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## "Wrens Make Prey Where Eagles Dare Not Perch": Poisonous Masculinity and Incel Ideology in The Tragedy of King Richard III

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“Wrens Make Prey Where Eagles Dare Not Perch”:  
Poisonous Masculinity and Incel Ideology in *The Tragedy of King Richard III*

Joshua Thomas Aldrich

A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of

GRAND VALLEY STATE UNIVERSITY

In

Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

Master of Arts in English Literature

Department of English

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Thesis Approval Form



GRAND VALLEY  
STATE UNIVERSITY

The signatories of the committee members below indicate that they have read and approved the thesis of Joshua Thomas Aldrich in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in English Literature.

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## CHAPTER ONE:

### CONNECTING *RICHARD III* TO THE PRESENT AGE

When Joe Biden announced his candidacy for President of the United States, he cited the white supremacist march in Charlottesville, Virginia as an event marking the resurgence of a particularly American strand of racism and misogyny and the impetus for his decision to run. Biden framed the 2020 contest between himself and then-President Donald Trump as a “battle for the soul of America.” While Biden was ultimately triumphant in his electoral campaign, the past two years have made clear that the ascendant hatred and ugliness of the Trump era will not be so easily contained by a nominal change in governmental power. In fact, the legacy of the 45th president continues to be deeply felt, whether through the power he still wields over the modern Republican party, or through the norm-shattering actions of the United States Supreme Court, which Trump stacked with conservative justices who have overturned judicial precedent at a historical rate. Neighborhoods throughout the United States are dotted with flags bearing Trump’s name, and the nation girds itself for a 2024 rematch between President Biden and former-President Trump; if the 2020 election was a potential conversion moment, the nation’s soul continues to reside in limbo.

That hate groups in the United States increased under the Trump Administration is undeniable; according to the Southern Poverty Law Center, white nationalist groups alone increased by 55% in the Trump era (Wilson). Likewise, counties that hosted a Trump rally in 2016 saw “a 226% increase in reported hate crimes over comparable counties that did not host such a rally” (Feinberg et. al.). In 2020, the former president himself used a national debate stage to tell the Proud Boys (a chauvinist, white supremacist group) to “stand back and stand by,” a command that was widely celebrated among hate groups online, many of which would

orchestrate the insurrection at the Capitol on January 6, 2021 (Frenkel and Karni). In the wake of the insurrection, views about the acceptability of political violence changed dramatically. In February 2021, the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace found that “one in five Republicans and thirteen percent of Democrats claimed that political violence was justified ‘these days’” (Kleinfeld). Among Republicans alone, the support for political violence has doubled and with real world consequences, including the attempted assassination of Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi and the resulting assault on her husband in November 2022, an event that was widely mocked by Republicans including Trump (McGraw). While these events and statistics paint a damning portrait of a president willing to court extremists in order to claim and maintain power, it would be a mistake to view Trump as the originator or even sole resurrector of such hateful ideologies. The reality is that these infectious strands of hatred have merely been ignored by mainstream America, no rarer in the United States than in any other patriarchal country. Trump’s direct appeals to the American legacy of white supremacy may have a uniquely nationalist flavor, but the hatred that feeds far-right and alt-right ideology can be traced back centuries before the founding of the United States. It is not necessary to wonder what might happen to a society that allows itself to be infected by misogyny, particularly when writers across history have already provided us with clear analogues to our own circumstances.

William Shakespeare’s *The Tragedy of King Richard III* is a play that reflects back the twenty-first century reader’s own loud, tumultuous times with startling clarity. Through the story of Richard’s rapid ascent to power, Shakespeare demonstrates how a nation saturated in patriarchal values can come to be ruled by a leader who is himself driven by the same aggrievement and misogyny common in contemporary society. In this way, Richard serves as a prophetic warning that can be used to understand the current era. Within the text, Shakespeare’s

Richard is enabled by men who believe that they can channel his political popularity into personal gains of their own, but they are slow to realize that the autocrat is accountable to no one once he possesses complete control. The king's only governing philosophy is self-aggrandizement and a hatred for the women he blames for rejecting him. The character of Richard thus becomes the result and the progenitor of rank hatred within his court and kingdom.

When examining the knotted web of extremism within our current context, it can be difficult to untangle the various threads of racism, Christian nationalism, and sexism from one another. These ideologies share common goals even if their entry points into radicalism are different, which explains why the insurrection featured evangelical Christians waving "Jesus Saves" signs next to Proud Boys wielding Confederate flags. These groups may seem disparate, but a main animating force behind these movements is a deeply rooted hatred of women and a desire to see them subservient to men. While white supremacist groups have certainly found an audience among disillusioned young men online, they have not flourished in the same way as groups within the so-called "manosphere," a network of loosely affiliated men's rights groups. These collectives undoubtedly cling to racist ideologies that promote an idealized image of white Western manhood, but the anger of many disaffected and dangerous young men has at its source (perceived or real) sexual rejection. To rage toward women as the source of unhappiness makes it that much easier for men to progress more deeply into conspiratorial theories about a secret world run by so-called "Chads" – "ideal male specimen[s] [who] can attract nearly all women easily" – and "Stacys" – "the female counterpoint[s] ... out of reach for any non-Chad man" (Van Brunt and Taylor 4). Such theories then lead adherents to a hatred of other racial, ethnic, and religious groups that possess supposed privileges not granted to others. Again, this may seem like a problem specific to an Internet age that allows the disaffected to easily connect with each



other; however, the animus of male entitlement precedes the most vile Reddit forum by centuries.

Donald Trump and his enablers may or may not have understood the depth of rage felt in the manosphere, but they were eager to harness whatever energy might help them to advance their cause. To listen to Trump's rhetoric in 2016 was to listen to a narrative about Washington, D.C. that was far removed from the aspirational hope and change talking points of the Obama era. Instead, the real estate mogul depicted government as a swampy morass, inhabited by evil bureaucrats hell-bent on enriching themselves on the backs of hardworking, everyday Americans. The swamp rhetoric evolved over the four years of Trump's presidency into something called the "deep state," a catchall term for any federal government agent or agency that did not acquiesce to the president's demands. Talk of the deep state dovetailed with well-known conspiracy theories, such as QAnon, but less recognized is that such ideologies have long existed within the manosphere, particularly the belief in "redpilling." The term derives from the science-fiction film *The Matrix*, in which the protagonist, Neo, is offered a life-altering choice in the form of two pills. His mentor, Morpheus, tells him: "After this there is no turning back. You take the blue pill, the story ends. You wake up in your bed and believe whatever you want to. You take the red pill, you stay in Wonderland, and I show you how deep the rabbit hole goes" (Wachowski and Wachowski). Neo's choice to take the red pill is the catalyst for a reality-altering journey into a world beyond his own, during which he realizes that his present perception of events is nothing but a simulation far outside of any individual's control. For those being radicalized in the manosphere or by stories of a shadowy deep state cabal, conspiracy theorists ranging from fellow Reddit users to the former president of the United States stand in as Morpheus-like guides to another reality:

To be red pill is to accept the cold, hard truth about the foundations of individual and collective existence, and to radically shift one's parameters of reality in accordance with this newfound knowledge. It symbolizes a bold exit from mainstream society, corrupted as it is by liberals and conservatives alike, and an alternative approach to making distinctions between what is and what ought to be. (Stern 16)

It should come as no surprise that those apt to buy into alt-right theories are particularly open to Trumpian rhetoric; researchers like Alexandra Minna Stern have referred to Trump, especially via his Twitter account, as “a red piller of colossal proportions;” supporters of the president in the media and Reddit were quick to preach messages like “Strategies to RedPill Your Family over the Holidays” in 2016 (Stern 20-21). While forum posts such as these may appear to be tongue-in-cheek, such a veneer of irony is part of the alt-right playbook as articulated by white-supremacist Andrew Anglin, who was involved in creating a “style guide” for writers on the American Nazi site *The Daily Stormer*. He writes: “The reader is first drawn in by curiosity or the naughty humor, and is slowly awakened to reality by repeatedly reading the same points...The indoctrinated should not be able to tell if we are joking or not” (Bates 206). Thus, men like Anglin create communities based on hatred and violence but hidden underneath the banner of comedy. Anyone not in on the joke is a humorless scold or a cuckold.

Republicans' acquiescence to Donald Trump became the stuff of legend over the course of his presidency. Such fealty was perhaps best expressed by an anonymous senior Republican official in December 2020, who asked the *Washington Post*, “What's the downside of humoring him for this little bit of time?” Per former Republican strategist Tim Miller: “The downside – which was intellectually, morally, and politically obvious at the time – was physically manifested less than two months later at the siege of the Capital.” The anonymous official's comment should be very familiar to those acquainted with the response (or lack thereof) to the manosphere over the past decade. In the wake of mass murders committed by two incels, Elliot

Rodger and Alek Minassian, the cultural reaction was not one of horror as much as it was a desire to humor and coddle the disaffected. *New York Times* columnist Ross Douthat argued that a form of “sexual redistribution” might be a solution to the problem of misogynistic violence fueled by fevered conspiracy theories, and Douthat cited the work of economist Robin Hanson to argue that “redistributing sex could be as worthy a cause as redistributing wealth” (Tolentino). Such arguments indicate a patriarchal “benefit of the doubt” granted to men who rage and inflict deeply destabilizing violence on society; their anger is not a public safety concern, but is instead treated as a mere temper tantrum based upon the unfair restrictions placed upon them by a society that does not pay enough attention to the emotional needs of unstable men. The question for certain aspirational politicians and their enablers becomes, “What’s the downside of humoring them?” particularly if rage and ideologies can be co-opted.

The ramifications of a zeitgeist in which hate was mainstreamed within the United States remain; the country is paralyzed along ideological party lines, and it remains an open question as to whether those who tried to overthrow the democratic system of government will face any real consequences. Adherents to the contemporary manosphere yearn for a return to a past that is much more closely aligned with the world that Shakespeare’s Richard III inhabited than the one in which we currently reside. Stern writes that “the red pill might lead to an epiphany about...the repudiation of feminism, multiculturalism, leftism, liberalism, and globalism, followed by the embrace of traditionalism, hierarchy, and inequality” (16). Such a societal restructuring would represent a tremendous victory for members of the manosphere.

If Trump inspired many men to take the red pill, it is worth considering the context in which his rise to power occurred. In 2016, the Democratic Party marked the end of eight years of governance by a Black man and subsequently nominated Hillary Clinton, the first woman in

history to lead the party, and potentially the country, for the next four years. In 2020, while Biden was the nominee, his eventual vice-president, Kamala Harris, would become the first female, first Black, and first Asian person ever to ascend to the second highest seat of power in the federal government. For those wishing for a return to the days of a clear social and racial hierarchy, the ascendancy of liberal women and people of color is not a reassuring development. Similarly, *Richard III* is set during a time of relative female ascendance in which “the landscape of political power and religious superstition...gave rise to a culture whose relationship to female authority was vexed, at best” (Smith 143). In her discussion of Shakespeare’s use of demonic signifiers to describe “feminine political power,” Kristin M. Smith cites 20th century Shakespearean scholar David Bevington, arguing that female political power “directly attacks masculine authority, revealing a ‘desire for mastery over the male’ that victimizes men” (144). Within this context, Smith argues that the logical result of the “degeneration of the English monarchy” was “the creation and destruction of the demonic Scourge of God - Richard III - allowing Richmond to defeat Richard and make way for the Tudor kings” (145). This reading proposes that not only is *Richard III* a reflection of Shakespeare’s political context, but that the women at the heart of the play are the catalyst for Richard’s “demonic” masculinity. Driven by a sense of rejection and a fear of emasculation, Richard is conjured on behalf of the unruly hordes of British men seeking to assert patriarchal rule. That Richard is mocked and derided by women like his mother and Queen Margaret only drives him to more fully embody the male rage permeating the text.

At the heart of autocratic rule is often a fury that finds its locus within the persona of a man who views himself as disadvantaged or unfairly ignored. Trump biographer Maggie Haberman describes her subject as “possessing a bitterness around him and a quickness to

anger,” emotions often the result of feeling patronized or disrespected (Haberman). Richard’s bitterness is evident from the opening of the play, which begins with a thunderclap of barely concealed fury from the Duke of Gloucester. Richard tears into his brother as a thoroughly unfit leader who has turned away from masculine pursuits of military conquest toward a life of leisure whose only goals are to imbibe as much alcohol and to have as much sex as possible (I.i.1-2, 10-13). Edward thus stands in sharp contrast to Richard, who declares that he is “cheated of feature by dissembling nature, / Deformed, unfinished” (I.i.19-20). The common reading of Richard’s disability often focuses on what Shakespeare reveals in the text (the duke has a withered arm) or the historical record (the actual Richard’s skeleton possessed a “spine...curved in a startling S”) (*Tyrant* 95). Evan Choate speculates that Shakespeare’s Richard actually possesses no physical deformity but is instead impotent and unable to sustain an erection (34). Choate argues that Richard can only be understood through the idea of impotence; the duke’s “claim that he is not shaped for ‘sportive tricks’... suggests that he physically lacks the turgidly specific shape that ‘sportive tricks’ logistically require” (34). If Richard is to be understood as a man incapable of engaging in sexual intercourse, his expression of masculinity then becomes wholly embodied in violence and a resentment against the women who will never truly accept him (assuming they were given the choice) due to his inability to have sex or reproduce. Choate ties Richard’s implied impotence to Milton and Augustine’s belief that the erection itself is a sign of a fallen world hell-bent on domination when he writes: “When [Richard] explains that he is ‘rudely stamped, and want[s] love’s majesty / To strut before a wanton-ambling nymph,” the phrase “love’s majesty” links the performance of sovereign power to sexual performance” (Choate 34). Indeed, Richard leaves little mystery as to his intent when he declares that he is thus “determined to prove a villain” since he “cannot prove a lover” (I.i.28, 30).

Whether Richard is indeed impotent or whether he possesses a literal, physical disability is largely immaterial to his subsequent conduct throughout the play. He is fundamentally a man marked by resentment toward his brother for his power (over the kingdom and over women) and the women of the court for rejecting him as unfit to rule. He thus takes upon himself a mantle of bitter aggrievement through which he channels every interaction, whether with his mother, his advisors, or Lady Anne, the target of the play's most unlikely conquest. It is through both his interactions with other characters and his disability that Richard places himself in league with the modern young man of the manosphere. The lack of sex, and thus the perceived lack of masculinity, drives Richard to pursue violent retribution against his nominal oppressors.

At this point in American history, the country has yet to elect a man completely versed in the ideology of the manosphere. No erstwhile "beta male" or, for that matter, "zeta male" has yet to shake off the bonds of rejection to attain political power. However, since 2016, the threat of such a man actually grabbing the reins of power is no longer a fantasy reserved for the darkest corners of the Internet. Indeed, leading figures in the manosphere celebrated Trump's ascendance, including pick-up artist Daryush Valizadeh, who wrote:

A Trump presidency will improve our standing... We now have a s\*\*tlord for President who has insulted ugly women as 'fat pigs,' and whose private macho talk, which all masculine men have done, was relentlessly attacked by the press but not punished in the voter booth... This means that, when you talk like Trump, the first thought your listener will have is, 'He sounds like the President of the United States.' (Bates 207)

Other incel forums featured comments such as: "If Trump can do these things without getting arrested, there is no reason an incel male should not be able to either," and, perhaps most tellingly, "Everytime I feel no one likes us I realize we are defended by the most powerful people in the world. The Trumps support incels, Trump loves us and respects us... He never said anything after the Alek Minassian thing like he did with every muslim (*sic*) attack ever" (Bates

208). While Trump himself may not be an adherent to incel ideology, “he, as a figurehead several steps removed from the actual manosphere itself, is nonetheless able to mobilise its members without explicitly being seen to refer to them” (Bates 208). Indeed, Trump’s first chief strategist in the White House, Steve Bannon, was deeply involved in the world of the manosphere and white supremacy. Bannon’s appointment was praised by misogynists and white supremacists ranging from former Ku Klux Klan grand wizard David Duke to white supremacist Richard Spencer to the chairman of the American Nazi Party, an excitement summed up by comments online such as, “Bannon is *our man* in the White House” and “We’re like one or two degrees of separation from the fucking President” (Bates 215). While Trump may not have fully practiced the ideologies of the manosphere or white supremacists, he was, at best, only two degrees away from one of its primary mouthpieces.

Quite simply, *Richard III* provides a glimpse of what happens to a society when those degrees of separation are completely removed. Richard does not need advisors to write his speeches or to provide him with a window into the expectations of his supporters online; he is a full practitioner of an ideology that emphasizes the hatred of women as a vehicle for attaining power and uniting the disparate threads of a misogynistic society. As a monarch, he need not concern himself with maintaining the appearance of plausible deniability; once he attains power, he can fully bend the direction of the country to his own will, and he does so with immediately bloody results. Richard is no mere artistic stand-in for the autocratic, faux-populist threats to democracy that the United States and other Western countries have already faced, he is a prophetic warning of the dangers that are yet to come. By presenting the picture of a man untethered from accountability and fully certain of the correctness of his misogynistic impulses, Shakespeare sends a warning to our present age about the embrace of a particularly deadly form

of masculinity, and one that is actively infecting American society right now under the guise of incel ideology.



## CHAPTER TWO:

### ORIGINS OF THE MANOSPHERE AND THE RISE OF THE INCEL MOVEMENT

In order to understand the rise of incels, it is necessary to first understand the network to which they belong, commonly referred to as the “manosphere.” The term first appeared in 2009 on a Blogspot post which “described an online network of men’s interest communities,” but was “later popularized by Ian Ironwood, porn marketer and pseudonymous author of the self-published *The Manosphere: A New Hope for Masculinity*” (Ging 639-640). The term was embraced by men’s rights activists, and it has since been flagged by feminist scholars for its apparent innocuity, something tantamount to “man cave, man flu and man bag... ‘man’ [used] as a prefix to denote a sense of gentle ridicule, suggesting something slightly pathetic... a joke and, therefore, harmless” (Bates 4-5). In reality, the manosphere is far from a benign, laughable presence, but instead represents an “interconnected spectrum of different but related groups, each with their own rigid belief systems, lexicons and forms of indoctrination;” a growing community that has contributed to a sharp rise in hate crimes against women and people of color (Bates 5). British feminist critic Laura Bates argues that by tempting disillusioned males with seemingly harmless memes and stories of loneliness, the manosphere is able to hook young men and pull them deeper and deeper into violent ideologies. A 2020 Michigan State University study of manosphere-affiliated groups found that

Membership in such online communities may represent an important first step towards indoctrination and acceptance of extremist and terrorist ideologies. Moghaddam (2005) uses the metaphor of a staircase to explain how individuals increasingly become engaged with terrorist groups. Climbing the staircase begins with individuals’ perceptions of injustice and a desire to improve their situation (Moghaddam, 2005) Those who react to perceived injustices with anger and frustration may be more likely to engage with, or be recruited by, extremist organizations. (O’Malley et. al. 5)

Indeed, Elliot Rodger, perhaps the most famous incel, wrote that “certain manosphere websites ‘confirmed many of the theories I had about how wicked and degenerate women really are’” (Van Volkenburgh 85).

Incels are perhaps the most recognizable group within the manosphere as they frequently serve as the first step for young men who feel disillusioned and rejected by women and, thus, society. Much like the manosphere itself, incels are frequently regarded as comical: “what you hear about them sounds so strange, so extreme, so hard to believe, so laughable even, that it is easy to shrug off,” and yet, this specific branch of the manosphere has been directly responsible for the deaths or injuries of over 100 people in the past ten years (Bates 11). The bulk of this chapter will be devoted to further exploring the roots of incel ideology and the ways in which it is represented in our current culture, but first, it is necessary to understand the other factions that make up the manosphere. These groups are united by common tenets of hatred toward women and a deep sense of ostracization from larger society. Any amount of time spent researching and reading their online forums reveals that there is a point at which all segments of the manosphere begin to blur together into one swirling morass of misogyny, largely animated by the same sense of rejection so often associated with incels.

While incels define themselves through their inability to secure sex, pick-up artists (PUAs), though they belong in the same sphere, are in some ways the opposite, completely driven by the desire to have as much sex as possible. To the extent that they are recognized at all, incels are seen as peripheral figures in society, but PUAs have frequently skirted the mainstream, whether through the debauched memoirs of Tucker Max (writer of such tomes as *I Hope They Serve Beer in Hell* and *Assholes Finish First*) or even Will Smith’s charming “dating coach” in the 2005 romantic comedy *Hitch*. While PUAs may be regarded as slightly more acceptable,

fraternity-adjacent young men, incels and PUAs both “cast heterosexual sex as the pinnacle of male achievement, and portray women as little more than objects, whose sole purpose is to provide sexual pleasure to men, like some kind of pornographic slot machines” (Bates 64). By reducing women to vehicles for sexual gratification, PUAs and incels both benefit from “himpathy,” a term defined by Cornell philosophy professor Kate Manne as “the disproportionate or inappropriate sympathy extended to a male perpetrator over his similarly or less privileged female targets or victims, in cases of sexual assault, harassment, and other misogynistic behavior” (36). The internalization of himpathy as a cultural value contributes to a world in which calls for “sexual redistribution” grace the editorial pages of *The New York Times*. An Amazon search for “how to pick up women” yields hundreds of results, including titles like *Be the Asshole that Woman Can’t Resist*, *How to Approach Women: The Ultimate Sexual Seduction System*, and *Get Laid Now!: How to Pick Up Women and Have Casual Sex (Revised Edition)*. With such ideologies readily accessible online, it is little wonder that young men develop a sense of entitlement when it comes to sex.

If incels and PUAs root their ideologies in the desire for sex, Men Going Their Own Way (MGTOWs) and Men’s Rights Activists (MRAs) preach a gospel that rejects sex as a tool wielded by women, who are universally regarded as immoral temptresses seeking to corrupt men. While their focus may be different, MGTOWs and MRAs are united with other members of the manosphere in their belief in the red pill. According to MGTOW, men who truly understand the way in which women manipulate the levers of power through their ability to entrap men (frequently through false rape accusations) would then choose to completely disengage from all females. MGTOW sites celebrate divorce as freedom from “legal slavery” and encourage users to avoid women at all costs, a philosophy that is summed up by this post from MGTOW.com:

“Women are out of control and have been for a very long time. It’s going to take a serious event to get them to behave like decent adults. Men aren’t men anymore and have allowed women to walk all over them. So, as for the rest of us, we have no choice but to do what we’re doing now and just go our own way” (Bates 101). For these men, the #MeToo movement was not a reckoning for serial rapists, like Harvey Weinstein, but instead the result of out of control women seeking vengeance on innocent men. This aspect of MGTOW ideology worked its way into the highest halls of power as seen when former Vice President Mike Pence “told reporters that he will never eat a meal alone with a woman who is not his wife,” a policy that not only limits women’s opportunities for career advancement but one that also plays into the MGTOW beliefs about false assault allegations made by women in the wake of #MeToo (Bates 112-113).

MGTOW adherents preach a total avoidance and rejection of women that is perhaps best summed up by an anonymous wealth advisor quoted in *Bloomberg* who claimed that “just hiring a woman these days is ‘an unknown risk’” (Bates 113). The closely affiliated members of Men’s Rights Activists groups, such as the Proud Boys, advocate for a much more aggressive approach to the perceived excesses of feminism. MRAs seek to return women to “their ‘natural’ place – to reestablish the biological binary through the formation of hypermasculinized tribes, patriarchal control of hypergamous women, and pronatalist incentives” (Stern 82). In this worldview, men are liberators of (white) women who, “once freed from the shackles of feminism can return to reproduction and mothering” while men “group into tribes to gain physical and mental prowess, and build endurance and stamina” (Stern 82, 84). The most punitive members of the MRA, including Paul Elam, founder of A Voice for Men (AVFM), claim that women must be forcefully returned to their place in the home. Elam summed up the MRA message to his 100,000 YouTube subscribers when he said in a broadcast, “Pussy is the only real empowerment

women will ever know. Put all the hopelessly wishful thinking of feminist ideology aside, and what remains is the fact that it is men, and pretty much men only, who draw power from accomplishment, who invent technology, build nations, cure disease, create empires, and generally advance civilisation” (Bates 122). Elam encapsulates core tenets of the manosphere in this statement: he commodifies women and reduces them to what they offer sexually; he places men upon the top of the social hierarchy; and he portrays masculinity as a violent force whose main goal is to conquer and imperialize. These beliefs unite Men’s Rights Activists with the other corners of the manosphere, including incels, pickup artists, and Men Going Their Own Way.

Future chapters will explore how the sixteenth-century character of Richard III exemplifies and embodies the core beliefs and tenets of the modern manosphere. While Richard uses techniques reflective of those employed by pickup artists and certainly adheres to a worldview that elevates men above women, he is most accurately located within the manosphere as an involuntary celibate. Richard embodies this ideology in a much earlier form, for this corner of the manosphere has certainly evolved over the past decades. The incel movement started innocently enough in the 1990s with a website called Alana’s Involuntary Celibate project. The site was founded by a queer Canadian woman who saw the potential for an online support group for those dealing with “dating-related loneliness and sexual dissatisfaction” (Manne 17). Alana hoped to remove the stigma from being single and not having sex, and the early members of her group embraced the label: “they weren’t virgins, they weren’t losers, they were involuntarily celibate. It felt more respectful” (Vogt). In time, Alana began dating a woman she met outside of the site, but she decided to stay on as a moderator until, eventually, she drifted away. The same was true for many who frequented the forums; there simply was not much appeal to hanging

around chatting with depressed single people once they were not in a similar position. In 1997, Alana left the site and its 100 person mailing list behind. By 2018, when Alek Minassian drove his van into 26 people over the course of a mile, an estimated 40,000 people online actively identified as incels (Vogt).

The most famous incel attack was not carried out by Minassian, but by Elliott Rodger in 2014. Rodger has become a figure of mythological significance within the violent factions of the manosphere; he is regarded with near religious reverence by incels online, and his actions inspired Minassian and other copycats, such as Dylann Roof, who murdered nine parishioners during a prayer meeting at a historically Black church in Charleston, South Carolina, and Nikolas Cruz, who opened fire in Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, killing seventeen students (Van Brunt and Taylor 207, 211-212). Cruz directly cited Rodger as an inspiration in online blog posts, an attitude which is common within the incel groups that refer to Rodger as “Saint Elliot” and aspire to be regarded as “Supreme Gentlemen,” a title created by Rodger to refer to himself and other incels, who, despite their moral and social superiority, are rejected by women in favor of “Chads.” An hour before Rodger opened fire on the Alpha Phi sorority house at the University of California, Santa Barbara, he posted a long diatribe on YouTube in which he delivered a chilling speech in an unaffected monotone:

For the last eight years of my life, since I hit puberty, I’ve been forced to endure an existence of loneliness, rejection, and unfulfilled desires, all because girls have never been attracted to me. Girls gave their affection and sex and love to other men but never to me. I’m twenty-two years old and still a virgin, never even kissed a girl...It has been very tortuous. College is a time when everyone experiences those things such as sex and fun and pleasure. In those years I’ve had to rot in loneliness; it’s not fair. You girls have never been attracted to me. I don’t know why you girls aren’t attracted to me, but I will punish you all for it. It’s an injustice, a crime, because I don’t know what you don’t see in me. I’m the perfect guy and yet you throw yourselves at all these obnoxious men instead of me, the supreme gentleman. I am going to enter the hottest sorority house at UCSB and I will slaughter every single spoiled, stuck-up, blonde slut I see inside there. (Manne 14-15)

Before driving his van through a crowd of pedestrians in Toronto, Minassian posted on Facebook: “The Incel Rebellion has already begun! We will overthrow all the Chads and Staceys! All hail the Supreme Gentleman Elliot Rodger!” (Manne 16). Minassian’s and Rodger’s actions were subsequently widely praised in online Reddit and 4/chan forums, as “contributors to these boards appeared to be using social media to organize a campaign of revenge against women, ‘social justice warriors’ and the ‘alpha males’ who had deprived them of sexual success” (Ging 640). These anonymous users study the videos left behind by Minassian and Scott Paul Beierle (another incel who opened fire in a Tallahassee yoga studio in 2018, killing two and injuring five) and pay particular attention to Rodger’s 141-page manifesto “My Twisted World” in which he promised “I will punish everyone. And it will be beautiful. Finally, at long last, I can show the world my true worth” (Van Brunt and Taylor 15).

The incel evolution from a quiet lonely hearts club to a domestic terrorist organization monitored by the FBI is a long and jagged one, but it has its roots in the inherent loneliness and desperation felt by its group members. In their clinical text *Understanding and Treating Incels*, Brian Van Brunt and Chris Taylor sum up the incel philosophy as

one where males believe the genetic, biological factors that impact our bone structure, height, physical or mental abilities, weight, eye and skin color and physical appearance are pre-determined and are the main factor dictating what women find attractive in men. When these factors are missing or substandard in the incel, they become less desirable and with this rejection by women, along with their perceived and actual marginalization, they become isolated, lonely and increasingly frustrated and jealous at the life that everyone else seems to have. (3)

This belief in biological essentialism can quickly curdle into a sense of deep alienation. If the incel has indeed been given a sort of mark of Cain from birth, they are then doomed to wander the earth alone, isolated, and angry. These men perceive themselves as victims, an attribute identified by O’Malley: “The term *involuntary* reflects a perceived lack of agency in one’s

current sexual inactivity, which causes them to experience significant personal distress” (3). It is safe to say that this is not the ideology envisioned by Alana when she first created her forum in 1997. However, as more and more of the founding members left when they found love outside of the forum, the remaining members’ despair at being “left behind” only grew (Vogt). By reducing “human value to a single dimension, namely sexual attraction” the young men on Alana’s site and subsequent other forums (including the infamous r/trp on Reddit and multiple locations on 4chan) grew angrier and more despairing (Van Brunt and Taylor 4). Incels began to speak of themselves as cursed and deformed, and in order to become a member of such groups, new users have to post grossly exaggerated, profanity-laden descriptions of their own hideous appearances. In fact, such descriptions serve as an initiation rite for many incels, who often accompany their first post with intentionally unflattering pictures (Hana Rosin compares one such photograph of former incel and acne-sufferer Jack Peterson to “the pepperoni on a day-old pizza... a photo no one in their right mind would share on any platform”) followed by long written diatribes about suicidal ideation and self-hatred. For example, one poster described himself as: “fat, ugly, poor...degenerate, manlet, got mental problems, skin disease, bad breathe (*sic*), bad teeth, and so on. I’m not good enough for stacy let alone any woman, I barely deserve to be on this earth, I’m a failure. I’ve accepted my fate and I’m done with coping” (O’Malley et al. 11). These posts are then greeted with “abuse and abuse and more abuse...incels hate empathy, sympathy, comfort of any kind – too feminine” (Rosin). Within this initiation process, incels attempt to determine whether this newest member meets their group’s standards; those who are not self-lacerating enough will be deemed “fakecels” and banished from the group.

Once an incel is accepted into the group, they will either choose to follow the “blackpill” or the “redpill” philosophy. “Blackpill” adherents resign themselves to a life of biologically



determined loneliness and despair (often leading to violence) whereas “redpill” incels throw themselves into programs of self-improvement, largely focused on physical fitness and weight lifting or the fanatical attainment of wealth. No matter which path an incel chooses, he is left with “a growing sense of frustration...[and a] mixture of negative emotions, combined with the idea that they will never be enough and that they are genetically behind the eight-ball, [which] often leads to further alienation” (Van Brunt and Taylor 5). Such intensity is fueled by a belief system in a biologically ordained moral order and social hierarchy. Rodger’s manifesto is dotted with stories of perceived bullying and rejection by girls and women, “cruel treatment” that he describes as “ten times worse than from men” and an experience that led to his sense of “trauma” (Manne 28). Rejection is especially infuriating for men like Rodger because they believe that they are owed the attention of women simply because they are (primarily white) men. Because their advances are spurned, they “perceive themselves as being the vulnerable ones...[and] feel like the true victims, even as they lash out violently at others” (Manne 28). Their stories of rejection become self-fulfilling prophecies; as they become angrier and more withdrawn, they look for rejection in any and all social interactions, and their complaints are frequently a “post ad hoc rationalization for an extant, and unwarranted sense of victimhood –of being oppressed or persecuted by people who aren’t in reality wronging, thwarting, or even rejecting them” (Manne 28). Incel manifestos and videos are full of such rationalizations; both Rodger and Beierle cite seeing happy couples together as traumatizing incidents of personal rejection (Manne 23-24; Van Brunt and Taylor 5). The very existence of (particularly blonde-haired, blue-eyed) women who do not throw themselves at these men affirms incels’ warped perception of events.

In exploring incel manifestoes and message boards, a common framework begins to emerge for those who ultimately commit acts of violence. Van Brunt and Taylor identify three

common factors that form what they refer to as “the incel triangle”: entitlement, jealousy, and misogyny. The researchers further define these elements as: “an objectified and reductionistic view of female worth, a jealousy that they are outclassed by the alpha males and Chads of the world, and a firm belief that they are entitled to more than they currently have” (16). Rodger exemplifies all three characteristics in his writing; his entitlement is evident in the usual rants about not being granted sex by the blonde women he lusts after, but also in unhinged rants about his stepmother, about whom he writes: “No! I am the eldest son! The house should be MY house before hers...It was such a betrayal, to put his second wife before his eldest son. What kind of father would do that? The bitch must be really good to him in bed...what a weak man” (Van Brunt and Taylor 17). In a similar vein, Alex Stavropoulos explained his brutal attack on a young mother and her daughter by saying, “I was angry at white women. I like white women but they won’t fuck me...I don’t get laid” (Bates 47). The misogyny in incel forums is startling and explicit, and it is often connected to a fetishization of past civilizations as morally and sexually superior. One representative post by an incel forum member advocates for the social acceptance of rape and slavery: “Taking female slaves has always been a normal part of human history, when enemies would fight each other the winning part would take female slaves and distribute them among the fighters. As an incel you were rewarded in history when joining an army” (Bates 33). Another user on a now defunct forum uses a similar pseudo-historical argument when he writes: “Females are artificially restricting the supply of available females in their reproductive years. Rape is the answer. Societies go to war over lack of females and jobs. Females have become a threat to society and must be put back in their place” (Bates 34).

Combined with a sense of entitlement and misogyny is a deep felt jealousy towards all men who are not in a similar, sexless position. Rodger’s manifesto is full of stories about the

men he saw, hated, and yearned to be, particularly once he became a college student. Every experience in Rodger's life, from getting coffee at Starbucks to shopping at the mall to walking through the park, was shot through with jealousy. He writes of couples in the park: "They all looked like typical fraternity jocks, tall and muscular. The kind of guys I've hated and envied all my life. With them came a flock of beautiful blonde girls, and they looked like they were having so much fun playing together" (Van Brunt and Taylor 20). Similarly, Beierle writes of his voyeuristic monitoring of his neighbor, recording when he sees women entering and exiting the man's house (Van Brunt and Taylor 6).

As seen through the actions of Rodger, Beierle, and many other imitators, the result of adherence to the incel triangle is often violence. For incels, these attacks are generally said to be in honor of the men who have gone before, namely Rodger and Minassian. Stories and fantasies of mass violence are described by incels as "lifefuel," "intended to give incels a feeling of joy and hope" (O'Malley et al. 17). Plans for violence and mass shootings are referred to as "going ER" in reference to Rodger, and posters fantasize about an apocalyptic Day of Retribution "in which incels will strike back against Chads and women," an event also referred as the "Beta Uprising" or the "Incel Rebellion" (Van Brunt and Taylor 11). Even the incels who do not explicitly espouse violence advocate for complicity. A user named *romancel* writes: "There are no laws saying you have to help anyone who's getting raped or murdered, or report it to the police...If I saw this happening while passing by, and the 'victim' called out to me for help, I'd just chortle and keep going my own way...in all likelihood, she deserved it" (O'Malley et al. 18).

In addition to the very real threat that incels represent, it is deeply troubling to see the ways in which their ideology has infected the broader manosphere and has thus been laundered into mainstream thought. Right wing thinkers like Canadian psychologist Jordan Peterson have

used their platforms (often provided by even more mainstream figures like Joe Rogan) to argue for ideas like the “male dominance hierarchy,” a theory rooted in the sort of social Darwinism that is embraced by incels (Rogan). Peterson, in particular, likes to explore “alpha” and “beta” male status among apes and then apply it to contemporary human “male hierarchies” (Peterson). It is little wonder, then, that Peterson has amassed such a large following among manosphere adherents; his academic credentials offer intellectual cover for ideas that have been floating around incel forums for years. However, for blackpill incels and men’s rights activists, the very concept of an alpha male has been distorted beyond recognition. According to AVFM’s Paul Elam, “alpha masculinity has been hijacked by feminists and is now part of the ‘gynocentric establishment’” (Ging 650). Incels agree with Elam’s basic premise: it is impossible for the beta male (a “weak man” opposite of the alpha “Chad”) to ascend to a higher plane; therefore, the only answer is to turn to violence (Van Brunt and Taylor 4). However, for those who actually seek to attain some sort of worldly success or for those who wish to see an inversion of the current social order, it is necessary for a third category of man to develop, defined by Elam as a “zeta-male,” “a sociosexual warrior, who is emergent and unpolished and struggling to find his legs, but is doing so thanks to the fertile, safe ground, provided by, of all things, other emerging zetas on the Internet” (Ging 650). The emergence of such zetas will finally allow for a world returned to a patriarchal order in which women are fully subservient and stripped of all agency while current Chads and alpha males are brought low. In this scenario, the formerly involuntary celibate will channel their sexual energies and eroticism to gain power and establish a new form of patriarchal order, which is mostly defined by their newfound social status. Such an order would naturally be fueled by the same anger and resentment that previously bonded together the incel (né zeta) males.

While Elam may like to think himself the originator of the zeta male idea, like most aspects of the manosphere, his concept is time-worn. However, incels are correct in imagining that a world completely dominated by zeta males would usher in a new epoch of patriarchal history. One can hardly blame them for thinking that such a goal may be closer to their reach than ever before. While Donald Trump and former UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson are no incels, their employment of Steve Bannon indicated a growing eagerness to weaponize incel ideologies to achieve political goals. Incel forums celebrated Trump's election with posts such as: "America has spoken wenches, Trump is the president. Nobody cares about your c-t whine anymore. And it is now time to show them the truth" (Bates 207). The president was subsequently praised on incel forums throughout his presidency for, among other actions, openly deriding Christine Blasey Ford's accusations of rape against then-Supreme Court nominee Brett Kavanaugh, threatening to revoke federal funding from universities that refused to host alt-right provocateur Milo Yiannopoulos, describing women as "fat pigs" and "dogs," and telling four U.S. congresswomen to "go back and help fix the totally broken and crime-infested places from which they came" (Bates 206-207, 209). In similar terms, Johnson claimed that female MPs only joined the Labour Party for "its planned erosion of male liberty" and said that women would not support him because of "the fickleness of their sex"; during his tenure, Johnson was also advised by Bannon (Bates 214, 216). It is little surprise that the coarse rhetoric and misogynistic policies employed by both men has led to acts of violence by manosphere adherents, ranging from online rape threats to the murder of Labour MP Jo Cox by a rightwing terrorist (Bates 217). While Trump and Johnson are out of power (for now), incels have seen a time in which their ideological allies have a direct line to the most powerful offices in the world, a reality unthinkable even a decade ago. After more than four years of hearing their ideas amplified and

echoed from the halls of power, the logical next step for incels is to ensure that future officeholders are zeta males who can bring about a Day of Retribution. As we will see, if incels want to know what such a future could hold, they could easily look to Shakespeare's Richard III as a precursor and fulfiller of their cause.

## CHAPTER THREE:

### RICHARD III AS THE PROTOTYPICAL ZETA MALE

Richard of Gloucester lays out his patriarchal vision of the world at the very onset of the play with an opening monologue that reveals the seething misogyny roiling beneath the surface of his plans to take over the throne. He opens Act I with sarcastic bombast, declaring that “Now is the winter of our discontent / made glorious summer” by his brother Edward (I.i.1-2). In terms reminiscent of epic poetry, Richard declares that war is over and has been replaced with a time of peace brought about by the house of York’s ascendancy. However, a close reading of Richard’s words reveals a biting sarcasm underlying the heroic description of his brother, the king. By establishing Edward as the author of a tremendous military victory, a man capable of turning winter into summer and burying “the clouds that loured upon our house / In the deep bosom of the oceans,” Richard establishes him as a demigod-like figure, which he immediately undercuts by describing him as one who “capers nimbly in a lady’s chamber / To the lascivious pleasing of a lute” (I.i.3-4, 12-13). The king no longer mounts “barbed steeds / To fright the souls of fearful adversaries” but instead spends his time pleasuring himself; he has transformed from a man whose sword smokes with bloody execution into a drunken dandy capering and leaping from bed to bed (I.i.10-11). In Richard’s telling, this man is no hero, but simply a spoiled playboy content to live off of the victories of yesteryear while the kingdom runs itself.

Richard contrasts this description of his brother with his declaration that he is not “shaped for sportive tricks / nor made to court an amorous looking glass” (I.i.14-15). Crucially, Richard defines himself in binary opposition to his indulgent brother; in the language of today’s manosphere, Edward is a prototypical alpha male who has been stripped of his former glory by the “gynocentric establishment” (Ging 650). Indeed, Hastings and Richard say as much in a later

discussion in Act I, about which Moulton writes: “Lord Hastings reports that Edward’s doctors fear for his life because he is ‘sickly, weak, and melancholy’ (all signs of effeminate weakness of spirit)...although their weakness is figured in vastly different ways, both Edward and Henry blast their reigns with effeminate marriages” (257). Conversely, Richard does not have the luxury of prancing through different bedchambers or indulging in a lie-in; he is predestined to be a man of action due to his “own deformity” (I.i.27). It is here that echoes of contemporary incel ideology become most pronounced. Not only does Richard loathe Edward for his ability to woo women, but he views himself as a biologically inferior, cursed specimen whose only recourse is to trade in the pursuit of sex for the attainment of power. Thus, Richard positions himself as a man of purpose and action, as opposed to the laissez-faire “swamp creature” on the throne.

Richard does not merely use his deformity in order to contrast himself with the king; he uses it as the impetus of his rage against those whom he believes have dismissed him. In this way, Richard diverges from the Trumpian autocrat; he does not merely use the anger of others, but instead personally identifies with the victim complex evinced by adherents to the incel movement. A core belief of incels is their biological inferiority in contrast to the Chads of the world; similarly, Richard says that he is “Cheated of feature by dissembling nature, / Deformed, unfinished, sent before my time / Into this breathing world scarce half made up — / And that so lamely and unfashionable / That dogs bark at me as I halt by them” (I.i.20-23). Richard’s description of himself is reminiscent of Caliban from *The Tempest*, a subhuman cursed to labor underneath the oppression of the amorous ruling class. In this way, Richard’s monologue calls to mind the initiation rite for incels in which they are subject to ridicule and abuse about their physical appearance. Richard uses the harassment of others as a justification for the violent and treacherous actions that he will take against the throne. Immediately before he comes to his plan



of action, he declares that “since I cannot prove a lover / To entertain these fair well-spoken days, / I am determined to prove a villain” (I.i.28-30). Richard reveals that his future actions, which will result in tremendous violence and anarchy, are solely fueled by personal grievance.

Richard then uses these feelings to justify the most horrific acts of violence, even against his only family members who are treated as mere detritus along the pathway to the throne. While Richard’s plot to commit regicide is multilayered and involved, his dispatching of his brother Clarence is immediate, and establishes Richard’s sincerity in creating chaos. At the end of his opening monologue, Richard reveals that he has been manipulating Edward to believe that a man whose name begins with a G (such as George, Duke of Clarence) is planning to usurp the throne. With this simple act of deception, Richard sets his brothers against each other, quickly ensuring that Clarence will be sent to the Tower and executed. Most tellingly, Richard admits to having no personal dispute with Clarence, going so far as to declare: “Simple plain Clarence, I do love thee so / That I will shortly send thy soul to heaven” (I.i.118-119). It is only personal ambition that motivates Richard to ensure the murder of his brother, an act that he regards as wholly justifiable due to the ways in which others (namely women and notably not Clarence) have acted toward him. Of course, this sense of rejection is first and foremost rooted in a fascination with sex that has curdled into anger and disgust, an attitude that has curiously modern parallels to the online manosphere. It is no wonder that a belief system rooted in innate biological inferiority leads to rage borne of helplessness. For Richard, his deformity is a sign of divine rejection that precedes any taunts from potential lovers. His feelings become a form of dogma that blinds him to any contradictory evidence, as portrayed in his wooing of Lady Anne.

Richard’s hyper-awareness of his physical deformity makes his actions in Act I, Scene 2 even more remarkable. In his opening monologue, he is not a man still holding out hope for

redemption through a relationship with a woman, instead declaring himself “rudely stamped and want love’s majesty / To strut before a wanton ambling nymph” (I.i.17-18). He has completely closed the door on any opportunity for romance, and instead channels his sexual energy into a Machiavellian pursuit of political power, a villain instead of a lover (I.i.28-30).. His conversation with Anne is just another rung on the ladder leading to the throne. However, one cannot help but be startled when Richard’s flirtations with Anne are effective beyond any reasonable expectation of success.

Before Richard even enters the scene, Anne is condemning him as the man directly responsible for the death of her beloved father-in-law (King Henry VI) and indirectly for the death of her husband (Edward, Prince of Wales). As she follows the coffin of King Henry VI through the streets of London, she “obsequiously lament[s] / Th’untimely fall of virtuous Lancaster” (I.ii.3-4). She describes Henry in reverent terms, and even invokes the king’s ghost so that he can be privy to her public lamentations as she weeps over his body (I.ii.9, 13). Her cries of despair soon transition to full-throated denunciation of Richard: “O cursed be the hand that made these holes, / Cursed the blood that let this blood from hence / Cursed the heart that had the heart to do it / More direful hap betide that hated wretch / That makes us wretched by the death of thee / Than I can wish to...any creeping venom’d thing that lives” (I.ii.15-20). Anne’s words are the first instance of many in which women in the play draw a direct line between Richard and an animal; behind his back, she compares him to a “spider” and a “toad,” but her insults to his face are much more severe (I.ii.19). Anne’s curses become more specific when she prays for his future offspring to be “abortive...prodigious, and untimely brought to light, / Whose ugly and unnatural aspect / May fright the hopeful mother at the view / And that be heir to his unhappiness” (I.ii.22-25). Of course, Anne’s words here are a direct echo of Richard’s opening

monologue when he laments his own deformed appearance at birth (I.i.20-24). Little does Anne know that in condemning her family's killer, she is also condemning herself as the future (and short-lived) queen, when she says, "If ever he have a wife, let her be made / More miserable by the death of him / Than I am made by my young lord and thee" (I.ii.27-29).

Immediately after Anne curses him, Richard emerges onto the same London street and orders the men carrying the corpse of the deposed king to lower the coffin to the ground so that he can speak with Lady Anne. He threatens to murder any pallbearer who would disobey him, an early indication of how he intends to rule. Anne responds to Richard's command, and the halberdiers' evident fear of the duke, by comparing him to Satan: "Are you all afraid? / Alas, I blame you not, for you are mortal, / And mortal eyes cannot endure the devil. – / Avaunt, thou dreadful minister of hell" (I.ii.43-46). Instead of responding with anger, or even the casual violence that is so readily available to him, Richard shrugs off Anne's insults and refers to her as a "sweet saint" afflicted by a bad temper (I.ii.49). The duke's flippancy only enrages Anne further, as she refers to him as a "foul devil" and a butcher, before zeroing in on his physical appearance. She commands him to "Blush, blush, thou lump of foul deformity" (I.ii.50, 54, 57). While other characters have at least granted Richard the courtesy of animalistic description, in Anne's telling he is nothing more than a "lump" belched out of hell to inflict pain and loss upon her family (I.ii.57). She also has the moral standing to condemn Richard as one who "know'st no law of God nor man" (I.ii.70). While Richard has been able to easily manipulate his brothers Clarence and Edward, Anne sees him for who he is and condemns him in venomous terms.

Given the ferocity of Anne's attacks, it would be understandable for Richard to internalize her words as further evidence of his unworthiness as a man, cursed to be forever subservient to the alpha males. However, Richard instead chooses to treat Anne as a modern-day

pick-up artist might, in which her insults are merely “expressions of displeasure, refusal, or negativity that may *seem* like discouraging signs, but are really just ‘faux indicator[s] of disinterest,” because “a woman will attempt to deter a man *precisely because she is interested in him*” (Van Valkenburg 93). It is not immediately clear whether Richard actually believes that Anne is sexually interested in him, but he certainly does not dismiss the possibility when he remarks in astonishment: “Was ever woman in this humour wooed? / Was ever woman in this humour won? / I’ll have her, but I will not keep her long” (I.ii.215-217). He anticipates her initial rejection of him, but he is also confident enough to pursue her despite her protestations and their shared history. There is no evidence that he ever doubts his ability to be successful, despite his disgust with her succumbing to his will. Richard’s audacity is borne of a misogynistic worldview, not unlike the one articulated in a typical article posted on /r/TheRedPill, in which the author claims that “women evolved the instinct to push a man’s buttons as a way of testing his willingness to fight conflict head-on” (Ging 649). Thus, Anne’s indignation becomes nothing more than a game that ultimately serves to reaffirm his paradoxically misogynistic and self-loathing worldview.

After Anne’s initial insults are parried, Richard invites her to a supposedly rational discussion of the events that led to her family’s assassinations. Despite Richard’s flatteries and attempts at gaslighting, Anne rebukes him and calls him a “diffused infection of a man,” a poison in the bloodstream of the country (I.ii.78). Seeing that his tactics are not working to persuade Anne of his innocence, particularly in regard to the death of her husband, Richard changes to direct sexual appeals, even going so far as to say that the only place he is fit to reside is within her bedchamber (I.ii.111). In his new telling of events, Richard is King David overthrown by Anne’s beauty and thus willing “to undertake the death of all the world / So [he] might live one

hour in [her] sweet bosom” (I.ii.123-124). Through his use of explicitly sexual language, Richard maneuvers the conversation toward eroticism, a term defined by Georges Bataille as “a psychological quest, independent...of any concern to reproduce life” (Kizelbach 89). In Urszula Kizelbach’s consideration of the role of eroticism in *Richard III*, the wooing of Lady Anne then becomes a way for Richard to “prove himself more worthy as an individual...a way to refuse to limit himself within his individual personality and...an attempt to deny his individual life as a cripple and a social outcast” (Kizelbach 89).

For nearly 100 lines, Anne rejects all of Richard’s advances and continues to heap insults upon him. In Richard’s eventual response, it is easy to be reminded of Elliot Rodger’s “Day of Retribution” video, in which he claims: “They’ve all treated me like a mouse...all I ever wanted was to love you, be loved by you. I wanted a girlfriend. I wanted sex, affection, adoration. You think I’m unworthy of you...If I can’t have you girls, I will destroy you” (Van Brunt and Taylor 228-229). While Richard engages in increasingly erotic banter with Anne, his pursuit of her is firmly grounded in his own desires and sense of rejection. Anne represents one of many necessary conquests along his path to the throne, but her acceptance or rejection of him is ultimately immaterial to his calcified worldview. According to Stephen Greenblatt, “[Richard’s] possession of power includes the domination of women, but he despises them far more than desires them. Sexual conquest excites him, but only for the endlessly reiterated proof that he can have anything he likes” (*Tyrant* 54). By Richard’s own accounting, sex is the primary thing that has been denied to him throughout his life, making his conquest of Anne an act of revenge upon all those women who have allegedly spurned him over the years.

When Richard’s verbal appeals appear to fall upon deaf ears, he reaches for an even more dramatic gesture, falling upon his knees and offering the lady his sword in a scene laden with

Freudian significance. By turning over the phallic symbol of the sword, he cedes power to Anne in a way that appears to signify humility and vulnerability: “Lo, here I lend thee this sharp-pointed sword, / Which if thou please to hide in this true breast / And let the soul forth that adareth thee, / I lay it naked to the deadly stroke / And humbly beg the death upon my knee” (I.ii.162-166). Richard’s act of seduction is “clearly an effect of previous study and cool calculation, but he adapts his theatrical performance so well to the need of the situation that he manages to dupe Anne with his pretended protestations of affection” (Kizelbach 97). Richard’s false contrition convinces Anne that he is indeed a sincere and changed man. One assumes that she also knows that her prospects as a Lancaster are going to be severely limited in a Yorkist England, a reality that Richard exploits when he springs a marriage proposal upon her. Whatever her calculations, Anne accepts Richard’s ring “with all [her] heart” and she leaves King Henry’s wake and heads directly to her new husband’s residence at Crosby House (I.ii.200, 207). Although Anne demonstrates some hesitance (she tells Richard that to “fare well” is more than he deserves) she nonetheless has gone from regarding Richard as a devil to her future king and husband in the course of a single conversation (I.ii.210).

The scholarly discourse around Anne’s decision to marry Richard predictably focuses on why she would decide to abandon her previous disgust for him so quickly. Choate views the seduction of Anne as proof of Richard’s impotence and his hypothetical inability to achieve an erection, something that society would have directly associated with masculinity. In Choate’s interpretation, “[By] lacking the empathic superiority [Anne] associates with humanity, Richard actually exemplifies a certain strain of militant masculinity that, reciprocally, proves his humanity” (28). Regardless of whether Anne has a romantic epiphany indirectly related to Richard’s perceived impotence, Choate does identify the crux of the scene: Anne is undoubtedly

attracted to Richard, the man she wished dead only moments prior. In his book *Tyrant*, Stephen Greenblatt observes that “Though she loathes and fears Richard, Anne can seem strangely fascinated by him, aroused somehow even in the midst of their most aggressive exchanges” (*Tyrant* 80). Even in the heat of their argument, Anne “finds herself not cursing but musing: ‘I would I knew thy heart’(1.2.192)” (*Tyrant* 81). While Anne’s capitulation could indicate a lack of agency among the female characters within the text, there is reason to believe that she does not give in merely as an act of self-preservation, but as a result of her arousal and attraction to the duke. While she will come to regret her choice later in the play, in the moment she expresses joy and a willingness to start a life alongside Richard (I.ii.207).

One might expect this incredible series of events to change Richard’s view of himself as an invalid incapable of receiving a woman’s love. After all, it is difficult to understand how a man whose entire worldview is largely shaped by involuntary celibacy can maintain this same dogmatic belief system when he easily wins over the woman whose family he slaughtered days earlier. Yet, this conquest does little to change his perception of the world or of himself. Like any true conman, Richard resents his mark for falling for his tricks. Indeed, he seems to use Anne’s willingness to love him as evidence for the unfaithfulness of all women, which is itself a core tenet of the contemporary manosphere, which claims that the same women who have condemned incels to a life without sex are too “shallow and vapid” to be worth the time a meaningful relationship would require (Vogt). So it is with Richard when he launches into a tirade against Anne immediately after she departs for his house:

Was ever woman in this humour wooed?  
Was ever woman in this humour won?  
I’ll have her, but I will not keep her long.  
What, I that killed her husband and his father,  
To take her in her heart’s extremest hate,  
With curses in her mouth, tears in her eyes,

The bleeding witness of my hatred by,  
Having God, her conscience, and these bars against me,  
And I not friends to back my suit withal  
But the plain devil and dissembling looks –  
And yet to win her, all the world to nothing? Ha! (I.ii.215-225)

Richard is both impressed with himself and disgusted by Anne's submission to his seduction. He goes on to describe Anne's late husband, Edward, Prince of Wales as a stereotypical alpha male, a "sweet" and "lovely gentleman, framed in the prodigality of nature" (I.ii.228-229). For Anne to give in to Richard's advances so quickly affirms the future king's status as a zeta male, a "sociosexual warrior" able to woo women while simultaneously hating them for their willingness to give in to men like him. Richard's worldview is circular in its logic; if Anne rejected him out of hand, it would serve as proof of his inherent unworthiness. By accepting him, she affirms his view of women as unfaithful and manipulative. Either way, Richard (like the incel) returns to his core belief of women as unfaithful and unfeeling and himself as "misshapen" and inherently undesirable, any evidence to the contrary be damned (I.ii.237).

Throughout Richard's interactions with female characters in Act I, he demonstrates behavior that is reminiscent of Van Brunt and Taylor's incel triangle. His flirtatious behavior with Anne is rife with a sense of entitlement, as is his behavior once he enters Westminster to confront Queen Elizabeth. From the beginning of the play, he seethes with jealousy toward his brother and all those who have been placed above him simply by virtue of their charisma and physical normalcy. Finally, he reveals the depths of his misogyny when he rants about Anne's unfaithful nature. However, the comparisons between Richard's and modern manosphere ideology do not end with these three attributes, any or all of which could be applied to many Shakespearean villains. Richard distinctly reflects incel beliefs in that his morality is determined by a misplaced sense of justice rooted in male entitlement to sex. When sex is denied him, he



channels his energies into the erotic pursuit of power and conquest at all costs. Tim Squirrell, a researcher who studies online communities, could be describing Richard when he writes of incels:

These people genuinely hate and pity themselves, but, simultaneously (and almost paradoxically), they feel this righteous anger and vindication that they see the world for how it really is, even if they're at the bottom of the heap. The feeling of absolute certainty that they are *correct* is twinned with the fact that they're correct about their own misery, and that's a powerful and strange cocktail. (Bates 18)

For many young men, this “powerful and strange cocktail” leads to further misogyny and misery, but some, like Elliot Rodger, are moved “to form a mission-oriented plan to go out in a blaze of glory” (Van Brunt and Taylor 7). This is where Richard’s motivations diverge from the standard incel’s; he is not content to die in a burst of senseless violence, but is instead motivated to avenge his mistreatment by becoming the most powerful man in England. It is ironic then that Richard’s demise occurs in what amounts to a war brought about by his own actions.

Richard’s ideology is defined by the belief that he alone understands how the world works, particularly when it comes to managing the levers of power, and that he is compelled to bend the country to his will as recompense for the abuse that he has long suffered at the hands of family members and subjects alike. Despite his many machinations and betrayals, he views himself as a put-upon victim, as evidenced in his conversation with Hastings in Act I, Scene 3, in which Richard announces: “They do me wrong, and I will not endure it. / Who are they that complain unto the King / That I forsooth am stern and love them not...Because I cannot flatter and look fair, / Smile in men’s faces, smooth, deceive, and cog, / Duck with French nods and apish courtesy, I must be held a rancorous enemy” (I.iii.42-44, 47-50). Anyone who doubts Richard’s sincerity is automatically regarded as suspicious and prejudiced toward him, despite the fact that he possesses none of the honest qualities that he claims to embody. Those who come

to distrust Richard in the play do so not because of his physical deformity but because they see his true character.

In Van Brunt and Taylor's *Understanding and Treating Incels*, the two researchers identify risk factors that make it more likely for an incel to enact violence against himself or others. Unsurprisingly, one risk factor for "targeted and predatory violence" is a lack of family support, and a primary catalyst for violence is for "attackers to experience teasing and bullying" (Van Brunt and Taylor 70, 81). In the National Threat Assessment Center's study of these trends, bullying is defined as: "unwanted aggressive behavior among school-aged children with an intent to do physical, social, or emotional harm; which involves a real or perceived power imbalance; and is, or could be, repeated" (Van Brunt and Taylor 81). While the researchers may have been thinking about behavior on playgrounds when writing this definition, their ideas could just as easily be applied to Richard. Just as the horrific acts of shooters are in no way excused by any social ostracization they may or may not have experienced, Richard's behavior cannot and should not be explained away simply because of the harassment he endures from his family, or even the larger society around him. Indeed, men like Richard often manifest self-fulfilling prophecies, treating others with contempt and then assuming the mantle of victimhood when others respond in kind. However, even though Shakespeare makes a point to highlight the depths of hatred that Richard's family harbors for him, never does the playwright excuse Richard's behavior in consequence.

It is easy to understand why someone like Lady Anne would hurl abuse upon Richard, a man she views as a murderer and usurper. It is perhaps less reasonable for his own family to perpetuate rumors of the duke as a physically monstrous freak upon birth, a story that is then repeated by young children, as when York says: "Marry, they say my uncle grew so fast / That

he could gnaw a crust at two hours old” (II.iv.27-28). Likewise, Queen Margaret calls him a “dog,” a “rooting hog,” and a “bunch-backed toad” in one conversation, sentiments that his own mother, the Duchess of York, does little to dispel (I.iii.213,225,244). Instead, the duchess tells her grandchildren that Richard “is my son, ay, and therein my shame” before washing her hands of his behavior when she says, “Yet from my dugs he drew not this deceit” (II.ii.29-30).

Greenblatt cites the verbal abuse that Richard endures as evidence of Shakespeare’s beliefs about the development of a tyrant’s psyche:

He held on...to the conviction that traumatic and lasting damage to a person’s self-image could be traced back to early experiences—to an adolescent’s fear that he is ugly, or to the cruel mockery of other children, or, even earlier in life, to the responses of nurses and midwives. Above all, he thought, irreparable harm could come from a mother’s failure or inability to love her child. Richard’s bitter anger at the goddess Love, who forswore him, and at nature, who shrank his arm like a withered shrub, is a thin screen for his rage against his mother. (*Tyrant* 62)

Richard’s mother reserves animosity for her youngest son only. She is disgusted by him, and in their last interaction, she curses him and wishes for his death (*Tyrant* 64-65). In response, Richard simmers with rage that he then aims outwardly at any who would dare to reject him, including the women who will not comply to his demands for sex and affection. For the future king, his mother’s rejection is simply more evidence of a world that has become completely unfair. If he cannot have what should come naturally to a child (the affection of his mother) he will seek it out in sexual conquest, and when stymied there as well, he will reorder the world until it accommodates his every desire.

Richard’s vision of England under King Edward IV is most explicitly stated when he is confronted by his sister-in-law, Queen Elizabeth, about his thinly veiled hatred for her and her children. Richard retorts: “The world is grown so bad / That wrens make prey where eagles dare not perch. / Since every jack became a gentleman, / There’s many a gentle person made a jack”

(I.iii.71-73). The parallel to incel beliefs here is clear: men like Richard are “supreme gentlemen” who should be regarded with respect and a healthy dose of fear. In the absence of such a world, society is ruled by undeserving lotharios. Richard regards himself as a majestic “eagle” fit to rule, but without such a leader, lowly wrens and jacks view themselves as equivalent to nobility. While Richard’s words may be more poetic, his verses reflect the same ideas expressed in Elliot Rodger’s manifesto when the future shooter recounts a conflict with the roommate he would eventually murder: “The ugly pig kept acting as if girls thought he was more attractive than me! Hah! I am a beautiful, magnificent gentleman and he is a low-class, pig-face thug. I had enough of his cocksure attitude, and I started to call him exactly what he was. I tried to insult him as much as I could, telling him how superior I am to him, and saying that he was low-class” (Van Brunt and Taylor 17). While Richard may never have been able to regard himself as “beautiful,” such feelings were clearly fleeting for Rodger as well based on his subsequent writings. What links the two men together is their belief in a “replacement theory.” White men born into wealth are eagles deserving of respect and, thus, sex, and when that respect is denied, drastic measures must be taken.

In this sense, Richard is the author and finisher of his cause, a man driven by a deep sense of personal grievance who then channels that feeling into a political movement. Of course, his philosophy for ruling is largely incoherent beyond the idea that he should be the one to hold the reins of power. Yet, cynical men in high positions of government see in Richard a vehicle toward greater authority and status. None of these men, including Hastings and Buckingham, are inclined to consider what is best for the kingdom, nor do they attach themselves to the future king’s ideologies. However, their desire for power enables them to look past Richard’s obvious instability and moral foibles in favor of his cunning ambition. Thus Richard transcends the

traditional beta male incel and fully achieves the title of zeta male, a warrior driven by a desire for status and an anger toward the opposite sex, who is “emergent and unpolished and struggling to find his legs” (Ging 650). Instead of finding compatriots on the Internet who help to advance his cause, Richard seeks out advisors and aristocrats who are willing to back him up. By the time they realize the errors of their ways and the harm that the new king is willing to inflict on anyone who crosses him, Richard is no longer emergent and struggling but ruthless and dominating.

## CHAPTER FOUR: RICHARD'S ENABLERS

In reality, many of Richard's schemes to steal the throne are far-fetched at best. Like most incels, Richard has suffered real abuse and ridicule at the hands of his family; he is not a man who has experienced great sexual success, and yet a cornerstone of his plot to overthrow the government relies on his ability to successfully seduce a Lancastrian widow, a matter of days after being directly involved in the death of her husband. Beyond that, he must somehow facilitate the death of his brothers (including the current king) and nephews, and he must form a sort of shadow government full of high-ranking officials prepared to back his claim to the throne whenever he determines to launch his campaign. While the erstwhile Duke of Gloucester is doubtless a formidable political animal, none of his plans could come to fruition without the explicit support of advisors and men willing to join his quest for power. In comparison to the current era, these are hardly men like Steve Bannon; there are no true believers in Richard's coterie, nor do there need to be for Richard's purposes. Whereas Bannon represented "one degree of separation" from the president, Richard embodies the ideology of the manosphere without the need for a base translator. All that Richard needs to become a tyrant is the acquiescence of morally flexible men, and their willingness to bend allows for this zeta male to become ascendent.

The stereotype of the incel is often one of an isolated, deeply lonely figure, but the irony is that they are supported and enabled by sizable online communities. A sense of alienation from the rest of society leads them to find a dangerous sense of camaraderie among those who fan the flames of hatred. Many of these groups encourage real-world violence and misogynistic acts; others take matters into their own hands and engage in acts of "collective trolling," harassment

that begins online with terrifying consequences for the targeted. Online forums that serve as a home base for such hateful ideologies are frequently subject to belated censorship once a violent event occurs, but the movement easily stays ahead of would-be regulators, who are then dismissed and attacked as free-speech scolds (Newsom et. al 264). Perhaps the most notable act of collective trolling occurred in 2014 in a series of events now referred to as “Gamergate,” which began when a programmer named Eron Gjoni wrote a blog post claiming that his ex-girlfriend, game developer Zoe Quinn, slept with a reviewer for *Kotaku* in order to generate a more positive reception for her upcoming video game project, *Depression Quest*. The story was completely false, but that did not stop the hordes of online trolls from rising up to make Quinn’s life a living hell. Her private nude photographs were stolen and distributed online; “her friends and family were subjected to extreme abuse; she was harassed and encouraged to kill herself; her online accounts were hacked; and, eventually, after people threatened to cripple, maim, rape, and kill her, she left her home in fear for her safety” (Bates 148). The harassment soon spread to other women in the video game industry, including media critic Anita Sarkeesian, who was subject to verifiable death threats that forced her to move away from her home (Bates 149).

Gamergate may have been primarily limited to a specific online gaming community; however, this type of targeted, collective harassment is seen in many other corners of the digital world. Steve Bannon-associate Milo Yiannopoulos was banned from Twitter in 2016 for organizing a blatantly racist campaign against actress Leslie Jones simply because she appeared in an all-female remake of *Ghostbusters*. Jones was subject to abuse including being sent pictures of “apes’ genitals...a picture of her own face covered in semen, among thousands of other messages” (Bates 152). Similar “troll army” campaigns have been organized by white-supremacist site *The Daily Stormer*, including its “Filthy Jew Bitch Campaign” targeting British

MP Luciana Berger and, later, its efforts against Australian Muslim lawyer and advocate Mariam Veiszadah, which resulted in credible death threats against Veiszadah's elderly parents (Bates 152). Instead of suffering consequences for their vile actions, the ringleaders of these harassment campaigns used them as a launching pads to online fame. Yiannopoulos and fellow provocateur Mike Cernovich used Gamergate to leverage their platform into massive Twitter followings, college speaking tours, cushy writing gigs for sites like Bannon's *Breitbart*, and profiles in staid mainstream media sources including *The New Yorker*. Meanwhile, the supporters of these collective trolling movements aligned themselves ever closer with the extremist wings of the incel movement, often referring to themselves as "gamERs" in tribute to Elliot Rodger or "altrightcels" to signify their dual allegiance.

The cascading fame of men like Bannon, Yiannopoulos, and Cernovich, the first of whom ended up as senior advisor to the president, would never have been possible without thousands of angry young men who spent untold hours marinating in the cesspool of incel and alt-right forums. Likewise, in a previous era, Gioni's angry screed against an ex-girlfriend would have been just that, an act of slanderous gossip from a mentally imbalanced former lover that would have spread no further than his immediate circle of friends and associates. Even in the Internet age, in which everyone is offered a personal platform with the click of a button, hateful messages must be cultivated and magnified by hundreds and thousands of other voices willing to take up the mantle of misogyny and thus inflict violence on strangers. Yet instead of regarding these acts of hatred as actual threats with horrifying ramifications for the targeted, they are too frequently ignored or treated with sympathy. In 2018, Donald Trump summed up this "himpathetic" view when he claimed in the wake of the #MeToo movement: "[This is] a very scary time for young men in America...[but] women are doing great" (Newsome et. al. 264).



Trump's rationale for these comments was clear: not only was it an act of self-preservation by a man who has been accused of sexual assault 26 times, but it was an explicit nod to the movement that had elevated him into office (Osborne).

Men like Yiannopoulos, Cernovich, Bannon, and, to an extent, Trump are, at their core, acquiesors. Their subservience to the dominant movements of the manosphere, whether that be Gamergate or the tiki-torch wielding demonstrators of Charlottesville, demonstrate a morality wholly determined by the movement that lends them the most power and notoriety. Such a dynamic is, once again, directly predicted in *Richard III*. Richard of Gloucester could have been cut off at the legs many times during his rise to power; as a zeta male he is, by definition, clumsy and prone to stumbles. His plans for attaining the crown are far-fetched and reliant on every circumstance breaking his way, and yet, he glides through enemies and past obstacles with ease, aided and abetted by those who see his poisonous ideology not as a mortal threat to the kingdom, but as gasoline for the fire of their own ambition. Richard's ascendancy, then, "depended on a fatal conjunction of diverse but equally self-destructive responses from those around him. Together these responses amount to a whole country's collective failure" (*Tyrant* 66). This failure is most pronounced when considering three of the king's key enablers: William, Lord Hastings; Henry, Duke of Buckingham; and the bishops of the Church of England.

Of Richard's associates, Lord Hastings is most dismissive of the threat represented by the Duke of Gloucester. His laissez-faire attitude toward a potential coup d'état is most vividly represented in Act III, Scene 2, during which Lord Stanley sends a messenger to Hastings' house at four in the morning to warn his compeer of disturbing premonitions about the scope of Richard's ambitions. The messenger breathlessly reports to Hastings that his lord had a dream in which "the boar had razed off his helm," a vision that he regards as a prophetic warning against

Stanley's imminent beheading (III.ii.8). Hastings barely entertains the messenger's words, instead telling him that Stanley's "fears are shallow, without instance / And for his dreams, I wonder he's so simple, / To trust the mock'ry of unquiet slumbers" (III.ii.22-24). Hastings insists that to flee to safety would only "incense the boar to follow us / And make pursuit where he did mean no chase" (III.ii.26-27). Greenblatt writes of Hastings' behavior in this scene:

[The] ambitious Hastings thinks that he can take advantage of [Richard's] ruthlessness to rid himself of his principal rivals at court. He is not ignorant of the potential risk, but he believes that he has adequately defended himself against it, both by making himself useful to Richard in the past and by cultivating well-placed allies who can warn him if the wind seemed to be shifting in an alarming direction. (*Tyrant* 74)

Chief among Hastings' allies appears to be his "good friend Catesby," a man who is actually much less loyal to Hastings than he is to his own self-interest (III.ii.19; *Tyrant* 74-75). Rather than viewing Richard as a legitimate threat to the throne (an obvious conclusion for anyone who has heard the duke speak), Hastings sees a vehicle through which he can advance his own narrow goals. In the same scene, he brags to his friend: "Well, Catesby, ere a fortnight makes me older, / I'll send some packing that yet think not on't" (III.ii.57-58). Of course, as both Catesby and Hastings soon find out, there is no controlling Richard's long-cultivated hatred.

Prior to Act III, Scene 3, Richard's machinations have largely been furtive, concealed from public scrutiny. Those who are aware of Richard's true nature, such as Hastings, still assume that the duke will be bound by the conventions of traditional patriarchal society. Hastings reassures himself that surely Richard knows his place and would never do anything to actually upset the God-ordained order of succession within the House of York; as such, Hastings is comfortable telling Catesby that he will not back Richard's claim to the throne over the duke's nephew. This decision confirms Hastings as nothing more than a yes-man who cynically believes he can use Richard's dysfunction to his own advantage; however, as becomes clear in Act III,

Scene 4, the English court is not dealing with a traditional alpha male in Richard, but a prowling, incel-like zeta hell-bent on vengeance against those who have scoffed at and demeaned him for years. Hastings represents the exact sort of aloof power broker that Richard is eager to destroy.

Act III, Scene 4 opens with Richard convening his council over which he immediately asserts his dominance. Those gathered at the table in the Tower of London include the Duke of Buckingham, Lord Stanley Earl of Derby, Lord Hastings, the Bishop of Ely, the Duke of Norfolk, and Sir William Catesby; each of these men commands great power over large swaths of the kingdom's population. Yet it is the former king's deformed brother who quickly makes himself the center of gravity in the room. In his first act, the future king dispatches the Bishop of Ely back to his house at Holborn in order to fetch a batch of "good strawberries in his garden," a clear sign that, under Richard, even God's representatives will be nothing more than errand boys (III.iv.32). Next, Richard pulls Buckingham aside and announces his intention to kill Hastings in the most brazen manner imaginable, both as an act of vengeance and as a means of testing the loyalty and fear he commands among his other enablers. Upon the bishop's return (strawberries in hand), Richard launches into a tirade against those who "do conspire against my death with devilish plots / Of damned witchcraft, and that have prevailed / Upon my body with their hellish charms," and thus invites his advisors to participate in a brainstorming session as to the proper punishment for those who dare threaten the anointed one (III.iv.60-62). Within these few lines, Richard manages to lay a trap for the nearly headless Hastings and to claim that anyone who opposes his imminent coup is in league with Satan. Upon Hastings' groveling insistence that anyone who threatens Richard should be sent to their death, Richard announces that it is Queen Elizabeth and Hastings' mistress Jane Shore who have bewitched the Duke of Gloucester: "Behold, mine arm / Is like a blasted sapling withered up. / And this is Edward's wife, that

monstrous witch, / Consorted with that harlot, strumpet Shore, / That by their witchcraft thus have marked me” (III.iv.68-72). The accusation is baldly ridiculous. Everyone in England knows that Richard’s arm has been deformed from birth, and yet when Hastings dares to question the king’s assertion, Richard calls him a “protector of this damned strumpet” and a “traitor” before demanding “Off with his head” (III.iv.74-76). He announces that he will not eat until Hastings is executed and then, in a grand flourish, commands all “that love me, rise and follow me” leaving Hastings alone, shell-shocked and doomed (III.iv.79).

Richard’s behavior at the council meeting is instructive for both its brazenness and the underlying ideology at play. While Richard may seem to be deploying a Pythonesque excuse for executing a political rival, his condemnation of Hastings is actually reflective of his view of the women left in the English court. Richard has already demonstrated his hatred for Lady Anne, a woman who challenges him but soon folds to his will. Neither posture does anything to endear her toward Richard; he loathes her for her unwillingness to be with him and he despises her more when she acquiesces. In Queen Elizabeth and Jane Shore, he sees two more women who are no better than witches casting around blindly for ways to stop the supra-human authority that he increasingly believes he embodies. His accusations against the women, aimed as they may be at riling the loyal Hastings, echo an ideology similar to that expressed by Elliot Rodger who frequently describes himself as godlike in his manifestos and videos (Van Brunt and Taylor 18). Even more striking than Richard’s sexism in this scene is the boldness with which he asserts his authority. Every person in the room has known both Hastings and Richard for years; there can be no doubt that the duke’s claims about the queen and Shore are a convenient excuse for eliminating Hastings. And yet, not a single person even raises a finger to challenge the tyrant or to help their colleague. Greenblatt writes: “Some, like Buckingham and Catesby, are already in

on the plot to take Hastings's life; others, like Ratcliffe and Lovell, are happy to go along with anything the tyrant orders; still others are simply relieved that the blade of the axe is not pointed in their direction" (*Tyrant* 75). No matter the motivation, their silence demonstrates a complicity that allows the ascendant zeta male to evolve from a struggling and flailing tyro into a terrifyingly confident tyrant.

If the Church's subservience to the whims of political power are first evidenced by the bishop running to retrieve the dictator's strawberries, it is further cemented by the boost that church leaders give to Richard's bizarre campaign to claim the throne. As for many incels, Richard's driving motivation is the rejection that he has experienced at the hands of those who traditionally possess social clout. While he seeks to avenge himself upon these same people and institutions, he is also driven by a deep need to feel accepted, liked, and respected by and in them. Thus, he deems it necessary to run a shadow campaign for office, a wholly unnecessary ploy within England's monarchical system. However, Richard does not just want the ring of power; he wants the average Briton to view him as an avenging hero, a harbinger of a second "glorious summer" as it were (I.i.2). Thus, he and Buckingham develop a plan to slander the now-dead Hastings as a traitor to the throne and to position Richard as rightful heir and protector of England, the conqueror of alpha males, the king of all kings, and, of course, the drainer of London's swamps. In order to "solicit a popular mandate, Richard conducts a political campaign, complete with a fraudulent display of religious piety, the slandering of opponents, and grossly exaggerated threat to national security" (*Tyrant* 76). The church's blessing enables him to succeed in quick order.

Just as Richard is correct in his descriptions of the abuse hurled at him by family members, his claims about King Edward IV contain a germ of truth. The king was indeed

lecherous and did avail himself of many women at court; no one disputes these assertions in the play. Richard, then, simply needs to play up his brother's corruption in order to make a moral claim to the throne. For the aggrieved, self-righteous Richard, the ridicule that he has endured more than justifies any methods he might use to attain power for himself; he views himself as a crusader for the disaffected beta male. Simultaneously, his desire for adoration naturally leads him to seek it through the affection of the populace and the endorsement of the second-most-powerful entity in England, the Church. Not unlike the modern American politicians who make a pharisaical show of genuflecting before the operators of the Evangelical machine, Richard seeks to endear himself to the masses by literally dressing himself in the borrowed robes of Christianity. Buckingham first draws the explicit comparison between the supposedly devout Richard and his immoral brother when he tells the mayor:

My lord, this prince is not an Edward.  
He is not lolling on a lewd day-bed,  
But on his knees at meditation;  
Not dallying with a brace of courtesans,  
But meditating with two deep divines  
Not sleeping to engross his idle body,  
But praying to enrich his watchful soul.  
Happy were England would this virtuous prince  
Take on his grace the sovereignty thereof. (III.vii.71-79)

The description of Richard is laughable to anyone who knows him, yet much like the advisors who look the other way as Hastings' execution is ordered, ecclesiastical and local government officials know that participating in this religious pantomime is the surest way to safely maintain their cozy positions. Additionally, the man who has been heretofore driven to attain power because of his inability to attain sex is now using his involuntary celibacy as a sign of his moral rectitude. It's unclear, though, if Richard even has to keep up the appearance of a tortured, righteous soul given how quickly the Bishop of Ely responded to his commands earlier in Act

III. Nevertheless, the Church bows to Richard's theatrics, going so far as to lend two bishops to accompany Richard during his very brief discernment process about taking the throne. He later appears above the streets of London flanked by both bishops before participating in a scripted dialogue with Buckingham, who points to all within earshot: "See, a book of prayer in his hand – True ornaments to know a holy man," before gratuitously thanking the prince for deigning to interrupt his prayer time in order to consider being crowned king (III.vii.98-99). By the time Richard acquiesces to the demands of the people (or, at least, Buckingham and a reluctant mayor) he has sated his desire to be publicly praised as a moral man and the Church has swiftly sacrificed any moral authority that it may have held prior to the dictator's ascension. Like the advisors that silently condemned Hastings to his fate, the religious leaders become complicit in an autocratic takeover of the kingdom.

Many aid in Richard's campaign through silent complicity and acts of self-preservation, but no one ties himself as explicitly to the future king as the Duke of Buckingham. Throughout the first three acts, Buckingham acts as a confidante, fixer, campaign manager, and tyrant-whisperer to Richard (*Tyrant* 85). Buckingham helps his kinsman ferret out those loyal to their cause, and he orchestrates the entire charade between Richard, the mayor, and the bishops. In exchange, he is acknowledged for his role. Richard says, "Thus high by thy advice / And thy assistance is King Richard seated" (IV.ii.4-5). Despite the king's apparent show of gratitude here, his fear of future usurpation remains. The king thus hints that he wishes for Buckingham to kill King Edward's young sons, Prince Edward and Prince Richard. Taken aback, Buckingham makes it clear that King Richard can act however he pleases, yet Richard demands a higher loyalty, demanding of his closest advisor: "Say, have I thy consent that they shall die?" (IV.ii.24). When Buckingham demurs, the king is enraged, despite the fact that he hardly needs a

duke's consent in order to kill children he regards as threats to his power. Greenblatt writes of the emerging schism between Richard and his co-conspirator: "That the tyrant asks his principal ally for his 'consent' has to do not with permission but with complicity. At this critical moment at the onset of his reign, he wants and needs to be assured of his associate's loyalty, and that loyalty is best guaranteed by having Buckingham make himself an accomplice to a horrendous crime" (*Tyrant* 87). By the time Buckingham returns to court after thinking over his options, Richard has already deemed him insufficiently loyal, declaring, "None are for me, / That look into me with considerate eyes / High-reaching Buckingham grows circumspect" (IV.ii.30-32). Just hours into his reign, the king is paranoid, isolated, and distrustful of his closest supporters. His decision making is driven by fear, and his behavior becomes even more erratic. Richard is a fundamentally isolated man, whose ascension to the throne has been fueled by a roiling hatred toward those who rejected him. Richard's attitude in Act IV is not all that different from many incels, these young men have defined their lives as isolated "lone wolves" separated from the companionship of women and the true camaraderie of other men. When faced with any perceived slight or condescension, they revert to rage and distrust born of a sense of entitlement that they alone are worthy of adulation. It would be difficult to find an advisor more loyal to the king than Buckingham, and yet even he cannot overcome Richard's suspicion that others will ultimately reject him, given the chance.

Following Richard's coronation, it becomes painfully clear that the new king has no governing agenda beyond the idea that he alone should possess power. To this point in his life, every action and decision has been motivated by the desire for revenge and a resentment toward those who hold power over him, whether by birth or, in the case of women, sexual attractiveness. Once Richard becomes king, he has nothing left to achieve so he becomes immediately obsessed



with the idea that others are trying to take the crown from him. Greenblatt writes of this familiar dynamic among autocratic rulers: “For the tyrant, there is remarkably little satisfaction...[he] is obsessed with loyalty from his inner circle, but he can never be entirely confident that he has it. The only people who will serve him are self-interested scoundrels, like himself” (*Tyrant* 87). Because Richard has engaged in heinous acts of violence and murder to attain power, the only way that he knows to execute his power is through repetition. Thus begins an era of subjugation for the people of England, a time in which the lives of everyday citizens and royals alike are completely determined by the whims of a monarch wholly intent on proving his masculinity.

## CHAPTER FIVE:

### THE END OF RICHARD AND THE LINGERING POISON

The difference in character between Richard of Gloucester and King Richard III proves to be negligible. There is no pivot upon taking the throne, nor does Richard suddenly gain the ability to act more “kingly” once he feels the weight of the crown on his brow. Instead, attaining the ring of power only makes him more paranoid and subsequently reinforces his worst instincts. While Richard is a fascinating character, he is not exactly a study in complexity. He is fueled by rage, jealousy, and a victim complex born of a bone deep misogyny; he subsequently responds to these feelings in similar ways no matter his role. As king, he acts exactly as he did before: he kills political rivals (regardless of age), threatens his closest advisors, and plots ways to further secure his power. Of course, his means for enacting his vengeful schemes typically run through the women he scorns so deeply.

Richard’s most significant step toward ultimate power is the seduction of Lady Anne. Perhaps it is no surprise that, given the success of this endeavor, Richard believes that he can simply repeat the same process whenever he deems necessary. By all accounts, Anne’s marriage to Richard is miserable. In her lone appearance as queen, Anne howls in regret: “O would to God that the inclusive verge / Of golden metal that must round my brow / Were red-hot steel, to sear me to the brains / Anointed let me be with deadly venom, / And die ere men can say ‘God save the Queen’” (IV.i.58-62). She goes on to blame her “woman’s heart / [which] grossly grew captive to his honey words” for her succumbing to Richard’s plan (IV.i.78-79). Her regret is well-founded as Richard seems to order her execution one scene later when he tells Catesby to “give out / That Anne, my queen, is sick and like to die” before announcing his intention to marry his niece and thus solidify his claim to the throne (IV.ii.58-59).

Richard's relationship with Edward's wife, the former Queen Elizabeth, is perhaps the most contentious of the play. While she is one of the few characters to cross the emergent king who does not end up dead, Richard turns her life into a living hell and expects her to respond with the same callous indifference that he so frequently displays. Before he ever hatches the plan to marry Queen Elizabeth's lone daughter, he imprisons Elizabeth's two sons in the Tower of London where he soon orders them executed by bargain-rate hitmen. As with Clarence and Edward, Richard is in no way bound by familial bonds when considering the obstacles that his nephews, Prince Edward and the Duke of York, present. Assuming that his sister-in-law is as transactional as he is, and without so much as an acknowledgment of Elizabeth's loss, Richard proceeds to enter into negotiations that would see him marrying the one member of Elizabeth's family that he has not killed. In this way, Richard demonstrates a core irony of incel ideology: the belief that everyone else views the world in the same cold, zero-sum manner that he does.

When Richard broaches the idea of making his niece, Princess Elizabeth, his new wife, the elder Elizabeth greets the idea with predictable horror. Yet Richard does not respond with anger, but bemusement. When Elizabeth points out that Richard killed her daughter's father, the king responds with a shrug of "Look what is done cannot be now amended" (IV.iv.273.4). Throughout their conversation, Richard demonstrates the same emotional disregard as he does in wooing Lady Anne, yet his words lack the charged eroticism of that previous conversation. In contrast, he seems almost bored when he tells Elizabeth that, if she helps him woo her daughter, he can provide her with grandchildren who "are as children but one step below / Even of your mettall, of your very blood / Of all one pain, save for a night of groans" (IV.iv.273.14-16). Here, Richard treats his offer to Elizabeth as if he is doing her a favor by providing her the object she desires (children) while sparing her the pain of childbirth, and this after he murdered her entire

family. Richard's emotional remove in this scene is startling, but it is fully in character for a man who believes that women are ultimately shallow creatures primarily driven by a desire for sex and money, which is itself a core tenet of incel beliefs (O'Malley 12). The grandchildren that Richard offers to Elizabeth are nothing more than material objects to him, and he is astonished when Elizabeth does not view them in the same way. When Elizabeth repeatedly reminds the autocrat: "Thou didst kill my children," Richard flippantly responds: "But in your daughter's womb I bury them / Where, in that nest of spicery, they will breed / Selves of themselves, to your recomfiture" (IV.iv.353-356). In Richard's mind, a child is a replaceable entity whose only purpose is to serve as claimant to the throne. Any shred of humanity that Richard once possessed has been subsumed by his conviction that he is untouchable and by his seething hatred for the women who deign to resist his proposals. Predictably, the princess herself is only a pawn in her uncle's machinations; she is referenced only by name in the script and is not granted any agency to determine her destiny, much less a voice. Richard leaves the conversation assuming that Elizabeth will ultimately hand over her daughter to him. Still, he cannot help but spit out "Relenting fool, and shallow, changing woman" as soon as she leaves, thus highlighting his hatred of and disregard for those he deceives (IV.iv.363).

Further underscoring Richard's rapidly metastasizing self-absorption is the conversation that he has with his mother shortly before he attempts to win over Queen Elizabeth and, by proxy, her daughter. When the Duchess of York repeatedly attempts to rebuke the king, he commands his train to drown out her words with drums and trumpets, yelling: "Let not the heavens hear these tell-tale women / Rail on the Lord's anointed. Strike, I say!" (IV.iv.150-151). Even though Richard's restraint here is perhaps notable (most who challenge him are executed within hours) he now demonstrates a belief that he is God's anointed one who "cannot brook the

accent of reproof” (IV.iv.158). After a life on the receiving end of his mother’s verbal abuse, Richard has become inured to any sort of counsel from her. However, his mother’s words prove prophetic when she tells her youngest son: “Bloody thou art, bloody will be thy end; / Shame serves thy life, and doth thy death attend” (IV.iv.195-196).

Richard’s death in Act V is indeed bloody as his final military campaign is cursed by all those he murdered in the form of visiting spirits. However, the vehicle of justice is wholly unsuitable for exorcizing the demons that Richard’s misogyny has unleashed upon England. Richard’s rival for the throne is the thinly-sketched, stereotypical alpha-male figure of Henry, Earl of Richmond, a man who loves England, his friends, and his mother (V.ii.1, V.v.35). If Richmond represents a return to the patriarchal status quo of King Edward IV and all of the monarchs before him, Richard has mutated into an even uglier thing – “a phallic ‘monster great deformed,’ perpetually engaged in erecting himself...utterly barren, able to destroy and corrupt but not to create” (Moulton 265). Richard’s reign has been characterized by utter chaos and a destruction of the social norms and orders that have previously been taken for granted in the court and throughout the country. Richard is referred to throughout the play as a “wild boar,” a title that would have special significance to Shakespeare’s audience who often kept boars in their homes and regarded the animals as “‘a creature of the threshold’ which ‘overlapped with, and confusingly debased human habitat and diet alike. Its mode of life was not different from, but alarmingly imbricated with, the forms of life which betokened civility’” (Moulton 265). Viewed in this light, Richard bears some of the hallmarks of a traditional leader, but his behavior is devoid of basic qualities of humanity or even a sense of shame.

The night before Richard engages in his final military conflict, he is revisited by the ghosts of those that he betrayed and killed throughout his rapid ascendancy to the throne.

Whereas Richmond spends the evening receiving blessings from the dead and assurances of his righteous cause to reclaim the kingdom, Richard is haunted by spirits, as well as his own deepening sense of utter loneliness. The only men left standing by his side at Bosworth Field are Catesby and Ratcliffe, relatively minor figures with whom Richard can discuss military strategy but little else (*Tyrant* 92). He sits alone, drinking wine and dreading the inevitable vengeance that is his to inherit. Richard's monologue in Act V, Scene 5 has been frequently pointed to as evidence of Shakespeare's lack of development as a young playwright, and indeed the soliloquy is a direct statement of loneliness that lacks the philosophical meanderings of Hamlet or the poetic self-loathing of Macbeth. However, Greenblatt argues that "perhaps Richard's schematic words manage to convey the notion not only of psychological conflict—I love myself; I hate myself—but also of a painful emptiness" (*Tyrant* 93). Indeed, the king's rejection of all those who may love him in exchange for an all-consuming rage toward those who would dare reject him has left him an embittered, small man drinking alone on the eve of his death. The ghostly visitors only reinforce the doomed monarch's sense that "There is no creature loves me / And if I die no soul will pity me" (V.v.154-155). Each character, including Lady Anne, the princes, and former allies like Buckingham, curse Richard to "despair and die" (V.v.74, 81, 89, 94, 97, 103, 110, 117). Perhaps the repetition of the curse finally breaks through to Richard: he briefly drops his self-image as a conquering zeta male and declares himself a "villain," a "fool," and ultimately a "guilty," unloved man (V.v.145,146,153). However, any self-reflection achieved during his dark night of the soul is quickly dismissed at the break of dawn.

As Richard becomes increasingly cornered, his misogyny becomes even more pronounced. When rallying his troops before battle, he makes a direct appeal to his own sense of grievance, when he declares that "If we be conquered, let *men* conquer us" (V.vi.62). In this

statement, Richard wraps himself in the language of the alpha male, even as the physically-deformed king leads his troops to fight against the model patriarchal figure, Richmond. Richard goes on to encourage his soldiers to protect their own property, which includes the women of Britain: “Shall these enjoy our lands? Lie with our wives? / Ravish our daughters?” (V.vi.66-67). In this final address, Richard both attempts to dress himself in the borrowed robes of patriarchal masculinity while also channeling the resentment that he feels from being kept outside of this masculinity for his whole life. Richmond embodies everything that Richard resents, and has resented from the onset of the play. In Richard’s final speech, Richmond becomes the traditional conqueror, a Chad come to ravish the women of Britain. Richard likewise appeals to a sense of hazy British history when the Tudors were responsible for raping and pillaging while the mighty Yorks responded by making Tudor armies into “the heirs of shame” (V.vi.65). Richard portrays himself as the inheritor of the York legacy and the last bulwark standing between “the bastard Bretons” and the rightful new order represented solely by Richard III (V.vi.63).

In contrast to Richard, Richmond shows love and affection to his captains, whom he calls his “most loving friends,” and he declares his deep respect for his mother (V.ii.1, V.v.35). In every scene, Richmond projects calm and confidence as he is assured of the righteousness of his cause by no fewer than ten friendly ghosts. Yet, Richmond is only a model of a more progressive masculinity insofar as he is presented in direct contrast to Richard. While Richard’s rallying cry is rooted in fear and misogyny, Richmond “offers a vision of a stable world held together in the present and future by familiar bonds of masculine duty and feminine and filial loyalty” (Moulton 268). Richmond does not warn of the rape and graft that will be inflicted upon his men’s “property” were they to lose, but he does appeal to a traditional sense of masculinity in which his men will be “welcome[d] home [as] conquerors” and their children will regard them with

suitable reverence (V.v.214-216). Richmond's declarations reveal that the poison that has become wholly manifest during Richard's reign will be in no way expunged by Richmond's. Instead, Richmond aims to restore a moderate order that will allow the poison to once again lay dormant in the bloodstream of society until it reemerges again in generations to come (Moulton 268).

After a heroic showing on the battlefield, Richard is victim to an ignominious death referenced only in stage directions before the play's final scene. Despite his brief transformation into a Thor-like figure, prowling through the fight on foot "seeking for Richmond in the throat of death," Richard is struck down by his enemy with some ease, clearing the way for the earl to be crowned King Henry VII and proving his nobility through a rousing speech about England's latent greatness and the justice that the new king has restored (V.vii.5). Henry concludes the play with a prayer declaring that "Now civil wounds are stopped; peace lives again" (V.viii.40). A more fitting concluding statement could instead be found in *The Tragedy of Macbeth* when the Scottish tyrant realizes that his botched assassination attempt on Fleance could eventually lead to his own demise: "We have scorched the snake, not killed it. / She'll close and be herself, whilst our poor malice / Remains in danger of her former tooth" (III.ii.15-17). The incel ideology of the zeta male cannot be killed simply by deposing one ruler and replacing him with a relatively inoffensive new king whose "social vision [still] includes the feminine in subordinate roles...[one that] rules women but does not reject or despise them" (Moulton 268).

Choate concurs with Moulton's analysis when he points to how little has changed in the world of the play once Richmond's fortunes are secured. Richmond declares his intention to take Elizabeth as his wife (the same outcome that would have occurred if Richard had been victorious). Furthermore, he announces that his new family will "Enrich the time to come with



smooth-faced peace, / With smiling plenty, and fair, prosperous days' [which] brings us uncomfortably close to the images of 'Grim-visaged War ... smooth[ing] his wrinkled front' in the 'fair well-spoken days' following the previous civil war (V.vii.30-34)" (Choate 46). Richmond's victory is, at best, a return to the status quo that first incubated Richard's rage. Additionally, Richmond's claim to the throne is hardly more legitimate than Richard's; after all, Clarence's son still lives. Choate rightly concludes (and concurs with Moulton) that "These parallels invite us to reread Richard not as an aberration that has been corrected, but as a glimpse behind the 'smiling plenty' of the normative order as it continues to 'smile and murder while [it] smile[s]'" (46). The toxic ideology represented by Richard requires a far more powerful emetic than the one offered by the blandly patriarchal Richmond. But there is simply no reason to believe that the world of the play, and its underlying societal ideologies, have fundamentally changed with the arrival of the newly crowned Tudor king.

Laura Bates compares manosphere ideology to a parasite called a Guinea worm that infests the human body through infected drinking water. Once the worm larvae enter, they take several weeks to hatch through painful blisters, which then exit the human body when the wound is submerged in fresh water, and thus the cycle of infection begins again. Bates writes:

Think of the manosphere like the Guinea worm. Its ideology, smuggled inside via other hosts, can infect you before you even realise it. Once inside, it spreads and grows, eventually causing great pain. In an attempt to ease that pain, hosts cause harm to others, and accelerate wider infestation. And, while only a small part of the problem is visible, a much greater portion lurks beneath the surface. (300)

Within the context of this metaphor, Richard is a manifestation of a very old, parasitic ideology that is just as present within the waters of 21st century America as it was in 15th century England. While the infection may lay dormant for periods of time, it does not go away easily, and certainly not through the patriarchal placebo that is Richmond. Such is true in the current

context as well. Extreme manifestations of the misogyny of the Trump years faded from the public memory with the election of Joe Biden and the scurrying of men like Steve Bannon to the dark corners of the Internet. Even with Trump and Bannon temporarily sidelined, the parasite found other hosts in the halls of power, as evidenced by recent statements from politicians in the wake of the Supreme Court’s decision in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health*, which overturned the federal protection to abortion established in *Roe v. Wade*. Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas used the *Dobbs* decision to encourage a rethinking of the previously settled rights to contraception, same-sex marriage, and same-sex sexual activity, calling such precedents “demonstrably erroneous” (Robin). Subsequently, Republican congressional candidates such as Ohio Senator-elect J.D. Vance referred to rape as merely “inconvenient” and decried the sexual revolution for encouraging women to leave abusive marriages rather than sticking it out for the sake of their children (Levin). Others, such as Indiana Attorney General Todd Rakita, called for a criminal investigation into a doctor who provided abortion services to a 10-year-old victim of rape (McCammon). Countless other examples of blithe misogyny exist; meanwhile the online manosphere continues to flourish, led by mainstream-adjacent crusaders like Jordan Peterson and Matt Walsh, as its adherents prepare for a real-world resurgence in 2024.

Bates notes that it is impossible to “simply pull the Guinea worm out of your leg” once it has established residence:

Though only the tip protrudes, the body of the worm might be up to a metre long, and it will not simply slide out with ease. Pulling too hard or too quickly risks breaking the worm, which can be disastrous, causing putrefication. The only way to extract the worm is to wrap it around a small stick, to slowly turn the stick a little each day, pulling the worm out gradually over a period of weeks. The same is true of the manosphere. It won’t work to try to lop off just the visible tip. It isn’t enough to try to yank it out in one go or to focus only on one part of the problem... The only method that will work must be slow and sustained, patient and thorough. (301)

By killing Richard, England managed only to lop off the visible tip of rank misogyny. The same can be said of a society that deposes an egregious sexist at the ballot box or one that arrests and charges incels after they commit a violent crime. The problem is much deeper, a worm that extends into the bloodstream of the body politic and often exists invisible to the naked eye. American society, then, is offered a stark choice. The country can either reject once and for all the ideas of the manosphere or it can continue to live within the gauzy myths it tells itself about equality, nobility, and patriotism. If it chooses the latter, one need only look to the blood-soaked, disastrous reign of Shakespeare's Richard III to see a vision of the country's future.

Of course, it is impossible to divorce *Richard III* from the context in which it was written. At the time of composition, the Tudor dynasty traced its lineage to the historical Richmond and was still attempting to solidify its claim to the throne ("*Richard III* Introduction" 539). It is difficult to know exactly how the historical Richard III aligns with the Shakespearean iteration of the character, though it is accurate to suggest that Shakespeare's creation is much more well-developed than other contemporary interpretations. As far as the real man was concerned, contemporary historians highlighted "Richard's solid administrative skills; [while] Tudor apologists depict[ed] Richard not merely as venal or unscrupulous but as a monster of evil, a creature whose moral viciousness was vividly stamped on his twisted body" ("*Richard III* Introduction" 539). Shakespeare never allows his Richard to fall into the cartoonish depiction of one-dimensional evil that was often the case in other Tudor-friendly renderings of the king that depicted him as "devil incarnate" ("*Richard III* Introduction" 539). In contrast to the sixteenth-century historians who were "far more interested in conveying moral meanings than in impartially recounting facts," Shakespeare takes the historical Richard as a useful character through which to explore the psyche of a power-hungry Machiavel ("*Richard III* Introduction"

540). It is telling that *Richard III* has only been regarded as a history by modern editors; the play was originally published as a tragedy (*Will in the World* 296).

Shakespeare's Richard may be an ahistorical creation, but this in no way diminishes his ability to serve as an artistic warning for our current era. The character is no doubt indebted to other assessments of the historical man, particularly those written by Thomas More, but he also reflects the truth of the playwright's patriarchal era ("*Richard III* Introduction" 539). In this tragedy, Shakespeare breathes life into the antihero creation; he is less interested in creating a piece of propaganda for the Tudor dynasty than he is in explaining why and how a morally deformed man like Richard could come to attain power. He takes a known historical fact (Richard's physical deformity) and turns it into a metaphorical representation of the fictional king's moral deformity; for Greenblatt, "Richard's deformity is less the *cause* of his evil nature than its *sign*" ("*Richard III* Introduction" 541). One can never truly answer the question of whether the fifteenth-century Richard was impotent (as Choate suggests) or a character of "unruly masculinity" (as Moulton argues). However, one can confidently conclude that Shakespeare's sixteenth-century creation is a warning against societal forces that were just as poisonous in his era as they are in our own.

It is, of course, simplistic to say that Western society's attitudes toward women have not changed since the 1600s. Certainly women have attained rights and privileges that would have been unthinkable to Shakespeare. However, it is equally simplistic to suggest that underlying attitudes and ideologies have fundamentally altered as a result of outward signs of progress. It is easy to be reminded of those who declared the dawning of a post-racial era upon the election of Barack Obama in 2008, only to be shell-shocked by the ferocity of the racial backlash in 2016 and subsequent years. The backlash to the decades-long modern feminist movement has been

equally intense. The ideology of incels and members of the manosphere are certainly amplified through the vehicles provided by the Internet, but that does not make this misogyny unique or even a direct result of our current era. The beliefs expressed by incels, PUAs, and other misogynists are directly echoed in the art of the sixteenth century through the character of Richard III. To argue whether the historical Richard actually resembled the Shakespearean one is to miss the point; the play itself is a window into the misogynistic attitudes of the sixteenth century that would be equally at home on the Reddit forums of the twenty-first century.

For as much has outwardly changed over the past four hundred years, so much of the discourse remains the same. Gains that were thought to have been solidified decades ago are once again up for debate. On an international scale, our world is one in which “millions of women are raped, beaten, mutilated, abused [and] murdered because of the simple fact that they are women” (Bates 1). Certainly, progress has been made, but to celebrate these advancements while ignoring the explicit sexism preached online and increasingly being manifested in the highest levels of governmental power is foolish. Similarly, to treat the rise of such hatred as a new development is to miss a vital context that is necessary for crafting a remedy. In *Richard III*, Shakespeare effectively diagnoses the same underlying resentments that exist today and then uses artistic license to demonstrate what a country governed by adherents to this ideology would look like. He also demonstrates the half-measures that are so often taken by societies when confronted with relentless hatred – a process that often results in hiding extremism rather than uprooting it.

*Richard III* raises questions about the ways in which history and literature can point to the roots of current ideologies and cultural movements. Shakespeare’s King Richard is an embodiment of the same chauvinistic impulses that animate right-wing movements in

contemporary Western culture. Despite the gains that have been made by the feminist movement, it is dangerous to assume that such progress is immutable or that the ideas which oppose it have decreased in ferocity. One hopes that future scholarship will explore the ways in which the rapid spread of chauvinist language and behavior contributes to the growth of real-world violence and the rise of autocratic movements as depicted in *Richard III*. There are few more pressing challenges to modern democratic and social norms than the continuing influence of misogyny, and one only need to look back to Shakespeare's prophetic text to understand the ramifications of placing adherents of this ideology into seats of power.

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