

O for a Muse of Fire: The Role of Linguistics in the Assertion of National Identity in Shakespeare's Richard II and Henry V

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*Whereas our mother tongue, to wit, the English tongue, hath in modern days begun to be honorably enlarged and adorned; for that our most excellent lord king Henry the Fifth hath, in his letters missive, and divers affairs touching his own person, more willingly chosen to declare the secrets of his will [in it]; and for the better understanding of his people, hath, with a diligent mind, procured the common idiom (setting aside others) to be commended by the exercise of writing.*¹

When Shakespeare wrote the second tetralogy around the turn of the seventeenth century, he was presenting his version of events that had taken place two centuries before. The lengthy reign of England's most famous monarch was coming to a close, and England had been established as a world power. Yet, the English language had yet to assert itself as a language of scholarship and culture. Ironically, it would be Shakespeare, not an English monarch, who would become the voice of the language, and four hundred years later he is still considered the most essential writer in all of English literature. It is not unreasonable to assert that the "King's English" belongs more to Shakespeare than to any king or queen. James L. Calderwood contends in his essay "Richard II: The Fall of Speech":

¹ Excerpt used here as appears in the Story of English. New York: Viking, 1986. Originally the text appeared in a 1422 resolution made by the London brewers, which adopts English by decree.

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how much more must he envy the king in whose words a nation's troth is plighted, the man who can lay claim to "the King's English." Whoever claims the English crown, at any rate claims not only England but English too, and that is a piece of property in which the poet cannot fail to have a stake (190).

Surely the poet does have a stake. It is quite unlikely that Shakespeare could have foreseen his own gargantuan presence in the English canon, but clearly he recognized the role that the English language plays in national identity. English history scholar Robert Colls expatiates in his book *Identity of England* that:

By the middle of the fourteenth century nearly all the requirements for an English Identity were in place . . . a distinctive sense of territory and ethnicity, an English Church, a set of national fables and a clear common language, and feelings that certain things could only be said in that language. (18)

Incidentally, Henry V, whose reign began early in the fifteenth century, was the first English king to use the English language not only for personal correspondence, but to document government records. Thus, King Henry V initiated the novel concept that England's recorded political history should be recorded in English (McCrum 84). It is often difficult for a modern reader to fathom that English, as a national language, was still relatively new when Shakespeare wrote *Henry V*. The canon of English literature at the time was hardly a canon. None the less, Shakespeare must have been intrigued by the idea that English could well become a language that would reflect his nation's development into a world power.

Undoubtedly, the role of linguistics in the construction of and progression toward a national identity is a theme we recognize in Shakespeare's history plays, *Richard II* and *Henry V*. The genius of Shakespeare's devices is that he manages a temporally triadic parallel unfolding of the sanctioning and empowerment of the English language—triadic because the sanctioning occurs in at least three different eras. Deliberately or not, Shakespeare is simultaneously chronicling the development of the English language as a stimulus toward, and a symptom of national identity in the eras of *Richard II* and *Henry V*, and advancing the evolution of the English language into a culture-defining mechanism in his own Renaissance England, as well as foretelling the Anglo ethnocentricity that a modern audience might discern.

Michael Neill observes that language is an "essential instrument of settlement" (15). Undoubtedly, language is a parameter within the cultural equation. Therefore, denying another's language results in denying the culture from which

that language comes. Unifying language serves to unify a nation. Peter Burke in *The Social History of Languages* reports that:

language is an active force in society, used by individuals and groups to control others or to defend themselves against being controlled, to change society or to prevent others from changing it . . . the social history of language cannot be divorced from questions of power (13).

Language has a power to unite and conquer, and this is a power that was utilized by the English Kings whose lives Shakespeare chronicled. To suggest that the plays are accurate representations of history would be a falsehood, but the plays, particularly *Henry V*, do seem to be in accordance with historical documentation that substantiates King Henry V's provocative role in the history of the English language. As mentioned, King Henry V documented his political regime in English. When he landed in France in 1415, he composed a letter on enemy soil, written not in the language of his enemies, but in English. Thereafter, English became the language of English Kings. Seven years later, in 1422, a decree is adopted establishing English as the official national language (McCrum 84).

Shakespeare unveiled his version of England's political history within the landscape of a newer rising England, and the vitality and the power of language is clearly a recurring motif in Shakespeare's history plays. He frequently uses words such as "words" and "tongue":

Gaunt: "O, to what purpose dost thou hoard thy words / That thou returnest no greeting to thy friends?" Bolingbroke replies: "I have too few to take my leave of you, / When the tongue's office should be prodigal / To breathe the abundant dolor of the heart" (I.3.253-257).

Northumberland: "His tongue is now a stringless instrument; / Words, life, and all, old Lancaster hath spent" (II.1.149-150).

Queen: "O, I am pressed to death through want of speaking!" (III.4.72).

Aumerle: "My tongue cleave to my roof within my mouth, / Unless a pardon ere I rise or speak" (V.3.31-32).

King Henry V: "Either our history shall with full mouth / Speak freely of our acts, or else our grave, / Like Turkish mute, shall have a tongueless mouth, / Not worshipped with a waxen epitaph" (I.2.231-234).

King Henry V: "This is the latest parle we will admit" (III.3.2).

Shakespeare's own special mastery of the language is imbued in his characters—characters who, like him, contributed significantly to the history of the English language. Even so, Shakespeare, in his presentation of these characters

and their situations, assigns them talents and expertisms that they only possess in his imagination. According to MacDonald in his essay "Uneasy Lies: Language and History In Shakespeare's Lancastrian Tetralogy," Shakespeare's Richard II "rises to a self-conscious mastery of language that no one else in this play approaches. Richard perhaps glimpses the fact that language, like magic, must be discounted before it can become effective" (29). Richard's language is studded with Shakespeare's linguistic gems: irony, paradox, understatement and overstatement, witticisms double entendres, homophones, and paronomasia. Consider this passage in Scene IV: Bolingbroke asks Richard, "Are you contented to resign the crown?" Evasively, Richard answers, "Ay, no, no ay" (IV.1.200, 201). The positive-negative juxtaposition in this line of the soliloquy portends of the "undoing" that will be detailed in the lines to come. It is also notable that to the hearer, "ay" could be ay or "I." Furthermore, the answer is vague. Perhaps he means "Yes, I know I must, but no, I'm not ready." Or it could be, "No I am not content, I will or I will not—I cannot say." Superficially, in this word play, Richard demonstrates vague deficiency in his utilization of language, but his vagueness only serves as a foil for his (or Shakespeare's) cleverness; for the lines that follow are, paradoxically, an assertive relinquishment. Ironically, even as Shakespeare tosses up these linguistic marvels, he propels the evolution of the language more than anyone had before, but he does this through his characters—characters that are both real and his contrivances.

Historically, *Henry V* was a proponent and advancer of the English language. Yet, Shakespeare plays with language even as he discourses on Henry's (Prince Hal's) acquisition of it. The idea that a king must learn to speak the language of a king is explored in *Henry IV* and *Henry V*. According to MacDonald's essay "Uneasy Lies: Language and History in Shakespeare's Lancastrian Tetralogy":

Much of Hal's "education" in the course of the plays, if that is what it is, may be described as his attempt to master new languages, to be able to "drink with any tinker in his own language" (II.iv.19); to be able to speak like Hotspur ("Give my roan horse a drench," says he, and answers, 'Some fourteen,' an hour after; 'a trifle, a trifle,'" (II.iv.106-8); to speak like a king; or to speak like himself. (33)

To be a king, he must speak like a king, which is to speak like himself because he is destined to be the king, and the king, as the audience knows, is destined to see his English become the national language. For the modern reader, it seems obvious that the English king should speak English, but Dermot Cavanagh posits in his essay "The Language of Treason in Richard II," that "the language of Richard II has been identified as expressing this shift from a world which assumes political values are divinely ordained, to one dominated by the functional pursuit and maintenance of power" (134). The conveyance of the message here has a striking multilateral

impact because it is difficult for the audience to determine whether that shift occurs in Richard's time and place, Shakespeare's world, or within the specific culture of any given audience. The ambiguity of the matter as linguistically constructed is congruent with the ambiguity of not only chronological boundaries, but geographical boundaries as well. That is, Shakespeare presents concepts, premises, and events that play out historically, but assumes they will be perceived within current and local sensibilities.

For the Elizabethan audience, what is happening in Richard II and Henry V has an unmistakable and provocative connection to what is happening in the Elizabethan epoch. In Richard II, themes of depositions, disenfranchisement, and banishment echo the struggle between Elizabeth and Mary Queen of Scots. In Margaret Shewring's essay entitled "Deposition and Regicide: The concept of 'State' in Shakespeare's Richard II," she notes is that "Shakespeare makes selective use of events from Richard's reign to focus on an assessment of the religious, legal, and political terms by which the position of monarchy can be maintained in the face of the disruption of an inherited 'right'" (22). Near the end of Henry V, Henry and Katherine engage in banter that, as an episode, stands as a metaphor for England's taking of France. The taking might have unfolded in Henry's day, but the scene is also an allusion to England's ongoing struggle with France—a struggle that was still active in Elizabeth's era. Furthermore, France may be interpreted as a symbol for continental Europe and beyond because during Elizabeth's day, England was stretching its reach, competing for space and power with Spain. Elizabeth had employed Humphrey Gilbert and Walter Raleigh to seek new lands to claim for England. Additionally, under Elizabeth's reign, the English had defeated the Spanish Armada, forestalling the dominance of Catholicism. By forestalling Catholicism, she also quelled the Catholic interests in her own kingdom. The various political upheavals that characterized Elizabeth's long reign were part of the struggle for national identity and were used to define her monarchical power and to some degree monarchical power in general. Furthermore, the themes of invasion and expansionism in Henry V, apparent even in the Prologue of the play, substantiate Elizabeth's imperialistic strategies—strategies that characterize British politics for the next three hundred years: "O for a Muse of fire, that would ascend / The brightest heaven of invention; / A kingdom for a stage, princes to act / And monarchs to behold the swelling scene!" (I.1.1-4).

Even in Elizabeth's day, "Englishness" was still a loose, confounding term. Consider the notion that in these plays, Richard II and Henry V, "Englishness" is often semantically expressed as a geographical state of being—to be English is to live within certain geographical boundaries. Several passages in these plays connect place and language with either power or loss of power; with patriotism and perfidiousness, and with national inclusiveness and exclusivity. An example of this occurs in John of Gaunt's famous speech on England. He says, "This earth

of majesty . . . This blessed plot, this earth, this realm, this England" (II. 1.41,50). During this soliloquy, before Richard and company enter, Gaunt catalogs terms indicating place and home: isle, earth, seat, Eden, demi-paradise, fortress, world, precious stone set, land, house, plot, realm, England. He makes all these references and more to England over the course of a dozen lines. According to Richard Altick in his essay "Symphonic Imagery in Richard II," Gaunt's speech "sums up all the feeling inherent in the sense of pride in nation—of jealousy when the county is threatened by foreign incursion, of bitter anger when its health has been destroyed by mismanagement or greed" (68). On the other hand, Gaunt's lyrical patriotic and passionate discourse demonstrates the selfishness of nationalism, the strange exclusivity of a seemingly inclusive idealism. In his article "Broken English and Broken Irish," Michael Neill comments on this paradox:

On the margins of the play (and of Richard's realm) are barbarous speakers of foreign tongues, unreliable Welsh and treacherous Irish, who do not properly belong to the English nation, and whose anomalous nature highlights the difference between the haphazardly inclusive medieval "kingdom," its boundaries defined by feudal allegiance, and the culturally exclusive "nation." (14)

In *Henry V*, some of these "marginal characters" seem to have their own definitive style of speaking, and Shakespeare shows this through form and dialectic distinction. For example, Fluellen is Welsh, and Shakespeare plays with form by substituting "p" for "b" and "f" for "v" to show this. This aspect would also be evident watching the play, not just reading it because the audience would be able to hear the various accents and dialects. According to Jonathan Hope in his "Introduction to Shakespeare and Language," this differentiation that Shakespeare achieves is fairly unique in his body of work. He remarks, "It seems to me that one of the most striking things about Shakespeare's treatment of language is the lack of comment on, or representation of dialect. Mention *Henry V*, *Merry Wives* and an exchange in *King Lear* and we have listed almost all the available data" (6). He suggests that the infrequency of dialect in Shakespeare's body of work is indicative not of the lack of dialect in Shakespeare's era, but of the overwhelming presence of it (7). If this is so, then the presence of dialect in *Henry V* must have some political objective, especially since the varieties of dialect fall along national delineations rather than regional or class. If language unifies, then these slight variations isolate, even exclude—as if to say, "You are almost one of us, but not quite." Certainly, two of the most vital aspects of a culture are its language and place. A culture, in its containment as circumscribed by predefined cartographic boundaries, struggles to thrive without a common, standardized mode of communication. Because culture is fundamentally linked to one's identity, and language is similarly linked to culture, it follows that

language is necessarily linked to one's identity. Still, there is the inevitable question regarding the uncertainty of Englishness as summed up in this rhetorical question, "Is to be Irish, Scottish, or Welsh to be English?"

Another famous passage from *Richard II* in which language, place, and identity form a Gordian knot is in the banishment passage. In Act I, after Mowbray is banished, he says, "A heavy sentence, my most sovereign liege, / And all unlooked for from your highness' mouth" (I.3.154-155). The word "sentence" has two meanings here applicable in the context: one as a unit of language, and another as a summation of punishment. Notably, this powerful admonition comes forth from the mouth of a human being. Whether a speaker expresses love, declares war, or banishes countrymen, his words are verbal representations of human effectuations. Banishment is deportation from a certain place, but in keeping with this theme of language and national identity, Mowbray elaborates on his banishment as a stealing of his native tongue:

The language I have learnt these forty years, / My native English, now I must forgo; / And now my tongue's use is to me no more / Than an unstringèd viol or a harp . . . What is thy sentence then but speechless death, / Which robs my tongue from breathing native breath? (I.3.159-162, 172-173).

Banishment is seen as a "crisis of language" according to David Norbrook in his essay, "A Liberal Tongue: Language and Rebellion in *Richard II*" (125). Indeed, Mowbray's reflection on language is a maneuver of Shakespeare's, since the primary concern of most individuals being banished would have little to do with language. It is ironic that even as Mowbray is being banished, he verbalizes exquisite patriotism with his profound profession of love for his native language. Mowbray's declaration of patriotism warrants consideration within the bounds of Elizabethan sensibilities as well. Neill posits that:

Mowbray's English is "native" in a double sense: it is both that into which he is born and that which defines (and is defined by) the "nation" to which he belongs. By the same token, for the rhetorician George Puttenham, a tongue is only fit to be dignified with the name "language" when it becomes the recognized domain of a nation: "after a speech is fully fashioned to the common understanding, and accepted by consent of a whole country and nation, it is called a language." For the Tudor and Stuart inventors of the "English nation," however, it was precisely in that "consent of a whole country" that the most intractable difficulties lay. For what precisely constituted the "whole country" was by no means clear. (16)

However, for a nation on the brink of some remarkably elastic imperialistic expansion, the definition of “whole country” was rapidly realigning. Whether one saw England as a plot, an isle, a demi-paradise, or a precious stone set, tomorrow it might well be something else. Language is power because it has the ability to control, persuade, and damage. Terry Eagleton postulates that:

To be on the inside of the discourse is to be blind to this power, for what is more natural and non-dominative than to speak one’s own tongue? . . . It is the power of authority vis-a-vis others—the power-relations between those who define and preserve the discourse, and those who are selectively admitted to it. (177)

This is certainly true for the two power figures in Shakespeare’s respective plays—*Henry V* and *Richard II*. As the king, Richard has the power, with a mere utterance of the words “never to return” to strip Mowbray of his national identity. Mowbray equates his banishment with a “speechless death.” By banishing Mowbray to a country in which they speak a different language, Richard expunges that which is fundamental to being essentially English. Similarly, Henry demonstrates his power through his abilities as a rhetorician. He presents long, elaborate speeches to unify his fellow Englishmen and motivate them for war against the neighboring French.

Henry’s power struggle is most apparent, however, in his discourse with the French princess, Katherine. Notably, what they argue about is language. Katherine tells Henry “I cannot speak your England” (V.2.102-103). Shakespeare is particularly clever here with the word “England.” Ostensibly, Katherine’s usage of the word “England” in place of the word “English” is to demonstrate the fact that she cannot speak English very well; however, Shakespeare’s subtle word-choice here appears to also be substantiating the idea that language is inevitably interconnected with a nation. Katherine cannot identify herself with England because she cannot speak the language. Megan Lloyd determines that Katherine’s words “embody a reaction toward English nationalism,” and suggest Katherine’s unwillingness to accept a new national identity (47). Furthermore, Henry equates language and national dominion when he says: “It is as easy for me, Kate, to conquer the kingdom as to speak so much more French” (V.2.184-185). Henry’s solicitous appeal, as executed through some maze of amalgamated French and English, is once again paradoxical. To “deconstruct” the dialogue, Henry is presenting a front of inclusiveness and generosity while simultaneously annexing the homeland of the woman to whom he is linguistically making love. It is an act of aggression that is symbolic of the English imperialism that was beginning to take hold during the reign of Elizabeth. Metaphorically speaking, Katherine represents France, and France is symbolic of not only France, but the whole of Europe, including other parts of Britain, and even the new world waiting to be explored. For the Elizabethan audience, France was only one of the

nations with which England was competing for power and territory. Elizabeth had indeed tangled with France, England's perpetual nemesis, but also with Spain. An essay by Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield suggests that this particular play's ideology was meant to reflect not only what happened in Henry's day, but also the Elizabethan regime: "The Church resented the fact that it was expected to help finance foreign wars; but in 1588 Archbishop Whitgift encouraged his colleagues to contribute generously towards resistance to the Armada on the ground – just as in *Henry V* – that it would head off criticism of the Church's wealth" (187). The lines from the play that accord with this postulate belong to the Archbishop of Canterbury, "So may a thousand actions, once afoot, / End in one purpose, and be all well borne / Without defeat. Therefore to France, my liege!" (I.212-214). The oxymoronic casting of the head of the church as a war hawk indicates yet another peculiarity that appears within and outside the play.

Like a chameleon, Henry is conveniently whatever he needs to be. As a gifted rhetorician, he manipulates with language: "Kate, when France is mine and I am yours, then yours is France and you are mine" (V.2.175-176). Essentially, he gets a Princess and a whole country in the bargain and all she gets is him. The role of marriage in creating national alliances was also a concept familiar to Elizabethan audiences. Even though Elizabeth never married, she speculated on and even promised herself to several different men for the purposes of political and territorial advances. Certainly, the union of two individuals is a metaphor for the union of two nations, but this scene cleverly implies not only union, but aggression. Even though the discourse between Henry and Katherine is presented lightly, and almost comically in its deliberate bungling misappropriation of the two languages, the scene depicts a sort of rape—a seizing and taking by force. Henry, the symbolic rapist, is the male, representative of England; and Katherine, symbolic of France, is the female, to be taken and violated—to be made Henry's. Neill writes about rape being a metaphor for conquest, but also twists Elizabeth's characteristic self-representation into an unexpected place in the analogy:

But here, as in Elizabeth's projection of her own virgin body as a figure for the inviolate kingdom, the metaphoric translation is reversed. The effect of such a literalization, arguably, is to draw attention to the operation of nation-building and empire on actual women's bodies—the way in which from the sack of Troy to the rape of Bosnia the completeness of conquest has habitually been expressed in acts of sexual possession." (21)

This, the play's final exchange in which rape is employed as a metaphor for military conquest, is not the first in *Henry V*. In Henry's soliloquy at the beginning of Act III Scene 3, he makes several allusions: "mowing like grass / Your fresh fair virgins" (line 13-14), "pure maidens fall into the hand of hot and forcing violation" (line 20-21),

“defile the locks of your shrill-shrieking daughters” (line 35). Nonetheless, conquest is unmistakably glorified. After all, what is a [my] nation but “a villain and a bastard, and a knave, and a rascal!” (III.2.122).

The English barbarian, bodily united with the civilized French princess, not only symbolizes a union between England and continental Europe, but also portends of imperialist agendas in the making. Deanne Williams in *The French Fetish* discourses on the meaning of King Henry’s lines: “shall not thou and I, between Saint-Denis and Saint George, compound a boy, half-French, half-English, that shall go to Constantinople and take the Turk by the beard?” (V.2.205-208). She writes:

The irreconcilable binary of French civility and English barbarism, the play suggests, may only be resolved through action: military conquest alone can establish a distinction between the civilized and the barbarian. Fusing the juggernaut of imperial ambition with fantasies of patrilineal succession and immortality, this rhetoric reaches its climax when Henry proposes to Katherine that their sexual union could produce yet another barbarianizing, orientalizing, conqueror. (219)

Here, again, Shakespeare dexterously manages to simultaneously portray the past, allude to the present, and speculate on the future.

Somewhat subconsciously, the viewer and reader of *Richard II* and *Henry V* absorb the notion that language portrays, enables, and encapsulates the power of the people. The audience watches as an English identity is forged, but the identity is forged within and outside the play, and English identity evolves as the audience evolves. In the Prologue to *Henry V*, Shakespeare equates the kingdom with a stage and princes with actors. The term Muse implies inspiration and poetics which corresponds with language. If the Muse is language, then the fire is an ever growing national spirit. Attention has been given to the Elizabethan perceptions—how episodes in the play were drawn to echo the politics and sociology of the day. But the same can be said of any audience reading or viewing these plays. In an article examining two specific performances of *Henry V*, Graham Holderness states, “The emotion of patriotism and the politics of nationalism always involve, in any given historical situation, attachment to a particular sectional group, or class, or ‘team’, or army, which can be seen as bearing or leading the national destiny” (238). As Holderness observes, war provides a natural environment for patriotism and nationalism to fester and ignite. In a play about war, patriotism takes hold within the play, on the stage, but also, in some cases, outside the play, within the audience (238). Whether the audience is the Elizabethan one for which Shakespeare wrote, a World War II audience watching Laurence Olivier in the role of *Henry V*, or a 1989 audience watching Kenneth Branagh in his iconic role, there is always a rift, a dichotomy, between those included and those excluded, the imperialist and the colonized, the

aggressors and the oppressed, the mother country and her children. England's identity has been forged and reforged many times over, and plays of Shakespeare, the linguistic magician, are performed repeatedly. Each time, the meaning is the same and yet different for the audience who is different from the one before; because, as Shakespeare implies, the monarchs or audience who "behold the swelling scene" have a role in the rendering of the play as well. Language, as Shakespeare employs it, wields power. Shakespeare may have been writing about events that took place well over a hundred years before he wrote, but he wrote within a progressive culture, in a world that was unfolding, searching for its mark in time and space and history. The complexity of this phenomenon is that it is multilateral, multidisciplinary, and multi-epochal. Certainly Shakespeare's general societal objective was to create art that would entertain. As art, these history plays are meant to reflect the culture from which they come, and they warrant consideration within the landscape of English Renaissance sensibilities. Because these plays continue to be enjoyed and studied, our view of them is, of course, colored by our modern perspective. Additionally, these are plays that relate to political and military history. However accurate or inaccurate the historical presentation of these events, the portrayal has its own historical implications within every cultural setting in which the work is appreciated, studied, or enjoyed. As an artist, Shakespeare proved to be a most serviceable and capable engineer and composer of language. This language we speak, though we may call it the King's or the Queen's English, belongs more to him than anyone else.

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