The Women of Richard III

The character of King Richard III of England is perhaps Shakespeare's most evil creation. A Machiavellian who delights in governing through fear and force, his evil is only offset by his ready and cutting wit. Yet Shakespeare does provide a contrast to Richard's villainy. The women of this play function as voices of protest and morality. They often see through his intrigues and predict dire consequences from his acts. Shakespeare uses the women to point out moral truths and emphasize general principles of the Elizabethan world view of moral and political order. Anne, Elizabeth, the Duchess and Margaret each contribute in furthering Shakespeare’s moral themes in three ways: through their roles as victims which is expressed in their intense lamentations, in their cries for revenge through divine retribution, and in alluding to a higher moral order that transcends men's actions. In all these ways, the women of Richard III help illustrate how destruction comes about when order is violated, either through the weakness of a king or through the machinations of those who cause civil war by wanting to take the king's place. Such chaos devastates the individual, the family, and the nation, resulting in moral decay, treachery, anarchy, and profound suffering.

The world that Shakespeare shows us in Richard III is a man's world. The women are presented as being on the sidelines to grieve, complain, or bury the dead. Richard views women as tools, as shown by his various asides to the audience when he announces his plots, where the marrying of Anne or Elizabeth are only moves in his elaborate games of intrigue and power. Overwhelmingly, the women are victims of such political machinations, and though their vulnerability allows their manipulation, the eloquent expressions of their grief shows not only that Richard's schemes are played out on people whose agony of body and spirit can be intensely real, but also shows that the state of civil turmoil, disorder, and treachery that has prevailed since the War of the Roses began leaves no one untouched by suffering. Anne, the first woman we are introduced to is grief stricken by her husband's death in combat. Shakespeare expands this theme in scenes such as Act II, sc.ii when both Elizabeth and the Duchess also lament and enumerate similar losses of loved ones. Act IV, sc. i contains some of the play's most touching lines when Elizabeth looks back on the Tower, suspecting she may never see her imprisoned sons again. In this scene, the Duchess sums up the state of despair all the women find themselves in when she says, "I to my grave, where peace and rest lie with me. Eighty odd years of sorrow have I seen, and each hour's joy wrack'd with a week of ten," (Act IV, sc. i). Though one can call the Duchess and the former Queen Margaret monotones of complaint, the point is made that this individual devastation is the result of the disaster that has befallen the nation as a whole. Everyone is tainted, even the women are not entirely guiltless in the struggle between the warring houses. Through their passive acceptance, as in Anne's acceptance of Richard's proposal, to Margaret's very active part as a soldier in the battlefield, the blood and barbarities of civil strife have reduced everyone, but especially the women, to helpless creatures who can only recite psalms of grief, guilt, and sorrow. Finally, in Act IV, sc iv, 'the wailing queens,' Margaret, the Duchess, and Elizabeth unite in their mournings. Again, Shakespeare uses the
women to emphasize the woeful state of the nation when Elizabeth asks Margaret to teach her how to curse, cursing being the only outlet for these women, powerful in title but impotent in reality, incapable of stemming the tide of sorrow and suffering the disorder of the times has wrought.

Perhaps because of their helpless suffering, the women of Richard III also come to function as the national voice for retributive justice. In Act I, sc. ii, Anne prays for vengeance. Revenge is cried upon Richard by the wailing queens. But it is Margaret who dominates with her litany of revenge. Serving a dual role as a spokeswoman of historical facts, she graphically outlines the violence and treachery that has been the ruling characteristic of the country since the accession of Henry VI. Here we learn that everyone is guilty: the moral abdication of Henry VI led to the dominance of Margaret, the Yorkists provoked civil war, Edward IV, as well as Clarence, broke their oaths...they are a generation nurtured in violence and individual repentances cannot heal the cancer of usurpation, civil disorder, and self-seeking individualism. Richard is the culmination of this strife, a monstrous incarnation of evil that springs from a context of decayed public morality. Anne and Margaret call him the scourge, and he is variously referred to as the devil himself.

When the women are not grieving, they are often venting their hate. The expressions of Margaret's thirst for revenge are her curses and she levels them generously at all who contributed to her personal losses: Clarence, Richard, Hastings, King Edward, and Dorcet while she also evokes the mechanical aspect of justice when she prophesies their destruction. All of the women join Margaret in cursing Richard, the most concentrated representation of the evil and illness that pervades the country, but it is interesting to note how often the curse reverses on the curser. Anne acknowledges this (Act IV, sc.i), thus admitting to her own duplicity in the mess everyone finds themselves in. All the scenes of female lamentation are riddled with curses, calling for justice when all are guilty. Shakespeare uses the women to illustrate how England itself is under a curse of civil dissension and moral ill. The ring of curses and the cries for justice directly reflect how deep the morass of blood, treachery, and disorder has become, and how urgently rightful order needs to be restored.

But does vengeance belong to man or God? Shakespeare uses the tension created with Margaret's curses and cries for personal revenge to answer this question in the person of Richmond. Throughout the play a sense of moral order that transcends men's actions is alluded to but never given full expression until the last Act. It is to this moral order, this immutable form of divine justice, that all the women are appealing when they cry to the heavens for their wrongs to be righted, especially poignant in the ‘wailing queens’ scene. In this scene, Margaret points out to Elizabeth how temporal life is: "For happy wife, a most distressed widow; For joyful mother, one that wails the name; ... Thus hath the course of justice whirl’d about And left thee but a very prey to time" (Act IV, sc. iv). However, though Margaret uses this allusion to temporality to emphasize the maxim ‘what goes around comes around’, she confuses the
fulfillment of her wishes with divine justice. Her curses come true because they should have, not because she wants them to. She, like the other women, tend to be morally myopic in their cries for justice, unable, or unwilling, to recognize their own guilt. Shakespeare makes Margaret the incarnation of the wrong sort of justice, derived from the Old Testament style of retributive justice, but he contrasts her with Richmond who submits himself to a higher order and incorporates forgiveness into his idea of justice. The fact that Shakespeare portrays Richmond as the nation's savior, not bringing him into the play until the last scene and making plain that Richmond alone is untainted by the treachery that has gone before, endorses the fact that Shakespeare himself felt that vengeance belonged to God, made plain when Richmond submits himself to this higher order.

In the last scene when Richard and Richmond present their soliloquies, the contrast between submission to order and extreme individualism is very clearly the contrast between good and evil. Here Shakespeare makes it clear that there is an existence beyond the realm of men that nevertheless has a profound effect on human life and experience. Margaret and the other women of the play serve to bring about this realization, through their lamentations and cries for revenge, that something over and above the world of men is needed to right the state of the country. They cry to this higher order and bring the need for its intervention to our attention, and this is their greatest contribution. Only their own participation in furthering the state of disorder prevents them from benefiting significantly from order's restoration in the form of Richmond's victory.

Cicero said, "Justice is the essential virtue and moral right is the basis of action." In Richard III, Shakespeare shows how the existing order of England has been violated and presents the conflict and turmoil that results on both the individual and national levels. Order is restored only by the eradication of the forces that originally violated it and Shakespeare shows that these forces were essentially immoral in nature. The female characters are the major vehicles of this view, by voicing the sorrow that results from the disruption of moral order, through their cries for retributive justice, and through their appeals for this justice from a divine realm. They are the essential contrast to Richard's evil, and through their struggles against his dominance they serve not only to illustrate the necessity of the restoration of order, but to bring about that restoration. In moral terms, the women of the play thus serve to mitigate the natural destructiveness inherent in a male dominated world.

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My Response

At the end of reading Galloway’s review, one has to wonder whether or not she is really a feminist. Galloway properly identifies the key issues which affect women in the play but neglects to view them as an exploitation of the view of women or use of women by Shakespeare in demonstrating the main themes of the work.

By identifying women as the direct contrast to Richard’s villainy, she moves towards almost a commendation of Shakespeare’s portrayal of the women in the book. This commendation is however unsupported by the main points to which she makes reference. The dramatic contrast to a villain is that of a hero. Does Shakespeare cast the women as heroes? In my opinion, No!

In fact, in direct contrast to Galloway’s view of this is her own statement that women are presented on the sidelines. Heroes do not appear on the sidelines! From Galloway’s description of them being tools for king Richard’s use, I get the impression that they are also Shakespeare’s tools.

Even though Galloway is adamant that Shakespeare uses the women as emphasis for the state of the nation as a whole, the reader is driven to wondering why the men are surprisingly quiet on the issue of morality. In his other works, such as King Lear, Much Ado About nothing and Romeo and Juliet, Shakespeare allows the men to lend their voices to decrying the state of the nation of the place in which the story is set. Instead of questioning why the women are so vocal about an issue which should affect both genders, Galloway quickly embraces the use of solely the female voice as an honour afforded by Shakespeare. In this respect, the feminist viewpoint is not really seen.

In fact, by presenting a man’s world and then affording women such a voice defender of women would make Shakespeare a defender of women, mocking the men. The play’s trajectory however suggests otherwise. Morality is portrayed as feminine concern and thus a weaker view. Galloway’s subsequent identification of the women’s helpless suffering and their course of action as only praying, complaining, grieving, hating and plotting, gives the impression of a certain characterization by Shakespeare. This character goes against the fundamental feminist view of women having power and autonomy. By allowing the women’s lamentations to be riddled with curses, once more Shakespeare gives a weakness to the women in the play. Galloway fails to identify this.

Her identification of the entrance of Richmond (the true hero of the play) is not supported by her realization that all along Shakespeare may have been mocking the traditional actions of women. He may have in fact been gently mocking the emotional response to evil.
The intervention of a high power through Richmond, in spite of and without reference to the women’s many and fervent pleas, suggests that the male order of enduring and fighting against evil is more successful than just crying and complaining.

Shakespeare suggests that emotions, even when geared towards morality does little to change actions and as such it is better to be silent and moral because the emotional only prolongs the incidence of immorality. Sorrow, crying and appealing, he seems to say, does nothing for righting moral disorder. It comes through an untainted medium, usually from an unexpected avenue.

Galloway therefore adequately identifies Shakespeare’s themes but fails at recognizing the degradation of women to achieve this. The women are not an essential contrast to Richard, Richmond is. The women’s plots, Shakespeare shows, are just mere distraction/ sidelines as against the actual delivery of justice.

Her closing statement summarizes her incorrect assessment because in moral terms, the women themselves are immoral (cursing, hatred filled, furthering the state of disorder). They do nothing to mitigate the male destructiveness in the male dominated world. In the male dominated world, the women served no purpose. Their cry didn’t bring justice, they contributed to it in a minor way. Justice only comes about through the intervention of a higher power. In my opinion, in this point, Shakespeare’s true point is like in Scripture, “Who hath known the mind of God and who hath been His counselor?” Our emotional begging and pleading does nothing to move God to act, He does not take counsel from us. Justice comes about just because the persons, who need to be corrected, will be corrected, in a matter of time with or without our help or input.