Unholy Mothers: Mothers as Negative Characters in Richard Iii, Cymbeline, Hamlet, Macbeth and the Tempest

The mothers presented in Shakespeare's plays encompass a broad range of social positions, personalities, goals, and prominences in their respective plays. From young and powerful to old and vulnerable, to long deceased, mothers in Richard III, Cymbeline, Hamlet, Macbeth and The Tempest act in ways that cause them to appear as largely negative figures. By upsetting familial and social bonds and boundaries, engaging in witchcraft and spouting prophecies and curses, the women in question act as destructive characters by disrupting the natural order of the world.

For example, Queen Margaret acts in a variety of unnatural and subversive ways. Her mere entrance in the third scene of Richard III represents an audacious legal and political rebellion, as she was banished from the kingdom on pain of death. Before she is noticed by the others, she spews vitriolic barbs at Glouster and Queen Elizabeth, the intensity of which dwarfs that of the argument between the two objects of her passionate hatred. Finally coming forward, she escalates her fury to an even more forceful level, demanding attention as she bitterly accuses Glouster and Elizabeth of being "wrangling pirates," stealing what was rightfully hers, namely, her husband and son and the power and security they provided (1.3.157).

Even now, however, without that power and security and in a position that should naturally make her weak and harmless, she strongly commands the notice of the other characters as she articulates a string of vengeful curses. Queen Margaret curses the current King, Edward IV, to be murdered during peacetime and Elizabeth's son, the Prince of Wales, to die violently at a young age, just as her husband and son met their ends. Emphasizing her abhorrence for Elizabeth, Margaret continues, damning the Queen to outlive her glory, live long to mourn the death of her children, and die after many years of anguish as, "neither mother, wife, nor England's queen" (1.3.208). After cursing Dorset, Rivers and Gray to similar fates, the old woman continues with her amazing burst of energy to proclaim her most explicit curses yet.

Commanding Glouster to stay like the dog by which she resentfully addresses him, Margaret condemns him to confuse traitors and friends and always experience sleep tormented by nightmares brought on by the gnawing, "worm of conscience" (1.3.221). Disregarding any trace of courtly decorum, she vividly attacks Glouster's deepest flaws and insecurities, raging,

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! Thou rag of honour! thou detested (1.3.227-232)

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After being interrupted, she finishes her cutting tirade with her most overt prophecy yet, calling Glouster by the name he will take when he treacherously ascends the throne, Richard. Continuing in this vein, she tells Elizabeth that by binding herself to Glouster through marriage she has, "whett'st a knife to kill thyself" (1.3.243). Although Dorset calls her a lunatic and Buckingham claims not to respect any of her statements, her shockingly passionate, explicit and articulate curses are extremely jarring, especially considering she is an elderly lady, expected to be helpless. Even if the characters do not yet appreciate the gravity of Margaret's words, the audience is immediately aware that she is not merely ranting, but rather giving foreboding warnings that more than she experience immense suffering.

Only after Queen Margaret's curses begin to come true does Elizabeth put stock in her elder's damning words. Her sons are murdered as Richard attempts to consolidate and defend his power, and Elizabeth starts to experience the agony of child loss that Margaret foretold. Desperately grieving, she listens to Margaret gloat about the truth of her words and her belief that some form of justice, no matter how delayed, is being served. The unfolding events remind Elizabeth of another prophecy, that one day she would entreat Margaret to teach her how to curse Richard. When she fulfills this prediction, the world weary Margaret advises her to live and view the world in an extremely unnatural way, instructing,

Forbear to sleep the night, and fast the day; Compare dead happiness with living woe; Think that thy babes were sweeter than they were, And he that slew them fouler than he is; Bettering thy loss makes the bad-causer worse; Revolving this will teach thee how to curse. (4.4.118-123)

Her advice for living contrasts sharply with that of the other characters, all of whom strive for success and prosperity. However, Margaret urges Elizabeth to deprive herself of even essential needs such as sleep and food, adding that she must skew her perspectives to inflate the goodness of family and the evil of her enemy. She believes, speaking from experience, that only by living in misery can one curse others with a misery just as profound.

Another Shakespearian Queen mother with ominous motives is Cymbeline's wife. More endowed with traditional power and more secretive in her malice than the old and blatantly hateful Margaret, the Queen uses different means in her attempts to achieve her desired ends, which transgress familial relationships through deception and murderous thoughts and actions.

In her first appearance in Cymbeline, the Queen attempts to comfort the soon to be separated young lovers, Imogen and Posthumous, by confiding in them that she will be their ally, insisting,

No, be assur'd you shall not find me, daughter, After the slander of most stepmothers, Evil-ey'd unto you. You're my prisoner, but Your gaoler shall deliver you the keys That lock up your restraint. For you, Posthumus, So soon as I can win the offended King, I will be known your

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advocate. (1.1.69-76)

Imogen sees through this facade of kindness and caring, accurately surmising that her stepmother does indeed look upon her with an evil eye. As the action unfolds, the audience discovers that not only will the Queen not attempt to convince her husband to restore Imogen and Posthumous' relationship, but that she will do everything in her power to destroy it.

Shortly after the Queen lies to her stepdaughter in her moment of torment, she attempts to deceive Cornelius, the royal physician, into giving her poison that she claims to need for experiments on small animals. Before she even receives a potion, the sight of Pisanio, the servant still loyal to Posthumous, stirs her to reveal her plans in a sinister aside. She muses,

Here comes a flattering rascal; upon him Will I first work. He's for his master, An enemy to my son. (1.4.27-29)

Previously claiming to be acting in Posthumous' interests, the Queen now reveals that not only is Posthumous her enemy, but so is anyone, such as Pisanio, who would serve him. Fortunately for Pisanio, Imogen is not the only person to suspect the Queen of ghastly motives. Cornelius wisely gives the Queen a harmless sleeping potion so that when she attempts to poison Pisanio while claiming her potion is a soothing token of an even greater good she means for him, the loyal servant will meet no harm.

After such treachery, it comes as no surprise when the Queen, with Cymbeline, walks by her son Cloten, encouraging him as he tries to win Imogen through song. It is only a matter of time, they assert, before the King's daughter will forget Posthumous and take Cloten's hand in marriage. It does come as more of a surprise, however, when the seemingly heartless and cruel Queen is overtaken by a fever caused by the disappearance of Cloten.

But like everything the Queen does, things are not quite as the appear at first glance. She did indeed fall sick after Cloten disappeared attempting to seize Imogen, but her angst was not just that of a grief stricken mother. The true root of her sickness is not revealed until the play's final scene, when the extent of her cruel scheming comes to light. Cornelius breaks the news to Cymbeline, bluntly lamenting the way the Queen ended her life,

"With horror, madly dying, like her life, Which, being cruel to the world, concluded Most cruel to herself" (5.5.31-33).

With the King's permission, Cornelius details the Queen's death bed confessions. First, the physician reveals that the Queen never loved her husband and only prized his power. He relates that she, "Married your royalty, was wife to your place,/Abhorr'd your person"

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(5.5.38-39). Cornelius goes on to say that the Queen saw Imogen as a "scorpion" whom she would have poisoned had the young lady not fled (5.5.45). Finally, and most shockingly, the doctor recounts that the Queen planned to poison the King so that her husband would slowly and painfully waste away until such point at which she could move her son onto the throne. However, as her malicious scheme began to unravel, Cornelius recalls, the Queen

Grew shameless-desperate; open'd, in despite Of heaven and men, her purposes; repented The evils she hatch'd were not effected; so Despairing died. (5.5.58-61)

So cruel is the Queen that even in her dying moments, she does not engage in the conventional act of repentance, but rather regrets that her plans did not come to fruition.

While Cymbeline's wife behaves in ways that sometimes fool those around her, Queen Gertrude leaves even the audience in a state of confusion regarding her true motives and character. However, she does clearly violate conventional familial boundaries and fails to fulfill normal expectations for the role of a good mother.

In Hamlet, Gertrude is introduced shortly after King Hamlet, brother of Claudius and husband of Gertrude, dies. Her introduction comes when Claudius announces that he and Gertrude will be wed. Hamlet, understandably distraught by his father's recent end, is unable and unwilling to join in the festive atmosphere that Claudius espouses. Gertrude, rather than mourning the late King and trying to help Hamlet through the natural grieving process, unites with Claudius in urging her son to immediately, "cast thy knighted color off" (1.2.68). She goes on to describe the universal and commonplace nature of death, depriving Hamlet of a nurturing presence to help him cope not only with the concept of death, but the loss of his beloved father.

Gertrude's lack of understanding words is not merely as disturbing as the act of marrying her dead husband's brother, an event on which Hamlet resentfully ruminates. After exclaiming, "Frailty, thy name is woman!" (1.2.146), be bemoans the recent sequence of events, lamenting,

Within a month, Ere yet the salt of most unrighteous tears Had left the flushing in her galled eyes, She married O most wicked speed: to post With such dexterity to incestuous sheets (1.2.152-157)

Condemning both the brevity and superficiality of her mourning, he bitterly notes his mother's transgression of accepted familial boundaries through a marriage that would have otherwise been regarded as incestuous.

The appearance of his father's ghostc compounds Hamlet's desperation at his mother's betrayal. The ghost figure suggests that the incestous relationship between Claidius and

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Gertrude began even before the King's death, when the Queen was seduced away from King Hamlet's dignified love and into the realm of his brother's "shameful lust" (1.5.45). Echoing Hamlet's feelings, the ghost calls his brother "a wretch whose natural gifts were poor/To those of mine!" (1.5.51-52). Although clearly the words of a vengeful victim, the ghost's assertions further emphasize the unnaturalness of the Queen's choices, forcing one to question how she could accept a man who pales in comparison to the great and respected King Hamlet.

When Hamlet finally confronts his mother about her misdeeds, he immediately tries to make her see how she has violated familial bonds, explaining, "Mother, you have my father much offended" (3.4.9). After addressing her as, "the Queen your husband's brother's wife" (3.4.15), he verbally overwhelms her even after she begs him to stop. In response to his outburst she cries, "Thou turn'st my eyes into my very soul,/And there I see such black grained spots/As will not leave their tinct" (3.4.89-91). But just when it seems that she is beginning to come to an understanding with her son, Gertrude betrays him by revealing the details of their recent confrontation to Claudius, once again subverting the expected trust between mother and child.

Yet another Shakespearian play, Macbeth, adresses bond between mother and son. Lady Macbeth, the sharp, cunning and determined accomplice of her husband in his treacherous ascendancy to the throne, uses her experience as a mother to further convince Macbeth to be true to his word and murder the King. Her disregard for the natural duties of a mother is blatant. When she senses her husband is contemplating reneging on his word, she forcefully utters a shockingly graphic and cruel thought stating, "I have given suck, and know How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me; I would, while it was smiling in my face, Have pluck'd my nipple from his boneless gums, And dash'd the brains out, had I so sworn as you Have done to this. (1.7.54-59)

In one sentence, she asserts her willingness to violate one of life's most basic, natural and essential bonds. She would be willing not only to break that bond, but to viciously destroy her newborn child in the midst of a moment of profound physical and emotional connection simply to cause her husband pain. Lady Macbeth makes clear that her resolve is stronger than any other aspect of her personality, including the instinctual motherly attributes of protectiveness and nurturance.

Furthermore, although she never actually appears, the accounts of Sycorax in Shakespeare's The Tempest present her as a mother capable of just as much cruelty as Lady Macbeth, although not directed at her offspring. Unnatural to the extreme due to her status as a banished witch, she is first mentioned by Prospero as possessing, "mischiefs manifold, and sorceries terrible" (1.2.264). He recalls that her commands were far too wicked for the delicate Ariel to carry out, so Sycorax, with "unmitigable rage", imprisoned the gentle spirit in a pine tree (1.2.276). In addition to being driven by an almost unfathomable brutality, the unnatural quality

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of Sycorax is reinforced through her son, Caliban. Characterized as a monster, "not honor'd with human shape", his existence leads the audience to wonder what sort strange union his mother Sycorax engaged in to bring about his conception (1.2.283).

None of these Shakespearian mothers are happy at the ends of their respective plays. Only one of them, Queen Margaret, lives, but her existence consists of misery and spite. These mothers' negative ends are natural extensions of their negative, unnatural presences. Through word and deed, these mothers use everything from cunning deception to blatant insults and curses to achieve their diverse ends. In doing so, they fail to live by not only motherly ideals, but timeless standards of decency, trust and humanity.

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