Thy mother was a piece of virtue, and

She said thou was’t my daughter…. *(The Tempest, 1.2.56-57)*

The aim of this chapter is to examine the role of women who seek to participate in the political process without occupying a public office. Such women, mainly mothers and consorts, who try to wrest power or participate in the distribution of power oscillate between conflicting poles in their self-fashioning. On the one hand, they appear to be tools in the wheels of power, manipulated and sidelined by their fathers, brothers, husbands, lovers and even their sons. On the other hand, they also operate as great schemers and plotters, aligning themselves in desperation to foes-turned-friends or in cold blood to murderers of parents, spouses and children. The fact that these women, witnesses both to the violence of power and the power of violence, try to bargain for space and legitimacy in power play, historically a male domain, lose out in their bargain, alerts us to the limits of textual space granted to them in Shakespeare’s drama.

In Shakespeare’s history plays the roles assigned to women change from the early histories to the late. What is most important about these plays from a feminist standpoint, however, is not primarily the images of women they construct (which are relatively few and often sketchy), but rather the impact the plays have had on the ways we imagine gender and sexual difference, the institution of marriage, and the gulf between “public” and private” life. Interestingly, the many English women hardly exist in plays like *Henry IV* and *V*. One, Mistress Quickly, a tavern keeper, has a small part in the early scenes.
nurses Falstaff, a debauched knight, as he lies dying. Once a good friend of the young prince, Falstaff has been cast aside as too lawless and disorderly to associate with Henry after his ascent to the throne. Mistress Quickly, Falstaff, and the other inhabitants of the tavern define the limits of what can acceptably be included within the new king’s charmed circle – Quickly is excluded because of her gender, the others for their undisciplined behavior. Among the French, unlike the English, female characters do appear in the royal court, but with one important exception (the French princess, Katherine) these women are not visible or prominent in the play. The French princess, of course, has to be foregrounded because she is the chief prize of war. By wedding her after he has defeated her father’s forces in battle, Henry can consolidate his control over the territory of France. But there is at least one other crucial moment in this text when French women become rhetorically important, even though visibly absent, and that is when Henry stands before the gates of the French city of Harfleur and threatens its destruction if the governor does not surrender. He thunders:

The gates of mercy shall be all shut up,
And the flesh’d soldier, rough and hard of heart,
In liberty of bloody hand, shall range,
With conscience wide as hell, mowing like grass
Your fresh fair virgins and your flow’ring infants.
What is it then to me, if impious War,
Arrayed in flames like to the prince of fiends,
Do with his smirch’d complexion all fell feats
Enlink’d to waste and desolation?
What is’t to me, when you yourselves are cause,
If your pure maidens fall into the hand
Of hot and forcing violation? (3.3.10–21)

Later in the same speech Henry again evokes the specter of daughters defiled, fathers with heads dashed against the wall, infants spitted, and mothers turning mad with grief. The speech acknowledges what the rest of the play seems to deny, that women are indeed present everywhere in the territories of England and France and that war is a nasty, brutal business which powerfully affects women even if it is waged by men. The speech also constructs these women in a certain way: in terms of their sexuality and their family status. The women most emphasized are “fair virgins” and “pure maidens,” women not yet married, whose virginity is the guarantee of their worth. The potential rape of these women is meant to be horrifying, though the speech is directed not to the women whose bodies would be violated but to the governor of the town. Henry is a man speaking to another man, and what he emphasizes is that the French are about to lose control over “their” women and children. In the struggle for power between men of two nations, the bodies of women become a crucial terrain where this battle is played out.

Henry’s speech depicts the prospect of a father’s family wrested from him by other men. In short, it directly threatens Frenchmen’s patriarchal authority
within their domestic domains, even as it reduces women to sexual counters in a struggle between the English and French forces. What matters to Henry about the women he abstractly describes in this speech is not their education, their eloquence, their capacity for military action, or even their productive labor. What matters is their status as the signifiers of patriarchal power and possession, and their capacity to be victimized and sexually violated. Here, as in the rest of *Henry V*, women are sexualized figures, regardless of their nationality or place in the social hierarchy. The position of the French princess, for instance, may appear to be quite different from that of Mistress Quickly, the keeper of a London tavern, which, it is insinuated, may also be a place of prostitution. But, like the imagined women of Harfleur, both Katherine and Quickly are defined in terms of their sexuality and marriageability. Quickly’s hand in marriage is the object of contention between Pistol and Nym; Katherine’s is the final prize in Henry’s French war, sealing his power over the French king as surely as his soldiers’ rape of the women of Harfleur would have sealed his power over those women’s fathers and husbands.

Henry’s masculinity is defined by his dually compelling performances as warrior and suitor. As the negotiations continue between the French and English and the French Queen prepares to join them, Henry tells her:

> Yet leave our cousin Katherine here with us:
> She is our capital demand, compris’d
> Within the fore-rank of our articles.  (5. 2.96-98)
With the Queen’s permission he then sets out to woo her, even as both struggle over their idiom:

…I’ faith Kate, my wooing is fit for thy understanding, I am glad thou canst speak no better English, for if thou couldst, thou wouldst find me a plain King, that thou wouldst think, I had sold my farm to buy my crown. I have no ways to mince it in love, but directly to say, I love you…. (116-117).

Throughout, Henry underlines his inability to engage in the finer arts of courtship: “I speak to thee plain soldier: if thou canst love me for this, take me.” With his simple suit he expects to reach out to the French princess.

Interestingly, the context frames Katherine as a woman preparing to be the bride of a conquering enemy, struggling to learn the language of that conqueror and to know her own body in the self-alienating terms provided by another’s tongue. Like the French territory she symbolizes, Katherine is preparing to be occupied, although her occupation will be called marriage. Whenever it is viewed, however, the scene in Katherine’s bedchamber, following directly upon the rhetorical and actual violence of the siege of Harfleur, can have the disconcerting, if unintentional, effect of undermining the mythologies of modern marriage. The context of violence with which the scene is framed associates the English soldiers’ potential violence against enemy women with the potential violence of husband against wife within the “protected” space of the household.
Returning to Katherine, the bedroom is, in effect, her prison. She has no place and no agency within the public arena, even though it is her body that will be bartered away in the final negotiations between Henry and the King of France.

*Henry V* offers a vision of strong male heroes who embody national prowess through their military achievements and their mastery of the women of other nations. Shakespeare’s play enables a fantasy of an England reborn to former greatness through a reconstruction of heroic masculinity and the reconstruction of women as sexual and domestic beings. Despite his constant interrogation of history, Shakespeare not only represents the greatness of his nation’s heritage; he also serves in the popular imagination as the leading historian of England’s past. It is contented that Shakespeare’s cultural authority is deeply implicated in the very ideology of the times. The history plays Shakespeare wrote in the 1590s helped produce what are now regarded as “traditional” gender relations and the divisions between what we now call the public and private domains.

*Henry IV, Part I* is the play which most marginalizes the roles of women. There are only three female characters in *Henry IV, Part I*, and the total number of lines they speak constitutes less than 4 percent of the script: female characters have less to say in *Henry IV, Part I* than in any of Shakespeare’s other English history plays. Moreover, even when women do speak in this play, the language they use signals their exclusion from its dominant discourse. Mistress Quickly uses words that serve as constant reminders of her inability to master the King’s
English, and Mortimer’s wife speaks no English at all. Instead of lines in the playscript, her language is represented by stage directions (“the lady speaks in Welsh”), and its meaning comes to the audience only through the medium of her father’s translation. Hotspur’s wife is the only woman in the play who manages to speak good English, but she is allowed to speak very little. Even then her husband criticizes her choice of language: “Swear me, Kate,” he orders “like a lady as thou art,/A good mouth-filling heath, and leave ‘in sooth,’/ And such protest of pepper-gingerbread,/ To velvet-guards and Sunday-citizens” (3.1. 253–6). Prior to that however, there is a brief but interesting exchange between them in Act two, scene four with the lady chiding her husband for preparing to rush away from home and returning banter for banter:

Lady: Out, you mad-headed ape!

A weasel hath not such a deal of spleen

As you are tossed with. In faith,

I’ll know your business, Harry; that I will…

Come, come you paraquito, answer me

Directly unto this question that I ask.

In faith, I’ll break thy little finger, Harry,

An if thou wilt not tell me all things true.
Hotspur: Away, away, you trifler!...

This is no world

To play with mammets and to tilt with lips.

We must have bloody noses and cracked crowns,

And pass them current too. (34)

Despite the light hearted words, there is a note of seriousness too. Women are not expected to know anything about the business of war. What they do not know cannot affect them or strain their powers of discretion.

In the less canonical plays, by contrast, female characters have no difficulty in making their voices heard. Joan’s, in fact, is the most vivid and memorable voice in *I Henry VI*. In the first tetralogy, *King John*, and *Henry VIII*, the playscripts assign over four times as many lines to female characters as they as they do in the canonical plays, although here again the women’s parts are often cut in modern productions. Female characters do much more than talk in the less canonical plays, however; they also have important roles in the historical action. All three parts of *Henry VI* feature women in what are now considered “untraditional” roles—as generals leading victorious armies on the battlefield and as political actors who exercise significant power in the conduct of state affairs. In *Henry VI, Part I* Joan leads the French armies to repeated victories.

In the subsequent Henry VI plays, Margaret turns out to be a better general than her husband, and she has no difficulty in overriding Henry’s efforts
to make peace with his Yorkist antagonists. As pointed out by Howard and Rackin, “in *Part II*, Margaret’s marriage to Henry VI brings the subversive forces embodied by the French women in *Part I* to the heart of the English court. The French women who threaten to subvert the English historical project in *Part I* are unmarried; in *Part II*, the dangers they embody quite literally come home to England in the form of ambitious wives, married to the men who govern the land. These women threaten both the authority of their husbands and the stability of the kingdom” (65). They engage in intrigue and battle to consolidate their husband’s power but end up being manipulated by other forces. Margaret openly defies her husband, engages in an adulterous love affair with an ambitious courtier, and takes a leading role in dangerous court intrigues. Eleanor Cobham, wife of Gloucester, the upright Lord Protector, defies his wishes, scheming to put him on the throne so she herself can become queen. Fundamental to the play’s brutal representation of political disorder, then, is its emphasis on the gender disorder at the heart of the English state and the English family.

It may be mentioned that *Henry VI, Part I* begins with the funeral of Henry V and concentrates on the struggles of Henry VI’s forces, especially those of Lord Talbot, to retain the French territories Henry V had conquered. *Henry VI, Part II* and *Part III*, by contrast, focus on the ensuing civil war in England, the so-called Wars of the Roses. *Henry VI, Part II* represents the early stages of that struggle. The world of *Henry VI, Part II* is defined by extraordinary social chaos. *Henry VI, Part II* makes the young King Henry responsible for much of the
disorder in his kingdom, and it insistently connects his failures as monarch to his failures of masculinity. Henry is presented as an emotional and irrational person. On the other hand, Margaret appears to be a woman with excessive self-assertiveness. She does not reciprocate her husband’s affection, but openly prefers the courtly Suffolk. In *Henry VI, Part I*, Shakespeare shows Suffolk arranging the marriage between Margaret and Henry to satisfy both his own adulterous desire for her and his political ambitions. In this play, Margaret speaks of her disappointment with Henry:

I tell thee, Pole, when in the city Tours
Thou ran’st a-tilt in honor of my love
And stol’st away the ladies’ hearts of France,
I thought King Henry had resembled thee
In courage, courtship, and proportion;
But all his mind is bent to holiness,
To number Ave-Maries on his beads;
His champions are the prophets and apostles,
His weapons holy saws of sacred writ,
His study is his tilt-yard, and his loves
Are brazen images of canonized saints.
I would the college of the Cardinals
Would choose him Pope and carry him to Rome,
And set the triple crown upon his head—
That were a state fit for his holiness. (1.3.50–64)
In Margaret’s account, Henry appears more eligible for a cloister than a throne while Suffolk is endowed with all the qualities desirable of a courtier. She prefers him to the Lord Protector, the duke of Gloucester who attempts to keep the young king from falling prey to the lies and machinations of the corrupt peers. In singling out Gloucester as a rival to be eliminated, Margaret both acknowledges Gloucester’s power and recognizes that Henry cannot pretend to control the realm while Gloucester retains his authority as Lord Protector. Although Margaret and her fellow conspirators at court eventually ease out Gloucester, Henry never commands full authority. He does not even use his authority to save Gloucester’s life when Gloucester is accused by his enemies of crimes against the state. Henry’s failings as a king are presented in part as failings of masculinity. He appears to be neither a warrior nor a statesman.

Henry’s shortcomings are highlighted to justify Margaret’s increasing visibility in the public sphere. As pointed out by Rackin, “It was a commonplace of early modern thought that mannish women – that is, those who assume the prerogatives of men – emerge when men are womanish and fail to assert control over their wives and daughters”(73). The Margaret who emerges is a woman whose sexuality and ambition place her quite beyond her husband’s control and who increasingly assumes the public roles he has abdicated. Anxious to be rid of Gloucester’s interference in state matters, she plays a leading part in engineering his death; and by Act-V she is herself on the battlefield, actively participating in
the military decisions in the campaign against York and telling Henry when he must flee and what he must do.

Interestingly, Shakespeare’s representation of Margaret makes her appear morally worse than she does in his sources. As noted by Pugliatti, the Margaret of the chronicles does not scheme against Eleanor Cobham, Gloucester’s wife, nor does she participate in the plot against Gloucester himself (460). Shakespeare has her do both, and, as with Joan of Arc, he associates her outspoken strength with heightened sexuality. In Shakespeare’s play, Margaret’s adulterous association with Suffolk is not just a rumor or a surmise, as it was when mentioned in his historical sources; rather, the two lovers appear frequently on stage together, and when Suffolk is banished, their farewell is an impassioned aria punctuated with kisses and tears.

Apart from Margaret there is the Duchess of Gloucester, Eleanor Cobham, who is not content to remain in the background. Depicted as enemies and rivals, Margaret and Eleanor are, in a way, united by their assertive, ambitious natures. Against Gloucester’s express wishes, Eleanor pursues her ambition, thereby posing a threat to his public position. She dreams of usurping power from the present king and queen and having them kneel at her feet:

Were I a man, a duke, and next of blood,
I would remove these tedious stumbling-blocks,
And smooth my way upon their headless necks;
And being a woman, I will not be slack
To play my part in Fortune’s pageant. (1.2.61-67)
Eleanor’s frequently noted sartorial extravagance is another signal of her ambition, as well as making plain the fact that the Lord Protector’s wife is much more wealthy than the poverty-stricken queen. Not born a queen, she plays the part of one by her sartorial displays and troops of followers.

In the canonical plays of the second tetralogy, by contrast, not only are women’s roles reduced both in size and in number, but the field of women’s action is also constricted: the few female characters who appear on stage are typically confined to domestic settings and domestic roles—as wife, prospective wife, mother, widow, lady-in-waiting. The only English queen who appears in the canonical histories is the wife of Richard II. Nameless, she has very little time on stage and no function in the plot of Richard’s fall. She weeps at her husband’s infidelities, and she weeps again at the news of his downfall, but she has no existence except as his wife.

Although Richard III has a large cast of female characters, it is male-centered drama: the entire action focuses on the story of a powerful male protagonist, Richard III. In this respect, it prefigures the canonical plays of the second tetralogy and differs strikingly from the Henry VI plays and King John, which are notable for their diffusion of royal and patriarchal authority. Second, although the women’s roles in Richard III are relatively extensive for a Shakespearean history, they are frequently disregarded in mainstream criticism and cut in theatrical performance. Margaret, the most powerful of the female characters in the play, often disappears entirely. Finally, although female
characters have relatively prominent roles in Richard III—a fact which probably helps to explain the popularity of the play among feminist critics—the nature of those roles prefigures the more domesticated women in the second tetralogy rather than reiterating the dangerous, demonic otherness of female characters in the early plays. The early plays tend to demonize female characters, but they also record women’s power as orators, as warriors, as forces to contend with. So long as the authority of monarchs rests on genealogy, as in the first tetralogy, its guarantors—and its potential subverters—are women; for no man could know that he was truly the son of his mother’s husband or the father of his wife’s son. Because the transmission of patrilineal authority could take place only through the bodies of women, it was vulnerable at every stage to subversion by female sexual transgression. In the first tetralogy and King John, characters like Joan and Margaret and Lady Faulconbridge register masculine anxiety about female sexual independence.

Despite the wide recognition of aristocratic marriages as politically based, a thrice-married widow could not have evoked as much audience sympathy as a widow who had remained single. But King John’s three widowed mothers have all left the stage by the end of the third act, and the deaths of Elinor and Constance are announced in the fourth. Dead, they cannot draw attention from the main male characters. Of the women, only Blanch, a chaste and obedient maid, approaches conformity with patriarchal precepts, and breaks her silence only when agonizing over whom to call master. Perhaps that is why after the
third act, she is heard no more. In contrast to the widows, Blanch is the perfect pawn, possessing neither agency nor power.

To the extent that John relies on her, Elinor has both, whereas Constance is a free agent but lacks power, able to rule only through her son Arthur. Insofar as she has the youngest and therefore most easily controlled son, she is dangerous. Frustrated in her hopes, she becomes a wailing woman, lamenting the loss of Arthur, never her husband Geoffrey. Elinor and Constance are ambitious actors in international politics to the detriment of their sons. Lady Faulconbridge, no kingmaker, was instead “made” by a king. But at the end of act one, she walks away without having to atone for her long-concealed adultery, leaving the rest of the play to her illegitimate child by King Richard. If the Bastard is represented as England’s salvation, are royal liaisons acceptable in the ethical jungle of King John? Whether Lady Faulconbridge has been a doting mother, has harbored ambitions for her sons, has sacrificed for them, remains unknown. Her role is barely more than a walk-on, fourteen lines. But because we see her only vis-à-vis her child and because her past behavior has been highly questionable, she earns a place among the problematic widowed mothers. Lady Faulconbridge is virtue incarnate, the soul of outraged maternal authority, until she learns that her elder son has renounced his Faulconbridge legacy. Then she confesses. From her perspective, she has incurred little blame. That she slipped was not because she made a conscious choice but because she had no choice. King Richard prevailed with her through a suit so “long and vehement,” “so strongly urg’d” (1.1.254-
that she could not possibly resist. The Bastard jocularly seconds her explanation:

Needs must you lay your heart at his dispose,

Subjected tribute to commanding love,

Against whose fury and unmatched force

The aweless lion could not wage the fight,

Nor keep his princely heart from Richard’s hand.  (1.1.263–67)

As for the cover-up, she may believe that she had no alternative. What recourse would her cuckolded husband have had against the King? Could she offer Sir Robert a life of frustration and shame? He seems to have reached the same conclusion, for until he was at the point of death he accepted Philip as his son and heir. Nor could Lady Faulconbridge do otherwise, it being incumbent upon her, even a sacred trust—to raise the King’s child. Tenderly she speaks of “my dear offense” (1.1.257), that is, not only an offence for which she may pay dearly, but an offense that is dear to her. It is doubtful that she deceived her husband; he knew, her son Robert knew, and her son Philip suspected as much. His pun on “horn” indicates that the Bastard has questioned his Faulconbridge paternity:

What woman-post is this?

Hath she no husband

That will take pains to blow a horn before her?  (1.1.218–19).

Physical resemblances served as the paternity tests of an earlier age. Until John supports the Bastard’s claim, subverting her husband’s testamentary rights, Lady
Faulconbridge has had to live a lie, while surrounded by those who know her for a liar. Yet by concealment, Lady Faulconbridge served the social order. At least she is not guilty of baldly exposing patrilinearity as a house built on sand. That is the work of the younger Sir Robert, who brings his claim to open court and of the Bastard, whose quips demolish the house:

But for the certain knowledge of that truth [his paternity]
I put you o’er to heaven and to my mother.
Of that I doubt, as all men’s children may. (1.1.61–63)

As pointed out by Phyllis Rackin, “Lady Faulconbridge’s infidelity has created the nightmare situation that haunts the patriarchal imagination, a son not of her husband’s getting destined to inherit her husband’s lands and title” (Stages 188). What John’s interpretation of the brothers’ claims amounts to is “admitting that the relationship between father and son is finally no more than a legal fiction . . .” (Rackin, Stages 189). The play elaborates on the issues of cuckoldry and paternity as elsewhere in The Taming of the Shrew, Love’s Labor’s Lost, Henry IV Part One, Much Ado About Nothing, and The Tempest. Because of Philip’s royal connection, Lady Faulconbridge gains prestige among the worldly. Only the relationship between Lady Faulconbridge and her son by Sir Robert remains at risk. Interestingly, he accepts his mother’s sexuality, and promises her protection. Knowing that his mother chose to preserve her “honor” by defrauding him, he has some cause for disaffection despite being made whole. Her subsequent fidelity to her husband, followed by a celibate widowhood, help to
mitigate her reputation to some extent. Further, she harbours no ambitions for her sons and does not intentionally meddle in their lives.

Like Lady Faulconbridge, in spite of her past transgressive sexuality, Elinor is not portrayed as a “lusty widow”; rather, both were lusty wives. When Constance replies to Elinor, who has just called Arthur a bastard—“My bed was ever to thy son as true / As thine was to thy husband” (2.1.124–25)—Shakespeare reminds the more knowing members of his audience of that reputation. The checkered past that both Elinor and Lady Faulconbridge share introduces King John’s all-important issues of legitimacy and inheritance, soon to be complicated by the pragmatics of power, the Queen and Duchess being players in the great game.

Shakespeare presents these contenders in dramatic vignettes, the first of which introduces the Queen, who had been married to Henry II. Despite the frequent critical assertion and theatrical representation of women’s power in King John as “illusory”, Elinor’s control over John appears near complete, looking forward to the relationship between Volumnia and Coriolanus. Though widows, in accordance with law, lost authority, possessions, and status when their eldest son came of age, Elinor appears to have lost little if any authority. John’s public and private responses to his mother’s death tell all: “What? Mother dead? / How wildly then walks my estate in France!” (4.2.127–28). Left alone, the first words John speaks are “[m]y mother dead!” (4.2.181). Within a patriarchal society, that a grown man, a king, should be so dependent on his mother and so much less
competent than she is a damaging admission. Elinor’s importance to John and to
the play bears a dramatic significance regarding parental roles. Henry II being
dead, Shakespeare introduces a parent/child relationship involving a widowed
mother and her son, then draws a double parallel to that relationship. Thus, John
appears to be a widower, his son appearing in the play but not his wife.
(Historically, Eleanor of Angoulême had left him during one of his French
campaigns.) In lieu of a wife, he has his mother.

Shakespeare’s method in constructing Elinor is to assign her an attribute
that is reaffirmed later in the play. For example, Elinor demonstrates her
importance from the first scene, strategically intervening in the French
ambassador’s address:

_Chat_: Thus, after greeting, speaks the King of France

In my behavior to the majesty,

The borrowed majesty, of England here.

_El_: A strange beginning: “borrowed majesty”!

_K. John_: Silence, good mother, hear the embassy. (1.1.2–6)

Elinor refuses to let the insult go unchallenged; rather than let Chatillion deliver
his message uninterrupted, she breaches protocol in a move to disconcert him. By
heightening John’s position as secure and defiant, she relays to John her sense of
an appropriate reply. Simultaneously, she diminishes Chatillion’s – and France’s
– hope of an easy compromise, and makes it clear that she is no mere adjunct.
Compared to John, who observes decorum to no advantage, and Constance, a
loose cannon, Elinor keeps her own counsel, cautions John shrewdly, and from the onset appears the more experienced and successful politician. She demonstrates a propensity for sardonic interruption, a characteristic she shares with the Bastard, as she braves not only the king’s ambassador but the king himself: “Who is it thou dost call usurper, France?” (2.1.120). Having no husband to subordinate or silence her, the widowed queen can speak freely—and artfully. Nor does she spare her advice. John made his first error before the play opens. Elinor reminds her son that because he disregarded her counsel to negotiate, he must now risk all on the fortunes of war. When, in act 2, scene 1, she advises him to avert war by supporting the marriage of Blanche to Louis, John is quick to listen. Although Chatillon describes Elinor as “the motherqueen,/An Ate, stirring him to blood and strife” (2.1.62–63), like Elizabeth, Elinor prefers politics to battle.

Most interesting is Elinor’s freedom from the moral constraints of religion. When John defends himself against her recriminations, claiming “[o]ur strong possession and our right for us” (1.1.39), Elinor whispers,

Your strong possession much more than your right,

Or else it must go wrong with you and me;

So much my conscience whispers in your ear,

Which none but heaven, and you, and I, shall hear. (1.1.40–43)

She is the first though not the last character to “jest with heaven” (3.1.242). Having taken Arthur aside while John shares his vicious purpose with Hubert, she
is—ahistorically—an implied accessory to the intended blinding or murder of the boy she addresses as “little kinsman” (3.3.18). Such willingness to cheerfully condone her grandson’s unhappy fate, the price of her power and John’s, reinforces her earlier jest, strongly implying that she has discarded religion for realpolitik. Since her characterization does not lead us to imagine a repentant Elinor receiving timely absolution, she is either a skeptic, or, like Macbeth, willing to jump the life to come. As the Bastard assures his mother, “Some sins do bear their privilege on earth . . .” (1.1.261). The aged widow can have no doubts about the imminence of her own death, having lost four sons and two husbands. Yet she refuses to capitulate to an almost universally accepted faith, and however heinous her actions, her resolution never falters. Although Elinor is a law unto herself, her good is England’s. John is the better of two evils. So the queen goes to war. In keeping with her strong personality and her compelling voice is a martial freshness sooner expected in John than in his aged mother. “I am a soldier, and now bound to France” (1.1.150), says the vigorous widow, despite her preference for outwitting over warring. Shakespeare also gives her a gift for banter:

_Bast:_ Madam, I’ll follow you unto the death.

_El:_ Nay, I would have you go before me thither (1.1.154–55) and for telling invective: “Out, insolent! thy bastard shall be king / That thou mayst be a queen and check the world!” (2.1.122–23). The insult is rhetorically resonant, for to deny Arthur’s legitimacy is to deny his claim; to
depict “that ambitious Constance” (1.1.32) as the would be ruler of England is to remind supporters and enemies alike that whereas England has an adult male ruler in John, Arthur is a foreign child. Moreover, under Arthur, England’s de facto monarch would be the French king to whom Constance is beholden, a point clarified later with regard to the match between Lewis and Blanch.

However, when Elinor employs telling invective to attack Constance as an ambitious mother eager to rule through her son, she reveals her own purposes as well. Elinor’s verbal duel with Constance is indicative of the possible tension between rival brothers, with Elinor standing in for John and Constance for the deceased Geoffrey, whose child John supplants.

As single women, widowed queens can exercise power on behalf of their sons and win male loyalty. Elinor demonstrates laudable acumen through her dealings with the Bastard. She is the first to recognize him as a Plantagenet and to recruit him for John. It is the Bastard’s loyalty that saves the throne for Henry III. Despite the energy and distinctiveness of her voice, Elinor is old with few lines, Constance young and endowed with a virtuoso role. While rhetorically a match for Elinor, Constance is out of control and politically out of her depth, as we see in her dealings with Austria and England.

In a heavy-handed move, she publicly promises Austria an eventual return on his investment in Arthur:
O, take his mother’s thanks, a widow’s thanks,

Till your strong hand shall help to give him strength

To make a more requital to your love! (2.1.32–34)

Knowing full well that Austria’s involvement is not altruistic, she nevertheless expects him to fight on principle: “Thou cold-blooded slave, / Hast thou not spoke like thunder on my side?” (3.1.123–24). She is similarly unrealistic in her hope for John’s eleventh-hour capitulation (2.1.46–47) and in her belief that the English would be sympathetic to the rule of a “boy” and his regent mother. (Significantly, not she but France speaks for Arthur to the men of Angiers.) At her most recklessly malicious, she undermines Arthur’s claim by answering Elinor’s charge of adultery in kind:

My boy a bastard? By my soul I think

His father [Geoffrey] never was so true begot [as Arthur]

It cannot be, and if thou wert his mother. (2.1.129–31)

To infer Geoffrey’s bastardy is to vitiate Arthur’s claim. Her reason clouded by emotion, Constance cannot thrive among people who outwit her.

Although Constance lives for Arthur, she knowingly sacrifices his happiness to win him a crown. In an interesting parallel, in act 2 he attempts to silence Constance as John had silenced Elinor when she interrupted Chatillion’s message (1.1.5–6). But whereas Elinor desisted, Constance speaks twenty-five more lines before Angiers’s trumpet ends the women’s confrontation. “Good my mother, peace,” Arthur weeps, “I am not worth this coil that’s made for me”
(2.1.163, 165). He is too young to understand that the ultimate beneficiary of “this coil” will be France, that Constance is the pawn of France as Arthur is hers. Elinor uses Arthur’s misery to continue her attack on Constance: “His mother shames him so, poor boy, he weeps” (2.1.166). Constance replies with a metaphor suggesting divine simony to advantage Arthur: his tears will bribe heaven (2.1.168–72). Does she see them as a useful commodity? Ignoring Arthur’s discomfort, she continues to rant, expounding Exodus 20.5 as proof of Elinor’s adultery when conceiving John and even Geoffrey. Elinor’s sin is visited on Arthur, “Being but the second generation / Removed from thy sin-conceiving womb” (2.1.181–82). Her tirades earn her insults: “Bedlam” (2.1.183) and “unadvised scold” (2.1.191)—time (dis)honored insults for women who, if they cannot be silenced can at least be unheeded. So disruptive and unpredictable is Constance that Philip and John offer to “create young Arthur Duke of Britain / Earl of Richmond, and [to give him] this rich fair town [Angiers],” hoping to “satisfy her so / That we shall stop her exclamation” (2.1.551–52, 557–58). Had she agreed, Arthur would likely have lived.

Constance might have survived as well. When she attempts to goad the kings to renewed enmity, she forgets her initial desire for peace: “we shall repent each drop of blood” (2.1.48). Constance’s desperate need to rely on uncertain allies and her fear for Arthur’s life turn her into the Bedlam and scold she has been called. We are told that Constance dies “in a frenzy” (4.2.122) like Cymbeline’s queen – if not a gendered end, one that seemed particularly suitable
for difficult women. It is not clear whether she is aware of her role in Arthur’s death. Constance never admits complicity, recalling Shakespeare’s earlier creation, the first tetralogy’s Margaret, who represses the role she played in the death of her son Edward. Perhaps Constance defies judgment, her interests being inseparable from Arthur’s: “Lewis marry Blanch? O boy, then where art thou? / France friend with England, what becomes of me?” (3.1.34–35).

Constance remains an ambiguous character. Her concluding expression of grief for Arthur is profoundly disturbing, in part because of her psychic fusion with her son, a fusion revealing another face of their indivisible political interests:

Grief fills the room up of my absent child,
Lies in his bed, walks up and down with me,
Puts on his pretty looks, repeats his words,
Remembers me of all his gracious parts,
Stuffs out his vacant garments with his form;
Then, have I reason to be fond of grief?

. . . O Lord, my boy, my Arthur, my fair son!
My life, my joy, my food, my all the world!
My widow-comfort, and my sorrows’ cure! (3.4.93–98, 103–05)

These are her last words in the play.

Compared to Arthur, wholly at the mercy of adults, and John, who cannot function without his mother, Coriolanus is a heroic military leader, though strangled in civilian life by Volumnia’s strong leading strings. Having raised her
country’s preeminent soldier, contemptuous of danger and eager for her approval, Volumnia has validated herself and gained importance beyond that of other patrician women. It is her misfortune and his that she could not have been a warrior in her own right. Volumnia compensates for having produced only one son by the quality of his service. Her superior status within her privileged class is partially due to her age and widowhood; her authority affects the public as well as the private sphere because she conforms to ancient Roman notions of male old age. But her status is largely a function of her son’s valor. Coriolanus is her service to Rome, her sacrifice for Rome. Shakespeare deliberately departs from his classical source in that Volumnia does not spoil her son with tenderness. At no little cost, he fulfills her notion of the patriarchal fantasy of manhood.

Volumnia, although a far more highly developed and complex personality than the character Shakespeare’s sources offered him, is nevertheless made out of ideology. That is perhaps most strongly demonstrated in act 1, scene 3, as she relates to Virgilia her joy in having borne a son (rather than a daughter); her eagerness to send him, even as a boy, to war; and her willingness to accept his death in war:

Vol. When yet he was but tender-bodied and the only son of my womb . . . I, considering how honor would become such a person, that it was no better than picture-like to hang by th’ wall, if renown made it not stir, was pleas’d to let him seek danger where he was like to find fame. To a cruel war I sent him, from whence he return’d, his brows bound with oak. I tell thee, daughter, I sprang not more in joy at first hearing he was a man-child than now in first seeing he had prov’d himself a man.
Vir. But had he died in the business, madam, how then?

Vol. Then his good report should have been my son . . .

(Coriolanus 1.3.5–21)

Volumnia rejoices in the latest of her son’s twenty-seven wounds. They will buy Coriolanus a consulship and gain him yet more honor: “There will be large cicatrices to show the people, when he shall stand for his place” (2.1.147–49). The play’s gender oppositions deconstruct ironically as Coriolanus, fearing the hold Volumnia has over him, turns away from her with a doggerel aphorism: “Not of a woman’s tenderness to be, / Requires nor child nor woman’s face to see” (5.3.129–30).

Volumnia’s considerable authority derives equally from her social identity as a mother and from her identification with the masculinist, militarist ideology of Rome. She embodies in an exaggerated, intensified form a construction of motherhood not only normative in Roman culture but still influential today in wartime. Insofar as Volumnia acts within the established feminine parameters by bearing and rearing a son, the play conforms to conventional gender binarism. Her complicity with Roman militarism is no less conventional. But it is precisely because Volumnia holds such power over her son as a mother that her advocacy of the dominant martial ideology gives her a crucial political leverage. As a mother, she is of course subjected by the dominant ideology – but she is also instrumental to it, and thus central to the play’s critique of virtus. “Thus the play dislodges “mother” as a representational category from its oppositional place in the masculinist discourses of war and of virtus, making it
a contestable term that cannot be placed securely on either side of a male/female or public/private…” (Kahn, 146).

In the text Volumnia greets her victory over Coriolanus, a personal triumph as well as a victory for Rome, with silence. He says his life is now endangered, but of course it always was. In militaristic societies for sons to outlive their mothers is not unusual.

Volumnia appears to push her son towards death as for her living and dying as a soldier was more important. In fact she is identified with Rome which devours its own children:

Now the good gods forbid
That our renowned Rome, whose gratitude
Towards her deserved children is enroll’d
In Jove’s own book, like an unnatural dam
Should now eat up her own! (3.1.288–92)

Although Volumnia is called “The cannibalistic mother who denies food and yet feeds on the victories of her sweet son” by Adelman (quoted in Kehler 90), Coriolanus cannot be absolved of his foolhardy decisions. Finally, his decision to spare the Romans at the request of his mother and wife earns the wrath of the Volscians and allows Aufidius to capitalize on it.

At the conclusion of Coriolanus, the patriarchal, militaristic code still prevails. The patricians are vindicated. Volumnia will soon lose her only son in Corioles, and Virgilia will join the ranks of widowed mothers. She will learn to
accept the brevity of her son’s life so that he can serve the state. Volumnia, her country’s savior and incarnation, has learned that already.

The mother’s feverish search for emotional fulfillment through the child can only make things worse. The incipient madness of Constance, not merely reported like that of Cymbeline’s queen but staged in act 3, could be construed as a punishment visited on mothers whose tunnel vision is so complete that the only lives they perceive as real are their own and those of the children they manipulate and unwittingly destroy. Other lives are destroyed, too. As Constance screams for war, we may remember the victims of the dynastic conflicts she initiates to make her doomed child a king: “Many a widow’s husband grovelling lies, / Coldly embracing the discolored earth . . .” (*King John*. 2.1.305–06).

Shakespeare depicts the grim realities of war, as they touched the lives of not only men but women as well. For the latter, obedience to strictures on widows’ proper behavior offers no temporal reward. Shakespeare’s celibate and child-centered widows suffer no less than those who ignore male precepts. Those who remarry for protection find none.

It might seem to follow, then, that a concomitant effect of Shakespeare’s writing history as tragedy is to vitiate female agency (Rackin, *Engendering* 51). In Shakespeare, lacking men to speak for them, the widows are of necessity articulate. Their rhetorical strategies, wit, invective, curses, and misleading speech succeed because plays are fabricated out of words. Lacking the ability to
command or exert authority, the widows fight calamity with words. Shakespeare allots these characters, whose only action is eloquence, a space from which to defend and attack. Unable to escape suffering, to turn back the clock and restore their husbands and children, the widows can nevertheless persuade. Although empowered only rhetorically, they serve as agents of the plays’ underlying pacific design.

Among the widows is Lady Grey of *Henry VI, Part Three*, who, upon her remarriage to Edward IV, becomes Queen Elizabeth and, upon the death of her second husband, becomes dowager queen. Whatever her motives, for moralists remarriage suffices to confirm the belief in female inconstancy. She proves that women are “changeable” by changing from one husband to another. Elizabeth Grey, née Woodville, is the widow of Sir Richard Grey, who died fighting at the battle of St. Albans. A mother upon whom the support of a warwracked family has devolved, she begs Edward IV for the return of the Grey lands. His attempt to seduce her founders, first on her reluctance to recognize his licentious purpose, then on her adamant rejection of concubinage, despite her need of a protector:

*K. Edw.* To tell thee plain, I aim to lie with thee.

*L. Grey.* To tell you plain, I had rather lie in prison.

(3H6 3.2.69–70)

She follows this overt display of wit with a more subtle demonstration. When Edward denies her the family estate, she answers, “Why then mine honesty shall be my dower . . .” (3.2.72), “dower” suggesting marriage, if only subliminally. In
her next retort, she calls his proposition a “merry inclination” (3.2.76), merely a jest, thus enabling him to save face. Gradually she becomes more earnest yet retains verbal mastery as evidenced by her response:

    K. Edw. Say that King Edward take thee for his queen?
    L. Grey. ’Tis better said than done, my gracious lord. . . .
    K. Edw. I speak no more than what my soul intends . . .
    And that is to enjoy thee for my love.
    L. Grey. And that is more than I will yield unto.
    I know I am too mean to be your queen,
    And yet too good to be your concubine.

(3H6 89–90, 94–98)

Her ploy is successful. Manipulated by her rhetoric, Edward offers her the throne. Perseverance and wit win Elizabeth a husband by whom she is silenced: “Answer no more, for thou shalt be my wife” (3.2.106). As a widowed mother whose lost lands are in the king’s gift, Elizabeth is more apt to wed for security than passion. When Buckingham narrates his version of this first encounter between Edward and Elizabeth to the Londoners, he describes her as the seducer, but one whose motive was pecuniary, she being “a poor petitioner, / A carecraz’d mother to a many sons . . .” (R3 3.7.183–84). Vulnerable because of the remarriage that her enemies choose to regard as only partial, she remains for them Lady Grey. Clarence does not protest when Richard says,
‘Tis not the King that sends you to the Tower;

My Lady Grey his wife, Clarence, ’tis she

That tempers him to this extremity.

(R3 1.1.63–65)

When Elizabeth the chaste widow is transformed into a chaste wife, she loses all trace of “her wit incomparable” (3H6 3.2.85) that had so impressed Edward. Having again become a breeder, she fears to feel, let alone speak, “Lest with my sighs or tears I blast or drown / King Edward’s fruit, true heir to th’ English crown” (3H6 4.4.23–24). Reinscribed as a silent, obedient wife, she plays a role that by the final scene is reduced to one empty line: “Thanks noble Clarence, worthy brother, thanks” (3H6 5.7.30).

Not until Edward’s death, when she once again becomes a single woman, does Elizabeth regain the verbal facility she had possessed as Grey’s widow. Politically Elizabeth is the wrong match for Edward, bringing neither a great dowry nor an important alliance, creating enmity with France over the match Edward breaks off with the king’s sister, and antagonizing the English nobility because of the wealth and power accorded the Woodvilles. Not only the Woodvilles’ social climbing but Elizabeth’s remarriage leads to the queen’s second widowhood and the loss of her young sons and brother.

According to Gloucester, who jests about the king’s mistress, Jane Shore, Elizabeth is “[w]ell strook in years” (R3 1.1.92). Married to a sometime husband about to die of “surfeit” (1.3.196), Elizabeth, her brother, and the children of both
her marriages are imperiled by her royal position. Her lost identity as rhetorician returns when, possessed by language in a frenzy of mourning for Edward, she announces his death with wild puns and grieving for her sons, she interrogates God:

Wilt thou, O God, fly from such gentle lambs,
And throw them in the entrails of the wolf?
When didst thou sleep when such a deed was done?

(4.4.22–24)

We do not hear so powerful a query again until Macduff loses his family: “Did heaven look on, / And would not take their part?” (Mac.4.3.223–24). That, unlike Macduff, she finds no easy answer bespeaks the intellectual depth Shakespeare grants her. By the end of Richard III, heavy with loss, her daughter’s only defender, Elizabeth regains the protective verbal facility she once possessed as Grey’s widow. Shakespeare even re-endows her with her talent for stichomythia. With words as her only weapon, she learns to combat.

It is in character for Elizabeth to defeat Richard through rhetorical superiority. When the Duchess asks, “Why should calamity be full of words?” Elizabeth, huddling conceit upon conceit, describes words as

[w]indy attorneys to their client’s woes,
Aery succeeders of intestate joys,
Poor breathing orators of miseries . . .

(4.4.126–28)

For her, however, words in the face of calamity are more than mere “orators of misery”; they are weapons that lead Richard to fatally drop his guard. In act 4,
scene 4, the second courtship scene, Richard asks Elizabeth for her daughter’s hand. Shakespeare creates dramatic irony as Elizabeth deceives Richard but not alert auditors. Whereas Richard holds his own against Anne and eventually gains rhetorical mastery over her, in this second debate he is confounded, his misogynous view of women leading him to underestimate his opponent:

*K. Rich:* Her life [the princess’s] is safest only in her birth.

*Q. Eliz:* And only in that safety died her brothers.

*K. Rich:* Lo at their birth good stars were opposite. (4.4.214–216)

In any case, Lord Stanley soon assures them that she has not given way: “Withal say that the Queen hath heartily consented / He [Richmond] should espouse Elizabeth her daughter” (4.5.7–8). The verbal facility that Shakespeare grants Elizabeth had first preserved her chastity against Edward’s assault. As Edward’s wife she demonstrates a keen awareness of likely duplicity. In *Henry VI, Part Three*, fearing Warwick she flees to sanctuary “to prevent the tyrant’s violence / (For trust not him that hath once broken faith) . . .” (4.4.29–30). Her keen survival instincts protect her daughter from a perverse, exploitative marriage to Richard, whose hallmark is broken faith. Deluded by Elizabeth, Richard’s complacency about wedding the princess translates into insufficient mistrust of Stanley, Richmond’s stepfather, who vindicates the wisdom of Elizabeth’s political move: the promised alliance with Richmond. Stanley has even greater reason to betray Richard, knowing marriage to the princess will strengthen Richmond’s claim. For all that, the power of a voice is an imperfect shield. Just
as the historical Elizabeth was sent away from court when Henry VII asserted himself, so she disappears from the play before the final act.

But whereas in *Henry VI, Part Three*, Shakespeare makes a Yorkist of historically Lancastrian Elizabeth Woodville Grey, Anne, the widow of Edward Prince of Wales, son of Henry VI and Margaret, remains on the Lancastrian losing side. Fighting for his right to inherit the crown, her husband is killed at Tewkesbury by Edward IV, Clarence, and their brother Richard of Gloucester, the last soon to become Anne’s second husband and England’s king. As a war widow, Anne’s position is even more difficult than Elizabeth’s. Anne has no claim on the Yorkist government. Her father, Warwick the Kingmaker, killed fighting Edward-IV, betrayed York by trading Anne to Lancaster in his pique over Edward’s marriage (3H6 3.3.242–43). Anne is impoverished and imperiled. Fatherless under a hostile monarchy, she has no one to champion her cause, to help her reclaim her dowry or receive her widow’s jointure. Further, whereas Lady Grey is politically unimportant, Anne, as Warwick’s heir and Prince Edward’s widow, is too central to the dynastic struggle to hope for a quiet life. Like Elizabeth she possesses rhetorical gifts, but Shakespeare depicts her situation as so desperate and her character as so uncertain that only after her death do words avail her. Anne is a foil against whom Richard can display his virtuosity.

The plight Anne finds herself in at least partly explains her surrender to Richard. He can make her “amends” as he puts it at the end of scene 1, by
repeatedly inviting her to see herself \textit{reflected in him}, as immensely powerful. Ironically, Anne emerges as one of the least powerful widows. What store of strength remains to her is exhausted in invective during her first encounter with Richard; she hates but not well, in time electing her own feminine nature as target for reproof: “Within so small a time, my woman’s heart / Grew grossly captive to his honeywords . . .” (4.2.78–79). One ghost among many, Anne participates in the supernatural tactic that unsettles and disheartens Richard before his last battle. But neither this effort nor self-recrimination enables her to transcend the derogatory nature of her construction.

For artificiality of construction even Anne cannot compete with Margaret of Anjou. Prior to her unhistorical return in \textit{Richard III} as a bitter widowed seer, she appears in the three parts of \textit{Henry VI} as a pastiche of misogynous commonplaces and canards laced with xenophobia. As \textit{Henry VI, Part Three}, draws to a close, Margaret, maddened with grief and rage over Prince Edward’s murder, commences the prophetic cursing that will structure \textit{Richard III}. Although the real Margaret died in her early fifties, Shakespeare’s queen, joyless but for her prescient knowledge of her enemies’ grim fates, is depicted in \textit{Richard III} as a crone: a “[f]oul wrinkled witch” (1.3.163) and “hateful with’red hag” (1.3.214). The description fits this last incarnation of Margaret to a tee. As in the \textit{Henry VI} plays, in \textit{Richard III} she remains an assemblage of formulaic slurs but these are more limited, advancing age having taken her husband, her status, her beauty, and her Lancastrian army.
With an armory only of words, Margaret nevertheless competes successfully against Richard for audience interest. A formidable foe, she commands an ease of aggressive speech that distinguishes her from her fellow victims. Her first entrance is an iconic positioning: “Enter old Queen Margaret [behind]” (1.3.109), her last speech a cruel gloating: “These English woes shall make me smile in France” (4.4.115). In lieu of soliloquies, Shakespeare grants Margaret a single address to the audience, but it opens with the play’s arguably most striking image: “So now prosperity begins to mellow / And drop into the rotten mouth of death” (R3 4.4.1–2). Otherwise, the closest Margaret comes to interior speech is through the words of the other widows, who construct her subjectivity by voicing communal emotions, and through her own corrosive asides:

Q. Eliz. Small joy have I in being England’s queen.

Q. Mar. [Aside.] And less’ned be that small, God I beseech him.

(1.3.109–10)

Yet limited as are her modes of displaying interiority, Margaret never lacks a distinctive voice. She revels in deploying an uncanny feature of her voice, the gift of prophecy. Foretelling the ills that are her heart’s desire, she becomes a likely candidate for the perilous designation of witch. Whereas Anne unwittingly curses herself, Margaret deliberately curses the entire family of Edward IV, both by blood and marriage; for good measure she curses Hastings and Buckingham, too. Her curses are specific and predictive, and most are fulfilled: the Prince of Wales
“[d]ie[s] in his youth by . . . untimely violence!” (1.3.200); Richard is tormented by “the worm of conscience” (1.3.221), bereft of sleep, suspecting friends like Hastings and Buckingham, trusting traitors like Stanley, and afflicted in dreams by his victims; by the fourth act Elizabeth does indeed wish for Margaret to help her curse Richard (1.3.244–45), and Buckingham has good reason to “say poor Margaret was a prophetess!” (1.3.300). Like Elizabeth, Margaret validates the power of words. Although she knows that ambitious nobles have produced the grief she relishes, those subject to her curses do not.

In the history plays, however, male responsibility for the Wars of the Roses is concealed under a cloud of female magic. The only magic Shakespeare allows the “wailing women” is the power of rhetoric. While it cannot avert their victimization, it can avenge them.

At some point, each of the wailing women including Richard’s mother, the Duchess of York, wishes for Richard’s death. Portrayed ambiguously, the Duchess is a wise interrogator of war, if not a good-enough mother. An elderly celibate living in remembrance of her husband and through her sons—“I have bewept a worthy husband’s death / And liv’d with looking on his images” (2.2.49–50)—she enters the play torn between maternal duty to Richard and moral judgment. Mourning the death of her son Clarence, she is aware of Richard’s complicity: “from my dugs he drew not this deceit” (2.2.30). Initially, she grants Richard her blessing (at Edward’s death, he becomes her sole
surviving son). But after her grandsons are killed at their uncle’s command, the Duchess, refusing to be silenced by trumpets and drums, curses Richard.

The Duchess’s implied witchlike power to kill is reinforced by the “most grievous” curse she calls down upon Richard, “Which in the day of battle tire thee more / Than all the complete armor that thou wear’st!” (4.4.188–90). Although Richard, intent on securing Elizabeth’s intercession with the niece he plans to wed, seemingly makes light of the power of a mother’s curse, it works to defeat him. We can also infer the power of the curse from Richard’s admission on the eve of Bosworth: “I shall despair; there is no creature loves me” (5.3.200)—not even my mother. Since crones like Margaret and the Duchess supposedly presaged death, by calling Margaret a witch Richard transfers his feelings about his mother on to her.

Not surprisingly, mourning scenes, both solitary and shared, are prominent in Richard III. The formal, incantatory verse of Anne’s mourning in act 1, scene 1, and of the Duchess’s and Elizabeth’s mourning in act 2, scene 2, which stands in for memorial services, attempts to redeem the slaughtered from oblivion and lend dignity to their deaths. As the widows (and Clarence’s children) contend over who has suffered more, they simultaneously create important human rites. Public mourning is a potent weapon. The culminating mourning scene, act 4, scene 4, involves the three surviving widows: three mothers and a grandmother who have lost sons and grandsons. The “wailing
women” scene fulfills Bedford’s prophesy of England’s decay: “And none but women left to wail the dead” (1H6 1.1.51).

In lamentation at its most ritualistic, Yorkists Elizabeth and her mother-in-law, the Duchess, support each other (Richard has already done away with Anne, their sympathizer), while Margaret remains “other”; bonding can surmount factional but not national lines. Despite the Duchess’s plea—“O Harry’s wife, triumph not in my woes!/ God witness with me, I have wept for thine” (4.4.59-60) – Margaret exults, retelling the names of her dead enemies like an unholy liturgy, a grotesque cathartic rite through which she grieves her own losses. Significantly, this rhetorical scene with its final tallying of the dead marks the beginning of Richard’s peripety.

Shakespeare reserves to the oldest widow, the mother who wishes her last surviving son dead, the bitterest condemnation of power-hunger. Having known “[e]ighty odd years of sorrow… / And each hour’s joy wrack’d with a week of teen” (4.1.95–96), she questions war itself. The other widows accept conflict as inevitable. Their protestations are local; not a war-prone honor-culture or war itself but rather those who fought against their husbands and children earn their anger. In contrast, the old Duchess of York gains authority by transcending partisanship; she speaks for all as she seeks words to depict the madness of a lifetime of war. Her indictment of internecine war provides the tetralogy with a moral center:
Accursed and unquiet wrangling days,
How many of you have mine eyes beheld!
My husband lost his life to get the crown,
And often up and down my sons were toss’d
For me to joy and weep their gain and loss;
And being seated, and domestic broils
Clean overblown, themselves, the conquerors,
Make war upon themselves, brother to brother,
Blood to blood, self against self. O, preposterous
And frantic outrage, end thy damned spleen,
Or let me die, to look on death no more!  (R3 2.4.55–65)

It is appropriate that a widow, alluded to but unrepresented, plays a determining role in Richard’s downfall: Edmund Tudor’s widow, Margaret Beaufort, mother of Henry Tudor, Earl of Richmond, the future Henry VII of England. Henry’s twice-widowed mother, Lancastrian Countess Richmond, had wed Lord Stanley, perhaps the most successful remarriage in the Shakespeare canon. She never appears on stage, although Elizabeth speaks of the Countess’s “proud arrogance” (R3 1.3.24). Countess Richmond influences Stanley to turn his coat at the Battle of Bosworth Field, risking the life of his (but not her) son George, Richard’s hostage. Stanley’s action at his wife’s behest assures Richard’s loss to Richmond and the triumphal Lancastrian ending of the first tetralogy, thus proving that, artfully used, women’s words can sometimes move armies and bring down a dynasty.
The widows of Richard III are impressive mourners, but they meet their match in Lady Percy of Henry IV, Part Two, who appears in only one scene and is almost entirely a Shakespearean invention. Her quiet intensity of grief is the equal of Constance’s lyric lament for Arthur (John. 3.4.93–98), affirming Shakespeare’s developing mastery of psychological, poetic, and dramatic representation. Kate’s tender remembrances of Hotspur recall the skepticism with which she had greeted his eagerness for battle. Hotspur’s high-handedness and secrecy deprive Kate of an opportunity to avert the rebellion; she has no voice in determining her fate but can only take her place among the wives who became war widows and had to bear the consequences of their men’s foolishness.

The young widow’s envisioning how, but for Northumberland’s betrayal, she might have been “hanging on Hotspur’s neck” (2H4, 2.3.44) brings to mind the playful Kate of Part One, threatening to break her Harry’s little finger. In Part Two, bereft of “him, O wondrous him! / O miracle of men” (2.3.32–33), she defies the rules of deference. She confronts the patriarch with the full implications of his having instigated war and then abandoned the son who fought it for him, forcing Northumberland to face his complicity in Hotspur’s death:

The time was, father, that you broke your word
When you were more endear’d to it than now,
When your own Percy, when my heart’s dear Harry,
Threw many a northward look to see his father
Bring up his powers; but he did long in vain. (2.3.10–14)
Exposing Northumberland’s ethical posture as no less “worm-eaten” than his hold (35), Kate contrasts with Morton, the retainer who brings news of the rebels’ defeat and Hotspur’s death. Morton’s survival hinges on Northumberland’s military commitment. So although Morton beholds his lord shedding his mountebank’s crutch and nightcap, hears him launch into unconvincing magniloquent nihilistic imperatives (1.1.153–54), Morton nevertheless accords the Earl honor: “Sweet Earl, divorce not wisdom from your honor” (1.1.162). Rather than echoing Lady Northumberland, who has obediently resigned herself to the patriarchal will, Kate impugns her father-in-law’s wisdom and his honor. Shakespeare summons up the earlier scene by juxtaposing the words “wisdom” and “honor” in Lady Northumberland’s acquiescence and her husband’s reply:

Lady N. Do what you will, your wisdom be your guide.

North. Alas, sweet wife, my honor is at pawn,

And but my going, nothing can redeem it. (2.3.6–8)

Kate offers to dissuade him by insisting that his honor is lost irredeemably:

There were two honors lost, yours and your son’s:

For yours, the God of heaven brighten it!

For his, it stuck upon him as the sun

In the grey vault of heaven. . . . (2.3.16–19)

Kate places blame, aware that Northumberland was not “grievous sick” (1H4 4.1.16) but “crafty sick” (2H4, 37). Shakespeare has the widowed daughter-in-law and soon-to-be-widowed wife of Northumberland urge him to flee “for all
our loves” (2.3.55). Wisely seeking the preservation of the Percys, Kate pleads with Northumberland to desert his fellow rebels. In the topsy-turvy moral world of Henry IV, betrayal is the only constant. Even duplicity’s victims counsel deception. Kate’s power is as ambiguous as her counsel. She succeeds because, for all her acerbity, she begs Northumberland to act in accordance with his nature. She says what he wants to hear, for he believes that the odds are still against the rebels: “Never so few, and never yet more need” (1.1.215). For 1590s theater buffs who knew Northumberland as a byword for betrayal (having gone back on his word to Richard and Henry IV as well as to his brother Worcester, son Hotspur, allies Glendower, Mortimer, and others), the play is a cautionary tale. The outcome of Kate’s plea could not have been in doubt. Despite her maturity, Kate like the rest of the wives and widows, is forced to make compromises and submit to the patriarchal order. The same however, cannot be said about Lady Macbeth who drives her husband to implement her designs.

In the mind of Lady Macbeth, ambition is represented as the ruling motive, an intense overmastering passion, which is gratified at the expense of every just and generous principle, and every feminine feeling. In the pursuit of her object, she is cruel, treacherous, and daring. She is doubly, trebly dyed in guilt and blood: for the murder she instigates is rendered more frightful by disloyalty and ingratitude, and by the violation of all the most sacred claims of kindred and hospitality. When her husband’s more kindly nature shrinks from the perpetration of the deed of horror, she, like an evil genius, whispers him on to his
damnation. The full measure of her wickedness is never disguised, the magnitude and atrocity of her crime is never extenuated, forgotten, or forgiven, in the whole course of the play. Lady Macbeth's amazing powers of intellect, her inexorable determination of purpose, her superhuman strength of nerve, render her as fearful in herself. She embodies terrible passion and mighty powers, but remains a woman, to the last,—still linked with her sex and with humanity. It may be noted that the first idea of murdering Duncan is not suggested by Lady Macbeth to her husband: it springs within his mind, and is revealed to us, before his first interview with his wife,—before she is introduced or even alluded to.

Why hath it given me earnest of success,
Commencing in a truth? I am thane of Cawdor—
If good, why do I yield to that suggestion,
Whose horrid image doth unfix my hair,
And make my seated heart knock at my ribs,
Against the use of nature?

(1.3.132-137)
It may be noted that Lady Macbeth thinks of murdering Duncan only after hearing from her husband. She believes that it is an extension of the prophecy of the weird sisters on the mind of her husband, kindling a latent passion for empire. The train of evil, first lighted by hellish agency, extends itself to her through the medium of her husband. The guilt is thus more equally divided than impressions that she goaded her husband on to crime. It is true that she afterwards appears the more active agent of the two; but it is less through her pre-eminence in
wickedness than through her superiority of intellect. The eloquence – the fierce fervid eloquence with which she bears down the relenting and reluctant spirit of her husband, the dexterous sophistry with which she wards off his objections, her artful and affected doubts of his courage:

Art thou afeard

To be the same in thine own act and valour,

As thou art in desire? Would'st thou have that

Which thou esteem'st the ornament of life,

And live a coward in thine own esteem?(1.7.39-43)

The sarcastic manner in which she lets fall the word coward – a word which no man can endure from another, still less from a woman, and least of all from the woman he loves – and the bold address with which she removes all obstacles, silences all arguments, overpowers all. Lady Macbeth is ambitious less for herself than for her husband. In her famous soliloquy, after reading her husband's letter, she does not once refer to herself. It is of him she thinks: she wishes to see her husband on the throne, and to place the sceptre within his grasp. Interestingly, there is no lack of womanly respect and love for her husband but on the contrary, a sort of unconsciousness of her own mental superiority, which she betrays rather than asserts, as interesting in itself as it is most admirably conceived and delineated. After the murder of Duncan we see Lady Macbeth, during the rest of the play, occupied in supporting the weakness and sustaining the fortitude of her conscience-stricken husband. She tells him “Things without remedy/Should be without regard: what's done, is done.”
Lady Macbeth is not a woman to start at shadows; she sees no imagined spectres rise from the tomb to appall or accuse her. Her mind disdains the visionary terrors which haunt her weaker husband. Shakespeare never confounds that line of demarcation which eternally separates good from evil, yet he never places evil before us without exciting in some way a consciousness of the opposite good which shall balance and relieve it.

Although traditional gender relations are called into question, and stereotypes constantly challenged through these women who are related to men who either govern or are close to the throne, they stand in danger of being marginalized as witches or mad women. For a while no doubt, they enjoy power and some like John’s mother Elinor dies when her son is still the king. Others however, like Margaret and Eleanor or Elizabeth are left to live out their loss with bitterness. Interestingly, these women while in power, display sufficient intelligence to the detriment of their weak or passive husbands and sons. Elinor influences King John’s political decisions while Margaret as Queen goes against her husband King Henry’s decisions or at best underestimates him. That they are vilified as shrews and witches or silly interfering schemers, like Eleanor, the Duchess of Gloucester, stems from the fact that women were not expected to take part in power politics, let alone warfare. Most of these women appear to be against war, but are forced to join the forces because of the supposedly weak men they champion. Elinor, John’s mother, going to battle is a case in point. In the case of Lady Macbeth, however, we have a woman encouraging bloodshed to
secure her husband’s latent ambition. Although she takes the initiative, it is always her husband’s cause that she promotes. However, her reception, like the rest of the ambitious wives, is in terms of her excesses. She, and the rest of the women---mothers and consorts alike---who engage in state affairs end up as meddling women who “Overflow the measure” (Antony and Cleopatra 1.1).

Thus women in their capacity as wives, widows, and mothers influence matters of State. However, the business does not leave them unscathed. Even as they play the role of manipulators, they end up at times as tools in someone else’s design. Strong women like Margaret and Eleanor, themselves schemers and plotters, find themselves outmaneuvered and pushed around as pawns of patriarchy. All these women are made to realize that they are not important in themselves. They are seen as sexualized figures regardless of nationality or social hierarchy. They are rather, signifiers of patriarchal power and possession. While some of these women enjoy power as wives they end up as bitter widows.