

The Gendering of Hauntology: *Richard III* and the Feminine Curse

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As Shakespeare's first tetralogy moves from the battlefield of the *Henry VI* plays into the action of *Richard III*, there is a marked change in feminine energy. Women are removed from active combat and incorporated within the domestic sphere, indicating a gradual absorption into the hegemonic discourse of femininity and a relinquishing of their roles as challengers of official historiography. While assimilation means that women are portrayed as ennobled figures in *Richard III*, it also results in a decline of direct martial agency. Whereas Joan la Pucelle and Queen Margaret don armour, the women of *Richard III* appear to be largely defined by their relationships with male family members. Rather than pursue retribution for their losses by means of physical action, the women seek reparation through spiritual appeals, curses, and communal mourning, functioning as a disembodied voice of remonstrance. The women's otherworldly power aligns them with providence and against Richard's worldly and Machiavellian political acumen. Speaking largely through petitions, curses, and lamentations for the dead, the women of *Richard III* materialize as ephemeral presences on and off stage. As the ghosts of Richard's murdered victims drift on to Bosworth Field, they parallel the role of the women in condemning Richard and invoking divine justice. While Lady Anne is the only female ghost, all of the spectres are partially feminine actors due to their affiliation with the supernatural. Clarifying the association of the feminine with the uncanny and spectral apparitions is crucial to understanding the evolved type of agency the women of *Richard III* possess.

There is no shortage of critical literature on the subject of gender and the masculine versus feminine wielding of power in Shakespeare's first tetralogy. Phyllis Rackin has produced several volumes on Shakespeare and women, commenting specifically on how women are domesticated in the action of *Richard III*, a phenomenon that carries over to the second tetralogy where they never again make an appearance on the battlefield. There are also multiple published works discussing how women employ and call upon supernatural forces as a way of achieving social power. Yet there is very little literature on the gendered phenomenon of haunting in *Richard*

III and the feminine relation to the dead and otherworldly that is reinforced throughout the action of the play. In the opening chapter of *Spectres of Marx*, Jacques Derrida discusses the ghost of Hamlet's father as a simultaneous agent of change and of the past. Derrida's description of the spectre's role extends beyond the borders of Denmark and the male experience and is relevant to the women of *Richard III's* relationship with the spiritual world. Derrida does not view the summoning of a spirit or power as a passive and dislocated act; instead, he defines conjuration in terms of a communal undertaking with clear and active intentions: "A conjuration, then, is first of all an alliance, to be sure, sometimes a political alliance, more or less secret, if not tacit, a plot or a conspiracy. It is a matter of neutralizing a hegemony or overturning some power" (47). The invocations of the women - from Anne's role as leader of the funeral procession in 1.2 to the stichomythic chorus of the females in 4.4 - go beyond a plaintive wailing for the dead and demonstrate a direct engagement with the political events of the drama. By focusing on the pleas and conjurations of the women in *Richard III* through the lens of Derrida's hauntology, I will argue that the spectral presence emerges as a role with concrete political agency that is not the result of displacement or disembodiment but rather a collective effort to effect change.

1. Past conjurations: the role of women and the spiritual in the *Henry VI* plays, feminine agency in *Richard III*

In order to understand fully the force of the supernatural invocations of the women in *Richard III*, it is important to situate their roles in relation to others fulfilled by women in the *Henry VI* plays. Critics observe that there is a marked moral realignment of women in *Richard III*, and, compared to the preceding instalments in the tetralogy, women are associated with providence rather than malevolent magical forces. In *The End Crowns All*, Barbara Hodgdon notes that even the play's narrative strategy is divided along gender lines: while the battle focuses on the male characters, the sympathy of the audience is drawn to Richard's victims. Since the women act as the mouthpiece for the dead and the keeper of their memories, the audience is prompted to empathize with their plight (105). In her article "History into Tragedy: the Case of *Richard III*," Phyllis Rackin similarly observes that women have undergone a remarkable transformation from their roles in the *Henry VI* plays and that while women are portrayed sympathetically, the result is "They take on their tragic roles as suffering

victims and assume their tragic status as central objects of male concern . . . they lose the vividly individualized voices and the subversive theatrical power that made the female characters in Shakespeare's earliest history plays formidable antagonists to the masculine project of history-making" (31). It is true that women in *Richard III* are no longer positioned as the demonic Other; there is no peasant Joan attempting to subvert English historiography, and long gone is the adulterous Margaret who donned armour and waved a blood-soaked napkin in York's face. In "Gender and Nation," Rackin further argues that women are subsumed into the conventional discourse because they are never present on the battlefield, and the action of the play is resolved by marriage to a princess with a "disembodied name" who does not materialize as a physical presence (97).

The antagonistic and subversive power Rackin identifies as necessary for a strong female theatrical presence is visible not only in the women's appearance on the fields of war but also in the way they engage with the discourse of witchcraft. Unlike *Richard III* where the summoning of spirits remains an ambiguous act, both Joan in *1 Henry VI* and Eleanor Cobham in *2 Henry VI* visibly call demons to the stage. While Joan's devils are possibly a figment of her imagination, the language she uses indicates a deliberate intent to call on dark powers, entreating them with "You speedy helpers that are substitutes / Under the lordly monarch of the north, / Appear and aid me in this enterprise!" (5.3.5-8). Queen Margaret is also rendered satanic in the earlier plays, though she never directly calls upon the aid of the spiritual world. In *3 Henry VI* she torments the "crucified" York, forcing him to look upon the blood of his murdered child. In her article "Martial Maids and Murdering Mothers," Kristin Smith conjectures that Margaret's acts "open a place in the political space of England for the diabolical 'birth' of Richard, Scourge of God" (152). Smith believes that by using the language of curses, Margaret gives birth to Richard in the same way that Joan gives birth to her demons - using feminine language and blood. Though it would be difficult to argue conclusively that Margaret's killing of Rutland directly facilitates the ascension of the Tudor dynasty, Smith's positioning of Margaret's language as a corrosive force is a convincing argument in light of the action in *Richard III* and presents an alternative view of the domesticated women Rackin critiques.

Rackin argues that the women of *Richard III* are unequivocally domesticated, and even their mourning cries are acts of dependence with little relevance to the play. Her analysis of Queen Elizabeth in the Tower of London scene is as follows: "Elizabeth serves as a kind of ventriloquist's

dummy. She gives forceful and eloquent voices to Richard's crimes, but her own motives remain ambiguous because they are irrelevant to the outcome of the plot" (*History* 39). However, it is possible that the marked change in feminine energy Rackin identifies is more than a loss of agency that results in parroting a litany of crimes. Throughout the play the women become aware of the legitimacy and efficacy of language, indicating recognition of the politic – a word mentioned in *Richard III* more than any other history play – that is necessary in a courtly world where the martial and chivalric codes are no longer sufficient guidelines for political conduct. This possibility is bolstered by the fact that Elizabeth's interest in language is not passive; she does not allow a flow of conventionally moral words to course through her without question. She demands that Margaret disseminate her power to curse, pleading "O thou well skilled in curses, stay a while, / And teach me how to curse mine enemies" (4.4 110-1). After Margaret's departure, the Queen repeatedly references the function of language in voicing grievances, calling them "Windy attorneys to your client woes" and "breathing orators of misery" (4.4.121-3), legalistic terms that indicate a growing knowledge of the role of written documents and rule of law in the running of the kingdom.

The affective and effective potential of words is corroborated by Derrida, who views words as essential to the conjuration of a spectre and the solidifying of an alliance to neutralize a hegemony or overturn some power (47). To perform a conjuration, the alliance or conspirators must swear on the subject of the spectre, and then "Conjuration signifies, *on the other hand*, the magical incantation destined to *evoke*, to bring forth with the voice...what is *not there* at the present moment of the appeal" (41). If we view the women as bearing the Derridian responsibility of conjuration, then their pleas cannot be, as Rackin says, "irrelevant" to the outcome of the plot. Although they do not summon the ghosts of Bosworth Field in a textually explicit way, their linguistic intent to obliterate Richard with a wordly, if not worldly, presence is irrefutable. Just before Richard enters into their circle of communal mourning in 4.4, the Duchess of York responds to Elizabeth's defence of vocalizing calamity with "If so, then be not tongue-tied, go with me, / And in the breath of bitter words let's smother / My damned son which thy two sweet sons smothered" (126-8). The women's incantation is imbued with intent to invoke a moral authority that will end Richard's rule. Even if they are not entreating the spirits of Richard's victims, or calling forth Richmond, they are evoking the voice of a suffering nation. Though they are not present in the ranks of the army,

the women should not be deemed ineffectual because they are not martial. They have entered the realm of the verbally political, and their speech-act breaks the limitations of the domestic sphere by representing a collective consciousness.

2. Mourning and the conjuring of memory: localizing the dead through lamentation

Lamentation is a speech act that carries dangerous connotations in *Richard III*, and instances of mourning are frequently used in a ritualistic fashion to give voice to political wrongs. In 2.2 and 4.4 the women gather together to wail the dead, invoking the spirits of their sons and husbands using cursing and chanting. When Queen Elizabeth enters in 2.2, she asks “O who shall hinder me to wail and weep / To chide my fortune and torment myself?” (34-5). While her plea is that of a woman grieving for her lost husband, Elizabeth’s fortunes are tied to the fortunes of the nation. Her supplications are emblematic of the personal mourning that takes place throughout *Richard III*, which often represents both private grief and the vocalising of a civic grievance that is connected to the illegitimacy of Richard’s rule. In his work *Hamlet and Purgatory*, Stephen Greenblatt articulates a similar view of mourning the dead as an expression of national grievances. He contends that the ghosts in the play “function as the memory of the murdered, a memory registered not only in Richard’s troubled psyche...but also in the collective consciousness of the kingdom...and as the agents of a restored health and wholeness to the damaged community” (180). Just as the ghosts represent Richard’s past victims, they are also the spectres of a previous political order. The ghosts are manifestations of Richard’s inability to secure legitimacy and thus are also present in the women’s cries against Richard’s rule as the females attempt to ensure the authenticity of the royal lineage. The women’s connection of their losses to the fracturing of the kingdom and the succession of rulers positions their communal lamentation in 4.4 so that it appears to predict the reintegration of the kingdom with Richmond’s return, thereby including them in the events of Bosworth, even though they are not a martial presence.

The effectiveness of articulating the national consciousness depends on its communal vocalization, as indicated by the unsuccessful remonstrations of Lady Anne in 1.2. As Anne leads Henry VI’s funeral procession, she announces her intention to “obsequiously lament” the fallen Lancaster, addressing the hearse with “Be it lawful that I invoke thy ghost / To hear the lamentations of poor Anne” (4.2.9-10). Anne’s calls to the

dead king imply that she believes he will hear and answer her cries, and while her speech contains power, she has limited control over its effects. After describing Richard at length she is startled by his appearance, demanding of him, "What black magician conjures up this fiend. / To stop devoted charitable deeds?" (1.2.32-3), implying that her accusations and curses have induced him to enter. In her article "Mourning and Communal Memory," Katherine Goodland hypothesizes that Anne's remembrances do not have the desired effect because the funeral is an empty ceremony – a political procession that marks the disruption of linear history but holds none of the necessary elements of a successful ritual. Goodland posits that "In the broadest sense, funeral ritual resolves the social and psychic disruption caused by death through the symbolic enactment of continuity" (33). When Anne confronts Richard with Henry's coffin, she issues proclamations of banishment: "Foul devil, for God's sake, hence, and trouble us not, / For thou hast made the happy earth thy hell" (1.2.48-9), and while her words contain moral force, they do not encompass the elements of historical and communal feeling that are present in the scenes where multiple women vocalize their despair. Yet her confrontation of Richard is immensely effective in the evocation of memory: while in his opening speech Richard glories in the defeat of his enemies, Anne asserts that she is right to mourn the king's Lancastrian corpse, and from that moment on the past consumes the stage in the form of Margaret's curse.

In his discussion of the ghost in *Hamlet*, Derrida attempts to dissect the same notion of spirit or lack of bodily presence that Anne grapples with by stating, "The body is with the King but the King is not with the body. The King, is a thing" (9). Derrida is referring to the effort to make what is not present *become* present. While the spectre is not a physical body, it can become a tangible phantom through: 1) the act of mourning; 2) evoking past generations; and 3) "working," or making itself known in a substantial if not corporeal way. It is the first act – the act of mourning performed by Anne and later Queen Elizabeth, the Duchess of York, and Margaret – that has particular application to Derrida's theory of the "working of the spirit." In his discussion of effective mourning, Derrida states, "It consists always in attempting to ontologize the remains, to make them present, in the first place by *identifying* the bodily remains and by *localizing* the dead" (9). As Anne stands over Henry VI's coffin, she identifies him as a "holy" king and confines his presence to his hearse, a localization that is indicated when his wounds begin to bleed in Richard's presence. In the communal mourning scene (4.4), Queen Elizabeth enters crying "Ah, my

young princes! Ah, my tender babes! / My unblown flowers, new-appearing sweets! / If yet your gentle souls fly in the air / And be not fixed in doom perpetual, / Hover about me with your airy wings / And hear your mother's lamentation" (9-14). Derrida contends that "Nothing could be worse, for the work of mourning, than confusion or doubt: one *has to know* who is buried where" (9). Since Elizabeth is unable to identify the remains of her young sons, she must satisfy herself with localizing the spirit of the boys, attempting to pinpoint their presence to the air around her, knowing they must be close in order to listen to their mother's grievances.

In "Mourning and Communal Memory," Katherine Goodland notes that Richard adopts a "forward-looking atomistic post-Reformation attitude towards death" (45) that manifests itself in a political amnesia regarding the dead. The mourning women and their continuous acknowledgement of the dead can therefore be interpreted as an attempt to obstruct Richard's progress. By ontologizing her sons and bringing them into knowledge through invoking their unknown spirits, Elizabeth is attempting to obstruct Richard's progress with her acknowledgement of the dead. The women and their mourning rituals embody the past, and by localizing the dead, they draw attention to the insistence of memory and how it must influence and intrude on human action – even the monstrous Richard is briefly compelled to call out "Have mercy, Jesu!" when faced with the spectres of his victims (5.4.155). Though wailing over the dead may be construed as a passive act, in the context of the Derridian definition of mourning the evocation of memory is an act of protest, one that comes to tangible fruition in the summoning of ghostly figures. This leads to Derrida's third component of spectral presence, the "work of the spirit," which he states "makes itself known whether it transforms itself, poses or decomposes itself" (9). The work of the spirit is evoked by the women of *Richard III* in two further ways: the curses and fulfillment of prophecy as brought about by Margaret, herself an anachronistic and theatrical ghost of revenge, and the invocation and appearance of the spirits that haunt Richard's conscious at Bosworth Field.

3. The Ghost of Margaret: the efficacy of curses, prophecies, and the "crime of the other"

While Richard largely occupies the role of "demonic presence" previously held by female characters, there is no doubt that the vengeful Margaret possesses a great deal of theatrical agency in the form of curses, prophecy, and vengeance. In 1.3, Richard immediately identifies her as a

supernatural agent, addressing her with, "Foul wrinkled witch, what mak'st thou in my sight?" (164). He later interrupts her mid-course to command "Have done thy charm, thou hateful, withered hag" (1.3.212). Margaret's presence is the most spectral of all the characters that are not marked as "ghosts" in the stage direction. She creeps onstage unseen and demands an opportunity to recite the crimes of the past, stating that, "But repetition of what thou hast marred, / That I will make before I let thee go" (1.3.165-6). Her insistence on the intrusion of memory transitions into a lengthy curse and prophecy, the majority of which is fulfilled by the end of the play. While the historical Margaret died in Anjou after her defeat at Tewkesbury, Shakespeare engineers her return as a voice from the dead to recall the past and pour curses on her enemies. In *Engendering a Nation*, Howard and Rackin argue that Margaret's verbal domination is usurped by Richard who interrupts her maledictions to turn Margaret's curses against herself. When she resents the interruption with "O, let me make the period to my curse!" he retorts, "'Tis done by me and ends in 'Margaret'" (1.3. 216-38). Yet it is not entirely justified to claim that this interaction fully negates Margaret's power and her role as patroness of curses. While Richard's authority has dissipated and crumbled by the end of the play, Margaret's oaths remain efficacious. By transferring her knowledge of cursing to the other women, Margaret retains power even when she removes herself bodily from the action of the play.

Derrida acknowledges that efficacy and anteriority of the crime are important for the invocation of spirits, and they are concepts Margaret references directly in her speeches. While discussing *Hamlet's* ghost, Derrida states that "Everything begins by the apparition of a spectre. 'This thing' will end up coming. The *revenant* is going to come" (4). Margaret's appearance indicates the beginning of Richard's fall and the collapse of his inner circle: she predicts the deaths of Dorset and Grey, the deaths of Elizabeth's children, Richard's demise, and finally foresees her own recognition as an agent of providence, stating they will "say poor Margaret was a prophetess" (1.3.301). But Margaret's words are more than a catalyst for calamity - it is Margaret who most closely embodies Derrida's theory of "hauntology," which he claims is a "staging for the end of history" (10). While the ghost or spectre must remain ephemeral to some degree, hauntology refers to a concrete occurrence: "After the end of history, the spirit comes by *coming back* [revenant], it figures *both* a dead man who comes back and a ghost whose expected return repeats itself again and again" (10). Margaret is the dead man, and her list of names are the ghosts whose expected return

manifests itself in the apparitions at Bosworth. Her lengthy curse presages the end of Richard's line and acts as the framework for the end of Plantagenet history and the beginning of the Tudor line. The names are the ghosts of the nation that Greenblatt refers to, a parade of individuals who represent the collapsed dynasties that have hindered Richard's claim to legitimacy. While the spectres may not be operative in the same way as a bodily presence, the words that make them present *are* effective. When Buckingham confronts Margaret with "curses never pass, / the lips of those that breathe them in the air," she replies "I'll not believe but they ascend the sky, / and there awake God's gentle-sleeping peace" (1.3.285-288). Margaret locates the curses as a source of power and a potential way to access providential justice. The substance of the spectre, what makes it effective, may be localized in the original calling forth of its powers or, in Margaret's case, within her curse.

Margaret's status as converted instrument of providence is potentially contentious since her misfortunes are also attributed to providential justice. Members of the court chastise Margaret repeatedly over the killing of Rutland, and, while referring to Margaret's losses, Elizabeth says "So just is God to right the innocent" (1.3.179). Yet Margaret's authority stems from the endurance of her misfortune and the opportunity to articulate her woes. In *The Subject of Tragedy*, Catherine Belsey observes that the occasion of having witches confess at the scaffold, though imbued with patriarchal oppression and bias, "paradoxically also offered women a place from which to speak in public with a hitherto unimagined authority which was not diminished by the fact that it was demonic" (190-1). Though Hastings derides Margaret as a "False-boding woman" and Dorset cautions "Dispute not with her, she is lunatic" as she exits, Hastings concedes, "My hair doth stand on end to hear her curses" (1.3.246, 254, 305). Despite the derisive feminine epithets, there is a recognized authority in Margaret's summoning, which implies a verbal power that is not entirely subsumed by negations of the male characters. The linguistic violence Margaret applies through curses predicts and governs the rest of the play, and though she is not acting physically, her complaints are political appeals channelled through an invocation of supernatural forces.

Margaret's curses could be construed as a verbal attempt to gain control in a world where she has been displaced as she doles out punishment for past wrongs. However, this does not explain the apparent effect of Margaret's prophecies or the process of power transference that takes place between the old queen and the new. Margaret predicts a time when

Elizabeth will require her ability to inflict verbal wounds, saying, “Fool, fool, thou whet’st a knife to kill thyself / The time will come that thou shall wish for me / To help thee curse that poisonous bunch-backed toad” (1.3. 244-6). After the death of her husband and two children, Elizabeth begs, “O thou well-skilled in curses stay a while. / And teach me how to curse mine enemies.” Margaret replies, “Thy woes will make them sharp and pierce like mine” (4.4. 110-119). While Elizabeth has “usurped” Margaret’s role, the old queen’s sorrows have been transferred voluntarily through their dialogue. As the women list their losses, Margaret’s reference to antecedent crimes are phrased in the same way as Elizabeth’s and the Duchess of York’s, creating a linear chain of grief that connects the women and their separate losses to the present day:

MARGARET

Thou hadst an Edward, till a Richard killed him.
Thou hadst a Richard till a Richard killed him.

DUCHESS OF YORK

I had a Richard too, and thou didst kill him
I had a Rutland too, thou holp’st to kill him.

MARGARET

Thou hadst a Clarence too, and Richard killed
him. (4.4.39-42)

The effect of the stichomythic chorus is a redirection and convergence of wrongs – the women’s grief is now localized within Richard’s rule, though Margaret also perpetrated crimes against their families. Derrida identifies tragedy as dependent on “the proper spectral anteriority of the crime – the crime of the other, a misdeed whose truth can never *present themselves* [sic] in flesh and blood, but can only allow themselves to be presumed, reconstructed, fantasized” (21). Margaret may then connect past wrongs to present circumstances despite the misdeeds she committed and focus the women on the “crime of the other.” The women’s cries are not a mindless ululation of sadness but a directed manipulation and reconstruction of historical events. Since the misdeed cannot present itself, Margaret presents it to the other women whose vocalization of their sorrows constructs a spectre outside of the ghostliness of their new histories, the ghosts of the dead at Bosworth.

4. The stichomythic scene: spiritual pleas as a form of exorcism and the role of the women on Bosworth Field

In the previous section on mourning as a means of burying the dead and invoking the spectre, it was suggested that the communal nature of a funeral rite is necessary for its success in articulating the wrongs done to the community and restoring a sense of wholeness to the fractured kinship groups and society. While there is a brief moment of communal mourning in 4.1, the most extensive instance of mourning comes three scenes later as Margaret, the Duchess of York, and Queen Elizabeth commiserate over their losses. Critics have positioned this scene as another moment that highlights women's increasing domestication in the English court. In her article "Swords and Curses," Rachel Wifall argues that the scene is an attempt to verbally represent powerlessness, and that "The preservation of Margaret who possessed great power and lost it, allows her to be the epitome of most participants' powerlessness in the historical process, for, like Margaret, they are doomed to witness history without the capacity to shape it" (162). Although the women's appeals to celestial aid are indicative of their failure to prevent the tragedies that occurred, their language is not representative of a pathetic and helpless righteousness. Margaret's speech is characteristically brimstone laced and reads more like a condemnation than a prayer as she asks for Richard's removal: "Earth gapes, hell burns, fiends roar, saints pray / To, have him suddenly conveyed away. / Cancel his bond of life, dear God, I plead, / That I may live to say, 'The dog is dead'" (4.4 70-4). Upon Richard's entrance, the Duchess of York stops his progress by identifying herself as "A she that might have intercepted thee, / By strangling thee in her accursed womb" (4.4. 131-2). These are not passive statements, rather the women use the language of the violence – gapes, burn, roar, strangle – that they do not commit themselves. While the women are not present on the battlefield, the incantation of curses is an effort to turn the future against their tormentors and, regardless of their lack of physical participation in this future, also a momentous and active *effort* that counters claims of accepted passivity. Whether or not Richard's failure can be attributed to the success of their pleas, their language is a demonstration of an agency independent from male characters.

While in the *Henry VI* trilogy the feminine relation to supernatural forces is presented as tainted, in *Richard III* it is aligned with what is credible and just. Margaret especially speaks lines that sound like spells – "Bett'ring thy loss makes the bad causer worse. / Revolving this will teach

thee how to curse" (4.4.116-7) – yet even she is associated with providential justice. Richard, on the other hand, equates piety and appeals to God with the weak and effeminate, crying out "O Jesu!" only after seeing the spectres of his victims. Conversely, Richmond believes in the power of words and visions as a form of divine protection, rallying his troops with "God and our good cause fight upon our side; / The prayers of holy saints and wronged souls, / Like high-reared bulwarks stand before our forces" (5.4.219-21). Richmond formulates his prayers of protection as though they were physical objects – barriers and bulwarks that will shelter his men. His treatment of words parallels the women's use of language as a material force. For example, the Duchess of York claims her words will "smother" her son, and Elizabeth believes she will die "in the thralls of Margaret's curse" (4.1.41-3). The women are allied with Richmond through their common use of language and cosmic belief before he arrives in England, though they never appear together on stage.

The alignment of the women versus Richard corresponds with that of Richmond versus Richard, but this alliance is complicated by the fact that as soon as Richmond arrives, the women disappear from the stage. Richmond embodies the physical and providential right, bearing weapons and spirits. With his appearance the women are no longer necessary to fulfill the role of moral voice, and after the stichomythic invocation, they become disembodied names rather than bodily presences. In her critique of *Richard III*, Hodgdon argues that this displacement is the final indication of women's domestication. Even their potential for subversive speech is appropriated by Richmond, who uses it to justify his moral victory. Hodgdon sees the woman as spectres, but as non-Derridian passive spectral forces: "Like the ghosts who appear on the night before the Battle of Bosworth Field, these 'poor mortal-living ghost[s]' (4.4.26) record the ending of patrilineal genealogy and invoke the higher authority of divine providence to validate Richmond's accession" (114). Just as Richard transfers the blame for the chaos he creates onto the form of Margaret and the alleged promiscuity of Queen Elizabeth, Richmond adopts their cumulative chorus of grievances as a way of legitimizing his rule's pre-marriage to Elizabeth of York. If we agree with Hodgdon's argument, the women are righteous suffering victims and scapegoats rather than convincingly individualized figures.

However, to accept that Richard's and Richmond's appropriation of female power transforms the women from active subjects into reflexive objects is to discount the power of language as it functions throughout the

play. The women view cursing and mourning as legitimate avenues for their goals, and this outlook would have been corroborated by an Elizabethan audience. As Rachel Wifall writes, "While Protestants would have questioned the efficacy of cursing, there was the belief that if the injury was grave enough, providence would grant the curse – a power of retaliation when other means failed" (180). Since the women originally voice the injury, they are the source of the pleas, which are a credible form of action against an enemy. It is important to note that while the curses are textually extensive, there is no moment where the women explicitly recite a "spell" or "chant" that is intended to raise the spirits of the dead. The stichomythic quality of the dialogue in the scene with the three mothers resembles incantations, yet there is no easily identified magic ritual as with Joan La Pucelle and Eleanor Cobham. The question of the women's agency is directly related to their involvement in calling forth the ghosts of the dead, as the haunting of Bosworth Field is the closest the women come to martial involvement. Therefore, determining whether they are responsible for calling on the spectres is essential to defining them as an active political force.

Derrida provides a potential solution to the problem of the women's agency in his second definition of conjuration. Previously, conjuration as the toppling of a hegemonic power was related to the women's funerary rites and communications of grief. Conjuration may also mean the exorcism of a malignant force, an act Derrida defines as intending to "attempt both to destroy and to disavow a malignant, demonized, diabolized force, most often an evil-doing spirit, a spectre, a kind of ghost who comes back or who still risks coming back *post-mortem*" (48). Richard is referred to as a demonic force in excess, given such soubriquets as "A hell-hound that do hunt us all to death" and "That foul defacer of God's handiwork" (4.4. 45-48). The women attempt to annul him as a destructive force and disavow him: Elizabeth betroths her daughter to Richmond, not Richard; the Duchess of York disowns him as her son; Lady Anne forces him to confront the bleeding body of Henry VI; and Margaret constantly rages against him as "the son of hell" (1.3.227). Rather than leading to the conclusion that their work is negated by the appearance of Richmond and the near simultaneous appearance of the ghosts, the Derridian definition of exorcism indicates continuity between the work of the women and the work of the ghostly presences on Bosworth Field. The potential continuation of the process of exorcism as transferred between wronged parties is further

elucidated by Derrida's explanation of the specific components of exorcism:

Exorcism consists in repeating the mode of an incantation that the dead man is really dead. It proceeds by *formulae*, and sometimes theoretical *formulae* play this role with an efficacy that is all the greater because they mislead as to their magical nature, their authoritarian dogmatism, the occult power they share with what they claim to combat...It is *effectively performative*. Effectivity phantomizes itself (48).

As the ghosts confront Richard, they each repeat "Despair and die," ensuring that the dead man is truly dead, and every apparition proceeds by a formulaic and performative condemnation of their tormentor. What is most notable in Derrida's definition is the statement that exorcism is a performative act that does not necessarily produce a physical result. Throughout *Richard III*, the female characters engage in a consistent attempt to verbally exorcize Richard from the throne and to localize and set free the ghosts of their own dead. Thus, the women's lamentations and tragic monologues cannot be singularly construed as passive mourning – they are a constant evoking and dispelling of spirits. Moreover, the effect of the exorcism "phantomizes itself," as the verbal attacks and linguistic aggression of the women reach their apex not in the last curse of Margaret or the Duchess of York's disavowal but in the apparition of the ghosts. Viewed in this way, the spectres are not an entity separate from female agency; they are a product of the women's effort and an indicator of their successful spiritual appeals.

Conclusion: Elizabeth of York as the final revenant

Rackin, Hodgdon, and other feminist critics are correct to observe that women are denied martial power as a form of direct action in *Richard III*. However, these critics do not identify the effective speech acts performed by the women as a sufficient replacement of martial agency, despite the way they affect the national landscape. Derrida's hauntology is the spectral presence of change, the "staging of the end of history," in which he describes the spectral revenant as "This thing that will end up coming" (4). It is true that Richard is killed in battle by Richmond, but the end of Richard's history is not only localized in Richmond's appearance. Rather,

the end of the Plantagenet dynasty must be at least partially attributed to the textual spectre of Elizabeth of York. Margaret's apocalyptic curses and the ghosts of Bosworth Field are harbingers of Richard's downfall, but it is Elizabeth's union with Richmond that is truly the end. Mentioned at various points throughout the play, Elizabeth is recognized as a potential instrument for the erasure of Richard's misrule. Richard expects her to provide much needed legitimacy, believing her hand in marriage will wipe out the memory of the dead princes; he announces his intentions to Queen Elizabeth with "In your daughter's womb I bury them" (4.4.343). Thus, Elizabeth of York is a haunting presence throughout the script, and, rather than provide the ending Richard expects, she becomes the ultimate revenant as her betrothal to Richmond is a continuation of the women's disruptions of Richard's plans. It is telling that the ephemeral and feminine bride is the final sign of Richard's loss of control over the monarchical lineage, the kingdom, and the battle of Bosworth. Elizabeth of York indicates Richard's reign is over, but his sovereignty has existed in a state of limbo for the duration of the play as it was always troubled by the shadow of the known historical outcome of marriage between the houses of York and Lancaster. Elizabeth's actual betrothal means that the enemy has been legitimized, and Richard's presence is expunged in the proceeding of the marriage rites.

While the martial and subversive acts of women in the *Henry VI* plays open up a space for the theatrical birth of the demonic Richard, it is the ghostly woman who signals his death. The women's concerted efforts to speak against Richard culminate in the ghosts of Bosworth, but the appearance of the spectres and Richmond's entrance are penultimate - Elizabeth of York is the finale and the final indicator that the women do not need to be bodily present in the action of battle to have an identifiable and active political presence. The women of *Richard III* exemplify the Derridian notions of spectres, exorcisms, conjurations and hauntology: they are impediments, they are the end, and they create the ending. They do not function as simplistic recording devices observing patrilineal genealogy; instead, by invoking spirits in an attempt to actively reconstruct history, they obliterate it.

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