

Gender Struggle in Heroic Fantasy in the Case of Margaret of Anjou

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Abstract: This essay focuses on the narrative of Margaret of Anjou in Shakespeare's first tetralogy and discusses gender bias in heroism. Despite her bravery and political skills, Margaret is at most performances presented as an undesirable heroine whose cruelty is emphasized. This anti-heroism of Margaret is considered to be linked to the lack of self-definition in her narrative and her motherhood. This essay also points out the potential closeness in dramatic representations of heroes and witches, referring to the complicated interpretations of Margaret's unhistorical appearance on stage in *King Richard III*.

Keywords: heroism, gender, Shakespeare's first tetralogy, motherhood

1. Introduction

Shakespeare's first tetralogy was first staged in the early 1590s, when the atmosphere of rising patriotism had continued in England since the defeat of the Armada in 1588. The tetralogy, which covers the historical events from the death of Henry V to the establishment of the Tudor dynasty, is considered to have satisfied the popular demand to approve of their national identity. Military prowess, or rather violence, shown in the battlefield attracted the audience and was regarded as masculine virtue. Brave heroes like Talbot thus aroused the admiration of the audience and were the object onto which their patriotism was projected.

Although military heroes, even villains like Richard III, are inclined to be welcomed and admired especially in such a pro-war social context, popular attitudes toward masculine heroines are quite different. In *The First Part of King Henry VI*, the military achievements by Joan La Pucelle are attributed to some supernatural power, not to her own talent. Margaret of Anjou led the Lancastrian, who were victorious in the Wars of the Roses in the end, but her political skills and valor are seldom rated as highly as those of male characters. Margaret, as well as Joan La Pucelle, is often represented as an eccentric female warrior toward whom the audience is likely to evoke a desire to alienate rather than to identify with. The difference between heroes and heroines in dramatic representation in the first tetralogy suggests that heroism entails gender bias.

This essay will deal with Margaret's failure in the formation of her self-identity as a favorable female heroine and consider the issue of gender bias in heroism in the first tetralogy. More specifically, the following two scenes in *The Third Part of King Henry VI* will be focused on: Margaret's humiliation of York in Wakefield and her last-ditch oration at Tewkesbury. By comparing each of these two scenes with similar situations from the other two contemporary texts, Christopher Marlowe's *Tamburlaine the Great* and the speech of Elizabeth I at Tilbury, where both the protagonists successfully achieved heroism, the author of this essay is going to consider the dramatic and social strategy in which Margaret's unwomanly exploit ends in being represented as her anti-heroic eccentricity.

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2. Brave Heroine or Amazonian Trull

Mary Beth Rose, who traces the changing representations of heroism in the early modern English texts, observes that the representation and enactment of violence can be commonly found at the basis of chivalry, or traditional heroism. Though she points out that the images of heroic figures become complicated and transform along with the social changes, she admits that the male warrior involving violence endures as a heroic figure in Renaissance literature, referring to such male characters as Tamburlaine, Richard III, Macbeth, and Coriolanus.²⁾ When we try to apply Rose's view of heroism to Margaret of Anjou, she seems to meet the heroic conditions except for her sex. She is a rare female character who kills her enemy on her own. (Even Joan La Pucelle does not do that.)

In almost any version of the performance, Margaret's cruelty is tremendously impressive in the scene of York's torture in Wakefield. After they capture York, Margaret makes him stand upon a molehill and derisively tortures him. She shows a napkin stained with the blood of his beloved son and throws it to him so that he can "dry his tear-stained cheeks." She also puts a paper crown on his head with the intention of debasing York. But her dramatic attempt to dishonor him ends up being thwarted. York's sexist comment on Margaret somehow sounds persuasive and assumes power to arouse the sympathy of the audience.

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,
How couldst thou drain the life-blood of the child
To bid the father wipe his eyes withal
And yet be seen to bear a woman's face?
Women are soft, mild, pitiful, and flexible:
Thou stern, obdurate, flinty, rough, remorseless. (1.4.111-142)³⁾

To the audience today, York's criticism of Margaret, in which unwomanliness is equated with inhumanness to condemn, may seem to be full of illogical gender bias. Yet his spiteful words still gain a kind of credibility not only of the early modern audience whose attitude toward gender parallels York's, but also of the post-modern audience who should be free of such a stereotypical view. The sympathetic reaction toward York reminds us that we are still unconsciously but deeply controlled by the rigid image of gender roles.

In addition to such persistent gender images, what seems to invite the audience to "support" York is Margaret's cruel suggestion to "dry his cheeks" with the napkin stained with his beloved son's blood.

Or, with the rest, where is your darling, Rutland?
Look, York: I stained this napkin with the blood
That valiant Clifford with his rapier's point
Made issue from the bosom of the boy:

²⁾ Rose, p8.

³⁾ The quotations from *The Third Part of King Henry VI* and *King Richard III* in this essay are based on the editions of The New Cambridge Shakespeare Series.

And if thine eyes can water for his death
I give thee this to dry thy cheeks withal.
Alas, poor York, but that I hate thee deadly
I should lament thy miserable state.
I prithee grieve to make me merry, York. (1.4.78-86)

Though she herself does not kill Rutland, her act of making the bloodstained napkin is associated with an ominous image of the typical early modern witches who were accused of having caught young children and eaten them. This association, along with the easily and generally shared grief over a lost child, helps the audience alienate Margaret, seeing her cruelty as a gross deviation from social morality, as York's expression of indignation encourages them to.

Other than York's emotional appeal and the queen's association with a witch, however, Margaret's narrative strategy itself also seems to be defective in impressing herself as a justifiable heroine. Cruelty, in a sense, is a heroic factor. Cruel violence shown on a battlefield is often interpreted as braveness in the early modern English literature texts like Marlowe's *Tamburlaine the Great*. By referring to C. L. Barber's interpretation of the "heroic" scenes where Tamburlaine abuses his captives, what anti-heroic factor is found in Margaret's narrative will be discussed in the following.

C. L. Barber observes that Tamburlaine successfully follows the "self-aggrandizing process" of creating his identity as an omnipotent hero, where he deifies himself by fittingly naming himself and ritualizing his violence.

The appropriation of names and ceremonies is integral to the aggrandizing process. The theatrical situation had always, by necessary convention, allowed for characters to name themselves. Marlowe uses the convention in a new way: Tamburlaine – and hero after hero after him – talks continually about himself as though from outside, using his own name in an incantatory fashion which amplifies his identity. ... Marlowe's Tamburlaine is a great ritualist, but he designs his own ceremonies, and they are all, like the first one of arming himself, aimed at aggrandizing his identity, indeed, creating it.⁴⁾

Tamburlaine's ostentation of cruelty toward his captives – ascending the throne on Bajazeth as a footstool and compelling captive kings to draw his chariot – functions as ceremonies to visually and verbally construct his identity as an unrivaled hero. His abused captives express their resentment, but unlike the scene of Margaret's humiliation of York, Tamburlaine dominates the stage: *his* audience is encouraged to be engrossed with the process of the creation of his heroic identity through his pompous self-definition and behavior even though it is amoral or anti-moral.

But villain, thou that wishest this to me,
Fall prostrate on the low disdainful earth
And be the footstool of great Tamburlaine
That I may rise into my royal throne.
...
Base villain, vassal, slave to Tamburlaine,
Unworthy to embrace or touch the ground
That bears the honor of my royal weight,
Stoop, villain, stoop! Stoop, for so he bids
That may command thee piecemeal to be torn
Or scattered like the lofty cedar trees

⁴⁾ Barber, pp.55-56

Struck with the voice of thund'ring Jupiter. (1st part, 4.2.12-25)⁵⁾

For Tamburlaine, abusive exploitation of his captives, together with his acute self-consciousness, contributes to the construction and demonstration of himself as an unrivaled hero. His cruelty is interpreted as what C. L. Barber calls theatrical magic to attract the audience with a feeling of exaltation for him and raise their desire to identify with the omnipotent hero.

In the scene of Margaret's humiliation of York, however, her effort to justify her violence is almost entirely absent. She tortures York in order not to demonstrate her authority but to enjoy looking on his affliction: "And I, to make thee mad, do mock thee thus. / Stamp, rave, and fret, that I may sing and dance" (1.4.90-91). Furthermore, she is willing to degrade herself to York's audience: "let's hear the orisons he makes" (110). She also lets her enemy describe what she is like. She never tries to define her identity on her own here, though it could be a perfect opportunity to demonstrate her justifiable victory. The purpose of her narrative here is to jeer York, and the subject "I" is rarely used except when she talks about her sadistic intention. Margaret fails to explain who she is in such a potentially heroic moment. As a result, the scene of Margaret's torturing York ends in the spectacle where the audience is induced to censure her sadism and sympathize with the miserable father. Despite her victory over him, the lack of self-consciousness in her narrative and failure to ritualize her violence deprive her of the chance to construct her self-identity as an acceptable heroine.

3. Motherhood versus Heroism

As is suggested in the general inclination to consider York's spiteful depiction of Margaret plausible, Margaret's failure to define her own identity as a legitimate heroine may be attributed partly to the contemporary androcentric social attitude. Women were traditionally considered to be the object of obtainment, possession, and exploitation for men, and female independence was in most cases denied. In such a misogynistic social context, it was almost impossible for a woman to establish her identity as a heroine just in a heroic way as masculine characters did. In this section I will focus on Margaret's oration at Tewkesbury and reconsider what has disturbed her construction of "heroic" self by firstly referring to the famous speech of Elizabeth I at Tilbury.

Mary Beth Rose considers Elizabeth I's Tilbury speech, which was done after the defeat of the Armada, as a rare narrative where a woman successfully gave a heroic impression and convinced people of her royal authority.

I am come among you at this time... being resolved in the midst and heat of the battle to live and die amongst you all, to lay down for my God and for my kingdom and for my people mine honor and my blood even in the dust. I know I have the body but of a weak and feeble woman, but I have the heart and stomach of a king and of a king of England too – and take foul scorn that Parma or any prince of Europe should dare to invade the borders of my realm; To the which rather than any dishonor shall grow by me, I myself will venter my royal blood; I myself will be your general, judge, and rewarder of your virtue in the field.⁶⁾

Based on the contemporary common ideas of "the king's two bodies" and of "feeble women," Elizabeth I claimed that she embodied kingly legitimacy while she admitted that she was physically female. She implied a sense of togetherness with the citizens of England in showing antagonism toward "Parma

⁵⁾ The quotations from *Tamburlaine the Great* are based on Regents Renaissance Drama Series.

⁶⁾ Rose, pp.36-37

and any prince of Europe.” But on the other hand she clearly differentiated herself from the people by defining herself as their “general, judge, and rewarder.” She thus succeeded in impressing herself as a prominent being with royal authority while winning over the people to her side. This speech suggests that keen self-awareness, clever manipulation of gendered self, and elaborate control of the relationship between herself and the “audience” are essential for a woman to obtain heroic authority through her narrative.

In contrast, Margaret hardly reveals her self-recognition in her oration at Tewkesbury as well as in the scene of York’s torture. She compares the enemy to the wild sea and the Lancastrian to a damaged ship, encouraging the army to overcome the crisis.

Great lords, wise men ne’er sit and wail their loss
But cheerly seek how to redress their harms.
What though the mast be now blown overboard,
The cable broke, the holding anchor lost,
And half our sailors swallowed in the flood –
Yet lives our pilot still. Is’t meet that he
Should leave the helm and, like a fearful lad,
With tearful eyes add water to the sea
And give more strength to that which hath too much,
Whiles, in his moan, the ship splits on the rock,
Which industry and courage might have saved?
Ah, what a shame; ah, what a fault were this!
...
And, though unskilful, why not Ned and I
For once allowed the skilful pilot’s charge?
We will not from the helm to sit and weep
But keep our course, though the rough wind say no,
From shelves and rocks that threaten us with wrack.
...
Why, courage then! What cannot be avoided
’Twere childish weakness to lament or fear. (5.4.1-38)

Though her words are apparently rhetorical and logical, the oration still does not seem to be persuasive enough to convince the audience of the power of Margaret’s leadership. For, unlike the speech of Elizabeth I, her words do not manifest her position among the people as a prominent individual. The subject “I” is rarely used in this oration either. Even in the rare cases of her using “I,” she mentions herself not as an independent female leader but as a mother who is inseparable from her son: “though unskilful, why not Ned and I / For once allowed the skilful pilot’s charge.” Margaret considers it her duty to maintain her son’s birthright in place of her feeble husband and this should have been the cause of the War of the Roses. However, she sounds like a mother with private emotions rather than a legitimate guardian to Edward because she calls her son by his nickname Ned on such a public occasion. The oration as a whole also seems to be permeated with Margaret’s motherhood. She spurs on the discouraged soldiers as if she were their scolding mother. She condemns the army for brooding over their defeat and displays her disapproval of having such emotions as lamentation and fear since it is “childish weakness.” This seems to strengthen the impression of Margaret as a mother who tries to protect her child, rather than as a heroine who leads the Lancastrian.

Margaret’s motherhood seems to disturb her construction of “heroic” self-identity. This is because femininity, which is disrespected in the traditional view of masculine heroism, is a precondition for motherhood. The incompatible relationship between motherhood and heroism is suggested in the scene

where her son is murdered in front of Margaret. When she sees his death, Margaret entreats the Yorkist brothers to kill her and faints away with shock. Soon after she is made to recover, she displays maternal lamentation which can evoke the image of Pieta.

O Ned, sweet Ned, speak to thy mother, boy!
Can'st thou not speak? O traitors! Murderers!
...
What's worse than murder that I may name it?
No, no, my heart will burst and if I speak –
And I will speak that so my heart may burst.
Butchers and villains, bloody cannibals,
How sweet a plant have you untimely cropped! (5.5.51-62)

Traces of her unwomanly cruelty, which York formerly mentions about her on a molehill, cannot be found in her any longer. The death of her son deprives Margaret both of her maternal role and of her unwomanly bravery. And after that, she never overturns the traditional image of “feeble femininity.”

In contrast to Elizabeth I, who achieved royal authority, or what Mary Beth Rose calls heroism, by deliberately keeping her gender ambiguous, Margaret's gendered self seems to be irreversible: Margaret remains female. She can indeed be represented as a masculine mother. As long as she is a mother, however, it is impossible for her to acquire masculinity, which is essential to heroism. For motherhood itself potentially threatens masculinity. According to her influential book *Suffocating Mothers*, Janet Adelman argues that a boy both physically and metaphysically needs to be separated from his mother in order to become a man.

Culturally constructed as literally dangerous to everyone, the maternal body must have seemed especially dangerous to little boys: fed *in utero* on her menstrual blood and then on the milk that was its derivative, he had too much of her blood in him. Contemporary object-relations psychoanalysis locates differentiation from the mother as a special site of anxiety for the boy-child, who must form his specifically masculine selfhood against the matrix of her overwhelming femaleness; how much more difficult and anxiety-ridden this process must have been if the period of infantile dependency – with all its pleasures and dangers – was prolonged, and if the boy itself, in all its vulnerability, could later be understood as the inheritance from her contaminating female matter. Cultural practice in fact formalized both the “femaleness” of the boy-child and the need to leave that femaleness behind in order to become a man, enforcing the equation of masculine identity with differentiation from the mother through its own differentiating ceremony.⁷⁾

If heroism is found somewhere in the process of acquiring masculinity, motherhood is considered to be incompatible with heroism. Despite her unwomanly bravery or cruelty, Margaret's motherhood might potentially result in her anti-heroism.

4. Conclusion

This essay has focused mainly on the narrative of Margaret of Anjou and has considered why the masculine mother, who appears to be heroic regardless of her gender at first sight, is unable to

⁷⁾ Adelman, p.7

overcome the gender bias in heroism. Originally heroism can be reworded as misogynistic fantasy which male-oriented society has built. In order for a woman to achieve heroism, it is necessary to deliberately develop and define an independent identity through narrative with acute consciousness of her gendered self as Elizabeth I did in her Tilbury speech. However, Margaret remains an eccentric female warrior. Her bravery, or cruelty, thus tends to be interpreted as a deviation from the socially acceptable gender norm.

At the end of this essay, a bit more about the social gender struggle will be considered in referring to the dramatic end of Margaret in Shakespeare's first tetralogy. Margaret is expelled to France at the end of *The Third Part of King Henry VI*. The historical fact is that she died there in 1482, never to return to England. In Shakespeare's *King Richard III*, however, she unhistorically reappears on stage as a "hateful, withered hag," frightening other characters with her horrible curses. In dramas, female warriors like Margaret, as well as Joan La Pucelle, tend to be represented as a witch or a witchlike character and excluded from the stage in the end.

This dramatic exclusion of a witch can be interpreted as another form of heroic fantasy. Women, especially mothers, potentially thwart manhood: boys must be separated from their mothers for acquisition of masculinity. Dominant women are also a threat to male authority. It is considered that such uncanny and threatening women have to be expelled to the periphery as social ills in order for the androcentric society to keep its vested interests and to justify it. Dramatic representation of witches can partly be interpreted as such a male-oriented social strategy.

Though they can be physically expelled to the periphery, it might be difficult to completely exclude witches from the psychology of the audience. Even after she disappears, her curses keep controlling the dramatic stage of *King Richard III*. The interpretation of whether Margaret is just an unwomanly eccentric mother or more than that is so complicated since her curses lead to the victory of Richmond and the establishment of the Tudor dynasty. Margaret's anti-heroism can be significant and threatening in a sense in that it uncovers gender bias behind the virtue of heroism and implies a close link between the dramatic representation of witches and heroic fantasy.

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