

Confusion Now Hath Made His Masterpiece: Brexit and the Bard

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400 years after Shakespeare's death, a tragedy of Shakespearian dimensions has unfolded in the United Kingdom: Brexit. One Friday morning in June 2016, staring in disbelief at the incoming news, we were asking ourselves: "Are you sure/That we are awake? It seems to me/That yet we sleep, we dream." A look at Shakespeare's work in the context of Brexit is no lofty, purpose-free exercise. For one, Shakespeare's work is instructive for explaining British national pride, its indulgence in splendid isolation that obviously provided one of the intellectual undercurrents of the Leave campaign (though the causes for voting Leave are, of course, a lot more multifaceted). The English nation formed itself in the Elizabethan age against the background of a century of quarrels with France in what was then the recent past. The pride that the British took from their victories is nowhere better reflected than in Henry V's Crispin's day speech. A small number of English soldiers heroically resisted the French forces. "We few, we happy few, we band of brothers." Shakespeare infused the play with a feeling of togetherness based on England's victorious fight against continental powers. It was this idea of nationhood that carried England and the whole of the United Kingdom successfully through the turmoil of the 20th century. Small wonder that some demanded compelling (economic) reasons to continue bonding with the continent.

But this is not my main point here. It is my view that the cultural legacy of Shakespeare lays open certain aspects about the dynamics of direct democracy that should assuage our concerns about referenda. Contrary to what some constitutional theorists might suggest, Brexit, if seen from the perspective of Shakespeare's dramas, provides some hints that vindicate direct democracy.

Of course, constitutional theory might raise legitimate concerns against the referendum. The preceding debate provides a sobering anti-venom to overly idealistic perceptions of public discourse. The breathtaking amount of misinformation left "the commoner," who may have been interested in taking an informed choice, bereft. One could not but forgive them for doubting the truth to be a liar. They did not find sufficient hold and orientation in civil society – whose traditional structures and institutions (including parties, unions, and

churches) are in a dramatic process of overall decline, and not only in the United Kingdom. To make matters worse, a new cleavage separating those who benefit from globalization and European integration from those who do not seems to have crept into the political parties, dividing both the Conservative Party and Labour. It created the perverse situation where moderate Tory and Labour leaders stood side-by-side against the more skeptical segments in each party. One might question whether a different Labour leader would have been any more successful in making the case for Remain among Labour voters than Jeremy Corbyn. Under the prevailing conditions, sceptics of direct democracy might feel vindicated. What would be the point of having referenda if they are not preceded by, and embedded in, a process of public reasoning?

Yet, a look at Shakespeare's drama might vindicate direct democracy. The dangers implicit in a lack of public reasoning might, in the long run, protect referenda against abuse. To develop this thought, we need to turn our attention to the persons involved in the process. Their fate is regularly the focus of Shakespeare's plays, and the blind spot of many constitutional theories. The latter tend to focus on structures and processes, paying relatively little attention to the acting persons, their motives, and to what happens to a constitution when they forsake the common good for their own benefit. But there is a personal dimension to political processes.

One of the dramas revealing this point most clearly must be *Macbeth*. Macbeth is a successful nobleman, promoted by the king for his allegiance. For personal gain, however, he crosses the line and kills the king. The hags' predictions were not heard or understood in their full significance. Thus, at the moment of triumph, when killing Duncan in his sleep, things take a bad turn for Macbeth. He stares at his dagger in disbelief and guilt. To his horror, all the hags' other predictions come true—one after the other. As much as Macbeth tries to avoid the unavoidable, it only makes him lose first his friend, then his wife, and in the end—his life. One cannot but remember the dagger scene when watching Johnson's and Gove's press conference on the day after the referendum. They had just committed a political murder against their leader and were watching with horror as the predictions of "organizations with acronyms" about the disruptive consequences of a Leave vote quickly came true.

How does this vindicate direct democracy? In Shakespeare's drama, the driving force is fate. It turns the viciousness of the *dramatis personae* against themselves, entangling them ever-more deeply in the consequences of their acts. Today, we do not believe in fate, but in public discourse. Leaders who tamper with it might quickly lose control of the process. What's done cannot be undone. If public discourse is led astray, it will turn against those believing to be in control, producing results that they did not desire, that ultimately kill their ambitious plans. It is this uncontrollable aspect of public discourse, this risk of public reason to become unreasonable, that sends a big warning to anyone intending to

manipulate it. Though this be madness, yet there is method in't. One should therefore always take the people seriously. Shakespeare did—his plays were immensely popular not only among the educated echelons of Elizabethan society, but also among the masses. The play at stage needs to appeal to them, too, not just to the senses of a detached (not to say: rotten) elite.

Ironically, the historical Macbeth ultimately exposed Scotland to English domination lasting until today. While Johnson and his followers might reverse that, England is now not at all less likely to be dominated by Europe than before.

