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Polycolonial Angst: Representations of Spain in Early Modern English Drama

One of the important questions that this conference¹ requires us to explore is how Spain was represented in early modern English theatre, and to examine such representation especially against the backdrop of the emergence of these two nations as arguably the most important players in the unfolding game of global imperialism. This is precisely what this article proposes to do: to take up representative English plays of the period belonging to the Anglo-Spanish War (1585–1604) which do mention Spain, analyse what the nature of their treatment of Spain is and hypothesise as to what may have been the reasons behind such a treatment.²

Given that England and Spain were at bitter war during these twenty years, and given furthermore that these two nations were the most prominent rivals in the global carving of the colonial pie that had already begun during this period, the commonsensical expectation from such plays, about the way Spain would be represented in them, should be of unambiguous Hispanophobia. There were several contextual reasons to occasion widespread Hispanophobia in the period. While Henry VIII's marriage to Catherine of Aragon (1509) and its subsequent annulment (1533) had already sufficiently complicated Anglo-Hispanic relations, and their daughter Queen Mary I's marriage to Philip II of Spain (1554) and his subsequent becoming the King of England and Ireland further aggravated the

¹ The conference referred to here is the International Conference on *Theatre Cultures within Globalizing Empires: Looking at Early Modern England and Spain*, organised by the ERC Project "Early Modern European Drama and the Cultural Net (DramaNet)," at the Freie Universität, Berlin, November 15–16, 2012, where the preliminary version of this article was presented.

² While the hypothesis that I offer here to do this, "polycolonial angst," is indeed an original theorisation, being presented here for the first time, for much of the information and inferences used to arrive at it, I am deeply indebted to three works. They are Edward Eaton, "Spain as Seen in the Theatre of London, 1588–1605: An Exploration of Popular Sentiment," *International Journal of Arts and Sciences* 3.16 (2010), pp. 321–331; Eric J. Griffin, *English Renaissance Drama and the Specter of Spain: Ethnopoetics and Empire* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009); and Griffin, "'Spain is Portugal / And Portugal is Spain': Transnational Attraction in The Stukeley Plays and *The Spanish Tragedy*," *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies* 10.1 (2010, special issue on "The Spanish Connection: Literary and Historical Perspectives on Anglo-Iberian Relations"), pp. 95–116. While I do quote from these sources and cite them appropriately later in the article, I thought this note of acknowledgement is due right at its outset.

apprehension of the general English public vis-à-vis Spanish designs on England, things came to an uglier pass when Philip II, stripped of his British crown with Mary's death and Queen Elizabeth I's ascent to the throne (1558), unsuccessfully courted the new English queen, in a probable bid to renew Spain's claims over England. The relationship between the two nations reached its nadir with Elizabeth I's Treaty of Nonsuch (1585) pledging support to the Dutch rebels against Spain and, of course, Philip II's consequent sending of the Spanish Armada (1588). Spain's apparent designs on England continued further with the successor Philip III's proposal in 1601 that his half-sister Isabella Clara Eugenia take the British throne after the heirless Elizabeth I's death. All these must have been sufficient reasons to have possibly occasioned widespread Hispanophobia in the then England. There were, however, other reasons too which contributed to this possible Hispanophobia in England, those which collectively contribute to what is called "The Black Legend," which refers to the acts of cruelty committed by the Spaniards in their colonies in the Americas, as also to the apparently "black" miscegenated nature of the Spaniards themselves, given their Moorish and Jewish heritage. This alleged revulsion in the early imperial English mind for the Spanish, on the dual grounds of the latter being cruel and inhuman, and of an impure breed—"black" in short—has been theorised by many critics, including William Maltby.³

But was early modern England really obsessed with Spain and was the representation of Spain in early modern English theatre really overwhelmingly Hispanophobic? Could it be that early modern English theatre was not that bothered with Spain after all? Or, could it even be that, the common sense assumptions elaborated above notwithstanding, there was actually quite some admiration for the Spanish on the early modern English stage, resulting probably from an aspiration in the English mind of that time to be able to do what the Spanish had done, leading to even a possible Hispanophilia? Rather than speculating, let us look at plays of the period that mention Spain, and judge for ourselves.

Let us begin with the Bard himself; after all, who could be a more representative playwright of the period? Very interestingly, only three plays by Shakespeare from the period (i.e. plays written by 1604) have Spanish subjects, and none of them demonstrates what may qualify as Hispanophobia. *Love's Labour's Lost* (1595–1596) is set in Navarre, but hardly shows any Hispanophobia, and though Don Adriano de Armado's name may recall the Armada, he is a rather lovable character. In *King John* (c. 1596), the king has a Spanish

³ See, for instance, William Saunders Maltby, *The Black Legend in England: The Development of Anti-Spanish Sentiment, 1558–1660* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1971).

niece, Blanch of Castille, and there are possible hints at a Spanish claim on the English throne, but the play is really about Anglo-French conflicts, with little or no Hispanophobia. Similarly, in *Much Ado about Nothing* (1598–1599), Don Pedro, Don John, Balthasar, Borachio and Conrade are all Aragonese, but none of them, not even Don John, is really evil. It is noteworthy that apart from these three plays, no play of Shakespeare from the period has Spanish settings or characters. And, how obsessed with a subject could the theatre of a people really be, if its greatest exemplar of the time was so sparing in his dealing with the theme?

In fact, not just Spanish settings, characters or subjects, but even the word “Spain” finds scarce mention in Shakespeare’s works. John Bartlett’s authoritative *A Complete Concordance or Verbal Index to Words, Phrases and Passages in the Dramatic Works of Shakespeare* reports as few as twelve uses of the word “Spain” in only eight plays in the entire Shakespearean oeuvre, and in only six plays—two comedies, three histories and one tragedy—in the period under consideration.⁴ Let us go through these six instances chronologically, one after the other, and see for ourselves what these rare references to Spain connote.

The first reference to “Spain” is to be found in *The Comedy of Errors* (1594), where Dromio of Syracuse in describing “the kitchen-wench”⁵ suggests that “she is spherical, like a globe; I could find out countries in her” (3.2.113 f.; p. 125), and upon being asked by Antipholus of Syracuse “[w]here Spain” (3.2.129; *ibid.*) could be located in her body, claims “I felt it hot in her breath” (3.2.130; *ibid.*), and reiterates his finding in her “the hot breath of Spain” (3.2.134; *ibid.*). While this connection of Spain with heat may be seen as pejorative by some (or even connected with its “blackness”), it should be noted that Dromio, in this “global” ascription of different nations unto Nell the maid’s body, is not partial to Spain alone, and in a similar comic vein locates Ireland, Scotland, France, England, America, India, Belgium and the Netherlands too in different parts of her body, thus seriously compromising any suggestion of an overarching Hispanophobia in this comparison. The second reference to the word can be found in *Love’s Labour’s Lost* (1595–1596), where Don Adriano de Armado, who I have mentioned earlier, gets described as “a refined traveller of Spain” (1.1.161; p. 168), who can narrate stories

⁴ See John Bartlett, *A Complete Concordance or Verbal Index to Words, Phrases and Passages in the Dramatic Works of Shakespeare: With a Supplementary Concordance to the Poems* (London: Macmillan, 1894; repr. New York, NY: St. Martin’s, 1963), p. 1434.

⁵ Shakespeare, *The Comedy of Errors* [1594], 3.2.94. All references to Shakespeare’s plays are from William Shakespeare, *The Complete Works* (New Delhi: Oxford & IBH, 1980) and will be given in the main body of the text. The page numbers given in parentheses after each quote correspond to this edition; here p. 125.

of knightly exploits “[f]rom tawny Spain” (1.1.171; *ibid.*) with great alacrity. Once again, the reference, sarcastic as it may be, is not really Hispanophobic, and is at best funny.

While the references to Spain in the two comedies cited above are indeed comic, the connection of Spain to martial rivalry and the apprehension regarding the Spanish infiltrating the English court through familial relationships—two reasons cited earlier as likely causes of Hispanophobia in the age—are somewhat evident when one moves to the histories. In the third reference one encounters, in *The Third Part of King Henry the Sixth* (1595), John of Gaunt gets described as someone who “did subdue the greatest part of Spain” (3.3.82; p. 684), thus recalling a precedent of England’s victory over Spain in times of war. In *King John* (c. 1596), as has been stated earlier, there is the character of Lady Blanch, daughter of the King of Castille and niece to King John, and thus quite an embodiment of the potential fear of a Spanish takeover of the English throne which could have plagued the English mind during the period. In the next reference from this play, therefore, when one notes a Citizen saying, “That daughter there of Spain, the Lady Blanch, / Is niece to England” (2.1.423 f.; p. 422), one can possibly sense this apprehension. The third and final use of the word “Spain” by Shakespeare in his histories is in *King Henry the Fifth* (1599) when a character uses the expletive “The fig of Spain” (3.6.58; p. 568), which refers to an obscene gesture of contempt quite common in Elizabethan England.⁶ Though these three references do show Spain in the light of rivalry, apprehension and contempt, they are so few and also so low-scale, one wonders if they can be construed to constitute widespread Hispanophobia.

The most spectacular use of the word “Spain” by Shakespeare happens in the only instance of it in a tragedy, in *Othello* (1603), when Othello famously kills himself with “a sword of Spain” (5.2.256; p. 1152). In fact, though the word “Spain” may not occur anywhere else in the play, Eric Griffin, a well-known scholar on the representation of Spain in early modern English drama, to whose works this article is deeply indebted, suggests that there is a lot of Spain in *Othello*. He shows how Iago is named after Spain’s patron saint, Santiago Matamoros, “the Moor Killer,” and that *Othello* was first performed on November 1, 1604, at the court of James I, with two visitors from the Spanish embassy, both members of the Order of Santiago, to commemorate James I and Philip III signing the Treaty of London to end the war.⁷ Thus Spain

6 “The fig of Spain is an ejaculation of contempt derived from the Spanish *dar la higa*, that is, to give the fig—a gesture made by thrusting the thumb between two of the fingers. This is also an obscene sign because it suggests a visual image of the female vulva.” (Monica Matei-Chesnoiu, *Re-Imagining Western European Geography in English Renaissance Drama* [Basingstoke/New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012], p. 153).

7 See Griffin, *Specter of Spain*, pp. 168–206.

is coded in *Othello*, but not necessarily in uncomplimentary terms. Therefore, in Shakespeare's plays of the period, references to Spain are very rare, and more often than not they have practically no element of Hispanophobia in them.

From Shakespeare, let us move on to other plays of the period with Spain as subject, and see if the situation is any different. Philip Henslowe's *Diary*, probably the most authoritative contemporary source on theatrical productions of the time, mentions 280 plays being performed between 1592 and 1602, out of which only eight have Spanish-sounding subjects: the available Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* and *The First Part of Hieronimo*; and the untraceable Philip of Spain, *Felmelanco*, *Spanish Fig*, *Conquest of Spain*, *The Spanish Moor's Tragedy*, and *Barnardo and Fiametta*—a rather insignificant number, one would say.⁸ In terms of plays published during the period, W. W. Greg's *A Bibliography of the English Printed Drama to the Restoration* shows that in the period a few more plays with obvious references to Spain were published: George Peele's *The Battle of Alcazar* (1588), Christopher Marlowe's *The Massacre at Paris* (1593), Robert Greene's *The Comical History of Alphonsus King of Aragon* (1599), and *A Larum for London* (1602), of disputed authorship (though often thought to be by Thomas Lodge).⁹ Besides, Griffin, in his book already cited above, also discusses George Peele's *Edward I* (1593), Robert Wilson's *Three Lords and Three Ladies of London* (1590), and Robert Greene's *The Spanish Masquerado* (1589) as plays of the period with Spanish subjects. The total number of English plays produced or published on Spanish subjects between 1585 and 1604 is very small, and out of all these plays only a few seem to be really Hispanophobic, thus seriously problematising the initial presumption that this article started with.

Thus, notwithstanding the Hispanophobic public attitudes and important critics like Maltby's elaboration of the same, some critics have argued that the representation of Spain on the English stage of the period was not entirely negative, was instead rather ambivalent and at times even bordered on Hispanophilia. Edward Eaton says, for instance:

[...] however politically or religiously important the war with Spain might have been to the Court of England, the evidence found in the plays published during this time clearly shows that the theatre-going public held no great interest in Spain, and when it did concern itself with things Spanish, it held *no* inherently or overwhelmingly negative view of the Spanish.¹⁰

⁸ See Neil Carson, *A Companion to Henslowe's Diary* (Cambridge/New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp. 82–84.

⁹ See Walter Wilson Greg, *A Bibliography of the English Printed Drama to the Restoration*, 4 vols. (London: Bibliographical Society, 1939–1959), vol. 1, pp. 164–328.

¹⁰ Eaton, "Spain as Seen in the Theatre of London, 1588–1605," p. 329; emphasis in original.

Similarly Griffin, says in his book already cited above that, in spite of a deep suspicion of Spain in the English mind of the times, “[...] within the network of relationships and connections that linked England and Spain we may observe a profound ambivalence. For there was a reverse side to the Hispanophobic coin. [...] Even Protestant England could express rank Hispanophobia in one breath and effusive Hispanophilia in the next.”¹¹

But, how does one explain this ambivalence? What would explain this complex nature of the representation of Spain in English drama even in the heyday of conflict between the two nations, and with numerous grounds for a general and overarching Hispanophobia in the English mind? My provisional and rather hypothetical answer to these questions is what I call a “Polycolonial Angst,” and I will attempt to explain this category in the rest of this article.

The term “polycolonial”¹² refers to a situation where multiple imperial powers are in the process of simultaneously vying to colonise the same tract or nation or continent—as was the case in early modernity with the Portuguese, the Spanish, the English, the Dutch, the French, the Danish, etc., concurrently colonising parts of Asia, Africa, the Americas—leading surely to severe rivalry or “angst” among such powers. Generally speaking, therefore, what I call “polycolonial angst” would refer to the mutual anxiety amongst different European nations in the context of their simultaneous implication in a colonial situation. Interestingly, in the current context of discussion, I note that there are two aspects to this “polycolonial angst”: one pertaining to the polycolonial situation in “distal” colonies, say in America or Asia; the other pertaining to the polycolonial situation in “contiguous” or “proximal” colonies, say in the context of one European power’s control over another European nation, like England’s over Scotland and Ireland, or Spain’s over Portugal and the Netherlands. Thus, I note two types of polycolonial angst at work in early modern Europe:

- (1) the mutual anxiety of multiple European powers—inclusive of the Dutch, the Danish and the French too, but primarily involving the English and the Spanish

¹¹ Griffin, *Specter of Spain*, p. 17.

¹² The term “polycolony” (or its derivatives) is not a neologism coined by me, and was used in its current sense, in the context of China, at least as early as Jack Chen’s book *Inside the Cultural Revolution* (New York, NY: Macmillan, 1975), where it is defined as “a colony of several powers” (p. 23). The concept has been used more recently in the context of Latin America by Amy Turner Bushnell and others (see, for instance Amy Turner Bushnell, “Gates, Patterns and Peripheries: The Field of Frontier Latin America,” in: Christine Daniels and Michael V. Kennedy, ed., *Negotiated Empires: Centres and Peripheries in the Americas, 1500–1820* [New York, NY/London: Routledge, 2002], pp. 15–28), and by me in the context of the Indian subcontinent from 2008 onwards on numerous occasions. The concept and the term “polycolonial angst” is, however, being used here for the first time.

- (Portugal was a part of the Spanish empire from 1580 to 1680)—in their bid to carve up the distal (non-European) colonial pie amongst themselves;
- (2) the anxiety among European “empires,” especially in times of decline of the same and the emergence of the mononational “nation state,” of retaining contiguous colonies in Europe, wherein also England (with its domination of Scotland and Ireland by 1603) and Spain (with its 1580 annexation of Portugal) become important players.

It is against the backdrop of these two kinds of “polycolonial angst” which England bore vis-à-vis Spain that I will try to explain the ambivalent nature of the representation of Spain in early modern English drama in the years of the Anglo-Spanish War.

The first “angst” is relatively easy to understand. Spain was the prime rival to England in the “distal” colonial game, both in Asia and the Americas. Though an English expedition sanctioned by Henry VII is reported to have reached Newfoundland and parts of East Asia as early as 1497, it was only in 1577 that England had its first formal colony on Baffin Island, to be followed by settlements in the Americas throughout the 1580s and 1590s, the establishment of the East India Company in 1600 and intense colonial activities in the Caribbean in the first decade of the seventeenth century, the exact period of the Anglo-Spanish War (1585–1604). Thus, a rival though it was, Spain was also way ahead of England in the initial stages of the colonial game, and in the period under consideration in this article, in spite of the Hispanophobia the war would have caused, England would have simultaneously looked at Spain with admiration, as the global power that it aspired to be. This could be an explanation, from the perspective of the first type of polycolonial angst, for the early modern English stage’s ambivalent or even adulatory attitudes towards Spain in the years of the war.

The second angst—the intra-European polycolonial angst—is, however, a little more complicated. As alluded to earlier, it involves, even in times of bitter war, England’s admiration for Spain’s 1580 annexation of Portugal, as a model to be replicated for its own recent domination of the similarly contiguous “colonies” of Scotland and Ireland. Though the Tudor conquest of Ireland began with Henry VIII being crowned the King of Ireland in 1541, the whole of Ireland came under the English sway only in 1603, with the setting up of James I’s privy council at Dublin. Similarly, Scotland and England were united under the same monarch only with James VI of Scotland becoming James I in 1603.¹³ Thus the period of

¹³ For details, see Jenny Wormald, “James VI, James I and the Identity of Britain,” in: Brendan Bradshaw and John Morrill, edd., *The British Problem, c. 1534–1707: State Formation in the Atlantic Archipelago* (New York, NY: St. Martin’s, 1996), pp. 148–171.

the Anglo-Spanish War was also one of Spain's successful consolidation of the Iberian peninsula under one crown and of England's attempts and final success at inaugurating the "United Kingdom" (though the term would come into being only with the Acts of Union of 1707) and, needless to say, on this front also Spain would thus be quite a model for England to emulate.

The representation of Spain in two well-known English plays of the period—*The Spanish Tragedy* (c. 1587) and *The Battle of Alcazar* (1588)—have direct relevance for this second kind of polycolonial angst. *The Spanish Tragedy* begins already with the unification, in a situation "Where Spain and Portingale do jointly knit / Their frontiers, leaning on each other's bound,"¹⁴ and goes on to assert that "Spain is Portugal, / And Portugal is Spain."¹⁵ Noteworthy is that in the play Portugal is ruled by a Viceroy, not a sovereign king, and the entire tragedy that the play makes unfold concerns this annexation, and its import for England with regard to its own proximal colonial plans would not have been missed by the contemporary audience.

The situation becomes even more pronounced in *The Battle of Alcazar* (1588) since this play is directly about the annexation of Portugal by Spain. The play documents King Sebastian I of Portugal's ill-fated attack on Morocco in 1578, his death wherein would cause Spain to annex Portugal, there being no direct heir to the Portuguese throne. More interestingly, there is in the play the character of the British mercenary Thomas Stukeley, who joins the Catholic forces in the hope that their promise to free Ireland from England and make Stukeley the Irish king may be fulfilled, thus connecting the contexts of Spain's annexation of Portugal and England's annexation of Ireland directly. Stukeley makes his intention very clear when he says, "King of a mole-hill had I rather be / Than the richest subject of a monarchy,"¹⁶ but a little later Sebastian tells him how difficult it would be for Ireland ever to gain independence from England, even with the support of Portugal, which ironically was itself soon to be subjected to such an annexation:

Sebastian: For Ireland, Stukeley? Thou mistak'st wondrous much,
With seven ships, two pinnaces, and six thousand men?
I tell thee, Stukeley, they are far too weak
To violate the Queen of Ireland's right,

¹⁴ Thomas Kyd, *The Spanish Tragedy* [1592], 1.2.22 f. All references to the play are from Thomas Kyd, *The Spanish Tragedy*, ed. David Bevington (Manchester/New York, NY: Manchester University Press, 2004), here p. 25.

¹⁵ 1.4.132 f.; p. 39.

¹⁶ George Peele, *The Battle of Alcazar* [1594], 2.2.81 f. All references to the play are from George Peele, *The Battle of Alcazar*, in: Charles Edelman, ed., *The Stukeley Plays* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), pp. 59–128, here pp. 84 f.

For Ireland's queen commandeth England's force.
 Were every ship ten thousand on the seas,
 Manned with the strength of all the eastern kings,
 Conveying all the monarchs of the world
 To invade the island where her highness reigns,
 'Twere all in vain, for heavens and destinies
 Attend and wait upon her majesty.
 Sacred, imperial and holy is her seat,
 Shining with wisdom, love and mightiness.¹⁷

This statement as to the inevitability and irreversibility of Ireland's accession to the English crown from none other than the king of Portugal—the annexation of whose own kingdom by Spain as a consequence of the action of the play was to become symptomatic of the legitimacy of such contiguous colonisation—would have definitely gone down well with the English audience of the day. In the play, finally, both Sebastian and Stukeley reach their tragic destiny, with the latter almost being made into a moral lesson, in the ensuing emergence of the Iberian union and the maintenance of the British one.

It is not only in theatre that such an equation between the Spanish annexation of Portugal and the English domination of Ireland and Scotland would be made, and that, in spite of the continuing war, the English would demonstrate admiration for the Spanish in their quest to relieve the second type of polycolonial angst elaborated above. This equation would often be made by real statesmen of the time too, and we gather that Sir Henry Savile, parliamentarian and one of the members of the team that translated the Authorised Version of the King James Bible, said the following to King James I in 1604: “in mine opinion the likest [empire] to ours, is that of the union between Portugall and Castile in the year 1580.”¹⁸ That the Iberian unification would provide an inspiration to England's own contiguous colonial aspirations is agreed upon by current scholars too, and Griffin, whom I have cited on several occasions in this article, says in a 2010 article of his: “The example of Iberian unification would provide, quite ironically, a key source of inspiration for Protestant England's imperial emergence. For in the new century the allure of a composite monarchy after the Spanish model beckoned suggestively toward ‘British union’.”¹⁹

Thus, and in conclusion, the representation of Spain in early modern English drama, especially during the years of the Anglo-Spanish War (1585–1604), does

¹⁷ 2.4.98–110; p. 93.

¹⁸ Henry Savile, “Historicall Collections,” in: Bruce R. Galloway and Brian P. Levack, edd., *The Jacobean Union: Six Tracts of 1604* (Edinburgh: Scottish History Society, 1985), p. 229.

¹⁹ Griffin, “‘Spain is Portugal / And Portugal is Spain’,” p. 112.

not demonstrate mere Hispanophobia, as would be commonsensically expected of it, but shows rather ambivalent and often even Hispanophilic attitudes. This can be explained through what I have identified as a dual polycolonial angst, whereby the English, in an extension of their rivalry with the Spanish in the emerging game of global imperialism, also held secret admiration for what the Spanish had managed to do and what the English aspired to do—namely, not only expand their hold over distal colonies in America and Asia, but also successfully annex and control their proximal colonies of Ireland and Scotland, much as the Spanish would have annexed Portugal, leading to the Iberian union of 1580.