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Why should people interested in territory read Shakespeare?

Abstract

This essay argues that territory is more than a simple concept, and that Shakespeare is a valuable guide to understanding its complexities. Shakespeare's plays explore many aspects of geography, politics and territory. They include ideas of the division of kingdoms in *King Lear*, to struggle over its control in *Macbeth* and many of the English history plays, to the vulnerability of small territories with powerful neighbours in *Hamlet*. But his plays also help to understand the legal and economic issues around territory, of the importance of technical innovations around surveying and cartography, and the importance of landscapes and bodies. Shakespeare is especially interesting because debates in political theory at this time concerned a recognisably modern understanding, and European states were consolidating their own rule, marking boundaries and seizing colonial possessions. Shakespeare dramatizes many of these themes, from *The Tempest* to plays set in the Eastern Mediterranean such as *Othello*. Territory is a word, concept and practice, and their interrelation is explored with Shakespeare as a guide. This builds on my previous work on territory, but also develops the understanding further, especially around the colonial, corporeal and geophysical. Historical work on our contemporary concepts can also be revealing of our present.

Introduction

Shakespeare has long been read politically, and in past few decades there has been a growing interest in how his work can be read geographically.¹ This goes beyond simply examining the location of his plays, though that can be interesting in itself. There has been work examining how Shakespeare thinks of colonialism, the extent of rule, travel and navigation, landscape, the town and country, the space of the stage and other related themes. In *Shakespearean Territories*, a book with the University of Chicago Press (Elden 2018), I build on this and

other work to make the claim that Shakespeare provides some significant insights into thinking about the question of territory.

Territory is an obviously political and geographical question, but Shakespeare helps us to understand the complexities embedded in this seemingly straight-forward term. As such, the work in this book develops themes I have explored in my two previous books on territory – a contemporary political study, *Terror and Territory*, and a historical-conceptual one, *The Birth of Territory* (Elden 2009, 2013a). Territory is often taken to be a bounded space under the control of a group of people, perhaps a state. But this definition hardly exhausts the concept, let alone the practice. While territory can certainly take that specific form at certain times and in certain places, not all bounded spaces are territories, and not all territories are bounded spaces. As I have argued elsewhere, to grasp territory we need to examine a number of registers beyond a narrow sense of the political. Territory encompasses economic, strategic, legal and technical concerns. It is a process, or series of processes, the making and remaking of spaces and the political control and struggle over them. This includes practices such as bordering and dividing, conquering and defending, enclosing and excluding, measuring, surveying, cataloguing and mapping. The purpose of such a broad way of understanding territory is to help grasp how territory is conceived and practiced in a range of times and places, rather than to provide a single ‘improved’ definition, which would be ahistorical and misleading.

Shakespeare is used as a guide for a range of reasons. The historical moment of his writing is the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century, a time when debates in political theory were beginning to focus on a recognisably modern understand of the relation between people, place and power. Indeed, the term ‘territory’ starts to be used in debates much more frequently around this time. At the same time, and in myriad connected ways, kingdoms in Europe were becoming states, gaining and losing lands and beginning to develop modern

boundaries. England was in the process of becoming Britain, with the coronation of King James of Scotland as King of England and the Union of the Crowns in 1603, although the Acts of Union were a century later in 1707. The Holy Roman Empire dominated central Europe, but the status of its constituent parts, their relation to the Emperor and the Pope was widely debated. The Thirty Years War (1618-1648) broke out in only two years after Shakespeare's death. Many European states were also beginning to colonise other parts of the world. With an eye to the past, especially as explored in his English and Roman history plays, and an eye to his present and the emerging future, Shakespeare is an intriguing guide to this moment. At the same time, the sheer range of his plays, and their multiple concerns, give rich material with which to work. His linguistic inventiveness, the breadth of his vocabulary and reading all give multiple clues and indications. While Christopher Marlowe, especially in *Tamburlaine*, is also intriguing, and there are some other plays from the period with some interesting discussion, Shakespeare seems to me to be far above his contemporaries.² I do not engage with the para-academic debate about whether Shakespeare himself wrote the plays, since I am interested in the plays ascribed to this author, rather than his biography. But I do explore other significant textual issues – authorship of disputed plays, the writing collaborative plays and variant versions of texts. The book is intended to be a book about Shakespeare for an audience in political geography, political theory and related fields, but also aspires to be a contribution to the growing interest in geographical questions in literary studies (see also Sanders 2011), and the sub-discipline of literary geography (see Hones 2008; Saunders 2010).

While the book is a study of literature, and keeps a focus on the written text with only a few comments about performance, it is not just a study of the word 'territory'. Shakespeare actually only uses the word 'territory' twice, in *As You Like It* and in *King Lear*. The instance in *King Lear* only appears in the text which appeared in the First Folio, not in the earlier

Quarto edition. The plural word ‘territories’ is a little more common, but still only appears in relatively few plays, mainly histories. There are some interesting issues in the use of the word, which I explore in one chapter through a reading of *King John*. In that play there is the use of the term with a definite, rather than possessive article – ‘the territories’ rather than his, our, your territories – which is revealing in the context of the time. However, as I argue in detail, many more of Shakespeare’s plays concerns issue about the concept and practice of territory, even if the language used is different. As I have discussed before, especially in *The Birth of Territory*, it is important to examine the word-concept-practice relation, rather than to assume that words have kept their meaning, or that concepts and practices were always described in the same way.

The Tragedies

The first piece I wrote on Shakespeare was on *King Lear*, beginning with the opening scene in which Lear divides his kingdom between his daughters and tests their love for him. A shorter version of this reading appeared in *The Birth of Territory*, a longer version in the journal *Law and Literature* (Elden 2013b). The article provides the basis for the reading here. I focus not just on the opening scene with that division of territory, but also the plays wider *geo-politics*, its politics of land and earth. I was interested not just in the division of Britain, the internal conflicts and the war with France, but also in the subplot about a bastard son and his wish to claim an inheritance in land from his legitimate half-brother. I used this reading as the beginning of a wider project which became this book.

The chapter on *King Lear* is followed by another chapter on two other tragedies, *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*. The purpose of reading *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*, neither of which include the word ‘territory’ or ‘territories’, is to show that concerns about what we would now call international relations or geopolitics frame both their narratives. There is tendency with both plays to read them in terms of the more narrow court politics, of the murder of Hamlet’s

father by his brother and the son's wish for revenge, or Macbeth's murder of King Duncan and the multiple killings that follow. While I have no wish to challenge the importance of readings that concentrate on those aspects of the plays, and the interpersonal relations of these characters, my reading takes a different approach (see also De Grazia 2007). The chapter looks instead at the regional relations of Denmark and Scotland. In *Hamlet*, Denmark is situated between Norway and Poland, and the struggle between these countries is outlined at the beginning of the play and forms a wider world in which its action is set. Fortinbras of Norway is initially a threat, when we learn that he wants to regain the lands lost by his father a generation before. It is to guard against a possible attack that there is a night watch on the battlements, the people who encounter the ghost of King Hamlet. Horatio tells the story of the conflict between the dead king and Fortinbras's father, and the lands that were wagered between them. Around the middle of the play, Fortinbras leads an army through Denmark to attack Poland – an army Hamlet encounters when he is leaving for England. At the end of the play, with all the main characters killed, Fortinbras enters to claim the Danish crown. There are still wider contexts in this play, with the more remote connections of characters to France, Normandy and Wittenberg. *Macbeth* is similarly situated between powerful neighbours – Macbeth makes his reputation for his valour in defending Scotland from enemies at home and from Norway and Ireland, and at the end of the play is defeated by Duncan's son and English forces. Both a civil war and one involving outside enemies, Scotland's turmoil forms the setting for the more familiar parts of the story.

While I use these three tragedies to show how territorial and wider geographical concerns feature in some of Shakespeare's plays, even when the mere word is absent, I recognise that the sense of territory that emerges is quite a traditional one. A kingdom can be divided, conquered, lost and regained. It might be riven by internal conflict and the object of external claims. This is certainly one sense of territory, but it is not sufficient to understand all of its

forms and elements. I suggest that Shakespeare's plays help to develop a richer, broader and more nuanced sense of territory. This is especially the case with the history plays. The next sequence of chapters explore some of those histories to open up broader aspects of the question.

The Histories and the Colonial Plays

In one chapter, I use *Richard II* to explore a set of questions about political economies of land, the rights of landowners and kings, and the use of land and rent. This play, as so many others, raises questions of banishment, national identity, inheritance and appropriation. All these concerns relate to ways in which territory is understood and contested. In another chapter I discuss *Henry V*, especially its opening scenes about the Salic law and rights of inheritance, to open up some crucial legal questions. This play also raises significant considerations about the relation of territorial ambition and the wish to possess the bodies of women. Such themes are paralleled in another play Shakespeare is likely to have had at least a hand in writing, *Edward III*, and there are parallels to some of Shakespeare's other plays and poems, notably *Cymbeline* and *The Rape of Lucrece*.

The relations of England to Scotland, Wales, Ireland and France are explored throughout Shakespeare's English history plays, but one of the key developments at the time he was writing was the exploration and conquest of the new world. The obvious place to look for colonial insight in Shakespeare is *The Tempest*, and I do discuss this play in some detail. But I balance the reading of that play with three plays Shakespeare set in the Eastern Mediterranean – *Pericles*, *Othello* and *Antony and Cleopatra*. *Othello* is interesting because of the struggle between Venice and the Ottoman Empire over Cyprus. Othello has made his reputation as a military commander in the Cyprus wars, and Venice again turns to him when the island is under threat. Intriguingly, the play's focus on race is not just between the Moor

and white Venetian society, but the figure of the Turk is continually mentioned, both in terms of the actual Ottoman threat and more metaphorical uses.

In the play's opening scenes, Brabantio is woken to be told his daughter Desdemona has eloped with Othello, and very shortly afterwards the Venetian council convenes in the middle of the night to be told of the Turkish threat to Cyprus. The parallels between a supposed 'barbarian' seizing a valued property – a daughter or a colony – are striking, and it is perhaps because Venice needs Othello for the latter that he escapes greater censure for the former. Interestingly, the idea of the Turks as deceitful and creating 'a pageant/To keep us in false gaze' (*Othello* I.iii.19-20) is established in this wider frame, only to be worked through in the play's principal plot when Othello's ensign Iago deceives him about his wife's fidelity. While the Cyprus plot falls into the background once Othello has led the fleet in victory against the Ottomans, Cyprus is the setting for the rest of the play, and what might appear a merely domestic tragedy. While not a history play and making use of a fictional source for the story, Shakespeare likely knew Richard Knolles's 1603 text *The General Historie of the Turkes* (Knolles 1621 [1603]), and situated his tragedy in that wider world.

Technologies and Corporeality

The importance of technological innovation in shaping the concept and practice of territory is well known (i.e. Jacob 2006; Sassen 2006; Strandsbjerg 2010; Branch 2014; Maier 2016). Developments in cartography and land-surveying are significant in allowing states better knowledge and control of their territories, as are the increased use of censuses and other statistics. Shakespeare's time of writing was one in which many of these techniques were being developed and utilised, and his plays are filled with language and discussions of measuring, navigation, calculation, military technologies, surveying and cartography (see Blank 2006; Cohen 2006). These themes are explored in the book through a reading of range of plays. Because of the link between cartography and territory, I spend some time discussing

this theme. There are a number of plays where maps are mentioned, but two key scenes actually involving a map, one of which is in *King Lear*. The other is in *Henry IV, Part I*, when Mortimer, Hotspur and Glendower are planning their joint overthrow of the king, but also discussing how they will divide the kingdom afterwards. The conspirators use a map, and propose rivers to form the borders between their shares – the Severn will divide Wales from England, and the Trent the south of England from the North. However, Hotspur objects to the way that the river Trent turns at Burton, saying that it ‘cuts me from the best of all my land’ (*Henry IV, Part I* III.i.97). He proposes that the river be damned up, and a new channel cut for the river to run in a more equitable way. This scene raises a number of interesting questions about the representation of a landscape on a map, but also about the relation between the geophysical and the geopolitical. Instead of choosing a different line on the map, the proposal is to alter the landscape itself, which will of course change not only the territorial divide but also render the map outdated.

The colonial and the geophysical are two aspects of territory that my previous work had neglected, and I use Shakespeare here to push me further. The limitations of the approach had been pointed out in some engagements with my work. The point of my previous writing on territory was not to exhaust all possible aspects of how we should understand it, but to widen the lens through which it was examined. Alongside the economic, strategic, legal and technical questions, Shakespeare forces a still broader engagement with the colonial and the geophysical. His plays also provide an impetus to think more about the corporeal relations of territory, of the ways that bodies are in these places, and the places themselves have corporeal aspects. While other plays might have been chosen, my focus here is on the Roman play *Coriolanus* – the other part of the book previously published (Elden 2013c).

Coriolanus is a play rich with body imagery and language, used to describe both the characters in the play and the polity itself. It is a play about the political body, its internal

health and well-being, the wars fought to gain territory and defend those gains, and the physical human and animal body. It is filled with language of wounds, contagion, animals and body parts. Yet, unlike *Troilus and Cressida* for example, which is also a very corporeal play, *Coriolanus* is almost entirely un-erotic. Despite being married with a young son, Coriolanus's corporeal relations are closest to his enemy, Aufidius, and his mother, Volumnia. Tentatively, I use this play to indicate what might be called the biopolitics of territory, its affective, emotional, and biophysical aspects. Using these and other plays to explore the colonial, corporeal and geophysical thus deepens and extends the work I have done elsewhere; even as other plays provide illustrations of previous arguments around the economic, strategic, legal and technical.

Territory and its Outside

The final chapter of the book uses a range of plays, especially *Titus Andronicus* and *As You Like It*, to explore what it might be to be outside territory. Today this is difficult for us to imagine, with the movement outside of one territory a movement into another. Yet at Shakespeare's time there were still places not yet turned into spaces, not yet transformed by political technologies. Ideas of the wild and the outside appear in many of his plays, even if these places were fast disappearing. In these two plays the outside is symbolised by a forest outside of a city, although they use the forest in quite different ways.³ In *Titus Andronicus* the forest is a place of murder, rape and barbarism. In *As You Like It* the forest is the place that the Duke and his entourage go in exile, and to an extent a place of freedom, but there are gradations of this area, some of which seems genuinely wild and some cultivated. Exploring issues around hunting and enclosure these plays open up different questions about what lies outside of politically controlled spaces, in related ways to the heath in *Macbeth* and *King Lear*, or the ocean in other plays (see Mentz 2009). Understanding what it might be to be outside territory is another way to better understand what it might be to part of one.

Shakespeare and geography is a topic which has received some important attention in recent years, as this essay's introduction noted. His importance to thinking about geographical issues is significant. Often, though, raising the question of geography in relation to Shakespeare raises the question of his giving Bohemia a coastline in *The Winter's Tale*. That play begins in Sicilia, an urban and wintery setting. A child is born to the Queen, which the King believes is due to her unfaithfulness with the King of Bohemia. The child is removed from the kingdom by the trusted servant Antigonus, and they arrive on the coasts of Bohemia. Bohemia is initially deserted, except for the famous bear, but later becomes a rural, summery place of bucolic pleasures.

Was this a simple geographical error by Shakespeare, as is often thought? Or would he have known from contemporary maps by Mercator and Ortelius that Bohemia was landlocked, encircled by mountains? If so, why did he give Bohemia a coastline? Part of the reason seems to be that Sicilia needed to have an outside, and if Antigonus and the child leave an island by sea, where else would they end up but another coast? There is obviously something a fairy-tale logic here, and the play does not make obvious sense for another reason – Bohemia would be a more obviously wintery setting than Sicily. If the situations were reversed, Sicily would provide the coastline too. Indeed, in one of Shakespeare's sources for the story, Robert Greene's novel *Pandosto*, the kings are indeed the opposite – it is the king of Bohemia who jealously accuses his wife of infidelity (Greene 1588). There is a lot of literature on this particular question, but one of the most plausible readings suggests that there were diplomatic niceties to be followed. Having a jealous king from Catholic and Spanish-controlled Sicily might be more politic than one from Protestant, Austro-Hungarian controlled Bohemia. With a likely date of composition in 1610-11, and initial performances in 1611; the play was later performed at the 1613 wedding of King James's daughter, Princess Elizabeth, to the

Habsburg prince Frederick, elector palatine of the Rhine, and later crowned as king of Bohemia (see Desai 1996, Bate 2004).

This example, minor though it may be, is a good indication of how situating plays in the context of their writing and performance can shed light on textual issues. The book's Coda discusses national identity, especially through *Cymbeline*. One of its themes is a shifting interest in Shakespeare's plays from England to Britain, paralleling the political transitions between Elizabethan and Jacobean rule (see McEachern 1996; Maley 2003). In the other part of the Coda I explore the relation of territory to a pale. A pale is a term Shakespeare uses frequently, sometimes literally and sometimes metaphorically. A pale was originally a fenced off area of land for hunting, surrounded by a ditch and fence. A *palus*, a stake, is what gives the term its name. A pale came to be used to describe a bounded area more generally, sometimes in a political way. The English Pale of Calais and the Pale of Ireland are two of the most important. In this sense, a pale is a jurisdiction, a territory. But I suggest that a pale is not sufficient to understand the question of territory more generally. It is one form that a territory can take, but not the only one. Shakespeare is my guide to developing that richer, historically specific understanding of this concept and practice.

The work of *Shakespearean Territories* remains close to the plays, which are read in modern critical editions but with a great deal of attention to variant texts, and their vocabulary, language, spelling and syntax.⁴ But these plays are of interest because they shed light on a formative moment in the history and politics of territory. In using Shakespeare to deepen and develop my conceptualisation of territory, I was led to reassess some of my previous work, and to think of new ways that I might take it forward. Some of this may be historical-conceptual, and some may be more contemporary political, as I did in *Terror and Territory* almost a decade ago. The reading of the relation between the geophysical and the geopolitical, for example, is one that I have developed in some other recent work (i.e. Elden

2017b), and I have begun to think more about the relation of territory to geopolitics and biopolitics (Elden 2017a). Historical work on our contemporary concepts can tell us as much about the present as the past.

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¹ See, for example, Addison Roberts 1991, Gillies 1994, Sullivan 1998, Kingsley-Smith 2004; Hopkins 2005; Mentz 2009, Poole 2011; and the collections Gillies and Mason Vaughan eds. 1998 and Floyd-Wilson and Sullivan eds. 2007.

² I discuss Marlowe briefly in the book (Elden 2018, 9-10). For another example, see John Webster's c. 1613 play *The Duchess of Malfi* (Webster 2009) where the Duchess's body and her territory is seen as equivalent and subject to male domination (II.v.9-11, 18-21).

³ For an important study which appeared after the book's final submission, see Barton 2017.

⁴ I generally used the excellent Arden Third Series editions of the plays, but also consulted the Oxford University Press, Cambridge University Press, Penguin, and RSC editions. I often went back to facsimile editions of the original Quarto and First Folio to check details, and made use of modern editions of those texts. I should also note that the references to secondary literature given here are merely indicative of each point, and a much more substantial set of references appear in the book itself.