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Accessing the Supernatural in Shakespeare's *Richard III*

There exists within Shakespeare's play *Richard III* two opposing forces of power: the worldly power found within the patriarchal political structure, and the supernatural power of prophesying via cursing. Both types of power prove effective: Richard's enemies – real or imagined – are murdered as he wields the authority granted him through the political system, and the curses uttered by the former Queen Margaret as she calls on the heavens to "give way . . . to my quick curses" (1.3.192) prove prophetic. Interestingly enough, Richard himself does not commit any actual murders; he merely gives the order, and other men kill his victims for him. Richard's power does not come solely through his political title, but also because of his male homosocial bonds. It is these male homosocial bonds more than anything else that grant the men in the play their power. Logically, then, it would seem as if the women, denied equal access on +account of their gender to this worldly power found through forming social bonds with men, have reverted instead to relying on the supernatural powers of heaven as exercised through prophetic cursing. Indeed, Alison Thorne refers to the women's prophesying as a way "to expose institutional corruption in the higher echelons of state by calling to account those whose power and status seemingly place them beyond reach of the law" (33), and points to their female gender as both the incentive for their cursing and the reason for its effectiveness. Because only the men can rely on the worldly power granted them through their male social bonds within the patriarchal structure of their society to influence events, it is only natural that the women rely instead on the powers of heaven to manipulate events.

However, this gendered explanation of these two types of power is too simplistic to fit every incident in the play. First of all, not every curse uttered by a woman is equally effective.

For example, while in the act of mourning the death of her husband and father, Anne curses Richard, saying:

> If ever he have child, abortive be it,
> Prodigious, and untimely brought to light . . .
> If ever he have wife, let her be made
> As miserable by the death of him
> As I am made by my poor lord and thee (1.2.20-26).

These curses of Anne's are as emotionally charged as any throughout the play, yet they do not prove prophetic, as Richard never has a child, and it is doubtful that Anne is made more miserable by his death than she has already been made by his life. Therefore, the femaleness of the speaker cannot be the only requirement for the curse to have actual power; there must be something more at play.

The other problem inherent in equating women with access to supernatural power is that certain of the men in the play also show evidence of having access to this same power. Clarence, Stanley, and Richard all have dreams that accurately show the future, and while these men do not exercise power through these dreams, the fact that they have these dreams at all does show that they at least have the potential to tap into a supernatural power source.

But if the ability to access the supernatural powers of heaven does not depend on gender, what, then, does it depend on? Who has the ability to access this power, and what determines the effectiveness with which they are able to wield it? I would argue that, while everyone in the play has the potential to access this supernatural power, the extent to which the characters are able to effectively wield this power is directly dependent on the extent to which they are willing to renounce their dependence on the worldly power found through forming ties with a male social

group. When the characters have these male social ties, they trust in that as their source of power to the extent that they ignore their access to the more supernatural power of prophecies and dreams. But once deprived of this access to worldly power – once cut off from the male social group – these characters resort to the only power left to them, and thus the way is opened for them to utter prophetic cries. As William Toole claims about the play *Richard II,* "Its central point, generally speaking, is that the loss of worldly power may lead to a kind of spiritual elevation" – and, inversely, that "the rise to worldly power may be accompanied by a sense of spiritual degradation" (165), and the same can be said of *Richard III.*

The wooing scene between Richard and Anne shows the first evidence of the importance of casting off male social bonds in order to gain access to the power of prophecy. While on the way to bury her husband and his father, Anne asks the carriers to set the caskets on the ground. Immediately she begins to talk to the corpses of these men that she has loved so much, even going so far as to invoke her father-in-law's ghost. As Paige Reynolds points out, "Her direct address demonstrates . . . her belief that her father-in-law is not completely gone" (21). By directly addressing these corpses, Anne shows that she is still holding on to her relationship with these men, thus showing her continued desire for communion within the framework of a male social group. It is because of this continued desire that when, immediately following her direct address of her dead father-in-law's body, she curses Richard, her prophecies of his wretched future fall flat. Although as emotionally charged as Margaret's curses in the next scene, Anne's prophecies in this scene lack the power to actually strike at their intended target. Anne shows further evidence of her reluctance to throw away her access to worldly power by her acceptance of Richard's proposal. She rails against him, yet in the end gives in to his avowal of love, showing that she can still be swayed by the hope of gaining access to the worldly power inherent

in a relationship with a male. It is this refusal to completely break ties with any male character, and thus break ties with the patriarchal system of worldly power, that prevents her from fully uniting with the otherworldly power that would grant her curses actual power.

Contrast this scene with that of Queen Elizabeth begging Margaret to teach her how to curse. This scene shows the Duchess of York's final transformation from a reliance on male social bonds as a source of power to a reliance on the power of heaven as the only sure source of power, and juxtaposes this transformation with the lack of a similar transformation for Elizabeth. The scene begins with Elizabeth and the Duchess lamenting the loss of their male kindred. Queen Margaret joins them, saying, "If ancient sorrow be most reverend / Give mine the benefit of seniority" (4.4.32-33), and the three women begin, competitively, to compare the number of their murdered male kindred. Margaret begins by lamenting, "I had an Edward, till a Richard killed him / I had a Harry, till a Richard killed him," then proceeds with reminding Elizabeth, "Thou hadst an Edward, till a Richard killed him / Thou hadst a Richard, till a Richard killed him" (4.4.36-40). As the conversation progresses, Elizabeth and the Duchess become increasingly aware that their relationships with the male social group upon which they have been dependent for safety and security have done nothing to protect their friends and families. In fact, it would seem that certain of the men in their lives are the sole *cause* of the destruction of their families. As the horror of this realization is added on to her already inconsolable sorrow, the Duchess lets go of all hope in the worldly power she once had access to through her association with this male social group. Although she still has a son left alive, she recognizes the danger inherent in fostering a relationship with him. He is the cause of the murders that have occurred, and for this reason she renounces her ties to him. This desire to no longer have any association

with a male social group, even one that includes her sole remaining son, proves so strong that she tells Richard, in reference to the upcoming battle:

> Either thou wilt die by God's just ordinance
> Ere from this war thou turn a conqueror
> Or I with grief and extreme age shall perish
> And never look upon thy face again (4.4.173-176).

She would rather die than see her son again, and this marks the point in the play where she has fully given up the faith she once had in her ties to the male social group. As she now realizes that her relationships with men, no matter how much access to worldly power those men may have, cannot save her or those she loves, she also realizes that the only recourse left to her is to turn to the source of power already demonstrated by Margaret: that of calling down curses from heaven.

Although this scene is often used as an example of women uniting together against the patriarchal power structure, I would argue that, instead, the actions of Elizabeth in this scene show that, just as the women cannot depend on male social relationships to supply them with power, neither can they fully rely on each other. It is Elizabeth, and not the Duchess, who begs Margaret to "stay awhile / And teach me how to curse mine enemies" (4.4.110-11), and yet it is the Duchess, and not Elizabeth, who ends up cursing Richard. Elizabeth, through asking Margaret for help, shows that she still believes that she can gain access to power through her ties to other mortal beings. Although Margaret does condescend to advise her former enemy in the ways of cursing, telling her to, "Forbear to sleep the nights, and fast the days" (4.4.112), she ultimately is too concerned for her own, presumably happier, future awaiting her in France to stick around to "quicken" Elizabeth's curses with her own, saying instead, "Thy woes will make them sharp and pierce like mine" (4.4.118). Margaret's response to Elizabeth's plea for help, and

Elizabeth's subsequent failure to curse (all she has to add on to the Duchess's prophetic cursing is a rather pathetic "Amen," claiming that while she has "far more cause," she also has "much less spirit to curse" (4.4.186-187)), shows the futility of relying on any tie to another human being, even other females, in one's attempt to gain access to power. And indeed, Elizabeth's actions at the end of the scene, where she gives in to Richard's request to woo her daughter for him, prove that she has not yet given up hope of gaining access to worldly power. Although it takes much pleading on the part of Richard, Elizabeth shows that she can still be swayed by the persuasiveness of a powerful male figure offering her renewed access to worldly political power. Unlike the Duchess, she is not quite ready to fully renounce all ties to power through mortal relationships, and therefore, she lacks the power to remain aloof enough to curse.

The Duchess, on the other hand, has no such remaining trust in any sort of social bonds, and thus she does not need Margaret's help in cursing her son, nor does she need to rely on another woman's words, as she has given herself over wholly to a reliance on the powers of heaven. The contrast between these two women shows clearly that it is not gender but attitude that determines one's ability to channel the power of the supernatural.

The first hint the play gives that men, too, possess the potential for accessing the supernatural powers of heaven occurs as Clarence relates to Brakenbury his dream. He says that he dreamed that he and his brother were on board a ship, walking along the deck, when "Methought that Gloucester stumbled, and in stumbling / Struck me, that thought to stay him, overboard / Into the tumbling billows of the main" (1.4.17-19). Although this dream of Clarence's death does turn out to be prophetic, it is very different from the prophecies of the women. For one thing, Clarence does not consciously call on the powers of heaven to help him prophesy; indeed, he is very much unconscious when the prophecy comes. Clarence also tells the

dream in a very ambiguous manner. He uses the word "methought" four times in twenty-two lines, showing his lack of belief in his own power of prophecy. It is also unclear in his description of the dream if Gloucester intentionally killed him, or if his striking him overboard was a mere accident. Compare this to Margaret's prophetic-cursing of Richard:

> Thy friends suspect for traitors while thou livest,
> And take deep traitors for thy dearest friends.
> No sleep close up that deadly eye of thine,
> Unless it be while some tormenting dream
> Affrights thee with a hell of ugly devils (1.3.219-23).

When compared with the specificity of Margaret's prophecies, the lack of clarity in Clarence's description of his dream shows his unwillingness to trust the power of the supernatural. The reason he cannot understand what his dream portends is because he trusts his ties with his male social group above his own intuition. He trusts his brother, Richard of Gloucester, so strongly that even when the executioners tell him that Richard hates him, he refutes them with "Oh, no, he loves me, and he holds me dear" (1.4.213). Even as events in his waking life start to mirror the events in his dream, still his sense of loyalty to his brother is too strong for him to trust in the power of the supernatural over the power he believes he can gain from his relationship with Richard.

Lord Hastings's response to Lord Stanley's dream parallels Clarence's experience. While Stanley believes the things his dream portends, to the point that he sends a messenger to wake Hastings in the middle of the night to warn him against trusting Richard, Hastings responds with, "I wonder he is so fond / To trust the mockery of unquiet slumbers" (3.2.24-25), and reassures the messenger that "the boar will use us kindly" (31). Even while at the council, Hastings

exhibits an intensity of trust in Richard, telling Stanley that he can tell, by Richard's appearance, "that with no man here he is offended." Stanley, on the other hand, shows further evidence of his distrust of Richard as he asks Hastings skeptically, "What of his heart perceive you in his face / By any likelihood he showed today?" then follows Hastings' assertion that Richard is obviously not offended with any of his fellow council-members with a fervent plea to heaven, "I pray God he be not" (3.4.59-63). Hastings' trust in his relationship with Richard and those in Richard's inner circle blinds him to the power of the prophecy that could have saved him. Even Stanley, aware as he is of the truth inherent in the dream, feels too tied to Hastings to run away without him and thus, at the very least, save himself. For both these men, their ties to the male social group prevents them from acting on the warnings given them by the power of prophecy, and thus these ties prevent them from fully channeling the potent powers of the supernatural.

The final dream in the play, that of Richard, shows what happens when men realize that they can no longer rely on their male social bonds. At this point in the play, Richard has executed his closest confidant, Buckingham (along with several other of his former allies); has received word that his former ally Richmond is riding to war against him; and only keeps Lord Stanley's loyalty through threatening to kill his son. Richard, as prophesied by Margaret, has no one left whom he can trust. And when the ghosts of all those whom he has murdered appear to him in his dream, his subsequent monologue betrays his uncertainty of whether or not he can even trust himself. He asks himself uneasily, "Is there a murderer here?" but does not trust his own answer. He advises himself to "fly," then questions, "What, from myself? Great reason why? / Lest I revenge. What, myself upon myself?" (5.3.182-84). William Toole points out that, "At this point Richard is uncertain and alternates between self-condemnation and an attempt to bolster his courage" (56). Richard is questioning his trust in his own reasoning and his motivation, and as he

loses his faith in his relationship with himself it is replaced with a trust in the supernatural power of prophecy. He tells Ratcliffe that, “shadows tonight / Have struck more terror to the soul of Richard / Than can the substance of ten thousand soldiers” (214-16). His dream – his access to the power of the supernatural – has at last become more real to him than his trust in the worldly power found through a relationship with the male social group.

Thus, while the power of the supernatural is in opposition to that of worldly political power, the difference between the two lies not in gender, but in where one places one’s trust. Those who trust in the political power, constructed of male social bonds, cannot access the supernatural power of prophecy. As Katherine Goodland states, the men view the wailing of the women as a threat to “those seeking political power” (32), and so too is communal political power a threat to the power of the supernatural. Because this political power is based off a patriarchal structure, the women realize quicker than do the men that they cannot depend on their relationships with men as a way to maintain power. The patriarchal nature of the worldly power structure also means that for the men to fully access the powers of heaven they must question even their relationship with themselves. Thus this play does not show a type of womanly power that compensates for the political power of the men, but merely shows how both men and women can tap into a power that is more dependable than any found on the earth; the heavenly power of the supernatural as channeled both through dreams and through conscious prophetic-curses. In this way, this play can be seen as reinforcing the prevailing religious view of the importance of trusting in God above all other powers.

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