

**“AN EFFEMINATE
PRINCE”: GENDER
CONSTRUCTION IN
SHAKESPEARE’S FIRST
TETRALOGY**

*Miguel Angel González Campos
Universidad de Málaga*

In the emphatically masculine world of Shakespeare’s History Plays, the king Henry VI shows some unequivocally feminine features. This character is particularly revealing to understand the underlying gender ideology in the first tetralogy. The aim of this paper is to approach this “effeminate prince,” as he is called in the play, who neglects his duties as a ruler and as a man, and to discuss the implications of his behaviour in order to analyse how these plays construct a gender system in which femininity and masculinity are defined by mutual opposition and in which power, an element clearly belonging to the male sphere, can have disastrous consequences when it is exerted by weak non-masculine men.

In the first scene of *1 Henry VI* Gloucester uses the expression “an effeminate prince” (I.1.35) to refer to the King. In the “emphatically masculine” world (Kahn 1981: 47) of Shakespeare’s History Plays the adjective “effeminate” has a priori an undeniable pejorative sense. However, the loyalty and the respect to the King which Gloucester displays at all times throughout the play suggest that these words are used with a strictly descriptive rather than offensive intention to represent the figure of Henry VI. Although some critics such as J. P. Brockbank have explicitly denied the “feminine character” of this king (1961: 97) it seems clear that a certain feminine quality exists in the figure of Henry VI. This femininity should not be understood, of course, in terms of sexual behaviour but rather it has to do with the character’s positioning in relation to the stereotypes of masculine and feminine behavior which we find in the Tetralogy.

If we accept the stereotypes that Irene G. Dash considers as dominant in the History Plays, “for ‘maleness’ strength, courage, and initiative; and for ‘femaleness’ docility, passivity, and weakness” (Dash 1981: 207), it is easy to conclude that some features of Henry VI are closer to those that would be typically feminine. In fact, probably the most accurate description of the character of the King can be found in York’s words when he defines what the feminine behavior should be, making explicit in this way the dominant gender

ideology in the Tetralogy: “Women are *soft, mild, pitiful and flexible* / Thou stern, obdurate, flinty, rough” (*3 Henry VI*, 1.4.141-2; emphasis mine). These words aimed at Margaret to criticize her absence of femininity also make evident the way the concepts of masculinity and femininity often appear defined by contrast in the Tetralogy. Consequently, the “femininity” or “non masculinity” of Henry VI is particularly marked by the presence of a character who acts as a counterpoint and represents precisely all those masculine values which the King lacks. In *1 Henry VI* this character is clearly Talbot, who appears, as Pilar Hidalgo points out, as the “paradigm of the English masculinity” (1994: 246). The enormous contrast between the behaviour of Talbot and the King in both the public and the private sphere perfectly illustrates the nature of the “femininity” of Henry VI.

Unlike Talbot, the most representative trait of Henry is his passivity. This feature traditionally associated to the female sex clearly contrasts with the dynamic active role which Talbot plays in the campaigns in France. The undeniable bravery and courage which all the characters, including his own enemies, acknowledge in Talbot and which make him emerge as “an epic hero” (Leggatt 1988: 2), represent a clear counterpoint to the attitude of the King, who appears as a figure who does not dare to face his enemies. Even the King compares himself to a female animal unable to act despite seeing his enemies destroy his family:

And as *the dam* runs lowing up and down,
Looking the way her harmless young one went,
And can do nought but wail her darling’s loss,
Even so myself bewails good Gloucester’s case
with sad unhelpful tears.
(*2 Henry VI*, 3.1.214-8; emphasis mine)

In this way, other characters constantly criticize his passivity which is linked to his lack of masculinity, such as we see in the words that the Queen aims at her husband: “Fie, coward woman and soft-hearted wretch! / Hast thou not spirit to curse thine enemy?” (*2 Henry VI*, 3.2.307-8). Undoubtedly, remarks like this one by Margaret make evident, as Dash points out, the pervasive strength of the dominant ideology since “women, too, tend to accept the stereotyped patterns for male and female behaviour” (Dash 1981: 158).

This passivity of the King is partly a consequence of his deeply ingrained religious beliefs which make him willing to follow the evangelical teachings, and therefore to turn the other cheek rather than do any harm.¹ In this sense,

¹Michael Manheim, who claims that the tetralogy stages the struggle between the Christian king and the Machiavellian ideals, offers a quotation by Machiavelli himself which is quite appropriate to describe the attitude of Henry VI: “If our religion does ask that you possess some

Larry S. Champion speaks of “a passivity provoked by religious concern” (Champion 1980: 32). But more specifically we can see that Henry uses his over-reliance on divine providence as an excuse for his lack of action. In fact the King often attributes his misfortunes to divine plans and considers therefore any action unnecessary. The inadequacy of the King’s religious beliefs is made evident by Talbot, who perfectly combines being a man of action with a more realistic religious conviction, which makes him aware that divine help should be a complement to human action and never a justification for passivity. In this way, Talbot’s invocations to God usually appear next to calls for human action: “God is our fortress, in whose conquering name / *let us resolve to scale* their flinty bulwarks” (*1 Henry VI*, 2.1.26-7; emphasis mine).

In spite of King Henry’s pious personality, however, when Suffolk describes Margaret of Anjou to him (*1 Henry VI*, 5.5.1-21) his not too Christian reaction is clearly marked by lust: he puts his pleasure before his duty and cancels a politically convenient marriage, an action of disastrous consequences for his family and his country as the Tetralogy shows. His favouring of sexual desire over public obligations brings again the King closer to the “feminine” personality since, as Valerie Traub points out, “at that time ‘lust’ was seen as effeminizing in its power to subordinate men to women by making men more ‘like’ women” (Traub 1992: 51). Leaving aside whether Henry VI feels at that moment a certain desire for Margaret, which I believe he does, although some critics such as M. M. Reese (1961: 199) would disagree, it is obvious that in this scene we find again a clear contrast between the King’s reaction and what we could consider as the exemplary “masculine” reaction represented by Talbot in his encounter with the Countess of Auvergne.² In spite of her wicked stratagems, the English knight never lets himself be seduced and always has his duty in mind, which makes him beat the enemy and, at the same time, overcome that “challenge to his manhood” (1988: 3) that, in opinion of Alexander Leggatt, the episode of Auvergne represents for Talbot.

Apart from these features of Henry VI which bring him closer to a more typical feminine behavior (weakness,³ passivity, prevalence of passion over

courage, it prefers that you be ready to suffer rather than to do a courageous act... the generality of man, in order to go to Heaven, think more of enduring injuries than in defending themselves against them” (1973: 79).

²As Paula S. Berggren points out, throughout the Tetralogy it is continuously shown that “natural impulses must be straitened and rationalized” (1980: 31) and, in this way, reason, a masculine value, prevails over passion, a value traditionally associated with the female sex.

³A clear example of this “female weakness” is when Henry VI faints after learning Gloucester’s death. Fainting, something traditionally related to the feminine personality, is another distinctive feature of the gender role played by Margaret. She also faints exactly at the moment in which she is again relegated to a typical feminine social position (*3 Henry VI*, 5.5.46),

reason, etc.), there is another element which particularly contributes to undermine his masculinity. Coppélia Kahn defends the importance of the “male bond” between parents and sons in the Tetralogy in order to build a man’s masculinity. According to her, “the two tetralogies are a continuous meditation on the role of the father in a man’s self-definition” (Kahn 1981: 47) and, in this way, she claims that in the History Plays, and very especially in the first Tetralogy, the identity and the masculinity of an individual is defined by this father-son bond:

The father’s role is to maintain, mostly by martial valor in the first tetralogy... the inheritance of family honor left to him by his father, and to pass it on to his son, who is expected to follow his father’s example and find a ready-made identity in it (Kahn 1981: 49-50).

In the case of Henry VI it is clear that, because of his father’s premature death, this male bond does not exist in the construction of his masculine identity. As a consequence Henry VI never attains the paternal authority he needs to keep order and to inspire loyalty (Kahn 1981: 51). Significantly enough, the Tetralogy starts off precisely with Henry V’s funeral, which comes to symbolize in words of Janet Adelman “the loss of a world of male bonds” (1985: 95). The absence of the father figure and the consequent impossibility of gaining access to a masculine identity partly explain that in some occasions Henry VI appears as a somewhat childlike character. For example, his attempt to hide after transferring the dynastic rights to York when he sees the queen approaching (*3 Henry VI*, 1.1.211-2) clearly reminds us of a child that hides fearing the punishment of his mother after a prank. In the same way, many characters often address him as if he was a child (*3 Henry VI*, II.ii.73-4; *3 Henry VI*, II.ii.122) and also at the level of imagery he is compared with infantile figures such as Phaethon (*3 Henry VI*, II.vi.11-2). This image of the King as a childlike man brings him closer again to a certain degree of femininity in the sense that he has not achieved the masculine identity yet. Traub, quoting Thomas Laqueur, points out that in Elizabethan times Galen’s medical theories were widely accepted and according to them “men originate as female” (Traub 1992: 51) and little by little they acquire the masculinity and become real men. This theory which tries to explain the androgynous and effeminate appearance of many adolescent boys who have not reached male maturity yet, can also be applied to the Tetralogy, with the implication that Henry VI, not having passed over the threshold of masculinity, still remains bound to that femininity. Consequently, the gender system appears as an exclusive bipolar system in which femininity and masculinity are defined by mutual opposition and in which those who do not belong to one of the groups must be bound necessarily

this fainting being in a way a point of inflection in her positioning with regard to the stereotypes of gender behaviour.

to the other. Therefore, Henry VI would be a somewhat “feminine” character not because of his undoubtedly feminine behavior but as a consequence of his “non-masculine” actions.

Not having received from his father the necessary bequest to build his own masculine identity, we see how, using Kahn’s words, “(Henry VI) never reaches full manhood or assumes rule firmly; he remains effeminate” (1981: 51). Once again, the figure of Talbot represents a significant counterpoint to the King. Talbot, as a model of chivalric masculinity, accepts to die next to his son defending the lands won by his elders before sullyng his honor and the honor of his offspring since he acknowledges that “the final act of honor is the final proof of identification between them” (Berman 1962: 490) and, at the same time, his son also “asserts his birthright by sacrifice” (Berman 1962: 490). On the contrary, Henry VI does exactly the opposite. He is shown as an unworthy son unable to keep the French territories conquered by his progenitor, a paternal legacy that works as a metaphor of this symbolic masculinity passed from parents to children. But besides, he also appears as an unfit father who does not fulfil “the obligation of a father to a son by the act of bequest” (Berman 1962: 494), since he shamefully hands the crown over and dishonors himself and also his son when he denies him his legacy in order not to put their lives in danger. This behavior could hardly be accepted in the chivalric masculine world represented by Talbot. It is significant that both fathers, Talbot and Henry VI, recall before dying the same mythological image of Icarus but with different implications: while Talbot feels proud that his son has died emulating his father (*1 Henry VI*, IV.vi.55), the ideal of the male father-son relation according to Kahn, Henry blames himself for his son’s death (*3 Henry VI*, V.vi.21).

As a consequence of his “non masculinity,” Henry VI fails not only in the public sphere (his passivity as a ruler leads his country to a bloody civil war) but also in the private sphere since he fails as a son, as a father, and also as a husband who does not live up to his wife’s expectations (*2 Henry VI*, I.iii.51-3). This symbolic “femininity” of Henry VI has another important consequence related to the construction of the gender system, since it leads the Queen to transgress the social order by taking on a masculine role in order to fill the gap left by her husband. Margaret herself makes perfectly clear the different masculine and feminine roles in the Tetralogy when she says: “Tell him my mourning weeds are laid aside, / And I am ready to put armor on” (*3 Henry VI*, III.iii.229-30).⁴ The Queen does not hesitate to lead the army to defend her son’s inheritance, something that according to the gender ideology of the History Plays should have been done by her husband as a king and as a father.

⁴ Significantly enough, in *Richard III* Margaret will be relegated again to these “mourning weeds,” a role more in keeping with her sex according to the dominant ideology.

In this way the undeniable cause-effect relation between the “femininity” and the inadequacy for rule of Henry and the forced “masculinity” of Margaret makes evident that, as Alan Sinfield indicates, in the History Plays “the most persistent alert [for the patriarchal power] is not that women will intrude upon the state and its wars, but that the men will prove inadequate” (cited in Hidalgo 1994: 242).

On the other hand, also quite revealing to illustrate the conflict between power and feminine identity is the fact that Margaret, as Joan of Arc, has to adopt a “masculine” attitude to take on a role of power and authority, and then she has to return to a more “feminine” position when she is beaten and deprived of her power, as we see in *Richard III*. Paradoxically enough, in order to understand why according to the dominant ideology power falls out of the sphere of the feminine identity we must not look at these female characters of masculine behaviour but at a male effeminate character such as Henry VI. The King is in a sense a figure more “feminine” than Margaret herself and his unfortunate actions clearly illustrate the fatal consequences of the women’s rule. Gloucester clearly articulates the predominant patriarchal ideology in the History Plays when, in talking about the Queen, he says that state matters “are no women’s matters” (2 *Henry VI* 1-1.3.115).

To sum up, we can conclude that in the emphatically masculine world of Shakespeare’s History Plays, the presence of Henry VI as an epitome of stereotypical feminine behavior has mainly two basic implications within the plays’ gender system. The first one is that it shows the close interrelation and mutual interdependence between the masculine and the feminine identity which are defined by opposition in a Saussurean way, placing, for example, Henry VI in a “feminine sphere” for his non-masculine behavior. The second one is that, in this opposition, power is an element clearly belonging to the sphere of masculinity, as illustrated by the disastrous rule of Henry VI, a female character in a symbolic sense, who makes evident the fatal consequences of a woman exercising power, something that, according to the dominant ideology in the History Plays, is not in keeping with her role. This explains her failure in such a task.

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