

## BABEL ON THE BATTLEFIELD Englising the French in Shakespeare's *Henry V*

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**Abstract.** This paper examines Shakespeare's *Henry V* from the perspective of the play's deep concern with languages and with the dynamics of their interaction. The drama is characterised by linguistic heterogeneity of various kinds, from the blatant bilingualism that sets it apart from other plays in the canon, to the welter of regional dialects, personal idiolects, and stylistic registers that are also played off against one another within it. At the same time as it enacts a confrontation between the English and French tongues, and the mentalities and cultural perspectives they respectively encode, it also juxtaposes different voices articulating contrasting evaluations of events and discrepant perceptions of the protagonist himself. The linguistic multiplicity of the play is therefore part and parcel of the ambivalence of attitude with which recent criticism of the play has increasingly been concerned. At the same time, it also implicates issues having to do with translation and other forms of cultural negotiation, as well as those of names and of the mechanisms through which these are conferred. If on the one hand the king is implicitly attempting to establish linguistic uniformity through his military conquest of France, he is unable to curb the tendency towards linguistic fragmentation that is manifest among his own subjects and even in his own use of language.

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### 1.

At a certain moment on the eve of the Battle of Agincourt, the Welsh captain Fluellen, one of the exiguous “band of brothers” preparing to take on the full might of the French army in Shakespeare's *Henry V* (4.3.60), indignantly censures a fellow officer for the excessive volume at which he is speaking. As is his pedantic wont, he cites the example of Pompey the Great as a model of military decorum in such matters, reminding his colleague that there was “no tiddle-taddle nor pibble-pabble in Pompey's camp” (4.1.71–72). Fluellen does not manage to enunciate the word *babble* correctly, because more often than not he pronounces the letter *b* as *p*, and editors have made different decisions as to how the spellings should be rendered in a modern edition of the play.<sup>1</sup> But such confusion is perhaps part of the point, or at least is something that can be adduced to illustrate a point. Babbling of green fields is what, if Malone's generally accepted emendation of the Folio text is correct,<sup>2</sup> Falstaff is doing in the last hours before he dies in indirect consequence—or so at least his friends believe—of his having been cast off by the newly crowned King Henry (2.3.16–17). Henry's attempt to bring order and moral clarity into his life has entailed the suppression of alternative voices, including those seductive but anarchic voices represented by Falstaff, and

<sup>1</sup> Thus while the New Arden Edition of the play renders the words as “no tiddle taddle nor pibble babble” (ed. Walter 1993), they appear as “no tiddle-taddle nor pibble-babble” in the *Oxford Shakespeare Complete Works* (eds Wells and Taylor 2006).

<sup>2</sup> See the New Arden Edition of *Henry V*, note to 2.3.17.

the consequence is that they have been reduced, in this case quite literally, to the level of babbling. But Henry's crusade against linguistic difference does not end there.

There would seem to be no etymological connection between the words *babble* and *babel*, but for reasons of homophony, as well as of a certain convergence in the meanings they have been made to assume, the terms have often been associated with one another.<sup>3</sup> In one way or another, it is Babel—the emblem both of a hubristic project destined to failure, and of the tumult of discordant voices ensuing from this project—that dominates the universe of *Henry V*.<sup>4</sup> A considerable amount of critical attention has been dedicated in recent decades to what might broadly be described as the “linguistic” dimension of *Henry V*, and it has many times been pointed out that there is no play in the Shakespearean canon in which the sheer multiplicity of competing languages is more conspicuously on display than this one. While other works evince an intense concern with language and with the power of language to reflect and even shape the reality inhabited by human beings, none is quite so thoroughgoing as *Henry V* in exploring the diverse ways in which perspectives can be linguistically embodied, and the ways in which both the perspectives and the languages in which they are inscribed clash with one another and contend among themselves for primacy.<sup>5</sup> Since it is evident that the linguistic heterogeneity that characterizes the play is an explicitly encoded feature of the text and not an accidental by-product of the playwright's verbal exuberance, it is an element that must be taken account of in any serious discussion of the work.

## 2.

This linguistic manifoldness is manifest at different levels, or (to avoid the hierarchical assumptions implicit in this latter term) within different spheres. Most obviously, what must inevitably strike any spectator of the work is the simple fact that *Henry V* is, to an exceptional degree, a pointedly and self-consciously bilingual play. Other plays set in France, or dealing with the conflicts between England and France, do not make such deliberate and sustained use of the French tongue as does this one. They follow the same convention as that used in plays set in Italy, in ancient Rome, Britain, and Greece, and even in such purely imaginary locales as the Illyria of *Twelfth Night*: irrespective of the nominal setting, characters speak English, as on an English stage and before an English audience they obviously must do. Yet in *Henry V* the presence of the French language is indispensable, because in some respects the play is as much about the clash of languages as of nations, and about what is implied when one language confronts and in some cases imposes itself upon another. At the same time, however, in deliberately incorporating French into the play Shakespeare was obliged to perform a somewhat precarious balancing act, for while the more educated portions of his audience might safely have been expected to understand the exchanges in French, it is

<sup>3</sup> In one of its definitions of the verb *babble*, the *OED* states that “the name of *Babel* . . . , although etymologically unrelated, may have been associated with the verb in later use” (*OED*, *babble*, v.<sup>1</sup>). The entry for *Babel* states that “the senses of the English noun . . . were probably influenced early on by association with the (etymologically unrelated) *BABBLE* n. and *BABBLE* v.<sup>1</sup> (*OED*, *Babel*, n.).

<sup>4</sup> The word *Babel* appears nowhere in Shakespeare, but Babylon—sometimes thought to be the site of the biblical tower of Babel—is mentioned in two plays, one of which is *Henry V*. This is once again in connection with Falstaff, who “talked of the Whore of Babylon” (2.3.36–37).

<sup>5</sup> Thus, in a fine discussion of the topic, Paola Pugliatti alludes to “the enactment of a number of a number of individual, diverse, diverging, and sometimes disturbing perspectives, the introduction of different voices and different social discourses, all of which are presented as equally creditable and worthy of the audience's attention” (Pugliatti 1993, p. 241). Other commentators have expressed analogous views.

difficult to imagine how the groundlings would have responded to such passages, and the risk of alienating the attention of the public was far from negligible.

The result is a strategic compromise, inasmuch as although the two tongues are simultaneously present in the drama they are unevenly weighted. One entire scene of the play is written in French, the last contains extended passages in French, and other fragments of French are scattered throughout the work. The speech of the French nobles is interspersed with French epithets, a rather craven French soldier captured by Pistol on the battlefield—incongruously named *Monseur Le Fer*—pleads for mercy in his own tongue, the nameless Boy who accompanies the Eastcheap crew Bardolph, Nym, and Pistol to France proves to be a competent speaker of French and indeed exhibits surprising skill as an interpreter in the final hours of his life. There is just enough French in the play, in other words, to keep at the forefront of the spectator's mind that what is at stake are languages and not only the people speaking them. Very often the languages are pitted against one another, or at least tellingly juxtaposed. In a scene marked by what is almost the linguistic equivalent of cross-dressing, the French princess Katherine undertakes an English lesson under the tutelage of her maid Alice, but the medium of instruction is French, with the consequence that each language is refracted through the distorting prism of the other. In the final scene of the play Henry woos Katherine, whose English has remained rudimentary notwithstanding the crash course she has taken, in his own language rather than hers, and the issue of communication between languages and even between cultures becomes of paramount concern.

No less significant than the primary antagonism between English and French—the languages of the “two mighty monarchies” that the play crushes together “within the girdle of these walls” (Prologue, 19–20)—is the almost ceaseless friction amongst the various other kinds of “language” that are jostling against one another in the play: languages consisting in regional dialects (or pseudo-dialects), in sociolects and idiolects, in registers and dramatic modes. In some cases, as has more than once been suggested, it is perhaps legitimate to talk about heteroglossia in the Bakhtinian sense, since the voices that are set off against one another reflect different perspectives on the world and on events.<sup>6</sup> One particularly trenchant example of this latter category is the language of the low-life characters, which deflates the heady rhetoric indulged in on occasion by the king himself. A notable instance occurs in the immediate aftermath of Henry's spirited “Once more unto the breach, dear friends” speech, with its fiery exhortation to courage and its affirmation that among his soldiers “there is none of you so mean and base / That hath not noble lustre in your eyes” (3.1.1, 29–30). After the king has charged back to the fray we learn what certain “mean and base” people actually think about the matter of fighting in a war of this kind. While Bardolph urges “On, on, on, on, on, to the breach, to the breach!”, Nym expresses his reluctance to contribute his body to the pile of English dead: “Pray thee, Corporal, stay; the knocks are too hot, and for mine own part I have not a case of lives” (3.2.1–4). When Fluellen appears on the scene for the first time in the play, it is to castigate the stragglers in terms that amount to being an inadvertent caricature of Henry's speech: “Up to the breach, you dogs!” (3.2.22). Where Henry incites his men to valorous feats in the high-flown language of epic heroism, Fluellen resorts to a verbal lashing in terms that are decidedly less elevated.

Certain characters—the captains Jamy and Macmorris, respectively Scottish and Irish—seem to have been introduced into the play for the sole purpose of providing speci-

<sup>6</sup> For more on this, see Pugliatti 1993, and Siemon 2002, in the latter of which however *Henry V* is only incidentally addressed.

mens of regional inflection, and disappear as soon as they have discharged this function, not however without one of them having picked a quarrel with Fluellen, whose language also stands out as deviant with respect to standard English.<sup>7</sup> Macmorris protests that “It is no time to discourse, the town is besieged, and the trumpet call us to the breech, and we talk, and, be Chrish, do nothing” (3.2.109–111), whereupon the altercation escalates:

*Flu.* Captain Macmorris, I think, look you, under your correction, there is not many of your nation—

*Mac.* Of my nation? What ish my nation? Ish a villain, and a bastard, and a knave, and a rascal? What ish my nation? Who talks of my nation?

*Flu.* Look you, if you take the matter otherwise than is meant, Captain Macmorris, peradventure I shall think you do not use me with that affability as in discretion you ought to use me, look you, being as good a man as yourself, both in the disciplines of war, and in the derivation of my birth, and in other particularities.

*Mac.* I do not know you so good a man as myself. So Chrish save me, I will cut off your head. (3.2.122–35)

If one of the reasons why Henry has undertaken his campaign in France is to foster unity among his own people, that project seems doomed from the beginning. Interestingly enough, the quarrel is interrupted, or at least suspended, when a parley with the French town of Harfleur is announced (3.2.138). What this “parley” turns out to be however is one of the most deeply disturbing episodes in the play, when Henry threatens the elders of the town with rape and slaughter if they refuse to surrender. “This is the latest parle we will admit” (3.3.2), he warns them, whereupon he proceeds, in the most graphic terms, to sketch out the horrors that will inevitably be their lot if they do not yield. In this case language, far from being a medium of communication, is used for the sole purpose of inspiring terror.

### 3.

But the play also contains other contending voices, or dissenting voices, or alternative voices, and at this point the word *language* takes on as much a metaphorical as a strictly literal meaning. As James Shapiro has remarked, “in responding to his audience’s mixed feelings—their sense that the war was both unavoidable and awful—Shakespeare fills the play with competing, critical voices ... Much of the play ... is composed of scenes in which opposing voices collide over the conduct of the war” (Shapiro 2005, pp. 104–105).<sup>8</sup> For many readers, one of the most memorable moments of the play is that in which Henry, having disguised himself in another man’s cloak, converses in subdued tones with a handful of common men who have been enlisted into his campaign. Though their loyalty to their sovereign is not in question, their observations concerning their plight enable us to see the war through the eyes of individuals who have very little to gain from the conflict and everything to lose. But there

<sup>7</sup> The one captain who does speak “standard” English is named Gower, a fact that is perhaps significant given that John Gower was among the poets who, together with Chaucer, were hailed as the fathers of English poetry. It is Gower’s *Confessio Amantis* that is one of the sources of *Pericles*, in the composition of which Shakespeare had a hand, and Gower who acts as chorus to that play.

<sup>8</sup> It should perhaps be acknowledged that not all critics are of the opinion that these contrasting voices are accorded comparable weight in the play. Stephen Greenblatt argues for example that although there is some recording of alien voices in *Henry V*—in the comments of the low-life characters, the representatives of the Scots, the Irish and the Welsh, and the French themselves—nothing is said that seriously affects the charisma of power surrounding Henry, and that both English allies and French enemies “say remarkably little that is alien or disturbing in relation to the central voice of authority in the play” (Greenblatt 1992, p. 58).

are other aspects to the linguistic diversity of the play than this, because the languages invoked, in addition to articulating different evaluations of events, also serve different purposes. It is not only alternative perspectives that are being invoked but different “language games”, to use Wittgenstein’s phrase, that come into play. We might be inclined to scoff at the French nobles descanting on the merits of their horses and armour on the night preceding the Battle of Agincourt, for instance, but as we listen to them we also become aware that what they are really endeavouring to do is not so much indulge their private vanity as distract themselves during what seems to be an endlessly protracted vigil:

*Con.* Tut! I have the best armour of the world. Would it were day!  
*Orl.* You have an excellent armour; but let my horse have his due.  
*Con.* It is the best horse of Europe.  
*Orl.* Will it never be morning? (3.7.1–6)

The exchange is imbued with tones prefiguring those of Vladimir’s question “will night never come?” in Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*. Verbal exchanges, however hollow and listless, are a means of staving off a sense of temporal inertia, a sense that time is very close to having a stop. And one wonders whether Henry’s own rhetorical effusions, his whipping himself up to paroxysms of nationalistic fervour, might not serve an analogous function: that of warding off his sense of inherited guilt over his father’s usurpation of the crown, and of the ultimate futility of the mission in which he is engaged. In each case, language is what stands between the self and the void of uncertainty.

Languages in *Henry V*, then, both embody different perspectives and perform different functions in the lives of those who use them. It is to be observed however that the linguistic fracturing which is being examined here, the centripetal tendency of language to fragment into different kinds and functions, is not something that is manifest in the interpersonal world only. It is most notably within the character for whom the play is named that there is a split between competing languages, and it is this among other things that makes him so inscrutable and in the end so deeply problematic a figure. Henry himself speaks with multiple voices, shifts restlessly and disconcertingly between different thought idioms, so that it is not clear who the “real” Henry is or even if such a being exists. Though in the most respectful of terms, the Archbishop of Canterbury draws attention to this linguistic chameleonism in the opening scene of the play:

Hear him but reason in divinity  
 And, all-admiring, with an inward wish  
 You would desire the King were made a prelate.  
 Hear him debate of commonwealth affairs,  
 You would say it hath been all in all his study.  
 List his discourse of war, and you shall hear  
 A fearful battle rendered you in music.  
 Turn him to any cause of policy,  
 The Gordian knot of it he will unloose,  
 Familiar as his garter, that when he speaks,  
 The air, a chartered libertine, is still,  
 And the mute wonder lurketh in men’s ears,  
 To steal his sweet and honeyed sentences (1.1.38–50)

Henry is equally at home in the languages of theology, of civil affairs, of military matters, of policy: is he then a divine, a soldier, an administrator, or a politician? Is he, like Kurtz in *Heart of Darkness* (or like Shakespeare himself according to Borges), all things at once and

therefore essentially nothing? It is remarkable that the figure who has often been exalted as a paragon of heroic virtue is so difficult to pin down, so elusive of definition. As Laurie Maguire puts it:

*Henry V* offers us not a unified hero but a series of roles played by Henry. The opening scene presents the statesman, pursuing justice and responding to French humiliation ... In act 2 Henry acts the betrayed friend, and stages a morality play to unmask the traitors ... Act 3 shows Henry in Tamburlain-cum-Rambo mode ... In act 4 Henry plays the common man ... The wooing scene of act 5 presents a constellation of starring roles: the negotiator who drives a hard bargain ...; the soldier, capable only of leaping into saddles; the poetically challenged wooer; the Petrarchan romantic, the inept language student; the imperialist who overrides the customs of the nation he has just conquered. (Maguire 2004, p. 102)

Other personas could doubtless be appended to this list. What is important is that to each role there corresponds a voice, and a language appropriate to that voice.

Not insignificantly, perhaps, in view of the conflict between two natural languages and the cultures associated with those languages that is central to this play, there is a division even in the linguistic affiliations of the English that Henry speaks. David Steinsaltz, comparing the Saint Crispin's day speech with the meditation on ceremony in which Henry reflects in sombre tones on the status of kings with respect to the common people he rules over, points out that while the ceremony speech is teeming with terms deriving from Latin or French, the words comprising the Saint Crispin's Day speech addressed to the "band of brothers" are largely Germanic in origin (Steinsaltz 2002, pp. 327–28). This linguistic hybridity reflects the hybridity of the English, descended from both Norman and Saxon antecedents.<sup>9</sup> The English are, as the French noblemen contemptuously put it, "Our scions, put in wild and savage stock" (3.5.7), and "Normans, but bastard Normans, Norman bastards" (3.5.10). The battle between French and English is a battle that takes place within the English national identity and ultimately within Henry himself.

#### 4.

This linguistic fragmentation is bound up, of course, with the notorious ambivalence of *Henry V*. It was long ago noticed that the Chorus and the play itself provide divergent versions of the campaign in France, and therefore implicitly articulate different perceptions of the king who is waging that campaign. The language of the Chorus, until the final bleak lines of the play, is that of an enthusiastic propagandist, celebratory and jingoistic, intoxicating himself with exciting but more or less vacant abstractions ("For now sits expectation in the air" [II.Prologue.8]), whereas what is depicted on stage is the grim and often sordid reality. On the one hand we have the Christian prince wielding the sword of righteousness in defence of his God-given rights, and on the other a world in which erstwhile boon companions are hanged for trivial crimes, towns threatened with destruction, and unarmed prisoners ruthlessly massacred. In a fine discussion of the play Harold Goddard posits a Shakespeare torn between irreconcilable imperatives in portraying King Henry, and suggests that "through the Chorus, the playwright gives us the popular idea of his hero. In the play, the poet tells the truth about him. We are free to accept whichever of the two we prefer" (Goddard 1960, I, p. 217). Not dissimilarly, James Shapiro has much more recently argued that "the Chorus and the ensuing stage action offer competing versions of what is taking place" and that "the

<sup>9</sup> For a more general account of how Shakespeare deliberately shifts between the Romance and the Germanic elements present in the English language throughout his work, see Watson 1990, pp. 613–28.

tension between what audiences are told and what they see for themselves ... becomes, far more than the antagonism between the French and English, the main conflict in the play” (Shapiro 2005, pp. 105–106). The different languages in the drama thus correspond to some extent to the different ways in which events can be viewed—the different ways, indeed, that events are perceived to be such.<sup>10</sup>

As such comments as these suggest, since the play can with apparently equal credibility be read as panegyric and as critique, as fulsome celebration and as mordant irony, the most convenient way out of the interpretative impasse may simply be to acknowledge that both readings are to be admitted on an equal footing. This has given rise to the idea that “Shakespeare designed the play to convey two contradictory meanings” that three decades ago was considered “all on its way to becoming the new orthodoxy” (Levin 1984, p. 134), and that only ten years later was viewed as “a critical commonplace” (McEachern 1994, p. 33). Perhaps one of the most influential proponents of this strategy for approaching the text is Norman Rabkin, who argued that “Shakespeare created a work whose ultimate power is precisely the fact that it points in two opposite directions, virtually daring us to choose one of the two opposed interpretations it requires of us” (Rabkin 1981, p. 34). This latter assertion, and the analogy it draws with the bistable percepts often invoked in gestalt psychology,<sup>11</sup> has however been contested by other critics on a number of grounds. Lawrence Danson maintains that “hard as the play’s problems are, they do not make it a gestaltist experiment, for the Chorus is there to give a sense of perspective, to establish the figure against the ground”, and that it is this uniquely situated personage who constitutes a “privileged voice” that we ignore at our peril (Danson 1983, p. 29). And while other commentators have agreed with Rabkin that the play does lend itself to equally valid but radically different readings, they do not for that reason concur also that it exacts from the reader an unreserved commitment to one at the expense of the other. As Paola Pugliatti puts it “the play’s two (or more) gestalts are by no means rival”, and what Shakespeare is really trying to do present is “a polymorphous or polyphonic political picture” (Pugliatti 1993, p. 237). What all these critics agree on, however, is the fact that the play does contain a plethora of voices, and that these voices are to a greater or lesser degree discordant among themselves.

## 5.

One of the issues that inevitably arises when a number of discrete languages are simultaneously present in the same dramatic space is that of the relation that exists among them, and of the extent to which one can be understood in terms of the other. Part and parcel of this is the issue of translation and what is entailed by the process of translation. The process of translation implies the possibility of linguistic misconstrual, and this is a phenomenon that is rife in *Henry V*, as for that matter it is elsewhere in Shakespeare as well. The scene pivoting on a lesson in English imparted by Alice to Katharine in the French language begins promisingly enough, when Katharine learns the English names of various

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Jonathan Baldo’s comments about how “nationalist ideology and resistances to it take the form of collisions over memory”, and how “control over how a nation remembers a momentous event like a war is almost as significant as the outcome of the war itself, given how crucial memory is for the legitimation and exercise of power” (Baldo 1996, p. 133).

<sup>11</sup> The cover illustration of the Arden edition of *Henry V* edited by J. H. Walter (Shakespeare 1993) features one such ambiguous form, of the kind variously referred to as the Rubin Vase or figure-ground vase.

parts of the human anatomy, but things take a distinctly problematic turn as the session proceeds. Although Alice generously assures Katharine that “*vous prononcez les mots aussi droit que les natifs d’Angleterre*” (3.4.37–39), what the women in fact find themselves having to contend with are words which, pronounced as Katharine pronounces them, sound like obscenities in their own tongue. The translation from French into English also raises difficulties of a cultural nature:

De foot, et de coun? O Seigneur Dieu, ils sont les mots de son mauvais, corruptible, gros, et impudique, et non pour les dames d’honneur d’user. Je ne voudrais prononcer ces mots devant les seigneurs de France, pour tout le monde. Foh! De foot et de coun! (3.4.47–51)

Nothing has actually been lost in translation, but something has been gained that is perhaps more than has been bargained for, and that is unlikely to go down well in polite French society. Similar problems of pronunciation cause Fluellen to render Alexander the Great’s name as “Alexander the Pig” (4.7.13). Corrected by Gower, he asks indignantly “is not pig great? The pig, or the great, or the mighty, or the huge, or the magnanimous, are all one reckonings, save the phrase is a little variations” (4.7.15–18).

Another episode of linguistic purposes mistook takes place when Pistol captures a French soldier. Avid for ransom, Pistol construes the words “*ayez pitié de moi!*” in terms of his own mental framework, and says that “Moy shall not serve, I will have forty moys” (4.4.13). In the course of the ensuing conversation “bras” becomes “brass”, while “*pardonnez-moi!*” is understood as meaning “a ton of moys” (4.4.16–19, 20–21). At a certain point the Boy is recruited as translator, and he has his work cut out for him:

*Boy* Écoutez. Comment êtes-vous appelé?  
*Sold.* Monsieur le Fer.  
*Boy* He says his name is *Master Fer*.  
*Pist.* Master Fer? I’ll fer him, and firk him, and ferret him. Discuss the same in French unto him.  
*Boy* I do not know the French for fer, and ferret, and firk. (4.4.24–30)

The Boy translates Pistol’s threat to cut his prisoner’s throat with the phrase “*couper votre gorge*”, and Pistol reinforces the message with his own mangled version: “Owy, cuppele gorge, permafoy” (4.4.34–36). Perhaps significantly, it is the Boy’s sad destiny to be killed in a French raid on the English camp, a gratuitous act of mayhem that suggests that this is not the moment for linguistic or cultural mediation.

What is not always accorded the attention it merits, notwithstanding the manifest nature of the play’s deep interest in languages and the relation between them, is the fact that *Henry V* takes its point of departure from an issue arising from translation. A problem that is recurrent in Shakespeare—that of how to identify the true referent of a term—is here given a cross-lingual implication. In this case the problematic term, upon which the legitimacy or not of Henry’s claim to the throne of France depends, is a geographical designation. When Henry asks the Archbishop of Canterbury to explicate his true position respecting the throne of France, the prelate obliges with a laborious exegesis of an article in Salic Law formulated in Latin as “*In terram Salicam mulieres ne succedant*”, which he translates as “No woman shall succeed in Salic land” (1.2.38–39). So far so good, at least on the face of things, but the problem swiftly presents itself of how the term “*terram Salicam*” is to be construed. “Which Salic land the French unjustly gloze / To be the realm of France” (40–41), complains the prelate, although he claims that there are authors even among the French who acknowledge that “the land Salic is in Germany” (1.2.44). The term “*terram Salicam*” is thus rendered by the archbishop in two phrases—“Salic land” and “land Salic”—which correspond to two different ways of understanding the significance of that term. The words can be translated readily enough, but the meaning of the words inheres less in the words themselves than in what they



are thought to refer to, and therefore remains subject to the biased constructions of those doing the translating.

A word frequently used in Shakespeare's time for translation was *Englishing*. This is a term that often suggests not only rendering into the English language as such, but also giving an English colouration to a foreign text so as to make it accessible to a local audience in cultural as well as linguistic terms. In some of its manifestations such a process amounts to being a kind of cultural appropriation, an imposition of English meanings upon a work that has no original connection with England or her inhabitants. A significant instance is Arthur Golding's translation of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, a work with which Shakespeare was closely familiar, in which among other things proper names are sometimes Anglicized to almost comic effect.<sup>12</sup> In a number of respects, though obviously none of them literary, "Englishing" is also what Henry is about in France. It has been suggestively argued by David Steinsaltz that Shakespeare's audience would have perceived Henry's campaign in France as a delayed English response to the linguistic consequences of the invasion of 1066, that "it is a reversal of the Norman conquest which imposed the French upon England", and that Henry therefore appears as "the avenging angel of the English tongue" (Steinsaltz 2002, p. 326, p. 327). The battles that are taking place in France are quite literally battles between languages, and it is of course English that, at least in the short term, prevails when Henry wins the day at Agincourt and forces the French to come to terms.

## 6.

Emblematic of the situation are the exchanges that subsequently take place between Henry and the woman who, daughter of the French King, is the person he must secure as a wife in order to reinforce his legal claim to her realm. It is at this point that things begin to fall into place, and that we understand why the princess has developed a sudden interest in foreign languages, whether she is as Greenblatt suggests "by implication learning English as a consequence of the successful English invasion ... graphically figured as a rape" (Greenblatt 1992, p. 59), or because she wants to equip herself with the linguistic skills necessary to be able to fend for herself in the matrimonial negotiations that will inevitably take place with the victorious Henry (Abate 2001). Notwithstanding the rather extraordinary assertion on the part of one commentator that the scene of Henry's wooing of Katherine provides "charming moments" that "show the tender, romantic side of the warlike king" (Lynch 2008, p. 151), it is fairly evident that the "wooing" of Katherine is little more than a charade, because the result is a foregone conclusion: "She is our capital demand, comprised / Within the fore-rank of our articles" (5.2.96–97). Nonetheless, although her destiny is sealed, Katherine—perhaps for the sake of her own dignity as a woman, because the alternative would be to acknowledge that she is no more than an object of barter—does play her role in the game of courtship that is being forced upon her. And Henry plays as well, pretending with counterfeit chivalry to be submitting himself to a language lesson:

<sup>12</sup> Thus, to cite a single example, the Aegean Sea becomes the "Goat Sea". This is one of a number of instances that John Frederick Nims cites in his Introduction to Golding's translation of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (Nims 2000, pp. xxxi–xxxii).

Will you vouchsafe to teach a soldier terms  
 Such as will enter at a lady's ear  
 And plead his love-suit to her gentle heart? (5.2.99–101)

Katherine cagily replies that “Your majesty shall mock at me; I cannot speak your England” (5.2.102–103). She understands well enough that the “terms” that Henry wants to hear are not to be couched in French, and that in fact Henry has no intention of making concessions to her lack of expertise in English.

A question that is recurrent in *Henry V* is that of what things or people or places are called. The whole issue of Henry's right to the throne of France pivots on the question of what part of Europe is designated by the term “*terram Salicam*”, the answer provided by the Archbishop of Canterbury being that “Salic” is “at this day in Germany called Meissen” (1.2.52–53). Katherine's English lesson consists largely in a dialogue with Alice based on the formula “*comment appelez-vous...?*”, followed by a French word for which the English equivalent is sought. The first question that the Boy asks Pistol's French prisoner is “*Comment êtes-vous appelé?*” (4.4.24). There are other variants on the question, as when Pistol asks the disguised king “What is thy name?”, to which Henry deviously replies that his name is Harry le Roy (4.1.48–49), or when Fluellen asks Gower “What call you the town's name where Alexander the Pig was born?” (4.7.12–13). And if one question consists in that of what things are called, another consists in what something or someone is *to be* called, what is to be named and in what way and by whom, and at this point the issue of names becomes even more problematic. When at a certain point in the wooing scene Henry effectively Anglicizes the name of the princess, what he is doing is incorporating her within his own linguistic universe at the expense of that she has formerly inhabited:

O fair Katharine, if you will love me soundly with your French heart I will be glad to hear you  
 confess it brokenly with your English tongue. Do you like me, Kate? (5.2.104–107)

Thus *Katherine* is transformed into *Kate*, in the space of two sentences, and she is called upon to declare in her halting English a love she is constrained to profess for a man she will be treaty-bound to marry. After this, to be a Kate is to be her fate—nomen omen.

It is a fate, interestingly enough, that Katherine shares in common with another woman in Shakespeare's works. Petruchio performs a similar act of renaming in *The Taming of the Shrew*, and coincidentally (or through an association in Shakespeare's own mind) it is the same name that is implicated, though in this case of course, given the exclusively Italian setting of the play, the issue of “Englishing” as such does not come into the picture. We might expect a Kate in *Henry V*, in *Henry IV* (this is the name of Hotspur's wife), and in *Henry VIII* (in a single affectionate reference to Catherine of Aragon by the King), but somehow it seems out of place in Padua. Nonetheless, in *The Taming of the Shrew* it is precisely this name that appears, and the renaming of Katherina is the first step in her domestication, prefiguring the more strenuous forms of coercion that will be subsequently be brought to bear to enforce compliance. *The Taming of the Shrew* is quite clear as to what is happening:

*Pet.* Good morrow, Kate, for that's your name, I hear.  
*Kath.* Well have you heard, but something hard of hearing;  
 They call me Katherine that do talk of me.  
*Pet.* You lie, in faith, for you are call'd plain Kate,  
 And bonny Kate, and sometimes Kate the curst;  
 But Kate, the prettiest Kate in Christendom,  
 Kate of Kate Hall, my super-dainty Kate,  
 For dainties are all Kates, and therefore, Kate,

Take this of me, Kate of my consolation (2.1.183–91)<sup>13</sup>

Katherina says that she is called Katherina, and Petruchio says that she is called plain Kate, but it is clear that it is he who, irrespective of her wishes, intends to call her by this name, which he proceeds to manhandle mercilessly just to make it clear who is in charge in the matter of names. If her name can be subject to his manipulation, he seems to be implying, then so can she. A variant of the name Katherina in *The Taming of the Shrew* is Katherine, which is also the name of the French princess in *Henry V*. In fact Henry's wooing of Katharine has more than a little in common with Petruchio's lightning courtship—if that is what it is to be called—of Katherina. The imposition of names in both cases implies the establishment of relationships based on power, or as the Italian adage has it: "*chi domina nomina, chi nomina domina*". As Laurie Maguire argues, the application of a diminutive constitutes in both cases "a deliberate attempt by the males to re-create the Katherines as Kates: in other words, to tame them by (re)naming them" (Maguire 2007, p. 125).<sup>14</sup>

This is not to say that Henry does not feign at least to be playing the part of the wooer, but he seems to be mocking the role of the courtly lover even as he plays it, and thus tacitly letting it be understood that the real dynamics of the interchange have little to do with affective relationships. There are, once again, different voices contending for primacy in his speeches: those of the romantic wooer, the astute negotiator, the bluff military man who will "speak to thee plain solder" (5.2.149), and of course, that of the king of England and conqueror of France. He asks Katherine whether she "likes" him, but the question leads to still further linguistic confusion, because "I cannot tell vat is 'like me'" (5.2.108). Instead of clarifying his meaning Henry replies "An angel is like you, Kate, and you are like an angel" (5.2.109–110), an explanation so little helpful as to justify the suspicion that his future as a language teacher is not likely to be a brilliant one. Not surprisingly, Katherine, having received confirmation from Alice that she has understood these words aright, says that "*O bon Dieu, les langues des hommes sont pleines de tromperies*" (5.2.115–16), which is putting things mildly.

There is more in a similar vein, and in the end Henry does yield so far as to deliver himself of an extended utterance in French, perhaps in order to demonstrate that he does in fact speak more of the language than he has hitherto admitted, and therefore that his insistence on English is a matter not of ignorance on his part but of deliberate policy. After this foray into what he pretends is unfamiliar linguistic territory but is evidently nothing of the kind,<sup>15</sup> Henry tellingly confesses that "It is as easy for me, Kate, to conquer the kingdom as to speak so much more French" (5.2.183–84). His effort induces Katherine to remark that "*le*

<sup>13</sup> While it is true that the name *Kate* is used earlier in the play, by both Bianca and Baptista Minola, it is Petruchio who makes a deliberate point of using this name in preference to the one the woman evidently prefers, and who plays with it with such relentless gusto.

<sup>14</sup> However, not all critics agree that there is something disturbing about this renaming. A.D. Nuttall, also noting the "happy accident" that the French princess has the same name the female protagonist of *The Taming of the Shrew*, says that when he uses the diminutive form "Henry can sound, as he modulates from the formal version of her name, like a gentler, sweeter Petruchio" (Nuttall 2007, p. 155). In an interesting reading of the play in which Katherine emerges as a significantly more empowered figure than the one I am depicting here, Abate argues that Henry's use of the name Kate "means he is now playing the self-described role of 'plain king'", and "helps to bolster Henry's role-playing as the plain solder" (Abate 2001, p. 76, p. 83n). This once again confirms the degree to which the play is susceptible to radically different readings.

<sup>15</sup> The historical Henry V did of course speak French, however actively he promoted English as the medium of government affairs, and this would have been known to most members of Shakespeare's audience.

*français que vous parlez, il est meilleur que l'anglais lequel je parle*" (5.2.186–87), and when he goes on to produce a spate of rather flowery but evidently jocular epithets in French she responds by saying that "Your majesté 'ave *fausse* French enough to deceive de most *sage damoiselle* dat is *en France*" (5.2.215–16). This is playful enough, at least on the surface, but the tone of the conversation becomes decidedly more sinister when Henry gets down to brass tacks and asks Katherine whether she will marry him. Katherine is perfectly aware that she has no effective say in the matter, that while Henry is making a proposal that purports to appeal to her personal wishes her destiny is actually being determined by negotiations taking place in another part of the palace. In this case as well, the assertion of Henry's power involves an act of naming:

*Kath.* Dat is as it sall please *le roi mon père*.

*Hen.* Nay, it will please him well, Kate; it shall please him, Kate.

*Kath.* Den it sall also content me.

*Hen.* Upon that I kiss your hand, and I call you my Queen. (5.2.244–49)

The "calling" on this occasion, like that on which he effectively renames Katherine, once again has performative force. And in this case the implications of the situation are overtly cultural as well as linguistic in character, for the conferring of the name of queen is accompanied by a gesture that is contrary to French manners, and that threatens to implicate regions of the body other than the hand. When the princess protests that premarital osculation is frowned upon in France, Henry remarks that "O Kate, nice customs curtsy to great kings. Dear Kate, you and I cannot be confined within the weak list of a country's fashion" (5.2.266–68). One again we have the image of boundaries being breeched. Not only the French language, but the conventions of French culture as well, are to be systematically violated by the all-conquering Englishman. As has frequently been observed, there is something not a little sardonic about Burgundy's use of the metaphor of language instruction when he arrives on the scene: "Teach you our princess English?" (5.2.279). Though ironically, Henry has already complimented Katherine on her perspicacity in seeing through male deceit by remarking that "The princess is the better Englishwoman" (5.2.121). In one way or the other, she is being Englished with a vengeance.

Having lost the contest, the French do not stand on ceremony, and the ensuing dialogue between Burgundy and Henry descends into faintly ribald repartee which assimilates the conquest of the woman to that of a country. This becomes even clearer when Henry talks to the French king, and it becomes evident that the talk of "love" is a mere facade for what is really taking place, which is less a matter of the heart than of military muscle. Katherine has been a trade-off for the French towns that would otherwise have been subjugated by force of arms:

*Hen.* ... you may some of you thank love for my blindness, who cannot see many a fair French city for one fair French maid that stands in my way.

*King* Yes, my lord, you see them perspectively, the cities turned into a maid; for they are all girdled with maiden walls that no war hath entered.

*Hen.* Shall Kate be my wife?

*King* So please you.

*Hen.* I am content, so the maiden cities you talk of may wait on her: so the maid that stood in the way for my wish shall show me the way to my will. (5.2.311–21)

The undertone of menace continues to reverberate even in Henry's apparently most gallant comments.

It is perhaps to be noted that the play that has its origin in an issue of how names are to be interpreted in a certain sense concludes with one as well. The one article that the French

king does not concede to in negotiating with Henry's delegates has to do once again with how names are to be translated:

Only he hath not yet subscribed this, where your majesty demands that the King of France, having any occasion to write for matter of grant, shall name your highness in this form and with this addition: in French, *Notre tres chër fils Henri, roi d'Angleterre, héritier de France*; and thus in Latin, *Praeclarissimus filius noster Henricus, Rex Angliae, et haeres Franciae*. (5.2.327–34)

The French king does not explain why he is wavering over this point, but it may be because he is sensitive to the fact that what Henry is doing is prescribing what he should be called even in French, and thus effectively co-opting the French language for his own English purposes. He agrees however to subscribe to this final provision as well, on the condition only that Henry request him personally to do so (5.2.362). This Henry does, and the pact is sealed:

*Hen.* I pray you then, in love and dear alliance,  
Let that one article rank with the rest,  
And thereupon give me your daughter.  
*King* Take her, fair son (5.2.337–39)

It cannot escape attention that the French king does not even make a pretence of consulting Katherine, who, like Hero in *Much Ado About Nothing*, does not speak while these decisions about her future are being made. There are times, perhaps, when silence itself is a kind of language.

## 7.

Henry has apparently accomplished everything he set out to do in embarking for France. But *Henry V* is not without its ironies even at Henry's expense, and in their different ways they are terrible ones. One of the most important things to be noted about *Henry V* is what is perhaps not sufficiently noted in discussions of the play, and this is that we know from the very beginning of the drama that Henry's project is destined ultimately to fail. The Tower of Babel, built by men speaking a common language, is fated to destruction even before it is completed, and babel is the consequence of the failure of that dream. The ending of *Henry V*, with its prayer for lasting unity between the kingdoms of England and France, is a provisional and in a sense spurious one, because we know already what is destined to happen next. What will happen next is that Henry will shortly die, and that through ineptitude and mismanagement his son and heir will forfeit everything his father has gained. Not only will France be lost, but there will be devastating civil strife in England as well, a struggle that will tear the country apart. Shakespeare's audience knew this was going to happen, if only because they would have seen *Henry VI*, the first part of which opens with the funeral of Henry V and with a succession of dispatches presaging disaster both at home and abroad. So as to leave no doubt, the terse epilogue that concludes *Henry V*, spoken by a Chorus which throughout the play thus far has been unwaveringly enthusiastic in its glorification of Henry's endeavour, announces very clearly how events are going to evolve, and thus as Eugene Ostashevsky points out, "gives the lie to Henry's providentialist rhetoric" (Ostashevsky 2004, p. 220). It does this by making explicit reference to Shakespeare's own earlier work:

Henry the Sixth, in infant bands crowned King  
 Of France and England, did this king succeed,  
 Whose state so many had the managing  
 That they lost France and made his England bleed,  
 Which oft our stage hath shown; and, for their sake,  
 In your fair minds let this acceptance take. (Epilogue 9–14)

The play thus ends with a marriage and a promise of perfect concord, but also with the distant sound of ancestral voices prophesying war, an anticipation of imminent catastrophe that, as Rabkin suggests, “wrenches us out of the paradise of comedy into the purgatory of Shakespearean time” (Rabkin 1981, p. 51). This is a fairly obvious irony, but there is another, having more directly to do with the linguistic dimension of the play, which is perhaps somewhat less so. It has been mentioned that the renaming of Katherine in some ways epitomizes the imposition of the English language upon the French. But there are signs as well that the process of linguistic appropriation is not unilateral, that it is also French meanings, and the words in which they are conveyed, that subtly impose themselves upon English. It is interesting to note that although, as Steinsaltz points out, Henry speaks a rugged language based on Germanic words for the benefit of the followers he is trying to spur on to heroic action, a crucial word in those speeches is of a quite different derivation:

The fewer men, the greater share of honour.  
 God’s will, I pray thee wish not one man more. (4.3.22–23)

He reiterates the point a few lines later, saying “God’s peace, I would not lose so great an honour / As one man more” (4.3.31–32). The word *honour*, whether Henry likes it or not, is one that he has inherited from his Norman ancestors, and not all the English in the world will wash out the chivalric conception which is the linchpin of his discourse. Henry’s thought is conditioned by the very language he is implicitly trying to suppress.

After the great battle has been waged which seems to seal the success of his campaign, Henry converses one final time with the French herald Montjoy, and once again the issues crop up of what things are called, and of what things are to be called:

*Hen.* What is this castle called that stands hard by?  
*Mont.* They call it Agincourt.  
*Hen.* Then call we this the field of Agincourt,  
 Fought on the day of Crispin Crispian. (4.7.87–90)

It is not clear why Montjoy, who is himself French, should use the third rather than the first person, but his words serve to set up a suggestive relation of contrast and assimilation: “*They* call it Agincourt ... Then call *we* this the field of Agincourt”. Henry may have imposed his language, converted a Katherine into a Kate, but at the same time the language he has thought to dominate insinuates itself into his own. Battles are customarily named for the place in which they are fought, of course, so there is nothing unusual about what is happening in this instance. Nonetheless, by focussing on this explicit gesture of naming the play seems to be making an ironic point. Though it is indeed the English who have won this particular battle, it is one that will go down in history by a French name.

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