



**Joshua R. Held.** *Bold Conscience: Luther to Shakespeare to Milton.* Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2023. 238 pp. ISBN 9780817321550. \$95.00 hardback.

As a Protestant layman, if you wanted to know plainly where you should stand on the big topics of spiritual life—predestination, marks of grace, the calling, ordering a family, and so on—you turned to William Perkins. His best-selling works were on the conscience, basing themselves on the rallying cry of Proverbs 28.1: “The righteous are as bold as a lyon” (4). The rectified conscience offered irrefutable evidence of God’s will, comfortable assurance of his love, and the basis for sound political action in the world—a splendid package! Joshua R. Held argues that, across the seventeenth century, conscience moves from being commonly spoken about as a gnawing worm of guilt, an internal faculty, to being valued for its ability to give a ground for external good works, but then is forced back inwards again. It follows a curve: from restraining the self, to offering support for taking bold stances in public, to retreating from those social and political arenas.

The problem of making known to others what the will of God has revealed to one internally, of course, is that they may think the message may not be from God or that it may have been misinterpreted by its receiver. When the conscience was (at least from others’ points of view) comfortably private, and intent on its possessor’s sinful

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self, any error was a personal problem, and no doubt would be cleared up by God in his own time (say, after death). But when that error could be acted on in public, then chaos might ensue. Thus, the royal chaplain Henry Hammond trumpeted that “the mistaking of every fancie or humour, carnall or Satanicall perswasion for Conscience [...] hath emboldened most of the vices of the world” (8). How, then, to determine between competing witnesses of God’s will?

One way, Held shows, is to read literary fictions which explore the conscience as instances of case casuistry. Moreover, unlike the practical divinity of the seventeenth century which focuses on the theology behind each case of conscience (and the more outré, the better), literature can show a collage of perspectives on how a particular case feels to the person having to decide on it. Held crisply suggests that the “process of reading the bold claims for conscience across prominent early modern English [literary] authors suggests an axiom at once practical and theoretical: conscience, like a literary text, requires meticulous interpretation” (11). The techniques used to read one can fit the other, too, he argues, selecting three canonical authors to establish how conscience was emboldened over the seventeenth century. Substantial central studies of William Shakespeare, John Donne, and John Milton, filled with detailed literary analysis, are bookended with contextual outlines of positions taken on the conscience by Martin Luther and Henry VIII (at the start) and John Locke (at the end).

The two chapters on Shakespeare deal with *Hamlet* (1601) and the Fletcher-Shakespeare *Henry VIII* (1613). Hamlet’s meditations show him making a satisfying U-turn over whether to kill Claudius: it is the murderer’s conscience, not the king’s, which gets caught by the play. At first Hamlet’s conscience finds such violence abhorrent, rejecting action, but then it inspires him to kill the king as an act of “perfect conscience” (45), as the character says in the Folio. This is where chapter one, on Luther’s claim to be required by God to speak out against church abuses comes in; as Held explains, Shakespeare’s play connects Hamlet with Luther through, for instance, references to Wittenburg and the Diet of Worms. Hamlet’s initial “oppressive” (39) inner debates stymie his will to act, as he tries to sort out whether cowardice or morality restrains him from moving forward. Held makes subtle use of the differences between the Folio and the first quartos to show how the former strengthens Hamlet’s thinking on the political element of his revenge. He turns to a Lutheran-inflected form of resistance theory, in which his conscience has reasoned and informed itself

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sufficiently about the wrongs done both to the royal family and to the national good to allow it to act. Early in the play, Hamlet scrupulously tries to find external proofs of Claudius's guilt; late in the play, he can rely on his own conscience being directed by Providence. In disobeying God's laws, Claudius forfeits his right to be protected as a public person, putting on Hamlet the responsibility of regicide.

*Henry VIII* moves uneasily and repeatedly over how the royal possessor of an uneasy conscience formalizes its workings, defending them by proclamation, or simply pretending to hear them, parodying the effects of a tender conscience. The result is the depiction of a court which keeps on testing what the king's conscience is, thus making it, in one sense, public, but comes to no common conclusion about its validity. The certainty which conscience claims is ironized throughout the play (and hence, Held suggests, provides a prolepsis of some responses to Charles I's claims to be directed by his conscience). *Henry VIII* presents the text of the king's conscience as collaboratively authored in the world of the play by the Duke of Buckingham, Cardinal Wolsey, Thomas Cranmer, Cardinal Campeius, and other clerics, allowing King Henry to disavow making any choice about his actions. His tender conscience about a private matter becomes a public text, and its readers bear the responsibility for what they find it to mean, by contrast to the appeal Queen Katherine makes to her own truth.

The sense that God notionally speaks to everyone alike but that the conscience of the king might have rights and responsibilities beyond those of others reappears in the following chapter on Donne's court sermons between 1625 and 1628. These are organized around the threefold supports a good conscience gives: a knowledge of good courses, a deeper honesty about the self, and comfort and confidence in one's positions. Held argues that Donne sincerely supports the authority of a rectified royal conscience. At his first public appearance after the death of King James, on 3<sup>rd</sup> April 1625, Charles I had called on Donne to preach, giving only one day's notice. Drawing on Psalm 11.3 ("If the foundations be destroyed, what can the righteous do?" 78), the sermon deals with the need for the royal conscience to be clean if it is to guide the public realm. In a court sermon of April 1627, Donne pretended to wish the king were not present to hear him state that "every man hath a Church in himselfe" (75). Nevertheless, in state affairs, Donne concludes, the informed royal conscience has more comprehensive knowledge and lacks personal bias, so should take precedence; a subject cannot make "private conscience the rules of publique actions" (75).

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The battle, of course, then moves to what is to be deemed “public,” that rapidly-widening realm in the mid-century. Held’s three chapters on Milton bring the workings of the conscience back into private sphere. *Areopagitica* (1644) begins to differentiate between toleration for differing stances in public debate (stances usually established by reference to conscience) and the supremacy of the individual conscience on issues of faith. Milton’s stress is on charity, on accepting that truth might appear differently to different people: a final and comprehensive interpretation of its text cannot be enforced. The second chapter shows how *Eikonoklastes* (1649) works backwards from the king’s actions to argue that the royal conscience cannot be deemed rectified and hence authoritative if it does not accept the validity of others’ responses to their own witness. The third chapter argues that *Paradise Lost* (1667) is interested in finding out how develop a paradise, specified as an approving conscience within, the vision which is glimpsed by Adam and Eve and shut out by Satan. Confidence in a bold conscience, which must speak out in public, is replaced by a more cautious sense that the conscience gives solace and inner strength against those who seek to force “the Spirit of Grace” (148), but does not impel outward action.

Held’s book has three virtues. First, it is exceptionally deeply grounded in a principal topic of early modern divinity, marrying this adroitly to some of the governmental discourse of the period. Second, his subtle literary analysis of the shifting connotations of both the concept and the word “conscience” is not confined to the literary texts. The persuasive techniques used by theologians, casuists, and political texts are illuminated by the rhetoric of the literary texts, and vice versa. Third, the book makes its U-shaped argument crystal clear: its expression is plain and direct and the local argumentation admirably tight, so the reader will rarely be tempted to disagree with the direction of the reasoning. Partly, this stems from a laudable determination to make the reader understand some slippery distinctions in theology; partly, it comes from a decision to sweep a good proportion of the debates and substantiation from primary and secondary texts into the endnotes. The technique is ruthless, to be sure, but it does ensure the reader grips each point, and moves on crisply.

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