Rhetoric and audience reception: An analysis of Theresa May's vision of Britain and Britishness after Brexit

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Abstract

This article demonstrates the value of rhetorical audience studies for analysing constructions of 'the nation' and national identity. A key strength of this approach is its recognition of the interplay between the rhetorical situation, the text of the speech, and the audience's responses to that rhetoric. Using the historical method for investigating rhetoric and its reception, the article examines Theresa May's efforts to bring the nation together after the 2016 referendum and to offer an inspiring vision of post-Brexit Britain. A textual analysis shows that her rhetoric of Britishness was constructed around an imagined audience of Leave voters, and thus excluded Remainers from her conceptions of Britain and 'the British people'. The audience reception study supports this finding, as it reveals two competing myths of 'the nation' which in turn constituted rival subject positions. In short, May's epideictic failed to unite the country behind her conception of a strong, cohesive Global Britain.

According to Tom Freeman (2018), 'Brexit has necessitated attempts to remind the world of what Britain is for, what role the nation will play, free from the shackles of any association with the European project'. It has also demanded a renewal of the national community, uniting the people behind a vision of what Britain will be when it leaves the European Union. The (re)definition of community is a function of *epideictic* rhetoric, whereby a speaker articulates shared values that, in turn, provide a starting point for the attribution of praise or blame. Such renewals take place periodically – on Remembrance Sunday, for instance – but they also occur at times of change. Here, as Celeste Michelle Condit (1985: 289) explains, 'the *epideictic* speaker will be called forth by the community to help

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discover what the event means to the community, and what the community will come to be in the face of the new event'. Following a moment as significant as the 2016 vote to leave the European Union (EU), the construction of a collective self-image takes on a new urgency. The role of *epideictic* rhetoric in this process, and how it was received by audiences, is the focus of this article.

To date, studies of Brexit and political language have typically employed discourse analysis (e.g. Daddow, 2019; Koller et al., 2019; Zappettini and Krzyżanowski, 2019). Broadly speaking, this approach – like rhetorical enquiry – is concerned with the 'dynamic, often temporally changeable meanings that shape social practices and that are actively transformed across time and space' (Martin, 2014: 11), as well as with the creation of subject positions. However, these methods diverge in two respects that are pertinent to this article. First, discourse analysis 'pays insufficient attention to the questions of why certain . . . discourses [and subjectivities] . . . come to be accepted over others, and of how these dominant interpretations are contested, transformed and (perhaps) superseded' (Atkins, 2018: 4). By contrast, the rhetorical approach attends to how a speaker constructs an issue (or social identity) and persuades others to accept this definition (or identify with this subject position), so paving the way for collective action. Second, whereas discourses 'organise social practices . . . rhetorical analysis explores the moments at which discursive "regimes" are introduced and reproduced through argument' (Martin, 2014: 11–12). In other words, rhetorical enquiry concentrates on situated encounters, on specific interventions that seek to become effective discourses. The situatedness of these occasions also permits consideration of how a speaker imagines their audience, while rhetorical reception analysis facilitates investigation of whether audience members identify with this construction of themselves.

These features of rhetorical enquiry enable it to shed valuable light on how Brexit, the nation, and 'the British people' have been (re)defined since 2016. Consequently, the article also makes a contribution to the literature on Britishness. On Robert Hazell's (2007: 105; see also Kellner, 2007; Mycock, 2010) view, notions of Britain and Britishness 'rest not just on shared values, but on shared interests and shared experience and a common set of institutions to give expression to those shared interests'. Other scholars, meanwhile, have studied the national myths and narratives that underpin such constructions of 'the nation' and British identity (e.g. Langlands, 1999; Marquand, 2007; Pryor, 2007). A rhetorical approach extends these lines of enquiry by facilitating examination of how elements from the two strands are (re)presented and (re)combined in *epideictic* speeches, where they are the objects of approbation. Moreover, by acknowledging the importance of audiences – both real and imagined – rhetorical analysis can explain why some visions of 'the nation' and 'the people' gain traction with the public while others do not. By doing so, it provides a distinct perspective on questions of national identity at a time when they are increasingly salient.

Through an examination of Theresa May's efforts to redefine Britain and Britishness during her premiership, the article demonstrates the value of rhetorical audience studies for analysing conceptions of 'the nation' and national identity. In part, this case is chosen because – unlike her two immediate predecessors as prime minister[1] – May sought to fuse her vision of Britain with an account of its global role. More importantly, however, it yields insights into why May's account of Britishness did not capture the public imagination. The article begins by discussing the rhetorical techniques used to affirm a shared national identity, before outlining the historical method for studying audience reception. It then locates the May premiership in its social and political context, and proceeds to

analyse her conception of Britain and Britishness. Here, the article identifies tensions in her rhetoric, which it attributes to her overly narrow conception of her audience. Finally, the article examines how empirical audiences responded to May's efforts to redefine the community and national identity. The analysis shows that May frequently constructed her rhetoric around an imagined audience of Leave supporters, thereby excluding and, at times, antagonising pro-Europeans. By marginalising this substantial proportion of her actual audience, May failed to unite the country behind her vision of Britain after Brexit.

Rhetoric, national identity, and audience reception

As noted earlier, *epideictic* rhetoric uses praise and blame to create 'a sense of communion centred around particular values recognised by the audience' (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1969: 51). Equally, a speaker might hail an institution or a remarkable individual as an exemplar of these values, and so seek to engender collective pride in the nation's achievements. A shared national heritage provides a further resource for the attribution of praise. Here, the rhetor may identify certain historical events as proof of the nation's inherent superiority or virtue, while glossing over others (see Marquand, 2009: 15). This is the rhetorical technique of invention and, for the analyst, the persons or episodes omitted from such narratives can reveal much about the speaker's aims and their intended audience. One such goal might be to 'create an identity for [their] community through a process of exclusion' (Jasinski, 2001: 213). In rhetorical terms, this is an example of *antithesis*, whereby 'our' values and way of life are lauded and those of an 'enemy' state are condemned: 'we' are a 'righteous people' (Jasinski, 2001: 213) and 'they' are a morally degenerate Other.

The values, institutions, history, and 'unique' character of a nation are termed common topics (*topoi*), which a speaker assumes are shared by their listeners. Through invention, a collective identity is constructed from these commonplaces, and this in turn is 'sustained and strengthened through . . . rhetorical acts of display and celebration of the shared *topoi*' (Kjeldsen, 2019: 227). Such subject positions include 'the silent majority' and 'the British people' and, by assigning positive traits to these subjectivities, the speaker encourages their listeners to identify with them. In short, *epideictic* underpins our self-definition as political subjects (Vatnøy, 2015: 10). It is worth highlighting that these inventions are not a phenomenon, but a process. After all, they are 'conjured into objective reality, remain so long as the rhetoric which defined them has force, and in the end wilt away, becoming once again merely a collection of individuals' (McGee, 1975: 242). Their impact may be of longer duration, however, if the rhetor's aim is to marginalise. Here, an act of communal sharing may exclude certain individuals who live within the territorial boundaries of the community (Condit, 1985: 289), and so risks alienating those designated as members of the out-group.

The idea of 'the people' is central to the rhetoric of national identity, where it is intertwined with social and political myths. In *epideictic* speeches, such myths 'function as a means of providing social unity and collective identity. Indeed, "the people" *are* the social and political myths they accept' (McGee, 1975: 247, emphasis in original). Once again, these myths are a product of rhetorical invention, a selective retelling of history that is intended to confer meaning on the past and, with its promises of continuity, to assuage concerns about the future (Niebuhr, 1967: 40; Probst, 2003: 45–46). More importantly for our purposes, social and political myths portray the nation's role in historical events in a favourable light, so constructing a collective self-image that underpins its claims to superiority on

the international stage (Niebuhr, 1967: 40) and affords a basis for self-praise. As these myths are (re)interpreted, generations also change, and with each new generation comes 'a new "people", defined not by circumstances or behaviour, but by their collective faith in a rhetorical vision' (McGee, 1975: 246). Consequently, there will be multiple myths and conceptions of 'the people' within a community, which in turn may lead to social tension (Atkins, 2016: 606).

Invention is also vital to the construction of audiences. As Alan Finlayson (2012: 763) explains, '"the audience" is not a unitary or stable referent and is always in some measure a fictive creation around which rhetorical invention is built'. In other words, a speaker imagines their audience and tailors their rhetoric accordingly. This process is more complex in contemporary societies, where audiences are increasingly variegated. Consequently, the speaker must deploy a multiplicity of arguments if they are to persuade their listeners (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1969: 22). From an analytical perspective, an appreciation of these imagined audiences is undoubtedly valuable, but what of the actual audience who read, view, and listen to rhetoric? To date, most scholars have overlooked this empirical audience in favour of textual analyses, which preclude a comprehensive account of the workings and effects of rhetoric (Kjeldsen, 2018: 4).[2] After all, audiences are active participants who interpret and respond to rhetorical texts which, by virtue of their multiple meanings (polysemy), will not affect each member in the same way (Stromer-Galley and Schiappa, 1998). In turn, these unpredictable reactions are 'crucial beyond their consequences for the reception of a given speech, because they drive future iterations of rhetoric' (Toye, 2018: 88) – the crafting of which is influenced by expectations of how an audience will respond. Thus, by acknowledging the power of the audience, reception studies can yield insights into the power of rhetoric (Kjeldsen, 2018: 7).

According to Jens E. Kjeldsen (2018: 8), rhetorical audience studies facilitate understanding of 'the interaction between the rhetorical situation, the characteristics of the utterances, and the audience uptake and its negotiation of the rhetoric' (Kjeldsen, 2018: 8). Reception studies may be conducted using focus groups and protocol analysis but, given the May premiership is now in the past, an historical method is most suitable. This entails a four-stage process, the first of which is to locate the speaker in their social, political, and cultural context (Kjeldsen 2018: 11–12; Toye, 2018: 87–88). The second is to consider evidence related to the drafting of the text. As this article examines six speeches, this stage is omitted for reasons of space. However, the speechwriters' conceptions of their audiences will be integrated into the third stage. This step demands a rhetorical analysis of the texts, having established their reliability by checking them against delivery. Here, as Richard Toye (2018: 94) observes, 'evidence of interruptions, laughter or applause can be very useful'. Fourth, it is necessary to investigate the media and public responses to the speeches. To this end, the article draws on newspapers, blogposts, and social media from both sides of the Brexit debate. It now applies the historical method to May's rhetoric of Britishness and its reception.

May's premiership in context

Following the Remain side's defeat in the EU referendum and the resignation of David Cameron, May (2016a) was elected Leader of the Conservative Party and became Prime Minister on 13 July 2016. Speaking outside Number 10, she pledged to lead a one-nation government and expressed her commitment to 'a union not just between the nations of the United Kingdom but between all of our citizens, every one of us, whoever we are and

wherever we're from' (May, 2016a). Her aim here was twofold: to bring the country back together and to offer her listeners an optimistic vision of a post-Brexit future. May enjoyed a brief honeymoon period, during which she was 'riding high in the polls . . . in control of Cabinet, the party and agenda' (Seldon, 2019: xiii). This came to an end with the snap general election of 2017, which ostensibly was called to strengthen May's hand in the Brexit negotiations. However, it cost her government its parliamentary majority and in turn led to a confidence-and-supply agreement with the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP).

May's weakened position emboldened the hard-Eurosceptic Conservative members of parliament (MPs) of the European Research Group (ERG), who had 'banked her promises of a hard Brexit in her first term' (Seldon, 2019: xix), to push for a departure without a deal. Moreover, the practicalities of leaving the EU resulted in concerns over the long-term stability of Northern Ireland and in growing calls for Scottish independence. Against this backdrop, the United Kingdom was negotiating the terms of its exit with the EU, and an agreement was approved on 25 November 2018. May's next challenge was to secure the passage of the deal through the House of Commons, for which she required the support of the ERG, the DUP, and Brexit-supporting Labour MPs (Seldon, 2019: xx). To the annoyance of EU leaders, MPs rejected the deal three times between January and March 2019, and the Prime Minister announced her resignation on 24 May (BBC, 2019).

This article analyses six set-piece speeches, of which five were delivered in the United Kingdom. Among the latter are May's addresses to the Conservative Party conferences of 2016, 2017, and 2018, which were 'chiefly or ostensibly' (Toye, 2018: 92) directed to Conservative Party supporters, but they were relayed to the British public and around the world by the mass media and the Internet. Due to Brexit, EU leaders were paying particularly close attention to May's words. The article also examines May's three keynote speeches on Brexit, which were delivered at Lancaster House and Mansion House, and in Florence. With the exception of Florence, which was chiefly directed to a European audience (Seldon, 2019: 341), these addresses were primarily for domestic consumption. At this point, it is important to note that political speeches – and party conference speeches, in particular – are 'typically hybrids of the deliberative and *epideictic* genre' (Kranert, 2019: 72), and that only the latter elements are examined here. We consider May's rhetoric of national identity below.

May's vision of Britain and Britishness: Our 'precious Union'

In her speech to her 2016 party conference, May (2016b) claimed that 'the lesson of Britain is that we are a country built on the bonds of family, community, citizenship. Of strong institutions and a strong society'. This organic view of society is consistent with traditional conservatism, while May's use of the pronoun 'we' was intended to unite herself and her listeners behind the myth of One Nation. Interestingly, May (2016b) then shifted from the collective to the personal, praising Britain as 'the country of my parents . . . A country of decency, fairness and quiet resolve'. Today, these values of propriety, fair play and 'keeping a stiff upper lip' are closely associated with Englishness and – crucially – with England in the early to mid-20th century (cf. 'the country of my parents'). This mythologised vision was likely to appeal to older Leave supporters (Barber, 2018) both within and outside the Conservative Party, which suggests they were May's primary imagined audience (see Marlow-Stevens and Hayton, 2020: 5). Indeed, the *antithesis* she created between Brexit voters and the 'well off and comfortable', for whom the Leave

side's victory was 'simply bewildering' (May 2016b), marginalised pro-Europeans and thus lends weight to this interpretation. At the same time, it risked deepening the division between these two factions, which was at odds with May's stated aim of rebuilding Britain as One Nation.

May's 2017 conference speech advanced a very different notion of Britishness, which was founded on a broader conception of her audience. This event took place four months after the Manchester Arena bombing, and May (2017a) condemned the perpetrator and his supporters as 'those who hate our country and despise our values', so excluding them from the national community. To create communion with the electorate, May (2017a) praised Britain for:

> The way in which our society is open, accepting, and tolerant of others. The fact that we celebrate diversity and champion difference. The way we encourage people from all backgrounds and beliefs to live their lives in freedom. To be all they want to be.

Most importantly, she continued, Manchester responded to the attack with a demonstration of solidarity, presenting to the world 'an image of modern Britain in all its diversity, compassion and strength' (May, 2017a). Here, the city functioned as a 'representative anecdote' (Burke, 1969: 326), a part that stood for the nation as a whole, while its citizens exemplified the best qualities of the 'British people'.

The stark contrast between this inclusive version of Britishness and May's parochialism of 2016 shows how national identity can be (re)defined to meet the expectations of different audiences and for a range of rhetorical purposes. Following a terrorist attack, convention demands that a prime minister projects an image of strength and unity, and so May needed to construct her rhetoric with the diverse national audience in mind. Although she succeeded on this occasion, it was arguably an exception to the rule. If we accept Anthony Seldon's (2019: xii) claim that the reference point for May's premiership 'was not the UK as a whole but Maidenhead, middle class, conservative, white and inward-looking' then, by implication, this was the imagined audience for many of her speeches. By targeting her rhetoric at this constituency, May omitted a significant portion of the population from her vision of 'the nation', and thereby limited its appeal to her highly variegated empirical audience.

Institutions are a recurring *topos* in the rhetoric of Britishness, and indeed they 'continue to be of huge importance when it comes to shaping and expressing national pride or identity' (McGlynn and Mycock, 2010: 225). Unsurprisingly, they featured in May's *epideictic*, where she described such institutions as the BBC and the National Health Service (NHS) as 'the glue that holds our Union together' (May, 2019). In common with previous prime ministers, May linked the NHS to an account of British values. Thus, she praised it as 'the very essence of solidarity in our United Kingdom. An institution we value. A symbol of our commitment to each other' (May, 2017a; see also May, 2018a). While such claims gloss over the reality that the NHS is four distinct institutions run by Westminster and the devolved administrations, they suggest that, for this section of her speech, May imagined – and sought to align herself with – a wide audience. At the same time, however, her praise for the NHS sat uneasily alongside the spending cuts implemented by successive Conservative governments since 2010 and, as we will see below, this tension alienated sections of her actual audience beyond the conference hall.

A second *topos* in May's rhetoric of Britishness was 'stronger together',[3] which she employed to create a communal identity through an *epideictic* of exclusion. Here, she used the possessive 'our' to rally her audience behind 'our precious union of nations – four nations that are stronger as one', and so positioned the Conservatives as the defenders of the Union and the national interest. However, she then warned that the United Kingdom was under threat from 'those with their narrow, nationalist agendas that seek to drive us apart' (May, 2017a; see also May, 2016b). This divisive force was most likely the supporters of Scottish independence, and May employed the conflict metaphor 'POLITICAL OPPONENTS ARE THE ENEMY' (Charteris-Black, 2005: 94–97) in a bid to delegitimise them. Such an antithesis would have appealed to Scottish Conservatives, who were May's immediate – and most likely her imagined – audience, and to her wider party. Yet, by pushing the Scottish Nationalists 'outside the realm of political acceptability, excluding them from the very principle of unity' (Marlow-Stevens and Hayton, 2020: 9), May risked further antagonising this section of her empirical audience at a time when opposition to Brexit and the desire for independence were placing the Union under considerable strain. In short, her *epideictic* of exclusion was once again at variance with her one-nation vision.

The commonplace 'stronger together' also appeared in May's account of a post-Brexit future, where it was fused with the *topos* of Britain as a nation of inventors[4] and the myth of British exceptionalism, according to which Britain is 'unique among nations and continues to play a key role in international affairs' (Atkins, 2016: 615). Thus, May (2017a, see also May, 2016b) praised the United Kingdom for its track record of innovation, reminding her listeners that

> it was here in Britain that we discovered the structure of DNA, the biological code for life. All the technologies for sequencing the human genome have been developed in this country. And today we are using this knowledge to improve human health.

By virtue of this remarkable capacity for discovery and invention, and 'by coming together as one great union of nations and people', May (2017c) claimed, Britain was uniquely well placed to take advantage of the opportunities ahead and so to flourish outside the EU. This linkage of exceptionalism and national unity formed the core of the Brexiters' belief that, freed from the shackles of the EU, Britain was an 'exceptional nation with a unique contribution to make to global politics' (Daddow, 2019: 14), and therefore, implies that they were May's intended audience. It also underpinned May's case for 'Global Britain', which we examine next.

Beyond Brexit: 'A truly Global Britain'?

According to Lothar Probst (2003: 46), 'modern political myths emphasise the interruption of the past, the emergence of a new beginning – initiated by collective action of people'. In turn, these ruptures can lead to the redefinition of the community and its fundamental ideals. May's (2017b) portrayal of 23 June 2016 as a defining moment in the nation's history is consistent with this observation, and indeed she depicted Leave's victory as a decision by 'the British people' to be a 'global, free-trading nation, able to chart our own way in the world' (May, 2017b). This definition of the referendum result drew on the *topoi* of Britain as a nation of seafarers, as an island nation,[5] that could now rediscover the freedom it supposedly had lost on joining the then European Community (Daddow,

2019: 14). It also invoked the myth of British exceptionalism, and thus was intended to inspire May's imagined audience of Brexiters with an optimistic vision of the future.

May's (2017c) characterisation of the referendum as 'the moment we chose to build a truly Global Britain' raises the question of who was included in this 'we' or, to put it differently, how she envisaged 'the British people'. While Remain voters could argue that Britain was already able to play a global role as an EU member state, May's use of the word 'truly' implies a rejection of this viewpoint; Britain could only fulfil its global destiny outside that organisation. As such, it seems the pronoun 'we' in the earlier quotation encompassed those who had supported Leave and, furthermore, placed May in communion with this audience. If this interpretation is correct then, by extension, May's conception of 'the British people' again disregarded Remainers. To coin a phrase, they were 'citizens of nowhere' (May, 2016b) because they did not share May's worldview. This move was highly divisive, as England and Wales had backed Brexit, but Scotland and Northern Ireland had voted to stay in the EU. So, despite her oft-repeated commitment to the Union, May offered a narrow definition of 'the British people' that sidelined the majority of voters in two of the four nations. While this would have appealed to her imagined audience of Leavers, it prevented her from creating a common 'WE-identity' (Probst, 2003: 46) that would foster identification and national unity – two key goals of her *epideictic* of Britishness.

Based on her interpretation of the vote to leave the EU as a rejection of isolationism, May (2017c) constructed the political myth of 'Global Britain'. She explained that this involved being not only:

> The best friend and neighbour to our European partners, but a country that reaches beyond the borders of Europe too. A country that goes out into the world to build relationships with old friends and new allies alike . . . A great, global trading nation that is respected around the world.

Here, May conferred a positive evaluation on Global Britain through personification, depicting it as capable of forming close, lasting relationships with others. Seeking to inspire her imagined Leave-supporting audience and arouse feelings of national pride, she then drew on the myth of British exceptionalism to praise Brexit as an opportunity for Britain to recapture past glories. Indeed, it is perhaps no coincidence that, of the 'old friends' she mentioned in the speech, Australia, New Zealand, India, and (some of) the Gulf States had previously been under British imperial control. While critics labelled this vision 'Empire 2.0' (e.g. Olusoga, 2017), the inherent nostalgia for Britain's imperial past would have held considerable appeal for May's imagined audience. Moreover, in casting the referendum result in a favourable light, she implicitly positioned Leave voters on the right side of the argument. By extension, Remain supporters were on the wrong side of history and, by resisting Brexit, they were obstructing Britain's pursuit of its global destiny.

Although May (2017c) identified a number of assets that would enable the nation to realise her vision of 'Global Britain', she asserted at Lancaster House that the 'essential ingredient of our success' was the 'strength and support of 65 million people willing us to make [Brexit] happen' (May, 2017c). Indeed, claimed May (2017c), the country was coming back together after the referendum and, moreover, everyone respected the result. 'The victors have the responsibility to act magnanimously' (May, 2017c), she explained, while 'the losers have the responsibility to respect the legitimacy of the outcome. And the country comes together' (May, 2017c). This display of national unity was dubious at best,

as Brexit continued to divide the electorate and MPs alike. Nonetheless, May positively evaluated her imagined audience of Leavers as the agents of Britain's success, while using them as a representative anecdote for the country as a whole. In so doing, she once more silenced the voices of pro-Europeans, while excluding them from her notion of a 'better Britain' (May, 2017c).

The linkage of 'the nation' and its international role was a distinctive feature of May's rhetoric of Britishness, and it lay at the core of her vision of Britain's future outside the EU. Thus, at Mansion House, she described Brexit as 'the means by which we reaffirm Britain's place in the world and renew the ties that bind us here at home' (May, 2018b). At the end of this process, May (2018b) continued, Britain would emerge as a global leader in industry and free trade, as a nation that is 'modern, outward-looking, tolerant', stronger and more unified than before. May's vision of a Global Britain was designed to amplify sentiments of national pride and collective identity in her imagined audience of Brexiters. Indeed, the idea that leaving the EU would herald a return to Britain's glory days echoes the Conservative Party and Eurosceptic media discourse that surrounded the Lisbon Treaty in 2004 (Daddow, 2019: 14). Meanwhile, for international audiences, May's words provided reassurance that the United Kingdom's decision to leave the EU did not constitute a retreat from its global role and responsibilities (see Seldon, 2019: 82). On the contrary, Britain would not only make a success of Brexit, but it would 'thrive in the world' (May, 2018b).

So, how did May view Britain's future relationship with Europe? In her three main speeches on Brexit she stressed that, despite the United Kingdom's departure, 'we are all still European and will stay linked by the many ties and values we have in common' (May, 2018b). Among them were democracy, liberty, human rights, and the rule of law (May, 2017b), and May's appeal to these shared principles was likely targeted at EU leaders. She then proceeded to reassure them that Brexit was not motivated by a desire to damage the bloc but, rather, that it was a vote 'to restore, as we see it, our parliamentary democracy, national self-determination, and to become even more global and internationalist in action and in spirit' (May, 2017c). This explanation reproduced the Eurosceptic narrative in which the EU is depicted as a 'chronic threat to national identity' (Gifford, 2010: 332) and popular sovereignty, and the Conservative Party is cast as the defender of the British people. Moreover, in using the words 'we' and 'our', May aligned herself with an imagined audience of Leave supporters, while simultaneously omitting Remainers from her conception of the national community.

A final component of May's rhetoric was the *antithesis* between the EU and the United Kingdom. Here, May (2017b) attributed to 'the British people' (i.e. Leave voters) a need for direct accountability and control, and she identified this as a reason why the United Kingdom 'has never totally felt at home being in the European Union'. Furthermore, she told 'the people of Europe':

> Our political traditions are different. Unlike other European countries, we have no written constitution, but the principle of Parliamentary Sovereignty is the basis of our unwritten constitutional settlement. We have only a recent history of devolved governance . . . and we have little history of coalition government. (May, 2017c)

Again, the *topoi* of the EU as an unaccountable, 'alien' power, and of Europe itself as Other, enable Eurosceptics to position themselves as the protectors of Britain, its people and its traditions (see Atkins, 2016; Gifford, 2010). Although May (2017b, 2017c) tempered her *antithesis* with assurances of friendship, which were likely for the benefit of EU leaders and Remain supporters, her rhetoric suggests that she imagined Brexiters as her

primary audience. Indeed, the ideas of sovereignty and national self-determination – encapsulated in Vote Leave's slogan 'Take Back Control' (Atkins, 2018: 164) – resonated emotionally with this constituency, and her attribution of these concerns to 'the British people' once more excluded pro-Europeans from her definition of 'the nation'.

The reception of May's rhetoric

There is a wealth of sources that shed light on how May's speeches were received. Among them are blogposts, Tweets, and newspapers – specifically, editorials, comment pieces, and readers' letters to the editor. Regarding the latter, the article examined non-paywalled online newspapers from across the political spectrum and with contrasting positions on Brexit. The selection of all sources was guided by the findings of the textual analysis and centred on May's use of commonplaces, myths, *antithesis*, and Othering. While not exhaustive for reasons of space, the audience reactions included here were chosen to be representative of the sample as a whole.

May's first conference speech as Prime Minister, in October 2016, was well received by her target audience. Indeed, the *Sun*'s Richard Wheatstone (2016) noted that 'as a pitch to *Sun* readers . . . [the speech] was a masterclass', while Express Comment (2016) favourably compared her vision to the former Conservative leader William Hague's 'common-sense revolution' of 1999:

> Theresa May went back to basics in speaking up for the silent majority. While the liberal Left poured scorn on suggestions such as putting British workers first and restoring national pride, many voters across the political spectrum will welcome a return to the politics of decency, fairness and quiet resolve.

However, May's (2016b) assertion that 'if you believe you're a citizen of the world, you're a citizen of nowhere' proved controversial. For one *Guardian* reader (Guardian Letters, 2016), it represented a repudiation of Enlightenment values, on the ground that cosmopolitanism is 'the glory of Enlightenment philosophy, encompassing liberty, equality, fraternity, and all our human rights'. Similarly, writes Tim Shipman (2017: 18), 'some Remain voters and many Cameroons saw it as a totemic symbol of May's hostile approach to internationalism, multiculturalism and immigration', which had characterised her tenure as Home Secretary.

Likewise, senior EU figures such as Jean-Claude Juncker regarded the phrase 'citizen of nowhere' as 'deeply offensive' (Seldon, 2019: 133). As one *Guardian* reader (Guardian Letters, 2016) wrote, it bore an uncanny resemblance to Stalin's notion of 'rootless cosmopolitans', which was deployed to justify the slaughter of Jewish intellectuals in the late 1940s. Several Twitter users also called attention to the phrase's sinister undertones, with one describing it as 'pure undisguised nationalism' (Bullen, 2016). In fairness to May, the 'citizen of nowhere' jibe was aimed at irresponsible business leaders who failed to contribute to British society, among whom was the former owner of BHS Sir Philip Green (Shipman, 2017: 18; Tapsfield et al., 2016). This is evident when the phrase is considered in the context of the speech, but it nonetheless highlights the polysemy of May's words and the active role of different empirical audiences in their interpretation.

In contrast, the content of May's subsequent conference speeches was of secondary importance to her audience. A weak orator at the best of times (Shipman, 2017: xxx), her delivery in 2017 was marred by coughing fits following an interruption by a prankster

and, towards the end of her address, letters began falling from the set behind her. Conservative-supporting newspapers were dismayed; indeed, the *Telegraph* condemned the speech as a 'tragic farce' while *The Times* claimed she was on her 'final warning' (Jones, 2017) from her party. Similarly, in 2018, May's decision to dance onto the stage to Abba's *Dancing Queen* dominated reactions, with one Twitter user (TheWeek, 2018) describing her performance as 'toe-curling'. The commentary on May's rhetoric of national renewal came largely from *Guardian* journalists (d'Ancona et al., 2018), who highlighted the tension between her chosen *topoi* and her policies as Prime Minister and, previously, as Home Secretary. Thus, Matthew d'Ancona observed that 'the nativism of her immigration strategy sat uneasily with her celebration of "Britain in all its diversity"', while David Shariatmadari noted the inconsistency between May's praise for the 'precious' NHS and the Conservatives' austerity measures, asking, 'Can the NHS be not just bandaged up, but made to thrive?' For these members of her empirical audience, May's attempts to construct a new social myth lacked credibility; her rhetorical vision of 'the nation' was at odds with their understanding of Britain and its recent past.

May's account of 'Global Britain' was favourably received by Leavers such as Matthew Elliott (2017), who lauded the 'inspiring' and 'optimistic' vision she presented at Lancaster House. However, her pro-European empirical audience took a cynical view, with Polly Toynbee (in d'Ancona et al., 2017) deriding it as fantasy: 'as if this "great global trading nation" with its gigantic trade deficit still ruled the imperial waves'! In a similar vein, the Observer Editorial (2018) claimed the Mansion House speech signified 'a moment of British retreat from the shared ideals and principles of collaborative internationalism'. While these reactions demonstrate the persuasiveness of May's appeals to British exceptionalism and nostalgia for Leave supporters, Remainers viewed her speech as further evidence of her isolationist impulses. As such, the two sides interpreted May's words through the prism of the myth of 'the nation' that each accepted, and which constituted their respective subject positions as 'Brexiters' and 'pro-Europeans'.

The notion of a strong, cohesive Global Britain elaborated at Lancaster House was widely criticised by May's empirical audiences. Toynbee (in d'Ancona et al., 2017), for instance, challenged her repeated assertions that the country was coming together, arguing that 'it has never been more sorely split', while the First Minister of Scotland, Nicola Sturgeon (SkyNews, 2017), argued that 'Scotland can't be taken down a path [to a hard Brexit] that we didn't vote for and is against our interests'. On Twitter, meanwhile, one user (in Gill, 2017) described the Lancaster House address as 'Theresa May basically telling the 48% who voted remain, and 62% of people in Scotland, to just sit down & be quiet'. Even the usually sympathetic *Sun* newspaper (Newton Dunn et al., 2018) noted that Mansion House was a 'landmark speech to also try to unify the divided country', and so acknowledged the discrepancy between May's words and reality. Her portrayal of a united Britain thus conflicted with the experiences of these audiences, regardless of their stance on Brexit.

The responses of European leaders to May's vision of the future UK–EU relationship also warrant examination. Her calls at Lancaster House for a hard Brexit were greeted with disappointment by some, with the former Foreign Minister of Sweden, Carl Bildt (in Bloom, 2017), observing that 'I think most of the EU would have preferred a closer relationship with the UK'. The reactions to May's Florence speech were generally more positive, and indeed the EU's Chief Negotiator, Michel Barnier (in Shipman, 2017: 501), welcomed her apparent 'willingness to move forward' with the talks. However, Ingeborg Grässle MEP (in Rankin and Boffey, 2017) criticised her for

'put[ting] forward a lot of contradictory positions' on the future UK–EU trading relationship, while Guy Verhofstadt (in Rankin and Boffey, 2017; see also Stone, 2018) quoted May's words back at her, saying, 'We hope to hear from them soon how they see the "deep and special partnership" with the EU'. These responses point to the inconsistencies inherent in May's Brexit strategy, which are well documented elsewhere (e.g. Glencross and McCourt, 2018). However, they also call attention to her limited success in imagining her European audience – to whom the Florence speech was chiefly directed – and adapting her rhetoric accordingly. As Grässle put it, 'We thought it might be a speech for Europeans, but in fact it continued to be a speech for the UK' (in Rankin and Boffey, 2017).

Conclusion

This article demonstrated that May tailored her rhetoric primarily to an imagined audience of Leave voters and, moreover, that she envisaged them as 'the British people'. Consequently, Remainers were excluded from her conception of the national community. Similarly, her vision of 'Global Britain' was infused with the myths of Empire and British exceptionalism, which resonated with Brexiters but alienated pro-Europeans. Finally, May (2017b) portrayed the EU as Other, but at the same time desired a 'deep and special partnership' with member states after Brexit. These tensions are also evident in the reception analysis, which revealed two rival myths of 'the nation' and concomitant subject positions. Whereas for Leavers Brexit was a unique opportunity for Britain to recapture past glories, Remain supporters regarded it as isolationist and inward-looking. In short, May's *epideixis* failed to heal the divisions of the referendum and unite the country behind her vision of Britain after Brexit.

The case of Theresa May shows the value of rhetorical enquiry – and especially of audience studies – for analysing the rhetoric of national identity. A textual analysis is useful for identifying the *topoi*, myths, and rhetorical strategies present in a speech, along with the imagined audience(s) around whom it is constructed. However, it cannot explain why some conceptions of 'the nation' gain traction, but others do not. This is the contribution of rhetorical audience studies, which – unlike discourse analysis – recognises both the situatedness of rhetoric and the active role of the audience in its interpretation. Furthermore, writes Kjeldsen (2018: 7), reception analysis can facilitate understanding of 'the persuasiveness of appeals we find surprising, or even worrisome'. After all, he continues, 'we will not find good answers by speculating about the values or (lack of) intelligence of the audience'. In this era of Brexit, putative 'culture wars' and COVID-19, it is clear that rhetorical reception and audience analysis has much to offer contemporary political studies.

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Notes

1. For an analysis of the rhetoric of Britishness of Gordon Brown and David Cameron, see Atkins (2016).
2. Notable exceptions include Martin (2014: ch. 6), Kjeldsen (2018), and Toye (2018).
3. The *topos* 'stronger together' has gained traction since the onset of devolution in 1999, featuring in both Labour and Conservative arguments for the Union and against 'separatism' (Hassan, 2008: 39).
4. In his 1997 conference speech, for instance, Tony Blair lauded the British as:

   one of the great innovative peoples. From the Magna Carta to the first Parliament to the industrial revolution to an empire that covered the world; most of the great inventions of modern times with Britain stamped on them: the telephone; the television; the computer; penicillin; the hovercraft; radar.

5. See, for instance, Cameron (2013). For discussion see Marquand (2009).

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