
Shakespeare's Portrayal of Irish Infiltration in *2 Henry VI*:
The Influences of Cade and of the Kerns

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Messenger:

Please it your grace to be advertised
The Duke of York is newly come from Ireland,
And with a puissant and a mighty power
Of gallowglasses and stout kerns
Is marching hitherward in proud array,
And still proclaimeth, as he comes along,
His arms are not only to remove from thee
The Duke of Somerset, whom he terms a traitor.

King:

Thus stands my state, 'twixt Cade and York distressed
Like to a ship that having scaped a tempest
Is straightway calmed and boarded with a pirate.
But now is Cade driven back, his men dispersed,
And now is York in arms to second him. (*2 Henry VI* 4.9.23-35)

In his 1548 *The Union of the Two Noble and Illustre Famelies of Lancastre and Yorke*, Edward Hall records that the Duke of York did indeed go to Ireland to suppress the rebellion (113), but that when he returned with troops to claim the crown, his troops were Welsh (Hall 119). It is significant that in Shakespeare's adaptation of these events in *The First Part of the Contention of the Two Famous Houses of York and Lancaster (2 Henry VI)*, York's soldiers are Irish. It seems likely that Shakespeare chose this ethnicity for the rebels because of the Elizabethan views of the Irish. The idea of the Irish as threatening rebels exists throughout the play, but comes through in various levels of prominence. Henry's realization, when both Cade and York are alive and pose a threat to his authority, that his loss of power is imminent shows that the threat that the Irish can impose upon the power of the English monarch is grave.

It does seem logical that the Irish soldiers' revolt against the monarchy could be transformed by York into support for a new monarch, who would overtake Henry VI and his regime. Additionally, the fact that the Messenger labels the "gallowglasses and stout kerns" as a "puissant and mighty power" is ironic. More often than seeing the Irish fighters as having an almost majestic power, Elizabethans disdained this lot, who, in their perception, were sneaky, conniving, and lawless. In 1578, John Derricke penned *The Image of Ireland, with a Discovery of Woodkern*, a description of life in Ireland, the purpose of which was to instruct those who read it in the way of true loyalty to the British crown. In his mocking and ironic tone, Derricke betrays the fact that he sees the kerns as lowly, yet dangerous rebels. To Derricke, they were threatening not only because of their nationality and their lawlessness, but also because of their religion (or irreligion):

As for the rest, so trimly dressed, I speak of them no evil,
In each respect, they are detect as honest as the devil;
As honest as the Pope himself in all their outward actions,
And constant like the wavering wind in their imaginations.
(Derricke 39)

These rebels, however, would eventually be punished for their disloyalty. Derricke cites the example of Rory O'More, who rebelled against the Queen's authority in 1576:

So as his reign endured not long, but tumbled in the mire,
Because he sinned in that he moved our noble Queen to ire.
O lamentable thing, to see ambition climb so high,
When superstitious pride shall fall in twinkling of an eye!
For such is every rebel's state, and evermore hath been,
And let them never better speed that rise against our Queen.
(Derrick 45)

Rory O'More's pride is the cause of his demise. He, who threatened the British monarchy, must be brought to justice.

Rory O'More's perceived presumption to try to regain control over parts of Ireland from the British is analogous to the ridiculousness of Jack Cade's claim to the throne, based on a tangential and nonexistent connection between his family and the

royals. The messenger, describing the kerns as “proud” (*2 Henry 6* 4.9.27), also provides a description of the attitude of Cade. The methods that Cade uses, treachery, deceit, and rioting, are similar to the rebellious techniques that he might have learned in Ireland. To Andrew Murphy, Cade is a “multiply transgressive character”: Cade is both “a commoner who pretends to aristocratic parentage” and “an Englishman who is able to transform himself into a native Irishman” (Murphy 43). This ability to metamorphosize endows Cade with a certain amount of power, which York harnesses for his own purposes. York appreciates Cade’s abilities to vacillate between his Kentish heritage and his adopted Irish patterns of behavior:

In Ireland have I seen this stubborn Cade
Oppose himself against a troop of kerns,
And fought so long till that his thighs with darts
Were almost like a sharp-quilled porcupine;
And in the end, being rescued, I have seen
Him caper upright like a wild Morisco,
Shaking the bloody darts as he his bells.
Full often like a shag-haired crafty kern
Hath he conversed with the enemy
And, undiscovered, come to me again
And given me notice of their villainies. (*2 Henry 6* 3.1.360-70)

York uses Cade’s ability to understand and appropriate Irish techniques of rebellion for his own ends; because Cade has explained all of the intricacies of the Irish rebellious mind to York, York has the ability to control any rebellion that would be set in this framework. However, Cade does meet his demise for attempting to usurp a throne that is not his. Had someone who was loyal to the crown not eliminated this pest, eventually York would have, of necessity, removed Cade from the picture. Although Cade, in several scenes, is portrayed as having tremendous sway among the commoners, Shakespeare makes a point of eventually relegating Cade to an ignominious death. Cade, therefore, is figured as Derricke’s version of a kern: a threatening but ultimately ineffectual rebel.

The actual kerns in the play pose a different type of threat to the Crown. York’s declaration of his intentions in Act 5, Scene 1 shows that his effort is calculated and dangerous: “From Ireland

thus comes York to claim his right/ And pluck the crown from feeble Henry's head" (*2 Henry 6* 5.1.1-2). It is not a coincidence that York has come from Ireland "to claim his right"; he has gone there to recruit fierce and rebellious troops. Also, the context in the play in which York makes this declaration is significant; this immediately follows the carrying off of Cade's corpse from the stage (*2 Henry 6* 4.10). In effect, the uprising staged by Cade, unsuccessful though it is, serves as a prelude to the more threatening and ultimately effective rebellion of York. York is more dangerous than Cade because York has an actual claim to the throne, he is the person who actually orchestrated Cade's uprising, and he has numerous angry, foreign troops in tow. The Irish kerns have proven a threat to English control in Ireland, but now, they will threaten England itself. In a 1626 account of the Irish rebellions during the reign of Elizabeth, Edward Cecil Wimbledon describes the uncivilized battle tactics of the Irish: the kerns "greatly trust in their advantage of Wood and Bogg, where they runne up and downe savagely, and in our disadvantage" (Wimbledon 52). The Irish soldiers, then, do not fight in the same way as the English; their tactics are tied to the terrain. Although inherently less advanced than their English counterparts, the Irish maintain an advantage in battle, because they use their incivility as a means of outsmarting others. As Bernhard Klein points out, "The Irish rebellion in thus doubly contagious, materially amplifying armed conflict in England and physically spreading across the Irish Sea. The activities of York bring to a fatal climax the interdependence of events in England and Ireland" (Klein 2: 7). Similarly, the Irish way of battle is contagious: York converts to a dishonest form of battle, inciting riots through an intermediary and bringing in treacherous and mercenary troops. York's bringing the Irish kerns across the Irish Sea is beneficial for him, but is detrimental to Henry as it contributes to York's unseating the monarch. Importing rebels who are known for their inconsistency and employing them to suit his own purposes marks York as a rebel himself; whether or not York is the legitimate heir to the throne, he gains it illegitimately. York "terms [Somerset] a traitor" (*2 Henry 6* 4.9.30), but in reality, he himself is a traitor to the monarchy, an institution to which he aspires.

Although York is able to harness the power of the Irish, both in the impersonations by the pseudo-Irish John Cade and in the

“shag-haired crafty kern[s]” (*2 Henry 6* 3.1.367), he utilizes these forces to destabilize what should be a stable institution. Murphy thinks that “what is striking about this text...is the confidence which it projects in an English ability to penetrate, master, marshall, and control the Irish forces and the power which they represent” (Murphy 44). Murphy goes on to qualify this statement, noting that “Otherness of every kind is seen to be available to be recruited and subverted to serve the ends of a particular aristocratic class fraction” (Murphy 44). This distinction is key. York’s power over the Irish is clearly established, but his use of this power both incites chaos and is destructive. Cade’s rebellion is, at least in Lancastrian eyes, beyond control. York’s rebellion is also out of control. York himself has adopted what Elizabethans would deem Irish characteristics: he has gone to Ireland ostensibly to suppress a rebellion, but comes back ready to begin his own rebellion; he pretends loyalty to Henry, but becomes the King’s chief rival. In his 1586 *Chronicle of Ireland*, John Hooker refers to the Irish as “trucebreakers and treacherous” (Hooker 58); in *2 Henry VI*, York is no better.

Ireland could be alternately viewed as a danger zone or a font of power, based on its representation in *2 Henry VI*. Murphy believes that “Ireland is a territory to be deployed as an English source of strength” in this play (Murphy 46). In *Richard II*, he thinks that “it [Ireland] is associated with a catastrophic draining away of that strength, leading to Richard’s loss of power, and ultimately to his death” (Murphy 46). Although in *2 Henry VI* Ireland was a source of subversive strength for York, the country’s inhabitants proved to be tremendously dangerous to the title character of the play. By emphasizing the idea that the Irish are a tool of York, Murphy seems to be downplaying the threat that they actually posed to the monarchy. Because they cause the demise of Henry, the Irish are actually dangerous; their power is not entirely harnessed and controlled. Especially if Henry is viewed as a sympathetic character in this play, it is impossible to agree with the idea that the Irish are a controlled force. In addition to adding strength to York’s campaign, the Irish kerns deplete Henry’s power.

Henry himself did not feel comfortable by any means. His realization—“Thus stands my state, / twixt Cade and York distressed / Like to a ship that having scaped a tempest / Is straightway calmed and boarded with a pirate” (*2 Henry 6* 4.10.31-

33)—is evidence that Henry comprehends the danger in which he finds himself. To Henry, Cade and York are the same. Both present a tremendous threat to Henry's power and to his personal safety. From Henry's viewpoint, neither Cade nor York is civilized. Henry also sees the connection between Cade and York: "But now is Cade driven back, his men dispersed,/ And now is York in arms to second him" (2 *Henry 6* 4.10.34-35). Henry's description of the threat posed to him abounds with ocean imagery. Seeing himself and his administration as a ship, Henry likens York to a pirate. Also, he loosely figures both Cade and York as ocean tides; once one is gone, the next is on its way. This continued, successive threat to Henry, over which he has no control, is both problematic and unavoidable. Henry thinks that the two men will impose a watery abyss upon his authority, overpowering him with their subversiveness. If the Irish Sea should serve, as John of Gaunt proposed, as a defensive wall against the Irish (Klein II.7), and this wall has been broken down by the entrance of Cade and York, it is especially fitting that Henry figures these attempted usurpations of power as ocean-driven events.

Additionally, referring to York as a pirate would have had contemporary Irish resonances. Grainne O'Malley, an Irish chieftain, pirate, and warrior, was summoned to appear at Elizabeth's court in 1593. Having arrived with a "retinue of wild Westerners" (Barton 157), O'Malley caused quite a stir in court. Her entreaties on behalf of her family were granted, and Queen Elizabeth sent her back to Ireland with license to continue living in the way to which she was accustomed, despite the admonishment to the contrary by Elizabeth's advisor Bingham (Chambers 148). In an old verse account of the meeting between the two women, the entrance of Grace and her entourage is described thus:

A Tucket sounds, and lo! there enters now
 A stranger group, in saffron tunics dressed.
 A female at their head, whose step and brow
 Heralds her rank; and calm, and self-possessed
 Onward she came, alone, through England's best,
 With careless look, and bearing free, yet high,
 Tho' gentle dames, their titterings scarce repressed,
 Noting her garments as she passed them by.
 None laughed again who met that stern and flashing eye. (McCraith
 134)

The poem goes on to describe the nobility and grandeur of Grainne as she appeared at court. In this account, the Irish soldiers are not as threatening as Grainne herself is. Even though she was, in this case, on dry land, she did, in some ways, pirate Elizabeth's court. Taking what she came to get, Grainne exerted her persuasive power over Elizabeth. Although *2 Henry VI* was probably written in 1591, two years before Grainne's summons to court, and not published until 1594, Grainne O'Malley was a well-known threat before her appearance at Elizabeth's court; it was her infamy that earned her the invitation. Aligning York with a pirate, then, not only makes York a thief and an unpredictable villain, but also equates him with an uppity Irish chieftain woman. This makes York triply subversive. His authority, to Henry, is illegal, illegitimate, and inappropriate.

Shakespeare manipulates historical documents and ideas that were in circulation during this time to write a play that is not only about the historical threat of English civil war, but also about the contemporary Elizabethan conflicts with Ireland, and about rule over Ireland. Andrew Hadfield asserts that the lack of many direct references to Ireland, at a time when Irish issues were at the forefront of the British mind, "indicates that the ghostly presence of Ireland haunts many of Shakespeare's works, and that some plays can be read as displaced allegories of Irish events" (Hadfield 52). The disorder that ensues when York enlists the help of Jack Cade and also when York recruits an army in Ireland results in an escalated conflict between the houses of Lancaster and York. Because of the disorderly influence of the Irish, the play exposes the threat that the Irish pose, at least in the play, to the order of the English monarchy. However, because of the continued problems that England had in controlling Ireland during the Elizabethan period, it is clear that the disorder that the Irish cause in England in the play is analogous to the disorder that they caused within the empire during Shakespeare's own time.

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