Tuesday 27 March 2007. **210ENG257**

How does imperialism shape Renaissance literary texts?

The second half of the sixteenth century saw the start of an expansionist period for England, with, in 1541, Henry VIII assuming the title of King of Ireland. The conquest of Ireland was a foretaste of the establishment of English colonies in America[1]. The Renaissance also corresponded to the consolidation of the State, around the person of the monarch, with a view of resisting conquest and expanding its territorial possessions; Machiavelli, in *The Prince*, enunciated the principles forming the bases of this new ideology: the State, where power is focussed on the Prince, is able to accumulate the resources necessary for exploration and colonisation. How, then, does the ideology of imperialism shape literature in this period? First, it is important to study the portrayal of expansion, colonisation and trade in texts of the period. Then, literature also plays a role in the focalisation of power around the person of the sovereign: Machiavelli gives us a clue in *The Prince*, when he underlines the duty of the Prince to honour excellence in the Arts[2]: his reputation depends on it. However, this relationship is ambivalent, as literature may exalt but also criticise the monarch and power. Finally, the State implies borders, and thus the concepts of inclusion, nationhood, and of exclusion, foreignness. Identifying the "Other" is also a way of creating a national identity. This point will also be analysed in different plays and poems.

[1] See Taylor, ch.6.
[2] *Le Prince*, ch. 21, p.105.

It is possible to find in several different texts an exaltation of a certain spirit, ambitious, daring, attracted by risk and the perspective of profit. In *The Merchant Of Venice,* Antonio and especially Bassanio are two examples of this entrepreneurial trait, and are opposed to the prudent, calculating figure of Shylock. Bassanio boasts of his extravagance: "'Tis not unknown to you, Antonio / How much I have disabled mine estate / By something showing a more swelling port / Than my faint means would grant continuance [...]"[3], and Antonio does not hesitate to throw all his resources at his friend: "[...] be assured / My purse, my person, my extremest means / Lie all unlocked to your occasions"[4]. Portia, to Bassanio, is a land to conquer, to win from opposing rivals[5]. It is significant that she can only be won by gambling on three caskets. On the other hand, Shylock does not offer his money freely, but only based on securities, an attitude clearly despised by Antonio[6]. This fundamental clash of values is underlined by Shylock in Act III, Scene 1: "He was wont to lend money for a Christian courtesy: let him look to his bond" (verses 41-42). Alas for Shylock, clearly the law that he invokes is biased in the favour of the adventurer, as justice bows to boldness and sophistry in the trial scene. It is also interesting to note that the adventurer's apparent boldness is undermined by the inherent partiality of the system: Portia's destiny is a "lottery"[7], but the gamble is culturally biased, and only an insider would know that gold is "gaudy" and silver – for money – is common[8]. Moreover, despite his proclaimed disdain for cash, Bassanio's first word about Portia is that she is a "lady richly left"[9]. Although in the end the adventurers

[3] *The Merchant of Venice*, Act I, Scene 1, verses 122-124.
[4] *The Merchant of Venice,* Act I, Scene 1, verses 137-138.
[5] Idem, Act I, Scene 1, verses 161-176.
[6] Idem, Act I, Scene 2.
[7] Idem, Act II, Scene 1, verse 15
[8] Idem, Act III, Scene 2, verses 101-104.
[9] Idem, Act I, Scene 1, verse 161.

triumph over the prudent and honest Shylock, their demonstrated hypocrisy contradicts this apparent victory.

Michael Drayton's poem, 'To The Virginian Voyage'[10], seems a glorification of a similar conquering character, enjoining "Heroique Minds" to "Goe and Subdue" while the less daring "Hinds" remain at home, "with shame"[11]. It also invokes glorious ancestors, challenging their descendants to grandeur: "Such *Heroes* bring yee foorth, / As those from whom We came"[12], in the same way as Henry V invokes the ancestry of his men to push them "unto the breach": "Dishonour not your mothers; now attest / That those whom you called fathers did beget you"[13], thereby justifying the need for present glory by a supposedly glorious shared past. Virginia is depicted as a land of plenty, brimming with resources but curiously devoid of human life, and if the "Cannons roare", it is only with the goal of "Frigthing the wide Heaven"[14]. The land supposedly located in the West[15] has a decidedly Oriental colour ("Vine", "Cedar", "Cypresses") and the appearance of a new Eden, "(Thanks to God first given)"[16]. Significantly, toward the end of the poem, a link is established between the colonisation enterprise and literature, between the writer "Whose Reading shall inflame / Men to seeke Fame" and the heroic minds of the first verse: the Word will "[...] much commend To after-Times thy Wit"[17]: conquest as inspiration to literature, literature as inspiration to conquest. Of course, as Drayton would certainly have known, the reality of colonisation in Virginia was far

[10] *The Penguin Book of Renaissance Verse*, 193, pp.431-433.
[11] 'To The Virginian Voyage', verses 1-6.
[12] Idem, verses 56-57.
[13] *Henry V,* Act III Scene 1, verses 22-23.
[14] 'To The Virginian Voyage', verses 53-54.
[15] Idem, verse 14.
[16] Idem, verse 50.
[17] Idem, verses 67-72.

different. In the first decades, settlers were dying in droves, hard labour was the norm, and few indentured servants would live to see the end of their contract[18]. Far from empty, America was home to millions of native inhabitants, whose initial benevolence toward the newcomers quickly turned into hostility when the colonisers rewarded their hospitality with theft and murder. As Hakluyt the Elder had written, the goal of colonisation was: "to plant Christian religion; to trafficke; to conquer"[19], a vision not that distant after all to the "Gold, Glory (and God)" ideology permeating Drayton's poem.

Constructing the Empire also meant constructing the monarch as the focal point of power, and the literature of the Elizabethan period was centred on the Queen, who, thanks to the decrease in strength of the feudal lords, concentrated power as never before[20]. The feudal pyramid of lieges and vassals had collapsed and been replaced by the Court, where the sovereign could keep a close eye on the nobility, who in turn give meaning and power to the monarch. The Queen becomes the personification of the country; in Puttenham's poem, 'Her Majestie resembled to the crowned pillar', she is "The sounde Pillar / Of Albions rest, / Stay and comfort"[21]. The poem is visually arranged as a pillar, but can also been seen as an "I", the merged identity of the monarch and of the country. The contradictions between the humanity of the sovereign and his or her responsibility to the State is illustrated in *Henry V*, in Henry's monologue in Act IV Scene 1: "Our children, and our sins, lay on the King."[22] and "What kind of god art thou,

[18] See Taylor, ch.6.
[19] Taylor, p.119.
[20] See 'The Social Setting', in *The Age of Shakespeare*, pp.15-47.
[21] *The Penguin Book of Renaissance Verse*, p.98, verses 21-23.
[22] *Henry V*, Act IV scene 1, verse 214.

that suffer'st more / of mortal griefs than do thy worshippers?"[23]. The King is built by language, and it is through language that he exerts his power, as is illustrated by the speeches that he pronounces in front of Harfleur ("Once more unto the breach [...]"[24]), or before the battle of Agincourt in Act III Scene 4, twice turning defeat into victory. Henry is indeed praised for his scholarship by Canterbury[25], and he embodies many of the principles delineated by Machiavelli in *The Prince* – including the unashamed resort to extreme violence, as in his threats to the governor of Harfleur, or the execution of prisoners. Daring, ruthless, unembarrassed by the dubious legality of his claims, Henry displays the conquering spirit described previously. By contrast, in Marlowe's *Edward II*, the king is shown as an antithesis of what a sovereign should be: unassertive, willing to invite foreign invaders, ignorant and relying on pedants, effete, wavering, hanging to the legality of his title like Shylock to his "bond".

As we have seen, at the apex of the Empire sits the Sovereign, the incarnation of the State. An essential part of the State, though, is its national identity, its borders, which implies the twin concepts of citizen and alien, of national and foreign cultures. In Drayton's poem, it is "*Britans*"[26] who are encouraged to go to the New World, while in Andrew Marvell's 'Bermudas', the settlers are said to be singing "in the *English* boat"[27]. In *Henry V*, we have, in Act III, Scene 3, Fluellen from Wales, Gower from England, MacMorris from Ireland and Jamy from Scotland playfully jousting with each other and fighting on the same side. Of course, historically as in the age of Shakespeare, this was

[23] Idem, verses 223-224.
[24] Idem, Act III, scene 1.
[25] Idem, Act I, scene 1.
[26] *The Penguin Book of Renaissance Verse*, 'To The Virginian Voyage', p.431, verse 7.
[27] Idem, 'Bermudas', p.471, verse 37.

kind of unity was mostly wishful thinking. Against this concept of nationhood is opposed the Alien; be it the French, weak and arrogant like the Dauphin in *Henry V*, effete and perverting like Gaveston in *Edward II*, or vainglorious like Aragon in *The Merchant of Venice*; or be it the Moor Morocco in that same play, or the different nationalities enumerated by Portia in Act I, Scene 2, including, amusingly, the English and the Scot. This sort of stereotyping reinforces the strength of the idea of nationalities, whose characters differ, and hence promotes in a way the unity of the State. As Yungblut argues, the Elizabethans had divided opinions about foreigners[28]: recognition of their potential economic utility on the one hand, suspicion on the other. That dichotomy appears in all the texts cited above.

Renaissance literature was fundamental in the definition and the support of these three aspects of imperialism: the "adventuring spirit", the exaltation of the Monarch and the creation of a national identity. Even discussions or criticisms of the uses and abuses of power by the Sovereign were contributing to the ideology. The plays could convey important arguments to the public, and poems could be used as rhetorical devices. As Rowle describes in his book[29], the Court was based on language and performance. Theatricality could even be found in punishments. Rather than imperialism shaping literature, it might be more appropriate to consider than it was literature that provided the structures on which imperialism could be constructed.

[28] *Strangers Settled Here Among Us*, Ch.2 ' Dichotomies in English attitudes toward the Aliens'.
[29] *The Elizabethan Renaissance*, Ch.2 'The Court'.

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

Barker, S. and Hinds, H. (2003) *The Routledge Anthology of Renaissance Drama*, Routledge, London.

Ford, B. ed. (1975) *The Pelican Guide to English Literature: 2 – The Age of Shakespeare*, Penguin Book, London.

Greenblatt, S. ed. (1997) *The Norton Shakespeare, International Student Edition*, Norton, London.

Machiavel, N. (1999) *Le Prince*, Librio, Flammarion, Paris.

Malet, A. and Isaac, J. (1961) *L'Histoire: Rome et le Moyen Age, L'Age Classique, Les Révolutions, La Naissance du Monde Moderne*, Marabout, Paris.

Norbrook, D. and Woudhuysen, H.R. ed. (2005) *The Penguin Book of Renaissance Verse 1509-1659*, Penguin Books, London.

Rowse, A.L. (1971) *The Elizabethan Renaissance: The Life of the Society*, Macmillan, London.

Taylor, A. (2001) *American Colonies: The Settling of North America*, Penguin Books, London.

Yungblut, L.H. (1996) *Strangers Settled Here Amongst Us: Policies, Perceptions and the Presence of Aliens in Elizabethan England*, Routledge, London.