

Gothic Renaissance

A reassessment

Edited by

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and BEATE NEUMEIER

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Queen Margaret's haunting revenge: the Gothic legacy of Shakespeare's Wars of the Roses

Elisabeth Bronfen

In one episode of *Political Animals*, Elaine Barrish (Sigourney Weaver), a divorced former First Lady, serving as Secretary of State, invokes a comparison to historical female politicians to explain her own will to power: 'I took this job as secretary of state because I feel I can make a difference. Eleanor Roosevelt, Cleopatra, Elizabeth the First. That's the kind of company I want to keep'.¹ I take this recent mini television series as my point of departure for a discussion of Shakespeare's historical re-imagining of the Wars of the Roses, because both texts cross political power struggles with a battle of the sexes, though they do so at different historical moments as well as in different media. The series's reference to the queen whom Shakespeare was never allowed to put on stage, as well as to the one to whom he gave his best tragic role, allows me to foreground the manner in which the cultural after-life of early modern theatre in contemporary cinema and television anticipates a Gothic sensibility. If Weaver's Secretary of State invokes powerful women of history in order to explain how she intends to make a difference, she does not only point to the fact that the enmeshment of femininity and political power she makes claims to has a tradition. Equally important, she suggests that the specific political power women have had in the past haunts the present cultural imaginary as well. For her to name Cleopatra and Elizabeth I in their association with Eleanor Roosevelt as her models speaks both to the way the reality of past female politicians inspires a desire for making a difference and the way the issue of women and politics remains historically unfinished business.

While each in her own way came to be known for the way she either gave public body to the political agenda of the powerful sovereign at her side, or, in the case of Elizabeth I, staunchly refused to share her political power with a man, the association between Cleopatra and Gloriana of early modern England foregrounds how the gender of a rule impinges on the way actual political struggles have recourse to theatrical means even while recasting these as mass entertainment. As Stephen Greenblatt

has argued, Shakespeare's plays in general are concerned with both the production and the containment of subversion and disorder, regardless whether this pertains to a struggle between generations, genders or classes. The salient correspondence between these two discourses, he explains, consists in the fact that Elizabethan playing companies 'contrived to absorb, refashion, and exploit some of the fundamental energies of a political authority that was itself already committed to histrionic display and hence was ripe for appropriation'. These energies, he adds, were both released and organized by the political and the theatrical.² If, in Renaissance England, a poetics of political power was inseparable from a poetics of theatre, it was, however, also inseparably bound up, as he goes on to note, with the figure of Queen Elizabeth, a ruler whose power was not only constituted in 'theatrical celebrations of royal glory and theatrical violence visited upon the enemies of that glory' (Greenblatt 64) but also grounded on a radical ambivalence regarding a female sovereign.

The association between the last pharaoh of Egypt and Elizabeth I which continues to have a resilient cultural afterlife is based on the fact that both were renowned for their skill at public performances of their political agendas. As Jonathan Bate and Dora Thornton note, while Shakespeare's Cleopatra cannot be reduced to an allegorical representation of his Queen, 'audiences would have been provoked into seeing the parallels: a woman ruler in an overwhelmingly male world, the identification between the queen and her country' (140). Equally seminal is the way the ambivalent fascination for their audacious politics came to be tied up with their insistence on being present on actual battlefields. In her famous speech at Tilbury, Elizabeth I invokes her hybrid gender in relation to her will for war, proclaiming to her troops that she has come amongst them 'not for my recreation, and disport, but being resolved, in the midst, and heat of the battaile, to live, or die amongst you all ... I know I have the bodie but of a weak, feeble woman, but I have the heart and stomach of a King, and a King of England too.'³ Shakespeare's Cleopatra, in turn, defends her insistence on taking part in the battle against Caesar Octavius, by explaining to Mark Antony's right hand, Enobarbus, 'A charge we bear i' th' war / And as the president of my kingdom, will / Appear there for a man. Speak not against it, / I will not stay behind' (*Antony and Cleopatra* 3.7.16–19).

By turning to Shakespeare's other warrior queen, Henry VI's wife Queen Margaret of France, this chapter offers another example of the ambivalence regarding feminine political power that continues to resurface in our contemporary cultural imagination. At issue is the way a will to battle survives in the political arena, even in periods of interstice

between actual battles, because any woman making claims to public authority is the adversary of someone. The containment of subversion which the Elizabethan theatre offers, and which continues to be the template for mass entertainment today, proves to be a two-edged sword. By having recourse to dramatic form and poetic language, Shakespeare's history plays not only reflect and reflect *on* the theatricality of the politics in his own time but also speak to the radical doubt which female political power continues to provoke. Before offering a reading of Shakespeare's dramatic historical imagination of the Wars of the Roses, I want, therefore, to invoke a few more examples for our current engagement with this anxiety so as to underscore how our contemporary cultural imaginary is riddled with precisely the ambivalent containment of a feminine will to political power provoked and played through in Shakespeare's early histories. By reading the earlier plays through the lens of recent mainstream films and television, my premise is that this is *the* medium most comparable to the Shakespearean stage in its mass appeal. At the same time, I am picking up on what Mieke Bal calls doing a 'preposterous history', namely looking back at themes, figural constellations and rhetorical devices deployed by early modern plays through the lens of their subsequent recycling in contemporary cinema.⁴

In Tony Gilroy's *Michael Clayton* (2007) we first see Karen Crowder (Tilda Swinton) standing alone in front of a mirror, breathing heavily as she tries to wipe away the spot which the sweat under her armpits has left on her pristinely clean white blouse. Once she has managed to calm herself, she will return to her scene of combat and, with utter ruthlessness, fight for her personal power interests in a battle over a chemical company's use of pesticides. Although she does not shirk from ordering her opponents to be killed, one of them, the lawyer Michael Clayton (George Clooney), brought in to fix his firm's dealings with her company, manages to escape the attempt on his life and returns to challenge his adversary in public. He has brought the police with him, so that she can do nothing more than faint once her clandestine power game has been brought out into the open. The final image we have of this bold businesswoman is her frail body, fallen to the floor, a visual formula for the vicissitudes of fortune that befall women who ruthlessly strive for political power. In her ambition, Karen Crowder had embodied the unregulated capitalist greed that Tony Gilroy's film narrative seeks to critique by staging the struggle between the law firm and the pharmaceutical company as a situation of domestic war. Her downfall is dramaturgic proof that the dark forces she has been part of (a capitalist enterprise gone out of control) have successfully been vanquished. Over her fainted (albeit not dead) body, the film offers

its imaginary resolution for the real contradictions current capitalism poses. By disclosing a woman, audacious in her lust for power, to be a rogue player, the system as such can be salvaged and the man who found her out turned into a public hero. The film thus recycles a narrative formula installed by Shakespeare's early history plays as well as his late tragedy *Antony and Cleopatra*, namely the way an unsavoury political battle comes to be contained once it can be presented as the derailed obsessions of a woman.

Gilroy's film, however, also marks a recent trend in Hollywood, where self-confident female politicians, having come into their own again, recall classic Hollywood's understanding of the female glamour star as queen. While Sarah Bernhardt recorded her version of Elizabeth I as early as 1912, performances of queenship in Hollywood had their heyday in the 1930s, with Greta Garbo as Queen Christina, Marlene Dietrich and Elisabeth Bergner as Catherine of Russia, Katherine Hepburn as Mary Stuart of Scotland, Claudette Colbert as Cleopatra, while Elizabeth I was brought to the silver screen by both Flora Robson and Bette Davis. As Hollywood returned to the royal epic genre in the 1950s and early 1960s, it brought back some of its previous stars, with Bette Davis once more impersonating the old Virgin Queen while Jean Simmons gave her face to the young Bess. The most iconic revival of queenship on the screen, Elizabeth Taylor's interpretation of the last Egyptian pharaoh, however, also marked the end of the classic Hollywood studio system, with female stars compelled to seek out different genres, most notably the romantic comedy and the family melodrama, to put the contradiction between public ambition and private happiness on display.⁵

In the 1990s, however, royalty re-emerged on screen with idiosyncratic twists. In *The Queen* (2006), Helen Mirren (who that year also performed Elizabeth I in an HBO series), portrays Elizabeth II as a woman who uses her political intelligence to counter British culture's fatal desire for celebrity news coverage. That same year Meryl Streep appeared as the queen of the fashion world in *The Devil Wears Prada* (2006), canny when it comes to securing her power yet also fairy godmother to the romantic luck of the young woman who had assisted her. As the CIA agent Corrine Whitman, Streep returned to the arena of public power in *Rendition* (2007), proving to be as ruthless as any man in her decision to have an Arab-American engineer arrested and tortured without certainty of his ties to a terrorist organization. While Gavin Hood's film is staunchly critical of this political policy, it does allow its star one moment of rhetorical glory. In a patriotic speech, Streep's CIA agent defends herself by claiming that, to protect the security of the USA, any politician must be willing to sacrifice lives. The actress's skilful

presentation of a position that undercuts the film's explicit ideology plays to the double-voicing already present in Shakespeare's plays, when these bring on stage precisely those dangerous feminine forces which must ultimately be vanquished.

It is above all Cate Blanchett, however, who gave a new face to queenship at the end of the twentieth century. If, in *Elizabeth* (1998), Shekhar Kapur focuses on the transition from the natural body of a woman to the symbolic body of the queen, *Elizabeth: The Golden Age* (2007) foregrounds her status as victorious warrior. And while the first film nods towards George Sydney's *Young Bess* (1953) with its narrative about how successful queenship is predicated on the sacrifice of personal romance, the second recalls how, at the onset of the Second World War, Michael Curtiz had cast Elizabeth's successful battle against the Spanish Armada in contemporary political terms. If, in *Fire Over England* (1937), the adversary Spanish King resembles the fascist dictator Franco, in Shekhar Kapur's recycling he resembles Ahmadinejad of Iran.⁶ The correspondence between these recent films (recycling as they do an earlier decade of cinematic royalty) and Shakespeare's early histories consists, as will be discussed in more detail below, in the way women, appropriating for themselves an active role in the political arena, are conceived. Even though the conflict between intimate individual and public persona is foregrounded, they are shown to be fully emplaced in the political sphere. In contrast to the female stars who fight their way through the Alien or Terminator films, these women politicians are no outsiders, seeking to disclose social and political corruption. Unlike the femme fatale in neo-noir they also do not stand for an enjoyment of lethal transgression. Rather, they stand for the law, even if (or precisely because) they play through its violent side. They are completely within the symbolic order, putting up their fight so as to preserve it. When they have recourse to violence and corruption they do so to assure the survival of a socio-political system they fully believe and trust in.

Why has Hollywood come to privilege female characters for an embodiment of this dark position in political power games, recalling the power machinations of Gothic fiction? Is there a hidden assumption that female rulers are more ruthless in their actions? Is this because, as Lady Macbeth in her desire to be unsexed so poignantly articulates, for them to move into the arena of politics they must break with attitudes of generosity, sympathy and kindness conventionally attributed to women? Does this say something about the current roles women play in their respective political parties? Because the Secretary of State in *Political Animals* could just as well have included Queen Margaret in her pantheon of role models, Shakespeare's dramatic conception of

this warrior queen takes on new topicality. This audacious woman, as skilled in battle as she is in diplomacy, is the only character to appear in all four of Shakespeare's first histories and thus stands for a resilient will to survival. As Jean E. Howard suggests, in Shakespeare's historical re-imagining of the Wars of the Roses, Margaret 'embodies strengths that contradict the patriarchal view that women are inherently weaker than men and therefore less suited to have dominion either in the state or in the household' (Greenblatt et al. 293).⁷ The demonization her ruthless audacity as mother and politician calls forth is part of this legacy.

Gothic sensibility, in turn, comes into play when we revisit the cultural anxieties surrounding women in public office on the Shakespearean stage through the lens of their re-emergence on the screen. In the histories Queen Margaret emerges as an uncanny figure, neither only a woman nor only a ruler but both, self-consciously using the allure of her physical appearance to sustain her symbolic role as mother of the future King of England. And she is an uncanny figure because while her appearance in England causes past civil discord to erupt, the curses she speaks before being once more banished to her homeland will reverberate in her absence. My wager is that, since Shakespeare couldn't bring Elizabeth I to the stage, it is the portrait of this other warrior queen that we can revisit to understand how our contemporary moment is possessed by the cultural survival of the conflicted fascination surrounding queenship in the past. The female force that Shakespeare's early histories are able to stage speaks to a re-evaluation of the still contested feminine political power today.

Let us, therefore, move to the texts themselves. The first of these early histories pits the kind-hearted Henry VI, unable to intervene in and resolve the strife between the embattled nobles of his court, against his ambitious French wife. As Jean E. Howard notes, presented as 'a sexualized figure of gender disorder, Queen Margaret fills the vacuum created by her husband's own weakness. In their relationship, traditional gender hierarchy is stood on its head' (Greenblatt et al. 203).⁸ Her appearance in England immediately calls forth a front line inside the country, shifting the political tension from an external war with France to an internal war amongst aristocratic brothers. Far from being the actual cause of this crisis, however, at her body a civil dissention is called forth and negotiated that has been brewing for quite some time. As such, her function in this early history anticipates a Gothic sensibility. As contested foreigner turned domestic queen, she serves as the privileged site where internal tensions riddling the English court since Richard II was deposed come to haunt the present. She fits the part because she both exceeds and falls short of what is expected of the Queen of England. Although she

is in possession of magnificent beauty, she brings no dowry into this marriage and is thus, as several courtiers point out, unfitting as a match for a king who has returned victorious from his battles.

At the end of *1 Henry VI*, Suffolk praises the foreign woman whom he had earlier gone to woo in the name of his king, predicting that her 'valiant courage and undaunted spirit, / More than in women commonly is seen, / Will answer our hope in issue of a king' (5.5.70–73).⁹ His hope that she may give birth to a legitimate heir to the throne only barely covers his actual political interest in her queenship. Through her he hopes, as he confesses in the very last line of the play, to bolster his own political power, ruling 'both her, the King, and realm' (5.5.108). At the beginning of *2 Henry VI*, we then discover how her undaunted feminine decisiveness is received in England. Over the body of this newly installed queen, the strife between the house of Lancaster and that of York finally comes to be ignited. Richard Plantagenet, Duke of York, believes he recognizes a clandestine capitulation in relation to France in a marriage which he claims 'dims the honour of this warlike isle!' (1.1.124). In his mockery that Henry VI had to give up two dukedoms for his wife he recalls past history, resurrecting a spectral world against which the present cannot hold its own in stature: 'I never read but England's kings have had / Large sums of gold and dowries with their wives; / and our King Henry gives away his own, / To match with her that brings no vantages' (1.1.127–30). Given that he had himself hoped these lands would fall into his possession, at issue implicitly is also his own political disappointment.

Most salient about the political discontent surrounding Queen Margaret, however, is the fact that she is fighting on two fronts. She has quickly realized that in the arena of court intrigues she must not only defend herself against the malicious accusations of the Yorkists, who were always against her marriage, but also against the political authority of her husband's uncle, Humphrey, Duke of Gloucester. She will not allow the man, who has assumed the role of the King's Protector, to tell her what she is to do. At stake, after all, is the legitimacy of her claim to the title of Queen. 'What? Shall King Henry be a pupil still / Under the surly Gloucester's governance?' she asks the Duke of Suffolk in front of a group of petitioners, adding to the complaint, 'Am I a queen in title and in style, / And must be made a subject to a duke?' (1.3.46–9). So as to help bring about the execution of the man whose power over her husband she dreads, she briefly aligns herself with her earliest enemy, the Duke of York. After the death of Gloucester, however, this clandestine pact will prove to have dealt a decisive blow to the king's power. York will successfully turn his own betrayal against both his sovereign

and the queen, his former ally. Not only does he rally his men to fight against Henry VI by openly accusing him: 'thou art not king; / Not fit to govern and rule multitudes' (5.1.93-4), but, more pointedly, his war furore is aimed at a queen he calls a 'blood-bespotted Neapolitan, / Outcast of Naples, England's bloody scourge!' (5.5.117-18).

In this political climate, where the aftereffects of past civil dissension haunt the present, Queen Margaret actually has no free choice. A stranger in England, she is utterly dependent on the approval of her husband, both for her symbolic and for her corporeal survival. The violence she either helps stimulate or clandestinely endorses keeps mounting to match the escalated attacks on her legitimacy as queen. Like the mythic Cleopatra, she finds she can respond to Henry VI's progressive helplessness only by increasing her willingness to use all weapons at her disposal: her beauty, her eloquence and ultimately her knowledge of the art of war. Since it is at her person that the violent fantasies of the rebellious courtiers come to be negotiated, she retaliates by taking this violence to its extreme. Part and parcel of the Gothic sensibility we can discern in her figure *avant la lettre* is the way she renders visible what up to this point had fed political discontent without being directly addressed; embodying the political unconscious of her world.¹⁰ During the battle at the end of 2 *Henry VI*, when it has become painfully clear that the king's forces will lose the day, she taunts her husband with the question of his legitimacy: 'What are you made of? You'll neither fight nor fly, / Now is it manhood, wisdom and defence, / To give the enemy way, and to secure us / By what we can' (5.2.74-7).

Although she is pursuing very different power interests from those of her opponents, she shares their assessment of this king. His lack of self-assertion as sovereign and man has prompted him to agree to putting his name to a document in which he shows himself prepared to disinherit his son and sign over the throne to Richard of York, on the condition that he be allowed to reign as king during his lifetime. Outraged at this foolish peace treaty, Margaret mobilizes her own troops. In contrast to her husband, she is not only willing to fight like a man for her son's royal rights. She also does not shy away from cruel mockery of her enemies. Staging her triumph after having captured her arch-enemy at the beginning of 3 *Henry VI*, she forces York to place a paper crown on his head, only to demand back both: 'Off with the crown, and, with the crown, his head' (1.4.107). As mother to the future Lancaster king, she viciously fights against the dethronement of the current one so as to defend not only the legitimacy of her own title but also that of the line of kings still to emerge from her family. York, her equal in contempt, derides her by calling her an Amazonian trull and she-wolf of France, 'whose

tongue more poisons than the adder's tooth!' (1.4.112). His denigration translates the battle among brothers over the throne of England into a gender battle. The Gothic inflection Shakespeare's tetralogy unfolds consists in the way it uses Margaret's personal transgression of classic feminine virtues to address the repetition loop of violence which comes to be replayed over and again when power-hungry men challenge the divine rights of their sovereigns. Along with the ghosts of Henry IV and Henry V implicitly invoked throughout these three early histories, the text also implicitly calls forth the spirit of transgressive femininity from the tragedies of antiquity. Women, Edward, the usurper of the throne proclaims, 'are soft, mild, pitiful and flexible; / Thou stern, indurate, flinty, rough, remorseless' (1.4.141-2).

In York's mouth, the queen's royal pride and ambition turn into signs of a monstrous inhumanity, rendering her as a gruesome Gothic figure. And yet, far from silencing her, his denigrating words having called forth the fatal thrust of her dagger open up a new scene of war. York's son Edward will also have recourse to the rhetoric of gender anxiety so as to screen out his own illegitimate appropriation of power and the clandestine executions that made his successful claim to the throne possible. If, by marrying Henry VI, Queen Margaret was meant to render less dangerous the border separating her native France from her new home, England, her enemies, who insist on her having brought the previous war's front line with her, declare her to be an uncanny political body that combines an external enemy with an internal one. After the death of Henry VI, his successor Edward, in turn, is compelled to split the symbolic body of the deceased sovereign from this allegedly monstrous queen. To legitimate his own rise to power he must find his uncle to be innocent of all the political machinations that led to his premature abdication. By producing a line of argument which put the blame for the complex intrigues that came to undermine the will of the recently deceased king elsewhere, he hopes to rehabilitate the symbolic name of Henry VI. In this he recalls Octavian's need to cleanse Antony from all shame his fatal romance with Cleopatra had cast on him, sustaining the Gothic repetition loop these early histories thematically feed on.

Because she is an outsider to Edward's domain of power in two senses (female and of French origin), the deposed queen proves to be the perfect target for his political ploy. He readily declares her responsible for the continuation of violence in England, taunting her with the accusation 'For what hath broach'd this tumult but thy pride?' (2.2.159). Invoking the same nomenclature of ideal femininity his father had, as though the dead York were speaking through him, he adds, 'Hadst thou been meek, our title still had slept; / And we, in pity of the gentle King, / Had slipp'd

our claim until another age' (2.2.160–3). What is significant in Edward's re-appropriation of gender trouble for the sustaining of an illegitimate claim to the throne is not merely the resolve with which Margaret insists on fighting through her power interests at all costs. At issue also is the extremely fragile status of her position as ruler. She consistently rallies her troops to fight in her name so as to reaffirm the sovereignty the men around her relentlessly want to take away from her. At the same time it is precisely the fragility of her own political power which endows her with a clarity of vision regarding the limits to what she, as a foreigner and a woman, can do. The Gothic quality she can be seen to be endowed with thus takes on a further dimension. She neither recalls the spirit of previous warrior queens nor can she simply be targeted as a monstrous body in her enmeshment of alluring beauty and martial furor. She also possesses a gift of prophesy that conflates an accurate assessment of the present with an ability to imagine its catastrophic outcome. Her astute courage consists in an ability to soberly take into account the contingency of all political power struggles so as to calculate her particular battles with utmost precision.

Although she claims to be fighting to reinstall her son as the future king of England, her resistance to the usurper Edward is never sustained by the personal sentimentality of a mother. Instead, she is sustained in her valiant if destructive will to battle by her desire for symbolic legitimacy and as such functions as the pivot in the systemic violence Shakespeare's early history plays put on stage. By spurring on the tragic repetition compulsion of betrayal and revenge underwriting the Wars of the Roses, she renders visible the logic of a political culture drenched in violence. She not only enacts the ruthless thirst for power which her opponents have always claimed for her but also performs a political point made by Michel Foucault regarding the mutual implication of war and politics. 'War is the motor behind institutions and order', he explains, with the civil law of peace itself a coded war:

We are therefore at war with one another; a battlefield runs through the whole of society, continuously and permanently, and it is this battlefield that puts us all on one side or the other. There is no such thing as a neutral subject. We are all inevitably someone's adversary. (Foucault 50–1)

By embodying the principle of a ubiquitous adversarial spirit underwriting politics, whether in peacetime or in a sustained civil war, Queen Margaret exceeds the misogynist allegations that the men, anxious about feminine political power, project on to her. Because her fate renders visible how fickle all political power games are, how quickly things can turn in unexpected and incalculable ways, she stands in for the uncon-

Her prophetic sight is predicated on the fragility of her position within this system of power doubly foreign to her as a French woman. From the start she knows she could trust none of her political alliances, not even those allegedly gained through her marriage with Henry VI.¹¹ While her opponents detect in her unswerving ambition a sign for her inhuman monstrosity, her allies interpret it as a grandiose appropriation of masculine heroism. It is worth recalling that in the world of the Renaissance, marked as it was by ever shifting political forces, women conventionally assumed two roles. Either they brought money and land as dowries into a marriage and thus guaranteed the peace between embattled royal houses. Or the children they gave birth to rendered the royal succession secure. Explicitly conceived as stakes in political alliances, women were not, however, meant to display any independent power interests or political ambitions of their own, only to sustain those of their families. In her radical insistence on self-determination, Margaret thus emerges as a cipher for the suspicious fascination with which many actual female rulers were regarded in the early modern period. At the same time, her unencumbered will for battle also proves to be the logical consequence of her prescient calculation of her situation, speaking to the contradictory feelings regarding female political power that have survived until today. Reduced to her function as a mother, she not only fights for the white rose against the red, but also unleashes her own war in the name of her son. In fact, however, she stands apart from the very war amongst brothers she thus keeps alive, looking askance at this fraternal rivalry.

Her oblique gaze gages a political condition in which everyone is inevitably someone else's adversary in the decidedly unsentimental manner of *realpolitik* precisely because, as a woman, she can never forget her own dependency on the power contingencies that define her as a political subject in this sustained civil war. She is willing to risk everything because she knows that she can lose everything, even the fruits of her own motherhood: the son, who alone can make sure that her own political power will be sustained. After having lost her last battle, with all her allies dead and her husband killed, she turns to the only weapon still left to her. A culmination of her prescient vision, her terrible prophecies set in at precisely the moment she takes the corpse of her son Edward into her arms after he has been stabbed by the Earl of March. The Gothic repetition loop dramaturgically played through at her body is such that this awful and awe-inspiring insight will, in *Richard III*, lead to a rich and strange bond between embattled female rulers. In this last of the histories about Henry VI, however, the prediction she makes, marked as it is both by mourning and by her desire for

revenge, serves to bring to the attention of those on stage and off the systemic repetition compulsion of violence that had been inscribed in the political strife between brothers all along. The last words she speaks, before she is forcibly removed from the stage in 3 *Henry VI*, are: 'So come to you and yours as to this prince' (5.5.80). To silence this Gothic foreboding of his own demise and instead celebrate what he hopes is the beginning of his lasting joy, Edward, having usurped the throne to become King of England, exiles Margaret to France.

But these are not her last words in Shakespeare's early histories. Because she is able to judge her own complicity in the brutal intrigues that led to the usurpation of her power and thus shows herself to be unwilling to veil herself in false innocence, she is also the one who can correctly gauge the situation of her successor. In the first act of *Richard III*, she calls Elizabeth, who at the side of Edward IV is now the reigning queen, 'poor painted queen vain flourish of my fortune' (1.3.241).¹² Evoking a bleak future regarding the political ambitions of Richard, now Duke of Gloucester, she assures her 'the day will come that thou shalt wish for me / to help thee curse this poisonous bunch-back'd toad' (1.3.245-6). At first, Elizabeth still tries to shield herself from this Gothic foreboding by telling herself that, in so far as she never did Margaret any wrong, she is innocent of any sad lot that might befall her. Assuming the exact opposite attitude as the deposed queen, she foolishly believes that she can keep her distance to the political intrigues her husband is engaged in. She is soon forced, however, to recognize that after her husband's death this selfsame Richard, once he has become the new King of England, wishes to marry her daughter. For this reason, she bonds not only with his mother, who curses her own son because she declares his backhanded treachery to be a shame to her maternity. She will also find herself compelled to form an alliance with the rival, who, from the very beginning, had insisted that because no one can be an innocent player in a political arena shaped by betrayal and revenge, no one can walk away unharmed. The final Gothic twist Shakespeare's early histories attribute to his dramatic reconception of Queen Margaret is that, once they are forced to view their world with sober eyes because they can no longer overlook the terrible deeds Richard has committed, the women of the house of York come to be haunted by the cursing spirit of the foreign warrior queen of the house of Lancaster.

Initially, the old Queen Margaret, who has not yet embarked for her homeland, merely listens to the complaints of the other women from the safety of her hiding place. Having stepped into their field of vision, however, to forewarn them that they will call upon her to help them curse, she takes on the role of a mirror held up against their foolish

desire not to see what they cannot afford not to acknowledge. Once more calling up her own sorrow, she offers by virtue of an analogy of names a telling correspondence between her sad fate and the woe of both the present queen and the current king's mother:

If sorrow can admit society,
Tell o'er your woes again by viewing mine.
I had an Edward, till a Richard kill'd him;
I had a husband, till a Richard kill'd him:
Thou hadst an Edward, till a Richard kill'd him;
Thou hadst a Richard, till a Richard kill'd him.

(4.4.38-43)

Her invocation not only renders visible that the way of justice has taken a new path. Her story also serves to inspire a desire for revenge on the part of the woman who has appropriated her own title as queen. In the course of this play, Margaret will, indeed, teach Elizabeth how to curse. With a touch of malice, she also assures her new ally that her woe makes those in France smile. Watching over the last episodes of this civil war from the safe distance of her homeland, she can assume the Gothic spirit of an avenging angel. Her keen courage in the past, one might surmise, serves as a model of feminine power; it infects the imagination of the current Queen Elizabeth and inspires her to prevent the marriage between Richard III and her daughter.

In so far as Margaret's curses force both women of the house of York to suspend all fantasies of non-complicity, they articulate a poignant ethical insight. To rephrase Stanley Cavell's discussion of the conditions of tragedy: if political disasters occur because individual players keep repeating precisely those actions which brought about the tragic course of events in the first place, then real abdication consists in stopping and seeing what one is doing (Cavell 81). The insight that will avert future disaster is predicated on a refusal of blindness, insisting instead on a sober and unsentimental recognition of the tragic consequences which any power struggle between noble families entails. If Margaret is the one to draw attention to the fatal loop of cursing, revenge and a lust for a renewed cycle of retribution, she is also the one who implicitly helps bring about the peace treaty that her kind-hearted but politically inept husband had failed to reach. The logical consequence of a political culture of civil war, in which everyone is inevitably the adversary of someone else, however, is that peace can be found only once all the sons of the rebellious house of York have been destroyed. The lust for violence on the part of the embattled brothers must, thus, first culminate in one last spectacle of battle. Decisive for the importance Shakespeare ascribes to the female politician who is the only figure present in all four

early histories is that this fatal necessity comes to be played out under the aegis of the voice that had foreseen the destruction of Richard III from the start.

In the final act of *Richard III*, the resolution to this civil war is anticipated in the spectral theatricalization of battle's violence, staged for the single-minded tyrant who is not willing to recognize that, by his refusing to stop and see, the fatal consequences of his actions will inevitably catch up with him. Or put another way, the Gothic staging of imminent disaster forces him to see what he had not wanted to hear. It is worth recalling that Richard had responded to Elizabeth's declaration of her sorrows and the curses of his own mother by exclaiming: 'Either be patient and entreat me fair, / Or with the clamorous report of war / Thus will I drown your exclamations' (4.4.153–5). The self-conscious, albeit implicit reflection on actual political violence in the England of his day on the part of the dramatized violence that Shakespeare's *Richard III* brings to the stage, thus thrives on the following analogy: As a result of his wilful blindness to the political consequences of his violent usurpation of power, the king will be forced to acknowledge the unavoidability of his tragic fate once it has been performed for him as a morality play. In this Gothic vision, the ghosts of his victims give body to the cursing voice of old Queen Margaret, who, though she has been exiled to France, remains a spectral presence throughout the final act of the play.

It belongs to the narrative formulas of representations of war that the night before an important battle is given special treatment on stage. One might recall the Chorus at the beginning of Act 4 in *Henry V* evoking a scene in which the moon presents to the English troops ghosts of their fellow soldiers, while the 'royal captain of this ruined band / Walking from watch to watch, from tent to tent' (4.1.29–30) eases their anticipation of danger with this 'little touch of Harry in the night' (4.1.47). In the final act of *Richard III*, both Richard and Richmond ask for paper and ink, so as to prepare themselves for the martial violence about to be unleashed in Bosworth Field. While Richmond soon falls into a deep, refreshing sleep, his opponent Richard finds himself confronted with all those whose untimely deaths he was responsible for. Among these the ghost of Lady Anne, his wife, calls upon him, 'tomorrow in the battle think on me, / And fall thy edgeless sword: despair and die' (5.3.163–4). One might imagine Queen Margaret, who foretold that she would follow this civil war to the end from her safe distance in France with cruel laughter on her lips, to be the hidden director of this spectral show. Indeed, one might take this speculation a step further and interpret her to be the master of Richard's personal unconscious, after having already helped articulate the political unconscious of an England torn in civil

war. Once the terrible ghostly visions have left him, he admits, 'shadows tonight / Have struck more terror to the soul of Richard / Than can the substance of ten thousand soldiers, / Armed in proof, and led by shallow Richmond' (5.3.217–20).

If Margaret thus continues to be the Amazon her enemies declared her to be throughout the histories surrounding her husband Henry VI, the battle for Richard III's soul is one she wins. Taking their shape in the ghostly apparitions of all the victims of his terrible power play, her curses force her opponent to heed his conscience even if he preferred to repress the knowledge it has for him. Against this voice he cannot defend himself, even after dawn has set in. Before the actual battle begins, Richard admonishes himself, 'Let not our babbling dreams affright our souls; / Conscience is but a word that cowards us' (5.3.309–10). Nevertheless, he succumbs to the curse old Queen Margaret brought into circulation. The spectral voices of the deceased can no longer be banished from the scene of battle. Instead, Bosworth Field transforms into the stage where the very power of those feminine woes and curses which he tried to occlude with his sounds of war return in the shape of the opponent army that will succeed in bringing about his demise as warrior and king.

In this last, gruesome spectacle, attesting to Shakespeare's anticipation of Gothic culture, we also, however, recognize the spectral power on which the mutual implication of dramatic violence on stage and political violence off stage thrives throughout these early histories. The fulminant theatrical enactment of war in which Shakespeare's historical re-imagining of the Wars of the Roses culminates, emerges from and vanishes back into the force of poetic language itself. It gives shape to a complex spectacle of ghosts – the dead, catching up with and changing the course of the present, as well as a repressed knowledge, catching up with and changing the fate of a flawed political figure, but also the voices of a set of *dramatis personae*, who come from the past to speak to us very much in the present. And at the centre of all these spectral apparitions stands Queen Margaret, a pivot between past and present, absence and present, a set of history plays and their cultural afterlife.

Notes

- 1 Created by Greg Berlanti, the series aired in 2012.
- 2 For a discussion of the political use to which Elizabeth I's pageants, processions and progresses were put, see also Louis Montrose.
- 3 See also Richardine Woodall 187–204.
- 4 See Mieke Bal's introduction to *Quoting Caravaggio* 7–44.
- 5 For an overview of royalty on screen see Elizabeth A. Ford and Deborah C.

- Mitchell; for a discussion of the final era of costume epics in Hollywood, see Michael Wood.
- 6 For a discussion of Elizabeth I's afterlife on screen, see Elisabeth Bronfen and Barbara Straumann 252–70.
 - 7 See Jean E. Howard's introduction to *3 Henry VI*.
 - 8 See Jean E. Howard's introductions to *2 Henry VI*.
 - 9 The edition of *1 Henry VI*, *2 Henry VI*, and *3 Henry VI* used is the one edited by Andrew S. Cairncross.
 - 10 I take this concept from Fredric Jameson, especially his insistence that the Real of History can only be reconceived in the violent aftereffects it has had. Queen Margaret's war furor emerges as precisely such an affective trace of past dissent.
 - 11 In this prescient attitude toward her own political power she anticipates the reality of Hillary Clinton's campaign for the US presidency as well as the depiction of women in positions of political power in current mainstream cinema.
 - 12 The edition used is edited by Antony Hammond.

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