

## The Bard's Witness: The Welsh and Early Modern English National Consciousness

*Winner, Humanities*

Author: Eric Franklin

Several of Shakespeare's plays reveal the complexities of early modern national selfhood, one that demonstrated not only a clear pride in Englishness but also a delineation between English and Other, an indication that membership in the national affiliation set a person apart from outsiders, but also an idea that there was something intangible yet salient about the national community—an English quality that came from the land itself. Yet while the dramatist's texts reveal an apparent celebration of English superiority, that ideal often lacks conviction, implying a national absence that suggests a national insecurity. Shakespeare's work, though fictional, provides insight into contemporary discourse regarding the early modern English notion of nationhood as the playwright understood it, revealing patterns that prove indicative of underlying currents of popular thought. While other nationalities appear in Shakespeare's canon, this paper seeks to uncover the dimensions of early modern English national consciousness and the place of the Welsh within that English national paradigm, using the following plays as primary source material: *Richard II*, *Henry IV - Part 1*, *Henry V*, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, and *Cymbeline*. The following recurring themes confirm the existence of a complex early modern consciousness whose relationship with the Welsh defined the meaning of Englishness in the late Tudor and early Jacobean eras. First, a sense exists that the glory that comprised Englishness came from the land itself. Second, Shakespeare's plays suggest that the Welsh could join the English national community, if they first assimilated to the English cultural norm. Furthermore, the normative centre suggests a vision of civility, compassion, and moderation while censoring crass elements in the English population. Finally, there is a sense of English cultural superiority tempered by an insecurity that led to the appropriation of the ancient Celtic (i.e., Welsh) past. Shakespeare's portrayal of the Welsh suggests that the early modern English welcomed them as closely-related brethren so long as the former adhered to and supported national ideals and objectives.

### **The Land as Source of Englishness**

Identification with the land exemplifies a primordial notion of national origins. For example, in *Richard II*, when the king banishes Bolingbroke from England, the latter departs the country with the following lamentation: "Then, England's ground, farewell; sweet soil, adieu, / My mother and my nurse that bears me yet. / Where'er I wander, boast of this I can, / Though banished, yet a trueborn Englishman."<sup>[1]</sup> Bolingbroke's connection to England proves personal, a link that determines his own identity, yet the emotive response to his country suggests not only profound attachment, but significant frustration, anger, and insecurity. In this excerpt, the character's speech is hagiographic: the love of a son for an absent mother. Significantly, Bolingbroke does not identify as a Catholic as he certainly would have been in fourteenth-century England. Rather, Shakespeare sidesteps this detail, so problematic in

sixteenth-century England, and instead connects his character's identity to his country, one defined by its link to the land.

This visceral response emerges again when the dying John of Gaunt awaits the arrival of his nephew, Richard II, and addressing his brother, the Duke of York, creates a hagiographic vision of England. Yet, the mythic basis of hagiography often lacks a realistic vision of its object. In this case, Gaunt juxtaposes the thoughtless whimsy of Richard and the solid stability of England, but it is the trying circumstance—essentially fear—which appears to trigger his speech. As one of Shakespeare's histories, *Richard II* takes place centuries before the playwright's life, but the rhetorical sentiment reflects the cultural currents of sixteenth-century England. In his "History and the Nation in *Richard II* and *Henry IV*," Derek Cohen argues that pre-modern English men and women looked to the past as a simpler world lacking the divisions that rent their own era: "Gaunt and Richard, too, are possessed by a nostalgia for lost plenitude, a world in which an imaginary unity, simplicity, and certainty once prevailed."<sup>[2]</sup> As he lies on his deathbed, Gaunt paints a picture of an England that proves separate from other lands, and cloaked in mythical and religious grandeur that hearken back to images of the lost greatness of earlier civilizations: "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."<sup>[3]</sup> The lofty language hints at imperial greatness, ironic for the impending arrival of a corrupt king preparing to rob the speaker of his material goods, but all the more useful in illustrating the difference between the land that is England and the ruler who presently governs it. Equally significant is the notion of England as the seat of the great Roman god of war within nature's fortress, a territory that proves paradisiacal. In other words, that which makes England great pre-dates its monarch and inhabitants. It is a nation born of ancient earth—of primordial strength and stability, a greatness unique unto itself. However, the mythic notion of England as a "sceptred isle" suggests an island that is entirely English. Gaunt's speech reveals a national disposition of placing England at the cultural and political centre of Britain, reflecting the early modern English desire to appropriate the ancient British past.<sup>[4]</sup>

The thematic focus of Gaunt's soliloquy continues, reflecting a desire for a nation of mythical greatness. In this passage, Shakespeare marries the idea of war-like tenacity and biblical ideals of paradise, and uses them to produce a vision of a country like no other. Yet the mention of the people who inhabit this mythic land remains fleeting: "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."<sup>[5]</sup> In Gaunt's speech, the pre-eminence of the nation comes from the land itself. England is not great because of the English people; it is worthy because of the inherent qualities of the land that constitutes the country's territory—a realm that remains on a constant defensive footing, a land with its own moat to protect a "breed of men," an intriguing appellation that suggests national difference. The inherent condition of Englishness makes one great, a sentiment evocative of national consciousness. Yet the focus remains on the intangible qualities of the actual land itself, so unique, its definition seems hardly certain, necessitating disparate nouns to assemble an approximate image of Gaunt's vision; it is a "blessed plot, this earth, this realm, this England, / this nurse teeming womb of royal kings, / Fear'd by their breed, and famous by their birth, / Renowned for their deeds as far from home, / For Christian service and true chivalry, ... Of the

world's ransom, blessed Mary's Son; / This land of such dear souls, this dear dear land, / Dear for her reputation through the world." [6] It is a remarkable tribute to a land that proves unlike all others, a country defined by the Christian blessing it enjoys and the mythic qualities it preserves, and yet the country remains susceptible to the faults of one individual, the king whose aspirations dull the shine of the country's lustre. Gaunt again suggests that the land itself gives the country its significance. Without geographical place, there could be no England with the implication of the primordial nature of nation.

Shakespeare's *Henry V* also dramatically illustrates the concurrent conceptions of English national consciousness and, at times, the implicit significance of the land as a source of greatness. The English campaign leading up to the Battle of Agincourt exemplifies the sense of worth that comes with English nationality. As Henry's forces besiege Harfleur, just when it appears that some of the English fighters begin to falter, the king rallies his troops:

Once more into the breach, dear friends, once more, /

Or close the wall up with our English dead! [7]...

On, on, you noblest English...whose limbs were made in England, show us here /

The mettle of your pasture. Let us swear /

That you are worth your breeding, which I doubt not...Follow your spirit, and upon this charge /

Cry 'God for Harry, England, and Saint George!' [8]

This last line offers spectacular support for Claire McEachern's notion of nationhood in Renaissance literature, that combination of appreciation for king, connection to land, and common religion. [9] As Henry inspires his men, he draws on their sense of national identity, reminding his soldiers that their greatness lies with their Englishness. Henry's sentiment is not entirely dissimilar from Gaunt's emphasis on the greatness of the land as separate from those who inhabit it. By suggesting that their strength and valour originate with their birthright, the king reveals a value system dependant on national origins, and though the action of the play makes clear that many of these characters belong to the dregs of society, in this scene, Henry speaks to no one in particular, for they are English, and on that count, they may see themselves as equals fighting for the glory of king, country, and patron saint.

### **Cultural Accommodation, Assimilation, and the English Normative Centre**

In considering the place of the Welsh within Shakespeare's cultural constellation, Edward Said's theory of the Other provides a useful metric by which to understand the English-Welsh relationship. In his *Orientalism*, Said argues that cultural confrontation reveals national differences that a particular people imposes on another population in an effort to define itself. Although Said does not examine Shakespeare's work in his monograph, Said's research provides a theoretical framework with which to understand the cultural interactions of the English and ethnically-distinct characters in Shakespeare's literary canon—and by extension, the possible hegemonic underpinnings of the English in forming their national identity vis-à-vis the Welsh. Said argues that Orientalism reflects a value system that implicitly distinguishes "between 'the Orient' and (most of the time) 'the Occident.'" [10] In *Henry V*, for example,

displays of ethnic markers establish oppositional relationships between Celtic and English characters, illustrating the theoretical east-west fault lines with the Celts representing the Orient of Said's paradigm. Said contends that without realizing it, western writers "have accepted the basic distinction between East and West," with the Orient and its indigenous inhabitants understood as manifestly different.<sup>[11]</sup> According to Said, the concept of Europe consists of "a collective notion identifying 'us' Europeans as against all 'those' non-Europeans."<sup>[12]</sup> This contrast begins to outline the concept of Other: a vision of cultures and peoples that rests upon the assumption that European identity proves inherently superior "to all non-European peoples and cultures," the latter usually representing "Oriental backwardness."<sup>[13]</sup> These notions of cultural superiority have their roots in the Renaissance when Shakespeare wrote his dramas and created his Celtic characters,<sup>[14]</sup> representatives of England's earliest efforts at imperialism.

Whilst Shakespeare's work reveals a sense of Other imposed on non-English figures in apparent conjunction with a distinct national consciousness, Welsh characters inhabit a unique space in the English national outlook, one that acknowledges cultural differences but without marginalizing them to the point of making them alien—or the Other of Said's theoretical paradigm. Within the context of Shakespeare's canon, evidence suggests an attempt to bring the Welsh closer to the English cultural centre. Such national centrism presupposes the English nation as superior to the inferior Welsh, Said's Other. However, Shakespeare's Welsh characters prove manifestly likeable and well-respected by benevolent English characters. The differences that separate the two nationalities are inconsequential, essentially connected to accented English. National confrontations do not exist, calling into question the applicability of Said's theory to the Welsh-English relationship. In his *Pursuit of History*, John Tosh argues that Said forces the "binary distinction of powerful/powerless on the colonizer and the colonized," thus precluding any deviation from that formula. Indeed, the colonized sometimes exercise more power than Said would allow, making them more than oppressed subalterns.<sup>[15]</sup> That said, there are English figures who ridicule the Welsh belief systems or manner of speaking English—notably Falstaff in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* and Hotspur in *Henry IV, Part 1*—but they come across as crass dullards whose treatment of the Welsh make the latter more sympathetic. If anything, Shakespeare seems to want to criticize these English characters, resorting to a form of poetic justice to condemn such unwarranted behaviour. Arguably, they become representative of the cultural backwardness of Said's theoretical paradigm, an intriguing reversal of the colonizer-colonized dichotomy. For that reason, this study examines the response of English characters to their Welsh counterparts in order to ascertain the socio-cultural position of the latter to English notions of national self. While the Welsh are certainly not English, Shakespeare arguably brings them into the English mainstream to the point that they become part of the national whole. They remain different; however, they are not foreign. Indeed, the Welsh become the known-unknown.

The Welsh figures in *Richard II* aptly reflect the playwright's arguably positive rendition of the people of Wales, their brief appearance notwithstanding. After the venal Richard departs England to lead a military campaign against Ireland, Welshmen await the king's return to Britain, ready to support him. While Richard follows a trajectory of corruption and dishonour, Shakespeare portrays the Welsh as loyal and independent. When the Welsh Captain informs the English Salisbury that they will leave for home

after patiently waiting ten days for the king, Salisbury attempts to convince him to delay their departure: “Stay yet another day, thou trusty Welshman / The King reposes all his confidence in thee.”<sup>[16]</sup> Though the Welshman rebuffs Salisbury’s request, the language he employs to do so resembles that of both Bolingbroke and Gaunt in terms of poetic quality. After declaring his belief that the king is dead and that they will therefore leave, the Welsh captain says,

The bay trees in our country are all withered,  
And meteors fright the fixèd stars of heaven;  
The pale-faced moon looks bloody on the earth,  
And lean-looked prophets whisper fearful change;  
Rich men look sad, and ruffians dance and leap,  
The one in fear to lose what they enjoy,  
The other to enjoy by rage and war.  
These signs forerun the death or fall of kings.  
Farewell. Our countrymen are gone and fled,  
As well assured Richard their king is dead.<sup>[17]</sup>

The juxtaposition with Salisbury’s speech emphasizes a Welsh character whose powers of language allow him to convey an eloquent rendition of the current difficult situation in England, and in doing so, his elegiac verse reveals the same sort of sophistication that the noble figures of Bolingbroke and Gaunt do in their own soliloquies. That the Welsh Captain’s language brims with rich imagery formed in part by a plethora of alliteration, parallel sentence structure, assonance, consonance, and paradox suggests a sophisticated, thoughtful character—hardly an inferior mind or insulting representative of a backward culture. That the quality of the Captain’s English proves equal to that of Bolingbroke and Gaunt underscores the notion that Benedict Anderson, Liah Greenfeld, and Richard Helgerson put forth: language determined in large measure one’s membership in the English national family.<sup>[18]</sup>

Significantly, the Captain’s reference to “countrymen” apparently references the English as the Welsh have yet to depart, revealing at least from the English perspective, a strong identification with their Celtic neighbours. In addition, the Welshman’s use of the first person possessive pronoun “our country” and “our countrymen” underscores an ambiguity that blurs the line between Wales and England in his speech. On the face of it, the Captain appears to reference Wales and the Welsh; however, Salisbury’s request that the Welsh warriors stay put suggests that “our countrymen” points to English troops who have already departed, presumably because of the forces gathering behind the advancing Bolingbroke. When the Captain explains that these men have “fled” out of a conviction that “their king is dead,” he confirms the close connection between the Welsh and English, for the possessive pronoun either refers to the Welsh who have fled (if the case) or to the English (who might have joined forces with Bolingbroke). If the former, the Welsh have accepted the English king as their own and presumably the close link between the English and Welsh nations. If the latter, the Captain has made it thus clear that

“our countrymen” refers to the English and that he considers himself part of their country or nation. At any rate, this scene suggests an attempt by Shakespeare to bring the Welsh closer to the English cultural centre.

In his speech to Salisbury, the Welsh Captain presents the national boundaries between Welsh and English as seemingly porous or fluid, as lacking definition. In her *The Poetics of English Nationhood, 1590-1612*, Claire McEachern connects Henry VIII’s Acts of Appeals (1533) that designated England an empire to the literary works of Renaissance writers including Shakespeare.<sup>[19]</sup> Specifically, McEachern investigates the way in which Henry’s statement prompted writers like Shakespeare to consequently create an idealized vision of nation that brought together crown, land, and church—three components that determined one’s status as English or non-English.<sup>[20]</sup> Thus, these three co-determinants produced an evolving ideal of belonging that transcends hierarchies and slowly supplanted the idea of a nation based on monarchical direction.<sup>[21]</sup> Although the third facet of McEachern’s tripartite concept of nationality—religion—plays no role in *Richard II*, its absence precludes the segregation of the Welsh from the English centre. Moreover, she argues that the meaning of “nation” was not necessarily static and unyielding:

In the early Tudor period, nation more often means race, or king—the kith and kin of a common nativity, or birth, *natio*. Yet in the course of the sixteenth century it comes to denote that principle of political self-determination belonging to a people linked (if in nothing else) by a common government.<sup>[22]</sup>

Henry VIII’s Anglo-Welsh union provided that common government.<sup>[23]</sup> Furthermore, McEachern proffers a theoretical basis for the possible fluidity of English national identity, thereby lending non-English characters in Shakespeare’s canon the ability to gain a sense of belonging. In fact, the Welsh Captain’s loyalty to King Richard and the eloquent nature of his speech make national difference indistinguishable. The willingness of the Welsh soldiers to fight for the king would also suggest a sense of connection to the land and monarch common to both nations. Yet that willingness to serve also bespeaks a certain degree of assimilation. While the culturally positive Welsh characters lose cultural markers and become more English, no indication exists to suggest that the English have likewise lost their sense of cultural identity.

In *Henry V*, that sense of Englishness stops short of inspiring all the king’s forces to fight. Captain Fluellen exemplifies a culturally acceptable Welshman who enforces order as he demonstrates his unquestioning loyalty to the English king. When Fluellen discovers several men and a boy hiding from the fight, he orders them into battle: “Up to the breach, you dogs! Avaunt, you cullions!”<sup>[24]</sup> With that admonition, the men and boy take up arms against the enemy, immediately obeying the Welshman. Though admittedly in fear of his rage, they do not question the legitimacy of his authority; national differences either disappear or are otherwise inconsequential. Throughout the play, there is, in fact, no indication as to the reason Fluellen fights so vigorously for King Henry, yet that loyalty suggests not only fidelity to a king whom the captain has adopted as his own, but by extension, the land and religion the English monarch represents and uses in his call to arms. In effect, Fluellen becomes the symbolic enforcer of royal authority,<sup>[25]</sup> and as such, he cements his place in the nation’s consciousness. In this regard,

Shakespeare's Welsh captain reflects historical precedent, for hundreds or even thousands of Welshmen fought at Agincourt for English victory.[\[26\]](#)

However, nothing in this scene makes Fluellen overtly Welsh; he simply accepts the king's authority. Yet that acceptance proves mutual, for Shakespeare's King Henry V, the heroic English warrior king, claims Welsh nationality on two different occasions. On the night before the Battle of Agincourt, the king moves disguised through the English camps to gain a sense of the mood of his fighting men. At one point, an Englishman, Pistol, a former companion from the monarch's wild younger days, calls out to the roving king and asks Henry to identify himself. In response, the monarch introduces himself as Harry Le Roy and says, "I am a Welshman."[\[27\]](#) This curious response would seem improbable if for no other reason than his lack of Welsh accent would surely indicate to his English interrogator that he is no Welshman. While suggesting a fluidity of nationality detached from the superficial marker of accent, the English soldier takes no notice of the king's incongruous speech. Rather, he asks Henry if he knows Fluellen, and when the king answers in the affirmative, the English soldier, a thief upset with the captain's refusal to prevent the execution of another thief, threatens to harm Fluellen on Saint Davy's Day, a Welsh holiday. Henry not only puts Pistol on guard that Fluellen would likely hit back, the monarch also claims both friendship and kinship with the Welshman, the latter effectively ennobling him.[\[28\]](#) While Pistol's choice of Saint Davy's Day implies anti-Welsh xenophobia, his threat not only underscores his crass demeanour, but sets into stark relief the common baseness that links Shakespearean characters who demean Welsh figures. In this case, the juxtaposition of Fluellen and Pistol emphasizes the latter's crude nature with the implication that early modern people saw themselves defined in part by national origin, but Pistol's apparent bigotry finds no reward in Shakespeare's narrative, suggesting an implicit condemnation of such behaviour within the English cultural norm.

Shakespeare's Henry fits into a larger pattern that emerges in the dramatist's canon of a largely sympathetic portrayal of Welsh figures, often taunted by unsympathetic English characters. That sympathy proves non-existent, however, when Welsh characters appear in opposition to the English cultural norm, indicating an expectation of assimilation into the English national community. In fact, in 1400, the Welsh under Owen Glendower revolted against English control of Wales, and from that time forward until the end of Welsh resistance in 1409, the historical Henry played an active, if inconstant, role in regaining and maintaining control of that country.[\[29\]](#) Nonetheless, Shakespeare wrote Owen Glendower into *Henry IV, Part I*. Hardly the threatening rebel, Shakespeare's Glendower appears gracious and tolerant as the English Hotspur bullies the Welshman, mocking his cultural beliefs as he calls the Welsh leader "tedious."[\[30\]](#) While the playwright gave Hotspur a boorish persona, Glendower reminds his antagonist that he speaks English as well as he, for the Welsh leader learned the language "in the English court,"[\[31\]](#) the epicentre of English refinement. Although this scene takes place in Wales far from the English metropole, conceptually, Glendower remains in the English cultural centre for all his apparent refinement, in stark contrast to earlier in the play when the Welsh leader fights against English military forces. At that moment, an English character describes Glendower as "irregular," "wild," and "rude." Geographically on the English periphery, in the border county of Herefordshire, the women accompanying the Welsh leader "butcher" the English dead, an act that indicates their "beastly

shameless transformation,” emphasizing the notion that the further from the English normative centre, the more depraved a person becomes.<sup>[32]</sup> Arguably, the English sense of national consciousness willingly admitted Welsh members to the national family, but only if they adhered to nationally accepted mores.

Because of his adherence to English norms, the Welsh Fluellen continues to receive esteem through the end of the fourth act, reflecting the historic reality of loyalty of the Welsh in sixteenth-century Tudor wars. In fact, Henry refers to the captain approvingly. When Fluellen and the English Gower—both captains and thus military equals—take their leave of the monarch, Henry reveals the object of his appreciation: “Though it appear a little out of fashion, / There is much care and valour in this Welshman.”<sup>[33]</sup> His comment provides an honest acknowledgement of the social awkwardness of total equity between Welsh and English, yet still promises a degree of cultural accommodation between the two groups, for Henry, the historic symbol of English strength and nationhood, relies on a Welsh adjunct to ensure victory against the enemy. The fictional nature of drama notwithstanding, Shakespeare’s depiction of Fluellen’s key role in Henry V’s military campaign in northern France remains fairly true to the historical record, suggesting an accurate rendition of the English regard for their Celtic neighbour. The Welsh played a prominent role at the siege of Harfleur and Agincourt, especially in the guise of captains, but also as archers and individual soldiers. Legend has it that a Welshman saved King Henry V’s life at Agincourt.<sup>[34]</sup> In Shakespeare’s *Henry V*, Gower accords Fluellen the utmost respect, taking the Welsh captain seriously even when his accented English takes comic proportions. In one conversation, Fluellen proudly attempts to compare the king to an earlier historic leader, informing Gower that the king had been born in Monmouth, a town in Wales. Unfortunately, Fluellen speaks of “Alexander the Pig,” meaning “big” or great. Robert Babcock argues that Fluellen’s speech at this point in the drama makes him “an object of derision” just as it does for Sir Hugh Evans in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*,<sup>[35]</sup> yet Babcock appears to overlook the greater context in which these two figures find themselves vis-à-vis the surrounding characters. Despite a number of these comic mispronunciations, Gower takes the Welsh captain seriously, and like Henry, treats him well, all the more significant, for Gower reveals an educated knowledge of the past and falls into the pattern of the more thoughtful and compassionate the character, the more accepting of the Welsh figures in these plays.<sup>[36]</sup> In a similar vein, Henry asks Fluellen for advice in how to deal with a recalcitrant soldier, asking the captain, “What think you, Captain Fluellen, is it fit this soldier keep his oath?”<sup>[37]</sup> That the king addresses his subaltern by name amplifies the respectful manner with which the monarch treats him just as he does the English Captain Gower. It also shows that this Welsh character enjoys easy access to the monarch, evoking a sense of mutual trust. When Henry gives Fluellen the responsibility of finding Gower, the king speaks to Exeter, calling the Welsh captain “valiant.”<sup>[38]</sup> Although King Henry demonstrates his faith and trust in other characters throughout this play, Fluellen is the only recurring recipient of the king’s gratitude, suggesting that culturally assimilated Welsh found a place among the more thoughtful segments of English society.

A few scenes later, the king again freely claims Welsh ancestry, this time rather boldly for his lack of disguise, suggesting a growing conviction in his connection to the Welsh principality. After the English victory at Agincourt, Fluellen addresses Henry, and the king responds, “I am Welsh, you know, good



countryman.” [39] This sincere admission comes without prompting or qualification. Furthermore, these statements do not appear to have been meant to provoke amusement. Indeed, the monarch’s repeated attempts to paint himself as Welsh represent an apparent desire to forge a connection between himself and Wales. Yet the playwright stopped short of allowing his character to proffer a justification for claiming Welsh descent. These two claims come without warning and appear unprecedented in terms of the historical figure of Henry V. Shakespeare’s portrayal of Henry notwithstanding, the real Henry of Monmouth (the eventual Henry V) possessed no near Welsh ancestry. While he was born in Wales and became the Prince of Wales, both parents were English, both members of the Lancastrian dynasty. Henry grew up and came of age in England and had always been known as English. [40] By the time of Henry’s military campaigns in France, many Welsh had come to accept English rule and actually fought in Henry’s forces against the French. [41] Thus, the question arises as to the significance of a king who claims Welsh heritage twice.

Revealing for its insight into the role of language in early modern national identity, the king pays no notice of Fluellen’s accented English, nor does he demand deferential treatment from the Welshman. Henry treats him as he does the English characters, and his repeated attempts to paint himself as Welsh represent an apparent desire to forge a connection between himself and Wales. As the English king, the symbolism could not be more clear. Shakespeare gave Welsh ancestry to an English monarch who had none, and it is significant to note that early modern English men and women held Henry V in high regard as the noble king who, against all odds, claimed victory at Agincourt. [42] For Shakespeare to feel free to paint a national icon as desirous of another country’s nationality suggests a comfort level with the Welsh that he himself as well as his English audience felt. Nevertheless, Fluellen’s loyalty and English language ability mark him as assimilated into the dominant culture. Furthermore, Henry’s declaration of Welshness costs him nothing. While his statements appear sincere, there is nothing overtly Welsh about him and certainly no indication that he speaks the language of Wales.

The following scene in *Henry V* proves especially significant, for it brings three Celtic characters together in juxtaposition, illuminating the colonial relationship that the early modern English shared with people from neighbouring countries. This relationship demonstrates a gradation in otherness that places Welsh characters nearer the English metropole. In this section of the third act, commonly called the four captains scene, the Welsh Fluellen, Irish MacMorris, and Scottish Jamy converse with one another and the English Gower. That Shakespeare places three different Celtic characters together in one scene provides the opportunity to draw conclusions from his treatment of each one of them, and thus to determine what each Celtic character meant to the English nation. With this four captains scene in mind, Brian Carroll argues that while the English characters go by their given names, the three Celtic characters are distinguished by ethnic markers, primarily speech patterns unique to their nationalities when speaking English. Although English characters address the Irish, Scottish, and Welsh figures as “Irish,” “Scot,” and “Welch” [sic] respectively—seemingly reducing them to caricatures of their nations, the Welsh figure is known as “Fluellen” before and after the four captains scene with the other two Celts. This scene, thus, “sets up a sort of matrix of nationality and individuality with each of the Celtic figures linked to their ‘ethnic ciphers’” unlike the English who “require no ethnic marking at all,” emphasizing their prestige culture. [43] While this scene establishes the Celtic characters as Other,

Fluellen inhabits a unique space within the play, retaining both his Welsh national traits but also his individuality, further emphasized when the king chooses to confide in him.<sup>[44]</sup> In the four captains scene, Shakespeare illustrates the significance of language to national identity, but also demonstrates the fine gradations of distance that come with language marked by accent,<sup>[45]</sup> with the implication that otherness is as arbitrary as nationality is imagined.

Not only do the external qualities demonstrate the proximity of these characters to the English centre, MacMorris emphasizes the unique space that the hegemonic power allows Welsh characters. David Baker argues that this scene discloses the difficulty the colonial power has in maintaining consistent control over the relationship between the imperial master and colonial subaltern. The colonial power might be “total,” but “it is not capable of insuring the stability of its own discourse. It is not capable of maintaining the distinctions it imposes.”<sup>[46]</sup> For this theory, Fluellen proves particularly apt, for his Welshness would have likely suggested some degree of otherness from the perspective of Shakespeare’s audience. However, in contrast to the Irish MacMorris, the Welsh captain fails to fit into the colonial paradigm that would make him as Other as his Irish counterpart. He proves similar to the English yet is not one of them.<sup>[47]</sup> To illustrate his argument, Baker contrasts MacMorris and Fluellen. When the latter comments that “there is not many of your nation,” the former responds with the well-known, “Of my nation? What ish my nation? Ish a villain and a bastard and a knave and a rascal. What ish my nation? Who talks of my nation?”<sup>[48]</sup> MacMorris speaks these lines with a defensive, combative air. His retort suggests discomfiture with Fluellen’s implicit attempt to define the Irish nation, a country overshadowed by England. For this Irish character, Ireland as a nation proves uncertain, under imperial domination, no longer existing as a national entity.<sup>[49]</sup> Rather, MacMorris becomes a “hybrid” or an “unsettling contradiction,” “a figure of unsettling ambiguity.”<sup>[50]</sup> In contrast, Fluellen seems at ease with his status, in fact playing the part of colonial master, attempting to control the volatile MacMorris. In this scene, the Irish captain proves bloodthirsty, telling Gower, Fluellen, and Jamy: “There is throats to be cut.”<sup>[51]</sup> When Fluellen cautions him as there are so few Irishmen, MacMorris becomes defensive, apparently ready to pounce at the slightest hint of insult, even threatening his Welsh counterpart with decapitation. With that, the English Captain Gower takes charge, the imperial master, directing both Fluellen and MacMorris to step back from the argument.<sup>[52]</sup> In the course of this scene, the Scottish Captain Jamy remains out of the verbal exchange. Yet his English proves so crude as to make him obviously Other: “Ay’l de gud service, or I’ll lig i’ th grund for it, ay...”<sup>[53]</sup> By contrast, Fluellen speaks English clearly and never becomes overtly combative, suggesting assimilation to English mores. Baker contends that “confronted by MacMorris, most Englishmen, [he] would suppose, left the theater with their sense of superiority intact. The ‘order of things’, in its larger outline, remained undisturbed.”<sup>[54]</sup> MacMorris leaves the colonial master-subaltern relationship in place, but by doing so presumably reinforces the notion of the Welsh character’s nearness to the English centre if not entirely an intrinsic part of it.

Finally, one additional Welsh character illustrates the base ridicule lobbed by English figures for his accented manner of speaking. In *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, that character is Sir Hugh Evans, the parson. The disdain with which the surrounding characters treat the Welshman proves readily apparent. Yet, the same derision shown Evans is heaped on the French character, Doctor Caius. In one instance,

the Host addresses them both: "Peace, I say, Gallia and Gaul, French and Welsh, soul-curer and body-curer!" [55] In their joint Introduction, Willy Maley and Rory Loughnane contend that the Host addresses the two characters "with an ironic comparison of the foreigners' respective professions...born out of their non-English otherness." [56] Yet, while the Host emphasizes the nationalities of the two characters, his imperative call for quiet hardly demonstrates a cultural chasm born of rank xenophobia. Though he reveals his own national awareness, the Host is not exclusionary, suggesting varying degrees of otherness. In *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, the actual derision comes from several figures in the play of arguably low moral character, providing an implicit condemnation of xenophobia rather than a celebration of it. In one of the intriguing twists of Shakespeare's body of work, the dramatist resurrected several characters he killed off in *Henry V*. Falstaff, Pistol, Nym, and Bardolph, unsavoury charlatans at best, treat Evans disparagingly for his national origins and manner of speaking English. In this way, they other him for his national difference, yet as parson, his respectability allows him to outrank his tormentors. When Evans accuses Pistol of thievery, the latter responds with an allusion to the mountainous terrain of Wales: "Ha, thou mountain foreigner! [...] Froth and scum, thou liest." [57] Not only does the thief insult the parson for his origins, he employs the familiar *thou* to further demean the Welshman. To his credit, Evans refrains from retaliating, verbally or otherwise. In the last act of the play, Falstaff issues several anti-Welsh comments that eventually culminate with the following snide question about Sir Hugh Evans' English: "Have I lived to stand at the taunt of one that makes fritters of English?" [58] Just as with the previous abuse, the parson does not react. Falstaff's scorn for Evans' accent acknowledges the difference between the Welsh and English, a significance based in part on the degree of language ability and assimilation. However, Falstaff's response proves anything but sympathetic, suggesting public censure for such base behaviour. Nonetheless, the contrast between Falstaff on one hand, and Henry and Gower in their responses to Welsh accents, suggests that in Shakespeare's drama anti-Welsh prejudice belongs to the baser sphere of the public.

### **English Superiority Tempered by Insecurity: Appropriation of the Welsh Past**

In *Richard II*, Gaunt's speech reflects an insecurity that forms an undercurrent in Shakespeare's representations of national consciousness. Gaunt outlines a country whose honour needs defence, whose reputation remains but mythical and therefore ethereal. It is a land prone to internal conquest, requiring defence against an unnamed threat. Oddly, a land of mythic gods, presumably protected by their might, proves prone to the base schemes of mere mortals. The dying Gaunt hints at the darker machinations of the king, and in doing so, he points to an inherently fragile England, for the country "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." [59] As much elegy as poetic commemoration, the vision of a "rocky" country would have found purchase in Shakespeare's audience and the early modern perception of itself as a nation under siege, evoking a national sense of insecurity.

While Elizabeth ruled her country for decades, the era was nonetheless imbued with an air of political and religious uncertainty. Similar to the national fragility that Gaunt's soliloquy reflects, late sixteenth-century England appears to have been especially prone to internal political strife. In his lament for an England under threat, Shakespeare's character might have spoken of Christianity and Mary's Son, but little agreement existed as to the forms those ideals should take. While the Church of England had

begun to stabilize by 1588, that institution still faced the threat of Puritan dissatisfaction with the established church. Concurrently, the remaining Catholic population in England began to realize that its religion would remain intact. Large Catholic landowners had facilitated the arrival of a new population of priests since the 1570s, a dynamic that inspired new generations of believers who rejected the Church of England, yet the threat of the Spanish Armada and the execution of the Catholic Mary Queen of Scots in February 1587 failed to rouse the Catholic minority against Elizabeth, [60] so while socio-cultural divisions existed, the monarchy appeared relatively secure. That said, the fact that Parliament pressured the Tudor Queen to sign the death warrant for her Scottish cousin reveals an ongoing insecurity within the realm, strong enough to unnerve the ruling elite.

While Shakespeare's characters provide insight into early modern English national consciousness, his *Cymbeline* represents the profundity of English anxiety regarding the national desire for a claim to the ancient past of Britain. For late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century English men and women, national legitimacy appears to have depended on establishing a connection to pre-Germanic Britain, long before their forebears arrived on the island. Set in the ancient Celtic past of Britain, *Cymbeline* represents the appropriation of Welsh cultural history by the English in the early seventeenth century. Nonetheless, the relationship proved highly complex. While *Briton* was for the early modern English a moniker for the Welsh, [61] the king of the Britons, Cymbeline, rules from Lud's Town, the assumed antecedent to London. [62] Wales itself is located beyond the River Severn and is wild and lawless, [63] far from the English cultural centre. In her article, Jodi Mikalachki examines the apparent dependence of pre-modern English national identity on an ancient British past. Using Shakespeare's *Cymbeline*, Mikalachki argues that the era's social tensions prompted the pursuit of a clearly defined national identity. She maintains that the search for the national origins of England was a "project of recovery." Intrinsic to this process remained the tension between the push to establish historical precedent and continuity, and the desire to excise primitive savagery from the national character. [64] However, the pattern of benign, sympathetic Welsh characters vis-à-vis English ruffians and the combative MacMorris act as the manifestations of her argument that the English sought to reinforce the image of a benevolent national character. Together, *Cymbeline*'s ancient Celtic setting and Henry V's claim to Welsh ancestry offer not only an implied yearning for the supposed stability of a time gone by, but they also reinforce the Tudor myth that linked the monarch to the "fabled British—that is, pre-Saxon, and thus Welsh—past." [65] That Shakespeare used his drama, with its fictionalized representations of history, to employ the past to shape contemporary notions of an English national consciousness that included the Welsh seems particularly apt. Like Humanists of the era, Shakespeare's work reflects the practice of finding truth in the historic past that gives definition to the present, both to English nationalism and to the Tudor desire for finding affirmation in the ancient British history of their island.

*Cymbeline* exemplifies the notion that various national monikers define setting as constituent to the English national consciousness. If the greatness of England derives from the "dear, dear land" to which Gaunt refers in his elegy for the "sceptred isle," or if the "sweet soil" that is Bolingbroke's "mother and nurse" makes England what it is, the country's greatness rests with its primordial origins. As Bolingbroke mournfully departs for life in exile, he talks of "England's ground" with the implication that the nation's

land gives it shape and value. Yet if the English nation's exceptional quality is powerfully bound to the land—territory that has its own history with a different people predating the contemporary world of the conflict-ridden early modern period—there can only be one solution: erase the national differences between Welsh and English, and set the story in the ancient past where the setting makes everyone a *Briton*. In this way, Shakespeare gave his contemporary English an ancient heritage by appropriating Welsh ancestral claims to the island's primordial past. Rather than hail from England or Wales, the characters in *Cymbeline* come from "Britain," as Iachimo tells Philario upon the arrival of Posthumus in Rome.<sup>[66]</sup> While there is "a Frenchman, a Dutchman, and a Spaniard,"<sup>[67]</sup> and there is an "Italian,"<sup>[68]</sup> Posthumus is known as "the Briton" during his stay in Rome.<sup>[69]</sup> Unlike the other European nationalities, *Briton* is an appellation that designates a tie to the ancient island of Britain, not membership in a common cultural community. The land itself unites both peoples into one British population, both with common ties to the island and its past. When Imogen speaks of Posthumus' absence from (the island of) "Britain," she turns the island and its land into a surrogate nation. Unlike the characters in the play from Italy, France, Spain, and Holland whose nationalities derive from their cultural communities, *British* and *Briton* derive from *Britain*, a geographic place, thereby emphasizing the region's land, the factor that connects all who inhabit it. Thus, the term *British* gives the English of Shakespeare's era a national pathway to the island's past, and *Cymbeline's* British theme allows the Tudor monarchs with their Welsh bloodline to celebrate themselves as truly British, and thus leaders of a British nation.

In effect, a nationalist trajectory runs from *Richard II* through *Henry IV* and beyond into *Henry V*, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, and *Cymbeline*. These plays provide evidence that reflects the Elizabethan desire to find a commonality in the past that would help forge their national identity in early modern England.<sup>[70]</sup> However, more than in any other of these plays involving Wales and the Welsh, this desire for national stability coalesces in *Henry V*, manifesting itself in the noticeable movement away from its embodiment in the monarch toward a national community.<sup>[71]</sup> These plays provide a look at the connection between the early modern English use of the past to shape contemporary national identity, implicating the past as central to the construction of a contemporary understanding of the collective national self. Shakespeare, like his contemporaries, was particularly concerned with who belonged to the kingdom.<sup>[72]</sup>

## Conclusion

William Shakespeare's depiction of Welsh characters is not necessarily negative. In fact, the dramatist has arguably created sympathetic Welshmen whose favourability increases for the disdain surrounding characters heap on them. Yet, that sympathy comes at the cost of assimilation into the English normative sense of national self. Degree of assimilation appears key to the level of acceptance, and distinctive Welsh cultural traits are less pronounced the closer the Welsh individual to the English cultural centre. Ultimately, the depiction of the Welsh demonstrates little genuine respect for Welsh cultural uniqueness. Pointing to an underlying current of national insecurity, Shakespeare's plays reveal a casual disregard for the so-called Other, the foreign subaltern of Edward Said's *Orientalism*. However, in the case of the early modern Welsh, otherness was not their destiny so long as they assimilated to the English normative self. While this sort of xenophobic national consciousness manifests itself in the plays

investigated for this project, the fact that a preponderance of national sentiment takes shape as sentimental primordialism signifies a need for an ancient past absent from English history. Taken together, both forms of national consciousness indicate an underlying insecurity within the English sense of self.

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[1] William Shakespeare, *Richard II*, ed. Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Werstine (New York: Simon & Schuster, Inc., 1996), I.iii.313-316.

[2] Derek Cohen, "History and the Nation in *Richard II* and *Henry IV*," *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 42, no. 2 (Spring 2002): 295.

[3] Shakespeare, *Richard II*, II.i.44-48.

[4] Alan MacColl, "The Meaning of 'Britain' in Medieval and Early Modern England," *Journal of British Studies* 45, no. 2 (April 2006): 249-50.

[5] Shakespeare, *Richard II*, II.i.49-54.

[6] *Ibid.*, II.i.55-64.

[7] William Shakespeare, *Henry V*, ed. Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Werstine (New York: Simon & Schuster, Inc., 1995), III.i.1-3.

[8] *Ibid.*, III.i.18-37.

[9] Claire McEachern, *The Poetics of English Nationhood, 1590-1612* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 1.

[10] Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1978), 2.

[11] *Ibid.*

[12] *Ibid.*, 7.

[13] *Ibid.*

[14] *Ibid.*, 7, 60.

[15] John Tosh, *The Pursuit of History: Aims, Methods and New Directions in the Study of Modern History*, 5<sup>th</sup> ed. (London: Longman Press, 2009), 290. After the publication of *Orientalism*, Said eventually altered his thinking to conclude that European imperialism "always" prompted "some form of active resistance" among the colonized subalterns. See Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993), xii.

[16] Shakespeare, *Richard II*, II.iv.5-6.

[17] *Ibid.*, II.iv.7-17.

[18] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 2006), 18, 37-38, 40-42; Liah Greenfeld, *Nationalism: Five Roads to Modernity* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1992), 30; Richard Helgerson, *Forms of Nationhood: The Elizabethan Writing of England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 9.

[19] McEachern, *The Poetics of English Nationhood*, 1.

[20] *Ibid.*, 4.

[21] *Ibid.*, 1.

[22] *Ibid.*

[23] G.R. Elton, *England Under the Tudors* (London: The Folio Society, 1997), 175-77.

[24] Shakespeare, *Henry V*, III.ii.22.

[25] Jonathan Dollimore and Allan Sinfield, "History and Ideology: The Instance of *Henry V*," in *Alternative Shakespeares*, ed., John Drakakis (London: Methuen, 1983), 223.

[26] David Walker, *Medieval Wales* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 178.

[27] Shakespeare, *Henry V*, IV.i.53.

[28] *Ibid.*, IV.i.55-61.

[29] Keith Dockray, *Henry V* (Stroud, Gloucestershire: Tempus Publishing, 2004), 85.

[30] William Shakespeare, *Henry IV, Part I*, ed. Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Werstine (New York: Simon & Schuster, Inc., 1994), III.1.164.

[31] *Ibid.*, III.i.126-127.

[32] *Ibid.*, I.i.39-46.

[33] Shakespeare, *Henry V*, IV.i.86-87.

[34] A. D. Carr, "Welshmen and the Hundred Years' War," *Welsh History Review = Cylchgrawn Hanes Cymru* 4, (January 1, 1968): 35-36.

[35] Robert S. Babcock, "'For I am Welsh, You Know': Henry V, Fluellen, and the Place of Wales in the Sixteenth-Century English Nation," in *In Laudem Caroli for Charles G. Nauert*, ed. James V. Mehl (Kirksville, Missouri: Thomas Jefferson University Press, 1998), 196.

[36] Shakespeare, *Henry V*, IV.vii.10-55.

[37] *Ibid.*, IV.vii.138-139.

[38] *Ibid.*, IV.vii.-187.

[39] *Ibid.*, IV.vii.111.

[40] Dockray, *Henry V*, 79-81.

[41] *Ibid.*, 228.

[42] Ibid., 46-47.

[43] Brian Carroll, "Appearances and Disappearances: *Henry V*'s Shimmering Irishman in the Project to Make an England," *Journal of the Wooden O Symposium* 9 (2009): 22.

[44] Ibid.

[45] Ibid., 18.

[46] David J. Baker, "'Wildehirissheman': Colonialist Representation in Shakespeare's *Henry V*," *English Literary Renaissance* 22 (1992): 39.

[47] Ibid.

[48] Shakespeare, *Henry V*, III.ii.122-127.

[49] Baker, "Colonialist Representation," 40.

[50] Ibid., 40.

[51] Shakespeare, *Henry V*, III.ii.115.

[52] Ibid., III.ii.137.

[53] Ibid., III.ii.117-118.

[54] Baker, "Colonialist Representation," 49.

[55] William Shakespeare, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, ed. Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Werstine (New York: Simon & Schuster, Inc., 2004), III.i.196-97.

[56] Willy Maley and Rory Loughnane, introduction to *Celtic Shakespeare: The Bard and the Borderers*, ed. Willy Maley and Rory Loughnane (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2013), 10-11.

[57] Shakespeare, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, I.i.155; 158.

[58] Ibid., V.v.150-151.

[59] Ibid., II.i.65-72.

[60] Alan G. R. Smith, *The Emergence of a Nation State: The Commonwealth of England 1529-1660* (New York: Longman, 1984), 240. Also, John Guy, *Tudor England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 336.

[61] Stewart Mottram, "Warriors and Ruins: *Cymbeline*, Heroism and the Union of the Crowns" in *Celtic Shakespeare: The Bard and the Borderers*, ed. Willy Maley and Rory Loughnane (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate Publishing, 2013), 169-183.

[62] Marisa R. Cull, *Shakespeare's Princes of Wales: English Identity and the Welsh Connection* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 140.

[63] Ibid., 141.

[64] Jodi Mikalachki, "The Masculine Romance of Roman Britain: *Cymbeline* and Early Modern English Nationalism," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 46, no. 3 (Autumn 1995): 302.



[65] Babcock, "For I am Welsh, You Know," 194.

[66] William Shakespeare, *Cymbeline*, ed. Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Werstine (New York: Simon & Schuster, Inc., 2003), I.iv.1.

[67] *Ibid.*, I.iv.0.

[68] *Ibid.*, II.i.49.

[69] *Ibid.*, I.iv.29.

[70] Cohen, "History and the Nation in *Richard II* and *Henry IV*," 42.

[71] *Ibid.*, 294

[72] Babcock, "For I am Welsh, You Know," 191.

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