# DISCOVERING THE ENGLISHNESS IN SHAKESPEARE'S HISTORIES

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***Abstract***
*This article aims to discover the Englishness of Shakespeare's history plays as they are proof that literature can overwhelm history even in a sphere as carefully documented and closely studied as the dynasties of England. Shakespeare's histories triggered a patriotic interest in England's past and motivated the understanding of the English as a nation. The interest of the sixteenth-century English in the history of their own country can be seen as one aspect of the complex process by which England was emerging as a modern nation state. Viewed in the context of this process of national consolidation and self-definition, the interest for national history and the national history plays in late sixteenth-century England, appears as an important component of the new image of an English nation.*
*Acest articol își propune să descopere caracterul englezesc al pieselor istorice Shakespeariane, ce sunt dovada că literatura poate influența istoria chiar și într-un domeniu atât de atent documentat și studiat ca dinastiile Angliei. Piesele istorice ale lui Shakespeare au declanşat un interes patriotic pentru trecut Angliei și au motivat înțelegerea poporului englez ca națiune. Interesul englezilor secolului XVI pentru istoria țării lor poate fi văzută ca un aspect al procesului complex prin care Anglia apărea ca stat național modern. Privit în contextul procesului de consolidare şi autodefinire a identității naționale, interesul pentru istoria națională și piesele istorice în Anglia secolului XVI, se defineşte ca o componentă esențială a noii imagini a națiunii engleze.*
***Keywords**: Shakespeare, nation, Englishness, history, England.*

Readers and audiences in and beyond Britain frequently mistake the history plays for accurate representations of the reigns of their eponymous kings. But Shakespeare took immense liberties in recasting history for the stage. His history plays abound in historical errors: chronologies are freely compressed and sometimes wildly altered, locations are changed, anachronisms inserted, motivations fabricated and characterizations invented. Shakespeare's concern was not to represent historical events with accuracy. He sought to make great theatre, but he paid heed to the political sensibilities of Queen Elizabeth and King James. Nevertheless, his influence on perceptions of the historical English kings is so far-reaching that even today Richard III is thought to have been as much a wicked plotter as the real Henry V is believed to have been a national saviour. The history plays are proof that literature can overwhelm history even in a sphere as carefully documented and closely studied as the dynastic rule of England. For the first time in English drama, historical events were treated as grandly as timeless themes such as love and death. Elizabethans of the 1590s were swelling with patriotism and military pride.

The interest of the sixteenth-century English in the history of their own country can be seen as one aspect of the complex process by which England was slowly emerging as a

modern nation state. In the medieval period, states were typically decentralized entities. "Their boundaries were fluid, readily changed when dynastic marriages united them or when conquest led to the absorption of one state by another." (Anderson, 1974). Medieval subjects owed allegiance to a feudal overlord and to the monarch, but not to the fixed entity we usually designate as "a nation." England was "one of the first European powers to develop some of the practices and institutions of a modern nation state." (Smith A.G.R., 1984).

The Tudors came to the throne in 1485, and for the next one hundred years they worked to wrest political power from the feudal barons and centralize it in the person of the monarch, and to wrest religious authority from the Church of Rome and vest it, as well, with the king. When Henry VIII through the Act of Supremacy in 1534 became head of the Church of England, he united – at least symbolically – temporal and spiritual authority in one person. Equally important, the Tudors developed a centralized administrative infrastructure for the country, making local justices of the peace, for example, accountable to London authorities, and extending bureaucratic control of taxation and judicial review. Ironically, however, the Tudors' relative success at building a more unified and centralized state created conditions in which the centrality of the monarch as the focus of allegiance could diminish. England's geography, commercial vitality, laws, and language could all become points of pride that focused attention less on the monarch than on what were perceived as the natural and essential aspects of the country itself as an entity with an organic and essential integrity. (Helgerson, R., 1992)

Of course, no nation is a "natural" entity. Nations are artificial creations, and the unity of a nation is a carefully constructed fiction. In Benedict Anderson's telling phrase, nations are "imagined communities," that is, they are communities that are imagined into being by certain cultural practices and ideas, rather than pre-existing entities that have only to be recognized and named. (Anderson B.,1983). In sixteenth-century England, trade between London and the rest of England increased considerably. As products moved from Bristol to London, for example, people, money, and ideas moved with them. This material practice – increasing internal trade – helped to bind England's different regions together. Discursive innovations such as mapmaking, linguistic standardization, and the development of a self-consciously national literature also contributed to the nation-building process. In short, conceptions of national unity both enabled and were enabled by a set of evolving material practices.

In 1918, Sir Walter Raleigh delivered a British Academy lecture on 'Shakespeare and England' in which he openly declared:

> I propose to return to the old Catholic doctrine which has been illuminated by so many disciples of Shakespeare, and to speak of him as our great national poet. He embodies and exemplifies all the virtues, and most of the faults, of England. Any one who reads and understands him understands England. This method of studying Shakespeare by reading him has perhaps gone somewhat out of vogue in favour of more roundabout ways of approach, but it is the best method for all that. Shakespeare tells us more about himself and his mind than we could learn even from those who knew him in his habit as he lived, if they were all alive and all talking. To learn what he tells we have only to listen. I think there is no national poet, of any great nation whatsoever, who is so completely representative of his own people as Shakespeare is representative of the English. There is certainly no other English poet who comes near to Shakespeare in embodying our character and our foibles. (Sir Walter Raleigh, 1918)

Summing up, Shakespeare is the key to an understanding of England, the embodiment of the British spirit, the quintessence of Englishness. In his essay 'Mapping Shakespeare's Britain', Peter Holland points out that Shakespeare's angle on cartography was an odd one: "History is written in the drawing of national borders and borderlines are a visible manifestation of the politics of map-making, what Shakespeare contemptuously calls in *Troilus and Cressida* 'mapp'ry' (I.2.205), an unusually rare word, so rare *OED* can offer only this example before 1840." (Holland P., 2006).

Actually, the scene takes place in the Greeks' tent, during a war council where, at Agamemnon's praise of the Greek army – which Nestor agrees to – Ulysses argues that in reality they are weak, and the army's order and hierarchy are disregarded. Interesting explanations of the word are given by the New Variorum edition of the play (1953) where we find the following footnote:

> [Bed-worke, Mapp'ry] THEOBALD (ed. 1733): The Poet in my Opinion would say, This is planning out Action and War, as a Man might do on his Pillow and in his Closet. [...] – LEE (ED. 1910): "Mappery," i.e., the making of maps and plans, is unknown elsewhere in the literature of the time. [N.E.D.: Mappery (contemptuous) the making of maps. – B.] [1]

Online resources offer the following definitions to the word: **mappery** – noun (*uncountable*): 1. (*archaic*, *rare*) cartography. (wiktionary); noun: 1. The making or study of maps (Webster), to which a note was added: "Mappery" was first used in popular English literature: sometime before 1828. Here are Ulysses' words:

They tax our policy and call it cowardice,
Count wisdom as no member of the war,
Forestall prescience, and esteem no act
But that of hand. The still and mental parts
That do contrive how many hands shall strike
When fitness calls them on and know by measure
Of their observant toil the enemy's weight,
Why, this hath not a finger's dignity.
They call this bed-work, mapp'ry, closet-war.
So that the ram that batters down the wall,
For the great swing and rudeness of his poise,
They place before his hand that made the engine,
Or those that with the fineness of their souls

(Troilus and Cressida, 1.3.197-210)

Holland mentions 'the two crucial examples' of cartographic conflict in Shakespeare, 'the map of England being divided up and re-divided … in Hotspur's irritation in *1 Henry IV* and the map of Britain being divided up in *King Lear*' (Holland, 199).

In the Romanian poetry, as ,,crazy, with the Crown of the plant rather than the ceremonial monarchic, Lear, appears to Eminescu, portrayed as in Shakespeare's play, as a symbol of the moment." [2].

Lear's use of the map of his kingdom and its subsequent division have been fully commented upon. In the case of *1 Henry IV*, in Act 3, scene 1, we have further reference to a map of Britain:

MORTIMER
These promises are fair, the parties sure,
And our induction full of prosperous hope.
HOTSPUR

Lord Mortimer, and cousin Glendower, will you sit down?
And uncle Worcester. A plague upon it!
I have forgot the map.

GLENDOWER

No, here it is. (*1 Henry IV*, 3.1.1-5)

Having found the map, Hotspur reveals his plans to – just like King Lear before him – divide Britain into three parts. The key words for this scene – which fully describe the rebels' cause – would be *division* and *dissection*, against the *unification* interests of Britain:

MORTIMER

The archdeacon hath divided it
Into three limits very equally:
England, from Trent and Severn hitherto,
By south and east is to my part assign'd:
All westward, Wales beyond the Severn shore,
And all the fertile land within that bound,
To Owen Glendower: and, dear coz, to you
The remnant northward, lying off from Trent.
And our indentures tripartite are drawn;
Which being sealed interchangeably,
A business that this night may execute,
To-morrow, cousin Percy, you and I
And my good Lord of Worcester will set forth
To meet your father and the Scottish power,
As is appointed us, at Shrewsbury.

(*1 Henry IV*, 3.1.68-83)

In this particular example, the map is a symbol of Hotspur's inability as a ruler and points to the devastating effects the rebellion might have on Britain.

Methinks my moiety, north from Burton here,
In quantity equals not one of yours:
See how this river comes me cranking in,
And cuts me from the best of all my land
A huge half-moon, a monstrous cantle out.
I'll have the current in this place damm'd up;
And here the smug and silver Trent shall run
In a new channel, fair and evenly;
It shall not wind with such a deep indent,
To rob me of so rich a bottom here.

(*1 Henry IV*, 3.1.93-101)

Shakespeare's *1 Henry IV* was written around 1597, and entered in the Stationer's Register on 25 February 1598. Queen Elizabeth I had still two more years to live, and there was a general concern with the unification of Britain. The navigators' and explorers' discoveries were put on maps and globes, published in geographical atlases which aimed at an image of Albion as a world power, and not as a shattered, fragmented, divided kingdom at the mercy of rebellious forces from within. Artists were doing their best at representing the kings and queens of Western Europe in the presence of maps of their kingdoms or empires, or even holding globes of the world. The same applies to Queen Elizabeth I who was the foremost supporter of the cult of her own image. (Fig. 14)

To return to Shakespeare's play, Jean E. Howard and Phyllis Rackin have the following comment of the map scene:

> The rebel cause is discredited, not only or even chiefly because it defies the authority of the monarch, but because it threatens to *dismember* the body of the land, a threat that is graphically illustrated when the rebel leaders haggle over the map of Britain and agree finally to have the river Trent turned from its natural course in the interest of their 'bargain.' (Howard E.J.and Rackin P., 1997)

There is one interesting remark in the first scene of the play: having travelled all the way from Holmedon battlefield in Northumberland to London, Sir Walter Blunt's horse carries with it the marks of the various places visited:

> Here is a dear, a true industrious friend,
> Sir Walter Blunt, new lighted from his horse.
> *Stain'd with the variation of each soil*
> *Betwixt that Holmedon and this seat of ours*;
> And he hath brought us smooth and welcome news.
> Ten thousand bold Scots, two and twenty knights,
> Balk'd in their own blood did Sir Walter see
> On Holmedon's plains. Of prisoners, Hotspur took
> Mordake the Earl of Fife, and eldest son
> To beaten Douglas; and the Earl of Athol,
> Of Murray, Angus, and Menteith:
> And is not this an honourable spoil?
> A gallant prize? ha, cousin, is it not?
>
> (*1 Henry IV*, 1.1.62-74, my emphasis)

The horse 'stain'd with the variation of each soil' sends to the different locations of the play, which is set in Wales and England one century earlier – actually, the Battle of Holmedon took place in 1492 – and Shakespeare leads his audience not only to King Henry IV's London palace, and the battlefields, but also to the Boar's Head tavern in London, or to the residence of Owen Glendower, the Welsh rebel. Glendower's residence is a place of mystery, a place where black magic is performed, and where England is divided into three parts by the rebels. Whether the Englishmen of Shakespeare's time were thinking favourably of the Welsh, continues to be a debatable matter.

Wales had been officially incorporated into England in 1535 and the use of the Welsh language forbidden in many contexts. Neither the Welsh tongue nor Welsh national feeling was eradicated, however, and in many texts of the period Wales is still imagined as a foreign and threatening place, rather than as a region of England like any other region. At the beginning of the seventeenth century James I tried to form a union between the kingdoms of England and Scotland. He failed, and the union did not occur until 1707. In the early modern period, therefore, there was always potential ambiguity about the very territory which the word "England" was to designate. Great Britain did not exist in the 1590s, but to use "England" to refer to any entity containing part or all of Wales, Ireland, or Scotland can be a form of verbal imperialism that elides the historical struggles, and the perceived differences, among these regions.

Viewed in the context of this process of national consolidation and national self-definition, the vogue for national history and the national history play in late sixteenth-century England appears as an important component of the new image of an English nation. Like their historiographic sources, the plays performed the necessary function of creating and disseminating myths of origin to authorize a new national entity and to deal with the anxieties and contradictions that threatened to undermine the nation-building project. These stories had an obvious selective function as well; that is, they highlighted some players in the nation's history and sidelined or erased others.

The number of dramatic histories which Shakespeare wrote indicates the popularity of this genre in the 1590s. Clearly, theatregoers had a taste for these plays; and the number of early printed versions that were produced suggests that readers did, also. Collectively, in their multiple versions, Shakespeare's histories triggered a patriotic interest in England's past and motivated the understanding of the English as a nation. When apologists for the theatre wished to defend it against attacks from critics who saw it as a place of idleness and moral danger, they often held up the history play as an example of theatre's value. And they did so in terms that stressed the role of history plays in preserving the memory of English heroes and of encouraging patriotic feelings in the spectators.

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