Aliens and Englishness in Elizabethan Drama

Lloyd Edward Kermode

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Covering a wide variety of dramatic texts and performances from 1550 to 1600, including Shakespeare's second tetralogy, this book explores moral, historical, and comic plays as contributions to Elizabethan debates on Anglo-foreign relations in England. The economic, social, religious, and political issues that arose from inter-British contact and Continental immigration into England are reinvented and rehearsed on the public stage. Kermode uncovers two broad 'alien stages' in the drama: distinctive but overlapping processes by which the alien was used to posit ideas and ideals of Englishness. Many studies of English national identity pit Englishness *against* the alien 'other' so that the native self and the alien settle into antithetical positions. In contrast, *Aliens and Englishness* reads a body of plays that represents Englishness as a state of ideological, invented superiority – paradoxically stable in its constant changeability, and brought into being by incorporating and eventually even celebrating, rather than rejecting, the alien.

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For aliaunts and butterboxes

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Preface

The frontispiece and cover illustration is from Jost Amman's *Gynaeceum, sive, Theatrum mulierum* [*The Theatre of Women*] (1586). The book is a collection of prints from fine wood engravings, each image accompanied by eight lines of Latin text by François Modius (1556–97). The title-page notes that the book is designed to present 'The female costumes of all the principal nations, tribes, and peoples of Europe . . . in commendation of the female sex, and for the especial gratification of such as by their manner of ordinary life, or from other causes, are hindered from distant travel, but at the same time take pleasure at home in the costume of various people, which is a silent index of their character.'[1] Costumed appearance of figures is of primary importance throughout this study as various dramatic 'types' and disguises question early modern notions of social, political, gendered, and religious 'character'. Amman's 'married lady of London' is what Pisaro's daughters are aspiring to in their attempt to shed their Portuguese nationality in William Haughton's *Englishmen for My Money*. This matron also, according to the dedicatory letter by the printer Sigmund Feyerabend of Frankfurt (1528–90), represents a moral goodness that we see being strived for in Robert Wilson's *The Three Ladies of London*. The text accompanying the image tells us that Amman's London matron has rosy cheeks deserving of a wealthy husband. She is thus a poignantly optimistic version of *Three Ladies*' Lady Conscience, who is by contrast offered the stability of marriage only by the laughable Simplicity and whose 'reddy and white' 'cheeks' attract the wealth of corrupted Lady Lucre. Amman's presentation of women, and Feyerabend's covert *instruction* of women, as on one hand a locus of national glory and praise and on the other hand the obvious site for corruption and failure to maintain moral uprightness, are further touchstones for the interplay of gender, national security, cross-border

traffic of bodies and habits, wealth, and religious conscience in the comedies and histories discussed in *Aliens and Englishness in Elizabethan Drama*.

NOTE ON QUOTATIONS

Quotations from early modern texts have retained original spelling with the exceptions of silent i/j and u/v correction and modern title capitalization.

Quotations from Shakespeare are taken from *The Norton Shakespeare*, 2nd edition (2008).

Acknowledgements

Introduction – aliens and the English in London

Tens of thousands of Continental migrants passed in and out of London and other major English towns during the reign of Elizabeth (1558–1603). The merchants of London were used to seeing aliens in their midst, Germans and Italians in particular being a significant presence since the twelfth century. But wars and military occupation in sixteenth-century northern Europe changed the complexion of the immigrant body in England. Protestants migrated in waves after the 1567 news of Alva's troop deployment to the Netherlands and after the fall of Antwerp in 1585, and a number of French Protestants made their way to England after the Paris Massacre of 1572.[1] Edward VI had established French and Dutch churches in London in 1550, when the resident alien population of England was at its peak, and these institutions continued to act as religious, social, and organizational community centres for the immigrant population throughout the century.[2] Among the religious refugees, however, were economic migrants, and this mixed group caused significant tension in the capital. On the one hand, the new residents brought new skills and stature to English production and trade. On the other hand, they were seen to be economically and ideologically dangerous: they clustered and traded among themselves, sent money abroad instead of reinvesting it in England, and practised religion that was influenced by extremists and attracted good members away from the Church of England.

Resentment against the aliens caused friction between English classes. Landlords benefited from the new immigrants as renters of cheap accommodation, while apprentices and journeymen saw aliens as stealers of jobs from the English. Reformed Christian immigrants were transnational 'brothers' against the Catholic beast, but the problem of extreme Protestantism from the Continent continued to trouble the queen.

Moreover, the question of rights to work in the city of London was a constant point of debate between the mayor, the guilds, and the Privy Council.[3] All these groups were similarly concerned about the size and impact of the alien population, and the Crown maintained a policy of dispersal, planting immigrants in provincial towns to spread both the wealth and the worry of the new communities. With perhaps 50,000 Continental aliens coming into England during Elizabeth's reign and living in clustered – and therefore visible – communities, it was not surprising if a perception of an 'alien invasion' was in the air.[4] But placed in the context of the general rise of English and 'British' residents in London, the contemporary censuses (the Returns of Strangers) show a proportional *decrease* in the Continental alien presence in the latter half of the century: from 12.5 per cent in 1553, to 10 per cent in 1571, falling to between 5 and 6 per cent in 1593.[5] Indeed, Elizabethan London's population was growing at an extraordinary rate, a phenomenon underpinned by migration from within the 'British Isles'. In the year 1600, London was over sixteen times larger than Norwich, the next most populous English town; fifty years later, it would be second only to Paris in European city population.[6] Frustrations about overcrowding and economic strain led to urban unrest, and the strangers 'provided a convenient scapegoat' for expressing that frustration in sometimes violent ways.[7]

While the usage is not perfectly consistent, Elizabethan documents widely employed the terms 'alien' and 'stranger' to refer to persons from a foreign country. The home 'country' in the second half of the sixteenth century is England plus the Principality of Wales. The Scots and the Irish are, therefore, 'aliens' along with the Continental European strangers. The term 'foreigner' referred to persons from outside the city or region being discussed or those who were not 'freemen' of the city (belonging to a guild, allowed to keep an open retail shop, possessing voting and civic representation rights). Continental aliens were usually 'foreigners' too, then, in so far as they rarely gained the freedom of the city and became 'citizens'.[8] In practice, freemen Londoners might cast themselves specifically within what the character Pleasure in Robert Wilson's *The Three Lords and Three Ladies of London* calls a 'race' of London.[9] That would set them against the provinces, such that while '"Foreign" English, needless to say, had separate interests from continental strangers', they were 'often lumped together with them by citizens' of London as general outsiders.[10] On the occasions I use 'foreigner' in this book, I generally do so in the modern sense of the term, synonymously with 'alien' and 'stranger'; I make it clear when I am talking specifically of the early modern sense of a foreigner.

In between the status of a 'true born' English man or woman and an alien was a denizen, a permanent resident with rights of residency and work in the adopted country. Denizens achieved their status through letters petitioned from the Crown. The exact privileges of any denizen were individually laid out in the letter, and it was a status that began with the date of the letter and was not inherited by the children of the alien.[11] In a state of limbo throughout the period were those whom we might consider English subjects (i.e. born to English parents) but born abroad (again, including in Scotland and Ireland) or born in England to one or two alien parents. Parliamentary debate and court cases through the reign of James I argued the national status of such persons, and the drama provides several examples of equivocally identified alien residents.[12] Aliens could also petition and pay for an Act of Parliament for naturalization, but very few took this expensive route. In fact, a surprisingly small number of aliens seem to have taken the option of the relatively inexpensive denizenship. Even before one of the primary benefits of denizenship – the right to apprentice an alien son with an English master – was removed by an Act of Common Council in 1574, the proportion of aliens taking denization was fairly low. There was also a very significant drop-off in letters of denization issued later in Elizabeth's reign: from 1,669 in the period 1558–78 to 293 in 1578–1603. Only 1 per cent of the alien population in 1593 had free denizen status.[13] This may indicate a loosening of the official attitude towards alien and native commercial contact as the alien communities became assimilated, such that aliens no longer needed letters to practise their trades with English men. It may also indicate the opposite: aliens could have become more introspective and dealt more within their own communities. There may also have been a *decreasing* commitment to permanent settlement, for aliens who could not be sure they would remain in England for long probably did not feel a strong need for denization.

ALIEN STAGES AND ALIEN CONFUSION

This book studies the ways in which English drama in the second half of the sixteenth century responded to and represented the increasingly diverse and increasingly fraught contact between alien and English men and women in London and England. From this context, I theorize the ways in which certain plays create a notion of 'Englishness' that early modern London audiences might – for better or for worse – recognize and approve of. In the preceding section, I outlined early modern

categorizations of national and local identity. Below, I introduce my own terminology for the present study, and as I do so I remain aware that retrospective labelling of a period or culture can *make* or impose categories as well as *describe* them. Therefore, I base my readings of Elizabethan drama in the contexts, signs, and events of the period. At the same time, I am interested in testing the effectiveness of stepping back into our own time to use hindsight and modern theoretical and political tools to assess the desires and anxieties and hopes, the proofs and arguments and gaps in Elizabethan English understandings of regional, national, and international relations.

This section's title phrase, 'alien stages', indicates this book's concern with several aspects of the working of the Elizabethan stage. First, rather simply, I am studying plays in which physical representations of contemporary and recognizable *aliens* appear on the *stage*. Second, where the English stage shows a play set primarily in England but featuring alien characters, it becomes an *alien* stage as representations of non-Englishness essentially determine dramatic 'readings' of London, England, 'British' history, and communal identities. And third, there were two broad steps or *stages* in the dramatic representation of the alien in Elizabethan England.

In the first 'alien stage' (primarily but not exclusively in the Marian and earlier Elizabethan drama), English–alien contact is represented as causing infection, 'deformation', or corruption by the presence of real alien bodies and influences. These earlier plays appear to do what they can to dismiss or eliminate alien elements (characters, habits, professions, clothing, language). They set up Englishness *against* otherness by homogenizing the varieties of alien identity (thus all foreigners are equally 'other'; thus all 'others' are diseased, corrupt, etc.). To highlight distasteful foreign elements and make of them a common denominator against which to define Englishness is the process of national-identity-building outlined by much current criticism, and I discuss this trend below.

The second 'alien stage' is suggested and tested in late morality plays, but is only clearly manifested in the late-Elizabethan drama. In this latter stage, the plays demonstrate that the absorption of what was deemed utterly 'alien' in earlier drama is not just acceptable, but also necessary, for the rise and maintenance of what the plays set forth as a stable, strong English protagonist. 'Englishness' in the plays always requires some moral grounding that asserts its superiority to other cultures (and in Elizabethan plays specifically un-Reformed cultures), and it requires physical prowess

demonstrated by strength of mind (standing one's ground in the face of adversity) and strength of body (successful judgement against evil, usurpation of positions of power, comic trickery) to secure solutions to intractable problems. 'Englishness' in these later cases combines itself with the alien and (generally rhetorically) extracts out of that fusion a reformed, expanded, revitalized, and always politically equivocal definition of the English self. As we will see throughout the book, the very status of 'Englishness' as a phenomenon with an existence *prior* to alien contact is continually undermined.

The working of the second alien stage is hardly straightforward, as it argues for an Englishness that is not set *against* the alien but rather relies on the presence of that other within itself. I contend that this notion of an Englishness that incorporates the alien in all aspects of its representation would not have been too surprising to Elizabethan writers or thinkers. In his Italian–English primer, *First Fruits* (1578), John Florio has his Englishman ask an Italian what he thinks of the English language. The Italian replies:

Certis if you wyl beleeve me, it doth not like me at al, because it is a language confused, bepeesed with many tongues: it taketh many words of the latine, & mo from the French, & mo from the Italian, & many mo from the Duitch, some also from the Greeke, & from the Britaine, so that if every language had his owne wordes againe, there woulde but a fewe remaine for English men, and yet every day they adde.
[. . .]
Make the experience of it, take a booke and reade, but marke well, and you shall not reade four woordes together of true English.[14]

This sense of the English language as a hodge-podge of tongues was asserted by several writers in the period. Language becomes a vital concern in most of the plays that I discuss in this book, because use and avoidance of language is seen to reveal the will of characters to be incorporated into various communal bodies. I have introduced the 'mongrel' English language issue here as a symptomatic synecdoche for the state of Englishness as a whole. For what is interesting in this passage is the use of the word 'confused' to describe English a few lines before the concluding notion that there *is* such a thing as 'true English'. We are thus presented with the two basic nuances of the word *confuse*: a sense of uncertainty and disorientation on the one hand, and the process of 'con-fusing' or coming-together to form a single entity on the other. The end of the passage attempts to keep an alien–English division to stave off

the fear of confused uncertainty in a mixed-up language. Yet such exclusivity of identity is already made equivocal by the passage's acknowledgement that 'confusion' in the second, literal sense lies behind the very construction of Englishness.

The passage from Florio briefly lays out the perspective of the two alien stages by keeping them both in suspension: as in the first alien stage, the speaker attempts to retain an oppositional hypothesis that the alien somehow comes along *after* the creation of an entire language of 'pure English' and invades it; however, as acknowledged in the second alien stage, the speaker has already outlined a process in which English is 'bepeesed', put together with foreign tongues – the alien is within English *as it is being formed*. The Italian speaker also notes that English 'is a language that wyl do you good in England, but passe Dover, it is woorth nothing',[15] suggesting the confusing paradox of a language made up of all the tongues from past Dover, but which is useless once outside the confines of the English borders. Englishness is an identity that only exists by containing the alien, yet it is an identity separate from other national identities.

In the second alien stage, and in the drama of the last decade of Elizabeth's reign, the search for a settled and ameliorating sense of Englishness will no longer permit simplistic tar-brushing of the alien; each alien element must instead be recognized as already involved in – *confused* with – English society or culture. As with the language that only develops into a full system by absorbing (pre-existing) alien words, the plays show the alien being absorbed and fused with the native self as that native forms and claims an 'Englishness'. The fact that such Englishness is most fully laid out by morality vices (with, as we shall see, alien origins), a Welsh king of England, and daughters of a Portuguese father in *Englishmen for My Money* lets us know that the question of origins remains at stake through the Elizabethan period, and remains unanswered. At any point a culture can look back and talk about previous incarnations of native identity, but from any point that identity can be seen as constructed from alien incorporation. This book will not resolve the question of the English chicken and the alien egg.

The second alien stage, then, gives us something beyond the traditional view of identity determined by its difference from the other: Englishness as an ideology of power built, paradoxically, around the alien that is within it, 'con-fused'. The process of alien incorporation between the first and the second alien stages is a political and rhetorical move as much as it is a representation of cosmopolitan awareness on the part of English

writers and audiences, because any 'openness' to the other is necessarily also a co-option of the other. To deny the alien through a prejudicial or ignorant confusion and rejection, as in the first stage, is to leave Englishness always naive and open to surprise, attack, and deformation by alien bodies and ideas. To incorporate the alien within Englishness by productive confusion, as in the second stage, is to hybridize and strengthen Englishness for its long-term imperial presence in wider British, European, and worldwide contexts.

The drama's rhetorical constructions of and rehearsals of versions of 'English identity' embed belief in the concept's reality. If the steady intake of alien elements – foreign bodies – promotes representations of an Englishness vaccinated against 'impurity' from the outside, it should be made clear early on that such an idea of exclusive identity is a fiction. The alien remains as a slightly uncomfortable joke or as ancestry to be sup- pressed and recast. Here, that other rather Miltonic sense of 'confuse' as the confounding (*confundere*) of the rebel angels comes into play, whereby determination to *be oneself*, to be true to one's not-lost identity, in spite of adversity, is itself delusional – but powerfully so. Ideologies of identity do not lose their status as having material existence within societies just because their truth factor is compromised. Thus the plays can *produce* identity separately from politico-historical impositions of geographical and religious identity. I should close this section with the note that the plays engage with the two alien stages as a matter of degree rather than exclusively – one play's anxiety and rejection of the alien may overshadow a subtle awareness of the alien's potential usefulness; another play may be very interested in celebrating the alien in England and Englishness while retaining some basic prejudices against the 'other'.

'THE STAGE IS ENGLAND': CRITICAL AND DRAMATIC POSITIONS ON NATIONAL IDENTITY

Much of the critical examination of representations of English identity has remained a study of the first alien stage. We have consistently been told in cultural and literary studies of English national identity that self- identity is determined by its reaction to the other, and specifically its insistence on its difference from the other. The attraction of an antag- onistic, oppositional theory of national identity formation has produced many exciting studies of exotic English–alien contact in plays set abroad, which engage forcefully with the early modern matrix of religion, ethnicity, sexuality, and commerce. Since these plays are usually travel or

historical plays featuring merchants, pirates, renegades, and soldiers, the premise of Anglo-alien opposition is reasonable. But in British studies, too, we are told that 'nationality can only be imagined as a dimension of difference' from the outside world; 'England is always discovered elsewhere, defined by the encounter with the Other' (frequently for these critics, the Irish 'other'); 'Englishness and English nationality have been historically defined against non-Englishness'; '"Englishness" at this point in time is fiercely determined by a demonisation of all that is not English'; and 'not-Welshness, not-Scottishness, and certainly not-Frenchness [and] not-Spanishness . . . gave the English their surest sense of national identity'.[16] One problem with these statements is that they seem to claim to know what Englishness is. I have been frequently using 'scare quotes' for the term Englishness so far to indicate the fact that 'Englishness' is not a stable concept, but one that is worked out and defined time and again in different plays and decades. Another problem is that the statements seem to place 'Englishness' only within a 'nation' of England that feels a sense of 'national identity', and they seem to assert that there is no 'Englishness' outside of England.

In his examinations of English nationhood, Richard Helgerson takes the investigation of the English search for a stable identity in a different direction. He has provided an alternative way to think of the production of a 'colonial' English self, one that brings the view closer to home in geographical terms but pushes it further away in time. He emphasizes the irony of Elizabethan writers' obligation to and desire for another set of others – the ancient colonizing Romans. The late sixteenth-century call for English rediscovery of their poetic genius did not strive for a new and different mode of expression but for a reliance on foreign examples, he argues: 'Likeness, not difference, will be the measure of success.'[17] Thus the alien invaders and their cultural legacy are indeed acknowledged as incorporated into Englishness, but this 'likeness' produces a new identity that is specifically 'English' (those Romans are gone) and therefore still set in opposition to contemporary alien bodies and cultures – this doubleness echoes John Florio's Italian speaker's representation of the English language.[18] Other scholars, such as Jodi Mikalachki, have also concentrated on the need for the English to understand themselves through classical comparison. She writes of the English 'longing on the one hand to establish historical precedent and continuity, and an equally powerful drive on the other to exorcise primitive savagery from national history and identity. The tensions between theses two imperatives inform virtually all articulations of the nation in this period.'[19] This book agrees