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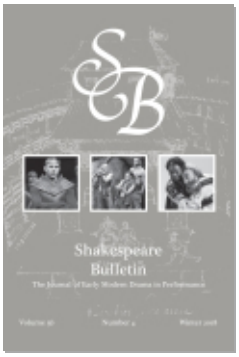

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Queering Poins: Masculinity and Friendship in *Henry IV*, *The Hollow Crown*, and the RSC's "King and Country"

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Ned Poins, Prince Hal's rabble-rousing sidekick in the *Henry IV* plays, appears in only five scenes across two plays and vanishes in each play before the third act.[1] Murray J. Levith suggests that his name alludes to his being "as tiny and insignificant as a point" (38), and indeed scholars and theater critics have overlooked him. In the usual understanding, these plays are about Hal's relationships with his father, Falstaff, and Hotspur—not with Poins. Two recent productions have challenged these assumptions by offering memorable, homoerotic Poinses. Series 1 of the TV program *The Hollow Crown* (2012) and the Royal Shakespeare Company's "King and Country: Shakespeare's Great Cycle of Kings" (2016) both represent Poins as a roguish but beleaguered queer hero whose erotically charged friendship with Hal must be swept aside to facilitate Hal's rise. Although several scholars have noted the second tetralogy's obsession with masculinity, few consider how Poins matters to this definition, and queer studies tend to focus on Falstaff or Hotspur.[2]

As this essay moves Poins into the spotlight, it analyzes sixteenth-century texts and twenty-first-century performances as equally rich instances of a Shakespearean "work," which Margaret Jane Kidnie defines as "a dynamic *process* that evolves over time in response to the needs and sensibilities of its users" (2). My method also draws on W. B. Worthen's definition of performance as "a collective means of knowledge *making*" (21) to argue that *The Hollow Crown* and "King and Country" do not simply present Shakespearean texts. Instead, each production enlarges them by offering what Pascale Aebischer has called "negotiated readings," or the fleshing out of "empty spaces" and marginalized characters,

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that allow critics and spectators to tell alternative narratives (12). Each instance of the *Henry IV* plays, whether an early modern text or a modern production, is entangled with its culture's ideas about queerness, masculinity, and friendship.

I begin by investigating how the earliest printed versions of these plays represent Poins as "queer" in its early modern connotations: peculiar, dubious, or disreputable. The playtexts suggest that he is not conventionally masculine, and they mark his friendship with Hal as inappropriate and suspect because of their disparity in rank. I then turn to the recent BBC and RSC productions, which offer versions of Poins that recall the past but are mediated by twenty-first-century notions of love and loss. To accommodate shifting definitions of masculinity and friendship, both use homoeroticism to underline how Poins's relationship with Hal can be "queer" in a modern sense: not corresponding to our established ideas about heterosexuality.[3] In both the early texts and the recent productions, Hal's rise to the monarchy hinges on his fulfillment of culturally defined masculinity, yet by making Poins a likeable character and by embracing temporarily his friendship with Hal, *The Hollow Crown* and "King and Country" encourage discomfort with Poins's disappearance and the conventional behavior expected of Hal. This alternative, twenty-first-century narrative requires no radical transformation of the sixteenth-century texts, but relies on cultural changes to produce a new understanding of Hal's narrative and Shakespeare's Henriad. Emphasis on the Poins subplot in our current cultural moment can make the *Henry IV* plays into modern tragedies about conformity and injustice.

"Be not too familiar with Poins": early modern texts and contexts

The texts of Shakespeare's *Henry IV* plays provide little information about Poins's status and background. Poins calls himself "a second brother," suggesting that his family has something to inherit, but his precise social rank is difficult to pinpoint (*1 Henry IV*, 2.2.53). Descriptions of him as the Prince's "continual follower" and "shadow" suggest that he is a kind of courtier, but we never see him at court (*1 Henry IV*, 4.3.53; 2.2.127). We might describe him as a gallant—not the brave kind like Hotspur, but a man concerned with fashion and pleasure—but *1 Henry IV* seems to mock that possibility when Falstaff hyperbolically calls Poins and other tavern-dwellers "Gallants" in a joking, grandiose style (2.5.228). Poins's drinking and jesting might associate him with "roaring boys," defined by Burton Milligan as either "boisterous young gentlemen, who often behaved in an ungentlemanly manner" or "petty

swindlers, who imitated the 'fashionable' excesses of such young bloods as cloak to more serious misdemeanors" (184). The play texts support both definitions at times, yet Poins seems less noisy and drunken than do Pistol and others. Shakespeare's texts present Poins not as a single or stable kind of character, but as an amalgamation of familiar types. As the play's characterization of Poins shifts between aspects of these types, it identifies Poins's relationship with Hal as a problem with an ambiguous cause.

Poins's most frequent label is "rogue," which designates the love for mischief and willful disregard of conventions that he shares with Hal and Falstaff. The texts repeatedly underscore his close friendship with Hal and animosity with Falstaff, who speaks the first words about Poins in *1 Henry IV*: "O, if men were to be saved by merit, what hole in hell were hot enough for him?" (1.2.84–85). Falstaff's regular complaints about Poins reveal dislike and probably envy, as the play establishes the two as competitors for Hal's attention and friendship. When Poins enters in the play's second scene, he mocks Falstaff and addresses Hal affectionately as "sweet Hal" and "my good sweet honey lord" (1.2.88, 125). In this initial scene, Poins is primarily a trickster whose main role is to convince Hal to execute the Gads Hill prank. When Hal soliloquizes at the scene's end about a time when he will throw off "this loose behaviour" (1.2.163), he indicates—at least in part—his need to escape Poins's negative influence. In act two, Poins and Hal together rob Falstaff and friends, tease Francis, and ridicule Falstaff for telling tall tales. Associated with playful mischief and jest, Poins disappears when the play pivots from the comic tavern to the battlefield.

2 Henry IV continues to associate Poins with trickery, along with extravagance and ambitious desire. It introduces Poins and Hal at the same moment in 2.2, when they enter as companions. Hal's first line announces that he is "exceeding weary" and Poins later teases him for talking "idly" after he has "laboured so hard" (2.2.1, 23–24). The scene invites the questions: why is the Prince weary, and what is his hard labor? Nicholas Grene speculates that Hal's exhaustion is the "aftereffect of the strenuous march from Wales back to London," a possibility explored by Anthony Quayle's 1951 Shakespeare Memorial Theatre production, which had Hal take off his riding gear with Poins's assistance (232). E.M.W. Tillyard argues that court affairs, rather than physical exhaustion, burden Hal (272). But Shakespeare's text most clearly associates Hal's weariness with the disparity between his high rank and his recent activities and companions. Hal expresses desire for "small beer" and delivers this anxiety-ridden speech to Poins:

> But indeed, these humble considerations make me out of love with my greatness. What a disgrace is it to me to remember thy name! Or to know thy face tomorrow! Or to take note how many pair of silk stockings thou hast—*videlicet* these, and those that were thy peach-coloured ones! Or to bear the inventory of thy shirts—as one for superfluity, and another for use. But that the tennis-court keeper knows better than I, for it is a low ebb of linen with thee when thou keepest not racket there; as thou hast not done a great while, because the rest of thy low countries have ate up thy holland. (2.2.10–19)

This passage invites several additional questions. What might the bawdy joke about tennis and linen reveal? Why does Hal dwell on Poins's wardrobe, and especially his peach-colored silk stockings? What is disgraceful about Hal's intimacy with Poins?

Scholarly discussions of this scene have focused on class rank to address the latter question. As Laurie Shannon has shown, Renaissance friendship discourses (based on Aristotle, Cicero, and Montaigne) emphasize likeness of sex and station (17–53). Angel Day's *The English Secretorie* (1592) says simply that "there can bee no *Friend* where an inequality remayneth ... no *Friendship* where resteth a Superiority" (sig. R1v). No matter Poins's specific station, he is far inferior to the heir apparent. Because of their difference in rank, Grene says, "real intimacy, based on equality, is never possible" (233–34), and Erich Auerbach says of Hal, "Far be it for him to respect Poins as his equal" (315). Peter Parolin argues that Hal's desire for small beer, a cheap brew associated with low ranks, causes Hal to confront how his time in the tavern has affected his nobility (30). Rank is indeed crucial to this scene, yet it is not the only cause of Hal's anxiety.

Hal's speech about silk and linen reveals that Poins is intimately connected to the play's representations of masculinity. Because silk was still a foreign, luxury commodity in England when the play was first printed and performed, it would have signaled lust, wastefulness, and non-Englishness to Elizabethan audiences. The color of Poins's stockings might have suggested indulgence in rare goods because peach seems to have been new to England in the late sixteenth century (Linthicum 40). Peach stockings represent extravagance in other contemporary texts. John Eliot's witty dialogues on London life and foreign travel, called *Eliots Fruits for the French* (1593), has a gentlewoman ask a merchant about "peach-colourd Netherstocke," which he says are "very fine" and expensive. One of the ways in which Fastidious Brisk in Jonson's *Every Man Out of His Humour* (1599) identifies himself as foolish and overindulgent is by wearing "two pair of silk stockings … a peach colour and another" (4.5.346–47). When

the *Henry IV* plays were first performed, sumptuary laws prohibited those of the lower ranks from wearing silk stockings. An especially detailed statute of 15 June 1574 reads:

> The excess of apparel and the superfluity of unnecessary foreign wares thereto belonging now of late years is grown by sufferance to such an extremity that the manifest decay of the whole realm generally is like to follow (by bringing into the realm such superfluities of silks, cloths of gold, silver, and other most vain devices of so great cost for the quantity thereof as of necessity the moneys and treasure of the realm is and must be yearly conveyed out of the same to answer the said excess) but also particularly the wasting and undoing of a great number of young gentlemen, otherwise serviceable, and others seeking by show of apparel to be esteemed as gentlemen, who, allured by the vain show of those things, do not only consume themselves, their goods, and lands which their parents left unto them, but also run into such debts and shifts as they cannot live out of danger of laws without attempting unlawful acts, whereby they are not any ways serviceable to their country as otherwise they might be. (*Elizabethan Sumptuary*)

The statute seeks to remedy the problem of young gentlemen and nobles who spend beyond their means and even turn to criminal behavior to finance their luxury clothing, and the ordinance later declares that "silk netherstocks" are reserved for men of high degree and those attending the monarch. Its language parallels that of Shakespeare's play: according to Hal's speech, Poins is exactly the kind of young man whose vain attraction to superfluous clothes might make him less "serviceable" to England. For a late Elizabethan audience, Poins's attire could have marked him as a royal attendant, a luxurious spendthrift, or both, and the color of his stockings might have symbolized a lack of riches, nobleness, or courage, according to M. Channing Linthicum's speculations about the color peach (40). This attire may very well highlight the deficiencies of a character who disgraces Hal by association.

Hal wastes so much time with Poins that he can produce an inventory of his clothes, and through this catalog Hal implicitly labels Poins effeminate. Alan Sinfield and Jonathan Dollimore define effeminacy in Shakespeare's time as everything that was not distinctively masculine, including too much devotion to women or any "falling away from the proper totality of masculine essence" (131). Although there were various, competing forms of manhood, the early moderns often saw lust as effeminizing because of its power to subordinate men to women and a man's reason to his bodily appetite (Shepard 12; Traub 51–52; Howard

and Rackin 194). Mario DiGangi defines masculine courtiers as those who dress according to the monarch's instructions for their station, while effeminate courtiers dress inappropriately, care too much about clothes, and are obsessed with powdering and perfuming (117). Hotspur's first speech in *1 Henry IV* uses this definition and foregrounds effeminacy as problematic when he complains about "a certain lord, neat and trimly dressed" and is enraged "To see him shine so brisk, and smell so sweet, / And talk so like a waiting gentlewoman" (1.3.32, 53–54). Poins, too, is effeminate by early modern standards, whether or not we interpret his attire as reflecting a high station and attachment to a royal subject. As most editors point out, Hal refers to Poins's sexual organs through the euphemism "low countries" in the speech cited above, and when he says that they have eaten up his "holland" (or linen), he means that the lusty Poins has spent his money either on whores with venereal disease or on providing linen for babies he has fathered. An additional line in the earliest Quarto develops the latter idea by teasing Poins about his illegitimate children, but the later editions make it likely that Hal jokes about Poins's sexual activity being *not* productive.[4] Even if this line is delivered in jest, it underscores the importance of what Rebecca Ann Bach calls "testicular masculinity," or the early modern definition of masculinity as breeding that she identifies as crucial context for *Henry V* (4).[5] It also helps us understand Poins. His silk stockings, his superfluous shirt, the references to his sexual organs: these are all possible markers of his effeminacy in an early modern context.

Although the texts encourage us to interpret Hal's misadventures as youthful exploits that he will outgrow, the same is not true for Poins, who misrecognizes his place in the world and never learns to behave differently. In *1 Henry IV* he addresses Hal as "sirrah," a term usually reserved for social inferiors (1.2.138; Shannon 178). Falstaff's letter in *2 Henry IV* warns Hal, "Be not too familiar with Poins, for he misuses thy favours so much that he swears thou art to marry his sister Nell" (2.2.103–104). Although Poins denies it and Falstaff is no reliable narrator, this line draws attention to the inappropriateness of Poins's intimacy with Hal. Poins also calls himself "a proper fellow of my hands," or a man of valor or skill in fighting, but he is not present in any battle scene, which leads us to assume that he uses his skills for frivolous or immoral acts instead of fighting for his monarch (2.2.54). Several feminist and queer theorists have read the Henriad as a sequence that expels feminine and homoerotic elements to achieve heterosexual masculine rule, and for these critics the major threat to Hal's masculinity is Falstaff, described by Valerie Traub

as a grotesque maternal figure "whose rejection is the basis upon which patriarchal subjectivity is predicated" (55–59).[6] Yet the text presents Poins as just as great an obstacle to princely, masculine behavior—less present and vocal than Falstaff, but a more intimate friend and just as much a possible image of sodomy.

Sodomy has been defined narrowly as same-sex relations or broadly as any sex act that is not married, procreative sex, and it is not necessarily connected to effeminacy or homoeroticism in the early modern period (DiGangi 46; Goldberg, *Sodometries* 19). As Alan Bray has shown, the difference between a sodomite and a masculine friend was tenuous (11). Male homoerotic desire could be consistent with honorable masculinity if tied to military fellowship (Howard and Rackin 194). The problem with Poins is that he loves Hal in the tavern, not on the battlefield. Because a man who rose in the ranks or a friendship between two men of unequal status could trigger an allegation of sodomy (Bray 11; Shannon 94), Poins's relationship with Hal might have indeed suggested sodomy to an early modern audience. When Falstaff's letter uses the word "familiar" to accuse Poins of overstepping his position, it signifies not only friendliness with a person of different rank, but also an inappropriate kind of sexual intimacy. As DiGangi points out, the notion that noble men are derogated through physical contact with inferiors is also a sodomitical image (46), and *2 Henry IV* implies that Poins's frivolity might infect Hal. Falstaff tells Doll that Poins is Hal's friend because he "drinks off candles' ends for flap-dragons, and rides the wild mare with the boys, and jumps upon joint-stools, and swears with a good grace, and wears his boot very smooth like unto the sign of the leg, and breeds no bate with telling of discreet stories, and such other gambol facilities a has that show a weak mind and an able body" (2.4.211–16). Hal and Poins are offended when they overhear this description, and its phallic imagery (ring toss, eels, candles) and focus on Poins's body hint at something erotic. The passage demonstrates that Poins is too sportive and playful, a child rather than a serious man. Falstaff argues that Poins is neither the courtier he aims to be nor the vain gallant Hal identifies, but a roaring boy who embodies wild, unprincipled youth. Falstaff also concludes that the Prince and Poins look and act alike: "the Prince himself is such another" (2.4.217). This likeness does not mean that their friendship has elevated Poins; instead, Falstaff and others imply that Poins has negatively influenced Hal. The text presents Poins as a cautionary tale about youthful misrule, an alternative to Hal's self-proclaimed emergence from his reckless youth.

A few other moments in *2 Henry IV* intermingle concern about social rank and appropriate behavior with hints at an erotic component to the relationship between Hal and Poins.[7] When Hal reveals that he might be sad at his father's illness, Poins calls him a hypocrite "because you have been so lewd, and so much engrafted to Falstaff" (2.2.49–50). The accusation of lewdness implies low rank and a range of inappropriate behavior, including impiety, impurity, vulgarity, or lack of education. Vin Nardizzi has argued that the sexualized rhetoric of plant grafting hints at a charge of sodomy between Hal and Falstaff, and the scene implies the same about Poins when Hal adds, "And to thee" (2.2.51). This response suggests that the same range of impropriety applies to the Hal-Poins friendship and causes Poins to retort defensively that he is "well spoke on" (2.2.52). When they exit the scene, Poins says to Hal, "I am your shadow, my lord; I'll follow you" (2.2.127). Other contemporary texts use "shadow" to signify something insubstantial or ephemeral, a parasite, a feeble person, darkness produced by intercepting the sun's light, or protection from danger ("Shadow"). Poins represents himself as an unwelcome or insignificant follower whose friendship with the prince (the royal "son") is fleeting. Although he declares willingness to follow and perhaps to protect Hal, Poins appears only once more in the earliest texts, when he and Hal overhear Falstaff call them witless and weak-minded (2.4.219–25). At the end of 2.4, Hal delivers a short speech beginning with: "By heaven, Poins, I feel me much to blame / So idly to profane the precious time" and ending with "Give me my sword and cloak.—Falstaff, good night" before he and Poins exit (2.4.313–18). Hal switches from prose to verse for the first time in this play to demonstrate his transformation from rogue to prince, yet the speech leaves unclear whether Hal bids farewell to Poins or invites Poins to join him in leaving Falstaff. Poins offers an extreme example of a cultural materialist emphasis on dissonance, described by Alan Sinfield as follows: "readers and audiences do not have to respect closures; they are at liberty to credit and dwell upon the adventurous middle part of a text, against a tidy conclusion" (136). There is no conclusion for Poins in the texts, tidy or otherwise, and this empty space creates a striking opportunity for today's productions.

Queer love and homoeroticism in *The Hollow Crown* and "King and Country"

By positioning the Hal-Poins scenes in their original cultural moment, I have proposed that Poins has always been queer; the lines delivered by

or to him can signal homoeroticism, effeminacy, and sodomy in an early modern context. The texts also offer ample potential for a queer reading of Poins today. It is not difficult for a modern reader to interpret Poins's relationship with Hal as erotic, given Poins's loving words to Hal, their subversive familiarity with one another, and Hal's interest in Poins's legwear. The BBC and RSC productions allowed modern audiences to readily identify the Hal-Poins relationship as transgressive—not because of rank, but because of illicit sexuality. Both productions drew on an assumption of the past as oppressed as they claimed to resurrect earlier times; they retained Shakespeare's language and were performed mostly in medieval or early modern dress, with marketing materials for *The Hollow Crown* identifying the series as "set in their authentic medieval period" ("About"). However, their occasionally updated language, the presence of famous actors, and the high-tech stage and projections at the RSC's New York residency served to remind audiences of their twenty-first-century moment. Poins's queerness, code for disrepute in the early modern period, became something different for the relatively progressive arts culture that produced and consumed "King and Country" and *The Hollow Crown*. In an era of struggles for LBGTQ rights and marriage equality in the US and UK, the suppression of male-male desire adopted tragic overtones to signal regrettable loss.

This version of Poins appeared in productions that were otherwise rather conservative. BBC Two aired the first series of *The Hollow Crown* in June and July 2012 as part of the "Cultural Olympiad" surrounding the London summer Olympics and amidst a license fee and charter renegotiation. L. Monique Pittman points out that the BBC often produces Shakespeare in such times of "institutional and fiscal vulnerability … to reaffirm its cultural significance." Although the BBC marketed the series as "bold adaptations," Shakespeare scholars found it to be rather traditionalist and therefore consistent with the BBC's long history of conservative Shakespeare ("Hollow"; Kirwan; Pittman). Pittman perceptively argues that the series "admits little room for questioning a construction of British nationalism as essentially white, male, and validated by the cultural iconicity of Shakespeare's canon." At the same time, the *Henry IV* episodes question heteronormativity through their portrayal of the Poins-Hal relationship.

The RSC has also turned to Shakespeare's histories in eras of perceived instability or new initiatives. The company's partnerships with two American universities were bookended with history plays: a five-year alliance with the University of Michigan began in 2001 with performances

of the first tetralogy in Ann Arbor, and a 2009–2016 collaboration with Ohio State University ended with a residency in New York that featured the second tetralogy. Robert Shaughnessy noted in 1994 that history cycles had forged a sense of unity, clarity, and purpose for the RSC, and the same has continued.[8] Each of the last three artistic directors—Adrian Noble, Michael Boyd, and Gregory Doran—launched major productions of one or both tetralogies that declared his competence or vision: "This England" (2000–01) under Noble's tenure, Boyd's "The Histories" (2006–08), and Doran's "King and Country." The latter was performed first as individual plays in Stratford-upon-Avon, and then as an international tour in commemoration of the four hundredth anniversary of Shakespeare's death, including the performances I saw at the Brooklyn Academy of Music in April 2016.[9] Like *The Hollow Crown*, Doran's tetralogy encouraged audiences to pause before accepting heteronormativity, an approach that is consistent with his past productions and stated view of Shakespeare. In a 2005 interview with *The Guardian*, he spoke of casting Shakespeare "in my own private image":

> As I am a gay man brought up in a Catholic family in Lancashire, so Shakespeare for me is a gay Catholic who spent some time in Lancashire. Others may dispute the facts of this biography, but throughout his plays I perceive the vivid perspective of a man who could empathise with outsiders, whether black, Jewish, female, or gay. ("He was a Gay")

Reviewers have noted strong threads of homoeroticism and male-male kissing in many of Doran's productions, including his 1999 *Timon of Athens* (Walker 115) and his 2007 *Antony and Cleopatra* and *Coriolanus* (Potter 517; Nightingale). The two plays that framed *1–2 Henry IV* in "King and Country" featured a passionate kiss between Aumerle and Richard II and a comically effeminate Dauphin who kissed one of his male followers. Doran also argued in the summer of 2017 that Shakespeare includes many "gay characters" who are sometimes "not played as gay, and I think in the 21st century that's no longer acceptable" ("Shakespeare May"). Under Doran's direction, heteronormativity was one of the conventions that made it so difficult for Hal to step easily into his inherited role. Both "King and Country" and *The Hollow Crown* emphasized Hal's hesitant, often unwilling acceptance of his kingship and presented sympathetic, loving versions of Poins.

In *The Hollow Crown* version of part one, Poins (David Dawson) is the near-constant companion of Hal (Tom Hiddleston). Poins frequently stands beside Hal while they exchange knowing glances and private jokes,

and Hal is without Poins only when he speaks to his father or fights in battle. Poins's appearance aligns him more with Hal than with the ruffians in Falstaff's crew. Like Hal, he is relatively short-haired, clean-shaven, and nicely dressed. The series gives him a larger role, following an editorial emendation championed by Fredson Bowers, in which Poins takes lines in the second and third acts assigned in the original texts to Peto. During the play-acting scene when Falstaff calls for Hal to "banish Poins," the camera pans to Poins, whose face falls, and as the camera lingers on his distraught expression, it is clear that he loves Hal deeply.

When Hal and Poins first appear in *The Hollow Crown*'s part two, they sit together in a bathhouse, naked except for the towels around their waists. The setting heightens the flirtatious tone of their dialogue when Hal chuckles as he says, "What a disgrace it is to me to remember thy name! Or to know thy face tomorrow!" Poins raises an eyebrow playfully as he responds: "How ill it follows, after you have laboured so hard, you should talk so idly!" Poins delivers the line ironically to insinuate either that Hal has not been working or that Hal's labor has been of a sexual kind. When Hal refers to Poins as someone "for fault of a better, to call my friend," he pauses before emphasizing "friend" as if the word does not fit their relationship. Instead of implying that their difference in rank precludes friendship, "fault of a better" here signals that Hal cannot find a better word to describe his feelings for Poins. Poins angrily defends himself ("By this light, I am well spoke on") but says nothing about being a second brother or a fellow of his hands. When Poins reads Falstaff's warning about Hal's familiarity with him, he and Hal turn immediately serious. The camera pans to Bardolph and the Boy, who exchange an amused but uncomfortable side glance. Poins appears upset and looks silently at Hal for several beats until Hal breaks the tension by laughing and taking the letter. The cuts in the bathhouse scene narrow its focus to the intimate relationship between Hal and Poins—a relationship for which the word "friend" seems inadequate.

Two scenes later when Hal bids Falstaff good night, Poins leaves *with* him, still his companion, and gives Falstaff a smug half-smile as he exits, which suggests that Poins has won their competition for Hal's love. But then, as in the text, Poins vanishes. Hal has an emotional last moment with his father and a heartbreaking final exchange with Falstaff, but nothing with Poins. Did Hal leave Poins quietly, or has their relationship moved out of the public eye? When *The Hollow Crown* turns to *Henry V*, it leaves this question unanswered and skips ahead to a time when Poins is no longer relevant.

Due in part to the significant fandom surrounding Hiddleston, *The Hollow Crown* inspired a host of Tumblrs, blogs, and works of fan fiction declaring excitement about Poins's relationship with Hal.[10] A Tumblr post by hiddleshoneybunny notes the homoeroticism in the bathhouse scene and asks why Hal "seem[s] to dump" Poins ("My Blue Eyed"). Another blog captions a still of Hal and Poins: "This is not the Universal Gaze of Heterosexual Longing. This is the Universal Gaze of Already Tapping That" (*The Shipper's Manifesto*). A Tumblr called "Texts from the Drunken Crown" offers seemingly endless memes of the two characters. One refers to the bathhouse scene as a "homoerotic shower" (917) and another captions a similar image of Hal and Poins as "Well I'm just gonna sit here naked in this chair and whatever happens happens" (606). The fan fiction site *Archive of Our Own* has an entire section tagged "Alternate Universe: No Poins Breakup," which alone underscores how many audience members described their relationship in romantic terms and interpreted Poins's disappearance as their separation. About forty pieces of fanfic inspired by *The Hollow Crown* on this website include Poins, and many are erotic.[11] These fan sites illustrate that some audiences understood this particular aspect of the BBC series to be less than conservative. Modern audiences might not recognize the problems of Hal's birthright, but they clearly feel drawn to a homoerotic Poins.

In the RSC's *1 Henry IV*, Hal (Alex Hassell) and Poins (Sam Marks) expressed intimacy through physical touching, including their initial encounter in a bed, and blocking encouraged us to see them as a pair, often set apart from the rest of the onstage characters. As in *The Hollow Crown*, Poins's appearance and richly embroidered red jacket marked him as an upper-class character. The production cut Hal's speeches during the Gads Hill robbery so he seemed less in charge and more like Poins's equal partner. The RSC also identified the play-acting scene as a critical moment in the Hal-Poins relationship. When Falstaff said, "banish Peto" and "banish Bardolph," everyone onstage yelled "No!" But at "banish Poins," they grew silent. In the filmed version of the original Stratford run, Poins jumped up with his arms out, yelled "hey!" and smiled, so that the moment became comic. In the New York performance I saw, Poins looked confused and hurt so that the moment felt poignant.

Part two gave us Hal and Poins not in a bathhouse, but sweaty and disrobing after playing tennis. They changed into new shirts as they punched and kicked each other playfully until their conversation turned serious. The production streamlined and occasionally modernized the scene by cutting outdated references to Poins's "silk stockings" and Hal's descrip-

tion of Poins's genitals as being "low countries." These cuts eliminated some of the scene's bawdy language, especially tied to Poins's womanizing. By converting early modern England's less binaristic version of sexuality to a modern homo-hetero binary, the cuts made it easier for a twenty-first-century audience to understand Poins as queer. Neither Poins nor Hal mentioned idle talk or hard labor, and when Hal identified Poins as "vile company," he delivered the line in a sincere, loving tone that cut against its meaning. Poins responded angrily to Hal's suggestion of lewdness and to Falstaff's letter, which precipitated a serious exchange between a defensive Poins and a wounded Hal. Poins later announced in a low, earnest voice, "I am your shadow," and ran offstage with Hal, never to return.

This relationship was fraught, with hints of something erotic. In the post-tennis exchange, lines that appear in the text as vulgar or impish became in this version sober, as if Hal and Poins were genuinely trying to understand their relationship. In the final play in the RSC tetralogy, Hassell played King Henry V as young and still settling into his new role, as if little time had passed between his coronation and the arrival of his French gift. The gift itself, tennis balls, alluded to the earlier scene between Poins and Hal and made it appear that the Dauphin's message and Henry's subsequent anger responded to an inappropriate relationship with Poins. Richard Corum has argued that these tennis balls mark the King as a sodomite in front of his "entire homosocial court" (81–82), and the New York RSC production made such an idea plausible. Reviewers of the Stratford, London, and New York runs rarely mention Poins unless to say that Sam Marks would have made a great Hal (Collins; Nice).[12] By making these two characters visually akin, both the RSC and BBC productions enabled a kind of narcissistic desire between them. Both also made it more feasible that the two *are* friends. As Marks says of his interpretation in a promotional video, "Poins isn't quite a low life. He spends a lot of time amongst low life, but he's from the court as well, so he's of a reasonable social standing. Poins is Prince Hal's best friend" ("Meet"). Marks's Poins was Hal's double, recalling the mirroring of selves so prevalent in early modern discourse.

"Thick-witted" or "quick-witted": Why Poins matters

This essay argues, above all, that we should pay more attention to Poins. It is difficult to construct a detailed performance history of this character, as Roberta Barker does with Hotspur or James C. Bulman

does with Falstaff, because far fewer traces survive. The stage history and literary criticism is dominated by famous Hals, Falstaffs, Hotspurs, and Henry IVs, and most reviewers and scholars do not mention Poins. Although we do not know how early moderns responded to Poins, he was memorable enough to receive mention in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* when Page worries that Fenton "kept company with the wild Prince and Poins" (3.2.55).[13] Leonard Digges highlights Poins along with Falstaff and Hal in his hyperbolic poem about Shakespeare's popularity, which prefaces John Benson's 1640 edition of Shakespeare's *Poems*: "when let but *Falstaffe* come, *Hall*, *Peines*, the rest you scarce shall have a roome" (sig. *4r).

Barker posits that interpretations of Hotspur reveal a particular culture's ideas about masculine heroism (299), and I suggest that Poins reveals the opposite: what theater professionals and literary critics assume Hal needs to excise. For Tillyard, that is anything and anyone low-ranking. He views Poins as far beneath Hal in wit and rank, as revealed by his condescending descriptions of Poins as "thick-witted" (273), "ignorant" (275), "unexacting company" (273), and a character who acts "simple mindedly" (272). Stage versions of Poins have interpreted him more positively, according to reviewers. In his discussion of Quayle's 1951 second tetralogy, J. Dover Wilson says Alan Badel played a "quick-witted Poins who made an excellent bridge between Falstaff and the reserved Prince" (71). When later twentieth-century performances followed Quayle in presenting Hal as an epic hero, his scene with Poins in *2 Henry IV* (2.2) often exposed which flaws Hal needed to incorporate or overcome to grow into a strong, masculine king.[14] Poins has provided a lens through which readers and stage audiences can better understand Hal, and he has represented either harmful influence or harmless fun.

Several productions in the twenty-first century complicated this binary by signaling gender, racial, physical, or sexual difference. A few theater companies have experimented with female Poinses who accompany male Hals, but for whom a relationship with the Prince can be only temporary.[15] As Poins in both parts of the 2010 *Henry IV* at the Globe, Danny Lee Wynter was one of only two black actors in the cast of twenty.[16] The same year at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival, deaf actor Howie Seago played Poins brilliantly in *1 Henry IV* as a hearing-impaired "outsider" in "a bar full of rowdy, hearing gangsters" who needed interpreters to translate others' speeches into American Sign Language (Shurgot 28). His and Wynter's Poinses were not innocent victims—both reveled in mischief—but their differences hinted at discrimination when other

characters ignored or ridiculed them. A homoerotic Poins can do the same, and examples of this type of Poins in adaptations of the *Henry IV* plays predate the twenty-first century. Robert Nye's 1976 *Falstaff: A Novel* describes Poins in its narrator Falstaff's words as "The Prince of Wales' male varlet" (255) and "a poof" (254) and tells a bawdy story about Poins's fear of vaginas (255). Orson Welles's *Chimes at Midnight* (1965) aligns Hal and Poins through similar physical appearances, dress, and behavior. They giggle together at Gads Hill, and while listening to Falstaff's tale about the robbery, they sit beside one another with arms folded and legs crossed, like mirror images. When Poins calls himself Hal's "shadow" and promises to follow him, the two men pause and gaze at each other for a moment with Hal's arm on Poins's shoulder. One section of dialogue from Scene 2.2 in *2 Henry IV* happens in Doll's bed, after Falstaff has exited and while Doll is asleep. Poins and Hal banter flirtatiously, and it is in this context that Hal calls Poins a "friend." Poins does not vanish completely—he appears at the end to see Falstaff's coffin—but we never again see him with Hal after they fight about Hal's hypocrisy and their friendship.

Gus Van Sant's film *My Own Private Idaho* (1991) makes more explicit the pair's homoeroticism as it loosely retells parts of *Chimes at Midnight*. The film is not exactly an adaptation of Shakespeare's *Henry IV* plays, but it combines rewritten scenes from these plays with other narratives and sources. The film is framed by and focused on a narcoleptic male prostitute named Mike, who seems to identify as gay and expresses unrequited love for his best buddy Scott. The film strongly identifies its Scott and Bob characters with Hal and Falstaff, respectively, but critics have disagreed as to how Mike figures into the Shakespeare allusions, arguing that he serves as a second Falstaff (Davis) or a combination of Poins-Hotspur (Goldberg, *Hand*) or Poins-Hal (Ferguson), or that his story line is kept separate from the Shakespeare episodes (Wiseman). Although Mike is not exactly Poins, he echoes the character in several scenes. The Gads Hill-like robbery is not Mike's idea, but otherwise Van Sant's scene plays out similarly to Shakespeare's version, with Mike and Scott working together to rob their friends and mock Bob. A campfire scene between Mike and Scott parallels Scene 2.2 in *2 Henry IV* by centering on the word "friend." When Mike asks, "What do I mean to you?" Scott replies, "Mike, you're my best friend." The word "friend" disappoints Mike, who declares his love for Scott, but Scott maintains that "two guys can't love each other." Soon thereafter, Scott chooses heterosexuality and his family's legacy, but until then, Mike had been his queer sidekick and

possible love interest. Like the RSC and BBC Poinses, Mike is an outsider who invites empathy. Because the film focuses on a group of men who sleep with men, it only somewhat marginalizes Mike's queerness, but it emphasizes his narcolepsy as different and disabling. Nye, Welles, and Van Sant introduced the possibility of making Poins queer in a modern sense. *The Hollow Crown* and "King and Country" further explore this possibility and the recent tendency to see Poins as a loveable outsider.

For at least the last century and a half, directors and scholars have understood the *Henry IV* plays as part of a larger narrative primarily about Hal's transformation from rascal to heroic king, and, as "King and Country" and *The Hollow Crown* illustrate, a queer Poins resonates beyond the *Henry IV* plays when viewed as part of a tetralogy. It draws special attention to Poins's absence in the second half of the sequence—an absence about which no character speaks—especially when so many of the other tavern characters appear or are mentioned in *Henry V*. A queer Poins can parallel Hal and Richard II in terms of effeminacy and inappropriate devotion to male favorites, as did both of these productions. In the text of *Richard II*, Bolingbroke complains of his son's frequenting taverns with "unrestrained loose companions … Which he, young wanton and effeminate boy, / Takes on the point of honour to support / So dissolute a crew" (5.3.7–12). When we encounter this play as the first in a "cycle," as the RSC's title says, we identify the potential for history to repeat itself, and the RSC production indeed played with this idea. Sam Marks doubled Poins with *Richard II*'s Aumerle, who shared a long kiss with Richard (David Tennant) at the beginning of the deposition scene. Because Aumerle delivered Richard's fatal stab in this version, the production implied that Richard's own lover took his life. When I watched Marks play Aumerle one night and Poins the next, this doubling made Hal's turn away from Poins seem wise.[17] Hal was already on his way to becoming a better, more effective king than was his father's predecessor because he learned something Richard did not: the damaging effect of privileging homoerotic relationships with favorites. A queer Poins also enables a new interpretation of Master Page's fear in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* that Fenton's association with Poins means he "knows too much" (3.2.56).

By making the friendship between Poins and Hal such a central component, the BBC and RSC productions enable audiences to lament Hal's need to embrace heteronormativity. Stephen Collins's review of the RSC Barbican run includes the following passage:

> When the conclusion you draw about a production of *Henry IV Part One* is that the finest, most assured and most memorable performance is that given by the actor playing the part of Ned Poins, you know, to mis-quote the Bard, that something is rotten in Bolingbroke's court and the taverns of Eastcheap. Yet, there it is. …it is Sam Marks's tremendously likeable, intelligently played Poins who triumphs.

Although I disagree that a memorable Poins signals a production's failure, Collins's review exposes how such a representation undermines two assumptions: that Poins matters little to the plays and that Hal journeys toward a necessarily positive conclusion. Neither "King and Country" nor *The Hollow Crown* blamed Hal fully for his decisions because both represented him as struggling with his preordained path. Hassell juxtaposed weeping with unnatural coldness, and Hiddleston paired pained expressions with somber voiceovers. Both productions implied that a society with narrow definitions of masculinity and sexuality is flawed, and it is Poins in both cases who makes most clear this understated critique. These productions teach us not to ignore Poins, but to understand him as the Henriad's unexpected linchpin.

Notes

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[1]Scene divisions can differ among modern editions. The Norton Anthology, for example, divides one scene in two so that Poins appears in six scenes.

[2]See, e.g., Bell; Billing; Nardizzi; Traub; Goldberg, *Sodometries*.

[3]I use "queer" as Eve Sedgwick does, sometimes to denote same-sex desire but more broadly to signify the "open mesh of possibilities" when "the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or can't be made) to signify monolithically" (8). On "homoerotic," I cite Valerie Traub's definition: "erotic bonds animated by specifically erotic desire, though that desire may not be fully conscious to or accepted by the desiring subject" (22).

[4]*2 Henry IV* has three extant texts: QA (1600), QB (1600), and F (1623). The line about Poins's illegitimate children in QA reads, "God knows whether those that bal out the ruines of thy linnen shal inherite his kingdom: but the Midwiues say, the children are not in the fault wherevpon the world increases, and kinreds are mightily strengthened" (sig. C4r). *1 Henry IV* was printed in eleven editions between 1598 and 1642, and the extant versions do not include any notable variants in Poins's lines.

[5]See also Simons 158–90 on the value and expenditure of semen in early modern Europe.

[6]See also Howard and Rackin 23–4, 167–77; Sinfield and Dollimore 128–29; Bach 3–23.

[7]Shannon focuses mostly on Hal's friendship with Falstaff but includes a few pages on Poins (178–80) that interpret him as Hal's intimate, though not erotic, friend. Jonathan Goldberg notes that Hal and Poins have an "illegitimate relation" (*Sodometries* 111), and Daniel Juan Gil briefly mentions Poins as part of the play's "eroticized male-male camaraderie" (117).

[8]See also Hampton-Reeves and Rutter, who explain (especially in pp. 2–6) how the performance history of the chronicle plays is bound up with the establishment of the RSC as "England's *de facto* national theatre for staging Shakespeare" (2).

[9]In addition to seeing the New York performances, I consulted commercial video of the UK run, recorded in Stratford-upon-Avon in May 2014.

[10]Hiddleston is best known for playing Loki in *Thor* and *The Avengers*, and the British media has dubbed his devoted fans "Hiddlestoners." In their study of Shakespeare fanfic, Valerie Fazel and Louise Geddes discuss the role that Hiddleston's cult celebrity plays in the large volumes of fanfic about *The Hollow Crown* (274–86).

[11]Two examples are "The Art of Deception" by Da Scribbla, in which Hal has Poins pretend to be his boyfriend to avoid Doll's advances, which leads to the men becoming lovers, and "Every Subject's Soul" by oxymoronic, in which Poins visits the newly-crowned King Henry for a tryst.

[12]A notable exception is a brief mention in *The Telegraph*, when Dominic Cavendish praises strong performances, including "Sam Marks's Poins, in full bromance mode with Hal." The word "bromance," which designates a non-sexual relationship between straight men, underscores a desire not to interpret Hal and Poins as queer.

[13]Thanks to Jim Marino for encouraging me to think about the implications of this line.

[14]For performance histories of the *Henry IV* plays until the early 1990s, see McMillin and Hodgdon.

[15]Examples include Trinity Repertory in Providence (2004), Keep It Simple Theatre Productions (2012), and Detroit Shakespeare in the Park (2016). Thanks to Ayanna Thompson for her question about female Poinses, which led me to think about various differences.

[16]The other, Daon Broni, played Mortimer and Hastings.

[17]In the Stratford/London run of *Richard II*, Oliver Rix played Aumerle and Marks played Bushy, so a Aumerle-Poins parallel would have been less obvious.

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