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“O lawful let it be/ That I have room to curse awhile”: Voicing the Nation’s Conscience in Female Complaint in *Richard III*, *King John* and *Henry VIII*

Alison Thorne

God’s wrong is most of all.

If thou didst feared to break an oath with him,
 The unity the king my husband made
 Thou hadst not broken, nor my brothers died.
 If thou hadst feared to break an oath by him,
 Th’imperial metal circling now thy head
 Had graced the tender temples of my child,
 And both the princes had been breathing here,
 Which now - two tender bedfellows for dust -
 Thy broken faith hath made the prey for worms.

*(Richard III, 4.4.308-317)*¹

In the speech quoted above Queen Elizabeth unmasks Richard’s pledge to atone for the murder of her two young sons by marrying her daughter for the travesty of reparation it is by reciting the crimes he has committed against his own family and the body politic. This incident, one of many such moments in the three plays examined here, bears witness to the oppositional role assumed by aggrieved royal women in some of the earliest and the last of Shakespeare’s chronicle plays: *Richard III*, *King John* and *Henry VIII* (the latter co-authored with John Fletcher). In particular, it serves to highlight the inter-related functions of these characters as custodians of England’s troubled history whose memory is continually at risk of being erased or over-written, as defenders of the national interest in the face of

¹ All references to Shakespeare’s texts are taken from *The Norton Shakespeare*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt et al. (New York and London, 1997).

lawlessness and tyranny, and above all as tireless agitators for justice. Although we might expect these good offices to be recognised as such by modern playgoers and readers in a post-feminist age, this has rarely been the case. More often, the formidable matrons of Shakespeare's Lancastrian cycle and *King John*, in particular, have met with a hostile critical reception that tends, ironically, to concur with the views of the male characters in regarding their activities as thoroughly detrimental to the nation's welfare. As Nina Levine notes, the military and political activism of viragos such as Margaret of Anjou and Eleanor of Aquitaine, like the supposedly overweening ambition of Constance, has been widely perceived to constitute a 'threat to order and stability' that 'must be brought under control for the good of the nation'.²

Without wishing to deny the obvious affinities between these disaffected female characters and the early modern stereotype of the unruly woman - as evidenced by their typically vociferous, self-willed and disruptive manner of communicating their views, their general propensity to excess and intolerance of patriarchal regulation³ - it is, I think, regrettable that these traits have too often been allowed to obscure the salutary effects of such wayward behaviour. Focusing on Margaret and the other wailing queens of *Richard III*, Constance in *King John* and Katherine in *Henry VIII*, this essay will argue the need for a more nuanced assessment of the motives behind their interventions in public life and of their contribution to the moral and political welfare of the nation. This requires that we make a conscious effort to redirect our attention to the more positive aspects of the women's role in the management of the commonweal without overlooking their involvement in the abuse of dynastic, political and judicial systems that is endemic to the play-worlds they inhabit. In particular, it means attending to the therapeutic effect of their intercessions in ministering to the healing of a nation at odds with itself: a

² Nina Levine, *Women's Matters: Politics, Gender, and Nation in Shakespeare's Early History Plays* (Newark, 1998), p. 16. See also Jean Howard and Phyllis Rackin, *Engendering A Nation: A Feminist Account of Shakespeare's English Histories* (London, 1997), esp. Chaps 5-6.

³ On this topic see Nathalie Zemon Davis, *Society and Culture in Early Modern France* (London, 1975), Chap. 5 ('Women on Top').

process primarily enacted, I submit, in their commitment to perpetuating the memory of past crimes that still cry out for redress in defiance of a governing elite intent on suppressing 'the sad remembrance of those wrongs' (*Richard III*, 4.4.238), and their tenacity in working to expose institutional corruption in the higher echelons of state by calling to account those whose power and status seemingly place them beyond reach of the law.

To understand what drives this female-led quest for justice we must situate this as a response to the traumas of the recent past which still convulse the respective play-worlds, whether the legacy of internecine strife from the War of the Roses that imprints itself upon the fractured court of *Richard III*, the unresolved struggle over the succession in *King John*, or the upheavals of the English Reformation in *Henry VIII*. Each of these plays evokes a profoundly dysfunctional society where the normal patrilineal structures of authority and legitimate succession have broken down, where oaths are routinely violated, theology is manipulated for political gain, and the law perverted to serve the will of individuals, instead of the *bono publico*. What is undeniably catastrophic for the body politic, though, proves oddly enabling for the plays' female protagonists. Along with the Bastard in *King John* and Richmond in *Richard III*, they become unlikely beneficiaries of the turbulent times dramatised in our three plays and the opportunities they generate for those normally disqualified from the exercise of power to become political players in their own right. Of course it may well strike us as thoroughly implausible that these female characters, who despite their royal status are multiply marked as outsiders by virtue of their sex, their discontent, their tenuous position and, in many cases, foreign origins, should come to play such a prominent role in state affairs. Nevertheless several factors conspire to propel them, both literally and metaphorically, to the centre of the public stage.

For a start, England is represented in each play as experiencing something of an identity crisis. Evidence of this self-estrangement abounds on both an individual and national level. Consider the defection of

Richard's subjects, both living and dead, to the cause of Richmond, a Welshman who returns to his native soil as a foreign exile at the head of a Breton-backed invasion. In *King John* the French King's claims to have the true interests of England more at heart than its titular monarch, and the subsequent decision of the English nobility, disillusioned by John's surrender of the kingdom's sovereignty to Rome, to ally themselves with the Dauphin's invading army can also be seen as symptomatic of an erosion of national identity. These ironies are ratcheted up still further when Henry VIII, the monarch famed alongside King John for asserting England's independence from external, that is to say papal, domination elects to disguise himself at the masque, both linguistically and sartorially, as a Frenchman, thus participating in the affectation of foreign manners roundly deplored by Henry's own courtiers, while his Spanish-born wife insists on addressing the cardinals in the English tongue rather than Latin as an act of fealty to her adoptive country (3.1.41-9). Given this perplexing, ever-shifting alignment of national loyalties, it is perhaps not so odd, after all, that the task of articulating England's malaise should fall upon the female characters, not only natives but strangers too such as Margaret of Anjou and Katherine of Aragon.

The women's colonisation of the stage of history is also facilitated by the absence of agreed political codes or a properly functional judicial apparatus. While the *concept* of justice is repeatedly brandished in these plays, its presence proves elusive. Indeed the frequency with which this idea is evoked – whether through the mimetic recreation of judicial processes in the elaborately staged trial scenes of *Henry VIII*, the constant disputation of legal issues or the characters' habit of slipping into lawyerly discourse – is in inverse proportion to its realisation on stage. For, in each of these plays, the due process of law is curtailed, perverted by bias, false testimony or interference, or simply overridden.⁴ It is

⁴ This is shown most clearly in the peremptory justice Richard meets out to his victims, none of whom are granted so much as a formal indictment (or only posthumously in Hasting's case), let alone a trial. But Henry VIII also curtails due process of the law, e.g., by prejudging Buckingham's guilt on the basis of his

this situation, I shall argue, that incites Shakespeare's royal women to occupy the discursive space vacated by the collapse of these institutional structures and leads them to enlist the rhetorical resources of complaint in order to supplement and correct a judicial system that has failed them. Armed only with this linguistic weapon, they take the highly unorthodox step of usurping the law's office by personally confronting known or suspected malefactors with evidence of their misdeeds. In so doing they unwittingly act in consort with the female complainants of the other plays who similarly assume the informal roles of prosecutor, judge and jury.⁵ Thus the plaintive accents of the plays' female protagonists emerge as, if by no means the sole, certainly the most insistent voice calling for a greater degree of moral and political accountability.

The following discussion will examine how this dramatic community of disaffected women navigates the conflict-scarred political landscapes of these plays in the pursuit of justice. Attending to the ambiguous relationship between the plaintive female voice and the act of truth-telling, it will argue that their unstable alliance operates as a crucial index of the health of the body politic as well as providing a necessary, albeit far from infallible, moral compass for theatre audiences and readers adrift in the plays' murky and unpredictable waters. From there it goes on to assess the efficacy of female complaint and its lachrymose twin, lamentation, as a remedy for various forms of ethical, political and legal malpractice. Addressing this key issue gives rise to others. To what extent can the vocalisation of discontent, however eloquent, compensate for the damage wrought by corrupt and discredited institutions? What is the relation between complaint and the law? Can justice only emerge from within the private recesses of the individual soul? Or does it require a communal event, an enactment of the collective will to preserve the memory of history's victims and arraign the living culprits, of the sort

surveyor's tainted testimony and by intervening in Cranmer's arraignment for heresy to forestall further examination by his peers.

⁵ In reality of course women were legally debarred from taking up any of these roles. For a summary of the manifold legal disabilities women endured in sixteenth and seventeenth century England, see Tim Stretton, *Women Waging Law in Elizabethan England* (Cambridge, 1998), pp. 21-5.

staged in the great scenes of choric female lament in *Richard III*? And in what ways might we think of the plays' female lamenters as a symbolic embodiment of the 'conscience of the nation'?⁶ These are the principal issues that will inform our analysis of the plays' female-driven crusade to cure England of its ills.

The politics of truth-telling

It is well documented that Shakespeare went out of his way to amplify the political dimensions of the female roles in all three plays by expanding on existing details in the chronicles or by inventing a public profile for them to offset the absence of such material in his sources.⁷ One of the key functions the playwright(s) assigns to these 'tell-tale women' is that of speaking truth, as they understand it, to those in positions of power. Each of them makes liberal use of the rhetorical figure of 'frank speech' or outspokenness (known as *parrhesia* in Greek, *licentia* in Latin) where the speaker feels compelled by a sense of duty to the truth to set aside considerations of the 'reverence' or 'fear' owed to authority and exercise his 'right to speak out, because[he] seem[s] justified in reprehending them ... for some fault'.⁸ Peacham's gloss on *parrhesia* in the 1593 edition of *The Garden of Eloquence* comes nearest to adumbrating the uses to which this 'aggressive frankness' is put by Shakespeare's female protagonists:

This figure serveth to insinuate, admonish, and reprehend ... which is the onely forme that boldly delivereth to great dignitaries and most high degrees of men, the message of justice and equitie, sparing neither magistrates that pervert lawes, nor Princes that do abuse their kingdomes.⁹

⁶This phrase is used *a propos* of Constance by A.R. Braunmuller in the Oxford edition of *King John* (Oxford, 1989), p.63.

⁷ See, e.g., Harold Brooks, 'Richard III, unhistorical amplifications: the women's scenes and Seneca', *Modern Language Review*, 75 (1980), pp.721-37; Juliet Dusinberre, 'King John and embarrassing women', *Shakespeare Survey*, 42 (1989), p. 39; Gordon McMullen's Arden 3 edition of *Henry VIII*, p.321 (headnote).

⁸ *Rhetorica Ad Herennium*, IV.37.49. Quoted in David Colclough, 'Parrhesia: The Rhetoric of Free Speech in Early Modern England', *Rhetorica* 17/2 (1999), pp. 184-5.

⁹ Henry Peacham, *The Garden of Eloquence* (1593), quoted in Colclough, *Ibid.*, p. 206.

As this passage reveals, the rhetorical handbooks generally assume *parrhesia* to be a feature of male political dialogue. That such bold and forthright speech issues here from the mouths of aristocratic women is peculiarly shocking in its refusal to conform to the convoluted protocols of civil discourse deemed appropriate to their rank and sex.¹⁰ David Colclough notes that early modern discussions of the use of this figure frequently emphasise its capacity for ‘dissimulation’ where the speaker seeks to ingratiate themselves under the guise of plain-speaking.¹¹ However, there is not the slightest hint of compromise or palliative intent in the curse-laden invective Margaret reserves for her enemies, or the accusations publicly levelled by Constance at the rulers who have betrayed her. Even Katherine, usually more circumspect of speech, as befits a royal consort, is provoked by Wolsey’s disingenuous denials of wrong-doing into abandoning her customary composure and verbal restraint. If, as James Scott has argued, the familiar maxim of speaking truth to power is more often honoured in the breach than the observance, subordinate groups being accustomed to dissembling their grievances by expressing them, if at all, in oblique or encoded forms to avoid incurring their masters’ displeasure, then these characters may be said to constitute a rare deviation from this rule.¹² For examples of such decorous encryption of dissent are remarkably thin on the ground in these plays. In fact the women’s astonishingly direct denunciations of wrong-doing spare neither corrupt ‘magistrates’ nor ‘Princes that do abuse their Kingdomes’.

It is predictable, then, that the women’s stand against injustice should take the form of an assault on the deviousness of male political rhetoric. A familiar scenario unfolds where discursive exchanges between members of the governing class are disrupted by the interjections of female complainants who interrogate their handling of the business of governance, justice or warfare and challenge the official

¹⁰ Cf. George Puttenham’s criticism of the French Princess who vented her frustration at being debarred from inheriting the throne with blunt vulgarity as ill-becoming ‘the greatness of her person, and much lesse her sex’, in *The Arte of English Poesie* (Menston, [1598] 1968), pp. 223-4.

¹¹ Colclough, ‘*Parrhesia*’, pp. 194-5.

¹² James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* (New Haven and London, 1990), Chap. 6.

rationale for the policies being pursued. In the process they raise awkward questions about the validity of the principles – of legitimacy, succession, justice, truth and conscience – on which the characters stake their reputations. Their self-appointed mission to expose corruption in high places translates into an attempt to dissect and demystify the pieties, empty moralising and righteous self-exculpation in which power wraps itself. Instead of submitting to state-sanctioned accounts of past or unfolding events, their energies are channelled into countering the distortions, evasions and omissions proffered by the political establishment in lieu of truth. Setting the record straight is their prime objective. While their main tactic is to cut through this obfuscatory language by rewording what has taken place in a pointedly different set of terms that reflect a combative, irreverent and profoundly suspicious attitude towards official historiography and the governing elite in whose interests it is shaped. Their plain-speaking obviously serves them well as a mechanism for flushing out unpalatable truths. However, this is only the most sensational tactic in what is, by any standards, an impressive arsenal of rhetorical devices at their disposal that includes ‘exclamation’ (i.e. accusation, voluble complaint), the use of lamentation, ironic asides, savage mockery, and the wresting of another’s meaning to reveal a sombre side of England’s heritage that seeps through the censorship imposed on it.

The daring ingenuity with which this rhetorical form of guerrilla warfare is conducted merits closer analysis. In *Richard III* Margaret is, unhistorically, brought back from the dead as a ghostly revenant and living witness to the crimes committed in the civil wars. In 1.3 she eavesdrops on the wrangling between Richard and the Woodville clan, punctuating their exchanges with sarcastic interjections that echo and, in so doing, subvert the self-righteous posturing of the disputants by commenting bitterly on the illegitimacy of their claims to the moral high ground. Impatient of their weasel words, she reminds both parties how they stole their honours from the Lancastrian line by no less barbarous means than they condemn in her. She rounds this off with a comprehensive and savagely worded curse that prophesies their collective downfall to the evident perturbation of all present. In 4.4 Margaret’s inquisitorial

function is taken over by the Duchess of York and Queen Elizabeth, as they join forces to waylay Richard and “charge” him with a catalogue of crimes. Throughout this scene Elizabeth is shown not only to possess greater political guile than the ‘Poor painted Queen’ (3.1.239) of Margaret’s description but to have absorbed the lesson of her rhetorical tactics. In the ensuing stichomythic skirmish between herself and Richard, she succeeds in upstaging him by turning the intended sense of his words back on him, until her opponent, wrong-footed and disconcerted, begs her to ‘[b]e not so hasty to confound my meaning’ (4.4.248).

The interrogation of ‘usurped authority’ is revived in the central scenes (2.1 and 3.1) of *King John* where the question of who has the stronger claim to the English throne, John or Arthur, is fiercely disputed with words and arms by the English and French Kings and their allies. But, once again, it is the women who ensure that the matter is not allowed to rest there. In the so-called ‘Billingsgate scene’, Constance and Eleanor launch into a slanging match over the symbolically-loaded question of legitimacy, each accusing the other of ill-founded ambition and their children of bastardy. At first there seems little point to this cat-fight beyond pandering to clichés of female rivalry. However, the very aspects of this scene that the play’s critics and on-stage audience find most embarrassing¹³ can be taken as an ironic, albeit inadvertent, commentary on the main political action. By referring back to the semi-farcical accommodation reached by the Bastard and his brother over their inheritance rights in 1.1, and forward to the equally absurd claims and counter-claims to be England’s lawful representative asserted by the opposing monarchs before the walls of Angers, this scene strips the central plot of its pretensions to dignity, principles and moral seriousness. When Constance falls victim to these same political manoeuvrings - King Philip and ‘Austria’ having been suborned by the enticements of ‘tickling Commodity’ to desert her cause – she resumes the offensive, accusing her former champions of reneging on their vows and Philip, specifically, of having ‘beguiled’ the world ‘with a counterfeit/

¹³ See Dusinberre, ‘*King John*’, pp. 40-41.

Resembling majesty, which being touched and tried/ Proves valueless' (3.1.25-7). She then proceeds to sabotage Philip's attempts to whitewash what the Bastard calls 'a most base and vile-concluded peace' (2.1.587); when the French King proclaims the occasion of his defection to be a day of celebration, she pounces on the phrase 'holy day':

A wicked day, and not a holy day!
 What hath this day deserved? What hath it done,
 That it in golden letters should be set
 Among the high tides in the calendar?
 Nay, rather turn this day out of the week,
 This day of shame, oppression, perjury. (3.1.9-14)

In Constance's anatomising of his speech the collusion between a false nomenclature and political subterfuge is laid bare.

Constance's intrepid "outing" of shameful truths finds its mirror image in Katherine. At the pre-trial hearing of the evidence against Buckingham in I.2, the Queen hijacks proceedings from the very outset by forcing onto the agenda the question of Wolsey's unauthorised taxation of the commoners (hitherto concealed from the King) and by speaking out in defence of their interests. The cardinal's efforts to evade blame for these extortionate measures are robustly dismissed by Katherine who interrupts the hearing to cast further aspersions on the probity of Wolsey's proceedings against his known enemy. At the tribunal for Henry's divorce suit she again breaks with judicial protocols in ways that recall, while going beyond, Holinshed's more subdued account in the 1587 edition of the *Chronicles*.¹⁴ First, she insists on pleading her own 'cause' directly to the King, instead of letting her clerical counsel represent her as custom demanded; then she quits the court in defiance of its orders, resolving never to submit to

¹⁴ Cf. Raphael Holinshed, *Chronicles of England, Scotland and Ireland* (London, 1808 [1587]), vol. 3, pp.736-740.

interrogation thereafter. In short, Shakespeare's Katherine is distinctly less tractable than Holinshed's, reflecting her more pronounced scepticism regarding the quality of justice she stands to receive, 'having here/No judge indifferent, nor no more assurance/Of equal friendship and proceeding' (2.4.14-16). Moreover, this queen persists in querying the cardinals' motives, where Holinshed's rapidly yielded under pressure. The accused turns accuser with a blistering speech, invented for her, in which she impugns Wolsey's impartiality and asserts her right to refer her case to papal arbitration. In denying his competency to pass judgment on her, Katherine refuses in effect to recognise the court's jurisdiction. A bolder challenge to the judicial system, contesting as it does both royal and ecclesiastical authority over legal matters, is hard to imagine.

Our admiration for the audacity with which these tactics are deployed in the service of equity and truth should not deter us, though, from observing that the women's conduct is no less vulnerable to critical scrutiny than those they indict. Indeed their active involvement in political life ought to caution us against overstating their exteriority to the systems against which they rail, for, like the Bastard and a host of other well-intentioned but complicitous courtiers, all of them are to varying degrees implicated in the unsavoury operations of power they are intent on challenging. Given the difficulty of deciphering the characters' fluctuating motives and intentions, it is all the more necessary to resist the temptation to postulate a simplistic antithesis that segregates women, imagined as pristine repositories of truth, from the venal practices of the court. The complex tangle of personal and public objectives, of self-interest and civic-mindedness, that impels them to speak out frustrates such categorical neatness. We need only consider Elizabeth's obscurely motivated rapprochement with her children's murderer, or Constance's eagerness to align herself with whichever side happens to be opposing King John, to appreciate that these figures are in no way exempt from the climate of moral and epistemological ambiguity that envelops these plays. To presume that the speech acts of these royal women are intrinsically more trustworthy than their opponents' would therefore be rash. In fact we may conclude

that the equivocal nature of their position – at once detached from and deeply embedded in a national malaise for which they are partly accountable - further compromises their status as truth-tellers. Against this it might be objected that their ability to view events from both within and outside the hegemonic order - like the Bastard who, significantly, aligns himself with Constance in this respect - gives them an unrivalled advantage in terms of understanding the corrosive effects of ‘commodity’ on political life. Using the evidence furnished by our three plays, the following sections will assess the effectiveness of female complaint not just as a tool for exposing the abuses of the time, but as a means of putting them right. This will require an analysis of the conditions that might enable a productive synthesis to be forged between different facets of this genre – proficiency in the art of lamentation, an ability to manipulate its legal associations, and its use as a vehicle for collective political protest.

Complaint and the law

Much has been made in recent years of the correspondences between literature and law. That their interconnectedness was taken for granted as an axiomatic feature of early modern culture is corroborated by a rapidly expanding body of scholarship devoted to investigating this field. These affinities manifested themselves in various ways, but at the most basic level they were inscribed in the use of a common vocabulary. As John Kerrigan notes, ‘complaint’ originated as a technical term referring to ‘the kind of bill submitted by a “plaintiff” prior to court proceedings, though its meaning would be extended to cover ‘many sorts of articulate dissatisfaction’.¹⁵ Other affiliated words – including to ‘arraign’, ‘indict’ or ‘accuse’ someone – sustained this dual valency, possessing a specific legal sense whilst also yielding a broader “lay” meaning. These ambiguous terms of reference helped stake out a shared discursive terrain that could be mined by practitioners of either discipline. Importantly, the

¹⁵ John Kerrigan, *Motives of Woe: Shakespeare and ‘Female Complaint’* (Oxford, 1991), p.7.

traffic of influence flowed in both directions. Legal historians have shown how deeply indebted canon (and civil) law were to the ‘topics’ of Roman forensic oratory which enabled the construction and evaluation of evidentiary proof.¹⁶ By the end of the sixteenth century these rhetorically derived categories had been assimilated into English common law where they became the grounds for determining a defendant’s guilt or innocence in the absence of irrefutable evidence. Conversely, Lorna Hutson maintains that the same techniques of probable reasoning used by prosecutors and juries were enlisted by early modern dramatists and poets as a handy device for inventing cohesive plots, plausible arguments and lifelike characters.¹⁷ These analogies are certainly seductive, but how robust are they when put to the test? Is there any literary evidence to suggest that the pseudo-legal idioms of complaint can ever serve as an adequate substitute for the rigors of the law?

Of all the popular literary genres of this period none exploited their connections with forensic rhetoric more vigorously than complaint in its many and various guises. Female-voiced examples of erotic versions of narrative and poetic complaint, in particular, offer an exceptionally rich source of penitential narratives in which fallen women lament their sexual transgressions while simultaneously seeking to exculpate themselves.¹⁸ However, it is to early editions of the *Mirror for Magistrates* - whose *de casibus* format supplied a template for *Richard III* and perhaps *Henry VIII*¹⁹ - that we must look for a tighter fit with the politically and legalistically oriented concerns of our Shakespearean complainants. Of particular relevance here are the monologues ventriloquised by the ghosts of ‘Shore’s wife’ and ‘Eleanor, Duchess of Gloucester’ (printed in the 1563 and 1578 editions respectively) who beg ‘leave to plead [their] case at large’ in language awash with legal terminology as they seek to repair their shattered reputations

¹⁶See Barbara Shapiro, ‘Classical Rhetoric and the English Law of Evidence’, in Victoria Kahn and Lorna Hutson (eds) *Rhetoric and Law in Early Modern Europe* (New Haven and London, 2001), pp.54-72.

¹⁷ Hutson, *The Invention of Suspicion: Law and Mimesis in Shakespeare and Renaissance Drama* (Oxford, 2008), Chap. 3.

¹⁸ See, e.g., Samuel Daniel’s *The Complaint of Rosalind* (1592) and Michael Drayton’s ‘The Epistle of Rosamond to King Henry the Second’ in *Englands Heroicall Epistles* (1597)

¹⁹ As argued by Paul Budra in *‘A Mirror for Magistrates’ and the de casibus Tradition* (Toronto, 2000), p.79.

from beyond the grave. Like their dramatic counterparts, they are adept at exploiting their 'piteous case' by presenting this in the most affecting light possible in the hope of eliciting a more magnanimous judgment from their readers than that handed down by their earthly judges.²⁰ But, as with Shakespeare's royal women, these self-serving manoeuvres coexist with a broader concern for the parlous state of the judicial system. Towards the end of her monologue Jane Shore admonishes 'Ye Princes all, and Rulers everychone' not to 'forget to joyne your justice right':

You should not judge til thinges be wel deserned,
 Your charge is styll to mainteyne upryght lawes,
 In conscience rules ye should be throughly learned,
 Where clemencie byds wrath and rashenes pawes,
 And further sayeth, stryke not wythout a cause,
 And when ye smite do it for Justice sake,
 Then in good part eche man your skourge wil take. (II.344-50)

But while the sentiments expressed may be similar, there are obvious differences not only of character (Shakespeare's complainants are impenitent and pugnacious) but, more importantly, of genre. Encased within the homiletic framework of narrative complaint and subject to its monovocal conventions, these female voices elicit no response except from their editors. Consequently their brave words remain little more than rhetorical flourishes.

By contrast, Constance, Katherine and the other aggrieved complainants of these plays inhabit a more dialogic, spacious and fully realised imaginative realm where their hopes, words and actions are liable to be either thwarted or confirmed. Not only does the dereliction of justice within their respective play-words oblige them to take matters into their own hands, but they use the law's failure to offer them either protection or remedy against the injuries sustained by themselves and others to justify their

²⁰Lily B. Campbell (ed.), *The Mirror for Magistrates* (Cambridge, 1938), p.385.

encroachment on male prerogatives. This is precisely the point Constance makes when she claims ‘no less law and warrant’ than the papal legate to curse her adversaries on the paradoxical (and morally dubious grounds) that ‘when the law can do no right,/ Let it be lawful that law bar no wrong’ (3.1.112-113). The search for alternative forms of redress propels these dramatic complainants beyond the mere elaboration of judicial analogies, of the type found in the *Mirror*, into attempting to translate these figures of speech into practical action. Hence their recourse to the rhetoric of complaint which they deploy as though it were a remedial supplement or proxy for the law, to the point of mimicking specific procedures employed in early modern courts of law. Let us reconsider, for example, Constance’s attempts to legitimise her cursing by equating this with Pandolf’s delegated authority to pronounce the act of excommunication against King John. This tacitly invites us to view the imprecations uttered by Margaret, the Duchess of York and Constance herself as divinely authorised speech acts that exclude the offender from participating in communion with Catholic Church and, by extension, from divine grace.²¹ Significantly, though, Pandolph denies the validity of this comparison (III.1.10). Similarly, Constance’s litany of complaint against the turncoats, King Philip and ‘Austria’ bears more than a casual resemblance to a bill of indictment of the type brought by individual citizens. The former is specifically accused of perjury, a criminal offence that normally fell within the jurisdiction of the court of Star Chamber and was punishable by a fine or imprisonment.²² Yet though Constance succeeds in exposing Philip’s breach of faith, she possesses neither the influence nor the material power required to secure more tangible forms of reparation. The problem lies in the disconnection of this speech genre from any formal legal process which deprives the judgments enunciated by these female “plaintiffs” of real executive force. These examples call upon us to recognise the intrinsic limitations of complaint, but without necessarily invalidating the persuasive, ethical and diagnostic qualities that otherwise make this discursive mode so

²¹ Cf. the Duchess’ curse at 4.4.181-96 which both consigns Richard to damnation ‘by God’s just ordinance’ and disowns him as her son.

²² See H. Baker, *An Introduction to English Legal History*, fourth edition (Oxford, 2007), pp.117-19.

compelling. Indeed, as we shall see, our plays bear witness to its capacity to bring intense pressure to bear on the accused and even alter the trajectory of history.

Reassessing female complaint

One remarkable feature of these plays is the unusually high proportion of female characters who are also mourners, variously engaged in bewailing the loss of their husbands, kinsmen or offspring or the privileges attendant on power. From pre-classical antiquity through to the late Medieval cult of the *mater dolorosa*, the business of grieving for the dead and dying, preparing the corpse for burial and playing a leading role in funerary rituals was acknowledged to be women's rightful and peculiar province. But, as a consequence of the seismic upheavals of the Reformation, that time-honoured tradition was ruptured and the histrionic display of female sorrow – invoking a corporeal lexicon of weeping, wailing, vociferous lamentation, and dishevelled hair – came to be viewed in a far more ambivalent light.²³ Patricia Phillippy has shown how epistemic shifts in attitudes to female mourning in the post-Reformation era led to a cultural devaluation of, and attempts to restrict, older and more extravagant forms of female grieving in favour of an ethic of inward and measured mourning. This distinction was formulated along sharply drawn gender lines, the self-contained, male Protestant subject being defined in part 'through his opposition to stigmatized female lamentational practices' now deemed to be 'excessive, violent, and immoderate'.²⁴ Mournful women, especially bereaved mothers such as a Queen Elizabeth in *Richard III* and Constance in *King John*, are often represented in this period as disturbing, even transgressive, figures whose extreme sorrow threatens to overspill the parameters of acceptable feminine behaviour. Their culturally scripted performance of grief was also

²³ Katharine Goodland explores the sources of 'England's profound ambivalence towards mourning women' in *Female Mourning in Medieval and Renaissance English Drama* (Aldershot, 2005), pp. 121- 3, 136-140.

²⁴ Patricia Phillippy, *Women, Death and Literature in Post-Reformation England* (Cambridge, 2002), pp.7-9.

deplored as proof of their sex's natural incapacity to govern their emotions. Ideological concerns about female mourning were compounded by its identification in the popular imagination with a retrogressive reprisal of pagan and Catholic rituals for honouring the dead. These intersecting factors combined to validate the introduction of more stringent patriarchal control over a domain once regarded as the preserve of women.

The same cultural prejudices regarding women's atavistic propensity to indulge in wild displays of grief are echoed within our three plays. Aligning themselves with the dominant reformist stance, the male characters are mostly contemptuous of such practices. For example, Richard emphasises the futility of Elizabeth's lament for her recently deceased husband, brusquely admonishing her that 'none can help our harms by wailing them' (2.2.91). Katherine is also advised by the cardinals to set aside her 'griefs' for the loss of her former 'dignities' and submit herself to the royal will. Likewise, King Philip and Pandolf react with a mixture of pity and distaste to Constance's enactment of her unbounded anguish at the loss of Arthur; she is rebuked for 'hold[ing] too heinous a respect of grief' (3.4.90) in making her sorrow a proxy for her abducted child. Of course it is not hard to find corroborative evidence of the excesses imputed to these female characters. None of them could be accused of being 'barren to bring forth complaints', each being intent on nurturing their woe by 'pamper[ing] it with lamentation' (2.2.67, 88). Nor do they heed the men's repeated exhortations to exercise self-restraint. But that is not to say that what seem to us as absurdly over-the-top displays of grief are pointless or futile. True, unflattering depictions of female lamentation, and complaint in general, as self-indulgent, intemperate, tediously verbose and, above all, ineffectual are widely endorsed in the literature of the period. And, with few exceptions, modern critics have followed suit, embracing such dismissive attitudes to this genre without

bothering to investigate its expressive and instrumental potentialities.²⁵ Nevertheless, we may plausibly hazard the view that the popular anxiety and distrust surrounding female mourners was driven less by doctrinal issues or worries about women's lack of rational self-control than by an implicit recognition of the enormous affective potency of female grief and the potentially subversive uses to which it could be put.

Immoderate grief is thus legible as an encoded affirmation of the women's oppositional stance and, as such, is instrumental in shaping their contrary evaluation of complaint. For the female mourners of these plays, far from viewing such affective display as fatuous, are keenly aware of the possibility of harnessing their own sorrow, along with other neighbouring emotions such as anger, resentment, indignation and a sense of loss, for more productive ends. Without the bitterness of personal grief to spur them into action, we are led to surmise, it is debatable whether they would have ventured such a comprehensive critique of England's methods of governance. It is Margaret's 'sorrow's rage' (1.2.276) for the murder of husband and son that continues to fuel her vendetta against the Yorkist faction more than a decade after the atrocities perpetrated at Tewkesbury. And just as Constance's despondency over Philip's treachery swiftly converts to fury, so at the divorce tribunal Katherine rejects the standard script of tearful lamentation and what it betokens – women's soft, watery disposition – for the fiery, choleric qualities thought to typify the male:

I am about to weep, but thinking that
 We are a queen, or long have dreamed so, certain
 The daughter of a king, my drops of tears
 I'll turn to sparks of fire. (2.4.68-71)

²⁵ See, e.g., Heather Dubrow, 'A Mirror for Complaints: Shakespeare's *Lucrece* and Generic Tradition', in Barbara Lewalski (ed.), *Renaissance Genres: Essays on History, Theory and Interpretation* (Cambridge, MA, 1986), pp. 399-417.

This combustible mixture of grief and ire imbues the women's speech with an impassioned vehemence, steering it away from the plangent accents of lament towards more combative figurative devices, such as accusation, exclamation and imprecation. As Philippy remarks, 'the same characteristic that opens women's mourning to censure [i.e. excessive grief] enables its use as a means of authorizing and empowering women's speech'; here it not only licenses the airing of social discontent, but greatly intensifies the persuasive force with which this is communicated.²⁶

In short, Shakespeare's royal women, unlike their male counterparts, generally place their trust in the forensic capacities of complaint, presuming that its ethically and emotionally charged discourse possesses considerable illocutionary force. Faced with Buckingham's scornful dismissal of the utility of imprecation, Margaret clings tenaciously to the belief that her words have power to influence divine agency itself (1.3.285-8) - a conviction her adversaries will come to share as they succumb one by one to the fates prophesied for them. In IV.4 the Duchess of York and Elizabeth debate the question of '[w]hy should calamity be full of words?'. Elizabeth subscribes to the commonplace belief that plaintive speeches are ineffectual, merely '[w]indy attorneys to their client woes,/ ...Poor breathing orators of miseries'; the best they can do is 'ease the heart'. However, the Duchess persuades her daughter-in-law to reject this pessimistic view of complaint, urging her to '[b]e copious in exclaims' when confronting Richard; if he tries to 'drown' their voices with 'martial music', they will retaliate by 'smother[ing]' him 'in the breath of bitter words' (4.4.126-154). The properties ascribed here to female complaint - a power to overwhelm the party accused with a battery of exclamation, to 'envenom' them with vitriolic reproof and to 'pierce' their conscience - are confirmed by numerous dramatic examples attesting to its capacity to induce disquiet in the recipient. Hastings begs Margaret to 'end [her] frantic curse', confessing that his 'hair doth stand on end' to hear them (1.3.245, 302). Even Richard struggles to

²⁶²⁶ Cf. Goodland's comment on the ambiguities of complaint as 'excessive yet inadequate, shunned and feared, yet necessary and efficacious' (*Female Mourning*, p.1).

maintain his trademark sardonic flippancy when exposed to his mother and sister-in-law's concerted indictment in 4.4. Clearly unnerved by the ferocity of his mother's denunciation and her parting curse, he complains that her speech is 'too bitter' and makes desperate attempts to placate her. Kings Philip and John are equally apprehensive about Constance's reaction to news of the Anglo-French alliance, hoping to deflect her fury by offering concessions in the form of land and titles. But John's anxious wish that they might 'in some measure satisfy her [will] so / That we shall stop her exclamation' (2.1.556-9) implicitly concedes that her protests are too cogent and forceful to be stifled.

Despite such heroic acts of resistance, however, these women appear a spent force well before the end of their respective plays. Overtaken by events and relegated to the margins of the political arena, they are increasingly ground down by the onslaught of old and fresh woes. In their latter appearances on stage, their sorrow is figured as a crushing 'burden' under which the owner 'sinks' - an idea materialised via the conventional theatrical gesture for indicating overwhelming grief: sitting or lying down on the stage (cf. *Richard III*, 4.4.21-8; *Henry VIII*, 4.2.1-3). But while their deteriorating fortunes appear to confirm the equation between female complaint and impotence, they vehemently repudiate this notion. Instead it is insinuated that their accumulated misery confers on those who have suffered so much a restorative dignity and authority that commands respect. This is certainly the view taken by Constance when she refuses to attend on the English and French kings, bidding them rather pay their obeisance to 'the state of [her] great grief':

I will instruct my sorrows to be proud,
For grief is proud and makes his owner stoop.

[She sits upon the ground]

To me and to the state of my great grief
Let kings assemble, for my grief's so great
That no supporter but the huge firm earth

Can hold it up. Here I and sorrows sit.

Here is my throne; bid kings come bow to it. (2.2.68-74)

The women of Richard's household also demand that due homage be paid to their wretched state, implicitly presenting themselves as an exemplary pattern of maternal grief after Hecuba. Margaret, who vies with the Duchess of York for the title of Queen of Woes, urges that '[i]f ancient sorrow be most reverend, /Give mine the benefit of seniory./ And let my griefs frown on the upper hand' (4.4.35-7). Katherine too clings to the prerogatives of grief, chastising the messenger of IV.2 for failing to show the 'reverence' owed to her 'state'.²⁷ Ironically, it would seem that the weight of their afflictions merely enhances the protagonists' moral stature. Moreover, the toll it takes on them is less debilitating than we might anticipate. Even as they enter the 'last fit of [their] greatness' (*Henry VIII*, 3.1.77), they continue to publicise their grievances with undiminished vigour and to reject the false consolation offered them. Right up to her final moments on stage Constance spurns her male comforters' belittlement of her grief ('Lady, you utter madness, and not sorrow' [3.4.43]) by refuting the early modern elision of female distress with insanity, insisting that her distracted behaviour has a rational foundation (cf. *Richard III*, 1.3.252 *Henry VIII*, 3.1.112). This simple refusal to let themselves be silenced is arguably the complainants' strongest card in their struggle against injustice.

Embodying the nation

Although generated in the first instance by personal grief, it is important to note that complaint lends itself to being read within a broader literary context as an extended metaphor for the sufferings of the nation at large. I would venture to suggest that Shakespeare's sorrowful mothers are the progeny of, and participate in, a venerable tradition of using emblematic female figures to embody and give voice to

²⁷ In each of these contexts we may assume that 'state' is being usually polysemically, to refer to the character's psychological condition (*OED*, I.2), their high rank (II.1) and a throne (II.2).

the grievances of the common subject.²⁸ Many of the complaints and petitions, printed in pamphlet form, that poured off the presses in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries are ventriloquised by female personifications of England or of its various regions and cities, particularly London. Parallel instances of this gendered use of *prosopopeia* as a medium for lamenting the nation's ills are to be found across a variety of other literary genres.²⁹ Just as 'England is insistently personified as a woman and mother' in Shakespeare's *King John*³⁰, so these female speakers conventionally style themselves as 'nursing mothers' to the nation's citizenry. They typically bewail the harms that have befallen their 'children', such as their affliction by poverty or disease, or, alternatively, berate their misguided offspring for straying from the path of righteousness. Thus in *Englands Threnodie, or a briefe and homely discoverie of some jealousies and grievances under which the kingdom at present groaneth*, Lady Anglia laments the damage inflicted by the Civil War and reproves her 'dear children' for allowing the country to descend into 'open wickedness', sectarianism and political disunity, while the maternal speaker of *Vox Civitatis, or LONDONS complaint against her children in the COUNTRIE* deplores the fact that her faithless progeny have forsaken the city at the first sign of pestilence or have become embroiled in dissolute behaviour.³¹ More directly pertinent to the situation of the plays' grieving women are complaints relating to the sporadic outbreaks of the plague during this period that milk the pathos of maternal anguish not simply for the purpose of arousing sympathy but to make a political point. Like Constance or the bereaved mothers of *Richard III*, the speaker of *Londons Mourning Garment*, figured as a childless widow, recalls her affectionate solicitude for her dead children and husband, victims of the

²⁸ For a general discussion of this allegorical tradition, see Marina Warner, *Monuments and Maidens* (London, 1985), esp. on representations of Britannia, Anglia's successor (pp. 45-55).

²⁹ Cf. Widow Ynglond, in John Bale's polemical anti-Catholic play, *King Johan* (first performed in 1538), who 'complaineth ... grievously' of the impoverishment and oppression inflicted on her children by clerical abuses; and grieving widow Belge who laments the loss of her sons [provinces] in Spenser's *Faerie Queene*, V.10.6-14. For French parallels, see Kate Van Orden, 'Female Complaintes: Laments of Venus, Queens and City Women in Late Sixteenth-Century France', *Renaissance Quarterly*, 54: 3 (2001), pp.818-35.

³⁰ Braunmuller, *King John*, p.71.

³¹ See Alexander Ross, *Englands Threnodie* (1648), pp. 1-8, and Benjamin Spenser, *Vox Civitatis* (1636).

disease, in intimate and touching detail as she laments her plight.³² Addressing the ‘Dames of London Cittie’, she exhorts them to ‘remember well’ what they have lost:

And now my harts, olde Widdowes and yong wives,
 And you that in silence, sit so sad and mute:
 You that wring hands, as weary of your lives,
 Heare London speake, she will expresse your suite.
 I know your sighes, is for your tender fruite.
 Fruite in the budde, in blossome ripe and growne,
 All deare to you, now death hath made his owne.

By drawing the reader(s) into her retrospectively imagined life as a mother, the speaker seeks to create an empathetic community of mourners around this (‘Is there no wife nor widdow that will hye,/ And reach a hand that hath some sorrowes felt,/ My griefes are more then I my selfe can welde’). Within this enlarged context the theme of the untimely death of children expands beyond the speaker’s personal experience to encompass new meanings, and as it does so this master-trope begins to resonate with other, more overtly politicised, kinds of loss. In *Londons Mourning Garment* the insistently repeated injunction to recollect the dead acquires a similar function to the commemorative acts performed in our plays, serving as a point of departure for the expression of a range of socio-economic grievances by drawing attention to the economic hardship and callous wastage of human life endured by the labouring poor. Such complaints often incorporate an impassioned plea to the state or civic authorities calling on them to alleviate this history of social injustice and ‘have respect/ To poor mens livelihoods’³³ which, whether heeded by its intended recipients or not, is likely to have struck a powerful chord with their popular readership.

³² William Muggins, *Londons Mourning Garment* (1603), STC 18248. This text is discussed by Phillippy in *Women, Death and Literature*, Chap. 4.

³³ Ross, *Englands Threnodie*, p.4

In the plays themselves the socio-political reverberations of plaintive speech are similarly amplified and supported by the construction of a community of ill-assorted women bound together by their mutual losses in a manner characteristic of the collectivist ethos of this genre. The parallel activities of these female complainants, once bitterly at loggerheads with one another, begin to converge not only within but *across* their play-worlds. An important indicator of this nascent co-operation is the willingness of former adversaries to offer each other emotional support as well as instruction in the art of grieving, as when Margaret teaches the woman who supplanted her how to make her curses more ‘sharp and pierc[ing]’ by meditating on the loss of her ‘tender babes’ (4.4.116-25). Growing evidence of such collaborative endeavour inaugurates a new phase where the female rivalry and antagonism that has dominated the plot for so long yields to a groundswell of empathetic solidarity. This is reflected most clearly in the shifting emphasis of the two great scenes of antiphonal lament in *Richard III* (2.2 and 4.4). Initially used to underscore the women’s competitive striving for precedence, the repetitive syntactical patterns and echoic rhetorical structures of these ensemble set-pieces come to express a united sense of purpose that is predicated on the speakers’ shared status as Richard’s victims. Take, for example:

DAUGHTER [Clarence’s to Queen Elizabeth]

Our fatherless distress was left unmoaned;
Your widow-dolour likewise be unwept. (2.2.64-5)

DUCHESS OF YORK

Was never mother had so dear a loss!
Alas, I am the mother of these griefs,
Their woes are parcelled; mine is general. (2.2.79-82)

Compare this with:

QUEEN ELIZABETH

Poor heart, adieu. I pity thy complaining.

ANNE, DUCHESS OF GLOUCESTER

No more than with my soul I mourn for yours. (4.1.87-8)

QUEEN ELIZABETH [to Richard]

Tell me, thou villain-slave, where are my children?

DUCHESS OF YORK

Thou toad, thou toad, where is thy brother Clarence?

And little Ned Plantagenet his son?

QUEEN ELIZABETH

Where is the gentle Rivers, Vaughan, Gray?

DUCHESS OF YORK

Where is kind Hastings? (4.4.144-8)

A more subdued version of the rituals of collective female grieving occurs in Katherine's penultimate scene where Henry's cast-off queen asks her loyal servants to dispel her sorrow by reflecting this back at her in their music-making. Even Margaret's implacable vindictiveness abates as she begins to entertain the notion that 'sorrow can admit society' (4.4.38). The choric complaints engendered by the rapprochement between Richard's female relations and his enemies are enhanced by their rhetorical unison to a point where they acquire an irresistible power and intensity.

These dramatic demonstrations of the companionable nature of female grief raise the question of the women's capacity to transcend their partisan interests and private woes in order to assume the role of commentator on the nation's ills. In actuality, the degree to which this ideal is realised varies markedly from one play to the next. Margaret's reluctance to look beyond her own grudges is mirrored in the

other women of the Ricardian court who suffer from similar, albeit milder, forms of moral myopia. Less solipsistic, Constance fluctuates between an aggressively self-serving outlook and a more detached perspective that allows her to occupy a position comparable to the Bastard's as a shrewd analyst of the ethical and political degeneracy infecting both sides in the Anglo-French wars. Only Katherine, I would argue, emerges with her credibility fully intact as a worthy spokesperson for the public weal. This is not because her views are untainted by personal animosity or self-interest - they clearly are - but because she aspires to a standard of impartiality by counterpoising unsparing judgment with charity in accordance with the legal concept of equity, as is exemplified by her balanced assessment of her old adversary Wolsey's career in IV.2. Moreover, she is the only female character in these play to show any awareness of, and compassion for, the commoners' plight in her advocacy of their interests.

Katherine's authority to represent the nation's conscience does not rest solely on her own acute moral sensibility, however. Her empathy for the plight of her down-trodden subjects and wish to ease their condition is underwritten not only by an allegorical tradition of using female personae to reflect upon the tribulations of the body politic, but by the politicised idioms of collective female lament. Another instructive comparison was proposed some time ago by Geoffrey Bullough when he suggested that the 'wailing queens' of *Richard III* fulfil a similar function to the chorus in classical drama.³⁴ Bullough had Senecan models in mind, but Greek tragedy, which often features choruses of subjugated barbarian women who yet dare to query the policies of their masters, are, I would argue, more germane to our plays. The classicist, Helen Foley, has commented on the tendency in tragedy for female lament to become a site for the articulation and mobilisation of 'political or social resistance' to civic authority, or a catalyst for avenging past injuries. 'A mourning woman', she states, 'is not simply a producer of pity, but dangerous' inasmuch as 'the message her lament carries is never fully suppressed'.³⁵ In *Richard III*

³⁴ Geoffrey Bullough, cited in Brooks, *Richard III*, p. 721.

³⁵ Helen Foley, *Female Acts in Greek Tragedy* (Princeton, 2001), p.55.

the women's collective bewailing of their dead kin likewise supplies a crucial focal point for the orchestration of resistance to a tyrannical and corrupt regime. As a form of 'memorial consciousness', ritual lamentation also facilitates an unbroken communion with the deceased whereby the dead are made present.³⁶ It should therefore come as no surprise that a pivotal scene of communal mourning (4.4) triggers the chain of events leading directly to the Duchess and Queen Elizabeth's decision to confront Richard with his crimes and culminating in his death. This encounter derives its power not only from the vocalisation of powerful feelings, but from their propensity to bring to the surface - that is, into public view - things that have long been suppressed in the nation's political unconscious. It is not only Richard's stifled emotional insecurities or his latent sense of guilt that are aroused by his mother's denunciation. The sequence of events strongly implies a causal connection between the women's recitation of the roll-call of his victims and the incantatory power of summoning the dead. For in the following act England's past is uncannily resurrected as the spectres of murdered men, women and children reappear on stage to add their vengeful curses and accusations to the women's and confer their blessings on Richmond.³⁷ In effect, these two groups – male and female, Yorkist and Lancastrian, the living and the dead – merge to form a new, expanded community founded upon their shared hopes and fears for the commonweal.

Between them, the interventions of the women and ghosts overwhelm Richard, precipitating a crisis of conscience from which he never recovers. His tormented psyche turns against itself, envisioning the arena of the soul as a courtroom where he is arraigned by his own sins which '[t]hrong to the bar, crying all "Guilty! guilty!" (5.5.147-54).³⁸ Significantly, this process is replicated across all three plays: in each

³⁶ Cf. Goodland, *Female Mourning*, pp. 13-14, 16. The term 'memorial consciousness' was coined by Pierre Nora.

³⁷ Indeed the varying of set phrases and constructions in the ghosts' speeches encourages us to view these as a continuation of the women's lamentation.

³⁸ This is a traditional metaphor: William Perkins likens the conscience to a 'judge that holdeth an assise, & takes notice of inditements, and causeth the most notorious malefactor that is, to hold up his hand at the barre of his judgement' (*The Workes of ... Mr. William Perkins*, vol. 1 [London, 1612-13], p. 519).

case the encounter with a female figure whose demand for justice carries huge symbolic weight appears to provoke a chain reaction that persists beyond her demise, as one dormant conscience after another is re-awakened. Following Constance's disappearance from the stage, Hubert, John and Melun are successively galvanised by their twinges of conscience into trying to set matters right. In *Henry VIII*, too, the King's restive and ambivalent conscience respecting the legality of his marriage is contrasted with the Queen's secure faith in her own as the true infallible source of judgment, and with Wolsey's rediscovery of his long neglected conscience.

The dramatic prominence given to the emergence of a revitalised private conscience is highly significant. What this does, in effect, is relocate the operation of justice by detaching this from its external manifestations in the corrupted administration of the law to lodge it within the soul's interior, self-regulatory dialogue with itself.³⁹ Moreover, this faculty, described by William Ames in 1639 as an internalised 'law' or 'practicall judgement' that directs our mental deliberations with regard to 'morall action', had by the mid-sixteenth century become barely distinguishable from the principle of equity in the eyes of the common law.⁴⁰ Its re-surfacing in the latter half of these plays, then, would seem to augur well for the body politic's capacity to heal or mend itself. Female investment in the ritual remembrance of the dead likewise takes on a salvific function, for only by conjuring up the ghosts of history's victims, literally and figuratively, can the sins of the past find remedy and a fractured nation be reconciled with itself. In promoting such commemorative acts together with their forthright defence of equity, Shakespeare's royal women may be said to play a crucial role in enabling this process of national

³⁹ Katherine affirms the superiority of conscience, as a form of self-judgment, over trial by public opinion at III.1.29-37. On the independence of private conscience from external authority, see Camille Well Sights, 'The Politics of Conscience in *All is True* (or *Henry VIII*)', *Shakespeare Survey*, 42 (1989), pp. 60-64.

⁴⁰ William Ames, *Conscience with the Power and Cases Thereof* (1639), pp.2-4. On the assimilation of conscience to the principle of equity, see John Guy, 'Law, Equity and Conscience in Henrician Juristic Thought', in Alistair Fox and John Guy (eds), *Reassessing the Henrician Age: Humanism, Politics and Reform, 1500-1550* (Oxford, 1986), pp. 179-98. For its importance in jury trials, see Thomas Andrew Green, *Verdict According to Conscience* (Chicago and London, 1985), Chaps. 4 and 5.

self-recovery and thereby laying the groundwork for Richmond, the Bastard and Cranmer's assertive visions of a resurgent national self-confidence.

