THE ROLE OF PROPHECY IN SHAKESPEARE'S THE TRAGEDY OF KING RICHARD THE THIRD

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ABSTRACT

This study of Shakespeare's The Tragedy of King Richard the Third analyzes the role of prophecy in the play. Three basic questions are considered: 1) To what extent does Shakespeare use prophecy in this play? 2) For what purposes does Shakespeare use prophecy in this play? and 3) What effects or results does Shakespeare achieve by his use of prophecy in Richard III?

The first question is the simplest to answer. Shakespeare uses prophecy so extensively in Richard III that to be able to discuss it in an effective way, it seems logical to consider prophecy in three closely related categories: prophecies, dreams, and curses. An example of a simple prophecy in which the future is merely predicted is referred to when Richard remembers that Henry VI had prophesied that Richmond would become king. There are only a few instances of such direct prophecies in Richard III.

The use of dreams as a tool of prophecy is more complicated because of the problem of interpretation. An example of one of the three important dream sequences is Clarence's dream which reveals that Richard will strike him overboard and cause him to drown.

The most important aspect of prophecy in Richard III is that of prophetic curses. The calling down of curses and their ultimate fulfillment permeate Richard III. Margaret of Anjou is especially effective as she liberally delivers curses and then waits for them to be fulfilled.

The second and third questions to which this paper addresses itself are closely related. If Shakespeare is successful in using prophecies for a dramatic purpose, then he has achieved the desired effect. Shakespeare uses prophecies, dreams, and curses to give the audience a feeling of anticipation and foreboding. This was possible because the Elizabethan audience as well as the characters in the play, generally accepted the predictive power of the prophecies, dreams and curses. As prophecies are made, curses called down, and dreams dreamed, the audience as well as the characters anticipate what is going to happen. This contributes to the unity of the play as the characters and the audience look from the past to the future.

Another factor enhancing the unity of the play is recapitulation. An outstanding example of this is the parade of Richard's victims who visit Richard's and Richmond's dreams the night before the Battle of Bosworth Field. They remind the audience of the evil and bloodshed that Richard has caused.

Thus this study of The Tragedy of King Richard the Third concludes that Shakespeare makes extensive use of the various facets of prophecy in his play. He does so for the purposes of giving his drama unity and of giving his audiences the feelings of anticipation and foreboding. He also uses the various facets of prophecy to recapitulate what has already happened in a complicated story. The use of prophecies, curses, and dreams thus contributes to the dramatic effectiveness of William Shakespeare's The Tragedy of King Richard the Third.

William Shakespeare begins his drama, The Tragedy of King Richard the Third, by directing the attention of the audience towards Richard, who immediately makes clear his intention "to prove a villain." It seems that Shakespeare may also be directing attention to the area of prophecy, for Richard uses the word prophecy twice in his opening soliloquy, and when his brother, Clarence, enters, he, too, discusses prophecy. This paper will attempt to analyze to what extent and for what purposes Shakespeare uses prophecy in Richard III.

The general understanding of the word prophecy is the foretelling of future events, usually by someone with special insight into the future, such as a prophet or a soothsayer. This paper will be concerned with this typical concept of prophecy, and it will also be concerned with two peripheral areas of prophecy which fulfill the Oxford English Dictionary's definition that prophecy involves foretelling the future by any means.[1] These two aspects of prophecy are dreams and curses. Dreams may fulfill the foretelling aspect of prophecy by revealing to a person during sleep what is going to happen to him. The problem with the dreams is

[1]The Oxford English Dictionary (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961).

generally one of correct interpretation. Curses may fulfill the predictive aspect of prophecy by consigning future evil upon a person. By looking closely at Shakespeare's use of prophecy in Richard III, it may be possible to determine to what extent and for what purposes Shakespeare does use it in this drama.

Shakespeare's use of prophecies, curses, and dreams must have been especially effective as presented to an Elizabethan audience. The Elizabethans accepted the existence of and the validity of these phenomena. John Bench Black writes in his study of Elizabethan society, ". . . in spite of its learning, culture, and realism Elizabethan England was permeated with superstition."[2] Black goes on to explain that charms and spells were a part of daily life as was the belief that ghosts walked at night to tell secrets, to right wrongs, or to make reparations.[3] It was also believed that ghosts sometimes appeared in dreams to deliver messages.[4]

These beliefs were not limited to the common people. Even the educated classes believed in the existence of ghosts

[2]John Bench Black, The Reign of Elizabeth 1558-1603 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1937), p. 279.

[3]Black, p. 279.

[4]H. Littledale, "Folklore and Superstitions: Ghosts and Fairies: Witchcraft and Devils," in Shakespeare's England: An Account of the Life and Manners of His Age (London: Oxford University Press, 1916, rpt. 1962), I, p. 535.

and believed in prophecies.[5] The audience would be thus aware of the ghosts and the prophecies and would place a great deal of credence in them.

As for the area of curses, the Church, in fact, ". . . set the example of solemn cursings, with bell, book, and candle; and the stage was not slow to utilize this department of rhetoric."[6] Thus Shakespeare's audience would be well-prepared to anticipate the fulfillment of the solemn and awful curses called down by Margaret of Anjou.

It is important to keep in mind while analyzing Richard III that Shakespeare's audience would have been very aware of the importance of the prophecies, curses, and dreams, and would have also viewed these as credible happenings.

The first aspect of prophecy that will be considered in this paper is that of the simple foretelling of what will happen in the future. There are only three instances of prophecy in Richard III that involve neither dreams nor the calling down of curses upon a person. The first of these occurs in the opening scene and involves Richard's ambitions for the throne. Richard had discussed these ambitions earlier in The Third Part of King Henry the Sixth,

[5]Littledale, pp. 533-534.

[6]Littledale, p. 530.

> I'll make my heaven to dream upon the crown
> And, whiles I live, t'account this world but hell
> Until my misshaped trunk that bears this head
> Be round impaled with a glorious crown.
> (III. ii. 168-71)[7]

The practical problem facing Richard is that there are so many people in line for succession before him. After Richard eliminates King Henry VI and Henry's son, Edward, he predicts, "Clarence, thy turn is next, and then the rest" (V. vi. 90). He now tells us in Richard III how he plans to get rid of Clarence. Richard has brought to King Edward's attention an old prophecy that predicted G would murder Edward's heirs (I. i. 39-40).[8] Clarence is the unfortunate bearer of the name George. Richard says,

> Plots have I laid, inductions dangerous,
> By drunken prophecies, libels, and dreams,
> To set my brother Clarence and the king
> In deadly hate the one against the other . . . .
> (I. i. 32-35)

Richard's first villainy in the play thus is dependent on his use of prophecy.

[7]William Shakespeare, The Third Part of King Henry the Sixth, in Alfred Harbage, ed., William Shakespeare: The Complete Works (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1969). Hereafter, all quotations from The Third Part of King Henry the Sixth will be from the Harbage edition and will be indicated in the text of the paper.

[8]William Shakespeare, The Tragedy of King Richard the Third, in Alfred Harbage, ed., William Shakespeare: The Complete Works (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1969). Hereafter, all quotations from The Tragedy of King Richard the Third will be from the Harbage edition and will be indicated in the text of the paper.

Richard is able to use prophecies because his victims believe in them. They see the prophecies as part of the world order. It is fascinating that as much as Richard uses prophecies for his own end, he fails to understand the impact of prophecies on him. He also fails to understand the power of curses, and thus he "plays" with Margaret when she curses him.

Richard takes himself outside of the world order in his first soliloquy when he determines "to prove a villain." He chooses to represent chaos to a society that believes in order. "The conception of world order was for the Elizabethans a principal matter . . . ."[9] And part of that order requires that prophecies, curses, and dreams are realized and that the chaotic Richard is defeated. Richard's excesses are against the divine order which demands that there be some sort of balance. Richard's villainies cannot go on unchecked. The prophecies function because they reflect a fundamental order. Their fulfillment will restore God's order to a world that Richard has for a time turned into chaos.

Richard begins disrupting the world order by telling the audience that he has plans for his brother Clarence.

[9]E. M. W. Tillyard, The Elizabethan World Picture (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1944), p. 16.

As Richard finishes explaining his plans, Clarence enters under guard and tells Richard that King Edward is sending him to the Tower because his name is George. He says that Edward "hearkens after prophecies and dreams" (I. i. 54), and thus he has committed him to the Tower.

The use of prophecy and the attention Shakespeare devotes to it in this opening scene stimulate the audience's awareness of prophecy. The audience should be alerted by this opening scene to anticipate the further use of prophecy in the play. The audience can also appreciate Richard's ingenuity in interpreting prophecies to benefit himself. Richard, the Duke of Gloucester, would have fulfilled the G prophecy just as surely as would his brother George, the Duke of Clarence.

The second instance of prophecy involves Hastings' prophetic statement as he is being led off to his death. Hastings has ignored dreams that urged him to flee, and now he is paying with his life. As he is led to the chopping block he says,

> O bloody Richard! Miserable England!
> I prophesy the fearfull'st time to thee
> That ever wretched age hath looked upon.
> Come, lead me to the block; bear him my head.
> They smile at me who shortly shall be dead.
> (III. iv. 103-107)

Hastings is prophesying for both Richard and England a "fearfull'st time" which will be realized in the final

battles of the Wars of the Roses. He is also prophesying that others will soon follow him. This again gives the audience a feeling of anticipation for what is to follow. The prophecy prepares the audience for a terrible time for Richard and for England.

The third instance of prophecy in Richard III is the prophecy that Richard remembers hearing from King Henry the Sixth,

> I do remember me Henry the Sixth
> Did prophesy that Richmond should be king . . . .
> (IV. ii. 94-95)

Richard also remembers the words of a bard that should increase his feelings of trepidation about Richmond,

> . . . a bard of Ireland told me once
> I should not live long after I saw Richmond.
> (IV. ii. 105-106)

The prophecy and the words of the bard serve to build anticipation for what is going to happen to Richard. They also contribute to developing a picture of a victorious Richmond, the one force in the play that will be able to overcome the villainy of Richard. If these basically identical prophecies prove true, Richmond will become king, and Richard will be out of power.

The prophecies thus serve functions for the characters in the play and for the audience. The characters in the play have the problem of correctly interpreting the

prophecies. G will murder Edward's heirs, but the G is Gloucester rather than George. Richard and England will suffer a fearful time, and others will follow Hastings to the chopping block. Most important, Richard will die shortly after seeing Richmond, and Richmond will become king. Shakespeare informs his audience of the prophecies in the first scene so that the audience is aware of prophecies when they are made, and he alerts them to watch for the fulfillment of the prophecies.

Shakespeare also directs attention towards the prophetic nature of dreams as early as the first scene in the play. In the same way that the initial discussion of prophecy alerts the audience to future prophecies and to the fulfillment of prophecies, the initial dreams of Clarence capture attention, make the audience aware of the prophetic nature of the dreams, and make clear the significance of the dreams so that the audience will be very aware of the possible importance of later dreams.

Clarence is tormented by terrible dreams the night before Richard puts an end to his imprisonment by having him murdered. In describing his dreams to the Keeper, Clarence reveals that his dreams have warned him of the coming danger from Richard. In his dreams, he and Richard are sailing to Burgundy, and Richard "from my cabin tempted me to walk/Upon the hatches" (I. iv. 12-13). The use of

the word "tempted" implies more than an innocent invitation to take a walk; it implies an urging towards something evil. Wolfgang Clemen says of this, "The language of the dream thus allows Clarence to express a subconscious sense of Richard's menace."[10]

Clarence goes on to describe what happens in his dream as he and Richard walk on the ship,

> Methought that Gloucester stumbled, and in falling
> Struck me (that thought to stay him) overboard
> Into the tumbling billows of the main.
> (I. iv. 18-20)

The dream thus presents a very definite foreshadowing of Clarence's death at the hands of Gloucester.[11] Clarence does not understand his dreams as he speaks of them to the Keeper, but he will realize their full impact when his murderers tell him, "'Tis he [Gloucester] that sends us to destroy you here" (I. iv. 238). In his dreams, Clarence's death results from Richard striking him overboard, and in his life, Clarence's death results from Richard's striking him down by hiring his murderers. Referring to his dreams,

[10]Wolfgang H. Clemen, A Commentary on Shakespeare's Richard III, English version by Jean Bonheim (London: Methuen and Company, Ltd., 1968), p. 69.

[11]Aerol Arnold, "The Recapitulation Dream in Richard III and Macbeth," Shakespeare Quarterly, VI (1955), p. 52.

Clarence says, "O Lord! methought what pain it was to drown!" (I. iv. 21), and in his death at the hands of Richard, Clarence's murderer says, "I'll drown you in the malmsey butt within" (I. iv. 265).

Clarence's dreams thus foreshadow his death, reveal who is the cause of that death, and show how it is going to happen. Wolfgang Clemen feels that Clarence's dreams foreshadow much more than this. "This dream is a prelude and foreboding not only to the murder of Clarence himself but also to the whole series of dark catastrophes following."[12] Clarence says to the Keeper after telling of his dreams,

> Ah, keeper, keeper, I have done these things
> (That now give evidence against my soul)
> . . . . . .
> O God! if my deep pray'rs cannot appease thee,
> But thou wilt be avenged on my misdeeds,
> Yet execute thy wrath in me alone:
> O, spare my guiltless wife and my poor children!
> (I. iv. 66-72)

Thus Clarence's words prepare the audience for his death and also for other catastrophes that must follow.

The next dream that Shakespeare presents in Richard III is one that is presented to the audience second-hand. A messenger comes to Hastings to tell him of the dreams that Stanley has had. Stanley has dreamed that "the boar [Richard] had rasèd off his helm [head]" (III. ii. 11), and he wants

[12]Wolfgang H. Clemen, "Tradition and Originality in Shakespeare's Richard III," Shakespeare Quarterly, V (1954), p. 255.

Hastings to fly north with him "to shun the danger that his soul divines" (III. ii. 18). Hastings refuses to listen and sends the message back to Stanley that "the boar will use us kindly" (III, ii, 33). It is just two scenes later that Richard, the boar, treats Hastings "kindly" by condemning, "Thou art a traitor./Off with his head!" (III. iv. 75-76). Hastings realizes that he should have heeded Stanley's prophetic dream and gone north,

> For I, too fond, might have prevented this.
> Stanley did dream the boar did rase our helms;
> But I did scorn it and disdain to fly.
> (III. iv. 81-83)

As Clarence's dream warns Clarence about evil coming from Richard, so does Stanley's dream warn him and Hastings. Both Clarence and Hastings fail to recognize the full significance of these prophetic dreams, and both fall under Richard.

It is interesting to note that Richard has credibility problems with his dreams, just as Clarence and Hastings experienced. It is possible that if Richard were still at his prime, this might not have been so. But when Richard murders the innocent princes, he crosses the line to total villainy. This is the first and only time that Richard kills someone without blemish. From the point of these terrible murders, Richard's activities are totally without a redeeming feature. And as Richard sinks farther into total

villainy, he loses the balance and control he once had that might have enabled him to deal with his dreams.

The night before the Battle of Bosworth Field Richard retires for a good night's sleep. But his dreams torment him as all of the persons he has killed, in the chronological order in which he killed them, visit him and prophesy that he will lose the battle and that he will die. These ghosts definitely get their point across. The ghosts remind Richard of how he has killed them, then say to Richard that he should despair and die. The first ghost in the long procession is the ghost of Prince Edward, son of Henry VI. He says to Richard,

> Let me sit heavy on thy soul to-morrow!
> Think how thou stab'st me in my prime of youth
> At Tewkesbury; despair therefore, and die!
> (V. iii. 119-121)

The ghost of Prince Edward is followed by the ghost of his father, Henry VI. The ghost of Henry VI follows the same pattern established by his son in prophesying in Richard's dream that he will die,

> When I was mortal, my anointed body
> By thee was punched full of deadly holes.
> Think on the Tower, and me: despair, and die!
> Harry the Sixth bids thee despair, and die!
> (V. iii. 125-128)

Next comes the ghost of Clarence, Richard's own brother, who also refers to his own death and then prophesies death for Richard,

> Let me sit heavy in thy soul to-morrow—
> I that was washed to death with fulsome wine,
> Poor Clarence by thy guile betrayed to death!
> To-morrow in the battle think on me,
> And fall thy edgeless sword: despair, and die!
> (V. iii. 132-136)

The ghosts of Rivers, Grey, Vaughan, Hastings, the two young princes, and Lady Anne all enter and reiterate what the ghosts that precede them say. They urge Richard to remember them during the battle tomorrow, and they curse him with their words that he should despair and die.

The final ghost to visit Richard in his dreams is Buckingham. Buckingham, who has been Richard's accomplice, joins the other ghosts in predicting defeat for Richard and in urging him to despair and die,

> The first was I that helped thee to the crown;
> The last was I that felt thy tyranny.
> O, in the battle think on Buckingham,
> And die in terror of thy guiltiness!
> Dream on, dream on, of bloody deeds and death:
> Fainting, despair; despairing, yield thy breath!
> (V. iii. 168-173)

All these ghosts serve the functions of cataloging Richard's victims and predicting Richard's defeat. Thus they serve as links between the past and the future.[13]

When Richard awakens, he is frightened, "Cold fearful drops stand on my trembling flesh" (V. iii. 182). But he rallies, and like Clarence and Hastings, he ignores the prophetic dreams about what is to befall him. Before giving

[13]Clemen, Commentary, p. 212.

his oration to his army, Richard says,

> Let not our babbling dreams affright our souls;
> Conscience is but a word that cowards use,
> Devises at first to keep the strong in awe:
> Our strong arms be our conscience, swords our law!
> (V. iii. 309-312)

Thus Richard verbalizes his determination to ignore what he has dreamed. His dreams prophesy what really is going to happen and they prepare the audience for Richard's defeat.

Each ghost leaves Richard after prophesying his defeat to go to Richmond to predict a glorious future. The ghost of Prince Edward, son of Henry VI, is again the first ghost to speak,

> Be cheerful, Richmond; for the wrongèd souls
> Of butcherèd princes fight in thy behalf.
> King Henry's issue, Richmond, comforts thee.
> (V. iii. 122-124)

The ghost of King Henry VI follows and predicts victory for Richmond,

> Virtuous and holy, be thou conqueror!
> Harry, that prophesied thou shouldst be king,
> Doth comfort thee in thy sleep: live, and flourish!
> (V. iii. 129-131)

A more dramatic prophecy follows as the ghost of Richard's own brother, Clarence, follows the utterance of his curse against Richard with a blessing for Richmond,

> Thou offspring of the House of Lancaster,
> The wrongèd heirs of York do pray for thee;
> Good angels guard thy battle! live, and flourish!
> (V. iii. 137-139)

The procession of ghosts — Rivers, Grey, Vaughan, Hastings, the two young princes, and Lady Anne — continues

coming from Richard's dreams, where they predict a dire future, to the dreams of Richmond, where they prophesy a happy victory. Buckingham, the last ghost to speak, says to Richmond,

> I died for hope ere I could lend thee aid;
> But cheer thy heart and be thou not dismayed:
> God and good angels fight on Richmond's side,
> And Richard falls in height of all his pride!
> (V. iii. 174-177)

It is no wonder that Richmond's awakening sharply contrasts with Richard's. Richard is frightened when he awakens, but Richmond says,

> The sweetest sleep, and fairest-boding dreams
> That ever ent'red in a drowsy head
> Have I since your departure had, my lords.
> Methought their souls whose bodies Richard murdered
> Came to my tent and cried on victory.
> (V. iii. 228-232)

The ghosts continue with Richmond the function of linking the past with the present and the future. The audience's awareness of the prophetic nature of the dreams and of the eventual fulfillment of what is prophesied in the dreams lends to the unity of the drama and gives it continuity. Thus the prophetic dreams of Clarence, Hastings, Richard, and Richmond all play an important part in Richard III.

An additional important facet of prophecy that this paper will be concerned with is that of curses. Curses are prophetic in that they call future evil upon a person.

Curses and their fulfillment, especially the curses of Margaret of Anjou, permeate Richard III. The fact that these curses are sometimes fulfilled in ways that the curser does not anticipate contributes to the dramatic irony in the play. This also helps to build a feeling of anticipation and foreboding for the audience.[14]

Lady Anne is the first character to actually deliver curses in Richard III, and she directs them against Richard, the most popular recipient of curses in the play. Anne is accompanying the corpse of King Henry VI to its burial, and as she looks on the dead king, she laments and remembers Henry's son, her husband, Edward, "Stabbed by the selfsame hand that made these wounds!" (I. ii. 11). Her lamentations for her dead husband and her dead father-in-law arouse bitterness in Anne. She curses Richard for bringing so much sorrow into her life,

> O, cursèd be the hand that made these holes!
> Cursèd the heart that had the heart to do it!
> Cursèd the blood that let this blood from hence!
> (I. ii. 14-16)

Anne leaves little doubt as to her feelings toward Richard. She extends the curse to include any children that Richard might have in the future,

[14]Wolfgang H. Clemen, "Anticipation and Foreboding in Shakespeare's Early Histories," Shakespeare Survey, VI (1953), p. 25.

> If ever he have child, abortive be it,
> Prodigious, and untimely brought to light,
> Whose ugly and unnatural aspect
> May fright the hopeful mother at the view,
> And that be heir to his unhappiness!
> (I. ii. 21-25)

Anne is determined to leave no one in Richard's world untouched by her curses. After she condemns any future children that Richard may have, in a passage filled with dramatic irony, she condemns any woman who might marry Richard,

> If ever he have wife, let her be made
> More miserable by the life of him
> Than I am made by my young lord and thee!
> (I. ii. 26-28)

Anne later remembers the curse she has called down on Richard's wife. She has become Richard's wife and thus has become "the subject of mine own soul's curse" (IV. i. 80). For the part of the audience which knows because of familiarity with national history that Anne will marry Richard, the passage in which Anne curses Richard's future wife is immediately ironic. Others in the audience will appreciate later the irony of the passage when they realize that Anne unknowingly has uttered a curse against herself.

As the funeral procession of Henry VI continues, Richard enters and commands the pall bearers to set down the corpse. The scene that ensues is one that stretches credibility almost to the breaking point. Anne curses Richard to his face. She asks God and the earth for

revenge and she goes on to say,

> Either heav'n with lightning strike the murd'rer dead;
> Or earth gape open wide and eat him quick. . . .
> (I. ii. 64-65)

Richard responds to her curses by wooing her. Richard's wooing of Anne at such an inappropriate moment, during the funeral procession, and his almost unbelievable success in doing so, have aroused considerable speculation among the critics. Why does Anne agree to marry a man whom she has just cursed with such vehemence? Murray Krieger offers the most logical explanation of why Anne ignores her curses of Richard enough to agree to marry him.

> These characters [Richard's victims] know from first to last that Richard is a villain so that they are never fooled by him. What they do they do in full knowledge of the truth. If they appear to be convinced of any poses he assumes, it is because they themselves are playing the hypocrite's role. Much of the difficulty in interpreting the play arises from an inability to recognize the villainy that pervades the entire stage. I shall eventually suggest that in Richard III there are no innocents: that rather than intruding himself as an alien force into the world of the play, Richard is a purified and thus extreme symbol, a distillation of that world; that the evil stems not from Richard but from a history he shares with the others even if it finds its essential representative in him.[15]

Richard capitalizes on Anne's vanity to induce her to change her position from one who curses him, to one who agrees to

[15]Murray Krieger, "The Dark Generations of Richard III," in Murray Krieger, The Play and Place of Criticism (Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 1967), p. 43.

marry him. She cooperates because there is something in it for her. Anne continues to loathe Richard even though she does agree to marry him.

The scene following Richard's wooing of Anne introduces the audience to Margaret of Anjou. Margaret appears only twice in Richard III, but she plays a very important role in the play. Her presence is continually felt as characters remember the curses she has called down. Though she is seldom present on the stage, she seems always to be hovering over the action. Margaret also contributes to the unity of the play for she prompts other characters and the audience to look to the past to recall why she is cursing a particular character, and to look to the future in which the character will remember Margaret's words.

Wolfgang Clemen sees Margaret as "Richard's equal in demoniac and elemental force, suggesting that there exist opposing powers which are neither duped by Richard's trickeries nor prepared to bow to his will."[16] Clemen views Richard as a total villain so that Margaret would have to be equal to him in demonic ways in order to understand him, cope with him, and thwart his attempts to control her. She would also have to be an elemental force to have the energy to sustain her in dealing with Richard.

[16]Clemen, Commentary, p. 48.

Michael Quinn, in examining the role of Margaret, says,

> Most of the individual "tragedies" in Richard III have two causes; the efficient secondary cause is usually Richard himself, whose Machiavellian plotting brings one character after another to destruction; the primary cause is indicated by curses and prophecies, above all by the curses of Margaret who, in this play, becomes almost a personification of Revenge, or rather, a prophet of Divine Vengeance.[17]

Margaret seeks retribution for the wrongs done to the House of Lancaster. She is more than just an old woman with terrible memories. She is an exiled queen. She is a once-powerful figure who has sinned as much as she has been sinned against. And she plays a very important role in the purgation that is to take place in England to pave the way for the succession of the Tudor line to the throne.

Margaret's initial entrance is made behind the action. None of the other characters on stage is aware of her presence. As Margaret listens to Queen Elizabeth, Richard and Rivers, she makes asides that reveal her deep bitterness. It is interesting that Margaret's presence is not noticed by the other characters. If her presence were known, she still could make her comments in the form of asides and not be heard by the other characters. It is unlikely that Margaret's presence would have had any inhibiting effect on characters the likes of Richard.

[17]Michael Quinn, "Providence in Shakespeare's Yorkist Plays," Shakespeare Quarterly, X (1959), p. 50.

By having Margaret enter in this way, Shakespeare makes her seem like what Clemen calls "a mythical figure"[18] and gives us the eerie feeling of Margaret's hovering over the action even when her presence is unknown to the other characters. This hovering effect continues even when she really is not there.

Upon entering Margaret first hears Queen Elizabeth say, "Small joy have I in being England's queen" (I. iii. 109). Margaret responds in an aside that everything that Elizabeth has should belong to her because she had been Henry VI's queen. This reminds the audience that Margaret is affiliated with the House of Lancaster and that the House of York is now in control of the throne.

As Richard speaks to Elizabeth, Margaret is pointing out continually the hypocrisy of what he says. She calls on God for revenge, thus exemplifying her role of "avenging angel."[19] H. M. Richmond explains this use of Margaret as a brilliant stroke of character development by Shakespeare. He suggests that Shakespeare takes Margaret from the role of ambitious sentimentalist to the role of avenging angel thus making her a worthy spiritual antagonist for Richard.

[18]Clemen, Commentary, p. 48.

[19]H. M. Richmond, Shakespeare's Political Plays (New York: Random House, 1967), p. 84.

Margaret's avenging angel is characterized by rhetorical vehemence and a haunting of the actions of Richard III.[20] Margaret is more than an old witch of a woman. She is a member of the House of Lancaster which has been grievously wronged by the House of York. Margaret considers it justice that the House of York make retribution for the wrongs it has done to the House of Lancaster.

Margaret's presence is still unknown to the other characters on stage as she addresses Richard as a devil, "Out, devil!" (I. iii. 117), because he "functions for her as an agent of the Devil —— bringing up lost souls and sending them to hell."[21] Margaret condemns Richard,

> Hie thee to hell for shame, and leave this world,
> Thou cacodemon! there thy kingdom is.
> (I. iii. 142-143)

The audience is very aware of the villainy of Richard and sympathizes with Margaret's view of him as Richard engages in interchanges such as the following:

> Rivers: We followed then our lord, our sovereign king.
> So should we you, if you should be our king.
>
> Richard: If I should be? I had rather be a pedlar:
> Far be it from my heart, the thought thereof! (I. iii. 146-149)

[20] Richmond, p. 80.

[21] Richmomd, p. 84.

When Elizabeth responds to these remarks by saying that she has little joy in being queen, Margaret can hold her peace no longer, but announces her presence with the words,

> Hear me, you wrangling pirates, that fall out
> In sharing that which you have pilled from me!
> (I. iii. 157-158)

Murray Krieger feels that Margaret's calling the entire group assembled there "wrangling pirates" gives support to his thesis that there is no innocence, only degrees of villainy in Richard III.[22] Margaret recognizes the shortcomings and the evil in the persons gathered on the stage.

Margaret herself could hardly be considered an innocent as she has also performed deeds that are villainous. When Margaret says that her banishment is more painful than death and that the sorrow she bears belongs to Richard and the others, Richard counters Margaret by insisting that she suffers because his father cursed her. Richard reminds everyone of what Margaret did to deserve that curse, and he brings to mind again Krieger's opinion that almost all of the characters in Richard III are tainted with guilt.[23]

Margaret had crowned Richard's father with a paper crown, had given him a cloth soaked in his own son's

[22]Krieger, p. 47.

[23]Krieger, p. 47.

[Rutland's] blood to wipe his tears, and had then killed and beheaded him. Margaret has been as ruthless in pursuing her ambitions as Richard is in pursuing his, and now she is suffering from a curse that she deserves as much as Richard deserves the curses that are called down upon him.[24]

In calling attention to Margaret's ruthlessness, Richard has switched the focal point from himself to Margaret, and the others unite in condemning her. Margaret is still a queen, and in a queenly and terrible speech she curses everyone present who has wronged the House of Lancaster. She begins by urging nature to help her curses reach heaven,

> Can curses pierce the clouds and enter heaven?
> Why then, give way, dull clouds, to my quick curses!
> (I. iii. 194-195)

Margaret then proceeds with her curses, quite appropriately beginning with the king. She curses King Edward to die by "surfeit" (I. iii. 196). Edward, the Prince of Wales, she curses to die by "untimely violence" (I. iii. 200). Rivers, Dorset, and Hastings are all cursed to die unnatural deaths for standing by when Margaret's son was killed (I. iii. 209-213). Queen Elizabeth is cursed to "outlive her glory" and to "wail thy children's loss" (I. iii. 202-203).

Margaret's curses are very effective. King Edward does die by surfeit. Edward, the Prince of Wales, is killed

[24]Krieger, p. 47.

in the Tower. Queen Elizabeth does outlive her glory and she sees a new queen ascend the throne and her children suffer great losses. Rivers and Hastings do die unnatural deaths. Margaret's curses are fulfilled and the victims remember her words as their fate becomes apparent. Hastings' words as he is being led to the chopping block are a typical instance of how each victim remembers what Margaret said,

> O Margaret, Margaret, now thy heavy curse
> Is lighted on poor Hastings' wretched head!
> (III. iv. 92-93)

Dorset alone escapes Margaret's curse. Queen Elizabeth urges him to fly "from the reach of Hell" and to live with Richmond. Richmond is outside of England and is untouched by the evil flourishing there, so he can offer salvation to Dorset.

Margaret saves Richard for the last to be cursed, and she has a special curse for him. She leaves no base untouched as she calls on heaven to help her send Richard to hell,

> If heaven have any grievous plague in store
> Exceeding those that I can wish upon thee,
> O, let them keep it till thy sins be ripe,
> And then hurl down their indignation
> On thee, the troubler of the poor world's peace!
> The worm of conscience still begnaw thy soul!
> Thy friends suspect for traitors while thou liv'st,
> And take deep traitors for thy dearest friends!
> No sleep close up that deadly eye of thine,
> Unless it be while some tormenting dream
> Affrights thee with a hell of ugly devils!
> (I. iii. 216-226)

Margaret loathes Richard. She addresses him as an "elvish-marked, abortive, rooting hog!" (I. iii. 227). She recognizes his villainy, and she curses him for the evil he has directed against her family.

An interesting thing happens as Margaret is concluding her curse of Richard. She is saying the line, "Thou rag of honor! thou detested—" (I. iii. 232), and Richard breaks in with the word "Margaret" (I. iii. 233). When Margaret wants to put a period to her curse, Richard tells her that he has already done it with his "Margaret." Queen Elizabeth says to Margaret, "Thus have you breathed your curse against yourself" (I. iii. 239). This interjection sets Margaret off on another string of curses. She turns to Elizabeth and she predicts,

> The day will come that thou shalt wish for me
> To help thee curse this poisonous bunch-backed toad.
> (I. iii. 244-245)

And as the toad, Richard, almost plays verbal games with her, Margaret calls on God for vengeance,

> O God, that seest it, do not suffer it!
> As it is won with blood, lost be it so!
> (I. iii. 270-271)

When Buckingham urges Margaret to stop cursing and to have charity, Margaret reveals a different facet of her character. She says, "O princely Buckingham, I'll kiss thy hand" (I. iii. 279), and she warns him of the dangers and the evils of Richard. Margaret's interchange with

Buckingham shows her not as an avenging angel but as an old and defeated queen who has feeling for a once-loyal subject. This conversation reveals her as a character who does possess feelings other than just hate and the desire for revenge.

Margaret tells Buckingham that he will remember what she has said another day when Richard "shall split thy very heart with sorrow" (I. iii. 299), and that then he will realize that Margaret is a prophetess. Margaret next utters her final words before departing, words that are indeed enough, as Buckingham says, "to make his hair stand on end" (I. iii. 303).

> Live each of you the subjects to his hate,
> And he to yours, and all of you to God's!
> (I. iii. 301-302)

After Margaret exits, Richard attempts to take the attention from what she has said about him by playing the Christian and repenting any wrong that he has done to her. But the attention will go back to Margaret's curses. Each person will remember Margaret's curse as it comes true, and all of the curses, except the one against Dorset, will come true.. As each of the curses becomes a reality, the characters look back on what Margaret has said, and they call her a prophetess. Thus Margaret provides links between the past, the present, and the future through her curses and her warnings.

Margaret reappears later in the play and says that she has "slily. . .lurked/To watch the waning of mine enemies" (IV. iv. 3-4). As the Duchess of York (Richard's mother) and Queen Elizabeth enter, Margaret again steps to the side so that her presence is unknown to the characters on stage. As in her earlier appearance, she again gives the feeling that she is hovering over the action without actually participating in it. While the Duchess of York and Queen Elizabeth weep for all their loved ones who have died, Margaret says that each death was a just one, a payment for a like death on the Lancastrian side. When Margaret makes her presence known, the three women sit and recount their losses. There is the feeling of a Greek tragedy in this scene where the three black, widowed, queenly figures sit wailing on the ground.[25]

Margaret says that she is still not satisfied and that her revenge will not be complete until she can say of Richard, "The dog is dead" (IV. iv. 78). It is at this point that Elizabeth remembers Margaret's prophecy that she would ask Margaret's help in cursing Richard (IV. iv. 79-81), and she says to Margaret, "Stay awhile/And teach me how to curse mine enemies!" (IV. iv. 116-117).

[25]Agnes Mure MacKenzie, The Women in Shakespeare's Plays (London: William Heinemann, Ltd., 1924), p. 72.

The Duchess of York is listening also, and she learns the lesson and curses her own son.

> Therefore take with thee my most grievous curse,
> Which in the day of battle tire thee more
> Than all the complete armor that thou wear'st!
> My prayers on the adverse party fight,
> And there the little souls of Edward's children
> Whisper the spirits of thine enemies
> And promise them success and victory!
> Bloody thou art, bloody will be thy end;
> Shame serves thy life and doth thy death attend.
> (IV. iv. 188-196)

There is something especially damning about a mother's curse of her own child. The curse of the Duchess of York on her son, Richard, is realized. Margaret of Anjou has taught her well.

It is with Richard that the final curses are realized. He is the center of interest throughout the play, so it is appropriate that it is Richard who suffers the final defeat and fulfills all the prophecies, the dreams, and the curses that have been placed so liberally upon his head. In fulfillment of Margaret's curses, Richard no longer knows his friends from his enemies, his sleep is tormented by frightening dreams, and even his conscience is bothering him. When Richard awakens after a whole procession of ghosts have told him to "despair and die," he says, "O coward conscience, how dost thou afflict me!" (V. iii. 180). All of these torments relate to Margaret's curses made in Act One, Scene Three.

On the day of the Battle of Bosworth Field, Richard rallies and fights, but his death is unavoidable. The prophecies, dreams and curses are to be fulfilled in the death of Richard. Krieger asserts the importance of the purgation process which almost requires that Richard be eliminated.

> Finally Richard III, the blood-bath personified in its purest form, cleanses the land of the last of the guilt-ridden generations, so that with his own bloody end England may begin anew with Henry Tudor, symbol of the conciliation of the past and its feuds. We see then why the world of this play is so unqualifiedly ugly. It is worth noting, too, that England's salvation, Richmond, must come from outside, from France, like a breath of fresh air, since this world of England is so entirely foul.[26]

The victory of Richmond and his succession to the throne, which was prophesied by King Henry VI, put an end to the blood-bath England has suffered throughout the sin and retribution cycle that the House of York and the House of Lancaster have been involved in. The cycle stops with the death of the villainous Richard (York), a death foreshadowed in his dreams and called down upon him in the curses of Margaret of Anjou (Lancaster).

Shakespeare's extensive use of prophecy in The Tragedy of King Richard the Third points to its important role in the play. Prophecies reveal future happenings, dreams

[26]Krieger, p. 48.

foreshadow occurrences that are destined to take place, and curses consign future evil as they are called down and are eventually fulfilled. These three similar facets of prophecy permeate the entire action of the play.

Shakespeare uses the prophecies, curses and dreams to build anticipation in the audience, to recapitulate what has gone before, and to link the past, the present and the future, thus providing unity in Richard III. This is especially true of the curses of Margaret of Anjou, which "assign every major character his appropriate place and provide prophetic exposition that determines the succeeding action."[27] In this way the various aspects of prophecy play a very important role in William Shakespeare's The Tragedy of King Richard the Third.

[27]Clemen, Commentary, p. 54.

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