S K E N È

Journal of Theatre and Drama Studies

4:2 2018

Kin(g)ship and Power

Edited by Eric Nicholson

SKENÈ Journal of Theatre and Drama Studies

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Published in December 2018
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ISSN 2421-4353

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SKENÈ Theatre and Drama Studies
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Dir. Resp. (aut. Trib. di Verona): Guido Avezzù
P.O. Box 149 c/o Mail Boxes Etc. (MBE150) – Viale Col. Galliano, 51, 37138, Verona (I)

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Robert S. Miola*

Curses in Aeschylus' *Seven Against Thebes* and in Shakespeare's *Richard* Plays

Abstract

Despite differences in theatrical convention and cultural context, Aeschylus' *Seven Against Thebes* and Shakespeare's *Richard II* and *Richard III* share important similarities: each occurs in a sequence of plays and features a ruler who, initially sure of himself, suffers a crashing downfall and death. Variously represented, curses, that is, callings for supernatural punishment upon people, appear centrally in these plays and structure their unfolding actions. Aeschylus' play presents the fulfillment of Oedipus' curse on his sons, Eteocles and Polyneices. Eteocles' confrontation with the curse both enables its fulfillment and defines his tragedy. Contrarily, characters curse each other in *Richard II*, but they do so ineffectually. In this play God's curse in Genesis structures and defines the action. Margaret's curses appear efficacious in *Richard III* but actually just serve to indicate the potent reality of divine retribution. In Shakespeare's plays confrontation with curses enables their fulfillment and constitutes the rulers' tragedies. Notice of the agency and operation of curses in these three plays reveals the different theologies, dramas, and tragedies they present.

Keywords: Aeschylus; Shakespeare; *Seven Against Thebes*; *Richard II*; *Richard III*; curses

Despite differences in theatrical convention and cultural context, Aeschylus' *Seven Against Thebes* and Shakespeare's *Richard II* and *Richard III* share important similarities. They all belong to an extended dramatic and historical sequence: the *Seven* is the third part of the trilogy, following *Laius* and *Oedipus*, and preceding the satyr-drama *The Sphinx*, these three largely lost; *Richard II* begins the eight-drama series, generally grouped into two tetralogies, that represents English history as it proceeds through the reigns of *Henry IV*, *Henry V*, the three parts of *Henry VI*, and culminates in *Richard III*. Represented actions thus occur in a thick historical context: past events – crimes, murders, wars – crowd a present that exists before a looming, often threatening future. The past is never past: Laius' defiance of Apollo (742-9)[1] and the recalled murders of Woodstock (*RII* 1.2.1) and Rutland (*RI-*

[1] Unless otherwise noted all references to Aeschylus are to Denys Page's edition

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© SKENÈ Journal of Theatre and Drama Studies 4:2 (2018), 87-103
http://www.skenejournal.it

II 1.2.160),[2] for example, intrude upon the present and inflect the future. Incidents radiate backwards and forwards in their effects and significances.

For all their differences *Seven Against Thebes* and the *Richard* plays present similar arcs of action. Like Aeschylus' play, *Richard II* features a ruler who demonstrates his *imperium* through assertion over opponents and ordered pageantry. Eteocles scolds the Chorus for improperly supplicating the gods; he coolly meets the announced threat of the first six warriors at the gates by answering their claims and assigning each a Theban opponent. Richard stages a medieval tournament to adjudicate the dispute between Bolingbroke and Mowbray, then abruptly cancels it. Both rulers face the threat of civil overthrow from a relative, Eteocles' brother Polynices and Richard's cousin Bolingbroke. Both suffer a crashing downfall and death, for which they are partly responsible. *Richard III* also shares some structural commonalities with *Seven Against Thebes*. Both plays feature public lamentations by women, the Chorus of Theban females and the ritualistic mourning of Queen Margaret, Queen Elizabeth and the Duchess of York. These dramas display on a grand scale the workings of divine retribution against the central character, and both end in military confrontation and the ruler's death. This retribution, of course, occurs in radically different theological contexts: ancient drama depicts the sometimes capricious, sometimes inscrutable actions of the gods, while the later Christian plays illustrate the workings of an omnipotent and just Providence.

Variously represented, curses, that is, callings for supernatural punishment, appear centrally in these dramas and in different ways structure their unfolding actions. Aeschylus' play presents the fulfillment of Oedipus' curse on his sons, Eteocles and Polynices.[3] In *Seven Against Thebes* Oedipus' spoken curse takes the form of a supernatural spirit of vengeance. Early on Eteocles invokes Zeus, Earth, and other deities, including Ara (Curse):

> ὦ Ζεῦ τε καὶ Γῆ καὶ πολισσοῦχοι θεοί,
> Ἀρά τ' Ἐρινὺς πατρὸς ἡ μεγασθενής,
> μή μοι πόλιν γε πρυμνόθεν πανώλεθρον
> ἐκθαμνίσητε δῃάλωτον Ἑλλάδος·
> (69-72)

(1972; with modernized sigmas and iota subscripts), and all translations from the Greek are mine.

[2] All references to *Richard II* are to Charles R. Forker's Arden edition (2002); to *Richard III*, James R. Siemon's Arden edition (2009).

[3] On curses in antiquity and in this play see Watson (1991) and Stehle (2005). Before Aeschylus this curse appeared in the *Thebaid*, where, Athenaeus reports, Oedipus got angry that his father's treasures were set beside him at table (West 2003: 44-5); a scholiast on Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus* provides a variant version (West 2003: 46-7), as does this play itself (1372ff.).

[O Zeus and Earth and you gods dwelling the city, O Curse and mighty Fury of my father, do not let my city be captured by its enemies, do not root it out utterly from Greece in total destruction!]

Eteocles here imagines his father's spoken curse as a supernatural power closely associated with the Erinyes.[4] Though the play does not specify the exact cause of Oedipus' curse, it suggests the content right before the terrible fulfillment. Hearing that his brother attacks at the Seventh Gate, Eteocles exclaims:

ὦ θεομανές τε καὶ θεῶν μέγα στύγος,
ὦ πανδάκρυτον ἁμὸν Οἰδίπου γένος:
ὤμοι, πατρὸς δὴ νῦν ἀραὶ τελεσφόροι.
(653-5)

[O my family, god-maddened and greatly hated by the gods full of tears, the whole house of Oedipus! Alas, the curse of my father is truly now fulfilled.]

His father's curse, he realizes, will result in fraternal battle and death.

After the Chorus warns against the shedding of fraternal blood, Eteocles reveals exactly what the Curse is doing and saying to him in the present:

φίλου γὰρ ἐχθρά μοι πατρὸς †τελεῖ† ἀρὰ
ξηροῖς ἀκλαύτοις ὄμμασιν προσιζάνει
λέγουσα κέρδος πρότερον ὑστέρου μόρου.
(695-7)[5]

[Yes, but the hateful, completed Curse of a loved father sits close by me with dry, tearless eyes, speaking of gain first, death after.]

Personified, the unnatural, hate-filled Curse sits close to its victim without pity, promising the κέρδος ("gain") of honour in battle, driving him to death. Similarly, the Chorus sees a δαίμων (705, "god, spirit") close by, seething (708, νῦν δ' ἔτι ζεῖ). The Curse is or evokes an active, malignant,

[4] Hutchinson (1985: 53, 163) notes that there was an Athenian temple to Ara (Curse) and a cult in Sparta and Thera devoted to Oedipus' and Laius' Erinyes. Sommerstein (2009: 407) observes that in Homer, "the Erinyes appear most frequently as the divine embodiments of a curse, especially the curse of a wronged parent (*Iliad* 9.454, 571; 21.412; *Odyssey* 2.135; 11.280)". In *Eumenides* Aeschylus specifically identifies the Curse with the Furies: the Erinyes say that they are the eternal children of Night and that "Curses" is their name in the houses below the earth (416-17).

[5] R. P. Winnington-Ingram (1983: 37) comments: "Whose eyes are dry? Does the Curse haunt the dry eyes of Eteocles or haunt him with dry eyes? It does not matter, because at this point the line of distinction between the Curse and the mind of Eteocles is hard to draw, because the Curse is working on him and in him".

supernatural spirit of destruction that seeks blood. Eteocles answers:

> ἐξέζεσεν γὰρ Οἰδίπου κατεύγματα·
> ἄγαν δ᾽ ἀληθεῖς ἐνυπνίων φαντασμάτων
> ὄψεις, πατρῴων χρημάτων δατήριοι.
> (709-11)
>
> [Yes, for the Curse of Oedipus seethes: too true the prophesies of those dream-visions dividing our father's property.]

The Curse causes φαντάσματα, dreams or ghostly visions of its fulfillment, here specified as the division of patrimony.

The Second Stasimon (720-33) gathers up these hints and half-guesses into more coherent exposition. The first strophe depicts again the Curse as a "god unlike other gods" (721, θεὸν οὐ θεοῖς ὁμοίαν), a terrible supernatural spirit of vengeance. It virtually identifies the spoken curse with the Erinys who fulfills it (723, πατρὸς εὐκταίαν Ἐρινύν, "the Fury invoked by a father"). The first antistrophe reveals some specifics of the curse as originally pronounced, namely the prediction that a "Scythian stranger" (727-8, ξένος . . . Σκυθῶν) will divide Oedipus' possessions. To its horror the Chorus realizes that the stranger is "savage-hearted Iron" (730, ὠμόφρων σίδαρος), that is, the sword that will kill both sons and give to each "as much land as is given to the dead" (732, ὁπόσαν καὶ φθιμένους ἐγκατέχειν), in other words, a grave (cf. 785-91). Oedipus' curse is here revealed as the mainspring of the action, the keystone to its arching structure, the beginning and end of the story the play relates. The spoken word becomes terribly incarnate in the Furies that stalk the Labdacid house down through the generations. The play does not tell the story of a political invasion, or of a heroic Greek polis resisting the barbarians at the gate, as Eteocles and the Chorus interpret the action early on; instead it tells the tale of Eteocles' own tragedy, linked backwards in an unbreakable and fateful chain of curses to the tragedies of his father Oedipus and his grandfather Laius, and forwards to that of his sister Antigone. Theban history is not only national and political but also familial and personal.

Unlike *Seven against Thebes*, *Richard II* does not present the operation of supernatural curses working their way through the generations and erupting with terrifying force. Twice in the play characters actually pronounce specific curses that are named and recognized as such by others onstage, but the curses are ineffectual. Thinking himself betrayed by the Earl of Wiltshire, Bushy, Bagot, and Green, Richard proclaims, "Terrible hell / Make war upon their spotted souls for this!" (3.2.133-4). Scroop tells him that three of these are already dead: "uncurse their souls" (137); "Those whom you curse / Have felt the worse of death's destroying wound"

(138-9). Misperceiving yet again the action unfolding around him, Richard's curse is cancelled as he speaks it. In 3.4, a classic case of blaming the messenger, the Queen curses the Gardener for telling her the news of Bolingbroke's rise and Richard's fall: "Gard'ner, for telling me these news of woe, / Pray God the plants thou graft'st may never grow" (100-1). But the Gardener empties the malediction of all power by responding selflessly and sympathetically: "Poor Queen, so that thy state might be no worse, / I would my skill were subject to thy curse" (102-3). He then disappears from the play. Adjuring hell and then heaven, these characters call down supernatural retribution for perceived injuries, but the action moves on to deny or evacuate the summonses. Unlike Oedipus' curse, terribly and supernaturally potent, these particular curses come to nothing.

Though not efficacious in themselves, the uttered curses in *Richard II* point to larger dramatic and theological realities because they resound in a general discourse of grim premonition and prophecy. Mowbray fears that the "King shall rue" (1.3.205) his support of Bolingbroke. As a "prophet new inspired" (2.1.31), Gaunt predicts that the king's "rash fierce blaze of riot cannot last" (33). An uneasy foreboding pervades the entire play: York knows that the events of "bad courses . . . can never fall out good" (2.1.213-14); Northumberland and Ross foresee "the very wrack we must suffer" (2.1.267), just as does the queen, "Some unborn sorrow, ripe in Fortune's womb, / Is coming towards me" (2.2.10-11). Portents signal impending disaster. The Welsh captain tells of withered bay trees, meteors frighting the fixed stars of heaven, a bloody moon, and "lean-looked prophets" whispering of "fearful change" (2.4.8-11). Carlisle delivers a formal prophecy of "Disorder, horror, fear, and mutiny" (4.1.143) for the present age and "children yet unborn" (322).

The discourse of dire premonition and prophecy that pervades the play derives not from the capacity of individuals to pronounce curses but from their underlying confidence in moral order, in God's ability to reward and punish, or curse, if you will. In 3.4, the Gardener, "old Adam's likeness" (72), talks of Richard's deposition and hears the queen's rebuke: "What Eve, what serpent hath suggested thee / To make a second fall of cursed man?" (75-6). The queen sees Richard's deposition as both an enactment of the original sin in Eden and as an example of its consequence, the fall from grace of "cursed man". She recalls God's heavy sentence, the curse on earth and humanity, particularly Genesis 4:11-12: "thou art cursed from the earth, which hath opened her mouth to receive thy brother's blood from thine hand. When thou shalt till the ground, it shall not henceforth yield unto thee her strength" (Geneva Bible 1599). Later Carlisle too recalls this curse when he predicts the future calamities arising from civil war, "the woefullest division" "That ever fell upon the cursed earth" (4.1.147-8). These allu-

sions to Genesis portray the play as reenacting both the fall and its consequence, the curse of God on sinful humanity. "In a general sense", notes Maveety (1973: 190), the Biblical "curse against birth and generation applies also to the English nation who for almost a century bear children to inherit a land cursed by the actions described in this play".[6] The play depicts both the fall and the fallen world. The similarity to (and difference from) *Septem* thus becomes clear: in both plays the past is not really past but uncannily present and future, as both playwrights explore the sacred triumph of synchronic over diachronic time; the divinely executed curses of ancient fathers, however, here get replaced by God's curse upon the mythological father of all humanity.

As regards efficacious cursing, *Richard III* appears to contrast with *Richard II*. "Can curses pierce the clouds and enter heaven?", Queen Margaret asks early on, "Why then, give way dull clouds to my quick curses" (1.3.194-5). The action of the play seems to answer her question in the affirmative, as a grim series of victims all ascribe their doom to Margaret's curses.[7] In the company of Rivers and Vaughan, the condemned Gray reflects, "Now Margaret's curse is fall'n upon our heads" (3.3.14). Before his execution Hastings similarly laments, "O Margaret, Margaret, now thy heavy curse / Is lighted on poor Hastings' wretched head" (3.4.91-2). Going to his death Buckingham repeats the almost formulaic recognition: "Now Margaret's curse is fallen upon my head" (5.1.25).[8] When her heart is split with sorrow as Margaret prophesied, Queen Elizabeth begs her former foe to teach her to curse: "O thou, well skilled in curses, stay awhile, / And teach me how to curse mine enemies" (4.4.116-17). Lancasters and Yorks, including notably the Duchess of York, finally unite in cursing their common enemy Richard III, who dies terribly on the battlefield. In this play uttered curses appear to have power and come to bloody fulfillment in the course of the action.

These appearances notwithstanding, Margaret's curses are not really efficacious in themselves but only point to a larger theological reality.[9]

[6] Hannibal Hamlin (2013: 140) has also added that a cluster of complementary allusions to Psalm 137 "represents England itself as fallen, exiled from its original happy state, as Jerusalem was after its fall, when it was mourned by Jeremiah and the Psalmist in exile following the Babylonian conquest".

[7] Productions have emphasized this point: in Sam Mendes's 1992 production "Cherry Morris as Margaret was allowed to reappear hauntingly as each of Richard's victims went off to his death" (Jowett 2000: 48). In the *Richard III* of *The Hollow Crown* series (2016), Sophie Okonedo's wonderfully eerie Queen Margaret used a mirror to curse her victims and presided over the ghostly visitations in Act 5

[8] I quote the Folio version of the line; Siemon prints the Quarto version, "Thus Margaret's curse falls heavy on my neck".

[9] Siemon (2009: 21) points out her "glaring errors": Queen Elizabeth does not end childless, Richard's most fearful dream is not a "hell of ugly devils" (1.3.226), and he

In context, they appear with Margaret's prayers, her invocations to God for justice and retribution. Margaret, for example, prays that Elizabeth's small joy in being queen be lessened, "God, I beseech thee!" (1.3.110); that Clarence's perjury be punished, "Which God revenge" (1.3.136); that guilty Yorks suffer early deaths: "God, I pray Him, / That none of you may live his natural age, / But by some unlooked accident cut off" (1.3.211-13). She does not invoke infernal devils to fulfill her maledictions but looks to a just, omniscient God to right earthly wrong: "O God, that seest it, do not suffer it; / As it is won with blood, lost be it so" (1.3.270-71). Later, hearing the laments of her enemies, she thanks this deity: "O upright, just, and true-disposing God, / How I do thank thee" (4.4.55-6). All of Margaret's victims, furthermore, explicitly recognize that God's power, not some dark curse, is the true efficient cause in their fates. En route to execution Rivers realizes that Margaret's curses are only obverse expressions of her prayers and that God disposes all.

> Then cursed she Richard; then cursed she Buckingham;
> Then cursed she Hastings. O, remember, God,
> To hear her prayer for them, as now for us.
> (3.3.17-19)

Hastings, similarly, attributes his fate to his own failure to reverence properly this deity:

> O momentary grace of mortal men,
> Which we more hunt for than the grace of God!
> Who builds his hopes in air of your good looks
> Lives like a drunken sailor on a mast,
> Ready with every nod to tumble down
> Into the fatal bowels of the deep.
> (3.4.95-100)

Buckingham asked for divine retribution when he failed to reverence the Queen and her house, "God punish me" . . . "This do I beg of God, / When I am cold in love to you or yours" (2.1.34, 40-1); on his way to execution he recognizes the fulfillment of that prayer:

> This is the day which, in King Edward's time,
> I wished might fall on me when I was found
> False to his children or his wife's allies.
> . . .
> That high All-Seer which I dallied with

justly observes, "Her foresight is limited to commonplace notions of divine retributive justice and earthly mutability".

Hath turned my feigned prayer on my head.
(5.1.13-15, 20-1)

As in *Richard II* curses in *Richard III* reveal the underlying moral order and the active presence of a just God who punishes the wicked.[10]

Each ruler's response to the curses in his play creates and defines his tragedy. When Eteocles climactically realizes that the curse of his father drives him to destined battle with his brother, he bitterly assents to his own destruction and that of his house:

ἐπεὶ τὸ πρᾶγμα κάρτ᾽ ἐπισπέρχει θεός,
ἴτω κατ᾽ οὖρον, κῦμα Κωκυτοῦ λαχόν,
Φοίβῳ στυγηθὲν πᾶν τὸ Λαΐου γένος.
(689-91)

[Since the god is indeed driving this matter on, let it go to ruin before the wind, consigned to the waves of Cocytus, all the house of Laius, hated by Phoebus.]

The allusion to Apollo recalls Laius' original violation of his oracle and the subsequent curse on the family. Eteocles' realization abruptly annihilates his previous construction of the world and himself. That ordered universe wherein humans can propitiate gods and count on their favor in return suddenly appears as a mysterious and malevolent world of past crimes and the present Fury, lurking, implacable, μελάναιγις (699, "with black aegis or storm"). Eteocles' own identity as the individual self-appointed high priest of ritual likewise changes to that of a voiceless and powerless descendant of Laius, his fate sealed by Phoebus Apollo's hatred before he was even born. These realizations lead Eteocles to abandon his previous theodicy and to despair:

θεοῖς μὲν ἤδη πως παρημελήμεθα,
χάρις δ᾽ ἀφ᾽ ἡμῶν ὀλομένων θαυμάζεται;[11]
τί οὖν ἔτ᾽ ἂν σαίνοιμεν ὀλέθριον μόρον;
(702-4)

[We are already, it seems, abandoned by the gods, and so can an offering from any of us doomed mortals be honoured? Why then should we still cringe before our fated death?]

[10] The combatants in *Septem* invoke another kind of underlying moral order, *Dike*, or "Justice," who appears personified as a portent on Polynices' shield with a promise to restore him to home and city (644-8); Eteocles, however, pointedly denies *Dike*'s involvement with his brother's cause (658-73); see Orwin (1980).

[11] I here depart from Page's text to follow Hutchinson (1985) and Sommerstein (2009) in reading line 703 as a question.

The particle πως ("it seems"), Hutchinson comments, "is bitter", and the aorist middle participle ὀλομένων ("having been destroyed") asserts powerfully his and all humanity's mortal condition, already destroyed, always dying, already doomed. The verb σαίνοιμεν ("we cringe") echoes the scout's contemptuous use earlier (383, σαίνειν μόρον) and has its usual force of cowering or fawning like a dog. The phrase ὀλέθριον μόρον ("fated death") recalls Homer's baleful ὀλέθριον ἦμαρ (*Il.* 19.294, 409, "day of doom") and conveys the full etymological force of μόρον, from μείρομαι ("receive as one's portion") and related to μοῖρα ("one's part, also the dread goddess of Fate"). This realization constitutes the tragic recognition (*anagnorisis*) and reversal (*peripeteia*) of the play as Aristotle later defined the terms: ἀναγνώρισις δέ, ὥσπερ καὶ τοὔνομα σημαίνει, ἐξ ἀγνοίας εἰς γνῶσιν μεταβολή, ἢ εἰς φιλίαν ἢ ἔχθραν (*Poetics*, 1452a, "Recognition, as the very name indicates, is a change from ignorance to knowledge, leading to friendship or to enmity", Halliwell 1987); Ἔστι δὲ περιπέτεια μὲν ἡ εἰς τὸ ἐναντίον τῶν πραττομένων μεταβολή (1452a, "Reversal is a change to the opposite direction of events", Halliwell 1987). Eteocles used to believe in a comprehensible, rational, and reciprocal connection between piety and prosperity: πόλις γὰρ εὖ πράσσουσα δαίμονας τίει (*Sept.* 77, "when a city is prosperous, it honors its gods"); ἀλλ᾽ οὖν θεοὺς / τοὺς τῆς ἁλούσης πόλεος ἐκλείπειν λόγος (217-18, "but it is said that the gods abandon a city that has been taken"). He discovers that he is doomed by gods who are actually enemies or, worse yet, indifferent to the piety of mortal men and women.

Resisting all entreaty, protector of the city to the last, grimly marching to the fated confrontation, Eteocles certainly appears to be a pitiable victim of the curse. But he is also responsible for his own fate, the play insists to our discomfort and unease. Rash and culpable, Eteocles, in fact, enacts the crime that originally caused the curse, disobedience of divine command (745-6, Ἀπόλλωνος εὖτε Λάιος / βίᾳ). The word signifying Laius' defiance of Apollo (βίᾳ, "by violence"), twice recurs to describe Polynices as mighty (577, 641), thus linking lexically the first and third generations, the past crime of Laius and the future one of Eteocles against his brother. Helen H. Bacon (1964: 30-1, 36) has observed other verbal links: Laius' counsels are ἄπιστοι (842, "defiant, disobedient") and this word echoes twice in the Choral kommos for the dead brothers (846, 876); images of sharpened steel describe Apollo's curse to Laius (844, θέσφατ᾽ οὐκ ἀμβλύνεται, "oracles do not lose their edge"), Oedipus' curse (944, θηκτὸς σίδαρος, "sharpened iron"), and Eteocles himself (715, τεθηγμένον τοί μ᾽ οὐκ ἀπαμβλυνεῖς λόγῳ, "I am sharpened and shall not be blunted by your words"). These images point to the "Scythian stranger" (727-8, ξένος . . . Σκυθῶν), i.e, the sword that will be both the physical embodiment of the curse and its executor.

The Chorus calls attention to the divine prohibition against shedding one's own blood and warns Eteocles of the consequences – οὐκ ἔστι γῆρας τοῦδε τοῦ μιάσματος (682, "there is no old age to that pollution"). They accuse him of blood-lust:

> τί μέμονας, τέκνον; μή τί σε θυμοπλη-
> θὴς δορίμαργος ἄτα φερέτω· κακοῦ δ'
> ἔκβαλ' ἔρωτος ἀρχάν.
> (686-8)
>
> [Why do you rush furiously on, child? Do not let yourself be swept away by this spear-mad blindness that swells your heart. Cast away the first stirrings of this evil lust!]

The young women reverse their former subordinate position and address the king as τέκνον ("child"), condemning the heart-filling passion that will bring evil. They censure his destructive ἔρως, the ὠμοδακής . . . ἵμερος (692, "fiercely gnawing desire") that provokes the shedding "of unlawful blood" (694, αἵματος οὐ θεμιστοῦ). Ignoring all warning, giving way to irrational impulse, Eteocles becomes in Hutchinson's words, a "horribly distorted" (1985: 148) version of the self-possessed commander that opened the play. He must know that taking arms against his brother will inevitably lead to his own destruction. "The inextricability of the brothers' fates", Isabelle Torrance (2014: 62) notes, "is stressed linguistically through compounds prefixed by auto- 'self' and references to the fratricide as *autoktonia* 'suicide' (681, 734-5, 805, 850)". Eteocles' recognition of the curse results only in a theology of "fatalism and despair" (Hutchinson 1985: xxxviii) that enables his own willful violation and self-destruction. Nothing matters anymore. Θεῶν διδόντων οὐκ ἂν ἐκφύγοις κακά (719, "When the gods send evils, no one can escape them"), says Eteocles and then leaves the stage. Taplin (1977: 165) pointedly comments: "Everything that is at stake in *Seven* 677-719 will be decided by a stage action, Eteocles' exit. The act itself is held up and examined; then in the end, Eteocles breaks the suspense . . . He goes; and in his going he fulfills the curse. For the audience, he is dead". Eteocles is both victim of the curse and its enactor.

Richard II's response to God's curse likewise enables and structures his tragedy as he too experiences a devastating recognition and reversal. Believing himself to be the divinely appointed king Carlisle describes, "the figure of God's majesty, / His captain, steward, deputy elect, / Anointed, crowned, planted many years" (4.1.126-8), Richard initially thinks himself invulnerable:

> Not all the water in the rough rude sea
> Can wash the balm off from an anointed king;

> The breath of worldly men cannot depose
> The deputy elected by the Lord.
> (3.2.54-7)

Bolingbroke's rise to power shatters this conception of himself and his place in Providential order. The confrontation with Bolingbroke at Flint Castle in the middle of the play (3.3) literally and figuratively depicts Richard's vertiginous fall and the collapse of his theodicy. From high on the walls Richard haughtily proclaims, "God omnipotent / Is mustering in His clouds on our behalf / Armies of pestilence" (85-8). But then he must descend to face the victorious rebel on stage: "Down, down I come like glist'ring Phaëthon, / Wanting the manage of unruly jades" (178-9).[12] In the moving deposition scene that follows, the divinely-anointed king renounces all the accoutrements of power and privilege:

> I give this heavy weight from off my head,
> And this unwieldy sceptre from my hand,
> The pride of kingly sway from out my heart;
> With mine own tears I wash away my balm,
> With mine own hands I give away my crown,
> With mine own tongue deny my sacred state,
> With mine own breath release all duteous oaths.
> All pomp and majesty I do forswear.
> (4.1.204-11)

Richard here discovers that God will not protect him from Bolingbroke and the rebels, that he is flesh and blood.

After the deposition scene, Richard too appears to be a victim of the curse in his play, a suffering human man in the hostile, fallen world. Remarkably, he begins to claim audience sympathy. He bids moving farewell to the Queen "So two together, weeping, make one woe. / Weep thou for me in France, I for thee here" (5.1.86-7). In his last scene, Richard speaks an extraordinary final soliloquy, markedly different from all earlier utterance, wherein he sees his kingship as a role and recognizes his common humanity:

> Thus play I in one person many people,
> And none contented. Sometimes am I king;
> Then treasons make me wish myself a beggar,
> And so I am.
> (5.5.31-4)

[12] Richard's dramatic descent, depicted in the staging as well as the imagery, echoes Eteocles' vertiginous fall from protector of the polis to curse-driven fratricide.

Instead of the earlier ornate and pompous rhetoric, simplicity and repetition express the fundamental paradoxes of human existence: we desire a happiness that we can never attain; our life must end in death; only death can free us from pain and desire.

> Nor I nor any man that but man is
> With nothing shall be pleased till he be eased
> With being nothing.
> (39-41)

Richard's new rhetorical style signals new insight into himself and the world; clearly and concisely he explains his plight: "I wasted time, and now doth Time waste me" (49). The brutally simple inversion and antithesis summarizes Richard's life and death without extenuation and excuse; whatever his faults, the poignant eloquence of the close claims a measure of respect and sympathy never evoked by Eteocles or Richard III. At least momentarily Richard II seems victim of division in the fallen, cursed world. And, at the last, he responds bravely to his murderers, fighting hard, slaying two men before his own end.

But despite this victimization and these moments of self-understanding and insight, Richard, the play insists, is also deeply responsible for his fate. Scattered moments of wistful regret never rise to true contrition and the king never truly acknowledges his own role in his downfall and the wide scope of his misdeeds. He acknowledges generally his "weaved-up follies" (4.1.229) but refuses to hear his wrongs enumerated; he never regrets or even remembers the blank charters, the theft of Gaunt's lands, the waste of resources, the playing of unworthy favorites, the devastation on the kingdom entrusted to him. His sorrow is all for himself, and in the lengthy recounting of his own woes he says not one word about the suffering he inflicted upon his people. Instead of seeing himself as a true son of Adam, negligent in the garden, as the Gardener does, Richard shatters the looking glass (4.1.288).

Self-loving and aspiring, a rash and ambitious prince, Richard II commits the original sin of pride that caused the divine curse on sinful humanity in the first place. Like Eve, who fell for the serpent's false promise, "Ye shall be as gods" (Genesis 3:5), Richard also displays divine pretension and aspiration: repeatedly he identifies himself with Jesus Christ.[13] Thinking

[13] Forker (2002: 394) comments: "The concept of the martyr-king, especially the analogy of Richard to Christ, is notably absent from Holinshed, Hall, Froissart, and Daniel, whereas the anti-Lancastrian French chroniclers emphasize the parallel". See also Streete (2009: 162-99). Productions have long emphasized Richard's self-identification with Christ for various purposes. Edwin Booth, remarkably, took Richard at his word and "clothed the character in his mind with the features of the accepted por-

that his favorites have made peace with Bolingbroke, he exclaims: "Three Judases, each one thrice worse than Judas!" (3.2.132). In his own mind he even surpasses Christ in the drama of disloyalty: infidelity to him is "thrice worse" than betrayal of Christ to Crucifixion. Later, he again portrays his plight as far worse than that suffered by Christ:

> Did they not sometime cry, "All hail" to me?
> So Judas did to Christ, but He in twelve
> Found truth in all but one; I, in twelve thousand, none.
> (4.1.170-2)

Christ had twelve apostles who remained loyal but Richard has none. Christ faced one Pilate who refused to take responsibility but Richard faces many:

> Though some of you, with Pilate, wash your hands,
> Showing an outward pity, yet you Pilates
> Have here delivered me to my sour cross,
> And water cannot wash away your sin.
> (4.1.239-42)

Repeatedly portraying himself as Christ, even as surpassing Christ in his Passion, Richard proves himself a son of Adam in the fallen world.[14] In his divine pretension he repeatedly commits the original sin of pride that incurred the Father's curse in Eden, that curse undone by Christ's redemptive sacrifice.

traits of Christ, and finally concluded to adopt them as being best suited to the person of the unhappy king" (Booth Grossman 1894: 7). Most others have sought to exploit the yawning gap between Richard's delusions and the sad reality. Ben Whishaw's pompous Richard rode to his deposition on a white steed in white garments, and met his death in a Crucifixion loin-cloth (*The Hollow Crown*, dir. Rupert Goold, 2012). A self-dramatizing David Tennant, bare-footed, clothed in flowing, white robe, and adorned with long hair and a cross on his chest, surrendered his crown to Bolingbroke (RSC, dir. Gregory Doran, 2013).

[14] Richard's earlier identification with Phaëthon (3.3.178-9) also ironically reveals this pride, as allegorical traditions interpreted this classical story as a warning against pretention, according to H. David Brumble (1998: 268): "Fulgentius saw Phaethon as one who fell for 'aspiring' (*Mythologies*: 1.16); Dante compared proud churchmen to Phaethon (*Letters*: 11.4, 5-8; see Pépin 1970: 112-13); Lydgate wrote of Phaethon's 'presumpsion' (*Reson and Sensuallyte*: 4206; see also Caxton, *Ovid*: comment on book 2). . . . Berchorius saw the story as showing that 'virtue is in the mean' (*Ovidius Moralizatus*: 154). *Ovide Moralisé* (2.689-730) and Berchorius (*Ovidius Moralizatus*: 160) treat Phaethon as a type of proud aspiring Lucifer and his revolt in heaven. . . . Sandys' comment is in the same tradition: "This fable to the life presents a rash and ambitious Prince, inflamed with desire of glory and dominion" (*Ovid*: 106; see also Golding, 'Epistle': 75)".

Richard III's mocking response to the curses in his play likewise creates and defines his tragedy. He cuts off Margaret's long and formal malediction by flippantly substituting her name for the climactic pronouncement of his own (1.3.232). He ironically asks God's pardon for those who have done Clarence harm, enjoying his little private joke, "For had I cursed now, I had cursed myself" (1.3.318). He ridicules his mother's prayer that God instill virtues in him, "Amen, [*rising; aside*] and make me die a good old man. / That is the butt-end of a mother's blessing" (2.2.109-10), and he stonily ignores her later curse (4.4.184ff.). His insistent mockery approaches blasphemy when he congratulates himself on triumphing over the Almighty in wooing Lady Anne: "Having God, her conscience and these bars against me, / And I, no friends to back my suit withal / But the plain devil and dissembling looks" (1.2.237-9). Theatrically playing the innocent, he casually takes the name of the Lord in vain: "I would to God my heart were flint, like Edward's" (1.3.139); "I thank my God for my humility" (2.1.73). Richard's insistent mockery, blasphemous impostures, and blatant disregard for the Providential order that others in the play recognize too late come to a climax in the charade at Baynard's Castle (3.7). Staging the scene with Buckingham, Richard enters aloft with two bishops, prayer-book in hand, posing as the pious, reluctant, and humble Christian prince in order to gain the crown.

God, however, will not be mocked in this play, and Richard, both like and unlike the other rulers, experiences a devastating recognition and reversal. After stealing the crown, he becomes haunted by past prophecies: Henry VI's prediction "that Richmond should be king" (4.2.95), and the Irish bard's saying that Richard "should not live long" after seeing Richmond (4.2.105). Eleven ghosts of his victims climactically and chronologically appear on stage to curse him and bless Richmond.[15] The final specter, Buckingham, reads Richard's life story and the historical action of the drama as a morality play: "God and good angels fight on Richmond's side, / And Richard falls in height of all his pride" (5.3.175-6). Richard discovers that all his secret sins are precisely numbered, that the world is manifestly not his to bustle in. He wakes, "Give me another horse! Bind up my wounds! / Have mercy, Jesu" (5.3.177-8). The calling upon Christ for mercy contrasts with all his other false prayers and invocations, and leads to a fleeting moment of self-revelation that precisely recalls his initial blithe resolution to "prove a villain" (1.1.30):

[15] The common tendency in criticism and production to portray the apparitions as mere figments of Richard's guilty imagination nullifies their role as supernatural participants in a larger moral order. See, for example, the portrayal in Al Pacino's otherwise quite brilliant documentary, *Looking for Richard* (1996).

> Alack, I love myself. Wherefore? For any good
> That I myself have done unto myself?
> O, no. Alas, I rather hate myself
> For hateful deeds committed by myself.
> I am a villain.
> (5.3.187-91)

Richard here momentarily recognizes exactly what he has achieved and what he has become. The arrogant bravado gives way to guilt, "I shall despair" (200), and a pathetic complaint, "There is no creature loves me, / And if I die, no soul will pity me" (200-1). The recognition and reversal are short-lived, however; Richard recovers, refuses to repent, and marches off to rally the troops against Richmond.

Though they live in very different worlds, Eteocles, Richard II, and Richard III all experience shattering confrontations with curses. In so doing, each enacts the original violations that occasioned the curses and each suffers terribly for that action. All the rulers suffer from fundamental misunderstandings about themselves and their worlds, specifically about their relations with the divine, and their places in the great chain of events stretching backwards into the past and forwards into the future. This chain comprises a drama of history unseen and unimagined by the royal actors, one that features for Eteocles the malevolent malediction of the Labdacid house, for Richard II God's curse on all sons of Adam, and for Richard III, God's punishment on those who blaspheme and take his name in vain. In the first two plays there is no satisfying closure after the deaths of the principals, and both *Seven Against Thebes* and *Richard II* end with a distinct sense of incompletion. The textual interpolation that concludes the *Seven* reifies this incompletion into an added scene forecasting the subsequent tragedy of Antigone and her struggle to bury Polynices. The victorious Bolingbroke says in his last speech that his "soul is full of woe" (5.6.45) and he decides to go to the Holy Land "to wash this blood off from my guilty hand" (50), an action that begins *I Henry IV*. Evocations of the primal fratricide, Cain's killing of Abel, however, complete the patterns of biblical imagery in this play and undercut this intended expiation. At the outset of *Richard II* Bolingbroke declares that Woodstock's blood, "like sacrificing Abel's, cries / Even from the tongueless caverns of the earth / To me for justice and rough chastisement" (1.1.104-6). Here he usurps God's role as the revenger of wrongs, just as he does after Richard's murder when he pronounces God's curse on Exton: "With Cain go wander thorough shades of night, / And never show thy head by day nor light" (5.6.43-4). Bolingbroke's curse swiftly and ironically redounds upon himself, as he in this very scene confesses a gnawing fear, worry, guilt, and need for expiation.

The curser utters God's curse and is himself cursed.

The curses and the tragedies of *Seven Against Thebes* and *Richard II* continue into the futures that unfold outside the limits of their plays. Only *Richard III* ends with a sense of completion, though some have read the closure as unstable and over-determined.[16] And yet, Richmond prays before battle, gives thanks to God, and finally proclaims, "The bloody dog is dead" (5.5.2), precisely echoing Margaret's earlier curse and prayer: "dear God I pray, / That I may live and say. 'The dog is dead'". This verbal iteration auditorily appears to confirm the potency of Margaret's curses and to cast her as a latter-day version of Ara or the Erinys. But, of course, that flickering image, like so many from the classical pantheon, fades into the larger sweep of Christian history and Providential order. These forces may work toward expiation of sin or the curses may become ironically fulfilled in the inauguration of the Tudor regime.

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[16] In Bill Alexander's 1984 RSC staging, "the absence of a fair fight, and the spectacularly theatrical slaughter of the praying figure by a Darth Vader-like Richmond, with full orchestral underscoring, sustained this production's increasing ambiguity" (Day 2002: 217). Jowett (2000: 70) quotes Wilbur Sanders' description of Richmond's final speech as "a pious shell and a hard core of prudential self-interest" (1968: 73), and notes its portrayal in Bogdanov's production (1988) as a "smooth exercise in public relations, scarcely ruffled by the darkly ambiguous and repeated injunction, 'Let them not live'". Siemon (2009: 115) observes, "recent productions generally reject England's purgation and Richmond's innocence".

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