

Foreignness and Femininity: French Queens in Shakespeare's History Plays

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Introduction

As Shakespeare's two tetralogies progress, the queen's presence steadily diminishes. While Queen Margaret dominates much of the *Henry VI* plays, subsequent French queens in the second tetralogy—such as Queen Isabel in *Richard II* and Princess Katherine in *Henry V*, are given far fewer lines. The compositional order of the two tetralogies is not chronological, and the plays were possibly not conceived as a series at the outset (Bullough 23-25). This tendency may suggest a shift in Shakespeare's political focus: his early history plays gradually strip women of power and authority, reducing them to powerlessness before eventually removing them from the stage (Adelman 9); warrior women are gradually replaced by domesticated wives (Howard and Rackin 98), whereas French princesses and queens constitute the full spectrum of this transition.

Princesses are typically used as political tools to forge international alliances. French princesses who marry English kings are placed in a paradoxical position, they are political figures regardless of whether they possess political authority, but none of them are expected to exercise any political agency. Their foreignness embodies the intersection of personal union and national connection, turning the queen's body into a symbolic construct which is largely detached from her individual will; their femininity further intensifies the objectification, which thoroughly denies them a full human identity.

In early modern England, debates about the nature of women were heavily shaped by ideological pressures. Public authority was exercised by men who fulfilled diverse roles necessary for society, but the ruler at the very top of such a patriarchal society was a queen (Montrose 1). This apparent discordance required corresponding strategies to reconcile the female sovereignty with patriarchal governance. The theory of the king's two bodies was one of the most effective strategies. In *The King's Two Bodies*, Kantorowicz describes at length the relationship between the king's body natural and the body politic. These two bodies are inseparably

linked (9), and only death can sever them (12-13). When something consists of two opposite qualities, the dominant side defines the less dominant one. By the same logic, if a person is simultaneously both female and male, the more prominent traits will determine the perceived sex (10).

Elizabeth I used to describe England under her rule as the motherland, presenting herself as both the Virgin Mary and the Virgin Queen, while emphasising her innate masculinity. In *Remains Concerning Britain*, Camden compares Elizabeth I to multiple goddesses while praising her for her 'manly character' in the poem *In Elizabetham Anglia Reginam*:

Cujus imago Deæ facie cui lucet in una,
Temperie mixta, Juno, Minerva, Venus?
Est dea: quid dubitem? cui sic conspirat amice
Mascula vis, hilaris gratia, celsus honos:
Aut Dea si non est, Diva est quæ præsidet Anglis,
Ingenio, vultu, moribus æqua Deis. (Camden 356)⁽¹⁾

And in another work, *The History of the Most Renowned and Victorious Princess Elizabeth*, Camden also records:

the Queen with a masculine Spirit came and took a View of her Army and Camp at *Tilbury*, and riding about through the Banks of Armed men drawn up on both sides of her, with a Leader's Truncheon in her Hand, sometimes with a martial pace, another while gently like a woman. (Camden 416)

The accentuation of the Queen's religio-political hermaphroditic nature helped stabilise her reign for much of her life time, but the presence of a female monarch did not bring Tudor society to revalue traits classified as feminine. Women continued to be treated as passive objects; thus, Elizabethan England encouraged men to engage in chivalric and Petrarchan conventions, in order to reassert masculine primacy in response to both a female monarch and a feminised nation (Hertel 200-205). However, to feminise the country carries a fatal risk in the discourse of his-story, for they also are subject to the danger of being conquered or colonised. Moreover, for English writers, feminising foreign territory was harder than for their Spanish or French counterparts, because the feminine space of the colonies remained associated with the body of the

queen (Hertel 204).⁽²⁾ Fortunately, the recognition of national identity was shifting, which alleviated the Queen's burden of maintaining authority. At that time, England's geography, language, economy and culture became increasingly central to national identity, rendering the monarch a less essential component in its formation (Howard and Rackin 48-49). This encouraged chroniclers to present new interpretations of national and personal identity, among which *Holinshed's Chronicle* is a prominent example. Because many history plays drew extensively on these chronicles, the genre that possesses a distinctive characteristic itself inherited the national implications embedded in its narrative sources (Hertel 91).⁽³⁾

Feminist readings of Shakespeare's history plays have been comparatively fewer than those of the comedies until the late twentieth century (Howard and Rackin 21), this neglect parallels the absence of gender analysis in studies of nationalism. Femininity and masculinity shape people's national identity respectively: women are usually marginalised in public nationalist discourse but still play crucial parts in private narratives (Eley and Suny 27).⁽⁴⁾ Queen Margaret in the *Henry VI* plays exemplifies this duality, she is deeply involved in public political and military affairs while bearing the maternal responsibilities of the private sphere. But it also puts her into an unfavourable predicament. Rackin points out that Tudor history was not only written without women but also against them, using patriarchal narratives to legitimise father-son ties while erasing and replacing the mother's role (160-61).

This argument echoes the point raised earlier in this paper, that women's spaces are disproportionately compressed in the scripts, leaving only the male-dominated political and familial sphere gradually—transforming warrior women into wives.⁽⁵⁾ Nevertheless, all the plays reveal that, regardless of the personality or manner of behavior, the French-born English queens are never fully accepted by the English court. Margaret strives to protect the Lancastrian lineage, Isabel dutifully serves as a symbol of diplomatic success, and Katherine marries Henry V with considerable dowry, etc.; but none of them are able to integrate themselves into the English nation. This paper explores why foreignness and femininity are unerasable for Shakespeare's French queens, and how their *otherness* is represented when reading the plays with the structural oppression under the patriarchal society in mind.

Let the Frenchwomen Do It

Queen Margaret is the first queen Shakespeare introduces in his English history plays. She makes her first appearance as a 'daughter to a king' (*IH6* 5.2.72) in captivity by the English commander Suffolk, which coincides with another French woman's exit from the stage. In

Henry VI Part 1, Joan's existence deviates from the accepted gender norms—as a French woman claiming divine inspiration; she is recognised as an abnormality within the male-dominated hierarchy. Joan is a figure of ever-present trouble undermining English virtues; despite her military successes, her reputation is consistently undermined by accusations of witchcraft and promiscuity (Tillyard 27-30). Her execution provides a lurking clue within the framework of English propaganda that permeates the plays, 'Shakespeare's Joan, who has oblique connections to the English monarchy, most obviously embodies the forces that Elizabethans feared might "mistress" Englishman' (Vanhoutte 144-45). To be defeated by an anomalous Frenchwoman constitutes a double humiliation for the Englishmen. For the audiences off the stage, defeat was inseparable from the idea of conquest. In the Elizabethan imagination, England was conceived as a motherland under the protection of a Virgin Queen, thus national integrity was symbolically tied to female chastity. Also, within Shakespeare's *Henry VI Part 1*, none of the English soldiers is woman and none of the women is English. The English army's defeat at the hands of an army led by a Frenchwoman represents not only military failure, but also a symbolic emasculation. Although Joan is depicted almost by default as the antithesis of the English masculinity, her rhetoric when persuading Burgundy to fight for France's cause paradoxically corresponds to that of the Englishmen. Joan depicts the ravaged France as a violated female figure also in need of defence:

Look on thy country, look on fertile France,
And see the cities and the towns defaced
By wasting ruin of the cruel foe,
As look the mother on her lowly babe
When death doth close his tender-dying eyes.
See, see the pining malady of France,
Behold the wounds, the most unnatural wounds,
Which thou thyself hast given her woeful breast. (3.3.44-51)

She further exhorts Burgundy to act 'like a Frenchman' (85), appealing once again to his masculine honour when she refers to him. The association between territory and female traits recurs throughout the play. In the opening scene, the insecurity spreads through the English court after Henry V's premature death. Bedford worries that the isle of Britain can be 'made a nourish of salt tears, /And none but women left to wail the dead' (1.1.56), while Exeter laments '[t]

hese tidings would call forth her flowing tides' (83) after hearing about the confusion witnessed all around the freshly-conquered French soil. This metaphorical feminisation of territory mirrors the Elizabethan queen-subject relationship, placing women in a passive position, waiting to be defended or rescued. Any feminine existence has to be subordinated to highlight the importance of men even if the background is about defending the motherland. A female patriot will not change her passivity, '[e]ven when they have been energized by nationalism, many women have discovered that, in practice, as women, they often have been treated by the male nationalist leaders and intellectuals as symbols—patriarchally sculpted symbols—of the nation' (Enloe 83). When victorious, Joan is a saintly guide of divine will, but when defeated, she becomes a symbol of the downfall; when she is captured and sentenced, her enemies are not only the English army but also her fellow Frenchmen.

However, masculinised rivalries involved competition among different types of masculine traits. Women were usually excluded from such rivalries unless they possessed these masculine traits and were wanting in femininity (Enloe 42-44); such unfeminine women were perceived as a transgression against the natural order. Unlike the fictitious episodes, historically, Margaret was a part of a treaty between England and France. The Earl of Suffolk who is presented dramatically as the Queen's paramour, was one of the escorts who was sent by the English king (Caster 324-25). She was also hounded by groundless rumours of her infidelity until she gave birth to a prince, at which point the gossip gave way to the questioning of the little prince's legitimacy (Earenfight 213). Shakespeare manipulates part of the historical sources and appoints a French queen as the designated culprit, whose nationality and gender make her an easy repository for England's troubles. However, the most rebellious French queen in the first tetralogy ultimately fights to preserve the patriarchal lineage of the English royal family, but is not considered as a conscientious protector most of the time. If the same character had been written as an Englishman, he might have been portrayed as a figure who outshines his sovereign in the first half of the play but surprisingly chooses loyalty to the prince rather than usurpation in the later half.

Queen Margaret's unwomanliness starts to show up from *Henry VI Part 2* onward. She confronts Gloucester's wife fearlessly and finally brings down both of them with other conspirators; she shows no loyalty to her lawful husband Henry VI, as her personal ambition far outweighs any allegiance to him and demonstrates an extraordinary fixation on the English throne—which is patently not for herself. She is trying to make sure the English crown belongs to her husband, and later her son. In *Henry VI Part 2* Act 5 Scene 2, when it becomes clear

that York and his supporters have the upper hand in the battle at St Albans, Margaret tells Henry VI:

If you be ta'en we then should see the bottom
Of all our fortunes; but if we haply scape —
As well we may, if not through your neglect —
We shall to London get, where you are loved
And where this breach now in our fortunes made
May readily be stopped. (78-83)

Margaret has more perceptive comprehension than Henry about the consequences of the King's capture, and she is well aware that as long as Henry still wearing the crown, the Lancaster family still has hope for a resurgence. In contrast, Henry remains completely passive in their previous conversation.

QUEEN

Away, my lord! You are slow, for shame, away!

KING

Can we outrun the heavens? Good Margaret, stay.

QUEEN

What are you made of? You'll nor fight nor fly.

Now is it the manhood, wisdom and defence

To give the enemy way and to secure us

By what we can, which can no more but fly. (72-77)

The English-born king resigns himself to thinking that misfortune is inevitable, the French-born queen maintains that 'manhood, wisdom and defence' can enable them to overcome the crisis. The King's lack of manhood also shows up when York's claim threatens succession in *Henry VI Part 3*, Henry VI capitulates without the queen by his side. This time he disinherits his son Prince Edward in favour of York and his heirs, which completely enrages Margaret:

Who can be patient in such extremes?

Ah, wretched man, would I had died a maid

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And never seen thee, never borne thee son,
Seeing thou hast proved so unnatural a father.
Hath he deserved to lose his birthright thus? (1.1.215-19)

Margaret recognises Henry's 'unnatural' conduct, his betrayal of both paternal and dynastic duty. The contrast between Henry's indifference and Margaret's determination underlines Margaret's position as the one who is compelled to assume the paternal role herself. The *Henry VI* plays to dramatise to some extent the rumours surrounding the prince's illegitimacy through Margaret's affair with Suffolk, if the Prince is illegitimate, the audience can categorise Margaret as a villain. However, Shakespeare arranges a more radical plot while Warwick asks Henry to '[p]rove it', and he 'shalt be king'; to which Henry VI answers, 'Henry the Fourth by conquest got the crown', and York imposes a dreadful sentence on him, "[t]was by rebellion against his king' (1.1.131-33). All Henry IV's descendants would be stripped of a legitimate claim to succession by York's charge. Henry VI and York ultimately reach a settlement in the following negotiation:

KING HENRY

My Lord of Warwick, hear me but one word:
Let me for this my life time reign as king.

YORK

Confirm the crown to me and to mine heirs,
And thou shalt reign in quiet while thou liv'st.

KING HENRY

I am content. Richard Plantagenet,
Enjoy the kingdom after my decease. (1.1.170-75)

In response to the Queen and the Prince's protest, Henry VI excuses himself, '[p]ardon me, Margaret; pardon me, sweet son; /The Earl of Warwick and the Duke enforced me' (1.1.228-29). The handover of their son's right of succession drives Margaret to devote herself to the battlefield. In the *Henry VI Part 3* Act 1 Scene 4, the element of exaggeration and theatricality is strikingly high, and Margaret alone carries out much of the brutality. She kills York's youngest son Rutland, wipes York's eyes with a handkerchief soaked in Rutland's blood; and thrusts a paper crown upon York's head after forcing him to stand upon a molehill. At the end of his life,

York curses Margaret as a 'She-wolf of France, but worse than wolves of France, /Whose tongue more poisons than the adder's tooth' (111-12) as a well as 'tiger's heart wrapped in a woman's hide' (137); he also compares Margaret against the ideal woman:

How ill-beseeming is it in thy sex
To triumph like an Amazonian trull,
Upon their woes whom Fortune captivates.
...
'Tis virtue that doth oft make women proud,
But God he knows thy share thereof is small.
'Tis virtue that doth make them most admired,
The contrary doth make thee wondered at.
'Tis government that makes them seem divine,
The want thereof makes thee abominable.
...
Women are soft, mild, pitiful and flexible;
Thou stern, obdurate, flinty, rough, remorseless. (113-142)

The feminisation of hostile men, the demonisation of hostile women are conventional strategies in Shakespeare's plays. York's final speech encapsulates late medieval and early modern English society's prescriptive expectations of womanhood, which Margaret's very existence transgresses. The *Henry VI* plays do not present a neutral chronicle of history but rather a deliberate allocation of blame, where French women serve as scapegoats for the disorder engendered by the king, the fractious nobles, or dislocation of succession. Margaret's temperament and actions entirely contravene the gender expectations of the time, and her marriage to Henry VI, lacking the dowry deemed indispensable to royal unions, both exclude her from the English nation psychologically.

The Ideal Woman

Queen Isabel in *Richard II*, is defined more by emotional vulnerability than political agency. As a foreign bride, Isabel is displaced both by Richard's political downfall and by her own exclusion from the centre of English authority. The character of Isabel shows the precariousness of being a foreign queen; she is valued as a means to diplomatic consolidation in a time

of peace yet expelled instantly when the national order of her husband's kingdom collapses. She is portrayed as being silent in crucial situations and leaves England in exile due to dynastic change.

Act 2 Scene 1 is a crucial transitional scene in which John of Gaunt warns Richard II that abuse of power will lead to his ruin. But the Queen has only one line after entering with Richard II, she says, '[h]ow fares our noble uncle Lancaster?' (71); and this greeting is interrupted abruptly by Richard II, '[w]hat comfort, man? How is't with aged Gaunt?' (72). Gaunt answers the King's 'aged Gaunt' and ignores the Queen who remains silent for the rest of the scene. Barkan argues that Isabel's conversation with Bushy in Act 2 Scene 2 shows 'the Queen's imagination is far more reliable than Bushy's reality' (9). Isabel fears that after Richard II's departure for Ireland, '[s]ome unborn sorrow, ripe in Fortune's womb, /Is coming towards me' (10-1), but Bushy dismisses her unease by saying she is 'too much sad' and what is haunting the Queen 'is naught but shadows /Of what it is not' (23-4). But Isabel is present in Act 2 Scene 1, and she must have witnessed the King's alienation of the nobles. Moreover, this conversation follows immediately after three of Bolingbroke's supporters have begun planning to reverse their political stance and resist Richard's authority. Sanchez argues that Queen Isabel's anxiety is not a stereotypical instance of feminine emotional excess but a rational response to the political tensions unfolding around her (98-99). Significantly, her accurate foresight is validated right away when Green enters to confirm these troubles. Shakespeare grants Isabel the political insight to the dissension in the masculine world, even if her voice is often muted. Later in Act 3 Scene 4, Isabel asks for 'some sport,' but refuses all her ladies' suggestions:

For it of joy, being altogether wanting,
It doth remember me the more of sorrow.
Or if of grief, being altogether had,
It adds more sorrow to my want of joy.
For what I have I need not to repeat,
And what I want it not to complain. (13-18)

She senses unrest but cannot yet articulate it until she overhears the conversation among the Gardener and his two apprentices, and learns of Richard II's misfortune by accident. Her grief intensifies not only because of the King's downfall, but also because she learns of it from a Gardener rather than through an official channel. Such extreme maginalisation makes her won-

der, 'am I last that knows it' (94) and departs for London to seek confirmation.

A similar pattern of passivity appears in Princess Katherine. Rather than acting as a mediator between the two nations, she functions as a reward for England's victory. This French princess is not threatening but domesticated; her silence and submissiveness also contribute to the idealised image of a compliant foreign bride. Katherine cannot even speak English in *Henry V*. After the fall of Harfleur in act 3 Scene 4, the Princess makes an attempt to learn English, as if anticipating her fate as queen of England, which also implies France will lose the war. Her lesson with her lady-in-waiting, Alice, concludes in comic, sexual wordplay. Katherine asks Alice how to say, 'le pied (the foot)' and 'le robe (the gown)' in English (45), Alice replies '[d]e foot' and 'de coun' (46). Katherine repeats Alice's answer in alarm, '[d]e foot et de coun?', and exclaims, '[o] Seigneur Dieu, ils sont /les mots de son mauvais, corruptible, gros, et impudique, /et non pour les dames d'honneur d'user' (47-49).⁽⁶⁾ The pronunciation of foot implies the French word foutre (to fuck), and the mispronounced 'coun' is a play on both the French word con (fucking stupid) and English word cunt.⁽⁷⁾

These comic elements of Katherine's English lesson appeal to a collective sense of Englishness among early modern audiences. As Howard and Rackin observe, the honour depends on her French nationality, which is rendered both harmless and feminine (209-12). Just as women are restricted to the position of the second sex, foreign territories are feminised and imagined as objects to be conquered and possessed.⁽⁸⁾ Thus, such symbolic subordination implies the threat of sexual violation, and the vigorous rhetoric of war of Henry V also suggests his acquiescence of rape (Wilcox 65). In Act 3 Scene 3, when Henry V demands the surrender of the city of Harfleur, he threatens that, '[i]f not, why, in a moment look to see /The blind and bloody soldier with foul hand /Defile the locks of your shrill-shrieking daughters' (33-5). The sexual threat never materialises due to the Governor's submission, which leaves the spectre of sexual assault unresolved.

With the victory of the Battle of Agincourt and the subsequent political diplomacy, Henry V meets Princess Katherine in Troyes finally and woos her as the consummation of his entire conquest. Just after wooing Katherine, Henry tells the French King that he 'cannot see many a fair French /city for one fair French maid that stands in my way' (314-15). Unlike the King of France in *The Famous Victories of Henry the Fifth*, Shakespeare makes his French King yield to Henry's half joke, 'the cities turned into a maid; for they are /all girdled with maiden walls that no war hath entered' (317-18);⁽⁹⁾ to which Henry responds, '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' (321-23).⁽¹⁰⁾ Both the French King and Henry's lines correspond to Burgundy's 'frank of mirth' (288).⁽¹¹⁾ According to the stage direction, Kathrine is present during the conversation, which exposes her to the sexualisation and objectification enacted by both the English and the French sides, in a language she barely understands. The marriage between Katherine and Henry V is a martial success; yet it can also be read as the ultimate act of ravaging committed by English men, Katherine represents the threatened French daughters of Harfleur. Although the violence is disguised with courtship, the Princess's body becomes an object of submission, turning her into the victim of the sexual violence Henry V could have projected onto the battlefield. Katherine enters the English court as both a trophy and an alien. Her inability to speak the language prevents any possibility of developing a sense of identity in England; moreover, when the French King chimes in with Henry's coarse jesting, he severs her connection to her home land, too. To some extent, the marriage of the French woman in Shakespeare's last history play mirrors the execution of the French woman in his first—both women are othered simultaneously by their enemies and by their countrymen.

Both Isabel and Katherine represent different extend of otherness in the English court. They are the very opposite of Margaret—they readily submit to male authority, even to those who do not hold equal rank or status. Such submission was idealised as the preferable virtue of womanhood in the late medieval and early modern England. Yet the qualities of being 'soft, mild, pitiful and flexible' (*3H6* 1.4.141) were never ascribed to good men; a man who embodies the qualities of a 'good woman' can only be condemned as a degradation of masculinity, making him unmanly, i.e. a *woman*.

Historically, Henry VI was known for his strict moral discipline. According to contemporary anecdotes, he was once scared by the cleavage-baring dresses at a ball and shocked by the bathing costumes in Bath; and he was 'very kindly, very liberal, and very weak in his memory,' overly accommodating and extremely generous of giving (Oman 336). Shakespeare clearly exaggerates Henry VI's indecisiveness and tendency to compromise with others. He is not typically effeminate, but his lack of the assertive masculinity of his father makes him unfit to be a king—because an ideal king should be the image of masculinity more prominently than other male citizens (Ward and Hefferan 17). Shakespeare underlines this deficiency through Henry VI's infatuation with Margaret; he suddenly delivers an uncharacteristic line, '[t]hat Margaret may be England's royal queen' (*IH6* 5.4.24), and claims, '[my] tender youth was never yet attaint /With any passion of inflaming love' (81-82).⁽¹²⁾ Edward IV repeats the previous king's error, failing to learn that a king's infatuation can be fatal to a kingdom, and ultimately fails to

preserve the primogeniture of the Yorkist line. Richard II also suffers from this perceived lack of manly authority. Samuel Daniel's *The First Fowre Books of the Cevile Wars*, was one of *Richard II's* sources; it is influenced by earlier French chronicles written by Richard II's contemporary (Bullough 369-72).⁽¹³⁾ It describes how Richard II '[s]traines forth his wordes, and throwes dismay apart /To raise up [the queen]' after his downfall; yet Shakespeare reverses this scene, making Isabel the one who comforts Richard II and pleads for mercy. Shakespeare tends to link failed kingship to a failure of masculinity.⁽¹⁴⁾

Henry VI, Edward IV, and Richard II are portrayed as unmanly in different ways, and this recurrent episode exposes a cultural consensus that femininity can be weaponised not only against women but also against men. Enloe observes that a patriarchal system privileges masculinity while contemplating femininity, thus rival men usually use feminine attributes to discredit one another, stripping their opponents' 'manly attributes [such] as strength, courage, and rationality' (42-44). Femininity can operate as a flexible category; it is not only a trait limited in women, but also can be used in the defamation of men. Only men who conform to culturally sanctioned ideals of *man* possess agency, while women and feminine men are rendered as other within this hierarchy. By destabilising the supposed boundary between manhood and womanhood, Shakespeare reveals the contingent nature of gender, showing gender functions not merely as a marker of identity, but as an instrument of social control that reinforce patriarchy.

Princesses & Dowries

Royal marriage is inherently political, diplomatic and highly interest-driven. In particular, noblewomen like princesses, or even widowed queens are severely restricted in their agency, most of their marriages were decided by their male family members. Personal affection does not even enter the conditions of such contracts—it is a transaction between men, '[w]omen are commodities in this culture, certainly, whose marriage are arranged for the advantage or convenience of men, either their fathers, or the male authority figures in their and their prospective husbands' families [*sic*] (Orgel 10). So, princesses and their dowries are treated as fundamentally the same, both function as leverage to balance dynastic negotiations. This expectation over time enforces tacit understanding that unmarried or widowed women must be put to use. Women who are mature enough but unmarried have potential but also may provoke worries about an unpredictable future. Thus, the male family members usually excises prudence in selecting in-laws without the personal will of the prospective bride.

This lack of female agency is repeatedly camouflaged in the proposal scenes. In nearly every case, the approval of the princess's male family member is necessary, while the princess herself has no power to choose her own spouse. In *King John*, when Blanche is facing the marriage arranged by her uncle, the King of England, she tells her fiancé:

My uncle's will in this respect is mine.
If he see aught in you that makes him like,
That anything he sees which moves his liking
I can with ease translate it to my will;
Or if you will, to speak more properly,
I will enforce it easily to my love. (2.1.510-15)

In the proposal scene in *The Famous Victories of Henry the Fifth*, Princess Katherine insists, '[i]f I were of my own direction, I could give you answer; but seeing I stand at my father's direction, I must know his will' (Pitcher 63). The English King then seeks the French King's permission in the following exchange.

King of England.
Well, my brother of France, there is
one thing more I must needs require of you.
King of France.
Wherein is it that we may satisfy your
Majesty?
King of England.
A trifle, my good brother of France; I
mean to make your daughter Queen of England, if she be
willing, and you therewith content. (Pitcher 68)

Similarly, in Shakespeare's *Henry V*, Katherine responds to Henry's 'will thou have me' by deferring entirely to her father's decision, '[d]at is as it shall please *le roi mon père*' (the king my father). Henry quickly assures her 'it will please him, Kate; it shall please him', prompting her to yield, '[d]en it shall also content me' (5.2.243-47). Lady Bona is once a potential Queen of England due to Warwick's plotting. In *Henry VI Part 3*, when Warwick proposes on behalf of

the new King of England, the French King Lewis asks Bona for her decision, '[n]ow, sister, let us hear your firm resolve' (3.3.129), and Bona answers, '[y]our grant or your denial shall be mine' (3.3.130). Even Queen Margaret, introduced in *Henry VI Part 1* as 'a daughter to a king,' and offered to Henry VI by Suffolk, gives her consent conditionally, '[a]h if my father please, I am content' (*IH6* 5.2.148). These plays present this system without explicit critique, yet the repetition of such moments reveals the rigid and limiting expectations imposed upon royal women in late medieval and early modern societal structures.

The marital transaction between two nations involves more than the princess, for her marriage is usually accompanied by a substantial dowry and jointure as the financial component of the match. A strict dowry system dominated English families for over three hundred years from the sixteenth century onward, continuing to dictate the marriages of their children; in fact, the dowry could be a considerable financial burden on the daughter's family (Stone 88-89). Historically, before the outbreak of war between England and France in February 1416, Henry V demanded as Princess Katherine's dowry, a total of 2,600,000 gold crowns. Despite the severe financial pressure, the French court offered territories far larger than expected along with a dowry of 800,000 gold crowns—which finally was refused by Henry V before the end of March. Later proposals by the French envoys suggested the addition of the sum of the cessions and the dowry but failed to satisfy Henry, who launched his campaign in France by the end of July (Oman 243-47).

Shakespeare picks many details from *Holinshed's Chronicle* and telescopes events from 1414 (the second year of his reign) to 1419 (his meeting with Katherine), ignoring events that happened after the Battle of Agincourt 'in order to hasten the King's claim and marriage' (Bullough 355). As the most credible source of *Henry V*, *The Famous Victories of Henry V* also adapts and simplifies these facts from a distinctly English perspective (Seymour 3-8), emphasizing and romanticising Henry's persuading of Katherine. However, beneath this romantic narrative, Henry V's actions suggest that Katherine and her dowries are claimed as trophies; he appropriates a political and economic conquest and glorifies it as love and marriage. Before the wooing scene, the King of France shows obvious discontent with the treaty he is going to make with Henry V; he has 'but with a cursitory eye /O'er-glanced the articles' and suggests the English council sit with them 'with better heed /To re-survey them' (5.2.77-81). And Henry V gives the French Queen options of going with the French King or staying, but requires Katherine to stay.

KING

Yet leave our cousin Katherine here with us:
She is our capital demand, comprise
Within the fore-rank of our articles. (5.2.95-97)

In fact, the re-surveying of the articles is unnecessary, Katherine is literally in the fore-rank of the treaty. The historical Henry V consented to marry Princess Katherine without a dowry, because she brought all France with her as a marriage gift (Oman 278). Additionally, in *The Famous Victories*, Henry V also asks to inherit the French throne.

Secretary.

Item, that after the death of the said Henry
the crown remain to him and his heirs forever.

King of France.

Why then, you do not only mean to dis-
Possess me, but also my son!

King of England.

Why, my good brother of France, you
Have had it long enough. (Seymour 61)

Henry V claims not only Katherine, but also plunders from her father and the whole family; his supposedly romantic proposal masks violence. Henry V introduces himself as 'a soldier' who only desires a lady's 'gentle heart' (5.2.99-101), which mirrors his speeches at Harfleur and Agincourt, where he exhorts 'non-hierarchical independence' to evoke the idea of a shared nationality and propagates the idea that honour is earned by deeds rather than birth to the English soldiers (Singh 24-25). He describes himself as an ordinary soldier, a portrayal that makes him appear humble while contrarily exposing his identity as a conqueror. The seemingly sweet words reveal that his courtship is based on a finished conquest. Henry is not only one of the soldiers but also the King of England to whom the soldiers belong, thus his proposal simultaneously the conquering of the entire French kingdom as a woman by the masculine force of the English army (Howard and Rackin 213).

Even without the threat of war, most of the fathers, particularly the kings, are willing to provide a munificent dowry for their daughters, because a daughter's marriage depends largely

on the size of her dowry (Pearson 211). Moreover, '[a]mong the most honourable deed in a noble man's life was providing for the proper marriage of his daughters . . . a noble father unable to provide suitable dowries would suffer dishonour, blame, and embarrassment' (Queller and Madden 704). In *King John*, when the English King plans to marry his niece Princess Blanche to the French Dauphin, he promises:

Her dowry shall weigh equal with a queen:
For Anjou, and fair Touraine, Maine, Poitier,
And all that we upon this side the sea —
Except this city now by us besieged —
Find liable to our crown and dignity,
Shall gild her bridal bed and make her rich
In titles, honours and promotions,
As she in beauty, education, blood,
Holds hand with any princess of the world. (2.1.486-94)

After Blanche and Dauphin agree to marry each other, King John further adds '[f]ull thirty thousand marks of English coin' (530) to her previous dowry. In Lady Bona's case, the French King Lewis also promises Warwick that 'our sister shall be Edward's. /And now forthwith shall articles be drawn /Touching the jointure that your King must make, /Which with her dowry shall be counterpoised' (*3H6* 3.3.134-37).

While most noblewomen in Shakespeare's plays are offered with dowries, some of them also depict situations where matrimony occurs without the anticipated transactional framework. These marriages produce political instability and social anxiety, because they disrupt the traditional logic of alliance-building through marriage. Though Margaret used to be the King of Naples' daughter, she weds Henry VI without a dowry, shocking the English court. The Duke of Suffolk, who pushes for the marriage for his own sake, tries to convince the King by championing Margaret's 'peerless feature', 'valiant courage and undaunted spirit' (*IH6* 5.4.68-70) rather than her political worth, and despises Exeter's reference to the 'warrant [of] a liberal dower' from another candidate (46). This lack of financial exchange makes Margaret vulnerable from the outset; she is not protected by the usual transactional bonds between nations, which contributes to her controversial role as queen. Similarly, Edward IV's queen Elizabeth Woodville is not a royal bride from abroad with diplomatic value, but a commoner and widow with no

dowry or noble lineage. Her marriage to Edward IV is treated as a personal whim rather than a state negotiation, provoking disapproval from the political elite.

In both cases, these French queens' precarious positions in England are not from their individual dispositions, nor from their dowry. Indeed, the dowry system traditionally safeguards queenship through conventional exchange; however, even when a father offers generous payments, such wealth cannot secure his daughter a genuinely position within her husband's realm. A great dowry ultimately fails to compensate for the bride's inherent foreignness, which is an attribute that appears negotiable but remains immutable. For the French queens in particular, their dual obligation to be the symbol of France while serving in the English court makes the assimilation nearly impossible.

Conclusion

In examining the French queens in the English court in Shakespeare's history plays, this paper argues for a distinctly unchanging pattern—women's exclusion in the main discourse of patriarchy. Christianity long cast women as sinful and inferior beings, but in the sixteenth century, both humanists and reformers began challenging this view (Hill 306). Shakespeare's plays undoubtedly reflect such characteristics of the era unawares, when notions of gender equality were only beginning to emerge: female characters in plays are placed in the awkward plight of being unable to embody excessive femininity, yet equally unable to transgress into the unfeminine.

Queen Margaret rejects all the feminine attributes. She is rhetorical, adulterous, and dangerously ambitious, whose qualities that are remote her from those of an ideal woman. Finally, she becomes the symbolic effigy of blame like her predecessor Joan. She refuses the role of a subordinate and gets involved in politics the moment she realises that her husband cannot be relied on, proving herself more decisive and combative than many of the English noblemen. Nevertheless, such initiative is perceived as a transgression that is looked upon unfavorably. Such a French woman who positions herself at the top of the English court would not have been accepted by medieval or early modern Englishmen. Margaret's oratory superiority prominently portrayed throughout the first tetralogy, even in *Richard III* which deals with a historical period in which the Queen was already dead, keeps on delivering piercing truths to the audience and other characters.

In plays that have silent Frenchwomen, Shakespeare just literally makes them speak less. For example, Isabel and Katherine, who makes limited appearances with little agency, are fur-

ther restricted by the larger political implications. Their marriages are arranged to strengthen national alliances or to pacify conflicts. In the latter occasion, the princess becomes the only sacrificed person among the defeated royal family members. The conquest of territory always entails the conquest of women, rationalising sexual violence as an inevitable corollary of final victory. In *Henry V*, this tacit agreement shows how linguistic, sexual, and imperial dominations share a common logic of possession and objectification of a foreign woman. Isabel and Katherine are depicted as yielding, compliant and willing to attach themselves entirely to the male superiors around them. On the other hand, a man who possesses any of the qualities above will be despised. Henry VI's irresolution and hesitation, Edward IV's lust and capriciousness, and Richard II's supposed effeminacy all converge in a cultural ideology that perceives femininity as a flaw.

The issue of the princess's dowry shows that a royal marriage is a political settlement rather than a personal union. The negotiations over land and money suggest that the princess's value lies in what she can bring rather than herself. A capable king must be fully aware of the mechanism. However, for the French princesses, whether they are endowed with a dowry or not, the marital bonds are likely to place them in the middle of both nations as an embodiment of political alliances, or an outsider.

As Connor observes, '[i]dentity does not draw its sustenance from facts but from perceptions; not from chronological/factual history but from sentient/felt history' (45). It was still usually men who recorded history, which means that whenever national identity was articulated in the collective consciousness, it was still implicitly understood in masculine terms. Thus, women seldom recorded their own experiences, and their representations are difficult to authenticate because of male authorship. Under this context, Shakespeare's French queens occupy a complex symbolic position. From Margaret's bold disposition to the subdued demeanour of Isabel and Katherine; and from the impoverished princess without a dowry to the naive bride who brings her homeland as one; these Frenchwomen, regardless of their virtues or contributions, are othered by the discourse of patriarchy on all occasion. Yet these French queens offer more than social realism—they become theatrical embodiments of the intertwined crises of nation and gender. Far from being the periphery of history, Shakespeare's French queens reveal both the constraints imposed by femininity and the multiple ways of negotiating female existence within a patriarchal and nationalist society.

Foreignness and Femininity: French Queens in Shakespeare's History Plays

Notes

- (1) 'Whose picture is it? A goddess in whose face shine in happy mixture June, Minerva, and Venus? She is a goddess; why should I doubt it? Her strength, her manly character, her blithe charm and her noble reputation combine in harmony. Or if she is not a goddess, she is a deity who rules the English, the equal of the gods in wit, beauty, and character' (Dunn 504-5).
- (2) The original source is: Schülting, Sabine. *Wilde Frauen, fremde Welten: Kolonisierungsgeschichten aus Amerika*. Rowohlt, 1997 (63).
- (3) According to Hertel, '[i]f historiography potentially contributes to national self-awareness by offering invented traditions and myths of the past, drama is particularly well equipped to foster such a development. In fact, the nationalizing potential of history plays was noted by Shakespeare's contemporaries' (91).
- (4) According to Eley and Suny, 'women are not exactly absent from the scene of nationalist grandiosity but figure as important supporting player—as "conquerors' mistresses, wartime rape victims, military prostitutes, cinematic soldier-heroes, pinup models on patriotic calendars," and, of course, as workers, wives, girlfriends, and daughters waiting dutifully at home—and this structure of meanings too needs to be unpacked' (27).
- (5) *King John*, emphasising particularly the mother-son relationship, is perhaps the Shakespearean history play that most directly resists this tendency. Lily Campbell provides a detailed analysis of the possible allusions to the real Tudor dynasty in *King John* in her *Shakespeare's Histories: Mirrors of Elizabethan Policy* (126-67). The composition of *King John* is believed to occur between the two tetralogies, where the personalities of French women are neither as recalcitrant as those in the *Henry VI* plays nor as submissive as those in the later history plays.
- (6) 'O Lord God, they are words of evil sound, corrupting, gross, and immodest, and not for ladies of honour to use.'
- (7) The translations of Princess Katherine's line can be found in the footnotes of the original text in *The Arden Shakespeare Third Series*.
- (8) Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (1949), famously theorised woman as 'the second sex,' a position defined relationally through the negation of male subjectivity.
- (9) In Scene Twenty of *The Famous Victories*, Henry V asks the King of France for first his and his posterity's right of succession of the French crown, then asks for the loyalty of all French nobles.
- (10) Shakespeare's use of the word 'will' sometimes carries a sexual innuendo depending on the context. The best-known examples appear in Sonnets 134 and 135: '[s]o now I have confessed that he is thine, /And myself am mortgaged to thy will' (Sonnet 134 1-2); '[w]ilt thou, whose will is large and spacious, /Not once vouchsafe to hide my will in thine? /Shall will in others seem right gracious, /And in my will no fair acceptance shine?' (Sonnet 135 5-8). These two poems play on the different meanings of 'will,' which include both sexual desire and sexual organ.
- (11) Burgundy's answer to Henry's 'cannot so conjure up the /spirit of love in her' is 'If you would conjure in her, you /must make a circle; if conjure up love in her in his /true likeness, he must appear naked and blind. Can /you blame her then, being a maid yet rosed over with /the virgin crimson of modesty, if she deny the /appearance of a naked blind boy in her naked seeing /self?' (*H5* 5.2. 285-294).
- (12) As Howard and Rackin state, in classical and medieval gender ideology, women are seen as more appetitive, thus a man's desire for a woman signifies double degradation—first, bodily urges surpass reason; second, the superior sex degenerates into the inferior (193-94). Rebecca Ann Bach in her *Shakespeare and Renaissance Literature Before Heterosexuality* also observes, 'sexual intercourse between men and women

done for the sake of pleasure—was viewed as polluting, a sign that men's reason had not triumphed over the disgusting urges of birds and insects; such joy in sex was the province and the curse of women and womanly men, whose appetites controlled their reason' (1-2).

- (13) The *Chronique de la Traison et Mort de Richard Deux Roy Dengleterre* was written by Queen Isabel's entourage, and *Histoire du Roy d'Angleterre Richard II* by Jean Créton's; both chronicles cover the events that occur in the latter half of *Richard II*, both of them are also referenced by Hall and Holinshed.
- (14) The poem is NO. 98 of *The Second Book* in *The First Fowre Books of the Cevile Wars*.

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