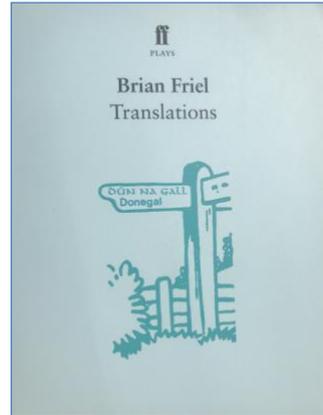


BRIAN FRIEL: WAS ONE OF IRELAND'S BEST-KNOWN PLAYWRIGHTS A SECRET OXFORDIAN?

By Rosemary O'Loughlin

In this article, a close examination of the play *Translations* by the Irish playwright Brian Friel¹ reveals allusions to Shakespeare, with undertones of secrecy and merging of classical and contemporary ideas, which lead to a clear impression that Friel was aware of and in sympathy with the Shakespeare Authorship Question (SAQ) and even of the effects of censorship and hidden authorship that affected Edward de Vere, the 17th Earl of Oxford. Indeed, it should be mentioned that Friel is not the first Irish author to raise the SAQ.² Following an initial observation in *Translations* of a character recalling de Vere himself, a series of Shakespeare allusions spring out of the text leading to a passage that multifariously evokes de Vere as the author of the canon. References are provided to the life and works of Brian Friel, who is well known in Ireland, and to the Irish language and culture, which was undermined by the English in the early 19th century – this undermining is central to *Translations*.



Background

Brian Friel is one of Ireland's outstanding playwrights. He was born in 1929 in County Tyrone in Northern Ireland. As a young man he initially trained for the priesthood, disliked the experience immensely, left and became a teacher. During the 1950s, being paid by the *New Yorker* for his short stories, he was in a position to become a full-time writer. Towards the end of that decade, he began writing plays. His best-known plays are *Philadelphia, Here I Come!* (1964), *Translations* (1980), *Dancing at Lughnasa* (1990) and *Faith Healer* (1990). Brian Friel died at the age of eighty-six in 2015.

The great corpus of work and the life of this renowned playwright are well documented elsewhere,³ but I would like you to note that he was a shy man who

did not court publicity. As with de Vere who lived in a time of acute censorship, the Ireland of Brian Friel was not one where a writer could freely express themselves on all topics. The earlier part of his career was a time in which the Catholic church and the Irish state mutually reinforced each other's positions. Many Irish writers over the years have been banned, including Liam O'Flaherty and Edna O'Brien. International writers too had been banned, including some writings of Saul Bellow, Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner and Graham Greene.⁴ A career as a playwright is notoriously difficult at the best of times and given my views that Friel was well acquainted with the SAQ, I consider that as a man with a family to provide for, this was not a topic he would have chosen to entertain openly. Indeed in 1973 after the production of his play *The Freedom of the City*, which took its inspiration from the tragic event in 1972 when thirteen unarmed civil rights demonstrators were killed by British paratroopers and which has become known as 'Bloody Sunday', Friel found himself the subject of much unwanted attention and was quite alarmed at the play being viewed in some quarters as propaganda.⁵

As to how my discovery came about, two years ago I was a student at a week-long course at the Drama League of Ireland Summer School. Having enjoyed many of their wonderful courses over the years, I had not intended to go that year until out of the blue, a drama group that I had been a member of emailed to say that there was a bursary with two available options, one of which was a course for directors. This I chose, and under the expert tuition of director Conall Morrison, we delved into a number of plays, including *Translations* – a play that up to that point I had not read or seen performed. As we examined the play with a slow, measured approach, turning over individual words and allowing maximum absorption of the richness of the text, a parallel dialogue started to run through my head as I noted matters that to my mind indicated yet a further layer weaved through the play – that of the SAQ.

Translations deals with the clash of language and culture. The story revolves around an ordinance survey being carried out in Ireland in the 19th century by British soldiers, where they went about the country mapping the territory and renaming Irish place names. The themes of the play centre around loss of language, loss of identity and culture, misinterpretation, and the insider/outsider

dichotomy. Although the play is written in English the audience understands through theatrical device that the Irish characters are speaking in Irish and the English characters in English. One character acts as a translator between them.

Some preliminary matters

Before I specify the indications in *Translations* that the SAQ weighed on Friel's mind, I want to say, for context, two noteworthy things about Friel and one about myself. First regarding Friel, this was not a man who had only a passing interest in or knowledge of Shakespeare. In his article on Friel's *Translations* and Shakespeare's Henry Plays, Irish scholar Anthony Roche notes that Friel took inspiration from *King Lear* when he wrote one of his first pieces of drama, the 1958 radio play *This Hard House*.⁶ Roche details clear parallels between *Translations* and two of Shakespeare's *Henry* plays. Another of Friel's plays, *Volunteers*, contains a number of implicit and explicit references to *Hamlet*.

The second point regarding Friel is that in 1963, shortly after his career as a playwright had begun, Friel spent six months in the company of acclaimed director Tyrone Guthrie in Minneapolis observing the latter directing Chekov's play *Three Sisters* and Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. It would appear Friel found the experience profoundly seminal to his career, indicating that it gave him 'the courage and daring to attempt things'.⁷ Guthrie himself was an authorship sceptic, publishing a piece in 1962 to that effect in the *New York Times Magazine*.⁸ Did the subject of Shakespeare authorship come up between them?

The point regarding myself concerns where my own mind was when I undertook this course – it was full of Oxfordianism. I had recently submitted my entry to the Shakespeare Oxford Fellowship 'Who Wrote Shakespeare' video competition and was also writing up my experiences of several short trips during the previous few years to places associated with de Vere, with a view to presenting these as a one-woman show. However, the last thing I expected when sitting down at the course to read through a play set in a hedge school⁹ in the fictitious town of Baile Beag (Irish for 'small town') in County Donegal in the year 1833, not long before the Great Famine, was to be thinking again about Shakespeare authorship. But that's exactly what happened.

De Vere?, secrecy, Athena, disguise and flashing eyes!

Before the first line of dialogue had even been uttered, the opening scene description in *Translations* brought Edward de Vere to mind. There are three characters present in a disused barn which has been repurposed as a hedge school – Manus the school master’s older son who works as his unpaid assistant, Sarah, a pupil who has great difficulty in speaking and Jimmy Jack Cassie. The outline of the latter in the scene description was striking:

Jimmy Jack Cassie – known as the Infant Prodigy – sits by himself, contentedly reading Homer in Greek and smiling to himself. He is a bachelor in his sixties, lives alone, and comes to these evening classes partly for the company and partly for the intellectual stimulation. He is fluent in Latin and Greek but is in no way pedantic – to him it is perfectly normal to speak these tongues. He never washes. His clothes ... are filthy and he lives in them summer and winter, day and night. He now reads in a quiet voice and smiles in profound satisfaction. For Jimmy the world of the gods and the ancient myths is as real and as immediate as everyday life in the townland of Baile Beag.

A thought flashed through my head – there are aspects of that description that evoke Edward de Vere!

In the opening lines Manus encourages Sarah to try and say her name. ‘Come on, Sarah. This is our secret. Nobody’s listening. Nobody hears you.’ Jimmy in the background interjects with his opening line – in Greek: ‘*Ton d’emeibet epeita thea glaukopsis Athene ...*’ The appendix at the back, which came with the original play script, translates this as ‘But the grey-eyed goddess Athene then replied to him’ and indicates that it is from Chapter XIII of Homer’s *Odyssey*. Eventually Sarah manages to say a complete sentence: ‘My name is Sarah.’ Manus is delighted and says, ‘soon you’ll be telling me all the secrets that have been in that head of yours all these years’.

Jimmy continues apace reading from *Odyssey*. He quotes another excerpt from Chapter XIII, this time presented in the play in English, wherein Athena disguises Ulysses in order that no one will recognise him: ‘She dimmed his two eyes that were so beautiful and clothed him in a vile ragged cloak begrimed with filthy smoke ... And about him she cast the great skin of a filthy hind ...’ Jimmy then asks the others, ‘You know what they call her?’ to which Manus replies,

‘Glaukopis Athene’.¹⁰ ‘That’s it!’ says Jimmy, ‘The flashing eyed Athene’.

At the mention of ‘flashing eyed’ something within me stirred as I recalled Gabriel Harvey’s Latin address to de Vere in 1578 with the famous line often translated into English as ‘Thine eyes flash fire, thy countenance shakes a spear’.¹¹

As *Translations* continues, it becomes apparent that Jimmy is obsessed with the goddess Athene. He compares Grainne from the legendary Irish tale of Diarmuid and Grainne unfavourably with her. He then asks the other two: ‘if you had the choosing between Athene and Artemis and Helen of Troy – all three of them Zeus’s girls – which would you take?’. Without waiting for a response he says, ‘I think I’ve no choice but to go bull-straight for Athene. By God, sir, them flashing eyes would fair keep a man jiggged up constant!’ to which Manus responds, ‘You’re a dangerous bloody man, Jimmy Jack.’ and Jimmy says ‘Flashing-eyed! Ha! Sure Homer knows it all, boy. Homer knows it all.’

I found the idea of Jimmy being bestowed sexual prowess by the deity Athena; and Manus’ response that this makes Jimmy ‘dangerous’ peculiar. Without Athena to prop him up, what is Jimmy? Is he not dangerous – or is he even emasculated?

At this early stage I began to wonder whether Friel was purposely and covertly raising the SAQ. Looking at what had already emerged – and we were only at the fifth page – the following stood out:

- a character, Jimmy Jack Cassie, who evokes aspects of Edward de Vere;
- the act of declaring a name being linked to the creation of a secret and to the spilling of secrets;¹²
- at the same time Jimmy Jack, a so-called prodigy who can speak Greek and Latin, refers to the spear shaking goddess Athena;¹³
- from the whole of the *Odyssey*, he alights on a passage that references Athena in the act of disguising Ulysses;
- a reference to ‘flashing eyed’ Athena, recalling the description of de Vere by Gabriel Harvey;
- the pairing of the goddess Athena with Jimmy Jack creating a combination that accords him with an aura of danger.

Further allusions to Shakespeare with undertones of secrecy

Small Latin and less Greek

A new character, Maire, also a pupil, enters the scene. In conversation, she uses the one expression in English that she knows: 'In Norfolk we besport ourselves around the maypoll'. She then asks Jimmy if he knows what that means and he responds, 'Sure you know I have only Irish like yourself.', to which Maire responds, 'And Latin. And Greek.' Reading this recalled the Ben Jonson line in the First Folio preface to Shakespeare's plays: 'And though thou hadst small Latine and lesse Greeke ...', which has been interpreted by orthodox scholars as implying that Shakespeare had very little learning. However, another way of looking at it is that the expression needs to be read in the whole context of the long clause in which it appears, and that 'And though thou hadst' invokes the subjunctive case. Thus, reading the expression in its entirety it can be paraphrased as 'If it were the case that you had had small Latin and Greek (which is not the case), then I would still compare you with Aeschylus, Euripides and Sophocles.'¹⁴

Leonard Digges

Talk turns to the activities of the English soldiers surveying in the locality for the purpose of mapping the territory and to an instrument called a 'theodolite' which the Red Coats 'lug about everywhere'. Jimmy says 'Theodolite – what's the etymology of that word, Manus?' to which Manus responds, 'No idea'. Jimmy says '*Theo* – *theos* – something to do with a god. Maybe *thea* – a goddess!'¹⁵

Feeling that Friel might be prompting us to investigate the origins of theodolite, research immediately reveals that this instrument was first described by a 16th-century mathematician named Leonard Digges, the earliest reference to it contained in a book by him completed and published in 1571 by his son Thomas, a close associate of John Dee, the Elizabethan magus.¹⁶ Thomas' son Leonard Digges wrote a prefatory verse for the 1623 Folio of Shakespeare plays and again for the 1640 edition of Shakespeare poetry.

Stamping out learning

Also in Act One, Bridget, one of the pupils, notes that the 'headline' set for the pupils that day (presumably for the class to translate) is 'It's easier to stamp out learning than to recall it.', which Jimmy informs the group is from 'Book Three,

the *Agricola* of Tacitus'. On one level, this is very apt to the denial and undermining of the rich Irish cultural heritage and language that is taking place. On another level, applying it to the SAQ, which is seeping through the lines of the play in so many places: it seems to be easier for people to ignore the extensive learning the author Shakespeare must have had, than to do the hard work all these years later of revisiting those times to ascertain what the real story was.

Sweet smell

The group discusses the 'sweet smell' arising from the potato crop and that this means the stalks are rotting. Maire says, 'Sweet smell! Sweet smell! Every year at this time somebody comes back with stories of the sweet smell. Sweet God, did the potatoes ever fail in Baile Beag?' A few pages later, Hugh, the school master himself, joins the group and gives a slightly twisted version of a quote of 'Sophocles from Colonus'. Hugh's version of the quote is 'To know nothing is the sweetest life.' Was Friel giving a little dig at the man from Stratford? These references to 'sweet' brought to mind several allusions to Shakespeare in the 1590s: 'Sweet Shakespeare' (William Covell) and 'Honey-tongued Shakespeare' (Francis Meres and John Weever), as well as Ben Jonson's reference to 'Sweet Swan of Avon!' in the First Folio preface.¹⁷ How interesting that the reality behind the 'sweet smell' is blighted potatoes and that behind 'sweet Shakespeare' is a cutting commentary on the state of Elizabethan times.

Ability to write one's name – education is complete

Hugh notices that some of the pupils are missing and in response to his question as to where Nora Dan was, Maire answers 'She says she's not coming back any more.', to which Hugh says 'Ah, Nora Dan can now write her name – Nora Dan's education is complete.' This immediately recalled the absence of any school records in respect of William Shakspeare of Stratford-upon-Avon, and that all we know about his literary 'career' is that he could just about write his own name. Was Friel sarcastically alluding to the notion, still widely held and institutionally supported, that William Shakspeare is the writer 'Shakespeare', despite no records of an education and a literary trail consisting solely of six signatures?

The correct spelling of names

The school master Hugh's other son, Owen, enters the scene. He explains that he is with two English soldiers one of whom, Captain Lancey, is a cartographer and

the other, Lieutenant George Yolland, is an orthographer. Manus states that being an orthographer refers to ‘The correct spelling of ... names’. This called to mind the difference between the spelling of ‘Shakespeare’ or ‘Shake-speare’, the name of the great author as it appears on the cover pages of the plays and poems, and ‘Shakspere’, the spelling associated with the man from Stratford.

Avon resonances

We learn that Sarah’s full name is Sarah John Sally. Owen, who has already recognised all the others in the classroom only recognises Sarah when she gives her full name. On so hearing, he declares ‘Of course! From Bun na hAbhann! I’m Owen.’ The place Sarah is from is Bun na hAbhann (translated as Burnfoot, the literal translation of which is ‘the mouth (or the bottom) of the river’). ‘na hAbhann’ is the genitive of Abhainn, which is pronounced somewhat like ‘Avon’ and has the same Celtic root. Owen does not recognise Sarah until he knows her surname, which he can then link with a place. The clear analogy with the SAQ is that no one associated the man from Stratford with being the writer of the works under the name ‘Shakespeare’ until that name was linked with the town of Stratford-upon-Avon – seven years after the Stratford man’s death! Surely significant that Sarah should be from a place which clearly resonates with Avon!¹⁸

Like Nora Dan and indeed other characters in the play, Sarah’s surname consists of what normally pass as first names. Both Sarah and Nora take part in the play largely by their absences. Whilst Nora does not appear at all, Sarah is present throughout much of the play but struggles to communicate verbally. This provides an analogy with the silent William Shakspeare of Stratford-upon-Avon, about whom little is known apart from a few business dealings and court cases. There is also something fake or unreal about the surname ‘John Sally’.

Surname undergoes subtle new spelling and pronunciation

Sarah, in Act 3, adjusts her surname. This further underlines the sense of its fakeness. Prompted by Manus for the second time as to what her name is she says, ‘My name is Sarah’. Manus asks ‘Just Sarah? Sarah what?’ and she responds, ‘Sarah Johnny Sally’. Why has she changed the ‘John’ part of the surname to ‘Johnny’? Manus sees nothing wrong in this, although present when she previously said it was ‘John Sally’, and indeed he repeats it: ‘Very good, Sarah Johnny Sally. There’s nothing to stop you now – nothing in the wide world.’ So, the simple fact that

Sarah can utter her full name, in its adjusted form, is sufficient to launch her forth into the world. When she previously declared her name was Sarah, Owen only recognised her when her surname was linked to the place Bun na hAbhann. Now, having merely adjusted her surname slightly, she is deemed bigger than Sarah John Sally from Bun na hAbhann – she is now unstoppable! What an analogy with the launch in 1623 of William Shakspere from Stratford-upon-Avon as the great author William Shakespeare. Brian Friel is more of a genius than is even currently recognised!

What's in a name?

In Act 1 and Part of Act 2, Owen is incorrectly referred to as 'Roland' by Lancey and Yolland. He ignores this, although his brother Manus takes it up with him: '... And they both call you Roland!'. Owen is reluctant to correct them and says, 'Easy, man, easy. Owen – Roland – what the hell. It's only a name. It's the same me, isn't it? ...' to which Manus responds, 'Indeed is it. It's the same Owen.'

As I read this, it evoked what I crudely describe as the Stratfordian position of 'Shakspere, Shakespeare, whatever'; and the line from *Romeo and Juliet* 'What's in a name? That which we call a rose / By any other word would smell as sweet.'

A few pages later, directly after the passage relating to Tobair Vree referred to below, Owen's frustration with Yolland's desire to maintain that place name comes out in his furious reprimand 'George! For God's sake! My name is not Roland!'. Owen and Yolland then start laughing, referring to spellings and mixing up their names to derive 'Rowen' and 'Oland'. Immediately after this Manus enters in an elated mood and they wonder what gives rise to his state, questioning whether it is a 'baptism'. Yolland says 'A thousand baptisms! Welcome to Eden!' and Owen responds, 'Eden's right! We name a thing and – bang! It leaps into existence!'. This brought to mind the launch of the name 'Shakespeare' in 1593 with the publication of *Venus and Adonis*.

Tobain Vree – what the hell does it mean?

I now turn to a key passage in the play, which I consider relates directly to Edward de Vere. To give some context for this piece, the English soldiers who are tasked with mapping the territory, are also tasked with anglicising all the Irish place names either by direct translation or by deriving an approximate word. Because the

soldiers don't speak Irish, Owen is helping them, which leads to a lot of tension between Owen and his brother Manus. Ironically the English soldier Yolland, who is working with Owen to translate the place names, has much more sympathy for retaining the culture than does Owen, an Irishman.

This activity of renaming place names ties into one of the main themes of the play which is that not only does translation result in the loss of language, but also the loss of cultural and historical identity, as many of the Irish place names have stories attached to them which are often lost in the translation.

Before considering the passage in question, those unfamiliar with the Irish language need to know the genitive case is formed. This will greatly assist their understanding of what Friel seems to be doing. The Irish for the name Brian is spelled the same but pronounced 'BRREE-an'. To put Brian into the genitive case the object is given first (as in 'the well of Brian', there being no option in Irish for 'Brian's well') and certain changes are made to the spelling and pronunciation of the 'possessor'. The Irish for 'well' is 'tobar' (pronounced TUB-er). So 'the well of Brian' is 'tobar Bhriain': an 'h' and an extra 'i' is added to 'Brian' and the pronunciation is changed to 'VRREE-an'. The letters 'bh' together in Irish sound like a 'v'. The additional 'i' in 'Bhriain' is silent.

In the play there is a discussion between Owen and Yolland around how to translate the place name, Tobair Vree. Yolland feels that something is being lost in the translation from Irish to English. 'Something is being eroded', he says. Owen, rather exasperatingly, stabs his finger at the map and says:

'We've come to this crossroads. Come here and look at it, man! Look at it! And we call that crossroads Tobair Vree. And why do we call it Tobair Vree? I'll tell you why. Tobair means a well. But what does Vree mean? It's a corruption of Brian – (*Gaelic pronunciation*) Brian [BREE-an] an erosion of Tobair Bhriain [VRREE-an]. Because a hundred-and-fifty years ago there used to be a well there, not at the crossroads, mind you – that would be too simple – but in a field close to the crossroads. And an old man called Brian, whose face was disfigured by an enormous growth, got it into his head that the water in that well was blessed; and every day for seven months he went there and bathed his face in it. But the growth didn't go away; and one morning Brian was found drowned in that well. And ever since that crossroads is known as Tobair Vree – even though that well has long since dried up.'

Tobair Vree is by far the most cited place name in the play – and if the middle two letters are swapped around the word is ‘Vere’. Moreover, the name ‘Brian’ is associated with ‘high’ or ‘noble’ after the High King of Ireland Brian Boru.²⁰

There are three other significant things about this passage. First it is bookended by references to erosion. Immediately before the subject of Tobair Vree is raised, Yolland says ‘Something is being eroded’. At the end of his description of Tobair Vree, Owen says:

‘What do we do with a name like that? Do we scrap Tobair Vree altogether and call it – what? The Cross? Crossroads? Or do we keep piety with a man long dead, long forgotten, his name ‘eroded’ beyond recognition, whose trivial little story nobody in the parish remembers?’

The second thing that floored me (I didn’t see this straight away because I am so conditioned to reading English) was that Tobair Vree is supposed to be an Irish place name that Owen and Yolland are attempting to find a suitable translation for – but there is no letter ‘v’ in the Irish language; moreover, Irish does not contain the double ‘ee’, which is made with a ‘síneadh fada’ (SHEEN-ah FAH-duh) – an ‘í’ (with a long accent). Sometimes this accent is omitted, as in Brian.

So, an Irish playwright in a play that has Irish place names at its centre, inserts into the place name that has the most discussion in the play a letter and a vowel combination that do not exist in the Irish language. That can only be deliberate! Ironically, Owen’s long explication as to how the name ‘Tobair Vree’ came about never focuses on the bizarre shortening of the ‘Bhriain’ to ‘Vree’.²¹

Of at least twenty-four place names in the play, all the others are spelled correctly. The only one spelled incorrectly is Tobair Vree. And Tobair is also spelled incorrectly – it contains an ‘í’, which puts it into the genitive case. So, it’s not only ‘Brian’s well’ – the well is possessing Brian.

The third remarkable thing was something that Owen said after his explication of the meaning of Tobair Vree. When Yolland declares that the place name should remain as it is, Owen is exasperated and declares, ‘Even though the well is a hundred yards from the actual crossroads – and there’s no well anyway – and what the hell does Vree mean?’ But in the previous passage, he asks ‘what does Vree mean?’ as a rhetorical question and proceeds immediately to answer it. So, asking the same question again makes no sense. The only explanation is that the

playwright is asking us, the readers, to consider what Vree means. I say the readers in this instance because the audience may not know how Tobair Vree is spelled. And only a reader who knows the Irish language will question the appearance of a ‘v’ and a ‘ee’ in what is supposed to be an Irish place name – and only a reader who knows the Irish language and is an Oxfordian will realise that there is a strong case to be made that Friel is referencing Edward de Vere!

I showed this passage and the dialogue leading up to it to my good friend and Oxfordian Dorna Bewley, who came up with several further fascinating points. After I had explained that ‘tobar’ means a well or a spring, Dorna exclaimed ‘vere’! She informed me that in middle English, the word ‘vere’ referred to ‘spring’ – as in the season.²² Thus, spring is vere, the well is vere, the well is Brian, the well’s Brian. Now the use of the genitive case, in ‘Tobair’, is making sense! Friel is being so clever! In effect Brian/Vere has been taken over and subsumed by the dark depths of water, and that well has now disappeared leaving him swallowed up and forgotten. What an analogy for the historical treatment of Edward de Vere!

The notion of ‘vere’ being ‘spring’ and the Chaucerian references to ‘vere’/‘veer’ tie into another layer in the play, the references to Ulysses,²³ evoking Chaucer’s *Troilus and Criseyde* – a source for Shakespeare’s *Troilus and Cressida*.

Dorna also noted that in the dialogue leading up to the passage concerning ‘Tobair Vree’ there are mathematical references. Owen jokes that his father ‘always promises three points and he never gets beyond A and B’. Dorna saw a link between this and the passage in which Owen points out that the crossroads are named ‘Tobair Vree’ although the well is ‘in a field close to the crossroads’. She also noted that the object that gives rise to the name, the true locus – the well – is at point C, not at the intersection of A and B. She reminds us that the play mentions that the surveying activities relate to ‘triangulation’²⁴ and that the language of mathematics forms part of the whole matrix of translation in the play.²⁵ Applying Owen’s explication of ‘Tobair Vree’ to the SAQ, she analogised that with Shakespeare we are at the crossroads in our conception of the author being the man from Stratford – but the real truth is somewhere off the crossroads. While some may wonder what mathematics has to do with Shakespeare, a number of Oxfordians have noted the connection.²⁶ And before he became a writer, Friel taught mathematics.

Immediately before Owen's joke that Hugh never gets beyond A and B, Hugh delivers lines that have become rather well known, which reflect George Steiner's *After Babel*, one of the main sources for the play. Hugh says:

'But remember that words are signals, counters. They are not immortal. And it can happen – to use an image you'll understand – it can happen that a civilisation can be imprisoned in a linguistic contour which no longer matches the landscape of ... fact.'

Again, to analogise with the SAQ, we are imprisoned in our conception of Shakespeare by the linguistic contour that 'Shakspere' equates with 'Shakespeare'.

Dorna noted the reference in the passage to Brian's face 'being disfigured by an enormous growth'. We agreed it recalled the Droeshout engraving that prefaces the Shakespeare First Folio plays, which may well be described as a bulbous head.²⁷ She also made the astute observation that Brian's ritualistic bathing of his face in water that he believed to be 'blessed' evoked John the Baptist,²⁸ whose feast day is 24 June; well known to Oxfordians as the attributed date that de Vere died, prompting Dorna to wonder if Friel was prompting us to resurrect de Vere?

Insider/outsider

Edward de Vere was a court insider for much of his life, but also an outsider in the later years. He was a man who had a deep interest in hermetic philosophy. I find it extraordinary that these core aspects of de Vere's life are reflected in *Translations* in so many ways.

Yolland, described in the character description at his first appearance as 'a soldier by accident', is deeply touched by Ballybeg and its surrounds. However, he realises 'I'd always be an outsider here, wouldn't I? I may learn the password but the language of the tribe will always elude me, won't it? The private core will always be ... hermetic, won't it?'. Jimmy too is an outsider, often dismissed by others who see his extraordinary learning as rather quaint. For example, when Jimmy informs the group that the phrase 'It's easier to stamp out learning than to recall it' comes from the *Agricola* of Tacitus, Bridget responds 'God but you're a dose'.

In Act 3, just before Jimmy breaks down and reveals the extent of his loneliness, he announces to the group that he is going to get married – 'To Athene'. Hugh says 'Who?' and Jimmy responds 'Pallas Athene', to which Hugh asks '*Glaukopis Athene?*'. What is interesting here, from the SAQ perspective, is

something revealed in the next few lines. Hugh asks, ‘The lady has assented?’, to which Jimmy responds, ‘She asked *me* – I assented’. Did this reflect Friel possibly musing as to whether the great author, when presented with a name congruent with who he was, assented to being represented thusly? Towards the very end of the play Jimmy says:

‘Do you know the Greek word *endogamein*? It means to marry within the tribe. And the word *exogamein* means to marry outside the tribe. And you don’t cross those borders casually – both sides get very angry. Now, the problem is this: Is Athene sufficiently mortal or am I sufficiently godlike for the marriage to be acceptable to her people and to my people? You think about that.’

Is Friel asking if the great author, before the launch of the name ‘Shakespeare’ in 1593, wondered if this name would be sufficiently ordinary sounding to pass as a surname whilst at the same time impart sufficient associations (Athena and Apollo) with the world of the gods and by association de Vere, such that both the author and the authorities sanctioning publication could settle on an acceptable compromise? Is Friel asking us to ‘think about that’?

Further analogies between Jimmy Jack and Shakespeare/de Vere

The character description for Jimmy Jack set out at the beginning of Act 1, describing his ragged clothes, corresponds to the description of the disguised Ulysses (‘clothed ... in a vile, ragged cloak’) referred to by Jimmy, thus linking Jimmy not only with de Vere, by virtue of his fluency in Latin and Greek, his prodigious ability, his lack of pedantry and his familiarity with the worlds of the gods, but also to Shakespeare.

Like Shakespeare,²⁹ Jimmy is a bit of a prophet. Quoting Book Two of Virgil’s *Georgics* – ‘*Nigra fere et presso pinguis sub vomere terra ...*’, he goes on to ask ‘Isn’t that what I’m always telling you? Black soil for corn. That’s what you should have in that upper field of yours – corn, not spuds.’ Jimmy’s surname, ‘Cassie’, again a name that can also be a first name, is short for ‘Cassandra’. In Greek myth Cassandra, a Trojan princess, was given the gift of prophecy by Apollo.³⁰

Reading through the play, it emerges that Jimmy has a number of names by which the other characters refer to him: he is ‘Jimmy’, ‘Jimmy Jack’, ‘Jimmy Jack Cassie’, ‘the Infant Prodigy’, ‘James’ and ‘Jacobi’. Again, this evokes the many

names under which Edward de Vere went – ‘Oxenforde’, Earl of Oxford, Viscount Bolebec, not to mention the nicknames he went by.³¹

Like de Vere, Jimmy is familiar with Ovid. In Act 3, when prompted by Hugh to respond to the latter’s statement, ‘*Barbarus hic ego sum quia non intelligor ulli?*’ – Jimmy says ‘Ovid’ and translates this as ‘I am a barbarian in this place because I am not understood by anyone.’ Immediately prior to this Hugh informs the group that he has had some ‘infelicitous’ tidings, to which Jimmy responds ‘*Infelix* – unhappy’ and Hugh goes on to say that a schoolmaster has already been appointed to the new national school by the name of Master Bartley Timlin, who ‘is also a very skilled bacon-curer’. Hugh later says ‘I will compose a satire on Master Bartley Timlin, schoolmaster and bacon-curer. But it will be too easy, won’t it?’ Is this Friel’s way of dismissing Francis Bacon as a credible candidate for the authorship of the works of Shakespeare?

Conclusion

The initial and intense evocation of Edward de Vere and Shakespeare betrayed in the play’s opening, numerous cryptic allusions to the SAQ and a key passage summoning the diligent reader to fix on de Vere allowed me to conclude that a strong *prima facie* case could be made that Brian Friel not only thought deeply about Shakespeare authorship but may have plumped for de Vere as author. There are parallels between Friel’s and Shakespeare’s methodology where the reader needs to scratch beneath the surface to unearth the gems of truth lying buried in the text.

The ‘Tobair Vree’ passage is the apex of the play’s multi-layered treatment of the SAQ. The image of the dried up well where Brian drowned provides a powerful, somewhat comical interpretation of the famous line from Sonnet 72: ‘My name be buried where my body is’. Given the centuries-long conflict between the countries that gave us Shakespeare and Friel, could the resurrection of de Vere/Shakespeare from an Irish well be a metaphor for a rapprochement between these two nations? A rapprochement already apparent in the character of the English Lieutenant Yolland? Not only did the English make inroads into depleting the cultural and linguistic identity of their nearest neighbour, but they have unwittingly done the very same to themselves. The two nations have a lot more in common than is readily apparent. And the irony of it is that it takes Brian Friel, a brilliant Irish writer to subtly to point this out.

End notes

1. Brian Friel, *Translations*. Faber & Faber (1981).
2. Gary Goldstein, 'Who Was James Joyce's Shakespeare?', *The Oxfordian*, Vol. 19 (2017).
3. For a sense of Friel's legacy, see contributions published in a special supplement of *The Irish Times* on his death on 2 October 2015, accessible at <https://www.irishtimes.com/culture>
4. Mark Patrick Hederman, *Crimson and Gold: Life as a Limerick*, Columba Books (2021), p.14.
5. Tony Coult, *About Friel: The Playwright and The Work*, Faber & Faber (2003), pp 48-52.
6. Anthony Roche, 'The Politics of Translation in Brian Friel's *Translations* and Shakespeare's Henry plays.' In: *Shakespeare and Contemporary Irish Literature*, edited by Nicholas Taylor-Collins & Stanley van der Ziel, Palgrave Macmillan (2018).
7. See Obituary, *The Irish Times*, 2 October 2015. See also *Brian Friel - Essays, Diaries, Interviews: 1964-1999*, edited by Christopher Murray, Faber & Faber (1999), pp. xv and 42, which gives a sense of the impact of this period on Friel.
8. Tyrone Guthrie, 'Threat of Newness to Olde Stratford', *New York Times Magazine*, (April 22 1962), pp.12, 60-61.
9. Hedge schools were illegal schools set up for non-conformist religions: i.e. Roman Catholic or Presbyterian.
10. The second mention of 'Glaukopis Athene'. The meaning of *glaukopis* is ambiguous. See <http://gazeinancientgreekreligion.blogspot.com/2011/12/what-is-glaukopis.html>
11. Bryan H. Wildenthal, *Early Shakespeare Authorship Doubts*, Zindabad Press (2019), pp124-6, for debate about the meaning of *vultus/Tela vibrat*.
12. The launch of the name 'Shakespeare' in 1593 in the dedication to 'Venus and Adonis', as the brand of a secret author who, given the cover of a pen name, was in a position to convey certain information including court intrigue.
13. George Steiner, *After Babel*, Oxford University Press (1975) is a primary source for the play. Steiner references Homer but not Athena.
14. Roger Stritmatter, 'Ben Jonson's "Small Latin and Less Greeke": Anatomy of a Misquotation (Part 2)', *The Oxfordian*, Vol. 20 (September 2018).
15. OED indicates that the etymology of the word 'theodolite' is unknown. Friel's question is intriguing and Jimmy, clearly knowledgeable, gives a response not necessarily based in fact.
16. Leonard Digges, *A Geometrical Practical Treatize named Pantometria, divided into three Bookes, Longimetra, Planimetra, and Sterometria*, (1571); reprinted in London, Abell Jeffs, (1591).
17. Alexander Waugh, 'Oxford as Shakespeare', Chapter 3 of *My Shakespeare*, Ed, W. Leahy, Edward Everett Root (2018).