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SHAKESPEARE'S *CYMBELINE*, BREXIT, AND BRITISH NATIONAL IDENTITY

by

KATRIN BAUER

Introduction

On the 23rd of June 2016, the government of the United Kingdom asked its citizens whether they wanted to remain in or leave the European Union. In the months leading up to the referendum, the question was fiercely debated by people from all across the political spectrum with one side highlighting the manifold ties between the UK and the EU and the other side focusing on reclaiming control over various political areas. That same year saw three major theatre companies in London and Stratford putting on stage their productions of William Shakespeare's late romance *Cymbeline* – a play that remains one of Shakespeare's lesser-known and rarely performed plays. Historically, the play's relative unpopularity has been well documented: ranging from Dr Johnson who criticized "its 'unresisting imbecility'" and George Bernard Shaw who famously called it "stagey trash of the lowest melodramatic order" (both cited in Billington n.p.), critics of the play have often admonished that the play contains several convoluted plot threads full of irrational twists with "some thirty denouements in the final scene, except that they are not revelations for the audience, who know all but one of them already" (King 1) and a conclusion that only seems possible through a literal deus-ex-machina (cf. *Cym* 5.3.156 SD). And yet, in 2016, the *Sam Wanamaker Theatre*, *Shakespeare's Globe* and the *Royal Shakespeare Company* all put on productions of this otherwise rather neglected play.

The reason behind this renaissance of *Cymbeline* lies at least to some extent with the Brexit referendum. The play and its central issues seem remarkably fitting to address precisely the political situation in which the UK found itself in 2016:

In the wake of Brexit, Shakespeare's histories are being ransacked for evidence of the roots and fruits of an earlier breach with Europe. [...] the 2016 anti-Brexit *Cymbeline* at Stratford is an example of harnessing Shakespeare in the interests of European union, and that particular play is itself a classic instance of history as allegory, revisiting the past in order to address the present (Maley n.p.).

The production directed by Melly Still for the *Royal Shakespeare Company* ran from February to August 2016 at the *Royal Shakespeare Theatre* in Stratford-upon-Avon – thereby spanning the months leading up to the referendum as well as its immediate aftermath – and explicitly addressed the heated discussions surrounding the vote on the UK's future relationship with the EU. Carole Sauvageot writes in her review of the production:

A potential Brexit was on everyone's mind as the play unfolded, revealing its deep political implications through an exploration of identity as the nodal point of family, clan, country, gender and nationality. This Britain seemed poised at the edge of disaster (echoing the tense debates between Remainers and Brexiteers), mired in the queen's despair and awaiting the consequences of her decision to break away from Roman rule (Sauvageot 125).

Michael Billington, too, picks up on these parallels when he writes that Cloten's assertion of British independence when he proclaims that "Britain's / A world by itself, and we will nothing pay / For wearing our own noses" (*Cym* 3.1.12-14) "sounds uncannily like Boris Johnson" (Billington n.p.).

This connection between the play's plot and the production's contemporary political context, where Roman Britain and the Roman Empire symbolically stand in for the UK and the EU, is also made explicit in the programme of the production.¹ Director Melly Still draws attention to the parallels between Shakespeare's 17th-century play and the debates surrounding the Brexit referendum:

In the play, Britain is undergoing a kind of identity crisis. It doesn't know whether to be part of a bigger empire, or to assert its island status and let the sea dictate its own independence. That sounds like 2016 to me (Still n.p.).

In what seems eerily prescient now, Still and designer Anna Fleischle go on to describe the setting of their *Cymbeline* as a "dystopian Britain some time in the not too distant future where the country's belligerent independence and insularity have taken root", where "fuel is scarce" and "resources have run out" (Still n.p.).

It is not only for these similarities that *Cymbeline* feels so relevant for 2016 but more so because it has at its core precisely those two fundamental questions that were also at the heart of the debates surrounding the Brexit referendum: What does it mean to be British? And what role should Britain play in an increasingly globalised world?

In this paper, I want to take a closer look at how these two questions are negotiated in Shakespeare's play and how they resonate both in its historical context of early modern England and in the context of its renewed topicality surrounding the Brexit referendum in 2016. In order to do that, I will first briefly outline the significance of Roman Britain for early Jacobean England. In a second step, I will then explore several examples from the play of how it negotiates questions of national identity and international relationships, before coming back to the context of the Brexit referendum for my conclusion.

Roman Britain and Early Jacobean England

Roman Britain became topical in a variety of ways during the early years of the reign of James I. With his ascension to the English throne in 1603 after the death of Elizabeth I, he became king of both England and Scotland. We can already see from his first speech to parliament in March 1604 that he was very interested in creating a formal union of the two nations:

¹ My thanks go to the *Shakespeare Centre Library and Archive* who have generously provided me with a copy of the programme.

These two Countries being separated neither by Sea, nor great Riuer, Mountaine, nor other strength of nature, but onely by little small brookes, or demolished little walles, so as rather they were diuided in apprehension, then in effect; And now in the end and fulnesse of time vnited, the right and title of both in my Person, alike lineally descended of both the Crownes, whereby it is now become like a little World within it selfe, being intrenched and fortified round about with a naturall, and yet admirable strong pond or ditch, whereby all the former feares of this Nation are now quite cut off (James I 135f).

While the formal union James had envisioned did not become a political reality until a century later with the *Acts of Union* of 1707, works like Raphael Holinshed's *Chronicles* still promoted this idea and were looking at Roman Britain "in order to project both the current attempts to unify England, Scotland, and Wales and also the growing imperial ambitions of Great Britain overseas" (Hingley 18).

This context of early Jacobean imperialism makes Roman Britain particularly interesting as a setting for *Cymbeline*. After several failed attempts at establishing settlements in America, James's reign saw a renewed interest in the so-called 'New World'. In 1606, James I granted a charter to the Virginia Company, allowing them to colonise parts of the eastern coast of North America. In 1608, the first permanent and lasting English settlement on American soil was established in Jamestown, named after James I, in Virginia, which received its name in honour of his predecessor Elizabeth I. This, James argues in his speech to Parliament mentioned above, has become possible because his ascension to the English throne has brought with it freedom from the historically justified fear of foreign attacks which had usually been aided in some form by the Scots. Britain, now finally united under him, he claims, is now able to focus on "their many famous and glorious conquests abroad" (James I 136). It was the Roman Empire that provided James's imperial ambitions with an example to emulate where he and his supporters saw themselves as the successors of that Empire in the sense of the *translatio imperii*.

At the same time, however, the Britons, as their actual historical predecessors so to speak, figured in the sources of the Roman Empire only as a colonised Other. Sources like Caesar's *De Bello Gallico* and Tacitus's *Agricola* paint a rather unfavourable picture of the Britons. They describe them as uncivilised and untrustworthy barbarians who only managed to avoid being conquered by the Romans for as long as they did because the Romans did not know much about them, because of the geographical and natural obstacles of getting an army to Britain, and because of the dishonourable behaviour of the Britons who would always go back on their word and break treaties if they believed they had a chance to get away with it. Eventually, however, these sources suggest, the Britons had to submit to the undeniably superior Roman Empire (cf. *Tac. Agr.* 1.36-38).

This aspect complicates the usage of the Roman Empire as a model for James's united Britain and its imperial aspirations. The reversed perspective of the Romans as the colonisers and the Britons as the colonised prohibits any straightforward analogy as Claire Jowitt points out in her analysis of John Fletcher's *Bonduca*:

On one level, [the Britons] represent indigenous inhabitants in a colonial terrain inevitably succumbing to the power and control of a more advanced civilization. At the same time, [...] the attitudes of individual Britons to invasion and processes of Romanization, all act as ways of measuring the success or failure of the colonial policies and leadership of the current monarch

and his immediate predecessor. The Romans represent an alien and hostile conquering force finally overcoming the Britons' independence but, at the same time, they also imaginatively stand in for the British in contemporary Virginia (Jowitt 475-476).

This same assessment also holds true for the Romans and the Britons in Shakespeare's *Cymbeline*. Similar to *Bonduca*, the play evokes and complicates changing ideas about English (and British) identity and the context of colonial ventures in America by moving the locus of the intercultural encounters between Romans and Britons from the centre of power to its periphery into the realm of the Other during a conflict between the colonisers and the colonised. The Britons in *Cymbeline* fulfil the role of the colonised Other suppressed and fighting back against the Roman colonisers while Shakespeare's early modern audiences would have been well aware of the aforementioned idea of the *translatio imperii*. In doing so, the play combines influences from Roman historiographies, medieval myths, and contemporary political discourse.

***Cymbeline* and British National Identity**

The conflict between the Roman colonisers and colonised Britons openly culminates for the first time in the play's peripeteia in Act 3. The Roman ambassador Caius Lucius arrives at Cymbeline's court and demands the outstanding "three thousand pounds" (*Cym* 3.1.9) of tribute that Britain has to pay as a result of their defeat by Julius Caesar. Should Cymbeline refuse, Lucius threatens him with military action. Surprisingly, given the gravitas of these potential consequences, it is not Cymbeline himself who responds to the Romans' demand. Instead, the Queen and Cloten assert the Britons' independence from Rome by insulting and ridiculing Caesar who stands symbolically for Rome's imperial ambitions.

The Queen and Cloten both portray Britain as an island that is independent of and impenetrable by outside forces, or as Cloten exclaims, "A world by itself" (*Cym* 3.1.13). This echoes almost verbatim James I's claim from his first speech to Parliament in 1604 discussed above. The Queen's following monologue further highlights Britain's special status and superiority in relation to the other peoples conquered by the Romans as well as to the Roman Empire itself:

Remember, sir, my liege,
 The kings your ancestors, together with
 The natural bravery of your isle, which stands
 As Neptune's park, ribbed and paled in
 With oaks unscalable and roaring waters,
 With sands that will not bear your enemies' boats,
 But suck them up to th' topmast. A kind of conquest
 Caesar made here, but made not here his brag
 Of 'Came, and saw, and overcame'. With shame –
 The first that ever touched him – he was carried
 From off our coast, twice beaten; and his shipping,
 Poor ignorant baubles, on our terrible seas
 Like eggshells moved upon their surges, cracked
 As easily 'gainst our rocks (*Cym* 3.1.16-28).

In this monologue, the Queen focuses on two central ideas, namely Britain's exceptionalism and Rome's inability to defeat the Britons. In doing so, she follows the tradition that we can also see in several English sources like Raphael Holinshed's *Chronicles* which was heavily influenced by Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia*. In contrast to the Roman accounts that we have for Roman Britain like Caesar's *De Bello Gallico* or Tacitus's *Agricola*, the English chronicles in this tradition portray the Britons in a distinctly positive and heroic way. Accordingly, Monmouth's Caesar for example is less of a strategic genius and more of a greedy and selfish tyrant trying to subdue the world for his own gain and glory (cf. *Mon. Hist.* 4.1). Monmouth also refrains from mentioning any of the natural and geographical obstacles in Caesar's path to Britain that are blamed for the slow progress in Caesar's *De Bello Gallico* (cf. *BG* 4.20-26). Instead, he focuses at length on the decisive battle which ends with a victory by the Britons (cf. *Mon. Hist.* 4.3). His Britons, too, are not the barbaric and untrustworthy oath breakers Caesar and Tacitus describe but are depicted as exceptionally brave, determined to defend their freedom, and as equals to the Romans (cf. *Mon. Hist.* 4.2). In her monologue, the Queen employs a similar strategy when she degrades Caesar's famous exclamation of "came, and saw and overcame" into a mere "brag" (*Cym* 3.1.23-24) and reduces the Roman Empire's fleet to "poor ignorant baubles" that are "cracked as easily" as "eggshells" "'gainst our rocks" (*Cym* 3.1.26-28).

Her speech is also strongly reminiscent of John of Gaunt's "sceptred isle" monologue from *Richard II*:

This royal throne of kings, this scepter'd isle,
 This earth of majesty, this seat of Mars,
 [...] This fortress built by Nature for herself
 [...] 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,
 [...] This blessed plot, this earth, this realm, this England,
 [...] Fear'd by their breed and famous by their birth,
 Renowned for their deeds as far from home,
 [...] England, bound in with the triumphant sea
 Whose rocky shore beats back the envious siege
 Of watery Neptune, [...]
 That England, that was wont to conquer others [...] (*R2* 2.1.40-65).

Both speeches highlight Britain's exceptional position as an island surrounded by dangerous waters and take up the idea that nature itself created Britain as an impenetrable fortress.

They both also invoke Britain's glorious past in what Jodi Mikalachki has called "the restitutive drive of early modern English nationalism" (Mikalachki 304). By evoking England's glorious past, they attempt to establish a long and continuous tradition to compensate for "the absence of a native classical past on which to found the glories of the modern nation" (Mikalachki 302). When Cymbeline eventually addresses the Roman ambassador after the passionate and emphatically nationalist appeals by the Queen and Cloten, his response takes up their ideas and further elaborates on them: he

traces his lineage back to Mulmutius and in doing so, “reclaims the past for his nation, allowing Britain to compete with Roman antiquity” (Escobedo 68). Repeatedly using the determiner *our* in “our ancestor” (*Cym* 3.1.52), “our laws” (*Cym* 3.1.53 and 3.1.58) and “our good deed” (*Cym* 3.1.57), he further emphasises this distinctly British identity as a “warlike people” (*Cym* 3.1.50). Cymbeline is here creating a mythological British past independent from the Roman Empire in order to emancipate the Britons from their portrayal as uncivilised barbarians in classical sources. In doing so, he is following a literary tradition which claims that “Britain was more than an outlying colony of Rome, with an independent identity reaching back into time immemorial” (Butler 37).

Despite that, the play eventually ends with Cymbeline, “[a]lthough the victor”, submitting “to Caesar / and to the Roman empire, promising / To pay our wonted tribute” (*Cym* 5.4.457-459). He blames his “wicked queen” for dissuading him from paying the tribute in the first place. With that, the conflict is finally over and the play can end with peace and harmony restored as “[a] Roman and a British ensign wave / [f]riendly together” (*Cym* 5.4.478-479). But while blaming the Queen undeniably offers Cymbeline the possibility to submit to Rome by paying the outstanding tribute from a position of strength and honour, it does not reflect the whole matter. Throughout most of the last act, Cymbeline has shown no signs that he wants to reconcile with Rome. Even after the Queen’s death and the revelation that she was trying to kill him, he is intent on executing Lucius and the other Roman captives:

Thou com’st not, Caius, now for tribute. That
 The Britons have razed out, though with the loss
 Of many a bold one, whose kinsmen have made suit
 That their good souls may be appeased with slaughter
 Of you their captives, which ourself have granted. (*Cym* 5.4.69-73)

This scene is harking back to the opening scene of *Titus Andronicus* where Titus tells Tamora that the dead “ask a sacrifice [...] / [t]’appease their groaning shadows that are gone” (*Tit* 1.1.127-129). It is noteworthy that the sacrifice in *Titus Andronicus* signifies that “the city is becoming barbaric in its practices” since “Rome prided itself on not allowing human sacrifice” (*Tit* 1.1.127 FN). Even after the Queen’s machinations have been revealed to him, Cymbeline sanctions a practice deemed “barbaric” by the Romans. In doing so, he is ironically conforming to the depiction of the barbarians in classical Roman sources that focus on their “overall savage nature [...], their ferocity, bestiality, and cruelty in its various forms (including human sacrifice)” (Schmidt 57). It is only after his reunion with his children and the several revelations that Cymbeline is willing to pardon the captives (cf. *Cym* 5.4.401-403) and does so mostly because of Innogen and Posthumus (cf. *Cym* 5.4.403-404 and 5.4.417-422). His literal last-minute decision to pay the tribute only comes after the soothsayer interprets Jupiter’s tablet (*Cym* 5.4.459-463).

Laying the blame for the fallout with Rome entirely on the Queen, therefore, is neither fair nor accurate. The Queen may have been one of the most vocal proponents of British independence from Rome but Cymbeline, too, has voiced similar ideas throughout the play. But scapegoating the Queen allows him to metaphorically denounce the “unruly women who challenge patriarchal order of early modern England” and the “rebellious females in native historiography [who] threatened the establishment of a stable,

masculine identity for the early modern nation” (Mikalachki 302-303) that she represents. Her death and the revelation of her wickedness, therefore, make her a convenient scapegoat for Cymbeline who can simply blame her for the “disruption of the masculine network of kinship, promises, and honor that binds [him] to Rome” (Mikalachki 305). In doing so, Cymbeline is able to re-establish his patriarchal authority that has been under threat from the beginning of the play.

While Cymbeline blaming the Queen for his conflict with Rome, therefore, is mostly disingenuous and inspired by ulterior motives, it does draw our attention to an important aspect of the play’s engagement with issues of national identity and the nation’s role within the wider world around it. As one of the play’s main antagonists, the Queen does not work as a convincing voice for any positive British national identity. This is also why her assertion of British independence fails to produce the patriotic effect that John of Gaunt’s speech does in *Richard II*. This is not because her words are any less convincing or less appealing than his – after all her speech is undeniably “one of the great nationalist speeches in Shakespeare” (Mikalachki 305). Her words fall comparatively flat because the play constantly undermines her credibility. We can see this from her first appearance on stage when she is professing her sympathy for Innogen and Posthumus, claiming that she is not “[a]fter the slander of most stepmothers, / Evil-eyed unto [Innogen]” (*Cym* 1.1.71-72) and pretending to “pity[...] / The pangs of barred affections” (*Cym* 1.1.81-82), while actively working against them (cf. *Cym* 1.1.103-106). Throughout the play, she openly admits her motives to the audience in several asides, and the physician Cornelius even directly describes her as malicious and untrustworthy:

I do suspect you, madam [...]
 [...] I do know her spirit,
 And will not trust one of her malice with
 A drug of such damned nature (*Cym* 1.5.31-36).

More importantly, her claims and predictions are repeatedly contradicted by the action of the play. As the play shows time and time again, Cymbeline’s Britain does not exist independently from Rome and is in fact always already “Romanized” (Escobedo 70). The Britons proclaiming this independence the loudest, it turns out, are themselves fully aware of how much Britain is influenced by the Roman Empire.

Throughout the play, it is Rome that provides validation to British honour: Cymbeline himself acknowledges as much when he admits to the close ties between himself and the Roman Empire: “Thy Caesar knighted me; my youth I spent / Much under him; of him I gathered honour” (*Cym* 3.1.67-68). Another example can be found during the exposition where the victory of Posthumus’s father “[a]gainst the Romans with Cassibelan” (*Cym* 1.1.30) is not only the first thing we learn about Posthumus but also forms the basis for his claim of genteel status rather than a noble heritage (cf. *Cym* 1.1.29 FN). Even the decisive victory of the Britons against the Romans is heavily indebted to Roman models of honour as it is inspired by Livy’s famous account of the legendary battle at the Sublician bridge where Horatio Cocles and two others are fighting with “miraculous audacity [which] stupefied the enemies” (*Liv.* 2.10, *my translation*).² They

² The original reads “ipso miraculo audaciae obstupefecit hostis”.

are the only ones fighting against an invading army while their compatriots are fleeing in fear (cf. *Liv.* 2.10). Despite the superior numbers of their enemy, these three men successfully manage to use the advantage of the narrow bridge to drive the invaders back, saving the city (cf. *Liv.* 2.10). In *Cymbeline*, we see Posthumus, Belarius, and the Princes fulfil the role of Horatius and his compatriots. Similarly outnumbered, this small group of Britons is able to fend off the Roman army in “a narrow lane” (*Cym* 5.3.52) and, according to Posthumus’s account, have “work / More plentiful than tools to do’t” (*Cym* 5.3.9-10). Thus, even the play’s culminating moment of Britain’s struggle for independence from the Roman Empire cannot escape the fact that, as Coppélia Kahn points out, British “independence from Rome is always already compromised by a kind of co-dependence on Rome for the validation of manly virtue” (Kahn 161).

The Roman influence also extends beyond the sphere of warfare and honour into the civic and day-to-day lives of the Britons: a surprisingly large number of Shakespeare’s Britons like the royal doctor, Cymbeline’s sons, and Posthumus all bear Latin names. Innogen at first seems to be one of the very few notable exceptions to this. Her name evokes the context of Britain’s mythical past through its connection to its founder Brutus (cf. *Hol. Chron.* 2.2). But even she adopts a Latin name when she dresses up as a young man and changes it to Fidele, which is based on the Latin *fidelis* meaning ‘faithful’ and ‘loyal’.³

Similarly, the Britons do not worship Celtic or Germanic deities but the Roman pantheon. The Queen herself acknowledges this even while actively propagating a separation from Rome when she evokes Neptune, the Roman god of the sea, as Britain’s protector (cf. *Cym* 3.1.19). Correspondingly, Jupiter, the head of the Roman pantheon, is referred to frequently by various Britons (cf. *Cym* 2.3.118, 2.4.98, 3.3.88, 3.5.84, 3.6.6, 3.6.42, 4.2.206, 5.3.84). There is also a temple dedicated to him in Cymbeline’s capital and centre of power (cf. *Cym* 5.4.480). He even makes an onstage appearance as a literal deus-ex-machina and facilitates the reconciliatory conclusion (cf. *Cym* 5.3.156-177).

Yet, it takes until almost the end of the play for Cymbeline to acknowledge Britain’s interconnectedness with the Roman Empire when he agrees to pay the outstanding tribute. The reality of Cymbeline’s Britain for most of the play, therefore, is not accurately described by the Queen’s monologue and its claim of national independence. The more accurate account comes from Innogen who “presents and experiences Britain, wandering through it, calling up its place names, and describing its natural situation” (Mikalachki 317). When Pisanio suggests that Innogen should leave Britain (cf. *Cym* 3.4.133-134), her questions first seem to suggest that she too regards Britain as exceptional: “Where then? / Hath Britain all the sun that shines? Day, night, / Are they not but in Britain?” (*Cym* 3.4.134-136). Yet, unlike Cymbeline, Cloten, and the Queen, Innogen ends up interpreting Britain’s extraordinary position not as a sign of honour and strength but as a weakness:

I’ the world’s volume

³ Another interesting name in this regard is Euriphile, the princes’ nurse, which literally translates to “Lover of Europe” (3.3.103 FN) which again highlights Britain’s connection to the continent (cf. Boling 64).

Our Britain seems as of it, but not in't;
 In a great pool a swan's nest. [...]
 There's livers out of Britain (*Cym* 3.4.136-139).

In contrast to the Queen's "unscalable and roaring waters" (*Cym* 3.1.20), Innogen's metaphor of the swan's nest reveals "Britain's isolation from Europe [...] [as] more of a shortcoming" (*Cym* 3.4.138 FN). Unlike the other characters who champion Britain's "natural bravery" (*Cym* 3.1.18), Innogen is able to "register the costs as well as the achievements of [...] Britain's isolation [which] looks protective but means exile to the global periphery" (Butler 44). As long as Britain's independence comes at the price of severing its connections to the Roman Empire, it cannot live up to its full potential.

Tellingly, none of the Britons are able to reach Milford Haven, even though most of them explicitly name it as their destination. This place carries an enormous symbolic significance as "the sacred spot of Tudor nationalism" (Butler 44), as the landing place of Henry Tudor's army in 1485 to take the English throne from Richard III and thus the beginning of the Tudor dynasty. This makes Milford Haven an apt metaphor for a fully realised British national identity that remains out of reach for the characters in the play precisely because Cymbeline's Britain is not yet prepared to acknowledge its place in the wider world around it. Once Cymbeline agrees to "submit to Caesar / And to the Roman Empire" (*Cym* 5.4.458-459), he finally acknowledges his already *Romanized* Britain, a Britain that is fully aware and thriving because of its place within the Roman Empire.

Cymbeline's depiction of Britain and its relationship with the Roman Empire ultimately blurs the distinction between the colonising Romans and the colonised Britons because they are always already both at the same time: "the Britons are Romanized, the Romans are Britonized" (Escobedo 70). The decision to have the intercultural encounter take place at the periphery (unlike in earlier plays like *A Midsummer Night's Dream* or *Titus Andronicus* where those encounters take place at the centre of power)⁴ in the realm of the colonised Britons draws heavily on both the contexts and sources of Roman Britain and early modern imperialism and nationalism. In doing so, it complicates the questions of national identity and the nation's role in an increasingly globalised world at its core.⁵ It further creates an ambivalence in Britain's emulation of Rome as well as in the assertion of nationalist independence as championed by the Queen, Cloten, and Cymbeline (at least up until the last scene of the play) which gives way to an acknowledgement of a shared community and equality.

We can see this clearly in the difference between the two interpretations the Soothsayer gives of the vision he had received before the decisive battle between the Romans and the Britons:

⁴ For a detailed analysis of how the portrayal of intercultural encounters evolves throughout Shakespeare's career as a playwright, see Bauer.

⁵ As Flynn and Giráldez argue, the early modern period can be seen as the first era where we can speak of globalisation in the modern sense of the word: "globalization occurred when all heavily populated land masses began sustained interaction in a manner that deeply linked them all through global trade" (235). This 'global trade' in a sustained manner began when the Spanish founded their trading outpost in Manila in 1571.

Last night the very gods showed me a vision –
 I fast and prayed for their intelligence – thus:
 I saw Jove’s bird, the Roman eagle, winged
 From the spongy south to this part of the west,
 There vanished in the sunbeams; which portends,
 Unless my sins abuse my divination,
 Success to th’Roman host (*Cym* 4.2.245-351).

As Heather James points out, this first reading of the vision “prefigures the extension of Augustus’ power over Britain” (James 153) but is not what happens in the play. Instead of the foretold Roman victory, the Britons manage to win the decisive battle because Belarius, the Princes, and Posthumus are able to use the natural geography of the narrow lane to their advantage and fight off the Romans with the British bravery also highlighted in the British sources discussed earlier (cf. *Cym* 5.2.1-5.3.63).

In his second interpretation of the vision, the Soothsayer adapts to this new circumstance by modifying his interpretation of what a Roman victory would look like:

The fingers of the powers above do tune
 The harmony of this peace. The vision
 Which I made known to Lucius ere the stroke
 Of this yet scare-cold battle, at this instant
 Is full accomplished. For the Roman eagle,
 From south to west on wing soaring aloft,
 Lessened herself, and in the beams o’th’sun
 So vanished; which foreshadowed our princely eagle,
 Th’imperial Caesar, should again unite
 His favour with the radiant Cymbeline,
 Which shines here in the west (*Cym* 5.4.464-474).

This time, the Roman victory is portrayed as a reconciliation with “the radiant Cymbeline” (*Cym* 5.4.473). This second reading subtly contradicts both British and Roman claims by foregrounding the mutual influence mentioned earlier: “If the Britons are Romanized, the Romans are Britonized” (Escobedo 70). This fact is epitomised by how easy it is for Posthumus to change sides during the decisive battle. The differences between Romans and Britons are merely superficial: Posthumus, an exiled Briton, arriving as part of the Roman army, “disrobe[s] [...] / Of these Italian weeds, and suit[s] [himself] / As does a Briton peasant” (*Cym* 5.1.22-24) and manages to turn the tide of the battle in favour of the Britons only to change back into his “Roman costume” (*Cym* 5.3.74 SD) after the victory.

The play overcomes the harmful insistence on an isolationist British national identity that exists separate from Roman influence that is at the root of the play’s central political conflict. Instead, the play ends with an endorsement of a shared community that ultimately allows for the play to end on the hopeful promise of peace and celebrations:

Set we forward: let
 A Roman and a British ensign wave
 Friendly together: so through Lud’s town march:
 And in the temple of great Jupiter
 Our peace we’ll ratify; seal it with feasts.

[...] Never was a war did cease,
Ere bloody hands were wash'd, with such a peace (*Cym* 5.4.477-483).

Conclusion

This brings me back to my initial point about *Cymbeline*'s topicality in the context of the 2016 Brexit referendum. Just as the conflict between Britons and Romans in *Cymbeline* has much more to do with how the Britons perceive themselves and their role within the Roman Empire than with the outstanding three-thousand-pound tribute, the Brexit referendum was not just about whether the UK should remain a part of the EU to which it is connected through manifold political, social, and cultural ties or whether it should 'take back control' over how it is spending its money and over its borders, as the Leave campaign proclaimed in its central slogan. As Daniel Carey writes, the referendum "remains ultimately a conflict over identity" where "the larger confrontation is with the UK's image of itself" (Carey 52). Just as the issue of British independence from the Roman Empire can be read both as a nationalist show of strength in *Cymbeline* in the Queen's monologue and as an acknowledgement of detrimental isolation in Innogen's "swan's nest" speech, the central questions in the debates before and after Brexit allow for both narratives of "weakness or strength, reasserted sovereignty or isolation in an interconnected world" (Carey 52).

Cymbeline ultimately focuses on a shared community that acknowledges its intercultural connections and that therefore has the potential for a peaceful co-existence. It might spark some hope that even among the "postapocalyptic wasteland, standing in stark contrast to a vibrant, multicultural [Europe]" (Clark 137) as which Still's explicitly anti-Brexit production portrays *Cymbeline*'s Britain, there is still the potential for "a place where influences, cultures and languages could merge to create something new, subtle and perhaps even beautiful" (Sauvageot 127). Only time will tell what this could look like for the UK's future relationship with their European neighbours.

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Zusammenfassung

Der vorliegende Beitrag untersucht die zentralen interkulturellen Begegnungen zwischen Römern und Briten in Shakespeares *Cymbeline*. Im Zuge des Brexit-Referendums erlebte dieses sonst eher selten aufgeführte Stück eine Art Renaissance: *Cymbeline*, so zeigte vor allem Melly Stills Inszenierung für die Royal Shakespeare Company, traf den Nerv einer durch heftig geführte Brexit-Debatten gespaltenen Gesellschaft, weil das Stück Fragen über die eigene nationale Identität und die Rolle der Nation in einer zunehmend globalisierten Welt aufwirft, die heute genauso aktuell sind wie im jakobinischen England. *Cymbeline* tut dies, so die These dieses Aufsatzes, indem es die Beziehung zwischen dem Selbst und dem Anderen in traditionellen interkulturellen Begegnungen umkehrt und verkompliziert.