

EXTENDED ESSAY
ENGLISH A 1

How Are French Women Depicted in Shakespeare?

An Analysis of the Portrayal of Joan of Arc in *Henry VI Part I*,
Helena in *All's Well That Ends Well*
and Princess Katherine in *Henry V*

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Word Count: 3,923

ABSTRACT

During Elizabethan times, the influx of French Huguenots into England, along with traditional rivalry and religious differences, caused many English to harbor anti-French bias, even during peacetime. The prevailing stereotypes, encapsulated by Thomas Nashe in *The Unfortunate Traveller*, portrayed French people as fickle, promiscuous, treacherous and hot-blooded. In 400 years of scholarly writing, no treatise appears to have specifically focused on how these prevailing biases affected Shakespeare's characterization of Frenchwomen. This essay aims to fill that void by analyzing the depiction of Frenchwomen in three plays: Joan of Arc in *Henry VI Part I*, Helena in *All's Well That Ends Well* and Princess Katherine in *Henry V*.

Shakespeare adopts the technique of gender role reversal with regard to Joan and Helena, portraying each as a masculine figure exercising hegemony over Frenchmen who have abrogated their traditional responsibilities. Thus, it is Joan who leads hesitant Frenchmen into battle, and Helena who cures the French King of his fistula. Although Katherine was a dominant woman in the mold of Joan and Helena in the source play on which Shakespeare based *Henry V*, Shakespeare portrays the future English Queen in the traditional gender role of obedient wife-to-be. Shakespeare engages in stereotypic characterization of all three Frenchwomen. In Joan's case, where she was already an object of English public scorn, Shakespeare uses ample invective to characterize Joan as a witch and harlot. With Katherine, the direct ancestor of his sovereign, Shakespeare resorts to clandestine stereotyping, intimating that Katherine is fickle in how she quickly changed sides, and suggesting that she relies on witchcraft to win Henry's heart. With these three Frenchwomen, Shakespeare departs from his sources to characterize each negatively. Shakespeare largely panders to the commonly held prejudices about Frenchwomen, rather than educating his audience and transcending stereotypes.

Word count: 294

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In four centuries of literary commentary, no treatise appears to have specifically focused on Shakespeare's depiction of Frenchwomen in his plays. Although Shakespearean scholars have noted that the influx of French Huguenots seeking refuge from persecution caused many Elizabethans to exhibit xenophobia due to the competition for jobs and resources,¹ few commentators have attempted an in-depth analysis of how anti-French bias may have affected Shakespeare's portrayal of Frenchwomen. For example, one of the only texts to discuss Shakespeare's stereotypic depiction of foreign characters foregoes analysis of the wooing scene in *Henry V* on the basis that it is "predominantly comic."² There are also few gender studies that have investigated Shakespeare's portrayal of Frenchwomen. The popular English view of the French during Shakespeare's time was encapsulated by Thomas Nashe in *The Unfortunate Traveller*:³ "What is there in France to be learned more than in England, but falsehood in fellowship, perfect slovenry, to love no man but for my pleasure, to swear 'Ah par la mort Dieu,' when a man's hams are scabbed?"⁴ Few if any commentators have analyzed how these prevailing Elizabethan stereotypes of the French as fickle, promiscuous, treacherous and hot-blooded⁵ may have impacted Shakespeare's portrayal of the women of France.

In an attempt to fill the gap in literary analysis of Shakespeare's portrayal of Frenchwomen, I have selected as the subject of this essay Shakespeare's depiction of Joan of Arc in *Henry VI*

¹ Hoenselaars, A.J. 1992, *Images of Englishmen and Foreigners in the Drama of Shakespeare and His Contemporaries*, Dickenson University Press, Rutherford, pp.26-27.

² *Ibid.* p. 90.

³ Contemporary French observers also recorded the animus which the English masses harbored towards the French: "Les gens de ceste nation hayent à mort les Francoys, comme leurs vielz ennemis, et du tous appellent *France chenesve*, *France dogue*, qui est à dire 'maraultz François' 'chiens François,' et autrement nous appellent *orson*, 'villains'..." Perlin, Estienne. 1558, *Description des royaumes d'Angleterre et d'Ecosse*, quoted in Lee, Sidney. 1910, *The French Renaissance in England: An Account of the Literary Relations of England and France in the Sixteenth Century*, Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, pp. 59-60.

⁴ Nashe, Thomas. 1985, *The Unfortunate Traveller and Other Works*, The Penguin Group, London, p. 344.

⁵ Clark, Cumberland. 1932, *Shakespeare and National Character*, Haskell House Publishers Ltd., New York, pp. 136, 142.

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Part I, Helena in *All's Well That Ends Well* and Princess Katherine in *Henry V*. Shakespeare portrays all three Frenchwomen in times of national crisis – Joan when France is occupied, Helena when the French King appears terminally ill, and Katherine when France is under invasion. This essay will specifically examine Shakespeare's use of the technique of gender role reversal in which he portrays Frenchwomen assuming the dominant, traditionally male role to fill the power vacuum created by the dereliction of responsibility by Frenchmen in the plays. Moreover, it has been noted that the utilization of artistic license to alter historical facts is a literary device authors use both to cater to and adjust the audience's perceptions.⁶ Where Shakespeare relied on historical or other sources for the depiction of these Frenchwomen, this essay will examine the extent to which he adheres to or deviates from the source and evaluate the effects achieved by such artistic license, particularly with regard to the characters of Joan and Katherine, where Shakespeare diverges most markedly from his sources. This essay examines both the subtle and overt ways that Shakespeare presented stereotypic characterizations of these Frenchwomen. From this analysis, this essay will draw conclusions about the literary effects these techniques achieve in the portrayals of Joan, Helena and Katherine. This topic has been selected and is believed significant because of the need to fill a void in existing analysis of Shakespeare's depiction of Frenchwomen. This topic will also facilitate a broader understanding of literature in the era when a woman ruled England for forty-five years and provide a foundation for investigations into how literature has exacerbated cultural and military rivalry between the nations.

Shakespeare utilizes the technique of gender role reversal in depicting Joan of Arc, portraying her as a masculine figure who wears men's armor and prods diffident Frenchmen into battle. Joan represents the ascendant woman exercising hegemony over effeminate Frenchmen who purportedly are too concerned with their own safety and comfort to make creditable soldiers. To demonstrate her superiority over Frenchmen, Joan challenges France's leader, the Dauphin, to "My courage try by combat"ⁱ and thrashes the future King with what he metaphorically describes as "the sword of Deborah."ⁱⁱ As her sovereign submissively grovels at Joan's feet, deprecating himself as her "prostrate thrall,"ⁱⁱⁱ he symbolizes the irresolution of the men of France who have

through cowardice and indecision seemingly become a subservient breed. This is the same ilk of Frenchmen who, according to Nashe, claim they are dying when their derrieres are scratched. Rather than fight, they helplessly surrender to craven soldiers like Pistol whom they ironically extol as the “très distingué seigneur d’Angleterre.”^{iv} It is not just courage which Frenchmen seem to lack and Joan provides, but also critical thinking and initiative. Although Reignier is willing without a struggle to “give over Orléans,” Joan exhorts Frenchmen to “fight till the last gasp.”^v Joan provides the strategy to infiltrate Rouen by stealth, so Talbot’s soldiers can be routed in a surprise attack. “That damned sorceress,/Hath wrought this hellish mischief unawares,”^{vi} Talbot remonstrates. Joan supplies the manliness sorely absent from Shakespeare’s French male persona. Joan is the one to “prove...masculine” and “underneath the standard of the French [to] carry armour.”^{vii}

Joan restores virility to the emasculated Frenchmen by leading them to triumph. After Joan’s victory at Orléans, Alençon exults in the restoration of French manhood: “All France will be replete with mirth .../When they hear how we have play’d the men.”^{viii} Joan’s military victories contain the imagery and symbolism of men achieving gender rehabilitation. Joan describes her beacon that launches the attack as “the happy wedding torch/That joineth Rouen unto her countrymen...”^{ix} Joan’s torch is a phallic symbol, representing the masculine role she performs.⁷ Joan vanquishes not only the Dauphin, but also the English champion, the elder Talbot, whom she defeats in hand-to-hand combat.⁸ Thus, whilst Joan restores virility to Frenchmen, she metaphorically emasculates the English. The prospect of being “vanquished by a maid” has English soldiers making rash decisions as young Talbot spurns Joan’s offer of combat, proclaiming, “Young Talbot was not born/To be the pillage of a giglot wench.”^x Instead, he rashly hurls himself “in the bowels of the French”^{xi} to his death.

⁶ *Ibid.* p. 92.

⁷ Williams, Deanne. 2007, *The French Fetish From Shakespeare to Chaucer*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, p.191.

⁸ This feat is nowhere mentioned in the two chronicles on which Shakespeare relied for Henry VI Part I, Holinshed and Hall. Cross, Wilbur & Brooke, Tucker (eds).1993, *The Yale Shakespeare The Complete Works*, Barnes & Noble, Inc., New York, pp. 437-38.

By Act III, Joan has acquired such mastery over Frenchmen that she can subdue them with words. This is demonstrated when Joan employs the devices of pathos and personification to describe “most unnatural wounds”^{xii} inflicted upon the “woful breast”^{xiii} of France to persuade the Duke of Burgundy to rejoin his countrymen. Burgundy suspects that Joan might “have bewitch’d me with her words,”^{xiv} and the diction utilized, such as “slaughtermen”^{xv} and “thy country’s stained spots,”^{xvi} contains vivid imagery of a man physically mutilating his country, personified as a woman. In its persuasiveness, Joan’s plea is the same genre of advocacy as Antony’s funeral eulogy in *Julius Caesar*, instantly transforming a hesitant foe into an ardent supporter, who “almost yield[s] upon my knees.”^{xvii}

In the final act, Shakespeare abandons Joan’s character development and reverts to jingoistic belief that witchcraft was the force behind Joan’s victories. Joan’s character development regresses rather than progresses: while in Act I Joan is a round character⁹ who displays magnanimity in sparing Talbot, even making him a Christ-figure by using the words that Jesus spoke to Mary in telling Talbot “thy hour is not yet come,”¹⁰ by Act V, Joan has become an apparent one-dimensional witch and harlot simplistically portrayed -- a stock character into which Shakespeare incorporates prevailing superstitions about witchcraft.¹¹ Joan’s character is marred by relying on sorcery, rather than divine guidance, to achieve her objectives. In Act V, Joan commits the definitive act of evil – offering to sell her soul -- if she can defeat England:

JOAN

[To the demons]

⁹ Forster, E.M. 1985, *Aspects of the Novel*, Harcourt, Inc., Orlando, pp. 67-78.

¹⁰ These words are particularly prophetic because Joan claims that Mary “deigned to appear to me/And in a vision full of majesty” exhorted Joan to “free my country from calamity.” Joan thus becomes a symbol of Mary’s power, but in Elizabethan England, so soon after the Catholic reign of Mary I, the allusion would have been considered subversive as the reinstated Protestant church sought to suppress the Catholic cult of the Virgin Mary and to discredit and abrogate Mary Tudor’s restoration of Catholicism in England. Williams, p. 192.

¹¹ Lee, Christopher. 2003, *1603 The Death of Queen Elizabeth I, the Return of the Black Plague, the Rise of Shakespeare, Piracy, Witchcraft, and the Birth of the Stuart Era*, St. Martin’s Press, New York, pp. 245-260.

Take my soul, my body, soul and all,
Before that England give the French the foil.^{xviii}

Joan's plea ironically alludes to Matthew 16:26-27 where Jesus admonishes that one will gain nothing by losing one's soul for the whole world.¹² Yet Shakespeare's Joan will accept damnation if she can gain France. When Joan is abandoned by the fiends who previously empowered her, she suffers the fate that Jesus foretold – forfeiting her soul, but gaining nothing.

To demonize Joan, Shakespeare portrays her as a close relation to the witches in *Macbeth* -- women doomed to spend eternity tempting mortals, such as Macbeth, who have the potential for evil. Joan is one of those mortals, like Macbeth, who when faced with the Faustian choice of his immortal soul or earthly advantage, chooses ephemeral advancement. Shakespeare suggests that Joan will spend eternity corrupting equivocators with the potential to be lured into ruin.

Shakespeare portrays Joan's chastity with the same stereotypic characterization. Although both Holinshed and Hall chronicled Joan's virginity,¹³ Holinshed wrote that once convicted of heresy, Joan claimed to be pregnant to delay her execution. Holinshed's assertion was contrary to the meticulous contemporary records of Joan's trial and to Hall's *Chronicles*.¹⁴ The inquisitors who

¹² This same passage from the Bible plays a prominent role in *A Man for All Seasons*, when another saint, Thomas More, quotes it to the man who had given perjured testimony against More so he could gain a position in Wales: "It profits a man nothing to give his soul for the whole world...but for Wales, Richard?" Bolt, Robert. 1988, *A Man for All Seasons*, Vintage Books, New York. Thomas More as portrayed in literature would not betray his conscience for anything, and certainly not for a temporal advantage. Yet Shakespeare's vision of Jean d'Arc is of a treacherous woman who would gladly give up her soul to regain France.

¹³ Nicoll, Allardyce & Josephine. 1965, *Holinshed's Chronicle as Used in Shakespeare's Plays*, Everyman's Library, London, p. 105 ("wherein found though a virgin..."); Hall, Edward. 1548, *The Union of the Two Noble and Illustrate Famelies of Lancaster & Yorke*. British Library, p. 148 ("whether it wer because of her foule face, that no man would desire it...she had made a vowe to liue chaste...kept her maydenhed, and preserued her virginitie.")

¹⁴ The inquisitors who wrote the records of Joan's trial would have certainly included a claimed pregnancy if it had really happened, so eager were they to find a justification to declare Joan a heretic. Not only does the record of Joan's actual trial not support Holinshed's claim that Joan pretended to be pregnant, it actually established the opposite. Barrett, W.P. (trans). 1931, *The Trial of Jeanne d'Arc*, George Routledge & Sons, Ltd, London.

tried Joan subjected her to physical examination to verify her chastity. She willingly agreed to the exam, and passed.¹⁵ Shakespeare went further than Holinshed and transformed a virgin who sacrificed her life in defense of principle into a strumpet who cannot identify which of three lovers fathered her illegitimate child.¹⁶ The ultimate degradation of Joan's chastity is York's invective, "She knows not well,/ There were so many, whom she may accuse."^{xix} The fabricated scene in which Joan keeps changing her mind as to the identity of her child's father can be viewed as propaganda, presenting English enemies in a negative light. Shakespeare's Joan is depicted as so unworthy that her unborn fetus is to be summarily aborted – a punishment contrary to English law.¹⁷

As characterized in Act V, Joan is the antithesis of a saint and a caricature. Indeed, the prophetic declaration that "Joan...shall be France's saint"^{xx} is apparently meant to be sarcastic.¹⁸ Joan's characterization is so manifestly negative that her execution becomes Shakespeare's perverse form of poetic justice.

Moving now to the character of Helena, we find that just as Shakespeare utilized the technique of gender role reversal in depicting Frenchwomen in *Henry VI*, so he utilized it in depicting Helena in *All's Well That Ends Well*. Like Joan, Helena is a dominant male-like figure who restores stability when the ineptitude of Frenchmen takes France to the brink of chaos. *All's Well* begins with an enfeebled and emasculated French King hopelessly ill with a fistula. Similar to Joan's vanquishing the Dauphin in combat, Helena metaphorically achieves dominion over the King by

¹⁵ Brooks, Polly. 1999, *Beyond the Myth: The Story of Joan of Arc*, Houghton Mifflin, Boston, p. 117. Joan was examined under the direction of the English Duchess of Bedford. .

¹⁶ The full passage is in Appendix I.

¹⁷ Indeed, Holinshed alluded to the tradition of staying the execution of condemned pregnant women until they had given birth when he wrote, contrary to the record of Joan's trial, that Joan's execution was delayed for nine months. Even pirate women were afforded this privilege of "pleading the belly." At minimum, Joan was entitled under English law on making the plea to be with child to be examined by a jury of matrons to determine if she were pregnant with a quickened fetus, a finding which would delay the execution until after she had given birth. Oldham, James C, 1985. "On Pleading the Belly: A History of the Jury of Matrons," VI *Criminal Justice History* 1.

¹⁸ Clark, p. 151.

curing an abscess in the nether regions of his body concealed to women. The King's fistula is a symbol of the corruption in France, as women assume the dominant role to compensate for "Frenchmen [who] are so braid."^{xxi} Even when cured, the King is not completely whole, as he relinquishes part of his sovereignty by granting Helena the masculine "power to choose" her spouse.¹⁹

The essence of gender role reversal in *All's Well* was captured by the Royal Shakespeare Company production I saw in which Judi Dench played the Countess of Rousillon and Claudie Blakeley played Helena. As Helena assertively struts amongst France's male nobility, tempting four lords before rejecting them with playful heroic couplets, she resembles a potentate inspecting his harem. "Thou hast power to choose," the King commands, "and they none to forsake."^{xxii} In the gender-reversed world of *All's Well*, Helena has become the sexual pursuer and French noblemen her effeminate prey. Lafew's aside "I would send them...to make eunuchs of..."^{xxiii} makes the harem imagery explicit, suggesting that Frenchmen have undergone a symbolic castration because of their deficiencies in courage and determination.

Paradoxically, Bertrand upsets the established order by asserting the right to act like a traditional man. Instead of acquiescing in the symbolic emasculation represented by a woman's choosing him, he insists on "leave to use/...mine own eyes."^{xxiv} Ironically, when Bertrand does exercise the precious right of choice, he squanders it by imploring Diana, a godless-like symbol of chastity, to "give thyself unto my sick desires."^{xxv} Helena's utilizing the "bed-trick" to deceive Bertrand into consummating their marriage – impersonating Diana in a darkened bedroom²⁰ – represents, as Helena metaphorically describes it, "the hind...mated by the Lion."^{xxvi} Yet in this

¹⁹ McCandless, David. 1997, *Gender and Performance in Shakespeare's Problem Comedies*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, p. 43.

²⁰ Shakespeare used the bed trick in another of his dark comedies, *Measure for Measure*, in which Isabella substituted a woman other than herself to placate the evil surrogate Duke's demand that she surrender her chastity to him. Isabella's deception was not as blameworthy as Helena's since Isabella did not use the bed trick offensively, as Helena did, but defensively to save herself from the evil Angelo's lust and her brother from the sentence of death for fornication.

perverse French world where men abrogate their responsibilities, the deer hunts and feeds off the lion. One critic compares the bed-trick to “a kind of rape, in which Helena coerces Bertram into having sex with her against his will.”²¹ Inasmuch as rape is defined as intercourse with another without consent and consent is vitiated if obtained through deception, Helena’s bed-trick can be viewed as “rape by means of fraud.”²² In Elizabethan England, rape was a crime committed by men against women. In *All’s Well*, however, the gender roles are reversed with a Frenchwoman becoming the rapist and a Frenchman the victim. Being raped by a woman, like being vanquished in combat by a woman, is another symbolic form of Frenchmen’s emasculation. Rape is not a crime of passion, but of violence and control. Helena’s tricking Bertrand into her bed represents mastery over him and, by implication, mastery by necessity of Frenchwomen over effeminate Frenchmen. Ironically, although Bertrand performs the seemingly virile act of impregnating Helena, the act represents submission rather than supremacy, since Bertrand loses the right to consent.

Shakespeare characterizes Helena as an obsessed, unrequited lover with low self-esteem, evidenced by her self-deprecating and hyperbolic metaphor that Bertrand is “a bright particular star...so above me.”^{xxvii} The first time Helena speaks in iambic pentameter rather than prose is when she fantasizes about Bertrand, demonstrating the effort she puts into pursuing him.^{xxviii} The more Helena idolizes Bertrand, torturing herself with arousing imagery of “His arched brows, his hawking eye, his curls,”^{xxix} the more she demonstrates a physical, male-like attraction. It is significant to the role reversal that Helena does not dote on male attributes like Bertrand’s strength or rippling muscles, but female-like qualities like his hair and countenance. The portrait Shakespeare paints is of a Frenchwoman smitten with a man’s “tender limbs,”^{xxx} like Miranda in *The Tempest* first beholding “beauteous mankind.”^{xxxi} Helena’s preoccupation with superficial qualities is stereotypic characterization rooted in the generalization that Frenchwomen choose mates based on hot-blooded passion, rather than rational assessment of suitable husbands.

²¹ McCandless, p. 37.

²² Garner, Bryan (ed). 2004, *Black’s Law Dictionary* (8th ed), West Group, St. Paul, p. 1288. In Elizabethan times, the definition of rape excluded intercourse between spouses.

Shakespeare further taints the characterization of Helena by burdening her with a compulsive personality. No matter how abominably Bertrand treats Helena – spurning her in open court, descending into debauchery by trying to seduce Diana -- Helena cannot overcome the compulsion to pursue him, although such unilateral love brings “the most bitter ... sorrow that e'er I heard virgin exclaim.”^{xxxii} Such masochistic pursuit despite repeated rejection seems to demonstrate a form of self-loathing,²³ perhaps originating in Helena's non-noble birth. Helena's rationalization for resorting to deception – which she calls “wicked meaning in a lawful deed”^{xxxiii} – is, like the play's title, another way of saying that the ends justify the means. Helena's resort to Machiavellian tactics demonstrates stereotypic characterization as Helena ruthlessly pursues her selfish interests. To an Englishwoman such as Cordelia in *King Lear*, all would not be well unless the means used to achieve her ends were just. Indeed, Cordelia forfeits her inheritance and life because she would not stoop to deception to achieve proper ends.

Helena displays other flaws originating in stereotypic characterization. Helena's desire to cure the king results from the selfish motive of finding a way to coerce Bertrand to marry her, “else...the medicine .../Had from ...my thoughts/Haply been absent...”^{xxxiv} There is also the subtle suggestion that witchcraft is the source of Helena's powers. Helena's intimation that “the luckiest stars in heaven”^{xxxv} are an integral part of her curative powers ascribes her abilities not to diligence, but to the supernatural – the same source of Joan's powers.

Although the character of Helena is based on Giletta in Boccaccio's *Decameron*,²⁴ Shakespeare's depiction departs from the source in several significant ways to achieve stereotypic characterization. The portrayal of Helena as a friendless Frenchwomen pursuing obsessive love is Shakespeare's invention as Giletta is a rich heiress whom many men willingly court.^{xxxvi} Moreover, Giletta is a pious woman whose powers originate in “the help of God.”^{xxxvii} Ascribing

²³ Moore, John D. 2006, *Confusing Love with Obsession* (3d ed.), Hazelden, Center City.

²⁴ Cross & Brooke, p. 367. Giletta's story appears in the ninth novel of the third day of the *Decameron*. Shakespeare apparently relied on the 1566 English translation by William Painter.

Helena's powers to witchcraft is another embellishment which seems designed to disparage Helena's character.

With regard to the character of Princess Katherine, we find that Shakespeare's depiction markedly deviates from the way that she appears in the source for her character, *The Famous Victories of Henry the Fifth*.²⁵ If Shakespeare had based Katherine on the way she appears in *Famous Victories*, she would have been another assertive, male-like figure in the mold of Joan and Helena forced by necessity to assume the traditional male role when Frenchmen abrogated their responsibilities. When Henry demands in *Famous Victories* that the French King abdicate so Henry can "immediately...be crowned King of France,"^{xxxviii} it is Katherine who rejects this demand. As lead negotiator for France, Katherine shrewdly refuses to marry Henry until he "abated all these unreasonable demands."^{xxxix} In depicting Katherine, however, Shakespeare restores what he would have considered the natural order by materially altering her persona to portray a thoroughly feminine ingénue who leaves negotiating and critical thinking to men. The traditional male role of waging war had been delegated to Joan in *Henry VI* and that of wooing to Helena in *All's Well*. Each play depicts a displacement of Shakespeare's vision of the natural order, as Frenchmen rebel against English rule in *Henry VI* and the King's illness jeopardizes stability in *All's Well*. In *Henry V*, Shakespeare exercises poetic license to pigeonhole Katherine into the traditional gender role ordained, in his view, by the *Book of Genesis*.²⁶ Shakespeare's message is that just as it is the natural order for Englishmen to defeat and rule France, it is the natural order for men to court and rule women.²⁷ Only when Frenchwomen are paired with unambiguously masculine Englishmen can they reassume their purportedly natural gender roles of meekness and submission.

The premise of Katherine's first scene is ironic as this French Princess whose country is under invasion displays so little confidence in France's defenders that she learns the invader's

²⁵ The source for the wooing scene, in addition to several other scenes in *Henry V* appears to be Anonymous, *The Famous Victories of Henry the Fifth*, registered in 1594. See Shakespeare, William, Brown, John Russell (ed). 1965, *Henry V, The Signet Classic Shakespeare*, New English Library Limited, London, p. 171.

²⁶ Williams, p. 190.

language, although the decisive battle has yet to be fought and France enjoys a five-to-one military advantage. This is the literary equivalent of fiddling whilst one's country burns.

Katherine's declarations "Il faut que j'apprenne à parler" – "I *must* learn to speak [English]" -- and "Je ne doute point d'apprendre...et en peu de temps"^{xl} – "I have no doubt I'll learn it, and in a short time" – foreshadow the English rout of French forces and suggest that Katherine is preparing to change allegiances because of France's inevitable defeat. Such fickleness represents stereotypic characterization.

The wooing scene subtly exacerbates this stereotypic characterization. When Henry takes a kiss from the princess, he declares:

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...^{xli}

Although Shakespeare may have thought it was a compliment to commend magical lips which could ensnare a King's affections, he actually perpetrated a subtle version of the same stereotype used overtly with Joan – that Frenchwomen employ sorcery to win battles and men's hearts. The allusion to witchcraft sends a covert message that Katherine has somehow conjured her way into Henry's heart, rather than using her natural gifts. Shakespeare again suggests, as he did blatantly with Joan, and more subtly with Helena, that Frenchwomen's virtues are gained through supernatural devices. In essence, Katherine has witchcraft in her lips, Helena has witchcraft in her medical bag, and Joan has witchcraft in her military prowess.

Katherine is defined by her obsequious comment that she will do whatever "shall please de Roi mon père."^{xlii} The contrast is inevitable to Shakespeare's depiction of a British princess, similarly situated to Katherine in all but her nationality, who had only to "please her father" by glibly describing how much she loved him. Cordelia would not patronize King Lear by telling him what he wanted to hear. Whatever the consequences, she told the truth. Cordelia did not have to invoke the supernatural to win men's hearts or rely on her inheritance as her dowry. She

²⁷ *Ibid.*

gained love through virtue and good deeds. As the King who took the disinherited Cordelia for his wife declared, “She is herself a dowry.”^{xliii} Most significantly, unlike Katherine, the British princess did not passively accept the fate forcibly imposed by her two evil sisters. She led an army in the unsuccessful attempt to restore King Lear to the throne. Cordelia gave her life in defense of principle; Katherine switched sides and married the invader King. Cordelia was a round, dynamic character for the ages; Katherine a static, flat character for one moment in time.²⁸

Shakespeare took the Cordelia-like Frenchwoman of *Famous Victories* and transformed her into a superficial character by eliminating critical thought and independence. The wooing scene is the pivotal juncture where Katherine could have asserted her and her people’s rights. She could have been the natural leader behind whom her people rally to repel invasion. As princess, it is Katherine who should have accomplished the feats that Joan performed – rallying the French to seek freedom from occupation. Katherine’s youth should have been no more a deterrent than it was to Joan, as both are roughly the same age when Shakespeare’s depicts them. Yet Shakespeare’s Katherine seems incapable of heroism beyond the feeble protest, “Is it possible dat I sould love the ennemie of France?”^{xliiv} She is portrayed as having scant aptitude for anything beyond learning English words such as “foot” and “gown”^{xliv} -- which sound like the obscene French words for “copulate” and “vagina,”²⁹ thus symbolizing the reproductive role that Katherine will play in “compound[ing] a boy.”^{xlvi} She is another undeveloped, stereotypic character, defined by adherence to social norms and the tendency to be self-absorbed and shallow. Katherine fits the mode of a docile and conquered princess, suitable as Henry’s queen consort, but not his equal.

²⁸ Forster, pp. 67-78.

²⁹ Katherine’s French pronunciation of the word “coun” also sounds like a vulgar English expression for female genitals, which invariably generates laughter from the audience. Thus, Shakespeare makes Katherine the object of jest rather than respect by having her unwittingly utter an obscene word. There is a more subtle interpretation of why Shakespeare has this French woman speak obscene words. As noted by Gervinus, it was a common at the time to believe that even refined French people were prone to use sexually explicit language. Gervinus, G.G, Bunnett, F.E. trans. 1877, *Shakespeare Commentaries*, Smith, Elder & Co., London, p. 169.

CONCLUSION

Whilst Shakespeare boldly practices de-stereotyping with Joan in the first four acts of *Henry VI Part I*, having her reverse gender roles and assume the dominant masculine position as she leads the French armies, by Act V the inventive character development abruptly ceases and Joan is neatly compartmentalized back into the roles that an English audience would expect -- witch and strumpet. Helena is also an innovative French women character who seeks out the dominant male roles in curing the King and exercising the masculine right of choice. Although Shakespeare depicts Joan and Helena in an iconoclastic manner, his portrayal of Katherine is more conventional: Shakespeare takes the multi-faceted, alpha character of Katherine from *Famous Victories* – a Frenchwoman who stands up to her country's conqueror -- and pigeon-holes her into the traditional gender roles of obsequious daughter and wife-to-be. Yet whether depicting the Maid of Orléans or the Princess Royale, Shakespeare could not resist engaging in frequent and pervasive stereotypic characterization of the three Frenchwomen. Where the Frenchwoman, as in Joan's case, is already an object of derision, Shakespeare heaps on the invective and all but has her dance around a caldron. Where the Frenchwoman, as in Katherine's case, is the great grandmother of his sovereign, Shakespeare does not abate the stereotypic characterization, but conducts it *sub rosa*, subtly suggesting that Katherine practices witchcraft and is fickle.

There is a continuum of bias which Shakespeare exhibits: Joan is at the extreme negative side with the vices of a witch and strumpet; Helena is in the middle with vices of hot-blooded passion, deceptiveness and ruthlessness; and Princess Katherine is at the positive end, but subject to intimations that she relies on witchcraft and is fickle. To fill the void left by the purported weakness and cowardice of Frenchmen, Shakespeare's Frenchwomen are depicted as forced by circumstance to become the dominant gender. It is they who must, in the case of Joan, lead vacillating soldiers into battle or, in the case of Helena, become the sexual pursuer who tricks Bertrand into consummating his marriage. Shakespeare portrays the Frenchwomen in all three plays as manifesting most of the prevailing English stereotypes about Frenchwomen, thereby

pandering to the commonly-held prejudices of the day rather than educating his audience and transcending stereotypes.³⁰

³⁰ Joan and Helena are depicted as such dominant, alpha women that they are reminiscent of another ascendant woman who dressed in male military attire and proclaimed to her troops, “I know I have the bodie of a weak and feeble woman, but I have the heart and stomach of a king...” The suggestion by some scholars that Joan is modeled on Queen Elizabeth is tenuous at best. Although both wore male military garb, the similarity stops there. Joan was vilified as a witch and strumpet. However, Elizabeth I was presented to her subjects as the “Virgin Queen” and a new goddess who exceeded the traditional Greek goddesses. Elizabeth was the prototype for many of Shakespeare’s great heroines, just as she was the model for characters like Helena, who exhibits the capacity to perform great feats, but, unlike Elizabeth, is ultimately found lacking in integrity because she acted in conformity with English stereotypes about French women.

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- ^v *Henry VI Part One* Act II, scene ii.
- ^{vi} *Ibid.* Act III, scene ii.
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- ^{xxxvi} Boccaccio, Giovanni. Trans. O'Cuilleain, Cormac. 2004, *Decameron*, Wordworth Editions Limited, Hertfordshire, p. 255. Giletta "had been left rich..."
- ^{xxxvii} *Ibid* p. 256.
- ^{xxxviii} Anonymous, *The Famous Victories of Henry Fif*, reprinted in Shakespeare, William, Mack, Maynard (ed). 1965, *Henry IV Part One, The Signet Classic Shakespeare*, New English Library Limited, London, p. 226.
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APPENDIX I

HENRY VI PART I

Act V, Scene iv

JOAN

I am with child ...

Murder not then the fruit within my womb...

YORK

Now heaven forbend! the holy maid with child!

WARWICK

The greatest miracle that e'er ye wrought:

Is all your strict preciseness come to this?

YORK

She and the Dauphin have been juggling:

...

WARWICK

Well, go to; we'll have no bastards live;

Especially since Charles must father it.

JOAN LA

You are deceived; my child is none of his:

It was Alencon that enjoy'd my love.

YORK

Alencon! that notorious Machiavel!

It dies, an if it had a thousand lives.

JOAN

O, give me leave, I have deluded you:

'Twas neither Charles nor yet the duke I named,

But Reignier, king of Naples, that prevail'd.

WARWICK

A married man!...

YORK

Why, here's a girl! I think she knows not well,

There were so many, whom she may accuse.