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ENGL 444: Shakespeare

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King Henry V's Political Wooing of Princess Katherine in *Henry V*

In Act V, Scene 2 of *Henry V*, Shakespeare demonstrates, through King Henry V of England's "wooing" of Princess Katherine of France after the English victory over the French, that Henry is seeking Katherine's consent in marrying her. However, as a war bride in this exchange of power, Katherine has been deprived of consent already, and Henry's courting of her takes on an understanding that he is wooing, not the French princess, who cannot understand his English, but the English-speaking audience, in convincing them to accept him as a gracious ruler and man after the horrific acts of war that he has threatened and committed earlier in the play. The play takes on a shift of genre in this scene, shifting from a history and potential tragedy to a comedy, in the resolution being symbolized in the marriage, or impending marriage, of two individuals; the comic ending serves as a treat to the audience, in delivering laughs and the image of a ruler, whose cheeks, once rouged with blood, are now blushed in love and embarrassment through this courtship. Thus, Henry's speech during the "wooing" scene, serves to develop the audience's positive image of him, in valorizing him as a humanized, righteous, and virtuous leader and historical figure.

First, Shakespeare establishes that Katherine does not understand Henry's English or French speech. Shakespeare, thus, raises the question of who Henry is wooing in this scene. For example, after a long monologue in broken French and English, in which he attempts French, "*Je quand sur le possession de / France,*" (5.2.189-190), Henry asks Katherine, "Canst thou / love

me?” (5.2.201-202), and Katherine replies, “I cannot tell (5.2.203),” indicating that she does not understand his advances and questions of love and commitment. Katharine does understand Henry’s attempts at French, in addition to those at English, as well; for example, when Henry asks, “What say’st thou, my fair flower de / Luce?” (5.2.18-19), mispronouncing “*fleur-de-lis*”, the lily of the French emblem, Katherine similarly responds, expressing her confusion at his speech, “I do now know dat” (5.2.220). Shakespeare, further, makes it clear that Henry himself understands that Katherine is not comprehending his speech, when Henry says, “Come, your / answer in broken music, for thy voice is music, and / thy English broken” (5.2.252-254). Shakespeare demonstrates how Henry is aware that his “wooing” speech is not persuading Katherine, raising the question of who Henry is wooing, or who the speech is directed at, and why.

Shakespeare, then, uses the language of political conquest to understand this courtship, cueing an understanding of his wooing as more of a political alliance than a romantic courtship. Shakespeare first has Henry position himself, to Katherine, not as a lover, but as a “soldier” and a “king”, saying, “And take me, / take a soldier. Take a soldier, take a king” (5.2.172-173). Shakespeare has Henry elaborate on his position as a wooer, presenting himself not as a traditionally soft lover, but as one with a “stubborn outside” (5.2.236) inherited through his “father’s ambition” (5.2.234) and his father’s ruminations on “civil wars when he got” (5.2.235), or conceived, Henry V, that, “when [Henry] come[s] to woo ladies” (5.2.237), makes him “fright them” (5.2.237). Henry, then, moves to demonstrate how he sees the wooing between himself and Katherine as part of England’s territorial acquisition. Henry uses the language of possession in his attempts to romantically woo Katherine, showing his true motivations to be political. For example, when Katherine asks herself, “Is it possible dat I sould love de enemy of France?”

(5.2.176-177), Henry uses rhetoric to argue that, “No, it is not possible [she] should love the enemy of France” (5.2.178-179), but that:

. . . . . in loving me, you  
 should love the friend of France, for I love France  
 so well that I will not part with a village of it. I will  
 have it all mine. And, Kate, when France is mine  
 and I am yours, then yours is France and you are  
 mine.

(5.2.179-184)

Thus, wooing Katherine is bound up in territorial acquisition, where Henry’s expressions of love are shown to be expressions of a political desire. His complicated turn of phrase, “when France is mine / and I am yours, then yours is France,” initially confuses the audience to be read as a sincere declaration of love, devotion, and commitment, but Shakespeare has Henry’s true desire of ownership of Katherine made clear at the end of the sentence, “you are mine.” Shakespeare has Henry elaborate on the proposition of a political alliance, disguised as a romantic offering, by offering Katherine the benefits of their potential marriage, saying, should they formalize a union, “I will tell thee aloud “England / is thine, Ireland is thine, France is thine, and Henry / Plantagenet is thine,” (5.2.248-250).” Henry offers Katherine the political power to claim ownership, herself, over new territories; in a show of performative generosity, Henry even offers her own country, France, back to her, offering a sign of agency that shows how she, as a French person, does not have it, in this lost war with England. Henry elaborates further on the benefits of their union by showing that his interest is in the heir that he and Katherine will produce, saying:

. . . . . 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?

(5.2.214-217)

Henry shows that he imagines their heir as a crusader that will take Constantinople from the Turks, a sign of his will to expand the territory under his and England's power and that he sees his marriage with Katherine as how to do it. Additionally, the context of this conversation in the plot shows how the scene functionally works as a corollary to the wartime peace treaty, as the French noblemen, including the French king, and the English noblemen, acting on Henry's behalf, are signing a peace treaty, while Henry stays behind to "woo" Katherine. When the Duke of Burgundy, a French nobleman, asks for "gentle peace" (5.2.64), Henry proclaims that "the peace which you before so urged / Lies in [the King of France's] answer" (5.2.77-78), to some "just demands" (5.2.72), including "Katherine [who] is our capital demand," (5.2.97-98), using the royal, plural "our". Thus, Shakespeare shows that the "wooing" scene between Henry and Katharine, happening simultaneously to the noblemen of French and English deciding on the terms of peace, functions as a dramatic representation of the peace treaty being signed, another sign of Henry's wooing being a political action.

Further, Shakespeare attempts to use the conventions of comedy to "woo", or rhetorically persuade, the audience, that Henry is a good ruler, showing the articulate and rhetorical king who delivered the St. Crispin's Day speech earlier, then effectively "wooing" his soldiers, to change from being seen as a king to a blushing lover, endearing himself to the audience. For example, Shakespeare shows the previously rhetorically articulate king finding himself stumbling over words, as he navigates French and English:

. . . . . *Je quand sur le possession de France, et quand vous avez le possession de moi*—let me see, what then? Saint Denis be my speed!—*donc vôtre est France, et vous êtes miennne*. It is as easy for me, Kate, to conquer the kingdom as to speak so much more French. I shall never move thee in French, unless it be to laugh at me.

(5.2.189-195)

In showing Henry to be stumbling over his words, when trying to woo a woman, after being articulate in front of his soldiers, Shakespeare humanizes the figure of Henry V, endearing him to the audience. Further, in claiming that he “shall never move” Katherine, or the audience “in French, unless it be to laugh at [him]”, Shakespeare gives Henry explicit justification for why he must speak in English, to rhetorically persuade, and in French, to incite laughter in his audience of both Katherine and the audience of the play. The comic aspects of Henry’s mistakes in French further allow the audience to see Henry as humanized, as he provides representation for the everyman notions of romantic wooing and courtship. Further, in the vein of comedies, Shakespeare uses this genre shift from history to comedy in the union of Henry and Katherine to incite the familiar attribute of comedies where the ending serves a regeneration of society, offering a better outlook for the world of the play, in attempt to argue that Henry and Katherine’s union is beneficial for French society at large. In the context of the rest of Act V, Scene 2, the “wooing” scene comes after the Duke of Burgundy uses an extended metaphor to compare France to a “fertile” (5.2.28) “garden” (5.2.37), that has been “corrupt[ed]” (5.2.41), with various weeds, “darnel, hemlock, and rank fumitory” (5.2.46), and one that he hopes will be restored to her “her former qualities” (5.2.69), upon being granted “gentle peace” (5.2.64) with England. Thus, Shakespeare argues, through the conventions of comedy, that Henry’s wooing of Katherine is endearing and valiant or desired, in how it restores “beauty” (5.2.54) to France.

Finally, Shakespeare establishes that Katharine, with repeated protests to Henry advances, does not consent to this union, showing that Henry’s part in this relation is that of the aggressor or assaulter. After Kate affirms that it will “content” (5.2.260) her, if it contents her father for her to marry Henry, Henry attempts to close on his proposition of marriage by kissing

Katherine's hand, "Upon that I kiss your hand, and I call you my queen" (5.2.261-262); the kissing of her hand becomes an attempt at a polite confirmation of affection. Katherine objects, "*Laissez, mon seigneur, laissez, laissez! Ma foi, je ne veux point que vous abaissiez votre grandeur, en baisant la main d'une—Notre Seigneur!—indigne serviteur. Excusez-moi, je vous supplie, mon très puissant seigneur*", which translates from French to English as, "Let go, my lord, let go, let go! On my word, I would never want you to lower your dignity by kissing the hand of an unworthy servant of your nobility. Pardon me, I beg you, my very mighty lord" (5.2.263-267). In Shakespeare having Katherine speak a lengthy piece of dialogue in French, her mother-tongue, as opposed to attempting English, he shows that she is desperate to object to this attempted action of Henry, not having the time to translate her speech for better understanding, but simply trying to object to it. Henry, however, presses on, "Then I will kiss your lips Kate," in attempting a larger display of affection (5.2.268). This time, Katherine objects on the basis of what is accepted in French culture, saying, "*Les dames et demoiselles, pour être baisées devant leurs noces, il n'est pas la coutume de France*", which translates, in English, to, "For ladies and gentleman to kiss before marriage is not the custom in France" (5.2.269-270). Whether this may be true or not, especially for royalty such as Katherine, she sets up a line that should not be crossed, at the high stake of her cultural heritage, experience, and acceptance. After Henry asks for clarification, "Madam my interpreter, what says she?" (5.2.271), Alice translates, "Dat it is not be de fashion pour les ladies of France—I cannot tell wat is *baiser* en English", using the conflation between *baiser*, as in "to kiss", and *baiser*, as in the vulgar, "to fuck" or "to have sexual relations", which shows how Henry is further pushing the boundaries of Katherine's consent and comfort with the suggestion of the action that is implied she would not be comfortable with. After understanding Katherine's meaning, Henry objects, "O Kate, nice

customs curtsy to great kings,” using personification in “customs curtsy”, to show how he views his power as the English king as reason enough to bend cultural customs (5.2.279-280). He elaborates, “Dear Kate, you and I cannot be confined within the weak list of a country’s fashion,” characterizing French culture as “weak”, and thereby insulting it and Katherine (5.2.280-281). Henry continues, “We are the makers of manners, Kate, and the liberty that follows our places stops the mouth of all find-faults, as I will do yours for upholding the nice fashion of your country in denying me a kiss” (5.2.281-285). Henry uses the inclusive “we”, holding “we” in opposition to “all find-faults” or “all critics”; in this case, the oppositional critic to his will to kiss is Kate, showing his rhetorical use of the inclusive “we” to make it seem like it was both of their ideas to kiss, when it was just his. He makes this clear in the second clause, “as I will do yours for upholding the nice fashion of your country in denying me a kiss,” which foreshadows his actions. Despite Katherine’s multiple protestations, Henry proves and shows not to care about her consent to kiss; he, next, directs her actions, willing her not to object physically or further, “Therefore, patiently and yielding” (5.2.285-286). He then kisses her, a symbol of domination in this passage of dialogue, in which Kate’s will is disregarded and overturned for his dominating actions. Henry concludes, “You have witchcraft in your lips, Kate. There is more eloquence in a sugar touch of them than in the tongues of the French council, and they should sooner persuade Harry of England than a general petition of monarchs” (5.2.286-291). Effectively, Henry shows that he views his romantic partner as a player in war, comparing her to “the French council”, and “a general petition of monarchs,” not viewing her as a consenting and equal partner. Notably, in the 2012 Shakespeare’s Globe production of *Henry V*, directed by Dominic Dromgoole, Henry says, “Here comes your father”, and retreats from his position of being close to Katherine’s face, having just kissed her, as if he were a schoolboy embarrassed to be caught making out with his

girlfriend. This embarrassment works to further humanize the English king, on the director and actor's part, and shows that the character, Henry's, only respect of authority is other men, as he retreats when he sees the French king approach, but not at the vocal and repeated protestations of the French princess.

Henry's actions in this passage shows his will to physically dominate the French, seeing the princess as an extension of the country and its people and soldiers. He does so without hearing protestations or the allowance of verbal consent. He does not view political alliance as something agreed upon by two parties, but as something that he chooses, himself, for both parties involved. Per his victory over the French, he believes himself able to overtake the will of individual citizens and the French culture itself, to completely and thoroughly dominate the country, an inhumane "victory" on his part. Shakespeare has Henry woo, not Katherine, who cannot understand much of his English speech, but the audience, in order to glorify and humanize the English king who has been shown as flawed in his "passing the buck" and threatening attitude towards the French thus far in the play. However, Shakespeare also allows the audience to see the cracks in Henry's attitude, how he is not humane in his dominating other peoples, as personified in his non-consensual "wooing" of Katharine. Ultimately, Henry's domination over Katherine's will function to communicate England's domination over France's will in this play of war, showing Henry as a victorious, if aggressively non-consensual, ruler.



Works Cited

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