

LION-SHIPS, SIRENS AND ILLUMINATED CARTOGRAPHY

Deploying heraldic and folkloric figures in critique of Brexit

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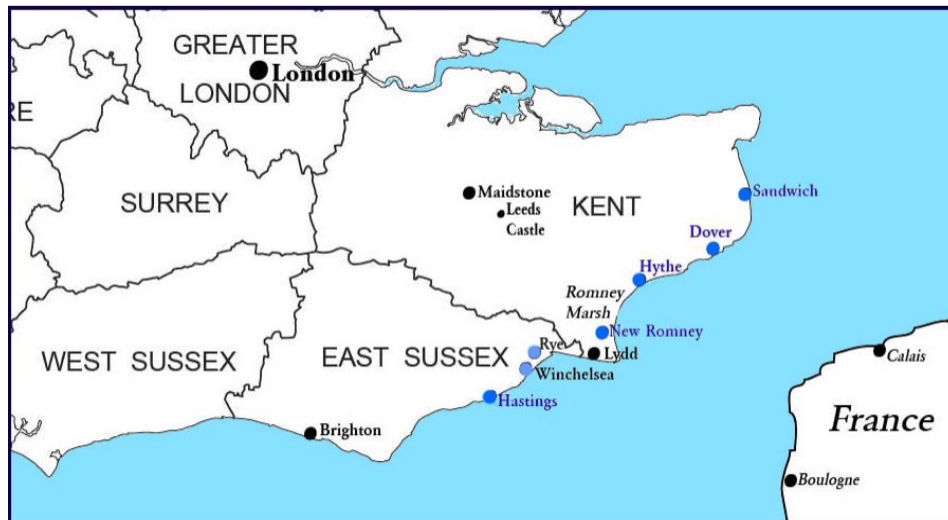
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ABSTRACT: This short research note provides an introduction to the lion-ship symbol of England's Cinque Ports (comprising the head, forelegs and upper torso of a lion and the middle and rear section of a 13th Century turreted wooden warship) and an artist's statement concerning my deployment of it alongside the more established figure of the (mermaid-form) siren in a recent artwork entitled 'Brexit Wrexite' that reflects my feelings about the United Kingdom's 2017 vote to leave the European Union. These figures are juxtaposed over a freely rendered map of Western Europe, providing a form of illuminated cartography. Discussion of the overall work, of details from it and their inspiration point to the manner in which long-established heraldic motifs and cultural figures contain embedded meanings that can be activated in fresh contexts to illuminate current socio-political developments.

KEYWORDS: Lion-ship, Siren, Mermaid, Heraldry, Brexit, Cinque Ports

The Cinque Ports, originally comprising the five coastal towns of Sandwich, Dover, Hythe, New Romney and Hastings (but later expanded to include Rye and Winchelsea as associate areas) are located on south-eastern coast of England. The ports and owe their collective identity and designation to the importance they assumed in the 12th and early 13th Centuries as England's front line of defence against potential aggression from French forces located in close proximity across the English Channel. Their importance to the English Crown led them to enjoy particular privileges in confederation, such as exemptions from most royal taxes, a degree of self-governance and their own system of law courts, in return for supplying and supporting warships in the service of the Crown at times of war (Murray, 1935). The ports' importance diminished in the 14th and 15th centuries due to various factors, such as the establishment of a Royal Navy during the Tudor period. Despite this, the confederated Cinque Ports continued to exist – albeit as a diminished and archaic entity – for several centuries and with their remaining privileges being removed by the Great Reform Act of 1832 (ibid). The ports' status as a collective is now largely a notional/historical one, its name mainly being retained by local sports and leisure organisations, as public house names (and their signs)¹ and with their original entity being principally commemorated in the shield discussed below.

¹ Such as the Cinque Port Arms in Hastings whose sign is a variant of the Cinque Port shield, see: <https://pubshistory.com/SussexPubs/Hastings/CinquePortArms.shtml> - accessed 29th May 2018.



Map of Kent showing the locations of Cinque Ports (in blue) (source: <http://www.historichampshire.org/research/searching3.htm> – accessed 30th May 2018)

The Cinque Ports' heraldic symbol (Figure 2), bestowed by the Royal College of Heralds in 1305, takes the form of a shield, unadorned by supporting figures or a motto, that conjoins two elements, lions and wooden warships, through the device of a vertical divide across the shield. This design element is an artistic conceit in that heraldry often combines the designs of two existing shields (such as family coats-of-arms) with each other so that the left-hand side (the sinister, in heraldic terminology) shows the left-hand portion of one and the right hand (the dexter) shows the other (a process known in heraldry as dimidiation). In some instances, the designs of each allow for a balanced juxtaposition of elements, occasionally to novel visual and/or symbolic effect, while on others the central divide simply yokes two heterogeneous sets of imagery and/or design vectors. The central design element of the Cinque Ports shield can be identified as a 'conceit' since the Cinque Ports shield does not actually combine two distinct shields but rather combines a shield showing three lions deployed horizontally (not rampant in heraldic discourse) – a motif long associated with England – with an implied preceding shield image that shows three wooden sailing ships deployed in a similar manner. Given that the horizontally combined design represented the first shield created for the Cinque Ports there was no actually preceding three ships shield that was incorporated into it.² This aspect allowed the shield's designer to integrate the three lions with the wooden ships at their mid points, using the images in such proportion that their central sections have an approximate continuity of breadth, making them appear as unified portmanteau figures. In this manner, they can be perceived to exist as integrate entities. Given the lack of any previous term to describe their form, I have characterised them as 'lion-ships'. The mermaid-form siren I use in my work 'Brexit Wrexite' has a much broader lineage in a range of visual arts traditions (including those discussed elsewhere in this special issue of *Shima*) that its design form requires no such discussion as to its pictorial origins in this context. It is however worth noting that while the mermaid conjoins human and piscine form, the lion-ship goes a step further by combining animate and inanimate elements.

² Although the three ships design was adapted for a horizontal rectangular format that was officially adopted as the flag of the Cinque Ports Authority in 2017 – see Flag Institute, 2017: online).

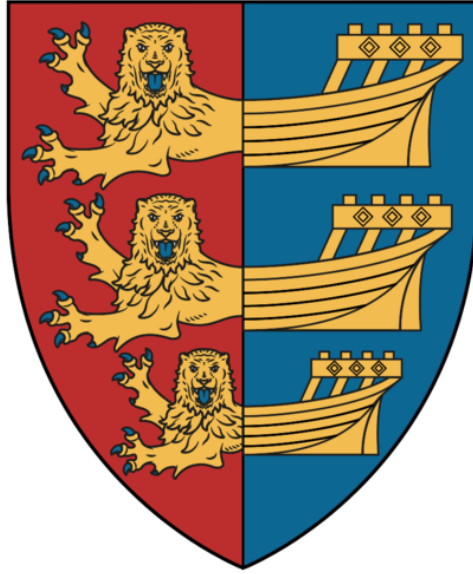


Figure 2 – Cinque Ports shield design (1305)

(source: http://wappenwiki.org/index.php/Cinque_Ports - accessed 30th May 2018)

The symbolism of the shield and the historical importance of the Cinque Ports themselves clearly chimes with the theme of Britain's exit from the European Union (acronymically referred to as 'Brexit') and tensions on either side of the English Channel that arose during the anti-EU campaign that was mounted in the 2000s and early-mid 2010s by UKIP (the United Kingdom Independence Party) until it secured its goal in the 2016 referendum that saw the leave vote secure a narrow victory (by 51.9%) that has yet to be implemented by the Conservative Government charged with pursuing it.

Since the 1980s I have produced an intermittent series of works that illuminate short poetic texts through visual designs rendered in pencil and watercolour. Two examples of these are entitled after their source texts, 'The Mower against Gardens' (1985) after Andrew Marvell eponymous poem (c1652) and 'They flee from me that sometime did me seek' (1990) after Thomas Wyatt's poem (c1530). These works incorporate sections of text from the poems and develop visual motifs from these in combination with more personal imagery to interpret and comment on the texts in modern day contexts. I drew on this practice when designing my 2018 work 'Brexit Wrexite'. I initially considered the opening lines of Horace's poem 'Ars Poetica' (19 BCE) as a central quotation/motif:

If a painter should wish to unite a horse's neck to a human head, and spread a variety of plumage over limbs [of different animals] taken from every part [of nature], so that what is a beautiful woman in the upper part terminates unsightly in an ugly fish below; could you, my friends, refrain from laughter, were you admitted to such a sight?

The idea of the figure of the mermaid being a laughing stock initially appealed to me as it accorded with my and many other people's responses to the Brexit campaign and referendum result. But the image was somewhat one dimensional in expressing the complexity of the

phenomena involved and I finally settled on a short verse written by Philip Hayward following discussion with him about his own work and about the inclusion of an artwork by me in second iteration of the 'Mermaids and Modernity' exhibition in Australia in December 2018– February 2019.³ His short, untitled and satirical text, written in a stilted and somewhat pompous style typical of Victorian era patriotic verse (and evoking the style and sentiments of the British anthem 'Rule Britannia') provided a lyrical pretext for the tone of my painting and the individual encounters between lion-ships and sirens depicted within it.



Figure 3 – 'Brexit Wrexit' Lucy Guenot (2018)

³ The exhibition initially ran at Sydney's Macquarie University Gallery in March-April 2018 and then transferred to Cowra Regional Gallery with additional works (including 'Brexit Wrexit').

The original Cinque Port towns of Dover, Hastings, Hythe, New Romney and Sandwich, located on England's south east coast, all voted to leave the EU, so it seemed appropriate that the lion-ship figure should be a pro-Brexit spokesman. This figure was incorporated into a shield design (Figure 5) modelled on that of the port of Hastings granted in 1634 (Figure 4), which shows a variation of the Cinque ports shield (Figure 2) by having the central lion-ship replaced by a conventional lion. I decided to transpose the new UKIP party lion head logo onto the lower lion-ship figure and colour the boat yellow and purple. These 2 colours are identified as the colours of UKIP and the fact that yellow and purple sit directly opposite each other on the colour wheel gives them a tension.



Figure 4 – Hastings shield design (source: Heraldry of the World: <http://www.ngw.nl/heraldrywiki/index.php?title=Hastings> - accessed 30h May 2018)



Figure 5 – Shield Detail from 'Brexit Wrexit' (Lucy Guenot, 2018)

The tension between the remain and leave camps is still very evident in the UK. I tried to show this tension in the representation of the British Isles (Figure 6). Scotland voted to remain in the EU, so it is shown trying to separate/move away from England and Wales. Similarly, the confusion and lack of clear solution to the border problem raised between the Republic of Ireland (remaining in the EU) and Northern Ireland (which voted to leave) is illustrated as a rift. A crack is also appearing between Wales and England as the trend towards independence grows.



Figure 6 – (Dis)United Kingdom map detail from 'Brexith Wrexith' (Lucy Guenot, 2018)

Amongst all this, the mermaids are attempting to calm the waters, acting as mediators and listening to the different factions whilst the government in London spouts sound-bites, platitudes and general hot air as personal political ambition and party-political expediency dominate (non)action, and as media coverage is increasingly clouded by this fog of verbiage. An observing eye (in the sea) looks on and weeps.

When I received the invitation to contribute to the 'Mermaids and Modernity' exhibition, I felt I had to incorporate the phrase "Brexith Wrexith"⁴ which has been rolling around my head ever since the referendum result in 2016. The medieval art characteristics of the Cinque Port coat of arms gave rise the illuminated manuscript style for the lettering. The initial B contains 2 figures: one shooting himself in the foot, and the other cutting off his ear to spite his face. A pie chart of the EU referendum votes and voter turnout sits centrally in the letter: 18,099,999 not on the electoral register, 12,948,018 non-voters, 16,141,241 remain voters (red) and 17,410,742 leave voters (yellow). A crying mermaid touches the B, her back turned on the disintegrating EU flag that flaps forlornly above the Brexith landscape (Figure 7).

⁴ The later term being an alternate spelling and condensation of the phrase "Wrecks it" that rhymes with the acronym "Brexith", coined to describe Britain's exit from the EU. The derivation of the phrase is unclear but has been attributed to Stanley Johnson, father of pro-Brexit Conservative politician Boris Johnson (Burton-Cartledge, 2016: online).



Figure 7 – Illuminated letter B, siren and EU Flag details from ‘Brexit Wrexit’ (Lucy Guenot, 2018)

The mermaids are mostly all represented in a medieval art style. I am attracted to their stoic, serious and slightly grumpy expressions and apparent physical strength. They are never seen to be smiling (which I see as a refreshing counter-balance to clichéd simpering mermaids) and I wanted them to appear as strong women not to be messed with. The mermaid to the right of the UKIP/Brexit lion (Figure 3) is based figures depicted in the 1562 map of America by Diego Gutiérrez and Hieronymus Cock (Figure 8) in which the oceans are populated by all types of sea monsters and fantastic fish. These mermaids have very strong muscular fish/snake-like tails and sit off the west coast of Patagonia, combing their hair and apparently blocking the passage of a sailing ship. In my rendition, the comb and mirror have been ditched, as the mermaid appears to be preparing to throw something at the Brexit lion.



Figure 8 – Detail from Diego Gutiérrez and Hieronymus Cock’s *Americae sive quartae orbis partis nova et exactissima descriptio* (1562) (Wikimedia Commons, 2018)

In a similar manner to the above, in another section of the image one of the mermaids has her arms around the neck of one of the Cinque Port lions and seems to be attempting to sink him (Figure 9). Her expressionless face may confuse the lion, who maybe misinterprets this physical contact as an amorous embrace even as he intones a patriotic rejection of her charms

(and – in the fourth line – a rejection of the possibility of a second vote on leaving the EU) represented in a speech bubble:

*So arch and dive, preen and pout
Flaunt upon your shores
Steadfast we sail, steadfast we guard
We'll call for no encores*

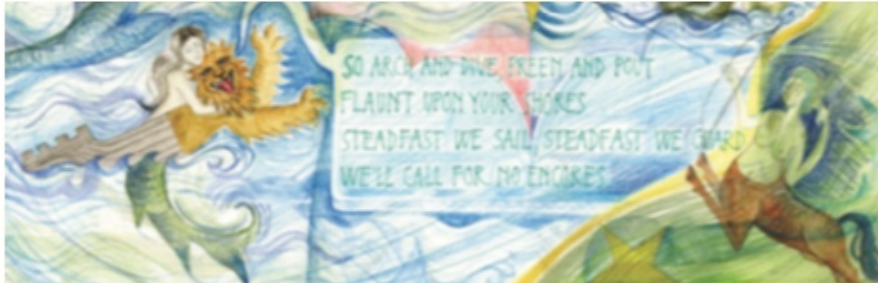


Figure 9 – Lower image detail from 'Brexit Wrexit' (Lucy Guenot, 2018)

Standing on the continental Europe coastline is a centaur firing an arrow at the UKIP/Brexit lion. One of the yellow stars of the European flag guides the way. My rendition of this mythical beast has a human female top half, and male horse lower half. Centaurs were often used to represent a division between a higher nature and more base instincts. I like this male/female ambiguity, which plays with the 'half and half' characteristics of mermaids. The female/male centaur is an animal of strength that has the power to intimidate. Similarly, the tall fish-tailed figure at on the right-hand edge of the artwork (Figure 2) is an androgynous one with a mixture of female and male attributes. S/he reaches out into the black storm clouds that sit on the horizon of the Brexit world. I see this figure as a representation of the full spectrum of gender and as such s/he embodies an unbiased, open-minded attitude and appears as a calm observer and chronicler of the ongoing story of Brexit. One of the 12 stars of the EU flag wraps itself round his/her neck but s/he remains dispassionate.

The visual text (and adopted title) of 'Brexit Wrexit' express my feelings about the rise of UKIP, the success of the leave campaign in the referendum and the implications of Britain's planned exit from the EU. In order to address this complex and gnarly topic I returned to the mixed media (pencil and watercolour) approach that typified my work in the 1990s. While my recent artistic activity has become more pared-down, in the form of text-only works, this didn't feel appropriate for what I was attempting in 'Brexit Wrexit'. Attempting to represent the historical and discursive swirls that typify the United Kingdom's relationship to Europe – and to the narrow English Channel/La Manche in particular – I decided to use figurative representations of mermaids and ship-lions along with text and impressionistic cartography. The encounters between mermaids and lion-ships in the tableau illustrate the clashes of sensibilities (and of sense and nonsense) involved in Brexit. In depicting such interactions, I appear to have created the first encounters between the ancient folkloric figure of the mermaid and the 13th Century heraldic motif of the ship-lion in a single artwork. In this manner, the artwork is stepped in history in its attempt to characterise a 21st Century moment in which disjuncture and disruption dominate and disrupt the Western European order.

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