

Death in northern Africa: The Battle of Alcazar and its theatrical representation

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On the 25th of August, 1578, the correspondent in Lisbon of the Fugger bankers sent these sad news to his master:

I cannot hide from you the regrettable and unheard-of disaster which befell our King and his whole army in Africa. On the 3rd day of this month, our King marched forward to encounter the enemy, meaning to arrive at Alcazar on the same day.¹

Needless to say, that king never returned. He was King Sebastian of Portugal, a man who thus met the glorious death he perhaps had so ardently sought, leaving as a result the doors of his country open to ambitious and greedy neighbours, like Philip II of Spain, who saw in the outcome of such an ill-fated expedition the great opportunity to add to an already flourishing empire the other half of what had been the Papal division of the world, as established in the Treaty of Tordesillas in 1494.² Portugal, thus, lost a man, a king and its independence, though it gained, in return, a legend. For this was a death with a mystery. The Fugger correspondent explained it with the following words:

Our King bore himself right bravely, and, so it is said, killed many Turks with his own hands, but at last, after he had mounted the third horse, he disappeared so that no one has found him either alive or dead until this hour.³

Many years later, as late actually as 1599, another chapter was added to the general story: the “dead” king had made its appearance once again. He was alive and well, though moving on a different stage:

The news now comes very hot that Sebastian, King of Portugal, that was said to be slain in the battle of Alcazar in Barbary in 1578, is now at Venice and hath made so good trial of himself that the Venetians allow him and maintain almost fourscore persons about him at their charge. They say he tells very strange stories, how he with fourteen more escaped from the battle and got up into the mountains, and so by many adventures, he went and he went until he came to Ethiopia, or Prester John’s land, meaning from thence to have gone into the East Indies.⁴

Somebody, and we know very little about him, had started a performance which was to last for rather a while. His “acting to the life”, his discourse and his brilliance on the Venetian stage, must

¹ Von Klarwill, V. ed. *The Fugger News-Letters*, New York, 1926, p. 25.

² The next king in Portugal was Cardinal Henry, who reigned until 1580. In that year, and after a successful campaign by Alva, Philip II succeeded him.

³ Von Klarwill, V. ed. p. 26.

⁴ Harrison, G. B., *An Elizabethan Journal*, Vol. 3, p. 4

have been astonishing, for in fact that personation of the royal figure blinded the audience to the fact that the protagonist was simply an impostor. A month later, for instance, the news was:

We are still fed with rumours of Don Sebastian that he is 'ipsissimus', and that the Venetians have sent ambassadors to the King of Spain to signify so much to him; and that there have been some great men executed of late in Portugal about this business.¹

Even a year later, in November 1600, and despite the fact that the given "actor" had by then spent a considerable time in prison as a result of the "lack of faith", or the "lack of taste" in realistic drama, of some Venetian authorities, the reports were that many were still inclined to believe that the whole episode was no pantomime, but rather an example of the cruel injustice with which some men react when confronted with the truth. Truth, however, was what the event demanded, and truth some would have, even if it meant searching for almost impossible proofs. These, however, could apparently in the end be found:

There is a constant report that he which hath been so long a prisoner at Venice is now discovered to be the true Sebastian by many secret tokens upon his body, confirmed out of Portugal by those which knew him both child and man.²

The "play" thus continued for a little longer, though with one addition of the utmost relevance: by March, 1601, the performance had lasted for so long that a "chorus" was needed which could fill in the gaps for latecomers. A body of literature was thus born, with precisely that purpose, in which one work stood above the rest, *The Strangest adventure that ever happened*, either in ages past or present, being a discourse of Don Sebastian from the time of his voyage into Affric, when he was lost in the battle against the infidels in the year 1578 unto the 6th of January last past; a discourse full of divers curious histories, some ancient prophecies, and other matters to show that he whom the Signiory of Venice hath held as prisoner for more than two years is the true Don Sebastian.³ The legend did not therefore need any other ingredient. In fact, the most important one for its eternal survival was already there, the fixed written form, which meant that secondary actors like the one who had originated it all were no longer necessary. Of his end we know very little: he was released in Venice only to be cast into prison again in Naples. After this, he was sent to the galleys and probably ended his days in San Lucar in Spain, telling his incredulous neighbours, we can well imagine, strange tales of Africa, Venice, kings, prisons, books and forced rowing for the Crown.⁴ A life for a leading role... but not the only one.⁵

The power of the character, however, did not disappear with that anonymous life, for this was not the case of "a king making progress through the guts of a beggar". The world might after all be a stage, and this might have lost one of its actors, but the character of Sebastian was too good a creation to die with the impersonator, too well shaped to be forgotten; in short, too full of promising literary material as to be discarded by the world of drama and its shrewd impresarios. And none like the English ones to see the benefits behind it.

Sebastian himself, for a start, could claim to descend from the House of Lancaster. Secondly, his death had meant a Spanish succession to the Portuguese crown, a fact in itself relevant enough to provoke a reaction of fear and hatred in a country like England that readily welcomed and backed a native Portuguese pretender, Don Antonio, for more than a decade after Sebastian's disappearance in Northern Africa. The former's involvement in the ill-fated expedition of Drake and Norris of 1589 against La Coruña and Lisbon, and his propaganda campaign, carried out

¹ Harrison, G. B., Vol. 3, p. 10.

² Harrison, G. B., Vol. 3, p. 125.

³ Harrison, G. B., Vol. 3, p. 175.

⁴ Harrison, G. B., Vol. 3, p. 301.

⁵ No fewer than four such claimants eventually appeared, all claiming to be the same person. They thus contributed to the power of the legend which so much inspired John Dryden in his composition of *Don Sebastian*. See, A. R., Braunmuller's *George Peele*, Boston, 1983, p. 67.

through books like *The Explanation of the True and Lawfull Right and Tittle of the Moste excellent Prince Anthonie*, (1585) published in English, French and Latin, all contributed to the outstanding place occupied by Portuguese affairs in the Elizabethan world. In the third place, King Sebastian's cause had been that of a Christian king fighting against the "infidels", but he had not been alone in the crusade. In fact, English hands had actually helped him and perished in his company. Lastly, the name of Alcazar echoed not only an exotic location for a battle, but a battle itself with what was probably an unprecedented characteristic, three kings had died in it: two members of the Moroccan royal house, Abdelmelec and his usurping nephew, Muly Mahamet (The Moor), and the Portuguese monarch; a sad record, but undeniably one full of theatrical possibilities.

The world of drama, therefore, jumped at the chance, and no fewer than three plays were staged in London with more than moderate success. Of the three, two occupy a most relevant position, George Peele's *Battle of Alcazar* and the anonymous *The Life and Death of Captain Thomas Stukeley*. A third one by Chettle and Dekker, *King Sebastian of Portingall*, staged in 1601¹, seems to have been much shadowed by the other two and probably owed much to them.

Of the works mentioned, it was undeniably Peele's play the one to prove more successful. Probably written just after the English expedition of 1589, the Lord Admiral's Men performed it several times with the famous Edward Alleyn taking the role of the Moor. The quarto edition of 1594 in fact claims in the title page, "as it was sundrie times plaid by the Lord high Admirall his servants". And undeniably, the play had all the ingredients to become a success. Right from the start, for example, the audience is told:

Sit you and see this true and tragicke warre,
a modern matter full of bloud and ruth,
Where three bolde kings confounded in their height,
Fall to the earth contending for a crowne... (49-52)²

Lines, in fact, which prove, especially if we take into account the second one, a basic characteristic of the text: the influence of Marlowe, and more precisely of his *Tamburlaine*, which had also been recently staged by the company with also Edward Alleyn in the leading role. As Braunmuller states:

High-flown speeches written in blank verse, an exotic locale, scenes of cruelty and violence- all these elements show Peele's attempt to overgo the earlier play.³

Peele's authorship, however, rests on inconclusive information. Some lines of the play, for example, appear as his in the anthology *Englands Parnassus* (1600), and critics have assumed for a long time a connection between the play and also Peele's *Farewell to... Norris and Drake* (1589), which seems to contain an advertisement for *The battle of Alcazar*, but these few bits of information are not totally reliable. This last piece of evidence, however, does provide us with another fact which is worth taking into account. It reads:

Bid Theaters and proude Tragaedians,
Bid Mahomets Poo, and mightie Tamburlaine,
King Charlemaine, Tom Stukeley and the rest
Adiewe: to Armes, to Armes, to glorious Armes ... (20-23)

A second character in the plot thus makes his appearance, Thomas Stukeley, whose importance is going to be comparable to that of the Portuguese king, and with good reason, for he too is presented by the playwright as a living legend. Daring, brave, and above all enterprising, the character agrees in Peele's play "to die with honor for Sebastian" (712). Convinced by the monarch and under the spell of his own ambition, Stukeley sees Morocco as a stage where glory can finally be gained: "Saint George for England, and Irelande nowe adue, / For here Tom Stukley

¹ Harrison, G. B., Vol. 3, p. 189.

² Dyce, A. ed., *The Works of George Peele*, 2d rev. ed., London, 1829-1839.

³ Braunmuller, A. R., p. 68.

shapes his course anue" (735-736). And like the King, he too meets his end while trying to find a place in the sun, for, as he confesses, he would rather be "*King of a mole-hill... than the richest subject of a monarchie*" (465-466).

But he too, the same as Sebastian, and this is what makes him truly interesting for our purpose, is a character with a real background, to the extent that Peele must have had in mind for his shaping the several ballads and the numerous tales that circulated in London in which this Quixotic figure appeared as the main protagonist. Exact and detailed biographical information, however, must have been scant, a fact that explains what appear to be mistakes on the part of the author. The one touching birth is perhaps the most apparent. In Peele's play he is made a Londoner, whereas in reality he seems to have been the son of a knight in Devon, one Hugh Stucley, whose father had in turn been a Knight of the body to King Henry VIII. But even this might be wrong, for Philip O'Sullivan in his *Compendium of the Catholic History of Ireland* put forward other views:

By some [he] was said to be an illegitimate son of Henry VIII, king of England; by others, son of an English knight and an Irish lady; by others, Irish by both parents, who either from anger at the English, or from religious motives, or desiring war and revolution in hopes of gain, or aspiring to reign, being perhaps a man of royal blood, was supplicating in the name of the Irish for succour against the English.¹

English or Irish, of royal birth or not, the truth is that Stukeley's first appearance in history presaged what would be a remarkable career but also one of ultimate failure. In 1562 he was put at the head of a joint Anglo-French enterprise for the settlement of Florida, following the return of the French Jean Ribault from that land and the publishing of a translation into English of his report, the first detailed account of a visit to North America to appear in English. Stukeley, for reasons not very well known, failed the test, giving Laudonnière the chance for the planting of the French Huguenot colony that would later on be cruelly extirpated by Menéndez de Avilés. Queen Elizabeth, whom he would call "my sister" given time, thus discovered one of the most unpleasant creatures of her gallery. Stukeley had failed her, and in the most disagreeable manner for that matter, for he had employed the means at his disposal in an erratic and short career as a pirate in the waters of the Gulf of Biscay. All this, however, was only the prologue to the story of a relationship which increasingly deteriorated with the passing of time.

By 1571, the rupture between Queen and subject was a well-established fact. Stukeley had by then left behind his office of seneschal of Kavanagh's country in Ireland in exchange for what most probably appeared to him as a golden opportunity, that of serving Philip II and the Catholic cause. Vivero, in Galicia, witnessed that year his landing on the Continent and heard, for the first time, the title with which he was to embellish his entrance upon the Spanish political scene, "Duke of Ireland". That same year Philip II received the first complaints about him:

... y lo que se dize es que V. Ser. (sin esperarlo ni pensarlo yo) me quiere hazer una grande injuria, procurando tomarme el Reyno de Irlanda, y leuantar alli sedicion, fomentando nros. sediciosos contrarios y desposseyendonos del Reyno que nros. padres y abuelos han tenido... [tratando y favoreciendo] a Thomas Stucley, nro. fugitivo y rebelde, hombre desbaratado, perdido y gastador, que ha consumido y comido torpemente toda su hazienda y la de sus mugeres, assi lo que en Inglaterra pudo en algun tiempo alcançar, mas por fauor de la fortuna que por algun merito suyo, como lo que tenia en Irlanda.²

They came, as can easily be imagined, from an enraged English Queen who, also by then, was beginning to feel the consequences of the Papal bull *Regnans in Excelsis*, which declared her a heretical figure, and realise that the relationship between the two courts was reaching the point of no

¹ Quoted by Richard Simpson in *The School of Shakspeare*, London, 1878, p. 5.

² Archivo General de Simancas, Estado, Legajo 823: "De la Reyna de Inglaterra a XX de Março, 1571."

return. The storm had begun to gather in the horizon, and her words in that sense could be prophetic:

... estando en el suauissimo curso de nra. amistad (como por la mayor parte suele acaesçer que no ay cosa humana estable y duradera) en estos pocos años se leuanto una como nubezilla, no por culpa nra, sino de los ministros de V. Ser.¹

Stukeley, needless to say, did not make things easier. He was accompanied by several other “rebels”, all asking for an army and a chance to prove the Catholic monarch that they could be taken for what they claimed to be, loyal subjects of the Spanish crown. Whether Philip II believed it or not is something that historians have still not fully disclosed, though one relevant episode seems to indicate that the former might be true, the pension of several thousand ducats given to him by the King. The army, however, which the Englishman also asked for, with the aim of invading Ireland and making of that country part of the Spanish empire, did not come with the money, a fact which in itself may in turn show the lack of trust of the “prudent” king towards such a weird character.

Be it what it may, the truth is that Stukeley finally abandoned Spain bound for a new destination, Rome, full of hopes in what Pope Gregory could do for his person. And if this was the case, he was not wrong, for it was in Rome where his dream finally took shape thanks to the help of the Pontiff and the Jesuits who assisted him in recruiting an army of almost 1000 Italian and Spanish brigands with which to carry out the planned invasion. By the 28th of May, 1578, this was well under way, with a victorious Stukeley making his entrance in Lisbon and proclaiming for everyone to hear his vision of a Catholic Ireland, free from the grasp of the woman who had rejected him in the past.

Lisbon thus witnessed the encounter of the two dreamers, though it also became the stage upon which a dark bargain was carried out. Steven G. Ellis sees it in the following way:

Stukeley recruited 1,000 Italian swordsmen, but after reaching Lisbon he was persuaded by King Sebastian of Portugal to support an expedition to Morocco where he fell in battle.²

Apparently, a matter of persuasion, though ambition might also have played a part. William Pillen, a British merchant who witnessed the arrival of Stukeley’s ship in Lisbon, reported the affair to England supplying details which cast some light into the whole affair:

While there, a great ship of 800 tons also arrived, wherein was Stuckley and about 700 soldiers, as Stuckley himself gave out... They were mustered before the King of Portugal and well liked by him, there being 80 who were very expert soldiers. Stuckley was called by no other name than Marquis, and he brought with him one Irish bishop and three or four priests. For a fortnight after his arrival, he kept on board, and there entertained resorters, but afterwards a house was prepared for him in Lisbon, where he kept house. When he first came to the King of Portugal, he humbled himself to have kissed the King’s hand, but he would not suffer it, and embraced him and received some letters which he brought from the Pope.³

A royal welcome in a moment of need, but also, to the eyes of the witness, a great opportunity to forget old plans and join a new enterprise which appeared to be very promising indeed. Ireland, in comparison, could only mean very little:

¹ Archivo General de Simancas, Estado, Legajo 823.

² Ellis, Steven G., *Tudor Ireland*, London, 1985, p. 279.

³ Calendar of State Papers, Domestic Series, April 1578. “Deposition of William Pillen”.

He knew Ireland as well as the best, but there was nothing to be got but hunger and lice.¹

Stukeley thus added a basic ingredient, his mysterious decision, to what had already emerged as a personal legend known not only in Spain and Italy, but also England, where his steps were closely followed by all those on whom the security of the country rested. With this background, therefore, the fact that his memory still survived years after his death, should not be surprising. In fact, it was on the contrary so much alive that, as we have already mentioned, the literary tribute was not scant. Peele's play is indeed a significant part of it, but equally also, a play entered on the Register of the Stationer's Company on 11 August 1600 as follows:

history of the life & Deathe of Captaine Tho. Stuclely, with his Mariage to ald Curtis his daughter, & his valiant endinge of his life at the battell of Alcazar.²

The date of composition is uncertain. Philip Henslowe, for example, recorded a play called "Stewtley", described as "ne" on December 11, 1596, which could be the same one. If indeed it was, it must have been quite a hit, for the Lord Admiral's Men performed it no fewer than ten times between that date and June 27, 1597.³ Quite a record, which may in turn explain the publication in 1605 of a Quarto edition, entered by Thomas Pavier. As for the author of the same, nothing is known with certainty, though one thing is clear: he knew, or worked in close connection with somebody that did, Gaelic; rather a surprising fact in itself, but more so when we consider that it is more accurate than any to appear in any other play of the period.

Once again, however, and the same as had happened with Peele's work, this play contains a number of what appear to be clear biographical mistakes. Stukeley, for instance, is made this time a Law student at London. There he leads, maintained as he is by an ignorant father, a life that has little to do with books and a lot with weapons, which fill up his study. The old qualities of the real character, however, as described by Queen Elizabeth, are still to be seen: arrogant, corrupt, and, above all, extravagant, Stukeley marries Alderman Curtis's daughter with the aim of using her money for his own exclusively personal benefit. Left behind by a husband who has soon forgotten her, Anne Curtis dies when Stukeley has already made clear his intention of leaving the country and seeking adventure and honour abroad. Once in Spain, and free from the bondage of marriage, the protagonist meets a Machiavellian Philip II, who has already heard about King Sebastian's plans for Northern Africa, and who simply awaits for the dreadful outcome that will set him on the Portuguese throne. As his adviser Davila says in the play:

Your highness knows, Sebastian once removed,
The way is open solely for yourself,
Either by force or by corrupting gold,
To step into the throne.⁴

And it is in the Spanish court where Stukeley finds himself playing a new role, ambassador of the Spanish king before the Pope. Thus, and through much invented material, the unknown author makes his character cover the basic steps that the real Stukeley took in real life. Finally, and on his return from Rome, the Englishman meets a credulous Portuguese king who ignores the wicked plans of the Spanish rival, and who, on the contrary, firmly believes in the Spanish help:

I tell thee cousin, never Christian king
Came with so proud a power to Africa.⁵

All is ready, therefore, for the final tragedy on African soil. Sebastian perishes with his dreams of a Christian conquest. Stukeley, killed by his own men, who do not forgive the decisions of a

¹ Calendar of State Papers, Domestic Series, April, 1578.

² Levinson, Judith ed. *The famous history of Captain Thomas Stukeley, 1605*, Malone Society Reprints, 1975: v.

³ Greg, Walter, W. ed. *Henslowe's Diary*, London, 1904, p. 50.

⁴ Simpson, R., p. 219.

⁵ Simpson, R., p. 245.

mad leader which have finally put them in a desperate situation. The end ... but only in fiction, for in Venice somebody claimed to be the real King, come to life again. And in Ireland, one of Stukeley's captains in Africa, Sebastian de San Giuseppe, kept his memory alive with his landing on the Dingle Peninsula, which set the Irish nightmare going in 1579. Fiction and reality mingled in one indivisible whole.

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