CHAPTER 3

History as Exclusion
Shakespeare's Feminine Historiography

The first two chapters of this book have explored the integral role female characters play in shaping Shakespeare's historical dramaturgy, which I define as the process by which non-dramatic historical sources and stories are adapted for the stage. In many ways, we can read this dramaturgy as a reflection of Shakespeare's beliefs about the purpose and shape of narrating history, as the practical requirements of the stage are turned towards demonstrating that history itself is multi-vocal, multi-tonal and ideologically complex. While the plays depict the events of history, and female characters hold a unique structural role within that depiction, these characters also narrate history within the plays, describing a version of the historical past as it exists within their own theatrical world. This is an intersection of form and content that points to essential features of Shakespeare's historiography more broadly and suggests new ways to read his place within the maturing historiographical landscape of the early modern period. I call this Shakespeare's feminine historiography: a specific register and style of history-telling that emerges directly from the dramaturgical position of female characters.

Chapter 2 outlined how Shakespeare's historical dramaturgy separates female characters from power along two axes: they are deprived of political power, attempting but unable to alter the events unfolding within the plays; and they are separated from structural power, instead forced to surrender their individual will to the demands of the already-inevitable historical narrative. Just as the silencing of female characters reveals the distance between history-as-play and history-as-event, Shakespeare's feminine historiography intentionally exploits the friction between form and content that is particularly present in history plays. It is a friction that transforms Chapter 2's sense of history as an implacable driving force – hinted at by the unwilling and sometimes pointedly inexplicable concession of female characters to historical necessity – into an invisible framework that guides and shapes not only the most marginalised female

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 17 Nov 2026 at 17:44:54, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009356121.004

characters, but the plays as a whole. This chapter will expand on three means by which female characters narrate or otherwise attempt to rewrite history within the plays: as cursers and prophetesses, as spectators of events they cannot control, and as forces that attempt to change the very nature of the plays they are in. The differing ways these characters relate to history itself help to illuminate the shape of the historical world, constantly and actively constrained by the recorded events of the past, within which all of Shakespeare's characters operate.

Prophesying the Past

Literary critics have long recognised that certain forms and styles of speech are particularly associated with female characters in Shakespeare's history plays, and in Elizabethan culture at large. As Marguerite A. Tassi has illustrated, '[l]aments, funeral dirges, and cursing belong to all cultures in some form or other and it is women who typically engage in these practices ... Through their bodies and voices, mourning women convey an affective ethics, making crimes known publicly and inciting revenge'.[1] This sense of the danger inherent in displays of public mourning, complaint and lament has been increasingly widely acknowledged, in contrast to an earlier critical tradition that suggested 'lament can seem absurd because it does not recover what is lost'.[2] Jean Howard and Phyllis Rackin provide the most influential articulation of this perspective, characterising the female characters in *Richard III* who engage in 'ritual lamentation, curse, and prophecy' as 'helpless, suffering wo[men]'.[3] Their understanding of the female characters of *Richard III* as powerless, however, is the portion of *Engendering A Nation* that has been subject to the most consistent and sustained revision by later critics. Alison Thorne, for example, likewise views the mournful female characters of *Richard III* and *King John* as 'a spent force well before the end of their respective plays', ultimately incapable of seeing through their desired ends.[4] But Thorne also acknowledges the vital role that their apparently ineffective public displays of mourning play within the ethical landscape of their country, 'as custodians of England's troubled history whose memory is continually at risk of being erased or overwritten'.[5] I will not argue for what I believe has been well-established by the critics cited throughout this chapter – namely, that these laments are not 'absurd' or aimless, but potent forces with a direct

[1] Tassi, p. 27. [2] Kerrigan, p. 65. [3] Howard and Rackin, p. 116.
[4] Thorne, 'Lawful let it be', p. 118. [5] Ibid., p. 105.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 17 Nov 2026 at 17:44:54, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009356121.004

impact on the worlds of the plays. Rather, I will take very seriously Thorne's suggestion of their custodial function, arguing that these speech acts of mourning, cursing and complaint are also moments in which female characters act as historians. Through the unique perspective on the past that these linked linguistic styles demonstrate, female characters suggest a connection between marginalisation from political and structural power and the gift of historical foresight – a union that illuminates essential facets of Shakespeare's broader historiography.

As discussed in Chapter 1, *Richard III* is the play in which modern critics are most likely to see the contributions of female characters as part of history, reading their scenes as an essential aspect of the play's historiographical landscape rather than excessive or irrelevant digressions. It is also the play in which female lament has been most thoroughly discussed, and most clearly understood as a form of history-telling. The arguments in favour of the power of the female characters' tragic linguistic forms in this play have broadly followed two major paths: one looks forward to argue that, as Paige Martin Reynolds writes, 'memory through female mourning determines the future';[6] and the other looks backwards to see the play, as Thorne, Tobias Döring, and others have argued, as a 'battle of memories', a contest over who will get to define the narrative of the past.[7] As we shall see, however, these understandings are complementary, not contradictory.

The first path, by which Reynolds and others argue that women's laments and curses have direct, actual impact on the events of *Richard III*, was perhaps overlooked for so long because their influence is not demonstrated in strictly realistic or literal terms. For example, Tassi describes how '[t]he Duchess of York's curse upon her monstrous son, Richard III, is potent, acting upon the spirit world to draw all of his enemies together in a vengeful haunting the night before his fateful battle'.[8] Similarly, Kirilka Stavreva notes that while 'Margaret is never restored to political power . . . by the end of [*Richard III*] the arc of history is bent in the direction of her curses'.[9] The critics who have challenged Howard and Rackin's reading of these women as 'pitiable victims' in whom 'the subversive power associated with women in the earlier plays is demystified'[10] have based their arguments on this direct connection between the women's mournful and prophetic speech and the

[6] Reynolds, p. 19. [7] Döring, p. 54. [8] Tassi, p. 57.
[9] Kirilka Stavreva, *Words Like Daggers: Violent Female Speech in Early Modern England* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2017), p. 150.
[10] Howard and Rackin, pp. 106–107.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 17 Nov 2026 at 17:44:54, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009356121.004

supernaturally tinged downfall of Richard.[11] Tim Carroll's all-male 2012 production of *Richard III* for Shakespeare's Globe (my description refers to the staging used for the 2013 transfer to the Belasco Theatre in New York City) reflected this sense that there is a direct and literal connection between the female characters' speech and Richard's defeat.

In Carroll's staging, the ghosts of Richard's victims returned to the stage during his final fight with Richmond, impeding Richard in battle just as they and the Duchess had prophesied. This battle sequence culminated in an act of supernatural female agency: Richard's wife Lady Anne was the last and most decisive spirit to appear. She took hold of Richmond's sword and Richard dropped to his knees in front of her, visually echoing the moment in their initial encounter when Richard offered his bared breast for her to stab in vengeance for the murder of her first husband. She raised the sword, and this gesture transformed into Richmond's death blow to Richard. As suggested by the critical readings discussed in the previous paragraph, Carroll's staging suggested a delayed enactment of these women's curses that was not merely a coincidental or symbolic mirroring of their pleas, but directly connected to and invoked by their speech. As Katherine Goodland notes, '[t]he poetics of lament often blur the distinction between lament and revenge, reinforcing the quality of women's cries as "speech-acts" with agency'.[12] Their public mourning is not just a call to action or lament for deeds past, but speech that literally generates the forms of revenge they describe. Within *Richard III*, '[l]earning to remember is learning to curse'[13] – and curses, of course, are efforts to change the future. Thus, in this understanding of the characters' role, past and future – mourning and cursing – are inextricably linked.

In this way, Döring's 'battle of memories' and a forward-looking understanding of mourning need not contradict one another. Isabel Karremann writes that there is a 'political dimension of mourning', one that the female characters perform as they attempt to disrupt Richard's rise to power. Because his rise is predicated on 'dismissing the past and his responsibility for it out of hand', his downfall takes the form of being forced to remember: 'When the ghosts of those he murdered appear on the eve of the Battle of Bosworth on All Souls' Day to tell their stories and curse their murderer, they reinstate ritual lament and, with it, historical truth'.[14] The mourners' laments, though firmly retrospective, still have a bearing upon the present as active efforts to remind that present of its past.

[11] See Goodland, Karremann, 'Rites of Oblivion', Mudan Finn, and Reynolds.
[12] Goodland, p. 20. [13] Wilder, p. 9. [14] Karremann, 'Rites of Oblivion', pp. 26–28.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 17 Nov 2026 at 17:44:54, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009356121.004

Backwards-looking mourning and forward-looking curses are always intimately connected in Shakespeare's histories: female characters never curse without mourning. This is more than coincidence. Retrospective mourning, active lament, and future-altering curses are all rooted in loss – loss that, under the patriarchal framework of Shakespeare's plays and culture, is synonymous with historical marginalisation.

Margaret notably curses her rival Queen Elizabeth to '[d]ie neither mother, wife, nor England's queen' (1.3.206). Under patriarchal systems of historical record-keeping, this is tantamount to an erasure from history: why would a woman's name be documented if she was not mother (to a royal heir, is the unspoken assumption – emphasised by the fact that Elizabeth does indeed remain mother to King Edward's daughter and a son by her first husband), wife, or queen? This is precisely why these characters must narrate their own unique forms of history, rejecting what Thorne describes as 'state-sanctioned accounts of past or unfolding events . . . the distortions, evasions, and omissions proffered by the political establishment in lieu of truth'.[15] The patriarchal historical records sanctioned by the state leave no room for these women once they have lost their male relations. I do not agree with Karremann's implication that the plays' historical discourses break down neatly into truth from women and falsehood from men; rather, the female characters craft a history that expresses their own interests. These interests inevitably run counter to those of the male characters whose actions have dispossessed the women of their genealogical connections to power, and have driven the women to recitations designed to redefine both history and their own contested place within it.

While scenes of mourning like those discussed here are often characterised as 'domestic', as in the scenarios critiqued in Chapter 2, this is a separation of spheres of activity that cannot be logically sustained. For female characters in history plays, loss is personal *and* political: loss of family means loss of connections to power, influence, and a place in history itself. For the women of *Richard III*, however, as Kavita Mudan Finn writes, 'even after this ritual stripping of titles – wife, mother, and queen – Margaret leaves both Elizabeth and the Duchess of York with a new sense of the power of language and storytelling'.[16] This is the same process of loss that Margaret herself has already undergone 'when she is deprived of her husband and son by their deaths [. . . and uses] this

[15] Thorne, 'Lawful let it be', p. 110. [16] Mudan Finn, p. 168.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 17 Nov 2026 at 17:44:54, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009356121.004

deprivation as a means of empowerment'.[17] Their new-found power comes not in spite of this deprivation but because of it. This is why cursing is prefaced by mourning in Shakespeare's history plays: because female characters must accept that they have indeed lost their connections to power and, thus, may be granted access to this alternate form of narrating history. They lose political power but gain a new kind of historical insight.

Often, female characters' alternate histories take the form of what I will call genealogies of loss – recitations of deceased family members that evoke and distort the recitations of genealogical claims to power with which history plays are commonly associated.[18] *Richard III* offers a straightforward demonstration of this form through its 'constant rehearsal of mostly first names, by mothers, aunts, and sisters, [which] brings home more strongly than any formal list of the dead the appalling internecine murders along Richard's route to the throne'.[19] Genealogies in plays by other writers – and those spoken by Shakespeare's male characters – are distinctly different from the mourning litanies that Shakespeare places in the mouths of his female characters. Phyllis Rackin argues that the history play itself is fundamentally genealogical, a definition that renders such recitations the base unit of the genre. Therefore, Rackin argues, because of the ever-present spectre of genealogy-invalidating adultery, women 'are inevitably threatening to the historiographic enterprise'.[20] However, as I shall demonstrate, while female characters do indeed have a different relationship to genealogy than male characters, the difference is not rooted in adulterous anxieties, but rather in an effort to articulate and enable a different form of historical accounting.

History plays of the late sixteenth century often begin with a recitation of the ruler's genealogy, establishing both that king's right and, more practically, the play's broader setting for the benefit of the audience. The anonymous play *The True Tragedy of Richard III* uses a prologue, not a historical character, to establish the events that predate the play's action. In this prologue, Truth is questioned by Poetry, and describes how the rule of England came from Henry VI, via 'Richard Plantagenet of the House of

[17] L. S. Stanavage, 'Margaret of Anjou and the Rhetoric of Sovereign Revenge', in *The Palgrave Handbook of Shakespeare's Queens*, ed. by Kavita Mudan Finn and Lea Leucking Frost (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 163–182, p. 173.

[18] Robert C. Jones, *These Valiant Dead: Renewing the Past in Shakespeare's Histories* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1991), p. 36.

[19] Piesse, p. 134.

[20] Phyllis Rackin, 'Anti-Historians: Women's Roles in Shakespeare's Histories', *Theatre Journal*, 37 (1985), 329–344, p. 336.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 17 Nov 2026 at 17:44:54, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009356121.004

York / Claiming the crown by wars, not by descent', to the present reign of Edward IV (1.19–38). Though the account is openly critical of the Yorkist claim, it is nonetheless framed as the objective historical backdrop to the story to ensue, literally delivered by Truth itself. Shakespeare, famously, does not begin with a such a dynastic scene-setting, but rather with Richard introducing and speaking for himself. Genealogical lists like the one that begins *The True Tragedy* do not enter into Shakespeare's *Richard III* until the women introduce them with repetitive litanies of given names: 'I had an Edward, till a Richard killed him. / I had a Harry, till a Richard killed him. / Thou hadst an Edward, till a Richard killed him. / Thou hadst a Richard, till a Richard killed him' (4.4.37–40). These genealogies of loss have no interest in creating dynastic clarity – indeed, their repetition of matching first names seems designed to invoke the opposite: confusion, and the blurring of temporal and generational bounds. The incantatory quality of these speeches has often been remarked upon, drawing comparisons to the three Marys of the medieval mystery plays, the mourning women of Senecan drama, and the Greek Fates.[21] But they are also attempts at historical documentation, an 'alternative view of succession'[22] or an example of Karremann's 'politics of mourning', by which a mourner 'authorizes her particular and partial story of the past'.[23] But in Shakespeare, genealogies are always pointedly partial. Rather than an account declared from the mouth of Truth, Shakespeare openly displays the agendas and biases of male and female characters alike.

Two of the most famous examples of Shakespearean genealogies are those delivered by the Archbishop of Canterbury in *Henry V*, and by Mortimer – later repeated by York – in *1 Henry VI*, discussed further in Chapter 4. While the traditional genealogy, exemplified by *True Tragedy*'s Truth, aims to establish the setting and the current dynasty so that the story can move forward, Shakespeare's male genealogists recite the past in hopes of redirecting the present: Canterbury hoping to provoke Henry V into declaring war, Mortimer in an effort to revive his family's pursuit of the crown. The female genealogies of loss are a further variation, establishing the terms of their marginalisation, and simultaneously justifying and expressing the alternate history that this exclusion from patriarchal historiographical systems allows them access to. Goodland describes these recitations in *Richard III* as a 'force that disrupts the forward, linear

[21] See Dillon, Mudan Finn, and Goodland. [22] Piesse, p. 134.
[23] Isabel Karremann, *The Drama of Memory in Shakespeare's History Plays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. 26.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 17 Nov 2026 at 17:44:54, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009356121.004

movement of history'.[24] This is true in more ways than one. Goodland means it fairly literally, in the sense discussed in Chapter 2: a disruption to the plot's expected progression with what seems to be a temporary swerve into less-essential narrative territory. But these female characters also trouble the linearity of the historical narrative itself, as their mourning is consistently associated with curses and prophecies that look into the future.

While the female characters of *Richard III* display this disruption of linear chronology very directly, by literally pulling the dead into the present with their forceful mourning, a subtler association can be seen in other, more infrequently discussed female characters. Blanche of Castile in *King John* is one such example. She laments not loss that has happened, but loss that is yet to come as she fails to prevent a war that will place her in an impossible position of divided loyalty (an effort discussed in depth in Chapter 2). Once it becomes clear that her pleas for peace will have no impact, she recites a genealogy that doubles as a farewell curse:

> Husband, I cannot pray that thou mayst win.
> Uncle, I needs must pray that thou mayst lose.
> Father, I may not wish the fortune thine.
> Grandam, I will not wish thy wishes thrive.
> Whoever wins, on that side shall I lose.
> Assurèd loss before the match be played. (3.2.346–351)

Alternating between relatives by marriage (husband Lewis and 'father' – that is, father-in-law – the King of France) and biological ones (her uncle John and grandmother Eleanor), Blanche enacts the 'authorisation' of her grief that Karremann describes. Blanche's right to complain stems from her ties to both sides of the upcoming conflict, and she invokes these to demonstrate the 'assured loss' she is about to undergo no matter the outcome of the war. Her power, which was rooted in her momentary role as symbol of the alliance between England and France, will dissolve along with the losses she foresees. She pairs this list with ill-wishes for those she names, a gesture perhaps too mild to properly be considered a curse, and yet one that performs the curse-like function of simultaneously calling down and foretelling the losses yet to come. In what is, for her, a civil war, mourning and cursing must be one and the same, as those she stands to lose are also those to blame for her losses. Her assessment of the situation may seem too obvious to be considered a prophecy – it is inevitable that

[24] Goodland, p. 147.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 17 Nov 2026 at 17:44:54, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009356121.004

one side will lose the war and the other will win, and therefore someone Blanche is connected to will come to harm – but no one else seems either aware of or willing to acknowledge this fact, rendering Blanche's clear-eyed view of the future unique amongst the onstage characters. Imagining this scene onstage emphasises the strangeness of Blanche's position: she delivers two full speeches that go almost entirely unacknowledged by the other characters. The speech that concludes with the litany of pre-emptive grief just quoted begins with a question: 'Which is the side which I must go withal?' (3.1.341). When Blanche reaches the end of her eleven-line speech, her husband Lewis only replies to the question of its second line: 'Lady, with me, with me thy fortune lies' (3.1.352). It is as if the intervening lines were not spoken at all. While Richard attempts to mock Margaret's prophetic speech and drown out his mother's with the sound of drums, the characters in power in *King John* seem unwilling or unable to hear what Blanche has to say, despite how obvious her words seem to the reader or viewer.

In Blanche, therefore, we see a convergence of the forms of speech discussed in this chapter thus far, as her mourning authorises, enables and becomes a form of cursing. Because the ability to curse is dependent on marginalisation, it is always prefaced with some kind of mourning, and this mourning calls upon genealogy to demonstrate the specific terms of one's disrupted connection to the masculine historical chronologies and lines of succession that such genealogies traditionally represent. Female characters who are able to curse are thus untethered not only from history as traditionally conceived in terms of content, but also in terms of their relationship to historical time itself, the second form of the disruption to linearity that Goodland describes. The nature of their separation recalls Erika Lin's revision of Robert Weimann's influential conception of the early modern stage in terms of the *locus* and the *platea.*[25] As Clare Wright succinctly summarises, on the early modern stage, 'rather than having two distinct worlds, juxtaposed but completely separated from one another (as in naturalism), Weimann hypothesises two distinct spaces (the play world, represented by the *locus*, and the real world, inhabited by the audience) connected by the fluid *platea*, a non-time, non-space'.[26] The *locus* contains the events of the play itself, while the *platea* is the space inhabited by

[25] Erika Lin, 'Performance Practice and Theatrical Privilege: Rethinking Weimann's Concepts of Locus and Platea', *New Theatre Quarterly*, 22 (2006), 283–298.

[26] Clare Wright, 'Ontologies of Play: Reconstructing the Relationship between Audience and Act in Early English Drama', *Shakespeare Bulletin*, 35 (2017), 187–206, p. 191.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 17 Nov 2026 at 17:44:54, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009356121.004

characters like Richard III, who have a direct relationship with the audience. Lin suggests reading the division between the two spaces as a division in what she terms 'theatrical privilege': 'regardless of who is socially privileged within the world of the play and regardless of what is privileged, thematically or otherwise, in a text based analysis, moments in these plays that foregrounded the process by which elements presented onstage came to signify within the represented fiction were *theatrically privileged*'.[27] That is, 'the more a character is aware of the playhouse conventions upon which audience members relied and the more he or she can manipulate them within the represented fiction, the more that character is in the *platea*'.[28] Lin highlights Edgar's use of theatrical, verbal scene-setting to make Gloucester believe he is on the edge of the cliffs of Dover, as well as Falstaff playing dead at the Battle of Shrewsbury, his fake corpse indistinguishable from Hotspur's 'real' one, to illustrate the types of theatrical convention that characters manipulate from within the *platea*.

I argue that cursing women like Blanche are likewise stepping into the *platea*, separated from the in-world events of the *locus* by virtue of their knowledge of history. What Lin describes as theatrical privilege might in this instance be called historical privilege: the ability to see the full scope of the already-written historical events, which is also a manipulation of the devices of theatre. But unlike Lin's male characters, who move easily between *locus* and *platea*, historical privilege can only be acquired at the cost of removal from political power.

The Duchess of Gloucester in *2 Henry VI* is rarely discussed as curser or prophetess, but her final actions onstage demonstrate the same arc of political disempowerment and subsequent historical privileging that we have seen in the female characters discussed thus far, representing the cost of movement from political *locus* to historical *platea*. At first, however, the Duchess's disempowerment exists only in her own mind. Her perceived separation from the power she believes her family deserves leads her to seek a path for her husband, Humphrey, to seize the throne. Tellingly, she has no supernatural abilities of her own at this point: she must hire a witch and a conjurer to prophesy for her (1.2.76–9). This leads directly to her husband's political downfall and her own banishment and public shaming, a double separation from the spheres of masculine historical influence. In the depth of this disgrace, she acquires the ability to see the future accurately – but only after she publicly mourns her losses. Rather than a

[27] Lin, pp. 294–295. [28] Ibid., p. 293.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 17 Nov 2026 at 17:44:54, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009356121.004

litany of family members, Humphrey alone is the centrepiece of her laments, which focus directly on her loss of status: 'To think upon my pomp shall be my hell. / Sometimes I'll say I am Duke Humphrey's wife / And he a prince and ruler of the land' (2.4.42–4). The fact that Humphrey is not dead allows her to emphasise the heart of a loss that is, in the other characters discussed in this chapter, occluded by personal grief: she had power and a connection to the circles wherein recorded history happens, and now she has neither. Having articulated this loss, however, the Duchess gains the ability to prophesy she previously had to purchase, declaring that her husband will

> . . . stir at nothing till the axe of death
> Hang over thee, as sure it shortly will.
> For Suffolk, he that can do all in all
> With her that hateth thee and hates us all,
> And York and impious Beaufort, that false priest,
> Have all limed bushes to betray thy wings;
> And fly thou how thou canst, they'll tangle thee.
> But fear not thou until thy foot be snared,
> Nor never seek prevention of thy foes. (2.4.50–8)

Like Blanche, the Duchess seems to combine curse and prophecy, as her use of the imperative – 'fly thou', 'fear not thou' – makes it difficult to discern if she is cursing him to undertake these actions, or foretelling what she knows he will do. In either case, though Gloucester insists that she 'aimest all awry' (2.4.59), her words come to pass. Like Blanche and the women of *Richard III*, Duchess comes into her own prophetic ability only when she has lost everything. At the moment when she is literally on her way out of England, her husband's life, and history, she gains the ability to look forward into that history she cannot help enact and see what is to come.

Curses and prophesies inevitably invoke what Benjamin Griffin describes as the audience's awareness of a play's 'embeddedness' within history – the awareness that the characters have a long past and future beyond the events of the play, even if a given audience member is not fully aware of what those undepicted events are.[29] As a rule, as Lina Perkins Wilder writes, '[p]lays do not have a "past". [A] "false" past . . . shares the same fictional space occupied by the unstated "true" past recalled elsewhere . . . the imagined past that allows for the construction of

[29] Griffin, p. 74.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 17 Nov 2026 at 17:44:54, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009356121.004

narrative'.[30] By this logic, nor do they have a future beyond that which the playwright directly depicts. But neither of these limitations apply in a history play, where what is unknown to the characters is potentially known to the audience. Lukas Lammers argues that this distance is the aim of such prophetic moments in history plays: 'the additional knowledge required [to recognise a prophesy] is not imparted to the audience by the play itself. Instead, the play counts on spectators to know this historical detail. [A] discrepancy therefore exists between the Elizabethan audience and *all* the characters in the play'.[31] But as the chapter so far has demonstrated, this last statement is not quite true (and, as Chapter 1 highlighted, nor is the assumption that the entire audience would readily distinguish historical fact from fiction). Lammers' argument points, however, to the ways prophecies disrupt the plays' temporal illusions by highlighting their own theatricality.

The women of *Richard III*, Blanche and the Duchess of Gloucester have the ability to predict or bring about the future, which in turn serves as a momentary reminder of their fictionalised place within an actual historical continuum. The *platea* of historical privilege into which these characters step when they curse or prophesy is associated with the audience and, within that space, the characters briefly share the audience's perspective: in the present, looking at the past from the vantage point of someone who already knows the future. It is a space where recollection and prophecy, auditor and actor, past and present, all momentarily become one. Thus, Goodland's description of these characters disrupting the 'linear movement' of historical progress can be seen to reflect the way these characters disturb not only the progress of a political plot from beginning to end, but disrupt the inexorable forward movement of history, the sense of time as a linear stream in which one is unable to bring future knowledge to bear on what has already happened. These characters step outside of that stream, able to see it in its totality with a spectator's broad scope of vision.

Such temporal compression is not a unique conception of history in the early modern period; rather, it is reflective of the dominant historiographical trends of the time, which sought to actively contextualise the past with the present. Roughly, late sixteenth century historiography has been broken down into three major 'strains': the providential, the humanist,

[30] Wilder, p. 141.
[31] Lukas Lammers, *Shakespearean Temporalities: History on the Early Modern Stage* (London: Routledge, 2018), p. 67.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 17 Nov 2026 at 17:44:54, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009356121.004

and the antiquarian.[32] Though modern historians recognise that this was a period of dramatic change in historiographical thought, there was not a straightforward transition from one strain to the next. Understandings of history did not switch seamlessly from the medieval providential world-view, which attributed historical events to the will of God, directly into the humanist, which derived from continental writers and was defined by an 'interest in secondary causes and human psychology, in matters of politics, and in its careful attention to rhetorical/literary style'. Rather, 'most non-antiquarian producers of historical texts at this time . . . freely mixed providential historiography with a humanist emphasis on secondary causes and wedded verifiable facts with legendary materials from the chronicles'.[33] Further, Ivo Kamps notes, the marriage of the humanist and providential philosophies was more natural than it might first appear: '[i]n fact, the single most crucial premise of humanist historiography – the assumption that history can teach us about the present because history repeats itself – closely resembles the medieval notion of time as cyclical'.[34] Though antiquarianism is the strain that looks most like contemporary historical practice with its interest in historical records and primary sources, its place as a gentleman's hobby in fact rendered it the least influential at this time.[35]

Shakespeare's plays have been read as subscribing to providentialism and humanism to varying degrees but most current critics – including most of those cited in this book so far – propose some combination of the two. The curses described in this chapter likewise situate Shakespeare in the transitional muddle between these strains that characterised the eclectic historiography of the period. Understanding how mourning underpins these curses likewise points to the uniquely theatrical combination of providentialism and humanism that Shakespeare's histories display.

Richard III is often read as the Shakespeare play that tilts most strongly towards the providential end of the scale, thanks to its blunt resolution through ghosts and prophecy. Brian Walsh argues, however, that the ghosts are the means by which Shakespeare 'dilutes the authority of the historical tradition that would render Richard's story unambiguously the story of God's will' because they are so explicitly theatrical: '[t]he ghosts connect the expression of history as retributive justice to a burgeoning

[32] See Neema Parvini, *Shakespeare's History Plays: Rethinking Historicism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012).
[33] Ivo Kamps, *Historiography and Ideology in Stuart Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 8–13.
[34] Ibid., p. 13. [35] Parvini, p. 100.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 17 Nov 2026 at 17:44:54, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009356121.004

stage convention of the vengeful revenant, not to a Christian scheme of renewal'. Thus, the ghosts can be seen 'as exemplifying the human agency that goes into the construction of historical knowledge'.[36] For Walsh, this sense of human agency is largely metatheatrical, recalling once again the power of the *platea* as conceived by Lin: the ghosts draw attention to the hand of the playwright in constructing the narrative of history itself, and in creating 'an alternative kind of historical consciousness to the written or the oral, one more transparent about the complicated dynamics by which history is formulated and circulated in culture'.[37]

I argue that the combination of ghosts and curses in *Richard III* also points to a broader historiographical current that runs beneath prophetic speech whenever it appears in Shakespeare's history plays. Curses and prophecies embed humanist agency within a providentially inflected historical arc. By linking Richard's death to the curses spoken by the mothers and widows of his victims, Shakespeare roots a downfall that appears preordained not in God's plan, but in Richard's own actions. The curses borne of mourning for Richard's victims cause his downfall – thus, Richard himself caused it. Richard reflects this cyclical sense of cause and effect in his soliloquy immediately after the ghosts' visitation:

> What do I fear? Myself? There's none else by.
> Richard loves Richard, that is, I am I.
> Is there a murderer here? No. Yes, I am.
> Then fly! What, from myself? Great reason why:
> Lest I revenge. What, myself upon myself? (5.3.194–9)

The presence of the spirits means that this is precisely what happens: Richard will revenge himself upon himself through the enactment of the curses that his murders gave rise to. Consistently prefacing mourning with cursing provides similar reminders across the plays that these curses and their effects do not spring from impersonal providence, but from the characters' own actions – even as the female characters' placement in the metatheatrical *platea* reminds us of the historical and dramaturgical constraints that confine every character's choices.

The female characters' accurate and often highly specific prophetic curses do still create the impression that they are able to see history because it has been predetermined – at least within the *locus*, from the perspective of characters who lack their historical privilege. However, I argue that it is

[36] Walsh, pp. 159–161. [37] Ibid., p. 161.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 17 Nov 2026 at 17:44:54, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009356121.004

not the plays' belief in a providential universe that allows them to see the future, but rather the placement of history itself in the role of providence. That is, an awareness not of God's predestined will, but of the play's status as a depiction of events that have already happened and, more importantly, of a history that has already been written. Marjorie Garber highlights the specifically theatrical nature of this awareness, whereby 'even without knowledge of the chronicle account, we are conditioned as spectators and auditors by the dramatic convention of historical prophecy. The audience knows that these "impossible" things [that prophecies predict] will prove true, and it can do nothing with that knowledge but wait for the fulfilment of the future anterior – the future that is already inscribed'.[38] A knowledge of theatrical convention, in other words, can replace a knowledge of actual history in placing the audience in a parallel position to those characters who can see the future. Walsh and Kamps notice a similar awareness of the particularly theatrical potential of historical narratives in Shakespeare's plays. For Walsh, Shakespeare's history plays 'show how the performance of history does not merely reveal the conditions of historical culture but that it can also intervene in it and help shape how his audience (and audiences to come) could imaginatively and practically participate in its creation and sustenance'.[39] Chapter 2 highlighted some of the ways in which this participatory quality troubles the plays' ability to uphold any one ideological perspective; this chapter has described how a shared 'prophetic' ability generates a further source of connection, once more allying audience members perhaps less with those enacting history than with those who are, like them, watching it unfold.

Kamps sees such a destabilising theatricality only in Shakespeare's later histories. I argue that his awareness of the presence of the historical process, the replacement of providence with history as the inescapable force that propels the characters, can be seen as early as the *Henry VI* plays in the connection between mourning and prophecy in the Duchess of Gloucester, or in *King John*'s Blanche. These characters flatten time by linking themselves to the audience through their access to historical privilege, which includes keener insight into humanistic cause and effect than the men around them are willing to acknowledge. Humphrey, Duke of Gloucester, specifically rejects the ability of human will to override a

[38] Marjorie Garber, '"What's Past Is Prologue": Temporality and Prophecy in Shakespeare's History Plays', in *Renaissance Genres: Essays on Theory, History, and Interpretation*, ed. by Barbara Kiefer Lewalski (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986), 301–331, pp. 317–318.

[39] Walsh, p. 131.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 17 Nov 2026 at 17:44:54, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009356121.004

larger sense of justice, insisting that his enemies cannot harm him 'So long as I am loyal, true, and crimeless' (2.4.64), but the Duchess clearly sees that the world operates otherwise: Gloucester's actions have made him enemies, even if their dislike of him is, by his reckoning, unjust. Blanche's concerns are likewise answered with an invocation of forces larger than herself. The Dauphin urges that her 'fortune' rests with him, but Blanche knows that 'Where my fortune lives, there my life dies' (3.1.352–3). This suggests a clash that the Dauphin cannot see: while he calls upon fate, she has an eye to the material consequences of what she clearly understands not as fortune's whim, but an active decision by her family members.

For all of these mourning female characters, such insights into both causes and effects of the history yet to unfold are gained by marginalisation from political power and thus from the power to assert one's will in a way that will lead to a presence in recorded history. Exclusion from the play's present-tense historical narrative leads to both the need and the ability to narrate alternate genealogies and to advocate for an alternate view of the past by foretelling what is to come, exchanging political power for historical privilege: the ability to see and understand events within their full historical scope.

Marginalised Historians

The connection between marginalisation and this expansive form of historical insight runs in both directions: while the female characters discussed step outside of the narrative, expressing what is history for us but the future for the others onstage, other female characters are empowered by their exclusion from the events of the play to provide unique insight into the past. As with the mourners, this is always an active effort. Constance in King John, often read by critics as a disruptive but aimless presence, explicitly blends genealogy, lament, and active attempts to redirect the play's events. Phyllis Rackin points out that her speech protesting Blanche and Lewis's marriage serves to 'remind an audience that the political alliance the marriage is designed to effect would still leave Constance and Arthur and the hereditary rights they urge upon us unincorporated and unappeased',[40] a reminder as well that the subtext of all of Constance's speeches, including her later mourning for Arthur, is genealogical.

[40] Rackin, 'Anti-Historians', p. 339.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 17 Nov 2026 at 17:44:54, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009356121.004

As examined in detail in Chapter 1, critical discussion of Constance's mourning has often been dismissive, if not outright annoyed. However, Constance states her intentions with regards to her display of grief as soon as she enters into the presence of the King and Dauphin of France: 'Lo, now, now see the issue of your peace!' (3.4.21). Thus prefaced, her mourning becomes a performance for the benefit of the King of France and his son, an action reflective of her actual feelings but also deliberately undertaken out loud and in public, before this specific audience, in order to shame them for their past deeds and to spur them to make amends. In doing so, she 'enlist[s] the rhetorical resources of complaint in order to supplement and correct a judicial system that has failed [her]'.[41] A specific and recognised literary and rhetorical form at the time, complaint, like the other linguistic strategies discussed in this chapter, is typically gendered female and is 'dependent on weakness' – the legal and social disempowerment of the individual who complains.[42] The language of complaint forces a public confrontation over grievances that cannot find formal redress, providing a means of 'calling to account those whose power and status seemingly place them beyond the reach of law'.[43] Thus, like the laments and curses discussed in the previous section, complaint is a kind of speech act, narrating history not merely to illustrate the past, but to have a direct impact on unfolding events. Constance's complaint – rooted in genealogy, as the implied reminder of Arthur's lineal claim forms the basis for Constance's lament – becomes her version of history, which then serves as a tool to demand present action.

Katherine of Aragon deploys history to the same ends in *Henry VIII*, her trial literalising the legalistic rhetoric that is traditionally associated with complaint. Like Constance and the Duchess of Gloucester, Katherine does not need to recite a full genealogy, emphasising instead her role as Henry's 'true and humble wife' (2.4.21). She briefly notes their respective fathers' kingly statuses (2.4.48–53), but her position as Henry's spouse is her most relevant claim to power, one she highlights through recitation not of the lineal descent that made her a suitable bride, but of the skill with which she has discharged various uxorial expectations over the course of their marriage. She thus rewrites the shared past that Henry has called this trial to invalidate as one of collaboration and dutiful service that demands respect, calling upon the assembled lords to reject Henry's revision of their shared history in favour of her articulation of the nature of their past.

[41] Thorne, 'Lawful let it be', p. 107.
[42] Kerrigan, pp. 27–28.
[43] Thorne, 'Lawful let it be', p. 106.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 17 Nov 2026 at 17:44:54, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009356121.004

Such attempted rewriting of history recalls Rackin's influential concept of the 'anti-historian', her description of the role played by Shakespeare's female historical characters, who are inevitably 'opponents and subverters of the [male] historical and historiographic enterprise'.[44] This understanding of the female characters' historiographical position, echoed in *Engendering a Nation*, relies on the notion that genealogy is the fundamental purpose of the history play, 'a narrative of patriarchal succession designed to legitimate the social order ... An adulterous woman at any point can make a mockery of the entire story, and for that reason women are inevitably threatening to the historiographic enterprise'.[45] But as the scenes discussed thus far illustrate, female characters in fact deploy genealogies in the service of legitimacy: as a means of demonstrating their right to attempt to intervene in the creation of the play's history, and the disruptions through death that have prevented them from doing so. Constance and Katherine exemplify another goal: to supplement that which the historical record has elided or erased. Rackin acknowledges that part of a female character's potential threat is her 'appeals to the audience', and that 'as soon as Shakespeare attempts to incorporate those feminine forces ... historiography itself becomes problematic, no longer speaking with the clear, univocal voice of unquestioned tradition but re-presented as a dubious construct, always provisional'.[46] I argue that this is entirely the point. To position the audience as merely a potential source of dangerous misreading, liable to be lured into a false vision of history by the appeals of unruly female voices, overlooks the alliance the plays consistently seek to build between such voices and the audience itself – as well as the more mundane fact that, had Shakespeare been so confused and frustrated by the feminine perspective on history, he need not have included it at all. We, the viewers and readers, are urged not only to attend to and sympathise with the marginalised narrators of history, but to notice the parallels between their historical position and our own, to the point of collapsing the temporal distance between us.

However, for some female characters, the connection between their perspective and that of the audience does not derive from external knowledge. Rather, audience and character are united in having watched the same history unfold onstage. The history these women narrate is a version of one that we have seen enacted – and often have seen them explicitly

[44] Rackin, 'Anti-Historians', p. 329.
[45] Rackin, 'Anti-Historians', pp. 336–337.
[46] Ibid., p. 330.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 17 Nov 2026 at 17:44:54, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009356121.004

excluded from. Describing events we have actually witnessed, these female characters are not anti-historians, but uniquely empowered by their marginalisation to provide historical perspective on the events of their own plays.

As with curses, this form of historical power is inescapably tied to exclusion from political power. Female characters who retain their political or historical power – usually through their husbands – consistently fail to separate themselves from absorption into and suppression by the broader patriarchal historical narrative. Unlike the other women of *Richard III*, Lady Anne's curses lead her away from supernatural historical power, not towards it, though initially she seems to follow the required pattern. She 'authorises' her mourning, in Karremann's phrase,[47] in very explicit terms. Addressing the corpse of Henry VI, she asks:

> Be it lawful that I invocate thy ghost
> To hear the lamentations of poor Anne,
> Wife to thy Edward, to thy slaughtered son,
> Stabbed by the selfsame hand that made these wounds. (1.2.7–11)

Having established her connection to Henry and her right to mourn him due to her marriage to his son, she can launch into her mourning speech, and from there into her curse upon 'the hand that made these holes' (1.2.15). Anne's curse is as potent as those that Margaret, Elizabeth, and the Duchess of York speak, but it is turned back upon herself: 'my woman's heart / Grossly grew captive to his honey words / And proved the subject of mine own soul's curse' (4.1.83–5). Her self-described capture by Richard, her absorption into the curse intended for him, undermines the intent of the curse and of her earlier mourning. Her narrative is reclaimed and redirected against her will, shifted from a protest against Richard's deeds into complicity with them. In the previously described Shakespeare's Globe production directed by Tim Carroll in 2012 and 2013, Anne embodied this helplessness as a silent presence in Richard's coronation scene, where she remained impassive and unmoving as she was bundled around the stage like a living doll, a prop more than a participant in the events. Though she was onstage at his side, she gave no reaction when Richard commanded Catesby to 'give out / That Anne my queen is sick and like to die' (4.2.59–60).

[47] Karremann, *Drama of Memory*, p. 26.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 17 Nov 2026 at 17:44:54, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009356121.004

Though this is the first time Richard has spoken of wanting to dispose of Anne, it is not the first the audience has heard of it. In the scene immediately preceding the coronation, Anne displays a similar flash of political prophecy to that displayed by the Duchess of Gloucester and Blanche of Castile, predicting a decision that Richard does not appear to have made yet: 'he hates me for my father Warwick, / And will, no doubt, shortly be rid of me' (4.1.90–1). Her position recalls that of *King John*'s Blanche, who is also pressed into acceptance from a position of resistance and subsumed into her husband's narrative. The next and last we hear of Blanche after her surrender to the inevitability of the war, Lewis is renewing hostilities by claiming England in her name. She is not seen, only spoken of. Blanche's prayers against the war are redirected towards its continuation, just as Anne's absorption into Richard turns her own curses and prophesies against her. This highlights the contradictory position of female characters within Shakespeare's vision of history: historical privilege – the power to curse, to prophesy, or to see and tell history – is only accessible to them when they are in positions of least political influence. A clear-eyed perspective on history can only be achieved from the outside. Unlike Constance, Blanche fails to command onstage power, though in theory she is bolstered by much stronger connections to the centres of political influence with the King and Dowager Queen of England as her kin and the Dauphin and King of France as relatives by marriage. Anne is a still starker example, never more historically privileged but politically powerless than in her first and last scenes, when she is, respectively, a widow on the losing side of the recent war, and dead. As a widow, she is able to undertake the lament and cursing described in the first section of this chapter; as a ghost, she participates in enacting the Duchess of York's curses, dooming Richard to 'think on me / And fall thy edgeless sword' (5.3.172–3).

Blanche's and Anne's husbands are the sources of their displacement from both political and historical power. Blanche's vision of destruction and despair is transformed into a war in her name; Anne's curses and prophesies of Richard's doom and despair become the presages of her own death. In *Edward III*, Queen Philippa enters in the play's final scene only to have her attempt to inscribe her place in history overtaken by a similar absorption into her husband's narrative. Just as Lewis attacks England in Blanche's name, Philippa has been defending England in her husband's. Jean Howard and Phyllis Rackin have separately discussed Philippa's role in the play, viewing the positive depictions of the Countess of Salisbury and Queen Philippa as contrasts to their conception of the dangerous,

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 17 Nov 2026 at 17:44:54, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009356121.004

negative female characters of the first tetralogy and the contained female characters of the second.[48] But Queen Philippa's attempt to add a narrative of her own achievements to the series of military conquests that the play displays is unsuccessful.

In Scene 10, King Edward III is told the 'happy tidings of success' against the Scottish forces, brought about by the 'painful travail of the Queen herself – / That, big with child, was every day in arms' (10.44). Eight scenes later, Philippa appears in order to demand that the soldier Copeland obey military custom and surrender the King of Scots, whom he captured, to Philippa herself. At the beginning of the scene, King Edward seems inclined to take her side against 'the proud, presumptuous squire of the north / That would not yield his prisoner to my Queen' (18.65–6). But, after Copeland pleads his case, Edward changes his mind: 'This man doth please me and I like his words' (18.89). Copeland's words are, in essence, an argument that Philippa's attempt to stand in for Edward is invalid: 'Receive, dread lord, the custom of my fraught / The wealthy tribute of my labouring hands, / Which should long since have been surrendered up / Had but your gracious self been there in place'. When Philippa protests that Copeland 'didst scorn the King's command, / Neglecting our commission in his name', Copeland doubles down on his assessment of her power: 'His name I reverence, but his person more; / His name shall keep me in allegiance still, / But to his person I will bend my knee' (18.86–7). Not only is Philippa's right to speak and act as regent undermined by Copeland and Edward, her actual actions in directing the battle that led to the King of Scots' capture are erased by Edward's acceptance of Copeland's reframing. Copeland implies that she is not due respect as a general in her own right, but only as the embodiment of her husband. And in rejecting her authority, Copeland and Edward reject her place in the narrative of the battle itself, crafting instead a purely masculine history in which the loyal knight Copeland directly served the absent Edward, who thereby gains the right to claim the victory and its spoils as his own. Philippa, as Edward commands her, 'let[s] displeasure pass' (18.88) and does not protest this revision of events. Philippa offers no reply to Edward's command, generating an open silence like those discussed in Chapter 2, an uncertain space that allows for the possibility that Philippa only grudgingly consents to Edward's ruling. But she does allow

[48] Howard, 'Women', p. 5; Phyllis Rackin, 'Women's Roles in the Elizabethan History Plays', in *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare's History Plays*, ed. by Michael Hattaway (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 71–86, pp. 78–82.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 17 Nov 2026 at 17:44:54, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009356121.004

Edward and Copeland's rewriting of history to stand, meaning her deeds are subsumed into Edward's; her actions, undertaken in his name, become literally his.

Such moments of erasure and exploitation of women's histories by their husbands seem to confirm the position that they are anti-historians whose inevitably threatening narratives must be suppressed by the authorised patriarchal perspective. That marriage is the most effective mechanism to achieve such suppression is a logical artistic reflection of a legal system that likewise subordinated women to their husbands, the legal principle of coverture literally rendering them an extension of their spouses in the eyes of the law. The Duchess of Gloucester, discussed above, appears to offer further confirmation of Rackin's argument that '[i]n the world of history, women are inevitably alien, representatives of the unarticulated residue that eludes the men's historiographic texts and threatens their historical myths'[49] as her parting curses briefly expand into a kind of historical narration:

> Sometimes I'll say I am Duke Humphrey's wife
> And he a prince and ruler of the land;
> Yet so he ruled and such a prince he was
> As he stood by whilst I, his forlorn duchess,
> Was made a wonder and a pointing-stock
> To every idle rascal follower. (2.4.43–8)

The heart of the history she plans to tell is of her own disgrace, but her husband plays an essential supporting role – one that requires not only describing his conduct at her public shaming, but the history of his time as Lord Protector and regent. Humphrey rejects this memorialisation, urging her to silence and quickly taking his leave (2.4.68). The potential danger of the Duchess's proposed narrative is plain: she threatens to re-write her husband's history as one of betrayal, his legacy as a leader undermined by his treatment of his wife in her moment of shame. But while Philippa, Blanche, and Anne's abortive histories do indeed feel like 'unarticulated residue', only able to separate themselves from their husbands' more powerful narratives in momentary glances, the Duchess's history is anything but 'alien'. By describing the literal scene in progress, her words are granted the authority of accuracy. We know the story she plans to tell is true because we are watching the history she describes happen. Though it

[49] Rackin, 'Anti-Historians', p. 343.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 17 Nov 2026 at 17:44:54, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009356121.004

may threaten Gloucester's sense of his own identity and legacy, her narrative is inescapably part of the play's own history.

The Duchess falls into a middle ground between the married female characters who are subsumed into their husbands' histories and the cursing women who are empowered by loss: her husband is alive, but she is permanently separated from him. Other female characters are also empowered by separation from their partners, through death or otherwise, to propagate a historical narrative that we have seen enacted within the play itself – and that we have also seen them forced out of. Like the Duchess of Gloucester's ability to describe her own actions as if from the outside, these characters' ability to narrate what they have not seen positions them beyond the linear stream of the play's plot, exchanging the marginalisation that their husbands imposed upon them for historical power gained upon their husbands' deaths. Their exclusion from the historical narrative draws attention to the divide between history as enacted and history as recorded, and the ways theatre is particularly equipped to highlight this gap.

One of the clearest examples is the Queen in *Richard II*, whose essential marginal perspective was discussed in Chapter 2. In her final scene in the play, Jennifer C. Vaught writes, the Queen 'contributes to the afterlife of Richard's "lamentable tale" by promising to retell it during her exile in a French cloister and memorializing him through her tears' – a relationship 'that challenges the notion that women are necessarily anxiety-provoking, debilitating, or contaminating for men in Renaissance literary works'.[50] More specifically, it challenges the notion that historical narratives in the mouths of female characters are always destabilising and threatening to patriarchal history as told by male characters. Unlike Gloucester's rejection of his wife's re-writing of his past, Richard actively urges his wife to narrate his history to others, in language that distinctly evokes the 'sad stories of the death of kings' that he himself longs to tell earlier in the play (3.2.156). The Queen is specifically chosen as the vessel for propagating his legacy. Vaught describes her as 'one of the few women in Shakespeare's plays entrusted with the task of memorializing another through narrative',[51] an intriguing distinction from the memorialisation through cursing and lament. The female characters of this chapter indicate that there are many

[50] Jennifer C. Vaught, *Masculinity and Emotion in Early Modern English Literature* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), p. 89.
[51] Ibid., p. 99.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 17 Nov 2026 at 17:44:54, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009356121.004

women who are positioned as bearers of the memories of another, usually a male family member. But Vaught highlights two elements that differentiate the Queen from women like Elizabeth, Constance, and the Duchess of York. First, she is 'entrusted with the task' of propagating her husband's memory by Richard himself, a status that does indeed render her unique amongst Shakespeare's female historical characters. No other women are explicitly and openly directed to memorialise their partners. The Queen's proposed memorialisation also takes a subtly different form than those of the women mentioned so far – what Vaught describes as 'through narration' – and lacks their supernatural and prophetic abilities.

The mourning style of the other female characters of this chapter necessarily centres the individual experience of the speaker, as her grief for the absent family member is rendered as important as the family member himself. This is in part what makes extensive scenes of mourning seem so readily dismissible: in centring a personal experience of grief as a form of historical narrative, they force reconsideration of what is thought proper content for history. Narrative and dynastic clarity, as the repetitions of first names and highly emotive language discussed suggest, is not necessarily the point. We do not know the nature of the story the Queen will tell, but Richard frames it as a history in which the Queen herself exists only as narrator:

> In winter's tedious nights sit by the fire
> With good old folks, and let them tell thee tales
> Of woeful ages long ago betid;
> And ere thou bid good night, to quit their griefs
> Tell thou the lamentable tale of me,
> And send the hearers weeping to their beds. (5.1.40–5)

Though we never hear her 'lamentable tale', one might wonder what exactly the Queen would say about her husband's reign: her only other speaking scenes enact her exclusion from participation in and even knowledge of politics. When the Queen speaks to Bushy in Act 2 about her premonition of impending doom at Richard's departure for Ireland, she lacks the clarity of the prophetesses discussed; rather, the passage 'insistently den[ies] the possibility to know the future'.[52] Under the dramaturgical framework discussed in this chapter so far, the Queen lacks clarity because she has not yet fully experienced or articulated her losses.

[52] Lammers, p. 73.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 17 Nov 2026 at 17:44:54, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009356121.004

However, like Blanche – and unlike Bushy, who is unwilling to acknowledge her fears – she is allowed a glimpse of the dispossession yet to come because her separation from power has, as the scene itself demonstrates, already begun. 'Now hath my soul brought forth her prodigy' (2.2.67) the Queen declares when she finally learns the specific form of her prophetic foreboding, Bushy's dismissive speech instantly undermined by the realisation of the Queen's fears. As discussed in Chapter 2, her next scene dramatises her resulting marginalisation; her final appearance onstage is to be named the bearer of Richard's memory. Despite knowing so little of the events surrounding Richard's fall that she is the last to learn he has been deposed, she is the person he calls upon to tell that story to others, suggesting once more that there is in fact an essential link between exclusion and the ability to narrate history.

Like the Queen, the majority of Lady Percy's stage time in *1 Henry IV* is devoted to her exclusion from political power and her husband's active refusal, discussed in Chapter 2, to allow her access to the information that would grant her a role in his rebellion. At the beginning of *2 Henry IV*, however, it is she who becomes the voice of Hotspur's legacy in explicit contrast to his own father. Her differentiation from both Lord and Lady Northumberland – the former accused by Lady Percy of abandoning his son's legacy, the latter easily giving up the fight to make her husband remember it (2.3.5–6) – emphasises that blood ties are not the source of historical privilege. L. J. Simmons proposes that '[t]hroughout the Henriad, the Mortimers [including Kate] signify female disruption and the corresponding failure of the male to control the coherence of historical narrative; this historical threat is simultaneously registered in the anxious constructions of male sexuality'.[53] However, like Richard II's Queen, Lady Percy's role is ultimately to construct, not disrupt, the historical narrative. The uncertain state of her marital relations with her husband – it is made fairly explicit that they are not sexually intimate at the beginning of *1 Henry IV*, despite the critical preoccupation with the 'sexiness' of their first scene[54] – does not seem to impact her ability to uphold his legacy in narrative form, though not in the form of an actual heir. She is not a threat to Hotspur, she is the source of his historical survival.

[53] L. J. Simmons, 'Masculine Negotiations in Shakespeare's History Plays: Hal, Hotspur, and "the Foolish Mortimer"', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 44 (1993), 440–463, p. 444.

[54] Anna Kamaralli, *Shakespeare and the Shrew: Performing the Defiant Female Voice* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2012), p. 42.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 17 Nov 2026 at 17:44:54, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009356121.004

Lady Percy's ultimate exclusion is a telling point of diversion from the marriage that most obviously and directly echoes hers and Hotspur's: the relationship between Brutus and Portia in *Julius Caesar*. But although the two scenes are marked by distinct structural and linguistic echoes, their outcomes and the characters' subsequent roles diverge sharply. This appears to be a stark example of Janette Dillon's 'scenic unit', discussed in Chapter 2. Brutus agrees to let Portia in on his plans, and her next and final scene is an anxious exchange with Brutus's servant, as she tries to ask him to bring news from the Capitol without revealing why she wants to know (2.4). Hotspur refuses to tell Kate anything, allowing her instead to follow him wherever he is going, but forbidding her to ask more questions (2.3). Lady Percy's next and final appearance in *1 Henry IV* is the result of that journey, a scene in which her marriage is set alongside that of the Mortimers, though critics differ on whether this contrast is meant to illustrate the relative harmony or discord of the Percys.[55] But, though often framed in critical discussions as a domestic anomaly, this scene of paired couples is bookended by political negotiations; generally overlooked is the fact that the women are admitted into the room only in the interim between martial preparations. Just as Lady Mortimer's song will '[make] such difference 'twixt wake and sleep / As is the difference betwixt day and night' (3.1.225–6), it also fills up the space between political actions: by the time she is done singing, Mortimer points out, 'will our book, I think, be drawn' (3.1.330).

Chapter 2 critiqued the utility of stark divisions between public and private when analysing these plays, but that is not to say that female characters are never separated from politics. In this instance, the male characters deliberately sequester their wives into a space where explicit talk of politics is not permitted to intrude. Even Lady Mortimer's direct reference to the upcoming conflict, her tearful pleas that 'She'll be a soldier too, she'll to the wars' (3.1.201), is mere rhetoric, as in the end her only actual request is to sing Mortimer to sleep. The scene is a continuation and duplication of Hotspur's efforts in his first scene with his wife: to keep the women from knowledge of the rebels' plans. Their scene in Wales is therefore not domestic for its own sake, or because there are female characters present in it, but because Hotspur, Mortimer, and Glendower have intentionally made it so. As discussed in Chapter 2, this is a choice that reflects on the rebels' cause. Their effort to render the space into which their wives are permitted apolitical is a political action – especially

[55] Ibid., p. 42.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 17 Nov 2026 at 17:44:54, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009356121.004

given that both Mortimer and Hotspur derive some of their political legitimacy from their marriages.

In contrast, Portia reminds Brutus that she is 'Cato's daughter' (2.1.318), and that comment seems to tip the scales for Brutus and force him to agree that she has a right to information. We next see her acting on the knowledge she has been promised. Though she cannot go in person to the Capitol, or participate directly in the assassination of Caesar, Shakespeare makes explicit that she has indeed received the political knowledge that Lady Percy is just as explicitly excluded from. The next we hear of Portia, she is dead. The next time we see Lady Percy, she is called upon to deliver an accounting of the cause she was never fully admitted to. And yet, her separation from the actual political events is essential. It is the point where Lady Percy and Portia's parallel paths diverge: Portia, admitted into political power by her husband, cannot then narrate what she has learned as a historian. Lady Percy, continually separated, can tell her husband's story with a clarity his own father and mother lack. Her position as an outsider renders her privy to a scope of vision characters more fully immersed in history cannot access.

For the Queen and Lady Percy, this separation from political power and an attendant place in history is reflected both within the narrative and extra-textually. They both exist in the blurred space between history and fiction discussed in Chapter 2: though critics and editors assign the Queen her documented first name and Lady Percy her real lineage, there is no textual indication of these historical identities. Their multiple layers of separation from the ordinary course of history – their small roles, their marginalisation within the story, their troubling of the boundaries between truth and fiction – combined with their unique and specific identities as historians suggest an intimate relationship between all of these traits, recalling once again the theatrical privilege Lin associates with the *platea* and those who are able to step outside of the narrative and into an active manipulation of the materials of the theatre. Karremann proposes that 'scenes of remembering and forgetting often double as moments in which the theatre reflects on its own function for the process through which cultural memory is made'.[56] Wilder specifically associates these processes with 'women and other outsiders from history ... Constructing a past from theatrical materials, such figures align themselves with the social and professional world of the theatre as much as, if not more than, with the fictional world of the plays in which they take shape'.[57] The connection

[56] Karremann, *Drama of Memory*, p. 71. [57] Wilder, p. 19.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 17 Nov 2026 at 17:44:54, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009356121.004

between female characters, historical narration, and the theatre itself is most clearly seen in these characters at the margins of the drama, for their potential fictionality, paired with their impossible knowledge of unseen events, is a reminder of their fundamental theatricality.

In Shakespeare's historical dramaturgy, it is history itself that shapes the narrative because each play depicts events that have both already happened and already been written. It is also history itself – patriarchal history, chronicle history – that forces these women's potential contributions into marginal spaces where they must largely be discovered imaginatively. Thus, there is a kind of logic in this border-blurring historical role being assigned to the most insistently theatrical figures onstage: female characters played by boys. Though scholars such as Stephen Orgel and Farah Karim-Cooper have noted that the overlap between boys and women in terms of early modern beauty standards suggests that, at least in terms of aesthetics and even eroticism, a kind of authentic feminine presence was achievable on the early modern English stage, I agree with Michael Shapiro that audiences 'probably maintained a dual consciousness of both actors and characters and hence perceived both female characters and female impersonators' when watching plays.[58] The embodied reminders of the limitations of theatrical representation of actual people or events, female characters are *always* in the mimetic borderland that their history-telling likewise inhabits. Associated once more with the *platea,* in but not entirely *of* the historical world of the play, these characters demonstrate Shakespeare's awareness of the distance between the events of the play and the broader historical narrative in which they are contained – and, in turn, between that narrative and unrecoverable actual events. This kind of separation between history and story could only exist in the theatre, not only because of its ability to associate the marginalised female characters with the audience's position as fellow spectators and potential disseminators of history, but due to the play's status as an adaptation of a pre-existing historical narrative that it can both reflect and comment upon. As Felicity Dunworth writes, the adaptation of chronicle narratives for the theatre 'allows for a representation of chronicle history in which the stories themselves, and the way they are told, can be tested against other discourses and other perspectives' – and female characters in particular serve as a conduit for these alternate perspectives.[59] There is no place for the

[58] Michael Shapiro, *Gender in Play on the Shakespearean Stage: Boy Heroines and Female Pages* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996), p. 2.
[59] Dunworth, p. 81.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 17 Nov 2026 at 17:44:54, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009356121.004

direct oppositions of history and anti-history in this multidirectional historiography.

As Chapter 2 demonstrated, the shifting landscape of Shakespeare's history plays fully accounts for the possibility that audiences will read the scenes' events on their own biased terms and may seek out sympathy in unexpected places. The various versions of history that stem both from the characters' own interpretations of events and the audience's varied readings of them must be seen to move together, complementary and contradictory by turns, but not in active opposition. It may seem like quibbling to reject the term 'anti-historian' for implying such an oppositional duality, but I argue that it is essential to consider these female figures and their presence in the history plays not as forces set against the historiographical hegemony, but rather as collaborative participants in creating a multi-vocal sense of history. This multi-vocality is what allows for the testing that Dunworth describes, as characters assert and present different understandings of the history they are enacting both as event and as drama. The historical-fictional blurring that Lady Percy and the Queen represent puts pressure on both of these angles, providing an alternate narrative of the events that the play itself has presented. The narrative they provide is founded on their position as apparently inessential bystanders and questions what theatre might offer that history cannot.

The Genre of History

I have returned throughout this book to the idea that female characters and the places where their supposedly domestic, excessively fictional contributions intrude most insistently on the plot of Shakespeare's history plays are often seen by modern critics as digressive or disfiguring to the plays' structures. As J. L. Simmons describes it, 'the plays represent history as a masculine discourse that is subject to female interference or generic mutilation'. This 'mutilation' might take the form of extraneous and excessive diversions into mourning, or it might mean a swerve into humour: 'As women translate men into fools, they transform history into comedy, with its attendant dangers of subversive indecorum'.[60] As Chapter 1 demonstrated, in the early modern period, such generic shifts were not universally considered as disruptive or inappropriate as Simmons suggests. But just as the historical comedies provide a model for a historical storytelling that accounts for women in a way Shakespeare's histories generally do not,

[60] Simmons, p. 445.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 17 Nov 2026 at 17:44:54, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009356121.004

tonal shifts like those highlighted by Simmons point to moments where the plays grapple with the possibility of female participation in history in terms that are otherwise unfamiliar to Shakespeare's historical dramaturgy. In such scenes, female characters' attempts to change the course of history result in changing the genre of that history's presentation. Unlike in historical comedies, these shifts are ultimately temporary, emphasising a specifically Shakespearean sense of the limited capacity of history as a genre. These moments highlight once more the role of history itself as something like a providential agent in Shakespeare's historiography: the implacable force that both drives the drama and limits its scope.

Chapter 1 discussed the porous boundaries between history and fiction in this period, and highlighted the ways in which early modern writers seem to have recognised far more readily than present-day critics that all history plays are fundamentally fictional. Given this generic flexibility, the question explored in Chapter 2 and in the preceding section of whether or not Richard's wife should or should not be called Isabella may seem irrelevant: she both is and is not her historical counterpart, and few in the period would have particularly cared. But Shakespeare's works consistently suggest a more rigid sense of the boundary between history and fiction than that expressed in the historical comedies – a genre whose structures he drew upon only twice, and neither in a straightforward manner. Richard Dutton points out the emphasis on comedy on the title pages of both the *Henry IV* plays and *Henry V*, while Jean Howard highlights the structural similarities between Hal and Falstaff's relationship in the *Henry IV* plays and the journey of a prince in a traditional historical comedy.[61] And while King Edward III's courtship of the Countess of Salisbury is framed along traditional historical comedy lines, she is distinctly different from the entirely fictional commoners who usually fill the role of the ruler's object of desire. She, like Lady Percy and the Queen, is plausibly factual – indeed, Shakespeare makes her more factual than his sources do, by replacing source author William Painter's ahistorical concluding marriage between Edward and the Countess with the more accurate threat of adultery and final return to their proper marital partners.[62]

Though I have discussed throughout this book how Shakespeare's historical vision is more capacious than criticism often reflects, on the

[61] Richard Dutton, '"Methinks the Truth Should Live from Age to Age": The Dating and Contexts of Henry V', *Huntington Library Quarterly*, 68 (2005), 173–204, pp. 173–174; Howard, 'Women', p. 11.

[62] Giorgio Melchiori, ed., 'Introduction', in *Edward III* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 1–51, pp. 36–37.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 17 Nov 2026 at 17:44:54, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009356121.004

whole, his history plays resist the kind of large-scale generic blurriness we see in the historical comedies, particularly when it comes to maintaining the division between (largely tragic) historical figures and (often comic) fictional ones. Even Shakespeare's most famous historical clown, Falstaff, is rooted in something like recorded fact, a connection that Shakespeare reinforced when he was forced to change the character's original name, John Oldcastle – a religious martyr with whom King Henry IV was supposedly associated – and replaced it with that of another actual person, John Falstaff, whom Shakespeare had already briefly depicted as a cowardly and dishonourable knight in *1 Henry VI* (where his name is often rendered 'Fastolf' by modern editors). Lammers reads the interlude with the Countess of Auvergne in that same play as an explicit and intentional expression of the contrast between Shakespeare's historical style and that of his contemporaries, arguing that 'the scene is indeed an "intrusion," but one that functions to reject the mode it cites. . . . More specifically, what is renounced as old-fashioned in the scene is the tradition of the so-called "romance" histories'.[63]

Unlike contemporary playwright and fellow prolific historical dramatist Thomas Heywood's historical style, for whom '[t]he boundaries between fact and fiction are wide open; and the principles of narrative relevance and coherence operate . . . with a gothic freedom',[64] Shakespeare erects a border, though this border is still more porous and permissive than present-day standards recognise. This suggests, to return to the question posed in Chapter 1, that however mutable the history play genre at the time, and however unclear its definition now, Shakespeare himself understood there to be some form of generic boundary.

But though Lammers relates the scene with the Countess of Auvergne to '[t]he comic "keening contest" between Aumerle and the Duchess and Duke of York'[65] in *Richard II*, which I will discuss later in this section, his reading of the Countess scene as a specific and deliberate attempt to mark out Shakespeare's new historical style in contrast to his theatrical rivals (for he also argues that *1 Henry VI* was the first of the tetralogy to be written) cannot account for the way such moments recur across Shakespeare's history plays. While these scenes are, to a certain extent, 'the rejection of romance as a mode for the presentation of history', they are also expressions of the difference in female representation in the romantic history genre as opposed to the more tragic historical forms that Shakespeare

[63] Lammers, pp. 37–38. [64] Dutton, p. 176. [65] Lammers, p. 37.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 17 Nov 2026 at 17:44:54, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009356121.004

prefers. The marginalisation that female characters undergo in such scenes is, therefore, simultaneously historiographical and dramaturgical: they are reaching the boundaries not of history itself, but of history as a dramatic and literary form. Lammers points out that this is not entirely a question of relative fictionality, but mostly of gender and tone, for, in *1 Henry VI*, the fictional Countess of Auvergne scene is immediately followed by the equally fictional exchange of red and white roses in Temple Garden.[66] When female characters seek to assert their presence and bend events to their will by warping the genre of the scene they are in, they raise the momentary potential that the play itself will shift away from tragically-inflected patriarchal history into a genre more capable of containing their fully-realised voices.

Critics often treat the mourning and curses discussed in this chapter so far as examples of such generic warping, inappropriate emotional incursions into the plays' political matters. However, Dermot Cavanagh argues that 'a tragic understanding of the past is common with Shakespeare ... and is often expressed through sorrowful memory, as figures such as Constance in *King John*, Richard II and Lady Percy in *2 Henry IV* demonstrate. Each of these figures is distinctive and open to multivalent understanding, but their presence ... allows us to note how often the historical action of the plays is arrested and then subjected to tragic reflection through acts of recollection and lament'.[67] While this chapter has already disputed the sense that such scenes 'arrest' the plays' actions, Cavanagh highlights the extent to which a tragic framework – one that naturally allows for mourning as a means of reflecting on history – is deeply embedded in the plays. The oft-discussed fact that almost all of the plays grouped as 'Histories' in the 1623 Folio were advertised as tragedies when published in quarto reaffirms this connection, and reinforces the idea that mourning itself is an integral element of Shakespeare's vision of history.

Across the plays, however, there are scenes that shift the drama into another key. Margaret's farewell to Suffolk in *2 Henry VI* is a case in point: as they lament his imminent departure together, the scene shifts from an impromptu murder trial and political exile into a romantic register. The sudden confirmation that their hitherto implied romance is indeed real realigns the terms of their conversation and its implications. Suddenly, they are not political co-conspirators, but star-crossed lovers:

[66] Ibid., p. 41. [67] Cavanagh, p. 39.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 17 Nov 2026 at 17:44:54, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009356121.004

So, get thee gone, that I may know my grief;
'Tis but surmised whiles thou art standing by,
As one that surfeits thinking on a want.
I will repeal thee, or, be well assured,
Adventure to be banishèd myself;
And banishèd I am, if but from thee.
Go, speak not to me. Even now be gone!
O, go not yet! Even thus two friends condemned
Embrace and kiss and take ten thousand leaves,
Loather a hundred times to part than die.
Yet now farewell, and farewell life with thee. (3.2.359–68)

The language distinctly recalls that of *Romeo and Juliet*, which was likely written within a few years of *2 Henry VI*. Rather than scheming politicians who have just successfully planned a murder, this language asks us to instead view the couple sympathetically – to imagine, momentarily, a genre in which they would be the heroes, either as victims of a tragic separation or destined for an unlikely happy reunion. Their exchange seems to exist in the alternate history that Margaret imagines in her first scene alone with Suffolk, when she confesses that she 'thought King Henry had resembled thee' (1.3.54).

It is a similar shift to that seen at the end of *Henry V*, in the courtship scene between Henry and Catherine. The tension between Catherine's distinct sense of coercion and the ease with which the scene is rendered charming and comic in performance, discussed in Chapter 2, makes its intentions difficult to discern. As Kavita Mudan Finn and Lea Leucking Frost argue, Catherine's resistance undermines 'the assumption that defeat and conquest can be papered over with sweet words and an attempt to change genres'.[68] Mudan Finn and Frost remind us that, no matter how well-performed the sense of true romance between Catherine and Henry, the scene's attempted generic shift must be unsuccessful; even without the undercurrent of Catherine's resistance, Henry's image of a romantic comedy capped with a son is immediately contradicted by the final Chorus's reminder of that son's unhappy history. Similarly, Margaret's reframing of her and Suffolk's conversation – for it is she who dictates the terms of their exchange throughout the scene – fails to permanently reframe the story in their favour. Mudan Finn sees a mirror image of such a failure in Edward IV's courtship of Elizabeth Grey, when 'Elizabeth resists Edward's efforts

[68] Mudan Finn and Frost, p. 242.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 17 Nov 2026 at 17:44:54, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009356121.004

to fit her into a known narrative – that of the lusty widow able and willing to become the mistress of a notoriously lusty king'.[69] But though Elizabeth may resist being narrativised as Edward's mistress, she cannot fully redirect the genre, and instead becomes his wife. All three scenes not only imagine but depict an alternate world, an alternate genre, but one that cannot endure beyond the boundaries of that single scene.

Lammers highlights the generic shift that takes place near the end of *Richard II*, when the Duke and Duchess of York and their son Aumerle race to present themselves before King Henry IV to plead against (in York's case) and for Aumerle's pardon for an intended but unfulfilled act of treason (5.3). It is an event King Henry himself explicitly identifies as a genre shift: 'Our scene is altered from a serious thing / And now changed to "The Beggar and the King"' (5.3.79–80). Molly Smith points out that 'the Duchess of York's part in [Aumerle's] pardon is an entirely Shakespearean invention',[70] which only strengthens the impression that she is the catalyst for the generic shifts that accompany her appearance in the play. Anthony B. Dawson and Paul Yachnin note in their edition of the play that 'only the title ["The Beggar and the King"] is pertinent to the present situation', not the content of the ballad it references,[71] but the title alone clearly suggests the Duchess's aims: to shift York's narrative of the loyal father and the treasonous son into a genre where humble intercession leads to royal grace. And in a certain sense, she succeeds: Aumerle is pardoned, and his part in the play ends with the Duchess's prayer that God will 'make thee new' (5.3.153).

However, as Molly Smith notes, Aumerle has been promised a pardon before the Duchess arrives; the 'vital exchange' of the scene is that between Henry and Aumerle, which 'redefines the monarchy as a contractual agreement between king and subjects'.[72] Instead of the kind of benevolent kingly mercy that the Duchess imagines, Henry has made a pragmatic move: 'To win thy after-love I pardon thee' (5.3.34). For some critics, this is an aspect of the scene's comedy: the York parents' pleas are, unbeknownst to them, seeking a foregone conclusion.[73] But the closing lines ask not that we dismiss the scene as a comic and ultimately unnecessary

[69] Mudan Finn, p. 161. [70] Molly Smith, p. 286.
[71] Anthony B. Dawson and Paul Yachnin, eds., *Richard II* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 269, n. 79.
[72] Molly Smith, p. 287.
[73] Peter Lake, *How Shakespeare Put Politics on the Stage: Power and Succession in the History Plays* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), p. 260.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 17 Nov 2026 at 17:44:54, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009356121.004

interlude, but instead grant it, and the Duchess of York in particular, some parting gravity:

> KING HENRY: Uncle, farewell, – and cousin, adieu.
> Your mother hath well prayed, and prove you true.
> DUCHESS: Come, my old son. I pray God make thee new
> (5.3.151–3)

Henry thus shifts the decision away from himself, relocating it in the Duchess's intercession and framing the scene as a triumph of her efforts. While modern productions now often attempt to bring Aumerle's debt of loyalty to Henry to an apparently logical conclusion by having Aumerle take up the role of Richard's murderer, the text itself actively resists any such reading. Shakespeare ushers both Aumerle and his mother out of the story with her prayer for his redemption. If she has indeed partly succeeded in shifting the narrative into the shape she desires, she has done so by pulling herself and her son into a genre the play can no longer contain.

All of these characters' shifts into comedy and romance are moves into genres that are distinctly more empowering for female characters than tragic histories tend to be, as the historical comedies themselves reflect. But just as Shakespeare stops short of historical comedy, his histories stop short of a form that can fully contain these alternate visions, necessitating temporary shifts into genres more hospitable to the characters' needs. These detours into other genres are not only or always comic: Smith notes that the Duchess of Gloucester's opening scene of trying to rally her brother-in-law Gaunt to action against King Richard is essentially a 'request for a revenge play'.[74] *Richard II* does not become one, but such a play would have the means to more directly satisfy her desire for justice for her murdered husband than Gaunt is willing or able to offer her. Talbot's interaction with the Countess of Auvergne is echoed by Margaret's dialogue with Suffolk at the end of that play, another exchange that briefly suggests the play might veer into romance. Lady Mortimer's single appearance in *1 Henry IV* and Catherine's conversation with her maid Alice in *Henry V* both literally introduce a different language for participating in history, a glimpse of a world beyond England that the English stage cannot sustain.

While all of these moments fail to permanently transform the play in which they are contained, this failure draws attention to the history play's

[74] Molly Smith, p. 287.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 17 Nov 2026 at 17:44:54, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009356121.004

limitations, and to the stories, languages, agendas, and potential endings it must exclude. David Scott Kastan describes how criticism of *1 Henry IV* 'has delighted in demonstrating the play's aesthetic unity by showing how the comic plot "serves" the historical plot . . . The formal coherence that critics have demanded from the play can be achieved only by subordinating subplot to main plot, commoners to aristocrats, comedy to history'.[75] Such subordination explains, in part, why critics have not generally demonstrated an equal enthusiasm for proving how these apparently extraneous female characters are equally essential to the plot. Their brief incursions are more difficult to integrate into a unified vision of a given history play's purpose as centred around the supremacy of its dominant political plot. As Kastan suggests of *1 Henry IV*, such tonal variety is a play's means of 'register[ing] its unreconciled social disjunctions generically'. The plays' very structures are designed to reflect their inability to fully contain all of the stories they brush against: '[h]istory is displayed as something other – something more extensive, however less stable – than merely the history of what Renaissance historians characteristically called "matters of state"'.[76] But the only thing these scenes truly destabilise is the contemporary reader's understanding of a history play.

The characters, scenes, and moments discussed in this chapter are essential, recurring elements of Shakespeare's attempts to contain England's history on the stage, constituting rather than troubling the plays' form. The irresistible pressure of history forges the shape of the plays themselves – and history itself is both process and genre, confined by what has already happened, how it has been recorded, and how Shakespeare defines or understands the limits of its onstage presentation. Women sit at the core of the plays' expressions of this tension between source and drama by articulating alternate styles and narratives for the histories the plays themselves are enacting. The divide between historical *locus* and *platea*, between those who can enact history and those who can see and narrate it, is inescapably gendered in Shakespeare's historical dramaturgy. The use of women in such a role is, moreover, not coincidental, but directly linked to the always unreal dramatic position that women, played by boys, held on the early modern stage.

[75] David Scott Kastan, *Shakespeare after Theory* (London: Routledge, 1999), p. 132.
[76] Ibid., pp. 132–133.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 17 Nov 2026 at 17:44:54, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009356121.004