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The Political and Aesthetic Productivity of Shakespearean Ambiguity in Brexit Discourse

In recent years, academic debates about the productivity of 'knowledge' have been enriched by considerations of the productivity of 'non-knowledge' or 'ignorance.' A prominent example of this is Robert N. Proctor's seminal work *Agnotology. The Making & Unmaking of Ignorance* (2008), which contrasts the established field of epistemology (Proctor 2008, 1) with the "consequential" (2008, 2) effects ignorance has on our lives. In particular, Proctor focusses on "ignorance – or doubt or uncertainty – as something that is made, maintained and manipulated" (2008, 9).

The aim of this paper is to extend the scope of non-knowledge to the concept of 'ambiguity,' hitherto neglected in this context, and to examine the productivity of ambiguity in relation to the use of Shakespeare within Brexit discourse. It will be argued that the ambiguity of Shakespeare's works, as well as the avoidance of that ambiguity, allowed for a use of the Bard for political gain. This will be contrasted with other examples of Brexit discourse, in which notions of ambiguity were embraced and related to Shakespeare's play *The Tempest*, which allowed for an aesthetic, more inclusive and forward-thinking approach to Brexit.

1. The Political Productivity of Shakespearean Ambiguity in Brexit Discourse

Following Foucault (1981, 52; 56), in this paper discourse is understood as the production and exchange of (linguistic) meaning in a particular field, with certain rules governing the production and exchange of meaning in that area. These rules mean that discourse functions as a structure that conditions what is permissible (or to count as knowledge) in its field. With regard to Brexit, political discourse in particular has been marked by a division into those supporting Britain's departure from the European Union and those opposing it, a division resulting in a sharp delineation of discursive borders and a breakdown in communication between the warring factions (Sandrock 2019; Sedlmayr 2019; Tönnies and Henneböhl 2019).

Across this divide, Shakespeare was enlisted by both 'Leavers' and 'Remainers' to further their opposing agendas. This utilisation of the Bard is entirely understandable, given the prestige accorded to the poet. Shakespeare was voted in fifth place in the 2002 BBC Greatest Briton Poll ("Victory for Churchill" 2002) and has been called "the most important Englishman who ever lived" (Watson 2019) as well as "the English national poet and […] the greatest dramatist of all time" (Spencer et al. 2021).

In this appropriation of Shakespeare, Brexit discourse follows a long tradition of examining the plays from a contemporary perspective (Kott 1961; Smith 2019) and of adapting them to the concerns of the present: "'Shakespeare' has been made to mean different things in different historical and cultural contexts" (Holderness 2001, x). This was also the topic of the 2009 collected volume *Shakespearean Culture – Cultural*

Shakespeare, in which Joanna Rostek highlighted the suitability of the national bard for identity politics (2009) and Jürgen Kamm and Bernd Lenz referred to the "scanty, almost non-existent" records "relating to William Shakespeare and to his works" (2009, 7). For them, this results in a "blank which cries out to be filled since it is apparently painful to face the *horror vacui* of his personality" (2009, 18).

Regarding the employment of Shakespeare within Brexit discourse, some of these aspects appear to be particularly pressing. According to Adler (2018) and Breutmann (2019), Shakespeare's works have functioned like something of a substitute for the unwritten constitution, a moral and political compass especially during times of upheaval similar to Shakespeare's own Early Modern Period. This referring of the chaos of Brexit to an established framework of placing human behaviour indeed seems to me to be the function of the many comparisons between Brexit and Shakespearean tragedy, or between contemporary politicians and Shakespeare's villains and jesters (e.g. "The Tragedy of MacGove" 2016; Titmuss 2016; Billington 2016; Conrad 2018).

More crucial in the context of this paper, however, are the more straightforward political uses of Shakespeare within Brexit discourse. As will be seen, many of these vainly attempted to fill the blank of Shakespeare's personal attitudes on Brexit-related matters by extracting these attitudes from the texts of his plays. This seems to have been a particularity of the cultural appropriation of Shakespeare within Brexit discourse, a result of the highly personalised and heated climate of a debate in which it no longer sufficed to appropriate the plays in a manner detached from their creator. Moreover, another particularity appears to be the simultaneous categorisation of Shakespeare as 'Leaver' and 'Remainer,' one person and his works at the same time opposing and supporting the Brexit process. Both camps thus made claims to knowledge about the poet's attitudes that seem to be incapable of being true at the same time.

It is here that the concept of ambiguity comes in. To clarify this concept, it is helpful to draw on the work done by Susanne Winkler et al. in the context of the Tübingen Ambiguity Graduate School. Winkler takes her starting point from a linguistic definition of ambiguity, according to which an expression is ambiguous if it has more than one possible meaning and can be interpreted in more than one way (2015, 1).

This seems to be the case with Shakespeare, long famed for inviting a multitude of interpretations due to the ambiguity of his plays. Already in 1817, John Keats famously spoke of Shakespeare's "Negative Capability" as an ability "of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts" (Keats 1899, 277). In 2020, Emma Smith, Professor of Shakespeare Studies at Oxford, published the paperback *This Is Shakespeare*, an introduction to his plays in which she claims that "ambiguity is the oxygen of these works" (Smith 2020, 3). For Smith, this ambiguity is largely a product of Shakespeare's dialectical style, which she ascribes to the rhetorical training Shakespeare received at Stratford Grammar School (where pupils were urged to regularly argue both sides of the question) (Smith 2019). She furthermore regards these dialectics as a result of the changes in the Early Modern Period, in which older worldviews like divine providence existed side by side with newer explanations like scientific causality and individual agency. These dualisms then mark Shakespeare's plays with a "gappiness," in which conflicts remain unresolved and in which silences, inconsistencies, and the absence of explanations force readers and spectators to come to their own conclusions (Smith 2020, 2-3).

In this sense, both 'Leavers' and 'Remainers' can claim Shakespeare as their own – something grasped by Stephen Greenblatt, who – in an interview entitled "Would Shakespeare support Brexit?" – stated that "Shakespeare is like the Bible. You can find quotations that justify almost anything" (Stefancic 2016). In a similar vein, Daniel Hannan (2016), the Tory party's Shakespeare afficionado and one of the founders of the "Vote Leave" campaign conceded that "Shakespeare is claimed by every faction. […] And, in a sense, they're all right." In Brexit discourse, Shakespearean ambiguity was therefore productive in allowing for the exploitation of the plays in two diametrically opposed ways.

If Shakespeare's works, however, are ambiguous, we would also assume something to be amiss with claims to knowledge that eradicate this ambiguity. After all, reducing the complexity of an issue at hand also relates to contemporary concerns about populism and post-truth politics. While populism uses ambiguity to inhabit the fringes of political correctness, very often ambiguity is the enemy of a political style that not only pits the 'people' against the power and knowledge of 'elites' but also thrives on simplification, polarisation and black-and-white binaries. These, as it were, are the rules of populist discourse and to a great extent they also were the rules of Brexit discourse. Thus, in their contribution to the collected volume *Contested Britain*, Marius Guderjan and Adrian Wilding spoke of a reliance "on drastically simplified communication" and connected that with a "Leave campaign […] built on a drastic simplification of complex political issues" (2020, 111). Populism is, however, not just a matter of the right, and the employment of Shakespeare within the Brexit campaigns reflected a general tendency to convince through the production of reductive 'truths' and of a 'knowledge' that can simply be asserted or felt. This is done in order to gather support for a specific political agenda and to answer to real or fabricated needs for orientation in times of change. If, as in philosophical epistemology, knowledge is regarded as "[j]ustified true belief" (Audi 2011, 246), there are deficits in the justification of populist knowledge, as the conclusions are not the result of appropriate processes of reasoning and do not take into account the full body of possible evidence. Uncertainties and ambiguities are ignored and problematically reduced to certainty and fixed meanings.

To illustrate this, four examples of the political avoidance of Shakespearean ambiguity in Brexit discourse will be considered and mapped onto the distinctions established by Winkler and Proctor. Here, it is important to note that Proctor does not just operate with a concept of the strategic production of ignorance but also has space for two other types of ignorance: a rather unconscious and non-deliberate "ignorance as a native state" (Proctor 2008, 4), where ignorance and non-knowledge function as synonyms to describe states where the agent simply does not know any better, and a second type of ignorance as "selective choice" (2008, 8). There is no wilful repression of ambiguity in this case, but one's preconceptions direct perception and judgement into a certain direction.

In her work on ambiguity, Winkler similarly speaks of the "question of whether ambiguity is deliberately or even strategically generated or avoided" (2015, 3). Winkler understands "strategically" to be largely synonymous with "deliberately" (2015, 3). On the basis of this, Winkler (together with Matthias Bauer, Joachim Knape, Peter Koch, Christof Landmesser, Jürgen Leonhardt, Thomas Susanka, Esme Winter-Froemel,

René Ziegler and Angelika Zirk) develops a "three-dimensional ambiguity model" (Fig. 1) that helps to clarify the origins of ambiguity.

LANGUAGE

Production   Perception

SYSTEM

non-strategic   PS⁻   RS⁻

strategic   PS⁺   RS⁺

DISCOURSE

P = Production
R = Perception / Language Reception
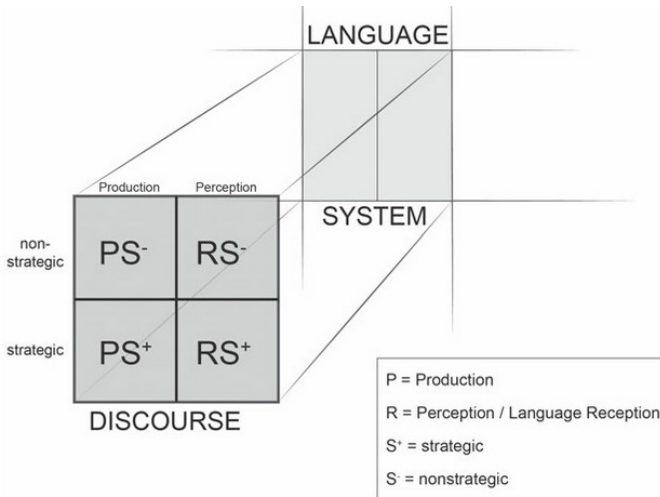S⁺ = strategic
S⁻ = nonstrategic

Fig. 1: The three-dimensional ambiguity model. Reprinted with permission of Walter de Gruyter and Company, from *Ambiguity. Language and Communication* (Winkler 2015, 6); permission conveyed through Copyright Clearance Center, Inc.

This model may lead us to the following hypotheses about the place of Shakespearean ambiguity in Brexit discourse: the Shakespearian texts feature ambiguities that were deliberately (PS⁺) or non-deliberately (PS⁻) incorporated by the author. 'Leavers' and 'Remainers' who enlist Shakespeare for their causes by not paying attention to elements of the Shakespearean text that challenge their one-sided interpretations produce discourse that deliberately (PS⁺) or non-deliberately (PS⁻) avoids this ambiguity, thus contributing to an ignorance of these ambiguities.

While these avoidances of ambiguity might also be the results of corresponding processes in the perception and interpretation of Shakespeare's works (RS⁻/RS⁺), a word of caution regarding the transparency of these processes is in order. The motives and reasons behind individual contributions to discourse are never to be fathomed with an ultimate degree of certainty. Nevertheless, trying to assess why someone did something is a common practice of everyday life and academic analysis in the more socially and historically oriented disciplines.[1] If we are not to dismiss outright the divisions of Proctor and Winkler, educated guesses about motives based on the circumstances of an utterance retain some validity regarding its probable origins. The following examples should thus be considered as featuring avoidances of Shakespearean ambiguity for the

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[1] Whereas literary studies examines works of fiction and has been influenced by the 'intentional fallacy' famously outlined by Wimsatt and Beardsley (1946), according to which the personal attitude of an author cannot be inferred from his works of fiction, historians (like Proctor) still tend to attempt causal analyses of non-fictional utterances and actions (Osterhammel 2007).

sake of supporting a specific stance on, but with each displaying different characteristics of ambiguity avoidance that suggest different proximities to the various categories established by Winkler and Proctor.

The first example accords with the idea of "ignorance as a native state" and a perhaps non-deliberate avoidance of ambiguity (RS$^-$/ PS$^-$). It refers to a Twitter post for the European elections by the short-lived Brexit Party from 23 April 2019. The posted image depicted two signs ("Polling Station," "Way in"), the logo of the Brexit Party, and a slogan ("Change politics for good") that was repeated as an appeal at the bottom of the image. And while it also wished everyone a happy St George's Day, most prominent were the words "Once more onto the breach, dear friends, once more…," a quote from *Henry V*, Act 3, Scene 1,[2] in which the king urges his troops not to abandon the siege of Harfleur (Brexit Party 2019). That speech is indeed a rousing call for courage on the battlefield and as such seems suitable for the defence of supposedly patriotic interests in the European elections.

Enlisting Shakespeare's words in support of Brexit in this way does, however, ignore some issues surrounding the speech. To begin with, Henry's speech takes place in France, and far from being engaged in acts of self-defence, the king could well be regarded as the aggressor in this case, trying to secure his dynastic claims to the throne of France by waging war on the Continent. Furthermore, *Henry V* is by no means an all-patriotic and all-militaristic endeavour. The king's inspiring speeches are not only parodied by, for example, the cowardly words and actions of Pistol (Act 3, Scenes 2 and 6), but also Henry himself ponders the costs of war (Act 4, Scene 1). The play does not end with a British secession from Europe but with peace between Britain and France. Moreover, the sequence of the histories sees the French territories lost again in *Henry VI* and regarding the histories solely as expressions of patriotic fervour ignores their engagement in questions of legitimate authority, succession, and good government.

This contextualisation of Henry's speech from Act 3 is, however, quite intricate and likely to evade a non-academic, casual acquaintance with the plays of Shakespeare. An acquaintance of this kind seems probable for what appears to be a rather spontaneous party post on social media, and the use of *Henry V* in the Brexit Party's Twitter post therefore seems to tend towards Winkler's non-deliberate avoidance of ambiguity (RS$^-$ / PS$^-$) and Proctor's category of "ignorance as a native state."

This kind of classification does not seem applicable to other uses. For example, the writer Ben Macintyre published an article in *The Times* called "Is It Nobler in the Mind to Leave or Remain?" There he acknowledged that "[o]n Europe, as on most matters, Shakespeare brilliantly presents both sides of an argument, without coming down hard on either" (Macintyre 2016). He nevertheless concluded that his

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2   All references to acts, scenes and passages are according to the Folger Shakespeare editions of the plays. <https://shakespeare.folger.edu/> [accessed 20 November 2021].

> hunch is that Shakespeare would […] vote to leave the EU. His best lines, after all, were written for English patriots standing up to continental interference: *This England never did, nor never shall, Lie at the proud foot of a conqueror* (Macintyre 2016, italics original).

Since Macintyre had, however, beforehand provided a nuanced interpretation of Shakespeare's stance on Europe, it would seem wrong to ascribe a lack of textual acquaintance to him.

This would also be wrong for one of the major 'Shakespeare pieces' on the 'Remain' side, a 2016 *The Guardian* opinion piece by the Labour MP Chris Bryant called "This Sceptic Isle Would Most Displease pro-Europe Shakespeare."[3] As opposed to Macintyre, Bryant claims Shakespeare as a 'Remainer.' His assessment is based on three arguments. First, that through their settings (e.g. Italy, Greece, Bohemia), continental sources (Homer, Froissart) and words borrowed from Continental languages (e.g. Latin, Greek and French), Shakespeare's works displayed a distinctive European identity. Second, that because of the peace treaty at the end of *Henry V* and, e.g. the excessively militaristic character of Coriolanus, Shakespeare was not a nationalist. Third, that Shakespeare expressed sympathy with minorities and foreigners in *Othello* and *The Book of Sir Thomas More*. These arguments do not quite work due to the patriotic sentiments also present in the plays and because the issue of Brexit is too complex and recent for Shakespearian attitudes pertaining to a particular area to provide suitable recommendations for voting. Bryant nevertheless goes on to state that he has "not a shadow of a doubt that William Shakespeare would have voted to remain" (Bryant 2016). Yet, given the arguments he puts forth, Bryant also seems to be thoroughly acquainted with Shakespeare's plays.

What might play a role with Macintyre and Bryant is something like a "confirmation bias," where "one selectively gathers, or gives undue weight to, evidence that supports one's position" (Nickerson 1998, 175). This relates to Proctor's idea of ignorance as "selective choice," where "inquiry is always selective […] and the decision to focus on *this* is therefore invariably a choice to ignore *that*" (Proctor 2008, 7). It seems plausible that Bryant and Macintyre were neither lacking in knowledge nor intending to deceive their readers about the ambiguities inherent in the Bard's work. Instead, they looked at Shakespeare with 'blinkers' (to borrow a term from equestrianism) – their preconceptions and desires led them to ignore passages contrary to their interpretations. According to Proctor, this type of ignorance can either be unintentional, deliberate, or both (Proctor 2008, 8). Macintyre clearly perceives the ambiguous aspects of the Shakespearean texts and reproduces them in his article. Bryant does not address these ambiguities but might be aware of them given his acquaintance with the plays. Both eventually discard the ambiguities in their verdict on the texts. They seem to deliberately avoid the ambiguities in their contributions to Brexit discourse (PS+), with the objective of convincing the reader of their stance on Brexit. They thereby also promote ignorance by not giving due attention to the complexity of the plays. While

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3 Other examples where Shakespeare is regarded as a 'Remainer' on the basis of his alleged pro-European attitudes are Watson (2019) and Connelly (2020).

such subjectivism is in line with journalistic 'opinion pieces,' their strong judgements nevertheless rest on highly selective, and thus unduly weighed, evidence.

While there is little indication of deliberate deception, of suppressing something the writers are aware of, this is different in the final example of the political productivity of Shakespearean ambiguity in Brexit discourse. It is a poster by the Leave.EU campaign, the unofficial one of the two campaigns that beat the drum for Britain to sever ties with the European Union. The poster depicts Shakespeare in front of an English flag. To the left is a quotation that uses words spoken at the end of Shakespeare's history *King John*. As they are in quotation marks and, almost in the form of a speech bubble, aligned with Shakespeare's mouth and gaze, they seem to be uttered by Shakespeare himself.[4] The words are:

> This England never
> did, nor never shall,
> lie at the proud foot
> of a conqueror,
> nought shall make us rue,
> if England to itself
> do rest but true. (Leave.EU 2016)

On the poster, they function as both statement and appeal, asserting that England has and always will successfully resist foreign domination (e.g. by the EU) and that whatever the short-term consequences, an England staying true to itself (i.e. one that is unified or preserves its identity) will come out fine in the end.

The campaign poster, however, does not quote the full passage from *King John* and crucially omits lines that would render the excerpt more ambiguous. Here is the full passage, according to the Folger Shakespeare:

> This England never did nor never shall
> Lie at the proud foot of a conqueror
> But when it first did help to wound itself.
> Now these her princes are come home again,
> Come the three corners of the world in arms
> And we shall shock them. Naught shall make us rue,
> If England to itself do rest but true. (Act 5, Scene 7, ll. 118-124)

These lines are spoken by Philip the Bastard at the end of the play. After rebelling against King John, the English nobles eventually return to his side and, after his death, support John's son Henry. They pledge their allegiance to Henry, and Philip – who had been loyal to John throughout – closes the play with the above words. The Leave.EU poster only uses the beginning and end of the original – and crucially omits the third line (l. 120). In modern English, this line adds an exemptive "except when it first

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4   Cf. Foucault (1977, 126-130) for a discussion of the "author-function." Not merely referencing the plays but alluding to the alleged personal opinion of Shakespeare allows the four examples to even more directly capitalise on Shakespeare's prestige and to problematically use the author as a unifying force that overrides the potential contradictions within the plays.

wounded (or wounds) itself" to the boisterous "England never was or will be conquered" of the first two lines. As such, it casts a shadow on the patriotism and demonstration of allegiance surrounding it – it adds ambiguity to the passage. As in John of Gaunt's famous "Scept'red isle" speech in *Richard II*, Shakespeare seems to be in two minds about England: there is a potential realisation of greatness, which is undermined by the tendency to perpetual inner conflict. Today, 'Remainers' could interpret these qualifications as a call on the 'Brexiteers' to stop their divisive agenda, or they could regard the suggested negative outcomes of leaving the European Union as a case of English self-harm.

This poster could be classified as a deliberate avoidance of ambiguity in the production of discourse (PS⁺). There is no indication of a wider awareness of Shakespeare's plays (as with Macintyre and Bryant), but the ambiguity also does not rely on such a wider awareness (as is the case with the Brexit Party's Twitter use of *Henry V*). Instead, the complication of the intended political message is inherent in the full passage, which was in all likelihood edited to avoid this complication. In this sense, the example falls into Proctor's category of ignorance as "strategic ploy," that is "the deliberate production of ignorance in the form of strategies to deceive" (Proctor 2008, 8).[5] Even if one were not to follow the reasoning about motives outlined in this paper, the four examples presented all avoid Shakespearean ambiguity to political effect, with the character of the avoidance becoming more pronounced with each example.

2. The Aesthetic Productivity of Shakespearean Ambiguity in Brexit Discourse

If Shakespearian ambiguity has been productive in Brexit discourse politically, it was also productive in Brexit discourse aesthetically. Whereas politically this productivity rested on the possibility of multiple interpretations of Shakespeare's works, with one-sided interpretations requiring the suppression of divergent interpretations, aesthetically the productivity belonged to a celebration of ambiguity. In the following, the focus will be on the prominent role that Shakespeare's play *The Tempest* has played in Brexit discourse, and on how a magical-transformative reading of *The Tempest* and the idea of intertextual play allowed for a more open approach to Brexit. Both, the magical-transformative reading and intertextual play, can be located in the opening ceremony of the 2012 London Olympics, Ali Smith's *Autumn* (2016), and John Lanchester's *The Wall* (2019). All three accord with a general definition of the aesthetic as "relating to art or beauty" ("Aesthetic" 2022).

According to Smith (2020, 317), there have been two influential "readings" of *The Tempest*. An autobiographical one (*The Tempest* as Shakespeare's alleged last play) and a "geopolitical," colonial one, centring on the Italian magician Prospero enslaving Caliban, the native inhabitant of the island Prospero is stranded on. There is, however, also a third reading of the play, which might be termed the "magical-transformative" reading. According to this reading, *The Tempest* is "a play of almost continuous

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5   The deliberate avoidance of ambiguity on this poster is commented upon by Pawel Kaptur in
     a recent article for the Polish Academy of Sciences (Kaptur 2020, 569-570).

spectacle," with "elaborate effects of magic and the supernatural" giving "a lesson in theatrical enchantment" (Ackroyd 2006, 460-461; also cf. Singh 2003, 501).

This reading also feeds on the association of the Shakespearean romances (or "tragicomedies") with a sense of possibility. The plays in this group – *The Tempest*, *The Winter's Tale*, *Cymbeline*, *Pericles* – are characterised by supernatural aspects not quite comprehensible by reason, by theatrical spectacle that highlights their performative quality, and by temporal and spatial shifts. The romances furthermore evade clear generic classification, and they suggest that despite the catastrophic events of the past and present it is possible to avoid tragedy in the end (Dillon 2010, 170; 174; 178-179). In all this, they incorporate elements of the Middle English Romances, whose continuation into the Early Modern Period has been examined by Helen Cooper, and which were marked by characteristics such as "the shaking loose of the narrative from precise time and space; quests; magic and the supernatural […] a happy ending […] a return from an encounter with death – a symbolic resurrection" (Cooper 2004, 9).

Such a magical-transformative reading of *The Tempest* was already employed in the opening ceremony of the London 2012 Olympics. While this event does not directly qualify as a contribution to Brexit discourse, it was already occupied with questions of national identity. A prominent role was played by the following speech of Caliban from *The Tempest*:

> Be not afeard. The isle is full of noises,
> Sounds and sweet airs that give delight and hurt not.
> Sometimes a thousand twangling instruments
> Will hum about mine ears, and sometimes voices
> That, if I then had waked after long sleep,
> Will make me sleep again; and then, in dreaming,
> The clouds methought would open, and show riches
> Ready to drop upon me, that when I waked
> I cried to dream again. (Act 3, Scene 2, ll. 148-156)

The first line (l. 148) was inscribed into the bell rung by cyclist and Tour de France winner Bradley Wiggins at the start of the ceremony. The whole speech was recited by no other than Kenneth Branagh, speaking as the railroad engineer Isambard Kingdom Brunel at that point of the ceremony when the rural idyll of pre-industrial Britain was about to be transformed (Karschay 2019, 63; 67-68). Moreover, the first line was also quoted in the pamphlet distributed to spectators in the stadium by the opening ceremony's director, Danny Boyle, who then connected these words to a "ceremony that celebrates the creativity, eccentricity, daring and openness of the British genius" (Boyle 2012).[6] This was reflected in the evolution of the ceremony, which traced the changes in British history and featured a panoramic display of British artists (from the world of music and film, in particular). By projecting Britain as a creative nation, Boyle

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6   In the accompanying image film, Boyle also used "Isle of Wonder" as the motto of the ceremony, which carries connotations of the *The Tempest*'s island "full of noises" (Olympic Broadcasting Services 2012).

used a politically well-established autostereotype,[7] while speaking to a Britain still unsure about its self-identity and place in the world, trying to find a new role in the face of devolutionary disintegration (with negotiations for the 2014 Scottish Independence Referendum already underway) and the inability to have full recourse to its imperial past. Boyle suggested that this new identity might consist of an island nation marked by its creative and transformative qualities, able to confidently weather any storm that may come its way. *The Tempest* was thus used as a cultural and national signifier for these qualities, and treated to a magical-transformative reading.

Ostensibly about the friendship between 32-year-old Elisabeth Demand and 101-year-old Daniel Gluck, Ali Smith's 2016 novel *Autumn* features references to *The Tempest* in a similar vein. Its central reference to *The Tempest* occurs when Daniel and a young Elisabeth are going to see a performance of the play in the theatre and free Prospero by clapping their hands – a reference to the Epilogue, in which Prospero asks to be freed from the island through the audience's applause:

> Daniel was at the front gate. I'm going to the theatre, he said. The outdoor theatre. Want to come too? He told her it was a play about civilization, colonization and imperialism […] So she went, and it wasn't boring, it was really good, about a father and a daughter. It was also about fairness and unfairness, and people getting hypnotized on an island and hatching plots against each other to see who could take control of the island, and some characters were meant to be the slaves and other characters got to be freed. But mostly it was about a girl, whose father, a magician, was sorting out her future for her. In the end the daughter could have been in it a bit more than she was, but all the same it was still really good; in the end, Elisabeth was nearly crying when the grown-old father stepped forward without his magic cloak and stick and asked the people in the audience to clap because if they didn't he'd be trapped forever in the play on the fake island with its cardboard scenery. […] It was […] quite exciting to be able, just by clapping your hands, to free someone from something. (Smith 2016, 207-208)

By addressing and imploring the audience, Prospero directly breaks the fourth wall and transfers agency to it. In the context of a Brexit novel, his address suggests the possibility of magical transformation as being in the hands of the people, as if by just clapping all the negativity surrounding the vote could be undone.

This sense of transformation is reflected in a narrative that, like the Middle English or Shakespearean romances, transcends strict temporal and spatial delineations. Instead, in *Autumn*, there are constant analepses, dreams and proleptic anticipations of death that undermine anything resembling the orderly sequence or unity of time, action and place, which leads to their collapse into blended co-existence.[8] Also fitting the impulse of romance, *Autumn* focuses on the possibility of rejuvenation and resurrection. This is reflected in the freeing of Prospero, but the book also opens with a quote from *The Tempest* (Act 4, Scene 1, ll. 127-128) in the epigraph ("Spring come to you at the

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7   Cf. Tony Blair in his "Millennium New Year Message" on 29 December 1999: "There's still no place on earth that has our combination of qualities. Our creativity, our determination, our courage, our sense of fairness" (Blair 1999).

8   This fits *The Tempest*, where the past events of Italy and the various storylines of the islanders and the shipwrecked are also interwoven in a condensed plot and setting.

farthest, In the very end of harvest!") and ends in November with the observation that "there are still roses," despite "the damp and cold" (Smith 2016, 260).

Such a magical-transformative reading of *The Tempest* was also part of another prominent 'Brexit novel,' John Lanchester's *The Wall* of 2019. It tells the story of a near-future Britain, in which a right-wing government has decided to protect the island from "the Others" by a wall running along its coastal line. Failure to fulfil one's duties on the wall results in being put to sea (as were Prospero and Miranda in *The Tempest*). This is what happens to the protagonist narrator (Kavanagh) and his girlfriend (Hifa). They eventually arrive at an oil rig populated only by a strange hermit. Certain hints establish the link to Shakespeare's play: his bearded appearance (Lanchester 2019, 257) resembles conventional portrayals of ageing magicians, and Kavanagh and Hifa find a coverless complete works edition of Shakespeare in one of the rooms (Lanchester 2019, 259). Moreover, just as *The Tempest*'s Prospero moves the survivors of the shipwreck around the island as he pleases, the hermit is in control of his platform. He performs a mute miniature play in a paper theatre:

> In front of him was a cardboard box […] the cardboard looked like a proscenium arch. […] The man said nothing but moved some of the pieces of paper around while looking at them through the box. (Lanchester 2019, 257)

The novel ends with Kavanagh and his girlfriend still on the platform, and Kavanagh trying to tell her a story "where everything turns out all right" (Lanchester 2019, 276).

The plot thus bears a certain resemblance to Shakespeare's romances, where a tragic ending is also narrowly avoided. A possible interpretation of the final chapters could detect parallelisms between the oil rig and Prospero's island, both being a place for those exiled from their homeland, with 'Brexit Britain' then assuming the role of an Italy beset by intrigue and corruption. Like Prospero to Milan, Kavanagh and Hifa might one day even return to their homeland with its usurpation undone. Another 'mirroring' then might take place regarding the cardboard play performed by the hermit. If taken as an allegory for 'Brexit Britain,' Kavanagh and Hifa are the passive spectators of a play controlled by forces beyond their control, yet again unable to pierce the 'fourth wall' of the proscenium arch formally dividing audience and actors. However, if Brexit is a performance, then perhaps the script might be changed. At least for Kavanagh and his girlfriend there seems to be an opportunity for a new beginning, for framing the works of Shakespeare with a new cover, for detecting the mechanisms of the play, for recovering agency in silence, in the company of a mute hermit but away from the propaganda of their place of origin.

While the link to ambiguity and knowledge might not be apparent in these examples at first sight, there is indeed a profound connection. Ambiguity rests on the availability of options, on the absence of solutions to which a degree of certainty, the status of knowledge, has been conferred. 'Knowledge' and strong convictions have the potential of foreclosing alternative possibilities, and a strict adherence to what has been established might lead to an insensitivity towards the available options and the proposals of others. This was the case in political Brexit discourse (and the employment of Shakespeare therein), where proponents of either course clashed with each other, their inability to communicate leading to a five-year (2016-2020) gridlock about how

to proceed. Shaping the future, however, requires a challenge to established certainties and a willingness to consider various possible courses.[9] This might not be so if there were no obstacles, or diverging opinions, or viable alternatives to a proposed course, which rarely seems to be the case. Challenging static knowledge and convictions, rendering things more uncertain and ambiguous, is therefore an important prerequisite for alternatives to be considered.

The three recent examples of the aesthetic use of *The Tempest* do not provide the alternatives themselves, but they use the magical-transformative reading of the play to replace fixed certainties with more fluid conceptions of reality. This was evident in the Olympic Games opening ceremony, where Britain was portrayed as a creative nation in constant flux. It was there in *Autumn*, with the magical freeing of Prospero linked to the liberation of an island from captivity and the approach to the categories of time, action and place as something malleable. Such fluidity also relates to the novel's concern with language, community and friendship being able "to undercut the constant representation of division and exclusion" (Tönnies and Henneböhl 2019, 191) in the text, which pits dialogue against the certainties of binary divisions (Sandrock 2019, 146-147). *The Wall* similarly hints at the possibility of a better future through highlighting agency, performativity and constructing narratives with a positive ending.

This is 'Shakespearian ambiguity' in the sense that the mechanisms employed to challenge static conceptions of reality, as well as the overall sense of possibility, are derived from a magical-transformative reading of *The Tempest*. The three examples discussed might, however, be guilty of their own repression of ambiguity, as little attention is paid to other possible readings of the play, especially the geopolitical/(post)colonial one. This is particularly true for the Olympic Games opening ceremony, in which the British Empire was conspicuous by its absence, and in which Caliban's speech (a lament of Caliban's depleted state that occurs while the slave is hatching a plot against his master, Prospero) is put into the mouth of an icon of British progress, Isambard Kingdom Brunel. Or, put differently: "By silencing *The Tempest*'s colonial aspects, Danny Boyle offered a whitewashed version of Shakespeare's play that smoothed over the cracks of Britain's imperial past" (Karschay 2019, 69). The ceremony thus used a specific reading of *The Tempest* to signify (positive) transformation, but this came at the expense of other important approaches to the play. This is less so in *Autumn* and *The Wall*, where in the two embedded performances of a play (of *The Tempest* in *Autumn* and the hermit's play in *The Wall*) the context of slavery is incorporated into vague allusions to a current enslavement of Britain. Both nevertheless prioritise the magical-transformative reading over direct colonial interpretations of Shakespeare's drama.

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9   This chimes with theories of creativity which see a breaking free from established routines as a crucial creative skill (Amabile 1996, 89) or which establish connections between non-knowledge and creativity (Smithson 2008, 226). It can also be related to Claus Otto Scharmer's theory of leading from an emerging future. Scharmer suggests a process that begins with suspending past patterns of knowledge in order to connect oneself with what might be possible and desirable – for oneself and everyone concerned (Scharmer 2009).

The artistic use of Shakespeare in Brexit discourse is thus similar to the political use, as the suppression of Shakespearian ambiguity comes with certain (political or aesthetic) effects. The artistic uses, however, go beyond suppression and also celebrate general notions of ambiguity connected to the romances. This is aided by their destabilisation of form.

In recent years, there has been renewed interest in form "as a way to knowledge" (Rogers 2014, 2) in both science and literature. A recent issue of *Anglistik* (30.2) was dedicated to this topic, wherein Funk, Huber and Roxburgh stated that "thinking through and about form […] helps to introduce order and to limit possibility" and that "[f]orm produces power" (Funk, Huber, and Roxburgh 2019, 10). This is interesting in the context of this paper as it is precisely the power of form to fix something as 'knowledge' by organising thoughts into a coherent, sharply delineated, permanent and intelligible shape. In *Autumn* and *The Wall*, uncertainty and ambiguity – but therefore also possibility – are furthered by the previously discussed undermining of principles of artistic order, such as the 'fourth wall' of much theatrical practice. The divergence from linear narrative in Ali Smith's novel can also be understood in this sense, as it formally complicates the interpretation of the novel.

An important aspect of this destabilisation of form is Wolfgang Iser's idea of reading as textual game or play (Iser 1993, 258), a theory that rests on his own account of textual gaps and interpretative negotiations of coherence and polysemy (Iser 1974, 277-289). As the reader engages with a text, he constantly has to think back to what he previously read and to connect the written word with his general knowledge of the world: Iser calls this the "aesthetic pole" (Iser 1974, 274), at which the meaning of the text is realised by the reader. He thereby invokes a specific conception of the 'aesthetic' that goes back to Immanuel Kant, and which does not relate the term to art in general. Rather, for Kant 'aesthetic experience' is the basis for a judgment of taste (Kant 2003, 89, § 1), and this aesthetic experience consists of "the state of mind in the free play of the imagination and the understanding" (Kant 2003, 103, § 9). Aesthetic experience is thus not a matter of knowledge in the epistemological tradition of "justified true belief" (which would be a matter of the understanding only), but instead a matter of neither imagination (read: perception) nor reason taking precedence, both instead constantly referring to each other in a state of pleasant and harmonious activation. Rather than setting up borders and limits, perceptions and meanings are brought into constant interrelation without being subsumed and classified under a particular concept. Together with Kant's idea of the disinterestedness of aesthetic judgment (Kant 2003, 95, § 5), this type of experience thus stands in contrast to the limiting binary oppositions of 'Leave' and 'Remain' in Brexit discourse.[10]

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10 Interestingly, Anna Kornbluh (2019, 3-4) defends form(alism) as enabling reality not restraining it. And whereas in this paper the aesthetic is regarded as a challenge to fixed forms, for Kornbluh (14-15) the Kantian conception of the aesthetic is a formal relation that provides grounds for intersubjective agreement and linguistically models possible futures (32). Transcending fixed forms and establishing the form of the future, disrupting certainties and finding a new consensus, might then just be complementary features of the aesthetic.

While it may now be argued that this kind of aesthetic, textual play is a feature of all literary texts (Funk, Huber, Roxburgh 2019, 7; Winkler 2015, 3-4), two remarks are in order. First, that playing the textual game is more difficult in some texts than in others. Second, that intertextual references, in which one text invites being related to another, also belong to this game and, yet again, playing an intertextual game might be more difficult (and rewarding) in some cases than in others. Should one text feature complicated intratextual games and pronounced, open-ended intertextual references it is likely to be highly ambiguous, with a multiplicity of interpretations being available to the reader. Some of these interpretations may be more plausible than others, but none is confirmed with a very high degree of certainty through the formal structure of a fully coherent, self-contained, singular text. This is the case with the intertextual references to *The Tempest* in the Olympic Games opening ceremony, *Autumn* and *The Wall*, which in their vagueness are not fully decodable, while nevertheless suggesting a transformative sensibility and openness that is markedly different from the lopsided political categorisations of Shakespeare as either 'Leaver' or 'Remainer.'[11]

3. Conclusion

As demonstrated in this paper, (Shakespearian) ambiguity has been productive in Brexit discourse in both a political and aesthetic way. Shakespeare's works can be interpreted in a great number of ways, and it is partly this versatility that has allowed Shakespeare to become and remain something of a 'cultural icon,' "a representative symbol […] of a culture" ("icon, n." 2001). For Singh, this iconic status is both a national and global matter. Whereas "the extensive cultural work done over several centuries to install Shakespeare as England's national poet, synonymous with the national heritage" (Singh 2016, 1184) points to Shakespeare as a national icon, "the power of his name today" for her rests on the ability of "representing or 'speaking for' […] many diverse cultures and identities" (2016, 1183). Prior to the Brexit referendum, the national adoration of Shakespeare had indeed been gradually replaced by a greater emphasis on the global dimension of the Bard (Jansohn 2019, 293), but Brexit discourse again drew on Shakespeare and his plays for more parochial concerns. Yet, as Singh also points out, even within Britain, the reception of Shakespeare's works never was solely a matter of static and straightforward nationalism, with a multitude of 'Shakespeares' existing already at the time of the First Folio (Singh 2016, 1184) and with "Shakespeare's status as a cultural icon" being "articulated and interrogated at various historical moments and settings" (2016, 1184). Singh describes these approaches to Shakespeare as "significations emanating at the intersections of text, author, history, and ideology" (2016, 1184), which also applies to Shakespeare within Brexit discourse.

Within political Brexit discourse, 'Leavers' and 'Remainers' approached Shakespeare against the backdrop of their convictions and at a time of uncertainty. They claimed the iconic writer to promote European or distinctively British identity

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11 Similar aesthetic approaches to Brexit can be found in the song "Merrie Land" (The Good, the Bad & the Queen 2018), an impressionistic panorama of a Brexit Britain rooted in the past and dreaming of the future, or in the art installation "Soften the Border" (Duffy 2017) and the "Brexit Tree" planted by the artist Clemens Wilhelm (Wilhelm 2020).

conceptions. In order to convince, their interpretations had to ignore and suppress passages and considerations that would have supported the claims of their opponents. They thereby replaced Shakespeare's openness with something like an "essential Shakespeare" (Singh 2016, 1184). While such an avoidance of ambiguity applies to most ways of interpreting Shakespeare in one way or another, ignoring alternative approaches seems more problematic in a political context, which links the use of Shakespeare within Brexit discourse to the work done on the effects and (ab)uses of 'ignorance' done by Robert N. Proctor.

However, there was also a different use of Shakespeare in Brexit discourse that centred on the romance *The Tempest*. The precedent for this use was the employment of the play in the 2012 London Olympics opening ceremony, with the novels *Autumn* and *The Wall* using a similar magical-transformative reading of *The Tempest* to question static conceptions of knowledge and conviction. This process of rendering things more ambiguous was supported by the employment of intertextual references to *The Tempest*, which in these texts added to a textual and aesthetic play that opened up a dialogical window of possibility beyond the entrenched oppositions of the present. If the two 'Brexit novels' considered here – the only major examples referencing Shakespeare – are placed within the wider field of serious 'Brexit fiction' and its emergent distinctions of, for example, a realist/panoramic and a dystopian mode (Löhndorf 2019; Zwierlein and Rostek 2019, 128-135), Shakespearean ambiguity in *Autumn* has contributed to the reconciliatory aspects of the realist/panoramic mode, whereas in *The Wall* it has imbued the novel with a hopefulness that strains against the rules of dystopian Brexit discourse. There is nevertheless a sense that the artistic uses also interpreted Shakespeare as a cultural and national icon from the point of view of their time. As opposed to the political uses of Shakespeare in Brexit discourse, the artistic uses celebrated ambiguity over certainty. In doing so, however, they ignored or suppressed the colonial aspects of *The Tempest*, and constructed Bard, play and nation as providing and possessing the capacity for renewal at a time of crisis.

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