

POLITICAL WOMEN AND THEATRICAL POWER

“TEACH ME HOW TO CURSE MY ENEMIES”:  
POLITICAL WOMEN AND THEATRICAL POWER IN SHAKESPEARE’S  
FIRST TETRALOGY

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TITLE: “Teach Me How to Curse My Enemies”: Political Women and Theatrical Power in Shakespeare’s First Tetralogy

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## ABSTRACT:

Drawing on Katherine Eggert's discussion of Joan la Pucelle's dramatic skills, this thesis argues that, through effective performances on the characters around them, the women of Shakespeare's first tetralogy achieve and exercise extensive political power and that the male project of silencing these women through vilification and condemnation is an attempt to diminish that political power. The women in these plays are not born to the power they achieve, and it is not bestowed upon them by others. The female characters of the first tetralogy use theatrical power to enter and, in some cases, dominate the masculine world of political authority through their theatrical skill. They persuade, seduce, manipulate, and argue their ways through the highest circles of political authority and, transgressing patriarchal notions of political authority, they wield decidedly unfeminine power.

These plays demonstrate the potential public impact and rebellious or resistant power of the female voice. In the first chapter of this thesis, I argue that these characters, through dramatically effective speech, exert significant female political agency. In the second chapter, I further contend that the male project of silencing these women's voices, expressed through gendered slurs and accusations of sexual misconduct, is a method of subduing the women's political power. By examining the subversive women of Shakespeare's first tetralogy, this thesis explores the ways in which these characters use voice to enter and, in some cases, dominate the masculine world of political authority.

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Introduction:

In the England of Shakespeare's history plays, women of the highest rank hold a unique position in society. Although they are vital to the continuation of patrilineal dynastic structures they are, theoretically, divorced from power. These plays generally concentrate on the "battlefield and court, . . . the sites of masculine power and authority" (Howard and Rankin 26). Despite this, there are history plays that present female characters able, for good or ill, to appropriate significant amounts of power and authority. I am interested specifically in the queens and noble ladies whose status places them on the borders of the highest circles of power and whose actions have not only domestic, but also public, repercussions. The female characters of *Henry VI*, parts 1, 2 and 3, and *Richard III* force themselves into the centre of powerful institutions when they should occupy only the fringes. In the *Henry VI* plays, Queen Margaret, Joan la Pucelle, and Eleanor Cobham are all explicitly threatening to male political authority. In *Richard III*, Margaret, along with Queen Elizabeth and the Duchess of York, resists Richard's rule. It is in these characters, and the theatrical power that they use to both assert and disrupt authority, that I foreground my thesis.

None of the women hold political authority legitimately. Even the queens are queens consort and, except Joan, they enter the political arena by virtue of being someone's wife or mother. Their only role should be to perpetuate the dynasty as wives and mothers. Practically, of course, this theory has its exceptions. Joan leads armies. Eleanor schemes to seize the throne. Margaret rules in her husband's stead and eventually becomes Richard's most theatrically powerful antagonist. Elizabeth and the Duchess of York resist Richard's rule, and Elizabeth actively collaborates with his enemies. Joan,

Margaret, Elizabeth, and even the Duchess use theatrically powerful methods of voice to gain and exercise authority. They wield decidedly unfeminine power and thus disrupt and transgress patriarchal notions of political authority. These plays demonstrate the potential public impact and rebellious or resistant power of female voice. In the first chapter of this thesis, I argue that these characters, through dramatically effective speech, exert significant female political agency. In the second chapter, I further contend that the male project of silencing these women's voices, expressed through gendered slurs and accusations of sexual misconduct, is a method of subduing the women's political power. In this thesis, I look at what is at stake when a woman speaks to and with political power. By examining the subversive women of Shakespeare's first tetralogy, I will explore the ways in which these characters use theatrical power to enter and, in some cases, dominate the masculine world of political authority. Further, I will examine how these characters' male enemies respond to them. I argue that while the men react to such women in a gendered way, those men use that reaction for political purposes.

Theatrical power, as a concept, needs some clarification. What exactly is theatrical power and what qualities give characters access to it? The short answer is that theatrical power is effective speech or performance that gives characters control and command of the action within the fictional context of the plays. Jean Howard argues, in relation to *The Wise-Woman of Hogsdon*, that “power is shown to lie with the theatrically skillful” (1989, 44) and that it is possible for characters to “manipulate the world [around them] through theatrical means” (1989, 40). For the purpose of this thesis, I consider theatrical power as it manifests within the narrative fiction of the plays and as essentially comprised of the effect the characters have on the other characters and the action around

them. While these characters certainly can and do move their audiences in the theatre, I am far more interested in considering the effects of and reactions to these characters within the fiction of the plays. Katherine Eggert's discussion of Joan la Pucelle in *I Henry VI* is particularly important to my conception of theatrical power. Eggert describes Joan's theatrical power as "the effect that she has within the context of the play,...her effect upon her auditors in the French and English armies,...what Joan's auditors perceive as her dramatic power" (220). A character's effect upon the other characters within the context of the fiction is vital to her level of political power, no matter what sort of reaction a theatre audience may have to that character or her actions.

Theatrical power is the ability to persuade, manipulate, and command. Margaret and Joan give commands that are followed. The prophecies and curses that all the women use carry the threat of words becoming action. The Duchess of York and Queen Elizabeth have no power until they abandon pure lamentation for theatrically effective cursing and Elizabeth is able to defeat Richard by refusing to submit to his demands. The most politically successful of the characters listed above are theatrically powerful in the sense that their voices are effective. When successful, they are able to incite in their contextual audiences the effects that they intend, from Joan's persuasion of Burgundy and Margaret's demonstrations of power, to Elizabeth's manipulation of Richard. Eggert's argument that Joan's "verbal power grants her the status of simultaneous dramaturge and theatrical spectacle" (Eggert 58) says it well. Theatrical power encompasses the ability both to stage-manage, as it were, the events within the fiction of the play and to control one's own performance. Theatrical power is more than simply persuasion or eloquence; it requires organization and control. Those characters with theatrical power are not mute

observers of the action of the play. They participate within and are able to direct that action, and have a great deal of control over what goes on around them. The theatrically powerful characters are in command of themselves and of the action in which they partake.

In her discussion of Joan, Eggert draws on Harry Berger Jr.'s concept of imaginary audition in order to lay out what she means by Joan's theatrical power. Berger suggests that Shakespearian soliloquies have "rhetorical contexts that clearly give them the value of performances directed at...auditors as well [the speaker]" (75) and that "even in their most formal and public utterances [Shakespeare's major characters] seem often to be listening to and acting on themselves" (75). For my purposes, Berger articulates how self-conscious performance is a key aspect of these characters' speeches. Even expressions of emotion can, if they have sufficient theatrical power, be deployed as political performances directed at that character's contextual audience. Eggert expands this idea to argue that the "imaginary audition of someone like Joan is formed primarily by other characters' voiced reactions to her, rather than her reactions to herself" (220). The characters' success is determined less by any literal audience reaction to their performances than it is by the fictional audience's reactions. A speech that moves a member of the theatre audience is not, within the context of the plays, theatrically powerful unless another character in the play finds that speech moving. As both Berger and Eggert note, context is vital in determining the ultimate effect of a character's performance.

Eggert's discussion of Joan's theatrical power focuses mainly on "feminine theatricality as a mode of seduction" (58) and she describes Joan as asserting her

theatrical power through “the combination of overwhelming feminine sexuality and entrancing speech” (58). While Joan certainly makes great use of her ability to enchant and persuade, her method is only one of the various strategies of theatrical power employed throughout the first tetralogy. The other models for theatrical power include the spectacles of power that Margaret stages and the arguments and debates that Elizabeth favours. In fact, the three most politically successful of the women in the first tetralogy, Joan, Margaret, and Elizabeth, make use of very different styles. Theatrical power can be comprised of witty banter or verbal manipulation. One of the methods of theatrical power most frequently used by the female characters in the first tetralogy is that of cursing. Among the various strategies they use, cursing is unique in that it does not provoke immediate action, but implies some kind of future causation. While prophecies predict that something will come to pass, these plays suggest that curses cause things to happen. The curses spoken by the female characters of the first tetralogy carry the threat of eventual, looming effectiveness, and thus hold a great deal of theatrical power, especially when other strategies are not feasible. These favoured strategies vary between characters and situations, but each one is used for the ultimate goal of political success.

For theatrical power to be successful, it cannot simply be dramatically impressive. It must also be governed by organization, control, and good judgment. Persuasiveness, spectacle, and other strategies of theatrical power require the character using those strategies to have some sort of conversational upper hand. The characters who, for example, attempt to use pleading, lamentation, or intense anger in order to get their way are rarely successful. If a character is out of control emotionally, that character cannot maintain dramatic control of the action around them and will not be particularly effective.

Gaining and using theatrical power requires the character's ability to make some sort of effect within the play's context. When a character loses control of the situation that he or she is in, that character's theatrical power is undermined. Sound judgment, while perhaps less obviously connected to theatrical power than control, is also vital. Poor choices, from making political missteps to simply choosing the wrong theatrical strategy, are devastating. Impressive as characters like Joan, Margaret, and Lady Anne are, their theatrical power fails when they lose control or make mistakes. Historical circumstances, like the literal battles that Joan and Margaret lose, are not irrelevant. Theatrical power and maintaining the level of control necessary to exert theatrical power becomes especially complex when issues of political and military control come in to play. Without the political clout or the winning army to defend oneself, maintaining control becomes difficult. Nonetheless, such characters typically lose their theatrical power in the scenes following battles. Although theatrical power without political power is difficult to exert, these women manage to use their theatrical power in order to extend their political power. While we do see both Joan and Margaret lose battles in the first tetralogy, it is the verbal battles that they lose and the failure of their voices that truly destroys them.

The first tetralogy gives individual voices to the historical women mentioned in chronicle history and gives those characters both subjectivity and political agency through their voices. However, voice itself is problematic. As Lorna Hutson notes, it is easy when reading Shakespeare to ascribe to the characters a kind of authentic voice (142-3), as if the words of Rosalind and Hamlet are their own, and not the words of an author. Drama is "an orchestration of various characterological voices by an 'invisible' author" (Harvey 2) and we can be tempted to endow dramatic female characters with an

authentic femininity that is not necessarily there. Elizabeth D. Harvey takes up the ethics and politics of male poets representing the female voice. She argues that “ventriloquism is an appropriation of the feminine voice, and that it reflects and contributes to a larger cultural silencing of women” (12). While she cautions against a narrowly essentialist reading of this argument, her claim “that transvestite ventriloquism stresses cultural suppression of the female voice” (Harvey 12) does seem to attack much of English literature on ethical grounds. While there are certainly reasons to question the appropriation of female voice, Harvey’s implication that the inclusion of female characters serves only to make early modern plays more ethically questionable is overly dismissive.

How do we respond to female characters whose greatest strength is their ability to use theatrically powerful words? Diane Purkiss looks at this issue in a slightly different way. She criticizes the tendency to read early modern plays signed by women’s pen-names as authentically feminine and to take “the emotion-laden speaking voice...less for itself than as a sign pointing towards such an authorial presence” (Purkiss 71). Purkiss writes that the “processing of woman as a theatrical role...which can never be equated with an essential woman...troubles the very notion of such a self identified figure” (69). These characters are not, therefore, significant for any sort of essential female authenticity they might possess. Although Harvey criticizes the “slippage between characterological and authorial voices...especially in a feminist criticism that seems increasingly to privilege and take for granted female voice” (16), there is value in exploring the performance of subversive characterological voices. Such characters are, by definition, dramatic constructions and their significance resides in the actions they

perform as characters. Harvey makes some excellent points but, for my purposes, I accept that characters exercise voice within their dramatic context, and consider the voices of Margaret, Elizabeth, and the others within the plays that they inhabit.

Exploring the portrayal of women's voices, especially those with great political influence, is important given the early modern English context of public performance attended by women. While the plays of the first tetralogy are among Shakespeare's earliest, and little is definitively known about the context of their initial performances, they seem to have been popular (Gurr 261). Given that "women, apparently, ... attended the playhouse in significant numbers" (Cerasano and Wynne-Davies 157), it is tempting to wonder what sort of impact characters like Joan and Margaret would have had upon an Elizabethan female audience, consider how women in the audience might have understood such characters, and imagine the potential significance of these powerful women's voices in the context of theatrical performance. Such questions, of course, are impossible to answer. The uncertain nature of contemporary women's reactions to what they saw in the theater means that we can never be absolutely certain "how women would interpret the expanded range of narrative and images to which theatre exposed them" (Howard and Rackin 36). While we cannot demonstrate that an Elizabethan woman in the audience of one of the *Henry VI* plays or *Richard III* would identify with or admire Joan, Margaret, or Elizabeth, neither can we prove the opposite. As Howard further asserts, even if a theatrical text "enacts, in order to allay, masculine anxiety about women who exercise control over themselves and over men, it is not clear that female spectators would focus only on the recuperative dimensions of that fiction" (1994, 90). There is no guarantee of how an audience, much less a female audience, would respond to these plays

and the female characters in them. Thus, there is definite space for Joan, Margaret, Elizabeth and the others to function in potentially more subversive ways than simply as examples of misbehavior. These characters could be subversive not only within the context of the plays, but potentially subversive beyond that context as well.

The theatrical power of Joan, Margaret, and Elizabeth parallels the implicit power of a female theatre audience. By their very presence in the playhouses, the women who attended the theatre also “participated – if not openly, at least covertly... – in the debate surrounding the social and moral influences of the playhouses” (Cerasano and Wynne Davies (157). The perceived “disruptiveness of women who came to the theatre” (1994, 79) arose, Howard argues, “not only because they made themselves into spectacles, but also because they became spectators, subjects who looked” (79). John Northbrooke, quoted by Cerasano and Wynne-Davies from *A Treatise wherein Dicing, Dauncing, vaine Playes, or Enterluds, wht other idle Pastimes, &c., commonly used on the Sabbath Day, are reproved by the authority of the Word of God and auntient writers*, worries “what safeguard of chastity can there be where the woman is desired with so many eyes, where so many faces look upon her, and again she upon so many?” (161). Northbrooke is troubled not simply by a fear for women’s reputations, but also a fear of women acting as looking, judging subjects. Howard describes the theatre as “liable to judgment by those who can and will pay to see it, whatever their rank, education and taste” (1989, 33). This would include the women who, as spectators, would serve as judges of the performances they attended as much as the male audience members did. Like men, as paying customers of the playhouses, they could make their preferences known. Entering the theatre as spectators gave women “access to the pleasure and privilege of gazing, certainly at the

stage and probably at the audience as well” (Howard 1989, 35). John Rainolds, quoted in Cerasano and Wynne-Davies, describes in *Th’overthrow of Stage Playes* a “gentlewoman that sware by her troth that she was as much edified at a play as ever she was at any sermon” (162). This gentlewoman and the other women in the audience could gaze upon the stage and be thinking, judging, interpreting subjects. In this way, the women in the audience would reflect female-gendered characters. Joan, Margaret, and Elizabeth refuse to become objects in the male power struggle and insist upon being thinking, judging, interpreting, and acting subjects as well.

The first tetralogy has much to offer the feminist critic. Howard and Rackin, for example, describe it as part of Shakespeare’s “feminist canon” (21). *Engendering a Nation*, their analysis of Shakespeare’s English history plays, is a key work on the female characters in the first tetralogy. They examine the representations of gender in Shakespeare’s histories and frame the first tetralogy as successively diminishing the power of female characters, arguing that the plays authorize the women as they become increasingly less threatening. Katherine Eggert, discussed above, makes the similar argument that although the women who follow Joan echo her power, they never possess “a sense of controlling the scene around them as theatrical performance” (69) and are “stripped of conscious theatrical authority” (70). My thesis takes up the characters that Howard, Rackin, and Eggert dismiss, and contends that female power is very much present even after Joan’s death. Eggert’s argument dismisses both Margaret and Elizabeth unnecessarily, while Howard and Rackin see the women of *Richard III* as having diminished theatrical power compared to those in the *Henry VI* plays. I argue, by contrast, that Margaret, even compared to Joan, is the most consistently successful in

staging spectacles in order to achieve her goal. In *Richard III*, Margaret's curses, at least according to the other characters in the play, go beyond mere prophecy and actually do carry effective power. Elizabeth, whom Eggert, Rackin, and Howard largely ignore, ultimately uses theatrical power most successfully, despite her slower beginnings. Once she learns from Margaret, Elizabeth succeeds in besting Richard's considerable theatrical power.

The relationship between gender and power, and the question of where the plays themselves stand with regards to judging these women come up repeatedly in the published criticism. In *Women in Power in the Early Modern Drama*, Theodora Jankowski examines, through Joan and Margaret, the often paradoxical position of the female ruler and argues that by “foregrounding the threat” (78) of politically powerful women and “questioning the morality of their claims to power” (78), these plays provide “ample means for controlling such claims to power” (78). Christina Leon Alfar, discussing the queens of Shakespearean tragedy in *Fantasies of Female Evil*, argues that “evil is ascribed to women who aspire to self-determination and thereby disrupt their designated sociopolitical function as obedient daughters and wives” (19). Even more recently, Kristen M. Smith, in “Martial Maids and Murdering Mothers: Women, Witchcraft, and Motherly Transgression in *Henry VI* and *Richard III*,” writes that Joan and Margaret “[corrupt] the masculine venue of politics and [create] a space for the arrival of Richard III” (1). Unlike Alfar and Jankowski, who evaluate the women through the eyes of their enemies, I argue that these women are not simply vilified because of their gender. While these women are discredited along gendered lines, it is not solely because they cause the kind of disruption Alfar and Jankowski identify. Many

male characters respond to such women with fear and hatred, but the contexts of such responses suggest to me that gender is not so much the motive of condemnation as the means. Unlike the critics discussed above, I also examine how the female characters respond to the accusations against them and compare the results. In the end, one of the key factors in these characters' success, or lack thereof, is the consistency of their rhetoric regarding the reactions of others to their behaviour, rather than the actual nature of that behaviour. Regardless of whether the accusations against them are true, the characters' ability to maintain their theatrical power despite those attacks governs how successful they are at defending themselves. These plays certainly demonstrate the double standard Jankowski and Alfar describe. I argue, however, that the plays do not necessarily endorse that double standard.

This thesis is divided into two chapters. In the first, I examine theatrical power as it is used by each of the female characters, beginning with Joan, the first of the women in the first tetralogy to usurp masculine authority. As a warrior woman, she transgresses the normal bounds of femininity and, up to a point, succeeds. Joan is an ambiguous figure; whether she is saintly or demonic is ultimately uncertain, as her execution can be read as both cruel and justified. Joan provides a benchmark for the other women of the first tetralogy. Her theatrical power is significant, but marred by her eventual failure. I next focus on Queen Margaret, who appears in all four plays of the first tetralogy, and could be called its central character. I trace her story through the development and triumph of her political authority and theatrical skills, though her fall from power, to her eventual use of cursing. I then look briefly at the Countess of Auvergne, Eleanor Cobham, and Lady Anne, the three female characters who fail in their attempts to exert theatrical

power and whose schemes fail as a result. Finally, I explore as a group the women of *Richard III*, looking at the ways in which Queen Elizabeth, the Duchess of York, and the older Queen Margaret, by working together and learning from one another, ultimately succeed, through Elizabeth, in using their theatrical power to destroy Richard.

In the second chapter, I examine the theatrical power of these characters in relation to their audiences within the fiction. Many male characters do indeed respond to such women with fear and hatred, but the contexts of such responses indicate to me that gender is the means of condemnation rather than merely the motive. While almost all the female characters in these plays transgress, to some extent, the proper bounds of female behaviour, the characters who pose a threat to their enemies are vilified through accusations of unnatural behaviour and sexual misconduct. Joan, Margaret, and Elizabeth are attacked because, through their significant theatrical power, they represent significant political threats, to such an extent that their enemies attempt to discredit and thereby silence them. The terms of the invective directed towards these women focus exclusively on their gender and frequently are comprised of allegations of sexual impropriety. The male characters in these plays deploy a rhetoric of gender and sexuality in their politically motivated attacks in order to wrest back from these women the power they have usurped. The way in which these female characters confront the distinct pattern of politically-motivated attacks on their gender ultimately determines their ability to resist those attacks. The characters who maintain consistent rhetoric when responding to accusations of sexual impropriety are the ones able to repel such accusations.

In the second chapter, I also examine the political motives behind the male reactions to these powerful female voices and consider the moral weight that can be given

to those reactions, given that many of the male characters are just as morally compromised as the female ones, some even more so. I discuss the general moral ambiguity that pervades the first three plays of the tetralogy. I argue that as dangerous and cruel as many of the theatrically powerful women are, the responses to their power are not necessarily endorsed by the plays, especially given that in the final play of the series some of these women are crucial to the establishment of morality and proper order.

Throughout both chapters I make brief reference to the queens of English chronicle history, the anonymous history play *The True Tragedy of Richard III*, and Shakespearean tragedy. By looking to the chronicles and *The True Tragedy*, I note the places in which the playwright has gone out of his way to inject theatrical power into the plays. The queens in the tragedies provide other models of female engagement with political power that I compare and contrast with the first tetralogy.

In this thesis I argue that the female characters of the first tetralogy enter and in some cases dominate the masculine world of political authority through their theatrical skill. They use dramatically effective speech in order to pursue political agency, and the male project of silencing these women's voices that results is a method of subduing their threatening power. I look at what is at stake when a woman speaks to and with political power. By examining the subversive women of Shakespeare's first tetralogy, I explore the ways in which these characters use voice to enter and, in some cases, dominate the masculine world of political authority.

Chapter One:

Theatrical Power from Joan to Elizabeth

The female characters of Shakespeare's first tetralogy operate within a dangerous political world built upon patriarchy and patrilineal dynasty where they are constantly in danger of becoming pawns in someone else's scheme. Theatrical power, effective speech that gives characters control and command of the action around them, is thus a vital skill to have, and the female characters of these plays use it to gain and exercise authority, and to disrupt (legitimately or illegitimately) patriarchal political authority. By taking control of the action around them, characters like Joan la Pucelle, Margaret of Anjou, and Queen Elizabeth are able to become not mere objects in the political area, but actual actors. They use theatrical power to exert their agency and verbally fight on their own behalf. Other characters, like the Countess of Auvergne, Eleanor Cobham, and Lady Anne, demonstrate the consequences of failing to successfully exert theatrical power. While their favoured strategies may differ, these characters use, or attempt to use, theatrical skill in order to wield significant power and thus disrupt and transgress patriarchal notions of political authority.

Of the female characters in Shakespeare's first tetralogy, Joan la Pucelle is the first to appear and, to some extent, the most powerful. While Joan, and the ways in which she is undermined by the male characters in the play, will be discussed more fully in the next chapter, she is a useful benchmark in measuring how theatrical power functions and the extent to which it can be accessed by a female character. Whether or not she is aided by supernatural forces, Joan clearly uses her speech to control the action around her. Eggert writes that Joan "is identified within the text as possessing a specifically theatrical

power” (Eggert 58) and that she achieves her theatrical power through “adept, carefully managed performance” (Eggert 58). Joan is “compelling...as a theatrical presence” (Eggert 58) not only to the play’s audience, but to the characters within the fiction as well. They are, for a time, moved by her persuasiveness and her ability to stage-manage the events she participates in and do so effectively.

Joan’s skill in this area is seen most clearly in her interaction with the Duke of Burgundy, whom she persuades to betray the English and join the French side. Though Charles instructs Joan to “enchant [Burgundy] with [her] words” (*IH6*, 3.7.40), the case Joan makes for his support is decidedly unsupernatural. Joan depends, instead, on her eloquence and rhetorical skills. She plays on Burgundy’s loyalty to and sympathy for France, calling it “thy country /...defaced / By wasting ruin” (3.7.44-6). Joan turns France into “a mother [looking] on her tender babe / When death doth close his tender-dying eyes” (3.7.47-8) and describes the “most unnatural wounds, / Which [Burgundy himself] has given her woeful breast” (3.7.50-1). She successfully urges him to “strike those that hurt, and hurt not those that help” (3.7.53) by returning to the side of his countrymen. Before Joan speaks, Burgundy tells her not to be “over tedious” (3.7.43) but, once she is done, he says he is “vanquished... [by her] haughty words” (3.7.78). Joan’s great oratorical skill enables this conversion.

However, Joan’s theatrical power, as skilled as it is, ultimately fails her and her defeat is, more than once, presented as failed attempts to muster some of that power. Her army, having been defeated by York’s in battle, calls upon the “charming spells and periapts and...choice spirits that admonish [her] / And give [her] signs of future accidents” (*IH6*, 5.3.2-3). Joan’s requests to the spirits, for them to “help [her] this once,

that France may get the field” (5.3.12), “hold [her] not in silence” (5.3.13), and “condescend to help [her]” (5.3.17), are all ignored. Joan attempts to buy the spirits’ support with “body [and] blood-sacrifice” (5.3.20), but her ultimate goal, whether they take her offerings or not, is to convince the spirits to support her. The interaction between Joan and the spirits is an unsuccessful replaying of her conversion of Burgundy. Instead of self-assuredly deploying a well-reasoned argument augmented with physical seductiveness as she does against Burgundy, Joan finds herself resorting to begging in this scene. Joan is not in control of the scene, and the spirits’ refusal to act is far more powerful than Joan’s attempts to persuade. Joan’s pleas to the spirits are for them to listen and obey. The military and theatrical command that Joan possesses up to this point and that prompts Eggert to call Joan the “dramaturge” (58) of the play is conspicuously absent in this moment. The failure of those pleas effectively amounts to a failure of theatrical power on Joan’s part and, without the skills she used to persuade Burgundy, Joan loses her war. Joan’s capture diminishes her vocal power even further. By ordering Joan to “hold [her] tongue” (5.4.13), the English acknowledge the danger posed to them by her voice and, more importantly, deprive Joan of her best weapon. Without the opportunity to speak, Joan has no opportunity to defend herself.

However, when she does get that chance, Joan proves that poor judgment is just as fatal to theatrical power as lack of control. Joan’s trial scene provides her with a final opportunity to use those theatrical skills to save herself and, although she attempts to talk her way out of being burned at the stake, she goes about it exactly the wrong way. With Burgundy, Joan chooses her strategy wisely and appeals to his sense of loyalty to France as a concept. Before York and Warwick, she jumps between tactics, first describing

herself as “virtuous and holy, chosen from above” (*IH6*, 5.6.39), then begging her captors to “murder not then the fruit within [her] womb” (5.6.63). When her plea inspires no sympathy, she scrambles to name a father that York and Warrick do not object to, but finds them concluding that because “there were so many” (5.6.81) it is “a sign she hath been liberal and free” (5.6.82). While much of the play sees Joan enchanting and destroying those around her with her theatrical power, in this scene her “words condemn...[herself]” (5.6.84). The only mercy Joan is offered initially is that of a quick death and for every new tactic Joan tries, her situation becomes increasingly worse. As in the scene with the spirits, here too Joan’s powers of persuasion are completely lost. Her command and control of the action around her is gone and she wildly misjudges her course of action. Joan’s theatricality is a vital component of her character. Joan’s theatrical power allows her to rise, and the failure of that theatrical power kills her.

The end of *1 Henry VI* shows Joan’s bid for power as failing spectacularly. The action of *2 Henry VI*, however, dramatizes Margaret of Anjou’s use of successful theatrical power to take control of her husband’s kingdom. The play depicts the breakdown of civic order and the beginning of civil war; as Howard and Rackin note, “unruly women...are inextricably implicated in the political disorder that overtakes the realm” (77). They are not, however, solely implicated. The men of the three *Henry* plays are, as will be discussed in the next chapter, equally responsible. Henry, despite his responsibilities as king, is “cold in great affairs” (*2H6*, 3.1.224). He has no control over his own kingdom and is content to leave much of his decision-making to others while most of the lords fight amongst themselves and plot against the crown. Henry is strikingly apathetic about kingship in general. He refuses to make judgment, saying he “care[s] not which”

(1.3.105) lord gains the regency of France as “all’s one to [him]” (1.3.106), and stays generally silent while Margaret and the lords argue. Over the course of *2 Henry VI*, Margaret grows to become the power behind the throne and by the end of the play is clearly ruling in her husband’s stead. Margaret’s rise to power is certainly enabled by the serious power vacuum depicted in the play. In her encounter with the petitioners, both Henry and Gloucester are absent. With the closest approximation of ruling power not there to prevent them, there is nothing to stop Margaret and Suffolk from stepping in and seizing power.

However, the disorder of authority does not fully explain Margaret’s success. The theatrical power that she develops over the course of the play enables her rise. Despite her inauspicious introduction in *1 Henry VI* as Suffolk’s prisoner, in the second play of the tetralogy Margaret emerges as a central focus of subversive female energy. The Margaret at the end of the play is very different from the one Suffolk meets at the end of the previous one and *2 Henry VI* charts her development of persuasive skill and rhetorical technique. She learns to use theatrical power to seize control first for Henry and then for herself. Margaret persuades, manipulates, and cajoles her way into power. Even as the play opens, Henry describes Margaret’s “grace in speech” (*2H6*, 1.1.30) as making him “fall to weeping joys” (1.1.32). By the play’s end she has assumed military leadership in Henry’s stead.

Margaret’s early scenes in *2 Henry VI* show her beginning to “enforce her own position as king’s consort” (Jankowski 90) by attempting to assert Henry’s power as king. Her chief rivals at this point are the Duke and Duchess of Gloucester, as Henry, though “old enough himself / To give his censure” (*2H6* 1.3.120-1), is “a pupil still / Under surly

Gloucester's governance" (1.3.50-1) and Eleanor "sweeps it through the court... / More like an empress than Duke Humphrey's wife" (1.3.81-82). Margaret's attempts to place Henry in charge are, of course, self-serving. She objects to the fact that, though "a queen in title and in style, / [ she]... must be made a subject to a duke" (1.3.52-3) and Suffolk's aim, though it proves highly ironic, is that by weeding out the competition "[Margaret herself] shall steer the happy realm" (1.3.104). By asserting Henry's position, she asserts her own and she does so through her increasing level of theatrical power within the play's fictional setting.

Margaret's desire to solidify her position as queen consort suggests that, even at this early stage in her political career, she has a definite understanding of the performative nature of queenship. There is significant political weight in playing at being queen, as seen in fact that Eleanor makes what is essentially a "theatrical challenge to Margaret" (Howard and Rackin 75) and to the basis of Margaret's power. By appearing "like an empress" (*2H6*, 1.3.82) so that "strangers in court do take her for the queen" (1.3.83), Eleanor lays her claim to Margaret's position. Margaret takes Eleanor's barely-veiled threat, and the poverty-weakened nature of her own performance of queenship, very seriously, telling Suffolk that "not all these lords do vex [her] half so much / As that proud dame, the Lord Protector's wife" (1.3.79-80). While Margaret unfailingly maintains throughout the tetralogy that she is rightfully the queen, she does acknowledge the extent to which performance has a hand in supporting that position. Though Margaret calls her "the presentation but of what I was" (*RIII*, 4.4.82) and "a queen in jest, only to fill the scene" (4.4.91), Elizabeth successfully takes on the trappings of queenship. Margaret's warning that Elizabeth will see another "decked in thy rights, as thou art

stalled in mine” (1.3.204) suggests that as much as Margaret considers herself the rightful queen, she also understands the extent to which being the queen is tied to the performance of that role and the pageantry surrounding it. Margaret, who takes the performances of others as serious threats, is aware of the potential usefulness of performance to herself and begins to explore her own theatrical power.

Eggert suggests that, other than Joan, the female characters of the first tetralogy do not “[control] the scene[s] around them as theatrical performance” (69). While it certainly is true that “Margaret’s scope of action is...far more limited than Joan’s” (Eggert 68), there are a number of moments, even as early as *2 Henry VI*, where Margaret not only stages her own self-performance but also controls the action around her. Considered in this light, the relatively minor interaction between Margaret and Eleanor in act 1, scene 3 is particularly interesting. Margaret drops her fan, orders Eleanor to pick it up, boxes her ear when she does not, and then pretends not to have known it was Eleanor she hit (*2H6*, 1.3.142-3). Though Henry tells her it was “against [Margaret’s] will” (1.3.147), Eleanor knows exactly what has happened and declares that “[Margaret] shall not strike dame Eleanor unrevenged” (1.3.151). In this moment, Margaret publically punishes Eleanor for her presumption of Margaret’s rightful place and the clearly staged fan drop is an excuse for Margaret both to take her revenge and to assert dominance. Eleanor’s challenge to Margaret is performative, and Margaret’s response is to stage a spectacle that will put Eleanor in her proper place.

Act 2, scene 3 and the exchange of Gloucester’s staff demonstrates Margaret’s skill at staging her own power with even greater significance. Margaret pushes for Gloucester’s removal from office from the beginning of the play, publicly asking “what

needs [Gloucester] / To be Protector of [Henry's] excellence" (2*H6*, 1.3.122-3) if the king is of age. Though Henry himself requests Gloucester's resignation and Gloucester lays his staff at Henry's feet, Margaret manages to insert herself into the exchange and take on a central role. Before Gloucester can respond to Henry's request for the staff, Margaret repeats it in much stronger terms, reiterating that she see "no reason why a king of years / Should be to be protected like a child" (2.3.28-9) and telling Gloucester to "give up [his] staff...and [give] the King his realm" (2.3.31). This speech is completely unnecessary, as Henry has already spoken, but Margaret, in this moment, is fashioning herself as co-ruler, saying "now is Henry King and Margaret Queen" (2.3.39). Her next action is particularly important. Margaret picks up the staff and hands it to Henry, saying "this staff of honour raught, there let it stand / Where it best fits to be, in Henry's hand" (2.3.43-44). In doing so, Margaret becomes a symbolic power broker capable of bestowing authority where she chooses. This is also a brilliant moment of self-staging. By handing Henry the staff, she presents herself to the entire assembly as in control of his power.

Margaret quickly makes the logical step from asserting her position to actively pursuing her own agenda. By the opening of act 3, Margaret is getting better and better at persuading people and is theatrically powerful in that, as a character, she is starting to gain control of the action around her. She begins to not only play the part of the queen, but also exercise her rhetorical skills in order to achieve her goals. She lays out a long and methodical argument against Gloucester, citing the "majesty [with which] he bears himself [and] / How insolent of late he is become" (2*H6*, 3.1.6-7), that he is "near [the king] in descent, / And should [Henry] fall, he is the next will mount" (3.1.21-2), the "rancorous mind he bears" (3.1.24), and that he has "by flattery...won the common hearts

and...’tis to be feared they all will follow him” (3.1.30) all as reasons for deposing the Duke. Margaret even explains that her interest in doing so is due to “the reverent care [she] bear[s] unto [her] lord” (3.1.34). Margaret’s speech doesn’t work entirely. Henry is not convinced and declares “the Duke is virtuous, mild and too well given / To dream on evil” (3.1.72-3). However, it becomes quickly apparent that what Henry decides is of little weight. Gloucester is arrested by the Cardinal’s men while Henry stands by and tells Margaret and the lords to do “what...seemeth best” (3.1.195). Though her attempts at persuasion do not entirely work, Margaret’s voice is the strongest in the chorus denouncing Gloucester. None of the lords’ speeches quite match the length or vitriol of hers. While they list the various crimes that Gloucester is accused of, Margaret makes the best case for the danger that Gloucester supposedly poses to Henry’s throne and she leads the lords in plotting that “Gloucester should be quickly rid the world” (3.1.233). Further, the increasing strength of Margaret’s theatrical power is illustrated by her ability to adapt her performance to its audience. In front of her husband, Margaret plays the part of the loyal queen and “speaks to Henry in the language of a consort” (Howard and Rackin 91) but, upon Henry’s departure, she transforms herself into a ruthless politician whose “rhetoric ceases to be subservient and becomes more overtly political” (Howard and Rackin 91) when interacting with the lords. Margaret, throughout the third act of *2 Henry VI*, is thus developing the skill to pursue her own personal agenda, independent from that of her husband.

Margaret’s pursuit of her own political interests, independent of Henry, is particularly notable in comparison to Shakespeare’s other great scheming queen, Lady Macbeth. In contrast to Margaret’s clearly personal ambitions of power beyond her

husband's control, Cristina Leon Alfar reads "Lady Macbeth's encouragement of her husband's regicide as Shakespeare's parodic inversion of wifely duty" (113) and argues that "if she functions as the guarantor of Macbeth's bloody desire, she cannot be said in any way to assert her own ambition" (117). Though clearly intensely ambitious, Lady Macbeth is ambitious for her husband more than herself and is essentially just supporting what Macbeth, despite his hesitations, wants all along. Henry, conversely, clearly wants no part in Margaret's schemes. Gloucester's arrest takes place without Henry's assent and despite his objection of "who's a traitor? Gloucester, he is none" (*2H6*, 3.1.222). While Macbeth "wouldst be great, / [and is] not without ambition" (*Macbeth*, 1.5.16-17), Henry has little interest in the business of kingship and thinks "it were a happy life / To be no better than a homely swain" (*3H6*, 2.5.21-1). Alfar writes that if Lady Macbeth "transgresses her gender to become manly...it is because she must do so to reflect—as conduct manuals demand—the bloody desires of her husband" (113). Margaret's actions, whether self-serving or for the good of the realm, may at times further Henry's interests, but they never reflect his desires. Margaret's theatrical power and her ability to control the action around her are all the more striking when we acknowledge not only the personal nature of her agenda, but also how rare such an agenda is. Margaret's highly developed theatrical skills allow her the rare ability to pursue political ambitions of her own.

Margaret's theatrical skill, however, is only effective when she uses it properly. Margaret, unsurprisingly, runs into the same problem as Joan. Her sheer presence, though impressive, is not sufficient to assure success. Margaret, like Joan, can neither maintain nor exploit her theatrical power without the use of sound judgment and wisely chosen

tactics. Having succeeded in pursuing her political agenda in having Gloucester killed, Margaret next pleads for Henry to spare Suffolk. This is particularly notable given that, by denouncing Gloucester, Margaret is ostensibly acting to protect Henry and consolidate his power. In Suffolk's case, the man she is protecting is her political ally and adulterous lover. Margaret fails here, and Henry has one of his very few actually decisive moments as he goes after Suffolk even before the Commons demand Suffolk's banishment. Instead of the persuasive skills Joan demonstrates earlier in the tetralogy or the manipulation Elizabeth Gray will use later, Margaret berates Henry for his treatment of her. She attempts to deflect Henry from "[rating the] lord of Suffolk thus" (2*H6*, 3.2.56) by suggesting that the reasoning by which he accuses Suffolk would lead to it "be[ing] judged [she] made the Duke away" (3.2.67). She argues that all she, or Suffolk for that matter, would stand to gain by Duke Humphrey's death is "reproach...[and] infamy" (3.2.69-71). This is not a bad start, but when Henry bemoans his "woe...for Gloucester" (3.2.72) Margaret sets off on a forty-eight line rant, accusing him of "foul inconstancy" (3.2.115). She claims that he has "drowned [her] on shore / With tears as salt as sea through [his] unkindness" (3.2.95-6) and "weeps that [she] dost live so long" (3.2.121). It is an impressive speech, certainly. The descriptions of her stormy sea-crossing, where she was "nigh wrecked" (3.2.82), are particularly powerful and Henry "turn[s] away and hide[s]" (3.2.74) to avoid her rage. The speech is not, however, effective within the context of the scene or upon Margaret's immediate audience. She is interrupted by the Commons storming in and the gruesome revelation of Gloucester's body. By the time she actually "plead[s] for gentle Suffolk" (3.2.291), Henry is furious, saying that by "plead[ing] for him / Thou wilt but add increase unto my wrath" (3.2.293-4). While

Margaret has become very good at staging herself, she is not completely able to use that skill effectively. Margaret fails to exert the kind of theatrical power over Henry that she needs in order to save Suffolk. After Margaret's effective use of manipulation, in first dismissing and then arresting Gloucester, and her brilliant staging of Eleanor's punishment and the transfer of Gloucester's staff, her strategy here of berating Henry seems poorly chosen and governed, perhaps, more by emotion than sound judgment.

The interaction between Margaret and Suffolk that follows his banishment is most notable in that it actually stages the queen's adultery, but it also hints at the supernatural power that Margaret will use to great effect in the later plays. Margaret curses the king with "mischance and sorrow,.../ Heart's discontent and sour affliction" (2*H6*, 3.2.302-3) and sends "threefold vengeance...upon [his] steps" (3.2.306). Suffolk tells her to "cease...these execrations" (3.2.307) and asks "wherefore should [he] curse" (3.2.311) as curses cannot kill. When Suffolk is particularly vicious in listing the curses he would make "could curses kill" (3.2.312), Margaret warns him that "these dread curses... [will] recoil / And turn the force of them upon thyself" (3.2.332-4). Suffolk's disbelief proves bitterly ironic because, as Margaret predicts, his mocking curses do turn against him. Already Margaret is portrayed as believing in the effective power of cursing; she also both incites another to curse and instructs him in how to do so. Though Margaret's extensive use of cursing does not begin until 3 *Henry VI*, she is, even here, clearly engaged with the method of theatrically powerful speech she will later use to great effect.

Margaret's brief foray into cursing in 2 *Henry VI* contrasts interestingly with the rhetorical activities of another female character in the play, Eleanor Cobham, Duchess of Gloucester. Like Margaret's, Eleanor's ambitions are intensely personal. In describing

her dream, Eleanor says that she “sat in seat of majesty” (2*H6*, 1.2.36) and “Henry and Dame Margaret kneeled” (1.2.39) to her. Also like Margaret, she is not entirely successful at persuading others, as she does not successfully convince her husband to participate in her schemes when he tells her to “banish the canker of ambitious thought” (1.2.18). The two characters are, however, distinguished by the fact that Eleanor, unlike Margaret, sees her gender as in her way, saying “were I man.../ I would remove these tedious stumbling blocks/ And smooth my way upon their headless necks” (1.2.63-5). Eleanor suggests that, as a woman, she does not have access to the kind of violence that would put her on the throne and turns instead to magic. In her use of magic, Eleanor stands in direct contrast to Joan and Margaret in two ways. Both of those characters, although they do also engage with supernatural powers, are depicted using violence on stage and both clearly use their gender, and sexual seductiveness in particular, to further their political ends. Eleanor’s speedy turn to magic also suggests that she is less able than Margaret to integrate herself into the political scene. Although Eleanor is described by the other characters as being “[taken]...for the queen” (1.3.83) by strangers to the court because of her proud manner and expensive clothing, there is no indication that she participates in the political dialogue in the way that Margaret does from her first introduction.

Although Eleanor’s engagement with magic and general disobedience links her with Margaret as “the figure of the strong willed wife...doubled..., compounding and underscoring the threat” (Rackin and Howard 74), there is also a significant difference between the prophecy that Eleanor hears and the cursing used by both Joan and Margaret. Joan, even after her defeat, retains some vestiges of theatrical power. Like the characters

that will follow her, when Joan cannot command she moves to cursing and her pronouncement of the “darkness and the gloomy shade of death” (*IH6*, 5.6.89) that will come over England casts a deep shadow over the plays to come. While cursing like Joan’s carries the implication of causation, prophecy does not. It does not influence the future; it can only reveal. Margaret is her own agent. In contrast, Eleanor has to hire others to do sorcery for her and even then it is prophecy, and not actual cursing. Even in what is perhaps Eleanor’s most moving moment, when she reproaches Humphrey during her public shaming, she still remains firmly in the prophetic mode as she rightly predicts that “the axe of death” (*2H6*, 2.4.50), that he cannot see or prevent, hangs inevitably over Gloucester. Eleanor does not curse him; she merely describes the fate that he cannot escape.

Eleanor Cobham stands in contrast to Margaret as, although she is similarly subversive, the Duchess of Gloucester is nowhere near as successful. Early in *2 Henry VI*, Eleanor vows to do what she can to “reach at the glorious gold” (*2H2* 1.2.11) of the royal crown. She describes herself as “not [being] slack / To play [her] part in fortune’s pageant” (1.2.66-7), but actually gets played herself. Eleanor’s plot with Margery Jordan and Roger Bolingbroke falls apart before it can even begin. By the time Eleanor actually hears the prophecies, John Hume has already revealed to the audience that “the rich Cardinal / And...the great and new-made Duke of Suffolk / ..., knowing Dame Eleanor’s aspiring humour / Have hired [him] to undermine the Duchess” (1.2.94-8). Eleanor imagines herself to be much more skilled at scheming than she actually turns out to be and is unknowingly burdened by her fundamental lack of crucial information. While Eleanor makes what is essentially a “theatrical challenge to Margaret” (Howard and

Rackin 75) and believes herself to be the organizer of the spectacle that is the conjuring scene, her ultimate lack of control over the action around her suggests that her theatrical power is not great. The initial implication that she is in control of the situation is quickly and thoroughly dismissed, because Eleanor is exposed as no more than a pawn in York's scheme to disgrace her husband. Eleanor does play her part, but she never controls the scene around her. These elements of her narrative separate her fundamentally from Margaret, who proves far more dangerous.

In fact, the character that Eleanor seems most like is the Countess of Auvergne, who briefly appears in *1 Henry VI*. She takes Talbot captive, saying she will “chain [his] legs and arms” (*IH6*, 2.3.38) because he has “by tyranny these many years / Wasted [her] country, slain [its] citizens” (2.3.39-40). But the Countess is “deceived” (2.3.51). Talbot's army turns out to be lying in wait and clearly demonstrates that the Countess never really posed him any danger. The Countess plots to capture Talbot, the “scourge of France” (2.3.14), but, like Eleanor, the scope of her control of the situation is extremely limited. Mere moments after the Countess declares herself to be victorious, Talbot reveals that he is supported by his army, his “substance, sinews, arms and strength, / With which he yoketh [France's] rebellious necks, / Razeth [its] cities and subverts [its] towns / And in a moment makes them desolate” (2.3.63-6). The Countess's failure, like Eleanor's, proves to be a success for her enemy. Talbot frames his occupation of her castle as merciful, explaining that he demands “no other satisfaction [than]...that [his army] may / Taste of [the Countess's] wine and see what cates [she has]” (2.3.77-79), but the fact remains that the Countess, who began the scene planning Talbot's capture, is forced instead to consider herself “honoured to feast” (2.3.82) an occupying army. The Countess's failure

to capture Talbot successfully reflects the fact that she does not possess the tools required for theatrical power. The Countess does not know her true situation and, without that crucial knowledge, has no chance of exerting even a limited amount of theatrical power. Like Eleanor, and unlike Margaret, she is unable to maintain command of the action around her and finds herself becoming a pawn used by others.

This pattern of almost immediate female failures of theatrical power, as distinct from Joan and Margaret's eventual flame-outs, continues in the confrontation between Lady Anne and Richard in *Richard III*. Richard's manipulation and seduction of Prince Edward's widow demonstrates how a character's pathos, when not combined with control and good judgment, fails to achieve theatrical power and success. Like Joan, Anne's theatrical power fails due to her lack of control and her bad judgment. Anne's speech before Henry's coffin is moving, but not effective in deterring Richard, and her curses, though eventually powerful, provoke no immediate result. When going up against Richard, she is unable to prevent Richard from taking control of the scene and his seduction is literally silencing. Anne's lines become shorter and Richard's become longer. As Richard argues that "[Anne's] beauty was the cause" (*R3*, 1.2.121) of the deaths, his lines begin to dominate the scene, while her responses shrink to single, short sentences. Richard's speech beginning at line 151 silences Anne completely. Instead of replying herself, her actions are narrated by Richard as he tells her to "teach not [her] lip such scorn" (1.2.159), not to pause with the sword (1.2.167) and to "take up the sword again" (1.2.171). Anne's silence marks Richard's control over the scene and his victory over her.

More than a lack of knowledge, a lack of control is the weakness that really destroys the attempts of Eleanor, the Countess, and Lady Anne. Vocal and potentially threatening though all three are, they represent almost the opposite of Joan, Margaret, and Elizabeth. While the latter are able to control, to some degree, the events around them, the former all attempt to do so and fail miserably, to the extent that their efforts have an effect opposite to what they had hoped for. Rather than directing the action, all three find themselves used for other characters' purposes. The Countess finds herself providing aid to the man she sought to take prisoner. Eleanor's actions unknowingly contribute to her husband's eventual demise. Anne's marriage to Richard secures her dynastic claim for his purposes. The control held by Joan, Margaret, and Elizabeth over the action around them is the key element that Eleanor, the Countess and Lady Anne all fail to achieve.

The difference between Eleanor and Margaret is illustrated particularly clearly by the fact that Henry's judgment of Eleanor's failed scheming and her subsequent public shaming play out against Margaret's increasing power. It is Margaret, with Somerset, who orders York's arrest and Margaret is the one York addresses when the king does not speak. Henry, as usual, is most notable in his silence as the beginnings of civil war take shape in front of him. In act 5, scene 4, Margaret takes control and becomes the character who will dominate so much of the next play. When Henry will neither "fight nor fly" (*2H6*, 5.4.3), Margaret takes over and strategizes. She understands that "if [Henry] be ta'en, [they] then should see the bottom / Of all [their] fortunes" (5.4.7-8) and realizes that they "can no more but fly" (5.4.5-6). Margaret, and not Henry, gives the order that they "shall to London... / where this breach now in [their] fortunes made may readily be stopped" (5.4.11-12). Margaret, who begins the play scheming for power, is now the de-

facto ruler of England. Though she is in part enabled by Henry's own refusal to rule, over the course of *2 Henry VI* Margaret develops her own theatrical power, works out which strategies work best for her, and by the play's end she gives commands that are obeyed.

In the opening scenes of *3 Henry VI*, Margaret is at the height of her power. She is clearly the leader of the Lancastrian faction, both politically and militarily. York indicates in the first scene of the play that it is "the Queen [who]...holds her Parliament" (*3H6*, 1.1.35) and he is later informed that "the Queen...intend[s] here to besiege" (1.2.49) his castle. York explicitly specifies that it is not just the Lancastrian army but "the army of the Queen [that] mean[s] to besiege [them]" (1.2.64). Richard of Gloucester calls her a "general" (1.2.68) outright and his brother George states that Margaret "[is] king, though [Henry] do wear the crown" (2.2.90). The Yorkist acknowledgement of Margaret's leadership is more than just a method of undercutting Henry. Though Richard asks "what should [they] fear" (1.2.68) from a woman, York credits the Lancastrian victory to Margaret, saying that "the army of the Queen hath got the field" (1.4.1) and exactly what they have to fear from Margaret is made horribly clear through York's execution in the following scene. The Lancastrian supporters defer to Margaret before Henry and, in act 2, scene 2, actually tell Henry to "depart the field" (2.2.73) because "the Queen has best success when [he] is absent" (2.2.74). Margaret, clearly, is the focal leader of the Lancastrian side. She is the one that their supporters defer to and their enemies fear. Far more than scheming queen, Margaret has become the effective ruler of King Henry's faction.

Among the Lancastrians, Margaret's position in relation to Henry's has undergone a major reversal brought about by her skilled use of theatrical power. In *3*

*Henry VI*, instead of Margaret's trying to control Henry, we see the king himself attempting to persuade his wife to do as he wishes. Margaret is notably absent when Henry agrees to disinherit his son and name York his heir. Margaret is understandably outraged by this and the scene between them demonstrates the extent of Margaret's theatrical power in comparison to Henry's. Henry begs her pardon, saying that "Warwick and the Duke [of York] enforced [him]" (3*H6*, 1.1.230), but Margaret refuses to forgive him and refuses his justification. She tells him that "the northern lords that have forsworn [Henry's] colours / Will follow [hers], if once they see them spread- / And spread they shall be, to [Henry's] foul disgrace / And the utter ruin of the house of York" (1.1.252). Henry requests that she "stay...and hear [him] speak" (1.1.258), but Margaret will not listen to him and responds that he "hast spoken too much already" (1.1.259). Where Margaret did not always have the final word between the two in 2 *Henry VI*, she is now very clearly in control. Unlike Henry, who seems to have never had much in the way of control, Margaret possesses the ability to command the action around her. Henry fails to persuade Margaret to stay and the Lancastrian lords follow her. Later, when Henry tries to assert that he is "a king, and privileged to speak" (3*H6*, 2.2.120), Margaret tells him to "defy [the lords]...or else hold close thy lips" (2.2.119). The privilege to speak that Henry claims is his as king has been transferred instead to Margaret. Henry's speeches, even in 2 *Henry VI*, do not work. Margaret's, however, by 3 *Henry VI*, now have the authority of a king's.

The death of the Duke of York reveals the ultimate triumph of Margaret's theatrical power and, specifically, her ability to stage spectacle. Eggert describes Joan's possession of the "status of simultaneous dramaturge and theatrical spectacle" (Eggert

58) as the source of her theatrical power. Margaret also possesses this ability to control the scene around her through self-staging and York's death is the most impressive example of her skill. When Clifford goes to draw his sword, Margaret stops him, saying "for a thousand causes I would prolong a while the traitor's life" (3*H6*, 1.4.52-3) and Northumberland looks to Margaret for direction as he asks "what would your grace have done unto [York] now" (1.4.66). They "make him stand upon [the] molehill" (1.4.68) at Margaret's order and Margaret produces both the napkin stained with Rutland's blood (1.4.80) and the paper crown which she mockingly sets on York's head (3 *Henry*, 1.4.96), then knocks off (1.4.108). Even York's admittedly moving speeches are allowed only because Margaret would "hear what orisons he makes" (1.4.111) and York is aware that by speaking he is doing what Margaret wants, saying "bidd'st me rage? Why, now thou hast thy wish. / Wouldst have me weep? Why, now thou hast they will" (1.4.144-5). Margaret orchestrates this whole spectacle, all the way down to ordering "off with his head" (1.4.180) at the end of the scene. Margaret is in complete control of the entire scene and by allowing York to speak she reaffirms the fact the he can only speak because she allows it. York proves himself an opponent worthy of Margaret through his own theatrical skills, specifically the long speeches of grief which move Northumberland to tears. However, as will be discussed more fully in relation to *Richard III*, lamentation, even when it moves others to grief, is only marginally successful as a theatrical strategy within the context of the fiction. York may move Northumberland emotionally, but he cannot save himself, especially not when set against Margaret's mastery of spectacle. York's death is the culmination of Margaret's use of spectacle and the height of her theatrical power.

The intensity of York's execution is particularly notable when compared with the accounts of his death in the chronicles which served as Shakespeare's sources. According to Hall's Chronicle, "York is slain on the battlefield, [but] Clifford caused his head to be 'stryken of, and set on it a croune of paper, and so fixed it on a pole, and presented it to the Quene'" (Levine 89-90). Holinshed "records that [York] was mocked with a paper crown and a derisive show of allegiance" (Goy-Blanquet 121), but the chronicle, in stark contrast to Shakespeare's play, "casts Margaret as audience rather than player" (Levine 90). Shakespeare, in depicting York's death, "goes one step further than the chroniclers with her presentation to York of a handkerchief dipped in Rutland's blood" (Goy-Blanquet 121). As Nina S. Levine indicates, "Shakespeare...goes far beyond the scope of history to make Margaret [the] chief tormentor and executioner" (89-90) in act 1, scene 4. *3 Henry VI* thus deliberately gives the Margaret of the plays a showcase for her theatrical power far beyond the portrayal in the chronicles of the historical Margaret of Anjou. The play's adaptation of its sources serves to emphasize Margaret's theatrical power, as York's death becomes a spectacle staged by Margaret.

Margaret runs into trouble, however, when words are not enough. York's son Edward ignores her command for him to stay (*3H6*, 2.2.175). He declares that he "in this resolution [defies her], not willing any further conference" (2.2.170-1) and says that he "will no longer stay [since]...words will cost ten thousand lives" (2.2.177). Margaret's tongue possesses "more poisons than the adder's tooth" (1.4.113) and words are her best weapons. They are what she uses to maintain control of the action around her. However, unlike Richard the "crookback prodigy...with his grumbling voice" (1.4.76-7), "wanton Edward" (1.4.75) has no interest in playing Margaret's game. Richard's own tendency

towards performance and spectacle gives Margaret room to maneuver. Edward's refusal to participate, like that of Joan's spirits, is, to Margaret, far more destructive. By robbing Margaret of the chance to speak the new King Edward deprives her of her most powerful asset and at this point things begin to go wrong for her.

Margaret's theatrical power and her political power seem to go hand in hand. Margaret achieves her immense political power by asserting her position through the use of theatrical power. Without much political power, however, Margaret's theatrical power is greatly weakened. Having lost the battle and been forced to flee to France, Margaret's chance to reclaim power comes when she finds herself again in a war of words, this time with Warwick, in order to gain King Louis's aid. She demands that Louis "hear [her] speak" (*3H6*, 3.3.65), and vows not to leave until she, with "talk and tears, /...make[s] King Louis behold / [Warwick's] sly conveyance and [his] lord's false love" (3.3.158-60). Although Margaret does gain Louis's support, words are not quite enough. Although Margaret's insinuations about Edward, now the king, are borne out in the news that he has married Elizabeth Gray, that news, and not Margaret's attempts to persuade, convince Louis to give her aid. This limitation of the effectiveness of Margaret's theatrical power is seen again in the battle at act 5, scene 4. Margaret, rather than her son the Prince of Wales, is set up as Edward's opposite and rival. Before leaving France she sends the message to Edward that she is returning "ready to put armor on" (4.1.103) and both are seen rallying their "brave followers" (5.4.68), "lords, knights and gentlemen" (5.4.73), commanding them to "strike up the drum, cry 'Courage'; and away" (5.3.24) and "fight in justice;.../ Be valiant and give signal to the fight" (5.4.81-2). Like Joan, however, Margaret is not completely successful at winning battles and, when the battle is lost,

there seems to be only so much that can be done to attempt to regain theatrical power. Margaret can maintain control of the scene around her only as long as she can do so through direct, immediate action. While Elizabeth will later do battle with words, Margaret cannot win a physical, literal battle with theatrical power. Once the battle is lost, Margaret loses her power to command as well.

Despite Margaret's loss, the ending of *3 Henry VI* points ahead to the power of cursing that she exerts in the final play of the tetralogy. No longer able to command, Margaret adopts a new kind of theatrical power. While she makes gestures towards cursing upon Suffolk's exile in *2 Henry VI*, Margaret begins to use it as her primary mode of speech at the end of *3 Henry VI*. Richard is on to something when he asks Edward "why should [Margaret] live to fill the world with words" (*3H6*, 5.5.43). This is, in fact, exactly what Margaret does, and exactly how she causes trouble. Pleading does not work for these characters. Margaret is unable to plead for her son's life or her own death and, with her son and husband imprisoned, she abandons the failed personas of warrior queen and pleading mother for that of the cursing widow. Margaret's dangerous power continues in her final moments in the play. She says that if Edward, George or Richard "chance to have a child, / Look in his youth to have him cut off" (5.5.65-7) and again, as she is dragged off, "so come to you and yours as to this Prince" (5.5.82). The final lines of the scene, with Edward going to his queen and the doomed son she has just born, serve as a clear reminder that these curses must, historically, come true.

The portrayal of female characters in *Richard III* differs dramatically from that of the *Henry VI* plays in a number of ways. Apart from being noticeably more populated with women, with four female characters in significant roles, *Richard III* moves away

from the representation of women as “dangerous, demonic Others” (Howard & Rackin 106). Unlike the warrior women in the earlier plays, the women of *Richard III* are weeping widows. Howard and Rackin argue that in *Richard III* the female characters lose the “dangerous theatrical power that made characters like Joan and Margaret potent threats” (105) and “become an undifferentiated chorus of ritual lamentation, curse and prophecy” (116). While there are clearly significant differences between the representation of women in the first three plays of the tetralogy and the last one, focusing on those differences as representative of stark contrasts loses sight of development that carries over from the *Henry* plays into *Richard*. Though Margaret no longer occupies the battlefield, she, Elizabeth Gray, and the Duchess of York put up a resistance to Richard’s rule that is ultimately far more successful than the rebellions of Joan, Eleanor, and even Margaret herself as she appears in the earlier plays.

The female use of theatrical power seen in the *Henry VI* plays is directed in *Richard III* towards Richard’s illegitimate rule. Howard and Rackin discuss women in the early history plays as capable of becoming “custodians of dynastic legitimacy” (26), a role clearly taken up in *Richard III*. Margaret, Elizabeth, and the Duchess play significant roles in bringing down Richard. They silence him, rhetorically and symbolically, before he is literally silenced for good on the battlefield. The failed wooing scene in act 4, scene 4 is the first time in the play that Richard is defeated and it marks a turning point in the play. After he loses control in that scene, he loses control of his kingdom. The “dangerous theatrical power” (105) that Howard and Rackin see as lacking in the female characters of *Richard III* is, in fact, their greatest asset and it clearly poses a threat to Richard’s regime.

Howard and Rackin argue that “witchcraft is reduced from genuine threat to a transparent slander” (107) in *Richard III*. Yet, although the overtly demonic forces linked to Joan and Eleanor are absent, there is still a prevalent sense that supernatural power exists and is particularly accessible to women. Though witchcraft itself is reduced, it is not rendered totally unthreatening since the power and potential of cursing is very present. Even Lady Anne, whose theatrical power quickly fails under Richard’s influence, utters curses that are clearly fulfilled. The end of the play sees fulfilled Anne’s curse on Richard of “more direful hap.../ Than [she] can wish to wolves, to spiders, toads, / Or any creeping venom’d thing that lives” (R3, 1.2.17-20) and that his eventual wife may be “more miserable made by the life of [Richard]” (4.1.75) than he made Anne by killing her husband and father-in-law. After marrying Richard, Anne tells other women that she has “proved the subject of [her] own soul’s curse” (4.1.80) and has “never yet one hour in his bed /... [enjoyed] the golden dew of sleep” (4.1.82-3). Of the major female characters in *Richard III*, Anne, silenced by Richard’s seduction and left out of the women’s final unification and confrontation with Richard, is the least able to use a “carefully managed performance” (Eggert 58) to further her ends. Nonetheless, even she clearly possesses the ability to use words effectively. Although “cursing hardly equals the planning, instigation and control of dramatic action” (Eggert 67), there is very distinct potency in it. Unlike the prophetic speech that Eleanor Cobham undertakes, cursing has the implication of causation. Cursing does not simply reveal the future; it suggests that the ones placing the curses are somehow able, through their words, to make that curse happen. Though not immediately effective, curses contain the threat of eventual, looming action.

In *Richard III*, Margaret harnesses the affective power of cursing and other characters recognize that her curses have a causal relationship with the events that transpire. The Margaret that returns to England after her husband's death is noticeably different from her character in the earlier plays. She has exited the political and military realm and now operates mainly through cursing, following a pattern set, ironically enough, by York before his death at her hands in *3 Henry VI*. Margaret remains, however, "the most powerful of Richard's female antagonists" (Howard and Rackin 106) and the first character to see Richard for what he is and the threat that he represents. She cannot be persuaded into silence and has to be drowned out by Richard's interruptions. Margaret says if "curses pierce the clouds and enter heaven / ...give way, dull clouds, to my quick curses" (*R3*, 1.3.192-3) and describes her curses as "ascend[ing] the sky / And there awak[ing] God's gentle sleeping peace" (*R3*, 1.3.285-6), prompting God, presumably, into fulfilling them. The courtiers upon whom she levels her curses attempt to dismiss her and the power that she wields. Hastings calls her "false-boding" (1.3.245), Dorset says "she is lunatic" (1.3.252), and Buckingham tells her that "curses never pass / The lips of those that breathe them" (1.3.283-4). Elizabeth has somewhat more faith in the power of cursing, but declares that Margaret has "breathed [her] curse against [herself]" (1.3.238). Time, of course, proves Margaret right. Hastings concludes that "[Margaret's] heavy curse / Is lighted on [his] wretched head" (3.4.92-3) and Gray tells Rivers that "Margaret's curse is fallen on [their] heads" (3.3.14). Elizabeth describes herself as "the thrall of Margaret's curses" (4.1.45). Even Buckingham, the last to doubt Richard, realizes that "Margaret's curse falls heavy on [his] neck" (5.1.25). The characters all

recognize Margaret's power as somehow having a hand in the events that transpire over the course of the play.

Rackin and Howard argue that Richard "takes from women [the power] to curse and seduce" (110) and they make much of the fact that "Richard literally appropriates the demonic power of a woman's voice" (109). While Richard's self-conscious theatricality certainly "affiliates [him]... with a feminine manner of dramatic seduction" (Eggert 71), the outcome of the play suggests that his attempt to appropriate Margaret's curse fails. Her curse that Richard will not sleep "unless it be while some tormenting dream / Affrights [him] with a hell of ugly devils" (*R3*, 1.3.223-4) is fulfilled in the nightmare sequence of Act five, scene five. Rivers and Gray also include Richard under the scope of Margaret's curse (3.3.16). Margaret's curse succeeds and Richard's bid to usurp her cursing fails. Margaret clearly does retain some of the theatrical power she possesses in parts 2 and 3 of *Henry VI*. Though it is to a lesser degree, her voice is still effective and gives her a measure of control over the action around her. That control, however, is not quite enough to let her succeed in defeating Richard.

Howard and Rackin make the case that the unification of the female characters in act four marks a rejection of some sort of essential individuality or characterological subjectivity that makes Joan and the younger version of Margaret more attractive to feminist analysis. Though Howard and Rackin argue that the female characters of *Richard III* "lose their individuality and become an undifferentiated chorus of ritual lamentation" (Howard and Rackin 116), the unification serves a vital purpose. Throughout much of the play, the female characters, even those ostensibly on the same side, are competitive in their grief, with the Duchess of York declaring that Elizabeth's

grief is “but a moiety of [her] moan” (*R3*, 2.2.60). These characters insist on their individuality by each emphasizing her own personal grief. Towards the end of the play they finally move from “a condition of bickering rivalry to a condition of sympathetic camaraderie” (Miner 45). That the female characters are mirrors of one another and work together in *Richard III* should not necessarily be grounds for dismissing them as powerless. The type of individualized voice these characters are accused of lacking is both arguably present and not really the point.

The “formation of bonds among the women against a single foe” (Miner 48) as they rehearse the various losses they have all experienced does not diminish their individuality. Their interactions in act 4, scene 1 and act 4, scene 1 reveal the connections that these characters, in so many ways very different, actually share and allow them to work together in a manner that in no way compromises their characterological integrity. In these scenes these characters come to understand that all four of the major female characters have lost husbands, children, or both at Richard’s hands. Elizabeth and Margaret in particular, though one is English and the other French, resemble one another. Both are inconvenient queens: unwise choices for royal marriage who gain their positions through sexual attractiveness. Not only does Margaret bring no dowry, Henry must actually “[give] away his own, / To match with her that brings no vantages” (*2H6*, 1.1.126-7). Margaret herself tells Suffolk that she is “unworthy to be Henry’s wife” (*1 Henry*, 5.5.88). Elizabeth, apart from being “too mean to be [Edward’s] queen” (*3H6*, 3.2.97), is politically disastrous as she brings no beneficial foreign alliance to “strengthen [England] / ‘Gainst foreign storms” (4.1.36-7) and through marriage to her “King Louis of [of France] / Becomes [an] enemy” (4.1.28-9) of King Edward. Both enter their royal

marriages from distinctly subordinate positions, Margaret as prisoner and Elizabeth as petitioner, and both are generally characterized as overly interfering in politics. Elizabeth is also linked to warrior-Margaret as a mother figure. Though Elizabeth never fights on the battlefield, both women struggle first for their sons' lives, and then for their sons' memories. The unification of these characters, particularly that between Elizabeth and Margaret, is not simply about their mutual hatred of Richard. It illustrates their identification with each other beyond the York and Lancaster divide. It is Elizabeth and Margaret, the white queen and the red queen, who first put aside the War of the Roses in order to destroy a single enemy.

The unification of the women in act 4, scene 4 is pivotal in the interaction between Richard and Elizabeth that follows, as one of the major points of distinction between Elizabeth and Margaret is that until this scene Elizabeth's speech is mostly lamentation and includes no cursing. It is her interaction with Margaret that allows Elizabeth to put lamentation aside and develop her theatrical skills in order to take on Richard. As mentioned briefly in relation to York's death, many of the characters in the first tetralogy express lamentation, but it is very rarely portrayed as theatrically powerful. Expressions of grief are not effective. While the theatrical audience may be moved by such speeches, fictional audiences within the context of the plays rarely are. While Northumberland is moved to tears by York's plight and "weep[s] with him" (2*H6*, 1.4.171), Margaret, who could have halted the execution, is clearly unaffected. Anne's expressions of grief for King Henry and Prince Edward cannot save her from Richard's seduction. The chorus of grief led by Elizabeth and the Duchess is unproductive until Margaret steps in. In act 4, scene 4, Margaret brings to an end the chorus of lamenting

that dominates the women's scenes in *Richard III*. The women lament the Richards, the Edwards, and the other victims of the conflict between York and Lancaster in this scene, but Margaret concludes the lamenting and moves on, to focus more productively on destroying Richard. While the Duchess weeps, Margaret instead is "hungry for revenge" (*R3*, 4.4.61) and vows that "at hand / Ensues [Richard's] piteous and unpitied end" (4.4.73-4). Elizabeth asks Margaret, who is "well skilled in curses" (*Richard*, 4.4.116), to "teach [her] how to curse [her] enemies" (4.4.117). Margaret's response to Elizabeth is a list of instructions that she and the Duchess decide to use to "smother [Richard]...with copious exclams" (4.4.133-5). Though Margaret exits the play in this scene, she bequeaths her vocal power to the Duchess and to Elizabeth. The "communion of sympathy shared by the three women" (Miner 48), and their rejection of lamentation in favour of cursing, enables the vocal domination of Richard that occurs after Margaret leaves. Her instruction is vital to their resistance to Richard's silencing. Margaret's teaching allows Elizabeth to appropriate her skill and, rather than lamenting her woes to Richard, to attack. In Elizabeth stands the unified force of all the widows and grieving mothers in the play and, taking up the project of defeating Richard, in a sense she speaks for all of them.

Howard and Rackin link the loss of individualized voices in the female characters of *Richard III* with a loss of theatrical power that makes them less threatening than the women of the earlier plays in the tetralogy (105). This assertion fails to work for a number of reasons. Though the women do speak in "undifferentiated, formal blank verse" (Howard and Rackin 106), Elizabeth has a distinct style of speech that none of the other women share. Elizabeth's dialogue with Richard in the wooing scene is in the same

pattern of witty one-liners, word twisting, and quick responses that she uses with King Edward in *3 Henry VI*. Edward asks “would not [she] do much to do [her children] good?” (*3H6*, 3.2.38), to which she responds that “to do them good [she] would sustain some harm” (3.2.39). He tells her that “[she] will take exceptions to [his] boon” (3.2.46) and she says that she will not “except she cannot do it” (3.2.47). His line “to tell thee plain, I aim to lie with thee” (3.2.69) is met with her “tell[ing him] plain [she] had rather lie in prison” (3.2.70). Most of Margaret’s text is in long speeches, and even Anne, whose wit almost rivals Elizabeth’s, never quite achieves the pace of her repartee. In fact, with Anne and Richard, Richard’s lines are the witty responses. When Anne wishes “ill rest...[to] the chamber where [he] liest” (*R3*, 1.2.12), Richard’s response is “so will it, Madam, till I lie with you” (1.2.13). The text of the dialogue is very similar, but while Richard, as discussed above, is very much in control of his conversation with Anne, Elizabeth clearly has the upper hand in the conversation with Edward. This particular style of repartee distinguishes Elizabeth’s speech from that of the other female characters and actually serves to link her somewhat with Richard, the character often cited as the most theatrically powerful in this play.

As for the issue of theatrical power and the extent to which the female characters are threatening, the length to which Richard goes to silence the women seems to suggest that they do in fact pose a significant threat to his regime. From the opening of the play, Richard is faced with inconvenient female voices, and consistently does as much as he can to shut them up. In contrast to Lady Anne, Margaret’s voice is dangerous and difficult to dismiss as she cannot be persuaded into silence. Perhaps the greatest indicator of the potential threat posed by Margaret’s cursing is that Richard tries to co-opt that

power by interjecting with her own name when she attempts to “make the period to [her] curse” (*R3*, 1.3.237). With Margaret, Richard has no other aim but to silence her and attempts to do so through interrupting her speech. When Margaret leaves Elizabeth and the Duchess to go after Richard he tries to literally “drown [their] exclamations” (4.4.154) by commanding a “flourish” and “alarum” from trumpet and drum (4.4.149). Like Margaret, and especially now that they possess Margaret’s teaching, Elizabeth and the Duchess pose a significant threat that Richard makes a point of attempting to silence.

The confrontation between Richard and the Duchess of York illustrates just how effective Margaret’s teaching is. Before Margaret’s instruction, Elizabeth does show some sparks that hint at her eventual status as Margaret’s worthy successor. The Duchess of York, on the other hand, does not. She mirrors Margaret in having lost her husband and son, a fact Margaret points out in act 4, scene 4, but apart from that her role is very different. She functions in *Richard III* essentially as the chief mourner of all the mourning Yorks, calling herself “the mother of...griefs” (*R3* 2.2.80) and “sorrow’s nurse” (2.2.88). While Margaret wars against the Duke of York in *3 Henry VI*, the Duchess is entirely absent from that play. Unlike Margaret, who returns to England to make her “quick curses” (1.3.193), the Duchess initially objects to learning how to curse, asking “why...calamity [should] be full of words” (4.4.126). Early in *Richard III*, she tells her son that she hopes God will “put meekness in [his] breast / Love, charity, obedience, and true duty” (2.2.95-6). Besides its obvious futility, this wish Richard himself mocks and dismisses. After learning from Margaret, however, the Duchess becomes far more difficult to dismiss. Her interaction with Richard in act 4, scene 4 demonstrates her struggle to be allowed to speak and to be listened to. The Duchess

repeatedly insists on speaking and being heard, and she vocally dominates the conversation. Richard tries to cut her off (4.4.165) and orders his men to “strike up the drum” (4.4.180), but she continues to demand that he “let [her] speak” (*Richard*, 4.4.159) and “hear [her] speak” (4.4.180). He finally relents when she tells him to “hear a word, / For [she] shall never speak to him again” (4.4.181-2). The Duchess refuses to be silenced by Richard and gives him her “most heavy curse” (4.4.188). This level of theatrical power becomes available to the Duchess only after she learns from Margaret.

The threat that Elizabeth poses to Richard is the most grave of all the female characters for number of reasons. Clare McManus, in discussing women’s participation in Caroline masque, argues that “the expression found in female refusal to perform is empowering” (18). This is absolutely true in the interaction between Richard and Elizabeth, as Richard requires not silence from Elizabeth, but speech. He wishes to “talk a word with [her]” (*R3*, 4.4.199), and much of the ensuing dialogue concerns what Elizabeth will say to her daughter, whom he wishes to marry. Richard needs Elizabeth’s voice for his purpose, the very thing that makes her dangerous to him. Richard seems to believe that Elizabeth’s cooperation is vital to his plot to marry the princess and help legitimize his rule and because her participation in this dialogue is necessary for Richard’s success, Elizabeth’s refusal gives her a great deal of power. As important as performance and spectacle are to the exertion of theatrical power, refusing to speak and perform as directed has its own power. Alfar cites the opening scene of *King Lear* as a notable example of this. By ordering his daughters to declare their love for him, she argues, Lear “produces a court spectacle with each movement, word and purpose emphasizing his benevolence—as father and king—towards his daughters and their great

love for him” (89). Cordelia’s famous refusal to “heave / [her] heart into [her] mouth” (*King Lear*, 1.1.89-90) thus amounts to a clear rejection of the kind of performance of love that Lear demands. Without Cordelia’s participation, the spectacle fails. Margaret’s theatrical power is hugely undermined when Edward refuses to play her game (*3H6*, 2.2.177). Anne, conversely, does not refuse to interact with Richard and allows herself to be directed by him. Elizabeth, however, does not cooperate with Richard fully or truthfully and her refusal to act gives her great theatrical power.

Further, Elizabeth is a threat to Richard for another reason. She represents the combined force of all the widowed queens and mothers of dead princes, and thus holds the full power of Margaret’s cursing. Elizabeth, and not Richard, controls the conversation. The scene between Elizabeth and Richard in act 4, scene 4 is both a replaying and a reversal of the wooing in act 1, scene 2. Elizabeth’s witty one-liners and mocking banter are used extensively here and, with one unbroken sequence running twenty-five lines, at far greater length than in the earlier scenes. Elizabeth and Richard are already the two characters who use this type of dialogue to greatest effect, and, in this scene, Elizabeth proves the winner. Elizabeth is just as skillful as Richard at twisting the meaning of her opponent’s words. He tells her he “will love [the princess] everlastingly” (*R3*, 4.4.280), to which Elizabeth asks “how long shall that title ‘ever’ last” (*R3*, 4.4.281). Richard’s response is “sweetly in force until her fair life’s end” (4.4.281). Elizabeth shoots back with “how long fairly shall her sweet life last” (4.4.282). He accuses her of “confound[ing] [his] meaning” (4.4.248) and says her “reasons are...too quick” (4.4.292). If theatrical power is held through effective speech that gives characters control of the action around them, Elizabeth clearly holds great theatrical power. Richard

says nothing that Elizabeth does not have an answer for. For every reason Richard offers, Elizabeth mocks him and quickly rejects that reason.

Not only does Elizabeth resist being silenced, she employs the same sort of interruption Richard uses and is able to exert control over his speech. For everything by which Richard attempts to swear, Elizabeth cuts him off and refuses to hear his oath. Richard begins to vow by his “George, [his] garter, and [his] crown” (*R3*, 4.4.297), “[him]self” (4.4.305), “the world” (4.4.406), “[his] father’s death” (4.4.307), “by God” (4.4.308), and finally by “the time to come” (4.4.318). For every attempt, Elizabeth not only supplies the reason why it is not valid, but also refuses to hear the end of the oath. Each time, she permits Richard no more than four words before she interrupts him, silencing him just as he silenced Anne and attempted to silence Margaret. Throughout the scene, Elizabeth is absolutely the one in control, to the point that Richard can only speak as long as she permits him.

Although “a number of critics have accepted Richard’s judgment at the end of their encounter” (Howard & Rankin 108) that Elizabeth has submitted to his will, judging by the text this is clearly not the case. In the following scene Stanley makes it clear to Richmond’s messenger Sir Christopher that “the Queen hath heartily consented/ He should espouse... her daughter” (*R3*, 4.5.17-18). However, Elizabeth’s successful evasion of Richard is clearly indicated in the scene itself. Her questions at the end of the scene, “shall I be tempted of the devil thus?” (4.4.349), “shall I forget myself to be myself?” (2.2.351), and “shall I go win my daughter to thy will?” (4.4.357), retain the sarcastic mode of rhetorical questioning that she uses when asking “how canst thou woo her?” (4.4.54) and “wilt thou learn of me? (4.4.256). Perhaps more striking is the fact that in

this scene, Richard, the master deceiver, is himself deceived. Richard never realizes that Elizabeth has not, in fact, been taken in by him and has been in contact with Richmond since she sent her son Dorset to join him (4.1.42.) several scenes previously. Eggert describes Joan's theatrical power as "depend[ing] upon her verbal, physical, and dramaturgical presentation of herself" (58). In this scene, Elizabeth clearly possesses some of this power and Richard is successfully deceived.

Elizabeth's defeat of Richard is a turning point in the play. Once Richard cannot control the women, he loses control of his kingdom. The women are not directly implicated in Richard's fall, and Elizabeth's plotting with Richmond is never seen, yet the second wooing scene is absolutely significant. Until this point in the play Richard is a powerful and manipulative figure; afterwards his power begins to unravel. Though the female characters of *Richard III* do not take to the battlefield, they do, in fact, possess a remarkable degree of theatrical power. Richard is threatened enough by the women's speech to make a point of attempting to literally silence them. The power of cursing is recognized by many of the characters as threatening and later effective. Cursing is beyond Richard, who, though he wields considerable vocal power, is unable to appropriate cursing for his own use. The emotional unification of the women allows them to unify vocally and consolidate what resources they do have. Elizabeth and the Duchess, in their final scene, refuse to be silenced and in that refusal is a symbolic rejection of Richard's power. The following scenes show a literal rejection of that power, where Richard is finally silenced for good.

The female characters of the first tetralogy are impressive. Joan la Pucelle leads armies. Eleanor Cobham schemes to seize the throne. Margaret of Anjou rules in her

husband's stead and eventually becomes Richard's most theatrically powerful antagonist. Queen Elizabeth and the Duchess of York also resist Richard's rule, with Elizabeth actively collaborating with his enemies. There is, however, a range of strategies with which the female characters access and exert theatrical power. Joan's skills lie in persuasion and seduction, whereas Margaret is a master of spectacle and Queen Elizabeth relies on wit and debate. All three engage in cursing. With control and good judgment they are able to become actors in the political world from which, by virtue of their gender, they should be excluded. Impressive as they are to a theatre audience, the effect of these characters on the characters around them and on the fictional context in which they exist marks them as theatrically powerful.

Chapter Two:

Political Condemnation, Attempted Silencing, and

Theatrical Power in Context

Studying the political voices of female characters in the first tetralogy, we must consider not only those voices themselves, but also how they function within the fictional context of the plays they appear in and how they are responded to by the men who are their enemies. The male characters of these plays, faced with adversaries like Joan la Pucelle and Margaret of Anjou, seek to combat the powerful female voices that oppose them. While the men in the plays do react to the most powerful of these characters with fear and hate, those reactions are at least as politically motivated as they are driven by moral disapproval. Such responses are reactions not simply to the transgressive behaviour of Joan, Margaret, and the rest, but also to the political threats that they represent. The enemies of these women exploit misogynist rhetoric about transgressive women in order to inflict political damage. They attempt to undermine the theatrical power of these characters. The voices of these women prove difficult for their enemies to overcome, and those men seek, instead, to silence them through discredit and disgrace. The gendered slurs and accusations of sexual misconduct that the men direct towards their female opponents serve to underline and emphasize the gender disadvantage these characters face. By calling the women who take up arms or manoeuvre politically unnatural and evil, the male characters attempt to deny their enemies' access to power. These women justify their positions through queenship and holy virginity. By accusing them of sexual misconduct and disorder, the men attempt to undermine their enemies' claims of authority. Ultimately, however, the success of these attempts to undermine the powerful

voices of such characters has little to do with the truth of the accusations. Rather, the way these characters respond to the gendered attacks and accusations against them determines their success and survival. While these female characters do prove vulnerable to accusations of sexual impropriety and gender-role transgression, the success of some of these characters, as opposed to the failure of others, suggests the vital importance of consistent rhetoric in responding to those accusations. The male reactions to theatrically powerful female characters include attempts to silence the women in gendered terms and, specifically, through sexually based condemnation. However, the plays do not grant the male characters a great deal of moral authority and the accusations against the women do not exclude the women from becoming foundational members of the new dynasty. The first tetralogy demonstrates, but does not necessarily endorse, the double standard that these attacks express.

Once again, Joan serves as a useful benchmark, as she is in many ways typical of the powerful female characters vilified and condemned in gendered terms for political purposes within the fiction of the first tetralogy. Cristina Leon Alfar's argument that "evil [in Shakespearean tragedy] is ascribed to women who aspire to self-determination and thereby disrupt their designated sociopolitical function as obedient daughters and wives" (19) clearly applies to Joan in the sense that Joan usurps for herself qualities of masculine rule and her enemies use those qualities as justification for their political condemnation of her. Further, as she insists that she "must not yield to any rites of love" (*IH6*, 1.3.92), Joan thus asserts "sexual control over her body" (Jankowski 87). Instead of following the accepted path of a lower-class woman, she rejects patrilineal and patriarchal order and inserts herself into the highest level of power on her own terms. The initial success of

Joan's theatrical power thus represents a threat to the supposedly natural order through both her class and gender for which her enemies forcefully condemn her.

However, while men discredit Joan along these lines, it is not solely because she causes the kind of disruption Alfar and Jankowski identify. They suggest that these characters, or characters like them, are targeted and attacked because of their gender. While I certainly agree that many male characters respond to such women with fear and hatred, the contexts of such responses suggest to me that gender is not so much the motive of condemnation as the means. Joan's military success offends her enemies and motivates their attacks upon her. Those enemies use Joan's supposed transgressions as ammunition to undermine her leadership. They ascribe unnatural and evil qualities to Joan in order both to undermine her as a leader and to explain away her victories. To the English, Joan is alarming not only because of her gender, but also because she is, for a time, militarily successful. Defeated by Joan, Talbot tells himself that "a witch by fear, not force... / Drives back our troops and conquers as she lists" (*IH6*, 1.7.21-2). Rather than acknowledging Joan's actual military prowess, Talbot attributes Joan's success to the theory that she must "practice and converse with spirits" (2.1.25). He describes Joan's conquest of Rouen, achieved through the thoroughly un-supernatural tactic of sneaking into the city with soldiers disguised as "that vulgar sort of market men / That come to gather money for their corn" (3.2.4-5), as "hellish mischief" (3.4.4) wrought by "that damned sorceress" (3.4.3). She is a "vile fiend" (3.5.5) and "railing Hecate" (3.5.24). Joan's enemies attribute her victories to witchcraft through accusations which both dismiss her actual military skills and serve to vilify her further. The exclusively gendered slurs with which the men condemn Joan are not only expressions of their

disapproval, but also ploys to undermine Joan and exclude her from serious consideration as a military and political force. The fact that they capitalize upon her gender and sexuality is as much a calculated tactic as it is a straightforward reaction.

Margaret's enemies dismiss and sexually objectify her in much the same manner as Joan's, and they do so for similar reasons. Despite the somewhat more respectful treatment that Margaret, as queen, receives, her political enemies, just like Joan's, use her gender as a way of attempting to dismiss her from the political arena and they react to her voice by trying to silence it. Although she never physically takes the field in the same manner as Joan, Margaret clearly functions as the "general" (1.2.68) of the Lancastrian forces and, even before her rejection of Henry, she takes an active role in politics and proves a key player in the Duke of Gloucester's fall. Margaret's threat to the Lancastrian side is political, yet the insults leveled at Margaret are exclusively gendered and focus a great deal on her supposedly unnatural behaviour. Throughout the three plays in which she plays a major role, Margaret consistently puts herself in positions of power and authority far beyond the supposed limits of her gender, a fact that her political enemies exploit. When Margaret disagrees with Humphrey over the king's need for a Protector, Humphrey tells her that "these are no women's matters" (2*H6*, 1.3.121). He does not bother to challenge her argument itself. Instead, he simply rejects her right to be involved in the discussion at all. Richard scoffs at the idea of a woman leading an army (3*H6*, 1.2.68), asking his father "what should we fear" (1.2.68). While his dismissive reaction to Margaret proves foolish, it also demonstrates the utter rejection of the female leader as a concept and, once again, reduces the warrior in Margaret to a figure defined by gender. These men react to her in a gendered way, but they use that reaction for political

advantage. York even makes a point of insulting Margaret's appearance, saying that "'tis beauty that doth often make women proud— / But, God he knows, [Margaret's] share thereof is small" (1.4.129-30). His comment that Helen of Troy "was fairer far than [Margaret]" (2.2.146) serves the same purpose. He attacks Margaret on gendered terms, attempting to demean her and remove her from consideration as a political force. Focusing on Margaret's appearance, York emphasizes her gender and attempts to deny her any power, even stripping from her the power of seduction, by calling her ugly. By rejecting women as unnatural and unfit to participate in the political sphere, Humphrey and York ultimately seek to capitalize on Margaret's gender disadvantage and thus prevent her from appropriating the political power they desire.

The terms of the invective directed towards Margaret by her enemies focus exclusively on her gender and, notably, on her position as a "cruel" mother in contrast to York's "womanish" weeping. York's famous description of Margaret, "O tiger's heart wrapped in a woman's hide" (1.4.138), focuses on her supposedly unwomanly qualities. As proof of her unnaturalness, he cites specifically the fact that Margaret can "drain the lifeblood of the child / To bid the father weep his eyes withal / And yet be seen to have a woman's face" (1.4.139-41). York says that while "women are soft, mild, pitiful, and flexible" (1.4.142), Margaret is instead "stern, obdurate, flinty, rough, remorseless" (1.4.143). To York, Margaret's violence marks her as an unnatural mother. Like Volumnia in *Coriolanus*, Margaret faces the accusation that "she has violated her own maternal, nurturing qualities" (Jankowski 103). If Volumnia stands as "a swift lesson in how a threatening woman is called into question and eventually demonized because she violates accepted social stereotypes regarding her role in society" (Jankowski 102-103),

then Margaret certainly does so as well. Although Margaret's treatment of York is not entirely without reason and, really, not all that much worse than the behaviour of some of the male characters in *3 Henry VI*, her treatment of York comes to condemn her far more than do the rumours of her adultery. Margaret's cruelty towards York is referenced even in *Richard III* (1.3.171-84, 4.4.44-5). Margaret's position as queen and ruler depends upon her claims of a very specific kind of motherly love for and loyalty to her son. York compares Margaret to a standard of motherhood that prioritizes kindness, nurture, and has no place in dynastic politics. The ruthless protectiveness with which Margaret defends her son's claim does not fit with that conception of what motherhood should be, and by positioning Margaret as an unnatural mother, York irrevocably destabilizes the foundation of her public image.

Although Joan and Margaret are the most prominent examples, shades of this pattern of politically motivated gendered attacks are visible in Richard's attempts to undermine Queen Elizabeth, who emerges as one of his most vocal and dangerous enemies. Richard uses the same logic of unnatural roles that is deployed against Joan and Margaret to dispute Elizabeth's participation in court politics. In saying to Clarence that "we are the Queen's abjects and must obey" (*R3*, 1.1.107), Richard echoes the earlier commentary on Margaret's control of Henry. He tells Clarence that Elizabeth is to blame for orchestrating Clarence's imprisonment on the flimsy basis of "prophecies and dreams" (1.1.54) and says that "this it is when men are ruled by women" (1.1.62). The truth, of course, is that Richard is responsible for Clarence's situation, but Elizabeth, known to be an influential voice and, according to King Edward, "not exempt from" (2.1.18) court rivalries, becomes a convenient scapegoat for Richard to blame. Again, the

powerful female characters are reacted to with hatred and distrust, reactions that are then exploited by her political enemies. The fact that Elizabeth is his enemy is what draws Richard's ire, not the fact that she is involved in court politics, and his dismissal of that involvement is part of his political strategy. Like Margaret and Joan, Elizabeth is an unruly woman who won't obey men, and therefore the men exploit sexual and other denigrations.

The politically motivated nature of the gendered attacks that Joan, Margaret, and Elizabeth are subject to is particularly striking when compared with the reactions, within the fiction, to the other female characters. As discussed in the first chapter, the Countess of Auvergne and Eleanor Cobham both fail to exert the same level of theatrical power and, by extension, political power, that Joan, Margaret, and Elizabeth all, to some extent, achieve. While they all behave fairly badly, the female characters who pose a threat to their enemies are vilified through accusations of unnatural behaviour and sexual misconduct. The Countess, for example, has an aim very similar to Joan's and takes it upon herself to fight for France. While Talbot's courteous behaviour towards the Countess, calling her "fair lady" (*IH6*, 2.3.73) even after she has tried to capture him, may reflect his position as the figure of chivalrous knighthood, it also contrasts distinctly with his words about Joan. Talbot describes Joan, a far greater danger to him than the Countess, as surrounded by "lustful paramours" (3.5.13) and he reduces her to either "pucelle or puzzel" (1.6.85). The Countess of Auvergne, however, he calls "your ladyship" (2.3.44) and "madam" (2.3.54). Her voice is not powerful enough, from Talbot's perspective, to need silencing. She poses no threat to him and thus does not need to be discredited. Despite the Countess's explicit rebellion, she is never condemned

to the same extent as the tetralogy's more successful women. Thus, it is not solely their gender or their class that comes to condemn these women, but the political threat they represent to their enemies.

Eleanor, not much more than a pawn in the plot to “quickly hoist Duke Humphrey from his seat” (*2H6*, 1.1.166), also proves not worth the trouble of attacking. Although Eleanor's behaviour is “presumptuous” (1.2.42), “ill-nurtured” (1.2.42), and has “despoiled...[her] honour” (2.3.10), the condemnation of her is remarkably muted. The play spends more time sentencing Margery Jordon, John Southwell, and Sir John Hume than it does condemning Eleanor. Joan and Margaret, in similar situations, provoke far more vitriol. Joan's trial is one of the most brutal scenes in *1 Henry VI* and, when Margaret is led before her captors in *3 Henry VI*, Richard berates her for having not “worn the petticoat” (*3H6*, 5.5.23) but instead “stolen the breech from Lancaster” (5.5.24). The difference between the reactions to Joan and Margaret and the reaction to Eleanor, even within very similar settings, illustrates just how politically motivated those reactions are, despite the gendered rhetoric these attacks share. Eleanor, having failed miserably in her attempt to advance herself, is much like the Countess of Auvergne in the sense that she is seemingly deemed not worth bothering to discredit. Anne, once again, follows the pattern set by Eleanor and the Countess. In this case, Richard silences her so easily that there is really no need to try to damage her reputation. While Anne never actually behaves in a manner that draws political condemnation upon herself, neither does Elizabeth. Richard's accusations against Elizabeth, of witchcraft and of sexual impropriety, are clearly baseless and only made as attempts to discredit her politically. Anne, on the other hand, explicitly curses Richard, declaring “cursed be the hand that

made these holes, / Cursed the blood that let this blood from hence, / Cursed the heart that had the heart to do it” (*R3*, 1.2.14-6). Anne, however, presents no political threat to Richard, who therefore has no need to discredit her by making public accusations. None of these characters represents any significant political threat to her enemies, a fact that is reflected in the treatment these women all receive. The accusations against Joan, Margaret, and Elizabeth are not always necessarily accurate, but those accusations are convenient methods of attempting to silence their powerful voices.

The male characters in the first tetralogy attack their female enemies for political purposes, but they do so through gendered and, more specifically, sexual means. The accusations of sexual misconduct that make up these attacks do reinforce the implication that because these characters are women they have no place in power, but they are also dangerous for another reason. The noblewomen in the first tetralogy justify their claims to power through marriage and motherhood, most notably as loyal wives of kings and chaste mothers of royal heirs. Of all the women in the first tetralogy, Joan is unique in that she effectively removes herself from the patrilineal system of order. She does not attain her position through either birth or marriage, and by maintaining her virginity she refuses to participate in the patrilineal transmission of power. Yet, while Joan’s claim to power is separate from issues of patrilineal dynasty, it still obliges her to chastity as it depends on her status as a holy virgin. For all these characters, the successful implication of sexual misconduct would destroy the foundations upon which they, through theatrical power, have justified their positions. Further, because seduction can be a useful method of theatrical power, Joan in particular leaves herself vulnerable to this kind of attack. As discussed in the first chapter, seduction is a key component of theatrical power, but it is

unwieldy and difficult to control. Theatrical power relies on the user's ability to make other characters react to her in a specific way. While most tactics are either effective or not, seduction, when it fails, has the potential to backfire spectacularly. Seduction can be a useful tactic, but a failed attempt to seduce can potentially be considered evidence of sexual misconduct, the accusation of which is very dangerous to these characters.

While Joan's use of seduction and her participation in sexual repartee certainly fuel the sexual accusations made about her, it does not fully justify those allegations, and Joan's use of seduction as method of exerting theatrical power does not necessarily invalidate her insistence upon her virginity. Joan is, I would argue, ultimately a virgin, though she does not rule out the use of sexuality as a part of her skill in self-staging and performance and uses at once both her freedom from patriarchal ties and physical seductiveness. Joan, for example, puts her effective persuasion of the Duke of Burgundy in seductive, if not sexual, terms, saying that she "will entice the Duke of Burgundy" (*IH6*, 3.7.19) with "fair persuasions mixed with sugared words" (3.7.17). While sexuality is a fundamental aspect of how characters react to her, from Charles to Talbot, her use of that allure does not entirely justify the sexual terms in which she is vilified. She uses seductiveness as a tactic, only to be viciously condemned by men who accuse her of sexual misconduct when that tactic backfires.

Throughout *1 Henry VI*, Joan's enemies attack her in explicitly sexual terms. The male characters, including the ones Joan is ostensibly allied with, place considerable emphasis on her sexual attractiveness and, despite her vow of virginity, her potential sexual availability. Talbot describes Joan as "encompassed with...lustful paramours" (*IH6*, 3.5.13). Burgundy calls her a "shameless courtesan" (3.5.5), the Dauphin's "trull"

(2.2.28), and hopes that she will “prove not masculine” (2.1.22), with the implication being that he hopes she is not pregnant with a male child, even if “underneath the standard of the French / She carry armour” (2.1.23-4). Though Joan is described to Talbot as “a holy prophetess...[who is] come with a great power to raise the siege” (1.6.80-1), as noted above, he deems her either “pucelle or puzzel” (1.6.85). Despite even her own insistence on her holy virginity and military prowess, to the male characters in the play Joan is, as Talbot says, either virgin or whore. Jankowski notes that “even those who are shown to accept Joan’s virginity—and its authority—still speak of la Pucelle as though she were a potential lover” (86). Charles “burns with...desire” (1.3.87) for Joan, calls her the “bright star of Venus” (1.3.123), and links her to “[Rhodope] of Memphis” (1.8.22), a Greek courtesan who married an Egyptian king. Joan’s character seems almost defined by sexual puns. Much of the dialogue spoken to, about, and even at times by Joan holds both military and sexual meanings. Charles, for example, declares that she shall “buckle with [him]” (1.3.74) and, later in the play, attempts to shift the blame for a lost battle by saying that “most part of all this night / Within [Joan’s] quarter and mine own precinct / I was employed in passing to and fro” (2.1.69-71). The suggestive rhetoric used around and about Joan “demeans [her] by removing her from consideration as a divinely inspired military leader” (Jankowski 87). Further, that rhetoric, by undermining Joan’s claim of virginity, attempts to invalidate the terms through which she has achieved power. Joan’s insistence on removing herself from the patrilineal order comes up, again and again, against the male characters’ conception of her as a sexual object. The men, meanwhile, by focusing on Joan’s sexuality, undermine her authority as military leader

by pushing her back into a role she has rejected and silence her by keeping her out of the political position that she has carved out for herself.

Although Joan is the focus of the worst of the sexually based slurs, the pattern applies, along with gendered dismissals, to Margaret as well. The basis and justification of Margaret's power, like Joan's, are tied to her sexuality, and her position depends on her reputation as a chaste wife. With York and his sons at war with Margaret by the end of *2 Henry VI* and throughout *3 Henry VI*, Margaret becomes the target of political attacks in the guise of explicitly sexualized and moralizing condemnation. York calls Margaret an "Amazonian trull" (*3H6*, 1.4.15), implying that she is both unnaturally masculine and sexually available, and says that "'tis virtue that doth make them most admired— / The contrary doth make [her] wondered at" (1.4.131-2). The several references to Margaret's position as daughter of the king of Naples, including York's epithet "blood-besotted Neapolitan" (*2H6*, 5.1.115), are glossed by the Norton editors as sexual, referring to the fact that Naples at the time was "synonymous with prostitution, . . . venereal disease" (236, note) and "sexual vice" (198, note). Richard, unsurprisingly, joins in, calling Margaret "iron of Naples, hid with English gilt" (*3H6*, 2.2.139). Edward suggests crowning Margaret with "a whip of straw" (2.2.144), alluding to the use of straw in public shaming rituals (237, note) and calls her a "shameless callet" (2.2.145). He also compares Margaret to "Helen of Greece" (2.2.146), saying that "ne'er was Agamemnon's brother wronged by that false woman, as this king by thee" (2.2.149). Richard's questioning "whoever got [Margaret's son Prince Edward]" (2.2.133) makes the seriousness of the accusations of adultery, implicit in Edward's comments, particularly clear. The slurs alleging sexual misconduct target Margaret's position as wife

of the king and, more importantly, mother of the heir, thus going after the very foundation of Margaret's political position and the right by which she claims power.

While the slurs against Margaret in *3 Henry VI* mostly fail, *Richard III* demonstrates just how potentially dangerous such allegations can be. One of Richard's many methods of justifying and legitimizing his usurpation of the throne is through yet another political motivated accusation of female misconduct, in this case, the claim that when his "mother went with child / Of [King Edward], noble York...then had wars in France, / And by true computation of the time / Found that the issue was not his begot" (*R3*, 3.5.84-88). These accusations demean Margaret politically and function as attempts to invalidate her authority by calling into question her status as rightful queen and mother of the rightful heir.

Richard's attacks against Elizabeth follow the same pattern of politically motivated accusations of sexual misconduct set by the enemies of Joan and Margaret. Given that Elizabeth's sons are declared illegitimate due to the legal technicality that King Edward was supposedly "contract to Lady Lucy- / ...and afterward,...betroted / To Bona, sister to the King of France" (*R3*, 3.7.169-72), there seems to be no suspicion, even in Richard's mind, that Elizabeth ever committed adultery. There is, however, clearly a sexual edge to the comments Richard and his supporters make in order to undermine her position as queen. Buckingham describes Elizabeth to the Mayor, aldermen, and citizens of London as "a beauty-waning and distressed widow / Even in the afternoon of her best days" (*R3*, 3.7.175-6) who "made prize and purchase of [King Edward's] wanton eye / [And] seduced the pitch and height of his degree" (3.7.177-8). Richard's allegation that Elizabeth has been plotting with Edward's former mistress "that

harlot, strumpet Shore” (3.4.71) adds a veiled implication of sexual impropriety as well that serves to further vilify Elizabeth in the eyes of Richard’s supporters and add weight to Richard’s claim to the throne. By aligning Elizabeth with illicit sexuality, Richard implicitly justifies his takeover of the kingdom.

Although Joan and Margaret provoke accusations of sexual misconduct, Elizabeth does not and the effectiveness of those attacks seems to have little to do with their truth. Joan, whose supposed sexual misconduct is never actually dramatized, loses her life to such accusations. Margaret, conversely, engages in an adulterous affair that never really does her any damage. In the end, one of the key factors in these characters’ success, or lack thereof, is the consistency of their rhetoric regarding the reactions of others to their behaviour, rather than the actual nature of that behaviour. With Joan, for example, the reaction that she provokes from her enemies only becomes a problem for her when she claims to be pregnant during the trial and gives in to their construction of her identity. By attempting to save her own life, Joan effectively capitulates to the English perception of her sexuality. She essentially confirms the lies her enemies have told about her and allows herself to become what her enemies describe her as being. Over the course of the scene Joan becomes less and less sympathetic to her captors by pleading pregnancy and listing a series of possible fathers. As she begins to realize that “nothing [will] turn [their] unrelenting hearts” (*IH6*, 5.6.59), Joan decides to “discover [her] infirmity” (5.6.60) and tells the Englishmen that she is “with child” (6.5.62). Upon hearing that the English “will have no bastards live, / Especially since Charles must father it” (5.6.70-1), Joan claims instead that “it was Alencon that enjoyed [her] love” (5.6.73). This confession elicits no more sympathy, and York tells Joan that the bastard of “that notorious Machiavel /...dies

an if it had a thousand lives” (5.6.74-5). Switching tactics once again, Joan then claims that it was “Rene King of Naples that prevailed” (5.6.78). Yet, for all her efforts, Joan’s desperate bid for mercy does not save her life, and serves only to further demean and discredit her in the eyes of her captors. Joan allows herself to be defined by what her enemies desire her to be and loses her life and her reputation as a result.

Each character’s response to the sexually based attacks against her determines her success and, in this case, Joan fails completely. In the trial scene, Joan gives license to the image her enemies have created of her, regardless of truth. She puts them in control of her image and lets their politically motivated reactions to her theatrical power define who she is. York declares that her own “words condemn... [her]” (*IH6*, 5.6.84) and takes her multiple attempts as confirming that “she knows not well– / There were so many– whom she may accuse” (5.6.80-1). Warwick, after hilariously suggesting that a married man as the father would be “most intolerable” (5.6.79), agrees with York that “she hath been liberal and free” (5.6.82). Joan’s attempt to save herself turns out instead to only confirm for the English the insinuations that have surrounded Joan for the entire play. As Jankowski writes, Joan’s final scene suggests to her captors that “Talbot’s construction of [her] sexuality was the ‘true’ one” (88). By assenting to this construction of herself, Joan abandons her rhetoric of holy virginity and allows herself to become the vilified whore her enemies want her to be seen as. York and Warrick push the “chaste and immaculate” (5.6.51) *La Pucelle* to the point of self-destruction. The accusations that are levelled against Joan do not need to be true in order to hurt her. Instead, the fact that she stops fighting those accusations and seemingly confirms their truth is most detrimental. Joan’s

presentation of herself gives her power and, when she denies it in an attempt to save her life, she lets herself be silenced by her enemies' reactions to her.

The importance of consistent rhetoric in responding to accusations of sexual impropriety is particularly clear when Joan's fate is compared to Margaret's. The accusations directed towards Margaret, unlike the ones against Joan, are actually accurate and Margaret's affair with Suffolk represents a significant threat to the all-important patrilineal transmission of authority. Suffolk is attracted by Margaret's "gorgeous beauty" (*IH6*, 5.5.20) upon their first meeting, and a romantic relationship is first hinted early in *2 Henry VI* by Margaret's memory of Suffolk running "a-tilt in honour of [her] love" (1.3.55) and by her disappointment in Henry, because she had "thought King Henry had resembled [Suffolk] / In courage, courtship and proportion" (1.3.57-8). Their political alliance and emotional attachment throughout the play is confirmed when Suffolk is threatened with exile, and Margaret pleads for King Henry to forgive her lover. During their dialogue preceding Suffolk's departure, Margaret calls Suffolk "[her] soul's treasure" (3.2.385) and says that through her lips "a thousand sighs are breathed for [him]" (3.2.347). Most telling, however, is Suffolk's bawdy punning on the word die. He says that in "[Margaret's] sight to die, what were it else / But like a pleasant slumber in thy lap" (3.2.390-2) and that "by [her] to die were but to die in jest; / From thee to die were torture more than death" (3.2.403-4). This phrasing essentially confirms a sexual relationship between Suffolk and Margaret. Scarcely less suggestive is Suffolk's desire "to have [Margaret] with [her] lips to stop [his] mouth, / So shouldst [she] either turn [his] flying soul / Or [he] should breathe it, so, into [her] body" (3.2. 398-400). Margaret's adultery is theoretically of great importance because it jeopardizes the purity

of the patrilineal royal dynasty. As Howard and Rackin argue, “because transmission of patrilineal authority could take place only through the bodies of women, it was vulnerable at every stage to subversion by female sexual transgression” (Howard and Rackin 26).

This is exactly the vulnerability that is opened by the queen’s adultery with Suffolk.

Margret’s behaviour supports what her enemies say about her, as it gives them something that they can use against her. However, while the play is very clear that Margaret does commit adultery, it also makes clear that the affair does not jeopardize her position given the unspecific and ineffective nature of the sexual accusations Margaret’s enemies make against her.

In portraying Margaret’s adultery with very little judgment, the play does not take a historical fact and minimize it. The inclusion of the adultery plot is deliberate and historically unnecessary, as historical evidence of Margaret’s supposed affair with the Duke of Suffolk is sketchy at best. As Dominique Goy-Blanquet puts it, “one random word in the chronicles... [inspires] a whole affair” (34). Hall writes that “the Quene... entierly loued the Duke” (218) and calls Suffolk “the Quenes dearlynge” (219) and her “chefe frede & counsailer” (219). According to Hall, it was by the “greate fauor of the kyng, and more desire of the Quene, [that Suffolk] was erected to the title, and name of the duke” (210). While Holinshed and, to a lesser extent, Hall do somewhat suggestively imply that Suffolk was high in Queen Margaret’s favour, they never explicitly accuse her of adultery. *2 Henry VI*, however, makes the relationship very clear and thus “takes the liberty of fabricating the incriminating details of Margaret’s...adulterous liaison with Suffolk” (Levine 79). The deliberate dramatization of Margaret’s adultery could, on the surface, suggest that the play uses the affair to further vilify Margaret. However, of all

Margaret's questionable behaviours, engaging in the affair seems to be the action for which for which she suffers the least punishment. By the time Margaret's political fortunes begin to fail, Suffolk is long dead, and the affair is never referenced explicitly in *3 Henry VI*. This situation is the opposite of Joan's. Margaret's sexual sins do not destroy her and she seems, for a time, the most legitimate of those fighting for control of the crown. The fact that the play depicts Margaret's affair but does not punish her for it suggests that the success of the gendered attacks against these characters has more to do with the response to such attacks than with their truth.

Margaret's behaviour is actually more sexually illicit than Joan's, but the reactions from other characters in the play suggest that the adultery itself does not actually cause much political damage for Margaret. The question is why. Despite the fact that *2 Henry VI* clearly dramatizes Margaret's infidelity, the allegations of Prince Edward's illegitimacy are never taken anywhere and the extent to which Margaret's affair damages her credibility as ruler is not completely clear. Although Jankowski implies that Prince Edward is "a son not of [Henry's] own begetting" (Jankowski 100), the truth of the prince's parentage seems to matter very little. The accusations of Margaret's adultery and Edward's illegitimacy, whether or not they are meant to be accurate, never have any major effect on Margaret's political position and are never pursued. Within the plays, the only suggestion that the prince may not be King Henry's son is made by Richard of Gloucester who has a vested political interest in discrediting Prince Edward and is by no means a credible source. Margaret, whose Frenchness and lack of dowry makes her almost as much of an interloper as Elizabeth, differs from the other women in this study in her response to these attacks. Theoretically, such attacks should damage Margaret,

who is guilty, more than Joan. However, unlike Joan, who is punished for a sin she never commits, Margaret comes out mostly unscathed. Margaret's tactics in this situation differ greatly from Joan's. Where Joan attempts to save herself by repeatedly changing her story, Margaret's rhetoric is entirely consistent. Margaret refuses to give in to her enemies' conception of her. She never tries to bargain to save herself and never allows the sexual slanders made about her to become reputed to be true, which, ultimately, is what really matters in the *Henry VI* plays. She does not give in to the attacks made against her or ever admit or publically acknowledge that there is a measure of truth behind those attacks. Margaret defends her position as true and rightful Queen to the very end, even describing Elizabeth in *Richard III* as "decked in [Margaret's] rights" (1.3.203). She never capitulates, never gives in, never publically confirms what other characters say about her, and ultimately survives the accusations of sexual misconduct.

While Joan the virgin allows herself to be seen as the whore people believe her to be, Margaret the adulterer insists upon portraying herself as rightful queen, her son as rightful king, and the Yorkist faction as usurping traitors. And while Margaret loses her son and her throne, she ultimately keeps her life and, in the play, returns to England to fight against Richard. This is where the self-staging of these characters, especially in relation to the reactions of other characters, becomes vitally important. Maintaining theatrical power requires the ability to keep the performance going. The ways Joan and Margaret portray themselves to the public and the ways they handle their enemies' accusations and attacks, regardless of the actual truth, are key to their success and survival.

If Joan's situation suggests that mostly innocuous behaviour can elicit accusations of sexual misconduct, Elizabeth's clearly illustrates that the accusations made against the theatrically powerful women of the first tetralogy can be pure invention and still do damage. The slanders against Elizabeth, discussed above, have no truth whatsoever, and yet they prove damaging nonetheless. With Elizabeth's absence from court and Richard's systematic elimination of King Edward's loyal supporters, there is no one to fight the claim of the princes' bastardry the way Margaret does in *3 Henry VI*. However, as discussed in the first chapter, Elizabeth never actually becomes the "relenting fool, and shallow, changing woman" (*R3*, 4.4.362) that Richard believes her to be. She manages not only to survive Richard, but also outwit him as well. Elizabeth's eventual success after she returns from court suggests that she, like Margaret, succeeds by refusing to accept the conception of herself that Richard creates in order to minimize the very real political threat that she represents.

The fact that the men in these plays are just as morally reprehensible and politically self-interested as the women suggests that to assume the words of the male characters are true simply because those characters are male is misguided. Alfar argues that in Shakespearean tragedy "the plays reveal how the women become evil through a simple double standard, by abrogating for themselves behaviours that would be laudable, or at least condoned in men" (25). While the focus of Alfar's discussion is neither the history plays generally nor the first tetralogy in particular, these plays clearly demonstrate the double standard she describes. I argue, however, that the plays do not necessarily endorse that double standard. Jankowski argues that any moral high-ground Margaret may hold is compromised by her sexual misconduct as "she ceases to be a consort with

political talents and becomes solely an adulterous wife” (91). However, this argument, along with Patricia-Ann Lee’s assertion that “Margaret’s generalship comes about as a result of revenge for her lover’s death” (Lee 215), makes the mistake of evaluating Margaret through the eyes of her enemies. Jankowski and Lee read Margaret’s motives as solely emotional and, in doing so, discount the importance of Margaret’s political self-interest and interest in her son. Margaret’s affair with Suffolk is not particularly surprising from a political perspective. Discussing Regan and Goneril’s involvement with Edmund in *King Lear*, Alfar argues that their attachment to him “is symptomatic of the authority that both women need in order to rule...[T]heir interest in Edmund demonstrates a need for a powerful and, it would seem, masculine ally” (99). With Henry indifferent to the business of rule, Suffolk becomes the masculine ally that Margaret needs to negotiate court politics. Margaret chooses between the danger her affair poses to her reputation and her need for a strong male ally and, it seems, makes the right choice. The vitriol with which other characters attack these women does not mean these condemnations reflect the absolute truth or are endorsed by the politics of the plays themselves. The gendered attacks and sexual rhetoric employed against the female characters are attempts to silence their voices. To unthinkingly accept that rhetoric serves to silence them outside the fiction as well as in.

The ambiguous moral landscape and ultimately recuperative ending of the first tetralogy serve to further problematize the vilification of the female characters. Until the conflict of good versus evil finally emerges in *Richard III*, there seems to be very little of the heroic throughout these plays. In fact, *Richard III*, with its restoration of order and triumph of divine right, bears little resemblance to the first three plays of the tetralogy.

The *Henry VI* plays reflect a political landscape of highly ambiguous morals, and not just for the female characters. Characters like Talbot and Gloucester, who, for all their misogynist tendencies, seem to be bastions of honour, chivalry, and the public good, cannot survive and are ultimately replaced by cruel, self-interested conspirators. The importance of theatrical power and of characters' ability to self-stage reflects the sense of cynicism and ambiguity that pervades the world of the plays. Good and bad, as categories, are not entirely stable and almost no characters are untainted. Many of the male characters are just as morally compromised as the female ones, some even more so. When order is finally reestablished in *Richard III*, the surviving women, even Margaret, are ultimately allowed on the side of good. Although Margaret is not present for the inauguration of the new dynasty, she is, through her instruction of Elizabeth and the Duchess, vital to its foundation. Rather than proving the gendered attacks against these women credible, *Richard III* allows the women a legitimate place in the foundation of the new dynasty. Despite the many factors that do serve to villify them, Joan, Eleanor, and Margaret are also, as Catherine Belsey writes, "in a sense heroic, and to this extent the plays offer their audiences no single unified position from which to judge heroines who refuse the place of silent subjection allotted to women" (184). The plays themselves certainly do not represent Joan, Eleanor, and Margaret as true heroes, but these women are also not true villains.

While Joan is certainly "the most demonic" (Howard and Rackin 44) of the first tetralogy's female warriors, accompanied on stage as she is in act 5, scene 3 by actual demons, the attacks against her come from highly suspect sources. The play ultimately seems to "denigrate both Joan and her captors" (Levine 45) as the treatment Joan receives

at the hands of York and Warwick seems unnecessarily cruel, even for a figure as dangerous as Joan once was. Furthermore, the position of the Englishmen is not so much better than Joan's, as York's voice, like Joan's, is not entirely sanctioned by the play (Levine 44). Unlike Talbot, the sole figure of chivalry in a world that is becoming less honorable, York is self-interestedly conspiring against the crown. Joan, ostensibly the villain of the piece, is fighting to free her country from enemy occupation. York, conversely, will soon be in open rebellion against his king. York's final lines in the play, when he forces the French lords to swear fealty to King Henry, are bitterly ironic. He tells them to "swear allegiance to his majesty / ...never to disobey / Nor be rebellious to the crown of England" (*IH6*, 5.6.169-71), a vow he himself will soon disobey. Nina Levine argues that "if we root for the English, we not only become complicitous in their cruelty, we also give legitimacy and power to aspiring noblemen whose interests are clearly against those of the nation at large" (45). Even Joan, a figure of rebellion, witchcraft, and threatening female power, is not condemned unambiguously. Despite the vicious responses to her, Joan is not defeated by a valid voice of moral authority.

Joan's enemies' lack of credibility is further suggested by the fact that the play significantly increases the cruelty of Joan's death from its chronicle sources, and makes York the source of that cruelty. Levine notes that "the reference to Joan's plea of pregnancy was a standard feature in the English chronicles" (44) as it allowed them to "display the leniency and humanity of her judges (who 'gave her nine moneths staie,' Holinshed reports)" (44-5). In *I Henry VI*, the inclusion of Joan's plea of pregnancy has the opposite effect. York shows no such leniency in light of her supposed pregnancy, telling Joan that her "words condemn [her] brat and [herself]" (5.6.84) and saying to Joan

as she is carried to her death “break thou in pieces, and consume to ashes, / Thou foul accursed minister of hell” (5.6.93-4). In the play, Joan is executed immediately, in part because of the pregnancy claim. From an English perspective, Joan’s position as an ambiguous figure is hardly surprising, but the play also makes a point of illustrating York’s cruelty. Joan’s claim of pregnancy does not simply fail to sway York and Warwick, it actually serves as justification for Joan’s immediate and unmerciful execution. Joan, who seems to have been thoroughly vilified through her interaction with the spirits, becomes in her final scene a desperate figure, pleading for her captors to “turn [their] unrelenting hearts” (5.6.59) and destroying her own credibility in an attempt to save her life. York, far from appearing as a bastion of morality, reveals a cruel streak. By abandoning the chronicle version of events and playing up the cruelty of Joan’s death, *1 Henry VI* complicates notions of good and evil and thus undermines the moral credibility of York’s attitude towards Joan. The differences between the chronicles and the play illustrate that in *1 Henry VI* neither Joan nor her captors are fully or unambiguously on the side of right. The gendered attacks made against Joan come from morally compromised characters and the play refuses to fully endorse those attacks.

Eleanor Cobham, in *2 Henry VI*, bears a striking similarity to Joan, as both are attacked by men as morally bankrupt as themselves. While her behaviour is undeniably problematic and while Howard and Rackin go so far as to suggest that, between Margaret and Eleanor, women are the “principle cause of England’s problems” (65) because their “transgressive ambitions are inextricably implicated in the political disorder that overtakes the realm” (77), this reading ignores the extent to which the male characters also bear the blame for England’s disordered state. Eleanor, despite her royal ambitions

and criminal activity, is essentially entrapped into incriminating herself and causing her husband's fall by others with designs on the throne. Although called the "bedlam brainsick Duchess" (*2H6*, 3.1.51) and "the ringleader and head of all this rout, / [Having] practiced dangerously against [King Henry's] state, / Dealing with witches and conjurors" (2.1.169-171), Eleanor, it turns out, is an "unwilling pawn in a larger and far more dangerous conspiracy to take the crown" (Levine 59) and her behaviour, while reprehensible, is no worse than that of the men who manipulate her into treason.

Immediately after Eleanor has revealed her ties to Margery Jordan and Roger Bolingbroke, John Hume reveals that he has been hired by Beaufort and Suffolk "to undermine the Duchess / And buzz these conjurations in her brain" (1.2.98-99) and says that his "knavery will be the Duchess' wrack / And her attainture will be Humphrey's fall" (1.2.105-6). Suffolk's true aim in orchestrating Eleanor's disgrace goes even higher than Gloucester, as the duke is just one of the nobles Suffolk means to remove so that he and Margaret may "steer the happy realm" (1.3.104). Again, the play refuses to provide a stable voice of moral authority, apart, perhaps, from Gloucester, who is utterly destroyed. Suffolk, Beaufort, and the others aspire to increase their own power, to an even greater extent than Eleanor. The reactions of Eleanor's enemies to her behaviour have no real credibility, coming as they do from men even more morally compromised than Eleanor herself. Their self-serving and hypocritical condemnation of Margaret has no moral authority. Eleanor's punishment is not so much justice for her scheming, as it is the result of her scheming less ably than others. The gendered attacks made against Eleanor, already less vehement than those directed towards Margaret, come from her far more successfully scheming male enemies, and ultimately hold little weight.

Even considering her cruelty and adultery, Margaret remains a complicated figure and the credibility of her enemies' responses to her cannot be taken for granted. Howard and Rackin allude to her treatment of York before his execution as proof that Margaret is "the central villain" (94) of *3 Henry VI*. They cite the fact that she "is a target of remarkable invective" (94) as supporting this reading and Jankowski argues that, in his denouncement of Margaret, York's "words have validity since they purport to represent the shocked reaction of all men to Margaret's behaviour" (101). However, as Levine argues, the play "places these charges exclusively in the mouths of the Yorkists and so clearly exposes the politics of their anti-feminist criticism [which is] fully discredited...when it emerges full-blown in Richard" (92). Furthermore, beyond the politics motivating York's vitriol, Margaret's moral authority is not so much less than York's. Despite her transgressions and ambition, Margaret's moments of greatest cruelty come in defense of her king, her son, and the realm. Margaret, in going to war with York, is defending the kind of patrilineal dynastic system of order she supposedly endangers. On the other hand, as Margaret herself points out, York has schemed, rebelled, and finally "broke[n] his solemn oath" (*3H6*, 1.4.101) that he "should not be king / Till...King Henry had shook hands with death" (1.4.102-3). Further, Margaret's heightened cruelty in this scene, as compared to the chronicle sources discussed in chapter one, reflects the fact that the play portrays neither Margaret nor York in a particularly positive light. The similarity between Margaret and York is especially clear if one considers York's involvement in Joan's death. Both York and Margaret play clear and unhistorically vicious roles in the execution of their enemies. As Goy-Blanquet argues, the cruelty of York's execution serves "to raise the level of transgression, and lay

the blame for it on both camps equally” (160). Far from making Margaret look worse than York, her involvement in his execution links them together. By defeating York, Margaret does what Joan could not. While Margaret is undeniably and deliberately cruel in this scene, York’s execution serves as an echo of his own brutality towards Joan. The changes from chronicle history vilify them both as York’s pitiful death recalls his moment of greatest cruelty. The facts that neither Margaret nor York is free from culpability and that neither one comes across as uncomplicatedly a hero or villain undermine the supposed authority of York’s attacks.

Only in *Richard III* does the concept of good versus evil start to have any real meaning, and when morality does become a factor, the attacks against the remaining women are of uniformly dubious validity. Where the *Henry VI* plays dramatize the struggles between various morally ambiguous factions, *Richard III* presents the unification of England against a single villain. For all the play’s focus on Richard, and despite the fact that Henry Tudor only appears in the final scenes, it ends with a clear bit of Tudor mythologizing. Having won the battle, the crown, and the hand of the princess, the new King Henry VII declares that “Richmond and Elizabeth, / The true succeeders of each royal house, / By God’s fair ordinance [shall] conjoin together, / And let their heirs... / Enrich the time to come with smooth-faced peace, / With smiling plenty and fair prosperous days” (5.8.28-34). The reordering of society that occurs at the closing of *Richard III* gives women a significant place in the establishing of the divinely sanctioned dynasty. The Princess Elizabeth is a silent figure, but Queen Elizabeth is clearly behind the marriage, and her scenes with Margaret, as discussed in the first chapter, bring about a unification of York and Lancaster even before the marriage. The women, so vilified by

their male enemies, are the first to understand the need to put aside the differences of the War of the Roses in the face of Richard's unequivocal evil.

The fact that Elizabeth, with Margaret's assistance, symbolically defeats Richard is completely unhistorical, suggesting that play ultimately rehabilitates her. Historically, Margaret of Anjou never came back to England. She was ransomed and returned to France after her defeat and imprisonment, where she ultimately died a year before King Edward (Goy-Blanquet 263). Her return, however, is vital to *Richard III*, where she stands a worthy opponent to Richard's unambiguous evil. Far from being irredeemable evil herself, Margaret is ultimately one of the more heroic characters in series of plays very short on true heroes. Despite her affair in *2 Henry VI* and her cruelty in *3 Henry VI*, the categorization of Margaret as villainess that the Yorkist faction attempts to perpetuate does not quite hold up when considering her role in *Richard III*. Margaret cannot destroy Richard herself, but it is her instruction that allows Elizabeth to resist him. While Richard certainly has adversaries among Edward's courtiers, with Elizabeth commenting that he "loves not [her], nor none of [her family]," (*R3*, 1.3.13) Margaret is the first to recognize the extent of the danger he poses. When Edward's court bands together against Margaret, she calls Richard a "bottled spider / Whose deadly web ensnareth [them] about" (1.3.240-1) and says that Elizabeth, in defending Richard, "whet'st a knife to kill [her]self" (1.3.242). She urges Buckingham to "have naught to do with him, beware of him" (1.3.290). Although the courtiers "scorn [Margaret] for [her] gentle counsel / And soothe the devil that [she] warn[s] [them] from" (1.3.295-6), the first two scenes have already proven Margaret right. Further, Margaret, in this play, represents the opposition to the kind of patrilineal disruption she is accused of threatening in the previous plays. The

play's departure from history helps to redeem Margaret. Taking on a role she absolutely did not shoulder historically, she participates in the symbolic unification of York and Lancaster, even before the literal unification of Henry Tudor and Elizabeth of York. Far from being the villainess her enemies have described her as, in this play Margaret, whatever her motivation, is ultimately the first character to try to combat the true villain. When order and morality are restored at the end of the tetralogy, Margaret seems to be on the side of right and plays a vital role in the establishment of the Tudor dynasty.

Elizabeth's image is also recuperated by the play's departure from chronicle history, further suggesting that the gendered attacks of *Richard III* are utterly baseless. The Elizabeth in the play differs significantly from her portrayal in chronicle history and the distinct changes clearly indicate the importance of her role as both a force for good and a foundational member of the new dynasty. Elizabeth Woodville was a "commoner," the widow of a Lancastrian knight, and her large family benefited a great deal from her secret marriage to Edward IV. In *Hall's Chronicle*, the historical Queen Elizabeth is condemned for "putting into oblivion the murder of her innocente children...[and] the bastardyng of her daughters" (406) and collaborating with Richard. Hall writes that "blyneded by avaricious affeccion and seduced by flatterynge words, [Elizabeth] first delivered into kyng Richard hands her. v. daughters as Lambes once agayne committed to the custody of the ravenous wolfe" (406). In *Richard III*, Elizabeth's cry of "wilt thou, O God, fly from such gentle lambs / And throw them in the entrails of the wolf" (4.4.22-3) is a direct and inverted reference the comments about Queen Elizabeth in *Hall's Chronicle*. Rather than being condemned for not fully defending her children, the Elizabeth in *Richard III* is vocal in grieving for her sons and successful at protecting her

daughters. The Queen Elizabeth who appears in the anonymous play *The True Tragedy of Richard III* is closer to the one Shakespeare portrays. While she does consent to the betrothal of Richard and her daughter Elizabeth (*True Tragedy*, 1586) and is reported to have urged the princess give her consent as well (1590), Queen Elizabeth also secretly communicates with Richmond and promises her daughter's hand to him (1680). She does not, however, get the opportunity to attack Richard directly in the way that Shakespeare's Elizabeth does. In *Richard III*, Elizabeth's stage presence is heightened. She is not only rehabilitated, but also given a clear and visible role in bringing about Richard's defeat. The rehabilitation of and emphasis on Elizabeth and the reintroduction of Margaret in Shakespeare's telling of this story illustrate the legitimate importance women can have in dynastic production. The ending of the tetralogy suggests that little moral weight should be put on the reactions to these women by their enemies. For all the condemnation that comes down upon them, it is the theatrically powerful woman who helps to bring about the new order.

Like the supposedly unnatural women of Shakespeare's tragedies, Joan, Margaret, and even Eleanor serve to "[press] against early modern popular beliefs about female nature" (Alfar 16) and the "practice [of vilifying] women's actions of violence and power because such acts transgress naturalized gender configurations" (Alfar 21). To impose some sort of moral judgment on the *Henry VI* plays and the characters in them ignores the plays' almost hero-less quality. The female characters' enemies certainly exploit their gender disadvantage though explicitly and exclusively gendered attacks. Those attacks, however, are exposed as not necessarily credible. The defiant and threatening acts that these female characters do and do not get away with are governed less by truth or right

than by political skill and theatrical power. Their use of rhetoric, theatricality, and tactics damns them, or not, in the court of public opinion within the plays. The attacks made upon Joan, Margaret, and even Elizabeth are attempts to silence them and diffuse the power that they have amassed through their theatrical skills, and it is only through skilled performance that such attacks can be resisted. The reactions to these characters' voices may purport to be the voices of moral authority, but those attacks are consistently motivated by political interest. Although the accusations and censures made against these characters by their political competitors are harsh, the weight of such words is measured also by the credibility of their speakers and by the eventual effect of such accusations.

Conclusion:

This thesis began, years ago now, when, in an upper-year seminar on Shakespeare's histories I started to think that something very important was going on in act 4, scene 4 of *Richard III*. Having performed this scene several years before, I am admittedly biased towards it. Nonetheless, Elizabeth's request to Margaret, "teach me how to curse mine enemies" (4.4.117), Margaret's instructions, and Elizabeth's subsequent defeat of Richard seem, to me, to constitute the play's major turning point. Richard seems unstoppable before his attempted wooing of Elizabeth, yet afterwards, things begin to go wrong for him. The substantial effort with which Richard attempts to silence Margaret, Elizabeth, the Duchess of York, and even Lady Anne reveals the considerable extent to which even he considers those women's voices threatening to his power. Further, the interaction between Margaret and Elizabeth dramatizes the passing of knowledge between female characters, with Margaret bequeathing her considerable theatrical power to the Yorkist queen. The questions and ideas about female theatrical power, what it is, how characters gain it, what they do with it, and how they maintain it, that this scene provoked form the central focus of this thesis.

At its broadest, this thesis essentially argues that, through effective performances on the characters around them, the women of the first tetralogy achieve and exercise extensive political power and that the male project of silencing these women through vilification and condemnation is an attempt to diminish that political power. While Elizabeth and Margaret have titles behind them, and Joan has her spiritual authority, all three use theatrical power to heighten their political authority. The women in these plays are not born to the power they achieve, and it is not bestowed upon them by others. Even

Joan, who actually fights on stage, and Margaret, who leads an army, are most politically effective when exercising theatrical power. Elizabeth only becomes a political threat when she abandons lamentation for more theatrically powerful methods and gains the ability to defeat Richard. Eleanor and Anne, the female characters unable to take control of the action around them, ultimately become pawns in other characters' scheming. Those with theatrical power, even those who eventually fail, insist on their position as thinking, acting subjects with their own roles to play and agendas to pursue.

These characters persuade, seduce, manipulate, and argue their ways through the highest circles of political authority. Joan successfully convinces Burgundy to defect to the French, Margaret stages the exchange of Gloucester's staff and the spectacle of York's death, the Duchess of York curses Richard, and Elizabeth manages to outwit him. While the most successful of the women in these plays all favour different tactics, their different methods all have the identical goal of affecting their fictional audience. Further, the success of each depends on the character's ability to maintain control of the scene around her. These women must have command over the action in which they participate in order to succeed. In order to affect other characters, whether through persuasion, staging, or debate, control is absolutely necessary and the character who has power over the scene generally holds power more broadly as well. The triumphs of theatrical power dramatized in the first tetralogy, the scenes where Joan enchants Burgundy, Margaret destroys York, and Elizabeth outwits Richard, all involve characters absolutely in control of their surroundings. While cursing causes with it no immediate effect, it nonetheless carries the implication of eventual causation. Where prophecy, which also appears in the

first tetralogy, only predicts event, curses provide control over future events and hold the threat of impending action.

Theatrical power is not infallible and it is not always enough. The first tetralogy dramatizes as many failures of theatrical power as it does successes and even Joan and Margaret fail eventually. Theatrical power is only effective when used properly and it requires good judgment and a great degree of control. Even political circumstances can affect the extent to which achieving theatrical power is possible. As these plays are history plays, historical fact does place some limits on eventual plot outcomes. Theatrical power seems necessary for these women to achieve political power, but not entirely sufficient. Even so, Joan and Margaret's worst failures come about not during battle, but after the battle has finished when they are unable to mitigate the damage caused by losing. Theatrical power does not function in a vacuum. A character's ability to use it depends on her capacity to affect the characters around her; that character's theatrical power will automatically fail if the other character does not respond, or does not respond in the right way. Elizabeth's favoured tactic, debate, obviously needs a contextual audience, or perhaps more accurately a partner, in order to be effective, and so do all the other methods. Theatrical power, effective speech, or performance that gives characters control and command of the action around them, requires an audience and requires that audience to respond in a specific way. Joan cannot persuade York and Warwick to spare her. Margaret loses her war when Edward refuses to let her speak. Anne's lamentation does not move Richard and thus cannot save her from him. Impressing the theatrical audience is not enough. A character must rather impress or affect the fictional audience around her to wield theatrical power.

These characters do not reach their positions of power without the inevitable backlash from their male enemies. Men like York, Edward, and Richard vilify Joan, Margaret, and even Elizabeth, condemning them as masculine, unchaste, unnatural women. While the accusations made against these characters are ostensibly made on moral grounds, they are, in fact, consistently political in motivation. Bad behaviour is not exclusive to the successfully theatrically powerful women of the first tetralogy, yet, compared to their less politically active counterparts, those women bear the far greater share of condemnation. The accusations made against these women are gendered, but they are made in the service of political goals. Gender is not the sole motivator of the attacks against powerful women, but the method through which those attacks are deployed. The vilifying of these women comes almost exclusively from their political and military enemies. These women's enemies seek to dismiss them from the political arena and the condemnation levelled at them is comprised of specifically gendered and sexualized terms. Accusations of sexual misconduct prove to be particularly dangerous. All of these women, whether through queenship or holy virginity, depend upon their reputations of chastity to legitimize their positions. The gendered and sexual slurs aimed at Joan, Margaret, and Elizabeth attack the foundations of their power and attempt to take away the power with which they speak, deny their right to speak, and ultimately dismiss them from the court and the battlefield.

While the women of these plays are vulnerable to the accusations of their enemies, in part by virtue of their gender, they are not completely defenseless. When Joan and Margaret are accused of sexual misconduct they deal with those charges in very different ways, to very different results. Joan, who essentially confirms the allegations

against her by pleading pregnancy and scrambling to name a father, becomes, in effect, the whore her enemies paint her as. Conversely, Margaret ignores all the accusations against her, maintains her rhetoric of rightful queenship well past the Yorkist victory, and survives to continue fighting in *Richard III*. Further, given that Joan's claim of virginity seems to be genuine and Margaret participates in an adulterous affair with the Duke of Suffolk, the female character's response to the accusations against her seems to bear a great deal more weight than the actual truth. Unlike Joan, Margaret consistently maintains the identity upon which she bases her power, that of queen and mother to the prince, and performs her way out of the accusations of adultery.

Finally, the responses to these female characters ultimately come from enemies no better than the women themselves. Measured against York, Warwick, Suffolk, Edward, and, especially, Richard, the women of these plays, even Joan and Margaret, seem outmatched in both cruelty and capacity for destruction. The worst of the accusations against the female characters of the first tetralogy come not as legitimate reprimands from bastions of moral authority, but as politically motivated attacks from self-serving conspirators. Meanwhile, the women who do survive *Richard III* play a key role in the destruction of the tyrant king and the establishment of a new royal dynasty. Although the general response to Joan, Margaret, and the rest within the fiction of these plays is generally intensely negative, it is not necessarily true that that attitude is endorsed by the plays themselves.

The nature of kingship and, beyond that, the performative nature of kingship are key themes of Shakespeare's history plays. From *1 Henry VI* to *Henry V*, the history plays seem to suggest that it is not quite enough to be born to kingship and that a

successful ruler must also play the king in order to legitimize and maintain his power. As this thesis shows, however, the plays of the first tetralogy also illustrate the performative nature of female power. The female characters that hold political power over the course of these plays are the ones most able to control their own performances and the performances of the characters around them. Eggert's description of Joan's "verbal power [granting] her status of simultaneous dramaturge and theatrical spectacle" (Eggert 58) applies to all these characters. Joan, the enchantress, and Margaret, the stage manager, both clearly perform for their audiences within the fiction of the plays. Elizabeth's manipulation of Richard requires her to perform seeming acquiescence while still maintaining dominance in the scene. They control the action around them as much as they act within it and use this ability to obtain, increase, and hold on to political power. The women of the first tetralogy speak, and speak effectively, and thus manage to carve powerful positions for themselves in the court and on the battlefield.

The successful female characters of the first tetralogy possess a command of language and performance although which they access a level of power generally denied to women. The exchange that is perhaps definitive of this thesis as a whole comes, appropriately enough, in act 4, scene 4 of *Richard III*. After Margaret's exit, but before Richard's entrance, the Duchess of York asks Elizabeth "why should calamity be full of words" (4.4.125). Elizabeth responds that words are "windy attorneys to their client woes" (4.4.126) and that "though what they will impart / Help nothing else...they do ease the heart" (4.4.130-1). Yet Elizabeth is surprisingly wrong here. While she herself will be the last, and most successful, of the female characters who take on Richard, in this moment Elizabeth vastly underestimates the potential effectiveness of words. The

Duchess, though she does not initially seem to contradict Elizabeth, is the one who gets it right. She suggests that, if words can indeed ease the heart, with “bitter words let’s smother / My damned son, that thy two sweet sons smothered” (4.4.133-4). This, ultimately, is exactly what they do. While the Duchess has to struggle to avoid being drowned out by Richard, Elizabeth manages, by interrupting Richard’s speech, to smother his words. Elizabeth’s theatrical power, her ability to wield language as a weapon, defeats Richard in this scene. Although Elizabeth seems to put little faith in words, the scene that follows those remarks makes the effective power of language very clear.

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