

## **A Lover or a Villain: Women and Fortune in Shakespeare's *Richard III***

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It is the women in *Richard III* who provide the play's title character with the most colorful verbal abuse. His wife, Lady Anne, calls him a "lump of foul deformity" (1.2.55); Margaret, the former queen of England, curses him as an "elvish-marked, abortive rooting-hog" (1.3.225), a "bottled spider" (1.3.242), and a "hell-hound" (4.4.45); his mother the Duchess of York refers to him as a "cockatrice" (4.1.50); and his sister-in-law Queen Elizabeth compares him to a "foul bunch-backed toad" (4.4.76). Richard has, of course, done little to ingratiate himself to these angry women, and his attitude toward female characters throughout the play is predominantly one of contempt. In fact, Richard does not even appear to be attracted to women, and although the audience witnesses him artfully woo and seduce Lady Anne in Act 1 Scene 2, he displays little to no sexual interest in her or in any other woman, implying that his erotically charged desire for power has displaced his physical sex drive. John Jowett reinforces our understanding of Richard's lust as purely political through his suggestion that Richard's manipulative seduction of Anne might be symbolic of his Machiavellian quest to conquer the elusive feminine figure of fortune. Richard has chosen the life of the ambitious villain over that of the courtly lover and, as such, his respect and patience for women is limited, and his use for them is primarily mercenary.

Critics such as Jack Trotter and Ian Moulton have attributed Richard's disdain for women to his rigid understanding of masculinity — one that requires him to reject and even hate all forms of effeminacy — and have pointed to Richard's brother King Edward

IV, known for his politically inconvenient sexuality, as a manifestation of the sort of effeminacy Richard strives to avoid. Having dismissed femininity as a form of weakness, however, Richard seems to underestimate the power of the play's female characters, namely Margaret, Elizabeth, and the Duchess of York. Although restricted to curses and appeals to the supernatural, the women in *Richard III*, I will argue, do play a role in Richard's ultimate defeat; Richard's rejection of the feminine and his consequent downfall thus demonstrate the limitations of the Machiavellian prince's attempt to exert complete control over fortune.

In his soliloquy midway through *3 Henry VI*, Richard discloses to the audience his secret aspirations to the crown, a revelation that may come as more or less of a surprise depending on the actor's presentation of Richard up to this point. As the youngest son of Richard Plantagenet — the Duke of York — Richard has been a character in all three of Shakespeare's *Henry VI* plays, which depict the conflict between the houses of York and Lancaster known as the War of the Roses. For the most part, however, Richard's preoccupation has been with removing Henry VI, the Lancaster king, and replacing him with his father. The young Richard certainly possesses a brutal streak, exposed in lines such as "Priests pray for enemies, but princes kill," and in his argument in *3 Henry VI* against keeping oaths (*2 Henry VI* 5.2.71, *3 Henry VI* 1.2.22). Moreover, he certainly recognizes kingship as something to be greatly desired, as evident in his exclamation to York, "And father do but think / How sweet a thing it is to wear a crown, / Within whose circuit is Elysium / And all that poets feign of bliss and joy" (*3 Henry VI* 1.2.28-31). Still, until York's death, he seems able to direct his competitive and violent energy toward serving his father and restoring the

York family's royal name. "Methinks 'tis prize enough to be his son," Richard claims early in *3 Henry VI*, an expression of family loyalty that contrasts sharply with his exclamation at the end of the play: "I have no brother, I am like no brother, / And this word 'love' which greybeards call divine, / Be resident in men like one another / And not in me: I am myself alone" (2.1.20, 5.6.80-83). As Randall Martin explains, "Family piety towards York, sustained beyond his father's death in pursuing revenge, [has] held Richard's personal aspirations in check" (54). The extent to which these aspirations are already actively brewing in Richard in these early scenes, however, can, of course, vary in performance.

It is not until Act 3 Scene 2, of *3 Henry VI*, therefore, when the house of York is on the throne and revenge on the house of Lancaster within his grasp, that Richard starts to consider what to do next. From the beginning of his soliloquy, Richard intimates that his "soul's desire" is sovereignty, but, given the lives that stand between him and this prize (his brothers Edward and Clarence, the former king Henry VI, Henry's son Edward), he acknowledges the difficulty and even impossibility of ever attaining it, and laments, "My eye's too quick, my heart o'erweens too much, / Unless my hand and strength could equal them" (3.2.128, 144-45). Having voiced the prospect that there might be "no kingdom then for Richard," he now considers how else he might occupy himself after the War of the Roses has settled down, and proposes a life of sexual pleasures as the obvious alternative, suggesting, "I'll make my heaven in a lady's lap / And deck my body in gay ornaments / And witch sweet ladies with my words and looks" (3.2.146, 148-50). In light of his physical deformity, however, Richard almost immediately rejects the image of himself as a romantic figure as ridiculous, and

exclaims, “O miserable thought, and more unlikely / Than to accomplish twenty golden crowns” (3.2.151-52). Confident that “love forswore me in my mother’s womb,” therefore, he determines that life can afford him no other joy than to dream and plot for the crown (3.2.153).<sup>1</sup> As Ian Moulton suggests, Richard’s “physical monstrosity manifests itself as social monstrosity” (261); he convinces himself that his bodily appearance necessitates a descent into villainy.

Consequently, in his soliloquy in *3 Henry VI*, and even more explicitly in his opening soliloquy in *Richard III*, Richard sets up the life of pleasure and love as directly opposed to the life of villainy and ambition. “Since I cannot prove a lover / To entertain these fair well-spoken days,” he explains in *Richard III*, “I am determinèd to prove a villain, / And hate the idle pleasure of these days” (1.1.28-31). His rejection of the life of pleasure is, of course, also a rejection of his brother, “The lustful Edward,” whom he has accused jokingly of loving “the breeder better than the male” (*3 Henry VI* 3.2.129, 2.1.42). “In early modern England,” Ian Moulton explains, “a man could show himself effeminate by being too devoted to women as well as by acting like a woman,” meaning that Edward’s “excessive sexual attraction to women” was as much a sign of effeminacy as King Henry VI’s childish weakness (257). In order to distinguish himself from his effeminate brother, therefore, Richard directs his desires exclusively toward power, rather than toward women. To truly embrace the role of villain, it seems, is to reject and

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<sup>1</sup> Jack Trotter points out that Richard does not, at any point, consider “the Christian pattern of heroism” as an alternative to kingship or love, despite the fact that the Christian model “offers itself equally to cripples and the fair proportioned” (36). We may assume, however, that Christianity, which fundamentally encourages cooperation (love thy neighbour), would not satisfy Richard’s competitive and ambitious inclinations. Richard’s understanding of salvation and damnation are purely material: his heaven is “to dream upon the crown” and his hell is all time spent on earth without this crown (*3 Henry VI* 3.2.168).

even hate the idle pleasures of peace: a villain, his soliloquy tells us, cannot also be a lover. Having asserted, therefore, that he cannot love because of his status as a villain, and that he cannot be loved because of his unattractive physical form, it is surprising that one of the first things we see Richard do in the play that bears his name is seduce a woman.

Seduction scenes — or attempted seduction scenes — are not foreign to Shakespeare's first tetralogy, the most noteworthy being Edward's wooing of Lady Grey (who becomes Queen Elizabeth) in *3 Henry VI*, and the Earl of Suffolk's wooing of Margaret (who becomes Queen Margaret) in *1 Henry VI*. These two previous scenes, however, unlike Richard's seduction of Lady Anne in *Richard III*, both open with the man in the position of power. Edward, for instance, is Lady Grey's king and wields the authority to return or to refuse to return the lands she has lost in the quarrel between the houses of York and Lancaster; a widow and a woman of non-royal class, Lady Grey is essentially powerless. Similarly, Suffolk is Margaret's captor and she, although the daughter to the King of Naples and of a higher class than Lady Grey, is his prisoner and subject to his whim, be it noble or ignoble. In both scenes, the power dynamic begins to shift as the men find themselves increasingly attracted to the women in their power. Edward, infatuated with Lady Grey's looks and wit, determines to make her his mistress, and, when she refuses to sleep with him even in exchange for her lands, offers to make her his queen (*3 Henry VI* 3.2.84-89). Suffolk, enamored with Margaret's beauty, which "Confounds the tongue, and makes the senses rough," remembers he is already married and therefore decides to woo Margaret in the name of King Henry (*1 Henry VI* 5.4.27). Thus both Lady Grey and Margaret ultimately manage to benefit politically from

their “seductions,” and even end up to some extent ruling over the men who have attempted to exert power over them. For instance, in the first scene of *Richard III*, Richard comments on Queen Elizabeth’s sway over her husband, complaining, “Why, this it is when men are ruled by women” (1.1.62). Similarly, in the second of the two *Henry VI* plays, Queen Margaret ends up wielding significant influence not only over Suffolk but also over King Henry and the fate of England.

Richard, who has witnessed Edward’s wooing of Lady Grey and experienced the political upheaval that resulted from his choice of queen, approaches Lady Anne rather differently. Whereas Edward and Suffolk began their seductions from positions of power, facilitating manipulation, Richard begins with the odds almost entirely against him, choosing a woman who has significant reason to hate him and little reason to submit to him. Not only was Anne married to Henry VI’s son Edward and not only is Richard responsible for the deaths of both her husband and her father-in-law, but he conducts the seduction in the middle of Henry VI’s funeral procession, over the former king’s corpse. In fact, just moments before Richard appears onstage, Anne has been angrily cursing him, exclaiming, “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” (1.2.24-26). As John Jowett puts it, “whether one considers Anne’s position as close relative of two men murdered by Richard, the seeming inopportunity of the moment, or the physical disadvantages that Richard in the previous scene has declared to exclude him from success in love, he would seem to be attempting the impossible” (41). Moreover, the entire episode has “no visible consequence whatsoever for his ambitions to the crown,” begging, first of all, the

question of how Richard possibly manages to seduce her and, secondly, of why he decides to in the first place (Jowett 41).

The answer to the first question (how he does it) lies, as several critics have suggested, in Richard's deeply manipulative rhetoric and careful reversal of gender roles throughout the scene. Although he enters the stage violently, threatening to strike and spurn the gentlemen bearing Henry's hearse, at no point during the seduction proper does Richard threaten violence to Anne or use his political status against her; in fact, from the outset he puts himself in the submissive position of distraught and devoted lover, giving her what Ian Moulton describes as "the illusion of power over her helpless 'effeminate' suitor" (267). As Anne curses and insults him, Richard responds with exaggerated Petrarchan compliments — even going so far as to claim it was her beauty that inspired him to kill her husband, Prince Edward (1.2.120) — and thus manages to provoke Anne into such a fury that, as Jack Trotter suggests, she approaches "that point where revulsion reaches its extremity and may begin, if carefully prompted, to spill over into its opposite" (40). With theatrical gusto, Richard offers Anne his sword and invites her to kill him, placing her in the role of violent male revenge figure, a role that, as Richard expects, she finds herself incapable of embracing. Thus, as Linda Charnes writes, unable to accept the phallic power offered to her, Anne is "reigned back into the confines of her female body," left with no option but submission (46). Much has been written about the nuanced rhetorical and psychological manipulation exhibited in this scene, but for the purposes of this paper, let it be enough to note that Richard seduces Anne not by imposing power on her, but rather by

mockingly offering her masculine power and using her rejection of this power to break her pride and ultimately entrap her.

The second question (why he does it) is potentially more complex than the first, and has generated just as much critical interpretation. Moulton refers to the seduction as Richard's endeavour to "triumph over the discourses of erotic pleasure by subordinating them entirely to his desire for power," describing how Richard "skillfully employs the language of affection, sexual desire, and physical obsession ... to achieve specific political ends" (257, 267). In this way, the seduction can be understood as a manifestation of Richard's rejection of his brother's effeminate devotion to women and the "sportive tricks" characterized by his reign (*Richard III* 1.1.14). Jack Trotter suggests that the scene's "troubling undercurrent of hostility" is evidence of Richard's overall hatred of women and, furthermore, of "his hatred of the flesh which takes woman as the emblem of all that is degrading in man's creaturely status" (42). By both of these readings, the seduction scene is Richard's assertion of freedom from the erotic desire that has proved more powerful than both Edward and Suffolk. Edward and Suffolk, bursting with desire and lust, have allowed themselves to be seduced, but Richard's seduction is premised upon no real desire or even regard for Anne. Moreover, we get the distinct impression that Richard's sex life after his marriage is less than satisfactory — Anne refers to sorrow haunting her bed and complains of being kept up all night by her husband's "timorous dreams" (4.1.80). His desire for power may be erotic in its intensity, but having chosen the identity of villain, Richard will remain chaste.

Richard's seduction of Anne, which is motivated by neither love nor lust and which has no evident consequence on his pursuit of the crown, can therefore be read as a



performance that confirms his ability to conquer. John Jowett, in his discussion of this scene in the introduction to the Oxford edition of the text, quotes Machiavelli's famously misogynistic instruction in chapter 25 of *The Prince*:

“I judge this indeed, that it is better to be impetuous than cautious, because fortune is a woman; and it is necessary, if one wants to hold her down, to beat her and strike her down. And one sees she lets herself be won more by the impetuous than by those who proceed coldly. And so always, like a woman, she is the friend of the young, because they are less cautious, more ferocious, and command her with more audacity.” (Machiavelli 101)

Jowett proposes Anne as representative for Richard of this elusive figure of fortune, suggesting, “She presents a challenge so severe that his conquest will act as a passport to more general success” (41). Richard's conquest of Anne is so unlikely that even he can hardly believe his own success, and he exclaims after her departure, “Was ever woman in this humour wooed / Was ever woman in this humour won?” (1.2.213-14). Anne is not the object of his desire, but his triumph over the almost impenetrable barrier of her hatred acts as an initiation into his triumph over the almost unattainable crown; this performance is proof both for the audience and for Richard himself of his impetuous ability to dominate and steer his fortune.

Fortune may prefer an impetuous man, but Richard's cruel behavior certainly does not impress the play's other female characters (Margaret, Elizabeth, and the Duchess of York), who express their contempt for him more vocally and with more vehemence than any of Richard's male opponents. Even Anne realizes quite quickly her mistake in marrying Richard and regrets how her “woman's heart / grossly grew captive to his

honey words” (4.1.74-75). While Anne passively accepts her own powerlessness and assumes that her husband will “shortly be rid of” her, however, the other women, although essentially just as powerless as Anne, continue to actively wield the only weapon in their possession: words of dissent (4.1.82). Under normal circumstances, Margaret — the supplanted Lancaster queen — would not be a friend of Elizabeth and the Duchess, both women of the house of York; in fact, in an earlier scene Margaret has cursed Elizabeth and accused her of usurping her position as queen of England (1.3.170). By Act 4 Scene 4, however, when the three women meet outside the palace, Richard has caused the deaths of Elizabeth’s two young sons as well as the Duchess’s son (his brother) Clarence, putting the two York women on comparable ground to Margaret, whose own husband and son were also killed by Richard. Their mutual hatred for Richard bridges the pre-existing divisions between the three women so that they can unite as one voice of feminine subversion. As earlier in the play Margaret predicted she would, Elizabeth requests instruction from England’s former queen in the art of cursing her enemies, exclaiming, “My words are dull. O quicken them with thine” (1.3.245-46, 4.4.118). Before disappearing from the play altogether, Margaret tells Elizabeth to contemplate and even exaggerate her woes; “Bett’ring thy loss makes the bad causer worse,” she explains, “Resolving this will teach thee how to curse” (4.4.116-17).

For a moment after Margaret’s departure in Act 4 Scene 4, Elizabeth and the Duchess seem to doubt the usefulness of curses; the Duchess wonders, “Why should calamity be full of words,” and Elizabeth claims, “Though what they do impart / Help not at all, yet do they ease the heart” (4.4.120, 124-25). Nonetheless, the Duchess decides to confront Richard and invites Elizabeth to accompany her, saying, “then be not

tongue-tied, go with me, / And in the breath of better words let's smother / My damnèd son which thy two sweet sons smothered" (4.4.126-28). Upon intercepting her son's expedition, the Duchess speaks both for herself and for Elizabeth:

... take with thee my most heavy curse,  
 Which in the day of battle tire thee more  
 Than all the complete armour that thou wear'st.  
 My prayers on the adverse party fight,  
 And there the little souls of Edward's children  
 Whisper the spirits of thine enemies,  
 And promise them success and victory.  
 Bloody thou art, bloody will be thy end.  
 Shame serves thy life, and doth thy death attend. (4.4.177-85)

The Duchess exits as soon as she has finished her speech, not waiting for a response from her son. It remains to be seen, however, whether these angry words are simply "Poor breathing orators of miseries," as Elizabeth has described them, or whether they do possess the affective power to influence fate (4.4.123).

Richard responds to his mother's antagonism by attempting to drown out her words with trumpets, and after she has departed he almost immediately asks Elizabeth for her daughter in marriage, demonstrating an overall disregard for these women and their words. Earlier in the play, of course, Anne's passionate curses have crumbled under his manipulative seduction, and he seems to think he can use this same tactic with Elizabeth, another woman he deems his inferior. Perhaps it can be argued that Anne has proved herself undeserving of Richard's respect; she does display almost

incredible weakness in submitting to the killer of her husband, spitting in his face one moment and accepting his ring the next. Richard clearly considers Anne's weakness, however, as a universal standard for femininity, a problematic generalization, since, as Ian Moulton writes of Anne's seduction, "a woman less willing to submit to conventional gender hierarchies (Margaret, say) would certainly plunge the sword through Richard's heart" (267). In fact, Moulton points out, although his conquest of Lady Anne is successful, Richard elsewhere deeply underestimates his female opponents — in 3 *Henry VI*, for instance, he claims the Yorkist forces have nothing to fear from a "woman's general," and then finds himself defeated by Margaret's troops (1.2.68). Therefore, we cannot be sure that Elizabeth is the "relenting fool, and shallow, changing woman" Richard assumes she is, especially since the sincerity of her consent to Richard's request is ambiguous (4.4.350).<sup>2</sup>

No matter what status we give the supernatural in this play, it cannot be denied that every curse uttered in *Richard III* does come true, implying that Richard has underestimated the potency of curses and has, moreover, underestimated the women who resort to cursing as the only remaining vehicle for revenge. In Act 1 Scene 3, Margaret curses Elizabeth to outlive her sons as well as her queenly title, and, over the course of the play, Elizabeth does lose her sons and does see another woman crowned. In that same scene, Margaret curses Richard with bad dreams, and, as we learn from Anne, Richard does suffer from nightmares (4.1.80). In Act 1 Scene 2, Anne curses Richard's future wife and consequently proves "the subject of [her] own soul's

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<sup>2</sup> In the 1995 film of *Richard III* starring Ian McKellan, in fact, Elizabeth marries her daughter to Richmond behind Richard's back, thus proving herself as deserving of significantly more credit than Richard has given her.

curse” (4.1.76). Finally, in Act 4 Scene 4, the Duchess’s curse accurately prophesies Richard’s downfall: the souls of Edward’s children do visit his opponent Richmond with encouraging words, and Richard does meet a bloody end (5.4.129, 5.7). Even if the women’s curses do not have direct supernatural influence over the events of the play, they must, given their uncanny accuracy, be considered as vested with some sort of very real power and authority. In the same way that Richard can, through rhetoric alone, transform Anne’s hatred into desire, the Duchess’s curse can imbue Richard’s lapsed conscience with “a thousand several tongues” to accuse him in his sleep (5.4.173).

Hannah Pitkin, in her book on Machiavelli, *Fortune is a Woman*, refers to the figure of fortune and her cohorts (fate, necessity, opportunity) as “versions of a generalized feminine power against which men struggle ... a vision of embattled men struggling to preserve themselves, their masculinity, their autonomy, and the achievements of civilization, against almost overwhelming odds” (169). Fortune may be a woman, and it may be possible to beat her and strike her down, but at no point does either Pitkin or Machiavelli suggest that she may be definitively conquered. Rather, Machiavelli establishes from the beginning of chapter 25 of *The Prince* that “fortune is the arbiter of half of our actions, but ... she leaves the other half, or close to it, for us to govern” (98). While fortune can be half-governed, there will always be forces that cannot be explained, conquered, and controlled.

Richard, however, who claims an ability to “set the murd’rous Machiavel to school,” refuses to acknowledge any limit to his powers, and his initial triumph over fortune — his seduction of Anne — gives him a false confidence in his ability to control his surroundings (3 *Henry VI* 3.3.193). In fact, as John Jowett points out, Richard’s fortunes

begin to descend as soon as he disposes of Anne: "At the moment he says 'Anne my wife hath bid the world goodnight,' he has himself bid fortune goodnight" (44). In murdering his wife, therefore, Richard demonstrates his disregard not only for women but also for the power of fortune; in returning to Richard in a dream, Anne proves that he cannot dominate and dispose of fortune any more than he can truly dominate and dispose of his wife. Ultimately, despite Richard's rigid masculinity, despite his manipulative charisma, and despite the intensity of his desire for power, fortune, as evoked by angry women, can and will smite him.

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