Taming the Shrew Within: Internalized Misogyny in Shakespeare's 1 Henry IV

Sarah Christy
St. John Fisher College, schristy_no@sjfc.edu

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Abstract
In lieu of an abstract, below is the first paragraph of the paper.

Surely, the frequent occurrence of "margin" and all of its forms in these examinations of 7 Henry IV is not accidental; the play's female characters are undoubtedly marginalized. Only three appear, and so to begin with, the male characters predominate. Because the depictions of men are more readily available, the men themselves are diverse: their personalities, views, and behaviors completely individual. For the women, however, there is very little room for diversity; while there are undeniable differences amongst the three women presented—while they come from different backgrounds, exist in different social settings, even speak different languages—each is "but yet a woman," marginalized (2.3.99). Therefore, despite their differences, the women are collectively "women" and can offer, really, only one view onto their collective abuse.
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Sarah Christy

“[... ] the Henriad is a “seminal” point for an examination of the construction and maintenance of phallocentric ideology... [embodying] a marginal, subversive discourse...”
(Valerie Traub, Desire & Anxiety 53)

“The marginal status of women in Shakespeare’s historical sources is reproduced in his history plays by a process of geographic and generic containment... [wherein] they play dominant roles in two marginal places...”
(Phyllis Rackin, “Foreign Country” 80)

“In the Henry IV plays female characters are confined to the margins of the action.”
(Rackin, Shakespeare and Women 68)

“Henry IV, Part I... tells us very little about women’s lives and histories. Taking patriarchal history as its ground and focusing on the heroic deeds of fathers and sons, the play marginalizes women’s roles and voices.”
(Barbara Hodgdon, Texts and Contexts 9)

Surely, the frequent occurrence of “margin” and all of its forms in these examinations of 1 Henry IV is not accidental; the play’s female characters are undoubtedly marginalized. Only three appear, and so to begin with, the male characters predominate. Because the depictions of men are more readily available, the men themselves are diverse: their personalities, views, and behaviors completely individual. For the women, however, there is very little room for diversity; while there are undeniable differences amongst the three women presented—while they come from different backgrounds, exist in different social settings, even speak different languages—each is “but yet a woman,” marginalized (2.3.99). Therefore, despite their differences, the women are collectively “women” and can offer, really, only one view onto their collective abuse.

Perhaps, then, it is best to evaluate the treatment, or rather, the mistreatment of women in the play—the misogynistic attitudes and behaviors—not in relation to the “marginalized” women towards whom they are directed, but rather in relation to the “diverse” and “individualized” men from whom they stem. The misogyny presented in 1 Henry IV, while certainly an image of fifteenth and sixteenth-century gender constructs and prejudices, is the direct cause of the male characters’ fears and insecurities concerning the hold each has on his own masculinity. While each of the play’s male characters assumes a distinct view of women, this view is not shaped solely by society or even by his own understanding and vague, consequential hatred of femininity; rather, because each man functions—to some extent—within the realm of masculinity, he can only see femininity through the lens of his own masculinity or his own form of it. The men’s rejection, then—both of femininity as an institution and of specific traits and behaviors of specific women—is in fact their denial of this femininity, their suppression of the “feminine” traits within themselves.

This abstract rejection of femininity is ever-present—even in men who never or barely interact with the women. For instance, King Henry, expressing his frustrations with war, declares: “No more the thirsty entrance of this soil / Shall daub her lips with her own children’s blood” (1.1.5-6). As R.A. Martin suggests, in
assigning the earth the feminine pronoun “her,” the king associates femininity with fearfulness and danger—in essence, cannibalism (258). The king’s suggestion, though, fits in seamlessly with society-perpetuated gender prejudices of the time; Joseph Swetnam, in “The Arraignment of Lewd, Idle, Froward, and Unconstant Women,” published in 1615, supports the king’s seeming innate prejudice. In direct reference to Woman, Swetnam states:

[...] her breast will be the harborer of an envious heart, & her heart the storehouse of poisonous hatred; her head will devise villainy, and her hands are ready to practice that which her heart desireth. Then who can but say that women sprung from the Devil, whose heads, hands & hearts, minds & souls are evil, for women are called the hook of all evil, because men are taken by them as fish is taken with the hook. (265)

Here, Swetnam readies an attack, in which he condemns Woman’s “villainy,” “poisonous hatred,” recklessness, devilishness, as well as her powers of seduction, and all the while, he defends the men who feel as he does—King Henry, to name one.

To the other extreme, but seemingly as subconsciously, Glendower polices his son-in-law, Mortimer’s, “feminine” behavior, and designates what is, in fact, properly “masculine”; Mortimer, distressed over his inability to talk to his wife, suggests that their only form of communication might have to be tears, to which Glendower responds, “Nay, if you melt, then will she run mad” (3.1.207). Through this small statement, said just in passing, Glendower re-establishes the entire gender construction: men are expected to be strong, both in will and in way, and women are expected to be emotional and weak—both physically and mentally. More importantly, these rules are to be rigidly observed, with neither a man nor a woman crossing the line between what has been deemed “appropriate” for their gender and for the other.

This implication, too, is deep-rooted in historical societal norms. Published in 1621, over a century past the play’s setting, John Dod and Robert Cleaver’s “A Godly Form of Household Government” prescribes proper behavior to both parties in marriage, reasserting gender roles and ultimately, placing wives—women—below their husbands—men—on the social ladder. Dod and Cleaver recommend that “if at any time it shall happen that the wife shall anger or displease her husband,” she “bear it patiently and give him no uncomely or unkind words for it” (258). In closing, though, attempting to underline the need for equality within a marriage, Dod and Cleaver advise that “[...] if one of [the partners] be angry and offended with the other, then let the party grieved open and make known to the other their grief in due time” (261). Because the wife’s silence and service are so greatly emphasized throughout the piece, this brief unraveling and the suggestion that partners in a marriage should be “open” seems to have been a put-on. Truly, then, what Dod and Cleaver believe and clearly establish is that within a marriage, an inherent hierarchy exists—in which strong, permissibly angry, “masculine” Husband dominates naturally impulsive, preferably silent and “feminine” Wife—and that this hierarchy should never, for any reason, be compromised. This hierarchy is the same as that to which Glendower alludes.

The comments made by both King Henry and Glendower—while damaging in their own rights—are obviously socially-constructed, and seem to be made almost subconsciously. Dissimilarly, though, three of the play’s other male characters—Hotspur, Falstaff, and Prince Hal—are, as R.A. Martin states, more “self-conscious,” more deliberately misogynistic (259). Most loudly and certainly most clearly, Hotspur denounces femininity. His fear and consequent rejection of femininity exists—as we first see it—in an abstract sense; before he interacts with female characters, even, his misogynistic attitudes are visible. Speaking about the messenger King Henry sent to him on the battlefield, Hotspur sneers:

_Came there a certain lord, neat and trimly dressed,_

_Fresh as a bridegroom, and his chin new reaped_.

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With many holiday and lady terms
He questioned me . . .
I then, all smarting with my wounds being
cold,
To be so pestered with popinjay,
Out of my grief and my impatience
Answered neglectingly I know not what,
He should, or he should not; for he made me
mad
To see him shine so brisk, and smell so sweet,
And talk so like a waiting-gentlewoman
Of guns and drums and wounds— God save the
mark! — (1.3.33-56)

Hotspur’s anger towards this man comes
not from the man’s questioning, as Hotspur first
suggests, but rather from his effeminacy; in true
bigot form, Hotspur begins quite even-tempered
and rational, so to speak, blaming the accused
for a legitimate offense—in this case, his
“pestering,” his being like a “popinjay”—but
soon, Hotspur’s objection collapses into a rant
concerning what about the man had truly
offended him—essentially, the man’s
womanishness. This rejection by Hotspur, this
attack on femininity, as Marvin Krims suggests,
is not one on the femininity in women or even in
this effeminate man, but rather on femininity in
any man, and thus the possibility that Hotspur
himself may be feminine, androgynous (124).
Even his refusal to submit to a request, claiming
“tis a woman’s fault,” exposes him as
misogynistic, and moreover, fearful of being
seen as femininely weak and pleasing (3.1.237).
Afraid and unwilling to face the possibility that
he himself may possess “feminine” qualities,
Hotspur rejects all femininity.

In his dealings with his wife, Kate,
Hotspur criticizes femininity and consequently
reveals his fear of association with it. To thwart
Kate’s questioning and claims of neglect, her
requests, even, to discuss what it is that afflicts
him, Hotspur says:

Away,
Away, you trifler! Love? I love thee not;
I care not for thee, Kate. This is no world
To play with mammets and to tilt with lips.
We must have bloody noses and cracked crowns
. . . (2.3.79-83)

As Marvin B. Krims claims, Hotspur’s slur,
here, is not simply evidence of his
“preoccupation with the insurrection,” but rather
a “manifestation of his difficulty with women”
(126). Hotspur jeers at “play with mammets”
and “[tilting] with lips”—two behaviors
gendered “feminine”—which refer, respectively,
to doll-play and to talking or to kissing. These
three actions, threatening only because they are
“feminine,” are three which Hotspur feels he
must belittle in order to secure himself as
“masculine.” If these phrases are taken to refer
to more sexual behaviors, though—namely, to
play with breasts, and to join genitally—then
they reveal much more about Hotspur’s fears
(Krims 127). Because he believes that doing so
will debase him to femininity, Hotspur refuses to
connect with his wife, or any woman, in any
way—whether emotionally, psychologically, or
sexually.

He does not, however, refrain from
sexually objectifying Kate. “Come, Kate, thou
art perfect in lying down,” he tells her,
explaining that he would like to lie on her lap
(3.1.224). The problems Hotspur seemed to
previously have with his wife—her “trifling”
and badgering and inconstancy—disappear at
the prospect of her “lying down,” unable to
defend herself against his advances. Vulnerable,
recessive even, Kate would edge closer to fitting
the male-demanded silent woman; because she
refuses, both in this case and throughout the
play, Kate instead embodies the male-feared
“upright,” strong-minded woman. Furthermore,
because she is “upright,” Kate is both
metaphorically and literally on level ground with
her husband; not only does she disrupt the
“way,” but she manages to creep up to equality.
Hotspur’s attempts to police Kate’s
rebelliousness seem to culminate in his criticism
of her language:

Not yours, in good sooth! Heart, you swear like
a comfit
maker’s wife. “Not you, in good sooth,” and “as
true as I live,” and “as
God shall mend me,” and “as sure as day . . . .”
Swear me, Kate, like a lady as thou art.
A good mouth-filling oath, and leave “in sooth,”

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And such protest of pepper-gingerbread,  
To velvet-guards and Sunday citizens. (3.1.245-52).

Debatably intentionally, but nonetheless ironically, Hotspur’s use of the word “heart” here is, in itself, an example of the behavior in which he is trying to curb his wife from partaking; meaning “by Christ’s heart”—or rather, “for Christ’s sake”—this expression is rough around the edges, “improper” even. This, and Hotspur’s reference to Kate’s being a lady, both insinuate that he believes that “protest of pepper-gingerbread”—or peppery, coarse language—should be left by delicate, fragile, faint-hearted women to strong, brusque men. The very fact that Kate speaks, and then, at that, she speaks so “masculinely” is almost too much for Hotspur to handle; as Lynda Booth points out, though, Hotspur’s problem may not be with the latter at all, but rather with the prior. “...the talkative woman is frequently imagined as synonymous with the sexually available woman, her open mouth the signifier for invited entrance elsewhere,” Booth asserts. “Hence the dicum that associates ‘silent’ with ‘chaste’ and stigmatizes women’s public speech as a behavior fraught with...a distinctly sexual kind of shame” (196). Almost simultaneously, then, Hotspur fears and eroticizes Kate; while she is threatening, dangerous even, she maintains a certain sexual appeal that lures him in and snare him; his entrapment, though, he realizes, is just as detrimental to his masculinity. Hotspur, then, does not prune the plant (Kate) at the flower (her “masculine” speech), for fear that it will grow back, but rather at the root (her speech, at all).

Hotspur, in much the same way as with Kate, polices sister-in-law Lady Mortimer’s use of language. While both Lady Mortimer and her father, Glendower, are Welsh-speaking, only he is gifted bilingualism, marking both sixteenth-century misogyny and the English prejudice against Wales and the Welsh language. Here, regardless of the fact that he speaks Welsh, that he is Welsh, Glendower is more-than-able to camouflage himself, assume the English language, and thus identify as English. Moreover, the preference being male, others forgive his Welsh tongue given his otherwise male anatomy. Lady Mortimer, however, as a direct result of her gender, is exposed immediately as Welsh and cannot take to hiding behind a learned English tongue. Because she is the only Welsh-speaker who is not also English-speaking, she is punished.

To begin with, as Barbara Hodgdon indicates, Lady Mortimer is excluded from a “linguistic community” of sorts to which all of the male characters and other female characters belong (220). Besides this, Lady Mortimer is scorned by Hotspur for her Welsh-speaking: “Now I perceive the devil understands Welsh,” he says to Kate, in reference to Lady Mortimer’s Welsh song (3.1.227). Here, because his reference is not to a proper noun—that is, “the Devil”—he is instead referring directly to Lady Mortimer, herself. In calling her “the devil,” Hotspur associates the Welsh language, and thus her—as she is the only exclusive-Welsh-speaker—with devilishness, evilness—perhaps even that same brand to which Joseph Swetnam alludes. Hotspur’s comment, then, is one of fear; because her language is foreign, incomprehensible to him, he cannot know what she is saying without the interference of a translator, and thus he cannot “place” her threat or, consequently, control her. Hotspur’s constant need to control women speaks volumes to his fears about them; because he fears the possibility of his own femininity, Hotspur keeps the women around him penned in, under his thumb and an artificial strand of femininity, purposely very unlike and very distant to the strand of masculinity under which he lives and thinks and behaves. The more distant he keeps femininity and masculinity—both spatially and with regards to their social hierarchy—the deeper he can settle into masculinity, and the sooner he can revel in its manufactured superiority.

In very much the same way, and for many of the same reasons, Falstaff guards the border between masculinity and femininity. His case, though, is much more complicated as he acts, not out of fear of possessing feminine traits, but rather out of denial of the feminine traits he already possesses. On two separate occasions, he associates masculinity—marked by strength, bravery, heroism—qualities that he
himself does not have—with goodness, righteousness. By extension, though, he associates femininity—masculinity’s polar opposite—with the qualities opposite of masculinity’s; that is, femininity, as Falstaff sees it, is marked by weakness, cowardice, and dishonor. To Prince Hal, Falstaff ribs: “There’s neither honesty, manhood, nor good fellowship in thee” (1.2.107). Banding “honesty,” “manhood,” and “good fellowship,” Falstaff establishes a bit of a contingency: to possess honesty or good fellowship, one must be male. That means that women—who are not and cannot be male—are not and cannot be honest or friendly. In a similar situation, grumbling about the prevalence of cowardice amongst the men he knows, Falstaff complains that “manhood, good manhood, [has been forgotten] upon the face of the earth” (2.4.104-105). Calling for bravery, but replacing it with “manhood” in his statement, Falstaff raids not only cowardice—bravery’s opposite—but womanhood—manhood’s opposite.

A permanent fixture in the Boar’s Head Tavern, at constant odds with the hostess, Mistress Quickly, Falstaff proves that he can add misogyny to the list of his other offenses. To begin with, as Rackin points out, it is important to take into account Mistress Quickly’s position in the play: “the proprietor of the Boar’s Head is a Hostess, not a Host, and . . . she speaks in malapropisms, disrupting the King’s English just as the fictional scenes in her tavern disrupt—as they interrupt, retard, and parody—the historical action” (“Foreign Country” 81). Therefore, even when a woman is pardoned the smallest amount of power—in this case, the ownership of a building, albeit a corrupt one—the representation is fictitious, inaccurate, a “parody,” and not to be taken as anything but comic relief. Beyond this most general misogyny, though, Mistress Quickly is mistreated by Falstaff. Because Falstaff assumes Mistress Quickly’s authority as proprietor of the tavern, overshadowing her presence and presiding over her, he displaces her, dominates her without really having to say a word.

In his interactions with Mistress Quickly, though, Falstaff is just as visibly misogynistic. In one instance, Falstaff says to Mistress Quickly: “Go to, you are a woman, go” (3.3.46). In belittling her gender, trivializing femininity and demeaning all women within it, Falstaff consequently tips the scales in favor of masculinity. Similarly, as a means of objectifying and demeaning her, Falstaff tells Mistress Quickly, “Setting thy womanhood aside, thou art a beast” (3.3.96). When she questions him, he clarifies, “What beast? Why, an otter,” stating that this fits as “she’s neither fish nor flesh,” and that “a man knows not where to have her” (3.3.99-101). Stripping her of her gender, and even of her subjection, Falstaff turns Mistress Quickly into an object, a “beast.” Besides this, Falstaff references Mistress Quickly’s sexual appeal, but also her ambiguity, objectifying her further. Falstaff’s misogyny, just as Hotspur’s was, is in essence a reaffirmation of masculinity; in denouncing all that is “feminine” and lifting all that is “masculine,” Falstaff attempts to deny the feminine traits within himself by way of developing contingencies (“if women are , then surely I am not , as I am not a woman”) and suppressing femininity and women to the point of absence. Though he tries, Falstaff is not nearly as successful at this as was Hotspur, as Prince Hal stands in his way and foils his every attempt.

To begin with, much in the same way that males today verbally tease and belittle other males as a way of asserting dominance, Prince Hal constantly rags on and criticizes Falstaff—namely, his roundness. Hal refers to Falstaff as being “as gross as a mountain” (2.4.183-4). He calls him a “bed-presser,” a “horse-backbreaker,” a “huge hill of flesh,” “a tun of man,” a “swollen parcel,” a “huge bombard,” an “ox with the pudding in his belly” (2.4.195-361). These names, while in reference to his weight and overall size, point directly to Falstaff’s rotundity, his round, pregnant-like belly (Traub 57). The fact that Hal refers to his male friend in such terms, and the obvious disgust he shows towards Falstaff for seeming pregnant says little to nothing about his revulsion of a pregnant woman; rather, because Falstaff—a male—possesses this quality, Hal’s disgust is at such. He rejects androgyne—this male-had feminine
trait—much in the same way Hotspur did. Prince Hal’s suggestions become more entangled in society’s gender constructs; Phyllis Rackin asserts that in fifteenth and sixteenth-century England, “[...] the body served as a map not of gender difference but of social and political hierarchy.” Claiming that “the relation of the head to the lower parts formed the basis for the ideological representation of the state as the body politic,” she establishes that society had “the king as its head, the lower orders as its subordinate members” (“Foreign Country” 76). As Hal always remarks on Falstaff’s round abdomen—his “womb”—the insinuation is that Falstaff is not the “king” but rather, a “subordinate member.” As the prior is associated with rulership, “masculinity,” in effect, the latter is by contrast associated with fewer of the mind’s functions, and more of the body’s—work, play, and so is the implication, childbirth. With masculinity at the head and femininity in the belly, Falstaff is pointedly “feminine” at the hand of Prince Hal.

While he seems like a textbook case of the hyper-masculine “young buck” because he is still young, Prince Hal’s insecurities concerning his own sexual immaturity and seeming homosexuality complicate his stance. In order to distance himself from—as R.A. Martin phrases it—the “adolescent and sexually ambiguous world presided over by Falstaff,” Prince Hal pushes the focus to Falstaff, exposing him as “wrong,” in essence, “feminine,” and stepping out of the spotlight to avoid being questioned and to avoid having to question himself. Prince Hal, though, never completely denounces femininity—in fact, he tends to defend women, namely Mistress Quickly—but rather, rejects the sort of androgyny he fears he may have in order to reassert himself as only masculine, only a man.

As is plainly seen, in the cases of each of these male characters, the rejection and denouncement of femininity as a sort of reassertion of masculinity creates a male-maintained social hierarchy, wherein all men dominate all women; however, also as a result, but perhaps less obviously, a hierarchy forms within the realm of masculinity. In this, Hotspur is more aggressively “masculine” than Prince Hal, who is more “masculine” than Falstaff, who is only more “masculine”—and barely, at that—than the women. This hierarchy, while it developed for many specific reasons, exists in the play only as a result of the men’s fear of association with the bottom rung.

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