

Willow Globe Talk

I'd like to start with some words from a Shakespeare play, and specifically from John Gower, the chorus/narrator from *Pericles*. There's a certain irony in these being the first words that are quoted at a festival to mark the publication of the First Folio of Shakespeare's plays, since *Pericles* is one of the plays that isn't in that volume and, given that the play was probably written in collaboration with George Wilkins, these words may not even be Shakespeare. However, one of the things you first realise when you start studying or directing Shakespeare is that things are rarely straightforward, so in a way that is quite appropriate. This is from Gower's fifth speech, in Act Four of the play:

Thus time we waste and long leagues make short,
Sail seas in cockles, have and wish but for't,
Making to take our imagination
From bourn to bourn, region to region,
By you being pardoned, we commit no crime
To use one language in each several clime
Where our scenes seem to live.

(*Pericles*, IV, 4, 1-7. All scene/line references are to the Arden editions.)

The words might not be Shakespeare, but the sentiment, and the method, surely are. Generally speaking, wherever a Shakespeare play is set, whether it's Denmark (like *Hamlet*), Italy (like *Romeo and Juliet*), France (like *As You Like It*), Ancient Rome, Ilyria (wherever the hell that is), or the imaginary seacoast of Bohemia, everybody speaks English. This isn't particularly remarkable – it's what you would expect of a playwright working for a mostly English-speaking audience. The reason I mention it is that there are (to my knowledge) three occasions when it doesn't happen – when we hear a character speaking in the language that they would be speaking in 'real' life.

The first is *Julius Caesar* – when the Emperor is stabbed by Brutus, he slips, momentarily into the Latin that his historical equivalent would actually have spoken: 'Et Tu Brute'. In context, the effect is striking; in a play that the original audience would have seen through the prism of Elizabethan politics – the play was written shortly before the death of Elizabeth I and deals with anxieties as to what would follow the death of this childless ruler – and which we inevitably see in a modern context, a wormhole opens up, throwing us back into the historical moment.

The other two moments are both from the History plays. In *Henry V*, the French court mostly speak English, although we're occasionally given a half-line in French at the start of a line, and in scene where they're speaking to English-speakers, such as that between Pistol and his prisoner, they speak French.

Most strikingly, one entire scene, between the Princess Katherine and her gentlewoman Alice, is played in French, as the Princess, on her first appearance in the play, tries to learn some English, following a scene in which marriage between her and Henry is first mentioned. This scene is to some extent about language and communication, which makes

the use of French logical, and depends partly on double-entendres – the two women are reduced to laughter by the discovery that the English words for ‘le pied et le robe’ are ‘the foot and the coun’ – which in French are swear words. (Children, if you don’t know which swear words, ask your parents later.). Again, it’s a striking effect; the use of the language makes us aware of the cultural differences between the two sides – when Terry Hands directed the play at the RSC in 1975, he brought over two French-speaking actresses to play the parts. Ludmila Mikael said that she felt that she was ‘defending my language in front of an English audience, which is somewhat what Katherine has to do in her last scene with Henry.’ (Beauman, p. 95)

The third example - and you’re probably way ahead of me here – is from *Henry IV Part One*. Hotspur and Glendower, the rebel alliance, have a council of war with Mortimer and his wife, Glendower’s daughter. Lady Percy, Hotspur’s wife, and Lady Mortimer come on, and the two men start to say their goodbyes. But there’s a problem. As Mortimer himself says:

‘This is the deadly spite that angers me:
My wife can speak no English, I no Welsh’

(*Henry IV; Part One*: III, 1, 188-189)

The scene goes on, with occasional stage directions: ‘Glendower speaks to her in Welsh, and she answers him in the same’ (194), ‘The Lady speaks in Welsh’ (196), ‘The Lady again in. Welsh’ (199), ‘The Lady speaks again in Welsh’. (207) and finally ‘Here the Lady sings a Welsh song’ (240).

At no point does Shakespeare tell us what Glendower and Lady Mortimer say, or what song she sings. Companies staging the play generally have to write a little bit of text here, and find, or compose, a Welsh song. Michael Bogdanov, for the cycle of the History Plays that he did with the English Shakespeare Company in the 1980s, created a scene with the help of the *Oxford Book of Welsh Verse*, taking stanzas from anonymous poets of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, and concluding with an anonymous verse known in English as ‘Song of Winter’, which, in Joseph Clancy’s translation reads like this:

Snow is falling, white the soil,
Soldiers go not campaigning
Cold lakes, their colour sunless

Snow is falling, cloaks the valley,
Soldiers hasten to battle.
I go not, a wound stays me.

Snow is falling, white the mountain’s edge,
Ship’s mast bare at sea.
A coward conceives many schemes.

At the other end of the credibility spectrum, I once saw a rehearsed reading at which Lady Mortimer sang a rousing chorus of ‘Sospan Fach’.

The textual imprecision here tells us two things:

1. William Shakespeare didn't speak Welsh. We know from the plays that could speak French, he probably read some Latin and Greek (not enough to impress Ben Jonson, but that's quite a high bar), and there's some evidence that he could read Italian and Spanish, but he clearly didn't know Welsh, at least not well enough to write dialogue in it. It is possible that he heard the language as a child; according to a theory first suggested in 1919 by Frederick James Harries in the book *Shakespeare and the Welsh*, his maternal grandmother might have been a Welsh woman called Alys Griiffin. The bilingual poet Gwyneth Lewis, who has translated *The Tempest*, believes (perhaps a little romantically, as she'd admit herself) that the song forms in his plays show a familiarity with Welsh verse, which his grandmother might have sung to him.
2. Someone in his company did. The stage directions indicate that Shakespeare was confident to sub-contract the dialogue writing to someone in his company, probably one or both of the actors playing Glendower and his daughter. The list of actors in the First folio contains several Welsh names, including Robert Gough, Jack Jones and Henry Evans.

One thing about Shakespeare that's always worth remembering was that – like Moliere, like Ben Travers, like Alan Ayckbourn - he was a working playwright, writing for an ensemble of people that he knew. It's possible to make certain conjectures about ways in which his plays changed as his actors did – most obviously, we can mark a change in the way he wrote his comic parts when Will Kempe left the company and Robert Armin joined it, leading from clowns like Launce and Dogberry to those like Touchstone and Feste. He often writes plays which involve two female characters of different heights, suggesting a contrasting pair of boy players. Similarly, we can sometimes speculate which parts were written for which actors - John Sinklo, who was famously very thin, may well have been the original actor for characters like Starveling in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* or Slender in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*.

In the late sixteenth century, it seems very likely that, for a specific period between about 1595 and about 1600, there was a Welsh actor in Shakespeare's company, and that Shakespeare wrote four parts for him – the Welsh Captain in *Richard II*, Glendower in *Henry IV Part One*, Llewellyn in *Henry V* and Sir High Evans in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. There may have been others - the First Soldier in *All's Well that Ends Well* is called Morgan, and like Glendower and the Captain, has one bravura scene and then disappears. *All's Well* is a notoriously difficult play to date, and it's possible that it was written during this period, though most scholars put it a little later.

This period coincides neatly with that in which he was writing his second tetralogy of History Plays; *Richard II*, *Henry IV Parts One and Two*, and *Henry V*. (Confusingly, the Second Tetralogy takes place before the First – the three *Henry VI* plays and *Richard III* – even though they were written and staged later. As one of my students said once 'Shakespeare was the George Lucas of his day.'). These plays are especially concerned with what is nationhood, and the relationship between what we now think of as the four nations of the

UK (though for Shakespeare, it was two, then three – Scotland joined the Union during his lifetime, and Ireland not until the eighteenth century). Modern companies staging the whole History Cycle, as the RSC occasionally does, will sometimes replicate the pattern I've described by having the three Welsh characters play at least two of the three Welsh characters – I was lucky enough to see both Gareth Thomas and then Sion Probert play Glendower and Llewellyn for the English Shakespeare Company.

The first Welsh character in the Histories is a tiny part and doesn't even have a name – he's just referred to as the 'Captain' and appears in a single scene, in which he meets with the Earl of Salisbury and announces that he is going to withdraw his troops. Salisbury attempts to restrain him:

'Stay yet another day, thou trusty Welshman,
The king reposeth all his confidence in thee.'

(*Richard II*, II, 4, 5-6)

To which the Captain replies:

"'Tis thought the King is dead. We will not stay.
The bay trees in our country are all withered,
And meteors fright the fixed stars of heaven;
The pale-faced moon looks bloody on the earth,
And lean-looked prophets whisper fearful change;
Rich men look sad, and ruffians dance and leap,
The one in fear to lose what they enjoy,
The other to enjoy in rage and war.
These signs forerun the death and fall of kings.
Farewell. Our countrymen are gone or fled,
As well assured Richard their king is dead.'

(*Ibid*, 7-17)

And he exits. As I said, it's a tiny part – apart from four lines at the beginning, that speech I just read is the whole thing – but it's a significant one – it's the first signs that Richard's day is over, and that his wheel of fortune is on the way down. It's also the first time that we see one of the major themes in Shakespeare's treatment of Wales, which is mysticism. For Shakespeare, Wales is the land of prophets and portents. In this respect, he's playing on a common trope of Elizabethan thought – real-life mystics, such as the scholar and magician John Dee, would play up their own Welsh ancestry.

The second Welsh character is a real person; Owain Glendower. His speech patterns are similar to the Captain's, though in the scene from *Henry IV Part One*, the mysticism is subverted by his clash with the rather more down-to-earth character of Hotspur. Like the Captain, Glendower is a great believer in portents, particularly applied to his own birth:

(A small note here; I made a decision not to attempt any kind of accent here, but one thing that is striking is that the writing itself forces a certain kind of delivery on you – it's very hard to read Glendower's lines without slipping into an impression of Richard Burton, in that lower register. Llewellyn and Hugh Evans tend to push you up, into a more Emylyn Williams voice.)

'Give me leave
To tell you once again that at my birth
The front of heaven was fully of fiery shapes,
The goats ran from the mountains, and the herds
Were strangely clamorous in the frightened fields.
These signs have marked me out as extraordinary,
And all the courses of my life do show
I am not in the roll of common men.'

(Henry IV Part One: III, 1, 35-42)

In a famous exchange, he says to Hotspur 'I can call spirits from the vasty deep', to which Hotspur replies, in two lines consisting entirely of monosyllables:

'Why, so can I and so can any man,
But will they come when you do call for them?'

(Ibid, 53-54)

To some extent, Glendower is a comic character, but he has his own dignity. He also demonstrates the remarkable consistency of Welsh tropes – stereotypes, if you like - over four hundred years. As well as being mystical and well-read, he is also, as he reminds Hotspur, bilingual, and can sing:

'I can speak English, lord, as well as you,
For I was trained up in the English court,
Where, being but young, I framed to the harp
Many an English ditty lovely well
And gave the tongue a helpful ornament –
A virtue which was never seen in you.'

(Ibid, 118-123)

The emphasis on learning is carried on into Shakespeare's next Welsh character, Llewellyn, a captain in the army of Henry V. People sometimes describe him as a Welsh archer, which he isn't – it's historically true that there were many archers at the Battle of Agincourt, and that many of them were Welsh, but there's nothing in the play indicate that Llewellyn is an archer – he's clearly of the officer class.

Glendower and the Captain are both one-scene wonders. Llewellyn is a more substantial part – indeed, after Henry and the Chorus, he's arguably the third lead. Unlike the earlier

two, he speaks mostly in prose, and is given a phonetic version of a comic Welsh accent – for instance, he says his ‘b’s as ‘p’s, something I’ve never heard anyone in Wales do, so that he refers to the legendary king of Alexandria as ‘Alexander the Pig’, and says ‘look you’ a lot (although, to be fair, so do other, non-Welsh characters in Shakespeare, including Launce in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*). He is very well-read on the literature of warfare, sometimes bordering on the pedantic, and is mostly a comic character. Trevor Peacock, who played the part in 1975, said that ‘He is very full of contradictions: he’s a stickler for rules, and is obsessed with law and order and organisation and the Roman wars, but he’s also a wild romantic, a sentimentalist, and a hero-worshipper. [...] That’s one of the things that makes him funny.’ (Beauman, p. 73)

At the same time, he spends much of the play dealing with the cowardly English soldier Pistol (who is often played by the same actor who played Hotspur) and ends up by humiliating him, making him eat a raw leek, then promising him he has another one in his pocket, at which point in performance the actor will either produce a second, massive, leek, or grab his crotch. The tradition of eating a raw leek on St David’s Day still exists in the Royal Welsh Fusiliers, where the youngest recruit has to do it – the poet Robert Graves was very proud that he had once participated in this ceremony and considered himself to be an honorary Welshman because of it. (*The White Goddess*, p. 29)

After the Battle of Agincourt, he is given a moment of complicity with the King who was born, as Llewellyn often reminds us, at Monmouth:

‘If your majesty is remembered of it, the Welshmen did very good service in a garden where leeks did grow, wearing leeks in their Monmouth caps, which your majesty know to this hour is an honourable badge of the service; and I do believe your majesty takes no scorn to wear the leek upon Saint Tavy’s day.’

(*Henry V*, IV, 7, 96-102)

To which the king replies, in verse rather than Llewellyn’s prose:

‘I wear it for a memorable honour,
For I am Welsh, you know, good countryman.’

(*Ibid*, 103-4)

The final one of the Welsh foursome, Sir Hugh Evans in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, has a lot in common with Llewellyn in both his speech patterns, and his pedantry, although in his case, the latter is a feature of his job, as well as being a clergyman, he is literally a pedant, a schoolteacher. It’s tempting here to read an autobiographical note on Shakespeare’s part – there was a Welsh figure schoolmaster, Thomas Jenkin, at Stratford grammar School at the time when he would have been a pupil. I’m always a bit wary of attempts to find autobiography in Shakespeare’s writing – he wasn’t that kind of a writer – although it is worth noting that when the teacher has a scene teaching testing a schoolboy on his Latin (II, 4), the boy is called William (one of only two characters in Shakespeare to carry that name).

Like Llewellyn, Hugh Evans speaks mostly in prose (as does almost everybody in that play), and like him, his accent, speaking both English and Latin, is used for comic effect – the play also does something similar with the French speaker, Dr Caius. He has a curious habit of mixing up his parts of speech, using nouns for verbs and adjectives so that he says things like “I will description the matter to you, if you be capacity of it’ (I, 1, 199-200). His mangling of the language is a running gag – at the end of the play, the character Ford, who has been cured of jealousy towards his wife says, to Evans ‘I will never mistrust my wife again till thou art able to woo her in good English’. ((V, 5, 132-3)

Even here, there is a hint of Glendower’s mysticism – when Falstaff is captured and led to believe that he is being attacked by a crowd of fairies, it is Evans who gets to play the Fairy king, leading to Falstaff saying ‘Heavens defend me from that Welsh fairy, lest he transform me to a piece of cheese.’ (V, 5, 81-2)

Those are the four most obviously Welsh characters in Shakespeare, all from plays which were probably written in this late sixteenth century period, when I have suggested the presence of a Welsh actor in the company. There are a few debateable ones, from other periods in his writing – Richmond in *Richard III* was historically Welsh, and is sometime played as such (notably by Stanley Baker in Olivier’s film or Brian Deacon, with a rather dodgy accent, in the 1983 BBC version), but there’s nothing particularly in the play to indicate it (if Shakespeare had intended the character to be read as Welsh, it’s hard to imagine him missing the chance to have Richard make a racist crack about it). *King Lear* is based on a Welsh legend and there may have been a degree of topicality – Lear is shown dividing his kingdom into three at the point in history where James VI and I was doing the opposite.

Welsh landscapes also appear in the History and Romance plays – Richard II hands over his crown at Flint Castle, the rebels against Henry IV meet at the Archdeacon’s house in Bangor, and *Cymbeline* is set partially in Milford Haven and the surrounding countryside, shown as a mountainous wild country, with a primal nature that’s set against the corrupt courts of Westminster and Rome.

The more remote Welsh landscapes have also been used in film adaptations: Gwynedd stood in for medieval Scotland in Roman Polanski’s *Macbeth* (1971). Ken Tynan in his account of the film commented, as a lot of English tourists in Wales have done, on the weather: ‘gale force winds and freezing horizontal rain’ (Tynan, 103). Similarly, the 2016 BBC *Richard II*, starring Ben Whishaw and Rory Kinnear, was filmed largely in Pembrokeshire, at locations including St. David’s Cathedral and Pembroke Castle. The film’s director, Rupert Goold, said that ‘There’s something very special about the cathedrals, the landscapes. It’s very difficult to find landscapes that can pass for the late 14th century, where there weren’t any fields, any pastures. So we were right down to the corner of Wales.’

Goold’s quote perhaps shows an Englishman’s view of Wales – simultaneously near and distant, both in terms of location and time. In this, he’s reflecting Shakespeare’s own view of the nation – his Welsh characters and locations are both familiar and undeniably foreign, reflecting a relationship that remains ambiguous.

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