CHAPTER 4

Blurring the Boundaries
Effeminacy and Feminine History

In proposing a gendered tension at the heart of Shakespeare's history plays, I join a substantial body of similar thinking. From the often-discussed and practically proverbial distinction between the effeminate French and Spanish and the hearty English, to the gendered undertones of Bolingbroke's overthrow of Richard II and Prince Hal's rejection of Falstaff, critics have long understood that gender is fundamental to the history plays, if not necessarily in the form of female characters. Essential to the history of this argument is not only a binary divide between men and women, but a blurrier relationship between masculinity and femininity onto which competing visions of rulership and Englishness are mapped. This awareness of gendered pressures is reflected even in discourses of the time, most famously Thomas Nashe's suggestion that a history play could act as 'reproof to these degenerate effeminate days'.[1] On the other hand, as Rebecca Ann Bach points out, even though 'Shakespeare's history plays display and reproduce dominant ideologies [of gender] . . . Shakespeare himself is clearly well aware that this reproduction sits uneasily with the theatre's inherent effeminacy'.[2] Analysing the presence of this effeminacy within the texts themselves is and has been considered essential to fully understanding how gender operates in the structure of Shakespeare's history plays.

Discussions of effeminacy in both tetralogies have focused in large part on the military ineptitude and personal sensitivity of King Henry VI and King Richard II, with Falstaff also discussed as a grotesquely feminised body. But twenty-first century definitions of effeminacy do not always match what the early modern period would have considered a transgression of gendered norms. The word 'effeminate' itself is a case in point, most frequently used in the sixteenth century to describe a man who was overly preoccupied with sex and women. This is presumably the usage

[1] Nashe, p. 1010. [2] Bach, p. 235.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 16 Nov 2026 at 23:56:00, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009356121.005

intended by King Henry IV when he describes his son as a 'young wanton and effeminate boy' at the end of *Richard II* (5.3.10). While current associations with masculinity and virility suggest the word has completely reversed its original meaning, the early modern period's expectations of proper masculine behaviour in fact reveal otherwise. As Alexandra Shepard writes, men in the early modern period were accused of effeminacy when they engaged in 'excessive or unchecked behaviour that diverted them from their rational purpose. Conduct writers . . . equated manhood with reason, temperance, and self-control and labelled deviation from these virtues in antithetical terms of unmanliness, beastliness, or effeminacy'.[3] Within this framework, the use of 'effeminate' to describe an excessively lustful man seems not like an outlier, but a logical aspect of the period's understanding of women as incapable of controlling their impulses and desires. By early modern standards, Henry VI, with his excessive pity and emotional vulnerability, is just as effeminate as the virile Edward IV and his proclivity for 'caper[ing] nimbly in a lady's chamber' (*R3*, 1.1.12), though in our current culture these behaviours exist at opposite ends of a binary gender spectrum.

Though critics including Alan Sinfield have been careful to delineate the difference, there is still a distinct critical tendency to replicate our present association of effeminacy with homosexuality, meaning that characters more amenable to queer readings, like Richard II or even Falstaff, are frequently discussed in terms of effeminacy, but characters who resist such readings are overlooked.[4] To the extent that sodomy might have been seen as an outlet for a man's effeminately voracious sexual appetite, or that excessive preference shown to a favourite was indicative of a general lack of self-restraint, the association is logical. But in general, this pattern in criticism has led to the impression of a false equivalency between early modern and current connotations of the word 'effeminate', both in relation to sexuality and in general. Emphasising the differences between

[3] Alexandra Shepard. *Meanings of Manhood in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 29–30. Shepard and others argue that this ideal represented one of many, sometimes competing, visions of masculinity in the early modern period, with young men and lower-class men in particular laying claim to 'effeminate' behaviour such as excessive public drunkenness or violence as a form of manhood. However, as this chapter shall demonstrate, Shakespeare's structural subordination of these alternate forms of masculinity and, in some cases, specific descriptions of them as failures of manhood, suggest that it is accurate, for our purposes, to define ideal manhood in the terms quoted here. This distinction highlights the importance, discussed in Chapter 2, of separating theatrical characters from actual social practice.

[4] Alan Sinfield, *Shakespeare, Authority, Sexuality: Unfinished Business in Cultural Materialism* (London: Routledge, 2006).

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 16 Nov 2026 at 23:56:00, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009356121.005

sixteenth- and twenty-first-century gendered expectations is essential to locating the presence of effeminacy in the history plays and to thereby uncover its role in Shakespeare's gendered historical dramaturgy.

Both Jean E. Howard and Jennifer C. Vaught have considered tears as a sign of effeminacy in history plays through readings that highlight the complexity of such gendered signifiers in the early modern period. Both suggest the use of tears as a double-edged indicator: as Howard writes, '[t]here were many early modern discourses ... in which weeping was considered salutary, both for men and for women. For example, the inability to weep could be a sign of humoral imbalance'.[5] Vaught argues that, in Shakespeare's plays, 'those men who ally themselves with women by adopting conventionally feminine forms of expression such as weeping and wailing are often strengthened rather than weakened as a result'.[6] Vaught's reading highlights the potential for male characters to engage in the rhetorical and dramaturgical strategies associated with women discussed thus far. By doing so, a male character might gain the power of 'conventionally feminine forms of expression', but thereby risks being rendered effeminate. I will call this state of being structural effeminacy to emphasise, as Vaught does, that it is a question of form rather than of content: such male characters draw upon female forms of expression, but may not otherwise conduct themselves in an effeminate manner. Kathleen McLuskie notes that, in early modern drama, '[t]he signification of "woman" is entirely contained within the text and in no way depends on the personality or the gender of the actor in question'.[7] As Howard and Vaught demonstrate, the same might be said in relation to certain feminine acts and the gender of the character performing them. For this reason, it is more useful to consider the types of speech and structural positions discussed in Chapter 3 not as female, but as feminine.

In accessing this feminine speech, male characters enter the likewise feminine dramaturgical space characterised by marginalisation that the previous chapters have illustrated. Andrew M. Kirk argues that a ruler's effeminacy renders him ineffective on multiple levels, as '[m]en with qualities conventionally ascribed to women are shown to be incapable of ruling or defending their country, incapable of controlling the forces of history'.[8] Kirk's argument reflects both the political and historical

[5] Jean E. Howard, 'Monarchs Who Cry: The Gendered Politics of Weeping in the English History Play', in *A Feminist Companion to Shakespeare*, ed. by Dympna Callaghan (Malden: Blackwell, 2016), 457–466, p. 460.
[6] Vaught, p. 2. [7] McLuskie, p. 103. [8] Kirk, p. 110.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 16 Nov 2026 at 23:56:00, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009356121.005

dimensions of their failings: they lose control not only of their country, but of their place in history itself. Structural effeminacy expands beyond kings, offering male characters across the history plays access to the kinds of historical insight – expressed through curses, prophecies, and genealogies – that Chapter 3 defined as feminine. But these men are bound by the same structural requirements for doing so as female characters: marginalisation from political and structural power. Sometimes this marginalisation is directly associated with a male character's personal effeminacy, but, at other times, the separation between structural role and character is more distinct, with characters verbally accessing rather than personally embodying these feminine traits, a fact that highlights the extent to which gender position in Shakespeare's histories is fundamentally a question of power.

Prophesy may be the form of feminised speech to which male characters have the readiest access: across the histories, male characters step aside to deliver anxious and ominous prophesies, often at the end of a scene. However, unlike the confident curses of Margaret, these glimpses of the future consistently serve to reinforce the speaker's lack of power to influence the events he foresees, as when the dying Gaunt, 'a prophet new-inspired', foresees the degradation of England, which '[h]ath made a shameful conquest of itself' (*R2*, 2.1.66). Repeatedly, male characters look into a future they fear is slipping out of their control, either due to changing political tides or, more frequently, their own impending death. This is in itself an instructive difference between male and female characters' relationships to power: there is very little that can permanently remove a male character's political autonomy besides mortality, and thus it is often necessary to reach the brink of death in order to become truly disempowered. Female characters do die, of course, but it is almost always offstage, and often after a prolonged absence from the stage, indicative of their separation from both political and structural power. King Henry VI, for example, floats at the margins of power for three plays, but is only decisively severed from it by death. In the penultimate scene of *3 Henry VI*, aware he is about to be killed, King Henry looks forward into the future:

> And thus I prophesy: that many a thousand
> Which now mistrust no parcel of my fear,
> And many an old man's sigh, and many a widow's
> And many an orphan's water-standing eye,
> Men for their sons, wives for their husbands,
> Orphans for their parents' timeless death,
> Shall rue the hour that ever thou wast born. (5.6.37–43)

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 16 Nov 2026 at 23:56:00, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009356121.005

Transitioning from this foresight into a narrative of Richard's birth, and the accompanying ill omens that seem to offer proof of what he foresees, Henry sounds a great deal like the mournful, prophetic women discussed in Chapter 3. Having short-sightedly trusted York and his sons to keep their word at the beginning of the play, on the brink of death, Henry gains the clarity to see who Richard really is and who he will become. Kavita Mudan Finn notes that York himself likewise turns to the 'primarily feminine rhetorical tropes' of cursing and prophecy before his death, which 'signifies [his] diminished position'.[9]

Prophecies inspired by purely political marginalisation do occur, as in *1 Henry VI* when Warwick, despite initially insisting that he is unfit to arbitrate the conflict between Somerset and York, finds himself taking sides and is driven to 'prophesy: this brawl today, / Grown to this faction in the Temple garden, / Shall send, between the red rose and the white, / A thousand souls to death and deadly night' (2.4.124–7). Warwick, no longer able to prevent this conflict, is correct in his vision of its potential outcome.

A similar moment occurs in *2 Henry VI*, when the Duke of Gloucester, who has repeatedly insisted that his innocence of any wrongdoing will protect him from his political enemies, realises that he is doomed. His death, he tells King Henry, 'is made the prologue to their play; / For thousands more, that yet suspect no peril, / Will not conclude their plotted tragedy' (3.1.151–3). Queen Margaret, with false magnanimity, emphasises the powerlessness of Gloucester's position when she declines to scold him for insulting her: 'I can give the loser leave to chide' (3.1.182). Though Gloucester's death is not formally plotted until the end of the scene, and not carried out until the next, his complete separation from political power has already been enacted and for the first time he can see the internecine threats he previously believed himself to be immune to. His invocation of theatrical language highlights the association, discussed in Chapter 2, between theatrical privilege – a character's metatheatrical awareness of their control over the mechanisms of the stage – and the historical privilege of seeing the future. By gaining the ability to understand how the theatre works, he is able to more clearly see the intended progress of the historical play itself.

In stark contrast to Gloucester's clarity of vision are the mistaken prophecies of the ascendant Edward IV, who interprets his vision of three suns as a promise that he and his two brothers will 'join our lights

[9] Mudan Finn, p. 158.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 16 Nov 2026 at 23:56:00, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009356121.005

together / and overshine the earth' (*3H6*, 2.1.37–8), or takes the promise that '"G"/ Of Edward's heirs the murderer shall be' to mean his brother George, rather than the real killer, Gloucester (*R3*, 1.1.39–50). As with female characters, prophetic accuracy increases the closer men draw to the margins of power, while those firmly in control of their own historical destiny cannot see beyond the frame of history into what is yet to come.

Genealogies, too, appear in the mouths of male characters who have been deprived of any other means of asserting their version of history. The elderly Mortimer recites one of Shakespeare's most famous and lengthy genealogies to his nephew York, passing on the mantle of the familial claim to power that he failed to secure, and will now be prevented from pursuing by his impending death (*1H6*, 2.5). As he slips farther from power in *Richard II*, Gaunt increasingly draws on the genealogical language first used, as Molly Smith highlights, by his sister-in-law the Duchess of Gloucester.[10] Reference to the Plantagenet bloodline becomes a means for Gaunt to express his frustration and despair at his nephew Richard's reckless rule. In her single scene, the Duchess of Gloucester emphasises the 'seven fair branches springing from one root' (1.2.13) of Edward III's sons, while Gaunt subordinates this familial claim to revenge to the orderly rights of monarchy. But in Gaunt's final appearance in the play, he repeatedly refers to his father and brothers, now situating himself within the genealogical mode of thinking he previously rejected. Only as he nears death is he able, like Lady Percy and the female historians discussed in Chapter 3, to recontextualise what has come before in light of what he now understands, looking simultaneously to the past and future: 'O, had thy grandsire with a prophet's eye / Seen how his son's son should destroy his sons, / From forth thy reach he would have laid thy shame, / Deposing thee before thou wert possessed, / Which art possessed now to depose thyself' (2.1.104–8). In foreseeing Richard's self-deposition, he demonstrates precisely the prophetic power he longs to assign to Richard's grandfather, recalling Lady Percy's unique ability to influence the present by speaking for those who, like Edward III and his sons, are gone.

A different kind of clarity comes to men on the brink of death in *Richard III*, who suddenly recognise the power of Margaret's curses earlier in the play. 'Now Margaret's curse is fall'n upon our heads', Grey realises before he and his companions are executed (3.3.13). Such deadly clarity strikes again just a scene later: 'O Margaret, Margaret, now thy heavy curse / Is lighted on poor Hastings' wretched head' (3.4.97–8). Buckingham not

[10] Molly Smith, p. 286.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 16 Nov 2026 at 23:56:00, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009356121.005

only evokes her name but quotes her directly: 'Now Margaret's curse is fallen upon my head. / "When he [Richard]," quoth she, "shall split thy heart with sorrow, / Remember Margaret was a prophetess"' (5.1.25–7). Delivering these lines, the male characters, like many female characters, seem to step temporarily outside of the linear temporality of the drama and see the broad scope of the curse that has been working against them. Grey and Rivers use this power to attempt to expand the curse beyond themselves – 'Then cursed she Richard, then cursed she Buckingham, / Then cursed she Hastings. O, remember, God, / To hear her prayer for them as now for us' (3.3.15–7) – and prove successful, or at least accurate in foreseeing the potency of Margaret's already-created curse. From these feminine structural positions, all of these male characters exit to their deaths.

In Shakespeare's Globe's 2019 production, this sense of stepping outside the linear timeline of the drama was envisioned literally, as the characters' textually offstage deaths were instead brutally enacted onstage, as a white-clad Richard (often accompanied by a stone-faced Catesby) personally saw his victims off in visceral, gonzo sequences that spattered blood across the plastic-covered walls and were accompanied by Sophie Russell as Richard performing a range of covers of Kris Kristofferson's 'For the Good Times'. These high-spirited and chaotic sequences ended abruptly, with audiences generally applauding Richard's exit, only to descend into an uneasy silence while waiting for the corpse of Richard's victim to slowly rise to their feet and speak, their prophetic dying lines shifted to become post-mortem direct address, often alone onstage. The isolation and abrupt rejection of any pretence of naturalism both during and after their murders emphasised their dislocation from the usual stream of history, and foreshadowed their reappearance as ghosts to enact the final stage of Margaret's curse. Richard's death came very literally at the hands of his former victims in this production, as they pinned him to the wall with sprays of blood like a firing squad, then smothered him in the plastic sheeting that had covered up his own murders – all accompanied, naturally, by a final rendition of 'For the Good Times' from the live band.

None of the characters described in the preceding paragraphs has been widely described by critics as effeminate, nor do their personal traits suggest that an early modern audience would have considered them as such. They reflect instead the gendered conflict embedded within Shakespeare's history plays, between those who manipulate the political currents of the plays and thus cannot see them clearly, and those who, powerless, are granted the ability to observe and sometimes to describe

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 16 Nov 2026 at 23:56:00, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009356121.005

history's full scope. The insistent association of marginalisation with femininity across Shakespeare's history plays displays an important aspect of the sense, expressed by the critics noted, that the central symbolic conflicts of the plays, their meditations on power and legacy, cannot be separated from the question of gender. This chapter will now propose three primary forms of structural effeminacy in Shakespeare's history plays, three sites of blurred gender boundaries between men and women: insufficiently masculine men who are forced into feminine exclusion from history, female historians who restore their male relatives into the masculine historical record, and boy characters, whose age and casting places them in a sometimes indeterminate gendered position both culturally and onstage. Because early modern definitions of effeminacy are often illegible to contemporary audiences, this chapter will draw particularly heavily on performance case studies to investigate the durability of these structural tendencies, which emerge even in places where the effeminacy of the characters in question is not readily perceived by contemporary expectations of masculinity.

Effeminate Men and Women's History

1 Henry VI opens with a scene of extravagant mourning that recalls the displays of loss and sorrow enacted by the female characters described earlier in this book. Unlike these unruly and disruptive figures, however, *1 Henry VI* depicts an authorised form of mourning, a state funeral for King Henry V that is disrupted not by inappropriately excessive sorrow, but by those who are criticised as paying insufficient attention to the scene of loss they are enacting, focusing instead on petty personal rivalries (1.1.44). The oldest of the deceased King Henry V's brothers, the Duke of Bedford, takes on the role of the chief mourner, painting in vivid terms the personal and political dispossession that will stem from Henry's death. Bedford's description of a world with 'none but women left to wail the dead' (1.1.49) evokes the feminine history-telling that the plays discussed in earlier chapters, including *Richard II*, *Richard III*, and *1* and *2 Henry IV*, all depict as a force for relative good. But Bedford's speech expresses anxiety over the possibility of an England left unpeopled of anyone but mourning women. His fear reveals the other side of female memorialisation: not the women who speak, but the men they speak about. While Chapter 3 demonstrated that women's mourning and history-telling has distinct power, Bedford suggests that, for a man, being made the object of a woman's memories is a fate to be feared. It means, after all, that the

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 16 Nov 2026 at 23:56:00, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009356121.005

man in question has died and permanently lost his ability to make a mark on history. More importantly, as this chapter will demonstrate, it means he has failed to root his image in the structured, documented preserves of masculinised history, forced instead to rely on the often unstable, marginalised narratives of women. In such male characters, structural and personal effeminacy are often united, though not always in terms that are readily legible to contemporary audiences and readers. In this union of personal and structural effeminacy, a character's insufficient masculinity in his personal conduct bleeds into his position in history itself, suggesting that one of the central threats of 'womanly' behaviour in Shakespeare's history plays is the risk of thereby assuming a woman's place in history.

When the Oregon Shakespeare Festival cast Alejandra Escalante as Hotspur in 2017, some audience members and local journalists complained about the choice, despite the fact that the play's contemporary setting and casting of women in multiple prominent martial roles, including as Hotspur's uncle Worcester, deliberately normalised Hotspur's presence in the military of the production's imagined England. Their issue was more deeply rooted: that a woman could not possibly play the hypermasculine Hotspur without fundamentally undermining the character's identity. On the other hand, positive reception of Jade Anouka's portrayal of the character in Phyllida Lloyd's all female production (described in more detail in Chapter 2) was in part because, as Jacqueline Rose writes in her review of the performance, Anouka's own gender threw the character's performance of idealised masculinity into stark relief by contrast.[11] Roberta Barker argues that 'the readings of Hotspur's role that dominate page and stage at a given time will most likely be those that reproduce their own cultures' normative concepts of masculine heroism', a tendency reflected in these opposite reactions to the concept of a woman playing Hotspur.[12] In Oregon, some audiences and critics felt that Escalante was fundamentally incapable of embodying the ideals that Hotspur represents; in London, Anouka's performance was understood as a deliberate critique of the impossibility of this ideal. But despite this reputation as the paragon of manliness, Hotspur in fact bears distinct signs of effeminacy in the text itself. He is even described in feminine terms by other characters, as when his uncle Worcester accuses him of 'break[ing] into this woman's mood / Tying thine ear to no tongue but thine own!'

[11] Rose.

[12] Roberta Barker, 'Tragical-Comical-Historical Hotspur', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 54 (2003), 288–307, p. 299.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 16 Nov 2026 at 23:56:00, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009356121.005

(1.3.245–6). His unstoppable tongue, devotion to violence, and bursts of anger are now read as masculine stereotypes, but in the early modern period were all markers of effeminacy, proof of a lack of temperance and self-control.[13]

In her speech in remembrance of Hotspur, Lady Percy highlights these shortcomings, noting that his fame was so great that imitators even mimicked his faults: 'speaking thick, which nature made his blemish, / Became the accents of the valiant; / For those that could speak low and tardily / Would turn their own perfection to abuse / To seem like him' (2.3.24–8). Early twentieth century Hotspurs, most famously Laurence Olivier, interpreted these lines to mean that Hotspur spoke with a stammer, but Lady Percy more likely refers to his tendency towards fits of temper and uncontrolled verbal outbursts.[14] This effort to reconfigure Hotspur's faults into evidence of his greatness – though Lady Percy herself acknowledges that his temper was a 'blemish' and an imperfection – is a key example of the narrative instability that accompanies feminine history-telling. A male character who cannot tell his own story naturally loses control over how the history of his actions is depicted and deployed.

By reframing rather than conventionally erasing her husband's faults, Lady Percy highlights them, and her speech draws particular attention to the negative traits most associated with effeminacy. Moreover, she does this in order to encourage her father-in-law to make a choice of which Hotspur himself would surely not approve: to abandon his allies and flee to Scotland rather than going to war. When Lady Percy vanishes from history after her single scene in *2 Henry IV*, Hotspur vanishes with her. He is mentioned in the play only once by those outside his family, characterised by the new generation of rebels as a rash failure. Lord Bardolph raises him as a cautionary example, someone 'who lined himself with hope, / . . . And so, with great imagination / Proper to madmen, led his powers to death' (1.3.29–34). With his true legacy consigned to the marginal world of women, the voices of masculine history misremember him, disdain him, then forget him. Though echoes of his style of speech endure in the language deployed by Henry V in his battles in France, they go unacknowledged as such. With none but a woman left to weep his death, Hotspur loses his place in the history made by men. Hotspur is one of several prominent characters in the second tetralogy to trace this structural

[13] Shepard, pp. 29–30.
[14] Scott McMillin, *Henry IV Part One*. Shakespeare in Performance Series (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1991), p. 27.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 16 Nov 2026 at 23:56:00, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009356121.005

path. Richard II, Falstaff, and Henry Bolingbroke represent different kinds of effeminacy – different from Hotspur and from one another – but all demonstrate how effeminacy blurs the line between masculine and feminine roles in history as it is both performed and retold.

Since his inclusion in Patricia Parker's *Literary Fat Ladies*, Falstaff's feminine traits have been widely recognised.[15] His leaky corpulence, his verbal excess, and his own references to his 'womb' all echo early modern beliefs about the uncontrollable female body. He is set in perhaps ironic contrast to Prince Hal, who is the only character in the first tetralogy to be explicitly called effeminate, but who consistently demonstrates that this is not an accurate assessment; indeed, his soliloquy in Act 2, Scene 1 of *1 Henry IV* cautions the audience against taking other characters' descriptions of his bad behaviour at face value. Fred B. Tromly notes that, despite his reputation for wanton disorder, Hal 'shows no interest in women, and it is not clear that he ever actually takes a drink ... Hal is obsessed throughout the play with the paying of debts, those of other people as well as his own'.[16] This fixation on redeeming debts – beginning with his promise to 'pay the debt I never promised' in his first and only soliloquy in the *Henry IV* plays (*1H4*, 1.2.197) – belies his apparent effeminate and irresponsible lack of interest in his political duties, as it links him directly to the preferred political metaphor of the rebellious Percys. King Henry IV 'studies day and night / To answer all the debt he owes to you' (1.3.184–5), Hotspur reminds his father and uncle, and Worcester agrees that 'the King will always think him[self] in our debt' (1.3.284). Hal's allusion to 'the debt I never promised' (1.2.197) not only suggests his awareness of the specific political currents at work in his country, but points to another distinctly masculine trait that other characters believe he lacks: the ability to set aside self-interest.

Rebecca Ann Bach proposes that Shakespeare's history plays 'degrade self-actualizing goals and the pursuit of individual pleasure', instead framing ideal masculinity as 'diametrically opposed to "selfe-loue"'.[17] This is another key element of the gendered contrast between Hal and Falstaff, one that the scene of Hal's rejection of Falstaff makes legible in both contemporary and early modern terms. Falstaff's effeminacy – expressed primarily through his determined pursuit of personal pleasure at the

[15] Patricia Parker, *Literary Fat Ladies: Rhetoric, Gender, Property* (London: Methuen, 1987).
[16] Fred B. Tromly, *Fathers and Sons in Shakespeare* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010), p. 97.
[17] Bach, p. 22.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 16 Nov 2026 at 23:56:00, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009356121.005

expense of any responsibility to a greater good – is one reason Hal must reject him. But the rejection itself can be read in terms of our own modern gender tropes, as Falstaff displays a stereotypically feminine degree of excessive emotional attachment, assuming personal ties will supersede political propriety, while Hal turns him away with cool, strategic, masculine detachment.

In *DruidShakespeare*, a 2015 production by Irish company Druid that combined abbreviated versions of *Richard II*, *1* and *2 Henry IV*, and *Henry V* into a single performance that lasted for approximately six hours (with two intervals and a dinner break), activation of contemporary resonances through casting as well as the production's marathon format allowed Falstaff's literal and metaphorical banishment from the centre of historical power to be displayed to an unusually full extent. The production toured venues across Ireland and to New York City, but its first set of performances (the version described here) were in Druid's hometown of Galway, at the Mick Lally Theatre. The black box venue made an intimate affair of the small ensemble and the highly abbreviated adaptations of each part of the play, the up-close and visceral energy enhanced by a dirt-covered floor and, eventually, rainfall over the Battle of Agincourt.

Director (and company artistic director) Garry Hynes employed what was repeatedly described in interviews as 'gender blind' casting,[18] in which the characters' genders did not necessarily correlate to those of the actors playing them, including the casting of female actor Aisling O'Sullivan as Prince Hal. Masculine Hal played by a woman and effeminate Falstaff played by a man emphasised the performativity of these gender ideals – both in the sense proposed by Judith Butler, but also in the terms I have suggested in this chapter so far: that effeminacy functions as a structural position, a way of existing within Shakespeare's dramaturgy rather than purely as a personal characteristic or mode of behaviour.[19] By the end of *2 Henry IV*, Falstaff, whatever his gender or the gender of the actor playing him, begins to function as a woman dramaturgically. His inability to adapt to Hal's masculine style, the tone of the dominant history Hal enters as he ceases to be the 'young wanton and effeminate boy' (5.3.10) his father despairs of in *Richard II* and becomes a king, means Falstaff cannot exist within that history.

[18] Paddy Kehoe, 'Film recalls Druid's history making production', *Raidió Teilifís Éireann*, 15 December 2015, available at: www.rte.ie/entertainment/2015/1214/752375-druidic-powers-druid-do-shakespeare/.

[19] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (London: Routledge, 2006).

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 16 Nov 2026 at 23:56:00, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009356121.005

While the characters discussed at the beginning of this chapter lose their place in history through political dispossession or death, Falstaff is explicitly banished, an exclusion that operates both literally – he must leave court – and metaphorically: he has no place in the history Henry will build. This is demonstrated in *Henry V*, when Captain Fluellen muses about the similarities between King Henry and Alexander the Great, both of whom, among other supposed similarities, banished close friends. At first, however, Fluellen cannot remember the name of King Henry's former friend. In the text, Captain Gower supplies the name for him (4.7.45). In *DruidShakespeare,* though Gower (played by Rory Nolan, who also played Falstaff) began to deliver this line, Fluellen cut him off with his next line before the name Falstaff could be spoken out loud. More completely than in the original text, *DruidShakespeare* banished even Falstaff's memory from the battlefields where the play's masculine history is made. While this is the last mention of Falstaff in the original text, a gradual reduction of references that echoes the slow fading of Hotspur from memory in *2 Henry IV*, in *DruidShakespeare*'s *Henry V*, it was the first time his name was spoken – or almost spoken. Adaptor Mark O'Rowe rearranged several of *Henry V*'s scenes, most notably shifting Hostess Quickly's description of Falstaff's death to the very end of the play, a feminine counterpoint (though played by a man) to the Chorus's subversive concluding speech. Hynes staged the textual but offstage deaths of Bardolph, Nym, and the Boy and added an onstage death in battle for Pistol, leaving Hostess Quickly to share her final memory of Falstaff surrounded by the bodies of her husband and her companions, a stage picture that transformed the words into a de facto eulogy for them as well. All of the men rose from their deaths over the course of the speech to silently bid farewell to the Hostess and depart for the war – and to depart the stage – once more. As the last to speak Falstaff's name, in this adaptation, the Hostess mirrored Lady Percy's role as bearer of her male companions' legacy, confirming the effeminate Falstaff's consignment to feminised history that cannot travel beyond the world of the tavern and to the battlefields of France, and cannot be memorialised in the kind of mythic history that *Henry V*'s Chorus labours to construct.

Falstaff's erasure from history stands in contrast to the legacy of another effeminate male character in both *DruidShakespeare* and the texts themselves: King Richard II. Though Richard is described throughout the play and its sequels in terms of irresponsibility and frivolity, it is notable, given his current critical reputation, that he is never explicitly described as effeminate. Like Hotspur, he is associated with femininity in terms of his

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 16 Nov 2026 at 23:56:00, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009356121.005

speech – Mowbray scorns his attempts at peace-making in the play's first scene as 'the trial of a woman's war' (1.1.48) in contrast to the trial by combat he and Bolingbroke wish to undertake – and in his excessive self-interest and attachment to his favourites at the expense of all others. Richard's imagination itself is subtly gendered feminine, as Lisa Hopkins highlights, in his famous prison monologue, where he strains to make his 'brain . . . prove the female to my soul' (5.5.6).[20]

In *DruidShakespeare*, actor Marty Rea's costume (a fitted gold bodice and floor-length purple skirt), his full face of white make-up, and his delicate mannerisms projected what a modern audience is poised to read as effeminacy, explicitly evoking images of Renaissance femininity through white cosmetics suggestive of Queen Elizabeth I. This struck a distinct contrast to Derbhle Crotty's grounded, stoic Bolingbroke, dressed in leather and dark jeans. Crotty's own description of her performance of the role emphasised a sense of contrast between actor's body and character's gender, commenting that the production's design choices 'reassured the audience that we were not in any way attempting to convince them that we are men'.[21] In other words, Crotty experienced and intended a dissonance between her own body as a female actor and the male character that she played. While the production's design choices could be read as a challenge to the notion of a biological gender binary – that is, the rejection of the idea that gender is essentially defined by secondary sex characteristics – I wish instead to explore the character's arc on the terms Crotty herself proposed. In doing so, I do not wish to reject the rich possibilities of the former, transgender reading,[22] but to focus on the sense of contrast rooted in a binary conception of gender that Crotty's language reflects, both because it remains the dominant mode for interpreting the genders of bodies onstage, and because it reflects the early modern beliefs about the firmly biological but also extremely slippery nature of gender, which included the belief that extreme transgression of one's gender role could result in a literal physical change from one sex to another.[23]

[20] Lisa Hopkins, 'The King's Melting Body: *Richard II*', in *A Companion to Shakespeare's Works: The Histories*, ed. Richard Dutton and Jean E. Howard (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), 395–411, p. 403.

[21] Peter Crawley, 'Blood, Sweat and Breasts: Derbhle Crotty's Bold Approach to Acting', *Irish Times*, 23 February 2016, available at: www.irishtimes.com/culture/stage/blood-sweat-and-breasts-derbhle-crotty-s-bold-approach-to-acting-1.2541284.

[22] For a deeper exploration of the concept of transgender reading, see Robin Craig, *Assimilation or Resistance: The Medicalised Body in 21st Century Shakespearean Performance* (doctoral thesis, University of Roehampton, London).

[23] Stephen Orgel, *Impersonations: The Performance of Gender in Shakespeare's England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 20.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 16 Nov 2026 at 23:56:00, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009356121.005

The production's stated desire for 'blindness' to the actors' genders seemed to be borne out by the distinct difference between Richard's feminine presentation and the actual bearing and aesthetic of any of the female actors onstage, almost all of whom – from Crotty to Karen McCarthy as Scroop and Marie Mullen as Northumberland, and even Charlotte McCurry as the Queen – offered firm and grounded performances, dressed in sombre-coloured knits and heavy boots, in contrast to Richard's scarlet velvet and purple silk. *DruidShakespeare* went on to suggest, however, that Richard's effeminacy was no less a performance than Crotty's embodiment of Bolingbroke's idealised masculinity – that, unlike Sullivan's Hal and Nolan's Falstaff, perhaps the 'truth' of both characters lay in collapsing the gap between actor and character's gender.

In the scene before his death in prison at Pomfret Castle, Richard's costume and cosmetics were implied to be a betrayal of the 'true' maleness of his body. In this scene, Rea washed away his white make-up, removing the blank canvas of his presentational cosmetics even as he gave a speech imagining transforming himself into kings, beggars, and everything in between. Shortly after, he undertook one of his few actions in the play that can be considered unequivocally masculine in both early modern and contemporary terms: the murder of Exton's servants in self-defence when they entered to kill him. Productions often cut this brief triumph of strength on Richard's part, preferring to have Exton (or, as is often now the case, Aumerle) commit the murder alone, but Rea's Richard was able to kill several men before Exton himself entered. Having dispensed with his feminine costume and cosmetics, the prison fight allowed Rea's Richard to display masculine physical might he was never previously implied to possess, answering violence with violence and thereby forcing his way back into Bolingbroke's masculine history. This happens very literally in the play's next scene, when his corpse intrudes suddenly into Bolingbroke's new court, and the indelible guilt of his deposition and murder haunt the subsequent three plays. As with Falstaff's arc, *DruidShakespeare*'s presentation of the entire second tetralogy allowed the enduring resonance of Richard's death, and its ability to shape the events of the reigns of King Henry IV and his son, to be explicitly demonstrated in a way that a performance of *Richard II* alone cannot depict as fully. This was made manifest in *Henry V*, when King Henry's prayer the night before battle that God 'think not upon the faults my father made / In compassing the crown' (4.1.281–2) was accompanied by the appearance of the spectre of Richard himself at Henry's side.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 16 Nov 2026 at 23:56:00, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009356121.005

Richard and Falstaff thus highlight that the fear of effeminacy haunts Shakespeare's history plays not only as the threat of failure to uphold cultural expectations of manliness, but as a danger that men, too, can be forced to the margins of power and relegated to feminine historical legacies. *DruidShakespeare*'s Richard II and Falstaff demonstrate this possibility in condensed form, Richard escaping the need to be memorialised by his wife with a final act of masculine strength that allowed him to assert his presence in the minds of both King Henrys to follow, and Falstaff ultimately forgotten by masculinised history and, like Hotspur, memorialised only by the women left behind by war.

When Rea's Richard appeared in dimly lit, spectral form during King Henry V's battlefield prayer, he was accompanied by Crotty's Henry IV. Henry V's description of his father's actions in his prayer, however, is far from flattering. Much like Lady Percy's appropriation of Hotspur's memory, Henry V distorts his father's legacy in favour of Richard's: Richard's name is spoken, but Henry IV's is passed over. Throughout *Henry V*, the new King Henry V seeks to construct a genealogy that will erase his father, repeatedly making reference to his great-grandfather Edward III – 'from whom you claim' (1.2.105), the Archbishop of Canterbury notes when authorising the French war, a formulation that skips two generations and draws a direct line from Edward to Henry, placing both France and England as inheritances that Henry V can claim without guilt.

King Henry IV is not often counted amongst the effeminate characters of the second tetralogy, but Meghan C. Andrews argues persuasively in favour of reading him as such. She demonstrates his effeminacy in early modern terms, including his self-description as 'cold and temperate' (*1 Henry IV*, 1.3.1), a humoural state associated with femininity, in contrast to warm, dry masculinity; his undesired but apparently unstoppable tears when confronting his son in Act 3 Scene 2 of *1 Henry IV*; the fact that Shakespeare never once depicts him achieving personal success in battle; and parallels between the play's political tensions and those of Shakespeare's England that cast Henry in the role of Queen Elizabeth I.[24] Falstaff, too, obliquely accuses King Henry of effeminacy, describing the 'cold blood that [Prince Hal] did naturally inherit of his father' (5.5.113), which his second son John supposedly likewise shares, making him prone to 'a kind of male green-sickness' (4.2.89) – an illness exclusively associated with young women (hence the need for the modifier 'male'),

[24] Meghan C. Andrews, 'Gender, Genre, and Elizabeth's Princely Surrogates in *Henry IV* and *Henry V*', *Studies in English Literature*, 54.2 (2014), 375–399, pp. 379–381.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 16 Nov 2026 at 23:56:00, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009356121.005

which Falstaff claims Hal has avoided by heating his blood with wine. While there is arguably some humoural logic in Falstaff's insistence that wine, a choleric drink, can counteract effeminate cold bloodedness, the abstemious self-control that Falstaff complains of in John would, as discussed at the beginning of this section, more frequently be considered highly masculine by an early modern viewer or reader. However, the plays affirm Falstaff's conclusion in another sense: if John inherits effeminacy from his father, Hal does not. The prince who will become Henry V will write his name in history in part by erasing his father's.

One of the feminine structural features Henry IV becomes associated with is prophecy. His relationship to prophecy follows a feminised path similar to the men in *Richard III* who fall victim to Margaret's curses. As he sleeplessly ponders his role as monarch, he recalls, almost verbatim, the words of King Richard – another moment that emphasises Richard's successful reassertion of his presence in the masculine historical record. Henry quotes one of Richard's feminised moments of prophetic speech, though, oddly, it is a moment for which Henry was not actually present in Shakespeare's earlier play. This recalls Lady Percy and Richard II's Queen's ability to narrate histories from which they were excluded:

> When Richard, with his eye brimful of tears,
> Then checked and rated by Northumberland,
> Did speak these words, now proved a prophecy?
> 'Northumberland, thou ladder by the which
> My cousin Bolingbroke ascends my throne' –
> Though then, God knows, I had no such intent,
> But that necessity so bowed the state
> That I and greatness were compelled to kiss –
> 'The time shall come', thus did he follow it,
> 'The time will come that foul sin, gathering head,
> Shall break into corruption' – so went on,
> Foretelling this same time's condition
> And the division of our amity. (3.1.66–78)

During this speech, *DruidShakespeare* underlined the effeminacy of prophecy by drawing a direct line between this speech, Bolingbroke's physical weakness, and femininity. As Henry IV's political and physical frailty increased, the production drew increasing attention through costume to Crotty's body beneath the character of Henry IV. As Bolingbroke in *Richard II*, Crotty wore a bulky black jacket and jeans that, as Crotty noted in the interview quoted, neither emphasised nor attempted to disguise the shape of her body. This jacket was later shed to reveal a more

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 16 Nov 2026 at 23:56:00, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009356121.005

tailored blouse, which she retained through the play and into *1 Henry IV*, though, after King Henry's coronation, it was paired with the same scarlet velvet king's robes that Richard had previously worn.

In the heavily adapted productions, *2 Henry IV* began with the speech quoted, which famously concludes, 'Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown' (3.1.30–1). Crotty's Henry entered visibly ill, shuffling slowly and leaning on a cane, fully half of her body covered in a mottled red rash that had begun to appear in the previous play, inspired, as she explained in an interview, by historical accounts that claimed King Henry IV suffered from leprosy.[25] The disease was made visible by Crotty's translucent black robe, under which she was nude. This simultaneous revelation of the extent of Bolingbroke's disease and Crotty's body directly associated her femininity with Henry's weakness, a gesture that recalls the fact that, as Phyllis Rackin writes, 'in Renaissance accounts of the body . . . the body itself – male as well as female – was gendered feminine'.[26] This dichotomy, Rackin explains, justified female subjugation by associating femininity with the sinful body in contrast to the pure, male soul. In his decay and mortality, King Henry IV's body was explicitly feminised, while the mind and body politic (as well as the pronouns and titles used by the other characters) remained that of a man and a king. Just as Rea's Richard found his 'true' masculine strength after doing away with his feminine clothing and cosmetics, the 'true' feminine weakness of Crotty's Bolingbroke could only be disguised, not erased, by the trappings of kingship.

Andrews argues that such a transition from masculine to feminine is the basic movement of every Shakespearean history play: they 'compulsively enact and re-enact the shift from effeminate monarch to masculine monarch, only for the masculine monarch to become feminized'. Andrews links this repeating arc to the cultural fears surrounding Queen Elizabeth's old age, arguing that, for Shakespeare, this process of feminisation is not necessarily a decline. Rather, 'the histories embody a fantasy of a renewed Elizabeth', monarchical femininity returned to youth and power.[27] Andrews argues that 'Hal's rhetoric itself is one of the unacknowledged feminine powers at [*Henry V*'s] core', acting simultaneously as the metaphorical promise of Elizabethan renewal and as a threat encoded in the audience's knowledge of the impending failures of Henry's effeminate

[25] Crawley.
[26] Phyllis Rackin, 'Historical Difference/Sexual Difference', in *Privileging Gender in Early Modern England*, ed. by Jean R. Brink (Kirksville: Truman State University Press, 1993), 37–64, p. 39.
[27] Andrews, p. 393.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 16 Nov 2026 at 23:56:00, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009356121.005

son.[28] Andrews' reading usefully illustrates the difference between reading effeminate traits into a character and the structural effeminacy I describe here. Though elements of his language may be feminine, Henry V's ability to forcefully control historical events, and the powerful presence of his memory after his death, argues for his firm entrenchment in masculine history. Indeed, through the continual invocation of his name in *1 Henry VI*, and less frequent but still pointed references in the other *Henry VI* plays, he can be detected as a presence in Shakespeare's sense of medieval history even before Shakespeare had written a version of the character, the power of his historical reputation sufficient to give him imaginary force without Shakespeare needing to explicitly depict him. Henry V may draw upon the kinds of rhetorical tricks that Mowbray and Hotspur deride as feminine, but he marshals them in defiance of the kind of structural effeminacy and marginalisation that leads to his father's name never being spoken in *Henry V*, his legacy reduced to usurpation.

If, as Andrews suggests, the unnamed presence of Elizabeth shapes the second tetralogy's relationship to gender, her actual presence in *Henry VIII* initially appears to entirely invert Shakespeare's usual gendering of historical power, as the voice of prophecy in *Henry VIII* is the voice of authority, not marginalisation. Though Queen Katherine has recourse to the language of mourning and genealogy, discussed in Chapters 1 and 3, the play's most conspicuous prophetic language belongs to a man, Archbishop Cranmer. It is he who delivers the play's concluding vision of the future glories of Elizabeth and King James I. Unlike feminine prophecies in earlier history plays, it is delivered from a position of and in compliance with masculine power.

A production during the 2012 Globe to Globe Festival, presented by the Spanish company Rakata, restored Shakespeare's usual gendering of prophecy by framing the entire fifth act as Katherine's nightmare vision of a Protestant future, in which the glorious reigning queen of England would be not her own daughter, but Anne Bullen's. But, even in the unadapted text, a female character – albeit one who does not and cannot speak – in fact initiates and enables the play's concluding prophesy. Though Cranmer speaks the lines that foretell Elizabeth's glorious reign, the presence of the infant Elizabeth creates a causal link between the female child and the man who speaks a vision of her future. In this scene, King Henry addresses two of the many unspeaking noblewomen who are present for Princess Elizabeth's christening:

[28] Ibid., pp. 383–385.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 16 Nov 2026 at 23:56:00, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009356121.005

KING HENRY I thank you heartily; so shall this lady
When she has so much English.
CRANMER Let me speak, sir.

(5.4.13–5)

Cranmer then launches into his vision of Elizabeth's future. But coming in immediate response to Henry's promise of future thanks from Elizabeth, it is as if his lines are spoken on Elizabeth's behalf. Henry's reply to the vision creates a further link between Elizabeth and this prophecy, as he praises Cranmer: 'O lord archbishop, / Thou hast made me now a man. Never before / This happy child did I get anything' (5.4.63–5). The prophecy and Henry's subsequent comment supplant Mary and erase Edward, rendering Elizabeth Henry's only heir and bearer of his legacy. Henry's assertion that the knowledge of her future fame has 'made [him] a man' recalls once more the simultaneously redemptive and complicated power of entrusting a man's legacy to a woman to bear. Like Hotspur, the consignment of Henry VIII's legacy to a daughter suggests the fulfilment of the threats of effeminacy that plague him throughout the play, not least in his determined and insistently sexual pursuit of Anne Bullen.[29] But the play and Henry himself frame this instead as confirmation of his masculinity. His legacy, previously unsteady, is assured. And by allowing Cranmer to deliver this speech, the feminised Tudor legacy that Elizabeth's rule could theoretically represent is instead masculinised, assured a place not in the marginal spaces of women's history, but the chronicles recorded by men.

Feminine Historians and Returning to History

While the second tetralogy and *Henry VIII* fit relatively smoothly into the cyclical journey of effeminacy to masculinity that Andrews proposes, matters are more complicated in Shakespeare's earlier history plays. While prophecy and feminised speech pervade the earlier *Henry VI* plays, the *Henry IV* sequence is much more sceptical. In these later plays, the ability to predict the future is either mocked (as with Hotspur's derision at Glendower's pretensions to mysticism [*1H4*, 3.1]) or rationalised (as with Warwick's famous counsel that 'there is a history in all men's lives' that can help one guess what others will do, rather than actual prophetic ability

[29] McMullan, pp. 83–84.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 16 Nov 2026 at 23:56:00, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009356121.005

[*2H4*, 3.1.79]), and the structural effeminisation of characters like Richard, Falstaff, and Bolingbroke is accordingly subtle. Rather than expressing their exclusion from masculinised history by stepping outside of its confines and looking into the future, this exclusion is demonstrated by the ways they are remembered, by their failure to ensure their place in the masculine historical narratives created by others. Because the *Henry VI* plays relate to feminised forms of speech differently, it is only logical that feminised history itself takes a different form. Richard II's arc reveals that death need not mean the end of a character's role in history; in *Richard III*, the boundary between life and death becomes even more porous. The distinction between masculine and effeminate characters is likewise blurry throughout the first tetralogy, and particularly complicated by the prominent figure of Queen Margaret, who moves between masculine and feminine historical spheres repeatedly across the four plays in which she appears. Her movement between dramaturgical positions emphasises the separation between character gender and gendered structural role, highlighting the first tetralogy's more complex transgressions of gendered roles and expectations. This permits a more complete, and thus more disruptive, restoration of effeminate male characters to a place in history.

Though she is perhaps the most famous curser and prophetess in the history plays, Queen Margaret's association with these feminine styles of speech is not a constant; rather, her ability to access such supernatural powers fluctuates across the four plays of the first tetralogy. As discussed in Chapter 1, I am sceptical of the claim that Margaret can or should be read as a single cohesive character across the three *Henry VI* plays and *Richard III* in any contemporary, psychological sense of the word. However, her consistent relationship to mourning and cursing can be seen to demonstrate not necessarily continuity of character but the fixed relationship in Shakespeare's history plays overall between loss and these modes of feminine speech, as the farther Margaret drifts from power within each of the *Henry VI* plays, the more prominent such aspects of her speech become. The more access Margaret has to political power – to the ability to shape the unfolding events – the less she has to the power to curse and prophesy. Throughout *2 Henry VI*, she strategically deploys exaggerated mourning at moments when her power over Henry appears to be slipping. Like the mourning discussed in Chapter 3, these speeches revise the past in service of her goals in the present. Her first association with cursing appears in that same play, during her farewell to Suffolk, her newly exiled lover (a scene discussed in more detail in Chapter 3). In a line that hints at why artists and critics have been so irresistibly drawn to reading Margaret's

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 16 Nov 2026 at 23:56:00, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009356121.005

journey through the plays as a single character arc, she urges Suffolk – as she will Elizabeth and the Duchess of York in *Richard III* – to find 'the spirit to curse thine enemies' (3.2.319). Her derision of his failure to do so as the behaviour of a 'coward woman and soft-hearted wretch' (3.2.311) is highly ironic in light of the previously discussed associations between cursing and femininity. Within a few lines, both persuade themselves of the futility of cursing and abandon the effort.

The reason for their inability to access extra-historical power becomes clearer in Suffolk's final scene, for, unlike the characters discussed in this section thus far, as Suffolk approaches his death, he refuses to acknowledge his loss of power. Reminded of a prophecy that he would die by water (a homophone, in the accent of the time, of 'Walter', the name of the pirate who is determined to kill him), he shakes off the coincidence in terms that highlight the class difference between his own aristocratic, French-speaking Norman ancestry and the English commoner Walter: 'Thy name is Gaultier, being rightly sounded' (4.1.48). Rather than dying in feminised awareness of the accuracy of prophecy or cursing, he insists upon his power to the last, inscribing his name into masculine history as he is borne away to death:

> Come, soldiers, show what cruelty you can,
> That this my death may never be forgot!
> Great men oft die by vile bezonians:
> A Roman sworder and banditto slave
> Murdered sweet Tully; Brutus' bastard hand
> Stabbed Julius Caesar; savage islanders
> Pompey the Great, and Suffolk dies by pirates. (4.1.133–9)

Placing himself in a line of famous murdered men, Suffolk insists upon his enduring ability to shape his own legacy, thereby denying himself the clarity that comes from stepping outside of the frame of historical events.

In her next scene, Margaret performs a grotesquely literal version of her later efforts to revive the memory and presence of a deceased male partner by carrying and speaking to Suffolk's decapitated head, cradling it as she imagines how readily the growing civil unrest would be quieted 'were the Duke of Suffolk now alive!' (4.4.40). The head's obtrusive appearance, rendered even more shocking by the other characters' total disregard of its presence, strands Margaret in a liminal theatrical space between the political power of the *locus* and historical privilege of the *platea* discussed in Chapter 3. She appears somewhere outside of the action, her borderline necrophilic adoration of Suffolk's head apparently unnoticed by the other

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 16 Nov 2026 at 23:56:00, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009356121.005

characters, and yet she cannot yet claim the privileges of feminised speech that would attend on entering the marginalised space of the historical *platea*, as she can imagine nothing beyond the power Suffolk – and, by extension, Margaret herself – *would* exert if only he were there.

Full access to supernatural power demands complete loss of ability to influence history, a state Margaret only achieves in *Richard III*, where her separation from real-world power is so complete that she defies her actual date and place of death in order to appear onstage. Learning to access the power of feminised forms of speech signals the approaching end of her story, as her prophesies become the last gasp of a character on the brink of complete erasure from the kind of history the plays are dedicated to depicting. While her devotion to Suffolk's head achieves a kind of embodied remembrance, it is one that, like the pleas of Blanche and Lady Percy discussed in Chapter 2, goes completely ignored by the other onstage characters. Her ability not only to command attention in *Richard III*, but to move from the partial embodiment of the dead represented by Suffolk's head into the power of full (if ghostly) embodiment indicates that her complete marginalisation allows her access to a new kind of power. The culmination of the tetralogy is also the culmination of her exclusion from the political influence she has fought for throughout her reign as queen, her mastery of feminised forms of history-telling achievable only when she has fully abandoned her more conventional political goals. Margaret thus epitomises the gendered conflict at the heart of Shakespeare's history plays. Not, as Andrews suggests, limited to the kings who might be read as stand-ins for Elizabeth herself, Margaret reveals the pattern of feminisation and its attendant marginalisation as a fundamental historical process that Shakespeare's characters continually fear, combat, and often surrender to. By epitomising it, she also complicates it, decisively divorcing what is figured as effeminacy in the male characters of the first tetralogy from a character's actual gender. Margaret, too, becomes effeminate in historical terms, though in narrative terms she has always been a woman.

In addition to complicating the relationship of effeminacy to a character's actual gender, Margaret disrupts the cycle that Andrews proposes defines the histories, reinserting herself into masculine history by using her curses to force men to speak about her. As described at the beginning of this chapter, the male characters that she curses to death repeatedly invoke her name to acknowledge the accuracy of her prophecies and the power of her curses (two concepts that, as Chapter 3 discussed, are often interchangeable). This forceful re-inscription of her name into masculine

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 16 Nov 2026 at 23:56:00, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009356121.005

history places her in a middle ground between a figure such as Richard II, who ultimately escapes the need for female memorialisation, and one like Henry IV, whose own son removes his name from history. Margaret's complete immersion in feminine structures and styles, and a distinctly feminine defiance of the realities of historical fact, are what enable her to force men to speak her name into their historical record. Though Margaret must become her own feminine historian, she also performs her curses in service of her husband's memory. This creates a structural parallel between Henry VI and Richard II. Both are interpreted by most critics as effeminate, and both initially seem consigned to marginalised, feminine history. Richard escapes this fate in the moment of his death and is ultimately restored to a masculine, politically powerful position in history. Henry VI achieves the same posthumous status by a different means.

Henry gains access to prophecy in the moments before his death, blending past and future to foretell Richard III's violent reign. But throughout *3 Henry VI*, Henry's structural position is distinctly effeminate, in direct contrast to Margaret's structural masculinity: he is directly excluded from positions of political and military power that she fills instead. He is, indeed, framed as an active impediment: 'The queen hath best success when you are absent' (2.2.74). Thus excluded, he resorts to the language of mourning and lament to engage with the horrors of a war he still feels responsible for, exemplified by the famous scene in which he watches parallel exchanges between a father who has killed his son and a son who has killed his father in battle (2.5.55–122). Unlike Richard, whose corpse disrupts the final scene of *Richard II* and ensures his continued presence in masculine history, Henry disappears after his death, and his presence in *Richard III* is facilitated exclusively by women: Anne is the soul mourner in his funeral procession, and only Margaret insists that his murder be remembered. At the play's conclusion, Margaret's interventions literally restore Henry to the play's history in the form of a ghost – one of only two ghosts, along with his son Prince Edward, who are not also living characters in the play – a form in which he is able to exert a greater influence on Richard's fate than he was able to in life.

Margaret's achievement was given literal form in Shakespeare's Globe's 2003 all-female production of *Richard III* (described in detail in Chapter 2), in which the actor playing Margaret doubled as the ghost of Henry VI, physically embodying the legacy she had laboured for the entire play to force others to recall. From the startling but overlooked presence of Suffolk's head to the appearance of Henry's ghost, Margaret's increasing

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 16 Nov 2026 at 23:56:00, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009356121.005

marginalisation grants her the ability to bring the men she seeks to memorialise into full presence onstage – and to restore the Lancastrian line itself, in the physical form of Richmond, back into full political power and an assured place in history. In the Globe's 2019 staging of the play, this connection was again made literal through the double-casting of actors, though from a different angle. Margaret's wish that she 'might live and say "the dog is dead"' (4.4.73) came partially true when Richmond defeated Richard in battle and declared that 'The bloody dog is dead' (5.7.2). The same actor, Steffan Donnelly, both expressed this wish and enacted it in the doubled roles of Margaret and Richmond, allowing Margaret to directly fulfil her own curse, and embody her own house's ultimate victory.

In Headlong Theatre's 2019 production of *Richard III*, which toured to locations across the United Kingdom, including London's Alexandra Palace (the version I will describe here), Henry assumed what could be read as a fully feminised role by taking over Margaret's structural position. Margaret herself was cut from the play; however, director John Haidar returned to *Richard III*'s eighteenth century adaptation tradition and began the performance with Richard's murder of King Henry VI from *3 Henry VI.* Henry haunted the play from this moment onwards, not given Margaret's lines, but given her position as a recurring reminder of past transgressions. The lurking presence of such a ghostly figure complemented the cavernous performance space in the historic Alexandra Palace Theatre, which has been left deliberately unfinished, with exposed brick visible amidst the plaster remnants of its opulent nineteenth century design. Unlike in many standalone productions of this play, references to the events of *Henry VI* were rarely cut. However, rather than allowing Margaret to embody the intrusive presence of memory that these lines generated, Haidar's adaptation rejected the power of the female mourner to speak for past events in favour of the now more conventional narrative of a male victim pursuing personal revenge. Even so, Margaret's language of cursing was evidently considered both too important to lose and impossible to reassign to a male character: Lady Anne and the Duchess of York absorbed what lines of Margaret's were retained, a pattern mirroring that discussed in Chapter 1, in Richard Loncraine's film adaptation of the play. Henry spoke nothing but his own lines from *3 Henry VI* and his text as a ghost the night before the Battle of Bosworth.

The placement of Henry's murder by Richard as a prologue to the events of *Richard III* rather than the penultimate scene of *3 Henry VI*

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 16 Nov 2026 at 23:56:00, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009356121.005

emphasised the prophetic nature of Henry's speech to Richard, while, due to the reassignment of Margaret's lines, literal cursing and mourning both remained resolutely feminine. Henry's interpolated presence disrupted the connection between these forms of speech and the spirits that ultimately helped defeat Richard in battle: he appeared at each characters' death to beckon the newly deceased to follow him, clearly suggesting that he was marshalling these ghostly forces in preparation for revenge, rather than the text's suggestion that they are being called into existence by the women's curses. By disrupting the connection between Henry, the ghosts' revenge, and the women's mourning, Haidar's production rejected the play's associations between femininity and marginalisation, instead imagining a new historical structure wherein men can pursue revenge from beyond the grave unassisted by female memory.

Haidar's revision of roles suggests that Margaret and Henry's unconventional gendered positions fit uneasily within contemporary narrative expectations. She is still seen as an unfit emblem of the martial past, but her intrusive curses are too strangely feminine to seem appropriate for a male character to deliver, even in adapted form; in contrast, allowing a woman to fight for Henry's legacy is still seen as too passive and strange for a king, and he must instead be assigned the role of the actively vengeful spirit in the vein of Hamlet's father or *The Spanish Tragedy*'s Don Andrea. While Hotspur and Bolingbroke's transgressions of gendered norms are largely illegible by twenty-first century standards, Headlong's revisions suggest the discomfort that Henry and Margaret's complex subversions of their assigned gender roles can still generate.

Historicising Boys

When considering the place of gendered performance in Shakespeare's history plays, it is essential not to overlook one of the key realities of performance in the period: namely, the presence of boy players in female roles. Thomas Lacqueur famously argues that the influence of Galen's 'one-sex' model in early modern England placed boys and women in related positions as 'not men', and thus closer to one another than to the masculine ideal which they both failed to fulfil.[30] The actual dominance of this model and genuine inability of early modern medical professionals and individuals to recognise the differences between male and female biology

[30] Thomas Lacqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992).

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 16 Nov 2026 at 23:56:00, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009356121.005

has been challenged by recent critics, notably Helen King.[31] Even Stephen Orgel's influential argument that, sexually, boys were 'a middle term' between men and women does not suggest that boys and women were therefore fully interchangeable.[32] Cultural similarities between boys and women were not so complete that a boy player did not need to perform womanhood when playing a female role; indeed, as Will Fisher notes, the place of boys on the early modern gender spectrum meant they were as much in 'drag' when playing men (as in boys' companies) as when playing women, 'naturally' aligning with neither.[33] Kathleen McLuskie argues, '[i]n plays where representations of fictional characters is produced by emblem and symbol, where the acting style evidently proceeds by a set of formal encounters, the difficulty of incorporating a stable representation of women was not great'.[34] However, Farah Karim-Cooper's analysis of the cosmetic world of Elizabethan drama highlights that some effort was still required to embody these symbols and create a satisfactory illusion of femininity – and specifically female beauty – onstage.[35] The unadorned boy was not sufficient, but rather his femininity had to be actively constructed by a combination of performance, costume and cosmetics. Boys thus provide a further reminder that the binary terms of 'masculine' and 'feminine' I have deployed are somewhat simplified expressions of what in fact is a fairly fluid boundary and introduce a complicating element into the gendered framework proposed thus far.

In *Richard III*, both Margaret and Anne seek to revive the memory not only of King Henry, but of Henry and Margaret's son, Prince Edward, who was also Anne's husband. The distinct discrepancy between how Edward is depicted in *3 Henry VI* and how he is described post-mortem in *Richard III* is further evidence of the difficulties of reading any of the tetralogies as a fully consistent narrative; however, like Margaret, Edward can be used to demonstrate not psychological or even temporal continuity, but consistent gendered structures. In such structural terms, the distance between the two versions of the character reflect Edward's changing relationship to masculinity, and the particular challenge that boy characters pose to early modern gender ideals.

[31] Helen King, *The One-Sex Body on Trial: The Classical and Early Modern Evidence* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2016).
[32] Orgel, p. 103.
[33] Will Fisher, *Materialising Gender in Early Modern English Literature and Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 89.
[34] McLuskie, p. 103. [35] Karim-Cooper.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 16 Nov 2026 at 23:56:00, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009356121.005

Even by the early modern period's relatively fluid understanding of gender, the position of boys was uncertain and unstable. Alexandra Shepard writes

> youth and old age were approached as 'other' to manhood . . . the implicit contest between the generations was more salient to the construction of manhood as a phase in the life course than any comparison between the sexes . . . Advice writers and moralists therefore cast the follies of youth in terms of an absence of self-control which they laboured to equate with unmanliness. By contrast, self-mastery was claimed as the defining feature of manhood.[36]

Within a culture that viewed masculinity as a state of being that had to actively be achieved and therefore could also be lost, the temperamental and biological separation of boys from men were one and the same: a boy could not be a man because he was not old enough to act like one. Stephen Orgel argues

> eroticized boys appear to be a middle term between men and women . . . But they also destabilise the categories, and question what it means to be a man or a woman . . . Whether boys are thought to look like women or not depends on how society constructs the norm of womanliness; clearly it is in our interests to view boys as versions of men, but the Renaissance equally clearly sought the similitude in boys and women.[37]

This potential similarity is the key to Rebecca Ann Bach's understanding of the role of boy characters in the history plays: 'boys are expected to be like women; therefore, when they behave like brave men, their behavior is exceptional, and it is also an example for men, who in these plays can always slip towards effeminacy should they let desire rule'.[38] In the dramaturgical terms laid out by this chapter, the overlapping categories of masculine and feminine place the boys in a contested historical space. Almost all of the boy characters in Shakespeare's history plays are, like Prince Edward, brutally murdered. Their curtailed lives combine with their indeterminate gendered position to render them roles fraught with historical uncertainty. For though they are neither masculine enough nor accomplished enough to guarantee a place in masculine history, their murders are startling turning points in each of their plays, and their memorialisation becomes, as Katie Knowles writes, an image of 'lost

[36] Shepard, pp. 23–28. [37] Orgel, p. 63. [38] Bach, p. 236.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 16 Nov 2026 at 23:56:00, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009356121.005

dynastic promise'[39] that each play takes great pains to verbally record. But, as with many of the male roles discussed in this chapter, it is a memorialisation that frequently consigns the characters to feminine history – a space from which Prince Edward alone firmly escapes, transforming his gendered signifiers in the process and laying out the terms under which, dramaturgically speaking, a boy can become a man.

In *3 Henry VI*, Prince Edward is specifically described as a child. Though engaged to Anne near the end of the play, she never appears onstage. His death scene clarifies that he has not grown to clearly marriageable age over the course of the play, but is still 'in respect, a child' (5.5.56). In *Richard III*, however, Richard seems to describe a young man when he speaks of Edward:

> A sweeter and a lovelier gentleman,
> Framed in the prodigality of nature,
> Young, valiant, wise, and, no doubt, right royal,
> The spacious world cannot again afford.
> And will she yet abase her eyes on me,
> That cropped the golden prime of this sweet prince
> And made her widow to a woeful bed? (1.2.227–33)

These references to Anne's 'woeful bed' and Edward's 'golden prime' suggest a marriage between two young adults, not the young boy we saw in *3 Henry VI*. Edward's implied ability to consummate his marriage to Anne would be an essential marker of reaching full adult masculinity[40] – a milestone that *3 Henry VI* pointedly never clarifies. But, just as Margaret's memory of Henry restores him to a masculine role in history, Anne's memorialisation of Edward allows him to attain the full masculinity he did not survive to achieve in life. The first to die at Richard's hand, he is the first to return as a ghost in *Richard III*, once again invoking his age: 'Think how thou stabs't me in my prime of youth' (5.4.98). While all the other ghosts offer prayers and good wishes to Richmond, Edward alone promises that 'the wronged souls / Of butchered princes fight in thy behalf' (5.4.100–1), strongly suggesting that he is one of the fighting princes in question. This active, martial vow affirms his masculinity in both personal and structural terms: he can directly influence the course of history by intervening, and will do so not in the feminine realm of prayers and curses, but the masculine space of combat.

[39] Knowles, p. 16. [40] Shepard, p. 83.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 16 Nov 2026 at 23:56:00, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009356121.005

Edward's fellow ghosts, the other Prince Edward (whom I will call Edward of York for clarity) and his brother Prince Richard, express themselves more mildly. Speaking as one, they call upon 'Good angels' to 'guard [Richmond] from the boar's annoy' (5.4.130). While the butchered Prince Edward of Lancaster will 'fight in [Richmond's] behalf', Prince Edward of York offers more passive prayers, and leaves the angels to do the guarding. Through memorialisation by their respective female relations, Edward is turned into a man, the York Princes into angelic boys. It would be interesting, though impossible, to know whether the ghost of Edward was played by an adult actor or a boy. John Jowett has proposed that one reason for the revisions to the text of *Richard III* found in the quarto is to reduce the number of boys required for the performance, by potentially allowing Lady Anne and one of the young princes to be double cast; if this were the case, and boys were already in short supply, it seems unlikely that one would have been spared for the heretofore unseen role of Edward.[41] Knowles notes that the princes' 'dramatic function is fluid and transitory: there are points are which they seem utterly childish and vulnerable, and points at which they take on roles – some linked to their royal status, others purely theatrical – which seem to invest them with a peculiar kind of power'. This power stems in part, she argues, from Shakespeare's decision not to depict their deaths, a choice which 'distil[s] the boys as emblems of noble innocence, forcing the audience to reflect on the destruction of that innocence, and view it as a kind of desecration'.[42] Their mother likewise draws upon this imagery in her memories of them as 'tender babes' (4.4.9), rendering them feminised not only by their consignment to the realm of female history, but by their mother's posthumous emphasis of their status as children, not yet men. Richard sarcastically describes his younger nephew as 'all his mother's' (3.1.155), an association their deaths only reinforce by rendering their mother the only bearer of their memory.

Shakespeare's other prominent historical boy characters, Arthur in *King John* and the Boy in *Henry V*, fall into the same category of structural effeminacy as the Princes. As Katie Knowles writes, while the Princes 'are only idealised by their mother posthumously, Arthur is romanticised by his while he is alive and present on-stage', consigning him to female memory before he has the chance to acquire a masculine identity of his own: 'He is figured as a blank sheet of paper or perhaps a piece of unformed wax – ready and waiting to receive an impression; to be stamped with the image

[41] Jowett, *Richard III*, p. 75. [42] Knowles, pp. 21, 23.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 16 Nov 2026 at 23:56:00, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009356121.005

of his paternal forebears, and to be inscribed upon by those who figure him as a vehicle for the writing of histories'.[43] A 'vehicle for the writing of histories' rather than the driver of his own historical narrative, Arthur is, as with female characters like Lady Anne, inescapably hemmed in by the forces of history. His name alone reveals the foregone historical conclusion before he can ever act to alter it: he cannot and never will be King Arthur. As Knowles' observes, he has been confined to female memory even before he dies. His strange triple death – mourned first by Constance, lamenting long before his actual passing that 'never, never / Must I behold my pretty Arthur more' (3.4.88–9); again as a 'poor child' with a 'little kingdom of a forcèd grave' (4.2.97–8) when his death is only a false rumour; and finally when the 'beauty' of his corpse is described not once but twice (4.3.35, 39), highlighting its youthful femininity – reinforces his importance less as a political actor or potential king than as a potential object of mourning. Mourning is of course the form of speech repeatedly associated throughout the play with Constance, his mother, who feelingly and tellingly describes her son as the embodiment of loss (3.4.94ff). He cannot enter into manhood and thus into masculine history; he is rather replaced, in Constance's own telling, with a mannequin that 'Puts on his pretty looks, repeats his words . . . [s]tuffs out his vacant garments with his form' (3.4.95–7), and is made of feminised grief itself.

The Boy of *2 Henry IV* and *Henry V* is a particularly clear example of feminised exclusion from the historical record, with no name to be memorialised. Though he may be the same character as the page Robin in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, he remains resolutely nameless in the two history plays in which he appears. Like his master Falstaff, he blurs class boundaries: introduced as a 'gift' from the Prince, and thus implied to be a page of sufficient rank to serve a gentleman, by *Henry V* that supposed background has been forgotten. He instead becomes associated with Falstaff's lower-class companions, who seek to make him 'as familiar with men's pockets as their gloves or handkerchiefs' (3.2.45). His description of his companions as 'swashers' and 'villains' exemplifies the early modern tendency to articulate '[d]istinctions between normative and deviant forms of manhood . . . in the most hostile terms . . . that also influenced the distribution of patriarchal dividends in favor of the married, the middle-aged, the householders, the English, the white, and increasingly the middling sorts and elites'.[44] Though Alexandra Shepard argues that the

[43] Ibid., pp. 35, 34. [44] Shepard, p. 294.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 16 Nov 2026 at 23:56:00, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009356121.005

scope of 'deviant' forms of masculinity was vast, and that manhood in the period cannot be compressed to one distinct code of ideals, the Boy's personal standards of correct behaviour are more precise.[45] In his telling – 'three such antics do not amount to a man' (3.2.30) – the men with whom he is most consistently associated are those whose class and behaviour places them firmly outside the boundaries of proper masculinity, and thus outside of proper masculine history. Left behind with 'the boys and the luggage' (4.7.1) the Boy is also decisively severed from the masculine realm of combat, his death in battle figured as a stark violation of 'the law of arms' (4.7.2). By the end of the same scene, however, he has been entirely forgotten, presumably absorbed as one of 'none else of name' on Henry's list of casualties (4.8.103). Rendered nameless by his class and age, having lost his not-quite-male companions (and the only woman in their circle), he has no one to speak for the corner of unnamed, undocumented history they all once inhabited. In *DruidShakespeare,* this was illustrated starkly. As the audience moved out of the theatre at the conclusion of each of the four parts of the play, they found the space of the Mick Lally theatre's foyer transformed: a bed of earth outside the playing space became a graveyard, with new tombstones erected after each section for the characters who we had just seen die over the course of that play. After *Henry V*, this included markers for the various tavern denizens who had died in France. For the Boy, there was simply a wooden cross that read, 'Unknown Boy'.

For both Prince Edward of Lancaster and his father Henry VI, reclamation of their masculine role is only possible because of the women who speak for them and bear their legacy. At the end of *Richard III*, their memories and the Lancastrian cause are passed to Richmond, confirming its endurance not in histories told by women, but those carried, shaped, and documented by men. The women, however, provide an essential intermediate step. Therefore, Richard III's consistent antagonism towards women is an essential aspect of his downfall both in plot terms, and in terms of his historical legacy. Some critics have argued in favour of reading Richard himself as effeminate, including Katherine Eggert, who compares Richard's unruly theatricality to that of Joan in *1 Henry VI* and argues that 'Richard willfully integrates feminine theatrical method, in all its sexual bewitchment, into his own modus operandi'.[46] But where Eggert reads unruly feminine disruption, Ralf Hertel argues that 'Richard embod[ies] a

[45] Ibid., note 9. [46] Eggert, p. 71.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 16 Nov 2026 at 23:56:00, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009356121.005

Machiavellian self-empowerment which is gendered specifically male'.[47] These arguments recall the distinction between feminine language and structural effeminacy established in relation to Henry V: while Richard's personal characteristics and use of language may indeed be feminine in the ways that Eggert suggests, what Hertel describes as his 'self-empowerment' is unquestionably masculine in terms of its structural and political influence. Richard indelibly shapes the arc of the play itself, and it requires supernatural intervention to break his control over his role within it. Moreover, his complete immersion in and power over the present means that he lacks the feminine perspective on the past and future. He consistently dismisses the prophecies that he hears and, unlike his victims, has no closing moment of clarity. Because he has killed his wife and been repudiated by his mother for his fratricide, he will have no women to carry his legacy forward into the future.

The position of women as bearers of men's history is key to the concerns of the history plays' central, usually male, characters: fear of consignment to feminine history on the one hand, and the potential for vindication after death through memorialisation by women on the other. While the degree of danger associated with effeminacy varies between the first and second tetralogies, what remains consistent is the marginal position assumed by men who behave effeminately – and the potential that they, like women, can access unique power by virtue of their placement outside of masculine history. This challenges conventional binary readings of the gendered conflict at the centre of the history plays, unmooring it from characters' literal gender and instead providing a reminder once again that every character is a theatrical device, not a person, and that their stated gender is not inherent to their imagined being, but merely an element of how that device is constructed and read.

This chapter, and this book as a whole, has argued that we must think of characters structurally, not as fictionalised people. This is never more obvious than when considering, as this chapter has, how the roles characters play can themselves be gendered, wholly separate from or even in deliberate opposition to the gender of the characters. Gender thus can be read as a theatrical device in itself, deployed to convey information to the audience and to open up a specific set of dramaturgical options. Though the factual framework of a history play may seem to demand that characters be gendered in specific and inalterable ways, this chapter has sought to demonstrate that, in fact, historical reality need not limit the gendering of

[47] Hertel, p. 209.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 16 Nov 2026 at 23:56:00, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009356121.005

a character within the drama. Thus, in the multi-faceted and malleable landscape of a historical drama, the choice to make a character a woman, or a boy, or an effeminate man, is a question of narrative utility, not an inevitability. It is a decision that carries narrative weight, and one that, as this chapter has demonstrated, Shakespeare makes deliberately in order to complicate and comment upon the shape of his own histories.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 16 Nov 2026 at 23:56:00, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009356121.005