

# Építész a kőfejtőben Architect in the Quarry



Tanulmányok  
Dávidházi Péter  
hatvanadik születésnapjára

Studies Presented to  
Péter Dávidházi  
On His Sixtieth Birthday

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(Szókratész kőbe faragja a három gráciát) című metszete alapján készült.  
A metszet Johann Joachim Winckelmann *Gedanken über die Nachahmung der  
griechischen Werke in der Malerei und Bildhauerkunst* című értekezésének első,  
1755-ös kiadásában jelent meg először.

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ZOLTÁN MÁRKUS

*Speaking “The Voice of England”*

*Shakespeare Quotations as Cultural Appropriations in  
London during World War II*

In an article from 1942 in *The Daily Express* the formidable theater critic, James Agate, lectures his readers by pointing out that those who speak English frequently quote Shakespeare whether they recognize it or not:

We all talk Shakespeare without knowing it, so why not read him? You are talking Shakespeare when you use such phrases as ay, there's the rub, at one fell swoop, sweets to the sweet, a rose by any other name, a charmed life, thereby hangs a tale, out-Heroding Herod, begging description, a trick worth two of that... But the list would fill a column.<sup>1</sup>

Either due to Agate's intention or else to slipshod editing, the quotation marks delimiting Shakespeare's words are missing. This absence – accidental or not – powerfully illustrates that these Shakespearian phrases are not assigned to their author-proprietor any longer but belong to the public domain.

To demonstrate his point even more vigorously, Agate offers a parable from World War I: “During the last war a British Tommy was heard to say, ‘I don't *hear* French, I only speak it. It goes like this: «Bon jour, mademoiselle. Voulez-vous promenez avec moi?»’ The average

<sup>1</sup> James AGATE, “A Book for Every Week,” *The Daily Express*, 25 April, 1942.

man takes Shakespeare for an airing without knowing the name of his companion.”<sup>2</sup> Obviously, those who speak English often ventriloquize Shakespeare without knowing that they are actually doing so. Agate’s article shows that the Bard’s words are with us even if we do not acknowledge their origin. A similar instance of recognition is a letter “To the Editor” in *The Daily Telegraph* pointing out that the “earliest use” of the phrase “take it” (as in “We can take it!” or “London can take it!”) can be found in *Hamlet* (Act 2, Scene 2): “Swounds, I should take it: for it cannot be / But I am pigeon-liver’d and lack gall / To make oppression bitter...”<sup>3</sup> This “letter to the editor” also supports the prevalent notion that ‘Shakespeare said it all and said it first...’

These examples reassign Shakespeare’s words from the realm of the public to that of the private: they “restitute,” as it were, the Bard’s “collectivized” property. By doing so, they reconfirm the status of Shakespeare as a point of linguistic origin, as the ultimate Author. In several of her works, Margreta de Grazia argues that the function of quotation marks gradually changed in the course of the 18<sup>th</sup> century from marking generally available and instructive “sententiae” and “commonplaces” (whose origin was not of primary significance) into serving as indicators of “copyright writ small” “cordoning off the locution signal: *Private Property. No Trespassing.*”<sup>4</sup> De Grazia underlines that the change in the status and indication of quotations was parallel with (if not instigated by) the birth of the modern concept of the author. In the quoted examples from wartime London, on the other hand, the reverse of this process is taking place: by a linguistic “enclosure,” a pre-(or post-)modern state of affairs is rectified. This act of “re-

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> James MERRYWEATHER, “‘We Can Take It.’ To The Editor,” *The Daily Telegraph*, September 12, 1942.

<sup>4</sup> Margreta de GRAZIA, “Shakespeare in Quotation Marks,” = Jean I. Marsden (ed.), *The Appropriation of Shakespeare: Post-Renaissance Reconstructions of the Works and the Myth*, New York: St. Martin’s, 1991, 57-72; also *Shakespeare Verbatim*, Oxford: Clarendon, 1991, esp. 214-220; and “Sanctioning Voice: Quotation Marks, the Abolition of Torture, and the Fifth Amendment” = Martha Woodmansee and Peter Jaszi (eds.), *The Construction of Authorship: Textual Appropriation in Law and Literature*, Durham: Duke University Press, 1994, 281-302.

author(iz)ing” Shakespeare’s words successfully underpins the myth of the omnipotent Author-Shakespeare. Recognizing these phrases as exclusively Shakespeare’s, therefore, also entails the espousal of the Shakespeare cult or myth and its cultural and political implications of English patriotism.

Beyond unacknowledged Shakespearian phrases, Shakespeare was, of course, very often also conjured up by acknowledged quotations. Jean R. Freedman observes about London during World War II that, “the words of Shakespeare... were everywhere.”<sup>5</sup> To support her argument, she presents several examples such as Shakespearian puns in the titles of the Crown Film Unit’s films (*Thereby Hangs a Tail* and *Tell Me Where Is Fancy Bread* [sic]), Anthony Eden’s radio broadcast urging volunteers “to make assurance doubly sure” (14 May, 1940), a quote from a letter of a couple in the East End to their daughter, “If an operation is necessary, ’twere well it were done quickly” (10 February, 1943), and another quote from the diary of Vere Hodson from Kensington, “Cowards die many times before their deaths!” (10 October, 1940).<sup>6</sup> Taken from a representative cross-section of wartime English society, these examples underline that Shakespearian references were plentiful in private and public discourse alike.

Supplying ammunition to a diverse rhetorical arsenal, Shakespeare’s words were quoted standing alone, embedded in texts, or in parodical distortions. As we have seen, James Agate had a particular penchant for invoking Shakespeare: on one occasion, for instance, he closed his brief account of an open-air production of *The Taming of the Shrew* in the “leafy Southwark” by adjusting Shakespeare to the experience of the Blitz,

Were W. S. alive today I feel he would have altered a couple of lines. Petruchio is asking Kate’s father if he thinks a little din can daunt him: “Have I not heard great ordnance in the field, / And heaven’s artillery thunder in the skies?” I feel that W. S. would have written: “Have I not heard the anti-aircraft roar, / And Messerschmitts dive-bombing from the skies?”<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Jean R. FREEDMAN, *Whistling in the Dark: Memory and Culture in Wartime London*, Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1999, 53 and 34.

<sup>6</sup> FREEDMAN 1999, 53–54.

<sup>7</sup> James AGATE, “The Bard Re-Writ,” *The Daily Express*, 5 July, 1941.

Even if the words are not particularly Shakespearian, the iambic pentameter remains almost intact.

Such facetious appropriations of the Bard were, however, occasionally frowned upon. On May 1, 1941, *The Daily Telegraph* reports that “Lovers of Shakespeare expressed amazement... when they heard that some of the poet’s lyrics, set to swing music and sung by a crooner, were broadcast by the B.B.C. to Germany on Shakespeare’s birthday.”<sup>8</sup> The three audacious hits were popular Shakespearian classics: “It was a lover and his lass...” [*As You Like It*; Act 5, Scene 3], “Blow, blow, thou winter wind...” [*As You Like It*; Act 2, Scene 7], and “O mistress mine...” [*Twelfth Night*; Act 2, Scene 3]. All three were crooned by Marion Mann accompanied by Bob Crossley’s “Bobcats”.

The event was judged to be so scandalous that it was discussed even in the British Parliament: a Socialist M. P. posed a question to the Minister of Information (Duff Cooper) regarding “the seemliness of presenting such versions of Shakespeare from his own land, and on his own day, to a people who have never concealed their respect for his genius.”<sup>9</sup> In other words, the sacrilege of broadcasting crooning Shakespeare was “unseemly” for several reasons. First, it was uncouth to have broadcast this kind of adaptation of the Bard’s words in the first place and, worse, to broadcast it on the Bard’s birthday (i.e. on St. George’s day). But the chief reason for its being a major embarrassment was that it was transmitted to the *Germans*. The M.P. who raised the issue focused exactly on this aspect in the second part of his question in which he asked whether the Minister of Information was “satisfied that this kind of broadcast assists our propaganda efforts.”<sup>10</sup> The ultimate question, therefore, was whether “crooning Shakespeare” was good propaganda or not.

In his response, Harold Nicholson, the Parliamentary Secretary of the Ministry of Information, argued that the B.B.C. German program honored the day by a “special talk” and by “a commentary on the Stratford-upon-Avon celebrations.” In the “lighter part” of the program, “which was especially designed to cater for those in Germany who

<sup>8</sup> “Shakespeare in Swing Music: Criticism of B.B.C.,” *The Daily Telegraph*, 1 May, 1941.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> “Jazz Shakespeare: Not Good Propaganda,” *The Daily Telegraph*, 2 May, 1941.

appreciated jazz music which they could not get on their own stations, some records were played from an English theatrical production which contained lyrics from Shakespeare's plays."<sup>11</sup> Having clarified all of this, however, he conceded that, "the answer to the last part of the question was in the negative." In other words, he did not think that crooning Shakespeare was good propaganda at all.

This episode illuminates some of the political and social dynamics of the Shakespeare myth in wartime England. The fact that the sound recordings of crooning Shakespeare existed indicates that there had been an increasing tendency to "experiment" with Shakespeare and to "popularize" the Bard. That these records were played on the air further suggested that some people had judged these songs adequate for the British Broadcasting Corporation and for what it represented. (Some might even have thought that "crooning Shakespeare," after all, was good propaganda.) The scandal demonstrates a clash between a "popularized" and an "official" Shakespeare image. "Crooning Shakespeare" (originating from light entertainment: "bad propaganda") was contrasted with and judged against "state Shakespeare" (representing dominant ideology: "good propaganda"). These sharp distinctions, however, were increasingly blurred in the course of the war: the government (and the Ministry of Information in particular) slowly realized that for propaganda to be effective it should appeal to the masses. In the "People's War" the people's taste should prevail, providing that this "taste" does not interfere with the war-effort.<sup>12</sup> The growing popularity of "popular Shakespeare" was a direct outcome of these readjustments of Shakespeare reception during World War II.

At the beginning of the war Shakespeare was most typically evoked through a handful of "serious" morale-boosting quotations. These patriotic "oldies" were frequently broadcast on the wireless and printed in the newspapers. In the dailies, they were printed customarily in separate boxes as parts of special quotation series variously called e. g. "Old and True" in *The Times*, "A Message for Today" in *The Daily Telegraph*, and "X Words for Today" or "X Words for Comfort" (X indicating

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. This scandal of "crooning Shakespeare" was also covered by *The Evening Standard* (30 April, 1941) and *The Times* (2 May, 1941).

<sup>12</sup> See Marion YASS, *This Is Your War: Home Front Propaganda in the Second World War*, London: Her Majesty's Stationary Office, 1983, 28.

the number of the actual words in the quote) in *The Daily Express*. Predictably enough, the king's "Crispin Crispian" speech from *Henry V* was one of the most frequently circulated Shakespeare quotations of all.<sup>13</sup> Another favorite passage was, no less predictably, Faulconbridge's oration at the conclusion of *King John*. As a reader of *The Times* pointed out in 1940, "Most of all his plays, Shakespeare's *King John* might have been written to-day:"<sup>14</sup>

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. Naught shall make us rue,  
If England to itself do rest but true.

(Act 5, Scene 7)

Most probably, however, the No. 1 patriotic "hit" was John of Gaunt's deathbed prophecy from *Richard II*:

Methinks I am a prophet new inspired...  
This royal throne of kings, this sceptred isle,  
This earth of majesty, this seat of Mars,  
This other Eden, demi-paradise,  
This fortress built by Nature for herself  
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,

<sup>13</sup> See e.g. "94 Words for Today (St. Crispin's Day)," *The Daily Express*, 25 October, 1941, or *Henry at Agincourt*, radio programme, produced by Peter Creswell, BBC Homeservice: Sunday, 28 February, 1943.

<sup>14</sup> R. W. LIVINGSTONE, "Shakespeare To-day: To the Editor of *The Times*," *The Times*, 23 July, 1940.

This nurse, this teeming womb of royal kings,  
 Fear'd by their breed and famous by their birth,  
 Renownéd 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, blesséd Mary's Son:  
 This land of such dear souls, this dear, dear land,  
 Dear for her reputation through the world,  
 Is now leas'd 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.  
 Ah! would the scandal vanish with my life,  
 How happy then were my ensuing death.

(Act 2, Scene 1)<sup>15</sup>

The iconic nature of these lines is highlighted by the curious fact that no less than three British feature films produced during World War II borrowed their titles from this deathbed passage: *This England* (1941; dir. David Macdonald; renamed, for obvious reasons, as *Our Heritage* in Scotland), *The Demi-Paradise* (1943; dir. Anthony Asquith), and *This Happy Breed* (1944; dir. David Lean; based on Noel Coward's play of the same title).<sup>16</sup>

The renowned Shakespeare scholar and (somewhat less renowned) actor and playwright, George Wilson Knight, also turned to this passage when he named his literary and theatrical undertaking of almost two decades "This Sceptred Isle". In its various manifestations, Wilson

<sup>15</sup> As quoted in George Wilson KNIGHT, *This Sceptred Isle: Shakespeare's Message for England at War*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1940, 4-5. See also S. R. LITTLEWOOD, "Birthday of an Englishman," *The Daily Sketch*, 23 April, 1941.

<sup>16</sup> See James CHAPMAN, *The British at War: Cinema, State, and Propaganda, 1939-1945*, London: I. B. Tauris, 1998. 233.

Knight's project offered a selection of patriotic quotations linked by his own narrative and commentaries. Although the Chancellors' Professor of English at Trinity College, Toronto, Knight found himself stranded on "This Sceptred Isle" of Britain during the war, and in the summer of 1940 he gave a "lecture recital" of the same title to the "People's National Theatre" at the Tavistock Theater and later to the Poetry Society of London. In the same year he also published the text of this recital. In July, 1941, he presented a short season of an expanded program of "This Sceptred Isle" at the Westminster Theater. This recital series became the basis for another book, *The Olive and the Sword* (1944). Eventually a further revision was published in his *Sovereign Flower* in 1958.

The 1940 edition of *This Sceptred Isle* has the subtitle "Shakespeare's Message for England at War" but it is evident that what the reader will find in this booklet is in fact Wilson Knight's message rather than Shakespeare's. The hurried introduction draws fast parallels between Shakespeare's time and the present, and points out that Shakespeare has "a very clear sense of a compulsion laid on England not only to attain, and maintain, unity, but to be, in a yet deeper way, *true to herself*. She has a part to play on the world-stage which she must not falsify."<sup>17</sup> In Wilson Knight's interpretation, therefore, Shakespeare's message is twofold: internal unity and external dominance, patriotic submission to the *status quo* at home and classic imperialism and colonialism abroad. Having defined Shakespeare's ideological message in such a truncated and definitive form, the mysterious appeal of the Bard's words is touched upon:

There is something magical about fine words; and I suggest that, in hard days like these we are going through now, we might do well to read some of Shakespeare's mighty passages and let his golden phrases burn deep into our minds and souls. More, we might practice reading them aloud. It does not matter whether anyone is listening or not. In speaking them make frequent changes of voice, from high to low and back again; and, generally start quietly, but let the sounds roll out more powerfully about three-quarters of the way through any long speech. Treated like this, Shakespeare's poetry has a quite surprising effect. One lives for a few minutes its superb assurance.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>17</sup> *This Sceptred Isle*, 2.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

What Wilson Knight describes here is an almost metaphysical invocation of the Bard, a kind of transubstantiation that is at the heart of every act of quoting a passage. Under the spell of the magic of the text, the quoter is merged with the quoted, the speaker identifies with the Bard. As Marjorie Garber asks, “Who is speaking when we speak in quotation?”<sup>19</sup>

For one, we could dismiss this question with another question, the Beckettian-Foucauldian “What matter who is speaking?” From the point of view of cultural appropriations, this issue, however, does have relevance: it matters that simultaneously both Wilson Knight speaks through Shakespeare and “Shakespeare” (or the cultural tradition short-handed as the Shakespeare myth) speaks through Wilson Knight. And the more fervently Wilson Knight claims that he presents the “true” Shakespeare, the more obvious it becomes that it is he himself who is speaking.

Quotation is clearly a tricky device. Rhetoricians of the Antiquity warned against quoting famous people because this practice did not influence “logos” but “ethos:” it did not affect the faculties of reason but appealed to reverence. Today the technique of quoting shorter sections from a literary work is criticized because it tends to yank passages out of their context, thus falsifying their “meaning” both within the work as a whole<sup>20</sup> and within the historical period in which the work has been placed or was created. The current condemnation of quotations from famous literary “loci” is fueled by the recognition that quotations create meanings that are frequently alien or contradictory to the contexts from which they originate.

Taking heed of the main thrust of the arguments that we need to be deeply suspicious of Shakespearean (or any other) quotations, I would like to quote here (however ironic this might be) what Wilson Knight had to say in 1940 about John of Gaunt’s famous speech above,

How poignant to-day rings this description of our island fortress. It takes a great upheaval like that we are enduring to render the obvious *facts* of

<sup>19</sup> Marjorie GARBER, “(Quotation Marks),” *Critical Inquiry* 25:4 (1999), 653-679.

<sup>20</sup> See for example Marjorie GARBER, “Character Assassination: Shakespeare, Anita Hill, and JFK” = *Symptoms of Culture*, New York: Routledge, 1998, 153-165 and “(Quotation Marks).”

great poetry evident to our senses. Yes – but there is something even harder to grasp. What does all this talk of royalty mean? Will the war make that too clear for us? Old though the speaker be, a great power gets the better of age and sickness as those mighty images gather towards the end. In reading, let them roll out with something of the great sea's thunder.<sup>21</sup>

Wilson Knight applies the text to his immediate present: the current crisis of the war makes the patriotic message of this Shakespearian passage even more heart-felt. And somewhat surprisingly, regarding John of Gaunt's rather strong critique of King Richard II in this particular passage, Wilson Knight even here feels that the central question is the issue of "royalty". With remarkable consistency and perseverance throughout his work from *The Imperial Theme* (1931)<sup>22</sup> to his often-cited contribution to the collection, *Authors Take Sides on the Falklands* (1982),<sup>23</sup> Wilson Knight's interpretations of Shakespeare's histories in particular and Shakespeare's other plays in general often return to his thesis that Shakespeare's work is ultimately "A Royal Propaganda".<sup>24</sup> He closes his introductory remarks in *This Sceptred Isle* with the instruction, "Notice all the way through Shakespeare's vivid feeling for essential royalty: it is something we have temporarily lost but must regain."<sup>25</sup> Anachronistically echoing the dominant rhetoric of World War I, Wilson Knight claims that Shakespeare, "the voice of England",<sup>26</sup> is ultimately a patriotic propagandist of the English monarchy.

In 1941, Wilson Knight, with Henry Ainley's participation, performed an expanded version of the 1940 *This Sceptred Isle* program at the Westminster Theater. The notice for *The Times* reports that Wilson Knight

<sup>21</sup> *This Sceptred Isle*, 5.

<sup>22</sup> G Wilson KNIGHT, *The Imperial Theme: Further Interpretations of Shakespeare's Tragedies Including the Roman Plays*, London: H. Milford, 1931.

<sup>23</sup> See e. g. Terence HAWKES, "Swisser-Swatter: Making a Man of English Letters" = *Alternative Shakespeares*, ed. John Drakakis, London: Methuen, 1985. 43.

<sup>24</sup> G. Wilson KNIGHT, "A Royal Propaganda" = *The Sovereign Flower: On Shakespeare as the Poet of Royalism Together with Related Essays and Indexes to Earlier Volumes*, London: Macmillan, 1958, 273-279.

<sup>25</sup> *This Sceptred Isle*, 2.

<sup>26</sup> *This Sceptred Isle*, 35.

shows his scholarship in his attack on character... as well as in his comments, and, indeed, the whole unusual production firmly establishes his conception of Shakespeare as the poet and prophet of a free and virile people united under a benevolent monarchy and determined to fight in themselves the evils of greed and corruption and to take up arms against tyranny and the lust for power in others.<sup>27</sup>

As a classic moment of “appropriating Shakespeare,” Knight’s patriotic and royalist meaning is registered and reinforced by the reporter of *The Times*: the Shakespeare scholar’s propagandistic meaning is welcomed by the media.

Despite these propagandistic efforts in *The Times*, one of the central issues of wartime Shakespeare reception in London is that this nationalistic and royalist Shakespeare image was not embraced by the masses. Wilson Knight’s anachronistic Shakespeare appropriation (more appropriate for World War I than World War II) was not particularly popular at the beginning of the Second World War. On the other hand, as we have seen, a popularized “crooning” Shakespeare was rejected by the British Parliament: it was judged to be embarrassingly “bad propaganda”. At the beginning of the war, therefore, “official” state-sponsored institutions attributed meanings to Shakespeare that the population was rather unwilling to share. As an elitist royalist, Shakespeare was unappealing to the masses. A more inclusive “popular entertainer” Shakespeare, on the other hand, was not acceptable for government officials and MPs. As a trivialized entertainer, Shakespeare was rejected by the political elite of British society.

This tension between “popular” and “elite” Shakespeare, however, gradually disappeared: Shakespeare gained more and more ground in the course of the war and eventually became a much more popular(ized) author – and a much more successful ideological weapon as well. The well-known examples of Laurence Olivier’s film *Henry V* (1944), John Gielgud’s arguably most successful *Hamlet*-production at the Haymarket Theater in 1944, or the Old Vic’s glorious 1944/45 season were the end-results of a longer process in the course of which elitist Shakespeare had given way to, or merged with, popular Shakespeare by the end of the war.

<sup>27</sup> Quoted in G. Wilson KNIGHT, *Shakespearian Production: With Especial Reference to the Tragedies*, Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 1964, 313.