

## A Note on the Representation of Foreigners in Robert Wilson's *Three Lords and Ladies of London*

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“What is it . . . against law of hospitality to jest at strangers, because they speak not English so well as we do? What do we learn?” (Sir Philip Sidney, *A Defence of Poesy*). Sidney's words encompass more than one direct question. They identify an increasingly obsessive sense of ‘Englishness’ as being separate from ‘other,’ or foreignness, characterized by racial and religious difference. By acknowledging that such jesting was occurring, Sidney also points to the function behind it; indeed, what is learnt or contributed? These words also target a more delicate issue concerning the actual use of foreign characters onstage in the 1580s and the ways in which a dramatist such as Robert Wilson might employ ‘foreignness’ as a method of questioning ‘Englishness.’

Descriptions of social stereotypes were popular (even Erasmus formulated such generalization<sup>(1)</sup>) and were widely known at a time when England was connected to her close major European neighbours either in war or economy.<sup>(2)</sup> A. J. Hoenselaars identifies religion as the basic polarising feature within England, and without. In *The Three Lords and Ladies in London*, this difference is expressed during the confrontation between the English and Spanish, in which segregation is identified in terms of nation and religion:

*Spanish Pride*: ‘Buena buena per los Lutheranos  
Angleses.’

*Faalty*: ‘Mala, mala per Catholicos  
Castillianos.’ (ll.1649–50)

Religious instability, which had continued after the death of Henry VIII and the succession of his children, had contributed to the distinct character of England. Moreover, it also encouraged a huge increase in immigrants from the Low Countries and France.<sup>(3)</sup> Hoenselaars suggests that more than a half of foreigners

migrating to England did so for religious reasons, and not for purposes of employment.<sup>(4)</sup> Naturally, this influx caused disquiet amongst native Englishmen, who increasingly had to compete against foreign craftspeople, some of whom set up business outside the bounds of regulation. As well as placing a burden on the economy, this influx of foreigners increased national awareness (especially in terms of religion) and encouraged a heightened xenophobia.

While the depiction of foreigners onstage was later exploited for its comic potential, this was only possible when relations with the nation represented were not strained.<sup>(5)</sup> *The Three Lords and Ladies of London* is therefore interesting because it was written shortly after the defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588. Contrast between the English and Spanish nations is marked. ‘London’ delivers the Prologue and is represented by “a Lady very richly attyred . . . having two Angels before her” (ll.1–2, Prologue), thus depicting a prosperous and beautiful city under divine protection. The divine status of London is confirmed by the assertion that “God loves our Queen” (l.16), thus marking Elizabeth as a divine ruler, equal to the Pope; the Spanish are constantly referred as devils by Policy. The Spanish are considered as vulgar because their herald wears a burning ship emblem which contrasts shamefully with London's Fealty, bearing an olive branch in an overtly symbolic manner. Mistrust of the Spanish is also confirmed when the pages of each side meet, the English couching their lances, while at first the Spanish refuse. Fealty expresses this mistrust succinctly: “But what they meane or be I know not yet” (l.1602).

The two main points of conflict between nations in this play pivot around marriage and war. Invasion of England, and here specifically London, is presented on two levels: the martial threat of the Spanish Lords and

the economic problems posed by the four vice figures. It is important to note that between *Three Ladies of London* and *The Three Lords and Ladies of London*, the vice characters have acquired foreign nationalities during what Hoenselaars identifies as a period of 'intensified national awareness.'<sup>66</sup> Fraud leads the other three vices in their treachery and an ambiguous Usury advises the other multi-national vices, "Whatsoever ye doe, be not traitors to your native countrie" (l.1438). His warning comes whilst the other three are dressed as sailors, planning to join the enemy, "where we and such good fellowes are tollerated and used" (ll.1433-4) but may return to England if their fortunes are not achieved. In fact, it is only Usury who is native to London, despite being Jewish. Therefore, his acquaintances do not harm their consciences by playing turncoat and then returning. They thus depict the worst type of foreigner: the sort who will live in England, plaguing the economy, without loyalty to England's interests in war or nationhood.

Another key scene which exposes the vice of Fraud witnesses English Simplicity, a poor man, yet susceptible to drink, being gulled by Fraud who is disguised as a French artificer. Simplicity is suspicious of Fraud, who plays the trump card in needing to sell off his stock so he might return home. He therefore plays on Simplicity's poverty with promises of easy money as well as appealing to his sense of nationhood in helping a Frenchman return to his native country. Wilson portrays Fraud as a stereotypically deceptive foreigner but also manages to communicate the stupidity of Simplicity. This is enforced when Simplicity says goodbye to the Frenchman with "Adieu Mounsier: Adieu foole" (l.1119). One is also aware that it is Simplicity who runs up a large 'score' at the alehouse and not any of the foreign vices, particularly Dissimulation who is half-Dutch, and might therefore have a taste for drink according to English stereotyping.<sup>67</sup>

If the English were prone to formulating such stereotypes, and the foreign invasion threatened both their economy and stability, an even more tender target manifests itself in issues of inter-racial marriage. Hoenselaars admits the degree to which this topic was

important: "The breaking point for a xenophobic or racist mind is procreation with the other, the assumed enemy."<sup>68</sup> Wilson communicates the threat of such marriages in a variety of scenarios. Initially, Lucre, Love and Conscience are described by the three Lords as being emphatically of English, and more importantly, London, stock. Secondly, it is imperative that the Lords save the Ladies from the fate of being married "to three farre borne Foriners" (l.54). This anxiety is re-introduced at the entrance of the Spanish who have already decided to conquer London, "this mool-hill Isle" (l.1660), "And take those Dames Love, Lucre, Conscience / Prisoners, to use or force as pleaseth them" (ll.1662-63).

The Ladies are also threatened with advances from the vices, all of whom have foreign origins. The point is enforced with the arrival of the Lords of Lincoln. Their offers of marriage are also rejected, for although they are Englishmen, "their countrimen, in London bred as they" (l.2090) are the only husbands suitable for these Ladies. Wilson concludes his presentation of marriage with a harmonious triple wedding, before which there is a song which unites praise for Elizabeth with laudation for single nation marriages:

If London list to looke, the streets were nere so  
cleene,  
 Except it was when best it might, in welcome of  
our Queene:  
 Three lovely Lords of London shall three London  
Ladies wed,  
 Strowe sweetest flowers upon the stones, perfume  
the bridall bed.  
(ll.2217-20)

The London Lords are victorious in defeating an enemy who threatened "London's" national integrity in martial and marital terms.

Central to the play's approach to the former aspect of national anxiety is the invasion of the Spanish. There is a certain irony featured in this scene when one considers the success of the English fleet in 1588. As well as indicating that the fear of such threat was still very potent, Wilson also takes advantage of England's

superiority on this point. The scene could be viewed as a comic replay of the events of 1588. In the play, the Spanish arrive just as the Lords have secured their partners in marriage, thereby posing yet another threat to the harmonious English marriage. The description of the Spanish by Diligence portrays a truly alien race, dressed in a flamboyant and thus vulgar manner, with gold and multi-coloured plumes. Policy describes them before they enter in a way which could only encourage the aversion of the audience:

I need not tel thee, they are poore and proud,  
Vaunters, vaine glorious, tyrants, truce-breakers,  
Envious, irefull, and ambitious. (ll.1472-74)

This is clearly a piece of propaganda designed to appeal to any xenophobia which resided in the audience. The contrast between this description and that of Charles V's Venetian ambassador is very distinctive:

The Spanish soldiers are very patient . . . quick of apprehension, vigilant and united amongst each other; prone to magnifying their success and making light of their reverses; courteous in speech and bearing, especially towards their inferiors; temperate and sober; and fond of show in their dress, although they are avaricious and greedy of gain.<sup>9)</sup>

Whilst these words echo descriptions of the Spanish found within the play, one cannot help noting the more neutral tone.

Despite the bravado of the Spanish and Fealty's assertion, "Yet was the Spanish brace and hot in teames" (l.1590), being another way of contrasting the Southern temperament with the more Northerly character of the English, the battle which follows verbal banter disgraces the Spanish. The English, with their olive branch metaphorically held aloft, do very little in provoking the retreat of the Spanish, who are seen sneaking onstage towards the 'abandoned' English shields before fleeing. The victory of London is emphasized in the wedding procession where the Spanish shields feature as matrimonial gifts which seem

to symbolize virility and assured protection of the Ladies.

There is perhaps more subtlety and substance located within the verbal battle which precedes the brief martial engagements, as Janette Dillon has skillfully observed. She remarks it is hardly surprising that at a time when monarchs employed political unity as an empowering weapon, "English writers in turn could scarcely avoid addressing questions of nation and nationhood."<sup>10)</sup> The heralds function as interpreters between the two sides, with the Spanish herald, Shealty, adding anti-Irish sentiment to the already sizeable aversion to the Spanish. While Shealty accosts Fealty as "base English groome" (l.1576), the "imperious Spaniard" (l.1572), is always described as aloof and proud, the English being vile and lowly in comparison. Even less amicable are the first words spoken by Spanish Pride in Latin, because he refuses to speak English despite understanding it. Whilst boasting of his skills he also insults the English language. As Dillon acknowledges: "Pride is audibly trapped into the format of the double act, upstages first be a mere herald, then by the triumphant Policy."<sup>11)</sup>

When Spanish Pride slips into Spanish, the English take the opportunity to humiliate him. First, Fealty replies to Pride's insult in equally insulting Spanish. Secondly, Policy questions Shealty in Spanish to inquire as to whether the herald speaks English. In one fatal blow, Policy matches Pride in his own tongue whilst also insulting the ability of the Spanish herald's role as "interpreter." As the insults are exchanged more rapidly, the English Lords take advantage of exposing their counterparts as evil: "Spight the Spanish tyrannie / Hath shed a sea of most unguilty blood" (ll.1715-16). It is possible that these lines might inspire the audience's recollection of the massacre at Paris, that is, the massacre of innocents by a notably Catholic power, truly a power of which to be suspicious, especially on English ground.

Dillon identifies the potential for alienation which language embodies within this scene. Not only does she point out the stark contrast between hearing Latin and the faster, unfamiliar sound of Spanish or Italian, she also links this to feelings of suspicion: "Traitors mask

their true identity with fraudulent speaking.<sup>12</sup> Hence at the end of the play the apt punishment of burning out Fraud's tongue is announced. It is appropriate not only for a foreigner, and one whose crime was to impersonate a foreigner, but for a vice character who threatens notions of 'Englishness.' In contrast with the easy defeat of the Spanish, the vice characters are more difficult to contain. The end of the play is not perhaps quite as conclusive in this area as the audience might have wished for in the actual punishment of Fraud. Wilson is careful in his ending of the play, not only in the use made of the marriage procession, but in indicating a more unsettling conclusion for xenophobic Englishmen.

Simplicity, appropriately enough, draws attention to the infiltration of 'Fraud' into English society, declaring that tanners, tailors and tapsters will miss the vice. He therefore exposes the extent to which foreign corruption of the English has occurred. Further irony is added by the fact that Fraud has not been defeated, as Simplicity thinks. He is very much alive, by merit of his slippery nature and friend, Dissimulation. Wilson thus compounds the image of Simplicity, not the drunken Dutchmen, having drinking debts. This uneasy undertone betrays a more subtle anxiety at work, in a country where Catholics had to consider whether they would fight for Pope or Queen in the event of a war.<sup>13</sup> What Sidney terms 'jest' appears to gloss over a more complex assembly of social anxieties, which incorporate religion, economy and national integrity. Fraud's simplistic statement 'you be free man, mee un'Foriner' (ll.1095 - 96) thereby trivializes and appears to mock a more sinister set of English crises, as represented by London in *The Three Lords and Ladies of London*.

#### Notes

- (1) See Hale, p.52.
- (2) See Hunter, p.45.
- (3) See Hoenselaars (1992), p.27.
- (4) *ibid.* p.49.
- (5) *ibid.* p.41.
- (6) *ibid.* pp.43-4.
- (7) See *Edward III* (3.1.1063-8), for instance.
- (8) See Hoenselaars (1991), p.162.
- (9) See Hale, p.53.
- (10) See Dillon, p.163.
- (11) *ibid.* p.168.
- (12) *ibid.* p.183.
- (13) *ibid.* p.163.

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