

☞ “I do not marvel in any ways to see such a multitude of people assembled . . . to behold the unfortunate tragedy of this my wretched life. For the case is rare. . . .”¹ He loved his wife, insisted John Kello at the scaffold. He denied that he’d dabbled in magic. But “the wicked spirit” had urged him to kill his wife to advance his career. (He never explains how she was an obstacle. Was she just set against his promotion? or having to move to some wretched small town? Then, you’d think, they’d talk about it or endure some marital spats. But murder? It sounds like a parody of men devoted more to their jobs than to their families.) He tried poisoning her, but she vomited. So he strangled her instead, leaving himself with the usual dilemma, how to dispose of the corpse. Picture him, please, the jittery husband, gingerly embracing his wife as if trying to patch things up after a fight and awkwardly presenting a valedictory gift, a necklace too cumbersome to please, still, his wife complaisant, sweetly uncomplaining: he circled a noose around the corpse’s neck and left the body hanging as if she’d committed suicide.

Kello already had drawn up his will, leaving all his property and the children’s care to her. A loving husband could do no more. And he already had spread rumors that she was “tempted terribly in the night.” Leaving his house keys inside, he slipped out the seldom-used back door of his study. A later tradition of uncertain provenance has it that after killing her, he sailed off to preach—Kello was a minister—and then invited some of the congregation back to his home, where he was shocked, shocked, to discover the dangling body.² Then he anguished over whether those commit-

¹ *The Confession of Maister Iohn Kello Minister of Spot, togidder with His Earnist Repentance Maid upon the Scaffald befoir His Sufferring, the Fourt Day of October. 1570* (Edinburgh, 1570). The pamphlet is reproduced with extensive variations in spelling and punctuation in Richard Bannatyne, *Journal of the Transactions in Scotland, during the Contest between the Adherents of Queen Mary, and Those of Her Son* (Edinburgh, 1806), pp. 39–51. I’ve modernized spelling in the text throughout, but only capitalization in footnoted titles, to assist those wishing to track down the sources. Yes, Kello was a real historical figure: see Hew Scott, *Fasti Ecclesiae Scoticae: The Succession of Ministers in the Church of Scotland from the Reformation*, new ed., 9 vols. (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1915–61), 1:417; *The Diary of Mr John Lamont of Newton: 1649–1671* (Edinburgh, 1830), p. 227.

² William Roughhead, *Twelve Scots Trials* (Edinburgh: William Green and Sons, 1913), pp. 1–15.

ting suicide could be saved. “And that my affection towards her might appear the greater,” he denied that God would suffer so innocent a creature to succumb “to the temptation and rage of Satan.”

Kello was hanged in Edinburgh in 1570. The historical context makes the episode a bit less murky. After the Reformation hit Scotland, just ten or twelve years before Kello’s turn at the scaffold, the kirk or church was severely understaffed,³ so he could well have glimpsed attractive job openings. By 1574, Scottish ministers were prosperous enough to provoke sumptuary legislation prohibiting them and their wives from wearing fine clothes, jewelry, and silk hats.⁴ The locals were used to duels and assassinations, also to “seizers,” zealous officers who the year of Kello’s death had two men burned alive for sodomy—and who kept up their savage enforcement of religious commandments into the 1700s.⁵ (Remember them the next time someone assures you that Islam just needs its own Reformation.) As far as I know, though, the execution of a minister was no everyday yawner. None of this tells us what Kello had in mind for his career or what his wife objected to. Here, too, the historical record is frustratingly opaque.

Kello might have gotten away with it, but the grumbling and gossiping of some of the faithful were getting under his skin. And “above all,” another minister penetrated “the inward cogitations of my heart” and interpreted a troubled dream he’d had. Staggered by the interpretation, Kello “persuaded myself God spoke in him.” *I persuaded myself* will easily bear the sense of *I came to believe*. But it’s tempting to construe it as admitting that he talked himself into it. Now why would he? And why would he report the dream in the first place? Was he afflicted by the fabled guilty conscience, plaguing the perpetrator, confronting him with knowing accusers at every turn, transmuting others’ casual glances into caustic glares? Maybe, but

³ Rosalind Mitchison, *The Old Poor Law in Scotland: The Experience of Poverty, 1574–1845* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), p. 11. For an incisive overview of kirk history, see Jenny Wormald, *Court, Kirk, and Community: Scotland 1470–1625* (London: Edward Arnold, 1981), chaps. 5–8.

⁴ David M. Walker, *A Legal History of Scotland*, 6 vols. to date (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark Ltd., 1988–), 3:279.

⁵ Allan Massie, *Edinburgh* (London: Sinclair-Stevenson, 1994), pp. 37–38; Ebenezer Henderson, R. L. Wright, and William Haldane, *The Annals of Kinross-Shire*, ed. Hon Rhoderick and Alison Moncreiff (n.p.: Fossoway & District Community Council, 1990), p. 30; Ebenezer Henderson, *The Annals of Dunfermline* (Glasgow, 1879), p. 377.

many guilty people don't seem to suffer from such inexorable consciences. Some innocent people do.

What is a guilty conscience, anyway? Just the detritus of years of conditioning, some irrational quirk that happens to be shared by others and vigorously promoted by pompous authorities? If so, can the agile murderer wriggle away from morality? Imagine the psychotherapist's ad: "Counsel for those in the clutches of the indefensible superstitions of morality. Triumphant testimonials on offer from prior clients now viewed by the base cowards around us as psychopaths." No, she's not offering merely to help out those in sweaty paroxysms of guilt over trivial faults. She's offering her patients the chance to burst the confines of morality into lives where they never hesitate over what's right or wrong, good or bad. Would you enter such therapy? Should you? Do you flinch at the prospect?

Or is a guilty conscience the still, small voice of God within?⁶ Recall how it feels when you want to do something questionable, when you've persuaded yourself that it is the right thing to do, and then you suddenly know that it's wrong. Even then, is conscience inescapable? or are some tone-deaf to its stern song? Are they culpable? negligent? or, not to put too fine a point on it, damned? Maybe Kello succumbed to visions of hellfire and the desperate seductions of being a deathbed convert. But how religiously orthodox could he have been? Yes, there's a distinguished tradition of people killing for God, even when they embrace Him as the Prince of Peace. But not killing their wives to advance their careers.

What kind of minister does such a thing? Linger over Kello's activities during the weeks he's planning the murder. Sometimes he's writing his will, figuring out how to get poison without leaving an incriminating trail, and sadly confiding in his parishioners about his wife's alleged nocturnal temptations. Sometimes he's officiating at marriages, baptizing infants, and solemnly urging the faithful to repent for their sins. You'd think he has to be play-acting in those latter activities, right? After all, he's dead serious

⁶ See 1 Kings 19:12. The crucial text in the reception and transformation of this notion in ethics is Bishop Butler's *Sermons* of 1726, an argument for the authority of conscience. (In his sixth Sermon, Butler flirts with blasphemy by casting "our nature" as "the voice of God within us.") For intellectual context and commentary, see J. L. Mackie, *Hume's Moral Theory* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980), esp. pp. 35–43; and Stephen Darwall, *The British Moralists and the Internal "Ought": 1640–1740* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), esp. chap. 7.

