

Human agency and  
divine providence:  
conflicting worldviews  
and perspectives on  
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In Shakespeare's *Richard III*, Richard of Gloucester and Queen Margaret offer conflicting worldviews and perspectives on identity. Richard believes in the power of human agency. He challenges the notion of divine providence and attempts to take on the role of fate itself, predetermining the death and destruction of others and creating his own history. By taking on this role Richard assumes an active presence throughout the play, masterfully manipulating the characters around him like pawns and setting in motion his own play within a play in order to elevate himself to sovereignty. Richard defines his identity in psychological and theatrical terms. He presents himself as a victim, blaming his deformity, misfortunes, and subsequent isolation from society on outside forces. However, Richard refuses to accept the poor hand Nature has dealt him and counteracts it by defining himself in theatrical terms, as an actor and playmaker. As such, he compensates for his lack of control by constructing an identity contrary to the one prescribed to him and creating his own play within God's greater play. Margaret offers the opposing worldview that divine providence governs the world and that fate and identity cannot be altered by individual human agency. Unlike Richard, Margaret rarely assumes an active presence on stage. She rejects the idea that individuals can have active agency in the world, and instead conceives of identity as a passive role prescribed to individuals by a higher being. In this way, Margaret also constructs a theatrical model of identity through her awareness that everyone is merely an actor in God's larger play. While Richard is confined to the scope of his own play, Margaret's sense of the bigger picture allows her to prophesize on the fates of the other characters. I will be focusing on the characters Richard and Margaret in two scenes from *Richard III* to demonstrate the conflicting worldviews and perspectives on <https://assignbuster.com/human-agency-and-divine-providence-conflicting-worldviews-and-perspectives-on-identity-in-shakespeares-richard-iii/>

identity inherent in the play (van Elk) (Greenblatt, 539- 544). In a soliloquy opening Act one Scene one, Richard introduces the notion of individual human agency as a challenge to the established worldview of divine providence and forms his identity in light of this perspective. Richard defines his identity in psychological terms by portraying himself as a victim: “  
Cheated of feature by dissembling nature, / Deformed, unfinished, sent  
before my time / Into this breathing world scarce half made up—” (19-21). By blaming his deformity wholly on external forces, Richard recognizes that he had no control over his creation. However, he also recognizes that he has the power to reform his identity and advance in the world. Richard expresses harsh criticism against the notion of divine providence. He perceives Nature as unfit to reign absolutely in establishing one’s fate. First, Richard appeals to the dishonest and deceptive traits of Nature. Then, he uses himself as an example of the “ deformed” and “ unfinished” product that results from giving the full responsibility of shaping one’s identity to a higher, detached being. Richard further stresses his role as a victim “ curtailed of this fair proportion” (18). Richard not only resents his lack of “ fair proportion” in regards to physical structure, but also in regards to being cheated of royal inheritance. The word “ curtail” implies that he is cut off or alienated from society due to his deformity, and also that he has been restricted from royal succession or inheritance. His current circumstances place many bodies ahead of his own in line for the throne. Presenting himself as a victim of adversity allows him to gain some sort of sympathy from the audience at the beginning of the play by justifying his villainous nature. Richard argues that it is not against his personal wishes “ to prove a lover / To entertain these fair well-spoken days” (28-29), but that he is “ determinéd to prove a villain / <https://assignbuster.com/human-agency-and-divine-providence-conflicting-worldviews-and-perspectives-on-identity-in-shakespeares-richard-iii/>

And hate the idle pleasures of these days" (30-31). The word "determined" in this context means resolved, or fated. Richard posits that a higher being is responsible for creating the universe. This lack of control over his own creation is a terrifying realization for Richard; therefore, he seeks revenge on Nature by counteracting its predetermined plan. He constructs a new identity for himself that opposes the one involuntarily forced upon him, and attempts to take control of his own fate and the course of history. In addition to the psychological, Richard appeals to the theatrical to form his new identity. He redefines himself as an actor. By assuming this role, Richard can deceive the other characters, subsequently giving him the power to manipulate them. Richard praises his own abilities as an actor by prescribing himself "subtle false and treacherous" (37) characteristics. All three adjectives contain the meaning hidden, misleading, and deceptive. Richard hides his dark, injurious intentions with the thick cloak of a new, feigned identity. In a soliloquy, the character is alone and able to contemplate his honest thoughts without fear of being overheard. However, as this soliloquy is interrupted Richard suddenly commands: "Dive, thoughts, down to my soul: here Clarence comes" (41). This line reveals Richard's self-conscious efforts to distance his true identity and true intentions as much as possible from the public. His success in achieving these dark intentions depends on how well he can deceive the other characters. The words "dive" and "down" express the distinction between the internal and external identity. Richard's external identity is defined as the collective identity that the public assigns to Richard, while his true identity is unknown to the public and accessible only to himself. Therefore, Richard tells his thoughts to "dive" so that they are lodged as deep in his soul as possible without any possibility of

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resurfacing. In addition to an actor, Richard also redefines his identity as a playwright. Richard replaces divine providence with human agency, and creates his own play within God's greater play. He takes fate into his own hands, dealing out destruction and ruin to those around him in order to advance toward sovereignty. He confesses, " Plots have I laid, inductions dangerous, / By drunken prophecies, libels and dreams" (32-33). The word " induction" denotes either the prologue of a play, or the bringing about or causing of an event. In the first case, Richard is appealing to his theatrical identity as a playwright and introduces his own play, where he controls and arranges the action and its " dangerous" theme. Richard aspires to be the agent that brings about and causes the events in history, instead of passively leaving it up to predestination. Richard attempts to take on the role of God, but since this role was not meant for him to play, he can only assume the role of a base substitute. He lays his plots and dangerous inductions, but they are contrary to the will of God. Therefore, his prophecies are not divinely inspired but rather " drunken"; they lack providential guidance or insight, and only offer an impaired vision of the future as conceived of by a mere mortal. Richard attempts to take control of his fate through active human agency, but in the end divine providence puts him back in his predestined place. At the beginning of Act four Scene four, Queen Margaret demonstrates the opposing worldview of divine providence and defines identity as a passive role predetermined by a higher being. This scene marks her return to the stage since Act one Scene three, where she first lays her curses on the other characters. Margaret appears on stage only twice throughout the entire play. When she does appear, it is only at brief intervals and a majority of her dialogue takes the form of soliloquy or "

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asides” to the audience that cannot be heard by the other characters in the play. These characteristics of Margaret’s presence exemplify the passive role to which she is confined. In a soliloquy opening the scene, Margaret remarks: “ Here in these confines slyly have I lurked / To watch the waning of mine enemies” (3-4). The use of the words “ confine” and “ lurk” signify Margaret’s restricted role in the play as she endeavors to exist in a static, unobserved state. Margaret presents herself as an observer, watching the downfall of her enemies, but not taking on an active role herself to cause their downfall. Margaret further explores identity in theatrical terms to convey her worldview that everyone is merely an actor in God’s greater play. In her brief soliloquy, Margaret states, “ A dire induction am I witness to, / And will to France, hoping the consequence / Will prove as bitter, black, and tragical” (5-7). The word “ induction”, first appearing in Richard’s soliloquy, “ Plots have I laid, inductions dangerous” (I. i. 32) appears again in the sense of a prologue to a play. However, where Richard takes an active role in laying these inductions, Margaret assumes a more passive role, only serving as a “ witness” to this induction. She even goes further than Richard to include the conclusion of the play. While Richard only sees as far as his “ inductions dangerous”, Margaret is capable of seeing the bigger picture, and recognizes that the “ consequence” will be “ bitter, black, and tragical”. The last line of her soliloquy, “ Withdraw thee, wretched Margaret. Who comes here?” (8), mirrors the last line in Richard’s soliloquy, “ Dive, thoughts, down to my soul: here Clarence comes” (I. i. 41). Margaret is also self-conscious of her role as an actor, and by referring to herself in third person she clearly distinguishes between her internal and external identities. Again, the theme of the true identity being deep and central in the body is conveyed in the <https://assignbuster.com/human-agency-and-divine-providence-conflicting-worldviews-and-perspectives-on-identity-in-shakespeares-richard-iii/>

word “ withdraw”, which means to draw back, retract, or remove oneself from some activity. Therefore, instead of reconstructing and expanding on her identity, she is confining and restricting it into the bounds assigned to her by fate. Margaret expands on her worldview by describing fate in terms of the Wheel of Fortune and demonstrating the insignificance of the individual. Contrary to Richard, Margaret does not attempt to fight back against Nature to change her fate, but accepts her miserable role in life, finding pleasure only in watching the fall of her enemies. Margaret has already experienced the capricious nature of Fortune’s Wheel, and hence, is able to foresee their downfall. In her soliloquy, she remarks, “ So now prosperity begins to mellow / And drop into the rotten mouth of death” (1-2). Margaret creates the image of a ripening fruit dangling from a high tree branch, growing plump and soft, and about ready to fall to the ground where it will rot. She sees the thriving prosperity of her enemies as a sign that Fortune’s Wheel will soon turn, when they least expect it, and cause them to fall into abatement. By describing the Wheel of Fortune in terms of the changing seasons, Margaret expresses the idea that fate is controlled by Nature, and its cycles are inevitable. In a later speech, Margaret again alludes to the Wheel of Fortune to explicate the insignificance of the individual in God’s greater plan. Margaret describes Elizabeth as the “ flattering index of a direful pageant, / One heaved a-high to be hurled down below” (85-86). The words “ heaved” and “ hurled” are powerful action verbs demonstrating the immense power God has over humans and the immense change in fate humans are a victim to. Elizabeth is being flattered with inheriting such good fortunes, but this rise in good fortune only serves as the prologue to a “ direful pageant”. The use of the word “ pageant” instead of “

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play” is significant. A pageant is defined as an elaborate public spectacle illustrative of history, consisting of a succession of participants or events. In light of the infinite succession of participants and events that occur in history, one individual’s role becomes truly insignificant in light of the bigger picture. In addition, a pageant is an exaggerated, elaborate public display that conceals a lack of real importance or meaning. In the same way, the good fortunes of royalty, wealth, and power that Elizabeth has inherited blind her from the realization that this role has no real importance. She is merely “A queen in jest, only to fill the scene” (91). The scene that Margaret is referring to is of course, a scene in God’s play. God prescribes roles to the characters on earth, only to move the course of history toward his greater plan. These assigned identities are not significant, because their purpose is fleeting and temporary and only serve as inductions toward a greater end. The use of the theatrical to illustrate Elizabeth’s role is further pursued when Margaret refers to her as “‘painted queen’— / The presentation of but what I was” (83-84). The word “painted” implies that Elizabeth is an actor wearing stage make-up and “presentation” implies that she is giving a performance as in a play. Therefore, as an actor taking on a role, the identity that Elizabeth assumes from Margaret’s downfall, is not significant or real; it only has the appearance of such. Margaret points out to Elizabeth, that she is just a copy of what Margaret once was, a “poor shadow” flattered with good fortune only to fall from a greater height. Richard and Margaret each present the opposing worldviews of human agency and divine providence and define identity in light of these views. Richard believes in the capabilities and power of the individual. While he at least posits that a higher being is responsible for creation, he supports the idea that humans can control their own fate.

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With this view in mind, Richard defines himself as an actor and a playmaker, in an attempt to reconstruct his identity and alter the predetermined fate of history. Margaret, on the other hand supports the idea that divine providence rules the destiny of history and the succession of people and events within it. With this view, she defines identity in passive terms, as an insignificant role assigned by God. These two conflicting views provide a structure for the action of Richard III. Divine providence takes the passive form of prophecies at the beginning of the play to prescribe the fates of the characters carried out later in the play. While Richard's active presence on stage, successfully manipulating the characters around him, seems to support human agency, divine providence triumphs in the end. Richard is defeated and the throne is restored to God's chosen ruler, Richmond, whose union with Elizabeth generates the House of Tudor. Bibliography Greenblatt, Stephen, second ed. 1997. *The Norton Shakespeare: Based on the Oxford Edition*, New York: Norton. Van Elk, Martine. "" Determined to prove a villain": Criticism, Pedagogy, and " Richard III."" *College Literature* 34 (2007): 1-21.