

The Strangers' Case: 'Viralizing' Shakespeare

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THE STRANGERS' CASE

Even early on in what has been termed “the refugee crisis” in Europe, Western news outlets and cultural institutions including *Shakespeare's Globe* started employing the famous “The Strangers' Case” speech from the Elizabethan play *Sir Thomas More* as a decontextualized trans-historical symbol of the humanitarian core of the issue to illustrate their coverage. In wanting to align themselves with the liberal ideologies that recognize the devastation that refugees experience, certain online communities have embraced this quote, allowing for it to gain viral traction. The speech in question was originally censored in the 1590s, for fear of incitement of xenophobic aggression in a historical moment that offers striking parallels to the present. The apparent affective potential of the quote, recognized by Elizabethan authorities, is now used to rouse support for “the strangers' case.”

RESCUE OPERATIONS IN THE MEDITERRANEAN

The Berlin based organization *Sea-Watch* calls the refugee route across the Mediterranean “the deadliest border in the world.” The humanitarian crisis caused by the conflict between the reality of migration and the reluctance of governments to provide a practicable solution has become symbolic of the refugee crisis, even iconic through shocking images such as that of the drowned boy Alan Kurdi. Although the case was embraced internationally as a symbol of empathy towards refugees' plight, it has not resulted in immediate government action: in April 2019 the rescue vessel named for the dead boy was kept at sea in dangerous conditions for 10 days with over 60 rescued plus crew on board while governments negotiated about their future, in a moment of rising concerns amongst both governments and citizens in the EU about how mass scale migration was bound to affect the socio-cultural fabric of Europe.

CONNECTION

Both the current image and the 400 year old decontextualized fictional speech have been used to throw light on this humanitarian cause and to prompt authoritative calls to action. The wide circulation of the images of migration today, although impactful, has arguably reduced the crisis to a spectacle, that contrary to the earlier motives of the employment of both the quote and the images tends to desensitise perception of the affected victims. The viral traction that images of the migration crisis have garnered suggests great empathy among people but how this has translated into tangible monetary action and an informed understanding of migrants' struggles remains an open question.

● This article is more than 3 years old

William Shakespeare's handwritten plea for refugees to go online

Sir Thomas More script is only surviving copy of a play in the bard's hand and is one of 300 texts being digitised in run-up to British Library exhibition

QUARTZ

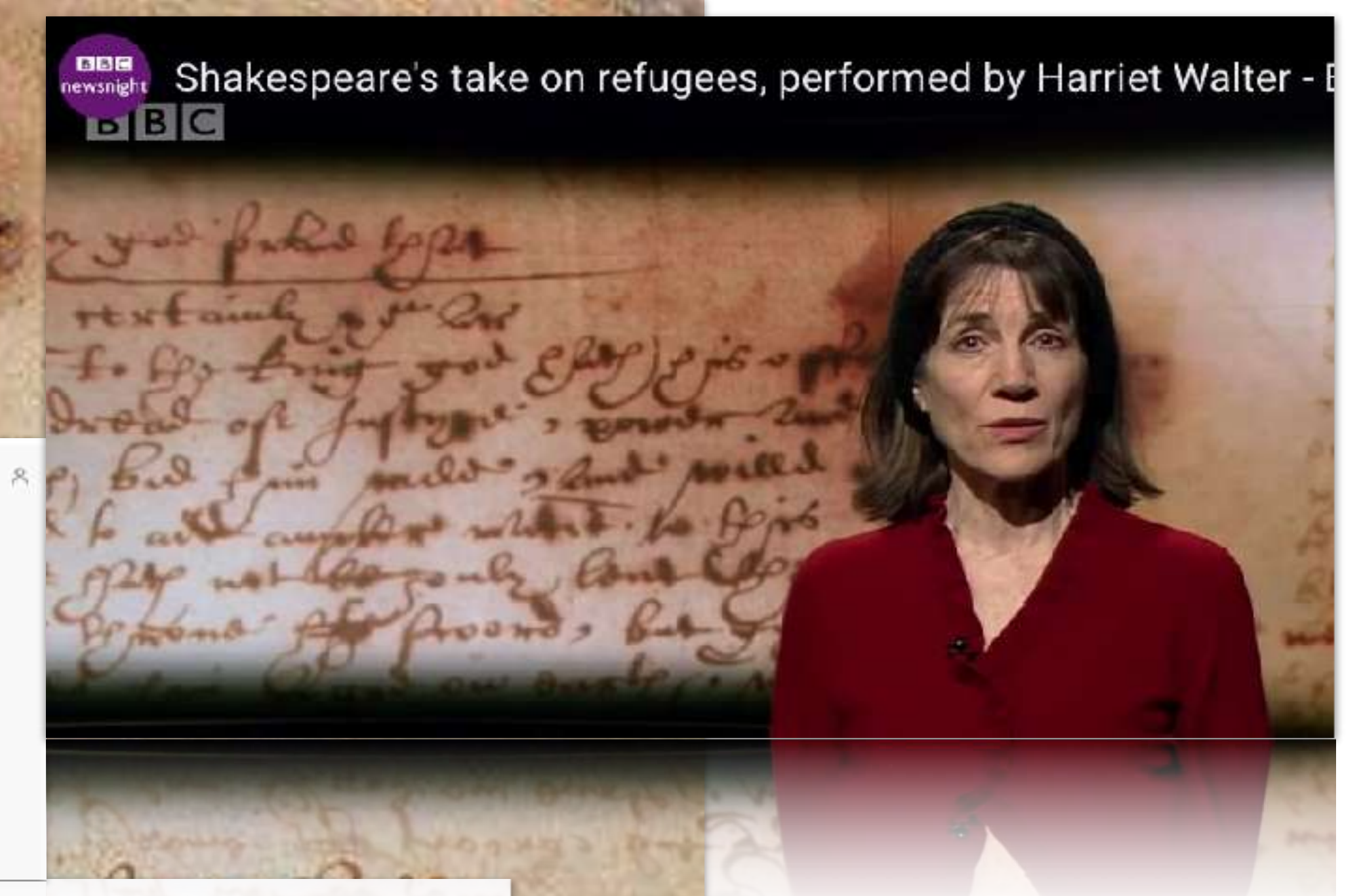
PLEA FOR HUMANITY

The banned 400-year-old Shakespearean speech being used for refugee rights today

By Anne Gault • September 21, 2016



“[...]Their babies at their backs and their poor luggage,
Plodding to the ports and coasts for transportation,
And that you sit as kings in your desires.
[...] Say now the king [...] banish you, whither would you go?
What country, by the nature of your error,
Should give you harbour? go you to France or Flanders,
To any German province, to Spain or Portugal,
Nay, any where that not adheres to England,
Why, you must needs be strangers: would you be pleased
To find a nation of such barbarous temper,
That, breaking out in hideous violence,
Would not afford you an abode on earth, [...]
- Sir Thomas More



CONTACT INFORMATION

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References

<https://sea-watch.org>
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4Bss2or4n74>
<https://qz.com/786163/the-banned-400-year-old-shakespearean-speech-being-used-for-refugee-rights-today/>
<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/mar/15/william-shakespeare-handwritten-plea-for-refugees-online-sir-thomas-more-script-play-british-library-exhibition>
https://www.huffpost.com/entry/shakespearean-speech-used-to-support-refugees_n_57e2b0b7e4b0e80b1b9f8ad7
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DiLwv-G9COQ>

“We are being systematically targeted by EU governments and institutions as political enemies, simply for defending people's right to live and survive and for working to restore accountability and the rule of law in the Central Mediterranean Sea.”

- Sea-Watch