

EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES



‘I cannot speak your England’: French Women in *King John* and *Henry V*

Elizabeth Pentland

York University

pent@yorku.ca

Much has been written in recent years about representations of France and the French in early modern English drama, and above all in Shakespeare’s plays, but French women, as a group, have received comparatively little attention.¹ There is, of course, a rich body of feminist criticism that considers the place of women in Shakespeare’s plays, and recent work has turned our attention to individual characters like Queen Isabel in *Richard II* or Princess Katherine in *Henry V*.² But are there larger patterns governing the representation of French women on the Elizabethan stage? Is it possible to generalise about the way Shakespeare writes these characters, as we do when we consider the kinds of popular stereotypes that were associated with France or the French in his plays? For the most part, those stereotypes – that, for example, the French were of ‘light’ or inconstant disposition,

¹ Recent studies include Michael Saenger, *Shakespeare and the French Borders of English* (New York: Palgrave, 2013); Jean-Christophe Mayer, *Representing France and the French in Early Modern English Drama* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2008); Deanne Williams, *The French Fetish from Chaucer to Shakespeare* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Richard Hillman, *Shakespeare, Marlowe, and the Politics of France* (New York: Palgrave, 2002); and Andrew Kirk, *The Mirror of Confusion: The Representation of French History in English Renaissance Drama* (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1996).

² On *Richard II*’s Queen Isabel, see Deanne Williams, ‘Isabelle de France, Child Bride’, in *French Connections in the English Renaissance*, ed. by Catherine Gimelli Martin and Hassan Melehy (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2013), pp. 27-47. Recent work on Katherine includes Sandra Logan, ‘Thrice Royal Queen: Katherine de Valois and the Tudor Monarchy in *Henry V* and *Englands Heroicall Epistles*’, in *The Rule of Women in Early Modern Europe*, ed. by Anne J. Cruz and Mihoko Suzuki (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2009), pp. 157-173. Both Katherine and Joan La Pucelle are discussed by Williams in *The French Fetish from Chaucer to Shakespeare*, and Andrew M. Kirk’s chapter on Shakespeare’s histories in *The Mirror of Confusion* includes an extended discussion of Joan’s role in *Henry VI, Part 1*. Also relevant is Diana Henderson’s discussion of Isabella of Bavaria in her book *Collaborations with the Past: Reshaping Shakespeare Across Time and Media* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006).

fickle and quarrelsome – referred to men. Discussions of the French ‘nature and humour’ in the period rarely mention women, except to focus on the influence of powerful figures like Catherine de Medici, or to suggest that Frenchmen, as a rule, were too liberal with their wives, allowing them too much freedom.³ Sir Robert Dallington thus remarked in 1604: ‘No marvel then, the bridle being left in their owne hands, though sometimes they be saddled, & their husbands know not.’⁴ What we see in Shakespeare’s plays is a little different. We do encounter adulterous French women in a few places (the *Henry VI* plays come to mind). And some of his characters do seem to support the view that French women were proud and assertive, assuming male prerogatives and powers at court, in diplomatic matters, and even on the battlefield. But French women were in fact subject to a range of representations, and if we look more closely, we find that they are either domesticated or estranged in Shakespeare’s plays according to a complex set of cultural (historical, political, literary, dramatic) negotiations that operate both within and beyond the world of the respective play.

French women appear more often in Shakespeare’s plays than women of any other European nationality. And some, like *Henry V*’s Katherine, are more visibly – or audibly – French than others. While they feature most prominently in the histories, we also find them in three comedies (*Love’s Labour’s Lost*, *As You Like It*, and *All’s Well that Ends Well*) and in one play that can be categorised as both history and tragedy (*Richard III*).⁵ Among Shakespeare’s plays, the only genre of play to exclude French women entirely is the romance, where the female characters are most often of Greek or Italian birth. But French women are overwhelmingly associated with Shakespeare’s English histories, appearing in seven of them through the 1590s – the three *Henry VI* plays, *Richard III*, *King John*, *Richard II*, and *Henry V*. Shakespeare’s final history play, *Henry VIII*, or *All is True*, alludes to the ‘French King’s sister’, Marguerite of Alençon, although she never appears on stage. The prominence of French women in these plays makes perfect sense if we recall that, ‘[f]rom at least as far back as the Norman Conquest of 1066, the story of England’s foreign relations was primarily about France.’⁶ Of Shakespeare’s French women, Margaret of Anjou (later Queen Margaret) is notable for appearing in all four plays of the first tetralogy, and for holding, as a result, what is almost certainly the largest

³ I am quoting from Sir Robert Dallington, *The View of France* (1604), in *Amazons, Savages & Machiavels: Travel & Colonial Writing in English, 1550-1630*, ed. by Andrew Hadfield (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 47.

⁴ Dallington, p. 49.

⁵ Rosalind and Helena have the largest speaking parts in *As You Like It* and *All’s Well*, respectively, and the French Princess has the third largest part after Berowne and Navarre in *Love’s Labour’s Lost*.

⁶ Carole Levin and John Watkins, *Shakespeare’s Foreign Worlds: National and Transnational Identities in the Elizabethan Age* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2009), p. 21.

cumulative speaking part of any woman in Shakespeare's canon (nearly 840 lines across the four plays).⁷ Her part in *Henry VI, Part 2*, at about 316 lines, is also the largest for a woman in any one of Shakespeare's English histories. However, the largest speaking part for a French woman – or indeed any woman – in a single play belongs to Rosalind, with approximately 670 lines in *As You Like It*. Among Shakespeare's other comic heroines, Helena speaks nearly 450 lines in *All's Well That Ends Well*, the largest part in that play, accounting for about a hundred lines more than either the French king or the aptly named Parolles, who hold second and third place, respectively. By way of context, four of the ten largest roles for women in Shakespeare are lead roles – that is, they are larger than any other role in the play. Three of these lead roles occur in comedies (*As You Like It*, *The Merchant of Venice*, and *All's Well That Ends Well*), and two of them, as we have seen, are held by French women. This fact should not surprise us, as Shakespeare's comedies tend to afford his female characters a greater degree of agency, and larger speaking parts, than do his tragedies or his histories.⁸

Shakespeare's French women do not always seem very French. For example, I have just claimed that Rosalind is French, and I do so mostly on the grounds that Shakespeare's main source for the play, Thomas Lodge's novella *Rosalynde*, is set in France. But there is nothing about her character that marks her out as such. Indeed, her English is perfect, and if the play were not peopled with courtiers named Amiens, Jaques, and Le Beau, we might as easily imagine the action unfolding somewhere in Warwickshire – as editors of the play have long noted.⁹ The setting of *All's Well* is less ambiguous: much of the play takes place in Rossillion (Roussillon) – 'a county in the kingdome of France', according to Shakespeare's sources (a story in Boccaccio's *Decameron* and its English translation by William Painter) – with scenes located in Paris, Florence, and Marseilles.¹⁰ Within the

⁷ My edition is *The Complete Pelican Shakespeare*, General Editors Stephen Orgel and A.R. Braunmuller (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2002). Line counts will vary slightly across individual editions of each play.

⁸ It is worth noting that three of the ten largest parts for women in Shakespeare occur in tragedies (*Antony and Cleopatra*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and *Othello*), but the lead roles in each of these plays belong to men.

⁹ Frances E. Dolan notes in her Introduction to the play that 'The setting [...] is both England – there is a Forest of Arden in Warwickshire, and Shakespeare's mother's name was Mary Arden – and France – since some of the characters' names suggest a French setting' (*As You Like It*, in *The Complete Pelican Shakespeare*, p. 401). 'Arden' thus refers, at least partly (as it does in Shakespeare's source), to the Ardennes, a forested region in northern France, Belgium, and Luxembourg.

¹⁰ William Painter retains the French setting of Boccaccio's tale: 'In Fraunce there was a gentleman called *Isnardo*, the Counte of *Rossiglione*, who bicause he was sickly and diseased, keppe alwaies in his house a Phisicion, named maister Gerardo of Narbona.' (Painter, 'Giletta of Narbona. The xxxviii Nouell', *The Palace of Pleasure Beautified, adorned and well furnished, with Pleasaunt Histories and excellent Nouelles, selected out of diuers good and commendable Authors* (London, 1566), Fol. 95r). Although historically, Roussillon was under Spanish rule in Shakespeare's time, the 'Rossillion' of the play is – in

world of the play, moreover, both the Countess of Rossillion and Helena address the king of France as their 'lord' and sovereign. We can claim with some confidence, then, that Helena is French. In *Love's Labour's Lost*, a French princess arrives at the court of Navarre on a diplomatic mission, and while the play's setting has been variously read as French or Spanish, Shakespeare nevertheless is very clear about the nationality of this character and her retinue.¹¹ While each of these French heroines is, in her own way, assertive, outspoken, and independent, there is nothing especially threatening (to England, or to an English audience) about them. They stand out, instead, for their liveliness, intelligence and wit.

When we turn our attention to the histories, which are more directly invested in the project of nation-building, things become far more complicated – especially for the plays' women. While it seems fairly clear that Joan La Pucelle is French in *Henry VI, Part 1*, and that Katherine, daughter of the French king, and Alice, her old gentlewoman in *Henry V* are also French, many of the other women in these plays are not so easily categorised. Across the plays of the first tetralogy, Margaret of Anjou, even as queen consort of England, never really sheds her status as a foreigner, or her identification with France.¹² On the other hand, some arguably 'French' queens of England, like Eleanor of Aquitaine in *King John*, seem firmly aligned with England and 'English' interests. Indeed, Eleanor serves in that play as the very model of a proud and unwavering English queen. One could easily forget there was ever anything 'French' about her. And later, in *Henry VIII*, the 'French' education and manners of the English-born Anne Bullen are discreetly overlooked as the play works to frame Henry's marriage to her as an 'English' one.

Although French women appear more often in the English history plays than in any other genre (and more often, as we have seen, than women of any other nationality), their parts are generally smaller than those belonging to the women of Shakespeare's comedies, tragedies, or romances. They also, invariably, play supporting or secondary roles. Whether by accident or by design, the largest roles for French women in Shakespeare's

keeping with playwright's sources – French. See Deanne Williams, 'Roussillon and Retrospection', *Representing France and the French in Early Modern English Drama*, ed. by Jean-Christophe Mayer (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2008), pp. 161-177.

¹¹ Most scholarship on the play treat Navarre as a French space. For the Spanish case, see my essay, 'Shakespeare, Navarre, and Continental History', in *Interlinguicity, Internationality and Shakespeare*, ed. by Michael Saenger (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2014), pp. 23-45.

¹² In *Henry VI, Part 2*, the Duchess of Gloucester calls her a 'proud Frenchwoman' (1.3.143), and later, in *Henry VI, Part 3*, the captive Duke of York addresses the 'proud queen' as a 'She-wolf of France' (1.4.119; 112). In 3.3 of that play, her husband banished and his throne usurped by Edward, Duke of York, she appeals to King Louis of France for help.

histories are found in the first tetralogy: Joan La Pucelle (Joan of Arc) with approximately 250 lines, has the second largest part in *Henry VI, Part 1* after the English hero, Talbot. At 316 lines, Margaret's part in *Henry VI, Part 2* is slightly larger than the king's, and second in size only to the Duke of York's. In *King John*, Lady Constance has the third largest part (with 260 lines) after Philip the Bastard and King John himself. These are among the largest roles for women in the histories.¹³ But while French women also occupy significant roles in the plays of the second tetralogy – in *Richard II*, for example, Queen Isabel is French, as is Princess Katherine in *Henry V* – their parts are generally much smaller (at 115 lines and 65 lines, respectively). Both Isabel and Katherine hold the largest of the women's parts in those plays, but they are far outstripped by their English husbands who dominate the dialogue with 738 lines (Richard) and 1058 lines (Henry) respectively.¹⁴ By the time we get to Shakespeare's final history play, *Henry VIII*, there is no speaking part for a French woman at all.

The largest parts for French women in Shakespeare's histories belong to characters who are in one way or another cast as 'enemies' to England (or to its king), and this is important because they occur in early plays, where they would have helped establish the paradigms for representing French women on the public stage. Indeed, it is possible to think of Shakespeare's later representations of French women – those coming toward the end of the 1590s – as deliberately complicating the patterns set by these early histories. In *Henry VI, Part 1*, Joan La Pucelle leads an army against the 'scourge' of France (2.3.14; 4.7.77), Talbot, and is vilified by the English as a 'strumpet' (1.7.12; 5.6.84), a 'sorceress' (3.4.3; 5.6.1), a 'railing Hecate' (3.5.24), and finally a 'foul accursed minister of hell' (5.6.93). The play trades in stereotypes about the 'warlike' English and the 'wavering' French, and in this context, 'Joan La Pucelle symbolizes a French barbarity that is defined not only by its production of masculine women but also by the effeminacy of its men.'¹⁵ In *Henry VI, Part 2*, Margaret's marriage to the young king is described by Gloucester as 'shameful' and 'fatal', less than a generation after the English victory at Agincourt:

Blotting your names from books of memory,
 Razing the characters of your renown,
 Defacing monuments of conquer'd France,
 Undoing all, as all had never been! (1.1.97-100)

¹³ Also among the largest parts for women in the histories is Queen Elizabeth in *Richard III* (about 260 lines) and Queen Katherine in *Henry VIII* (about 360). Both are secondary or supporting roles.

¹⁴ Henry V's is the fourth largest part in all of Shakespeare (after Hamlet, Richard III, and Iago).

¹⁵ The quotation is taken from Deanne Williams, *The French Fetish from Chaucer to Shakespeare* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 189.

The match meets with considerable opposition once it is revealed that Suffolk, in exchange for her hand, has given away ‘the keys of Normandy’ – the duchies of Anjou and Maine (1.1.111). Described by a modern editor as ‘Joan’s successor’, Margaret is depicted as proud, forceful, and manipulative in this play, refusing to yield to Gloucester, the Lord Protector (‘Am I a queen in title and in style, / And must be made a subject to a duke?’), and carrying on an illicit affair with the ambitious Duke of Suffolk.¹⁶ In *Henry VI, Part 3*, she threatens to ‘divorce’ herself from her ‘timorous’ husband (1.1.248; 232) ‘[u]ntil that act of Parliament be repealed / Whereby my son is disinherited’ (1.1.250-1), and then raises an army against her husband’s rival, the Duke of York. Her bitter mockery of York upon his capture in 1.4 prompts him to address her as a ‘She-wolf of France, but worse than wolves of France, / Whose tongue more poisons than the adder’s tooth!’ (1.4.112-13). It is, of course, the same Margaret – now a widow and estranged from the English court – who will curse the Yorkist faction in *Richard III*. While not a queen of England herself, Lady Constance in *King John* has mothered a claimant to the English throne, but then aligns herself with France in her attempt to wrest the crown from her brother-in-law, John. A closer look at two very different histories written by Shakespeare in the late 1590s will suggest some of the ways that Shakespeare worked to complicate his representations of French women. In *King John*, we find him unsettling our ideas about the cultural or political differences between the French and the English; in *Henry V*, we find those differences entrenched. Each approach has consequences for the way French women are characterised.

King John

The question of who is French in *King John* is hard to settle. This may be because, as Linda Gregerson reminds us, ‘the process by which any nation distinguishes its own kind from the Other is a precarious one’.¹⁷ But the difficulty also has to do with the play’s medieval setting. *King John* stages events that took place in the early thirteenth century, at the height of the Anglo-Norman period in England, when French was the language of the English court and of its political and cultural elites. Although England’s Anglo-Norman ruling class was gradually domesticated, intermarriage among the political elites

¹⁶ For ‘Joan’s successor’, see Andrew Cairncross, Introduction in *King Henry IV, Part 2*, Arden Shakespeare third series (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), p. li.

¹⁷ Linda Gregerson, ‘French Marriages and the Protestant Nation in Shakespeare’s History Plays’, *A Companion to Shakespeare’s Works: The Histories*, ed. by Richard Dutton and Jean E. Howard (Malden and Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2003) pp. 246-62 (p. 251). She adds that ‘[u]nstable and dissolving boundaries give nationalist hatred its edge of panic’.

of England, France, and other parts of Europe during this period resulted in the kinds of hybrid or shifting identities we see throughout this play.¹⁸ As Gregerson puts it, ‘French and English had been, at least on the level of their landholding elites, problematically construed to be two parts of a single realm for over half a millennium: the foreign and the familiar were inextricably entwined’.¹⁹

Written during a period closely associated with the formation of English national identity, the play both registers the impulse to differentiate between ‘French’ or ‘English’, and frustrates it. Although *King John* seems, at first, to trade in popular stereotypes about the fickle and inconstant French, we find that the English are not much different. The play imagines, instead, a world of mixed or hybrid identities and shifting political allegiances – men and women who align themselves with one political power or the other as need be. National identity, for the characters in this play, is not necessarily a function of birth, language, or place of origin. In its feudal context, political allegiance is more significant. Indeed, since both England and France can be described as francophone in this period, language was not as significant a marker of difference as it would become later, under Henry V, when the king began to promote the use of English, instead of Anglo-Norman French, as the language of government. *King John* registers the earlier historical moment by minimising the linguistic differences between the French characters and their English counterparts. In fact, the play is remarkable for how little French is spoken in it. Shakespeare’s *Henry V*, on the other hand, dramatizes what critics agree is an ‘improbable’ language gap between the English and French elites in the early fifteenth century, as we watch a French princess struggle with the language of her conqueror. Henry spoke perfectly good French, but Shakespeare’s point was to allow his audiences to imagine, for a moment, what it would be like if the English language enjoyed the cultural status that had, for so long, been accorded to French.²⁰

¹⁸ We are witness to the diplomatic functioning of intermarriage in the play as John’s niece, Blanche of Spain (herself the product of an Anglo-Spanish union), is offered to the Dauphin, along with her dowry of ‘Volquessen, Touraine, Maine, / Poitiers, and Anjou’ (2.1.527-8) to broker an alliance between England and France. Although Spanish by birth, Blanche (with her French name) serves as an ‘English’ pawn in the diplomatic game of chess between King John and Philip of France.

¹⁹ Gregerson, pp. 248-9. Both plays discussed in this essay fall within the ‘half a millennium’ she is describing.

²⁰ On the cultural capital or prestige attached to the French language, and on French language instruction in Elizabethan England, see Michael Saenger, *Shakespeare and the French Borders of English* (New York: Palgrave, 2013), especially his chapter on ‘The place of French in England’ (pp. 13-49). On women learning French, see Juliet Fleming, ‘The French Garden: An Introduction to Women’s French’, *ELH* 56.1 (1989), 19-51.

If, on the whole, *King John* works to collapse national or cultural differences in its depiction of what Deanne Williams calls a ‘squabble among in-laws’, the play does, nevertheless, present us with characters who are clearly identified as French: Philip, King of France, for instance, and his son, Lewis, the Dauphin; or Chatillion, the French ambassador.²¹ Indeed, by the usual logic of Shakespeare’s plays, Philip *is* France by virtue of his royal blood and his title, as when Eleanor notes, in 2.1, that she sees ‘a yielding in the looks of France’ (2.1.474). By and large, his subjects, too, are French. But they appear to be so by allegiance, and not necessarily by their birth or blood. The people of Angiers, for example, describe themselves as ‘the King of England’s subjects’ (2.1.267), but they do so in the context of a rival claim to the English throne, refusing to declare their allegiance to one claimant or the other – and it is not clear, in any case, that the French king shares their view. Mixed blood also comes into play, at least briefly, as with the Count Melun, a wounded French noble who, in 5.4, urges the ‘revolts’ Salisbury, Pembroke, and Bigot to save themselves by reconciling with King John. Explaining that his ‘grandsire was an Englishman’ and declaring that this fact ‘[a]wakes my conscience to confess all this’ (5.4.42-3), he reveals that, if the invading Dauphin should win the day, he is ‘forsworn’ (5.4.31) and ‘means to recompense the pains you take / By cutting off your heads’ (5.4.15-16). Melun’s divided loyalties are affective and, fascinatingly, presented as a function of his mixed heritage. But, in fact, he is not the only character in the play with mixed blood – nor, for that matter, is he the only one whose allegiances shift from one nation or crown to another. At a time when England was forging national identity for itself, Shakespeare is asking his audiences to think about what it really means to be ‘English’ or ‘French’.

The experience of the play’s commoners suggests how identities, in the early thirteenth century, were also subject to the shifting political fortunes of a town or province. By the time Shakespeare wrote *King John*, Angiers (Angers) was a French city, but playgoers would have recalled that, like Calais and Boulogne, it had once been English. When Philip, King of France, declares his intention to conquer the city for John’s young rival, Arthur, he assures Constance that:

We’ll lay before this town our royal bones,
Wade to the marketplace in Frenchmen’s blood,
But we will make it subject to this boy. (2.1.41-3)

²¹ My reading of the play’s collapsing of national or cultural differences is indebted to Williams, who argues that ‘the differences between France and England that are emphasized in the Henry VI plays are entirely absent’ in *King John*. She also observes that, ‘the grand dialectic between France and England, and civilized and barbarian devolves, instead, into a squabble among in-laws’ (*French Fetish*, p. 200).

While Philip's lines convey his determination to take Angiers for Arthur at all costs, he leaves some doubt as to whether the 'Frenchmen's blood' in this instance includes that spilled by the people of the city, or whether it refers only to that lost by his own troops. Politically, Angiers declares itself English, and by that logic the blood of its citizens would be English, but if the French king is using Arthur's claim to advance his own interests, as appears to be the case, then his statement may well betray a desire to claim Angiers as French and bring it under his own rule. The image of wading through blood recurs when Philip makes his appeal to the citizens of Angiers:

[...] shall your city call us lord,
In that behalf which we have challenged it?
Or shall we give the signal to our rage
And stalk in blood to our possession? (2.1.263-6)

Both the French and the English threaten to level Angiers if the city refuses to declare its allegiance to one claimant or the other. But by the end of the scene, the city's fate has been determined by a marriage instead, and John has offered up as a dowry for his niece, Blanche of Castile, nearly all his territories 'upon this side the sea' (2.1.488). Although John declares his intention to keep the city for himself, Shakespeare's audiences would have known that Angiers, like the rest of Anjou, had ended up in French hands. In that moment, a citizen born in Angiers under English rule would have become, for all intents and purposes, French.

The conflict between England and France in *King John* leads some characters in the play to mark clear divisions between English and French, prompting critics to comment on the play's final note of 'exhilarated patriotism and newly forged national integrity'.²² Throughout the play, Philip the Bastard, especially, is wont to invoke popular stereotypes in his speeches against the French. John, too, relies upon them. And as critics have pointed out, the anti-French rhetoric here (and elsewhere in Shakespeare) has the dual effect of reinforcing English claims to masculinity and feminising the French (as faithless, fickle, cowardly, and inconstant – all traits traditionally associated, in anti-feminist literature, with women). When trying to persuade Arthur to abandon his claim to the throne, for instance, John offers to give him 'more / Than e'er the coward hand of France can win' (2.1.157-8). This is classic wartime rhetoric, of course, but it also plays into the French reputation for 'lightness' and inconstancy. A little later in the scene, speaking before the

²² David Womersley, 'The Politics of Shakespeare's *King John*', *Review of English Studies* 40.160 (1989), 497-515 (p. 497).

gates of Angiers, he finds new ways to disparage the French: having prepared a 'bloody siege', he claims, Philip's forces had been on the verge of taking the city when the English forces arrived 'to save unscratched your city's threatened cheeks' (2.1.213, 225). Now, 'amazed' at the sight of John's army, they suddenly 'vouchsafe a parole', and instead of bullets 'they shoot but calm words folded up in smoke, / To make faithless error in your ears' (2.1.226, 229-30). Overwhelmed by the presence of the English, John suggests, the French have lost their courage and now hope to take the city by deceit rather than by force. Trust them 'accordingly', he warns the citizens, invoking the French reputation for reneging on promises.

Later in the same scene, King Philip, as 'France', comes under fire for breaking faith first with Arthur (and the boy's mother, Constance), and then with his new ally, King John. Having watched the French king negotiate a marriage for the Dauphin that would exclude young Arthur from any claim to the disputed territories (by putting them instead into French hands), the Bastard rails against 'commodity, the bias of the world' and calls Philip fickle 'France' for abandoning an 'honorable war' in favour of a 'most base and vile-concluded peace' (2.1.574, 583, 585-6). Constance, outraged at this news, calls France 'a bawd to Fortune and King John' and, turning to Salisbury, she asks: 'Tell me, thou fellow, is not France forsworn?' (3.1.60, 62). And when Philip, under threat of excommunication, abandons his alliance with King John in 3.1, it is then Eleanor's turn to curse him: 'O foul revolt of French inconstancy!' she declares. As these examples suggest, almost all of the anti-French rhetoric in this play is directed at the king himself. But the epithets would have served to reinforce stereotypes that were fairly common in Shakespeare's time: the French were widely thought to be 'very idle, wauering and inconstant'.²³

On the other side, the English are described at various points as 'warlike', 'lusty', and 'noble' – sometimes through the person of their king, sometimes more generally. When, however, on the eve of the battle, the Bastard describes how, in John's forehead 'sits / A bare-ribbed death, whose office is this day / To feast upon whole thousands of the French' (5.2.176-8), he calls up a familiar image of English warlike masculinity. But we are also shown examples of Englishmen behaving badly: if France is 'fickle' and inconstant, some English nobles are, too. One need only think of Salisbury, Pembroke, and Bigot, who defect to the Dauphin's camp. For this infidelity, the Bastard calls them 'degenerate' and 'ingrate revolts' (5.2.151). Just one scene later, these men are persuaded by Melun to 'fall

²³ Dallington, p. 47. Hastings expresses a similar sentiment in *Henry VI, part 3*, when he observes, "'Tis better using France than trusting France' (4.1.41). For an extended discussion of these stereotypes, see Andrew M. Kirk, *Mirror of Confusion*, especially his chapter on Shakespeare's histories, pp. 107-54.

off' from the French king and show once more their 'obedience [...] to our great King John' (5.4.56-7). More than Shakespeare's other English histories, this play – even as it invokes popular stereotypes – calls into question the perceived differences between the English and the French by showing us Englishmen who are 'French' in their loyalties, Frenchmen who are at least partly English by birth (and who demonstrate loyalty to England as a matter of conscience), and women whose identities are in fact the hardest to determine of all.

The roles assumed by women in the play also work to complicate claims about national difference. There are four speaking parts for women in the play (and the same number in *Henry V*), and critics have pointed out that they dominate the first three acts.²⁴ However, after 3.4 they disappear altogether. The Lady Faulconbridge appears only in the play's opening scene, where she reveals to her son, Philip the Bastard, that, 'King Richard Coeur de Lion was thy father' (1.1.253). The most unambiguously 'English' of the play's women, she and her proud son – the quintessential 'Norman bastard' – nevertheless epitomise the 'French' at the heart of English identity during this period.²⁵ Blanche of Spain appears in just two scenes, agrees to marry Lewis the Dauphin in 2.1, and speaks for the last time in the very next scene (3.1). Eleanor, who is present from the beginning of the play, has a few last lines in 3.3, and Constance, who appears for the first time in 2.1, gives a series of impassioned speeches in 3.4, fearing for her son's life. Just two scenes later, a messenger reports that Eleanor has died:

My liege, her ear
Is stopped with dust. The first of April died
Your noble mother; and, as I hear, my lord,
The Lady Constance in a frenzy died
Three days before. But this from rumour's tongue
I idly heard; if true or false I know not. (4.2.119-24)

²⁴ Juliet Dusinberre in fact argues that 'up till the end of Act 3 the dramatic action is dominated by the women characters, and this is a cause of extreme embarrassment to the men on stage, while it also provides a pretext for their own determination to create embarrassment for those women'. Juliet Dusinberre, 'King John and Embarrassing Women', *Shakespeare Survey* 42 (1990), 37-52 (p. 40).

²⁵ Here I quote from *Henry V*, where Britaine (the Duke of Brittany) refers to the English as 'Normans, but bastard Normans, Norman bastards!' (3.5.20). Richard Coeur de Lion, like his father, held numerous French titles, including Duke of Normandy. As Braden Cormack observes, the effect of the Norman Conquest was still being felt long afterward: 'to be English', for Shakespeare's contemporaries was, 'at once and with equal force to be and not to be French'. Cormack, *A Power to Do Justice: Jurisdiction, English Literature, and the Rise of Common Law, 1509-1625* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2007), p. 179.

With the deaths of Eleanor and Constance (their close proximity being Shakespeare's invention), war breaks out between France and England, and the women are not seen again. Through the first three acts, however, these characters play key roles in guiding the affairs of England and France, challenging male authority, and asserting their respective sons' rights to the English throne.²⁶ While these 'disorderly' women seem to challenge the gender ideologies of Shakespeare's day, we should remember that high-ranking women did take part in diplomatic negotiations. It was well known, for example, that Marguerite of Alençon (later Marguerite of Navarre) successfully negotiated the release of her brother, François I, after his capture by Spanish forces at the siege of Pavia in 1525. Similarly, the women of this play are among its chief negotiators. In the absence of women, diplomacy gives way to armed conflict.²⁷ The two halves of the play are thus gendered: the first half, dominated by the women, is marked by a war of words between Eleanor and Constance; the second, devoid of women, centers on the death of Arthur, the Dauphin's unchecked ambition, and a French invasion of England that ultimately fails.

The noble and royal women of *King John* are not only diplomats, they are all, to some degree, transnational figures, and Blanche epitomises this phenomenon. She is first introduced to us by Hubert as '[t]hat daughter there of Spain, the Lady Blanche' (2.1.423) when he proposes a diplomatic solution to the conflict over Angiers. Her being 'near to England', he argues, makes her a perfect match, politically, for the young Dauphin (2.1.424). Her role, then, is to secure a peace between England and France through a marriage that will appease France and circumvent the rival claims of John's nephew, Arthur. Through this marriage, Blanche of Castile, a future queen of France, becomes the play's most unequivocally 'French' woman, but the treaty quickly collapses, and she finds herself married to her uncle's enemy. Blanche realizes, to her great distress, that she must choose: 'Which is the side that I must go withal?' she asks. Her speech exposes the inherent violence of the early modern traffic in women:

I am with both. Each army hath a hand,
And in their rage, I having hold of both,
They whirl asunder and dismember me.
Husband, I cannot pray that thou mayst win.
Uncle, I needs must pray that thou mayst lose.
Father, I may not wish the fortune thine.

²⁶ For more on the women's challenge to patriarchal authority in the play, see Howard and Rackin, *Engendering a Nation*, pp. 119-33.

²⁷ As Juliet Dusinberre puts it, 'the play goes to pieces once the women leave the stage' (p. 51).

Grandam, I will not wish thy wishes thrive.
Whoever wins, on that side shall I lose;
Assured loss before the match be played. (3.1.326-336)

When Lewis, her new husband, insists that her fortune lies with him, she replies: 'There where my fortune lives, there my life dies' (3.1.338), figuring her new marriage as a kind of living death. This is her final speech of the play, and reminiscent of the predicaments faced by Shakespeare's tragic young women – Juliet, and later Desdemona and Cordelia – who recognize that as married women their loyalty and love must shift from father to husband.

If, by virtue of her marriage, Blanche of Castile becomes French, then that former queen of France, Eleanor of Aquitaine, by the same logic must be read as 'English'. Indeed, unlike Margaret in the *Henry VI* plays, Eleanor is presented in this play as a staunchly English queen. She is only ever seen in the company of her son, John, entering and exiting with the English king. But while Shakespeare suggests that she is unwaveringly English, his audiences would probably have known she had once been married to the king of France (Louis VII, father of this play's King Philip). Their marriage, discussed by Holinshed, produced two daughters but no male heirs, and was annulled on grounds of consanguinity in 1152; soon afterward she married the Duke of Normandy, who would, in 1154, become Henry II of England.²⁸ By the time the events of Shakespeare's play take place, however, she had been queen of England for some fifty years. From the perspective of the play, then, this 'French' past is also a distant past, largely forgotten. Indeed, Eleanor is on stage, and silent, as John makes a dowry gift of the city of Poitiers, once part of her rich inheritance. In fact, no one at all remarks upon the fact that Poitiers had been among the possessions gained and lost by France half a century earlier, when Eleanor, like Blanche, had married a French prince.

Constance of Brittany has the largest speaking part of any woman in *King John*, with some 260 lines (about five times as many lines as Eleanor), and her political affiliations in the play make her arguably more French than English. From the standpoint of nation or birth, however, she is neither, being descended from the Dukes of Brittany on her father's side, and the Scottish royal house on her mother's.²⁹ In the play, however, she allies herself with the French king, Philip, in order to oppose King John and assert her

²⁸ Simon Gaunt, 'French Literature Abroad: Towards an Alternative History of French Literature', *Interfaces* 1 (2015), 25-61 (p. 27).

²⁹ The Dukes of Brittany were independent sovereigns until the time period of this play, when Arthur made himself a vassal of the French King.

son's claim to the English crown. If Eleanor enters and exits in the company of England, Constance always appears in the company of the French king and his followers. We first meet her before the gates of Angiers in 2.1, in conference with the King of France, the Dauphin, and Austria. It is not long before she goes head-to-head with Eleanor, trading insults and accusations with the dowager queen in a bitter war of words over the English succession. We meet her again in the following scene (3.1), once more in the company of the French king and his entourage. The news of Blanche's marriage is still fresh in this scene – her longest – and she quickly assumes the role of the aggrieved victim: 'I will instruct my sorrows to be proud,' she tells Salisbury,

For grief is proud and makes his owner stoop.
To me and to the state of my great grief
Let kings assemble, for my grief's so great
That no supporter but the huge firm earth
Can hold it up. Here I and sorrows sit.
Here is my throne; bid kings come bow to it. (3.1.68-74)

The scene is full of overwrought speeches like this one, Constance's rants no doubt leading Juliet Dusinberre to remark upon the part's 'potential for alienating the audience through its excesses, emotional and verbal'.³⁰ The character's prolixity invokes stereotypes pertaining both to women and to the French, and if her rhetoric tends to 'alienate' or estrange her from Shakespeare's audiences, the effect is part of a larger representational strategy linking her to the prototypical French women of the first tetralogy. Whereas Eleanor can be comfortably domesticated as queen of England, Constance enters into a strategic alliance with France, becoming, in effect, England's enemy. Her insistence on young Arthur's claim to the throne imperils the stability of the English monarchy and opens the way for a French invasion.³¹ Her estrangement, then, is not merely rhetorical, but ideological, a product of her opportunistic alliance with John's (and England's) enemies in this play.

³⁰ Dusinberre, p. 38.

³¹ It is in fact the papal legate, Pandulph, who persuades the Dauphin to invade England, arguing that in the event of young Arthur's 'fall' he could 'in right of Lady Blanche [his] wife / [...] make all the claim that Arthur did' (3.4.142-3).

Henry V

Shakespeare's final history play of the 1590s is famous for what Ton Hoenselaars calls its 'extreme polarization of the French and the English'.³² Nation, as numerous studies have argued, is one of the play's great preoccupations.³³ And England, as critics have shown, defined itself in the histories in opposition to a feminised France. In contrast to the plays of the first tetralogy, and to *King John*, the parts for French women in *Henry V* are quite small. Moreover, as feminist critics have shown, *Henry V* depicts women as objects of military and sexual conquest – in the substance of Henry's speech at the gates of Harfleur, and in his marriage to Katherine, who is his 'capital demand' in the treaty negotiations with France at the end of the play (5.2.96).³⁴ If the earlier play depicts a failed invasion of England by France in the early thirteenth century, the later one dramatizes the successful conquest of France by England two hundred years later. Indeed, recalling the English loss of its last French territory, Calais, in 1558, Jean-Christophe Mayer describes *Henry V* as, 'at least to some extent, a theatrical attempt to recover a lost English past and to regain a lost territory – France – through the imagination'.³⁵ Both plays recall, in different ways, the Norman Invasion of 1066, an event that shaped England's relation to France, and to the French language, for centuries afterward. And Deanne Williams argues about *Henry V* that, 'the triumph of the English over the French at Agincourt dramatizes the ultimate reversal of the Norman Conquest'.³⁶ Mindful of this past, but more interested in the way *Henry V* sets one language against another, Ema Vyroubalová remarks that 'Shakespeare represents the English subjugation of France', in this play, 'as at once a military and a linguistic event'.³⁷ These critics draw our attention in different ways to the role of language in the conquest of one nation by another. In *Henry V*, we see the English armies win an unlikely victory on the battlefield at Agincourt, but Shakespeare is just as interested in Henry's verbal prowess. The play suggests that it is Henry's fiery rhetoric that wins him Harfleur, and it is his rhetoric, once again, that wears down Katherine's defenses in the play's final scene.

³² Ton Hoenselaars, Introduction, *Shakespeare's History Plays: Performance, Translation and Adaptation in Britain and Abroad*, ed. by Ton Hoenselaars (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 17.

³³ In addition to works already cited here, see also Claire McEachern's discussion of *Henry V* in *The Poetics of English Nationhood, 1590-1612* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 83-137.

³⁴ See, for example, Howard and Rackin's chapter on *Henry V*.

³⁵ Jean-Christophe Mayer, 'The Ironies of Babel in Shakespeare's *Henry V*', *Representing France and the French in Early Modern English Drama*, ed. by Jean-Christophe Mayer (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2008), pp. 127-41 (p. 128).

³⁶ Williams, *French Fetish*, p. 219.

³⁷ Ema Vyroubalová, 'Multilingual Ethics in *Henry V* and *Henry VIII*', *Shakespeare and the Ethics of Appropriation*, ed. by Alexa Huang and Elizabeth Rivlin (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), pp. 179-92 (p. 182).

Readers (and audiences) of *Henry V* will note that far more French is spoken in this play than in *King John*, where we find only a few words spoken – by English characters, ironically. In *Henry V*, a whole scene (3.4) plays out in French, and it is this scene in which we first encounter Princess Katherine, who is engaged in an English lesson with her attendant, Alice. Language, in this scene, serves to estrange the French princess, to heighten the sense of her difference, even as it frames her as an object of erotic conquest. Katherine's need to speak English is Shakespeare's invention: although Henry would later use English for his personal correspondence, and would promote its use as the language of government in England, he spoke French fluently and would have conducted his negotiations with France in that language. As Williams points out, then, this is a play that 'famously (and implausibly) uses French dialogue to illustrate the mutual incomprehension of French and English royalty'.³⁸ Notably, too, as Vyroubalová remarks, 'English [...] dominates over French' in this play, 'in the sense that English lines outnumber those in French, specifically by a ratio of approximately 26:1'.³⁹ She adds:

This may sound like a trivial point, since *Henry V* was obviously conceived by an English playwright for a primarily English-speaking audience. What is significant, however, is the decision to represent just enough French that the dominance of English over French is brought into the audience's consciousness.⁴⁰

The English lesson in this play is thus part of the play's larger project to 'reverse' the effects of the Norman Conquest. Predicated on a language gap that 'would not have existed in the first place', the scene makes fun of Katherine's attempts at English pronunciation.⁴¹ The point of this scene is not just to humiliate a French princess, however, for it also allows Shakespeare's audiences (who may, themselves, have struggled to learn French) to indulge a powerful fantasy – in which English might supplant French as the language of the political elite, thereby acquiring the kind of cultural prestige that had long been enjoyed by its continental rival. But in a play that trades on the narrative of Henry V's unlikely victory at Agincourt, where his soldiers were tired, sick, and outnumbered 'five to one' according to Exeter (4.3.4), Shakespeare also makes it that much harder for Henry to elicit Katherine's consent to the marriage that will seal his conquest.

³⁸ Williams, *French Fetish*, p. 200.

³⁹ Vyroubalová, p. 183.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid, p. 183. As many critics have pointed out, Katherine's future husband, Henry V, would have spoken both French and English fluently.

Katherine's part in this play amounts to some 61 lines, half of it spoken during the language lesson in 3.4. She appears in just one other scene, 5.2, where she is left on stage with Henry to be courted by him. If English lines outnumber French ones in this play, in a similar manner Henry's lines outnumber Katherine's in this final scene (by a ratio of more than 5:1). Throughout this scene, as Karen Newman observes, Henry's strategy is to 'domesticate' the French princess: 'Henry systematically denies Katherine's difference – her French maidenhood – and fashions her instead into an English wife. He domesticates her difference, refashioning the other as the same'.⁴² Although she puts up some resistance from the beginning of their exchange – 'Your majesty shall mock at me', she protests, 'I cannot speak your England' (5.2.102-3) – it is Henry who dominates the dialogue, overwhelming her with his protestations that he loves her, and France, too. Armed conflict gives way in the final scene to a verbal barrage that all but silences the object of Henry's desire. She can barely get a word in edgewise. When she does, however, it is to question his claims ('Is it possible dat I sould love de *ennemie* of France?'), to express incomprehension ('I cannot tell wat is dat' or 'I do not know dat'), to equivocate ('I cannot tell'), or to protest, in turn, that he has 'fausse French enough to deceive de most sage demoiselle dat is en France' (5.2.169, 177, 210, 194, 217-18). Katherine's rhetoric is defensive, and Sandra Logan reads her responses as efforts to '[resist] Henry's advances and [retain] her autonomy from him'.⁴³ Eventually, however, she does yield to Henry's advances, allowing that she will 'have' him 'as it sall please de roi mon père' (5.2.246). She does not, however, promise to love him. As though to reinforce our impressions of a verbal siege, her own father, taking up Henry's martial conceit, likens her maidenhead to the walls of a French city 'that war hath never entered' (5.2.320). Katherine's part here is much like Blanche's, meant to avert further bloodshed and secure a lasting peace between two warring nations. With her marriage to Henry, she will become English, and England, through her, will secure, once more, its dynastic claim to France – at least for a time.

The play situates Katherine's English lesson in the scene directly following Henry's capture of Harfleur, where we first encounter the feminised image of a French town 'entered' by war. The scene establishes, first of all, Henry's ability to conquer with words, but his threats of 'hot and forcing violation' also forge an ambivalent link between his conquest of France and his later conquest of Katherine. In Henry's speech before the gates of Harfleur (3.3.1-43), which critics note is Shakespeare's invention, the town itself is

⁴² Karen Newman, *Fashioning Femininity and English Renaissance Drama* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), p. 104.

⁴³ Sandra Logan, 'Thrice Royal Queen', p. 162.

feminised when he declares: ‘I will not leave the half-achieved Harfleur / Till in her ashes she lie burièd’ (3.3.8-9).⁴⁴ Gender in this speech is subject to the same kinds of polarisations that characterise national identity throughout the play. Although Henry addresses himself to the men of Harfleur, whose ‘pride’ threatens their undoing, most of the speech focuses on the destruction of the town’s women and children. His reference to Harfleur’s pride recalls the accusation in the *Henry VI* plays that Queen Margaret is a ‘proud Frenchwoman’ and a ‘proud queen’.⁴⁵ He then exploits a series of stark contrasts, setting the ‘fresh fair virgins’ of Harfleur and its ‘flow’ring infants’ against the ‘fleshed soldiers, rough and hard of heart’, who will mow them ‘like grass’. If they were not already overmatched, their innocence is further contrasted with the ‘smirched complexion’ of ‘impious war’ – personified by Henry in this speech, and compared to ‘the prince of fiends’ who appears ‘arrayed in flames’ (3.3.14-16). Soft and hard, pure and sullied, cold and hot, innocent and evil: these are powerful binaries, reinforced in the speech by dense patterns of alliteration. Harfleur is likened, for a brief moment, to a walled garden (‘fleur’ in French means flower) – a space that is traditionally feminised in early modern literature – and Henry’s soldiers to mowers, who will cut it down. But the language of gardens soon gives way to that of a burning city, its ‘waste and desolation’, with Henry promising that the penetration of Harfleur’s defenses will inevitably lead to another kind of rape as the ‘pure maidens’ of the town ‘fall into the hand / of hot and forcing violation’ (3.3.20-1). If French women in the *Henry VI* plays and in *King John* are strong and defiant, and lead armies against their enemies (usually the English), they are depicted in Henry’s speech as helpless victims of war, betrayed by their men, and incapable of defending themselves or their children against England’s conquering forces.

One other French woman takes an active role in the play, and her part is even smaller than Katherine’s. Isabel, the French queen, appears only in the final scene, where she plays the diplomat, offering a gracious welcome to Henry and his entourage, and expressing the hope that ‘this day / Shall change all griefs and quarrels into love’ (5.2.19-20). A little later in the scene, she takes her leave of Henry in order to take an active part in the treaty negotiations: ‘Happily a woman’s voice may do some good’, she explains, ‘When articles too nicely urged be stood on’ (5.2.93-4). Her role in brokering the peace with England,

⁴⁴ Howard and Rackin argue that the play’s association of military conquest and rape ‘appears to be intentional, for the speech Henry delivers at the gates of Harfleur is Shakespeare’s invention’ (*Engendering a Nation*, p. 212). They go on to argue that in *Henry V*, ‘the entire French kingdom is represented as a woman to be conquered by the masculine force of the English army, a conceit that is implied by the placement of Katherine’s language lesson immediately after Henry’s speech at Harfleur and literalized in the final scene when Henry claims the French princess for his bride’ (*Engendering a Nation*, p. 213, citing L. Wilcox, ‘Katherine of France as Victim and Bride’, *Shakespeare Studies* 17 [1985], 61-76).

⁴⁵ See note 12, above.

here, seems to align her with Henry's interests – and indeed the Treaty of Troyes, concluded in 1420, had the effect of disinherit her own son, the Dauphin (who does not appear in the play's final act), in favour of the English king and his descendants. Nevertheless, her final speech, after the scene of Henry's negotiation with Katherine, is one of reconciliation: calling upon God to bless the marriage and 'combine' their hearts and realms 'in one', she asks that in this union 'English may as French, French Englishmen, / Receive each other' (5.2.363-4), collapsing once more the differences that had set one nation against the other. Although the speech appears to establish a new relation of equality and interchangeability between the nations, the chiasmus also suggests a reversal of fortunes. The French are now 'Englishmen' just as the English were once French. The play, of course, does not allow its audiences to indulge this particular fantasy for very long. Just moments later, the Chorus enters to remind us that France was soon lost amidst the civil wars that erupted under Henry VI, as 'oft our stage hath shown' (Epilogue.13). But as Shakespeare's audiences also knew, Katherine's story did not end with the sudden death of Henry V in 1421. Although the reign of her first son, Henry VI, was marred by losses in France and civil wars at home, her second marriage, with Owen Tudor, produced several more children in the 1430s, and laid the groundwork for the Tudor dynasty. Without making this connection explicitly, Shakespeare directs our attention back to the first tetralogy, which culminates with the defeat of Richard III at Bosworth Field in 1485 by the earl of Richmond. Richmond, Katherine's grandson, became Henry VII and ruled successfully for 24 years; her great-great granddaughter was Shakespeare's queen, Elizabeth I.

French women are represented more often in Shakespeare's plays than women of any other European nation. They also hold the largest parts for women in all of Shakespeare's plays. The reasons for this are historical, as we have seen. In his English history plays, Shakespeare takes liberties in his representations of French women, just as he does with other historical figures – emphasizing or downplaying their 'Frenchness' for a variety of aesthetic or ideological reasons. The greater their challenge to English power, the more they are vilified, like Joan La Pucelle or Queen Margaret, as 'proud', 'wanton', and unruly. But Shakespeare varies his representation of French women. Some, like Eleanor in *King John*, bear few traces of their French origins or past. *Henry V*'s Katherine, on the other hand, is emphatically French, but manages to avoid the kinds of criticism leveled at Joan or Margaret. Katherine's English lesson, and the wooing scene that follows later in the play, suggest that while she knows what is expected of her, she will not easily be won, or domesticated, by Henry. However, her historical role as Henry's queen, and later as a founder of the Tudor line, requires a careful negotiation on Shakespeare's part. Although she resists the advances of her English suitor (and conqueror), calling into question the claim that 'griefs and quarrels' can be turned to love (5.2.20), we must also be able to

imagine Katherine as an English queen – and not only as the mother of the unfortunate Henry VI, but as the progenitor of Elizabeth I, one of the most successful English monarchs of all time.