

Shakespeare and the Cultural Colonization of Ireland

Robin E. Bates

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Introduction

Probably in private, perhaps even in their souls, those who colonized the world were certain that they had the best of intentions. Exploration, expansion, correction, salvation—these are the positive words used by an empire that finds itself in the right, and believes that any who are not of their mind have not yet been convinced. These words do not take into account the values to the invaded culture which are cleared in exploration, squeezed out in expansion, erased in correction, and demonized in salvation. In the encounter between empire and invaded culture, those values and the people who hold them become othered, subjected. When a culture which has been invaded and subjected to a dominant empire works culturally against the constructions it finds of itself in the dominant literature, it must reappropriate the image that has been constructed or write against that image.

Writing against something and reappropriating it should be mutually exclusive acts. Writing against a negative image deconstructs the logic and power of the image and dismisses it. Reappropriating a negative image rehabilitates the negativity of the image for one's own purposes of self-description. The two acts are separate—they require separate means and create separate results. They should not be possible together. To do both would require a combined colonial identity of something othered and something which belongs.

Doing both, however, is exactly what was taking place in Irish literature in the first part of the twentieth century. Irish writers simultaneously write against British constructions of themselves and reappropriate the characters and images used in those constructions while writing their way towards an independent experience for themselves. They are grappling with their relationship to the writers of literature which they inherited as a part of the empire but which oppressed them in its constructions of the relationship of the colony to the empire. Shakespeare was one of

those inherited writers. W. B. Yeats, Sean O'Casey, George Bernard Shaw, James Joyce, Samuel Beckett, and Seamus Heaney are among the writers who struggled with Shakespeare as both their own cultural inheritance and yet a cultural representation of their colonial oppression. As writers seeking to engage with the traditions of English culture on their own terms, they found themselves contending with Shakespeare in complicated ways. They were writing from a nation that had been dominated by, or at least involved with, the English for eight centuries and the literature of that dominant culture included representations of the Irish for its own defining purposes. The Irish find themselves in Shakespeare's work, but in ways that they sometimes find troubling and sometimes find validating. What, then, was Shakespeare doing in his representations of the Irish that make their paradoxical relationship to him possible?

The vast work available in New Historicist/Cultural Materialist and Post-Colonial studies lays bare issues of cultural hegemony and how dominant and subversive elements contend with each other within texts. Within these discourses, the perceptions of the powerful and the marginalized necessarily become shaping issues, but the applications of these discourses have directed their uses towards either imperialist or post-colonial texts.

Presenting nation and community as constructs, Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* reveals that all nations understand themselves to have defining origins, boundaries, and common purposes and that nations construct all three things as part of self-identification and can be distinguished "by the style in which they are imagined," or, by the structure and terms they set up for themselves as unique to themselves.¹ Concerned with the phenomenon through which a nation is created by a pluralist construction of people who will never meet each other, Anderson roots the emergence of this larger-than-life nationalism in the Enlightenment, when secularism began to bring into scrutiny the larger nation of faith and separate people into smaller, location-based groups. What Anderson does not take into account, when he presents the eighteenth century as the period in which this transformation became possible, is that the ideas emerging in the early modern period of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries were early versions of the changes so important to the Enlightenment. A serious focus of nation-building in the early modern period was this seeking of an "immemorial past" which the English employed through a number of investigations which historicized religion, custom, and identity to racial and social origins.² Anderson's application of this theory covers a broad, almost global, scope, and so its investigations, while many, are at times necessarily brief and shallow. But Anderson's crucial contribution, of the ideology of imagined commonalities which tie

nations together, has been fundamental to subsequent studies of culture in Britain in the early modern period.

Two applications of Anderson's theory specifically to the idea of Britain are David J. Baker's *Between Nations* and Richard Helgerson's *Forms of Nationhood*. Both of these works apply the idea of an "imagined" Britain to specific texts from early modern England. Baker's *Between Nations* points out the shaky senses of belonging that held the empire together by a thread of imagined construction in the early modern period. His premise is that, while this sense of belonging was written ostensibly as stable, it should instead be viewed suspiciously because of the strenuousness with which it is written. Leaning on Anderson's ideas of the place of a constructed ontology in nation-building, Baker is interested in discovering what was "unwritten" while Britain was being written. Baker reads Shakespeare's *Henry V*, Spenser's *A View of the Present State of Ireland*, and Andrew Marvell's "An Horation Ode upon Cromwell's Return from Ireland" and "The Loyal Scot" with a view to the uncomfortable plurality of the nations being subsumed within the idea of Britain and the unstable definition of the empire that resulted from attempting to make these nations both different enough to require justification for inclusion and similar enough to be included.³

Helgerson's *Forms of Nationhood*, on the other hand, focuses less on the difficulty of consumption by empire and more on the means through which that empire was written. Helgerson, intrigued by Spenser's question of why the English should not have "a kingdom of our own language," investigates the texts through which one can trace an almost communal attempt to insert England and the English language into the world stage as a contending language and nation. Those texts include poetry, plays, law, and even maps in a self-conscious path set out upon by English artists at a time in which being a contender amongst dominant cultures seemed possible. Their project was the project of a nation-state.⁴

New Historicist pioneer Stephen Greenblatt examines the construction and deconstruction of dominant discourses. Investigating the social context of appearance and social standing in the construction of outward identity, Greenblatt focuses his attention in *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* on the means of appropriating social discourses (verbal and visual) used for the purpose of creating a temporary narrative reality.⁵ Appropriation of these discourses both reinforces the writer's entry into them as outsider and constitutes a comment on them. Greenblatt's ten rules for self-fashioning, which are now widely known, all pivot on issues of order and disorder, belonging and othering. Because an "achieved identity always

contains within itself the signs of its own subversion or loss,” investigation of that identity can allow for a probe into the subversion at play.⁶

In *Shakespearean Negotiations*, Greenblatt argues for the appropriateness of an historicist approach to early modern texts, pointing out that the historicist reader’s resistance to a “single, master discourse” allows recognition that even the desire for such discourse among early modern writers “was itself constructed out of conflicted and ill-sorted motives.” He points out that “Even those texts that sought most ardently to speak for a monolithic power could be shown to be sites of institutional and ideological contestation.”⁷ He offers *Shakespearean Negotiations* as a study of how early modern experiences were “shaped” and “offered for consumption.”⁸ He questions whether bringing alien discourses “into the light for study, discipline, correction, transformation”⁹ creates contained subversion or subversion of containment and he examines how dominant discourses become and remain dominant, and at what cost to the alien discourse.

Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield investigate the potential for dissident readings, describing the space for subversion as “creative vandalism” or “intellectual vandalism” and so while a New Historicist such as Greenblatt will focus on the strength of the dominant discourse as evidence of that which is being suppressed, Dollimore and Sinfield read the text’s presentation of that suppression as a potentially, if inadvertently, subversive act in itself. “Creative vandalism” is Sinfield’s term, and “intellectual vandalism” is Dollimore’s. The difference is slight but interesting. Sinfield’s use of the word “creative” indicates dissident usage of dominant discourses as an artistic endeavor, while Dollimore’s use casts it as a critical endeavor.¹⁰

In *Radical Tragedy*, Dollimore contends that the mere representation of a dominant discourse as dominant brings into question its stability and creates an ambiguity in its superior power. Jacobean tragedy has endings which are too perfunctory to be real reassertions of the *status quo*. But it is the fragility of surrounding power structures of that *status quo* with which Dollimore is most concerned, when he asks: “did these plays reinforce the dominant order, or do they interrogate it to the point of subversion?” Dollimore characterizes his own difference from Greenblatt as being that, while Greenblatt reads for the process in which “subversive social elements are contained in the process of being rehearsed,” *Radical Tragedy* looks for a “subversive knowledge of political domination, a knowledge which interrogated prevailing beliefs.”¹¹ Dollimore goes on to apply this theory to several early modern tragedies, including Shakespeare’s *King Lear*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, and *Coriolanus*. He finds in them closure of subversive elements which is in many cases superficial, but he finds that those elements are given room to

speak and perform before being closed out. Perhaps most important for this study, Dollimore discovers that once subversive elements have been given voices, their voices are never entirely erased by the dominant forces at the end of the play, because in the act of speaking they have stated their case and created the potential for the audience to identify with them. Those perfunctory endings may close out or attempt to erase the subversive elements which were presented as threats to be eliminated. Once represented, however, they have been identified as a threat and one with which cultural subversive elements might identify. The play, as long as it is performed, will continue to re-introduce those voices, even if it continues to close them out.

Alan Sinfield, with whom Dollimore has often worked, focuses *Fault-lines* around the gaps between dominant and subversive discourses which are not resolved through containment.¹² Sinfield characterizes his project as being “designed to epitomize a way of apprehending the strategic organizations of texts—both the modes by which they produce plausible stories and construct subjectivities, and the faultlines and breaking points through which they enable dissident readings.”¹³ Sinfield applies his theory to works by a range of writers including Shakespeare (also Sir Philip Sidney and Christopher Marlowe). In his focused chapters on *Othello*, *Arcadia*, *Macbeth*, *Henry V*, and *Hamlet*, Sinfield discovers that the dominant frequently appropriates what parts it can of the other which it works to contain, and that it is the parts which cannot be made useful that the text villainizes and erases. Using much the same terms as Dollimore, Sinfield examines attempts by a dominant discourse to represent and then apprehend threats, but Sinfield is more interested in remaining gaps through which subversive elements may self-identify. Throughout *Fault-lines*, Sinfield works to reveal the split between legitimacy and actual power. He, too, investigates “contained subversion,” examining maneuvers that seem designed to challenge the system but actually help to maintain it.

In *Political Shakespeare*, which Sinfield and Dollimore co-edited, Dollimore writes that not only can a dominant force appropriate elements of the subjected which it seeks to contain, but that “appropriation could also work the other way: subordinate, marginal or dissident elements could appropriate dominant discourses and likewise transform them in the process.”¹⁴ Building on the theoretical insights made possible by the New Historicist and Cultural Materialist investigations of dominant and subversive ideologies, post-colonial critics study the means through which the dominant force characterized the other and the means through which the other read itself and re-imagined its place in the empire.

Post-Colonial theorists focusing on Ireland, such as Declan Kiberd, Terry Eagleton, and Seamus Deane, examine Irish writers in the context of

the imperial control from which they emerged or the residual structures in which they still operate. Declan Kiberd's massive works, *Inventing Ireland* and *Irish Classics*, study the narrative of Ireland as it emerges through Irish literature of the last two centuries.¹⁵ *Inventing Ireland* is the more helpful to the argument of the following chapters, as it focuses more on the Irish writers under investigation here—O'Casey, Beckett, Yeats, Shaw, and Joyce—and their literary maneuvers in the context of empire.

Kiberd's work has a similar thrust to Helgerson's—a study of self-consciously Irish writing as a collaborative enterprise to re-imagine Irish culture as an authorizing structure in the emergence of nationalism. He states his purpose as “to trace the links between high art and popular expression in the decades before and after independence, and to situate revered masterpieces in the wider social context out of which they came.”¹⁶ Kiberd examines text, context, style, and choice of language in the explosive movement of Irish writing that articulated both the frustrations of imperial dependance and ambivalence towards political autonomy. Finding that “it was less easy to decolonize the mind than the territory,” Kiberd traces the links between the inherited British imperial culture and the Irish response, including how Irish writers responded to Shakespeare.¹⁷ Kiberd seeks to find patterns in this literature that try to “imagine Ireland,” but despite the tenuous connections, he finds that the patterns are a challenge to articulate because the independence movement in Irish culture “produced a great experimental literature” from “a people of immense versatility, sophistication and multiplicity of viewpoint.”¹⁸ Covering the broad reach of those multiple viewpoints accounts for the immense scope of his study. *Inventing Ireland* examines not only a range of writers and the historical situations in which they wrote, but also the unique achievements of those writers through their own relationships to the fracturing country in the early twentieth century.

It is the multiplicity of viewpoint which focuses Terry Eagleton's study of Irish culture, *Heathcliff and the Great Hunger*.¹⁹ Concerned with the processes through which the divided Irish culture responded to imperial oppression through literature, Eagleton digs through the ideologies of Irish and Anglo-Irish writing to investigate the sliding degrees of interaction with empire for a nation he describes as oppressed through literature and education as well as through more obviously violent imperial hegemonic practices. He sets up his argument through the image of Heathcliff in *Wuthering Heights* as Irish by pointing out that Emily Brontë's brother Patrick Branwell had traveled to Liverpool (Heathcliff's only known origin) just before she began writing the novel, and could certainly have returned home with tales of the destitute Irish immigrant children who thronged there even before the

mass exodus from the Famine. Briefly mentioning the Brontës' own Irish origins, Eagleton speculates about the novel's preoccupation with development of an Irish Heathcliff and his inability to conform to English expectations.²⁰ Eagleton applies the idea of an Irish Heathcliff as the necessary dark side of the Heights as an analogy to the cultural relationship between the empire and its colony and to the cultural relationship between the factions within that colony. Figuring Ireland as Britain's subversive and unruly unconscious, just as Heathcliff is the disruptive unconscious of the Earnshaws, Eagleton reads an array of Irish works including those of Yeats, Joyce, Wilde and Shaw to find their replies to the British inability "to decide whether the Irish are their antithesis or mirror image, partner or parasite, abortive offspring or sympathetic sibling."²¹

Kiberd and Eagleton investigate the dissonant and dissident relationship between Ireland and England. Ireland, however, while having a unique relationship to the empire, was one of many colonies, and broader studies of the imperial relationship to its colonies have established and developed the arguments Kiberd and Eagleton are using. Edward Said and Salman Rushdie examine more generally the condition of post-coloniality in terms of the interior conflicts caused by discordant identities. Said's landmark *Culture and Imperialism* studies literature participating in overseas expansion, rather than as reacting to, commenting on, or exposing it.²² Focused primarily on the novel as a "cultural artifact of bourgeois society," Said argues that it is impossible to separate the novel from imperialism.²³ But while the novel is central to Said's work, the key concepts of *Culture and Imperialism* apply heavily to an examination of Shakespeare and Ireland: Said's emphasis on structures of attitude and reference in post-colonial writing reveal that "There is no way in which the past can be quarantined from the present" because the structures that newly independent nations emerge from remain, at least in part, as both the means of their struggle and the culture that they work in and against.²⁴ He also argues that imperial literature accomplishes its goals through the "silence of the native," creating either acquiescence in the speech of representations of the colonized or by removing their speech entirely from the narrative. The post-colonial response is then both limited and prompted by their character as reactions to imperial literature.

While Said's collection, *Reflections on Exile*, involves a wide examination of issues in the writings of many post-colonial writers, the essays create a loosely arranged body of work on issues of identity.²⁵ The title essay most closely informs the following chapters and in particular centers on the divided nature of the post-colonial identity and the process through which exile, self-imposed or otherwise, both separates an artist from the context

which created him or her and also creates a new context for self-identification. Attempting to separate the literary motif of exile from the reality of it which is experienced by millions, Said writes that "On the twentieth-century scale, exile is neither aesthetically nor humanistically comprehensible," but while a literary exile figure cannot be understood as the total representation of the condition of exile, a poet in exile contains "exile's antinomies embodied and endured with a unique intensity."²⁶ The writing produced by exiles is then unique in its goals with the audience, because for the exiled writer, "nothing is secure" and so "What you achieve is what you have no wish to share."²⁷ The exiled experience is unnatural and so resembles the fiction the artist creates. The work is then a sort of new home which the writer attempts to create in shared art, driven by a sense of "defiance and loss."²⁸

Said's words on exile, as a experience in permanent displacement between the broadly national and the deeply personal, could just as easily be a description of Salman Rushdie's essay collection, *Imaginary Homelands*.²⁹ In seventy essays, Rushdie writes about separation, culture, popular culture, censorship, nationalism, fundamentalism, commonwealth, and immigration. The common thread between them all is encapsulated in the title essay which leans on the relationship of the artist to society, original or adopted, for good or ill. Arguing in that essay that all vision is fragmentary, Rushdie contends that the artist who is perhaps best equipped to capture this is the one who is separated from home and so required to admit to and grapple with incomplete memory. Rushdie characterizes the separation from origins as displacement, and as a writer who has left his home and is now "partly of the West," Rushdie asserts that the displaced writer has an identity "at once plural and partial." He qualifies the grimness of this statement, however, with the observation that "however ambiguous and shifting this ground may be, it is not an infertile territory to occupy."³⁰

The fertile territory of Irish writing in the twentieth century is the shifting ground of writers displaced from, and seeking, starting places. Displaced from their own past by eight centuries of British colonialism, the Irish found that anything like a recognizable past was never an entirely Irish one—it was always a past including English administrators in The Pale, English texts in the classroom, English plays on the stage, English soldiers knocking on the door. Salman Rushdie, sensitive to the connections between military and cultural invasion, writes: "One of the key concepts of imperialism was that military superiority implied cultural superiority, and this enabled the British to condescend to and repress cultures far older than their own."³¹ Revivalist Irish writing reacted by writing both in a recovered Gaelic and a triumphantly thorough English and took as its models both the

stories of Irish folklore and the English stories of imperialism. Shakespeare's participation in the nationalist writing of early modern England was part of a larger attempt by many to define Englishness and the English language as both traditional and unique, as preceded in a glorious history and unprecedented in its superiority.

Shakespeare's use of Irish characters as belongings of the empire and his attribution of Irish characteristics to those who fall providentially for the benefit of the empire is part of a larger scheme to press the Irish culturally into the service of British imperial writing. Militaristic language has been used frequently to describe imperial cultural practices: Declan Kiberd writes that English educators never "expected Irish students of Shakespeare to treat his works like captured weapons which might one day be turned back upon the enemy."³² But literature is not a weapon that can be captured, because it is still in the hands of the empire as well. No writing remains in the exclusive control of anyone from the moment it leaves the author's hands. The same work is read with different agendas. The empire triumphs in an ending's order, even if, as Dollimore and Sinfield contend, that ending is a superficial reinforcement of an ideological framework and the subversive elements which are consumed or erased at the end were identified. The colony identifies with the subversion that is represented to authorize the force of that reinforcement. The writing that responds to the subversion both inhabits it and rejects the means of its representation. We are able to read them together. With the luxury of retrospect, we can examine the relationships between texts that are separated by time and distance but which stand side by side on our shelves. That luxury affords us the ability to find the means through which a work creates for the empire a colonial subject which is plural in its identity—both separating it from its origins and yet insisting upon them. And we can read for the response of the subject who is displaced from an autonomous home and kept in the periphery of a new home.

To do this, we need a more apt metaphor and model for reading, one of both separation and inclusion, one that positions the writer as both a member and an other. The military practice of impressment into service is more apt for this: the forced service of those whom the state thought would be useful to fill the ranks of the military in time of need. Press gangs live in popular imagination as roaming the streets and rooting through taverns to violently trap unsuspecting men and force them to join the military. The community of the ship was one of hierarchies and demanded service, like the ship of state and its administrators, volunteers, and victims. Kiberd uses a number of military metaphors to describe imperialist discourse, and briefly stumbles upon the press gang, writing that the English helped invent

Ireland, creating the situation from which modern Ireland emerged. Imperially, “Ireland was pressed into service as a foil to set off English virtues.”³³ While Kiberd is hinting at cultural practices, he is speaking more practically of Ireland as a physical place enlisted politically and economically. But the idea of Ireland as enlisted into Britain imaginatively and culturally needs expansion.

Rather than attempting to decide for myself which characters and structures represent “Irishness” in Shakespeare, I will defer to nationalist Irish writers of the twentieth century and allow them to decide for me. I will then limit the bulk of this study of cultural impressment of the Irish in Shakespeare to works which appear most prominently in the writing of the early twentieth-century Irish nationalist movement. These works are *Richard II*, *Henry V*, and *Hamlet*, in which Shakespeare demonstrates pragmatism winning over idealism, and characters from these plays are re-read and recycled in Irish writing in unexpected ways.

While Chapter One will seek to establish cultural impressment as a metaphor for the depiction of other societies in acts of service to imperial goals, subsequent chapters will investigate how this operates in the three major plays with which Irish responses to Shakespeare seems to be preoccupied.³⁴ Chapter Two will focus on the great English panegyric, *Henry V*, and investigate how it sets up a model of subservience to the English crown which includes all of the Celtic nations surrounding Britain. These holdings are arrayed in Henry’s captains, listed in the *dramatis personae* as “officers in the King’s army”: Fluellen, Jamy, and Macmorris the Irishman. This arrangement of captains impresses the Irish by representing English-occupied territories, specifically for this study in the character of MacMorris, cheerfully serving the ambitions of a king who is the very symbol of all that is English. Leaning on Sinfield’s questions about the invasion of France as a metaphor for Ireland, this chapter will also look into references to Henry as the pragmatic Englishman in Irish literature. Kiberd finds the “two major Irish stereotypes on the English national stage” to have been first “conflated by Shakespeare in the sketch of Captain Macmorris” from *Henry V*. Kiberd identifies them as “the threatening, vainglorious soldier” and the “feckless but cheerily reassuring servant,” recycled by Sean O’Casey and Samuel Beckett, whose plays this chapter will explore for their versions of servitude.³⁵

Service to national interests does not have to take place in the visible form of a servant character, but can instead be depicted through a character whose inability to rule originates in character flaws which are the same as those of an “othered” nation. *Richard II* has long been read as a play which moves from a medieval emphasis on spirituality to a Renaissance