DIGESTING THE THIRD:
RECONFIGURING BINARIES
IN SHAKESPEARE
AND
EARLY MODERN THOUGHT

by

Rob Carson

A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements
for the degree of doctor of Philosophy
Graduate Department of English
University of Toronto

© Copyright by Rob Carson 2009
Dissertation Abstract

“Digesting the Third: Reconfiguring Binaries in Shakespeare and Early Modern Thought”
Rob Carson (PhD 2009)
Department of English
University of Toronto

My argument assesses and reconfigures binary structures in Shakespeare’s plays and in Shakespeare criticism. I contend that ideas in early modern literature often exhibit three aspects, but that critics, who mostly rely upon a binary philosophical vocabulary, tend to notice only two aspects at a time, thereby “digesting” the third. My opening chapter theorizes the superimposition of triadic structures upon dyads, arguing that this new polyrhythmic strategy helps recapture an early modern philosophical perspective by circumventing the entrenched binary categories we have inherited from the Enlightenment.

In Chapter Two, I examine the relationship of tyranny and conscience in Tudor politics, Reformed psychology, and Richard III. Early modern political theorists often employ a binary opposition of kingship and tyranny, and historians typically draw a binary distinction between absolutists and resisters. I argue that there were in fact three ideological positions on offer which these binaries misrepresent. As well, Reformed psychology emphasizes the relationship of the individual subject and an objective God, unmediated by community, and I propose that this opposition of subjectivity and objectivity digests the idea of intersubjectivity. In Richard III, Shakespeare interrogates the implausibility of Tudor political binaries and stages a nostalgia for intersubjective community and conscience.

In Chapter Three I read the debates on value in Troilus and Cressida alongside contemporary economic writings by Gerard de Malynes on currency reform and “merchandizing exchange.” Our current models of value – intrinsic and extrinsic, use and exchange, worth and price – are emphatically binary, but the mercantile practices that
Malynes describes depend upon a triadic conception of value. My contention is that *Troilus and Cressida* becomes a less problematic problem play when value is conceived as triadic rather than dyadic.

In Chapter Four I explore early modern scepticism in connection with *Coriolanus*. Reading Montaigne and Wittgenstein in parallel, I distinguish between various conceptions of truth that are regularly grouped together under the blanket term “scepticism.” Then I turn to read *Coriolanus* as an experiment in competing modes of early modern epistemology, arguing that the play ultimately endorses the same sort of polyphonic Pyrrhonian scepticism that we find in Montaigne and Wittgenstein.
For Beatrice, who helped to get me started;
for Desmond, who helped to get me finished;
and for Ingrid, who made everything in between such a joy.
Acknowledgements

It is perhaps fitting that a dissertation so obsessive about the number three should
begin with a trio of thanks: to my supervisor Jill Levenson, for her unswerving support, her
unfailingly excellent advice, and her unparalleled attention to detail in the final stages of
revision; to Elizabeth Harvey, for calling all of my bluffs, for divining what I meant to say at
times when I couldn’t find the words myself, and for steering me clear of some potentially
disastrous missteps; and to David Galbraith, for sharing his valuable commentary, his
collegial friendship, and his excellent music collection. The Department of English at the
University of Toronto is, of course, a powerhouse of early modern studies, and my argument
has also benefited greatly from conversations with Sally-Beth MacLean, Lynne Magnusson,
Scott Schofield, Paul Stevens, Holger Schott Syme, and especially Michael Ullyot. Special
thanks go to Mary Nyquist and to my external reader, Lars Engle, both of whom offered
fantastically useful constructive critiques of my argument at my defense – the next
incarnation of this project will undoubtedly be considerably stronger as a result.

I have been fortunate to have had the opportunity to workshop every section of the
dissertation in a number of forums over the past few years, and of course my argument has
benefited greatly from the comments of others. I presented an early version of Chapter One
in Richard Strier’s seminar on King Lear at the SAA in April 2006 and received helpful
feedback from Colleen Shea and Richard Strier, and another version as a Friday workshop
for the Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies in February 2007, where Katie
Larson raised some very insightful questions. Chapter Two took shape in May-June 2007
during an excellent spring seminar at the Folger Institute on “Staging Political Thought” led
by Conal Condren, and discussions with Conal Condren, Kristine Johanson, András Kiséry,
Bernice W. Kliman, Peter Lake, Joseph Navitsky, and Shannon Stimson were instrumental in
developing my argument. I later presented part of the chapter at the “Renaissance Dualisms and Distinctions” conference at Queen’s University, Belfast in January 2008 and also in Kathleen Lynch and Adam Smyth’s “Representing Selves” seminar at SAA in March 2008, and conversations that followed with Malachy Costello, Julie Crawford, David Currell, Majella Devlin, Elizabeth Hanson, John Joughin, Kathleen Lynch, Mary-Ellen Lynn, Gaywyn Moore, Steven Mullaney, Rebecca Munson, Alan Stewart, and Adrian Streete contributed to my argument in various ways. I used a portion of Chapter Three as a job talk in January 2007 and January 2008 at the University of Toronto, Southern Methodist University, the University of Missouri-St. Louis, and Hobart and William Smith Colleges, and questions from Andrew DuBois, Dennis Foster, Frank Grady, Ezra Greenspan, Grant Holly, Jeremy Lopez, Lynne Magnusson, Mary Nyquist, and Tim Rosendale prompted me to revisit some aspects of my argument. Chapter Four began as a paper for Tom Bishop and Peter Holbrook’s SAA seminar on “Shakespeare and Montaigne” in April 2005, where it received extremely helpful feedback from Tom Bishop, John D. Cox, Lars Engle, William M. Hamlin, Peter Holbrook, John Lee, Marcus Nordlund, David Schalkwyk, Anita Gilman Sherman, and William O. Scott. Special thanks go to Tom Bishop and Peter Holbrook for encouraging me to revise and publish a version of the paper, to the Shakespearean International Yearbook for permission to reprint, and to the anonymous reader at the Yearbook as well for further feedback.

Material support for my writing of this dissertation has come from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada; the Ontario Graduate Scholarship program; the University of Toronto; the Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies; the Department of English at the University of Toronto; the Department of Philosophy at
Queen’s University, Kingston; the Folger Shakespeare Library; and the Department of English at Queen’s University, Belfast.

In closing, let me return to thank my wife, Ingrid, once again for all that she did to make this project not only possible, but so thoroughly delightful as well.

♣♣♣♣

Chapter 4 presents a revised version of my article “Hearing Voices in Coriolanus and Early Modern Scepticism,” and is reprinted by permission of the Publishers from Shakespearean International Yearbook 6, Special Guest Editor Peter Holbrook, General Editors Tom Bishop and Graham Bradshaw (Aldershot etc.: Ashgate, 2006), pp. 170-209. Copyright © 2006.
## Table of Contents

**Introduction**  
1. Digesting the Third: An Introduction to Hemiolic Criticism 20  
3. Reassessing Value in *Troilus and Cressida* and Early Modern Economics 107  
4. Hearing Voices in Montaigne, Wittgenstein, and *Coriolanus* 152  
5. (This World is Not) Conclusion 196  
**Works Cited** 210  
**Vita** 232
Introduction

George Bernard Shaw spent his career making outrageous, self-serving, and often contradictory comments about Shakespeare, but the character assassination he offers in the Epistle Dedicatory to *Man and Superman* is perhaps his most outlandish. Here he presents a defence for his claim that Shakespeare does not qualify as an “artist-philosopher”:

I read Dickens and Shakespear without shame or stint but their pregnant observations of life are not co-ordinated into any philosophy [. . .]. Both have the specific genius of the fictionist and the common sympathies of human feeling and thought in pre-eminent degree. [. . .] But they are concerned with the diversities of the world instead of with its unities: [. . .] they are anarchical [. . .]: they have no constructive ideas: they regard those who have them as dangerous fanatics: in all their fictions there is no leading thought or inspiration for which any man could conceivably risk the spoiling of his hat in a shower, much less his life. [. . .] The truth is, the world was to Shakespeare a great “stage of fools” on which he was utterly bewildered.

Pshaw, I say. Apparently, in order to count as an “artist-philosopher” in Shaw’s estimation, a writer must be a dogmatist advancing a narrowly focused position, a “leading thought,” and in this respect, I gladly concede that William Shakespeare is no George Bernard Shaw.

Most of us, I suspect, are instead inclined to follow Coleridge’s lead in accepting Shakespeare’s “myriad-mindedness” as a rare virtue rather than a common vice (2: 13). Shakespearean drama, as I read it, seems above all to be a theatre of investigation: through his plays, he tests his culture’s institutions and received ideas; he experiments with both emergent and historical alternatives to the status quo; he juxtaposes competing theoretical accounts and competing practical strategies; he magnifies ambiguity at every turn; and he confronts insistent paradoxes without pretending to be able to resolve them. He may well be “concerned with the diversities of the world instead of with its unities,” as Shaw suggests, and he may even be “anarchical” if we take the term in its original sense, but this committed open-mindedness hardly makes him unphilosophical, let alone “bewildered.” His theatre, it
seems to me, functioned in its time as a crucible for the testing of early modern ideas, a place
where abstract theories were reified, put into action, and assessed under a range of different
conditions. This form of public ideological experimentation clearly generated considerable
popular interest in his day, since Shakespeare’s plays fared so well in the lucrative
Elizabethan entertainment market; and furthermore, these experiments also seem to have
carried some sway in the politics of public opinion, if we may judge by the records of
governmental intervention in the businesses of the playhouses and the of printing houses.
The suggestion I begin with, then, is that in Shakespeare’s plays, philosophical ideas are
experimentally tested under investigative pressure, not (as Shaw would have it) in order to
advance a single-minded predetermined position, but for the sake of investigation itself.

I think it is worth noting how often philosophers, or at least philosophers of a
certain disposition, employ rhetorical strategies that verge upon the dramatic in their
philosophical writings. Plato’s dialogues, for example, especially from his middle period, are
often highly theatrical, since they explore philosophical subjects from competing points of
view that are voiced by different characters. Furthermore, Plato takes some pains to flesh
out the characters that he depicts in contention with one another, and he often sets the stage
for these conversations with concrete details about the scenery surrounding them and the
props that are ready to hand.¹ Some philosophical dialogues written in the modern era (such

¹ By no means do I intend to suggest, however, that I expect to see a staged reading of the Hippias Minor
playing to packed houses on Broadway at any time soon. Nevertheless, it should be noted that a number of
Plato’s dialogues have been adapted for the stage. The Symposium has been especially popular in this respect:
in 2007, Target Margin Theater mounted an adaptation called Dinner Party in New York that garnered
favourable reviews (Isherwood), and the dialogue was also adapted as a musical, All About Love, by Murray
Ross, Mark Arnest, and Lauren Arnest, in 1997. As well, in his 2007 play Socrates on Trial, Andrew D. Irvine
adopts material from a number of Platonic dialogues. Furthermore, Agora Publications has released recordings
of staged readings of Plato’s dialogues on the assumption that these works were originally intended for public
performance (as their website explains, although not at all convincingly). On Plato’s reliance on dramatic
techniques, see Rebecca Bensen Cain, The Socratic Method.
as Berkeley’s Three Dialogues Between Hylas and Philonous) go further still in this direction, using speech prefixes to help readers distinguish between the competing voices, and thus presenting philosophical arguments in a form that closely mirrors the appearance of playbooks. Even when we examine the monologic treatises that are, of course, the norm in philosophy, we can often discover subtle inclinations towards dramatic form. In Descartes’s Meditations, for example, the argument unfolds through something like an internal dialogue between the philosopher and an imagined interlocutor, as Descartes asks himself questions and then casts doubts on his own responses. It is a compelling read, of course, much more compelling than a work like Spinoza’s Ethics, and in large part this is because it inclines towards a dramatic soliloquy in its form rather than a Euclidean mathematical proof. For that matter, we might discern a number of structural elements in the narrative arc of Descartes’s six nights of meditation that will surely feel familiar to the theatrically-minded: the philosopher’s initial hubris and hamartia for having placed too much faith in his reason and his senses; the peripeteia that follows as he strips his beliefs of everything that can be doubted; the subsequent agon in which he scrutinizes his thoughts in a quest for clear and distinct ideas; the moment of anagnorisis when he recognizes that the cogito provides him with a foundation for knowledge that cannot be shaken; the ensuing catharsis as rationalist philosophy is reborn and purged of sceptical doubt; and ultimately the comic resolution, one that is made possible only when an implausible deus ex machina is lowered from the rafters (twice) in order to overcome the blocking figure of the malin génie so that the young lovers, mind and body, can be reassuringly married at last. I suggest that one of the reasons that the tragicomedy of the Meditations appeals to us as much as it does is that when we first encounter to it, we are already familiar with so many elements of its dramatic structure.
Writing philosophy is a challenging task, after all, for it requires us not merely to think profound thoughts (no small feat in itself), but also to present in writing a performance of ourselves engaged in thinking (perhaps a tougher challenge still). We only need recall Lucky’s contortions when he is ordered by Pozzo to “Think” as a performance piece in order to remind ourselves of just how difficult a task this is: it takes a tremendous effort to shape the chaotic barrage of ideas that fills our heads when we confront philosophical questions into a form that will prove comprehensible to a reading public. It is, of course, helpful for both writers and readers when philosophical discussions draw upon familiar rhetorical structures in their presentation of such abstract and challenging material. In the sixteenth century, philosophers often employed dialogue form to explore philosophical ideas, rather than turning to other familiar rhetorical forms such as mathematical proofs or sustained allegories or sentential aphorisms (although of course these alternatives turn up often enough as well). A search of the sixteenth-century books catalogued on EEBO reveals some 214 entries whose titles contain the words dialogue, debate, or disputation: among them we might find investigative philosophical conversations staged between a man and a woman, between winter and summer, between the commons and the prince, between the cap and the head, between a courtier and a countryman, between death and a lady, and scores upon scores more besides. The tendency towards polyphony in these philosophical writings, it seems safe to surmise, is at least in part a product of the political and religious turmoil of the century: a good many of these 214 books touch on questions of religion or politics, and in an age when orthodoxy was so unstable and when heresy was so dangerous, it was perhaps only prudent for writers committing their thoughts to print to consider a question from multiple angles instead of advocating a single unequivocal position.
However, this rhetorical proclivity for polyphony might also be linked to a feature of humanistic education that Joel B. Altman explores in depth in his landmark study *The Tudor Play of Mind*. Here he traces the emergence of early modern English drama from disputation in *in utramque partem*, a mode of argument in which problems were considered from opposing points of view. Early modern students in the grammar schools, the Inns of Court, and the universities were trained to construct arguments, both in their written exercises and also in oral debates staged before their peers, by considering an issue from multiple perspectives at once. Altman demonstrates convincingly that a clear connection can be drawn between the academic culture that favoured this mode of philosophical disputation and the theatre culture that became such a popular success in the latter half of Elizabeth’s reign. He asks:

> what happens to a mind conditioned to argue in *in utramque partem*—on both sides of the question—as Renaissance students were trained to do? Surely one result must be a great complexity of vision, capable of making every man not only a devil’s advocate but also a kind of microcosmic deity […] who can see all sides of an issue. (3-4)

If Shakespeare shows more concern for the diversities of the world than he does for its unities, as Shaw charges, then it seems that his mode of thinking was in step with his culture at large.

In our standard accounts of the history of philosophy, we typically give considerably less attention to sixteenth-century philosophy than we do to the periods that precede and succeed it. A brief survey of introductory philosophy textbooks and undergraduate course offerings will reveal that the discipline has more or less settled upon a standard narrative for medieval philosophy, beginning with Augustine and culminating in Aquinas, and a standard narrative for modern philosophy, beginning with Descartes and culminating with Hegel and the German idealists. However, the narrative for the period between Aquinas and Descartes


is considerably less certain and often treated only cursorily (if not ignored completely) in historical surveys. Without doubt there are excellent books and compelling courses to be found that focus on Renaissance philosophy, incorporating Renaissance humanism, the Protestant Reformation, the Second Scholasticism of the Counter-Reformation, the Machiavellian shift in political thought, the revival of scepticism, and the first stirrings of the Scientific Revolution into a coherent story, but this narrative has not been privileged institutionally to anywhere near the extent that the standard accounts of medieval and modern philosophy have been privileged. One plausible explanation for this disinclination of philosophers, I propose, is that it is in Descartes’s writings that modern philosophy begins to take on its familiar tone, a tone that (in spite of the drama in its narrative structure) is more linear, more dogmatic, and more monologic – perhaps we might say, more Shavian – than what had gone before. Pre-Cartesian thinkers like Montaigne, as well as the authors of the scores of sixteenth-century English dialogues I mention, were much more inclined to write philosophy in non-linear, non-dogmatic, dialogic – or Shakespearean – ways, as they investigated philosophical problems in utramque partem, concerning themselves more with the diversities than with the unities of the world. I would contend strongly, however, that these pre-Cartesian writings are by no means less philosophical for this choice, only differently philosophical, from the writings that we have ensconced in the canon of modern philosophy. To put this point another way, we might suggest that the brands of philosophy that we find in the early modern period tend to be more myriad-minded, while the philosophies of the Enlightenment tend to be more single-minded.

Plato famously banished the poets from his republic, making a passing reference to an “ancient quarrel” between philosophy and poetry (607b). Although very few subsequent writers have followed Plato in condemning poetry to this extreme extent (and to be fair,
even Plato himself seems anything but consistent on this point), his passing allusion to a long-standing feud between philosophy and poetry for some reason seems to have taken root in the collective consciousness, especially, it would seem, during the Renaissance, when this quarrel was referred to time and again. Philip Sidney, for example, wrestles with the subject in the *Apologie for Poetrie*, struggling to make sense of the fact that Plato, whom he considers to be “of all Philosophers [. . .] the most poetical,” would nevertheless choose to “defile the Fountaine, out of which his flowing streames haue proceeded” (sig. H4). Sidney implausibly concludes that Plato must not mean quite what he says in the *Republic*, and he proposes that Plato meant to banish not the poets themselves, but only “those wrong opinions of the Deitie” that were held by poets living before the time of Christ (sig. I1v).

Montaigne, on the other hand, retaliates against Plato directly rather than attempting to apologize for his anti-aestheticism; he turns the Platonic violent hierarchy of philosophy and poetry on its head by making the provocative claim that “philosophy is poetry adulterated by Sophists.” Montaigne looks back to the pre-Socratic philosophers to bolster his revised genealogy as he goes on to argue, “The original authorities were themselves poets; they treated philosophy in terms of poetic art. Plato is but a disjointed poet” (602).² I strongly suspect that Shakespeare would have agreed with Montaigne rather than Plato on this point. In Shakespeare’s plays, it seems to me that there is much more of an affinity than an antagonism to be found between poetry and philosophy. Accordingly, I would like to begin my argument with the contention that we have every reason to read these plays as philosophically-inflected and philosophically-inclined works. Building on Altman’s argument, I propose that there is a reciprocity to be found between English Renaissance

² Here and throughout I quote from M. A. Screech’s edition of Montaigne’s *Essays*, which seems to me to be the most convincing English translation available. For all references to Montaigne, however, I have compared Screech’s translation to Florio’s as well as the French original.
drama and English Renaissance philosophy, both with respect to the subject-matter they
choose to explore and also with respect to the rhetorical forms they choose to employ.
Philosophers, as Montaigne suggests, may well be disjointed poets, but playwrights like
Shakespeare, I suggest, may just as validly be considered to be disjointed philosophers.

In the chapters that follow I set out to explore the reciprocal interactions between
some plays by Shakespeare (namely Richard III, Troilus and Cressida, and Coriolanus) and
some problems in the history of philosophy (both early modern philosophy and
contemporary critical theory). The arguments that I develop below might reasonably be
grouped into three categories, since it seems to me that my interests and my methodologies
occupy three critical “dimensions”: a historicist dimension, a presentist dimension, and a
formalist dimension. Although these dimensions are often imagined to be in competition
with one another, my own contention is that they are complementary rather than conflicting,
running perpendicular to one another instead of in opposition. Perhaps, then, I should
preface my argument by commenting briefly on how my work might be positioned
theoretically and methodologically, and in particular on how it is that I envision historicism,
presentism, and formalism to complement one another.

The historicist aspect of my argument, to begin with, differs from much of the work
that has been done in early modern literary studies over the past decade in that I do not focus
particularly much attention on the material archive. The New Materialist movement that has
come into institutional prominence in the wake of New Historicism and Cultural Materialism
has undoubtedly contributed a great deal to early modern studies, not just because it has
helped to stabilize our historical accounts of the period by giving them a more secure
material foundation, but even more because it has encouraged literary critics to engage with
the material archive in such creative and imaginative ways. Historicist criticism is undoubtedly very much the richer for this ongoing work. At the same time, however, it seems clear to me that the interests of early modern individuals extended considerably beyond their immediate local and material concerns, and thus I think we would do well to supplement the work of the New Materialism with an historicist criticism that takes into account these more general, abstract, and philosophical early modern interests. Some might see this shift as a step backward, since to a certain extent it returns us to the ideological and textual focus that characterized the first wave of New Historicism, but I would prefer to see it instead as a step forward, one that draws inspiration from both the historical rigour and the creative imagination of the New Materialists as it returns to consider the interplay of early modern ideas in a new light. In this respect, I find myself particularly excited by the recent work of early modernists like Mary Bly, Margreta de Grazia, Bruce R. Smith, and Henry S. Turner, all of whom seem to me to be especially willing to take creative and imaginative risks within the context of a rigorous and wholly convincing historicist criticism.\(^3\)

The second dimension of my argument is its presentist aspect. Until recently, the word \textit{presentist} was primarily a term of abuse employed by historians and historicist literary critics, a pejorative dismissal for critical accounts that they deemed to be insufficiently historicized. In particular, the charge of presentism was most often applied to historical work that seemed to be too teleological, or in other words, too invested in explaining only

\(^3\) I would like to take this opportunity to thank Bruce R. Smith for sharing a chapter from \textit{The Key of Green} with me in advance of publication. It influences my argument in the chapters that follow at a number of points, but usually only in indirect (and thus hard-to-footnote) ways; and so let me offer a broad acknowledgement of his influence here. I might also take the opportunity to add that I was taken aback by the startling number of references to “imagination” that I noticed at this year’s Shakespeare Association of America conference in Dallas, perhaps most notably in Mary Bly’s memorable plenary paper. In Dallas, “imagination” felt very much as if it were becoming a buzzword in Shakespeare studies. I wonder: could it be that before long “imagination” will become the new “archive,” much in the way that “archive” became the new “ideology” a decade ago? Thanks also are due to Mary Bly for sharing a copy of her excellent paper with me after the conference.
those elements of the past that appeared to foreshadow our own present-day critical interests and concerns. In the past decade, however, a group of literary critics led by Hugh Grady and Terence Hawkes have begun to adopt the moniker of “presentism” to characterize their own work. Grady and Hawkes take issue with the historicist premise that real knowledge about the past is recoverable in a form that is independent of our own critical interests. Not all historicist critics would make a claim of this sort; certainly many critics in the first wave of New Historicism were closely attuned to the ambiguity of their project, which, Janus-like, tried to make sense of both “The Historicity of Texts and the Textuality of History” at once, as Louis A. Montrose so elegantly put it (23). More recently, however, prominent historicists like David Scott Kastan have been moving increasingly in this positivistic direction, and focusing on the first half of this chiasmus alone, as Paul Stevens observes (2). Grady argues in response to this trend in Shakespeare, Machiavelli, and Montaigne that “all our knowledge of works from the past is conditioned by and dependent upon the culture, language, and ideologies of the present, and this means that historicism itself necessarily produces an implicit allegory of the present in its configuration of the past” (2). Rather than attempting to efface our own interests from our criticism, the presentist strategy encourages us to embrace our present situatedness, highlighting connections between the past and the present, and attending to the ways in which the meaning of the past is continually being reshaped by the evolving interests of the present. The presentist dimension of my argument is significant,

---

4 The more common term among British historians for this fault is “Whiggishness.” For complaints against presentism, see David Hackett Fischer’s Historians’ Fallacies 135-40 and Quentin Skinner’s “Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas.” Advocating on behalf of presentism, on the other hand, we find Nancy Struever’s “Introduction” to Theory as Practice and David Hull’s “In Defense of Presentism.”

5 Grady tells me in an email correspondence that he initially gave thought to the term when he came upon it in Howard Felperin’s The Uses of the Canon, and then adopted it to describe his own critical approach in 1996’s Shakespeare’s Universal Wolf. Hawkes in turn appreciated Grady’s use of the term and adopted it for himself in Shakespeare in the Present. With the publication last year of the essay collection Presentist Shakespeares, edited by Grady and Hawkes, presentism now seems to be coming into its own as a bona fide movement.

6 Many thanks go to both Paul Stevens and David Scott Kastan for sharing thought-provoking conference papers on the subject of presentism with me that they delivered at last year’s meeting of the MLA.
and has been influenced to a considerable extent by Grady and Hawkes, but also by other critics who take an interest in the relationship between past and present, such as Michael D. Bristol, Linda Charnes, Lars Engle, Richard Halpern, and David Schalkwyk.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge a formalist dimension in my argument as well, an aesthetic interest in the literary and dramatic features of the plays themselves, considered apart from the historical contexts of their initial production and the theoretical contexts of their current reception. Although I do not find myself convinced by Angus Fletcher’s call for a conservative strain of “new formalism” that ignores all of the theoretical developments of the past forty years (this would lead only to a zombie-like resurrection of New Criticism), I am quite intrigued by John J. Joughin and Simon Malpas’s forward-looking conception of a “new aestheticism,” and even more so by Stephen Cohen’s convincing articulation of a “historical formalism.” Literary criticism, I think it is safe to say, has never really lost sight of the formal and aesthetic aspects of the texts it studies, however much it may have vilified the New Critics and their critical beliefs over the past four decades. Accordingly, these recent calls for a renewed formalism propose not so much that we adopt unfamiliar critical practices as that we acknowledge the value of traditional practices like close reading and character analysis that have continued to play a vital role in literary criticism all along, often alongside or intermixed with historical and theoretical interests. In my own critical readings, I have taken a great deal of inspiration from the work of virtuoso close readers such as Stanley Cavell, Harry Berger, Jr., and Alexander Leggatt, and I gratefully acknowledge their influence on the formalist dimension of the arguments below.

It seems to me to be notable, however, that whenever the various iterations of formalism, historicism, and presentism have set out to define themselves, they have almost invariably done so by means of a binary opposition, establishing one critical stance by
pointedly rejecting another position that has gone before.⁷ I find two aspects of this tendency to be intriguing and to be worth calling into question: the binary aspect and the oppositional aspect. The opening sentence of Cohen’s argument for historical formalism provides an excellent example of both of these aspects in action: “Without overmuch simplification, the institutional history of literary studies over the last hundred or so years can be characterized as a series of agonistic oscillations between the discipline’s two mighty opposites, form and history” (1); shortly afterwards, he uses the image of “the form-history pendulum” to illustrate this binary oscillation (2). In contrast, when Kastan sets out to purge historicism of its weaknesses in Shakespeare after Theory, he also imagines historicism locked into a binary, but it is not formalism but presentism that he envisions in opposition to it. Kastan proposes that the original wave of New Historicists and Cultural Materialists, in their shared tendency to acknowledge their own historical situatedness in their criticism, fell victim to the pitfalls of “theoretical sophistication” to such an extent that their “presentist” commitments threatened to obscure their ability to read aright the unadorned facts of history (17-18). Formalism does not form part of the equation for Kastan, just as presentism does not form part of the equation for Cohen. To cite a third example, we might observe that when Grady sets out to define “presentism,” he does so by situating it in opposition to historicism, casting the presentists as a small band of rebel forces combating the imperial behemoth of institutional historicism. Here again, we witness an advocate of one critical methodology defining it in opposition to a second while ignoring a third class completely. So far as I know, no one has ever proposed that there are in fact three sets of

⁷ I should likely acknowledge at this point that there are a great many critics writing today who do not feel compelled to segregate themselves into a discrete critical box and instead work within an eclectic critical framework. I do not mean to give the impression that every critic is, or ought to be, a card-carrying member of some faction or other. For that matter, one of my goals in this argument is to theorize eclecticism in a way that will make it seem not only feasible but attractive to more theoretically entrenched critics.
interests in contention here: one that privileges the historical and the factual, one that
privileges the theoretical and the ideological, and one that privileges the aesthetic and the
literary. As so often happens, binary models hold us in their thrall and cause us to overlook
a third alternative.

One benefit of dividing our disciplinary methodologies into three categories instead
of two is that it encourages us to see them as distinct from one another rather than as
opposed to one another. Each of the three approaches asks its own particular set of
questions, and each set of questions yields its own particular range of answers. Accordingly,
it seems to me that each of these modes of inquiry is entirely valid on its own terms, and
need not be seen to be in competition with the others. The only reason that I can imagine
for thinking that these approaches are, in fact, opposed to one another would be if we were
to return to the essentialist belief that there was a single correct interpretation for every text
waiting to be found, in which case it would indeed matter a great deal which of these
approaches yielded the lone correct result. But surely no one can be so single-minded as this
in our current pluralistic, myriad-minded, post-Shavian (or should it be aftershavian?) critical
climate. For that matter, it also seems to me that any attempt at pursuing a pure historicism,
or a pure presentism, or a pure formalism would prove to be impossible. We undoubtedly
can choose to privilege just one of these three angles of interest in our criticism, but I do not
think it is possible (let alone productive) to try to avoid the impact of the other two. To
some extent, the historical context of the production of a text will always mark its language,
making historicist considerations inevitable on at least some level; as well, the present
situation and interests of the critic can never be transcended or effaced from consideration
completely (whatever the positivists may have to say on the matter), with the result that
presentist considerations will always be a factor to some degree; and the text itself
construing the word “text” very broadly) is always at the centre of our critical inquiry, and thus it would seem that formalist considerations will always be brought to bear to some extent as well. I think it is perfectly reasonable for a critic to choose to investigate just one of these aspects of a text at a time; and I will gladly admit that this sort of critical focus tends to be very productive. Overall, in fact, I am very much disposed towards the idea of critical inclusivism. I only tend to balk at critics who make dogmatic claims that privilege one of these approaches by devaluing the others, generating a needless oppositionality between approaches that, it seems to me, do not impinge upon each other, and furthermore, can be seen to supplement each other richly.

In my own work, I aim to balance my interests in all of these aspects of a text, ideally exploring all three at once. My hope is that what my approach lacks in single-minded focus, it makes up for in breadth and depth. I am delighted to be anticipated in my call for critical inclusivity to a large extent by Cohen, whose proposal for a “historical formalism” is precisely the sort of thing that I have in mind. He describes the way in which his approach is committed to “recognizing the limits imposed on [both historicism and formalism] by the absence or neglect of the other and the correspondent gains to be had through their union”; and he suggests that “historical formalism neither imposes nor assumes any single understanding of form, history, or the relationship between them, but instead explores the complexity of their mutual implication” (3). I break from Cohen only in my suggestion that his binary pendulum of form and history effaces our presentist concerns (and especially our interests in questions of contemporary theory and politics) from consideration. My proposal, then, is that we add a third dimension to his formulation, making room for our theoretical interests in a text alongside our historical and our aesthetic interests. The designation “historical formalism” has an agreeable ring to it, but I fear that any attempt to add
“presentist” into the mix would be disastrously inelegant (“historical formalist presentism”? “presentist historical formalism”?). Not only do these awkward formulations sound like the ludicrous “tragical-comical-historical-pastoral” genre invented by Polonius (2.2.381), they also raise the difficult question of which term should go first, which second, and which third. All of these compound name options would thus misrepresent what I have in mind. Instead, I call the approach that I take in my critical reading “aspectualism”: my strategy may not be quite myriad-minded, but it is ternary-minded and non-oppositional, and my suggestion is that this openness and flexibility tends to be especially useful in confronting texts from an age that itself inclined towards this sort of open-endedness.

In the first chapter, I set out the theoretical framework and critical strategy that I employ in the readings that follow. As it turns out, I have already provided an example of the kind of situation that I will make my focus over the course of this dissertation, which is to say, an instance where three options present themselves to us, but where our reliance upon binary analytic strategies prompts us to see only two choices instead of three. Borrowing a phrase from King Lear, I call this process of conceptual redistribution “digesting the third.” The strategy that I develop in response to digesting the third, in turn, is an approach that I call “hemiolic criticism.” Here I draw my inspiration from the musical figure of “hemiola,” the polyrhythm that results from the superimposition of triple time upon duple time. For the remainder of the opening chapter, I consider the idea of digesting the third and the hemiolic response to it more broadly, clarifying in particular how my position differs in its treatment of binaries from both post-structuralism and deconstruction. I also draw attention to the considerable influence that Wittgenstein has had on my approach, arguing that in many cases, the best way to recover digested thirds from familiar
philosophical binaries is to consider how Wittgenstein’s later writings draw distinctions that are typically elided in critical theory, especially by theorists influenced by Foucault. I conclude the chapter by considering more broadly the overarching binary formation in critical theory that pits essentialism against social constructivism in its consideration of so many questions, and propose instead that we adopt a ternary redefinition that analyzes problems in terms of realism, pragmatism, and constructivism.

In the three chapters that follow, I explore how we can find competing binary and ternary understandings of philosophical problems coming into conflict with one another in some of Shakespeare’s plays. From a historicist perspective, I argue that our current binary philosophical vocabulary, although undoubtedly already available in Shakespeare’s time, only became entrenched when Descartes initiated the modern era in philosophy. In the sixteenth century, however, before the Enlightenment was under way, these familiar binary analyses were still in competition with alternative ternary models, models that literary critics working in the long shadow cast by Descartes have by and large overlooked. Even more to the point, I suggest that in some of Shakespeare’s plays, written just as the project of modernity was gaining steam in the aftermath of the Reformation and in anticipation of Descartes, we can witness examples of “third” categories of thought in the process of being swallowed by binaries. Overall, I contend that what we discover in these plays is Shakespeare’s struggle to make sense of the seismic conceptual redefinitions of his age. Furthermore, from a presentist perspective, I argue that by attending to the polyrhythmic relationships of philosophical problems in the sixteenth century, we might in fact discover “new” ways of making sense of our current theoretical tangles, overcoming our inherited binary inclinations by recovering ternary strategies for making sense of philosophical problems. In this respect I build upon Stephen Toulmin’s suggestion that we might observe close parallels between
the pre-modern and the post-modern intellectual landscapes, as if the Enlightenment were a circuitous detour that we took in the seventeenth century and returned from in the twentieth. I also share Toulmin’s suspicions that a study of sixteenth-century thought yields results that are not just historical curiosities, but strategies that are immediately relevant to theory today, because of the powerful resonances that can be found between the pre-modern and the post-modern.  

Lastly, from a formalist perspective, I demonstrate through close readings how these conflicts between competing ways of thinking are registered in the language of the plays themselves. In this respect, I am taking an interest not in what the plays meant to Shakespeare and his original audience, nor in what they might mean to us in our present situation, but instead in the tensions and echoes and ambiguities that are to be found in the texts themselves.

The first of my readings focuses on Richard III, exploring two related philosophical problems: the problem of kingship and the problem of the conscience. In both cases, the concepts were theorized during Elizabeth’s reign in terms of a binary opposition between what we would now call objectivity and subjectivity. Tudor political theory and Protestant psychology relied heavily on binary models to establish the divine right of the monarch and the individuality of the reformed self before God. In both cases, however, a third category that emphasizes community is digested within the binary, and I contend that we can find clear traces of these digested thirds preserved in early modern discussions of the common law, the English Parliament, and the pre-Reformation conception of the conscience. I argue that in Richard III, Shakespeare sets out to interrogate and undermine both Tudor politics

---

8 I sat down with Toulmin’s book only in the final stages of writing this dissertation, and in hindsight, I very much wish I had begun my research with it, since he anticipates many of the conclusions that I came to independently. Notable in this respect is the connection he draws between Montaigne and Wittgenstein (x), which anticipates a major theme of my argument to come and which certainly warranted acknowledgement in the version of Chapter 4 that I have already published. More broadly, though, my conception of modernity and the parallels that I draw between pre-modern and post-modern patterns of thought have a great deal in common with the position Toulmin develops in his compelling and fascinating book.
and Protestant psychology by exploring how these forms of community are digested within the insurgent binaries. In the next chapter, I turn to *Troilus and Cressida* and the problem of value. Focusing on early modern debates about currency reform, international exchange, and mercantile practices, I establish that there is a conflict to be found between binary economic theory and ternary mercantile practices in the early modern period. Working on the assumption that Shakespeare – the son of a usurer and a remarkably successful venture capitalist in his own right – would be more persuaded by practical than theoretical concerns, I reread the discussions of value in *Troilus* in ternary terms, and argue that much that has seemed puzzling about this problem play can be resolved once we forgo the binary models of intrinsic and extrinsic value and use and exchange value, and turn instead to a ternary model of substance, toleration, and valuation that we find employed in the writings of the Tudor economist Gerard de Malynes. Thirdly, I turn to the most pressing philosophical puzzle of all, the nature of truth and the challenge posed to it by scepticism. I begin this chapter by reading Montaigne and Wittgenstein in parallel with each other, arguing that in their polyphonic texts we can discern three distinct dogmatic conceptions of truth as well as two distinct sceptical responses. I contend that both Montaigne and Wittgenstein reject the more familiar mode of Academic scepticism, which is grounded in the method of doubt, and instead embrace the more challenging mode of Pyrrhonian scepticism, which embraces a commitment to open investigation. With these distinctions in place, I read *Coriolanus* as a play that pits the three dogmatic accounts of truth and two modes of scepticism against one another, ultimately (and perhaps unsurprisingly) endorsing myriad-minded Pyrrhonism. Finally, in the last chapter I briefly return to theoretical concerns, addressing two objections that I set aside in the opening chapter, and then I reconsider some of my findings more generally, drawing a few broad conclusions about Shakespeare and his culture, and extracting
some ideas from the Pyrrhonism I find in Montaigne, Wittgenstein, and Shakespeare that I think might prove useful for critical theory today.
Chapter 1

Digesting the Third: An Introduction to Hemiolic Criticism

Who is the third who walks always beside you?
When I count, there are only you and I together

Shakespeare’s tragedies often conclude with a dead march, a sombre two-beat pulse that in performance segues into the lively sprung rhythms of audience applause. I would like to reverse this familiar progression, spooling the film of the tragedy backward, as it were. Thus, I propose that we begin this chapter with the disorderly sound of hands clapping, and then proceed through the five acts that follow to make a concerted effort to extract life anew from the binary pulse of a dead march.

**Hemiola** is a term of music theory that, in contemporary usage, refers to the polyrhythm that results from the superimposition of a triple and a duple rhythm upon each other. The term comes from the Greek *hēmiolios*, literally “half-whole,” which means something like “half as much again.” In surviving classical literature, the word is most often used in a general sense to describe the relative sizes of two armies or cities or costs, in cases where one of these is one-and-a-half times as great as the other. The Pythagoreans, however, seem to have placed a special emphasis on the mathematical ratio of the *hēmiolios*, which is to say 3:2, in particular since they recognized that a lyre string divided in this precise ratio will produce two notes that are harmonious to each other, forming an interval that we now refer to as the “perfect fifth,” the foundation of all Western harmony (Jones 41).

However, the use of *hemiola* as a designation of rhythm rather than pitch also dates back to classical times, for in the *Rhetoric* (1409a), Aristotle discusses the hemiolic metre that was employed by the Greek paean, a shuffling poetic foot composed of a single long (two-beat)

---

1 I base this claim on the forty-seven instances of the word contained in the Greek text collections that I found using the “Perseus Lookup Tool” at the *Perseus Digital Library Project*. 
syllable followed by three short (one-beat) syllables (˘ ˘ ˘) or vice versa (˘ ˘ ˘). During the Baroque period, this rhythmic sense of the word seems to have moved to the forefront of English usage as “hemiolias” – patterns of duple and triple rhythms juxtaposed with each other – became one of the popular ornamental devices in music of the time. These rhythms were most often developed in 6/8 time, a time signature notable for the fact that it can be broken down either into two groups of three beats or three groups of two. A Baroque hemiola will typically juxtapose these two alternatives against each other, forming a rhythm like this: 1-2-3 4-5-6 / 1-2 3-4 5-6.2

In the twentieth century, however, as Western music (and especially jazz) began to embrace the dynamic polyrhythms employed by various forms of non-European music (most notably West African and Afro-Cuban beats), the term hemiola shifted away from referring to the mixed-metre juxtaposition of duple and triple rhythms alongside each other and towards referring to the polyrhythmic superimposition of a duple and a triple rhythm on top of each other, a rhythm that on paper looks like this:

![Polyrhythm Example]

This is the sort of hemiola, I should emphasize, that hemiolic criticism takes as its primary inspiration, and so before we proceed any further, I would encourage you to take a moment to learn how to play this polyrhythm for yourself. This really is not all too difficult a task. First, begin by tapping a rhythm in three with your right hand: 1-2-3 1-2-3 1-2-3. Next, introduce a rhythm in two over top of this with your left hand – 1-2 1-2 1-2 –

---

2 You might find it helpful to count this aloud as “One-and-a Two-and-a / One-and Two-and Three-and.” Alternatively, if you sing “America” from Leonard Bernstein’s West Side Story, you will hear a familiar instance of this sort of mixed metre in play: “I-want-to live-in-A / me- ri- ca- / I-want-to live-in-A / me- ri- ca.” Here, bars of two triplet beats alternate with bars of three doublet beats.
playing the “one” at the same time as the “one” on your right hand and the “two” exactly in between the “two” and the “three” on your right. This may take a little practice. It helps to think of the polyrhythm like this: “Both, right-left-right,” or to count out the rhythm as “One, two-and-three.” (Another strategy you might try is to assure yourself aloud that this is “not difficult, not difficult.”) In any case, what a hemiola does is divide the passage of time in two different ways simultaneously, with one voice breaking a given unit of time down into three equal parts and the other breaking it down into two. The resulting polyrhythm pulls us in two directions at once, creating a suspension between the lulling lyricism of the triple time on the one hand and the tick-tock exactitude of the duple time on the other. When you first encounter a hemiola, you will most likely find your ear gravitating toward either the triplet feel or the doublet feel. With a little practice, however, you should begin to feel this polyrhythm as a single complex rhythm in its own right.

The earliest (and arguably the greatest) record of hemiola in Western art, I suggest, is to be found in the Republic. Plato’s account of the composition of the just state and, by analogy, of the just self is developed using a famous tripartite model: he divides the state into three classes of citizens (the philosopher kings, the auxiliaries, and the workers) and the soul into three analogous faculties (the reason, the spirit, and the appetite), structuring his accounts of group politics and of individual psychology on top of congruent triangular foundations. Simultaneously in the dialogue, however, he elaborates on these tripartite political and psychological structures using binary terms drawn from the arsenal of his metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics – powerful binaries like reality and appearance.

---

3 For more discussions on hemiola, see Rose Brandel, “The African Hemiola Style,” Ruth I. DeFord, “Tempo Relations Between Triple and Duple Time in the Sixteenth Century,” and Royal Hartigan, West African Rhythms for the Drumset. Thanks to Dave Clark, the finest drummer I know, for this last reference, and many thanks to him as well for getting me excited about polyrhythms in the first place.
objective knowledge and subjective opinion, virtue and vice, and so on – superimposing these dyadic philosophical distinctions on top of his triadic accounts of politics and psychology.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Metaphysics</th>
<th>reality</th>
<th>appearance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Epistemology</td>
<td>objective knowledge</td>
<td>subjective opinion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethics</td>
<td>virtue</td>
<td>vice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Politics</td>
<td>philosopher kings</td>
<td>auxiliaries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychology</td>
<td>reason</td>
<td>spirit</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Crucially, Plato does not seem to recognize this spectacular philosophical polyrhythm in his dialogue as a polyrhythm, and we can observe him frequently collapsing his intriguing psychological and political ternary structures into the more familiar philosophical binaries as his ear gravitates to just one of the competing rhythms in his dialogue at a time. (Something comparable may well have happened to you when you first attempted to play a hemiola. It takes some practice to keep both rhythms going at once.)

Most often, the casualties of this structural tension in the *Republic* are the middle categories that he proposes: the political class of the auxiliaries and psychological faculty of the spirit. The primary opposition that Plato envisions in the dialogue, of course, is between the philosopher kings and the reason on the one hand, and the workers and the appetite on the other. He quite clearly allies the former with a reality of universal forms, with objective knowledge, and with virtue, and by contrast, he associates the latter with the transient world of appearance, with subjective opinion, and with moral vice. What, then, becomes of the middle thirds of the auxiliary class and the spirited aspect of the soul when they are
considered within these binary schemata? When Plato acknowledges the existence of these middle thirds at all, they are most often tacitly collapsed into one camp or the other, depending on his purposes at any given time. For example, when Plato wants to set the philosopher kings apart from the lower classes in order to emphasize their inherent superiority, the auxiliaries are lumped in with the workers and classed among the ruled; but when Plato wants instead to segregate the lowest third, the auxiliaries are promoted to join forces with the philosopher kings and classified as fellow guardians, employed as authoritative muscle to keep the appetitive riff-raff firmly in their place. More often than not, however, the auxiliaries simply vanish from the equation altogether, falling into a conceptual blind spot created by the binary goggles that Plato’s metaphysical, epistemological, and ethical vocabulary places on us. Attending to the hemiolic rhythm of the Republic in this way accomplishes two results: from a philosophical perspective, it draws attention to inconsistencies in Plato’s argument by highlighting some of the sleights of hand that he attempts as he oscillates between binary and ternary analytic models in this philosophical shell game; and from a literary perspective, it accounts for some of the dialogic features that have made the Republic so puzzling and so fascinating to readers over time, since the tension between these underlying structures is in many ways the core conflict that fuels the argument in the dialogue.

4 The auxiliaries and the spirit might be seen to occupy the same ambiguous middle space that Ariel does in The Tempest, especially in the way that this “brave spirit” (thumos) complicates the master-slave relationship between the reason (nous) of Prospero and the appetite (epithumia) of Caliban.

5 Plato spends most of Book 3 discussing the Guardians, which is to say, the class of both the Philosopher Kings and the Auxiliaries. At the end of this book, however, he divides the Guardians into the rulers and the ruled (412b), and from this point onward we hear very little about the Auxiliaries, who occupy an uncomfortable place as Guardians who are ruled. The ambiguity is even more pronounced with respect to the spirit. Julia Annas observes: “Because the argument divides the soul so definitely into rational and irrational parts, it makes the place of spirit questionable. For spirit shares features of both desire and reason [. . .]. The argument separating reason from desire so sharply seems to leave no conceptual room for spirit; spirit turns out to be like reason in so far as reasons are appealed to, and like desire in so far as impulses come in, but seems not to be a unity in its own right” (140).
Alongside the *Republic* I would like to consider another primal scene in Western thought: the opening action of *King Lear*. Before the play begins, Lear has already determined that his kingdom will be divided into three new territories: one of these lands is earmarked for Goneril, “With shadowy forests and with champaigns riched, / With plenteous rivers and wide-skirted meads” (1.1.62-63); while another is set aside for Regan, “No less in space, validity, and pleasure / Than that conferred on Goneril” (1.1.79-80); and the remaining territory, a third that is “more opulent” than the other two, is reserved for Cordelia (1.1.84). Given Albany’s location in the north and Cornwall’s location in the southwest, it seems reasonable to assume that this most opulent third of Britain includes the bulk of England itself. I suspect that the play’s original London audience would likely have identified it at once as their home in the heart of Britain. However, when Cordelia fails to please her father better, he abandons his initial scheme and summarily redivides his carefully apportioned kingdom into two arbitrary fragments, announcing to Cornwall and Albany, “With my two daughters’ dowers digest the third” (1.1.126), thereby plunging the fate of England into a state of uncertainty. Lear’s original plan to divide Britain clearly had its flaws, but at least it demonstrated a certain degree of socio-political forethought on his part, demarcating new territories with an eye towards their natural boundaries and physical resources and defining these geographical divisions precisely and publicly, a point that is emphasized for us in performance by his prominent use of a map in the ceremony (1.1.35). In his wrath, Lear abandons his original plan and leaves the heart of Britain to be carved up by Albany and Cornwall howsoever they might chance to determine it between themselves. However, this crucial political negotiation never seems to take place; certainly the play makes

---

6 Since *The Norton Shakespeare* offers three texts of *King Lear*, I should clarify that all quotations are drawn from *The Tragedy* (F) rather than *The History* (Q) or the conflated text. Unless otherwise noted, all other quotations from Shakespeare come from the Norton.

7 Hawkes makes a point similar to this in *William Shakespeare: King Lear* 5-6.
no further reference to a boundary of any sort being drawn between the newly distended states of Albany and Cornwall, even though the logic of the story would seem to demand that something of the sort take place. (Surely it is difficult to imagine Goneril and Regan leaving the rule of the most opulent third of Britain as an open question for very long.) What seems to me most notable here is that we in the audience do not seem to notice anything missing from the story in this respect; to my knowledge the question of how exactly this third of the kingdom gets “digested” by the other two has rarely, if ever, been broached in criticism of the play. England is not merely digested within the new political landscape of Britain: it seems to have been completely effaced from our consciousness.

It is this very same sort of digesting the third, of course, that we can see at work in the Republic, as Socrates initially apportions a class of auxiliaries and a faculty of the spirit within his design and then proceeds to digest the third through the remainder of his dialogue. Moreover, I would argue that this underlying philosophical tension between binary and ternary models is in no way unique to the Republic, since the history of Western philosophy presents us with an extensive list of comparable examples of hemiola in action. As I will illustrate in the chapters that follow, time and again the arguments of philosophers (as well as political theorists, theologians, economists, legal theorists, and other such thinkers) have led them toward tripartite findings, and time and again they have responded to these discoveries just as Plato and Lear do, falling back into familiar binary structures that digest the thirds, usually with no acknowledgement whatsoever of this rupture or loss. Perhaps this occurs so often because we are taught from our earliest days to appreciate the world in terms of pairs of opposites, as the structuralists and post-structuralists have demonstrated so aptly; or perhaps the reason is more fundamental still, moving beyond socio-cultural discursive formations to the underpinnings of our biology itself, where the bilateral symmetry of the
human body prompts us to contrast things “on the one hand” with things “on the other.” Whatever the case, I would argue that the history of Western thought has exhibited a remarkable tendency to gravitate in its analyses of philosophical concepts towards an inopportune binarism, most often paying no attention to the implications of such reductivism. The orchestra plays for us in waltz time, and we stubbornly insist upon a dancing a two-step.  


There seems to be a widespread consensus among current literary critics that there is a problem with binaries, so much so that even the word “binary” itself has taken on a strong pejorative connotation. To begin with, then, I should go on the record as saying that even though the hemiolic strategy that I develop in this chapter sets out to redescribe binary structures using ternary strategies, I am by no means opposed to all binaries whatsoever. Many of them, in fact, seem to me to be entirely unproblematic, if not wholly indispensable: for example, I have no misgivings at all when it comes to flipping light-switches that place “off” and “on” in binary opposition to each other; I am not at all concerned that my computer saves my work in an enormous chain of 1s and 0s; I feel no compulsion to seek out creative alternatives to “heads” or “tails” during a coin-toss; and so on. The world is full of a great many wholly sensible binary oppositions, I suggest, and thus one of the shortcomings that I frequently find in post-structuralist and deconstructive critiques of binary thinking is the knee-jerk (or even essentialist?) assumption that binaries are somehow

8 On this tendency toward binarism in philosophy, see also “Philosophical Pairs and Their Justification” in Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 420-26. As a brief tangent, one that I hope to explore in more depth on another occasion, I would also like to suggest that a compelling historical analogue for “digesting the third” might be found in the Protestant refashioning of popular conceptions of the afterlife in the sixteenth century, as Purgatory was summarily digested into the binary of Heaven and Hell. Greenblatt’s Hamlet in Purgatory, of course, offers an excellent extended discussion of the impact of this seismic shift in early modern belief; and see also Steven Mullaney’s recent article “Affective Technologies” for a thoughtful and compelling historicist investigation of the profound emotional loss that was occasioned by the digestion of Purgatory.
problematic “violent hierarchies” by their very nature. Furthermore, I think it is important to acknowledge that the term “binaries” is used to represent quite a varied range of dyads: not just dichotomous oppositions, but also more open-ended competing alternatives, and even at times dyads that seem to me to be wholly complementary pairs of ideas. We might see a confusion of this sort, I suggest, at the core of Anna Maria Cimitile’s argument in Shakespearean Orders, which offers a deconstructive reading of how Shakespeare’s plays subvert a whole range of binaries that she envisions as being parallel to one another, including nature and culture, good and evil, justice and mercy, matter and spirit, filiation and usurpation, and commerce and law (23). I would argue in response that there seem to be crucial differences to be found between these dyads. Good and evil, for example, quite clearly form a dichotomous binary opposition, whereas justice and mercy seem to present us with a much more ambiguous pair of partly-competing alternatives, and commerce and law in turn seem to be little more than two vaguely related concepts that Cimitile considers alongside each other. Surely, I suggest, these dyads are not all “binaries” in the same way, structured on a model of presence and absence.

I greatly appreciate the work that the past generation of critical theorists has done in drawing attention to the ways in which violent hierarchies of social power are often constructed and maintained through particular binary oppositions in language. However, at the same time, I am far from persuaded by the strategies that both the post-structuralists and the deconstructivists have adopted in their attempts to address this concern. It seems to me that the usual post-structuralist strategy of inverting binaries in order to privilege whatever position had previously been marginalized does little to overcome the problem of binaries, since the inversion of a binary preserves it intact. An upside-down binary, after all, is undoubtedly still a binary nonetheless. This is, as I understand it, the thrust of the complex
and convincing argument that Derrida develops against Foucault in “Cogito and the History of Madness.” To make the same point much more prosaically, however, I am reminded of the famous quip that the cartoonist Bob Thaves made about Ginger Rogers, namely that she was a better dancer than Fred Astaire because she managed to do everything that he did, only backwards and in high heels. I sometimes find myself thinking the same thing about Foucault and Descartes. Foucault, of course, undoubtedly comes across as the more compelling philosopher as he tackles Enlightenment metaphysics so daringly and so stylishly, but it seems to me that in the end what Foucault is doing is very much the same old song and dance that Descartes did, only backwards and in high heels. In cases where binary thinking really is a problem, the post-structuralist response challenges the hierarchy within a binary, privileging the marginalized and validating the undervalued, and although I see this as a worthwhile task in its own right, I do not see how it enables us to overcome the problem of the binary itself.

Derrida accepts that the post-structural inversion of a binary can be a valuable first step in deconstruction, but only if the inverted binary is then put under erasure to make room for “the irruptive emergence of a new ‘concept,’ a concept which no longer allows itself to be understood in the terms of the previous regime” (Positions 39; cf. Spivak lxxvii). This is very much closer to the sort of idea that I have in mind, and in fact in many respects, I find that there is a great deal in common between the hemiolic critical strategy I am developing and deconstruction. At the same time, however, Derrida seems to me to be

---

9 Graham Bradshaw makes something of a similar point about Shakespeare criticism when he claims that “radical” critics like Jonathan Dollimore and John Drakakis “are not so much correcting Tillyard’s approach as standing it on its head, by privileging those anti-humanist, anti-essentialist perspectives which most threaten Tillyard’s Elizabethan World Picture” (x).

10 This is especially true if we imagine deconstruction as broadly as Derrida sometimes does, as here, for example: “if you want to ‘do deconstruction’ [. . .] then you have to perform something new, in your own language, in your own singular situation, with your own signature, to invent the impossible and to break with the application, in the technical, neutral sense of the word” (“As If I Were Dead” 217-18).
above all committed to the task of undermining ontological stability, and this is not an agenda I share. This, I suggest, was a very productive corrective step for critical theory to take as it set out to liberate us from the illusions of Enlightenment philosophy, but it does not seem to me to be a desirable endpoint in and of itself. In particular, I am uncomfortable with the emphatic oppositionality of deconstruction, and would like to move beyond deconstruction’s antagonistic focus on dismantling received opinion and towards establishing new and more productive ways of thinking. The hemiolic strategy in a sense begins with a form of deconstruction, but, I hope, takes deconstruction somewhere new. In particular, it seems to me that the model of presence and absence that forms the core of so many deconstructive readings is deeply problematic, since in many cases it appears to reassert and to galvanize the same binaries that it purports to overcome. Furthermore, Derrida suggests that philosophical binaries, although flawed, are inescapable (Positions 39), but I propose that this is very much an open question. Rather than committing ourselves to a perpetual deferral of meaning within an unstable ontology, I encourage us to discover new ways of meaning by means of the hemiolic strategy, and even, as I will later argue, to establish a new kind of ontological framework through it.

There are two kinds of binaries that are of particular interest (and particular concern) to me. The first of these is the kind of binary that results from the logical fallacy traditionally called “false dilemma.” This occurs when an argument starts off by presenting two valid alternatives, but then goes on to make the faulty assumption that these two options are the only options available to us. To put this idea another way, there is almost never a problem with simply drawing a binary distinction (which is to say, a contrast between two alternative concepts), but there may well be a problem if this binary distinction is then recast as a dichotomous opposition, as if these two alternatives were diametrical opposites of each
other, opposites which, when taken together, exhaust the field of relevant possibilities.\footnote{Here is an obvious example of a false dichotomy: “Catholicism is a religion; Buddhism is a different religion; therefore, all religious people are either Buddhist or Catholic.” I should add that Fischer's brief discussion of the “fallacy of false dichotomous questions” is particularly worth consulting (9-12).} (The Latin idiom that logicians use to express this situation is *tertium non datur*, “the third is not given.”) This type of slippage from distinction to dichotomy can sometimes be quite subtle and very often passes unnoticed. A famous instance, I suggest, might be seen in the case of Cartesian dualism. Descartes draws a wholly legitimate distinction between the mind and the body, conceiving of the mind as a thinking and unextended thing and of the body as an extended and unthinking thing (1: 190). However, the appealing tidiness of this chiasmus sets the stage for this valid binary distinction to be recast as an invalid binary opposition, as if mind and body were not just distinct but dichotomous, and *tertium non datur*. Before we know it, thought and extension shift from being two apparently unrelated concepts to being two diametrically opposed concepts.

I would suggest in response that the reduction of the whole of our experience into the categories of the mental and the physical carries with it certain philosophical casualties. It is not just the idea that mind and body are opposed that concerns me, although I think some very valuable critical work has been done in recent years that undermines this opposition by focusing on the embodiedness of the mind and the ensouledness of the body. What concerns me more is that the Cartesian binary is not exhaustive, especially in the way that it fails to account for the kinds of intersubjective social behaviours that seem to me to be every bit as fundamental to human experience as thought and extension are. When I console my crying son, or teach my daughter how to play a card-game, or flirt with my wife over dinner, or engage in any of the hundreds of forms of enculturated behaviour that we all engage in on a daily basis, are my actions readily explainable as being either mental or...
physical, or even as some combination of the two? For that matter, when you learned to play a hemiola at the outset of this chapter, was it a mental accomplishment or a physical accomplishment? Does either characterization make sense? Human experience fundamentally involves us performing actions that we learn from one another, and these enculturated social behaviours, so foundational to our understanding of meaning, are bifurcated awkwardly under the Cartesian model. Certainly we have thoughts and certainly we occupy space, but we also just as certainly participate in shared practices with one another, and I would suggest that these intersubjective behaviours make much more sense when they are examined on their own terms than when we try to explain them using the unresponsive and inappropriate categories of the mental and the physical.

Cartesian dualism, of course, provided the template for the more sweeping binary oppositions that would soon come to dominate Enlightenment philosophy – spirit and matter, noumenon and phenomenon, the objective and the subjective, the ideal and the material, and so on – all of them still touchstones of analytic philosophy that seem to me to be false dichotomies in ways that run parallel to one another. Furthermore, despite our best efforts in recent decades to escape from our Cartesian inheritance and to move beyond mind-body dualism, I would suggest that we nevertheless continue to rely quite heavily upon these other derivative Enlightenment binaries. In literary criticism, this reliance is perhaps most perspicuous in our continued subscription to the dichotomy of the material and the ideal, albeit this is now usually recast as an opposition of the material and the ideological, or taken even more broadly, as an opposition of fact and theory. Of course, this last

---

12 Douglas Bruster has memorably described this dichotomy in literary criticism as an opposition between the “rash” and the “reckoned”: he classifies the more theoretically-inclined critics who focus upon conflicts of ideology (like Theodore Leinwand) as the “rash” and the more factually-inclined critics who focus upon material history (like Andrew Gurr) as the “reckoned” (69). He even goes so far as to draw a table, setting out the opposed critical traits in two parallel columns, underscoring this binary very clearly (70).
opposition is foundational to a great many modern academic disciplines, but perhaps none more so than philosophy, which in the twentieth century saw itself divided into two camps: the analytic idolaters of fact and the Continental idolaters of theory.

My favourite account of this far-reaching philosophical schism is a story recounted by Adam Gopnik. During the five years that he worked as the Parisian correspondent for *The New Yorker*, Gopnik discovered that French intellectuals were not only unfamiliar with the idea of fact-checking in journalism, but deeply suspicious of the whole enterprise (94-97). The fact-checking department of *The New Yorker* is, of course, famous for being one of the strongest bastions of positivism in the West. Like most serious American magazines, as a matter of course *The New Yorker* places follow-up telephone calls to all interview subjects in order to confirm all of the substantive claims that are set to go into print, and Gopnik’s French subjects were often baffled by what they imagined to be an unhealthy fetishization of fact. Some felt affronted that they were being asked under cross-examination to confirm the “truth” of the details that they had already presented in the interview (as if such a thing as truth could possibly be imagined to exist in the first place), while others assumed this process of “fact-checking” must be part of an iron-fisted strategy by which the magazine maintained a strong ideological line, and others still were convinced that Gopnik’s fellow reporters must be conspiring against him from across the Atlantic and attempting to sabotage his position. Gopnik’s moment of insight comes when he imagines how American intellectuals would respond to receiving a follow-up telephone call along these same lines from a “theory checker” at a French magazine. He envisions a call of this sort:

“A what?”

“You know, a theory checker. Just someone to make sure that all your premises agree with your conclusions, that there aren’t any obvious errors of logic in your argument, that all your allusions flow together in a coherent stream — that kind of thing.” (96)
Is a “theory checker” any less sensible an idea than a “fact checker”? If truth be told, I suspect that almost all of us working in academia would benefit greatly from keeping checkers of both kinds employed full-time on retainer. In any case, I will argue below that the binary assumption that sets fact and theory in dichotomous opposition to each other very much deserves to be called into question. In the first place, fact and theory are surely not polar opposites of each other in the way that good and evil are, since an argument can be both factually and theoretically sound (or for that matter, unsound) at once. Fact and theory can undoubtedly complement each other, not just compete with each other. Furthermore, and more pointedly, I would also suggest that the dyad of fact and theory is not exhaustive, since the kinds of social practices and enculturated behaviours that interest me so much are not adequately explained either in terms of fact alone or in terms of theory alone. (Did learning to play a hemiola, for example, involve learning a fact or learning a theory?) The practical, I suggest, constitutes a digested third in this model that warrants consideration alongside the factual and theoretical.

The second class of binaries that both interests and concerns me is the kind that results from the process of dialectical antithesis. Whereas the problem of false dilemma might be seen to be characteristic of certain strains of dualistic thought, the problem of dialectical antithesis might be seen in turn to be characteristic of certain strains of monistic thought. Here we might cite as representative examples of dialectical antithesis gone awry the binary oppositions of essentialism and anti-essentialism and of realism and anti-realism. The problem in each of these cases stems from the fact that we set out a positively defined position in opposition to a negatively defined position, and negatively defined positions are difficult to make sense of since they are identified only in terms of what they are not rather than what they are. All oppositions that take the form of “x” and “anti-x” are perfectly valid.
as dichotomies, of course, since by definition the component parts of any such dyad will be mutually exclusive and conjointly exhaustive. What is problematic here, I suggest, is our too-ready acceptance that concepts like “anti-essentialism” and “anti-realism” are coherent in and of themselves in the first place. Few of us would be tempted to divide the world’s religions up into the categories of “Christianity” and “anti-Christianity”: this is undoubtedly a perfectly valid dichotomy on paper, but in practice we have little reason to classify two religions (say, Islam and Shinto) together in terms of their shared difference from Christianity.

Is it self-evident that anti-essentialism and anti-realism are any more coherent as concepts than “anti-Christianity” is? When we opt to define a concept like anti-essentialism in purely negative terms, our implication is that in spite of the differences between the various strains of anti-essentialist thought, their shared resistance to essentialism is enough in itself to constitute a coherent category, and this is an implication that I suggest we would do well to question. We find similar qualms, of course, in postcolonial theory and in identity politics: critics will often feel a pull in one direction to unite diverse marginalized populations together in order to fight the good fight against oppression; yet at the same time they will feel reluctant to homogenize the rich and varied traits of distinct cultures by gathering them together into a single nondescript “Other” and defining them not on their own terms but only in terms of their alterity. Most of us, I think, would agree that negatively defined reductivist terms like “non-white” and “oriental” are highly problematic, and it is for much the same reason that I, as a committed opponent of both essentialism and realism, am nevertheless reluctant to describe myself as either “anti-essentialist” or “anti-realist.” To put

---

13 See, for example, the essays in Homi K. Bhabha’s anthology, *Nation and Nationhood*, many of which explore the problems attendant upon homogenizing distinct cultures by galvanizing them into “the Other.”
this point more succinctly: I hold specific beliefs of my own; I do not merely hold objections to the specific beliefs of others.

In the chapters that follow, I begin with the premise that our most familiar philosophical binaries very often digest a third term, either because they are structured upon dualistic false dichotomies that obscure and efface a third option from our consideration, or because they are the product of monistic dialectical thinking that pits a positively defined principle of “x” against a negatively defined “anti-x” instead of more sensibly contrasting the “x” with a “y” and a “z”. Before proceeding further, however, let me take a moment to distinguish between the sort of digested third that I envision and some of the other triadic structures that have found a place in traditional philosophy. First, I should emphasize that the digested thirds that I have in mind are not some sort of middle ground that is located somewhere in between the received binaries. I am thus in no way revisiting the Aristotelian doctrine of the mean, which envisioned virtue as forming the midpoint on a continuum stretched between opposing vices. Instead I imagine these third terms as being wholly distinct from the original binary opposition.\(^\text{14}\) It might help to imagine the three positions not as if they were on a continuum but instead as if they were situated in relation to one another more like the legs on a stool: a stool can be rotated so that any one of the three legs might be positioned as if it were “between” the other two when considered from a particular point of view. Or better yet, we might imagine them as if they occupied the three dimensions in spatial geometry (which is to say, as the x, y, and z axes) with each position

\(^{14}\) I will be the first to admit, however, that it is often very tempting to imagine the digested third as occupying a medial position within the traditional binary rather than a third position quite separate from the original dyad. Even the image of “digesting” the third unfortunately seems to imply that third is somehow contained between the binary pair. I will acknowledge that when I first developed the hemiolic strategy, I very often found myself sliding into this trap, and traces of this error may yet be evident in the chapters that follow.
perpendicular rather than opposed to the other two. This last option appeals to me in particular since it encourages us to imagine that each one-dimensional and linear concept receives breadth and depth from its relationship with the other two perpendicular concepts, an idea that emphasizes that these three dimensions can be viewed as complementary rather than conflicting.

Secondly, I should clarify that the sort of third term that I envision has nothing to do with the notion of synthesis in Hegelian (or more properly, Fichtean) dialectic. The familiar dialectic strategy undoubtedly employs three terms – thesis, antithesis, and synthesis – but this ternary vocabulary, I contend, is misleading, since in effect what we see in a dialectical analysis is a succession of binary oppositions, never an interplay of three ideas at once. Each new synthesis comes into being only by displacing the previous opposition, and so at no point are there three positions in contention with one another; this simultaneous ternary tension is crucial in my conception of a digested third. My own conception, then, has little to do with the Hegelian Aufhebung, or for that matter, with the triadic “moments” that we find Kant employing as he organizes his tables of judgments and of the categories. The thirds that interest me are not the products of binary oppositions any more than depth is the product of height and breadth. When I recover a digested third, I am not developing a new third position from a binary conflict, but identifying something that has existed alongside the binary opposition from the outset, a third option that has been divided or mangled or overlooked because of our inopportune tendency towards binarism.

Finally, I should also clarify that the sort of third I imagine is also quite distinct from the many examples of liminal “undecidables” that are so exciting in Derrida’s work: the supplement, the pharmakon, the hymen, the gram, and so on. These “unities of simulacrum,” as he explains in Positions, are:
“false” verbal properties (nominal or semantic) that can no longer be included within philosophical (binary) opposition, but which, however, inhabit philosophical opposition, resisting and disorganizing it, without ever constituting a third term, without ever leaving room for a solution in the form of speculative dialectics. (40)

There is undeniably considerable similarity to be found between Derrida’s interests and my own, since the purpose of the hemiolic strategy is also to resist and disorganize traditional philosophical binaries by bringing ambiguous and overlooked counter-examples to light. However, where I break from deconstruction is that I see nothing “nominal,” “semantic,” or in any other way “false” about these digested thirds, nor do I feel that traditional philosophical oppositions are inevitable, as Derrida maintains (Positions 39). More importantly, unlike Derrida, I in fact do make an attempt to recover a “third term” from my problematization of the binary, in the hope that this new ternary structure will help to overcome the problem created by the traditional opposition.

♣♣♣

As you might infer from the examples that I have offered thus far, the kind of digested thirds that most interest me typically involve enculturated behaviours, social practices, or other such intersubjective and functional aspects of our experience. My broad contention is that the influential and overarching binary opposition that pits the material against the ideological (as well as the natural against the artificial, the real against the constructed, fact against theory, and so on) is ill-equipped to make sense of the ways in which we interact with one another within the world. This intersubjective functionality, I suggest, is bifurcated awkwardly and inexacty when we attempt to envision it as being either a passive feature of the material world or an active contributor to the process of ideological construction. Instead, my argument – perhaps the central claim of this dissertation – is that we would do better to imagine social functions as constituting a third category unto
themselves rather than dividing them up between the categories of the real and the constructed.

We might find exemplary cases of the digestion of the social in two very different books with disconcertingly similar titles: Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann’s foundational text of constructivism, *The Social Construction of Reality*, and John R. Searle’s more recent contribution to the realist cause, *The Construction of Social Reality* (a book that, I propose, would have been more accurately titled *The Social Reality of Construction*). Berger and Luckmann’s argument, written during the first flush of structuralism, is above all anti-essentialist, since they set out to demonstrate that even those aspects of reality that seem most natural, commonsensical, and objective might nevertheless be better explained as constructions that are generated by our social practices and our individual choices. Many variant forms of social constructivism have prospered in the wake of this book, but one common element among them is the dialectical belief that social practices and individual choices can be allied together, working in tandem for the anti-essentialist cause. Searle, in contrast, begins with the opposite assumption that our social practices are not so much a force of construction as a component of the real, occupying a place in our experience that he calls “social reality.” As I see it, Searle digests the social into his fundamental explanatory principle of reality in precisely the same way that social constructivists like Berger and Luckmann assimilate social practices into their own fundamental explanatory principle of construction. In my own work, I am deeply suspicious of the central ideas that are found at the core of these two books: the idea of social reality and the idea of social construction. To put the point very broadly, the social does not seem to me to qualify as real in the same way.

---

15 Ian Hacking does an excellent job of establishing how diverse and how ambiguous our conception of social construction seems to be by undertaking an interdisciplinary survey and analysis of the use of the term in recent criticism, interrogating the social construction of everything from authorship to Zulu nationalism. I should note, of course, that although I share his qualms, Hacking reaches conclusions quite different from my own.
that other objectively real things might be thought to be real; and at the same time, our social practices do not seem to me to be responsible for constructing statuses in the same way that the choices of individuals construct statuses. Philosophers since Hume have debated the “Is-Ought” problem, trying to determine how to bridge the gap between the is statements of realism and the ought imperatives of constructivism. I propose that we would do well to recognize alongside is and ought a third category of does statements, which take into account our intersubjective social practices without trying to amalgamate them into either the objectively real or the subjectively constructed aspects of our experience.

In contrast to realism and constructivism, I have adopted the term pragmatism to designate the philosophical effort to understand the social on its own terms rather than treating it either as a passive component of a foundational reality or as an active force engaged in the constructions of power. My choice of the term pragmatism, I should acknowledge, has the potential to be misleading, since the connection between what I mean by this term and the positions held by canonical pragmatists like Charles Sanders Peirce, William James, John Dewey, and, more recently, Richard Rorty is somewhat tenuous. To be sure, there are strong affinities to be found between their conceptions and mine, but I should emphasize that the kind of pragmatism that I discuss below links up with this tradition only indirectly. A more direct connection might be drawn, however, to the position that Lars Engle develops in Shakespearean Pragmatism, one of the most important influences on my own work. Engle envisions pragmatism above all as a way of making sense of the world in terms of dynamic economies rather than fixed structures, and his recurrent focus on an enculturated and intersubjective functionality that gets assessed through practice is very much the sort of thing that I have in mind for pragmatism as well. I depart from Engle, however, most notably in that he often chooses to set pragmatism in a binary
opposition to what I call realism, contrasting the “fixed structure of fact, truth, and
knowledge” that we find in realism with the “mutable economy of value, action, and belief”
that defines pragmatism (3). This binary opposition, I suspect, is what leads him to propose
that there is “an affinity between pragmatism and poststructuralism” (4), since both
pragmatism and post-structuralism can be defined negatively as anti-realist positions. But
this analysis does not quite do justice to Engle’s position, since at other times he envisions
pragmatism much more subtly as involving the recognition that there is a continuum or
spectrum to be found “which includes in one direction logocentric or metaphysical systems
of explanation and in the other antifoundationalist or sceptical ones” (147). Thus, it might
be better to envision Engle’s pragmatism as an acceptance of the idea that there is a
continuum to be found between realism and anti-realism, rather than imagining that his kind
of pragmatism itself functions as the oppositional anti-realist endpoint on this continuum.

I, on the other hand, am much less inclined to see an affinity between pragmatism
and post-structuralism. As I read it, post-structuralism is predominantly a constructivist
position, albeit one that often annexes particular aspects of pragmatism and fuses with them
into a conglomerate position of dubious coherence. Perhaps the clearest evidence for this
amalgamation can be seen in Foucault’s ambiguous and often criticized idea of power. Here,
it seems to me that he takes a viable constructivist idea of power and then collapses into it a
viable pragmatist idea of culture, in such a way that he elides the difference between status
(ought) and function (does), as if there were no difference to be found between coercion and
community. He tries to use the distended hybrid that we now call “Foucauldian power” as a
broad explanatory principle, one that might even be thought to provide the sort of
foundation for post-structuralism that reality provides for realism. Pragmatism and
constructivism, as I understand them, both present distinct alternatives to realism, but the
trouble with post-structuralism is that it falls into the dialectical trap of assuming that this common difference from realism is enough to warrant gathering pragmatist and constructivist strategies together into a single anti-realist camp. In other words, I would suggest that Foucault assimilates culture into his conception of power in precisely the same way that Searle assimilates culture into his conception of reality. Thus, I differ from Engle most notably in the emphasis I place on the idea that pragmatism is not merely anti-realist but also anti-constructivist, and moreover, that it is every bit as distant from constructivism as it is from realism.  

Furthermore, I do not share Engle’s idea that there is a continuum to be found between realism and constructivism. To take up his geometrical metaphor, I would argue instead that these positions are better envisioned not as if they were situated linearly along a one-dimensional continuum, but as if they occupied a three-dimensional space, one in which the axis of pragmatism is perpendicular to both the axis of realism and the axis of constructivism. Each of these three strategies, in my account, asks a distinct set of questions and yields a distinct set of results, wholly irrespective of the other two. These strategies can be combined with one another (and of course very often are), just as vectors can be added together in three-dimensional geometry. There is no reason why we, as critics reading a text or as philosophers or theorists considering a problem, should not ask realist and pragmatist and constructivist questions in conjunction with one another, since it seems to me that their findings complement rather than conflict with one another. Drawing upon more than one

16 The distinction that I draw between pragmatism and constructivism also shows some parallels to Hugh Grady’s contrast between Montaignean and Machiavellian “constellations” of thought in the sixteenth century and also in the present. See “Historicism and the Cultural Present in Shakespeare Studies: Subjectivity in Early and Late Modernity” in Shakespeare, Machiavelli, and Montaigne 1-25.
strategy at once adds breadth and depth to analyses that, to my mind, otherwise run the risk of seeming one-dimensional.\footnote{The other metaphor that I sometimes draw upon to explain this idea is one that contrasts black-and-white images with colour images. There is a one-dimensional continuum of greys that can be drawn between black and white, of course, and black-and-white digital images are composed of pixels selected from along this greyscale. Digital colour (also known as additive colour), on the other hand, is defined using three component values: red, green, and blue. All colours whatsoever, including black and white, can be generated by controlling the intensities of these three “RGB” colour values. The world of our experience, it might be said, is three-dimensional not only in terms of space, but also in terms of colour. Another way of presenting my central claim in this chapter is to suggest that the time has come for critical theory to make the transition from black-and-white to colour modes of thinking. Although I am somewhat reluctant to admit this publicly, my favourite analogy for the shift in critical methodology is the moment in The Wizard of Oz when Dorothy leaves her black-and-white Kansas farmhouse and enters the Technicolor splendour of Oz.}

While Engle’s conception of pragmatism takes its inspiration from Rorty in particular, I am much more inclined to associate my conception of pragmatism with ideas developed in the later writings of Wittgenstein. I would like to illustrate this connection by indulging in an extended metaphysical conceit, returning to King Lear to read the play as if it provided a complex allegory for the relationship between the two competing strains of modern philosophy. We begin the play in the early seventeenth century, as the old king Philosophy resolves in his growing insecurity to stage an odd and misguided “certainty test,” or in other words, to launch what Engle calls “the great certainty project of modernity” (8). Philosophy makes the demand that truth and knowledge be unequivocally and irrefutably defined. We can first hear Goneril’s voice, the reply that might be seen to define the Enlightenment, articulated by Descartes when he designates clear and distinct ideas as the grounds for his rationalist certainty. “Cogito, ergo sum,” he tells us: I know this more than words can wield the matter; I am more certain of my reason than I am of the evidence of my own eyesight, beyond what can be valued, rich, or rare. Variations upon this Gonerealist theme continue to echo through the modern era, as philosophers attempt to demonstrate the certainty of their certainty by drawing attention to the irrefutable foundations for
metaphysics that they find in the reality of our reason, or our innate ideas, or our empirical experience, or the transcendental deduction of the categories, or the rigours of propositional logic, or the stability of the material world. In Albany’s domains, the denizens worship the brazen idol of fact under a sequence of different veils. On the whole, the Gonerealists find the evidence provided by the world of their experience (in spite of its acknowledged occasional unpredictability) to be sufficiently compelling that they are willing to ground their claims of certainty in it. Quite a sizeable population of academia today, I would suggest, continue to make their homes within Albany’s borders, clinging to their faith in the explanatory power of fact.

Regan’s voice, in contrast, provides us with a counterpoint of resistance to her sister’s positivistic proclamation. Goneril, she suggests, comes too short in turning to evidence drawn from the world to guarantee her certainty. Instead, Regan trumpets the will, insisting that certainty is constructed according to self-interest and enforced through the exercise of power. Although early iterations of Regan’s position might be found in the arguments of classical sophists like Thrasymachus, and then more clearly in the writings of Machiavelli, and perhaps also in Marx’s concern that Hegel’s absolute idealism neglects the most precious squares of sense, it is really only in Nietzsche that we can hear the Regonstructivist position fully articulated in opposition to Gonerealism, displacing the certainty of fact with a certainty of theory. Through the twentieth century, it was in Cornwall’s territory that phenomenologists and structuralists and post-structuralists and their widespread progeny constructed their homes, worshipping at the idol of theory instead of the idol of fact.  

Although many accounts of the schism in twentieth-century philosophy have been offered, Michael Dummett’s is especially compelling. He observes that in 1903, there was not a tremendous difference to be found between Frege and Husserl, who were “remarkably close in orientation, despite some divergence of
In the latter half of the last century, this philosophical drama grew more complicated still as a gripping sub-plot developed within Cornwall’s domains in the influential house of Critical Theory. First of all, a strikingly bald and prominently bespectacled Edmund, dressed nattily in leather pants, declared “Thou, Power, art my Goddess.” Meanwhile, Edmund’s good-natured but sorely baffled half-brother was confronted by a crise at home and responded with the exceptionally odd strategy of cloaking himself in the disguise of a madman, slathering himself with mud, injuring himself with twigs, and crying out, “Poor Jacques-a-cold! Flibbertigibbet! Thoth! Turlygood! Do-de-do-de-do-de-dif-fé-rance!” I certainly find myself sympathizing with Edgarrida quite strongly (and I even sometimes suspect that he might best be read as the hero of the piece on some level), but I also find it difficult to account for why this noble philosopher adopts so singular a strategy in response to his predicament. In particular, his decision to convince Critical Theory to throw himself into the abyme, seeking salvation through botched suicide, prompts me to raise a puzzled eyebrow, or even two.

But what of Cordelia (our last and our least)? In this idiosyncratic production of the play, my choice would be to cast Wittgenstein in Cordelia’s part, since in this case the role seems to me to be particularly well-suited. Wittgenstein began his career in a cryptic and calculating mode. The Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus, his first major work and the only one published during his lifetime, wrestles with the challenges posed by philosophy with such complexity that most of his original readers were utterly baffled by the book. Part of the problem here is that the Tractatus is largely focused upon the problem of what can and what cannot be meaningfully said in language, and Wittgenstein eventually reaches the

interests” (26). At this crucial point in history, however, Frege turned his attentions toward the problems of language and Husserl turned his attentions toward the problems of consciousness, and the division of the kingdom into two opposed camps was underway. A compelling story, any way you tell it.
conclusion that most of the subjects with which philosophy has traditionally concerned itself – met
aphysics, ethics, aesthetics, and in a remarkable paradox, the argument of the *Tractatus*
itself – are beyond the capacities of language to express meaningfully. To put this idea another way, we might say that he discovers that our loves are far more ponderous than our tongues. He concludes the book with a famous aphorism, and one that to my ear echoes Cordelia really quite clearly: “Whereof one cannot speak, thereof must one be silent” (7.0). What shall poor Ludwig speak, after all?

In a delightful coincidence of history, after making this bold pronouncement, Wittgenstein left England and disappeared onto the Continent for more than a decade, steering clear of philosophy altogether while Fooling around with a variety of other projects, but eventually he was persuaded to return to Britain to contend with the problems he had left unresolved with Philosophy. During his absence, moreover, he seems to have undergone some form of radical personal transformation, with the result that he abandoned his earlier calculating and cryptic approach. Instead, Wittgenstein’s later work places particular emphasis on social bonds, as he argues that it is ultimately our social interactions with one another that provide the foundation of all meaning, not some sort of exacting and calculating logic of correspondence. Furthermore, in the later acts he also envisions his work primarily as if it were a form of therapy, an attempt to turn Philosophy’s focus away from abstruse wild speculations and onto the practical matters of everyday life. Critics continue to debate whether we can read his early work and his late work as being consistent with each other. Certainly it seems undeniable to me that Wittgenstein is an extremely complex and compelling character, driven by powerful and mysterious motivations, at both stages of his career. In fact, I’m not sure I’ve ever seen a more appealing choice cast in the role of Cordelia.
It is, I think, a shame that literary critics and theorists have not often drawn upon Wittgenstein more often, not just because he offers such a sharp and powerful critique of realism, but moreover because he draws such a useful and important distinction between practical functions and constructed statuses, the sort of distinction that I find to be so unfortunately lacking in post-structuralists like Foucault. Wittgenstein began his career as a staunch realist, committed to exploring the consequences that follow upon the correspondence theory of truth and meaning, but in his later writings he abandons the correspondence theory as untenable, and focuses instead on exploring language as a social practice. His rejection of realism is perhaps most notable for the fact that it does not involve a turn toward constructivism. Ray Monk has demonstrated that we might find traces of the influence of both Schopenhauer and Nietzsche in Wittgenstein’s work (18, 121), and so I think it telling that Wittgenstein in his rejection of realism does not follow these Continental thinkers down the usual anti-realist paths. Instead he develops the novel idea that language is above all a form of social interaction, something best understood on the model of a game, partly describable by rules but ultimately comprehensible only in practice.

19 I do not mean to overstate this point, since of course a great many critics have undoubtedly read Wittgenstein’s work very carefully indeed. Terry Eagleton, for example, arguably knows his Wittgenstein as well as anyone living, and has even written a first-rate screenplay (Wittgenstein) and a decent novel (Saints and Scholars) about him. Furthermore, at least a dozen of the examples and illustrations that Eagleton uses in Literary Theory are borrowed from Wittgenstein, although surprisingly he offers no acknowledgement of this influence. (He mentions Wittgenstein by name only once in the book.) The facility with which Eagleton adopts Wittgenstein’s examples to illustrate post-structuralist concerns, I suggest, speaks volumes about the largely untapped resources that his work might offer to literary criticism and theory. More recently, in Literature and the Touch of the Real, David Schalkwyk argues that a powerful alliance might be formed between ideas drawn from Derrida and Wittgenstein. He makes a compelling argument, one that offers a great many parallels to my own position, although to my mind he reads both Derrida and Wittgenstein somewhat too selectively in order to cement this alliance. To return to my allegorical reading of King Lear, Schalkwyk’s fascinating position looks a lot like the sort of rewritten happy ending that we find in Nahum Tate, since he makes both Cordelia and Edgar seem more likeable than they are in the source text and then tries to marry them off to one another. Personally I am not convinced that the marriage he proposes works all that well, but I can very much relate to the underlying wish that prompts his revisionism. See also Kenneth Dauber and Walter Jost’s collection Ordinary Language Criticism for some other intriguing recent attempts to bring Wittgensteinian ideas to bear on literary theory.
Meaning, as he sees it, can no longer be seen to be representational, nor can truth be understood to be dependent upon a correspondence of language with the states of affairs of the world. Instead, meaning derives from the use of language within a linguistic community, and truth in turn is a function of the coherence of the social practices of a culture. Truth is thus not a status constructed and enforced by the subjective wills of powerful individuals, as a constructivist like Nietzsche would have it, but a function that emerges from the intersubjective practices of a culture. Wittgenstein elucidates this position (as he often does in his writing) in the form of an internal dialogue:

“So are you saying that human agreement decides what is true and false?”—It is what human beings say that is true and false; and they agree in the language they use. That is not agreement in opinions but agreement in form of life. (§241)

All understanding for Wittgenstein is mediated through a public language, which is itself defined as a kind of practice, grounded in the shared behaviour of a Lebensform, or “form of life.” Meaning and truth are not the products of the human will or, for that matter, of any kind of self-interest; they are instead wholly concomitant with a way of living.

The traditional opposition of the objective world and the subjective will is significantly complicated by this approach, since both of these concepts rest outside of the operation of intersubjective language. Wittgenstein does not deny that there is an objective world, but he does maintain that nothing about it can be understood except through the enculturated practices of a form of life that are necessary for meaning. Different forms of life – say human beings and lions – might in one sense be said to inhabit the same world, but in another sense they do not, since “The limits of my language are the limits of my world” (Tractatus 5.6). He illustrates this point further in one of his most famous aphorisms: “If a lion could speak, we could not understand him” (Investigations p. 223). The world is meaningful to us only inasmuch as we experience it as part of our particular way of living.
The world outside our Lebensform, the objective world that we share with lions and other forms of life, is not to be doubted (such doubt serves no purpose and is thus meaningless), and yet at the same time the objective world cannot be understood at all sensibly. In a way, we might connect this idea back to Wittgenstein’s earlier conception of das Mystische, the mystical, a category designating those things about which we cannot speak and which thus must be passed over in silence. The objective world is not to be denied, but at the same time, it cannot be spoken of meaningfully, or even doubted meaningfully.

The same thing might be said about our experience of the inner processes of subjectivity, such as the will. Since meaning can establish itself only within the context of a public way of living, private experience is comprehensible only as it is mediated through public behaviour. No such thing as a “private language” is possible, as Wittgenstein argues at length (§§243-317), since “An ‘inner process’ stands in need of outward criteria” (§580). Our personal experiences of subjectivity are not to be doubted, and yet at the same time, they cannot properly be known, since nothing sensible can possibly be said about them. Subjective experience “is not a something, but not a nothing either,” although we might very well be tempted to dismiss it as a nothing since “a nothing would serve just as well as a something about which nothing could be said” (§304). We understand the word “I” not phenomenologically, but grammatically and indexically. The self of phenomenology, if such a thing can even be thought to exist, must belong to the realm of das Mystische. In short, Wittgenstein articulates an opulent world of intersubjectivity that had previously been overlooked by metaphysics and epistemology, and insists that the traditionally privileged concepts of objectivity and subjectivity are wholly incomprehensible (unless perhaps they are accepted as points of faith), since they are beyond our capacity to express or to understand meaningfully.
Most of the triads that I explore in the hemiolic readings that follow might be seen to fall under the broad tripartite rubric of realism, pragmatism, and constructivism; and before getting underway with these readings, I would like to take a moment to map out these three underlying philosophical positions in more detail. I should pause briefly to acknowledge that I first came upon this triad in a paper by Sergio Sismondo and Nicholas Chrisman about the philosophy of map-making. Sismondo and Chrisman outline three schools of thought that might be applied to cartography: the realist approach, which emphasizes the idea that maps represent states of affairs in the world; the instrumentalist approach, which emphasizes the idea that maps are useful in helping us to accomplish specific tasks in particular social circumstances; and the constructivist approach, which emphasizes the idea that maps actively construct boundaries that ultimately project outward into the world. The paper makes the excellent point that in some cases it makes sense for map-makers to emphasize the realist priorities of a map, privileging its representational accuracy, while in other cases it makes sense to emphasize the map’s instrumentalist functionality, privileging the map’s utility in specific contexts, and in other cases still it makes sense to emphasize the map’s constructivist aspects, privileging the map’s capacity to effect change in the world. All maps might be seen to exhibit these three aspects, even though the priorities they place upon them will vary considerably: topographic survey maps incline towards realism; subway maps incline towards instrumentalism; and political maps incline towards constructivism. It thus would seem that a philosophy of map-making would do well to harness all three of these approaches together in some way. Traditionally, however, philosophers have been inclined to adopt a single perspective and strategy at a time; they assume that these strategies are in competition with one another, and as a result, they place
all their eggs in a single basket. Building upon Sismondo and Chrisman’s argument, my suggestion is that we explore the idea that these strategies might complement rather than conflict with one another.

With this in mind, I set out in the chapters that follow to redescribe traditional binary oppositions – most often binaries that are built upon a foundational structure that pits essentialism against social constructivism – into new ternary configurations. For the most part, I structure these new triads in terms of a contrast between realism, pragmatism, and constructivism, and it might be useful at this point if I chart out some of the parallel thirds that compose this overarching contrast. Realism, as I define it, is a mode of understanding that grounds itself in the idea that there exists in some form an objective, mind-independent world of reality beyond ourselves, one that is ultimately responsible for providing a ground for meaning and for truth through a relationship of correspondence. Constructivism, in contrast, is a mode of understanding that grounds itself instead in the foundational idea of a will to power, a subjective, mind-dependent force which is ultimately responsible for the construction of meaning and truth. Pragmatism, in contrast to both of these, is a mode of understanding that grounds itself in the foundational idea of a culture, an intersubjective and mind-interdependent community that generates meaning and truth through the coherence of its social practices. Realism gives precedence to facts (ideas of how things are), and thus is prone to analyze things in terms of their natures; constructivism gives precedence to theories (ideas of how we ought to think of things), and thus is prone to analyze things in terms of assigned statuses; and pragmatism gives precedence to practices.

20 Here I am reminded of an episode of The Simpsons (“The Front”) where Bart and Lisa play a round of rock/paper/scissors with each other in order to come to a decision. Their thoughts are given in voice-over. We hear Lisa’s thoughts first: “Poor, predictable Bart, always takes rock”; and then we shift to Bart’s thoughts: “Good ol’ rock: nothin’ beats that!” It goes without saying that Lisa wins. (I sometimes find myself thinking that Bart’s strategy would make an excellent prefatory epigram for Searle’s The Construction of Social Reality: “Good ol’ reality: nothin’ beats that!”)
(ideas of what we do with things), and thus is prone to analyze things in terms of their functions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Realism</th>
<th>Pragmatism</th>
<th>Constructivism</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>reality</td>
<td>culture</td>
<td>power</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>world</td>
<td>community</td>
<td>will</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>objective</td>
<td>intersubjective</td>
<td>subjective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mind-independent</td>
<td>mind-interdependent</td>
<td>mind-dependent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>correspondence</td>
<td>coherence</td>
<td>construction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fact</td>
<td>practice</td>
<td>theory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>is</td>
<td>does</td>
<td>ought</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nature</td>
<td>function</td>
<td>status</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some are born great;</td>
<td>some achieve greatness;</td>
<td>and some have greatness thrust upon ’em.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Maria’s oft-quoted analysis of greatness in the letter gulling Malvolio (2.5.126-27) offers a perfect analogue for the kinds of triads that I have in mind, and thus provides an excellent template for a brief summary of the positions that I will explore in the chapters to follow. In Chapter 2, I explore the analysis of kingship in Richard III, assessing the early modern political disputes about whether some are born kings, or some achieve kinghood, or some have kinghood thrust upon ’em. Then, turning to Troilus and Cressida, I consider how the play addresses the early modern economic question of whether commodities are valuable in themselves, or if they achieve value only through their usefulness to our social practices, or if in the end they merely have value thrust upon ’em in a market economy. Finally, with
with respect to Coriolanus, I turn to a more traditionally philosophical consideration of truth, tracing the play’s investigation in the face of early modern scepticism of whether statements are truthful in themselves, or if statements achieve truth in practice, or if instead statements merely have a status of “truth” thrust upon ’em.

I have had the opportunity to present this idea of hemiolic criticism to audiences a half-dozen times to date, and my arguments have typically prompted two questions that I have not yet addressed in this chapter. The first is: “Why this strange fascination with the number three? Wouldn’t fours or fives or sevens be worth exploring as well?” and the second is: “Isn’t there something programmatic, or dogmatic, or reductivist, or foundationalist, or positivist in your tendency to collapse so many philosophical conflicts into the same tripartite template? Is there room for contingency here? Or is this not just a new essentialism in disguise?” These are both excellent questions, stemming from qualms that I myself have felt very strongly as well. However, rather than addressing these questions now, I would like to set them aside until the Conclusion: it will be easier for me to address both of these questions once we have given rein to these theoretical ideas and explored them in practice instead of grappling with them now, when the theory still must seem abstract. If you have serious misgivings about these points in the meantime, feel free to skip ahead to the final act. Otherwise, please rest assured that there is a happy ending coming; after all, this is designed to be a tragedy spooled in reverse.
Chapter 2

Hearts of Glass: Tyranny and Conscience in Richard III

If my heart was made of glass, you would surely see
How much heartache and misery you’ve been causing me
– Holland, Dozier, and Holland, “Baby, Don’t You Do It”

When Lady Anne first begins to capitulate to Richard’s outrageous courtship over the bleeding corpse of Henry VI, she gives voice to a powerful wish, one that finds analogues everywhere from classical Greek fable to contemporary American pop music, and moreover, one that seems to have resonated with particular force for early modern audiences: “I would I knew thy heart” (1.2.180). The dramaturgy of the scene surely demands that in performance, the actor playing Anne will pause for an emphatic moment of silence before delivering this line: it is in this moment, after all, with Richard theatrically levelling his sword at his own throat and in spite of his audacious confession just moments earlier that he murdered both her husband and her sovereign, that Anne must decide to spare the monster’s life and to give ear to his suit (1.2.162-79). The only explanation that the text provides for Anne’s remarkable volte-face at this moment, however, is her expression of a desire to know Richard’s heart. Her wish is perhaps not quite as striking as the graphic fantasy that Lear articulates when he commands a shadowy “them” to “anatomize Regan” in order to “see what breeds about her heart” (3.6.31-32), but it gestures quite clearly in the same direction. After all, there is a bleeding cadaver on stage next to Anne – one whose physical heart might even be visible through the “windows that let forth [the king’s] life,” the fatal holes that form the pattern of Richard’s butcheries (1.2.12, 54) – and this spectacle powerfully literalizes Anne’s metaphor, visually illustrating the psycho-anatomical impulse underlying her desire to know Richard’s heart. We find echoes of the same wish scattered throughout the remainder of the play as well, as characters grow increasingly secretive about
the loyalties of their own hearts and increasingly inquisitive about the inclinations of others’. For example, during the scene of the divided council, Buckingham disingenuously declares that he is familiar with the Lord Protector’s face, but not with his heart (3.4.10-12), while Hastings unwisely accepts the verdict that it is instead he who is “most inward” with the Duke, naïvely insisting that Gloucester’s heart can always be known by his face (3.4.51-53).

In the wake of the civil war, however, it seems that words have grown so false that the Yorkist court is loath to prove reason with them (to poach a phrase from Feste). Oaths no longer carry any weight in this forsworn society, as Elizabeth insists to Richard (4.4.297-327), a culture where even the most likeable nobleman in the whole princely heap, the Duke of Clarence, is saddled with the epithet “perjured.”1 Tongues no longer carry any credit, and so it is perhaps unsurprising that we find so many instances in the play of individuals longing to know each other’s hearts, directly, without the mediation of language. In this light, we might suggest that the trouble with the villainous Richard is not simply that he has a black heart, but even more that he has an opaque chest.

Anne’s longing for intersubjective transparency might be emblematized by the image of the heart of glass. This metaphor recurs throughout the history of literature, and is often intended to convey emotional fragility – certainly this is the primary effect of the image in Donne’s “The Broken Heart” (not to mention Blondie’s “Heart of Glass”). I am more interested, however, in cases where the tenor of the image is not the fragility of our emotions but the transparency of our thoughts and feelings, and in this vein we might find examples that date back as far as the Greek fable “Momus and the Gods.” This little myth is included in the collection of Aesop’s fables by Babrius (74-77), but it was much more likely known to early modern readers from its retelling in Lucian’s philosophical dialogue Hermotimus:

1 On the pivotal role played by oaths in early modern political thought and in Shakespeare’s history plays in particular, see Thomas McAlindon, “Swearing and Forswearing in Shakespeare’s Histories.”
You have heard, I suppose, what faults Momus found in Hephaestus; if not
I’ll tell you. The story goes that Athena, Poseidon, and Hephaestus were
quarrelling over which of them was the best artist. Poseidon modelled a bull,
Athena designed a house, while Hephaestus, it seems, put together a man.
When they came to Momus, whom they had appointed judge, he examined
the works of each. What faults he found in the other two we need not say,
but his criticism of man and his reproof of the craftsman, Hephaestus, was
this: he had not made windows in his chest which could be opened to let
everyone see his desires and thoughts and if he were lying or telling the truth.

Although other versions of the story circulate,² it seems most likely that it was Lucian’s
version that transmitted the image to three early modern political texts from diverse points
in the political landscape: an anti-monarchical treatise by Étienne de La Boétie written in the
1550s; a political pamphlet by Francis Bacon published in 1592; and a 1605 speech to
Parliament by James I. Each of these texts employs the image of Momus’s glass to explore
the relationship between tyranny and conscience, and intriguingly, each text manages to
direct the image toward different political ends. My argument later in this chapter will assess
the parallel interrogations of conscience and tyranny that we find preserved in Richard III,
but I would like to begin this discussion by exploring how these two concepts can be seen to
be reflected in (or even refracted through) these three competing early modern fantasies of
the heart of glass.

The first of the images that I would like to consider is that found in James I’s speech
to Parliament on November 9, 1605, delivered four days after the discovery of the
Gunpowder Plot and speedily printed in three editions before the end of the year. Here

² Most notably, the same story is told at the outset of Leon Battista Alberti’s satiric dialogue Momus (17);
however, in this version, instead of wishing for a window in the human breast, Momus suggests that our inner
thoughts ought to have been displayed in our faces, just as Hastings misguidedly claims of Richard (3.4.51-53).
Incidentally, the character of Momus was remarkably well known in the early modern period, despite his
extremely minor presence in the corpus of Greek and Roman mythology: a full-text search on EEBO turns up
114 works that mention the name “Momus” in sixteenth-century English books, and 241 more from the
seventeenth century, although most of these instances merely invoke him as a god of satire and censure rather
than referring to this particular fable in any detail. My favourite account of Momus’s glass, I might add, is
Tristram’s glorious excursus on the subject in Sterne’s Tristram Shandy (Book 1, Chapter 23).
James attempts to negotiate a delicate balance: he needs to dissuade an angry population from engaging in vigilante justice against suspected Catholics, without at the same time giving the impression that he himself nurses any sympathies toward the old faith, as many of his new-made subjects feared he might. After making the argument – one that seems eerily familiar in our present political climate – that Roman Catholics on the whole ought not to be held accountable for the terrorist activities of a few religious zealots, James goes on the defensive:

And for my part I would wish with those ancient Philosophers, that there were a Christall window in my brest, wherein all my people might see the secretest thoughts of my heart, for then might you see no alteration in my minde for this accident, further then in these two points. The first, Caution and wariness in gouernment, to discover and search out the mysteries of this wickednesse as farre as may be: The other, after due triall, Seueritie of punishment vpon those that shall bee found guilty of so detestable and vnheard of villanie. (153)

James’s defensiveness here seems to me to be really quite odd: after all, it surely would seem that if the Gunpowder Plot should prompt any sort of “alteration” in James’s mind, it would be further away from Catholicism, not closer towards it. Why, then, might he wish to make public his hidden conscience at this particular moment, with this particular fantasy?

James, of course, was a staunch believer in both the divine right of kings and monarchical absolutism. Monarchical power, in James’s view, derives from God himself and, as such, is logically prior to the law and the parliament of the realm. Thus, while the king’s power is typically exercised in accordance with the law and in conjunction with the support of parliament, it nevertheless cannot be limited in any way by either the statues

---

3 For James’s views on political theory, see his Political Writings, as well as secondary accounts by William C. Carroll, “Theories of Kingship in Shakespeare’s England” 127-33 and J. H. M. Salmon, “Catholic Resistance Theory, Ultramonomism, and the Royalist Response, 1580-1620” 247-53. Carroll offers the useful observation that divine right theory and monarchical absolutism are conceptually distinct, with neither one entailing the other (143n4). Many critics, however, follow James in equating the two ideas, but we would do well to remember with Carroll that early modern subjects were almost certainly more supportive of the idea of divine right than they were of monarchical absolutism.
constructed by law or the functions encouraged by parliament. Earlier in this speech, for example, James observes that kings are “in the word of GOD it selfe called Gods, as being his Lieutenants and Vice-Regents on earth, and so adorned and furnished with some sparkles of the Diuinitie” (147), precisely the sort of claim that made members of Parliament increasingly uneasy as the seventeenth century progressed. At the same time, however, James also maintains that true kings will never abuse their absolute power by giving in to self-interested and tyrannical urges. He explains in the Basilicon Doron:

A good King, thinking his highest honour to consist in the due discharge of his calling, emploieith all his studie and paines, to procure and maintaine, by the making and execution of good Lawes, the well-fare and peace of his people; and as their naturall Father and kindly Master, thinketh his greatest contentment standeth in their prosperitie, and his greatest suretie in hauing their hearts, subjecting his owne priuate affections and appetites to the weale and standing of his Subiects, euer thinking the common interesse his chiefest particular. (20)

As such, the core of James’s political theory is the idea that even though a king’s power, because of its divine nature, must be held to be illimitable by law or parliament, a truly kingly king will nevertheless resist the urge to exercise this absolute power tyrannically and instead rule with an eye fixed firmly upon the common weal, adhering to the law of the realm and attending to the advice of parliament.

Most readers today – and surely a large part of James’s original audience as well – would greet James’s confidence in the responsible nature of kings with a healthy dose of cynicism. Indeed, in the 1610 speech to Parliament, James himself comes precariously close to conceding the idea that rex ought to be subservient to lex after all:

And therefore a King gouerning in a setted Kingdome, leaues to be a King, and degenerates into a Tyrant, assoone as he leaues off to rule according to his Lawes. In which case the Kings conscience may speake vnto him, as the poore widow said to Philip of Macedon; Either gouerne according to your Law, Aut ne Rex sis [or be no King]. (183)
Even here it seems to me that his position is on the whole consistent with his earlier absolutist formulations, since the king is technically answerable only to his own conscience in such cases, not to the law itself or to his subjects as represented in parliament. So far as we can tell, James really did believe in the theory of divine right and in the idea of the great chain of being, not merely as theoretical hypotheses, not simply as politic rhetoric, but as objective facts of nature. The “sparkles of the Diuinitie” that James imagined as adorning and furnishing God’s earthly vice-regents were, in his mind’s eye, not merely metaphorical: they were bona fide sparkles. James, to put the matter bluntly, seems to have believed his own press, and this, I think, might account for his odd fantasy of having a crystal window in his breast. His dilemma was that he was fully convinced that he was God’s anointed deputy, and thus he could not in good conscience accept the idea that any earthly institution such as the law or parliament could possibly limit his power. However, at the same time, he also recognized that wielding this absolute power places kings in a position where they can very easily degenerate into tyrants – or perhaps worse, they might be perceived to be tyrants by fickle public opinion, whatever their true nature may be. So much political confusion could be avoided if only his private heart were publicly knowable! If only James had a crystal breast, his innate monarchical nature and his immaculate conscience would be readily verifiable by all doubters. Such an intersubjective recognition of his subjective conscience would provide incontestable proof of his objective kingly nature, freeing him from all taint of tyranny. In the aftermath of the Gunpowder Plot, James knew that his decisions would be under intense scrutiny, and this fantasy of intersubjective validation bubbled to the

---

4 The extent of James’s concession to parliament in this speech and through the later years of his reign is a matter of ongoing debate; as Sommerville notes, even in James’s day the speech was widely quoted by “thinkers of every shade of opinion” who “invariably used the king’s remarks to confirm their own political prejudices” (Royalists and Patriots 125). Sommerville elsewhere offers a very useful précis of revisionist historical claims that argue that James turned toward constitutionalism (“English and European Political Ideas in the Early Seventeenth Century” 171n9), but he then goes on to convincingly re-establish James’s absolutism.
surface in a context in his speech where, quite frankly, it makes little logical or rhetorical sense.\(^5\)

Elizabeth, on the other hand, almost certainly did not believe all of her own press and seems to have been much less assured about her natural place in the great chain of being. Overall, she was much more canny than James when it came to distinguishing between reality and appearance, between interiority and exteriority, and between the private and public spheres. Whereas James was a committed realist, placing his faith in the objective natures of things, Elizabeth was much more pragmatically-minded, inclining to the view that what people did mattered a great deal more than what they were. In matters of religion, for example, her official policy was to prosecute heretics only for their public actions, not for their private beliefs.\(^6\) Discussing Elizabeth’s leniency toward Catholics in a 1592 pamphlet, Francis Bacon explains his sovereign’s position, once again invoking the fable of Momus:

> her Majesty, not liking to make Windowes into Mens Hearts and Secret Thoughts, Except the Abundance of them did overflow into Ouvert and Expresse Acts and Affirmations, Tempered her Law so as it restraineth only manifest Disobedience, in impugning and impeaching, advisedly and ambitiously, her Majesties supream power. (128-29)

Elizabeth’s strategy was one of politic discretion: she allowed her subjects to lead discrete public and private lives, rendering unto Caesar that which was Caesar’s and keeping for God that which was God’s. We might compare Elizabeth’s double-consciousness here with a

---

\(^5\) I find it intriguing that George W. Bush also places considerable faith in knowing the hearts of his inner circle. His rationale for nominating Harriet Miers to the Supreme Court in late 2005, for example, seems to have been grounded on little more than this: “I know her heart, I know her character. I know that Harriet’s mother is proud of her today, and I know her father would be proud of her, too.” I suspect that if President Bush were given the option of having a crystal breast, one that would enable him to forgo rational explanations and concentrate instead solely on the purity of his intentions and of the intentions of those around him, he would swiftly take it, and moreover he would do this for the very same reasons as James.

\(^6\) However, as Ethan H. Shagan has recently argued, in the later years of Elizabeth’s reign the Court of High Commission’s use of \textit{ex officio} oaths blurred this distinction into incoherence by coercing suspected heretics to take a public oath about their private beliefs. These oaths were controversial in 1592 since they “occupied a liminal position between outward behaviour and inward belief” (543) and thus undermined Elizabeth’s otherwise strong distinction between public weal and private liberty. In fact, early modern discussions of oaths go a long way toward anticipating Austin’s conception of a speech act, since in taking an oath, speech unmistakably becomes a deed. Thanks to Scott Schofield for directing me to this excellent article.
fascinating oath taken by Gertrude in the 1603 quarto of *Hamlet*. At the end of the closet scene, the prince requests his mother’s secrecy and aid, and in response, she swears:

I vow by that majesty
That knowes our thoughts, and lookes into our hearts,
I will conceale, consent, and doe my best
What stratagem soe’re thou shalt devise. (sig. G3-G3v).

Here we find the private/divine and the public/human spheres defined discretely just as Elizabeth would have it, so discretely, in fact, that Gertrude is able to swear by the transparency of the former sphere to remain opaque in the latter.\(^7\) Elizabeth’s sacralizing of individuals’ private consciences, setting them apart from their public deeds, of course, finds its roots in the thought of Luther and the other reformers who privileged faith over works, but it also very much anticipates the shift in emphasis that political thought would take later in the seventeenth century as it came to focus its attention on defending the liberty of the individual within a social contract. Elizabeth was thus somewhat ahead of the political curve (and certainly leagues ahead of James) in her conception of monarchy as an institution dependent upon the maintenance of dynamic pragmatic interactions instead of an institution possessed of a static real nature.\(^8\) Nothing would have made James happier, I suspect, than if we all had crystal breasts that publicly displayed our private natures, since this window in his breast would clear him of all suspicion of tyranny. Elizabeth, on the other hand, would have viewed this Jacobean fantasy as a horrific nightmare, since respecting the privacy of her subjects’ individual consciences is precisely the distinction she imagines to be the one that keeps her from being counted a tyrant.

---

\(^7\) Thanks to András Kiséry for reminding me of this fascinating passage.

\(^8\) On this point, see Rebecca Bushnell, *Tragedies of Tyrants* 37-79. She, however, dates this shift in emphasis in political thought to the 1620s instead, whereas I am more inclined to see this shift prefigured in Elizabethan polity.
The image of Momus’s glass turns up in a different context still in Étienne de La Boétie’s treatise from the early 1550s on civil disobedience, *Discours de la servitude volontaire*. La Boétie’s argument begins by observing the strange fact that in every known society, large numbers of individuals willingly give up their personal liberty and commit themselves to a position of servility, if not slavery, and most often in the service of a single ruler. (La Boétie draws no distinction between kings and tyrants: all monarchy appears tyrannical in his eyes.) How can it be that the masses invariably consent to make themselves the willing slaves of kings, especially since these populations invariably possess thousands of times the muscle power that would be required to reclaim their liberty? La Boétie answers:

> The great zeal and the affection of those who, in spite of the times, remain devoted to their freedom, are ineffective communally, whatever their number may be, because they can in no way share knowledge [entrecognoistre] with one another. Under a tyrant, their freedom of action, of speech, and almost of thought is taken hostage, and thus they are left isolated in their dreams. Momus, the jesting god, was not joking much when he found fault with the man forged by Vulcan for not having a little window in his heart so that one might see his thoughts within. \(^9\)

La Boétie thus appears to share James’s fantasy of a world where we all have windows in our chests, but with quite a different end in mind: whereas the realist James imagined that Momus’s windows would allow us all to recognize our natural place within the structured hierarchies of the great chain of being, the constructivist La Boétie instead imagines that these windows would allow us to see one another’s individual wills, which is to say, our parallel desires for liberty, and that this would free us from our discrete cages of reformed subjectivity and enable social revolution through a newfound (or perhaps rediscovered)

---

\(^9\) Translation mine: “Or, communément, le bon zele & affection de ceux qui ont gardé maugré le temps la deuoition à la franchise, pour si grand nombre qu’il y en ait, demeure sans effect pour ne s’entrecognoistre point : la liberté leur est toute ostee, sous le tiran, de faire, de parler & quasi de penser ; ils deuient tous singuliers en leurs fantasies. Doncqes Mome, le Dieu moqueur, ne se moqua pas trop quand il trouua cela à redire en l’homme qui Vulcan auoit fait, dequoil ne lui auoit mis vne petite fenestre au coeur, afin que par là on peut voir ses pensees” (31).
intersubjective awareness.\(^{10}\) The strength of the people is such, he argues, that such a revolution would require not even a violent uprising, but merely consensus among citizens that they would prefer freedom to slavery, an intersubjective connection that would jolt us awake from our isolated daydreaming and galvanize us into social action. Thus, for La Boétie, the privacy of the individual’s conscience is not the hallmark that the threat of tyranny has been averted, as Elizabeth would have it. Instead, the privacy of the individual’s conscience is the enabling condition of tyranny.

Clearly the fable of Momus resonated in a number of different ways for early modern readers.\(^{11}\) What interests me most about the image of the heart of glass, however, is the way that it encapsulates a desire to transcend some of our most powerful philosophical binaries: the oppositions we imagine as separating inner from outer, private from public, subject from object, soul from body. Furthermore, it draws attention to the fact that many of the concepts that we typically associate with the heart – charity, courage, loyalty, love – prove resistant to these binary oppositions in the first place. This is because our understanding of these concepts relies so heavily on the roles that they play within our cultural practices, and as so often happens, the social sphere is awkwardly bifurcated by the

\(^{10}\) I should acknowledge that my classification of La Boétie as a constructivist is questionable, since he does not in fact advance any sort of concrete political position of his own whatsoever. Certainly he is deeply critical of the sort of realism that James espouses, and also unconvinced by the sort of cultural pragmatism that Elizabeth seems to have practised (if not always preached). Moreover, he also seems prone to imagining human agency primarily in terms of the will to power, in a way that smacks something of the Nietzschean. But, as I shall argue about Montaigne in chapter 4, we might do better to read La Boétie (who was Montaigne’s much-loved friend, after all) as a sceptic rather than as a straightforward constructivist. It is because of his sceptical leanings, and also because he offers no positive position of his own, that La Boétie is sometimes defensibly classified as an early anarchist. In the terms I employ below, he seems most like an Academic (as opposed to a Pyrrhonian) sceptic.

\(^{11}\) This sort of ambiguity, of course, might be seen in the fable itself, since its interpretation turns on whether we respect Momus’s censure of Hephaestus for not making windows in the human breast or whether we think the censure is ludicrous. An epimythium added to an early version of the myth seems to take the latter view, appending this moral to the myth: “Try to make something, and do not let envy pass judgment on it. Nothing is entirely satisfactory to someone who is a Momus” (qtd. in Gibbs 108). I, for one, am inclined to agree with this verdict, as would Elizabeth, perhaps because we both share the suspicion that Bob Dylan voices so well in “It’s Alright, Ma (I’m Only Bleeding),” namely, that “If my thought-dreams could be seen / They’d probably put my head in a guillotine.”
dominant philosophical binaries. When we act charitably toward one another, or perform courageously on behalf of one another, or prove our loyalty to one another, or express our love to one another, these intersubjective actions are neither inner nor outer, neither private nor public, neither subjective nor objective, neither ideal nor material, and thus they call these oft-emphasized oppositions into question. The realist monarch James inclines to the view that these intersubjective practices are grounded in our objective natures; the constructivist rebel La Boétie reads our intersubjective practices as constrained by the exercise of power; and the pragmatist counsellor Bacon praises his sovereign for keeping the social cogs turning by privileging functions over both real natures and constructed statuses.

My overarching suggestion in this chapter is that in the late sixteenth century, the concepts of tyranny and conscience were both very much in a state of hemiolic agitation, redefining themselves in the wake of the English Reformation and Renaissance humanism and in anticipation of the English Civil War and the Enlightenment, and thus frothing per fretum febris. Elizabethan and Jacobean culture negotiated this turbulence by attempting to draw sharp boundaries on these concepts even when they resisted such tidy analysis, by turning to binary oppositions even when much more responsive and supple ternary options hovered before their eyes. Part of the power of Richard III, I argue, comes from the ways in which Shakespeare harnesses the political and philosophical tensions of his historical moment and puts them to work in fuelling his political and philosophical theatre. Thus far, however, historicist readings of Richard III have been deeply binary in their approaches to the play. My contention in this chapter is that a hemiolic reassessment of its examination of tyranny and conscience casts its politics and philosophy in a new light entirely.
Carroll’s “Theories of Kingship in Shakespeare’s England” offers a valuable survey of indispensable contextual material for Shakespeare’s history plays, but one that at the same time employs quite an odd rhetorical structure. Carroll begins his discussion much in the way that I do mine, by offering three quotations taken from three different political perspectives, and then, after a brief discussion of these quotations, he proposes that the remainder of his article will amplify the roles played by these “three philosophical positions” in early modern political thought (126). Surprisingly, however, the remainder of the article proceeds to divide its discussion between two long sections, one entitled “Providential Theory” (127-33) and one entitled “Contractual Theory” (133-43): the third position appears to have been digested, without comment, into the other two. This sort of binary redefinition of a ternary understanding, I suggest, happens with alarming regularity in discussions of early modern political thought, by literary critics and by historians alike. New Historicist critics, for example, have often been criticized for their ready reliance on the binary model of orthodoxy and subversion, but nevertheless, variations upon this familiar binary theme continue to dominate political readings of early modern literature. What this approach does, of course, is encourage us to construct a monolithic conception of orthodoxy out of a wide variety of examples of historically-privileged individuals, practices, and ideas, and then to gather all competing historically-underprivileged individuals, practices, and ideas, no matter how disparate and disconnected from one another they may be, under the single heading of subversion. Our construction of orthodoxy along these lines is typically problematic, but our concomitant construction of subversion is downright irresponsible.

---

12 See Andrew Hadfield’s discussion of this problem in Shakespeare and Republicanism, 10. The most influential political readings advanced by the recent generation of oppositional critics – Greenblatt’s “Invisible Bullets,” Dollimore’s Radical Tragedy, and the essays collected in Dollimore and Sinfield’s Political Shakespeare – are overwhelmingly binary in their thinking, and these works continue in large measure to define the discursive field of politically-minded Shakespeare criticism.
We find a similar gravitation toward inopportune binary oppositions at work in the New History of Political Thought, a movement among historians of the early modern period that in many respects runs parallel to the New Historicism. These historians typically bisect early modern political theorists into two overarching camps: absolutists and resistance theorists. In recent decades, they have taken an interest in the idea of resistance that quite strongly echoes the New Historicist fascination with subversion. Both of these terms, I should add, make me somewhat nervous, and for similar reasons: subversion and resistance are both defined negatively, only comprehensible in terms of their opposition to a position that is itself defined positively. This sort of negative definition, as I argue in the previous chapter, runs the risk of constructing incoherent categories of thought and fostering ineffective critical strategies. With resistance theory, for example, historians construct a category that combines the beliefs of recusant Catholics, radical Puritans, lawyers who privilege the common law above royal prerogative, parliamentarians inclining toward classical republicanism, anarchists, Anabaptists, Machiavellians, Marlovians, and anyone else who happened to resist Tudor and Stuart rule (even to the extent of including absolutists who supported rival claimants to the throne!), and I think we would do well to question this decision. After all, I feel quite certain that these “resisters” would not have accepted this unholy alliance between themselves nearly as readily as early modern historians have. This

13 At first glance, New Historicism and the New History of Political Thought seem to be quite different beasts, since New Historicists typically show signs of influence from Continental thinkers like Foucault and Althusser, while the New History of Political Thought draws much more heavily instead on Anglo-American influences, especially speech act theory. However, in many important respects the two show similarities: they both embrace multiple historical perspectives instead of trying to pin down a single master narrative; they both maintain that all texts are utterances made within and in response to specific political contexts; they both focus attention on non-canonical texts in an attempt to enrich the breadth of our knowledge of historical contexts; and they are both interested in the ways that texts often present us with complex internal contradictions. In other words, they are both reactions against the same Old Historicism and thus show a great many parallels to each other. Bushnell’s discussion on the relationship between the two is especially rewarding (xii).

14 Conal Condren offers a fascinating discussion of our conceptualization of resistance in Argument and Authority in Early Modern England 186-208. Thanks are due to him also for leading an absorbing spring seminar at the Folger last year, where many of the ideas in this chapter began to take shape.
sort of oversimplification is of course understandable, perhaps even inevitable, given the undeniable messiness of early modern political writings: these texts are often highly inconsistent in their arguments; they regularly show evidence of pre-emptive self-censorship (as well as governmental censorship after the fact) that obscures their meaning; and they nearly always seem more concerned with scoring short-term political points than with establishing long-term political theory. However, in spite of these challenges, it seems to me that we could still find a much better strategy for making sense of them than simply falling back on the traditional analytic binaries, pitting absolutism against relativism, the real against the constructed, and royalist against resister.

As a starting point for my own analysis, I would like to observe that there is an important common element to be found among political writings from both sides of this (purported) fence: royalists and resisters alike almost invariably define their positions in opposition to the concept of tyranny. Bushnell draws attention to the binary reciprocity that is at work here, suggesting that “the image of the king is unimaginable without his reflection in the tyrant” (22). How are we to understand the relationship between absolutism and resistance, then, if each position defines itself on the one hand against the other, and on the other hand as the opposite of tyranny? To begin with, it will be useful for us to acknowledge that the early modern conception of tyranny embraced two separate ideas at once, ideas that were sometimes distinguished by early modern political theorists by means of the terms “tyranny of acquisition” and “tyranny of exercise.” Absolutists tend to conceive of tyranny primarily in terms of the former concept, which is to say, in terms of usurpation. For them,

---

15 See, for example, Vindiciae, Contra Tyrranos 140. Condren dates the formulation of this distinction between species of tyranny back to the fourteenth century (198); see, for example, Bartolus 132 and Salutati 78. Robert S. Miola locates the same distinction in Aquinas (275), who distinguishes between tyranny ad modum acquirendi praelationem and ad usum praelationis (6: 788). Bushnell, however, makes it clear that this same sort of fissure between essence and use, between nature and function, is fully evident, if not explicitly expressed, in Plato and Aristotle. The opening chapter of her Tragedies of Tyrants (“The Subject of Tyranny”) surely remains the essential starting point for anyone interested in studying early modern conceptions of tyranny.
kingship is determined by the divine will as revealed through the royal bloodline, and accordingly, a tyrant ought to be understood to be any false pretender who interrupts God’s designs by usurping the throne from its natural progression. Most of the (so-called) resisters, on the other hand, focus their attentions instead on tyranny of exercise, associating tyranny more strongly with despotism than with usurpation: for them, tyranny is to be found whenever a king (irrespective of his hereditary legitimacy) acts in an unkingly way, placing his own needs ahead of the needs of the commonwealth. Tyranny for these resisters is thus a kind of doing, while tyranny for the absolutists was a kind of being. Thus, both political positions manage to define kingship reciprocally by setting themselves up in opposition to different aspects of tyranny.16

The absolutist camp, of course, did not deny the claim that true-born kings ought to behave in a kingly way, placing the common good before their own personal interests; certainly James offers overwhelmingly pragmatic advice to Prince Henry about proper kingly behaviour in the Basilicon Doron. Similarly, resisters for the most part opposed not the idea of an hereditary monarchy, but the idea of an unchecked hereditary monarchy. Accordingly, royalists and resisters were in agreement with each other on most key political issues, but differed crucially on the specific question of whether a king who behaved badly in the eyes of his subjects might legitimately be resisted or even deposed. To put the matter another way, both camps officially opposed both the tyranny of acquisition and the tyranny of exercise, but could not agree which of the two tyrannies was the worse. They both

16 Of course, the evidence of the historical record is not nearly so clean-cut as I suggest here. In the above quotation from James’s 1610 speech to Parliament, for example, we find him using the term “tyranny” quite unambiguously to mean “tyranny of exercise” rather than “tyranny of acquisition” in spite of his lifelong absolutism. It is not my intention to oversimplify the rich and complex historical record here, but instead to refine the tools we employ to make sense of it. James’s political theory reveals a tension between the two conceptions of kingship and between the two conceptions of tyranny. At some points he envisions monarchy and tyranny as dichotomous concepts, but at others he complicates this dichotomy by envisioning tyranny as resisters do, as a kind of behaviour that kings ought to avoid, but to which they occasionally succumb.
maintained that the threat of one kind of tyranny was so great that it could justify accepting
the effrontery of the other, but they differed on the relative demerits of each. The 1570
publication of the *Homelie against Disobedience and Wylfull Rebellion* (written in response
to the Northern Rebellion in 1569 and added to the second edition of the Church’s official
collection of homilies in 1571) makes quite clear the official Tudor position on this matter,
namely, that it is God’s will that the subjects of the realm tolerate and in no way resist the
rule of evil-doing kings, accepting the tyranny of exercise as a necessary evil in order to
forestall the greater threat of the tyranny of acquisition:

Nay let vs either deserue to haue a good prince, or let vs paciently suffer and
obey such as we deserue. And whether the prince be good or euill, let vs
accordyng to the counsell of the holy scriptures pray for the prince, for his
continuance and increase in goodnesse yf he be good, and for his
amendement yf he be euill. Wyll you here the scriptures concerning this
most necessarie poyn? I exhort therefore saith saint Paul, that aboue al
things, prayers, supplications, intercessions, & geuing of thankes be had for
all men, for kinges, and all that are in aucthoritie, that we may liue a quiet and
peaceable lyfe with all godlynesse: for that is good and acceptable in sight of
God our sauiour. &c. This is saint Paules counsell. And who I pray you was
prince ouer the most part of Christians, when gods holy spirite by saint
Paules pen gaue them this lesson? Forsooth, Caligula, Clodius, or Nero, who
were not onlye no Christians, but Pagans, and also either foolishe rulers, or
most cruell tyrauntes. (sig. B3)

A king was thus to be obeyed, however tyrannical he might prove in exercise, so long as his
bloodline established that he was the rightful king in the eyes of God.

Evil kings were understood to be “scourges,” instruments of punishment employed
by God to chastise and purify the commonwealth of their sins.\(^1\) The twelfth-century

\(^1\) We might observe that the word “scourge” is derived from the Latin *excoriare* (“to excoriate”), and originally
denoted a whip used to flay the skin off a person or animal. I am intrigued to think that the act of scourging
provides us with yet another example of early modern thinkers taking an interest in viewing each other’s inner
selves, as we saw with the references to Momus’s glass. When a tyrant holds the throne, we are scourged as a
people: our corruptible flesh is cleared away until the windows into our souls are wiped clean, with our
subjective selves becoming intersubjectively knowable at last through our shared suffering.
diplomat and political theorist John of Salisbury accounts for the necessity of suffering under tyrants in the language of patristic philosophy:

> Just as in a painting, a black or smutty color or some other feature, looked at by itself, is ugly, and yet considered as a part of the whole painting is pleasing; so things which separately examined seem foul and evil, yet when related to the whole appear good and fair, since He adapts all things to Himself whose works are all exceedingly good. Therefore even the rule of a tyrant, too, is good, although nothing is worse than tyranny. (351)\(^{18}\)

However well-reasoned this may be, the paradoxical final claim surely sounds sophistical, and undoubtedly it would sound very much so to anyone who was actually suffering under a tyrant. If we are to take the rhetoric of monarchy seriously, however, as James seems to have done, this seems to be the only logically consistent conclusion that we can draw from the premise of absolutism. Furthermore, it is clear that this absolutist position was the official Tudor doctrine and was preached by royal decree on a regular basis on Sunday mornings from pulpits across the land.\(^{19}\)

At the same time, there is ample evidence that many people in England envisioned kingship as a social role, one that performed a function and carried with it responsibilities; and they thus approached the concept pragmatically rather than picturing it realistically as a class of being within the natural hierarchy. There were two other deeply pragmatic institutions in English culture that had considerable bearing on the king’s power and that

---

\(^{18}\) John of Salisbury’s brilliant solution to the problem of tyranny, I might add, is to suggest that while it is our duty to obey our own kings however tyrannically they may behave, it is also our duty to execute foreign tyrants for their manifest evil, since we owe no fealty to them and thus commit no treason in deposing them. Tyrannicide is thus a pious act when committed on foreign shores, but utterly impious at home.

\(^{19}\) On the extent of support for absolutism in England, see Sommerville (“English”). Carroll observes that early modern English political treatises in print are overwhelmingly absolutist in their sympathies, although he also makes the fascinating observation that their arguments “became even more strident and absolute as the Stuart monarchy lost more and more of its power and influence in the 1630s” (133), which suggests that rhetoric may have been inversely proportional to reality. Hadfield, on the other hand, disputes the idea that the absolutist position of the 1570 *Homilie* was accepted by the English population at large, but he offers very little in the way of evidence to support this claim about popular opinion (Renaissance Politics 42-44). He suggests that in the provinces, residual Catholicism would have led parishioners to turn a deaf ear to this compulsory sermon whenever it was preached, while in London, sophisticated urbanity would have ensured that it received the same ambiguous response from the city’s pews. This seems to me to be a feasible hypothesis, but Hadfield offers little from the historical record to substantiate it.
thus warrant comparison: the common law and parliament. English common law offers one of the most effective illustrations that I can imagine of Wittgenstein’s concept of a Lebensform in action. The common law is neither objectively real nor subjectively constructed, but instead emerges from the intersubjective practices of a culture, adapting over time as the culture changes. The English commonwealth both generates and inherits the common law at once, and thus some early modern lawyers (most notably Edward Coke) insisted that the common law even outranked royal prerogative, and thus that rex ought to be made subordinate to lex.20 The English Parliament was a second considerable force of pragmatism and intersubjectivity in the realm, representing the interests of the people in their own rule, and was made especially powerful in a de facto sense by their direct control over the taxation of the realm.21 It is thus not wholly surprising that we find significant evidence of English thinkers taking an interest in pragmatic alternatives to the absolutist conception of kingship by circulating treatises of political resistance like George Buchanan’s De jure regni apud Scotus, Robert Parsons’s Conference about the Next Succession to the Crowne of Ingland, and the Huguenot tract Vindiciae, Contra Tyrannos.22

The common enemy of both these resistance theorists and absolutists alike, of course, is Niccolò Machiavelli – or perhaps we should do better to rechristen this enemy as

---

20 On Coke, the common law, and their relationship to early modern political theory, see Glenn Burgess, Absolute Monarchy and the Stuart Constitution 165-208.
21 Oliver Arnold offers some extremely useful insights into the importance of the English parliament. I am especially convinced by his observation that the New Historicism fascination with the concept of “coercion” has encouraged critics in recent years to overlook the importance of the related concept of “consent,” so much so that we have overvalued the historical power of the monarchy and undervalued the power held by parliament (24-34). This argument is, of course, closely related to my own suggestion that our willingness to discover evidence of constructivism in action in the early modern period has led us to overlook (and also misinterpret) the ample evidence we might find for pragmatism.
22 The Vindiciae was most likely written either by Philippe du Plessis Mornay or Hubert Languet, or both. On the English readership of resistance theorists, see Hadfield, Shakespeare and Republicanism 38 as well as “The Power and Rights” 572-73, which also offers a compelling argument about the influence of the Vindiciae on Hamlet. Furthermore, although it was written slightly later in the period, Francisco Suárez’s Defensio Fidei Catholicae et Apostolicae Adversus Anglicanae Sectae Errores esp. 705-25 is especially rewarding and deserves more critical attention than it has received.
“the Machevil,” since the Florentine philosopher was much better known in Elizabethan England as a caricature of sophistical constructivism than as a sophisticated political theorist in his own right, as John Roe quite rightly observes (ix). Bushnell goes so far as to suggest that Machiavelli functioned as “the scapegoat for the truth of European politics” (54-55), arguing that other schools of political thought depended on Machiavelli to provide them with a rhetorical straw-man which they could readily dismantle as a sure-fire means of gaining the support of their audience. It thus matters little that Machiavelli’s writings reveal him to be not nearly so one-dimensional a constructivist thinker as he was popularly depicted to be; what matters much more is the fact that early modern audiences envisioned him to be the embodiment of constructivism, the heir of Plato’s Thrasymachus, the champion of the ideas that might makes right, that force and will determine reality, and that appetite is a universal wolf. In this light, Richard’s memorable boast in 3 Henry VI that he would “set the murderous Machiavel to school” (3.2.193) might be seen as something more than bravura and hyperbole, since Machiavelli’s constructivist leanings in fact do leave some considerable headroom for a committed Machevil like Richard to overgo. Paul Strohm argues convincingly that early modern English readers had access to all sorts of examples of realpolitik in classical literature, especially in Tacitus and Livy, and thus that we need not worry overmuch about tracing the circulation of Machiavelli’s writings in early modern England with precision. Anxiety about constructivist politics and tyranny was everywhere to be found in the Elizabethan era, and this discomfort coalesced in the shared cultural construction of the character of the Machevil, who combined the threats of usurpation and despotism within a single figure. It seems safe to suggest that if reports of Machiavelli’s

---

23 Roe elucidates this contrast with the convincing suggestion that Hamlet can be seen to be a Machiavellian, working with a flexible philosophy that insists, for example, that things are only good or bad because thinking makes them so, while Claudius is better seen to be a Machiavel, a power-hungry villain who uses force, deception, and whatever else seems effective to bend reality to his will (xi).
works had not reached England’s shores, the bogeyman Machevil would have needed to have been invented. Alongside the Machiavellian focus on the will to power, we might also think of La Boétie’s leanings toward constructivism: he insists that all kings, regardless of the purity of their bloodline and irrespective of the conscientiousness of their rule, ought to be considered to be tyrants, since monarchy by definition forces a population into a state of servitude. “Kingship” for him is nothing more than the title that is granted to the oppressor of willing slaves, and thus it differs little from the title of “tyrant,” the title granted to the oppressor of unwilling slaves. The clearest early modern expression of this constructivist position, however, turns up later in Hobbes, who maintains that “tyranny” is nothing more than the name we give to “misliked” monarchy, and is thus nothing more than a status constructed by the population for an individual ruler rather than a particular nature embodied within him or a particular function performed by him (sig. N3).

By this point, my critical agenda is surely becoming clear: my suggestion is that we would do much better in our discussions of early modern political thought to turn to a ternary model of nature, function, and status (or realism, pragmatism, and constructivism) than to continue relying upon the usual historicist binaries of orthodoxy and subversion or of absolutism and resistance. Admittedly, early modern thinkers themselves quite often tend to gravitate toward binary formulations in their own discussions of politics – often, but not exclusively, I must emphasize. I am thus not encouraging us to jettison binary analyses completely, but instead proposing that we approach the matter polyrhythmically, attending to the interplay between binary and ternary analytic strategies that we find preserved in the texts. The most influential treatise of all in early modern political thought – Aristotle’s Politics – argues that there are three primary forms of government, and these correspond reasonably well to my ternary model: monarchy (which typically conceives of sovereignty in
realist terms); aristocracy (which typically conceives of sovereignty in pragmatist terms); and democracy (which typically conceives of sovereignty in constructivist terms). Echoes of Aristotle’s triad abound in early modern political writings. Thomas Smith’s *De Republica Anglorum*, for example, uses it as a structuring principle throughout his whole argument. Bodin relies on it heavily in *The Six Bookes of a Common-wealth*, and furthermore, he goes on to subdivide monarchy into three subclasses highlighting three comparable aspects of kingship: the tyrannical, the royal, and the despotic (sig. S4). Moreover, a similar sort of ternary structure underlies La Boétie’s claim that there are three kinds of tyrants: those who are born into the position (nature); those who are elected to perform the role (function); and those who seize the title for themselves (status) (19). We might even locate a parallel triad in the opening scene of *Titus Andronicus*, when the emperorship dangles precariously for a time between Saturninus (who has the real nature of primogeniture on his side), Bassianus (who would perform the social function of the emperor most effectively), and Titus (who has the force of popular opinion swelling behind him).

Confusion arises, however, when these ternary conceptions of sovereignty are redescribed using the familiar binary oppositions, such as reality and appearance and the private and the public. Realist (or absolutist) theorists, for example, focus their attentions on the reality of the king’s bloodline and define themselves polemically in opposition to the mere “appearance” of constructed statuses. In the process, the pragmatic functions of sovereignty are digested by the binary: these functions are partly naturalized and defined as forming part of the king’s true nature, and partly rejected as artificial appearances, accidents that ought not to be confused with essences. In quite a comparable way, when pragmatist (or “resistance”) theorists focus their attention on the king’s proper function and define the

---

24 Although Aristotle’s *Politics* was not published in English until 1598, there were dozens of editions published on the Continent in Latin, Greek, French, Spanish, and Italian, beginning in 1469.
public responsibilities of kingship in opposition to the unchecked private desires of tyranny, they digest realism and constructivism into each other, no longer differentiating between a king who came to the throne naturally (by blood) and one who came to the throne artificially (by force), and classifying both as enemies to the commonwealth should they fail to perform their proper function. To put the matter succinctly, both absolutists and “resisters” define themselves in large measure by associating the other with the tyrannical bogeyman of the Machevil, redescribing three distinct conceptions of sovereignty into two distinct polemical binary oppositions, one that pits true nature against false appearance, the other that pits the public good against private interest. When we approach a play like Richard III, where the issues of usurpation and despotism are both central concerns, I suggest that we would do well to keep the ternary model in mind as a tool for gauging the rival binary alternatives.

♣ ♣ ♣ ♣ ♣

Most discussions of Richard III identify tyranny as one of the play’s central concerns without proceeding to ask the pressing follow-up question: what kind of tyranny is at stake here? Is it the tyranny of acquisition, the kind of tyranny that is opposed by absolutists, or is it the tyranny of exercise, the kind opposed by resisters? Are we to see the play as a piece of Tudor propaganda designed to justify Henry VII’s rightful accession and Elizabeth’s ongoing absolutist legitimacy, as a great many critics have suggested? Or are we instead to follow Blair Worden in observing that before the Battle of Bosworth Field, “Richmond vindicates his rebellion, with a boldness worthy of a Huguenot resistance theorist, by appealing to the legitimacy of tyrannicide” (25)? This latter view intriguingly aligns

25 This is also, of course, Tillyard’s position, but we should observe that despite Tillyard’s unfashionable reputation, many sophisticated recent readings continue to support his reading of the play as conservative Tudor orthodoxy. Bushnell, for example, argues that “Richard III necessarily fixes Richard in traditional antitheses in order to protect Richmond’s status as Elizabeth’s ancestor, even though Richard himself has brilliantly manipulated those antitheses” (142); Katharine Eisaman Maus also imagines the play as depicting “the providential drama of history” (54); and Dominique Goy-Blanquet declares that “there is little support for a subversive reading of Richard III in the text, unless one reads between the lines” (264).
Shakespeare’s fifth-act portrait of the scion of the Tudor dynasty with the anti-Tudor factions that were threatening to overthrow his granddaughter, a connection that reminds us that Tudor political theory was very often difficult to reconcile with Tudor political history. Looking at the canon as a whole, we find that many of Shakespeare’s plays are concerned with interrogating the tyranny of acquisition, examining the means by which kings come to power (the *Henry VI* plays, *Julius Caesar*, *Macbeth*), while many other plays are more concerned with scrutinizing the tyranny of exercise, calling into question the rights and responsibilities that attend upon sovereignty (*King Lear*, *Measure for Measure*, *The Tempest*). In many cases, of course, a play will consider both kinds of tyranny in detail, as in the fascinating diptych of *Richard II*, where Shakespeare first explores the tyranny of exercise in the person of Richard, then investigates the tyranny of acquisition in the person of Bolingbroke, and finally challenges us to choose between the two tyrannies by concluding the play with the ambiguous conflagration between the loyalist Aumerle and the flip-flopper York.

With *Richard III*, however, we are presented with the same sort of diptych in an even more condensed format, since the Machevil Richard is himself both a tyrant of acquisition and a tyrant of exercise in rapid succession.26 Because of this, I suggest that the question of the play’s politics might be profitably read by tracing the attitudes that it takes towards these two distinct species of tyranny. Does the play line up alongside the realist absolutism of the Tudor party line and fault Richard primarily for his usurpation of the throne from its natural course, or does it instead side with the pragmatist contractual theorists and fault Richard primarily for his despotic misbehaviour and his disregard for public standards of virtue and justice once he attains power? There is a third option

---

26 Bacon’s *Historie of the Raigne of King Henry the Seuenth* opens by making the point that Richard was notable for being a “Tyrant both in Title and Regiment” (1), emphasizing his twofold tyranny.
available to us as well, we must remember, which is the idea that the play does not reject either kind of tyranny but instead subscribes to the Machevillainous mode of realpolitik practised by Richard, endorsing the sort of cynicism toward kingly natures and kingly functions that we find in La Boétie. This constructivist view of the play is perhaps most elegantly propounded by Jan Kott, who argues that “Richard is impersonal like history itself. He is the consciousness and the mastermind of the Grand Mechanism” (45). The “Grand Mechanism” is Kott’s poetic conception of a Nietzschean will to power operating as the sole determinant of the progression of history, the sort of idea that critics more often associate with Christopher Marlowe than Shakespeare. As in most of Marlowe’s plays, in Richard III (a play that out-Marlowes Marlowe) the overreaching protagonist does receive his comeuppance in the end as the traditional social order reasserts itself, but only after a seed of constructivist doubt has been planted in the audience’s mind: the idea that the fixed truths of the establishment might be nothing more than the interests of the powerful, the Grand Mechanism at work, a con game of the highest order.

Before proceeding further, I should probably acknowledge that I am extremely wary about attributing a specific political position to Shakespeare himself on the evidence of his dramatic output: these plays were all written with an eye toward so many different political interests (those of his fellow actors, of the various theatre company patrons, of the public theatre audience at large, of the royal, municipal, and ecclesiastical authorities, and so on) that they cannot reasonably be imagined to present anything identifiable as Shakespeare’s own political views. For that matter, given that even the most dogmatic of political treatises from the period seems to present conflicted and contradictory messages because of the plurality and instability of early modern political vocabularies (as Pocock demonstrates time and again), it would be surprising indeed if we could extract a single consistent political
position from stage plays, especially since they most often generate dramatic interest by pitting competing viewpoints against one another. It is thus tempting to retreat and take shelter behind the familiar critical claims about Shakespeare’s myriad-mindedness, openness, and versatility.\(^{27}\) It seems to me that this strategy, however, runs the risk of going too far in the other direction, depoliticizing plays that undoubtedly resonated very powerfully on a political level with early modern theatre-goers. With these competing misgivings acknowledged, however, I propose that we might nevertheless profitably discuss the ways in which contentious political positions are arranged within a playtext, with an eye toward imagining why these particular dramaturgical choices might have been made, even if our overarching goal is not to come to some single and definite conclusion about the political orientation of the play or of the playwright lurking mysteriously in the shadows behind it.

These things said, I would like to suggest that the still-pervasive idea that Richard III functions as straightforward Tudor propaganda validating Elizabeth’s place on the throne seems to me to be far from tenable. Certainly the play vilifies Richard, overpainting Thomas More’s already-dark portrait of the king in still pitchier tones, but in the process it firmly establishes the instability of Tudor political rhetoric. Richmond’s hereditary claim on the throne was, after all, really quite tenuous. It was not nearly as strong as that of Clarence’s two children (whom Richard discounts as threats, but who remain alive and well at the end of the play), nor was it as strong as that of Buckingham’s son, Edward Stafford, who boasted a direct lineal descent from Thomas of Woodstock.\(^{28}\) Richmond is surely granted the throne

\(^{27}\) On this point, see Martin Dzelzainis, “Shakespeare and Political Thought” 101-6.

\(^{28}\) See Goy-Blanquet 197-289, esp. 225. Richmond’s claim to the throne was based on his mother’s descent from John of Beaufort, one of John of Gaunt’s bastard (although later “legitimized”) sons with his mistress Katherine Swynford – surely a dubious lineage. His claim was buoyed by the fact that his father, Edmund Tudor, was the son of Catherine of Valois, Henry V’s widow, and thus was Henry VI’s half-brother (albeit the wrong half). Richmond’s marriage to Elizabeth of York provided a poetic sense of closure to the War of the Roses, but from an absolutist perspective, it did little to aid his claim to the throne: acknowledging Elizabeth’s Yorkist right to the crown only makes his crime of regicide all the more evident. Elizabeth in fact had a much
because of his successful opposition to Richard’s tyranny of exercise, not because he can pretend to have the strongest claim on the throne himself through his bloodlines. It is thus not surprising that his oration to his soldiers draws more upon the rhetoric of contractual theory than it does on the rhetoric of absolutism: the “bloody tyrant” that he urges his troops to overthrow is depicted more as a despot than as a usurper (5.5.191-224).

Admittedly, he does refer to Richard explicitly as a usurper on two occasions (5.2.7, 5.5.65), and his claim that Richard was “raised in blood, and [. . .] in blood established” (5.5.201) glances briefly at the idea that the Yorks in general were usurpers and Richard in particular a usurper of usurpers, but he does not belabour the point. This is perhaps because he does not want to draw attention to the fact that he himself is about to usurp this usurper of usurpers. Alternatively, he may turn away from this line of thought because he recognizes that there is a dangerous equivocation in the way he formulates his charge: from an absolutist perspective, after all, Richard is “raised in blood” and “in blood established” because he is in fact the most immediate living blood descendant of Edward III. Richmond quite wisely chooses to direct his oration before his troops against Richard primarily as a tyrant of exercise rather than acquisition, emphasizing his deeds more than his lineage.

If we are to take the 1570 Homelie seriously in its claim that evil kings are to be suffered patiently as instruments of the divine will, it is difficult to see how Richmond’s resistance against Richard could possibly be justified. Richmond, however, is not Richard’s only antagonist in the play: it is instead Margaret who is most adamant in her opposition to Richard as a usurper – and, in an odd and telling twist, most tolerant of him as a despot.

The job of voicing the absolutist position that evil kings must be suffered as divine
instruments of punishment falls mainly to Margaret, who increasingly takes delight in Richard’s bloody successes as a scourge of the Yorkist court:

    O upright, just, and true-disposing God,
    How do I thank thee that this charnel cur
    Preys on the issue of his mother’s body,
    And makes her pew-fellow with others’ moan. (4.4.55-58)

It is also Margaret who more than anyone else in the play relies upon black-and-white absolutist binary images in her rhetoric, repeatedly pitting the real substance of the former Lancastrian court against the constructed shadow of the current Yorkist usurpers, and remembering the angels of her departed kin in contrast to the devils who have displaced them. Richard, of course, will gleefully fall back upon absolutist arguments himself to bolster his own cause whenever it suits his purposes, as when he and Buckingham choose to infer the bastardy of the young princes and (gratuitously) of Edward himself, while emphasizing Richard’s true lineal descent from the Duke of York to cement his claim on the throne (3.5.72-92; 3.7.5-14, 117-36, 167-90). More pointedly absolutist still is his response to the news of Richmond’s invasion: “What heir of York is there alive but we? / And who is England’s king but great York’s heir?” (4.4.402-3) – but we can hardly imagine him believing this realist argument himself.

The Citizens, in the little we see of them, seem to be generally inclined toward following the advice of the Homelie, and the Third Citizen in particular seems to accept the rule of a destructive king as deserved divine punishment for the sins of the realm. He speculates, “All may be well, but if God sort it so / ‘Tis more than we deserve, or I expect. / [. . .] / But leave it all to God” (2.3.36-45), thus foreshadowing John of Gaunt’s orthodox arguments to the Duchess of Gloucester in Richard II (1.2). Surely, though, in this play the Citizens must strike us as naïve, Richard as fraudulent, and Margaret as unnervingly unbalanced in their support of the absolutist position. Donald G. Watson raises the
interesting possibility that Shakespeare elects to include Margaret in the play (despite the fact that her inclusion is "historically indefensible and dramatically illogical") in order to provide a "warped and hysterical" mouthpiece for the absolutist position in the play, one that would enable him to parody devastatingly the providential notion of justice (120-21). There seems to me to be considerable merit to this idea, and thus, instead of reading the play as a piece of Tudor propaganda, it seems to me to be much more convincing as a *reductio ad absurdum* assault on the 1570 *Homelie*, one that illustrates exactly what is entailed by the dictum that a realm must suffer patiently under an evil king, no matter how despotic. If there is anything resembling a political argument to be found in the play as a whole, it seems to me to be the idea that kings are ultimately to be judged by their actions more than anything else. As Hadfield puts it – phrasing his thoughts in a succinct ternary formulation, no less – "Shakespeare’s representation of kings in all his history plays is governed by the understanding that it is what kings do rather than what they are or claim to be that is important" (*Renaissance Politics* 56; emphasis mine).

Richmond comes to the throne not because he can make the claim with right and conscience (as Henry V puts it to the bishops), but because he seems to be best suited for the job. Critics and audiences over the years have consistently found Richmond’s character to be less than captivating, especially when contrasted with the larger-than-life persona of Richard, but this is surely in large measure Shakespeare’s point: Richard is a dazzling individual, but one who cannot form social relationships of any sort, whereas Richmond is unprepossessing as an individual, but proves his skill in social contexts again and again. Alexander Leggatt draws attention to the emphasis the play places upon this contrast: “It is appropriate for an intriguer to be a solitary, but a king, whatever final privacy he maintains, must be the centre of a whole network of social and political relationships, and Richard
simply cannot function in that way” (36). The main impression that we are given of Richmond, on the other hand, is one of sociability. The first word he utters, notably, is “Fellows” (5.2.1), and the remainder of his introductory scene focuses our attention on his relations with friends. His catalogue of supporters in 5.4 seems to some critics to be dramatically gratuitous (and thus evidence that Shakespeare was taking the opportunity to flatter the theatrical patrons Pembroke and Strange), but the emphasis placed upon proper names further makes the point that Richmond is enmeshed within an intersubjective network of reciprocal support and is prepared to take care of the people who in turn help to take care of him. In his prayer to God before battle, he notably uses the first person plural in a context where we might expect him to use the singular: “Make us thy ministers of chastisement, / That we may praise thee in the victory” (5.5.66-67). Here the message of the Homelie is inverted as the subjects of the realm become the divine scourges and the king (or perhaps the kingship) the scourged. Shakespeare surely would have expected his Elizabethan audience to support Richmond’s rebellion against the Machevil Richard, and it seems notable to me that this support makes his audience complicit in an act of political resistance, certainly an act of tyrannicide, perhaps even one of regicide, but undoubtedly an act in conflict with the orthodoxy of Tudor absolutism. The orthodox conflict over tyranny of acquisition is played out between the realist Margaret and the constructivist Richard; the battle between Richard and Richmond, in contrast, centres on tyranny of exercise, and thus echoes the resistance treatises in pitting a pragmatism of selfless rule against a constructivism of tyrannical self-interest.

---

29 John Jowett, for example, makes this argument (4-7).
30 Richmond is definitely not adopting the royal “we” here, since he refers to himself in the singular immediately before and after voicing this wish.
31 Parsons, writing in 1595, cites the deposition of Richard III as clear proof that the doctrine of absolutism is untenable. He comments “albeit [Richard] synned greuously by taking vppon him the crowne in this wicked manner yet when his nephewes were once dead, he might in reason seeme to be lawful king [. . .] and yet no man vvil say (I thinke) but that he vvas lawfully also deposed [. . .] by the cömöwealth” (1: 61).
Richard’s isolation from his community is perhaps even more pronounced than Richmond’s sociability. This emphasis upon his isolation is heralded in 3 Henry VI by his stunning constructivist soliloquy over the corpse of the king he has murdered:

    I had no father, I am like no father;
    I have no brother, I am like no brother;
    And this word, “love,” which greybeards call divine,
    Be resident in men like one another
    And not in me – I am myself alone. (5.6.80-84)

Richard’s isolation comes into even starker focus still in the opening scene of Richard III. The Folio and all eight Quartos begin with identical stage directions, “Enter Richard Duke of Gloster, solus,” the redundant “solus” making Richard’s unattended entry all the more emphatic. This sort of opening is standard practice for Marlovian dramaturgy, but it is not typically Shakespearean; in fact, nowhere else in the canon does Shakespeare begin a play with an introductory soliloquy. The soliloquy is made all the more notable by Richard’s exceptional use of first person pronouns. Despite its familiarity, I would like to quote the passage at some length:

    Now is the winter of our discontent
    Made glorious summer by this son of York;
    And all the clouds that loured upon our house
    In the deep bosom of the ocean buried.
    Now are our brows bound with victorious wreaths,
    Our bruisèd arms hung up for monuments,
    Our stern alarums changed to merry meetings,
    Our dreadful marches to delightful measures. (1.1.1-8)

Who precisely is denoted by the “our” that Richard refers to six times in the first eight lines (or seven if we count its concealed appearance in “loured”)? Whose discontent has thawed

---

32 This claim, of course, sets aside the seven plays that begin with Prologues: Romeo and Juliet, 2 Henry IV, Henry V, Troilus and Cressida, Pericles, Henry VIII, and The Two Noble Kinsmen.

33 There are more echoes still if we acknowledge the insistent assonance found in the words “Now” “clouds” “house” “Now” “brows” and “bound,” especially in lines 3 and 5, where the diphthong occurs four times.
at last and resolved itself into wreaths, monuments, merry meetings and delightful measures?
It could be that the “we” in question is a straightforward first-person plural referring only to
Richard’s own immediate family, and thus that he begins the play by trumpeting the recent
Yorkist victory over the Lancastrians. Alternatively, since Richard seems to be addressing
the audience directly here, it could be interpreted as a more widely inclusive “we,” one that
includes the first and second person together, reaching out to include his auditors and
gesturing beyond the court to the realm as a whole to acknowledge that the season of civil
bloodshed that has sullied England’s soil is at last a thing of the past. Furthermore, there is
always the possibility (especially for an audience unsure of where in Richard’s history the
narrative begins) that Richard opens the play by presumptuously adopting the royal plural,
announcing the end of his own private discontent, and thus that by “our” Richard merely
means “my.” But Richard’s first-person plural is something odder than this, since for the
final two-thirds of the speech, the monologue shifts its focus so that it sets “I” in opposition
to “our,” repeating the singular pronoun nine times as he outlines his exclusion from the
lascivious gambols of the court and his determination to prove a villain instead (1.1.14-40).
Apparently Richard was not including himself in the ambiguous and insistent “our” of the
opening lines. He was never a part of “us” – or of “them” – whoever “we” – or “they” –
may have been. We were mistaken to think so, mistaken not only about Richard’s meaning,
but perhaps mistaken about the workings of language itself. In Richard’s mouth, the
pronoun “we” can be twisted to denote what the rest of us normally mean by “you” or by
“they”; in his mouth, it seems to mean something along the lines of “we (but not I).”
Richard’s first-person plural is singular indeed.

As the play progresses, Richard’s intersubjective connections all replicate this initial
pattern: his allies are led to believe that they constitute a “we” with him, only to learn too
late that they had assumed too much. Leggatt, with characteristic insight, argues that we in the audience follow this same path in our relationship with Richard (32-40). We begin the play seemingly in his confidence, made privy to his plans through a steady stream of asides and soliloquies; but gradually as the play progresses, we are shut out of his inner circle; and in the latter half of the play, Richard’s stratagems increasingly catch us off guard. As Leggatt observes, “Even his jokes become odd and private: the rotten armour, the strawberries, the exchange with Buckingham over the jack of the clock” (36). The personal relationship that we had initially assumed to be a “we” turns out to be nothing of the sort, and we are left to “realize that the sort of bond Richard had with us, founded as it was on an agreement to mock love and treat humanity with contempt, could never have lasted” (40). Richard’s disconnection from those around him is reinforced for us by his entrance in 1.3: he arrives at court railing furiously to no one in particular and Rivers is forced to ask, “To whom in all this presence speaks your grace?” (1.3.54). Richard moves within his peers but never quite among them, embodying the Machiavellian conception of an atomic self who remains disconnected from all others, as Maus suggests (48). Over time, he comes to sacrifice all of his intersubjective social bonds, a point that is dramatized for us pointedly in his final confrontation with Elizabeth, who denies him the right to swear by his kingship, his knighthood, his family, his humanity, his God, his own self, and even his own future, since he has so thoroughly profaned all such bonds (4.4.297-327). More than anything else, he avoids being drawn into relationships with others; or, as Richard himself explains the matter, “None are for me / That look into me with considerate eyes” (4.2.30-31). James wished that he could make his soul visible to considerate eyes; Elizabeth on the other hand defended herself against charges of tyranny by refusing to turn her considerate eyes on other men’s souls; and La Boétie envisioned unconsidered private subjectivity as the enabling condition
of tyranny. Richard clearly is closest to La Boétie here, turning to his own advantage the
coonception of individual and private subjectivity that La Boétie finds so enervating.

Richard is often described by critics as a Trickster figure, perhaps because they take
at face value his boast in 3 Henry VI:

> Why, I can smile, and murder whiles I smile,
> And cry “Content!” to that which grieves my heart,
> And wet my cheeks with artificial tears,
> And frame my face to all occasions.
> [. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .]
> I can add colours to the chameleon,
> Change shapes with Proteus for advantages,
> And set the murderous Machiavel to school. (3.2.182-93)

Certainly he continues to put on a series of performances in Richard III – the reassuring
fraternal confidant, the Petrarchan lover, the indignant loyalist, the pacifist courtier, the
caring uncle, the dutiful Protector, the politic statesman, the pitiable cripple, the pious
Christian, the reluctant king – but the question might still be asked of these “tricks”: is
anyone actually fooled by them? Certainly the text makes it clear Richard adopts a
sucession of exaggerated poses, but there is little evidence to think that his target audiences
are typically taken in by these charades. Watson puts it succinctly: “This is ‘nerve,’ not
consummate acting” (104). Clarence undoubtedly believes his brother’s performance in the
opening scene, of course; Anne may come close to believing Richard in 1.2, but the text
leaves her reaction equivocal (her responses are politic and cautious, not necessarily
convinced); and the Mayor seems to be taken in by Richard for a short time in 3.5, only to
renege on his support quietly a scene later (3.7.24-33). In all other cases, however, Richard’s
audiences remain decidedly unreceptive in their responses to him, most likely recognizing
these performances for what they are, but politicly unwilling to make a scene by challenging
them. Brakenbury, King Edward, the Duchess of York, Queen Elizabeth, the Queen’s
ennobled kin, the young princes, Buckingham, Hastings, Stanley, both sets of executioners,
and the citizens of London all seem to recognize to varying degrees that Richard is playing a part and trying to mislead them, but no one other than Margaret is willing to call him out on this. This reluctance, I suggest, is because in the aftermath of the Wars of the Roses, the court has devolved into the kind of world described by Kott, with the survivors all intimately aware of the indiscriminate operation of the Grand Mechanism. In other words, constructivism has become the order of the day, and Yorkist reality is no longer grounded in objective natures or intersubjective cultural practices but dependent instead upon the promiscuous caprices of subjective power. The court are all aware of the flimsiness of their own constructed statuses – they have all caught a fleeting glimpse of the wizards pulling levers behind their respective curtains, if you will – and so they cannot run the risk of impugning Richard for his obvious fabrications without drawing attention to their own prevarications. As Richard tells his brother with delicious irony, commenting on the political climate at court, “We are not safe, Clarence; we are not safe” (1.1.70).34

Even though I would agree that the court depicted in Richard III appears quite similar to the world that Kott describes, I nevertheless would resist the idea that the play as a whole espouses the constructivist outlook that Kott discovers in it. Most readings that incline this way seem to me to be especially binary in their thinking; they recognize that the play profoundly undermines the orthodoxy of Tudor absolutism and they conclude that it instead endorses a subversive Machiavellian constructivism, as if these were the only two options available to Shakespeare. My own reading proposes instead that the play sets out to undermine precisely this sort of binary analysis by calling into question both absolutism and Machiavellianism at once, and advocating instead for the sort of pragmatist contractual

34 Sandra Bonetto offers a useful discussion of the anticipation of Nietzschean constructivism in Richard III, although I wish she had gone somewhat further in historicizing her discussion, focusing perhaps on the classical and early modern examples of constructivism that might have influenced both Shakespeare and Nietzsche rather than simply reading Shakespeare anachronistically as anticipating Nietzsche.
theory we find in resistance treatises like *Vindiciæ, Contra Tyrannos*. Margaret, the voice of realism in the play, poses very little threat to Richard’s constructivism; in fact, by making Margaret so hyperbolic a harpy, Shakespeare might be seen to be offering a scathing parody of the unconvincing rhetoric of absolutism. Richmond’s pragmatism, on the other hand, succeeds precisely where Richard’s constructivism fails. In the short term, Richard manages to disrupt social bonds by taking advantage of uncertainty and sowing dissension wherever he can find it, but his power to coerce in the long run is limited by his subjective isolation. Ultimately, the intersubjective social bonds within the realm – the sorts of bonds that underlie the profoundly English institutions of the common law and parliament – reassert themselves, and the mechanism of consent supplants the mechanism of coercion, as Arnold might put it. It is in part because Richmond is so utterly forgettable an individual that we recognize that he deserves the throne. His desert derives from his intersubjective functionality alone, his recognition that kingship is a job that carries with it both rights and responsibilities, not merely a rarefied nature determined by an individual’s blood nor a constructed status available to the most forceful contender for the crown. What the play champions above all, I suggest, is a call for recognition of the social responsibilities held by those in power.

How is it, then, that we can distinguish between the usurper Richard and the usurper Richmond, recognizing the former as a tyrant and the latter as a king? Bodin offers an extensive catalogue of differences between kings and tyrants (i.e., tyrants of exercise), one that runs to some twenty-five items in length, but most of them might be encapsulated effectively by the third item on his list: “[the king] referreth all his actions to the good of the Commonweale, and safetie of his subjects; whereas the other [the tyrant] respecteth nothing
more than his owne particular profit, reuenge, or pleasure” (1: 212). In short, kings rule conscientiously and selflessly, whereas tyrants rule unconscientiously and selfishly. Looking at this contrast, however, we might sense a tension, since it seems that selfishness and conscientiousness are pitted against each other. What does this say about the relationships of our selves and our consciences? In the modern era, we typically imagine the conscience as an inner voice, or as the OED puts it, “Inward knowledge, consciousness; inmost thought, mind” (n.1), and thus it is tempting to associate – if not to equate – the conscience with pure subjectivity. The headnote to the OED entry on “conscience,” however, provides a much more complicated story. The word derives from the Latin conscire, “to know together,” and when the word first found its footing in English, it was “a noun of condition or function, like science, prescience, intelligence, prudence, etc., and as such originally had no plural: a man or a people had more or less conscience.” Crucially, what early modern individuals did not have were discrete individual private subjective consciences. Instead, when confronting a moral concern, they would draw upon their shared conscience, a conscience with one another (conscire alii). It was only by means of analogy that the idea of a private conscience eventually came into being, in the form of the phrase conscire sibi, “to know together with oneself.” Our current subjective and private sense of conscience, then, derives from an earlier intersubjective and public sense of the word, one that perhaps still survives whenever we speak of someone following “the dictates of conscience.” In this earlier conception of conscience, we typically imagine our own individual actions from other points of view, extrapolating outward to consider other subject positions and then internalizing this extrapolation of intersubjectivity. Thomas Thomas’s 1587 definition of the Latin conscientia captures the reflexive, internalized exteriority of the concept well: “a testimonie or witnesse of ones owne mindes knowledge” (sig. O1). This, I suggest, is precisely why selfishness and
conscientiousness are at odds with each other on a primitive level: the idea of conscience originally imagined an external communal “we” reflecting on an internal subjective “I.”

Condren offers an excellent discussion of how the conscience was originally viewed functionally by Aquinas and others, as an operation of the mind, “both a form of knowing and an application of principles to conduct,” but of how, over time, this intersubjective function of the soul came to be taken as “a synecdoche for the soul” itself (130-31). We might see a telling progression between two of the seventeenth-century texts he quotes: Henry Mason’s *The Tribunall of the Conscience* (1624) follows Thomas closely in envisioning the conscience as “a kinde of judiciary proceeding, wherein a mans conscience doth giue sentence vpon himselfe” (sig. A3v), almost certainly drawing upon the earlier conception of conscience as an internalization of an intersubjective extrapolation; whereas Jeremy Taylor’s treatise *Ductor Dubitantium* (1660) employs the later, derivative, and purely subjective sense, opening with the declaration, “Conscience is the minde of a Man governed by a Rule, and measured by the proportions of good and evil, in order to practice; viz. to conduct all our relations, and all our entercourse between God, our Neighbours, and our Selves: that is, in all moral actions” (sig. B1). Hencage Finch, writing in 1674, clarifies the earlier confusion by suggesting that there are two kinds of conscience under consideration, *conscientia politica et civilis* and *conscientia naturalis et interna* (Condren 133). This idea of a double consciousness along these lines, however, certainly dates back at least as far as James I’s writings, since the king’s body natural and his body politic possessed separate consciences that would sometimes conflict with each other, as Kevin Sharpe observes (158). Sharpe’s discussion of James’s natural and politic consciences is fascinating, but I suspect it need not be restricted to early modern monarchs. Although the king alone had two bodies, every subject of the realm might have been imagined as possessing two consciences: an older,
intersubjective conception of conscience that is preserved unmistakably in the word’s etymology and that is the predominant sense of the word in the Bible; and a newer, subjective conception of conscience that gained ascendancy in Shakespeare’s time because it fit much better with a Protestant conception of the individual in a direct, unmediated relationship with God. The idea of communal intersubjectivity, I suggest, was beginning to falter in Elizabeth’s reign as the powerful binary of subject and object masticated it, a process that paved the way for its eventual digestion into Cartesian dualism a few years later.

Pocock draws attention to Michael Walzer’s analysis of the new Calvinist individual as “the type of the first revolutionary, the first radically alienated man in modern Europe, filled with a sense of loneliness—a loneliness before God” (336), and I suggest that we can read this loneliness in terms of the shift of conscience away from communally-mediated values and toward the individual’s immediate relationship with God.

The thirty-odd references to the conscience in the Bible (both conscientia in the Latin vulgate and conscience in the Geneva translation) incline on the whole toward the intersubjective rather than the subjective sense of the word. Most of these instances are ambiguous: when someone undertakes some action “for conscience’s sake,” for example, there really is no reason to imagine the concept in either sense. Of the more revealing cases, I find only one reference that seems to suggest the subjective sense of the word:

For we must all appeare before the iudgemêt seat of Christ, that euerie man may receiue the things which are done in his bodie, according to that he hathe done, whether it be good or euill. Knowing therefore that terror of the Lord, we persuade men, & we are made manifest vnto God, & I trust also that we are made manifest in your consciences. (2 Cor. 5.10-11)

The Vulgate passage also pluralizes “consciences” here (in conscientiis vestris), and this suggests to me that Paul is envisioning each member of his audience as possessing a separate

---

conscience. On the whole, though, this usage is anomalous: in every other comparable case, we find a plural possessive pronoun linked to a singular conscience, thus yielding “our conscience” or “their conscience” rather than “our consciences” or “their consciences.” Earlier in 2 Corinthians, for example, Paul writes, “For our reioycing is this, the testimonie of our conscience, that in simplicitie and godly purenesse, and not in fleshly wisedome, but by the grace of God wee haue had our conversacion in the worlde” (1.12). The parallel drawn here between conscience and conversation, furthermore, strongly suggests to me that Paul is thinking of conscience intersubjectively rather than subjectively. Similarly, when Paul offers the pragmatist argument about the fate of the Gentile souls who have had no access to the Law, we find what seems to me to be unequivocally an intersubjective conscience:

For when the Gentiles which haue not the Lawe, doe by nature, the things conteined in the Lawe, they hauing not the Lawe, are a Lawe vnto themselues, Which shew the effect of the Lawe written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witnes, and their thoughts accusing one another, or excusing. (Rom 2.14-15)

Here quite clearly we see “their conscience” presented alongside “the Lawe” in the singular in contrast to “their hearts” and “their thoughts” in the plural: our hearts and thoughts may well be individual, but our conscience is communal like the law.

Maus’s impressive argument in Inwardness and Theater in the English Renaissance begins by asking an epic question concerning the early modern fascination with issues of subjectivity and objectivity:

[. . .] why, although the distinction between interior and exterior may seem tediously commonsensical, should it so rarely seem to “go without saying” in sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century England? Why must that distinction be endlessly reiterated in prefaces, satires, sermons, advice literature, medical treatises, coney-catching pamphlets, doctrinal debates, anti-theatrical tracts, speeches from the gallows, published reports of foreign and domestic turmoil, essays on the passions and the soul? What engenders this curious state of affairs, in which everyone seems to concur with everyone else, but still feels obliged to announce those unexceptional convictions with the emphasis usually reserved for novel or tendentious claims? (14)
Her book-length answer to this question explores in riveting detail “the inwardness topos” in the early modern period, tracing the era’s negotiation of the self through the binary opposition of interiority and exteriority. My own approach, in turn, proposes a different answer to Maus’s question: although the distinction between interiority and exteriority seems commonsensical to those of us living in the shadow of the Enlightenment, in the days before the binaries of mind and body, subject and object, and private and public became so deeply entrenched, the distinction between interior and exterior may well have seemed to have been much less of a fait accompli. Furthermore, one early modern concept where the ambiguity between inner and outer registers with particular force, I suggest, is in the concept of the conscience. As I have suggested, the original communal sense of the word occupied a conceptual territory of pragmatic and cultural intersubjectivity, distinct from both real/divine objectivity and constructed/human subjectivity. However, during Elizabeth’s reign this concept of conscience was on the wane as it was reshaped by the Protestant redefinition of the individual’s relationship to God as direct and wholly unmediated by worldly communities and practices. Before long, intersubjective conscience would be digested completely by the insurgent binary oppositions of subject and object, mind and body, and ideal and material that came to dominate Enlightenment (and, regrettably, post-Enlightenment) thinking.

As we turn to explore the role played by conscience in Richard III, it seems appropriate to begin with a question that runs parallel to the one we asked earlier about tyranny: precisely which sort of conscience is at stake here, the intersubjective conscience or the subjective conscience? To begin with, I think it interesting to note that of the 133 occurrences of the word conscience in Shakespeare’s works, more than half are found in the history plays, a fact that at least circumstantially suggests that his conception of conscience
was geared more toward the political than the personal.\textsuperscript{36} In some cases, Shakespeare quite clearly uses the word with a predominantly intersubjective connotation, while in others he clearly envisions the conscience in its purely subjective and reformed context. Henry V, for example, uses the word with both connotations within the space of a single scene. First, speaking to his brothers before the battle of Agincourt, he metaphorically refers to the assembled French troops as “our outward consciences” (4.1.8), apparently envisioning conscience as the product of a plurality of voices. Shortly afterwards, however, in his disguised conversation with his soldiers, he prefaces his own personal opinion with the phrase, “By my troth, I will speak my conscience of the King” (4.1.113-14), and it would seem that here he is using the word to connote something wholly private and subjective. On the one hand, we find Troilus imagining a plural cacophonous conscience that “mouldeth goblins swift as frenzy’s thoughts” (\textit{Tro}. 5.11.29), while on the other we find Cranmer setting “private conscience” pointedly in opposition to public place (\textit{H8} 5.2.74). Perhaps even most notably, we find Lancelot Gobbo picturing conscience in both senses at once, since in his description of his internal debate about whether or not to abandon his master, he suggests that his conscience is both a voice within this debate and also the forum of the debate itself: “and in my conscience, my conscience is but a kind of hard conscience to offer to counsel me to stay with the Jew” (\textit{MV} 2.2.22-23). Such a versatile conscience is indeed a “soft cheveril conscience” (\textit{H8} 2.3.32) if it can be stretched to contain itself, as one voice among many and as many voices at once. An equally baffling logic of conscience might be found in the paradox that opens sonnet 151: “Love is too young to know what conscience is, / Yet who knows not conscience is born of love?”

\textsuperscript{36} There are sixty-nine instances of “conscience” (and its variants) in the histories, which nearly quadruple the eighteen instances found in the tragedies. The word turns up most often in \textit{Henry VIII} (24), \textit{Henry V} (14), \textit{Richard III} (13), \textit{Merchant of Venice} (10, all in a single speech by Lancelot), \textit{Cymbeline} (9), and \textit{Hamlet} (8).
Richard III, I propose, is a play that is concerned with knowledge just as much as it is concerned with power. In fact, it might be argued that power in the play is most clearly expressed by controlling knowledge, by manipulating who has access to information at any given time. Richard is particularly adept at orchestrating ignorance and misinformation, a point that the play reinforces for us when he insists on holding “divided councils” in 3.4, with one group meeting at the Tower and the other at Crosby Place – a choice that Stanley quite rightly recognizes as a diversionary tactic (3.2.9-11). Hastings, on the other hand, makes the mistake of revealing his true feelings to Catesby and Stanley in 3.2, an episode that shows how necessary it is in Yorkist England to keep one’s cards close to one’s chest. We might also think of the way in which Richard establishes power by controlling knowledge through his spectacularly dramatic revelation of the execution of Clarence in 2.1:

RICHARD GLOUCESTER
Why, madam, have I offered love for this,
To be so flouted in this royal presence?
Who knows not that the gentle Duke is dead?

They all start
You do him injury to scorn his corpse.

RIVERS
Who knows not he is dead? Who knows he is?

QUEEN
All-seeing heaven, what a world is this! (2.1.78-83)

Most of the time, “common knowledge” is a term that suggests reliability, since intersubjective consensus typically carries some weight. However, in Richard’s England, common knowledge is common indeed, as Hamlet might derisively put it, and not at all to be trusted. Richard quite clearly never shares his knowledge with anyone. He may well claim to the Mayor of London that he once made Hastings “[his] book wherein [his] soul recorded / The history of all her secret thoughts” (3.5.26-27), but of course this book is every bit as much a fraudulent prop in his hands as the prayer-book that he employs two
96

scenes later. Buckingham perhaps comes closest to attaining a shared experience with Richard as the two of them go about counterfeiting the deep tragedian together (3.5.5), but as they make themselves into the shadows of shadows of shadows, fabricating a performance of fraudulence, he too finds that his bond with Richard is entirely insubstantial, mere words that need not be grounded in any correspondent thought and that are in no way to be trusted. Richard is the enemy of English common knowledge, every bit as much as he is the enemy of the English common law and the English common weal.

However, at the same time we also are presented with instances where communities of shared knowledge (in a sense, consciences) resist Richard’s dominance. Some of these cases of communal resistance are markedly unsuccessful, such as Elizabeth’s futile attempt to take sanctuary with her family (2.4.65-72, 3.1.27-60). Other attempts at forging new communities, however, fare much better, and here we might think in particular of the chorus of cursing queens that takes form in act four. At first, however, community among the women is decidedly lacking, a point that is emphasized for us in 2.2, as Elizabeth, the Duchess of York, and Clarence’s son and daughter compete over whose grief at the loss of Clarence is greatest, showing division even in their suffering. Anne is welcomed into their fold briefly in 4.1, but even here there seems to be competition among the three women about who has the most right to see the princes in the tower (4.1.21-25); and then of course Anne is almost instantly pulled away to be crowned as Richard’s queen, and never heard from again. Margaret, on the other hand, spends the majority of the play as an outcast, so removed from the social sphere that she might even be mistaken for a ghost, and it is thus a powerful moment in 4.4 when Elizabeth and the Duchess of York finally capitulate and welcome her into their community. This scene begins with the same sort of competitive rhetorical one-upwomanship that characterizes all of the earlier scenes with the women, and
matters grow more heated still as they ritualistically enumerate their losses of Edwards and Harrys and Richards. But in the midst of all of this highly stylized venom, after Margaret imagines herself passing the burdens of her grief onto the usurping queens (perhaps recalling the devious way in which Hercules passed the weight of the heavens back on to Atlas in the Garden of Hesperides), Elizabeth changes course and asks Margaret for instruction on how to curse her enemies (4.4.116-17). The three women then surprisingly come together for a brief but powerful moment of community, united by their shared sense of loss and their common desire for revenge, and a bond is formed. They do not need windows in their chests to recognize their mutual loss. When Richard arrives a few lines later, the Queen and Duchess are finally prepared, and they set out to smother him with words (4.4.133-35). For the first time in the play, Richard fails to gain the upper hand in a confrontation, as Elizabeth argues and equivocates circles around the Lord Protector.

The other community (if we may call it one) that successfully rises up against tyranny are the ghosts who appear to Richard and Richmond in their peculiar shared dream on the eve of Bosworth. There are of course a great many dreams mentioned in the play, among them Edward’s superstitious (yet prophetic) dream that prompts him to imprison his brother because his name begins with “G” (1.1.53-59), Clarence’s magnificent underwater fantasia and vision of the afterlife (1.4.9-63), Stanley’s prophetic dream of the boar razing his helm (3.2.8), and the tormenting visions of a hell of ugly devils that Margaret wishes upon Richard’s dreams (1.3.223-24), a curse which Anne later confirms succeeded (4.1.82-84). These earlier dreams might each be taken to be the expression of a private conscience, a veiled acknowledgement of personal guilt for deeds committed in the past or of insight into

---

37 Richard’s dreams of being tormented by devils are mentioned by Hall as well (sig. JJ4), but I wonder if Shakespeare might not also be thinking of a passage in Buchanan at this point: “Not only does [the tyrant] suffer from the torments of conscience while he is awake, but he is aroused out of his sleep by terrifying visions of both the living and the dead, and is harassed by the faces of the furies” (97).
dangers lurking in the time to come. This emphasis upon the private conscience, it seems to me, is especially evident in Clarence’s dream of suffocation: even though his soul struggles valiantly to escape his body in order to “find the empty, vast and wand’ring air,” “the envious flood” prevents its escape, so that it is forced to remain “smothered [. . .] within [his] panting bulk” (1.4.36-41). Meeting the souls of Warwick and Edward in the dark monarchy of hell nearly gives him an intersubjective perspective on himself, but only teasingly, since before he can interact with his victims, “a legion of foul fiends” descends upon him howling terrible cries in his ears, and Clarence is smothered back into private interiority once again (1.4.48-63). It is perhaps for the same reason that at the outset of the dream, when he attempts to look into the eye sockets of the dead men’s skulls, he finds “in scorn of eyes [. . .] reflecting gems” (1.4.31), gems that once again prevent him from making any sort of intersubjective connection and return him to his solitary confinement, an unwilling Narcissus. This sense of anxious isolation not only pervades Clarence’s prison cell, but extends beyond to be felt through the Yorkist court at large, for they all inhabit a world in which “no man shall have private conference, / Of what degree soever, with [his] brother” (1.1.86-87), a world of parallel but discrete subjectivities.

With the shared dream in the final act, however, we are confronted with something entirely different, since this dream quite clearly transcends this conception of private subjectivity. Because of this shift, Greenblatt argues that these ghosts are not merely “psychic projections” or emblems of “wounded conscience,” but instead actual “materializations” that need to be accepted as “an ineradicable, embodied, objective power” (Hamlet 176-80). However, to my mind Greenblatt’s position is undermined by his assumption that conscience can be read only as something private, disembodied, and subjective. For similar reasons, I am not convinced by Maus’s insistence in her discussion of
Richard III that dreams demand to be viewed as necessarily private phenomena, as when she asks, “For what could be more personal, less available to others than a dream, in traditional philosophical skepticism the very criterion of an unshareable inwardness?” (53). If, however, we instead choose to conceive of conscience in its older intersubjective sense, keeping in check our post-Lutheran post-Cartesian insistence on the discrete subjectivity of individual minds, it seems much less perplexing that Richard and Richmond, sharing the same cultural context and focused on the same pressing concerns, past, present, and future, should have their consciences and dreams overlap in this way. This is simply what it means to have a conscience in this sense: to know the same thing together with another.

Because Richard isolates himself from intersubjective community and insists upon the privacy of his own subjectivity, he commits himself to inhabiting a decidedly binary context, one in which his interior self is wholly distinct from the exterior world he bustles in, and one in which his private thoughts display no necessary connection to his public words. In the short term, he manages to turn his binary redefinition of his experience to his advantage. So long as he can force those around him to subscribe to the same binaries of subject/object, self/world, and thought/word, they will inevitably find themselves fighting a losing battle, since Richard’s private thoughts are entirely unknowable and his public words utterly unreliable. Resistance must be sought elsewhere. One of the main effects accomplished by the ghosts in the shared dream is that they draw attention to a third set of categories that are digested by Richard’s binaries. These ghosts, after all, seem to be neither quite subjective nor quite objective, but rather intersubjective, thus highlighting a blind spot created by our subscription to the opposition of subject and object. Similarly, their intention is to remind Richard and Richmond – and by extension, all of us – that we are not each discrete islands of subjected selves kept isolated from one another in the world at large (like
the infamous brains in vats that philosophers of mind love to discuss), but are instead interconnected with one another through our social functions within communities of many sorts. As well, and perhaps most important of all, the ghosts draw attention to Richard's deeds, a category that gets overlooked when we focus too narrowly on analyzing thoughts and words in relation to each other: Richard's thoughts may be unknowable and his words unreliable, but his deeds are unmistakable. The overall thrust of the ghosts is pragmatic, intersubjective, and communal, and they thus give the lie to a number of powerful Tudor and Protestant binaries.

Furthermore, the three-way interplay among thoughts, deeds, and words in the play is registered in an image pattern of body parts, one in which hearts, hands, and tongues are regularly juxtaposed against one another. In the first seduction scene, for example, Anne introduces the pattern as she laments over the king’s corpse: “O cursèd be the hand that made these holes, / [. . .] / Cursèd the heart that had the heart to do it” (1.2.14-16). When Richard begins his courtship, he redirects attention away from the language of hearts and hands (which is to say, away from thoughts and deeds) and towards hearts and tongues (which is to say, towards thoughts and words): “My tongue could never learn sweet smoothing word; / [. . .] / My proud heart sues and prompts my tongue to speak” (1.2.154-56). Anne, of course, eventually replies with the wish, “I would I knew thy heart,” prompting Richard’s response that his heart is “figured in [his] tongue” (1.2.181). Like all masterful conjurors, he deflects attention from his hands at all times. Following his success, Richard continues to focus on hearts and tongues in his self-congratulatory soliloquy, marvelling that he could “take her in her heart’s extremest hate, / With curses in her mouth”

38 On the early modern iconography of the heart, see Scott Manning Stevens’s “Sacred Heart and Secular Brain” and Robert A. Erickson’s The Language of the Heart, 1600-1750. I am especially interested in Stevens’s rich discussion of the multivalent tension between the symbolism of the heart and of the brain in the early modern period.
(1.2.219-20). Hands re-enter the dramatic equation in the following scene, when the Executioners reassure Gloucester, “We go to use our hands, and not our tongues” (1.3.350). However, when they unadvisedly fall into conversation with Clarence about their plan to murder him, he observes, “You scarcely have the hearts to tell me so, / And therefore cannot have the hearts to do it” (1.4.163-64), complicating the business of hands with the conscience of hearts and the verdicts of tongues. This interplay among heart and hand and tongue, moreover, continues unabated through the remainder of the play: “tongues” are mentioned sixteen times in the play, “hands” forty-two times, and “hearts” fifty-three times. The impact of these references, overwhelmingly, is that the mysteries of our hearts are much more reliably revealed through the work of our hands than through the pronouncements of our tongues.

It is tempting, of course, to connect the play’s repeated emphasis on the importance of deeds to an inclination toward Catholicism, perhaps all the more so because of the exciting prominence the play gives to an invading army of purgatorial ghosts in its closing act. Moreover, Shakespeare seems to go out of his way to draw attention to the Catholic historical context of Richard’s reign: we can probably assume that the Bishops that Richard employs as props in 3.7 were mitred in performance and thus quite recognizably Papist; Richard’s regular invocation of saints (especially Saint Paul) contributes to this general sense of Catholicism as well; and Shakespeare’s ahistorical decision to make Buckingham’s day of execution All Souls’ Day, the day of the commemoration of the faithful departed, seems especially notable in this respect (5.1.12, 18). When Anne pauses to wonder if it is “lawful” for her to invoke her father-in-law’s ghost (1.2.8), she is clearly getting beyond herself chronologically: it was of course perfectly lawful to invoke a ghost in 1483, and it was just

39 I should acknowledge that I am including in these counts the words “handsome,” “handled,” “handiwork,” “handkerchief,” “underhand,” and “heartily” as well.
as obviously illegal in 1593. Furthermore, as Jean-Christophe Mayer observes, Margaret seems like a soul in purgatory, doomed for a time to inhabit a shadowy world of tormented intermediacy; and Clarence’s dream conveys a similar sense of purgatorial in-betweenness (47). However, although I find the idea that the play exhibits Catholic sensibilities to be compelling, I think it would be irresponsible to go too far with this line of argument, much in the same way that I find the play’s sympathies toward contractual theory and other pragmatic modes of political resistance to be notable, but hardly definitive of a single ideological stance for the play. It seems more reasonable to me, however, to suggest that the play dramatizes a nostalgia for intersubjective community, one that arose psychologically in response to the Protestant emphasis on the individual’s direct relationship to God in isolation from a community, and one that arose politically in response to the absolutist orthodoxy of the Homily Against Disobedience which invalidated communal political sensibilities in the name of the divine right of kings.

The question remains: how are we to read the remarkable fact that on the night before battle both Richard and Richmond dream that they are visited by the same succession of ghosts? Two answers would seem to present themselves: first, it could be that the ghosts are in fact real and thus that these experiences are not dreams but parallel spectral visitations; alternatively, it could be that these are indeed dreams, only dreams that are not nearly so private and subjective as we now typically envision dreams to be. Support for the first option might be found in the Queen’s Men play The True Tragedie of Richard the Third, a play that Shakespeare certainly knew well (since he parodies a line from it in Hamlet) and on the whole an under-appreciated source for Richard III. In the final act of this play, Richard complains to Lovell about his disquieted state of mind as they prepare for the Battle of Bosworth Field:
The hell of life that hangs vpon the Crowne,
The daily cares, the nightly dreames,
The wretched crews, the treason of the foe,
And horror of my bloodie practise past,
Strikes such a terror to my wounded conscience,
That sleepe I, wake I, or whatsoeuer I do,
Meethinkes their ghoasts comes gaping for reuenge,
Whom I haue slaine in reaching for a Crowne.
Clarence complains, and crieth for reuenge.
My Nephues bloods, Reuenge, reuenge, doth crie.
The headlesse Peeres comes preasing for reuenge,
And euery one cries, let the tyrant die. (sig. H1v)

It is not entirely clear if the Queen’s Men’s Richard is haunted by real or imagined ghosts, but the fact that they torment him both day and night, both sleeping and waking, gives some credibility to the idea that they are something more than mere dreams. The alternative option, on the other hand, that the ghosts are not real and Richard and Richmond dream the entire episode in parallel with each other, garners support from Shakespeare’s more widely-acknowledged source, the account of Hall’s chronicle, where ghosts are not mentioned at all and it is instead a vivid nightmare that troubles Richard:

The fame went that he had thesame night a dreadfull & a terrible dreame, for yt semed to hym beynge a slepe th’he sawe diuerse ymages lyke terrible develles whiche pulled and haled hym, not sufferynge hym to take any quyet or rest. The whiche straunge vision not so sodeinly strake his heart with a sodeyne feare, but it stuffed his hed and troubled his mynde with many dreadfull and busy Imaginacions. (sig. JJ4)

Shakespeare’s own version seems to combine elements of both of these accounts, making it ambiguous whether he is following the True Tragedie in tormenting Richard with the ghosts of those he has murdered or else following the chronicle history and tormenting Richard with noisome dreams.

However, I am even more intrigued by a comment that Hall – or more properly, Polydore Vergil, who was Hall's source for both the anecdote and the comment – appends to the tale: “I thynke this was no dreame, but a punccion and pricke of hys synfull
conscyence” (fol. liii”). This provides us with a third option still: Richard was attacked neither by angry ghosts nor by a dream of terrible devils, but by conscience. What, then, is this conscience, if it is neither something real and objective (like an angry ghost) nor something apparent and subjective (like a dream of devils)? I suspect that what we face here is another example of the earlier conscience, a reflexive internalization of intersubjective moral sensibility, something that warrants Polydore’s intrusion into the text with a comment that distinguishes conscience from a purely subjective dream. I think it most likely that when Shakespeare chose to renovate his source material further and extend Richard’s experience to Richmond as well, that he was not thinking of the ghosts as being either objectively real or subjectively apparent, but instead following this hint in Hall to envision them as intersubjectively functional instead. La Boétie, in the passage I quote in the opening section of this chapter, laments the fact that under the rule of a tyrant, individual subjects “are left isolated in their dreams,” and he longs for the opposite to be true. With the shared dream in Richard III, I suggest that Shakespeare is fulfilling precisely this sort of longing for intersubjectivity that was felt by reformed consciences who stood lonely before God.

When Richard awakes from his attack of conscience, he is unable to make sense of what has happened because of the binary limitations of his understanding. As he attempts to digest a third before our very eyes, collapsing new-found intersubjective awareness into the familiar two-step of subject and object, the incoherence registers once again in his struggles with pronouns:

O coward conscience, how dost thou afflict me?
[. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .]
Richard loves Richard; that is, I am I.
Is there a murderer here? No. Yes, I am.
Then fly! What, from myself? Great reason. Why?
Lest I revenge Myself upon myself? (5.4.158-65)
This is perhaps a fitting fate for someone who defined himself with the phrase, “I am myself alone.” Unable to recognize his conscience as anything other than a subject or object, Richard tries to have it both ways at once: he begins by objectifying his conscience, calling it a “coward,” but then he immediately turns the tables and acknowledges instead that it is his conscience who is afflicting him, and not the other way around. There is clearly a functional reciprocity at work here, registered in the desperately transferred epithet: Richard’s relationship with his conscience demands something like a verb in the middle voice rather than the active or the passive, and yet active and passive are the only voices available to him. Forced to contend with his intersubjective conscience at last, he is compelled to fragment himself into subject and object at once, setting the word against the word and himself against himself. 40

When Richard finally attends to his conscience, he hears in it “a thousand several tongues, / And every tongue brings in a several tale, / And every tale condemns [him] for a villain” (5.5.147-49). What seems to me to be most notable in this image is the finesse with which Shakespeare manages to make the voices that compose Richard’s conscience both distinct (“several”) and unanimous at the same time. We have, of course, witnessed this ourselves in the progression of ghosts, from the Prince of Wales through to Buckingham, each of them offering his or her own individual curse to Richard and blessing to Richmond, with each of these curses and blessings at the same time also ritualistically identical to all the rest. My suggestion, then, is that we need not imagine these phantoms to be either objectively real ghosts or subjectively imagined dream figures, as if these were the only two

40 The Norton/Oxford text adopts the Q1 reading of “I am I,” which might be read either as a desperate, almost Cartesian, assertion of basic selfhood, or else perhaps as a deliciously blasphemous echo of the Lord’s self-identification in Exodus, “I am that I am” (3.14). In Q2 and F, however, the line is given as “I and I,” a variant that emphasizes instead Richard’s fragmentation of himself into multiple first-person singular pronouns. Perhaps we would do well to remember Martin Buber in this context, and suggest that Richard understands only I-It relationships, and cannot grasp the concept of I-Thou. Buber, of course, offers spectacular insights into intersubjectivity in general.
options available to us. Instead, I propose that these figures function intersubjectively as
Richard and Richmond’s conscience: not objective goads to their individual consciences, nor
parallel subjective projections emanating from their individual consciences, but quite literally
their shared conscience itself. Richmond’s attention to his conscience, in this reading, is not
simply analogous to a political act: it is a political act all unto itself, since it is through
conscire, knowing together, that Richmond attends to the common weal, and in so doing,
deserves the crown. Moreover, what Shakespeare dramatizes here is a nostalgia for
intersubjectivity, which is to say, the sort of shared experience that we find informing the
variant fantasies of the heart of glass. Here, however, the wish for intersubjectivity can be
seen to function in two parallel registers: from a psychological perspective, as a longing for a
renewed sense of pragmatic social interconnection, a community that in reformed thought
had been swallowed up by the binary opposition of the individual and the divine; and from a
political perspective, as a desire that the monarch would be answerable to the interests of the
people as expressed in the common law and through parliament, showing a responsibility
that was not required by the official Tudor policy of monarchical absolutism.
Chapter 3

Reassessing Value in *Troilus and Cressida* and Early Modern Economics

Money itself isn’t lost or made: it’s simply transferred from one perception to another.
– Weiser and Stone, *Wall Street*

There seems to be widespread consensus that *Troilus and Cressida* is the most problematic of the problem plays, a work so vexing that many Shakespeareans have resolved that the play is quite simply more trouble than it is worth. This general scepticism about the value of *Troilus*, however, seems to me to be oddly appropriate for a play that is itself so deeply saturated with anxieties about evaluation, a play that painstakingly examines the question of what it is that makes pains worth taking. In this chapter I analyze the play’s interrogation of the problem of value, admittedly one of the most extensively analyzed aspects of the play in the criticism to date, but a subject that thus far has invariably been broached using only binary models. My contention here is that a hemiolic remodelling of our critical strategy enables us to discern alternative articulations of value in the play that are digested within the standard binary accounts. Furthermore, I demonstrate that just such a hemiolic analysis of value is necessary to make sense of the economic practices of the sixteenth century, especially when we consider writings about the great debasement of the English coinage by Henry VIII that circulated mid-century and pamphlets addressing currency reform and “merchandizing exchange” that circulated at the turn of the seventeenth century just as *Troilus* was taking shape. My main contention in this chapter is that early modern economic thought was marked by competing binary and ternary accounts of value, and that this hemiolic conflict is clearly registered in the unruly discussions of value that we find preserved in *Troilus and Cressida*. 

107
There seems to have been little interest in Troilus of any sort whatsoever until early in the twentieth century, and even then, the critics who did acknowledge the play almost invariably approached it as a curiosity in the canon, an oddball, a sport. Even the play’s most enthusiastic supporters show the tendency of praising it only with backhanded compliments. E. M. W. Tillyard, for example, offers the amusing (or alarming?) suggestion that Shakespeare’s problem plays might best be considered on the analogy of problem children. “There are at least two kinds of problem child,” Tillyard proposes, “first the genuinely abnormal child, whom no efforts will ever bring back to normality; and second the child who is interesting and complex rather than abnormal: apt indeed to be a problem for parents and teachers but destined to fulfilment in the larger scope of adult life.” He suggests that Measure for Measure and All’s Well That Ends Well fall into the former category of unsalvageable weirdness, but maintains that Troilus is better considered alongside Hamlet as “interesting and complex” rather than fundamentally defective.1 Similarly, Linda Charnes makes reference to this tradition of Shakespeareans handling the play at arm’s length with the delightful comment that, “if [critics] praise the play at all, they attempt, unconvincingly, to praise a humpback for his handsome figure” (“‘So Unsecret’” 414). However, instead of going on to deny that the play is in fact monstrous or in any way deformed, she herself resolves “to praise the humpback for his hump” (414), celebrating its marginality instead of questioning its marginalization.

The most memorable comment in this vein, however, and one that I think condenses a great deal of the play’s reception history into a single inspired image, comes from Graham Bradshaw, who refers to Troilus at one point as “the afterbirth” of Hamlet (6):

---

1 Shakespeare’s Problem Plays 2. Tillyard surely intends the close association with Hamlet to be taken as a strong compliment, but his comparison of the play to an awkward adolescent is, I would suggest, still a far cry from flattering. As a former “interesting and complex” young man myself, I can personally attest to the sorry truth that, in practice, this sort of phrase usually translates into “not dating very much.”
not an unrecognized twin of the publicly-acknowledged masterpiece, nor its scheming bastard half-brother, nor even its philandering layabout spendthrift drunkard cousin, but instead the placenta that nourished the foetal Hamlet to term while it gestated inside Shakespeare’s skull. We might even pause for a moment here to imagine Shakespeare delivering the placenta in solitude off in the corner of the tiring house while Hamlet first held the stage at the Globe, birthing the shadowy prodigal anticlimax in private while all public eyes were fixed adoringly on the young prince. Bradshaw’s image powerfully captures the idea – implicit in much of the play’s criticism – that Troilus is not merely different in degree but somehow different in kind from the rest of the canon. Moreover, by situating the play in this relationship to Hamlet in particular, Bradshaw also manages to invoke a second common thread in the criticism, the prevalent idea that Troilus is perhaps more successful as a work of philosophy than drama, as if the play itself were not Shakespeare’s proper child but the left-over raw material that went into the making of a child, not so much a drama as the stuff that dramas are made on. However smitten I am with Bradshaw’s remarkable image, I would like to take a different tack in this discussion of the play and begin by suggesting that we have no real cause to imagine Troilus to be particularly “unruly,” “monstrous,” “untheatrical,” or even especially “problematic” in the context of the Shakespeare canon at large. Ever since Frederick Boas coined the term in 1896, critics have nearly always opted to classify Troilus as a “problem” play, and accordingly we have tended

2 This trend might be dated back to G. Wilson Knight’s highly influential early reading, which argues that the play is set in a “metaphysical universe” (48) and that its speeches are “primarily analytic rather than dramatic” (51). We might see something similar in A. P. Rossiter’s suggestion that the play is best classified generically not as a tragedy, a comedy, or even a satire, but as “an inquisition” (147), or R. J. Kaufmann’s claims that the play is “about competing modes of knowing” (140) and that its “language and manner of thinking is forensic” (146). Jane Adamson offers a useful corrective to these readings, arguing persuasively that all of the philosophical verbiage that the Greeks and Trojans chew upon in Troilus need not be seen to make the play as a whole any less dramatic or any more philosophical than any other play of the period. Moreover, she makes the compelling observation that the play “is a nightmare for the tidy-minded; and this means that, despite appearances, it is no play for intellectuals” (6).
to value it precisely for the ways in which it thwarts our expectations and foils our understanding, working on the assumption that this resistance to neat analysis is a feature of the play itself rather than a failure of the analytic models that we bring to bear upon it. However, as I argue below, such an account relies on a conception of value that the play itself demands we call into question.

Nearly every critical discussion of Troilus offered to date has paid some attention, and very often considerable attention, to the play’s treatment of the problem of value. When critics first began to consider the play seriously in the early twentieth century, they found a foothold for their readings by focusing on the discussions of value that infuse the text. This seems to me to be an extremely sensible idea: after all, the text spends an inordinate amount of time directing our attention toward disputes about the value of the war, the value of Helen, the value of Achilles, the value of Cressida, the value of Hector, and the value of a dozen further subjects besides. Thematic readings of value undoubtedly help to bring coherence to a play that I must admit feels even more myriad-minded than is usual for Shakespeare. Wilson Knight blazed the trail for this line of inquiry in a highly eccentric reading that, I maintain, continues to shape criticism of Troilus to this day to a truly astonishing extent. Knight argues that the play stages an elaborate trial between two competing systems of value: he aligns the Trojan camp with “intuition,” a term that he associates at various points in his argument with faith, individualism, tradition, romance, the Medieval, human beauty, and human worth; and in contrast he aligns the Greek camp with “intellect,” a term that he associates just as variously with cynicism, the social hierarchy, innovation, literary satire, the Renaissance, and – most surprisingly of all – “the bestial and stupid elements” of humanity (47). The fact that each of these distended categories seems to
be generally incoherent does not dissuade Knight from insisting that the play nevertheless presents us with a “sharp dualism” of ideas (62); nor does he seem to be much disturbed by the fact that even a cursory consideration of the actual Greek and Trojan characters in the play shows them to be a deeply heterogeneous lot who, in most cases, quite clearly fail to conform to the broad ethnic types that he constructs for them. In fact, at many points it seems almost as if Knight were discussing Antony and Cleopatra rather than Troilus and Cressida, so intent is he on discovering a clean-cut contrast of two competing world-pictures facing off against each other across the Dardan plain.

Knight’s influence on criticism over the next few decades was pervasive, however, with readers as perceptive as Terence Hawkes choosing to construct their own analyses of the play upon Knight’s questionable foundations. Even though most subsequent thematic readings abandon the idea that the play can be neatly divided into competing “Greek” and “Trojan” ideologies, they nevertheless persist in advancing the idea that the play stages a contest between two competing systems of value. Una Ellis-Fermor, for example, argues that the play is primarily focused upon “the question of whether value is absolute or relative; inherent in the object or superimposed upon it; objective or subjective to the valuer” (64), introducing three closely-related sets of binary distinctions into our critical matrix. Winnifred Nowottny further deepens this dichotomy by incorporating the contrasts of “truth and opinion” and “reality and ideality” into her interpretation of the play’s dramatic design. In the 1960s, A. P. Rossiter and J. Oates Smith recast this idea as a dispute between essentialist and existentialist modes of thought, with the forward-looking Rossiter siding with the existentialists and the backward-looking Smith cheering for the essentialists. I would suggest that this mostly straightforward translation of Ellis-Fermor’s and Nowottny’s binary
categories might in turn be seen to form a bridge that links these early thematic readings of value with critical readings from the age of post-structuralism and beyond.³

Many of today’s critics, of course, would strenuously object to the suggestion that they were still in any way working in the shadow of Knight, and yet it seems to me that even outrageously inventive critics like Bruce Boehrer – who reads the play as if it were primarily concerned with investigating social binaries (70) – are doing precisely this. Our deep-seated subscription to the overarching binary of realism and anti-realism ensures that instead of genuinely interrogating the analytic models we have inherited from the Enlightenment, we most often simply transfer the old wine into new bottles, translating received binary modes of thought into a new binary vocabulary and then, for good measure, inverting traditional critical allegiances to privilege whatever position had previously been marginalized, as Jill Mann has cogently suggested (118). Feminist critics, for example, have focused their attention primarily on the way in which the women in the play are treated sometimes as objects and sometimes as subjects, but in so doing, they structure their readings on precisely the same model of subjectivity and objectivity that we find at the heart of Ellis-Fermor’s account, very often invoking the same passages in the text towards many of the same ends. Similarly, we might observe that psychoanalytic criticism of the play typically relies upon a Lacanian vocabulary of Self and Other and of wholeness and fragmentation that inevitably runs parallel to earlier binary accounts of subject and object and of essence and accident. Marxist readings, in turn, have tended to emphasize the play’s contrast of the objective, essentialist values of feudal society with the subjective, mercantilist values of nascent

³ See Knight, The Wheel of Fire 47-62; Hawkes, Shakespeare and the Reason 1, 72-82; Ellis-Fermor, The Frontiers of Drama 63-73; Nowotny, “‘Opinion’ and ‘Value’ in Troilus and Cressida” 289-91; Rossiter, Angel With Horns 135-48; and Smith, “Essence and Existence in Troilus and Cressida” 167. As far as older thematic criticism of the play goes, I would like to draw particular attention to the perceptive readings in W. R. Elton, “Shakespeare’s Ulysses and the Problem of Value,” and Norman Rabkin, Shakespeare and the Common Understanding 31-60, both of which have contributed substantially to my own response to the play.
capitalism, situating Shakespeare in the middle of a tug of war between a realist Hooker and a social constructivist Hobbes, a strategy that closely replicates the old historicist readings of the play as embodying a conflict between Medieval and Renaissance world-pictures. Even deconstructive readings, which self-consciously target binary modes of thinking, fall into familiar polemical patterns of us-against-them as they assault the metaphysics of presence with the gadflies of *différance*, thereby subscribing once again to underlying binary structures of absolutism and relativism, wholeness and fragmentation, objectivity and subjectivity, and essence and accident. More recently, New Historicist and Cultural Materialist readings have succeeded at forging fascinating connections between the play and various ideological and material aspects of early modern English culture, but again working within a theoretical framework that inevitably reasserts traditional historical models (such as those employed by C. F. Tucker Brooke), inverting received modes of thinking instead of genuinely reconfiguring them. In short, even though criticism of *Troilus* in recent decades has on the surface veered away from the older thematic discussions of value in the play, I suggest that these readings nevertheless continue to subscribe to the same binary structures that we find at the heart of the New Critical accounts.  

This is not to say that no attempt whatsoever has been made to transcend binary models in reading the play. Two early articles – by R. J. Kaufmann and by R. A. Yoder – respond against the insistent binarism of thematic criticism and advocate instead for a

---

“pluralist” approach to the play. However, each of these promising calls for pluralism continues to rely upon a wholly binary vocabulary in its rejection of binarism, with the result that both of these innovative arguments quickly collapse back into traditional formulations. Similarly, Terry Eagleton struggles against binary models with particular valour in two separate readings of the play: in *Shakespeare and Society* he pushes the standard binaries to their breaking-points, and in *William Shakespeare* he even begins to peer beyond their limits, but in neither case does he quite manage to overcome the framework that his argument calls into question. Finally, I should take a moment to highlight three critics whose discussions of the play come closest in spirit to my own: Lars Engle, Hugh Grady, and Paul Yachnin.

Engle’s account of Shakespearean pragmatism, as I suggest above, often overlaps considerably with the sort of digested third categories that I aim to recover, but he tends to situate pragmatism within received binaries instead of examining how it might be seen to pose a challenge to them. In much the same way, Grady’s discussions of social power and instrumental reason in many ways run parallel to the sort of third category that I envision, but he also steers these ideas through well-worn binary channels. Yachnin, in contrast, does break away from traditional models through his formulation of the idea of “artisanal value,” a convincing and well-historicized category that undoubtedly complements my own discussion of pragmatic value below. At the same time, however, it seems to me that Yachnin does not theorize this historical category as thoroughly as he might, with the result that it is not wholly clear what he envisions the relationship to be between artisanal value and received binaries such as intrinsic and extrinsic value or use and exchange value.⁵

Furthermore, my reading of the play also draws upon trends in New Historicist, Cultural Materialist, and New Economic criticism in that I strongly concur with the idea that there are powerful resonances to be found between the debates on value enacted in \textit{Troilus} and economic controversies that were under way in England at the turn of the seventeenth century.\footnote{“New Economic criticism” is a term coined by Martha Woodmansee and Mark Osteen and adopted recently by Linda Woodbridge as an aegis for an excellent collection of essays on Shakespeare and economics. Central works in this field include Jean-Christophe Agnew’s \textit{Worlds Apart}, Douglas Bruster’s \textit{Drama and the Market in the Age of Shakespeare}, Richard Halpern’s \textit{The Poetics of Primitive Accumulation}, Theodore B. Leinwand’s \textit{Theatre, Finance, and Society in Early Modern England}, as well as more theoretically-inclined works such as Jean-Joseph Goux’s \textit{Symbolic Economies} and \textit{The Coiners of Language} and Marc Shell’s \textit{Money, Language and Thought}. Scott Cutler Shershow’s “Idols of the Marketplace,” moreover, is especially thought-provoking. I might also offer a cautionary word here about Frederick Turner, whose extensive writings on Shakespeare and economics on occasion show real insight, but more often are seriously marred by their overwhelmingly right-wing and pro-capitalist bias.} This connection was first proposed by Tillyard, who conjectured that Shakespeare may have been glancing at “the spread of the new commercialism” in his depiction of the Greeks (Shakespeare’s 85), and soon afterward was developed by Albert Gerard into a substantial economic reading. Many subsequent critical readings have traced this economic thread through the play, with the most impressive of these accounts (for my money) coming from C. C. Barfoot, Stephen X. Mead, and Jonathan Gil Harris. All three of these readings, however, fall back upon received binary models as they analyze the interrelationship of the play’s considerations of value with economic debates from the turn of seventeenth century. Barfoot’s argument, for example, begins with a useful catalogue of oppositions that illustrates how these economic readings are typically built upon relentlessly binary structures:

Frequently the play implies that value should be based on a unity of thought and action, of passion and reason, of word and deed, of what the eye beholds and what is truly there to be seen, of appearance and being, of the object or the person and the gratification of the senses. The thing and the name, the character and the epithet, the praise and the price, the attribute and the prize should be one. “Integrity” and not “bifold authority” should govern the world. (45)
This wildly chaotic list of oppositions surely must remind us of the “sharp dualism” of ideas that Knight so unconvincingly locates in the play, and I suggest we would do well to ask if these insistently dualist structures are not rather a feature of our own analytic apparatus than an unequivocal component of the text. Mead, on the other hand, establishes the historical connections between *Troilus* and early modern economics in much more specific detail, focusing attention in particular on debates about the bullion content of English coins and arguing that the play’s negotiation of intrinsic and extrinsic value draws upon Elizabethan anxieties about specie, especially as illustrated in the writings of the turn-of-the-century English economist Gerard de Malynes. More recently, Harris has followed Mead’s example in situating *Troilus* specifically against Malynes’s work, while also highlighting a further set of resonances between these texts and early modern medical writings, but yet again Harris draws these exciting historicist and materialist connections entirely from within a framework that limits its analysis of value by relying solely on binary models. With this in mind, my own reading adopts the work of Barfoot, Mead, and Harris as a launching point, agreeing with them strongly that early modern economic history (especially Malynes’s work) provides a rich context for a reading of *Troilus*. However, I adapt their approaches by contending that the conceptions of value underlying both *Troilus and Cressida* and its economic context need to be understood polyrhythmically, since I maintain that binary analyses of value will inevitably conceal a digested third term.⁷

Analyses of value have been advanced using a variety of models from classical times to the present, but most of the distinctions that have been drawn fall into one of three binary patterns. The first of these is probably most clearly expressed by the terms *intrinsic*

---

and extrinsic value, although we might find a similar distinction at work in contrasts such as natural and artificial value, essential and accidental value, objective and subjective value, and perhaps more prosaically, worth and price. All of these pairs of terms, of course, ground themselves in the overarching binary of realism and anti-realism, and thus invoke an opposition between the real (mind-independent) and the constructed (mind-dependent) elements of our experience. As I have argued above, however, what this sort of analysis inevitably conceals are the pragmatic (mind-interdependent) elements of our experience, elements that emerge from the interactive and intersubjective practices operating within a culture and thus which cannot be convincingly defined as either real or constructed, either objective or subjective.

We can see this sort of digesting the third at work in Aristotle’s writings on money, which of course were the most influential authorities for early modern economic theorists, just as they had been for the Scholastic debates on value that preceded them. At many points Aristotle distinguishes between intrinsic and extrinsic value, suggesting for example that commodities have value “by nature” while money has value only “by convention” (Nicomachean Ethics 1133a31). It is for this reason as well that in the Politics he...

8 In Shakespeare’s Troilus and Cressida and the Inns of Court Revels, Elton observes that there is a strong continuity in discussions of value from Seneca, (who contrasts dignitas and pretium) through the Medieval romances (which contrast pretz and valour) to Kant (who contrasts Wert and Preis) (129n4). Karl Marx observes in Capital that seventeenth-century English economists frequently draw this contrast with the terms “worth” and “value,” wryly noting that “This is quite in accordance with the spirit of a language that likes to use a Teutonic word for the actual thing, and a Romance word for its reflexion” (42n3). The earliest use of the Scholastic terms intrinsic and extrinsic value in English that I can find comes in 1622 by Malynes in his Consuetudo; it seems that these terms come into prominent use in English only later in the century. Incidentally, Shakespeare uses forms of the word intrinsic on two occasions (Ant. 5.2.295, Lr. 2.2.69), both times in conjunction with images of knots, which suggests to the OED editors that he saw the word as a synonym for intricate (“intrinsicate” a). Adele Davidson, however, presents the delightful alternative hypothesis that Shakespeare envisioned the word as referring to the threefold (i.e. “in” + “trip”) braid of a rope. This would mean that in Lear, when Kent envisions rats attempting to bite “holy cords a-twain / Which are too intrince t'unloose” (2.2.68-69), he is imagining yet another instance of hemiola in the play, one in which gnawing vermin work to separate the tripartite “intrinsice” cords into two halves, much in the way that Goneril and Regan divide Lear’s three-in-one “intrinsice” England a-twain between themselves. Unsurprisingly, I find Davidson’s astute reading to be very compelling.

9 For an excellent discussion of the Scholastic debates on the nature of value, see André Lapidus, “Metal, Money, and the Prince.”
distinguishes between economics (“household management”) and retail trade, declaring the former business to be honourable since it sets out to cultivate intrinsic goods within a community in the form of a natural growth of commodities, but deeming the latter business dishonourable since it focuses on the acquisition of wealth for its own sake and at the expense of other community members, and thus privileges the extrinsic value of artificial (sterile) money over the intrinsic value of natural (fertile) commodities (1258a39-b2). Of course, Aristotle reserves special contempt for the practice of money-lending at interest: here his concern is that the charging of interest demands the unnatural breeding of new extrinsic value from sterile money, value with no underlying intrinsic value of natural commodities (Politics 1258b2-8), a concern that is echoed countless times in the voluminous early modern economic writings against the practice of usury.10

What gets digested most notably within a model of intrinsic and extrinsic value is the idea that value can be related to usefulness. When we work under the assumption that all values are either intrinsic or extrinsic, we are compelled to declare that some of the uses to which we put things are intrinsic in the things themselves (their “natural” uses), while others are instead extrinsic to them (the “artificial” uses that we construct for them). In philosophical discussions of value we sometimes see the claim made, for example, that water is intrinsically valuable because it is necessary to human life, as if this were a fact about water in itself rather than an observation about the particular role that it plays within the practices of our particular form of life. But surely this is wrong: we can easily imagine an alien culture for which water is poisonous, or even a human culture which refuses to drink water (perhaps for religious reasons they choose to subsist wholly on fruit), and thus we have little reason to believe that water is in and of itself intrinsically valuable. To borrow Searle’s terminology for

---

10 The standard account of usury in early modern England is still Norman Jones’s God and the Moneylenders.
a moment, I would argue that it is a social fact about our particular culture that we do in fact value water for its potability, not a brute fact about the nature of water itself. In other words, we should not conflate the materiality of water with the uses to which we ourselves put water, since these two ideas demand wholly distinct modes of conceptualization: the former is a brute fact, the latter a social fact. Theories of intrinsic value regularly attempt to naturalize some of our cultural practices and project them outward onto the natures of the objects in the world. In turn, in cases where such a projection seems unfeasible, this model compels us to declare that the value of a given cultural practice is instead extrinsic, artificial, relativistic, subjective, and even unnatural. Clearly, though, there is something odd about the idea that we are using gold naturally whenever we use it as a commodity (say, when we wear it in the form of jewellery), but artificially whenever we use it as currency (say, when we use it in the form of coins to purchase something like jewellery). What seems to be missing from this economic model is a category that is distinct from the natural and the artificial, perhaps one that we might refer to as the customary, which takes our cultural practices into account without trying to redefine them as either natural or artificial.\footnote{Aristotle uses the terms physis ("nature") and nomos ("convention") to explain the difference between intrinsic and extrinsic value, and in these two terms themselves we might see a textbook case of digesting of the third in action (Nicomachean Ethics 1133a31). Nomos is usually translated either as “law” or as “custom,” depending on context, and thus the word itself in a way might be seen to conflate the core ideas of pragmatism and constructivism. I have attempted to echo this ambiguity in my diplomatic translation of the word as “convention,” which I think might be read in both senses as well. The Greeks, moreover, seem to have recognized this ambiguity in the word, since in Greek idiom we find a contrast preserved in the distinction between cheir̃on nomos ("an enforced convention") and dikēs nomos ("a customary convention").} In short, we need such a category because we value usefulness, and usefulness can be sensibly determined only by reference to our intersubjective cultural practices.

Elizabethans undoubtedly recognized that there was value to be found in the use of commodities as well as in the commodities themselves, since in practice they were often willing to pay for such usage. Tenants rented properties from landlords, travellers rented
rooms in inns, theatre companies rented costumes from the Royal Wardrobe, and so on, and in so doing they paid money in exchange for the use of a commodity for a fixed period of time rather than in exchange for the commodity itself. Such rental practices could be digested within the binary of intrinsic and extrinsic value readily enough by distending the concept of intrinsic value to imagine that any such “natural” functions of a commodity inhered in the nature of the commodity in itself. At the same time, Elizabethans must also have recognized that there was value to be found in having money ready-to-hand when it was needed – certainly Bassanio’s case provides us with evidence of this sort of situation – and thus we might expect that they would acknowledge that there was a value to the use of money over and above the value of the money itself, just as there was a value to the use of a commodity such as a room at the inn considered apart from the value of the room itself. However, because money was imagined to possess only an artificial, conventional, and symbolically unreal in and of itself, the usefulness of money could not be explained in the same way that the usefulness of commodities was, with the result that the practice of charging interest for the use of money was castigated as a gross abomination against nature. At the same time, early modern economies relied heavily on credit in order to function, and since Christ-like selfless merchants like Antonio were in short supply, the business of interest needed to be a matter of course for early modern merchants.  

The binary ideology of intrinsic and extrinsic value was thus challenged by the pragmatic demands of nascent capitalism in the sixteenth century, and the result of this conflict both in England and on the Continent was a series of unconvincing and seemingly arbitrary anti-usury laws, laws that maintained, for example, that a loan charging 10% interest

---

12 The fullest discussion of the subject is to be found in Craig Muldrew, *The Economy of Obligation*. 
was good business, while a loan charging 10.1% interest was an affront to God. The extreme venomousness of the anti-usury pamphlets from this era surely must be seen to derive in large measure from cultural anxieties about the arbitrariness of the moral position they defend. Shakespeare, of course, had a savvy head for business, so much so that he warrants regard as a highly successful early modern venture capitalist: not only was he a sharer in the most lucrative theatrical company of his time, but he also seems to have been involved to some extent in his father’s sideline business of money-lending, perhaps even acting as his father’s agent in London, and he himself is known to have dallied in questionably ethical practices of grain-speculation in his later years in Stratford.\(^{13}\) It is thus not surprising that Shakespeare’s reflections on the problem of value in plays like *The Merchant of Venice* and *Troilus and Cressida* should challenge and transcend such a limited analysis of value as we find in the intrinsic and extrinsic model, especially to the extent that it underlies the Elizabethan persecution of usurers.

The second model of value that warrants attention distinguishes between “use” and “exchange” value, a contrast that dates back at least to fourteenth-century commentaries on Aristotle by Jean Buridan and Nicholas Oresme, which argue that we would do better to abandon the idea of intrinsic value and refocus our attention on the usefulness of goods to human needs.\(^ {14}\) Nowadays, of course, we associate the ideas of use and exchange value primarily with Marx, who develops his account of value at length through the opening

---

\(^{13}\) On the money-lending of the Shakespeare family, see E. A. J. Honigmann, “‘There Is a World Elsewhere’”; on Shakespeare as a venture capitalist and grain-speculator, see Richard Wilson’s compelling discussion in “Pursued by a Bear.”

\(^{14}\) Buridan is a character who deserves considerably more attention from New Economic critics; on both Buridan and Oresme, see Lapidus. Eric Spencer makes a plausible case in “Taking Excess, Exceeding Account” that the distinction between use and exchange value is already implicit in Aristotle’s discussion in the *Categories* of the incommensurability of quantity and quality.
section of *Capital.* Here again we see a clear instance of digesting the third: whereas the Aristotelian model digests pragmatic utility between intrinsic realism and extrinsic constructivism in order to create a binary model, the Marxian model instead collapses realism and pragmatism into a single category (use value) and then sets it in opposition to constructivism (exchange value). Marx argues:

> The utility of a thing makes it a use value. But this utility is not a thing of air. Being limited by the physical properties of the commodity, it has no existence apart from that commodity. A commodity, such as iron, corn, or a diamond, is therefore, so far as it is a material thing, a use value, something useful. (1:42)

From this, it seems clear that in his formulation of the idea of use value, Marx effectively equates the beings of goods with their uses, and in so doing, he must be seen to be functionalizing the natures of goods much in the same way that the intrinsic/extrinsic model demanded that we naturalize the functions of goods. With both models, however, it seems clear that it is only by doing violence to our understanding of the distinction between natures, functions, and statuses of goods that we can divide this understanding into a binary set of categories.

Over the course of the twentieth century, capitalist economics shifted its attention increasingly away from the microeconomic buying and selling of commodities and focused instead on the macroeconomic workings of its own systems, much in the way that during the same period, Saussurean linguistics shifted our focus away from defining words in terms of their individual underlying references and toward defining words in terms of the roles they performed within the workings of differential system. Most Western nations abandoned the

---

15 Marx's theory of value is complicated by the fact that alongside use and exchange value, he also employs a third category simply termed “value,” which is geared to the socially-necessary labour time embodied in a commodity, but which often seems to vanish from the equation altogether, since he focuses primarily on the contrast of use and exchange value. Furthermore, Marx's model also sets all three of these “values” in contrast to "price," yielding yet another overarching binary. Most Marxist critics, on the other hand, tend to set aside these complications and fall back on the use-exchange binary when discussing the presentation of value in a literary text.
gold standard in the 1930s, with the result that while money was previously conceived of as
the symbolic representation of a value that was backed up by the physical existence of an
actual thing (an established quantity of gold or silver), money is now defined only in terms of
the role that it plays within an economic system. Furthermore, in recent years, Western
economic practices have been increasingly marked by trading in futures, options, and other
derivatives, markets of economic abstractions whose connections to actual commodities in
the real world are anything but direct. We have moved from investing in commodity
markets, to gambling on the performance of commodity markets, to gambling on the
outcomes of our own gambling. In such circumstances, the models of intrinsic and extrinsic
value and of use and exchange value are ineffective, and so instead we now typically rely
upon a third binary model which avoids the question of the value of commodities in
themselves altogether: the binary of asking price and selling price. This model takes no
interest whatsoever in the nature or uses of goods (since in contemporary economics many
of these “goods” are wholly abstract and thus have no natures or uses to speak of) and
focuses instead purely on the relationship that obtains between the statuses that we assign to
them or offer for them (asking price) and the functions that they perform for buyers and
sellers within the market (selling price). My suspicion is that, in practice, early modern
merchants also thought of their business primarily in terms of asking price and selling price,
in terms of constructed statuses and practical functions, certainly more often than they did in
terms of intrinsic and extrinsic value or use and exchange value, whatever the theoretical
pamphlets of the period may otherwise suggest. William Harrison’s account of Elizabethan
markets and fairs reveals a great many cagey and canny business dealings in practice: he tells
us of corn “bodgers” hiding their wares to give the false impression that supply was low in
order to drive up prices, of “purveyors” speculating in “eggs, butter, cheese, pigs, capons,
hens, chickens, hogs, bacon, &c” by buying at one town fair and then having their wives sell them at another, and of village markets reducing the size of their bushel measure in an effort to make their markets more attractive to vendors (1.202-4).

All three of these binary models continue to find their ways into critical readings of the problem of value in *Troilus and Cressida*, but I suggest we would do well to question whether any of the three is adequate to the task. There seems to be something myopically reductivist about each of them, since each of them proves to be incapable of expressing important distinctions that are quite readily drawn using the other two. For that matter, the fact that each of them carves up the idea of value meaningfully but so differently from the other two should suggest to us that we are dealing with a concept that has more than two meaningful aspects. In this light, the hemiolic strategy suggests that we would do better to employ a ternary model organized in terms of nature, function, and status in our analysis of value, attending to the three aspects of the concept by asking three parallel sets of questions about what value is, what value does, and how value ought to be treated. As I have argued, my contention is that in the sixteenth century, before the Enlightenment redirected Western thought into fixed binary channels, it was much more common for ternary modes of thinking to exist alongside binary modes, but that our own reliance upon binary models leads us to overlook the ternary alternatives alongside them. It is thus only by bracketing off these Enlightenment binaries that we can reconstruct the hemiolic superimposition in early modern conceptions of value. With this in mind, I now turn to consider two economic debates from the sixteenth century that I contend make sense only when we consider them using a ternary model, but which economic historians have invariably approached using binary models: the great debasement of the coinage under Henry VIII and the problem of merchandizing exchange in the final years of Elizabeth’s reign.
The English coinage had been altered many times before Henry VIII’s time, but the Tudor debasement of the coinage was novel in two respects. Kings since Edward I had found it necessary on a number of occasions to reduce the weight of the coinage by small amounts, in part so that newly minted coins would be comparable in weight to the well-worn coins already in circulation, with the result that by the sixteenth century, a newly minted shilling (a twentieth of a pound sterling) weighed slightly less than a twentieth of a pound. Henry’s first innovation was to focus his own debasement on quality rather than on quantity, reducing the precious metal content in nation’s coins to about 90% in 1526 and then considerably more in each successive minting for the remainder of his reign. The absolute nadir of this process came in 1551 under Edward VI, when the silver coinage contained just 17% of the silver used in pre-debasement issues. This issue was so full of copper they appeared quite red, prompting John Heywood’s marvellous quip, “These testons look red: how like you the same? / Tis a token of grace: they blush for shame” (qtd. in Mayhew 46).

Henry’s second and even more insidious innovation was to keep his string of debasements secret from the public at first, foisting millions of pounds of base coinage upon a people who assumed for years that they were still dealing in unadulterated sterling. Mayhew suggests that the Crown profited a full £1.27 million pounds from the debasements between 1544 and 1551, a sum that he estimates to be somewhere in the vicinity of 10% of the English gross domestic product for these years; he quite reasonably suggests that this

---

16 It is, of course, one of the great ironies of Tudor history that a king who was so monomaniacally obsessed with the purity of his biological issue should have been so cavalier about the purity of his numismatic issue. On the subject of the great debasement, my primary source for figures and anecdotes is N. J. Mayhew, *Sterling* 42-56, but see also these more substantial works on the subject: C. E. Challis, *A New History of the Royal Mint*; Albert Edgar Feaveyear, *The Pound Sterling*, and J. D. Gould, *The Great Debasement*.
“remains the greatest single fraud deliberately carried out by any English government on its own people” (47).

Once this deception was discovered, however, the economy fell into chaos, since very few merchants at home or abroad were eager to accept such debased coin in payment. Before long, it became common practice in England to disregard the face value of the coins entirely and revalue them in practice at somewhere in the vicinity of half of their official valuation. The King and Parliament, however, were unable to partake in this custom of revaluation without undermining their own authority, and so they begrudgingly continued to accept the debased coinage at face value even when many merchants would not. As a result, through the 1550s, the population at large invariably made sure to pay its taxes using the most debased coin it could muster. Before long, the Crown realized it was in trouble and legislated new values for already circulating issues of coins, sometimes simply by proclamation but other times by physically recalling and reminting them, adding a new stamp to the surface of an old coin in order to establish its new discounted face value. As strange as this may sound, by the end of 1556, a London merchant could be imprisoned and all his goods made forfeit unless he publicly acknowledged that a shilling was worth half a shilling.

Here the crucial differences between the realist, pragmatist, and constructivist conceptions of value should be clear, for depending on our perspective, the 1551 issue of shillings might be seen to have any of three values. From a realist perspective, since the coins contained just one sixth of the bullion that had been present in pre-debasement issue, we might reasonably argue that a 1551 shilling was in fact worth but two pence, since a silversmith would be able to extract only about a sixth of an ounce of silver from it. From a pragmatist perspective, on the other hand, we might maintain that a 1551 shilling was actually worth around sixpence, since in practice this was the purchasing power that the coin
carried: in other words, a 1551 shilling was capable of buying about half an ounce of silver, despite the fact that it contained about a sixth of an ounce of silver. Finally, from a constructivist position, we might reasonably suggest that a 1551 shilling actually ought to be worth its proclaimed value of a full shilling, since under the law it was assigned the status of being exchangeable for a full ounce of sterling. (At least this was the law until the shillings were recalled, stamped, and reissued at the value of sixpence; at this point, their pragmatic purchasing power on the open market responded predictably and dropped down to just four pence.) Anyone hoping to navigate the turbulent economic waters that resulted from the repeated re-legislation of the value of reminted coins through the 1550s would need to keep these three aspects of value in mind, since the pragmatic purchasing power of a coin nearly always fell somewhere between the real weight of its bullion and the constructed status of its face value. No binary model of value is capable of accounting for the complications presented by this economic situation, for here we see a clear instance in which the three aspects of value have unbraided themselves from one another, with each aspect defined itself independently from the other two.

One of the most influential and effective decisions that Elizabeth made upon coming to the throne was her resolution to restore the purity of the coinage. This meant that in the early years of her reign, the crown was forced to accept a substantial economic loss as it bought back all of the bad Tudor issue with new good coin, but this substantial short-term investment was responsible for restoring long-term faith in English currency, and it almost certainly saved England from a devastating downward economic spiral. At the end of Elizabeth’s reign, however, a new monetary crisis was beginning to gather steam, one that the Elizabethan economist Gerard de Malynes calls “merchandizing exchange,” a blanket term coined to describe a number of related mercantile practices which involved profiting
from the inconsistencies between currency exchange rates in different markets. Even though the purity of the English coinage was now stabilized, the coins of other nations in the 1590s varied wildly in quality, especially coins from Poland, Russia, and Turkey. Malynes suggests that when English merchants did business abroad, they often failed to take the foreign debasement of coins adequately into account, and had fallen into the practice of paying out high quality English coin for foreign commodities while also accepting debased foreign coin at face value for their own goods. Since English merchants abroad were usually under pressure to do business quickly, they found themselves at a disadvantage when negotiating with foreign merchants and, as a result, they often lost out on the exchange and returned home with debased money. This trend, Malynes argues, was responsible for a gradual leeching of gold and silver bullion out of England.

Furthermore, exchange rates between different European currencies typically varied from market to market, with the result that cunning merchants could make a profit merely by converting the currencies in the right places (selling English money for Spanish in Antwerp, for example, and then selling Spanish money for English in Lyons, or some such boondoggle). As Malynes suggests:

> for we shall find in effect, that one summe of mony, of one sett and kind of coine, hath two prices, & two valuations, at one time, exchanged for one distance of time; differing only by the diuersitie of place & countrie: whereby priuate men alter as it were the valuation of coines, which is rated & valued in al countries by the Prince or gouvernour of the same, as a matter concerning their dignitie and soueraigntie: & so consequently of too high presumption for subjects to step into. (Canker 56)

This is, of course, exactly the sort of artificial “retail trade” that Aristotle condemns, since it involves merchants making money not out of the production and circulation of useful commodities, but out of manipulation of the artificial value of money within the purely
symbolic monetary system, a system that should be supervenient upon and subservient to natural “economics,” but by no means a system of value unto itself.

Malynes’s *A Treatise of the Canker of Englands Common Wealth* explicitly connects this business of merchandizing exchange with Henry’s great debasement (11), recognizing that the circulation of currency with differing bullion content within the European economy opened the door for exactly the same sort of fiscal skulduggery that plagued England in the 1550s. Here again there was a gap to be found between the bullion content of coins and the face value stamped upon them, and merchants were able to seize upon this inconsistency between substance and valuation to turn a profit by buying and selling money at different rates, treating money as a commodity in itself rather than as an artificial symbol for the value of natural commodities, as Aristotle would have it. In response to this threat, Malynes’s pamphlet urges the Queen to legislate the exchange of English currency both at home and abroad, insisting that English merchants observe the rule of *par pro pari* ("equal for equal") in their currency exchanges, so that all currencies are measured against one another in terms of their (real) bullion content, not their (pragmatic) market values or (constructed) face values. The minting practices of foreign nations were, of course, beyond Elizabeth’s power to control, but her influence extended over all merchants who counted themselves her subjects, and thus Malynes’s programme primarily aims to control the practices of English merchants through the authority of the sovereign. His anti-mercantilist bias verges upon utter contempt: throughout the pamphlet merchants are treated not only as short-sighted and self-interested, but as carcinogenic upon the body of the commonwealth, since mercantile greed prompts them to “feede still upon their mothers belly” (45). Similarly, in a pamphlet written some twenty years afterwards for James I, Malynes urges the king to ignore the advice of merchants at all times, since he suggests that consulting merchants about the
problems of economics would be as foolish as consulting vintners about the problem of public drunkenness (Maintenance 4-5).

Economic historians like Joyce Oldham Appleby and Andrea Finkelstein typically fall back upon the model of intrinsic and extrinsic value in their discussion of Malynes, setting his “intrinsic” bullionist arguments in opposition to the “extrinsic” mercantilist position later articulated by his main rival economist theorist, the merchant Edward Misselden, and thus casting their conflict comfortably within an overarching model of realism and anti-realism. Appleby characterizes Malynes in this way:

His is a mental terrain marked by fixed points and real qualities. The weight and purity of coin determined values, and merchants would profit by attending to these substantial qualities rather than by making their own uneducated guesses of exchange value. (42)

In a similar way, we find Finkelstein emphasizing the “absolutist leanings” that we find in Malynes (39). Such readings are, of course, quite understandable, since at many points he situates himself in precisely this way, as a defender of the real value of gold and silver against the threat posed by the constructed artifice of greedy and self-serving merchants. However, to reduce Malynes’s argument in *Canker* to this consistently realist position demands that we ignore a great many claims in the pamphlet where he seems to be supporting alternative positions entirely. At one point, for example, his argument takes a surprising turn towards pragmatic cultural relativism, and he argues that the value of goods is solely determined by their usefulness to life, not by any property inherent to them, and furthermore that this usefulness will vary even from culture to culture (66-68). More often, though, we will find his argument veering into strong constructivist territory: after all, Malynes’s primary argument is that princes ought to establish the value of coinage in accordance with its bullion content, an argument that clearly endorses the idea that the value of money depends directly upon the verdict of the sovereign, and only indirectly upon the substance of the
bullion. Consequently, Malynes’s argument is probably best seen as a constructivist argument masquerading as realism. 17 Appleby is I think quite right when she suggests: “To operate in Malynes’s world required submission not only to the coercive force of authority but to the order it represented” (45). The phrase is worth reading twice. Malynes, of course, attempts to focus our attention on “the order it represented,” but when push comes to shove, all that matters for his argument is “the coercive force of authority” that masquerades as the natural order.

For my purposes, what seems most notable about Malynes’s discussion of merchandizing exchange is that he consistently employs three separate terms to distinguish the realist, constructivist, and pragmatist conceptions of value: “substance,” “valuation,” and “toleration.” The (real) substance of coinage is determined by its “weight and fineness”; the (constructed) valuation “is done by publike authority of the Prince or gouernour of every countrey”; and the (pragmatic) toleration “is brought in by particular men, as the marchants are, that contrary to the commaundement of Princes or states, do receiue and pay the mony at a higher rate” (35-36). Malynes never acknowledges the ternary structure underlying his argument; indeed, his subscription to the binary Aristotelian model of value demands that he present his argument in two binary stages, arguing first, that Elizabeth’s valuation of domestic and foreign coinage should precisely reflect the substance of bullion in the coin, and second, that Elizabeth should enforce this sovereign valuation by insisting that all mercantile toleration should conform to the formula par pro pari. In fact, Malynes’s argument would be considerably less convoluted if only he acknowledged that there were three terms in play at all times, not just two at a time. The real thrust of his argument, after

17 We might find an analogous gambit in the Archbishop of Canterbury’s elaborate construction of Henry’s claim on the French throne (Henry V 1.2.33–114): here too we see palpable self-interest masquerading as disinterested fact.
all, is that substance and toleration and valuation should all correspond to one another, because allowing these three strands to unbraid themselves from one another enables foreign merchants to engage in questionable business practices. Once again, what interests me most about Malynes’s pamphlet is its hemiolic quality, since it delineates so clearly a ternary economic system and then insists upon analyzing it using exclusively binary models. It seems to me that early modern merchants, on the other hand, who of course were deeply engaged with the concrete practices that Malynes theorizes in abstraction, must have been aware of the fact that their “toleration” of a foreign currency typically fell somewhere between its “substance” and its “valuation,” thus employing a ternary model in their practices even if the theorists understood these practices only in binary terms.

My suggestion, as we now turn to Troilus and Cressida, is that we might see exactly this sort of hemiolic conflict in play both in the drama and in its criticism. The plot of Troilus and Cressida is fuelled by two recurrent and unmistakably economic activities: appraisal and exchange. In the opening scenes, it is Pandarus who ushers us into this world of appraisal, assessing the relative values of Cressida and Helen in conversation with Troilus (1.1.30-84) and then haggling with Cressida on the relative values of Troilus and Hector (1.2.35-162). When the Trojan soldiers return home from battle, Pandarus and Cressida proceed to assess each one of them in turn, viewing them limb by limb as if they would buy them, and thus commodifying the Trojan army just as Achilles later quotes Hector joint by joint (1.2.163-237; 4.7.121-30). Pandarus seems to be so compulsive in his need to appraise those around him that he cannot even resist picking a pointless quarrel with a servant over the respective worths of Helen and Cressida (3.1.32-36). Troilus also shows a tendency to imagine the world in economic terms, introducing himself to us with an image that positions
himself as a merchant, Pandarus as his doubtful vessel, and Cressida as the Indian pearl that he dreams of purchasing abroad (1.1.94-100). We encounter very much the same sort of mercantile language in the Greek camp, where the value of Achilles is the primary disputed issue, one that has come to a head because Achilles himself seems to value his peers so lightly. Before long, we find the play directing our attention toward the relative values of Ajax, Aeneas, Agamemnon, Paris, Menelaus, and more, until we are so accustomed to the act of evaluation that we in the audience surely must begin to feel more like speculators than spectators. In performance, this process is compounded by the fact that we will inevitably find ourselves evaluating the merits of the actors’ performances, not to mention the value of the production as a whole, and of course the value of Shakespeare’s play itself. The play in turn must be seen to be deeply concerned with evaluating the values of its literary sources in Homer (via Chapman), Chaucer, and Lydgate through its delightful fusion of homage and travesty, with the result that we shall further catch ourselves evaluating Shakespeare’s own appraisals of the Western literary tradition. Troilus opens with the Prologue urging us to “Like or find fault” (Prologue 30) with the work as a whole, but little do we expect there to be such intense trafficking in the two hours’ traffic of our stage that ensues.

Similarly, we might observe that the plot of the play is driven by a series of exchanges, and this only further contributes to its overall emphasis on economic matters. Following Lydgate, Shakespeare suggests that Helen’s abduction was initially prompted by the earlier Greek abduction of Priam’s sister Hesione, and thus at the root of this account of the Trojan War we find an exchange of abducted women (2.2.79). As Shakespeare’s plot gets under way, we witness Hector offering to exchange one kind of battle for another, proposing that the two armies give themselves a respite from gruelling siege warfare waged in the name of Helen to turn instead toward a chivalric single combat waged for the honour
of their respective mistresses. The Greeks reply to this challenge with an exchange of their own, since they substitute the unexpected Ajax for the expected Achilles in the deal, borrowing a strategy from merchants who show their foulest wares so that they may keep the more lustrous in reserve (1.3.352-55). Ajax’s mettle is quite clearly less substantial than Achilles’, and he is accordingly valued at a lower rate in both camps, perhaps because he turns out to be an alloy of sorts, since his Greek blood is mingled with Trojan (4.7.4-19). Hector is unable to purchase Ajax’s desirable Greek blood without also receiving his uncurent Trojan blood, and he thus calls the transaction off abruptly. In the meantime, we are introduced to the Trojan traitor Calchas, who has given “all / That time, acquaintance, custom, and condition / Made tame and most familiar to [his] nature” in exchange for many promised Greek benefits (3.3.3-16), and the first benefit that he chooses is yet another exchange, asking the Greeks to return the captured Trojan soldier Antenor for Calchas’s daughter, Cressida. Cressida herself has just made an exchange of sorts with Troilus, an exchange of fluids, a point driven home by Pandarus when he asks them the morning after, “How now, how now, how go maidenheads?” (4.2.25). Despite Cressida’s protestations that her love for Troilus is sterling and “admits no qualifying dross” (4.5.9), Troilus concludes that the new threat of their enforced separation devalues their exchange from the night before: “We two, that with so many thousand sighs / Did buy each other, must poorly sell ourselves / With the rude brevity and discharge of one” (4.5.38-40). Troilus then proceeds to bargain with Diomedes about how Cressida ought to be valued, just as the action moves symbolically toward the mercantile port, and here, as Mead suggests, we see how Trojan currency is reminted by the Greeks (255). Cressida in turn proceeds to effect one final exchange once she reaches the Greek camp, trading Troilus for Diomedes, a bargain that she soon comes to regret. As the play comes to a close, Pandarus states explicitly the play’s
implicit message that we are all “traders in the flesh” (5.11.31.14), a phrase that almost
certainly suggests that we are traitors in the flesh as well, given our startling proclivity for
reducing one another to the status of “fraughtage.”

The main question to be addressed, then, is what does the play do with all of this
economic material? Ulysses’ protracted speech on degree seems a useful place to begin,
especially since I think it is one of the most widely misread passages in all of Shakespeare.
Again, the usual binary analytic models are the culprits that lead us astray in this case.
Ulysses undoubtedly is opposed to constructivism in his argument, as is clear by the
memorable straw man that he sets up in opposition to his position:

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. (1.3.119-24)

His animus undoubtedly seems to be anti-realism in this passage, and consequently there has
been an overwhelming tendency to follow Tillyard in The Elizabethan World Picture in
reading the speech as a textbook statement of realism, one that analyzes the universe
through a series of nested homologous hierarchies. To be sure, many elements of the
speech incline in this direction: his descriptions of degree as “the ladder to all high designs”
(1.3.102) and as an attunement of strings (1.3.109), for example, certainly seem to be leaning
toward the sort of neo-Platonic model of the macro- and microcosmic natural order that we

---

18 Barfoot mines the trader/traitor pun further and very convincingly (47), examining the ways in which trade
and treachery impinge upon each other in the play; his argument is that the play suggests that “we trade in
selves just as we trade in words” and that all such trade is treacherous (56). As well, I should acknowledge that
the remarkable word fraughtage is a Folio-only spelling (Prologue 13) that most editors (including the editors
of the Oxford text that is employed in the Norton) amend to the more pedestrian freightage. Muir’s edition
retains the more suggestive spelling.
find in Hooker and elsewhere. However, many critics have found it puzzling that the
polytropic Ulysses is made the mouthpiece for such a deeply conservative vision; even
Tillyard himself elsewhere surmises that Shakespeare’s tongue must be “at least partway in
his cheek” in this passage (Shakespeare’s 55). Elton, in turn, presents an insightful analysis
that highlights the importance of the need for degree to be “unmasked,” arguing that the real
emphasis of the speech is on communicating this natural order, not merely adhering to it,
and thus concluding that Ulysses is in fact a “supreme pragmatist rather than a pious
traditionalist” (“Shakespeare’s” 99). Berger, on the other hand, goes even further and
brilliantly uncovers a constructivist undercurrent running beneath the superficially realist
argument, proposing that when we “observe” degree, we observe it like basilisks, not only
passively registering the natural order in our vision but also actively bringing this order into
being, ourselves making it into something concrete through our observation of it. Berger’s
argument, however, is unfortunately hampered by its binary vocabulary, since as happens so
often, he equates an opposition to realism with constructivism. As a result, he overlooks a
much stronger alternative reading, one that I think is implied by Elton but not adequately
developed there either.

My suggestion instead is that Ulysses has two targets in mind in the speech on degree:
the universal-wolf constructivism of Achilles and also the self-assured realism of
Agamemnon. The Greek general, of course, is already fully convinced of the neo-Platonic
realist natural order and so would hardly need any further convincing of this position from
Ulysses. Agamemnon establishes his ideology using a bullionist metaphor, one that might be
seen to align him with Malynes’s position: he suggests that true value resides in the fineness
of metal/mettle as something substantial, something that is discoverable only through the
wind and tempest of Fortune’s frown. “Distinction,” he continues, “winnows the light away,
And what hath mass or matter by itself / Lies rich in virtue and unmingled” (1.3.26-30).

Agamemnon’s vision, notably, insists that the value of an object ought to be determined by its “mass or matter by itself” and thus must be something that he imagines in isolation from the economy as a whole, as an essential component of things, as a fact of nature. Nestor also endorses this realist position by turning to yet another economic image, this time a merchant vessel at sea: he suggests that storms of fortune are what divide “valour’s show and valour’s worth” (1.3.33-46), and he thus analyzes value through the binary lens of reality and appearance, dividing the essential and intrinsic from the accidental and extrinsic.

In contrast to both, Ulysses seems to envision value not essentially but differentially, locating value within the workings of a dynamic cultural system rather than affixing it within a static natural hierarchy. He begins his analysis with the image of the beehive – a pragmatist business model if there ever were one – and consistently emphasizes that value depends on the performance of function within a system, not merely on the brute fact of existence within a hierarchy. This is not to say that Ulysses advances anything like a ternary analysis of value either in this speech or elsewhere. However, if there is an analytic model underlying Ulysses’ argument, it is surely the binary model of word and deed, a motif that recurs throughout the play, one that is best understood as distinguishing between constructivism and pragmatism. Pandarus, for example, will later cajole Troilus into approaching Cressida with the advice, “Words pay no debts; give her deeds” (3.2.53), and at the end of the play, Troilus will tear up Cressida’s letter of apology, rejecting it because she feeds his love with “mere words” while she “edifies another with her deeds” (5.3.110-14). These scenes imply that the constructed statuses that words bestow are ultimately hollow, and all that is to be trusted is what gets proven in practice. From an economic point of view, this is undoubtedly a mercantile way of thinking, the sort of thinking that takes the toleration of the
market much more seriously than either the valuation of the sovereign or the substance of the bullion (to return to Malynes’s terms once again). As a result, my suggestion is that Ulysses embodies a force of mercantile pragmatism in the play that sets itself up in contrast to the Platonic realism of Agamemnon on the one hand and the Machiavellian constructivism of Achilles on the other.\footnote{My reading here runs parallel to Eagleton’s insightful discussion of the play in *Shakespeare and Society* 19-37 (esp. 13-14) which explores the idea that Ulysses is a structuralist avant la lettre.}

Many readings of Ulysses argue that his position over the course of the play is inconsistent, since in his conversation with Achilles in 3.3, he appears to be endorsing a system that is wholly incompatible with Tillyard’s realist world picture. Rossiter suggests that this inconsistency stems from Ulysses attempting to negotiate between his idealist beliefs and his practical concerns (145); Soellner, on the other hand, accounts for the apparent difference by arguing that he is “philosophically a skeptic, politically an absolutist” (202); and Bradshaw suggests that his voicing of incompatible positions alongside each other situates him (as well as Shakespeare) in a Montaignean camp of “radical scepticism” (156). In my reading, however, Ulysses shows no inconsistency whatsoever between his arguments in 1.3 and 3.3, since in both scenes what he argues is that value depends upon function rather than nature or status. In his discussion with Achilles about the mysterious book he is reading, for example, he first establishes the point that an individual’s value is in no way intrinsic but is instead formed by “th’applause” of others (3.3.110-18), an anti-realist position that, on first glance, we might reasonably assume to be constructivism. Certainly when Ulysses proceeds to contrast “things [. . .] / Most abject in regard and dear in use” with “things [. . .] most dear in the esteem / And poor in worth” (3.3.122-25), we seem to be in the familiar binary territory of realism and constructivism. However, the next thrust of Ulysses’ argument (3.3.139-84) maintains that the constructed statuses that are bestowed by
“applause” of this sort need to be perpetually renewed through continued action, that words need to be backed with deeds, and thus he establishes that it is pragmatism, not constructivism, that he supports as an alternative to realism. The crucial figure in Ulysses’ pragmatist system is Time, for on the one hand, it is the added dimension of Time that converts the fixed Platonic hierarchy of essentialist degree into Ulysses’ own dynamic economy of functionalist interactivity, while on the other hand, it is also “envious and calumniating time” (3.3.168) that ensures that all statuses grow hollow unless they are immediately bolstered and continually replenished with deeds.

Achilles, on the other hand, seems to represent the force of constructivism in the Greek camp quite unambiguously. Our first sustained image of the notorious warrior comes from Ulysses’ lengthy (and in performance often very funny) report of the “pageants” of the Greek captains that Achilles and Patroclus have been staging in their tent (1.3.142-84). Everything that we hear about Achilles emphasizes the ideas of appearance and opinion in opposition to reality and truth: his ear is “full of airy fame”; he has grown “dainty of his worth”; he and Patroclus call their playacting “imitation,” but Ulysses counts these performances as slanderous misrepresentations, even one degree further removed from mimesis; and Achilles seems above all “like a strutting player, whose conceit / Lies in his hamstring” – perhaps as damning a review of an actor’s performance as might be imagined (1.3.144-54). Ulysses concludes his complaint with this final volley:

And in this fashion
All our abilities, gifts, natures, shapes,
Severals and generals of grace exact,
Achievements, plots, orders, preventions,
Excitements to the field or speech for truce,
Success or loss, what is or is not, serves
As stuff for these two to make paradoxes. (1.3.178-84)
Ulysses himself continues to draw a clear distinction between “what is” and “what is not,” a distinction that Achilles and Patroclus’s cavalier attitude toward reality apparently threatens. Such is the threat of constructivism: when valuation is permitted free rein apart from considerations of substance and toleration, we open the door to “misprision in the highest degree” (TN 1.5.50). On such occasions, for example, we might be forced to accept that a sixth of an ounce of silver is worth an ounce of silver, or even that a shilling is worth half a shilling, and other such implausibilities. It is in precisely this way that Achilles overholds his own price (2.3.125). The Greek captains fall back on economic terms when they debate whether or not they will tolerate his valuation of himself, much in the way that early modern merchants debated whether they would tolerate a monarch’s valuation on the face of a coin. Nowhere, however, is Achilles’ constructivism more evident than in his murder of Hector, for here he orders that his Myrmidons fall upon the unarmed Hector and kill him, and then commands them to spread the word that “Achilles hath the mighty Hector slain” (5.9.10-14), taking credit for his overthrow when in fact the text suggests that he himself takes no part in the fight. What matters here, of course, is the “bruit” fact, not the brute fact, to borrow Shakespeare’s pun (5.10.3). Ajax’s response to the news cuts to the heart of the matter, for in an unexpected moment of clarity, he proposes that the deed ought to be “bragless” (5.10.4), stripped of the status that Achilles had set out to construct through it in the first place.  

The Trojan camp is also divided on the question of value, but here the competing positions do not seem to be as clearly defined as those of Agamemnon, Ulysses, and Achilles. In the Trojan council scene (2.2), for example, Hector, Troilus, and Paris all present

---

20 On the constructivism of Achilles, see also Mallin 148-50, especially for his discussion of parallels between Achilles and the Earl of Essex.
arguments about the value of Helen, but none of their positions seems particularly coherent. Hector first argues for one position in the “way of truth” (188), but nevertheless resolves upon an entirely different position in order to preserve the joint dignity of the Trojans.\footnote{On the Trojan council scene, see Tatlock’s monumental source study and analysis.}

This concern with preserving dignity, of course, is Troilus’s main argument from the outset, but Troilus also acknowledges quite openly that his is not a rational position: “Nay, if we talk of reason, / Let’s shut our gates and sleep,” he suggests, since “Reason and respect / Make livers pale and lustihood deject” (2.2.45-49). Moreover, Troilus himself also seems to be operating with a number of incompatible conceptions of value at different points in the play, and so it is difficult to attach much weight to what he says in the council scene in and of itself. Paris, furthermore, does not even seem to be listening to his brothers’ speeches: his argument relies upon the claim that there is no Trojan so mean in spirit that he would not gladly die in Helen’s name, and he insists that the Trojans are agreed that the “world’s large spaces cannot parallel” Helen, despite the fact that this is precisely the subject under dispute (2.2.155-61). It thus seems very odd to me that so many critical readings of the play attempt to use this Trojan council scene as a magic decoder ring for interpreting the play as a whole, since to my mind this is the most philosophically unfocused (if not downright vexing) scene in the play, one that poses many more problems than it presents solutions.

Hector begins by arguing what seems to be a realist position: he measures Helen’s value against the values of the many thousands of lives that have been lost on her behalf, and thus he seems to be appraising human worth as if it were something fixed and concrete, something whose fineness and substance might even be weighed in a scale of common ounces, as Troilus observes in objection to him (2.2.25-27). His language, furthermore, focuses insistently on the ratio of the tenth:
Since the first sword was drawn about this question,
Every tithe-soul, 'mongst many thousand dimes,
Hath been as dear as Helen – I mean, of ours.
If we have lost so many tenths of ours
To guard a thing not ours – nor worth to us,
Had it our name, the value of one ten –
What merit's in that reason which denies
The yielding of her up?  (2.2.17-24)

Here Hector manages to use four synonyms for ten percent over the course of just five lines ("tithe," "dimes," "tenth," and "one ten"), and so surely the specific figure he focuses upon warrants our attention. Underlying all of these references to tenths is undoubtedly the idea of tithing, the practice of paying a tax of ten percent of one’s profit, which dates back at least to Abraham’s time (Gen 14.20). However, it is tempting to think that Hector’s calculation is also informed by Elizabeth’s 1571 statute against usury, which fixed the maximum allowable rate of interest at 10%, since his objection is not so much that Troy is paying for the use of Helen, but more that they are overpaying for her use. We might also wonder if his comparative valuation of Helen’s and other Trojans’ lives also glances laterally at the proportional valuation of gold and silver coinage, which differed from market to market across Europe in 1601 but typically settled somewhere in the vicinity of 10:1.22 Hector’s view is thus very much that of the conservative early modern economist, one who accepts the custom of tithing at ten percent and rejects the practice of usury over ten percent as if these arbitrary economic policies were in fact laws of nature. More importantly, however, Hector looks to real substance to be the primary determinant of value. When Troilus argues instead that value is something that we ourselves construct (2.2.51), Hector replies:

But value dwells not in particular will.

---

22 In England in 1601, “crown” gold (which was 91.7% pure) typically traded for sterling silver (92.6% pure) in the proportion of 11:1, while “angel” gold (99.0% pure) was traded at a commensurably higher proportion (Malynes, Canker 8-9). In other markets, however, the proportion between gold and silver varied from as low as 9:1 to as high as 12:1. Yachnin identifies a further possible source for the emphasis on “tens” throughout the play by reading it as a reference to the ten sharers of the Lord Chamberlain’s Men (308-9).
Hector does not deny outright that “the prizer” contributes something to the equation as well, but he maintains that substance needs to be considered alongside valuation, since it is the reality of substance that prevents value from falling into the bottomless snares of relativism. In short, he presents a compound position that closely resembles Malynes’s arguments about the value of currency, since it yokes realism and constructivism together in an uneasy marriage; or at least he does so “in way of truth” (2.2.188) for a hundred-odd lines of stage time, before he rejects this position summarily in exchange for his brother’s position.

Troilus, on the other hand, draws attention to the differential economy of the war as a whole, and in so doing, might be seen to voice a mercantilist position against his older brother’s bullionism, one that privileges toleration over a composite of substance and valuation. Troilus recognizes how much of their identities and their honours the Trojans have invested in the martial economy, an economy that in a way has adopted Helen as its currency, and he further understands that if Helen were to be devalued to a rate in accordance with her actual substance, the economy as a whole would undoubtedly collapse. Despite Malynes’s protests to the contrary, Troilus recognizes that the fineness and substance of the bullion makes no practical difference whatsoever so long as it is tolerated consistently – as far as Troilus is concerned, what matters above all is the economy, not the coinage – and so he argues that the Trojans need to keep the energy circulating by maintaining their economic practices without being too scrupulous about the fineness of the substance that underlies these practices. This inclination toward pragmatism, we might assume, is what prompts Ulysses to speak so highly of Troilus, describing him to Agamemnon as “matchless-firm of word, / Speaking in deeds and deedless in his tongue”
(4.6.100-1), yet another instance where the play degrades the constructions of language in order to endorse the pragmatics of action, privileging function over status.

Despite these strong signs of pragmatism, however, Troilus at other points presents very different faces. In his relationship with Cressida, for example, he frequently adopts what seems to be an overtly realist stance, especially in his compulsive emphasis upon his own “truth”: he insists that he is “as true as truth’s simplicity, / And simpler than the infancy of truth,” so true, in fact, that “True swains in love shall in the world to come / Approve their truth by Troilus,” since they will undoubtedly recognize him to be “truth’s authentic author” (3.2.155-69).23 This Troilus seems to be very different from the subversive relativist who asks, “What’s aught but as ’tis valued?” (2.2.51), for this other Troilus seems to believe in an absolute and objective standard of truth. Later, a third Troilus complicates matters further still: when Diomedes comes to collect Cressida, Troilus demands that he value her at a certain rate, and Diomedes responds by asserting that he will value her however he sees fit, refusing to tolerate the constructed valuation imposed by Troilus (4.5.130-35). It would thus seem that Troilus is a pragmatist as a soldier, a realist as a lover, and a constructivist as a rival, altering his outlook as the situation demands. Perhaps in this respect he resembles Ajax, who is described by Cressida’s servant Alexander as “a man into whom nature hath so crowded humours that his valour is crushed into folly, […] he hath the joints of everything, but everything so out of joint that he is a gouty Briareus, many hands and no use” (1.2.20-27). Or perhaps we would do better to commend Troilus for the inclusivity of his conception of value: in one of his most clear-headed moments, he suggests to Cressida, “Praise us as we are tasted; allow us as we prove” (3.2.83-84), a formula that acknowledges the connections and interrelations among realism, pragmatism, and constructivism. Malynes

---

23 Forms of the word “true” turn up a remarkable nineteen times in 3.2 (sixteen of them spoken by Troilus) and sixteen times in 4.4 (ten of them spoken by Troilus).
might rewrite this tag as, “Valuate us according to our substance, and tolerate us accordingly as well.”

Does the play itself as a whole incline toward any one of the three analyses of value that it interrogates? It certainly seems to undermine the realist belief in substantial intrinsic value quite consistently; no one to date has ever mistaken Agamemnon for the hero of the play, for example. Hector, on the other hand, does seem to add a certain credibility to the realist position for some readers (especially older critics who were inclined that way in the first place), but at the same time we must acknowledge that Hector’s faith in moral absolutes like chivalry is ultimately what brings about his downfall. Furthermore, Shakespeare includes a strange episode in the final act that I suspect is designed to wean us from any residual beliefs we may have in intrinsic value. Here, Hector encounters a Greek soldier dressed in “goodly” armour (5.6.27-31): if Shakespeare were following Lydgate’s account of the battle at this point, he would imagine the soldier’s armour as being completely covered in precious gemstones (Bevington, Troilus 5.6.27n). But in a clearly emblematic move, Shakespeare has Hector discover that this walking treasury that appears “so fair without” in fact contains a “Most putrefièd core” (5.9.1), a phrase that echoes Thersites’ unforgettable comparison of the Greeks to running boils with botchy cores (2.1.5-6), as well as Achilles’ description of Thersites as a “core of envy” (5.1.4). It is telling, of course, that immediately after his discovery of the rotted-away shell, Hector’s realist chivalry should come into direct conflict with Achilles’ constructivist policy, and with such disastrous consequences. The putrefied corpse remains onstage while Hector is brutally murdered by the Myrmidons, and we thus cannot help but wonder if the natural feudal chivalric order to which Hector
subscribes is itself just such a hollow shell, superficially attractive but fetid within, and one
where the appearance of substantiality is nothing more than an illusion.

At a number of other points, the play takes essentialist claims and unequivocally
situates them within differential systems. We might take Pandarus and Cressida’s wry
discussion of Hector and Troilus as an example:

PANDARUS [. . .] Troilus is the better man of the two.
CRESSIDA O Jupiter! There’s no comparison.
PANDARUS What, not between Troilus and Hector? Do you know a man
if you see him?
CRESSIDA Ay, if I ever saw him before and knew him.
PANDARUS Well, I say Troilus is Troilus.
CRESSIDA Then you say as I say, for I am sure
He is not Hector.
PANDARUS No, nor Hector is not Troilus, in some degrees.
CRESSIDA ’Tis just to each of them: he is himself.
PANDARUS Himself? Alas, poor Troilus, I would he were. (1.2.56-66)

One might assume that identity – either logical identity (that is, x = x) or else personal
identity (that is, I am that I am) – would be able to provide some sort of philosophical
foundation for the realist position, but the play goes out of its way to undermine even this
most commonsensical of beliefs. Pandarus proposes in this exchange that Troilus is a man
\textit{per se}, so authentic a man that other men ought to be measured against him. However, we
soon discover that the value of Troilus is ultimately not comprehensible on its own terms
and needs to be understood differentially, with Troilus situated in relation to other
individuals such as Hector. When Cressida charitably suggests that Troilus might
nevertheless be valued in isolation, since at the very least he could be thought to be self-
identical and thus seen to be as valuable as himself, her suggestion surprisingly falters since it
turns out that Troilus is \textit{not} currently “himself”: apparently, this both is and is not Troilus,
just as Cressida will later both be and not be, and just as the Greeks are reduced to
paradoxes of what is and what is not by the slanderous imitations of Patroclus and Achilles.
In this respect we might also recall Thersites’ brilliant parody of Ulysses’ speech on degree in which he declines the folly of the Grecian camp differentially: “Agamemnon is a fool to offer to command Achilles; Achilles is a fool to be commanded of Agamemnon; Thersites is a fool to serve such a fool; and Patroclus is a fool positive” (2.3.56-58). Here, of course, we must acknowledge that an essentialist foundation does seem to lurk at the base of Thersites’ social system, but only if we are willing to accept the idea of a “fool positive” as a transcendental signifier. In this same vein, we might think back to Falstaff’s own invention of a transcendental signifier to support his fabricated account of the bungled Gadshill robbery. Falstaff begins by drawing attention to his tattered clothes and punctured bekler, but then tries to cement the plausibility of his account by pointing to his sword which has been hacked like a handsaw and uttering the Latin tag, “Ecce signum” (1H4 2.5.154). A similar joke recurs in Troilus when Pandarus – quite feasibly, the very same member of the Lord Chamberlain’s Men who played Falstaff – appraises Hector as he returns from battle:

PANDARUS  Look you what hacks are on his helmet. Look you yonder, do you see? Look you there. There’s no jesting. There’s laying on, take’t off who will, as they say. There be hacks.
CRESSIDA  Be those with swords?
PANDARUS  Swords, anything, he cares not. (1.2.197-202)

There be hacks indeed. Claims toward realist authenticity in Troilus are consistently deflated and undermined in an exhilarating variety of ways, and since self-identity itself is left in question, it surely cannot seem plausible to maintain that the play as a whole advocates anything resembling a realist conception of value.

At the same time, we would be hard pressed to maintain that the play advances a constructivist position, the usual alternative to realism, for its assault on constructivism seems no more sympathetic than its savaging of realism. Realist truth may well have a botchy core, as Thersites suggests, but he observes equally convincingly that constructivist
opinion can be worn “on both sides like a leather jerkin” (3.3.255-56). The dangers attendant upon constructivism are especially evident in the case of Helen, whose appearance in the middle of the play shines forth like a great beacon to mediocrity. Bradshaw makes the excellent observation that the only point of agreement to be found among critics of Troilus is on the staggering worthlessness of Helen (132), and here the agreement seems more or less unanimous. Of course, she is described by a servant in the play as “the mortal Venus, the heart-blood of beauty, love’s visible soul” (3.1.30-31), but in performance, her single appearance at the midpoint is invariably anticlimactic, giving the play a botchy core all its own. Even Helen’s staunchest defenders in the Trojan camp make tellingly unfortunate choices of words when they come to her defence: Troilus, for example, compares her to soiled clothes that one would like to return to a merchant and to left-over food that one is tempted to throw into an “unrespective sieve” (2.2.68-71), and even Paris himself refers to the soil that clings to her “fair rape” (2.2.147-48). Among the Greeks, Diomedes deserves special credit for the venom he shows toward every scruple of Helen’s “contaminated carrion weight” (4.1.56-76), and Thersites surely warrants an honourable mention for his ten uses of the word “whore,” often in reference to Helen.

At the same time, Helen is quite clearly at the centre of the play’s various economies (the erotic economy, the political economy, the homosocial economy of identity, and so on). Mead argues that Troilus might be read as a bullionist war, one in which Helen is the bullion (248), but I think this is a serious misstep: the play makes it abundantly clear that Helen is above all else completely insubstantial, and is thus entirely constructed valuation with no correspondent real substance. Cook’s reading, on the other hand, seems to me to be completely persuasive:

Helen functions purely as a cipher in the world of Troilus and Cressida. [. . .] Her absence from Menelaus’ bed is the nothing or lack which generates both
desire and violence, and which makes possible all value and identity. [... ] As the empty marker of value in the economy of masculine desire, she is also the black hole which draws all things to it. (39)

To commandeer (and to pervert) one of Lear’s Fool’s greatest insights, we might suggest that Helen is, above all, an O with a figure. There seems to be absolutely nothing to her, yet despite being such a big nothing when considered on her own terms, in the context of the differential economy at large, her O has the alarming capacity to turn ones into tens into hundreds into thousands.24 The number zero, of course, was an Arab invention that had only been recently introduced into English computation; Shakespeare was part of the first generation to be introduced to the zero in grammar school.25 Why are the Greeks and Trojans struggling so much with making sense of Helen? She is the new math. More pointedly, she represents everything that bullionists like Malynes fear, since her valuation has come completely unglued from her substance. As a result, I find it difficult to read Troilus as an endorsement of constructivism, since the play’s depiction of Helen seems to be an emblematic warning against placing too much faith in valuation, just as the episode with the putrefied corpse seem to be a warning against placing too much faith in substance.

Would it then make sense to suggest that the play pushes us instead toward a third option of pragmatism, much in the way that (as I argue above) Richard III undermines established political and psychological binaries in order to advance an alternative pragmatic conceptions of responsible government and an enculturated self? With Troilus, however, matters seem to be somewhat more complicated, mainly by the persistent gall of Thersites. It does seem to me that Ulysses’ brand of pragmatism is presented as a more attractive

---

24 Here we might compare the use of this image by the Prologue in Henry V and by Polixenes in The Winter’s Tale: “O pardon: since a crooked figure may / Attest in little place a million, / And let us, ciphers to this great account, / On your imaginary forces work” (H5 Pr.15-19); “And therefore, like a cipher, / Yet standing in rich place, I multiply / With one ‘We thank you’ many thousands more / That go before it” (WT 1.2.6-9).

25 Apropos of nothing, see Colie 219-51 and Rotman 57-86.
alternative to Agamemnon’s realism and Achilles’ constructivism, and yet at the same time, it hardly seems sufficient in and of itself as a theory of value. Pragmatism, after all, grounds itself in the workings of a culture, and it thus relies upon the concept of a coherent culture to exactly the same extent that realism relies upon the concept of a correspondent nature and that constructivism relies upon the concept of a constructive power. Unfortunately, when placed under scrutiny, culture inevitably fails to cohere (just as nature fails to correspond and power fails to construct). This is precisely the sort of objection that Derrida raises against structuralism when he proposes that we reject the idea of difference and turn instead toward différance, and this is also the sort of assault that we see Thersites, a proto-deconstructivist if there ever were one, launch against the proto-structuralist Ulysses. In this highly quotable play, the line that echoes longest in my ears is Thersites’ pronouncement: “Lechery, lechery, still wars and lechery; nothing else holds fashion” (5.2.193-94); he later adds the trenchant observation that “lechery eats itself” (5.4.29-30). In contrast to the well-ordered hive of valued workers performing valuable work that Ulysses tries to fantasize into existence, we leave the theatre with Thersites’ vision of a perpetual deferral of value, a world of continual self-consumption, lodged in our minds. Is this sceptical inclination toward nihilism the vision endorsed by the whole of the play? Is love nothing more than a generation of vipers, as Pandarus wonders (3.1.123-24)? It seems to me that after the play systematically undercuts Agamemnon’s (and sometimes Hector’s) realism, Achilles’ (and perhaps Paris’s) constructivism, and Ulysses’ (and sometimes Troilus’s) pragmatism, we are left with little to side with other than Thersites’ entertaining scepticism. However, I am still not entirely convinced that the botchy-core, running-sore world of Thersites provides us with a preferable alternative to no choice at all. Here, however, we have ventured into the realm of
early modern scepticism – a fraught subject if there ever were one – a question that I shall take up afresh in the next chapter.
Chapter 4

Hearing Voices in Montaigne, Wittgenstein, and Coriolanus

It seems certain, that though a man, in a flush of humour [. . .] may entirely renounce all belief and opinion, it is impossible for him to persevere in this total scepticism, or make it appear in his conduct for a few hours.

– Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (132)

In the previous chapter, I informally described Thersites’ philosophical attitude as being “sceptical,” but this is a decision that I feel warrants further consideration. Certainly Thersites might be seen to count as a sceptic in our current sense of the term, but early modern scepticism was a beast quite different from its present-day counterpart, and we would do well to historicize such philosophical concepts with care. Shakespeare’s transactions with early modern scepticism have received considerable attention in recent years, but most of these discussions tend to rely upon a conception of scepticism so broad in its scope as to be almost meaningless. David Bevington, for example, in his discussion of the “sceptical” interests evident in Shakespeare’s plays, suggests that both Edmund and Edgar might be considered sceptics: he takes Edmund to be a sceptic because he is a social constructivist who presents an “intellectual and sceptical challenge […] to traditional ideas of moral and religious order,” while he ventures that Edgar is “a sceptic because he is a realist,” one who “sees the need to banish the illusion that things are bound to turn out all right sooner or later” (*Shakespeare* 146). At the same time, Bevington also maintains that the half-brothers are ideologically opposed to each other in every important respect (146), and so I am far from clear about what he hopes to gain by classing both Edmund’s radical constructivism and Edgar’s level-headed realism as “scepticism.” We might find a similar conceptual blurriness at work in Michael Stigley’s recent book on Shakespeare’s scepticism.
Surprisingly, Srigley begins his argument with a discussion of Hotspur’s “scepticism,” arguing that his commonsense rejection of Glendower’s mumbo jumbo might be seen to link him to Ralegh, the School of Night, and in general to “the vogue of sceptical attitudes that emerged during the course of the sixteenth century” (13) – and this a man who kills him some six or seven dozen Scots at a breakfast. Srigley’s argument proceeds to embrace nearly every conceivable instance of early modern questioning as an example of scepticism, uncomfortably situating the archetype for early modern scepticism in Bacon’s proto-science, a philosophical position which would seem to me to be as dogmatic as any imaginable. Millicent Bell does a somewhat better job of providing a credible historical context for Shakespearean scepticism in the opening chapter of her recent book on the subject, but her subsequent discussion of Shakespeare’s tragedies consistently reverts to a casual conception of scepticism as a general dubiousness about received ideas.\(^1\) William M. Hamlin thus seems to me to be spot on in his suggestion that most discussions of early modern scepticism offered to date show a worrisome tendency to gather together any number of incompatible philosophical positions under a single broad aegis, conflating “naturalism, disillusionment, atheism, fin de siècle social anxiety, ‘Jacobean melancholy,’ anti-stoicism, challenges to prevailing ideology, and varieties of religious heterodoxy” with one another into a shapeless muddle of unorthodoxy (“Skepticism” 293).\(^2\)

---

1 I might add that Bell’s peculiar decision to include no footnotes whatsoever in her ostensibly historicist book, as well as her reference to Jonathan Dollimore as “Jonathan Dolliver” (xii), breeds a scepticism all its own.

2 Hamlin has recently published the most impressive book to date on early modern English scepticism, *Tragedy and Scepticism in Shakespeare’s England*, which should be the starting point for anyone interested in the subject. Of the dozens of recent articles written on Shakespeare and scepticism, the most notable seem to me to be: Kent Cartwright, “Scepticism and Theatre in *Macbeth*”; John D. Cox, “Shakespeare’s Religious and Moral Thinking: Skepticism or Suspicion?”; Lars Engle, “*Measure for Measure* and Modernity: The Problem of the Sceptic’s Authority”; Ronald Knowles, “Hamlet and Counter-Humanism”; Anita Gilman Sherman, “Disowning Knowledge of Jessica, or Shylock’s Skepticism”; and Richard Strier, “Shakespeare and the Skeptics.” As well, Robert B. Pierce’s “Shakespeare and the Ten Modes of Scepticism” warrants special mention for its careful historicization of modes of scepticism evident in Shakespeare.
In spite of the considerable latitude that these discussions allow in their conception of scepticism, most of them are predominantly historicist in their interests and they thus make an attempt to situate early modern scepticism historically with some precision.

Drawing on Richard Popkin’s long-established and still-definitive historical account of the subject, they typically begin by drawing attention to two Latin translations of the ancient Greek sceptic Sextus Empiricus that were published on the continent in the 1560s, translations that can be reasonably said to have launched the great revival of early modern interest in classical scepticism. They usually proceed to make note of Thomas Nashe’s intriguing 1591 allusion to an apparently lost English translation of Sextus’s work, and also mention in passing a short contemporary treatise called *The Sceptick* that is sometimes attributed to Ralegh and is now thought to be this “lost” translation of Sextus. Very often, they pause to speculate on the extent that Florio’s translations of Montaigne’s *Essays* might have circulated in manuscript in the decade prior to their 1603 publication. However, after establishing this very specific historical context for early modern scepticism – a context that would seem defined it quite unmistakably in terms of the Pyrrhonian sceptical practice outlined in detail by Sextus and employed so dazzlingly by Montaigne in the “Apology for Raymond Sebond” – these readings almost invariably proceed to explore Shakespeare’s “scepticism” in the vague and open-ended sense that we now commonly assign to the term.

There is, of course, no denying that the interweaving of the various unorthodox

---

3 Richard Popkin’s classic history of early modern scepticism, first published in 1960, has recently been updated as *The History of Scepticism: From Savonarola to Bayle* and remains the best starting point for any reading in the subject. Alan Bailey’s *Sextus Empiricus and Pyrrhonian Scepticism* provides a rich account and assessment of Sextus in particular and ancient scepticism in general from a contemporary perspective. Luciano Floridi’s *Sextus Empiricus: The Transmission and Recovery of Pyrrhonism* offers an authoritative bibliographic account of the early modern manuscript and print history of Sextus’s writings. Nashe’s reference to the translation of Sextus is found in his “Preface to *Astrophel and Stella*” (sig. A4v). The best edition of *The Sceptick*, as well as the convincing argument that this treatise is in fact the “lost” English translation of Sextus, are to be found in William M. Hamlin, “A Lost Translation Found? An Edition of *The Sceptick* (c. 1590).” Hamlin also offers an outstanding discussion of the English reception of scepticism, as well as providing the definitive bibliography on the subject, in “Skepticism in Shakespeare’s England.”
philosophical threads in Shakespeare’s work merits our careful attention, but we should do well to question the wisdom of clumping so disparate a range of philosophical positions under any single heading, and in particular under the heading of “scepticism.” Certainly we should acknowledge that few to none of these diverse challenges to tradition need presuppose any particular familiarity with Sextus’s writings, and so the contextualization of these various philosophical positions against the specific backdrop of the Pyrrhonian revival seems unnecessary at best, and at worst misleading. Moreover, we should observe that in very many cases, these putative instances of scepticism prove to be wholly antithetical to the philosophical strategy outlined by Sextus, since they usually advance definite heterodox positions in opposition to the orthodoxy they challenge, and any such dogmatism is of course anathema to the Pyrrhonist.⁴

The hemiolic strategy again provides us with a valuable model to analyze this confusion and a powerful tool to help us clarify it. One of the most influential binaries in Western thought is the distinction drawn between truth and opinion, a deep-seated binary that is of course intimately interconnected with the fundamental underlying binary of realism and anti-realism. The realist conception of truth as a correspondence between language and reality (which is to say, a correspondence of statements with facts) has such a hold on our imaginations that we tend to clump together all alternatives to the realist account –

---

⁴ Pyrrhonian scepticism, named for Pyrrho of Elis (c.360-c.270 BCE), was a school of thought that flourished for some 500 years in the ancient world, though nearly all of our knowledge of the movement is derived from the late-period writings of Sextus Empiricus (fl. 3rd century CE). Pyrrhonism is most often defined in contrast to Academic scepticism, the variety of scepticism that was practised at the Academy under Arcesilaus, Carneades, and others. Academic sceptics maintain that knowledge of any sort is impossible, and set out to substantiate this claim by demonstrating that all knowledge claims can be doubted. Pyrrhonian sceptics, on the other hand, go one step further still and refuse to commit themselves even to the Academic position that knowledge is impossible. Instead of focusing their sceptical practice on negating dogmatic philosophical beliefs, Pyrrhonists abstain from pronouncing judgment on every philosophical question, including the question of the possibility of knowledge, with the result that their focus is placed on investigating knowledge claims with an open mind, not merely rejecting them out of hand in line with a predetermined Academic agenda. While Academic scepticism tends toward nihilism, Pyrrhonian scepticism tends toward pluralism in its quest for ataraxia (“freedom from care”) that accompanies the individual’s acceptance of the uncertainty of knowledge.
pragmatist theories of truth, constructivist theories of truth, and sceptical rejections of all theories of truth – under a single banner. We take the realist conception of “objective truth” as a philosophical standard and then produce a convenient binary by relegating all alternatives to this position into the category of “subjective opinion.” Furthermore, in so doing we readily fall into the trap of defining our conceptions of “subjective” and “opinion” in negative terms rather than considering them positively as viable concepts in their own right. Because we overlook the all-important differences between the pragmatist and the constructivist theories of truth, there are intriguing “digested thirds” to be found that have been effaced by our opposition of the objective and the subjective and of truth and opinion, thirds that the hemiolic strategy sets out to recover. As well, we should keep in mind that scepticism involves the rejection not merely of realist theories of truth but also of pragmatist and constructivist theories of truth: sceptics may regularly draw upon pragmatist and constructivist ideas in their arguments with realists, but this does not in turn amount to a positive endorsement of pragmatism or constructivism. To reiterate this important but often confused point, scepticism is properly opposed to all forms of dogma, and thus rejects realism, pragmatism, and constructivism with equal conviction. It is only because we have historically privileged realism to so great an extent that we find ourselves tempted to marshal all alternatives to realism, however incompatible with one another they may be, into a single anti-realist camp.⁵

Complicating matters even further is the fact that there are two distinct forms of classical scepticism at work in the early modern period for us to keep in view. The

⁵ Anita Gilman Sherman presents the intriguing argument that “the vocabulary of [scepticism] invites binary forms of thinking,” since classical sceptical practices (such as those that Sextus expounds) typically involve opposing dogmatic propositions with counterpropositions (290). The danger, of course, comes when we begin to mistake the content of these counterpropositions for sceptical beliefs in their own right, rather than as alternatives provisionally adopted for the sceptical cause and then immediately rejected. There are, of course, no sceptical “beliefs.” Accordingly, we might suggest that scepticism is primarily concerned with form rather than content.
differences between Academic and Pyrrhonian scepticism are extremely easy to overlook, but are as important to acknowledge as the difference between “atheism” and “agnosticism.” Academic sceptics deny the possibility of knowledge outright, adopting a programme of universal doubt in an attempt to undermine the credibility of any dogmatic claim that crosses their path. Pyrrhonian sceptics, on the other hand, recognize that this insistence upon universal doubt represents a dogmatic belief in its own right and thus might be seen to constitute a “negative dogmatism” all its own. They instead encourage us to adopt a programme of continual investigation, counterpoising idea against idea in an ongoing quest for knowledge while at the same time resisting the Academic tendency to imagine that the outcome of this investigation is predetermined. In early modern England, both of these conceptions of scepticism seem to have been in circulation. We find Donne, for example, claiming in “Paradox 3” that “amongst Philosophers, the Sceptique which doubts all is more contentious than either the Dogmatique which affirmes, or Academique which denies all” (Selected Prose 39). In fact, the influence of Sextus and of Montaigne on Shakespeare’s England seems to have been such that the word “sceptic” was regularly used to designate Pyrrhonian scepticism in contrast to Academic scepticism, just as Donne does. Similarly, we find John Beaumont glossing the word Scepticks in 1602 as “[th]ose Phisitiëns [w]hich deale [by] searching [in]to nature” (sig. E2v), while John Healey glosses it in 1609 as “Philosophers that held themselves discusers and exact inquirers of all things” (sig. K8v), both of them emphasizing the zetetic explorations of the Pyrrhonist rather than the knee-jerk nihilism of the Academic.

It is for this reason that I have called the validity of my earlier description of Thersites as a sceptic into question, for he seems to be much more fired by Academic negativity than calmed by Pyrrhonian ataraxia. Most of us, I think, would imagine there to
be little in common between Montaigne and Thersites, and it is important for us to remember that for Shakespeare’s contemporaries, Montaigne was very much the model of scepticism. It is the Academic mode, however, that dominates our current conception of scepticism, in large part because of the all-pervasive influence that Descartes has had on Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment thought: it is the spectre of Academic scepticism that Descartes wrestles with in the *Meditations*, and the Cartesian “method of doubt” very much underlies our current conception of scepticism as a form of dubiousness. Our Cartesian inheritance is thus the greatest impediment that we face in our attempt to reconstruct the early modern conception of scepticism, and it will thus take some effort for us to remind ourselves that the primary activity of the Pyrrhonian sceptic is not in fact doubt or denial, but investigation (Gk. *skepsis*).⁶

There is a second point that I would like to clarify over the course of this chapter as a corrective for claims that I make above. So far, my argument has repeatedly presented Wittgenstein as an archetypal voice of pragmatism, but this, I would suggest, offers at best a lopsided picture of Wittgenstein’s later work. To be sure, the *Philosophical Investigations* includes the most convincing account of pragmatism that I know of, and a great many Wittgensteinians remain convinced that this position is indeed Wittgenstein’s own. My own reading of the *Investigations*, however, is somewhat more complicated: it seems to me that Wittgenstein develops this pragmatic position in order to demonstrate the shortcomings of both realism and constructivism, positions that were as much in conflict in his time as they are in ours, but that he himself does not endorse the pragmatist position itself as a dogmatic third alternative. Instead, it seems to me that Wittgenstein takes something of a Pyrrhonian

---

⁶ On this point, see Anthony Palmer, “Scepticism and Tragedy: Crossing Shakespeare and Descartes,” an article that I discovered only after the bulk of this chapter was written, but which anticipates my argument on this point and a number of others as well.
approach to philosophy, setting the word itself against the word (as Richard II might put it) while refusing to choose between any of the balanced philosophical alternatives to which his writing gives voice.\(^7\) In this way, we might draw an important parallel between Montaigne and Wittgenstein, two thinkers that have only rarely been considered alongside each other but who nevertheless seem to display some remarkable similarities. In the first half of this chapter, then, my plan is to act on an Emma Woodhouse-ish impulse that I have, introducing Montaigne’s “Apology” and Wittgenstein’s *Investigations* into conversation with each other, since I have a strong sense that these two texts share some important interests and values in common with each other and a sneaking suspicion that they might get along famously, given the right opportunity and some gentle coaxing.

My hope is that developing this connection between Montaigne and Wittgenstein – two thinkers who might arguably be imagined to bookend the Enlightenment – will help to forge a path between our contemporary sensibilities and early modern scepticism. To put this idea another way, my plan is to use Wittgenstein as a sort of springboard to vault us over the impediment of Cartesian scepticism directly back to the era of Montaigne, plotting an alternative route back to Shakespeare’s day that manages to bypass the Enlightenment altogether. In adopting this strategy, I might add, I am obliquely endorsing David Schalkwyk’s compelling recent argument that Wittgenstein’s work offers powerful and largely untapped resources to literary criticism, resources moreover that have the capacity to reinvigorate critical theory, enabling it to free itself from the snares of neo-Saussurian constructivism. I should also acknowledge that my decision to approach Montaigne and Shakespeare via Wittgenstein has a great deal to do with Stanley Cavell, who I hardly need to say has used Wittgenstein so brilliantly as a starting point for his own investigations of

\(^7\) My reading of Wittgenstein as a Pyrrhonian thinker is also endorsed by Hans Sluga in “Wittgenstein and Pyrrhonism” and by Robert J. Fogelin in *Pyrrhonian Reflections on Knowledge and Justification* (205).
Shakespearean scepticism. In the second part of the chapter, I proceed to develop a new reading of Coriolanus that builds upon my restructuring of early modern scepticism, exploring how this reconfiguration of our analytic historical models directs our attention to new resonances to be found between the play and early modern theories of knowledge.

Many attempts have been made to situate Montaigne’s particular brand of scepticism in the “Apology for Raymond Sebond,” and yet despite this mass of critical attention, there still seems to be little consensus on any of the central disputed issues: the consistency of Montaignean scepticism over the course of his career; its indebtedness to his classical, Medieval, and contemporary sources; its influence on subsequent philosophy; its complicated relationships with his occasional Epicureanism, his intermittent Stoicism, his professed Catholicism, and his unprofessed politics; and its awkward coupling with Sebond’s own arguments in favour of deploying reason in support of faith. One of the main reasons that these questions prove to be so vexing, I suggest, is that Montaigne’s scepticism appears to exhibit wild inconsistencies in practice, not only from essay to essay, but even from thought to thought – as he himself admits, “I go backwards and forwards: my judgement does not always march straight ahead, but floats and bobs about” (638). Many readers maintain that there is nevertheless a single Montaignean voice discoverable within this swirl of ideas: Gérard Defaux, for example, argues that throughout the essays, “which are deemed so deceiving and so hollow, one voice makes itself heard, one presence, admittedly reserved

---

8 See Cavell, Disowning Knowledge, as well as The Claim of Reason and his recent “Reply to Four Chapters.” Cavell’s readings have been a great influence to me, but I nevertheless find that on specific points, I disagree with him as often as I agree. I suspect that this is because Cavell is generally more inclined to consider Shakespeare and Wittgenstein in terms of Descartes and the Academic sceptical tradition, while I am more intrigued by the context that Montaigne and the Pyrrhonian sceptical tradition provide for them.

9 Ann Hartle’s account of the ongoing disputes about Montaigne’s scepticism (242-44 n.4) is excellent and also provides a thorough and up-to-date bibliography on the subject.
and hesitant, but so poignant that it soon becomes impossible to forget.”\(^{10}\) I, however, find such accounts extremely difficult to fathom, especially since their “discovery” of a single coherent voice in Montaigne inevitably demands a selective reading of the text and, more often than not, seems carefully tailored to support a preformed critical agenda. Even Ann Hartle’s recent and deeply receptive reading of Montaigne sets out with the goal of locating “Montaigne’s distinct philosophical voice” (13), tracing its erratic “accidental” wanderings but insisting that it is a single voice nonetheless. My own experience of reading Montaigne, in contrast, seems to be much more in line with that of Sylvia Giocanti, who suggests that Montaigne’s reader “lets herself be carried from Charybdis to Scylla, from Epicureanism to Stoicism, passing by Cynicism and Platonism as well, […] without being able to extract with confidence from the discordant choir of philosophers a philosophical position which seems appropriate to him.”\(^{11}\)

Even though this account of Montaigne’s philosophical heterogeneity sounds much more plausible to me, I still feel there is a crucial assumption here that needs to be addressed: why is it that the “choir” of voices that we find in Montaigne warrants the pejorative adjective “discordant”? Could we not just as easily suggest that this chorus of philosophers is simply “polyphonic,” with some of his lines of thought running artfully parallel to one another and others artfully perpendicular? Montaigne interweaves voices drawn from his vast reading in extremely complicated ways, but in a fashion that calls to mind Bach, not Schoenberg. With this in mind, perhaps we ought to reconsider the approach we take towards Montaignean “inconsistency,” and rather than trying either to ignore or to apologize

\(^{10}\) The translation is mine: “dans ces essais jugés si décevants, si vides, une voix se fait entendre, une présence, certes discrète, hésitante, mais si poignante qu’elle en devient vite impossible à oublier” (791).

\(^{11}\) The translation is again mine: “le lecteur s’était laissé porté de Charybde en Scylla, de l’épicureanisme au stoïcisme, en passant par le cynicisme et le platonisme […] sans pouvoir extraire avec assurance du chœur discordant des philosophes un position philosophique qui lui soit propre” (38).
for his copious variety, we should instead focus our attentions on examining his interweaving of ideas as a form of philosophical counterpoint. In this respect, Montaigne’s multivocality offers a stark contrast to Descartes’s radical univocality in the *Meditations*, where we eavesdrop upon a single, private voice growing increasingly isolated from the world as it doubts itself into near-oblivion. Montaigne’s writing, in contrast, is conversational, investigative, and very much in the public sphere, scrutinizing ideas in a way that (to my ear anyway) anticipates the bantering dialogic style employed in the later writings of Wittgenstein. Montaigne praises Plato’s use of dialogue in philosophy because it makes him “better able to expound the diversity and variety of his concepts,” adding, “Variety of treatment is as good as consistency. Better in fact: it means being more copious and more useful” (568). He also praises the “freedom and vigour of minds in Antiquity [which] created many Schools holding different opinions” (630), and later elaborates, “The writings of the Ancients […] tempt me and stir me almost at will; the one I am reading always seems the most firm. All appear right in their turn, even though they do contradict one another” (642). With this in mind, I suggest that instead of seeking after a single definitive philosophical position in the “Apology” or in the *Investigations*, we instead attune our attentions to the counterpoint of voices to be found in each work, exploring in particular how a grasp of the interplay of voices in one enables us to hear better the interplay of voices in the other.

Wittgenstein begins the *Investigations* with an act of ventriloquism, quoting at length Augustine’s account of language acquisition in the *Confessions*. Before long, we recognize

---

12 Consider, for example, how much Montaigne sounds like Wittgenstein here: “‘What ought I to choose?’ – ‘Anything you wish, so long as you choose something.’ A daft enough reply! Yet it seems to be the one reached by every kind of dogmatism which refuses us the right not to know what we do not know” (562).
other voices creeping into Wittgenstein’s text as well – Plato’s, Frege’s, Russell’s, Moore’s, and most intriguingly “the author of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*” himself (which is to say, Wittgenstein himself from an earlier stage in his career) – all of whom offer variations upon the correspondence theory of meaning and truth (§§22, 23, 48). Despite their differences, these voices all rely upon a foundation of realism, working with the fundamental assumption that our words are made meaningful by their correspondences to the real natures of things in the world and that our sentences are made true by their correspondences to real states of affairs. Wittgenstein’s earlier work in the *Tractatus* had developed this correspondence theory of language to its most fully realized form, teasing out its implications and purging it of its contradictions until he was left with a logical account of language that could withstand the most arduous scrutiny. However, the success of his account came only at the expense of relegating great expanses of human experience into the category of things about which we cannot speak and which thus must be passed over in silence (7.0). In the decade after completing the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein came to reject the correspondence theory, and so this is the received wisdom that he calls into question over the course of the *Investigations*. He demonstrates that even the most certain philosophical truths – the objective truths of mathematics, to cite one example, and the subjective truths of phenomenological self-awareness, to cite another – can be meaningful to us only within the contexts of particular intersubjective cultural practices. In so doing, Wittgenstein contributes a number of compelling new manoeuvres into the sceptical playbook.\footnote{Wittgenstein is very often read as if he were combating scepticism – this is certainly how Cavell reads him in *The Claim of Reason*, for example. However, such readings tend to envision scepticism purely in the Academic vein, as the sort of strategy that Descartes enunciates and attempts to overturn, and certainly I would have to agree that Wittgenstein is not a sceptic of this sort. By inducting Wittgenstein into the Pyrrhonist tradition (as both Fogelin and Sluga have done before me), I am presenting an alternative view that, I suggest, might be seen to complement Cavell’s reading rather than contradict it. As a neo-Pyrrhonist, Wittgenstein rejects the negative dogmatism of Academic scepticism just as he forsakes all other modes of dogmatism, and so there is no inconsistency in recognizing that he rejects one mode of scepticism while practising another.}
However, unlike Descartes or Hume – or Nietzsche or Foucault, for that matter – Wittgenstein does not employ sceptical tactics in order to displace one dogmatic philosophical account with another. Instead, his scepticism is much more zetetic in nature, functioning as an ongoing act of investigation, a corrective against the abuses of our reason by the presumptions of dogmatic philosophy of all sorts. As he explains, “The work of a philosopher consists in assembling reminders for a particular purpose” (§128), but not in advancing any kind of new theory (§109). Wittgenstein seeks to counterpoise alternative voices against the received dogma of realism not because he wants to advance a competing philosophical account, but because he hopes to convince us to suspend our judgment on problems of no consequence to our everyday lives. The *Investigations*, we should note, is filled with strong echoes of the realist position that he develops in the *Tractatus*, and Wittgensteinians continue to debate whether his later work is better seen as a rejection of his earlier ideas or a development from them. In the absence of an articulated alternative theory, however, we find ourselves balancing our options as we read the *Investigations*, weighing our investment in traditional realist structures against Wittgenstein’s powerful subversions of these structures, and ultimately reassessing what we can defensibly claim to know through reason and what we must instead accept on faith.

Montaigne’s essay begins by looking back towards an earlier act of ventriloquism on his own part: his translation of Sebond’s *Natural Theology*. Sebond’s work argues for the validity of using reason in support of faith, a traditional patristic position that grants value to philosophy while at the same time unambiguously subordinating it to theology, and one that is also fundamentally realist in nature its beliefs about truth and knowledge. In many ways, we can see that the *Natural Theology* functions in the “Apology” much in the same way that Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus* functions in the *Investigations*: it provides a traditional line of
argument to be problematized, a realist voice that serves as a base (a bass?) for an exercise in counterpoint in which a number of alternative positions are superimposed upon the undersong of received wisdom. Montaigne’s attack on the value of human knowledge dominates the “Apology” much in the same way that Wittgenstein’s critique of correspondence theories of language dominates the *Investigations*, but here too we find that Montaigne never unambiguously abandons the original idea that his discussion places under scrutiny, the core realist idea that we can formulate a true picture of things in the world through our sense experience and reason. He continues to make explicit dogmatic realist claims even in the midst of his sceptical attack on all dogma, such as his metaphysical insistence that “Nature is One and constant in her course” (521), his ethical pronouncement that “only humility and submissiveness can produce a good man” (543), and his epistemological assertion that “Truth must present the same face everywhere” (652), despite the fact that elsewhere in the essay he quite explicitly denies that we can have any understanding whatsoever of nature, virtue, or truth.

It is, of course, extremely puzzling that this ostensible apology for the value of deploying reason in support of faith should also argue that reason is “most surely, a touchstone full of falsehood, error, defects and feebleness” (608), that it is only through Grace and never through reason that we might recognize truth to any extent at all (622), and that attempts to support faith with reason are in a sense un-Christian (623). Moreover, it is downright baffling that in the midst of so intense an assault on the faculty of reason (nestled in the midst of an ostensible defence of reason), Montaigne should then pause and suggest to his “Patroness” that this mode of scepticism is, in fact, merely a rhetorical gambit that he is demonstrating for her so that she may be better prepared to disable arguments from the propagators of pernicious irreligious theories, not something to be taken seriously in itself
These core conflicts, where the essay announces itself as both an apology for reason and an indictment of it at once, as an earnest philosophical profession and an abstract rhetorical exercise in the same breath, are so central to the argument of the “Apology” that they clearly demand a response from the reader. Although we can variously attempt to explain these conflicts away, as critics often have – perhaps Montaigne vacillated in his beliefs while writing; or perhaps the inconsistency derives from layers of revision over time; or perhaps he is engaged in irony on a deep level on one side of the debate or on the other; or perhaps he feared the political ramifications of publishing his more radical doctrines – we can also choose to suspend our judgment on the matter and accept the essay as a contrapuntal composition that showcases the tension and balance of the range of possible thought on these subjects. Furthermore, in so doing, we are simply taking Montaigne’s own lead and swearing our loyalty to the Pyrrhonian motto of “epechō”: “I am in suspense; I will not budge” (563).

The second voice that I would like to identify in the *Investigations* is the position that is most commonly associated with Wittgenstein, the pragmatic idea that linguistic meaning emerges from the practices of a “form of life” and that truth, as a result, depends upon the agreement of the social behaviour of a community. Wittgenstein sets out this pragmatist coherence theory of truth in opposition to the realist correspondence theory, suggesting that we are only able to identify a correspondence between words and things in the world after a place for such a relationship has been prepared within the social practices of the community. It is the agreement of our social practices that ultimately enables language to be meaningful, and as a result, whenever our discussions lack an underlying foundation of coherent practices, “language is like an engine idling” (§132) or more pointedly “language goes on holiday” (§38). In such an arrangement, truth is clearly not
universal or objective, and yet it is surely different from subjective opinion as well; it may be culturally relative, but its connection to the intersubjective practices of a form of life ensures that it is anything but arbitrary. Since cultural practices evolve to meet the needs of a given culture over time, meaning for a form of life will depend on use and truth on usefulness. This voice is clearly the one that Wittgenstein directs most of his energy towards developing in the *Investigations*, and I would of course agree that his development of this particular position marks his major contribution to twentieth-century philosophy.

At the same time, it is far from clear that he intends us to take this stance as a dogmatic replacement for traditional realism, although many Wittgensteinians have done precisely this. Time and again Wittgenstein reminds us that he is not advocating any kind of new theory, emphatically claiming at one point that the “main cause of philosophical disease” is “a one-sided diet” (§593). Crucially, we should note that if this pragmatist voice is taken as a dogmatic assertion, it is open to attack on many fronts, exhibiting weaknesses that Wittgenstein himself could not have failed to recognize. However compelling we may find this pragmatist alternative in certain respects, it nevertheless requires us to cordon off large sections of our private experience (our awareness of our own subjectivity; our private sensations; our personal ethical beliefs; our individual aesthetic tastes) as if these things were beyond the capacities of our language to express and of our understanding to comprehend. One voice in the *Investigations* argues for this pragmatist position firmly and dogmatically, to be sure, but I would suggest that the text as a whole is careful to demonstrate the limitations of this position alongside its strengths, clarifying for us the vital aspects of our

---

14 Particularly vulnerable, to my mind, is the idea of relying on a “form of life” as a foundational principle for truth and meaning. It is surely notable that Wittgenstein himself – far from presenting this idea as the centrepiece of a new philosophical system – uses the term only five times in the *Investigations*, and only a handful of times in the whole corpus of his surviving writings, sometimes inconsistently and rarely with any particular emphasis. (On this point, see Newton Garver.) Even when – in an uncharacteristic moment of apparent dogmatism – Wittgenstein seems to define “meaning” as the use of a word in a language, he emphasizes that this definition holds only for “a large class of cases – though not for all” (§43).
experience that we would need to sacrifice all meaningful verbal access to in order to subscribe to such pragmatism as dogma.

We might hear a similar sort of pragmatist position developed in the “Apology” in the many instances where Montaigne focuses on the relativity of custom from culture to culture. As he contrasts differing conceptions of beauty, of religion, of justice, of values, of cosmology, and of nearly everything else under the sun, he makes a strong case for the claim that the truth for any given culture can be shown to be relative to its particular practices. As he explains, “Any object can be seen in various lights and from various points of view: it is chiefly that which gives birth to the variety of opinion: one nation sees one facet, and stops there; another sees another” (655). This relativity extends not only from culture to culture but also from species to species as well: our own understanding of the world is limited by the fact that we experience it through a clearly restricted and arbitrary assemblage of human faculties, and thus Montaigne maintains that the world that we experience need not correspond to the world that is experienced by dogs or dolphins or dodos. His lengthy discussion of the rational capacities of animals and of their abilities to communicate has a strongly pragmatic thrust to it as well, subordinating reason to behaviour, since it is solely from his observations of animal behaviour that he concludes that some animals do indeed employ reason and use language within their own forms of life. In contrast to the traditional realist account of value, he suggests, “If Man were wise he would gauge the true worth of anything by its usefulness and appropriateness to life” (543) – as clear a statement of pragmatism as we might ever wish for.15

15 I examined Northrop Frye’s heavily annotated copy of the Essays, and in the margin next to Montaigne’s claim that “truth must be made to abide the yoke of our need,” I was intrigued to find Frye anticipating my response here: “16th c. pragmatists?” (390). Later in the book, Frye reiterates his verdict, “he was not a dogmatic but a pragmatic skeptic” (451).
Of course, such a relativistic account of truth runs directly perpendicular to his professed faith in the absolute truth of the teachings of the Catholic Church, an inconsistency that troubles a great many of Montaigne’s readers. Surely, however, Montaigne must intend us to be troubled by this tension and to question the relationship between realism and pragmatism in our own thought, to distinguish between those truths that we feel compelled to hold as objective and absolute and those that we might more convincingly hold to be the by-products of our cultural practices. In one breath, Montaigne will suggest that “religion is really no more than a human invention, useful for binding societies together” (653), but in the very next, he will reassert that his own religious faith is nevertheless absolute in spite of this admitted relativism: “Oh God, how bound we are to the loving-kindness of our sovereign Creator for making our belief grow up out of the stupidities of such arbitrary and wandering devotions, establishing it on the changeless foundations of his holy Word” (653). The “Apology” presents us with a range of philosophical options and then teaches us to weigh these competing alternatives against one another, but it does not seem intent on forcing any one dogmatic position upon us.

The third voice that I would like to extract from the Investigations is somewhat subtler, but it nevertheless plays a crucial role in Wittgenstein’s argument: the voice of constructivism. Constructivism is the position that we will most often think of in opposition to realism, and because of this, Wittgenstein takes considerable pains to distinguish the more novel pragmatist voice in his arrangement from the more familiar constructivist voice, emphasizing that we ought not to confuse his new position with more established attacks on realism (such as Nietzsche’s or Schopenhauer’s, for example). We can hear the constructivist voice most clearly in his discussions of giving and following orders and of formulating and obeying rules: here the pragmatist and the constructivist voices come into
conflict with each other about whether our social practices are themselves foundational and are merely describable by rules or whether our social practices come into being only as the products of the exercise of power upon one another. The constructivist position holds that rules are constitutive rather than descriptive of our practices, and thus constructivism maintains that our social practices are not fundamental in themselves but instead are grounded in some deeper foundation of the exercise of power or will.16

For the lion’s share of the Investigations, the pragmatist voice asserts itself more strongly than the constructivist voice, arguing convincingly that the exercise of power is possible only in the context of established cultural practices, since it is only within such a context that we can identify any action as formulating, issuing, following, or breaking a rule in the first place. Yet at the same time, Wittgenstein also demonstrates that the development of any such structure of cultural practices and the training of individuals in them in turn will necessarily rely upon the exercise of power, returning us to a chicken-and-egg scenario once again. Furthermore, in what is now by far the most famous section of his book, the “private language argument” (§§243-89), Wittgenstein examines scenarios that push pragmatism past its limits, exploring situations that take place outside of public contexts where we would nevertheless like to think that meaningful uses of language would still be possible. As pragmatism begins to collapse upon itself in these examples, we cannot help but wonder if a constructivist account of meaning grounded in the will of individuals would not provide a firmer foundation for us in instances where participation within a form of life is lacking. Again, in such cases the text directs us not towards a single conclusion but

---

16 As I have argued above, I do not mean by “power” what Foucault means by the term, but instead hearken back to the more intuitive pre-Foucauldian sense of the word. Foucault’s particular form of anti-realism, I maintain, is a hybrid of pragmatism and constructivism, and his conception of power as a result is compelled to do double-duty, sometimes playing the role of a mysterious force that determines our social practices and sometimes playing the role of our social practices themselves.
instead into a place of rich irresolution: we do not really argue for or against Wittgenstein’s discussion in the private language argument inasmuch as we continue to argue within it, inhabiting the text instead of simply responding to it.

Montaigne also introduces a constructivist voice into his polyphonic arrangement whenever he focuses on cases where truth is determined by the choices of individuals rather than the practices of cultures; he typically signals this distinction for us by using the word law instead of custom. When he redescribes truth in constructivist terms, he envisions it not merely as being relative to cultural norms, but instead as wholly arbitrary, subject only to the caprices of the wills of those holding power. His most memorable metaphor in this respect is drawn from the realm of economics: “Learning pays us in the coin of suppositions which she confesses she has invented herself” (603), with the result that “we now no longer try and find out what weight and value such coins have: each of us in his turn accepts them at the going rate” (631). He elsewhere suggests that it is in the terms of our will and not our understanding that we go about defining the natural world: “we have imposed our own commandments on Nature and carved them in stone” (588). But it is in his discussion of the wide variety of religions that he develops this constructivist voice most fully, chastising humanity for our tendency to invent gods according to our own personal whims: “In short, both constructively and destructively, we forge for ourselves the attributes of God, taking ourselves as the correlative. […] Wretched little Man, puff yourself up as much as you like! More. More. More still!” (595). Montaigne himself is clearly aware of the extent to which skilfully deployed rhetoric can redefine our understanding of the world, a point that he demonstrates in his tour de force reconstruction of the traditional hierarchy of nature, degrading humanity and privileging animals (502-55). He is particular scathing in his sketch

---

17 We might compare his use of the terms weight, value, and rate in this passage to the triad we find in Malynes’s treatise: substance, toleration, and valuation.
of the lawyer who finds a case “doubtful” until he is offered a good fee, at which point a
“clear and indubitable truth comes and presents itself to his understanding” (638). Yet at the
same time, he is careful not to give the constructivist voice in his essay too much weight,
since this would only serve to feed the vanity of humanity. It is for this reason that he
attacks Protagoras’s constructivist claim that man is the measure of all things with the
scathing rejoinder that “Man […] has never known even his own measurements,” which
“leads to the inevitable conclusion that both measure and the measurer are nothing” (628).

The fourth and final voice that I mean to focus upon in the Investigations is perhaps
its most memorable: the deflationist voice. Wittgenstein scholars are nearly as likely to
declare that this voice represents the “true” Wittgenstein as they are to associate him
exclusively with his pragmatic voice, portraying him as an anti-philosopher intent on finding
ways to dissolve philosophical problems rather than an investigative philosopher deeply
engaged in reconsidering these problems from a variety of perspectives. Whereas
Wittgenstein’s pragmatist voice encourages us to engage in a new programme of non-realist,
non-constructivist philosophy, his deflationist voice disparages the value of any analysis
whatoever, urging us instead to get on with living rather than wasting any more time in so
unhealthy, unproductive, and hollow an activity as philosophy. These disparaging attacks on
philosophy, of course, are reminiscent of Academic scepticism in their blanket denials of the
idea that philosophy might ever reach the sorts of conclusions it sets out to discover. “The
results of philosophy,” this voice suggests, “are the uncovering of one or another piece of
plain nonsense and of bumps that the understanding has got by running its head up against
the limits of language. These bumps makes us see the value of the discovery” (§119).
Wittgenstein uses a metaphor of disease to describe philosophy on a number of occasions,
suggesting that a “philosopher’s treatment of a question is like the treatment of an illness”
and that the “real discovery is the one that makes me capable of stopping doing philosophy when I want to. [….] There is not a philosophical method, though there are indeed methods, like different therapies” (§133). What makes these claims both perplexing and intriguing is that Wittgenstein appears to be thinking of philosophy in two different ways at once, both as a disease and also as the cure for this disease. Perhaps this is because he uses the word “philosophy” in different senses at different points, but it seems to me more likely that this fuzziness derives from an even more foundational disparity in his thought, a disjunctive ambiguity running through the Investigations as a whole about the value of its own project. When critics imagine Wittgenstein to be an anti-philosopher, it is typically this dubious, deflationary voice that they fasten upon, while ignoring the wealth of compelling philosophy that surrounds this voice’s occasional outbursts. But to do this is to mistake Thersites for the whole of the Greek camp: certainly there is an aspect of the Investigations which borrows the voice of the Academic sceptic to call the value of all philosophy into question, but the intensity of argument in the book itself paradoxically provides a de facto counterexample against any such doubt.

Montaigne also stages a number of attacks on philosophy in a highly memorable deflationary voice, trampling down human vanity for presuming that we can discover truth through our own efforts. “Philosophy is a hollow bone with no flesh on it” (566), he tells us at one point, and shortly afterwards, after running through a lengthy catalogue of dissenting accounts of metaphysics, he exclaims, “So much din from so many philosophical brainboxes! Trust in your philosophy now! Boast that you are the one who has found the lucky bean in your festive pudding!” (576). Montaigne shares the opinion with Wittgenstein that philosophy marks a deviation from “natural” human behaviour, and argues, “We would be better off if we dropped our inquiries and let ourselves be moulded by the natural order of
the world” (564) – a natural order, apparently, that seems to include everything in our experience other than philosophical discussion. It is thus also somewhat tempting to think of Montaigne as a sort of anti-philosopher, one who chooses to pass the time by collecting “the asinine stupidities of human Wisdom” (613) into a sotissier, an anthology of folly, as a reminder to himself of the futility of engaging in any such intellectual pursuit in earnest.

However, even more so than with Wittgenstein, it seems to me nearly impossible to maintain this image of Montaigne for long: there may be a good deal of anti-philosophical posturing in the “Apology,” but these deflationary comments are scattered throughout a philosophical discussion so rich in detail and so enthusiastic in spirit that they are instantly belied by their context. Intriguingly, Montaigne anticipates Wittgenstein in seeing philosophy both as an aberration against nature and also as a therapy to remedy this aberration: he recommends Pyrrhonist philosophy as a “prophylactic against the deadly plague which is daily spreading” through Reformation-era Europe (630).

With these four separate voices identified, we are now in a position to make a number of useful distinctions about Montaignean scepticism. Three of the voices that are discernible in the “Apology” present dogmatic positions, each employing a different strategy to account for truth and each grounded in a different foundational concept. The realist voice situates truth as a correspondence between language and reality, a strategy that presupposes the existence of an objective reality of some sort which offers us access to the natures of things in themselves. The pragmatist strategy, in contrast, suggests that truth emerges from the coherence of practices within a given culture, a strategy that presupposes a structure of intersubjective cultural practices within which our actions generate meaning. In turn, the constructivist strategy maintains that truth is determined by the exercise of power by individuals, and this strategy in turn presupposes the operation of a power that is able to
construct our understanding of reality and also to determine our social practices. In a broad sense, pragmatism and constructivism might be considered “sceptical” in that they call the typically more traditional realist approach into question, and certainly both positions can be shown to generate argumentative strategies that scepticism regularly draws upon. However, I would suggest that we would do better to avoid designating either of these dogmatic positions as “sceptical,” since in fact both of them offer concrete accounts of knowledge as alternatives to realism.

The fourth voice I identify, the deflationist voice, has a much stronger claim to be considered “sceptical”: in denying the viability of the three dogmatic strategies, it gestures towards the sceptical position that nothing can be known. This, however, is the strategy that characterizes Academic scepticism, the form of scepticism that Descartes would come to engage with so memorably and the one that continues to dominate our conception of scepticism today. However, as Sextus and Montaigne explain, such a sceptical stance is in fact a “negative dogmatism,” a position whose outright denial of the possibility of knowledge paradoxically needs to be recognized as a strong knowledge claim in itself. The Pyrrhonian position sets itself against Academicism by working in precisely the opposite fashion: instead of doubting every position, the investigative Pyrrhonist entertains them all at once (including the Academic position), balancing knowledge claims against one another in such a way that we can neither assent to nor deny any of them. This, I suggest, is the sceptical strategy that both Montaigne and Wittgenstein employ: a highly flexible scepticism that encourages us to inhabit the rich irresolution of a debate, amplifying our beliefs so diversely that no dogmatism will seem adequate to contain them, rather than a rigid scepticism that insists we limit our thoughts to exclude anything that might be doubted, reducing our beliefs according to the negative dogmatism that nothing can be known. With
these five terms (realism, pragmatism, constructivism, deflationism, and Pyrrhonism) established in our critical arsenal, I suggest that we now turn our attention to Coriolanus to investigate how Shakespeare – whose dramatic career coincided almost exactly with the twenty-odd year vogue for Pyrrhonism in England – brings these competing voices into concert in his own work.  

What makes Coriolanus tick? The play directs our attention toward this question relentlessly, challenging us to make sense of a character who seems to be defined in large measure by his absolute unfamiliarity. Everyone in the play, from his own family to the servingmen he encounters in Antium, seems to have a theory on offer to account for his baffling otherness, and yet none of these explanations seems quite adequate to the task of comprehending Coriolanus. There is something simply unfathomable about him – “unfathomable” in all three senses of the word, for his character pointedly resists all efforts to understand him, to measure him, and to embrace him. Earlier in his career, Shakespeare had experimented with developing other such enigmatic characters, characters whose motivations are either teasingly underdetermined or else bewilderingly overdetermined for us; here we might think of Shylock, Iago, Vincentio, and Cordelia as significant examples. In Coriolanus, however, Shakespeare elects to place this sort of enigma-character in the role of the tragic protagonist, intriguingly thwarting his audience’s expectation that they will be guided through the world of this tragedy by their understanding of the personal experience of the hero at its centre. In this way, Shakespeare takes his ongoing experiment in

---

18 Here I might again mention Pierce’s article, which anticipates my association of Shakespeare with Pyrrhonian scepticism (and also with Wittgenstein), and which furthermore presents the intriguing suggestion that Shakespearean drama might be seen to function as just the sort of polyphonic “therapy” that both Wittgenstein and the Pyrrhonists envision as a goal for philosophy (146). As well, Bradshaw’s emphasis on Shakespeare as a “radical” rather than a “dogmatic” sceptic surely aims to make a point of this sort as well (39).
problematizing the knowledge of his audience even further than usual in this play, structuring his last great tragedy around a core of epistemological challenges, not least among them, the problem of our knowledge of other minds.

Perhaps it would be more productive for me to rephrase my initial question somewhat and begin this discussion by asking, “What makes Coriolanus tic?” Here I would suggest that Anne Barton offers a telling insight: “Essentially, Coriolanus fears and despises words” (27), a suggestion that seems all the more notable if we take into account Carol M. Sicherman’s observation that this resistance to language is Shakespeare’s own contribution to the character and not something he derives from Plutarch (191). In the late 1960s and early 1970s, discussions of Coriolanus regularly focused on language as one of the play’s central concerns, and this approach generated a number of exceptional readings of the play. Over the past thirty years, however, critical attention has been riveted mainly on political and psychoanalytic readings of the play, and questions of language have accordingly received considerably less attention. This seems to me to be a shame, since the play directs our attention insistently toward matters of language. Concordance data support this contention very strongly: forms of the verbs “to speak” and “to say” each occur more often in Coriolanus than they do in any other play by Shakespeare, even outnumbering the references to speech in plays so clearly preoccupied with communication as King Lear, Othello, and

---

19 The most important contributions from this early period are: D. J. Gordon, “Name and Fame: Shakespeare’s Coriolanus”; James L. Calderwood, “Coriolanus: Wordless Meanings and Meaningless Words”; Terry Eagleton, Shakespeare and Society 98-122; Norman Rabkin, Shakespeare and the Common Understanding 119-49; Carol M. Sicherman, “Coriolanus: The Failure of Words”; Lawrence Danson, Tragic Alphabet 142-62; and Stanley Fish, “How To Do Things With Austin and Searle.” Nearly all of these readings, however, structure their arguments around binary distinctions, most often focusing on the distinction of public and private: Calderwood, for example, examines public and private languages; Eagleton contrasts “truth-to-others” with “truth-to-self”; Rabkin compares shame-based cultures with guilt-based cultures; and Fish explores the relationship of the individual and the community through a brilliant application of speech act theory.

20 Nevertheless, there are useful discussions of the play’s interest in language to be found in Russ McDonald, “Late Shakespeare: Style and the Sexes” and Kenneth Gross, Shakespeare’s Noise 131-60. The most interesting contribution to the subject in recent years is John Plotz’s “Coriolanus and the Failure of Performatives,” which shares my unease with binary readings of the play’s examination of language and even begins to suggest something like a hemiolic response to this problem, although only in very general terms.
The Winter's Tale. Perhaps more notable still is the play's insistent use of the verb “to hear,” which dramatically outstrips its use in every other play in the canon. As well, “voices” are referred to in the play a staggering number of times, nearly as often as “eyes” are in Lear and even more often than “death” is in Hamlet, a fact that strongly suggests that this deserves consideration as one of the most developed images in all of Shakespeare’s plays. Further images of mouths, tongues, teeth, and breath all contribute to the idea that there is a substantial speech-image cluster to be found in the play, and its many references to reports, to rumour, to truth, and to flattery underscore this point as well. The play opens by drawing attention to language, as the Citizens urge one of their number to “Speak, speak” (1.1.2), and the play concludes similarly with Aufidius ordering that a drum be beaten so “that it speak mournfully” (5.6.150). On the whole, I would suggest that the language of the play is highly self-conscious, consistently making us aware of its presence, its absences, its effects, and its limitations.

However, despite this insistent focus on language in the play, critical accounts have frequently suggested that this is a play more concerned with action than words, and that Coriolanus himself is, as Maurice Charney maintains, “the least articulate of Shakespeare’s tragic heroes,” one who might be seen to be characterized by his “natural antipathy to eloquence” (187-89). Even sensitive readers of the play’s language sometimes make Coriolanus out to be a thuggish brutalizer of language (Calderwood 215) or consider him to be so inarticulate that “his rare brief moments of eloquence” come as a complete “shock, almost as a fault in characterization” (Sicherman 191). Alexander Leggatt offers a useful

21 For all of these counts I have used Spevack’s Concordance. Forms of the verb “to say” appear 75 times in Coriolanus, placing it on par with Hamlet (75), and slightly ahead of Lear (70), and Othello (70). Forms of the verb “to say” appear 100 times in Coriolanus, setting it somewhat ahead of The Winter's Tale (93), Othello (92), Much Ado (86), Richard III (86), and Shrew (86). Forms of the verb “to hear” appear in Coriolanus 82 times, setting it well ahead of Antony and Cleopatra (57), Hamlet (55), 1 Henry IV (54) and Much Ado (53), with Lear trailing further behind (41). Forms of the word “voice” appear 48 times in the play, a count that is comparable to the 49 “eyes” in Lear and somewhat above the 38 instances of “death” in Hamlet.
corrective to these readings, arguing that Coriolanus is “remarkably shrewd, articulate, and quick-thinking,” adding that “he is also alert to the exact significance of words” (201).

Furthermore, we should note that despite his reputation for taciturnity, Coriolanus is an extremely verbal role for an actor: he speaks 24% of the words in the play, a figure that places him on par with both Othello (24%) and Antony (25%) and even slightly ahead of Lear (22%).

It seems to me that Coriolanus has a heightened sensitivity to the ways in which language can be used to alienate us from the world, and from our deeds especially: most of the explanations that he offers for his perplexing behaviour in the opening three acts explicitly direct our attention toward his distrust of language. For example, when Cominius begins to praise him following his stunning victory at Corioles, Martius balks and replies firmly, “Pray now, no more. My mother, / Who has a charter to extol her blood, / When she does praise me grieves me” (1.10.13-15). When Cominius persists in his praises, Martius protests that his wounds “smart / To hear themselves remembered” (1.10.28-29), and here, in granting his wounds the faculty of hearing, he forges a fascinating symbolic connection between wounds and ears that continues to resonate for us through the remainder of the play. We might wonder if Coriolanus imagines himself hearing through his wounds because, by some odd process of metathesis, it is primarily through his ears that he has been used to experiencing pain. Volumnia, we eventually learn, raised her son by loading him with precepts (4.1.9-10), and given her gross insensitivities to the nuances of language as well as her startling proclivity to fantasize rapturously about her son’s death and dismemberment in the name of Rome (1.3.1-44), we can only imagine how painful such an upbringing might

---

22 These calculations are based on Spevack’s word counts.
have been.²³ Facing the senators back in Rome, Coriolanus continues to resist hearing words spoken about himself, explaining, “I had rather have my wounds to heal again / Than hear say how I got them” (2.2.65-66), a puzzling but rich assertion that again unexpectedly privileges open wounds over open ears. This connection of language and violence is made even more explicit when he continues, “oft / When blows have made me stay I fled from words” (2.2.67-68), again drawing attention to his attraction to swordplay and to his correspondent repulsion from wordplay. A typically Shakespearean pun on “words” and “swords” percolates through the whole of the play: it seems that words and swords have exchanged functions for Coriolanus, with the result that he now treats language as an almost tangible threat, while violence has become his primary mode of communication. I suspect that there might be a parallel extended pun to be found running through the play as well on the words “voices” and “Volsces,” words denoting Coriolanus’s two primary enemies that tend to blur into each other both on the page and in the air.

Words, moreover, seem to pose a physical danger not only to the ears that hear them, but also to the mouths that speak them: as Coriolanus launches into his prolonged verbal assault on the Tribunes in 3.1, one that surely must remind us of his unrelenting physical assault on Corioles in the first act, he vows that his lungs will speak words until his mouth scabs over with tatters (3.1.81-83), further emphasizing his perception of words as corrosive physical hazards. Even when he stands most in need of the support of language, facing a hostile mob while being tried on a charge of treason, he seems utterly incapable of hearing words spoken in his own defence: as Menenius begins to describe the wounds that

²³ I might acknowledge at this point that my reading of Volumnia as a blood-curdling character has a longstanding critical tradition behind it, but one that in fact makes me somewhat uneasy, especially with respect to questions of how gender has been addressed in the play’s criticism. Christina Luckyj’s persuasive argument in particular has prompted me to question my response to Volumnia, and although I think her rereading of the character is wholly plausible, I still find myself inclined to think that many of the play’s choices are designed to elicit a response of horror toward her from the audience. (Angela Lansbury’s memorable performance in The Manchurian Candidate is very much what I envision for the role when I imagine a staging of Coriolanus.)
he received for his country, Coriolanus immediately interrupts his speech and dismisses his wounds as being “Scratches with briers, / Scars to move laughter only” (3.3.52-53) in a desperate attempt to avoid hearing these “nothings monstered” (2.2.73) any further. Many people, of course, have a fear of public speaking, but Coriolanus seems to have developed a very peculiar fear of public listening.24

Where might this compulsive discomfort with words – and specifically with words referring to his wounds – stem from? On closer inspection, Coriolanus’s struggle with language seems to be symptomatic of a deeper struggle, one grounded in concerns about the status of truth in the state of Rome. When Coriolanus first meets his arch-enemy Aufidius in battle, he taunts him with the most damning insult that he can imagine: “I do hate thee / Worse than a promise-breaker” (1.9.1-2). Unfortunately for Coriolanus, there seem to be promise-breakers as far as the eye can see in Rome, and Shakespeare’s depiction of life in the city life strongly emphasizes the dangerous flexibility of truth in Rome. The play begins with a civil brawl that has been bred of an airy word by Sicinius and Brutus, two characters who will break oaths as soon as speak them; Menenius then manages to quell this clamour with his own bravura verbal performance, one that surely must succeed on the strength of its impressive form and not its semi-coherent and generally offensive content. The citizens continue to play fast-and-loose with words as the play progresses, and Shakespeare increasingly makes the elasticity of Roman truth an object of satire in the play, culminating in the Third Citizen’s outrageous claim that “though we willingly consented to [Coriolanus’s] banishment, yet it was against our will” (4.6.152-54) and the Second Citizen’s equally

24 Sicherman reads Coriolanus’s reluctance to listen, and especially his tendency to focus on individual words out of context, as “a defect in hearing” (199) and as further evidence for his insensitivity to language. I find myself more convinced by Kenneth Gross’s claim that he instead shows an oversensitivity to words: “Coriolanus’s hearing is as acute as Hamlet’s; the noise of the battlefield has not dulled his ear for the political lie, for evasive double-meanings or self-flattering equivocations” (143).
ludicrous assertion that all of the citizens were opposed to the decision for which they
themselves voted (4.6.164). Shakespeare depicts a Rome where truth has become a
commodity that is bartered in the marketplace: the truth of any assertion is constructed by
the sheer volume of voices backing it, not by the nature of things in the world corresponding
to it nor by its coherence within the established practices of a culture. Thus, the play as a
whole appears to be deeply concerned with a central philosophical question: is truth no more
than this? Has constructivism become the order of the day? Do our virtues merely lie in the
interpretation of the time, as Aufidius claims (4.7.49-50), or do the interpretations of the
times instead show a pronounced tendency to lie whenever they pretend to define our
virtues? It is this cavalier constructivist attitude towards the truth in Rome, I suggest, that
triggers Coriolanus’s intense distrust of language, one that has grown so great that he cannot
even bear to hear the trumpets of war played in a victory fanfare without worrying that they
might somehow be “flattering” (1.10.41-44).

Why is it that Coriolanus shows such anxiety about the misemployment of utterance?
Recalling the four Montaignean “voices” that we identified above, it is tempting to imagine
that Shakespeare utilizes Coriolanus to represent the realist stance in the play, which is to say,
the traditional belief that truth is derived from an accurate correspondence between language
and reality, the position that is usually set up in opposition to slippery constructivist flattery.
However, matters are not quite so simple as this, since Coriolanus also displays marked
pragmatic tendencies in his consistent emphasis on deeds as the foundation of value and
identity, and he similarly shows constructivist leanings as well in his ongoing concerns with
the proper allocations of honour and other forms of status. Coriolanus’s pragmatism is
particularly important to note: although critics often read Coriolanus as an aristocratic snob
disgusted by the inferior natures of the proletariat, his complaints against the plebeians tend
to focus primarily on their laziness and uselessness, not on any kind of inherent baseness. It seems preferable, then, to suggest that Shakespeare develops for us in Coriolanus a somewhat more complex position: recognizing that language is capable of complicating our understanding of truth by bringing its realist, pragmatist, and constructivist aspects into conflict with one another, Coriolanus responds to this linguistic threat by adamantly insisting that these three aspects of truth be tethered together into a unified whole, one in which the (real) nature, the (pragmatic) function, and the (constructed) status of things in his world be kept in strict accord with one another. To put this idea another way, Coriolanus recognizes that the newly empowered range of voices in Rome has fragmented reality into the shards of perspective, multiplying competing truth claims like so many Hydra’s heads, and he responds to this pervasive threat of radical polyphony by insisting that all of these disparate voices instead be compelled to speak in unison. As he explains:

    my soul aches
      To know, when two authorities are up,
      Neither supreme, how soon confusion
      May enter ’twixt the gap of both and take
      The one by th’other.

(3.1.111-15)

Whenever possible, Coriolanus simply avoids language outright, since it is only through words that these competing aspects of truth can be pitted against one another, but when he does relent and participate in the economy of language, he insists that objective nature, social function, and subjective status be compelled to coincide with one another. In a way, then we might be able to recognize in Shakespeare’s depiction of Coriolanus a reaction that many of us have had while reading Montaigne: confronted by an apparent antiphony of competing voices, we find ourselves longing for a philosophical consistency that we are nevertheless denied, wishing that all of these contending voices could be made to conform with a single integrated reading. In Coriolanus, Shakespeare embodies the fundamental desire to impose
unity upon multiplicity. Critics have often recognized this aspect of his character when considering the play in political terms, but a compelling epistemological reading suggests itself here as well, one that might be seen to link Coriolanus to Bacon’s proto-science and the coming Enlightenment, and to set him very much in opposition to Montaigne’s Pyrrhonism.

With this in mind, we can begin to reassess Coriolanus’s struggles in the first half of the play. He is compulsively unwilling to accept praise in the opening scenes because he believes that granting any authority to the subjective statuses that are accorded him would threaten to open up a gap in the tenuous linguistic fabric, allowing for the possibility that his nature and his deeds would be engulfed in confusion. He would much rather have nothing at all spoken of his deeds and of his wounds – wounds that he relies upon to provide him with tangible, extra-linguistic evidence of his own identity, of his past performances, and of his history of “communication” with others – than to hazard such treasures to the reckless and inconstant interpretative caprices of language. In spite of his general distrust of words, however, we should acknowledge that he nevertheless does allow himself to accept a new name, the ceremonial agnomen of “Coriolanus.” Why? One plausible answer is that he feels comfortable accepting this title because of its precision: this (constructed) status exactly describes his (pragmatic) deeds as the (real) individual who conquered Corioles, thus providing him with a tidy bundle of nature and function and status that admits of no obvious gap for confusion to infiltrate. Cominius’s praises are dangerous to him because they threaten at any moment to lurch into flattery – note how Coriolanus compulsively protects himself against the risk of the verbal by hastily retreating offstage while Cominius

---

25 Danson makes this argument particularly impressively, contrasting Coriolanus’s need for unification with the play’s use of rhetorical figures of fragmentation: metonymy and synecdoche (146).
offers his report to the Senate (2.2.78-125) – but the agnomen “Coriolanus,” in its simple accuracy, appears to offer no comparable risk of misrepresentation.

At the same time, we must acknowledge that, like all other names, the new designation to a certain extent redefines the nature and the function of the object it nominates, reshaping our perceptions and expectations of its bearer. In this case, however, we might also imagine that Martius, despite the attendant dangers of any such redefinition, thrills to the opportunity of refashioning himself under the influence of this particular new title. He accepts his new christening, we should note, immediately after undergoing a process that very much resembles a second birth, emerging from the labial gates of Corioles following a tremendous labour within, covered in blood from head to toe like a newborn. By accepting the rebaptism that is offered him, leaving the stage “to go wash” as soon as he is called by his new name (1.10.67), Coriolanus effectively effaces his original childhood, thereby distancing himself from his (un)natural mother and the unbearable unstable world of language that he associates with her. Martius may well have been a vulnerable boy at one time, and one who felt vulnerable to words in particular, but Coriolanus is given the opportunity to be reborn like Athena, fully-formed and fully-armed, or – perhaps better still – to be reborn not as a man but as a sword (1.7.76), which in his mind stands as the very antithesis of words. Even though he may distrust accolades on principle, faced with the prospect of refashioning his identity in this new mould, the risks attendant upon acknowledging the value of this new status must seem to him to be worth the taking.

However, his acceptance of this new status opens the door for much greater dangers when he returns to Rome. Here, his mother pressures him into standing for the consulship, and seeking after this particular status requires him to perform functions that he recognizes as being utterly incompatible with his nature. Wearing the gown of humility and submitting
his wounds to public scrutiny do not simply launch an assault on his pride: they place the entire epistemological framework that he clings to under strident attack. He is horror-struck at the very thought of acting in a way that is false to his nature, of being publicly adjudicated for behaving in a manner that does not tally with his character, of opening up the sort of gap that lets confusion in. He begs his mother, “Rather say I play / The man I am” (3.2.14-15; emphasis mine), expressing in eight short words Coriolanus’s own personal credo, his insistence that his status and function and nature should exactly coincide with one another. He surely knows at this point what is obvious to the audience from the outset, that he is a wholly inappropriate candidate for the consulship and that his donning of the gown of humility makes him resemble nothing more than a wolf in sheep’s clothing. In seeking after this new status, he feels as if his mother has charged him to “counterfeit the bewitchment of some popular man” (2.3.92-93), to suppress his own natural dispositions and to possess himself instead with the spirit of a harlot, a eunuch, a nursemaid, a knave, a schoolboy, a beggar, a conman, or – perhaps worst of all – an actor, in short, everything that by nature he is not (3.2.111-37). He recognizes that in this action he surceases to honour his own truth, as he puts it (3.2.121), and the threat that he faces at this point is nothing less than a complete loss of his identity, the prospect of knowing himself no longer (2.3.137).

This process of seeking after a status that befits neither his nature nor his function disentangles these aspects of his world from one another and leaves him vulnerable to the
attack of the tribunes. By acknowledging the power of their voices, however reluctantly, Coriolanus enters himself into the burgeoning new economy of language in Rome and thus commits his identity to the whims of the marketplace. Sure enough, the confusion that he so fears soon bursts forth onstage in an absolute chaos of fragmented voices:

ALL THE CITIZENS
Down with him, down with him!
SECOND SENATOR
They all bustle about Coriolanus
Weapons, weapons, weapons!
ALL
Tribunes! Patricians! Citizens! What ho!
Sicinius! Brutus! Coriolanus! Citizens!
SOME CITIZENS and PATRICIANS
Peace, peace, peace! Stay! Hold! Peace!
MENENIUS What is about to be? I am out of breath.
Confusion’s near; I cannot speak. You tribunes
To th’people, Coriolanus, patience!
Speak, good Sicinius!
SICINIUS Hear me, people, peace!
ALL THE CITIZENS
Let’s hear our tribune! Peace! Speak, speak, speak!

(3.1.185-94)

At this point, surrounded by such a cacophony of ineffective voices (and worse still, voices that repeatedly cry out for even more speech) Coriolanus must feel as if he has entered Room 101 from 1984. He seems to have brought this tribulation upon himself, however, for in seeking after the consulship and in recognizing the authority of the people to grant statuses regardless of their propriety, he has betrayed the core of his own beliefs. To put this idea another way, once he admits that he is willing to be called “Consul” by the public despite the obvious inappropriateness of this designation, there is nothing left in place to prevent them from calling him “Traitor” as well. The voices of public opinion have become at last the sole arbiters of truth in Rome.

As Coriolanus’s struggle to impose unity upon multiplicity collapses, he undergoes something that might be seen to resemble a crise sceptique: despairing of his initial mission
to stabilize truth and knowledge in Rome, he now turns his back on them completely with
the unmistakably sceptical pronouncement “I’ll know no further” (3.3.91). Then, when the
mob banishes him shortly afterwards, he memorably responds, “I banish you. / And here
remain with your uncertainty” (3.3.127-28), emphasizing for us that what he abandons in
Rome is above all the incoherent mishmash of competing pretended truths. He could not
succeed at delimiting a single and stable truth amidst the cacophony of Roman voices, and
so he now despairs of truth altogether, opting to accept no truth at all rather than admitting
the possibility of a plurality of truths. Clearly there is a resonance to be found here between
Coriolanus’s crisis and the sorts of sceptical crises that were sweeping through the
intelligentsia of London in 1608 in the wake of Florio’s Montaigne, a suggestion that is very
much supported by the fact that Shakespeare departs from his source material repeatedly in
order to emphasize Coriolanus’s peculiar struggles with problems of language, knowledge,
and truth. This is not to say, of course, that we ought to read the character of Coriolanus as
if he himself were consciously engaging with these philosophical questions – this is not
Troilus and Cressida, after all – but only to suggest that Shakespeare drew upon
philosophical tensions that were very much in the air in his day in order to fuel the drama of
this play. Nothing, of course, would have been more fashionable for his original audience
than Montaigne; in 1606, in Jonson’s Volpone, Lady Politic-Would-Be exudes that
“Montagnie” (as she calls him) “has so moderne, and so facile a veine / Fitting the time and
catching the court-eare” that all English writers now steal from him (sig. SS2). It is thus
reasonable to imagine that Shakespeare’s contemporaries would have recognized the
hallmark of modish scepticism in Coriolanus’s banishment of the certainty of Rome.
Furthermore, careful readers of Montaigne might even have stipulated that this determined
rejection of knowledge is more properly seen as a gesture of Academic scepticism, the type of scepticism that Montaigne insists is better considered to be a “negative dogmatism.”

As he departs from Rome, Coriolanus embarks upon a strange project in which he seems intent on avoiding all forms of acknowledgement whatsoever. We first see this sceptical project in action in his awkward attempt at circumventing the usual exchange of names when he meets Aufidius in Antium, hoping against hope that Aufidius will be able to recognize him directly for the man he is without their having to resort to acknowledging each other’s identities. Aufidius is baffled by the stranger’s reluctance to name himself, and is forced to ask for his name some six times before Coriolanus eventually relents (4.5.52-72). After his adoption by the Volscians, Coriolanus escalates this campaign against language even further, forbidding the use of all names during his interview with Cominius, who explains once back in Rome that Coriolanus has made himself into “a kind of nothing, titleless” (5.1.9-15), refusing either to know or be known. When Menenius reaches the camp, he is similarly informed that the virtue of his name is not passable there (5.2.13-14), and when Coriolanus eventually emerges from his tent, he begins the interview by emphasizing his newfound and all-encompassing scepticism for Menenius, asserting that “Wife, mother, child I know not” (5.2.78), let alone old friend and lover. Here again he pointedly refuses to hear the embassy speak even one word to him (5.2.87-88), announcing himself as much as an enemy to status, to language, and to knowledge in general as he is an enemy to Rome.

During this scene, the audience must find themselves asking why it is that Coriolanus cannot make an exception in his plans of levelling Rome in order to spare the lives of his

---

Lars Engle has presented me with a compelling alternative, suggesting that Coriolanus might be better read as turning toward constructivism rather than toward scepticism, especially given his intention to forge a new name for himself in the fire of burning Rome (5.1.14-15). This reading seems to me to be compelling in its own way, especially in light of this line, but nevertheless, especially considering what follows, I am still more inclined to read Coriolanus as relinquishing dogmatism altogether rather than pitting constructivism against constructivism in his campaign against Rome.
still-loyal friends and still-loving family. His explanation to Cominius, that he “could not stay to pick them in a pile / Of noisome, musty chaff” (5.1.25-26), surely must seem unconvincing to us: after all, how difficult could it be for him to arrange asylum for a selection of his close friends and family when Rome is already sending them beyond the walls to plead for his mercy? My suggestion here is that this task of winnowing must seem so unpalatable to Coriolanus because it would require him to form judgments about who in Rome ought to be saved and who not, reintroducing him into the economy of statuses that he has sworn to forgo. His revenge is directed towards something much more abstract than the city of Rome and the people living within it: he is instead intent on destroying the verbal mechanisms of knowledge which Rome has come to represent for him. Thus he recognizes that acknowledging particular individuals to be spared would force him to engage with the very mechanisms that he has set out to obliterate.

However, Coriolanus soon discovers that his sceptical project cannot be sustained for long. After all, even though he attempts to refrain from acknowledging all distinctions of status, he nevertheless is forced to distinguish between Romans and Volscians in planning his revenge, and he similarly cannot help but accept the status of General when he agrees to oversee one half of the Volscian army. We learn from Cominius that during their meeting he faltered briefly in his resolve when he deigned to call him by name (5.1.9), and he falters yet again at the end of his meeting with Menenius, giving him a personal letter and confessing to Aufidius that Menenius was his “beloved” in Rome (5.2.85-89). When the final embassy arrives, however, Coriolanus’s sceptical experiment is pushed past its limits: confronted by his mother, his wife, his son, and a respected Roman noblewoman, he finds it impossible to avoid acknowledging the natural and social bonds that are interwoven with assignments of status (5.3.25). He cannot, for example, manage to deny to himself that
Young Martius is in fact his natural son, that he acts like his son, and that he warrants the status of being called his son, nor can he deny that Virgilia, both in her nature and through her deeds, deserves to be properly acknowledged as his wife. In short, he cannot live his scepticism. Coriolanus’s former self cannot help but rear his head again at this point, and like a “dull actor,” the sceptical Coriolanus begins to forget the part that he has assigned himself (5.3.40-42). Once again he begins to “play the man he is” and acknowledge himself as himself.

Confronting the final embassy, it seems that Coriolanus undergoes a second crisis, something that now resembles a crise pyrrhonienne rather than a crise sceptique, for here he begins to understand the inherently paradoxical character of his failed experiment in negative dogmatism. A Pyrrhonist like Montaigne might be able to explain to Coriolanus at this moment just how he went wrong, pointing out that in resolving to make no choices, he was paradoxically still making a choice; that in adopting the behaviour of someone with no social function, he was paradoxically still performing a social function; and that in redefining himself as a nothing, he was paradoxically reiterating himself as a something. These are precisely the sorts of arguments that the Pyrrhonist raises against the Academic sceptic, recognizing that we are inescapably bound to realism, pragmatism, and constructivism to some degree, since even asserting the claim “I resolve to know nothing” commits us to acknowledging ourselves as real beings, acknowledging the enculturated practices of resolution and knowing, and acknowledging the constructed status of “nothing.” Because of these inevitable commitments, Academic scepticism must be recognized as just another form of dogmatism, and one that is inherently self-defeating in its paradoxical belief that we ought
We simply cannot help but acknowledge natures, functions, and statuses in the process of doubting them, and thus however problematic the interrelationship of these aspects of our experience may be, any attempt to turn our backs on this complexity can only lead us towards self-delusion. Once again, I do not mean to suggest that during Volumnia’s silence, Coriolanus himself engages directly in any sort of overt philosophical contemplation along these lines, weighing competing modes of scepticism against each other as I have just done. However, it does seem reasonable to me to suggest that the personal, ethical, and political questions that he surely does consider as he reassesses his campaign against Rome find important parallels in the Pyrrhonian critique of Academic scepticism, and parallels that a public with Montaigne’s “Apology” fresh in their minds and Descartes Meditations not yet on their horizons may well have recognized.

Coriolanus tells Aufidius at this point that his intention all along had been to fight “true wars” (5.3.191), wars that for the first half of the play were waged in defence of truth, against the voices within Rome and the Volsces without, and that for the second half of the play were waged against the very possibility of truth in a vain attempt to destroy that which no longer seemed salvageable to him. Now, however, Coriolanus must come to terms with the fact that such a sceptical war, a war waged against acknowledgement itself, cannot properly be fought, let alone won. He can no more escape from the contradictions of the world than he can reconcile them, since being human involves a necessary involvement with the objective natures that we discover in the world, with the social functions that we perform in the world, and with the subjective statuses that we bestow upon the world, a

---

28 This, furthermore, is really all that Descartes discovers with the cogito, that he cannot manage to doubt everything whatsoever when he undertakes his programme of doubt: his ability to doubt proves that he is inextricably bound up with structures of nature (“I”), function (“think”), and status (“I am”). Descartes, however, takes this failure of negative dogmatism as a licence to begin dogmatising all over again, this time as a committed realist, whereas the Pyrrhonist will respond to the same situation by taking on an even deeper form of scepticism.
world that thus cannot meaningfully be doubted. The Pyrrhonists maintain that an acceptance of the inevitable contradictions of our beliefs brings with it an overall freedom from care or ataraxia, and that this release from philosophical turmoil is what the true sceptic seeks, but it is far from clear whether Coriolanus discovers any such ataraxia in the “convenient peace” he is compelled to frame at this moment (5.3.192).

It may be that at this moment, Coriolanus comes to terms with the necessary irresolution of the world, finding a sense of purpose in the bonds of family and of state that somehow allows him to overcome the “terrifying purist zeal for truth and self-sufficiency” he had exhibited earlier, and bestows upon him a sense of quietude of the sort that Hamlet seems to discover in his own final act. Alternatively, he may also emerge from Volumnia’s silence with a sense of utter defeat, reverting to his original fixations about truth and language, but now burdened even further with the painful awareness that he has become something very much worse than a dull actor: he has become a promise-breaker. Both of these conclusions make good dramatic sense to me, but I lean toward the latter interpretation, reading Coriolanus in the final scenes as a broken man, one who has reluctantly betrayed the very principles he fought so valiantly to defend and one who is now compelled to play the unlikely role of a spin doctor before the Volscians. In this moment of conflicted vulnerability, Aufidius finds it easy to bait him, and Coriolanus resolves once again that he will be judged for playing the man he is, emphasizing that in the Volscian histories – if they be written true – the name “Coriolanus” will properly signify the warrior who, all on his own, fluttered the Volscians like an eagle in a dovecote (5.6.114-17). The truth will be set right once again, he vehemently promises, with natures and functions and statuses unified,

29 I take both this phrase and this interpretation of the ending from an insightful set of comments offered on an earlier version of this paper by Peter Holbrook, for which I am extremely grateful.
provided only that historians tell it truly – and here we cannot help but notice that
Coriolanus finds himself at the mercy of words once again.

Although Coriolanus seems to end the play by turning away from scepticism, it is not
at all clear that the play as a whole should be seen to convey this message. Shakespeare,
especially in the moments when he deviates from Plutarch, regularly directs our attention in
ways that privilege an irreconcilable multiplicity of perspectives in the play, siding with none
of the interpretations that he explores at length, and thus in a sense we may observe that his
dramaturgical method here bears no small resemblance to the dialogic styles of both
Montaigne and Wittgenstein. The play presents historical truth as having not just multiple
perspectives but also multiple aspects, since historical accounts are always grounded in real
and objective events, as well as viewed relatively in accordance with how these stories are put
to use in varying cultural contexts, and also, ultimately, arbitrarily constructed by the biased
choices that individual historians (and individual playwrights) make in recounting them.

Coriolanus makes the tension between the competing aspects of truth perspicuous for us,
riveting our attentions on an intriguingly unfathomable character, prompting us to
investigate what we know of him, how we come to know it, and why we ought to believe
this account rather than any other. In short, the play places us in Coriolanus’s own position,
challenging us to forge a unity out of the disparate interpretations of his character offered
within the play, and also forcing us to fail just as he does, for we soon discover that no
individual reading of the character (including, I confess, the reading that I develop above)
quite manages to do justice to him. Many critics have been tempted to follow Coriolanus’s
lead into Academic scepticism, denying that any sufficiently coherent account of the
character is possible, but such an approach seems to me misguided. Instead, my sense is that
Shakespeare steers us in the direction of Pyrrhonism, of Montaigne, and of Wittgenstein,
toward a paradoxical acceptance of the rich irresolution of the character, of the play, and of the world that we ourselves inhabit.
Chapter 5: (This World is Not) Conclusion

This World is not Conclusion.
A Species stands beyond —
Invisible, as Music —
But positive, as Sound —
– Dickinson “501” (1-4)

Before turning to my concluding remarks, I need to address two clusters of questions that I set aside at the end of the first chapter. The first group, as you will recall, focuses on my pervasive (some would say “compulsive”) interest in triads. Are threes really any better than twos, after all? Is the fairy-tale allure of threes not just as captivating and just as inopportune as the symmetrical allure of twos? Would fours or fives or sevens not be worth exploring as well? Even if the hemiolic strategy yields interesting results on a few sample cases, what reason do we have to think that we can generalize any further about the usefulness of ternary analyses? Would it not be more reasonable to commit to a more flexible position of open-ended pluralism rather than privileging triads to the extent that I do?

The second group of questions focuses more tightly on the (apparent) rigidity of the critical methodology I propose. Since it seems at many points that I envision the hemiolic strategy to be something of a panacea for our critical woes, is there not something reductivist and dogmatic about my suggestions? What room is there for contingency and change in a strategy that seems to make transhistorical (or even ahistorical) claims about the natures of philosophical concepts? More to the point, is there not an element of foundationalism or even essentialism underlying my arguments?¹ In the first half of this chapter, I will try to respond to these two clusters of questions in turn. Then, in the second half, I will attempt to draw some conclusions about the arguments I have advanced, considering the formalist,

¹ I have been asked questions along these lines on a number of occasions, and I am always grateful for the opportunity to work through them, since they are concerns that I myself share. However, I would like to thank András Kisséry and Kristine Johanson in particular for giving these ideas an excellent workout over drinks one evening in June 2007 after a day of research at the Folger.
To begin with, then, I would like to emphasize that my enthusiasm for ternary analyses was initially predominantly pragmatic. Whereas binary analyses—especially when they are constructed out of false dichotomies or through negative definition—have a tendency to bifurcate, obscure, efface, or distend other alternatives, in my experience, ternary analyses do not tend to show the same flaws. Here in particular I am thinking of binaries grounded in the opposition of reality and social construction, in contrast to triads built on a foundation of nature, function, and status. (As I argue above, not all binaries whatsoever seem to me to be problematic, and of course, I should also add the further provision that not all triads whatsoever seem to me to be useful.) Why should it be, though, that the ternary model of nature, function, and status does not fall prey to the same troubles that plague the binary opposition of reality and social construction? I am above all persuaded by a pragmatist response to this question, namely that the reason does not much matter so long as the results work. I have been experimenting with the hemiolic strategy for the past few years, considering philosophical problems from as many different angles as I can fathom, and in practice I have found consistently that these ternary redefinitions of philosophical problems do not seem to lead us into the same sort of tangles that we so often find with binaries analyses. The question remains, however: why should we wish to analyze concepts in three respects rather than in four or five or seven? Again, my response is above all empirical and pragmatic: after a great deal of consideration, I have yet to find a problem of conceptual analysis that was better explained in four or more dimensions rather than in three. I should clarify at this point that I am making this claim about a specific class of philosophical problems, which is to say, problems of definition or of conceptual analysis,
cases where we set out to explain what we understand an idea to mean. Other problems will undoubtedly call for larger and more intricate taxonomies, but for cases of conceptual analysis, my experience suggests that concepts present three and only three aspects that stand in need of definition, and thus that ternary accounts are both necessary and sufficient for this purpose.

One explanation for the consistency of my pragmatic findings would be to suggest that concepts exhibit three aspects. What I mean by this is that there seem to me to be three classes of questions that we can ask about a concept we hope to analyze or a term we wish to define: we can inquire into what it is in and of itself, taking a realist line of inquiry that commits us to a set of realist assumptions about the world; we can inquire into what it does within the context of our way of living, taking a pragmatist line of inquiry that commits us to a set of pragmatist assumptions about the workings of culture; or we can inquire into how the concept ought to be respected, taking a constructivist line of inquiry that commits us to a set of constructivist assumptions about the exercise of power. In other words, we can imagine a concept to be defined in terms of its nature, its function, or its status, and so far as I can determine, anything that we might suggest towards defining a term or analyzing a concept falls into one of these three categories. Each avenue of approach, moreover, makes an assumption that it is incapable of defending on its own terms: the realist approach assumes the existence of stable reality that cannot itself be explained in realist terms; the pragmatist approach assumes the operation of an efficient culture that cannot itself be explained in pragmatist terms; and the constructivist approach assumes the exercise of a coercive power that cannot itself be explained on constructivist grounds.

These alternatives have been illustrated for me with remarkable clarity over the past few months by my interactions with my exceptionally inquisitive four-year-old, Beatrice.
Most four-year-olds, of course, are full of questions about the world, but Beatrice can string together such an impressive chain of “whys” that I imagine she would leave Socrates himself lying prostrate in the agora and begging for mercy. One of Wittgenstein’s most useful observations in the *Investigations* is his insistence that “Explanations come to an end somewhere” (§1; cf. §§211, 485), and in my recent experience with Beatrice, I find that they come to an end with me taking refuge in one of three familiar claims: in some cases I find myself saying, “That’s just the way it is”; in others I say, “This is just how we do things”; and in others still, I am forced to resort to saying, “Because I said so.” I could probably reduce these answers down to three single words: “Reality,” “Culture,” and “Power.” These, I propose, are our three bedrock ideas: we dig and we dig and we dig, and eventually we come to one of these three points where we find that we can dig no further. I choose to relate this anecdote because I think it illustrates two important points. First, experience teaches me that I need all three of these answers to respond to Beatrice’s questions: I can’t imagine doing away with any one of them, since there are many cases where one answer works well and the other two seem wholly unconvincing. Second, and perhaps more importantly, I have not yet come upon a case where I need a fourth “bedrock” proposition; these three really do seem to cover every situation that arises. These, then, are the pragmatic reasons that I have been advocating for specifically ternary redefinitions of binary problems rather than for pluralism more broadly.

Surely, however, it must sound as if I am making a worrisomely sweeping claim about the nature of concepts, at least implicitly, when I suggest that all concepts seem to me to exhibit three and only three aspects. This misgiving brings us to the second set of

---

2 This is not quite true, since there is admittedly a fourth set of responses that I sometimes find I need to employ: “I don’t know”; “No one knows”; “No reason”; and “Why not?” In these cases, when I find myself incapable of finding even a bedrock response to “why?”, I evade the question and offer an agnostic non-answer using one of the variant forms of scepticism instead.
questions that I would like to address: is this triangular account of concepts not a form of
dogmatism, or foundationalism, or even a covert form of essentialism? My contention is
that it is none of these. Certainly I am not advocating any kind of essentialism: after all, the
binary opposition of essence and accident is one of the traditional categories that the
hemiolic strategy rejects and redefines, and so it is difficult to imagine how my position
could at the same time count as an endorsement of essentialism. Moreover, the hemiolic
strategy is certainly not an endorsement of the kind of approach that I call realism, although
it does make room for realism to contribute an aspect to our experience. Realism, however,
carries exactly the same weight in my thinking as pragmatism and constructivism do: it
provides one of three dimensions to my understanding, but I maintain that if it is taken
alone and on its own terms, one-dimensionally, stripped of all breadth and depth, reality
vanishes into pure abstraction. For this reason, I suggest that my account of concepts is not
foundationalist either. Admittedly, it identifies reality, culture, and power as three seemingly
foundational concepts, since I take these three ideas to be hypotheses that are necessary in
order for us to think using any of the three dogmatic strategies. To put this another way, I
propose that any positive claim we can make is either realist or pragmatist or constructivist,
and thus it will necessarily presuppose one of these three “foundational” concepts.
However, my position goes on to insist, first, that no one of the strategies is sufficient in
itself, and second, that these hypothetical foundations can be imagined not on their own
terms, only by means of the other two. In other words, my account is grounded in three
concepts that are not only inessential but, in fact, utterly chimerical; they are simply the three
answers we have to choose from when we run out of answers. In a sense, they are not
answers at all, since they mark the limit of where answers come to an end. I would thus be
hard-pressed to describe my aspectualist position as either “foundationalist” or “dogmatic,”
although again I should emphasize that it is sometimes difficult to see how traditional binary philosophical vocabulary ought to apply to the position I propose. It is perhaps better to acknowledge that we are in open waters and then begin charting afresh.

What kind of argument, then, can I offer in support of my “triangular” account of concepts? Defining what a “concept” is, however, proves to be an even more difficult task than defining “reality,” “culture,” or “power,” but three answers suggest themselves nevertheless. In one light, I propose that concepts exhibit this triangular structure all on their own (a realist claim); in a second light, I contend that in practice, this triangular explanation provides the best account for explaining what we do with concepts, regardless of their actual structure (a pragmatic claim); and in a third light, I maintain that I myself am reconceptualizing concepts in this triangular way, drawing a new blueprint for conceptual analysis that I have not seen articulated elsewhere (a constructivist claim). In other words, all at once I am saying, “That’s just the way concepts are” and “This best explains how concepts work for us” and “Because I said so.” I am not sure I can offer a more satisfying alternative, unfortunately: we are in abstract territory here and we have hit bedrock in all three directions. There are times when I feel tempted to turn toward deconstruction to temper my claims, and suggest that I am making these competing (although not conflicting) assertions “under erasure.” However, I think that this approach would take me in the wrong direction entirely, since it veers toward the negative dogmatism of Academic scepticism rather than the position I prefer, the zetetic investigation of Pyrrhonian scepticism.3 In other words, I do not want to suggest that I mean none of these three answers, since in fact

---

3 For that matter, I might follow Robert J. Fogelin (who is himself following Jonathan Barnes) in distinguishing between rustic and urbane Pyrrhonism (“Skeptics” 163). “Rustic” Pyrrhonists, as he explains, are more committed to the sceptical side of Pyrrhonism, plunging headlong into the almost unliveable project of suspending themselves between all choices and choosing none. “Urbane” Pyrrhonists, on the other hand, are more interested in the investigative side of Pyrrhonism, taking advantage of the freedom from dogmatic constraints to tackle philosophical problems in bold and creative ways. I think Fogelin’s “urbane Pyrrhonism” sounds very appealing and fits in well with my own aspectualist position.
I mean all of them, and moreover, all of them at once. At the same time, I also recognize that each of these answers, taken on its terms, is one-dimensional and unsatisfying. My suggestion is that if we take them in combination, with none of them privileged before the other two and with all of them acknowledged to be both inessential and chimerical, we gain access to the explanatory power of these strategies without falling into the dogmatic trap of thinking that any one aspect is essential, sufficient, or even necessary, and also without falling into the sceptical trap of thinking that we cannot speak of such things, or else that we can at most speak of such matters “under erasure.”

Returning to the matter of Shakespeare’s plays, and adopting for the time a formalist perspective, my hope is that the hemiolic strategy of seeking out ternary structures alongside the familiar binaries and attending to the resultant polyrhythms has helped to elucidate some of the internal philosophical conflicts that we find in these texts. My reading of Richard III proposes that the play juxtaposes three political positions: a realist position embodied most clearly in Margaret; a pragmatist position embodied most clearly in Richmond; and a constructivist position embodied most clearly in Richard himself. In this light, the play dramatizes how these three competing philosophical and political outlooks are redistributed by a binary vocabulary that pits absolute against relative, king against tyrant, and subject against object. In conjunction with this conflict, I suggest, the play also takes a pointed interest in the question of the conscience, examining how Richard’s binary mindset effaces community on both political and psychological levels. This is registered in his struggles with pronouns at the beginning and end of the play, and is made especially clear in the staged manifestations of Richard and Richmond’s shared conscience in the final act. The spirits who appear on stage seem to occupy a communal space in between the material and the ideal, the subjective and the objective, and the public and the private, thus undermining
these binaries and demonstrating powerfully the extents to which Richard has ignored and Richmond has respected the social bonds of community.

In my discussion of *Troilus and Cressida*, I set out to make sense of the play’s overwhelming thematic interest in the question of value. My contention is that a ternary vocabulary enables us to comprehend Ulysses’ pragmatism, since it grants it a place in the symbolic economies of the play that is distinct from both Agamemnon’s realism and Achilles’ constructivism. Thersites’ scepticism, furthermore, can be read in this respect as a rejection of all three dogmatic positions, instead of simply a rejection of realism; this reading clarifies especially the difference in temper we find between the constructivist Achilles and the sceptical Thersites. The hemiolic strategy is perhaps less successful at making sense of the positions expressed in the Trojan camp, but only because the Trojans themselves are quite confused in their thinking. Nevertheless, in this respect it can still be seen to help us offer a better account of the Trojans’ confusion. Finally, my reading of *Coriolanus* explores the play’s juxtaposition of competing dogmatic and sceptical accounts of truth. Rome is above all a constructivist state, a place where words carry more weight than deeds or things in themselves do, and Coriolanus begins the play making a valiant effort to combat this verbal inflation by keeping nature, function, and status closely united, especially in the case of his own person. When he is persuaded by his mother to stand for the consulship, however, he unbraid this treble cord and, as if in sympathy, his world itself begins to unravel as well. In the second half of the play, I argue that his choices run parallel to the path of Academic scepticism, as Coriolanus sets out to doubt all truths in a fashion that, to my mind, anticipates Cartesian scepticism. This strategy of negative dogmatism fails him, however, and my argument concludes with the suggestion that what we find in the play as a whole is a turn toward zetetic Pyrrhonian scepticism such as we find in Montaigne.
Switching from a formalist to a historicist perspective, I also hope to have demonstrated that in Shakespeare’s age, binary and ternary strategies of making sense of the world were very much in contention with each other, arguably to a greater extent than we find in the age of modernity that followed. Admittedly, when ideas such as kingship, value, and truth were theorized in the sixteenth century, these theoretical accounts for the most part employed binary strategies, strategies that pitted kingship against tyranny, intrinsic value against extrinsic value, and truth against scepticism. These cases of binary oppositions undoubtedly anticipate the kinds of fixed categories that became entrenched in the seventeenth century, and so our critical readings of early modern literature have been predisposed to work within these familiar binary structures. However, I contend that in the sixteenth century, when philosophy was more fluid, alongside these familiar binaries we can find examples of ternary structures that have been for the most part overlooked by early modern studies. For example, since both absolutists and constitutionalist resisters defined their differing conceptions of kingship in opposition to differing conceptions of tyranny (in both cases, lumping their opponents in with the Machevils), I propose that we would do better to recognize that there were in fact three positions in contention in this debate: realist absolutism, pragmatist constitutionalism, and constructivist Machiavellianism. Furthermore, I suggest that a parallel might be drawn between Tudor absolutism and Protestant psychology: just as Tudor political theory contrasted the objectivity of kingship with the subjectivity of tyranny, in the process digesting the intersubjectivity of constitutionalism, so too does the contrast in Protestant psychology of the objective God and the subjective individual soul digest the intersubjective notion of community. My contention is thus that there is a resonance to be found in the early modern period between the political resistance to absolutism and a psychological nostalgia for community, a resonance that is registered in
particular in the shift in the meaning of the word *conscience*, and furthermore, that this complex resonance functions as a central concern in *Richard III*.

Similarly, despite the fact that early modern economists like Gerard de Malynes attempt to theorize the problem of value using a binary model, we find clear evidence of ternary structures in early modern economic practices, especially among merchants, and we also find Malynes himself consistently using three distinct terms to express different aspects of value: *substance*, *toleration*, and *valuation*. Thus, we can see that the early modern economic dispute between bullionists and mercantilists has a great deal in common with the early modern political dispute between absolutists and constitutionalists. In both cases, a realist position and a pragmatist position come into conflict with each other, and each side makes its case by associating the other with constructivism. Absolutists and bullionists insist that their views coincide with an objective and divinely sanctioned order of things, and because of this premise, they can maintain that constitutionalist and mercantilist beliefs are opposed to the natural order. Constitutionalists and mercantilists, on the other hand, insist that their position functions for the public good of the commonwealth, and building upon this premise, they maintain that absolutists and bullionists are self-interested and tyrannical, working in opposition to the common good. In light of this, my suggestion is that absolutists and bullionists digest a third by emphasizing the binary of the natural and the artificial, while constitutionalists and mercantilists digest a third by emphasizing the binary of the public and the private. Historians of the early modern period, I suggest, would do well to renovate these faulty analytic models in their accounts of early modern politics and economics.

Finally, I propose that in the case of early modern scepticism, we can find a variety of positions that oppose the realist conception of truth as objectively stable, knowable, and
expressible. Early modern pragmatists reconceived truth in terms of cultural practices, suggesting that something was true because it worked within a particular way of living, and this, of course, is the kind of cultural relativism that we typically associate with Montaigne. Constructivists, on the other hand, envisioned truth as a status that was determined and bestowed by individuals in power, a position that we hear at points in Montaigne but which we associate more strongly with Machiavelli. For the pragmatist, truth is relative; for the constructivist, truth is arbitrary. Over and above these two dogmatic options, however, there are also two distinct sceptical responses to the problem of truth: Academic scepticism, which denies that there is any such thing as truth and encourages us programmatically to doubt all assertions whatsoever (except, it seems, its own insistent claims about the impossibility of truth); and Pyrrhonian scepticism, which withdrawing judgment and instead encourages us to investigate competing truth claims, accepting them without endorsing them.

The influence of Descartes is such that we have come to think of scepticism predominantly in the Academic sense: the modern era in philosophy might reasonably be defined in terms of its quest for certainty, a quest that has involved a continual grappling with the spectre of Academic scepticism over the course of nearly four centuries. Before Descartes, however, the term scepticism was associated much more closely with the Pyrrhonian tradition, as Montaigne emphasizes, a tradition that lurked in the philosophical shadows for centuries before returning to prominence in the later writings of Wittgenstein.

The redefinitions I propose here open up a number of historical questions that warrant further examination. For example, to what extent can we group Puritan dissidents, Catholic recusants, parliamentarians, common law advocates, and others who objected to the absoluteness of the English monarchy into a single category of “resistance”? Many of these resisters seem to me to be pragmatists, but how does their common pragmatism resonate
with or clash with their other differing beliefs and interests? In particular, is there a
difference to be found between Puritan pragmatists, Catholic pragmatists, and Anglican
pragmatists? For that matter, to what extent was there an early modern pragmatism,
construing the position more broadly across philosophical debates? Are there historical
connections that might be drawn between political resisters, economic mercantilists, and
cultural relativists, or were these insurgent forms of early modern pragmatism independent
of one another? Furthermore, if we accept my distinction between pragmatism and
constructivism, are there new histories of early modern pragmatism and early modern
constructivism to be written, perhaps building upon Hugh Grady’s separation of
Montaignean and Machiavellian “constellations” of ideas in the early modern period?
Similarly, does early modern scepticism warrant further consideration in light of the
distinctions I draw between pragmatism, constructivism, Academic scepticism, and
Pyrrhonian scepticism? Finally, might these distinctions allow us to say anything plausible
about the arc of Shakespeare’s own career? It might be inferred, for example, from the three
plays I discuss that Shakespeare’s thought in the 1590s inclined toward pragmatism, but that
somewhere around the end of the century (say, with *Julius Caesar* and *Henry V*) he lost faith
in pragmatism and took a turn toward Academic scepticism, and then in the final plays
(beginning, perhaps, with *Antony and Cleopatra*) he shifted again, and ended his career
inclining more towards Pyrrhonian scepticism. By no means am I advancing this particular
argument now, but I would be interested to know if this plausible narrative for his career
stands up to extended scrutiny.

Finally, adopting a presentist perspective, I take inspiration from Montaigne’s zetetic
scepticism and Shakespeare’s myriad-mindedness to offer some reflections for critical theory.
To begin with, I would like to reiterate my inclusivist suggestion that we recognize
historicism, presentism, and formalism as complementary critical modes, modes that provide breadth and depth to one another, rather than perpetuating critical debates that focus on defining these approaches by means of binary oppositions that pit them against one another. Historical formalists like Stephen Cohen and presentists like Hugh Grady, it seems to me, are moving in this inclusivist direction already, although I think that these two groups would both do well to recognize the contributions of the other, abandoning their binary formulations to recognize that there are three strands of critical interests to be braided together, not just two. My inclusivist argument is thus directed mainly against exclusivist historicists who imagine that historical criticism is weakened by an acknowledgement of the critic’s situation in the present or an emphasis on the aesthetic features of a text independent of the material and cultural contexts of its production. Such a “pure” historicism, it strikes me, is wholly impossible in practice: we can never completely abstract our criticism from our own present interests and situations, however much some staunch historicists hold this up as an ideal; and furthermore, no matter how “materialist” our focus may be, there is no escaping the textuality of history as well. More importantly, the exclusivist historicist agenda privileges the “facts” of history to such an extent that we now seem to be facing the rise of a new positivism in literary studies, a position whose implausibility was established decades ago. David Scott Kastan wryly suggests in Shakespeare after Theory that his own critical approach demands a belief in a combination of “magic and positivism” (18), and although I appreciate the honesty of his claim, I am not convinced that either magic or positivism provides us with any sort of a viable solution. Undoubtedly criticism in the past decade has been marked by a pronounced desire to return to the material facts of history, a longing for “the touch of the real,” as Greenblatt calls it, despite the fact that we successfully theorized objective reality into oblivion some time ago. My hope is that my theory of aspectualism
offers a method for circumventing this dilemma, in that it allows us to incorporate reality as a meaningful aspect of our criticism without at the same time committing us to an endorsement of positivism, or for that matter, magic. The touch of the real, I suggest, is in fact available to us, but only when we give this one dimension of our criticism depth by acknowledging the contributions that are made by the other two.
Works Cited


*BibleGateway.com: A Searchable Online Bible in Over 50 Versions and 35 Languages*. 2008. 


Bonetto, Sandra. “Coward Conscience and Bad Conscience in Shakespeare and Nietzsche.” 


An Homelie against Disobedience and Wylfull Rebellion. London, [1570?].


Parsons, Robert. *A Conference about the Next Succession to the Crowne of Ingland Diuided into Tyvo Partes*. Antwerp, 1595.


Sicherman, Carol M. “Coriolanus: The Failure of Words.” *English Literary History* 39 (1972): 189-207.


VITA

Name: Rob Carson

Place of Birth: Toronto, Canada

Date of Birth: Oct. 23, 1974

Post-Secondary Education: Hon. BA in English and Philosophy
University of Toronto, 1998

MA in English
Queen’s University, 2000

MA in Philosophy
Queen’s University, 2002

PhD in English
University of Toronto, 2008

Honours and Awards:
CRRS Graduate Fellowship (2006-08)
SSHRC Doctoral Fellowship (2003-05)
Viola Whitney Pratt Foundation Scholarship (2003-05)
University of Toronto Open Fellowship (2002, 2005)
Ontario Graduate Scholarship (2000-02)
Distinction, General Comprehensive Exam (2002)
R. Samuel McLaughlin Fellowship (1999)
St. Michael’s College Silver Medal (1998)

Work Experience:
Assistant Professor, Hobart and William Smith Colleges (2008-)
Instructor, University of Toronto (2006-08)
Research Assistant, Shakespeare and the Queen’s Men (2006)
Teaching Assistant, University of Toronto (2001-06)
Teaching Assistant, Queen’s University (1999-2000)

Publications: