Richard II and the Book of Life

LAURA ESTILL

The Tragedy of King Richard the Second is the only play by Shakespeare in which the phrase “book of life” or “book of heaven” occurs. Generally speaking, the book of life is not an actual book, but a theological concept, a metaphorical “book” that holds the names of those who will get into heaven. The play refers to the book of life directly during Mowbray’s trial and Richard’s deposition, though there are other oblique references throughout. Most importantly, Richard discusses the “record” of the offenses of his deponents and concludes that the deposition—including his participation—is “[m]ark’d with a blot, damn’d in the book of heaven” (IV.i.230 and 236). The importance of the book of life and having one’s name “blot[ted]” from it is particularly evident when Richard identifies himself as a book in the notorious “mirror” scene, in which he tries to read himself. While struggling to understand the loss of his throne, Richard comes to realize that his name, the name of a divinely ordained king, can also be blotted from the book of life. He realizes that names and titles, even a king’s, can be “blotted” at God’s will. Correspondingly, then, I want to argue that Richard II is a play that does not focus primarily on kingship, but is above all concerned with who will have their names written in the metaphorical book of life to grant them entry into heaven. This argument does not discount the play’s attention to political concerns, but demonstrates that Shakespeare’s play highlights the more distinctly religious elements of premodern kingship.

This essay uses the Geneva Bible, the works of medieval church fathers St. Augustine of Hippo and St. Thomas Aquinas,
as well as treatises by John Calvin to understand the book of life in relation to *Richard II*. The Geneva Bible contains numerous cross-references for the book of life, as well as marginal notes to explicate the concept. Revelation 20:12–5 gives perhaps the clearest account of how the book of life works. When Judgment Day comes, “the dead, both great & small stand before God: and the bokes were opened, & another boke was opened, which is the boke of life, and the dead were judged of those things, which were written in the bokes, according to their workes ... And whosoever was not founde written in the boke of life, was cast into the lake of fyre.”

The characters in *Richard II*, then, have good reason to hope that their names appear in the book of life and that they are judged well, else they will be cast into the lake of fire. The book of life, also called the book of heaven, is not the same as the text of the Bible, as Revelation 22:19 demonstrates: “if any man shal diminish of the wordes of the boke of this prophecie [the Bible], God shal take away his parte out of the Boke of life, and out of the holic citie.”

The book of life was an established religious concept during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. Based on the idea of God’s book of life, certain medieval churches created actual books of life and wrote names in these physical *libri vitae* with the hope that these names would also be copied into God’s book of life. The preface to the Hyde Abbey *liber vitae* explains that “in befitting order there follow the names of brethren, monks, admitted members and benefactors alive and departed [so that] by the temporal record of this writing they may be written in the page of the Book of Life.” The Durham *liber vitae* includes the prayer that was said when adding names to the book: “We pray you, O Lord and Holy Father, through your son Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit, that their names may be written in the book of Life.”

There has been a lack of scholarly work surrounding the theological topic of the book of life, although scholars have examined physical *libri vitae*. The historical information available in these physical *libri vitae* has led to research on anthroponomastics, monastic confraternities, genealogy, and medieval guild registers, and these texts have also been of interest to paleographers and codicologists. One current scholarly endeavor, the Durham *Liber Vitae* Project, is creating a digital copy of an extant medieval *liber vitae*, one of the actual books that tried to realize the theological concept of God’s list of who gets into heaven. The Durham *liber vitae* and the New Minster *liber vitae* were used throughout the Middle Ages, and therefore offer insight into the use of *liberi vitae* during the reign of Richard II from 1377–99. The historical
Richard’s religious life certainly included the theological concept of the book of life—he may even have seen a *liber vitae*. Shakespeare, who, as the text of *Richard II* demonstrates, was aware of the religious idea of the book of life, might have seen a physical *liber vitae* as well. Shakespeare employs the medieval book of life topos in *Richard II* both to emphasize the historical nature of the play and to contribute to ongoing religious dialogues about salvation during his lifetime.

The Durham *liber vitae* remained in use until the dissolution of the monasteries in 1539, which partly explains why Shakespeare’s contemporaries were familiar with the theological concept. Shakespeare’s contemporaries, including Thomas Dekker, Robert Greene, and George Chapman, refer to the book of life in their poetry and plays. While the extant *libri vitae* have been used for historical research, theological concepts of the book of life have not been applied to an early modern cultural context. Although dealing only with *Richard II*, this essay hopes to stimulate broader academic discussion on the literary and theatrical use of the book of life topos.

As mentioned at the outset, Shakespeare only mentions the “book of life” or “book of heaven” in *Richard II*, although his other plays allude to similar concepts. Certain Shakespearean plays with pre-Christian settings refer to what might, in a Christian context, be considered the book of life, but the plays do not directly relate to the notion of getting into heaven. Menenius in *Coriolanus*, for instance, expresses how Rome is “enroll’d in Jove’s own book.” The third Queen in *The Two Noble Kinsmen* entreats for justice so Theseus will not enter the “book of trespasses,” which seems like the inverse of the book of life in which the names of sinners are written. Other Shakespearean references to names written in books relate primarily to activities in life, rather than the afterlife, such as Romeo’s “misfortune’s book,” which refers to the events of his life. In *2 Henry IV*, there are numerous book references, but these often relate to how people act: Prince Henry claims he is not in the “devil’s book,” and Prince John expresses the Archbishop of York’s piety in terms of being a clergyman “within the books of God.” Similarly concerned with earthly matters, in *The Winter’s Tale*, Autolycus expresses his apprehension that he will be taken off of the roll of thieves and placed in the “book of virtue.” *2 Henry VI* mentions of “God’s book,” in which people are “adjudg’d to death,” is the closest reference to *Richard II*’s “book of heaven,” because it associates a book with God’s judgment. These books relate to earthly events (such as
2 Henry IV’s “book of fate”), rather than discussing the afterlife.\(^{19}\)

It is notable that in act IV Richard’s mention of the book of life looks toward the afterlife, both in relation to his eternal salvation and to his reputation. As Richard tries to reconcile himself with Henry’s usurpation and his own loss of power, he fixates on the book of life. Seeing his life as ruler coming to an end, Richard refers to his deposition as “[m]ark’d with a blot, damn’d in the book of heaven.” Northumberland has asked Richard to “read / These accusations” that Bullingbrook’s faction drafted to prove that Richard is a criminal no longer fit to rule England (IV.i.222–3). Richard does not want to read them and he claims that Northumberland would similarly feel “shame” if confronted with charges against himself (IV.i.231). According to Richard, Northumberland’s record includes the “heinous article, / Containing the deposing of a king” (IV.i.233–4); the deposition is “heinous” in the oldest sense of the word, both “highly criminal” and spiritually “wicked.”\(^{20}\)

For Richard, seeing the physical presence of the written accusations conjures images of his name written in the book of heaven, “[m]ark’d with a blot.”

Although Richard begins by righteously asserting his innocence, he soon realizes that by acquiescing to the deposition, he too might be tainted by the “blot” that could damn him in the book of heaven:

\begin{quote}
RICHARD. For I have given here my soul’s consent
Tundeck the pompous body of a king;
Made glory base, [and] sovereignty a slave.
\end{quote}

(IV.i.249–51)

Rather than simply handing the crown to Bullingbrook, Richard emphasizes his agency in the de-coronation, saying, “I resign to thee. / Now mark me how I will undo myself” (IV.i.203–4). Richard’s use of anaphora highlights his involvement with all levels of his being:

\begin{quote}
RICHARD. With mine own tears I wash away my balm,
With mine own hands I give away my crown,
With mine own tongue deny my sacred state,
With mine own breath release all duteous oaths.
\end{quote}

(IV.i.207–10)

Confronted with Northumberland’s adamant repetition, “[m]y lord, dispatch, read o’er these articles” (IV.i.243), Richard recog-
nizes that he is himself a “traitor with the rest” for his role in the deposition (IV.i.248). Richard highlights the religious valences of the de-coronation, acknowledging that it is by his “soul’s consent” that he gives away his crown and denies his “sacred state” (IV.i.249 and 209).

Ernst H. Kantorowicz famously reads this reference to “traitor” in relation to the later events of 1649, when the body natural (“King”) turned against the body politic (“king”) of Charles I. Kantorowicz explains that when Richard gives away his crown, “he deprives his body politic of the symbols of its dignity and exposes his poor body natural.” Traditionally, Richard II has been read as a political play. Kantorowicz, however, argues that the play should be examined through the lens of “political theology,” demonstrating that the theology of the play is as important as the politics. Kantorowicz’s notions of the king’s two bodies are often taken as axiomatic in early modern literary studies. This essay builds on Kantorowicz’s interpretation of Richard II, while nuancing some of his conclusions.

When Richard participates in the de-coronation ceremony, he severs his body natural from the body politic, an action that is worse than high treason: Richard’s actions are a sin. The divine right of kings holds that the king is God’s appointed representative on earth. By removing the “Godhead” of the king, Richard goes against God’s will.

Richard realizes that his participation in the de-coronation ritual could lead to his eternal damnation, as the entire deposition is “[m]ark’d with a blot, damn’d in the book of heaven.” This blot could also be on Richard’s heavenly record. Having begun by accusing Northumberland that his record was blotted, Richard realizes that the deposition may have marred him, too. The fear of being blotted from the book of life was a genuine theological concern. Psalm 69:28 states that sinners will be “put out of the boke of life,” and the Geneva Bible’s annotation explains that if one professes to be good but one’s actions are sinful, then that person will be “knowen as reprobate” with a name that will be blotted from the book of life.

In The City of God, Augustine believes the book of life expresses God’s foreknowledge of who will sin. Augustine’s explanation creates a religious dilemma: if God is omniscient, nobody could be blotted from the book of life as their names would not be registered in the first place. Aquinas nuances Augustine’s interpretation and reminds his readers that there is, indeed, a danger of being blotted from the book of life. Aquinas explains that “to be blotted out, and not blotted out, of the Book of Life is not only to be referred
to the opinion of man, but to the reality of the fact.” Because there is a real possibility of being blotted from the book of life, Richard II’s book of life topos raises the legitimate metaphysical issue of securing a position in heaven, one that supercedes the earthly matters of Richard’s loss of political power.

Richard might not have lost his political power or endangered his immortal soul had he not participated in the de-coronation. As Richard himself says when initially confronted with the notion of a rebellion, “we know no hand of blood and bone / Can gripe the sacred handle of our sceptre, / Unless he do profane, steal, or usurp” (III.iii.79–81). No corporeal body can take the throne from Richard. Paradoxically, it is his noncorporeal, nonnatural, “artificial, mystical, and immortal” second body (the body politic) that allows Richard to divest himself of his second body. Because Richard believes that his place as king is sacrosanct—“Not all the water in the rough rude sea / Can wash the balm off from an anointed king” (III.ii.54–5)—he recognizes his spiritual guilt in giving away his crown. The Bishop of Carlisle, just before the deposition, reminds Bullingbrook and the audience of the king’s divine authority, as “the figure of God’s majesty, / His captain, steward, deputy, elect, / Anointed, crowned, planted many years” (IV.i.125–7). Richard relies on this extralegal kingly authority when he uses a series of speech acts to transfer the crown to Bullingbrook (“With mine own hands I give away my crown”).

Richard cleaves the body politic from his body natural (as Kantorowicz argues), losing legal and spiritual authority. His greatest loss, however, is his name, his marker in the book of life, which is a roster of names. Richard laments the numerous ways the meaning of names are now lost to him: “I have no name, no title, / No, not that name was given me at the font, / But ’tis usurp’d” (IV.i.255–7). As Robert M. Schuler points out, Richard acknowledges that by “denying him his kingly name, they [Bullingbrook and his followers] have, furthermore, nullified his own baptism.” Schuler astutely observes that Richard’s loss of name is a religious matter, but it is also important to realize that the spiritual impact of losing a name is the possibility of being blotted from God’s list in the book of heaven.

Fearing this loss of name and self, Richard famously calls for a mirror, to see “the very book indeed / Where all my sins are writ, and that’s myself” (IV.i.274–5). Here, Richard claims that he himself is the book in which sins are written, just as the annotation of the Geneva Bible at Revelation 20:12 explains that “[e]very man’s conscience is as a boke wherein his dedes are written, which
shall appear when God openeth the boke.” Richard anticipates the moment when “bothe great & smal stand before God: and the bokes were opened, & another boke was opened, which is the boke of life, and the dead were judged of those things.” Aquinas reminds Christians that a “thing is said metaphorically to be written upon the mind.” 32 By seeking a mirror to read himself, Richard looks for a physical manifestation of the metaphoric writing on his soul. Richard is, strangely, a book trying to read itself: “[g]ive me that glass, and therein will I read” (IV.i.276). Richard tries to discern if he is somehow “[m]ark’d with a blot,” but acknowledges that the “flatt’ring glass / … / dost beguile me” (IV.i.279–81). 33 It seems that Richard still believes himself divine but is unable to read the book of his conscience.

As Arthur F. Kinney explains, Richard’s inability to see clearly in the mirror relates to Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians, which claims that now we can only see “through a glasse darkely” (13:12). 34 Kinney’s assertion that by looking into the mirror “Richard is publicly forced to confront the verdict of his own life and afterlife” can be carried further by recognizing that Richard is attempting to read the book of life in the mirror. 35 The “verdict of his own life and afterlife” is whether or not Richard’s name is found in the book of life. Richard cannot read the book of life in his face, even though “[e]verie mans conscience is as a boke,” for, as Revelation explains, these books are only to be read by God. Bullingbrook is more theologically astute on this point than Richard. Bullingbrook notes that Richard’s face is a “shadow” (as if seen through a “glasse darkely”); God is the only one who can clearly see and read the book of heaven or a mortal conscience. For Calvin, “Christ, then, is the mirror in which we ought, and in which, without deception, we may contemplate our election [to heaven] … if we are in communion with Christ, we have proof sufficiently clear and strong that we are written in the Book of Life.” 36 Richard cannot discover if he is in the book of life because he is attempting to use a mirror to look inwards, rather than looking outwards to God for his salvation. The issue here is whether a king (God’s anointed) can read the names listed in the book of life. Bullingbrook’s theological awareness surpasses Richard’s because Bullingbrook realizes that only God can read the book of life, and moreover, only God can blot names from it.

Kantorowicz recognizes the importance of names in act III scene 3 by identifying Richard’s move from pride to disheartenment as “a metamorphosis from ‘Realism’ to ‘Nominalism.’” 37 Reading Richard II in relation to the book of life highlights the
importance of names, as they mark a person’s position in the book of life and ultimately secure entry into heaven. According to Kantorowicz, Richard’s divinely appointed kingly self “pales into a nothing, a nomen.” Kantorowicz sees Richard’s downfall as a “cascading: from divine kingship to kingship’s ‘Name,’” and from the name to the naked misery of man.” While he appropriately assesses the fact that Richard loses his name, Kantorowicz inaccurately positions the state of having a name as less than divine kingship. “Name,” as Kantorowicz calls it, is not actually a state of being, like his other categories of divine kingship or “the naked misery of man.” Names are labels that apply to both a “miserable” man and a divinely appointed king. But given the significance of the book of life, a name is not a hollow or meaningless appellation (Kantorowicz’s “nothing”); rather, in Richard II, names constitute identity, title and nobility, reputation, and the means to be recorded in the book of life. Names are the only means of representation available (following Kantorowicz’s identification of the move to Nominalism), and terrifyingly, even these can be lost or blotted out.

In Richard II, “name” can mean not only a designation for a person, but also a person’s reputation. When Harry Percy describes the occupants of Berkeley castle, he says, “in it are the Lords of York, Berkeley, and Seymour, / None else of name and noble estimate” (II.iii.55–6). Percy’s conflation of name and nobility foreshadows Richard’s examination of his name and his kingship. The meaning of “name” as reputation recurs throughout Richard II, showing why having one’s name in the book of life would be so important to these characters: names are the earthly continuance of their reputations, by which they will be judged worthy for entry into heaven. Richard does not fall into a state of “kingship’s ‘Name,’” as Kantorowicz would have it, because a king’s given name is not theologically more valuable than any other name; the value of a king’s name lies in its political title. Richard’s loss of political power produces his theological fear that his name will be blotted out of the book of heaven. As he loses his title, his reputation, and his Christian name, he worries how and if he will be represented in the book of life. Kantorowicz famously labels this play as “the tragedy of the King’s Two Bodies”; the true Tragedy of King Richard the Second, however, is actually the realization of the tragic possibility that anyone, even kings, can be blotted from the book of life.

The image of being blotted echoes throughout the play and is applied to many characters and situations that reinforce Rich-
ard’s legitimate fear that he could lose his place in the book of life. The prevalent and polysemous blots in Richard II achieve the same result as the focus on names and naming: they resonate with and amplify the book of life metaphor that is central to the play. John of Gaunt describes England as “bound in with shame, / With inky blots and rotten parchment bonds” because of Richard’s poor administration of the country, including his choice to banish Bullingbrook (II.i.63–4). Later, not Richard, but Bullingbrook is metaphorically a blot, evident when Aumerle asks, “is there no plot / To rid the realm of this pernicious blot?” (IV.i.324–5). Bullingbrook says that Aumerle’s conspiracy to reinstate Richard is also a blot, but one redeemed by York’s loyalty: “thy abundant goodness shall excuse / This deadly blot in thy digressing son” (V.iii.65–6). It seems that no person, not even a king, is exempt from being associated with blots, which means that all people must come to terms with the possibility of being blotted from the book of life.

Faced with the prospect of no longer finding himself in the book of life, Richard struggles to find meaning in a life that could end in damnation. His tragedy is magnified because he was once a king; for him, being blotted from the book of life is inextricably intertwined with his deposition. Richard expresses his regret at banishing Henry, and wishes for a change in situation: “[o] that I were as great / As is my grief, or lesser than my name” (III.iii.136–7). Richard feels politically disempowered but is still forced to live up to the title of king. He struggles with the loss of his title—“[o] that I could forget what I have been! / Or not remember what I must be now!”—demonstrating his wish never to have been a king (to be “lesser than his name”) or always to remain a king (III.iii.138–9). Being robbed of one meaning of his name, Richard’s entire identity begins to crumble. He vocalizes his identity crisis through his loss of names as well as through his pronominal usage. Joseph Candido explores how Richard gradually moves from self-identifying with the plural and royal pronoun “we” to the singular pronoun “I”; this pronominal shift indicates the loss of the king’s second body, the “semi-divine Body Politic.” This shift also demonstrates Richard’s difficulties in labeling and naming himself, which are symptomatic of his deposition and identity crisis.

Names are one expression of divine justice because they mark a person’s place in the book of life. Shakespeare’s diction in Richard II links names and justice. At the opening of the play, Richard enters and asks John of Gaunt if he has brought his son to court
to “make good the boist’rous late appeal” against Mowbray (I.i.4). The word “appeal” had numerous meanings, as it comes from the Old French root “apeler,” meaning “to name.” To appeal means to accuse, as Herschel Baker glosses Richard’s use in the opening scene, “[i]f he appeal the Duke on ancient malice” (I.i.9). To appeal also means “to call to a higher judge,” which alludes to the divine judgment recorded in the book of heaven. Richard explains that the play’s action begins because Henry and Mowbray have arrived “Namely, to appeal each other of high treason” (I.i.27, emphasis added). This play is namely about names and about appeals for both divine and earthly justice. Bullingbrook’s first words point the audience to the relationship between the already introduced themes of name, justice, and the Christian book of life. While explaining that he comes as an “appellant” (I.i.34), Bullingbrook begins, “heaven be the record” (I.i.30): the record of heaven is the book of life, and Bullingbrook wants his righteousness to be expressed therein, thereby guaranteeing his entrance into heaven. Bullingbrook reminds the audience that God is the sole writer of the book of life and the one true judge, unlike Richard who cannot render a real verdict in this dispute between Mowbray and Bullingbrook. Richard is entangled in a political web, yet this play calls for a religious reading to explain Richard’s inability to act as judge.

Shakespeare uses the opening scene to reinforce the themes of names, judgment, and salvation that resonate through Richard’s deposition, while also introducing the concept of the book of life that unifies these ideas. Mowbray stakes his innocence on his eternal salvation:

MOWBRAY. No, Bullingbrook, if ever I were traitor,  
My name be blotted from the book of life,  
And I from heaven banish’d as from hence!  
(I.iii.201–3)

Mowbray believes that God’s judgment will not mistake him as the world’s and the king’s judgments have. In his subsequent lines, Mowbray calls a higher power to judge both him and Bullingbrook, saying, “[b]ut what thou art, God, thou, and I do know, / And all too soon, I fear, the King shall rue” (I.iii.204–5). Exhibiting caution, Mowbray does not insult the king directly because he does not address King Richard. Mowbray implies, however, that Richard’s worldly judgment cannot match God’s judgment.

Maintaining his innocence, Mowbray knows that he needs to uphold his name in order to be recorded in the book of life.
Bullingbrook’s challenge to Mowbray is a challenge to his name: “[w]ith a foul traitor’s name stuff I thy throat” (I.i.44). Mowbray later claims that neither Bulingbrook nor Richard can label him as a treasonous (and therefore sinning) traitor. Mowbray positions his name as something outside the feudal system of duty, the one intangible thing that the sovereign cannot rule:

MOWBRAY. Myself I throw, dread sovereign, at thy foot,
   My life thou shalt command, but not my shame:
   The one my duty owes, but my fair name,
   Despite of death that lives upon my grave,
   To dark dishonor’s use thou shalt not have.

(I.i.165–9)

Names can function to prevent “dark dishonor” on earth, and because they constitute the book of life, they also determine who will enter heaven.

To increase his honor—and possibly gain more chances to be entered into the book of life—Bullingbrook claims multiple names. When the audience first hears of Bulingbrook in the opening speech, King Richard calls him “Henry Herford” (I.i.3). Shakespeare occasionally calls him Harry throughout the play (I.i.162, I.iii.1, and II.i.144, among others). In the lead up to the duel, Bulingbrook is repeatedly called “Harry of Herford, Lancaster, and Derby” (I.iii.35, I.iii.100, and I.iii.104). Bulingbrook uses the names of all his lands to bolster his claims against Mowbray—he even claims that his actions will “furbish new the name of John a’ Gaunt” (I.iii.76). By associating himself with proliferating names, he traces an opposite trajectory to Richard, who loses names throughout the play.

Bullingbrook not only accrues many names, but also gains the earthly ability to name—though he does not conflate his political power with heavenly power. After Richard has been humiliated and expresses the loss of his names and his royal “we,” he asks Bulingbrook if he can have one “boon” (IV.i.302). Bulingbrook regally answers “[n]ame it, fair cousin,” because he now holds power over names (IV.i.305). Bulingbrook uses the word “[n]ame” as a command, showing his grasp of royal power. Immediately, Richard objects to Bulingbrook’s naming him “fair cousin,” and bitterly remarks that when he was king his flatterers were only subjects, and now that he has a king as flatterer, he must yet be great (IV.i.30–8). Richard asks leave to depart, and Bulingbrook has the former king conveyed to the Tower. Bulingbrook can issue commands (and can name) because he has taken the
title of king, although the official coronation will not be until the following week. Unlike Richard, however, Bullingbrook does not have a misguided sense that because he is on the throne, he has access to God’s will or the book of life.

The actions surrounding these two characters may be read in two possible ways. On the one hand, Richard may be a tragic figure whose throne was usurped by power-hungry Bullingbrook. On the other, Bullingbrook may be viewed as a savior who has come to rid England of a tyrant whose unfair taxes and war in Ireland are bankrupting the nation. Shakespeare’s play leads the audience to experience both perspectives. Ultimately, however, what makes both Richard and Bullingbrook tragic figures worthy of the audience’s sympathy is the fact that neither Richard nor Bullingbrook can guarantee that their names will be found in the book of life.

When Bullingbrook discovers that Exton has murdered Richard—an act “chronicled in hell” rather than found in the book of heaven (V.v.116)—Bullingbrook fears, rightly, for his own kingly reputation. This “deed of slander” rests both on Henry’s head and on “all this famous land” (V.vi.35–6). Bullingbrook, while denying culpability in Richard’s death, fears more than legal repercussions, because killing a sovereign is a sin greater than murder. The concluding speech brings Bullingbrook’s woe to center stage: he is not a clear-cut victor who ascends to an untroubled throne, as the two eponymous Henry IV plays in the tetralogy assert. Shakespeare concludes the play with Henry’s promise to atone for Richard’s death, in an attempt to “grace [his] mournings” (V.vi.51). In The Riverside Shakespeare, Baker glosses grace as “dignify,” but that evades the deeper theological meaning. Richard II concludes with King Henry, like Richard before him, pursuing grace in order to keep his name in the book of heaven.

For Aquinas, there are two ways to enter heaven: predestination and grace. If one achieves eternal life through predestination, then it is impossible to be blotted from the book of life, as predestination accounts for God’s absolute and infallible knowledge. Aquinas continues, “[t]hose who are ordained to eternal life, not through Divine Predestination, but through grace, are said to be written in the Book of Life not absolutely (simpliciter), but relatively (secundum quid).” For Aquinas, those who achieve entry to heaven through grace can be blotted from the book of life. This solves the dilemma of God’s being unable to foresee who will be granted eternal life, as Aquinas concludes, “[a]lthough things are immutably in God, yet in themselves they are subject to change.
To this it is that the blotting-out of the Book of Life refers.” While it seems that the king, as God’s representative on earth, would have a place in the book of life through predestination, the transfer of the crown from Richard to Bullingbrook calls this predestination into question. If the king’s body politic can be severed from the body natural, the presumed entry into heaven must also be transferable, making Richard’s and Bullingbrook’s positions in the book of life a matter of grace instead of predestination.

For Calvin, however, being blotted from the book of life is less a matter of grace than a personal choice to turn from heaven. Calvin recasts the theological debate, arguing that “the meaning is simple: those are deleted from the book of life who, considered for a time to be children of God, afterwards depart to their own place.” Traditional religious narratives contrast the Calvinist view of unconditional election (where a select few are saved due to God’s choice and not their actions) against the Arminian view of conditional election (where God infallibly predicts who will be saved ahead of time, but the choice to live a holy life and turn to God rests with the individual). Calvin refutes the idea that the names of all people are initially written in the book of life. For the elect who are written in the book of life, however, Calvin warns that they can take actions that result in the removal of their names from the book of life: “[l]et no one then seek confidence of his election elsewhere [than in Christ], unless he wish to obliterate his name from the book of life in which it is written.”

Bullingbrook and Richard can have their names removed from the book of life due to their actions that turn away from God. Richard, as discussed above, sins by denying his own divine right. Bullingbrook describes his kingship as divinely sanctioned when he proclaims, “[i]n God’s name I’ll ascend the regal throne” (IV.i.113). His determination to seize the throne, however, is still a rebellion and therefore a sin that he willingly undertakes (IV.i.113).

Grace and predestination as means to eternal salvation were at the center of theological debates during the English Reformation. As Dewey D. Wallace Jr. explains, “[a] Reformed theology of grace ... became the fundamental theology of English Protestantism in the generation preceding the reign of Elizabeth I.” The Reformed theology of grace “sought above all to magnify the role of divine grace in the process of salvation by stressing gratuitous regeneration and sanctification as well as predestination.” This Reformed or Calvinist theology was accepted by a majority of the Church of England; predestination was central to Calvinism. The 1560s were rife with tracts about predestination; debates
continued well into the 1590s, when Shakespeare wrote *Richard II*. The medieval and early Reformation debates about the book of life allowed English Renaissance thinkers, including Shakespeare, to explore the notions of grace and predestination that were the source of such theological debate.

Shakespeare does not offer his audience a solution to the turbulent spiritual conflicts of his day with *Richard II*. Moreover, the lack of the hero/villain binary and the lack of assurance that either Richard’s or Henry’s names can be found in the book of life foreshadows the politico-theological uncertainty that chronologically followed the events of *Richard II* in the War of the Roses. Shakespeare’s second tetralogy centers on the idea that “rebellion is both a crime and a sin, and is bound to lead to trouble until the curse is lifted.” While Tudor historians such as Edward Hall often lauded the union of the houses of York and Lancaster as the solution to the crime and sin of Richard II’s deposition, Shakespeare reminds his audience that the sin has not been resolved. Neither Yorks nor Lancasters (and even kings) have a guaranteed position in the book of life; for Shakespeare, salvation remains contingent.

NOTES

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1 This claim is based on a search of the Shakespeare corpus using *Literature Online* (www.lion.chadwyck.com). This claim is reinforced by a search of *The Riverside Shakespeare*, 1st edn., ed. G. Blakemore Evans (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974) using Googlebooks (books.google.com).

2 As St. Thomas Aquinas explains, the “Book of Life’ is in God taken in a metaphorical sense” (*The Summa Theologica* of St. Thomas Aquinas, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, 3 vols. [London: R. and T. Washbourne, 1911–21], part 1, question 24, article 1). Henry Peacham, a Renaissance rhetorician, shares Aquinas’s views, explaining that for the phrase “written in the booke of life, here the wordes written and booke, are Metaphors” (*The Garden of Eloquence, Containing the Most Excellent ornaments, Exornations, Lightes, Flowers, and Formes of Speech, Commonly Called the Figures of Rhetorike, By Which the Singular Partes of Mans Mind, Are Most Aply Expressed, and the Sundrie Affections of His Heart Most Effectuallie Uttered. Manifested, and Furnished With Varietie of Fit Examples, Gathered out of the Most Eloquent Orators, and Best Approved Authors, and Chieflie out of the Holie Scriptures. Profitable and Necessarie, as Wel for Private Speech, as for Publicke Orations* [London: printed by R. F. for H. Jackson, 1593], p. 10; EEBO STC [2d edn.] 19498).
Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of King Richard the Second*, ed. Herschel Baker, in *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans, 2d edn., 2 vols. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997), 1:847–83, I.iii.202, IV.i.230–6, and IV.i.265–80. The other oblique references to the book of life include the blot imagery (II.i.63–4, IV.i.324–5, V.iii.65–6), importance of names (IV.i.255–7, II.iii.55–6), the relation of names to justice (I.i.27, I.i.34), and the antithetical notion of hell’s chronicles (V.v.116), all of which will be discussed later in this essay. Subsequent references to *Richard II* are from this edition and will appear parenthetically in the text by act, scene, and line number.


5 Aquinas clarifies that there is a second possible connotation of the book of life: “[i]n another sense, the conscription of those things which lead us to life, may be called the Book of Life; and this also is twofold, either as of things to be done: and thus the Old and New Testaments are called a Book of Life” (p. 336). This essay, however, deals with the primary meaning of the book of life as the register of names for those who will get into heaven.


8 Trans. Moore in “Prosopographical Problems,” p. 168. A facsimile of this manuscript has been edited by David Rollason, Lynda Rollason, and

It is not unreasonable to conjecture that Shakespeare might have seen a *liber vitae*. Moore speculates that “presumably most medieval monasteries would once have maintained such records, but nearly all English examples have vanished as a result of the Reformation” (“Prosopographical Problems,” p. 167). Keynes explains that “there were *libri vitae* at Glastonbury, Abingdon, Peterborough, and Ely, and doubtless at other places as well” (“The *Liber Vitae* of the New Minster, Winchester,” p. 153). After the monasteries in England were closed, their books sometimes went to private collectors; Sir Robert Cotton (1571–1631), for instance, gathered the Durham *liber vitae* into his book collection. See Colin G. C. Tite, “The Durham *Liber Vitae* and Sir Robert Cotton,” in The Durham “Liber Vitae” and Its Context, pp. 3–15.


Charlotte Scott has recently attended to the book of life in *Richard II*, although her focus is on representations of more generalized books in Shakespeare’s plays (*Shakespeare and the Idea of the Book* [Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2007]). While Scott’s remarks about books in *Richard II* are useful, when she turns to the book of life specifically, her argument falters from lack of theological grounding. Scott claims that “for Gaunt or Mowbray the
book of life is a narrative process of representation in the inevitable effects of action,” even though the book of life is simply a list of names (p. 107). Scott later labels the book of life as a “heavenly ledger,” that best aligns with the theological understanding of the book of life as represented by extant physical *libri vitæ* and scriptural references (p. 109). Jan Gerchow explains that “[b]y far the majority of *libri vitæ* were plain manuscripts, effectively just wads of parchment leaves intended to be filled with personal names without much attention to adornment” (“The Origins of the Durham *Liber Vitæ*,” in *The Durham *“Liber Vitæ” and Its Context*, pp. 45–61, 46). Cecily Clark explains that the Thorney Abbey *liber vitæ* is comprised of “name-lists” (“The *Liber Vitæ* of Thorney Abbey and Its ‘Catchment Area,’” *Nomina* 9 [1985]: 53–72, 53).


22 Kantorowicz, p. 36.

23 Kantorowicz, pp. 40–1.


26 Kantorowicz explains that the king’s two bodies refer both to the body natural and the body politic as well as to the manhood and Godhead of the king (p. 39).
St. Augustine of Hippo explains why the book of life exists: “[t]his book is not for reminding God, as if things might escape Him by forgetfulness, but it symbolizes His predestination of those to whom eternal life shall be given. For it is not that God is ignorant, and reads in the book to inform Himself, but rather His infallible prescience is the book of life in which they are written, that is to say, known beforehand” (The City of God, trans. Marcus Dods, in Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, ed. Philip Schaff, first series, 14 vols. [1886–90; rpt. Peabody MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994], 2:435).

Aquinas refutes those who believe that names are not blotted from the divine book of life. He explains that “[a]lthough things are immutably in God, yet in themselves they are subject to change. To this it is that the blotting out of the book of life refers” (part 1, question 24, article 3). He further explains that you can believe that you are blotted from the book of life (a misconception based on our limited human understanding), or that you can be blotted in an actual sense: “The way in which one is said to be blotted out of the book of life is that in which one is said to be written therein anew: either in the opinion of men, or because he begins again to have relation towards eternal life through grace; which also is included in the knowledge of God, although not anew” (part 1, question 24, article 3). This article returns to Aquinas’s beliefs with more attention to his nuanced position.

When discussing Shakespearean books, Scott refers to The Merry Wives of Windsor, which suggests “that both kings and history lie ‘writ with blank space for different names’” (p. 107). As Scott reads this quote, it resonates with Richard as a king, which further reinforces the image of Richard as one who seeks to read the book of heaven in his face.

To show how Kantorowicz has misconstrued the importance of a king’s name, we turn to one of his sources, Sir Frederick Pollock and Frederic William Maitland, The History of English Law before the Time of Edward I, 2d edn., 2 vols. (1898; rpt. Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1923). Pollock and Maitland give historical evidence that “the corporation is but a name” (1:490). They claim that the most natural corporation to understand is the body politic: they see corporations as “artificial persons” or “group-persons,” such as the king, who embodies the body politic (1:486–7). If the king is a corporation and a corporation is but a name, we can read Pollock and Maitland’s statement in a new light: the king is but a name. There cannot, pace
Kantorowicz, be a fall from divine kingship to kingly name, because they are both the same thing.

41 The OED, 2d edn., defines “name” as “reputation” in the second major definition, using another play from Shakespeare’s second tetralogy, 1 Henry IV, as one of the examples.


44 Christopher Pye describes the historical importance of these “inky blots” (II.i.64) as marks on the “blank charters” (I.iv.48) that Richard used to unfairly tax the population and fund the war in Ireland (“The Betrayal of the Gaze: Theatricality and Power in Shakespeare’s Richard II,” ELH 55, 3 [Autumn 1988]: 575–98). Pye further explains a semantic use of “blots” in Elizabethan England: “the most unspeakable of crimes [treason] is always marked in that unmarked form [a blot]” (p. 580). Pye’s findings attest to the multivalent nature of blots, but Pye emphasizes the political rather than the theological ramifications of blots in Richard II.

45 Charles R. Forker claims that the third act dramatizes Richard’s “crisis of identity” (“Unstable Identity in Shakespeare’s Richard II,” Renascence 54, 1 [Fall 2001]: 3–22, 6). Forker paraphrases Kantorowicz and explains that “Richard’s dual nature not only defines but magnifies his sufferings” (p. 4). Forker’s essay argues that Richard’s identity crisis demonstrates a move from a stable medieval worldview to a shifting modern view.


47 Candido’s essay parallels the conclusions of this essay because pronouns stand in for names, and as such, exhibit similar tendencies to names throughout the play. Bullingbrook’s pronominal usage inversely mirrors Richard’s: Bullingbrook’s names increase while Richard’s decrease. Richard’s loss of his first person plural pronoun signals the loss of the multiplicity of names he once held.

48 OED, 2d edn., s.v. “appeal,” and “appellant.”

49 See Baker’s unnumbered footnote to I.i.9 in Shakespeare, Richard II, p. 847n.

50 OED, 2d edn., s.v. “appeal,” 2.

51 For more on justice and judging in Richard II, see Hutson, “Imagining Justice: Kantorowicz and Shakespeare,” in Fifty Years, pp. 118–42, 135–9.

52 The political and historical reason that Richard is unable to effectively act as judge is that he had a hand in his brother Woodstock’s murder. Many theatergoers would have known of Richard’s guilt not simply from history texts, but also from the play Woodstock (written in the early 1590s). Woodstock is sometimes called Richard II, Part I (see, for instance, the modern edition: Thomas of Woodstock: Or King Richard the Second, Part One, ed. Peter Corbin and Douglas Sedge [Manchester: Manchester Univ. Press, 1988]) and is occasionally attributed to Shakespeare (for one of the most recent and detailed arguments to this effect, see The Tragedy of Richard II Part One: A NewlyAuthenticated Play by William Shakespeare, 3 vols., ed. Michael Egan [New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 2006]).
The word “deposition” also links the themes of names and justice (the play is about “the deposing of a king” [IV.i.234]). The OED, 2d edn., gives these relevant definitions: “degradation, dethronement,” emphasizing the loss of name as reputation and name as title, and “the giving of testimony on oath in a court of law,” which demonstrates the connection to judgment (1).

Scott misrepresents the book of life, claiming that “[t]he book of life, as compiled by Mowbray, is a long and ubiquitous volume, in which ‘life’ is a written history of events and effects” (p. 106). But the book of life is not compiled by Mowbray, or even by the sovereign: it is compiled by God. Although Scott’s discussion of generalized books is stimulating, when she turns to the book of life without the theological background, she wrongly assumes that Richard has any “symbolic power of what he can either ‘show’ or ‘blot’” (p. 107).

See also George D. Gopen, “Private Grief into Public Action: The Rhetoric of John of Gaunt in Richard II,” SP 84, 3 (Summer 1987): 338–62. Gopen discusses the power of naming in Richard II: “[n]aming transforms the potential into the actual. It creates” (p. 349). Gopen compares the divine power of naming (“fiat lux”) with the earthly power to name and create (pp. 348–9).

Bullingbrook’s concern for his reputation (that he has been slandered) relates back to the idea that name is reputation. At the end of the play, his name is uncertain in two ways: it might not be in the book of life and his reputation is also undecided.

See Baker’s unnumbered note to V.vi.51 in Shakespeare, Richard II, p. 879n.

Aquinas, part 1, question 24, article 3.


Calvin, Predestination, p. 126.


Peter White points out the “moderation of early Elizabethan Calvinists on the doctrine of predestination” evident in the Geneva Bible (Predestination, Policy, and Polemic: Conflict and Consensus in the English Church from the Reformation to the Civil War [Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1992], p. 91).

As Baker notes, Richard II was possibly written in 1595 and was first published in quarto in 1597 (p. 842). For a discussion of many of the
predestination tracts from the early Elizabethan period through the end of the sixteenth century, see White, esp. pp. 82–140. See also Penny, esp. pp. 191–216. For further information on the “Cambridge debates on grace and predestination in the 1590s” (p. 130), see Nigel Voak, “English Molinism in the Late 1590s: Richard Hooker on Free Will, Predestination, and Divine Foreknowledge,” *Journal of Theological Studies* 60, 1 (April 2009): 130–77.


68 Edward Hall, *The Union of the two noble and illustre familie of Lan-
castre & Yorke beeung long in continual discension for the crowne of this noble realme, with all the acres done in both the tymes of the Princes, both of the one linage and of the other, beginning at the tyme of kyng Henry the fowerth, the first auctor of this devision, and so successively proceadyng to the reigne of the high and prudent prince kyng Henry the eight, the undubitate flower and very heire of both the sayd linages* ([London: Richard Grafton, 1548], title page and passim; EEBO STC [2d edn.] 12722).