

‘CALIBAN’S’ CHOICE IN THE ‘IRISH TEMPEST’

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They say their kingdom belongs to Your Majesty for it is of Spanish origin, the first founders being part from Galicia, part from Vizcaya. I replied I understood it to be so.¹

Philip II read these words in 1574 in Madrid and he probably felt happiness in doing so, the same, perhaps, that his father had felt back in 1529 when an Irish nobleman, a Galfididus, appeared in the Spanish court to tell him that the Irish catholics under the banner of the Earl of Desmond were ready to fight in the imperial side against an English king who was by, then, beginning to forget the duties his title of “Fidei Defensor” carried along with it so as to be able to wink an eye both to a Lutheran reformation, then fastly growing, and to a new mistress, Anne Boleyn, whose beauty no doubt surpassed that of an old growing Catherine of Aragon, incapable of giving a male heir to the future Head of the Church of England.²

The author of the lines mentioned above was a Spanish captain, a Basque, Diego Ortiz de Urizar, who in the year given visited Ireland in order to obtain as much information as possible, no matter of what kind,

¹ “Dizen ellos que aquel reyno toca a V. Magd. por ser su origen y antigüedad de españa, parte de galizia y parte de bizcaya. Yo les dezia q bien entendido se tenia en españa”. Archivo General de Simancas, Estado, Legajo 828.

² British Library, Vespasian ms.

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and who certainly found it, as we see from the memorandum the Spanish king received from his hands. The 'Green Island', populated by 'savages' who attacked the Spanish officer the moment he set foot on it, began, thus, to be well known in the court of Madrid: "I was immediately attacked and robbed by the English and savages of that land, as one can see in the information I have procured."¹

The Spanish officer, however, lived to tell not only the ordeal but various other things, among which we must include that legendary piece concerning the Spanish origin of Ireland that medieval writers like Giraldus Cambrensis or Elizabethan ones, like Edmund Campion, to mention but just a few, also dealt with in their respective works. The Irish 'Caliban' had by then, obviously, changed his attitude towards the Spanish visitor. In the lapse of a few days Urizar, therefore, had gained a new status in the island. He no longer was a 'foreigner' but had become the living symbol of a prince who, given time, -who could know in 1574?-might perhaps become master of the island bringing to it all that the native population ardently wished:

They all have their hopes set on Your Majesty. They thoroughly believe that you will protect them so that they can live as Christians saving, thus, their souls.²

Caliban, thus, blesses the day in which this Spanish 'visit' has taken place, an episode that fills his heart with joy and that makes him forget the despair caused by a, till then, lost fight: "Heiday, Freedom. Caliban has a new master!". He, however, ignores that his new lord does not see in him a subject in need of help but an invaluable tool to dethrone the 'female Prospero of the place', Elizabeth I, and enjoy the benefits and advantages that the island may procure. An island, by the way, that, following Urizar's words, "would produce anything in great abundance, except olive oil and

¹ "al momento fui saqueado por los yngleses y saluages de aquella tierra como se be por la ynformacion que tengo hecho dello". Archivo General de Simancas, Estado, Legajo 828.

² "toda su esperança tienen en V. Mgd que tienen por muy çierto que les a de tomar debaxo de su protection real para poder ser cristianos y saluar sus almas". Archivo General de Simancas, Estado, Legajo 828.

oranges”,¹ without forgetting, of course, the mineral resources which, in the captain’s opinion, are also considerable. As one can well see, the pragmatism of this ‘Spanish Stephano’ is not by an inch smaller to that of Shakespeare’s character.

The tragic element in Caliban’s choice, however, does not lie in the choice itself but, on the one hand, in the firmness with which it is made, something that will lead the native population to a great degree of suffering and frustration, and on the other, in the revenge of the English master, who cannot understand this lack of appreciation towards his system of government and his language, as Edmund Spenser will show in his *A View of the State of Ireland*; a man for whom, in the true fashion of the age, writing *The Faerie Queene* and cutting heads are two perfectly compatible things. In other words, the Catholic Ireland of the sixteenth century makes its choice without considering the consequences. It jumps into an abyss of misery pursuing a dream which will never come true. Caliban sees in Stephano ‘the man in the moon’ and not the drunkard.

Ireland, its O’Donnells, O’Neills, Desmonds, see in Philip II, in the Spain of the sixteenth century, not the giant with trembling feet but the empire of reason and true faith. Idealism and reality clash to let the former win the day, probably because the atmosphere of the island is still impregnated with the magic taste of medieval chronicles that tell the supernatural deeds of heroes like Cuchulainn who exceed human dimensions.

Caliban’s faith, however, is worth praising. It comes alive on top of a thousand and one disasters. In 1593, therefore years after the disaster of the Spanish Armada (1588), the tragic episode of Smerwick in which Sir Walter Raleigh had his baptism of blood in a not very well studied butchery (1580), years after the body of Desmond were exhibited in Cork’s gallows, or, to end a long list, years after Munster and Ulster had already known the bitter taste of revenge, he has still vigour enough to say: “[the strongest and most powerful catholic lords in Ireland] willingly risk all their fortunes and lives to serve God and Your Majesty [Philip II]. We plead before you, for the love of God, with all our strength, that you may take

¹ “daria qualquera cosa en abundancia ecepto azeyte y naranjas”. Archivo General de Simancas, Estado, Legajo 828.

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pity on us”¹ The figure thus writing is Maurice Geraldine who still has hopes, despite a thousand drawbacks, of fulfilling his dream. Needless to say, of course, that Caliban illustrates his plead with powerful arguments: “[England] will have, no doubt, to withdraw its help from the Low Countries and France. Therefore the English won’t be able to attack the Spanish coasts”²

O’Donnell himself will repeat practically the same argument in his letter to all the Irish nobles living in Spain: “Gentlemen, let us all come here to fight in the service of God and to defend and recover our lands. To this effect it is important that we understand and help each other as I will do till the end of my life with the help I hope to get from His Majesty [Philip II]”³

Caliban’s cry echoes, once again, in Madrid: “This island is mine!”. Once again blind faith in a symbol and closed eyes to sad reality: Spain could not procure the help she had been asked for, sunk as it was in very serious economic difficulties and immobilised by the lack of trust in the Irish, because it never indeed fully trusted the vehement words of the ‘savage’, as the Irish is described in many a document of the age. It is enough, to this effect, to remember that mixture of cynicism, arrogance and superiority that this piece of information from the intriguing Spanish ambassador In London, de la Quadra, conveys: “O’Neill has arrived to this

¹ [los señores catolicos mas fuertes y poderosos que ay en Irlanda] voluntariamente ponen a riesgo sus estados y vidas por seruir a Dios y a V. Mgd. Somos de parecer de suplicar a Md. por amor de dios y con el encareçimiento que podemos se sirua de hazernos a todos md de dolerse de su neçesidad”. Archivo General de Simancas, Estado, Legajo 839.

² “por fuerza [Inglaterra] ha de retirar el socorro que suele imbiar a flandes y a Françia y no habra tanto acorrimento de ingleses en las costas de españa” Archivo General de Simancas, Estado, Legajo 839.

³ “señores, procuremos todos assistir aqui y pelear y combatir por el seruiçio de dios y para defender y ganar nras tierras porque conuiene que nos entendemos bien y que ayudemos unos a otros para el dicho efecto lo qual hare yo de mi parte hasta la muerte mediante el socorro q espero de su Md”. Archivo General de Simancas, Estado, Legajo 839.

court. He is indeed a savage in his looks, though I don't think that he is that savage when it comes to thinking" ¹

The truth is that official Spain never appreciated, never wanted probably, Irish favours: the death of Ireland's nobility in an unfair fight; the courage of O'Rourke, executed in Tyburn after having helped certain survivors of the Spanish Armada; the protection, indeed, of some of the few survivors of that same Armada by different clans, and a long etcetera. It is only natural that Mateo de Oviedo, 'Ireland's greatest friend of all times', archbishop of a city he never saw, Dublin, inquisitor, theologian, spy and, above all, lover of anything Irish, went mad on occasions before the lack of energy showed by a court, like the Spanish one, that in theory, but only in theory, should have been able to carry out the highest enterprises.

Caliban's choice of a Spanish catholic master, however, bears also some other characteristics worth pointing out, as they explain, in a very special way, the development of other countries' histories. In other words, Caliban turns on a mechanism that makes events reach extremes he could never have foreseen. It has been said, and probably with a great degree of reason, that the English fight in Ireland, the way it was carried out, the solution to the 'Irish Question' of the sixteenth century, is essential to understand the future development of English colonies in America and the treatment there of the native population. That is, that the English settlements of Ulster and Munster were but the first steps of a long imperial march.²

The question, however, is generally analysed as the problem of two sides, the Irish and the English one, forgetting, thus, the role of the Spanish

¹ "ha llegado a esta corte O'Neill, el qual aunque es muy saluage en los cabellos no me parece que lo es tanto en el seso". Archivo General de Simancas, Estado, Legajo 816.

² D.B. Queen, "Ireland and sixteenth century European expansion", *Historical Studies: I. Papers read before the second Irish Conference of historians*, London, 1958. D.B. Queen, "Sir Thomas Smith (1513-1577) and the beginnings of English Colonial Theory", *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, Vol. 89, N 4, 1945. N.P. Canny, "The Ideology of English Colonization: From Ireland to America", *William and Mary Quarterly*, 30, 1973. K.S. Bottigheimer, "Kingdom and Colony: Ireland in the westward enterprise, 1536-1660", *The Western Enterprise*, 1979.

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agent. Our approach is somewhat different, triangular and not double-sided; that is, we must count on three, and not two, protagonists. After all, it was Queen Elizabeth I in person who in 1571 wrote to the Spanish monarch to say, in what regards the Irish problem, "Your Highness mustn't be surprised if we wake up and stand on our guard, as the storm comes from the side we least expected".¹ The 'English female Prospero' is ready to defend her island, not only against Caliban's uprisings, but against anyone who may become his 'partner in crime'. An island, by the way, that the Queen defines as the land that "our parents and grandparents possessed".²

The letter we have just mentioned, apart from being a magnificent example of diplomatic abilities on the part of Elizabeth, is also the key that opens new possibilities for the understanding of the 'Irish Question' in the sixteenth century: basically that the English crown acted in part as an answer to deeds generated by a third protagonist, Spain, suffocating thus a growing fear of a Spanish successful intervention. Caliban, simply, had to be 'subdued, brought into submission', as Spenser says, for he had become a real threat. In order to do so, all the weapons were welcome, including a whole range of arguments and reasons that can be summarised in the following way: the Irish, that inferior being who lacks knowledge, who despises work, must be given precisely what he lacks ... whether he likes it or not. He is the 'masterless man' Terence Hawkes mentions in his essay "Playhouse-Workhouse"³ "who haunted the margins of that society and (supposedly) the suburbs of its cities, ungoverned, unrestrained, challenging from the periphery the central ligature on which social order rested; such figure offered fertile ground for the seeds of moral panic".

The panic, however, that Caliban generates in England does not come from his own figure but from the acquaintances he possesses. They were, actually, the ones that sought the destruction of an order they considered 'heretical'. It so happens, then, that Caliban becomes a useful tool for both contenders, though, of course, he is not an equal for any of the

¹ "no se deue marauillar V. Ser. si nos despertamos y velamos, leuantandose contra Nos la tempestad de donde menos esperauamos". Archivo General de Simancas, Estado, Legajo 823. Letter of Queen Elizabeth, written in Latin and later translated into Spanish.

² "el reyno que nros padres y abuelos han tenido". Archivo General de Simancas, Estado, Legajo 823.

³ Hawkes, T., *That Shakespeherian Rag*, London, 1986.

two. The treatment he is given is, therefore, basically the same one: he is used, though, obviously, with different aims in mind. He is the precious piece two arms tear apart in two opposite directions.

Traditionally, Catholic Ireland has taken joy in believing that Spain was a faithful ally in the past. Reality, however, might have been somewhat different; Spain could well have used the argument of the defence of the catholic faith, something Ireland obviously wanted to hear at that given moment, as a shield to hide a different aim: the destruction, as Protestant England was, of a very dangerous and uncomfortable adversary. Philip II never spoke clear to the catholic clans. He played the game, though he did not trick Caliban, of promising the defence of Irish interests in order to obtain England's destruction. Caliban, however, as we have said, managed to see through the watchful eyes of El Escorial, though he accepted the bet which, in the end, would be very painful to pay, as the episode of the 'Flight of the Wild Geese' clearly demonstrates.

Even today, the primitive machiavelism of the 'Spanish Prospero' still shocks the audience when this hears, for example, the instructions given to 'Ariel' in a mission carried out in 1596. Two captains, Medinilla and Cisneros, are to go to Ireland and analyse the situation of the island. The instructions they are given come straight from Philip II, though it is an intermediate hand, that of El Conde de Portalegre, the one that transmits them. The king is worried, above anything else, with causing a good impression. That is precisely why the first point of the given instructions is the following:

Tell them and assure them that His Majesty's will is totally in their favour due to their quality and deeds and very especially to their defence of the Catholic faith in that realm; a faith His Majesty has defended all over Christendom.¹

¹ "Direiles ... que se aseguren de q su Mgd. les tiene la buena voluntad q mereçen por su gran calidad y por sus hechos y especialmente por defensores de la causa catholica de aquel Reyno, de la qual su Mgd. ha professado siempre ser verdadero protector en toda la cristiandad". Archivo General de Simancas, Estado, Legajo 839.

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In the same vein, the captains are ordered also to transmit the catholic leaders the joy of the Spanish king for the victories obtained in the past and the courage shown, but also:

Tell them to persevere in what they have started so well adding that they have obtained so much glory that all princes in the world will feel jealousy. Persuade them and talk them into telling you the means they have now to carry on war against the heretics. His Majesty has also ordered me to tell you that if they don't raise any objection, Medinilla can remain there with a couple of soldiers who are experienced and talk well, while you, Cisneros, can come back to make an account of the subjects treated with them.¹

As can already be seen, Caliban's image in Madrid begins to deteriorate, something that actually increases in the following point:

According to all the things mentioned so far, discuss with them the help they need and what they pretend. You will have to make a deduction of the amount of truth they supply you with, their firmness, morale and possibilities of success. Make them see softly the difficulties you may find so as to hear the solutions they give to them, but do it so that the trust they show on us be not broken.²

The Spanish official view of the Irish is still, however, incomplete. There are some strokes missing in the portrait; not very agreeable actually for the portrayed. In the first place one must bear in mind, of course, that

¹ "que persistan en lo que han comenzado con tan buen suceso y tanto loor suyo que todos los Principes del mundo les pueden hauer inuidia, y que apersuadirles esto y platicar los medios que pueden tener para proseguir la guerra contra los hereges. Me mando su Mgd. que os embiasse y que gustando q uno de los dos quede a seruirlos y assistirlos. Quedara el capitan Hernando de Medinilla con un par de compañeros soldados todos de mucha platica y experiencia y vos tornareis a dar cuenta a su Mgd. de lo que con ellos haueis tratado". Archivo General de Simancas, Estado, Legajo 839.

² "en conformidad de lo q aqui se os dize platicareis la materia del socorro q pretenden sacando de ellos todo lo que se pudiere conjeturar de su verdad y firmeza y animo y posibilidad, apuntandoles blandamente las dificultades que se os offreçieren para ver como satisfazen a ellas sin procurar vençerlos de manera q se desconfien". Archivo General de Simancas, estado, Legajo 839.

the Spanish court feels it is dealing with an ignorant who may not know very well the seriousness of war. It so appears, when one reads the following lines, that the almost total destruction of Munster, to give but only one example, may not have been a sufficient lesson for the Irish:

Tell them with great care that they must maintain the secrecy of all this because it is very important that the enemy doesn't know. Encourage them to get ready.¹

In the second place, of course, one has to bear in mind archetypes: the Irish character towards the same Irish. After all, captain Urizar had already said in 1574 that “the people were quarrelsome” and that “that who stole more considered himself to be the better man”.² That is the reason probably why in the instructions ‘Ariel’ is asked to “try to understand whether they have real friendship among themselves, whether Tyrone is respected and, finally, whether during a war he commands with energy or rather he begs favours”.³

Medinilla and Cisneros do as they are ordered and bring back answers. Positive ones, indeed, for Spain, though not Philip II (he had already died in 1598), sent in 1601 troops to the port of Kinsale ‘to help’ the Irish catholic clans. The result is well known to everyone: death, humiliation, misery and a sad return home. Mateo de Oviedo, who was present in the campaign, must have felt tremendous despair. Once in his country he will start a legal plea so as to hold Don Juan del Aguila, the commander in chief of the tragic operation, responsible for the failure. In Ireland, however, the story was different. The main heads had, by force, to begin making plans of exile. For the humble even that alternative, sad as it was, was closed. They inevitably had to prepare for, and let's use a beautiful sentence, the winter of Ireland's discontent.

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¹ “Hauéisles de encargar mucho el secreto por lo que importa que no lo entiendan los enemigos y se preparen contra ellos”. Archivo General de Simancas, Estado, Legajo 839.

² “es gente armijera”; “el que mas roba al vezino se tiene por mas hombre”. Archivo General de Simancas, Estado, Legajo 828.

³ “primeramente procurareis entender si tienen entre si aquellos señores verdadera amistad y conformidad y en que manera reconoçen al de Tiron, y si en la guerra es obedecido y manda con imperio o con ruegos”. Archivo General de Simancas, Estado, legajo 839.

Laus Deo
in die Sancti Dominici
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