

## NEW PERSPECTIVES ON SHAKESPEARE’S PLAYS: THE ENGLISH NATION

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**ABSTRACT:** THE AGE THAT PRODUCED SHAKESPEARE WAS ITSELF THE PRODUCT OF SEVERAL GENERATIONS OF PREPARATION. THE ENGLISH RENAISSANCE WAS SOMETHING MUCH MORE COMPLEX THAN THE REVIVAL OF GREEK AND ROMAN CULTURE, IMPORTANT AS THAT WAS, AND IT DID NOT AT ONCE ATTAIN ITS FULL FLOWERING. A WHOLE SERIES OF EVENTS AND DISCOVERIES, COMING TOGETHER AT THE END OF THE FIFTEENTH CENTURY, TRANSFORMED AND COMPROMISED, IF IT DID NOT ACTUALLY SWEEP AWAY, MANY OF THE INSTITUTIONS AND THE HABITS OF MIND THAT WE CALL MEDIEVAL. MODERN ENGLAND WAS BORN IN THE PURITAN REVOLUTION, AN AFTERMATH OF THE REFORMING ZEAL.

**KEYWORDS:** SHAKESPEARE, ENGLAND, RENAISSANCE, NATION.

In Act II of *Richard II*, John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster and uncle to the King, delivers one of the most patriotic descriptions of England. Here is a sample of this oft-quoted text:

This royal throne of kings, this scepter'd isle,  
This earth of majesty, this seat of Mars,  
This other Eden, demi-paradise,  
This fortress built by Nature for herself  
Against infection and the hand of war,  
This happy breed of men, this little world,  
This precious stone set in the silver sea,  
Which serves it in the office of a wall,  
Or as a moat defensive to a house,  
Against the envy of less happier lands;  
This blessed plot, this earth, this realm, this England,  
This nurse, this teeming womb of royal kings,  
Fear'd by their breed, and famous by their birth,  
Renowned for their deeds as far from home,  
For Christian service and true chivalry,  
As is the sepulchre in stubborn Jewry  
Of the world's ransom, blessed Mary's Son;

This land of such dear souls, this dear, dear land,  
Dear for her reputation through the world [...] *(Richard II, 2.1.40-58)*

These patriotic lines, “full of cartographic lyricism” (Neill, 14), are also satirical and critical in nature. The syncretic vision they develop is built from a mixture of pagan and Christian elements: Mars and Neptune indeed coexist with the Garden of Eden and the services rendered to Christianity. Also, the text introduces a parallel between the West and the East, in terms of martial glory and reputation. At the end of the monologue, the text delineates the geographical contours of the country. The image of the rocky coast of England enclosed within a sea triumphant gradually gave way to that of ‘rotten parchment bonds’ that evoke shame and defilement (‘inky blots’). The sea, a specific component of the English landscape, indirectly evokes the drafts of writing (‘foul papers’), even though, according to Ben Jonson on Shakespeare, his rival and friend, ‘he never blotted out line’.

All this leads directly to the theme of the division of the kingdom and the movement of withdrawal that will result in the Wars of the Roses. In *1 Henry IV*, the rebel Mortimer, Glendower and Percy (aka Hotspur) meet to divide the country on the map:

GLENDOWER.

Come, here is the map, shall we divide our right  
According to our threefold order ta'en?

MORTIMER.

The Archdeacon hath divided it  
Into three limits very equally [...]

HOTSPUR.

I do not care, I'll give thrice so much land  
To any well-deserving friend:  
But in the way of bargain, mark ye me,  
I'll cavill on the ninth part of a hair.  
Are the indentures drawn? Shall we be gone?  
*(1 Henry IV, 3.1.66-135)*

The word ‘indentures’ refers both to the meandering course of the River Trent and to the apprenticeship contract, which is again the metaphor of the parchment. The names are reduced to a manuscript that can be adjusted according to the whims or requirements of any one, as a theatrical text could be changed depending on the contribution of actors and the material conditions of the stage performance.

The landscape is eroticized and figured as a male anatomy with references to ‘rich bottom’ and the idea of castration contained in the word ‘gelding’. We remember the passage of the horrible mutilation practiced by the Welsh women on Mortimer’s English soldiers (1.1.44), which seems to be back at the division on the map:

WESTMORELAND

My liege, this haste was hot in question,  
And many limits of the charge set down  
But yesternight: when all athwart there came  
A post from Wales loaden with heavy news;

Whose worst was, that the noble Mortimer,  
Leading the men of Herefordshire to fight  
Against the irregular and wild Glendower,  
Was by the rude hands of that Welshman taken,  
A thousand of his people butchered;  
Upon whose dead corpse there was such misuse,  
Such beastly shameless transformation,  
By those Welshwomen done as may not be  
Without much shame retold or spoken of.

(*1 Henry IV*, 1.1.33-45)

Shakespeare's England is the picture of a heroic England, crowned by the sceptre of royalty, the 'seat' of Mars the warrior, but also another Eden, a fortress that nature built for itself against all 'infection' and wars – in a word, a blessed spot of land. This patriotic zeal reveals – or possibly hides – the Elizabethan England, an England of great changes and restlessness. It is "a fantastic world" which has its "own time and space" (Curelar M.R.O, 70).

The age which produced Shakespeare was itself the product of several generations of preparation. The English Renaissance was something much more complex than the revival of Greek and Roman culture, important as that was, and it did not at once attain its full flowering. A whole series of events and discoveries, coming together at the end of the fifteenth century, transformed and compromised, if it did not actually sweep away, many of the institutions and the habits of mind that we call medieval. The gradual break-up of feudalism, the challenge to the authority and the unity of the medieval church, the discovery of gunpowder and the consequent revolution and democratization of warfare, the discovery of the mariner's compass and the possibility of safely navigating the limitless ocean, the production of paper and the invention of printing, and later, before the sixteenth century was half over, the Copernican system of astronomy which formulated a new centre of the universe – all of these new conceptions had a profound effect upon human thought and became the foundations for intellectual, moral, social, and economic changes which quickly made themselves felt.

In Italy, in France, and in Germany, the Renaissance had developed gradually over several centuries and with a characteristic emphasis in each nation; in England, the insular position of the country and the conservative nature of the English people made its reception more tardy and, at the same time, less cataclysmic. Medieval England may be said to have come to an inglorious end with the fifteenth-century Wars of the Roses. These wars were followed by the unsettling experiences of the Protestant Reformation-itself an aspect of the reawakening-which prevented any early flowering of the Renaissance proper. Modern England was born in the Puritan Revolution which, politically as well as religiously, was an aftermath of the reforming zeal. The age of Elizabeth, therefore, was a kind of lull between two storms, glorious while it lasted and even more glorious in retrospect.

Both the Renaissance and the Reformation had been anticipated in England by more than a century. The poetry of Chaucer is more akin to Elizabethan poetry than it is to medieval; Wycliffe's preaching and the Lollard movement were spiritually similar to the activities of the Tudor reformers; even the national spirit had burst into flame for a moment under Edward III and the Black Prince, but had subsided. Now in the reign of the great

queen, England entered upon an intellectual development abreast of the Continent. The humanistic spirit, eagerly interested in all the glorious, infinite capabilities of the individual, was abroad:

HAMLET

What a piece of work is a man! How noble in reason! How infinite in faculty! In form and moving how express and admirable! In action how like an angel! In apprehension how like a god! The beauty of the world! The paragon of animals!

(*Hamlet*, 2.2.305-9)

Whether the Stratford-born Shakespeare travelled farther than his native Warwickshire, going all the way to London and back, is of a minor importance. It is already common knowledge that the English aristocrat's life had an overtly expressed European dimension. Shakespeare's *Hamlet* may be interpreted as such: Shakespeare, the *Englishman*, writes about the drama of the heir of a *Danish* prince, attacked by the heir of a *Norwegian* prince. The *Danish* prince's father had murdered his *Norwegian* counterpart, conducting to a desire of revenge which sends Fortinbras, the *Norwegian* prince, to war against *Denmark*. Hamlet, the Dane, wants revenge against his uncle, the murderer of Hamlet Sr., now married to young Hamlet's mother. From the very beginning, we find ourselves in the geographical space of *Scandinavia*. But this is not all of it. Like Horatio, Prince Hamlet had returned to Denmark from the University of *Wittenberg*, in *Germany*, a notable outpost of Protestant humanism, and the headquarters of the Lutheran faith. Laertes, Polonius' son, asks for the king's permission to return to *France*, while his father, Polonius, hires spies to watch his doings in *Paris*. At the court of *Elsinore*, Hamlet is met by two of his fellow students – the *Judeo-Germanic* Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, citizens of the same *Western Europe* and (dis)interested servants of Claudius, the *Danish* king. As a solution for the crisis, Hamlet is sent to *England*, to be killed by the king of perfidious *Albion*, but the plot does not work. In the end, all of them die, and Fortinbras comes over from Norway to set things straight. Thus we have travelled full circle.

An interesting example is offered by Thomas Nashe's picaresque novella *The Unfortunate Traveller* published in 1594. Jack Wilton, the protagonist-narrator, has the chance to go on his Great Tour, visiting France, Germany and Italy as a page to the Earl of Surrey. While in Italy, Jack meets an anonymous banished English earl who – contrary to the general trend of the age – insists on the uselessness of travel, which is pointless and corrupting:

Countryman, tell me, what is the occasion of thy straying so far out of England to visit this strange nation? If it be languages, thou may'st learn them at home; nought but lasciviousness is to be learned here. Perhaps, to be better accounted of than other of thy condition, thou ambitiously undertakest this voyage: these insolent fancies are but Icarus' feathers, whose wanton wax, melted against the sun, will betray thee into a sea of confusion. (Nashe, 341)

Travel abroad, according to this English aristocrat, teaches the traveller nothing useful that he could not have learned at home, substituting false pleasure for true

knowledge. Those who were trying to learn foreign languages in order to serve their country will only harm it, as they will return with increased – and more perverse – appetites. Those who travel out of a combination of pride and curiosity will also suffer. Much more can be learned from books than from travel.

There are great chances for Shakespeare to have read the book. As already mentioned, the book was published in 1594, during Shakespeare’s so-called ‘lost years’ (1589-1592), when he may have travelled abroad, visiting France, Germany and Italy, but there are equal chances that he followed Nashe’s advice: there was no need for a writer to visit other countries in order to acquire an intimate knowledge of their geography, people, and cultural and political affairs. As a matter of fact, the late 16th and early 17th centuries editors and collectors of travel literature were not necessarily travellers, but Shakespeare shows a keen interest in a large range of European countries, giving many of his plays distinct European settings, including a wide variety of national identities: Denmark and Norway (*Hamlet*); France (*All’s Well That Ends Well, As You Like It*); Spain (*Love’s Labour’s Lost*); northern Italy (*Romeo and Juliet, The Two Gentlemen of Verona, The Taming of the Shrew, Much Ado About Nothing*); Cyprus, Africa, Morocco (*Othello*); an unnamed island in the Mediterranean (*The Tempest*); Venice (*The Merchant of Venice, Othello*); Athens (*Timon of Athens, A Midsummer Night’s Dream, The Two Noble Kinsmen*); Vienna (*Measure for Measure*); Illyria (*Twelfth Night*); Rome (*Julius Caesar, Titus Andronicus, Coriolanus, Antony and Cleopatra*), and the list may be further expanded and complicated.

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