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The Shakespeare death tercentenary celebrations in England and Scotland: How British was Shakespeare in 1916?

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The tercentenary of Shakespeare's death fell in 1916, during the Great War. Scholarship on the commemorations has so far focused on English attitudes to Shakespeare, with critics demonstrating how celebrants in England linked Shakespeare to notions of patriotism and national pride. This paper shows that celebrants in both Scotland and England used Shakespeare to stress the importance of British unity in wartime, and associated him with a range of concerns unrelated to national identity. It concludes with the idea that the flexibility of Shakespeare's figure mirrors the nature of "Britishness," making the Shakespeare of 1916 a "British icon."

"We can say one thing for sure – that Shakespeare was content with the world and the world he was content with was England"¹

The three hundred year anniversary of William Shakespeare's death was in 1916, two years into the Great War. In Britain, the war prevented the grand scale of the Shakespeare festivals of 1769 and 1864 from being repeated (Habicht 450). Nevertheless, the anniversary did prompt a range of celebratory events (lectures, performances, and speeches) and a range of written tributes (articles, poetry, and published sermons). Tercentenary celebrants frequently suggested that the conjunction of the tercentenary with the Great War made it particularly important for the playwright to be publicly admired and for his great literary renown to act as a source of patriotic pride. Shakespeare was held-up as a source of inspiration, hope, and nationalist feeling for soldiers and civilians alike (Hendley 25).

Critics studying the tercentenary have so far focused on how contemporary commentators in Britain and Germany "fought" over Shakespeare, both sides representing him as "belonging" to their own culture (Calvo, "Fighting" 48; Habicht 453; Hendley 25; Thornton Burnett 456). These critics assume, however, that feelings within Britain about Shakespeare and his commemoration did not vary, at times assuming that "England" and "English" can be used synonymously with "Britain" and "British." They overlook the potential tension behind their statements that Shakespeare – the English national poet – was used to express support for a war being fought by all of Britain.

To address this problem, I compare how the English and the Scots responded to the 1916 tercentenary, drawing on a large, previously unearthed, range of material relating to the tercentenary. The diversity of sources consulted provides a picture of the variety of voices that commented on the celebrations. Firstly, I argue that both groups used Shakespeare as a vehicle to express the importance of national unity within Britain. Secondly, however, I stress that tercentenary celebrants also appropriated Shakespeare in the service of their own personal interests. Such a practice suggests that

one should de-emphasise Shakespeare's significance as a national figure, whether British or otherwise, during the 1916 anniversary. That is, one should see the custom of associating the playwright with nation only as one of many ways in which celebrants employed him to suit their own ends. I conclude that such a "flexible" quality in Shakespeare's figure mirrors the vagueness of the notions of "British identity" and "Britishness." During the 1916 anniversary, Shakespeare was British, and "Britishness" was Shakespearean, in the sense that both the dramatist and the concept of British nationality could connote whatever celebrants wanted them to connote.

"The British Constitution has always been puzzling and always will be" (Queen Elizabeth II, qtd. in "Power" n.pag).²

The most contentious term in this paper's title is "British." As the quotation above from the current British monarch suggests, part of this contentiousness comes from the historically complex nature of Britain's political complexion. Whilst Wales and England unified in 1543 (Gottlieb 15), the Union of Crowns in 1603 brought Scotland and England under the same monarch, James VI and I, without actually achieving political or cultural unity. It was not until 1707 that Scotland and England shared a parliament (which has of course altered again since devolution). The still troubled relationship between Ireland and Britain, meanwhile, has its roots in the Elizabethan period.

Such political complexity is mirrored in lexical ambiguity. "British" and "Britain" in common usage have a bewildering range of overlapping denotations, making the establishment of a scholarly discourse in which to discuss Britain and its constituent countries highly complicated. In its narrowest sense, "Britain" is used to refer to the island comprising of Wales, Scotland, and England (synonymously with "Great Britain"), but can also mean "the Kingdom of Great Britain," the sovereign state established in 1707, and "the United Kingdom" (which excludes the Republic of Ireland). Susan Bassnett recommends referring to the "British Isles" instead of "Britain" to avoid associating Ireland with a political entity – Great Britain – with which its relationship is highly contested (49). Yet Tom Nairn deems the "British Isles" to be "too geographical," that is, removed from felt senses of national identity (93).

I use "British" to refer to a sense of national belonging with which both Scottish and English people can identify. Such a usage is potentially problematic because it excludes concepts of "Welshness" and "Irishness." To qualify this idea of "British," then, I stress that my suggestions about shared senses of Anglo-Scottish identity act as a model for what might constitute a "British" identity; that they provide only an indication of how "Britishness" was conceived in 1916.

The focus of the article is, for several reasons, on the tercentenary in England and Scotland, rather than any other of the British Isles' constituent nations. Firstly, an analysis of Shakespeare's relationship to ideas about national identity would not be complete without an exploration of his position as the English national bard. Secondly, the relationship between English and Scottish culture is particularly interesting because it is particularly complex. On the one hand, Michael Hechter argues that Scotland was bullied into union with England through the English use of imperial tactics, a process he calls "internal colonialism" (342). On the other hand, Evan Gottlieb suggests that Anglo-Scottish relations are actually more complicated, that Scotland's cultural and political contribution to

union should not be underestimated, not least because the union had its roots in the reign of a Scottish king (15).

“According to all accounts, there is a Shakespeare Tercentenary afoot” (“Life” 3).

As might be expected, most celebratory events in Britain in 1916 took place in Stratford-upon-Avon and in London. In Stratford, the great Shakespearean actor Sir Sidney Lee gave lectures on the importance of the playwright to the town – and the town’s importance to the playwright (“Lee” 3). There was also a fortnight’s worth of performances led by F. R. Benson (“Tercentenary” 6), a commemorative sermon at Shakespeare’s church, Holy Trinity (*Church Times* 422), fund-raising efforts to save the Stratford-based Shakespeare Head Press from financial ruin (“Week” 5), a ceremony in which the people of Stratford donated an oak to the New York Shakespeare garden (*Daily Mirror* 10), and a Shakespeare-themed conference on “The National Life of the Allied Countries” (“Conference” 8). Celebrations in London ranged from a four-hour complete reading of *Hamlet* by actor Ben Greet (“Celebrations” 9), to a Shakespeare exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum (“Exhibition” 3), to a grand tercentenary pageant at the Drury Lane Theatre attended by the Royal Family and ending with a “surprise” knighthood for F. R. Benson (“Knighted” 12). Tercentenary events did also take place elsewhere in England, however, including exhibitions, performances and lectures in Bolton (Spielmann 476), Malvern (“Tercentenary” 6), Manchester (“Manchester” 14), Norwich (“Tercentenary” 6), Leeds (“Champion” 7), Birmingham (“Vince” n.pag), and Plymouth (“Devon” 300).

Contrary to the beliefs of one English journalist, who lamented that “it is to be remarked, with a sigh, that Scotland as a whole seems to have made no sign” of the tercentenary (Spielmann 476), many celebratory events did occur in Scotland as well. There was a series of Shakespeare performances at the Royal Lyceum Theatre, Edinburgh (“Lyceum” n.pag) and at the King’s Theatre in Glasgow (“King’s” n.pag). Dundee saw Shakespeare performances starring Martin Harvey (“Hamlet” 2), as did Aberdeen (“Correspondence” 7), and hosted a commemorative lecture on Shakespeare by Professor Grierson of The University of Edinburgh (“Influence” 3). In Aberdeen, staff at the City Public Library compiled, and took pains to encourage the use of, a special Shakespeare reading list (“Work” 2); the principal of Gordon’s College coordinated celebrations amongst local schools (“Aberdeen” 4); and Professor Jack from Aberdeen University gave an address on Shakespeare to local school pupils and teachers (“Jack” 2). More modest Scottish tributes included participation in the sale of “Shakespeare Medallions” to raise funds for the Red Cross (“Buckie” 9), an address on the playwright to senior students at the Blairgowrie High School (“Blairgowrie” 6), and the presentation of a print of the Droeshout portrait of Shakespeare to the Melrose School Board (*Southern Reporter* 5). Students from both the Caledonian Road School, Perth (“Caledonian” 3) and the Dollar Academy, Clackmannanshire (“Educational” 10), moreover, staged programmes of different scenes from Shakespeare’s works.

There was, then, a huge interest in celebrating the tercentenary in both England and Scotland. But what can be deduced from this shared interest? Is it possible, as this paper’s title asks, to characterise Shakespeare as “British” based on the events listed above? That people in Scotland staged

celebrations for the tercentenary indicates, at the very least, that there was no Scottish opposition to promoting the English bard strong enough to prevent such celebrations from going ahead. One might conclude from this that there was a large degree of cultural harmony between England and Scotland at the time, enough harmony for Scots to see Shakespeare as a British author rather than either as exclusively English or as a symbol of English cultural hegemony. Indeed, there was some overlap between the two nations' tercentenary events. The same groups of actors performed in both England and Scotland, members of both nations participated in the selling and wearing of "Shakespeare medallions" ("Festival" 4; "Tercentenary" 6), and both countries' commemorations had an educational slant, often taking the form of lectures in both schools and universities ("Festival" 4; "Tercentenary" 6).

Yet it is an oversimplification to suggest that the existence of such similar commemorative functions in England and Scotland indicates that Shakespeare was seen as a "British author." That tercentenary celebrations took place not only in countries in the Allied Forces ("Disciples" 9), but also in the US³ ("America" 3; Smialkowska 192; Spielmann 476) and in Germany ("Englishman" 12; Hendley 25) immediately refutes the idea that the mere fact of commemorations being held is a sign of sympathy with senses of "Englishness" and/or "Britishness." To address thoroughly the question "How British was Shakespeare in 1916?", it is crucial to examine the ideas that celebrants connected with Shakespeare, and their attitudes to the celebratory events that took place. When such ideas and attitudes are explored, it emerges that Shakespeare was appropriated for a range of functions. He was used to encourage a strong war effort, to showcase writers' hobbies, and to advertise several different products. After elucidating the diverse appropriations of Shakespeare in the name of the tercentenary, I suggest in the final section of this paper that it was the range of ideas that celebrants connected with Shakespeare, not the fact that he was celebrated in both Scotland and England, which made him a thoroughly British figure in 1916.

"By the way, talking of Shakespeare celebrations [...]" ("Gossip" 10).

Perhaps the most striking thing about the tercentenary texts published in England and Scotland is the extent to which their authors (or the speakers they quote) stress links between Shakespeare and the war effort. Below are two case studies of this phenomenon.

Canon Rawnsley of Keswick, firstly, stated in his tercentenary sermon that Shakespeare

"would always have protested that the true patriot put country first and self after; that men should serve their country, do their duty, and put right above expediency" (Rawnsley n.pag).

The powerfully affecting circumstances of the First World War prompted Rawnsley to characterise Shakespeare almost as a recruitment officer. He exploits the coincidence of the war and the tercentenary to make the two events mutually legitimising, that is, his attitude equates to the circular argument that "supporting the war effort is worthwhile because Shakespeare would have done so, and celebrating Shakespeare is worthwhile because he would have supported the war effort." Indeed, Rawnsley reflects a wider association that developed in Britain even before the tercentenary year. In 1915, for example, actors were employed to deliver Shakespearean battle speeches, such as the famous Agincourt address in *Henry V*, to crowds of potential recruits ("Waller" 2).

One Scottish commentator who echoed Rawnsley's sentiments was Sheriff Johnston of Perth. In his tercentenary address, he quoted Volumnia in *Coriolanus* expressing a desire that her sons should die in the service of the Roman Empire, before going on to suggest that her "heroic" spirit was "exemplified by thousands of British mothers at the present moment – the spirit of the Scottish mother who said with thankfulness – 'Charlie's joined; man, I was afeer'd he wouldna'" (qtd. in "Tribute" 3)

Behind Johnston's comments is an amalgam of national associations and significances. By quoting Volumnia he introduces the idea of the greatness of the Roman Empire. It was built and maintained, her comments imply, on the willingness of its citizens and rulers to make huge sacrifices for it. The parallels with the contemporary context of the First World War would be clear without Johnston's elaboration of Volumnia's "heroic spirit." The way in which he chooses to connect the play with his current Scotland, though, is telling in relation to the internal British Isles politics of the time. The intrusion of the colloquial Scottish voice belonging to the imagined "Scottish mother" is initially surprising in a lecture whose speaker is otherwise preoccupied with stressing that the Scots and the English were "one great united people" (qtd. in "Tribute" 3). Yet the voice does not convey a sense of fractiousness or contentiousness; quite the contrary is true. Johnston portrays the mother's speech as entirely continuous with that of both Volumnia and "British mothers." By beginning with a concept of the Roman Empire, moving towards a notion of Britain, and then introducing a specifically Scottish individual, Johnston creates a sense of a series of nations, nested like Russian dolls. The Scottish mother becomes like the smallest doll in a chain of national identities that reside within each other. In using Shakespeare to promote the British war effort, Johnston and Rawnsley had a shared purpose. They employed Shakespeare in the service of Britain.

Perhaps surprisingly, given that Shakespeare is today often thought of as an English icon, such patriotic appropriations of the playwright occurred in a large range of Scottish texts. In his lecture in Dundee, for example, and in a poem published in the official commemorative volume of the British Tercentenary Committee,⁴ Professor Grierson stressed Anglo-Scottish unity by highlighting links between the English and Scottish literary canons (qtd. in "Influence" 3; Grierson 266-69). An author called A. Gordon Mitchell, furthermore, wrote a "Scottish Tercentenary Tribute to William Shakespeare" in the form of a sonnet sequence (n.pag). Like the members of the public who wrote to local newspapers demanding more celebrations in Scotland (see, for example, Hamilton 10) he sought to emphasise that "Scotland is not a whit behind England in passionate reverence for the greatest of poets" (n.pag). Shakespeare became a vehicle through which tercentenary celebrants could stress Anglo-Scottish unity at a time when harmony within Britain was crucial for a successful war effort (Macdonald 166).

"The field for more or less foolish speculation has been left open" (W. M., "Our Shakespeare" 5)

Despite what Rawnsley and Johnston imply, and despite some commentators' claims that Shakespeare "predicted" the struggles of the First World War (Askew n.pag), it is of course highly speculative and subjective to claim that one can determine Shakespeare's personal views from reading

his works. As several tercentenary commentators at the time emphasised, celebrants were only able to suggest that Shakespeare would have supported the war effort because little was known about his life and personality (at least in comparison to more modern authors) (see, for instance, “Life” 5). When studying the commemorations, then, it is important to remember that Shakespeare’s figure was co-opted into “supporting” other areas than those relating to senses of nationhood. Both English and Scottish celebrants used the opportunity of the tercentenary to suggest particular areas in which they believed Shakespeare would have been interested. Unsurprisingly, these areas tended to overlap with the celebrants’ own hobbies and/or occupations. As one journalist for *The Daily Mirror* put it, “by an inevitable accomplishment of human egoism, nearly all of those who have written about him have proved that Shakespeare was like them” (W. M. 5).

For example, a self-styled “horse” man wrote an article for a local Aberdeen newspaper entitled “Shakespeare and the Horse: The Poet’s Equine Knowledge,” in which he elucidated the playwright’s “connection with the equine race,” arguing that Shakespeare most frequently refers to horses when he wishes to elaborate “a moral or adorning tale” (“Horse” 4). Similarly, a doctor wrote a piece for *The British Medical Journal* in which he debated the standard of Shakespeare’s medical knowledge. He posited that the playwright had a good understanding of the medical theories of his time, as well as “wise and reasonable” views about proper treatment and hygiene (“Medicine” 654). Quotations from Shakespeare’s plays and cartoons of his person were even used to advertise both domestic silver polish (“Silvo” 9) and a brand of beer (“Peter Walker” 2). It is perhaps unwise, therefore, to lay too much emphasis on the national significances that became attached to Shakespeare during the tercentenary. Although both English and Scottish critics, such as Rawnsley and Johnston, did link Shakespeare to support for the British war effort, this was just one of many ways in which the playwright was appropriated in 1916.

“In this year of his tercentenary you cannot expect Shakespeare to be cheap. Posthumously, he too does his bit” (W. M., “Even Shakespeare”).

In a short tercentenary play by J. M. Barrie, *Shakespeare’s Legacy*, the issue of Shakespeare’s national associations is explicitly made secondary to a more frivolous use of his work. The play begins with a Scottish wife revealing to her new English husband that Shakespeare was in fact Scottish, and from her village. She tells her increasingly exasperated spouse how her family home was full of old manuscripts, including that of *Hamlet*, some unperformed plays, a revue called “Hullo, Bacon,” a “key to the sonnets,” and a volume entitled “My Life, and the Mess I’ve Made of It” (16). Barrie thus establishes a large degree of tension relating to Shakespeare’s national status. In England, he implies through the husband’s frustration, the dramatist’s works are treated with an almost foolish reverence. In Scotland, as the wife’s family’s carelessness with the plays indicate, Shakespeare is entirely unimportant. Shakespeare’s figure is thus far from a symbol of Anglo-Scottish harmony.

Yet the play ends with a suggestion of how the modern appropriation of Shakespeare provides something on which the husband and wife, England and Scotland, can agree, even if it is frivolous. The wife confesses that she acquired her great beauty using a secret she discovered in one of the manuscripts in her village. Her husband forgives her for the deception, and closes the play with the

idea that they should reveal the secret to all women in celebration of the Shakespeare anniversary. “Think of them all becoming beautiful within the next three weeks or so,” he comments, “What a way of celebrating the Tercentenary” (27). The national differences and tensions Shakespeare’s figure had initially brought to light, then, become obscured by a shared desire for cosmetic perfection. His texts gain the same status as the list of advertising slogans the wife parroted earlier in the play when describing all the creams and potions she had bought to try to increase her beauty. Shakespeare’s works become somewhat of a commodity. Appropriating Shakespeare for practical, non-literary ends, Barrie’s satire implies, was more important in the tercentenary year than the dramatist’s connections to national pride.

“That comprehensive sympathy with its consequently wide-ranging insight [...]”
(Williams 6)

As Barrie was aware, celebrants in 1916 appropriated Shakespeare for whichever ends happened to suit them, not only for the purposes of supporting the war effort or patriotic pride. As is hinted in the quotation above, Shakespeare could become anything one wanted him to be because his plays were viewed as having a comprehensive subject matter. The answer to the question in my title, “how British was Shakespeare in 1916?”, would thus seem to be “he was only British when it suited tercentenary celebrants for him to be so.”

In the wide-ranging nature of the associations both the English and Scots gave Shakespeare, though, there is a parallel with the idea of “Britishness.” As Ian Baucom has demonstrated, “British identity” at the time of the tercentenary was a highly flexible concept, defined not by family background but by whether or not individuals were born in the British Empire (7-8). Even today, people may feel partly Scottish, for example, and partly British. To illustrate that “Britishness” holds a similar “flexible” quality to that associated with Shakespeare’s figure during his tercentenary, one can usefully turn to the recent debate over Scottish independence. In a key speech on the referendum David Cameron drew on rhetoric from the 2012 Olympics to call for support for “Team GB,” before going on to herald the international success of the BBC drama *Sherlock* as an Anglo-Scottish effort. The stories were, he noted, “Written by a Scot a hundred years ago, played by an Englishman today and created for TV by a Scotsman” (Cameron n.pag). His version of “Britishness,” at least for the purposes of this speech, had no relation to the more traditional, Anglocentric evocations the term has – the monarchy, tea, Mini Coopers. He exploited the flexibility of “Britishness,” that it can be embodied by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Mo Farah, and Benedict Cumberbatch, as well as by the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge, to suit his own ends.

The primary feature of “Britishness,” I therefore suggest, is actually its lack of clear definition, the fact that its connotations can stretch to facilitate the needs of its commentators. In this characteristic it shares an important quality with how Shakespeare was represented in 1916. “Britishness,” like Shakespeare, can signify almost anything people may want it to signify. To conclude, then, if in 1916 the primary feature of both Shakespeare and “Britishness” was flexibility, then during the tercentenary Shakespeare was very British indeed – and “Britishness” was highly Shakespearean.

¹ “Shakespeare’s Industry.” *Saturday Review of Politics, Science and Art* 121.3156 (1916): 398–99. Print. 398.

² All but the first of the section headings in this paper are taken from tercentenary texts. They have a colloquial tone to reflect the idea that the tercentenary was a key “talking point” despite the pressures of war surrounding the commemorations.

³ The US joined the Allies in 1917.

⁴ Gollancz, Israel, ed. *A Book of Homage to Shakespeare, To Commemorate Three Hundredth Anniversary of Shakespeare's Death MCMXVI*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1916. Print.

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