“Aucuns de ma langue”: Language and Political Identity in Late-Medieval France

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Ha ... Angleterre ... combien que tu me aies fait maux innumerables, toutefois de toy me feusse bien chevie et recompansee et te faire tenir en ta terre sans entre en la mienne, se se n'eust esté la separacion d'aucuns de ma langue

Ah... England... though you have done me countless ills, nevertheless I would have gotten the better of you, and made you stay in your own land without coming into mine, if it had not been for the secession of certain [people] of my language

Jean Juvénal des Ursins, Audite Celi, 153

In his translation, adaptation, and annotation of Aristotle’s Politics, carried out between 1370 and 1377 at the request of King Charles V of France, the royal counselor, theologian, and philosopher Nicole Oresme cites language as a component of identity, one which unites some speakers and divides others. Oresme writes that

plusieurs regions sunt divisees ou separees par mers ou par grands fleuves ou palus, par forests, par desers, par montaignes, par lieuz inaccessibles ou inhabitable pourquoy les uns ne pevennent converser avec les autres de tele conversation comme requise est entre gens d’un royalme ou d’une policie. Item ... nature a donne a homme parole pour entendre l’un l’autre afin de communication civile. Et donques la division et diversité des langages repugne a conversation civile et a vivre de policie. Et a cest propos dit Saint Augustin ou xix livre de la Cité de Dieu que ii bestes mues de diverses especes s’acompaignent plus legièremament ensemble que ne furent ii hommes dont l’un ne congoist le langage de l’autre. Et di assés tost apres que un homme est plus volentiers avec son chien qu’ovecques un homme de estrange langue.

many regions are divided or separated by seas or by great rivers or swamps, by forests, by deserts, by mountains, by inaccessible or uninhabitable places such that the ones cannot communicate with the others in the manner that is required of people of one kingdom or one polity. Likewise... nature has given man language to understand one another and in order to carry on civic communication. And therefore the division and the diversity of languages repels civic conversation and living in a polity. And on this subject Saint Augustin says in Book 19 of the City of God that two dumb beasts of different species keep company more readily than do two men of whom one does not know the language of the other. And he says just after that a man remains more willingly with his dog than with another man of a foreign tongue. (Menut 291)

As Oresme’s citation of Augustine makes clear, the idea that language forges bonds between people is longstanding. In the present article, I aim to show that language not only contributes to the formation of collective identity, but more specifically that in early fifteenth-century France, it becomes a constitutive element of political – even national – identity.3

Despite Oresme’s conviction that those of different languages do not prefer to “vivre a policie,” linguistic and political boundaries cannot
be assumed to map reliably onto one another in medieval France, or elsewhere in Europe.\textsuperscript{4} Occitan, for instance, was employed in literary, especially poetic, contexts from Bordeaux to Nice, even extending into what is today eastern Spain and northern Italy, and yet no political entity ever emerged of which Occitan was the language.\textsuperscript{5} England, in contrast, employed not one but two different vernaculars in addition to Latin, thereby giving rise to a linguistic complexity that has received considerable critical attention.\textsuperscript{6} The use of French, on the other hand, unique among the romance vernaculars, extended far beyond the “four rivers”\textsuperscript{7} and was used in a wide variety of places and contexts. In practical terms, French in England functioned as a kind of Latin \textit{bis}, while the same may be said of many localities across Europe and extending east to Cyprus and the Levant, where French was employed for a range of diplomatic and economic purposes (Lusignan, \textit{La Langue des rois au Moyen Âge}, 200)\textsuperscript{8}. In literary terms French had long been a prestigious and useful vernacular, “a literary (and performative) instrument, not a birthright” (Cornish 310). Thus, while French enjoyed diplomatic, legal, economic, and literary utility and prestige, its very ubiquity rendered it a politically neutral idiom, one that the English themselves employed in their governance of Gascony during the fourteenth century (Lusignan, \textit{La Langue des rois}).

In what follows I will show how, in the early fifteenth-century, under the pressure of the English occupation of France and of the French civil war, the French language began to shed its status as a politically unaligned vernacular, and, while remaining culturally prestigious, began to assume the contours and connotations of a national language that would be associated with the facts of one’s birth, and would allow for – even invite – certain assumptions with respect to one’s political allegiances.\textsuperscript{9} I am interested in what one might call the fiction of French, that is to say, the social and political imaginary surrounding the French language. Consequently, I will not focus upon actual language use, but upon the ways in which the French language is discussed and deployed in a range of texts in order to define political allegiances through claims of both exclusion (the English) and inclusion (the Burgundians), thereby producing and asserting partisan and proto-nationalist understandings of political identity, of who, precisely, constituted “the French” during the opening decades of the fifteenth century.

My analysis will center upon a roughly twenty-year period which raises, with particular clarity, questions of language, allegiance, and identity. Henry V’s crushing defeat of the French at the battle of Agincourt (October 25, 1415) inspired the English king to reassess the scope of what he might achieve in France and to recalibrate the extent of his political ambitions. The Treaty of Troyes (May 21, 1420), Henry V’s diplomatic victory (made possible by the military one), effectively disinherited the French heir, Charles, and named Henry V regent of the kingdom and heir to the king of France, thereby paving the way for the so-called Dual Monarchy. Those loyal to the dauphin Charles denounced the Treaty of Troyes as “un tel desraisonnable, tres deshonnest et desnaturel traictié” (“such a very unreasonable, very dishonest, and unnatural treaty,” emphasis