Writing in the Disciplines

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Marriage and Power in Shakespeare's *King Henry V*

In the Life of King Henry the Fifth Shakespeare presents a nuanced portrait of the famously heroic English king, one that is made even more complicated by his dealings with Princess Katherine Valois of France. The marriage between Katherine and King Henry in Shakespeare's work is the best example of the complications, power struggles, and implications of the political marriage at its largest possible scale—between two heads of state. It is also an important characterization of Henry and Katherine themselves and the political and personal union they forged.

During the fifteenth century of England personal marriages where the bride and groom chose each other were extremely rare: Marriage was used as a tool to gain power and shift the social structure. In contrast to our contemporary society, marriage was not about love or even physical attraction--it was a political institution that reinforced the monarchical structure. For men marriage presented an opportunity through dowry to gain wealth or vital territories that could lead to new titles and authority. It also provided the chance to conceive an heir that would keep the possession of these territories in the family. For the brides themselves marriage had less of a direct benefit, although it usually elevated their social status. Instead, it was their obligation to their family and their fulfillment of a social contract (Duby 7).

The historical link between marriage and politics was established early on: Early modern political treatises even borrowed terms and contractual obligations from marital discourse and contracts (Ray 16). Each marriage had lasting implications for the husband, the wife, and their

families. Other than heroism in battle, which could often lead to new territories as reward, marriage presented the only chance for a family name to better their social situation and role in the monarchical power structure. It was also the most effective—once territories and wealth had been gained through a marriage contract they were very difficult to lose. The marriage contract was honored both by the law and the church and the dowry was a vital part of the tract. More importantly it was enforced by social norms and the monarchical structure giving every newly married couple a more permanent place in the societal structure McCarthy).

With these kind of stakes it was impossible to avoid political calculation and power manipulation in the selection of a marriage partner. Arranging marriages was a very careful act of diplomacy, from the initial approach to the art of negotiating the dowry. The more eligible and politically desirable the bride, the less dowry was required, but the opposite was also true; it was common for some newly wealthy families to pay large sums to acquire the nobility that came with certain older names and titles in fifteenth century England. On a smaller scale, the political machinations that went into arranging marriages mirror the kind of negotiations that high level state diplomacy required and show just how intensive the marriage tract process was (Olsen 147).

Beyond negotiation and the marriage tract, fifteenth century England viewed the actual marriage union as a necessity to maintain social order. Writing in 1598 Robert Cleaver compared "A household is as it were [to] a little commonwealth" (Ray 14). Marriage was considered to be the desired end state of human relationship and a fulfillment of God's wishes (Ray 16). It's most important function though was to reinforce the role of the monarch. As Hilda Smith writes "the early modern household functioned more clearly as a unit of the state in

which the father established public order and enforced accepted moral and religious values for his various dependents" (Ray 16).

While the nobility occasionally had some choice in the marriage partner, kings had even less freedom. A king's marriage served many important roles to fifteen century society. Among these was the symbolic: If the common marriage reflected a unit of state, the king's marriage was the ultimate representation of the ideal orderly household. His marriage served to unite the small scale political state with the larger one--his kingdom, and enforce the social norms that all citizens were expected to conform with. The king's marriage was also key to reinforcing the hierarchal class structure. If the king were to marry a woman lacking the right name, title, family, or wealth it could set a dangerous precedent for the rest of the nobility that could ultimately collapse the system (McCarthy 92).

Henry V's marriage to Katherine Valois in 1420 is the ultimate political marriage. By using military force Henry was able to conquer France, but he needed a way to ensure that his claim to the country would be legitimate in bloodline succession rules. Marrying Katherine allowed Henry to unite the monarchical succession lines of the kingdoms of France and England into one. Where Henry had previously had a very shaky claim to the throne of France, dramatized by Shakespeare in Act 1, he now established a legitimate source of power and built the foundation for future English claims of France.

In a practical sense the marriage gave Henry the opportunity to conceive an heir that would have a legitimate claim to the throne of both England and France given his bloodline. In Henry's vision his family would forever rule a unified France and England because of Henry's marriage to the Princess of France. This can be seen as an obvious attempt to improve on the

loose succession claim that Henry originally uses to stake his claim over territory in France. While Henry did have a son, the kingdom of France was quickly lost and the young Henry VI was unable to regain his father's conquests. Even though Henry V's plan ultimately proved unsuccessful it was based on traditional and historical succession precedent and was one of the most important factors behind his marriage to Katherine.

Their union can also be seen as the culmination of the idea of the body natural and the body politic as one. By marrying Katherine Henry united his physical body with the kingdom of France, represented by the body of his new wife. In a symbolic way, he brought together his physical union with the political one he had just achieved. It is the ultimate representation of this idea of the king as one with his politics and role. His physical presence and his absolute ruling power are one and the same, his actions and orders and his authority as head of state are one and the same. This elevated the marriage of Henry and Katherine beyond a physical union of two people to a political alliance with important implications for two distinct nations.

This symbolic nature of the marriage to both England and France is almost as important as its political implications. The joining of Henry, King of England and Katherine, Princess of France provided an important representation of the joining of England and France to the people of both countries. It gave Henry a referent source of power to rule France with and demonstrated to the nobility his legitimate authority. Even though he had conquered France to gain his new position as head of state, the marriage symbolically linked the two countries and demonstrated that the war was over—a new era of peace had begun.

Henry and Katherine's union is also an example of a common fifteenth century idea—marriage as a right for men. Because Henry had conquered France he was entitled to Katherine's

hand, with or without her say. It was part of the "spoils of war" and the privileges that go to the victorious monarch. This idea is readily seen in Shakespeare's play: During the treaty negotiations Henry states "she is our capital demand, compris'd/ within the fore-rank of our articles" (H5). Neither King Charles nor Queen Isabel offers any objections to Katherine as an object and political demand to be granted to Henry for his victory. All parties involved in the negotiation of the Treaty of Troyes appear to view it as a legitimate requirement.

The marriage between King Henry and Princess Katherine is also an example of diplomacy at its highest level. As previously stated, the marriage was one of the first and most important conditions of the Treaty of Troyes. It was a necessity to ensuring peace between England and France. It may seem strange to contemporary readers that a marriage could be the first article of a peace treaty, but it wasn't an unusual or strange idea in the fifteenth century Europe. An entire peace agreement between two nations was contingent on this union; without Katherine Henry would not have accepted the negotiation between the kingdoms of England and France and surely would have returned to war. Shakespeare dramatizes this point in Act III during the prologue; Henry rejects France's peace offer of Katherine—her dowry is nothing more than insignificant French territories and the battle of Harfleur continues. BJ Sokol writes: "in the marriages of Princess Katherine to Hal in Henry V… personal concerns are second to questions of the peace of nations and the disposition of great territories" (Sokol 39).

This level of diplomacy that pervades the marriage contract can also be seen in Henry's later dowry negotiation for Katherine's hand, after his initial rejection of the small offer. He demands immense territories in France for Katherine's marriage debt, even though his demand of the princess is already a capital debt France must pay to England (Winkelman 190). Though Henry is requiring Katherine as a condition of the treaty, her family is still required to pay a

dowry! While this is standard to fifteenth century marriage tract, it seems quite surprising and unrealistic now. Henry's victory at Agincourt allows him to demand both territory as well as the princess (Sokol 71).

King Henry's full diplomatic powers are on display in his private bargaining with Katherine. He uses his charm, intelligence, and reasoning to seal the marriage tract, just as he had in the treaty negotiation with France. In these lines he frames his dowry demand in an intricate logical argument that also appeals to Katherine's emotions:

> No, it is not possible that you should love the enemy of France, Kate. But in loving me, you
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> should love the friend of France, for I love France so well that I will not part with a village of
>
> it , I will it all mine; and Kate, when France is mine, and I am yours, then yours is France, and
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> you are mine. (H5 5.2. 171-6)

It is evident from these lines that Henry's dowry requirement is great and a necessary condition of the union between him and Katherine. He must use his full diplomatic prowess to convince France to fulfill these demands and gain peace between the two countries.

This scene in Act V is crucial to Shakespeare's characterization of Henry and his new wife. The playwright has Henry woo Katherine, attempting to win her over to his proposal and accept his terms. Claire McEachern explains it as "a scene in which both parties baldly acknowledge the political work that romance must do" (McEachern 1125). Even though Katherine and her territorial dowry is the primary condition of the treaty, the king still romances her using classic appeals to emotion and reason to convince her. The dialogue clearly shows

Henry's political skill and clever wit, even as he appears to genuinely desire Katherine. Henry is revealed as exceptionally skilled at logical argument and rhetorical persuasion.

Katherine is shown to be quite clever as well throughout Henry the Fifth, leading the audience to believe that she and Henry will be a good match for each other. In Act III, Scene IV she asks her maid to teach her English, shrewdly knowing that she will be the bride of King Henry and already beginning to prepare herself. Later in Act V, she holds her own against Henry's wit offering counterpoint and rebuttals to his arguments and attempts to woo her. When Henry tries to kiss her she chastises him, showing remarkable independence and spunk that differs greatly from typical characterizations of a fifteenth century noblewoman. However, this moment also shows her modesty and desire for purity; adherence to her societal role. This portrayal of Katherine sets her up as an ideal feminine match for Henry-intelligent, clever, and moderately independent, but not overbearing or controlling like a Lady Macbeth figure.

It is interesting to consider why Shakespeare creates this romantic comedy within the epic history play. He clearly wants to show his audience the complicated Henry, a man incapable of simple characterization. But Shakespeare also shows the human side of even the most political of marriages: After the negotiations were through, the ceremony performed, the new husband and wife still had to become a family. As the personal become political, the political must also become personal. Henry and Katherine were still human beings who had to make a permanent life together and consummate their marriage. Act V is really about their attempts to make the political union a personal union that would lead to the fulfillment of their basic human need for love and romantic companionship.

Henry V's marriage to Katherine Valois is the ultimate example of the medieval political union and its implications for succession and power in Europe. It is an intricate blending of the personal and the political, the body politic and the body natural. In their society marriage was the ultimate tool of gaining and consolidating power and Henry and Katherine did it on the grandest scale, bringing together two distinct nations, languages, and cultures. Shakespeare's portrayal of their marriage gives the audience meaningful characterization of both Henry and Katherine and unique insight into the power struggles of their era.

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