"Thou elvish-mark'd, abortive, rooting hog":[1] Unfriendly Verbal Insults in *Richard III*

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When critics approach *Richard III*, they face a seemingly endless array of questions they could raise and discuss. Here are a few:

- When was the play written? When was it first performed? In what settings was it performed? How was it first received?
- What is the best text that textual editors can create, considering that textual editors routinely combine, to varying extents, the first quarto (1597) and the first Folio (1623)? What editorial procedures should they follow? When should they depart from their copy-text, and why? What can we learn from studying the parts that editors omit—learning from both the material they omit itself and the fact that at places, there is disagreement among textual editors?[2]
- What is the relationship between Shakespeare's play and its sources? In other words, at what points, and in what amounts, did Shakespeare rely on Sir Thomas More's *History of Richard III*? What material, if any, comes from Holinshed's *Chronicles* or some other source? What can we learn by studying the way Shakespeare chooses certain sources—and certain passages within those sources—as opposed to other sources and passages? What do Shakespeare's decisions tell us?
- What is the relationship between the play and its contemporary milieu? To what extent, if any, does it uphold the Tudor Myth (i.e., the idea that the Tudor dynasty was not only legitimately founded, but also gloriously founded and perpetuated)? To what extent, if any, does it subvert the Tudor Myth? Or, as New Historicists would ask, in what ways does the play unleash subversive ideas only to contain them? In what ways, if any, does it comment upon specific issues, circumstances, or persons at that particular historical moment? In other words, in what ways is it topical?
- What is the play's stage history (from beginnings to present)? Which famous actors played Richard? In what ways, if any, has the play been altered as it passed from one era to the next? What parts were cut or changed at various times, and why? Why is *Richard III* one of the most frequently revived plays this

century? What is it about the play (generally) that makes it resonate with audiences even today?

- More specifically, what is it about Richard personally that fascinates and mesmerizes audiences? In what ways is he charismatic? How does Shakespeare design the play in such a way that we are coaxed into sympathizing with Richard, even though we know he does evil?
- To what extent, if any, does *Richard III* satisfactorily conclude not only the *Henry VI* tetralogy, but also the tetralogy which began with the deposition and death of King Richard II? In other words, have the English (by 1485) endured enough suffering and penance to satisfy divine justice? Is Richard a divine scourge appointed by Providence to punish England? If so, how?

These are all compelling questions, ones that would lead any Shakespearean to months, if not years, of fruitful scholarship. Such Shakespeareans tread the high road of scholarship. I wish them well.

I, on the other hand, am going to drop all pretenses, venture down the low road, and go slumming through the bars, back rooms, and back alleys—the underside of the neighborhood that is *Richard III*. I intend to discuss insults in *Richard III*. This is how I will proceed: first, I will distinguish between unfriendly verbal insults—my paper's specific kind of insult—and many other kinds of insults; second, having focused us upon unfriendly verbal insults, I will discuss them in general, then concentrate upon five major kinds/categories; third, I will identify the five characters who hurl the most insults, as well as point out the way unfriendly verbal insults are distributed across the play's five acts; fourth, I will compare the number of times certain insulting words appear in *Richard III* with the number of times those same insulting words appear elsewhere in Shakespeare's *corpus*; and fifth, I will study in detail one of the play's most intriguing insults, "Thou elvish-mark'd, abortive, rooting hog" (1.3.227), one of many insults with which former Queen Margaret blisters Richard.

In order to talk about unfriendly verbal insults, I will need to take a few moments to define terms. First, I must distinguish between non-verbal and verbal insults. As Desmond Morris points out, there are at least twelve ways you can deliver a non-verbal insult.[3] These primarily consist of making certain gestures with your body, such as giving someone the finger, rolling your eyes, looking down your nose at someone, spitting, etc.[4]

My favorite is pretending to roll up my pants' legs during a conversation to signify that my interlocutor is uttering such far-

fetched or self-congratulating bilge that I must roll up my pants' legs to wade through his b.s.[5]

In contrast to non-verbal insults, verbal insults are, according to the Mike Price dictionary of the incredibly obvious, affronts delivered by means of language. Here I must make another distinction. Verbal insults can be friendly or unfriendly. Friendly verbal insults may consist of teasing or raillery—the witty banter one finds, for example, among Prince Hal, Bardolph, and Falstaff in *I Henry IV*. Teasing Bardolf for his red nose or tweaking Falstaff for his girth are meant to reinforce friendships, to initiate moments of levity, to stoke the embers that make for warm fellowship among friends.

On the other hand, unfriendly verbal insults are manifestations of verbal aggression, instances when you might, for example, yell "You imbecile!" at someone. An important branch of the unfriendly verbal insult is one I call "the unfriendly but funny as heck" verbal insult. *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* abounds with this kind of insult. I will limit myself to one example: Towards the end of the movie, King Arthur and Sir Bedivere arrive at the Castle Aggh, which they believe houses the Holy Grail and thus brings their quest to an end. When Arthur and Bedivere approach the castle, a Frenchman appears on the battlements and rains insults upon the two knights below. Here are the Frenchman's unfriendly but funny as heck verbal insults heaped upon Arthur and Bedivere from the top of the Castle Aggh:

> *Arthur.* The Castle Aggh. Our quest is at an end! God be praised!
>
> *Frenchman.* 'Allo, daffy English kniggets and Monsieur Arthur-King, who has the brain of a duck, you know! So, we French fellows out-wit you a second time!
>
> *Arthur.* How dare you profane this place with your presence!? I command you, in the name of the Knights of Camelot, to open the doors of this sacred castle, to which God himself has guided us!
>
> *Frenchman.* How you English say, "I" one more time—I unclog my nose in your direction, sons of a window-dresser! So, you think you could out-clever us French folk with your silly knees-bent running about in dancing behavior! I wave my private parts at your aunties, you cheesy lot of second hand electric donkey bottom biters.
>
> *Arthur.* In the name of the Lord, we demand entrance to this sacred castle!

Frenchman. No chance, English bedwetting types! I burst my pimples at you and call your door opening request a silly thing. You tiny-brained wipers of other peoples' bottoms!

Arthur. If you do not open this door, we shall take this castle by force! (splat! [the castle guards dump dung upon Arthur and Bedivere]) In the name of God and the glory of our—(splat!) Right! That settles it!

Frenchman. Yes, depart a lot at this time and cut the approaching any more or we fire arrows at the tops of your heads and make castanets out of your testicles already! Ha ha!

Arthur. Walk away. Just ignore them.

Frenchman. And now remain gone, illegitimate faced buggerfolk! And, if you think you got a nasty taunting this time, you ain't heard nothing yet! Daffy English kniggets! Thpppt![6]

Having distinguished three forms of verbal aggression, we need to make one other distinction: the difference between unfriendly verbal insults and curses. The word "curse" can mean many things. In Tennessee, where I come from, the word "curse" is used interchangeably with "cuss." To cuss someone out, you verbally attack someone, just as you would with an unfriendly verbal insult, but in this case, you use profanity. In this sense, "cuss words" are synonymous with "curse words." Similarly, to curse someone is the equivalent of cussing him out.

To curse, on the other hand, is to call upon divine or supernatural power to torment or punish someone. It is related to the term "imprecate," which is to invoke evil upon someone.[7] An example of this kind of curse appears in II Kings 2:23-24, when the prophet Elisha is walking to Bethel: "… while he was on the way, some small boys came out of the city and jeered at him, saying, "Go away, baldhead! Go away, baldhead!" When Elisha turned around and saw them, he cursed them in the name of the Lord. Then two she bears came out of the woods and mauled forty-two of the boys." I have tried this on my more obstreperous students, but so far it hasn't worked.

Curses do work, however, in *Richard III*. Queen Margaret, the wife of the now-deceased King Henry VI, formulates some of the most spectacular curses one will ever encounter in literature. Over and over, she calls down evil upon the now-victorious Yorks, begging the heavens that the Yorks be made to suffer at least as much as she has, if not double or triple that suffering. For example, after Richard dismisses her as a "hateful wither'd hag" (1.3. 214),

Margaret responds by begging heaven to inflict this curse upon him:

> Stay, dog, for thou shalt hear me.
> If heaven have any grievous plague in store
> Exceeding those that I can wish upon thee,
> O, let them keep it till thy sins be ripe,
> And then hurl down their indignation
> On thee, the troubler of the poor world's peace!
> The worm of conscience still begnaw thy soul!
> Thy friends suspect for the traitors while thou liv'st,
> And take deep traitors for thy dearest friends!
> No sleep close up that deadly eye of thine,
> Unless it be while some tormenting dream
> Affrights thee with a hell of ugly devils!
> Thou elvish-mark'd, abortive, rooting hog. (1.3.215-227)

Strictly speaking, this passage is a curse, and as such, it falls outside the scope of this paper. Nevertheless, what is important for us are the specific unfriendly verbal insults embedded within the curse. I find seven of them, four of which I will discuss later. For now, let us note that Richard is a "dog" and a "troubler of the poor world's peace." He also has a "deadly eye." As this passage indicates, unfriendly verbal insults can not only be nouns, such as "dog" or "hog"; they can also be inferred from adjectives, such as "*deadly*." "*Deadly*" not only implies Richard's penchant for looking around to see whom he can murder; it also correlates with his later being called a "cockatrice" (4.1.54), a creature reputedly able to kill a person with a single glance.

Before we go any farther, let's pause to take stock of where we've been. We have made four important distinctions. We have distinguished between verbal and non-verbal insults, between friendly and unfriendly verbal insults, between unfriendly verbal insults and curses, and between curses and the unfriendly verbal insults embedded within them. We are now ready to start examining the play's unfriendly verbal insults. Let us begin most broadly, considering the play as a whole.

After reading and rereading the play, I have identified roughly 339 individual words which may be either part of a larger insult or, considered singly, an insult in and of itself. After cataloguing all 339 words, I found that these insults fall into approximately 14 categories. Some of the less important categories simply reflect how many times an insulting word occurs. For example, "blood" or "bloody" occurs 18 times (e.g., "O bloody Richard!" [3.4.103]); "foul" appears 10 times (e.g., "That foul defacer of God's

handiwork" [4.4.51]); "villain" or its variants occurs 12 times (e.g., "every tale condemns me for a villain" [5.3.195]); "wretched" or its variants appears 6 times (e.g., "The wretched, bloody, and usurping boar" [5.2.7]); "dissembler" or its variants pop up 7 times (e.g., Anne to Richard: "Arise, dissembler" [1.2.184]; "traitor" is present 10 times (e.g., Richmond asks his army, "What traitor hears me, and says not amen?" [5.5.22]). Let us turn, now, to the five most significant categories.

First, there are 22 references to four-legged, often vicious mammals, and of these, there are 11 different species. Almost all of them refer to Richard. These are not simply factual references to the boar, his emblem. "Dog" is tops, appearing 8 times (e.g., the men who murder the boy princes are called "bloody dogs" [4.3.6]); others include the "hedgehog," the "hog," the "tiger," the "wolf," the "hellhound," the "boar," the "foul swine," and the "charnel cur." In addition, there are 10 references to other kinds of animals. The "toad," the most prevalent, appears four times, emerging in such expressions as "this poisonous bunch-back'd toad" (1.3.245) or Anne's assertion that "Never hung poison on a fouler toad"(1.2.147).[8] Characters also mention the "spider" (2 times)," the "cockatrice," the "owl," and the "slug."

Second, there are 20 references to evil or hell. Again, almost all of them refer to Richard. The devil is mentioned 8 times (e.g., Richard is called a "devilish slave" [1.2.90]); after that, we have references to such things as an "evil spirit," "his hell-govern'd arm" (1.2.67), "thou dreadful minister of hell (1.2.46)" "the fiend," the "son of hell" (1.3.229), and "hell's black intelligencer" (4.4.71). Furthermore, characters claim that "sin, death, and hell have set their marks upon [Richard]" and that "their ministers (i.e., sin, death, and hell) attend him" (1.3.292-293).

Third, in 11 different instances, a character attributes stupidity to another character, such as when Richard gloats, "simple, plain Clarence" (1.1.118). Elsewhere he refers to Buckingham as a "pretty rebel" who is also "dull-brain'd" (4.4.332). Other insults based upon stupidity include references to "many simple gulls" (1.3.127), "iron-witted fools / And unrespective boys" (4.2.28-29), "Dull, unmindful villain" (4.4.445), and "Relenting fool, and shallow, changing woman!" (4.4.431). Things made of stone (or stones themselves) surface five times (usually to indicate stupidity). For example, when Buckingham and Richard orchestrate the public scene where the masses are to call for Richard to be king, the masses at first do not respond as they ought. Buckingham reports that instead of cheering, they merely stood there "like dumb statues

or breathing stones." Richard retorts, "What tongueless blocks were they? Would they not speak?"(3.7.25, 42).

More subtly, one may attribute stupidity to oneself in order to appear a simpleton rather than a villain. Richard, of course, has mastered this form of dissimulation. While plotting others' deaths, he complains that the world has become so corrupt that he, "a plain man," "cannot … live and think" (1.3.51). Elsewhere, he claims he is "too childish-foolish for this world" (1.3.141). His boldest dissimulation occurs, obviously, when he claims he is "unfit for state or majesty" (3.7.205). Why is he unfit? Because "so much is … [his] poverty of spirit [and] / So mighty and so many [are his]… defects" (3.7.159-160).

Fourth, in 25 instances, a character is insulted on the basis of social class and breeding (or the lack of them). "Slave" is the most prevalent of these, occurring four times; after that, the class-based insults mostly appear in Richard's speech to his troops in Act 5, where he belittles his opponents as "vagabonds, rascals, and runaways" (5.3.316) "famished beggars" (5.3.229) or "base lackey peasants" (5.3.317). In fact, Richard boasts that Richmond is a "paltry fellow" and a "milksop" (5.3.323, 325). On the other hand, one may be surprised to learn that in Act 5 alone, Richmond, the founder of the Tudor dynasty and grandfather of the reigning Queen Elizabeth I, utters 25 insulting terms—many more than Richard mutters in Act 5.

Fifth, 13 other insults fall into a catch-all category I ingeniously call "Others." These mostly consist of insulting phrases which apply to a range of characters. These include such phrases as that "tardy sluggard" (5.3.225), "that peevish brat" (1.3.194), "This little prating York" (3.1.151), "the haughty prelate" (4.4.500), "Thou rag of honor" (1.3.232), "Thou slander of thy heavy mother's womb" (1.3.230), "Thou loathed issue of thy father's loins" (1.3.231), "Thou lump of foul deformity" (1.2.57), "diffus'd infection of a man" (1.2.78), "knot … of damned blood-suckers" (3.3.6).

Let's now rank the characters in terms of who insults others the most. Not surprisingly, Richard delivers the most, followed in descending order by Queen Margaret, Lady Anne, Queen Elizabeth, and Richmond. Let's also look at the way these insults are distributed: I found only three in Act 2; 38 in Act 3; and 49 in Act 5 (where approximately 50% of them are spoken by Richmond). The majority of insults are concentrated in Act 1, which has 129, and Act 4, which features 120. The insults in Act 1 appear primarily in two incidents: in scene 2, when Anne execrates Richard as he

woos her, and scene 3, when former Queen Margaret denounces the Yorks. More specifically, when Richard intercepts Anne and woos her, she insults him 21 times in the space of 191 lines (1.2.33-224). Similarly, when Queen Margaret eavesdrops upon and then enters a conversation involving Richard, Queen Elizabeth, Rivers, and others, she hurls approximately 37 insults over the course of 193 lines (1.3.110-303).

Queen Margaret is also responsible for many of the insults which appear in Act 4. As in Act 1, she first eavesdrops upon a conversation, then reveals herself and enters it. This time, she converses with the Duchess of York, Richard's mother, and Queen Elizabeth. Once she joins this conversation, she manages to pack 37 insults into 90 lines (4.4.35-125). The following passage showcases her ability to conceive withering invective. Here she reminds the Duchess of York that it was

> From forth the kennel of *thy womb* ... [that] crept
> A hell-hound that doth hunt us all to death.
> That dog, that had his teeth before his eyes
> To worry lambs and lap their gentle blood,
> That foul defacer of God's handiwork,
> That excellent grand tyrant of the earth
> That reigns in galled eyes of weeping souls, [it was]
> *Thy womb* [that] let loose [this "charnel cur"] to chase us to our graves. (4.4.47-54, 56, my emphasis)

Let's look at this passage in detail. No fewer than twice in eight lines does Margaret specify that Richard issued from the Duchesses' "womb," which Margaret likens to a "kennel." "Kennel" prepares us for the three different dogs Richard resembles: a "hellhound," a predatory, bloodthirsty, sheep-killing "dog," and a "charnel cur." Indeed, this image—the Duchess' womb as a "kennel" from which a "hellhound" springs—reminds me of the monster Scylla, from mythology, and the personification of Sin in *Paradise Lost* Book II.[9] Like the Duchess, both are females whose wombs issue biting dogs. But there is more. Margaret compares Richard to a second creature, a "tyrant," whom she characterizes as "That excellent grand tyrant of the earth / That reigns in galled eyes of weeping souls." Whether taken together or taken separately, the references to dogs or tyrants accentuate Shakespeare's point: Richard is cruel and evil.

All this transpires while Margaret is present. But moments after Margaret departs, the Duchess of York and Queen Elizabeth, still smarting from Queen Margaret's tongue-lashing, decide to heap their wrath upon Richard, who has ceased his march to pause and

converse with them. Between lines 136-430 of scene 4, the two women review with Richard the trajectory of his life, beginning with his abnormal birth, proceeding through his childhood, his schooldays, and his young adulthood, then concluding with current behavior as King. Over the course of these 294 lines, the Duchess and Queen Elizabeth lambaste Richard with some 76 insulting terms. Richard's mother, the Duchess of York, provides a representative sample:

> Thou know'st it well,
> Thou cam'st on earth to make the earth my hell.
> A grievous burden was thy birth to me,
> Tetchy and wayward was thy infancy;
> Thy schooldays frightful, desp'rate, wild, and furious;
> Thy prime of manhood daring, bold, and venturous;
> Thy age confirm'd, proud, subtle, sly, and bloody,
> More mild, but yet more harmful, kind in hatred. (4.4.166-173)

One notes that as Richard ages, his violence changes from violence that others can perceive to violence that others cannot perceive. He has, as the Duchess puts it, learned to dissemble his hatred under the guise of mild, kind behavior, much as King Claudius can "smile, smile, and be a villain" (*Hamlet*, 1.5.109).

For a broader perspective, let's now contextualize the play's unfriendly verbal insults. Marvin Spevack's *Harvard Concordance to Shakespeare* reveals how many times key words appear in *Richard III* as well as how many times those same key words from *Richard III* appear in Shakespeare's other works.[10] Here are some of my findings:

- *Richard III* refers to a spider or spiders (as in "bottled spider") three times, more than any other play (*The Winter's Tale* comes in second place with two references).
- *Richard III* cites "toad" 5 times. *Romeo and Juliet* is the runner up with three references.
- Richard's "hell-governed" arm appears only once, and that in *Richard III*.
- Similarly, "hell" is cited 13 times in *Richard III*, more than in any of Shakespeare's other plays. (*Othello* references "hell" twelve times, and *Hamlet* mentions it ten times.)
- "The devil" is mentioned eleven times in *Richard III*, coming in a distant sixth place behind, in descending order, *1 Henry IV* (22 times), *Othello* (20 times), *The Merchant of Venice* (14 times), *Twelfth Night* (13 times), and *The Merry Wives of Windsor* (12 times).
- "blood" appears 38 times in *Richard III*, tying it with *Richard II* for second place. *Richard II* and *Richard III* are surpassed only by *King John*, of all plays, which mentions blood 46 times.

- *Richard III* includes the word "foul" 13 times, tied with *King Lear* for second place. Only *Othello* uses the term more (18 times). *Richard II* and *The Tempest* tie for third with 12 references.

Having studied single words, I would like for us now to return to my favorite insult: "Thou elvish-marked, abortive, rooting hog." After consulting Spevack's *Shakespeare Concordance*, I was amazed by what I found out about the individual words that comprise this phrase:

- "elvish-mark'd" appears only in *Richard III.*
- "abortive" is mentioned only four times in Shakespeare's entire corpus. *Richard III* uses "abortive" twice, surpassing *Love's Labor Lost* and *2Henry VI*, which cite it once.
- "rooting" appears only in *Richard III.*
- "hog," surprisingly, surfaces only four times in all of Shakespeare. *Midsummer Night's Dream* cites it twice, while *Richard III* and *King Lear* mention it once.

Now let's process this data. In other words, in order to craft this phrase, Shakespeare used two words ("elvish-mark'd" and "rooting") which appear nowhere else in his entire corpus. Furthermore, "abortive" is mentioned only four times in all of Shakespeare, and *Richard III* features it the most (twice). Similarly, "hog" occurs only four times in all of Shakespeare. It is found twice in *Midsummer Night's Dream*, and once in *Richard III* and once in *King Lear*. Thus, out of a four-word phrase (excluding "thou"), we have two words Shakespeare never used elsewhere and two other words that are mentioned only four times in his entire *corpus.* These are rare words indeed. But what do they signify?

We can better appreciate these words' significance if we consider the general context of Richard's life and what he does during it. David Bevington speaks for many when he asserts that Richard's birth is part of an overarching divine plan—that which we call Providence. He explains:

> Providential destiny, having determined the need for a genius of evil at this point in English history, decrees that Richard shall be born. The teeth and hunched back merely give evidence of what is already predetermined.... Though he devotes himself to selfish ambition and evil-doing, Richard ultimately serves the righteous purpose of divine Providence in human affairs. He functions as a scourge of God, whose plots or tyranny are permitted in order to bring retribution upon offenders of moral law.[11]

Indeed, the argument for Providence becomes more compelling when we consider the implications of individual words in the insult.

Let's begin with "elvish-mark'd." "Elvish-mark'd" is almost universally interpreted as something evil that happened to Richard at his birth. But what exactly happened is not universally agreed upon.[12] Bevington, in an uncharacteristic failure of imagination, glosses "elvish-mark'd" as "marked by elves at birth" (n.1.3.228). Anthony Hammond, editor of The Arden Shakespeare's edition of *Richard III*, takes it a step farther, interpreting it to mean that Richard was "marked by the elves as one of their kind, i.e., spiteful, peevish" (n.1.3.222). John Jowett, editor of the *Oxford World Classics* edition of *Richard III,* takes this line of reasoning still further, suggesting that "elvish-mark'd" "refers to a belief that physical defects were left by malignant elves to mark an infant out for wicked deeds" (n.1.3.225). Two other critics, however, attribute the marking to fairies, not elves. Peter Holland, editor of the Pelican Shakespeare, interprets "elvish-mark'd" to mean that Richard was "marked at birth by evil fairies" (n.1.3.228). Stephen Greenblatt, editor of *The Norton Shakespeare*, claims that this "mark[ing]" means Richard was "deformed by evil fairies" (n.1.3.225). Whether the markings were imprinted by elves or fairies, they predispose him towards wickedness and thus contribute to the predetermined plan for Richard's life.

Let's turn now to the second term, "abortive." Greenblatt glosses "abortive" as "misshapen" (n.1.3.225). Anthony Hammond enlarges this interpretation, proposing that "abortive" is "the imperfect offspring of an untimely birth, or any dwarfed or misshapen product of generation" (n.1.3.228). Greenblatt appears to concur when he suggests that Richard is "a creature whose moral viciousness was vividly stamped on his twisted body" (507). Jowett, however, disagrees: "Richard's physical deformity ... [is] a *supposed* measure of his evil inner being" (Jowett 18, my emphasis). Furthermore, "Richard is unlikely to have been as misshapen as More [and therefore Shakespeare] describes him" (Jowett 18). Nevertheless, the majority of interpretations correlate with the accounts of Richard's birth and life found elsewhere in Shakespeare.[13] "Rooting" and "hog," the third and fourth terms in this string of insulting terms, evoke a comprehensively uncomplimentary picture of Richard, especially when we remember that Richard's emblem is a boar, a kind of hog.[14] The words "rooting hog" conjure up the image of a hog inserting its snout into the ground, snorting and dislodging dirt, and chomping upon the food it finds. When the hog lifts its head and shows its face, we see saliva dripping from its mouth, making its dirty face a muddy face. Just picture it: there it stands, a muddy-faced hog—oinking,

chewing, and drooling. Perhaps Shakespeare is also punning on "rooting," implying that Richard, the boar, is searching for and destroying the genealogical roots which constitute his kinsmen's claim to the throne.[15] One of Shakespeare's possible sources for *Richard III*, the anonymous *The Rose of Englande*, portrays Richard this same way:

> Then came a beast men call a bore,
> And he rooted this garden upp and downe,
> By the seede of the rose he sett noe store,
> But afterwards itt wore the crowne.
> Hee took the branches of this rose away,
> And all in sunder did them teare;
> And he buryed them under a clodd of clay,
> Swore they sholde never bloome nor beare.[16]

Now to conclude. I could have chosen a more socially acceptable topic for this paper; instead, I chose to drag you down the low road, where discarded insults, like illegitimate children, clamor for the attention we're too embarrassed to give them. Few will openly acknowledge them, but I bet that some of you secretly delighted in this free-for-all of put-downs. I know I did.

As I wrote this paper, certain findings surprised me. I learned that there was as much verbal violence as bloody violence, and, as another surprise to me, that much of the verbal violence originated from female characters. This finding left me disappointed with my male counterparts. Couldn't they have acquitted themselves better? I was disappointed, too, by the dearth of scatological humor. Male characters had ample opportunities to heap scatological insults upon their foes, but failed to do so. For example, when rallying his troops for the battle at Bosworth Field, Richard lets those wimpy Frenchmen off the hook too easily. He could have unleashed a volley of scatological insults so filthy that it would have left them wishing it were 1766 so that they could clean themselves off with their newly-invented bidets. Instead, he resorted to less-amusing, anemic insults that pertained to social class. And speaking of lost opportunities, Richard should have let Queen Margaret have it. She was way overdue. He should have been the one to silence this whiney hanger-on with a good volley of scatological insults. Who was he to stand upon ceremony?

Lost opportunities aside, Richard nonetheless distinguishes himself as the most prolific hurler of insults—male or female. Although his insults could have been more vicious and creative, nevertheless, they have a certain *je ne sais quoi* to them. Perhaps Peter Holland puts it best when he observes, "The *Henry VI* plays

are full of insults traded between rival factions, but Richard … brought to this repeated ritual a particular brand of acerbic wit." [17]

Notes

1. Unless I specify otherwise, I will be citing David Bevington's *The Complete Works of Shakespeare.* 3rd edition. (Glenview, Illinois: Scott, Foresman, 1980). Henceforth, references to Shakespeare will be cited parenthetically in the text.

2. Stanley Fish would argue that such points of disagreement are textual cruces. In other words, if we approach the play from a reader-response perspective, what can we learn about ourselves as readers by studying the ways we and others have grappled with certain textual cruces? See, for example, Stanley Fish, *Self-Consuming Artifacts: The Experience of Seventeenth-Century Literature* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972).

3. Richard insults Buckingham by means of some of the non-verbal insults which Morris catalogues. (Desmond Morris, *Manwatching: A Field Guide to Human Behavior* [New York: Henry Abrams, Inc., 1977] 186-187). In Act 4, scene 2, Richard asks Buckingham to kill the two boy princes (line 18). When Buckingham wavers (lines 24-26) King Richard refuses to give Buckingham the Earldom of Hereford (which he had earlier promised to do). Buckingham protests and presses his claim. In response, Richard insults him by ignoring him, by appearing bored with him, and by expressing impatience with him (lines 88-122).

4. Morris, 186-193.

5. Dante makes the same point in *Hell* canto 18, where he plunges flatterers in dung, returning upon them all the proverbial dung they inflicted upon others during their earthly lives (Dante, *The Divine Comedy: Hell*, ed. and trans. Dorothy L. Sayers [Harmondsworth: Penguin Classics, 1949] 18: 100-136.)

6. Monty Python, *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* (1974) scene 24. http://www.montypython.net/grailmm3.php#Scene%2024. "Knigget" appears twice in this passage. I believe that it is an early French form of the word "knight" (i.e., "knyghit" [*OED* "knight," 4a]). Thus it would be appropriate for the film's ostensible time frame.

7. Such a curse also occurs in *The Odyssey*. After Odysseus taunts the Cyclops Polyphemos, Polyphemos calls down curses upon Odysseus. He beseeches his father, Poseidon, that if "destiny/ intend that he [Odysseus] shall see his roof again/ among his family in his father land, / far be that day, and dark the years between./ Let him lose all companions and return/ under strange sail to bitter days at home" (*The Odyssey*, ed. Robert Fitzgerald [New York: Anchor, 1963] 9.580-585).

8. Once we understand that the toad is repeatedly associated with evil and lies, we can better appreciate a passage in *Paradise Lost* Book IV. While Eve is sleeping, Satan is at her ear, pouring poisonous thoughts into her psyche. Milton writes, "him (e.g., Satan) there they (e.g., the angelic guard) found/ Squat like a toad, close at the ear of Eve;/ Assaying by his devilish art to reach/ The organs of her fancy, and with them forge/ Illusions as he list … ." John Milton, *Paradise Lost.* (London 1672). Repr. as A Norton Critical Edition, 2nd ed., ed. Scott Elledge (New York: W.W. Norton, 1993), 4.799-803.

9. *The Odyssey* (12.189-237) and *Paradise Lost* (2.643-666).

10. Marvin Spevack, *The Harvard Concordance to Shakespeare* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1973). All references to Spevack's *Concordance* will henceforth appear in the text.

11. David Bevington, ed., *The Complete Works of Shakespeare,* updated fourth ed. (New York: Longman, 1997), 629.

12. David Bevington, ed., *Richard III*, 3rd ed.; Anthony Hammond, ed., *King Richard III,* The Arden Shakespeare (London: Thomson Learning, 2000); John Jowett, ed., *Richard III*, The Oxford Shakespeare, Oxford World's Classics (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000); Peter Holland, ed., *Richard III,* The Pelican Shakespeare (New York: Penguin Books, 2000); Stephen Greenblatt et al., eds., *The Tragedy of Richard III, The Norton Shakespeare* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1997). Henceforth, references to these books will be incorporated within the text.

13. For example, we have already seen that the Duchess of York, Richard's very own mother, portrays Richard's life as an ever-increasing degeneration into evil (4.4.168-173). Richard, too, recounts the rumors he has heard about his birth (*3 Henry VI* 5.6.68-83). Similarly, in *3 Henry VI*, King Henry (of Lancaster) informs Richard of the portents that occurred at the time of Richard's birth: (5.6.44-54). The soliloquy which opens *Richard III* climaxes this theme (1.1.14-31).

14. Ian McKellan's film version of *Richard III* features a scene in which the murderer Tyrell is tossing scraps of food to a hog.

15. Eric Partridge, in *Shakespeare's Bawdy*, points out (no pun intended) that "root" has sexual implications. It means either "penis or *penis erectus* or, as in modern slang, an erection or copulation" (London: Routledge, 1968) 176.

16. *The Rose of Englande*, in *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare*, Volume III: Earlier English History Plays: *Henry VI, Richard III, Richard II*, ed. Geoffrey Bullough (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1960), 346 (lines 13-20).

17. Holland, xxxi.