

Borge, Francisco J. 2007
A New World for a New Nation.
The Promotion of America in Early Modern England
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As a result of the growth of postcolonial studies in the late 1970s, early modern literary scholarship has increasingly considered such issues as alterity and the question of the Other, racism, and proto-colonialism, besides examining the role of these issues in the creation of nation-states, including England (or 'Britain', as it was started to be known during the sixteenth century). Stephen Greenblatt's 'Invisible Bullets' (included in *Shakespearean Negotiations* [1988]), his *New World Encounters* (1993) and, above all, his *Marvellous Possessions: the Wonder of the New World* (1991) are key examples of this scholarship. With regard to the colonization of the New World, we might also add Tzvetan Todorov's *The Conquest of America* (1984), Eric Cheyfitz's *The Poetics of Imperialism* (1991), Jeffrey Knapp's *An Empire Nowhere: England, America, and Literature from Utopia to The Tempest* (1992), and Anthony Pagden's *European Encounters with the New World* (1993) and *Lords of all the World* (1995). Concerning England and Islam, we have D.R. Blanks & M. Frassetto's *Western Views of Islam in Medieval and Early Modern Europe: Perception of Other* (1999), Daniel Vitkus' *Turning Turk: English Theater and the Multicultural Mediterranean, 1570-1630* (2003) and *Piracy, Slavery and Redemption: Barbary Captivity Narratives from Early Modern England* (2001), Jonathan Burton's *Traffic and Turning: Islam and English Drama, 1579-1624* (2005), and Nabil Matar's *Britain and Barbary: 1589-1689* (2005), and his seminal texts *Islam in Britain. 1558-1685* (1998), and *Turks, Moors, and Englishmen in the Age of Discovery* (1999). These works exemplify a new awareness of social and historical conflicts related to race, nation, and the Other, conflicts which are negotiated through various strategies of contention or subversion and which, inevitably, permeate early modern writing.

In *A New World for a New Nation. The Promotion of America in Early Modern England*, Francisco J. Borge, of the University of Oviedo,

brilliantly explores the rhetorical strategies deployed in a particular kind of writing that was intended to entice English rulers and their subjects to colonize the New World and thereby engage in the same race to plunder the Americas on which the Spaniards, the Portuguese, the French and even the Dutch had already embarked. Borge analyzes the discourses that English writers used to project the Americas as an appealing object of consumption, focusing on 'promotion literature,' consisting mostly of travel books, sermons and pamphlets, from the period between 1580 and 1625. The author asks,

How can an 'empire nowhere' be successfully promoted? How can one convince one's countrymen to embark on enterprises that, to that date, had ruined the lives and the careers of many others? How can one transcend the weakness posed by insularity, transforming failure and loss into strength, success, and profit? This transcendence is exactly what these promoters tried to attain, and, in many cases, they did it so successfully that they greatly contributed to England's ultimate displacement of Spain in the international arena (46).

Borge's text is divided into four sections which, after a very brief introduction, attempt to conceptualize various aspects of this promotion literature: history, style, ideology, and rhetorical strategies. The similarly brief conclusion sketches a prospective area of research that the author identifies as a "poetics of English proto-colonial discourse" (211-214). After the introduction, the book focuses on the 'American enterprise' (chapter 1: 19-67), analyzes the major forerunners of English colonization of the New World (chapter 2: 69-114), briefly addresses the formal and thematic elements of promotion literature (chapter 3: 115-136) and ends with the scientific challenge of analyzing promotion literature through the critical lens of Hayden White's theories of 'tropicality' (chapter 4: 137-210).

The genesis of this book appears to be a doctoral dissertation with the same title defended by the author at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst in 2002, although this is not indicated in the book. If so, then the transition from thesis to book has been successful, maintaining the depth of a good dissertation, while avoiding the excessive display of erudition that often accompanies one. However, the theoretical structure of this research may need some more elaboration, since it appears to have been to a certain extent neglected for the sake of readability, even though most readers would be able to assimilate a more profound theoretical

stance, one that the ambitious purview of this work might possibly require. Still, the book provides interesting information from well chosen primary sources, and the notion of ‘promotion literature,’ its operations, and the major features of the debate over whether to colonize the New World, are well narrated and convincingly argued.

In chapter 1, ‘The American enterprise,’ we have a concise account of English enterprise in the Americas, from Henry VII to James VI, emphasizing Elizabeth I’s reign. It is noticeable that Habsburg Spain is an inevitable presence throughout the text, and especially in this chapter. England’s colonial ambitions, Borges claims, were much shaped in response to Spain’s predominance in the international arena, and were limited by the perceived superiority of Spain’s maritime power until the 1580s. Unlike Charles V’s and Philip II’s Spain, England lacked, for most of the seventeenth century, the expertise, the royal impulse and vision and the economic interest to explore (let alone colonise) the New World. For English monarchs, aristocrats, and tradesmen, colonial ventures in the New World were of scant interest, and they were more inclined to favour and promote trade with Eastern Europe or through the Mediterranean, in spite of the efforts of advocates of the New World colonial enterprise such as Richard Hakluyt, author of *Principal Navigations* (1589) (who, the book informs us, paradoxically never travelled to the Americas himself). The chapter also introduces central figures such as Walter Raleigh, Humphrey Gilbert, or Francis Drake, exploring the function and meaning of: Tudor imperialistic propaganda of a paradoxically non-existent empire (the ‘empire nowhere’); England’s approach to the expansionist race in the pre- and post- Armada years; the first (failed) English expeditions to the New World; the justification of colonialism on spiritual and material grounds; and the eventually successful establishment of the first permanent English colony in the New World – Jamestown (1607) – and the arrival of the Pilgrims in Maryland (1620).

Chapter 2 analyzes at length the figure of Richard Hakluyt and the influence of his *Principal Navigations* (1589), together with an account of other distinguished forerunners: his disciple Samuel Purchas and his *Pilgrimes*, Thomas Hariot, Theodor de Bry’s *America*, Walter Raleigh, William Crashaw, and John Smith. Borge makes clear that the English colonialist experience of this period is characterized by utter failure, and thus the major task of these propagandists is to produce narratives that “served as replacements for the profits that English adventurers failed to find in the New World” (114). The final

stages of this process are characterized by two radical changes: “the opening of the colonial enterprise to all social classes in the country” (106), as an indirect consequence of the Puritan approach to colonialism; and the change of paradigm and model to imitate: since Spain’s model – based on the extraction of gold and silver – proved useless for a colonial enterprise that found no mineral resources to exploit, English propagandists eventually decided to follow Holland’s example and promote the use of other resources such as fish or corn.

Propagandist writing on the colonial enterprise based its success (ie, its credibility) on ‘authority’, that is, unmediated experience, and had as an implicit but very real hidden agenda that of the authors’ self-promotion. This is what chapter 3 develops, with some brief discussions on ‘verisillimitude’, the so-called “modesty topos” (121) or the complex relations established between travelling and writing.

Finally, the last chapter contains the most ambitious analysis (and probably the most relevant) of the whole book. This analysis addresses the goal outlined in the introduction: namely, “rather than attempting to explain *why* the English finally engaged in the American venture” to illuminate on “*how* and *to what extent* they did so” (12, emphasis mine). To this aim, Borge uses the work of the American critic Hayden White, focusing on his best known notions: those of the ‘tropics’ and the ‘tropicality of discourse’, as expounded in *Tropics of History* (1978) and *Metahistory* (1973). This critical apparatus seems appropriate to the kind of analysis intended (and to the kinds of texts studied) yet it seems to provide insufficient critical tools, if only because White’s approach has been enriched in the last decades by the work of (among others) Jean Baudrillard, Fredric Jameson and Edward Said, all of whose work is particularly relevant to many of the ideas outlined by White. The movement articulated by Borge (and cleverly adapted from White) from metaphoric apprehension (and appropriation), through metonymic description, to ironic self-reflection on one’s own discourse, together with the awareness of the non-factual nature of all discourses, the constitution of meaning by discourse, the artificiality of all events narrated or the discursive constructedness of ‘reality’ does indeed help explain the rhetorical procedures employed by promotion literature, but leaves unanswered a number of relevant (and unavoidable) questions, such as the final nature of ‘reality’, the significance and relevance of the perceived inability to relate to the Other in adequate terms (which Said, Sonesson, Lotman or Todorov have more recently and

productively addressed) or the precise meaning of that (postmodern-like) final ironic twist that the text suggests, a statement which Borge may have not argued convincingly.

Some issues that are treated only superficially or not at all might have been elaborated further, and suffer from the excessive concision of the book: the status of England/Britain as a (proto) nation-state (22-23); the notion of 'identity' (something explored in some depth by that area known as 'image studies' and practiced, among others, by Ton Hoenselaars); the conflictive relations existing between piracy and trade (Fuchs); or the radical otherness of America as opposed to Catholic or Muslim nations. Some very interesting issues are certainly mentioned, but almost *in passim*: the role played by public theatre in this process of promotion of the New World (102-114), and the so-called 'battle of narratives' (p. 62, n. 61).

Evidently, the author has made choices, and it would be inappropriate to argue that these or other issues should have (*per force*) found a place in this essay, but it seems that they could have illumined many of the discussions so intelligently developed. That said, there is a glaring omission. There is practically no mention of the slave trade, the infamous activity that seems to have conditioned and permeated all colonial adventures by all early modern nations of Europe. If it was conventionally believed that this practice was limited – during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries – to the Spanish and the Portuguese, scholars such as Gustav Ungerer, Folarin Shyllon, Alfonso Franco, Consuelo Varela and Juan Gil, have convincingly shown that the English were engaged in the slave trade as early as the 1480s, and that black African slaves were bought and sold in England from the early sixteenth century onwards. In this sense, it would have certainly been interesting to determine to what extent this experience did influence the directions taken by the English colonial agenda a century later, and whether (and why) promotion literature did, or did not, mention this practice as a legitimate, realistic and/or desirable objective for the New World enterprise.

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