

## ALEXANDER THE PIG

**Trevor Lloyd**

Towards the end of the battle of Agincourt in Shakespeare's *Henry V* the Welsh captain Fluellen (that is Shakespeare's name for him; in historical fact he would have been Llewelyn) compares the triumphant Henry of Monmouth favourably with Alexander the Pig. Gower, the English captain to whom he is speaking, says "Alexander the Great," perhaps to correct him, perhaps just to make sure he follows what Fluellen is talking about. In any case Fluellen replies "the pig or the great or the mighty or the huge or the magnanimous are all one reckonings."<sup>1</sup> Alexander the Pig is a funny mistake, but it is also very authentic: a Welsh speaker would have grown up knowing about Alexander fawr, and would learn that fawr (or mawr) normally translates into English as 'big.' So, Alexander the Big, and then it's very natural for a Welsh speaker with the traditional difficulty with 'b' and 'p' to pronounce it Alexander the Pig.<sup>2</sup> An English speaker could hardly invent that, and yet it is all likely enough. I infer that Shakespeare met a Welsh speaker, or was told about one by a friend, and it would have been natural for a Welsh speaker say "the pig or the great (and possibly even the huge) are all one reckonings," though there are distinct Welsh equivalents for mighty and for magnanimous.<sup>3</sup>

There had been Welsh speakers in London for a long time and it is pretty clear that there was at least one Welsh speaker in Shakespeare's theatrical company. Glyn Dwr came to court, as Shakespeare points out. Owen Tudor came to court, as Shakespeare is at pains not to point out. I have seen membership lists of medieval City companies that had difficulty spelling the names of members who had the pre-anglicised version of my own name. But there were a lot more Welsh-speakers in London after the victory at Bosworth of Henry VII, Earl of Richmond. Although Richard III at one point calls Henry "the Welshman,"<sup>4</sup> not intending it as a compliment, in general Shakespeare underplays the Welshness of what went on at Bosworth. There are two distinct reasons for this. It is made very clear in

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<sup>1</sup> *Henry V*, iv, 7. When Fluellen refers to Pompey (*Henry V*, iv, 1) he calls him Pompey the Great in the normal English usage; presumably he had heard of Alexander at home in Wales but had not heard Pompey called "the Great" until he was moving in military circles.

<sup>2</sup> I have it on authority that the Welsh for Passport is *Pasbort*.

<sup>3</sup> Bruce Griffiths and Dafydd Glyn Jones (ed.), *The Welsh Academy English-Welsh Dictionary* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1995).

<sup>4</sup> *Richard III*, iv, 4.

each part of *Henry VI* that the Yorkist claim to the throne was better than the Lancastrian, and I expect historians would agree that this was the case.<sup>5</sup> However, it would hardly be polite or even prudent to tell Queen Elizabeth's subjects how weak her grandfather's claim to the throne had been. The safest approach was to say nothing about the subject whatsoever and leave audiences thinking that the pro-Yorkist expositions in *Henry VI* had inadvertently left something out.

The story of Henry's invasion is told in a way that keeps Welsh involvement as slight as possible. Scenes in the play are interlocked as though Richmond landed in Dorset at the time of Buckingham's 1483 revolt and, finding Devon unsatisfactory, went on to the next useful port, Milford Haven.<sup>6</sup> In fact the two landings were well over a year apart, and in 1485 Richmond went to Milford Haven because it was in his uncle Jasper's honour of Pembroke.<sup>7</sup> In the play Richmond lands with important allies and "many others of great name and worth, And toward London do they bear their power."<sup>8</sup> In reality he had a small army and after landing he marched to Aberystwyth, a lovely place, but not the same direction as London. Richmond did what Bonnie Prince Charlie did 250 years later – that is, he landed in a part of Britain where underemployment and poverty meant men could easily be raised for an army by someone who had family and national claims on local loyalties. Richmond was better placed for this in one way: he spoke Welsh and Prince Charles Edward did not speak Gallic.<sup>9</sup> So he gathered his army, with a substantial number of Welsh recruits, and marched east from Aberystwyth, through Shrewsbury and on to Bosworth. Even allowing for the fact that the two armies were fairly evenly matched after Richmond's Stanley relations had changed sides and rallied to him, Bosworth was enough of a Welsh victory to mean that opening up the question could awaken animosities that Shakespeare thought were best left untouched. Henry VII was to be seen as a king of all his people, and certainly not as a Welshman who had triumphed as the last faction leader left standing after thirty years of intermittent civil war.

Assembling a Welsh army was one thing; holding it together without a leader and without pay was quite another, and it was Richard II's failure

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<sup>5</sup> *Henry VI*, pt 1, ii, 5; *Henry VI*, pt2, ii, 2; *Henry VI*, pt3, i, 1.

<sup>6</sup> In *Richard III*, iv, 4, Richmond lands at Milford Haven before the Duke of Buckingham is executed.

<sup>7</sup> Jasper was not completely committed to his Welsh title and was ready to move up and become Duke of Bedford after Bosworth.

<sup>8</sup> *Richard III*, iv, 5.

<sup>9</sup> John Selby, *Over the Sea to Skye* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1973), p. 141.

to hold together 12,000 or 20,000 Welsh soldiers that left him at Bolingbroke's mercy and opened the way for the dynastic troubles of the following 86 years.<sup>10</sup> It also left plenty of men under arms available to join Glyn Dwr's revolt and bring on the idea of a partition of England and independence for Wales placed by Shakespeare in *Henry IV*, part one. (The historical plan for partition was worked out after the battle of Shrewsbury and the death of Hotspur, so it ought to come in part two of *Henry IV*). In the partition scene Hotspur jeers at Glendower in a way that some Englishmen sometimes jeer at the type of Welshman they see as unreliable, too high-flown and sometimes impractical.<sup>11</sup>

How can I convey to the reader who does not know him any just impression of this extraordinary figure of our time, this syren, this goat-footed bard, this half-human visitor to our age from the hag-ridden magic and enchanted woods of Celtic antiquity. One catches in his company that flavour of final purposelessness, inner irresponsibility, existence outside or away from our Saxon good or evil.<sup>12</sup>

That in fact is Keynes on Lloyd George but it is very much in the spirit of Hotspur's remarks, and his English associates tell him that he is going altogether too far, and that Glendower is a gentleman and deserves to be treated politely. Glendower keeps his temper much better than might be expected from the stereotype of the over-excitabile Welsh and, when Hotspur has calmed down, asks his daughter to sing to them. The request for a song, the daughter's response and then the song itself are all in Welsh, but all of that is given as stage directions and I do not think Shakespeare ever wrote a word of Welsh.<sup>13</sup> It is hard to imagine an English-speaking boy being asked to learn a song in Welsh in order to play Glendower's daughter and, even if he were, it would have required a Welsh-speaker as singing coach. I infer that the theatre company had a boy with a good singing voice who spoke Welsh (and undoubtedly spoke English as well), and that Shakespeare said "And we'll have Dafydd sing in Welsh here." Presumably

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<sup>10</sup> *Richard II*, iii, 2.

<sup>11</sup> *Henry IV*, pt 1, iii, 1

<sup>12</sup> Roy Harrod, *The Life of John Maynard Keynes*, (London: Macmillan, 1951), p. 256.

<sup>13</sup> It has been suggested by Megan Lloyd (no relation) in *Speak it in Welsh* (Lanham, Lexington Books 2007), p. 147-150, that Glendower's daughter speaks no English as a sign of resistance to English power. Shakespeare could probably have found a more eloquent way of expressing it. Casting difficulties seem a more likely explanation.

the stage directions would be cut out if the play was revived at a time when no Welsh-speaking boy was available, rather than ask an English-speaking boy to learn to sing a song in Welsh. However, Middleton does seem to have expected an English-speaking boy to speak Welsh in his *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside*. Most of the soubrette role of the ‘Welsh Gentlewoman’ is in English but she has a few lines in Welsh. When the play was published these lines were printed in a phonetic version for an English-speaker; I do not say it is a very good phonetic rendering; for instance, it offers ‘Comrage’ as a phonetic equivalent of ‘Cymraeg,’ the Welsh language, but clearly the intention was that a non-Welsh speaking actor could pick up those lines in the role.<sup>14</sup>

If *Henry IV* part 1 provided phonetic renderings of how he pronounced words, we could tell how seriously Glendower was to be taken when he talks of having been at court and learnt English. Is his English eloquent with musical overtones to it, or is it a comic ‘Indeed to goodness boyo’ accent that undercuts his grandiloquence? *The Merry Wives of Windsor* and *Henry V* flow out of the *Henry IV* plays, and they do make the position of their Welsh characters clear: they are the only plays (apart from a few lines for Edgar in *King Lear* written in broad yokel)<sup>15</sup> that give phonetic renderings for some roles. Of course only the British plays can have phonetic renderings; there would be no sense having everyone in *Romeo and Juliet* speak with an Italian accent or everyone in *Macbeth* speak with a Scottish accent. Phonetic renderings are provided for people who are not English when they try speaking English, and that sort of arrangement implies that they are going to be figures of fun.

*The Merry Wives of Windsor* has, among a number of other pretty threadbare theatre tricks, two non-native speakers of English: Hugh Evans, the Welsh parson, and Dr Caius, the French physician. The disreputable characters see Evans as Welsh: Pistol calls him “you mountain foreigner.” After Falstaff has been tricked into coming out at midnight as Herne the Hunter and been exposed as something of a fool Evans moralises at him and he admits “I cannot answer this Welsh flannel.” But there is no sign that the townspeople of Windsor are worried about Evans being Welsh and they probably thought that moralizing at loose livers was part of the job of a parson, English or Welsh. Evans is a schoolmaster as well as a parson, and presumably it is in this role that he is asked to mobilise some of the local children to go out disguised as fairies to take part in baiting Falstaff. While

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<sup>14</sup> *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside*. The Welsh gentlewoman speaks a little Welsh in iv, 1 and an even smaller amount in i, 1.

<sup>15</sup> *King Lear*, iv, 6.

moralising Evans suggests Falstaff has been overindulging in (among other things) metheglin. This is most unlikely, but it does show that Shakespeare knew about Welsh drinking; metheglin is a version of mead, and is about the only drink specific to Wales. The Welshman emerges better than the Frenchman in the play: in the subplot about the marrying of Anne Page, daughter of one of the merry wives, Dr Caius is ready to marry her although it is not what she wants at all, and he is deceived for his pains. However funny Evans's accent may be, he is a solid member of Windsor society and he isn't made a fool of, and not many people in the play (apart from the wives themselves) can say so much.<sup>16</sup>

Henry V is the most linguistically ambitious of all Shakespeare's plays; if Glendower's daughter and the 'Welsh gentlewoman' indicate that there was a willingness to have a scrap or two of Welsh in a play, there is a lot more than a scrap of French in *Henry V*. Evans does not speak Welsh in *The Merry Wives*, but Dr Caius does have a bit of French; nine characters in *Henry V*<sup>17</sup> have to speak at least a tiny bit of French; and the boys playing Katherine and Alice have to speak quite a lot of it, and also speak English (wiz zee French accent). More immediately relevant is the Celtic involvement: during the siege of Harfleur there is a discussion between the classic Irishman, Scotsman and Welshman, each of them speaking English with the accents of his own country. Elsewhere in Shakespeare Scotland and Ireland are insulted as countries just like England, France, Spain and the Netherlands. The passage in *The Comedy of Errors* is coarse and vulgar and the jokes about the Frenchman, the Neapolitan, the Englishman, the Scotsman and the two Germans, one from Saxony and the other from the Palatinate in *The Merchant of Venice* are no more complimentary, though they are certainly more fit for polite society.<sup>18</sup> Neither of these passages suggests that Scotland or Ireland are linked to England and might be expected to help in a common enterprise of overseas expansion.

I believe Macmorris is the only Irishman in Shakespeare; his accent is perfectly recognizable though there may be too much of the Lillibulero style about him, with his willingness to talk of cutting off Fluellen's head, and this vehemence carries over to saying that anyone who speaks of his nation is a villain and a knave. Presumably he is denouncing anyone who suggests that there is an Irish nation that should support the rebellion that O'Neill (Tyrone) was leading when the play was first produced. Jamie the

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<sup>16</sup> *Merry Wives of Windsor*, i, 1; iv, 4; v, 4, 5.

<sup>17</sup> Dauphin, Constable, Orleans, Pistol's prisoner le Fer, Katherine and Alice, Pistol's boy Robin, Henry, and Exeter.

<sup>18</sup> *Comedy of Errors*, iii, 2; *The Merchant of Venice*, i, 2.

Scotsman emerges as the most balanced and practical of the three, and his accent is also rendered accurately enough – he says ‘gud’ for good when more modern authors usually say ‘guid,’ but he is clearly the Scotsman. Apart from the almost entirely Scottish characters of Macbeth, who have very few distinctive Scottish characteristics (unless one wants to make something of the fact that while Richard III, Edmund Duke of Gloucester and Iago are villains without consciences, Macbeth is a villain with an ineffective conscience), the only other Scotsman on stage in Shakespeare is the minor role the Earl of Douglas in *Henry IV* part 1 and he is simply a good soldier who has got mixed up in someone else’s quarrel.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, perhaps Macmorris and Jamie are to be seen in the same way. In the Harfleur scene Fluellen sounds like something of a pedant, anxious to debate ancient wars at a moment when everyone on both sides is tense and exhausted – his pedantry is useful later on, when he argues that the French attack on the boys in the camp at Agincourt is against the laws of war and justifies Henry in slaughtering French prisoners,<sup>20</sup> but after Harfleur I think a modern audience, while hoping to see three Celtic captains again, might feel more able to do without Fluellen than either of the other two. In the event Fluellen is the only one we see again, possibly because a Welshman was an easily acceptable comic character whom the audience enjoyed, while Scotsmen or Irishmen were too exotic to be part of everyday life. This itself may have been because the play has an immense number of speaking roles,<sup>21</sup> which requires extensive doubling, and putting on a Scots or an Irish accent in between having a French accent for one of the French nobles and an accent for a nobleman and perhaps a different accent for an ordinary soldier would have been quite a strain, and rather an unnecessary strain, for the actors involved.

As the play goes on, more particularly in Act IV, Fluellen becomes distinctly more than a comic Welshman, from Henry’s observation “Though it appear a little out of fashion, There is much care and valour in this Welshman” and his comment that Fluellen is “valiant, full of choler and hot as gunpowder” to Gower rebuking Pistol, after Fluellen has cudgelled him into eating a raw leek, for thinking that it was all right to sneer at Fluellen because he does not speak English properly.<sup>22</sup> By the end Fluellen has become a strong argument for saying that one should not look down on

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<sup>19</sup> *Henry IV*, pt 1, iv and v.

<sup>20</sup> It is now thought that Henry ordered the slaughter of the prisoners (with the consequent loss of ransoms) because it was thought a new French army had arrived. Desmond Seward, *Henry V* (London, Sidgwick and Jackson, 1987), p. 80-81.

<sup>21</sup> I count 41 speaking parts. *Hamlet* has 25.

<sup>22</sup> *Henry V*, iv, 1, iv 7, and v, 1.

worthy and worthwhile people just because they don't have the right accent. This is in harmony with the way Glendower and Hugh Evans are handled: they are Welsh and they are funny, but the English must not go too far in the direction of treating them as ridiculous. Political correctness now tells us that we can jeer only at members of our own group or at members of a group we realize is superior to our own; Shakespeare does not go that far, but he knows there are limits to what the English ought to say about the Welsh, and strongly suggests that sometimes they go beyond the limits.

Fluellen is certainly the only person in *Henry V* whose part is written spoken with a Welsh accent, but he may not be the only Welshman in the play. Henry says to Pistol and later to Fluellen that he is a Welshman.<sup>23</sup> Conceivably he is fooling Pistol and flattering Fluellen, but from his words to Fluellen it is to be taken literally and is not just a royal declaration that he is a countryman of all his people. It really does look as if Shakespeare, perhaps misled by his title of Prince of Wales or by his birth in Monmouth, thought Henry had Welsh blood.<sup>24</sup> Turning Henry V into a Welshman is a curious way of making amends for suppressing Henry VII's Welshness, but this is the way history plays come out.

A little bit of Welshness survives into *Henry VIII*; when Anne Bullen says she would not be queen for all the world, a court lady says that she would for "Carnarvonshire, although there belonged to the crown no more but that;" the joke depends on the audience knowing that Carnarvonshire had very little revenue, even standards of Welsh counties.<sup>25</sup> On the other hand Henry did make Anne Boleyn Marchioness of Pembroke when he was grooming her to become Queen, just as in the play, presumably choosing the title to commemorate his great-uncle Jasper.

The two Ancient Britain plays, *Lear* and *Cymbeline*, may indicate a point about Shakespeare and the supernatural. He was perfectly ready to use the supernatural as a driving force in his plays, whether or not he believed in it himself; ghosts, potions, magicians with attendant spirits have to be accepted by the audience or some of the plays fall apart. However none of

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<sup>23</sup> *Henry V*, iv, 1 and iv, 7.

<sup>24</sup> *Henry V*, iv, 7 (continuous passage; nothing omitted): Fluellen "I do believe your majesty takes no scorn to wear the leek upon Saint's day". Henry "I wear it for an honourable memory. For I am Welsh, you know, good countryman." Fluellen "All the water in Wye cannot wash your majesty's Welsh plood out pody."

<sup>25</sup> *Henry VIII*, ii, 3.

this goes on inside England.<sup>26</sup> The Wars of the Roses plays involve no acceptance of the supernatural: Richard's claims that his deformity is the result of Hastings's witchcraft is obviously a fabrication and, while it was a matter of history that the Duchess of Gloucester tried using witchcraft to enquire about the future, nobody is required to believe she actually acquired supernatural powers.<sup>27</sup> A lot of extraordinary things happen in *Lear*, but none of them require an acceptance of the supernatural, and the reference to Merlin is a joke.<sup>28</sup> *Cymbeline* is slightly different: as a result of a misunderstanding of travel arrangements a good deal of it is set in Wales, because the play runs as though communication between Britain and Augustus's Roman Empire was by boat from Milford Haven, which obviously was not the case. But setting scenes in what is, accurately enough, called Cambria opens the way to the supernatural. Posthumus's dream and Jupiter's scroll are not as essential to the plot as the love potion in *Midsummer Night's Dream* but they do suggest that odd things can happen in Wales.<sup>29</sup> It is not as foreign as Scotland or Ireland or all the other places satirized in the *Comedy of Errors*, but Shakespeare is slightly more ready to ask the audience to suspend their disbelief. Wales was part of England in a way that Scotland and Ireland were not, and it was a part to be treated with amused respect, but it was not the same as England and Shakespeare was ready enough to use the differences to add something to the story.

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<sup>26</sup> The supernatural activity in *Henry VI*, part I, Act V, iii, the appearance evil spirits, takes place in France.

<sup>27</sup> *Richard III*, iii, 4; *Henry VI*, 2, i, 4.

<sup>28</sup> *Lear*, iii, 2.

<sup>29</sup> *Cymbeline*, iii, 4, 5; iv, 3; v, 4.