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Shakespeare, Brexit and Henry V : A proper place in the Curriculum?

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University of Huddersfield  
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Thesis in support of the Masters by  
Research (M Res)-  
Bridge Scholarship

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‘Shakespeare, Brexit and Henry V :  
A proper place in the Curriculum?’

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Submitted: 17/01/2020

Corrections submitted: 21/09/20

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## **Abstract-**

Recent public discourse around Brexit has seen Shakespeare's authority as an essentially English nationalist writer called upon to provide authority for an English Nationalist project, with the History plays cited as the locus of conceptions of Nationalism. This fits into a well-established narrative wherein the History plays have provided a mirror to national anxieties, that has regularly been co-opted for a Conservative agenda.

Pedagogically, however, the History plays have fallen out of favour and are rarely taught through the National Curriculum, despite Shakespeare remaining the cornerstone of value in English education. Conversely, however, through their renewed topicality, the History plays have recently been subject to several innovative productions that have addressed and questioned the nature of Nationalism in the age of Brexit, whilst challenging established, and often chauvinistic, stage conventions. This thesis seeks to consider how Presentist readings of the History plays reveal a different set of resonances that challenge dominant right wing appropriations, with a specific focus on *Henry V*, reflecting its established status as the work most commonly cited and performed in times of national (and nationalistic) crisis.

Such readings can challenge a Conservative agenda that whilst claiming ideological neutrality, has ossified the status of Shakespeare studies within the national curriculum and remains implicitly tied to a conception of literary study based upon outmoded essentialist readings of Shakespeare and his work.

The argument is posited that despite being pedagogically problematic, the History play remains culturally significant. Thus, the inclusion of the History play into the national curriculum has significant value in interrogating issues of Nationalism in the age of Brexit; whilst adopting Presentist approaches to the plays renews their relevance and affords a more nuanced critical perspective upon their meaning.

## **Introduction and research questions**

This thesis seeks to ask specific questions about Shakespeare's History plays and their relevance in the age of Brexit. These are:

Overall, to consider –

To what extent are Shakespeare's History plays still a viable 'teachable' text in the twenty first Century, given they have often been co-opted for a right -wing nationalist agenda in public discourse? To evaluate this, the following research questions are to be considered:-

- 1.Are Shakespeare's aims (as far as we can discern) in writing the History plays and *Henry V* discernibly nationalistic or not? To what extent have the full range of critical assessments of *Henry V* successfully deconstructed an earlier nationalist and conservative view?
2. How does the public discourse of Brexit selectively use the History plays to feed into an established narrative, given greater urgency in the age of Brexit and the rise in right-wing nationalism. How have the history plays come to be co-opted for such an agenda and how far does the case of *Henry V* support this?
3. Does the production history of the plays by necessity support a nationalist agenda and to what extent has the recent resurgence of history plays in production challenged this tradition? How effectively can a more explicitly Presentist critical approach deconstruct the Brexit narrative and the underlying English nationalist exceptionalism central to its articulation?
4. To what extent does Shakespeare's unique status in the National Curriculum similarly reflect a narrowly nationalist agenda of English particularism that has dominated Educational policy making? How far does this delimiting agenda run counter to the full range of contemporary critical approaches to the plays and thus undermine a fuller perspective for study and critical thought about nationalism?
- 5.Can the pedagogical impediments to teaching the History plays be overcome; what strategies would allow for a challenging interpretative context to underpin this. How might the History plays be a useful means of interrogating the future of Nationalism and national identity in the age of Brexit?

## Introduction: Shakespeare and English Nationalism in the age of Brexit.

I will begin by considering what the popular discourse around Shakespeare's history plays and their Brexit analogies reveals about established attitudes to employing Shakespeare in the cause of nationalism. This will provide a background against which to consider both the initial context and developing critical history of the plays, to establish the relevance of a Presentist critical approach. I will then evaluate the extent to which recent productions can be seen to challenge nationalist discourse via specific dramaturgical choices, that can be seen as Presentist in intent.

I shall touch briefly upon other of Shakespeare's plays that have been drawn upon in the Brexit discourse including *Richard II* via John of Gaunt's much cited lament for 'This England' and recent performances of *King Lear*, to give a sense of both the popular usages of Shakespeare's history and a flavour of the theatrical responses to Brexit.

However, I shall primarily focus on *Henry V*, given that it is the play most associated with nationalist sentiment in Shakespeare's own time, and in subsequent ages, particularly in terms of a performative history of 'vigorous patriotism' (Shaughnessy, 2011, p. 180). Furthermore, *Henry V* has been the most widely performed of the History plays in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (despite its relative unpopularity in the immediate years following its first performances)<sup>1</sup> yet has often been shown in redacted forms that are unproblematically patriotic and nationalistic. Arguably, this has allowed for a misappropriation of the play's more complex dissection of the narrative of nationalism. Thus, it is the most apposite play from which to assess how both evolving criticism and more recent stage productions have challenged this traditional dramaturgy (Shaughnessy, 2011, p. 179). Moreover, the selection of one play allows for a better consideration of the pedagogical issues at stake in the scope of this thesis, and a 'way in' to considering the challenges of incorporating it into a programme of study.

## Shakespeare, Brexit and English Nationalism

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<sup>1</sup> Loehlin (1997) and Smith (2004) link the popularity of History plays and *Henry V* in particular to specific moments of nation crisis or affirmation to explain the relative overall paucity of productions, relative to other plays in the canon. This stands in sharp contrast to the early production history where *Henry VI, Part I* was the most published play and widely performed play from the 1590's through to the 1630's according to the World Shakespeare Bibliography (Estill, 2015). There have only been a handful of productions of *Henry VI* at all in the twentieth century, usually as part of the larger 'cycle'.

Undeniably, English Nationalism currently faces a renewed crisis in the age of Brexit. The ways in which Shakespeare has been recruited in this cause reflect his centrality to the sense of English identity. He has been claimed as either a progressive ,outwards facing European (Dobson P. M., 2016) , a man with a 'distaste for rampant nationalism' (Bryant, 2016) or 'the mascot of Brexit Britain' (Swift, 2019). The views here encompasses the literary-historical perspective of Professor Michael Dobson, the left -liberal *Guardian* view of Labour MP Chris Bryant and the more socially conservative views of *The Spectator*, paradigmatic of Shakespeare's ubiquity in both academic and popular discourse around Brexit. This suggests that like another national poet ,Robert Burns, called upon by both sides for the cause of nationalism in 2012 ([www.telegraph.co.uk](http://www.telegraph.co.uk), 2012) when the Union was perceived to be under threat, his works can be mobilised to present utterly divergent positions . As Swift notes:

The deployment of Shakespeare to describe Brexit is by now a cliché...It has two possible modes. There is triumphalism drawn from the history plays: this sceptred isle, once more unto the breach. And there is tragic calamity: the betrayal by Brutus, Hamlet dithering (Swift, 2019).

Swift identifies the familiar mobilisation of the History plays here specially to a set of well -worn nationalist cliches that establish the basis of English/ British exceptionalism- Gaunt's speech for Richard II and victory over European enemies, achieved through the rallying call of a galvanising leader. Swift adds that 'Shakespeare is our national myth, most useful in a time of crisis' pointing to a second important aspect to the application of Shakespeare in nationalist discourse, the 'National Poet', whose work 'speaks across the ages' in the guise of the 'Universal' bard that unites the nation in sentiment. Whilst such a concept of Shakespeare's universality has followed since Ben Johnson's famous preface to the First Folio of 1623 that 'he was not of an age but' all time, Shakespeare scholars such as Dobson have tracked how this developed from, and fed back into, an explicitly British cultural exceptionalism that took nationalist form throughout the Eighteenth Century (Dobson M. , 1994). I shall survey how this 'timeless' aspect of Shakespeare has problematically erased the significance of historical fractures, both in considering the plays in his own age and how such similar fractures have relevance to our own. This discourse of exceptionalism has remained deeply entrenched in the education system via the National Curriculum that has



enshrined Shakespeare as the only mandatory writer set for study.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, any mobilisation for Shakespeare for nationalist purposes has significant implications in the age of Brexit, notably within the renewed exceptionalism represented by ‘Fundamental British Values’.

### Chapter overviews and rationale

It is fitting that the history plays and particularly *Henry V* are examined in this current age of crisis, given that they initiate from a time of English national crisis in the 1590's, over Ireland, the Reformation, relations with Europe and fractures with the emerging nation state much overlooked in earlier criticism (Smith, 2004). *Henry V* as ‘the *locus classicus* of the Elizabethan discourse of the nation’ (Cahill, 2006) provides the perfect ground for examining such divergent uses of nationalism in Shakespeare’s time. Equally, though as subsequent crises emerged within the developing nation state, notably foreign wars, the growth and subsequent loss of Empire, the History plays have been mobilised to promote, consolidate or (less commonly) question national identity. Most recently, this has taken a familiar form around Brexit.

Hence, the purpose of this research is to open up the question of Shakespeare’s relationship to nationalism and national identity at the timely historical juncture represented by Brexit.

I will consider this within the context of Shakespeare’s position in the National Curriculum in England and Wales, plotting the links between the creation of a conservative discourse of exceptionalism in English culture and pedagogy and the aims of the National Curriculum. I will posit that such an ideology is outmoded in critical practice yet remains doggedly entrenched through historic and current conservative policy making and stands in opposition to a more inclusive and polyvocal criticism and practice in contemporary scholarship.

Thus, I intend in Chapter 1 to outline the significance and urgency of the history plays, and *Henry V*, to our current moment, as part of an ongoing discourse of nationalism. I will define the history play and consider the existing tradition with which Shakespeare was working, theatrically and historically. Following this, I will review how the history plays potential as a

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<sup>2</sup> This applies only to state schools in England and Wales, yet in principle nearly all schools in the UK teach Shakespeare as part of the curriculum, as I outline on page 10.

nationalist project has been considered via different critical and ideological stances to establish my own critical approach, defining and positing the potential for Presentist readings to refresh the critical problematics of the plays.

In Chapter 2, I will apply the Presentist possibilities of *Henry V* in a renewed age of English nationalism, considering the play's potential for subversion based upon its performativity that mirrors that of many key actors in the Brexit cause.

I will then in Chapter 3 review how effectively recent productions have attempted to surmount the conventional dramaturgy of the plays in the face of resurgent English nationalism, through the use of nontraditional casting and acting practices that challenge the chauvinism and cultural bias of the plays. I will evaluate the extent to which such choices point towards more inclusive theatrical methods that can potentially renew pedagogical interest in the plays.

In chapter 4, I will outline the way in which the ideology of a 'National Bard' developed and fed into the ideas behind the National Curriculum will be explored to posit the thesis that an anachronistic and elitist educational agenda has endured into the twenty first; utilising, reproducing and reinforcing the foundational status of Shakespeare. It is my contention that this agenda represents the ideological culmination of reactionary forces to contain the cultural and political anxieties that potentially threaten a specific vision of an English (and British) national project.

I will move then to more practical pedagogical matters in the second part of the chapter.

I will consider if the History Plays –rarely taught or even considered for study in the twenty first century, can be revived and made to speak anew to students at 6<sup>th</sup> Form level, particularly with the opportunities opened up by a wider focus on contexts and different interpretations in the current curriculum. I will consider why the history plays have fallen out of the curriculum; potential barriers to teaching the plays, in terms of structure, content and representation, and resolve to offer potential solutions to these. It is notable how the plays' absence in the curriculum is not necessarily a reflection of the plays' waning popularity; either with more traditional theatre audiences, demonstrated via the range of contemporary productions made for film and theatre, such as the BBC *The Hollow Crown* (2012); Michelle Terry's 2016 *Henry V*, the 2019 Globe *Henriad* or mainstream television

viewers ,via the popular reworking of *Henry IV* and *Henry V* into the remarkably traditional Netflix hit *The King* (2019).<sup>3</sup>

Finally, I will aim demonstrate how pedagogical approaches to the play might work in practice, via suggesting some potential classroom resources to present ‘Henry V’ within both an A Level setting as a set text and as a series of 1 hour HE Plus lectures designed to bridge Level 3 to Level 4 study. These materials are to be included as an appendix to this thesis overall, and I aim to review the students’ experiences and feedback on the latter materials to assess their relevance as part of ongoing CPD research.

I will conclude by considering how the History plays, and *Henry V* in particular, can be used in relevant ways to open up debates for students, if a creative approach to the new curriculum is taken and linked to a critical, credible pedagogical approach.

#### Rationale : The History plays and pedagogy : Challenges

I will define and then outline some of broader and practical pedagogical challenges facing the history play before considering how approaches to the plays both critically and in performance might offer ways of overcoming these challenges.

Given the relative absence overall of the History play from the English stage in production history, the commercially and artistically healthy ,if varied, state of recent dramatic presentations of the plays suggests a contemporary relevance appreciated by directors, producers and actors that has acted to renew theatrical interest in the plays. I shall consider the extent to which this corresponds to questions of resurgent nationalism. However, this resurgence of these rarely performed plays has not translated into a renewal of interest in presenting the plays to students within the national curriculum; a particular irony given the nationalistic foundation of the national curriculum project in the teaching of English (Olive S. , 2013) There are several reasons for this. Firstly, they are rarely set for study for the practical reasons that they are hard to set. The five examination boards in England, Wales and Northern Ireland within the national curriculum offer only a relatively small range of Shakespeare plays; with the two main exam boards AQA and EDEXCEL placing the

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<sup>3</sup> In a startling reworking ‘The King’ sidesteps the famous rejection of Falstaff issue by having Henry take him to France as his new general and win Agincourt for him. A number of other cruxes in the play are similarly elided, reflecting a tradition in both Olivier and Branagh’s film versions of 1944 and 1989 respectively – see Loehlin, 1997 ch II nd ch VII.

curriculum choices into either distinct categories of ‘tragedy’ or ‘comedy’ at A Level. Within the whole range of A Level specifications currently taught, the only discernible history play is *Richard III*, included within the ‘tragedy’ section of one of the two AQA specifications. It is only the relatively small CCEA examination board that largely cover Northern Ireland that offer plays beyond these two genres, setting *Measure for Measure* to be studied within the genre of ‘Shakespeare’s Problem Plays’ and *The Winter’s Tale* in the genre of ‘Shakespeare’s Late Plays’.<sup>5</sup> There is even less range at GCSE Level where AQA who set the largest number of papers in English Literature note that ‘The most popular Shakespeare text by far was *Macbeth* followed by *Romeo and Juliet*.

Of the other available choices, *Much Ado About Nothing* and *The Merchant of Venice* were the next most popular, with just a few centres opting for *The Tempest* and *Julius Caesar* (AQA). Sarah Olive outlines the paucity of choice in Shakespearean texts set for GCSE and A Level with only a tiny handful of histories taught at all at 6<sup>th</sup> Form Level. Furthermore, the tragedies first given serious scrutiny by A.C Bradley over 100 years ago, take precedence over other plays at A Level study as a source of ‘higher’ study than those at GCSE (Elliot, 2019).<sup>6</sup> McEvoy (2005) also raises the issue of the “assessment objectives” which are applied to writing about Shakespeare’s plays in examinations, and particularly the question of social and historical context which might prevent the teaching of plays which require greater historical contextualisation and knowledge than others. *Henry V*, for example, might require setting within Shakespeare’s contemporary political context of the 1590’s, as well as that of the time at which the events related actually happened in the 1400’s, adding further burden on hard pressed teaching time. Furthermore, the all-male casting, complex dynastic politics and passages of obscure language and names mitigate against their being taught, even at Level 4 study (Ellinghausen, 2017).

Thus, it might seem that the practical opportunities for the history plays are marginal and their future possibly terminal within the curriculum.

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<sup>5</sup> Whilst acknowledging that such genres are ‘debated’ the mark scheme for the questions nonetheless rewards students for identifying and making links to the genre conventions listed.

<sup>6</sup> The implications of the disproportionate influence of a handful of English scholars and critics on the national curriculum and the teaching of English shall be examined in more detail in Chapter 4.

Nonetheless, it equally seems an urgent moment to reintroduce these living dramatic texts into the classroom at just the point that the nationalist sentiments they are called upon to support or critique are so pervasive and fundamental in the shaping of the nation.

Ideologically, the mandatory embedding of 'Fundamental British Values' within both the curriculum and structure of all educational settings brings the question of a shared set of national values, even more urgently into focus in the classroom. These are a set of specific beliefs introduced as part of the then coalition Government's 'prevent' strategy in 2011 and given formal definition in 2014. The five values themselves are not especially controversial : 'Schools should promote the fundamental British values of democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty, and mutual respect and tolerance of those with different faiths and beliefs' ( Department for Education, 2014).

The way in which these were announced, however, in response to the 'Trojan Horse controversy' over alleged (and ultimately unproven) Islamic Fundamentalist infiltration of schools created a hostile and divisive public discourse, quite contrary to the stated aims of the strategy (Vincent, 2018). Furthermore, subsequent accusations by teaching staff, local communities and teaching unions that the Prevent strategy has disproportionately targetted certain communities and may represent an act of 'cultural supremacism' (Espinoza, 2016) has ensured that they remain controversial.

So central are they to the curriculum that students' knowledge of, and teachers' failure to 'actively promote' the five 'fundamental British values' is central to Ofsted and embedded in all school and college documents. An inability to demonstrate an active commitment to these values is a limiting factor in an Ofsted judgement and can potentially place institutions in special measures. Recent research by the Commission for Countering Extremism conducted for a Select Committee identified the divisive nature of the strategy, outlining how a more 'universal...human rights' based approach may 'generate less controversy' and is 'urgently needed' to 'facilitate an effective policy in this area' (Weber, 2019).

The report describes how:

A continuing stream of concern and negativity about teaching FBVs has emanated from the press, the teaching profession, and communal groups right across the religious spectrum, from secular to faith groups.

Furthermore, teachers' union NASUWT commented in 2016 that:

There is a fear that the term 'British Values' implies that these are values that are unique to Britain, which could foster alienation and division, implying that Britain is somehow better and more civilised than other countries. The requirement has also sometimes been misinterpreted as an instruction to promote stereotypical ideas of what it means to be British or to celebrate Britain's imperial past. (Weber, 2019, p. 3)

How such stereotypical ideas of British exceptionalism have found currency within the Brexit debate shall be examined in chapter 3, through considering the pronouncements of the architects of Brexit. Thus, I will draw an implicit link between the shaping of educational policy and the cultural assumptions at the heart of one strand of Brexit discourse.

The Commission's report, which remains unimplemented as of 2020 concludes that:

The greatest challenge ... (is) concern that the stated values were clearly not exclusive to Britain and that 'the label 'British' may alienate students and staff with another heritage, and that it has the potential to divide communities and people from different cultural backgrounds. (Weber, 2019, p. 4)

The challenges in the teaching of Shakespeare are thus potentially exacerbated in the teaching of the history plays whose performance and popularity has been closely linked to British imperialism (Mardock J. D., 2016)<sup>7</sup> and whose casting has overwhelmingly marginalised cultural difference (Daieader, 2014).

However, can they also be presented to contemporary students in a way that challenges British exceptionalism and allows a more relevant and diverse Britishness to emerge in the age of Brexit?

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<sup>7</sup> Mardock notes how by the 1890s *Henry V*, its interpretation heavily influenced by the tradition of spectacular Victorian productions, had become such a symbol of British nationalism and imperialism that George Bernard Shaw complained, in an 1896 review of *1 Henry IV* at the Haymarket, that Shakespeare could so unforgivably 'thrust such a Jingo hero as his Harry V down our throats' (Shaw 2: 428-29).

## **Chapter 1: The national project of the History plays and the case of 'Henry V'**

I will consider first what is meant by a 'History play' and the tradition within which Shakespeare was working, to establish how the extent to which such plays helped form or challenge the project of a national identity, and if they were singularly conservative in intent. From here, how Shakespeare chose to present his *Henry V* in relation to both the historic Henry and the established praxis of Henry in own age will be evaluated to consider how the play makes problematic any simplistic patriotic notions of the King and his actions.

I will consider how the ambivalences in Henry's character and actions implicit in Shakespeare's dramaturgy are analogous to the actors in the Brexit debate in chapter 2, to consider the view that Henry may in fact provide a different kind of critical 'mirror' in our current age.

### **The History Play and *Henry V***

Shakespeare inherited a tradition of plays written about the events of English history in the 1590's which used the established chronicle sources of Raphael Holinshed, Edward Hall and others to be refashioned into a popular dramatic form (Smith, 2004). How closely Shakespeare followed chronicle and other sources, both in terms of narrative, and more significantly, moral tone and didactic purpose, is the source of considerable academic debate, the key points of which I shall examine below to consider if Shakespeare's aims in writing *Henry V* are discernibly, or simplistically nationalistic or not. I will evaluate the pivotal and influential historicist critical approach of Tillyard and others, who saw Shakespeare's view as homologous in their conservatism to his chronicle sources. Such critics, in describing Shakespeare's universalism, linked this forwards in time, to their own conservative outlook (Smith, 2004). I will examine the ensuing critical reactions against this, to evaluate the extent to which the plays can still be seen as convincingly nationalistic in intent.

### The project of the History plays :Paean to power or critique of the state?

Shaughnessy notes the scope of Shakespeare's works on English history in undertaking 'one of English theatre's most ambitious projects ever attempted', dramatising the course of English history from 1398 with Henry Bolingbroke's challenge to Thomas Mowbray, precipitating the events that will lead to the deposition of Richard II, through to 1484, which saw the accession of Henry VIII and the inauguration of the reign of the Tudors (Shaughnessy, 2011).

The exact nature of this project has been the source of much debate, complicated by the original sequencing of his plays that did not follow the chronological history they mapped, yet were restructured as such in their most famous published form in the 1623 First Folio, whose compilers felt that the plays formed a coherent group. The significance of the plays being created as a literary sequence- for which there is no direct historical evidence – has nonetheless determined many critical interpretations. However, in terms of their circumstances of initial publication and performance, the plays appeared *out* of this retrospective sequence, with the three Henry VI plays appearing before *Richard II*, the two parts of *Henry IV* and *Henry V*. This is significant in considering the context for Shakespeare's audience, who would have experienced the *Henry VI* plays, rather as a modern movie audience might with *Star Wars episodes*, acting as 'prequels' to later works. Thus, the events which lie in the future of the second tetralogy are already firmly part of its theatrical memory, creating a sense of 'double time' in early audiences, specifically invoked in the closing chorus of *Henry V* that reminds us how ultimately Henry's achievements were lost following his death, as Henry VI failed to keep the gains made by his ancestor, a man 'whose state so many had the managing / That they lost France and made his England bleed' (*Henry V* v.iii LN 12). The miserable losses and divisions of the reign of Henry's son, already shown on stage across three plays, thus might further the exceptionalism of Henry's achievement to early modern audiences. However, it equally undermines the historical permanence of his achievements, often elided in later performances that deal with the play alone, and presented in edited forms, thus creating a more laudatory nationalistic reading of the King.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Century performance for example would not only elide lines but add specific passages of praise for an English King or critique of the French. See Ewert, 2006, chapter 4.



Structurally, at least, any consideration of the sequence as straightforward patriotic celebration is thus problematised for Shakespeare's own audience, even if the Chorus and other critical scenes are included or not. How unqualified Henry's success is, is also partially dependent upon the significant and sometimes perplexing differences between the quarto (Q) and later folio (F) versions of the play, assumed to be written and performed in 1599 and 1600 respectively, with the Q text's shorter version allowing 'for a less morally complicated picture of the king' (Shaughnessy, 2011) and thus somewhat closer to the intentions of Shakespeare's dramatic source, the *Famous Victories*.

Debate over the significance of the differences between the two versions is considerable and there isn't scope here to outline them fully,<sup>10</sup> but the revisions and changes from a 1599 to 1600 script seem to reflect changes in contemporary politics, with numerous references to the war in Ireland removed. This suggests that 'the company emphasized different aspects of the play at different times, adjusting the script for different audiences' (Mardock, 2016). Thus, it can be posited that for Shakespeare and his company the history plays, and *Henry V*, in particular with its topical and then redacted allusion to the Early of Essex and Ireland, were not merely didactic lessons in history but as a form of Presentist<sup>11</sup> reflection that drew upon, as well as shaped, the nationalist discourse of his own age.

The English history plays are given further retrospective coherence, not apparent at their first theatrical performances, by being organised by twentieth century critics into the two 'tetralogies' or 'Henriad' sequences of *Richard II*, *Henry IV, Part 1*, *Henry IV, Part 2*, and *Henry V* (the second Henriad in terms of the period covered) starting in composition in 1595 that is taken to represent Shakespeare's 'epic' theatre, with *Henry V* acting as the dramatic conclusion to the sequence in 1599. This leaves the earlier written and performed plays that cover the later period of English history following Henry V's death that explore The Wars of the Roses; *Henry VI, Part 1*, *Henry VI, Part 2*, *Henry VI, Part 3*, and *Richard III*<sup>12</sup>, a series begun in 1591 and completed at some point in 1592/3.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Gurr, 1992, gives an excellent overview of the differences and debates they have generated.

<sup>11</sup> The term is defined in greater detail later and was coined in work of Terence Hawkes, see Hawkes (2012).

<sup>12</sup> The term Henriad was popularised by Alvin Kernan in his 1969 article *The Henriad: Shakespeare's Major History Plays* but readings of the play consciously created as a meaningful sequence heavily inform the views of historicist critics, such as Campbell and Tillyard. The question over Shakespeare's intentionality in writing an 'epic' sequence is often based upon correspondences between the plays in terms of imagery and characterisation, but there is no firm evidence of such an aim.

<sup>13</sup> Shakespeare's 'outlier' plays on English history are not considered structurally as fitting this sequence by critics. *King John* covers a different period of history to both tetralogies and makes no links to the others; *Edward III* was not considered as written by Shakespeare

The critical prominence of the second tetralogy in the twentieth century reflects the belief of critics like Kernan that only this sequence shows the ‘epic’ structural qualities ‘tracing the movement of a nation or people through violent change from one condition to another’. Politically and socially, then the Henriad represents a ‘movement from feudalism and hierarchy to the national state and individualism’ with Henry V, as the last ruler in the sequence a metonym for modernity and the ideal ruler (Kernan, 1969). The comparative theatrical and critical neglect of the first tetralogy that shows England in chaos after Henry V has abetted retrospective glorification of Henry V,<sup>14</sup> yet the original sequencing means that Shakespeare’s audiences wouldn’t view this play as the epic conclusion. For them, *Henry V* was not the culmination of a new age, but prequel to later tragedy. Nonetheless, this view of the sequence and its significance has been an important stepping off point for modern criticism thus is addressed in the second part of this chapter.

First, however, it is worth considering the materials Shakespeare was working with in his portrayal of the ‘mirror of all Christian Kings’ (*Henry V*, 2.1 ln 6) and how he moulded an existing praxis of the historical individual into a distinct theatrical form to interrogate the nationalist rhetoric of his own age, and thus act instructively to our own.

Shakespeare inherited a discourse around Henry V began even when Henry was alive that emphasised his exceptional character.<sup>15</sup> Historically, Henry V was, and has been, remembered for four central achievements: his military prowess and successes at home and then in France; his ability to control internal dissent; his piety and ultimately his status as an exemplary King, when set against both preceding and subsequent monarchs.<sup>16</sup> By Shakespeare’s time, Henry’s glory by comparison with lesser monarchs is significant in his

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until as recently the New Cambridge edition of 1998 and its authorship remains contested; *Henry VIII*, written in collaboration with John Fletcher, appeared a decade after *Henry V*, well after the popularity of the history play had waned. These plays, given their contentious status have not been widely performed or critically assessed, have had little subsequent bearing on nationalist discourse and thus remain outside the scope of this thesis.

<sup>14</sup> Poole, 2003, for example. Notes how *Henry VI* was never played by any significant Victorian actor/director, unlike the frequent patriotic *Henry V* productions of the era.

<sup>15</sup> The *Gesta Henrici Quinti* of 1417 and later texts give numerous examples of his heroism and achievements. The references to Sir John Oldcastle still being alive means it must have been written prior to 1418. As Lewis notes ‘In reminding readers of the nature of Henry’s victory at Agincourt and the duplicitous disposition of the French it was apparently designed to encourage both moral and material support for the continued pursuit of Henry’s rights in France’ (p48).

<sup>16</sup> Modern historians have not been universally approving. Certainly, contemporary historians now look more carefully at his reputation in the round; more negative aspects such as his persecution of the Lollards and cruelty in battle in his last years have presented a more mixed picture of Henry. See Allmand (2013)

position in the sequence of Shakespeare's plays<sup>17</sup> and a central aspect of even modern historiography.<sup>18</sup> Thus:

Shakespeare's heroic version of Henry is not simply a posthumous fiction but was the fruit of almost two centuries of tradition which has its roots in Henry's reign and conduct, and in the reminiscences of those who knew him...No other English king enjoyed such popularity as literary subject matter in the Middle Ages. (Lewis, 2013, p. 48)

This was not merely a reflection of his achievements in life, it began a process of employing Henry to spur on actions in the present. Thus, Lewis notes how even as late as the sixteenth Century, Henry's life was called upon in propagandist purposes to galvanise English support for military endeavours in France.

By Shakespeare's time, Henry's glory by comparison with lesser monarchs was enhanced by his position in the sequence of Shakespeare's plays an observation that gained renewed currency in the twentieth century<sup>19</sup>, yet Henry's exceptionalism remains a central aspect of even modern historiography.<sup>20</sup>

In his *Henry V*, Shakespeare touches upon all of the laudatory aspects of Henry, if somewhat lightly in terms of domestic policy and sceptically in relation to piety, with many critics detecting a hypocrisy and political expediency in his use of Providential claims (Rabkin, 1977, Loehlin, 1997) not found in earlier sources<sup>21</sup>. Overwhelmingly, though Shakespeare's primary focus is on the military reputation, in particular 'the events of the year 1415' that 'still claims headlines status' in Henry's reputation (Allamand, 2013), notably the battle of Agincourt.

I shall consider here how Shakespeare deviates both from his historical and theatrical sources in his portrayal of Henry to posit that his version of this nationalist hero is far more ambiguously conceived than in his source materials.

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<sup>17</sup> See Tillyard (1944), Chapters 1 and 4.

<sup>18</sup> Thus twentieth century historians such as K.B MacFarlane have posited that 'taken all round, he was, I think, the greatest man that ever-ruled England.' Cited from Lewis (Lewis, 2013, p. 51).

<sup>19</sup> See Tillyard (1944), Chapters 1 and 4.

<sup>20</sup> Thus twentieth century historians such as K.B MacFarlane have posited that 'taken all round, he was, I think, the greatest man that ever-ruled England.' Cited from Lewis (Lewis, 2013, p. 51).

<sup>21</sup> Modern historiography has not universally accepted Henry's piety at face values. As Lewis notes, some historians have seen 'his piety as hypocritical and counterfeit...just one aspect of his duplicitous attempts to pass off naked ambition in France as God's work.' (Lewis, 2013)

The historical Henry V would have been familiar to Shakespeare's largely illiterate popular audiences in the 1590's, more through an established stage tradition and popular myths than a detailed understanding of historiographic sources (Gurr). The anonymous play *The Famous Victories of Henry the fifth: Containing the Honourable Battel of Agincourt: As it was plaide by the Queenes Maiesties Players*, commonly referred to as the *Famous Victories* was performed widely from the mid -1580's provided a great deal of the narrative structure, general content and the tone of *Henry V*, in the use of comic elements and the 'wooing' scene that brings resolution in Act 5. The *Famous Victories* and other chronicle histories sought to commercially exploit the mood of a post-Armada England, desirous to assert its military prowess and celebrate nationalistic pride in a successful and popular form. Norwich provides a typically traditional critical view of how Shakespeare's *Henry V* fitted into this established discourse as:

a patriotic paen celebrating England's only royal hero, the triumphant conclusion of a nine-part work that had taken the author the first decade of his active life...The English felt themselves reborn, and filled with an unfamiliar confidence and pride...After a century of chaos, the Tudors had forged a modern state which, by the time William Shakespeare was born ...was both peaceful and prosperous.  
(Norwich, p6-7)

Such a view, however, has been undermined significantly by later critical assessments of the Tudor and Stuart state that see the internal repressions and domestic tensions that this image of a 'golden age' elide.<sup>22</sup>

Shakespeare, furthermore, used the materials of the *Famous Victories* in a less uncritically patriotic manner than their anonymous writer, particularly in the folio text that -unusually for Shakespeare, and especially the histories- uses a chorus to comment upon the action we see and ultimately draws attention to discrepancies between the stage action and this commentary upon it.

As Shaughnessy notes the addition of the Chorus, whilst potentially adding to the patriotic and jingoistic mood of the play, particularly in the first acts, thus begins to undermine this narrative and acts in such a way as to undermine any view of the play as merely a reworked *Famous Victories*.

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<sup>22</sup> See Tennenhouse (1986) who posits that the theatre itself acted as a means of staging state power to maintain repressive control. Such a position is rejected by Bradshaw, 1993 who sees audiences as much more capable of seeing beyond this.

As one critic notes:

The anonymous Famous Victories...shows what a bluffly jingoistic dramatization of Henry's war he *could* have produced. Shakespeare...could easily have removed the more questionable aspects of Henry's character with more strategic cutting, but they did not...Evidently the ambiguity of the portrait was seen as a central and desirable aspect of Shakespeare's dramatization of history. (Mardock, 2016)

Henry's life certainly offered much material for a heroic portrayal of marital and leader success. Henry (Price Hal as he is Shakespeare's *Henry IV parts 1 and 2* and Henry of Monmouth in historiography) became heir to the throne in 1399, following his father's deposition of Richard II and subsequent accession as Henry IV. As Lewis notes 'Warfare was the defining element of Henry's reign and personality' (Lewis, p 46) with his martial skills developed fully from youth and his military successes the chief source of his reputation.<sup>23</sup> However, Henry's preparation for Kingship was not merely military. Henry was skilled in diplomacy, active in the Government of England since his father's succession and subsequently ruling during his father's prolonged and often incapacitating illness, effectively running the country from January 1410 until he was discharged by his father in November 1411. Thus, as Sacco notes 'Henry V came to the throne well experienced in politics, administration and warfare: few kings have been so well trained for their job' (p66). Henry ascended the throne in a position of relative popularity, enhanced by his conspicuous policy of reconciliation with those viewed as enemies or with suspicion in the past.<sup>24</sup> Whilst not facing the fiercely oppugnant internal forces that beset either Henry IV or Henry VI, the fifth Henry nonetheless had to initially overcome seditious factions, notably the Lollard discontent focused around their leader Sir John Oldcastle between 1414 and 1417 and the Southampton plot of 1415 which sought to restore Richard II's onetime heir presumptive, Edmund Mortimer, the 5<sup>th</sup> Earl of March to the throne. The initial Lollard

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<sup>23</sup> Norwich notes that: 'Henry was, first and foremost, a soldier. At the age of only twelve he had accompanied Richard II on his second expedition to Ireland; later, after Richard's deposition and his father's seizure of the throne, he had fought valiantly at Shrewsbury and had commanded the army in successive campaigns against Owen Glendower in Wales. His personal courage was never questioned. By the time of his own accession at the age of twenty-five he was already a seasoned general, loved and trusted by his men, possessing a thorough knowledge of siegecraft, highly experienced in pitched battles and guerrilla warfare.' (Norwich, 1992, p174).

<sup>24</sup> This reconciliation was symbolised first by his ceremonial reburial of Richard II in the tomb the usurped king had built for himself in Westminster Abbey and shown via the release and restoration of Richard's heir presumptive Edmund Mortimer, to his noble title and in his conciliation of hostile nobles, including the house of Percy and the northern lords who had so opposed his father. Allamand suggests that such actions were highly significant in the prevention of further internal discord during his reign. See Allamand (2013).

uprising was fairly easily dealt with. Henry, warned in advance, soon quelled the uprising and Oldcastle was arrested and tried. Oldcastle, as an old friend of the King's was given the opportunity to recant his heretical statements. He escaped from jail (rumours suggested with the King's aid) but finally put to death in 1417 in a manner which would suggest the king sought to make an example of his old friend as a warning to others. In Shakespeare's histories 'Oldcastle' is perhaps best known for being the name originally used for Falstaff in *Henry IV, Part 1* until his contemporary ancestors complained about the disreputable deeds of the character on stage and it was changed in later versions. The rejection of Falstaff in *Henry V, Part 2* similarly represents the theatrical Henry's testing of friendship versus duty, with the rejection of the former for the latter, in the achievement of Kingship. However, there is no evidence of such a significant change in character being a premeditated strategy by the historic Henry V; the narrative of Henry's 'reform' being a popular myth that 'cannot be substantiated from contemporary evidence' (Saccio, 1977, p. 66). In Shakespeare's characterisation, Prince Hal compares himself to the 'sun' noting how his 'glittering' 'reformation' achieved via the symbolic rejection of Falstaff will 'show more goodly and attract more eyes/Than that which hath no foil to set it off' (*Henry IV*, 1.2.220; 221-222). Shakespeare thus suggests a more consciously Machiavellian Henry, alert to the significance of a range of performative gestures than that of his more consistent historical counterpart (Greenblatt, 1985).

Despite the drama of the last act of Oldcastle's life, The Lollard uprising and its leader do not feature at all in Shakespeare's play for both dramatic and political reasons. As Saccio notes:

...It is easy to see why Shakespeare omits all this. Not only is religious revolution irrelevant to his play about the conquest of France, but also English attitudes had changed towards the Lollards by this time. To Protestant Englishmen after the Reformation, Oldcastle died a martyr. Shakespeare cannot portray his king as the agent of Papist persecution.

(Saccio, p72)

The second domestic uprising of Henry's reign does feature briefly in Shakespeare's play, but the dynastic element of the Southampton plot is barely notable on stage, reduced to a secondary motive by only one of the conspirators, with the French foregrounded as the

paymasters of the would-be usurpers. Again, dramaturgically this focusses the plot on the justification for Henry's mission against the French, removes an unnecessary plot complication and allows Henry's cunning in uncovering the plot to foreground strength of character.<sup>25</sup> This is no reference to the fact that the plot was revealed to the king by Mortimer himself, or that Mortimer's claim to the throne may be more secure than Henry's own. Whilst both Shakespeare's sources Hall and Holinshead introduce the plot as inspired by French bribery, they explore fully the dynastic causes behind it, something Shakespeare chooses to elide. This is not least as he has explored the nature of dynastic struggle over the course of both Henry IV plays, and in significant detail in the *Henry VI* plays almost a decade earlier.

The Southampton plot temporarily interrupted Henry's more significant policy aim; his 'adversary of France'. Henry's historical reputation was cemented in his own time by his three campaigns in France of 1415, 1417-1420 and 1421. The first saw Henry take Harfleur followed by his most famous victory at Agincourt. The sustained campaign of 1417-1420 sought to reduce Normandy and concluded with the treat of Troyes. The final campaign of a series of sieges in 1421-1422 was extinguished by Henry's death from dysentery, aged 35. Again, for reasons of dramatic continuity Shakespeare elides the time frame of Henry's campaigns as:

Shakespeare represents some of the diplomacy and most of the Harfleur-Agincourt expedition. He hastily summarises the events between Agincourt and Troyes in the choral narrative preceding Act V, and altogether eclipses the final campaign, barely mentioning Henry's death in the epilogue to the play. (Saccio,p75)

Furthermore, Shakespeare examines little, if any, of the context of the French internal conflict that Henry was able to exploit to make his gains. Whilst the victory at Agincourt remains remarkable, it needs to be set against the factionalism that had developed through Charles VI's periodic fits of madness that allowed for ongoing internecine conflict between hostile factions. To best secure his claims in the first years of his reign Henry made negotiations with both main factions, using alliance with one group to create division with

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<sup>25</sup> Saccio notes how in the 'abbreviated dramatization of the Cambridge plot the king has already taken steps to deal with the conspirators...the charge is simply that they have been suborned by the French to murder the king...The early of March is never mentioned ...the dynastic issue is altogether obliterated'. (Saccio, 1977, p. 74)

the other.<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, Henry negotiated with the Holy Roman Emperor in an impressive display of diplomacy that secured an alliance valuable to his cause.

Shakespeare's focus on Agincourt follows the established medieval discourse of Henry's greatest victory resultant from Henry's skill and Providential intervention. Henry's pragmatic attempt to sue for peace before the battle, a 'decision which has always tended to be overlooked by the more patriotic or chauvinistic historians', is thus elided (Norwich, 2018, p. 185). The advantages of the rain, the superior firepower of the English bowmen and Henry's use of stakes and defensive lines are all well-known to modern historians and tacticians in enabling Henry's victory, but go unmentioned in Shakespeare, elevating the Hero-King's achievements significantly.<sup>27</sup> The play's telescoping of the last years of Henry's life and later campaigns are based upon the structure of the *Famous Victories* with his marriage to Katherine allowing the resolution of comedy and the clarification that Henry is to inherit France.<sup>28</sup> As noted, following his death, Henry was already being valorised as an exemplum of the ideal King, and utilised in shaping the course of the nation with tracts of his exploits being given to his son Henry VI to encourage him to mimic his heroic father.<sup>29</sup> Shakespeare's audience, through the earlier plays having referenced the hero-King as a mythical almost superhuman warrior have similarly been encouraged to see 'King Henry the Fifth, too famous to live long' be given an afterlife which raises him to the status of a Phoenix-like superhero in Henry VI Part I with :

His arms spread wider than a dragon's wings;

His sparkling eyes, replete with wrathful fire. (Act 1,1, ln 14-15)

Nonetheless, the ending of Henry V serves to make this earlier panegyric hollow – Shakespeare's audience already know how the hero-King's achievements are denigrated by

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<sup>26</sup> During the King's periodic madness France was misruled by his nobles, who each controlled areas of the country loyal to the King. At Henry's accession, the internecine conflict was between the Burgundians under John the Fearless Duke of Burgundy, and the Armagnacs or Orleanists under Bernard Count of Armagnac, and with the Dauphin Louis, heir to the throne supporting them. Other factions remained in the middle or switched allegiances via secret treaties.

<sup>27</sup> Thus, the numbers of dead given by Shakespeare are 10,000 'slaughtered French' including 126 nobility, 8,400 knights, esquires and gentlemen and 1,600 mercenaries, contrasted with just 29 English dead. Henry reads the nobles' names: the Duke of York, the Earl of Suffolk, 'Sir Richard Keighley, Davy Gam esquire / None else of name', and add that 25 commoners also died. In historical reality, it is estimated that almost 6,000 Frenchmen lost their lives during the Battle of Agincourt, while English deaths amounted to just over 400. Branagh's film version (1985) gives a higher figure of 'three score and ten' for the English yet still has 'none else of name'; the apparent 'band of brothers' is thus as much a strictly hierarchical order in Shakespeare's time as Branagh's.

<sup>28</sup> Ironically despite saying 'No King of England/if not of France' in the play, the historical Henry never actually became King of France. If he had lived six weeks longer, he would have become King following the death of Charles VI.

<sup>29</sup> Katherine Lewis notes how a later text 'Fruelovisi's life presents Henry V as a model to Henry VI, thus forming part of the extensive body of didactic literature aimed at the young king.' (Lewis, 2013, p. 54)



mismanagement of the state in the reign of his son. His individual heroism – symbolic of the Chivalric age- cannot be reborn in the modern age in which ‘many’ act to mismanage the state.

Therefore, in terms of his use of historical materials, Shakespeare’s own elisions do focus the heroism of the play on Henry and create the potential for an unequivocally nationalist hero. However, against this needs to be balanced the clear differences in Shakespeare’s play from the *Famous Victories*<sup>30</sup>, the fractures created by the Chorus that undermine Henry’s rhetoric and the audience’s knowledge from the earlier plays in the cycle that his efforts will all be lost.

### The critical backstory: From history to ideology

Critical assessment of Shakespeare’s sequence of history plays has, in attempting to discern his intentions, often considered them either as part of a nationalist project in support of the Tudor state or exposing the tensions with this.

A timely starting point for the most influential critical view on the History plays begins- perhaps unsurprisingly- during an intense period of national crisis - the Second World War. As Smith notes, ‘Almost all criticism of the history plays since the mid –twentieth century has had to take account of E.M.W Tillyard’s *‘Shakespeare History Plays’* (1944) (Smith, 2004)- even if to travel in a range of opposing directions .Tillyard’s view was that the sequence of English history plays should be read as ‘ a unified historical narrative expressing a politically and morally orthodox monarchist philosophy of history’ (Holderness 1992,p3 ) that act as an expression of the desirability of ‘the principle of order behind all the terrible manifestations of disorder’ (Tillyard ,1944). From this position, Shakespeare is assumed to be unapologetically using the past to glorify the Tudor Myth in aid of a nationalist project. This providential view of history rejects the influence of Machiavelli and finds Shakespeare’s central influence in the sources of Hall and other promulgators of the Tudor Myth ;wherein the ‘union of the two houses of York and Lancaster’ was seen as the unifying outcome that restored the disorder of the Wars of the Roses and the ‘gross violation of order’ caused via the deposition of the legitimate King Richard II only restored via the

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<sup>30</sup> As Mardock notes the *Famous Victories* ‘takes the siege of Harfleur offstage, entirely omits both the Southampton treason and the killing of the prisoners, and in avoiding all mention of the English retreat to Calais, gives the impression that the Agincourt campaign was nothing but one unstoppable march to victory. Indeed, the more patriotic productions of Shakespeare’s play that have cut these more distressing elements might have taken the smoothed-over plot of *Famous Victories* as a model’ (Mardock J. D., 2016).

accession of the first tudor Monarch , Henry VII (Tillyard , 1944). Thus,for Elizabeth I,last of the five Tudor Monarchs,there was a providential stamp of approval to her rule that added legitimacy to a state that rejected Machiavellian versions of the nature of authority as :

Such a way of thinking was abhorrent to the Elizabethans (as indeed it always has been and is now to the majority) who preferred to think of order as the norm to which disorder , though lamentably common,was yet the exception

(Tillyard, 1944)

Later critics have identified how Tillyard's critical view reflects his own essentially conservative agenda in the 1940's that sought to stabilise a nation undergoing seismic change, hence his assumption that 'order' is as popular 'now' (in the 1940's) as in the 1590's. His critical views can be seen to reflect the 'Ideological crisis of British nationalism as the war drew to a close' wherein 'the imperialism built on British nationalism entered its last,terminal phase' (Holderness, 1992). Nonetheless, It is Tillyard's contention that the History play as a genre of the 1590's simply 'exploited the conscious patriotism of the decade after the Armada and instructed an inquisitive public in some of the facts and legends of English history' (Tillyard 1943,1988).

However, this somewhat narrow remit for Shakespeare's project ,bound to a singular ideological purpose has been challenged by the clear contention that:

Not every Elizabethan could have accepted the state's official explanation of things: there were within the culture intellectual divisions over matters of religion, politics, law, ethics; there were Catholics and Protestants and Puritans, monarchists and republicans, believers in the divine right of Kings and defenders of the common law and the rights of the subject.

(Holderness G. , 1992)

Furthermore ,in Elizabethan England nationalist anxieties are apparent not only within a fractious English state ,but in tensions surrounding the nations around England that would by necessity need to be ultimately subsumed to create a singular nation. Thus, any view of national identity in response to the capstone play in Tillyard's contention (*Henry V*) is determined partly via issues of wider characterisation and structure not merely in the

infamously divisive character of Henry himself (Woodcock, 2008). As Andrew Gurr notes 'the presence of four captains of Henry's army in France' representing England, Wales, Scotland and Ireland can be read as 'a not particularly subtle piece of political prophecy' and 'certainly an Elizabethan rewriting of English history', altering Shakespeare's primary source Holinshed in changing the loyalties of Welsh and Scots mercenaries from financial payment from the French to nationalistic loyalty to a British state still under formation. Thus, the play enacts a nationalist fantasy wherein it is possible 'to unite the different domains of Britain into one army', negotiating a 'politically very suggestive' situation in the 1590's where even 'the possibility' of naming James VI of Scotland as successor to Elizabeth resulted in being sent to the Tower of London (Gurr, 1992). Furthermore, the only direct reference in the Shakespeare canon to an immediately contemporary event via the reference to the Earl of Essex highlights both the debatable role of the chorus and places centrally the intractable war of the 1590's in Ireland, with an imagined heroic resolution that links Henry, the Earl of Essex and a classical triumphal parade:

Like to the senators of th' antique Rome,  
 With the plebeians swarming at their heels,  
 Go forth and fetch their conquering Caesar in—  
 As, by a lower but loving likelihood,  
 Were now the general of our gracious empress,  
 As in good time he may, from Ireland coming,  
 Bringing rebellion broached on his sword,  
 How many would the peaceful city quit  
 To welcome him!

(Henry V Act5, 1 lns 26-34)

This furthers another English nationalist fantasy; a future projection of a pacified Ireland. However, this was brought abruptly to a halt by Essex's dismal failure and ultimate execution for an untimely and ill-considered rebellion against the queen. That Elizabeth herself saw the Essex rebellion and its supporters as a viable threat to her rule and the fraught question of succession that exacerbated over her reign is demonstrated by the well reported staging of *Richard II* by Essex supporters. Following Essex's execution, an ensuing government investigation noted that Essex's servants sought to take the play in the words

of Francis Bacon ‘from the stage to the state’, a play that presented a ‘tragedy ... forty times played in open streets & houses’. As Dr Jason Scott-Warren notes : this staging ‘can be read as another response to these events, one that registers Shakespeare as a political threat.’ Whilst the facts of Elizabeth’s reported comment to her keeper of the records William Lambarde: ‘I am Richard II, know yet not that?’ has been brought in to question (Bate J. , 2008) ; the linkage between the characters of the History plays and the reality of Elizabeth’s reign are nonetheless apparent in a contemporary interplay that suggests a more complex relationship than one of accepted state propaganda and monolithic audience (Scott-Warren, 2012).

Indeed, a wide range of subsequent critics have contested the idea of Shakespeare as a unifying figure working in an essentially conservative medium and explored the range of different, and potentially conflicting, political and ideological ‘meanings’ in the History plays, in studies such as Dollimore and Sinfield’s iconoclastic ‘Political Shakespeare’ (1985) ; the ongoing work of New Historicism (Greenblatt, 1985) and Feminist criticism (Rackin, 1990)- albeit with often quite divergent conclusions. Such approaches have sought to relocate the plays in specific points of contemporary cultural and political anxiety, such as the already noted Essex rebellion and intractable military crisis in Ireland identified by Shapiro (Shapiro, 2005) and Maley (Maley, 1997; 2007 ) ; anxieties about primogeniture and succession ( Taylor, 1998) and even the ‘racial degeneration’ inherent in creating specific ‘discourses of nationhood’ (Cahill, 2003) .Thus,there is now a considerable weight of critical evidence that questions Shakespeare’s role as uncritical propagandist for the Tudor dynasty and inherently conservative supporter of the status quo identified by earlier critics such as Tillyard and Lily B. Campbell (Campbell, 1947). Furthermore, that Shakespeare unquestioningly follows his sources in a conservative reading of history has been debated; an argument supported by Shakespeare’s own selective use of the sources and the view that: ‘Sixteenth century chronicles, such as those by Hall or Hollingshead, did not embody a uniform ideological stance’ (Kewes, 2003). Annabel Patterson’s compelling account of the writers of the chronicles and their diverse styles of historiography, and varied purposes in writing that clearly look beyond the simply didactic, furthers this idea (Patterson, 1994). Beyond which, Shakespeare – the great adapter of existing materials into new theatrical

forms – would be unlikely to follow an established genre without working out from it into something richer.

As Parvini argues that this is self-evident in the nature of the Shakespeare canon itself. As:

To assume on the strength of his plays that Shakespeare was an exceptionally intelligent and imaginatively gifted individual is to expect them to be engaged in more than merely upholding or exposing Tudor or Stuart state propaganda

(Parvini, 2012, p. 75).

In short, ‘Shakespeare the propagandist’ cannot be the only, or most significant, ways in which to read the history plays.<sup>31</sup>

Thus, this critical overview suggests that the weight of modern critical evaluations *cannot* support the earlier contention that Shakespeare was working to a singularly propagandist nationalist and conservative view.

However, if ‘Shakespeare the conservative’ is not the only view possible, then what other views of nationalist power can we derive from his history plays, and its cornerstone play *Henry V*? How best can we evaluate other views through the *application* of modern theory to practice, particularly in the Brexit era?

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<sup>31</sup> Whilst the post-war view of Tillyard and Campbell that Shakespeare, in utilising the ‘providential history’ of Halle created ‘loyal celebrations of Tudor power’ was critiqued from the 1950’s onwards, Holderness notes that ‘Virtually all modern critical accounts of Shakespeare’s historical drama...take their bearings’ from Tillyard- surprising given that his ideas are ‘firmly rooted in the kind of conservative ,nationalistic and authoritarian ideology contemporary criticism has sought comprehensively and systematically to challenge’ (Holderness, p1 , *Introduction to Shakespeare’s History Plays : Richard II to Henry V*).

### The critical debate today: power, containment, and action in the present.

Having identified how twentieth century critical assessments of the plays have deconstructed the view of Shakespeare narrowly serving a nationalist agenda, I will now turn to the contemporary critical debate over the extent to which the plays allow for subversion, or whether the conservatism of a heavily censored state and stage mute or contain such subversion<sup>32</sup> and the implications this has for readings of *Henry V*.

From this, I will consider how these insights can be applied pedagogically and impediments to the use of theory. I will then consider how the presence of discordant voices in the play *can* be legitimately heard and used to question nationalism, in the practical application of critical theory to correspondences between the plays and our current moment.

In our current moment, the History plays have added relevance in that they are undoubtedly political in nature and openly concerned with national identity.<sup>33</sup> Thus, one urgent concern which emerges in more recent criticism -the focus on what the history plays say about power- is of particular relevance in an age in which the ability to 'Get Brexit Done!' depends upon galvanising rhetoric and the accretion of power.

Critically, there is with a contention between the New Historicist School associated with the early work of Stephen Greenblatt and the Cultural Materialism associated with Dollimore and Sinfield. Critics such as Jean E. Howard and Phyllis Rackin also address issues of power in the History plays from the perspective of how ideologies of gender were formulated and regulated in the late 16<sup>th</sup> Century (Howard, 1997). Indeed, no major critical position since Tillyard has denied that power is central to the plays. The contention, however, is where the play of this power lies; how totalising it is in nature, and what possibility there is for subversion. Following Foucault in his early work, Greenblatt sees ideology as central to any consideration of Shakespeare and other early modern writers yet posits that in the play world, any resistance to power is always subject to containment by forces from above, and individual agency controlled. As Belsey notes Greenblatt's early analysis suggests that in early modern drama and society there is 'no rebellion that is not complicit with the power that produced it, and no chance of a revolt that is not subject to co-option or worse' (Belsey,

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<sup>32</sup> Tennenhouse (1986), for example sees all acts of subversion as ultimately contained on the stage ,feeding back into the elaborate myth of Elizabeth I's power.

<sup>33</sup> See Holderness 1997 chapter 6.

2007). In relation to *Henry V*, the Machiavellian cynicism of the play allows a certain level of subversion, yet only in order to ultimately crush it, for as Greenblatt posits 'The subversive doubts the play continually awakens originate paradoxically in an effort to intensify the power of the king and his war' (Greenblatt, 1988).

Furthermore, the impossibility of the stage world achieving meaningful political *praxis* is exacerbated further not just by State oppression of subversion at the time via censorship, but also the shifting context of the play from our own time. Greenblatt thus concludes his first ground-breaking essay on *Henry V* that thus 'there is subversion, no end of subversion, just not for us' (Greenblatt, 1985). Greenblatt therefore notes of *Henry V* and its theatrical presentation of the King that 'it is not at all clear that *Henry V* can be performed as subversive' (Greenblatt, 1988).

However, as Parvini notes, the limitations of the New Historicist position are that in the process of containment there is little sense left of the agency of the writer; nor for an audience's response to the play to question the operations of power they have seen enacted. He questions how such an anti-essentialist position may go too far and posits, not unreasonably that: 'If Foucault, writing in the twentieth century, could have original, provocative insights into the order of things in his time, why could not Shakespeare writing in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries?' (Parvini, 2012).

Furthermore, that audiences have responded in such varied ways as they have to demonstrations of power, state and otherwise, suggest the limitations of Greenblatt's view in theatrical practice. As theatrical historian and critic Kathryn Prince notes 'popular Shakespeare reception has always been multivocal and polyphonous' (Prince, 2012). Alternately, the Cultural Materialist view allows more for the 'play' of subversion of power in the theatre, following a more Marxist tradition developed through a view of historical process less focussed on the aesthetic terms favoured by Greenblatt that ultimately can be seen to dissolve opposition to power, and more on history as a potential agent of change.<sup>34</sup> Their work builds upon theorists such as Gramsci, Althusser and Raymond Williams, developing a view of history and culture as a site of ideological struggle, wherein subversion

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<sup>34</sup> Catherine Belsey suggest that the differences in American and European views of 'resistance' are central here to the agenda of New Historicism. She detects in the work of Greenblatt the influence of Functionalism, the American sociological school associated with Talcott Parsons. More questionably, she asserts that the different American and European views of how history is made by conflict can account for the differences in critical positions. Belsey, 2007, pp. 36-40

‘from below’, once brought into the open *can* act in radical ways. Dollimore notes of *Henry V* that: ‘to silence dissent one must first give it a voice, to misrepresent it one must first present it’ (Dollimore, 1992). Thus, the ‘oppositional elements’ in *Henry V* become a key focus which can help underline ‘the play’s failure to conform to the idealised history promised by the Chorus’ (Loehlin, 1997). Whilst such an approach to *Henry V* valuably opens up the contested nature of nationalism in the play, it cannot account for the ways in audiences have – in quite recent years, such as the Richard Olivier 1997 production with Mark Rylance, equally failed to see what playwright John Arden first described as ‘a secret play within the official one’ (Loehlin, 1997, p. 1). That is, a play critical of narrowly celebrating Henry and his actions. In Olivier’s all male ‘antiquarian’ production the ‘groundlings’ were encouraged to participate in booing the French and ‘this participation seemed not all that distant from unironically jingoistic bigotry; the audience cheering at the slaughter of the French prisoners made more than one critic uncomfortable’ (internetshakespeare, 2012). Thus, the actions of power in the play perhaps depend as much upon *how* it is performed as what the text itself actually ‘says’ in terms of its approach to nationalist concerns, a phenomena I shall explore in evaluating recent productions in the age of Brexit in Chapter 3.

One further limitation of Cultural Materialism is the way that views in opposition to it are dismissed as ‘ideological’, dismissing as ‘essentialist’ or humanist views that ignore historical agency, and therefore are assumed to be quietist and conservative in intent (Parvini, 2012). This is to ignore some of the potentially radical trajectories of earlier criticism (Woodcock, 2008) and has often led to readings of plays as selective as the New Criticism it sought to displace. Furthermore, the rendering of the individual to merely an agent in history, as Parvini notes, diminishes the way in which texts can be anything *more* than merely operations of power and Shakespeare the conservative agent who enacts them. Ironically, for such iconoclast theories, there is a more recent question of their political relevance. That New Historicism and Cultural Materialism reached their most fertile period during the divisive political era of Reaganism in America and Thatcherism in the UK cannot be ignored, particularly in terms of its enduring, if sometimes misinterpreted pedagogical influence (Olive S. D., 2015). In a less overtly ‘ideological’ age, it can possibly be argued their focus on repressive power has less relevance. It also cannot be denied that the relative



influence of both critical movements is debated and been legitimately subject to the very criticisms they themselves raised against earlier schools of criticism of partial readings and elisions (Vickers, 1993) (Belsey, 2007) .

Pedagogically, however, two significant criticisms of much contemporary criticism have been made. Firstly, that such critical positions have rendered themselves irrelevant to pedagogy through obscurity and a level of complexity that places their insights out of the reach of many students, particularly at level 3 study. Secondly, that the inherent ideological nature of modern criticism is destructive to literary tradition and thus a threat to shared and accrued cultural values. It is to an evaluation of the validity of these criticisms and how theory can best be practically applied and revived in pedagogy, that I now turn.

### Is Theory still relevant?

Certainly, the first criticism cited above has some validity : much of the critical Theory of the 1980's can be obscurant and intellectually complex (Vickers, 1993). As Tiffany Stern notes, such obscurity has thus shored up the endurance of conventional 'character' led criticism as:

(A.C) Bradley continues to live on the classroom...so that much classroom teaching of Shakespeare is at least 100 years behind current criticism. This is probably because Bradley wrote with a lucid, accessible prose style, and many modern critics do not; current criticism's failure to be approachable has limited its readership, and, largely, confined it to university (Stern, 2003).

However, as McEvoy suggests, and the evidence of my own teaching supports, there is a real value in encouraging student engagement with the insights from different critics and approaches, that are not necessarily exclusionary for 'less able' students. As McEvoy not unreasonably notes of presenting critical views: 'If what we were offering was too demanding for A Level, it would be the least academically able who would fail or leave' (McEvoy, 2005, p. 107). The evidence of student retention and success at his institution, he notes, reflects the ways the theoretical approaches used engages students.

Whilst it would be equally absurd to move to the pedagogical position described by Stern of a Cambridge undergraduate course where *only* theory is taught and students 'do the Shakespeare by themselves' (Stern, 2003) undoubtedly for students at Level 3, awareness of

and engagement with theory can often revivify students' readings of Shakespeare in complex ways that actively engage them.

Kastan typifies the other criticism of theoretical approaches which are 'regularly identified as the potent destroyers of the literary culture' and thus 'guilty of politicizing familiar texts and alienating them...from the reading public' (Kastan, 1999). However, that these two criticisms are often twinned together, suggests the contradictory views of those who oppose theory. Theory is seen as obscurant and irrelevant yet wields a terrible power. However, as Foucault notes 'where there is power, there is resistance' (Foucault, 1978) suggesting that the very existence of such resistance to theory thus suggest it has at least a *perceived* power, and therefore remains relevant.

Criticism of 'Theory' within pedagogical discourse, is reflected in the complaints of teachers like Joseph Francis who suggests substituting theory for traditional close reading will 'lead us away from close engagement with the text, towards the phoney citadels of cultural, contextual and critical abstraction' (Francis 2003: 95, cited from Olive, 2015). That this is reinforced through right wing think tanks such as Civitas and individuals like Michael Gove, who deny any ideological view of their own, underlines a perceived or residual power: if theory no longer holds relevance, why the reactionary resistance? Francis, a teacher at Eton College detects the 'conspiratorial flavour' of cultural materialism (particularly towards his own illustrious institution) yet even he concedes the value of teaching 'critical perspectives and historical context' (admittedly secondary to 'language' and 'character') (Francis, 2005).

That such a bastion of convention makes this concession surely reflects how since the introduction of the National Curriculum, the value of reinstating historicist readings of different schools cannot be ignored as 'different interpretations' of texts are now central to the assessment (and thus teaching) of texts at both GCSE and A Level. That this inherently involves a discussion of ideology in the broadest sense cannot be ignored, unless 'critical perspectives and historical contexts' are to be reduced to the type of 'pertinent details about kingship' (Francis, 2005, p. 82) so beloved of Tillyard, et al.

That this may indeed be a favoured approach is suggested by the advice given in preparation for the National Curriculum about contextual knowledge for the teaching of the

history plays by the then DCFS<sup>35</sup> which suggests starting in Year 8 with an examination of ‘the positive representation of leadership in plays such as *Henry V* and *Richard II* in the wider historical and political context of the latter years of Elizabeth’s reign in order to idealise the Queen and set the standard for kingship’ (36). This seems to have more of the ‘flavour’ of old historicism about it, than introduce students to the fruits of critical enquiry, or indeed consider what the standard for kingship might be.

Indeed, Shakespeare’s *Richard II* himself seems to question whether or not he is well suited to the position of ‘kingship’ notably in the deposition scene of Act 4,sci, an ahistorical addition of Shakespeare’s, considered too controversial for performance before Elizabeth and not ‘published well into the reign of James I, in the fourth quarto of 1608’ (Clare, 1990).

The views expressed in the DCFS document seem to endorse the view of Tillyard from the 1940’s which, as noted earlier, are now commonly held as lacking credibility in modern critical discourse.

Furthermore, there are two stated contextual aims at Year 8:

To understand how characters’ actions reflect the social, historical and cultural contexts of Shakespeare’s time (*and*) To understand the cultural significance of Shakespeare and his place in our literary heritage (DFCS, 2009).

The aims of the DFCS document are admirable enough in seeking to outline practical approaches that hard –pressed teachers short of time and resources can implement.

However, the two aims outlined above that are the first underpinnings of context in the curriculum are never *linked together*; ‘Shakespeare’s time’ is granted as being of value as a closed concept. As it is ‘Shakespeare’s time’ it is intrinsically worthy of study (it is notably not Early Modern England or more commonly used contemporary formulations, it is a time dominated by his status as our most significant writer). Furthermore ‘his place in *our* literary heritage’ is equally assured – and kept distinct – from the first valued aim. We are clearly *not* to find little of ‘cultural significance’ in Shakespeare or question how or why he is has his appointed place in ‘our literary heritage’. This has already been decided by the workings of

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<sup>35</sup> The DFCS was the Department for Children, Schools and Families that was reorganised into the Department of Education in 2010.

his genius in history. This takes us back to the ‘universal’ Shakespeare outlined in my introduction. Thus, the DCFS predictably tells us that- ‘his friend and rival, the playwright Ben Jonson, said, ‘He was not of an age but for all time!’ (DFCS, 2009).

However, there is a concession that at post-16 that students may develop their study of Shakespeare ‘Through a critical analysis of others’ interpretations of a play, perhaps showing an appreciation of the way different literary critical theorists and theatre practitioners have reinterpreted Shakespeare over time and across cultures.’ (DFCS, 2009)

The tentative adverb ‘perhaps’ shows some concern over where this might lead, pertinent given the kinds of criticism Kastan has noted have been levelled at ‘Theory’ ‘with a capital T’. However, it can be argued that there is no reason why such interpretations could not also include new historicist, cultural materialist and feminist readings of relevance and open the door for further contemporary theoretical concerns, such as Presentism, into the curriculum.

There are obvious challenges in this. Kastan, perhaps not unreasonably suggest that given its position in the academy, ‘literary theory is for the most part isolated from the more significant scenes of political action that exist both above and below its place of articulation.’ (Kastan, 1999, p. 27)

Clearly, we *can* question how much the politicisation of theory can actually change societies. It would seem Dollimore and Sinfield’s assertion that ‘cultural materialism registers its commitment to the transformation of a social order that exploits people on grounds of race, gender, sexuality and class’ (1985) might now be put aside as the flourish of 1980’s resistance, no longer relevant to contemporary students’ lives. However, the rise of ‘identity politics’<sup>36</sup> in the new millennium reflects the fruits of a range of past radical actions, that have in certain ways progressively altered the ideology of race , gender, sexuality and perhaps, less convincingly, class (Robson, 2016). It cannot be convincingly posited that we live in a post- ideological age, when children are organising Climate Strike protests under the Extinction Rebellion slogan ‘This is life in rebellion for life’(2019) and being considered as domestic terrorists under the Prevent strategy for their labours (Dodd, 2019). That the

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<sup>36</sup> See Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2012, for a detailed discussion of the history and the debates over the term. I use it here to refer to the post 1960’s

fundamental British Values outlined in my introduction were also created via the Prevent strategy suggests that ideology is both overtly and covertly inherent in the lives of young people in the UK.

However, are the interventions of critical theory still necessary in our approach to Shakespeare? In relation to Shakespearean representations, for example, it is hard to imagine setting a group of students to watching the 'blackface' Anthony Hopkins BBC *Othello* in any contemporary school; yet this was commonly viewed well into the 1980's as an exemplary work of 'high' culture, yet has long since been considered unacceptable<sup>37</sup>. In a similar fashion, the BBC series of the complete plays often played 'RP' actors in 'noble' roles and 'regional' types in 'low' status and comic roles (often with appallingly mimicked 'regional' accents). It seems unlikely that 'Gatekeeper' Institutions such as the BBC would now consider making any 'high culture' play this way, at least without anticipating 'resistance' from audiences.<sup>38</sup>

Certainly, Criticism did not cause this situation to change alone; yet, it can (and should) play its part in social transformation, by questioning cultural representation and its influence *has* been filtered 'down' to an extent. That critical theories are considered both (within limits) as a credible voice (or set of voices) and potentially a threat, even by essentially conservative institutions, offers the best case for their relevance.

For example, it is notable and telling that in the second part of his recent diatribe on the Black Lives Matter debate, Dr David Starkey lays blame for a relativist culture at the English department of his (then) University, Cambridge, that creates 'no academic content whatever' but 'merely indoctrination' and which he would thus see defunded as a public institution<sup>39</sup> alongside the BBC. Surely, it more vital than ever to consider critical evaluations of our national culture when such voices present their position as merely 'common sense'.

However, if at the heart of British society sits an entrenched conception of Shakespeare, it follows that criticism has its part to play in unpacking this conception. Pedagogically, the

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<sup>37</sup> The tradition of 'blackface' acting is considered in further detail in Chapter 3

<sup>38</sup> The recent cancellation of programmes with questionable representations of race and gender by the BBC and the range of responses to 'cancel culture' would suggest that this process is ongoing and remains hotly contested.

<sup>39</sup> The full interview can be seen at : <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2tVjZ9hA4SQ>. The comments on the simultaneously pointless and dangerous nature of 'theory' start at 33.16 where the 'English Faculty' is singled out for its suspect promotion of 'a programme of Marxist indoctrination dressed up in this preposterous French...American-French language...the language of critical theory, the worst form of perverse verbiage'. The nationalist tone is clear here and follows a familiar rhetoric of 'theory' as a foreign insurgent into 'English' thought.

very way in which contexts *have* become central to assessment in a more flexible, less traditional manner, shows the distance travelled since Sinfield's ground-breaking 1985 essay. Parvini, argues that:

Cultural materialism *has* been successful in its most vital tasks: the tasks of debunking the myth of universalism that has been built around Shakespeare's plays and exposing the ways in which the status quo has exploited that myth in the classroom to further its own ends (Parvini, 2012).

Whilst this is certainly the case at Level 4 study, I would argue that the evidence that this 'debunking' has filtered down through the education system in England and Wales is debatable; particularly in relation to the aims of the national curriculum and conservative education policy. As Olive notes, the process via which the academy transmits 'down' new theoretic concerns and research, as well as their reception in the secondary sector suggests that their relevance is demised significantly. Thus, the:

Analysis (*of*) ...government policy documents and pedagogic literature suggests that there is a significant time lag between the inception of these ideas as radical in academia and their manifestation in school classrooms, meaning that much of what is appropriated as cutting edge in schools is actually held by then as a blunt knife among academics, roundly criticised or neglected altogether (Olive, 2015, p. 98).

That is not say that the ambition to bring theory into practice should not be a real one.

#### Towards Presentism : a dialogue with the past in the present?

Moreover, though, the essentially Historicist approach of both New Historicism and Cultural Materialism, that look primarily at the text in its context(s) of production - fails to account for the ways in which audiences have responded – in particular to the history plays – as relevant and specific to their own times and concerns. This removes both agency from Shakespeare in commenting up his own times and traps the plays as potential museum pieces (Bradshaw, 1993). The irony of this is not lost on Parvini who observes that:

...in writing the two tetralogies Shakespeare was thinking through for himself and palpably struggling with the issues raised by history, ideology and power – the very issues that have preoccupied new historicists and cultural materialists, who ironically

seem intent on subordinating Shakespeare's insights into those issues to the history, ideology and power of his time ( Parvini, 2012).

Clearly, the most vital recent stage productions of the history plays are those which have sought to engage with them in a manner which can be described as Presentist, in terms of rooting the plays in issues current and relevant to their audiences, just as Shakespeare did with English history for his own. This theoretical perspective takes the view of Benedetto Croce that 'All history is contemporary history'; that is, our view of the past is always shaped by the present (Hawkes, 2002). It thus offers a theoretical position that can focus both on what the text can reveal about the past and find relevance in the present. In a renewed dynamic, 'It will not only yearn to speak with the dead, it will aim, in the end, to talk to the living' (Hawkes, 2002, p. 12).

Furthermore, the removal of individual agency that New Historicist and Cultural Materialist positions deny in their discussions of power is renewed by reconsidering the relevance of subjectivity:

In opposition to historicist studies that theorize the subject as straitjacketed by manifestations of political, social, and economic power, presentism theorizes subjectivity as resistance. In opposition to 'new materialist,' or antiquarian, studies that drain politics out of Shakespeare's texts, presentism (re)politicizes Shakespeare. (Gajowski, 2010)

However, the Presentist approach sees this subjectivity not as a return to an essentialist 'universal' self, the 'universal bard' of old that speaks to all people at all times but one which shows, 'an understanding of subjectivity that is historically produced rather than timeless' (Grady, 2007). From this perspective, the urgency of the history play can be determined by how 'we are involved in the continuous 'making' rather than the discovery of cultural meanings' (Hawkes, Shakespeare in the Present, 2002). This approach does not ignore the relevance of historical contexts, or even necessarily stand in opposition to context; but rather openly recognises these as another means via which the present constructs meanings upon the past.<sup>40</sup> Hawkes, however, also notes that 'The worrying truth

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<sup>40</sup> In pedagogical terms, Hawkes notes that: 'A consideration of the conditions – social, political, or economic – within which the play came to exist, from which it derives and to which it speaks will certainly make legitimate demands on the attention of any well-prepared student nowadays.' (Hawkes, 2012, p2).

is that nobody can just pick up Shakespeare's plays and read them. Perhaps- even more worrying –they never could.'

That is, the play text is – and as I intend to show in reviewing the stage history and critical reception of *Henry V* – always has – and always will – be mediated by the *present* context of reception<sup>41</sup>.

Hawkes radically rejects both the limitations of 'antiquarian' scholarship that seeks to fetishize the 'facts' of the past and takes issue with New historicist focus on the discourses of the period as the *only* significant shaping context. Presentism thus acknowledges that ideology shapes our experience of the text, just as our experience of texts shape, and reinforce, ideology.

It is my aim to outline, therefore, how the idea of the history play- and *Henry V* more specifically, can be viewed through a Presentist perspective, in relation to Nationalism, Brexit and the struggle for authority and legitimacy in contemporary society.

However, I want to consider my reading of the play as simply one in an historical range that sees Shakespeare through the lens of the present to suggest that the history play is a sense *always* a Presentist text, if not necessarily a 'universalist' or essentialist one. To see plays as a site of constantly generated meanings, in fact would argue the opposite case to essentialism, wherein Shakespeare's 'universal truths' remain the same throughout every age of reception. This would be to ignore Jan Kott's dictum that 'Shakespeare is like the world, or life itself. Every historical period finds in him what it is looking for and what it wants to see' (Kott, 1964).

Thus, I will foreground how Shakespeare can speak to the Brexit moment and open up valuable discussion in considering how English nationalism's concerns with power, identity, leadership and nostalgia can be deconstructed through critical evaluation.

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<sup>41</sup> Thus, Hawkes notes that texts 'don't speak at all unless and until they are inserted into and perceived as part of specific discourses which impose their own shaping requirements and agendas. We choose the facts. We choose the texts. We do the inserting. We do the perceiving. Facts and texts, that is to say, don't simply speak, don't merely mean. We speak, we mean, by them' (Hawkes, 2002, p. 14).



Therefore, we can legitimately ask the question of the relevance of theory in the teaching of History plays in the age of Brexit. Can the complexity of such theoretical concerns be legitimately passed down the educational system at A Level and how best can they be approached in questioning nationalism? Is it possible to use aspects of such theories in ways that expose the operation of power, particularly given that the national Curriculum places Shakespeare at the centre of national culture in a much more uncritical and unexamined manner?

### Shakespeare in the Curriculum : An Ideology but no theory?

Somewhat ironically, against this background of shifting academic perceptions of the History Plays, that in significant ways have decentred Shakespeare Studies away from any singular or universalist principle as Pechter has noted (Pechter, 1995) the national Curriculum and subsequent policy making has become increasingly conservative (Gillard, 1998). This creates a significant pedagogical challenge in allowing the voices of a wider range of critical evaluations outlined earlier. Based upon universalist and exceptionalist principles there has been a corresponding and ongoing *re-centring* of 'Shakespeare' into the National Curriculum in schools in England and Wales; most recently announced in the Curriculum changes of 2013, wherein all students must study 'two complete Shakespeare plays in their entirety' (Olive, 2013). The reform's 'whole play' aspect reflects in part Shakespeare's special status in the canon and suggests the richness of his plays cannot be abridged. This can be seen to reinforce the aura around Shakespeare's texts as having a hieratic aspect, reflecting the religious origins of the term 'canon' and the tradition of viewing his texts as akin to holy writ (Sillars, 2013). However, this process needs to be considered against the practical reality that the versions that currently GCSE and A Level students study are composites or several earlier versions of the plays in 'modernised' forms, wherein strategies of abbreviation and alteration have already been made that crucially effect how we respond to them.<sup>42</sup> Thus, in terms of pedagogy, the 'whole play' aspect offers potential for richer analysis, but also challenges in terms of class time and focus.

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<sup>42</sup> See Beesley, 1989, ch 7 where the point is made that some plays, notably *Henry V*, editors are forced to make such a choice, so significant are the differences in variant texts.

In terms of *Henry V*, studying the full play is undoubtedly valuable in being able to evaluate both the heroic presentation and the costs of a nationalist rhetoric in the pursuit of war and glory. Indeed, discussion of what is achieved in the variant versions of the play is a valuable lesson in both historiography and dramaturgy. Why it is only Shakespeare who has the status that affords the full study of his text is more questionable, however, raising the question of ‘why Shakespeare’?<sup>43</sup>

Much of the rationale behind the study of Shakespeare in ‘whole’ form was explained as being one pillar of the drive towards raising national educational ‘standards’ (Daily Telegraph, 2013) reflecting the view that Shakespeare is challenging and a whole play challenges more than extracts. Thus, the logic runs that a whole Shakespeare play challenges students the most. However, much of the rhetoric around this also suggests that Shakespeare’s works are themselves now accepted as a cornerstone of a historical and historicising project to ‘appreciate the depth and power of the **English** literary heritage’ (National Curriculum, 2013). In terms of pedagogy, the ‘whole play’ aspect offers potential for richer analysis, but also challenges in terms of class time and focus. In terms of *Henry V*, studying the full play is undoubtedly valuable in being able to evaluate both the heroic presentation and the costs of a nationalist rhetoric in the pursuit of war and glory, particularly given the simplistic glorifications of redacted texts in earlier periods (Sillars, 2013). Why it is only Shakespeare who has the status that affords full study is more questionable, however.

Students in Scotland and private education do not have to study Shakespeare, with Scotland setting only mandatory Scottish writers and private schools not even having to follow the National Curriculum. However, in reality most Scottish and practically all private schools overwhelmingly do study the requisite number of Shakespeare plays, itself a reflection of Shakespeare’s cultural value (Elliot, 2019). Wales is covered by the National Curriculum, whilst in Northern Ireland, there is an equivalent National Curriculum, closely based on the English model. Thus, the notion of how ‘*English*’ this heritage is, or remains, or is likely to remain in the future, is a contentious point, likely to be tested further in a post-Brexit polity<sup>44</sup>.

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<sup>43</sup> It was this question that formed the basis of Michael Dobson’s groundbreaking study *The Making of the National Poet* (Dobson, 1994)

<sup>44</sup> In Scotland it is only mandatory to study a Scottish writer, notably Robert Burns another ‘national’ poet. It will be interesting to observe how the curriculum in the ‘home countries’ may respond post-Brexit.

This 'heritage', as many critics within the major teaching bodies and in Educational research have suggested, often represents a specifically conservative agenda, based upon attempts to shore up nationalist sentiments, regardless of inherent pedagogical value (Olive S. , 2013). As Turvey succinctly puts it in terms of the curriculum 'as far as literature in schools is concerned, the oversimplified equation goes something like this: Tradition + X = the safety of collective identity' (Turvey, 1992). Furthermore, as Terence Hawkes, who acerbically undertook the cultural and semiotic deconstruction of Shakespeare's value warns : 'we are constantly reminded, both inside and outside of the classroom, that there is no greater tradition than Shakespeare' (Hawkes, 1986).

Moreover, as equally politically and ideologically minded critics such as Holderness, Murphy (Holderness, 1997) and John J Joughlin have pointed out (Joughlin, 1997) ,the 'natural' position of Shakespeare is not, perhaps, as straightforward as might appear, representing the culmination of a long process of 'universalising' Shakespeare in order to meet the needs of a political project started in the eighteenth century and given specifically nationalist focus in the nineteenth and twentieth century. This project reflected notions of **English** national identity that were being formed and made synonymous with **British** identity, a process identified as a response to internal tensions and the growth of Empire (Dobson ,1994 ).

The fractious state of the Union and collective identity seems likely to exacerbate following Brexit and the challenging questions raised over Fundamental British Values. Thus, it now seems timely to consider if this eliding of Englishness and Britishness retains relevance and if the history plays reveal continuity between the beginnings and the possible end over the subsuming of the 'home nations', an issue explored in the next chapter.

More generally, I will now foreground how Shakespeare can speak to 'our' moment and open up valuable discussion in considering how English nationalism's concerns with power, identity, leadership and nostalgia can be deconstructed through the application of the critical approaches outlined in this chapter.

## **Chapter 2: The History play; Brexit and the British question: ‘I speak but in the figures and comparisons of it’.**

In this chapter, I will consider how effectively a more explicitly Presentist critical approach can deconstruct the Brexit narrative and the underlying English nationalist exceptionalism central to its articulation.

Therefore, methodologically, I will use a mixture of statements both by and about the architects of Brexit and critical evaluations of those plays most cited in the popular discourse around Brexit to isolate specific analogies. I will focus initially on *Richard II*'s much cited 'This England' speech given the scene's ubiquity and then more widely on the character and actions of *Henry V* to consider how nostalgia, English exceptionalism, the question of pragmatic leadership and the use of chivalric values, central to *Henry V*, all find currency in the Brexit debate. I will critically evaluate if the plays themselves can offer potential insights into the uncertain nature of such concepts and deconstruct this narrative. I will then move on to considering what the latest productions of the history plays have suggested about Brexit in performance, and thus the extent to which English nationalism is supported or challenged on the contemporary stage.

Whilst there are numerous correspondences possible between Brexit and the History play, particularly given Brexit has yet to fully unfold, arguably the most significant links thus far can be identified in terms of-

- 1.The valorisation of charismatic, active and disruptive leadership with a demotic touch (whether this is true or false), which may even imply a Machiavellianism in the action of the leader.
- 2.The sense of English power over others that takes expression in the sense of a plucky, embattled English spirit that links Europe post- Reformation and Britain post- Brexit.
- 3.A sense of nostalgia and loss over the past, yet combined with an awareness that a new nation must be formed.This links Gaunt's lament in *Richard II* with contemporary lament and idealism for the loss and idealisation of Empire.
4. The sense of English power over others that takes expression in the sense of a plucky, embattled English spirit that links Europe post- Reformation and Britain post- Brexit.

5. An implicit *awareness*, but playful, even comic, ignoring of internal fractures with the 'home nations' that speaks of deeper tensions in the national polity. Thus, the fractures within Shakespeare's captains can be drawn in comparison with the potential break-up of the union in our own age.

6. The use of traditions and medievalist ideology to suggest a moral superiority over others. Thus, *Henry V* calls upon the outmoded discourses of chivalry in an Early modern context, whilst in practice exploiting them, just as specific Brexit architects are often modern technocrats who can 'play' being aristocratic and draw upon obscure legal precedence, when required.

7. The use of historiography by the architects of Brexit to create a nostalgic linear narrative, found in Shakespeare's sources, but resisted in his dramaturgy.

These correspondences are not exhaustive nor mutually exclusive, but I shall aim to outline some key examples to question their validity in deconstructing nationalist discourse.

Firstly, in terms of correspondences, it is significant that Shakespeare's histories – considered in their two tetralogies – show the movement, less of Providential history *pace* Tillyard than from one type of society to another as Rackin, Maley and others suggest (Howard, 1997, Maley, 1997). This movement, starting with the deposition of *Richard II* reflects the shift from a medievalist and chivalric world view in which the King is legitimated through succession to one in which 'Monarchs who have no natural right to rule' hold the crown. This means that within Shakespeare's two tetralogies that 'all English monarchs after Richard' now 'have to prove themselves worthy of the people's support' (Hadfield, 2004).

Thus, the first key analogy at a point of crisis like Brexit is legitimacy in leadership (points 1 and 3). The connection between creating a credible, populist leader that needs legitimation for an act of disruption – as the opening of *Henry V* posits Henry's war will be (1.1 and 1.2) – and our current moment is clear in the rise of Farage, Gove and Johnson, each of whom has used explicit military metaphors for Brexit and the image of 'surrender' to describe a second referendum (Casalicchio, 2019).

The political capital of using external war pragmatically to create internal unity in times of crisis, is explicitly identified at the end of Shakespeare's *Henry V*, Part 2 in a scene purely of Shakespeare's invention that utilises explicitly Machiavellian terms, undermining Tillyard's rejection of such values as being relevant in the cycle of plays.

The dying Henry IV, foregrounding the expiation of guilt over his usurpation of Richard II, offers the soon to be Henry V, this advice:

Therefore, my Harry,

Be it thy course to busy giddy minds  
With foreign quarrels; that action, hence borne out,  
May waste the memory of the former days.

(*Henry IV*, Act 4, SC3, lines 343- 349)

Henry, 'who so effortlessly seems to have it his own way' is a figure 'not beset by doubts' over his own behaviour (Tanner, 1994) ; a character assessment often applied to Boris Johnson in particular, yet equally applicable to other populist leaders (Spence, 2019).

Furthermore, Henry's use of that 'little touch of Harry in the night' (IV, 47) that seeks to show his demotic connection to the common soldier, finds echoes in Farage's belief he is 'an ordinary bloke' (Kirkup, 2016) and Johnson's election broadcast where he casually makes a cup of tea and tells an unseen 'bloke-ish' interlocutor which are his favourite bands (www.youtube.com, 2019) .<sup>46</sup> However, just as critics of *Henry V* have questioned the way in which in 4.1 , in dealing with his questioning soldiers who are 'none of name', 'sentiments are meant to appear democratic and egalitarian, but are actually authoritarian' (Hadfield, 2004, p. 61) , so contemporary populist leadership over Brexit has been deemed 'cynical and controlling' (Cavendish , 2019) . The divisive nature of the Brexit vote (with the 52- 48% split of the nation mirrored exactly in the vote in Shakespeare's native Stratford-Upon -Avon) is mirrored equally in the divisive rhetoric and views of leaders who would use popular nationalism (Browning , 2019). As one critic notes, 'amongst Shakespearean protagonists... none has provoked such firmly polarized interpretations' as Henry V (Mardock , 2019).

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<sup>46</sup> Jonson notes of his taste in popular music that it 'was The Clash, but now The Rolling Stones- make of that what you will'. Perhaps, like Henry, Jonson's move from a punk-ish youth- now passed- to enduring national institution, suggests a change that speaks of shrewdly planned reform?

Surely, it is this very sense of polarization that makes Henry a vital object of study in the age of Brexit and draws analogy to his contemporary counterparts.

Furthermore, several analogies have been made between Brexit and historical antecedents that influenced England's troubled relationship with Europe in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century, notably the Reformation, partly to lament what has 'gone wrong' in terms of sovereignty ,yet how England can make it alone (points 2 and 3). David Starkey, a conservative constitutional historian vilified for his views on race ,yet often called upon as a cultural commentator on sovereignty, until comments upon the history of slavery effectively destroyed his current academic career (Siddique, 2020) has noted of the analogy between Brexit and the Reformation that :

The Roman Catholic church of the time looks very much like the European Union of today - an international body with its own body of law, general assembly and elected head. The resemblances are really very striking...Henry's decision to break with this took England in a very different direction. For 500 years, we have had propaganda that we are different, separate and do things our own way. When the referendum took place in 2016, Henry VIII won again. ( Cited from Burn, 2018)

Of course, what Shakespeare made of the Reformation has proved, like much else, a cause of great speculation, casting much heat and less light.<sup>47</sup> What is clear is that he wrote during a period in which the country was fractured fundamentally in the present and thus looked to the past for ways to reconcile itself (Shapiro, 2005).

That the cycle of history plays is already set in a nostalgic past in Shakespeare's age following the Reformation and the development of an incipient modern, patriarchal and acquisitive capitalistic nation state is significant to any consideration of them. Such a state was moving from feudalism to nationalism (Morrill, 1996, pp. 35-53) focussed on controlling internal strife and creating an incipient external Empire, within a hostile European context (Maley, 1997). Maley notes how the formal loss of Calais in 1564 was a significant blow; *Henry V*, the English monarch who says he is 'no King of England/If not King of France', is thus an appealing fantasy that allows an audience of the 1590's to both

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<sup>47</sup> The discovery of a pamphlet associated with recusant Catholics in the attic of a building his family once lived in and the possibility that he was taught by a recusant Catholic who escaped to France have proved insufficient evidence for even the most dogged biographers to prove him a recusant Catholic; others have 'proved' his Protestantism via similarly ingenious biographical details and esoteric readings of the plays.

remember their previous glories across one water and 'imagine a triumphant conclusion to England's ongoing crisis in Ireland' across another (Cahill, 2006,p76).

In the Brexit moment, that we stand at a pivotal moment in terms of our European neighbours is clear, even if the analogies with the Reformation may be at points strained and incomplete (Kissane, 2018). Yet, it can also be suggested that the fractured nature of the peripheral Union under painful and bloody formation in Shakespeare's age (Dollimore, 1992) is likely to return as a stubbornly thorny issue in post-Brexit Britain. Northern Ireland and Scotland, who voted 55.8% and 62 % respectively to remain in the EU, are at best less unlikely to seek to remain complacently subsumed within a political centre that determines a future the majority do not seek. The former nation is currently without political representation in its own Parliament since 2017 and was only restarted on the 11<sup>th</sup> January 2020 and the latter is seeking to extend the powers of its own through renewed calls for devolution. This would suggest that there is further urgency in considering what the history plays might say to a contemporary audience about national unity at points of rising crisis and tensions over the 'home nations' (point 4). This is given expression in *Henry V* through key scenes which suggest that the history of 'our' island, however, involves more than our exceptionalism from other countries. It also calls for an internal vigilance that resists the 'rogue' elements within the incipient 'home nations' that can destroy the state need to be overpowered and contained. Henry's court (in the character of either Ely or Westmoreland) sees England as locked into a Darwinian struggle for survival, and thus justified in violent action against the threat presented by the rebellions of the Scots. That this is an accepted wisdom is shown, as:

... there's a saying very old and true:

'If that you will France win,

Then with Scotland first begin.'

For once the eagle England being in prey,

To her unguarded nest the weasel Scot

Comes sneaking and so sucks her princely eggs,

Playing the mouse in absence of the cat,

To 'tame and havoc more than she can eat.

(Henry V 1.ii. 168- 175)



The imagery here is clear; the superior vigilant 'eagle' of England must watch its borders and resist those threats to its future security and power metonymically embodied in the 'princely eggs' that will hatch future Princes, and thus ensure succession via creating a 'hostile environment'. We do not have to follow Tillyard's famous 'Great Chain of Being' or 'correspondences' too closely to see that English nobility is at the top of the food chain, whilst the furtive deceptions of the 'weasel Scot' engaged in 'sneaking' are lower and thus more base /debased in their attempts to 'tame' – break in to- and destroy that which is not rightfully theirs; but the imagery certainly fits his pattern (Tillyard , 1943,1988). That such a chain or 'order' is under threat is underlined by the juxtaposition of the metonymic 'cat' and 'mouse' which reinforces how the 'natural' order is reversed in the absence of strong discipline. The point of the 'old and true' saying is unmistakable; attack is the best form of defence, particularly if you are engaged in creating the type of 'imperial greatness' suggested in 5.1, where Harry is transformed into a 'conqu'ring Caesar' (5.1.28).

However, the imagery would probably be more meaningful the other way round; it is the English state that seeks to undermine the stability of those around *it* via wars of conquest. The eagle stands above the weasel, just as surely as the cat does the mouse in the taxonomies of the age. Thus, the role of the Scots within Henry's army can be seen as one that is subsumed and tolerated, yet not fully trusted. As Jeremy Black notes, the contradiction of the role of Scots in the period of Empire so treasured by Brexit architect Rees-Mogg, was one wherein to 'describe yourself as English was the norm' for the 'Irish or Scots', yet any attempts at identity beyond the merely external (Kilts, music) such as language or religious difference, was identified as a threat to the 'seamless web' of English history (Black, 2018). That Shakespeare's lines here precede Canterbury's more famous extended metaphor of the bees, with its vision of harmony within a 'natural' structure ( 1.2 186-215) is surely also significant : 'the lazy yawning drone' has no place in this structure, being handed over to 'the executors pale'. Only those within the state who understand the primacy of an apostrophised 'Obedience' and thus subsume their energies into the militaristic 'one purpose' it is created for, will survive and be of value.

The resonant, yet ultimately constructed image of such harmony within the nation state is a powerful foundation myth of the type identified by Tennenhouse (1986) that still has resonance in the rhetoric called upon when the Union is under threat ,such as the 'Better

together’ slogan deployed in 2014 to uphold the Union in face of a Scottish Independence Referendum.

The ‘captain’s scene’ in *Henry V* provides a further model that finds resonance in the modern conservative discourse of the Union, with the Welsh, Irish and Scots captains acting metonymically as parts of a diverse nation ,given over to a singular cause . Dollimore and Sinfield note, however, that the scene suggests the true discourse of power that lies behind such apparent unity, as:

In fact *Henry V* is only in one sense ‘about’ national unity ;its obsessive preoccupation is insurrection...Thus the Irish ,Welsh and Scottish soldiers manifest not their countries centrifugal relationship to England but an ideal subservience of margin to centre (Dollimore, 1992)

Boris Johnson used an apt metaphor for this ‘centrifugal’ relationship for the way in which he considers ‘margin’ of Scotland can literally serve the English centre in a 2011 piece on the country for *The Spectator*, noting that: ‘Since Scotland is higher up than England, it is surely time to do the obvious - use the principle of gravity to bring surplus rain from the mountains to irrigate and refresh the breadbasket of the country in the south’ (Cited from McIlkenney, 2019).

Furthermore, the essentially comic function of the captain’s scene- which can make for painful viewing in a modern context and thus often cut in performance- is significant in showing how to patronise those at the margin reinforces the impunity of the voices at the centre. The gleeful mockery of ‘The Scotch’ (a term for whisky, not a people, nation or race) in a 2014 *Spectator* poem, published under Johnson’s editorship, has tended to be overlooked since his later, equally controversial comments on race and gender.<sup>48</sup> However, it is worth quoting in full in order to consider its intentions:

*The Scotch – what a verminous race!*

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<sup>48</sup> Johnson’s literary career has been put on hold since his biography of *Churchill*, with his own contribution on Shakespeare, *Shakespeare; The Riddle of Genius*, now indefinitely delayed. The subject matter of both, we can only assume, would have been equally nationalistic.

*Canny, pushy, chippy, they're all over the place, Battening off us with false bonhomie,  
Polluting our stock, undermining our **economy**.*

*Down with sandy hair and knobbly knees!*

*Suppress the tartan dwarves and the Wee Frees!*

*Ban the kilt, the skean-dhu and the sporran*

*As provocatively, offensively foreign!*

*It's time Hadrian's Wall was refortified*

*To pen them in a ghetto on the other side.*

*I would go further. The nation*

*Deserves not merely isolation*

*But comprehensive extermination.*

*We must not flinch from a solution.*

*(I await legal prosecution.)* (Michie, 2004)

Whilst the poem is intended as a piece of (anachronistic) satire and crude caricature, the focus on those from the margin as a 'verminous race' setting about 'polluting our stock', thus requiring 'comprehensive extermination' echoes the ways in which the Irish were described in the Elizabethan age with fears over miscegenation amongst the English plantation class. Furthermore, as Dollimore and Sinfield note:

The assumption that the Irish were a barbarous and inferior people was so ingrained in Elizabethan England that it seemed only a national duty to subdue them and destroy their culture (Dollimore, 1992) .

That this took the form of violent repression in the Elizabethan age is well documented (Cahill, 2006). However, power can also be expressed through the ability to mock and thus

create a discourse that allows centre to subsume periphery. Such a view of the Captains' scene notes how:

Here, MacMorris the Irishman, along with Fluellen the Welshman and Jamey the Scots-man, those other ethnic "types" whose accents are heard in *Henry V*, are entirely absorbed into the colonizers' racial typology and reduced to ludicrous caricatures. (Baker, 1993)

Thus, as in Johnson's doggerel, that which Baker identifies as 'provocatively, offensively foreign' can be contained through mockery. Yet, there is always in such discourse a hierarchy of mockery; a 'typology' that is not merely descriptive. In *Henry V* Fluellen's mockery of the lowly Pistol and Henry's joke at the expense of the unwittingly insubordinate Williams reiterate show how those of higher rank – thus nearer the centre – can have another form of power over the margins, or marginal figures.

Pistol's marginal nature on his return to England will see him not made 'gentle' via his actions in Henry's army as the St. Crispin's day speech implies the soldiers will be. Henry notes in his most famous speech how those serving will be able to brag that 'these wounds I had on Crispin's day'. In Act V, Pistol describes how he will become the type of 'vagabond' returning soldier that Dollimore notes were equated with the Irish who 'unnaturally served as rebels' as his departing words describe how: 'To England will I steal, and there I'll steal/ And patches will I get unto these cudgelled scars/ And swear I got them in the Gallia wars.' (*Henry V* Act 5 .I, lns 80-82).

Of course, 'these wounds' are those received by his altercation with Fluellen, not those nobly received in battle. His oath – to 'swear' – falsely, reminds us of the other oaths made by Henry in the play; his oath to reject Falstaff in *Henry IV Part 2* and this consider the questionable nature of oaths overall in the play (Kerrigan, 2012). Structurally, the movement from the Court to the Tavern early in the play also allows a gap between the official discourse and the people who enact it. Pistol's parting words to his wife add a cynical note that follows the apparent piety of Henry's cause

Trust none;

For oaths are as straws, men's faiths are wafer cakes ,

And Hold –fast is the only dog, my duck...

Let us now to France, like horse-leeches, my boys,

To suck, to suck, the very blood to suck!

( *Henry V* II.iii, 51- 57)

Thus, the marginal characters serve to undermine the heroism implied by the central narrative of Henry, bringing into question if Henry really has the 'absence of any critical, questioning, contesting voices near him' (Tanner, 1994) a parallel drawn to Johnson's premiership (Kissane, 2018). Similarly, the Captains, whilst generally rendered comic in performance, can't simply be read as crude symbols of obedience to the centre. Critics have noted their moments of questioning and resistance to the dominant ideology of the play (Maley, 2003). Firstly, the rambling Fluellen draws attention to the fact that Henry rejected Falstaff, just at the point of Henry's apparent victory, noting the analogy to Alexander the Great :

Alexander, God knows...did in his ales and his angers ...kill his best friend Cleitus...as Alexander killed his friend Cleitus...so also Harry Monmouth, being in his right wits and his good judgements ,turned away the fat knight...I have forgot his name.

Gower; Sir John Falstaff.

Fluellen: That is he.

(IV, vii, 33-55)

The heroic allusion to Alexander is strongly undermined by the juxtaposition of Alexander's drunken decision placed alongside the 'right wits and good judgements' of 'Harry Monmouth'; we thus see a man prepared to ruthlessly kill both his enemies and his friends. Henry is compared to Alexander in other, quite different contexts. The Archbishop of Canterbury describes Henry's pragmatism, noting how it is possible to: 'Turn him to any

cause of policy /The Gordian knot of it he will unloose' (1.1. 45-6) .The allusion here is used to suggest Henry's pragmatism and ability to literally cut through 'any' problem; fitting what Richard Olivier (son of Laurence) has described in inspirational and aspirational modern terms as '*Henry V, CEO*'(Olivier,2015). It could equally fit the mantra of the ability to 'Get Brexit Done', the problematics of which Donald Tusk described as a 'Gordian knot' irresolvable through a lack of resolute leadership.Tusk noted: 'Unfortunately, I can't see a new version of Alexander the Great,'he quipped, 'It's not so easy to find this kind of creative leader.' Asked whether May's former foreign minister Boris Johnson might have the mettle to find a solution, Tusk said such claims may be 'exaggerated' (Carbonnel, 2018). Henry also famously appeals to his men to remember that their 'Fathers like so many Alexanders /Have in these parts from morn to even fought' (3.1.19-20) building up an image of their inherited rights as powerful conquerors of others; yet the allusion also raises questions as to the enduring nature of the project of even the greatest Empire and would-be Empire builders. This is to be the last generation of warriors to set foot in France as conquering heroes; equally, as Shakespeare's audience would already know, given the performative sequence of the plays and the aforementioned final prologue noted in my introduction, an early death is to come for 'This Star of England' (V.ii.6) just as it did for Alexander, whose Empire broke up upon his death; the historical Henry died at 35 and Alexander at 32.

Further, all that these 'noblest English' warriors who return will be able to show will be the 'scars' and 'wounds' on display on St Crispin's day, rather than any personal long term gain. Of course, the permanent guarantee of their nobility conferred by such scars is undermined by Pistol's later admission that he will make false claims to such wounds, as noted earlier.

Both hero and vagabond may be found in this army, implicitly reflecting the rhetoric and rapacity of their leader. After all, Pistol's desire to 'steal' is immediately followed by Henry's taking of that which *he* has stolen by conquest, Katherine, yet he gains legitimation for his claim in a way denied Pistol.

Furthermore, the very appearance of the captains and MacMorris' angry retort 'What Ish My Nation?' suggests that apparent unity of Henry's army is not just challenged by the enemy and voices from 'below' such as Pistol. The anger of MacMorris' lines need not be a

quirk of national temperament – the first stirrings of the ‘stage Irishman’ as a belligerent ‘stock’ character type – but rather can be seen to articulate Michael Cronin’s view that:

To characterize the encounter between Macmorris, Fluellin and the others as simply a failed exercise in verbal comedy is to miss the point. In a play...dominated by the problematic of translation- emotional, political and linguistic- and haunted by the nightmare of non- equivalence (this scene) takes on a significance that far exceeds the tribute of easy laughter. (Cronin 1997)

Thus, the position of both the ‘home nations’ and ‘voices from below’ cannot be easily subsumed with the text of *Henry V*.

A further common analogy is the nostalgic view of Brexit within English nationalist sentiment, identified by conservative commentators in the much cited speech of John of Gaunt in ‘Richard II’ the first play that sets in motion the cycle of history enacted over the two tetralogies, often, as noted, for earlier 20<sup>th</sup> Century critics, in terms of a providential reading of their actions<sup>49</sup> that links points 2, 3 and 5. The dying John of Gaunt, is thus seen to enact both a panegyric for and foreshadow Divine retribution upon, the nation he loves. Taking advantage of his status as the King’s first cousin he describes:

This royal throne of kings, this sceptred 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... (*Richard II*, 2.i.,40–50)

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<sup>49</sup> That is not to say that the assumed unity or enacting of a ‘cycle’ of plays is agreed by all contemporary critics. Nonetheless, the staging and study of the plays over a sequence has produced suggestive readings and correspondences suggested by Rabkin (1977), Rackin (2012), Odom (2017) and in the BBC ‘Hollow Crown’ production.

The nationalist sentiment of this speech is clear - English particularism is set against hostile and envious others; the rhetorical juxtaposition of this 'other Eden, demi-paradise' with 'the envy of less happier lands' creates an image of an isolated, yet plucky martial nation; 'this seat of Mars' that acts like a 'fortress' against hostile forces. It is clear to see how and why this imagery that combines an apostrophised 'Nature' and a divined 'majesty' was so appealing in the age of English (and then British) Empire building that followed from the 16<sup>th</sup> Century, until the end of the Second World War. It is perhaps unsurprising that this evocative speech was set rote as a part of the entry examination for the British civil service, particularly often chosen for the administrators of Empire (Poole, 2003). As Sillars notes, with the introduction of compulsory testing in the 1880's 'Pupils ...were required to 'Read a passage from one of Shakespeare's historical plays, or from a History of England' (Sillars, 2013). Thus, in the nineteenth century how the History plays 'are offered as alternatives to passages from writings on English history reveals the depth to which they have become integrated within ideas of national identity' (Sillars, 2013, p. 163).

I would go further and suggest that the history plays have not been merely 'integrated' within ideas of national identity but have in fact been mobilised to *actively construct* that identity, via eliding Englishness and Britishness together. In fact, the plays interchangeable value with 'factual' history in the Victorian era underlines the way in which the literary construction of a national identity corresponds with Haden White's view - influential in Presentist critical discourse - that the historian and literary writer are engaged in a similar process of 'narrative reconstruction' of the past (Hawkes, 2002).

Whilst the relevance of the Shakespeare passage above to an expanding British imperial state spoke clearly to the project of Empire that endured well into the post- world war two period, how relevant is the sentiment of John of Gaunt in 2020, in an era that now sees the terminus of an Empire set in its incipience in Shakespeare's age and facing the divisions of Brexit?

A recent conservatively focussed Spectator opinion piece notes Gaunt's speech is essentially a nostalgic one that '...suggests pride in England's land and history, but not much hope for its present or future' (Saunders, 2013). Saunders here is referencing the second, equally stirring, part of Gaunt's dying words which describe an England forever altered from its idealised self. A nation which:



Is now leased out – I die pronouncing it –  
Like to a tenement or a pelting farm.  
England...is now bound in with shame,  
With inky blots and rotten parchment bonds.  
That England that was wont to conquer others  
Hath made a shameful conquest of itself. (*Richard II*, 2.i.51- 58)

Thus, for Saunders, Gaunt's lines represent idealisation of a past age as well as a criticism of those who would wrongly guide that nation, and thus a warning over making the 'wrong' choices. Moreover, 'Gaunt's conviction that England's best days are behind it' are identified as an ineffable aspect of English identity wherein the paradoxical belief that 'England's past is too good for us. And that's how we know we're English' (Saunders, 2013) describes the eternal regress to an unachievable 'first' Eden. Saunders, writing prior to the rupture of Brexit acknowledges how this regressive idealisation can be found ideologically both in 'the creation of UKIP' and in the leftist idealisations of 'Ken Loach that 'Britain in 1947 was the pinnacle of human achievement' (Saunders, 2013). Arguably, however, Gaunt himself seems an unlikely catalyst for either a radical right- or left-wing transformative belief; as there is no aspect of his speech that offers, or seeks, an alternative future.

In a quite different iteration, Gaunt's speech has found new currency on the Brexit -era stage, most recently via the 2019 Globe Production that drew cheers from the audience at Gaunt's speech for its Presentist implications. Michael Billington's review in *The Guardian* noted:

But what really hits one is the play's eternal relevance. When Doña Croll's veteran John of Gaunt declared "That England that was wont to conquer others / Hath made a shameful conquest of itself", a spontaneous roar erupted from the audience as if in recognition of the current chaos (Billington, 2019).

This suggest that Gaunt's words need not be necessarily conservative and nostalgic in performance- the audience were clearly reacting to the 'current chaos' of Brexit, with the current nation indited as Gaunt's target.

Thus, Gaunt's speech now works at two, quite different positions that reflect the span of an incipient Brexit and post- Brexit Britain. What is clear in the language of Gaunt's speech that

creates an enduring resonance to Englishness are its qualities of opposition to the present order and appeal to a nostalgia for a better age. Of course, that Gaunt is already, in Shakespeare's time, referring to an age already gone some two hundred years ago (and indeed well gone -even by the end of the cycle of history plays) adds to the sense of nostalgia; a lost world that will only ever be a 'Demi-paradise', a 'fallen' world whose past ideals have been lost, from the 1590's back to the 1390's, back through to the Fall of Man. Terence Hawkes identifies how Gaunt's speech participates:

... In the discourses that weave the fabric of a national culture. In this case, a glance at the map confirms what geography has materially decreed. England is not, never has been and, unless some cataclysm intervenes, never will be an island encircled by the sea. In short, the 'scepter'd isle' is as much an invention as the 'Englishness' for which the plays at large are said effectively to speak (Hawkes, Shakespeare in the Present, 2002).

However, that the imagery of English exceptionalism remains often ideological, as much as geographical, is underlined in David Starkey's assessment of how Henry VIII's achievements created the foundation for Brexit:

Nobody before Henry would have made any argument about England being much different from the rest of Europe. It was Henry who turns *England into a defensible island*, who literally fortifies the English coastline. *It really is Henry that turns England into a genuine island* (My emphasis)

Hawkes' identification here reinstates the elision of England's most immediate borders, Wales, Scotland and Ireland that were, of course, the first annexations of Empire, and now, following the fracturing of the Union, may be the last, in a way not apparent for Starkey. That Shakespeare was implicitly aware of the 'home nations', I have already suggested. This imagery of an embattled, plucky England has, however, gained considerable currency through Brexit (Kissane, 2018).

Furthermore, the nostalgia of Gaunt's speech - its idealised past preferable to a corrupted future wherein the documents of 'inky blots and rotten parchment bonds' are metonyms for the avaricious and rapacious faceless bureaucracy of a bloated state can be read as an attack on the past, from an unpalatable present, that will ultimately ruin the future.

Thus, we can see in Gaunt's fears a symbolic prefiguring of the dreaded European 'superstate' so feared by ardent Brexiteers like Daniel Hannan, one of the founders of Vote Leave as an existential threat, not only to the UK but the very 'precepts that define Western civilization' (Hannan, 2013). That this takes the form of the indomitable national spirit in the face of a hostile Europe is similarly identified by Kampfner in his review of Boris Johnson's *Churchill* (2014) as Johnson 'equates the European Union, time and again, with the crushing of the British spirit' (Kampfner, 2014).

Another significant correspondence identified earlier is between the History plays and our current moment lies the way in which traditions and medievalist ideology are deployed strategically to suggest a moral superiority over others and gain political advantage (point 5). Thus, Jacob Rees Mogg's pejorative description of Theresa May's Chequers plan as 'the greatest vassalage since King John paid homage to Phillip II at Le Goulet' gives a favour of the appeal of the medievalist past to the Brexit architects, which one writer has described in this instance as 'a bizarre reference to a short-lived treaty by which England accepted French sovereignty over territories in France' (Kissane, 2018). The link to the loss of specifically English power at the hands of a major European power in 1200 is perhaps, however, not that 'bizarre', in the resonances it creates. Gaunt's mourning over 'That England that was wont to conquer others' finds clear correspondence in Rees-Mogg's lament for the glories of English history, and specifically the British Empire. Rees-Mogg has regularly used a number of suggestive historical analogies and given his approval of the Victorian age as a pinnacle of British success that would readily return to (Meek, 2019).<sup>50</sup> His latest scholarly work on the Victorians, *The Victorians: Twelve Titans who Forged Britain* 'published to coincide with the 200th anniversary of Queen Victoria's birth' was critically mauled by both right and left (Perraudin, 2019) and described by one reviewer as 'an origin myth for Rees-Mogg's particular right-wing vision of Britain' (Hughes, 2019).<sup>51</sup> The resoundingly chauvinistic and apparently chivalric tone of Rees-Mogg can be seen to reinstate the kind of Victorian 'order' that stands against the 'current chaos' of the

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<sup>50</sup> Meek quotes a retort to a fellow MP in Parliament where Rees-Mogg noted 'I was concerned about my hon. friend's attack on the Victorian age, which was one of the finest ages in British history, when most employers were benevolent, kindly, good ...'

<sup>51</sup> Unlike their classical forebears, Rees-Mogg's 'titans' are resounding male, with the exception of Victoria herself. We are however, reassured that Victoria 'became no less of a woman when she learned to rely upon Albert as a partner and to trust him' (Hughes, 2019).

contemporary moment Billington identified at the 2019 Globe *Richard II*. However, as James Meek notes, Rees-Mogg has a 'curious duality' in terms of identity, split between his compulsion for convention and religious tradition and a ruthlessness founded in exploiting the cutting edge of hi-tech 'global capitalism' (Meek, 2019). In this sense, his pronouncements speak as much of the thrusting Henry V as the dying John of Gaunt. Historic precedents are all well and good if they serve your interests; but new technology (Henry's longbows) and advantage over opponents (mud stakes, shrewd negotiations) will allow you to reach your aim.

Certain pronouncements from the Brexit architects link disapproval of the present with a glorification of the past<sup>9</sup>point 2 and 3), equally in keeping with the praxis of Henry as an exemplar fighting a just cause, particularly when set against the decline that followed in the reign of his son. For Jacob Rees-Mogg however, the exemplum resides more in a band of entrepreneurs and figureheads than military 'brothers'. Thus, his admiration for the Victorians is based upon a:

confidence in their civilising effort...How favourably this compares with the contemporary nervousness about the country where moral relativism accepts an equivalence between good and bad and with a tangible feeling that all we can do is manage decline (Reese-Mogg cited from Hughes, 2019).

That Britain has been managing decline from the 'high noon' of the Victorian period is commonly debated by historians, particularly in economic terms (Crafts, 1994). That Brexit is partly an economic issue- or has been presented as such- is undeniable.<sup>52</sup> However, it is the more ideological elements of Empire that are referenced here, specifically its 'moral' purpose that speak of a use of historiography by the architects of Brexit to create a nostalgic linear narrative, found in several of Shakespeare's sources, but resisted in his dramaturgy (Holderness, 1992) that corresponds to point 6, perhaps the most significant in terms of pedagogy.

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<sup>52</sup> That Britain has been managing decline from the 'high noon' of the Victorian period is commonly debated by historians, particularly in economic terms (Crafts, 1994). That Brexit is partly an economic issue- or has been presented as such- is undeniable, but beyond the scope of this thesis.

British attitudes towards the history of Empire, Imperialism and Nationalism are perhaps more complexly linked, both to Brexit and Shakespeare, than we might at first consider. David Cameron's visit to Amritsar in 2004, acknowledged the 1919 massacre there as a 'deeply shameful event' in British history, yet offered no formal apology, adding 'there was a great deal to be proud of' (Watt, 2013). Boris Johnson has posited that the problem for postcolonial societies is 'not that we were once in charge, but that we are not in charge any more' (Johnson, 2016). He ends a piece on Africa with the conclusion that: 'The best fate for Africa would be if the old colonial powers...scrambled once again in her direction; on the understanding that this time they will not be asked to feel guilty' (Johnson, 2016). Johnson is not alone in his belligerence about British Imperialism. Michael Gove railed against 'Left-wing versions of the past designed to belittle Britain and its leaders', particularly in relation to the First World War. (Gove, 2014). That Gove might be promoting a Right-wing version of the past remains unmentioned, reflecting the apparent 'lack' of ideology that Olive recognises as an aspect of Conservative educational views (Olive, 2015). Gove outlines how in the teaching of history we must counter 'misrepresentations which reflect an, at best, ambiguous attitude to this country and, at worst, an unhappy compulsion on the part of some to denigrate virtues such as patriotism, honour and courage' (Gove, 2014). The causes of the First World War lie at the feet of the 'ruthless...German elites' and their 'pitiless approach, aggressively expansionist war aims and their scorn for the international order.' Love of country and denigration of the enemy's motives are thus to be valued, just as they have been through much of the performative history of *Henry V* (Loehlin, 1997).

However, unlike Henry, who is the scene before Agincourt has to – even if in disguise- make the case for and accept the criticism of – his participants in Act 4. Scene 1 of *Henry V*, Gove sees a singular ideological unity in the British forces during the First World War. He notes that 'the war was also seen by participants as a noble cause. Historians have skilfully demonstrated how those who fought were not dupes but conscious believers in king and country, committed to defending the western liberal order' (Gove, 2014). This is somewhat difficult to square with the works of several poems approved for study by the then Secretary of State for Education, Michael Gove; notably Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon<sup>53</sup>, whose famous anti-war statement published in *The Times* made clear his view that the British were engaged

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<sup>53</sup> the latter who according to the *Dictionary of Literary biography* 'will be remembered primarily for some one hundred poems ... in which he protested the continuation of World War I'.

latterly in 'a war of aggression and conquest deliberately prolonged by those who have the power to end it'. One would have to work very 'skilfully' indeed to see that one of its most famous and respected participants held a belief in the 'noble cause' of this war, just as a Shakespearean audience cannot ignore the powerful words of the serving soldier Williams who questions what 'if the cause be not good' (*Henry V*, 4.1. In 70) and puts responsibility on the leaders who conduct war. *Henry V* similarly seeks justification for his war as 'a noble cause' shown initially in the Bishops' scene in Act 1 and generally presented as cynical in most modern productions, given that the rationale of the Church is clear.<sup>54</sup> As Rabkin notes 'The Archbishop's speech to the King follows immediately on his announcement to the Bishop of Ely that he plans to propose the war as a means of alleviating a financial crisis in the Church' (Rabkin, 1977 ).

Thus, an audience watching an unexpurgated play cannot help but to observe the order of events in *Henry V*; a pecuniary motive is concealed from the rest of society to benefit an elite, wherein we witness an extended, elaborate rolling out of precedent and an enthusiastic call to arms. The analogy here to Brexit is not an insignificant one. As Patterson notes, the principal sources for Shakespeare's histories, Hall and Holinshed, were valued in Shakespeare's age for their ability to justify precedent beyond the religious and providential and thus justify specific political positions of power, and even usurpation. Thus, they sometimes thus trod a fine line with the censors, much as Shakespeare did throughout his career (Patterson, 1992). However, it is undeniable that in the main the Tudor Myth of Order was the central thrust of much didactic historiography (Smith, 2000) , one which as we have seen ,Shakespeare did not wholeheartedly follow.

The relative obscurity of the Bishops' speech is often problematic in performance, perhaps precisely as it is stylistically the closest section of the play to Shakespeare's sources (Gurr, 1992) and thus dramatically plodding in performance and often elided (Norwich, 2018).

Rabkin, however, notes how the prolixity of the speech may in fact act to disguise its political import as the:

... very qualities that make its equivalent in Shakespeare's sources an unexceptionable instrument of statecraft make it sound on the stage like doubletalk,

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<sup>54</sup> However, as both Loehlin (1997) Smith (2002) note, it has often been elided altogether in many productions, both for its theatrical difficulty that Ewert (2006) addresses and its ideological potential to undermine the 'heroic' version of Henry.

and Canterbury's conclusion that it is "as clear as is the summer's sun" that King Henry is legitimate King of France is (*thus*) a sardonic bit of comedy (Rabkin, 1977 ).

Such drawing upon historical and chivalric precedent has been commonplace to one strand of Brexit ;the use of political and legalistic terminology has led to a bewildering series of contemporary jargon over Brexit ,a veritable 'Brexicon' (O'Grady, 2018) of 'doubletalk' whose meanings perhaps ultimately collapse, like the sense of the Bishop's speech, into tautology like 'Brexit means Brexit'. However, there has been an equal linguistic and rhetorical focus on past precedent and historiographical concerns that, like the Bishop's speech, is used for the endorsement of actions. This has on occasion, like Olivier's film of the scene<sup>55</sup>, been rendered in comic form, such as Jacob Rees-Mogg's assertion that 'I think one can take back the divergence between our legal system and that of the continent to the Fourth Lateran Council' as justification for the Brexit cause (Meek, 2019) ,or his justification for the 'floccinaucinihilipilification' of 'European judges' (Power, 2019). Nonetheless, that 'the most amusing man in Parliament' is in fact whipping up justification for overruling Parliament and established laws for some future gain ,can often be overlooked in his performance.

Just as Olivier in his 1944 film of *Henry V* renders the Bishops' scene as a piece of comic 'business' to disguise its import (Woodcock, 2008), so the business of being comic can do the same in modern political discourse.

Therefore, it can be argued that at the heart of much of the Brexit discourse is an implicit assumption about the significance of history and historiography in creating the narrative of nationalism, that links Shakespeare's era to our own.

Ivo Kamps notes several immediate contextual factors affected how 'popular' history took hold amongst the public from the early of the sixteenth century, as:

events such as the conflicts with Rome...encouraged an interest in religious, legal, and parliamentary history ...the strife with Spain in the second half of the century promoted a fervent patriotism that found an expression in nationalistic historiography.  
(Kamps, 2003)

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<sup>55</sup> Olivier's use of Felix Alymer- an actor noted for playing doddery elderly clerics and the 'backstage' comic business before this scene heightened the comic tone considerably.

Kamps adds that access to such nationalistic history was commonplace and widely disseminated in a range of popular forms, including chap-books and broadside ballads. Similar promotion of patriotic, nationalistic historiography has also been a point of connection between several of the architects of Brexit. English history presented as a linear, unbroken narrative of *exceptionalism* was one aim of certain early chronicle histories that sought to link English history back to the mythical Brutus of Troy, descendent of Aeneas<sup>56</sup> (Patterson, 1992). In a similar fashion, British exceptionalism and foundational mythology has become a key narrative of Brexit, focussed on key markers, such as the Reformation and the British Empire, as noted, and latterly, the Second World War. As Kissane notes the iconography of the Second World War has been ubiquitous in the discourse of Brexit, as:

In the British mind, that history remains centred on the second World War, the 'darkest' and 'finest' hour in which Britain imagines it stood alone in defiance of Nazism, not as a global imperialist allied to emerging superpowers...While the horrors of war remind the UK's continental neighbours of the need for co-operation, Britain's war story feeds an adversarial view of the country's place in the world (Kissane, 2018).

This narrative, linking points 3 and 6 Brexiteers look back to WW2 to invoke national identity, echoing Olivier's wartime *Henry V* that was generously funded by the wartime Government to promote patriotic values and was heavily influenced by Tillyard's criticism of the same year (Smith, 2000).

In this nationalist historiography one key text links together several of the architects of Brexit<sup>57</sup>; David Cameron, Michael Gove and Jacob Rees-Mogg, H.E Marshall's *Our Island Story*, the book selected (quite without irony) by David Cameron when asked to select his favourite children's book. In 2010 he noted how: 'When I was younger, I particularly enjoyed *Our Island Story* by Henrietta Elizabeth Marshall [...] It is written in a way that really captured my imagination and which nurtured my interest in the history of *our great nation*.' (Hough, 2010) (My emphasis). Cameron also noted how 'my favourite book, 'Our Island

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<sup>56</sup> This is explored in Patterson, 'Henry V : Text and History', 1992.

<sup>57</sup> Whether or not David Cameron *intended* to *actually* be an architect of Brexit is debatable, particularly in his autobiography that seeks to justify his actions. Unlike Henry he does not invoke God, but like him, he does seek sympathy for the burdens of office (Henry v 4.1) Noting that "My regrets about what had happened went deep. I knew then that they would never leave me. And they never have." Cited from <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2019/sep/19/david-cameron-autobiography-for-the-record-review-brexit-referendum>



Story' in outlining Magna Carta as the "foundation of all our laws and liberties" was the source of his reflection over the *lack* of respect for these value in the present, thus framing the Prevent strategy and ultimately Fundamental British Values (Cameron,2014).

It is a simplistic, chronological narrative first published in 1905 and served as a key set text at grammar and private schools that conveniently ends with the reign of Queen Victoria (Marshall, 1905, reprinted 2005) and contains a significant chapter on *Henry V* that runs together historical facts unproblematically with Shakespeare's account in an unavowedly patriotic version that raises significant questions as to the co-opting of literature in a nationalist historical project (Marshall, 1905, reprinted 2005, pp. 40-68). Michael Gove, as Olive notes, pressed for the return of the book in the National Curriculum for History, but finally withdrew his decision in the face of 'a deluge of criticism and ridicule from the entire historical profession' (Evans, 2019). A recent review in *The New Statesman* makes explicit the linkage between Rees-Mogg's own literary preferences and prejudices in *The Victorians* (2019) and Marshall's book<sup>58</sup> Evans makes clear both the appeal of such historiography and the uses to which it can be put in the Brexit narrative, as:

This kind of colonial nostalgia exerts a baleful influence over the minds of Brexiteers today, who view the prospect of a "global Britain", illusory though it is, as a kind of resurrection of the imperial glories of the Victorian era. (Evans,2019)

Gove noted as Secretary of state for education that 'the numbers of young people showing an appetite for learning about the past, and a curiosity about *our nation's story*, is growing once more' (my emphasis) (Gove, 2014). The repeated possessive pronoun used throughout clearly does no promote a considered view of world history, but one that promotes an Anglo-centric British exceptionalism. Furthermore, it is not possible to say that this view is currently a minority one, when two thirds of the UK feels the British Empire was a positive force (Dahlgreen, 2014).

A current critic on Brexit notes that:

To varying degrees, the 52% of Britons who opted for a divorce from Brussels were prey to nostalgic fantasies. For most Leavers, the ideal chronological destination was 1973, just a moment before the UK joined the European Economic

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<sup>58</sup> Evans(2009) notes that 'Patriotic, enthusiastic and celebratory, it (*Rees-Mogg's book*) recalls nothing so much as Henrietta Marshall's 1905 children's history of Britain, *Our Island Story* (though Marshall was a much better writer than Rees-Mogg)'

Community. Hard-core Brexiteers would have preferred to go further back to the Edwardian era, thus restoring the country's lost imperial greatness (Browning C. S., 2019).

Unless we also wish to remain trapped in an era where literature has been pressed into service for nationalist and imperialist concerns- the Edwardian era of *Our Island Story*- we surely need to re-evaluate the History play's continuing relevance.

I set out this chapter to assess the extent to which the correspondences between Shakespeare's history plays and Brexit can be employed to question a singular notion of English exceptionalism in nationalist discourse. The evidence of the numerous counters to this narrative in Shakespeare's plays, such as the questioning of Henry's motives, the challenges from 'below', the presentation of the Captains as critical and other scenes as identified, would all seem to run counter to the use of a singular narrative historiography based upon nostalgic evaluations of greatness.

I shall now turn to contemporary stage productions to consider the extent to which these have added further challenge or critique of nationalist representation in the History plays.

### **Chapter 3: Brexit staged and played sundry times upon the stage.**

#### **Henry V upon the stage; a problematic modern play?**

The production history of the History plays, and *Henry V* in particular are troubling and problematic in allowing the play's contemporary relevance to be shown to modern audiences. Largely ignored for long periods of dramatic history, their popularity has waxed and waned at points of chauvinistic and nationalistic fervor (Lidster, 2018) with *Henry V* in particular serving three main purposes. Firstly, to act as a galvanizing force for British militarism, secondly to show off the bombast of the theatre itself and thirdly as a set piece for chauvinistic actor-directors to test their mettle. Often all three purposes were incorporated together. The history of such populist productions has often acted to provoke a knee jerk sentiment of nationalism in audiences. For example during the Seven Years' War (1756-1763) productions reflected prevailing anti-French sentiment: *Henry V* was staged every year in London with playbills that advertised the 'Conquest of the French' featuring new sections of jingoistic dialogue, as well as contemporary French costume, prompting audience members to rally against and attack the actors who played the French (Lidster, 2018). *Henry V* was performed 23 consecutive times to celebrate the coronation of George III in 1761; the coronation scene from *2 Henry IV* was incorporated into the production in deference to the monarch. A similar pattern was repeated during the Napoleonic wars where 'the use of Shakespeare in anti-French political debate centred overwhelmingly on the history plays' (Poole, 2012).

This pattern only shifted more generally with scepticism over war and nationalism into the twentieth Century (Smith, 2000), yet two most famous twentieth century productions, whilst offering alternative interpretations, were still clearly indebted to earlier notions of *Henry* in production. Olivier's 1943 film of *Henry V* with its panegyric: 'dedicated to the Commandos and Airborne Troops of Great Britain the spirit of whose ancestors it has been humbly attempted to recapture' (Olivier, 1944), gave renewed purpose against a common enemy, Nazi Germany, yet still presented the French troops as effeminate in comparison to the English counterparts. Branagh's more ambivalent, yet equally stirring production of 'Henry V' (Branagh, 1989) responding to the crisis of the Falklands war presented an altogether bloodier play that hinted at the 'sceret' play noted earlier. However, both

versions elide Henry's 'pragmatic' (and unprovoked) killing of his prisoners of war and make a number of links between the 'band of brothers' led by their King and the responsibilities of the actor-Director leading the acting company (Loehlin)

Thus, I will consider the extent to which the dramaturgy of contemporary productions of the play can be seen to viably step outside the historical problematics of the plays in production. Against the conventional theatrical backdrop a number of recent productions have acted to reference Brexit, either through symbolic points of dramaturgy or have been identified as such by the interpretations of critics and audiences. However, given that the references to Brexit, whilst topical, are often passing, it is my contention that it is the wider dramaturgical choices in casting that offer the greater challenge to a monocultural post-Brexit nationalism.

Firstly, I will consider issues of who audiences may accept and directors might cast as playing an English King; an issue with a problematic history of its own before evaluating the impact of performances that challenge existing notions of Kingship and the nation.

In the History plays, there has been a relative lack of diversity in available roles and casting, particularly in light of the chauvinistic and patriarchal tone of historic productions that favour the male actor-director hero (Sillers, 2014). The crude patriarchal assumption of rights reaches its apogee in the often unconvincing and uncomfortable 'wooing' scene in Act 5 of *Henry V* (Rakin and Howard, 1993) that even Branagh's more gritty production failed to address with conviction.<sup>60</sup> It is thus significant in deciding upon the potential efficacy of Brexit and post-Brexit productions of the history plays, to evaluate the extent to which contemporary attitudes towards gender and race have been effectively addressed or not, through recent productions and to consider the debates that 'non-traditional' or 'color blind casting' in the plays have generated.

The first aspect to consider is the way in which roles have conventionally been cast in Shakespeare, in terms of the history plays. Given their material, the plays have overwhelmingly been cast with powerful white male actors (and especially actors-directors) which suggest a reinforcement of the idea of the powerful leader, galvanizing disparate

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<sup>60</sup> Branagh's use of his then wife Emma Thompson as Katharine overcame some of the awkwardness of the scene, but the crude double-entendres that must rate as one of the 'most uncomfortable of any scene in the canon' (Norwich, 1999, p 104) still fail to convince, and Henry's insistence of his 'right' to her father remains uncomfortable.

forces into a common cause – ‘this band of brothers’ –that, as with Olivier and Branagh, links war with the theatrical company itself (Smith,2000).

Nonetheless, recent productions have challenged such conventions in the use of an all-female cast ( with the exception of a male Katherine) in Michelle Terry’s *Henry V* (2016) and in Terry taking on the role of artistic director of the *Henriad* with black actor Sarah Amankwah playing the evolving Hal /Henry across the three plays (2019). Thus, both in terms of individual casting and the structure of the company there have been interesting challenges to theatrical conventions around the history plays. It is worth evaluating the extent to which such dramaturgical choices can be seen as evidence of a Presentist approach- casting ‘unhistorical’ figures in such roles- and how this might, implicitly or explicitly, challenge nationalist assumptions.

Clearly, the difficulties facing BAME actors in the Shakespeare canon are significant and worth considering in their wider context. Scholars such as Ayanna Thompson have interrogated how the history of casting black actors in Shakespeare , despite having roots from the nineteenth century, has proved problematic, with debates around blackface, ‘colorblindness’ (sic) and non-traditional casting and the prescribed roles for black actors remaining heated, both in theatrical and cultural terms.<sup>61</sup> Conventionally,(male) black actors have been cast in three identifiably marked ‘black’ roles in the canon, Othello, Aaron, and the Prince of Morocco, despite some, notably Cleopatra, also being described as non-white in the texts themselves (Berry). <sup>62</sup>As Celia R.Daieader notes of the canon ‘That amounts to three out of some 1,100 dramatis personae, or approximately one quarter of one per cent.’(Daieader) This limitation of roles was increasingly questioned by the development of black acting companies in the US who raised the question of what roles black actors could be cast in and how audiences should respond. This issue was not merely aesthetic; a schism developed between those who favoured colorblind casting and those who rejected it, with both positions occupying political and cultural stances that remain

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<sup>61</sup> As Sita notes, ‘Although models of ‘non-traditional’ casting have been theorised in the American context through the work of Ayanna Thompson, a comprehensive study of contemporary British theatrical casting practices has yet to be undertaken. The terminologies and discourses used to discuss such issues are unstable, contested, and continually evolving’ (Sita, 2014)

<sup>62</sup> That is not to say that black actors had not played other roles. In the nineteenth Century, Ira Aldridge played a host of leading roles, such as Shylock, Macbeth and Lear but in “whiteface” to emphasise the race of the part over the actor. This did not prevent racist slurs being made about his delivery. (Thompson)

urgent today. Colorblind casting - the principle that the best qualified actor ,regardless of race, should play the part -began with Joseph Papp , in response to the desegregation of US theatres in the 1940's and was designed to negate the necessity of black actors having to assume 'whiteface' roles, as in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Furthermore, blackface acting ,with its cultural roots in the horrific mimicry of minstrelsy in the US, could potentially be left behind ; although, without direct connection to this source, it remained commonplace in the UK until the 1980's in the playing of *Othello*, and has remained contentious in Shakespeare studies as to how accurately it reflects 'authentic' early modern performances (Thompson). Papp faced opposition on the grounds that there were insufficient black actors of suitable quality or wide enough audiences for his project to work, yet resisted such attempts to derail his project and appealed to the idea of the theatre as a democratising force, following the 'popular notion that Shakespeare's plays are 'universal' and ultimately Papp 'envisioned a theatre in which race would have no reliable signification in performance' (Thompson). Thus, all actors could feasibly play all parts.

Black playwright August Wilson ,sharply opposed to Papp, decried that ' Colorblind casting is an aberrant idea that has never had any validity other than as a tool of the Cultural Imperialists...It is inconceivable to them that life could be lived and even enriched without knowing Shakespeare' (Wilson, in Thompson). Thus, for Wilson, Shakespeare's universalism serves to maintain existing power structures and subsume back cultural difference, and therefore, the value of a distinctly black culture. The twin poles of this argument were renewed in 1996 in the debate between Yale critic, writer and director Robert Brustein and Wilson, with Brustein seeing Wilson's position as one which promoted separatism (and thus division along race lines in society) and failing to see, as he himself did, the role of theatre as potentially unifying and transcending race/ethnicity differences. Wilson rejected this, reiterating his belief that colourblind casting fosters an assimilationist agenda 'that conflates white culture with a universal human condition and expects minorities to conform to it.' Pao)

Thus, ideologically, the issue of casting fractures along both the critical and implicit pedagogical views of Shakespeare and his implied value to society identified earlier.

A traditionally 'universalist' approach suggests Shakespeare's transhistorical ability means all actors and audiences have equal access to his 'universal' plays, whilst a more critical

approach sees the implicit workings of an established ideology which seeks to promote its *own* culture as 'universal', in order to marginalise others.

Thompson identifies three main currents in colorblind casting since the 1940's, each of which raises critical questions about its practice. Firstly, Papp's initial aim of ignoring existing theatrical conventions and picking the best actor for the role, even if this might mean casting, for example, a person of one race as brother to that of another, or as father and son, as when Hugh Quarshie played Hotspur, when his stage father, the Earl of Northumberland, was white.<sup>63</sup> In the history plays, with their close focus on feudal 'houses' and patrimony this requires an audience to be completely 'blind' to race and thus theatrical critic Berry believes that 'Shakespeare's Histories remain the biggest hurdle: all the royal figures and nobles are white, and all are kin (they are always addressing each other as 'cousin'). He describes how audiences often don't approve, as when 'At Stratford-on-Avon a few years ago, the appearance of a black actor playing a French king was greeted with an angry outburst by a French woman in the audience.' (Berry)

The second approach is one in which the 'best' actor is cast, except when the race of the character remains central to the plot, for example in the practice of casting Othello; it is no longer acceptable for white actors to play the role in blackface, even if a white actor were considered the best actor available. Thus, the RSC halted all such productions of Othello, until 1999,<sup>64</sup> with black actor Ray Fardon taking the role, reflecting the belief that shifts in 'socio-political and cultural-historical factors influence an audience's viewing abilities' (Thompson). From a Presentist perspective, this suggests that modern audiences would not tolerate blackface performance, regardless of arguments as to historical 'authenticity,' as it is culturally demeaning given the weight of history since first productions. This suggests that no audience can be 'blind' to race, or productions be divorced from their context of reception.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Thompson gives examples from Branagh's *Much Ado About Nothing* (1993) that casts Denzel Washington as Don Pedro and Keanu Reeves as his bastard brother Don John.

<sup>64</sup> The BBC film production of 1981 was still widely shown in UK schools in the late 1980's and the last blackface stage production was with Michael Gambon in the role in 1990. <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2015/jun/10/othello-actors-rsc-lucian-msamati-hugh-quarshie>

<sup>65</sup> Celia R. Daieader coined the term 'Othellophilic' to describe how criticism and theatrical responses to Othello, both as play and protagonist, have overwhelmingly fallen back on prejudicial terms of interracial sexuality and miscegenation with a fetishization that is almost impossible to now escape. Director/actors are forced to address this issue, even if they do not see this as the primary focus of their productions.

A more recent turn has been the casting of actors of colour in roles not traditionally associated with race, colour or ethnicity in order to make a socio-political point (or points) about the character that might be more adequately described as 'nontraditional' casting, such as a black actress playing Hermione in a US production of *A Winter's Tale*, dressed as a plantation slave in chains when accused of adultery.<sup>66</sup> Directors and producers in such cases do not assume that audiences will be 'blind' to the actor's colour, race or ethnicity; indeed it is central to an interpretation of the dramaturgy.

The history plays have been particularly resistant to both colorblind and nontraditional casting which have exposed the very 'anxieties' Thompson identifies over race; Hugh Quarmshire has described the controversy within the RSC company itself when he played Hostpur in 1983<sup>67</sup>, the first black actor to take a major role in a history play. David Oyelowo played the first black King in a history play as recently as 2000<sup>68</sup>, where he was critically well received as *Henry VI*. Whilst this casting still was considered remarkable enough to be deemed controversial, the distance travelled between the casting of the two roles was made clear by Quarmshire who described the response to the casting of Oyelowo as more of a media 'shock' than evidence of endemic racism in the theatre itself as:

editors appear to think their readers would find this newsworthy, believing perhaps that Outraged is still alive in Tunbridge Wells and will soon be penning furious missives at the affront to both history and to Shakespeare at the casting of a "veritable Negro" as a British monarch. But I wonder whether this may not be a misreading of the public mood, and certainly a misunderstanding of Shakespeare's history plays (Quarmshire, 2000).

Quarshie, unlike Wilson, thus sees the value of Shakespeare 'universalism' as beneficial to black actors, particularly in relation to the history plays as:

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<sup>66</sup> This was The Guthrie Theatre production of 1992-1993. Thus, the subjugation of married women in Elizabethan England was linked to the nature of subjection in other contexts.

<sup>67</sup> He notes how Trevor Nunn cast him 'in the face of opposition from distinguished members of the company - my colleagues if not my friends'. (Quarshie, citation added)

<sup>68</sup> Ira Aldridge famously had played Lear, but the role is considered a tragic, rather than historical one and rarely carries the same nationalist connotations.



Is it not clear that he used history imaginatively to write about things other than history? Henry VI is not ultimately about Henry VI. (Henry VI is not actually the major role, but never mind.) It is about power, ambition, the grip of one generation on another: universal themes.

However, It can be posited that, in terms of the history plays, recent challenges to conventional staging cannot be seen to be gender or color 'blind', either in terms of the director's intentions or the audience and critics' reactions. The nontraditional gender and colorblind choices of the Michelle Terry production need to be considered against the idea that audiences (and critics) have a strategy for reading race and gender in plays (Pao, 2010).

Furthermore, in terms of nationalism, the casting of an actor of color in a nontraditional role makes a strong statement about national identity, that seeks both to redress the monocultural productions of the past and make appeals to a contemporary, multicultural identity, whilst raising interesting questions about the gendered nature of our view of leadership.

### Brexit on the stage

Brexit has influenced several recent Shakespeare stage productions within the UK, in ways that reference current fractures explicitly in Present dramaturgical choices and implicitly in the inferred responses of critics. The impact of Brexit upon these productions cannot, however, always be easily divided along these lines, with some productions actively seeking a resonance with Brexit and others that have not, being seen as such by critics. Some productions have indeed both sought to present Brexit elements on stage and had additional correspondences identified by critics during performance. Unlike earlier nationalist productions, such as the Vietnam era productions that used imagery of that war explicitly (Loehlin, 1997, pp. 95-122), the presence of Brexit has been more slightly seen.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the initial focus in the run up to Brexit has been on tragedy. *King Lear* has been presented with a focus on questions of political decision making and regret, as well as the consequences of the break-up of the Union, a clear potential outcome of Brexit. The fracturing of the Union was addressed explicitly via the use of Lear's initial division of his Kingdom made under an anachronistic Union flag in the 2018 Duke of York

/National Theatre Live production.<sup>69</sup>Tim Walker notes how ‘It is, firstly, difficult now not to feel the contemporary resonance of the story of a leader who, by dint of one vain and ill-considered decision, renders asunder his kingdom and then comes to bitterly regret it’ (Walker T. , 2018).

As Stephen O’Neill notes in his review of the 2018 production the map scene also raises issues of nationalism and identity resonant in a post –Brexit world:

when Ian McKellen’s Lear takes up a map on which featured Britain and also Ireland, current events intersect with prior histories, points of contact between islands, and future relationships. Lear, scissors in hand, disposes of Scotland first, then England, now in two halves, and Ireland, as the last and, what seemed to this audience member at least, the reluctantly or awkwardly received, territory.

(O'Neill, 2019)

The resonances here of an anachronistic map and union flag show that historical fidelity can be sidestepped in order to bring the Shakespeare text vitally into current debates. Such productions that ‘chime with the Brexit fall –out’ (Cavendish D. , 2018) shows that it is perhaps unsurprising that a play that addresses the division of a Kingdom should find currency with Brexit and suggest the consequences of a singular decision played out rashly.

However, productions of the English History plays, and in particular, *Henry V*, present potentially a greater challenge in their Brexit resonances. Lear is rarely evoked as a specific historical figure, role model or business leader in the way that Henry is in contemporary society<sup>70</sup>. Furthermore, Henry’s galvanising power in the theatre aligned with what Ewan Fernie describes as his ‘fierce action’ (Grady, 2007) rarely allows a careful audience consideration of his decision making as it occurs. Like the Referendum decision, we are pushed forwards via an inevitable process set in motion to resolve an issue from a past generation, that has reached fruition in this one.<sup>71</sup>For Henry, it is the sins of the father(Henry Bolingbroke usurping Richard II) that he must expiate. For the Brexit narrative

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<sup>69</sup> As Tim Walker notes of the 2018 production with Ian McKellan the staging placed centrally the way that ‘The king even stands before a Union flag in the opening scene as he rips up a map of his kingdom and hands out the pieces to his oleaginous but calculating daughters.’

<sup>70</sup> I am thinking here of the references to ‘for God, Harry and England’ at recent England European football qualifying games as much as Richard Olivier’s series of lectures to businesses on ‘Henry V: CEO.’ (The Times, 2013)

<sup>71</sup> As Browning notes ‘the Brexit referendum of 23 June 2016 was invested with hopes and dreams, of refound sovereignty and control, freedom and liberty, subjectivity and agency. Brexit was an opportunity for both new beginnings and a reclamation of British essences.’

the source is less singular, yet no less pressing. As several critics have noted, it is this reaching back to the calamitous decisions of the past –such as joining the Common Market, or the loss of Empire, that many Brexiteers seek to redress (Browning C. S., 2019). Furthermore, *Henry V* in the theatre is as much a play about acting and action itself and the *contingency* of Henry's ongoing actions – as it is about judging their effects. Is Henry Hazlitt's 'amiable monster' or a hard-pressed pragmatist who acts responsibly to the challenges before him? Or as Rabkin suggests, can he be both? (Rabkin, 1977 ).

However, beyond the question of how Henry is perceived in contemporary production, is the question of who we now expect him to be that is perhaps more vital in his on-stage portrayal.

The English History plays have found new and challenging resonances through Brexit, in particular in two recent productions that have sought to overcome the stage history of their chauvinistic forefathers , not simply in terms of our response to Henry, but also in terms of radical re-casting.

Michelle Terry's 2016 performance as Henry at the Open-Air theatre, Regent's Park re-cast the play as an all –female cast, with the exception of Katherine being switched to a male part. Critics perceived the relevance of the play to Brexit in that one performance took place on the night of the Brexit vote itself , reading ominous signs in the clouds and the ensuing storm after the play ,yet also commended the 'modern dress clarity and urgency' of the performance ,that sought to place the Chorus centrally to Henry's project as she 'chooses Terry to wear the crown and play the part' (Shenton, 2016) suggesting perhaps the element of Providential history in more traditional readings. The switching of gender, however, didn't undermine Shenton's essentially positive view of Henry as protagonist with praise for Terry's 'intelligence and reason'. He could even find a contemporary resolution in the often troubling 'wooing' scene in Act 5 that cause him to reflect how:

Our single most timeless play about the state of the nation...achieves an even bigger resonance watching it on the eve of a vote that may take us out of Europe, but this play - which sees Britain and France united in a royal marriage -reminds us that even though we may have communication difficulties with different languages, we share more.

(Shenton, 2016)

Thus, perhaps surprisingly, the reviewer sees many of the qualities found in more 'traditional' readings of the play that advocate the harmony of Act 5, rather than the direct political analogues intended, whilst still recognising the play's significance in national discourse as '*our* single most timeless play about the state of the nation'.

David Lister in *The Independent*, in contrast, identified the production's intention to connect to contemporary ideas about 'just war', foregrounded in the programme notes that noted how 'It is testament to the continuing relevance of Shakespeare's work that our production is staged as we await the Chilcot report into why our country goes to war'

Yet Lister goes on to criticise the need for directors to foreground such relevance for Shakespearean productions, resisting Presentist practice. However, he praised Terry's 'androgynous performance, neither studiously male nor female', yet felt her Henry was 'insufficiently imposing or charismatic', noting that ultimately the play was uncertain 'about war and its motivations' and that in the final analysis '*Henry V* must always be judged on its lead character' (Lister, 2016). Thus, like Shelton, the reviewer falls back on traditional assumptions about the need for a charismatic Henry to convince us on stage, regardless of their gender.

Michael Billington in a more extended review in *The Guardian* noted that:

Robert Hastie's highly intelligent production gives the casting a context. Charlotte Cornwell as Chorus leads on a group of actors in everyday clothes...Cornwell then looks for someone to play the king. Passing over several male actors, who preen with a sense of entitlement, she turns towards Terry and hands her the crown. Immediately, this opens up multiple possibilities: above all, the idea that monarchy is a performance, and that Henry has to assume a variety of conflicting roles (Billington, 2019).

Billington thus acknowledges how the director has undermined the sense of male entitlement assumed in playing the role of Henry and the performative aspect of Henry, echoing an earlier review of a 1975 performance that made clear Henry was 'an actor playing a man playing a king' (Smith, 2002), or rather here, a *woman* playing a man, playing

a king, with notable success. This undermines gender assumptions about performative ability, thus undermining the 'actor-director -hero' model of the past.

Billington directly links this performative aspect to tensions within the character of the King that represent 'the constant battle between military necessity and natural instinct', recognising ultimately that: 'You could argue that Henry is simply a first-class hypocrite; (yet) what Terry suggests is something more complex, which is the cost to any wartime leader of the suppression of their humanity' (Billington, 2016). Again, this suggests a self-reflexive pragmatist, in the mould of Branagh's Henry (Smith, 2002). Billington suggests this portrayal of Henry's character in this 'riveting performance... makes you see Henry as a role player, rather than hero or war criminal'. Here, he makes a direct link to the Brexit moment, noting how 'At a time when we are still reeling from the referendum, it is also instructive to be reminded that all leadership involves an element of masquerade.' This suggests the performative aspects of Brexit identified earlier, find a clear resonance on the current stage.

Natasha Tripney in *The Stage* also referenced the Brexit context and how it has focalised issues of leadership in particular. However, her response to the play's political aspect noted that the casting was in itself also an overtly political act, as:

Opening on the eve of the referendum the whole thing feels doubly political too, both in what it says about our leaders and the tools they use to lead, the way they deploy words, and about gender and power: this band of sisters and brothers standing together on this stage makes a statement, and Terry, in lipstick, crown and battle fatigues, is every inch the king (Tripney N., 2016).

Susan Clapp in *The Guardian* also noted the significance of gender as empowering in this production, specifically in the way it also serves to undermine the absurdity of the Salic Law with 'the law about female succession' managing to appear 'new minted' in the face of a powerful *female* Henry. This staging thus gives more sense of Henry's right to go to war than Gurr, for example, notes about both the ambiguities of succession that lie at the heart of both Henry's claim and in Elizabethan England (Gurr, 1992), yet undermines Rackin's identification that Henry's own right to rule through the female undermines his masculinity (Howard, 1997). Clapp also identifies how Henry's rallying rhetoric can be seen to mirror

the decision of Brexit, placing Henry's unifying cause as an alternative to 'brexit' the stage for good:

As Terry delivers her St Crispin's day speech, proclaiming that anyone is free to go – to "brexit" – one soldier does exactly that, leaving the army on the stage and strolling into the audience. As Terry continues, he stops, listens and finally returns, persuaded. If only. (Clapp, 2016)

It is thus interesting to observe that in what might legitimately be the first 'Brexit' *Henry V* the critical reception of the play falls back, in large part, to questions of leadership and performativity, focussed almost exclusively on Henry. Whilst there is approval from all of the cited reviewers for the bold casting and the central role of the Chorus, the question of pragmatic leadership, more common in late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> Century critical readings that recognise the 'fallibly human creature' identified by critics such as John Palmer (Woodcock, 2008) come to the fore. That such readings of the instability of 2016 chime with other periods of political instability is perhaps unsurprising. In the critical instance, the readings of the immediate post-war period that portray an essentially positive figure who may have to enter the 'depths of self-deception to which a successful politician may be driven' (Palmer, 1945) are evidenced here, to an extent. Such a view was revived dramatically in Branagh's view of Henry as 'a complicated, doubting, dangerous young professional- neither straightforwardly good nor consciously evil', yet still ultimately, a man who feels his 'own sense of responsibility' (Bate, 2010). This presentation, as critics have noted, reflected the greater political instability and social uncertainty of the post Falklands and Thatcherite era of pragmatic political actions and strident leaders (Smith, 2002). Other critics identify this 'dangerous young professional' in Branagh's own sense of assuming a leading role in the theatre at a notably young age, in a role made famous by the leading actors of previous generations (Woodcock, 2008). Branagh notes how the version of the play staged and then filmed 'seemed less like a historical pageant and more like a highly complicated and ambiguous discourse on the nature of leadership' (Bate J., 2010).

Thus, the actor-director Branagh places Henry at the heart of the play in a relatively 'pro' Henry stance, even whilst recognising his failings. Similarly, even though several of the reviewers comment upon the brutality of the firing squad that dispatches Bardolph shown

on stage in the 2016 version, Tripney notes simply that this allows for 'nuance and emotion' in Terry's /Henry's response, similar to Branagh's angst ridden scene in his *Henry V* (Bate J., 2008). Contrastingly, however, Henry's violent threats at Harfleur which are followed by visible relief on the face of Henry in Branagh's version (using the filmic medium of a shot that allows us, but not his men, to see this response) (Smith, 2002), are met only with a 'grim sardonic smile', yet are fully visible and on public display in Terry's performance.

It can be suggested firstly that in the disquiet over the referendum and what it might mean, that such reception reflects ultimately an acknowledgement of both the pragmatic and performative nature of leadership; twinned with a modern conception of the necessity of ruthless political action. Each of the reviewers pays testament to Terry's own performative ability, as 'spellbinding', 'mesmerising', and 'riveting'. This reflects, in fact, the main theatrical tradition of the play, in which evaluation of the play rests upon how convinced we are by Henry throughout (Ewert, 2006).

However, it also raises the long standing question of what *uses* Henry's performative power is put to. Greenblatt notes of the early modern world that acts of 'calculation, intimidation and deceit...performed in an entertainment for which audiences...pay money and applaud' were part of 'the founding of the modern state' (Greenblatt, 1985). Thus, an audience applauding such a 'charismatic leader' acts to consolidate the power of the state. He thus suggests of *Henry V* that: 'the very doubts that Shakespeare raises serve not to rob the king of his charisma but to heighten it, precisely as they heighten the theatrical interest of the play'. The 'charisma' of Terry's performance is rightly foregrounded by the reviewers and audience responses. However, we might reflect how such an unquestioned view of theatricalised power mirrors our own age as much as that Greenblatt describes, wherein an 'engaging and populist' leader can, through performance persuade us of their cause, be it just or not, as (Culshaw, 2019). That the departure and then return of the doubting soldier (not in the play text) is described as a result of 'a riveting performance that makes you see Henry as *role player*, rather than hero or war criminal' (Billington, 2016, my emphasis) gives a sense of how rhetorical performance can perhaps alter our better instincts and overwhelm our individual agency. For the returnee actor/soldier may just as easily have been convinced back into the totalising structure of power that finds expression in Brexit

and does so *through* nationalist sentiments, than achieved a unity within a 'band of brothers'.

A further set of Brexit references are demonstrable in the 2019 'Henriad' cycle at the Globe, that played both parts of *Henry IV* and *Henry V* together. The appeal to more modern genres was notable, with explicit links being encouraged, and made, to the vogue for long form drama on TV. Thus, the cycle was described suggestively as 'Game of Thrones with leathers' and 'Shakespeare's box set'. However, links were also made to the myth of Shakespeare's own foundational status with artistic director Michelle Terry describing the performances as 'the *original* box set' (Wyver, 2019).

One reviewer noted the direct relevance to Brexit as an act of confrontation, reliant upon rhetorical performance:

Is there ever going to be a better time, given the current European palaver, to mount Shakespeare's *Henry V*? A show pitting two mighty nations against one another, where a war of words among leaders can cost the fortunes of those serving under them? (Wood, 2019)

Furthermore, that this is 'the play most closely intertwined with ideas of nationhood, English patriotism and valour in a time of war' (Tripney S., 2019) was foregrounded by the metonymic title of *Harry England*, removing the performance from a narrow historicist reading that was further emphasised by the use of costumes in both modern and older military fashions. That the major parts are played by female actors and actors of colour is barely noted in the reviews, itself showing how perceptions of who can play such roles in the histories has changed.

This production of *Henry V* used the development of Henry's character from *Henry IV Parts 1 and 2* to show how he must adopt the role of King. Like Terry's 2016 production, there is an ambivalence about Henry's character in relation to power, one reviewer notes how having firmly rejected Falstaff, 'now she is majestic – her rule is just, her roar ferocious and her humble Saint Crispin's Day speech sublime' (Hitchings, 2019). However, another reviewer notes that whilst this transformation shows that 'he (sic) is King Henry, ready to



embrace heroism', this is questioned within the wider play for: 'even as patriotism seems to be celebrated, the very idea of being a patriot is shrewdly put on trial' (Wyver, 2019).

Mark Ludmon most clearly linked this production to nationalist concerns, recognising how its currency 'as a celebration of patriotism and masculine valour' is undermined in the production by 'the bickering soldiers and the cynical cowards who stand out rather than their noble leaders.' This suggests a more critical view of the war 'from the bottom up' more befitting the critical work of Cultural Materialists like Sinfield and Dollimore than traditional 'Henry' based readings (Dollimore, 1992).

He observes two other notable factors, which underline the more questioning view of nationalism in the production. Firstly, he identifies the role of the Chorus, not as justifier of Henry's cause, but rather serving to question 'the eponymous king's place in the myths of English nationalism' as the:

...narrative gloss provided by the Chorus is shared out among the characters, fragmenting the jingoistic message and highlighting how the words often have little to do with the action they commentate on (*thus*) The king and his allies may be confident about their war against France but the soldiers and ordinary people are more sceptical or even hostile, longing for "a pot of ale and safety" instead of dying on the fields of Agincourt (Ludmon, 2019).

It can therefore be suggested that in the presentation of 'Brexit' era Henry we see a more urgent questioning of nationalism, its 'myths' and its consequences. As Ludmon notes of the 2019 Globe version 'Despite the play depicting a victorious invasion, there is not a St. George flag in sight', yet equally, the focus on the quality of Henry's leadership appears to remain as central as it ever has, suggesting that the current moment has in itself need of both Henry's 'fierce agency' and the 'consummation of will' his actions represent (Fearney, 2007) .

Some tentative conclusions can be drawn from these early 'Brexit' productions about the presentation of nationalism. Firstly, references can be made overtly, to elicit Presentist ahistorical moments of surprise- the divided map of *Lear* – the audience's linkage of

Gaunt's lament and the present. However, given the earlier stated history of the plays production, surely most significant and radical issue is the optics of the casting.

This suggests that leadership need not be necessarily be chauvenistic or reside in a stereotypical view of who plays the King. Colorblind and nontraditional casting being legitimised offers a more inclusive notion of nationality that by its very existence questions populist assumptions about 'Britishness'.

Whilst the current stage seems to question the validity of, and offer alternatives to a narrowly singular English nationalism, the Curriculum has less often done so; for reasons which are themselves historical and woven together with the 'myths' of English particularism. I shall now turn to considering how this myth developed and how it may impede a critical pedagogy.

#### **Chapter 4 – The national Curriculum ,national identity and pedagogy; overcoming the challenges in teaching the History plays.**

**In this chapter, I will briefly consider if the centrality of Shakespeare in the National Curriculum ,itself an implicitly nationalist project, makes the teaching of the history play a further challenge or an opportunity that can be grasped to create a more inclusive and critical assessment of nationalism.**

Gillard has shown how the development of the national Curriculum was a reflection of an increasingly Conservative and marketised educational system that nonetheless sought to counter fragmenting social structures in a globalised world (Gillard, 1998) ,with a nationalist narrative that placed the 'English language' and 'Shakespeare' at its core (Olive S. D., 2015) . Shakespeare's centrality to 'our' 'national' culture; or indeed 'our cultural education' (Gove, 2012) can be traced through a long tradition of English particularism, stemming from late –19th Century responses to political, cultural and economic conflicts (Dobson, 1994). The influence of Key critics such as Arnold and Leavis - whose essentially elitist and patrician views are viewed sceptically at best in academic circles (Olive S. , 2013)- retain a central hold on English education policy making at the most profound level today, in their influence upon C.P Cox in creating the National Curriculum, and in placing Shakespeare so centrally within it. Furthermore, conservative critical cultural critics still retain a disproportionate sway over policy, as noted in my earlier and concluding discussions of Theory, with A.C Bradley and New Criticism still holding significantly more sway than more contemporary, more overtly politicised critical views. That such critics were working in a tradition that saw the critics role as essentially apolitical – as Striphas notes 'disinterestedness' was a key term for Leavis and his students (Striphas, 2017) such as Cox, the architect of the National Curriculum. Such a view places the cultural critic above mere politics, yet has significant implications for teaching texts that are inherently political in nature,particularly in an age of ideological conflicts outlined in Chapter1. Leavis sought to actively and directly shape the way in which English might be taught in the future. As 'Culture and Environment'(1933) suggests, the rationale for 'literary education' is inherently conservative ,if not Conservative, in that it stands in opposition to a modernising culture, particularly that of the

popular medium of film which encourages a shallow, immediate responsiveness in its audience. Nonetheless, such a struggle creates a purpose for:

...the very conditions that make literary education look so desperate are those which make it more important than ever before; for in a world of this kind -- and a world that changes so rapidly -- it is on literary tradition that the office of maintaining continuity must rest (Thompson D. a., 1933).

Thus, whilst Leavis never explicitly ties his views to a political Conservatism - a reflection of the higher calling of 'discrimination' - his *social* conservatism is clear here; as Stuart Hall has suggested he might be best considered a 'conservative liberal' (Hall, 1983).

Baldick notes how, for Leavis, teachers were to form 'his chosen agency of cultural resistance' against the inevitable rise of a mass culture (Baldick, 1983) that would, if left unchecked offer no bulwark against the far greater threat of a collapse of the values of 'life' itself. Fittingly, then, it was Leavis' former student, C.B Cox, that fulfilled the enduring wider legacy of Leavisite thought upon the teaching of English (Olive S. , 2013)

Most significantly the national curriculum:

alluded to Shakespeare as universal – in the sense of speaking to all – rendering Shakespeare a key entity around which to build a common curriculum, even a common culture. (*thus*) the social mission of Shakespeare, and other canonical writers, meshed neatly with the Conservative conception of inclusion, derived from thinkers such as Arnold, as a matter of 'raising up' or assimilating people into 'the best that has been thought and said' by the nation's authors.

(Olive S. D., 2015)

However, this was never in reality Arnold's aim for education at a 'mass' level and in fact as Sutherland notes, Arnold's aim was really to create schools for the middle classes that echoed the public school run by his father (Sutherland, 1973). Despite the renewed attempts to press Arnold into service as a liberal in support of 'standards' for by contemporary conservative critics such as Conway (2010) his

elitist tone and intentions are clear in works such as 'Ecce, Convertimur ad Gentes' (1886, in Sutherland 1973).

Since the National Curriculum was enacted in 1988, two clear critical views to the study of Shakespeare have been established—Shakespeare is to be admired for his exceptionalism and exceptional ability with character that places him transcendent to his immediate context, a traditional 'Humanist' perspective, exemplified by Harold Bloom (1998) and its contrary opposite; that Shakespeare is a product of ideological forces that use 'The Shakespeare myth' (Holderness, 1998) to reinforce specific, powerful interests.

Whilst this binary divide may somewhat simplify the range of Shakespeare criticisms(s) identified earlier, these two poles have been most commonly conceived of in relation to the teaching of Shakespeare since the introduction of the national curriculum (Conway, 'Liberal Education', 2010). Historically, the reason for the study of Shakespeare has been aligned most consistently in UK Educational policy with the former position, with growing acknowledgement of the latter, albeit, as noted, in the face of resistance as outlined in Chapter 1.

The reasons for this tradition were interrogated most clearly by Sinfield who holds the view that the established state, and by implications its would-be architects, Arnold, Leavis and Cox must 'include the conditions for its own continuance, and capitalism and patriarchy do this partly through the education system'. Yet, he also notes that within such an ideology there is 'space for divergent attitudes and practices'; and, in fact this means that 'modern English education has developed around a dispute between traditional and progressive approaches, with varying relations between these approaches and government.' However, despite an acknowledgement that the 'many contradictions' of the educational system 'can also provide the "space" for practical action for change' Sinfield notes that effectively, in reality :

In education, Shakespeare has been made to speak mainly for the right...His construction in English culture generally as the great National Poet whose plays embody universal truths has led to his being used to underwrite established practices in literary criticism and consequently, in examinations. For literary criticism,

Shakespeare is the keystone which guarantees the ultimate stability and rightness of the category 'Literature'... Shakespeare is always there as the final instance of the validity of Literature. (Sinfield, 134-135, 1985)

However, must the presence of Shakespeare in the National Curriculum be made to 'speak' singularly for such an agenda; cannot the 'practical action and change' Sinfield posits be reinvigorated in the twenty first Century, to suggest not a 'levelling up', but an *opening up* of culture that if it is oppositional, it is not necessarily so to modernity and change in Leavisite fashion.

Thus, it can be suggested that the aims of the National Curriculum posit a preferred way in which Shakespeare and thus the history plays 'should' be taught that is archaic and lacks relevance to contemporary culture. Does this add a further burden to teaching the plays effectively using overtly political approaches? Is this, compounded with the plays problematic links to nationalism, as well as their archaic nature, too great to consider?

It is to this challenge, particularly as it relates to the History plays, that I now turn.

#### **Chapter 4 : Pedagogical challenges and responses to teaching the History plays**

**I will move in this chapter from theory and history to practice to consider the challenges and potential solutions to these in teaching the history play in the age of Brexit.**

There are undoubtedly a number of pedagogical challenges in teaching the History plays at A Level. Firstly, as noted in my introduction, the availability of the plays on the Specifications of exam boards is sparse, with only a handful to choose from. Whilst one of the available plays could be selected, what Olive has described as the 'dead hand' of the exam must be considered. In practical, pedagogical terms, the relative rarity of the plays set means that statistically extremely small numbers of students will sit papers in those texts. Therefore,

centres that have selected such 'minority' plays are overwhelmingly in the Private sector and thus results will be skewed against 'State' schools where the 'hothouse' conditions of Saturday morning 'prep' classes and advantages of the immersive school trip, where pupils can perform and direct a number of plays that Francis identifies at Eton College, tend to create a far from level playing field (Francis, 2005).

There is undoubtedly some irony in this situation; as the shared 'heritage' of the National Curriculum with its ethos of 'English for all', has in effect, segregated which texts can be taught with a measure of success within it, skewed by one of the few parts of the educational system that is not subject to the demands of the National Curriculum.

However, it is clear that to enter into undertaking such an enterprise as teaching a 'new' History play might jeopardise results, incurring the wrath of everyone from Heads of Department, parents and Ofsted, always alert to sudden changes in results, yet less concerned with the causes: I think here of Sir Michael Wilshire's 2018 pronouncement that Secondary schools were too narrowly focussed on the Curriculum and should be prepared to go 'off-piste' like their colleagues in the private sector. Thus, one challenge is institutionally based: can an individual, committed teacher persuade hard pressed colleague and under resourced departments, doggedly chasing grades that the move to a new more 'obscure' text could reinvigorate the curriculum? Well, if the range of available resources is as rich as it currently is, allied with the wealth of free and downloadable online resources, from the RSC, Shakespeare Online and a host of better and (sometimes worse) 'student friendly' web sites, then this, whilst a significant consideration, is not the only one to make. Moreover, a collaborative approach with colleagues, the use of flipped learning with students, where they can sift and organise the wealth of readily available contextual materials (obviously with suitable guidance as to their relative merits) can be invaluable in constructing relevant resources.

The demands of the curriculum might also be hemmed in by the other key pedagogical challenge- time. The new Linear A Level specification, whilst designed to allow more 'depth' to teaching, has in fact placed more specific demands on what students need to be able to do with texts. With a Shakespeare play, this means both the traditional focus on characterisation ('meaning') and 'language, form and structure'; associated with an

essentially Leavisite 'close reading' of passages that requires modelling, as despite repeated claims to the contrary, this is not really the way that most students read. Indeed, as critics such as Olive have noted, Leavis never intended the study of such texts to be a pluralistic, democratic process (Olive S., 2013). That *any* passage from a five act play can be set, with often relatively obscure passages set (such as the 'porter's scene' in 'Macbeth', for example) to avoid the reverse engineering of 'question-spotting' is a considerable source of stress for 16-19 year olds, particularly those anxious about 'getting every word' in 'Shakespeare's language'. Thus, even though extract questions seek to ascertain the '**dramatic** significance' of a scene, students will instead sweat it out over the significance of verse and prose; set lists of imagery and the merciless assignation of meaning to 'the iambic pentameter' identified in a particular passage. A play with long passages of relative obscurity, such as the 'Salic law' speech in 1.2 of *Henry V* or the focus on long lists of genealogical names, which Shakespeare takes from his sources, in a number of the History plays, are no longer either dramatic or necessarily easy to explain in literary terms. The value of hearing familiar names from the annals of 'our history' has practical limitations in the modern classroom when those names were antique at the point of their first performance. Nonetheless, a focus in what is actually **dramatic** in a passage can be reinstated best through seeing a performance; however, given the obvious financial and logistical constraints of this, there are a wealth of excellent DVD copies and increasing opportunities to watch 'Stage on Screen' versions that can revivify the experience of the play as drama. The presence of the Olivier, Branagh and The *Hollow Crown* series all offer different, and still engaging experiences that can be analysed for dramatic differences. It is not inconceivable, given the broadly successful performances of 2016 and 2019 that the History play in a new form will regain stage popularity performed once again. Beyond which, audio recordings are invaluable in recognising verse and prose as living, flexible mediums of expression, rather than a fixed feature to 'spot'; 'we murder to dissect', is sadly, all too true in much classroom practice. After all, the dramatic 'extract' is part of a greater whole, where verse and prose are often used to specify **patterns** of meaning and where shifts between form, style and imagery merge to create the dramatic 'moment'; for example in Henry's remarkably fluid language in the 'wooing' scene, or in the series of juxtapositions of scenes of court and tavern life.



The second area of assessment at A Level asks for an understanding at whole text level ,supported by ‘different interpretations’ and ‘changing views over time’, that might reasonably include both ‘the contexts of production and reception’. Thus, there is a demonstrable challenge in teaching both a set of skills and a body of critical knowledge.

However, the wealth of excellent available editions, all with introductory essays, comprehensive notes and often a range of stage histories, provide an excellent basis of both aspects of assessment ,relatively easily supplemented by extracts from the ‘texts in Production’ and ‘Reader’s Guides to essential Criticism’ series , which are not cheap , but can be ‘filleted’ for key information and organised into a study pack, that could be scanned and distributed in a digital format ,accessible to students on mobile devices. Laurie Ellinghausen gives an invaluable overview of such resources, and outlines their relative merits in classroom practice (Ellinghausen, 2017).

These are perhaps the ‘material’ issues to consider. However, further objections could reasonably be made over relevance. The history plays feature very few women characters; those that do appear in roles that can appear at best misogynistic, at worst, as objectified ,marginalised and silent. The history play it seems is the place of male action. However, as Phyllis Rackin suggests, even a brief survey of the whole range of history plays can show the range of women’s roles through, for example Joan’s mockery of male feudal order in act 4, scene vii of *I Henry VI*, or indeed any number of scenes from the excellent BBC *The Hollow Crown* can support this. Challenging though this may be in terms of teaching time, Rackin identifies how reading a short passage of an ‘oppositional’ woman’s powerful stance literally restores women’s voices into the play. She also notes how raising questions about whether or not we consider women to have played the roles of warriors in history can be instructive at contextualising our quite recent historical views of the past (Rackin, in Ellinghausen, 2017). Furthermore, the wealth of different critical positions on the role of Katherine, as well as looking at how this scene has been elided or negotiated on stage, can in itself provide an invaluable discussion of Feminist perspectives. Furthermore, the recent all –female performances outlined earlier can be referenced in terms of images and clips that are widely available and the views of contemporary theatre critics can be considered in terms of representation. As Tripney she notes of the 2019 *Henry V* discussed in Chapter3 :

This production, however, more than those that preceded it, pushes the idea that anyone can play any role in these most mythic of plays, exploding the notion that they need to be cast literally to make them comprehensible (Tripney,2019).

Furthermore, the effects of the gender reversal of the 'wooing scene' can be a source of a fruitful critical debate, particularly in juxtaposing Olivier's Romantic style, based on the movies of the 1940s (Woodcock, 2008) with the 2019 production that 'makes you more keenly aware of the negotiations of status and power that underscore these exchanges ...(that) continually makes the audience think about power, who has it and who doesn't, then and now' (Tripney ,2019).

Another obvious criticism could be the issue of historical obscurity; of studying a play that requires a specialist knowledge that students lack, apparently as a result of no longer teaching traditional 'linear' history in English schools. However, it can be argued that establishing both the actual historical 'facts' for the plays ,which are widely available in most editions, an examination of Shakespeare's sources (often printed in extracts in most editions ) and Shakespeare's choices in representation is not just a lesson in history, but also in historiography and 'dramatic significance'. The differences between the 'real' Henry, the *Famous Victories* and Shakespeare's text can raise stimulating questions as to what we include or not, in the writing of both History and Literature . That much of this preparatory work can now been done without recourse to specialist libraries and texts reflects the range is of great advantage here. Furthermore, if the alternative to grasping literary texts with an historical basis is the rigid, linear essentialist history of *Our Island Story*, that elides Shakespeare and English poetry *into* the narrative of history, then we might consider the narrow nationalist discourse to have won out. Such a whimsical narrative of 'our' past may be a more comforting method, but hardly less credible, than seeing how literature is *both* within history and comments upon history itself. That an *Our Island Story* history is essentially reactionary is shown in the blurb to the 2005 edition, that recommends the text as 'a marvellous antidote to the fractured, incoherent history most school children are taught today. It chimes with Prince of Wales's campaign to restore narrative and chronology to history teaching' (Marshall, 1905, reprinted 2005). As noted earlier, the uses to which such whimsy has been put are into a narrow, chauvinistic discourse of English

exceptionalism. That Shakespeare acts a critic of history itself, beyond merely *being* an historical 'artefact' is surely of value to inquisitive students. Here the differences between the established narrative of the historical Henry V and Shakespeare's representation are instructive as they show how we reshape the narratives of our national identity in response to the present, as much as the past.

The relatively 'low' cultural value ascribed to the Histories in comparison to the Comedies, and especially the Tragedies is a further consideration. It is noteworthy, for example, that some exam boards *only* set either Tragedies or Comedies and the Northern Irish examination board make the distinction between Tragedies, Comedies and 'Late Plays' and in its 'indicative content' marks student responses against a specific checklist of genre features (CCEA, 2019). Whilst the chronology of Shakespeare's plays is debatable, the predominance of the more 'serious' plays of the Tragedies over the Histories is not.

However, to return to my introduction, this may be more of an issue of the slow moving nature of criticism into teaching and the educational establishment. David Self notes in a TES article how some plays are inherently considered 'an "A level play", such as *King Lear*, *Anthony and Cleopatra* and *Winter's Tale* (sic), with *Hamlet* and *Othello* as close runners up'; he identifies a sense that literary merit is important, and that a Shakespeare play studied at A level should be representative of his work, rather than a quixotic choice (quoted in Elliot, 2019).

It is surely not just the 'dead hand' of the exam at work here, but the presence of the literary tradition of the early twentieth century- what Olive describes as the 'ghost of A.C Bradley' that stalks the classroom (Elliot, 2019). If *The Tempest* is now taught at GCSE and *Macbeth* at A Level, does this mean their inherent value has shifted? I suspect not. That 10 of his 37 plays are histories would suggest that logically they are 'representative' of his work and not merely the whim of a 'quixotic' teacher. Not to keep score, but it is generally considered that he wrote ten tragedies; could equal numbers mean equal value? Are other plays written by Shakespeare *not* 'representative' of his work? Surely, the breadth of his writing is a central reason posited for the value of studying him.

However, this may further reflect issues of the slow-moving nature of recent criticism into teaching and the educational establishment. The relatively 'simple' patriotic view of *Henry V* established in the early twentieth century is now far from the norm. That Greenblatt chose the play for his opening radical critical salvo in 1985 is surely telling (Greenblatt, 1985). That this essay is now 34 years old, yet that exam markers are served the same diet of Bradley, Wilson Knight and 'the Great Chain of Being' is somewhat depressing. Furthermore, both Shakespeare's histories and work on historicism itself has been greatly revived by a range of relevant scholarship in the intervening years.

A further issue that is more problematic is to consider the potential limitation of detaching a History play from its larger cycle. As several critics have noted to consider the plays in isolation is to miss their 'epic' effects. Certainly, to consider any Shakespeare play in the light of another is always a valuable pedagogical exercise. The obvious length of watching time mitigates against direct classroom work on this, but a VLE system of access to a DVD version or an Online theatre subscription package such as Digital Theatre can allow for external access for students seeking to 'add value' to their learning.

A final issue might be that of the position of monarchy. The rights (and responsibilities) of Kings may be unlikely to be of interest to students, particularly as the position of the UK monarchy and its authority seems in question. However, the internecine links between Royal lineages and 'houses' chimes with such 'long form' dramas such as *Game of Thrones* have been made explicit in promoting recent performances of the histories, unsurprising given that the hit TV show is based upon The Wars of the Roses. Students of *Game of Thrones* may find less dragons in Shakespeare's plays, but clearly will have ideas about succession, usurpation, violence and Machiavellianism to bring to the classroom. As Wood notes of the 2019 *Henriad* 'there's more than a whiff of *Game of Thrones* to the plot' (Wood, 2019).

Therefore, whilst there are challenges, no end of challenges, to teaching them, we cannot allow the power of the history play to be confined to the dustbin of pedagogical history.

## **Conclusions**

I sought to question in this thesis if Shakespeare's History plays still a viable 'teachable' text in the twenty first Century. This led to an evaluation in Chapter 1 that, whilst early critical and stage productions tended to present an unproblematically nationalistic view of hero-Kings like *Henry V*, the full range of contemporary critical assessments has deconstructed this, raising significant issues about fractures in the plays that are significantly echoed in the age of Brexit. Despite a Brexit discourse that selectively uses History plays to feed into an established narrative, *Henry V*, read fully could not support this. In Chapter 2, a Presentist critical approach was applied to deconstruct the Brexit narrative and the underlying English nationalist exceptionalism central to its articulation and exposed a number of potentially significant correspondences. Chapter 3, in considering recent 'Brexit' plays in production asserted that beyond audience and critical reactions that acknowledged and responded to 'Brexit' resonances lay the more significant issue of representation, central to a pluralistic notion of national identity, and given urgency in the resurgent 'culture wars' that seek to marginalise national identity. Chapter 4 considered how a narrowly nationalist agenda of English particularism has dominated Educational policy making but reached the conclusion that the multiple pedagogical impediments to teaching the History plays can indeed be overcome and reached the view that the History plays provide a useful means of interrogating the future of Nationalism and national identity, particularly in the age of Brexit.

## **The future of the History play**

It can thus be suggested that theory, pedagogy and practice at a vital moment; the opportunities to challenge nationalist discourses are significant and do necessarily run counter to the central narrative of educational policy, which increasingly encourages the use of both different critical perspectives, as well as a focus on historicised readings, beyond that of merely 'background'. As Eaglestone notes, there is some irony in this, as the lag in scholarship reaching Level 3 study means that theory is being applied, just as the 'new kid' on the academic block arrives in Shakespeare studies. However, this is not a source of despair, but a realisation of a significant change that has taken place as whilst:

The tides of structuralism and post-structuralism criticism may well have partially receded from the university study of English ... the 'theory' revolution has established firmly is the necessity of reading texts *inside* history, and not in some idealized nowhere place (Eagleton, 2000).

This means that we should read texts *both* as a product of their time and place, and within a discourse of which has been created by the historical circumstances in which we find ourselves now. QCA's introduction of Assessment Objectives Four and Five in the restructuring of linear courses can thus be seen as the 'bringing up-to-date' of English Literature A-Level : allowing the opportunity, if we take it, for the dissemination of the critical ideas at the highest levels of study into schools and colleges.

As Eagleton argues, A Level English has become dominated by a worldview:

That was developed as a subject in the first half of the twentieth century .Among other things this turns potentially exciting literature into bland exam fodder...All this risks making English into a subject studied as a bland ritual, a 'heritage' subject. (Eagleton, 2000)

I would venture that this world view looks both back to the nationalist project of the ancestral architects of the National Curriculum outlined earlier and finds approval amongst the modern proponents of English exceptionalism outlined in Chapter, who similarly believe themselves free of ideology altogether, whilst promulgating a well-established chauvinistic, conservative narrative of continuity. The choice appears stark. English studies, within the current system, with Shakespeare at its unshakeable core can continue peddling the myth of the 'universalising Bard' standing against the tide of a hostile modernity. Or it can seek to work more closely and consistently in linking with contemporary scholarship, regardless of accusations of irrelevance and 'politicisation'. As McEvoy notes 'What other academic subject would teach an approach and indeed a content at A Level that was now almost entirely superseded in the universities?' (McEvoy, 2005).

A further, more immediate danger is in sight too, I would posit. I outlined earlier the 'correspondences' of *Henry V* to Brexit and the rise of a populist Nationalism, rooted very much in ideals of tradition and precedent, yet also highly performative and even glib in some of its uses of rhetoric. Such expressions sit at the 'top' of such discourses. The effects

of a reignited English exceptionalism can be found increasing in the more toxic discourse of the revived 'Far-Right'. The Government's most recent data shows a 50% decrease in referrals to Prevent for Islamic extremism in 2019, with a corresponding 50% increase over 'right-wing concerns' with the highest increase coming from the North of England, specifically areas that had a strong 'Leave' Brexit vote (Prevent, 2019- information obtained during INSET training). The iconography and names of many 'Far-Right' organisations and their rhetoric utilises Nationalist imagery, notably the Union Jack and Christian, Medievalist images, such as swords and crosses, not out of place in the iconography of a History play.

It is significant that the iconography of the St George's flag need not be used singularly in this way, if we consider the use of it in the iconography of the more multicultural performance of Richard II (see images in appendix 2 ). Thus, it seems like *the* vital moment to consider what a Presentist, activist, demystifying, theoretical and pluralist approach to the history play can achieve in interrogating English Nationalism in the twenty first century, before it is set to other, more sinister purposes.

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## Appendix 1- Materials for use in HE Plus session

### HE+ Session: Shakespeare and English national history ; *Richard II* and *Henry V*

*Richard II* Starter focus questions:

1. Is England an island. Why /why not? Has England ever been an island?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
2. How do the English tend to see their own past? In a positive or negative way? Is this the same of all countries?  
  
What types of historical moments are seen as important? Why?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
3. What is **nostalgia**? (Use your phones to look up some simple definitions; what words does it derive from?)
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
4. Can nostalgia be a positive or negative thing?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
5. Do you think the summers were warmer and nicer when you were young? (ask your parents/guardians /relatives this question when you get home tonight...)

6. Would aspects of the past do you miss? Was life simpler for you in the past?
7. On your deathbed, who would you seek to criticise for what has gone wrong in your own (modern) world, if you had the chance? Look up the meanings of a **lament**.

**Focus questions on the Richard II extract –John of Gaunt’s dying speech**

1. What kinds of **imagery** does Richard use to describe England? How would you describe the **tone** of this speech and does this tone **shift** as he continues?
2. What does John of Gaunt suggest has changed in his lifetime? To what extent can this speech be considered a **lament**? What is he **lamenting** over?
3. What does John of Gaunt suggest about what has **changed** since his youth. What is England like now in comparison to the past? Identity some **specific images** and explain their effect

4. What is John of Gaunt's conclusion? To what extent can this speech be seen to be nostalgic?
  
5. Consider how the context of this being a deathbed speech would affect its dramatic significance. How are the other characters on stage and the audience likely to react?

(For example, how do we feel when a favourite character in a long running series or film is 'killed off')?

6. In what modern **contexts** (outside of Shakespeare's time) do you think this speech is most likely to be used? For what purposes?  
How might you feel about the speech if you are Welsh, Scottish or Irish? Can it still apply to you?

## Appendix 2- Images of Nationalism.

Figure one- poster of Adjoa Andoh as Richard II behind the English flag .

-Andoh noted she deliberately wanted this image on the flyer after flying the flag out her window during the World cup to showcase she's just as English as anyone.



Figure 2-



Figure 3 –



Figures 2 and 3 are taken from : <https://www.paccsresearch.org.uk/blog/mythologizing-the-medieval-ethnonational-symbolism-by-far-right-extremists/>

They show the use of medievalist and chivalric imagery around St George and the Knights Templars with clearly violent and exclusionary connotations. The different views of nationalism between top and bottom is stark and instructive.