

What if William the Conqueror, Was William the Failure

A satire on the influence of the French
language on modern English

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Scene 1: (*Philadelphia, UK, 2002. Britain is and always has been sovereign over what is considered the “United States”. Scene opens in the Residence of John and Patty Jefferson. Grandpa, John’s father, enters bedroom of Billy, stage left.*)

Grandpa: “All set for bed Billy, morning comes quickly and you have a big test tomorrow don’t you.”

Billy: “Yeh, I’m a little worried, so many names and dates. George Jefferson, Thomas Henry, Patrick Washington, it gets so tough.”

Grandpa: (*Chuckles to himself as he sits down*) “You mean Patrick Henry and Thomas Jefferson . . .”

Billy: (*Interrupting*) “Yeh whatever, they’re all the same to me.”

Grandpa: “Well, I’ll have you know that Thomas Jefferson was your great-great-great-great grandfather.

Billy: “Really?!”

Grandpa: “Why yes, in fact he was a great scholar and patriot.”

Billy: “Well then why don’t we talk a lot about him in school? Do they talk about him in the other British provinces such as New York or California?”

Grandpa: “No, they don’t. It seems that many folks don’t like to remember much of what he did. They say it was a shame to our great, and ever-expanding nation of Britain where we live today.”

Billy: “Why, what happened Grandpa?”

Grandpa: (*Leans back in chair*) “Well, it all began in the spring of the year 1776. Patrick Henry, who was a good friend of your great-great-great-great grandfather, was talking to a group of people outside of the North Church right here in Philadelphia . . .”

(*Lights dim on stage left, and rise on stage right where Patrick Henry is standing on wooden carton addressing a small crowd gathered on a street corner in front of the North Church.*)

Patrick Henry: (*With confidence*) “And so my beloved (*Begins to stutter, as if for loss of words*) _____ of Philadelphia, will we allow for such _____ among our _____? Will we allow for such _____ from that man that is called King?! And so I say to all, citizens of Philadelphia Give me _____ or give me Death!”

Crowd Member 1: “What nonsense!”

Crowd Member 2: “He can’t even explain himself!”

Crowd Member 3: “What good are you supposed leaders, if you can’t even explain what you mean?!”

(*Shouting continues in like manner as crowd disperses. Patrick Henry dismayed and humiliated steps off his wooden crate and exits stage right.*) (*Lights dim stage right*)

Scene 2: *Philadelphia, summer 1776*

(*John Hancock, John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, and others are gathered for a Meeting of Delegates. All are seated about to begin another day’s session.*)

John Hancock: “Welcome delegates, please all be seated, and we shall begin. James Madison, what is first on the agenda?”

James Madison: “Yes, first item of business, the declaration.”

John Adams: "Why yes that's right, Thomas have you completed the document?"

Thomas Jefferson: "Well yes, I believe I have."

John Hancock: "Then lets hear it."

Thomas Jefferson: "Well, here it goes,

"When in the(*sudden mind black, searching for words*) _____ of _____, it becomes _____ for one _____ to dissolve the _____ which have connected them with _____, and to _____ among the powers of the earth the _____ and _____ to which the Laws of _____ and of _____ God _____ them, a _____ to the _____ of _____ that they should _____ the _____ which _____ them to the _____."

John Adams: "Thomas, that was horrible, I've heard drunk men speak better than that! What on Earth happened?"

John Hancock: "Yes, Thomas, Britain will surely laugh at us if that is the best we've got. Oh dear heavens, what will be done with us?"

Thomas Jefferson: "But gentlemen, I assure you, it was far better written in my head, I don't know what happened."

John Hancock: "Well you better, Thomas, or else we may not have a fight after all. Madison, what follows?"

James Madison: "Well, it appears that all the remaining issues on the agenda are dependant on Jefferson's document."

John Hancock: "Well in that case, it appears that we'll adjourn for today."

(As Hancock hits his gavel, general chatter develops among all representatives. Jefferson quickly stands and exits stage left.)

Scene 3: *(Later, in Thomas Jefferson's Philadelphia apartment. Martha Jefferson is busily preparing dinner, as Thomas enters stage left.)*

Martha: "Good evening dear, how was everything in Philadelphia?"

Thomas: "I don't understand. I had it all in my head, but the words just wouldn't come out. It's as if they were blocked by some unknown source."

Martha: "Well, honey how about you sit down and tell me all about it. Listen I've just finished preparing some cow for you. Do you want some cow, it's what's for dinner, complete with all the fixings."

Thomas: "Oh, honey, you know I can't think on an empty stomach."

Martha: "Well, Tom, you can't wallow in your misery all day. I'm sure that something will come of this. Now sit down and explain to me what happened."

(Thomas sits at table, Mrs. Jefferson carries over platter to the table and sits)

Thomas: "Oh this cow smells delicious! Oh! and pig and potato trimming. How wonderful."

Martha: "So, what happened exactly at the Convention?"

Thomas: "Alright, so there I was all ready to deliver the document, and the words just were not there! And so now it seems that I can't get any support from the other delegates. They say that without a proper document, there is no way the British will listen to us."

Martha: "Well I'm sure that you'll be able to find the right words to . . ."

Thomas: *(Interrupting)* "The worst thing dear, is that we don't even have the support of the French."

Martha: "Why is that?"

Thomas: "Ever since they lost to Britain back in the days of William the Failure . . ."

Martha: *(Interrupting)* "William the who?"

Thomas: "William the Failure was the leader of the Norman army in 1066, but was killed in battle. Because of that, the Normans who are France's ancestors, have always hated Britain with a passion.

Martha: "But doesn't France realize that we are trying to fight against Britain?"

Thomas: "Sure they do. However, they are so disgusted by our speech that they will not help at all. They say that any future nation who cannot address themselves in a dignified and poetic manner is not worth becoming a nation. Now I ask you dear, do you think that we speak differently, or obscurely? I do not believe so.

Martha: "Why no, dear. Of course we don't. I feel that we do our Germanic ancestors proud."

Thomas: "In fact, dear, Franklin tells me that the Frenchmen feel that we should adopt French phrases into our vocabulary."

Martha: "Like what?"

Thomas: "Well they say before we begin fighting we need terms like: army, navy, combat, ambush, and soldier."

Martha: "What on Earth for? We can fight for a new nation without such words."

Thomas: "They say we wouldn't be able to establish a nation even if we win."

Martha: "Why is that?"

Thomas: "They say that without words such as: government, state, authority, treaty, judge, jury, or attorney, it would be very difficult."

Martha: "How absurd!"

Thomas: "And then they say that we wouldn't have any town improvement abilities either."

Martha: "Why?"

Thomas: "They say we need words such as: art, literature, beauty, music, color, and sculpture."

Martha: "The nerve of some people. . . well at least we would have our churches."

Thomas: "Oh, they said something about churches, too. Saying we would need such words as: religion, sermon, sacrament, prayer, clergy, pastor, confession, and baptism."

(Enter John Adams, stage left)

John: "Tom!"

Thomas: "Why, what is it, John?"

John: "What are we going to do about the paper?"

Thomas: "I don't know, it was horrible, truly horrible!"

John: "Well, we have to simply make of it what we can. Will you still do it, Thomas?"

Thomas: "Well, I suppose, but I . . ."

Martha: "Of course he will, John."

John: "Good."

Thomas: "I will have it by next week's meeting."

John: "Fine then, just make sure it is complete by next week's meeting. We must hurry! Now, if you'll excuse me, I must finish some urgent business at hand. *(removes hat and bows head to say goodbye)* Mrs. Jefferson." *(exits stage right)*

Martha: "You go to your room and write, I'll clean up."

Thomas: "Fine, thank you dear." *(exits stage left)*

(Lights down.)

Scene 4: *(Philadelphia, The following Monday at the delegate's meeting. General chatter is exuberant in the room.)*

John Hancock: "Welcome delegates, please all be seated, and we shall begin. James Madison, do you have the agenda for today?"

James Madison: "Yes, first item of business, the declaration."

John Hancock: "Well, this better be good. Let's here what you've got Thomas."

Thomas Jefferson:

"When in the pathway of times that pass, it becomes met for one group of men to dissolve the links of views between groups which have connected them with one that is not himself, and to guess among the powers of the earth the detached and same post of being apart to which the Laws of World and of World's God allow them, a good awe to the feeling of beings demands that they should say the reasons which force them to the breakup."

(General outbursts of disgust)

John Hancock: "Oh that will never do. We will be the laughing stock of them all."

John Adams: "Good Heavens, what shall we do?"

Delegate 1: "Nothing. Let us stop this madness!"

Delegate 2: "Yes, why not we return to our families and farms and simply live in accordance to what we have!"

Thomas Jefferson: "Well, what about our rights, our lands."

Delegate 3: "We have our land, what more do you want?"

John Hancock: "Order, order. We must vote."

(All delegates, take there seats, outbursts slowly cease)

John Hancock: "James would you please begin the voting count."

James Madison: "Yes, Mr. Washington. Delaware what do you vote?"

Delegate 1: "Nay."

James Madison: "Massachusetts"

Delegate 2: "Nay."

(Lights dim on stage right, and rise on stage left on Billy's bedroom.)

Billy: "So great-great-great-great grandfather was a failure?!"

Grandpa: "No, of course not. He simply lacked the needed vocabulary to express himself. That's why you must take French in school and bring back that great dream of Independence."

Billy: "Ah grandpa, I hate French!"

Grandpa: "But French is the language of knowledge, and politics and science. English lets you communicate amongst your friends, but French gives you the opportunities of speaking to diplomats, scientists and governors. Just imagine the possibilities . . . Inventions, World Domination, Nobel Prize Winner, Wealth, Fame . . . !" *(Grandpa gazes off-stage in wonderment)*

Billy: "Really, grandpa?!"

Grandpa: *(Stirring from his day-dreaming)* "What . . . oh, yes, exactly . . . well it's late, I must not disturb you from anymore rest. Sleep tight, Billy." *(Grandpa rises from his chair, and exits through bedroom door stage left.)*

Billy: “Don’t worry grandpa, I will. Thanks grandpa. Good night.”
(*Billy lays in bed, his face filled with smile and excitement.*) “French enables World Domination . . . wow!!”

(*Lights dim on stage left. Lights rise on stage right as dream sequence begins—Billy is seen in his high school classroom learning French at an amazing rate. His teachers shocked but impressed.—Billy is seen at graduation giving the commencement speech.*)

Billy: “And so I say to you my fellow students. Will we simply go forth this day and do nothing with the education we have attained? Or will we make a stand in this world. Will we raise our voices towards our government and complete the dream which our fore-father’s tried to reach?!”

Students: (*Cheering*) “Yes!!”

Billy: “Will we fight against the injustice which we are compelled to face?”

Students: (*Cheering*) “Yes!!”

Billy: “Then let us make tomorrow become today! Let us take Action! Give me Liberty or give me Death!!” (*Crowd erupts and all students begin to riot*)

Student 1: “For Thomas Jefferson and our Life, and Liberty!”

Student 2: “REVOLUTION!”

Student 3: “Down with the Monarchy and the Queen!”

(*Students gather around Billy and hoist him up onto their shoulders. As cheering continues, Billy raises his arms triumphantly and all exit stage right.*)

(*Lights dim stage right, and rise stage left. Billy is seen still sleeping. End Scene.*)

Billy: (*Murmuring in his sleep*) “Let us take arms and pledge for justice.” (*Smiles and continues to sleep*)(*Lights dim.*)

Scene 5: (*The next morning. Billy’s High School. Bell rings and students all take their seats*)

Teacher: (*Starts to hand out test to students*) “Well class, hope you all prepared well for this exam. I must say it won’t be one of my easiest.” (*Students groan. Teacher smiles to herself. Billy raises his hand.*)

Teacher: “Question Billy?”

Billy: “Yes, right after the test can we begin learning about the French language?”

Teacher: “Why certainly Billy, but don’t you receive enough French instruction in Monsier Giau’s class?”

Billy: “Well, yes it’s just I think it’s important to learn as much as we can about the French language.”

Teacher: “That’s very true, Billy. However might I inquire as to your sudden interest?”

Billy: (*Smiles as if he’s hiding something*) “Let’s just say this last unit of history has made a tremendous impression on me.” (*Billy, begins to fill out his exam booklet and pauses to gaze towards the front of the classroom. He sees himself standing before his fellow delegates, poised and assured. He begins to read—“When in the course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people... ..” The Liberty Bell is heard ringing in the background. Lights dim. Curtain.*)

THE END

***Author’s Note: Upon the writing of this play, I realize that I am taking some liberties. I realize that the English language did have words already in existence which meant the exact

same thing as their French adoptions. However, in order to make an intuitive-thinking leap and add humor to this production, and to make an etymological statement of the amazing amount of French word-adoptions which exist today in modern English, I am purposely ignoring such stated facts.

I would like to acknowledge the following source which gave me the various examples of French-adopted words:

Albert C. Baugh, and Thomas Cable, *A History of the English Language*, (Prentice Hall, New Jersey, 1993), pp. 163-177.