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The Iron Queen and the Paper Crown: Imperial Anxiety in the Minor Tetralogy

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In his 1994 article “Mourning and Misogyny: *Hamlet*, *The Revenger’s Tragedy*, and the Final Progress of Elizabeth I, 1600-1607,” Steven Mullaney recounts how “[i]n 1597, Andre Hurault, *Sieur De Maisse* and Extraordinary Ambassador from Henri IV, noted that although the English people still professed love for their aging queen, the sentiments of the nobility were such that ‘the English would never again submit to the rule of a woman’” (139) “The English” had “submit[ted] to the rule of a woman” at various points in their history, most recently under Mary, although those precedents were not generally well-regarded. The reign of Mary in particular had produced a torrent of misogynistic dissidence, much of which survived in the form of pamphlets and sermons which, despite official suppression, complicated popular understanding of the reign of Elizabeth. John Knox exemplifies this dissidence in *The First Blast of the Trumpet Against the Monstrous Regiment of Women* when he writes, “[t]o promote a woman to bear rule, superiority, dominion or empire above any realm, nation, or city is repugnant to nature, contumely to God, a thing most contrarious to his revealed will and approved ordinance, and finally it is the subversion of good order, and all equity and justice” (8).

When Shakespeare began the minor tetralogy in 1591 Elizabeth was fifty-seven-years-old; layered onto the fundamental misogyny of the sixteenth century, underscored by an extensive body of misogynistic politico-theological commentary, was the recognition that the Virgin Queen portended dynastic breach. For all that Elizabeth had commanded stability, facilitated prosperity, and brought the nation’s Catholic enemies to heel, she remained a figure of disruption, the discomfiting embodiment of feminine rule. Feminine rule is a central theme of *Henry VI part I*, split as it is between Joan la Pucelle and Queen Margaret of Anjou. Of the two, Margaret is the more enduring presence, appearing in each play of the tetralogy, and yet considerably less attention has been devoted to her place in the national consciousness. The character of Margaret is complex, a late-Elizabethan projection of the nation’s gendered political anxieties

undertaken as those anxieties were in ascent. She is of a piece with Shakespeare's interrogations of English identity throughout the histories, but in the figure of Margaret the playwright distills the nations' anxieties regarding feminine rule to create a kind of nightmare image, in equal measure seductive and terrifying, and portending the bloody horrors of civil war.

Consider the moment in 1.4 of *3 Henry VI* when, following her victory at the Battle of Wakefield, Queen Margaret taunts the captured Richard, Duke of York, with a paper crown, ordering Lord Clifford and the Earl of Northumberland to "Come, make him stand upon this molehill here, / That raught at mountains with outstretched arms, / Yet parted but the shadow with his hand."¹ She addresses the Duke directly, demanding of him

... was it you that would be England's king?
 Was't you that revell'd in our parliament,
 And made a preachment of your high descent?
 ... [W]here is your darling Rutland?
 Look, York: I stain'd this napkin with the blood
 That valiant Clifford, with his rapier's point,
 Made issue from the bosom of the boy;
 And if thine eyes can water for his death,
 I give thee this to dry thy cheeks withal.
 ... I prithee, grieve, to make me merry, York.
 What, hath thy fiery heart so parch'd thine entrails
 That not a tear can fall for Rutland's death?
 Why art thou patient, man? thou shouldst be mad;
 And I, to make thee mad, do mock thee thus.
 Stamp, rave, and fret, that I may sing and dance.
 Thou wouldst be fee'd, I see, to make me sport:
 York cannot speak, unless he wear a crown.
 A crown for York! and, lords, bow low to him:
 Hold you his hands, whilst I do set it on. (1.4.67-95)

Margaret inverts York's monarchial ambitions through ironic parody; he "raught at mountains," but is set upon a "molehill." He made a "preachment of [his] high descent," but is confronted with the death of his own descendant. His "fiery heart," which burned against the Lancastrians, is now turned against itself, so "parch[ing] [his] entrails" that "not a tear

can fall for Rutland's death....” He is brought to grief in order to make the Queen “merry”; he is entreated to “rave and fret” in order that she might “sing and dance,” and, finally, he is coronated with a paper crown, an ephemeral mockery of the lasting glory he sought.

In this scene, Margaret is the sadistic “she-wolf of France,” the “tiger’s heart wrapped in a woman’s hide” who inverts feminine orthodoxy, the precursor to such monstrous anti-women of the mature tragedies as Regan and Lady Macbeth. The scene is remarkable for the intimacy of its violence, and for its prolonged sadism, but all the more remarkable for the fact that it is almost entirely ahistorical. For all that the playwright is beholden to his sources in constructing the minor tetralogy, none of those sources include a clear antecedent for this scene. His principal source, Edward Hall’s *Union of the Two Noble and Illustre Famelies of Lancastre & Yorke*, describes how

cruell Clifford, deadly bloudsupper not content with this homicyde, or chyldkillyng, came to y place wher the dead corps of the duke of Yorke lay, and caused his head to be stryken of, and set on it a croune of paper, & so fixed it on a pole, & presented it to the Quene, not lyeng farre from the felde, in great despite, and much derision, sayng: Madame, your warre is done, here is your kinges raunsome, at which present, was much ioy, and great reioysing.

His secondary source, Raphael Holinshed’s *Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland*, recounts how Queen Margaret “marched from Yorke to Wakefield, and bad base to the Duke, euen before his castell gates,” where York

fought manfullie, yet was he within half an hour slaine and dead, and his whole armie discomfited.... After this victory by the queene, the earle of Salisburie and all the prisoners were sent to Pomfret, and there beheaded; whose heads (together with the duke of Yorke’s head) were conueied to Yorke, and there set on poles ouer the gate of the citie, in despite of them and their lineage. (124)

Finally, *The Mirror for Magistrates* presents the Duke of York recounting how, in the aftermath of the battle, “cruell Clifford”

came to the campe where I lay dead, / Dispoylde my corps, and cut away my head. / And whan he had put a paper crown thereon, / As a gawring stocke he sent it to the Queen / And she for spite,

commanded it anon / To be had to Yorke: where that it might be
seen, / They placed it where other traytours been. (189)

All of these sources include the bare outlines of the scene: York is defeated and beheaded, to Margaret's triumph, but none of them present the Queen taunting him, smearing his face with the blood of his slain son (twelve years old, in Shakespeare's construction; the historical Edmund, Earl of Rutland was a soldier of seventeen), or applying the paper crown to the living Duke with her own hands. All of these elements, the elements which make up the sadistic humiliation of York at the hands of Queen Margaret, are apparently original to Shakespeare.

As Carole Levin notes, Shakespeare's Margaret is far more dangerous, passionate, and powerful than the historical queen appears to be in his sources (120). She is also more sadistic. In presenting the spectacle of an English noble, one who traces his lineage through the Plantagenet kings, humiliated at the hands of a conspicuously foreign queen, the poet creates a strange fantasy of national abasement, of cultural degradation, and a space for interrogation of the specific English anxieties of the late sixteenth century: dynastic breach, imperial inversion, and the still-discomfiting figure of a Queen regnant, undertaken at a moment when these anxieties were approaching their zenith.²

In the century between her death and Shakespeare's tetralogy, Queen Margaret had come to be a limnal figure in the English imagination. As the daughter to the Duke of Lorraine and the wife to the King of England, she registers as neither wholly French nor wholly English. In her role as Queen to the invalid King Henry, she is neither fully a queen consort nor a queen regnant; she embodies elements of each, or we might better say that she usurps regnancy through a combination of seduction and force of will.³ Likewise, for all that she is described by the Tudor historians as beautiful, she is nevertheless pointedly androgynous. Polydore Vergil in his *Anglica Historia* describes her as "full of ... all manly qualities," while Edward Hall writes that her "stomacke and courage ...[was] more lyke to a man than a woman." (Lee 209)⁴

The renaissance imagination constructs Margaret as a monster in the literal sense of the word, a prodigy portending disorder (from the Latin *monstro*, meaning to warn). She is a French queen who dominates an English king: a beautiful woman possessing a man's strength, courage, and will. These popular imaginings provide all of the necessary raw materials

from which the playwright constructs his Queen Margaret, a nightmare from England's collective unconscious, embodying all of the nation's gendered political fears and anxieties of the late sixteenth century.

From her first appearance, in 5.2 of *1 Henry VI*, Shakespeare's Margaret is a totem, a fetish object, and her desirability is central to her power. Upon taking the stage, she is immediately eroticized. The Duke of Suffolk describes her as the "fairest beauty" and "nature's miracle", a "gorgeous beauty" who imitates "the sun upon the glassy streams, / Twinkling another counterfeited beam."⁵ Suffolk invokes the familiar neoplatonic trope of the lady reflecting the sun, although Margaret does so, ominously, at a remove, not merely reflecting the divine energy of the sun, but "counterfeit[ing]" it. She is the source of her own energy, which is of necessity something other than divine. The image forecasts Margaret's duality, and thus the impossibility of establishing, or even perceiving, a clear identity for her (5.2.83-84). As Suffolk notes, "Beauty's princely majesty is such, / Confounds the tongue, and makes the senses rough." (70-71)⁶

Margaret's beauty portends confusion for the state, as Suffolk acknowledges in lines 117-118 when he notes that Margaret's father, the Duke of Lorraine and Earl of Reignier, is "poor" and "[English] nobility will scorn the match." Her father grants her marriage to the English King "[u]pon condition [Reignier] may quietly / Enjoy ... the country of Maine and Anjou, / Free from oppression or the stroke of war ..." (174 - 177). In an inversion of gender orthodoxy, Margaret will take property from England by her marriage, rather than bringing property in a traditional dowry; she will reduce the nation, rather than enrich it. That said, despite her relatively low birth and inverted dowry, the Duke of Suffolk is the one who is abased in their negotiations, declaring "I unworthy am / To woo so fair a dame to be [Henry's] wife" (144-145). These inversions, of class, nation, and gender, are further underscored when Suffolk presents Margaret to Henry in 5.4, declaring that "[h]er peerless figure joined with her birth / Approves her fit for none but for a king. / Her valiant courage and undaunted spirit / (More than in woman commonly is seen) / Will answer our hope in issue of a king" (68-71). Of course, Margaret's "courage" and "undaunted spirit" contrast with her husband's qualities, highlighting his (and, implicitly, the nation's) essential weakness.

These qualities may do something else, as well, echoing as they do the description which Elizabeth gives of herself in her “Speech to the Troops at Tilbury” some three years earlier in which she declares herself to “have the heart and stomach of a king.” Suffolk’s language ostensibly serves to praise Margaret, but it also furthers her association with the reigning monarch Elizabeth. The audience cannot hear it without being reminded of the instability which follows after Margaret, and the implicit instability which will follow Elizabeth, who has not “answer[ed the nation’s] hope in issue of a king.”

The marriage of Margaret’s powerful spirit and masculine agency to Henry’s feckless pliancy bodes ill for the realm, and, historically, lent itself to salacious gossip, specifically the charge that Margaret had cuckolded her husband with the Duke of Suffolk. The charge is made all but explicitly in 1.1 of *2 Henry VI*, when the Duke of Gloucester laments that “Suffolk, the new-made duke that rules the roast, / Hath given the duchy of Anjou and Maine / Unto the poor King Reignier, whose large style / Agrees not with the leanness of his purse”⁷ (106-109). The reference to the ruling of “the roast (roost)” suggests the conventional association with the cuckoo, thought to lay its eggs in other nests to be raised by other birds, whose name provides the etymological root of the word *cuckold*.

Margaret’s adultery is suggested most powerfully, and most viscerally, in 4.4, when she enters cradling Suffolk’s bloody, severed head, declaring “Here may his head lie on my throbbing breast; / But where’s the body that I should embrace?” (6-5). The tableaux is a rich one, presenting Margaret not only as an adulteress (one who would “embrace” the “body” of her lover), but also as a kind of monstrous anti-mother who cradles to her “throbbing breast” not an infant representing new life, but the totem of death. She is likewise an anti-queen, cradling not an heir to ensure the continuance of the realm, but rather the embodiment of its breach. Her reference to her “throbbing breast” collapses together her madness and grief, along with erotic passion and a grotesquely inverted maternity. Beyond this, the Duke’s severed head reifies the separation which has occurred within the kingdom (largely through Margaret’s machinations – as Prince Edward notes in 2.2.159 of *3 Henry VI*, asking “what hath broached this tumult but thy pride?”) and forecasts her most conspicuous violation of feminine orthodoxy, her humiliation and murder of the Duke of York in 1.4 of *3 Henry VI*.

That scene presents Margaret's inversion, and the destruction she both enacts and facilitates, with a particular clarity. Margaret defies maternal tropes, taunting the captured York with the death of his son and rubbing his face with a rag soaked in the boy's blood, "to dry thy cheeks withal." The climax of her taunting occurs at line 95 when she affixes the paper crown upon his head, declaring "[a]y, marry, sir now looks he like a king" In placing the paper crown upon the head of York, Margaret effectively deconstructs the notion of providential monarchy, exposing the pretense which underpins kingship. Margaret's parody of coronation invites an audience to consider the nature of proper coronation. Is Henry a legitimate King? His grandfather won the throne by force, while he shows no aptitude for the role himself and allows his son to be disinherited. Is York a usurper? He never wins the crown, but two of his sons do and, as Kavita Mudan Finn notes, his claim "is, technically, the superior one" (130). What legitimizes a coronation, or a king? Is kingship divinely ordained, or is it merely the result of power and circumstance?⁸ Throughout the minor tetralogy, the golden crown is revealed to be essentially as ephemeral as the paper one, as claimant after claimant rises and falls upon what Jan Kott calls the Grand Mechanism (11).

At the point of his death, York provides Margaret with the sobriquet by which she will be known to history, declaring her "She-wolf of France, but worse than wolves of France, / Whose tongue more poisons than the adder's tooth! / How ill-beseeming is it in thy sex / To triumph, like an Amazonian trull, / Upon their woes whom fortune captivates ..., / O, tiger's heart wrapped in a woman's hide..." (111-115). In York's construction, Margaret embodies all of the predations of nature, combining the appetites of the wolf and the tiger with the venom of the adder. His words suggest the Queen's relation to the larger state: she both consumes and poisons it. She exists as a violation of every feminine convention, an "Amazonian trull," both conqueror and whore, a living inversion, and a prodigy of both gendered and political disorder. Her very presence on the stage deconstructs the carefully maintained edifice of stability and security, as well as androgynous authority, which was central to Elizabeth's monarchy.

Even the language in which her enemies insult her bespeaks Margaret's fundamental threat, and by extension, her strength. In 5.3 Richard of Gloucester, the future King Richard III, echoing the language of his father, refers to her as "Iron of Naples hid with English gilt, / Whose

father bears the title of a king,-- / As if a channel should be call'd the sea, ...” In attempting to highlight her inferiority, Richard paradoxically highlights her power, which derives not from her titles or her lineage, but rather from her nature. Her power is intrinsic to her. She is a queen of “iron”; if her titles are hollow, her will is nevertheless unyielding, and it is by force of will that she disrupts the realm, or perhaps merely facilitates that disruption. Indeed, it is “English gilt” which allows the Queen to breach the political order; England, by her hybris and her greed, is complicit in her own destruction. As Jean Howard notes in her introduction to *1HVI* in the Norton, the tetralogy is “not only about the valiant acts of ‘our forefathers’ but also about the failings of less admirable Englishmen and indeed about the actions of women” such as Margaret who speak “to anxieties generated very close to home” (441).

In *3HVI*, Margaret’s attack on York invites a complex response from the audience. As H. M. Richmond notes, the sufferings of York upon the dunghill are analogous to those of Christ upon the cross. Northumberland declares that York’s “passion moves me so / That hardly can I check my eyes from tears” (1.4.150-151), and Richmond observes how “the blood-soaked cloth is grotesquely analogous to the one offered by St. Veronica to Christ,” while, similar to Christ’s crown of thorns, “Richard also has his mock crown, from the hands of Margaret” (61). For all of those parallels, however, Richard of York is no Christ-figure. If he is a clear embodiment of English identity (tracing his lineage through the Plantagenets), particularly in contrast to the French Queen Margaret, he is also “a brutally ambitious man ... meeting his just desserts for having broken his oath to King Henry.” The implicit analogies to the Christian passion are “savagely ironic,” and Margaret is at once a vengeful fury and “the agent of just retribution” (61). At her most sadistic, Margaret is not merely an inversion of orthodox femininity, she is also an embodiment of the national anxiety, and her breaches of order are bound up in the crimes of the nation.

Even after Margaret’s final defeat at the Battle of Tewkesbury in 5.5, her spirit is unbroken. The historical Margaret of Anjou was imprisoned briefly in the Tower of London before being ransomed by King Louis XI in 1475, after which she retired to exile near Anjou. Shakespeare’s Queen Margaret, however, is not to be contained. She haunts the final play of the tetralogy, *Richard III*, as a fury, stripped of her beauty and her army, but not her iron will. The historical Margaret died in 1482, the year before

Richard III took the throne. Shakespeare's Margaret, then, is a wraith, the discontented ghost of the nation's past. As Phyllis Rackin writes, "Queen Margaret ... is kept alive in the England of Richard III to rail at the Yorkists and remind the audience of past crimes that make their present sufferings justified" (93). She has become, by the end of the tetralogy, the "voice of divine vengeance" (176).

Having passed, as Naomi Liebler notes, through all of the feminine Jungian archetypes (virgin, wife, mother, and crone) Margaret provides the play with its chorus, in the fashion of classical tragedy, exposing and decrying the crimes of Richard and underscoring once again the ephemerality of the monarchy, inviting the Duchess of York to

Tell o'er your woes again by viewing mine:
 I had an Edward, till a Richard kill'd him;
 I had a Harry, till a Richard kill'd him:
 Thou hadst an Edward, till a Richard kill'd him;
 Thou hadst a Richard, till a Richard killed him....
 Thy Edward he is dead, that kill'd my Edward;
 Thy other Edward dead, to quite my Edward
 Thy Clarence he is dead that stabb'd my Edward,
 And the beholders of this frantic play,
 Th' adulterate Hastings, Rivers, Vaughn, Grey,
 Untimely smother'd in their dusky graves. (4.4.39-43, 63-70)⁹ (79)

Richard calls her a "foul, wrinkled witch," and so she is; she is a soothsayer, the hideous embodiment, and the herald, of England's destruction. In Margaret's description, Kott's Grand Mechanism is laid bare, showing how tenuous and arbitrary is English history. As Kott describes it, the Grand Mechanism is "[a] succession of kings climbing and pushing one another off the grand staircase of history ... a natural order that has been violated, so that evil produces evil, every injury calls for revenge, every crime produces another" (30). In *3HVI*, Margaret is a participant in this mechanism; after her defeat, she merely exposes it, a fury to plague her hearers, both on the stage and in the audience, with the truth of the history which they are doomed to relive.

Of course, in one sense the nation was already reliving its history in the person of Queen Elizabeth, the "model of a successful female ruler", personified as "Gloriana, Belpheobe, Judith and Astrea ... a sovereign prince who was also a woman" (Lee 211). At the same time, Elizabeth could

never fully transcend the anxieties represented by the figure of Queen Margaret, among others. She was constrained by the same androgynous tropes embodied in Shakespeare's Margaret. As Patricia-Ann Lee observes, "bitter and powerful" feelings of misogyny "were tied to political considerations" in a series of tracts and sermons, of which Knox' *First Blast of the Trumpet Against the Monstrous Regiment of Women* was only the most famous (213). The complex, seductive, and terrifying figure of Shakespeare's Margaret, emerging as she does late in the reign of Elizabeth, when succession anxiety was beginning to grip the nation, reifies English fears, and perhaps her paradoxical desires, as well.

Shakespeare's Queen Margaret is simultaneously an embodiment of history and, in Rackin's description, a "subverter of history" (73), a theatrical deconstruction of the Tudor myth. We might productively consider Dollimore's observation that, in the late sixteenth-century, "the didactic stress on order" particularly in regards to the Tudor myth, was "in part an anxious reaction to emergent and (in)-subordinate social forces which were perceived as threatening" as well as "an ideological legitimation ... rendered the more necessary by the apparent instability" of the social order (5). To borrow Raymond Williams' phrasing, in Materialist terms, the figure of Margaret is at once an element of England's residual culture, *id est* a holdover from Tudor historiography, and at the same time an emergent element, a sixteenth-century stage Machiavel who interrogates popular assumptions regarding national identity and providential order, *id est* the Tudor myth, even as she ostensibly embodies them.

In the complex, ahistorical figure of Queen Margaret, the poet constructs a kind of fantasy of national abasement, an inversion of the imperial project in which the subjugated foreign power, in this case conquered France, returns with a literal vengeance. Shakespeare's Margaret is the anxious nightmare of a nascent empire already in fear of its decline. In the case of Queen Margaret, this nightmare is compounded by her gender; she inverts orthodox English femininity, as well as political dogma and notions of providence, in a sadistic, carnal monster of appetite, proving herself equal, and even the superior, of the ruthless men she opposes, and she remains unbowed, haunting the English imagination even in defeat.

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¹ All quotations from *3 Henry VI* are taken from the third Arden edition (ed. John D. Cox and Eric Rasmussen) unless otherwise noted.

² See also Jean Howard who notes, "Margaret, striding into battle, orchestrating the knightening of her son (2.2.58-60), silencing her husband if he will not give defiance to his enemies (II.iii118), and instilling courage in her soldiers by her rhetoric (5.4.1-38), is a figure who evokes what we might call 'Amazon anxiety.'" (*Engendering a Nation* 94)

³ As Anne Crawford writes, Margaret is ensconced in the historical consciousness as "an object lesson in how not to behave as a queen consort" (53).

⁴ As Imogene Dudley notes, "[t]he nature of the primary sources and the developing historiography has culminated in the creation of two opposing Margarets in popular

culture: a proud, cold, power-hungry and sexually immoral she-wolf on one hand, and a softer, courageous, proto-feminist heroine on the other” (216).

⁵ All quotations from *1 Henry VI* are taken from the third Arden edition (ed. Edward Burns) unless otherwise noted.

⁶ We see in these descriptions another echo of Elizabeth, whose beauty was, famously, central to her persona, being celebrated in her portraiture and allegorized by Spenser as the “most ... beautiful Lady” Gloriana the Faerie Queene.

⁷ All quotations from *2 Henry VI* are taken from the third Arden edition (ed. Ronald Knowles) unless otherwise noted.

⁸ Finn notes “the ultimate emptiness of dynastic claims” in the tetralogy, such that “lineage ...has little discernible effect on the events as they transpire” (129).

⁹ All quotations from *Richard III* are taken from the third Arden edition (ed. James Siemon) unless otherwise noted.