

# 'Full of ugly sights, of ghastly dreams': dreams and tragedy in Shakespeare's *Richard III*

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## **Abstract**

This article argues that dreams are an important and deliberate part of Shakespeare's conception of tragedy in *Richard III*. Shakespeare, when composing this play, exploited the uncertainty in his time about whether dreams were natural or supernatural phenomena in order to deploy dream devices as a form of commentary on the material as well as spiritual implications of his characters' actions. As a result, dreams ultimately sharpen the play's focus on human agency by amplifying the characters' ambitions, crimes and guilty consciences.

## **Keywords**

Shakespeare, *Richard III*, dreams, tragedy

## **Résumé**

Cet article s'attache à démontrer que les rêves constituent un élément important et délibéré de la conception shakespearienne de la tragédie dans *Richard III*. Dans sa composition de la pièce, Shakespeare exploite les incertitudes de son époque sur les rêves comme phénomènes naturels ou surnaturels afin de déployer des scènes de rêves comme une forme de commentaire sur les implications tant matérielles que spirituelles des actions de ses personnages. De ce fait, les rêves contribuent à renforcer l'accent mis sur l'action humaine en amplifiant les ambitions, les crimes et les consciences empreintes de culpabilité des personnages.

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**Mots clés**Shakespeare, *Richard III*, rêves, tragédie

Shakespeare's *Richard III* (c.1593) contains a considerable amount of references to dreams, visions and prophecies; John Jowett notes that '[t]he word "dream" and its cognates' occur more often here than in any other of Shakespeare's plays (25 times in dialogue, and once in a stage direction).<sup>1</sup> Most importantly, there are three major dream sequences or dream retellings in the play. These include Clarence's dream in Act 1, Scene 4, which ostensibly predicts his own death; and Stanley's ominous dream in Act 3, Scene 2, which seems linked to Hastings's subsequent demise and death. The play's most prominent dreams, however, affect Richard and Richmond in Act 5, Scene 4. Here, the ghosts of Richard's murdered victims return to haunt the king in his sleep and repeatedly condemn him to '[d]espair and die' (105); these utterances contrast with the 'Live and flourish' (117) that the same ghosts address to the sleeping Richmond. It seems that the ghosts' will is fulfilled when Richard's desperate exclamations 'A horse, a horse! My kingdom for a horse!' (5.6.13) are followed by his being slain in the field by Richmond (5.7).

In spite of their seemingly prophetic nature, however, Clarence's, Stanley's and Richard's visions ultimately echo the ambivalent status of dreams in wider early modern thought; dreams in *Richard III* are located at the crossroads of the supernatural and the psychophysiological, and this indeterminacy fosters interpretive uncertainty. Jowett writes that 'some [dreams in *Richard III*] are prophetic, some reflect the dreamer's state of being; sometimes there is little difference' (*Richard III*, p. 52). But dreams in *Richard III* in fact do follow a pattern, because Shakespeare consistently complicates the models of the prophetic and god-sent dreams, conventionally found in classical tragedy, by linking dreams to past and present circumstances as well as to the characters' mental constitutions. The outcome is a much stronger focus on the characters' interiority and on the ways in which they create tragedy from within themselves; this reflects the developments seen in early modern dream theories, which increasingly highlighted interior and human, rather than exterior and supernatural, origins.

Dreams in *Richard III*, unlike conventional prophetic visions, do not reveal a chain of events directed by higher forces and therefore do not materially change or shape the plot; as a result, they ultimately support Shakespeare's conception of the play as a tragedy in which human characters autonomously forge their own calamities, rather than being confronted with a predetermined course of action or being instructed by metaphysical forces, as tends to happen in the classical model. While it is true that the play's dreams, by reflecting states of body, mind and spirit, constitute potential moments of recognition for the characters – of their underlying fears, of their guilty consciences or of the likely outcome of their undertakings – this awareness is never entirely transposed into their waking reality; instead, the characters remain tragically submerged in the destructive environment that they themselves have created. Dreams in *Richard III* are always at the heart of Shakespeare's focus on how his characters create, advance and experience tragedy.

Even though Marjorie Garber has linked dreams in *Richard III* to ‘psychological observation, historical summation, . . . structural unity’ and to ‘the creative unconscious’, and Stephen Greenblatt has discussed the play’s dream ghosts in terms of ‘the intertwining of psychological terror, Machiavellian politics, and metaphysics’, critics have to date mostly examined dreams, the supernatural and tragedy individually in relation to *Richard III*.<sup>2</sup> Too often, moreover, criticism has simply considered the play’s dreams to be part of a dramatic tradition of prophetic dreams that are ignored or misunderstood, or has deployed Freudian psychoanalysis in a retrospective – and arguably anachronistic – attempt to overcome the puzzling nature of dreams in Shakespeare and in the early modern period more widely.<sup>3</sup> As a result, not enough attention has been given to how Shakespeare drew on the uncertainties in the early modern understanding of dreams, and deliberately modified dreams that he found in his sources, in order to help (re-)shape the tragic experiences both of his characters and of his audiences and readers; this offers an intriguing basis for a re-evaluation of the use of dreams in *Richard III*.

In order to show how dreams are purposely woven into the tragic design of *Richard III*, this article first sets out to establish the cultural background of Shakespeare’s approach to dreams by offering a survey of classical and early modern dream theories. It then examines the functions of Clarence’s, Richard’s and Stanley’s ominous dreams in the context of the wider clashes in the play between references to supernatural pre-determination or retribution, and persistent emphases on the human creation – and experience – of tragedy.

## Reading early modern dreams

It is not possible to achieve an appreciation of the functions and effects of dreams in Shakespeare’s works without considering how dreams were understood in his time. Early modern thinking about dreams was both directly and indirectly informed by a basic distinction, made at least since classical antiquity, between physiological and prophetic or supernatural dreams. This distinction was influentially outlined by the Greek writer and diviner Artemidorus of Daldis. In his seminal treatise *Oneirocritica*, he called the psychophysiological dream ‘*enhyption*’ and defined it as ‘a reminder of a present state’:

a dream that has no meaning and predicts nothing, one that is active only while one sleeps and that has arisen from an irrational desire, an extraordinary fear, or from a surfeit or lack of food is called an *enhyption*.<sup>4</sup>

The Roman poet Claudian, in a prominent trope possibly inspired by a passage in Lucretius’s *De Rerum Natura* and subsequently transmitted to the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, where it is found in Chaucer’s *Parlement of Fouyls* (c.1380) and in Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* (1595), talked about this category of dreams when he noted that hunters, for example, commonly dream of hunting, judges of lawsuits and lovers of love.<sup>5</sup> The second kind of dream referred to by Artemidorus, the ‘*oneiros*’, in contrast, was founded on the assumption that dreams could convey prophecies and originate from supernatural sources; unlike the *enhyption*, the *oneiros* thus reflects the future: ‘*Oneiros* is a movement or condition of the mind that takes many shapes and

signifies good or bad things that will occur in the future'.<sup>6</sup> According to Artemidorus, the *oneiros* is either directly god-sent, or it is produced by the soul, in which case the gods' ability to work through the soul nevertheless still means that it can be indirectly god-sent.<sup>7</sup> The same or similar divisions of dreams into natural (non-mantic) and supernatural (mantic or true) are found in the works of most other important theorists on the subject, including the author of the Hippocratic text *De Victu (On Regimen)*, Herophilus, Galen, Averroes, Cardano and St Augustine. The Roman author Macrobius, whose hugely significant fivefold classification system established important terms of reference for later medieval and early modern dream theories, as well as for the poetry of Dante and Chaucer, was himself influenced by Artemidorus and by neo-Platonic and Stoic philosophy as he elaborated on these basic pre-existing bifurcations of dreams.<sup>8</sup>

The classical period created a tradition of dualistic thinking about dreams that was passed on to the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. The influential medieval theologian Thomas Aquinas, for instance, distinguished between inward causes of dreams, which were located in the mind, the body, or the soul, and outward causes, which included the environment as well as divine and demonic agents.<sup>9</sup> In literature, the tradition of supernatural or visionary dreams flourished especially through the medieval dream poems.<sup>10</sup> In Shakespeare's time, these paradigms went on to shape, for example, Thomas Hill's frequently reprinted *The Moste Pleasaunte Arte of the Interpretacion of Dreames* (1559). Hill's work, which is to Peter Holland 'the most substantial attempt in Renaissance writing to produce an account of dream theory', explicitly draws on a series of classical writers including Artemidorus, Aristotle, Averroes, Hippocrates and Galen.<sup>11</sup> The kinship of Hill's treatise with Artemidorus's *Oneirocritica* in particular is epitomized by the Stationers' Register's description of it as a title 'of sertayne Dreames made by Artemedorus', and by its echoing of Artemidorus's classification of dreams: Hill essentially restates the fundamental distinction between 'vain dreames', which are 'no true signifiers of matters to come but rather shewers of the present affections and desiers of the body' (*enhyppnia*), and true dreams which 'do signifie matters to come', 'foreshewe al matters imminent' and 'frame the superior cause come vnto the soule' (*oneiroi*).<sup>12</sup> Artemidorus's *Oneirocritica* itself, meanwhile, was widely available in Latin, French, German and Italian throughout the sixteenth century, and was translated into English by R. Wood in 1606 and subsequently reprinted several times.

The early modern adoption of originally classical thinking did not come without significant recalibrations, however. In the classical period, the possibility of god-sent or otherwise supernatural dreams was almost never explicitly contested; among the ancient schools of philosophy, Stoicism in particular accepted all forms of divination, including divination by dreams.<sup>13</sup> Thus the prophetic and god-sent dreams found in many classical tragedies like those of Aeschylus were born out of prevalent cultural beliefs at the time; as Greenblatt remarks, Greek and Roman plays include prophetic dreams, omens, ghosts and curses 'as part of the fabric of historical actuality'.<sup>14</sup> In Shakespeare's time, in contrast, dreams were much more commonly and openly associated with vanity and ambiguity. Whereas the dichotomy between natural and supernatural dreams in the classical period never displaced the near-universal acceptance that divine and veridical dreams could and did happen, early modern writings focused increasingly on

psychophysiological and material causes, and stressed the deceptive potential of dreams – partly in response to fears about the devil’s involvement in them.<sup>15</sup> This growing scepticism was further fuelled by the Protestant orthodoxy that miracles had ceased.<sup>16</sup> In early modern England, dreams were consequently even more problematic phenomena than in classical antiquity, and even Hill, who maintained that dreams could be vatic and supernatural and asked his readers to trust professional interpreters, had to acknowledge that, ‘for that ther be so few parsons that see true Dreames, and fewer whiche vnderstande or obserue them . . . is the arte now come into a contempt with most persons’.<sup>17</sup> Due to the strong influence of Hippocratic, Aristotelian and Galenic writings, increasing attention was given in particular to the association of dreams with humoral dispositions, and to dreams as resurgences of waking thoughts. Thomas Wright, for instance, declared that ‘we proove in dreames . . . what humor aboundeth’, and he explained that

these dreames are caused by the spirites, which ascend into the imagination, the which being purer or grosser, hotter or colder, more or lesse, (which diversitie dependeth vpon the humours of the bodie) moove divers Passions according to their Nature.<sup>18</sup>

Reginald Scot, for his part, noted that ‘some [dreams] come by meanes of cholere, flegme, melancholie, or bloud; and some by love, surfet, hunger, thirst, &c’.<sup>19</sup>

Despite the fact that the belief in god-sent and prophetic dreams was in early modern England thus much more strongly and systematically challenged than in the classical period, it would nevertheless be wrong to conclude that it had disappeared. In fact, it likely continued mainly among the less educated and on religious grounds; to many early moderns, strong evidence in favour of veridical and supernatural dreams came from the Bible, for example.<sup>20</sup> In that respect, the physician André Du Laurens found that ‘those [dreams] which come from God, doe oftentimes put vs in minde of that which must happen vnto vs, and maketh vs partakers of reuelations, containing in them great mysteries’; and the clergyman and writer Thomas Walkington spoke of divine dreams ‘prognosticous of some event to fall out’, which he contrasted with ‘false illusions’.<sup>21</sup> In addition, various popular beliefs assumed that dreams occurring in the morning, at full moon, at the solstice or on special days like Christmas were always significant and even truthful.<sup>22</sup> All of this resulted in constant tensions between explanations of dreams as physiological or supernatural events. Dreams, like miracles, had moreover become politically charged in post-Reformation England, which makes it difficult to assess the impact of the Protestant doctrine of ceased miracles especially among lay people and further cements the ambiguous status of dreams in Shakespeare’s time. As Alexandra Walsham has demonstrated, both Protestants and Catholics ‘made shrewd and selective use of circumstances which fell out in their favour, and turned a blind eye to those which did not’.<sup>23</sup> Carole Levin, for her part, has shown that even some Protestants continued to believe in divine dreams, and she cites John Foxe’s *Acts and Monuments* (1563) as a work that, despite being generally scornful towards dreams allegedly sent by God, ‘treated them with great seriousness when they were the dreams of future martyrs’.<sup>24</sup> The consequently unanswered question of whether dreams ultimately had material or supernatural origins, combined with the energetic questioning of oneiromancy by a

growing number of writers, provided Shakespeare with exciting dramatic opportunities. In *Richard III*, he was thus able to inscribe dreams into wider tensions between a political course of tragedy and a framework of ostensible metaphysical direction and retribution, and between the characters' rational modes of thinking and the mysterious experiences that frustrate their very assumptions. Because of their indeterminacy, dreams in the play help approach the question of the characters' tragic responsibility from both material and spiritual perspectives, thereby bringing together, in dramatically powerful moments, the different secular and religious interpretations that the text sustains. The effect of this is to expand the scope of the tragic experience and to sharpen the focus on human agency.

### Reading dreams in *Richard III*

When working on Richard's famous dream, Shakespeare drew upon his sources selectively. As Geoffrey Bullough notes, instead of giving Richard the 'dreadfull and terrible dreame' described in Edward Hall's *Union of the Two Noble and Illustrate Famelies of Lancastre and Yorke* (1548), of 'diverse ymages, lyke terrible develles whiche pulled and haled him', Shakespeare probably derived his inspiration either from *The Mirror for Magistrates* (1559), which talks of a dream of 'All of those murdered Ghostes whom [Richard] | By death had sent to their untimely grave', or from the anonymous *The True Tragedy of Richard III* (c.1588–92; pub. 1594)<sup>25</sup> – or from a combination of the two. In *The True Tragedy*, as part of a soliloquy that involves epistrophes of 'revenge', Richard declares that '[t]he hell of life . . . hangs upon the Crowne', before reporting that 'sleepe I, wake I, or whatsoever I do, / Meethinkes their ghoasts comes gaping for revenge, / Whom I have slaine in reaching for a Crowne' (18.1874, 1879–81).<sup>26</sup> Whereas *The True Tragedy* thus merely reports the dream, Shakespeare in his own play chose to represent it visually, to great dramatic effect. In a major departure from his sources, Shakespeare also extended the dream into Richmond's sleep in order to create a contrast between the two characters. Shakespeare's rewriting of this episode suggests that he deliberately adapted dreams in order to create important moments of insight and reflection both for his characters and for his audiences. The conclusions that are drawn from them, however, can differ radically, as will become apparent in the course of this article.

The ostensibly oracular nature of Richard's, Clarence's and Stanley's dreams, the sense of supernatural retribution or determinism that they convey, and the play's wider framework of curses and forebodings seemingly align *Richard III* with the model of classical, Senecan tragedy. At the same time, however, the dreams in the play carry strong psychophysiological meanings and moreover suggest that tragedy involves self-destructive human actions rather than metaphysical intervention. Robert Burton noted in *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621) that dreams could be 'of diverse kindes, *Natural, Diuine, Daemoniacall, &c*'.<sup>27</sup> Shakespeare's introduction of various different possibilities into *Richard III* frustrates any attempts at subsuming the play's dreams under any definitive category and contributes significantly to the complexity of the characters' tragic experiences. Indeed, Richard's ostensible predetermination to be a villain and his alleged association with Satan are strongly linked to his reckless ambition, and proclamations of divine approval or condemnation in the play are often inseparable from

political ploys. By drawing on the wider early modern uncertainty about whether dreams were physiological or supernatural, and deceptive or truthful, Shakespeare was able to weave dream devices into his unfolding of metaphysical as well as material perspectives or experiences.

Throughout *Richard III*, there is a suggestion that the protagonist's downfall might be the result of divine retribution for the crimes he has committed, notably the murders of kings or kings-to-be. Given that the early modern sovereign was seen as God's representative on earth, it is unsurprising that Shakespeare's play evokes the idea of divine retribution as the inevitable outcome of regicide.<sup>28</sup> Moreover, the representation of gods as the punishers of human transgression or hubris is found in classical drama and therefore belongs to a dramatic tradition ultimately inherited by Shakespeare; in Aeschylus's *Persae*, for example, Zeus is described as 'the punisher of thoughts / Too overboastful' (827–8).<sup>29</sup> Perhaps the most powerful sense of divine intervention in Shakespeare's play derives from the numerous curses that are aimed at Richard. Lady Anne, mourning the death of Henry VI, calls Richard a 'minister of hell' (1.2.44) and 'foul devil' (48), and asks God to 'revenge [Henry's] death' (60). Henry's widow Margaret replicates Anne's reproach when she calls Richard a 'devil' (1.3.118) and a 'cacodemon' whose 'kingdom' is hell (144), before praying to God that his allies will die prematurely (210). In an adumbration of Richard's nightmare, Margaret also curses him so that '[n]o sleep close up that deadly eye of [his], / Unless it be whilst some tormenting dream / Affrights [him] with a hell of ugly devils' (197–9); this verbally echoes the account of the dream found in Edward Hall's chronicle. Considered alongside these passages, Richard's dream may appear as an expression of higher judgement and retribution, with his eventual defeat becoming the climax of his punishment. The ghosts' presence on stage, confirmed by the stage directions in Act 5, Scene 4, might seem to support the case for perceiving them as real, and not just as vain phantasms. In addition, there is the interesting and corroborating fact that the dream happens on 'All Souls' Day' (5.1.10), the day on which 'God was petitioned on behalf of the souls of the faithful dead' (*Richard III*, note to 5.1.10).

The idea that Richard's and Richmond's dreams are supernatural is further nurtured by the carefully wrought allegorical contrast between the two characters, with Richard being likened to the devil and Richmond to the saviour. This dichotomy probably stems from the text's reliance on the morality play tradition: Richard is strongly associated with the medieval stock character of the Vice, with whom he compares himself explicitly (3.1.82) and with whom he also shares the characteristic intimacy with the audience and the possession of a dagger (110–1). The contrast between Richard and Richmond becomes most apparent in Act 5, Scene 4, where we first witness Richmond's camp preparing for battle, and then Richard's. In a marked difference from the ominous prophecies and curses addressed to Richard throughout the play, Stanley tells Richmond that 'Fortune and victory sit on [his] helm' (58), and Richmond declares himself God's 'captain' (87) before praying that his army be looked upon 'with a gracious eye' (88). Against this backdrop, the divergent messages that the ghosts subsequently convey to the two sleeping antagonists achieve a potent climax, especially in performance, for the stage directions stipulate that Richard and Richmond be on stage simultaneously. In

practical terms, the ghosts have to address the two characters alternately, but the dichotomy between the devil Richard and the saviour Richmond also suggests a strong symbolic dimension to this.

The potential for reading the play's dreams as supernatural derives in part from the influence of Senecan revenge tragedy. As Russ McDonald writes, 'Elizabethans automatically identified Senecan drama with blood, vengeance, violent death, and supernatural intervention'.<sup>30</sup> The Senecan model influenced Shakespeare at least indirectly, reaching him through Thomas Legge's Latin academic play *Richardus Tertius* (1580), which reflects Senecan style and convention, but it may also have been a more direct inspiration for him, in the form of Jasper Heywood's translations of Seneca's tragedies.<sup>31</sup> On Seneca's approach to dreams, William V. Harris notes that, while the Roman dramatist's 'Stoicism might theoretically have inclined him to defend predictive dreams', he 'largely avoids the subject'.<sup>32</sup> Nevertheless, the wise man in Seneca's dialogue '*De Superstitione*' refers to 'the delusive appearances of dreams and nocturnal visions which have nothing in them that is substantial and true', and the chorus in *Hercules Furens* addresses Sleep (Somnus) as '[you] who mingle falsehood with truth, sure yet deceiving guide to the future' (lines 1070–1).<sup>33</sup> Whereas the wise man in '*De Superstitione*' thus appears to reject the value of dreams outright, the chorus in *Hercules Furens* is less dismissive: it recognizes the potential of dreams to be ambivalent, but at the same time acknowledges them as a 'sure' guide to the future. In spite of these ostensible expressions of scepticism towards truthful and vatic dreams, most of the instances of dreaming found in Senecan tragedy correspond to the *oneiros*, which seems in line with Seneca's Stoicism. In *Troades*, Hecuba alludes to a dream in which she had given birth to a firebrand, signifying the destruction that the child (Paris) would bring upon Troy (1.36–7), and Talthybius tells of a dream in which the spirit of Achilles called for Polyxena to be sacrificed in his honour (2.168–202) – a demand that is subsequently authenticated and satisfied.<sup>34</sup> Later in the same play, another likely *oneiros* occurs when the spirit of Hector appears to his wife Andromache in a dream, telling her to hide their son in order to protect him from being found and murdered by the Greeks (3.438–60).

In *Richard III*, however, Shakespeare does not simply replicate this model of a tragedy instigated or influenced by supernatural forces, but successfully balances a metaphysical framework with a strong emphasis on human agency and psychological insight, which makes dreaming much more ambiguous and, at times, puzzling. Even as dreams in the play can be seen to point to ideas of higher moral, spiritual or poetic justice, they arguably also constitute mere resurgences of fears or memories. This is shown perhaps most powerfully by Clarence's nightmare about his own death in Act 1, Scene 4:

Methoughts I was embarked for Burgundy,  
 And in my company my brother Gloucester,  
 Who from my cabin tempted me to walk  
 Upon the hatches. Thence we looked toward England,  
 And cited up a thousand fearful times  
 During the wars of York and Lancaster



That had befall'n us. As we paced along  
 Upon the giddy footing of the hatches,  
 Methought that Gloucester stumbled, and in stumbling  
 Struck me, that sought to stay with him, overboard  
 Into the tumbling billows of the main. (9–19)

The dream falls into several parts, and after Clarence has thus drowned, his nightmare is 'lengthened after life' (40):

O then began the tempest of my soul,  
 Who passed, methought, the melancholy flood  
 With that grim ferryman which poets write of,  
 Unto the kingdom of perpetual night. (41–4)

In this underworld, Clarence meets the souls of those who were wronged by him, including Warwick and Prince Edward (46–60), crying out for revenge. Despite echoes of Virgil, Seneca, Ovid, Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* (1587) and Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* (1590–6), among others, no single or direct source for this episode has been identified.<sup>35</sup>

The ambiguity of Clarence's dream derives to some extent from its complex relationship with the play's wider cultural setting, which is unequivocally Christian: Clarence portrays himself as 'a Christian-faithful man' (1.4.4); Richard mingles with bishops (3.5.98; 3.7.87–93) and portrays England as a 'Christian land' (3.7.111); Buckingham notes that it is 'All Souls' Day' (5.1.10); Richmond says a Christian prayer (4.4.87–96); and Richard cries out to Jesus following the visitation by the ghosts (5.4.157). In spite of this background, Clarence's dream does not use any Christian imagery: the 'grim ferryman which poets write of' (1.4.43), the Virgilian descriptions of hell as 'the kingdom of perpetual night' (44) and as a 'dark monarchy' (48), and the 'Furies' (54) all connote a pagan faith. In a play as self-consciously Christian as *Richard III*, the dream sits uneasily, whether it is conceived of as supernatural and oracular, read as symbolic or metaphorical, or seen as psychophysiological for conveying Clarence's fears.

In Renaissance drama, we find examples of pagan as well as Christian representations of the underworld; this demonstrates that both options were available to Shakespeare, even though any full and serious evocation or representation of a Catholic underworld could have fallen foul of censorship regulations, and a pagan (rather than Christian) version might therefore have been safer and more acceptable.<sup>36</sup> A famous allusion to Catholic cosmology occurs in *Hamlet* (c.1600–01), where King Hamlet's ghost describes, albeit implicitly, how he has become imprisoned in Purgatory (1.5.10–13).<sup>37</sup> An earlier, equally prominent representation of a Christian underworld is found in Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* (1588–9). In contrast, Kyd's *Spanish Tragedy*, in the first of a cornucopia of references to classical literature, presents us with another case of a pagan hell, albeit a fully staged one (1.1), and also refers to 'the gates of horn, / Where dreams have passage in the silent night' (1.1.82–3);<sup>38</sup> this is a classical myth that goes back to Homer's *Odyssey*, where Penelope explains the provenance of dreams in mythological terms:

[T]wo are the gates of shadowy dreams, and one is fashioned of horn and one of ivory. Those dreams that pass through the gate of sawn ivory deceive men, bringing words that find no fulfilment. But those that come forth through the gate of polished horn bring true things to pass, when any mortal sees them. (19.562–7)<sup>39</sup>

Clarence's dream cannot be conclusively included in any of the categories of prophetic or vain content, of supernatural or psychophysiological origination, or of pagan or Christian imagery. Even as the dream includes pagan images, it resembles a Christian prick-of-conscience dream, particularly through Clarence's afterlife encounter with the souls of those he betrayed (1.4.40–60); and even as it belongs to the play's supernatural framework, it provides insights into Clarence's mental state and into the guilt he has acquired as a result of his previous crimes (committed in *3 Henry VI*). As well as being influenced by the Senecan revenge tragedy tradition, Shakespeare's decision when composing Clarence's dream is likely to have been informed heavily by aesthetics and dramatic effect: while the more extensive depiction made possible by the pagan option significantly amplifies the sense of horror and prolepsis that derives from the nightmare, the Christian undertones of Clarence's guilt emphasize the character's tragic agency and add significantly to the representation of his physical as well as spiritual suffering. As a result, the dream encompasses both the exterior and the interior tragedy that is taking place, and it involves characters onstage and audiences offstage in the increasingly frightening environment that has been created by the actions of Richard, Clarence and their allies.

Garber rightly points to the structural as well as psychological importance of Clarence's 'prophetic' and 'monitory' dream.<sup>40</sup> Referring to the dream as supernatural or prophetic, however, seems problematic, even if Clarence is murdered in the same scene in which he recounts his dream. In fact, Clarence's dream does not intelligibly or accurately predict the course of events; most significantly, Clarence does not drown – even though his head is thrust into a 'malmsey butt' (1.4.244) – but is stabbed by three executioners dispatched by Richard, who himself gets nowhere near the crime scene. Richard's stumbling in the dream (17–18), which strikes Clarence overboard and is probably an indication of the duke of Gloucester's physical deformity, would need to be interpreted as a symbolic sign of his moral deformity if it were to make sense in the context of Clarence's death.<sup>41</sup> All of this does not mean, though, that the dream contains no truth, because it both reflects and highlights Richard's treacherous nature, and thereby correctly captures the dangerous environment in the play. Richard's presence in the dream in fact indicates the threat that he poses to Clarence's life, but it only does so to the audience, because Clarence fails to interpret or acknowledge properly Richard's agency in his oneiric journey into hell, and naively favours a false sense of comfort over his well-founded apprehension: 'I shall be reconciled with the king again' (160), he claims, before telling his murderers that Richard would reward them for sparing his life (209–11). Clarence's moment of recognition and insight here fails at least partially. That is because Shakespeare does not use the dream simply to communicate an external truth or to foreshadow the later action (and Richard's own dream), but also deploys it as a tool of character

representation; the dream underlines the contribution that Clarence has made, and continues to make, to his own tragic downfall, because it foregrounds the guilt that he has incurred as a result of his crimes and it helps reveal his blind and misguided trust in Richard's ostensible benevolence towards him. In part through its representation of dreams, the tragedy of *Richard III* does not announce itself as one shaped by fate or supernatural intervention – ideas which clear-cut *oneiroi* would underpin – but as one that is created and driven by human actions, ambitions and states of mind.

As Clarence's dream points to the perverse human and political energies that drive the tragic plot, the character is filled with horror: 'I trembling waked, and for a season after / Could not believe but that I was in hell' (1.4.58–9). Clarence goes on to report that his 'soul is heavy' (67), and the dream is thus also spiritually unsettling to him. In part because of its vacillation between human and supernatural origination, the dream deconstructs any sense of total interpretive certainty and thereby acquires a rich indeterminacy and polysemy. Its ambiguity is further fostered by the fact that it is retold rather than staged; indeed, the unreliable nature of Clarence's account of the dream is accentuated by the character's striking use of the phrase 'methought', which he repeats seven times. Richard and Richmond, too, draw on this phrase in the speeches following their dreams, albeit not as frequently, and 'methought' is only ever used in the play to retell a dream. As a self-reflexive grammatical compound, the term emphasizes subjectivity and uncertainty, and it therefore neatly accommodates Shakespeare's equivocal representation of dreaming; by putting the character's perception rather than the dream's factual content (if there can be any) at the centre, it reinforces the association of dreams with ambiguity and moreover subjects even potential *oneiroi* to the interpretative faculties of both the dreaming character and the audience. Because of the uncertainty that thus surrounds Clarence's dream, the latter produces a vague apprehension about what the characters' debased ambitions may produce, rather than a certain foreknowledge of an impending, ordered punishment of the transgressors by higher forces – something a straightforward *oneiros* would achieve. The example of Clarence's dream shows how Shakespeare's refusal to devise dreams as clear *oneiroi* bolsters the refocusing of tragedy away from unambiguous supernatural intervention and more towards the characters' uncompromising ambitions, self-destructive actions and subsequent internal sufferings. By partly liberating dreams from their traditional, arguably one-dimensional oracular and structural functions, Shakespeare crafts a more dynamic tragic experience that is centred on the characters' minds – the place not only where much of the tragedy manifests itself, but also where it begins.

An important part of tragic experience in *Richard III* involves the representation and amplification of Richard's guilty conscience. The concept of conscience has religious as well as psychological connotations, and Shakespeare masterfully exploits this ambiguity. Apart from the religious imagery that accompanies Richard's rise and fall, the text in fact gives considerable attention to the character's aspirations and motivations, to his mental response to the unfolding action, and to the later disintegration of his self; this has led Garber to declare *Richard III* Shakespeare's 'first truly psychological play'.<sup>42</sup> The play's twofold focus culminates in Act 5, Scene 4, where the simultaneously supernatural and psychological meanings of Richard's dream deepen the character's

self-inflicted suffering and emphasize his tragic agency in a single powerful and visual moment.

It is following the appearance of the ghosts in his dream that Richard finally, albeit reluctantly, acknowledges the guilt that weighs upon his conscience:

O coward conscience, how dost thou afflict me!  
 The lights burn blue. It is now dead midnight.  
 Cold fearful drops stand on my trembling flesh.  
 What do I fear? Myself? There's none else by.  
 Richard loves Richard; that is, I and I.  
 Is there a murderer here? No. – Yes, I am.  
 Then fly. – What, from myself? – Great reason why:  
 Lest I revenge. – What, myself upon myself?  
 Alack, I love myself. – Wherefore? – For any good  
 That myself have done unto myself.  
 O no, alas, I rather hate myself  
 For hateful deeds committed by myself.  
 I am a villain. – Yet, I lie; I am not.  
 Fool, of thyself speak well. – Fool, do not flatter.  
 My conscience hath a thousand several tongues,  
 And every tongue brings in a several tale,  
 And every tale condemns me for a villain.  
 (5.4.158–74)

Richard's fragmented speech mirrors his state of mind: having murdered all those who would or could have prevented him from ascending the throne, he finds himself not only at a political crisis point, but also at an existential one. In a way, this speech is where Richard's tragedy becomes most apparent, because he partly and belatedly recognizes that he has done wrong, and he can now no longer reconcile his actions with his conscience, nor suppress the latter. Like Clarence's vision, Richard's nightmare therefore resembles a prick-of-conscience dream, and it highlights, in a dramatically powerful way, his transformation from someone who causes and spreads fear to someone who is haunted by fear. In line with the insights that Shakespeare provides into the character of Richard throughout the play, the ghosts haunting him in the dream are staged; this allows the audience to partake not only in his schemes and crimes, which he shares through soliloquies, but also in his terror as his guilty conscience surfaces with a vengeance. The causality is important here, because Richard's dream does not preordain or preannounce his defeat in the manner of an *oneiros*, but rather foregrounds and recapitulates the wrongdoings that are (already) leading to his demise; by evoking the wider moral and spiritual implications of Richard's actions, the dream influences the audience's judgement and points to the moral argument for the character's removal.

It is integral to the success of the dream's moralizing dimension that Richard, apart from being seen to be suffering internally, can also be seen as being denounced externally or supernaturally, whether by God or by the ghosts of those he wronged. Richard upon awakening begs Christ for mercy (5.4.157), and his dream certainly bears

connotations of higher condemnation or damnation. This meaning is prepared for when Margaret curses Richard in order to deprive him of peaceful sleep (1.3.197–9). The association of Richard’s dreaming with guilt, which may emanate from both memory and metaphysics, aids this process of merging psychophysiological and supernatural elements and, by extension, private and universal perspectives on tragic action and experience. As John S. Wilks notes, ‘[t]he power of conscience to prefigure for the sufferer both the moment of his own death and the accusations of the Last Judgement was . . . well documented in the Pauline tradition of scholastic philosophy’.<sup>43</sup> Early moderns believed that the soul was infused by God, which led to a permanent presence of divinity in humans, with feelings of conscience and guilt representing God’s external, but internalized, judgement on their thoughts and actions.<sup>44</sup> In spite of the dream’s moral and spiritual importance, however, Shakespeare’s Richard rationalizes its uncomfortable connotations and continues to conjure up his own tragedy: ‘Soft, I did but dream’ (5.4.157). Later on, as he already does in his monologue instantly after his dream vision (158), he associates both conscience and fear with cowardice (5.5.37–8). Richard’s dream, similarly to Clarence’s, therefore does not merely highlight tragic agency and wilful blindness, but in fact extends them as its amending potential is left unexplored by the character.

The remaining major dream in *Richard III*, Lord Stanley’s, is much more allegorical than Clarence’s and Richard’s; probably as a result of that, it ends up being interpreted in two very different ways by Stanley and Hastings, respectively, and thus becomes an emblem of the ambiguity of dreams in Shakespeare’s time, when conflicting natural and supernatural interpretations were often simultaneously possible. In Act 3, Scene 2, Stanley sends a messenger to Hastings to warn him that he ‘dreamt tonight the boar [Richard’s heraldic badge] had razed his [Stanley’s] helm’ (9), and to ask him to flee with him because of this ‘danger that his soul divines’ (16). Hastings instantly dismisses the dream as ‘shallow’ (23) and calls it a ‘mock’ry’ (25), suggesting that ‘[t]o fly the boar before the boar pursues us / Were to incense the boar to follow us / And make pursuit where he did mean no chase’ (26–8). Hastings thus rejects Stanley’s reading of the dream on the ground that it would be politically foolish to run away: doing so would only activate Richard’s suspicions towards them, especially if, at least at present, he has no plans of persecuting them. Shakespeare’s rendition of Stanley’s dream is derived from Sir Thomas More’s *Life of Richard III*, reproduced in Hall’s *Union of the Two Noble and Illustrious Families of Lancastre and Yorke*: More reports how Stanley sent a messenger to Hastings the night before the latter’s death to tell him about a ‘fearfull dreame in the whiche he thought that a bore with his tuskes so razed them bothe [Stanley and Hastings] by the heades that the bloud ran aboute bothe their shoulders’.<sup>45</sup> As in *Richard III*, Hastings in More’s *Life* dismisses the dream, telling the messenger that ‘it is playne witchcraft to beleve in such dreames’, and making the argument that fleeing would prove their falseness to Richard.<sup>46</sup>

In Shakespeare’s play, two scenes after the messenger’s retelling of Stanley’s dream, Richard calls Hastings a ‘traitor’ (3.4.80) when the latter voices doubts about Richard’s assumption that Edward’s wife used witchcraft to make him deformed (73–7), and an order is issued for Hastings to be decapitated (81). Hastings reacts by

declaring Stanley's dream to be veridical (87–8), and mentions another sinister sign noticed during the day: the stumbling and startling of his horses (89–91).<sup>47</sup> Because of this seemingly oracular dimension to Stanley's dream, it might seem that Hastings dismisses a true *oneiros* to his own detriment. It is uncertain, however, whether Stanley's dream is genuinely prophetic in the play; unlike in Shakespeare's source, the dream here does not, according to the messenger's account, foretell Hastings's death, but only Stanley's – and Stanley does not die in the play. More convincingly, therefore, Stanley's dream may be read in the context of the play's atmosphere of paranoia and danger, in the fashion of an *enhyption* produced by fear; to Greenblatt, dreams in the play are 'essential to an understanding of [Richard's] power', because '[o]ne of the characteristic signs of power . . . is its ability to provoke nightmares'.<sup>48</sup> A more psychological reading of Stanley's dream is not in fact inconsistent with its vaguely premonitory element, namely 'the danger that his soul divines' (3.2.16); in extreme and dangerous circumstances, many of Shakespeare's tragic characters, including also Clarence, seem able to sense the imminent ruin – frequently through their dreams. Shakespeare, however, rarely affords his characters the same responsiveness to dreams that was shown, for example, by his contemporary Bishop Joseph Hall, who declared that he would 'not lightly passe ouer [his] very dreames [because] [t]hey shall teach [him] somewhat'.<sup>49</sup> To the characters in *Richard III*, their oneiric capacity to sense the tragic direction of events, which is never fully acknowledged by them, only contributes to the mysteriously unsettling nature of dreams, but to the audience, it presents misjudgement and myopia as further sources of tragedy in the play, in addition to the forces of villainy and ambition.

According to Levin, 'Hastings's mistrust in the ability of dreams to foretell the future and his trust that Richard . . . will deal with him justly, lead to the sudden, horrible attack on Hastings two scenes later'.<sup>50</sup> Dreams in *Richard III*, however, never stand alone, but are always closely connected to, and are reflective of, the characters' calamitous undertakings; in that respect, what Levin sees as Hastings's refusal to take supposed *oneiroi* seriously rather marks his failure to recognize the perilous political dynamics in the play, to read the other operators and to accept that Stanley's fears are substantiated – just like Richard fails fully to acknowledge his guilty conscience. The present article has shown that dreams in *Richard III* are located in a dramatically energizing position between the supernatural and the psychophysiological, and between prolepsis, analepsis and present consciousness; this enables them to connect the exterior unfolding of the tragedy onstage to the characters' inner motivations, thoughts and fears. Shakespeare's deviations from the classical tragic convention of true, god-sent *oneiroi*, and from the dramatic commonplace of prophetic dreams that are misunderstood or ignored, are probably inspired by the uncertain status of dreams in his time, because the play resists any secure sense that its dreams are supernatural or prophetic. In line with his wider emphasis on human agency, Shakespeare uses dreams to highlight those transgressions and states of mind that create and drive tragedy. The fact that his characters (often wilfully) resist these exhibitions of their responsibility as soon as they awaken adds a further layer of tragic agency to their story.

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## Notes

1. William Shakespeare, *Richard III*, ed. John Jowett (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2008), 52. All subsequent references given after quotations in the text are to this edition.
2. Marjorie Garber, *Dream in Shakespeare: From Metaphor to Metamorphosis* (New Haven, CT, Yale University Press, 1974), 20–1; Stephen Greenblatt, *Hamlet in Purgatory* (Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 2001), 179.
3. For considerations of dreams in *Richard III* as part of dramatic convention at the time, see Carole Levin, *Dreaming the English Renaissance: Politics and Desire in Court and Culture* (Houndmills, Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 102; Garber, *Dream in Shakespeare . . .*, 17; Bain Tate Stewart, ‘The Misunderstood Dreams in the Plays of Shakespeare and his Contemporaries’, in H. Craig (ed.), *Essays in Honour of Walter Clyde Curry* (Nashville, TN, Vanderbilt University Press, 1954), 197–206. On the use of Freudian, psychoanalytic theories, including those of displacement, condensation, and of the subconscious, see Garber, *Dream in Shakespeare . . .*, especially 69–74; Hildegard Hammerschmidt-Hummel, *Die Traumtheorien des 20. Jahrhunderts und die Träume der Figuren Shakespeares* (Heidelberg, Carl Winter Universitätsverlag, 1992); and the essays by David Aers and Kathleen McLuskie in Peter Brown (ed.), *Reading Dreams: The Interpretation of Dreams from Chaucer to Shakespeare* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1999).
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5. See Robert K. Presson, ‘Two Types of Dreams in Elizabethan Drama, and their Heritage: *Somnium Animale* and the Prick-of-Conscience’, *Studies in English Literature*, 7:2 (1967), 239–56, 241–6; Andrew Galloway, ‘Visions and Visionaries’, in Elaine Treharne and Greg Walker (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Medieval Literature in English* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2010), 256–75, 262–3; and Manfred Weidhorn, *Dreams in Seventeenth-Century English Literature* (The Hague, Mouton & Co, 1970), 30, 110–11. For Chaucer’s and Shakespeare’s respective versions of this trope, see *The Parlement of Foulys*, ed. D. S. Brewer (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1972), lines 99–105; and Mercutio’s speech in *Romeo and Juliet*, ed. Jill L. Levenson (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2008), 1.4.51–93.
6. Artemidorus, *The Interpretation of Dreams . . .*, 1.2.
7. Artemidorus, *The Interpretation of Dreams . . .*, 1.6, 4.2.
8. On Macrobius’s influence on medieval thinkers including Peter Abelard, Peter Lombard, Alain de Lille, and Hugh of St Victor, see Macrobius, *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio*, trans. and ed. W. H. Stahl (New York, Columbia University Press, 1952), 42–6.
9. Also see Weidhorn, *Dreams . . .*, 32–3. For a discussion of dreams in medieval times, including the availability of neo-Platonic as well as Aristotelian-medical models of interpretation, see Steven F. Kruger, *Dreaming in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1992).

10. See, for example, Helen Phillips and Nick Havely (eds), *Chaucer's Dream Poetry* (London, Longman, 1997), 5.
11. Peter Holland, 'The Interpretation of Dreams in the Renaissance', in Brown (ed.), *Reading Dreams . . .*, 125–46, 142; Thomas Hill, *The Moste Pleasaunte Arte of the Interpretacion of Dreames* (London, Thomas Marsh, 1576), sigs A2v–A3r, B1r–v.
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17. Hill, *The Moste Pleasaunte Arte . . .*, sig. A3v.
18. Thomas Wright, *The Passions of the Minde in Generall* (London, Valentine Simmes and Adam Islip for Walter Burre and Thomas Thorpe, 1604), sig. F1r.
19. Reginald Scot, *The Discoverie of Witchcraft, Being A Reprint of the First Edition Published in 1584*, ed. Brinsley Nicholson (London, Elliot Stock, 1886), 144.
20. Hill's treatise cites numerous cases of divine dreams in the Scriptures. See Hill, *The Moste Pleasaunte Arte . . .*, sig. A3r.
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22. See Hill, *The Moste Pleasaunte Arte . . .*, sigs C1v, E2r.
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25. Geoffrey Bullough, *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare*, 8 vols (London and Henley, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977), vol. 3, 247.
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28. On the doctrine of the king's two bodies – the body natural and the immortal, quasi-divine body politic – see Ernst H. Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Mediaeval*



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  32. Harris, *Dreams and Experience . . .*, 192.
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  36. On the potential difficulties of representing a Catholic or Christian underworld, see Greenblatt, *Hamlet in Purgatory . . .*, 236; Alison Shell, *Shakespeare and Religion* (London, Methuen Drama, 2010), 56; Grace Ioppolo, *Dramatists and their Manuscripts in the Age of Shakespeare, Jonson, Middleton and Heywood* (London, Routledge, 2008), 126.
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  40. Garber, *Dream in Shakespeare . . .*, 21–5.
  41. This would be consistent with Tudor efforts to depict Richard’s physical misshapeness as a sign of his moral depravity.
  42. Garber, *Dream in Shakespeare . . .*, 88.
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46. Hall, 'From *The Union . . .*', 265.
47. The stumbling of the horses as a harbinger of death is also mentioned by More. See Hall, 'From *The Union . . .*', 266.
48. Greenblatt, *Hamlet in Purgatory . . .*, 168.
49. Joseph Hall, *The Works of Joseph Hall* (London, John Haviland, Miles Flesher, and John Beale for Nath. Butter, Thomas Pavier, Miles Flesher, John Haviland, George Winder, and Hanna Barret, 1625), sig. F1v.
50. Levin, *Dreaming the English Renaissance . . .*, 102.

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