

Maley, W. (2016) Shakespeare, Easter 1916, and the Theatre of the Empire of Great Britain. *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism*, 16(2), pp. 189-205.

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Deposited on: 09 November 2016

Shakespeare, Easter 1916, and the Theatre of the Empire of Great Britain

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Abstract

It is a commonplace to speak of the dramatic qualities of the Easter Rising; the staging of rebellions inevitably attracts theatrical comparisons. In the case of 1916, the dramatic aspect has arguably been overplayed. Either the focus is on amateur dramatics and improvisation, with the Rising itself as a piece of theatre, which plays down the history and politics as well as the rich theatrical traditions behind the Rising, or the emphasis is on a drama of martyrdom and grand gesture, a political passion-play with Padraig Pearse at its centre, which erases many of the conflict's complexities. That 1916 also coincided with the three-hundredth anniversary of Shakespeare's death – events in Dublin interrupted planned celebrations there by the English playwright's Irish admirers – prompts us to reflect on an approach to history as drama – and drama as history – that does not see theatre merely in terms of spectacle or violence, a theatricality that goes beyond caricature, character assassination, pantomime, or the politics of a Punch and Judy show. This article suggests that a reading of 1916 in the context of the ongoing critical debate around Shakespeare's dramatic depictions of the Irish has more to teach us than invocations of theatricality of a more limited kind.

Introduction

Theatrical metaphors for the staging of rebellions are not new. Sir John Temple (1646), in *The Irish Rebellion*, responded to the 1641 Rising by examining 'the secondary steps and motions of this great plot, as well as by what persons it was wrought out in Ireland, and

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carried on to the very point of execution', how its leaders 'did first appeare upon the stage, and by their bloody execution notoriously declare themselves chief actors in this horrid tragedy', and how they 'had severall parts assigned them to act at severall times in severall places, and did but move according to the first resolutions taken, and such directions as they had received from the first Conspirators' (Temple 1646:72–73). Temple's account of the events of 1641 was published the same year as a Catholic drama about the Rising, Henry Burkhead's (1646) *A Tragedy of Cola's Furie, or, Lirenda's Miserie*, which allegorized Anglo-Irish conflict through a face-off between Angola (England) and Lirenda (Ireland). Patricia Coughlan shows how far Burkhead's play was caught up in the history of the period: 'however clumsily, the text of *Cola's Furie* nevertheless represents with unparalleled vividness the painful interaction of the literary imagination with the facts of Irish history in the 1640s' (Coughlan 1990:15).

It may seem futile in the face of the facts to argue against the theatricalization of the Easter Rising (Moran 2005). The staging of a rebellion at Easter was done for a reason. The date had religious significance – a context that has also served to focus attention on theology as well as theatricality (Ruczaj 2013). It also had dramatic significance of a different kind. The Rising was originally planned for Easter Sunday, the three-hundredth anniversary of Shakespeare's death, but was rescheduled for the Monday. On 27 April, the *Irish Times* famously asked how many Irish citizens knew their Shakespeare. Many of the key participants in the ongoing insurrection were poets and playwrights who knew their Shakespeare well enough to have practiced Shakespearean forms and taught Shakespeare's plays.

Thomas MacDonagh's dramatic works included the Abbey Theatre production *When the Dawn is Come* (1908), seen to have Shakespearean echoes (Moran 2007:5–6). James Connolly's *Under Which Flag?* (1916), in tackling the 1876 Fenian Rising, reprises elements of *Cathleen ni Houlihan* (1902) by Yeats and Lady Gregory, which dramatized the 1798 Rebellion. Just as Marx admired Shakespeare, so too did the leaders of the Rising. As Andrew Murphy observes, 'Pearse read and re-read [Shakespeare's] plays, performed them at home with his siblings, recited passages from them at public events, and included them in the curriculum of St Enda's, the nationalist-focused school which he founded in Dublin in 1908' (Murphy 2015a:268). Later prominent Irish fighters for independence were equally admiring of England's national poet. Ernie O'Malley declared, 'I like Shakespeare best' (cited in English 1996:186), while republican socialist Peadar O'Donnell explained his appreciation of the bard in the clearest terms:

I don't remember on what day of the week I finally escaped from prison but it was on a Wednesday that I saw a copy of Shakespeare in the officers' lavatory when I was outside having a bath; I stole it! Well, listen here, there's no punishment I could ever receive for that theft that would exceed the joy its capture gave me. I'm telling you, Shakespeare was a great man, and I would suggest to the British ruling class that the least they can do when they jail folk like me is to present each of us with a copy of his works. It is true that in this case I rescued Shakespeare from a few of my countrymen but that must not be

used as an argument to resist my plea, for it is only that section of my countrymen who can be hired to serve the Empire who would use Shakespeare in a lavatory. (Cited in English 1996:182–83)

Shakespeare here is a site of resistance rather than a locus of acquiescence, and that is an aspect of the response to his work that I will return to later.

In 1912, Jim Larkin's sister Delia, leader of the Irish Women Workers' Union, set up the Irish Workers' Dramatic Company, which staged plays to raise cash as well as consciousness, including A.P. Wilson's Dublin Lockout drama, *The Slough* (1914) (Wilmer 1992:36). As Steve Wilmer observes: 'James Connolly was likewise fond of using theatre for propaganda and improving morale. He also wrote a play called *The Agitator's Wife*. . . . On Palm Sunday, a week before the Rising, he . . . presented a three act nationalist play which he had written, called *Under Which Flag* [sic] – (Sean Connolly, an Abbey actor who played the lead in the play, died a week later in the Rising.)' (ibid.). According to Samuel Levenson, 'Connolly is said to have had a passion for Shakespeare but never once had the money to see a Shakespearean play performed' (Levenson 1973:290). Connolly's play *Under Which Flag?* was staged in Dublin shortly before the Rising, and a recent reprint as well as online journal publication has made it more available to the reader and potential producer (Connolly 2008 [1916]; Moran 2007:105–29). The other Connolly play mentioned by Wilmer, *The Agitator's Wife*, written while he was in America, the script for which is presumed lost, was discussed by Connolly's daughter Nora in her memoir in ways that suggest it drew on his own family life as an activist (O'Brien 1975:97). The Irish Literary Revival had theatre and public performance at its centre, and the Abbey Theatre had become a key platform for cultural nationalism. So it was Easter, it was Shakespeare's tercentenary, and a drama was unfolding in the streets of Dublin led by playwrights and performers like the writer James Connolly and the actor Sean Connolly; there are also telling anecdotes of Constance Markiewicz on her way to take part in the Rising in her uniform being asked if she were appearing onstage, and the Proclamation being mistaken for a playbill (Moran 2005:15).

Clair Wills, in her landmark book on the Easter Rising plays up the staged and stagey nature of events and the commemorations that have followed ever since. Wills goes beyond the events of 1916 to focus on the aftermath, including its memorialization. Wills sees theatricality in the Rising from the outset. She then traces those dramatic lines right up to 2006 and the ninetieth anniversary: 'In the weeks following the executions, Dublin streets became a theatre for showing sympathy and support for the rebels. Songs and badges were an antidote to the repressions of martial law, and were very hard to police' (Wills 2010 [2009]:105). By the 1930s the performative elements are becoming more pronounced: 'Each year there were bigger and better viewing stands, fancier drapes. In this para-theatre of the Rising the massive height of the GPO and its grand columns were crucial. . . . But for the Rising to fulfil the demands of a national political display the street itself, and the ordinary Irish public, had to become part of the performance' (ibid.:156). The theatricality of the Rising gives rise to dramatic reenactments and public performances: 'The frequent military displays performed in front of the GPO throughout the war years – and integrating the army,

the Old IRA and the emergency services – were a form of communal theatre, emphasising the link between the rebellion of 1916 and the country's present fight for neutrality' (ibid.:165–66). Discussing the fiftieth-anniversary events in Cork, where there was 'a mock GPO, complete with pillars, windows, doors and viewing platform', Wills writes: 'A tiny group of onlookers gather as an even tinier group of soldiers march past the diminutive GPO – looking like nothing so much as a cardboard stage set in an under-resourced amateur dramatic production' (ibid.:173). Throughout, Wills shows a keen critical edge in her treatment of the culture of commemoration, but at a certain stage the metaphors of drama begin to supplant analysis. Moreover, the types of theatre invoked are never themselves unpacked. An account of the looting concludes with 'carnival reigned', which is left hanging without any comment on the relationship between carnival and popular protest (ibid.:51). Yet Wills is at other times an assiduous reader, alert to the ways in which Shakespearean language could surface in unexpected quarters. Citing a letter in a provincial paper at the time declaring that the rebels 'loved their country not at all wisely, but too well', Wills nails the Shakespeare quotation: 'The rebels might have been crazed Othellos, destroying the thing they loved, but at least they weren't cowards' (ibid.:97).

Andrew Murphy (2015b), in his important essay on Shakespeare and the Easter Rising, homes in on the ways in which Shakespeare informed the political perspectives of educated unionists and nationalists. According to Murphy (ibid.:177), Easter 1916 was 'an uprising carried forward by a league of playwrights and actors, most of them heavily under the dramatic sway of Shakespeare'. Other critics have noted the tug-of-war over Shakespeare's legacy (Doggett 2013). Shakespeare was part of the war effort as well as the anti-war struggle. 'This England' was a battle cry in the wartime collection of that title edited by Edward Thomas (1915), but 'England' meant empire, and Ireland was conscripted to fight for the bard. In an article entitled 'Martial Law', *The Irish Times* on 27 April 1916 advised its readers to use their time indoors productively: 'How many citizens of Dublin have any real knowledge of the works of Shakespeare? Could any better occasion for reading them be afforded than the coincidence of enforced domesticity with the poet's tercentenary?' (cited in Murphy 2015b:179). The 'citizens' of Dublin shared with Shakespeare their status as subjects of an imperial monarchy. A month earlier, on 24 March 1916, the same newspaper, in a piece headed 'Shakespeare in Dublin', had expressed concern that the city might not make enough fuss about Shakespeare's tercentenary: 'At this time the whole Empire is fighting for ideals that Shakespeare, more than any other human being, helped to shape and glorify. Irish soldiers are bleeding and dying for those ideals' (cited in Murphy 2015b:161).

Of course, Shakespeare's attitude to empire, monarchy and nationhood has been shown to be rather more complex than this. Patricia Parker and John Kerrigan are key figures in enriching our understanding of Shakespeare's relationship with national identity (Kerrigan 2012; Parker 2002). Situated as he was between the English Reformation and the breach with Rome, and the beginnings of a British state that would finally colonize all of Ireland, Shakespeare offers unique insights into independence and empire. Recent readings of Shakespeare make him resemble James Connolly more than the *Irish Times* would have believed, as the playwright emerges as a writer with, if not Catholic and republican sympathies, then a more subversive

attitude to war and empire than hitherto envisaged. Certainly the received image of a royalist imperialist in the tradition of the British Empire Shakespeare Society is somewhat simplistic (Hadfield 2005; Marotti 2003). In a wartime context when Germany was requisitioning Shakespeare for its own ideals, those loyal to the British Empire were determined to hold on to him. James Moran points out that prior to the Rising, Dublin's Shakespeareans were gearing up to celebrate the bard: 'A group of enthusiastic amateurs in Dublin's "British Empire Shakespeare Society" were determined to claw Shakespeare back, and planned to have *Hamlet* performed at the Abbey Theatre, "the patriotic play" *Henry V* staged at the Gaiety Theatre, and a range of other lectures given around the city to inspire pride in Shakespeare and the British Empire' (Moran 2007:19). Connolly's political drama, *Under Which Flag?*, is quite in keeping with the spirit of Shakespeare, both in the question asked by *Henry's V*'s Irish captain Macmorris – 'What ish my Nation?' – and in the use made of *Richard II*, staged on the eve of the Essex Rebellion of 1601 (Albright 1927; Hammer 2008).

I

There's something rotten in the state of criticism on 1916 that puts a stage Irish version of theatricality at the heart of the Rising. Theatricality is arguably used not as a platform for analysis but a putdown for effect. According to Charles Townshend (2015 [2005]:355):

It has been well said that 1916 was above all a public drama, an astonishingly effective piece of street theatre. It was costume drama, staged by dramatists in a 'drama-mad' city. In this sense Michael Collins missed the mark when he complained that it had 'the air of a Greek tragedy'. That was, above all else, its point.

The Easter Rising, 'above all' and 'above all else', has been dramatized to death. In the conclusion to the chapter on 'Playing' in *Vivid Faces* (2014), Roy Foster (2014:112) dwells on the dramatic elements of the Rising:

The conflagration of Dublin 1916 would also envelop other passionate thespians: Constance Markievicz, Máire nic Shiubhlaigh, Joseph Plunkett, Thomas MacDonagh, Eimar O'Duffy, Terence MacSwiney, Piaras Béaslaí, Helena Molony, and the Abbey actors Charles Wyse Power, Michael Conniffe, Arthur Sinclair and Seán Connolly. Even the Marxist ideologue and labour leader James Connolly was a part-time playwright; in 1915 the drama group of the socialist militia, the Citizen Army, mounted his history play about the 1867 Fenian Rising, *Under Which Flag?* The Rising is often called a revolution of poets; in fact playwrights and actors were far more prominent. Appositely, when the insurrection broke out, several people mistook the manoeuvres for street theatre; Constance Markievicz was asked by passers-by at Liberty Hall if she was rehearsing a play for children, and Joseph Holloway,

encountering a copy of the 'Proclamation of the Irish Republic', took it at first for a playbill.

The fact that the two hundred copies of the Proclamation of the Irish Republic were 'secured by flour paste' may be an interesting detail, although hardly an insight, since flour paste has been used since antiquity to post public notices, but this apparently trivial detail extends the amateur dramatics metaphor (ibid.:235).

The emphasis on costume, performance, props, setting, speeches, symbols, and spectacle means that the motif or metaphor of theatricality is used, not to inform historical analysis, or to examine politically the drama of a rebellion at the heart of empire. Rather, theatricality is used as a way to downplay the impact and implications of the Rising. As Clair Wills notes, the theme of the theatricality of 1916 was a common thread: 'Impressed by the natural theatricality of the events of Easter week, in 1932 the playwright Denis Johnston suggested the inauguration of bank holiday re-enactments in Dublin, arguing that O'Connell Street was the perfect space for open-air drama' (Wills 2010 [2009]:151). When Lenin (1979) and Trotsky (1916) read in the Rising a lesson for socialists opposed to war and empire and capitalism, they were arguing against reductionist views of the Rising as a mere putsch, a fatal and fatalistic act of defiance with no chance of success and therefore no real point. By contrast, Lenin and Trotsky, ahead of their time, were better at reading the drama of history. They sensed what one might call the Brechtian character of the Rising. A political gesture confronting the might of empire on its doorstep had the power to transform a situation. Viewing the Rising in these terms opens up the question of theatricality in a different way.

Rather than merely invoke Shakespeare in order to point up his popularity across borders and barricades there may be some mileage in looking at the ways in which the Rising might be informed by a reading of Shakespeare's history plays of the 1590s. Those so-called 'English' histories are also about war, empire, and relations between England, Scotland, Ireland, and Wales – Home Rule versus Rome Rule, the politics of Civil War versus wars of invasion and occupation, the impact of the non-English nations on England's independence and imperial aspirations – and were produced in the context of the emergence of the British state and empire. Shakespeare's history plays, staged at a time when England was asserting its independence from Rome and resistance to the Catholic powers of France and Spain, at war in Ireland, and watchful of Scottish inroads upon its sovereignty, are a useful source for understanding the relationship between history and drama that goes beyond the emphasis on theatricality as spectacle, performance, and 'play' in the most trivial sense. James Holstun has argued that Shakespeare's drama offers a way of examining how a writer engages with contemporary politics through history and allegory: 'Shakespeare never portrays plebeian revolt without considerable sympathy, though his sympathies tend to be oblique, interspersed with antipathies, fragmented, lying athwart the main plot lines' (Holstun 2003:199).

To take two examples: the plays most closely associated with the situation in Ireland in the 1590s – although they are set two centuries earlier – are *Richard II* and *Henry V*. *Richard II* was the subject of an exchange of views in the *New Statesman* in 1979. John Arden, the Barnsley-born playwright who moved to Ireland and co-authored a cycle of dramas about

James Connolly, wrote a piece in which he attacked the anti-Irish prejudice, as he saw it, of writers like Edmund Spenser and Shakespeare (Arden 1979a). Arden was building on the work of earlier critics who had catalogued the anti-Irish representations of Shakespeare and his contemporaries (Bartley 1954; Barton 1919; Comyn 1894; Duggan 1969; Rabl 1987; Snyder 1920; Truninger 1976). Arden's article, 'Rug-headed Irish Kerns and British Poets', took its title from *Richard II* and cited the famous speech by the king at the outset of his expedition to Ireland:

Now for our Irish wars:
We must supplant those rough rug-headed kerns,
Which live like venom where no venom else,
But only they, have privilege to live. (2.1.155–58)

Arden cites this passage as an example of Shakespeare's anti-Irish prejudice. Conor Cruise O'Brien (1979) wrote in reply to point out that he was surprised that a dramatist like Arden would confuse character and creator so readily. Anyone who looked closely at Shakespeare's *Richard II* knew him to be a flawed king and a flawed character (Holliday 1996; Potter 1994). How safely could one then assume that Shakespeare shared Richard's views on Ireland? O'Brien's intervention was given the title 'Shakespeare: Not Guilty'. Arden's (1979b) reply, entitled 'Shakespeare: Guilty' argued that, since *Richard II* was not contradicted in the play over his views on Ireland, Shakespeare was indeed guilty of anti-Irish sentiment. My sympathies lie with O'Brien, much as I admire Arden, because of course in Shakespeare's play Richard's costly and disastrous Irish expedition is one of the main grounds of his downfall. Indeed, shortly after the king's remarks on the venomous Irish who, unlike the snakes, were not banished by St Patrick, the noble Ross says:

He hath not money for these Irish wars,
His burthenous taxations notwithstanding,
But by the robbing of the banish'd Duke. (2.1.259–61)

Arden's co-authored drama on Connolly has more subtlety than his reading of Shakespeare. Reflecting on staging Connolly's life, D'Arcy and Arden write: 'There is no doubt that the events of Easter 1916 are as immediately suited to the requirements of the stage as, say, the Battle of Agincourt or the Siege of Troy: and neither Shakespeare nor Euripides would have had much doubt as to how to deal with them' (D'Arcy and Arden 1977:161). But at its best drama is about doubt. D'Arcy and Arden's allusions to Shakespeare are telling, since they either assume simplicity or resist complexity: 'We had already come to the conclusion that the "flawed hero" is not vital to "artistic" theatre, whatever Shakespeare and Sophocles may have made of him in the past, and whatever Aristotelian prejudices still inform the judgement of contemporary critics' (ibid.:165). More persuasively, they compare their compression of events and adaptation of Connolly's speeches to different contexts to Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* (ibid.:180).

Michael Cohen (1990:87) defends the drama of D'Arcy and Arden on the grounds that their depiction of 1916 is truly modern:

What the two dramatists perceived when they began to consider the problem of writing about the life and times of James Connolly was a situation similar to that described by the young Brecht . . . The vital aspect of our epoch which has seldom entered the drama, as opposed to the more limited form of documentary theatre occasionally, was not so much Connolly's Ireland, important as the cycle's contribution to the portrayal of this is, but the serious presentation of working class politics in their international dimensions made possible by the choice of Connolly as hero. The way in which drama usually averts its gaze from such experience, however often it may turn to the working class for a 'slice of life', has long called into question the term 'modern drama' as applied to the most accepted tradition of the twentieth-century stage.

If Arden and D'Arcy's drama offers another angle on the theatricality of 1916 then studies of Shakespeare and Ireland have moved on from the Arden-O'Brien exchange. It could even be said that Ireland has colonized Shakespeare (Callaghan 2001; Poole 2004). Certainly there is a richer sense of the place of Shakespeare in early modern and in modern Ireland (Bates 2008; Steinberger 2008). *Richard II*, with its famous deposition scene, is one play ripe for subversive readings, including a republican reading that opens up another discussion of its relevance to Ireland as an anti-colonial play critical of the imperial monarchy (Norbrook 1996). Historical readings of Richard II's Irish expedition also offer a more nuanced perspective than Arden envisages (Curtis 1927; Johnston 1983; Lydon 1963). I have elsewhere argued that Shakespeare's depiction of the Irish is more sympathetic than critics have hitherto acknowledged (Maley 2003).

II

If we now consider *Henry V* we find a double engagement with Ireland. There is an Irish character, captain Macmorris, with an Irish accent, serving in the army of Henry V, an English/British army led by a monarch who, having roused his troops with 'Cry "God for Harry! England, and Saint George!"' (3.1.34), can calmly announce: 'I am Welsh, you know, good countryman' (4.7.104). In the famous four captains scene, Macmorris, speaking to the Welsh captain Fluellen, the Scottish captain Jamy, and the English captain Gower, gets rattled by a reference to his 'nation' and asks angrily 'What ish my nation? Who talks of my nation?' (3.2.126). Here, on a battlefield in France, an Irish captain experiences a moment of identity crisis. Who is he fighting for? Why is he fighting? And under which flag? And in the context of the debate, what are the laws of war? What does war allow for? It has been pointed out that the Earl of Essex, who was fighting in Ireland while Shakespeare's Henry V was fighting in France, had issued orders for the war in Ireland that forbade quarrels between captains and differences of nation in the camp (Butler and Maley 2013; Devereux 1599). It has also been noted that Macmorris is a stock Elizabethan type (Brereton 1917). As well as the engagement with an Irish character in *Henry V*, there is a whole allegorical structure that represents the contemporary conflict in Ireland through the historical war in France as a way of circumventing censorship. Moreover, the histories now appear less straightforwardly

patriotic than they would have done a hundred years ago. This has been written on extensively, and I can do no more here than indicate a handful of key sources (Altman 1991; Coleman 2008; Greenblatt 1985; Neill 1994; Spencer 1996). Perhaps the most intriguing interpretation of *Henry V* for a reading of the Easter Rising appears in an essay by Patricia Cahill (2003:71):

Through Henry's interpellation of his subjects as 'We few, we happy few, we band of brothers' (4.3.60), the play would seem to consolidate national identity in simple terms around the question of a subject's willingness to die for England. But . . . the play's seemingly simple national language of 'blood' and 'brotherhood' is entangled with complex narratives of racial difference. Rather than signal a triumphalist assertion of nationhood, in fact, Henry's speech signals the paradox on which the play's discourse of the nation is founded: namely, that to gain membership in the English nation is to be willing to shed one's blood on its behalf, but to be constituted as a physical body, in the terms of this play, is to be part of a narrative of generation in which one is already constituted by – indeed contaminated by – an essence that is not English.

The non-English elements of *Henry V*, including the Irish captain Macmorris, complicate the notions of nationhood and patriotism that traditional Shakespeareans – and imperialists, monarchists and unionists – would want to keep simple.

My fundamental point is that Shakespeare's histories of the 1590s were staged at a time of war in Ireland when the state was literally seeking to busy the minds of imperial subjects in foreign wars, and Shakespeare constantly exposed the carnage that resulted from earlier wars of profit and empire. Indeed, the great trick of state of Shakespeare's time was the complicity between the distraction of empire 'abroad' and the suppression of anti-colonial and anti-centralist resistance at 'home'. Ireland was always at the heart of empire. Viewing 1916 theatrically must mean more than reducing the actions of the leaders of the Rising to a piece of petty 'street theatre'. It must entail a more subtle and sophisticated understanding of drama than the mere invocation or incantation of 'theatricality'.

'What ish my nation?' is the question Shakespeare's Irish captain Macmorris asks in *Henry V*, and it is a question that one of the leaders of the Rising might also have asked, for the 'Captain Jamy' of the Dublin scene in 1916 was Edinburgh-born James Connolly, and Connolly's great-nephew Ian Bell has spoken of the double-bind that made Connolly a stranger in Ireland and in Scotland, as his family, including Bell's grandmother, disagreed about Connolly's legacy:

So Scotland chooses to forget James Connolly while Ireland holds him in the vice of approved memory. So a niece stays silent while a daughter prefers to misremember. So two women are born in Scotland to an Irishness, refused or embraced, that sets confused echoes sounding down the years. Then there's the Scot, Connolly himself, who approaches his death knowing that no

comrade in Scotland, Britain, America, or Europe will remember what is fundamental to him: he's Irish. (Bell 2016:40)

III

Adam Putz reminds us that the lesson that Yeats drew from Shakespeare's *Richard II* was very different from the negative depiction of the Irish detected by John Arden. According to Putz, Yeats's 'identification of Renaissance England with Revival Ireland focuses his reading on the themes that he finds first taking flight in *Richard II*'. Shakespeare 'meditates with tremendous sympathy and regret upon the fortunes of those usurped figures that Yeats represents in his criticism – Richard II and Hamlet, Lear and Timon, Antony and Coriolanus' (Putz 2013:97). Andrew Murphy (2015b:171) situates Yeats's view within the wider context of Irish nationalist readings of Richard that were sympathetic to his plight.

One familiar reading of the Easter Rising is that it was a betrayal, a stab-in-the-back. England always had issues with its back doors, since it was always warring abroad. Scotland was thus a back door for France; Ireland a back door for Spain. A Spanish emissary of Philip II declared in 1567 that: 'There is an English proverb in use among them which says – "He who would England win, In Ireland must begin"' (Froude 1866:480). The idea that either nation might resent the intrusions of its dominant neighbour seldom occurs to historians. Daniel O'Connell is credited with the line that 'England's difficulty is Ireland's opportunity' but the sentiment was an old one – J.A. Froude (1872:85) applies it to the 1641 Rising. A common saying of Shakespeare's time was 'If that you will France win, Then with Scotland first begin', which an English lord recites at the opening of *Henry V*, elaborating thus:

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. (1.2.169–73)

William Hazlitt long ago pointed out the double standards implicit in this speech:

'The eagle England' has a right 'to be in prey', but 'the weazel Scot' has none 'to come sneaking to her nest', which she has left to pounce upon others. Might was right, without equivocation or disguise, in that heroic and chivalrous age'. (Cited in Quinn 1983 [1969]:37–38)

Yet many accounts of the Easter Rising focus on the opportunism of the 'rebels' at a moment of war, rather than acknowledging the fact that for the British Empire 'wartime' is all the time (Habicht 2001). The Easter Rising can be viewed in the context of a century of conflict (MacAskill and Cobain 2014). The question of a 'just war', which has exercised critics of 1916 – and more recently opponents of the decision to invade Iraq in 2003 – makes a focus on *Henry V* highly relevant here too (Highley 1997).

Conclusion

What does drama do? Can it contribute to political events? In a late poem, 'The Man and the Echo', Yeats reflected on an early play, *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*, the short drama he co-authored with Lady Augusta Gregory set at the time of the 1798 Rebellion, and asked:

Did that play of mine send out
Certain men the English shot? (Yeats 1983:393)

The allusion a few lines later to there being 'no release/ In a bodkin' confirms the echo of *Hamlet* in the idea that 'The play's the thing', and in Hamlet's reference to 'a bare bodkin' (ibid.:394). Critics have drawn parallels between the use made of Shakespeare's *Richard II*, staged on 7 February 1601, the eve of the Essex Rebellion, and *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*, questioning Shakespeare's culpability for his own art as instigation and incitement (Goldman 1985:135). Conversely, Paul Muldoon, channeling W.H. Auden, slyly asked: 'If Yeats had saved his pencil-lead / would certain men have stayed in bed?' (Muldoon 2001:178).

In *Autobiographies* Yeats reflected on an earlier moment than *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* when his actions may have influenced events. Looking back at the 1897 visit of Queen Victoria to Dublin, Yeats (1999:276) recalls encountering Maud Gonne in conversation with 'a young working-man who looks very melancholy'. The reason for the young man's sadness is that Gonne, having promised to speak at a socialist meeting against the royal visit has gone back on her word. Yeats persuades her to go to the man's house and agree to address the meeting. She relents. The young man turns out to be James Connolly and Yeats's account closes thus:

Later that night Connolly carries in procession a coffin with the words 'British Empire' upon it, and police and mob fight for its ownership, and at last, that the police may not capture it, it is thrown into the Liffey. And there are fights between police and window-breakers, and I read in the morning papers that many have been wounded; some two hundred heads have been dressed at the hospitals; an old woman killed by baton blows, or perhaps trampled under the feet of the crowd; and that two thousand pounds' worth of decorated plate-glass windows have been broken. I count the links in the chain of responsibility, run them across my fingers, and wonder if any link there is from my workshop. (Yeats 1999:277)

In 1903, Yeats remarked that if he was given a gift,

I would say 'Let my plays be acted, sometimes by professional actors if you will, but certainly a great many times by Irish societies in Ireland and through out the world. Let the exiles when they gather together to remember the country where they were born, sometimes have a play of mine acted to give wings to their thought'. (Cited in Jack 1984:152)

We know that drama and poetry can give wings to thought, and not just wings but weapons too. Plays that portray violence onstage can provoke it offstage and even against the players themselves, as shown by the riots prompted by J. M. Synge's *Playboy of the Western World* (1907) and Sean O'Casey's *The Plough and the Stars* (1926) (Maley 2011).

Connolly certainly believed in the power of a play to provoke action. According to Margaret Skinnider (1917:65), another Irish-Scottish participant in the Rising, Connolly saw his own drama of rebellion as a rehearsal for the real thing:

Presently, news came from Dublin that James Connolly had written a play entitled 'Under Which Flag'. We heard also that when it was produced, it had a great effect on the public. In this play the hero, during the last act, chooses the flag of the republic and the final curtain falls. Some one told Mr. Connolly he ought to write another act to show what happened afterward. His reply was that another act would have to be written by 'all of us together'.

Connolly himself echoes this in 'The Call to Arms', published in *Workers' Republic* on 1 April 1916: 'So endeth the first chapter. Who will write the next?' (Connolly 1916).

In the wake of the Ulster Plantation of 1609, John Speed published his monumental mapping of imperial geography, *The Theatre of the Empire of Great Britain* (1612), praising King James I as 'inlarger and uniter of the British Empire; restorer of the British name' (Speed 1612, dedication). When it comes to remembering 1916, if Ulster is one 'great thing of us forgot' then empire is the other (Maley 2012; Netzloff 2003). Yet it was the Ulster Plantation that laid the foundations of partition and the 'carnival of reaction' that James Connolly warned against: 'the betrayal of the national democracy of industrial Ulster would mean a carnival of reaction both North and South, would set back the wheels of progress, would destroy the oncoming unity of the Irish Labour movement and paralyse all advanced movements whilst it endured' (Connolly 1914). That 'carnival of reaction' has been the theatre of the empire of Great Britain since 1916. But we can promote a different theatre – more critical, less in thrall to the structures of power that underpin the imperial monarchy that persists to this day. Shakespeare's histories – and in particular the two plays most readily viewed against the backdrop of an ongoing Irish war, *Richard II* and *Henry V* – have over the last thirty years or so been viewed afresh through new historicist and cultural materialist lenses as less patriotic, more subversive than was the case with earlier criticism (Baker 1993; Baldo 1996; Cohen 2002; Dollimore and Sinfield 1985; Dutton 2005; Fitter 2004; 2005; Healy 1994; Kastan 1999; Kezar 2000; Plotnick 1991).

We can also be more historically aware and less fixated on dismembering the narratives of nationalism while leaving the story of empire intact or untold. In a speech on Easter Monday, 28 March 2016, at an RTE symposium entitled 'Remembering 1916', the Irish President Michael Higgins called for as thorough an examination of British imperialism as there has been of Irish nationalism (Kelly 2016). That thorough examination is well underway in Shakespeare studies. Remembering Shakespeare imperially – and submitting the plays to postcolonial critique – is now standard practice (Collier 1991; Kahn 2001; Maley 1997, 1999;

O'Connor 1987). It is also increasingly clear that empire and the quest for colonies was the basis of the early modern British expansion into Ireland that laid the foundations for a series of risings of which Easter 1916 forms a part (Armitage 2004; Williamson 2005). Shakespeare's histories play in critical ways with competing and complementary notions of nation and empire (Belsey 1990). Such critical engagement should be more evident in readings of the Easter Rising.

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