IN Richard III, the climax of the first historical tetralogy, Shakespeare weaves the strands of the earlier plays into a full artistic unity. Whatever the merits of the Henry VI plays, they are seldom performed; and whatever the limitations of Richard III compared to the later masterpieces, it is one of the most popular plays in the canon. Sir Thomas More's fine ironic portrait of an evil king gave Shakespeare rich material to work from. Having a dominant protagonist implicit in the source may have freed him from some of the perils of the chronicle form. He may have learned from Marlowe how to shape a play around a great villain. But however the growth came about, the poetic and dramatic patterns of the tetralogy here attain a new concentration. The family, as important a presence in this play as in 3 Henry VI, contributes to the new unity of effect.

What gives order to Richard III is the central conflict between the villain-king and the power of nemesis. This vengeful force has some effect on the consciousness of Richard himself; but it is primarily an external force, embodied in the curses, the wailing
women, and the figure of Richmond as God’s minister. Although the concept of nemesis is in part Senecan, Shakespeare fuses this classical power with Christian Providence. Thus he tempers the melodrama of Thyestes’ creator with the sober moralism of Edward Hall and the authors of A Mirror for Magistrates. One might see Margaret as a more realistic version of the Senecan ghost, but as the play goes on, Richmond and the Yorkist women take over her role as the spokesmen of nemesis.

Also Richard himself is by no means an ordinary Senecan villain swept by passion. In the first place, he has the qualities of the Elizabethan Machiavel, a modification of Seneca’s rulers to emphasize their disruptive effect on the orthodox political order. What takes him out of the ranks of Elizabethan Senecanism, however, is his connection with the traditional Vice, the stock villain of the morality plays. Whereas the Senecan tyrant rages against virtue in the name of ambition or lust, Richard, “like the formal vice, Iniquity” (III.i.82), thrives by an ironic detachment from all the standards of traditional morality, including the claims of the family. Like Politic Persuasion in John Phillip’s Patient Grissell, he undermines the bonds of natural love by his plots. Richard shares with the Vice his consummate hypocrisy and his demonic sense of humor, both of which exploit the morality of the family. Thus he draws on three traditions of evil: the Senecan villain for his personal forcefulness and powerful position, the Machiavellian schemer for his political nihilism, and the morality Vice for his ironic detachment from human feeling. Shakespeare's villain
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is a formidable opponent for the nemesis of the play, not just a tool of superhuman forces.

The main role of the family in Richard III is to make nemesis more than just a Senecan doom, to give it weight and ethical meaning as a force of Providence. Richard's demonism shows itself in his attacks on the family; and a marriage, the union of Richmond and Queen Elizabeth's daughter, symbolizes the triumph of Providence. Even before this union the opposition to Richard speaks through the wailing women, who call on the moral standards of the family. Their scenes of lamentation use the ritualistic technique of the Henry VI plays with its appeal to traditional morality and religion, but the ritualistic scenes in Richard III have an even more central place in developing the theme. The scenes of lamentation and the character of Richard are the two poles around which the language of the play clusters, though references to the family pervade the entire play.

If Richard III achieves a uniquely English and popular Senecanism, one of the main reasons is its language. The clumsy and merely decorative classical allusions of the Henry VI plays have largely vanished, and the tricks of formal rhetoric are adapted to a thoroughly English idiom. What The Spanish Tragedy does for the Senecan plot, Richard III does for its language. The tone of the play is lofty and severely ornate. Emotional climaxes use a highly stylized language that almost completely obscures individual voices; but the characteristic appeal of such passages is to the commonplaces of the family, religion, and the state, not to literary knowledge. One such moment
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is King Edward's lament when he discovers that Clarence is dead:

Have I a tongue to doom my brother's death,
And shall that tongue give pardon to a slave?
My brother kill'd no man: his fault was thought;
And yet his punishment was bitter death.
Who sued to me for him? who, in my rage,
Kneel'd at my feet, and bade me be advis'd?
Who spoke of brotherhood? who spoke of love?

(II.i.102-8)

The vocabulary of this speech is by no means Latinate, though it is abstract and generalized. The main poetic devices are rhetorical: parallelism of short clauses and phrases, antithesis, anaphora, and other repetition of key words and ideas. The reiteration of "brother" suggests how unnatural is Edward's crime, how it wars against the love that should bind families together. One hears the natural voice of brotherhood in his recollection of Clarence's words:

Who told me, in the field by Tewkesbury,
When Oxford had me down, he rescued me,
And said "Dear brother, live, and be a king"?

(111-13)

Their directness and simplicity have the power of contrast in this formally rhetorical speech, but both brothers express reconcilement, the return of natural love. Their reconciliation may be only in death, but their dying words help to evoke the morality by which Richard is finally judged. Reference to the family
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plays an important part in establishing the moral
ground of this passage, as it does in the play as a
whole.

Richard himself, who uses the rhetorical patterns of
the others only with irony, has a distinctive language
in this otherwise homogeneous play. His characteristic
idiom is vigorous and homely. Shakespeare may be
transferring Sir Thomas More's colloquial irony to
Richard, but the device has dramatic precedent in
comic morality characters and in the earlier plays of
the tetralogy. Anarchic figures like Joan of Arc smile
at the formal moralizings of the spokesmen for vir­tue. Since Richard is the arch-rebel against order, it
is not surprising that he excels in parody of the lofty
style. The evil that in the Henry VI plays spread
through the two conflicting houses of Lancaster and
York is by now concentrating more and more in Rich­ard, who acts to destroy his own house and family.
Edward, Clarence, Anne, Elizabeth, the Duchess of
York—all defend family love and loyalty with at least
some sincerity, while he laughs at all such moral
claims. Except when the approach of new wars
changes the focus of the play for a time, this conflict
in attitudes is one of the controlling themes.

Just as in the earlier plays, destruction of the family,
corrupted inheritance, and tainted marriage pervade
the language and action of Richard III. When the
Duchess of York recalls what has happened to her
family, she sums up the pattern of disorder in the
tetralogy:

My husband lost his life to get the crown;
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And often up and down my sons were toss'd,
For me to joy and weep their gain and loss:
And being seated, and domestic broils
Clean over-blown, themselves, the conquerors,
Make war upon themselves, brother to brother,
Blood to blood, self against self.

(II.iv.57-63)

This despair and longing for returned order and natural affection fill most of the characters. Clarence, who repents his earlier ambition, is haunted by a vision of disorder. When his dream inspires remorseful forebodings, he asks that God at least "spare my guiltless wife and my poor children" (I.iv.72). When he disputes with the murderers, he grasps desperately at the hope of Richard's brotherly love and recalls how York charged the three sons to love one another. With similar futility the dying Edward tries to end the quarrels among his kindred and allies and seems to find hope in their hypocritical vows of reconciliation. But when Richard brings the news of Clarence's execution, the king is forced to see the uselessness of his efforts. Even the ordinary citizens are shown worrying about dissen­sion among the new young king's uncles after Edward's death. Only Richard is undisturbed by his awareness of a disorder that has eroded the bonds of family.

The end of the play has a concentration of generalized references to the destruction of the family by civil war and Richard's tyranny. When Richard swears to Queen Elizabeth by the time to come, she denies his right to do so:

The children live, whose fathers thou hast slaughter'd,
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Ungovern'd youth, to wail it with their age;
The parents live, whose children thou hast butcher'd,
Old barren plants, to wail it with their age.

(IV.iv.394-97)

As in 3 Henry VI, this kind of reference helps to expand the significance of the ritualistic scenes of lament. The wailing women become typical of a whole nation, and their tears mark the suffering of England under a curse.

Also the two rivals for the crown appeal to the family in their battle orations, with a characteristic difference of tone. Richmond speaks with lofty abstraction:

If you do fight in safeguard of your wives,
Your wives shall welcome home the conquerors;
If you do free your children from the sword,
Your children's children quits it in your age.

(V.iii.260-63)

The oratory is impeccable with its neatly balanced parallelism and its reliance on stock emotions, but it is rather colorless opposite Richard's bluntness:

If we be conquer'd, let men conquer us,
And not these bastard Bretons, whom our fathers
Have in their own land beaten, bobb'd, and thump'd,
And in record left them the heirs of shame.
Shall these enjoy our lands? lie with our wives?
Ravish our daughters?

(V.iii.333-38)

He appeals to the English heritage of valor and con-
trans the corrupted inheritance of the Bretons. The homely vigor of “beaten, bobb’d, and thump’d” plays against the abstract figure of the next line. Apart from its dramatic context, the speech is a fine rallying cry to defend the hearth and home, the sort of words one might expect from Talbot or Faulconbridge. But the last lines are likely to remind the audience that Richard has made “quick conveyance” with Anne (IV.iv.286). He has a legitimate claim to talk of warlike courage, but his appeal to protect the family is blatant hypocrisy.

Richmond has the last word on this theme when in his closing speech he alludes to the family with the power of deeply felt commonplace:

England hath long been mad, and scarr’d herself;
The brother blindly shed the brother’s blood;
The father rashly slaughter’d his own son;
The son, compell’d, been butcher to the sire.

(V.v.23-26)

The link to the father-and-son scene of 3 Henry VI is apparent, but it is more important that these lines conjure up a vision of all four plays as a time of unnatural disorder, a time now past. E. M. W. Tillyard emphasizes the significance of the oration: “Every sentence of Richmond’s last speech, today regarded as a competent piece of formality, would have raised the Elizabethans to an ecstasy of feeling.” Though one may find his confidence in the power of commonplace excessive, the judgment is basically sound. In this speech Richmond comes closest to being a worthy antagonist
of the formidable Crookback, and his appeal to the family is one source of his strength.

Like family disorder, inheritance is a recurring theme in the language of Richard III. Carried over from the earlier plays is the idea of hatred that spreads from parent to child. Richard’s enmity is especially quick to go beyond one foe to all his kin, as Elizabeth suggests when she urges her son Dorset to flee because “Thy mother’s name is ominous to children” (IV.i.40). Among the other characters Margaret revels in the sufferings of her foes’ children. Still this kind of hatred is concentrated more and more in Richard alone. The Duchess of York even tells of having wept for the sufferings of Margaret, who killed her husband and son. And at last virtue can be inherited as well as enmity. The doctrine of orderly succession with its corollary heritage of virtue gradually reasserts itself despite Richard’s cynical abuse of it. References to the traditional symbol of the sun-king suggest how powerful a force for good in the land the king is, but at the same time the frequent play on son suggests the importance of lineal succession.

Another metaphor of inheritance, that of plants and growth, is even more common. Before Buckingham clearly associates himself with Richard’s villainy, he uses this figure to express a noble sentiment at Edward’s death:

Though we have spent our harvest of this king,  
We are to reap the harvest of his son.  

(II.ii.115-16)
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But as he involves himself in Richard's scheme, the two of them manipulate the ideal of kingly inheritance with cynical freedom. Buckingham learns from his tutor in evil to accuse the new king and his brother of bastardy. In the little play enacted for the mayor and chief citizens, he charges that Richard has abandoned

The lineal glory of your royal house,
To the corruption of a blemish'd stock.
(III.vii.121-22)

A few lines later (127) he makes the plant image explicit, and with consummate hypocrisy Richard uses the same image in his rebuff: "The royal tree hath left us royal fruit" (167). But even these cynical echoes reinforce the traditional commonplaces by ironic restatement. They foreshadow the return to orderly succession that Richmond brings.

If Richard is full of expressions of filial duty, Richmond acts like a son. If Richard feigns a tender concern for his mother's name even while blackening it, Richmond asks after his mother with filial concern. If Richard carries his mother's curse into battle, Richmond learns that he has his mother's prayers. Thus the Tudor hero reveals the virtue and strength of a noble inheritance. A shadowy figure he may be, but the ideas he stands for are clear enough. By his marriage to Elizabeth of York he makes the House of Tudor undisputed claimant to the throne (in Shakespeare if not in fact) and therefore untainted in its nobility. For the first time since Edward III's death, hereditary
right and the power and ability to rule have come together. Since the threat to successive inheritance has distilled into Richard’s malevolence, it perishes with his destruction.

In the Henry VI plays marriage is a tool of ambition and wedded life a microcosm of the disorder in the state. This distortion of the orthodox pattern of marriage recurs in Richard III, especially toward the beginning. The folly of King Edward’s marriage is an important element in 3 Henry VI, and in this play Richard echoes all the old attacks on it. Indeed, he suggests that through the queen’s rancor the marriage lies behind most of the strife in the court. There is some truth to this charge, since she has apparently used her influence over Edward to elevate her kin, thereby earning the hatred of Edward’s family and allies. She seems to have been responsible for Hastings’s imprisonment, but of course Clarence’s arrest and death, which Richard blames on her, are in fact his own contrivance. There are no women’s quarrels at court comparable to that between Queen Margaret and the Duchess of Gloucester in 2 Henry VI, but there is a hint of similar enmity when Elizabeth alludes to the arrogance of Stanley’s wife and Stanley evasively apologizes for her. Here and elsewhere it is not clear how sincere is the queen’s avowed meekness and how much it covers spite and ambition for her kin. At any rate, adversity soon drains her of pride, while Richard’s rise to power overshadows these petty dissensions of the court.

The most important use of marriage is in the contrast between Richard’s Machiavellian schemes and
the reconciling union of Richmond and the younger Elizabeth. Seeing in Richmond's marriage a symbol of the reconciliation after the civil war goes back at least to Edward Hall, who in his dedication to Edward VI writes: "For as kyng henry the fourthe was the begin­nyng and rote of the great discord and deuision: so was the godly matrimony, the final ende of all discen­cions, titles and debates." This theme receives its clearest statement in Richmond's closing speech, though it is less trumpeted there than in the ending of The True Tragedy of Richard the Third, an anonymous play some form of which was probably one of Shakespeare's sources. The difference is no doubt owing to decorum; it would not be appropriate for this severe tragedy of retribution to end with The True Tragedy's pageant of kings and exhortation to England to "kneele upon thy hairy knee" in thanks. Even so, Richmond's language gives the marriage divine endorsement and cosmic importance:

Smile Heaven upon this fair conjunction,
That long have frown'd upon their enmity!

(V.v.20-21)

Richard as Enemy of the Family

Richard and the women who oppose him determine the role of the family in Richard III. Richard's character is established in part by his antagonism toward the values of the family and especially by his behavior toward Margaret, Anne, Elizabeth, and the
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Duchess of York. The dramatic role of these women centers in the scenes of lamentation and the episodes of confrontation with Richard which often follow those scenes. Thus one can study the role of the family in the play by looking at Richard's character in relation to it and then at the lamenting scenes and confrontations.

A description of Richard's character in relation to the family is bound to ignore part of him, especially his behavior as politician and warrior. Still much of his character comes out in his dealings with the family. The Richard who dupes the Mayor of London with his prayer book and bishops is not very different from the Richard who convinces Anne of his holy penitence. What loyalty is to the state, love is to the family. In the family as in the state Richard is from beginning to end an alien force, a monster. In his first soliloquy he argues that his hunchback prevents success in love:

And therefore, since I cannot prove a lover,
To entertain these fair well-spoken days,
I am determined to prove a villain,
And hate the idle pleasures of these days.

(I.i.28-31)

Shakespeare presents Richard's deformity both ways: as one cause for his hostility to those who can love and be loved and as a portent of his unnatural evil. In an age that has great faith in the power of psychology to explain and eliminate human evil, it is tempting to interpret his malevolence as compensation, but that is oversimple. What makes him formid-
able and even convincing as a portrait of evil is the discrepancy between the causes for his alienation and the monster he is. Besides, his hunchback is not the only portent that sets him off from ordinary human nature. This play follows 3 Henry VI in emphasizing his unnatural birth. Not only does the young Duke of York jest about Richard's being born with teeth, but the old Duchess recalls her abnormal birth-pangs in the course of reproving his viciousness. Omens like these have marked him as a demonic force, an enemy to natural order.

In the railing that fills Richard III, references to his deformity are countless, but Margaret most accurately defines its symbolic meaning:

Thou elvish-mark'd, abortive, rooting hog!
Thou that wast seal'd in thy nativity
The slave of nature and the son of hell!
Thou slander of thy heavy mother's womb!
Thou loathed issue of thy father's loins!

(I.iii.228-32)

Richard is the final corruption of natural inheritance, the extreme result of a process that operates through the entire tetralogy. He has received none of the nobility of the York line, nothing to inspire his parents' pride. Elizabeth charges him with having dishonored his father's death, and his mother repudiates this product of her nurture. Of the many animal images applied to him, which suggest his inhumanity, most important are the frequent references to him as the boar. He inherits, not the symbolic tradition of his
family crest, but its literal meaning monstrously come
to life. He is not only natural inheritance corrupted
("the slave of nature"), but also a demon incarnate
("the son of hell"). All of the evil that has infected
England comes together in one monstrous creature,
whose destruction purges the kingdom. The reassertion
of family loyalty in others as the play goes on makes
Richard's alienation all the more conspicuous.

But Richard is a very special kind of monster, the
monster as humorist. To him the code of traditional
morality and the bonds of social affection are not a
hated enemy but an amusing tool. He uses them to
play with other people's emotions, both to attain his
secret ends and out of sheer virtuosity. If he were an
embittered outcast, he would never have the detach­
ment to be such a consummate hypocrite. Hatred is
a powerful form of evil, but Richard goes beyond
hatred to the malevolence of the brilliant man, con­
tempt. Without passion he can juggle family affections
just as he does religion and political orthodoxy. Every
now and then a touch of envy does appear and
express itself in open hatred. In the film of Richard III
Sir Laurence Olivier lets a spasm of rage flash across
his face when the young Duke of York playfully refers
to his deformity. Buckingham seems to have a glimpse
of the power of this hatred when Richard's denial of
his suit makes him decide to flee.

This Richard is rarely seen, however. For the most
part his dazzling skill in hypocrisy enables him to pose
as a supporter of traditional morality. Like the old Vice
he is able to manipulate the clichés of family duty;
but also like the Vice, when he knows that people see
through his hypocrisy, he delights in playing with these clichés simply to shock them. His kneeling for his mother’s blessing is a typically sardonic gesture, and it follows close upon the report of an even more cynical piece of deception. Clarence’s son tells the Duchess of York that Richard blamed King Edward for Clarence’s death, wept, and promised to “love me dearly as a child” (II.ii.26). This trick is the sheer virtuosity of evil, since Richard has no need to dupe this feeble-minded youth. More purposeful though similar in manner are the constant professions of brotherly love to Edward and Clarence.

Richard is also fond of parading the doctrines of moral inheritance. Buckingham and he riot in the pretense that they are shocked by the bastardy of Edward and his sons as well as by Edward’s lust and Hastings’s adultery with Jane Shore. Buckingham ably picks up the jargon of Richard’s pose:

Withal I did infer your lineaments,
Being the right idea of your father,
Both in your form and nobleness of mind.

(III.vii.12-14)

That is, unlike his supposedly illegitimate brother Edward, Richard is the true inheritor of his father’s virtue. Of course Buckingham is no more deceived by these pretenses than Richard himself. Knowing this, Richard delights all the more in playing the tender son who will not have his mother’s reputation smeared any more than is necessary. He manipulates the values of marriage just as he does those of filial piety. In
seeking an appropriate weapon to oppose the queen’s party, he makes great use of Edward’s hasty marriage to one of questionable parentage, a widow and a Lancastrian as well.

The flexibility with which Richard changes from pose to pose in the first three scenes, each time expressing a new attitude toward love and marriage, is one of the first indications of his brilliance in villainy. He repudiates love with frank malevolence in the soliloquy that opens the play, but when Clarence enters, a new Richard speaks with soldierly toughness about Edward’s infatuation for his queen and Jane Shore. Like Iago, Richard acts the blunt military man, one who scorns the lust that makes men submit to female dominion. In the soliloquy that ends the scene, this cynicism alters subtly in tone to become, not the public role of rough-spoken virtue, but demonic pleasure in his inversion of all moral standards:

For then I’ll marry Warwick’s youngest daughter.  
What though I killed her husband and her father?  
The readiest way to make the wench amends  
Is to become her husband and her father.  

(I.i.153-56)

Then, in order to outwit Anne and subdue her weak will, he takes up the role of the conventional Petrar­chan lover. A scene later, as he insults the queen and her relatives, he has returned to the blunt soldier, scornful of Edward’s uxoriousness and too honest to hide his scorn.

Thus at the beginning of the play Richard’s in-
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humanity allows him to dart from role to role at his pleasure so that he can manipulate the affections and loyalties of the family. His rivals are helpless before him because they are torn between their ambitions and hatreds on the one hand and their scruples on the other. Later he seems to lose power, not so much because he declines as because his opposition is able to find a moral stance. Especially, the murder of the princes, who are his kin and his charge as Lord Protector, unites everyone in shocked opposition. Confronted by this renewed moral unanimity, his hypocrisy is no longer nearly so effective.

With the whole natural order and even the supernatural marshaled against him, Richard momentarily succumbs to horror at his isolation. The coming of the ghosts at V.iii is the last of the emblematic scenes; but of the wailing women only Anne is present, and the family is a minor theme. The soliloquy that follows throws important light on Richard's character. His pride of intellect temporarily suspended by the terrors of the night, he reveals how destructive his chosen isolation from human affection has been:

I shall despair. There is no creature loves me;
And, if I die, no soul will pity me:
Nay, wherefore should they, since that I myself
Find in myself no pity to myself?
(V.iii.201-4)

For the first time he feels his isolation with real pain. The last two lines show him regaining control over himself with rueful irony. Only by repudiating pity,
even for himself, can he escape the debt of pity for his victims and hence a crippling remorse. This soliloquy is the one occasion on which he speaks of his conscience, and even here Shakespeare's artistry is not especially subtle in portraying his divided mind. Still the moral logic of the passage is clear and true: a man who denies human affection becomes a monster, one in whom even self-love is no more than a tautology: "Richard loves Richard; that is, I am I" (184).

But Shakespeare allows the humorous monster to regain his full vigor before he dies. Richard's return to the battlefield from "this weak piping time of peace" (I.i.24) produces this recovery. If hypocrisy is no longer a possible stance for him, open warfare against the forces of good is. Proclaiming the Machiavel's code, he leads his troops into battle, and Shakespeare gives his great villain a heroic death in single combat with Richmond. Richard dies alone, struggling against the man who will bring order to England, just as he has always stood alone against all the values that bind society together.

The Family as Antagonist

Richard III gives a new prominence to the ritualistic method shown in the father-and-son scene of 3 Henry VI. In that play Henry VI and two representatives of England lament the consequences of civil war, and in Richard III the women lament the victims of Richard's tyranny. The last play of the tetralogy expands the technique into three long passages of ritual grief and
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several shorter ones. Balancing the pyrotechnic displays of Richard's evil, these scenes reveal the moral force that eventually destroys him. Opposite his fluid rhetoric they establish a severe and lofty idiom, which comes to dominate the play, though at first it may seem ineffective against him. Unfortunately this idiom is strange to modern audiences, so much so that these scenes are severely shortened or eliminated in almost all modern productions, which turn Richard III into a one-man play. Sir Laurence Olivier's film version illustrates this tendency.

Such near-unanimity poses the question whether any amount of historical imagination can make these scenes fully effective or whether Shakespeare has simply failed to create a worthy antagonist for his heroic villain. Is Richard too big for his role in the plot, as is often claimed of Falstaff and Shylock? Is his final defeat mere theatrical fakery, called for by the chronicles and a political moral but not given sufficient dramatic cause? Unless nemesis is strong enough to balance the hero-villain, Richard III is merely a brilliant melodrama. Since Richmond's role is kept to a minimum, nemesis must speak primarily through the women. Only if these scenes are successful does nemesis have dramatic viability.

Hence Shakespeare has given new importance to his ritualistic scenes. No longer just reiterating an established theme in a different key, they form a vital part of the play. Richmond can oppose Richard as warrior, but this is primarily a play of intrigue, not battle: Richard rises to the throne by plotting against his own family. The women of that family express the values
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that he opposes, and through the looming presence of Queen Margaret their grief is invested with power. She brings the Senecan power to curse, but she is after all outside the York family and besides is tainted with her own past crimes. She can represent the Senecan vengeance that pursues crime, but not the nobler idea of a ruling Providence. Only when Richard's wife and mother are moved to curse him is his doom sealed. A closer investigation of this pattern in the play may suggest whether or not it succeeds in providing a balance for Richard's villainy.

Lady Anne, widow of a prince whom Richard has helped kill, first sounds the note of lamentation as she follows Henry VI's coffin. Although there is no full-scale scene of mourning, her language foreshadows the later technique. A passage from her monologue illustrates how these lamentations pit Richard's barbarity against the values of the family:

If ever he have child, abortive be it,
Prodigious, and untimely brought to light,
Whose ugly and unnatural aspect
May fright the hopeful mother at the view,
And that be heir to his unhappiness!
If ever he have wife, let her be made
More miserable by the death of him
Than I am made by my young lord and thee!

(I.i.21-28)

The heavy regularity of the lines, bare of decoration except for their balanced syntax and the paired abstractions, establishes the dominant style for lamentation. But Anne is hardly a formidable antagonist for
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Richard, since within two hundred lines she brings this curse on herself.

Richard's entrance violently interrupts her grief, a dramatic pattern that will recur. With remarkable audacity he courts and wins her love. Their language suggests the ease with which he subdues her resistance: Anne is confined to a rigidly formal style, while he slips into and out of whatever artificial mode he chooses. He competes with her in an opening stichomythic combat until he suddenly shatters the decorum (and the meter) with his blunt proposal:

Anne. And thou unfit for any place but hell.
Glou. Yes, one place else, if you will hear me name it.
Anne. Some dungeon.
Glou. Your bedchamber.

(I.ii.109-11)

Then with consummate skill he shifts to the Petrarchan language of love. Because he is completely detached from the love and honor that her speech evokes, he can take her out of her depth by using her mode and then suddenly switching out of it. His own characteristic way of speaking reappears with brilliant effect in the soliloquy that closes the scene. This dazzlingly theatrical scene starts one of the central patterns of the play, the confrontation of formal mourning by Richard's amoral virtuosity. Anne's malleability makes the weakness of the women apparent. The consequence of their skirmish is Richard's marriage to his foe's widow, a grotesque parody of the union that ends the play. His anarchic power triumphs with
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ease over Anne, a representative of traditional values and of the solemn and artificial rhetoric that expresses them.

The first extended scene of wailing comes at II.ii, when the Duchess of York and Queen Elizabeth mourn the deaths of Clarence and King Edward. Clarence's children join in to give the scene an easy pathos, but they also show that the court has not yet come together in opposition to Richard's crimes, that inherited hatreds still divide his enemies. They refuse to mourn Edward because they think that the queen has been their father's enemy. This scene with its antiphony on repeated names and labels of kinship establishes the pattern of communal lamentation.

Chil. Ah! for our father, for our dear lord Clarence!
Duch. Alas! for both, both mine, Edward and Clarence!
Q. Eliz. What stay had I but Edward? and he's gone.
Chil. What stay had we but Clarence? and he's gone.
Duch. What stays had I but they? and they are gone.
Q. Eliz. Was never widow had so dear a loss!
Chil. Were never orphans had so dear a loss!
Duch. Was never mother had so dear a loss!

(72-79)

The technique is similar to the antiphony of king, father, and son in 3 Henry VI, though this scene makes less appeal to universal significance and more to pathos. Like the earlier figures, these four are the debris of a conflict that has passed them by, left behind to speak freely because they are so ineffectual.

As with Anne's mourning for Henry VI, the weight of the scene is undercut when Richard enters. He
offers a few words of consolation to Elizabeth and then with zestful hypocrisy asks for his mother’s blessing. The venerable Duchess obliges him with a blessing that is an implied reproof, but he laughs at her in a flippant aside. He and Buckingham promptly set to work to outwit their rivals, and the scene closes on their scheming. It is clear that their villainy controls events with ease and the women can only register their opposition. Although these women are less malleable than Anne, they are just as futile. The pathos of their mourning may be greater, but there is still no hint that they embody the power of nemesis.

Richard as Machiavellian plotter holds the center of the stage through Act III and the first part of Act IV, though the women appear briefly in II.iv and IV.i. The latter scene shifts abruptly in tone from the triumphant mummery of Buckingham and Richard before the London worthies. Elizabeth, Anne, and the Duchess of York come together to visit the princes in the Tower and there hear the news of Richard’s impending coronation. The signs of his hatred and power make their love seem even more futile. Motherly affection can do nothing except harm its children or, worse yet, produce a monster. The Duchess voices this fatal paradox: “O my accursed womb, the bed of death!” (IV.i.53). Anne emphasizes their weakness by recalling how she succumbed to Richard’s wooing and how her curse has fallen on her own head. The scene ends with Elizabeth’s pathetic lines begging from the Tower itself the humanity of which Richard has stripped the English court:
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Rough cradle for such little pretty ones,
Rude ragged nurse, old sullen playfellow
For tender princes, use my babies well!

(IV.i.100-2)

The conceited epithets for the Tower, which offended Samuel Johnson, seem appropriate to Elizabeth's conscious unreality. Like Richard II she indulges her grief even though she is conscious of her "foolish sorrow" (103). The tyrant's cynical voice is not allowed to break in on the integrity of this grief, yet his power is at its peak.

By IV.iv, however, the murder of the princes has brought a turn of fortune. Margaret now returns to the action and describes the change vividly:

So! now prosperity begins to mellow
And drop into the rotten mouth of death.

(1-2)

The most powerful of the wailing scenes follows when the other queens come in to lament the princes' deaths. Their pathetic vein is toughened by Margaret's more aggressive rhetoric, in which the iterative imagery of most early Shakespearian purple passages is just starting to become progressive and organic. (See, for example, lines 47-58.) Her finest speech, beginning at line 82, pulls together some of the most important themes of the play. She recalls the long past history of crimes that have led to this terrible hour. One line (86) evokes the image of the Wheel of Fortune, which raises people up only to throw them down. This
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pattern is part of the drama, but later she gives the same figure a different color, one closer to the import of Richard III:

Thus hath the course of justice whirl'd about,
And left thee but a very prey to time.

(105-6)

Just as in the Tudor modifications of the morality play, Fortune becomes an instrument of retributive justice.\textsuperscript{12} With fearsome precision Margaret balances Elizabeth's sufferings against her own, as she has earlier done for the Duchess of York.

Margaret, the only character to appear in all four plays, fuses the events of the tetralogy into a single historical vision. Her tigerish ferocity is not gone but modulated into an austere wrath dignified by the severe regularity of her poetic idiom. She talks with the weight of one who comprehends the whole sweep of events. Thus she surveys the past to show how the destruction of her family has destroyed the families of these rival women. Her force of will inspires them to a new violence of anger against Richard. He is undaunted and apparently unharmed by her curses; after all, she is an old enemy, a Lancastrian. But when the Yorkist women, members of his own family, curse him, his complete isolation becomes clear.

Emboldened by Margaret, the other women sound far less ineffectual when she leaves. As Richard enters in procession, the Duchess of York for the first time pronounces her maternal curse on him. These words are more than "Windy attorneys to their client woes"
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(127); they imply the strength that is in a curse, a strength that pervades the tetralogy. Richard’s mocking tone provides a new confrontation of the two styles, but this time the victory is not unequivocally his. With an admirably orthodox sentiment he calls on drums and trumpets to drown out their agonized questions:

Let not the heavens hear these tell-tale women
Rail on the Lord’s anointed!

(150-51)

The mock-solemnity is amusing, but his pious words raise the question whether heaven may indeed be hearing their curses. The Duchess, never a contemptible figure, rises to new dignity in this scene, though she cannot silence her son’s brisk levity. Even his light answer does not obscure the terrible weight of her question: “Art thou my son?” (155). Now the two strongest-willed people of the drama meet head-on. If Richard is undaunted by her enmity, still his irony is reduced to a petulant “So” by her measured tones.5

She leaves the stage and the play with a curse on her unnatural son, one that gains formidable power from its dignity and restraint. Shakespeare uses the Elizabethan horror at a parent’s curse to blacken Joan of Arc before her execution, but here the device gains effect from being woven more tightly into the structure of the play. Not only has the curse that leads to retribution been a recurring theme, but this speech foreshadows the ghost scene, in which the souls of Edward’s children do, as she prays, curse Richard and

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bless his foe. It is appropriate that his fortunes turn sharply downward from this point on. Always before his alienation from the human bonds of family has seemed a strength. Now, when his mother's voice merges with nemesis, it becomes for the first time a weakness.

Richard blandly turns from his mother's curse to reenact the wooing scene of Act I. His aim is to guarantee his succession through marrying Elizabeth's daughter. The episode is an extended and less effective version of Anne's courtship, probably in order to suggest his lessening power. His arguments are often perfunctory, as though he were bored with the need to deceive still another foolish woman. He justifies the murder of the princes with a casually brutal remark:

Look, what is done, cannot be now amended:
Men shall deal unadvisedly sometimes,
Which after-hours gives leisure to repent.

(294-96)

It is he who is trapped by an artificial style when in a passage of stichomythy he cannot avoid Elizabeth's bitter jibes, though he does recover his jaunty hypocrisy in the long speech that appears to sway her. Addressing her as "dear mother," that is, his future mother-in-law, is worthy of the early Richard, though the last line of the speech tapers off into petulance.10

The proposed match is a second parody-in-advance of the marriage union that ends the play. Richard suggests complacently that only in this way can England
be saved. Elizabeth's motives in seeming to accept his offer are not clear, since at the beginning of the next scene Stanley sends word to Richmond that he may have her daughter's hand. The most likely explanation is that she has deceived Richard but that Shakespeare delays this dramatic information briefly. Perhaps he does so in order to keep Richard's decline from being too precipitous. At any rate, the king's ascendancy over the women of the court is no longer so complete as when he was able at will to outwit Anne and reduce Elizabeth, then the reigning queen, to tears. Even his enjoyment of his apparent triumph is thin, a single line of contempt before he turns to other matters.

The whole movement of these confrontations between Richard and the wailing women is from his easy dominance toward slackening of his control. The appearance of the ghosts the night before his death makes even him acknowledge that there is a kind of power he has not taken into account. Then for the first time he feels the strength of nemesis, or rather of Providence, since by this time the moral significance of the force is unmistakable. The ghosts are in one sense projections of his conscience (and of Richmond's confidence), but they are more than that. They speak for a restored moral order, one that has canceled all the bonds that he has himself repudiated. The members of his family, the cast-off confederates of his plots, his old enemies—all turn to Richmond as the king of a new England. Thus the last of the ritualistic scenes makes clear that the order of society has been restored, with Richard cast out.
In his effort to humanize the Senecan dramatic use of nemesis and give it some of the dignity of Christian Providence, Shakespeare makes use of the family, which has already had an important part in the Henry VI plays. Not only do sympathetic characters like the Duchess of York and the dying Clarence evoke the values of the family, but Richard gives them parodic reinforcement by his hypocritical posing. On the whole, the device works. His demonism is shown to stimulate powerful forces that oppose him in the name of love and order. Hence this greatest of villain-kings purges his realm of evil, of the selfish ambition and petty hatreds that have divided the court and laid waste the land. In Seneca, the villains are often mere playthings of fate, swept by passions they cannot control, but Shakespeare's Richard and the nemesis against which he struggles are worthy opposites.

Nevertheless, when in the great tragedies Shakespeare returns to this polarity of love and order versus evil, there is a remarkable deepening of effect. One may recognize Iago or Goneril, Regan, and Edmund as descendants of Richard III even while admiring the increased subtlety and scope; but the love that they try to destroy is embodied in Othello and Desdemona, Lear and Cordelia. It is perhaps an ungrateful question to ask why the characters who embody love are so much less compelling in Richard III, but part of the answer is not far to seek. In associating the family with nemesis, Shakespeare gives nemesis some of the immediacy and moral significance of the most
basic human institution, but the family also acquires some of the lofty impersonality of Senecan nemesis. It is symptomatic of this development that Richard’s language shows extraordinary flexibility, whereas the spokesmen of the family use a stylized, impersonal idiom. The artificiality of their language can be a virtue when it creates a ritualistic movement, one in which the patterned severity of the language suggests the order that Richard tries to destroy. But the family does not come to life as the villainous protagonist does. Richmond is a dramatic nonentity, and even the women are much less distinct as personalities than their enemy.

Confronted with the need to give an impersonal force dramatic equality with a great villain, Shakespeare relies on techniques largely foreign to the modern stage, stylized language and ritualism. If Richard were in any great degree a divided figure, he could himself show the antagonistic force in soliloquy, as Macbeth does. Instead, the earlier Shakespeare uses direct, ritualistic appeal to the traditional sanctions of his world, to the values of religion, the political order, and the family. The voices of the Duchess of York, Richmond, and to some extent even Margaret merge in a lofty expression of these ideals. Richard’s variety of language becomes symbolic of anarchy in this world where virtue asserts itself in the austere language of ritual.

However, the moral significance of the contrast may not be so clear as this discussion implies. Defining the forces of Richard III in much the same way, Arthur P. Rossiter in a brilliant discussion comes to very dif-
ferent conclusions about their relative morality. His argument is representative of recent attack on the interpretation of the history plays as politically orthodox. Thus he dismisses Tillyard’s doctrine of the Tudor myth: “This historic myth offered absolutes, certainties. Shakespeare in the Histories always leaves us with relatives, ambiguities, irony, a process thoroughly dialectical.” If this statement meant only that Shakespeare explores the human meaning of political ideas and actions rather than preaching them as do official documents like the Homilies, it would be true of the first tetralogy and even more so of the second. But Rossiter goes beyond that to argue that Richard earns a kind of moral approval by his comic detachment and that the operation of Providence as vengeance is deliberately shown as inhumane. If true, both assertions would seriously alter the significance of the family along with the whole dramatic order of the play.

It is true, as Rossiter contends, that until Richard orders the murder of the young princes the full horror of his crimes is blunted by his wit, just as the machinations of the Vice are in the morality plays. Like Jack Cade, Richard is amusing, but to argue that he is therefore good or ambiguous is to confuse aesthetic enjoyment with moral approbation. It is on the face of it plausible that one admires Richard more than his foes when one thinks of his foes as dupes like Anne and Hastings or scoundrels like Buckingham; but is it also true, even for a moment, that a parental blessing is a thing to be sneered at, brotherly love a weakness of fools, and religion a convenient mask? For Richard’s humor is the enemy of everything that
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the Elizabethans found important, and even the twentieth century has not abandoned all these values. The principle of Richard’s humor is straightforward: distortion of the normal is amusing when its consequences are not so immediately and visibly painful as to prevent laughter. His hypocrisy is funnier than Zeal-of-the-Land Busy’s in Bartholomew Fair precisely because the virtues that he apes are real ones, with a genuine claim on the audience.

Rossiter’s second argument, that Providence in Richard III is inhumane, has even more serious implications. The pattern of crime, curse, and punishment that gives shape to the play is primarily a structural principle, not a description of reality. Nonetheless, it is artistic shorthand for something that Shakespeare, like Hall, must have seen in fifteenth-century England, the vision of a land under a divine curse. The first tetralogy shows an accelerating cycle of evil revenging evil, and surely the orderliness of the progression is not only a literary device. It must imply something about the nature of political disorder. To the extent that Rossiter is asking whether divine mercy is consistent with punishing evil, he raises a question beyond the scope of literary criticism. It is only necessary to remark that it was quite possible for a sane and intelligent Elizabethan to believe in a merciful yet vengeful God.

But Rossiter’s argument is vulnerable even within the bounds of dramatic analysis. He neglects to point out what happens to the Senecan chain of nemesis during the course of Richard III. Margaret is the voice of nemesis in a cursed land; but as the curse is dissipated,
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or rather as it is concentrated in the single figure of Richard, she fades out of the play. Richmond and the Duchess of York embody the Providence of a redeemed land, not the nemesis of a cursed land, and they show little of Margaret’s sanguinary lust for vengeance. Richmond’s oration, the last speech of the play, ends by contrasting the horrors of civil war with peace in a land to which fecundity has returned. The image is of a woman whose wounds are healing—peace or perhaps England—while “the bloody dog” Richard lies dead at Henry Tudor’s feet. Life, hope, fertility, a noble young king, a royal marriage on the one hand, and death, the bloody corpse of a villain in whom the sins of a land have perished on the other: surely there is no ambiguity in the choice. Richard III dramatizes the triumph of order and justice over the demonic forces released by guilt and civil war, and among the values that share in that triumph is the traditional morality of the family.

1 Tom F. Driver, The Sense of History in Greek and Shakespearean Drama (New York, 1960), pp. 114-15, cautions against uncritical application of the idea of nemesis. In thematic discussion his warning is important, but he underrates the structural similarity between nemesis in Seneca and the impersonal force in this play.


3 John Dover Wilson counts 23 classical allusions in 1 Henry VI, 24 in Part Two, 28 in Part Three, and 7 in Richard III (The Second Part of King Henry VI, New Cambridge Shakespeare [Cambridge, Eng.,
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1952], p. 1). Virgil K. Whitaker, Shakespeare’s Use of Learning (San Marino, Calif., 1953), p. 64, has a very different count: in the same order 16, 13, 16, 14. Douglas Bush finds some 50 classical allusions in the three Henry VI plays and only 8 in Richard III (“Classical Myths in Shakespeare’s Plays,” Elizabethan and Jacobean Studies Presented to Frank Percy Wilson, ed. Herbert Davis and Helen Gardner [Oxford, Eng., 1959], p. 67). Such are the perils of quantitative analysis. Still, it seems safe to say that most of the allusions in Richard III are less conspicuous than those of the earlier plays.


5 Thus Lord Gaspar in Castiglione’s The Courtier argues that men are ashamed of their deformities “because it seemeth by the testimonie of the selfe same nature that a man hath that default or blemishe (as it were) for a patent and token of his ill inclination” (The Book of the Courtier, trans. Sir Thomas Hoby, Tudor Translations XXIII [London, 1900], p. 303).

6 German criticism, following Schlegel, is especially fond of this idea, but the habit goes back to Samuel Johnson, The Plays of Shakespeare (London, 1765), V, note on I.i.28.

7 Anne refers to his “timorous dreams” at IV.i.84. Both passages suggest that Richard is not quite so monolithic as he seems.

8 See his note at the passage, Plays, V.


10 Thus James I tells his son of the power of a parent’s curse: “But assure your selfe, the blessing or curse of the Parents, hath almost ever a Prophetick power joyned with it” (The Basilicon Doron of King James VI, ed. James Craigie, Scottish Text Society, 3d. ser., XVI [London, 1944], 155).

11 Cf. the majestic “Are you our daughter?” which is Lear’s first word of reproof to Goneril (I.iv.217).

12 “If I were playing Richard I would sacrifice anything else in the play sooner than that monosyllable ‘So’; which tells more of Richard than a dozen stabbings and baby smotherings” (George Bernard Shaw,
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"And be not peevish found in great designs." The reading "peevish-fond," repunctuated from "pieuish, fond" in Q1, is rejected by Thompson in the Arden Edition but has a temptingly Shakespearian ring.


"Folio and quarto agree in having Richard slain on stage. Stanley's reference to "this bloody wretch" (V.v.5) makes it likely that his body is still there. Since there is no convenient time to remove the body in the brief last scene, it is no doubt carried off at the end as the victors march away. The problem with this explanation is that according to both texts Stanley enters with the crown when Richmond reenters after having killed Richard. If part of the stage direction is mistaken, the detail of the crown seems more likely to be so than the important matter of Richard's death. Or perhaps Stanley is with Richmond when he kills Richard and takes the crown at that time. That, however, seems an undesirable proliferation of stage business. At any rate, the dramatic contrast is the same whether or not Richard's body is actually present to complete the stage picture.