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# the cursed self

## *Anxiety and Unspoken Curses in Richard III*

*Hannah Laudermilch*

Shakespeare utilizes curses as prophetic indications of what will come in many of his plays, including in the well-known Weird Sisters' curses in the tragic *Macbeth* and Caliban's cursing in the romantic *Tempest*. Curses, particularly in Shakespeare's *Richard III*, add an eerie element of mystery and the suggestion of a higher power for the audience and, perhaps most importantly, play a clear role in the plot and in characters' reactions to various events. The curses integrated throughout *Richard III* have an unnerving effect, causing certain character to comment that their "hair doth stand on end" upon hearing curses (1.3.300). They recognize some power in curses which they find difficult to understand. These curses ultimately determine, to a large extent, the fate of the characters and the conclusion of the play.

However, not all the curses in *Richard III* are verbalized; unspoken cursing often occurs inside Richard's head. These unspoken curses, found between the lines of the text, come into play in *Richard III* in the form of Richard's anxieties. It may seem impossible for a curse to be unspoken in a play, which inherently relies on what is spoken; however, while the dialogue does not display Richard's anxieties explicitly as curses, his anxieties often serve as prophetic indications of the future. These anxieties act as curses in that they signal and even determine what will come, and Richard's responses to them bring about his eventual downfall.

Richard's fears can essentially be rolled into one single anxiety: an obsession with power and a fear of losing it. In his obsession with varying aspects of his power—most visibly masculinity, loyalty, and maintaining the throne—Richard unwittingly and nonverbally curses himself. By acting on his anxieties, he dooms himself to fulfill his unintended prophecies of losing everything he cares about. The power of these unspoken curses lies in human action. As characters seek to combat a curse—whether another's spoken prophecy or their own unspoken curse—they unintentionally fulfill it in the process. In other words, psychological action and reaction, not access to the divine, is the source of the power of curses: Richard, internalizing external forces and seeking to prevent his anxieties, or unspoken curses, from being fulfilled, actually gives them power over him, ensuring that certain feared events come to pass. Richard's unspoken curses play into the bigger picture of curses in the tragedy, determining the fate of the characters and bringing about Richard's ultimate downfall and the rebirth of the nation.

In order to understand the role of unspoken curses in *Richard III*, it is helpful to understand how normal, spoken curses function in the play, especially as discussed critically among scholars. As an important aspect of language and corresponding action, cursing comes up regularly in critical discussion of *Richard III*. However, this critical conversation is often strikingly limited to cursing's ties to women and Christianity. Cursing, as it is often associated with witches and other feminine characters across literature, is similarly 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. Additionally, critics 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 plot.

These spoken curses follow a general pattern, pointing to things to come and acting as a form of power. More than simply foreshadowing what will become of certain characters, these curses either foretell or cause future events, as seen when Grey mourns, "Now Margaret's curse is fallen upon our heads" (3.3.13). Repeatedly, whether Margaret psychologically influences or merely predicts future events, her curses come to pass, which suggests that

she must indeed be the “prophetess” she claims to be (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. One must therefore consider whether cursing in *Richard III* stems from higher powers or merely from the human psyche. If the power comes from on high, then 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. However, if there is a psychological basis for curses’ power, then 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’ reactions to curses than it is about some higher power. Curses are, simply put, a presentation of the future which eventually comes to pass through human action. Overall, although these critics significantly illuminate several aspects of curses in *Richard III*, what consistently goes unconsidered is unspoken cursing and how it expands one’s understanding of curses and contributes to Richard’s personal and political downfall.

To fully understand the new scope of cursing that *Richard III* offers, which lies in the unspoken, one must begin by understanding Richard’s anxieties as not simply fear but as a clear obsession with power. While he is plainly 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 stem from a deep obsession with rising in and remaining in power. Consumed 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 court 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 an obsession with power and the ever-abiding worry that someone will prevent him from having it. These power-driven anxieties are effectively prophecies against self in that they consume him and lead him directly toward the very outcomes he anxiously tries to avoid.

In understanding how Richard's anxieties operate as unspoken curses, it is apparent that it is a psychological, not divine, power at work in the curses of *Richard III* as characters act and react in various situations. 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 trying to prevent them from coming true, 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, this psychological cursing holds 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 characters hear a spoken curse, as evident in instances when Margaret curses, they internalize the curse and unconsciously act in a manner that leads to 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 then unintentionally ensures his failure in the process. His anxieties aren't mere prophecies or predictions of what will occur; he makes them occur through his actions. In both 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 non-verbal curses) internalizes them and acts in reaction to them.

Richard's anxieties further fit into one's understanding of curses when one examines the method of cursing prescribed 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. This exaggeration of anxieties can be seen 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.

Richard's most obvious anxiety is masculinity, and it demonstrates how external forces can be internalized to become a curse. Richard is obsessed with being masculine enough to please those around him. After killing Henry at the end of *Henry VI Part 3*, Richard 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). Characters throughout *Richard III* refer to him as a devil. Having internalized others' perceptions of him as cursed because of his body, 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 about his deformities or that he "cannot prove a lover" like other men; he is obsessed—even to the point that this is his first motivation to be the villain, as if villainy will compensate for his inherent lack of sexual manhood. It turns out that his villainy overcompensates for a lacking masculinity, becoming "unruly masculinity" which "pose[s] a threat to [the] patriarchal order" already established in England (Moulton 251). In making villainy his marker of masculinity, Richard overcorrects and acts out in ways that later tear down the masculine power he seeks to build up. Richard, though he doesn't intend to speak a curse, acts out in response to his masculine anxieties to provide "narcissistic compensation for [his] low self-esteem" (Hunt 23), or bring others down and build himself up politically to counter his anxieties. Because Richard has internalized others' perceptions, his fears regarding a lacking or fallen masculinity become a guide by which he acts.

This pattern of internalizing external factors extends into Richard's perception of love and its consequent anxieties. Because of his deformities, or his perceived lack of masculinity, 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

therefore acts accordingly. In internalizing others' perceptions of masculinity and its inherent ties to love, Richard lets his anxiety determine the fact that he cannot and will not be a lover. 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 tenderness and thereby ensures that not even his own mother will care for him.

Examining Richard's power-driven fear of disloyalty helps one 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 dread is illustrated when he asks Ratcliffe, "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 his followers 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 the young man if Stanley proves unfaithful, but Stanley deserts him for Richmond. Richard's threat, though intended to ensure Stanley's loyalty, only makes Stanley more inclined to side with Richmond. Richard's obsession with the possibility that people might desert him causes the very thing he fears. 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 pattern of Richard fulfilling his own worst fears 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 take the throne and become king, 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. In this way, his self-fulfilling anxieties, like the other curses in the play, play a part in destroying the current political system.

Richard is surprisingly anxious that his conscience will haunt him, as is evident in one of the seemingly insignificant executioners sent to kill Clarence. When Clarence makes a comment about the man's voice, the second executioner responds, "My voice is now the king's" (1.4.152). The audience 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 seen through most of the play, the audience does 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. He illustrates this 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 manifested 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).

Each of these unspoken curses illuminates how curses impact not only the cursed but also 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 the

audience 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 through these unspoken curses. He condemns himself in the “fearful symmetry” of “the ironic fulfillment of one[’s] own casual oaths or curses” (Hunt 11). While Richard’s evildoing undeniably affects others, his unspoken curses ultimately damage him the most.

Finally, Richard’s unspoken curses eventually culminate into a spoken curse: “And if I die, no soul will pity me” (5.3.199). 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 influenced his decisions throughout the play, Richard is displayed as both the cursed and curser in this moment. Here “cursing is presented as both self-serving and self-destructive” (Overton 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 been a self-destroying act. As both the creator and receiver of the curse, Richard experiences the curse as it is directed at both the speaker and the audience. Just as 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). This fear is not only a result of external forces like Richmond but of his own internal forces. Richard’s fear after speaking a curse illustrates that he recognizes that it is possible to curse himself. This is seen once more in a conversation about those who have wronged Margaret. 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 at the end what he has done in speaking this pitiful curse (or *pitiless* curse), it won’t make a difference. His curses have already taken effect in his action.

In taking this added element of unspoken curses to the rest of curses in the play, one sees how they help further Richard’s personal downfall and the rebirth of the nation. Both spoken and unspoken curses help in “purging England of evil and clearing the way for Tudor ascension” (Wheeler 304–05). As people act either in accordance with or in opposition to Margaret’s curses, they allow the curses to exercise psychological power over them and bring destruction upon larger politics. Likewise, because Richard is obsessed with

acting *despite* his anxieties but 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, thereby fulfilling his own unspoken curses, Richard's death marks the end of the line of York and creates space for Richmond and the new Tudor line—a rebirth of the nation. Richard's unintentional cursing of self through his anxieties, and subsequent responses to those curses, ends in his own demise.

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