

# Richard iii



Richard III has an unusually large cast of female characters: 'women are assigned over 22 percent of the lines in this play, by far the greatest number in any of Shakespeare's English histories.'<sup>1</sup> However, Nicholas Brooke has observed that 'the flexibility of private speech in this play is almost entirely confined to Richard'.<sup>2</sup> This is through the power of his language.

In the patriarchal society of the Renaissance period men were allowed freedom of speech, where as women were supposed to be chaste, silent and obedient. During the Renaissance; Femininity... was presented as no more than a set of negatives. The requirement of chastity was the overriding measure of female gender. Woman not only had to be chaste but had to be seen chaste: silence, humility and modesty were the signifiers so.<sup>3</sup> This means that if women were to be silent, then men would have total control; and therefore, language is gendered.

None of the female characters have a soliloquy, even Margaret who is the most powerful female character. Jean E. Howard ; Phyllis Rackin describe the women as the 'direct antitheses'<sup>4</sup> of the men in the play, and that 'all of the female characters ...are highborn English women who speak in undifferentiated language, formal blank verse that constitutes the standard language of the playscript'.<sup>5</sup> I disagree with this, as both Lady Anne and Elizabeth use Richard's style of prose to try and overcome him. This prose is the pattern of language in which 'one speaker appropriates and reapplies the word of another,'<sup>6</sup> which results in the dialogue reiterating the action of the historical narrative, as one character takes the verbal or political authority from the other.

This is displayed in the opening scene when Richard is talking to Brakenbury:

Rich: How say you, sir? Can you deny all this? Brak: With this, my lord, myself have nought to do. Rich: Naught with Mistress Shore? I tell thee, fellow, He that doth naught with her (excepting one) Were best to do it secretly, alone. 7(I. i. 96-100) There are a lot of exchanges like this between Richard and other characters, which portray to the audience the power that Richard has verbally by using this type of rhetoric language. However, Lady Anne does attempt to use this strategy when trying to defend herself against him:

Rich: Vouchsafe, divine perfection of a woman, Of these supposed crimes, to give me leave By circumstance but t'acquit myself. Anne: Vouchsafe, defus'd infection of a man, Of these known evils, but to give me leave By circumstance t'accuse thy cursed self (I. ii. 75-84) She seeks to 'neutralize his attack by appropriating his syntactic and rhythmic patterns and transforming his meanings with antonymous verbal substitutes.'<sup>8</sup> Lady Anne is actually using Richard's way of speaking to try and surpass him. Not only is she won over by Richard, but as she is using his technique, it suggests that she believes his way is the right way, and as the conversation develops she spits at him, which could suggest that she believes her words are no longer sufficient to triumph over Richard. This again reinforces the idea that Richard maintains his power through speech. Richard continues in his pursuit to seduce Anne by using the discourses of erotic pleasure by subordinating them entirely to his desire for power. During the seduction he 'skilfully employs the language of affection, sexual desire, and physical obsession (a language he despises as an indication of effeminate weakness) to achieve specific political ends.'<sup>9</sup> He is thinking in

terms of the political as he wants to win the throne; therefore will use the power of his language to get what he wants. This does not work for the women in the play, as when they ask for something they are ignored or silenced.

When Richard offers Anne his sword during this seduction, he is offering the opportunity to 'exercise phallic power which he assumes in advance she will be incapable of accepting.'<sup>10</sup> Richard is correct as Anne is deceived by the erotic seduction, as it gives the illusion of her holding a power over him; however, Anne has rejected using the sword on him which makes her submissive towards him. It is: one of Richard's greatest errors is to assume that all women conform to gender stereotypes to the same extent as Anne. Richard always reads gender in essentialist terms, and thus, although his seduction of Lady Anne is successful, he elsewhere underestimates his female opponents.'<sup>11</sup> One of these 'opponents' is Elizabeth, who can be seen as a villain, as she dares to speak not only in the same style of prose of Richard, but she also outwits him with this prose. Although Richard is known to be very skilled when arguing with his enemies, Elizabeth proves to be the more sly of the two, as she leaves Richard with the impression that she will woo young Elizabeth on his behalf, when in actual fact, she has already promised her to Richmond; therefore, outwitting Richard and thus preventing him achieving a tighter grip on England's throne which results in his final demise. Elizabeth practices Richards rhetoric strategy, in a similar scene in which he wooed Lady Anne; however, in this speech Elizabeth keeps Richard 'on the defensive by means of divisionary rhetoric, surviving chiefly on a keen awareness of the power of words.'<sup>12</sup> It is usually Richard that has

power with words, but now Elizabeth, by using the flexibility of language is able to overcome him: K.

Rich: Say I, her sovereign, am her subject low. Eliz: But she, your subject, loathes such sovereignty.(IV. iv. 355-56)Elizabeth continues to outwit Richard in this speech and expose his failing verbal skills that were once so strong at the beginning of the play. This is the turning point; and marks his downfall, as he says, " You mock me, madam, this is not the way / To win your daughter" (IV. iv. 284).

She is mocking him throughout the scene, as she has so much contempt for his proposal that she will not add to the dignity of it to take it seriously. In his article " Richard III Versus Elizabeth: An Interpretation," Stephen Tanner points out that the critic Louis Dollarhide states Richard is not outwitted by Elizabeth; ' Shakespeare gives not the slightest clue that Richard loses the debate.'<sup>13</sup> In my opinion, Dollarhide is wrong, as when comparing Richard's wooing scene with Lady Anne and this scene with Elizabeth it is obvious who is in control. In the wooing scene he is full of confidence; he is ' full of wordplay and cleverly twists the meanings of Anne's remarks to suit his entreaty.'<sup>14</sup> In comparison to this Elizabeth has him retreating as she breaks off his sentences with powerful conviction: Rich: Now, by the world -Eliz: ' Tis full of thy foul wrongs. Rich: My father's death -Eliz: Thy life hath it dishonour'd(IV. iv. 372-75)His wit is no use to him anymore, as he has been outsmarted by Elizabeth; therefore, he resorts to violence: Without her, follows to myself, and thee, Herself, the land, and many a Christian soul, Death, desolation, ruin and decay: It cannot be avoided but by this:(IV.

iv. 407-410) There is no such conversation that takes place like this in the wooing scene, yet another example of Richard losing his power. The women in the play operate as a group of mourners; however, they are also the ones in the play who are made to question the very use and function of language. When Queen Elizabeth is mourning the death of her sons she turns to Margaret for help: " My words are dull. O quicken them with thine!" ( IV, iv. 124) This suggests that she thinks her suffering can be directly transformed into language; thus relieving her pain through the act of speaking, namely cursing: " Thy woes will make them sharp and pierce like mine". (IV. iv.

125) When moments of crisis strike, the women in Richard III are clearly aware that their only weapon is words. The Duchess of York asks: ' Why should calamity be full of words?' (IV. iv. 126) and Queen Elizabeth replies: Windy attorneys to their client woes, Airy successors of intestate joys, Poor breathing orators of miseries! Let them scope: though they will impart Help nothing else, yet do they ease the heart.(IV. iv. 127-31) Due to the patriarchal society, where men were in control and women were submissive, speech was the only outlet for these women. Although the women of the monarchy had special rights, it has been stated that ' Elizabethan law offers no general statement on the position of women.

There is no text or statute specifically concerned with their rights- or lack of them.'<sup>15</sup> Girls were educated on two particular goals; ' the culture of virtue and the development of the skills of housewifery.'<sup>16</sup> Therefore, the curriculum was based on teaching the girls how to become a chaste wife and mother. They learned this through bible readings, which made them aware of their inferiority to their husband. They also learned practical skills such as

‘weaving, sewing, basic medical knowledge, singing and dancing.’<sup>17</sup> This meant that ‘girls and women...

were imprisoned within an ideology which promised freedom for men at the expense of circumscribing women’s access to knowledge and learning.’<sup>18</sup>

This, yet again, is another example of how women were made to be seen as inferior to men, and how they would be controlled by men. Margaret did not like the idea of being controlled by men, and can also be seen as a villain.

She is a figure that represents rage and pain, but she is vital to the play for the sheer focus of torment she brings the world surrounding Richard’s irresistible evil. She is a villain, because similar to Elizabeth, she speaks out against the male population. She continually curses Richard and shows utter hatred towards him: O Buckingham, take heed of yonder dog! Look, when he fawns, he bites; and when he bites, His venom tooth will rankle to the death: Have not to do with him, beware of him; Sin, death, and hell have set their marks on him, And all their ministers attend on him.(I. iii.

289-294) Margaret should not be speaking out like this, especially since she is disrespecting a man. However, she shows no respect towards Richard, which also means that she is failing to follow the ideal feminine virtues for the Renaissance woman. She is resisting the patriarchal ideals; of silence and obedience, and trying to defy him in any which way she can. Her lesson to Elizabeth and the Duchess about how to curse portrays to the audience how the use of language can be a mean of alleviating anguish. Hence, language is the only way these women can express their feelings. In late-sixteenth century England, when this play was being performed; anxieties about unruly masculine aggression were exacerbated by the contemporary

political situation. The monarch, who ought to incarnate patriarchy symbolically in the body politic of the kingship, was not a man but a woman, Elizabeth I, whose body natural was feminine. 19The parliamentary statute, which was passed from the beginning of Mary's reign and enabled women monarchs to have power stated that: That what and whensoever statute or law doth limit and appoint the king of this realm may or shall.

.. do anything as a king...the same the queen...

may by the same authority and power likewise...do. 20Therefore, this statute 'effectively rendered a queen masculine for the purposes of her public and princely function.'21 Elizabeth was a wise and shrewd leader, who repeatedly upstaged the men who would have controlled her. The empire she built up caused the male rulers of Spain and France, to fear her. The character of Margaret could evoke images of Queen Elizabeth I in the audience, as Margaret is trying to fight against the men in her society.

However, whereas she fails, Elizabeth I succeeds. This is because the play will have been written for an audience that need to see the patriarchal society restored to its natural order; that is male in control and female submissive, as this is what their society is like, as the male population did not want it to change. Richard is not afraid of the women's harsh words, and neither does he show any respect to what they have to say. This misogynistic attitude is portraying the attitude at the time the play was written, 1592. Richard does not respect Margaret, because she does not act like the typical Renaissance woman should, as they 'not only had to be chaste but had to be seen chaste: silence, humility and modesty were the



signifiers'.<sup>22</sup> Her cursing does not portray her as a chaste woman, as she is not being silent. Marilyn French responds to this; 'Shakespeare did not unthinkingly adopt the ideas of his culture: he saw something profoundly lethal about misogyny, and tried to find another way to deal with the traditional arrangement of morals implicit in the gender principles'.<sup>23</sup> The women in Richard III have a number of different roles as explained, but all of these roles are mainly defined by their relationships with men.

Anne and young Elizabeth are either wives or potential wives. The Duchess and Queen Elizabeth are mothers, and once Richard kills his brothers they become identical to Margaret, in the way of becoming powerless, their only outlet is through cursing.