

KWARTALNIK NEOFILOLOGICZNY, LXVII, 4/2020
DOI 10.24425/kn.2020.135201

PAWEŁ KAPTUR
(UNIwersytet Jana Kochanowskiego, Kielce)

“THIS SCEPTRED ISLE”. REFLECTIONS ON SHAKESPEARE AND BREXIT

ABSTRACT

During the Brexit campaign, both those who opted for Britain leaving the EU and those who wanted to remain in the structures of the Union referred to William Shakespeare to support the rightness of their preference. The question of how Shakespeare would have voted was raised by numerous journalists, writers and politicians who either tried to present Shakespeare as a national bard promoting British isolationism or a staunch adherent of England being an integral part of the European continent. The paper scrutinizes some aspects of Shakespeare's plays which indicate the writer's attitude towards the relations between England and Europe.

KEYWORDS: William Shakespeare, Brexit, European Union, isolationism, integration

STRESZCZENIE

W czasie kampanii brexitowej, zarówno ci, którzy opowiadali się za wyjściem Zjednoczonego Królestwa ze struktur Unii Europejskiej, jak i ci którzy chcieli w nich pozostać odwoływali się do twórczości Williama Szekspira, aby wesprzeć swoje racje. Pytanie „jak głosowałby Szekspir” podnoszone było przez licznych dziennikarzy, naukowców i polityków, którzy starali się przedstawić Szekspira albo jako narodowego barda promującego brytyjski izolacjonizm, albo jako zagorzałego zwolennika Anglii będącej integralną częścią kontynentu europejskiego. Niniejszy artykuł jest próbą analizy wybranych aspektów twórczości Williama Szekspira, które mogłyby wskazywać na stosunek dramaturga do relacji pomiędzy Anglią a Europą.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: William Szekspir, Brexit, Unia Europejska, izolacjonizm, integracja

INTRODUCTION

Being one of the most recognisable and incontestable icons of England, William Shakespeare became one of the most frequently and willingly quoted authors of all time, not only in the context of general truths and philosophical approaches to life but also in the context of the local, political issues which dominate life in his contemporary homeland. Undoubtedly, Brexit must be classified as one of the most ground-breaking events which shaped and overwhelmed the social and political

discourse in the 21st century Britain – a watershed in the liaison between England and Europe. The word Brexit became one of the most frequently used words in the world public debate and found its eternal place in English dictionaries. Panels of experts have struggled to explain the phenomenon not only from a political but also from a historical and cultural perspective. The divorce with Europe – as Brexit has often been colloquially labelled – has spurred a global discussion on the position of England on the geopolitical map of Europe and the world and even evoked associations with Henry VIII's Act of Supremacy of 1534, which marked the breaking of bonds with the Church of Rome. Opponents of the idea of Brexit have spread visions of mayhem, disorder and disintegration that the country will have to face when Britain leaves the structures of the European Union, whereas its supporters have presented figures and statistical data which were to illustrate the level of the country's financial exploitation by the central institutions in Brussels.

During the Brexit campaign and even after the referendum, both sides of the conflict turned to the authority of their greatest poet of all time to either prove their political beliefs or undermine the assumptions of their opponents. Parlett (2016: "The Sleeping Sovereign") claims that what actually happened in 2016 might have evoked some Shakespearean associations: "the political shockwaves sent through Whitehall following the decision to Brexit have drawn comparisons with Shakespeare's history plays. The flood of resignation, back-stabbings and power grabs would be quite at home amongst the upheavals and machinations dramatized in his tales of kings and their subjects".

What strengthened the global reception of Shakespeare in the context of Brexit is that the year of the planned referendum coincided with the 400th anniversary of the bard's death, which was widely celebrated across the globe. William Shakespeare became a tool in the hands of politicians, commentators, journalists and ordinary people who claimed that if Shakespeare had been alive, he would have voted their way. The dominant opinion was, however, that Shakespeare should mostly be treated as part of national heritage, a bastion of English patriotism and a eulogist of isolationism.

The present article aims at analysing selected aspects of Shakespeare's life and oeuvre in the light of Brexit, paying particular attention to the bard's views on Europe and European culture.

SHAKESPEARE AND EUROPE

In order to scrutinize the issue of Shakespeare's posthumous participation in the Brexit campaign and to guess his theoretical voting preferences, it is vital to comprehend his literary output from a rather all-encompassing and highly contextualized perspective pinpointing his outlook on Europe and England or,

more widely, Britain. Obviously, the usage of the term Great Britain in relation to Shakespeare would be anachronistic or misleading as it could be mistaken for the Kingdom of Great Britain which was created in the 18th century and hence should not be applied to the Elizabethan period. However, Great Britain or, more conveniently, Britain should not only be understood as a state but also a geographical entity, namely an island – the largest of the British Isles. The application of the geographical name of Britain as an island for the needs of the present article is highly relevant as Shakespeare refers in his texts not only to the state of England but also to the idea of Britain as an island, a natural fortress and a “sceptre isle”, and the later discussed concept of insularism requires the name of Britain to be used in the present paper. To avoid ambiguity, the term Great Britain will not be used in relation to Shakespeare and his times.

According to Peter Holland’s count, quoted by Michael Dobson (2016) in his article on “Shakespeare and Europe”, the playwright used the word “Europe” ten times and “Europa” three times. It seems that in his usage of the nouns “Europe” or “Europa” he does not distinguish or place a division line between both sides of the English Channel, although one exception might be the line from *Henry VI* (part 1), uttered by the Duke of Bedford getting ready to defend Plantagenet territory in France: “Ten thousand soldiers with me I will take,/Whose bloody deeds shall make all Europe quake.” Of course, the “bloody deeds” are addressed to France, the continental country with which England was in a permanent political conflict over territories, but what might surprise the reader in the given fragment is the phrase “all Europe” which apparently excludes Britain from its geographical structure drawing a firmly accentuated line between continental Europe and the British Isles. Interestingly enough, some Polish translations¹ of the text omit the word “Europe” and instead use the word “świat” (“world”) as if to suggest that what Shakespeare means by making “all Europe quake” is actually the intention to shock and impress the world with England’s heroic deeds. In such a reading, England’s belonging to the “world” does not have to be reiterated as it is obvious enough and the phrase might be read as to make all OTHER European nations quake, obviously excluding England. Whatever the interpretation is, the line from *Henry VI* is possibly the only example of a clear (at least lexical) separation of Britain and the continent. In the other twelve cases, Europe is “more or less synonymous to Christendom, an imagined territory to which even the most reprobate and irresponsible among Shakespeare’s compatriots emphatically belong” (Dobson 2016). As an example, Dobson gives the instance of John Falstaff announcing himself in *Henry IV*: “Jack Falstaff with my familiars/ John with my brothers and sisters/ and Sir John with all Europe”. In this case, the phrase “all Europe” does not evoke any doubts as it refers to the whole continent (or even the world) where Falstaff’s fame should spread, and there is no distinctive division drawn between England and Europe, although

¹ “Dziesięć tysięcy biorę z sobą Luda/ A świat zatrzwożą odwagi ich cuda” (translation by Leon Ulrich).

Europeans are not supposed to be familiar with Falstaff's boasting to the extent allowed to his "brothers and sisters" understood as his kinsmen. The Polish translation² of the phrase makes the context quite evident as it changes "all Europe" to "the rest of Europe" ("reszta Europy") implying that England is indeed a part of Europe, but Falstaff's fame is intended to be scattered across the rest of the geopolitical unity to which we all belong, that is Europe.

Shakespeare said that "all the world's a stage", but it would be much more accurate to state that it was mostly Europe that constituted and built the settings for most of his plays. Apart from England and Scotland, he casts his stories all over the continent: in Austria, Denmark, Spain, France, Spain, Italy, the Czech Republic, and Greece. His famous love stories were set in Verona, Messina, Vienna, Roussillon, Navarre, Sicily, Bohemia, Venice, Padua, Ephesus, and Troy. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1992: 70–71) in his "Shakespeare and no end" (1815) notices Shakespeare's uniqueness in being indeed an English poet but drawing vast inspirations from the world outside Britain:

The whole civilized world too brings its treasures to Shakespeare; Art and Science, Commerce and Industry, all bear him their gifts. Shakespeare's poems are a great animated fair, and it is to his own country that he owes his riches. For back of him is England, the sea-encircled and mist-covered country, whose enterprise reaches all the parts of the earth. The poet lives at a noble and important epoch, and presents all its glory and its deficiencies with great vivacity.

Even Ben Jonson reiterated Shakespeare's merits for the continent, writing these praising lines about Shakespeare in the First Folio of 1623: "Triumph my Britain, thou hast one to show/To whom all scenes of Europe homage owe". Dobson (2016) emphasizes that Shakespeare's works cannot be treated in any other way but in the context of the Renaissance, which was undoubtedly not English but a European cultural phenomenon and concept: "Shakespeare was a product of the European Renaissance, and he grew up in the knowledge that the territory in which he lived had originally been Britannia, a mere province of something much larger and more significant, the Roman empire". The reference to Britain being a "province of something much larger" seems to be an unusually accurate comparison in the Brexit circumstances as the whole issue concentrates around the question of Britain being either a part ("a province") of the European Union as a "larger" structure or a separate, independent and detached entity. Dobson seems to have no doubts as to how Shakespeare perceived the position of Britain in Europe: "I would add that it is even more misleading to suggest that Shakespeare thought of Britain as anything other than part of a larger geopolitical entity called Europe" (2016).

This idea is confirmed not only by Shakespeare's settings of his plays crisscrossing the whole European continent and the bard's Renaissance spirit, but also by

² "Dżon Falstaf dla moich przyjaciół/ Dżon dla sióstr i braci, i sir Dżon dla reszty Europy" (translation by Jankowski).

the language he used and mastered. It is widely known that it was the playwright who greatly contributed to the evolution from the middle to the modern English language by introducing approximately three thousand new words to the common use. The neologisms he implemented in the English language were, to a large extent, borrowings from other European languages. The grammatical flexibility of the Early Modern English provided an excellent opportunity for the bard to take advantage of the European linguistic heritage and enrich his native language both for his literary work and for posterity. Greenblatt (2016) precisely underlines this phenomenon as a proof of Shakespeare's high awareness of England's past relying on multiple foreign influences, its present shape resulting from the historical invasions and England's being a part of the multicultural entity called Europe:

The English language is a fascinating, weird language precisely because of the Norman invasion and the fact that instead of simply displacing Anglo-Saxon with French, they doubled up, tripled up, got multiple words for things. An interesting feature of Shakespeare is the unbelievable linguistic richness, which builds upon English as a result of multiple languages, invasions, migrations and so on.

It appears then that Shakespeare was considerably mindful of the significance of that European heritage which had built up and influenced English culture and society. He realizes that England lies on the foundations of foreign invasions and immigration and he willingly comments on the issues of otherness in his plays being an integral part of Englishness. Bryant argues that Shakespeare was certainly not a xenophobe and he gives the example of *The Comedy of Errors* which is based on an absurd ban on Syracusan migrants entering the city of Ephesus. He also strongly emphasizes the fact that we the readers "sympathise with Perdita abandoned in Bohemia in *The Winter's Tale*, Celia who dresses up as Aliena in *As You Like It* and Prospero in *The Tempest* because they are castaways in a strange land" (Bryant 2016). Indeed, Shakespeare never shows any fear of people from different and remote cultures and lands but instead he seems to be "delighted in the clash of cultures" (Bryant 2016). The critic also evokes the example of Othello – a black man who falls in love with Desdemona, a daughter of a Venetian senator or of Shylock – a stereotypical Jew from *The Merchant of Venice*, who says:

If you prick us with a pin, don't we bleed?
If you tickle us, don't we laugh?
If you poison us, don't we die?
And if you treat us badly, won't we try to get revenge?
If we're like you in everything else, we'll resemble you in that respect. (*The Merchant of Venice*, Act III, Scene I)

The above quotation is especially resounding in the context of Brexit which was spurred mostly by the growing reluctance and aversion of the English people

towards immigrants. Professor Dobson (2016) also relies upon the example of Othello and, to be more precise, of Iago "whose name suggests he is of Spanish origin, despite serving among Venetian and Florentine comrades [...] but nobody in Shakespeare's Venice asks Iago to show them a visa or a work permit". Dobson (2016) adds to it, recalling the French doctor Caius in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*: "In Shakespeare's England, as in ours, the health service seems to depend on imported labour, and in *The Merry Wives*, nobody suggests for a moment that Dr Caius doesn't have at least as much the right to live and work in Windsor as do the Fords and the Pages". Remembering the above mentioned scenes from the bard's plays and keeping in mind the words of Shylock, which underline the ultimate respect and equal treatment for all people regardless of their origin and nationality, it would be a challenging task not to recognize Shakespeare's invaluable contribution to building the integration of European nations and cultures and to dispelling the fears of immigration making his readers aware not of national entities but of cohabitations of people representing otherness. Such a reception of the playwright's attitude towards Europe does not allow us to state that Shakespeare was a staunch proponent of the insular version of Britain and that he would have theoretically voted to support Brexit.

Bryant continues his article in *The Guardian*, reiterating Shakespeare's awareness of the necessity to integrate, rather than to dismantle European unity. The author supports his stand by evoking the example of *Henry V*, which ends with a peace treaty with France, by recalling the instance of Coriolanus, who prefers to sign a treaty with Rome rather than have his city destroyed even though he is to be killed by his own people for such an act, and by emphasizing that *Cymbeline* ends with social joy when after a period of insular nationalism, the English king agrees to pay tribute to the Roman Empire (Bryant 2016). Even if the above given examples of Shakespeare's desire for closer European integration and peace can be reduced by some readers to the mere argument implying that historical plays generally teem with random fictitious turning points and events which cannot be interpreted in terms of the author's personal political preferences, it would be a rather demanding challenge to find any other fragments in the bard's works (with a sole exception of Gaunt's speech in *Richard II*) in which the Englishmen are encouraged to isolate from Europe and stay hostile towards other powers of the continent, either in a diplomatic or a military sense. The ultimate stance of Shakespeare's will to reinforce the integration between nations and cultures of Europe is clearly presented in a speech for a never-produced play about the life of Thomas More, which Bryant recalls and accentuates in his article: "Go you to France and Flanders/ To any German province, Spain or Portugal, Nay, anywhere that not adheres to England/ Why you must needs be strangers" (*Sir Thomas More*, Act I, Scene IV).

SHAKESPEARE IN THE BREXIT CAMPAIGN

When browsing through the Internet, one may come across a number of pictures, cartoons and memes suggesting Shakespeare's potential stand in the referendum. One of them is a parody of the First Folio presenting David Cameron disguised as Shakespeare with the EU stars on his forehead as the author of the "First Folio EU Leaflet being a Comedie, Historie & Tragedie which costeth millions of guineas" and it includes "As EU Like It, The Comedy of Errors...". This comes as an obvious example of a pro-Brexit usage of Shakespeare's fame which reiterates the ridiculousness of the situation in which Britain's being the part of the European Union is forced to do whatever way "As EU Like It". This parody of Shakespeare's title *As You Like It* implies Britain's long lasting dependence on the European Union, and Cameron seems to be the chief figure to be blamed for that state, especially when one looks at the years of his political activities through the prism of another Shakespearian title *The Comedy of Errors*. When juxtaposed with "As EU Like It" and the suggestion that the Prime Minister's foreign policy in terms of the relations with the EU was a combination of a comedy, tragedy and history, the overall picture can be clearly read as a voice calling to leave the European Union.

On the other hand, there is another image on the web depicting only the head of the bard with the distorted title "As EU Like It". It does not provide the recipient with any other allusive line or picture and hence could be interpreted in two ways – either again ironically implying Britain's political dependence on the EU's decisions, and at the same time the EU's exploitation of British finances, or a simple message advocating the idea that indeed Britain should do "as EU like it" and remain in its structures. However ambiguous the image may seem, it generates a rather negative sense of the EU's supremacy over independent countries, and therefore the picture was most often disseminated among pro-Brexit activists.

Another usage of Shakespeare's work in relation to Brexit is conspicuous in a cartooned meme with Shakespeare's image and a famous quote from *Hamlet*, which is adapted to the current situation: "To be cuckolded, or not to be cuckolded. Brexit". According to the Urban Dictionary, the word "cuckolded" is "synonymous with cuckolded" but also, in the second meaning, it may be understood as "a term used to describe one who was defeated in a particularly lampooning way." It is again not clearly stated who is supposed to be "cuckolded" or who is the one to "cuck". The full phrase, however, is accompanied by the key word Brexit, which still gives the poster some ambiguity. Are the British people supposed to vote for Brexit because otherwise they will be "cuckolded" – deceived or defeated by the European Union, or are they supposed to believe that the Brexit idea – to leave the EU – is all a way to "cuck", to cheat the public opinion. No matter whether Brexit represents a potential threat to the stability of Great Britain or a way to political and social improvement, Shakespeare was deliberately entangled into the current debate.

The above mentioned examples of Shakespeare's presence in the Brexit campaign still seem marginal as they are limited to a humorous reception of a relatively small audience and are not expected to exert real impact on the results of the referendum. The most conspicuous sign of using Shakespeare and his literature in the Brexit campaign before the referendum of 2016 is tangible in the Leave.eu organisation poster, which, together with Shakespeare's image and an English flag in the background, presents a quote from his *King John*:

This England never did,
Nor never shall,
Lie at the proud foot
Of a conqueror,
Nought shall make us rue,
If England to itself
Do rest but true (*King John*, Act 5, Scene VII)

The above quote, being only a fragment of the full speech delivered at the end of the play by Philip Faulconbridge, bastard nephew of King John, was accepted by the proponents of Brexit as an invocation of English patriotism and independence and widely publicised prior to the referendum. Analysing the given fragment, it seems quite apparent that its major aim was to arouse the sensation of England being independent of outer forces never lying "at the proud foot of the conqueror" and able to withstand the menace if it remains "true" to itself. The fragment seems accurate and explicit in the current political context as the pro-Brexit campaigners often reiterated that the European Union should be treated as a continental conqueror trying to impose its rights and rules on Britain forcing it to yield to their supremacy. In such a context, Shakespeare indeed appears as a nationalist and a patriot calling his natives to remain "true" to themselves and never to bend before others and consequently such an approach could have generated the desired effect. In order to comprehend Shakespeare's idea borrowed and used by the supporters of Brexit, it is vital to read the full version of Faulconbridge's speech in *King John*:

This England never did,
Nor never shall,
Lie at the proud foot
Of a conqueror,
But when it first did help to wound itself.
Now these her princes are come home again,
Come the three corners of the world in arms,
And we shall shock them.
Nought shall make us rue,
If England to itself
Do rest but true (*King John*, Act V, Scene VII)

Indeed, the speech might be perceived as a manifestation of “English invulnerability [...] and patriotic confidence [...]” (Ennis 2007: 214). There are, however, lines which have been omitted by the Leave campaigners and which provide Shakespeare’s words with an important meaning and put them in a slightly altered context. The line “But when it first did help to wound itself” clearly suggests that while England is powerful enough to resist its outer enemy, its primary weakness lies in its self-destruction. England’s history abounds in the “products of an internal strife – England wounding (and healing) herself” (Ennis 2007: 214). The line must have been deliberately eliminated from Faulconbridge’s speech by the pro-Brexit campaigners as it could provoke a distorted reinterpretation of the speech and the words could possibly fail to achieve their intended effect. Reading the full fragment in the current political and social context, that is the Brexit campaign, England hurting itself might have been interpreted in two ways: it is wounding itself at present by being the member of the European Union largely financing the organisation, or it will wound itself if it leaves the EU forever. In order to avoid the risk of misinterpretation, the Brexiters apparently decided to cut out the contextualizing line, especially that one of the most famous and widely-presented cartoons displayed by anti-Brexit campaigners was a picture of a leg and a Union Jack shoed foot being shot by its owner. This common and popular image of Britain actually wounding itself by leaving the EU could perfectly dovetail Shakespeare’s words uttered by Faulconbridge and therefore, it was safe to eliminate the ambiguity of interpretation and a potential convergence of associations.

In the referendum of 23rd June 2016, nearly 52% of British people voted to leave the European Union. Shakespeare was yet again recalled to prove the rightness and legitimacy of Brexit. As William Keegan (2018) stated in his article: “we know that Brexiters want to recapture a lost Britain; and few Britons can rival William Shakespeare in the patriotism stakes”. Brexit supporting politicians suggested that Shakespeare as a “national” poet “would have endorsed strictly insular version of British nationalism” (Dobson 2016), and to prove it they quoted John of Gaunt’s widely known speech in Shakespeare’s *Richard II*.

This royal throne of kings, this sceptered isle,
 This earth of majesty, this seat of Mars,
 This other Eden, demi-paradise,
 This fortress built by Nature for herself
 Against infection and the hand of war,
 This happy breed of men, this little world,
 This precious stone set in the silver sea,
 Which serves it in the office of a wall
 Or as a moat defensive to a house,
 Against the envy of less happier lands,—
 This blessed plot, this earth, this realm, this England.
 This nurse, this teeming womb of royal kings,

Feared by their breed and famous for their birth,
 Renowned for their deeds as far from home
 For Christian service and true chivalry
 As is the sepulchre in stubborn Jewry
 Of the world's ransom, blessed Mary's son.
 This land of such dear souls, this dear, dear land,
 Dear for her reputation through the world,
 Is now leased out - I die pronouncing it -
 Like to a tenement or pelting farm.
 England, bound in with the triumphant sea,
 Whose rocky shore beats back the envious siege
 Of watery Neptune, is now bound in with shame,
 With inky blots and rotten parchment bonds.
 That England that was wont to conquer others
 Hath made a shameful conquest of itself. (*Richard II*, Act II, Scene II)

Many believe that the given fragment is an undeniable proof of Shakespeare's patriotic or even nationalistic views on the relations between England and Europe. Indeed, when quoted out of a context and in a fragmented, ruptured way, it may seem as an invocation of Englishness, manifestation of Britain's insular independence on the European continent. "This other Eden" or the "demi paradise" apparently results from the fact that Britain is an island, a "fortress built by Nature for herself", which defends its people against "infection and the hand of war". Such a reading of the quoted fragment might build an appealing depiction of the English bard as of a defender of England's safety against exterior enemy forces, a propagator of the island's separation from the outer world as well as a progenitor of Brexit ideas. There are, however, contextual elements which seriously distort such an attitude. First and foremost, the passage concentrates around a speech delivered by John of Gaunt – a Flanders born claimant to the throne of Castile and, moreover, Gaunt's speech relies on a text written by a French speaking chronicler Jean Froissart who lived in the Holy Roman Empire. Hence, its alleged Englishness and nationalistic undertone could be easily questioned. Moreover, the line suggesting that England is now "leased out" might be read as a reference to Richard II's plans to fund his wars in Ireland by leasing parcels to wealthy noblemen. Therefore, "this sceptered isle" being free from outside danger and harm, and being the conqueror in the past, "Hath made a shameful conquest of itself" by corruption. Wilson (2017) implies that what emerges from the speech is that "nationalism is the infection it pretends to fight, in the autoimmune crisis that is Shakespeare's take on the Wars of the Roses". So yet again, the above quotation from *Richard II* could be interpreted from two different perspectives: as a praise of England's invincibility and power over foreign forces or as a warning against the self-destructive corruption and nationalism, which builds a parallel to the previously quoted line from King John – "If England to itself/Do rest but true". If the inner conflict spurred by the War of the

Roses is devastating and “infecting” England, then Brexit – which has divided the people of Britain almost in two even halves – could also be treated, in however exaggerated a way, as a social civil war of the 21st century, which may lead England to the point where it “Hath made a shameful conquest of itself”. Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1992: 140) in his “Lectures on the Characteristics of Shakspear” (1813) comments on Gaunt’s speech: “This speech of Gaunt is most beautiful; the propriety of putting so long a speech into the mouth of an old dying man might easily be shown, it thence partook of the nature of prophecy”. Then Coleridge quotes the other famous lines from *Richard II*: “Methinks I am a prophet new inspired/And thus expiring, do foretell of him”. Coleridge’s remark suggests that Gaunt’s expiring life only weakens the initial strength of his speech and undermines the probability of the prophecy’s fulfilment. Despite that, Coleridge (1992: 139) admits that *Richard II* was indeed “to make his countrymen more patriotic; to make Englishmen proud of being Englishmen”. It seems that Shakespeare, however, made an effort to make his countrymen proud by addressing their historical and present glory of England rather than by denying its European cultural and geographical origin and lineage. This means that Shakespeare’s words in the current political circumstances might be taken advantage of both by the pro- and anti-Brexit campaigners, but when highly contextualized, the words seem to speak more ardently for the Remain rather than the Leave supporters.

CONCLUSION

Without doubt, Brexit has dominated the public debate in recent years. For some, it has become a unique chance to reinforce and accentuate British patriotism and insularity, while others have treated the phenomenon as the greatest rupture and split within the nation in history. Both sides of the still unresolved conflict have attempted to persuade the public of the rightness of their beliefs both before and after the referendum in 2016 by spreading both catastrophic and utopian future visions and often referring to Britain’s glorious past. Some have done this (as we have seen) by reaching for the country’s greatest national pride and authority – William Shakespeare. However preposterous it might seem to theorize about a potential political preference demonstrated in the current context of someone deceased four hundred years ago, placing the bard in the Brexit circumstance has undoubtedly spurred an interesting cultural debate. Obviously, the key concept was not to present any incontestable judgements as to Shakespeare’s voting side, but to spotlight the continuity of British heritage, and to precipitate the discussion about the Island’s lineage within the European continent. Having looked at the playwright as the product of the Renaissance – an Italian born cultural, philosophical and social phenomenon which spread across the old continent – and having scrutinized Shakespeare’s inclination to promote otherness, integration, tolerance and

multicultural societies rather than British insularity, hostility towards others and the idea of Britain being a "fortress built by Nature for herself", one may come to the conclusion that there is not any rational reason for placing the playwright in the same box as the pro-Brexit politicians and the Brits who voted to leave the European Union. Bryant (2016) puts a firm and ultimate stamp on the deliberations of Shakespeare's theoretical Brexit preference: "The bard would not have pondered whether to Brexit or not to Brexit. His plays showed his love for Europe and a dislike of rampant nationalism".

REFERENCES

- BRYANT, C. (2016, April 21): "This sceptic isle would most displease pro-Europe", *The Guardian*, retrieved on 12-10-2019 from: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/apr/21/how-love-eu-count-william-shakespeare-remainbrexit>.
- COLERIDGE, S. T. (1992): "Lectures on the Characteristics of Shakespeare", in: BATE J., (ed.): *The Romantics on Shakespeare*, London, 129–147.
- CONRAD, P. (2018, September 29): "Shakespeare in the age of Brexit and Trump: the play's still the thing", *The Guardian*, retrieved on 10-10-2019 from: <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2018/sep/29/shakespeare-in-the-age-of-brexit-and-trump-peter-conrad-theatre-of-our-world>.
- DOBSON, M. (2016, July 8): "What did Europe mean to Shakespeare?", *Voices*, retrieved on 20-08-2019 from: <https://www.britishcouncil.org/voices-magazine/what-did-europe-mean-shakespeare>.
- ENNIS, D. J. (2007): "Invasion of the afterpieces: Richard Brinsley Sheridan and Frederick Pylon 1778–79", in: ENNIS, J./ SLAGLE, J. B. (eds.): *Prologues, Epilogues, Curtian-Raisers, and Afterpieces. The Rest of the Eighteen-Century London Stage*, Newark, 214–238.
- GOETHE, J. W. (1992): "Shakespeare and no end", in: BATE J., (ed.): *The Romantics on Shakespeare*, London, 68–77.
- GREENBLATT, S. (2016: August 14): "Would Shakespeare support Brexit?", interview by Nadina Štefančič", *Versopolis.com*, retrieved on 03-10-2019 from: <https://www.versopolis.com/people/conversation/175/would-shakespeare-support-brexit>.
- KEEGAN, W. (2018, April 22): "Shakespeare's scept'r'd isle has always been a part of Europe", *The Guardian*, retrieved on 25-08-2019 from: <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2018/apr/22/shakespeare-sceptrd-isle-part-europe-brexit>.
- PARLETT, J. (2016): *How to Brexit*, London.
- SHAKESPEARE, W. (1999): *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*, Great Britain.
- Urban Dictionary, retrieved on 16-10-2019 from: <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=cucked>.
- WILSON, R. (2017, April 23): "To leave or not to leave", *The New European*, retrieved on 01-10-2019 from: <https://kingstonshakespeareseminar.wordpress.com/2017/04/23/richardwilson-the-bard-on-brexit>.