SHAKESPEARE PERFORMANCE AND THE UK

Shakespeare productions on BBC Radio: Reflecting the nation?

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Shakespeare’s plays broadcast on radio have been little studied: the performance history of his work is more often told through stage, film and occasionally television. However, radio productions make up a substantial body of work, with around 400 broadcast by the BBC alone. This paper will look at two productions aired more than seven decades apart to examine whether they reflected, or even influenced, the British sense of nation.

While academic attention to radio Shakespeare has been limited, people in the wider community have been aware of its significance and of radio’s power to engage and affect. In 1933, Baronet Sir Michael Bruce stated that ‘rarely enough does one hear Shakespeare on air’. The lack of it, and the willingness of the BBC to give ‘prominence to the foreigner, at the expense of our own artists’ led him to ask: ‘Is the Broadcasting Corporation entitled to the adjective British?’ Only a decade after the first play was broadcast, the link between Shakespeare, broadcasting and the British sense of nationhood was clearly set out.

Alex Goody asserts that by the time of the Second World War, radio drama ‘accrued extra resonance as a site for communal, public meaning as the tensions in Europe escalated’. Grace Wyndham Goldie would have agreed. The columnist for The Listener, writing in the Radio Times said:

This, heaven knows, is a moment when we need broadcast drama […] It is left to broadcasting to keep in front of us the permanence of faith and love and friendship, of poetry and imagination, those things which remain to us in spite of the war.

The archive of the Radio Times shows that Shakespeare is mentioned in the listings of around 200 programmes during the war. These include extracts, pastiches and brief references, as well as full productions. It might be anticipated that these would largely be about victory in conflict; certainly excerpts of Henry V were performed at least twice, as well

1 Michael Bruce, ‘Make the Broadcasting Corporation British’, Saturday Review 2 December 1933, p.571.
3 Grace Wyndham Goldie, Radio Times, 4 October 1940, p.3.
4 Search via BBC Genome https://genome.ch.bbc.co.uk/
as two productions of King John, described by Herbert Farjeon as ‘of all Shakespeare’s plays [...] probably, at this moment, the most topical, being a merciless exposure of the political morality of Europe.’\(^5\) In addition, Shakespeare on radio was used to directly demonstrate the bravery of those who served in the armed forces: C. Gordon Glover highlights the actor Esmond Knight ‘as King Henry [the Fifth], playing his first big radio part since he lost his sight when serving on the Prince of Wales during the Bismarck action’.\(^6\) This particular edition of the Radio Times was billed as ‘Army Week’, with the following proclaimed on the front cover: ‘In 1415 the men wore armour, and in 1943 the armour is borne by the vehicles, but the same spirit informs the steel’.\(^7\)

However, it appears Shakespeare’s comedies better reflected the desires of the nation during the war. Goody states that:

Shakespeare formed part of the notion of home the BBC was broadcasting about and to. Drama on the BBC created a sense of belonging, defining a specific space of security that listeners could listen to and participate in.\(^8\)

This notion of home and belonging seems to have been conjured up by A Midsummer Night’s Dream, The Merry Wives of Windsor and As You Like It. Of a production of A Midsummer Night’s Dream, Alan Bland wrote:

The BBC could have chosen no better way of celebrating the double event of the poet’s birthday and the feast of England’s patron saint than a broadcast of A Midsummer Night’s Dream. It [...] more thoroughly expresses the spirit of England than even the historical dramas.\(^9\)

He even acknowledges that ‘Although The Dream ostensibly takes place in Athens in some remote heroic age, it is English of the English throughout’.\(^10\) The ‘real’ location was immaterial; it was the England it conjured up that mattered.

Farjeon was less positive about The Merry Wives of Windsor, a production clearly aiming for a large, populist audience with comedy stars Elsie and Doris Waters as Mistress Ford and Mistress Page. However he had to admit: ‘As though the fairies had foreseen or foreheard my prayer for more Shakespeare than half an hour in half a year of Home and

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\(^5\) Herbert Farjeon, Radio Times, 22 December 1944, p.16.
\(^6\) C. Gordon Glover, Radio Times, 26 February 1943, p.5.
\(^7\) Radio Times, 26 February 1943, p.1.
\(^8\) Goody, p.74.
\(^9\) Alan Bland, Radio Times, 21 April 1944, p.4.
\(^10\) Ibid.
Forces programmes, there came, on Sunday night, a potted version of *The Merry Wives of Windsor*.11 ‘Potted’ in this case was seventy-five minutes; short, but still substantially longer than the usual extracts. And again, emphasis is placed on the need for broadcast Shakespeare.

During the war, there were around twenty major productions of Shakespeare’s plays on BBC radio, some considerably longer than others.12 However the only surviving, complete example held by the BBC is *As You Like It* from 1944.13 There are virtually no sound effects, just the occasional jingling of bells as Touchstone enters. The actors’ performances are rather stagey; their voices slightly projected, with most using ‘Received Pronunciation’ (RP), while the non-court characters assume a generic, yokel accent. When compared to the lively, American productions of the previous decade, it seems somewhat old fashioned, but it adds to an overall sense of an England of the past, creating Goody’s ‘specific space of security’.14 By harking back to an earlier time, however fictional, this production creates not only a warm, safe space for listeners, but perhaps builds a picture of the idyllic England they are fighting for.

One of the most evocative ways this is done is through music. With a running time of around 140 minutes, this production of *As You Like It* is almost full text with every song retained. Traditional settings of Shakespeare’s words are used, opening with an instrumental version of ‘It was a lover and his lass’, set by Shakespeare’s contemporary, Thomas Morley. ‘Under The Greenwood Tree’ and ‘Blow, blow, thou winter wind’ are both set by eighteenth century composer Thomas Arne, probably best known for writing the patriotic ‘Rule Britannia’. And ‘What shall he have that killed the deer?’ is in a version by nineteenth century composer, Sir Henry Rowley Bishop; a more modern piece, but in an older style and still written around a century before the time of broadcast. These tunes are generally very simply accompanied, or sung *a cappella*, and are evocative of ‘ye merrie England’. It is as if producer Mary Hope Allen was trying to capture, or perhaps invent, a pastoral loveliness from before the war. Farjeon in the *Radio Times* listings states that ‘*As You Like It* is the sunniest of all Shakespeare’s plays’ and this production certainly seems to be attempting to create that atmosphere for its listeners.15

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13 *As You Like It*, prod. Mary Hope Allen, 8 September 1944, accessed via the BBC Archive.
14 Goody, p.74.
15 Farjeon, *Radio Times*, 1 September 1944, p.16.
The BBC has continued to produce a steady output of Shakespeare on radio, the majority of which is broadcast on Radio 3, including three new productions in 2019: *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, *The Two Noble Kinsmen* and *Coriolanus*. However Radio 4 has also had two notable productions in the past five years, both aired over several days. *Hamlet* in 2014 ran across a week in the Afternoon Drama slot; a forty-five minute programme regularly drawing an audience of one million.\(^{16}\) And in 2016, a three-part version of *Julius Caesar*.\(^{17}\) Nothing was said in the publicity material about the political timing of this production, more attention was paid to the four-hundredth anniversary of Shakespeare’s death, but it was aired just weeks before the Brexit vote. Whatever the motivations behind choosing this particular play, the text’s themes of power, who has it and how they use it, were all key issues in the vote.

Attitudes to Shakespeare on the radio had changed greatly between the 1940s and the 2010s. Now the BBC was criticised for broadcasting too much of the playwright; Dominic Cavendish in the Daily Telegraph suggested the BBC output of Shakespeare in 2016 amounted to ‘overkill’.\(^{18}\) Gillian Reynolds, also in the Telegraph, in an article headed ‘I love Shakespeare but the BBC is overdoing it’ asked: ‘What is the BBC doing? Is it trying to show the Government that it, alone, serves national culture and therefore deserves a decent licence fee?’\(^{19}\) However, the production of *Julius Caesar* did bring plaudits from her:

Radio 4’s *Julius Caesar* was dusty old set-text Shakespeare suddenly sprung to new life [...] Director Marc Beeby made the streets of Rome sound real, Tim Pigott-Smith was a threateningly regal Caesar, Robert Glenister an intriguing Brutus, Jamie Parker a persuasive Antony. Productions like these show how centuries can melt away when the heartbeat of the language comes through.\(^{20}\)

While *As You Like It* seemed to be harking back to an England of the past, this production of *Julius Caesar* appeared to be pointing towards an era yet to come. BBC Radio 4 had launched the series *Dangerous Visions* in 2013, with the aim of presenting ‘uneasy reflections of the future’.\(^{21}\) And the opening music of *Julius Caesar*, with its clanking noises

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\(^{16}\) Dan Rebellato, ‘Writing Radio Drama’, in *BBC Writers Room* [https://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/writersroom/entries/7a950b76-3850-44d8-98a8-6d0494d6ae5b] para.9.

\(^{17}\) *Julius Caesar*, dir. Marc Beeby, private recording. First broadcast 3, 4, 5 May 2016.


\(^{19}\) Gillian Reynolds, ‘I love Shakespeare but the BBC is overdoing it’, *Daily Telegraph*, 27 April 2016 p.28.


\(^{21}\) ‘Dangerous Visions’, in *BBC Radio 4* [https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/articles/1WmJwtkMPKs9CJV4mkDj/SZ/dangerous-visions-back-with-a-difference]
and unsettling bassline, belongs more to a future dystopia than Rome two thousand years ago. All the characters speak with English accents, and therefore by extension it could also be argued that this production is suggesting a future vision of England.

This is a place where the people are in opposition to the ruling classes. The play opens with indistinct chatter, laughter and shouting. The first voices clearly heard, and speaking from Shakespeare’s text, are the two tribunes, Flavius and Murellus, and the two tradesmen, Carpenter and Cobbler. The tribunes speak with ‘RP’, even posh, voices; the tradesmen with common accents. The added line ‘come on friends, come away friends’, given to Cobbler with laughter in the background, suggests not only a mutual respect among the people, but a clear divide between them and the tribunes. Flavius says ‘They vanish tongue-tied in their guiltiness’ (1.1.61) but in this production they are not silent but grumbling about their treatment. The people are given little individual identity, but have a presence and significance.

In the following scene, Robert Glenister presents Brutus as weary, reluctant and sad. His performance adds emphasis to the lines ‘poor Brutus, with himself at war’ and ‘I do fear the people / choose Caesar for their king’ (1.2.48, 81-82). The combination of the lines and the delivery creates an intimate portrait of a character fearful for his country. Brutus appears a kindly figure, softly spoken, caring, paternal. However, his attitude is still one of superiority; he knows best.

After the death of Caesar, Brutus’ and Antony’s vastly differing speeches reflect two different political attitudes towards the populace still current today; the reasoned argument and the passionate declamation. Ahead of Brutus’ speech, the crowd sound angry, shouting. Much is indistinct, although ‘Brutus tell us’ can be heard clearly, and a version of Shakespeare’s ‘I will hear Brutus speak’ (3.2.8) is rendered more colloquially as ‘I wanna hear you Brutus’. At ‘The noble Brutus is ascended: silence!’ (3.2.11) there is shushing and they fall quiet. Their exclamations continue throughout Brutus’ speech, culminating when he says ‘I pause for a reply’, received with an emphatic ‘None, Brutus, none’. His voice is steady and he only briefly shows emotion when he says ‘when it shall please my country to need my death’; the crowd respond ‘live, live’. Brutus is calm and apparently factual; he is a patrician, he believes not only that he is right but that it is obvious to others.

In contrast, Antony is presented as one of the people, although as Caesar’s right-hand man he is clearly part of the elite. He plays with the crowd, fully exploiting his ability to
show emotion and the effect that can have. When he first appears, he can barely be heard over the chatting and mumbling of those digesting what they have just been told by Brutus. Initially they are hostile to Antony. However, Jamie Parker, as Antony, places particular emphasis on ‘bury’ as he tells them: ‘I come to bury Caesar, not to praise him’ (3.2.771). He continues his supposed support of Brutus in his subsequent lines so that the people are swiftly subdued and won over by his disingenuous speech; in particular, the repetition of ‘honorable man/men’ (3.2.79, 80, 84, 91, 96) seems extremely potent in performance, his voice clearly expressing the reverse sentiment. Simply reading the script, it is obvious that Antony is appealing to the previous loyalty of the people to Caesar, but in radio performance, the switch of allegiance of the crowd is much more obvious. When Antony first describes Brutus as ‘an honourable man’, they echo ‘yes, all honourable men’. At the second ‘honourable man’ the ‘yes’ is quieter, slightly uncertain. At the third, they are clearly doubtful. At ‘was this ambition?’ there’s a clear ‘no’ from one person. By the time Antony says ‘you all did love him once’, the voice says, sadly, ‘yes’. And as Antony continues and his voice breaks, the noise of the crowd begins to build, their lines overlapping, and despite the content of Antony’s speech clearly being in line with Brutus’, the delivery has changed the crowd’s opinion from hostile to Caesar to hostile to his killers. This is all in the text and other Mark Antionys might deliver the speech in a similar way, but on radio, especially when heard on headphones, the listener becomes part of the crowd, swept up with them by Antony’s political acumen. As any modern political observer will note, especially those watching the debates on the run-up to the Brexit vote, reasoned argument alone is not enough to sway a crowd; drama in delivery is crucial.

Shakespeare's play is said to reflect political concerns not only during the time of Julius Caesar, but also during the reign of Elizabeth I. Stanley Wells states that Shakespeare ‘wrote a study of the uses and abuses of political power [...] which would have been easily applicable to the state of the nation at the time it was first performed’. It might also be applied to the timing of this production, coming when tensions between the people and Westminster were particularly strained, and politics was divided between the patrician and the populist. Three weeks before the vote, Bernhard Trafford wrote in the Newcastle Journal that he’d been ‘struck more powerfully in recent weeks by the similarity in our political

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world to that depicted [...] in *Julius Caesar*. He saw David Cameron as a Julius Caesar figure, with Boris Johnson as Brutus; a leader being figuratively stabbed in the back. However, perhaps the parallels could be better drawn if Cameron is viewed as the paternal, even patronising, Brutus, while Johnson is the more emotionally engaging Antony. In addition, Daisy Dunn writing in the *Evening Standard* suggested that like Brutus and Antony, neither side of the Brexit debate truly reflected the general populace who wanted to be heard:

> If the Leave campaign is now being cast as a class struggle between the comfortable-off for Remain and ordinary Joes for Leave, then we shouldn't be surprised to see Oxford-educated Michael Gove and Boris Johnson at the helm of the latter. It was ever thus.

This production of *Julius Caesar* seemed perfectly timed to capture both the differing styles of political campaigning, and the similarities in status of the leaders of those campaigns.

By looking closely at these two BBC radio productions of Shakespeare’s plays, one can hear not only two very different interpretations of how his work can be delivered on radio, but a reflection of the changing way the BBC represents the British nation. Neither presents a Britain of the current era. Both present Europe (France and Italy) as English. However, during the Second World War, at a time when commentators felt it was the BBC’s patriotic duty to perform Shakespeare, *As You Like It* presented a positive, pastoral and supposedly historical world; something to aspire to and to recreate after the war. In the twenty-first century, *Julius Caesar* reflected not only the tensions between the elite and working class, but seems almost to predict the increasing animosity between them after the Brexit vote. However, while both reflect preoccupations with nationhood at the time of their performance, it is difficult to suggest they had any direct influence on their audiences, despite the large listening figures both will have received. While BBC radio productions of Shakespeare’s works can be used to reflect Britain’s sense of nation, it cannot be concluded that they have any direct effect on it.

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23 Bernhard Trafford, ‘Our politics and democracy have been diminished by the bully and bluster of the EU debate’, *Newcastle Journal*, 2 June 2016 p.31.
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