

“Masking Disability: Hypermasculine and Neo-Misogynistic Richard”

Masculinity as a social construct has changed inevitably as society also transforms through time. Despite the differences pertaining to ‘machismo’ from the Elizabethan Era to the Contemporary Western Cultures, Shakespeare’s *Richard III* proves that some forms of masculinity remain the same, and that some means of political mobility remain socially unacceptable. Australian sociologist and Professor Emeritus at the University of Sydney Raewyn Connell is well known for her theory on hegemonic masculinity, what she has coined the dominant and most culturally valued qualities associated with the male sex. Connell also identifies three other types of masculinity: complicit, marginalized, and subordinate. As a means of clarification, Connell speaks of masculinity as a non-gender specific term, “defined as the patterns of practices by which...both men and women...engage that position” (R. Connell). However, for the sociopolitical purposes of this paper, the term will specifically refer to the position of male characters within *Richard III*, as women do not play a particularly large part in the political action of the drama. Hegemonic masculinity is embodied in men who display admirable qualities, which according to Connell, “guarantees the dominant position of men and the subordination of women” (R. W. Connell 77). In the case of post-war England, these qualities included heterosexuality, white skin, political power, and lustful characteristics. Both complicit and subordinate masculinities do not have the capability to hold power within a society, as they either physically cannot or knowingly oppose the values of hegemonic masculinity. Marginalized masculinity fits into the constraints of hegemonic masculinity, but is subdued by “the concept of marginalization...that result[s] from the interplay of gender with other structures, such as class and ethnicity” (Demetriou 342). The portrayal of Richard III within William Shakespeare’s text and Richard Loncraine’s 1995 filmic adaptation

communicates his masculinity through the marginalization that these artists represent as a development from his “deformity” at birth. This is later embodied by his rejection of the significance of and political advancement through the female gender.

Richard is a character of true presence, both in the first written words of Shakespeare’s text and in his initial appearance in Loncraine’s filmic adaptation of *Richard III*. His masculinity is blatantly depicted by coercive diction and simple mise en scène techniques. The interpolated scene of Henry VI and Prince Edward’s death as the opener of Loncraine’s film proves wordlessly to characterize Richard as an extremely powerful political figure. Additionally, the low camera angle used emphasizes his physique, sexual power, and quite possibly powers of intimidation, which display Richard’s dominance over the situation. These are all aspects of the hegemonic masculinity that have remained timeless. The introductory soliloquy solidifies Richard’s charismatic air, shocking and intriguing the audience as he boldly states, “I am determinèd to prove a villain” (1.1.30), ultimately revealing what will transpire in the play. In Loncraine’s film, this monologue is broken into two scenes, one in which Richard is making a public speech to the Royal Family and the second in the lavatory by himself. While alone, Richard, played by Ian McKellen, breaks the fourth wall. Samuel Crowl states that the “direct address of the camera is a stunning move, and...it has been sparingly used in...Shakespeare films” (Crowl 28). Thus, Loncraine’s use of such a technique is intrepid at the very least, but clearly communicates Richard’s ability seemingly to interact with the audience. By creating an ambiguous line between fiction and real life, Loncraine creates an even more dominant Richard. One can also note this technique used with Richmond the final shot of Loncraine’s film. Just after Richard’s death, Richmond looks into the camera and smiles, implying that his reign as

king will be just as horrific as Richard's. Additionally, this suggests that Richard was bound to remain subordinate to Richmond because of his marginalized masculinity.

The characteristics of Richard's hegemonic masculinity also lie with his interaction with women such as Lady Anne and Lady Gray. Richard's ability to woo is paramount to that of any other male character within the drama. While traveling to bury her recently deceased husband, Lady Anne encounters Richard, whom she curses but with stunning swiftness agrees to marry. Richard proudly celebrates his seeming skill at impossible wooing by stating,

I that killed her husband and his father,
To take her in her heart's extremest hate,
With curses in her mouth, tears in her eyes,
The bleeding witness of my hatred by,
And yet to win her, all the world to nothing?

(1.2.218-221,225)

Using the power of language, Richard is able to coerce a woman that despises him into marriage. The use of wit and intellectual dialect is a prime characteristic of the hegemonic masculinity within Shakespeare's works, as seen by similar psychologically dynamic characters in other dramas. Loncraine's filmic adaptation transposes the time period into a fascist England setting. The "film grew out of a noted stage production of *Richard III* at London's National Theatre...starring Ian McKellen. That production set the play in 1930s England, when several prominent members of the Royal Family had fascist leanings and expressed an admiration for Hitler" (Crowl 84-85). Altering the setting of the time period efficiently executes the general atmosphere of power and masculinity with the pure aesthetics of the film, as one often associates fascism with political power and patriarchal masculinity. Without doubt, Richard's depiction

bleeds characteristics of hegemonic masculinity through both the text and 1995 filmic adaptation of *Richard III*.

Although Richard's power is clearly evident through diction, hints to his physical disability indicate his eventual suppression by the play's hegemonic male, Richmond, eventually King Henry VII. As *Richard III* commences with his soliloquy, we immediately are made aware of his disability, which has "curtailed [him] of this fair proportion" and "cheated [him] of feature by dissembling nature" (1.1.18-19). His physical disfiguration resulted from birth, inflicting a mountainous back and root-like hand. The label "hedgehog" is repeatedly thrown around by various characters as a means of describing Richard in a dismissive manner. However, until *Richard III*, Richard never actually had a physical disfiguration in Shakespeare's interpretation of these historical events. Nonetheless, this disability further accentuates the villainy and subordination of Richard to other male figures. In Loncraine's film, this impairment is shown physically through a limp and idle hand. Not only does this disability point towards weakness and marginalized masculinity, but Loncraine's casting of Ian McKellen at the age of 56 immediately sets his character subordinate to the much younger princes and dukes. Although Richard appears to have sociopolitical strength, his physical frailty does not completely allow his masculinity to be categorized as hegemonic. Marginalized masculinity cannot be completely accepted as hegemonic because of characteristics such as race or class, aspects that generally are viewed as biological or will remain stagnant for a person's lifetime. Such a disability can never be changed, and, therefore, will always leave Richard at a disadvantage, despite his efforts to break the social construct assigned to him at birth. As the seed of his subordination, the disability is also a cause of curses from women, the public, and jokes from children.

Little York perversely tells Richard, “Because that I am little like an ape, He thinks that you should bear me on your shoulders” (3.1.130-131), catalyzing a shocked reaction from Buckingham. In Loncraine’s filmic adaptation of the scene, York goes so far as to overpower Richard physically by attempting to climb upon his back. The situation is cringe-worthy, leading any viewer almost to pity the suddenly vulnerable Richard. Scholar R.W. Connell observes that “Hegemonic masculinity is maintained through male homosocial interactions” (R.W. Connell 347), a tool of communication that Richard does not possess. In addition to the lack of encouragement from family and fellow aristocrats, Richard cannot gain support from the public. Even when he is in line for the throne, the crowd speaks “not a word, but, like dumb statues or stones, stared each on other” (3.7.24-26). Although Shakespeare’s text provides an ample amount of evidence to prove Richard’s marginality, Loncraine’s adaptation is slightly more subtle about his flaws. Richard’s death scene is perhaps the most cinematically blatant in regards to his diminished masculinity. As Richard falls from the structure that Richmond and he are in, the camera perspective is a complete bird’s-eye view, diminishing his figure into an object obscured by the symbolic flames of hell below. Despite his attempts to fit the hegemonic masculinity construct of his society, the disabilities that Richard cannot control eventually cause his downfall led by Richmond, the idealistic male figure.

Despite Richard’s attempts to compensate for the masculinity lost due to his physical disfiguration, his rejection of certain effeminate characteristics necessary to the hegemonic male figure leads to the devaluation of his masculinity. Additionally, Richard seeks to overcompensate for the lack of compassion with what he identifies as “treacherous” actions. “Richard is consistently characterized in strongly masculine terms, and his hypermasculinity is closely tied to his aggressive pursuit of power over effeminate pleasure” (Moulton 259). The complete

rejection of a woman's love appears to be one outlet that Richard chooses to display his masculinity. Loncraine's film contains a scene subsequent to his controversial marriage to Lady Anne in which Anne comes down the stairs in her nightgown. It is evident that Anne wishes to fulfill the consummation of their recent marriage. Yet Richard dismisses her by simply turning out the lights. If Richard cannot see any value in women other than for political stratification, he also rejects any compassionate characteristics expected of a husband. He rejects a woman's love to display his masculinity, removing a type of affection that was required of men in the Elizabethan Era.

Richard replaces the type of effeminate characteristics necessary to a hegemonic male with villainy, which creates his false masculinity. As found by the first soliloquy in *Richard III*, he is "determinèd to prove a villain, / And hate the idle pleasures of these days" (1.1.30-31). "Richard forcefully expresses his disgust with "idle pleasures" in a speech that," Moulton claims, "in its reiterated movement from. . .from violence to pleasure, and from rage to joy, provides an anatomy of effeminization" (Moulton 259). He claims that he cannot woo, but later proves it wrong with his proposal to Anne, haughtily claiming, "Was ever woman in this humor wooed?" (1.2.215). It is clear that Richard has the capability of such romantic and lustful acts. He simply chooses to dismiss their significance in his passage to idealistic virility. The admiration and embodiment of hypermasculinity is what Moulton claims to be the "specifically masculine disorder [that] plagues the kingdom in Richard III until proper patriarchal proportion is reintroduced with the accession of the earl of Richmond as Henry VII" (Moulton 255). The overcompensation of masculinity leads to Richmond's victory over Richard to secure the kingdom. Richard instead chooses to channel his compassionate capabilities into political advancement, translating into his rejection of the significance of women.

Richard's rejection of effeminate qualities can be linked to his equally mystifying rejection of the female figure. As discussed previously, the ill-mannered treatment received from women, children, and the public evoke an equally wrathful response from the aspiring king. Whether consciously or subconsciously, Richard invariably attempts to blame the women for actions that he was the cause of. Queen Margaret, a "foul wrinkled witch" (1.3.164), is subject to Richard's sharp tongue after he kills her husband and son. Queen Elizabeth is considered a "relenting fool, and shallow, changing woman" (4.4.362), after she is forced to give her daughter to Richard. When Richard is not blaming his mother for his physical deformity, he turns to witchcraft claiming that "this is Edward's wife, that monstrous witch" (3.4.70). Clarence's imprisonment and eventual death is blamed on the King's wife, Lady Gray. Richard claims, "Why this it is when men are ruled by women . . . 'tis she / That tempts him to this harsh extremity" (1.1.62,64-65). This type of casual hatred evolves into a full-fledged support of the patriarchy, an extreme neo-misogynistic view during Shakespeare's era. Richard's disdain towards females is evident within Shakespeare's text. Moulton claims, "Richard endorses a (demonstrably false) opposition between effeminate love and masculine conquest" (Moulton 266), after realizing he is not capable of loving women. Loncraine chooses to display Richard's disdain more subtly with Lady Anne's characterization in the filmic adaptation. The decision to make Lady Anne American in a cast of English members alienates her from the majority. The gala at the beginning of Loncraine's film introduces Lady Anne and Lord Rivers as sloppy and carelessly informal when interacting with the royal family. With condescending looks from the royal court, it is evident that Anne is not meant to be respected. Richard not only vocalizes his contempt towards women, but fittingly utilizes them to advance him politically.

The ability to undermine women catapults Richard into implementing his personally beneficial realpolitik. Although Richard's actual plans of political actions are not very clear, it is unmistakable that he plans on taking the crown from Edward IV and have it as his own. In this case realpolitik, simply politics based on consideration of power rather than morals, perfectly describes Richard's movements to his position as king. With no direct genetic ascension to the crown, Richard makes use of women (as much as murder) for the stepping stones of his devious plans. Moulton claims that "not even so great a misogynist as Richard can afford to ignore women. For in a patriarchal society in which property and social status are passed from father to son, women are crucial to male power" (Moulton 266). With the clear disregard for feminine rights, Richard merely view women as the pawns by which he will politically escalate. The sexual objectification that Richard superimposes upon females within *Richard III* begins specifically with Lady Anne. He intends to marry Anne "not all so much for love / As for another secret close intent / By marrying her which I must reach unto" (1.1.157-159). Richard plans on using his marriage as political stratification to stabilize his path to the crown. Moulton labels this technique as Richard refusing "to subordinate himself to traditional patriarchal power structures and lines of succession" (Moulton 255). Richard chooses to break the natural equilibrium of the regression of the crown through father-son relations. Realizing the futility of his marriage to Anne, Richard rushes to make amends by removing the woman who is thwarting his plans of regency. These reparations include keeping Lady Anne hidden from the public and informing the royal court that she is ill and expected to die. His own wife becomes a weapon to use and discard when necessary. So consumed by his vision of the crown, Richard commands Catesby "About it for it stands me much upon / To stop all hopes whose growth may damage me" (4.2.60-61). The use of a personal pronoun within both lines communicates the self-

obsessed motivation. Immediately after, Richard reveals he “must be married to” his “brother’s daughter, / Or else my kingdom stands on brittle glass” (4.2.62-63). The final pawn to Richard’s vision is truly labeled a “Young Elizabeth” when played by actress Kate Steavenson-Payne in Richard Loncraine’s filmic adaptation. Only twenty at the time of the film release, Princess Elizabeth of the House of York is physically a child compared to the rest of the royal court. The insidious underlying meaning behind Richard’s motives are magnified within this casting of Princess Elizabeth, who is expected to marry a man nearly thrice her age. Richard’s evident lack of compassion toward females manifests the true villainy of his manipulative character within both Loncraine’s adaptation and Shakespeare’s text.

Connell’s concept of marginalized masculinity, based on certain values of hegemonic masculinity, perfectly embodies the types of male figures exhibited in *Richard III*. Hegemonic Masculinity manifests itself within Richmond, as he ultimately claims victory in Shakespeare’s text. Richard’s marginalized masculinity can be visually and literally represented through his “deformity” and disability. Her explanation of such a social construct reflects Richard’s ultimate defeat against other superior males, such as Richmond. According to the conceptualization and proof within the cinematic elements of Loncraine’s filmic adaptation and the original text, any Shakespearean character with a disability out of human control will ultimately fall subordinate to society’s ideal male. Richard attempts to break free of his subordination to other males by displaying his hypermasculinity and rejecting effeminate characteristics necessary to a hegemonic male figure. His lack of lustful appearance and murderous habits support this. Despite these efforts to break free of his inevitable impairments, Richard remains at a diminished stature that provokes his dismissal of the significance of women. As a political statement in reference to social mobility or stratification, Richard then objectifies women to advance himself

politically. By creating an extreme patriarchy, Richard's crown balances on the tips of knives. Richard merely buys additional time before his defeat through masking his "disability" with the weaponization of women. As with many Shakespearean characters, Richard had a specific destiny. Although he desperately attempted to change this fate, he could not. Via my synthesis of Connell's social theory, Shakespeare's drama, Loncraine's filmic adaptation, and Moulton's research paper, we can assume that Richard's masculinity and misogynistic views are rooted in the marginalization that remains set from his premature birth to tragic death.

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