

COMPLAINTS ABOUT COURT LIFE IN RENAISSANCE ENGLAND AND SPAIN:

A comparison between Edmund Spenser's *Prosopopoia* or *Mother Hubbard's Tale* and an anonymous letter of 1591 from Madrid to El Escorial (Public Record Office State Papers: Spain 94 vol 4, part 1, folios 51-53v)

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Some years ago, when I was a postgraduate student at the University of London, I was asked to translate some Spanish State Papers in the Public Record Office for someone in the history department. They were to do with Spanish policy in the Netherlands in the second half of the sixteenth century, and some were business letters concerning the spice trade. In amongst them was a manuscript which was different from the rest in that it was of a social nature and of obvious literary merit. (I came to publish it in the *Bulletin of Hispanic Studies*).¹ The manuscript comprises two pieces of writing constituting folios 51 to 53v of S P 94, vol 4, part 1, bearing a title scribbled in a mixture of French, Spanish and Italian on the back of folio 53v: "Discours del Escorial en Sopra la Bragheta" ("Discourse on the Escorial' Followed by 'The Flyhole'"). Both pieces are anonymous, the former in the guise of a letter from Madrid dated 28 August 1591, and addressed to an unnamed acquaintance of high degree in El Escorial; the second is also in the form of a letter, but has no date or location. Both are copied in the same small, compact hand, and the second passage follows the first with a break of only a few lines, thus suggesting that they may proceed from the same source. They are not directly connected in subject matter, the first concerning El Escorial and the second covering the fashions and morals of the day, but the general theme of life at court and certain characteristics of style, such as enumerations and antitheses, point to a common author. The critical nature of the passages with their satirical humour leads one to suppose that they were intended for a limited circulation among friends, and their presence in a compilation of State Papers in England would suggest that they had been sent back to England by an Englishman or an

Anglophile to amuse a government official who knew Spanish and had a sense of humour.

The first passage, dealing with El Escorial, is interesting in that it deviates from the pattern of eulogy set by most works on the subject. It is portrayed as a rustic, comfortless place, though there is obvious exaggeration for literary effect. At the time of writing of this piece, the palace of El Escorial was quite new, having been completed only seven years earlier, in 1584, yet the building, in its stark setting, was half palace and half monastery and mausoleum, so one must have lived there in the shadows of the cloister and the grave. Furthermore, at this time, Philip II (referred to here rather irreverently) was an ailing man, so it must have been sombre and depressing to live there.

But what the author most roundly denounces is the corruption and hypocrisy of the world of the court, with its ambitious ministers, sycophantic petitioners and faithless wives. In the second passage, particularly, on 'La Bragueta', he condemns the lax morals of court life. He appears to write from bitter experience, and it is quite possible that he was one of the frustrated *negociantes* of whom he sympathetically speaks.

The cosmopolitan atmosphere surrounding the court is also remarked upon with little relish. The diversity of nationalities present at El Escorial was possibly a literary topic of the day, for the same theme occurs in a letter entitled *Carta a un Hidalgo Amigo del Autor LLamado Juan de Castejón, en que se Trata de la Corte*, and attributed to a contemporary, Eugenio de Salazar.² While Salazar enumerates foreign salutations, comparing the place to the Tower of Babel, our writer lists foreign swear-words and compares it to Noah's Ark:

todo anda confuso, a uno se oye bramar el ciervo, gemir la dama [...] renegar el soldado, grasnar el ansar, regoldar el privado: en un mismo tiempo se oye el castellano hechar su pese a tal, el catalan su capicul, el biscayno su arengorpuca, el portugues su consagio a Deus, el tudesco su dasticot, el flamenco su pestilence, el frances su morbleu, el ytaliano su putadica, el ungaro su corbasy, de manera que jamas en el arca de Noe hubo tanta confusion de diversos sonidos y voces quanto ay en aquel pueblo [...].

Our anonymous author obviously had contact with the foreign troops in Spain, and we deduce also from the passage that he had a close knowledge of firearms. It was possibly military life that gave him experience of these things and of foreign influences.

The things in the letters that would have interested the English court are the factors related to the images Elizabeth and Philip both portrayed of themselves or had portrayed. She would have been amused by the very critical view of El Escorial, by the way the princesses are described as having lost their beauty by horse-riding and hunting, by the almost invisibility of the king, and even more pronounced invisibility of his wealth and his books. His dithering and indecision far surpassed Elizabeth's, and his lack of trust of statesmen was very different from Elizabeth's way of governing, indeed, her trust of ministers who had served her father Henry VIII, like Robert Cecil, was and is, considered one of the factors that contributed to the success of her reign.

Elizabeth knew about Philip's new palace, in fact, a drawing of the almost completed construction was acquired by Robert Cecil, Lord Burghley. No doubt she knew that Philip's court was much less culturally insular than the English court which celebrated the Queen as the personification of glory, adored by her courtiers, and her England was seen as enjoying a golden age of domestic harmony and potential international might; as tensions with Spain rose, so too did the cultivation of Elizabeth's status as national heroine and rightful "empress of the world".

Edmund Spenser subscribed to the Platonic doctrine that "true beauty is not material but heaven-sent, bespeaking in principle an inner spiritual excellence; Love is a god who leads man to such beauty and reduces warring chaos to harmony". Hence the effectiveness of the image of Elizabeth as Britomart, representing Chastity, and the spiritual power of her apparent virginity. In her temple, Eliza was surrounded by her vestal virgins, and the most common offence of her courtiers was seduction of her "maids of honour". Most of the leading courtiers fell into disgrace on this score -Leicester, Oxford, Essex, Pembroke, Raleigh. It was suggested that the courtiers' morals detracted from their learning. So of course, all was not sunshine at Eliza's court.

Spenser shows at some points in his career symptoms of frustration over the unresponsiveness of the powerful to his needs and wishes. So although he wrote *The Faerie Queene*, where Elizabeth appears in all her flattering personae: Gloriana, Belphoebe, Una, Britomart, Marcilla, and King Phllip is

Orgoglio the "hideous geant horrible and hye "This monstrous masse of earthly slime/ Puft up with emptie wind, and fild with sinfull crime."²

He also wrote his *Complaints*. One of these, "Prosopopoeia or Mother Hubbard's Tale", probably written earlier and published in the wake of the success of *The Faerie Queene*, caused the authorities to withdraw unsold copies the year after publication, 1592, because it contains a covert attack on Lord Burghley. Spenser seems to have believed that this lord's powerful influence was blocking his and other worthy men's progress.

These sentiments are just like those expressed by the anonymous author of the letters from Madrid to El Escorial. Since they seem to have been stock themes of the day, we will compare how they are expressed in the two works.

To disguise their attacks, the Spanish author uses the cloak of anonymity, while Spenser adopts the age-old device of the bestiary. He sets his fable in the Kingdom of the Animals and has the disillusioned Ape and Fox undertake a series of adventures which take them through the three estates, as they feign to be soldiers, clergy and courtiers (the three estates being brought together, of course, by the particular nature of El Escorial), until they actually drug King Lion and steal his crown, and rule, or rather misrule, to the point where Jove has to intervene to restore order.

Both works begin with a complaint about the disorder of the times, meaning that if all were order and harmony, the writer would be enjoying privilege and would not be penning a complaint. "Mother Hubbard's Tale" (*Poetical Works* pp. 494-508) opens with "the sinfull world": And pour'd on th' earth plague, pestilence, and death" (1.8).

The Spanish letters complain of the state of affairs being: "contra todas las leyes y orden de la naturaleza." Man's sin has upset the natural order and harmony and the Age of Gold has been lost for ever. Men and animals no longer know or accept their place in society, in the great chain of being, still accepted in the Renaissance. The King at the top, who should set an example of duty to kingship, has become rustic: "los hombres desaliñados, groseros, rusticos, que aun el mismo Rey por la fatal constelacion de la tierra, como olvidado de su grandeza, duerme ally en una cama de paño pardo".

The Spanish author uses the Escorial as a scapegoat. He bitterly rues his personal misfortune, then puts the blame for his lack of preferment on El Escorial:

Se que tambien soy yo de carne y de gueso para estar triste
no teniendo blanca, mohino quando no negocio, melancolico
estando yndispuesto y finalmte descontento saviendo que
nunca Dios llueve sobre cosa mia, como dijo aquel pobre
poeta; de todo esto tiene sin duda la culpa essa tierra desierta,
esse pueblo, yba a dezir maldito, del Escorial, pueblo sin
comedimiento, montaña desgraciada, sitio sin afabilidad, a
donde sacando el edificio y las cosas sanctas y sagradas de
aquel monasterio, todo lo demas es horrible, todo aborrecible,
todo abominable.

The second Spanish letter blames the caprices of Fortune for everything being out of joint. This is parallel to Spenser's work, for in *Mother Hubbard's Tale* the Fox expected favour for what he thought was merit, but when other inferior beasts were preferred, he grew tired of being scorned by Fortune:

Thus manie years I now haue spent and worne,
In meane regard, and basest fortunes scorne,
Dooing my Country service as I might,
No lesse I dare saie than the prowdest wight,
And still I hoped to be aduanced
For my good parts; but still it hath mischaunced.
(ls. 59-64)

The Ape agrees with him:

For I likewise haue wasted much good time,
Still wayting to preferment vp to clime,
Whilest others alwayes haue before me stept;
And from my beard the fat away haue swept,
That now unto despaire I gin to growe (ls. 75-79).

Power and wealth is concentrated in the hands of the few: "For now a few haue all and all haue nought" (1.141).

The Fox and the Ape, the two cleverest or most cunning of beasts decide to leave their humble place in line and try to improve their fortunes

moving up through the estates. They begin disguising themselves as soldiers: "That now is thought a ciuile begging sect" (1.198).

This lowly view of the soldier and his reputation is reflected in the Spanish letters, where in El Escorial you hear them swearing instead of fighting for a noble cause.

The Ape and the Fox as soldiers deceive a farmer who entrusts his flock of sheep to them. When they have killed and eaten the whole flock they run away and trick a priest they come across. He is easy to deceive as he cannot read -he never found reading necessary in his profession. They also deceive him with flattery and evasive words, which the priest adduces as proof that they are clergy. They manage to get charge of a parish and are content for the meantime as it is a job that requires a minimum of work and offers the chance to dress well and perhaps to rise to high estate. They are not constrained by the rule of chastity, as they say in lines 475-8: "Beside we may haue lying by our sides/ ur lovely Lasses, or bright shining Brides:/ We be not tyde to wilfull chastitie,/ But haue the Gospell of free libertie".

Equally, in the Spanish piece, the clergy are sorely tempted because the Escorial is both palace and monastery:

los frayles viven aborridos los monjes cuya profesion es vivir
solitarios andan maullando como gatos en desvanes, oyendo
las tiernas voces de las damas y teniendo la corte a las
espaldas del dormitorio.

The clergy do not study or teach because all the books are hidden:

¿Qué puedo mas dezir de los hombres si aun los mismos
libros alli se hazen salvajes y huyen la vista de los hombres
doctos, escondiendose por aquellas encantadas arcas de la
ynvisible libreria?

Philip II notoriously hoarded books in El Escorial; Fray Luis de Leon described them as "tesoro escondido debajo de tierra". Antonio Agustín remarked to Zurita in 1573: 'recoger alli tan buenos libros y no comunicarlos, se hace mas daño que provecho.' Mariana also saw no advantage in keeping them "cautivos".³

After the two false priests, the Ape and the Fox, have been exposed, they decide to try their luck as courtiers. They meet the Mule, who has been blessed by Fortune, but he warns them of the vicissitudes of life at court:

From royall Court I lately came (said he)
 Where all the braverie that eye may see,
 And all the happinesse that heart desire,
 Is to be found; he nothing can admire,
 That hath not seene that heavens portracture:
 But tidings there is none I you assure,
 Save that which common is, and knowne to all,
 That Courtiers as the tide doo rise and fall.

They are also warned of the corruption at court, at the need for guile and bribery:

But if thee list unto the Court to throng,
 And there to hunt after the hoped pray,
 Then must thou thee dispose another way:
 For there thou needs must learne to laugh, to lie,
 To face, to forge, to scoffe, to companie,
 To crouche, to please, to be a beetle stock
 Of thy great Masters will, to scorne, or mock:
 So maist thou chaunce mock out a Benefice [...]
 These be the wayes, by which without reward
 Liuing in Court be gotten, though full hard.
 For nothing there is done without a fee:
 The Courtier needes must recompenced bee [...].
 (ls. 502-516).

Be sycophantic, pay the price and wait. That is what one has to do in order to get on at court. The Spanish writer appears to have bitter experience of this:

Pasa todo al contrario a donde los hombres ciudadanos,
 dejando las cortes y pueblos ynsignes y los regalos de sus

casas, se van entre aquellos ynfelices peñascos y sierras,
 movidos no de la musica de Orfeo, sino siguiendo el
 embeleco de las enfermas y engañosas esperanças de uno y de
 otro ministro.

O que lastima es ver un pobre negociante bajar del sitio
 sudando por aquella cuesta, renegando la pasciencia porque
 no le despachan [...].

To add to the woes of the man kept waiting for his business or his
 favour at El Escorial, back home in Madrid, his wife is being unfaithful:

mientras que muchos casados andan los veranos por aquellos
 estanques pensando refrescarse con el agua de sus
 pretendencias y privanças, suelen sus mugeres en Madrid y
 otras partes hazerles nascen la luna nueva en las frentes.

The court in *Mother Hubbard's Tale* is no less immoral a place. There
 are, of course, some fine examples to follow, and Spenser gives us a
 description of the perfect courtier, as set out by Castiglione (translated by Sir
 Thomas Hoby as *The Courtyer* in 1561): he is a successful soldier, a
 consummate statesman, he takes part in jousts, is interested in music and the
 arts-like, of course, Sir Philip Sidney and Sir Walter Raleigh. Unfortunately, the
 Ape does not emulate them, but the "lustie gallants":

with mumming and with masking all around,
 With dice, with cards, with balliards farre unfit
 With shuttlecocks, misseeming manlie wit,
 With courtizans, and costly riotize [...] (ls. 802-5).

The Ape did well at court, because he could play, dance and juggle, and all his
 exploits were supported by the necessary back-up ruses of the Fox, who always
 had his graft. The unenviable lot of the suitor at court in lines 891 to 914 is a
 set piece as it is self-contained and distinguished stylistically, it is marked by
 parallel lines beginning with an infinitive, followed by two lines of verbs in the

infinitive, beginning "So pitifull a thing is Suters state". It has the same sentiments as in the Escorial piece.

When the Fox is exposed and has to flee the court, the Ape's downfall is imminent. The two have moved up through the estates, revealing corruption in each until they actually reach the top, they steal the drugged King Lion's clothes, crown and sceptre. But they quarrel over who should be king. The Ape is most like man physically, but the Fox, with his cunning, is most like man "in wit and spirite", that other, not to be neglected half, of man's nature. They reach a compromise: the Ape embodies the king, but agrees to do nothing without the Fox's advice, so he is a puppet king. It was this likeness to Burghley and his activities that got the *Complaints* into trouble.

There follows a period of tyranny and misrule, with everything falling into chaos until Jove intervenes to rally King Lion to wake up and take charge of his kingdom. This he does without his robes and trappings, showing that true kingship does not lie in appearances but in the true worth that is required to defend the kingdom, in this case, the Lion's strength.

Spenser may not be going so far as to imply that Elizabeth is a puppet queen, or that England is going through a period of misrule, on the contrary, her delegation of state decisions to such as Burghley and Walsingham was seen as wise policy. Philip, on the other hand, was afraid to trust anyone, and by trying to do everything himself, or just not getting on with taking decisions, he was criticised more than Elizabeth. The anonymous Spanish writer talks of "los reyes que no saven regir", and "Piensan los reyes y sus consejos que todo lo saven". He covers himself in such a direct attack by attributing disorder firstly to the goddess Fortune, who has turned everything upside down:

ella haze los ricos avaros, los pobres liberales, los que
governan nescios, los gobernados sabios, los soldados
cobardes, los frayles valientes, los reyes que no saven regir,
los basallos que no quieren obedecer,

and secondly to the Escorial itself. If it is pure *escoria*, as all the gold and silver has been extracted, and if places influence the constitution (las complecciones), and these influence customs, as Galen supposes, then it is not surprising that the people living at El Escorial are as they are.

Spenser does not blame the place, he suggests that human nature is the same everywhere, there will be envious apes and cunning foxes in any society, but apart from that, and one feels that the Escorial is only an excuse or a cover, the pieces are similar in sentiment. There is corruption in every layer of society, and nowhere is this more noticeable or dangerous than at court.

The English and Spanish writers also share some traits of style. The Spanish author begins with a reproach to the addressee, his patron or master, for not answering letters:

No puedo atribuir sino a la mala ynfluencia que ay en esse pueblo y sitio que V M siendo el hijo del mismo comedimiento, padre de la cortesia y hermano mayor de las gracias, quiera de mi una cosa tan agena de todo esto como es pedir muchas cartas y no responder a ninguna, ¡cuerpo de tal con el mundo!

Spenser pens a similar sarcastic reproach not in *Mother Hubbard's Tale*, but in a letter to his friend Gabriel Harvey:

Good Master H. I doubt not but you haue some great important matter in hande, which al this while restraineth youre Penne, and wonted readinesse in prouoking me vnto that, wherein your selfe nowe faulte. (*Poetical Works*, p. 611).

Both authors have a rich vocabulary and add pace and movement to their writing with lists of verbs. Lists of nouns and adjectives give force to an argument, and the verb + noun combination is used by Spenser and it is also productive in the Spanish passage, particularly at high points of the discourse. They both make the usual references to Ovid, 1589-99 being the great decade of the influence of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Spenser does not do so in the *Hubbard* piece, as it pretends to be related by "Mother Hubbard", so the only classical reference is at the beginning before Mother Hubbard starts her tale. But of course in *The Faerie Queene*, Book 1, Canto V, v 35, there is the usual reference to Ixion, Sisyphus, Tantalus, Tityus, Typhaeus and Theseus. The

motif fits in perfectly with the Spanish author's thesis, that of the changes wrought by Fortune:

en estos montes, en estos balles, en estas cuestras, creo que
esta condenado Sisipho a volver su piedra, Yxion a estar
enrrodado, Titio a que aguilas le comen las entrañas: y Tantalo
a morir de hambre y de sed, de todo lo qual y de estar
muchos dias en essa tierra, guarde Dios a V M.

These references are taken from the *Metamorphoses* Book IV where Juno visits the Underworld, suggesting that the Escorial is no better than the Underworld.

Finally, on appearances, both authors show an interest in clothes and their significance. The second letter "La Bragueta" is ostensibly about fashion, but complaining about the immorality of the times, it shows how men's clothing was more complicated and difficult to undo than women's, when it should have been the other way round. Ladies' fashions in the late sixteenth century were not so uncomplicated as the writer asserts: Philip II himself wrote to his daughters in about 1583 "I think that the ladies of my sister have shortened the trimmings of their gowns, for they do not wear them very long: but this is not true of the bustles, which are terrible [...]".⁴ The implication is not so much that women's clothes were very bare on the outside, but *underneath* those great skirts.

Edmund Spenser also shows how important clothes are in society. The Ape cuts a dash in his new-style Portuguese soldier's outfit (lines 211-12), contrasting with the humble farmer's simple grey suit (lines 231-32). Even the clergy dressed in fancy clothes:

Ne to weare garments base of wollen twist,
But with the finest silkes us to array,
That before God we may appeare more gay. (ls. 460-2).

At court the Ape appears "As if he were some great *Magnifico*" (l.665) and he passes off his strangeness as being foreign and of the latest fashion:

For he was clad in strange accoustrements,
Fashion'd with quaint deuises never seene

In Court before, yet there all fashions beene:
 Yet he them in newfangelnesse did pas:
 But his behaiour altogether was
Alla turchesca, much the more admyr'd (ls. 672-7).

As both writers complained at the outset, the day is for the parvenu; the constant, truly worthy and virtuous courtier does not get very far, so one suspects that even Castiglione's man had to grease a few palms now and again.

NOTES

- 1.- *Bulletin of Hispanic Studies* LII (1975) 217-225.
- 2.- His letters are edited as 'Cartas de Eugenio Salazar', *Sociedad de Bibliófilos Españoles* I (Madrid 1866).
- 3.- Book I Canto VII v8 & v9, all quotations from Edmund Spenser *Poetical Works* ed. J. C. Smith & E de Selincourt, Oxford 1912, 1985 reprint.
- 4.- References from Vicente Llorens, 'La discontinuidad española -La invasión árabe y el legado de la antigüedad clásica', *RO*, CXXI (1973) 21.
- 5.- Quoted in English in Sir Charles Petrie *Philip II of Spain*, London (1963) 181.