

The Enemy Within: Otherness in Thomas Dekker's *Lust's Dominion*

Jesús López-Peláez Casellas

UNIVERSIDAD DE JAÉN

jlopez@uajaen.es

The history of English and Moroccan relations, commercial and political, can be traced back as far as 1548, and these relations were, from the outset, conditioned by the threatening presence of a third party, Catholic Spain. The need to create Spain as many powerful enemies as possible implied that the English broke the prohibition against a Christian nation providing munitions to non-Christian kings, and so Anglo-Moroccan contacts started to be implemented in spite of the many prejudices existing on both sides (D'Amico 1991: 7-32). After a period of difficult relations, in 1600 trade is substituted for politics in the relation between both countries; the reasons that explain how and why these two antagonistic countries were suddenly considering the possibility of a joint political action are varied: firstly, after the English attack on Cádiz and the failure of the Spanish Armadas, the Moroccans perceived that the English were the most suitable European power to provide them with the naval support they required to fight Spain; secondly, the English were informed of Almansour's economic success, and of the problems the Spaniards were having with the Alpujarras rebellions; in short, the Moroccans needed arms, the English needed gold, and, most important, both had a formidable common enemy: Spain (D'Amico 1991: 32-38).

However, for a treaty to work out between these two nations it was obvious that certain values had to be modified; after all, if it was true that the Spaniards were papist, they were also Christians, whereas the Moroccans were for the English nothing more than infidels, heathens, the heirs of Noah's son Ham, and an almost perfect metaphor of evil (Barthelemy 1987: 1-17). The political appropriateness of a military joint venture against Spain seemed to hide these moral conflicts, although religious animosity remained strong. In August, 1600, a Moroccan embassy arrived at Dover. Approximately fifteen men, including an Andalusian interpreter, Sidi Abdala, a pretended merchant, Al-Hage (probably *Hash*) Bahanet, and the ambassador of *Barbary*, a Fessian called Abd-el Ouahed, were lodged near the Royal Exchange for six months, during which they met Queen Elizabeth, participated in some social events (anniversary of the Queen's coronation) and learnt about English daily life (prices, cost of living, costumes, etc.). Almansour's plans for an invasion of Spain needed English ships: he would provide the troops, and would share the territory with the English; as it seems, he maintained that he could easily get some help from falsely converted muslims living in Spain as Christians, who would support the invasion from within (D'Amico 1991: 35-38; Bullough 1973: 207-208). Apparently, the embassy was given a negative answer, but Elizabeth offered an alternative: they would attack Spain in the Indies, and again the English would supply ships and

weapons, and the Moroccans men and, interestingly in Elizabeth's proposal, money. Almansour refused to send the treasure before they could discuss the details, and demanded that a ship be sent to Morocco. Negotiations stopped in 1603, with the death of both monarchs and the Anglo-Spanish peace under James I. In 1601, two years before her death, Elizabeth decreed the deportation of "blackmoores brought into this realme" (D'Amico 1991: 32).

Thomas Dekker's *Lust's Dominion* (1600) tells the story of a prince from Barbary, Eleazar, who has been accepted within the Spanish court of King Philip, and tries to find his way to the top of Spanish aristocracy by cheating and imprisoning his opponents, until he is eventually betrayed and unmasked. The prominence that the figure of the *Moor* Eleazar acquires, and the specific setting of the play, Catholic Spain, leads one inevitably towards certain considerations of the concepts of aliens, natural enemies and otherness, which seem to point to a specifically significant dramatisation of one of the most relevant debates of the century. Dekker's play was for its audience, obviously, a play about foreigners; I am persuaded that it responded to the anxieties created by a situation historically determined that tried to cope with religious, economic and colonial issues.¹ From a religious point of view, England was practically surrounded by Catholics; economically speaking, its technical backwardness demanded a high number of foreign technicians (especially from the Low Countries); and, finally, the country was experiencing a paradoxical reaction towards the colonial expansion: it was closing in on itself at the same time as it was expanding (Marienstrass 1985: 101-5). Since England (or any country for that matter) was considered as a territorial and symbolic space occupied by the body politic and whose head is the crown, it is not surprising that the sanctity of this realm were perceived as endangered by a new situation that required to re-think the relations with other cultures, religions and peoples. It is in this context that Dekker's unusual play has to be perceived; if it is true that it has sometimes been rightly analysed as a "play about a Moor", it is also true that the presence of a "Moor" in a Spanish setting has traditionally been overlooked.

Lust's Dominion explores, in the first place, the different dimensions of the concept 'subject'. It has been pointed out that the English sixteenth century feels the need to theorize what it is to become a subject, and it is fully explained by contrast with the figure of the foreigner (Marienstrass 1985: 104-5). These two categories are not absolutely exclusive, but the distance between both depends on several factors that mediate and eventually define the degree of closedness of the country. In this sense, Edward Coke developed in 1608 the concepts that are supposed to establish the separation between these two types: allegiance and its different classes (natural, acquired, local, legal); the relation to the kingdom (natural and political bodies); and kinds of laws involved (that is, natural or positive). That the subject (who owes obedience to his sovereign: allegiance) and the foreigner (who is such in relation to the subject: anyone born out of allegiance to the king) are perceived as necessarily distant implies that political theory and the legal system have already started to elaborate a colonial theory that explains the different relations of the people to the authorities, establishing privileges, creating rights and producing inequality. But this theorization needs, on account of political opportunity, to distinguish between 'friends', 'temporary' or 'explicitely tolerated' enemies, on the one hand, and 'perpetual enemies', on the other. Perpetual enemies and subjects always maintain perpetual hostility: there is no possibility of redemption, temporary agreement or forgiveness. Infidels are perpetual enemies, for there can be nothing but hostility between God and their leader, the Devil. Perpetual enemies are perpetual foreigners, they are subjects of Satan, and their apparent friendliness can only be a way to deceive. Economic or political issues seem to be left behind when this category appears: absolute otherness can only be explained through reference to the

¹ In fact, when Hakluyt and his cousin determined why it was necessary for England to start the colonization of Virginia, they mentioned three reasons: the implantation of Christianity; commerce; and conquest (Marienstrass 1985: 103).

devil; however, its ideological content only remains hidden: like modern notions of race,² the perpetual enemy constitutes a timeless, ahistorical, and unredeemable category, which will always remain isolated and with no possibility of going through the whole scale that ranges from exclusion through acceptance to inclusion (Marienstrass 1985: 105-17).

Dekker's play offers an interesting ambivalence, progressively resolved as the play advances, in relation to the real nature of Eleazar, his meaning and his position in the play. Is he a man or a devil? According to what I have presented above, it seems clear that he represents both an internal and external threat to Spain, and the play seems to work in order to highlight the ways in which his behaviour corresponds to his actions. His liaison with the Queen Mother is cruel, rude, savage and extreme; his attitude as husband is utterly dishonourable; his conduct as a noble is blatantly aberrant. However, it is also evident that the rest of the characters do not conform to any ideals of noble or Christian conduct either: the Queen Mother has sex with Eleazar; King Fernando lusts after Eleazar's wife; Cardinal Mendoza had a bastard son with the Queen Mother, ... All these characters will cheat, and lie, and punish others just in order to satisfy their, normally sexual, desires. The metaphor of infection comes then readily to mind: Eleazar is the 'perpetual foreigner' whose presence in the court of Spain spreads around a moral illness; for decent Spaniards, Eleazar is 'lustful fury' ravishing the chastity of the Spanish nation; but the play suggests that this nation is not so chaste. In this reading, Eleazar is also a symbol of division: incoherence as a threat arising from those who are not entire subjects but "half-faced" (Marienstrass 1985: 103); the state is a living organism, affected by the ambition and lack of principles of an inoculated perverting element.

Looked at closely, the play offers more possibilities than an outright condemnation of its main character; as an agent of corruption, the North-African prince doesn't seem to have had much trouble corrupting such a group of lustful aristocrats. In fact, Eleazar seems to be pursuing his own affairs, just like the rest with the only exception of his wife Maria. In such a court, everyone, Christian or infidel, tries to satisfy his or her own needs, at whatever the cost. Banishments, killings or treasons, although apparently stimulated by the presence of this agent of evil, seem to belong to the code of conduct of many of the main characters in the play. The play, I suggest, balances both options, and fosters an interrogation on the nature of the different characters of the play; the Spaniards are enemies, although temporary; Eleazar is, for both English and Spanish, a permanent foreigner. To what extent, then, is Eleazar responsible for the events taking place here? Or is it correct to characterize him as an absolute "other"? The text doesn't seem to be consistent with a traditional reading of the Moor as the agent of destruction, at least not with one that overlooks what he actually does, and to whom and where he does it.

The presentation of Eleazar as an outsider is consistent with the symbology of chaos that the play regularly offers (I. i. 147-151; I. iv. 57-60; II. 1. 94-106; II. iii.35-6; V. vi. 59-85). His otherness, used either as the metaphor of infection I mentioned, or as a contrast with the scale of exclusion in which the Spaniards are included, is presented, again, from a double perspective, historical and ahistorical. The latter produces a figure rejected more on account of his blackness (timeless feature) than his irreligious cynism: a 'Moor' surrounded by white devils, and whose blackness is a symbol of his soul and his vice. But I am persuaded that there is a historical dimension of the play; one which focuses on the known features of Eleazar: a captive of royal blood, a prince taken as prisoner to Spain, enormously ambitious and who has some kind of *virtù*; in all these elements, Eleazar is not unlike other noble Spaniards in the play, even if his responses seem to be in opposition to the conventional codes of Christian behaviour; but then so are the Spaniards'.

The relative puzzlement created by a play which seems to support the orthodox definition of perpetual enemies yet consistently refuses to separate Eleazar from other Christians (though they be

² Significantly, perpetual enemies are also 'racially' different, as in the play under scrutiny here.

sinful Spaniards) can only start to be solved by postulating the complex relationship existing between Eleazar and the community and power. This relation is mediated by a continuous activity of role-playing, which I consider to be determinant for the dramatic structure and meaning of the play: Eleazar's plot consists on playing different roles with different people, in order to secure their support and their mutual hatred. His blackness is also the form adopted to hide this game; he and the play will at times try to fight stereotyping (I. iii. 65-68), whereas as the play progresses this will become unavoidable, and Eleazar will appear as dissembling (I. iv. 47-51), evil (II. ii. 80-85; 103; V. v. 202-203), or ruthlessly cruel (V. iii. 38-44). The roles that Eleazar plays have to do with the double discrimination he suffers, as foreigner and racially different; and, on another level, as less than human ("dog" I. i. 151-3) and other than human ("devil" I. ii. 6). Eleazar seems to laugh at this characterization at the beginning of the play while he provides the possible reasons of his hostility towards Christian Spaniards: the "killing looks" and the "hissing tongue" (I. i. 87; 89). Eleazar is an outsider, and is constantly made to feel like one: his different roles constitute his response to the animosity he perceives everywhere, and the ways he articulates to achieve his ends. But he is not the only one to do so: the Queen Mother cheats husband and sons; king Fernando cheats Mendoza; etc. In an ambiguous statement, Eleazar realizes that religion "masques" the black face of sin (I. ii. 114), and kingdoms can be got by cunning, although they may not last long (V. i. 38). Role-playing pays, or seems to pay, in the modern world of simulation and appearances governing the Spanish court. Blacks, who must appear white at times to hide their evil natures and keep their souls black, are actors, the play suggests; they play different roles and almost succeed; but whites do the same for the sake of expediency (Barthelemy 1987: 107-9). This behaviour, acting like the 'Moors', pretending to be what they are not, will lead to disaster when the purpose is dishonest. However, the play does not condemn Eleazar's main activity, role-playing, at all; this ability is what anthropologists have called "mobile sensibility", and is defined as "the capacity to see oneself in the other fellow's situation" (Lerner 1964: 50). Working on this concept, Greenblatt uses the term "improvisation" to refer to a "crucial Renaissance mode of behaviour" which consists on "the ability to capitalize on the unforeseen and to transform given materials into one's own scenario" (Greenblatt 1980: 227). Actually, Eleazar's partial success is a consequence of his opportunistic role-playing, and this is what Greenblatt calls "improvisation"; this villain insinuates himself into *preexisting* structures of different kinds established within the Spanish court. Eleazar didn't inoculate a virus as much as he used what he found, realizing how what others had perceived as truths had been ideologically manipulated; and, lastly, the play states that he could achieve this because he found a strange similarity between his ways (his roles), and those of the Spaniards'.

The play conjures the danger that it creates; when role-playing is used for an honest purpose, Eleazar is defeated. The Spaniards (as in Greenblatt's story about the Lucayans)³ can also improvise, and the enemy within, the perpetual enemy, is exposed in all his malevolence. But what remains is the fearful proximity of the other, his appropriation of our own ways, and the threat that it poses. Like Queen Elizabeth, after knowing about Almansour's plans to conquer Spain, Dekker's Spanish king decision parallels an infamous edict by, now, real monarchs of Spain: "And for this barbarous Moor, and all his train / Let all the Moors be banished from Spain" (V. vi. 204).

³ In fact, they have historically proved that they can be very good at it (as Greenblatt's Lucayan story seems to show).

REFERENCES

- Barthelemy, A. G. 1987: *Black Face, Maligned Race: The Representation of Blacks in English Drama from Shakespeare to Southerne*. Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University Press.
- Bullough, G. 1957-1975: *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare*. 8 vols. New York, Columbia University Press.
- Coke, Sir Edward 1826: *The Reports of Sir Edward Coke in Thirteen Parts*. Ed. by J. H. Thomas and J.-F. Fraser. London.
- D'Amico, J. 1991: *The Moor in English Renaissance Drama*. Tampa, University of South Florida Press.
- Dekker, T. 1994 (1657): *Lust's Dominion; Or, The Lascivious Queen. A Tragedie*. > *English Verse Drama 1300-1900. The Full Text Database*. CD-ROM Database. Cambridge, Chadwyck-Healey.
- Greenblatt, S. 1984: *Renaissance-Self Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare*. Chicago, The University of Chicago Press
- Jones, E. 1965: *Othello's Countrymen: The African in English Renaissance Drama*. Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- Lerner, D. 1964: *The Passing of Traditional Society*. New York, Free Press.
- Marienstrass, R. 1985: *New Perspectives in the Shakespearean World*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

* * *