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Whose Castle is it Anyway? : Local/Global Negotiations of a Shakespearean Location

Abstract: Kronborg Castle in the Danish town of Elsinore is a location strongly associated with Shakespeare thanks to the setting of *Hamlet*. It is a place where fiction currently eclipses history, at least in the context of a cultural tourist industry where Shakespeare's name is worth a great deal more than Danish national heritage sites. Indeed, Kronborg is now widely marketed as 'Hamlet's Castle' and the town of Elsinore has acquired the suffix 'Home of Hamlet'. This article examines the signifiers implied in the naming and renaming of Kronborg as a Shakespearean location, while also looking at its unique international Shakespearean performance tradition, which spans two centuries. It describes how the identity of the castle has been shaped by its Shakespearean connection against the backdrop of changing ideologies in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, and poses questions as to how this identity may continue to develop within the current contexts of renewed nationalism in Europe and the world.

Keywords: Hamlet, Elsinore, Kronborg, globalization, nationalism, borders, interculturalism.

Something have you heard
of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark's transformations
and of the manifold interpretations
which have confused us and confuse us still.
Is he a Dane? A countryman of yours?¹

Kronborg Castle in Elsinore has acquired most—if not all—of its international fame thanks to Shakespeare. Every year tourists flock to the small port town on the east coast of Denmark to see the rather magnificent fortified castle associated with *Hamlet*. Of course, there is no "Kronborg Castle" mentioned in *Hamlet*, but since the play specifies battlements and a royal residence in Elsinore, the fact

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¹ An extract from a poem by the Danish writer and political activist, Tom Kristensen, welcoming the British actors in the *Hamlet* production at Kronborg in 1939.

that there *is* a town called Elsinore in Denmark—with a castle in it—has proved more than sufficient to establish a Shakespearean location where fiction and reality continue to (con)fuse and attract visitors from all over the globe.

Strategically positioned to control the narrow strait separating Denmark and Sweden, the medieval fortress *Krogen* ('The Hook') was modernised and renamed 'Kronborg' in the 1580s by the Danish King Frederik II. However, from the perspective of cultural tourism, Frederik II's presence at Kronborg has clearly become so overshadowed by Shakespeare's much more famous Danish prince that yet another renaming of the castle now appears to have taken place. 'Hamlet's Castle' has not officially replaced 'Kronborg', but the name is widely used for advertising purposes.² It is not surprising that the Shakespearean denomination should go hand in hand commercial strategies, but Kronborg's connection to the Bard also includes a slightly less well known, but long and rich, tradition of performing *Hamlet* and other Shakespearean plays and of hosting international visiting productions. The first *Hamlet* performance at Kronborg took place in 1816 in celebration of the bicentenary of Shakespeare's death, so in 2016 'Hamlet's Castle' could celebrate its own unique bicentenary while also joining the worldwide celebrations of 400 years since Shakespeare's death. This article is partly inspired by the exhibition 'Hamlet at Elsinore 1816-2016', which I curated for the current resident theatre at Kronborg, HamletScenen.³ The exhibition traces 200 years of *Hamlet* and Shakespeare at Kronborg and is partly based on an extensive archive of photographs and production programmes, which has been preserved by HamletScenen. Kronborg's Shakespearean performance tradition continues to develop a stronger global outlook as well as a rather brave attempt to cultivate a space for experimental and intercultural theatre. Yet whether claiming Kronborg and Elsinore as locations on the global Shakespearean map is motivated by touristic or artistic interests (or both), there are several complex factors involved in the process, some of which also produce certain amounts of ideological tension. That is the central point of discussion in this article: how Kronborg's homage to Shakespeare's status as a global celebrity has had (and still has) to co-exist with

² A current Google search shows variations on Kronborg as 'Hamlet's Castle', 'Shakespeare's Castle', 'Elsinore Castle' with reference to *Hamlet*, or as 'Home of/to Shakespeare's Hamlet'. Most can be found on the castle's own advertising webpages, the webpages of HamletScenen, or Danish tourist sites, such as VisitDenmark.com.

³ The exhibition was part of the World Shakespeare Congress and the Shakespeare400 Festival at King's College London in August, 2016, and was subsequently translated into Danish for a run at 'Marienlyst Castle' near Elsinore in November, 2016. In May 2017 it was included in the York Shakespeare Festival. I am grateful to HamletScenen for their collaboration and the opportunity to create the exhibition and to the Royal Danish Embassy in London for additional support.

more local—and sometimes nationalistically inflected—interests in the space and its signifiers.

Historically speaking, Hamlet or his creator have few, if any, claims to a gratuitous ownership of Kronborg; indeed, the renaming of the castle is somewhat comparable to what David Schalkwyk notes about the name of Shakespeare's Globe on London's Southbank:

A theatre, in the most material sense of the word, a play-house, which arose from, and flourished within, a set of peculiar historical, social, political, and aesthetic practices which included a wide range of disparate traditions, voices, actors, audiences, events, entrepreneurs and companies, has, under the sign of authenticity, been reduced to a single man's name. (35)

Kronborg in its “most material sense” certainly also “arose from, and flourished within, a set of peculiar historical, social, political, and aesthetic practices”, so the current process of reducing it “to a single man's name”—and under even less verifiable signs of authenticity than in the case of Shakespeare's Globe in London—can be viewed as yet another example of what Schalkwyk calls the “fetish” of Shakespeare's proper name (35); a phenomenon which has spread far beyond Stratford-upon-Avon, or the Southbank.

Kronborg's main (and only) claim to a historically verifiable Shakespearean connection is the visit at the court of Frederik II in 1586 by three English players later to become Shakespeare's colleagues in *The Lord Chamberlain's Men*: George Bryan, Thomas Pope and the famous Will Kemp (Drábek 187).⁴ However, the current promotion of the castle as a Shakespearean location draws less on claims of historical authenticity and much more on Shakespeare's status as a global celebrity, or what Michael Bristol in *Big-Time Shakespeare* has called “the mobility of Shakespeare's works in the commercial market for cultural goods and services” (ix). Kronborg is a place where fiction currently eclipses history, at least when it comes to deciding what is and what is not bankable in the tourist industry. As one might expect, the marketing material—both online and in the form of posters and leaflets—is stamped with ubiquitous skulls and several variations on “To be, or not to be”, and the castle shop offers a selection of chic and sleek Danish designer objects more or less inspired by Shakespeare or *Hamlet*.⁵ There is little overt acknowledgement or promotion of any particular value or validation from the Shakespearean connection at Kronborg; a relatively typical feature of the kind of Shakespearean cultural consumption discussed by Bristol, who remarks that

⁴ Also noted in Gurr 49.

⁵ One of the items specially created for 2016 is the ‘Hamlet table’ by the Danish design concept LoudLiving in collaboration with the tourist organisation Visit North Zealand.

The actual suppliers of the cultural goods trademarked by Shakespeare are as likely as not to be quite indifferent to the ideological payloads carried by their products. (xi)

In other words, visitors at Kronborg seem to be at liberty to bring and apply their own understandings and interpretations of its Shakespearean connection. The castle mainly provides a scenic and atmospheric backdrop, which during the summer of 2016 was populated by actors in Renaissance costumes performing snippets of Shakespearean dialogue and deliberately anachronistic jokes of the kind often heard at Shakespeare's Globe in London.

Although recent decades have seen a marked increase in scholarship on Shakespearean appropriations by cultural tourism in the global economy, or indeed on the Shakespearean 'theme park' phenomenon, Kronborg has not yet received much attention.⁶ This is partly explained by the fact that the commercial branding of the castle's Shakespearean connection has only recently begun to aspire to the scale of other locations—such as precisely Shakespeare's Globe—even if it has attracted tourists for decades. As the resident theatre at the castle HamletScenen has certainly been a prime mover in this process. It was inaugurated in 2008 and receives state funding to stage its own productions and to continue the tradition of inviting international companies to perform *Hamlet* and other Shakespearean plays at the castle. The first *Hamlet* production to visit Kronborg from abroad was the 1937 Old Vic production with Laurence Olivier in the title role and Vivien Leigh as Ophelia, and since then companies from a wide range of countries have performed at the castle. Today HamletScenen hosts an annual summer festival called the 'Shakespeare Festival at Hamlet's Castle'.

However, it is also worth noting that HamletScenen as an institution has its own brand and identity, which are closely connected to the international performance tradition that it represents. As its name and specific purpose imply, HamletScenen has naturally always had a key interest in promoting Shakespeare at Kronborg, whereas other Elsinorians have been slightly slower to realise the full potential of their local Shakespearean goldmine. In an interview in the Danish newspaper, *Berlingske Tidende*, on 13 June 2015 Elsinore's conservative mayor Benedikte Kiær, indicated that the town would need to become better at realizing and utilising the potential of the Shakespeare and Hamlet brands, and a great deal of investment has now gone into marketing Elsinore as 'Home of Hamlet'. This is another renaming which calls for a pause.⁷ Whereas the act of renaming Kronborg as 'Hamlet's Castle' may mean handing over its proverbial

⁶ For recent scholarship related to Shakespeare and cultural tourism and consumerism, see Bristol; Kennedy; Schalkwyk; Worthen; or Calvo and Kahn.

⁷ 'Elsinore, Home of Hamlet' is a recent brand by the Danish tourist organisations Visit Denmark and Visit North Zealand with its own dedicated website and logo in the form of a skull.

keys to Shakespeare in recognition of his status as a global celebrity (and of course expecting a fair commercial return under his patronage), renaming the town of Elsinore as Hamlet's 'Home' carries a series of slightly different connotations. The fictional Elsinore of Shakespeare's play is a thing quite distinct from the Danish town now claiming Hamlet as a local inhabitant. Furthermore, giving Hamlet a specific geographical home seems to place him in local rather than a global context. The word 'home' evokes notions of origins, authenticity, and inclusion (sometimes by the exclusion of others), and applied to Shakespeare or his works it may perpetuate a discourse of national, geographical or cultural monopoly.

Thus, Shakespeare's presence in Elsinore and at its castle is inflected by a local-global discourse which can appear both contradictory and confusing. And this is even further complicated by the fact that Shakespearean signifiers at Kronborg co-exist with other markers of the castle's identity.

Sharing a Space

Between 1915 and 2013 Kronborg also housed a museum for the long and multifaceted maritime history connected to the castle and to Elsinore. The medieval fortress was built to control the maritime traffic of the narrow 'sound' separating Elsinore and Sweden, and ensure that passing ships would pay the 'Sound Dues', which helped fill the Danish state coffers for several centuries. In a series of personal recollections published in 1990 Henning Henningsen, one of the museum workers, mentions the visiting *Hamlet* productions at the castle. Henningsen recalls his small office being full of foreign actors, talking to each other and using his phone, and adds that while "it was all very exciting, many of us gradually developed a certain hostility towards Shakespeare's masterpiece" (Henningsen 13).⁸ What exactly was the cause of this hostility is left unspecified; it may simply have been the understandable inconvenience of sharing one's office with groups of loudly speaking actors, but, at the same time, this slightly unexpected and unexplained remark might offer a glimpse of tension in the negotiations which have been involved in shaping Kronborg Castle as a Shakespearean location. As Henningsen's comment reveals, Kronborg's Shakespearean connection meant that the castle became a culturally *shared* space, both in abstract and very practical (or unpractical) ways, and, as might be expected, such sharing can be characterized by varying amounts of strain and harmony.

Realizing the commercial potential in connecting Kronborg with the global market for all things Shakespearean is perhaps an inevitable development,

⁸ The translation of the quotation from Henningsen here is mine.

but those who wish to promote—and benefit from—the connection have had to negotiate the space and its signifiers with those who wish to preserve and promote Kronborg's identity as a national landmark. To many Danes the most famous figure associated with Kronborg is not so much Hamlet as the legendary Danish national hero 'Holger Danske' ('Holger the Dane'), who appears in folk tales as well as in a story by another famous Dane, Hans Christian Andersen. According to the legend, Holger Danske has been asleep for centuries, but will reawaken in Denmark's day of need.⁹ In the intricate system of tunnels beneath Kronborg, the so-called 'casemates', sits an enormous statue of Holger Danske, in full Viking armour, slumbering with his sword across his knees. Incidentally the statue rather fits the description of Hamlet's father's ghost in Shakespeare's play, and one wonders if some tourists coming to see 'Hamlet's Castle' have assumed Holger Danske to be old King Hamlet instead; such is the curious interchangeable nature of some of Kronborg's spaces and their symbolic signifiers.

Like so many national symbols, Holger Danske is an international import: he first appears as 'Oger le Danois', one of the knights of Charlemagne in the *Chanson de Roland* (ca. 1060 AD), and has no more authentic connection to Kronborg than Shakespeare or Hamlet, yet like them he has been appropriated and included into the pastiche-like web of signifiers of the castle. His statue, sitting in its dark underground dwelling, dimly, but dramatically lit, seems to belong to the world of Baudrillard's "models of a real without origin or reality" (1). In fact, the statue is a model of a mould built for a bronze statue, which removes it even further away from any notion of originality, but hundreds of Danish and international tourists still venture down the steps and tunnels to have the legend explained to them by tour guides.¹⁰

A similar view may be taken of the Shakespeare stone relief on the wall close to the entrance gate of the castle. At first view the relief by the Danish sculptor Einar Utzon-Frank seems to set Shakespeare's presence at Kronborg quite literally in stone, however the text below the image of the Bard somewhat betrays that concrete materiality. The text explains how the Viking legend of 'Prince Amleth' was written down by Saxo Grammaticus and re-told by Shakespeare, who situated the tale in Elsinore and thereby "secured an eternal reputation for the Danish prince and made the name of Elsinore known all over

⁹ One of the Danish resistance groups during the German occupation of 1940-1945 also took its name from Holger Danske.

¹⁰ A bronze statue of Holger Danske was made by the sculptor Hans Pedersen-Dan by commission from 'Hotel Marienlyst' in Elsinore in 1907. The statue at Kronborg is a copy in concrete of the plaster mould made for the bronze original, which now stands in the Danish town of Skjern. Significantly, the bronze original is both less known and less popular from a touristic perspective than the copy at Kronborg.

the world”.¹¹ In the absence of reality legends and tales provide the moulds for signifiers at Kronborg and help to foreground something which is much closer to postmodernist notions of the hyperreal than the castle’s actual historicity. Moreover, it is significant that this process applies both to those signifiers which have acquired local symbolic value of a nationalist character, like Holger Danske (despite his French heritage), or those which have been—and might still be—experienced by some as visitors or outsiders, like Shakespeare.

(Inter)National Encounters: *Hamlet* at Kronborg in the Twentieth Century

The hostility towards Shakespeare’s presence at Kronborg expressed by Henningsen is singular, because it provides a counter tone to the often exceedingly polite and friendly relations reflected in the archival material related to the visiting *Hamlet* productions at Kronborg in the twentieth century. In 1959 *The Glasgow Herald* published an article on the ‘Danish hospitality to *Hamlet*’ at Kronborg, which particularly praised what was by then a well-established tradition:

This adoption by one country of another’s masterpiece is an astonishing phenomenon and reflects as much credit on Denmark as on Britain. If cultural nationalism is involved on either side, it is of the most generous and fruitful kind: those countries are truly fortunate which can thus cross-fertilize each other (Small 5).

Whether it was generous and fruitful or not, cultural nationalism was indeed involved in establishing the *Hamlet* performance tradition at Kronborg in the twentieth century. The Old Vic’s visit in 1937 was by invitation from the Danish Tourist Association and Kronborg’s newly established ‘Nationale Friluftscene’ (the ‘National Openair Theatre’), and throughout the following years, interrupted by the war, the majority of the visiting productions were by national theatres or institutions considered close enough to that particular status. In a Danish newspaper article written shortly before the 1937 performance, the Old Vic is described as “England’s most national theatre insofar as its productions are most in line with English traditions”.¹² In the same article the Old Vic is also praised

¹¹ My translation. One might note the implication here of Hamlet described as a Danish prince who has been appropriated by Shakespeare, marking a distinction between Hamlet, the character or legendary figure, and *Hamlet*, the play. Surprisingly, the marketing strategies involved in the promotion of Kronborg or Elsinore as ‘Home of Hamlet’ tend to dwell on the latter rather than the former.

¹² In historical hindsight, it is remarkable that the praise of the Old Vic’s status as being close to that of a national theatre does not refer to the manager of the Old Vic, Lilian

as always having been “true to Shakespeare’s spirit and tone”, whereas other British theatres, apart from the open-air productions in Regents Park, “do not regularly perform Shakespeare and are almost more experimentally inclined”.¹³ The author of the article does not provide further information as to how such conclusions have been made, but whether they are justified or not, the point is that the Danish audience are reassured that the British visitors will present something “true to Shakespeare’s spirit and tone” and thankfully not something incomprehensibly experimental!

Clearly the initial attempts at establishing the Shakespearean performances at Kronborg were characterized by a wish to appear as a dignified preserver of what was considered traditional and worthy of a national institution. Furthermore, the visiting productions usually enjoyed a joint royal patronage from Denmark and the visiting nation; in 1937 the patrons were the Danish King Christian X together with the British Queen Elizabeth, both whose portraits grace the printed programme. The fact that the visiting productions also became part of wider political and diplomatic contexts can be sensed in the quickly established tradition of including a welcome note by the current Danish prime minister in the programmes. In 1937 prime minister Thorvald Stauning looks forward to the artistic exchange “especially with a country which has such a close relation to us as England”, and hopes for bonds between peoples and further exchanges “with all countries and nations in the interest of peace”.¹⁴

Such words might have been reiterated with a degree of unease the following year, when the visiting production was by Staatliches Schauspielhaus led by the famous German actor Gustaf Gründgens. The visit created a series of political and diplomatic hot potatoes, not least as to whether the German Chancellor, Adolf Hitler, would expect to join the Danish king as patron for the production; he did not, but his photograph was included in the programme on the page after the King’s portrait. Secondly, there was some discussion in the Danish Foreign Ministry as to whether or not Gründgens ought to receive an official Danish decoration. The argument was that Gründgens during the Nazi regime had been appointed Prussian state councilor as well as director of the Staatliches Schauspielhaus in Berlin. In other words, this time the National Openair Theatre at Kronborg had more than fulfilled their wish to secure a visiting artist of national representative status. The question of decorations became no less pertinent when Hermann Göring arrived in Elsinore to attend Gründgens’s performance on 24 July 1938; both he and Gründgens were treated

Baylis, who was naturally involved in bringing the 1937 production to Kronborg. Baylis died in November that same year and her work has often been described as fundamental to the creation of the National Theatre in London.

¹³ My translations. The article can be found in the archive held by HamletScenen, but is unfortunately without any further references.

¹⁴ My translation.

with careful civility and did eventually receive decorations.¹⁵ Two years later Denmark was occupied and German troops stationed at Kronborg.

However, in between Gründgens's *Hamlet* and the war, another British *Hamlet* production visited Kronborg. This was by John Gielgud's company and took place "Under the Auspices of the British Council" as stated in the programme, which also included 'A Message from Lord Lloyd', Chairman of the Council. The wording is unmistakably coloured by the contemporaneous political context:

If Shakespeare himself could be present at one of these performances I am sure he would be the first to thank the Danish people for providing the occasion for a demonstration of those neighbourly and cordial relations, strengthened by the ties of a common ancestry, which have existed for so long between England and Denmark. I am confident that Dramatic Art, added to the many other bonds which have united the two countries, can exert a powerful influence on the consolidation and maintenance of a friendship which has always been so highly valued by the British people and never more valued than today. (15)

An answer from the Danish side, also included in the programme, may be found in Kristensen's poem, which hints at the political tension by appropriating lines from *Hamlet*:

Welcome, John Gielgud and your actors, welcome!
 Moreover that we much did long to see you,
 The need we have to use you did provoke
 our hasty sending. Something have you heard
 of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark's transformations
 and of the manifold interpretations
 which have confused us and confuse us still.
 Is he a Dane? A countryman of yours?
 A spirit of the modern doubt and weakness
 or active as a prince of the renaissance?
 A hero or a coward? Tell us that. (21)

Here the question of Hamlet's national identity is bound up with the question of his ability (or inability) "to take arms against a sea of troubles" (3.1.59), and the British visitors at Kronborg are welcomed as an occasion for timely Danish self-reflection.

After World War II visiting productions returned to Kronborg in the context of increasing post-nationalism and unification, and their international

¹⁵ The deliberations and negotiations between the organisers at Kronborg and the Danish Foreign Ministry before, during, and after the visit from Staatliches Schauspielhaus in 1939 are very thoroughly described by Bay-Petersen.

range expanded as processes of globalization continued to develop. One of the post-war productions to visit Elsinore was by the State Theater of Virginia in 1949. The American actors were flown in by the United States Air Force, and the production programme celebrates the occasion as “the greatest distance a national company of players has journeyed to historic Elsinore”. The twenty-first century saw the return of German Hamlets to Kronborg for the first time since 1938 with major productions by Schaubühne, Berlin in 2010 and by Dresden Staatsschauspiel in 2015. Other productions which demonstrate the international range of Kronborg performances have included ‘The Prince’s Revenge’ by the Shanghai Peking Opera Theatre, and ‘The Al-Hamlet Summit’ by Sulayman Al-Bassam, both in 2005.

Observing how Kronborg has been shaped by its Shakespearean connection clearly fits within a much broader discourse of national and cultural borders. The international performance tradition developed against the backdrop of changing ideologies of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, and thrived as borders became easier and easier to cross. Now it will experience the renewed forms of nativism, of which Britain’s recent vote to leave the European Union is but one example. The pressing question faced by Kronborg, as well as other and similar Shakespearean locations in and outside the UK, is whether Shakespeare’s name is to be appropriated as a cultural commodity contained by—and reinforcing—these new borders, or as a representative of a communal global heritage, which still stands a chance of transcending them. In this sense Shakespearean locations, such as Kronborg, may currently be at a critical point in the ongoing process of shaping their identities, which should be intercultural, but risk becoming the opposite, mainly for the sake of attracting touristic visitors in search of authenticity. As noted—and referring to Bristol’s analysis in *Big-Time Shakespeare*—marketing strategies promoting Shakespearean authenticity and local origins may not be conscious of—or in any way wish to subscribe to—the potentially ideological connotations of their advertising slogans, but the question is whether neutral positions can be sustained within current Brexit-inflected demarcations.

“What’s in a Name?” Present and Future at ‘Hamlet’s Castle’

Kronborg’s Shakespearean connection has placed the castle in a liminal position. It is both a local site invested with national symbolism and a global heritage with an international performance tradition. The unofficial, but largely prevailing renaming of Kronborg as ‘Hamlet’s Castle’ signals an identity which is best defined as hyperreal in postmodernist terms, and which will most likely continue to outshine historicity. One of the most recent productions to visit the castle was Shakespeare’s Globe’s ‘Globe-to-Globe’ *Hamlet*, which was performed there on

21 April 2016. Interviews with actors on the Elsinorian experience are loaded with words such as “hallowed ground”, “atmospheric”, “ominous” and “profound”. However, the choice of Kronborg as the penultimate stop on the world tour also shows that as atmospheric as the salty Elsinorian air may be, it cannot quite compete with the largest Shakespearean simulacrum of them all: Shakespeare’s Globe. Hamlet is only almost home in Elsinore before he finally returns to the origin of origins and the centre of centres: London. In other words, Shakespearean locations on the world map can be seen to follow a geographical-symbolic hierarchical order underscored by where and when the largest and most prestigious celebration is to take place.¹⁶

In recent years, scholarship on Shakespeare’s global presence has attempted to destabilize such notions of geographical centres and origins, and argued that something like a rhizomatic web of connections is more meaningful and appropriate (Huang 282), but hierarchies die hard, and within the current turn from globalization (and return to demarcations of nationalist interests) questions as to whom and where Shakespeare belongs may be refuelled and fraught with anxieties. One might hope that Kronborg—and other Shakespearean locations—can influence the debate by accentuating and developing an intercultural identity. While Kronborg and Elsinore cannot quite compete with more famous hyperreal homes of Hamlet and Shakespeare, they do have a Shakespearean performance tradition which has provided—and continues to provide—a rather unique and purposeful occasion for intercultural intersections of Shakespearean text, place, performers and audiences. As a Shakespearean location Kronborg will have to continue to negotiate its identity in terms of local-global discourses and it may be no less immune to competing ideologies than it was in the 1930s. Yet as a performance space what ‘Hamlet’s Castle’ can simultaneously offer is occasion for self-reflection through the consideration of other perspectives—an urgent need in the current political climate.

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¹⁶ One might also note that the date of the Kronborg performance was *almost* on 23 April, but not quite: the date on which Shakespeare is supposed to have been born and died—and the most important date in the Shakespearean year of 2016—was not surprisingly reserved for London.

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