

THE NATURE OF CURSING: EFFICACY, FEMININITY AND REVENGE IN
SHAKESPEARE'S CURSES

by

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Amanda Rose Echeverria Bitz

May, 2013

DEDICATION

To Henry, who wiped my tears, picked me up, and never doubted.

He is the half part of a blessed man,
Left to be finished by such as she;
And she a fair divided excellence,
Whose fullness of perfection lies in him.
King John

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I can no other answer make but thanks,

And thanks; and ever oft good turns

Are shuffled off with such uncurrent pay.

Twelfth Night

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ABSTRACT

Curses are present in many of Shakespeare's texts, specifically his first tetralogy and tragic plays. In an effort to elucidate the various effects they have on the plays in which they occur, I apply J.L. Austin's speech act theory to curses, in conjunction with fostering a cultural understanding of the beliefs surrounding curses in the early modern period. The role of curses differs based on the genre of the play in which they are uttered, so this thesis is divided into a chapter on the histories, namely Shakespeare's first tetralogy, and a chapter containing analysis of three tragedies: *Titus Andronicus*, *King Lear*, and *Timon of Athens*. The efficacy of curses varies with their position against Austin's performative and constative speech acts, and they frequently embody characteristics of both. Curses in Shakespearean plays are nearly always feminized and function as a tool for vengeance by marginalized characters, which serve to represent and reinforce the beliefs of the time surrounding curses.

CURSES AS SPEECH ACTS: APPLYING J.L. AUSTIN'S SPEECH ACT THEORY
TO SHAKESPEAREAN CURSES

You taught me language, and my profit on't

Is I know how to curse. *The Tempest*, 1.2.362-3

Whenever I tell someone I am writing a thesis on Shakespeare's curses, I inevitably get the same response. It consists of a pause, metaphorical wheels turning, and the question, "Do you mean swear words or hexes?" I explain to the questioner that I mean curse as in hexes and maledictions, but this question necessitates a distinction between swear words and cursing. Today, swearing and cursing are distinct from one another. Cursing today carries a similar meaning as in the early modern period, but swear words in the 21st century are used quite differently than they were four hundred years ago and carry far less weight. Throughout Shakespeare's plays, swearing consists of short outbursts, such as "Damn her!" (*Othello* 3.3.476), or "A pox o' your throat, you bawling, blasphemous, incharitable dog!" (*The Tempest* 1.1.40), which are strikingly similar to the longer, more potent curses I examine in this paper. Shakespearean curses and swear words are constructed from the same desire for a bad event to fall upon the person that is being sworn at or cursed. Rather than using swearing as an exclamation, as modern speakers do, swearing in the early modern period expresses an earnest desire for misfortune to fall on someone. The biggest difference between these two styles of curses in Shakespeare's plays is the potency behind the long, hex-like curses. Short swearing curses occur frequently and place emphasis on speech as our modern swear words do, but do not have the same efficacy exhibited by the longer hexes. Because of the potency

demonstrated by the hex style curses, I direct my attention to those in order to explore the influence they exert on the plays through their politicized status, feminization, and utilization as a tool for vengeance.

Cursing is a tradition that dates back to ancient times. Lindsay Watson explains frequent mentions of curses in Homer, in addition to their presence in the legends of Attic tragedy (12). The curses of Greek antiquity were potent and frequently involved interaction with the gods. Watson explains that “curses, both public and private, were, according to the conventional wisdom, inevitably fulfilled” (22). This belief in the overwhelming efficacy of curses grants significant power to the curser. Thus a curse might wreak havoc through generations of a family, as was the case in the house of Atreus. The ancient belief in the efficacy of cursing made it an effective tool to attain justice, exact revenge, or humiliate an enemy. Curses were frequently uttered out of a desire for revenge and “usually name specific misfortunes envisaged for the enemy, although sometimes vaguer formulations such as [...] ‘let him be accursed’ [...] are considered sufficient” (Watson 2). The motive to use a curse to harm an enemy is explained by the strong belief in the power of a curse. Watson explains that the Greeks believed the gods were responsible for executing just curses (48) and so they would frequently call upon the gods to fulfill their curses, delivering divine justice.

Even though belief in the Greek gods had vanished by the early modern period, the belief in the efficacy of a curse had not. The superstitions of the time, such as the evil eye, witchcraft, and the potency of prophecy, are reflected in the way cursing was feared to be as powerful as inflicting physical harm. Mary Steible describes how “curses or

words petitioning harm against others became meaningful in their feared ability to destroy or foresee the destruction of the monarch's body natural, not just in their sinfulness" (3). Not only were curses viewed as sinful, they were believed to hold the power to enact physical destruction. In 1580 the "Act against seditious words and rumours uttered against the Queen's most excellent Majesty" made curses spoken against a monarch an act of treason. By the time of the staging of *Richard III* in 1592, "cursing became secularly controversial with the advent of statutes or acts against witchcraft" (Steible 3). The criminalized status of curses would make enacting them on stage quite powerful and noteworthy to an early modern audience.

Because curses were believed to be so powerful, they were an effective tool in seeking revenge and were usually used when the curser had no other recourse against the person harming him. While the motivation behind curses varies from a desire to see an enemy humiliated, to the regaining of one's self-respect, to an assertion of moral superiority, "the most constant motive for pronouncing a curse was the attaining of [...] 'justice'" (Watson 38). In order to do this, cursing frequently calls upon the aid of God or gods, or some sort of supernatural force. But what about in plays such as *King Lear* or *Titus Andronicus*, where gods are either absent, uncaring, or uninvolved in the lives of the characters? Watson explains that in ancient Greece there "existed a widespread conviction that the words of a curse were invested with a magical potency which could in itself effect the annihilation of their target" (Watson 4-5). The continuance of this ancient belief in the efficacy of curses manifests in the statutes enacted against cursing and

illustrates the early modern fear that the language itself contained enough power to set a desired course of events into action.

Since this belief in the power of language is so prevalent, it becomes crucial to look at who is wielding this power. Although cursing was believed to be quite powerful, it was not done by those with great power. In the plays I examine, curses follow the trend that the more socially marginalized the character is, the more potent the curses are. Curses in Shakespearean plays are almost always feminized. They are either given by women, on women, or using the medium of women. This feminization of curses creates a clear tie to the fear of witches and witchcraft during the early modern period. Stephen Greenblatt explores the depiction of witches in *Macbeth* and *Henry VI Part 1* and explains that “one of the central paradoxes of the discourse of witchcraft, widely recognized in the period, is that the women identified as wielding immense metaphysical power were for the most part socially marginalized” (“Shakespeare Bewitched” 115). The curses examined in this paper reflect this social marginalization, which is shown through a loss of power by the character cursing. This loss is counteracted by a curse, resulting in a form of power brought back to the character. However, this power can be gained only through immense personal suffering. The most powerful curses occur when the person cursing has no other recourse. At that moment of utter loss and despair, language gains a power unmatched by any political or physical force in the plays. Although it may be too late to prevent the harm or death imminent for the character who is cursing, cursing provides her with the power to exact revenge upon her enemy. Lindsay Watson explains that “one of the most universally feared curses drew its power, however, not from the

authority of the person pronouncing it, but from the circumstances in which it was uttered. This was the curse of the dying” (27). Since circumstances were believed to have a great effect on the potency of a curse, it becomes clear why cursing a monarch would be viewed as an act of treason. Cursing is the great equalizer. A Duke may have the power to burn a French peasant at the stake, but the curse of that peasant can play a role in the destruction of that Duke’s life and family.

Curses are liberally sprinkled throughout the Shakespearean corpus, yet they vary significantly in everything from length and efficacy to whether or not they come true, who is cursing, who is being cursed, and the effect they have upon the play. Perhaps the most significant difference lies in a distinction of genre. Shakespeare’s first tetralogy, consisting of *Henry VI* parts 1-3 and *Richard III*, is scattered with curses, culminating in Margaret’s lengthy curse in *Richard III* 1.3. These history plays have the benefit of being just that – history. Because of this, Shakespeare was able to use the curses to tell the audience what they already know is going to happen, which brings an element of prescience to the characters. Functioning as a prophecy did in the plays of antiquity, curses within the histories have a determining effect. The characters cursing seem to exert power over those they curse, although the events have been pre-determined, by history acting as fate. Conversely, in Shakespeare’s tragedies, characters curse others, but in effect are bemoaning themselves, or their fate. Rather than foreshadowing the events of the play, these curses reflect the fight for justice and the futility of fighting against a world that does not contain Greek gods who take a vested interest in the actions of humans. In plays such as *Timon of Athens* and *King Lear*, the curses reach far beyond the

scope of the play either in the vastness of who they are cursing or the amount of time it would require to know if it came true. Because these curses are so vast, they do not drive the characters toward their fate as clearly as in the histories. These curses serve to emphasize the despair of the characters and the futility of fighting against their fate within the play.

Applying J.L. Austin's theory of speech acts allows for a deeper understanding of how curses function in the plays. Austin breaks down speech acts into the constative and the performative. The constative is speech which can be determined to be true or false or denotes action that has already taken place, as in storytelling. However, what is of greater interest in this paper is the performative speech act as defined by Austin:

- A. they do not 'describe' or 'report' or constate anything at all, are not 'true or false'; and
- B. the uttering of the sentence is, or is a part of, the doing of an action, which again would not *normally* be described as, or as 'just', saying something. (Austin 5)

He provides examples such as marriage vows, apologies, and the naming of things as speech acts that are not merely describing an action, but creating the action through the speech. Just as the bequeathing of an item to someone determines that he will receive it at some point in the future, a curse seeks to exact vengeance on someone, determining some misfortune yet to come, solely through the power of language. Those who curse are powerless in all other ways to exact the desired vengeance upon the cursed. We see in the plays that curses appear when the curser has fallen from political power or is unable to act to physically harm the cursed, and there is a delay between the curse and its fruition. Aligning with Austin's stipulations for performative speech, a curse is not describing or

reporting on something, but is creating itself and its effects through language. While other actions may potentially be used to construct a curse, such as gestures or attempts at sorcery, the uttering of the curse is a part, if not the whole, of the action. A curse cannot exist without language, a connection demonstrated by Caliban in the opening quotation of this paper.

However, Austin did not intend this theory to extend to drama, since all the speech in stage drama is reflecting the performance of the actor. He argues, “a performative utterance will, for example, be in a peculiar way hollow or void if said by an actor on the stage, or if introduced in a poem, or spoken in soliloquy” (Austin 22). What Austin is failing to take into account through his assertion of the hollowness of stage utterances is the performativity that occurs throughout an entire play. The process of staging a play is to create a world inside our existing one and transport the audience to that world. Though space, set, costuming and movement all contribute to creating that world, language is arguably the most important element in its creation, especially in the Elizabethan time when sets remained the same from scene to scene and costuming often consisted of modern clothing. To ignore the importance of the performative within the performance is to disregard the power of the theatre and its ability to have a profound effect on the audience. The words spoken within literary works and stage productions are anything but hollow. In fact, because every word in a play, poem or soliloquy is specifically chosen by the author to evoke a desired reaction, I argue that the words in these works are infused with far more potency than those spoken in everyday life. The

creation of this other world relies solely on language, and that in itself is inherently performative.

Austin's discrediting of speech acts that occur on stage is ignorant of the powerful effect a curse would have on the early modern audience. Because of the beliefs of the time, a curse would not only fulfill the requirements to be categorized as Austin's performative speech act, but it would have a profound effect within the play and outside of it. Curses were far more noticeable and meaningful to an early modern audience than they are to a modern one. Jonathan Culler states,

Like the performative, the literary utterance does not refer to a prior state of affairs and is not true or false. The literary utterance too *creates* the state of affairs to which it refers, in several respects. First and most simply, it brings into being characters and their actions, for instance. [...] Second, literary works bring into being ideas, concepts, which they deploy. [...] In short, the performative brings to centre stage a use of language previously considered marginal – an active, world-making use of language, which resembles literary language – and helps us to conceive literature as act or event. (*Literary Theory*, 97)

Devaluing the language spoken by actors in the theatre ignores the powerful effect drama can evoke, especially when that drama is reflecting cultural beliefs and helping to reinforce them. In a society where language is considered so powerful that a curse would be counted as treason, it is imperative to recognize the curses spoken by characters as performative speech acts that bring events into being. Marguerite Tassi expands on Austin's theory, saying "words can be understood not simply in opposition to actions, but on a continuum with deeds, inspiring and shaping future actions, stating intent, swearing oaths, cursing, bringing harm to others, and so forth" (57). Curses have the power to shape or alter the destinies of those they are uttered against, and by understanding the

effect curses had on an early modern audience we can more clearly understand their dramatic effect.

Judith Butler appropriates Austin's subsets of performative speech acts, illocutionary and perlocutionary acts, and their roles in injurious speech. Since cursing is attempting to injure through speech, Butler's adoption of these terms serves this paper well. Butler describes the illocutionary act as one in which,

Saying something, one is at the same time doing something; the judge who says, 'I sentence you' does not state an intention to do something or describe what he is doing: his saying is itself a kind of doing. Illocutionary speech acts produce effects. (17)

Cursing functions as an illocutionary act through its power to produce a result. The act of cursing someone, or even saying, "I curse you," is to produce an effect through speech.

However, curses also function as perlocutionary speech acts, which Butler denotes as

Those utterances that initiate a set of consequences: in a perlocutionary speech act, 'saying something will produce certain consequences,' but the saying and the consequences produced are temporally distinct; those consequences are not the same as the act of speech, but are, rather, 'what we bring about or achieve by saying something.' (17)

Because the intent of a curse is to initiate consequences that will occur later, many curses can be characterized as perlocutionary. The consequences initiated by cursing, combined with the temporal distance between the speech and those consequences imbues curses with both illocutionary and perlocutionary characteristics. This is important because this dual positioning of curses is what creates the potency of the curses within the plays and makes them notable to the audience. Upon hearing a curse, an early modern audience would understand that the cursing was functioning as speech that contained more force

than an angry rant or descriptive exchange, and they would also know to look for the effects of the curse unfolding throughout the course of the play.

Because of the feminization of cursing described earlier, the social implications of cursing must be examined. Butler asserts that “speech does not merely *reflect* a relation of social domination; speech *enacts* domination, becoming the vehicle through which that social structure is reinstated” (18 emphasis in original). Because cursing was done by the marginalized in society and revolved around women, it is important to explore how these speech acts serve to continue the marginalization of women and reinstate the social structure of the time. Tassi describes how in “ancient and medieval cultures, female lamentation was thought to be efficacious; women’s wailing could pierce the heavens and call down divine vengeance” (71). Combining the efficacy of women’s words to “pierce the clouds and enter heaven” (*Richard III* 1.3.194) and the power of words to create actions and shape destinies, the feminization of curses makes them efficacious in an early modern setting. Using curses in a play draws attention to the words and externalizes them. They become more than lines being spoken on stage; they are the enactment of a social structure and the shapers of destinies.

Through the course of this paper, I examine curses in eight different Shakespearean plays. The curses function differently based on the genre of the play, and for that reason the paper is divided into two chapters: histories and tragedies. The first chapter on histories consists of Shakespeare’s first tetralogy, the three parts of *King Henry VI* and *King Richard III*, where curses play an active role in Shakespeare’s retelling of the War of the Roses. They act as historical revisionism, reinterpreting

motivations and events surrounding this tumultuous time in English history. Shakespeare has the benefit of hindsight and alters historical figures to create characters that fulfill their historically determined fates. Curses in the histories initiate the cycles of vengeance found in this war and provide foreshadowing and prescience. The second chapter focuses on the tragedies *Titus Andronicus*, *King Lear*, and *Timon of Athens*, where curses shift to a more fatalistic tool. Rather than driving a character toward his fate, curses in the tragedies show the futility in fighting against fate and nature. The tragic characters are still fated, but curses are not used to drive characters toward that fate, as they are in the histories. Curses in the tragedies are used in an attempt at revenge, as they are in the histories, but as the tragedies progress chronologically they involve women less and the efficacy of the curses lessen as a result. The paper concludes with a section on *The Tempest* where Caliban's curses against Prospero and Miranda occur in a world where Prospero acts as a disinterested god ignoring the suffering of Caliban. Through the examination of the ways curses interact with women, and the power curses wield in relation to the power of the curser, we can see how curses are an efficacious tool for vengeance, marginalization and social reflection.

THE HISTORIES: SHAKESPEARE'S FIRST TETRALOGY

Shakespeare's first tetralogy tells the story of the ineffective reign of Henry VI and the War of the Roses. While Shakespeare takes dramatic liberty and compresses timelines, events, and introduces supernatural elements, he is ultimately working toward a historical outcome that is known to his audience. Because this outcome is pre-ordained, the curses present in these plays carry an added weight to their dramatic effect. The audience does not question whether the curses will come true since they would have known the outcome of the events. The curses act much like prophecies in the plays of antiquity, where the audience is unaware only of the machinations that will make the curse come true. Because of the predetermination of the major events in the history plays, curses act as both performative and constative speech acts. In the play, where the outcome is unknown to the characters, curses are performative, creating the events they describe. To the audience, to whom the outcome is known, the curses act as constative speech acts, ones that are describing the events that have already occurred, yet still setting into action the course of events. The curses in the history plays challenge Austin's notions of speech acts by functioning as performative and constative at the same time.

Women, curses and witchcraft are intricately linked in the first tetralogy. The first curser in the series is Joan of Arc, or Joan Puzel as Shakespeare names her. Portraying Joan as a witch on the English stage and eliminating God as her claimed source of power was typical of the culture of the time. Just as the cursing was viewed as dangerous and volatile, witchcraft carried the same weight. Stephen Greenblatt explains,

It was principally among the educated elite, among those who had it in their power to punish, to pardon, and to represent, that there was serious disagreement about how witches should be conceived or even whether they should be said to exist at all. To represent witches on the public stage was inevitably to participate in some way or other in the contestation. (“Shakespeare Bewitched” 115).

Shakespeare’s use of witchcraft and curses on stage could be viewed as more than a means of creating a dramatic effect; they were an entry into the conversation regarding the supernatural. Concurrently, they explored potential results of resorting to those controversial means of seeking power. As the tetralogy progresses, the role of witchcraft is lessened and disappears, while the women’s ability to curse gets stronger. Joan Puzel and Eleanor, the two women involved in witchcraft in the tetralogy, are punished for their actions and removed from the stories. Margaret, however, never resorts to witchcraft and her political power steadily grows, as does her involvement with cursing. Shakespeare removes efficacy from witchcraft and gives it to cursing. Witchcraft in this tetralogy depends on the cooperation of demons and spells, and the lack of cooperation by those elements results in failed attempts at manipulating events. Association with witchcraft, whether it is successful or not, results in severe punishment, but cursing does not. Although cursing was punishable as treason in early modern England, the curses on the stage did not face the same illegality within the political system of the play. In fact, the power of cursing is frequently underestimated by characters in the plays. Like witchcraft, cursing relies on a supernatural power, but instead of the power of demons and spells, it relies on the power of language to produce results.

The evolving roles of witchcraft and cursing, the continuing story line through all four plays, and the subject matter of the War of the Roses distinguish this tetralogy as a

sustained cycle of vengeance. The curses and the murders depict a drawn-out cycle of vengeance and retributive actions, all centered around gaining the throne of England. Although the power of the throne resides with the men, women play a substantial role in the politics that surround it and even participate in battle. As a result, women participate heavily in the revenge elements of the plays. Cursing is a frequent attempt at exacting vengeance on an enemy, especially in this war-heavy tetralogy, because it is

typically resorted to by persons who have no other means of redress; when, for instance the offence in question is not punishable by law; when the person uttering the curse is either dying [...] or even dead; or when the power of the person uttering the curse is dwarfed by that of his enemy, so that in no other way can the latter be damaged. (Watson 6-7)

In war there are no legal repercussions for deaths in battle, so a father distraught at the death of his son has no recourse but to curse. When one has been vanquished in war, no other recourse remains. The power of the enemy dwarfs that of the curser, leaving cursing as the only option for an attempt at justice. War causes women to suffer in a distinct way from soldiers. Women lose sons, husbands and fathers, those responsible for supporting women and providing them with dowries and households. The death of a male family member in a war can result in serious and long-lasting repercussions on a woman's life and livelihood. The loss women experience as the result of war, their lack of political power as a result of their sex, and the feminization of cursing create a strong relationship between women, cursing and revenge that serves to provide women with a specific and effective illocutionary power in the quest for vengeance.

King Henry VI Part 1

The first reference to cursing occurs very early in *1 Henry VI*, setting the tone for all four plays. The play begins with the funeral of Henry V, the brave and inspiring king who led the English to victory in France. Exeter, mourning this loss, says, “What? Shall we curse the planets of mishap / That plotted thus our glory’s overthrow?” (1.1.23). His question sets up the somber mood of the tetralogy and implies that with the death of the glorious Henry V is the end of a golden time for England. Nine-month-old Henry VI is now king and proves to be an ineffective one, losing the land his father won.

Although multiple curses occur in this play, the most significant exchange involves Joan Puzel. Throughout this play Joan leads the French army against the English. Joan is portrayed as a witch during the course of the play, and at times, is even distrusted by the French. She tells the French she has been spoken to by God, but in 5.2, she summons “choice spirits that admonish me / And give me signs of future accidents” (5.2.24-5). Her fear that the French will be defeated causes her to reveal to the audience the true power behind her strength, her witchcraft. As the fiends appear before her she explains,

This speedy and quick appearance argues proof
Of your accustomed diligence to me.
Now, you familiar spirits, that are culled
Out of the powerful regions under earth,
Help me this once, that France may get the field. (5.2.29-33)

Despite her following pleadings and offers of blood and limb, they leave and refuse to help her. She knows her power is at its end, and after the fiends leave, she is captured by York. As York taunts her and her supposed relationship with King Charles, she curses,

JOAN

A plaguing mischief light on Charles and thee,
And may ye both be suddenly surprised
By bloody hands, in sleeping on your beds.

YORK

Fell banning hag, enchantress, hold thy tongue.

JOAN

I prithee, give me leave to curse awhile.

YORK

Curse, miscreant, when thou com'st to the stake. 5.2.60-65

Joan's curse and York's reference to her as a "banning hag" (where banning means cursing) demonstrates the relationship between cursing, vengeance and witchcraft. However, Joan's previous reliance on witchcraft takes some of the power from her language. As Joan falls further down the political ladder her speech becomes more efficacious. It is after the introduction of Margaret of Anjou, in the immediately succeeding lines, the virginal, beautiful French woman who will rule England, and after Joan's denial of and desertion by her father, that Joan's cursing carries more weight. As Watson explained about the power of the curse of the dying, Joan's curse becomes more powerful the further she falls from the height of her power.

As Joan is led away to be burned at the stake, she is met by her father, a shepherd, who has been searching for her and offers to die with her. Joan denies the man is her father because he is too base. He insists, and as she continues to deny him and refuses to accept his blessing, he curses back to the time of her birth:

Now cursed be the time
Of thy nativity. I would the milk
Thy mother gave thee when thou suck'st her breast
Had been a little ratsbane for thy sake –
Or else, when thou didst keep my lambs a-field,
I wish some ravenous wolf had eaten thee.
Dost thou deny thy father, cursed drab?

O burn her, burn her, hanging is too good. (5.3.26-33)

The shepherd curses his thankless and unnatural child. Joan is repeatedly shown as unnatural through her cavorting with fiends, denying her father, and pleading for her life through proclamations of virginity and then pregnancy. However, since her life is nearly over, the shepherd curses the time of her birth rather than her future. Cursing backwards is inherently ineffective because one cannot change the past, only hope to influence the future. This backwards curse acts as a constative speech act because it describes the life that is already cursed. It acts in a circular way. By referring to her as a “cursed drab” he could be meaning the curse he just put on her or the fact that she has led a cursed life. Perhaps her life was cursed from the time she was born which has led her down this path of witchcraft and sorcery that results in her father cursing her. In this case, the curse functions similarly to a prophecy: does the fruition of the prophecy (or curse) occur because the person knows fate and fulfills it through the attempted avoidance of it? Is knowledge of the prophecy integral to the fulfillment of the prophecy? Did her father curse her because she is cursed? Or is she cursed because her father curses her? These questions are of the utmost importance to this tetralogy because it consists of the retelling of history and the curses are elements of Shakespeare’s narration and character development. Shakespeare in effect is partaking in the same action as Joan’s father. He is imparting these curses backwards on the characters’ lives, knowing how they must end, and the use of the curse raises these circular questions. This reflexive and circular cursing theme continues throughout the tetralogy and becomes more and more pronounced

through the continuation of the story, showing the reflexive and circular nature of destruction and vengeance.

Joan and her father's curses set up an event that will be repeated in *King Lear*. The curse of a parent onto a child is a very powerful and unnatural one. Marguerite Tassi explains that "curses were granted supernatural powers in early modern England, as they were in ancient Greece. A parent's curse, for example, was understood as a powerful, damning use of language meant to crush, disown, or even destroy a child" (72). At this time children were viewed as a continuation of the parents and a reflection of them. For a parent to curse a child was akin to cursing himself since the loss or destruction of a child was the same as a loss and destruction of the parent. Through the cursing of his child the shepherd curses himself and ends his legacy.

Joan's grasps for any semblance of power while proclaiming her superiority over everyone show the fear and desperation she has in her final moments of life. Her final words as she is led away are curses laid upon her conquerors and the whole of England:

Then lead me hence – with whom I leave my curse.
 May never glorious sun reflex his beams
 Upon the country where you make abode,
 But darkness and the gloomy shade of death
 Environ you, till mischief and despair
 Drive you to break your necks, or hang yourselves. (5.3.86-91)

If this curse is interpreted as a metaphor for the War of the Roses, Joan's curse proves quite efficacious. Not until the defeat of Richard III by the future Henry VII does England see a king in any way comparable to Henry V. Joan's curse also outlines the cycle of revenge and betrayal that occurs during the rest of the tetralogy.

King Henry VI Part 2

As Joan of Arc exits the tetralogy, Margaret of Anjou is introduced into it. Joan leaves as a disgraced, powerless, sexually ambiguous sorceress, and Margaret enters as a beautiful, virginal bride destined to become queen. Joan's power wanes, her curses are largely ineffective, but Margaret's power grows as she increases her role as queen to a king who would rather not be ruling. As she arrives in England and becomes Henry's queen, she is already feared and hated by Eleanor, wife of Gloucester, who was the Protector of the kingdom while young King Henry was underage. Eleanor, like Joan, turns to witchcraft to try to save her power. Like Joan, Eleanor falls, and as a result, Gloucester is disgraced and dismissed, allowing Margaret to exert more power over Henry.

Unlike the two women she replaces, Margaret never resorts to witchcraft to try to wield power and through this proves that language is more effective than the occult, and reinforcing the fear of cursing and its fundamental unnaturalness. She does, however, use curses to express her anger and contempt toward her husband. Margaret and Suffolk are in love and Henry banishes Suffolk because Suffolk killed Gloucester, Henry's uncle and trusted companion. After Henry leaves the room Margaret curses him:

Mischance and sorrow go along with you!
 Heart's discontent and sour affliction
 Be playfellows to keep you company!
 There's two of you, the devil make a third,
 And threefold vengeance tend upon your steps. (3.2.300-4)

Margaret's curse takes effect through Henry's increased melancholy as the war continues.

Always the reluctant leader, Henry wishes he were a shepherd rather than a king. As his

strength as a leader wanes, Margaret's waxed and she increasingly imposes her will upon the kingdom and takes a more prominent role in the battles.

As Margaret curses her husband, Suffolk urges her to stop talking so he can leave. Margaret admonishes his weakness by calling him a "coward woman and soft-hearted wretch!" and asks, "Has thou not spirit to curse thine enemies?" (3.2.307-8). Margaret knows the power of words and curses when Suffolk chides her for using this power. She calls him weak and womanly, projecting the perceived notions of cursing onto him. Her marginalization of Suffolk aligns him with the power of cursers, a power which he ineffectively denies in the immediately following lines. Responding to her accusation he says,

A plague upon them! Wherefore should I curse them?
 Could curses kill, as doth the mandrake's groan,
 I would invent as bitter searching terms,
 As curst, as harsh and horrible to hear,
 Delivered strongly through my fixed teeth,
 With full as many signs of deadly hate,
 As lean-faced Envy in her loathsome cave.

 And even now my burdened heart would break
 Should I not curse them. Poison be their drink!
 Gall, worse than gall, the daintiest that they taste!
 Their sweetest shade a grove of cypress trees;
 Their chiefest prospect murdering basilisks;
 Their softest touch as smart as lizards' stings;
 Their music frightful as the serpent's hiss,
 And boding screech-owls make the consort full!
 All the foul terrors in dark-seated hell – (3.2.309-28)

Through explaining why he would not curse, Suffolk decides to curse them anyway. His claim that curses cannot kill as quickly as the groan of a mandrake makes them powerless in his eyes. Yet he expresses the strong desire to curse anyway and claims his "burdened

heart would break” if he does not. He then curses the means of their sustenance, a type of curse that is seen later in *Timon of Athens*. Suffolk’s feminization at the hands of Margaret and his inability to act physically as he would like to leads him to curse as his search for vengeance.

However, Margaret’s response to Suffolk’s curse is to cut him off before it is finished, which makes this the first of many truncated curses. Margaret interjects with,

Enough, sweet Suffolk; thou torment’st thyself,
And these dread curses, like the sun ‘gainst glass,
Or like an overcharged gun, recoil
And turns the force of them upon thyself. (3.2.329-32)

Margaret recognizes the power of curses and fears that Suffolk’s curse will turn back against him if it is too vehement. She sees that Suffolk is just tormenting himself and not exhibiting any real power, except that it may be harmful to him. Since Suffolk is cursing those who do not need to be cursed, and he himself has performed acts worthy of being cursed, he places himself in danger of being overzealous. Margaret’s fear of the curse recoiling on Suffolk shows that curses are fallible and must be used in an appropriate way, or risk having the results visited upon the curser. Watson asserts that unjust curses or ones ignored by the gods would simply come to nothing (25) but that assertion relies on the power of gods to participate in the actions of men and be the enactors of the curses. In Shakespeare’s worlds there are no interventions from gods, so if gods exist in his worlds, they are most likely not listening and are certainly not active. Thus the power of the curse remains in the language and an unjust curse might not function as intended. The power of the language is certain, the directing of that power is not.

Suffolk suffers the fate of having his curse reverse on himself. The witch consulted by Eleanor prophesied that he would die by water. As he travels to France after his banishment his ship is captured and he is imprisoned by Walter Whitmore (the 'I' is silent). As Suffolk annoys Whitmore by proclaiming that he cannot die at the hands of someone so base, he seals his own fate, fulfills the prophecy of his death, and ends up beheaded by Whitmore, dead by Water. Margaret cut off Suffolk's curse too late. The curse recoiled on him, as she feared, and he was the one to be shaded by cypress trees, murdered, frightened, and stung by a sword. His language was efficacious, but his directing of it went awry resulting in his revenge being visited upon himself.

King Henry VI Part 3

By the time of the third play, Henry has so little will to fight that he agrees to pass the throne to York (formerly Richard Plantagenet) at the time of his own death, effectively disinheriting his young son Edward. This continues the cycle of revenge as this truce is broken. While York is originally content to wait for Henry to die to inherit the throne, his sons convince him that it should be seized now. Margaret's rage at the disinheritance of her son spurs her to lead the army herself, regardless of King Henry's desires. As York and Margaret meet on the battlefield, she has already killed his young son Rutland, and offers a handkerchief dipped in his blood to vanquished York to dry his tears. York's rage at Margaret's cruelty leads him to curse her:

There, take the crown, and with the crown my curse;
And in thy need such comfort come to thee
As now I reap at thy too cruel hand! (1.4.164-6)

This is the first wholly effective curse of the tetralogy, and a continuation of the reflexive destruction. York curses Margaret to receive the same comfort that he receives from her and her trajectory follows one similar to his after this point. Margaret gains the crown for Henry, but then loses it permanently to the York family by the end of the play. Her son is stabbed, just as Rutland was stabbed by her follower, Clifford. (Clifford had already vowed revenge for the death of his father by being willing to kill even the youngest of the house of York, which he did with his murder of Rutland.) At the time of Margaret's great sorrow over the loss of her son, she curses, finding the same comfort and only recourse of action available, that York found at his moments of loss. Margaret curses the new King Edward IV, son of York, to another cycle of having children murdered:

But if you ever chance to have a child,
 Look in his youth to have him so cut off
 As, deathsmen, you have rid this sweet young prince! (5.5.63-5)

York's comfort was to curse and have that curse come true, and Margaret experiences the same comfort. Her curse on Edward's children does come true when they are murdered by Richard. Yet, as York's curse comes true, it becomes a curse on his own family. Since his comfort is to curse his enemy, and this becomes Margaret's comfort, he has now cursed his own family, the house of York.

Richard is wary of Margaret's ability to evoke power through words as established by his response to Edward's decision to send Margaret back to France at the end of the play, rather than killing her. He asks, "Why should she live to fill the world with words?" (5.5.43). Rather than commenting on her power to inspire an army, ability to kill without hesitation, or manipulate leaders, he comments on her ability to fill the

world with words, words that could be more powerful than any other trait she possesses. Although Richard could be interpreted as treating Margaret dismissively, his comment is an appropriate foreshadowing to the curse she unleashes on the Yorks, specifically Richard, in *Richard III*. Throughout the course of *3 Henry VI*, we can see the character of Richard develop and his self-serving motivations come to light, setting the stage for his destructive rise to power in *Richard III*.

Richard's mocking acknowledgment of the power of words is further illustrated in his treatment of King Henry just before his death. Richard visits the imprisoned Henry, who recognizes the foulness of Richard that is mirrored in his physical appearance. As Henry prophesies about the torment Richard will bring to the land through his ambition, and reflects upon his unnatural birth when he already possessed teeth "to signify thou can'st to bite the world" (5.6.54), Richard cuts off his speech and stabs him crying, "I'll hear no more: die prophet, in thy speech" (5.6.57). Henry VI is seen as a weak, feminized king, who is overly religious and allows his actions to be influenced by his allies and his enemies. His weak, feminized nature and dispossessed status illustrate his marginalization and why he resorts to words to exert power when he has none of his own left.

Unlike Henry, Richard is neither weak nor feminized. He is however, marginalized based on his warped appearance. As a silver tongued man who is able to manipulate freely through his speech, Richard fully understands the power of words. His cutting off of King Henry's speech and prophecy, desire to kill Margaret so that she cannot fill the world with words, and his cutting off of Margaret's curse in his play, all

show that he understands the power of words, the power of curses, and the disenfranchisement that comes with a lack of voice. To speak is to have power, a power that Richard is not willing to allow others to possess. Richard himself is a powerful manipulator, using language since his deformity prevents him from using other wiles to get his way. He and his brother are able to manipulate their father, and in his titular play we see the astonishing effect his words can have. Through his own disenfranchisement and marginalization, Richard is fully aware of the power of language the dispossessed can acquire.

While we see a decrease in witchcraft from the first two plays, we see an increase in a concern with nature and unnaturalness. The power of the occult ultimately failed, but the power of cursing subsumed it and created a more powerful and more acceptable form of supernatural event. Instead of relying on devilish elements to attempt to manipulate events, we see the rise of power in the unnatural characters of Margaret and Richard. The play begins with the unnatural act of King Henry giving up the right to succession at the expense of his son, and the rage he must endure from Margaret:

Ah! Wretched man, would I had died a maid,
And never seen thee, never borne thee son,
Seeing thou hast prov'd so unnatural a father. (1.1.222-4)

Margaret is then condemned by York as an unnatural woman after she so cruelly taunts him over the death of his son: “Women are soft, mild, pitiful, and flexible; / Thou stern, indurate, flinty, rough, remorseless” (1.4.141-142). In the following scene, three suns appear in the sky, an unnatural event that is witnessed by Richard and Edward, who interpret the event in different ways. Richard is frequently characterized as unnatural

because of his hunched back and withered arm, and his unnatural spirit can be seen as manifesting itself through his body, or his body could be creating his unnatural spirit. These two unnatural characters, Richard and Margaret, wield great control over the outcome of the events. The connection of cursing with the supernatural and these unnatural characters shows the power of cursing lies outside the natural world, yet is a more acceptable form of harnessing the supernatural. The marginalized wield the power since there is no way to capture it without that unnaturalness.

King Richard III

All the curses and events in the preceding plays of the tetralogy come to fruition in the curse Margaret unleashes in the final play. After being the maiden, the wife, and the mother, she is now the old crone come back to revenge herself on the house of York. Although historically she went back to France and died there, Shakespeare's decision to have her return to England and curse the family provides a supernatural element to the play. The early modern audience would have known that she was actually dead before Richard ascended the throne and so her presence takes on an unnatural manifestation. The events of this play are pre-determined. The audience knows Richard will become king and then fall to Richmond, who becomes Henry VII, grandfather to the reigning Queen Elizabeth. But even though the events of the play are pre-determined, the curse is not. By introducing the curse, Shakespeare adds an element of the supernatural and creates an effect similar to that of a prophecy, allowing the audience to check off each event as it

dragged the cursed Richard closer and closer to his foretold doom. Greenblatt explains that

Witchcraft provided Shakespeare with a rich source of imaginative energy, a collective disturbance upon which he could draw to achieve powerful theatrical effects. But a dramatist could only achieve these effects [...] if this energy were conjoined with what Aristotle called *enargeia*, the liveliness that comes when metaphors are set in action, when things are put vividly before the mind's eye, when language achieves visibility. ("Shakespeare Bewitched" 122)

By bringing back Margaret and creating a curse that is the driving force of action in the play, Shakespeare combines the power of cursing and the visibility of the language to conclude this long, bloody cycle of revenge.

Margaret's curse functions as a fulfillment of York's curse, but it also functions as her revenge against the family that cost her everything. Like most revengers, Margaret cannot achieve revenge through immediate methods because of the political circumstance. She has no more allies, and wields no power. There is a delay while she suffers from the loss of her husband, son and Queenship. Just as many revengers do, she invokes the supernatural to help accomplish her revenge. She is not so powerful that she can exact it on her own; she must rely on a power greater than hers. This final play contains elements of the supernatural, just as the whole tetralogy has. Foretelling dreams, curses, prophecies and ghosts bring about the conclusion of this unnatural war which marks the beginning of the rule of the Tudors.

Margaret's final curse is the most self-conscious, and the most efficacious of the curses studied in this paper. Margaret's curse predicts the action for the remainder of the play and calls attention back on itself and other curses. As Margaret enters the scene

comprised of Yorks and their followers, she recounts the atrocities committed during the war and eventually comes forward and is noticed by her enemies. As she criticizes them for celebrating their victory, Richard corrects her grumblings about her misfortune at their hands:

The curse my noble father laid on thee
 When thou didst crown his warlike brows with paper,
 And with thy scorns drew'st rivers from his eyes,
 And then to dry them, gav'st the Duke a clout
 Steeped in the faultless blood of pretty Rutland –
 His curses then, from bitterness of soul
 Denounced against thee, are all fall'n upon thee;
 And God, not we, hath plagued thy bloody deed. (1.3.173-80)

Richard acknowledges the power of his father's curse and how it has come true for Margaret, but posits God is the enforcer of the curse rather than the power of language. Here he fails to acknowledge the power of Margaret's language that he was so cognizant of in the previous play. Margaret's political power is completely gone: she is a deposed queen, a woman in a foreign country, a remnant of the losing side of a war, and she has been cursed. She has fallen as low as she can and has nothing but language left.

Margaret reflects upon the power of York's curse on her, and Richard's assertion that God himself is taking up York's cause against her, and then unleashes her own vehement curse against the Yorks:

Did York's dread curse prevail so much with heaven
 That Henry's death, my lovely Edward's death,
 Their kingdom's loss, my woeful banishment,
 Should all but answer for that peevish brat? [Rutland]
 Can curses pierce the clouds and enter heavens?
 Why then give way, dull clouds, to my quick curses.
 Though not by war, by surfeit die your king,
 As ours by murder, to make him a king.
 - Edward thy son, that now is Prince of Wales,

For Edward our son, that was Prince of Wales,
 Die in his youth, by like untimely violence.
 Thyself a queen, for me that was a queen,
 Outlive thy glory, like my wretched self.
 Long mayst thou live to wail thy children's death
 And see another, as I see thee now,
 Decked in thy rights, as thou art stalled in mine.
 Long die thy happy days before thy death,
 And, after many lengthened hours of grief,
 Die neither mother, wife, nor England's queen.

.....
 RICHARD

Have done thy charm, thou hateful withered hag.

QUEEN MARGARET

And leave out thee? 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 work of conscience still begnaw thy soul;

Thy friends suspect for 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 heal of ugly devils.

Thou elvish-marked, abortive, rooting hog,

Thou that wast sealed in thy nativity

The slave of nature and the son of hell;

Thou slander of thy heavy mother's womb,

Thou loathed issue of thy father's loins,

Thou rage of honour, thou detested –

RICHARD

Margaret.

QUEEN MARGARET

Richard! (1.3.190-232)

Just as Margaret cut off Suffolk's curse, and Richard cut off Henry's prophecy, Richard cuts off Margaret's curse and attempts to turn it back on her. Margaret had cut off Suffolk's vehement cursing so that he might not run the risk of having it rebound upon himself, but Margaret need not fear that anymore. She has nothing left to lose at this point so cursing herself would have no greater effect. Richard's attempt to curb her power of

speech, his fear that she might “fill the world with words” (3*HVI* 5.5.43) is realized in this curse. She fills his world with words, and those words have the power to determine the fate of the York house. Richard understands the power of language and attempts to stifle it, but to no avail. Margaret’s lack of power in all other aspects of her life empowers her speech beyond anything that can be stifled by Richard. If the efficacy of cursing is related to the lack of power possessed by the curser, then stifling that curse would only serve to make it more powerful. Attempting to destroy a power that is gained through oppression with increased oppression serves to increase the force of that power.

As Margaret’s curse is ignored and discredited, “for curses never pass / The lips of those that breathe them in the air” (1.3.284-5), she warns that they will,

But remember this another day,
When he [Richard] shall split thy very heart with sorrow,
And say poor Margaret was a prophetess. (1.3.298-300)

As Margaret’s curse comes to pass, the audience is reminded of it. Queen Elizabeth (wife of Edward IV and by this time no longer a queen) calls on Margaret to help her curse Richard after he has killed her sons, and begs, “O thou, well skilled in curses, stay awhile / And teach me how to curse mine enemies” (4.4.116-7). Hastings refers back to the curse just before his death and cries, “O Margaret, Margaret, now thy heavy curse / Is lighted on poor Hastings’ wretched head” (3.4.91) Yet Richard never recognizes the power of Margaret’s curse on him, even though it comes true all around him, right down to the tormenting dreams. His rise to the top blinds him to all the steps he took to get there, leading to his ultimate downfall.

Shakespeare's depiction of the War of the Roses and the utter destruction of the two families vying for the throne of England is captured through the marginalized characters and the unnatural powers they are able to wield. Through the use of curses, Shakespeare is able to capitalize on the fears and superstitions of his time and tell the story through the lens of the powerless in conjunction with the powerful. This new perspective serves to infuse an element of the metaphysical into this world and demonstrates the power that can be wielded by the marginalized members of society, creating justification for the fear of curses and witchcraft. The curses present in the first tetralogy not only represent the beliefs of the time, but reinforce them, legitimizing the fear of the feminine and the dispossessed.

THE TRAGEDIES: CURSES WITHIN *TITUS ANDRONICUS*,
KING LEAR, AND *TIMON OF ATHENS*

As a marked difference from the history plays, tragedies don't have a historically predetermined outcome Shakespeare was working towards. Although the characters are fated, the plot is not reliant on relatively recent national history with which the audience was familiar. Even though Shakespeare used source material that may have been known to his audience, such as the 1605 version of *King Lear*, changing the ending of a fictitious story is far less controversial than changing the outcome of the War of the Roses.

Because of this, the curses act noticeably different from the curses in the history plays. Unlike the history plays, where the curses move the action forward and foreshadow the fate of the characters, tragic plays contain curses that show the characters attempting to alter fate through a curse. Curses in the tragedies attempt to set events in motion, but are hindered by fate, thus their ability to alter the outcome is diminished. They also suffer a loss of potency as the role of women decreases in the curses. The curses in this chapter still act as perlocutionary speech acts, but their illocutionary characteristics diminish as women become more separated from the curses.

As this chapter progresses, curses become more separated from women and they begin to take on characteristics of swearing, as well as cursing. The chapter starts with Lavinia uttering a curse, moves to Lear cursing his daughter, and ends with Timon cursing all of mankind through the actions of women. Lavinia is the only female curser and her curse is the most efficacious of those occurring in the tragedies because she combines action with her curse. This shift in curses changes them to express the

frustrations of characters and this places the emphasis on the speech rather than the resulting action of that speech. Although the motivation to enact harm remains the intent behind uttering curses in the tragedies, the curses do not drive the story forward as they do in the histories and instead show the futility of railing against fate. In the history plays, curses act as constative speech acts for the audience by describing the fate of the characters that was already known to the audience. However, in the tragedies, curses are infelicitous¹ speech acts, or performative speech acts that fail in the literal sense. The curses reflect the anger the characters feels toward their enemy, and the fate they wish to befall that enemy, but also act constatively by showing the corruption already present in the society inhabited by the curser.

Curses in the tragedies maintain their perlocutionary characteristics through the motive to exact revenge on an enemy. A curse was an effective way to do this because Watson describes how “curses, both public and private, were, according to the conventional wisdom, inevitably fulfilled” (22). This belief alerts the audience to a potential (and probable) outcome for the cursed. The curse attempts to create and initiate a consequence that will transpire later and describes how that event should occur. The consequences of perlocutionary speech are created by saying something, but the effect remains temporally distinct from the speech itself. This aligns the perlocutionary curses with the motives of revenge.

¹ Austin characterizes performative acts that fail in some regard as infelicities, since the utterance of the initial statement is not false, but rather unhappy (14).

The delay that occurs between a curse being uttered and its fruition is an important convention of revenge dramas. John Kerrigan discusses the conventions of revenge and the power vengeance can exert in a play. He argues,

Vengeance offers the writer a compelling mix of ingredients: strong situations shaped by violence; ethical issues for debate; a volatile, emotive mixture of loss and agitated grievance. The avenger, isolated and vulnerable, can achieve heroic grandeur by coming to personify nemesis. (Kerrigan 3)

These situations exactly mirror the circumstances for when a curse is uttered. Without the presence of an initial wrong, a curse does not need to exist. Cursing occurs once the curser has become isolated and vulnerable as an attempt to combat the initial wrong and achieve “heroic grandeur.” Kerrigan expounds upon the effect of revenge by saying, “the motive [of revenge] cuts two ways at once, subordinating the agent to a situation but, at the same time, prompting him to shape events towards that action's end” (Kerrigan 15-16). Cursing exhibits these characteristics. The curser attempts to subordinate the cursed, and shape the events of the enemy’s ultimate downfall. The curse is an attempt to bring vengeance and justice into being through language.

Curses functioning as speech acts demonstrate the power of language when all other forms of power have deserted the utterer. Curses appear after a decline in self-efficacy, and take place at the moment the curser seems weakest. However, the power of the curse can exceed the power previously held by the character, showing the overwhelming power of language, or the futility of fighting against fate. Curses in the tragedies maintain their performative characteristics, but the potency of them decreases. As women hold less prominence in the curses uttered, and the marginalization of the

characters cursing decreases, the performativity in cursing changes from creating action that drives the plot, to conveying the desolation of the cursing character and the characters' attempt to regain self-efficacy.

Titus Andronicus

Lavinia's curse in *Titus Andronicus* is the shortest curse given in the plays examined here and the most potent of the curses in the tragedies. This two-word curse can be easily overlooked, but its importance lies in its means of fruition and Lavinia's femininity. This curse contains the last words ever spoken by Lavinia. When Lavinia and her husband Bassianus discover Tamora trysting in the woods with Aaron the Moor, the taunting they aim at her leads to Bassianus's death and Lavinia's downfall. After Bassianus is killed and Chiron and Demetrius have decided to rape Lavinia on the body of her dead husband, with encouragement from Tamora, Lavinia pleads to Tamora to save her from this horrific fate. After Tamora ignores Lavinia's pleas, Lavinia cries out,

No grace, no womanhood? Ah, beastly creature,
The blot and enemy to our general name!
Confusion fall – (2.3.182-4)

Her optative curse² is cut off by Chiron “stopping her mouth,” a phrase that traditionally signifies a kiss, though perhaps in this case a blow would be more appropriate based on the violence of this scene and the behavior of this family. We never hear Lavinia speak

² Lavinia's use of the optative mood embodies Watson's explanation that “the same belief in the impossibility of escaping the effects of a curse is mirrored in the not infrequent substitution [...] of the future indicative for the imprecatory optative or imperative” (23). The use of this grammatical structure shows the conviction behind Lavinia's curse.

again. Julie Taymor's depiction of this scene in *Titus* shows a violent end to Lavinia's speech, with Chiron screaming his line and throwing her down to her knees, indicating the beginning of the rape and stopping her mouth in a more sexually violent way than a kiss or a blow. Not only do Chiron and Demetrius sexually rape her, they rape her of her hands, her voice, and the conclusion of her curse, her last semblance of power.

Although this curse is a mere two words, it is powerful in the play. The word "confusion" in this case means "destruction," and through this expanded meaning, we know Lavinia wishes destruction to befall Tamora, and that is achieved. However, Lavinia takes a role in facilitating that destruction. Like Margaret's curse, Lavinia's curse is truncated. The difference lies in Lavinia being cut off at the beginning of her curse while Margaret's curse was cut off at the very end. Lavinia does not have the opportunity to outline the details of how the destruction will be visited on Tamora. As a result, Lavinia takes a more active role in the fulfillment of her curse and becomes a direct instrument in the revenge against Tamora and her sons. She acts in conjunction with her words to become a revenger. She is left alive, without hands or tongue to tell her story, and is cared for by the men left in her life. She is able to communicate her tragedy to her family with a stick in the sand, and at the urging of her father, is present at the murder of her attackers. She holds the bowl to catch the blood of Chiron and Demetrius who are then baked in a pie and fed to their mother. With her last words she curses and with her last actions she helps fulfill her own curse.

Tamora mimics the language of the curse at 5.2.7-8, "Tell him Revenge is come to join with him, / And work confusion on his enemies." She unwittingly delivers her

sons to their demise and helps set the course of revenge against herself. She pretends to be working for Titus, not realizing that she is playing right into his plan and helping bring about her own destruction. When Titus has Chiron and Demetrius captive and is preparing to kill them, he summons Lavinia to participate in their death. Titus's speech begins, "Come, come, Lavinia; look, thy foes are bound. / Sirs, stop their mouths" (5.2.166). Titus stops their mouths, just as they stopped Lavinia's, and we can be quite certain this time it is not with a kiss. Titus's inclusion of her in their deaths enables her to participate in the fulfillment of her curse upon Tamora, which is unique to Lavinia. No other curser explored in this paper takes an active role in the fruition of the curse.

Unlike Joan, Margaret and Lear, Lavinia does not call upon a supernatural power to fulfill her curse. The depth of her suffering and her willingness to participate in the vengeance her family seeks is what provides the illocutionary force behind her words. Although all the cursers in this chapter experience a decline of power, none of them suffer as much as Lavinia. Lavinia is abused horrifically. Her husband is killed in front of her, she is told she will be raped by Chiron and Demetrius, and rather than be killed as was instructed by Tamora, she is mutilated with her tongue and hands cut off. Yet she does not disappear from the stage. She remains present throughout the play, her grim specter a haunting reminder of the wrongs done to her and how they will not be forgotten. She manages to convey her story and reclaim a new voice. Lavinia enters the death scene of Chiron and Demetrius carrying a bowl between her stumps and Marguerite Tassi describes how this entrance and Titus's encouragement to have Lavinia "come / receive the blood" (5.2.196-7) is reminiscent of a ritual sacrifice (99). The revenge is

solemnified, recognized, and echoes the original crime. Lavinia's two word curse and her actions to help fulfill it set up a detailed and fitting vengeance. The consumption of the evil Chiron and Demetrius by the evil Tamora acts as a purification for Lavinia, and once it is done, her vengeance is complete and she is released to death at the hands of her father. Titus offers a post-consumption confession of the true nature of the meal and the extent of the revenge is realized. The ensuing carnage is the ultimate fulfillment of Lavinia's unfinished curse. She was unable to finish her decree on whom destruction should fall, but nonetheless, it fell on everyone. This curse, like Margaret's, shows the last grasps for agency through language, and the hope it carries. It is through language that vengeance and justice can be achieved.

King Lear

In contrast to Lavinia's curse, the curses in *King Lear* are both given by Lear, a man who *chose* to give up his power and place himself in the care of his daughters. Lear's curses exert some level of power over Goneril, but he is not able to achieve the same potency as the cursers in the histories, or even Lavinia. In the histories, curses were used to determine fate, but in the tragedies fate has already been determined and curses are used in an attempt to influence that which has already occurred. Lavinia was able to help fulfill her curse through a combination of words and actions, but Lear's reliance on words alone is not enough to alter the fate already determined for the characters. Lear's masculinity and existence in a pre-determined world result in his curses exerting a reduced influence than other cursers are able to wield.

When he does not receive the care he prefers, Lear chooses to leave the house of his daughter, Goneril and flings this parting curse at her:

Hear, Nature, hear, dear goddess, hear:
 Suspend thy purpose if thou didst intend
 To make this creature fruitful.
 Into her womb convey sterility,
 Dry up in her the organs of increase,
 And from her derogate body never spring
 A babe to honour her. If she must teem,
 Create her child of spleen, that it may live
 And be a thwart disnatured torment to her.
 Let it stamp wrinkles in her brow of youth,
 With cadent tears fret channels in her cheeks,
 Turn all her mother's pains and benefits
 To laughter and contempt, that she may feel
 How sharper than a serpent's tooth it is
 To have a thankless child. Away, away! (1.4.267-81)

Lear's anger stems from Goneril's telling him that his knights are too many and too raucous and they need to leave. He calls upon the goddess Nature to avenge him, similar to Edmund's profession that Nature is his goddess two scenes earlier. The two men are calling upon the same goddess, yet they are seeking different results from her. Edmund cries out, "Thou, Nature, art my goddess; to thy law / My services are bound," (1.2.1-2) calling upon Nature as a force by which he is bound. Because he is a bastard, he is by nature a corrupt man and embraces his role and Nature's role in shaping him this way. Lear, however, calls upon Nature as a destructive force, to sterilize Goneril, an action that would be unnatural and reshape the work Nature has already done.

In *King Lear*, Nature acts as Fate. It governs the behaviors of the characters and determines their outcomes. Lear's calling for Nature to alter the intended course of Goneril's life to suit Lear's revenge is different from Margaret and Lavinia's curses that

call upon some unnamed and unknown force to exact their vengeance. While Margaret and Lavinia's curses determine the fate of the ones they curse, Lear calls upon Nature to change the fate of Goneril so that she might understand the pain she has caused her father. Even the words Lear uses in the curse refer to nature: fruitful, womb, spring, teem, create, spleen, disnatured, channels, and serpent. Lear calls for her organs of increase to dry up, to go against their nature of fruitfulness. He clarifies, "from her derogate body never spring / A babe to honour her," likening her body to a spring of water, and a vehicle to expel life. If she is to bear a child, it should "with cadent tears fret channels in her cheeks," referring to channels, another body of water. From her dry barrenness, any fruit that might spring would bring waters to erode her. Lear's appeal to Nature is as fruitless as an appeal to the Fates would be. His fate and Goneril's are already determined by Nature, and trying to change Goneril's nature is as futile as trying to avoid his own fate. In this curse, Lear calls for Nature to alter its own work, to go against its own nature, and become a destructive force rather than a guiding one. In this predetermined world, Lear's speech lacks the ability to exert the influence he seeks. Lear is fated to powerlessness and no amount of performative speech is able to change his fate.

The second curse of the play is also directed against Goneril while Lear is speaking to Regan. Regan encourages him to return to Goneril's house and he exclaims:

All the stored vengeance of heaven fall
On her ingrateful top! Strike her young bones,
You taking airs, with lameness! (2.2.352-3)

This time he does not appeal directly to Nature, but he is calling for more unnatural acts to befall her. He calls upon the "taking airs," where "taking" means blasting, or noxious,

to “strike her young bones with lameness.” In the 1605 version of *The True Chronicle History of King Leir*, “Leir says Goneril is tetchy because she ‘breeds young bones’ or is with child and it is not clear whether Lear’s curse here applies to Goneril or to any child she may have” (Foakes 248, note 352). Yet Shakespeare does not say that Goneril is breeding young bones, and instead curses *her* young bones. Goneril is not depicted as being pregnant, and Lear had already cursed her to barrenness. Choosing to depart from the source material’s indication of pregnancy, Shakespeare strengthens the effect of Lear’s first curse in 1.4 and alludes to venereal disease befalling Goneril. The noxious air and weak bones are symptoms of syphilis, and wishing this upon Goneril calls upon Nature to divert itself even more. Contrary to Margaret and Lavinia, Lear’s curse is never cut off. He does not lose the power of speech and maintains his voice throughout the play. Lear choosing to call upon Nature and noxious airs reinforces the importance of Nature over the power of gods or man in this world. Lear does not have the power to alter Goneril, so his curse reflects the unnaturalness that is already present in Goneril. His curse is constatively reflecting that which is already present, Goneril’s unnatural nature, which only Nature can set or alter.

Although Shakespeare departs from insinuating a pregnancy for Goneril, we still don’t know if Lear’s curse comes true because the play doesn’t last long enough, and neither does Goneril’s life. Lear’s initial curse functions as an illocutionary speech act in that it is invoking action, yet the delay and lack of fruition of the curse are characteristic of revenge and make it a perlocutionary speech act. This raises the question of the importance of the action taking place to validate the speech act in the first place. A curse

uttered by someone without the authority to curse makes it less efficacious. Lear voluntarily gave up his power making his curse less potent. As has been seen in the curses thus far, the loss of power has always been involuntary. Revenge stems from an inability to gain justice because of the unbalanced power dynamic between the two foes. Lear's mock trial for his daughters in Act 3 Scene 6 can be interpreted as an attempt to regain his power over them. Since a judge has the authority to issue a sentence on someone and have that language result in action, Lear's trial of his daughters shows him attempting to take a position of authority over them. He wants the power that a judge has, to proclaim a sentence and have it come true, thereby exacting his revenge and regaining his power over his daughters.

Lear's second curse on Goneril, to be struck with lameness, comes to fruition through her inability to act as she pleases. Goneril lusts after Edmund, who partners with Regan after the death of Cornwall, causing Goneril to hate her sister and former ally. She commits the unnatural act of poisoning her sister, using nature to defeat Regan, but defiling herself in the process. Lear's second curse upon her comes true through the thwarting of her desires and the emergence of her twisted nature.

While Lear's curses are not as efficacious as the curses in the histories, or *Titus Andronicus*, they do serve to illustrate the role reversal of Lear and his daughters, and the powerlessness to which Lear has subjected himself. By giving up his kingship and his power to Goneril and Regan, and desiring to live in their homes through their expected generosity and complacency to his plan, he has placed himself in the childlike role of the one who needs care. When Goneril attempts to reduce the number of his entourage, Lear

becomes the thankless child with which he curses Goneril. Though Goneril and Regan are undoubtedly cruel in their treatment of Lear, he is partly to blame for his displacement to the heath. He desires to “retain / The name, and all th’addition to a king” (1.1.136-7) while passing the responsibility of the kingship to his daughters and their husbands. To live with them as he begins his “unburdened crawl toward death,” (1.1.40) and maintain his retinue of a hundred knights is a vast drain on the resources of his daughters and their households. His decision to leave Goneril’s house rather than comply with her demands is the beginning of his self-imposed exile. As will be seen with Timon, Lear *chooses* to cast himself out, unlike Lavinia and the cursers of the histories. Lear’s cursing might be more effective had he done it when he had truly lost everything, after the death of Cordelia. The voluntary suffering does not allow for the same source of power as the rape of self-efficacy.

Lear’s diminished potency may also stem from the fact that he is never fully abandoned. Although his daughters do not fulfill their duty to support him and his entourage, he could return to their homes if he was willing to acquiesce to their demands. His loss of power is the result of his desire to have an easy and comfortable end to his life rather than the result of capture, or losing a war. Lear’s moment of true despair comes at the very end of the play and his life, after Cordelia has been hanged. He cries out,

Howl, howl, howl, howl! O, you are men of stones!
 Had I your tongues and eyes, I’d use them so
 That heaven’s vault should crack: she’s gone for ever. (5.3.255-7)

Lear longs for the power to pierce the clouds of heaven with his speech and right the wrongs done to him. Perhaps this is the moment where a curse would have proved most

potent. Watson explains that one of the most universally feared curses comes from someone who is dying because of numerous examples where it proved to be most effective (27). Lear calls upon Nature to fulfill his curse, yet Nature is portrayed as an indifferent force when it comes to the suffering of man. When Lear is on the heath we see how Nature is indifferent to his suffering, as he had been indifferent to the suffering of his subjects. As he weathers the storm, Lear bemoans the fate of the “poor naked wretches, wheresoe’er you are, / That bide the pelting of this pitiless storm,” (3.4.28-9) and how he had “ta’en / Too little care of this” (3.4.32-3). He is finally learning what it means to fall, yet he has not finished his descent. Only at the very end of the play, after the death of Cordelia, has Lear truly lost everything. Only at this time would a curse have a chance of altering this pre-determined world.

As described during the analysis of the history plays, the curse of a parent onto a child is potent, unnatural, and terribly destructive. Lear’s curses destroy Goneril, and also himself. To destroy a child is to destroy yourself and your legacy. Lear hearkens the power of a parental curse as he continues to rage against Goneril:

Blasts and fogs upon thee!
Th’untented woundings of a father’s curse
Pierce every sense about thee. (1.4.291-3)

Lear’s reference to an “untented wounding,” one that is too deep to be cleansed by a roll of lint, demonstrates the powerful effect he knows his curse would have. The curse of her parent is enough to make Goneril despair of life, and although her suicide would not condemn her to damnation in the non-Christian world of the play, the Christian audience would have interpreted her despair and death as a great sin. Unfortunately for Lear, the

destruction of his daughter also portents the destruction of himself. His curse upon Goneril was instrumental in his own downfall.

The indifference of Nature and Lear's ineffectiveness in cursing illustrates Lear's world as deterministic. Unlike the histories, where the cursing is used as an illustration of what is to come and works toward a known fate, Lear curses against Nature and fate, and seeks to undo the natural world through the sterilization of Goneril. In a world where Nature is indifferent and will take its course regardless of the desires of man, Lear's attempts to change it illustrate the futility of trying to avoid fate. Fate is an obstacle and no longer able to be altered by words. Unlike Lavinia, Lear is unable to participate in his desired revenge against his daughter. He curses broadly, and rather than calling for an end of life as Lavinia and Margaret do, he calls for the inability to create new life, or if that life is created, that it be unnatural.

Timon of Athens

Timon of Athens is ripe with curses through Timon's fall and eventual death. What is different about this play from *King Lear* and *Titus Andronicus* is the number of people cursing. While the other two tragic plays contain only one person cursing, *Timon of Athens* contains multiple cursers. The most notable curse is Timon's lengthy diatribe in 4.1 that makes up the entire scene. This curse illustrates the continuing shift from curses being performative and efficacious, to being infelicitous and constative as the curses become more distanced from women. Though the curse is uttered and its power is released into the world, its presence is more similar to the cursing of a swearing style

instead of a hex style, as all the other curses thus far have been. Instead of determining the fate of the cursed, these curses reflect the anger and frustration of the curser. Because of the breadth of the curse, a literal fulfillment of it is far outside the scope of the play. Timon's curse is an attempt to be performative, but it actually embodies characteristics of the constative. Timon's curse reflects the corruption already present in Athenian society.

The most significant curses of the play are given by Timon against his false friends, and then against the whole city of Athens. He curses his false friends at the mock banquet he throws for them after he realizes they are abandoning him during his time of need. He serves his guests stones and water, and after throwing it in their faces, he condemns them to

Live loathed and long,
Most smiling, smooth, detested parasites,
.....
Of man and beast the infinite malady
Crust you quite o'er! (3.7.92-8)

Like many of the curses in this play, it calls for long life and disease to be brought down upon the cursed. Nature makes an immediate appearance in the curses of this play, continuing the trend from *King Lear*. Timon desires the reversal of nature from a sustaining element to a destructive one. However, he is unwilling and unable to provide any force to assist his words in their efficacy.

The most significant curse in the play is a lengthy tirade by Timon directed at all of humanity. After the false banquet, Timon leaves Athens to go live in the woods alone. He has become a misanthrope and wants no part of the trappings of society. As he leaves

his home and passes through the gates of Athens, he hurls a lengthy curse back at the city, cursing everyone within it:

Let me look back upon thee. O thou wall
 That girdles in those wolves, dive in the earth
 And fence not Athens! Matrons, turn incontinent;
 Obedience, fail in children; slaves and fools,
 Pluck the grave wrinkled senate from the bench
 And minister in their steads. To general filths
 Convert o'th' instant, green virginity,
 Do't in your parents' eyes. Bankrupts, hold fast;
 Rather than render back, out with your knives
 And cut your trusters' throats! Bound servants, steal:
 And pill by law. Maid, to thy master's bed,
 Thy mistress is o'th' brothel. Son of sixteen,
 Pluck the lined crutch from thy old limping sire,
 With it beat out his brains. Piety and fear,
 Religion to the gods, peace, justice, truth,
 Domestic awe, nigh-rest and neighbourhood,
 Instruction, manners, mysteries and trades,
 Degrees, observances, customs and laws,
 Decline to your confounding contraries –
 And let confusion live! Plagues incident to men,
 On Athens, ripe for stroke. Thou cold sciatica,
 Cripple our senators that their limbs may halt
 As lamely as their manners; lust and liberty,
 Creep in the minds and marrows of our youth
 That 'gainst the stream of virtue they may strive
 And drown themselves in riot. Itches, blains,
 Sow all th' Athenian bosoms, and their crop
 Be general leprosy; breath, infect breath,
 That their society, as their friendship, may
 Be merely poison. Nothing I'll bear from thee
 But nakedness, thou detestable town.
 Take thou that too, with multiplying bans.
 Timon will to the woods, where he shall find
 Th'unkindest beast more kinder than mankind.
 The gods confound – here me, you good gods all! –
 Th'Athenians both within and out that wall,
 And grant as Timon grows his hate may grow
 To the whole race of mankind, high and low!
 Amen. (4.1.1-41)

Though women are nearly absent from this play, Timon calls for women to be the undoing of Athenian society and mankind. He calls for the disruption of the social order, beginning with the actions of women, and then charges those who are governed to go against their socially prescribed roles. He invokes plague and disease to cripple the senators, corrupt the youth, and disease all Athenians, to infect their society. He spurns the society and declares he will take nothing from it but nakedness. He tells Athens to "Take thou that too," possibly referring to clothes, and leaves with nothing to go live in the woods where even the unkindest beast will be kinder than mankind. Timon calls for his curses to reproduce, those "multiplying bans," just as diseases spread and reproduce. He then invokes the gods to confound, or deviate, humankind and that the deviation will grow in proportion to Timon's hate. The generality of this curse is unlike that of the other curses explored. Rather than invoke revenge on specific people as Margaret, Lear and Lavinia did, Timon invokes his rage at all of humanity and wishes his downfall to be echoed in the downfall of humanity. The scope of his curse makes it too broad to come to literal fruition in the play, and can instead be read as his condemnation of society and the people within it. Since Timon has already suffered the inhospitality of his friends, his curse is a reflection of what he believes has already happened, rather than what will happen. Timon's curse is a constative warning, a description of the atrocities already committed by humanity.

Like Lear's curse, Timon's curse focuses on sexuality and sexual organs. Lear curses Goneril's womb to cease to function, and Timon curses people to promiscuity so they contract syphilis. This curse is also significantly different from Margaret's curse in

Richard III. Margaret's curse is the externalizing of her revenge in the form of a speech act, while Timon's lengthy curse tells us about his mental shift from generous philanthropist to bitter misanthropist. Timon's curse is a constative speech act by its condemnation of Athens and his interpretation of how far society has fallen.

While Timon has certainly fallen far from his position of wealth and favor in his community, the depth of his fall was determined by him. Like Lear who chose to leave his daughters' houses, it was Timon's choice to leave Athens and tear his clothes off along the way. By voluntarily spurning the trappings of society, he is not as powerless as Margaret or Lavinia, who had their power taken from them against their will. Timon's cursing carries less efficacy because of his relationship to power, but also as a result of his distance from women. In all the other curses, women are either cursed or cursing. In this entire play the only women to appear are prostitutes in the woods who are accompanying Alcibiades. Timon charges one to,

Be a whore still, they love thee not that use thee;
Give them diseases, leaving with thee their lust.
Make use of thy salt hours: season the slaves
For tubs and baths, bring down rose-cheeked youth
To the tub-fast and the diet (4.3.83-7)

Just as in the curse in 4.1 where Timon calls for women to be the carriers of the curse and be the cause of the downfall of mankind, here he charges a woman to go forward and spread her disease throughout Athens and bring down society. Although the presence of women is significantly reduced in this play, Timon still recognizes and calls upon the power of women's destructive force. Their association with witchcraft and cursing is indicative of their darkness and marginalization. Cursing by a woman results in death;

cursing through women is swearing. Without the power of women with their ability to spread disease and their lamentations to pierce heaven, Timon's curses are merely swears that bring no result.

While the curses in the histories demonstrate increased efficacy culminating with Margaret, the curses in the tragedies arc down toward Timon's fruitless curse. Lavinia's truncated curse is the most efficacious of the tragic curses, but as women are increasingly separated from the cursing process in *King Lear* and *Timon of Athens*, the efficacy of the curse decreases. In addition to the presence of women influencing the efficacy of a curse, the genre of the play carries a distinct role. Shakespeare uses curses in the histories to enact fate, bringing about the predetermined downfall, but uses curses in the tragedies to illustrate the futility of fighting against fate, and they offer a reflection of the corruption already present in the cursed characters and societies. In plays where most of the characters are doomed to tragic fates, the presence of infelicitous curses serves to emphasize the tragic nature of the play and the characters.

A TEMPESTUOUS CONCLUSION

Curses become increasingly ineffective through the tragic plays, which leads to the ultimate examples of ineffective cursing, Caliban's curses in *The Tempest*. The tragedies take place in worlds where the gods are distanced and uninvolved in the lives of humans. In the histories, curses show the characters fated to gain power. In the tragedies, curses show the characters fated to be powerless. In *The Tempest*, Caliban is fated to be powerless because of his colonized status on the island and Prospero's overwhelming power on the island. Prospero takes on the role of the god figure through his colonization of the island and ability to wield magic. His power over Caliban is absolute, and Caliban's attempt to harm him through language is laughably futile. As a result of Prospero's omnipotence, Caliban's curses lose all aspects of illocutionary or perlocutionary speech acts and are ultimately ineffective. Although Caliban's curses contain all the necessary requirements to be effective, his attempt to curse the god of his world reduces his curses to utterances with no hope of being realized, effectively turning them into swear words.

Although Caliban carries many of the characteristics of a successful curser, including a fall from power, societal marginalization, and feminization of his curse, his failure lies in the lack of authority behind his words. Caliban lives in a world governed by god-like Prospero. Prospero's ability to wield magic enables him to control Caliban and Ariel. Additionally, Prospero's maleness distinguishes his magic as favorable, as opposed to Joan and Eleanor's morally unacceptable witchcraft. The result of this significant power wielded by Prospero is the absolute oppression of Caliban and the inability to

speak performatively. Authority is integral to the efficacy of performative speech acts and this is reflected in Caliban's failed cursing. Butler explains the importance of authority in illocutionary acts:

I may well utter a speech act, indeed, one that is illocutionary in Austin's sense, when I say, 'I condemn you,' but if I am not in a position to have my words considered as binding, then I may well have uttered a speech act, but the act is, in Austin's sense, unhappy or infelicitous: you escape unscathed. Thus, many such speech acts are 'conduct' in a narrow sense, but not all of them have the power to produce the effects or initiate a set of consequences; indeed, many of them are quite comic in this regard. (16)

Unlike the other cursers in the histories and tragedies, who never resort to cursing the gods, Caliban attempts to curse up the hierarchy. His curse on a god contains no hope of fruition because of the overwhelming power of Prospero. Since Caliban is the "other" on the island, presumably any curses he would unleash against any of the colonizers of the island would be ineffective. Caliban's attempt to curse up the hierarchy without authority is what dooms his curses to be fruitless.

Although Caliban lacks the authority to curse, his motivations behind cursing are the same as all the other cursers analyzed in this paper. Caliban believes he has been wronged by Prospero and seeks vengeance. According to Prospero, he had treated Caliban kindly until Caliban's attempted rape of Miranda. Miranda taught Caliban language and Prospero allowed him to live with them. Once Caliban attempted to violate Miranda, Prospero cast him out and treated him as a slave. It is through language that Prospero enacts the social domination of master and servant. Caliban recognizes the power of language and for that he curses Miranda:

You taught me language, and my profit on't
Is I know how to curse. The red plague rid you

For learning me your language! 1.2.362-4

Caliban was elevated enough to be thoroughly oppressed through enslavement and disinheritance. Caliban's anger over his treatment at the hands of Prospero and Prospero's conquest of the island feeds Caliban's anger and desire for revenge. However, Caliban is fated to never achieve vengeance. His words become as ineffective as swear words, despite the malicious intent behind them.

Caliban's curses take on a reflexive nature, similar to those seen in the history plays. He calls upon the powers of his dead mother and curses himself for helping Prospero on the island when he first arrived, condemning himself for his actions and reflecting his already cursed status as enslaved and disinherited. Caliban's claim to the island stems from his mother, Sycorax, and she had the power that Caliban longs to gain:

And then I loved thee,
And showed thee all the qualities o'th' isle,
The fresh springs, brine pits, barren place and fertile –
Cursed be I that did so! All the charms
Of Sycorax, toads, beetles, bats light on you! (1.2.336-40)

Caliban's call for the charms of his mother to be the fulfillment of his curse and vengeance against Prospero feminizes the curse, just as Timon's curse was. His phrase, "Cursed be I that did so," acts performatively by cursing his own future, and constatively by communicating his already cursed state.

Caliban's call on his mother to fulfill his curse simultaneously feminizes his curse and embraces the supernatural. Sycorax is a witch who supposedly mated with the devil to produce Caliban. Caliban is described as being part fish and was without language until Miranda taught it to him. Caliban wants to recapture the power of his mother, and

control of his island through his curses. Like Timon, he calls upon the power of the feminine to fulfill his curse, and like Joan and Eleanor, he embodies a type of power that stems from a more evil place than the power of language. Sycorax's foul witchcraft is contrasted with Prospero's noble sorcery, and it is that feminine witchcraft Caliban calls upon to fulfill his curse, aligning cursing and witchcraft once again. The benevolent Miranda taught dehumanized Caliban language, feminizing his language and the manifestations of it. However, despite the feminization of his learning and manifestations of language, his efforts still prove to be futile. Caliban, like Eleanor and Timon, is fated to be ineffective.

Even though Caliban has all the characteristics to be an efficacious curser, the omnipotence of Prospero overwhelms the potency of Caliban's language. Caliban's lack of authority over Prospero renders his speech impotent and it loses all aspects of performativity. His curses are rendered as constative speech acts, destined to have no greater effect than "Zounds", "Marry" and "A pox o' your throat." Perhaps the easiest explanation for this lies in the genre of the play. As seen in the histories and tragedies, genre has a clear influence on the effect of curses and that carries through to *The Tempest*. Called a romance, comedy, or tragi-comedy, *The Tempest* has a tidy ending where the majority of the characters end up happy. In a world where characters are destined to regain lost property and make happy marriages, the curses of the "other" could not be efficacious in this world. Curses by definition are negative, and there is no room for Caliban's misfortune in this fortunate world.

While the social perception of curses remained the same throughout Shakespeare's writing lifetime, he used them in very different ways throughout his body of work. From the enactment of fate, to the railing against fate, to the complete separation of Caliban from civilization, curses display the marginalization always present in societies. This feminized tool of vengeance is an important characteristic in early modern literature, and understanding the cultural significance of it can lead to a more thorough understanding of its functions in Shakespeare's texts. Though this marginalization may seem to render these outcasts powerless, it is that very act of marginalization that allows them to "fill the world with words" and enables those words to "pierce the clouds and enter heaven."

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