Shakespearean England and Views of the Irish Language
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The Irish language has been associated with politicisation and conflict, particularly in the context of contemporary Northern Ireland identity politics. As recently as 2017, support for the language became a core element in the failure to agree on the restoration of Northern Ireland's devolved government at Stormont, a disagreement which was to linger for three years. However, debates around the Irish language extend much further back in time, and some key elements of the discourse may be traced to Giraldus Cambrensis (Gerald de Barri, a royal clerk and priest of mixed Welsh and Norman descent) in the twelfth century. The writings of Gerald (in his *Topographia Hiberniae*) and, indeed, of St Bernard of Clairvaux (in his *Life of Saint Malachy*) have been held responsible for the poor reputation of the Irish in this period. In particular, the *Topographia Hiberniae* is credited with the origins of the discourse which portrayed the Irish as barbarous and lacking in civility and which reached a high point in writings which are associated with the Tudor conquest of Ireland in the sixteenth century.

This lecture will look at the portrayal of the Irish language by Shakespeare and his contemporaries, and the nature and motivations for some negative stereotypes which were to prove resilient and enduring in later centuries. The question of language plays a major role, in contradistinction to the work of Giraldus in which it is not mentioned. Following the legislation which made King Henry VIII king of Ireland (it previously having been a lordship under the English crown), an act dating to 1537 censured the use of the Irish language as an indelible mark of Irishness which (together with religion, dress and other customs) was seen to be an obstacle to assimilation and, where spoken amongst the descendants of the Anglo-Norman settlers (the 'Old English'), a symptom of degeneracy. There was no sense in which bilingualism was seen to be an advantage (or a necessity) in this view of the situation. In the memorable words of Edmund Spenser: "The speach being Irish, the hart must needes be Irishe."

The question was one, also, of linguistic legitimacy. William Shakespeare's *Henry V* has been described as the most bilingual of his plays, the bilingualism concerned being English-French in the context of the king's wooing of, and marriage to, Catherine de Valois, daughter of the king of France, Charles VI. French and English are perceived as languages of authority; Henry V was a fluent speaker of French, and French was the language of his ancestors (although his father, Henry IV, is thought to have been the first in the Norman line of succession whose major language was English). Irish and Welsh are languages which may be spoken but which are rendered unfamiliar and require translation. However, there appears to be one line of Irish in the play *Henry V*, and it has been remarked that Shakespeare's attitude to linguistic plurality and difference differs in some interesting respects from that of his contemporaries, particularly those who were involved in the conflict in Ireland. The position of the queen herself, Elizabeth I, is also intriguing. An Irish primer survives, which was written especially for her (possibly in 1564), and there is other evidence for some support of the language, particularly the provision of funding by her for a Gaelic fount to enable printing in Irish. There is also ample evidence for speakers of Irish in court circles; might the Queen have been able to greet her visitors in Irish?

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