“Obsequious Laments”: Mourning and Communal Memory in Shakespeare’s Richard III

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In 1590, outraged reformers in Lancaster documented “enormities and abuses” and “manifold popish superstition used in the burial of the dead” by the local community:

And when the corpse is ready to be put into the grave, some by kissing the dead corpse, others by wailing the dead with more than heathenish outcries, others with open invocations for the dead, and another sort with jangling the bells, so disturb the whole action, that the minister is oft compelled to let pass that part of the service and to withdraw himself from their tumultuous assembly.

The Elizabethan prelates decry the practice of “wailing the dead” as a lawless abomination that undermines civil authority and impedes the progress of the reformed church. In Shakespeare’s Richard III, Gloucester and Buckingham similarly view lamentation as a threat. They worry that their furtive execution of Hastings will cause the citizens to revolt, and they imagine that rebellion taking the form of wailing the dead. Buckingham asks the mayor to justify their assassination to the citizens because he fears they “haply may / Misconstrue us in him and wail his death” (3.5.60-1). Buckingham’s words directly link politics and lamentation: he implies that the citizens will “wail” for Hastings, not as a matter of course, but as a deliberate means of protest.

The citizens do not rebel against Richard, but the women do, staging their rebellion in the same manner that is denounced both within the world of the play and without. In Act Four, Scene Four, which Nicole Loraux dubs “the scene of mothers” (1), the Duchess of York, Queen Elizabeth, and Old Queen Margaret congregate outside the Tower and “wail” their dead. They invoke the spirits of their dead sons and husbands with “heathenish” cursing and chanting. Earlier in the play, Lady Anne performs a similar ritual over King Henry VI’s corpse,
invoking his ghost, weeping over his body, and calling down curses on his murderer.

Scholars often refer to the ritualistic nature of the women’s laments in Richard III. However, no one has yet recognized that these scenes evoke actual mourning practices that were viewed as increasingly problematic after the Reformation. In this essay, I explore Shakespeare’s tragic history of an England divided against herself in the context of Elizabethan tensions over mourning and burial ritual. As I hope to show, the reintegration of the fragmented kingdom depends not upon the proud elegies of the men in power, but instead upon the woeful laments of the disenfranchised women. My approach qualifies Stephen Greenblatt’s recent reading of Richard III, in which he argues that the ghosts in the play, “function as the memory of the murdered, a memory registered not only in Richard’s troubled psyche ... but also in the collective consciousness of the kingdom. ... [And] as the agents of a restored health and wholeness to the damaged community” (180). I propose that it is the women, not the ghosts, who articulate the communal consciousness and catalyze the healing of the kingdom. For the appearance of the ghosts and Richard’s troubled dreams are poetically and dramatically linked to the ritual laments of the widowed queens. Richard III thus probes the relationship between funeral ritual and communal consciousness, registering a sense of loss for the medieval structure of communal mourning and remembrance that was dismantled by the Reformation.

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Shakespeare wrote Richard III “about 1592” (Baker 708), within two years of the riotous ceremony recorded in Lancaster. It is a striking coincidence that he stages a similar Lancastrian uprising with his weeping widowed queens. Whether or not he knew about this particular event, however, the conjunction of drama and ecclesiastical record suggests that “wailing for the dead” was a matter of some concern in late sixteenth-century England.

What is it about “wailing for the dead” that threatens those seeking political power, as in the case of Shakespeare’s Richard III, or ecclesiastical control, as in the case of the Lancastrian visitation record? For Buckingham and Gloucester it represents not only public grief, but civic grievance: a communal commemorative ritual that would call them to account for their crimes. For the Elizabethan reformers, the practice demonstrates the tenacity of indigenous mourning customs despite an extensive official program to eliminate them. These instances embody