

**Demonic Women and Machiavellian Men in Shakespeare's Early History Plays**

A thesis by Yiding Yu

Thesis Advisor: Professor John Parker

Presented to the Graduate Faculty  
of the University of Virginia for the Degree of  
Master of Art

Department of English

University of Virginia

April 30, 2024

### Abstract

In Shakespeare's first history tetralogy (*Henry VI Part 1, 2, 3, and Richard III*), there are three prominent women characters, Joan of Arc, Eleanor (the Duchess of Gloucester) and Queen Margaret. All these three women are portrayed as extremely ambitious, crafty, and monstrous in the sense that they are not only pitiless, but also invoke the unearthly power of devils to achieve their own political ends. Assisted by her fiends, Joan fights on behalf of France, England's arch enemy; having dreamed of being crowned as queen herself, the ambitious Eleanor consorts with a witch for political prophecies about King Henry's death; and Queen Margaret is an infanticide of the innocent child Rutland and ruthlessly taunts his bereaved father York. But are these "demonic women" merely the nation's bane and a reflection of the evilness in an irredeemable world, or do they have more complex motives and responsibilities? And what roles do they play in the historical narrative that Shakespeare intends to present to his audience?

Instead of focusing on a single "female monster" excluded from the context of history-making itself or viewing them as a considerable threat to the patriarchal authority and the nation's integrity, I aim to examine the complexity of the three women characters within a wider political framework in comparison with the male Machiavels around them in order to analyze a pattern of political struggle interrupted and intensified by the ambitious women. Not assigning these men and women characters to antithetical positions—the righteous male hero and the demonic female other—Shakespeare deemphasizes the relevance of gender to our moral judgment and underscores the inevitable political struggle not only in history but also the Elizabethan present in his own time.

## Demonic Women and Machiavellian Men in Shakespeare's Early History Plays

Facing the Spanish invasion in 1588, Elizabeth I bravely declared: "I have the body of a weak and feeble woman, but I have the heart and stomach of a king, and of a King of England too."<sup>1</sup> The queen adroitly used sexual politics during her reign as "both woman and man in one, both king and queen together, a male body in politics in concept and a female body natural in practice" (Levin 121). According to Nina S. Levine, Elizabeth had a profound influence on England's politics and culture, because "the presence of a woman on the throne necessitated revisions in England's gendered discourse of state and nation" and "celebrated the monarch's gender even as it worked accommodate it to the beliefs and expectations of a patriarchal culture" (*Women's Matters* 21). However, it is unjust to call Elizabethan England a "patriarchal culture" not only because a woman, ironically, is the most powerful figure, but also because numerous women have ruled successfully in the sixteenth century Europe. Elizabeth's sister and predecessor Mary I was first coronated as queen in 1553 and ruled England for 5 years; Mary Stuart, cousin to Elizabeth, was Queen of Scots from 1542 to 1567; Catherine de' Medici was Queen of France from 1547 to 1559, and the years during which her sons reigned are called "the age of Catherine de' Medici."<sup>2</sup> Therefore, anxieties about female rule arise not from the lack, but the abundance of female rulers instead. For example, John Knox acridly attacks women's rule in his *The First Blast of the Trumpet against the Monstrous Regiment of Women*: "it is more than a monstre in nature, that a woman shall reigne and have an empire above men" (5). Incisively

---

<sup>1</sup> For Elizabeth I's monumental speech, see *Cabala: Sive scrinia sacra: Mysteries of state and government in letters of illustrious persons and great agents in the reigns of Henry the Eighth, Queen Elizabeth, K: James, and the late King Charles*, 260.

<sup>2</sup> See Quilligan's *When Women Ruled the World* for a detailed historical account and analysis of the respective reign of the "quartet of Renaissance Queens"—Mary Tudor; Elizabeth I; Mary, Queen of Scots; and Catherine de' Medici.

criticizing Knox' blast as an "anti-woman diatribe" and "misogynistic horn," Maureen Quilligan argues that "the quartet of Renaissance Queens" in the sixteenth century Europe not only sustained their amenity as "sisters" through years of gift-exchanging, but they also "collectively needed to band together to protect their power against the patriarchal assault" and achieved a "brilliant monumental culture" together (Quilligan, x, xvii, 245).

Dangerous patriarchal assault certainly penetrated the Elizabethan era. Despite her privileged position and considerable power, Queen Elizabeth's visibility as a female monarch "subjects her to the scrutiny of her own subjects and solicits the approbation of her inferiors" (Montrose 81). While the state cannot always fully control the presentations of the queen's royal image, "the continued conflict with Spain, deepening economic problems, factionalism within the court, together with the queen's refusal to name an heir" (Levine, *Women's Matters* 21) inevitably cast deeper doubts on her rule and therefore blemished her image on the historical stage, even though "some of the problems of Elizabeth's reign would have been problems for any ruler, male or female" (Levin 9). Having taken advantage of the opportunities offered by "both the public theater and the new genre of the national history plays," Shakespeare stages historical characters such as Joan of Arc, Eleanor the Duchess, and Queen Margaret in his first history tetralogy, who are "negative stereotypes of women framed, and qualified, by political contexts" (Levine, *Women's Matters* 22-23). Literally accompanied by fiends on the stage, Joan invokes "the help of hell" for France's military success (*1 Henry VI*, 2.1.18); Eleanor, the ambitious duchess, employs a witch Margery for dangerous political prophecies; and the ruthless Margaret—"who epitomizes the dangers of ruling women" (Levine 24)—kills the innocent child Rutland and bids his father York to wipe his tears with the napkin stained with his son's blood. All these three women are portrayed as extremely ambitious, crafty, and monstrous in the sense that they are not

only pitiless, but also invoke the unearthly power of devils to achieve their own political ends. In addition, they also represent female illegitimacy in opposition to the male authority: Joan first identifies herself as the daughter to a nameless shepherd versus the royal English noble Talbot, and Margaret is initially a French countess who becomes the English queen only through her marriage with Henry VI and later dominates the king.

Although Shakespeare portrays these women as demonic and cruel, whose sexuality and political transgression are regarded as especially dangerous to male authority, it is unclear whether the devil's agency or their own political skill plays a major part in their political success. Despite their significant roles in the plays and the remarkable number of lines they speak, Phyllis Rackin argues that women are never the protagonists in Shakespeare's history plays, but "aliens in the masculine world of history" who "can [either] threaten or validate the men's historical projects but can never take the center of the history's stage" (147), since the process of history writing is always gendered male. However, Shakespeare does not assign these women and their male counterparts to antithetical positions; although the women are certainly not innocent in their respective ambition and crafty political maneuver, the men are not completely morally upright either. While the women are demonized by their transgressive actions, "the English demonize each other" through endless civil strife (Watson 46). By placing the women at the center of a political turmoil surrounded by various aspiring men—contentious nobles and usurping rebels—the play presents "a double critique of female domination and aristocratic self-interest" (Levine, *Women's Matters* 43). Instead of focusing on a single "female monster" excluded from the context of history-making itself or viewing them as a considerable threat to the patriarchal authority and the nation's integrity, I aim to examine the complexity of the three women characters within a wider political framework in comparison with the male Machiavels around

them in order to analyze a pattern of political struggle interrupted and intensified by the ambitious women.

In the beginning of *1 Henry VI*, Joan of Arc introduces herself to the Dauphin and the French nobles as a “shepherd’s daughter” who is ordained by “Heaven and Our lady” to “free [her] country from calamity” (1.2.72-81). Speaking as the Virgin Mary’s “minion and mirror,” Joan bears a striking resemblance to Elizabeth I who declared herself to be the Virgin Queen by underscoring her inviolable chastity (Solberg 156). Joan pictures a supernatural transformation of her appearance as she who “was black and swart before” (1.2.84) is suddenly endowed with beauty. She recounts this transformation to show us that one’s outward appearance is a mirror of one’s inward quality. Just as Richard III’s deformed body is often read as a sign of his inward vileness, the supposed transformation of Joan’s countenance seems to suggest that she is elevated by a certain divine force when she forsakes her “base vocation” (1.2.80) and undertakes a heroic act to fight for her country. To perform her new role as a brave warrior on the battlefield and a shrewd leader in political matters, the first requirement for her is to shatter the gender convention: “My courage try by combat, if thou dar’st, / And thou shall find I exceed my sex” (1.2.89-90). Joan’s Amazonian appearance and unaccountable beauty indeed have an uncanny effect on stage. Emma Maggie Solberg reads Joan as “an upstart” whose transformation is “hypocritical rather than miraculous” (160) since it is unclear whether she is assisted by a divine force from above or a devilish power from the underworld. The outward transformation and her proclamation to exceed her sex nevertheless have an unnerving power, since a woman’s beauty is not always read in a positive light, as it can also be a dangerous temptation and hindrance to the male authority.

Not only does she effortlessly defeat the Dauphin with her sword in a duel, but she also makes him helplessly infatuated with her: “Whoe’er helps thee. ’tis thou that must help me: / impatiently I burn with thy desire” (1.2.107-08). Her sexuality is portrayed as dangerous and unsettling since it brings out the passion in the Dauphin and in the meantime stifles his reason. Howard and Rackin also suggest that “Joan’s sexual promiscuity and her association with bastardy are hinted even in her first appearance,” since she first enters the play as “the object of the courtiers’ lascivious jokes” (62). Her name “pucelle,” which means “virgin” in French, puns on the word “pussel,” a sexually promiscuous woman in English.<sup>3</sup> However, we do not see any direct evidence of her promiscuity in the play, but an entire indifference towards courtship and romance instead. She bluntly refuses the Dauphin when he tries to woo her: “I must not yield to any rites of love, / for my profession’s sacred from above” (1.2.113-14). Her statement completely contradicts the stereotypical image of a slut who is led by her unsatiable sexual desire. Although we cannot be entirely sure whether it is really a sacred profession as she insists, at least she ventures outside the domestic sphere of women and sets her foot on the political realm that belongs to men. Her sexuality is not an indicator of her carnal desire but instead an effective tool for her to implement gender politics in warfare. Shakespeare wrote the play in a time when witchcraft trials and supernatural intervention were prevalent, yet again, Joan’s own active participation in war and politics itself as a woman militarist makes us question the devil’s agency and the misogynistic culture that prejudicially condemns her behavior as transgressive and monstrous.

---

<sup>3</sup> See *Oxford English Dictionary*, “pussel,” variant of pucelle, n.1a, 1b, and 2a: usually with the capital initial “la Pucelle,” it is a name given to Joan of Arc, the “Maid of Orleans”; it can also be a general term that refers to “any girl, or maid”; while it can also be a depreciative term that refers to a “female prostitute, (also) a sexually promiscuous woman.”

Like the Dauphin, Talbot, too, is overcome by Joan, as he doubtfully questions himself: “Where is my strength, my valor, and my force?” (1.5.1). Disempowered by “a woman clad in armor” (1.5.3) and his own humiliating defeat, Talbot ascribes Joan’s victory to witchcraft and the assistance of devils: “Devil or devil’s dam, I’ll conjure thee: / Blood I will draw on thee, thou art a witch/ And straightway give thy soul to him thou serv’st” (1.5.5.7). Unlike Henry V, the matchless English hero, Talbot is not so invincible even from the beginning of this play. He first appears on the stage as a newly released prisoner instead of a triumphant warrior, as Salisbury asks him: “How wert thou handled, being prisoner? / Or by what means gotts thou to be released?” (1.4.24-25). In addition, the countess of Auvergne’s description of Talbot’s physical appearance is contrary to the image of the legendary hero, who is known as masculine and powerful. The countess mocks Talbot when she first sees him:

Is this the scourge of France?  
Is this the Talbot, so much feared abroad  
That with his name the mothers still their babes?  
I see report is fabulous and false.  
I thought I should have seen some Hercules,  
And large proportion of this strong-knit limbs.  
Alas, this is a child, a silly dwarf!  
It cannot be this weak and writhled shrimp  
Should strike such terror to his enemies. (2.3.16-24)

Instead of a gigantic Hercules, we see “a child,” “a silly dwarf” and “writhled shrimp” comically standing in for our imaginary hero. In response to the countess’ doubt, Talbot explains: “I am but shadow of myself” (2.3.50). Because “‘a shadow’ was a common term for an actor, and in the sense that the man who spoke these lines was quite literally ‘a shadow’ of the elusive Talbot, the emblem of lost historical presence,” theatrical performance is never adequate to call the real historical Talbot back to life. The theatrical Talbot argues that he is not only what he appears to be because “history and renown portrayed him more truly than physical appearance” (Rackin,

“Anti-historian” 333-334). Later he displays his well-equipped army and tells the countess that “these are his substance, sinews, arms and strength” (2.3.63). Talbot explains that his power lies not only in his own body but the English army, which constitutes his extended self.

Yet his deficient physical presence belies the melodramatic historical report, and Talbot’s metaphor of his extended self becomes ironic since it is soon discredited by the reality of his defeat. The unity of the body members is destroyed when the two English nobles York and Somerset delay the necessary supplies for him due to their own dispute. While Somerset blames York for not sending the supplies in time and secretly plotting Talbot’s death, York accuses him of withholding the horsemen for his own gain. Without any assistance and overpowered by the French military force, Talbot dies on the battlefield with his son. Therefore, Talbot is actually betrayed by the Englishmen themselves. The strife between York and Somerset cuts off his powerful sinews and leaves him unsupported, as Lucy says: “The fraud of England, not the force of France, / Hath now entrapped the noble-minded Talbot” (4.4.36-37). Neither France, “a fickle wavering nation,” (4.1.138) nor Joan, “a woman clad in amor,” is the direct cause of Talbot’s death, the annihilation of the symbol of England’s injured manhood. It is the disintegrating brotherhood and the broken bonds between men that breach the nation’s unity, manifested by Talbot’s degenerating valor, as Levine emphasizes that “the feuding nobles are even more central to the play’s politics than is the Amazonian French woman” (*Women’s Matters* 41). Besides the conflict between York and Somerset, the “bitter feud” between Gloucester and Winchester which looks like “farce on stage” (Watson 45) continues in *2 Henry VI* and results in an even worse fragmentation of the nation. Nevertheless, Shakespeare has made radical revisions to his sources by “cutting Talbot’s life short by nearly a quarter century in order to allow Joan to triumph over

his death.”<sup>4</sup> But why would Shakespeare make such considerable changes to undermine the masculine English hero and empower the feminine French enemy instead? By fictionalizing Joan’s triumph over Talbot’s death and “casting the Machiavellian York as Talbot’s successor in the war against the Amazon” (Levine, *Women’s Matters* 43), Shakespeare refutes the gendered binaries between demonic women and heroic men. He debunks the falsity of the chivalry code and aristocratic virtue upheld by those seemingly honorable men, since these qualities can be conveniently exploited and perverted for one’s own political advancement. Ironically, instead of honor and virtue, only Machiavellian aspiration is powerful enough to counteract female gender transgression.

At the same time, just like York and Somerset, the French men also seem to lack solidarity with each other. Facing a military failure, the Dauphin and Alençon blame each other for not guarding the city walls securely:

*Dauphin.* Duke of Alencon, this was your default,  
That, being captain of the watch tonight,  
Did look not better to that weighty charge.

*Alençon.* Had all your quarters been as safely kept  
As that whereof I had the government,  
We had not been thus shamefully surprised. (2.1.60-65)

While the men are busy blaming each other for their own blunder, Joan is the one who remains calm and placates their anger, rationally analyzing their mistake, making plans, and looking for remedy:

Question, my lords, no further of the case,  
How or which way; ‘tis sure they found some place  
But weakly guarded, where the breach was made.

---

<sup>4</sup> According to Levine, the historical Talbot died some twenty-two years after Joan’s execution, 39. While Joan was burned at the stake on May 30, 1431, Talbot died in battle on July 17, 1453,

And now there rests no other shift but this,  
 To gather our soldiers, scattered and dispersed,  
 And lay new platforms to endamage them. (2.1.73-77)

She persuades the men to stop blaming each other and unites them in their next strategic move. And she indeed uses both her valor and her wit to attain success for French, as she instructs her soldiers to disguise as marketmen both in clothes and accent so they can enter the city of Rouen. Through deceit and disguise, Joan's military strategy may appear "unheroic" and dishonorable in the eyes of the noble England, but her "pragmatic, guerilla tactics" indeed work effectively for her success (Watson 45). Shakespeare inverts the gendered convention by positioning Joan as a unifying power against the dissenting French nobles.

Aside from Talbot's faithful bond with his son till the last moment of his life, we do not see much solid connection between him and his men, and there are even fewer words spoken to his soldiers. He always seems to fight alone. In contrast, Joan has a unifying power that Talbot lacks; she knows how to invigorate her army when the morale is low:

Dismay not, princes, at this accident,  
 Nor grieve that Rouen is so recovered.  
 Care is no cure, but rather corrosive  
 For things that are not to be remedied.  
 Let frantic Talbot triumph for a while,  
 And like a peacock sweep along his tail;  
 We'll pull his plumes and take away his train,  
 If dauphin and the rest will be but ruled. (3.3.1-8)

She tells the warriors not to mourn for what has already been lost but rather to be patient while at the same time get ready for the best opportunity to fight. In addition, she also uses her powerful rhetoric to turn her enemy into her ally, as the Dauphin asks her to "enchant him [Burgundy] with thy words" (3.3.40). Joan tells Burgundy to behold "the most unnatural wounds" of France, his native country, "as looks the mother on her lowly babe" and persuades him to "turn [his] edged sword another way" (3.3.44-52). Deeply feeling the guilt of betraying his own country and

being the cause of his country's wounds, Burgundy capitulates to her: "I am vanquished; these haughty words of hers / Have battered me like roaring cannon-shot, / And made me almost yield upon my knees" (3.3.78-81). Burgundy, who has sworn allegiance to Talbot deserts him under Joan's powerful persuasion, and therefore Talbot loses yet another limb.

Although Talbot has called Joan a witch many times and ascribed her power to that of the devil, the actual conjuring scene does not take place until the play nears its end. The fiends appear, but they either hang or shake their heads without speaking a word; and they depart despite Joan's desperate entreaty for their assistance: "Then take my soul, my body, soul and all / Before the English give the French the foil" (5.3.22-23). Joan has brought France many military triumphs before the final defeat, but it remains ambiguous whether they are facilitated by the fiends or her own political skills, or both, since her previous consultations with the demons might have happened off-stage. Maybe Joan, as bold and manipulative as she is, is finally overpowered by the English's military strength, or she can no longer command the devils' heinous power to change the outcome of the last war, which has already been preordained by God, as she laments: "My ancient incantations are too weak, / And hell too strong for me to buckle with" (5.3.26-27). Moreover, her subterfuges at her last trial make her identity even more ambiguous. She first denies her parentage as a shepherd's daughter and claims that she is "issued from the progeny of kings" (5.4.38) and "a virgin from her tender infancy" (5.4.50). However, because virginity was seen as too ideal a quality to be actually preserved in the secular world by "the reformed [who] had been taught to distrust the apparent holiness of Catholic maidenhood," the image of the Virgin has long been controversial for the Protestant England as "virginity became tainted by its associations with disease, pride, hypocrisy, and whoredom" (Solberg 158, 159). In addition, Marcus argues that "the figure of Joan is a projection of hatred and pent-up

resentments which it was impossible to vent directly in full vehemence against the English monarch” (Marcus 80) who professes herself to be the Virgin Queen, refusing to marry and produce an heir for the nation. Just as the Virgin Mary is doomed to be defiled by worldly sin and seen as a mockery of harlotry in the eyes of antipapists, Joan later seems to confirm the mistrust against Catholic maidenhood by confessing that she is pregnant with a bastard child.

Undoubtedly, not many would buy Joan’s various pretexts as she strives to win sympathy from her executioners, but she is not entirely wrong when she says: “Because you want grace that others have, / You judge it straight a thing impossible / To compass wonders but by help of devils” (5.4.46-48). Despite the many instances of women’s successful rule in the sixteenth century Europe, many misogynistic critics such as Knox still regard women’s regime as monstrous and unnatural, which might be the reason why Joan’s role as a military commander and woman warrior is always associated with the uncanny and devilish power, regardless of her own exceptional intelligence and political skills. But her political foe York is certainly not less “stained with the guiltless blood of innocents / Corrupted and tainted with a thousand vices” (5.4.44-45), as he proves to be an arch Machiavel and infamous usurper in the later two plays of the sequence. As Shakespeare stages myths of the chivalric past in the historical context of Elizabeth’s reign— her queenship against foreign hostility and domestic chaos—Joan’s complexity and her male counterpart York invite us to reexamine women’s role on the political and historical stage in the sixteenth century.

The ominous ending of *1 Henry VI* foretells the impending chaos in the following play, with York’s overt contempt for the “effeminate peace” (5.4.107) after the truce between England and France and the arrival of Margaret, who is “symbolically at least, Joan’s daughter” after her

execution in the sense that Margaret “transfers the ‘misrule’ associated with Joan of Arc and France to England itself” (Marcus 88-89). If Joan is regarded as the feminine bane and a representative of disorder for England, Margaret is no less. But Margaret’s absolute dominance over the young king is not revealed until Eleanor, the Duchess of Gloucester first unmask her own usurping ambition:

Methought I sat in seat of Majesty  
 In the cathedral church of Westminster,  
 And in that chair where Kings and Queens are crowned;  
 Where Henry and Dame Margaret kneeled to me,  
 And on my head sat the diadem. (1.2.36-40)

Jean E. Howard and Phyllis Rackin note that “Eleanor’s dream reveals much about the exact form of her transgression” since “the person crowned in the dream is Eleanor alone” despite the fact that Gloucester is the nearest kin to the royal line if Henry VI does not have an heir (75). Wishing to use her husband as her steppingstone for her own political ambition, Eleanor first persuades Gloucester to reach for the crown himself while she strives to lengthen his hand with hers. However, while she is dreaming of the “seat of Majesty,” Gloucester is the complete opposite, a man who fully devotes himself to honor and his allegiance to the king. Infuriated by Gloucester’s blunt refusal and his passivity, she claims:

Follow I must; I cannot go before  
 While Gloucester bears this base and humble mind.  
 Were I a man, a duke, and next of blood,  
 I would remove these tedious stumbling blocks  
 And smooth my way upon their headless necks;  
 And, being a woman, I will not be slack  
 To play my part in Fortune’s pageant. (1.2.61-67)

Instead of being content as a passive follower, she aspires to become an active leader in her political maneuver. Just like Joan who deeply resents the constraints of her gender as a woman,

Eleanor, too, refuses to passively wait for Fortune's dictation but strives to "play a part in Fortune's pageant." The Roman goddess of fortune is gendered female, since the changeable nature of one's fortune resembles the stereotypical characteristics of women who are susceptible to hysteria and inconstancy. According to Machiavelli, "fortune is a woman and if she is to be submissive it is necessary to beat and coerce her...Experience shows that she is more often subdued by men who do this than those who act coldly."<sup>5</sup> His sexist doctrine indicates that Fortune is a woman who is only to be tamed by men, and therefore in other words, political advancement is only a men's matter. Although Fortune's role throughout Shakespeare is often an overpowering force that can perhaps be endured but can hardly be conquered, just as Eleanor's tragical downfall suggests her ineffectual performance in Fortune's pageant, her presence shows that women have at least an equal share of aspiration to participate in the political struggle.

However, the historical Eleanor might be largely distorted and denigrated since "[her] story was first recorded by her husband's enemies, by Yorkists Chroniclers writing during the reign of Edward IV (Levine, *Women's Matter* 52), and John Foxe also hinted at the possibility that Eleanor was framed, and her treason might be untrue in his book of martyrs.<sup>6</sup> Shakespeare reveals such partiality in *2 Henry VI* as well; despite her impassioned speech of her ambition to usurp the throne, unlike Joan, an exceptional French warrior and militarist, Eleanor does not take any real action to forestall her political enemies but relies on a conjurer for political prophecy instead. Levine observes that "Eleanor's ambitions are exploited and even manipulated by her husband's enemies to further their own power over the Lancastrian state" ("The case of Eleanor"

---

<sup>5</sup> Machiavelli, *Prince*, Chapter XXV.

<sup>6</sup> See "Brief Answer to the Cavillations of Alan Cope's Concerning Lady Eleanor Cobham" in *John Foxe's Books of Martyrs: Acts and Monuments*, 1641: vol.3, p.704-709.

105). Eleanor is, in fact, an unwitting pawn in a political game played by men, as Hume reveals to us: “They [Suffolk and the Cardinal], knowing Dame Eleanor’s aspiring humor, / Have hired me to undermine the duchess, / buzz these conjurations in her brain” (1.3.97-99). Later, when she is arrested in the middle of the conjuring scene, York confirms the sinister plot against Eleanor: “A pretty plot, well chosen to build upon!” (1.4.59). Knowing no other means to secure her power, Eleanor is easily persuaded to believe in the demonic power of witchcraft, and her participation in the conjuration is used as direct evidence against her by her crafty political foes.

The conjuring scene in which Eleanor “is conspicuously silent” also suggests her limited active participation in witchcraft, which the opposing factions use as a trick that contributes to her fall. The theatrical performance of the conjuring scene makes it “a play within a play” that “shifts the location of authority away from Eleanor and onto her enemies” (Levine, “The Case of Eleanor” 113). In addition, the oracle delivered by the spirit is very equivocal. After reading the transcription of the oral prophecy, York remarks: “These oracles are hardly attained / And hardly understood” (1.4.71-72). Steven Mullaney makes an insightful observation about the effects of political oracles: “Obscure or doubtful as the riddles were, they possessed a persuasive force” (120). Subject to many obscure interpretations, political prophecies can be a dangerous tool to instigate false hope among the rebellious factions. Although Eleanor is ambitious and eager to resist the constraints of her gender, she is nonetheless overpowered by those more cunning Machiavels around her. Furthermore, Margery, the witch whom Eleanor consorts with, is even more of an underdog and the marginalized “other” in the social hierarchy, because as “a peasant woman who adopted the dark arts as a means of gaining money and social power, [Margery] Jourdayne’s pure existence is subversive” (Holden 140). Besides, Shakespeare bestows upon her an almost near-invisible role in *2 Henry VI*. Despite the scanty several words Margery speaks

during her invocation of the spirit, we almost hear nothing else from her. Even when she is forced away, imprisoned, and burned, Shakespeare does not give her a chance in the least to defend herself. Jessica Freeman points out that Margery's fall is chiefly due to her imprudent social mobility and her fast clinging to "the declining political influence of Humphrey, whose stance against peace negotiations with France was increasingly unpopular" (347). Therefore, while Eleanor is the pawn in a fierce political game, Margery is the voiceless victim and scapegoat, buried in her own conjuration. By situating Eleanor as both an ambitious woman and victim "within the broader political context that extends from the contentions between Winchester and Gloucester to the political machinations of York and Suffolk" (Levine, *Women's Matters* 60), the play refuses the binary of gender and morality between the evil female other and the righteous male authority.

Marcus states that Eleanor "dabbles in black magic in the hopes of attaining the crown and thereby destroys her husband" (92). However, rather than a traitor to her husband, Eleanor is, in fact, his protector instead. Surrounded by various ambitious characters, she is aware of the perilous political situation she is in throughout the play. Therefore, it is Eleanor who warns Gloucester about his own danger when she is humiliated and banished:

But be thou mild, and blush not at my shame,  
 Nor stir at nothing till the ax of death  
 Hang over thee, as, sure, it shortly will.  
 For Suffolk, he that can do all in all  
 With her that hateth thee and hates us all,  
 And York and impious Beaufort, that false priest,  
 Have all limed bushes to betray thy wings;  
 And fly thou how thou canst, they'll tangle thee.  
 But fear not thou until thy foot be snared,  
 Nor never seek prevention of thy foes. (2.4.42-57)

Eleanor's last words before her banishment are the mightiest prophecy she makes, since "Eleanor's humiliation is also the prelude to Gloucester's fall" (Howard and Rackin 77). She understands that both the queen and Suffolk want to displace Gloucester since he is the Protector of the King and the nearest kin to the royal line, and therefore the largest threat to their own power. Thus, it is not Eleanor's ambition that causes Gloucester's downfall, but his own naivety can hardly escape the malice of his deadly foes:

I must offend before I be attainted;  
 And had I twenty times so many foes,  
 And each of them had twenty times their power,  
 All these could not procure me any scathe  
 So long as I am loyal, true, and crimeless. (2.4.59-63)

He believes that his spotless virtue renders him invulnerable to his enemies. After Gloucester banishes his wife, King Henry dismisses him from his office under the pressure from the queen: "Give up thy stuff: Henry will to himself / Protector be; and God shall be my hope, / My stay, my guide and lanthorn to my feet" (2.3.23-25). Just like Gloucester who trusts his virtue as his only effective weapon against his morally corrupted enemies, Henry blindly trusts the providence as his unmistakable guidance. While Henry "throws away his crutch" (3.1.189) in dismissing Gloucester, the duke unwittingly casts off his own protector by banishing his wife. Obsessed with virtue and honor, Gloucester is doomed to be a victim of the power struggle around him. When he is arrested by the Cardinal, Gloucester, just like Eleanor, also makes a potent prophesy: "For good king Henry, thy decay I fear" (3.1.194), for in the following play 3 *Henry VI*, the weak king is deposed by York and later killed by his son Richard.

Compared to Eleanor, whose ambition is taken advantage of by men for their own political ends, Margaret is an independent and powerful woman both in words and action. Given that

“Renaissance gender role prescribed silence as a feminine virtue” (Rackin, *Stages of History* 147)—a sign of conformity and subjectivity to men’s dominance— rhetoric is undoubtedly Margaret’s most effective weapon against the patriarchy. She subverts her gender role entirely by talking back to the men and even scolding them when she feels like it. For example, when Gloucester chides her active participation in men’s political discourses: “Madam, the king is old enough himself / To give his censure: these are no women’s matters” (*2 Henry VI*, 1.3.117-18), it angers her and she boldly retorts: “If he be old enough, what needs your Grace / To be Protector of his Excellence?” (1.3.120-21). Watson compares Henry with Aeneas and Margert with Dido, who is abandoned by her husband so she can only “console herself with Suffolk, her Ascanius” (62). However, he egregiously underestimates her agency both in his marriage with the king and her illicit romantic relationship with Suffolk. Not only is it Margaret herself who banishes the king in *Part 3*, but she also completely dominates her lover Suffolk. When Suffolk is banished by the king, she chastises him for not being manly enough to curse his enemies: “Fie, coward woman and soft-hearted wretch! / Hath thou no spirit to curse thy enemies?” (3.2.307-08). Calling Suffolk a “coward woman,” Margaret castrates and feminizes him. In addition, when he starts his vehement cursing that lasts for 19 lines, it is Margaret who calmly commands him to govern his desperate emotions and bear the separation patiently: “Go: speak not to me; even now be gone” (3.2.352). Her composure and manly assertiveness form a stark contrast with his ungoverned passion. Suffolk, whose initial ambition is to “rule both her, the king, and the realm” (*1 Henry VI*, 5.5.108), turns out to be ruled by Margaret both physically and emotionally, as he takes his painful leave of her: “If I depart from thee I cannot live; / And in thy sight to die, what were it else / But like a pleasant slumber in thy lap?” (3.2.389-91). Though introduced by Suffolk to King Henry through marriage for his own political purpose, Margret gradually

dominates him and makes him depend on her entirely, as the center of power has completely shifted toward her.

Since warfare is not only about unimpregnable armors and weapons, but also a magical conjuration of words and speech, Margaret's adroit usage of words and rhetoric (like Joan's) plays an indispensable role in her military success. Even King Henry understands the power of her persuasive speech when she and Warwick compete for France's assistance:

For Warwick is a subtle orator,  
 And Lewis is a prince soon won with moving words;  
 By this account, then, Margaret may win him;  
 For she's a woman to be pitied much.  
 Her sighs will make a batt'ry in his breast;  
 Her tears will pierce into a marble heart;  
 The tiger will be mild whiles she doth mourn;  
 And Nero will be tainted with remorse  
 To hear and see her plaints, her brinish teats. (3.1.33-41)

Queen Elizabeth's adept use of gender politics is manifested by her successful self-representation as a powerful monarch because she knows how to "capitalize on the expectations of her behavior as a woman" while in the meantime she is also able to "move away from the expectations of her gender and 'act like a man'" (Levin, 1). For Margaret, gender, too, is no longer a hindrance but a privilege for her to further enhance her speech and invoke sympathy as a skillful diplomat. Once she speaks on behalf of her disinherited son, it immediately strikes the French king like a storm as he tries to placate her: "Renowned Queen, with patience calm the storm, / While we bethink a means to break it off" (3.3.38-39). Margaret herself is also aware of the irresistible power of rhetoric when Warwick comes with a suit to marry Lady Bona, Lewis' sister, with Edward. Even before Warwick speaks, Margaret is able to predict: "Ay, now begins a second storm to rise / For this is he that moves both wind and tide" (3.3.50-51). She understands the bewitching power of

eloquence in her cunning political enemy, and therefore, she secretly prays to God that Warwick's words will not take effect: "Heavens grant that Warwick's words bewitch him [King Lewis] not" (3.3.112). When Lewis is almost convinced by Warwick due to Edward's declared legitimacy to the throne, his irrational and hasty marriage with Lady Grey completely breaks the alliance. Edward's rash mistake not only enrages the French king but also makes Warwick desert him: "I came from Edward as an ambassador, / But I return his sworn and mortal foe" (3.3.256-57).

In addition to her exceptional political skills and admirable courage, Margaret is also an eloquent military orator:

Great lords, wise men ne'er sit and wail their loss  
 But cheerly seek how to redress their harms.  
 What though the mast now be now blown overboard,  
  
 The cable broke, the holding-anchor lost,  
 And half our sailors swallowed in the flood?  
 Yet lives our pilot still. Is't meet that he  
 Should leave the helm and, like a fearful lad  
 With tearful eyes add waters the sea  
 And give more strength to that which hath too much,  
 Whiles in his moan the ship splits on the rock,  
 Which industry and courage might have saved?  
 .....  
 Why, courage then! What cannot be avoided  
 'Twere childish weakness to lament or fear. (5.4.1-38)

She speaks metaphorically about the war as a perilous navigation; while she assumes the role of the pilot, her soldiers are the brave crew. During a desperate fight, though the army has suffered great loss and the situation is bleak, she encourages them not to indulge in sorrow but to keep fighting, since what has been lost can never be recovered. Her powerful words are magic spells that invigorate the morale of her soldiers.

In contrast to women who are “soft, mild, pitiful, and flexible” (1.4.141), Margaret has usurped the men’s role by dressing in armor and participating in the military discourse. Just like the rash marriage between Edward and Lady Grey, King Henry’s marriage with Margaret is also seen as a fatal mistake by critics since it is by no means to his political advantage: not only does Margaret bring no dowry to England, but the Duchy of Anjou and the county of Maine are forced to return to her father.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, it is unjust to blame Margaret alone for England’s civil strife. Henry’s cowardly disposition renders him unfit to rule from the very beginning. He is neither ambitious nor eager to be king:

Was ever king that joyed an earthly throne,  
 And could command no more content than I?  
 No sooner was I crept out of my cradle  
 But I was king, at nine months old  
 Was never subject longed to be a king  
 As I do long and wish to be a subject. (4.9.1-6)

Instead of a ruler, Henry longs to be a subject who enjoys the idyllic peace. Different from York, who is discontent with the peaceful treaty between England and France, Henry prefers effeminate peace to bloody war. More concerned with safety rather than honor, he keeps negotiating and compromising with his enemies. Under the siege of the rebels led by Jack Cade, Henry decides to “send some holy bishops to entreat” and he himself “parley[s]” with Cade in order to shun any violent confrontation. In contrast, Margaret is endowed with masculine valor and courage. For instance, when beholding the severed head of her lover Suffolk, Margaret strives to prevent her womanish tears and focus on revenge instead: “Oft have I heard that grief softens the mind / And makes it fearful and degenerate. / Think therefore on revenge, and cease

---

<sup>7</sup> For instance, Howard and Rackin note in their book *Engendering a Nation* that “the marriage between Henry and Margaret threatens to erase history itself” and it has been “repeatedly characterized as a ‘fatal mistake,’ the reason for his loss, first, of manhood and royal authority and finally the crown he inherited from his father” (62, 215).

to weep” (4.4.1-3). She regards grief as something as “fearful and degenerate” and only manly valor can help her revenge her beloved. While Henry passively waits for the enemies’ capture, Margaret takes a preemptive move and chides him: “Now is it manhood, wisdom, and defense /To give the enemy way, and to secure us / By what we can, which can no more but fly” (5.2.75-77). Decisive and courageous, Margaret takes advantage of the adverse situation and makes the most of it. At the same time, she is also good at timing and makes meticulous plans ahead of time. She decides to go to London with the king, not out of her cowardice, but to shun the fiercest rebels and return at the most opportune time to suppress them.

Margaret’s assertiveness and ambition are a stark contrast to Henry’s femininity—the “warlike queen” versus “the coldness of the King” (*3 Henry VI*, 2.1.124-25). Being married to a weak king who is both defenseless and unaware of the vortex of political peril he is in, Margaret has no choice but to assume the role of “the family’s patriarch” and “fill[s] the vacuum created by Henry’s ineffective performance as king” (Howard and Rackin 84). While she strives to be a successful substitute for a weak king, she is also the only protector of her son, the young prince. When Henry gives up his royal throne and disinherits his son, Margaret is furious. She breaks all the social boundaries and forsakes all the female etiquette, accusing her husband and her sovereign of being “so unnatural a father” and “timorous wretch” (1.1.218, 231). Unlike Eleanor, who finally subjects herself to her husband’s rule, since it is Gloucester who banishes her from his sight, Margaret has the real authority to divorce her husband:

And seeing you dost, I here divorce myself  
Both from thy table, Henry, and thy bed,  
Until the Act of Parliament be repealed  
Whereby my son is disinherited. (1.1.246-50)

When Henry entreats her to listen to him, she silences him outrightly: “Thou hast spoke too much already. Get thee gone!” (1.1.258). Ironically, it is the king himself who denies his son’s parentage but Margaret who leads a mighty army to defend his birthright. Facing York and his faction, she displays undaunted courage on the battlefield, as the messenger reports to us: “The Queen with all the Northern earls and lords / Intend here to besiege you in your castle/ She is hard by with twenty thousand men” (1.2.49-52). Although Richard shows contempt towards her: “A woman’s general. What should we fear?” (1.3.68), their valor seems to fall short before the valiant woman who is driven by her urgent need to protect her son, as York later admits his failure: “The army of the Queen hath got the field” (1.4.1).

In spite of her heroism in fighting against the usurpers to protect the royal line, Margaret is portrayed as devilishly cruel when she shows the defeated York a napkin that is stained by his son Rutland’s blood and taunts his ambition by making him wear a paper crown. Later, she also beheads him and sets his severed head upon the gates. York vitriolically condemns her of being “She-wolf of France, but worse than wolves of France,” and “an Amazonian trull” who is “stern, obdurate, flinty, rough, remorseless” (1.4.111,114, 142). However, York’s position does not fully justify his misogynistic censure of Margaret’s character since he “speaks out of self-interest, especially out of his desire to possess the Lancastrian Crown” (Levine, *Women’s Matters* 68). Compared with the ambitious Eleanor and warlike Margaret, the Duke of York’s usurping ambition is no less transgressive as an arch Machiavel who speaks in the language of witchcraft:

But I am not your king  
Till I be crowned and that my sword be stained  
With heartblood of the house of Lancaster;  
And that’s not suddenly to be performed  
But with device and silent secrecy.

.....

Till they have snared the shepherded of the flock,  
 The virtuous prince, the good Duke Humphrey.  
 'Tis they seek, and they in seeking that  
 Shall find their own deaths, if York can prophesy. (2.2.65-77)

Not accompanied by any demons on the stage, York seems to possess the prophetic power of demons. He is able to foresee the outcome of a bloody war due to his own shrewd knowledge of different court factions' opposing political interests and his ability to manipulate them to further his own political ends:

I will stir up in England some black storm  
 Shall blow ten thousand souls to Heaven or Hell  
 And this fell tempest shall not cease to rage  
 Until the golden circuit on my head,  
 Like to the glorious sun's transparent beams,  
 Do calm the fury of this mad-bred flaw. (3.1.349-354)

Again, he describes political upheaval in terms of meteorological disturbances that are caused by witchcraft. His language to a large extent resembles that of Medea, the revengeful and powerful witch in Seneca: "I have summoned water out of rainless clouds/ and forced the sea to its depths; Ocean withdrew / his heavy waves, as his tides were overpowered" (4.754-56).

Moreover, like a conjurer, York invokes his demon, John Cade, as his instrument to produce a tempestuous political commotion:

I have seduced a headstrong Kentishman,  
 John Cade of Ashford,  
 To make commotion, as full well as he can,  
 Under the title of John Mortimer.  
 .....  
 This Devil shall be my substitute. (3.1.356-59)

According to Machiavellian tenets, an honorable public image is indispensable to a political ruler: "The prince should determine to avoid anything which will make him hated and

despised.”<sup>8</sup> By instigating Cade to play the treacherous peasant rebel, York keeps his own honor spotless, while at the same time he takes advantage of the chaotic political situation and King Henry’s incompetence to usurp the throne. Although York calls Cade “this devil” and renders him his substitute, it is hard to distinguish Cade and York, the devil and the conjurer. Since both are cunning and ambitious, it is more like a game a devil plays upon another devil. York, the arch Machiavel and master of magical language, has never been charged with witchcraft, because, though no less ambitious and subversive than the female opponents, he belongs to the masculine sphere, and therefore is viewed as less transgressive under the protective camouflage of his gender than the diabolic females. In fact, Margaret’s aggression is more justifiable than that of York since she fights for her son’s succession and England against the rebels, while York battles only for his own ambition to usurp the throne. By placing York not as Margaret’s foil but as her evil male equivalent, Shakespeare does not fully distinguish the men as incontrovertibly righteous heroes and women as the opposing demonic others. The play downplays the role of gender by reminding the audience that the most dangerous threat to the nation’s welfare is not a “manly woman,” but the division caused by “self-interests” and “old antagonism” within the English court instead (Levine, *Women’s Matters* 81).

In addition, the complexity of Margaret’s character allows for a sympathetic reading. Despite her ambition and cruelty as a female Machiavel and the warlike queen, she faints when seeing king Edward, Clarence, and Richard stab her son to death. When she finally gains her consciousness, she sheds her masculine persona and grows hysterical:

O Ned, sweet Ned, speak to thy mother boy.  
Canst thou not speak? O traitors, murderers!

---

<sup>8</sup> Machiavelli, *Prince*, Chapter XIX

They that stabbed Caesar shed no blood at all,  
 Did not offend, nor were not worthy blame,  
 If this foul deed were by to equal it.  
 He was a man; this, in respect, a child.  
 Men ne'er spend their fury on child. (5.5.51-57)

She is wrong when stating that “men ne'er spend their fury on a child” out of her desperate anguish, since, ironically, under her own command Clifford kills York's boy Rutland.

Unfortunately, the struggle for power is often more prominent than the fight for justice in the political world, and bloody wars do not even spare an innocent child. However, she is both an ambitious Machiavel and a loving mother at the same time, just like the fierce lioness who loves her cubs selflessly. Her son's death breaks Margaret's heart, drains her valor, and kills her dignity, at last, rendering her feminine.

In *3 Henry VI*, the disintegration of Margert's power by no means restores the order in England and the return to men's rule does not end the domestic strife either. The male bond is not broken by a single demonic female, but the division driven by self-interests among the men themselves instead. The auspicious astrological sign of the three embracing suns is often read as a symbol of solid brotherhood:

Three glorious suns, each one a perfect sun,  
 Not separated with the racking clouds  
 But severed in a pale clear-shining sky.  
 See, see, they join, embrace, and seem to kiss,  
 As if they vowed some league inviolable.  
 Now are they but one lamp, one light, one sun;  
 In this, the heaven figures some event. (2.1.26-32)

Praising brotherhood with such hyperbolic metaphors, ironically, it is Richard himself who later plots the deaths of his own brothers and nephews in the following play. The “inviolable league” is soon violated when their father York is killed and Edward crowned as king: “His name that

valiant duke hath left with thee; /His dukedom and his chair with me is left” (2.1.89-90). As the oldest brother and heir apparent, Edward complacently flaunts his inheritance of both the throne and dukedom in front of Richard, who inherits nothing but merely a “name” from his father, Richard Plantagenet, Duke of York. Moreover, Edward’s unwise marriage with Lady Grey seems to render him an uxorious man, and later in the play, the brothers grow even more estranged from each other when Edward decides to marry the heirs of two rich lords with his wife’s brother and son rather than his own brothers Richard and Clarence. Emboldened by his newly gained authority, Edward refuses any connection to his brothers: “Edward will be king, / And not be tied unto a brother’s will” (4.1.65-66). In return, Richard accuses his absolute disregard of their interests: “But in your bride you bury brotherhood” (4.1.55). Later in the play, he rejects brotherhood outright in his soliloquy:

I have no brother, I am like no brother;  
And this word “love,” which greybeards called divine  
Be resident in men like one another  
And not in me: I am myself alone. (5.6.80-83)

By claiming “I am myself alone,” Richard reveals a “destructive individualism” (Levine, *Women’s Matters* 101) in the sense that he refuses to form any emotional attachment with another human and is entirely motivated by his own self-interest. Edward’s severance of the ties to his brothers, Clarence’s desertion, and Richard’s individualistic assertion indicate a complete collapse of the brotherhood.

In *Richard III*, despite the dissolution of the brotherhood, the center of power has returned to men. Yet, once again Shakespeare made radical revisions to his historical sources by reintroducing Margaret back into his play and having her haunt the Yorkists, while the historical

Margaret never returned to England after her imprisonment and exile.<sup>9</sup> Like a historian who might challenge the historical accuracy of Shakespeare's own invention, Richard asks a similar question at the end of *3 Henry VI* that addresses Margaret's fictionalized presence in the following play: "Why should she live to fill the world with words?" (5.5.44). Why did Shakespeare fictionalize her presence in the English court and preserve her distinguished voice till the very end of his first tetralogy? Howard and Rackin argue that as Margaret transforms from "the adulterous wife" and "blood thirsty warrior" in the earlier play into a "bereaved and suffering prophet of divine vengeance" in *Richard III*, her subversive gendered power is "demystified" (106-107). Margaret, the deposed queen and bereaved mother, directs her political linguistic power to bitter cursing:

Can curses pierce the clouds and enter Heaven?  
 Why then, give way, dull clouds, to my quick curses!  
 Though not by war, by surfeit die your king,  
 As ours by murder to make him a king. (1.3.204-07)

Being unable to use her words to negotiate with a political ally as a skillful diplomat any longer, she turns them to vengeful prophecies. Either by a power unknown to herself or the incorrigible political disorder of the English monarchy, her words become a prophecy of King Edward's death, later by Richard's treachery. However, her ability to prophesy also derives from her awareness that these men's personal grudge against each other and selfish motives will ultimately lead to their own downfalls: "say poor Margaret was a prophetess. /— Live each of you the subjects to his hate, /And he to yours, and all of you to God's" (1.3.320-22). Struck by

---

<sup>9</sup> See Abbott's *History of Margaret of Anjou, queen of Henry VI of England*, especially the Conclusion (306-316) for a detailed account of Margaret's last few years of life. After Margaret was defeated and captured in the Battle of Tewkesbury in 1471, she was first sent to Tower of London and kept as a prisoner there for about four years. In 1575, she was ransomed by her father King René under the assistance of the French King Louis. She spent the remainder of her days in the castle of Dampierre, near her native province and died on 25 August 1482.

Margaret's blunt revealing of the truth, the men seem to be in awe of her, as Buckingham confesses, "My hair doth stand on end to hear her curses" (1.3.323). Her words are not only the so-called divine prophecies that foretell the tragical fates of various ambitious characters, but most significantly, a warning against the nature of political struggle itself—while many willingly die for their insatiable hunger for power, they often forget that politics is a game in which not a single ruler sits on a secure throne and no friendship or even kinship is reliable facing the temptation of self-interest.

The three bereaved mothers—the old queen Margaret, Queen Elizabeth and the Duchess of York— compete for the most potent curses. While the duchess mourns for King Edward and Queen Elizabeth laments the murders of her young children, Margaret stands out for her powerful lamentations:

If ancient sorrow be most reverend,  
Give mine the benefit of signiory,  
And let my griefs frown on the upper hand.  
If sorrow can admit society,  
Tell over your woes again by viewing mine. (4.4.37-41)

Margaret's lamentations indeed get the upper hand of the other two women in the competition. Elizabeth's complaints seem to pale in comparison with Margaret's passionate curses, and therefore she pleads Margaret to teach her: "O, thou well-skilled in curses, stay a while, / And teach me how to curse my own enemies" (4.4.119-20). Having completely lost her agency in politics and warfare, Margaret has turned her curses into her only remaining powerful weapon against her enemies. She depicts a macabre scene of evil retribution for Richard:

Earth gapes, hell burns, fiends roar, saints pray,  
To have him suddenly conveyed from hence.  
Cancel his bond of life, dear God I pray,  
That I may live and say "The dog is dead." (4.4.77-80)

Again, playing the role of a prophetess of divine justice, her violent curses take effect, since at the end of the play Richard is left pitifully alone on the battlefield and slain by Richmond.

According to Howard and Rackin, Joan, Margaret, and Richard belong to “two sorts of anomalies”—“the Amazonian woman and the deformed Machiavellian man”—that are produced by a corrupted patriarchy (96). Kristen M. Smith suggests that “while Joan conjures fiends, Margaret uses her murders of York and Rutland to inadvertently conjure a much worse devil: Richard, Duke of Gloucester” (152). Since the “objectification of evil” often “appears in a form, grotesque, non-human, and terrifying” (Maxwell-Stuart 42), it is no surprise that the hunchbacked and club-footed Richard, the Duke of Gloucester, is perceived as monstrous and demonic. Indeed, Richard’s treacherous crimes are not justifiable in *Richard III*: through manipulation and deceit, he murders his brothers and his nephews to crown himself king. Not only others perceive Richard’s outward appearance as an evil curse, but “the discourse of deformity [also] becomes part of Richard’s own self- characterization” (Howard and Rackin 97). Watching the jubilant celebration of King Edward’s triumph and being excluded from the grand pageant, Richard laments:

But I, that am not shaped for sportive tricks  
 Nor made to court an amorous looking glass;  
 I, that I am rudely stamped, and want love’s majesty  
 To strut before a wanton ambling nymph;  
 I, that am curtailed of this fair proportion,  
 Cheated of feature by dissembling Nature  
 Deformed, unfinished, sent before my time  
 Into this breathing world scarce half made up,  
 And that so lamely and unfashionable  
 That dogs bark at me as I halt by them  
 Why, I, in this weak piping time of peace,  
 Have no delight to pass away the time,  
 Unless to spy my shadow in the sun  
 And descant on my own deformity.

And therefore, since I cannot prove a lover  
 To entertain these fair well-spoken days  
 I am determined to prove a villain,  
 And hate the idle pleasure of these days. (1.1.14-31)

Instead of being born with a villainous nature, it is more accurate to say that Richard has deliberately tailored his character and deeds like an artful performance to fit his outward deformity. Devoid of any sense of self-love, he makes himself into this loveless creature.

However, contrary to the conventional impression of Richard as a representative and impeccable Machiavel, “Richard’s dreams of the crown seem to be mixed with regrets about his incapacity for sensual love and with an obsession for petty revenge,” which makes him “fall short of the virtu` of the greatest princes whom Machiavelli holds up as models for imitation” (Herbert 240). Sometimes, his scheming furthers no political purposes but for him to boast about his cunning. Bernard Spivack calls Richard’s wooing of Anne his “most memorable” and “florid manipulation,” since it is a most hopeless enterprise to woo a woman whose husband and father-in-law he has just murdered (404-405). Spivack suggests that Anne succumbs to Richard’s conquest because his cunning rhetoric triumphs over her “astonished heart” (405). Nevertheless, instead of being simply “bewitched” by Richard’s words, it is also very possible that Anne has perceived a potential for self-advancement through this marriage since Richard is a duke and also a legitimate heir to the English royal line. Likewise, he uses similar sophistry when trying to convince Queen Elizabeth to consent to marry her daughter, though he has murdered her sons: “The loss you have is but a son being king, / And by that loss your daughter is made queen” (4.4.321-22). Naively triumphing in his supposed easy persuasion of Queen Elizabeth: “Relenting fool, and shallow, changing woman” (4.4.454), he does not anticipate that she will soon break her promise and marry her daughter Elizabeth to Richmond.

Moreover, Richard is by no means the best Machiavel compared to his marvelous predecessors, since his political maneuvers are far from being faultless. According to Machiavelli, for a ruler to choose his advisers wisely and keep them loyal is indispensable for maintaining his power.<sup>10</sup> In addition, a shrewd leader must have his own good judgment without solely depending on his counselor. However, Richard seems to lack his own discernment and trusts Buckingham entirely. Instead of making use of his counselor wisely, he follows all his advice indiscriminately like a puppet, as he calls Buckingham: “My other self, my counsel’s consistory, / My oracle, my prophet, my dear cousin. / I as a child, will go by thy direction” (1.3.151-53). A successful Machiavel would never consent to infantize himself and be led by his subordinates. Buckingham has been guiding Richard in eradicating first Elizabeth’s factions and then King Edward’s sons—Richard and Richmond’s shared political enemies— and later he defects to Richmond at the most critical moment. With Buckingham probably working for him in secret, Richmond can finally govern effortlessly without any political rivals. Besides, Richard’s political speech is also rather clumsy, and his words lack the magic to “bewitch” his audiences. First, he says to the public that “I have done some offenses / That seems disgracious in the city’s eye” (3.6.110-11). Instead of embellishing his own good deeds as a newly ascended king, he unwisely talks about his “offenses.” Second, having intended to pretend his lack of ambition, Richard reminds the public that “the royal tree [King Edward] has left us royal fruit [the princes]” (3.6.166). However, by saying so, he unwittingly admits that he is an illegitimate usurper of the throne, given his already insecure position. Instead of directing events by himself, Richard entirely relies on Buckenham’s instructions; like a nervous child, he does not know to play this majestic role at all. In the end, in contrast to Margaret’s superb ability to unite her

---

<sup>10</sup> *Prince*, Chapter XXII.

supporters, almost all Richard's important allies desert him and even his army lacks the morale to fight.

Just as a single transgressive female is not responsible for the chaos in the kingdom alone, so too is Richard, the immature Machiavel, not solely to blame for the civil strife in England either. The mistrust among the brothers and the ancient grudge between different political factions have been brewing for a long time. Richard schemes to "set [his] brother [Edward] and Clarence / In deadly hate" (1.1.34-35) by using "drunken prophecies, libels, and dreams" (1.1.33) telling him that he will be disinherited by a person whose name starts with G, but Edward is almost too easily convinced by the groundless prophecy and suspects Clarence immediately since his name is George. After hearing the news of Clarence's murder, although Edward heartily mourns for him, we should not forget that it is Edward himself who sent him to the tower in the first place. Thus, the brothers have mistrusted each other long ago, Richard's libel is only an inducement to the complete dissolution of the waning brotherhood. In the meantime, Clarence is not so innocent either as Edward says: "My brother killed no man; his fault was thought / And yet his punishment was bitter death" (2.1.107-08). Instead, in the tower Clarence dreams of "sights of ugly death" (1.4.24) that can be read either as ominous omens of his own tragical death or a manifestation of his guilt. Just as the guilty Macbeth sees the murdered Duncan's ghost, Clarence sees the ghost of his father-in-law Warwick accusing him: "What scourge for perjury / Can this dark monarchy afford false Clarence?" (1.4.51-52). Later when the murderers capture him, Clarence immediately admits that he is sinful in the political struggle while he tries to shift the blame on Edward: "in the sin he is as deep as I" (1.4.221). In addition, after the murder of Clarence, Richard observes: "How the guilty kindred of the Queen / looked pale when they did hear of Clarence's death? / O, they still urged it unto the king" (2.2.139-41). Although it is

Richard who plots Clarence's death, he is aware that he is not the only one who wants him dead since the queen's factions are also irreconcilable political rivals to Clarence. Moreover, the rivalry between prince Edward and his brother Duke of York is palpable despite their young age, as York taunts his brother Edward by telling Richard: "You said that idle weeds are fast in growth. / The Prince my brother has outgrown me so far" (3.1.104-05). Having felt the tension between the two children, Richard has to placate York: "He [Prince Edward] may command me as my sovereign, / But you have power in me as a kinsman" (3.0.110-11). From the brief interchange between York and Prince Edward we can almost perceive another cycle of unavoidable political struggle when the younger brother grows discontent and strives to usurp the throne, but the cycle is forestalled by Richard's own ambition for the throne.

At the end of the play, Richard's conscience seems to wake up during the last hour of his life:

What do I fear? Myself? There's none else by.  
 Richard loves Richard: that is, I am I.  
 Is there a murderer here? Yes, I am.  
 Then fly. What, from myself? Great reason why!  
 Lest I revenge. What, myself upon myself?  
 Alack, I love myself. Wherefore? For any good  
 That I myself have done unto myself?  
 Alas, I rather hate myself  
 For hateful deeds committed by myself.  
 I am a villain. Yet I lie, I am not. (5.3.194-203)

Despite the many incoherencies in his last speech, this is the moment when Richard's "other self" strives to separate from the theatrical performance of villainy he has been playing across the two plays, but still, he cannot be fully reconciled with his true identity. Instead of being "the scourge of God," Richard is, in fact, no worse than the other Machiavellian politicians since few of them are guiltless of the equivalent deceit and vice. In fact, like a mirror, Richard reveals the corruption and depravity of a dark world, as he says, "the world is grown so bad" (1.3.69). Being

born in the nest of Machiavels, he is just one of the observers and practitioners of the dark magic of politics. Levine argues that the women's feckless competition of curses that exemplify "female vulnerability and suffering" and Richard's deformity in both the mind and body "persistently argues for the need for a heroic male savior" (Levine, *Women's Matters* 102). Having created this void at the verge of the nation's destruction, Shakespeare nominates Richmond, the "English masculine hero-king," as the noble savior who saves England from the corruption of feminine witchcraft (Smith 152) and the rule of "a bloody tyrant and a homicide" (5.3.260). However, since "positive heroes too might make use of Machiavelli to obtain their ends" (Roe 1), it is not always easy to distinguish terms such as "hero," "anti-hero" and "villains" in a history play. Thus, Richmond is not necessarily any nobler than the villains; instead, it is just that his self-interest operates under a better pretense—a fight for the legitimate right of the kingdom and a mission against treasonous characters. Therefore, Richmond's ascending the throne is not a reassertion of England's untainted manhood and returned legitimacy but rather an emphasis on the struggle for power between fathers and sons, uncles and nephews, monarch and rebels, consistently disrupted by women who are motivated by their own ambition and responsibility.

In Shakespeare's early history plays, men are certainly not the only authors of the history-writing project. Instead of nominating the women as "anti-historians"—"opponents and subverters of the historical and historiographical enterprises" (Rackin, "Anti-historians" 329) who only operate as foils to heroic men, Shakespeare underscores their power in politics and history-making that vastly exceeds the domestic sphere and gender norms. Without a single spotless and upright male hero, not even Richmond who ascends the throne at the end of the tetralogy, by juxtaposing his transgressive female characters with men perpetually driven by self-

interests, Shakespeare deemphasizes the role of gender and renders it irrelevant to the moral judgment. The heinous witch Joan is also a heroine who fights for her country fearlessly, Eleanor an ambitious woman but also a protector for her saintly husband Gloucester and a pitiful victim of the vicious political game played by other sinister characters, and Queen Margaret is a ruthless infanticide, but in the meantime, she is also a mother who fights in place of a weak king against the usurpers and loves her son selflessly. These women are not just irrelevant voices imbedded in a single male historical narrative. Their complexity gives them life on Shakespeare's stage as they fill the void left by the power-hungry men. In this sense, these demonic female characters offer an incisive critique of a misogynistic society that judges women as incapable of rule and applauds the brilliant women rulers in Shakespeare's own time who not only ruled but ruled well in a world rife with political storms conjured by Machiavellian magic spells.

## Bibliography

- Abbott, Jacob. *History of Margaret of Anjou, Queen of Henry VI of England*, Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1904.
- Cabala: Sive scrinia sacra: Mysteries of state and government in letters of illustrious persons and great agents in the reigns of Henry the Eighth, Queen Elizabeth, K: James, and the late King Charles*. London: Printed for G. Bedel and T. Collins, 1654.
- Foxe, John, Books of Martyrs: Acts and Monuments. Early English Books, 1641-1700, Internet Archive, 1641, [https://archive.org/details/bim\\_early-english-books-1641-1700\\_acts-and-monuments-of-ma\\_foxe-john\\_1641\\_3/mode/2up](https://archive.org/details/bim_early-english-books-1641-1700_acts-and-monuments-of-ma_foxe-john_1641_3/mode/2up).
- Freeman, Jessica. "Sorcery at court and manor: Margery Jourdemayne, the witch of Eye next Westminster." *Journal of Medieval History*, 2004, 30:4, p.343-357, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jmedhist.2004.08.001>
- Hebert, L. Joseph. "The Reward of a King: Machiavelli, Aquinas, and Shakespeare's Richard III." *Perspectives on Political Science*, Vol. 44, No. 4, Routledge, October 2015, pp. 238-246, [10.1080/10457097.2015.1022098](https://doi.org/10.1080/10457097.2015.1022098).
- Holden, Stephanie. "Domestic Subversion as Class Revolution: Dismantling Gender and Destroying Hierarchy." *Journal of the Wooden O.*, 2021, Vol. 21, p.130-148, <https://omeka.li.suu.edu/ojs/index.php/woodeno/article/view/273>.
- Howard, Jean E., and Phyllis Rackin. *Engendering a Nation: A Feminist Reading of Shakespeare's Histories*. Routledge, 1997.
- Knox, John. *The First Blast of Trumpet against the Monstrous Regiment of Women*. 1558, edited by Edward Arber, 1880.
- Levin, Carole. *The Heart and Stomach of a King*. 2nd ed., University of Pennsylvania Press,

2013.

Levine, Nina S. "The Case of Eleanor Cobham: Authorizing History in 2 *Henry VI*."

*Shakespeare Studies*, 1994, Vol. 22, p.104-121,

[https://www.proquest.com/docview/1297960899?pq-](https://www.proquest.com/docview/1297960899?pq-origsite=gscholar&fromopenview=true&imgSeq=1)

[origsite=gscholar&fromopenview=true&imgSeq=1](https://www.proquest.com/docview/1297960899?pq-origsite=gscholar&fromopenview=true&imgSeq=1)

---. *Women's Matters: Politics, Gender, and Nation in Shakespeare's Early History plays*.

Associated University Press, 1988.

Machiavelli, Niccolò. *The Prince*, translated by George Bull. Penguin Classics, 1999.

Marcus, Leah S. *Puzzling Shakespeare: Local reading and its Discontents*. University of California Press, 1988.

Maxwell-Stuart, Peter. "Magic and Sciences During an Age of Change." *The History of Evil in the Early Modern Age 1450-1700 CE*, edited by Daniel N. Robinson, Routledge, pp.38- 52, 2018.

Montrose, Louis. *The Purpose of Playing*. The University of Chicago Press, 1996.

Mullaney, Steven. *The place of the Stage: License, Play, and Power in Renaissance England*, University of Michigan Press, 1995.

"Oxford English Dictionary." *Oxford English Dictionary Online*.

Quilligan, Maureen. *When Women Ruled the World*. Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2021.

Rackin, Phyllis. "Anti-historians: Women's Roles in Shakespeare's Histories," *Theatre Journal*, Vol.37, No.3, pp.329-344, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3206852>.

---. *Stages of History: Shakespeare's English Chronicles*. Cornell University Press, 1990.

Roe, John. *Shakespeare and Machiavelli*. D.S. Brewer, Cambridge, 2002.

Seneca, Lucius, Annaeus. *Medea*, edited and translated by John G. Fitch. Harvard University

Press, 2018.

Shakespeare, William. *Henry VI Part one, Henry VI Part Two, Henry VI Part Three*, edited by

Sylvan Barnet. Signet Classics, 2005.

---. *Richard III*, edited by Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Werstine. The Folger Shakespeare

Library, 1996.

Smith, Kristin M. "Martial Maids and Murdering Mothers: Women, Witchcraft and Motherly

Transgression in *Henry VI* and *Richard III*." *Shakespeare*, July 2007, Vol. 3 Issue 2,

p143-160, [10.1080/17450910701460908](https://doi.org/10.1080/17450910701460908).

Solberg, Emma Maggie. *Virgin Whore*. Cornell University Press, 2018.

Spivack, Bernard. *Shakespeare and the Allegory of Evil*. Columbia University Press, 1958.

Watson, Donald G. *Shakespeare's Early History Plays*. The Macmillan Press, 1990.