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# “Blame the Due of Blame”

## The Ethics and Efficacy of Curses in *Richard III*

*Alexandra Malouf*

Language, particularly the language of cursing, plays a powerful role in determining the outcome of events in Shakespeare's *Richard III*. Gender imperatives reflected in the speech of *Richard III*'s characters indicate where power lies and how it is exercised across gendered spheres. While male characters in the history plays typically obtain and exert power through violence, both in war and in secret, the primary source of power held by female characters in *Richard III* is their use of language. Consistently, the women seal the violent ends of their enemies with curses, and Richard is perpetually given cause to believe himself evil because of the women's descriptive language surrounding his deformity. When working outside of a homosocial context however, Richard uses women's own source of power—language—as a performative tool of manipulation against them. In this way, he defies many masculine gender imperatives, a fact which allows him to obtain patrilineal power despite his initial isolation from the patriarchal line of succession. Ultimately, Shakespeare's thematic use of language as the determining conveyor of power in *Richard III* places the violence-causing curses of the women on an equal ethical plain with the physical violence of their male companions, and in so doing, urges us to consider speech as an action for which we are morally responsible.

To date, much of the critical conversation surrounding *Richard III* revolves around which characters are to blame for the destructive events that occur in the course of the play. Furthermore, a substantial portion of this discussion is confined to a binary, gendered discourse, such that one critic blames the play's female characters while a responding critic argues against the male sphere. In this debate, female characters are typically blamed through association with witchcraft, sorcery, and their procreative power to continue or discontinue the patrilineal line of succession. Meanwhile, Richard himself is cast in various, often opposing, gendered positions; some construe him as a dangerous user of women, while contenders interpret him as unfairly used by women. Such arguments of blame often focus on Richard as a hypermasculine powerhouse, a deformed evil created by female procreative powers, or as an unmanly runt excluded from the patriarchy who must consequentially rely upon female powers in order to access the power he desires.

This discussion of gendered blame in *Richard III* finds its significance in the gender anxieties of the Elizabethan age, during which the play was initially staged. In transition from warrior community to court society, Early Modern English culture began to discourage violence amongst the aristocratic male populace and feared it as a deplorable form of masculine unruliness (Moulton 253). Fearing male aggression, this period also produced a range of instructional texts such as Castiglione's *Book of the Courtier*, which provided counsel to men attempting to navigate the now "pacified social spaces" of the aristocratic court (Elias). Under Elizabeth I, law enforcements also allocated significant effort to reining in lower-class male violence, including the implementation of curfews to prevent night riots, placing limits on unauthorized pistols, and prohibiting concealed firearms (Moulton 252). Unruly men, however, were not the only source of gender anxiety for Early Modern Englanders. During the reign of Queen Elizabeth I, female divergence from gender imperatives was also a subject of great anxiety. Although symbolically and politically representative of the patriarchal "body politic," England's late sixteenth-century monarch was an aged woman, who nonetheless embraced the role of militant leader in the war with Spain (Moulton 254). It was during this war with Spain that the London stage saw a flourishing of history plays, which despite representing events of the past, often reflected the gender imperatives and anxieties present in contemporary England (Moulton 254). In

*Richard III*, men, including Richard himself, are critically implicated in the disastrous events of the play due to their tendency to approach power play through violence.

While the narrative of Shakespeare's Wars of the Roses tetralogy occurs a century prior to its staging, patriarchal anxieties of the late sixteenth-century, rather than the fifteenth, are ever present in their pages. Shakespeare's representation of *Richard III* is perpetually aggressive and hypermasculine. Richard vehemently rejects anything he perceives as effeminate, beginning with the "idle pleasures" and "sportive tricks" that he has previously warned his womanizing brother, Edward, against (*Richard III* 1.1.14–31). In his youth, Richard begins to perceive weeping as an effeminate weakness "for babes" (*Henry VI* 2.1.86). Recounting his father's death to Anne, Richard recalls that his "manly eyes did scorn an humble tear," such that he was physically incapable of weeping in response to the loss of his father (*Richard III* 1.2.166–67). Further evidence of Richard's scorn for femininity is present in his contempt for women. For him, the "mighty gossips in this monarchy" (*Richard III* 3.4.72) are to blame for anything that goes amiss, including the imprisonment of his brother, Clarence. Richard perceives himself "incapable of loving women" and instead "makes his heaven to dream upon the crown" (Moulton 266). Moreover, Richard's hypermasculinity is not merely present in his rejection of effeminacy, but also in his vicious preoccupation with obtaining a place in the patriarchal succession. His multiple marriages are obviously pursued "not all so much for love / As for another secret close intent" (*Richard III* 1.1.157–58), under the recognition that women are vital to the legitimacy of his patriarchal power. Richard's hypermasculine compensation for the effeminacy of his brothers reflects the Early Modern anxiety towards unruly masculinity and is frequently used to implicate Richard as the villain behind the ruinous occurrences in Shakespeare's play.

Richard's monstrous deformity is also frequently cited in order to cast blame on both Richard and women. Due to the Renaissance belief that physical beauty is correlated with moral virtue, Richard's evil nature and aggressive pursuit of power is integrally tied up with his physical deformity. More importantly, his deformity also serves to implicate the play's female characters by connecting them to witchcraft and corruption. The witch's proclivity for birthing "monstrous and illegitimate children" (Roper 219) allows the witch to interfere with, and ultimately "preserve or pervert the

patriarchal heritage” (Willis 98) without engaging in the masculine violence that Richard must resort to for obtaining power. While it is Richard who directly and violently interferes with the line of succession, it is the Duchess of York who gives birth to his corruption, and who consequently might present the greater threat for the Elizabethan audience. “From forth the kennel of [her] womb hath crept / A hell-hound . . . that foul defacer [and] grand tyrant of the earth” (*Richard III* 4.4.47–53). Through female association with witchcraft, the women of *Richard III* come to represent a perceived hazard to society that is equal to, if not the origin, of Richard’s unruly nature. Richard, in murdering his way to the throne, complicates the royal line of succession by altering it from its present state and leaving the line of descent pending. Yet, as critics on the male side of the debate will argue, Richard’s monstrosity is an evil produced not by any male power, but by female sorcery.

What correlates effeminacy even more strongly to witchcraft and blameworthiness in *Richard III*, however, is the women’s use of language. Particular to the female speeches in the play is their tendency to come in the form of curses, a fact which invariably associates the women with witchcraft. Throughout, Queen Margaret’s prophetic curses predict with frightening accuracy the events of history. Functioning within the world of *Richard III*, curses have real world consequences that interrupt both historical outcome and royal succession. Grammatically, the curses are spoken as optatives—imperative and “highly articulate” statements of wish (Magnussen 32). What separates these curses from mere wishes is the insertion of “God” into the statements, as in the Duchess of York’s, “Cancel his bond of life, dear God, I plead. / That I may live and to say, ‘The dog is dead’” (*Richard III* 4.4.7). The women’s statements transcend mere wishes, for by invoking God, their words become prayers or curses, which ultimately act as the agent’s “plea that God intervene on his or her behalf” (Magnussen 36). Regardless of where the source of the curses’ power lies, they are nonetheless more substantive than mere statements.

Linguistically speaking, the curses constitute what J.L. Austin has termed perlocutionary speech acts—statements which perform actions, rather than merely reporting or describing (Austin 6). In their perlocutionary nature, curses in *Richard III* differ from mere exclamations of profanity, for like marriage vows and orders of house-arrest, the perlocutionary curse generates effects external to the performance

of the curse. Prior to his death for instance, Richard's mother leaves him with her "most heavy curse," that "Either [he] wilt die by God's just ordinance . . . Or [she] with grief and extreme age shall perish / And never look upon [his] face again" (*Richard III* 4.4.173–76). This, the Duchess of York's "most heavy curse" (4.4.177), not only precedes, but conclusively secures Richard's bloody end at Richmond's hand.

The curses, for their remarkable influence on the royal succession, function as the primary means of female power in the play. Female transgression in *Richard III* differs fundamentally from the aggressive unruliness of female characters such as Kate in *Taming of the Shrew*, and even from the women of the earlier *Henry VI* plays, in that these women do not consistently attempt to cross into the male sphere of physical violence. Even when explicitly given the opportunity to stab Richard, Anne does not act out physical aggression. Rather, female violence in *Richard III* is fundamentally linguistic in nature. Looking upon the dead *Henry VI*, Anne's curse upon Richard is full of violent language: "O, cursed be the hand that made these holes! / Cursed the heart that had the heart to do it! / Curse the blood that let this blood from hence!" (*Richard III* 1.1.14–28). This curse, although ultimately backfiring on Anne's intent, conducts a linguistic "dismemberment" of Henry's murderer, "dividing hand from heart and heart from blood" (Brown 548). Although Anne refrains from physical violence, she may still be implicated in linguistic violence. By nature of the power structures in *Richard III*, female characters are isolated from the patriarchal succession and consequently are not frequently present for the pivotal moments of male violence and warfare that determine the line of succession. Clarence's executors are not women, nor is *Richard III* killed in battle by a woman. Female influence nevertheless snakes its way into the war on succession by way of perlocutionary, optative speech acts. When Richard criticizes Margaret, asking "Why should she live to fill the world with words?" (Richard Duke of York, 5.5.43), he both affirms Joan's foretelling that Margaret's power lies in her words (Smith 152), and implies that she is culpable for the effects of her power.

Joan's prophesy also leads us to a major difference in the way that *Richard III* navigates patrilineal power structures as compared to other male characters in the play. While male power is typically navigated through violence in *Richard III*, Richard himself frequently interjects

himself into the female linguistic sphere in order to obtain power that he cannot access within the patrilineal sphere. Richard's strategic participation in different gendered spheres is not present in Shakespeare's preceding *Henry VI* plays, but rather, is distinctive of Richard's behavior in *Richard III* alone. In the *Henry VI* plays, threats to the patriarchal succession are much more typically female, as with Joan's sexual transgressions, their even more overt witchcraft, Margaret's adultery, and the consequent illegitimacy of her children (Howard 106-7). Contrastingly, the greatest threat presented by the women of *Richard III* is the perlocutionary speech act—a power which Richard frequently hijacks. Margaret's first torrent of curses on Richard is interrupted by the latter and reversed upon Margaret (Howard 109). Responding to his interjection, Margaret protests, "O, let me make the period to my curse!" to which Richard stingingly replies, "Tis done by me, and ends in 'Margaret'" (*Richard III* 1.3.237-8). Thus has Margaret, "breathed [her] curse against [her]self" (*Richard III* 1.3.239). More than other male characters in the play, Richard understands the crucial influence that women play on the patrilineal succession, and his unhesitating appropriation of female power is rooted in his relentless pursuit of a place within that patriarchal line.

Richard also deftly appropriates female power in his manipulative seduction of Anne during the first act of the play. Following her verbal dismemberment of Richard, she curses that "If ever he have wife, let her be made / More miserable by the life of him / Than I am made by my young lord and thee!" (*Richard III* 1.1.26-28). As with Margaret, Richard interjects Anne's curse, speaking to her seductively, in an emotionally evocative discourse which he has otherwise rejected for its effeminacy (Moulton 267). Richard further diverges from his staunch hypermasculinity to fully enter into the female discourse by placing his sword in Anne's hand and "lay[ing] his breast 'naked' for her penetration" (Howard 109-10) (*Richard III* 1.2.177). Richard, still owner of the sword to which he submits, plays the part of both possessive man and submissive woman (Bushnell 124). By engaging in female discourse Richard is able to effectively dispossess Anne's curse of its power, turning her malediction against her so that "she becomes the wife whose life is blighted by her husband's" (Brown 548). Although the female curses certainly harness incredible power over the outcome of events, the greatest threat to the patriarchal succession in *Richard III* is not female adultery as in the *Henry VI* plays, but alternatively, the murderous Richard (Howard 106-7).

Richard at once harnesses both the power of the female curse and the aggressive power of male warfare, suggesting that gendered power is performative rather than being implicit in the character's "sexed bod[ies]" (Howard 109). Perlocutionary speech acts certainly comprise the prominent means of female power. Nonetheless, cursing is not *inherent* to the female sex, a fact which is insinuated by Elizabeth's appeal for Margaret to "teach me how to curse mine enemies" (*Richard III* 4.4.116-17). This request suggests that cursing is not a natural form of action, but one which must be learned, and as with Anne's unintentional cursing of herself prior to her wooing, these actions can be carried out successfully or unsuccessfully by the agent performing it. That these speech acts are not inherently sexed, but rather are consciously performed by individual agents, implies that Richard is not merely, as scholar, Kristin Smith argues, a product of witchcraft and "Margaret's embodied curse" (156), but an agent accountable for his own actions. For this reason, we cannot hold the women solely responsible for either the historical outcome of the play, nor all of the moral wrongdoings enacted to bring it about. Individuals of both sexes must answer for their actions regardless on what gendered side of the patrilineal struggle they stand.

Who is to blame for the tragedies of *Richard III* is, however, further contingent on how these tragedies, or histories, of the play are defined. During the literal Wars of the Roses, history was perceived as something that merely befell helpless victims, unfairly favoring one man while condemning another, but this conception differs starkly from the view of history presented by Shakespeare's play. Alternatively, the historical events that occur within the text of *Richard III* are largely created by the actions of characters, who subsequently must answer for the moral responsibilities associated with the results of their actions. Of the many types of action influencing the events of the play, perlocutionary speech acts bear a consistently more significant impact on historical events than does physical violence. Certainly, murder and violence do function as the tool by which the patrilineal succession is deconstructed. Nevertheless, the actual outcome of this deconstruction is sanctioned by the engagement of both male and female characters in the discourse of perlocutionary cursing, rather than violence. Richard's death, although exacted by Richmond on a battlefield, is sealed and authorized by his mother's sworn curse. Through this, it becomes increasingly apparent



that the active influence of curses in *Richard III* does more than merely implicate women in witchcraft, and furthermore, does not hold either sex solely responsible for the corruption of the patriarchal line.

Yet, even though curses possess the strongest efficacy on the outcome of history of any action in the play, they are not the sole perlocutionary speech acts that bear ethical weight. One instance of this can be found in Richard's complete divergence from his earlier mode of using physical violence to gain control of the throne. Instead of directly stabbing his brothers, as he does Margaret's son in *Henry VI Part II*, Richard conducts his later murders through the use of verbal orders given to others. Consequently, the fault for these murders is not limited purely to those who do the stabbing, or the drowning, or the poisoning, but is also extended to him who speaks the order. On some level, Richard is aware of the ethical responsibility that he bears for these spoken actions, and his consciousness of that guilt is evidenced by his efforts to verbally justify his murderous actions. He attempts perpetually to peg others as the cause for his unjust actions, beginning by "making Edward appear . . . responsible for Clarence's death," then later "positing Anne's beauty as the cause for his murdering the men she loved, and putting Elizabeth to blame for virtually all of the country's woes" (Olson 317). Such vocal casting of blame does not constitute genuine "justification," but in reality, merely reveals an ineffectual attempt on the part of a wrongdoer to neutralize his or her moral responsibility by envisioning it on the shoulders of another. This is one of the dangers of linguistic power, that it allows the user to act and yet remain mentally removed from direct responsibility for their actions.

Richard is not alone in his attempts to morally neutralise his actions in this way. His transformation from violent power to vocal power between the *Henry VI* plays and *Richard III* is shared by Queen Margaret. On the battlefields of *Henry VI Part II*, Margaret is a direct and violent participant in the war on patrilineal power, yet her only source of power in *Richard III* is her tongue. This, she uses to blame Richard for the continuation of the war: "I had an Edward, till a Richard kill'd him: / I had a Harry, till a Richard killed him" (*Richard III* 4.4.40-41). Responding to Margaret's accusations, the Duchess of York contends that Margaret has likewise spilled the blood of men she loves. Margaret refuses to acknowledge her guilt, and retorts by reversing the Duchess's blame upon

herself: “Thy womb let loose, to chase us to our graves” (*Richard III* 4.4.54). The fact that both Richard and Margaret attempt to defer their moral responsibility to others confirms the enormous ethical gravity behind their actions, for there is no reason to justify an action for which one is not guilty. Moreover, the fact that their guilt stems equally from acts of physical violence and from perlocutionary speech acts indicates that the ethical weight between both types of action is relatively equal. It is of further significance to point out that the very presence of this mutual blame may actually account for much of the widespread critical controversy regarding which gender is at fault in *Richard III*. However, to merely participate along with the characters in this game of blame is analytically insufficient, if we do not also understand the ethical implications of blame on speech acts within the play.

Because speech actions function as the primary means by which the events of history are sealed, the ethical weight of speech acts is enormous. Within the textual world of *Richard III*, words are potentially more dangerous and impactful than any other form of action in the play. This fact suggests that all agents who exercise this power bear just as much ethical responsibility for what they say as any man who wields a sword in battle. This play neither asks readers to side with the women who cast all blame upon Richard, nor with Richard who casts all blame upon women. Rather, it begs us to question the efficacy of our words, and further, to reconsider the ethical responsibilities borne by every man or woman who wields them as weapons. The incredible ascendancy of curses in *Richard III* insists upon our viewing words as actions with real world consequences—actions which hold the power to destroy, deconstruct, and terminally alter the course of history. In these words, moral responsibility is implicit, and this responsibility cannot—as the characters of *Richard III* certainly attempt to do—simply be shrugged off and cast upon others as blame.

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