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# **William Shakespeare's "United" Kingdom: Henry V's Captains and the Dawn of Empire**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Primary historical accounts contain no indication that Wales, Ireland and Scotland participated in the battle of Agincourt in the way that Shakespeare portrayed in *The Life of King Henry V*. The captains are strikingly similar to individuals and groups involved in England's past, present and future. Specifically, Fluellen seems to be a call-back to the Welsh troops at the battle of Poitiers in 1356, MacMorris a representation of Earl Hugh O'Neill (whose military ferocity caused the English to flee Ireland in 1599), and Jamy a reference to the transference of the English crown to the Scottish king, James VI four years after the play was performed. This essay explores the development of the sense of unity that would envelope the British Isles through Shakespeare's representations of the nations that would make up the United Kingdom. The historical significance of the captains in the context of the rhetorically patriotic play sketches a timeline of British unification through cultural rather than violent imperialism. In reveling in and partaking in Henry's proto-nationalism, the captains became something that was unheard of in 1415, as well as 1599: British.

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## William Shakespeare's "United" Kingdom: Henry V's Captains and the Dawn of Empire

Based on an Arthurian prophesy, Britons believed that the nations of the British Isles would be united under a virgin monarch, convincing many that Queen Elizabeth would consolidate England, Wales, Scotland and Ireland into an empire (Canny 116). The first monarch to title their domain the Empire of Great Britain was not the "virgin queen," Elizabeth I, but her successor, King James I, formerly James VI of Scotland. *The Life of King Henry the Fifth* is a fundamentally English play, celebrating the early modern imperialism of the monarchy through King Henry V's 1415 campaign in France. The play creates an overarching theme of unity in everything from the chorus unifying the audience and actors, to Henry's unification of his forces at Agincourt in his legendary "band of brothers" monologue.

The word "Britain" is rooted in the name "Brutus"; in English lore Brutus fled Rome prior to his death with his three sons, Lochrine, Albanact, and Camber who went on to be the first rulers of England, Scotland and Wales respectively. Prominent in the myth is the reverence owed by the younger brothers of Scotland and Wales to the eldest king of England (Canny 113). The myth of Brutus began a precedent of familial connection between the British nations, as well as creating a precedent of reverence for England as the heir to Roman glory, and therefore head of the eventual empire. *Henry V's* Chorus encourages an impression of mythological grandeur, calling back to epic poems like *The Aeneid* about the origins of empire. *The Life of King Henry the Fifth* features four captains from the countries that would eventually make up the British Empire: Gower of England, Fluellen of Wales, MacMorris of Ireland, and Jamy of Scotland. Gower makes very few contributions to the plot, allowing the characterization of the English to be left to Henry and his subjects. James L. Calderwood notes that the captains "though contentious enough with one another, are united in their desire, as Jamy puts it, to 'de gud service' against the French" (Calderwood 144), but in doing good service against the French, they are doing good service for the English, their mythological patriarch. Henry V is not inciting a war for the defense of the British Isles, nor to right any wrong the French

have committed against his people, but rather to imperialistically seize the French throne.

Fluellen, captain of Wales, is a fundamentally anachronistic character; in nearly every one of his scenes he makes references to the history of warfare. Fluellen goes so far as to solidify the play's theme of mythical imperialism and warfare by referencing *The Iliad* and the Trojan War when he praises "The Duke of Exeter is as magnanimous as Agamemnon" (3.6.6-7), seeing a kind and forgiving nature in Agamemnon that most of Homer's readers have failed to sympathize with. Fluellen's words are riddled with archaic references, including a preoccupation with traditional warfare so persistent that his compulsion to adhere to it seems to outweigh his desire for victory. When called to the trenches dug around the walls of the besieged town in order to plant explosives, in the midst of battle, he argues "To the mines? Tell the Duke it is not so good to come to the mines; for look you, the mines is not according to the disciplines of war" (3.2.56-58). He goes on to describe that the mines have not been dug to traditional depth and that the mistake must be rectified before he will participate in that front, despite the fact that it will all be blown up anyway.

Fluellen's behavior can be explained by the service of the Welsh forces in the battle of Poitiers in 1356 under Edward the Black Prince. The Welsh did not participate in the battle of Agincourt in the numbers that Shakespeare would have his audience believe; it is estimated that only about 400 Welshmen participated in the battle, many of them former rebels whose only goal was receiving legal pardon as reward for their service (Chapman 312). The history of the battle of Poitiers, however, paints a much more complimentary picture of Welsh forces and their allegiance to the reigning Prince of Wales, the son of Edward III. Medieval French historian Jean Froissart described the English forces as "in number a four thousand men of arms and ten thousand archers, beside Irishmen and Welshmen that followed the host afoot" (5), emphasizing the loyalty of Prince Edward's fellow Britons. Unlike Shakespeare, a French historian would have no motivation to sensationalize or glorify the English forces, nor is his account presented as a

dramatic piece. By invoking the harmony of the Welsh and the English in 1356, in a play celebrating British unity and patriotism in 1415, Shakespeare emphasizes, much like Fluellen himself would, tradition; citing history as justification for contemporary comradeship much like the English would reference the mythical history of Brutus as reason for dominion over the sovereign nations of the British Isles.

MacMorris, captain of Ireland, has significantly less dialogue than Fluellen but does not waste a single line on small talk, ferociously erupting into celebrations of the act about being a soldier or lamenting the state of his people at the hands of the crown he serves. MacMorris in his Irishness and conflicting Englishness, seems to be a reference to the contemporary Elizabethan Irishman Hugh O'Neill Earl of Tyrone. The relationship between the Irish and the English is one of cultural blending, antagonism, and resistance. The first mention of the Irish in the *Henriad* takes place in *Richard II*, when the solipsistic king over whom Henry V's father would triumph orders "pet wars" in Ireland for the sole purpose of attaining military glory. The juxtaposition between relations with the Irish in *Richard II* and *Henry V* illustrates the alternating periods of invasion and camaraderie present throughout history. Polarizing shifts in international politics are personified in MacMorris's character, as well as in the patriotic Irishman and assimilated Englishman Hugh O'Neill. MacMorris laments the imperialistic cultural forces ravaging his homeland and the anti-Irish sentiments of the English commonwealth, asking "Of my nation? What ish my nation? Ish a villain, and a bastard, and a knave, and a rascal? What ish my nation?" (3.2.118-120).

MacMorris is fundamentally separate from the other captains, just as Ireland is geographically separated from the nations of Great Britain. While Fluellen and Jamy only have slight tinges to their dialogue, MacMorris's thick accent can be seen clearly in the text. In 1599, as Shakespeare was writing *Henry V*, the English Earl of Essex took a large army to Ireland, but within a year, Hugh O'Neill Earl of Tyrone, an Irishman with a penchant for adopting English characteristics, embarrassed the invading army, sending them fleeing back to England (Carroll 13). Both the historical O'Neill and the fictional MacMorris simultaneously embody antagonism and assimilation

into English life and behavior, highlighted by Brian Carroll with the fundamental statement that "O'Neill, like MacMorris, could have rightly asked 'what ish my nation?' toggling, as he did between his Irishness and his adopted Englishness, between otherness and sameness" (13). When a country is occupied by foreign invaders over the course of centuries, it is inevitable that the aggressor culture will begin to permeate that of the invaded. The English have had a strong influence on what it means to be Irish, complicating the nationalistic fervor of Irishmen like MacMorris or O'Neill, because as time goes on more and more of the native culture they sought to defend and preserve became that which they resisted. Irishmen like MacMorris and O'Neill were faced with the dilemma that the culture they defended from the English was in some part an English culture; that the invading English had already diluted Irishness to be inseparable from Englishness, begging the question "what ish my nation?"

*The Life of King Henry V* was written a short four years before the death of Elizabeth I and the reign of James I of Scotland. Captain Jamy is a dutiful soldier, praised by Fluellen as "a marvelous valorous gentleman, that is certain, and of the great expedition and knowledge in th'anchent wars" (3.2.74-76). Jamy is distinct from his counterparts in that his motivation to fight on behalf of the English does not appear to have any root in a love for battle; Jamy fights with neither complaint nor bloodlust. There is little to no evidence of any Scots serving under Henry V or under Edward III in the original Anglo-French conflict. In fact, Scotland was a catalyst in inciting the Hundred Years War as they had been at war with the English on and off for years (Mortimer 28). Fluellen references Welshmen from the past; MacMorris alludes to the great contemporary Irishmen of Shakespeare's lifetime; and Jamy, with no parallels in pre-Elizabethan history seems to glorify the Scottish in a manner that would calm the English as their rule by a Scottish king drew near. It was crucial in the last years of the 16<sup>th</sup> century that the English people came to trust the Scots in order to ensure stability, and Shakespeare had a unique means of delivering ideas and influences to the common people through the theater. In Elizabethan England, theater was woefully out of style with the upper rings of society, inspiring most great writers of the time to

write sonnets for the aristocracy, while Shakespeare chose to remain the playwright of the people.

Cultural trends are molded and reflected by those who create and proliferate media. This circular relationship lays the foundation for speculating on the symbolic identity of captain Jamy. The priesthood and aristocracy of Shakespeare's England were enemies of the public theater, the very institution from which Shakespeare derived his livelihood. Elizabeth did not explicitly weigh in on either side of the issue, but James was not so silent on the matter. Leonard Tennenhouse points out that "In contrast to Elizabeth, James made it a matter of royal policy not only to seek control of the theatre but also to advocate the celebration of festivals" (116), and writer James Melville, often trusted as an authority on Scottish life at the time, penned in his *Diary and Autobiography* an account of James attending a play with the aristocracy in 1580 (62). As king of England and Scotland in 1603, James I united the crowns of the two nations, becoming the first to title his dominion The British Empire, and to call his people – in England and in Scotland – Britons.

Shakespeare's belief in and promotion of King James did not lack payoff. Shortly after James' coronation, Shakespeare put on seven of his plays, including *Henry V*, for the new king, and as a result his acting company, Lord Chamberlain's Men, was made the official acting company of the crown, rebranding them The King's Men (Greenblatt 329). While the Scottish captain is listed in the dramatis personae as Jamy and typically referred to as such, Fluellen greets him "Good e'en to Your Worship, good captain James" (3.2.81) both parts of which foreshadow King James; the latter obviously because they share the same name, but in referring to a fellow military captain as "Your Worship" as a proper noun, the monarchy as divinely chosen head of the church of England may be hinted at, a concept with which King James would define his reign.

Shakespeare presented the international captains as symbols of unity between the nations of the British Isles, as mythical representations of the past, present, and future. Despite the squabbles of the captains, they are eager to do battle in the name of the English crown. While a great many English characters in the play express doubt regarding the justifications for war, the captains are unflinchingly loyal: the personification of a

diverse empire united harmoniously for a valiant cause. While it is Henry's speeches to his men which command the most attention, the captains subtly do more for the unity of the British Empire than rhetoric can accomplish. Henry can speak of a band of brothers, but those brothers, mythically descended from Brutus and spread across the empire and spread throughout time itself, represent the true spirit of British union, not as Welshmen, Irishmen, or Scots, nor subjects of the king, but as Britons.

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