You should be women,
And yet your beards forbid me to interpret
That you are so.

Banquo (Macbeth, Liii.45–7)

Saint Paul writes to the Galatians of a world where all difference has been erased: ‘For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus’ (Gal. 3.27–8). As we will see below, Paul provides the theological justification for the transvestism of such religious figures as Joan of Arc. But if religion or some force erases all differences, what happens to the distinctions that cultures typically make? In the Henry VI trilogy, Shakespeare confronts this troubling question in his exploration of the clash between English and French medieval societies. As in A Midsummer Night’s Dream and The Two Noble Kinsmen, Shakespeare again focuses on the violation of gender boundaries between male and female as a metaphor for cross-cultural differentiation, but in the history plays French gender instability becomes an urgent threat to English national and cultural identity.

This chapter focuses on the gender instability that two French female warriors, Joan of Arc and Margaret of Anjou, bring about. A question emerges about how Shakespeare distinguishes French from English characters in the Henry VI plays. In these plays, he does not, for example, underscore the specific Frenchness of their language as he does in part for the purposes of humor in Henry V. This later play depicts Pistol’s amusing attempt in Act IV, scene iv, to talk to a French soldier who speaks no English; Katherine’s French
lesson in Act III, scene iv; and her effort to communicate in broken English with Henry V in Act V, scene ii. When she confesses, 'I cannot speak your England,' her future husband reassures her: 'O fair Katherine, if you will love me soundly with your French heart, I will be glad to hear you confess it brokenly with your English tongue' (V.ii.104-7). The French King, Charles VI, however, speaks fluent English throughout; whereas the boastful, cowardly Dauphin mixes English with French phrases and expletives such as 'O Dieu vivant!' (III.v.5) and 'Ça, ha!' (III.vii.12). In the *Henry VI* plays, Shakespeare does not emphasize such linguistic differences; rather, he connects the Frenchness of Joan of Arc, the French courtiers, and Margaret to a specific gender anomaly: the French female characters usurp what the Englishmen interpret as proper masculine gender roles, and thus create a profound sense of gender instability that poses a threat to the English themselves.

Both Joan and Margaret emerge from a cultural matrix similar to that of the Amazons, but unlike Hippolyta and Emilia, they offer strong performative presences and threaten to deploy by military means an alien cultural system. In the *Henry VI* trilogy, English culture confronts a culture from which it should differ and yet to which it seems intimately connected and upon which it depends. French culture, no less alien and fantastical than the Amazon kingdom, emanates from the two women warriors, Joan of Arc and Margaret of Anjou. Unstable and fraught with inner disturbances, this fantastical world, where gender exchanges are deployed, subverts English ideological certainty.

To demonstrate how these women provide the foundation for the cross-cultural contrast and become conduits to guide the action to the frontiers of culture, I will discuss first Joan of Arc and then Margaret of Anjou both as historical figures and then as characters in Shakespeare's drama. However, I should underscore that Shakespeare does not altogether observe this distinction between history and fiction. Perhaps, like Edmund Spenser, Shakespeare realized that the method of the 'poet historical' must perforce differ from that of the historiographer:

For an Historiographer discouseth of affayres orderly as they were done, accounting as well the times as the actions, but a Poet thrusteth into the midst, even where it most concerneth him, and there recoursing to the thinges forepaste, and divining of thinges to come, maketh a pleasing Analysis of all.