RENAISSANCE ENGLAND - BUILDING UP THE NATION, JUSTIFYING COLONIALISM AND EXPANDING THE EMPIRE

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Abstract: Renaissance England - building up the nation, justifying colonialism and expanding the Empire is a necessary historical incursion into those events which contributed to the Age of Discovery, and gave an enduring dimension to the English nation. It all started with the accession of Henry VII in 1485, which marked an end to an extended period of civil unrest and facilitated greater and open cultural dialogues and exchanges with their European neighbours. The following English monarchs – Henry VIII, Elizabeth I, and James I – contributed a wide range of religious, political, and economic changes which brought England to the fore in the arena of European affairs, with a heavy price paid by the native population. It is not a surprise that English Renaissance writers were deeply embedded in the radically changing cultural landscape which their audiences – noblemen and commoners alike – were experiencing, and often explored in new and challenging ways the directions which the developing English nation might take.
I have also taken into consideration the late twentieth-century challenges the traditional term Renaissance has met: distinguished scholars – obviously informed by the gender studies and feminist approaches – questioned whether it was only male members of certain political and intellectual elites who profited from a period of Renaissance (that is, cultural renewal). Actually, such debates justify the present-day preference for early modern, meant to safely replace Renaissance.

Keywords: Renaissance, colonialism, nation, empire, early modern.

For a better understanding of the Early Modern appropriations of such notions as 'nation' and 'empire', 'Englishness' and 'Britishness', we consider it necessary to return in time to the realm of charismatic King Henry VIII who, in 1532, one year before the birth of the future Queen Elizabeth I, issued the so-called *Act of Appeal* – an important document which made impossible the appeals of the subjects of the British Crown to the Holy See of Rome in any religious or political matters. Thus, the King of England became the upmost legal authority in all such matters in England and all the other possessions of the Crown. England was officially proclaimed an Empire, and the English crown became an Imperial Crown. The historians at the court of Henry VIII were quick in rewriting the royal family history and went as far as to claim that they could trace the lineage back to Brutus and the fall of Troy!

This was a far-reaching measure which made accepting papal authority, or following papal rulings in church, faith or other matters illegal. It was followed a year later by the *First Act of Supremacy* (1534) which made King Henry VIII "the only supreme head in earth of the Church of England called Anglicana Ecclesia, and shall have and enjoy annexed and united to the imperial crown of this realm". There are two important elements in this title: the king becomes the head of the Church of England, and the realm achieves the status of *empire*, united under the *imperial crown*. Any previous states of affairs were changed by the Acts of Parliament. Opposition led to trial and execution, Thomas More being a notorious example. Last but not least, the King could finally divorce his wife in favour of Ann Boleyn. But sixteenth-century England was reconsidering not only its relations with the Holy See of

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Rome and the rest of (Catholic) Europe, but also its more intimate links with the rest of the British realm – or Empire, as Henry VIII would have it. In the late 1540s, Bishop John Bale – author of *Kynge Johan*, the oldest known verse drama in English devoted to King John (1538, almost fifty years before Shakespeare's homonymous play) – contributed a significant description of England/Britain: "this our English or British nation". It is confusing, as the England of Bale's and King Henry VIII's time was an entity of its own, apart from Rome and its neighbours (Scotland, Wales, Ireland) alike.[1]

In this revised edition of John Leland's *The laboryouse Journey*, John Bale may be said to have juxtaposed – though not completely avoiding – the two nations (English and British). It is a fact that England's cultural self-image in the sixteenth century was informed by this special relationship between England and Britain – interrelated but not interchangeable. It is a complex self-image which informs both isolationist England and expansionist Britain, in which England is the one nation involved in the conquest of other nations – hence a motivation of the expansion of the Empire outside its borders, without involving 'any shameful conquest of itself."

John Bale's concept of Britain is an early example of the tendency of England to reach the status of 'Britain' as a political and geographical entity, and a forerunner of the Empire. Sixteenth-century English literature and politics offer numerous examples of England's colonising tendency. England's colonising tendency is as apparent in English literature as in England's British political policies in the sixteenth century, but one consequence of the recent critical attention on England's 'British' identity at this time has been a tendency for critics to overlook that other of Bale's two nations – the nation of England itself. Nevertheless, what should be kept in mind is that the term 'imperial' did not always connote colonial expansion in the sixteenth century, and that when some Tudor writers referred to England as an empire they were indeed referring to England, not Britain, to a sovereign realm, not a synecdoche for 'the Empire of Great Britain'.

The *Appeals Act* had claimed historical precedent for its idea of England as an 'Impire', compact of Church and state, and 'governed by oon Supreme heede and King'. [2] The image of England in the literature of the Royal Supremacy – and here I refer to the reign of Henry VIII and the Reformation – was that of both an empire and a nation (in the modern meaning of a *nation state*). The imperial idea was officially expressed in the preamble to the already mentioned *Act in Restraint of Appeals*, passed on 7 April 1533. The *Appeals Act*, which forbade foreign courts from presiding over legal cases originating in England, was designed to prevent the See of Rome from intervening in what Archbishop Cranmer referred to as Henry VIII's 'great cause of matrimony':

> "It spoke of England as an 'Impire', autonomous as well from 'the See of Rome as fromme the auctoritie of other foreyne potentates', and it alleged that this imperial idea was grounded on the authority of 'dyvers sundrie olde autentike histories and cronicles.'" [3]

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[1]John Leland, *The laboryouse Journey & serche of Johan Leylande, for Englandes Antiquitees, geuen of hym as a newe yeares gyfte to Kynge Henry the viii.in the .xxxvii. yeare of his Reygne*, rev. John Bale (London, 1549)

[2]*Statutes*, 111(1817), 427. This and the following citations from the Acts and Leland, have been borrowed from Stewart James Mottram, *Reforming Nationhood: England in the Literature of the Tudor Imperial Age, 1509-1553,* PhD Dissertation. Online resource, http://etheses.whiterose.ac.uk/355/1/uk_bl_ethos_417743.pdf.

[3] 'An Acte that the Appeles in suche Cases as have ben used to be pursued to the See of Rome shall not be from hensforth had ne used but wythin this Realme', in *Statutes*, III (1817), 427-29 (p. 427).

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Again and again we have references to the idea of an Empire of England, independent from Rome and other European states, an idea deeply grounded in ancient histories and chronicles.

Thirteen years later, Leland was finally compiling the historical evidence that would beat the pope's claims to exercise authority over the English Church. In his treatise, Leland spoke of a four-volume work – the *De uiris illustribus*, which was published posthumously in 1709 as *Commentarii de scriptoribus Britannicis* – wherein he had 'digested' the names of all English writers 'wyth their lyues and monumentes of learnynge'. [4]

Leland also provides precious information about his works-in-progress, impressive even to the present-day scholarly standards: a book describing the 'mountaynes, valleys, mores, hethes, forestes, woodes, cyties, burges, castels, pryncypall manor places, monasteryes, and colleges' of Henry's realm; a book detailing 'the auncyent names of hauens, ryuers, promontories, hilles, woodes, cities, townes, castelles, and varyete of kyndes of people' in England; a fifty-volume history of England and Wales; and another book entitled *De nobilitate Britannica* – a genealogy of the royal and other noble families of England. To these printed encyclopaedias of all things English, Leland intended to add one more, engraved on a tablet of silver, and designed to appeal directly to Henry's self-image as emperor of England. 'Thus instructed', he wrote to Henry,

> "I trust shortly to se the tyme, that like as Carolus Magnus had amo[n]g his treasures thre large and notable tables of syluer, rychely enameled, one of the syte and descripcion of Constantynople, an other of the site and figure of the magnificent citie of Rome, and the third of the descrypcion of the worlde. So shall your Maiestie haue thys your worlde and impery of Englande so sett fourthe in a quadrate table of syluer, yf God sende me lyfe to accomplyshe my beginning, that your grace shall haue ready knowledge at the fyrst sighte of many right delectable, fruteful, and necessary pleasures, by contemplacion therof, as often as occasyon shall moue yow to the syghte of it."

Unfortunately Leland did not live long enough to accomplish his beginning. He appears to have fallen victim to insanity at some point in 1546, and he died in April 1552. In 1549 John Bale published Leland's New Year's gift to Henry under the title *The laboryouse Journey*. In its preface, Bale explained that another friend of Leland's had written to him

Bale was eminently qualified to continue the antiquarian work that Leland had already begun. In *The laboryouse Journey*, Bale took the opportunity to advertise the fruits of his own 'laboriouse serche for olde and newe wryters', and to append the names of some four hundred and seventy-five writers who had been omitted from the *Summarium*, and whose works Bale intended to include in a revised catalogue, eventually published between 1557 and 1559 as the *Scriptorum illustrium maioris Brytannie* [...] *catalogus*. [5]

Bale's enthusiasm for Leland's antiquarian projects is everywhere present in the extensive commentary that accompanies the text of Leland's New Year's gift in *The laboryouse Journey*. Leland claimed to have encountered 'manye thynges' in monastic libraries that were written against the 'vsurped autoryte of the Byshopp of Rome'. In his

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[4]*Commentarii de scriptoribus Britannicisl auctore Joanne Lelando Londinate.Ex autographo Lelandino nunc primus edidit Antonius Hall, A. M. Coll. Reg. Oxon. Socius.* (Oxford: E. Theatro Sheldoniano, 1709)
[5]*Scriptorum illustriu[m] maioris Brytannie quam nunc Angliam & Scotiam uocant catalogus* [...] Autore Joanne Baleo Sudouolgio Anglo, Ossoriensi apus Hybernos iam pridem episcopo, 2 vols (Basil: Ioannem Oporinum, 1557-59; STC 1296 Variant).

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commentary, Bale affirms that 'in all ages haue there bene some godly writers in Engla[n]de, which haue both smelled out, & also by theyr writynges detected the blasphemouse fraudes of [...] the Romysh byshop'.

He commends the suppression 'of the sodometrouse Abbeyes & Fryeryes', but laments that in the Dissolution 'so lytle respecte was had to theyr lybraryes for the sauegarde of those noble & precyouse monume[n]tes' contained within them. Like Leland, Bale sees utility in the works of 'godly writers' opposed to papal pretensions to supremacy in the English Church. Like Leland, he seeks to press these historical works into the service of the Royal Supremacy – to justify Henry's self-image as emperor by allusion to 'frutefull auncye[n]t authors', who 'inueye agaynste the false doctryne of papystes'. Referring to Leland's intention to engrave the 'impery of Englande' in a 'quadrate table of syluer', Bale defends Leland's use of the word 'empire' to describe the realm of England. 'In that he calleth Englande an empire', Bale writes, Leland 'doth non otherwyse than ded bothe Josephus and Egesippus, wyth other notable Historianes'.

The *Appeals Act* had called England an empire, and had claimed that in so doing it was simply echoing the language of 'dyvers sundrie olde autentike histories and cronicles'. It is to historical precedent that Bale also refers when he writes to defend Leland's language of empire, and in *The laboryouse Journey* he is more specific than was the preamble to the Appeals Act about which of the histories and chronicles were sympathetic to the imperial idea enshrined in statute. Bale suggests that England had long been called an empire, and he names a number of English kings who had themselves borne the 'Imperiall Crowne' which in the Appeals Act is bestowed upon Henry and his successors! 'The empire therof', Bale writes, 'is manifest in kinge Brennus, in great Constantyne, in Arthure, and in Edwarde the third'.[6]

In Act II of *Richard II*, John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster and uncle to the King, delivers one of the most patriotic descriptions of England. Here is a sample of this oft-quoted text:

> JOHN OF GAUNT
> "This royal throne of kings, this scepter'd isle,
> This earth of majesty, this seat of Mars,
> This other Eden, demi-paradise,
> This fortress built by Nature for herself
> Against infection and the hand of war,
> This happy breed of men, this little world,
> This precious stone set in the silver sea,
> Which serves it in the office of a wall,
> Or as a moat defensive to a house,
> Against the envy of less happier lands;
> This blessed plot, this earth, this realm, this England,
> This nurse, this teeming womb of royal kings,
> Fear'd by their breed, and famous by their birth,
> Renowned for their deeds as far from home,
> For Christian service and true chivalry,
> As is the sepulchre in stubborn Jewry

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[6]For quotations from John Leland and John Bale's writings we have used the selection in Stewart James Mottram's *Reforming Nationhood: England in the Literature Iof the Tudor Imperial Age, 1509-1553,* PhD Dissertation. Online resource, <http://etheses.whiterose.ac.uk/355/1/uk_bl_ethos_417743.pdf>

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Of the world's ransom, blessed Mary's Son;
This land of such dear souls, this dear, dear land,
Dear for her reputation through the world […]"
(*Richard II*, 2.1.40-58)

These patriotic lines, full of cartographic lyricism (Neill, 14), are also satirical and critical in nature. The syncretic vision they develop is built from a mixture of pagan and Christian elements: Mars and Neptune indeed coexist with the Garden of Eden and the services rendered to Christianity. Also, the text introduces a parallel between the West and the East, in terms of martial glory and reputation. At the end of the monologue, the text delineates the geographical contours of the country. The image of the rocky coast of England enclosed within a sea gradually gave way to that of 'rotten parchment bonds' that evoke shame and defilement ('inky blots'). The sea, a specific component of the English landscape, indirectly evokes the drafts of writing ('foul papers'), even though, according to Ben Jonson on Shakespeare, his rival and friend, 'he never blotted out line'. All this leads directly to the theme of the division of the kingdom and the movement of withdrawal that will result in the Wars of the Roses. In *1 Henry IV*, the rebel Mortimer, Glendower and Percy (aka Hotspur) meet to divide the country on the map:

GLENDOWER
"Come, here is the map, shall we divide our right
According to our threefold order ta'en?
MORTIMER
The Archdeacon hath divided it
Into three limits very equally […]
HOTSPUR
I do not care, I'll give thrice so much land
To any well-deserving friend:
But in the way of bargain, mark ye me,
I'll cavill on the ninth part of a hair.
Are the indentures drawn? Shall we be gone?"
(*1 Henry IV*, 3.1.66-135)

The word 'indentures' refers both to the meandering course of the River Trent and to the apprenticeship contract, which is again the metaphor of the parchment. The names are reduced to a manuscript that can be adjusted according to the whims or requirements of anyone, as a theatrical text could be changed depending on the contribution of actors and the material conditions of the stage performance.

In Italy, France and Germany, the Renaissance had developed gradually over several centuries and with a characteristic emphasis in each nation; in England, the insular position of the country and the conservative nature of the English people made its reception more tardy and, at the same time, less cataclysmic. Medieval England may be said to have come to an inglorious end with the fifteenth-century Wars of the Roses. These wars were followed by the unsettling experiences of the Protestant Reformation – itself an aspect of the reawakening – which prevented any early flowering of the Renaissance. Modern England was born in the Puritan Revolution which, politically as well as religiously, was an aftermath of the reforming zeal. Therefore, the Elizabethan age was kind of period of calm between two storms, glorious while it lasted, and even more glorious in retrospect.

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Both the Renaissance and the Reformation had been anticipated in England by more than a century. The poetry of Chaucer is more akin to Elizabethan poetry than it is to medieval; Wycliffe's preaching and the Lollard movement were spiritually similar to the activities of the Tudor reformers; even the national spirit had burst into flame for a moment under Edward III and the Black Prince, but had subsided. In the reign of the great queen, England entered upon an intellectual development abreast of the Continent.

Whether the Stratford-born Shakespeare travelled farther than his native Warwickshire, going all the way to London and back, is of a minor importance. It is already common knowledge that the English aristocrat's life had an overtly expressed European dimension. Shakespeare's *Hamlet* may be interpreted as such: Shakespeare, the *Englishman*, writes about the drama of the heir of a *Danish* prince, attacked by the heir of a *Norwegian* prince. The *Danish* prince's father had murdered his *Norwegian* counterpart, conducting to a desire of revenge which sends Fortinbras, the *Norwegian* prince, to war against *Denmark*. Hamlet, the Dane, wants revenge against his uncle, the murderer of Hamlet Sr., now married to young Hamlet's mother. From the very beginning, we find ourselves in the geographical space of *Scandinavia*. But this is not all of it. Like Horatio, Prince Hamlet had returned to Denmark from the University of *Wittenberg*, in *Germany*, a notable outpost of Protestant humanism, and the headquarters of the Lutheran faith. Laertes, Polonius' son, asks for the king's permission to return to *France*, while his father, Polonius, hires spies to watch his doings in *Paris*. At the court of *Elsinore*, Hamlet is met by two of his fellow students – the *Judeo-Germanic* Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, citizens of the same *Western Europe* and (dis)interested servants of Claudius, the *Danish* king. As a solution for the crisis, Hamlet is sent to *England*, to be killed by the king of perfidious *Albion*, but the plot does not work. In the end, all of them die, and Fortinbras comes over from Norway to set things straight. Thus we have travelled full circle.

An interesting example is offered by Thomas Nashe's picaresque novella *The Unfortunate Traveller* published in 1594. Jack Wilton, the protagonist-narrator, has the chance to go on his Great Tour, visiting France, Germany and Italy as a page to the Earl of Surrey. While in Italy, Jack meets an anonymous banished English earl who – contrary to the general trend of the age – insists on the uselessness of travel, which is pointless and corrupting:

> "Countryman, tell me, what is the occasion of thy straying so far out of England to visit this strange nation? If it be languages, thou may'st learn them at home; nought but lasciviousness is to be learned here. Perhaps, to be better accounted of than other of thy condition, thou ambitiously undertakest this voyage: these insolent fancies are but Icarus' feathers, whose wanton wax, melted against the sun, will betray thee into a sea of confusion."[7]

Travel abroad, according to this English aristocrat, teaches the traveller nothing useful that he could not have learned at home, substituting false pleasure for true knowledge. Those who were trying to learn foreign languages in order to serve their country will only harm it, as they will return with increased – and more perverse – appetites. Those who travel out of a combination of pride and curiosity will also suffer. Much more can be learned from books than from travel.

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[7]Thomas Nashe, *The Unfortunate Traveller and Other Works*, ed. J.B. Steane (Harmondsworth, 1972), p. 341. Quoted in Hadfield, Andrew and Paul Hammond, eds., *Shakespeare and Renaissance Europe*. (London: Thomson Learning, 2005).

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There are great chances for Shakespeare to have read the book. As already mentioned, the book was published in 1594, during Shakespeare's so-called 'lost years' (1589-1592), when he may have travelled abroad, visiting France, Germany and Italy, but there are equal chances that he followed Nashe's advice: there was no need for a writer to visit other countries in order to acquire an intimate knowledge of their geography, people, and cultural and political affairs. As a matter of fact, the late 16th and early 17th centuries editors and collectors of travel literature were not necessarily travellers, but Shakespeare shows a keen interest in a large range of European countries, giving many of his plays distinct European settings, including a wide variety of national identities: Denmark and Norway (*Hamlet*); France (*All's Well That Ends Well, As You Like It*); Spain (*Love's Labour's Lost*); northern Italy (*Romeo and Juliet, The Two Gentlemen of Verona, The Taming of the Shrew, Much Ado About Nothing*); Cyprus, Africa, Morocco (*Othello*); an unnamed island in the Mediterranean (*The Tempest*); Venice (*The Merchant of Venice, Othello*); Athens (*Timon of* Athens, A *Midsummer Night's Dream, The Two Noble Kinsmen*); Vienna (*Measure for Measure*); Illyria (*Twelfth Night*); Rome (*Julius Caesar*, *Titus Andronicus*, *Coriolanus*, *Antony and Cleopatra*), and the list may be further expanded and complicated.

Shakespeare is less concerned with careful geographical accuracy or reproducing the lands and peoples of Europe as they could be found in the works of his time – Abraham Ortelius's *Theatrum Orbis Terrarum*, published in Latin in 1570, or Gerardus Mercator's *Atlas*, published in 1595, also in Latin. Shakespeare's famous 'slip', whereby Bohemia is given a coastline in *The Winter's Tale* indicates that knowledge was placed in the service of dramatic action. He was concerned to employ a *poetic geography*, a mode of perception that envisaged the world existing in terms of ideas, not areas.

The key to understanding how Elizabethan and Jacobean writers made sense of who they were and how they understood the rest of the world is the religious division within Europe. Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* represented its Spanish protagonists trapped within a destructive cycle of revenge that was controlled by pagan gods, showing that the Spanish were pagan rather than Christian, and so were damned. Arguments for colonialism in the Americas by Richard Hakluyt and others made the case that, if Protestant England did not start to establish colonies in the New World then, the Spanish, who had a significant head start, would become too powerful to resist and so would dominate the world. Propagandists of the 'Black Legend', who sought to highlight Spanish atrocities in the Americas in contrast to the virtuous behaviour of Protestants, often made a close link between Spanish behaviour in the Netherlands (which were trying to resist Spanish rule) and colonial America.

Debates over Shakespeare's *The Tempest* have seen critics try to establish whether the play should be read as European (the action takes place on an unnamed island in the Mediterranean, the characters are Italian, and the action refers back to events in Milan and Naples), or belonging to the colonial New World. Shakespeare seems to have read Erasmus's *Naufragium*, Peter Martyr's *De orbo novo*, as well as William Stracheys' pamphlets – eyewitness reports of the shipwreck of the *Sea Venture* on the islands of Bermuda. It looks as if the play situates itself within both continents; or rather, that Renaissance English writers were reluctant to divide the world of their imagination up so neatly.

The questions posed by Andrew Hadfield are just a way of defining the dimensions of Renaissance Europe:

> "What were the boundaries of Europe then? Where did Europe stop? Today this is still a complex question and different answers can be given, different maps drawn up, even if now we have a clearer sense of the boundaries of nations fixed by international treaties. The basic shape of the continent is easy

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to visualize, but its extent is more problematic to define. The westward edge of Europe is established by the Atlantic Ocean; the south-western boundary by the Mediterranean; and the northern boundaries by the northern seas above Britain and Scandinavia. But how far does Europe stretch south-eastwards? [...] At times, people appeal to gradations of 'Europeanness'. Hence it is common to hear northern Italians argue that the south of Italy is really 'African' in character. Greece is sometimes represented in the same way, seen as less European, because it is less centralised and more 'primitive.'" (Hadfield, 6)

The Ottoman Empire was generally regarded as the antithesis of Christian Europe from the Crusades onwards, a dangerous, aggressive culture keen to expand its territories into those of its major rival. English literary texts contain numerous examples of hostile representations of the 'turban'd Turk' – such as Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* (1590), another work that Shakespeare certainly read. King James VI of Scotland, later to succeed Elizabeth I as James I of England, wrote a long poem celebrating the Venetians' victory over the Turks in the Battle of Lepanto (1571), seeing it as a triumph of Christian virtue over paganism. Yet, as many were all aware, the boundaries between the Ottoman Empire and Europe were permeable and confusing.

However, Mercator's text acknowledges that this clear distinction between the continents is effectively problematic; he chooses to place the boundaries of Europe at the Caspian Sea and the Bosphorus. The map shows Europe as a peninsula, jutting out of Asia: self-contained and distinct in one sense, but also a promontory of a larger landmass struggling to retain its identity. Abraham Ortelius's *Theatrum Orbis Terrarum* (*The Theatre of the Whole World*) also defines Europe as a peninsula and acknowledges the problems of fixing its eastern boundaries. Europe borders Barbaria in North Africa and Tartaria, the kingdom of the Tartars, in Asia. The threat to Europe is made even clearer in the map of Turkey, which shows how little Europeans could take for granted.

Nevertheless, Mercator's *Atlas* is Eurocentric in content, devoting 813 of its 930 pages to European countries and regions:

"[Europe] not only farre excels the other parts of the World in the wonderfull temperattenesse of the climate, temper, pleasantnesse, and great company of the inhabitants; but also in the abundance of Fruits, Trees, and Plants, all kinde of living Creatures, Mettals; and in the plentie of all other thinges which are necessarie to sustaine mans life." [8]

In addition, the cities of Europe are said to rival – if not excel – those built in other parts of the world. And both works claim that more than twenty-eight European countries officially adhere to the Christian faith. Mercator's *Atlas* performs another function that many early modern English books provided for their readers: a handy list of the characteristics of peoples for ease of reference, but which could often lapse into easy prejudice masquerading as knowledge.

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[8]Mercator, *Historia Mundi, or Mercator's Atlas containing his cosmographical description of the fabricke and figure of the world: lately rectified in divers places, as also beautified and enlarged with new mappes and tables / by the studious industry of Iudocus Hondy; Englished by W.S. Generosus* (London, 1635), 10-11. Quoted in Hadfield, Andrew and Paul Hammond, eds. *Shakespeare and Renaissance Europe*. (London: Thomson Learning, 2005), p. 10.

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Thus, we have references to peoples of present-day Germany: the Franconians, the Thuringii, and the Bavarians of modern-day Germany, the Grisons of modern-day Switzerland, the Italians and the Spaniards, but also the people of the Low Countries, then the Sarmatians and the Illyrians, the Bohemians (to whom Shakespeare generously offered a non-existing coastline); the Poles are mentioned, as well as the Servians – inhabitants of Servia, a province of Greece – and the people of Pannonia. Though there is no mention to Wallachia or Moldavia, we have a good picture of Europe as it was known at the time, and for which we have all reasons to believe that it was well-known to Shakespeare himself.

Such lists supplied convenient means of characterizing the peoples and nations of Europe for those who did not have the time to explore the areas in greater depth, whether as a traveller (a privilege granted to a very few) or as a reader. Books full of maxims, *sententiae*, and proverbial wisdom were ubiquitous in the Renaissance and probably formed the key ingredient of many readers' reading experiences. Books tabulated vital pieces of information and summarized complex arguments and dense passages of discursive prose for those who were too busy to spend time in scholarly activity. Individuals noted down key sentences and phrases in their own commonplace books for future reference. It is hardly a matter of surprise that out of such an intellectual culture, handy brief descriptions of foreigners and foreign lands should develop and define how English men and women encountered other regions.

To conclude, almost one century after Shakespeare's death, his London had retained its cosmopolitan aspect.

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