

## The Politics of French Language in Shakespeare's History Plays

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Amid his arduous and apparently superfluous wooing of Princess Katherine of France, Shakespeare's King Henry V exclaims, "It is as easy for me, Kate, to conquer the kingdom as to speak so much more French."<sup>1</sup> Since he has just conquered the kingdom this is no idle boast, but why *does* he speak so much French? And why is an entire scene of the same play conducted in French, save for a few words of comically mispronounced English? Why are French words and phrases sprinkled liberally through the speeches of French and English alike? While it is not quite true, as George Watson has suggested, that Shakespeare is "the only Elizabethan dramatist to write at length in a foreign language"—Thomas Kyd's "language of Babel" in *The Spanish Tragedy* is a well-known counterexample—these French passages are too prominent and unconventional, even disruptive for those spectators not conversant in French, to pass unremarked.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, unlike Thomas Middleton who passed off a kind of pidgin English as Dutch for comic effect in *No Wit, No Help Like a Woman's*, Shakespeare did write essentially correct French, relying on its familiarity to much of his audience.

This final act of *Henry V* has been knocked about for centuries by shifting currents of critical fashion. One line of critics, tracing descent from Samuel Johnson, has dismissed act V outright as an ill-conceived and inapposite sequel.<sup>3</sup> In recent years, though, as the play has, in the words of Katherine Eggert, "assumed a surprisingly prominent place not only in Shakespeare criticism, but [also] in wider critical debates over the relations

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between literature and hegemonic political power," the two French scenes have begun to come into focus.<sup>4</sup> A consensus has developed that these scenes—the courtship scene in particular—are no mere comic interludes or superficial nods to romantic convention. They may, in fact, be the keystone in the play's dramatic structure, and in the sociopolitical project of the entire tetralogy.

What exactly this structure and this project are, though, and why exactly the French scenes are so crucial, have occasioned rather less consensus. Do they consummate the personal developments of Hal-Henry,<sup>5</sup> or demonstrate the public "lesson of harmonious marriage"<sup>6</sup> that unites and pacifies the warring nations? While the bilingual singularity of the French scenes of *Henry V* is no longer ignored, as it often was in earlier work, the language is often relegated to a sideshow for political, social, and sexual conflicts.<sup>7</sup> Eggert, for instance, extending an observation of Alan Sinfield and Jonathan Dollimore, relates the princess's English lesson to the Archbishop's disquisition on the arcana of Salic law, another scene which criticism has traditionally disparaged or ignored, and to anxieties about the potency and legitimacy of a female monarch, ever more salient in the last decade of Elizabeth's reign.<sup>8</sup>

The French language is not, however, an arbitrary sign for something foreign or feminine. J. M. Maguin points out that Shakespeare in *Henry V* "presents the French language in a ridiculous light," and, more significantly, that "the national epic is a co-exalting of the virtues of the hero and the virtues of the tongue."<sup>9</sup> These ideas deserve further exploration. There is a scheme of linguistic antagonism that pervades the histories, something more precise than the "sort of delayed revenge for the Norman Conquest" that Watson has espied there.<sup>10</sup> As the English nation is perpetually at war with the French, so must their languages be at war. In particular, the gender cleansing that Eggert described is portrayed, enacted, and consummated in its linguistic incarnation. As the Englishmen are virile, rugged, honest, and virtuous, so must be their language, in opposition to the womanish, effete, deceptive, and perfidious language of the French. Contrary to Watson's suggestion, this linguistic ethnicity rooted in the language's ancient Anglo-Saxon loam, forming the core of English nationhood itself, was not Shakespeare's own discovery.<sup>11</sup> Not only was it a fashionable topic for Elizabethan writers, but it was also backed by an estimable literary and political tradition, in which the historical Henry V himself had played a substantial part.

In his history plays Shakespeare has set himself a formidable task, made explicit in the almost self-abasing Chorus that opens *Henry V*: to represent “two mighty monarchies” with the limited means of the theater, “Turning th’ accomplishment of many years / Into an hour-glass” (Prologue 20, 30–1). This “accomplishment” was, at least in part, the forging of a united English nation in the struggle against the ancient enemy France. The French armies could not be transported into the theater, but in a sense they were already there. Not the armies that Henry V fought at Agincourt, but the Norman armies of three-and-a-half centuries before, who imposed a French-speaking nobility and repressed English to an unwritten plebian jargon. While the foreign rulers were slowly domesticated in the centuries of Anglo-Saxon twilight, a thick stratum of French vocabulary survived in English. With it survived, too, the native English resentment, in the English-speaker’s unconscious sense that French words are arrogant, mannered, and even rude. In quest of purely poetic means to manifest the titanic national struggle, it is no wonder that the dramatist should reach into this persistent cleavage in the English speaking audience’s deepest sense of their own language. While most evident and thematically essential in *Henry V*, this linguistic polemic runs throughout the history plays.<sup>12</sup>

The inaptitude for speaking French, which Shakespeare’s *Henry V* asserts and simultaneously demonstrates, may startle the historically aware theatergoer. Is it plausible that an English monarch of the early part of the fifteenth century would have lacked fluency in French? The record is not entirely clear. Since the time of the Norman Conquest in 1066, French had been the native tongue of the English nobility. During the fourteenth century, while the nobles gradually adopted English, the royalty remained incorrigibly francophone. So, while Edward III’s parliament in 1362 decreed that court proceedings be conducted in English rather than French (because French “is much unknown in the said realm”) it is doubtful whether Edward himself (Henry’s great-grandfather) could speak more than rudimentary English.<sup>13</sup>

In the fourteenth century, the status of vernaculars began to rise throughout Europe. While this was primarily an assertion of the popular speech against the prerogatives of Latin, for the first time the native tongue became a primary banner and cause for national identity.<sup>14</sup> The English, in particular, saw themselves dispossessed and alienated in their own land by a foreign tongue. Thus the chronicler Robert of Gloucester, writing around 1300, lamented

Vor bote a man conne frenss me telth of him lute.  
 Ac lowe men holdeth to engliss & to hor owe speche zute.  
 Ich wene ther ne beth in al the world contreyes none  
 That ne holdeth to hor owe speche bote engelond one.<sup>15</sup>

As the long-tense relations with France degenerated into ceaseless warfare, the French language came to appear more and more as an occupying enemy.

Clearly French hegemony in England was already crumbling by 1346, when Edward III broadcast the accusation (first contrived by Edward I) that the French king was plotting “to destroy and wholly annihilate the English nation and language,” with particular emphasis on the latter.<sup>16</sup> As O. F. Emerson observes, “it is unbelievable that the destruction of the English language would have been mentioned so prominently if there had not been hope of appealing to the popular pride.”<sup>17</sup> Seventeen years later came the change from French to English in court proceedings, though statutes continued to be enrolled in French until 1489. By the end of the fourteenth century, letters and wills began to appear in English, a trend which accelerated in the reign of Henry IV.

The order deposing Richard II in 1399 was read to Parliament in English, as were Henry IV’s speeches claiming the throne. John Fisher sees in this the beginning of a deliberate policy of the Lancastrian monarchs to substitute English for French as the prestige written language.<sup>18</sup> A sudden profusion of English-language poetry manuscripts around 1400, and the enshrinement of Geoffrey Chaucer, were linked to close companions of the future Henry V, and to his court after he became king. His five proclamations in 1416 to the citizens of London, requesting men and supplies for the invasion of France, were very nearly the first royal proclamations in English in 330 years. His military dispatches from France were written in English, and were quickly recognized as a model for patriotic Englishmen. Consider, for example, the 1422 resolution of the London Brewers’ Craft, formally adopting English for their records: “Whereas our mother tongue, to wit, the English tongue, hath in modern days begun to be honorably enlarged and adorned; for that our most excellent lord king Henry the Fifth hath, in his letters missive, and divers affairs touching his own person, more willingly chosen to declare the secrets of his will [in it]; and for the better understanding of his people, hath, with a diligent mind, procured the common idiom (setting aside others) to be commended by the exercise of writing.”<sup>19</sup> Without Henry’s royal example, Fisher argues, English

might not have established itself as a public written language or official spoken language at this time, just as other linguistic shifts—from English to French in Quebec, for example—have followed changes in policy, not in demographics. The promotion of English would be, in this view, much like the French campaigns themselves, a means to inflame patriotic sentiment and divert criticism from the father's controversial usurpation. Henry V, and to a lesser extent Henry IV, saw in an already mature English linguistic ethnicity a lever that could move the hearts and minds of the citizenry to their favor.

V. H. Galbraith, writing on the development of linguistic nationalism in medieval England, draws a straight line from Henry V's communiqués to the “perfect correspondence” of nationality and vernacular that he sees finally attained in the Elizabethan era.<sup>20</sup> The correspondence was in fact far from perfect, and the native tongue not yet entirely triumphant. Queen Elizabeth still typically addressed her people in French, which had also “become the language of international correspondence and was considered a necessity for those looking for employment under the Crown.”<sup>21</sup> Still, if the queen and her courtiers did occasionally speak French, there can be no doubt that a new sensitivity to the history and character of the English language, a new pride in the national language, blossomed in Shakespeare's day. For instance, Raphael Holinshed's *Chronicle*, Shakespeare's preferred historical source, laments a past when,

In the court also it [English] grew into such contempt, that most men thought it no small dishonor to speake any English there. Which brauerie tooke his hold at the last likewise in the countrie with euerie plowman, that euen the verie carters began to wax wearie of there mother toong, & laboured to speake French, which as then was counted no small token of gentilitie. And no maruell, for euerie French rascall, when he came once hither, was taken for a gentleman, onelie bicause he was proud, and could vse his owne language, and all this (I say) to exile the English and British speaches quite out of the countrie.<sup>22</sup>

That English had since acquired a modicum of respectability he attributes to the efforts and the influence of Chaucer and John Gower. It is perhaps significant for the present argument that Chaucer, who died within months of Henry IV's coronation, is nonetheless subsumed by Holinshed into this king's reign.

In the Elizabethan era, according to Richard Foster Jones, writers “came to view the native speech as the most valuable possession of the English people, and as an end itself rather than as a means to an end.”<sup>23</sup> This is apparent in the influential writings of Richard Mulcaster: “I do not think that anie language, be it whatsoever, is better able to vtter all arguments, either with more pith, or greater planesse, then our *English* tung is”; and in a more distinctly patriotic vein, “I loue *Rome*, but *London* better, I fauor *Italie*, but England more, I honor the Latin, but I worship the *English*.”<sup>24</sup> While it was the Flemings John Van Gorp (or Goropius) and Simon Stevin who purported to show that their language had been prattled in the Garden of Eden, the end of the sixteenth century saw English philologists asserting the primacy of their own native speech with only slightly more restraint.<sup>25</sup> Cecil Grayson has further made the case that this exaltation of the English language was intimately bound up with Elizabethan England’s surge of national pride in its military, political, and scholarly achievements.<sup>26</sup>

We might then posit a Shakespeare, immersed in the linguistic patriotism of his day, finding his hero in the warrior monarch who not only led the English army to glorious victory on the fields of France, but also bestowed glory upon his beloved English language. The Elizabethan efforts to ennoble the native tongue and bedizen it with fine poetry had their roots in those times—and was self-consciously initiated by Henry V himself, if we accept Fisher’s argument. But was this connection recognized or generally accepted in Shakespeare’s day? The king was not alone in promoting English literacy. Henry’s practical support may have been significant, even indispensable, but the ideological defense of written English came from the Lollards, whom Henry unswervingly opposed. Avid to render the very word of God into their own tongue, they were the first to assert the general worth of the English language. As Janel M. Mueller has explained, this secular sideline lived on after their main project of religious reform was brutally suppressed, developing into “something like a universal and self-evident truth in the course of the fifteenth century.”<sup>27</sup> John Foxe, in his widely read mid-sixteenth-century religious history *Actes and Monumentes*, emphasized their devotion to English language books.<sup>28</sup> Holinshed, too, reminds his readers that possessing “books written in English” was considered, under Henry V, strong evidence of treason.<sup>29</sup> Holinshed’s account found its way into *The First Part of Sir John Old-Castle*, a play which appeared shortly after Shakespeare’s *Henry V*. There a

bishop ransacks the Lollard leader's library, and exclaims, "All English, burne them, burne them quickly."<sup>30</sup>

Clearly there was some popular association of Lollardy with vernacular literacy, then, and of Henry V with the suppression of Lollardy. Whether the educated public would have completed the syllogism, though, is less clear. Mueller herself sees the French scenes in *Henry V* as evidence that "the racial memory had preserved to Shakespeare's time the association of the Lancastrians with speaking English, on principle."<sup>31</sup> One might see the desire to dispel the negative association behind Shakespeare's decision to place the young Prince Henry under the tutelage of Sir John Oldcastle, albeit in the grossly unhistorical form that was later rechristened Falstaff. These were, after all, the years when Hal by his own account was learning to "drink with any tinker in his own language" (*1 Henry IV*, II.iv.18–9).

With this smattering of historiographical linguistics laid out, I will try to trace these concerns through the plays. The loathing of the French language is most venomous in *Henry VI Part II*, when the proletarian rebel Jack Cade condemns Lord Say with, "he can speak French, and therefore he is a traitor," adding that "The Frenchmen are our enemies . . . can he that speaks with the tongue of an enemy be a good counsellor, or no?" (IV.ii.166, 170–2). This offers another context for Dick's earlier exhortation, "The first thing we do, let's kill all the lawyers" (IV.ii.76–7). Whatever else a lawyer may represent, whatever other grievances the people may have, one thing is certain: a lawyer would speak French. A few scenes later, Dick petitions Cade "that the laws of England may come out of your mouth" (IV.vii.6–7). It is French laws that are here to be abrogated and replaced by the English laws of Cade's English mouth.

This antagonism is further alluded to in the opening scene of *Henry VI Part I*. At Henry V's funeral, Exeter decries fatalistic quiescence, suggesting that any patriotic Englishman should

think the subtile-witted French  
 Conjurers and sorcerers, that, afraid of him,  
 By magic verses have contriv'd his end.  
 (I.i.25–7)

The French are treacherous sorcerers, and their language composes diabolic "magic verses" which have assassinated England's glorious king, whose "deeds exceed all speech" (I.i.15). Later Talbot weeps over his slain son, exhorting him to "Brave Death by

speaking, whether he will or no; / Imagine him a Frenchman, and thy foe" (IV.vii.25–6). The Frenchman "Death" here is to be defeated by an Englishman's spoken words.

For the Elizabethan imagination, the French were by nature fickle, over-refined, deceptive, effete, and (to which all these qualities sum up) womanish. "The Mutable and Wavering Estate of France" is the title of one anonymous 1597 treatise while Robert Dallington, writing around 1598, calls the French "childish and ridiculous," "idle, wauering and inconstant," marveling above all at the paradoxical immutability of this French inconstancy through the ages.<sup>32</sup> In Shakespeare's early histories, France is accounted "a fickle, wavering nation" (*1 Henry VI*, IV.i.138) of "the false revolting Normans" (*2 Henry VI*, IV.i.87).

If the spirit of each nation lives in its native tongue, the language itself will not merely represent but must partake of the national character. Until late in the sixteenth century, Jones writes, "The Englishman viewed his language as plain, honest, and substantial, but uneloquent," all virile attributes which he tended to assign to his countrymen as well.<sup>33</sup> The French language, on the other hand, was not only considered effeminate in Tudor England, but also bore connotations of sexual impropriety. The "French disease" was venereal, and a visit to a prostitute was euphemistically a "French lesson."<sup>34</sup> Dallington identifies more than once the fickle French character with the French language: "As the Frenchmens pronounciation is very fast, so are their wits very wauering."<sup>35</sup> He quotes with approval an Italian proverb, according to which "[t]he French neither pronounce as they write, nor sing as they pricke, nor thinke as they speake."<sup>36</sup> Nor need one look far to find parallel formulations in Shakespeare. The duke of Alanson in *Henry VI Part I* calls the French women "shrewd tempters with their tongues" (*1 Henry VI*, I.ii.123), while Joan in turn ridicules the duke of Burgundy, saying, "Done like a Frenchman—turn and turn again" (*1 Henry VI*, III.iii.85–6). Richard III mocks the "French nods and apish courtesy" so inimical to "a plain man" of "simple truth" (*Richard III*, I.iii.49, 51–2). And in *Henry VI Part I* the French language is identified directly with cowardice, when Sir William Lucy blusters to the French leaders, "Submission, Dolphin? 'tis a mere French word; / We English warriors wot not what it means" (IV.vii.54–5).

More telling than the occasional comments on language, though, is the actual use of French in the plays. In *Henry VI Part I*, for instance, there is just one exchange of two lines in French, and that is for a treacherous lie, when Joan sneaks into the city

of Roan, purporting her noble cohorts to be "*Paysans, la pauvre gens de France*" (III.ii.14). She immediately translates her line for the audience, a populist gesture that Shakespeare eschewed in most of *Henry V*, save for the low comedy of act IV, scene iv. The few French words that appear in *Richard II* are also intended for deception. In act V, scene iii, the duchess of York comes to plead with the king to spare her son's life, begging him to "Say 'pardon'" (V.iii.116). The duke of York suggests that the king sidestep her plea by a verbal stratagem: "Speak it in French, King, say '*pardonne moy*'" (V.iii.119). Furious, the duchess reproaches him that he "sets the word itself against the word!" (V.iii.122). The duchess insists, though, "Speak 'pardon' as 'tis current in our land, / The chopping French we do not understand" (V.iii.123–4). It is Henry IV who hews to the honest English meaning.

The most extensive and complex use of French comes in *Henry V*. Here again, we are shown the fraudulent nature of the language, as when the disguised king calls himself "Harry le Roy" (IV.i.49). The French "le Roy" is a deception, a disguise for "the King." He is not the first to use French in this scene, though, for the sentry Pistol inexplicably issues his challenge in the language of the enemy: "*Qui vous lâ?*"<sup>37</sup> (IV.i.35). J. W. Lever has explained that the garbled spelling of the original quartos ("Ke ve la") was not really French, but was probably meant to represent "a stock piece of Elizabethan thieves' argot," used by a highwayman in challenging his victim.<sup>38</sup> Tracts and pamphlets published in the Elizabethan and early Stuart periods refer to the jargon of the underworld as "broken French" or "pedlar's French."<sup>39</sup>

A few scenes later, in act IV, scene iv, Pistol really does play the highwayman, and can bring all his francophone attainments to bear in shaking down his captive French nobleman, in particular his trademark phrase "*cuppele gorge*" (IV.iv.37) (or "*Couple a gorge!*" as it appears elsewhere [II.i.71]). This soldier, speaking only French, is a quaking coward. He surrenders to the most craven and base ruffian in the English army (as the Boy reminds us directly), and yet flatters him as a "*gentilhomme de bonne qualité*" (IV.iv.2–3) and "*le plus brave, vaillant, et très [distingué] seigneur d'Angleterre*" (IV.iv.56–7). Pistol banters with the Frenchman, interpreting his words as though they were the same coarse criminals' argot with which he is familiar: "*la force de ton bras*" becomes "brass" and "*pardonnez moi*" becomes "a ton of moys" (IV.iv.16–7, 18, 21, 22).

So far, then, French is seen to be the language of French poltroons and English thieves, and of all who wish to deceive.

The French nobility speaks French for three related purposes, to wit: boasting, blasphemous oaths, and vulgarity. For the boasting we have the Dolphin's raving about "*le cheval volant*," with "*les narines de feu*" (III.vii.14–5) who will soar above "*les eaux et terre*" (IV.ii.4). This mighty horse is described as a "palfrey," though, considered a lady's horse.<sup>40</sup> The oaths are legion, among them "*O Dieu vivant!*" (III.v.5), "*Dieu de batailles!*" (III.v.15), "*O diable!*," "*O Seigneur!*," and "*Mort Dieu, ma vie!*" (IV.v.1–3). This contrasts starkly with Henry's remark about "oaths, which I never use till urg'd" (V.ii.144). For vulgarity there are the Dolphin's colorful biblical citation "*Le chien est retourné à son propre vomissement*" (III.vii.64) and the final speech in Katherine's English lesson, act III, scene iv. It is there that we see the inherent vulgarity of the French language, for the plain, unexceptionable words "foot" and "gown" become comically obscene and offensive to the unsullied ears of a "dame[s] de honneur" (III.iv.54). In her exaggerated horror at these words "*de son mauvais, corruptible, gros, et impudique*" she repeats them again and again, and still includes them on her final list of new words (III.iv.53–4).

The only characters who do not speak proper English are the cowardly nobleman and these two women, the Princess Katherine and her maid Alice. As the main interest of the scene is the comic spectacle of French people mispronouncing English, the particular words and remarks do not seem terribly significant; but several facts do stand out. First, that the speakers are two women; indeed, this is the only conversation between women in the whole play. Second, that all but one of the words they discuss describe parts of the body, culminating in the titillating puns on the French for "fuck" and "cunt"—the latter breaking from the pattern of body parts, being a mispronunciation of "gown."<sup>41</sup> Third, that the French princess is taking a lesson in English. Why is that? She says only, "*[I]l faut que j'apprenne à parler [l'Anglois]*" (III.iv.4–5), with no further explanation. As has often been observed, the princess's yearning to learn English comes hard on the heels of Henry's first French conquest at Harfleur, in a scene seething with images of rape and penetration. English Henry is on his way to conquer the kingdom of France, and the French women must submit to English masters, as the effeminate French language must yield to virile English. It is a reversal of the Norman conquest that imposed the French upon England, as made explicit in the following scene, when the duke of Britain calls the English "Normans, but bastard Normans, Norman bastards" (III.v.10). The Dolphin laments that



The latter is typical, lofty Shakespearean poesy: sleek and sophisticated, replete with Latinate “inkhorn” words, as these foreign borrowings were termed. Of twenty-five words, eleven are derived from French or Latin. How different in texture are the lines from the Saint Crispin’s Day speech, consisting as they do entirely of Germanic words, mostly monosyllabic, all but one (“happy”) of Anglo-Saxon derivation.<sup>43</sup> The speech continues with “be he ne’er so vile, / This day shall gentle his condition,” a line of courtly Gallicism to suit the subject, then concludes with

And gentlemen in England, now a-bed,  
 Shall think themselves accurs’d they were not here;  
 And hold their manhoods cheap whiles any speaks  
 That fought with us upon Saint Crispin’s day.

(IV.iii.64–7)

Of thirty-one words, the only French root is the contemptible “gentlemen.” Otherwise, with the exception of the name “Saint Crispin,” the passage is solidly Germanic. This context of rugged monosyllables places special emphasis on the “accurs’d” “gentlemen,” and especially on the Anglo-Saxon compounds “England” and “manhoods.” This hearty English oratory, the fruit of Henry’s “wilder days” (I.ii.267), mocks by example the Gallic preening of the previous scene, and the pusillanimity that will follow. However the king may speak to himself, the words he chooses to stir the hearts of English peasants and yeomen are pure Anglo-Saxon.

This intentional reliance on Old English monosyllables seems all the more purposeful if we compare Shakespeare’s speech with a corresponding passage of his presumptive sources, the chronicles of Holinshed and Edward Hall. Here Shakespeare:

If we are mark’d to die, we are enow  
 To do our country loss; and if to live,  
 The fewer men, the greater share of honor.  
 God’s will, I pray thee wish not one man more.  
 . . . . .  
 God’s peace, I would not lose so great an honor  
 As one man more methinks would share from me,  
 For the best hope I have. O, do not wish one more!

(IV.iii. 20–33)

Here Holinshed (1587): “And if so be that for our offenses sakes we shall be deliuered into the hands of our enimies, the

lesse number we be, the lesse damage shall the realme of England susteine: but if we should fight in trust of multitude of men, and so get the victorie (our minds being prone to pride) we should therevpon peradventure ascribe the victorie not so much to the gift of God, as to our owne puissance."<sup>44</sup>

And here Hall (1548): "For if you aduventure your liues in so iust a battaile & so good a cause, whiche way soeuer fortune turne her whele, you shalbe sure of fame, glory and renoune: If you be victors and ouercome your enemies, your strength and vertue shalbe spred and dispersed through the whole world: If you ouerpessed with so great a multitude shal happe to be slaine or taken yet neither reproche can be to you ascribed."<sup>45</sup>

The early versions offer an eloquence drenched in latinate vocabulary: "victorie," "aduventure," "battaile," "enemies," "vertue," "indignation," and so on. Shakespeare's King Henry eschews these words, except for the French "honor" and "country," relying instead upon the Old English roots "mark'd to die," "wish not one man more," "methinks," "share."

"Manhood(s)" is the crux of Henry's speech, and this manhood entails the slaughter of men and conquest of women. The bloodthirst is admirably slaked in the two great battles; the other conquest must be deferred until the final scene, where, as Katherine's previous appearance obliquely promised, Henry will simultaneously conquer the kingdom, the princess, and the language. At first blush, Henry's wooing seems ridiculous, as his marriage to Katherine has been arranged by treaty. But he knows he cannot "buffet for [his] love, or bound [his] horse for her favors" (V.ii.140-1). The laws of chivalric manhood demand that he win her heart with words; the romantic project is a linguistic project. Katherine *is* the French language, as Henry reminds us when he says that his French "will hang upon my tongue like a new-married wife about her husband's neck" (V.ii.179-80); and the French language is France, as Henry remarks, "It is as easy for me, Kate, to conquer the kingdom as to speak so much more French" (V.ii.184-6). Conquering France, for the king no less than for his soldiers, has literally taken the place of being forced to speak French, as were their ancestors. Katherine, for her part, indicates by her blunder "I cannot speak your England" (V.ii.103), that the English language to which she is being introduced is one with the nation of England.

Henry lamenting, "I cannot . . . gasp out my eloquence, nor I have no cunning in protestation; only downright oaths" (V.ii.142-4), is in fact the very model of rough eloquence, the Aristotelian

mean between the bloodless Latin and the crude Anglo-Saxon, which for Shakespeare's contemporaries was the glory of the English language. No woman can best such a manly king in anything, except by chivalrous pretense. If he speaks English rather than French it must be by choice, not by incapacity. Thus, despite his humble protestations, Henry acquits himself quite competently in French; if he does get tangled in a complicated sentence, he can at least make himself understood. In case we might be uncertain on this point, each of the women assures us explicitly. First Katherine: "*le François que vous parlez, il est [meilleur] que l'Anglois le quel je parle,*" to which he responds modestly, "No, faith, is't not," confirming the calm assurance of his understanding (V.ii.188–190). And Alice insists, "Your Majestee *entendre better que moi*" (V.ii.264). Katherine further praises (in a backhanded way) Henry's command of "*fausse* French" which, she declares, is "enough to deceive de most sage demoiselle dat is en France" (V.ii.218–9). Henry, in contrast, calls Katherine's English "broken" and says, "I am glad thou canst speak no better English" (V.ii.244, 123). An analogy may be found in Holinshed, who remarks with pride that English speakers learn foreign languages more readily than others, especially the French.<sup>46</sup>

Once his superiority has been demonstrated, once it has been confirmed that he speaks English by choice, Henry may claim victory for himself and for his language. He retorts, "[F]ie upon my false French! By mine honor, in true English, I love thee" (V.ii.220–1): again the contrast between false French and true English, but now the decision has been made to hold fast to the English. He commands her, "break thy mind to me in broken English" (V.ii.245–6). A telling phrase, because of the multiple meanings of "break": to reveal (information), to train to obedience (as, a horse), and to crush (as, a spirit). Her French mind is broken, submits to his will, in English. All that remains is to mark this with a kiss, a joining of lips and tongues, by which he seals her mouth, and then exclaims that it is more eloquent than the speech of the French council. (He also repeats indirectly the imputation of sorcery to the French speech: "You have witchcraft in your lips, Kate" [V.ii.275].) As an epilogue, we have Burgundy's ironic comment on the kiss, "teach you our princess English?" (V.ii.282); as, in a sense, he does.

The special role of French is underscored by Shakespeare's parallel treatment of the Welsh language. Welsh was another "enemy" language, whose use had been suppressed for nationalistic reasons since shortly before Shakespeare's time.<sup>47</sup> In *Henry IV*

*Part I* Mortimer laments that “My wife can speak no English, I no Welsh” (III.i.191). That Shakespeare himself and his presumptive audience also spoke no Welsh may be inferred from the laconic stage directions that Mortimer’s wife and Glendower simply speak “in Welsh” (III.i.195–210). Welsh is the domain of music and love, of women and femininity, of soft sensual pleasure.<sup>48</sup> There is a certain analogy here to the feminization of the French language, but without the Manichaeian rancor. In contrast to Princess Katherine, the Frenchwoman who learns and is forcibly converted to the English, it is the Englishman Mortimer who vows to learn Welsh. While this appears as tantamount to emasculation, the contrast to Hotspur’s ultimately suicidal manliness is not unflattering to Mortimer. Perhaps Shakespeare allows the Welsh language a greater freedom, more ambiguity, for the same reason that he does not actually write dialogue in Welsh: namely, that the Welsh language was genuinely alien, with the charm of the exotic, and by the sixteenth century safely subjugated to boot. French was a too familiar alien presence infiltrating the English language, a linguistic fifth column that could not be ignored.

It is unsurprising that Shakespeare, who did as much as any one man to endow the English language with power, grace, and self-esteem, should have been among those who saw that language as intimately entwined with the life and honor of the English nation. He re-imagined old battles once fought with massed pikes and ranks of longbows upon the fields of France, as linguistic battles fought simultaneously with words and lines of iambic pentameter upon the tongues of Frenchmen and Englishmen, Frenchwomen and Englishwomen. If the language is the nation, then the Chorus’s challenge has been met: the “two mighty monarchies” have indeed been confined “within the girdle of these walls” (Prologue 20, 19). The audience has not merely seen a representation of England’s triumph over France, but has experienced the humiliation and tumultuous trouncing of the French language, which had subjugated their native English for so long. All English speakers, but particularly those who understood the French passages poorly or not at all, those who have felt most keenly the weight of French pretensions in everyday speech, experience the triumph of their shared language. Unlike the field of Agincourt, this is no mere simulation; it is the thing itself that they experience, the struggle to assert the potency of their national tongue. In this greater struggle, which Shakespeare has contrived to present, the king is only a ragged player in a tin crown. The real field of battle is the theater stage and the printed page, and there it is the poet who is king and general at once.

## NOTES

I would like to express my gratitude to Richard Marius, sorrowfully missed, without whose support and encouragement this paper would not have been written.

<sup>1</sup> William Shakespeare, *Henry V*, in *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974), pp. 935–75, V.v.184–6. All Shakespeare quotations are from this edition and will appear within the text by act, scene, and line number.

<sup>2</sup> George Watson, "Shakespeare and the Norman Conquest: English in the Elizabethan Theatre," *VQR* 66, 4 (Autumn 1990): 613–28, 614. See J. R. Mulryne's "Nationality and Language in Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*," in *Langues et Nations au Temps de la Renaissance*, ed. M. T. Jones-Davies (Paris: Université de Paris-Sorbonne, 1991), pp. 67–91.

<sup>3</sup> For a brief discussion and careful rebuttal of this critical tradition, see J. M. Maguin, "Shakespeare's Structural Craft and Dramatic Technique in *Henry V*," *CahiersE* 7 (April 1975): 51–67.

<sup>4</sup> Katherine Eggert, "Nostalgia and the Not Yet Late Queen: Refusing Female Rule in *Henry V*," *ELH* 61, 3 (Fall 1994): 523–50, 523.

<sup>5</sup> Marilyn L. Williamson, "The Courtship of Katherine and the Second Tetralogy," *Criticism* 17, 4 (Fall 1975): 326–34.

<sup>6</sup> George Walton Williams, "The Unity of Act V of *Henry V*," *South Atlantic Bulletin* 40, 2 (May 1975): 3–9, 5.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Paul A. Jorgensen, "The Courtship Scene in *Henry V*," *MLQ* 11, 2 (June 1950): 180–8; and Paul Dean, "Chronicle and Romance Modes in *Henry V*," *SQ* 32, 1 (Spring 1981): 18–26.

<sup>8</sup> The nexus of gender and language in *Henry V* is explored by Helen Ostovich in "Teach You Our Princess English? Equivocal Translation of the French in *Henry V*," in *Gender Rhetorics: Postures of Dominance and Submission in History*, ed. Richard C. Trexler (Binghamton: SUNY, 1994), pp. 147–61; and by Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield, "History and Ideology, Masculinity and Miscegenation: The Instance of *Henry V*," in *Faultlines: Cultural Materialism and the Politics of Dissident Reading*, ed. Sinfield (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1992), pp. 109–42. See also Juliet Fleming, "The French Garden: An Introduction to Women's French," *ELH* 56, 1 (Spring 1989): 19–51, 44–5; Phyllis Rackin, "Patriarchal History and Female Subversion," in *Stages of History: Shakespeare's English Chronicles* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1990), pp. 146–200, n. 150; and Williamson, p. 334. One fascinating study which does place language at the center of the picture, from a very different perspective than the present work, is Joseph A. Porter's *The Drama of Speech Acts: Shakespeare's Lancastrian Tetralogy* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1979).

<sup>9</sup> Maguin, pp. 54, 55.

<sup>10</sup> Watson, p. 622.

<sup>11</sup> See Etienne Balibar, "The Nation Form: History and Ideology," in *Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities*, ed. Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein (London: Verso, 1991), pp. 86–106.

<sup>12</sup> The two tetralogies: *Henry VI, Parts I, II, and III* and *Richard III; Richard II, Henry IV, Parts I and II* and *Henry V*.

<sup>13</sup> Quoted in Albert C. Baugh, *A History of the English Language* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1957), p. 177. See William Longman, *The History of the Life and Times of Edward the Third* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1869), p. 72. A slightly more positive opinion of Edward's language prowess is offered by O. F. Emerson in "English or French in the Time of Edward III?," *The Romanic Review* 7, 2 (April–June 1916): 127–43.

<sup>14</sup> V. H. Galbraith, "Nationality and Language in Medieval England," in *Kings and Chroniclers: Essays in English Medieval History* (London: Hambledon Press, 1982), pp. 113–28, 124–5.

<sup>15</sup> Quoted in Baugh, p. 136.

<sup>16</sup> Quoted in Emerson, p. 138.

<sup>17</sup> Emerson, p. 140.

<sup>18</sup> John H. Fisher, "A Language Policy for Lancastrian England," *PMLA* 107, 5 (October 1992): 1168–80. See also Malcolm Richardson, "Henry V, the English Chancery, and Chancery English," *Speculum* 55, 4 (October 1980): 726–50.

<sup>19</sup> Quoted in Baugh, p. 183.

<sup>20</sup> Galbraith, p. 125.

<sup>21</sup> Fleming, p. 32.

<sup>22</sup> Raphael Holinshed, *Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland*, 6 vols. (London, 1586; rpt. London: J. Johnson, 1807), 1:24. I will adopt the title page's convention of calling the collective authors "Holinshed." For a discussion of these (and other) issues, see Annabel Patterson, *Reading Holinshed's "Chronicles"* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1994).

<sup>23</sup> Richard Foster Jones, *The Triumph of the English Language* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1953), p. 212.

<sup>24</sup> Quoted in Jones, pp. 194, 193.

<sup>25</sup> Jean-Claude Margolin, "Science et Nationalisme Linguistiques ou la Bataille pour l'Étymologie au XVI<sup>e</sup> Siècle," in *The Fairest Flower: The Emergence of Linguistic National Consciousness in Renaissance Europe*, ed. Fredi Chiappelli (Florence: Presso L'Accademia, 1985), pp. 139–65. See also Jones, pp. 215–23, which includes a brief account of Johannes van Gorp's theories.

<sup>26</sup> Cecil Grayson, "The Growth of Linguistic National Consciousness in England," in *The Fairest Flower*, pp. 167–73.

<sup>27</sup> Janel M. Mueller, *The Native Tongue and the Word* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1984), p. 113.

<sup>28</sup> Margaret Aston, "Lollardy and Literacy," in *Lollards and Reformers: Images and Literacy in Late Medieval Religion* (London: Hambledon Press, 1984), pp. 193–217.

<sup>29</sup> Holinshed, 3:92.

<sup>30</sup> Quoted in Patterson, p. 153.

<sup>31</sup> Mueller, p. 9, n. 23.

<sup>32</sup> Sir Robert Dallington, *The View of Fraunce* (1604; rpt. Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1936), sig. Xv, V4v.

<sup>33</sup> Jones, p. 18.

<sup>34</sup> Fleming, p. 32.

<sup>35</sup> Dallington, sig. V4v.

<sup>36</sup> Dallington, sig. V2v.

<sup>37</sup> As it is printed in *The Riverside Shakespeare*; the phrase appears as "Qui va là?" in *Complete Works of Shakespeare*, ed. William Clarke and William Wright (Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1952).

<sup>38</sup> J. W. Lever, "Shakespeare's French Fruits," *ShS* 6 (1953): 79–90, 81.

<sup>39</sup> Jones-Davies, "Le Français du Colporteur ou la Langue des Classes Dangereuses dans l'Angleterre Élisabéthaine," *Langues et Nations au Temps de la Renaissance*, ed. Jones-Davies (Paris: Klincksieck, 1991), pp. 95–112.

<sup>40</sup> Dollimore and Sinfield, "History and Ideology," p. 133.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. Suzanne Gossett, "'I'll Look to Like': Arranged Marriages in Shakespeare's Plays," in *Sexuality and Politics in Renaissance Drama*, ed. Carole Levin and Karen Robertson (Lewiston NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1991), pp. 57–74, 64.

<sup>42</sup> The political implications of Hal's field work in common English speech are discussed by Stephen Greenblatt in "Invisible Bullets: Renaissance Authority and Its Subversion, *Henry IV* and *Henry V*," in *Political Shakespeare: New Essays in Cultural Materialism*, ed. Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1985), pp. 18–47.

<sup>43</sup> Holinshed condemned words "of manie syllables" (Holinshed, 1:25), while George Gascoigne advised poets in 1575 that "the most auncient English wordes are of one sillable, so that the more monasyllables that you use, the truer Englishman you shall seeme" (quoted in Jones, p. 115).

<sup>44</sup> Holinshed, 3:79–80.

<sup>45</sup> Edward Hall, *Chronicle; containing the History of England, during the Reign of Henry the Fourth, and the Succeeding Monarchs, to the End of the Reign of Henry the Eighth, in Which Are Particularly Described the Manners and Customs of Those Periods* (1548–50; rpt. London: J. Johnson, 1809), p. 67.

<sup>46</sup> Holinshed, 1:25.

<sup>47</sup> Dollimore and Sinfield, "History and Ideology," p. 125.

<sup>48</sup> Rackin, pp. 172–4.