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National Boundaries in Question: Shakespeare and the Theoretical Limit of the Nation

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When discussing national limits in Shakespeare's texts, the first thing that comes to mind is probably the issue of geographical borders; the inviolable spatial boundary between England and the continent. The claim that national sentiments can be identified in Shakespeare's plays is not infrequent. The staging of a triumphant England conquering France in *Henry V*, seen among others in the linguistic power held by English king Henry himself over his future bride, the French-speaking princess Katherine, who, in her own words, "cannot speak [Henry's] England" (5.2.102–03) and is eventually silenced in a forceful kiss (266) literally imposing the 'English tongue' on her, has often been seen as participating in an overall narrative of nation-building in early modern England (Williams 217–19, Bellis 236–39). This impression is reinforced by the fact that the play was written at a time when French was an international language and a *lingua franca*, whereas English was little more than a local vernacular. In addition to this, French had been the language of the aristocracy in England from the Norman Conquest (1066) onward, prompting some critics to identify the linguistic domination of English over French in *Henry V* as a nationalistic statement.² Similarly, the unification of the various factions of Irish, Scottish, and Welsh soldiers, identified in the play by their accented speech, into a centralized national army led by the English crown, has been deemed to outline a "British nationalist narrative" (Outland 92).³ The nation as conceived today, however, is estimated to have appeared in the late eighteenth century at the earliest. A nationalist reading

¹ I am profoundly indebted to Dirk Delabastita for his precious insights on the structure of this article, as well as for his ingenious but nonetheless grounded take on the debate around the issue of the 'national limit'.

² Deanne Williams for instance suggests that *Henry V* reverses the rhetoric of "lack and absence" (217) which had been associated with the English language and deemed a sign of its inferiority when compared with refined French, turning it into soldierly virtue in the character of the victorious Henry. The play thus "talks back to the supremacy of French language and culture in England" (218), and reverses the Norman Conquest by making Katherine a colonized object rather than a subject (218). The notion of a reversal of the Norman Conquest can also be found in Anny Crunelle-Vanrigh (63).

³ Nationalist readings of *Henry V* are perhaps reinforced by later adaptations like Laurence Olivier or Kenneth Branagh's film versions, which cut out lines and scenes which could make Henry appear like a tyrant and impair the overall positive reception of the English king. The dual tradition of reading *Henry V* either as a statement of English nationalism or as a subversive piece opposing nationalist ideologies will be developed later. Outland's interpretation itself sees the play as a rather subversive piece, criticizing the Tudor regime through the staging of Henry as a tyrannical character.

of a historical play, in this perspective, may seem an anachronistic approach, superimposing a modern framework onto a Renaissance text.

How, then, can one conceptualize a text like *Henry V*, which seems to be concerned with issues of self-assertion and cultural belonging? This question hints at other types of boundaries tied to the national framework. To determine whether one can talk of nationhood and nationalism in Shakespeare's text, one needs to wonder whether nationhood existed in the Renaissance imagination, thus raising the question of the temporal boundary of the nation. This, in turn, raises epistemological and methodological issues, asking the questions of whether the vocabulary associated with nationhood can be applied to the past, and, more largely, whether a framework which seems as modern as that of the nation necessarily limits perspectives on the past, or can be used to make sense of it.

This paper addresses these questions by offering a review of the two main theoretical stances surrounding the issue of early modern cultural identity in England, especially in the context of Shakespeare's plays, suggesting that the traditional opposition drawn between the two approaches of continuity and discontinuity is a false dichotomy by highlighting the artificiality of these binary, extreme positions, and, in the final section, suggesting a potential, more flexible way to move beyond this traditional opposition. Although some of the approaches reviewed here are relatively dated and tend to be very theoretical, the debate is still very much evoked in recent discussions of early modern England, and it tends, in some cases, to be treated as a *passage obligé* in which several scholars feel compelled to take sides (McKinnon 23, Larkin 3). Gaining a sense of the development and main arguments of this debate, I hope, can contribute to moving past these sometimes-heavy theoretical stances. Although it will present ways to hopefully move beyond old dichotomies, the point of this article is thus not to develop a definitive solution to the issue of early modern nationhood, but to gain insight into historiographical debates and their limitations. Through the exploration of the historical, methodological, and epistemological issues posed by the national framework, finally, I hope to contribute to wider critical debates, while making a case for the relevance of interdisciplinary perspectives. This paper, therefore, does not address the question of whether nationalism can be found in Shakespeare's texts *per se*; however, it attempts to offer a theoretical framework allowing more nuanced perspectives on this issue.

Nations and limits

Already in the short discussion initiated in the previous paragraph, the fundamentally double nature of the word 'limit' has emerged. A limit is both a restriction, a separation; and something

which invites crossing or transgressing. A simple research on frequent collocates of the word in the British National Corpus illustrates this double relation, with the first and third most frequent prepositions echoing its confining nature ('within', representing 36% of uses; 'below', 17%), and the second and fourth evoking crossings ('above', 26%; 'beyond', 17%).

When discussing the history of the national question in sociological and historical studies, Ardis Butterfield notes how, in practice, "the debate has hinged on the larger philosophical conundrum of the separateness of the past" (30) – a debate which opposes a Foucaultian vision of history as discontinuous, made of a series of ruptures, to a continuous conception, with change happening gradually over time. Nationhood is thus either seen as having a fixed beginning and representing a break from the past (the question, in this perspective, is *when* the 'nation' in the modern sense actually appeared), or as developing gradually from *ad hoc* allegiances into the modern ideology.

The notion of the limit, with its inherent ambiguity, seems an efficient way to apprehend the duality of theoretical approaches, according to which the past may be seen as either separated from the present, with the rise of the national ideology inevitably alienating us from a pre-modern, pre-national time – thus acting as an invisible but uncrossable boundary; or a relatively uninterrupted, continuously developing and, in many ways, borderless flow, inviting to cross the methodological boundaries of periodization.⁴

Defining the nation

In the opening pages of his seminal *Imagined Communities* (1983), Benedict Anderson reflects on the semantic vagueness surrounding the concept of nation despite its political and historical prevalence, pointing to how "notoriously difficult" the terms of 'nation', 'nationality', and 'nationalism' are to define (13). Despite Anderson's attempt to address this issue, the definition of the nation in scholarly works remains relatively unstable, as seen in Eric Hobsbawm's comment that the concept lacks a "defining criterion" (*Nations and Nationalism* 5), almost ten years after Anderson's monograph. Derived from the Latin *natio*, the term has been used since the Middle Ages to point to "a human aggregate united by a common descent" (Leerssen "Nation, Ethnie, People" 377) – a wide definition which, over time, has been applied to different groups of various kinds and sizes, from the entire population of continents, to local communities of students sorted by their region of origins in medieval universities. This temporal evolution, needless to say, does not help to resolve the ambiguity of the term 'nation'.

⁴ As suggested before and as will be developed below, this of course refers to the most extreme positions on a methodological continuum, which tend to be untenable in practice.

Definitions from the late twentieth century onwards tend to exclude essentialist approaches, rather pointing to imagination and self-consciousness as core characteristics of modern nations and nationalism. Anderson widely defines the nation as “an imagined political community” sharing a sense of common destiny and shared experience, in the form of culture, traditions, perceived shared traits, or language (15). People belong to a nation not only because of their administrative or political status, but first and foremost because they feel that they belong to it; and it is such a belief which creates, and reinforces, both nation and nationalism. The nation, in this perspective, is an ideological, even imaginary, construct, leading Ernest Gellner, among others, to suggest that nationalism predates nationhood: “Nationalism is not the awakening of nations to self-consciousness: it invents nations where they do not exist” (55).⁵

Anderson’s definition has been particularly successful in scholarship, but retains a level of technical vagueness which has remained in subsequent studies. Depending on the approach adopted, the nation, in Joep Leerssen’s terms, can be defined as “a tribal-racial concept, a linguistic-cultural one, a legal-institutional, a moral-social or a constitutional-political one” (“Nation, Ethnie, People” 378). There is a relative consensus that the term ‘nation’ entails modernity (Greenfeld 18; Hobsbawm *Nations and Nationalism* 14). The term ‘modernity’ itself, however, is no less vague, as seen for instance in the appellation of the ‘early modern period’, often defined as spanning the period from the 15th to the 18th century. Furthermore, this typology is not universally approved, with Adrian Hastings for instance disagreeing with Liah Greenfeld’s statement that nationalism is a ‘road to modernity’, and more generally putting into question the divide between ‘pre-modern’ and ‘modern’ (9). Similarly, a form of democracy, or of horizontality, is generally considered a characteristic of the nation; but this horizontality, again, can take many forms.⁶

This semantic instability can be seen in debates among historians and sociologists surrounding the emergence of the ‘English nation’, with sources establishing the starting point of the nation in virtually every century from the eighth to the nineteenth. Patrick Wormald, for instance, sees Bede the Venerable’s *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* as instrumental in defining a form of English nationhood and English identity in the eighth century, and posits

⁵ Gellner goes further than Anderson in his suggestion that nations are fully imaginary, and not merely ‘imagined’. While in many cases, the formation of national sentiments may predate political unity, it is not universal, with feelings of unity and self-definition sometimes following the establishment of a political entity – as is the case, for instance, in many former colonies.

⁶ Whereas Greenfeld (50) identifies democracy as an important component of the nation, Hastings suggests that an emerging sense of shared identity and comradeship, which he calls ‘horizontal’, is a sign of nationhood in early modern England (i.a. 56, where this notion is tied in with Shakespeare’s *Henry V*). Grabes suggests that the popular opposition to Mary I and her Catholic monarchy after the English Reformation, indicating a growing sense of common religious identity independent from the state, is nationalist in tone (xi).

that the English nation was fully established by the time of the Norman Conquest (20–24, esp. 26); whereas Sarah Foote identifies a self-conscious sense of “cultural uniqueness”, which she calls a ‘nation’ – albeit in inverted commas –, in the ninth century (25, 33). John Gillingham identifies a “revival of the English Nation” (123) in the twelfth century, a period when the English no longer saw themselves as oppressed by Norman invaders and elite, allowing the nation to truly re-emerge after “the traumas of the Norman conquest” (xx–xxi). Hastings names the fourteenth century as the latest point by which the nation was firmly established (51), naming the Hundred Years’ War and a ‘renaissance’ of vernacular literature as factors in this assertion of nationhood (5).⁷ Herbert Grabes identifies the sixteenth century as the time when the concept of the nation became a serious competitor to the monarchic system in England (ix). Similarly, Greenfeld situates the emergence of English national consciousness in the early sixteenth century (27–88, esp. 30; 42), and suggests that England was the first nation in the modern sense and a pioneer in Europe (8–9).⁸ Hans Kohn, while also seeing England as the “first full manifestation of modern nationalism”, situates its beginning in the seventeenth century and ties it to Puritan influences (16–17). Finally, Gerald Newman argues for the eighteenth century as the century in which the English nation was born, together with the rise of modernity and of nationalism as an ideology (54–57); whereas Krishan Kumar does not see any strong form of English nationhood – as opposed to British identity – before the nineteenth century and the decline of the British empire (x).⁹

Closing off historical borders: the nation as a historical limit

For several sociologists and historians, talking about nations and nationalism before the eighteenth century at the earliest is problematic. Although he recognizes that plays such as *Henry V* are “propagandist ... about English history” (*Nations and Nationalism* 75), Hobsbawm objects that nationalist readings are probably anachronistic, because there is no guarantee that these readings were shared among Shakespeare’s audience. Similarly, Kumar refuses the argument that Shakespeare’s histories might contain nationalistic views, going as far as to state

⁷ Hastings however sees traces of an emerging English nation already in the tenth century, and locates the climax of this early modern nation in the aftermath of the sixteenth century.

⁸ This argument is echoed in Hastings (4–5), who however expresses doubts concerning the date identified by Greenfeld as that of the beginning of English nationhood, deeming it arbitrary and unsupported by sources. Although he situates the beginning of English nationalism at a much later date, a similar argument can be found in Newman, who argues that nationalism “flourished first in that one country where, according to present theory, it never really existed at all” (224). The feeling that nationalism is absent in England is often evoked, especially by theorists from England, and is at the basis of Kumar’s debatable argument that it only appeared toward the end of the nineteenth century. Hastings acknowledges this tendency, suggesting that it is due to the bad reputation of nationalism leading English patriots to deny its existence, but disagrees with this view (5).

⁹ Useful overviews of these arguments can be found in Kumar (39–59) and in Larkin (2–3).

that “[t]here is ... no comforting assertion of English superiority or triumphant nationalism to be found anywhere in Shakespeare” (118). *Henry V*, in his view, does not simply endorse a supposed nation, but criticizes the monarchy and questions the legitimacy of the Tudors, painting the portrait of a centralised monarchy dissociated from its middle and lower classes, and reflecting a “distrust of authority that w[as] widespread in the 1590s” (Kumar 117–19; Helgerson *Forms of Nationhood* 322).

The interpretation of the play as resisting dominant ideology is not new. Whereas several critics see *Henry V* as an outwardly nationalist play, tensions have often been identified in the plot and characters, which have led some to suggest that the play may covertly criticize the monarchy. In 1981, Norman Rabkin famously noted that *Henry V* can be read either as national propaganda, or as a piece of “mordant satire” criticizing the Tudor regime (Rabkin 33–62; Wentersdorf 264). Among others, he names Henry’s threats against the city of Harfleur (“What’s it to me, when you yourselves are cause,/ If your pure maidens fall into the hand/Of hot and forcing violation? ... in a moment look to see/ ... Your naked infants spitted upon pikes”, 3.3.99–101; 113; 118) as examples of a Machiavellian characterization. More recently, the argument of subversion has been recuperated in readings of the play inspired by postcolonial approaches, which tend to see *Henry V* as resisting dominant, centralized English nationalism. Critics like Paula Blank and Marianne Montgomery have pointed to Katherine’s refusal to speak English in the wooing scene despite Henry’s insistence, and to her possible allusion to an untranslatable *double-entendre* which escapes Henry’s understanding (“*Les dames et demoiselles pour être baisées devant leurs noces, il n’est pas la coutume de France*”, 5.2.249–250; with *baiser* meaning both ‘to kiss’ and ‘to sleep with’, but which Henry can only understand as ‘kiss’), as discreet forms of resistance against Henry’s nationalist and imperialist conquest (Blank 166–67; Montgomery 45–47). Similarly, Blank has pointed to the role of the Welsh captain Fluellen as a critical commentator questioning Henry’s idealized narrative of standardized national unity, calling out the king’s tyrannical tendencies by comparing him to “Alexander the Pig” (4.7.12). This position of subtle subversion, she argues, is made possible because of Fluellen’s non-standard speech pattern, and allows him to make a discreet but potent argument against Henry’s standardized, centralized Englishness (138).

As opposed to modernist views, however, these readings tend to present the play as resisting a form of ideological nationalism present in England and epitomized in the play by a tyrannical Henry. In such readings, this dominant ideology of centralization and standardization, fostered by the English crown, is seen as a form of nationalism. Subversive interpretations, in other words, do not oppose the concept of nationalism in early modern England itself: rather, they

situate nationalism outside of the text, in its immediate historical context, and tie it with the figure of the monarchs. Additionally, a putative form of opposition to authority does not automatically exclude a sense of national self-definition. For Grabes, who identifies a ‘split’ between England’s dynastic ruler and an independent, popular sense of English identity from Henry VIII’s reign (1509–1547) onwards, which “established the nation as an autonomous – and more precious – body” (x), the opposite might actually be true.

The perception of the national framework as irrelevant when talking about early modern England, in other cases, has been fed by recent studies analysing linguistic and cultural diversity in early modern Europe. Scholars such as Butterfield suggest that the national framework, marked by nineteenth-century nationalist ideologies of monolingualism and monoculturalism, is unsuitable to describe early modern England (34–35; 52; 57). Early modern London, as the historical consensus suggests, was a largely multilingual and multicultural space, marked by waves of immigration (Hunt Yungblut 10–14, Selwood 1–2) and commercial encounters (Hsy 2–4). The large number of language primers, as well as the frequent use of European vernaculars in early modern English plays,¹⁰ suggest that multilingualism was both frequent and encouraged (Montgomery 6–10; Saenger 13–21). In addition to this, England’s medieval and early modern history is strongly interconnected with France following the 1066 Norman Conquest and the subsequent establishment of a French-speaking dynasty in England, with both countries sharing a long history of wars and intermarriages in the course of the early modern era.¹¹ This medieval plurality and interconnectedness of cultures lead Butterfield to resist the idea of the beginning of an ‘English nationhood’ in early modern England (xviii), seeing English and French identities as too intertwined to claim separateness, and fearing that the national framework would lead to see them as more distinct than they actually were. Following William McNeill, who suggests that polyethnicity and multilingualism may have been the default form of society in the premodern era, with homogeneity generally considered under-advanced until the rise of the national ideology in the late eighteenth century (4; 24),¹² Butterfield suggests that the national framework may be anachronistic, because reductive, in many periods, and encourages moving beyond this paradigm to acknowledge the plurality and flexibility of identities and

¹⁰ Shakespeare’s *Henry V* features three bilingual scenes (3.4, 4.4, 5.2), including one, almost exclusively in French, in which Katherine attempts to learn English (3.4). The speech of French characters in the play is frequently punctuated with sporadic French words and expressions.

¹¹ The historical interconnectedness is also noted by Newman, but largely predates his period of study. The historical intertwining of England and France evokes Michael Werner’s and Bénédicte Zimmermann’s notion of ‘histoire croisée’, and their argument for a trans-national history which is more than the simple addition of national, local histories (43).

¹² McNeill, however, acknowledges a form of cultural homogeneity in Northern-Western Europe in the early modern era (7). On ‘natural’ diversity, see also Hobsbawm (“Language, Culture, and National Identity” 1066–68).

allegiances. Suggesting that the conquest of France by England or the unification of British forces under a common, centralized English crown in Shakespeare's *Henry V* translates a strong sense of English nationhood and nationalistic pride, in this perspective, would be a retroactive superimposition of national ideologies; a methodological limit preventing a proper understanding of the past. Setting this paradigm aside would be the only way to regain some form of access to the past, and to cross the epistemological boundary.¹³

While a model accounting for plurality and evolution in definition of identity is desirable indeed – as will be suggested below –, Butterfield's suggestion to entirely set aside the national paradigm in studies of the past seems quite extreme. Even during the nineteenth century, monolingualism and monoculturalism were little more than ideologies, with reality being often much more plural than national myths would have it. The language policies of nineteenth-century France, urging the unification of the French language, are only reminiscent of how linguistically diverse France was at the time. Using the mixture of cultures and languages as an argument against the application of the national framework to early modern England, in this perspective, seems logically flawed. Linguistic and cultural heterogeneity do not necessarily prevent a sense of shared group identity or the assertion thereof. On the contrary: the contact between cultures may precisely encourage self-differentiation and phenomena of group identification, as also suggested by Grabes (xiii). An image of the 'other', after all, is necessary in order to define oneself; and self-images are frequently established and refined through comparison and opposition with the 'other'. In the case of early modern England, statements of cultural identity seem difficult to ignore indeed: in addition to xenophobic and popular anti-foreign movements in the highly cosmopolitan London, suggesting a sense of community (Hunt Yungblut 38–43; Selwood 53–55), early modern texts often include examples of so-called national images, opposing perceived natural English traits to foreign stereotypes. Honesty, straightforwardness, manliness, and Protestantism were presented as proper English traits (Larkin 7–8), and epitomized on stage by strong, manly, brave and chivalrous English soldiers like Talbot in Shakespeare's *Henry VI*, who courageously fights against treacherous French soldiers. Drunk Dutchmen walked the stage in comedies like *The Shoemaker's Holiday*, and *Henry VI's* Joan of Arc may be the epitome of the arrogant, effeminate (or, more largely,

¹³ A perspective interestingly also developed by Reynolds, who argues that the study of the medieval definition of 'nation' is relevant precisely because it is different from the modern paradigm, forcing us to detach ourselves from our certitudes (xiii).

gender-treacherous), deceptive, and promiscuous ‘Frenchman’ in early modern drama.¹⁴ Joan leads troops of men, disguises her men and herself as “*paysans, pauvres gens de France*” (3.2.13) to infiltrate and take over the town of Rouen, thus using ruse and treachery instead of military strength, and claims pregnancy by three different men to avoid execution (5.3.59–78). Cultural stereotypes were found in correspondence and chronicles;¹⁵ and revealed in the contemptuous trope of the Frenchified English gentleman, an essentially national traitor “all Frenche, in eatyng, drynkyng and apparel ... in Frenche vices and bragges” (Hall 49). The cosmopolitanism of early modern London, in this perspective, seems precisely to have sparked a wish for national self-definition and differentiation from perceived foreigners.¹⁶

Most ‘modernist’ historians of the nation do acknowledge earlier forms of allegiances and/or senses of shared identities in early modern England. For them, however, these expressions of identity can be called neither nationalist, nor even national, since they are, in their view, too socially elitist (Hobsbawm *Nations and Nationalism* 73–77), too “unselfconscious”, or too small-scaled (Reynolds lviii–lx; the term is from Anderson 38). Proposed alternative terms accommodating these earlier forms of allegiances include ‘patriotism’, which is generally defined as a more primal, basic, popular feeling of attachment and allegiance to one’s land of birth (Newman 52–56). This primal feeling, in Newman’s understanding, is entirely devoid of nationalism’s ideological connotations, and therefore more appropriate to define early modern feelings of belonging. In its modern sense, Leerssen defines the term as a “mild and benign form of nationalism” (“Patriotism” 393) which, as noted by Hastings, is more positively connoted than the latter (5).¹⁷ Critics like Claire McEachern however take issue with the patronizing tone of traditional definitions like Newman’s or Hobsbawm’s, and their tendency to associate patriotism with a primitive feeling mainly expressed by “groundlings” – a term referring to the popular class attending plays in the pit of the Globe, but which McEachern

¹⁴ In Thomas Dekker’s *The Shoemaker’s Holiday*, Lacy, disguised as a Dutch shoemaker, sings in mock-Dutch of “een bore” who was “als dronck he cold nyet stand” (“a boor so drunk he could not stand”) (4.40–42). On this and on Joan of Arc, see also Hoenselaars (91–92); Williams (189–90).

¹⁵ John Chamberlain reports that French agents behave “very arrogantly” (170), and variants of the expression “French brag” are often found in Hall’s *Chronicles* (151, 154, 192, 551 i.a.).

¹⁶ The counterpart of this impulse of self-definition in regard of London’s cosmopolitanism was, perhaps, an increased xenophobia in English subjects, as mentioned in texts such as *The Londons Looking-Glasse* (1621) – a recusant pamphlet whose covert criticism of the English reformation is veiled under an argument for greater tolerance of foreigners in London – and as attested in cases of anti-foreign uprisings and attacks on foreigners in cosmopolitan London (Hunt Yungblut 39–40). I thank my reviewers for suggesting the addition of this nuance.

¹⁷ “Foreigners have nationalism, which is a bad thing; we English have patriotism, which is a good thing!” (Hastings 5). This sarcastic statement, with which the author disagrees, evokes Emmanuel Macron’s much less sarcastic insistence that nationalism is an undesirable corruption of patriotism. Emmanuel Macron, “Le patriotisme est l’exact contraire du nationalisme : le nationalisme en est la trahison”. 11 November 2018, 1:36 PM. Tweet. I thank my reviewers for suggesting this helpful example.

deems condescending because of what she sees as a connotation of intellectual simplicity (7). This criticism interestingly highlights the sometimes ironically teleological tone of such approaches, which tend to associate what they call ‘pre-national’ times with a lack of civilization.

Other proposed terms include ‘proto-nation’ and ‘proto-nationalism’, which are especially used by Hobsbawm to denote socially elitist forms of allegiances and senses of ‘imagined communities’ predating the growth of national ideologies, and differing from later nations because of their lack of inclusion of lower-class citizens. Hobsbawm defines a proto-nation as a community bound by the “consciousness of belonging or having belonged to a lasting political entity” (*Nations and Nationalism* 73). Such proto-nations, in some cases, are seen as facilitating the emergence of national ideologies in the nineteenth century, since a sense of shared identity had already been present (77). In this perspective, *Henry V*’s expression of cultural belonging, echoing the power of the Tudor monarchy and mainly experienced through the elite characters of Henry and the French princess, would correspond to proto-national feelings (75). The term ‘proto-nation’, however, has been treated as a way to shy away from the use of the proper word (McEachern 19), with Leerssen defining nationalism as a “political instrumentalization of a national auto-image” often having “premodern discursive roots” (Leerssen “Nationalism” 386). If nationalism is a nineteenth-century phenomenon, Leerssen suggests, national feelings appeared earlier; and one can talk of ‘nation’ in this context.

Finally, Colin Kidd, who studied the role of ethnicity in the early modern English sense of identity while mainly adopting the modernist framework, proposes the term of ‘regnalism’, inspired from Susan Reynolds (Kidd 288). This term, which supposedly reflects how early modern political discourses were largely focused on issues of heritage, regnal status, and ecclesiastical polity rather than ethnicity, has however failed to take off in recent scholarship.

Modernist approaches, for fear of anachronism, thus tend to treat the national paradigm as an impassable methodological limit. The national framework, they suggest, is either too restrictive, or too ideologically marked, to be applied to any period before the nineteenth century. What is more, such a prevalent paradigm is dangerous, tempting researchers to give more importance to forms of communal identity in what would later become nation-states than to other forms of shared identity, in a self-confirmation bias which may suggest that these nations were ‘destined’ to appear (Reynolds lx). Although scholars should try to set aside their own beliefs and paradigms as much as possible in order to read the past on its own terms, Reynolds suggests that this may not be enough to “eliminate all distortions and get our history

right” (xiii).¹⁸ Refusing to superimpose the national framework onto the early modern world, in this perspective, would constitute a first step toward accuracy.

Continuity readings: borderless history?

At the other end of the methodological spectrum, many scholars consider that the intellectual framework of the nation can be applied to the past, thus rather leaning towards a more continuous reading of history, either explicitly or not. For Hastings, the modernist approach is unsatisfactory, not least because it tends to downplay, or even outright disregard, medieval and early modern evidence of allegiances and nationhood (6, 9, 10). In his perspective, not only can the intellectual framework of the nation be applied to early modern England: if one is to properly trace back the history of nationhood and of nationalism, it has to be used.¹⁹

Many of these more continuous approaches point to the shift in cultural and social organization in early modern England as factors fostering the emergence of national identity. In particular, they highlight a process of vernacularization of culture, literature, and language (Hunter 18; Leerssen “The Poetics” 64), with Hastings for instance suggesting that “an extensively used vernacular literature” is “the most important and widely present factor” in the development of nationhood in general (2–3). In addition to this, the role of religion, especially in the case of early modern England, cannot be downplayed.²⁰ The English Reformation, following King Henry VIII’s (r. 1509–1547) declaration of the religious independence of England from the Roman Catholic Church, and which was established among others in the 1534 Act of Supremacy which declared the King the head of the Protestant Church of England, led to a merger of the Church and the State, reinforcing both political and social feelings of unity. This unity continued during Elizabeth I’s reign (1558–1603), who was in power for much of Shakespeare’s life, after a brief interval during which the Catholic Mary I (r. 1553–1558) had reinstated Roman Catholicism as the official religion of England. The resistance of English

¹⁸ Reynold’s approach is otherwise more of an in-between, incorporating elements from both continuity and discontinuity readings.

¹⁹ In the same vein, McEachern’s literary analysis of English nationhood argues that early modern England saw the birth of what can be seen as a nation in the modern sense, and draws the portrait of a self-aware “England” striving toward social homogeneity, simultaneously centred around the figure of the monarch and profoundly questioning its legitimacy. Shakespeare’s *Henry V*, in her view, represents the duality of an emergent, centralised nationhood personified in the royal figure, and of fear of the tyranny which this centralization may cause. The duality of reading highlighted above is thus directly woven into the fabric of the play, and intentionally encodes the profoundly ambivalent nature of early modern nationhood (84–85). Based on this, she argues that refusing to use the term ‘nation’ when talking about Shakespeare’s time because of the possible lack of popular inclusion and adherence is falling into another trap of the nation, that of considering that nineteenth-century nations’ ideal of social homogeneity is universal, and shared by all (16–17). The notion of popular ambivalence toward and distrust of the monarch is also found in Grabes, whose argument is developed below.

²⁰ I thank my reviewers for their precious comments and suggestions on the following section.

subjects to this forced re-catholicization, as evidenced by the large number of anti-Catholic and anti-Marian pamphlets circulated during her reign, is treated by Grabes as the evidence of a new distinction between the monarch and the national body of ‘England’ (x).²¹ In his discussion of the national ‘vernacular literature’, understood in a wide sense, Hastings highlights how religious texts – mostly the English Bible, Thomas Cranmer’s *Book of Common Prayer* (1549), and John Foxe’s *Actes and Monuments* (1563), arguably the most influential texts of Shakespeare’s time – both fostered and reflected this sense of nationhood in early modern Englishmen, using the word ‘nation’ in the modern sense repeatedly (15) and, in the case of Foxe’s *Actes and Monuments*, chronicling the history of the Church of England and illustrating how and why Englishmen “were indeed a ‘peculiar’ people set apart for divine purposes” (59).²² Additional, often-identified factors include the rise of print culture, which allowed for the dissemination of the pamphlets and texts named above, and of increased physical mobility which encouraged contacts with foreigners; as well as England’s wish to assert a strong identity as a response to the fear of Catholic invasion and to its growing, but fragile, place in the world (Larkin 4; Mayer “Introduction” 30).

As implied above, such a continuous approach is quite frequent in literary studies, where authors tend to adopt the terms and intellectual framework of nations and nationalism without necessarily commenting on their methodological choices. Although she deems Shakespeare a subversive figure against nationalist ideologies and sees *Henry V* as a rather anti-nationalistic play, Margaret Tudeau-Clayton for instance identifies a movement toward a centralised, conformist ideal of English identity in the early modern period following the Reformation, which she calls an “ideology of national character” (93) and which, in her view, Shakespeare resisted by favouring cultural openness and linguistic diversity, seen among others in his multilingual scenes (195). She does not comment, however, on her use of the term ‘national’; nor does she define it or openly acknowledge her stance on the issue.

Studies acknowledging the profoundly multilingual and multicultural nature of early modern England do not, most of the time, exclude the intellectual framework of the nation. Many studies of Anglo-French relationships in early modern England, for instance, openly mention nation-

²¹ The tension highlighted by Grabes could be argued to have become less acute during the reign of Queen Elizabeth, who reconnected with the Anglicanism of her father, due to the fact that her religious policies were more in line with the growing sense of common faith and religious destiny.

²² This idea is also found, among others, in Grabes (xiv). On the modernist end of the spectrum, Anderson also names the Reformation as a factor setting the stage for the later emergence of imagined communities, among others because it contributed to the pluralization and decentralization of formerly all-encompassing, universal religious values, and because Bible translation both fostered vernacularization and helped with the development of print capitalism (36–37). As noted below, Anderson however does not consider these elements signs of early modern nationhood.

building and national images to highlight the fluidity of English and French identities, the intermingling of both cultures, as well as assertions of cultural identity or their subversion in literature, including in Shakespeare. Jean-Christophe Mayer, for instance, mentions how, despite the progressive decline of the French language in England and the unsuccessful conclusion of the Hundred Years' War (1337–1453) leading to the loss of French territories, the fantasy of England's "special relationship with France" and the image of France as a "dissembling semblance" or inverted mirror image of England persisted well into the sixteenth century ("The Ironies of Babel" 127; "Introduction" 26). *Henry V*, in Mayer's view, is a direct response to this fantasy, a "theatrical attempt to recover a lost English past and to regain a lost territory – France – through imagination" ("The Ironies of Babel" 128); and Henry himself epitomizes the wish for an inverted Norman Conquest, a practically colonial English fantasy to be unified with France once again. Henry's possessiveness of a France which he "love[s] ... so well that [he] will not part with a village of it" (5.2.169–70), represented in his aggressive wooing of Katherine and his attempts to Anglicize her ("the Princess is the better Englishwoman", 5.2.122), however impairs his dreams of peaceful, horizontal unity, showing that England could "only fail in her will to embrace other culture fully" (Mayer "The Ironies of Babel" 133).

In these cases, the adoption of the intellectual framework of the nation, although not always overtly acknowledged, both builds bridges between the past and today by mapping the history of Anglo-French relationships and how both cultures were instrumental in the construction of the other's self-image,²³ and deconstructs nineteenth-century ideologies of linguistic homogeneity by pointing at the prevalence of multilingualism in the early modern world.²⁴ The national paradigm is not applied to the early modern period, or to Shakespeare's texts, to convey essentialist ideas about national identity, but to deconstruct them by showing how seemingly fixed, unalterable national boundaries and national images evolved in history. This aim, which is explicitly adopted by the discipline of imagology, is also expressed by Mayer in his analysis of *Henry V*, in which he reflects on how the French scene in which Katherine learns basic words in English (3.4) must have created a feeling of foreignness in the early modern audience, which

²³ The term 'culture' itself remains difficult to define, but is used in this case in a functional way, following the definition of the OED: "the civilization, customs, artistic achievements, etc., of a people, esp. at a certain stage of its development or history".

²⁴ Similar movements of assertion of national identity while acknowledging the mixture of English and French cultures in medieval England, as well as the central role of multilingualism, can be found in historical studies as well, for instance in Gillingham (xv).

in turn “pointed out that foreignness is only a construction, and indeed a question of perspective” (“The Ironies of Babel” 131).

Continuous approaches, as suggested above, tend to base themselves on a less restrictive definition of the nation than that of modernists. Studies of English self-representations, for instance, often take into account the evolution of the term’s meaning over the centuries, and use it in a contextualised manner. While she states that situating the birth of the English nation in the sixteenth century would be “to claim too much” (Larkin 3), Hilary Larkin does not shy from using the terms ‘national images’ in her study of discursive motifs of English identity in the early modern era. Larkin’s use evokes Leerssen’s aforementioned definition of national auto-images as having “premodern discursive roots” (“Nationalism” 386), although nationality only became an ideologically marked, “all-dominating anthropological and cultural category” after the eighteenth century (“Nation, Ethnie, People” 380). Before that, Leerssen suggests, national images were either based on *ad hoc* observations or, in the seventeenth century, on more systematic pseudo-anthropological reflections, and were thus much less centralized and politicized than in later times.²⁵

The application of the intellectual framework of the nation to the premodern period, when not handled with caution, can however lead to the issues feared by modernists – that of anachronistic, possibly teleological readings. Nationalist interpretations of *Henry V*, for instance, have addressed what they see as the “triumph of the English language” in the play (Helgerson “Language Lessons” 296; the term comes from R.F. Jones), arguing for instance that Henry, through his proud monolingualism, his imposition of “true English” (5.2.213), and his insistence on the English values of straightforward speech (“I cannot ... grasp out my eloquence, nor I have no cunning in protestation – only downright oaths”, 5.2.141–44), embodies a new pride in the native tongue in a period when, in reality, it “was not yet entirely triumphant” (Steinsaltz 321). Such a reading could be deemed problematic in and of itself, because it seems to be superimposing the ideological agenda of linguistic homogeneity as a marker of national identity advocated by nineteenth-century nationalism onto a period in which such an ideal did not yet exist. Anderson, while recognizing the vernacularization of early modern England and the officialization of English as a state language in the early modern period, considers these changes too gradual, haphazard, and practically-motivated to be considered a sign of an emerging national ideology (37–38). Jonathan Hope similarly argues that, if there was indeed a movement toward linguistic homogeneity in early modern England,

²⁵ It is worth noting that Leerssen does not take a firm stance on the continuity-discontinuity debate, instead pointing at the limits of both.

it did not come from an ideology of national unity, but from a Humanist concern for clarity (37). The increasing importance of printing also created the need for a form of linguistic homogeneity, in order for the written language to be understandable by the greater number of readers. While acknowledging these practical motivations, proponents of the beginning of a sense of nationhood in early modern England do not deem it far-fetched to suggest that the beginning of a monolingual ideal could have appeared at that period (Bellis 1; Montgomery 12).²⁶ David Steinsaltz's formulation, however, seems to suggest that the English language was somehow destined to dominate: a formulation which comes dangerously close to falling into precisely the teleological, essentialist readings which modernists seek to avoid. Similar issues have been raised in Michael Dobson's review of Tudeau-Clayton's book, in which he suggests that the reading of Shakespeare as a subversive figure supporting diversity against a normative, exclusive, bitterly xenophobic, and universally-shared English national identity may be a little too inspired by recent events to be fully historically accurate – Tudeau-Clayton's book, after all, was published during the Brexit negotiations (Dobson 28).

Beyond the debate: shifting limits

Both sides of the argument thus seem to offer strengths and problems, with modernists assuring a form of methodological caution while showing excessive restraint in their approach of the past, and medievalists opening up possibilities of interpretation and deconstruction which can, in some cases, lead to anachronisms.

But whereas the terms are debated, the arguments are often similar. It is striking to see how Anderson's argument, which identifies a rising sense of unified identity in early modern England as sparked by a combination of the rise of capitalism and print culture without calling it a nation (38–39), closely resembles arguments developed for instance by Michael Saenger, who sees the book market as a factor contributing to, and as a vector of, national identity and nationalism in post-Reformation England (5). At its heart, and as suggested above, the debate between so-called 'modernists' and 'medievalists' is a false binary. When pushed to the extreme, the opposition between discontinuity and continuity becomes quite absurd:

²⁶ Examples of legal texts suggesting the beginning of a monolingual paradigm in early modern England include the 1535 Laws in Wales Acts, whose section XX declares the following: "Also be it enacted by the Authority aforesaid, That all Justices Commissioners Sheriffs Coroners Escheators Stewards and their Lieutenants, and all other Officers and Ministers of the Law, shall proclaim and keep the Sessions Courts Hundreds Leets, Sheriffs Courts, and all other Courts in the English Tongue ... and also that from henceforth no Person or Persons that use the *Welch* [sic] Speech or Language shall have or enjoy any manner Office or Fees within this realm of *England*, *Wales*, or other the King's Dominion, upon Pain of forfeiting the said Offices or Fees, unless he or they use and exercise the *English* Speech or Language." (Raithby 252; punctuation is original). I thank my reviewers for suggesting this example.

corresponding either to a Heraclitan view of history as constantly changing, so that no patterns can be identified; or to a more Platonian view, in which the essence of things is immutable, and change is merely an illusion. In practice, the binary between both views is a construct: it is next to impossible to strictly limit oneself to one view or the other. Disregarding discontinuity prevents periodization, but disregarding continuity means refusing to account for causality and evolution in time, which prevents a proper, holistic understanding of history.²⁷ In practice, then, an ‘in-between’ approach seems the only viable option, as evidenced by the fact that both sides of the argument generally acknowledge forms of group identity and self-definition in early modern England which resemble modern nations, while highlighting that these movements were not exactly the same as nineteenth-century nationalism. In other words, the focus of the debate on naming conventions gives the impression that both sides of the argument are irreconcilable, while there is a deeper consensus about the historical phenomena at work.

The issue, then, is largely semantic in essence – a point also made by Leerssen when he points to the “fruitless debates” surrounding the national framework, caused by an “imprecise use of the concept” (Leerssen “Nation, Ethnie, People” 379). Rather than debating on the facts, what is needed is a clarity of concept; a more effective semantic model to come to terms with the question of the nation in history. More restrictive perspectives, which tend to see the ‘nation’ as defined by a series of criteria needing to be present for a state or social group with a sense of shared identity to qualify, seem to employ a rather too static and rigid semantic model which is not very good at dealing with change, nuance and borderline cases: a group is either a nation, or not a nation; is either democratic, or non-democratic; ideological, or non-ideological. Pushed to the extreme, this line of thinking implies that all nations, and all nationalisms, are the same, leaving no room for geographical, cultural, or individual differences. Moreover, such a model creates the impression that the nation appeared all of a sudden, the ideological switch happening at some point in the late eighteenth century.

When discussing forms of allegiances in the early modern world and the emergence of nationalism, a more flexible model, which takes the evolution of the term over time into account, seems necessary. Because of its more flexible nature, a cognitive model inspired from Eleanor Rosch’s prototype theory seems more helpful when it comes to the national framework (Rosch 328–50). In such a model, the cognitive category ‘nation’ would be exemplified by certain communities, past and present, sharing a number of attributes viewed as typical of a nation, immediately coming to the mind of a speaker upon thinking of the concept of a ‘nation’,

²⁷ For a brief but meaningful reflection on the problems of periodization and the fear of teleology, see among others Jean-Marie Le Gall’s introduction to his 2018 *Défense et illustration de la Renaissance*.

and against which any new potential candidate for inclusion in the category would be compared to determine whether it resembles the prototype enough to qualify as a nation. Such exemplars, in the case of post-nineteenth-century Western nations, would for instance include the United States or France, sharing attributes such as political unity and shared government, a form of democratic participation, a shared territory with fixed boundaries, a language shared by most citizens, a sense of kinship or shared identity, and a sense of common history. Possessing all these attributes is however not necessary to belong in the category. Countries with several official languages, for instance, could perfectly be seen as belonging to the category 'nation'. Less typical features, shared by some, but not necessarily the majority of exemplars, could include a shared religion. In such a model, early modern England could be deemed a non-typical example of a nation, since it shares some of the typical attributes of modern nations, including for instance a sense of kinship and shared identity, and a form of political unity, and, less typically, a common faith, while lacking others, such as popular voting.

Prototypical categories are, by essence, tailored by culture. Prototypical exemplars and attributes may differ depending on one's surroundings. This allows for a level of temporal evolution too, suggesting that contemporary 'nations' may not be understood in the exact same way as early modern ones. Common faith, shared self-images, and a sense of common purpose, for instance, may have been more central – more prototypical – attributes of nations in early modern England, than they might be in today's globalized world and in the increasingly secular, deconstructed Western society. England, by these standards, would have grown to be a quite prototypical exemplar of a nation, characterized among others by political and Church unity, a sense of shared history, a common purpose – the understanding of oneself as God's elected people restoring His true Words on earth, as seen in Foxe's *Actes and Monuments* –, or a sense of shared national character illustrated for instance in conduct-books and in drama.

In the case of *Henry V*, the model outlined above could allow for a more nuanced reading of the play: if it is perceived a piece of nationalist propaganda, this notion can be enriched by paying a closer attention to the attributes of nationhood it conveys, including Henry's imperialist tendencies, the acknowledgement of the English army's unexpected victory as part of God's providence – both suggesting a sense of shared English destiny as the elect people – national stereotypes, and the fact that the play can be seen as part of an effort of common history-writing, chronicling the victories of the past. If the play is read in a subversive light, the understanding of early modern nationhood can enhance traditional arguments of resistance against English nationalism in *Henry V* by emphasising how the elements traditionally perceived as subversive turn the specific attributes of early modern English nationhood on their

head: the piety of England and its supposed status as God's elect people is undermined by Henry's hypocrisy and lack of Christian faith when he turns his soldiers against one another or orders the massacre of French prisoners. Similarly, Henry's imperialist ambition illustrated in his demand for "a boy, half-French half-English, that shall go to/ Constantinople and take the Turk by the beard" (5.2.201–02) from Katherine can be considered satirical, seeing how his territories were lost by his son Henry VI, a fact with which the audience would have been familiar, given that *Henry VI* was first performed in 1592, about seven years before *Henry V*. This also undermines the play's apparent wish for glorious chronicling.

A more flexible model such as the one outlined above thus allows to talk of a 'nation' in the early modern world without falling into the trap of teleology feared by modernists. Early modern England, as highlighted above, saw profound social change, leading to major shifts in values. The feeling of crisis associated with the loss of the Ptolemaic geocentric model, leading to a new focus on the human being and to a need for new forms of allegiances, the aforementioned rise of mercantile values, mobility, print culture, and vernacularization, and of course the Reformation, may have indeed favoured the apparition of *ad hoc* secular allegiances and senses of belonging, expressed among others through a wish for cultural differentiation and self-definition: in two words, the rise of 'imagined communities'. These communities may be called 'national' in the historical sense of social groups sharing a sense of common heritage; but were not 'national' in the nineteenth-century sense evoking a monolithic, institutionalised ideology. Such a flexible model, thus, allows us to recognize both a 'nation' and a 'non-nation' before the eighteenth century, and to highlight historical continuities while acknowledging existing discontinuities – just like it is possible to see a 'nation' and 'non-nation' in Shakespeare's *Henry V*, and to reconcile subversive and nationalist readings by acknowledging the very ambivalence of the play. The nation is not a monolith, but a flexible, fluctuating concept, both then and now; and accounting for this flexibility allows us to talk of a 'nation' in earlier times while accounting for the plural, dynamic, and sometimes contradictory, nature of identified 'national' allegiance. The nation, then, is no longer a strict limit preventing a proper understanding of history, nor is it a category to be applied indiscriminately to the past in a borderless conception of time as could be feared by a strict modernist approach. It is a shifting boundary, an elastic, dynamic, evolving model, much like

the geographical borders of states in early modern maps, regularly changing through wars and intermarriages.²⁸

Although it is rarely addressed from a theoretical point of view, such a shift in perspective may already be underway. Debates around the methodological issues posed by the national framework in the context of early modern studies peaked in the 1980s and 90s, and have somewhat abated since. Recent works like Leerssen's or Larkin's appear to combine methodological prudence and an acknowledgement of differences between the early modern nation and nineteenth-century conceptions with a more pragmatic, source-oriented take on the definition of collective identity in the early modern world, and tend to express, as seen in Leerssen's comment on "fruitless debates", a form of lassitude around heavy theoretical discussions which seem beside the point. By focusing once more on primary sources, these works help to re-centre the debate, giving more voice and agency to the past where it had, sometimes, been almost stifled by an exclusive focus on twentieth-century naming conventions.²⁹ Their practical approaches, which lead them to adopt the vocabulary of their sources (Larkin 6–7), seem to resonate with the flexible model suggested above: one which accounts for the plurality of conceptions, for the evolution of concepts, and for the inherently plural and fluctuating character of national – and human – identities.

Final thoughts

In her study of communities in medieval Europe, Reynolds reflects that twentieth-century conceptions of nationhood may be too different from early modern preoccupations to allow us to accurately understand, let alone reconstruct, past assertions of group identity (xiii). Neither the review of theoretical debates, nor the suggestion of a more flexible approach suggested in this paper, can offer a solution to this much wider problem. The assertion that both 'extreme' sides of the theoretical continuum are untenable, as well as the suggestion of an approach accounting for the plurality and instability of experience comes precisely from an awareness of the inherent limitedness and partiality of human understanding.

With this in mind, can one, ultimately, talk of an English nation, or indeed even of nationalism, in Shakespeare's texts? In this review article, I hope to have paved the way for more nuanced responses to this question by offering a more detailed understanding of

²⁸ Early modern conceptions of national identity may have been less fleeting than actual political borders, suggesting that the sense of shared identity and character may be a more prototypical attribute of early modern nations than political boundaries.

²⁹ As seen, for instance, in Kumar, whose first five chapters are almost exclusively dedicated to expressing disagreements with previous scholars' arguments and pointing to perceived logical fallacies in their reasoning.

theoretical contention. By reflecting on the national framework as an epistemological and methodological limit, I hope to have shown the promising complementarity of seemingly dichotomous approaches, and to have made a case for a pragmatic approach grounded in methodological flexibility and historical contextualisation. Finally, by suggesting the use of a more flexible and dynamic model to make sense of a literary and historical issue, I hope to have contributed to illustrating the richness which can grow from the crossing of disciplinary boundaries, although the model suggested is only a theoretical outline, which, I hope, can be further developed in the context of practical, source-oriented analyses.

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