The “Cursèd Self”: Anxiety and Unspoken Curses in *Richard III*

Near the beginning of *Richard III*, Hastings and Rivers comment that their “hair doth stand on end” when they hear Queen Margaret’s curses (1.3.300). They recognize in her curses some power which they find difficult to understand. These curses provide for us, the audience, a similar effect, adding an eerie element of mystery and higher power to a play. Curses are used in several of Shakespeare’s plays, from the Weird Sisters’ prophetic curses in the tragic *Macbeth* to Caliban’s cursing in the romantic *Tempest*. Shakespearean curses unnervingly make our hair stand on end, especially when we hear the curses integrated throughout *Richard III*. These curses determine, to a large extent, the fate of the characters and the conclusion of the play.

As an important aspect of language and corresponding action, cursing comes up regularly in critical discussion of *Richard III*, especially as relating to Elizabethan questions of women’s power and of Christianity. Cursing is understandably often tied to women in the play, as Kristin M. Smith demonstrates when she argues that women access a kind of illegitimate feminine power in cursing to tear down the failed masculine power. Critics also discuss cursing in a biblical or Christian context: Brian S. Lee discusses how Margaret’s curses reflect a “moral discourse of the pains of hell” (19), and Richard P. Wheeler discusses the correlation between Margaret’s curses and a fulfillment of God’s “divine plan” (305). Further discussion revolves around whether curses are God’s work and whether they actually cause events to occur. These critics focus largely on how cursing as language impacts the play. Although these critics significantly illuminate several aspects of curses in *Richard III*, what consistently goes unconsidered is unspoken cursing and how it expands our understanding of curses and contributes to Richard’s personal and political downfall.
Unspoken curses come into play in Richard III in the form of Richard’s anxieties. Though unspoken, his anxieties are, like curses, prophetic indications of what will come. When we examine each of the anxieties within the play, we see anxiety presented as obsession with power. In his obsession with varying aspects of his power, including masculinity, loyalty, and maintaining the throne, Richard unwittingly and nonverbally curses himself, dooming himself to fulfill his unintended prophecies. As with all curses in the play, the power of these unspoken curses lies in human action. The play presents cursing not as access to divine power but as psychological action and reaction: Richard, in seeking to prevent his unspoken curses from occurring, actually gives them power over him to ensure that certain feared events come to pass. Richard’s unspoken curses play into the bigger picture of curses in the play, determining the fate of the characters and bringing about Richard’s ultimate downfall and the rebirth of the nation.

To fully understand the new scope of cursing that Richard III offers, we must begin by understanding Richard’s anxieties as not simply fear but as obsession with power. While he is clearly afraid of what may occur, as evidenced in his frightful waking from a dream in Act 5 when he tells Ratcliffe, “I fear, I fear” (5.3.211-12), his anxieties go deeper, revealing themselves to be part of his obsession with rising in and remaining in power. Obsessed with being the heir of York and maintaining the throne, Richard manages to kill everyone (except Richmond) who poses a threat to his chance at the throne, and he attempts to woo the right women to obtain the position of power he seeks. His every action, from “seem[ing] a saint when most [he] play[s] the devil” (1.4.334) to killing his own family members, revolves around his obsession with power and the ever-abiding worry that someone will prevent him from having it.

To discuss how these obsessive anxieties become curses, we must first examine the obvious, spoken curses in the play. Throughout Richard III, curses follow a general pattern,
pointing to things to come and acting as a form of power. More than simply foreshadowing for
the audience what will become of certain characters, these curses either foretell or cause future
events, as we see when Grey mourns, “Now Margaret’s curse is fallen upon our heads” (3.3.13).
Repeatedly, whether she psychologically influences or merely predicts future events, Margaret’s
curses come to pass, meaning that she must indeed be the “prophetess” she tells Buckingham she
is (1.3.297), or else her curses have some other form of power. Yet cursing extends beyond
foretelling and prophecy: curses operate with an actual power within the play. Unlike Macbeth’s
Weird Sisters, who obviously have supernatural powers, or Caliban in The Tempest, who is a
product of magic, the characters who curse in Richard III are ordinary human beings. We must
therefore consider whether cursing in Richard III stems from higher powers or merely from the
human psyche. If the first, Richard is, as Wheeler argues, “the scourge of God” with his actions
aiding a “divinely ordained” purpose to end the line of York and bring about the better Tudor
reign (304). This would mean that the curses either call upon powers from on high or align with
what God already has in mind. If the second, psychological basis for curses, cursing may, as
Maurice Hunt says, “reflect [characters’] hostile needs rather than demonstrate God’s benign
Providence” (12). Cursing from this perspective is more about the characters’ interactions with
one another and reactions to curses and to the play’s events than it is about some higher power.

Curses are, simply put, a presentation of the future which eventually comes to pass
through human action, and when we understand how Richard’s anxieties operate as unspoken
curses, we see that it is a psychological, not divine, power at work in the curses of Richard III.
Richard’s anxieties, as curses, present in his mind undesirable concepts of the future which he
hopes to avoid, but in dwelling on them and making certain choices because of them, Richard
merely ensures their fulfillment. There may be allowance within this perspective for God’s part
in cursing: it may be true that, as Stephen Greenblatt asserts, “psychology is itself the tool of a supernatural scheme” (378). However, whether the divine influences the plot or not, the effects of cursing on the characters are clearly psychological. Though not supernatural, we see in this psychological cursing a real power as characters react to curses: Hastings and Rivers with a visceral, hair-raising fear and Buckingham and Richard with scoffing disbelief. The way the characters choose to interact with curses influences how they come to pass. Curses aren’t just automatically fulfilled. Power is always involved, even if that power is not divine or supernatural. The power of curses, both spoken and unspoken, lies in human action. When one hears a spoken curse, as we see when the characters hear Margaret’s curses, they internalize the curse and unconsciously act in a manner that effects the very future they wish to avoid. In the case of Richard’s unspoken curses, he obsesses over his anxieties about power, acts to prevent what he fears, and unintentionally ensures it in the process. His anxieties aren’t mere prophecies or predictions of what will occur; he causes them to occur through his actions. In both verbal and nonverbal instances, the reason curses have power is that characters give the curses psychological power through their actions in response to curses. These curses are, in a sense, self-fulfilling when a hearer (or thinker, in the case of Richard’s nonverbal curses) internalizes them and acts in reaction to them.

Richard’s anxieties further fit into our understanding of curses when we examine the method of cursing presented by the play itself. When Elizabeth asks Margaret to “teach [her] how to curse” (4.4.111), Andrew Moran argues, “Margaret’s instruction is to exaggerate” (154). Margaret tells Elizabeth that this exaggeration of her “woes” will make her words “sharp and pierce” (4.4.119). When taken out of a linguistic context, the same criteria apply to all cursing, including Richard’s internal curses. An obsessive exaggeration of his “woes” and anxieties
allows him to curse himself with them. We see this exaggeration of anxieties in the extremes he presents: he must either be a lover or be a villain (1.1.28, 30), be a saint or be a devil (1.4.334), love himself or hate himself (5.3.185-187). For Richard, there is no middle ground, and this exaggerated polarity enables his anxieties to have power over him and direct his actions toward the unhappy future which they foretell.

The first and most obvious of Richard’s anxieties, masculinity, offers insight into how external forces can be internalized to become a curse. Richard is obsessed with being masculine enough for everyone else. In 3 Henry VI, after killing Henry, he declares that because others say that he “came into the world with [his] legs forward” and was “born with teeth,” he will be morally “crooked” to match his appearance (5.6.71, 75, 79). This is paired with statements throughout Richard III in which other characters refer to him as a devil. Having internalized others’ perceptions of him as cursed, Richard sees his disfigurement as a roadblock to being as masculine as other men. This anxiety is evident from the first scene of Richard III, in which Richard’s opening speech brims with his frustrations with his disfigurement as he says that he is “rudely stamped” (1.1.16) and “deformed, unfinished” (1.1.20), concluding that “since [he] cannot prove a lover,” he is “determinèd to prove a villain” (1.1.28, 30). He is not merely self-conscious or worried about his deformities or that he “cannot prove a lover” like other men can; he is obsessed—even to the point that this is his first motivation to be the villain, as if villainy will compensate for his initial lack of sexual manhood. It turns out that his villainy overcompensates for a lacking masculinity, becoming what Ian Frederick Moulton calls “unruly masculinity” which “pose[s] a threat to [the] patriarchal order” already established in England (251). In making villainy his method of proving his masculinity, Richard overcorrects, acting out in ways that later tear down the masculine power he seeks to build up. Richard, though he
doesn’t intend to curse, acts out in response to his masculine anxieties to, in the words of Hunt, provide “narcissistic compensation for [his] low self-esteem” (23), or bring others down and build himself up politically to counter his anxieties. Because he has internalized others’ perceptions, his fears regarding a lacking or fallen masculinity become a guide by which he acts.

Closely tied to this masculinity is love. Because of his deformities, Richard thinks that he cannot be a lover, even though he successfully woos Lady Anne in the second scene of the play. He mourns in the final act, “There is no creature loves me” (5.3.198). Although Richard can woo, he already perceives himself as a loveless creature, and he acts accordingly. Interestingly, his desire for love is also tied to power. The inability to produce an heir would mean the end of the York line, which Richard fears. But this anxiety of the lack of love extends beyond romantic or sexual love. Richard is unloved by even his mother, who says she has an “accursèd womb” and that her son is a “cockatrice” (4.1.48-49). Because Richard fears that no one will love him, he acts without love, which only ensures that no one, not even his own mother, will love him.

Examining another of Richard’s power-driven anxieties, disloyalty, helps us see how Richard’s obsessive anxieties prove to be self-fulfilling prophecies. As Richard seeks to ensure the loyalty of those who serve him, he actually drives them away, thereby fulfilling his unspoken curse that people will leave him. This anxiety and dread are illustrated when he asks Ratcliffe upon waking from a ghost-filled dream, “What think’st thou, will our friends prove all true?” Even after Ratcliffe’s reassuring “No doubt, my lord,” Richard says, “O Ratcliffe, I fear, I fear” (5.3.210-12). Richard knows that his power will fall if the people under him choose to desert him. It is with this mindset that he threatens Stanley earlier in the play. Though Stanley assures Richard that there is “no cause to hold [his] friendship doubtful,” Richard forces him to leave his son behind, threatening to kill him if Stanley proves unfaithful. Yet Stanley still takes
Richmond’s side. That is to say, despite Stanley’s assurance that he is loyal, Richard fears that he won’t be and seeks to make absolutely sure that he will stay on his side, but this merely makes Stanley more inclined to side with Richmond. This is reminiscent of Richmond’s speech in Act 5 in which he says, “those whom we fight against / Had rather have us win than him they follow: / For what is he they follow? Truly, gentleman, / A bloody tyrant and a homicide” (5.3.241-44). Because of Richard’s reactions to his anxieties, those who follow him don’t want him to succeed. In seeking to ensure the loyalty of those who follow him, Richard actually does the opposite, turning people away from him with his murders and threats.

This is furthered by Richard’s psychological, unspoken curse that his power will fall. He acts under the influence of his obsession with being the powerful, male heir of York and his anxieties over maintaining the throne. When he hears that Richmond is coming, Richard asks, “Is the chair empty? Is the sword unswayed? / Is the king dead? The empire unpossessed?” (4.4.383-84). Only under these circumstances can Richmond become king and take the throne, but Richard doesn’t see that as an option. “What heir of York is there alive but we?” he asks; “And who is England’s king but great York’s heir?” (4.4.385-386). Unfortunately for Richard, his actions in trying to secure his place as the heir of York enable the unforeseeable circumstances to occur. He has killed the rest of the line of York, and he doesn’t have an heir. Because of him, the line of York can’t continue. His obsessive concern that the line of York will end ultimately does come true because of his own actions. His self-fulfilling anxieties, like the other curses in the play, play a part in destroying the current political system.

Another of Richard’s anxieties, involving a sense of conscience, is evident in one of the seemingly insignificant executioners sent to kill Clarence. When Clarence makes a comment about his voice, the second executioner responds, “My voice is now the king’s” (1.4.152). We
could take this to mean simply that he is on the king’s errand and following his commands. However, the king’s voice is being heavily influenced by Richard’s own voice, which is a product of his anxieties about another taking the throne. Therefore, this executioner’s voice reflects Richard’s own feelings. After the first executioner kills Clarence, the second says that this is a “bloody deed, and desperately performed,” calling it a “grievous guilty murder” (1.4.245, 247). While this second-guessing, remorseful executioner sounds nothing like the heartless, devilish Richard we see through most of the play, we do see Richard battle with these feelings after the ghosts visit him while he sleeps. “O coward conscience, how dost thou afflict me,” he says upon waking (5.3.177). Not only does this fulfill Margaret’s curse when she exclaims, “The worm of conscience still begnaw thy soul” (1.3.218), but it betrays another of his anxieties acting as a curse. Though he tries to suppress it, he fears that his conscience will condemn him: “My conscience hath a thousand several tongues, / And every tongue brings in a several tale, / And every tale condemns me for a villain” (191-93). Instead of acting in accordance with his conscience to combat the villainy, he has suppressed his conscience and attempted to embrace the villainy throughout the play, as he illustrates when he says in his opening soliloquy that he is “determinèd to prove a villain” (1.1.30). He has tried to respond to his conscience by going against it, hoping this will overpower his anxiety. However, as we see in his fright upon waking up before fighting Richmond at the end of the play, this action has not served him. His conscience does, as Margaret prophesied, “begnaw [his] soul,” and it will lead him to his death with “despair” and guilt (5.3.198).

Richard’s unspoken curses about power illuminate how curses impact not only the cursed but the curser. While curses like Margaret’s are generally aimed at others, Richard’s anxieties highlight a different aspect of cursing evident in the play: an unintentional condemnation of self.
This leads us to consider the part Richard plays in his own ruin. Although the play is considered a history, the full title, *The Tragedy of King Richard III*, rings true. Richard, like any tragic hero, brings about his own downfall, and he does so through these unspoken curses. He condemns himself in what Hunt calls the “fearful symmetry” of “the ironic fulfillment of one[’s] own casual oaths or curses” (11). Though unintended curses to begin with, Richard’s obsessive thoughts may be “casual oaths”—curses he would never think of as curses at all. And, like Lady Anne, who “proved the subject of [her] own soul’s curse” (4.1.75), while Richard’s evildoing undeniably affects others, his unspoken curses ultimately damage him the most.

Richard’s unspoken curses culminate into a final, spoken curse: “And if I die, no soul will pity me” (5.3.199). This curse, as part of a soliloquy, reflects his thoughts and may not necessarily be a spoken curse. Nevertheless, even if it is a spoken curse, it serves as the spoken “amen” to his unspoken curses just before everything falls. This curse shows Richard as the producer and the audience of his own cursing. Though the unspoken curses have, all along, influenced his decisions, Richard is displayed as both the cursed and curser in this moment. Here, as Bill Overton writes, “cursing is presented as both self-serving and self-destructive” (6).

Though Richard has tried to counter his anxieties by acting to prevent them, initially serving himself and harming others in the process, this has ultimately been a self-destroying act. As both the creator and receiver of the curse, Richard takes the curse as it is directed at both the speaker and the audience. Just like Rivers and Hastings respond to Margaret’s curses with hair-raising fear, Richard follows his own spoken curse with “I fear, I fear” (5.3.212) only thirteen lines after he speaks this curse aloud to himself. This fear is not only a result of external forces like Richmond but of his own internal forces. He fears his own internal forces because he recognizes that it is possible to curse himself. We see this in a conversation about those who have wronged
Margaret, in which Rivers remarks that Richard is good to “pray for them that have done scathe,” and Richard responds by saying, “So do I ever . . . For had I cursed now I had cursed myself” (1.3.313-15). Richard fears cursing himself. However, because his unspoken curses have been present throughout the entire play, even if Richard realizes in speaking his pitiful curse (or pitiless curse) what he has done, it won’t make a difference. His curses have already taken effect in his action.

Richard’s anxieties, though the bulk of the unspoken curses in the play, are not the only form of nonverbal curses. There is, for the other characters another type of initially unuttered cursing: dreams. Near the beginning of the play, Clarence dreams that “Gloucester stumbled, and in stumbling / Struck me . . . overboard / Into the tumbling billows of the main” (1.4.17-19). This part of the dream, in the words of Aerol Arnold, “is allegorical and foreshadows Clarence’s death at the hands of his brother” (52). But this allegorical, foreshadowing dream may be even more. Like other curses, the dream presents an unpleasant future which comes true, showing that this dream does not merely foreshadow but prophesies. We see this again in Stanley’s dream that “the boar had razed his helm” (3.2.9). The messenger relaying this dream refers to this image as “danger that [Stanley’s] soul divines” (3.2.16), illustrating this dream as prophetic. Both of these dreams point to future events. The difference between dreams and anxieties as unspoken curses in the play is that the dreams don’t remain unspoken. Through the act of relaying a dream to someone else, the internal curses of one person become external curses for those who hear them. Hastings hears Stanley’s dream, but he “disdained it, and did scorn to fly” (3.4.88). He admits as he goes to his own execution that he “might have prevented this” had he listened to Stanley’s prophetic dream (3.4.86). These dreams differ from Richard’s dream in that the content of his dream remains unspoken and is a reflection of his anxieties, but as such, it, too, is a curse.
When we take this added element of unspoken curses to the rest of curses in the play, we see how they help further Richard’s personal downfall and the downfall of the nation. Both spoken and unspoken curses, as Wheeler writes of Margaret’s curses, help in “purging England of evil and clearing the way for Tudor ascension” (304-05). As people act either in accordance with or in opposition to Margaret’s curses, thereby allowing the curses psychological power over them, they bring destruction upon larger politics. And because Richard, obsessed with acting despite his anxieties, acts in response to them, he also plays a part in tearing down the current political system. Because he kills anyone from the York line who could potentially take the throne and fails to produce an heir, Richard’s death marks the end of the line of York and creates space for Richmond and the new Tudor line.
Works Cited


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