

"hadst thou groaned  
for him": maternity,  
power, and history in  
richard ii



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Richard II, like most of Shakespeare's history plays (though, notably, unlike his comedies and tragedies), establishes a theatrical world dominated by men and masculinity. Female characters are few, and those that appear on the stage tend to say little and have less agency. But, as critic Graham Holderness notes, "women may not be much in evidence in the play, but femininity is" (173). Holderness' article "A Woman's War: A Feminist Reading of Richard II" attempts to reinsert femininity into history and historicity into feminist criticism, but his insightful argument does not examine fully enough the most powerful way in which femininity is in evidence in Richard II: in the imagery, metaphors, and explicit comments about motherhood, maternity, and childbirth that appear at various important moments throughout the play. Maternity not only reinserts femininity into the history play but indeed constructs femininity as the site of an uncanny, incomprehensible experience (of emotion, of power, of pain) that haunts both male and female characters and makes women far from a silent presence in Richard II. From John of Gaunt's searing elegy to his threatened motherland to Queen Isabella's prophetic fantasy of the birth of sorrow to the Duchess York's impassioned plea on behalf of her traitorous son Aumerle, maternity, and the mother-child relationship, are represented as traumatic - painful and ineffaceable - sources of knowledge and power that resonate throughout not only individual life but (through metaphor and rhetoric) the life of the nation and, thus, in a sense, structure the way history is created and experienced within the play. Queen Isabella is certainly the most tragic female character in Richard II; for most of the play (most saliently in scene 2. 1) she is, as Holderness notes, "a virtually silent, self-effacing character, who is also ignored by everyone else in the room," <https://assignbuster.com/hadst-thou-groaned-for-him-maternity-power-and-history-in-richard-ii/>

virtually as an absence, a non-existence" (170). When she speaks, her words often seem as vague and unfocused as the sense of sorrow that haunts her; entering the garden with her attendants and asking "What sport shall we devise here in this garden/To drive away the heavy tough of care" (3. 4. 1-2), then stubbornly refusing every "sport," the Queen seems silly and childlike if not altogether mad, a pathetic Ophelia-like creature addled by grief. The Queen's speech in 2. 2, though, is both eloquent and thematically significant, and its engagement with the issue of maternity is fascinating. Haunted by a sadness that has no obvious cause, the Queen says that "Yet again, methinks,/Some unborn sorrow, ripe in fortune's womb/Is coming towards me, and my inward soul/With nothing trembles. At something it grieves/More than with parting from my lord the king" (2. 1. 9-13). Queen Isabella's voice is not only melancholy but prophetic; with what might be somewhat crudely called a particularly feminine kind of knowledge (insight denied to, or ignored by, men), she anticipates the play's impending tragedy and puts the fall of a King - a moment of national, historic crisis - into the language of pregnancy and maternity, envisioning a "fortune" that might be broadly defined as the narrative shape of history or of the play as a pregnant woman, a mother. Refusing Bushy's reassurance that "'Tis nothing but conceit, my gracious lady" (2. 2. 33), the historically childless Isabella (Holderness 177) continues to imagine herself as involved, in a complicated fashion, in the birth of tragedy. Holderness claims that "Isabella naturally uses the imagery of pregnancy and birth, but displaces such possibilities from her own body, envisaging the birth of nothing but misfortune" (176). I am not convinced, however, that Isabella's rhetoric is so far removed from her body: "nothing" was a commonly recognized Elizabethan euphemism for <https://assignbuster.com/hadst-thou-groaned-for-him-maternity-power-and-history-in-richard-ii/>

vagina, and the Queen's repeated use of the word (" my inward soul/with nothing trembles" [2. 2. 12]; " As, though on thinking on no thought I think,/Makes me with heavy nothing faint and shrink" [2. 2. 31-32]; "' Tis nothing less.../For nothing hath begot my something grief,/Or something hath the nothing that I grieve" [2. 1. 34-37]) in speeches that deal explicitly with pregnancy and childbirth suggest that this meaning is being consciously referenced here. The female genitals, literally the site of reproduction and birth, metaphorically (and through worldplay) become the site of premonition and tragedy; Isabella implies, in fact, that her portentous melancholy is a fatherless child, a pure product only of the female genitals: " Conceit is still derived/From some forefather grief. Mine is not so,/For nothing hath begot my something grief" (2. 2. 34-36). Her next line - " Or something hath the nothing that I grieve" (2. 2. 37) might be read as mourning the loss of that moment of purity or as claiming further agency for the female body, the location of a physicalized, embodied knowledge (and thus power) derived from the experience of maternity, one that becomes more closely tied to Isabella's own body when she says " So, Green, thou art the midwife to my woe,/Bolingbroke my sorrow's dismal heir./Now hath my soul brought forth her prodigy;/And I, a gasping new-delivered mother,/Have woe to woe, sorrow to sorrow joined" (2. 1. 62-66). The female experience of the traumatic pain of childbirth - as the " prodigy" or monstrous omen (which is, of course, now justified and proved not " nothing" at all) is transmitted through Isabella's soul and conflated with her body or genitals - becomes explicitly tied to the workings of the state and of history: not only are Isabella's personal " woe" and " sorrow" joined to those of England, but it is through the woman's suffering that the sufferings of the King and the nation

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are both dramatically anticipated and rhetorically represented. The play's most explicit representation of the power of motherhood is its last: against the wishes of her husband, who turns against their son Aumerle for his treasonous plot, the Duchess of York begs King Henry for pardon on behalf of her son. Holderness argues that, in contrast to the Queen and the Duchess of Gloucester, "the Duchess of York offers what is in effect a contrasting success-story, precisely because she accepts and embraces the subjected and marginal role of women...the prospect of losing her son would rob her of her very existence" (178), exemplifying Holderness' thesis that women's identities in the play are constituted solely through their relationships to men, that "their only function in this masculine world is that of bearing sons for their powerful husbands" (177). Holderness reads the Duchess' passionate plea for her son, first to her husband and then - against that husband's will - to the King as yet one more example of female subjugation to male power, finding in her begging on her knees to the King and her self-effacing appeal to paternal pride ("He is as like thee as a man may be,/Not like to me, or any of my kin" [5. 2. 108-109]) evidence that "to save her son the Duchess is not only prepared to humiliate herself...but even to sacrifice from her boy the personal traces of her maternal inheritance..." (178). I would propose that the Duchess of York's scenes with her husband and with King Henry display a much more profound engagement with issues of gender, maternity, paternity, and power than Holderness gives them credit for. To begin with, the Duchess of York does, as Holderness acknowledges, represent a "contrasting success-story" in that she succeeds in bending the will of the king to save the life of her son; perhaps she does so through a kind of subjugation - "For ever will I walk upon my knees/And never see day

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that the happy sees,/Till thou give joy.../By pardoning Rutland, my transgressing boy" (5. 3. 94-97) – but it is a subjugation so literal as to seem highly self-conscious: this is a woman who, in perhaps inappropriate post-feminist terms, knows what she wants and what she has to do to get it, even – especially – if that means a performative reenactment of the rhetoric and structures of patriarchy. Brilliantly manipulating those structures, the Duchess begs the king to " Say ' pardon' first, and afterwards ' stand up.'/And if I were thy nurse, thy tongue to teach,/'Pardon should be the first word of they speech/.../Say ' pardon' king; let pity teach thee how./The word is short, but not so short as sweet;/No word like ' pardon' for kings' mouths so meet" (5. 3. 112-118). On her knees, she subtly inverts power structures not through nearly forcing the king to say " pardon" through her insistent, rhythmic, alliterative speech, but suggesting that the figure of the " nurse" (whom for the sake of this argument I would conflate with that of the " mother" as women charged with the responsibilities of child-rearing, though it is worth noting that historically the nurse is even more marginalized than the mother) is invested with the power, through teaching, of controlling what men say, of controlling the inheritance of language, of deciding what words are " for kings' mouths so meet." This strange female authority over language is also suggested in Mowbray's lament over his banishment: " The language I have learnt these forty years,/My native English, now I must forgo.../I am too old to fawn upon a nurse,/Too far in years to be a pupil now" (1. 3. 159-171). Leaving his motherland and without access to a new source of maternal teaching, Mowbray conceives of himself as robbed of the power of speech, radically disassociated from language itself. The Duchess'

inversion remains ambivalent and the triumph incomplete, since the <https://assignbuster.com/hadst-thou-groaned-for-him-maternity-power-and-history-in-richard-ii/>

oppressive workings of patriarchy cannot be denied both in society and in language itself (the speech being taught by the nurse is an inherently masculinist one), but the moment is nonetheless a profound one: the scene, I would argue, suggests that even when most fully entrenched within patriarchal domination (in what Holderness calls an "embrace" and I would call a performative and thus destabilizing enactment), the woman, as the figure charged with the responsibility of passing language on to (male) children, exerts a kind of control over that very language and thus over its uses. In the scene prior to her appeal to the King, the Duchess refuses to indict her son for his participation in the treasonous conspiracy though her husband orders her to do so, disavowing fatherly affection and accusing his wife of overly emotional feminine weakness: "Thou fond mad woman,/Wilt thou conceal this dark conspiracy.../Away, fond woman! Were he twenty times/My son, I would appeach him" (5. 2. 95-102). The Duchess argues eloquently for the placement of familial bonds over political loyalties (a vexed issue throughout the play, as evidenced by the bond of blood shared by Richard and Bolingbroke that torments both men) and for the supremacy of maternal experience: "Hadst thou groaned for/him/As I have done, though wouldst be more pitiful" (5. 2. 103). Holderness recognizes that here "the Duchess does at least suggest that femininity may have its own peculiar experiences and values, in some ways quite separate from the world of masculine ideology" (178) but, again, I would argue that the Duchess' words suggest something more meaningful than that: the traumatically painful ordeal of childbirth (the Duchess' term "groan," which in Shakespearean usage often directly or indirectly references the pains of labor, resonates throughout the play, as in Richard's potentially <https://assignbuster.com/hadst-thou-groaned-for-him-maternity-power-and-history-in-richard-ii/>

transgendering injunction to the Queen: " Go, count thy way with sighs; I mine with groans/.../Twice for one stop I'll groan, the way being short..." [5. 1. 88-91]), an ordeal that at once ruptures and strengthens the primal bond between mother and child, gives the woman access to a realm of physical and psychic experience not only " separate from the world of masculine ideology," not only at odds with it, but exerting an uncanny power over it while remaining incomprehensible to it. Though tied to Linda Bamber's psychoanalytic concept of feminine Otherness, " female principle apart from history" (quoted in Holderness 167), this evocation of maternal experience claims authority and power not only against history but within it - or even over it: the profound original bond between mother and child, the traumatic (because painful and ineffaceable) ordeal of childbirth, alters the shape of history (or history as written within the history play). " His words come from his mouth, ours from our breast" (5. 2. 102) the Duchess says of her husband to the King, claiming once again the primal authority and uncanny knowledge of maternity and locating it, like Isabella's prophecy does, in the body (specifically the breast, the son's first source of food), in a place beyond and deeper than language but also (recall the image of the nurse) exerting control over language and over action. The scene of Oedipal struggle is played out between father and son but, as the King himself (symbolically the ultimate Father) cedes to the demands of the Duchess, it is the Mother who triumphs. Mothers are, of course, intimately tied to nations in the (largely masculinist) rhetoric of patriotic sentiment, as the term " motherland" and the traditional gendering of countries as female makes clear. The rhetoric of England-as-mother occurs throughout Richard II: " Then England's ground, farewell; sweet soil, adieu,/My mother, and my nurse, that <https://assignbuster.com/hadst-thou-groaned-for-him-maternity-power-and-history-in-richard-ii/>



bears me yet!" (1. 4. 306-309) says the banished Bolingbroke, and King Richard speaks of "our peace, which in our country's cradle/Draws the sweet infant breath of gentle sleep" (1. 3. 132-133), conceiving of the political situation ("our peace") and thus, in a sense, of history as the child sleeping in the mother-country's cradle. Most significant, of course, is the famous speech in which John of Gaunt laments the state of his beloved nation, his motherland: "This blessed plot, this earth, this realm, this England,/This nurse, this teeming womb of royal kings,/Feared by their breed and famous by their birth,/Renowned for their deeds as far from home,/For Christian service and true chivalry,/As is the sepulcher in stubborn Jewry/Of the world's ransom, blessed Mary's son..." (2. 1. 50-56). Holderness argues: "In Gaunt's feudal and aristocratic perspective, women appear as the passive vehicles by means of which the patriarchal seed is procreated...Even the femininity of his metaphorical 'England' is ultimately spurious, since that maternal symbol is so completely a construction of the kings and warriors who have served their country" (185). Yes, but: I would suggest that my analysis of the other moments of intersection of maternity and politics in the play might allow a re-reading of Gaunt's speech and of how the sentiment expressed within it functions in the play. Though his perspective is undoubtedly "feudal and aristocratic" and steeped in the rhetoric and ideology of patriarchy, I would propose that considerably more agency can be granted to the abstract femininity represented here by England than Holderness allows; as he acknowledges, "You cannot really talk about nurses, and wombs, and birth, and breeding, without bringing into play a feminine dimension of meaning...[that] proves remarkably hard to expel" (174). England is represented as both mother and nurse, both woman who

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gives birth and woman who breeds and teaches (the parallel structure of lines 51-52 emphasizes this point), and as a "teeming womb" (a woman before birth) filled with unborn children, unachieved potential, unlived history. The womb, as in Queen Isabella's speech, is rhetorically imagined as a vessel of kings and of history, but not only as a "passive vehicle." As we have seen, the figure of the Mother (and of the Motherland) retains a kind of control, even if it is a control planted firmly within patriarchal structures, over the actions, words, and thoughts of the sons - the warriors, the knights, the kings - who create history. This is why the image of a woman's body - a womb - is so appropriate in the middle of a movingly patriotic monologue and at the same time so jarring: the authority granted by maternity, the knowledge/power of the womb, the insertion of female meaning into male speech (and male history), is deeply troubled and ambivalent but - like the relationship of mother to son - inexorable. In *Richard II*, the incomprehensible (to men) physical and psychic pains of pregnancy and childbirth, the traumatically disrupted but never fully shattered primal bond of child to mother, the authority of mother/nurse to teach language to the son and thus to in a sense control the way that knowledge is transmitted, grant to women an uncanny, ambivalent, but surprisingly strong control over the way that history is structured and spoken about. History, or at least history as dramatized and given narrative arc within the history play, can be envisaged as a kind of endless Oedipal battle between Father and Sons, as an older king (and generation) is deposed by a younger one. King Henry is haunted at the end by guilt over his historically ordained murder of the father-figure King Richard: "Lords, I protest my soul is full of woe/That blood should sprinkle me to make me grow" (5. 6. 45-46). As in every Oedipal

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battle, though, the figure of the Mother looms large, and this is no exception: in Isabella's prophetic knowledge, in the Duchess of Gloucester's linguistic power, in John of Gaunt's patriotic rhetoric, maternity exerts its uncanny force within history. Works Cited  
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