tudor England between the monarchy and a nobility whose obsession with status fostered the socially disruptive tradition of private revenge.<sup>4</sup> However, this important connection between aristocratic psychology and revenge honour is hampered by a tendency to establish a simplistic distinction between the moral conduct encouraged by the state and the nobleman's concern for his status and reputation. Like Shalvi, Dodsworth sets up an opposition between 'honour as virtue' and 'honour as precedence', perceiving in Hamlet the lesson that the good man 'follows virtue without respect to rank'.<sup>5</sup> Dodsworth does not consider that the concept of aristocracy involves social obligations as well as social rewards, and that privilege is the prize of

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4.Martin Dodsworth, Hamlet Closely Observed (London and Dover, New Hampshire: The Athlone Press, 1985), pp.9-35.

5.Ibid., p.100.



public virtue. Nor does he consider that in the 'mole of nature' speech reputation is conceived of as the natural complement of virtue; that Hamlet's meditation on the features which obscure a nation's or an individual's worth presupposes a fundamental relation between virtue and the external honour that reflects it:

and indeed it takes  
From our achievements, though perform'd at height,  
The pith and marrow of our attribute.

Ham., I.4.20-22.<sup>6</sup>

To view Hamlet in Dodsworth's terms, as assuming a conflict between the 'great lord' and the 'honest man',<sup>7</sup> is thus to ignore the complexities engendered by the play's suggestion that there is a connection between virtue and status.

Shalvi's and Dodsworth's moral antitheses encourage two forms of reductiveness: either that the plays make simple moral statements or that they require anachronistic condemnations of the unegalitarian concept of class superiority. This is not to deny that the plays in question present critiques of honour and hence of aristocracy; it is rather to recognise that simple moral dualities obscure their intellectual complexity. Shalvi's and Dodsworth's failure to respond fully to their dramatic sophistication arises from a failure adequately to grasp the concept of honour itself. It is clear, moreover, that their conceptual shortcomings involve

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6.All quotations are from The Arden Shakespeare: Hamlet, ed. Harold Jenkins (London and New York: Methuen, 1982).

7.Dodsworth, p.105.

a tendency to confuse concept with tradition. Although both critics are alert to the strained relation between the two meanings of honour, they present the concept's intrinsic duality as the rivalry between two principal sixteenth-century formulations of honour - between an orthodox and a subversive tradition or between state authority and aristocratic self-assertion. In so doing, they oversimplify not only the concept, but the traditions of honour operative during the Renaissance; for their antithetical poles of moral orthodoxy and individual pride represent less the dominant Renaissance conceptions of honour than the social tensions inevitably generated by a concept in which public virtue is inseparable from social stature and the quest for glory.

Both Shalvi and Dodsworth examine honour as the organising concept of a particular play. There are to date three studies which explore honour in relation to a broader spectrum of Shakespearean drama: Norman Council's book, When Honour's At the Stake. Ideas of Honour in Shakespeare's Plays; Paul Siegel's article, 'Shakespeare and the Neo-Chivalric Cult of Honor'; and Curtis Brown Watson's book, Shakespeare and the Renaissance Concept of Honor.<sup>8</sup> Like Shalvi and Dodsworth, these critics situate their considerations of Shakespearean honour within the context of certain Renaissance traditions

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8. Norman Council, When Honour's At the Stake. Ideas of Honour in Shakespeare's Plays (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1973); Paul N. Siegel, 'Shakespeare and the Neo-Chivalric Cult of Honor', CentR, 8 (1964), 39-70; Curtis Brown Watson, Shakespeare and the Renaissance Concept of Honor (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1960).

which define the nature and function of honour. Both Council and Siegel, moreover, present a similar opposition between a dominant orthodox tradition and what they term 'decadent' formulations of honour. Council interprets the authoritative Renaissance position in terms of the Aristotelian conception of honour as the reward for virtuous conduct on behalf of the commonwealth - a pagan formulation easily accommodated within Christian doctrine - and contrasts this ideal of social virtue with an 'aberrant' tradition which claimed independence from orthodox morality and saw the honourable man as an autonomous moral being possessed of an innate sense of rectitude.<sup>9</sup> Siegel also identifies a single orthodox tradition, that of Christian humanism, which conceived of honour as a rational principle encouraging patriotic endeavour and obedient service of the monarch. In conflict with this mainstream conception of honour, Siegel posits a decadent feudal 'neo-chivalric' tradition, focussed not on public service, but on the quest for personal glory independently of royal authority and conventional morality.<sup>10</sup>

It would seem that the difference between these two appraisals of Renaissance traditions of honour is essentially nominal, in that both assert the dominance of an orthodox formulation based on social virtue and opposed to the individual pursuit of honour. Like Shalvi and Dodsworth,

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9. See Council, pp.11-31.

10. Siegel, pp.39-47.

then, Siegel and Council invoke a simple moral dualism to explain why honour can sometimes manifest itself not in active virtue, but in disruptive and unacceptable modes of conduct. Their binary oppositions between public service and private glory, the state and the individual, similarly mistake the social conflict engendered by an unstable concept of public virtue for the competition between two culturally determined conceptions of honour, one good, the other bad. The result is a twofold misrepresentation - of the concept itself, and of its role in the sixteenth century - that produces reductive readings of Shakespeare. For both scholars, Troilus and Cressida becomes no more than a straightforward critique of a false notion of honour.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, their polarities provide little sense of the cultural particularity of individual plays. For example, Brutus emerges from Council's discussion of Julius Caesar as the representative not of Roman ideas of honour, but of Council's own formulation of a decadent honour.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, in Siegel's reading of Coriolanus, the hero exhibits merely a debased honour, while his mother's final appeal to patriotism makes her the (unlikely) exponent of the Christian humanist concept of honour.<sup>13</sup> This cultural confusion, which fails to take account of the way in which the Roman plays, inspired by a close reading of Plutarch, dramatise honour within the specific context of the pagan

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11.Council, pp.75-88; Siegel, pp.51-56.

12.Council, pp.60-73.

13.Siegel, pp.60-65.

ethic of social virtue, suggests that Siegel's and Council's antithesis between orthodoxy and aberrancy gives an inadequate sense not only of the unstable connection between virtue and honour in Shakespeare, but also of the variety of Renaissance traditions of honour to which Shakespeare responds. The pagan ethos of the Roman tragedies indicates an interest in honour as it functions in a purely secular setting - a sixteenth-century perspective absent from Siegel's and Council's studies, and which calls into question their assertions of a unitary orthodoxy based on the fusion of the classical and Christian legacies of the Renaissance. For if the sixteenth century inherited a concept of honour which is more diverse than Siegel's and Council's interpretations would suggest, that diversity implies the possibility not only of reconciliation, but also of tension; it suggests that through the movement of history, the sixteenth century acquired conflicting attitudes to honour, derived on the one hand from a man-centred and on the other from a God-centred morality.

All four of the critical works to which we have referred adopt a synchronic approach to conceptual analysis, examining honour as it functions within the sixteenth century. They therefore assume that honour operates within the context of formulations that are structurally determined. On this level, they clarify that honour is not an abstract concept with an existence independent of cultural structures, but a social concept with an existence affected by social conditions. Their synchronic method serves to emphasise that a concept

like honour has a unique configuration produced by a particular social complex.

However, the confusion evident in their analyses of the idea of honour suggests that synchrony is an inadequate tool with which to elucidate what is in fact an historical concept if it is divorced from a diachronic perspective. Siegel and Council themselves imply that the Renaissance concept of honour, if it is a phenomenon of a particular age, is equally the product of the linear historical development that bestowed upon the sixteenth century both pagan humanist and Christian traditions. However, they do not pursue these implications; and it is in part their failure to examine the ideological heritage out of which the Renaissance concept of honour grew that blinds these critics to the complex part it plays in Shakespeare's age. This suggests that it is by restoring to the synchronic entity its relation to its own past that one fully reveals its originality. At the same time that it joins culture to sources, historical diachrony disentangles concept from tradition, for the historical unfolding of an idea discloses both continuity and change, both its intrinsic character as well as its progression through a sequence of roles dictated by particular cultural contexts. I want to argue that when a firm grasp of the structure of the concept is coupled with an awareness of the multiple traditions of honour that descended to the Renaissance, we find, not simple binary oppositions, but a concept of secular virtue beset with internal tensions operating in a cultural milieu of strained

ethical loyalties.

Curtis Brown Watson, in Shakespeare and the Renaissance Concept of Honor, offers an analysis of the main Western traditions of honour which presents the cultural particularity of the sixteenth century as the emanation of its varied cultural heritage. Watson begins his study with a brief survey of the concept from Plato through the Middle Ages which succeeds in identifying honour as an essentially secular aristocratic ethic functioning naturally in moral systems in which there is no transcendent standard of morality to deprecate the individual capacity for virtue and the importance of social esteem as a criterion of worth.<sup>14</sup> Watson's technique thus facilitates the perception of the fundamental opposition between pagan humanist and Christian attitudes to honour. Watson presents this conflict as central to the sixteenth century, which inherited a concept of honour inspired by pagan humanist ethics at the same time that it maintained a powerful allegiance to the Christian tradition.<sup>15</sup>

However, if Watson's analysis seems exhaustive, it is coloured throughout by his declared allegiance to the Burckhardtian thesis that the Renaissance represents a genuine break with medieval culture, a new era whose secular values were bolstered by the retrieval of a formal body of pagan

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14. Watson, pp.19-50.

15. Ibid., pp.50-162.

moral philosophy.<sup>16</sup> In his determination to differentiate between the Renaissance and the Middle Ages, Watson tends to dichotomise the two traditions - classical humanism and Christianity - on which he bases his distinction and hence to diminish the complexity of honour's position in the history of Western thought. Thus, although he offers what is in many ways a sensitive appraisal of a fundamentally secular conception of virtue bound up with ideas of class and individual superiority and their reflection in public approbation and high rank,<sup>17</sup> Watson fails to consider the problematic role which this aristocratic ethic plays even within the pagan formulations in which it assumes its natural place. His account reflects no trace of the 'mistaken' notion of honour which appears in the other works we have considered, and which, albeit misleadingly, at least posits the possibility of conceptual conflict and contradiction. For Watson, there are no tensions at work in classical conceptions of honour; rather, his reading of the Renaissance requires that an uncritical pagan veneration of the heroic individual should come into conflict with the Christian repudiation of pride.<sup>18</sup> In general, Watson is right to stress the difference between a secular and a spiritual morality; but his rigid dualism oversimplifies not only the various classical traditions of honour, but also the Christian heritage of the

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16.Ibid., pp.7-15; 47-54.

17.Ibid., pp.91-159.

18.Ibid., pp.102-135.



Renaissance. It leads him in particular to minimise the significance of the scholastic attempt to harmonise a religious and a secular conception of virtue - a compromise tradition which holds an important place in sixteenth-century thought, but which Watson cannot accommodate within his scheme of polarities. Moreover, he oversimplifies the relation between honour and Christian ethics by his insistence that during the Renaissance spiritual and secular imperatives operated in separate realms; the sixteenth-century nobleman was simultaneously a good Christian and a wholehearted subscriber to the code of honour.<sup>19</sup> Watson's theory of the divided loyalties of the Renaissance aristocrat is valid as far as it goes. However, with the exception of his discussion of duelling and private revenge,<sup>20</sup> he stresses inconsistent coexistence rather than tension and conflict, and so ends up by diminishing the impact made on sixteenth-century thought by a diverse ethical inheritance which afforded rival perceptions of man's status as a moral being.

When applied to Shakespeare, Watson's uncomplicated cultural dualism has unfortunate consequences. Shakespearean drama becomes a straightforward endorsement of aristocratic values by a dramatist for whom 'a resonant sense of honor is in every respect excellent and never questionable'.<sup>21</sup> This

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19. Ibid., pp.4-7; 102-35.

20. Ibid., pp.127-35.

21. Ibid., p.11.

interpretation is aided by a dubious critical method; rather than examining a play as a dramatic unity, Watson takes extracts from numerous plays to illustrate the various divisions of the concept of honour he has identified, such as 'Valour and Patriotism' and 'Ambition'. Thus, in the section titled 'Revenge', Laertes's vow to avenge his father's death ('Conscience and grace, to the profoundest pit! / I dare damnation.' Ham., IV.5.132-33) is excised from its dramatic context and offered as evidence that Shakespeare's tragedies reflect

the quick sensitivity to affront which the Renaissance had acquired from Aristotle through his numerous Renaissance disciples. Indignation, anger, and the desire for revenge are not, therefore, disparaged.<sup>22</sup>

That Laertes's vow is patently blasphemous suggests not the dramatist's uncritical and contradictory espousal of an unchristian aristocratic code of conduct, but his perception of honour as a radically unstable conception of secular virtue, and his attempt to give dramatic form to the tension between the rival cultural legacies of his age.

In entering the critical debate over the role of honour in Shakespeare's plays, this thesis aims to address the argument on the social and historical level on which it has consistently been conducted. It concurs with the previous participants in the discussion in supposing that mastery of the concept is the condition of effective dramatic analysis.

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22. Ibid., p.362.

and that because honour is an historical and therefore evolving concept, it cannot be defined by finally specifying necessary and sufficient conditions; its constants are shaped by and adapted to a particular culture's needs. Yet this thesis suggests that the history of an ethical concept is governed by two principles: that a determinate culture is distinctive, and that its distinctiveness is, in the realm of ideas, in part a response to past ideas. This thesis will concern itself with intellectual history. This is not to imply that a culture cannot be viewed in various other ways - economic, political, social, linguistic or cultural. But insofar as this thesis proposes to study a concept, it seems appropriate to consider it from the point of view of its content. This perspective requires that the Renaissance's particular response to the past should be a response to the conceptual forms that antecedent philosophers have devised for moral problems. This dual method seeks to avoid the limitations of the hermeneutic formula of previous studies which, in restricting itself to the analysis of honour in the Renaissance, falls prey to a reductive dualism that obscures both a problematic concept and its controversial presence in sixteenth-century intellectual life. While acknowledging, with the benefit of Watson's example, the misapplication to which its method is liable, this study intends to define honour through a history of the concept in the light of which Shakespeare's exploration of an idea of secular virtue based on the public function of a superior class can be understood as an expression of the tensions at work in the sixteenth

century's complex ethical heritage.

The first chapter of this thesis accordingly seeks to re-evaluate the classical and medieval complex of traditions which shape Renaissance ideas of honour. The opening section studies the pagan concept of honour in terms of the Homeric, Platonic, Aristotelian and Stoic formulations of social virtue, and identifies honour as the problematic relationship between an aristocratic ethic of heroism and the society which it functions to preserve. The second section examines the role which this conception of secular virtue plays in the Christian universe, specifying two main traditions: the Augustinian, which denies man's power to do good and deprecates the value of social esteem on the grounds of man's fallen nature and his absolute dependence upon God; and the scholastic, which grants man a limited capacity for well-doing and, in locating secular virtue within a divinely-instituted social structure, provides the theoretical framework for chivalric honour. The third section addresses the complex reception and transformation by the Renaissance of this plurality of ideas on the problem of individual excellence. It focusses on three conflicting Renaissance moral systems designed to secure an unstable concept of secular virtue within the Christian metaphysic: humanist secular ethics underpinned by a purely formal Christianity; the neo-chivalric tradition, which values honour within a conservative, hierarchical vision of social order; and the Calvinist divorce of reason and faith, which calls into question the human

capacity for virtue. The last three chapters examine the way in which this ethical heterogeneity enters into Shakespearean drama, producing an exploration of the strains inherent in the chivalric concept of honour in Henry V and Troilus and Cressida; of the self-defeating tensions in honour within the context of a Christian universe in the revenge tragedy of Hamlet; and of the contradictory nature of the pagan ethic of public service in Julius Caesar and Coriolanus.

There remains the question of what links the simplest and earliest conception of honour in the Iliad to its extraordinarily elaborate treatment in the honour plays of Shakespeare. This thesis does not rest on the claim that Shakespeare had direct access to the pre-Renaissance tradition, only that he was, as his plays indicate, intensely and comprehensively receptive to the intellectual currents of the Renaissance, which were themselves informed by their Christian and classical antecedents. This thesis is neither a study of influence, tracing causal couplings in the historical progress of ideas, nor an intertextual study, attending to allusions, quotations and pastiches in Shakespeare's work, although both of these are legitimate areas of inquiry. What it attempts to offer is an analysis of the complex and unstable structure of a key concept in Shakespeare's plays and in the intellectual life of his period. The chief consideration governing the choice of texts in the first chapter cannot therefore be Shakespeare's reading - an area about which we know much, but which remains riddled with

conjecture and hypothesis. Rather, it must be a concern to select those texts in which the evolution of the idea of honour is pre-eminently displayed, and which mark and epitomise the major phases of a process as it was retained or rediscovered by the most influential texts of the Renaissance.

Yet it must be said that a glance at what we know of Shakespeare's reading in this area is instructive.<sup>23</sup> We can be reasonably certain that as a grammar school boy in Stratford Shakespeare read Livy and parts of the Aeneid and became acquainted with classical moral philosophy through close study of Cicero's De Officiis.<sup>24</sup> Most editors of Troilus and Cressida agree that Shakespeare also knew the

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23. A considerable amount of research has been done on Shakespeare's reading. Some of the available studies are: H.R.D. Anders, Shakespeare's Books. A Dissertation on Shakespeare's Reading and the Immediate Sources of His Works (New York: AMS Press, Inc., 1965); E.A. Armstrong, Shakespeare's Imagination: A Study of the Psychology of Association and Inspiration (London: Lindsay Drummond, 1946); T.W. Baldwin, William Shaksper's Small Latine and Lesse Greeke, 2 vols. (Urbana, Ill.: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1944); Geoffrey Bullough, Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare, 8 vols. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1957-75); Alfred Hart, Shakespeare and the Homilies and Other Pieces of Research into the Elizabethan Drama (Melbourne: Melbourne Univ. Press, 1934); G.K. Hunter, 'Shakespeare's Reading', in A New Companion to Shakespeare Studies, eds. Kenneth Muir and S. Schoenbaum (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1971), 55-66; Richmond Noble, Shakespeare's Biblical Knowledge and Use of the Book of Common Prayer as Exemplified in the Plays of the First Folio (London: SPCK, 1935); J.A.K. Thomson, Shakespeare and the Classics (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1952); Virgil K. Whitaker, Shakespeare's Use of Learning. An Inquiry into the Growth of His Mind and Art (San Marino, Calif.: The Huntington Library, 1953).

24. See Baldwin, II, 573-74, 584-616, and Anders, pp.31-32. For an account of the role of Livy's Ab Urbe Condita in Coriolanus, see Anne Barton, 'Livy, Machiavelli, and Shakespeare's Coriolanus'. SS, 38 (1985), 115-29.

Iliad through Chapman's translation, the first seven books of which were published in 1598. But it is perhaps from his extended use of North's Plutarch that Shakespeare learned the most about the moral ethos of antiquity. Beyond this brief reading list, evidence for Shakespeare's study of Graeco-Roman ideas of honour becomes fragmentary and tenuous.

Nevertheless, if one cannot say with any certainty that Shakespeare read Plato or Aristotle or a sixteenth-century Aristotelian like Robert Ashley, one can probably safely assume that Shakespeare knew a good deal more about classical humanism than we know about his reading. The Elizabethan penchant for the commonplace book, collections of ethical maxims by classical authors which were assembled both by publishers and private readers, testifies to the importance generally attached to classical morality in Shakespeare's age.<sup>25</sup> It was a central feature of a widespread humanist tradition, of which Robert Ashley's treatise Of Honour is a fairly typical expression.<sup>26</sup>

Shakespeare's familiarity with the tenets of Renaissance chivalry is marginally easier to gauge. We know that he encountered the medieval chivalric tradition in Chaucer's Knight's Tale and Troilus and Criseyde, Caxton's The Recuyell of the Historyes of Troye and Lydgate's Troybook. It is clear, moreover, that orthodox theology and cosmology were

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25.G.K. Hunter, 'Shakespeare's Reading', pp.56-57.

26.Both Norman Council (pp.14-17) and Curtis Brown Watson (p.67) treat it as such.

inculcated at school, instilled through compulsory church attendance and expounded in such homilies as 'An Exhortation concerning Good Order and Obedience to Rulers and Magistrates' (1547) and 'An Homily against Disobedience and Wilful Rebellion' (1574). Numerous scholars have heard echoes of these homilies, as well as of Elyot's The Governor and Hooker's Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity, in much of Shakespeare's work, particularly in Henry V and Troilus and Cressida.<sup>27</sup> Whether or not we can identify Elyot and Hooker as direct sources, they clearly represent a powerful current of traditional thought which would have formed part of Shakespeare's cultural experience. The Elizabethan nostalgia for chivalry has also been well documented, especially by Frances Yates and Roy Strong in their studies of state festivals and court pageantry.<sup>28</sup>

With regards to the Calvinist dissent from orthodoxy, we can be certain that Shakespeare knew the Genevan Bible (1560), which was the standard household bible of the Elizabethan middle classes and remained in use in some churches, despite its associations with Calvin, after the authorised Bishop's

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27. See, for example, Hart, pp.36-76, and Whitaker, pp.155-58, 171-72, 197-209.

28. Frances A. Yates, 'Elizabethan Chivalry: The Romance of the Accession Day Tilts', JWCI, 20 (1957), 4-25; Roy Strong, The Cult of Elizabeth: Elizabethan Portraiture and Pageantry (London: Thames and Hudson, 1977).



Bible was issued in 1568.<sup>29</sup> Shakespeare would probably have translated passages from it in the third form at Stratford Grammar School, and scholars searching for biblical references in the canon have identified numerous allusions to the Genevan version.<sup>30</sup> We also know, of course, that Calvinism had been a pervasive presence in English spiritual, intellectual and political life at least since the return of the Marian exiles in the late 1550's. Their enthusiastic reception of the doctrines of Geneva penetrated the Church, the universities and the House of Commons, offering a vigorous challenge to orthodoxy that exercised a profound influence on many of Shakespeare's contemporaries, including Sidney and Spenser.<sup>31</sup>

These traditions of honour thus constitute part of the moral and intellectual climate in which Shakespeare moved, the cultural ideas and trends to which he was no doubt at once consciously attentive and unconsciously receptive. For the imagination of the great author is perhaps characterised not simply by intellectual curiosity, but also by its comprehensiveness, its ability to embody and give form to what

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29. See Anders, pp.196-97, and S. Schoenbaum, William Shakespeare, A Compact Documentary Life (Oxford, London, New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1977), p.56.

30. Schoenbaum, p.69; Anders, pp.199-201; Noble, pp.69,86-87.

31. For the influence of Calvinism on English thought, see Hardin Craig, The Enchanted Glass, The Elizabethan Mind in Literature (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1950), pp.55-56. M.M. Knappen, Tudor Puritanism, A Chapter in the History of Idealism (Chicago and London: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1939), pp.134-48 and S.T. Bindoff, Tudor England, The Pelican History of England (Penguin, 1950), pp.225-33.

is important not merely in the author's own life, but in the life of his period. Because the dramatist's work is an embodiment of cultural history as well as the product of the individual consciousness surveying it, what chiefly matters in approaching the concept of honour in Shakespeare's plays is not what he may have read, or which sources were available to him, but the different attitudes to honour operative during the sixteenth century which made up part of the cultural fabric of his age.

Honour, of course, is an important concept in many of Shakespeare's plays. I have confined my selection to those in which it becomes the central issue. It could be argued that any consideration of Shakespeare's treatment of honour should include Othello and Macbeth, for in each play the hero's concern for honour contributes to his tragic error. Yet Othello's tragedy is focussed less on honour than on love: hence the hero's own distinction between the endurable loss of honour and the insupportable defilement of love:

but, alas, to make me  
A fixed figure, for the time of scorn  
To point his slow unmoving fingers at . . . oh,  
oh.  
Yet could I bear that too, well, very well:  
But there, where I have garner'd up my heart,  
Where either I must live, or bear no life,  
The fountain, from the which my current runs,  
Or else dries up, to be discarded thence,  
Or keep it as a cistern, for foul toads  
To knot and gender in! Oth., IV.2.54-63.<sup>32</sup>

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32.All quotations are taken from The Arden Shakespeare: Othello, ed. M.R. Ridley (London: Methuen and Co. Ltd., 1958).

It is the destabilising nature not of honour but of love with which the play is primarily concerned. In the same way, Macbeth's tragedy, although in part impelled by Lady Macbeth's imputation of cowardice, becomes material for an exploration of the nature of guilt in which honour plays a subsidiary role. For the sake of uniformity, all quotations from the plays are taken from The Arden Shakespeare series, though in the case of as textually difficult a play as Hamlet, occasional reference is made to other editions. All plays are dated in accordance with the Oxford chronology.<sup>33</sup>

Finally, this thesis is perhaps a bit unusual nowadays in that, although written by a woman, it makes little reference to the role of women in Shakespearean drama. To some extent, the relative unimportance of women in the pages which follow is dictated by the subject matter: women play a limited part in the study of a concept structured around public virtue because in the sixteenth century they had little access to the public sphere. One might cite Queen Elizabeth as evidence to the contrary, but her own political power derived not from any real improvement in women's legal status, but from the accident of royal birth. Yet Elizabeth's genius at discharging the most demanding of all public functions testifies to the strain between the general legal inferiority of women in the Renaissance and their social abilities and aspirations. This strain is reflected in the plays examined

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33. Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor, eds. William Shakespeare: A Textual Companion (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1987).

in this thesis, particularly in the characters of Portia and Volumnia, whose identification with honour demonstrates a deep-seated discontent with the traditional female role; a discontent which, in Volumnia's case, finally involves an entry into the public domain, albeit one rendered ambivalent by the tensions present in her society. Thus, although a character like Ophelia, enjoined by brother and father to defend her chastity, shows us a sixteenth-century conception of female honour that allows a woman no connection to the public life except through the private virtues that reinforce the public stature of her male relations, Shakespeare's exploration of honour is also attentive to the social and sexual powers simmering beneath the surface of female subjection.

CHAPTER 1

THE CONCEPT OF HONOUR FROM ANTIQUITY

TO THE RENAISSANCE



The Iliad reflects a society characterised by a morality of role fulfilment. The central evaluative term of agathos, the forerunner of our word 'good', pertains specifically to the role of the Homeric chieftain. As A.W.H. Adkins explains, in order to be agathos,

one must be brave, skilful, and successful in war and in peace; and one must possess the wealth and (in peace) the leisure which are at once the necessary conditions for the development of these skills and the natural reward of their successful employment.<sup>1</sup>

The Homeric chieftain is agathos if he demonstrates the qualities necessary to sustain his function: the courage, cunning, wealth and leisure which enable him to fight, rule and plot successfully.<sup>2</sup> Accordingly, when Nestor counsels Agamemnon not to take Briseis from Achilles - 'Neither do thou, mighty [agathos] though thou art, seek to take from him the girl' - he assumes that Agamemnon, in his role as commander-in-chief of the Greek forces, is agathos and will remain so whether or not he offends the honour of his co-equal.<sup>3</sup> This powerful commendatory term attaches to the aristocracy because it is their role which is thought to contribute most to the community's stability and well-being in

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1. Adkins, Merit and Responsibility. A Study in Greek Values, p.33.

2. See Alasdair MacIntyre, A Short History of Ethics (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966), p.6.

3. The Iliad, trans. A.T. Murray, 2 vols. (London: William Heinemann Ltd., 1924), I.i.275. This passage is frequently cited as a telling example of a morality of role fulfilment. See, for example, Adkins, Merit and Responsibility, p.37, and MacIntyre, A Short History of Ethics, p.8.

war and in peace.<sup>4</sup>

If the nobleman executes his social function, he possesses areté, a cognate of agathos usually translated as 'virtue' or 'excellence'. Honour, in the form of the respect of one's peers and the material equivalence of respect, or honours, is the reward the Homeric chieftain claims for success in discharging his social role. It is, moreover, an indispensable adjunct of areté: a nobleman's worth is equivalent to the honour in which he is held, for the opinion of his co-equals provides the only effective measure of his success or failure in performing his appointed function.<sup>5</sup> On this basis, we can understand the distress of Achilles in the Iliad and that of Ajax as recounted in the Odyssey: the denial of the material rewards of valour constitutes a denial of honour due, and without honour, a man has no value.<sup>6</sup>

The Iliad reveals honour's integral relation both to aristocracy and to a social conception of virtue, for it is the preserve of a ruling class whose excellence resides in the successful maintenance of the social unit. Yet in evaluating conduct in terms of excellence, an evaluation that is

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4. Adkins, Merit and Responsibility, pp.34-6.

5. See Lionel Pearson, Popular Ethics in Ancient Greece (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford Univ. Press, 1962), p.50.

6. The Iliad, I.i.188-245, 292-303, 345-412; ix.307-429; The Odyssey, trans. A.T. Murray, 2 vols. (London: William Heinemann Ltd., 1919), I.xi.541-567. See Pearson, p.50, and MacIntyre, After Virtue. A Study in Moral Theory (London: Duckworth, 1981), p.125.

necessarily relative, 'always implicitly the claim to excel over others',<sup>7</sup> honour differentiates not only between a power élite and their social inferiors, but also between individual members of the superior class. On this level, honour has a fundamental link with competitive self-assertion as well as with aristocratic pride. This is particularly the case in the Iliad, where the nobleman excels as warrior and ruler through an indomitable exercise of will. Yet even within the social order depicted in the Homeric epics, in which this form of successful self-promotion plays an essential stabilising role, the tensions at work in an honour culture make themselves felt. The conflict between Agamemnon and Achilles illuminates the ease with which a situation of mutual respect among co-equals can disintegrate into the unbridled self-assertion of the 'superior' and the chafed pride of the hero diminished by his supremacy: both Agamemnon and Achilles claim to be 'the best of the Achaeans'.<sup>8</sup> As the growth of the polis rendered the competitive qualities of the Homeric hero increasingly anti-social, moral philosophy sought to integrate the aristocratic function more securely into the new social order through a redefinition of public virtue.

In the Republic, Plato divides his ideal city into three classes which correspond with his theory of the tripartite

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7. Julian Pitt-Rivers, 'Honour and Social Status', in Honour and Shame. The Values of Mediterranean Society, ed. J.G. Peristiany (Chicago: The Univ. of Chicago Press, 1966), p.23.

8. The Iliad, I.i.91,244.



soul.<sup>9</sup> Just as the soul has its appetitive, highspirited and rational parts, so men fall into three distinct groups according to which part of the soul is dominant. Plato assigns reason, the ruling element of man, to the Guardians, the ruling philosophical élite, highspiritedness to the Auxiliaries, the warrior class whose function is to defend the state, and appetite to the merchant and peasant classes.<sup>10</sup> Plato's perfect state is essentially an aristocracy of intellect and courage, and it is in delineating the public function of the Auxiliaries that Plato attempts to redefine aristocratic virtue.

Plato associates the highspirited part of the soul with self-assertion and the pursuit of honour, or timé, the word which denotes both social esteem and material honours.<sup>11</sup> He thus recognises an integral link between aristocratic virtue

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9. For the theory of the tripartite soul, see the Republic, in The Dialogues of Plato, trans. B. Jowett, 4 vols. (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1953), II, IV, 428bff. For discussions of Plato's theory of the tripartite soul, see Helen F. North, 'Canons and Hierarchies of the Cardinal Virtues in Greek and Latin Literature', in The Classical Tradition: Literary and Historical Studies in Honor of Harry Caplan, ed. Luitpold Wallach (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell Univ. Press, 1966), pp.171-73; R.C. Cross and A.D. Woozley, Plato's Republic. A Philosophical Commentary (London and Basingstoke: The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1964), pp.127-33; Eduard Zeller, Outlines of the History of Greek Philosophy, trans. L.R. Palmer (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1931, rpt. 1969), pp.136-44; I.M. Crombie, An Examination of Plato's Doctrines, 2 vols. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962), I.99; and MacIntyre, A Short History of Ethics, pp.39-40.

10. Republic, IV, 428bff, 436a-445e. See also Adkins, Merit and Responsibility, p.294.

11. Republic, III.375aff, VIII.547c-550b.

and a self-assertive spirit. Socrates insists that a man cannot undertake military service if he is not high-spirited because an ambitious, striving spirit implies the possession of an exceptional strength of will, itself the condition of the ability to face the dangers of battle.<sup>12</sup> At the same time, however, Plato understands this aggressive impulse to be dangerously allied to the Homeric inheritance, particularly to its expression in the success-centred ethics of the Sophists, which taught that happiness is achieved through unlimited self-assertion disguised by a veneer of conventional conduct. On this level, the agathos pursues reputation and public honours for the power and profit they afford, and the nobleman's social prominence becomes a licence for unrestrained self-seeking.<sup>13</sup>

In formulating his ideal city, Plato does not seek to eradicate the self-assertive will, but to make it obedient to the rational principle. This synthesis of spirit and reason exhibits itself as the virtue of courage and is achieved through a moral training which teaches the Auxiliary what reason dictates should or should not be feared.<sup>14</sup> This education produces in the Auxiliary the love of the morally

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12. Ibid., III.375a-c.

13. See Adeimantus's argument in Republic, II.362e-365d10. See also VIII.548c5-6.

14. Ibid., III.375e-412b. I am indebted for my discussion of Plato's treatment of the Auxiliary class to Cross and Woosley, pp.96-107, and to Terence Irwin, Plato's Moral Theory (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1977), pp.202-203.

honourable (kalon), which manifests itself in deeds that sacrifice selfish interests for the common good. The word kalon, usually translated as 'the noble' or 'the honourable', denotes the actions of the agathos. It contains the implication of the favourable response of others to the deeds the nobleman performs: kalos actions are well thought of and receive the benefit of time.<sup>15</sup> The word kalon became increasingly prevalent in the classical period,<sup>16</sup> and the development in the moral vocabulary suggests a growing tendency to distinguish between the aristocratic function and the respect and public marks of respect earned by fulfilling that function. In the Republic, at any rate, honour has two distinct though interrelated meanings, one internal and one external to the self; it has come to denote a rational standard of public virtue as well as the social response that rewards it. The Platonic kalon-standard aims at the satisfaction of rational desire; the self-assertive will is focussed not on unlimited self-aggrandisement through the pursuit of reputation and honours, but on an internalised conception of honour, fidelity to which leads the agathos to risk his life on behalf of the city, to aspire to honourable deeds before social rewards. Yet because deeds of social virtue can be authenticated only by the response of others, Plato grants martial heroes the traditional honours of the

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15.K.J. Dover, Greek Popular Morality in the Time of Plato and Aristotle (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1974), pp.69-73. See also Adkins, Merit and Responsibility, p.180.

16.Dover, p.71.

polis.<sup>17</sup>

Plato's conception of aristocratic virtue undoubtedly influenced Aristotle's formulation in the Nicomachean Ethics. However, it is important to recognise the difference as well as the continuity between Platonic and Aristotelian notions of social virtue. For although both thinkers were entirely Greek in their preoccupation with the polis as the arena of the good life, Plato formulated his moral theory in terms of an ideal state that entailed a repudiation of existing states, while Aristotle's ethics are firmly grounded in contemporary upper class Athenian life.<sup>18</sup>

Early on in the Nicomachean Ethics, Aristotle informs us that public men, who are 'men of superior refinement and active disposition', equate happiness, the telos of human life, with honour; that is, with timé.<sup>19</sup> Aristotle's public men are Athenian gentlemen, the men of high rank who dominated political life in fourth-century Athens.<sup>20</sup> Aristotle, however, does not hesitate to reject their point of view, for two reasons: first, on the grounds that external honour depends on 'those who bestow honour rather than on him who

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17. Republic, V.468dff.

18. See Alasdair MacIntyre, A Short History of Ethics, p.67.

19. Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, trans. W.D. Ross, in The Basic Works of Aristotle, ed. Richard McKeon (New York: Random House, 1941), 1095b22-25.

20. See Adkins, Merit and Responsibility, pp.318-19; 338-43.

receives it', while the supreme good in life must be 'something proper to a man and not easily taken from him'; secondly, because, as the object men seek 'in order that they may be assured of their goodness', honour is necessarily of secondary interest to the virtue it commends.<sup>21</sup>

In place of the public man's identification of happiness with timé, Aristotle proposes that the final good for man consists in activity of the soul in accordance with virtue, or with the rational faculty that makes us uniquely human.<sup>22</sup> Aristotle divides the soul into rational and nonrational parts.<sup>23</sup> The nonrational element includes the faculty of desire, the realm of passions and impulses which are rational or irrational insofar as they conform to the dictates of reason. The moral, as opposed to the intellectual, virtues are activities that spring from the obedience of desire to reason.<sup>24</sup> Thus, Aristotle perceives an integral link between moral virtue and passion. The feelings accompanied by pleasure or pain can resist the rational principle and become

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21. Nicomachean Ethics, 1095b23-30.

22. I am summarising the essential features of Aristotle's concept of the Good as they appear in the Nicomachean Ethics, 1097a15-1098b8. It must be stressed, however, that the notion of public virtue on which I base my account of Aristotle is transcended at the end of the Ethics by the superior happiness to be found in a life of philosophical contemplation (EN, 1177a12-1179a33). As this is available to only a few men, however, the life of public virtue remains a vital, if secondary, kind of happiness.

23. Nicomachean Ethics, 1102a35-1103a10.

24. Ibid., 1103b26-1106a12.

vice or accord with it and become virtue.

What then does reason prescribe? In his account of good self-love, Aristotle distinguishes between the reprehensible self-love of men who gratify their appetites and the irrational element of the soul by assigning to themselves the greater share of such objects of competition as 'wealth, honours, and bodily pleasures',<sup>25</sup> and the self-love of the good man who gratifies the rational element in himself by desiring what is kalos or honourable, which entails acting so as to benefit others:

the good man acts for honour's sake, and the more so the better he is, and acts for his friend's sake, and sacrifices his own interest.<sup>26</sup>

Thus, reason enjoins acting for honour's sake - not for timé, but for kalon. Indeed, Aristotle sets up an explicit contrast between the irrational desire for external goods like material honours and the rational desire to attain the honourable course by sacrificing such selfish interests. It is clear, therefore, that although Aristotle rejects the identification of happiness with timé, which he associates with competitive self-assertion, his notion of the Good is focussed upon a conception of honour as virtuous conduct on behalf of others. It should be stressed, however, that the Aristotelian kalon-standard rests not on altruism, but on good self-love: acts of beneficence derive from the individual's desire to

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25. Ibid., 1168b15-21.

26. Ibid., 1168a32-34.

identify himself with the highest good, a state of character which Aristotle insists must be created by moral training.<sup>27</sup> For Aristotle, then, internal honour is a question neither of self-effacement nor of self-aggrandisement, but of educated passion; the agathos asserts himself by aspiring to gain nobility through the performance of deeds that profit others.

The kalon-standard forms the basis of Aristotle's conception of the aristocratic public function, for in securing internal honour, the agathos simultaneously secures the good of the community. The assumption that individual and collective happiness are inseparable informs Aristotle's discussions of each of the moral virtues. The liberal man is characterised as one who uses his wealth to confer benefits on others, while the magnificent man spends his money on 'proper objects of public-spirited ambition'.<sup>28</sup> Aristotle's megalopsychos, or great-souled man, performs notable deeds of public beneficence, such as facing the dangers of battle without regard for personal safety.<sup>29</sup> To offer one's life for one's country is for Aristotle the highest instance of the honourable act. In his discussion of the virtue of courage, he praises the man who faces the noblest of deaths in battle.<sup>30</sup>

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27. Aristotle deals with education at EN, 1103a14-b26; 1104b4-13.

28. Ibid., 1120a23-b6; 1122b18-25.

29. Ibid., 1124b6-11.

30. Ibid., 1115a29-35.

The Rhetoric provides a further illustration of Aristotle's conception of the nobleman's public role. Virtue is there defined as a 'faculty of beneficence'. The highest virtues are identified as courage and justice, for these are the most useful to others. Aristotle characterises the quality of honourable or kalos actions: those a man performs for his country with no thought for himself; all actions done for the sake of others, since they 'are not directed to one's own profit'.<sup>31</sup>

Aristotle's conception of honour thus defines a social élite that is also a moral élite. In denoting the aristocratic function of military and public service, the kalon-standard applies to a propertied class with the wealth to confer benefits on the city and the leisure to develop the martial and administrative skills that preserve social prosperity. Yet it also characterises Athenian gentlemen as those members of society who, in acquiring virtuous habits of personality, attain a higher level of being. The kalon-standard establishes the moral basis for the social superiority of a ruling class.

Aristotle insists, in the Nicomachean Ethics, on the interdependence of the moral and the social. He stresses that public virtue requires external goods; without wealth, the liberal man cannot bestow benefits on the polis, and without

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31. Rhetoric, trans. W. Rhys Roberts, in The Basic Works of Aristotle, 1366b2-6; 1366b35-1367a7.



power, the brave man cannot perform noble deeds of courage.<sup>32</sup> This introduces us to the complex relationship in Aristotelian ethics between internal and external honour. As we have just seen, Aristotle differentiates sharply between the honour that is 'proper to a man' and the honour that is bestowed on a man by others; between deeds of social virtue and the response that rewards them. We have come a long way from Homer. The excellences that sustain the nobleman's public role have undergone a fundamental re-evaluation, while the Homeric identification of virtue with respect and public honours has lost the social context that gave it meaning; a man's moral worth is now distinct from and superior to the respect in which he is held. Aristotle's emphasis on volition is of crucial importance in this distinction, for it identifies the man by the actions that result from his own will. Aristotle declares that an act which a man performs through a rational principle is his own act; it is voluntary and so reveals the man in his true nature.<sup>33</sup> Hence, the act of the rational will belongs to the agent in the sense that the principle of action comes from within him.

The interior dimension of Aristotelian ethics endows intention with a significance that would have been unintelligible to the Homeric hero, for whom results alone

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32. Nicomachean Ethics. 1099b1-8;1178a28-34.

33. Ibid., 1168b30-1169a2.

mattered.<sup>34</sup> When Aristotle insists that the best type of man 'acts for honour's sake',<sup>35</sup> he measures the moral status of an act by the motivation of its agent. There is now a clear distinction between a deed performed for the sake of glory and one performed for the sake of its inherent nobility. In his discussion of courage, Aristotle prizes the man who acts bravely because it is honourable to do so more highly than the Homeric warrior, who fought in order to win the respect of his peers and avoid disgrace.<sup>36</sup>

Yet it is important to remember that we are dealing in Aristotle's ethics with a world in which intentions remain secret until translated into action. Aristotle himself declares how difficult it is to discern intention and that virtue must therefore consist in both the will and the deed.<sup>37</sup> The pagan reliance on the external manifestation of the will immediately implies the presence of others to judge a man's deeds. Thus, virtue in Aristotelian ethics cannot be other than social. This is why Aristotle defines the Noble as 'that which is both desirable for its own sake and also worthy of

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34. See Adkins, Merit and Responsibility, p.35.

35. Nicomachean Ethics, 1168a32-33.

36. Ibid., 1115b7-24; 1116a15-b2. For discussions of Aristotle's treatment of the motivation behind courageous deeds, see H.H. Joachim, Aristotle: The Nicomachean Ethics (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1951). p.118, and Sir David Ross, Aristotle (London: Methuen and Co. Ltd., 1949), p.204.

37. Nicomachean Ethics, 1178a24-b2.

praise'.<sup>38</sup> We have seen that this connection between honourable deeds and the response of one's fellow men is contained in the word kalon, which refers to both action and the favourable response to action. Aristotle entirely understands the integral relation between kalon and timé when he calls timé 'the prize appointed for the noblest deeds'.<sup>39</sup> His vision of the moral virtues consistently evokes the response of others to the actions of the honourable man. The deeds of the liberal man earn gratitude and esteem; magnificence acquires prestige; bad self-love is greeted with reproach; good self-love is approved and praised.<sup>40</sup> In Aristotelian ethics, a man's social self forms an essential part of what he is as a man. Aristotle's observation that public men seek honour in order to 'be assured of their goodness'<sup>41</sup> testifies to the logical connection between self-respect and the respect of one's peers; a connection examined further in Aristotle's discussion of 'proper pride'.

Aristotle proposes that there is a mean in the desire for respect; a point, intermediate between the two extremes of vainglory and poor-spiritedness, at which it is right to want to be honoured.<sup>42</sup> The mean depends on the quality of 'proper

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38. Rhetoric, 1366a33-35.

39. Nicomachean Ethics, 1123b20.

40. Ibid., 1120a15-18; 1122b34; 1169a6-8.

41. Ibid., 1095b27-28.

42. Aristotle discusses the mean at EN, II.6-9.

pride', the self-knowledge and self-respect of the honourable man who 'thinks himself worthy of great things, being worthy of them'.<sup>43</sup>

Now, the great man's pride in his own merit must derive from a knowledge of his deeds, for it is only through the performance of deeds that are desirable in and of themselves that a man's worth is evinced. However, the standard that determines what is honourable is social law, the rational principle inculcated through education, so that the rational will of the nobleman makes its choices purely on the basis of social values. Indeed, the Aristotelian rational will is internalised social law. Hence, the pride that Aristotle's public man takes in the performance of noble acts and for which he does not hesitate to claim the honour of his peers seems to derive ultimately from society, as do the deeds themselves.

So, do the nobleman's deeds belong to him or to the community? 'Both', would seem to be the answer provided by Aristotle. Yet the relation which Aristotle sets up between internal and external honour, between the self and society, clarifies the complex and contradictory nature of social virtue. The distinction between kalon and timé, which on one

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43. Nicomachean Ethics, 1123b1-3. The theory of proper pride is offered in EN, IV.3. Aristotle considers that men who seek external honour with excessive or deficient zeal do not know themselves: the vain man exaggerates his worth, while the humble man underestimates his capabilities.

level integrates honour into a formulation of virtuous conduct on behalf of society, on another makes the heroic individual to some extent independent of the public to which he is at the same time, by virtue of the social basis of his deeds, irrevocably tied. This tension in Aristotelian social virtue, the problematic relationship which it establishes between aristocratic pride and the society it serves, suggests the tragic meaning latent in the classical concept of honour.

In 'doing the Good', the Aristotelian nobleman also fulfils the function of his class. Here we return to the connection between a ruling class's social and moral pre-eminence. The respect the nobleman seeks is one expression of the social privilege that Aristotle deems an essential part of the performance of noble deeds; hence timé is designated the greatest of external goods.<sup>44</sup> As part of a class-bound concept, timé is sought not from society in general, but from one's social equals. Public men desire to be honoured 'among those who know them' because timé has value only when 'conferred by good men'.<sup>45</sup>

Timé, then, is a crucial part of the nobleman's greatness, rewarding moral superiority with a commensurate social superiority. On this level, the Nicomachean Ethics reinforces the integral relation between honour and distinction, and

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44.Ibid., 1123b15-21.

45.Ibid., 1095b28; 1124a6.

testifies to the permanent instability which this relation generates. We have seen that Aristotle, following Plato, attempts to control aristocratic self-assertion by defining it in terms of rational desire and good self-love. But throughout the Nicomachean Ethics, Aristotle points to the continuing prevalence of the competition for eminence, at times pursued with a determination akin to moral blindness. Thus Aristotle tells us that public men equate happiness with timé, and characterises the ambitious man as one who does wrong for the sake of external honour.<sup>46</sup> Although the Aristotelian kalon-standard clearly aims to supply a rational basis for the individual desire for distinction, it is possible that by yoking social superiority more securely to moral superiority, it inadvertently provides the moral justification for competitive individualism.

With the decline of the Greek polis and the growth of the large-scale Hellenistic and Roman empires, moral philosophy becomes less concerned with the individual as part of a community and more interested in man as a private individual.<sup>47</sup> Stoicism reflects this sense of individual separation from the world. The Stoic doctrine of the universal law of Nature aims at individual peace of mind through a virtuous life that

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46. In EN, 1125b1-25, Aristotle declares that the ambitious man desires honour (timé) 'more than is right', and in the Rhetoric (1368b19), he defines the ambitious man as one who 'does wrong for the sake of honour (timé)'.

47. See Bertrand Russell, History of Western Philosophy (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1961), p.240, and MacIntyre, A Short History of Ethics, p.100.

conforms with the rational principle of moral law.<sup>48</sup>

However, although Stoic doctrine aspires to individual tranquillity, the concept of natural law makes each human being an equal citizen of the cosmos and therefore presupposes that there are moral and social obligations binding the individual to his fellow men. Individual virtue is thus linked logically to human community. Epictetus considers that mankind is naturally disposed to social life and to the sacrifice of private interests for the common good.<sup>49</sup> Marcus Aurelius similarly interprets the active duty of beneficence as the end of human life:

. . . as man is formed by nature to acts of benevolence, when he has done anything benevolent or in any other way conducive to the common interest, he has acted conformably to his constitution, and he gets what is his own.<sup>50</sup>

For the Stoics, then, virtue consists in the renunciation of selfish private interests in the performance of deeds that benefit others. This social standard of virtue lies at the heart of the public role of the Roman nobility. As a vision of the aristocratic function, it makes abundantly clear the

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48. I am indebted for my discussion of Stoic ethics to R.D. Hicks, Stoic and Epicurean (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1910), pp.74-152; to J.M. Rist, Stoic Philosophy (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1969), pp.1-36; and to Alasdair MacIntyre, A Short History of Ethics, pp.100-109.

49. Arrian's Discourses of Epictetus, trans. P.E. Matheson, in The Stoic and Epicurean Philosophers, II.x.

50. The Meditations of Marcus Aurelius Antoninus, trans. G. Long, in The Stoic and Epicurean Philosophers, ed. Whitney J. Oates (New York: Random House, Inc., 1957), IX.42.

Stoics' debt to Aristotle. However, unlike Aristotle, the Stoics tend to polarise reason and passion. Virtue derives not from rational desire, but from the conquest of irrational passions - a category in which the Stoics place nearly all emotions.<sup>51</sup> The Stoic sage aspires to apathia, the absence of desire and all other vicious emotional impulses. This inner virtue produces happiness, or immunity from suffering, for the man who desires nothing can lose nothing; he is independent of the caprices of circumstance. Stoicism thus associates public virtue with a curious combination of self-subdual and self-sufficiency, both quite foreign to Greek ethics.

It is clear, moreover, that Stoicism abandons the link between morality and the telos. Virtue is the only unconditional good, to be sought solely for its own sake. Thus, Cicero declares that virtue should be desired 'in and for itself, apart from any profit or reward'.<sup>52</sup> Not surprisingly, Stoic doctrine has no room for an external good like public honour which, as the reward for virtue, is at once an ulterior motive and an unstable object of desire. However, if Stoicism repudiates honour in its external guise, it gives a central place to an internal honour denoting the individual's aspiration to virtue:

If you wish to be a man of honour and trust,  
who will forbid you? . . . But if you wish to

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51. See The Cambridge History of Renaissance Philosophy, ed. Charles B. Schmitt (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1988), p.364.

52. Cicero, De Finibus Bonorum et Malorum, trans. H. Rackham (London: William Heinemann, 1914), II.xiv.45.



keep what is outside you as well - your paltry body, and goods, and reputation - I advise you to begin this moment to make all possible preparation. . . . For when you once allow outward things to dominate what is your own, you had better become a slave and have done with it.<sup>53</sup>

This passage from the Discourses of Epictetus exhibits both the rejection of public honour and the primacy of an honour conceived of as the essential and independent moral self. Latin makes a distinction between these two meanings of honour comparable to that we found in Greek: honestum denotes a man's fidelity to 'the honourable', while honor refers to both respect and material honours.

Thus, the central ethical relationship defined by the Stoic conception of honour is not that between a man and the community, but that between a man and himself. How does one reconcile this moral autonomy with a standard of virtue which dictates participation in the public life? For Aristotle, after all, social morality necessitates the coexistence of self-respect and earned respect. However, if Stoicism here seems to be at odds with its ethical roots, its formulation of honour in fact represents a logical development from Aristotle. The internalised social values that constituted the proper pride of the Aristotelian nobleman have become self-sufficient: if a man can find within himself the principles that guide the rational will, what need does he have for social esteem?

Let us give to the soul that peace which is afforded by constant meditation on wholesome

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53. Arrian's Discourses, II.2.

instruction, by noble deeds, and a mind intent upon the desire for only what is honourable. Let us satisfy our conscience; for reputation let us strive not at all. Let even a bad name attend us, provided that we are really well-deserving.<sup>54</sup>

The Stoic conscience should not be confused with the Christian conscience. It is not the voice of God within a man, but a self-applauding faculty, the internalised acclaim of one's peers. A.D. Nuttall explains this phenomenon:

In Stoic philosophy the heroic ethic of pride, of glory in the sight of others, is cut off from its reliance on social esteem and made self-sufficient in each individual. The rational man is taught to fill the silence of his own skull with clamorous self-applause, with a majestically austere approbation of his own feats. Every man his own Achilles in his own, private Trojan War.<sup>55</sup>

What the Homeric nobleman could find only in the respect of his co-equals, the Stoic sage finds within himself, in the consciousness of his own integrity and devotion to moral principle. The implications of moral independence which we find in Aristotle are thus realised in the figure of the gloriously self-reliant Stoic hero, paradoxically proud in his achievement of passionless indifference.<sup>56</sup> While retaining the framework of an active, social conception of virtue, Stoicism divorces self-respect from the respect of others, with the result that honour comes to denote the capacity for good of an autonomous moral being.

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54.Seneca, 'On Anger', in Moral Essays, trans. John W. Basore, 3 vols. (London: William Heinemann Ltd., 1928), I, III.xli.1.

55.A.D. Nuttall, A New Mimesis. Shakespeare and the Representation of Reality (London: Methuen and Co. Ltd., 1983), p.105.

56.Ibid., p.103.

From this discussion of the concept of honour in antiquity, it is possible to draw several general conclusions about pagan morality. In the Graeco-Roman world, man exists and functions in a predominantly man-centred universe, in which morality involves a system of right relations between a man and his fellow men. Human society emerges as the foundation of natural order, so that virtue logically becomes a social concept which equilibrates individual and social well-being and bestows the highest moral value on the conduct that contributes to society's prosperity.

Honour forms an integral part of such an active, social conception of virtue, denoting both the deeds of public virtue that help to preserve the social unit, and the response of others to such deeds well-performed. Honour, therefore, is associated throughout antiquity with the aristocracy, the class with the wealth and leisure that enable it to cultivate the skills beneficial to society. Yet we have seen that honour's basis in aristocratic pride, in social and moral differentiation, renders the relationship between society and aristocratic virtue intrinsically problematic, vulnerable to the self-exaltation of the heroic individual upon whom the social order depends for its survival. Moreover, attempts to stabilise the honour relationship through the identification of social virtue with public service achieve at best an insecure control over heroic individualism and may, through their suggestions of an autonomous moral superiority, actually

encourage it.

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With the advent of Christianity, honour assumes a diminished role within an ethic that calls into question the human capacity for good. Christian ethics follow logically and irresistibly from the twin pillars of Christian doctrine, the Creation and the Fall. In a created universe, man exists in a relationship of absolute dependence upon God, from whom he derives both existence and substantiality.<sup>57</sup> The central tenet of Christian metaphysics produces a radical transformation in the conception of man as a moral being. The virtuous conduct that for the Greeks was the ne plus ultra, that which is desirable in and of itself, is now desirable only in that it leads man to God, the transcendent principle who is the source of morality. Thus, the moral order that finds its basis in the natural reason is regulated and defined by the divine order that encompasses it. Moral error can therefore no longer be merely an offence against reason that can be corrected through a renewal of well-doing. In the Christian universe, a violation of the moral order entails a violation of the universal, divinely-instituted order. The magnitude of this transgression precludes the classical belief in the ability of man to restore harmony through his own efforts and presupposes instead human reliance on God's

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57. See Étienne Gilson, The Spirit of Medieval Philosophy, trans. A.H.C. Downes (London: Sheed and Ward, 1936), p.129.

grace.<sup>58</sup>

A morally bad act, then, which the Christians call 'sin', in fact denotes man's opposition to God, a conception of natural morality that is a measure of the distance between classical and Christian ethics. The independence in the order of existence that man enjoyed in pagan morality becomes the foundation of sin, the source of man's proud rebellion against the essential law dictating the creature's absolute dependence on the Creator. The concept of original sin interprets the human will primarily as the cause of human mortality and earthly suffering through its evil aspiration to self-sufficiency. Deprived by the Fall of the rectitude of will which he possessed only by virtue of God, and thus utterly reliant on grace, Christian man can have little of his pagan predecessor's faith in the efficacy of his own will to virtue. In the God-centred universe of Christianity, virtue is transformed from a secular into a religious concept, involving a man's relationship not to the community, but to God. This development of a sacred, and the decline of a secular, conception of morality has a profound and lasting effect on the concept of honour.

Out of the dual basis of Christian theology develops a dual conception of human nature; a conception that lies at the heart of the first great formulation of Christian philosophy.

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58. Ibid., pp.324-41.

St. Augustine's The City of God. For Augustine, Nature is inherently good because created by God. As part of God's creation, man is therefore also essentially good, though corrupted by his evil will:

the vice that makes them oppose God is their own hurt. . . because it corrupts their good nature. . . . the natures that an evil will has corrupted, though in so far as they be polluted they are evil, yet in so far as they are natures they are good.<sup>59</sup>

In his created nature, man is able to participate in God's will through the medium of reason, which is imbued with natural law through the moral conscience, the divine illumination within each individual.<sup>60</sup> Man's fallen nature, on the other hand, is dominated by what Augustine terms 'lust': the desire for the temporal goods of money, power and sexual pleasure that drives man to strive restlessly for a satisfaction the perpetually eludes him.<sup>61</sup> The City of God presents these two natures as separated by a chasm of sin; in his fallen state, man is in bondage to the polluted nature he unleashed in his pride, his will infected, his intellect darkened, capable of redemption only through the unmerited grace which God bestows on a few elect by virtue of Christ's mediatory sacrifice. For the vast majority of men, the effects of the Fall are inescapable.<sup>62</sup>

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59. St. Augustine, The City of God, trans. John Healey, 2 vols. (London: J.M. Dent and Sons Ltd., 1945), I.xii.3.

60. Ibid., I.v.12; II.xiv.28.

61. Ibid., II.xiv.15.

62. Ibid., II.xxi.12.

This binary conception of Nature shapes the central theme of The City of God, for Augustine divides mankind into the two societies developed by man's two natures: the city of man, inhabited by those men who remain enslaved to the selfish drives of the unregenerate condition; and the city of God, the citizens of which pass through the earthly city as pilgrims, using the temporal goods it has to offer only as a means of reaching their final, higher destination of union with God:

Two loves therefore have given origin to these two cities, self-love in contempt of God unto the earthly, love of God in contempt of one's self to the heavenly. . . . For the city of the saints is above, though it have citizens here upon earth, wherein it lives as a pilgrim until the time of the kingdom come. . . .<sup>63</sup>

Not surprisingly, the state in Augustinian doctrine ceases to be, as it was for the ancients, an essential means of securing the good life, serving mainly the necessary but negative function of restraining the enormities attendant upon man's fallen condition.<sup>64</sup>

Augustine's rigid separation of man's temporal existence and his supra-terrestrial end generates a spiritualisation of morality. Augustinian ethics, based on the metaphysical foundation of an omniscient, creative deity, refers all human

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63. Ibid., II.xiv.28; xv.1.

64. See F.C. Copleston, Aquinas (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd., 1955), pp.236-38; Ernest Baker, 'Introduction', The City of God, xviii; Herbert A. Deane, The Political and Social Ideas of St. Augustine (New York and London: Columbia Univ. Press, 1963), pp.11-12, 221-24.

activity to a supernatural absolute that is the sole source of morality. Because virtue is a good that God creates, and that man defiled through sin, the performance of virtuous deeds must ultimately be ascribed to God rather than to the individual. Moreover, God's infinite knowledge dictates the interiorization of morality; good and evil are measured not, as they necessarily were for the Greeks, by the act, but by the will, which in turn locates the essence of moral order not in society, but in the prescriptions of the moral conscience, through which the God of creation legislates for man.<sup>65</sup> Thus, the social relationship that lies at the heart of pagan ethics is radically diminished in The City of God, both secular virtue and social response devalued as criteria of the Good. For if the individual owes his good deeds to God, manifests his intentions to God, and learns what is good from God, then his sense of himself as an honourable man within society and his expectation of public honour as the reward for his deeds not only lose the meaning they gained from the civic morality of antiquity, but become expressions of the sacriligious madness - the self-love, the worldliness - of the city of man.

Yet Augustine denigrates the social relationship only in its secular guise; transmuted into a spiritual ethic, it continues to define the primary moral community of

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65. For the Christian interiorization of morality, see Gilson, The Spirit of Medieval Philosophy, pp.344-57. See also Peter Abailard, Ethics, or Know Thyself, in Philosophy in the Middle Ages, eds. Arthur Hyman and James J. Walsh (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1973), pp.188-202.



Christianity: the association between man and God. Honour becomes focussed on God as the origin of virtue, and good deeds performed in the earthly city serve the sole function of glorifying him and extending his truth in this world. Thus Augustine instructs:

Do not well with an intent that men should see you do so, and so turn to behold you, who by yourselves are nothing: but do so that they may glorify your Father in heaven, unto whom if they turn they may be such as you are.<sup>66</sup>

Virtue, then, is social only insofar as it enlarges the society of believers; a spiritual society the imperatives of which take absolute precedence over those of any temporal community.

In this sense, Augustine's celestial city can be seen as a transfiguration of the classical idea of the state from a secular into a religious concept:<sup>67</sup> the City of God, the true Jerusalem, where the individual, as part of the communion of saints, serves the King of heaven:

and then it gathers all the citizens together in the resurrection of the body, and gives them a kingdom to reign in with their King forever and ever.<sup>68</sup>

The idea of the public, then, retains its force in Augustinian doctrine, though in a drastically altered form. Within the social framework of the heavenly city, honour has an equally crucial, if transformed role to play. Raised from the secular

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66. The City of God. I.v.14.

67. See Deane, pp.11-12.

68. The City of God, II.xv.1.

to the sacred level, honour denotes the correct relationship between man and God; it is what the elect, the servants of the true God, owe to their King. God replaces the aristocracy as the powerful authority concerned with honour; an honour paid not by co-equals, but given unreservedly by a finite creature to an infinite Being. The citizen of the City of God displays public virtue by honouring God as the transcendent principle from which all goodness emanates, and is rewarded not with the respect of men, but with the ultimate honour of beatitude, or union with God:

The first seeks the glory of men, and the latter desires God only as the testimony of the conscience, the greatest glory. That glories in itself, and this in God. That exalts itself in self-glory: this says to God: 'My glory and the lifter up of my head.'<sup>69</sup>

It should be added that although St. Augustine does not equate the City of God with the organised Church, which contains both the reprobate and the elect, he does nonetheless envisage the Church as the corporate body ordained by Christ for the assembling of the elect before the Last Judgement.<sup>70</sup> The Church Militant therefore has a closer affinity with the invisible Church than does any other terrestrial society. It follows from this that the Church is superior to the State, an idea that will have profound implications for the political theory of the medieval Church.

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69.Ibid., II.xiv.28.

70.Ibid., II.xx.9.

The dual conception of Nature that we find in Augustinian theory remains an essential feature of Christian philosophy, defining the problematic connection between man's temporal existence and his spiritual end. Yet although the superiority of the sacred over the secular persists as an unquestioned metaphysical truth, by the high Middle Ages, the scholasticism of Aquinas offers an ethical system altogether more tolerant of secular affairs due to its conviction that the human reason helps to assuage the effects of the Fall.<sup>71</sup> The Thomist reconciliation of reason and grace narrows the gap between man's created and fallen natures and restores some ethical value to moral conduct in the secular sphere.

Scholasticism, then, generates a conception of honour significantly different from the otherworldly formulation developed by Augustine. Aquinas follows his great predecessor in distinguishing absolutely between man's supra-terrestrial and earthly ends. Happiness, Aquinas tells us, consists in the supernatural vision of God, an activity of the intellect realised only in the next life and unattainable without grace.<sup>72</sup> Yet there is also an imperfect happiness, to be had in this life, which consists principally in contemplation, and secondarily in 'the activity of the practical intelligence

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71. See Gilson, The Spirit of Medieval Philosophy, pp.140-45.

72. Saint Thomas Aquinas, Summa Contra Gentiles, in Basic Writings of Saint Thomas Aquinas, ed. Anton G. Pegis, 2 vols. (New York: Random House, 1945), II.3.37; Summa Theologiae, 60 vols. (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1964-75), 1a2ae.3,4;3,5.

governing our deeds and feelings'.<sup>73</sup> This latter, subsidiary form of imperfect earthly happiness is the domain of the natural reason, the faculty whereby man conducts his active, civic life in accordance with virtue, the 'perfections by which the reason is directed towards God and the lower powers are managed according to the standard of reason'.<sup>74</sup> Aquinas, then, seeks not to deliver man from his mortal existence, but to define the subordinate position of temporal endeavour within the total scope of human destiny and to direct it towards that destiny.<sup>75</sup> In the same way, the classical philosophy that concerns itself with man's imperfect happiness is not denigrated, but seen as operating in a relationship of harmonious inequality with the truths of the Christian faith: philosophy bolsters faith which in turn completes and perfects philosophical truth.<sup>76</sup>

Thus, in his account of the imperfect happiness attainable in this world, Aquinas relies on the ethical system of Aristotle to determine the nature of virtuous activity in man's civic life. Aquinas follows Aristotle in defining this virtue in social terms. Throughout Aquinas's discussion of moral virtue, well-doing is placed in a natural social

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73. Summa Theologiae, 1a2ae.3,5.

74. Ibid., 1a.95,3; Summa Contra Gentiles, in Pegis, II.3.63.

75. See Alasdair MacIntyre, A Short History of Ethics, p.117.

76. See Copleston, Aquinas, pp.193-98; Henry Sidgwick, Outlines of the History of Ethics for English Readers (London: Macmillan Co. Ltd., 1931), p.140.

context: good deeds are those accounted praiseworthy, evil actions those deserving reproach.<sup>77</sup> Operating in this social arena, virtue emerges logically as the Aristotelian quality of beneficence: Aquinas interprets the function of human excellence as the bestowing of benefits on one's fellow men. He therefore accepts the Philosopher's judgement that justice and fortitude are the greatest of the moral virtues because the most useful to others.<sup>78</sup>

The Thomist formulation of honour is dictated by this social construction of virtue. Honour denotes the relationship between the self and society. As in the Nicomachean Ethics, it is examined in its internal and external manifestations: as 'the affection for nobleness' (honestum) that repudiates selfish interests and encourages the performance of deeds of social virtue, and as the public response to such deeds (honor) that bears 'positive witness to a man's virtue'.<sup>79</sup> Like Aristotle, Aquinas insists on the integral relation between honourable deeds and social response; men desire recognition as a testimony of their worth because self-respect is logically dependent on the respect of other good men.<sup>80</sup> Yet because it is the interior act of the will that ultimately determines the nature of action, Aquinas

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77. Summa Theologiae, 1a2ae.21,2; 2a2ae.144,1.

78. Ibid., 2a2ae.131,1; 132,2; 1a2ae.66,4.

79. Ibid., 2a2ae.145,1; 129,1.

80. Ibid., 2a2ae.103,1.

cites Aristotle's dictum that the man who performs brave deeds for the sake of external honour is not truly virtuous.<sup>81</sup> Thus, honestum takes precedence over honor.

It is in the relationship that Aquinas sets up between the deed and the response to the deed that the distance separating Thomist from Aristotelian honour becomes apparent. In the Nicomachean Ethics, this relationship is a problematic one, for if Aristotle insists on the primacy of the rational will's aspiration to the morally beautiful, that will must ultimately be defined by its social context in a pagan universe where society is the basis of natural law and where intentions can be discerned only through action. For Aristotle, then, internal honour is inseparable from its logical concomitant, the response of society to the deeds of the honourable man.

In Thomist theory, the situation is quite different, for the central tenet of Christian ethics - that virtue is not an end in itself, but a good directed to its source, the omniscient God of creation - dictates that the moral quality of action is determined not by the will as internalised social law, but by the will fixed firmly in God.<sup>82</sup> The will, then, is neither the autonomous agent of honourable deeds nor inextricably bound to social imperatives, so that the tensions present in the Aristotelian account of honour cease to operate

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81.Ibid., 2a2ae.131,1.

82.Ibid., 1a2ae.20,1. See also Copleston, Aquinas, pp.201-208.

in Thomist ethics. Moreover, the Christian subordination of the exterior relationship between the self and society to the interior relationship between a man and God endows intention with a far greater significance than it could have claimed in Aristotelian ethics. Thus, Aquinas acknowledges that insofar as virtue functions in a social arena, intention can be discerned only in its external manifestation:

Inner choices can be recognized only through outward conduct, and if this is honoured, it is as showing forth inner rightness. Nobility is rooted in our interior freedom, and is signified by our exterior conversation.<sup>83</sup>

Yet if Aquinas here speaks the language of classical ethics, this formulation of the social relationship is ultimately transcended by the supernatural order that rules and envelops it. For Aquinas, then, to do good for the sake of external honour entails not merely an offence against reason, but an offence against the author of reason. It is to claim a tribute for excellence that belongs properly to God, and to give a perverse primacy to social standards.<sup>84</sup> It is, fundamentally, to assert the existence of a moral order independent of God. Thus, Aquinas variously glosses the inordinate desire for social esteem as the sin of vainglory, ambition and pride.<sup>85</sup>

Yet if the supra-terrestrial end on which Thomist

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83. Ibid., 2a2ae.145,1.

84. Ibid., 2a2ae.131,1; 132,3.

85. Ibid., 2a2ae.131; 132; Summa Contra Gentiles, in Pegis, II.3.63.

philosophy is constructed radically transforms its Aristotelian heritage, so does its Aristotelianism distance it from Augustinian otherworldliness. What we find in Aquinas's moral theory is a syncretism that accommodates the demands of man's temporal existence to the overriding claims of his final end. Aquinas interprets virtue as a divine gift within man, bestowed upon him in order that he might benefit his fellows.<sup>86</sup> This vision of a social relationship presided over by God postulates a deity intimately concerned with man's social life and a human reason capable of translating sacred imperatives into virtuous action in the secular realm. In Aquinas's formulation, God oversees civic morality, the interior relationship between God and the rational will directing the performance of honourable deeds of social virtue. Within this public context of virtue, a man may properly desire recognition of his deeds in order to honour God, from whom they emanate, and to profit his neighbour by his good example.<sup>87</sup> Honour, therefore, is focussed principally on God, and only secondarily on the individual virtue that, through the channel of the human reason, mediates between God and society.

Aquinas's conception of the social relationship subordinates secular activity to an end outside itself while integrating that activity within a pattern of divine order.

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86. Summa Theologiae, 2a2ae.131.1.

87. Ibid., 2a2ae.131,1; 132,1.



Thus, Aquinas distinguishes the virtuous moderation of the love of public honour from the beatific contempt for it, and asserts the radical imperfection of temporal honour when compared to the infinitely superior honour of beatitude, whereby 'men are raised to the highest position of honor. . . because, in a way, they are united to God'.<sup>88</sup> At the same time, however, he is able to define the relationship between a man and his fellows in the Christian terms that envisage a social order inextricably linked to God.

This sense of harmonious disparity between man's supernatural and temporal ends extends as well to Aquinas's political theory, which stresses the state's positive role in promoting the good life, rather than its coercive power in restraining man's evil will.<sup>89</sup> The decline of the early-Christian otherworldly tradition reflects both Aquinas's Aristotelianism and the dominant ideology of the medieval Church, which had itself maintained a dual basis in spiritual affairs and temporal power since Constantine merged Christianity with the Roman Empire in 312. This interplay of sacred and secular affairs had important consequences for medieval political thought, engendering a doctrine of Church supremacy which vested power in the Pope, Christ's representative on earth, from whom it might be deputed to

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88. Summa Contra Gentiles, in Pegis, II.3.63; Summa Theologiae, 1a2ae.69,3.

89. Summa Theologiae, 1a.96,4. See also Deane, pp.223-24 and Copleston, Aquinas, pp.238-39.

secular authorities.<sup>90</sup>

The notion of hierarchy lies at the heart of this theocratic conception of a state descending from God through the papacy to temporal rulers. The equation of social stability with the idea of hierarchy that formed the basis of feudal social life demonstrates the extent to which the Church, having entered the secular arena, based its political doctrine on existing social structures.<sup>91</sup> The lines of the Besançon liturgy - 'O God, who after the Fall didst constitute in all nature three ranks among men. . . .'<sup>92</sup> - illustrate the Church's appropriation of the concept of social order founded on three distinct and graded estates. Yet in borrowing from feudal culture, the Church transformed a hierarchical system of social relations into an emanation of the will of God. Hence, if the Church incorporated secular concepts into its political theory, in doing so it necessarily generated a sanctification of secular life - of the State as an instrument of papal suzerainty, of the social system as an expression of divine law.<sup>93</sup> Thus, the interaction of religion and society fostered the characteristically medieval world view of a divinely-regulated social order, of which Aquinas's

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90. For an account of the evolution of the medieval Church's political theory, see Deane, pp.223-34.

91. See MacIntyre, A Short History of Ethics, pp.116-17.

92. Quoted in Marc Bloch, Feudal Society, trans. L.A. Manyon, 2 vols. (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1961), II,319.

93. See Deane, pp.233-34.

formulation of social virtue can be seen as the conceptual expression.

In the case of the second estate of the feudal nobility, the medieval synthesis of the sacred and the secular realms achieved an integration of secular virtue into the Christian universe; for it is a cardinal principle of chivalry, the word which denotes the way of life of the medieval warrior class, that knighthood constitutes a Christian vocation. The harmonisation of God and honour found its fullest expression in the militant piety of the Crusades, when the self-assertive spirit of aristocratic virtue was enlisted into the service of Christ and his Church. The interpenetration of noble and religious traditions generated a conception of knighthood as an explicitly Christian order. John of Salisbury's Policraticus (1159) delineates the function of the warrior class:

To defend the Church, to assail infidelity, to venerate the priesthood, to protect the poor from injuries, to pacify the province, to pour out their blood for their brothers (as the formula of their oath instructs them), and, if need be, to lay down their lives.<sup>94</sup>

This union of Christ and the sword was given symbolic expression in chivalric rituals such as the arming of the knight by the clergy and the religious oath of knighthood, whereby the initiate placed his sword on the altar as a token that 'he dedicates himself to the service of the

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94. John Dickinson, ed. The Statesman's Book of John of Salisbury (New York: Russell and Russell, 1963), p.199.

altar and vows to God the never-failing obedience of his sword'.<sup>95</sup>

The Policraticus bases its christianisation of the chivalric life on the knight's role as the agent of the Church or the prince, the lawful authority which reserves the right to wage war and to confer honour upon its obedient servants. Thus, John of Salisbury insists that knights 'owe obedience to the prince and ever-watchful service to the commonwealth, loyally and according to God'.<sup>96</sup> This position, which one might term the orthodox formulation of chivalry, legitimises aristocratic virtue, redeems it from the secularity inherent in an heroic ethic that locates virtue within the individual will, only insofar as it serves the temporal representative of divine law.

However, John of Salisbury's version of chivalry had to contend with a rival chivalric tradition, given expression in the treatises of chivalry, or textbooks of knighthood, the classic example of which is generally held to be Ramón Lull's

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95.Ibid., pp.203-204. See also Bloch, II, 315-16, and R.W. Southern, The Making of the Middle Ages (London: Hutchinson and Co. Ltd., 1953), pp.112-14.

96.Dickinson, p.198. See also Mervyn James, 'English Politics and the Concept of Honour 1485-1642', Past and Present, Supplement 3 (1978), pp.9-10. I am indebted to James for my account of the differing approaches of John of Salisbury and Ramón Lull. For another study of the Bartolan tradition which Salisbury represents, see N.A.R. Wright, 'The Tree of Battles of Honoré Bouvet and the Laws of War', in War, Literature and Politics in the Late Middle Ages, ed. C.T. Allmand (Liverpool: Liverpool Univ. Press, 1976), pp.12-31.

The Book of the Ordre of Chyvalry, which Caxton translated between 1483 and 1485. Lull's treatise also presents chivalry as a Christian profession, instituted to maintain order and justice, to defend both Church and temporal lord. Yet for Lull, this exalted spiritual function depends less on the knight's role as the servant of a central governing authority than on the innate moral excellence of the knightly class: the 'moost loyal, most stronge and of most noble courage'.<sup>97</sup> Throughout his treatise, Lull celebrates the values of the noble life: the lineage, social status, traditions of service and martial virtues that define a unique and self-sufficient chivalric culture.<sup>98</sup> Lull's men of honourable estate are accordingly governed less by ecclesiastical or monarchical injunctions, than by 'the corporate authority of the code of honour and of the order of chivalry itself',<sup>99</sup> a network of feudal obligations and rules of conduct binding upon all honourable men, the prince included.

The Book of the Ordre of Chyvalry thus gives expression to a chivalry that is rooted in class pride and has at best a tenuous connection with notions of knightly obedience to a

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97. The Book of the Ordre of Chyvalry, translated and printed by William Caxton from a French version of Ramón Lull's 'Le libre del orde de cauayleria', ed. A.T.P. Byles, Early English Text Society, clxviii (London, 1926), p.15.

98. Ibid., pp.16-17,37,47ff.,113.

99. James, p.10. See Lull, p.115.

single authorised power in the state.<sup>100</sup> Within the bounds of this autonomous and self-regulating chivalric order, aristocratic virtue tends to claim a commensurate self-sufficiency. As the class exalts its martial function, so the individual knight exalts his own capacity for virtue on the field of battle, through a form of warfare that focussed on individual feats of arms. Thus, honour in this chivalric formulation retains rather than sheds its intrinsically secular and competitive nature; the medieval knight strives through his deeds of prowess to evince his greatness and to show himself superior to his fellow men. As Geoffrey de Charny expresses it in his treatise of chivalry, the Livre de Chevalerie (c.1350), 'Qui plus fait, miex vault'.<sup>101</sup>

On this level, the orthodox chivalric tradition voiced by John of Salisbury clearly represents an attempt, not unlike that we perceived earlier in the pagan formulation of public service, to tame the aristocratic power which, rooted in the psychology of honour, manifests itself in contention and

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100.Lull's self-validating aristocratic ethic emerges from many historical studies as the dominant chivalric tradition. See, for example, Maurice Keen, Chivalry (New Haven and London: Yale Univ. Press, 1984), pp.16-17, 42-43, 51-63, 200-218; Wright, 'The Tree of Battles of Honoré Bouvet and the Laws of War', in Allmand, pp.19-26; J. Huizinga, The Waning of the Middle Ages, trans. F. Hopman (London: Edward Arnold and Co., 1924), p.30; and V.G. Kiernan, The Duel in European History. Honour and the Reign of Aristocracy (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1988), pp.37-42.

101.Quoted by Maurice Keen, Chivalry, p.12. See also Arthur B. Ferguson, The Chivalric Tradition in Renaissance England (Washington, D.C.: The Folger Shakespeare Library, 1986), pp.31-32.

unbridled self-assertion. Thus, John of Salisbury contrasts the saintliness of the 'duly ordained' knight, who 'follows not his own will but the deliberate decision of God, the angels, and men, in accordance with equity and the public utility' with those knights who serve 'their own private self-will', thereby 'so extending the kingdom of man as to narrow the empire of Christ'.<sup>102</sup> Yet the terms in which John of Salisbury expresses his opposition to knightly excesses clarifies that the tension between the two chivalric traditions is at bottom the tension inherent in the medieval synthesis, which seeks to reconcile what is essentially a man-centred ethic, based upon the individual pursuit of distinction, with Christian morality, which forbids the individual's pride in his own merit and ascribes all honour to God. The two formulations of chivalry that we have examined illuminate both the possibility of this fusion of conflicting forces and the deep-seated incompatibility of God and honour. We will find that the problematic nature of this chivalric compromise between Christian ethics and secular virtue forms the dramatic basis of Shakespeare's exploration of chivalric honour.

We have thus far identified three main conceptions of honour: the social virtue of antiquity, which makes the association between man and society the dominant ethical relationship; the Augustinian negation of secular virtue and

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102. Dickinson, pp.199-200.

transformation of honour into a spiritual concept; and the medieval synthetic tradition, which restores some value to deeds of public virtue performed within the framework of a divinely-ordained social system. In the next chapter, we will examine how each of these formulations enters into Renaissance thought, the first through the humanist tradition, the second through the theology of Calvin, and the third through the chivalric revival of the sixteenth century, which found in the orthodox chivalric tradition a means of integrating aristocratic virtue into the new nation-state.

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The decline of chivalric culture in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries is a commonplace of historical studies of post-medieval Europe. The development of artillery and infantry and the consequent growth in the scale of military operations spelt the end of the dominance of the mounted knight fighting in the service of his feudal lord and marked the gradual development of the national standing army. Nicholas Wright has described these new fighting forces as 'national chivalries',<sup>103</sup> a term which clarifies the continuity linking the old order of knighthood to the new political and economic system. The medieval knight, and the cultural values constructed around his martial function, did not simply

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103.N.A.R. Wright, 'The Tree of Battles of Honoré Bouvet and the Laws of War', in Allmand, p.31. For another discussion of chivalry in transition, see Keen, Chivalry, pp.245-48.



vanish; rather, they changed with the times, and the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries witnessed a blending of chivalric ideals with the nascent nationalism that characterised post-feudal Europe. It is this relationship between the nobility and the monarchy that forms the basis of chivalry in Tudor England.

The English nationalist drive culminated in the Elizabethan Settlement, which fundamentally altered the Catholic view of the relationship between Church and State, while at the same time preserving the medieval conception of synthesis, of Church and State as two aspects of the same social order. This conflation of change and continuity is typical of an age in which radical political and religious developments were consolidated by reference to the past. Protestant historiography sanctified Elizabeth's position as head of Church and State by reference to the Catholic tradition of divine imperial power.<sup>104</sup> John Foxe's Actes and Monuments (1563) presents Elizabeth as Constantine, as the restorer of the original unification of imperial power and the Christian faith, unfettered by papal suzerainty.<sup>105</sup> This recodification

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104. See Frances A. Yates, Astraea: The Imperial Theme in the Sixteenth Century (London and Boston, Mass.: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975), pp.37-47.

105. John Foxe, 'Dedication to Queen Elizabeth', Actes and monuments of matters most speciall and memorable, happening in the Church, with a universall historie of the same, 3 vols. (London: Company of Stationers, 1610), I.ix-x. I owe this point to Yates, Astraea: The Imperial Theme in the Sixteenth Century, pp.42-43, and to Roy Strong, The Cult of Elizabeth: Elizabethan Portraiture and Pageantry (London: Thames and Hudson, 1977), pp.115,128.

of medieval syncretism to exalt a monarchical hegemony independent of Rome finds a theological basis in orthodox cosmology. Hooker's Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity (1593) delineates a vast hierarchy of law, descending from the eternal law of God to the 'positive laws' of earthly rulers, and perceives in this affinity between spiritual and temporal government the logical supremacy of the Prince as the head of Church and State.<sup>106</sup> Thus, the corpus Christianorum becomes focussed on the figure of the Queen who symbolizes in her mortal being the timeless and sacrosanct body politic.<sup>107</sup>

Hooker's hierarchy of laws is but an expression of the pattern of the natural law by which God regulates his creation. It is this benevolent universal order to which human society aspires to accommodate itself, not only through civil law, but also through degree, the social stratification that reflects the divine system.<sup>108</sup> In The Book Named the Governor, Sir Thomas Elyot gives the classic Tudor statement of this medieval tradition:

Behold also the order that God hath put generally in all His creatures, beginning at the most inferior or base, and ascending upward. . . . so that in everything is order, and without order may

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106. Richard Hooker, Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity, 2 vols. (London: J.M. Dent and Sons, Ltd., 1907), I.147-232.

107. See Stephen Greenblatt, Renaissance Self-Fashioning. From More to Shakespeare (Chicago and London: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1980), pp.166-67.

108. For discussions of Elizabethan cosmology, see E.M.W. Tillyard, The Elizabethan World Picture (London: Chatto and Windus, 1943), and John Danby, Shakespeare and the Doctrine of Nature. A Study of King Lear (London: Faber and Faber, 1948), pp.20-31.

be nothing stable or permanent; and it may not be called order, except it do contain in it degrees, high and base, according to the merit or estimation of the thing that is ordered.<sup>109</sup>

The enlistment of this aspect of orthodox thought into the Tudor formulation of the nation-state forms the foundation of English Renaissance chivalric idealism. Elyot's configuration of natural hierarchy becomes the theoretical basis for his endorsement of the aristocratic principle, and this principle is elucidated not independently of, but in conjunction with, the natural law of royal sovereignty that mirrors the unity of God:

For who can deny but that all thing in heaven and earth is governed by one God, by one perpetual order, by one providence?<sup>110</sup>

The integral place of the nobility within a national monarchy expressive of natural law dictates that the aristocratic function should maintain the ideal, Christian role characteristic of the chivalric vision.

This state-centred chivalry clearly represents the realisation of the central tenet of the orthodox Salisbury tradition: aristocratic obedience to sovereign authority. The transfiguration of an independent class code into an instrument of royal jurisdiction was accomplished by a Tudor social policy which jointly accommodated and eroded aristocratic might. The Tudors' initial reliance on the

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109.Sir Thomas Elyot, The Book Named the Governor (London: J.M. Dent and Sons, Ltd., 1962), I.1.3-4.

110.Ibid., I.2.7.

cooperation of the governing class in establishing their dynastic power ensured the nobility's continued pre-eminence in the military and administrative structure of the kingdom.<sup>111</sup> Yet this royal maintenance of noble prestige was accompanied by a systematic focussing of chivalric loyalties on the crown which effectively undermined aristocratic independence. Henry VIII's appropriation of the heraldic authority to grant honourable status facilitated the expansion of the gentry with men of non-noble origins beholden to the monarch for their ascent in the social scale.<sup>112</sup> Consequently, the once-autonomous community of honour came increasingly to revolve around the figure of the king who represented both the sole object of fealty and the sole source of dignity and honours.

Buttressed by the presentation of the prince as the agent of divine law, this royal monopoly of honour generated a king-centred chivalry which drastically modified class-bound chivalric attitudes. The nobility naturally grew less inclined to see itself as a self-regulating group of superior individuals discharging an innately sacred function when honour and sanctity were the exclusive properties of the king.

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111. For accounts of the Tudor and Stuart aristocracy, see S.T. Bindoff, Tudor England (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1950), pp.29-30; Lawrence Stone, The Crisis of the Aristocracy, 1558-1641 (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1965), pp.53-64; Keen, Chivalry, pp.244-47; and James, p.2.

112. See James, pp.18-27; Paul N. Siegel, Shakespearean Tragedy and the Elizabethan Compromise (New York: New York Univ. Press, 1957), pp.3-24; and Ferguson, The Chivalric Tradition in Renaissance England, pp.107-108.

Within the framework of the new 'nationalised' chivalry, honour was achieved through obedient service of the monarchy. Individual heroism and class pride were rendered subservient to lawful authority, and the competitive self-assertiveness of aristocratic virtue harnessed to public utility.<sup>113</sup> The complexities of state service required of the man of honourable estate the comprehensive military, administrative and political duties of government. The warrior caste of medieval chivalry was thus gradually transformed into a 'literate magistracy'.<sup>114</sup> This neo-chivalric conception of honour assumed two main forms in the Tudor period: the ceremonial affirmation of Protestant chivalry in the annual pageants of the Accession Day Tilts and the procession of the Order of the Garter, and the theoretical formulation of the function of the governing class.

A central technique in the Elizabethan elaboration of royal power was the development of a tradition of semi-religious state festivals that concentrated pre-Reformation allegiances on the Queen as God's temporal representative. These celebrations of the nation-state centred on the relation between the sovereign and her worshipping knights, and it was chiefly the old chivalric forms that continued to define the

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113. Ferguson sees the new political context of the aristocratic function as the primary distinction between medieval and Renaissance chivalry. See The Chivalric Tradition in Renaissance England, pp.34-39; 107-25.

114. James, p.27. See also Ferguson, The Chivalric Tradition in Renaissance England, p.109.

ideal role of the nobility within the body politic. Frances Yates, in her study of the Accession Day Tilts of Elizabeth's reign, has shown that through the apparatus of chivalry a complex mythology was constructed around the service of the Virgin Queen.<sup>115</sup> Mock tournaments, and pageantry imbued with the symbolism of cosmic order and chivalric romance, focussed patriotic fervour and Protestant zeal on the idealised figure of the Queen, and reinforced the protective role of the nobility in the safeguarding of Protestant England. The procession of the Order of the Garter represented the second most important annual public appearance of the Queen and her courtiers, and it was stage-managed with equal care. This deliberate revival of a fourteenth-century chivalric order offered, through the spectacle of the Queen as the sovereign of a group of Protestant knights dedicated to the defeat of the dragon of popery, a vision of Protestant state power, as well as what Roy Strong has described as 'a reinforcement of medieval hierarchical principles and an affirmation of chivalrous ideals'.<sup>116</sup>

The conscious elaboration of a state ceremonial defining the place and function of the courtier within a divinely-sanctioned monarchical order expressed the principles elucidated in contemporary treatises on the governing class, of which Elyot's The Governor is perhaps the definitive

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115.Frances A. Yates, 'Elizabethan Chivalry: The Romance of the Accession Day Tilts', JWCI, 20 (1957), 4-25.

116.Strong, p.165.

example. We have noted that Elyot's delineation of aristocracy is essentially neo-chivalric in that it integrates public virtue into a national hierarchy dictated by natural law. For Elyot, aristocratic privilege derives from the universal principle of degree, which structures creation 'according to the merit or estimation of the thing that is ordered'.<sup>117</sup> It is his superior virtue that destines the governor to assume the burden of public service, as it entitles him to the wealth and authority that exalt him above his moral inferiors.<sup>118</sup> This combined duty and reward of public virtue Elyot terms 'honour':

And unto men of such virtue by very equity appertaineth honour, as their just reward and duty, which by other men's labours must also be maintained according to their merits.<sup>119</sup>

Governors, whom Elyot considers should in the main be chosen from the 'estate of men which be called worshipful',<sup>120</sup> perform a public function termed 'benevolence', or the giving of benefits - a social virtue which Elyot invests with a Christian resonance, identifying the love of one's fellows that motivates and justifies public service as a divine attribute, ordained by God to foster harmony in human society.<sup>121</sup>

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117.Elyot, I.1.4.

118.Ibid.

119.Ibid.

120.Ibid., I.3.13.

121.Ibid., II.9.122; III.3.164.

Elyot's notion of aristocracy reflects the persistence of medieval political theory, which interpreted the public good as dependent upon the personal moral stature of the governors. This idea of good government tends to dissociate honour from political realism, opposing loyalty and service to opportunistic pragmatism. Yet the political function of Elyot's chivalry involves honour in the skilful control of complex social forces required of the governing class.<sup>122</sup> Thus, in elucidating the virtues conducive to public service, Elyot fuses honour and 'creative statecraft'.<sup>123</sup> Public virtue ceases to consist merely in the maintenance of order and justice through martial prowess, but comes to comprehend the humanist ideal of an educated governing class, whose primary function is to provide the ruler with the good counsel essential to effective policymaking.<sup>124</sup> That this honourable service requires political acumen Elyot's definition of the governor's 'industry' makes clear:

It is a quality proceeding of wit and experience, by the which a man perceiveth quickly, inventeth freshly, and counselleth speedily. Wherefore they that be called industrious, do most craftily and deeply understand in all affairs what is expedient, and by what means and ways they may soonest exploit them.<sup>125</sup>

Within the framework of the national chivalry, Elyot's learned

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122.Arthur B. Ferguson, The Indian Summer of English Chivalry (Durham, N.C.: Duke Univ. Press, 1960), p.119.

123.Ibid. See also p.114.

124.See Elyot, I.iv-xxv; III.xxviii-xxx. See also Ferguson, The Chivalric Tradition in Renaissance England, and James, pp.27,61.

125.Elyot, I.23.82.



knight is at once pragmatic and honourable.

However, as had been the case in the Middle Ages, there was great tension during the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods between the orthodox conception of chivalry and the aristocratic pride which it sought to absorb into the nation-state. The habits of aristocratic independence died hard;<sup>126</sup> and there was inevitable conflict between the growing power of the Crown and Commons and a powerful governing class indoctrinated in a disruptive code of honour that legitimated duelling and private revenge.

If we examine the testimony of a nobleman tried and convicted of exacting private vengeance during the reign of James I, we can determine more closely the nature of this surviving chivalric tradition.<sup>127</sup> In 1607, Lord Sanquire lost an eye while practising the foils with his fencing master. Five years later, the fencing master was murdered by two of Sanquire's hired ruffians. Sanquire and his accomplices were then arrested, tried and executed, on the orders of the king. During his trial, Sanquire made the following confession:

I must confess I ever kept a grudge in my soul against him, but had no purpose to take so high a revenge: yet in the course of my revenge, I considered not my wrongs upon terms of

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126. See Stone, pp. 54-55; 199-200, and Kiernan, p. 6.

127. For accounts of the sixteenth-century cult of honour, see Paul N. Siegel, 'Shakespeare and the Neo-Chivalric Cult of Honor', *CentR*, 8 (1964), 39-70, and Frederick Robertson Bryson, The Point of Honor in Sixteenth Century Italy: An Aspect of the Life of the Gentleman (Chicago: The Univ. of Chicago Libraries, 1935).

Christianity. . . but being trained up in the courts of princes and in arms, I stood upon the terms of honour. . . . Another aspersion is laid on me, that I was an ill-natured fellow, ever revengeful and delighted in blood. To the first I confess I was never willing to put up a wrong, where upon terms of honour I might right myself, nor never willing to pardon where I had a power to revenge.<sup>128</sup>

The repeated phrase 'terms of honour' implies a fully-formulated code of conduct. This code governs how one responds to wrongs. It indicates that honour is essentially a question of individual worth; a man is honoured because his deeds and social status proclaim him worthy of respect. The honourable man, then, must be treated in accordance with his dignity, for contemptuous treatment impugns his claim to pride and deference. Thus, Sanquire interprets his injury as a diminishment of the self, and revenge as a restoration of selfhood, for failure to resent an affront to one's honour, to 'right' oneself, is tantamount to proof that one is in fact worthless, too cowardly to retaliate against one's opponent. Yet Sanquire's action makes it clear that honour can become a kind of blind passion, an obsession with moral and social status that will stoop to any method to attain its goal of self-affirmation. Indeed, it was to Sanquire's means - his use of assassins to implement a long-nurtured revenge - that both the prosecutor, Bacon, and the presiding judge drew attention.<sup>129</sup>

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128. T.B. Howell, ed. A Complete Collection of State Trials and Proceedings for High Treason and Other Crimes and Misdemeanors from the Earliest Period to the Year 1783, with Notes and Other Illustrations. 21 vols. (London, 1816), II, 746-50.

129. *Ibid.*, II, 750-54.

Private revenge is thus a logical outcome of the psychology of honour, whose roots in class superiority and individual distinction encourage a regard for personal dignity that is predisposed to degenerate into unrestrained self-assertion. Sanquire's testimony demonstrates that this aristocratic ethic asserts its independence from Christian morality and, by implication, from the temporal law of the monarch. By enlisting honour into the service of a divinely-instituted monarchy, the neo-chivalric tradition radically destabilises itself. Sanquire's reference to his training 'in the courts of princes and in arms' suggests that the cultivation of class supremacy invariably promotes aristocratic values which are intrinsically resistant to the idea of submission to an absolute authority, whether temporal or divine.

Consequently, the royal power which, on the one hand, fostered distinctions in rank as the basis of moral and social order was forced, on the other, to penalize and fulminate against the natural expression of such distinctions in duelling and private revenge:

he that taketh so unjust a course to revenge his private wrong, is so farre from getting honor thereby, as he rather looseth whatsoever honor or reputation he had before; the combat being a thing odious and offensive unto God. For it is said, that he reserveth revenge unto himselfe; which, they that by combat seeke to wreake themselves, take upon them to do by their owne power and strength, against all lawes divine, naturall and positive, in contempt of magistrates, contrary to the orders and constitutions of all

Lodowick Bryskett, in A Discourse of Civill Life, is the voice of chivalric orthodoxy, condemning private revenge as the product of a conviction of merit and self-sufficiency ('their owne power and strength') which offends against the hierarchy of law: against God and the temporal order that represents him. Bryskett insists in his treatise that honour derives solely from the social virtue that engenders public stability.<sup>131</sup> Yet the noble superiority that makes these acts of social virtue possible has as its logical complement the acute sensitivity to insult that inevitably comes into conflict with the structures of law. In short, Renaissance chivalry inherited from its orthodox medieval model the instability built into the attempt to harmonise an independent class code with centralised authority, a formulation of secular virtue based upon individual greatness with a metaphysic demanding subservience to the will of an omnipotent deity. If the neo-chivalric tradition admits the resolution of God and honour in the figure of the Protestant knight loyal to his sovereign, that resolution is necessarily fragile and prone to fragmentation.

The medieval tradition of reconciliation was doubly transformed in the transition from the feudal to the modern

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130. Lodowick Bryskett, A Discourse of Civill Life, ed. Thomas E. Wright (Northridge, Calif.: San Fernando Valley State College, 1970), p.54.

131. *Ibid.*, pp.60-61; 154-55.

age. Not only was orthodox chivalry transferred from a class to a national level; the great Thomist synthesis of classical philosophy and Christian doctrine was also modified.

Aquinas's insistence on the subordination of philosophy to theology gave way to Ficino's and Pico's assertions of parity between them, and this new confidence in the efficacy of the human reason led to a renewed interest in virtuous activity within the public realm. Although the humanists made every attempt to present this rational civic morality as part of a new 'vigorous ethical Christianity'<sup>132</sup> opposed to the contemplative tradition, their reliance on purely human powers exercised in the social arena engendered a predominately secular ethic to which theology was subordinated.

This failure to synthesize Christian morality with an essentially classical formulation of social virtue, so characteristic of Renaissance humanism, is perhaps exhibited most clearly in humanist approaches to honour. In Petrarch's Secret, or the Soul's Conflict with Passion (1342), the author makes a conscious attempt to reconcile pagan morality with theology. The work takes the form of a dialogue between Petrarch and St. Augustine on, among other topics, the place of honour in human life. Augustine initially condemns such worldly vanities as the desire for public esteem, telling Petrarch that they encourage him to,

dream of nobleness, and forget your frailty; they  
choke your faculties with fumes of self-esteem.

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132. Hiram Haydn, The Counter-Renaissance (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1950), p.59.

until you think of nothing else; they lead you to wax so proud and confident in your own strength that at length you hate your Creator. So you live for self-pleasing and imagine that great things are what you deserve.<sup>133</sup>

Against this uncompromising stance, Petrarch advocates separate but complementary roles for the sacred and temporal realms, for the honour of God and the honour of men:

My principle is that, as concerning the glory which we may hope for here below, it is right for us to seek while we are here below. One may expect to enjoy that other more radiant glory in heaven, when we shall have there arrived, and when one will have no more care or wish for the glory of earth. Therefore, as I think, it is in the true order that mortal men should first care for mortal things; and that to things transitory things eternal should succeed. . . .<sup>134</sup>

This world and the next: pagan ethics answers the needs of man in relation to society, while the Christian faith provides for the relation to his Maker that will eventually ensue. This virtual separation of secular activity and man's supernatural end abandons the Thomist model of harmonious inequality. Petrarch gives Augustine the last word on honour, which he offers as a compromise between secularity and Christian otherworldliness. But this is a compromise that no true Augustinian would countenance:

I will never advise you to live without ambition; but I would always urge you to put virtue before glory. You know that glory is in a sense the shadow of virtue. And therefore, just as it is impossible that your body should not cast a shadow if the sun is shining, so it is impossible also in the light of God Himself that virtues should exist and not make their glory to appear. Whoever,

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133. William H. Draper, ed., Petrarch's Secret, or the Soul's Conflict with Passion (Westport, Conn.: Hyperion Press, Inc., 1911), p.49.

134. Ibid., p.176.

then, would take true glory away must of necessity take away virtue also; and when that is gone man's life is left bare, and only resembles that of the brute beasts that follow headlong their appetite, which to them is their only law.<sup>135</sup>

What Petrarch provides is a classic statement of pagan social virtue dignified by the endorsement of the Christian God. It is a deeply uncomfortable compromise that illuminates the tensions within the dual ethical inheritance of the Renaissance and within the resolution proffered by the humanists. Petrarch's final formulation of the status of honour makes society rather than God the source of morality, for it envisages the desire for social esteem, not divine grace, as the force that permits the performance of virtuous deeds. He clearly understands the nature of the conflict between pagan and Christian morality, but Petrarch's Secret exhibits the humanist need for a theology capable of being integrated into an ethical system based on the right relations between a man and his fellows. Renaissance moral philosophy seems to have had little difficulty supplying such a compliant Christianity. In its various classical guises, humanist ethics offers a Christian faith that, in its eagerness to co-operate with pagan morality, is transformed into something merely formal.

Robert Ashley's treatise Of Honour (1596-1603) represents a classic instance of Renaissance Aristotelianism. Ashley

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135.Ibid., p.182.

studies honour in a largely Aristotelian context that he has no difficulty reconciling with his Christian faith.<sup>136</sup> As with Petrarch, it is the manner in which he effects this reconciliation that clarifies the nature of the humanist ethic. As an Aristotelian who is also a Christian, Ashley has a close relation to the scholastic tradition, so that it is by comparing the roles assigned to secular virtue in Of Honour and in Thomism that one can discern what distinguishes Renaissance humanism from its scholastic counterpart.

Ashley begins, in good scholastic fashion, by acknowledging man's supernatural end: honour partakes of the divine because it is what we give to God and what God gives to us when he grants us salvation.<sup>137</sup> Yet for Ashley honour is also a civic concept; it is the reward of virtue that is active and social in this world, through performance of which man is 'likened to th'image of th'Almighty'.<sup>138</sup> This perception of honour appears to accord with the scholastic Aristotelianism that envisages secular virtue as a means of realising man's full potential as a rational being.<sup>139</sup>

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136.Robert Ashley, Of Honour, ed. Virgil B. Heltzel (San Marino, Calif.: The Huntington Library, 1947). Ashley bases his account of honour chiefly on Aristotle, though he includes reference to Plato's association of honour with 'the angry part of the mind' (p.40).

137.Ibid., pp.27-28.

138.Ibid., p.30.

139.St. Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologiae, 2a2ae, 3.2; 5.7.



It is in the relationship that Ashley establishes between these two levels of honour that his humanist vision makes itself felt. Thomist ethics insists on stratification; civic honour remains a subordinate stage in the Christian's progress towards the infinitely superior honour of beatitude.<sup>140</sup> Ashley, however, draws little distinction between divine and social honour:

Moreover when he maketh us blessed then are we also partakers both of his divinitie and of his honour. Therefore honour of sorte must needs be some divine thing since that both God so highly accompteth of yt, and we also by a secrete instincte of nature so much desire yt. . . . the same (as great Philosophers affirme) ys the reward of vertue. For how can vertue stand yf you take away honour? who wold imbrace yt with so great labor and paines as yt bringeth with yt yf there were no prickes of honor to awake and stirr upp our mindes to the study thereof? Very well sayd Antisthenes in my opinion, being asked what was the destruccion and overthrowe of a common wealthe, that yt was the want of regard to be had of honour and of shame, wisely considering that mens mynds are not easilie of themselves stirred upp to wellldoing except some honorable reward be proposed for good deeds. . . .<sup>141</sup>

Here, Ashley makes no real attempt to differentiate between the honour of God and the honour of men. This blending of the sacred and the secular results ultimately in a sacralization of the secular quite distinct from the scholastic compromise; for in the absence of a system of gradation conferring absolute value on man's supra-terrestrial end, honour's relativity is removed, and it becomes simply invested with divine potency. Indeed, Ashley's opening elucidation of

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140. St. Thomas Aquinas, Summa Contra Gentiles, in Pegis, II.3.63.

141. Ashley, pp.28-29.

honour as a sacred quality is presented less as a means of glorifying God than as a means of dignifying the relationship between society and individual virtue that is the real subject of his study.

In short, the basic difference between scholastic and Renaissance Aristotelianism is that the former subordinates secular virtue to an end outside itself, whereas the latter gives prominence to social virtue and justifies that prominence by the endorsement of the humanist God. If Aquinas enlists Aristotle to bolster Christian dogma, Ashley enlists Christianity to bolster his essentially Aristotelian honour. Society emerges from Of Honour as the dominant value; honour is a concept of the highest importance because, as the relationship between a man and the community, it ensures the existence of individual virtue, which in turn guarantees the prosperity of the commonwealth. Ashley's formulation of honour hinges on the Aristotelian conception of social virtue. Because the function of human virtue is to benefit others, the greatest honour consists in public-spirited deeds.<sup>142</sup> This concept of virtue makes self-respect dependent on the respect of other good men:

. . . therefore men do wishe to be in honour that they may seeme to have some good thing in them by the judgement of good men. . . .<sup>143</sup>

Ashley's chief purpose in composing his treatise is to

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142.Ibid., p.57.

143.Ibid., p.39.

discredit the contempt for external honour, an attitude which he perceives as destructive of a relationship on which the good of society depends:

For how shold freindshipp be exercised, liberalitie, equitie, justice. . . yf you deale altogether inwardly with yourself and do not thincke that the goodnes of your mind ought to be brought to light? Had you rather when your Countrey wanteth your helpe not to geve help at all unto yt nor to your freindes, kinsfolkes, and Countreyemen, that thereby you might shunne all honour, then to proffitt them with some prayse unto your self?<sup>144</sup>

Thus, Ashley's primary allegiance is to classical moral philosophy and to the social relationship on which it is founded. The Christian references in Of Honour do not finally disguise the fact that Ashley's eyes, like Petrarch's, are fixed firmly on this world.

Both the neo-chivalric and humanist confidence in the compatibility of honour and Christian doctrine originate in the classical/scholastic conception of human nature; that is to say, they share the belief that human nature, even if depraved by original sin, retains some power to do good and that this capacity for virtue derives from man's ability to control the lower faculties of will and appetite through the rational principle. However, there were cultural forces at work during the Renaissance that challenged the authority of reason, among the most potent of which was Calvinism.

In propounding his religious doctrine, Calvin saw

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144.Ibid., p.35.

himself as returning to an Augustinian purity, cleansed of the pernicious scholastic emphasis on the spiritual efficacy of human reason. For Calvin, man's pre-lapsarian condition is 'utterly and completely lost'; his nature, although inherently good, is corrupted, so 'infected with the contagion of sin' that 'no good thing remains in his power'.<sup>145</sup> Utterly dependent on God's undeserved grace, fallen man can have no confidence in the power of his reason to promote good works:

There is no doubt that whatever is praiseworthy in works is God's grace; there is not a drop that we ought by rights to ascribe to ourselves. . . . For nothing proceeds from a man, however perfect he be, that is not defiled by some spot.<sup>146</sup>

Calvin condemns both pagan philosophers, who encouraged man to believe in his own excellence,<sup>147</sup> and the scholastics, who sought to divide 'the credit for good works between God and man'.<sup>148</sup> Thus, in Calvinist thought, the gap between man's created and fallen natures, which narrows with Aquinas and Hooker and virtually ceases to be an issue at all in much humanist thought, widens again with an Augustinian finality. Because nature is so thoroughly debased, man can only hope for God's mercy, and there can be no question of a reconciliation between the divine and the secular. In England, Calvin's doctrine exerted a widespread influence, his refusal to

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145. John T. McNeill, ed., Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, 2 vols. (Philadelphia, Pa.: The Westminster Press, 1960), I, II.i.1; II.i.5; II.ii.1.

146. Ibid., I, III.xv.3.

147. Ibid., I, II.i.1.

148. Ibid., I, III.xv.3.

harmonise Christianity with a secular formulation of virtue finding expression in the work of his disciple, William Perkins:

Though liberty of nature remains, yet liberty of grace, that is, to will well, is lost, extinguished by the fall of Adam.,<sup>149</sup>

as well as in Book One of the Faerie Queene:

Ne let the man ascribe it to his skill,  
That thorough grace hath gained victory.  
If any strength we have, it is to ill,  
But all the good is Gods, both power and eke  
will.<sup>150</sup>

Calvin's view of nature engenders a spiritualisation of morality comparable to that we noticed in The City of God. The virtuous 'travel as pilgrims in this world',<sup>151</sup> renouncing self-love and social identity in favour of the love of God:

when Scripture bids us leave off self-concern, it not only erases from our minds the yearning to possess, the desire for power, and the favor of men, but it also uproots ambition and all craving for human glory and other more sweet plagues. Accordingly, the Christian must surely be so disposed and minded that he feels within himself it is with God he has to deal throughout his life.<sup>152</sup>

As virtue becomes a spiritual concept, so honour assumes an otherworldly guise, defining the proper relationship between man and his Creator:

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149.William Perkins, Workes, Printed at London by John Legatt, Printer to the Universitie of Cambridge, 1612, I.729.

150.Edmund Spenser, The Faerie Queene, ed. A.C. Hamilton, Annotated English Poets Series (London and New York: Longmans, 1977), I.x.1.

151.Institutes, I. III.vii.3.

152.Ibid., I, III.vii.2.

Because it acknowledges him as Lord and Father, the pious mind also deems it meet and right to observe his authority in all things, reverence his majesty, take care to advance his glory, and obey his commandments.<sup>153</sup>

In the same way, man honours Christ as the King of a spiritual society, the invisible Church of the elect to which Christian man aspires to belong:

Thus it is that we may patiently pass through this life with its misery, hunger, cold, contempt, reproaches, and other troubles - content with this one thing: that our King will never leave us destitute, but will provide for our needs until, our warfare ended, we are called to triumph. Such is the nature of his rule, that he shares with us all that he has received from the Father. Now he arms and equips us with his power, adorns us with his beauty and magnificence, enriches us with his wealth. These benefits, then, give us the most fruitful occasion to glory, and also provide us with confidence to struggle fearlessly against the devil, sin, and death. Finally, clothed with his righteousness, we can valiantly rise above all the world's reproaches; and just as he himself freely lavishes his gifts upon us, so may we, in return, bring forth fruit to his glory.<sup>154</sup>

Thus, Calvin effects an Augustinian transference of the city from earth to heaven, simultaneously transforming honour into a supernatural principle denoting the beatific relationship of perfect respect rewarded with perfect happiness that unites the King of heaven to his subjects.

In his drive for otherworldliness, Calvin does not identify the invisible Church with the organised Church on earth; neither does he dissociate the two, but interprets the temporal Church as a unified society of believers endowed with

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153.Ibid., I, I.ii.2.

154.Ibid., I, II.xv.4.

the vital spiritual function of preaching the gospel, by faith in which man may come to partake of the higher Society of Christ.<sup>155</sup> The conviction that this sacred role of the visible Church separated it from and raised it above the State, which should therefore take its principles from the Church, became one of the reasons for the Puritan opposition to the Anglican Settlement. Thus, Calvin's theocentric vision, coupled with his theocratic political theory, constituted a powerful challenge to the chivalric and humanist conceptions of secular virtue and society.

This chapter has attempted to define the concept of honour and to identify the three distinct traditions that descended to the Renaissance from antiquity and the Middle Ages. Chivalry in the sixteenth century denotes primarily the relationship between aristocratic virtue and the the Christian monarchy: a chivalric relationship that remained as ambivalent in Tudor and Stuart England as it had been during the Middle Ages, involving at once the moral role of the nobility in the protection of a society reflective of natural order and the conflict between absolute authority, royal and divine, and an autonomous aristocratic code of honour. Humanism represents another aspect of the syncretic tradition, focussing on the fusion of Christian doctrine and pagan moral philosophy. In this case, the ethical confusion of synthesis is reflected in the necessity, in much humanist thought, of modifying

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155.Ibid., II, IV.i.1.

theological imperatives in order to accommodate them within an essentially man-centred moral vision. In Calvinism, this ambivalence vanishes before a theology dedicated to the revival of the Augustinian separation of God and secular virtue. Consequently, man is judged not in relation to secular society, divinely-ordained or otherwise, but in relation to his Creator and the society of the elect. Honour remains a social concept, but one that functions solely on the spiritual plane, defining the relation between the King of the Society of Christ and his loyal and obedient servants.

These three conceptions of secular virtue operate during the sixteenth century, offering conflicting interpretations of man's status as a moral being. The Renaissance concept of honour is thus characterised by the presence of opposing currents of opinion which preclude a consensus position. It reflects, not cultural unity, but the tensions at work in a period of conflicting ethical loyalties. It is clear, moreover, that this tension derives principally from the confrontation of a secular and a spiritual morality and the moral problems it engenders concerning the place of secular virtue in the Christian universe. We have seen throughout this introductory chapter that honour is a fundamentally secular concept which situates active virtue within the individual will, and that, as the preserve of the aristocracy, this power for good is consistently destabilised by its intrinsic relation to competition, self-assertion and the demand for recognition. Thus, the conflict is essentially



that between an unstable secular formulation of virtue and a Christian ethic which calls into question the moral efficacy of the human will.

It is clear that honour in the sixteenth century is the focus of the Renaissance debate on the extent, in his post-lapsarian condition, of man's power to do good. This thesis argues that Shakespeare's treatment of honour develops not out of a unified perspective, but out of the cultural diversity generated by rival ethical legacies, each of which provides different answers to the central moral problem of his age. The plurality of sixteenth-century attitudes to honour enters into Shakespearean drama in the form of a complex exploration of the human capacity for virtue and the relationship between honour and Christian-derived morality. In Henry V and Troilus and Cressida, Shakespeare examines the chivalric integration of secular virtue into the pattern of natural law and, in Hamlet, investigates the problematics of revenge honour in the context of a Christian metaphysic. The exploration of chivalric honour reveals the tensions latent in the syncretic tradition, and in so doing suggests the tragic potential of the honourable stance. This potential is realised in Hamlet, in which honour forms the basis of the dilemmas facing its protagonist. The examination of honour as a tragic concept also shapes Julius Caesar and Coriolanus, the two Roman plays which reflect the humanist interest in the man-centred morality of antiquity and which dramatise the pagan concept of social virtue in terms of an

unstable relationship between society and aristocratic honour.

CHAPTER 2

THROUGH HISTORY TOWARDS TRAGEDY:  
CHIVALRIC HONOUR IN HENRY V AND TROILUS AND CRESSIDA.

The essence of the orthodox chivalric vision is the reconciliation it seeks to effect between God and honour. With its basis in the scholastic theology of compromise, traditional chivalry envisages hierarchical social order as the product of a rapprochement between man and God, that is to say, as a divinely-instituted pattern which man implements through natural reason. It posits a universal synthesis which cautiously affirms human powers and makes secular virtue an expression of the will of God.

In Henry V (1598-99), Shakespeare integrates this chivalric tradition into the culminating play of an historical cycle dealing in part with the social disorder engendered by the tension between royal legitimacy and natural competence. Chivalric unity is offered and celebrated as the achievement of an ideal king capable of resolving the conflicts of the past in a foreign war that is an act of national honour sanctioned by God. However, this interpretation of Henry's reign is not one that the spectator is asked to accept uncritically. Rather, the chivalric ideal is put under pressure by dramatic impulses which call attention to the irreducible complexity of historical process and the problematic nature of kingship.

In Troilus and Cressida (1602), Shakespeare moves from the exploration of chivalric orthodoxy as an historical model to a consideration of the 'world picture' on which it bases its

reconciliation of the divine and the secular. In its depiction of the Greeks, the play tests hierarchy's claim to universality by dramatising its connections to a competitive heroic ethic. Through its portrayal of the Trojans, the play deals with another form of chivalric idealism, based upon courtly and Neoplatonic values. Both chivalric impulses are exposed as self-contradictory, as the sources of notions of honour and heroism that are essentially individualistic. In going one step further than Henry V in its exploration of chivalric honour, Troilus and Cressida approaches tragedy, for in its dramatic world of debased ideals what is shown to be impossible is not merely chivalric fusion, but virtue itself.

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In the second scene of Henry V, the Archbishop of Canterbury delivers the 'honeybees' speech, which presents England under the rule of its new king as a society reflecting God's will:

Therefore doth heaven divide  
The state of man in divers functions,  
Setting endeavour in continual motion;  
To which is fixed, as an aim or butt,  
Obedience: for so work the honey-bees,  
Creatures that by a rule in nature teach  
The act of order to a peopled kingdom.  
I.2.183-89.<sup>1</sup>

The lines offer a vision of a divinely-ordained social order whose division into a structure of God-given functions fosters

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1. All quotations from the play are from The Arden Shakespeare: King Henry V, ed. John H. Walter (London and New York: Methuen and Co., 1954).

obedience to a single authority, which in turn guarantees unity in diversity, the 'one consent' (I.2.181,206) of an integrated and harmonious nation. This social system is encoded in the natural world. The hive image, with its multiplicity of social functions revolving around the 'emperor' (I.2.196), identifies the unified monarchical state as an inherent natural order emanating from God.

Thus, the 'honeybees' speech posits a cosmic synthesis in which England, unified under its king, participates in God's will. This syncretism belongs to the orthodox chivalric tradition, with its conception of human society as an harmonious relationship between man and God - the relationship evoked in the honeybees passage between a deity intimately involved in human affairs and a society capable of learning the 'act of order', of inferring from the natural world the workings of the law of nature. This collaborative effort achieves a double reconciliation of God and honour. Not only does it effectively blur the distinction between the sacred and the secular; in acknowledging the spiritual efficacy of the natural reason, it also assumes that men retain some capacity to translate divine imperatives into active virtue. Yet in the 'honeybees' speech, natural order is identified specifically with the monarchical state; its vision is thus neo-chivalric, the term used to denote the Renaissance formulation of chivalry on a national rather than a feudal scale. It is by operating harmoniously within the natural organic unity of monarchical England that the ideal of honour

can be thought of as reflecting divine purpose:

Others, like soldiers, armed in their stings,  
Make boot upon the summer's velvet buds;  
Which pillage they with merry march bring home  
To the tent-royal of their emperor. . . .

I.2.193-96.

The 'honeybees' speech claims a triumphant resolution, through exemplary kingship, of the tensions and contradictions of the recent historical past. Bolingbroke's coup d'état, justified in Richard II (1595) on the grounds of the superior public competence of its instigator, is nonetheless implicated in naked political opportunism, and the moral inadequacy of policy is given a metaphysical context. The prophecies of national discord in Richard II - 'foul sin gathering head / Shall break into corruption. . . .' (R2, V.1.58-59)<sup>2</sup> - assume both that there is an order above the secular which usurpation violates and that this violation will have political consequences: Bolingbroke's realpolitik destabilises the relationship between the king and the nobles who helped him to power, generating civil war.<sup>3</sup> Thus, usurpation involves

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2. All quotations from Richard II are taken from The Arden Shakespeare: King Richard II, ed. Peter Ure (London: Methuen and Co. Ltd., 1961). Ure discusses power and its transcendent sanction in the play in his excellent 'Introduction', lxxx.

3. John Danby, in Shakespeare's Doctrine of Nature (London: Faber and Faber, 1948), has put forward the influential view of the Henry IV plays as a dramatic world where power and political expediency are the only values, where there is no 'frame of absolute moral values that embraces both the individual and society and yet transcends them. . . .' (p.83). Yet it would seem that the second tetralogy's portrayal of historical processes is rather more complex than Danby's formulation would allow. The plays insist both on the need for political acumen and on its moral deficiency, and the social disorder consequent upon the 'sin' of usurpation,

Bolingbroke in a deep-seated contradiction: his political efficiency can operate only in a negative fashion, to enforce the monarchical hegemony he himself challenged. His seizure of power disrupts public values and fragments society, producing a nation made up of partial and opposing claims. The order of the usurper is placed in relation to Rebellion and Misrule<sup>4</sup> and their respective principles, honour and instinct.

In Henry IV. Part One (1596-97), chivalric honour is examined as the martial function of the nobility. Hotspur's spirited defence of Mortimer against the king's accusation of treason identifies this function as the capacity to face pain and danger; Percy invokes Mortimer's 'mouthed wounds' (I.3.96), 'willingly' received in combat with Glendower (I.3.110).<sup>5</sup> His dual emphasis on injury and volition is crucial, for those voluntarily received wounds declare Mortimer's intention to serve while associating aristocratic virtue with the resolution to endure what ordinary men

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(Footnote 3 continued from previous page)  
coupled with Henry's own troubled conscience, serves to remind us that there is more to life than the acquisition of power, that the political and the moral are not only inextricably connected, but are, by implication, governed by an otherworldly reality.

4.I am here borrowing C.L. Barber's term, from Shakespeare's Festive Comedy. A Study of Dramatic Form and its Relation to Social Custom (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1959). See pp.192-221.

5.All quotations from King Henry IV. Part One are from The Arden Shakespeare: King Henry IV. Part One, ed. A.R. Humphreys (London and New York: Methuen, 1960).



instinctively shun. It is this strength of will that forms the foundation of the nobleman's honour in the play.

In identifying public virtue with courage, Hotspur sets up an explicit opposition between honour and policy:

Never did bare and rotten policy  
Colour her working with such deadly wounds. . . .  
I.3.107-108.

While the honourable man willingly risks his life in the execution of his public role, the politician eschews danger through self-serving opportunism, cunning and treachery. Yet Hotspur's lines also imply a distinction between honour and instinct, between the willingness to confront and the natural impulse to avoid that which threatens one's safety and well-being. Death, after all, is the test of honour (a fact to which Falstaff later calls our attention) because it is what we most fear. The distinctions that inform Percy's lines lay claim to a superiority that is at once social and moral.

However, if Hotspur is a great nobleman and 'the king of honour' (IV.1.10) because he stands firm when ordinary men flee from danger, his strength of will is portrayed not as the calm self-control of the man who has quelled his own nature, but as ardent self-assertion:

Send danger from the east unto the west,  
So honour cross it from the north to south,  
And let them grapple: O, the blood more stirs  
To rouse a lion than to start a hare! I.3.193-96.

As Hotspur, relishing the prospect of 'some great exploit' (I.3.197), imagines honour 'grappling' with danger, he

conceives of martial virtue as the ability to compete with peril. Battle is a contest in which he asserts himself against adversity, and it is in this contest that he proves his greatness, his own capacity for virtue - hence his enthusiasm at the promise of a fresh encounter with danger. The hunting metaphor likens this eagerness to the thrill of the chase, which is all the more intense the more fearsome the quarry. Hotspur's self-assertiveness is not teeth-gritting force, but élan, the highspiritedness of the man who rushes headlong towards a new opportunity to manifest his heroic nature.<sup>6</sup>

Honour emerges from these lines as a form of passionate self-affirmation. As such, it is essentially self-regarding. When Hotspur imagines himself effortlessly plucking honour from the pale-faced moon, we get another glimpse of this self-relationship, for his hyperbole claims a power for virtue that puts the impossible easily within his grasp:

By heaven, methinks it were an easy leap  
To pluck bright honour from the pale-fac'd moon,  
Or dive into the bottom of the deep,  
Where fathom-line could never touch the ground,  
And pluck up drowned honour by the locks,  
So he that doth redeem her thence might wear  
Without corrival all her dignities:  
But out upon this half-fac'd fellowship!  
I.3.199-206.

The final lines of the speech supplement internal honour with

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6. Norman Council connects Hotspur with the Platonic identification of honour with highspiritedness, but confines his analysis to a consideration of Percy's irascibility. See When Honour's At the Stake, Ideas of Honour in Shakespeare's Plays (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1973), p.45.

the public honours, or 'dignities', that constitute its reflection and reward. Hotspur's refusal to share these honours, his repudiation of 'half-fac'd fellowship', clarifies honour's intrinsic relation to competition and pride. What Percy seeks is singularity; his aspiration to excellence is at bottom the aspiration to excel over others.

Hotspur's passion for the heroic self lies at the heart of his aristocratic nature, making him throughout the play proud, self-assertive, impetuous, irascible and more than a little exasperating for his companions. As a passionate man, he is also able to accommodate the private life, as his relationship with his wife Kate and her moving eulogy in Henry IV. Part Two (1597-98) make clear. But he remains an individualist, who exhibits the tension between honour and authority, and between the self and communal action. The play offers no conclusive moral judgement. Rather, its dramatic structure ensures that its commentary works two ways. Thus, Hotspur's contempt for policy, which calls for some endorsement, is shown to render his honour hopelessly impractical, as his conduct at Shrewsbury demonstrates.<sup>7</sup>

Analogously, the play uses Falstaff to celebrate the values of 'holiday' leisure scorned by honour.<sup>8</sup> Falstaff's code of conduct reflects an engrossment in the life of appetite, that

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7. Ibid., pp.46-49.

8. See Barber, pp.195-97.

is to say, the pursuit of pleasure, comfort, safety and well-being. Like Hotspur, he is intensely self-involved. But the physical gratifications he pursues, and his profound cynicism towards religion, morality and public service locate him at the opposite pole to honour's inflexible personal idealism. This dramatic embodiment of the instinct for survival lives 'out of all order, out of all compass' (1H4, III.3.18-19) and gets away with it through a fertile wit that tirelessly recodes reality to his advantage. His improvisatory flair and comic opportunism succeed in creating around him an enchanted space which keeps at bay the consequences of his self-gratification. But even his most brilliant equivocations cannot conceal his essential egoism, even when they seem to recreate the world itself in his own rotund image: 'banish plump Jack, and banish all the world.' (1H4, II.4.473-74). But the world is more than Falstaff's imaginative solipsism, as Hal's retort makes plain: 'I do, I will.' (1H4, II.4.475).

The mockery of morality that underlies Falstaff's comic resourcefulness becomes explicit in his comments at the Battle of Shrewsbury. Through them, the play offers an alternative perspective on an ethic which dictates that for a man to live honourably he has to be prepared to die. Falstaff's famous catechism on honour reduces it to a word: 'What is honour? A word. . . . Who hath it? He that died a-Wednesday.' (V.1.134;136). Honour is granted no more than nominal value because the reality is injury, death and posthumous

'detraction' (V.1.139).<sup>9</sup> The voice of 'instinct' strips honour of its mystique and calls it death: 'I like not such grinning honour as Sir Walter hath. Give me life. . . . ' (V.3.58-59). Yet the demystification does not finally demystify responsibility and courage, and verbal brio in the service of individual survival will not make unreal the claims of others and the fact of death.

Thus, in the dramatic world of Henry IV, Part One, policy, honour and instinct emerge as mutually inimical national energies. The dramatic structure which permits one world to comment on another is organised around the figure of the prince who is responsive to all three perspectives. The play consistently places Hal in relation to the worlds of the court, the rebels and the tavern, and numerous critics have suggested, though in a variety of ways, that this dramatic design constitutes Shakespeare's institutio principis, exhibiting the growth of a sovereign nature that somehow tempers and harmonises these opposing values.<sup>10</sup> It is

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9. See Council, pp.38-42.

10. The most common formulation of Hal's nascent royalty in Part One is the quasi-Aristotelian paradigm of honour, which sees Hotspur as the excess, Falstaff the defect and Hal the virtuous mean of the truly honourable man. See, for example, E.M.W. Tillyard, Shakespeare's History Plays (London: Chatto and Windus, 1944), pp.264 -304; Hiram Haydn, The Counter-Renaissance (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1950), p.600; David Berkeley and Donald Eidson, 'The Theme of Henry IV, Part One', SQ, XIX (1968), 25-31; and Sherman H. Hawkins, 'Virtue and Kingship in Shakespeare's Henry IV', ELR, 5 (1975), pp.327-29. Council argues persuasively against this interpretation in his chapter on the play, pp.36-59. The formulation of integrated sovereignty which I put forward here is closest to that offered by C.L.

tempting to read Part One along these lines, as dramatising the reconciliation in Hal of honour and instinct. Certainly, the prince's acquaintance with Eastcheap allows him to parody Percy's battle passion - 'he that kills me some six or seven dozen of Scots at a breakfast, washes his hands, and says to his wife, "Fie upon this quiet life, I want work".'

(II.4.100-103) - and thereby capture the narrowness of his aristocratic nature. At the same time, however, Hal is shown to understand the limitations of Falstaff's world, its essential indifference to public emergencies: 'What, is it a time to jest and dally now?' (V.3.55) - a perception dependent on a complementary awareness of the value of honour.

The broadened social perspective which Hal acquires in Eastcheap is frequently regarded as a crucial factor in his progression towards an inclusive, national royalty.<sup>11</sup> In learning to speak the language of the common people ('I can drink with any tinker in his own language during my life.' 1H4, II.4.18-19), Hal can be seen to transcend a class-bound aristocratic ethic, and to develop a communal rather than a sectional national consciousness:

and when I am King of England I shall command all

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(Footnote 10 continued from previous page)

Barber in Shakespeare's Festive Comedy, pp.195-201.

11. See J. Dover Wilson, The Fortunes of Falstaff (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1943), pp.24-25; Paul A. Jorgenson, Redeeming Shakespeare's Words (Berkeley and Los Angeles, Calif.: Univ. of California Press, 1962), pp.65-67.; C.L. Barber, Shakespeare's Festive Comedy, pp.200-201; and Zdenek Stribrny, 'Henry V and History', in Shakespeare: Henry V. A Casebook, ed. Michael Quinn, The Macmillan Casebook Series (London: Macmillan and Co. Ltd., 1969), pp.186-87.

the good lads in Eastcheap. 1H4, II.4.13-14.

Yet this school of criticism represents an incomplete response to the text. For example, the tone of Hal's observation here is mock-heroic, and his fellowship with the 'leash of drawers' (II.4.7) patronising. Indeed, after his soliloquy in the second scene ('I know you all. . . .' 1H4, I.2.190-212), we can never wholly trust his Eastcheap friendships, or be certain of the warmth and authenticity of his life with the people. It is difficult for us to decide just what it is that he gains from it; in one view at least - that of Warwick - the language he learns from his drinking mates 'comes to no further use / But to be known and hated.' (2H4, IV.4.72-73).<sup>12</sup>

The tavern scenes of Part One show us a prince who is an accomplished impersonator, who shares with Falstaff a delight in playing roles. In his soliloquy, Hal discloses his plan to enhance his accession to the throne with a 'reformation' which he understands to be inherently dramatic: the repudiation of the former self to some extent cultivated simply in order to be rejected.<sup>13</sup> This acute sense of the theatricality of kingship forms at least as significant a part in the portrait of Hal's nascent sovereignty as do the royal virtues frequently cited by critics. It is an art of government that the prince shares with his father. In Henry's speech to Hal

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12. All quotations from Henry IV, Part Two are from The Arden Shakespeare: King Henry IV, Part Two, ed. A.R. Humphreys (London: Methuen, 1966).

13. See Michael Goldman, Shakespeare and the Energies of Drama (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1972), pp.52-55.

in Part One (III.2.29-91), his calculated formation of the public role is at once an essential political skill that fosters obedience to royal authority, and a cynical political commodity, the expedient means to power. Bolingbroke's conscientious maintenance of the public persona neglected by his predecessor is compromised by its unscrupulous history. Thus, the capacity to cultivate the public role is by no means an unmixed blessing. The Henry IV plays make clear the damage which the prince's public destiny inflicts on his private being. They also, of course, alert us to the Machiavellian implications that attend the dissociation of the private man from the public figure.

Therefore, if Part One severely qualifies its suggestion that through Hal aristocratic honour and the common life can be fused into an instrument of national solidarity, the integration of policy into this alleged synthesis proves even more problematic. The plays strongly imply that policy's legitimate claim to authority - its efficiency and public responsibility - is irrevocably implicated in usurpation and the 'indirect crook'd ways' (2H4, IV.5.184) through which Bolingbroke came to power. Henry undoubtedly has a strong sense of public accountability, and he maintains order at great personal cost. But his competence operates only negatively - to quell the disorder he unleashed - and ultimately has to rely on naked political machination, as the Gaultree Forest episode makes clear. This bears directly on Hal's future role as king, for although he learns from his



father's experience of rule that the crown brings with it an enormous burden of public service ('polish'd perturbation! golden care!' 2H4, IV.5.22), the king's deathbed counsel urges expediency: a foreign war to avert the rebellion that will threaten the son of a usurper, notwithstanding his claim of hereditary right. Thus, the power won by 'indirect crook'd ways' will finally be consolidated by the same means.

Henry's last speech to his son informs us how heavily the past will hang over the new king. Hal inherits a legacy of usurpation and division, and advice on how to deal with the threat of factious nobles. The speech, coupled with the final lines of Henry IV, Part Two, in which John of Lancaster reports that he has heard a bird singing of a French war, whose music 'pleas'd the King' (2H4, V.5.108), hardly encourages us to feel that for Henry V policy will function as an unproblematic royal virtue within an integrated sovereignty.

The opening scene of Henry V shows us two clerics worrying about a bill before Parliament threatening to expropriate Church lands and discussing the near-miraculous transformation of the new king. The description of Henry's reformation is explicitly religious in character, its language based on the baptismal service from the Book of Common Prayer:<sup>14</sup>

The breath no sooner left his father's body,  
But that his wildness, mortified in him,

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14. Walter, 'Introduction', The Arden Shakespeare: King Henry V xviii.

Seem'd to die too; yea, at that very moment,  
Consideration like an angel came,  
And whipp'd th'offending Adam out of him,  
Leaving his body as a Paradise,  
T'envelop and contain celestial spirits.

I.1.25-31.

This is nothing less than a cleansing of the taint of original sin. The passage's allusion to baptism evokes the restoration through grace of the rectitude of will damaged by the Fall, for baptism offers man a regeneration 'which by nature he cannot have'.<sup>15</sup> However, it also emphasises the role of 'consideration' in Henry's redemption. J.H. Walter has elucidated the religious significance of this term, its association with the 'intense spiritual contemplation, and self-examination' through which, with the help of heavenly beings, man communicates with God.<sup>16</sup> Thus, if the line, 'Consideration like an angel came', articulates man's dependence on grace, it equally presupposes a natural reason not wholly darkened by the Fall. In this way, Canterbury assumes a degree of collaboration between nature and grace; he expresses a compromise theology that also signifies the accord between secular leadership and its divine sanction. His account of Henry's conversion thus anticipates the syncretic vision of the 'honeybees' speech.

These implications of synthesis are reinforced by

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15. 'The Ministration of Holy Baptism', The Book of Common Prayer and Administration of the Sacraments and other Rites and Ceremonies of the Church, New York: The Church Pension Fund, 1945, p.274.

16. See Walter, 'Introduction', The Arden Shakespeare: King Henry V. xix.

the clerics' commendation of the new king's inclusive royal virtues: Henry can 'reason in divinity', 'debate of commonwealth affairs', 'discourse of war', and search to the bottom of 'any cause of policy' (I.1.38-47). The emphasis is on the unification of what is diverse, in contrast to the fragmentation that characterised the reign of Henry IV, and specifically on the integration of the three opposing dramatic worlds of the Henry IV plays: in Henry, policy and honour are plainly reconciled, and even 'instinct' is present in the natural idiom of the clerics, which implies that the new king's acquaintance with Misrule has proved 'fruitful' - for 'wholesome berries' ripen best 'by fruit of baser quality' (I.1.61-62). The partial claims of a divided society are fused in the king who contains within himself the unity in diversity imaged in the 'honeybees' passage.

This corporate identity is presented as the reflection of the king's natural abilities. Canterbury and Ely discuss at some length how riot could generate such royal perfection, concluding that, because 'miracles are ceas'd' (I.1.67), the riot must have been a disguise, beneath which Henry 'obscur'd his contemplation' (I.1.63). Their natural idiom suggests an organic growth into sovereignty and posits perfect harmony between the two natures of the king, his body natural and the body politic he assumes in the ceremony of coronation.<sup>17</sup>

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17. See Ernst H. Kantorowicz, The King's Two Bodies. A Study in Mediaeval Political Theology (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1957), pp.7-23.

In this view, Henry's reformation crowns the accord between self and role with divine favour. Natural energies flow into royal virtue, which is in turn completed and legitimated by grace. In Henry, it is suggested, an ideal unity is established which joins royal and divine authority and thereby harmonises God and secular virtue.

However, the clerics' theory of the king's feigned former self, the 'veil of wildness' (I.1.64), alerts us to the fact that his reformation is as public as it is private, that it represents at least in part the dramatic transformation first planned at the start of Henry IV. Part One and now executed with stunning success. This suggests that the role is to some extent a calculated public performance, that part of Henry's effectiveness as king resides in the theatrical skill with which he takes centre stage:

when he speaks,  
The air, a charter'd libertine, is still,  
And the mute wonder lurketh in men's ears,  
To steal his sweet and honey'd sentences. . . .  
I.1.47-50

While this proficiency at play-acting need not cast doubt upon the reality of Henry's virtues, it makes us aware that the relation between the private and the public man is considerably more complex than the portrait of the ideal king would allow.

The clerics' account of Henry's reformation is further coloured by their ecclesiastical interests currently under legal threat. How far this is the case can be shown by

Shakespeare's alteration of his sources. In Hall and Holinshed, the prelates introduce the subject of war with France in order to distract Henry's attention from the bill of temporal dispossession. The king plays a passive role in their accounts. He has no attitude towards the bill, which is simply brushed aside by Canterbury's 'sharpe invention'.<sup>18</sup> The clerics' offer of financial support for the war is made only after the statement of the legality of Henry's claim to the French throne.

Shakespeare changes this material in two significant ways. First of all, the prelates do not initiate the discussion of foreign war. When Canterbury makes his bid to preserve Church property, the cause is already 'in hand' (I.1.77). The mention of the arrival of the French ambassador reinforces our awareness that Canterbury is responding to a prior interest in France, for although we are not told until the next scene that the ambassador has come in response to Henry's claim to 'some certain dukedoms' (I.2.247), Canterbury informs Ely that he can easily guess the purpose of his embassy. In the chronicles, no such claim to French territory has been made, the dukedoms in question forming part of the rightful

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18. Holinshed's Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland (London: J. Johnson, 1808), III.65; Edward Hall, The Union of the Two Noble Families of Lancaster and York (1550) (Menston: Scolar Press, 1970), fol.iii.

inheritance which Canterbury urges the king to secure.<sup>19</sup>

By establishing the cause of foreign war as already under consideration, Shakespeare significantly alters the nature of Canterbury's political manoeuvrings:

He seems indifferent,  
Or rather swaying more upon our part  
Than cherishing th'exhibitors against us;  
For I have made an offer to his majesty,  
Upon our spiritual convocation,  
And in regard of causes now in hand,  
Which I have open'd to his grace at large.  
As touching France, to give a greater sum  
Than ever at one time the clergy yet  
Did to his predecessors part withal. I.1.72-81.

The Archbishop's machinations now take the form of flattering what he takes to be the king's military designs, by 'opening' (or 'fully expounding') the causes 'now in hand',<sup>20</sup> and by offering what is, in effect, a substantial financial bribe.

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19. Holinshed reads: 'Whereupon, on a day in the parliament, Henry Chichele, Archbishop of Canterbury, made a pithy oration wherein he declared how not only the duchies of Normandy and Aquitaine, with the counties of Anjou and Maine and the country of Gascoigne, were by undoubted title appertaining to the king as to the lawful and only heir of the same, but also the whole realm of France, as heir to his great grandfather King Edward the Third.' (Holinshed's Chronicles, III.65). See also Hall, fol.iiii.

20. 'Open' is a somewhat ambiguous verb. As in OED I.9, it can signify 'To lay bare or make manifest to the (mental or spiritual) view; to reveal, disclose, declare, make known'. This gloss, favoured by C.T. Onions in A Shakespeare Glossary, 2nd edn. (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1919), implies that Canterbury has introduced the subject of war. However, in view of the Archbishop's knowledge of Henry's prior claim to dukedoms, it is difficult to ascribe this role to him. OED I.10, 'To unfold the sense of; to expound, explain, interpret', seems to fit the sequence of events more closely. This reading is adopted by Irving Ribner and George Lyman Kittredge, eds. The Complete Works of Shakespeare (Waltham, Mass. and Toronto: Xerox College Publishing, 1971) and Gary Taylor, ed. Henry V, The Oxford Shakespeare (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1982).

Yet it is important to distinguish between Shakespeare's modification of his sources, which becomes clear through study but remains imperceptible to an audience, and the way he dramatises his own version of events. The reworking of the chronicles certainly suggests the dramatist's intention to make Henry's role in initiating war more problematic than it appears in Hall or Holinshed. But his presentation of the clerics' political scheming seems designed to arouse suspicions of the king's motives without confirming them. The Archbishop's report of his meeting with Henry is suggestive but imprecise. The repeated verb 'seems', coupled with the pattern of statement and counter-statement, evokes conjecture and uncertainty: Henry first 'seems indifferent', and then more inclined to the Church than to the Commons; he 'seems' to receive the offer of financial support with 'good acceptance' (I.1.82-83), but apparently has not countenanced it, the meeting having been interrupted before Canterbury could assure him of the legality of his claim. The passage suggests that in making overtures to the king, the prelate can only guess at his attitudes and motives. Henry may or may not be susceptible to his inducement, and if Canterbury believes that a foreign war is in the offing, he also assumes that it depends upon the verification of the king's 'true titles to some certain dukedoms, / And generally to the crown and seat of France. . . .' (I.1.87-88). It is only with the benefit of hindsight that we can feel properly sceptical about Henry's legal scruples, for at this stage we do not know that he has

already claimed the dukedoms in question; we have only the Archbishop's hint, which closes the scene and encourages us to attend carefully to the ambassadors' message. Nor does close examination of the text enable us to point to Henry's prior interest in France as proof of his political scheming, for in the next scene his title to these territories, descended from Edward III through the Treaty of Brétigny, is apparently not thought to require confirmation, the only claim in question being that to the French throne, derived from Edward III's mother, Isabella.<sup>21</sup>

By suggesting, through his treatment of ecclesiastical interests, that Henry may be responsive to pressure groups, and that he may be actively seeking war, Shakespeare alerts us to possible flaws in the image of an ideal king who resolves the tensions generated by usurpation. We cannot discount the possibility that Henry's dodgy inheritance is shaping events, that he is pursuing foreign quarrels to forestall the threat of disorder bequeathed to him. The clerics' confidence in synthesis is consequently put under pressure, both by doubts

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21. In both Hall and Holinshed, Canterbury distinguishes between the claim to dukedoms and the larger claim to the French throne, and his legal arguments are designed solely to refute the 'false feigned Law Salique, which the Frenchmen allege ever against the Kings of England in bar of their just title to the crown of France.' (Holinshed's Chronicles, III.65). See also Hall, fol.iiii. For historical accounts of Henry's two distinct claims to French territory, see Peter Saccio, Shakespeare's English Kings: History, Chronicle and Drama (London, Oxford and New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1977), pp.75-77; E.F. Jacob, Henry V and the Invasion of France (London: Hodder and Stoughton Ltd., 1947), pp.14-23; and J.D. Griffith Davies, Henry V (London: Arthur Barker Ltd., 1935), pp.143-48.



concerning the legitimacy of Henry's title and intimations that his talent for performance may be Machiavellian dissimulation.

The second scene continues the discussion cut short by the arrival of the French ambassadors and gives out similarly ambiguous signals. Henry's initial appeal for truth promises to allay our doubts, for in reminding Canterbury of the grave moral consequences of opening 'titles miscreate' (I.2.16), the king appears to guard conscientiously against what he knows to be the Archbishop's bias for war:

For God doth know how many now in health  
Shall drop their blood in approbation  
Of what your reverence shall incite us to.  
Therefore take heed how you impawn our  
    person,  
How you awake our sleeping sword of war:  
We charge you, in the name of God, take  
    heed. . . . I.2.18-23.

Yet there is a curious undercurrent in Henry's lines. The verbs, 'incite', 'impawn', 'awake', make him a passive instrument, the Archbishop the active instigator of war. This apparent eagerness to transfer all responsibility to his counsellor makes us uneasy, for it becomes difficult to tell whether Henry is concerned chiefly to avoid an illegitimate campaign or to exonerate himself from blame for a possibly unjust war that he knows will be officially sanctioned. The entire exchange between the king and Canterbury conflates the issues of justice and responsibility. After the Salic Law speech, Henry asks, 'May I with right and conscience make this claim?' (1.2.96), to which Canterbury replies, 'The sin upon

my head, dread sovereign!' (I.2.97). Consequently, we do not know whether Henry's scruples are sincere or a performance masking political opportunism while betraying symptoms of the private man - his moral evasion and sense of guilt.

Shakespeare places the burden of legal proof on a speech arguably 'unrivalled for tediousness' in the entire canon.<sup>22</sup> Perhaps the chief problem of the Salic Law speech is the discrepancy between its style and its substance. In content, it establishes two main points - that the Salic Law does not apply to France and that French kings have for centuries claimed the throne through the female line - which effectively dispose of the law as a bar to Henry's claim. Yet the Archbishop's concluding remark, that Henry's legal title is 'as clear as is the summer's sun' (I.2.86), is a pointed bit of humour, for the speech is long, unwieldy and full of unintelligible genealogies.<sup>23</sup> Although it can be decoded in the study, it is extremely difficult to follow in the theatre. How does one respond to a speech that is not doubletalk but sounds suspiciously like it? It may be that Shakespeare's faithful reproduction of Holinshed is designed neither to relieve nor verify the doubts he has raised about the validity of the enterprise, but to keep the matter an open question. One may with justice feel sceptical of Canterbury's arguments.

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22.A.R. Humphreys, ed., Henry V, New Penguin Shakespeare (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd., 1968), p.26.

23. See Norman Rabkin, Shakespeare and the Problem of Meaning (Chicago and London: Chicago Univ. Press, 1981), p.52.

or one may accept them, while recognising that the motives for the war remain suspect.

The legal warrant is pressed home with rousing appeals to Henry's honour to claim what is rightfully his. This honour is portrayed in terms of lineage and nature; it is the capacity for martial virtue transmitted to the king through the blood of Edward III and the Black Prince: 'The blood and courage that renowned them / Runs in your veins. . . .' (I.2.118-19). This natural royal virtue expands into national honour; the king's deeds, inhabiting historical time, flow into the history of the nation. In renewing the feats of his illustrious ancestors, Henry will embody England's greatness, enshrined in the memory of the near-miraculous victory at Cressy:

O noble English, that could entertain  
With half their forces the full pride of France,  
And let another half stand laughing by,  
All out of work, and cold for action! I.2.111-14.

The king's collective self, here identified as his honour, again grows out of natural abilities and incarnates the 'nation', which emerges in the 'honeybees' speech as a 'rule in nature' issuing from God. This national identity is contained in history - the story of English honour which inspires the present to revive the heroic past while also teaching the prudence that Henry exhibits in forestalling Scottish incursions. Accordingly, Henry presents his decision to enforce his legal claim on France as an affirmation of royal honour, that is, as a determination to win a glorious

place in English history:

Either our history shall with full mouth  
Speak freely of our acts, or else our grave,  
Like Turkish mute, shall have a tongueless mouth,  
Not worshipp'd with a waxen epitaph. I.2.230-33.

However, the scepticism which the play has engendered towards the war extends as well to this stirring unitary vision of king, nation and God. Canterbury and Ely are the chief spokesmen of national honour, and their renewed pledge of financial assistance casts a shadow over their assertion of perfect accord between religion and secular power. Moreover, the neo-chivalric harmony so memorably evoked in the 'honeybees' speech becomes a questionable national image when proffered by the representative of a sectional interest.

It is at this point that the French ambassadors are admitted, and we hear explicitly of the demand for dukedoms hinted at in the first scene. Shakespeare's rather cryptic presentation of this prior claim, pointing inconclusively at private reasons for the war, serves to complicate our response to the Dauphin's gift of the tennis balls. This insult to king and nation provides an opportunity to arouse nationalistic fervour for the war, turning it into an honourable quarrel as well as a legal claim. Henry greets the Dauphin's gift with a proud affirmation of his royal stature:

But tell the Dauphin I will keep my state,  
Be like a king and show my sail of greatness  
When I do rouse me in my throne of France. . . .  
I.2.273-75.

This assertion of English power against foreign humiliation is

stunningly effective rhetoric, and would ordinarily invite wholehearted approval of a king capable of rising so brilliantly to meet a challenge to his honour. But it is just this simple response that the play hinders by having alluded to a political gambit by Henry that might be construed as provocation. However crude the Dauphin's insult, the patriotic sentiments it arouses are qualified by this further suggestion that there may be more to Henry's charismatic role than meets the eye, a suggestion intensified by the king's eagerness to treat the Dauphin as he treated Canterbury - as a repository for the transgression of bloodshed:

and his soul  
Shall stand sore charged for the wasteful  
    vengeance  
That shall fly with them. . . . I.2.282-84.

The first act of Henry V offers the possibility of a sublime universal order, accomplished by a great and virtuous king whose role is an expression of his natural gifts, perfected and ratified by God; that through this king who embodies the identity of his nation, its greatness of spirit will be realised in a foreign war at once heroic and just; that secular virtue will become an instrument of national unity compatible with the divine order. Yet all this depends on taking for granted precisely what the play asks us to question: that there is an essential compatibility between the man and the role and between the role and God. In the first act's portrayal of a war the validity of which hangs in the

balance. Henry's public persona may be a reflection of a man in whom honour is consistent with piety and statecraft, or it may be a performance concealing the political manoeuvres of a young king at once incapable of resolving his problematic legacy and uneasy at the moral implications of a war of expedience. The neo-chivalric view of Henry's reign is celebrated throughout the play, in its patriotic and martial rhetoric and especially in the Chorus's epic narrative. But the ambiguous presentation of Henry in the first act encourages us to feel both the tensions beneath the mask of triumphant monarchy and the king's remoteness from a world of private men for whom his emotions and motives must remain in shadow; and it is these conflicts and ambivalences in kingship that develop in complexity during the course of the play, exposing cracks and strains in the neo-chivalric conception of honour.

The second act deepens our perception of the relation between the natural self and its corporate identity by focussing on the king's friendships. Henry's treatment of the conspirators Cambridge, Grey and Scroop in II.2 makes it clear which of these three betrayals makes the deepest impression. It is the treason of Scroop, the friend who 'knew'st the very bottom of my soul' (II.2.97), that prompts the long, deeply emotional speech in which Henry grieves for the trust and

intimacy that now seem irrevocably lost to him.<sup>24</sup> This episode is framed by the two scenes dealing with the death of Falstaff, whose rejection at the end of Henry IV, Part Two is presented by his associates as a kind of betrayal: 'The king has killed his heart.' (II.1.88). The public role damages rather than reflects the private man. Henry inhabits a public realm where amity is an illusion, where he must at once suffer and commit acts of personal disloyalty.

In the invasion scenes of the third and fourth acts, the neo-chivalric vision is sustained chiefly in the nationalistic and martial rhetoric of Henry and the Chorus. It presents, in the person of the ideal king, a transformation of honour from a reckless class-bound value rooted in individual pride into a synthesizing function of the nation-state consonant with piety. These two acts show us a king whose inspirational role as commander is tempered by his pragmatism. The withdrawal to Calais is the action of a king who combines courage with tactical advantage:

We would not seek a battle as we are;  
Nor, as we are, we say we will not shun it. . . .  
III.6.169-70.

Here, Henry represents a realistic honour, that is, one that accepts but does not invite danger.

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24. I am indebted for my reading of Act II to Prof. Anne Barton's essay, 'The King Disguised: Shakespeare's Henry V and the Comical History', in The Triple Bond: Plays, Mainly Shakespearean, in Performance (University Park, Penn. and London: The Pennsylvania State Univ. Press, 1975), pp.103-104. See also Goldman, p.64.

The king whose graced virtues express a compromise between God and honour further balances his role as general with that of priest, rousing his soldiers to valiant deeds while also fulfilling the sacramental function of affirming man's dependence on God. The military campaign, Henry declares, 'lies all within the will of God' (I.2.289); he will deliver 'Our puissance into the hand of God' (II.2.190); and on the march to Calais, when Gloucester fears a French attack, Henry reassures him that 'We are in God's hand, brother, not in theirs.' (III.6.174).

We saw in our examination of Hotspur that martial honour is conceived of as the power of the will to outface danger. In Henry's oration before Harfleur, this mechanism within the self is depicted as a wilful self-transformation, from man to tiger:

But when the blast of war blows in our ears,  
Then imitate the action of the tiger;  
Stiffen the sinews, conjure up the blood,  
Disguise fair nature with hard-favour'd  
rage;  
Then lend the eye a terrible aspect;  
Let it pry through the portage of the head  
Like the brass cannon. . . . III.1.5-11.

The rhetoric conjures up a physical metamorphosis. The soldier becomes as fearsome as the dangers he encounters in battle and, thus transfigured, is able to challenge adversity. The man who 'conjures up the blood', disguises 'fair nature' with 'hard-favour'd rage', and bends up 'every spirit / To his full height' (III.1.16-17) is summoning the power within himself to contend with danger.



Yet Henry's appeal to honour is social rather than competitive and individualistic. The power for valour he invokes resides not in the superior class or individual, but in an English nature, passed on through blood and breeding both to Henry's nobles, whose 'blood is fet from fathers of war-proof' (III.1.18) and his yeomen: 'let us swear / That you are worth your breeding' (III.1.27-28). The oration thus conceives of honour as originating in a kind of national gene-pool which is derived from and recreates the natural unity of England. This national honour does not obliterate distinctions in rank; rather, it purports to incorporate class chivalry into a communal endeavour. The aristocracy becomes part of a national chivalry in which the yeoman and common soldier share in its nobility of spirit:<sup>25</sup>

For there is none of you so mean and base  
That hath not noble lustre in your eyes.  
III.1.29-30.

However, for all its appeal, there is a certain tension in this vision of national honour. Henry's nobles must teach 'men of grosser blood' how to fight (III.1.24), while the common soldiers who have 'noble lustre' in their eyes are at the same time 'mean and base'. It is not easy to sustain this simultaneous reinforcement and blurring of class divisions, and the strain in Henry's language suggests commensurate

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25. See Zdenek Stribrny, 'Henry V and History', in Shakespeare: 'Henry V'. A Casebook, ed. Michael Quinn (London: Macmillan and Co. Ltd., 1969), pp.174-75.

strain in his extension of honour to the rank and file. The effect of Henry's collective nobility is to transform his army into a community of honourable men, in which the king himself participates. In his rallying cry of 'dear friends' before Harfleur (III.1.1) and, later in the play, in his repeated refusal of the royal prerogative of ransom, Henry presents himself not merely as his soldiers' king, but as their comrade. The effectiveness of this image, particularly to an army isolated and exposed to mounting danger, should not be underestimated.<sup>26</sup> Yet with the second act's pessimistic portrayal of Henry's personal relationships fresh in our minds, we are free to sense as well both the appeal that the idea of fellowship might hold for a man whose private self is submerged in his royal office and the difficulty, even impossibility, of the easy comradeship he offers.<sup>27</sup> The tensions apparent in the Harfleur oration indicate that it is with those most socially distant from him, his ordinary soldiers, that genuine fraternity is most problematic.

There is another subtle undercurrent at work in the heroic self-mutation imaged in the first section of the speech. As martial rhetoric, the passage is remarkable for the contrast it establishes between the qualities suitable to peace and war; and the verbs 'disguise' and 'lend', describing the transition from the former state to the latter, portray a

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26. See Barton, 'The King Disguised: Shakespeare's Henry V and the Comical History', p.104.

27. Ibid.. pp.104-106.

transformation that is superficial and temporary, necessary 'when the blast of war blows in our ears'. Yet this moderate tone is to some extent countered by the steady accretion of physical detail, which urges the spectator to visualise the frightening physical distortions invoked. Moreover, the language associates honour with 'blood' and 'rage', and with a certain distancing of the self from nature. The line, 'Disguise fair nature with hard-favour'd rage', expresses the disparity between nature and honour in terms that stress the opposition between what is kindly and humane and what is grim and violently angry.<sup>28</sup> It urges the unleashing of a passion (albeit provisionally) cut loose from the restraints of 'natural' human feeling. The language of the oration qualifies rather than subverts the heroic mood by suggesting that if the man turned tiger becomes superhuman in courage, he simultaneously becomes bestial in ferocity, the embodiment of a lower passional nature untempered by human sympathy. Accordingly, in Henry's speech to the citizens of Harfleur, the 'enraged soldiers in their spoil' (III.3.25) are likened to an inexorable force of elemental nature quite outside of human control; and in Burgundy's speech in Act V, this rampant nature is termed 'savagery' and represents the devastation

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28. J.H. Walter, in The Arden Shakespeare: King Henry V. glosses 'fair nature' as 'natural kindly looks', Ribner and Kittredge, in The Complete Works of Shakespeare, as 'natural humane appearance' and Dover Wilson, in Henry V, The New Shakespeare (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1947), as 'kindly feeling'. In the glossary to his edition, Dover Wilson defines 'nature' in this line as 'the natural feelings of humanity' (p.196). Walter reads 'hard-favour'd' as 'grim-faced', and C.T. Onions (A Shakespeare Glossary) glosses 'rage' as 'warlike ardour, impetuosity or fury'.

wreaked by war (V.2.47,59). In portraying heroism and brutality as two sides of the same coin, the play draws attention to one possible source of conflict in the yoking together of honour and religion.

Henry's warning to the governor of Harfleur shows him to be quite aware of the savagery that is the dark side of honour and of his own rhetoric. In announcing that the 'no surrender' point in the siege has been reached and urging capitulation,<sup>29</sup> Henry presents a horrifyingly graphic account of the atrocities that attend the sacking of a town. He speaks here as a military pragmatist and formidable opponent, but also arguably with the persuasive force that comes from an acute sensitivity to the horrors of war - a sensitivity, and indeed a concern with the responsibility for these horrors, reminiscent of his speeches in the second scene.

As the French put mounting pressure on Henry's enfeebled army, the frictions in neo-chivalry rise increasingly to the surface, reaching near-crisis point on the eve of Agincourt. The Chorus invites us to visualise a 'ruin'd band' (Chorus, IV.29), comforted and emboldened by Henry's sun-like majesty:

Nor doth he dedicate one jot of colour  
Unto the weary and all-watched night;  
But freshly looks and overbears attaint  
With cheerful semblance and sweet majesty;  
That every wretch, pining and pale before,  
Beholding him, plucks comfort from his looks.

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29. See J.H. Walter's gloss in The Arden Shakespeare: King Henry V, that of Ribner and Kittredge in The Complete Works of Shakespeare and Dover Wilson's in Henry V, The New Shakespeare.

A largess universal like the sun  
His liberal eye doth give to every one,  
Thawing cold fear, that mean and gentle all,  
Behold, as may unworthiness define,  
A little touch of Harry in the night.

Chorus, IV.37-47.

What IV.1 shows is a rather more troubling encounter between the king, disguised as a common man, and three of his ordinary soldiers, Williams, Bates and Court. The king-in-disguise gives form to the monarch's dual nature, and it is the tension inherent in this doubleness that is shown to be the source of difficulty in Henry's relation to his men. His first speech alerts us to his dilemma:

I think the king is but a man, as I am: the violet smells to him as it doth to me; the element shows to him as it doth to me. . . .Therefore when he sees reason of fears, as we do, his fears, out of doubt, be of the same relish as ours are: yet, in reason, no man should possess him with any appearance of fear, lest he, by showing it, should dishearten his army. IV.1.101-104; 108-13.

Henry argues here for the common humanity of the king, but his speech also informs us that although he may be a man with private emotions, as the king, responsible for sustaining the morale of his troops, he cannot show them. The role places constraints on his humanity. Throughout this scene, Henry seems to want not only loyalty to the public figure, but also fellowship, his soldiers' recognition of him as a man like themselves whom they can know as a private individual. This, however, is precisely what his soldiers refuse. Henry's attempt to assure them of the king's true attitude towards the impending battle - 'I think he would not wish himself any where but where he is.' (IV.1.120-21) - meets with Bates's insistence, not on comradeship, but on the privileges of rank

separating the king from the common soldier:

Then I would he were here alone; so should he be sure to be ransomed, and a many poor men's lives saved. IV.1.122-24.

Henry answers with an assertion of solidarity:

methinks I could not die any where so contented as in the king's company, his cause being just and his quarrel honourable. IV.1.127-29.

To which Williams replies, 'That's more than we know.'

(IV.1.130). Fellowship thus turns out to depend on a knowledge unavailable to ordinary men, cut off from the circles of power where political decisions are made. They do not know what lies behind the public pronouncements; they know only that they are the king's subjects and owe him obedience. Responsibility for the justice of the cause resides with the king alone.

Henry's meeting with his soldiers illuminates an alternative version of the relationship between subject and monarch which touches on what we suspect is a raw nerve: the guilt attaching to the instigator of an unjust war. Williams draws a disturbing picture of the 'heavy reckoning' Henry will have to make 'if the cause be not good' (IV.1.135-36) - a reckoning to which he gives a transcendent dimension:

when all those legs and arms and heads, chopped off in a battle, shall join together at the latter day, and cry all, "We died at such a place"; some swearing, some crying for a surgeon, some upon their wives left poor behind them, some upon the debts they owe, some upon their children rawly left. IV.1.136-43.

This ultimate perspective brings to the surface a radical questioning of the moral status of war which has hitherto

simmered under the play's heroic vision. Williams fears that few men die a Christian death in battle, 'for how can they charitably dispose of any thing when blood is their argument?' (IV.1.144-46). If the nature of war inhibits 'dying well', it will be a 'black matter' (IV.1.147) for the king who leads his obedient subjects into the battlefield.

What is immediately striking about Henry's long and eloquent rejoinder is that it does not address the question of the justice of his cause, which simply slips out of sight. Instead, he takes up the charge that he is responsible for the fate of his soldiers' souls, but in a manner that turns the argument away from the impiety of death in battle to individual sinfulness. The central assumption underlying Henry's speech is that sin is coextensive with life, and that it is the atonement one makes for these sins before death that determines whether one is saved or damned. This assumption is incorporated into two scenarios, both of which absolve the 'master' of blame should his 'servant' die unprepared. The analogy of service with which Henry begins presents the deaths of the son and servant as the inadvertent outcome of their duties, for which the father and master cannot be held responsible. Henry then adds the king to this list; none of them purpose their servants' deaths 'when they purpose their services.' (IV.1.162-63). The appeal to intention, while sound enough in respect of the father and master, seems a curious justification to be deployed by a king and general, who may not intend his soldiers to die, but knows when he

purposes their services that some (perhaps many) of them will. Given the extremity of the danger facing Henry's men, his analogy seems at the very least strained.

Henry then extends the idea of individual sin to the criminal elements present in every army - the robbers and murderers whose deaths in battle represent a just retribution. War is thus transformed from an arena of hatred and carnage into an execution chamber of God's justice: 'war is his beadle, war is his vengeance. . . .' (IV.1.174-75). Again, Henry puts forward a case in which the king is clearly not guilty of his soldiers' damnation, but which has only a limited applicability to his own situation. Criminal soldiers are a very special case and not at all representative of the men who comprise his army.

The king's insistence on preparation for death, his perception of a man's soul as constituted not by a battle, but by his whole life, offers a counter-truth to Williams's cogent critique of war and permits Henry to assume his priestly role: 'Therefore should every soldier in the wars do as every sick man in his bed, wash every mote out of his conscience' (IV.1.184-86). Moreover, the arguments he uses to dissociate himself from this version of the private relationship between the subject and his soul are hard to fault on strictly logical grounds. If they remain unsatisfying, it is perhaps because they obscure the plight of the ordinarily sinful men risking their lives on his behalf. It may well be that the king, as



such, cannot respond in human terms to their predicament. If so, this merely serves to demonstrate that the perspectives of king and subject are logically incompatible, and that the dream of a comradeship of honour cannot be realised.

Be that as it may, when Williams declares that the justice of the king's cause is 'more than we know', he speaks for many in the audience as well. Henry's silence on this matter revives suspicion that he may be evading a major source of disquiet, and it leaves unanswered our questions about the legality of the war and the king's private motives.<sup>30</sup> Coupled with the obvious rhetorical sophistication with which he defends his position, Henry's reticence exposes the facility of his professions of fellowship, for it shows us, the audience, that his private self is finally not available for his subjects' or our own scrutiny.

Henry's arguments convince his men; even Williams concurs that 'the king is not to answer' the particular endings of his soldiers (IV.1.194). However, their expression of loyalty clearly does not satisfy Henry, for he seeks at this point to reaffirm fellowship: 'I myself heard the king say he would not be ransomed.' (IV.1.197-98). Henry wants an acknowledgement of the unity of man and public role, yet once again encounters scepticism:

Ay, he said so, to make us fight cheerfully; but  
when our throats are cut, he may be ransomed, and

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30. See Barton, 'The King Disguised: Shakespeare's Henry V and the Comical History', pp.100,102.

we ne'er the wiser. IV.1.199-201.

Williams sees the role not as an honest reflection of the private man, but as a politically useful performance, and he mocks Henry's suggestion that the king can be called to account by his lowly subject should he fail to keep his word:

That's a perilous shot out of an elder-gun, that a poor and a private displeasure can do against a monarch. IV.1.203-205.

This final insistence on the distance separating the powerless commoner from the king provokes a quarrel between Henry and one of his 'brothers' in arms.

After the battle, Williams learns from Henry that it 'was ourself thou didst abuse.' (IV.8.50). He receives both a royal pardon and reward, but Henry's magnanimity has on this occasion to share the stage with Williams's trenchant defence:

Your majesty came not like yourself: you appeared to me but as a common man. . . and what your highness suffered under that shape, I beseech you, take it for your own fault and not mine. . . .  
IV.8.51-52;53-56.

Williams's plea drives home the point that Henry cannot be both a king and a man to his soldiers, cannot claim both their loyalty and their comradeship. However sincere his desire to befriend them, his conduct towards them on the eve of Agincourt demonstrates at the same time that even when disguised the role isolates him from other men.

Henry's encounter with his soldiers prompts his only soliloquy. That the encounter has left him uneasy is clear enough, for the speech deals with the burden of royal



odds. The king who steps back from his glamorous office and 'finds' ceremony 'a proud dream' (IV.1.265,263) is no Richard II, convinced of the magical properties of his sacred name.<sup>31</sup> But he is no Richard III either, glorying in his manipulative skills. For Henry, the role is something that he must play, but the exhaustion and resentment that fill his lines make us see this performance not as simple Machiavellian detachment, but as the effort of a man, isolated from other men, who must strain to inhabit historical time and carry the burden of a collective persona. This need not mean that the role, in its contradictory claims, does not exact a moral price; but it does mean that it also exacts a heavy psychological and emotional one.

This recognition of the impossibility of unity between self and role leads on, in the prayer that follows, to a recognition of the uncertain alliance between his authority and its divine sanction:

Not to-day, O Lord!  
O not to-day, think not upon the fault  
My father made in compassing the crown!  
IV.1.298-300.

A soliloquy is no guarantee of sincerity; and one may feel disinclined to take wholly for granted the quality of a religious feeling that emerges at a moment of crisis. However, the prayer tells us not only that Henry regards the guilt of the past - of the deposition and murder of an anointed king - as part of his inheritance, but also that he

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31. See Rabkin, Shakespeare and the Problem of Meaning, p.47.

has all along been attempting to atone for it through acts of contrition. The sin, however, has not been expiated. It hangs over him still, making his 'relationship' with God intensely problematic. In his position, he cannot assume that his title is divinely countenanced. The prayer suggests the depth of Henry's piety; he clearly states that the outcome of the approaching conflict is ultimately in God's hands. But of divine favour in that battle he cannot be certain. Moreover, although he rehearses his acts of atonement, he shows no faith in the efficacy of his own efforts:<sup>32</sup>

More will I do;  
Though all that I can do is nothing worth,  
Since that my penitence comes after all,  
Imploring pardon. IV.1.308-11.

In these lines, Henry distinguishes between good works and grace, assuming not their collaboration, but his absolute dependence on the divine pardon he here implores. The line, 'all that I can do is nothing worth', seems resonant with the conviction of human insufficiency, and displays a piety that is not of the middle-of-the-road chivalric variety. Instead of a king touched by grace, embodying the harmonious interaction between man and God, we see a king with an insecure title, filled with a sense of unworthiness. We perceive a tension between the severity of Henry's private piety and the necessary confidence in human powers of his public generalship.

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32. In a well-known essay, Una Ellis-Fermor sees Henry's prayer as an attempt to 'bargain with God like a pedlar'. See The Frontiers of Drama (London: Methuen and Co. Ltd., 1945), p.47. However, she does not consider the significance of the final lines of the speech.

On the eve of Agincourt, the entire neo-chivalric structure teeters on the brink of collapse. We have witnessed a progressive questioning of the play's syncretic vision, culminating in the quasi-Calvinistic rigour of Henry's prayer. Given these conflicts and the distress that Henry's one moment of dramatic solitude calls forth, it is difficult not to feel a corresponding strain in the public performance of the St. Crispin oration that follows it.<sup>33</sup>

The oration represents Henry's most rousing appeal to honour. As in the speech before Harfleur, it is measured by the danger a man is able to endure. The army must not wish for reinforcements, because the greater the peril each soldier faces, the greater his share of honour. The lines make clear that the honour of which the king speaks is an internal rather than an external quality:

By Jove, I am not covetous for gold,  
Nor care I who doth feed upon my cost;  
It earns me not if men my garments wear;  
Such outward things dwell not in my desires:  
But if it be a sin to covet honour,  
I am the most offending soul alive. IV.3.24-29.

The honour that Henry 'covets' refers only indirectly to social esteem and explicitly to the inner worth that manifests itself in honourable deeds. What he desires is the chance to demonstrate his inherent capacity for virtue, understood as valiant deeds performed in the face of danger and death.

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33. For an interesting reading of the St. Crispin oration, see Goldman, pp.70-71.

After his prayer, it is hard not to construe this as image-projection rather than self-expression. Henry skilfully deploys the interdependence of honour and danger to present a struggle against insurmountable odds as an opportunity to reveal one's intrinsic worth, seeking to inspire his troops with the example of his own ardour. Yet the speech itself is not only negatively, or reactively, affected by the prayer that precedes it. Its appeal to a secular morality that assumes the natural capacity for virtue is couched in theological terms that call it into question: if it is a sin to covet honour, Henry is the most offending soul alive. This is curious language for a martial address, and it may be possible to detect, in Henry's ostensible rejection of this doctrinal position, an underlying lack of conviction in the individual pride he here affirms.

The fervent honour Henry recommends, although reminiscent of Hotspur, is again enlarged into the collective courage of a group of individuals bound together by shared danger - the solidarity which the king calls 'fellowship' (IV.3.39). This community of honourable men Henry portrays as participants in an event of historical moment. By naming the day of the battle, he endows it with historical significance, making the feast of Crispian an occasion of personal and national commemoration. In his evocation of the soldier standing 'a tip-toe when this day is name'd' (IV.3.42), feasting his neighbours and showing them his scars, memory is the seat of

self-respect in a social setting. The exploits of war turn into the narrative of peace. Moreover, these individual memories, transmitted from one generation to the next - 'This story shall the good man teach his son' (IV.3.56) - blend into the collective memory of the nation.

This emotionally charged vision of communal virtue, mutual dependence and national renown rises to the climactic coda:

We few, we happy few, we band of brothers;  
For he to-day that sheds his blood with me  
Shall be my brother; be he ne'er so vile  
This day shall gentle his condition. . . .  
IV.3.60-63.

This is Henry's warmest expression of fellowship and collective honour, yet the events of the night make it impossible for us to measure accurately or conclusively the personal conviction which underlies it. It may articulate his wish to find in his corporate identity as king a genuine community of interests, or it may be part of the public performance, the calculated effort to sustain his soldiers' morale.

Certainly, the play makes it plain that Henry cannot ultimately reconcile his piety with the social and secular morality he invokes to such dazzling effect. For when the battle is over and the seemingly impossible discrepancy in the English and French death tolls is presented - an impossibility that according to the terms of the St. Crispin speech should redound to the honour of Henry's soldiers - the king ascribes the victory exclusively to God: 'Praised be God, and not our



strength, for it!' (IV.7.89). This is insisted upon:

O God, thy arm was here;  
And not to us, but to thy arm alone,  
Ascribe we all! IV.8.108-10.

Finally, we hear the startling pronouncement:

And be it death proclaimed through our host  
To boast of this or take that praise from God  
Which is his only. IV.8.116-18.

It is clearly impossible to interpret these declarations as expressing a neo-chivalric compromise theology, for they in effect deny that natural ability played any part in the victory. Henry's prayer militates against seeing this self-effacing piety as a simple instance of role-playing. Yet his response to the resounding English win, although to some extent prepared for, still takes one aback. Indeed, the play calls attention to the vehemence of Henry's religious feeling. His proclamation of death elicits an incredulous response, even from the loyal Fluellen:

Is it not lawful, an please your majesty, to tell  
how many is killed? IV.8.119-20.

Henry consents, but with a proviso: 'but with this acknowledgement, / That God fought for us.' (IV.8.121-22).

The battle is framed by two emphatic statements of the inadequacy of natural virtue. Yet we are prevented, particularly after the event, from giving this perspective our conclusive assent.

After Agincourt, Henry insists that it is indeed a sin to covet honour. The play leaves us free to ascribe his

astonishing success to his own formidable morale-boosting powers, or even to the ruthless pragmatism with which he commands each soldier to 'kill his prisoners' (IV.6.37) as the French forces mass for a second attack.<sup>34</sup> But Henry presents it as an act of grace - a miracle proclaiming the divine favour for which he had hardly dared hope before the battle. The victory is God's judgement on a dynasty, a forgiveness of past sin denoting grace rather than human strength. We can recognise that this public expression of his private piety is politically useful for Henry - after all, it consolidates the legitimacy of his rule - without casting doubt on its sincerity. Yet paradoxically, the triumph that appears to unite secular leadership to its divine sanction sees God and honour fall apart. The penitent son of a usurper cannot finally reconcile what he owes to his subjects with what he feels he owes to God. The conflict between his secular and priestly functions resurfaces in the Chorus to Act V, where Henry, 'free from vainness and self-glorious pride' (Chorus, V.20), forbids a triumphal entry into London, only to find that its citizens have crowded the streets to 'fetch their conqu'ring Caesar in' (Chorus, V.28).

By the close of Act IV, the neo-chivalric synthesis appears too simple to accommodate the complexities either of history or of kingship. The play sustains our awareness, both through Henry's prayer and through its ambiguous presentation of his

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34. See Gary Taylor, 'Introduction', Henry V, The Oxford Shakespeare, pp.32-34.

cause and motives, of the pressures which the past exerts on the present. Political expediency is an aspect of rule that we are not permitted to discount, and the shadow it casts across the play, along with the suggestions of Henry's own anxieties, qualifies the uncritical celebration of national unity by encouraging consideration of its moral cost. Throughout the play, the simple epic perspective on Henry offered by the Chorus before each act is accompanied by a relentless exploration of the complex price the man pays for the role which makes us feel his greatness less as an heroic unity of man and function than as an ability to carry a burden of almost tragic dimensions. The play ends in courtship and marriage, but even its engaging comic resolution depends in part on the difficulties which a private declaration of love creates for a king embarking on a dynastic union: 'Give me your answer; i' faith, do: and so clap hands and a bargain.' (V.2.130-31).<sup>35</sup> And of course, the Epilogue, with its bleak reminder of impending civil war, undercuts the promise of future harmony. The play's simultaneous affirmation and interrogation of ideal unity serves to expose the inadequacy of the two central tenets of neo-chivalric honour. The national chivalry promised by a monarch whose private self must perforce remain hidden behind the mask of kingship is a community of honour in which we can never wholly believe, while the stubborn tensions of the historical past are shown to generate a self-deprecating royal piety that denies the

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35. See Barton, 'The King Disguised: Shakespeare's Henry V and the Comical History', pp.106-107, and Goldman, pp.72-73.

collaboration of nature and grace.

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Ulysses's 'degree' speech in the Greek council scene of Troilus and Cressida shares with the 'honeybees' speech of Henry V the idea that social harmony derives from conformity with a universal order encoded in nature. The hive image reappears, identifying as 'natural' the single authority which unifies society's disparate functions:

When that the general is not like the hive  
To whom the foragers shall all repair,  
What honey is expected? I.3.81-83.<sup>36</sup>

Yet the 'degree' speech extends this syncretic vision beyond the terms of the 'honeybees' speech by justifying sovereign power specifically on the grounds of the universal principle of hierarchy:

The heavens themselves, the planets, and this  
centre  
Observe degree, priority, and place,  
Insisture, course, proportion, season, form,  
Office, and custom, in all line of order.  
And therefore is the glorious planet Sol  
In noble eminence enthron'd and spher'd  
Amidst the other. . . . I.3.85-91.

Moreover, although Henry V calls attention to the problems that undermine the neo-chivalric interpretation of English history, Troilus and Cressida exposes Ulysses's stronger version of chivalric unity to the charge of unreality and failure. He presents it as an ideal that has collapsed in the

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36.All quotations are from The Arden Shakespeare: Troilus and Cressida, ed. Kenneth Palmer (London and New York: Methuen and Co. Ltd., 1982).

Greek camp. It has been subverted by the 'external' honour - the public esteem and 'honours' - that, in crowning Achilles with 'an imperial voice' (I.3.187), has challenged the authority that is the keystone of degree, and turned singleness of purpose into its antithesis: the inactivity born of 'so many hollow factions' (I.3.80). By claiming that public honour disrupts rather than consolidates universal order, the Greek council scene appears to question not simply the survival of chivalric unification in the world of the play, but the very terms which define it.

To discuss the Greek council at the level of ideas is not, of course, to imply that it is undramatic. In drama, ideas are not merely defined, but used, and are continually qualified or undercut by the interactive psychological motives of the speakers. Thus Agamemnon's and Nestor's defence of constancy can be seen, in the dramatic context, as rationalisations of inactivity; and Ulysses's justification of authority as a manipulative device for rousing the Greeks from their torpor. If, in what follows, I attend to the intellectual content of what is said, I do so on the assumption that the ideas themselves are self-defeating, and that the dramatic irony is reinforced by an intellectual irony.

The 'degree' speech identifies moral superiority as the theoretical justification of hierarchy. Degree is a social order that establishes an equivalence between moral and social

eminence:

Degree being vizarded,  
Th'unworthiest shows as fairly in the mask.  
I.3.83-84.

Hierarchy objectifies moral worth; the better the man, the higher his position on the social ladder. The 'degree' speech is full of the language of inherent superiority: the planet Sol is 'enthron'd' due to its 'noble eminence' (I.3.90); degree permits 'age, crowns, sceptres, laurels' to 'stand in authentic place' (I.3.107-108). If the speech stresses the paramount position of the king as the pinnacle of virtue, degree emerges equally as the organising principle of society. It forms the basis of a social order reflective of moral order, in which each man knows his place and treats his superiors with due respect. Degree, therefore, is put forward as the antithesis of individualism. Ulysses's vision of the disorder that follows the collapse of degree evokes a world in which power has no other basis than the individual will driven by appetite:

Then everything includes itself in power,  
Power into will, will into appetite,  
And appetite, an universal wolf,  
So doubly seconded with will and power,  
Must make perforce an universal prey,  
And last eat up himself. I.3.119-24.

In overturning the social hierarchy, public honour produces a society dominated by individualism. Public honour as it functions in the Greek camp is presented as a form of idolatry:

They were us'd to bend,  
To send their smiles before them to Achilles,  
To come as humbly as they use to creep

To holy altars. III.3.71-74.

The champion's deeds inspire hero-worship, which in turn generates pride: the conviction of supremacy that leads Achilles to slight his superiors and separate himself from his fellows:

The great Achilles, whom opinion crowns  
The sinew and the forehand of our host,  
Having his ear full of his airy fame,  
Grows dainty of his worth, and in his tent  
Lies mocking our designs. . . . I.3.142-46.

As others are infected by his example, social order gives way to emulation, hierarchy to mutual rivalry and self-assertion:

The general's disdain'd  
By him one step below, he by the next,  
The next by him beneath: so every step,  
Exempl'd by the first pace that is sick  
Of his superior, grows to an envious fever  
Of pale and bloodless emulation. I.3.129-34.

The language portrays this inversion of the hierarchical ladder as a form of sickness; the infringement of natural order in the competition for power reflects not healthy vigour, but an enervating disease that saps morale and results in prostration.

The equation of moral worth and social prominence is the traditional basis not only of monarchy, but also of the aristocratic principle, which defines the nobility's status in terms of the moral superiority which ordains them to defend society and merit its rewards. These two levels, of social obligation and social reward, constitute the two meanings of 'honour': the nobleman's performance of virtuous deeds and the respect that society bestows on those deeds.

The Greek council scene accordingly elaborates a theory of honour, or aristocratic virtue, alongside its presentation of hierarchical order. In Agamemnon's and Nestor's opening speeches, honour is conceived of as constancy, as the will to remain loyal to one's aims in the face of adversity:

Why then, you princes,  
Do you with cheeks abash'd behold our works,  
And call them shames which are indeed naught else  
But the protractive trials of great Jove  
To find persistive constancy in men,  
The fineness of which metal is not found  
In fortune's love? I.3.17-23.

The role of fortune in this idea of virtue stresses that it is in the encounter with adversity that inherent worth is revealed:

For then the bold and coward,  
The wise and fool, the artist and unread,  
The hard and soft, seem all affin'd and kin;  
But in the wind and tempest of her frown,  
Distinction, with a broad and powerful fan  
Puffing at all, winnows the light away,  
And what hath mass or matter by itself  
Lies rich in virtue and unmingled. I.3.23-30.

Misfortune distinguishes between men; it separates the constant from the inconstant, the exceptional from the ordinary. The great emerge as such through trial, revealing an inner stability that is not prey to natural impulses of fear and self-preservation:

but when the splitting wind  
Makes flexible the knees of knotted oaks,  
And flies flee under shade, why then the thing of  
courage,  
As rous'd with rage, with rage doth sympathize,  
And, with an accent tun'd in self-same key,  
Retires to chiding fortune. I.3.49-54.

Nestor evokes a contest with adversity which sees 'the thing



of courage' oppose his will to the 'storms of fortune' (I.3.47). The strength of will that sets the hero apart from his moral subordinates derives not from self-conquest, but from self-assertion.

Agamemnon's and Nestor's speeches thus portray honour in terms of the moral superiority that lies at the heart of the 'degree' speech. Honour is depicted as an instance of individual excellence that is rooted in a self-assertive impulse and claims a 'distinction' that is necessarily relative - not just superiority, but superiority over others. Agamemnon and Nestor are appealing to the Greek princes for collective constancy. But their speeches simultaneously expose the competitive individualism inherent in honour which undermines the communal effort to virtue by encouraging the individual pursuit of distinction. The Greek warriors become a collection of individuals competing for the prize of virtue where the success of one presupposes the failure of many. By illuminating the tensions at work in an honour culture, the speeches identify the Greek camp as prone to pride and emulation.

Moreover, the moral implications of these speeches extend beyond honour to degree itself, for the idea of virtue as the inherent moral superiority that forms the basis of hierarchy promotes the individualism that the 'degree' speech has denounced as destructive of hierarchical order. This confusion is compounded when one considers the relation

between the individual honour recommended by Agamemnon and Nestor and the public honour that rewards it. Again, it is clear that this relationship is fundamental to chivalric social order, for public honour grants moral superiority a commensurate social dimension, thereby implementing the essential premise of degree. However, it is also clear that an ethic of the superior individual fosters 'idolatry', subverting the authority fundamental to degree.

Thus, honour in the Greek camp seems at once an expression of traditional chivalry and the manifestation of its opposite. The heroic ethic clearly grows out of degree, for the honour of the nobleman consists in the individual excellence which is acknowledged by public honour, the social equivalence of his superiority. Yet it is equally clear that the concept of honour as moral pre-eminence foments competitive self-assertion and precludes stratification and obedience, for where the exaltation of one involves the diminishment of another, each man is necessarily 'sick' of his superior.<sup>37</sup> The worship of the hero who has proven his supremacy elevates him above authority's imperial voice, swelling his self-esteem and aggravating emulation, the envy of the rivals belittled by his greatness.

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37. For an interesting analysis of emulation in the Greek camp as an instance of 'mimetic desire', see René Girard, 'The Politics of Desire in Troilus and Cressida', in Shakespeare and the Question of Theory, eds. Patricia Parker and Geoffrey Hartman (New York and London: Methuen, 1985), pp.201-209.

If the heroic ethic is both the reflection and the antithesis of degree, then orthodox chivalry emerges from the Greek council scene as a form of social and moral order that undoes itself. Thus, the situation in the Greek camp is not, as first appears, that honour has generated a gap between the ideal and the real. It is rather that the ideal produces the real; degree is neglected in the Greek camp, but it is degree which fosters the heroic ethic that ensures its collapse. The Greek council scene therefore dramatises a situation which prohibits moral and social order. It presents both degree and its contrary and, by establishing the subtle interplay between the two, reveals social stability and individual virtue to be logical impossibilities. The play's portrayal of the Greeks focusses on the decline of a society whose moral and social construct leads inexorably to moral and social collapse.

At this point, it is necessary to devote a few words to Agamemnon. The degree speech makes it abundantly clear that hierarchy only functions through the strong leadership that enforces obedience. In the case of the Greeks, such leadership is conspicuously absent, and the play employs Agamemnon's mode of speech to stress his inadequacy. His speech on aristocratic virtue is full of such features of the 'high style' as doublings ('tortive and errant', 'bias and thwart') and obscure Latinate diction ('conflux', 'tortive', 'errant') which, coupled with sententiae and lengthy, tortuous similitudes -

As knots, by the conflux of meeting sap,  
Infects the sound pine and diverts his grain

Tortive and errant from his course of growth.

I.3.7-9. -

contrive to make his formal style sound pompous rather than dignified.<sup>38</sup> His language suggests a leader whose claims to authority are as pretentious as his rhetoric, a general who is not at one with his public role. The later account of Patroclus's portrayal of Agamemnon as a ham actor (I.3.151-61) only reinforces this. The brisk, efficient verse of the 'degree' speech that immediately follows Agamemnon's exhortation serves, as we shall suggest, to identify Ulysses as the real leader of the Greek forces.

Analysis of the ideological content of the Greek council has shown that the relationship between hierarchy and honour assumes a collusion of degree and individualism. This relationship itself exhibits the discrepancy between profession and practice in the Greek camp: Agamemnon and Nestor condemn emulation and give their assent to Ulysses's diagnosis of Greek demoralisation, while their own speeches on honour clearly encourage unbridled self-assertion. This gulf between what the Greek leaders think they are saying and what they are actually saying betrays a confusion born of a moral language that operates on two levels, one explicit and

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38. For this account of the stylistic quality of Agamemnon's speech on virtue, I am indebted to Derek Traversi, An Approach to Shakespeare (London, Sydney and Toronto: Hollis and Carter, 1969), II.38. For the linguistic features of the 'high style', see S.S. Hussey, The Literary Language of Shakespeare (London and New York: Longman, 1982), pp.55-56, 162-63. See also T.P. McAlindon, 'Language, Style and Meaning in Troilus and Cressida', PMLA, 84 (1969), pp.35-36.

the other implicit. This duality of degree is manifested most clearly in Ulysses's account of Greek disorder. The 'degree' speech and the description of Achilles's pride simultaneously condemn individualism and provoke competitive fury by reminding the Greek generals of their champion's contempt for their authority. This instance is of particular interest, for Ulysses's detailed representations of Patroclus's 'pageants' of the Greek leaders show the language of degree sliding naturally into the language of emulous rivalry, as Ulysses tells the generals, 'Look how that man despises us'. That Ulysses can use the language of moral order to foment emulation indicates that the former involves the latter.

At this point, it must be stressed that Ulysses, unlike Agamemnon and Nestor, is fully conscious of the double significance of his speech. As his plot will subsequently make clear, he deliberately exploits the relationship between degree and competitive rivalry. Thus, the play reveals the situation in the Greek camp as one ripe for policy, for if the moral language contains its opposite, then the politician can use the language of moral 'truth' to further policy.<sup>39</sup> Ulysses's scheme aims to reactivate Achilles in order to defeat Troy once and for all; he will try to replace the pride that generates inactivity with the restless urgency of

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39. It is a commonplace of Troilus and Cressida criticism that the means Ulysses employs to spur Achilles to action represent a contravention of the ethical terms of the 'degree' speech. See, for example, L.C. Knights, Some Shakespearean Themes (London: Chatto and Windus, 1959), p.69.

emulation, but in such a way as to secure the backing of moral authority. The 'degree' speech, then, is ultimately a tool of policy; the politician, for whom the ends justify the means, for whom pride is an evil not because it subverts order, but because it is inactive, alone stands outside of the social disharmony of the Greek camp, separated from it by the lucidity of sophisticated manipulation.

The play gives the Trojans, like the Greeks, a scene which establishes their dominant cultural values. Moreover, the Trojan council scene (II.2) exhibits a similar subversion of moral 'truth' in favour of an individualistic honour. However, unlike the Greek council, the Trojan debate does not expose a covert alliance between the moral concept and its opposite. The debate form itself stresses not the co-operation, but the antagonism of the two points of view expressed. Consequently, the position held by Hector in the discussion has a special status in the play. His moral 'truth' stands apart as the play's sole genuine affirmation of virtue. Yet here, too, though for reasons different to those demonstrated in the Greek council, virtue is shown ultimately to be thwarted.

The question debated in the Trojan council is whether or not it is right to keep Helen. Hector answers in the negative, on two grounds: that Helen is not worth what it costs to defend her, and that her abduction represents a violation of natural law. Throughout the scene, Hector's

position is depicted as rational and objective. He is shown to believe that there is a general standard of right and wrong, intelligible to rational enquiry and enshrined in law, and that value is more than the projection of individual will, residing also in things as they exist independently of a man's private desire.

Troilus, on the other hand, replies affirmatively to the question, on the grounds that it is dishonourable to let Helen go. When, in response to Hector's assertion that Helen 'is not worth what she doth cost the keeping' (II.2.52), Troilus asks, 'What's aught but as 'tis valued?' (II.2.53), the debate emerges clearly as a confrontation between Hector's rational objectivism and Troilus's subjective honour. In the speech that follows, Troilus attempts to deal with the problem of value. He begins by acknowledging the difficulty of making an objective assessment of another's worth: if the senses are skilled navigators, yet the shores between will and judgement remain 'dangerous' (II.2.64-66). Honour, however, demands that the subject remain constant to the object of his choice even if the will should later 'distaste what it elected' (II.2.67). But later in the same speech, Troilus identifies honour not with fidelity to the object of choice regardless of its value, but with fidelity to one's original appraisal of value: the Trojans decided to 'do some vengeance on the Greeks' (II.2.74), and declared their prize to be "'Inestimable!'" (II.2.89); they cannot now change their minds without proving more inconstant than fortune:

why do you now  
The issue of your proper wisdoms rate,  
And do a deed that never Fortune did -  
Beggar the estimation which you priz'd  
Richer than sea and land? II.2.89-93.

Troilus's honour, then, turns out to involve an idea of subjective constancy to one's original perception of merit. It makes the value the subject places on the object the only measure of its worth; there is no recognition of value independent of the valuer, and no standard of right and wrong independent of the agent. The debate makes clear that for Troilus this formulation of honour constitutes the foundation of moral order. As in the Greek council, constancy is conceived of as the mechanism for virtue within the self. It becomes the means whereby the individual creates stability against the random fluctuations of fortune. As such, it offers a defence against relativism, for to remain loyal to one's estimation of value is to maintain its truth, its status as 'knowledge'. Constancy's role as the anchor of virtue is guaranteed by courage, for fear makes a man the plaything of his impulses. Thus, Troilus dismisses reason, which considers the ethical context of action, as the rationalisation of cowardice and self-interest:

You know an enemy intends you harm,  
You know a sword employ'd is perilous,  
And reason flies the object of all harm.  
. . . . Nay, if we talk of reason,  
Let's shut our gates and sleep: manhood and honour  
Should have hare hearts, would they but fat their  
thoughts  
With this cramm'd reason. . . . II.2.39-41;46-49.

As the keystone of virtue, honour assumes the status of an



absolute; it is 'infinite' and 'past-proportion' (II.2.29).

However, if Troilus's honour is portrayed as aspiring to moral legitimacy, Hector's arguments effectively demolish subjective constancy's claims to virtue. Honour is identified not as a moral concept, but as 'mad idolatry' (II.2.57). Hector insists that 'value dwells not in particular will' (II.2.54), that it must also be the property of what one values. To make value merely subjective means imputing merit to what one desires because one desires it:

And the will dotes that is attributive  
To what infectiously itself affects,  
Without some image of th'affected merit.

II.2.59-61.

Underneath Troilus's subjectivism lurks appetite, so that constancy to one's original choice is nothing more than constancy to one's own appetite.

How telling Hector's diagnosis is should be plain to the audience, which recognises in Troilus's ardent defence of Helen the voice of the man sexually obsessed with Cressida, and who has every reason to wish to see a romantic, as opposed to a realist, ethic prevail. However, as in my discussion of the Greek council, the contradiction of the ideas expressed by Troilus can also be seen at work in the ideas themselves. Ignoring the real cause of the abduction of Helen, Paris's infatuation with and seduction of the beautiful Spartan queen, Troilus foregrounds the decision to avenge Hercules's abduction of Hesione that prompted the Trojan expedition to

Greece. Yet by highlighting honour as the motive that subsequently led the Trojans to countenance the rape of Helen as a vindication of the collective prestige damaged by the rape of Hesione, Troilus merely exposes the affinity between honour and sensuality, as Hector makes plain:

for pleasure and revenge  
Have ears more deaf than adders to the voice  
Of any true decision. II.2.172-74.

Hector identifies both motives as blind passions, colluding through 'affection' (II.2.178) and the 'partial indulgence' of 'benumbed wills' (II.2.179-80) in an abduction that violates the natural law determining the husband's claim upon his wife. If the 'moral laws / Of nature and of nations' (II.2.185-86) demand Helen's return, then the Trojan honour that insists on keeping her does not extenuate but merely compounds the error.

Whether collective or individual, honour is more than constancy to appetite. It is appetite itself, a passion for one's moral and social standing that acts in contravention of moral law. This places Troilus's rejection of reason in a very different light: one repudiates reason as cowardice in order to invalidate any argument that inhibits the gratification of desire. Fidelity to Helen becomes the means whereby one indulges one's appetite for greatness:

She is a theme of honour and renown,  
A spur to valiant and magnanimous deeds,  
Whose present courage may beat down our foes,  
And fame in time to come canonize us. . . .  
II.2.200-203.

The self-contradictory nature of the honour Troilus

advocates is clear. He presents it as the power for virtue within the individual will. But the Trojan debate shows this energy for good to be involved in a self-assertive passion that flouts such morally authoritative faculties as reason and law. In Hector's speeches, law, natural and positive, emerges as the authentic basis of moral order, in that it offers an ethical framework for action and places a curb on individual excesses, the 'raging appetites that are / Most disobedient and refractory.' (II.2.182-83). Without such a stabilising framework, honour is self-defeating; the will to virtue collapses into egoism.

The Trojan debate dramatises a conflict of styles as well as a conflict of ideas. Both brothers adopt a clear and emphatic mode of expression appropriate to the debate form. But in Troilus's case, the presentation of argument coexists with a particular kind of rhetoric. His opening speech on honour takes the form of an extended question; it develops, through a series of consecutive clauses that intensify rather than elucidate, to a climactic repudiation of Hector's position:

Will you with counters sum  
The past-proportion of his infinite,  
And buckle in a waist most fathomless  
With spans and inches so diminutive  
As fears and reasons? Fie for godly shame!  
II.2.28-32.

This is an emotive rhetoric that seeks to discredit not by giving reasons, but through assertion and emphasis. The style is that of the subjectivist who deals in distaste and

contempt. In Troilus's lengthy speech on knowledge and value, the same stylistic subjectivism is apparent. The ordered enumeration of ethical points is repeatedly interrupted by lyrical passages that exhibit the lapse of argument into romantic ardour:

Is she worth keeping? - Why, she is a pearl  
Whose price hath launch'd above a thousand ships,  
And turn'd crown'd kings to merchants.

II.2.82-84.

It is not that Troilus lacks ideas, but they remain unexamined; he values them more for their emotive charge than their rational implications. Because they are self-generated rather than tested in the real world, he continually reverts to unreflective modes of expression.

Hector's style, by contrast, is entirely free of linguistic emotionalism. He opposes Troilus's position not with a reactive rhetorical extravagance, but with logically presented argument. His speech on value develops systematically and economically from one point to the next. He is principally concerned with elucidating a complex argument, drawing accurate distinctions and finding apt analogies. In no more than eight lines of compressed verse, he presents a radical, indeed memorable, critique of subjectivism. He has the intellectual control that comes from resistance to ready-made notions. His ethical vocabulary ('discourse of reason', 'benumbed wills', 'raging appetites') lends dignity to his case, but his consistent verbal directness - 'Brother, / She is not worth what she doth cost the keeping.', 'But value

dwells not in particular will', 'Nature craves / All dues be render'd to their owners' - prevents the tone from becoming moralistic, pompous or sententious.

Hector's language serves as a moral and intellectual norm in the play, contrasting not only with Troilus's subjectivism, but also with Agamemnon's tortuous style, and even with the tenets of the 'degree' speech. Throughout the Trojan debate, Hector has insisted that true virtue must transcend individual inclination. The conception of morality he represents is thus anti-individualistic, and it shares with the 'degree' speech the notion that the chaos of egoism is escaped through responsiveness to a natural order beyond the single self. Yet if Hector's principle of morality is in this sense hierarchical, it does not extend to the idea of a society stratified according to moral worth, which the Greek council showed to stimulate competitive individualism. The absence of this aspect of degree from Hector's discourse stresses hierarchy's dubious moral standing in the play, while reinforcing his position as the play's sole exponent of truth.

The Trojan debate relates Troilus's honour to a form of chivalric idealism which has courtly and Neoplatonic roots. We have seen that Troilus describes Helen as being of incomparable worth. The intoxication with honour is channelled into idealisation, which in turn is focussed on the physical beauty that itself gives form to Trojan honour:

he touch'd the ports desir'd,  
And for an old aunt whom the Greeks held captive,

He brought a Grecian queen, whose youth and  
freshness  
Wrinkles Apollo's, and makes stale the morning.  
II.2.77-80.

The beauty that for Troilus represents Trojan supremacy over the Greeks (the ravishing young queen for 'an old aunt') is elevated to the status of a virtue. In these lines, Helen's beauty transcends the merely physical; her perfection suggests that she transmutes form into essence. The Trojan's prize thus comes to embody the Beautiful, and is accordingly made an object of worship. Honour becomes a religious relationship between subject and object, as Troilus's (that is, Shakespeare's) identification of Helen with the parable of the kingdom of heaven as a pearl of great price (II.2.82) implies.

Thus, out of the subject's passion, an 'idea' of the object is engendered commensurate with the passion that creates it: like the honour she represents, Helen's worth is 'infinite'. The Neoplatonic strain in Troilus's idealism in turn transfigures honour into the principle of moral ascendancy. As the worship of moral beauty, it becomes the channel of transcendence:

She is a theme of honour and renown,  
A spur to valiant and magnanimous deeds,  
Whose present courage may beat down our foes,  
And fame in time to come canonize us. . . .  
II.2.200-203.

Troilus conceives of honour as the foundation of a secular religion, its virtuous deeds being inspired by the veneration

of beauty and canonized by everlasting fame.<sup>40</sup>

Yet the play undermines Troilus's exalted claims by identifying, through his language, the appetitive origins of his aristocratic faith. His discussion of the related questions of knowledge and honour is crucially formulated in terms of taste:

- how may I avoid,  
Although my will distaste what it elected,  
The wife I choose? II.2.66-68.

Troilus's example construes choice as preference, or 'taste' (with its antonym 'distaste'). Moreover, his response to Cassandra's prophecies of disaster shows, in the event, that his honour prohibits any subsequent reconsideration or change of mind:

her brain-sick raptures  
Cannot distaste the goodness of a quarrel  
Which hath our several honours all engag'd  
To make it gracious. II.2.123-26.

The repeated verb 'distaste' reinforces the involvement of the Trojan cause in appetite. It generates an ideal the value of which is kept in place by constancy ('honour'), whatever the consequences - even if they extend to the catastrophe Cassandra foresees.

The real source of Troilus's idealism has already been established, of course, by the opening scene of the play.

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40. It is worth noting that Shakespeare's portrayal of chivalric idealism anticipates Huizinga's judgement of chivalry as an aesthetic ideal masquerading as an ethical ideal. See J. Huizinga, The Waning of the Middle Ages, trans. F. Hopman (London: Edward Arnold and Co., 1924), p.58.

Troilus thinks of his love for Cressida as the worship of ideal beauty. Like Helen, she is idolised as a pearl of great price (I.1.100),<sup>41</sup> while Troilus is a pilgrim, as it were, prostrated before his shrine:

O - that her hand,  
In whose comparison all whites are ink,  
Writing their own reproach, to whose soft seizure  
The cygnet's down is harsh, and spirit of sense  
Hard as the palm of ploughman. I.1.55-59.

But even this refinement of beauty betrays signs of physicality in such words as 'soft seizure'. In fact, throughout the scene Troilus speaks of love in terms of physical sensation so intense as to be incapacitating: he is unable to fight because he feels 'such cruel battle here within' (I.1.3); his heart is an 'open ulcer', or festering sore (I.1.53); love is a wound made by beauty (I.1.61-63). This violent response to beauty may be the underlying cause of Troilus's curious passivity as a lover; overwhelmed by desire, he is obliged to rely on another - Pandarus - to negotiate the practical side of the affair.

Troilus's dependence on Pandarus serves to bring out the self-deception and sensuality in his idealisation of Cressida. Pandarus's view of the affair is practical and realistic. His colloquial prose, which presents love in the unromantic terms of preparing and eating food, is sensible and quotidian. However, it is also frankly sensual, even prurient: 'nay, you

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41. See A.P. Rossiter, Angel with Horns. Fifteen Lectures on Shakespeare, ed. Graham Storey (New York: Longman Group Ltd., 1961), pp.142-43.



must stay the cooling too, or you may chance burn your lips.' (I.1.24-26).<sup>42</sup> By alluding to love's physical consummation, Pandarus is whetting Troilus's appetite even as he appeals to him for patience, and arguably (like the true procurer) getting a vicarious thrill from the passion he enflames. In the same way, he dwells on Cressida's charms, exciting Troilus to a pitch of erotic desire:

I tell thee I am mad  
In Cressid's love: thou answer'st, 'She is fair';  
Pour'st in the open ulcer of my heart  
Her eyes, her hair, her cheek, her gait, her  
voice. . . .  
But saying thus, instead of oil and balm,  
Thou lay'st in every gash that love hath given me  
The knife that made it. I.1.51-54; 61-63.

Troilus's language, with its disturbing metaphors of physical rending and infection, conveys an intense sexual craving. At the same time that he reproaches Pandarus, he is unconsciously colluding in his game. Troilus thinks he is in the realm of value; but his idealising imagination is deeply rooted in the world of appetite.

The Trojan council, largely through Troilus, but with the support of Paris, exhibits an idea of honour that cannot achieve the moral legitimacy it seeks because it is fed by self-regarding desire. However, Troilus emerges as the winner of the argument, not because he has made the better case, but because his opponent collapses. Quite abruptly, Hector concludes his defence of a virtue that is more than

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42. See R.A. Foakes, 'Troilus and Cressida Reconsidered', UTQ, XXXII (1963), p.143.

a projection of 'particular will' with a volte-face:

My spritely brethren, I propend to you  
In resolution to keep Helen still  
For 'tis a cause that hath no mean dependence  
Upon our joint and several dignities.  
I.2.191-94.

This reversal is generally considered to be either dramatically inexplicable or a cynical betrayal of ethical truth.<sup>43</sup> It is unquestionably a major dramatic crux. Hector capitulates to what may seem by the close of the Trojan debate to be the prevailing ideology of Troy, enacted in the collective endorsement of the abduction, given expression in Troilus's and Paris's arguments, and exhibited in the play's opening scenes. The contest is not between two alternatives of equal currency, but between a formulation of virtue and the ruling Trojan ethos which it contradicts. Nevertheless, Hector is not alone in questioning the validity of this dominant ideology. In the course of the discussion, Troilus and Paris are reproved by Helenus and Priam respectively, and Cassandra makes an appearance to warn of impending calamity. Yet Helenus is immediately silenced by Troilus's sharp rejoinder - 'You are for dreams and slumbers, brother priest. . . .' (II.2.37) - while Priam's rebuke fails to muzzle Paris. Without the benefit of hindsight, Cassandra's

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43.Hiram Haydn sees only cynicism in Hector's volte-face. See The Counter-Renaissance (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1950), p.609. By contrast, A.P. Rossiter finds his reversal incomprehensible. See Angel with Horns, p.143. Jean Gagen explores sixteenth-century theories of the duel, and concludes that Hector's surrender represents the man of honour's reluctant endorsement of an unjust course of action out of the necessity of avoiding the imputation of cowardice. See 'Hector's Honor', SQ, XIX (1968), p.137.

prophecies can easily be dismissed as the ravings of a madwoman. For the audience, these characters serve to underline the flaws in Trojan honour; but they are shown, both here and in the play as a whole, to be impotent.

However, the point is arguably not that Hector collapses because he receives no effective support from his society, but that the support he receives is rendered ineffectual by his collapse. In his sudden acknowledgement of the primacy of Trojan 'dignities', Hector displays a considerable degree of attachment to the ideology he has decisively refuted - an allegiance already implicit in his 'roisting challenge' to the Greeks (II.2.209), which antedates his part in the debate, and which he now reveals. He is not a cynic, but he is a Trojan. And although he cannot finally sacrifice honour for truth, the honour he embodies represents a kind of compromise between the two poles of the Trojan debate, insofar as it operates within chivalric conventions that attempt to bring warfare and self-assertion under social regulation. He thus remains committed, even in his post-lapsarian state, to the necessity of a ratified system of forms and rules to hold individual appetite in check. In stressing his persistent regard for principles of conduct beyond individual desire, the play distances the Trojan champion from Troilus and makes him the moral opposite of Achilles. Nevertheless, there is no denying the implications of Hector's failure to press home his arguments: it shows that in Troy virtue cannot compete with honour, and it seals his fate and that of his country.

Moreover, Hector's chivalric standards of conduct, for all their appeal, will prove disastrously out of touch with the climate of the Trojan War.

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In its central acts, the play's interrogation of the Greek and Trojan chivalric ideals develops into a radical rewriting of the received narrative of the Trojan War.<sup>44</sup> The depiction of the Greek camp focusses on Ulysses's plot, which works in two stages. In the first, he transfers military hero-worship from Achilles to Ajax. The scene portraying this process (II.3) takes place before Achilles's tent. The Greek commanders enter, and Achilles immediately withdraws, earning their weighty censure of his self-regard and contempt for the common cause. Yet their righteous indignation is too facile, for the scene goes on to demonstrate, albeit in burlesque form, that the social values which they embody generate the very pride they condemn. In the terms of my argument, the scene portrays honour as the expression and subversion of hierarchy.

Throughout the episode, the Greek leadership speak the

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44.If Lydgate is a critic of the Trojan War, his account of the conflict is nonetheless suffused with the spirit of chivalric romance, particularly in the descriptions of the Trojan heroes. See John Lydgate, Lydgate's Troy Book, Part One, ed. Henry Bergen, Early English Text Society, 1906 (e.s.97), II,4775-4941. See also E.M.W. Tillyard, Shakespeare's Problem Plays (London: Chatto and Windus, 1951), pp.41-46.

orthodox language of degree:

and worthier than himself  
Here tend the savage strangeness he puts on,  
Disguise the holy strength of their command,  
And underwrite in an observing kind  
His humorous predominance. . . . II.3.127-31.

Agamemnon presents Achilles's pride as an inversion of degree: the leader who, according to the terms of hierarchy, maintains the authority of command due to his pre-eminent virtue, is forced to defer to a man less worthy than himself. The Greek leaders condemn Achilles's pride by echoing Ulysses's speech on degree, in which he likens self-will to a form of chaos:

Imagin'd worth  
Holds in his blood such swol'n and hot discourse  
That 'twixt his mental and his active parts  
Kingdom'd Achilles in commotion rages  
And batters down himself. II.3.173-77.

The lines present pride as a passion that makes the individual prey on himself, recalling the appetite which Ulysses found to be the cause and the consequence of the collapse of order. Moreover, in the phrase 'kingdom'd Achilles', they sound again the civic concerns of the earlier speech. As in the state, so in the self, unbridled will means anarchy.

The Greek generals show all the symptoms of self-serving orthodoxy. Their speech abounds in windy generalisation:

and you shall not sin  
If you do say we think him over-proud  
And under-honest, in self-assumption greater  
Than in the note of judgement. . . .  
II.3.124-27..

and moral sententiae mixed with proverbial wisdom:

The elephant hath joints, but none for courtesy:  
His legs are legs for necessity, not for flexure.  
II.3.107-108.

Agamemnon, in particular, continues to show that he possesses a special talent for turning gravity into platitude:

He that is proud eats up himself: pride is his own glass, his own trumpet, his own chronicle; and whatever praises itself, but in the deed, devours the deed in the praise. II.3.156-59.

The affectedly archaic syntax of the initial pronouncement, the pedantic triple repetition ('his own glass, his own trumpet, his own chronicle') and the smug chiasmus of the final proverb create something akin to a parody of moral solemnity; they serve to turn 'truth' into pretentiousness.

These linguistic suggestions of the dubious moral status of degree are confirmed in what follows. The Greek leaders, in seeking to punish Achilles for his pride, cynically pretend to transfer public prestige to Ajax:

O Agamemnon, let it not be so!  
We'll consecrate the steps that Ajax makes  
When they go from Achilles. Shall the proud lord  
That bastes his arrogance with his own seam  
And never suffers matter of the world  
Enter his thoughts, save such as do revolve  
And ruminates himself - shall he be worshipp'd  
Of that we hold an idol more than he?  
II.3.183-90.

The Greeks' charade betrays the integral connection between hero-worship and degree. Its object is, in effect, to make Ajax Achilles's superior. By urging that Ajax should not be allowed to entreat Achilles, Ulysses claims to be safeguarding the interests of hierarchy:

No: this thrice worthy and right valiant lord  
Shall not so stale his palm, nobly acquir'd,  
Nor, by my will, assubjugate his merit -  
As amply titled as Achilles is -  
By going to Achilles. II.3.191-95.

The lines of Ulysses's speech abound in the language of superiority, the excessive formality of which conveys its parodic quality: 'stale his palm' denotes demeaning the emblem of the superiority evinced through deeds, while 'assubjugate his merit' signifies cheapening one's intrinsic value. Ajax, if he defers to another, will render himself inferior. To be great demands that one jealously guard the pre-eminence which the speech evokes through its religious idiom ('consecrate', 'idol') and sun imagery ('great Hyperion' II.3.198).

Honour as idolatry is firmly rooted in the very ethic of moral superiority which holds up hierarchical order. Ulysses's mock-insistence on precedence is the inverted image of Agamemnon's earlier criticism of Achilles's violation of natural hierarchy: 'and worthier than himself. . . .' Yet the comparison with Agamemnon is instructive, for the language of hero-worship clarifies that if idolatry is born of degree, it also undermines the established power structure, that the 'idol' challenges the 'holy strength' of command. Moreover, Agamemnon's insistence on his own supremacy suggests the rivalry generated by degree, just as Ulysses's parodic version of hero-worship stresses that excellence is relative. The emphasis on 'distinction', if it implies emulation, is also shown to encourage pride: the refusal to defer and so compromise one's greatness.

Ulysses's burlesque of public honour uncovers the logic of Greek demoralisation - a logic which shapes the scene as a

whole. The duping of Ajax gives comic form to the joint condemnation and generation of pride which we noticed in our discussion of the Greek council. The Greeks' asides, which mock the lack of self-knowledge which their feigned idolatry has aggravated, reflect back ironically on their disparagement of Achilles's 'imagin'd worth'. Ajax himself indulges in an extended rebuke of Achilles's pride, which in turn provides a kind of debunking of the Greek leaders' earlier self-contradictory moralising. Ajax's censure echoes the conventional moral vocabulary - 'A paltry, insolent fellow!' and 'Can he not be sociable?'(II.3.209,211) - while reducing it to the level of the crudest antagonism:

If I go to him, with my armed fist  
I'll pash him o'er the face. II.3.203-204.

This is a caricature of the competitive envy lurking beneath the surface of Greek 'specialty of rule' (I.3.78), for Ajax is shown to despise pride because he is proud himself:

Do you not think he thinks himself a better man  
than I am? II.3.146-47.

It is this emulous individual psychology that Ulysses's plot exploits.

This episode is farcical, but its humour is finally bitter in tone, for the comic interplay depicts a society which foments self-regarding competition only to deplore it, and in which hero-worship and contempt are two sides of the same coin. The scene deflates heroism by showing the Greeks engaged in a parody of their own heroic ethic which necessarily rebounds on them. The joke is finally on the



entire Greek camp. Yet the scene's anti-heroic strain encompasses a radical questioning of the chivalric social ideal, for it shows that if individual virtue in the Greek camp is consumed in self-will, it is the self-defeating logic of hierarchy which dictates that the situation could hardly be otherwise.

The play will make equally clear that the joke is also on Ulysses. The second stage of his plot concentrates on the relationship between individual honour and public honour. The collective scorning of Achilles forces the Greek champion to reconsider his own merit:

I do enjoy  
At ample point all that I did possess,  
Save these men's looks; who do, methinks, find out  
Something not worth in me such rich beholding  
As they have often given. III.3.88-92.

This is not yet inconfidence, but it shows that Achilles is no longer able to take his sense of his own value absolutely for granted. The prescient Ulysses senses this, and times his attack perfectly:

no man is the lord of anything,  
Though in and of him there be much consisting,  
Till he communicate his parts to others;  
Nor doth he of himself know them for aught,  
Till he behold them form'd in the applause  
Where th'are extended; who, like an arch,  
    reverb'rate  
The voice again. . . . III.3.115-21.

Through his account of the 'strange fellow' he is reading (III.3.95), Ulysses reminds Achilles that the merit of the self is not wholly in command of the individual, but is in large part dependent on reputation, that is, on the respect of

others. This is an argument for the social nature of virtue, but it is tailored for an egoist. Its appeal to the 'social' does not extend to anything as altruistic as regard for the common cause, but is restricted to the concern for the status of the self.

It is in this perspective that Ulysses introduces the name of the man who seems to have displaced Achilles in public esteem. True to his general objective (to get Achilles to fight), he discusses the Greek champion's predicament, now that he has been overtaken by the 'unknown' Ajax (III.3.125). He flatters Achilles by referring to his rival as 'the lubber Ajax' (III.3.139), a 'very horse, that has he knows not what' (III.3.126). His real purpose is not, however, to hold up to scorn the bad judgement of the generals who prefer the inferior man to the superior one, for that would merely confirm Achilles in the justice of his own self-esteem. His true intention is to show up the unreliability of reputation.

Accordingly, he emphasises the gap that can exist between the value of a thing and its place in public esteem:

Nature, what things there are  
Most abject in regard and dear in use!  
What things again most dear in the esteem  
And poor in worth! III.3.127-30.

He has no difficulty in getting Achilles to accept this flattering idea. And on that basis, he reveals the thrust

of his intervention:<sup>45</sup>

For emulation hath a thousand sons  
That one by one pursue; if you give way,  
Or hedge aside from the direct forthright,  
Like to an enter'd tide they all rush by  
And leave you hindmost;  
Or, like a gallant horse fall'n in first rank,  
Lie there for pavement for the abject rear,  
O'er-run and trampled on. III.3.156-63.

Reputation, without which true worth remains unrealised and impotent, is extremely unstable and transient. Time, made up of collective competitive strivings, turns into an irresistible forward motion which makes heroic complacency an impossibility. The hero is condemned to incessant struggle if he wishes to maintain an eminence under the perpetual threat of emulation. Ulysses stresses Achilles's superiority by contrasting the greatness of past deeds with the inferiority of the present; the 'gallant horse' is overtaken by 'the abject rear'. He evokes a heroic stature that is forgotten and despised, surpassed by its subordinates.

The play leads us to believe that the transference of hero-worship to Ajax is intended to provoke action by reminding Achilles that his greatness exists only insofar as it is authenticated by his peers. Ulysses, however, is more far-seeing than this limited objective suggests. He wants to avoid a process that would merely repeat what has gone before - idolisation followed by withdrawal. What he seeks is not a temporary renewal of activity, but an unremitting

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45. For Ulysses's distortion of the theory of social interdependence, see Frank Kermode, 'Opinion, Truth and Value', *EIC*, V (1955), pp.183-84.

scramble for precedence. He promotes a conception of honour which dictates that the hero can never afford to rest on his laurels for fear that another less worthy than himself will oust him from prominence.

In the final analysis, Ulysses is manipulating the central components of degree - individual superiority and its confirmation in exalted social position - in order to guarantee unceasing emulation. His goal is a kind of collective individualism; Ulysses wants to stimulate a competitive energy that, 'controlled' by the fear of one's rivals, cannot envisage the alternative of opting out. Yet the substance of Ulysses's arguments illuminates the impossibility of this joint aggravation and restriction of passion. In order to reawaken Achilles's emulous rivalry and banish the inactivity of pride, Ulysses is forced to intensify his conviction of superiority and devalue social response as a measure of individual worth. Thus, he has to flatter Achilles as the 'great and complete man' (III.3.181) who is incomparably superior to the blockhead whom society now worships, and he must depict a society which forgets virtuous deeds, which, dominated by time, values only what is new, even if worthless:

One touch of nature makes the whole world kin -  
That all with one consent praise new-born  
gauds. . . . III.3.175-76.

In attempting to promote the contention underlying degree, Ulysses necessarily exacerbates the fragmenting effects of the

heroic ethic. His promotion of collective individualism involves a contradiction in terms: what could be described as antisocial sociality. In the event, all his plotting produces is two pre-eminent warriors, each 'consumed with greatness'. The second stage of Ulysses's plot culminates in Thersites's 'pageant of Ajax' (III.3.271), which enacts pride as a self-absorption so complete that it destroys the human. The Ajax who cannot tell Thersites from Agamemnon has 'grown a very landfish, languageless, a monster.' (III.3.262-63). Analogously, Achilles is shown finally to be driven not by commitment to the common cause, but by private passion. He continues to keep out of the fray because of his alleged love for 'one of Priam's daughters', Polyxena (III.3.194) - a love for which he is prepared, like Troilus and Paris, to sacrifice everything else:

Fall, Greeks: fail, fame: honour, or go or stay;  
My major vow lies here, this I'll obey.  
V.1.42-43.,

and he returns to the fray from equally egoistic motives - private revenge for the death of his 'masculine whore', Patroclus (V.1.16). Ulysses's policy, far from counteracting social disintegration, contributes to and confirms it.

It is precisely to this chaotic state of affairs that Thersites, the play's chorus, draws our attention. It is significant that the play's choric character should represent a cynical perspective, for what Thersites perceives is what we can see for ourselves: the absence of virtue not only in the Greek camp, but in the Trojan conflict as a whole, driven as

it is by the overwhelming reality of appetite.

Thersites's cynicism functions in particular to debunk the ethic of the superior individual through his abuse of the Greek heroes, Achilles and Ajax. The main target of his contempt is the warriors' stupidity. He re-presents these heroes as dull-witted brutes who are 'here but to thrash Trojans' (II.1.48). This diminishment of martial virtue deflates hero-worship; Achilles is merely the 'idol of idiot-worshippers' (V.1.7). It is not only the followers who are self-deceived, but the heroes themselves. Thersites's abuse of Ajax as a fool who 'knows not himself' (II.1.68) culminates in the 'pageant of Ajax' to which we referred above, which satirises heroic pride as self-infatuation. Achilles too is 'a valiant ignorance' (III.3.310), and his decision to place love before every other consideration is attributed to 'too much blood and too little brain' (V.1.47). Generally, for Thersites, heroism is nothing more nor less than an egocentric passion. His comment on the outcome of Ulysses's policy confirms this heroic disorder as the dominant force in the Greek camp and associates it with a state of social degeneration:

They set me up in policy that mongrel cur Ajax,  
against that dog of as bad a kind Achilles; and  
now is the cur Ajax prouder than the cur Achilles,  
and will not arm today; whereupon the Grecians  
begin to proclaim barbarism, and policy grows into  
an ill opinion. V.4.12-17.

Nor is Thersites's cynicism limited to the Greek side of

the conflict. The Greeks are worthless not simply because they are driven by the appetite for self-aggrandisement, but because they are fighting for a worthless cause:

All the argument is a whore and a cuckold: a good quarrel to draw emulous factions, and bleed to death upon. II.3.74-76.

The war's basis in a love triangle associates heroic passion with sexual appetite: 'war and lechery confound all!' (II.3.77). Thus, 'blood' emerges as the motivating force behind the Trojan war, and Thersites's curses on the Greek camp, with their invocation of the diseases of lechery, define a state of general corruption:

After this, the vengeance on the whole camp - or rather, the Neapolitan bone-ache; for that methinks is the curse depending on those that war for a placket. II.3.18-21.

In the final scenes of the play, Thersites's commentary embraces both sides in the conflict, and his invective serves to reduce the narrative of Troy from its traditional late-medieval presentation as the embodiment of heroic ideals to the sordid story of the degradation engendered by kindred forms of appetite.

Yet for all his masterful diagnostic powers, Thersites remains part of the corruption he detects. He too is driven by a particularly nasty passion, as his eager stalking of Diomed to Calchas's tent makes plain:

I will rather leave to see Hector than not to dog him; they say he keeps a Trojan drab, and uses the traitor Calchas' tent. I'll after. Nothing but lechery: all incontinent varlets! V.1.94-98.

Once on the scent of depravity, nothing will distract

Thersites from sniffing it out. Like a true cynic, he takes pleasure in discovering dirt.

The identification of the Trojan war with sexual desire is of crucial importance in the play's treatment of love as a manifestation of Trojan chivalric idealism. We have seen that in the depiction of its central love affair, the play uses Pandarus to embody the chasm between the ideal and the real, demonstrating how far the idealistic impulse is rooted in sensuality. The play drives this point home in its second scene, which shows us Pandarus wooing Cressida on Troilus's behalf. The motive and technique remains the same as in the opening scene. Pandarus's praise of Troilus is calculated to titillate, and the procession of Trojan warriors across the stage becomes a kind of male beauty contest, as Pandarus enumerates the qualities that make Troilus more desirable than other men:

Is not birth, beauty, good shape, discourse,  
manhood, learning, gentleness, virtue, youth,  
liberality and such like, the spice and salt that  
season a man? I.2.257-260.

Yet Cressida is a realist and knows exactly what Pandarus is up to - 'By the same token, you are a bawd.' (I.2.286) - and indeed, what idealism really means:

Women are angels, wooing:  
Things won are done; joy's soul lies in the doing.  
That she belov'd knows naught that knows not this:  
Men prize the thing ungain'd more than it is.  
That she was never yet that ever knew  
Love got so sweet as when desire did sue.  
I.2.291-96.



Cressida's soliloquy locates the idealising impulse in sexual attraction that pales upon achievement. It also tells us that she returns Troilus's desire, but that, given the instability of desire generally, she cannot respond simply to him; instead, she resorts to a strategy of coyness which, by whetting the appetite, allows her to maintain the tactical advantage. The soliloquy tells us as much about Cressida as it does about Troilus; and its identification of love with the transitory urgings of appetite, and portrayal of a woman radically divided within herself, torn between desire and self-protection, anticipate the infidelity that will eventually shatter her lover's self-deceived 'idea' of her.

The play's central love scene brings together this trio of courtship. As Troilus awaits the consummation of his passion, he can scarcely endure his sensual rapture:

Th'imaginary relish is so sweet  
That it enchants my sense: what will it be  
When that the wat'ry palate tastes indeed  
Love's thrice-repured nectar? Death, I fear me,  
Sounding destruction, or some joy too fine,  
Too subtle-potent, tun'd too sharp in sweetness  
For the capacity of my ruder powers. III.2.17-23.

The passage exhibits, but to a greater degree, the remarkable fusion of refinement and appetite, of purity and sensation, that we have already encountered in Troilus. Once again, his language subtly clarifies the erotic springs of idealism. There is no transcendence in the passage, just the intoxication of sensual experience, as the verbs 'relish' and 'taste' indicate.

It is to this lover, beside himself with longing, that Pandarus, oozing with sexual innuendo ('Words pay no debts, give her deeds. . . .' III.2.55), brings the divided Cressida:

I have a kind of self resides with you,  
But an unkind self, that itself will leave  
To be another's fool. III.2.146-48.

In this confession, Cressida watches herself betray herself; the self that desires betrays the self that would 'hold off' (I.2.291): desire defeats circumspection. Cressida's intense self-consciousness and her low opinion of the human sexual instinct contrast with Troilus's idealism and his commitment to constancy in love. Throughout the scene, Troilus presents himself as the soul of fidelity and portrays fidelity as the very principle of moral order:

O that I thought it could be in a woman -  
As, if it can, I will presume in you -  
To feed for aye her lamp and flames of love;  
To keep her constancy in plight and youth,  
Outliving beauty's outward, with a mind  
That doth renew swifter than blood decays!  
Or that persuasion could but thus convince me  
That my integrity and truth to you  
Might be affronted with the match and weight  
Of such a winnow'd purity in love -  
How were I then uplifted! III.2.156-66.

For Troilus, constancy preserves and expresses singleness of being. It is 'integrity', 'truth', a type of unity that overcomes the flux of time. The image of 'winnow'd purity' associates constancy with a perfected state of being, unsullied by base matter. It is this purity that Troilus wants to find in Cressida. Yet, far from expressing confidence, the passage resounds with uncertainty, with the fear of how difficult it is to sustain a reciprocity of subjective faith.

The troth-plight ritual which ironically closes the scene suggests that the three characters are performing a single doomed dance:<sup>46</sup> the lover constant to the beautiful woman to whom desire imparts an ideal value; the insecure woman for whom love is an unstable passion subject to time; and the bawd, or 'broker-between' (III.2.202), who battens on both.<sup>47</sup> With the arrival of the news that Cressida is to be exchanged for Antenor, the trio of courtship is replaced by the sexual triangle of Troilus, Cressida and Diomed. Through this love triangle, the play confirms the lovers' prophecies; dramatic time registers Troilus's constancy and Cressida's falseness and makes the lovers' defining qualities the basis of a re-enactment of the cause of the Trojan war.

In Cressida's betrayal of Troilus, the play concludes its depiction of her in terms of the divided self, associating her doubleness with the instability of appetite:

Troilus, farewell! One eye yet looks on thee,  
But with my heart the other eye doth see.  
Ah, poor our sex! this fault in us I find:  
The error of our eye directs our mind.  
What error leads must err: O, then conclude,  
Minds sway'd by eyes are full of turpitude.  
V.2.106-11.

The stylized verse, with its rhyming couplets, provides a

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46. David Kaula, in 'Will and Reason in Troilus and Cressida', SQ, 12 (1961), p.276, offers an illuminating reading of this episode of the drama.

47. Palmer, in The Arden Shakespeare: Troilus and Cressida, cites King John, II.1.582: 'This bawd, this broker, this all-changing word'.

little moral lesson on the error of sensuality, of the mind operating to gratify desire. For all its reductive effect, it anticipates the rationalising arithmetic of Troilus's 'rule in unity' speech. Both are bound together by the logic of appetite; but it shows itself in each in opposite ways. The sexual desire that for Troilus constitutes an irrevocable commitment remains for the divided Cressida essentially variable; the heroine quite literally has a roving eye. In the end, then, Cressida can be faithful neither to herself nor to another; she could not 'hold off' from Troilus any more than she now can from Diomed, and the changeable passion that in her soliloquy characterises male desire becomes in her final speech the typically feminine vice. The duality that divides her first between love and self-defence and then between Troilus and Diomed is that of the realist who sees plainly what is the 'right' course of action, but for whom pleasure offers a temptation that proves, especially in the remorseless context of the Trojan War, ultimately irresistible.

For Troilus, the discovery of Cressida's infidelity precipitates a crisis of faith, which his 'rule in unity' speech portrays as a collision of two irreconcilable valuations of her, that which is objectively offered by the evidence of his senses, and that which is subjectively enshrined in his chivalric religion of beauty. Shakespeare's dramatic organisation of this climactic moment of truth emphasises Troilus's subjectivism by contrasting it with two

very different perspectives: Ulysses's pragmatism, which asserts simply that facts are facts, and Thersites's cynicism, which delights in the prospect of the human degradation before him: 'How the devil Luxury, with his fat rump and potato finger, tickles these together! Fry, lechery, fry.' V.2.55-57). The idealist, however, can only hold on to his subjective faith by dividing its object into two:<sup>48</sup>

This she? - No, this is Diomed's Cressida.  
If beauty have a soul, this is not she;  
If souls guide vows, if vows be sanctimonies,  
If sanctimony be the gods' delight,  
If there be rule in unity itself,  
This is not she. V.2.136-41.

The parallel clauses mark a progression through the tenets of faith in order to reaffirm the 'truths' that have been negated: if beauty has a 'soul', if it does indeed reflect inner being; if this soul guarantees the sacred vow of love, and defines a person as one essential, knowable thing and not another, then this cannot have been Cressida before him. Troilus's subjective 'truths' illuminate the central epistemological problem of his chivalric idealism: whether physical beauty mirrors moral beauty or whether value is merely a projection of desire.

Troilus understands that he is involved in a 'madness of discourse' in which reason and unreason are confounded: in which reason can revolt against the evidence of the senses,

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48. For an interesting reading of the 'rule in unity' speech, see I.A. Richards, Troilus and Cressida and Plato, in The Signet Classic Troilus and Cressida, ed. Daniel Seltzer (New York and Scarborough, Ont.: New American Library, 1963), pp.247-55.

and yet remain reasonable, and madness assume control without reason revolting (V.2.141-45). Thus, Cressida divides; but because this is an impossibility in 'a thing inseparate' (V.2.147), she cannot divide. And if Cressida is his, 'tied with the bonds of heaven' (V.2.153) which cannot dissolve, those bonds are now 'slipp'd, dissolv'd, and loos'd' (V.2.155).

And with another knot, five-finger-tied,  
The fractions of her faith, orts of her love,  
The fragments, scraps, the bits, and greasy relics  
Of her o'er-eaten faith are given to Diomed.  
V.2.156-59.

Thus, subject and object fall apart, and the ideal and the real are sundered. Yet the subjectivist does not relinquish his constancy; rather, his constancy turns to hatred, his love to revenge:

Never did young man fancy  
With so eternal and so fix'd a soul.  
Hark, Greek: as much as I do Cressid love,  
So much by weight hate I her Diomed. V.2.164-67.

Troilus switches commitment from one passionate urge to another, replacing Cressida with Diomed and turning murderous. As we observe a sexual triangle generating martial conflict, the cause of the Trojan war is re-enacted. By making the private plot (infidelity) replicate the public plot (war), the play confirms Hector's claim that subjective constancy is not virtue, but its opposite, 'mad idolatry',<sup>49</sup> and gives sinister resonance to Thersites's invocation of venereal disease as the

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49. See Alice Shalvi, '"Honor" in Troilus and Cressida', SEL, V (1965), p.297.

appropriate curse upon 'those that war for a placket'. What the play finally offers us, then, is the story of a war started and fought on the basis of selfish desires that are masked and exacerbated by chivalric ideals. It is for this reason that the play gives Pandarus the last word; for the figure of the disease-ridden bawd standing amid the ruins of Troy bequeathing his infections to the audience provides an apt symbol of the meaning of connivance between idealism and appetite.

In Hector the play presents an honour that attempts to escape the anarchic individualism of the Greeks' heroic pride and the Trojans's chivalric subjectivism. We have seen that in Hector's demonstration that virtue depends on the ability to see beyond mere individual inclination, the play offers its sole authentic moral voice, which tells us that honour, without a force greater than itself to support it, degrades rather than exalts. The fact that Hector fails to make that voice prevail does not, of course, discredit it. But it certainly discredits the form of action that he offers as an alternative, however attractively he performs it. Having refuted the claims of honour in terms of moral realism, his re-commitment to chivalric noblesse oblige cannot but remain radically vitiated.

Nevertheless, it has to be said that Hector's conception of honour differs from Troilus's in one important respect: it accepts the need for a ratified social framework for

individual conduct. It expresses itself within chivalric conventions like courtesy and the challenge to single combat, which are designed to control violence and self-assertion:

If there be one among the fair'st of Greece  
That holds his honour higher than his ease,  
That feeds his praise more than he fears his  
    peril,  
That knows his valour and knows not his fear,  
That loves his mistress more than in confession  
With truant vows to her own lips he loves,  
And dare avow her beauty and her worth  
In other arms than hers. . . . I.3.264-71.

Hector's challenge, as communicated to the Greeks by Aeneas, is not driven by unbridled appetite, like Troilus's 'challenge' of Diomed at the end of the play. The terms of the challenge, including the service of the 'mistress', are impersonal and conventional, and the stylistic register conveys their conformity to ceremonial procedure. Yet the play will make it plain that Hector's chivalry is anachronistic, and that by reverting to it, he has taken refuge in an unreal social construct that proves fatally weak in the new brutalism of the Trojan War. Although unlike Troilus's idealism, which rejects any inhibition of passion, Hector's chivalry resembles it in its quality as illusion, with its pathetic reliance on rules in a game that is played for real.

As the play presents it, Hector's chivalry is defined by a code of conduct called 'courtesy' which dictates the individual's behaviour towards others, specifically, in this play about war, towards one's enemies. It regulates conduct between adversaries both in and out of battle, seeking to



restrain individualism and its consequent social disintegration.

In peace, courtesy takes the form of the elaborate politeness through which one pays honour to one's opponents:

I ask, that I might waken reverence,  
And bid the cheek be ready with a blush  
Modest as morning when she coldly eyes  
The youthful Phoebus.  
Which is that god in office, guiding men?  
Which is the high and mighty Agamemnon?  
I.3.226-31.

Through his ceremonious compliment, Aeneas defers to the general of the enemy forces. His description of the Trojan courtly virtues - 'Courtiers as free, as debonair, unarm'd / As bending angels. . . .' (I.3.234-35) - defines an aristocratic grace. The image of 'bending angels' conveys an aesthetic ideal: it expresses the cultural refinement that makes aristocracy a higher form of secular life. The play makes fun of Trojan courtesy, of the hyperbolic mode of expression that leads Agamemnon to suspect that Aeneas's extravagant compliment constitutes a subtle form of insult, and especially of the ever-present tension between courtesy and aristocratic pride:

By Venus' hand I swear  
No man alive can love in such a sort  
The thing he means to kill, more excellently.  
IV.1.23-25.

Yet if the play exploits the comic potential of this 'noblest hateful love' (IV.1.34), it stresses simultaneously courtesy's attempt to cultivate the highly-developed social forms that bridle self-assertion.

Courtesy encompasses not only the refined manners that govern interaction outside of battle, but also the rules around which combat is structured. The play presents Hector as the embodiment of this higher chivalry. In his encounter with Ajax (IV.5), he is shown to refuse the honour of victory rather than disobey the law of kinship, an act which manifests not a proud disregard of his opponent's worth (as Achilles claims), but a courtesy that limits the sway of war:

Weigh him well,  
And that which looks like pride is courtesy.  
This Ajax is half made of Hector's blood;  
In love whereof, half Hector stays at home. . . .  
IV.5.81-84.

The scene thus sets up an opposition between military pride and a courtesy that is responsive to a code beyond the individual. Hector is the champion of martial virtue; but the fact that he allows his power as a soldier to be restrained by the conventions of fair play fosters human respect rather than emulation, as Nestor makes clear:

I have, thou gallant Trojan, seen thee oft,  
Labouring for destiny, make cruel way  
Through ranks of Greekish youth; and I have seen  
thee,  
As hot as Perseus, spur thy Phrygian steed,  
Despising many forfeits and subduements,  
When thou hast hung thy advanced sword i'th'air,  
Not letting it decline on the declin'd,  
That I have said to some my standers-by  
'Lo, Jupiter is yonder, dealing life'. . . .  
IV.5.182-90.

Nestor echoes his earlier lines on the superhuman nature of valour, but here 'the thing of courage' (I.3.51) is, like Jove, a dealer of life. The connection between this passage and Agamemnon's and Nestor's discredited conception of heroism

is instructive, for it emphasises valour's decline into rampant individualism. This point, of course, is underlined by the contrast between the chivalric Hector and the megalomaniacal Achilles, who ends by butchering his rival, and the now murderous Troilus who, 'more vindicative than jealous love' (IV.5.107), repudiates his brother's 'vice of mercy' (V.3.37).

The fact remains, however, that this honour, which draws its self-respect from service of an essentially social code of conduct, is vulnerable to the critique of subjectivism. The scene presenting Cressida's betrayal of Troilus is followed by one which shows Hector, deaf to his own arguments in the Trojan debate, actively embracing honour as subjective constancy. Andromache's dreams and Cassandra's visions have foreseen his death, and the women comprehend in that event the destruction of Troy. In the face of his family's pleas, and his own knowledge that constancy in wrongdoing does not extenuate the wrong, Hector endorses an absolute honour: 'the gods have heard me swear.' (V.3.15). Once again, fidelity to one's word guarantees an honour that is 'more precious-dear than life.' (V.3.28). Andromache and Cassandra remind him of the very distinction that made him resist Troilus and Paris: 'It is the purpose that makes strong the vow. . . .' (V.3.23). They insist that absolute vows are 'polluted offerings' (V.3.17), that it cannot be 'holy' to 'hurt by being just' (V.3.19-20), and that to persist in loyalty to a vow the consequences of which are plainly disastrous is not to be

virtuous, but 'hot and peevish' (V.3.16).

The scene insists that Hector is not Troilus, that his honour, in its regard for the rules of 'fair play' (V.3.42), has a focus beyond the self. Yet the play also makes it clear that the compromise which Hector seeks between virtue and individualism is an unqualified disaster, for it sustains fidelity to a bad cause while accepting limits to what is permissible in a war where Geneva conventions are outmoded and unreal. Hector's magnanimity, which shines so brightly in this play's otherwise unremitting self-interested motives, stands no chance against the maniacal conceit of an Achilles, for whom any means whatever are justified to secure his self-regarding needs. Hector's fate thus acquires a sort of desperate moral poignancy, for it reflects the predicament of a man who, in trying to maintain a semblance of decency in a world temporarily unable to sustain moral conduct, brings about the destruction of his own country.

This bitter, disenchanted play approaches tragedy in that it portrays a dramatic world in which virtue is a logical impossibility. Honour is depicted as a value that cannot stand on its own, that, deprived of the support of a force greater than itself, debases rather than elevates its proponents. Yet the medieval ideals of hierarchy and chivalry enlisted to stabilise individual will are shown, in their self-contradictory logic, to precipitate degradation. The play offers us, in Hector, a glimpse of the virtue which,

in this dramatic world of false ideals, is denied a social framework in which to function, and the Trojan champion who seeks to temper honour with chivalric standards of conduct is finally ignominiously slaughtered. This collapse is tragically inevitable. It does not follow, however, that the play is cynical. Its choric voice, Thersites, is indeed so; but if he is right that the story of the Trojan War is one not of heroism, but of appetite, the play does not ultimately share his delight in the fact. What the climactic spectacle of ruin shows us is that virtue, if it is impossible, is also necessary; and that in the death of Hector and the triumph of Achilles, there are no grounds at all for rejoicing.

CHAPTER 3

THE TRAGEDY OF THE INDIVIDUAL:  
REVENGE HONOUR IN HAMLET.

Troilus and Cressida dramatises honour as a self-contradictory ethic in which the individual capacity for virtue degenerates into egoism. The play shows that in locating virtue within the individual will, honour stimulates a relationship between a man and his own greatness which fosters emulation and comes to disregard any moral consideration that inhibits the pursuit of distinction. The mechanism for virtue within the self which generates constancy and courage by overcoming the instinct for self-preservation deteriorates into an instrument for self-assertion indifferent to moral distinctions. This self-defeating tension in honour appears in Hamlet (1600-01) in a different form. It is objectified as a contradictory task: the virtuous cause which is simultaneously a mandate to execute private revenge. In Hamlet, the hero is torn between the necessity to act and the necessity that action will turn into a manifestation of self-interest; the will to good is either neutralised or corrupted by its inevitable relation to an ethic that precipitates unscrupulous and egocentric action. Yet the dramatic action of Hamlet unfolds within the context of a Christian universe in which the possibility of providential guidance affords the prospect, wholly lacking in Troilus and

Cressida, of a power for good higher than honour.<sup>1</sup>

Honour makes its first appearance in Hamlet in the opening scene, as part of that scene's portrayal of the confrontation of the natural with the supernatural. After the first appearance of the Ghost that comes in the shape of the late king, Marcellus's query about Denmark's preparations for war gives rise to a discussion of Fortinbras, father and son. We are told the story of 'th'ambitious Norway' (I.1.64) who, 'prick'd on by a most emulate pride' (I.1.86), challenged King Hamlet to single combat.<sup>2</sup> Honour in these lines takes the form of emulation, the competitive rivalry of a man envious of another's reputation for greatness: King Hamlet was 'esteem'd' 'this side of our known world' for his valour (I.1.87-88).

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1. Many critics have pointed to the importance of the Christian tradition in Hamlet. A.C. Bradley, in Shakespearean Tragedy (London: Macmillan and Co., 1904), speaks of Hamlet as manifesting 'a freer use of popular religious ideas, and a more decided, though always imaginative, intimation of a supreme power concerned in human good and evil, than can be found in any other of Shakespeare's tragedies.' (p.174). Philip Edwards, in his critical introduction to the play in Hamlet Prince of Denmark, The New Cambridge Shakespeare (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1985), also stresses the centrality of the play's religious element. In interpreting this religious element in terms of the inherent ambiguity of the hero's task, I am indebted to numerous scholars who have also based their studies of the play on the ambivalence of action: Maynard Mack, 'The World of Hamlet', in 'Hamlet': A Casebook, ed. John Jump (London and Basingstoke: The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1968), pp.86-107; Nigel Alexander, Poison, Play, and Duel (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979); Paul Gottschalk, 'Hamlet and the Scanning of Revenge', SQ, XXIV (1973), 155-70; Catherine Belsey, 'The Case of Hamlet's Conscience', SP, 76 (1979), 127-48; and Harold Jenkins's 'Introduction' to The Arden Shakespeare: Hamlet (London and New York: Methuen and Co., 1982).

2. All quotations from the play are taken from The Arden Shakespeare: Hamlet, ed. Harold Jenkins.



Old Fortinbras, then, was motivated by the same desire for superiority that characterises the Greek warriors in Troilus and Cressida. The will to virtue was distorted into a form of self-aggrandisement. The relationship between a man and his own virtue became paramount, and the energy to which honour appeals, the courage to endure the prospect of danger, was focussed on the self in its quest for singularity: Old Fortinbras risked death for the sake of his own greatness.

Horatio's speech moves from the past to the present, introducing us to the play's first avenging son. Yet his description of Young Fortinbras's planned campaign stresses adventure rather than revenge; it portrays a young man, 'Of unimproved mettle, hot and full' (I.1.99), seeking an opportunity for 'some enterprise / That hath a stomach in't' (I.1.102-103). It is the recovery of the lands lost by his father that affords such an opportunity, and his easy change of purpose in the later scene (II.2) clarifies that for Young Fortinbras any occasion for adventure will suffice. What attracts Young Fortinbras, then, are enterprises characterised by their 'stomach', or spirit of daring, for it is these that permit him to demonstrate his courage, his honourable nature. In his quest for self-realisation, he is not fussy about the value of the cause. Horatio's speech, in stressing the legality of the terms of the combat - 'Well ratified by law and heraldry' (I.1.90) - underlines the illegality of Fortinbras's undertaking. The Polish campaign, of course, will be similarly identified by the worthlessness of its

object.

Just as Old Fortinbras resembles the emulous Greeks of Troilus and Cressida, so Young Fortinbras is the dramatic counterpart of Troilus. His honour is comparably subjective, in that it disregards the moral substance of its object. Young Fortinbras says little until the close of the play; he is instead the stimulus of other characters' reflections. But his actions speak for him, and they inform us that, like Troilus, he rejects the demand for objective value as the voice of craven self-interest and attaches moral significance solely to the will in its pursuit of greatness. They tell us, moreover, that this repudiation of scruple as cowardice entails the repudiation of any restraints on action, of any hindrance to the performance of courageous deeds. Thus, the honour that appears courageously to scorn self-interest is in reality a form of self-gratification. Again, honour as the relationship between a man and himself undoes honour as the will to virtue. Like his father, Young Fortinbras faces danger solely in order to prove his own worthiness.

This account of secular activity - of a world in which men act for the self - is offered within the context of a scene imbued with the presence of the supernatural. The appearance of the Ghost stimulates discussion not only of Old and Young Fortinbras, but also of the relationship between this world and the next. This relationship is characterised chiefly by uncertainty, by the 'fear and wonder' (I.1.47) which the

encounter with the supernatural inspires in Horatio, Marcellus and Barnardo. Yet out of the three men's speculations as to the significance of the apparition, there emerges the powerful sense of an otherworldly reality that, if it defies human comprehension, is nonetheless intimately connected with the natural world. Horatio interprets the Ghost's appearance in terms of its public significance - it 'bodes some strange eruption to our state.' (I.1.72) - and this consideration prompts comparison with the portents preceding the assassination of Julius Caesar. Upon the disappearance of the Ghost at the crowing of the cock, this transcendent reality is identified in Christian terms:

Some say that ever 'gainst that season comes  
Wherein our Saviour's birth is celebrated,  
This bird of dawning singeth all night long;  
And then, they say, no spirit dare stir abroad,  
The nights are wholesome, then no planets strike,  
No fairy takes, nor witch hath power to charm,  
So hallow'd and so gracious is that time.

I.1.163-69.

Marcellus's speech on Christmas evokes, in the terms of popular religious lore, the workings of grace in this world. The seasonal banishment of the malevolent forces to which man allied himself in his pride illuminates grace as a partial liberation from the taint of original sin, a momentary renewal of man's pre-lapsarian condition that brings with it a temporary purification of a damaged capacity for good. The speech is suggestive rather than conclusive: its simple piety is fixed within the realm of folk belief ('Some say', 'they say') and qualified by Horatio's response: 'So have I heard and do in part believe it.' (I.1.170). It offers the

possibility of divine regenerative power, while leaving God's intervention in human affairs a matter of conjecture and mystery. In the Christian universe of Hamlet, therefore, if the mechanism for virtue within the self is distorted into a self-centred obsession with one's moral stature, there may also be a moral influence at work in the world higher than the individual will. These two aspects of the play's opening scene - the evocation of a disfigured honour and of the possibility of divine intercession - will form the dramatic parameters of the play's exploration of honour.

The second scene introduces the play's hero, who is immediately presented as an isolated figure. Clad in black, Hamlet remains in mourning for his father as the assembled court carries on the affairs of state, having recently celebrated the marriage of the late king's widow to his newly-crowned brother. He is publicly reprovved for his allegedly excessive grief, and makes veiled references to the hypocrisy of Elsinore's protestations of affection for their dead king. It is not until he is left alone on the stage, however, that this contrast between remembrance and forgetfulness is fully formulated.

In the prince's first soliloquy, his intense attachment to his father and indignation at his mother's remarriage have been thought to reveal a morbid obsession with death and a

pathological disgust with sexuality.<sup>3</sup> It is clearly the case that one's interpretation of the prince's character hinges on this initial elucidation of his attitude towards his mother. Is Hamlet's response 'in excess of the facts', as Eliot claimed?<sup>4</sup>

The soliloquy shows us Hamlet tormented by the two mutually exclusive 'facts' of his mother's conduct: the brief space of time in which she mourned her husband's death before remarrying, and the intensity of her earlier demonstrations of love and grief:

A little month, or ere those shoes were old  
With which she follow'd my poor father's body,  
Like Niobe, all tears - why, she -  
O God, a beast that wants discourse of reason  
Would have mourn'd longer - married with my uncle,  
My father's brother - but no more like my father  
Than I to Hercules. I.2.147-53.

The soliloquy's repeated elaboration of the inconsistency in Gertrude's behaviour in disjointed, unbalanced verse reflects the anguish induced in Hamlet's mind by the inescapable truth that his mother's hasty remarriage belies her apparent affection, revealing it to have been no more than empty display. The 'fact' that Hamlet confronts in Gertrude's remarriage is that she did not really love his father, or

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3. For various versions of this theory, see G. Wilson Knight, The Wheel of Fire, rev. ed. (London: Methuen and Co. Ltd., 1949), pp.18-24; Eleanor Prosser, Hamlet and Revenge, 2nd edn. (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford Univ. Press, 1967), pp.127-28.; and L.C. Knights, An Approach to 'Hamlet' (London: Chatto and Windus, 1961), pp.59, 63-66.

4. T.S. Eliot, Selected Essays 1917-1932 (London: Faber and Faber Ltd., 1932), p.145.

rather that the reality behind her conduct as wife was  
appetite:<sup>5</sup>

Why, she would hang on him  
As if increase of appetite had grown  
By what it fed on. . . . I.2.143-45.

Hindsight is working unconsciously in these lines,  
transforming the conduct that seemed evidence of a profound  
love into an expression of sensuality. Hamlet's reaction  
cannot be reduced to a diseased aversion for normal human  
sexuality, for the soliloquy insists not merely on the speed  
with which Gertrude transferred her affections, but on the  
inferiority of their new object:

So excellent a king, that was to this  
Hyperion to a satyr. . . . I.2.139-40.

Whether Hamlet is right or wrong about Claudius, he makes here  
a crucial distinction between objective and subjective  
judgement. What concerns him is the recognition of merit  
independent of the valuer. Gertrude's failure to distinguish  
between men demonstrates to her son that she acts on the  
promptings of subjective desire which, having no goal beyond  
its immediate satisfaction, is incapable of constancy.

It is true that we have at this stage in the drama no  
independent evidence to substantiate Hamlet's low estimation  
of Claudius's worth. Yet this evidence is quickly provided by  
the play and Hamlet's perception validated as more 'prophetic'  
(I.5.41) than he could have guessed. What is important is  
that his first soliloquy shows him insisting, like Hector,

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5. See Bradley, Shakespearean Tragedy, pp.115-17.

that excellence cannot be reduced to preference; that without objective knowledge, there is only the self bent on the gratification of its own desires. Hamlet's devotion to the memory of his father is therefore, as he sees it, not excessive, but essential; for it expresses an extrinsic apprehension of human value which acts as a kind of anchor for virtue. Conversely, the absence of constancy in Gertrude betrays the dominance of selfish interests. And of course, this discovery of inconstancy applies not only to Gertrude, but to Elsinore generally. Claudius's opening speech makes it clear that the court has curtailed its period of mourning for King Hamlet - the memory of whose death remains 'green' (I.2.2) - in order to endorse Claudius's marriage to Gertrude. This eager abandonment of former allegiances suggests another form of 'appetite' - time-serving and self-advancement.

The soliloquy enacts the trauma of Hamlet's discovery. He longs for oblivion, indeed wishes that suicide was not forbidden by canon law, because the values he holds supreme no longer appear to have any foundation in reality: so life becomes meaningless and corrupt, 'an unweeded garden / That grows to seed. . . .' (I.2.135-36). The soliloquy thus shows us a man whose parents are the guarantors of his world view. Hamlet's despair is a measure of the extent to which he has internalised the moral order represented in his parents' relationship as it appeared to him before his father's death. The discovery that the mother he thought was virtuous is merely appetitive has collapsed his inner landscape. His

despair is therefore not neurotic, but a function of the moral convictions to which he remains committed: he abhors hypocrisy because it denotes self-absorption, and continues to believe in his father as a worthy object of fidelity. But in Denmark no such image of virtue remains, and Hamlet is at once powerless to alter this state of affairs ('But break, my heart, for I must hold my tongue.' I.2.159) and isolated by a moral intelligence that makes him cling to values which no longer seem to have any place in his world.

At this stage of the drama, honour has not yet become an issue for Hamlet. But the moral convictions exhibited in this scene - the opposition of constancy to selfish interests, the insistence that people 'be' rather than 'seem' - are those to which honour appeals in constructing the inner stability that generates moral action. They are, moreover, centred on the figure of the dead father whose ghost will shortly appear to Hamlet and command him to act out of filial devotion ('If thou didst ever thy dear father love -' I.5.23) and constancy: 'Remember me.' (I.5.91). Yet it is equally apparent that honour, as the play has already presented it in the adventures of Fortinbras, father and son, is implicated in the kind of self-centredness that Hamlet is shown to despise. The play's opening scenes prepare us for the contradictory nature of the Ghost's command, which will form the basis of the hero's tragedy.

As Hamlet, Horatio and Marcellus await the appearance of



the Ghost, the noise of the king's rouse provokes Hamlet's comments on reputation. The 'mole of nature' speech presents reputation as the logical complement of virtue, whether on the national or the individual level. Hamlet is critical of the custom of the king's revel because it obscures Danish achievements; in making the Danes appear drunkards to the rest of the world, it deprives Denmark of the esteem its qualities should enjoy:

and indeed it takes  
From our achievements, though perform'd at height,  
The pith and marrow of our attribute. I.4.20-22.

A comparable rupture between worth and social response occurs 'in particular men' (I.4.23) when 'some vicious mole of nature' (I.4.24) hides an individual's virtue from onlookers. The essence may remain 'as pure as grace' (I.4.33), but its reflection will 'take corruption' (I.4.35) from the single defect. Because it is not the man's character, but others' impression of it, which is vitiated by the fault, the speech cannot be interpreted as a statement of the Aristotelian tragic flaw - of the 'dram of evil' (I.4.36) which leads inexorably to Hamlet's own ruin.<sup>6</sup>

Although the speech admits the possible discrepancy between individual worth and public image, it nonetheless assumes throughout the importance of the social self. A man may be almost infinitely virtuous, but what value does that moral

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6. See, for example, John Dover Wilson, What Happens in 'Hamlet', 3rd edn. (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1951), pp.206-208.

excellence have if it is not perceived by others? The isolated hero we have encountered is not, therefore, a solipsist; he understands the social self to be part of what one is as a man. For Hamlet, who gives such weight to the individual capacity to judge human value, virtue is necessarily social, and the individual is responsible not only for recognising virtue in others, but also for demonstrating his own virtue to his fellow men. Again, what Hamlet insists upon is that essence and appearance should correspond.

Yet the play has made clear, particularly in its account of Old Fortinbras, that the concern for reputation can become a self-regarding passion. The inextricable connection between virtue and respect, the necessity that one's claim to pride be recognised and acknowledged by others, makes social stature the measure of moral stature. Hence the envious rivalry of Old Fortinbras when confronted with a man whose reputation for valour surpassed his own: in order to be the best, you have to be accounted the best. Hence also the aristocrat's intense sensitivity to insult, for to be treated in a disrespectful manner is to find one's right to pride in one's moral worth impugned. In this sense, it is dramatically appropriate that the 'mole of nature' speech should directly precede Hamlet's encounter with the Ghost which commands revenge.

When Hamlet confronts the ghost of his father, he is told of an appalling injustice - of his mother's adultery and his father's murder by the brother who now wears his crown - and

is commanded to correct this injustice. The figure who orders Hamlet to act has been subjected to a variety of critical interpretations. Scholars have seen him as a demonic spirit, as a messenger of divine justice and as a purposefully ambiguous figure who may be either 'a spirit of health or goblin damn'd' (I.4.40).<sup>7</sup> The dramatic action undoubtedly supports the ambivalence theory, not only on the grounds of the Ghost's doubtful provenance, but also by virtue of the intrinsic ambiguity of a being attached simultaneously to this world and the next. The Ghost's first statement of the nature of Hamlet's task clarifies the extent to which the spirit still belongs to the values of the temporal world: 'So art thou to revenge when thou shalt hear.' (I.5.7). This injunction is twice repeated: 'Revenge his foul and most unnatural murder.' (I.5.25) and 'If thou has nature in thee, bear it not. . . .' (I.5.81). In telling Hamlet that he is duty-bound to avenge his father's murder, the Ghost invokes an

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7. The theory of the demonic nature of the Ghost follows Hermann Ulrici's judgement, in Shakespeare's Dramatische Kunst, that 'it cannot be a pure and heavenly spirit that wanders on earth to stimulate his son to avenge his murder.' See Hamlet, A New Variorum Edition of Shakespeare, ed. Horace Howard Furness, 2 vols. (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1963), II, 293. Notable modern advocates of this interpretation include G. Wilson Knight, in The Wheel of Fire (pp. 39-42), and Eleanor Prosser, in Hamlet and Revenge (pp. 118-43). A.C. Bradley, in Shakespearean Tragedy (pp. 173-74), Irving Ribner, in Patterns in Shakespearean Tragedy (London: Methuen and Co. Ltd., 1960), pp. 71-72, and Sister Miriam Joseph, in 'Discerning the Ghost in Hamlet', PMLA, LXXVI (1961), 493-502, see the Ghost as a messenger of divine justice. Scholars such as Robert H. West, in 'King Hamlet's Ambiguous Ghost', PMLA, LXX (1955), 1107-17, Nigel Alexander, in Poison, Play and Duel (pp. 30-33), and Martin Dodsworth, in Hamlet, Closely Observed (London: The Athlone Press, 1985), pp. 39-43, have stressed the inherent ambiguity of the supernatural figure.

obligation of blood rooted in family honour, the social and moral standing which the family inherits collectively through the blood of its ancestors. Honour belongs to the individual through the kinship group. This honour is an alienable commodity, damaged or lost by acts of contempt or hostility that impugn the group's worth and right to respect. The equivalence of personal and collective honour makes an offence against one family member an offence against the family as a whole. Thus, the enemy of the father becomes the enemy of the son, and the act of vengeance the erasure of a wrong that diminishes father and son alike.<sup>8</sup> The individual honour that derives from the honour of the clan therefore carries with it the responsibility for the integrity of the family unit, an uncompromising duty that is inextricably bound up with the desire for self-affirmation.

Yet the family is the site not only of the individual's honour, but also of his closest emotional ties, both of which are located in shared blood. In his response to an injury inflicted on a family member, the avenger's natural feelings of grief and outrage are inseparable from his assertion of individual and collective honour. It is to the natural ties of blood that the Ghost appeals to authorise the duty of

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8. For a valuable discussion of family honour from the standpoint of cultural anthropology, see J.K. Campbell, 'Honour and the Devil', in Honour and Shame. The Values of Mediterranean Society, ed. J.G. Peristiany (Chicago: The Univ. of Chicago Press, 1966), pp.143-45. See also Mervyn James, 'English Politics and the Concept of Honour, 1485-1642', Past and Present, Supplement 3 (1978), p.15.

revenge: 'If thou hast nature in thee, bear it not. . . .', and 'If thou didst ever thy dear father love - ' (I.5.23). Within the kinship group, honour is measured according to the standard of nature. The blood that 'takes fire' at an outrage committed against the family translates love and resentment into honourable action.

The formulation of Hamlet's duty in terms of the ethics of private revenge has complex implications for the action to come. It locates the power for justice in an appointed individual who, by virtue of his relation to the victim of injustice, is at once a partial and an injured party. The punishment of wrongdoing, then, is entrusted to a man who is acting out of the passion of blood ties in order to restore his and his father's honour. This last point clarifies the equivalence that revenge ethics establish between injustice and dishonour. What is violated by a criminal act is the standing of the individuals comprising the family group; what is repaired by retaliative action is the damage done to group pride and the egoistic self. Blood feuds arise because retaliation inflicts on one's opponent a comparable disparagement that must in turn be requited, thereby provoking a potentially interminable cycle of violence. The command to punish Claudius is therefore predicated on a concept of retribution that is antithetical to justice: partial, self-centred and disastrously short-sighted.

Just as injustice is equated with dishonour, so honour

consists in the internal energy that stimulates retaliatory action. This the Ghost makes clear:

And duller shouldst thou be than the fat weed  
That roots itself in ease on Lethe wharf,  
Wouldst thou not stir in this. I.5.32-34.

Dishonour in these lines takes the form of inaction and is equated with decadent self-indulgence; the language evokes torpor, lethargy and oblivion and, in the words 'fat' and 'ease', associates such indolence with a life of sense-gratification, indifferent to everything but the satisfaction of appetite. Not to act is to prove oneself morally degenerate.

This speech is delivered in response to Hamlet's declared intention to take swift and unreflective action:

Haste me to know't, that I with wings as swift  
As meditation or the thoughts of love  
May sweep to my revenge. I.5.29-31.

To which the Ghost replies approvingly, 'I find thee apt.' (I.5.31). This suggests a quantitative equation: the more determined you are to act, the more honourable you are. It is this consideration that underlies the traditional role of the avenging son as Hamlet initially perceives it, for he assumes that hasty and passionate action measures the depth of one's filial piety; that it reflects the level of passion with which one responds to an injury to family honour. Yet the equation clearly encourages an uncritical attitude to action, for it implies an equivalence between moral worth and the refusal of limitations on action. Like Troilus, then, the avenging son can dismiss moral considerations as the rationalisation of

craven weakness and find in that dismissal the measure of his honourable nature.

Thus, the Ghost's exhortation to revenge shapes Hamlet's task in three significant ways: it rests on the assumption that the power for virtue resides within the will of an interested party; it makes the response to injustice the vindication of one's own honour; and it endorses the rejection of restraints on action as indicative of moral stature. Yet the royal Ghost who commands secular revenge is simultaneously a revenant from the next world, acquainted with the mysteries of an unearthly justice, 'living' proof of the existence of the afterlife. That the Ghost comes from the next world to reveal a horrifying transgression suggests that he represents a higher justice concerned with human justice. The scene intensifies this suggestion in several ways. If the Ghost speaks the language of family honour, he also, in the accounts of Gertrude's adultery and Claudius's fratricide, stresses the moral upheaval which those acts entail. Gertrude's sensuality is called 'lust', and identified as an engrossment in pleasure so total that moral distinctions are effectively obliterated; because everything serves the will in pursuit of its own satisfaction, the lowest and most loathsome object has the same value as the highest:

But virtue, as it never will be mov'd,  
Though lewdness court it in a shape of heaven,  
So lust, though to a radiant angel link'd,  
Will sate itself in a celestial bed  
And prey on garbage. I.5.53-57.

According to the Ghost, Gertrude's sensuality led her to a

more serious transgression than a hasty second marriage to her dead husband's brother. In his description of Claudius as 'that incestuous, that adulterate beast' who 'won to his shameful lust / The will of my most seeming-virtuous queen.' (I.5.42,45-46), he strongly implies that Gertrude and Claudius committed adultery.<sup>9</sup> The account of the murder, with its graphic description of the grotesque effects of poison on the workings of the human body, presents the act as a defilement of natural order. The speeches give considerably more than a personal significance to these crimes; they are made to represent not merely a personal wrong, but the violation of a moral order. Thus, when the Ghost commands,

If thou has nature in thee, bear it not,  
Let not the royal bed of Denmark be  
A couch for luxury and damned incest. I.5.81-83..

the connotations of 'nature' transcend the level of familial obligation; they endow Hamlet's task with the public dimension of cleansing Denmark of a regime that is unnatural and corrupt.

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9. The phrase 'adulterate beast' is not sufficient to convict Gertrude and Claudius of having had sexual relations while King Hamlet was alive, for it has been shown that the word 'adultery' often referred to promiscuity and incest. See Bertram Joseph, Conscience and the King (London: Chatto and Windus, 1953), pp.16-18. Yet, as Jenkins points out (long note, p.456), an adulterous relationship is clearly present in Belleforest, and the phrases 'adulterate beast' and 'seeming-virtuous queen', combined with the stress on seduction (11.43-45) and the implied contrast with fidelity to the marriage vow (11.48-50), strongly indicate the accusation of adultery. Hamlet is struck anew by the extent of his mother's viciousness (1.105) and, in the final act, states clearly that Claudius 'whor'd' his mother (V.2.64). Gertrude's own guilt (III.4.88-91; 94-96; IV.5.17-20) points to a graver sin than an incestuous marriage.



Moreover, the Ghost places qualifications on action:

But howsoever thou pursuest 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.5.84-88.

The first injunction, 'Taint not thy mind', is vague enough to have aroused a variety of critical responses.<sup>10</sup> But it does seem to indicate that there are mental and moral dangers inherent in 'contriving' this act against which Hamlet must guard. The second directive stipulates that he must not take action against his mother, an injunction that diminishes the impression of the Ghost's vindictiveness,<sup>11</sup> and reinforces the need for moral restraint implied by the first. It also adds a transcendent dimension to the Ghost's appeal to justice, and suggests that, if Gertrude's punishment belongs to an afterlife, that of Claudius represents the workings of a higher justice in this world.<sup>12</sup>

Hamlet, then, confronts a Ghost who instructs him to avenge his father's murder, and who at the same time suggests that the deed will be a restorative, purifying public act, sanctioned by a higher authority. How does Hamlet respond to

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10. John Dover Wilson, in What Happens in 'Hamlet', understands the Ghost to be warning against the dangers attendant on the loss of mental control (pp.46,209). Sister Miriam Joseph, on the other hand, in 'Discerning the Ghost in Hamlet', interprets the Ghost's injunction as a warning against personal vindictiveness (pp.501-502).

11. See Philip Edwards, 'Introduction', Hamlet Prince of Denmark, The New Cambridge Shakespeare, p.43.

12. Ibid., pp.43-45.

the Ghost's command? In answering this question, what we have already learned of the play's hero is of vital importance, for the Ghost's revelation and injunction reinforce and intensify the world-view elucidated in the second scene. The Ghost's appeal to filial piety is clearly compelling for the son dismayed by his society's inconstancy to the memory of their late king. Yet we have seen that Hamlet's devotion to his father has its source not simply in the bond of kinship, but in the knowledge of King Hamlet's worth; that his despair arises from the realisation of his mother's and his society's indifference to moral distinctions. The story which the Ghost tells Hamlet reveals that virtue has not merely been forgotten in Denmark, but betrayed and actively subverted. Hamlet discovers that the moral degeneration he perceived around him goes far deeper than he had believed, that the world of 'seeming' he inhabits hides the reality, not simply of moral laxity, but of adultery and murder. The mandate to act out of love and remembrance of his father thus involves far more than righting a personal wrong. It means vindicating virtue against the corruption that has defiled it, restoring an order turned on its head by criminal appetite - the setting right of a time that is 'out of joint' (I.5.196-97).

For a hero who conceives of his appointed task as the repairing of a fractured world, the Ghost's formulation of honour as the opposite of appetite clearly has a special resonance: not to act is to be engrossed in selfish ease, to be oblivious to moral purpose, to be like his mother. Thus

Hamlet vows to act:

Now to my word.  
It is 'Adieu, adieu, remember me.'  
I have sworn't. I.5.110-12.

Hamlet's vow is like a baptism,<sup>13</sup> the relinquishing of a previous life in favour of a new and higher form of existence:

Remember thee?  
Ay, thou poor ghost, whiles memory holds a seat  
In this distracted globe. Remember thee?  
Yea, from the table of my memory  
I'll wipe away all trivial fond records,  
All saws of books, all forms, all pressures past  
That youth and observation copied there,  
And thy commandment all alone shall live  
Within the book and volume of my brain,  
Unmix'd with baser matter. I.5.95-104.

The vow is traditionally the declaration of honour, the vehicle through which the individual constructs the stable, constant self, unflinching in its dedication to duty. Hamlet vows to remember the Ghost as long as memory has any place in a 'distracted globe',<sup>14</sup> to erase as trivial and foolish all other memories and to maintain only the essential command to act. The commitment to memory defies a world given over to forgetfulness, and affirms order in a disordered kingdom, holding out the possibility that the values of the past which his father represented have not entirely lost their grip on men. The tone of hysterical sincerity in the prince's vow reflects both the intolerable strain induced by the Ghost's revelations and his desperate need to recover subjective

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13. Ibid., p.45.

14. I accept Philip Edwards's gloss: 'It is the world that Hamlet is talking about, not his head.' The lines are forceful in that they convey the moral significance which Hamlet attaches to remembrance in a world on which it has a precarious hold.

meaning and certainty. The honour to which he appeals is a mechanism of self-formation through which he seeks to recreate the relationship between subject and object, desire and value, which originally sustained his sense of identity. This subjectivity is moral rather than egocentric, based on the inner need for virtue in a world now proven to be devoid of moral order.

In Hamlet's vow, honour takes the form of an anchor for virtue. It is the means whereby he hopes to translate his moral convictions - constancy to a virtuous object and accord between word and deed - into action. Yet in revenge honour, this sense of individual moral identity inevitably turns egoistic, and becomes fixated on an unrestrained refusal of diminishment to the self. And it is private revenge that the Ghost has demanded of Hamlet. Consequently, the honour that acts against injustice is inseparable from the honour that disclaims contempt, and the determination to act in execution of a moral imperative becomes involved in the resolution to act in disregard of moral scruple. These two aspects of the prince's duty are inextricably connected; yet they are at the same time irreconcilable, for honour is focussed simultaneously on a deed that aspires to transcend self-interest and on a deed in which self-interest is the motivating force.

To approach Hamlet from the perspective of honour enables us to redefine the dramatic foundation of the play's portrayal

of its hero's self-reproachful delay. It consists in the contradiction that both action and inaction are manifestations of self-interest. The moral being that we have come to know in the first act is unlikely to be able either to renege on the pressing moral duty that has been assigned to him, or to accept that the impoverished moral assumptions of revenge honour can in any way accomplish that task. It is Hamlet's tragedy that the virtue which for him is objectively and subjectively necessary cannot be restored by the deed he is commanded to perform. Thus, he is trapped in an impasse by a contradiction that never fully rises to consciousness, but makes its presence felt in the combined passivity and self-recrimination of a man unable either to renounce or to endorse the vengeance imposed on him by the double authority of his father's spirit and the next world. In the bitter lines that close the first act - 'The time is out of joint. O cursed spite, / That ever I was born to set it right.' (I.5.196-97) - there is a hint of the terrible predicament awaiting Hamlet, for as he faces the execution of his momentous task, it appears to him an inescapable and impossible burden.

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By the close of Act I, Hamlet has formulated only one plan of action - to adopt an 'antic disposition' (I.5.180). This feature of the old Amleth story becomes considerably more than a strategy for averting suspicion, for the assumption of the

role of madman gives expression to the prince's estrangement from Denmark. When the second act opens, enough time has passed for his 'transformation' (II.2.5) to have become a cause of anxiety - for Gertrude, but especially for Claudius. They have sent for Hamlet's old school friends, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, in an attempt to discover the cause of his affliction. Much critical disagreement has surrounded the role of these two characters in Claudius's plot. Are they loyal friends, motivated by concern for Hamlet's well-being, or time-servers, prompted by the desire for self-advancement?<sup>15</sup> In reply to the royal request for assistance, Rosencrantz declares:

Both your Majesties  
Might, by the sovereign power you have of us,  
Put your dread pleasures more into command  
Than to entreaty. II.2.26-29.

Guildenstern adds:

But we both obey,  
And here give up ourselves in the full bent  
To lay our service freely at your feet  
To be commanded. II.2.29-32.

Their language is formal and courtly, but its expression of deference is excessively slavish and suggests, in the context of a sycophantic court, that they are serving authority with an eye to the main chance. Hamlet's welfare seems a secondary consideration, mentioned only at the close of the interview:

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15. Defenders of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern include Prosser (p.228), and Salvador de Madariaga, On 'Hamlet' (London: Hollis and Carter, 1948), pp.14-20. Other critics feel that their motives are primarily self-interested. See, for example, Nigel Alexander, pp.70, 77-80; L.C. Knights, An Approach to 'Hamlet', p.42; and Roland Mushat Frye, The Renaissance 'Hamlet: Issues and Responses in 1600' (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1984), pp.111-12.

'Heavens make our presence and our practices / Pleasant and helpful to him.' (II.2.38-39). The comradely sentiments which Guildenstern expresses here are somewhat undermined by the word 'practices', with its connotations of deceit. When, later in the play, they inform Claudius of Hamlet's 'crafty madness' (III.1.8), Rosencrantz and Guildenstern ally themselves overtly with the powers that be.

When the old friends first meet, their conversation dwells on the inconstancy of fortune, the 'strumpet' (II.2.236) who gives her favours to many and is faithful to none. Within the structure of the play, the topic is not a new one; rather, it serves to introduce a new concept - that of fortune - with which to define the moral condition of Denmark. The arrival at Elsinore of the 'the tragedians of the city' (II.2.327), who have been overtaken in popularity by the boys' acting companies, presents Hamlet with a particular case of vulnerability to the random rise and fall of fashion that dominates Denmark:

It is not very strange; for my uncle is King of Denmark, and those that would make mouths at him while my father lived give twenty, forty, fifty, a hundred ducats apiece for his picture in little.

II.2.359-62.

The passage implies both the haphazard nature of fortune's movements, that she bestows and withdraws her favours indiscriminately, and the fickleness of her subjects, who follow her whims with a comparable lack of discernment. The rule of fortune, then, is one without objective truth, in which there is no equivalence between prosperity and worth and

men approve not what is good, but what is presently flourishing and hence likely to ensure their own advancement. Hamlet's reflection takes in the general corruption and hypocrisy of Elsinore while glancing specifically at his two friends, whose disinterestedness he now suspects.<sup>16</sup>

After welcoming the players to Elsinore, the prince calls for 'a passionate speech' - Aeneas's tale to Dido of 'Priam's slaughter' (II.2.428,444). The player's speech introduces another avenging son, who is presented not as the opponent, but as the agent of fortune. What we see in Pyrrhus is the furious avenger for whom there are quite clearly no restraints on action. His savage passion is expressed in his grotesque exterior, caked with the blood of the indiscriminate carnage that feeds a seemingly insatiable appetite for revenge: 'fathers, mothers, daughters, sons' (II.2.454) are consumed in his progress towards the defenceless old man who is the main target of his wrath.<sup>17</sup> His momentary pause stresses neither hesitation nor the loss of resolve, but the renewed ferocity that follows:

soafter Pyrrhus' pause  
Aroused vengeance sets him new awork,  
And never did the Cyclops' hammers fall  
On Mars's armour, forg'd for proof eterne,  
With less remorse than Pyrrhus' bleeding sword  
Now falls on Priam. II.2.483-88.

This avenging son vindicates family honour by hacking to death

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16. See Frye, pp.111-12.

17. See Harold Skulsky, 'Revenge, Honor, and Conscience in Hamlet', *PMLA*, 85 (1970), p.78.



his helpless victim. His barbaric act, however, identifies him with fortune's rule:

Out, out, thou strumpet Fortune! All you gods  
In general synod take away her power,  
Break all the spokes and fellies from her wheel,  
And bowl the round nave down the hill of heaven  
As low as to the fiends. II.2.489-93.

The act of vengeance is an act of injustice, recoded as an exemplum of fortune's dominion over human affairs. From the murder of Priam, the speech moves to the grief-stricken Hecuba, and the prospect of her suffering and loss prompts another attack on 'Fortune's state' (II.2.507), presented in terms of the pity and outrage felt for the victim of injustice, a passion to which even the gods may be subject (II.2.514).

The player's speech, then, identifies two forms of passion: the passion of vengeance which perpetrates injustice, and the passion that responds to the suffering inflicted by that injustice. The latter is presented as a moral faculty, as the capacity to feel both indignation at an inhuman act and pity for its victim. The player himself, with his pallor and tears, embodies this intense fellow-feeling, and it is his emotional identification with Hecuba's anguish that arouses Hamlet's bitter self-recriminations in the 'O what a rogue and peasant slave' soliloquy. The prince berates himself for not being able to conjure up as much feeling for the victim of a real injustice as the player does for 'a fiction', 'a dream of passion' (II.2.546):

- no, not for a king,  
Upon whose property and most dear life

A damn'd defeat was made. II.2.564-66.

Hamlet claims that he lacks the passion to respond to unjust suffering because he has not taken the retaliatory action that is the measure or proof of passion. But in the speech that has indirectly provoked his self-contempt, retaliatory action belongs to Pyrrhus, whose savagery extends fortune's sway over the world. And Hamlet, like Pyrrhus, is an interested party; it is not just that the injustice to which the hero must respond is real rather than fictional, but that he, unlike the player, is related to the injured party: 'What's Hecuba to him, or he to her, / That he should weep for her?' (II.2.553-54). Trapped within the revenge ethic, Hamlet is paralysed by the contradiction between the player's and Pyrrhus's perspectives. For if he tells us in the soliloquy that he does not feel enough, his self-reproaches inform us that he does after all feel something: that he feels ashamed for lacking the impulse to act. The soliloquy shows us, then, that the prince is not wanting in moral commitment, but that because revenge is the only action available to him, he is split between moral intention and immoral implementation. What Hamlet fails to feel is the impetus to revenge; and his almost hysterical self-disparagement reflects both his bewilderment at an apparently unaccountable procrastination, and his attempt to whip himself up into the feelings he requires in order to assume the role of avenging son.

Hamlet's self-reproaches are focussed on the question of

honour, the internal mechanism that impels action. It is honour he betrays by his failure to act - a failure he sees as indicative of the sluggish indolence disparaged by the Ghost:

Yet I,  
A dull and muddy-mettled rascal, peak  
Like John-a-dreams, unpregnant of my cause. . . .  
II.2.561-63.

The identification of dishonour with moral laxity and idle self-absorption culminates in the charge of cowardice:

Am I a coward?  
Who calls me villain, breaks my pate across,  
Plucks off my beard and blows it in my face,  
Tweaks me by the nose, gives me the lie  
i'th'throat  
As deep as to the lungs - who does me this?  
Ha!  
'Swounds, I should take it: for it cannot be  
But I am pigeon-liver'd and lack gall  
To make oppression bitter, or ere this  
I should ha' fatted all the region kites  
With this slave's offal. II.2.566-76.

Yet the soliloquy presents this cowardly failure to act against injustice in a curious context. For the wrongs to which Hamlet imagines himself too fainthearted to respond are directed at the self; they are contemptuous insults which diminish the recipient and so damage his honour. Hamlet is punishing himself in these lines by transmuting his own sense of shame into an implicitly public humiliation; he is seen to be as worthless as he feels himself to be. But this publicly-witnessed 'oppression' at the hands of an imaginary assailant is what begins to generate animosity towards the real oppressor, Claudius; it is by imagining himself on the receiving end of injurious and degrading treatment that Hamlet works himself up into a frenzy of rancour and bloodlust towards his opponent, expressed in the swiftly-executed,

brutal deed visualised in the passage and in the prince's hysterical invective:

Bloody, bawdy villain!  
Remorseless, treacherous, lecherous, kindless  
villain! II.2.576-77.

The passion that Hamlet needs in order to act the part of avenging son is the passion of a wounded ego; what stimulates the son to avenge an injury inflicted on his father is 'gall', the spiteful feelings towards one's scornful enemy. Thus, the task of revenge, based in the imperative of family honour, dictates that action against injustice becomes retaliation against the adversary who has injured one's honour, and that honour itself becomes a kind of passionate self-regard, a determination to assert one's right to respect by refusing to endure contemptuous treatment. Hamlet's paralysing predicament is clear enough. He must act, but if he does, he will act not for virtue, but for the self.

Hamlet's dilemma is expressed in the ebb and flow of the soliloquy. Although he has managed to generate the avenger's passion, it clearly lacks conviction, for he promptly dismisses its rant and fury as demeaning and contemptible. This is followed in its turn by his plan to test the truth of the Ghost's revelations. However one interprets the play-plot, one thing remains clear: it demonstrates Hamlet's conviction that the value of the cause is what determines the nature of the deed, whether it is moral or immoral, virtuous or damnable. In this, he is quite unlike Troilus, who dismisses such scruples as craven. Hamlet makes plain, then,

how far he is from endorsing honour's equation of moral worth with action per se. Yet although the soliloquy exhibits his distaste for honour's spurious moral discourse, it also clarifies his unavoidable connection with it. Thus, if the play-plot legitimises the prince's cause, it will at the same time confirm him in the role of avenging son.

The appearance of the 'To be or not to be' soliloquy directly after the formulation of the play-plot suggests that Hamlet's new plan of action cannot afford him even a temporary respite. The soliloquy is essentially a continuation of the inquiry into how to deal with fortune. The 'question' with which the soliloquy begins presents two alternatives: to endure the 'slings and arrows of outrageous fortune' (III.1.58) or 'to take arms against a sea of troubles / And by opposing end them.' (III.1.59-60). It is the relative nobility of patience or opposition which Hamlet considers in these much-discussed lines. Scholarly controversy has centred on the second option: what kind of resistance is Hamlet proposing? Although many answers have been given, critics fall roughly into two camps, claiming either that Hamlet is thinking about killing the king or that he is contemplating suicide.<sup>18</sup>

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18. Supporters of the theory that Hamlet is contemplating suicide in the soliloquy include John Dover Wilson, What Happens in 'Hamlet', pp.127-28; G.B. Harrison, Shakespeare's Tragedies (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1951), p.100; Paul N. Siegel, Shakespearean Tragedy and the Elizabethan Compromise (New York: New York Univ. Press, 1957), p.108; Philip Edwards, ed. Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, The New Cambridge Shakespeare, pp.48-50; and Martin Dodsworth, Hamlet

One version of the former theory sees Hamlet making a choice between enduring injustice and taking resolute action against it.<sup>19</sup> According to this reading, the soliloquy offers the possibility of constructive action - by 'opposing' one's troubles, one 'ends' them - and then turns abruptly to a secondary consideration: that action against Claudius will lead to Hamlet's own death: 'To die - to sleep, / No more' (III.1.60-61). The weakness of this reading lies in the fact that the soliloquy provides no real indication that a break in the flow of Hamlet's thoughts has taken place. When such a break does occur a few lines on - 'To sleep, perchance to dream - ay, there's the rub' (III.1.65) - we are left in no doubt that it has taken place. The line, 'And by opposing end them. To die - to sleep', does not suggest that a contingent event (the prince's death) has been foreseen. Rather, it implies that the phrase 'To die' defines the condition of the cessation of adversity; in other words, that one opposes and ends 'a sea of troubles' only by drowning in it. But if death cannot be seen simply as an inadvertent outcome of avenging

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(Footnote 18 continued from previous page)

Closely Observed, pp.114-18. Other scholars have interpreted the soliloquy, with varying emphases, as a debate on the relative claims of action and passivity. Among these are I.T. Richards, 'The Meaning of Hamlet's Soliloquy', PMLA, XLVIII (1933), 741-66; Hiram Haydn, The Counter-Renaissance (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1950), pp.628-30; Eleanor Prosser, Hamlet and Revenge, pp.160-73; and Catherine Belsey, 'The Case of Hamlet's Conscience'.

19. I am here summarising Eleanor Prosser's reading of the soliloquy's opening lines. See Hamlet and Revenge, pp.161,166-67.

action, neither can it be seen as the inevitable consequence of a futile defiance of omnipotent fortune.<sup>20</sup> The construction 'by opposing end them' implies that conquering one's troubles through death is not the unavoidable result, but the purpose of 'opposing' them.<sup>21</sup> This becomes still clearer when the phrase is viewed in context:

Or to take arms against a sea of troubles  
And by opposing end them. To die - to sleep,  
No more; and by a sleep to say we end  
The heart-ache and the thousand natural shocks  
That flesh is heir to: 'tis a consummation  
Devoutly to be wish'd. III.1.59-64.

The repetition of the verb 'end' stresses that the objective of opposing 'troubles' is the termination of suffering, an objective that can be attained only by intentionally embracing death. The contest with fortune is futile, in the sense that one cannot seriously challenge her control over the sublunary sphere. But there is one act through which the individual can oppose her by asserting his independence of her - and that act is, of course, suicide. It seems clear that the two alternative responses to fortune which Hamlet offers in the opening lines of the soliloquy are endurance or self-slaughter, the latter envisaged not as a cowardly retreat from life, but as a courageous act competing for the title of superior nobility.

Nevertheless, one can detect no note of triumphant defiance

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20. See Jenkins's long note, The Arden Shakespeare: Hamlet, pp.490-91.

21. See Skulsky's illuminating analysis of this passage, p.82.

in Hamlet's hypothetical victory over fortune through suicide. The two options he puts forward are ghastly because they assume that there is no possibility of subverting fortune's power, no hope of constructively changing the world. In the drastically reduced scope of human nobility which he presents to himself, his soliloquy tells us that Hamlet, about to test Claudius's guilt and possibly act against him, feels powerless to accomplish his task of rectifying the world. The unspoken assumption underlying this sense of impotence must be that revenge is incapable of repairing the condition of Denmark.<sup>22</sup> The world-view which Hamlet holds at this point in the drama reflects the despair induced by his inability to correct what he feels he must correct. Life, which in the first soliloquy was meaningless and corrupt, has now become an unalterable condition of oppression, which subjects its victims to a punishing succession of wrongs and humiliations:

For who would bear the whips and scorns of time,  
Th'oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely,  
The pangs of dispriz'd love, the law's delay,  
The insolence of office, and the spurns  
That patient merit of th'unworthy takes. . . .  
III.1.70-74.

The world of the soliloquy is one riddled with injustice and the undeserved misery it inflicts, over which fortune holds absolute sway. In such a world, Hamlet identifies with the victims; yet his soliloquy indicates that because this identification is powerless, he includes himself among their

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22. See Edwards's 'Introduction', Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, The New Cambridge Shakespeare, p.48. I am indebted for my interpretation of the soliloquy to Prof. Edwards's insightful reading.



number. He too is at the mercy of fortune's blows.

In his impotence, Hamlet sees the condition of Denmark as the irrevocable human condition and entertains the idea of suicide as the only path of active opposition left open to him. But that path too is quickly closed by 'the dread of something after death' (III.1.78). The vision of suicide as an honourable act derives from a long pagan tradition, associated particularly with certain schools of Stoicism, which interprets the taking of one's life as both rational and heroic, the act through which a man declares himself master of his destiny by voluntarily removing himself from adversity.<sup>23</sup> This tradition was repudiated by Christian doctrine, which regarded suicide not as a moral action, but as an infringement of the sixth commandment.<sup>24</sup> Hamlet's fear of the uncertain end awaiting him in the next world is not presented in explicitly Christian terms: 'what dreams may come', 'something after death', the 'undiscover'd country' (III.1.66,78,79) - these phrases evoke the human tendency to fear what we cannot know. However, the play does, of course, make unequivocal

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23. For an account of Stoic attitudes to suicide, see J.M. Rist Stoic Philosophy (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1969), pp.17,130,231-54. Prof. Rist stresses that the Stoics had no single theory of suicide, though most Stoic thinkers considered it a rational act, an expression of self-mastery to be undertaken after due consideration and under reasonable circumstances. It is in the works of Seneca that suicide is exalted as the ultimate expression of human freedom.

24. Although there appears to be no specific biblical injunction against suicide, the Church consistently viewed it as an act of homicide. See St. Augustine, The City of God, trans. John Healey, 2 vols. (London: J.M. Dent and Sons Ltd., 1945), I, 1.16-27.

reference to the Christian injunction against suicide - in the Everlasting's 'canon 'gainst self-slaughter' (I.2.132), and in the gravedigger's malaprop inquiry into the circumstances of Ophelia's death: 'Is she to be buried in Christian burial, when she wilfully seeks her own salvation?' (V.1.1-2).

In view of this explicitly Christian context, it is difficult to interpret Hamlet's fear of the afterlife as anything other than a recognition of the possibility that he will be punished in the next world for an act that contravenes divine law. His uneasiness would therefore seem to represent the result not of a morally neutral reflective process, but of moral anxiety about the nature of the proposed action. The faculty which thwarts his resolution by generating disquiet is identified as conscience: 'Thus conscience does make cowards of us all. . . .' (III.1.83).

There seems little justification for the widespread gloss of conscience as 'consciousness'.<sup>25</sup> The passage from Timon of Athens often invoked in its defence is exceptional in the

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25. J. Dover Wilson, ed., The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1936) gives 'reflection, consciousness'; Irving Ribner and George Lyman Kittredge, eds., The Complete Works of Shakespeare (Waltham, Mass. and Toronto: Xerox College Publishing, 1971) read 'consciousness, reflection, consideration'; G. Blakemore Evans, ed., The Riverside Shakespeare (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974) gives 'reflection (but with some of the modern sense too).' Bradley, in Shakespearean Tragedy, advocates the gloss 'consciousness'. In contrast, the OED favours the modern sense, as do Jenkins, in The Arden Shakespeare: Hamlet, and Edwards, in Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, The New Cambridge Shakespeare.

Shakespearean canon: 'Canst thou the conscience lack / To think I shall lack friends?' (II.2.170-71).<sup>26</sup> Shakespeare more commonly uses the word 'conscience' to mean the moral faculty that distinguishes between right and wrong, and in this he conforms with what several scholars have shown to be customary Elizabethan usage.<sup>27</sup> Richard III offers particularly striking parallels with the Hamlet passage, for the play consistently presents 'conscience' as the inner voice of moral judgement which inhibits action by warning of its consequences. For example, the second murderer hired to kill Clarence fears 'to be damned for killing him, from the which no warrant can defend me.' (I.4.107-109), though, corrupted by earthly reward, he finally dismisses conscience as cowardice: 'I'll not meddle with it; it makes a coward. . . .' (I.4.126).<sup>28</sup> In Hamlet, the word occurs on seven other occasions, each of which strongly implies the modern sense.<sup>29</sup>

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 26.Reference is to The Arden Shakespeare: Timon Of Athens, ed. H.J. Oliver (London: Methuen and Co. Ltd., 1959).

27.See, for example, The Arden Shakespeare: Henry V, ed. J.H. Walter (London and New York: Methuen and Co., 1954), I.2.96; The Arden Shakespeare: The Merchant of Venice, ed. John Russell Brown (London: Methuen and Co. Ltd., 1955), II.2.1-30; The Arden Shakespeare: Titus Andronicus, ed. J.C. Maxwell (London: Methuen and Co. Ltd., 1961), V.1.74-78; The Arden Shakespeare: Othello, ed. M.R. Ridley (London: Methuen and Co. Ltd., 1958), I.2.1-3 and III.3.206-208. Scholars who uphold the modern reading of conscience by reference to Elizabethan usage include Joseph, pp.108-10; Prosser, p.169; and Belsey, 'The Case of Hamlet's Conscience', pp.127-48.

28.Reference is to The Arden Shakespeare: Richard III, ed. Antony Hammond (London and New York: Methuen, 1981). See also V.3.310-312.

29.See II.2.601; III.1.50; IV.5.132; IV.7.1.; V.2.58; V.2.67; V.2.300.

Indeed, Claudius employs it in this way immediately before the 'To be or not to be' soliloquy, when he reveals his guilt to the audience for the first time: 'How smart a lash that speech doth give my conscience.' (III.1.50).

Scholars who favour the reading 'consciousness' gain some support from the apparent apposition between the conscience that makes us cowards and 'the pale cast of thought' that 'sicklies o'er' 'the native hue of resolution' (III.1.84-85). 'Thought' might suggest that action is impeded not by the internal moral arbiter, but by heightened awareness and reflection. However, 'thought' need not be a non-moral term here; it can plausibly be seen as a property of the moral judgement. Protestant divines like William Perkins followed Aquinas in regarding conscience as a function of the human understanding, as a rational principle that arrived at moral decisions 'by a kind of reasoning or disputing'.<sup>30</sup> Catherine Belsey, in her valuable study, 'The Case of Hamlet's Conscience', has shown that in the morality tradition one of the principal roles assigned to the allegorical Conscience was that of encouraging the wayward hero to think: 'In what occupation that ever ye be, / Always, or ye begin to think on the ending'.<sup>31</sup> It is in the nature of its evaluative function that conscience should be identified with deliberation.

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30.From A Discourse of Conscience, quoted Belsey, p.132.

31.From The World and the Child, quoted Belsey, p.134.

For Romantic commentators from Coleridge on, 'the pale cast of thought' denoted the excessive powers of introspection that make Hamlet unequal to the duty of revenge. It seems closer to the spirit of the speech and the play to interpret the phrase as a reference to the thoughts prompted by conscience which neutralise the hero's search for an honourable mode of action. For Hamlet, seeking a way out of an impasse, conscience cannot provide a satisfactory answer or in any way enable him to understand his predicament. It merely sentences him to passivity and self-loathing, to a tameness in the face of injustice and corruption that can only seem to him like cowardice and dishonour. Hence his bitter equation of conscience with cowardice, with the 'thought' that infects and debilitates the healthy vigour of resolution.

It is at this point in the soliloquy that Hamlet moves from a specific meditation on suicide to a generalised consideration of 'enterprises of great pitch and moment' (III.1.86), inhibited by the same 'regard' of conscience (III.1.87). If, as seems likely, Hamlet is now alluding to his appointed task, then we can deduce that his original 'question', prompted by despair at his inability to counter the corruption of fortune and Denmark, expressed his anxiety about private revenge. So 'conscience' opposes not only suicide, but also revenge. Hamlet has to associate it with dishonour ('Thus conscience does make cowards of us all') because he needs to act. Yet the soliloquy tells us that if he does act, he will have to do so without regard for the

morality of the action, as Fortinbras and later Laertes will act. It would seem, then, that it is Hamlet's moral intelligence which both paralyses and torments him, for it understands simultaneously the necessity of constructive action and the insufficiency of the only forms of action open to him. It pulls him in opposite directions, towards two conflicting and incompatible truths. Hamlet's predicament once again emerges in the form of that contradictory honour which his moral being at once demands and restrains.

The scene depicting the play-within-the-play examines honour within the cluster of ideas which the play has established: passion, fortune, constancy. Hamlet's advice to the players focusses on excessive passion as a distortion of the mimetic principle of dramatic art; it misrepresents nature. What he advocates is not the eradication, but the tempering of passion:

for in the very torrent, tempest, and, as I may say, whirlwind of your passion, you must acquire and beget a temperance that may give it smoothness. III.2.5-8.

This notion of the control of passion forms the basis of Hamlet's speech in praise of Horatio. What Hamlet admires in his friend is his indifference to fortune:

for thou hast been  
As one, in suff'ring all, that suffers nothing,  
A man that Fortune's buffets and rewards  
Hast ta'en with equal thanks. . . . III.2.65-68.

Horatio does not endure 'outrageous fortune'; rather, he receives her 'buffets and rewards' with 'equal thanks'.

Hamlet goes on to identify this immunity from fortune with self-control:

and blest are those  
Whose blood and judgement are so well commeddled  
That they are not a pipe for Fortune's finger  
To sound what stop she please. Give me that man  
That is not passion's slave, and I will wear him  
In my heart's core, ay, in my heart of heart,  
As I do thee. III.2.68-74

Because Horatio's 'blood and judgement' are commingled, he is not the slave of his own irrational passions. Again, Hamlet favours the rational restraint, not the extinction, of passion. The man who attains this self-mastery is 'blest', or happy, possessed of an inner stability impervious to the fluctuations of circumstance.

What Hamlet celebrates in Horatio unquestionably resembles the twin Stoic ideals of honour and tranquillity. Stoic ethics sought immunity from the suffering caused by factors outside the individual's control. Peace of mind resides within a man and is a property of his virtue, which consists in the deliberate control of irrational impulses. It is this condition of rational self-command that the Stoics termed 'honour'. Through it, a man comes to own himself and so achieve independence of fortune's caprices. Although suicide would seem incompatible with an ethical theory devised to make fortune impotent, the Stoics generally held that it was rational and honourable to remove oneself from external evils

when they endangered one's integrity.<sup>32</sup> We have encountered this Stoic idea of suicide in the 'To be or not to be' soliloquy, and Horatio, declaring himself 'more an antique Roman than a Dane' (V.2.346), will seek the same self-liberation at the end of the play. What is less recognizably Stoic in Hamlet's eulogy is his formulation of the 'commeddling' of reason and passion; for although the term apathia originally referred to the conquest not of passion as such, but of reckless and destructive desires, it was generally mistaken during both antiquity and the Renaissance for the total abolition of emotion.<sup>33</sup> It is clear, nevertheless, that the stable self based on the fusion of blood and judgement has the Stoic aim of control over the irrational desires that make us the creatures of fortune.

This connection between unrestrained passion and subjection to fortune has another point of reference in the speech. Hamlet begins his eulogy of Horatio with a consideration of the nature of choice which reintroduces the subject of objective and subjective judgement:

Why should the poor be flatter'd?  
No, let the candied tongue lick absurd pomp,  
And crook the pregnant hinges of the knee  
Where thrift may follow fawning. Dost thou hear?

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32. St. Augustine pointed out the contradiction in Stoic doctrine. See The City of God, II, xix.4. At the end of Julius Caesar, Brutus criticises suicide as unStoic, but is compelled to embrace it himself out of regard for his honour. See The Arden Shakespeare: Julius Caesar, ed. T.S. Dorsch (London and New York: Methuen, 1955), V.1.101-120.

33. See Rist, pp.26,34,52-53, and The Cambridge History of Renaissance Philosophy, ed. Charles B. Schmitt (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1988), pp. 361-67.



Since my dear soul was mistress of her choice,  
And could of men distinguish her election,  
Sh'ath seal'd thee for herself. . . .

III.2.59-65.

Hamlet's choice of Horatio as a friend, based on knowledge of his merit, is contrasted with the false friendship of those who choose opportunistically. On this level, his speech reiterates the abhorrence of subjectivism that has estranged Hamlet from Elsinore and from Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, the false friends (as he sees them) whose dismissal immediately precedes his warm reception of his real friend and confidant. Hamlet's friendship with Horatio preserves those principles - the independent recognition of value, the existence of moral distinctions - that are the condition of his own sense of purpose as a man and a prince. The speech reaffirms the convictions which the soliloquies have shown to be frustrated by their necessary connection with private revenge.

Hamlet, of course, envies his friend's tranquillity with an intensity which suggests that it is for him an unattainable ideal. What distinguishes him from Horatio is that he has the task of eradicating fortune's sway over the values of the court of Denmark. And this is a task, as we have seen, which prohibits the blending of blood and judgement; which turns objective value into subjective desire, and passionate indignation into immoral action. Hamlet cannot act without becoming 'passion's slave' and he cannot renounce action without submitting to injurious fortune. Either way, he is 'a

pipe for fortune's finger'. It is not hard to understand why Horatio's honourable self-mastery should inspire Hamlet's admiration.

The play-within-the-play which rapidly follows Hamlet's eulogy of Horatio continues to attend to the motifs of passion, constancy and fortune, which are a striking feature of this sustained phase of the dramatic action. The climax of the 'Mousetrap' - the re-enactment of the murder of King Hamlet in order to test Claudius's guilt - is delayed by a lengthy discussion of why men do not do what they purpose to do. The player queen's vows of undying love are answered by the player king's speech on the difficulties of keeping one's resolutions, more specifically, of translating one's feelings into action:

The violence of either grief or joy  
Their own enactures with themselves destroy.  
III.2.191-92.

A promise has no meaning unless it is enacted, fulfilled in deeds.<sup>34</sup> Two reasons are given why vows of constant love are not kept: first, as the above passage implies, because purposes inspired by passion are intrinsically unstable; secondly, because love is often guided by fortune, and so fluctuates in accordance with the prosperity of its object.

In the context of the episode, the vow in question is the marriage oath, and the conduct required that of a faithful

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34. The QED glosses 'enacture' as 'carrying into act, fulfilment'.

wife and widow. On this level, the second of the player king's explanations for infidelity, like the entire sequence of the 'Mousetrap', clearly alludes to the hypocrisy of Gertrude's protestations of love. Yet the player king's speech is not only specific; its gnomic couplets also make a statement of general truths. This stylised, sententious quality has regularly led critics to see it as a comment on Hamlet's own failure to act. If this is so, the speech makes indirect reference to honour, a particular instance of constancy, or, more accurately, to dishonour, the failure to 'honour' a promise. The player king sees life as dominated by mutability, forgetfulness, opportunism - to the extent that he cannot know whether 'love lead fortune or else fortune love' (III.2.198), and concludes that 'Our thoughts are ours, their ends none of our own.' (III.2.208). Love fades with time, so constancy becomes, as it were, a race against time. If love is enlarged to include filial love (as it must if the speech is to be seen as alluding to Hamlet's delay), then, when revenge is demanded by love, action has to be swift to overtake the progress of forgetfulness. Once again, the criterion of sincerity, or honour, becomes rapidity rather than legitimacy of execution, action rather than scruple.

This oblique commentary on revenge honour is perhaps grasped more readily in the study than in the theatre. However, the hints it provides will be made explicit later in the play when Claudius employs the player king's two explanations of inconstancy in order to hustle Laertes into

adopting a criminal plot to recover his family honour. Its function, for the moment, is to make clear that the principles of inconstancy applying to Gertrude are identical to those applying to Hamlet, and that the obligations of love coincide with the obligations of vengeance.

It is at this point in the play, then, when Claudius's guilt has been verified independently of the Ghost and Hamlet knows that he must act, that he is depicted most clearly as the avenging son. During the play-within-the-play, Hamlet's commentary has exhibited a state of mounting excitement, and the tone of his brief concluding soliloquy strongly suggests that ocular proof of Claudius's guilt has generated the hatred and bloodlust of an avenger:

'Tis now the very witching time of night,  
When churchyards yawn and hell itself breathes out  
Contagion to this world. Now could I drink hot  
blood,  
And do such bitter business as the day  
Would quake to look on. III.2.379-83.

Hamlet is here speaking the traditional language of blood revenge, familiar to us from his blood-thirsty rant in the 'O what a rogue and peasant slave' soliloquy. On that occasion, Hamlet's rhetorical extravagance clearly lacked authenticity. Is this latest assumption of the role he is required to play equally artificial? Both speeches display an abrupt change of register, from the language of blood to the language of reflection:

Soft, now to my mother.  
O heart, lose not thy nature. Let not ever  
The soul of Nero enter this firm bosom. . . .  
III.2.383-85.

However, it is clear that Hamlet's attitude to the role of revenger has changed: he is no longer deriding a sensational idiom which he has strained to generate, but seeking to calm his own homicidal impulses in anticipation of his meeting with Gertrude. He thinks himself capable at this moment of murdering his own mother. What Hamlet's state of mind is at this point has been variously debated.<sup>35</sup> From the perspective of the play's interrogation of revenge honour, however, the speech can be read as exhibiting at once the terrifying extent to which he has at last achieved identity with the role of avenging son and his attempt to stand outside the role and impose restraints upon it. There is a tension between the revenger and the moral being, who maintains just enough control to bridle his bloodlust.

Hamlet, then, obeys the Ghost's command to leave Gertrude 'to heaven', at least to the extent that he will not take retributive action against her. However, he does not obey the Ghost's further instruction to leave her 'to those thorns that in her bosom lodge / To prick and sting her.' (I.5.87-88). Hamlet's determination to punish Gertrude with words, if not with daggers, reflects the moral motive inherent in his

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35. Eleanor Prosser interprets the speech as a sign of Hamlet's decline into inhuman ferocity (pp.185-86). Philip Edwards, on the other hand, suggests that the line, 'Now could I drink hot blood', should be spoken with 'a shiver of apprehension and disgust', and reflects Hamlet's fear that he may be slipping into hellish activity. See the 'Introduction' to Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, The New Cambridge Shakespeare, p.52. Martin Dodsworth sees the speech as a piece of play-acting in which Hamlet tries out the traditional role of avenger (p.177).

conception of 'action'. We cannot assume that because Hamlet obeys Gertrude's summons rather than immediately seeking Claudius, he has allowed his desire to awaken her conscience to take precedence over the duty of revenge. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have just announced that the king is 'in his retirement' (III.2.293); and when Hamlet goes to his mother, he does not hesitate to kill when he thinks he has Claudius at his mercy. What we can say, however, is that the reformatory impulse remains entangled with the retributive one.

On his way to his mother's closet, Hamlet comes upon Claudius at prayer, but decides that to kill him there and then would be insufficiently severe: 'Up, sword, and know thou a more horrid hent. . . .' (III.3.88). To expedite Claudius's soul to heaven, or at the very least to purgatory, would fail to meet the criterion of revenge, and repay an injury with reward rather than punishment:

A villain kills my father, and for that  
I, his sole son, do this same villain send  
To heaven.  
Why, this is hire and salary, not revenge.  
III.3.76-79.

Retributive justice cannot countenance killing a man who has denied his brother the last rites when that man is, or seems to be, in a state of grace. Nor would such a deed count as honourable. The phrase 'hire and salary' suggests a gross betrayal of the filial relationship; it is as if Hamlet had hired Claudius to murder his father and were now paying him

his wages.<sup>36</sup> To kill Claudius at prayer seems tantamount to proof that Hamlet does not love his father, that he is in fact a monstrous hypocrite like Claudius. To be honourable, to translate constant love into action, is to repay his uncle's injury in kind; thus, to be honourable is to damn Claudius's soul.

In this speech, the desire to avoid moral degeneracy through retaliatory action is shown to result in the assumption of unlimited powers for the self, in the prince's conviction that he can effect justice not only in this world, but in the next. Through Hamlet's ludicrously inflated conception of his own authority, the play exhibits the absurd logic of revenge ethics, which turns plaintiff into magistrate and law into retribution, making it 'moral' to seek the damnation of one's enemy: Hamlet is not repudiating morality in this speech; rather, he is making a conscious attempt to act in a virtuous manner, according to the terms of revenge honour. The consequences of his fidelity to the revenge ethic are an appalling vindictiveness that, for Dr. Johnson, made this speech 'too horrible to be read or to be uttered',<sup>37</sup> and

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36. This is Kittredge's gloss, in The Complete Works of Shakespeare, eds. Irving Ribner and George Lyman Kittredge (Waltham, Mass. and Toronto: Xerox College Publishing, 1971).

37. In The Plays of Shakespeare, vol. 8 (London, 1765). Modern scholars who agree with Dr. Johnson's verdict include Irving Ribner, Patterns in Shakespearian Tragedy, p. 77; Paul Gottschalk, 'Hamlet and the Scanning of Revenge', p. 165; and Roland Mushat Frye, The Renaissance 'Hamlet': Issues and Responses in 1600, p. 135. G.B. Harrison, in Shakespeare's Tragedies, p. 103, sees the play as here employing an acceptable theatrical convention.

pride, the conviction of his own unlimited moral authority. The perspective of honour on the play does not force us to claim, with numerous critics, that Hamlet is procrastinating in this speech, or that he is too sensitive to murder a defenceless man.<sup>38</sup> He is simply trapped in the logic of revenge, imposed on him by an authority at once paternal, royal and otherworldly.

Hamlet's exorbitant claims are immediately deflated in the closet scene. Thinking he hears Claudius eavesdropping behind the arras, the prince acts swiftly and decisively, and promptly kills the wrong man. Far from exhibiting an unlimited control, the murder of Polonius suggests Hamlet's essential powerlessness to effect his own designs. The dispenser of justice commits an injustice that makes him the villain in a cause that mirrors his own. Yet his murder of Polonius does not deflect him from his verbal assault on Gertrude's complacency. Hamlet's apparent lack of remorse has often drawn the censure of critics,<sup>39</sup> and there is no denying that he is now worked up into a pitch of frenzied excitement.

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38. Peter Alexander, in Hamlet, Father and Son (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1955), pp.144-47, and C.J. Sisson, in Shakespeare's Tragic Justice (London: Methuen and Co. Ltd., 1962), pp.68-69, have put forward the influential argument that the scene illustrates the prince's inability to kill a defenceless man. Supporters of the procrastination theory include Hazlitt, in Characters of Shakespeare's Plays (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1916), p.83, and Bradley, in Shakespearean Tragedy, pp.134-35.

39. See Prosser, p.195; Edwards, 'Introduction', Hamlet Prince of Denmark, The New Cambridge Shakespeare, p.54; and de Madariaga, pp.22-23.



The device of the two portraits, to be sure, suggests that Hamlet is trying to raise his mother's moral consciousness by enforcing upon her the necessity of objective value. Yet his tirades are not disinterested exhortations, but feverish castigations which suggest the extent to which Hamlet's own inner stability has been damaged by his mother's apparent betrayal of her first husband and, with him, of the distinction between virtue and vice. Her conduct seems to him to call 'virtue hypocrite', to pluck the soul from 'the body of contraction' and to make 'sweet religion' a 'rhapsody of words' (III.4.42,46-48). Indeed, her sensuality becomes exemplary licence:

Rebellious hell,  
If thou canst mutine in a matron's bones,  
To flaming youth let virtue be as wax  
And melt in her own fire. . . . III.4.82-85.

Hamlet's bitter words to Gertrude at the start of the scene - 'You are the Queen, your husband's brother's wife, / And, would it were not so, you are my mother.' (III.4.14-15) - indicate how desperately important it is for him that his mother should not be vicious, that he is trying to purge and reclaim her for his own sake, not merely for hers.

It is a commonplace of criticism that in his reproof of his mother, Hamlet's moral language is symptomatic of a 'tainted mind'; and causal explanations, often Freudian, have not been

in short supply.<sup>40</sup> My argument leads me to take his professed intention on its own terms, seeing here a moral, rather than a merely psychological, crisis. But it does not follow that he has escaped the contradictions of his predicament. The anguished speeches pleading for the corroboration of his moral values that his mother's reform would provide are delivered over Polonius's corpse - the emblem of Hamlet's own lapse into egoism. In this way, the scene gives dramatic form to the gulf between moral aspiration and implementation. This gap is widened by the reappearance of the Ghost, who has come 'to whet' Hamlet's 'almost blunted purpose' (III.4.111), to sharpen a resolve which, as the prince sees it, has 'laps'd in time and passion' (III.4.108). With the corpse of Polonius in full view on the stage, it is hard not to see irony in Hamlet's equation of his failure to execute the Ghost's 'dread command' (III.4.109) with his own failure to take the swift and passionate action required of the avenging son. He has acted all right. His only failure is that he has killed the wrong man.

Indeed, it is the gap between intention and action that underlies Hamlet's response to the Ghost's return:

Look you how pale he glares.  
His form and cause conjoin'd, preaching to stones,  
Would make them capable. - Do not look upon me,  
Lest with this piteous action you convert  
My stern effects. Then what I have to do

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40. See Ernest Jones, Hamlet and Oedipus (New York: The Norton Library, 1976), pp.81-103; L.C. Knights, An Approach to 'Hamlet', pp.64-65; Prosser, pp.195-97; and A.J.A Waldo, 'Hamlet': A Study in Critical Method (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1931), p.58.

Will want true colour - tears perchance for blood.  
III.4.125-30.

The Ghost's mute eloquence matches in its effects that of Hecuba's fate on the player, and recalls the strain between the passion of pity and the passion of retribution: Hamlet actually fears that the Ghost's demeanour will 'convert' his 'stern effects', turn the punitive bloody deeds he purposes into 'tears'. The sundering of the moral indignation provoked by the victim of injustice from retaliative action illustrates the problematic nature of Hamlet's task in terms of two contradictory forms of passion: that which is moral but inactive and that which generates the 'stern effects' which we have just seen go so disastrously wrong. Thus, the need to act is again coupled with the certainty that action produces something akin to moral collapse.

If Hamlet's initial lack of response to the death of Polonius seems callous, the play subsequently indicates that he may have grasped the terrible irony of his botched attempt to act the avenging son:

For this same lord  
I do repent; but heaven hath pleas'd it so,  
To punish me with this and this with me,  
That I must be their scourge and minister.  
III.4.174-77.

In these lines, Hamlet does not claim the privilege of ordaining for others. On the contrary, what he perceives is his own lack of control, a perception that carries with it the complementary awareness that it is he that has been made use of. He begins to feel that he is the instrument of a greater

plot than his own.<sup>41</sup> In this role, Hamlet sees himself as both punisher and punished. Thus, the death of Polonius, the outcome of the logic of the revenge ethic, results in the intimation of providential design, which suggests in turn the possibility of agency, of a new form of action untainted by egoism. The scene, however, offers no confirmation of Hamlet's new perspective on his task, and the suggestion that he might be able to find a way out of his impasse must be carefully balanced against this uncertainty.

The murder of Polonius is a major dramatic climax, for it stimulates the perception of instrumentality that will figure so prominently in the fifth act, while initiating Laertes's revenge upon Hamlet, out of which the play's dénouement will spring. For the moment, however, Hamlet's sense of providential purpose does nothing to dispel his confusion over his appointed task. He departs for England, his duty unfulfilled, and in his next encounter - with Fortinbras - returns to the problem of honour. Young Fortinbras's Polish venture offers Hamlet an example of honourable élan and dash: the readiness to face death for a worthless piece of land. Hamlet reacts by condemning the absurdity of the undertaking.

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41. See Fredson Bowers, 'Hamlet as Minister and Scourge', PMLA, LXX (1955), 741-49. Bowers argues that Hamlet comes to understand, at this point in the drama, that having undertaken a purely private revenge rather than the execution of public justice required by heaven, he has been punished by killing the wrong man. Sister Miriam Joseph, in 'Discerning the Ghost in Hamlet', similarly interprets Hamlet's task in terms of the repudiation of private revenge in favour of acting as an instrument of Providence.

then by spurning the shame of his own inaction.

Hamlet begins by characterising the Polish campaign as an acte gratuit, as a manifestation of the unnatural cravings bred by a surfeit of wealth and peace:

Two thousand souls and twenty thousand ducats  
Will not debate the question of this straw!  
This is th'impostume of much wealth and peace,  
That inward breaks, and shows no cause without  
Why the man dies. IV.4.25-29.

The risking of so much for so little is likened to an internal abscess, 'an inward swelling full of corrupt matter'.<sup>42</sup> The idea of an appearance of health masking an inner disease recalls Hamlet's words to Gertrude:

Mother, for love of grace,  
Lay not that flattering unction to your soul,  
That not your trespass but my madness speaks.  
It will but skin and film the ulcerous place,  
Whiles rank corruption, mining all within,  
Infects unseen. III.4.146-51.

What these two instances of internal corruption share, not surprisingly at this stage in our argument, is their basis in subjectivism. Like Gertrude, young Fortinbras imputes value to what he 'infectiously affects' (T&C, II.2.60) - which is clearly the opportunity to display his own courage. His honour, the courage to face death for nothing, emerges as an expression of appetite.

Yet once Hamlet is alone, his dismissal of honour as appetite does not satisfy him (just as the promptings of

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42. Jenkins, in The Arden Shakespeare: Hamlet, cites Randle Cotgrave, A Dictionary of the French and English Tongues, 1611.

conscience could not satisfy him in the 'To be or not to be' soliloquy), for not to act (his only alternative to what Fortinbras is doing) is no improvement on acting absurdly. Hamlet's soliloquy begins with the question of the point of human life:

How all occasions do inform against me,  
And spur my dull revenge. What is a man  
If his chief good and market of his time  
Be but to sleep and feed? A beast, no more.  
Sure he that made us with such large discourse,  
Looking before and after, gave us not  
That capability and godlike reason  
To fust in us unus'd. IV.4.32-39.

A man who does not use his reason - that is, whose reason does not issue into deeds - cannot be distinguished from the sub-rational beast. However, the only form of action open to Hamlet is irrational revenge, as the soliloquy's first sentence makes plain. Hamlet does not seem to have progressed one jot: he remains trapped in the contradiction between reason and revenge. To act is to be irrational and appetitive like Fortinbras. Yet inaction is proof of moral impoverishment, which takes two forms in the speech: the 'Bestial oblivion' (IV.4.40) of those who merely 'sleep and feed', and the 'craven scruple / Of thinking too precisely on th'event. . . .' (IV.4.40-41).

One of the major problems of the soliloquy is the phrase 'craven scruple', for scruples are concerned not merely with 'th'event' (here death as the outcome of action), but with 'th'event' as it relates to the moral quality of the deed. As in the 'To be or not to be' soliloquy, conscience makes us

fear the possibility not of death merely, but of damnation. To reject such scruples as less wisdom than cowardice (IV.4.42-43) therefore entails endorsing action regardless of its nature. It is to make action the basis of virtue, and to relocate virtue not in the cause, but in the courage, of the acting subject. Under the impulse of Hamlet's own shame and guilt, the soliloquy becomes an exaltation of 'divine ambition' for its own sake:

Witness this army of such mass and charge,  
Led by a delicate and tender prince,  
Whose spirit, with divine ambition puff'd,  
Makes mouths at the invisible event,  
Exposing what is mortal and unsure  
To all that fortune, death, and danger dare,  
Even for an eggshell. IV.4.47-53.

In this formulation, virtue becomes a function of the self-consistent will.

In this soliloquy, Hamlet, in effect, wants it both ways. The curious formulation of honour in the speech - the honour that rejects both bestial oblivion and craven scruple - evokes the ambiguity of his own duty. For although the prince, unlike Fortinbras, has a cause - 'a father kill'd, a mother stain'd' (IV.4.57) - that cause is itself inseparable from the imperative of private revenge, which the play has shown to be rooted in an egocentric honour which exalts the self at the expense of conscience. Thus, if Hamlet acts to overcome bestial oblivion, he will do so only by scorning scruples as cowardice. The soliloquy shows Hamlet attempting to reconcile the two levels of his task, but their incompatibility expresses itself in the form of two contradictory

propositions:

Rightly to be great  
Is not to stir without great argument,  
But greatly to find quarrel in a straw  
When honour's at the stake. IV.4.53-56.

Capell's reading, that the single negative should be taken in a double sense ('Is not not to stir'),<sup>43</sup> surely deprives the passage of both its complexity and dramatic consistency. For Hamlet is here seeking to harmonise the two inseparable but mutually exclusive aspects of his relationship to action: in the first, the subject derives his greatness from the greatness of his cause; in the second, greatness derives from the subject's determination to act, regardless of the worth of the cause, when his own honour, or moral substance, is in question. One formulation associates virtue with the intrinsic nature of the action, the other equates the cause with the self and makes the function of action self-vindication. In short, the one is rational and objective, the other subjective and passional. Hamlet declares that his task appeals simultaneously to 'my reason and my blood' (IV.4.58), yet in the soliloquy, and indeed in the play as a whole, these two impulses to action are mutually inimical in the sense that the latter undoes the former, that is to say, transforms the aspiration to active virtue into a self-centred passion.

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43. Edward Capell, Mr. William Shakespeare, his Comedies, Histories, and Tragedies, vol.10 (London: 1767-68). Harold Jenkins, in The Arden Shakespeare: Hamlet, adopts Capell's reading, as does Philip Edwards, in Hamlet Prince of Denmark, The New Cambridge Shakespeare.



We have argued that this contradiction, in one form or another, has informed the progress of the play's tragic conflict. It has shaped Hamlet's soliloquies, manifesting itself in a self-recriminative delay expressing simultaneously his belief that he is morally obliged to act and his distance from the form of action required of him. The play has shown, moreover, that when Hamlet does manage to generate the passion necessary to obey the Ghost's directive, the result is an appalling moral débâcle. Confronted with the Fortinbras soliloquy, one is tempted to conclude that, having been unable to sustain that pitch of emotional intensity, Hamlet reverts to the preoccupations that held him before the sight of Claudius's guilt drove him into action. Yet this final soliloquy differs from its predecessors in one important respect: it states explicitly to the audience for the first time the tragic contradiction in which Hamlet is trapped. Does this suggest that it is at last rising to the surface of his consciousness? If so, we can regard it at this stage as no more than a preliminary tremor which does nothing to release Hamlet from his predicament, for the speech as a whole drives on towards its climactic resolution:

O, from this time forth  
My thoughts be bloody or be nothing worth.  
IV.4.65-66.

This is the last we hear from Hamlet until his return from his sea voyage at the beginning of Act V.

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During the prince's temporary absence from Denmark, the play keeps the nature of revenge honour before our eyes in its second cycle of revenge. Laertes provides a portrait of revenge in its simplest terms. For the son of Polonius, the duty of private vengeance is just that; it has none of the public or moral implications that complicate Hamlet's task. His highest imperative is family honour, and his attitude to the role of avenging son is as lucid as Hamlet's is opaque and ambiguous.

Laertes, of course, is contrasted with Hamlet not only in his uncritical attitude to honour, but in the fact that his role as avenging son is public. Unlike Hamlet, he does not have to hide his purposes, but can openly identify his enemy, declare his purposes and invoke the necessary sanctions of family honour:

That drop of blood that's calm proclaims me  
    bastard,  
Cries cuckold to my father, brands the harlot  
Even here between the chaste unsmirched brow  
Of my true mother. IV.5.117-20.

To be 'calm' under the kind of provocation he feels he has received would confirm the dishonour of the entire family unit. This dishonour would be emphatically public; the verbs ('proclaims', 'cries', 'brands') make family disgrace audible and visible to the world at large. To take the affront lying down would be tantamount to a public declaration that he is not his father's son, a declaration that would convert the roles of 'son', 'father', 'mother' into roles of social ignominy: 'bastard', 'cuckold', 'harlot'. The ties of blood

uniting family members involve Laertes in a role that is simultaneously private and public, and the revenge honour he here expresses advocates the translation of private passion - filial piety, grief, outrage - into public display and action. Moreover, the family's dignity in the eyes of others is shown to be indivisible; the dishonour of one family member entails the dishonour of all. As guardian of familial integrity, Laertes's revenge is at once a binding obligation and an act of self-restitution.

To underline Laertes's commitment to revenge honour is not, of course, to deny either the sincerity of his grief or the legitimacy of his grievance. He has unquestionably been wronged, and the impetuous fury with which he forces his way into the king's presence makes it impossible to interpret his passion as anything other than genuine. When Ophelia enters later in the scene, we witness his grief-stricken reaction to her madness and recognise the extent of the injury he has suffered. In an earlier scene of leave-taking, the play encouraged us to see Laertes in his roles as son and brother. In I.3, he demonstrated his concern for Ophelia's reputation, urging her to defend her honour, or chastity, against the 'trifling' of Hamlet's favour (I.3.5) and the stirrings of her own desire. Though clearly prompted by fraternal affection, this moral instruction, at once worldly and puritanical, had a smug and conventional flavour, conveyed in the penchant for platitudes that Laertes shared with his father:

The chariest maid is prodigal enough  
If she unmask her beauty to the moon.

Virtue itself scapes not calumnious strokes.

I.3.36-38.

And indeed, Ophelia's playful rejoinder, charging Laertes to heed his own counsel, suggested the shallowness of his moralising.

We are not altogether surprised, therefore, that Laertes should now operate entirely within the code of family honour. This he locates in the blood which constitutes the family bond. When he declares that even one calm drop of blood dishonours both his parents and himself, it is impossible to distinguish natural feelings from honour feelings. It is this identity of honour and nature which gives to the role of avenging son its curious combination of impulsiveness and theatricality. The blood which burns with indignation at an offence committed against a loved one both expresses natural feelings of grief and resentment and demands the ritual of public reparation. Sincerity of emotion coexists with display of emotion. This demonstration of passion is inevitably self-regarding, for in vindicating the honour of the group, Laertes seeks simultaneously to exhibit his own honourable nature by declaring his refusal to endure the wrong that calls it into question.

The full implications of Laertes's unquestioning adherence to the revenge code are clarified in his public declaration of courage:

To hell, allegiance! Vows to the blackest devil!  
Conscience and grace, to the profoundest pit!  
I dare damnation. To this point I stand,

That both the worlds I give to negligence,  
Let come what comes, only I'll be reveng'd  
Most throughly for my father. IV.5.131-36.

What Laertes proclaims is his contempt for restraints on action. He will break his faith, ignore the voice of conscience, and reject the grace upon which man depends for his salvation. What is extraordinary about these lines is that they are offered as the measure and criterion of honour and courage: Laertes is so brave, so devoted to the memory of his father, so passionately committed to his cause, that he will dare even damnation, the possibility that he may be condemned to eternal punishment for an immoral action.

Laertes, of course, is following the logic of revenge honour, which equates moral worth with retaliatory action and scruple with cowardice. According to this logic, individual virtue manifests itself in unprincipled action. That Laertes is ready to accept it reveals not only a disastrously uncritical attitude to revenge, but a concern for reputation that can only be described as obsessional, for the need to repair a damaged identity clearly blinds Laertes to the viciousness of the mandate he obeys.

That Laertes is obsessed with his social image is shown by his response to Hamlet's public apology in Act V:

I am satisfied in nature,  
Whose motive in this case should stir me most  
To my revenge; but in my terms of honour  
I stand aloof, and will no reconciliation  
Till by some elder masters of known honour  
I have a voice and precedent of peace  
To keep my name ungor'd. V.2.240-46.

Laertes can relinquish the ties of 'nature', but not the 'terms of honour' that keep his name 'ungor'd'. The phrase 'terms of honour' evokes a formal code of conduct which regulates interaction between claimants to honour and defines the terms whereby an individual may avoid loss of prestige. Laertes's adherence to a code of honour (the intricacies of which require the specialist interpretation of 'elder masters') reveals his role as avenging son to be governed by conventional rules of conduct.

It is Laertes's conventionality that makes him so easy for Claudius to manipulate, for the conventional man is always predictable. What Claudius knows about Laertes is that his readiness to undertake any action in the name of honour will allow him to stoop to any crime. Thus, Claudius begins his manipulation of Laertes by implying that he did not really love his father, and that his displays of affection are mere hypocrisy:

Laertes, was your father dear to you?  
Or are you like the painting of a sorrow,  
A face without a heart? IV.7.106-108.

This suggestion of dishonour is followed by Claudius's speech on love as a self-consuming passion that can be translated into action only with the utmost haste. Hence, the two explanations of inconstancy that earlier formed the basis of the player king's speech - the violent and transitory nature of love and its insincerity - become in Claudius's hands the arguments for a swift and passionate demonstration that one is not a dishonourable hypocrite. The identification of honour

and action leads to the climactic question, with its implication that the more extreme the deed, the more honourable Laertes will be seen to be:

what would you undertake  
To show yourself in deed your father's son  
More than in words? IV.7.123-25.

The appeal to Laertes's most cherished sense of himself is clearly irresistible, for he replies that he would defy the law of sanctuary: 'To cut his throat i'th'church.' (IV.7.125). Yet Laertes's honour, the unrestrained determination to act, leads headlong into dishonour.<sup>44</sup> Far from 'daring all', he participates in a plot which requires poison and deception, and which will protect him from all its shameful or dangerous consequences: 'And for his death no wind of blame shall breathe. . . .' (IV.7.65).

Thus, the episode with Laertes reminds us, in Hamlet's absence, of exactly what is at stake in the hero's own implementation of duty, for it exhibits not only the spurious ethics of private revenge, but the moral blindness and corruptibility of the avenging son who endorses them uncritically out of regard for his own honour. The desire to right a wrong becomes hopelessly entangled in the desire to affirm the self. This deterioration of honour is further explored in the graveyard scene. The two clowns' muddled discussion of Ophelia's death with which it opens makes a

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44. See Council, pp.93,95.

crucial distinction between voluntary and involuntary action:<sup>45</sup>

Here lies the water - good. Here stands the man -  
good. If the man go to this water and drown  
himself, it is, will he nill he, he goes, mark you  
that. But if the water come to him and drown him,  
he drowns not himself. Argal, he that is not  
guilty of his own death shortens not his own life.

V.1.15-20.

This parody of legal argument stresses that guilt is determined by whether or not an act is willed. The reference to unwilled action develops the idea, first mooted by Hamlet at the end of the closet scene, of action untainted by the egoistic impulse. The difference between the man who commits suicide and the man who drowns accidentally is that the former acts in wilful defiance of divine law, characterised by the sexton as the wilful seeking of 'salvation' (V.1.2). We are clearly reminded of the alternative possibility of involuntary action.

It is the self-aggrandising impulse that is radically diminished in Hamlet's deliberations on mortality. As the sexton throws up one skull after another, the sight of these 'traditional motif[s] of moral reflection'<sup>46</sup> prompts the prince to meditate on the transitoriness of worldly ambition. He considers a series of types: the crafty politician who 'would circumvent God' (V.1.78); the courtier who uses obsequious good manners to get what he wants; the lawyer who reaches the

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45. Eleanor Prosser offers an illuminating discussion of this episode. See pp.219-20.

46. See Jenkins's gloss, in The Arden Shakespeare: Hamlet, p.380, and his Longer Note, pp.550-51.



top of his profession through a mastery of legal sophistry. These time-servers are self-servers; and it is the self that death utterly diminishes, as the sexton's unceremonious shovelling demonstrates (V.1.88). What the skulls represent to Hamlet is more than mortality; it is the absurdity of a life centred on the ego:

Is this the fine of his fines and the recovery of his recoveries, to have his fine pate full of fine dirt? V.1.104-106.

The one skull endowed with an individual identity, that of Yorick, the king's jester, takes on the function of the dead fool, offering a lesson on the vanity of self-importance:

Now get you to my lady's chamber and tell her, let her paint an inch thick, to this favour she must come. Make her laugh at that. V.1.186-89.

From here, the prince's deliberations progress to Alexander and Caesar, the traditional representatives of heroic ambition, and the certainty of mortality produces, in Hamlet's doggerel verses, a radical diminution of human pride:

Imperious Caesar, dead and turn'd to clay,  
Might stop a hole to keep the wind away.  
O that that earth which kept the world in awe  
Should patch a wall t'expel the winter's flaw.  
V.1.206-209.

The catalogue reaches its climax with the two foremost examples of the magnification of honour, and ends by linking honour with the worldly selfishness Hamlet despises.

What is the significance of this process of perception? In various ways, through Fortinbras and Laertes straightforwardly, and through Hamlet in his existential conflicts and confusions, the play, by focussing on the

special case of vengeance, has established the contradictions inherent in the operations of honour, which seeks to harness the self-creating energies of the ego to the service of virtue, and therefore makes a very thin divide between moral action and unscrupulous self-regard. That Hamlet should now perceive the vanity of honour suggests that he has at last attained the vantage-point of conscious repudiation.

Hamlet's thoughts are cut short by the arrival on stage of Ophelia's funeral cortège. Grief-stricken and incensed at his sister's fate, Laertes leaps into her grave and curses the man he holds responsible for her death:

O, treble woe  
Fall ten times treble on that cursed head  
Whose wicked deed thy most ingenious sense  
Depriv'd thee of. . . .  
Now pile your dust upon the quick and dead,  
Till of this flat a mountain you have made  
T'o'ertop old Pelion or the skyish head  
Of blue Olympus. V.1.239-42;244-47.

Laertes's language amplifies both resentment, in the 'treble woe' multiplied ten times, and sibling love, in the image of the mountain that touches the sky. His speech and gesture manifest his characteristic combination of immediacy and theatricality, recalling his earlier response to the sight of Ophelia's madness:

O heat, dry up my brains. Tears seven times salt  
Burn out the sense and virtue of mine eye.  
By heaven, thy madness shall be paid with weight  
Till our scale turn the beam. IV.5.154-57.

Love and revenge, or nature and honour, springing from the same source in shared blood, work together to generate a form of speech at once genuine and histrionic.

Hamlet steps forward and accuses Laertes of indulging in self-referential display. He attacks his grief for its 'emphasis' (V.1.248), the rhetorical term for excessive language,<sup>47</sup> and its 'phrase' (V.1.248), or conventional, formalised style,<sup>48</sup> and proceeds to parody his idiom:<sup>49</sup>

'Swounds, show me what thou't do.  
Woo't weep, woo't fight, woo't fast, woo't tear  
thyself.  
Woo't drink up eisel, eat a crocodile?  
I'll do't. V.1.269-72.

Laertes, Hamlet suggests, is merely acting out a role - a role which Hamlet can play with equal vigour. His contempt for Laertes's public demonstration of the honour code, which externalises private passion into a stock exhibition of emotion, is patent. Yet he apparently also regards it as an outrage, when measured against his own love and grief for Ophelia:

Forty thousand brothers  
Could not with all their quantity of love  
Make up my sum. V.1.264-66.

The 'bravery' of Laertes's grief, Hamlet later tells Horatio, put him into a 'tow'ring passion' (V.2.79-80). His

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47.Jenkins, in his gloss on this line, quotes Puttenham's Art of English Poesy. See The Arden Shakespeare: Hamlet, note, p.390.

48.See Edwards, Hamlet Prince of Denmark, The New Cambridge Shakespeare, note, p.222.

49.For accounts of Hamlet's parody of Laertes, see Madeleine Doran, Shakespeare's Dramatic Language (Madison, Wisc.: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1976), pp.44-45, and Maurice Charney, Style in 'Hamlet' (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1969), pp.275-80.

aversion for Laertes's rhetoric reinforces his rejection of the conventions of the honour code. But if he is right to detect exhibitionism in Laertes's passion, he is certainly not justified in dismissing it as insincere. Moreover, his own affirmation of love for Ophelia seems considerably less than an adequate response to the charge Laertes has levelled against him, which, however clamantly expressed, is undeniably warranted. Perhaps Hamlet is grief-stricken at the discovery of Ophelia's death, but we never hear him voice regret for the suffering he caused her. What he clearly does come to regret, however, is his conduct towards Laertes:

But I am very sorry, good Horatio,  
That to Laertes I forgot myself;  
For by the image of my cause I see  
The portraiture of his. I'll court his favours.  
V.2.75-78.

In these lines, Hamlet recognises that Laertes's cause is the mirror image of his own and determines to apologise for the wrong he has done him. The irony, of which Hamlet is unaware, is obviously that the parallel grievances make Hamlet the target of Laertes's revenge.

It has perhaps not been sufficiently noticed to what extent the graveyard scene, which is a sustained dramatic meditation on death, serves to undermine the claims and pretensions of self-aggrandising honour. It introduces a new dimension into the play, perhaps anticipated by Hamlet's philosophical perspective, but certainly in complete contrast to the way he has regarded death up to this point. To contemplate suicide as the only means of opposing a corrupt world is quite

different from recognising that one is subject to a condition of mortality that trivialises the self-centred and self-motivated activities of human beings, among which Hamlet numbers honour.

Hamlet's colloquy with Horatio that opens the final scene returns to the subject of unwilled action. Hamlet recounts the accidental events of his sea journey, and his uncalculating response to them, and asserts that he perceives a pattern in them that betrays a providential intent:

Rashly -

And prais'd be rashness for it: let us know  
Our indiscretion sometime serves us well  
When our deep plots do pall; and that should learn  
us  
There's a divinity that shapes our ends,  
Rough-hew them how we will - V.2.6-11.

He distinguishes between 'rashness', or acting impulsively, without premeditation, and 'deep plots', the carefully planned schemes which men formulate to achieve their ends. The fact that rashness can succeed where his own willed and prepared efforts have failed proves to Hamlet what he intimated at the close of the closet scene: that events are controlled, but not by himself. This is a crucial moment in the play, for it suggests that through what is, in effect, a surrender of will, Hamlet has been released from the psychology and mechanism of revenge honour.

To what extent does the play endorse this view? The dénouement of the action certainly confirms that 'deep plots' - notably of Claudius and Laertes - 'do pall', while

Hamlet's insouciance, his refusal to protect himself, despite his misgivings, and to finesse any further against Claudius, at last delivers his vengeance into his hands. But whether this implies the hand of providence is not evident. Hamlet's conversation with Horatio is not straightforward in that respect. It is significant, moreover, that unpremeditated action is identified as 'rashness', for this term does not suggest the fatalistic patience consonant with a thoroughgoing providential determinism, and retains disturbing associations with the impetuous action of the avenging son. Laertes rushes to his revenge with 'impetuous haste' (IV.5.100); in his encounter with Laertes in the graveyard, Hamlet implies that Polonius's son is 'splenative and rash' (V.1.254); and when Hamlet stabs Polonius through the arras, the deed is termed 'rash and bloody' (III.4.27).<sup>50</sup> On that occasion, Hamlet was not plotting, but acting on impulse, fresh from the encounter with the praying king, where he declared his intention to damn his enemy's soul. During the colloquy with Horatio, we learn that Hamlet, again acting 'rashly', has sent Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to their deaths, 'Not shriving-time allow'd' (V.2.47). It was after the murder of Polonius that Hamlet first perceived himself as a powerless agent in a providential plot; when the revenge ethic reached its disastrous climax, it appeared to turn into something else. Is criminal rashness then transmuted into agency? It is possible. But the play, by insisting on the parallels between the actions of the

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50. See Dodsworth, pp.259-60.

ruthless avenger and the blind instrument, forces us to recognise the perilously thin line separating the man who offers to guarantee the damnation of his enemies from the man who claims to be guided by 'heaven'.

The play does not allow us to dismiss the fates of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. It offers no evidence that they are privy to Claudius's plot against Hamlet's life, which the king discloses in soliloquy (IV.3.61-71). Moreover, had they known the contents of Claudius's letter, they would surely not have troubled to deliver it in Hamlet's absence;<sup>51</sup> yet the prince assumes that they will pass the commission on when they reach England. This last point calls into question the assumption that Hamlet believes Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to be Claudius's accomplices. The passage at the end of the closet scene where he accuses them of complicity in a plot to destroy him and determines to 'blow them at the moon' (III.4.211) grants Hamlet a knowledge he has had no opportunity of acquiring and places great strain on his account of the sea journey, where he claims to have discovered Claudius's murderous designs through a sudden moment of divinely inspired rashness. The passage does not appear in the Folio version, and it has been argued that Shakespeare deleted it when revising the play.<sup>52</sup> If this is the case, we

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51. See Skulsky, n., p.86.

52. See Edwards, 'Introduction', Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, The New Cambridge Shakespeare, pp.14-19, and Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor, eds. William Shakespeare, A Textual Companion (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1987), pp.396-402.

must view Hamlet's punishment of his school friends as an impulsive act undertaken without prior intimation of their role in the plot.

Yet we do not need to address the complex textual problems of the play to see that the colloquy with Horatio does not invite a simple response to Hamlet's device. Horatio does not applaud its justice; he says only, 'So Guildenstern and Rosencrantz go to't.' (V.2.56). Whether or not we sense an implicit reproach in Horatio's comment, it is clear that Hamlet feels the need to justify himself:

Why, man, they did make love to this employment.  
They are not near my conscience, their defeat  
Does by their own insinuation grow.  
'Tis dangerous when the baser nature comes  
Between the pass and fell incensed points  
Of mighty opposites. V.2.57-62.

Here, if anywhere, we would expect a clear accusation of complicity, but the speech is curiously imprecise. Hamlet says in his defence that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern 'made love' to their employment, 'insinuated' their 'baser natures' between two 'mighty opposites'. The language implies both their sycophancy and their eager participation: they are destroyed by the employment which they deliberately sought out of self-interest. Yet nothing in this explanation points clearly either to their prior knowledge of the commission or to their ignorance of it. The invocation of the duel between 'mighty opposites' is equally ambivalent: are they contemptible time-servers engulfed in a momentous combat or willing accessories who got more than they bargained for? The



speech seems designed not to settle the matter, but to underline the problematic nature of Hamlet's new conception of action. We may feel either that the prince is rationalising his own doubts or that he genuinely believes that, as Claudius's confederates, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern need not weigh heavily on his conscience. In any case, the play has made the refusal of absolution far too loaded an issue for it to be brushed aside here.

Horatio's role in the colloquy strengthens the impression of ambivalence. He responds to Hamlet's conviction that there is 'a divinity that shapes our ends' with a resounding 'That is most certain.' (V.2.11). Yet he appears uneasy about the fates of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. However, his response to the prince's self-justification - 'Why, what a king is this!' (V.2.62) - does much to focus our attention on Claudius's defilement of the royal office - the defilement that imparts to Hamlet's task its critical public dimension.

It is this remark which prompts the prince's all-important question:

Does it not, think thee, stand me now upon -  
He that hath kill'd my king and whor'd my mother,  
Popp'd in between th'election and my hopes,  
Thrown out his angle for my proper life  
And with such coz'nage - is't not perfect  
conscience  
To quit him with this arm? And is't not to be  
damn'd  
To let this canker of our nature come  
In further evil? V.2.63-70.

It is clear that Hamlet's faith in providential design has

strengthened rather than decreased his sense of responsibility for fulfilling his task. The conscience that in the 'To be or not to be' soliloquy forbade action on the grounds that to act was to dare damnation now seems to demand it. Now it may be damnable not to act, not to purge Denmark of a spreading infection. Now perhaps only inaction will be a manifestation of self-interest, of the bestial oblivion that avoids the acceptance of a moral and religious duty.

It is this union of action and morality that Hamlet has sought throughout the play and that his position within the revenge ethic has consistently denied him. In the urgent question that he puts to Horatio, he is looking for a resolution to his predicament, asking whether killing Claudius is not an act of 'perfect conscience' that he can neglect only at the peril of his soul. To this question he receives no answer. Hamlet is appealing to Horatio for assurance, but gets only the reminder that Claudius will shortly learn the 'issue of the business' in England (V.2.72).

It is his personal responsibility for a moral imperative that concerns Hamlet in these lines. He seems still to be thinking, despite his graveyard meditations and sea journey, about willed action, about the honour that sustains commitment to a virtuous cause. Throughout the play, this inner mechanism for good has been either paralysed or vitiated by its relation to a revenge ethic that dictates its decline into unscrupulous and egoistic action. And the play has offered no

hope that Hamlet can be freed from revenge and the disfigured honour which impels it through his own self-motivated efforts. The only way out of the impasse is to relinquish honour-driven action altogether - an alternative which the play has defined in terms of divinely guided 'rashness'. Hamlet's question is unanswerable because he poses it in the terms that cannot solve it, while the 'new' terms of instrumentality and divine purpose are not only shrouded in uncertainty, but are also, in Hamlet's own account of his actions on board ship, fraught with moral problems.

In reply to Horatio's warning that he has only a brief space of time in which to act, Hamlet declares, 'The interim is mine.' (V.2.73). But of course the play does not grant him any time in which to translate his moral and religious duty into action. Nor does he seem interested in formulating any plan, for he observes simply that man's life is short - 'And a man's life's no more than to say "one".' (V.2.74) - and thinks with regret of his conduct towards Laertes in the graveyard. When Osrlic appears with the summons to the fencing match, we know that Hamlet is walking straight into the trap laid for him. He senses the danger himself, but refuses to heed his premonition:

We defy augury. There is special providence in the fall of a sparrow. If it be now, 'tis not to come; if it be not to come, it will be now; if it be not now, yet it will come. The readiness is all. V.2.215-18.

Nowhere else do we feel more strongly that Hamlet's perspective has altered radically. The moral despair of the

struggle with fortune has given way to belief in a divine purpose at work in even the most seemingly insignificant event. It is to this ubiquitous providential design that Hamlet surrenders himself. There is courage in his resignation, for he willingly relinquishes self-preservation. But this courage is very different from honour, for it is based not in the efficacy of the individual will, capable of creating stability through its own efforts, but in the determination to face the consequences of events which are believed to be governed by a power higher than the self.

Dr. Johnson regretted that in his apology to Laertes Hamlet should 'shelter himself in falsehood', and many critics have followed suit in deploring the prince's disclaimer, 'What I have done. . . I here proclaim was madness.' (V.2.226,228).<sup>53</sup> Others have argued that to the prince of Act V, who has regained his self-possession, the murder of Polonius must indeed appear the result of 'a sore distraction' (V.2.225).<sup>54</sup> The play has certainly presented it as such, and there signs even at the end of the closet scene that Hamlet had begun to grasp the extent of his mental and moral collapse. Whether or not Hamlet is being economical with the truth (and it would be

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53. The Plays of Shakespeare, vol.8. Seymour felt that the disclaimer was an interpolation, it being too ignoble a device for the hero to employ (cited in Hamlet, A New Variorum Edition of Shakespeare, ed. Horace Howard Furness (New York: Dover Publications Ltd., 1963), I,440). De Madariaga calls the apology 'an admirable example of egotism' (p.28).

54. See Prosser, pp.236-37; Edwards, Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, The New Cambridge Shakespeare, n., p.235; Ribner, Patterns in Shakespearian Tragedy, p.84; and Nigel Alexander, p.192.

impossible for him to confess publicly that he killed Polonius thinking he was Claudius), there is no reason to doubt the sincerity of his expression of regret. He offers his apology in explicitly fraternal terms: 'I have shot my arrow o'er the house / And hurt my brother.' (V.2.239-40). His defence rests ultimately on a denial of intention to offend, and is accompanied by a frank public admission of blame: 'Give me your pardon, sir. I have done you wrong. . . .' (V.2.222).

That Hamlet can recognise Laertes as a fellow sufferer and make a public apology suggests that he is as detached from the honour code as Laertes is trapped inside it. This unscrupulous covert avenger declines to accept the apology until such time as his 'terms of honour' (V.2.342) are made legally secure. He does not scruple, however, to offer a provisional reconciliation to the man he is plotting to murder:

But till that time  
I do receive your offer'd love like love  
And will not wrong it. V.2.246-48.

Throughout this climactic episode, as his honour collaborates with hypocrisy and policy, Laertes serves to remind us of the self-defeating logic of revenge honour. His unquestioning allegiance to the honour code leads him to act in the most dishonourable fashion, colluding in a murder plot disguised as sport, which is designed to shield him from risk and during which he seems prepared to strike at his opponent when he is off his guard: 'Have at you now.' (V.2.306). Through an aside, however, we learn that his honour-driven actions are

'almost against' his conscience (V.2.300). It is hard not to feel that Hamlet's courage ('We defy augury') rises as far above the courage of honour as Laertes's craven scheming sinks below it.

What this amounts to saying is that the play achieves resolution only when the claims of honour have been dismissed. Whether we can say that it underwrites the claims of providence is far less certain. The climactic scene seems at pains to stress that through faith the hero has transcended self-motivated action and so been released from the impasse to which his agonised conflict over honour condemned him.

'Benetted round with villainies' (V.2.29), with no plan of his own, Hamlet approaches the fencing match resigned to what he sees as the beneficent workings of the divine will. It is after a rapid and dreadful sequence of revelations, which include his mother's death and the discovery that he has received his own death-wound, that Hamlet learns of the plot against him and, acting impulsively, kills the king. The play suggests that in performing the deed that has so long eluded him, Hamlet acts as far as possible without vicious and self-centred motives - that, to use the gravedigger's metaphor for unwilling action, he did not go to the water, the water came to him.<sup>55</sup>

Laertes's comments after the fencing match invite us to see

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55. See Prosser, p.238.

some kind of retributive justice at work as the plotters are caught in their own traps. As he expresses it after being stabbed with the poisoned sword: 'I am justly kill'd with mine own treachery.' (V.2.313). In the same way, Claudius's double plot against Hamlet's life is served back upon him; Hamlet stabs him with the envenomed and unbated sword and then forces him to drink from the poisoned cup, after which Laertes comments, 'He is justly serv'd.' (V.2.332).<sup>56</sup> Yet the stratagem that backfires on its authors claims as well the lives of Gertrude and Hamlet, who, though in different ways and degrees corrupted by Claudius's original fratricide, did not initiate the cycle of lies and violence.

Are we then to see the death of Claudius as a victory, as the accomplishment of a purifying public act sanctioned by a higher authority? The play does not answer this question. It strongly suggests that the hero fulfills his task not through the impetus of revenge honour, but by submitting himself to what he believes is a supreme and mysterious design in the world, even if it means giving his own life, which in the event it does. His reactive impulses during the fencing match are made part of a pattern of 'deep plots' palling that shows evil to be self-destructive, even if it also shows others to be vulnerable. But in Hamlet, this is a temporal pattern, not a transcendent one. Shakespeare remains rooted in 'this harsh world' (V.2.353). To put it in Christian terms (which the

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56. See Frye, p.268.

play does not suppress), the fact of original sin is diagnosed, but the possibility of grace remains a possibility, a hope, not a certainty. Horatio's optative 'And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest' (V.2.365) against Hamlet's indicative 'the rest is silence' (V.2.363). Hamlet's responsibility as a prince remains towards the world from which he is about to depart. As he dies, he insists that Horatio stay behind to tell his story. It matters to Hamlet that he should not leave 'a wounded name' (V.2.349) behind him, that the truth about himself and the cause he espoused should be reported to 'the unsatisfied' (V.2.345). His last thought is for the succession, as he gives his 'dying voice' to Fortinbras (V.2.361), freshly arrived from his Polish conquest.

The military funeral which the play grants its hero seems to acknowledge the heroic dimensions of his struggle with a task that appeared at once essential and deeply doubtful, and to which he willingly surrendered his life. However, the play's suggestions that Hamlet succeeded, that he found a way out of his terrible predicament, are qualified in such a way that the extent of his achievement remains an open question. Claudius is dead, but Fortinbras takes over, and there is no denying that the foreign adventurer's accession to the throne of Denmark is a devastating climax. Hamlet has strived to restore moral order to a society dominated by ambition and fortune, but he leaves it in the hands of a man whose subjective honour represents everything that he has opposed



and apparently, within himself, transcended. It may be that Fortinbras's accession should be taken less as a measure of Hamlet's failure than as the play's judgement that in this world there are only temporary solutions - purgations rather than final cures. However, it cannot be denied that although Horatio accepts the prince's charge to explain events to 'th'yet unknowing world' (V.2.384), the story he tells points neither to successful completion nor divine sanction:

So shall you hear  
Of carnal, bloody, and unnatural acts,  
Of accidental judgements, casual slaughters,  
Of deaths put on by cunning and forc'd cause,  
And, in this upshot, purposes mistook  
Fall'n on th'inventors' heads. V.2.385-90.

We need not align this account too strictly with the particular events of the play to see that Horatio makes no allusion to justice restored or even to order won at great cost. He speaks of 'accidental judgements' and 'casual slaughters', of plots recoiling on their inventors, but there is no sure indication that what is apparently random and fortuitous in fact represents the hidden workings of providence. When the English ambassadors arrive with the news that 'Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead' (V.2.376), the play reminds us of the questionable fate meted out to these two unfortunate time-servers by a hero who felt himself to be acting as God's instrument. If we want assurances that Hamlet really did become the agent of an inscrutable providential playwright ordering events in this world, the play refuses either to deny or confirm this; and it recognises his courage and self-sacrifice without losing sight of the intractable

moral problems and uncertainties that have surrounded his attempt to transform a dubiously righteous deed into a redemptive act of 'perfect conscience'. Whatever our conclusions about Hamlet's achievement, the play has demonstrated that the secular virtue which it calls honour cannot rise above the medium of corruption that gives birth to it and which it seeks to purify. It shows that honour - the power for virtue within the individual will - can only perpetuate the disorder it opposes, that insofar as it can be transcended, it is only at the cost of life itself, and that even then it cannot be exorcised from the world.

CHAPTER 4

JULIUS CAESAR AND CORIOLANUS:  
THE SOCIAL TRAGEDY OF PUBLIC SERVICE.

The two Roman plays considered in this chapter are both inspired by Shakespeare's close reading of Plutarch, and give dramatic form to an ethos quite different from that which characterises Henry V and Hamlet. The action of Julius Caesar (1599) and Coriolanus (1608) unfolds within the context of a pre-Christian era in which virtue is ultimately a social rather than a metaphysical concept. This is equally the case in Troilus and Cressida, where the absence of a power for good higher than honour is shown to lead to moral and social disintegration. In the Roman tragedies of public service, Shakespeare offers a critique of the pagan conception of social virtue by making it the basis of a tragic contradiction which exposes the flaws in a moral system founded upon honour.

The social conception of virtue which characterised antiquity descended to the Stoic philosophers from Aristotle's classic formulation in the Nicomachean Ethics. It rests on the idea that human beings are naturally social animals and that society therefore forms the basis of natural order. It follows from this that the central ethical relationship is that between a man and his fellow men and that the highest form of virtue consists in deeds that benefit the social unit. Individual virtue thus becomes largely a question of actions which sacrifice selfish private interests for the sake of the group. Such actions are considered to manifest the higher nature of man which resides in fidelity to reason, the authoritative and defining human faculty. Deeds performed

through the rational principle are voluntary, and hence provide a clear indication of the inner moral quality of the man who performs them. The man who is controlled by reason casts aside the irrational passions and appetites that dominate most men, directing them to seek their own private advantage through, for example, the pursuit of pleasure, wealth, comfort and material honours. It is this power within the self that makes possible the performance of deeds of public service. Although Aristotle perceived this internal faculty as the obedience of passion to reason, Stoicism identified it more closely with the suppression of the emotional life.

Public service is the traditional sphere of the aristocracy which, by virtue of its capacity to discharge this public function, lays claim to moral superiority. The individual nobleman's ability to rise to its demands is bound up with his sense of personal honour. Yet this honour which is internal to the self is logically dependent on what is outside the self, that is, on the community presupposed in the idea of service. The social conception of virtue envisages this relationship between the self and society as the basis of moral order. However, its roots in aristocratic distinction render this relationship chronically unstable. The classical formulations of public service represent in large part the attempt to control the agonistic and self-assertive impulses which sustain the individual drive for excellence. Both Aristotelian honour - the rational desire to attain nobility -

and the Stoic conception of heroic self-conquest seek to socialise the self-regarding will, to harness its energies to social ends. Yet this rational standard of honour remains an instance of moral superiority, even acquiring, on the strength of its lofty ethical character, a degree of moral autonomy. Classical moral philosophy was thus unable to regularize the connection between the superior individual and the society he serves. It is the persistent tension in honour - between service and the self-assertive will - that Shakespeare explores in Julius Caesar and Coriolanus. Both plays find tragic meaning in a social conception of virtue which, in making honour the foundation of natural order, endangers that which it aims to maintain.

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When Brutus tells Cassius that if 'it be aught toward the general good', he will set 'honour in one eye, and death i'th'other' and 'look on both indifferently' (I.2.84-86),<sup>1</sup> his lines associate the honour of the public servant with the capacity to overcome the instinct for self-preservation in the fulfilment of public duty. As the force within the self that stimulates public virtue, honour is the moral cornerstone of Roman society in Julius Caesar, the internal mechanism that enables the patrician class to execute its allotted public

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1. All quotations from Julius Caesar are taken from The Arden Shakespeare: Julius Caesar, ed. T.S. Dorsch (London and New York: Methuen, 1955).

function. However, although Rome depends on honour, the play dramatises in Caesar's rise to power the strains in this patrician ethic which destabilise the social order it is designed to preserve.

Like Brutus, Caesar envisages his own exceptional public virtue as deriving from a complete subjugation of instinct:

I rather tell thee what is to be fear'd  
Than what I fear; for always I am Caesar.

I.2.208-209.

What honour generates and sustains is a higher public self, devoid of ordinary human fears, capable of assuming the burden of public service or of undertaking dangerous and glorious exploits on behalf of Rome. Caesar here claims identity with a public role of superhuman stature. Honour thus emerges as the power within the self to construct and remain constant to the ideal public role: 'for always I am Caesar'.

Although achievement of this public identity is confined to male patricians, in the character of Portia the play gives voice to female resentment in the face of exclusion from the public domain. When Brutus is preoccupied with public cares, Portia insists that the 'right and virtue' of her place (II.1.269) pertains not merely to Brutus's private existence, but to the totality of his experience. To deny her access to his public affairs is therefore to dishonour her:

Am I your self  
But, as it were, in sort or limitation,  
To keep with you at meals, comfort your bed,  
And talk to you sometimes? Dwell I but in the  
suburbs  
Of your good pleasure? If it be no more,

Portia is Brutus' harlot, not his wife.  
II.1.282-87.

Portia claims for herself the same capacity for public virtue that constitutes masculine honour: she too has overcome natural inclination, giving herself 'a voluntary wound / Here, in the thigh' (II.1.300-301).

However, Portia's claim to honour rests on her ability to be exceptional, to exceed her sex:

I grant I am a woman; but withal  
A woman that Lord Brutus took to wife;  
I grant I am a woman; but withal  
A woman well reputed, Cato's daughter.  
II.1.292-95.

This implied tension between her public aspirations and the limitations imposed by gender shapes her response to Brutus's confidences; for having entered the public life through his revelations, she copes with the role she has assumed with only partial success, her 'man's mind' undermined by her 'woman's might' (II.4.8). A similar strain informs the account of her suicide, which represents less the deliberate conquest of the fear of death than an act of private anguish: unable to endure either Brutus's absence or the news of his enemies' strength, she 'fell distract' and 'swallow'd fire' (IV.3.154-55). Thus, the play's sensitivity to women's impatience with their domestic function is qualified by its portrayal of a conflict between female ambition and natural disposition.

The play conveys the integral link between honour and role-playing through the patrician characters' tendency to



refer to themselves in the third person.<sup>2</sup> This linguistic device creates the effect of the divided self; it suggests both the gap between the self and the role and the effort to identify the self completely with the role. It therefore demonstrates at once the pre-eminence of the public life in the patrician ethic and its artificiality, the fact that it demands the repression of a part of the self for the sake of the public performance:<sup>3</sup>

But I fear him not:  
Yet if my name were liable to fear,  
I do not know the man I should avoid  
So soon as that spare Cassius. I.2.195-98.

In these lines, Caesar asserts the absoluteness of the name, of the public self.<sup>4</sup> The unity of being to which Caesar here lays claim constitutes the goal of honour. Yet the lines which show honour to reside in the absolute public self simultaneously betray the illusory quality of the quest for singleness of being. The passage exhibits the duality of self

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2.This linguistic feature of the play is frequently commented upon. See, for example, R.A. Foakes, 'An Approach to Julius Caesar', SQ, V (1954), pp.264-68; Maurice Charney, Shakespeare's Roman Plays. The Function of Imagery in the Drama (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1961), p.70; and Edward Dowden, Shakespeare: A Critical Study of His Mind and Art (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd., 1875), p.285.

3.A.D. Nuttall comments on the tension between the role and the man, with particular reference to Stoicism, in Shakespeare and the Representation of Reality (London and New York: Methuen and Co. Ltd., 1983), p.105.

4.On the name as an ideal self-concept, see J.L. Simmons, Shakespeare's Pagan World. The Roman Tragedies (Charlottesville, Va.: The Univ. Press of Virginia, 1973), p.79, and Madeleine Doran, Shakespeare's Dramatic Language (Madison, Wisc: The Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1976), pp.132-34,143.

involved in role-playing: it sets up an opposition between will and nature, between the name and the ordinary man, that clarifies the impossibility of being solely the public self.

Yet honour's austere virtue remains elusive not only because it demands an extraordinary degree of self-suppression, but also because it involves a passionate self-relationship. When Caesar asserts unity with his near-legendary name, we sense the man's commitment to his own greatness. We have seen repeatedly that this kind of elated self-involvement is an essential ingredient of honour which, based as it is on the pursuit of moral excellence, generates competitive self-assertion.<sup>5</sup> In Caesar's case, pride in pre-eminence leads him to transform himself into an aristocracy of one:

Yet in the number I do know but one  
That unassailable holds on his rank,  
Unshak'd of motion. . . . III.1.68-70.

The 'Northern Star' speech lays claim to singularity, to the uniqueness born of perfect constancy. Caesar's insistence on the autonomous will of the great man thus engenders an incipient tyranny. The honour that exalts him above his fellow patricians rests on a contradictory blend of self-conquest and self-celebration.

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5. Plutarch writes of Caesar's striving spirit: 'This humor of his was no other but an emulation with him selfe as with an other man. . . .' See 'The Life of Julius Caesar', Plutarch's Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romanes, trans. Sir Thomas North, V.335.

The play reveals Caesarism to be an integral aspect of Roman society, an expression of the cult of the Roman martial hero dramatised in the play's opening scene, in which the relationship between Pompey and the people of Rome is depicted in terms of the private loyalty owed to the unique individual. Pompey is presented as a kind of father-figure deserving of a personal devotion which transfers a public relationship to the private level. The tribunes therefore condemn the plebeians' switch of allegiance from Pompey to Caesar as the betrayal of a natural bond. The public and the private, will and nature, are again shown to be inseparable aspects of an ethic of public virtue founded on the renunciation of the private instinctual life.

The play depicts the friction between Republicanism and Caesarism as an ideological conflict that has its roots in aristocratic honour. Caesar's rise to power endangers two things simultaneously: the Republic and the honour of his fellow patricians, who enjoy as a society of co-equals a relative parity of worth and rank threatened by his claim to superiority. Their alarm at Caesar's assumption of unconstitutional power is inseparable both from their anger at being diminished by his greatness and from envy of his supremacy:

Why, man, he doth bestride the narrow world  
Like a Colossus, and we petty men  
Walk under his huge legs, and peep about  
To find ourselves dishonourable graves.

I.2.133-36.

The emulation latent in honour is thus unleashed by the

emergence of the pre-eminent hero. Of course, the play makes it clear that factionalism and private grudges also play a part in generating hostility to Caesar: Caius Ligarius has fallen foul of Caesar by 'speaking well of Pompey' (II.1.216), and Cassius's own intense animosity stems at least in part from the fact that he is unlikely to prosper under Caesar's rule: 'Caesar doth bear me hard. . . .' (I.2.310). But in his role as the instigator of the assassination, Cassius always appeals to honour, to the combination of abstract political principle and personal pride that constitutes aristocratic Republicanism:

But life, being weary of these worldly bars,  
Never lacks power to dismiss itself.  
If I know this, know all the world besides,  
That part of tyranny that I do bear  
I can shake off at pleasure. I.3.96-100.

Cassius's incitement of Casca conflates the hatred of tyranny with the refusal to endure dishonour. At the same time, it clarifies the integral connection between self-assertion and the energy to which honour appeals, for suicide, the ultimate renunciation of the fear of death, here emerges as the quintessential act of self-affirmation.

If honour gives rise to Caesarism and hero worship in the Rome of Julius Caesar, it also sustains the Republican ideal of public service. This version of social virtue is embodied in Brutus, for whom devotion to the higher public good demands the repudiation of natural instinct:

If it be aught toward the general good,  
Set honour in one eye, and death i'th'other,  
And I will look on both indifferently;  
For let the gods so speed me as I love

The name of honour more than I fear death.  
I.2.84-88.

When Brutus refers to himself as the 'son of Rome' (I.2.171), he conceives of the social order as the embodiment of nature and public service as the highest of natural bonds. The connection between the individual and society is expressed as a family relationship, and the private sphere is transmuted into the public realm. This means that the instinctual ties of the family are sacrificed for the natural ties of the state, and the state in turn becomes a natural organism which begets the unnatural public self that secures its prosperity. This ethic of public service makes the 'higher' public self the sole reality, and by means of the mechanism of honour locks the individual into the social. In Julius Caesar, it is inextricably bound up with Republicanism. To serve Rome is to serve the Republic; to fail to do so is to forfeit honour:

Brutus had rather be a villager  
Than to repute himself a son of Rome  
Under these hard conditions as this time  
Is like to lay upon us. I.2.170-73.

The honour of the public servant requires that he overcome the appeal of nature out of a disinterested concern for the public welfare. It therefore demands the equal suppression of instinct and self-interest; he must be simultaneously unnatural and impersonal. When Brutus first confesses to Cassius that he loves Caesar and that he fears he will be made king (I.2.81), we perceive in his conflict the struggle to realise this selfless public virtue. At the same time, however, the scene evokes the tensions in Brutus that counter

it: not only the inner division that exhibits his sensitivity to the claims of nature, but also the passion which informs his honour.

When Cassius attempts to incite Brutus against Caesar, he does so through an appeal to honour that combines solid republican sentiments - 'When could they say, till now, that talk'd of Rome, / That her wide walks encompass'd but one man?' (I.2.152-53) - with a warm commendation of Brutus's virtue:

I have heard,  
Where many of the best respect in Rome  
(Except immortal Caesar), speaking of Brutus,  
And groaning underneath this age's yoke,  
Have wish'd that noble Brutus had his eyes.  
I.2.57-61.

Although Brutus detects the provocation lurking beneath this praise, Cassius's technique nonetheless serves to highlight the duality in Brutus's honour: the dedication to the common good that is the measure of his virtue has as its logical concomitant an ardent identification with that virtue. Thus, when Brutus declares that he loves the 'name of honour' more than he fears death, his words betray the self-love which impels public virtue. To be great is to love one's greatness, particularly the name which proclaims one's pre-eminence. Brutus's name is furnished with a mythology every bit as potent as Caesar's: he is an alchemist who can turn offence into virtue (I.3.157-60), an exorcist capable of conjuring up men's mortified spirits (II.1.321-26). Like Caesar, his characteristic use of the third person reflects his own

investment in the name that represents his extraordinary virtue: 'Brutus had rather be a villager. . . .'

On this level, the competition which Cassius sets up between the names of Brutus and Caesar ('Why should that name be sounded more than yours?' I.2.141) is more than crude flattery, for the two men are rivals insofar as Brutus represents the summit of the republican virtue affronted by Caesar. Brutus is like the other conspirators in that Caesar cannot threaten the political order without also threatening his honour. However, Brutus differs from his fellow patricians in that the honour endangered by one man's claim to distinction itself makes a claim to distinction, albeit a republican one. The play places the two 'seduction' scenes side by side in part to stress Cassius's flexible technique; with Casca, he also invokes honour, but without recourse to flattery. It is Brutus's excellence that renders him partially vulnerable to Cassius's insinuations. This is not to say that Brutus envies Caesar with the virulent sense of personal diminishment of Cassius and the other conspirators, just that it is impossible to disentangle his devotion to the Republic from his sense of himself as the embodiment of republican virtue.

The play couples Brutus's inner division - the struggle with the rival claims of friendship and the Republic that clearly antedates the attempted seduction - with Cassius's solicitations and incitements in order to suggest that Brutus

is neither simply immune to such blandishments nor simply seduced. The letter thrown in at his window, 'tending to the great opinion / That Rome holds of his name' (I.2.315-16), confirms rather than initiates his resolution, but its role in Brutus's decision to undertake the assassination of his friend points to the confusion of his own motives, the intermingling of the personal and the impersonal that lies at the heart of honour. Brutus's public role is thus placed under a double strain: by the repressed natural inclinations of the private man, and by the pride which is at once inseparable from and incompatible with his ideal self.

The contradictory nature of honour dictates its collapse, with consequences extending beyond the individual to society itself, which is plunged into a constitutional crisis, political assassination and civil war. The play gives these individual and social tensions dramatic form by placing Brutus between policy and nature, for his decision to obliterate the claims of his friendship with Caesar involves him at once in conspiracy and political scheming. The conspiracy needs Brutus specifically because he will convert policy into honour:

O, he sits high in all the people's hearts:  
And that which would appear offence in us,  
His countenance, like richest alchemy,  
Will change to virtue and to worthiness.

I.3.157-60.

Brutus's reputation for honour invests him with transformative power. As the 'soul of Rome' (II.1.321), the embodiment of the honour of the public servant, Brutus possesses a moral



authority that will cleanse the conspiracy of the taint of political opportunism in the eyes of the people.

However, if policy needs honour's powerful appeal, honour can preserve itself only by refusing policy. The main political strategies advocated by Cassius, the oath and the plan to kill Antony, call into question the 'even virtue' of the enterprise (II.1.133) by implying that the conspirators are motivated not by a disinterested regard for the public good, but by malice and envy ('Like wrath in death and envy afterwards. . . .' II.1.164). Leaving aside for the moment the question of Brutus's friendship with Caesar, his decision to spare Antony and to let him speak at Caesar's funeral dramatises the struggle of honour to avoid the contamination of political self-interest, to maintain the deed as an impersonal sacrifice of the spirit of Caesarism. Policy and honour, however, are simultaneously irreconcilable and inseparable, for if honour must reject political expediency, the necessity to do so threatens with destruction the Republic Brutus seeks to safeguard. The assassination fails politically precisely because honour refuses to silence the voice of nature in the form of Antony's appeal to personal loyalty.

It is no accident that honour's repudiation of political expediency should entail an accommodation of private affection, for what Brutus rejects as dishonourable in his fellow conspirators is the personal malice towards Caesar that

makes the deed an expression of selfish private interests rather than selfless public virtue. Moreover, the private passions that Brutus detects lurking beneath the surface of policy are to a real extent the passions within honour: the anger and envy of men so slighted by another's superiority that they will embrace dishonourable means to restore their dignity. This is certainly how Artemidorus interprets the conspirators' motives:

My heart laments that virtue cannot live  
Out of the teeth of emulation. II.3.11-12.

If policy constitutes the methods to which honour stoops, honour's reliance on nature grows out of its own instability: because its motives are not simply impersonal, it can sustain its claim to integrity only by appealing to its antithesis.

Yet this alliance with nature is a strategy not only to protect honour from itself, but also to protect Brutus from the disturbing implications of his denial of private ties:

We all stand up against the spirit of Caesar,  
And in the spirit of men there is no blood.  
II.1.167-68.

The aspiration to public virtue contains a need to suppress the realities of murder and the butchered corpse of his friend - realities that rapidly resurface in grotesque form: 'Let's carve him as a dish fit for the gods. . . .'

(II.1.173). Brutus's repeated affirmation of the private level of love - 'I, that did love Caesar when I struck him' (III.1.182); 'Not that I loved Caesar less, but that I loved Rome more.' (III.2.22-23) - demonstrates his desperate attempt

to reconcile his public and private selves in order to confirm both that his motives were irreproachable and that he did not betray his friend. His honour lays claim to a higher public self unsullied by selfish passions and compatible with nature. By trying to abolish the tensions between the man and the role, he seeks to achieve a flawless public being without having to pay the price.

Yet the play makes clear the limits of honour's transformative power. Indeed, the very fact that the deed requires transformation underlines its inherently dishonourable nature; and if the reference to alchemical potency suggests honour's magical properties, it also hints at the impossibility of changing a base enterprise into a pure one. Brutus refuses policy because it casts doubt upon the conspirators' motives, yet he is unable finally to avoid its methods. His involvement in policy reflects the constraint of political necessity at the same time that it suggests his affinity to his fellow conspirators, impelled, like him, to kill 'the foremost man in all this world' (IV.3.22). The play shows Brutus's struggle to transform political scheming through the language of honour:<sup>6</sup>

Let not our looks put on our purposes,  
But bear it as our Roman actors do,  
With untir'd spirits and formal constancy.  
II.1.225-27.

The lines ironically equate constancy to a role based on

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6. See Brents Stirling, "'Or Else This Were A Savage Spectacle"'. PMLA, LXVI (1951), p.769.

hypocrisy with the constancy to the role of public honour. The decline of the public servant's unity of being into the duality of the dissembler exhibits honour literally undoing itself. Moreover, honour's complicity in policy involves a commensurate surrender of private ties, for the conspiracy rests not on friendship, but on personal treachery and the pretence of friendship. In reply to Ceasar's invitation to proceed 'like friends' to the Capitol (II.2.127), Brutus comments:

That every like is not the same, O Caesar!  
The heart of Brutus earns to think upon.  
II.2.128-29.

Brutus's aside calls into question his attempted reconciliation of honour and nature, for how can one claim to be the friend of the man one is plotting to kill? On this level, Brutus is, like his fellow conspirators, a false friend, and without the bulwark of private affection, honour is consumed in policy and nature in treachery.

Brutus's relationship to Rome thus involves him in a hopeless contradiction. Honour is connected to both policy and nature but defeats and is defeated by both. The honour of the public servant demands the subjugation of private attachments and self-interest, because honour derives from the sacrifice of what is private and instinctual for the good order of society as a whole. However, the internal inconsistencies in honour dictate that he can detach himself from personal passions only by harmonising public and private bonds. Thus, paradoxically, honour becomes the reconciliation

of the public and private selves invoked by Brutus in his oration: 'I slew my best lover for the good of Rome' (III.2.42). Insofar as he can legitimately make this claim to selfless public virtue, he unleashes Antony's voice of nature, with its horrifying disregard for the good of the commonwealth. Insofar as his honour is partially false, it is challenged by Antony, who asserts that the man who stabbed Caesar with 'the most unkindest cut of all' (III.2.185) out of 'private griefs' (III.2.215) betrayed a natural bond for selfish reasons. Antony's censure of Brutus presents an important half-truth, clarifying the hero's personal motives and the impossibility of harmonising the conflicting imperatives of public and private life. This Brutus's conscience also repeatedly tells him: in his attempts to distance himself from the ulterior motives in which he is implicated, in his desperate desire to unify honour and private affection, in his awareness of the personal treachery involved in dissembling, and later in the play in the appearance of Caesar's ghost - friend turned into 'evil spirit' (IV.3.281). In all these we recognise the dark shadow cast in this play by the concept of honour.

Thus, in Antony's oration, the epithet 'honourable' is withdrawn from Brutus. This denial of the 'name of honour' is just, because it is the selfish interest for which he betrayed friendship, and unjust, because unlike Antony, who has no concern for the common good, he has aspired to serve the state. If honour tragically entangles the public and the

personal, nature is devoid of a sense of public responsibility and blithely plunges the city into civil war: 'Mischief, thou art afoot, / Take thou what course thou wilt!' (III.2.262-63). Yet the nature of honour requires that the assassination should fail both morally and politically; that the deed, undertaken in accordance with the terms of the social conception of virtue, which makes the renunciation of selfish private interests the source of both individual virtue and social cohesion, should finally prove neither morally honourable nor socially beneficial. The frustration of its exalted aims clarifies the self-contradictory nature of an ethic rooted in an egocentric impulse that at once stimulates and impedes its progress towards the higher public self. The tensions in the service ethic are exhibited on every level of the drama: within the self, trapped between policy and nature in its quest for singleness of being, and in the city, simultaneously dependent on honour and engulfed in its internal contradictions. Brutus is left with the impossible task of trying to overcome and to accommodate nature in his pursuit of an honour that is inevitably consumed on the one hand in self-interest and on the other in civil war.

It is only when nature has triumphed and the ruthless political mechanism of Octavius been instituted that the 'name of honour' is returned to Brutus on the grounds that he alone acted out of disinterested regard for the good of Rome. Antony's eulogy affirms the honour of the public servant at the same time that it maintains the reconciliation of public

duty with private loyalty; it suggests that, because Brutus's motives were impersonal, he did in fact love Caesar as he struck him. On one level, of course, this is true; yet on another, the play has shown this flawless honour and integrated selfhood to be impossible. There remains, then, considerable irony in the play's apparently conclusive judgement. The tensions it has dramatised are so deep-rooted that they can be resolved only when the public servant and the Republic he struggled to preserve have both been destroyed.

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The depiction of honour in Julius Caesar effectively establishes the terms in which the concept is explored in Coriolanus. The later play also presents the ethic of public service as a political tragedy arising out of the social conception of virtue, which locates the welfare of the natural order in a concept riddled with internal contradictions. Yet in Coriolanus, the instability of honour is dramatised as a tragic relationship between society, conceived of as the foundation of nature, and the unnatural public self on which it depends for its survival.

Coriolanus presents the Roman republic in an early stage of its development, when Rome was a small city-state constantly at war with its neighbours. In this primitive ethos, virtue is necessarily social, consisting in deeds which ensure the city's survival, particularly deeds of valour, logically

considered the highest form of public service:

It is held  
That valour is the chiefest virtue and  
Most dignifies the haver. . . . II.2.83-85.<sup>7</sup>

Social virtue is the preserve of the patrician class, whose function it is to serve the state, both politically in the Senate and militarily on the battlefield. Consequently, honour is also a property of nobility, for it refers both to deeds of public virtue and to the social respect and material honours which reward them. Thus, the play's first act shows us the martial deeds of Caius Martius, followed by the honouring of them, initially on the field of battle - the horse, the garland, the new name - and then in the city:

Know, Rome, that all alone Martius did fight  
Within Corioles gates: where he hath won,  
With fame, a name to Martius Caius. These  
In honour follows Coriolanus.  
Welcome to Rome, renowned Coriolanus!  
II.1.161-65.

Honour, here again, defines the relationship between the warrior and the community he defends. The relationship itself is based on mutual obligation - of the warrior to serve the state through deeds in war against Rome's enemies, and of the state to requite that service. Martius owes the Senate his 'life and services' (II.2.134) and Rome owes him recognition of his deeds:

To gratify his noble service that  
Hath thus stood for his country. II.2.40-41.

However, as in Julius Caesar, this apparently straightforward relationship is given a tragic meaning arising out of the

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7.All quotations are from The Arden Shakespeare: Coriolanus, ed. Philip Brockbank (London: Methuen and Co. Ltd., 1976).



contradictory nature of honour.

The deeds of public service that constitute the patrician function are those which benefit the wider community at the expense of the individual. In the fable of the belly, Menenius characterises the political service of the Senate:

for examine  
Their counsels and their cares, digest things  
rightly  
Touching the weal o'th'common, you shall find  
No public benefit which you receive  
But it proceeds or comes from them to you,  
And no way from yourselves. I.1.148-53.

In this view, the Senators provide public benefits at great cost to themselves. Cominius later speaks of the nature of military service to the state:

I have been consul, and can show for Rome  
Her enemies' marks upon me. III.3.110-11.

Cominius's scars are emblematic of the warrior's willingness to risk his own life for the good of his country. This, understandably, is conceived of as the epitome of public virtue:

Hear me profess sincerely: had I a dozen sons,  
each in my love alike, and none less dear than  
thine and my good Martius, I had rather had eleven  
die nobly for their country, than one voluptuously  
surfeit out of action. I.3.21-25.

Volumnia claims to prefer the noble deaths of numerous sons to the ignoble life of one because in the patrician service ethic to lay down one's life for one's country is the greatest sacrifice a man can make and hence evidence of the highest virtue.

Volumnia envisages only one alternative to a noble life of public service: not to serve is to 'voluptuously surfeit out of action'. Her lines, like those of Menenius and Cominius, implicitly claim a prerogative stemming from patrician service of Rome: the burden of public responsibility differentiates the patrician class from other elements of Roman society and allows the nobility to see themselves as inherently superior to those classes that are not endowed with a public role. In the fable of the belly, Menenius claims that the public benefits which the patricians provide at great personal cost naturally render them the most important class in Rome. Because the state depends on the servants of the state, the patricians are accounted 'good' citizens, the plebeians 'poor' (I.1.14-15).

Behind this belief in aristocratic moral superiority lies the social concept of virtue, with its equilibration of individual virtue and the capacity to transcend natural human inclinations. Because society is the greatest good - because it is the natural order on which depends the collective well-being of its members - the highest virtue resides in the willingness to sacrifice what is merely private and self-centred for the sake of the common good. We have seen repeatedly that the public function of the nobility rests on this fundamental distinction between public and private life, between will and nature, between the higher constructed self and the innate self governed by spontaneous impulse, or what we have termed 'instinct'. Plutarch points to this opposition

of will and instinct in 'The Life of Caius Martius  
Coriolanus':

Yet men marveling much at his constancy, that he  
was never overcome with pleasure, nor money, and  
howe he would endure easely all manner of paynes &  
travaillles. . . . 8

Plutarch defines as 'constancy' the subdual of private  
advantage on which service depends; the hero's ability to  
master the potent appeals of pleasure and wealth is what  
enables him to endure the hardships and dangers of military  
service. Plutarch's observation implies the preference of one  
way of life over another; the love of what is noble over the  
love of what is merely natural or advantageous. It therefore  
suggests the essential feature of patrician virtue in  
Coriolanus: the effort of the will to secure the higher self.  
Thus, when Titus Lartius vows to fight against the Volsces in  
spite of his physical injuries, Menenius hails him as  
'true-bred' (I.1.242); Titus Lartius is a true patrician  
because his determination to serve, to sacrifice his own  
comfort, endows him with exceptional powers of endurance.

It is according to this conception of virtue that the play  
demonstrates the logic underlying the aristocratic conviction  
of superiority, for insofar as the patrician class embodies  
a higher form of existence, it constitutes a moral as well as  
a power élite. The patrician vocabulary so important in  
Coriolanus - 'noble', 'gentle', 'virtue', 'deed', 'name',

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8. 'The Life of Caius Martius Coriolanus', in Plutarch's Lives  
of the Noble Grecians and Romanes Translated by Sir Thomas  
North, II.172.

'honour', 'power'<sup>9</sup> - makes authority the logical consequence of service and the moral superiority that service implies:

the honour'd number  
Who lack not virtue, no, nor power, but that  
Which they have given to beggars. III.1.71-73.

On this level, the honour of the class consists in its social and moral differentiation from other classes.

It is on this basis that the play presents the patricians' contempt for the common people of Rome, whom they see as their moral opposites, abandoned to the promptings and propensities of natural instinct. Plebeian cowardice in battle and in civil life attains an almost proverbial status in the patrician world of the play:

For though abundantly they lack discretion,  
Yet are they passing cowardly. I.1.201-202.

and

Methinks I see him stamp thus, and call thus:  
'Come on you cowards, you were got in fear  
Though you were born in Rome.' I.3.32-34.

Governed by timidity, fear and self-protection, the plebeians are incapable of constancy in adversity. If nobility is characterised by the stable will, the common people are associated with mutability;<sup>10</sup> the multitude wavers and changes, plucked one way and then another by ignorance and sensation:

not that our heads are some brown, some black,  
some abram, some bald, but that our wits are so  
diversely coloured. . . . II.3.18-21.

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9. See Brockbank, 'Introduction', The Arden Shakespeare: Coriolanus, p.70.

10. For an account of Renaissance attitudes to the populace, see C.A. Patrides, 'The Beast with Many Heads: Renaissance Views of the Multitude', SQ, XVI (1965), 241-46.

The pervasive animal imagery of the play relates the patrician perception of their relationship to the plebeians to natural hierarchy:

He that trusts to you,  
Where he should find you lions, finds you hares;  
Where foxes, geese. . . . I.1.169-71.

and

. . . which will in time  
Break ope the locks o'th'senate, and bring in  
The crows to peck the eagles. III.1.136-38.

When Volumnia characterises life without service as 'voluptuously surfeiting out of action', she makes indulgence of appetite the only alternative to honourable activity. This contrast between the self-sacrifice of those who serve and the self-indulgence of those who don't explains the paradoxical attribution of asceticism to a class which is rich and powerful and of appetite to a class which is poor and hungry.<sup>11</sup> When Martius mocks the people's want:

They said they were an-hungry, sigh'd forth  
    proverbs -  
That hunger broke stone walls; that dogs must eat;  
That meat was made for mouths. . . .  
  I.1.204-206.,

the lines bear witness to a patrician abhorrence of self-interest that transforms the desire for the most basic human necessity into weakness and self-seeking. For Martius, who will invite the hardship of lingering 'But with a grain a

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11. See Maurice Charney, Shakespeare's Roman Plays. The Function of Imagery in the Drama. Charney discusses the association of the people with appetite (p.150) and the ascetic strain in patrician values (p.154).

day' (III.3.90), the plebeians, in their desire for bread, are the literal embodiment of appetite, of the lower instinctual life.

However, the play illuminates the ethical assumptions underpinning such attitudes without obscuring their partiality. When the play opens with the city in famine, we see a ruling class that is wealthy and privileged and a citizenry that is starving, and Menenius's defence of the aristocracy in the belly fable invites a sceptical response from the spectator even if it satisfies his plebeian audience. Although the fable is designed to vindicate the nobles' distribution of public benefits, it inadvertently condemns the governing class which has been systematically 'cupboarding the viand' (I.1.99).<sup>12</sup> Moreover, in justifying the Senate to the group of mutinous citizens, Menenius is concerned to establish not the interdependence of classes required by his body politic metaphor, but the pre-eminence of a social élite to which the people are at once beholden and subordinate and which receives no adequate acknowledgement of its public burden:

'Yet I can make my audit up, that all  
From me do back receive the flour of all,  
And leave me but the bran.' I.1.143-45.

The sophistry of the belly fable culminates naturally in the characteristically patrician judgement that concludes Menenius's lesson:

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12. Anne Barton, 'Livy, Machiavelli, and Shakespeare's Coriolanus, SS. 38 (1985), p.117.

Rome and her rats are at the point of battle;  
The one side must have bale. I.1.161-62.

The servants of the state are transformed into the state  
itself, the people into its rats.

This partisan spirit is made equally apparent in patrician attitudes to the people, who are shown to play an important role in the campaign against the Volsces, even if war is not their function. They capture Corioles when they join Martius in the second assault on the town, and in the field are roused by the hero to a pitch of battle ardour which makes each of them worth 'four Volsces' (I.6.78). Although Martius has a selective memory and later recalls only their delay in entering the enemy town (III.1.121-23), the battle scenes of the first act alert us to the patricians' dependence on the contributions which the common people make to the city's survival.<sup>13</sup>

Yet the play also makes it clear that the patrician conviction of superiority coexists with a perception of the city as an integrated whole comprising patricians and plebeians, without which the public function of the nobility would simply not exist. Thus Cominius, after his army's retreat, expresses fellowship with his common soldiers and pays tribute to their conduct in battle:

Breathe you, my friends; well fought; we are come  
off  
Like Romans, neither foolish in our stands  
Nor cowardly in retire. I.6.1-3.

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13.Ibid., pp.120-21.

The interdependence that constitutes a social organisation is evoked in the opening scene in terms of political compromise: the patricians' assent to the institution of the tribunate manifests the necessity of accommodating plebeian demands in order to quell the civil disorder that threatens to engulf the city. Like any power élite, the patricians are fiercely resistant to social innovation, which invariably means a reduction in their authority, and it takes a popular uprising to force them into social reform. But their grudging compromise reflects their recognition that they must adapt themselves to social change if the city on which they depend for their vocation and prosperity is to survive. On this level, the Rome of Coriolanus is shown to be a society in flux, and the social evolution which brings the people an improved legal position at the same time places a certain strain on the pure heroic ideal that interprets valour as 'the chiefest virtue':

if it be,  
The man I speak of cannot in the world  
Be singly counter-pois'd. II.2.85-87.

Cominius's cautious 'if it be' suggests that Rome may be in the first stages of transition from a simple heroic past.<sup>14</sup>

With the exception of the play's hero, the patrician characters are shown to move with relative ease between the two contradictory social perspectives contained in their class

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14.Ibid., pp.115-16. I am indebted to Prof. Barton for this account of the patrician response to developments in the structure of Roman society.



role. Cominius's battlefield praise of his soldiers is followed by the more sectional tone of his speech to Martius: 'the dull tribunes, / That with the fusty plebeians hate thine honours. . . .' (I.9.6-7). Menenius, in similar fashion, can discourse on friendly terms with the aggrieved plebeians before presenting the fallacious élitism of the belly fable. The patricians are socialised; they know how to adapt their speech and conduct to social ends. If there is no reason to doubt the sincerity of Cominius's comradely sentiments (even Martius displays fellowship when the rank and file are eager for the fray), patrician sociality more often than not amounts to dissimulation; it is policy which mediates between the claims of the city and those of the class. In the Rome of Coriolanus, therefore, the social system functions by virtue of compromise, requiring of the patrician an adaptability that is inseparable from inconsistency and hypocrisy. It is because Coriolanus refuses to compromise, insists on absolute constancy to the class ideal, that his actions disclose the contradiction at the heart of Roman society. The play exhibits this contradiction most fully in the honour on which the city bases its well-being.

The 'sovereignty of nature' (IV.7.35) which the patricians claim makes them the 'natural' rulers of Rome arises, as we have seen, from the subjugation of certain natural inclinations. On one level, then, deeds of public service evince a quality of unnaturalness implicit in the subordination of a part of the self, particularly of that part

concerned with its own immediate interests. But insofar as such deeds are a manifestation of the higher nature which serves the natural order of society, service becomes a 'natural' function. Cominius's statement of his relationship to Rome makes clear the duality of patrician service:

I do love  
My country's good with a respect more tender,  
More holy and profound, than mine own life,  
My dear wife's estimate, her womb's increase  
And treasure of my loins. . . . III.3.111-15.

In these lines, Cominius boasts of putting his country before his most precious private attachments and, at the same time, conceives of his relationship to Rome as the most tender and sacred of natural bonds. The lines contain an implicit contrast between the private and the public life which the play exhibits more fully in the contrast between Virgilia and Volumnia.

However, the relationship between the servant and the state lies not only in deeds of social virtue, but also in the response of the community to those deeds. Indeed, it is presupposed in the concept of service that a man's virtue exists not independently of, but in conjunction with, the gaze of the community, for without a public there can be no public-spirited acts. In the service ethic, therefore, external honour is an essential concomitant of virtue. Hence, if Rome depends on the servants of the state for its well-being, those servants equally depend on Rome for the confirmation of their virtue. The superior class establishes its superiority only in relation to the inferior class.

When Volumnia upholds the values of service to her daughter-in-law, her vision encompasses deed and social response, the servant and the community:

When yet he was but tender-bodied, and the only son of my womb; when youth with comeliness plucked all gaze his way; when for a day of kings' entreaties, a mother should not sell him an hour from her beholding; I, considering how honour would become such a person - that it was no better than picture-like to hang by th'wall, if renown made it not stir - was pleased to let him seek danger where he was like to find fame. I.3.5-14.

Volumnia envisages public honour as both the motive and reward for valour, providing the initial incentive to action and the subsequent proof of virtue. In making the honour achieved by the self dependent on the honour conferred by society, the lines testify to the patricians' dependence on the community they serve.

The passage also confirms the cost of honour. Volumnia shares with Cominius a sense of pride in having overcome natural inclinations in training her son to internalise the martial code. Her three opening clauses, with their stress on the moment when the bond between the mother and her child is at its strongest, serve to underline the prematurity of Volumnia's separation from Martius, the fact that his leaving of the nest was no natural evolutionary process. Rather, ordinary maternal instincts - private, jealous and protective - were sacrificed so that Martius could fulfil the higher nature that lies not in the private life, but in the public, active life of danger, and without which men are no

better than pictures, lacking form and substance. Volumnia's 'I', coming after the heartfelt evocation of maternal affection, resounds with the confident selfhood of a woman who conquered nature by sheer force of will.

The man capable of honourable deeds achieves a new self out of the defeat of the old instinctual self. This new being is associated with blood rather than milk:

The breasts of Hecuba  
When she did suckle Hector, look'd not lovelier  
Than Hector's forehead when it spit forth blood  
At Grecian sword contemning. I.3.40-43.

Shocking as it is, this image is not merely brutal, as some critics have asserted.<sup>15</sup> For Volumnia, the blood which generates honour is no less fecund than the milk which nourished the infant. As an index of sacrifice, blood creates value. Similarly, the honours that society bestows on its warriors are endowed with life-giving properties:

To a cruel war I sent him, from whence he  
returned, his brows bound with oak. I tell thee,  
daughter, I sprang not more in joy at first  
hearing he was a man-child, than now in first  
seeing he had proved himself a man. I.3.14-18.

The oaken garland, the symbol of the recognition of Martius's deeds, becomes the indispensable proof of virtue. As such, it confers new life upon the recipient: the winning of honour,

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15. Derek Traversi characterises Volumnia's speech as 'a glorification of bloodshed more fantastic and inhuman than all that has gone before. . . .' See An Approach to Shakespeare (London: Hollis and Carter, 1969), II, 238. Norman Rabkin sees in the passage the shadow of Lady Macbeth. See 'Coriolanus: The Tragedy of Politics', SQ, 17 (1966), p.198. Kenneth Burke, in 'Coriolanus and the Delights of Faction', HudR, XIX (1966-67), p.191, calls Volumnia a 'pugnacious virago'.

which is initiation into manhood, is like a second birth; just as the honour conferred on Martius by his new name is like a fresh baptism:<sup>16</sup>

My gentle Martius, worthy Caius, and  
By deed-achieving honour newly nam'd -  
What is it? - Coriolanus, must I call thee?  
II.1.171-73.

So powerful are the life-giving properties of valour and honour in the patrician service ethic that the commonplace idea that a man's fame survives his death is invested with a new intensity. If to give one's life for one's country is the most honourable of acts, then death logically loses its negative connotations, and a nobleman's reputation, his existence in the eyes of others, acquires a substantial value that lives on after death. Consequently, in response to Virgilia's enquiry, 'But had he died in the business, madam, how then?' (I.3.19), Volumnia makes the name the man:

Then his good report should have been my son, I  
therein would have found issue. I.3.20-21.

It seems, then, that the relationship of the public servant to the city he serves is perceived by the patricians as a profoundly natural one, in which a man is re-born and re-named and lives on after death in the memory of the community. To be sure, in this transfiguration of the family relationship from a private into a public concept - a motif already noticed in Julius Caesar - the play suggests the

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16.D.J. Gordon, 'Name and Fame: Shakespeare's Coriolanus', in Papers Mainly Shakespearian, ed. G.I. Duthie (London: Oliver and Boyd, 1964), p.51.

extent of repression of natural impulses, and of sublimation into moral transcendence, that the honour ethic demands. Yet it also makes it clear that in this ethic the state is regarded as a natural organism. The patrician concept of service links the aristocracy to Rome as a child is linked to its family. That this is more than a metaphor is evident from the fact that the values of service are transmitted and preserved through the institution of the patrician family.

Although critics who simply condemn Volumnia's enthusiasm for valour lose sight of what it reveals about the patrician concept of service, her association of war with maternity and childhood is indeed disturbing, in part because it conveys the violence of her own self-suppression. Moreover, in her ardent identification with honour, the play exhibits the public energies struggling to find expression within the narrow scope of the traditional female role. Volumnia's forcible repression of her maternal instincts is arguably her only means of sharing in honour; it therefore suggests the extent of her own frustrated public ambitions, which, restricted as they are by her gender role, she can channel only through her son. Throughout the play, Volumnia participates fervently in the public life, but she does so solely through her maternal role and, until the fifth act, chiefly from the relative seclusion of the domestic sphere. Her 'unfeminine' interests and demeanour gain her a reputation for eccentricity remarkably similar to that she has acquired from some modern scholars. When the tribunes have the misfortune to encounter

her after Martius's banishment, Sicinius asks, 'Are you mankind?' (IV.2.16), suggesting not only that she is mad, but that she is 'masculine, virago-like'.<sup>17</sup> Volumnia is unquestionably an extreme personality, but the play accommodates the implication that her fierce involvement in her son's honour grows out of her own thwarted desire for self-realisation.

Yet in her notion of the relationship between Rome and patrician virtue there is a deep-seated ambivalence, for it comprises two contradictory conceptions of what it is to be a Roman. Her idea of patrician virtue entails, as we have seen, the resolute subjugation of nature in the interests of a higher self, and the valorization of noble constancy against the instability of vulgar instinct. This higher identity, for all that it is a social concept, can only be achieved by individual determination and energy. That is to say, virtue comes from the self.

However, this view coexists in Volumnia with a radically different notion of the connection between the self and society. When she asserts that without renown a man is no better than a picture, she equates identity with a man's existence in the eyes of others. It is society that creates the higher self and confirms it through the symbols that 'prove' a man's worth. This concept of the relationship

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17. QED, s.v.a.2: a.1B3.

between aristocratic virtue and the community comprehends the dependence of the nobility on the society they serve: without the city as the foundation of natural order, the aristocratic function would not exist, and without the response of the community, the nobleman's public-spirited deeds would have no meaning. Virtue, then, comes from society.

In Volumnia's speech to Virgilia, we find a telling expression of the play's tragic contradiction. The passage demonstrates that a social conception of virtue is radically flawed because based on two ideas of nature and selfhood that, if they are fundamentally opposed, are at the same time inseparable. The duality of Volumnia's account of service is a measure of the interdependence of self and society that forms the basis of a social conception of virtue: society does rely on the nobleman for its preservation, and the nobleman does in turn rely on society for the realisation of his selfhood. But this interdependence is also logically impossible, for the continuation of society demands the creation of an unnatural and therefore potentially asocial self, while the constructed self depends for its existence on the unstable nature that it must necessarily repudiate.

The conflict, then, is between will and nature or, viewed in different terms, between the honour of the self and the class, and the honour the city bestows on its servant. The play makes clear that these two levels of honour are inseparable. Yet at the same time, an honour that is based



on the stable will and intrinsic to the self can be accommodated to an honour that is based on an unstable society and extrinsic to the self only by compromise. This, of course, is understood by the other patrician characters. But for Martius, absolutely loyal to the principles of his training, compromise is seen as the antithesis of an honour based on constancy and hence as a logical impossibility.

The play's tragic contradiction - that the self and society can neither be divorced nor harmonised - is exhibited in the complex relationship which the play sets up between Caius Martius and Rome, a relationship that involves society's creation of an asocial hero who is thus detached from the city to which he is at the same time irrevocably tied. In order to understand this paradoxical dramatic situation, it is necessary to explore the education in patrician virtue that Volumnia gives her son. Before tackling that subject, however, we must devote a few words to Virgilia, the character through whom the play proclaims a counter-truth to the service ethic.

Virgilia exists on the very private level that the service ethic claims to transcend. It is not surprising, therefore, that Volumnia sees her daughter-in-law's attitudes as fundamentally opposed to patrician values. For Virgilia, war is where men get killed, not where they find new life, and blood is a token, not of the highest virtue, but of pain and suffering. Her vision of life places the highest value on

private affection and makes the safety and well-being of loved ones the paramount concern: 'Heavens bless my lord from fell Aufidius!' (I.3.45).

Yet if Virgilia cannot, like her mother-in-law, find 'solace' in Martius's 'hazards' (IV.1.28), she does provide a corrective to the patrician assumption that life without service can have no value. In her silent presence, the play affirms the values of the quiet life, and shows that man's 'lower' nature may encompass virtues, such as love and solicitude, that cannot adequately be characterised as indulgence of appetite. Moreover, as the episode with Valeria reveals, the private can be as constant as the public to its ruling principle; considerably more constant, in fact, than Volumnia and the other patricians, who attempt to divide their loyalties between the class and the city.

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The tensions which we noted in Volumnia's speeches to Virgilia have profound implications for the upbringing of her son. As the representative of public service, Volumnia embodies both Rome and the patrician class. She sent her son while he was 'tender-bodied' to a 'cruel war' in order that he might grow up a 'true-bred' (I.1.242) patrician whose relationship to Rome is the highest of natural bonds. The play traces the educational process through which patrician values are inculcated. Martius himself tells us a great deal

about the training he received from his mother:

I muse my mother  
Does not approve me further, who was wont  
To call them woollen vassals, things created  
To buy and sell with groats, to show bare heads  
In congregations, to yawn, be still, and wonder,  
When one but of my ordinance stood up  
To speak of peace or war. III.2.7-13.

In raising her son to be noble, Volumnia taught him the essential differentiation of the patrician class from the plebeian, of the class which renounces the private level in order to serve in 'peace or war' from that which exists on the private level of commercial transactions. The lines inform us how successfully Volumnia imparted the separatist values of the aristocracy to her son: the values that confine virtue to the class with a public role and make power and authority the logical consequence of moral superiority. Coriolanus has learned that the patricians rule Rome through a sovereignty of nature that makes them the natural masters, and the people, who lack human value, the natural slaves.

The irony of these lines relates to Martius and to Volumnia and, through Volumnia, to Rome itself. Volumnia's two roles, as the spokesman of Rome and of the patrician class, are clearly incompatible, for here the demands of one exclude the other; class solidarity prohibits any relationship with the rest of the city beyond that of masters to slaves. Volumnia has indoctrinated her son in a theory of aristocratic superiority which is an essential part of public service, but which cannot accommodate an association with the common people of Rome. The irony for Rome, then, lies in the fact that the

education which guarantees its own survival becomes, in the case of Coriolanus, the instrument that forbids the service relationship. Volumnia has provided a tutelage so effective that it amounts to a kind of conditioning, which produces an asocial being, uncritically dedicated to the principles of his training. However, if Martius points in these lines to his mother's inconsistency, his own anxiousness for her approval reveals equally his dependence on her and, through her, on Rome, for his own sense of identity; the self comes from society, the ascendant will from nature.

As he goes into exile from the city of his birth, Martius enlarges the picture of his education:

You were us'd  
To say, extremities was the trier of spirits;  
That common chances common men could bear,  
That when the sea was calm all boats alike  
Show'd mastership in floating; fortune's blows,  
When most struck home, being gentle wounded,  
    craves  
A noble cunning. You were us'd to load me  
With precepts that would make invincible  
The heart that conn'd them. IV.1.3-11.

The passage, itself a series of precepts, provides a vivid account of the way in which patrician values are passed on. Through aphoristic instruction, Martius has learned that the proof of patrician moral superiority lies in constancy in the face of adversity. Thus, the essential quality of aristocratic virtue, the power of the will to overcome the instability of nature, can be tested only in moments of extremity, when great men are distinguished from the common herd. The passage is reminiscent of Agamemnon's and Nestor's

speeches in the Greek council scene of Troilus and Cressida, which similarly portray aristocratic virtue in terms of the 'distinction' which adversity provides between 'the bold and coward' (T&C, I.3.23), the 'shallow bauble boat' and that 'of nobler bulk' (T&C, I.3.35,37). Thus, it is in the encounter with hardship that the nobleman manifests a moral superiority that is measured by the inferiority of others; to be excellent is to excel over one's fellow men. The passage points to the competitive principle that is an intrinsic part of honour. The motivation impelling the nobleman's construction of the constant self is the aspiration to singularity, the desire to demonstrate a unique, unrivalled capacity for virtue.

The formulation of honour that emerges from Martius's speech involves the passionate relationship between a man and his own virtue which forms an essential part of an ethic which locates moral conduct in the appeal to the self. Yet the glimpse into Martius's education which the passage affords shows that his training has granted a priority to this self-relationship that renders its connection to the state it is intended to serve intensely problematic. The conception of honour which Volturnus imparts to her son is focussed entirely on the self in its pursuit of greatness. It envisages the end of honour not as social stability, but as self-assertion. Moreover, the stress on differentiation makes honour an absolute, for one is either constant in adversity or inconstant, noble or base. Thus, to be honourable is to be immovably self-consistent, what Aufidius describes as his

rival's determination 'Not to be other than one thing' (IV.7.42). This also encourages the conviction of self-sufficiency, for it assumes that the sole guarantee of stability is the strength of the individual will. Thus, the self-regarding will is implicitly severed from its traditional reliance on social esteem and made complete in and of itself. Volumnia has bestowed upon her son a conception of honour based on the superior individual who is unique, inflexible and morally independent. The logical outcome of her training is egoism - the fervent self-involvement that, in Martius's case, comes to exclude all other considerations.

However, in accordance with the play's tragic logic, the assertion of the absolute and autonomous self simultaneously betrays its dependence on others. Coriolanus learns self-sufficiency, but in owing his self-sufficiency to his education, he clearly loses his claim to be self-sufficient. Moreover, the emphasis on differentiation, which on one level is a measure of the unbridgeable gap between will and nature, is on another proof that Martius's honour is not self-existent, but conditioned by reference to his social and moral inferiors. Yet the dramatic action shows clearly that Coriolanus is unaware of these divisions, having been subjected to a training so efficient that it made his heart 'invincible'. He is consistent in a way which the other patrician characters are not because he pursues the logic of an education that, in equating the consistency of the will with the honour of the class and the self, prohibits

reflection and self-questioning. Rome produces a warrior who is quite unable to compromise the twin ideals of class pride and individual autonomy bequeathed to him by his mother. His rigid devotion to the ethic of the superior individual is simultaneously the measure of his detachment from Rome and of his dependence on the city which created him.

In Martius's military career, we witness the enactment of the principles of his training. Cominius's formal encomium attaches great significance to the hero's youthful valour:

At sixteen years,  
When Tarquin made a head for Rome, he fought  
Beyond the mark of others; our then dictator,  
Whom with all praise I point at, saw him fight,  
When with his Amazonian chin he drove  
The bristled lips before him; he bestrid  
An o'erpress'd Roman, and i'th'consul's view  
Slew three opposers; Tarquin's self he met  
And struck him on his knee. In that day's feats,  
When he might act the woman in the scene,  
He prov'd best man i'th'field, and for his meed  
Was brow-bound with the oak. II.2.87-98.

The mother's suppression of maternal instinct in sending her young son to war finds its reflection in the boy who fights like a man, actually exceeding other men in his valour. As the lines enumerate the feats of the boy-hero - actively seeking danger, unsparing of his life - the effort to conquer instinct becomes prodigious. The acting metaphor suggests the deliberate overcoming of natural inclinations, while the rhythms of the verse show us Martius growing into his occupation like a great natural force:<sup>18</sup>

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18. See Reuben A. Brower, Hero and Saint: Shakespeare and the Graeco-Roman Tradition (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1971), p.357.

His pupil age  
Man-enter'd thus, he waxed like a sea,  
And in the brunt of seventeen battles since  
He lurch'd all swords of the garland.

II.2.98-101.

The subordination of the lower nature secures a higher one; in the effort to be unnatural, Martius finds his nature - a nature which, because it is based on the conquest of a part of the self, is simultaneously unnatural and superhuman. The transcendence of instinct creates an inner strength likened to the physical power of the natural world. In conquering natural proclivity, Martius becomes unconquerable:

as weeds before  
A vessel under sail, so men obey'd  
And fell below his stem: his sword, death's stamp,  
Where it did mark, it took; from face to foot  
He was a thing of blood, whose every motion  
Was tim'd with dying cries. . . . II.2.105-10.

The images of remorseless and irresistible motion associated with Martius's valour point to the awesome power of the constructed self. The man of flesh and blood is transformed into a machine of war, wielding his sword arm with the impersonal power of a god.<sup>19</sup>

On one level, the encomium is a verse portrait of Martius's self-creation, of the will's construction of the higher self. It depicts the passion for pre-eminence that inspires his deeds. Cominius comes back repeatedly to the idea of ascendancy: Martius fought 'beyond the mark' of other men; he proved 'best man i'th' field'; he 'lurch'd all swords of the garland'. That climactic verb tellingly conveys the violence

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19. Ibid., pp. 357-60. See also Traversi, pp. 240-42.



of Martius's urge for singularity.

This same love of the higher self characterises an earlier Shakespearean portrayal of absolute valour - Young Clifford's battle speech in Henry VI. Part Two:

Let no soldier fly.  
He that is truly dedicate to war  
Hath no self-love; nor he that loves himself  
Hath not essentially, but by circumstance,  
The name of valour. 2H6. V.2.36-40.<sup>20</sup>

The overcoming of instinct that makes Martius an absolute warrior is here defined as the rejection of self-love, of the natural desire for self-preservation that is incompatible with total self-sacrifice. Yet Clifford's speech does not feel like a negation of the self. Rather, it reveals self-sacrifice to be a form of self-assertion - the means whereby the hero demonstrates his moral supremacy. The contrast between essence and circumstance stresses again the 'distinction' which extremity affords between the great man who incarnates nobility and the common run of men incapable of perfect virtue.

It is this love of the higher self, with its desire for absolute superiority, that is dramatised in the battle scenes of the first act. Martius's solitary assault on the enemy town demonstrates in vivid theatrical terms the quality of essential valour: the refusal to guard one's life, the active

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20. All quotations are from The Arden Shakespeare: The Second Part of King Henry VI, ed. Andrew S. Cairncross (London: Methuen and Co. Ltd., 1957).

seeking of danger and almost certain death which manifest a martial virtue untouched by the lower nature. In this pure heroic commitment, Martius is sharply distinguished from both his patrician comrades, who 'retire to win our purpose' (I.6.50), and the common soldiers, who view Martius's all-or-nothing brand of heroism as 'Foolhardiness' (I.4.46).

As in the encomium in Act II, the conquest of nature becomes the source of the hero's invincibility. The higher nature again rivals the power of the natural world; Martius's valour is likened to earthquakes:

Thou wast a soldier  
Even to Cato's wish, not fierce and terrible  
Only in strokes, but with thy grim looks and  
The thunder-like percussion of thy sounds  
Thou mad'st thine enemies shake, as if the world  
Were feverous and did tremble. I.4.56-61.,

and his voice to thunder:

The shepherd knows not thunder from a tabor,  
More than I know the sound of Martius' tongue  
From every meaner man. I.6.25-27.

The portrayal of the hero's valour in terms of natural power, encompassing speech and countenance, voice and motion, evokes a total warrior whose aspiration to transcend instinct creates a courage stronger than steel:

Oh noble fellow!  
Who sensibly outdares his senseless sword,  
And when it bows, stand'st up. I.4.52-54.

The juxtaposition of 'sensibly' and 'senseless' stresses what is involved in transforming a body into a sword.

Titus Lartius's tribute to his comrade - 'Here is the

stead, we the caparison. . . .' (I.9.12) - gives expression to the contrast between essence and circumstance. Martius embodies valour in a way which his patrician comrades do not because the higher self is the focus of his reality. Moreover, these battle scenes underline his drive for uniqueness. The striving spirit that impelled him in his first encounters to lurch 'all swords of the garland' leads him also to relish the war with the Volsces as the opportunity to confront his rival, Aufidius. Martius views his adversary as a kind of mirror image of himself:

And were I anything but what I am,  
I would wish me only he. I.1.230-31.

He sees Aufidius as 'a lion / That I am proud to hunt.' (I.1.234-35), and is inevitably drawn towards the only man whose valour he considers to rival his own. When he stands before Aufidius and boasts of his deeds, he is asserting his uniqueness before the only man capable of challenging it:

Within these three hours, Tullus,  
Alone I fought in your Corioles walls,  
And made what work I pleas'd: 'tis not my blood  
Wherein thou seest me mask'd. I.8.7-10.

The play makes it clear that competitive singularity and the good of Rome are potentially conflicting motives:

Were half to half the world by th'ears, and he  
Upon my party, I'd revolt to make  
Only my wars with him. I.1.232-34.

This vision of a world at war in which the soldier betrays his allegiance in order to pursue his ideal of perfect valour clarifies the denial of community underlying Martius's pursuit of the higher self. In the play's complex portrayal of

patrician honour, we are offered a cluster of related notions, each expressive of the solipsistic and autonomous 'I': self-creation, self-sufficiency, integrity, singleness of being, singularity. The repudiation of an unstable nature generates a superior self which will come to see itself as independent of everything else.

We inevitably return to the tragic contradiction that informs every aspect of Coriolanus. The play's depictions of Martius's self-creation in valour are also portraits of society's creation of an asocial citizen. While Martius is shown to be completely dependent on nature for his selfhood - dependent on society through the mother who trained him and through the social and moral inferiors who alone give his superiority meaning - Rome is revealed as the creative force that begets a warrior whose education has rendered him incapable of participating in the natural bond of public service.

Volumnia's tutelage manifests itself not only in deeds, but also in words. The play establishes a clear connection between Martius's upbringing and a certain kind of language:

he has been bred i'th'wars  
Since a could draw a sword, and is ill school'd  
In bolted language. . . . III.1.317-19.

Martius's training renders him incapable of using language in a certain way. He is, according to his fellow patricians, ignorant of the refinements of speech that enable men with conflicting social interests to get on together, to express

themselves in ways that avoid offence and foster social ties.

This connection between the hero's education and his unsociability Shakespeare found in Plutarch:

. . . for lacke of education, he was so chollericke and impacient, that he would yeld to no living creature: which made him churlishe, uncivill, and altogether unfit for any mans conversation.<sup>21</sup>

The play takes Plutarch's suggestion of a hero whose education (or lack of it) has rendered him incapable of 'conversation', or social interaction, and makes Coriolanus's mode of speech an analogue of his valour:

As for my country I have shed my blood,  
Not fearing outward force, so shall my lungs  
Coin words till their decay, against those measles  
Which we disdain should tetter us, yet sought  
The very way to catch them. III.1.75-79.

The lines draw a parallel between, on the one hand, the refusal to dissemble and the warrior's self-sacrifice and, on the other, the language of policy and the lower nature. The constant will that impels Martius's deeds and that constitutes his 'truth' (III.1.121) is translated into a language of absolute truth; while the civil speech that allows the patricians to negotiate with the common people is associated in his mind with the instability of nature manifested in the inconsistency of a class that simultaneously 'disdains' and 'seeks' contact with their social inferiors. Martius's language is as much a function of his asociality as his deeds. Will expresses itself verbally in the stability of truth:

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21. Plutarch's Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romanes. II.172.

nature, in the form of the city of Rome, in the instability of lies.

Coriolanus's 'truth', then, consists essentially in the moral superiority of the patrician class and the heroic individual who embodies its values. Through invective, the language of abuse, he gives voice to the contempt of the higher for the lower nature, whether in the form of cowardice:

You souls of geese,  
That bear the shapes of men, how have you run  
From slaves that apes would beat! I.4.34-36.,

or of mutability:

With every minute you do change a mind,  
And call him noble that was now your hate,  
Him vile that was your garland. I.1.181-83.

Shunning the refinements and evasions of polite interaction, he is abrupt to the point of rudeness, even with his patrician comrades: 'Come I too late?' (I.6.24,27) and 'I will go wash' (I.9.66). As a member of a ruling class, Coriolanus is at home using the language of command, the mode of speech based on the only association of nobility and baseness compatible with his inflexible idea of patrician honour:

You herd of - boils and plagues  
Plaster you o'er, that you may be abhorr'd  
Farther than seen, and one infect another  
Against the wind a mile! . . . Pluto and hell!  
All hurt behind, backs red, and faces pale  
With flight and agued fear! Mend and charge home.  
Or, by the fires of heaven, I'll leave the foe  
And make my wars on you. Look to't.  
I.4.31-34; 36-40.

The language of command is the opposite of the 'soothing' language of policy and, as an absolute mode of speech, is

emphatically denied the tribunes:

Shall remain!  
Hear you this Triton of the minnows? Mark you  
His absolute 'shall'? III.1.87-89.

As an aristocrat with a public role, Martius is equally comfortable with the balanced cadences of military rhetoric:

If any such be here -  
As it were sin to doubt - that love this painting  
Wherein you see me smear'd; if any fear  
Lesser his person than an ill report;  
If any think brave death outweighs bad life. . . .  
I.6.67-71.,

and its civil analogue, political rhetoric:

If he have power,  
Then vail your ignorance; if none, awake  
Your dangerous lenity. If you are learn'd  
Be not as common fools; if you are not,  
Let them have cushions by you. III.1.96-100.<sup>22</sup>

As public, functional speech, rhetoric is again fundamentally opposed to the 'soft way' (III.2.82) of civil speech.

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In Shakespeare's dramatic portrayal of Coriolanus, the hero's unity of being is conveyed jointly through words and deeds. As this unity is fundamentally asocial, so the language that expresses it is asocial; while, on the other hand, social language must be false as it gives voice to the notion of interdependence which for Martius is a monstrous lie. Here, of course, we are dealing with the two ideas of selfhood that form the basis of the play's tragic

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22.S.S. Hussey, in The Literary Language of Shakespeare (London: Longman Group Ltd., 1982), p.173, remarks on the structural similarity of these two passages.

contradiction and that involve two levels of honour that are at once mutually exclusive and inseparable. When Coriolanus must seek the honour of the city, the two aspects of honour, internal and external, meet head on. An honour based on the integrity of the self confronts an honour based on the dependence of the self on society, and the collision produces the play's central dramatic crisis. This crisis is explored in terms of the conflicting modes of speech and motion that characterise the two conceptions of the relationship between society and the self.

Civic honour is an essentially social type of language. As the praise of a man's deeds, it confirms active virtue in the response of the community and hence assumes the dependence of the individual on society. It is not surprising, therefore, that Martius condemns the acclaim of the army as false:

May these same instruments, which you profane,  
Never sound more! When drums and trumpets shall  
I'th'field prove flatterers, let courts and cities  
    be  
Made all of false-fac'd soothing! When steel  
    grows  
Soft as the parasite's silk, let him be made  
An ovator for th'wars! I.9.41-46.

This speech makes it clear that as far as Coriolanus is concerned there can be no such thing as true praise, because praise by its very nature asserts the social basis of his deeds - an idea which for Martius constitutes a violation of the 'truth'. This, of course, is the reason why Martius despises the honour not only of the common people, but also of the army and his patrician peers. If praise is false, then it



must be flattery, the 'false-fac'd soothing' that for Martius characterises all civil speech and which he sees here as polluting martial values. The hero regards the army's tribute as a profanation of a truth he holds sacred: the truth embodied in the life of valour, symbolised by the drums and trumpets of the battlefield, which suggest Martius's own mode of speech, and the steel of his sword, which conjures his own invincible bearing in battle. The speech and motion that reflect the integrity of the higher self are transformed into the attributes of the lower nature, of a parasite who is a fundamentally social creature, with soft ways and no deeds.

In offering Martius flattering acclamation, the army inadvertently accuses him of vanity - an imputation Martius strenuously denies:

For that I have not wash'd my nose that bled,  
Or foil'd some debile wretch, which without note  
Here's many else have done, you shout me forth  
In acclamations hyperbolical,  
As if I lov'd my little should be dieted  
In praises sauc'd with lies. I.9.47-52.

The hero's belittling of his deeds can hardly be taken as a sign of humility. Rather, it is a logical expression of his obsession with the higher self, which cannot bear to owe anything to anyone else, and which public honour threatens to transform into its opposite: the vanity of the man who has no existence outside the gaze of the community. During the scene in the Capitol (II.2), Coriolanus speaks of words as if they destroy his deeds; not all words, but those that 'soothe' (II.2.73), that offer a false commendation which makes his

deeds expressions not of a self-sufficient will, but of an unstable nature that relies for its identity on external reference. Accordingly, when Martius refuses to 'idly sit / To hear my nothings monster'd' (II.2.76-77), his diminishment of his deeds demonstrates his contempt for the dependence of 'parasites' and the instability of the monstrous 'many-headed multitude' (II.3.16-17). As flatterer or as the worthless, vain recipient of flattery, he perceives in the social relationship established by external honour the destruction of the internal honour of the self.

Martius's internalisation of the two principles of his training - patrician superiority and individual integrity - dictates that he must repudiate the language of external honour as false. If the play leaves us in no doubt that the army's approbation is not spurious but sincere, it nonetheless demonstrates the validity of Coriolanus's judgement with regards to the city itself. It shows that within Rome the honour relationship must be based on patrician flattery and plebeian reception of flattery because there honour, in the form of public office, is requested by a proud and privileged class of a multitude which it holds in contempt. The patricians are therefore compelled to hide their scorn under the soothing language of policy. The contradictory pressures of public service necessitate that they compromise their nobility in the act of confirming it.

The play's exploration of civic honour as the interplay

of patrician flattery and plebeian instability shapes the interlude with the two officers in the Capitol. The second officer observes:

'Faith, there hath been many great men that have flattered the people, who ne'er loved them; and there be many that they have loved, they know not wherefore. . . . II.2.7-10.

Civic honour appears here as the union of flattery and ignorance. Thus, Coriolanus, like Brutus, is caught between policy and nature: the public servant overcomes the lower nature only to confront the necessity of accommodating it. The second officer goes on to contrast Coriolanus with patrician flatterers:

He hath deserved worthily of his country; and his ascent is not by such easy degrees as those who, having been supple and courteous to the people, bonneted, without any further deed to have them at all into their estimation and report; but he hath so planted his honours in their eyes and his actions in their hearts, that for their tongues to be silent and not confess so much were a kind of ingrateful injury. (II.2.24-32).

The honour won by flattery derives from deceptive appearances; from the supple motion and courteous speech of hypocrites who have no deeds and hence no inherent worth. The contamination of internal honour by civic honour is again depicted in terms of opposing modes of speech and movement. Martius, the absolute warrior who moves with remorseless power and always says what he thinks will, if he seeks the city's honour, have to become a parasite who bends his body to the people and tells them soothing lies.

Martius bows reluctantly to the custom granting the

plebeians the right to ratify his election to the consulship. But when he stands in the marketplace, he requests the people's voices with such contempt that the tribunes are able to incite the citizenry to withdraw their endorsement. In response, he unleashes a tirade against the 'double worship' of mixed government (III.1.141) which upsets the fragile equilibrium of the social order and plunges Rome into tumult. Martius's fellow patricians implore him to compromise with the people. 'Unless by not so doing, our good city / Cleave in the midst, and perish.' (III.2.27-28). Yet in the great central scene of the play, when Martius is confronted by the patrician conviction that honour and policy 'do grow together' (III.2.43), we discover the proleptic irony of his earlier battlefield vision of the false-faced parasite, for in order to be social he must say what he doesn't mean:

with such words that are but roted in  
Your tongue, though but bastards and syllables  
Of no allowance to your bosom's truth.

III.2.55-57,

and bend his body to the people:

I prithee now, my son,  
Go to them, with this bonnet in thy hand,  
And thus far having stretch'd it - here be with  
    them -  
Thy knee bussing the stones. . . . III.2.72-75.

Coriolanus, then, can compromise with the people only by detaching speech and gesture from their source in the self. Volumnia assures him that he can tell lies and act basely while preserving his nobility, his 'bosom's truth' intact within himself. Yet for Coriolanus, this is clearly impossible, for he would lose his unity of being and betray

the absolute self-consistency required by his ideal of honour.

Therefore, when Martius agrees to speak to the people, he bids farewell to his disposition:

Away my disposition, and possess me  
Some harlot's spirit! My throat of war be turn'd,  
Which choired with my drum, into a pipe  
Small as an eunuch, or the virgin voice  
That babies lull asleep! The smiles of knaves  
Tent in my cheeks, and schoolboys' tears take up  
The glasses of my sight! A beggar's tongue  
Make motion through my lips, and my arm'd knees  
Who bow'd but in my stirrup, bend like his  
That hath receiv'd an alms! III.2.111-20.

The speech is a lament for a lost higher nature. The verse takes its impetus from the clash of patrician and plebeian values in which Coriolanus sees himself transformed and debased. His 'bosom's truth' degenerates into dissembling. The 'throat of war' that represents both his essential valour and the speech that mirrors it is weakened and unmanned. The verb 'tent', used in conjunction with the 'smiles of knaves', evokes the sense of the perversion of a way of life by policy. The man of steel loses his strength, his voice and his bearing and speaks and grovels like a beggar.

It is this prospect - that a nobleman who is inherently superior should prove inherently base - that momentarily stops Coriolanus in his tracks:

I will not do't,  
Lest I surcease to honour mine own truth,  
And by my body's action teach my mind  
A most inherent baseness. III.2.120-23.

At this point, Coriolanus understands that to play the role endorsed by his mother and his patrician comrades will be to

destroy himself.<sup>23</sup> This destruction of the self is a failure of internal honour, conceived in terms of a betrayal of the unity of the self which renders it liable to moral contamination.

Patrician inconsistency is fully exhibited throughout the third act of the play, as the nobles simultaneously affirm Coriolanus's absoluteness as the essence of nobility and betray that absoluteness by attempting to incorporate it into the unity of the state:

You are too absolute.  
Though therein you can never be too noble,  
But when extremities speak. III.2.39-41.

The anomalies of the patrician position could not be more clearly displayed. Volumnia, who taught her son that absoluteness in extremity is the proof of nobility, now insists that extremity demands compromise. In recommending policy to her son as an honourable course, Volumnia in effect betrays the essential nature of patrician virtue:

I would dissemble with my nature where  
My fortunes and my friends at stake requir'd  
I should do so in honour. I am in this  
Your wife, your son, these senators,  
the nobles. . . . III.2.62-65.

Here, the mother who inculcated the patrician ideal of honour as the transcendence of the private, natural level advocates the primacy of instinct: of self-interest and the private attachments of family, friends and class. An honour based on will is asked to surrender to one based on nature. The fact

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23. See Gordon, pp.50-51.

that the patrician class is now associated not with the higher but with the lower nature signals the hero's separation from his caste to which the play has consistently looked forward.

Patrician inconsistency is, of course, the inevitable consequence of the tensions built into a service ethic that, in seeking to fuse society and the unnatural self, acquires a highly problematic character which the play encapsulates in the relationship between Coriolanus and Volumnia. As the representative of both Rome and patrician virtue, Volumnia must create honour only to endorse nature. Yet if Volumnia is profoundly contradictory in asking her son to betray the nature she herself taught him, her position as mother and teacher clarifies Martius's dependence on her and, through her, on Rome. On this level, the play once again reveals the impossibility and the unnaturalness of Coriolanus's ideal of self-sufficiency. Even Martius's great affirmation of fidelity to his own 'truth' is an unconscious testimony to the education that 'taught' him a nobility he conceives of as inherent (III.2.120-23). Society, the creative force that shapes individual virtue and gives it meaning, becomes the very embodiment of nature, a feature which the play dramatises in the patricians' vision of service as a 'natural' function. It is within the context of such service that individual will can be seen as part of the natural order. Hence, Coriolanus's conviction of self-sufficiency constitutes a denial of society that is equally a denial of nature - the nature that

encompasses both the private level of instinct and the public level of national duty.

Throughout the third act, when he is faced with the moral contamination of compromise, Coriolanus desperately and repeatedly asserts what he is, and he does so in terms of the patrician ideal of constancy in the face of danger, of fearless self-sacrifice:

Let them pull all about my ears, present me  
Death on the wheel, or at wild horses' heels,  
Or pile ten hills on the Tarpeian rock,  
That the precipitation might down stretch  
Below the beam of sight: yet will I still  
Be thus to them. III.2.1-6.,

and

Well, I will do't:  
Yet were there but this single plot to lose,  
This mould of Martius, they to dust should grind  
it  
And throw't against the wind. III.2.101-104.

Yet what is Coriolanus sacrificing himself for? Under the circumstances, these affirmations of the patrician function become assertions of the autonomy of the self. In offering to face annihilation rather than compromise with the people, Coriolanus conquers nature in order to preserve his own singularity at any price. Martius, it would seem, repudiates the vanity of the lower self only to embrace the monstrous egoism of the constructed self. In the climactic banishment scene, Martius's cry of 'I banish you!' (III.3.123) assumes a power for the self that encompasses and subsumes the very power of the state, and his denial of the city that made him what he is will prove ultimately to be a denial of all human



relationships. As Coriolanus rejects and is rejected by the city of his birth, we are confronted with the consequences of the contradiction that has driven the action of this play from the start.

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Coriolanus, however, cannot 'banish' Rome, for the self cannot be greater than the community. In his pride, Martius overestimates his own value, not least because he owes it to Rome. However self-sufficient he feels himself to be, he cannot exorcise his dependence on society. When he dismisses the people with the declaration, 'Who deserves greatness, / Deserves your hate. . . .' (I.1.175-76), he unwittingly testifies to his reliance on them; his virtue is confirmed by the hatred of the people who are by nature his opposite. Analogously, Coriolanus's superiority depends upon the hatred of his rival, Aufidius. Martius is eager to learn Aufidius's opinion of him because he finds therein corroboration of his own uniqueness:

How often he had met you, sword to sword;  
That of all things upon the earth he hated  
Your person most; that he would pawn his fortunes  
To hopeless restitution, so he might  
Be call'd your vanquisher. III.1.13-17.

For Coriolanus, honour derives from the hatred of his social inferiors and of his rival in valour.

Perhaps the name at the centre of this play best illustrates the interdependence of the two levels of honour.

After the battle with the Volsces, the hero is honoured for a unique valour, and if he refuses the words of praise that affirm the social foundation of his deeds, he nonetheless accepts the honours that capture his singularity: the garland, the horse and, most particularly, the new name. The third name, the cognomen, is a mark of individuality:

The third, was some addition geven, either for some acte or notable service, or for some marke on their face, or of some shape of their bodie, or els for some speciall vertue they had. <sup>24</sup>

The name 'Coriolanus' represents the hero's distinctive virtue, but it is a name that the city gave him.<sup>25</sup> His singularity exists only in relation to society.

Martius's exile from the city of his birth continues to explore the interrelation of the honour of the self and the honour of the city. Having claimed autonomy for the self, Coriolanus turns his back on Rome and promises his mother that he will 'exceed the common' (IV.1.32), depending still on the distance between himself and ordinary men as the measure of his worth. He sees himself existing outside the city, like a mythical beast that threatens the state:

                                  though I go alone,  
Like to a lonely dragon that his fen  
Makes fear'd and talk'd of more than seen. . . .  
  IV.1.29-31.

But even from that vision of a solitary, antisocial self, he cannot eradicate the voices of the community, the response of

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24. Plutarch's Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romanes. II.184.

25. See Gordon, p.52.

the city to his deeds. The warrior who found a relationship with the people of Rome through mutual hatred will consummate his dependence on the city through the bond of revenge. Yet in order to do that, he must go to another city:

A goodly city is this Antium. City,  
'Tis I that made thy widows: many an heir  
Of these fair edifices 'fore my wars  
Have I heard groan, and drop. IV.4.1-4.

Martius's proud assertion of the effect of 'my wars' can be made only in reference to the city. Whether as ally or opponent, the self can have meaning solely in a social context. More particularly, Coriolanus seeks out Aufidius, the rival in whose hatred he sees a reflection of his own virtue. When, muffled and disguised, he meets Aufidius, and the question 'What's thy name?' resounds, the name he gives represents both his unique selfhood and its relation to society:

My name is Caius Martius, who hath done  
To thee particularly, and to all the Volsces,  
Great hurt and mischief: thereto witness may  
My surname, Coriolanus. The painful service,  
The extreme dangers, and the drops of blood  
Shed for my thankless country, are requited  
But with that surname. . . . IV.5.66-72.

The impossibility of transcending the social is exhibited with equal clarity in the depiction of Martius as avenger. He regards his attack on Rome as the repudiation of the bonds that once tied him to the city of his birth. However, revenge is not a negation of relationship. It is based on the requital of injury, hence the traditional idea of revenge as the vindication of honour. When Coriolanus complains to

Aufidius of his treatment at the hands of Rome, he speaks the language of public honour, presenting himself as dishonoured by Rome's ingratitude. In so doing, he unconsciously endorses the notion of service as a contract of mutual obligation between the public servant and his community:

So if he tell us his noble deeds, we must also  
tell him our noble acceptance of them.  
Ingratitude is monstrous. . . . II.3.8-10.

The dramatic irony illuminates in Martius's ostensible rejection of society the strength of the bond tying him to Rome. What he desires is gratitude, remembrance, reward for his deeds - all the manifestations of the city's honour he refused as poisonous of his integrity. Martius, who earlier smarted to hear his wounds remembered and longed for the people to forget his deeds, now blames the city for its ingratitude and injustice. His service, which once made wounds 'physical' (I.5.18), or therapeutic, and scars 'unaching' (II.2.148), now appears as dangerous and painful. What this means, of course, is that Coriolanus cannot finally conquer nature and finally sustain the higher self. His attack on Rome is an unconscious attempt to reclaim the social meaning he has lost:

He was a kind of nothing, titleless,  
Till he had forg'd himself a name o'th'fire  
Of burning Rome. V.1.13-15.

However, if Martius's revenge on Rome clarifies the interdependence of the honour of the self and the honour of society, it also exhibits the irreconcilability of the hero

and Rome. The play charts the inevitable progression of an ideal of patrician virtue into a destructive, even apocalyptic, force which the suppression of nature has made solipsistic. The essential link between the defender of Rome in Act I and its destroyer in Acts IV and V is emphasised through a continuity of imagery and symbol. The 'thing of blood' who killed Rome's enemies with the remorseless power of the god he serves re-emerges, when he turns against Rome, as 'a thing / Made by some other deity than nature' (IV.6.91-92). Coriolanus retains his association with irresistible motion. He moves 'like an engine and the ground shrinks before his treading.' (V.4.19-20). He leads his army like a god, and his soldiers follow him 'with no less confidence / Than boys pursuing summer butterflies' (IV.6.94-95) - an image unforgettably associated with the nurture of the boy-warrior (I.3.57-65). These are representations of the inflexible constructed self, moving inexorably towards the violation of its natural function. When Menenius observes, 'There is differency between a grub and a butterfly; yet your butterfly was a grub.' (V.4.11-12), he bears witness to the inevitability of Martius's metamorphosis from defender to attacker, from 'man to dragon' (V.4.13). His 'natural' idiom connects this process to the play's tragic logic: that society, the foundation of nature, creates the unnatural force that threatens it. But of the contradiction he embodies, Coriolanus remains, as a condition of being locked in the integrity of the self, completely unconscious. He attempts to follow his training to its logical conclusion, which means

repudiating everything external to the self - both the natural bonds of city:

                  he does sit in gold, his eye  
Red as 'twould burn Rome. . . . V.1.63-64.,

and family:

                                  I'll never  
Be such a gosling to obey instinct, but stand  
As if a man were author of himself  
And knew no other kin. V.3.34-37.

Coriolanus's claim to be self-created entails a total rejection of nature in favour of will. Yet if his desire to be 'author of himself' is the logical conclusion of his upbringing, it is also the reductio ad absurdum of the ideal of self-sufficiency.

This hopeless contradiction is most fully exhibited in the hero's final encounter with his family and neighbour, where it takes the form of a bold and simple opposition. As Coriolanus confronts Rome in its most poignant form, the contradictory elements of honour - the self versus the community, the principle versus the natural organism - are divided into two. By means of this polarity, the play moves towards tragic resolution. Volumnia appears in this scene as the representative of nature, in the form of the family and of Rome itself. As in the central scene of the play, she is profoundly inconsistent. In her joint maternal and national role, she refutes her son's assertions of a self-generated existence:

                                  Thou art my warrior:  
I help to frame thee. V.3.62-63.

But there is great irony in these lines, for the speeches through which Volumnia affirms Rome's claims on her son are necessarily appeals to the very nature which she trained him to overcome in the quest for superiority. She has to unmake the son she made. The tensions in the service ethic dictate that when Volumnia assumes the public role she has hitherto played only vicariously, she must oppose the egoistic honour she created in favour of the values of family, community and service - the private and public worlds encompassed within the natural social order.<sup>26</sup>

When Volumnia kneels to her son:

I kneel before thee, and unproperly  
Show duty as mistaken all this while  
Between the child and parent. V.3.54-56.,

she presents the inversion of natural order manifest in Coriolanus's attack on Rome, an inversion Martius finds instinctively abhorrent:

Then let the mutinous winds  
Strike the proud cedars 'gainst the fiery sun,  
Murdering impossibility, to make  
What cannot be, slight work! V.3.59-62.

Coriolanus's vision of unnaturalness contains an implicit self-criticism. The images of natural power recall Martius's own valour, born of a suppression of instinct through which the hero sought to 'murder impossibility' - to be self-sufficient, to be author of himself. That Martius

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26. Anne Barton points out that the presence of Valeria in this scene stresses that the family and the community are inseparable in this play, that the women's victory is not simply that of private over public values. See 'Livy, Machiavelli, and Shakespeare's Coriolanus', pp.126-27.

endorses on an intuitive level the moral imperative of nature indicates the powerful pressure exerted on him by what he denies.

When Volumnia seeks to impress upon her son what it means to destroy Rome, she gives voice to the ideal of service as a natural function. But this ideal can no longer accommodate the unnatural self. Throughout her speeches, Volumnia associates the bond between Martius and Rome with the natural ties of the family: the public and the private are indissolubly joined within the order of nature. To assault Rome will be to destroy not only his mother, wife and child, but the city, 'our dear nurse' (V.3.110). This destruction involves a reversal of the life-giving properties of service which a man earns through the defeat of the instinctual self: the sources of creative life, childbirth, baptism, immortality. To attack Rome is to strike at the city that nurtured him, to tread 'on thy mother's womb / That brought thee to this world.' (V.3.124-25), to destroy the wife and son who will keep his name 'Living to time' (V.3.127), and to obliterate the noble reputation that allows a man's virtue to live on in the memory of the community:

if thou conquer Rome, the benefit  
Which thou shalt thereby reap is such a name  
Whose repetition will be dogg'd with curses,  
Whose chronicle thus writ: 'The man was noble,  
But with his last attempt he wip'd it out,  
Destroy'd his country, and his name remains  
To th'insuing age abhorr'd.' V.3.142-48.

What this means, of course, is that the manifestations of



the higher self that a man secures through the repudiation of nature are now denied Coriolanus on the grounds that he is repudiating nature. This is inconsistent, but it is also just, for what Volumnia forces Coriolanus to recognise is that he is dependent on Rome for his virtue. In her speeches, the state and the family are united in a bond of natural affection through which individual identity is created and sustained.

Outside of the ties of nature, selfhood is lost:

This fellow had a Volscian to his mother;  
His wife is in Corioles, and his child  
Like him by chance. V.3.178-80.

In this scene, the mother who indoctrinated her son in the ethic of the will as the source of national duty and individual virtue advocates nature as the essence of selfhood and of the social relationship. Her inconsistency is that of a society which embodies nature and seeks to reconcile natural instability with the immovable constancy of the will. This Volumnia asks her son to do (V.3.136) and, as in the play's central scene, the vision she presents of the happy consequences of compromise is a desperate, albeit an unconscious, lie. The contradictory pressures of public service dictate that Martius really cannot win; in constancy or compromise, he will destroy himself, for he can neither be separated from nor reconciled to the city that created his singular virtue only to ask him to betray it.

This Coriolanus comes fully to understand. His mother's powerful appeal makes it impossible for him to sustain his

solipsism. He bows to what created him, and spares Rome. Yet it is, tragically, too late for this to constitute a real reconciliation with the city of his birth. He knows that he can spare Rome only at the cost of his own life:

O mother, mother!  
What have you done? Behold, the heavens do ope,  
The gods look down, and this unnatural scene  
They laugh at. O my mother, mother! O!  
You have won a happy victory to Rome;  
But for your son, believe it, O, believe it,  
Most dangerously you have with him prevail'd,  
If not most mortal to him. But let it come.  
V.3.182-89.

The lines show us a man who has moved from preoccupation with the self to an awareness of how he appears to others. In yielding to Rome, Coriolanus loses unity of being and with it the unconsciousness of egoism. He has become socialised, and for the first time in the play can see himself from the outside. What he sees is the contradiction that he and his mother have embodied. In his vision of the laughter of the gods, there is a recognition of the terrible irony of his situation. The unnaturalness of the scene consists not merely in the mother bowing to the son,<sup>27</sup> but in the mother's destruction of the son to which the lines look forward. Coriolanus is fully aware both that the appeal to nature is imperative and that his surrender to it will prove literally fatal - that the conflict between Rome and its hero can be resolved only in the hero's death. Volumnia too has to pay for the contradiction, for she can reclaim her son only by losing him. But as she returns to her Roman triumph (V.5).

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27. See Brockbank, The Arden Shakespeare: Coriolanus, pp.58, 296.

there is no sign that she has risen to self-awareness.

Coriolanus achieves consciousness only after the complex history of his relations with Rome has made it impossible for him to enter the community whose claims he has belatedly recognised. He is under obligation to the Volscians, whose interests he has now betrayed; and he can preserve his self-respect only by returning to confront the fate that he knows awaits him at their hands. In a sense, Coriolanus, by sparing Rome and therefore acknowledging his dependence on the city, really does become a self without a society. With the Volscians, he attempts to be conciliatory, but is easily provoked by Aufidius to an outburst that literally invites the destruction that his rival has contrived for him:

Cut me to pieces, Volsces, men and lads,  
Stain all your edges on me. Boy! False hound!  
If you have writ your annals true, 'tis there,  
That like an eagle in a dove-cote, I  
Flutter'd your Volscians in Corioles.  
Alone I did it. V.6.111-16.

In these lines, Coriolanus lays claim to a singular valour undiminished by compromise, but the pure heroic ideal he dies affirming is one that neither he nor Rome has been able to sustain. But although we feel by the end of the play that Rome's evolution has rendered its hero a disruptive anachronism, we also recognise the extent to which his extreme honour has only brought to the surface the tensions latent in a service ethic based on co-operation between the state and the self-assertive will. Both Julius Caesar and Coriolanus encourage us to ponder the value of a concept of social virtue

which is so profoundly contradictory that it can be resolved only in death. The plays' portrayal of the self-defeating nature of the pagan ideal of public service identifies the secular morality of antiquity as tragically flawed. Yet, in Coriolanus in particular, this tragic vision provides a ritual solace in the satisfaction that is derived from a dramatic problem exhaustively explored.

## CONCLUSION

In its analysis of Shakespeare's treatment of honour in a selection of his major plays, this thesis has made two methodological assumptions that may serve to justify whatever claims to originality it can sustain. The first is that honour is an historical concept, the content of which is affected by its historicity. This means that all attempts to study the subject that have not taken this on board have suffered from the oversimplifications which attend the view that honour is a fixed, unitary notion, which can be understood by perspectives limited solely to the sixteenth century. Indeed, the relationship between the first chapter, which begins with the Iliad, and the subsequent discussion of Shakespeare's plays may be open to misconstruction. The introductory survey is not designed to argue for direct influences on Shakespeare, nor is it in any way meant to contribute to the question of his reading. Rather, its purpose is to show that the idea of honour was more complex and dynamic in Shakespeare's time than is commonly recognised, on the assumption that it was his extraordinary responsiveness to the life of his period that made him return again and again, and from such a variety of points of view, to the psychological, social and moral implications of the problem. If this is so, then it becomes essential to achieve an adequate sense of the place of honour in the thought of his age. The usual synchronic method has to be supplemented by a diachronic perspective if it is not to produce altogether too categorical conclusions.

The emphasis that this thesis has placed on honour as a legacy from the past has served to highlight two of honour's major characteristics: its secularity, and its instability. It has also shown that the three distinct formulations it acquired in the course of its historical development - the classical, the Christian and the chivalric - descended to the sixteenth century, producing a unique Renaissance configuration that reflects an age of rival ethical allegiances. The idea that honour may contain problematic tensions was already present in classical antiquity; its secularity took on an entirely new meaning with the rise of Christianity; this yielded to a chivalric accommodation, which was in turn challenged by the Calvinist return to an Augustinian otherworldliness. What was novel about the Renaissance was the degree to which these traditions coexisted, and coexisted necessarily in a state of tension, even of conflict. Classical humanism collided with a Christian repudiation of the possibility of secular virtue; aristocratic pride and competitiveness both served and undermined the chivalric compromises of the Christian state. In general terms, honour in the Renaissance was the focus of the central tension between the period's secular and spiritual legacies and of the debate on the extent of man's capacity for good which that diverse heritage engendered. Under such conditions, it became quite impossible for comprehensively receptive minds to take honour for granted. Controversy breeds consciousness, turns convictions into questions, and

converts habits into ideas.

The second methodological assumption made by this thesis arises out of the first. As will have become apparent, it examines the plays in terms of their treatment of ideas. Of course, a play is an enactment of conflicting human interests which no interpretation that claims to be critical can ignore. But these interests may be construed in different ways - psychological, sociological, dramaturgical, to name but a few. But it is also legitimate to approach them intellectually. Such an approach can have nothing to do with philosophical argument as such, or with the deployment of abstract 'themes', for the integrity of an artistic medium defined by interaction has to be respected. But it is perfectly compatible with what could be called the interplay of concepts. This does not presuppose that Shakespeare's ideas can be deduced from the views of his characters, even of his protagonists. Rather, what it assumes is that these views have to be taken seriously - that is to say, that they have to be questioned, as they come into conflict with other views, as they reflect personal prejudice, or as their limitations are betrayed in the forms of expression into which they fall - in the belief that together they form an aggregate or pattern from which a diagnostic coherence will emerge. On this basis, Shakespeare's position becomes the product of the play as a whole.

This thesis has argued that Shakespeare's examination of



the concept of honour, as inhabiting the fault-lines of the sixteenth century's complex ethical inheritance, drove him into the problematic coherence of tragedy. This is not to say, of course, that the tragic vision is the only possible contemporary response to the ethical phenomenon of honour. Don Quixote, not to mention Henry IV, Part One, demonstrates the opportunities for comedy available to an age which was evolving new forms of consciousness and a new synthesis out of its complicated heritage. But Shakespeare was particularly alert, as Henry V makes plain, to the inadequacies, and even the dishonesties, of the compromise tradition. In fact, his imagination was most deeply engaged, at least in relation to what has been the subject of this thesis, by contradictions and incompatibilities. And, as I have sought to show through my discussion of Troilus and Cressida, Hamlet, Julius Caesar and Coriolanus, he found these contradictions installed within the very structure of honour itself.

In The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy, Jacob Burckhardt describes honour as an 'enigmatic mixture of conscience and egoism'.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps 'conscience' is not quite the right word, for it lacks the social connotations central to a concept grounded in the public role of the aristocracy. Nevertheless, insofar as Burckhardt links the individual's sense of his moral being to self-exaltation, his definition

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1. Jacob Burckhardt, The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy, trans. S.G.C. Middlemore (New York, Hagerstown, San Francisco and London: Harper Colophon Books, 1958), II, 428.

succeeds in capturing the essential instability of honour. This thesis has attempted to demonstrate that Shakespeare perceived the tragic meaning of an idea of secular virtue that locates the power for good in the ascendant will of the superior individual and so makes virtue inseparable from pride, from a relationship between a man and his own greatness which ends up excluding considerations of morality and community. In the final analysis, it seems clear that Shakespeare's plays present a sustained critique of honour. But this critique is not simply moral, as numerous scholars have concluded. To be sure, Shakespeare consistently shows honour to have pernicious consequences. In the plays in which no greater moral imperative exists, it conspicuously fails to sustain its claim to generate moral and social stability; and Hamlet, which offers the possibility of a moral power in the world higher than honour, leads us to hope that its self-destructive mechanism can be transcended. But the chronic collapse which Shakespeare portrays cannot be characterised as his repudiation of a 'bad' honour, based on pride, in favour of a 'good' honour, based on service, for the plays make clear that it is the result not of moral viciousness, but of an aspiration to virtue that is hopelessly entangled with self-regard. Moreover, although Shakespeare dramatises honour's self-defeating logic with great insight and complexity, he is also fully attentive to the exceptional courage and constancy produced by its self-creating energy. Shakespeare's honour plays are finally tragic rather than merely judgemental, for they demonstrate that it is out of

its very energy and strength that honour precipitates its own disintegration. If virtue itself is implicated in its opposite, then Burckhardt's 'mixture' is more than 'enigmatic': it becomes a source of pity and fear.

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