

References to Spain in Herman Melville's *Pierre; or, the Ambiguities*: The Relation between the Two Queens of Spain Named Isabel and Isabel Banford's Evil

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Abstract

Pierre; or, the Ambiguities, published in 1852, was Herman Melville's big bet to regain his success as a writer, after the failure of *Moby-Dick*. However, this new novel became an even greater failure. It received fierce criticism in which its author was even accused of madness. This novel was rediscovered in the early decades of the twentieth century, and since then there have been many studies on it. These studies range from the issue of Pierre's discovery of the tragic side of life and his spiritual advance towards the truth to the analysis of Pierre's mental status. But, none of them have focused yet on the references to Spain and its Empire that appear in *Pierre*. Therefore, through certain behaviors of Isabel Banford I intend to analyze various allusions to Spain which have hitherto gone unnoticed. In my opinion Isabel is the dark part of the world, as she leads Pierre to perdition. This might be related to the two queens of Spain named Isabel and other aspects of the Spanish empire. I will also try to frame these references within the overall meaning of the novel.

Keywords : Isabel, evil, Queen of Spain, Spanish Empire, darkness.

Introduction

Pierre; or, the Ambiguities, published in 1852, was Herman Melville's big bet to regain his success and prestige as a writer, after the failure of *Moby-Dick*. However, contrary to what Melville expected, this new novel became an even greater failure. It received fierce criticism in which its author was even accused of madness. This novel was rediscovered in the early decades of the twentieth century, and since then there have been many studies on it. These studies range from the issue of Pierre's discovery of the tragic side of life and his spiritual and conscious advance towards the truth and the story's "ambiguous threads of the warp woof of good and evil" (Watson 162), to the analysis of Pierre's mental state evolution from his being a Christian gentleman, through his Christ-like struggle against conventionality to help Isabel and finally himself as an author (Higgins and Parker 241-65). Of course, in these studies the themes of incest (Higgins and Parker 256) or the questioning of Christian doctrine are included. But, none of them have focused yet on the references to Spain and its Empire that appear in *Pierre*. Therefore, through certain behaviors of Isabel Banford, Pierre's half-sister, I intend to analyze various allusions to Spain which have hitherto gone unnoticed. Contrary to what one of the Melville's revival scholars, E.L. Grant Watson, stated, in my opinion Isabel is not Pierre's dark soul manifestation (165), she is just the representation of the dark side of the world, hence, she is unconsciously evil, and that evil leads Pierre to perdition. This might be related to the two queens of Spain named Isabel and other aspects of the

Spanish empire. I will also try to frame these references within the overall meaning of the work.

1. Isabel Banford and the two Spanish Queens named Isabel. Their relation that goes beyond the name.

The fact that the character of Pierre's half-sister is called Isabel, the denomination given to the name Elizabeth in Spanish, is probably not a mere coincidence, but it was meticulously chosen by Melville. In the story it is told that Isabel's mother was French and it seems likely that Isabel herself could have spent the first years of her life in France. Considering this, the question is why her name is in Spanish and not in its French version, Élisabeth, or even in English, given that her father was American (this could lead us to the question of why the protagonist is not named Peter, but I will leave this issue for another article). The reason might be Melville's intention to identify Isabel Banford with two Spanish queens also named Isabel. Melville gives us a little hint of this objective at the beginning of the text: "A plain-faced Queen of Spain dwells not in half the glory a beautiful milliner does. Her soldiers can break heads, but her Highness cannot crack a heart; and the beautiful milliner might string hearts for necklaces." (24). Upon reading this, it is possible that to Melville the image of the Queen of Spain seemingly represents the dark sight of the world, while the beautiful milliner represents the essence of feminine beauty itself, the bright part of the world. Thereupon, the fact that Pierre's half-sister is named "Isabel" could be related to all this.

Isabel II was the Queen of Spain at the time when Melville was writing *Pierre*. This queen, who failed miserably in her task of government and was expelled from Spain in 1868 as a result of "La Gloriosa" Revolution, had a lascivious and carefree personality (Ben-Amí 13). An example of this is that the queen went out to the theater, popular festivals and balls every night, returning to the palace at about five in the morning (Escribano 302). This personality and behavior of Isabel II might represent to Melville the dark side of the world. Hence, Pierre's half-sister also represents, from my point of view, the impurity and darkness of the world as she seduces, in a way close to witchcraft, her brother who, being under this dark seductive influence, decides to make her his wife. Watson points out that Isabel, as I commented above, is the "manifestation of the dark side of his soul, a soul-image of a new awakening universe (the tragic aspect of life) and Pierre must descend to the underworld as Isabel is the gate and the way to it" (165).

Close to this is the theory of Brian Higgins and Hershel Parker. They assert that Isabel is a product of Pierre's unconsciousness. When he is involved with her he realizes that all of what he thought was true, was not. This is the dark side of reality. Before Isabel and Pierre's first meeting, he considered himself a cavalier imbued by Christianity, but the real chivalric appeal comes when he first meets Isabel face to face, and after receiving her letter he finds a good reason to demonstrate his Christ-like chivalry. This reason is to help and acknowledge her (Higgins and Parker 248-50). However, I think that Isabel's devilish seduction is what makes Pierre go down to the Hell of the tragic and dark sense of life, not his Christ-like unconscious chivalric impulse towards it or his dark soul's revelation of it, because Isabel herself is that new sense of life.

This type of seduction is present from the first meeting of Pierre with his sister, when she plays the guitar for him, as the narrator describes in the first chapter of Book VII: "The inexplicable spell of the guitar, and the subtleness of the melodious appealings of the few brief words from Isabel sung in the conclusion of the melody; all this had bewitched him, and enchanted him..." (128). We must also remember that Pierre was already bewitched by Isabel's dark spell, even before deliberately meeting her, because after coming across their faces accidentally at the Miss Pennies' home, Pierre feels this way:

But with this nameless fascination of the face upon him, during two days it had first fully possessed him for its own, did perplexed Pierre refrain from that apparently most natural of all resources, (boldly seeking out, and returning to the palpable cause, and questioning her, by look or voice, or both together) the mysterious girl herself? (51)

Queen Isabel II used her "charms" to attract men as well. José María Zavala points out that the queen "was attractive to men...She knew how to make advances towards men, by wearing dresses with sexy necklines which showed the curve of her shapely breasts" (17). On another occasion, being housed in the mansion of a Castilian nobleman, the queen called for a foot bath to recover from the trip. A young servant brought it to her, and the queen took a strong liking to this boy. So that night, Isabel II requested the presence of the young man in her chambers. The servant was shocked when entering the room, the queen was lying in bed completely naked. The young man, of course, could not resist the "charms" of Her Majesty (Escribano 295). Then, Melville, in order to remark on the impure and dark character of Pierre's half-sister as the representation of the dark side of the world, could have chosen for her precisely the name of this infamous Spanish Queen.

The name of Isabel leads to another Spanish Queen, Isabel the Catholic. She was the main driving force behind the voyage of Christopher Columbus to America. The discovery of America by the Spaniards meant the emergence of the largest colonial empire in history and with it the establishment of black slavery in the New World for three centuries. Taking this into account, Melville also might have had in mind this "other" Queen Isabel, when he was choosing the name for Pierre's sister. Melville had already shown his anti-slavery and anti-imperialism in *Typee*, or even in *Moby-Dick*, and in *Pierre* it is probable that he chose for her the name of the Queen of Castile who began constructing the vast slavery-based Spanish Empire in America to refer to Isabel's impurity and darkness. Regarding slavery, the two queens are related, as Isabel II was enriched by this practice, despite the abolition of slavery by Spanish legislation at that time. Therefore, this might be the double reason for Melville to call his feminine protagonist in *Pierre*, Isabel.

In the story a counterpart of Isabel exists. This is Lucy, Pierre's betrothed. She is the pureness, the innocence of the world, in fact, Watson calls her "Pierre's Innocence Angel" (165). Pierre himself refers to her like this: "Methinks one husbandly embrace would break her airy zone, and she exhale upward to that heaven whence she hath come, condensed to mortal sight....I am of heavy earth, and she of airy light" (58). The name of Pierre's fiancée would not be chosen randomly either. Lucy derives from the

Latin word *lucis* whose meaning is light. Hence, these two characters, Lucy and Isabel, are opposed even in the names. Pierre's half-sister, the representation of the world of darkness, has the name of the two "dark" Spanish queens, and on the other hand, the name of Pierre's betrothed, who is the purity and brightness of the world, means directly "light". Pierre, as we observed, because of the mysterious, dark attraction that his half-sister exerts on him, abandons that bright, pure but artificial world where Lucy reigned, to penetrate a hellish world of harsh reality, where the *sovereign* is Isabel.

It is probable that Melville could have heard about Isabel II from Washington Irving. This successful writer was one of the first prominent people who supported Melville in his literary career. He was the American Minister to Spain from 1843 to 1846, having firstly resided there from 1826 to 1829 (Gentry, Paddock, and Rollyson 293). For this reason he accumulated great knowledge about this country and its culture, as reflected in his works such as *Tales of the Alhambra* (1832) or *The Life and Voyages of Christopher Columbus* (1828). When Melville's older brother, Gansevoort, first met him in London (during Irving's visit to England) to discuss the publication of *Typee* in early 1846, Irving was living in Madrid (Gale 205), where Queen Isabel's court was established. During those three years it is likely that he was close to everything that occurred in the court, such as the dark matter of the loss of virginity of the queen, who apparently was deflowered by Salustiano Olózaga, one of her most eminent ministers. Some authors, among whom Ricardo de la Cierva stands out, claim that this incident was provoked by Isabel II's sexual precocity (265). Furthermore, in a September 1844 letter from Irving to his sister about his stay in Madrid, he recognizes that "One would hardly suspect, from the luxury of the capital, that the country was so wretchedly impoverished" (Munroe Irving 364), implying that the queen was only concerned with the luxury of the court and not with her people. In light of this, it could be said that his opinion of the court and the queen might not have been so much positive. Thus, probably it was through Irving that all these negative references to Isabel II came to Melville's notice.

The *Amistad* case accounts might be another source through which Melville could have known Isabel II's dark character, as it seems that he used these accounts for his novella *Benito Cereno* (Osagie 47). In the summer of 1839 the Spanish schooner *Amistad*'s mutinous black slaves, led by Joseph Cinqué, were captured by the *USS Washington*'s commander Thomas R. Gedney near Long Island (Jones 16). He thought Cinqué and his group were pirates, so in order to get a reward, Gedney brought the slaves to trial. At the trial, celebrated in 1841, it was revealed that the slaves had been captured illegally in Sierra Leone, violating the antislavery treaties of 1817 and 1835 between the United Kingdom and Spain (Jones 15). However, the Spanish government, led by a young Queen Isabel II, claimed that the slaves had to be returned to Spain, initiating a legal conflict with the US. Finally, the American President, Martin Van Buren, made the decision that the slaves were released and repatriated to Sierra Leone. Isabel II got enriched by slavery, so since she was very young she was very much in favour of this horrendous practice, as we could observe in this case. In my opinion this event was what finally prompted Melville to name Pierre's sister, Isabel, as the Queen of Spain was not only defending slavery but she was also willing to ignore the law and even to enter into a conflict with the United States in order to continue carrying it out.

Concerning the other queen Isabel, one possibility is that Melville knew her figure from James Fenimore Cooper's *Mercedes of Castile*, a novel in which we can observe the support that the queen gave to Columbus' project of going to the Indies: "and so long as God giveth me power to direct, and knowledge to decide, your interests, as well as those of this long-cherished scheme, shall be looked to" (Cooper 139).

It is confirmed that Melville, in his boyhood, read a large number of books by Fenimore Cooper (Sealts 39), so it is very likely that he could have read this one as well. It is also known that Melville read another book based on the Catholic Monarchs' times, the above mentioned *Life and Voyages of Christopher Columbus* by Washington Irving (Tsuji 125). Also, there is Prescott's *Ferdinand and Isabella*, a book that approached the history of the Catholic Queen's time seriously, and it is proved that Melville owned it (Sealts 127).

2. Isabel's Evil.

In my view, Isabel is not only the darkness and impurity of the world but she is also the evil, as she destroys Pierre's perfect life. Isabel herself is obviously not conscious of it; she is just searching for help. However, Melville presents her to us as a very dark and malicious being. One of the best examples of this is the following excerpt:

Then with a single toss of her hand tumbled her unrestrained locks all over her, so that they tent-wise invested her whole kneeling form close to the floor, and yet swept the floor with their wild redundancy. Never Saya of Limeean girl, at dim mass in St. Dominick's cathedral, so completely muffled the human figure...

The long curls swept over the strings of the guitar, the strange sparks (still quivering there) caught at those attractive curls; the entire casement was suddenly and wondrously illumined (149).

This text refers to when Isabel is playing the guitar while flashes are radiating from the instrument. At that time all of her black hair falls over her body, appearing to be covered by a veil or petticoat. Melville compares this scene with the image of a girl covered with a saya in the Saint Dominick's Cathedral in Lima.

As we can observe in the excerpt above, Isabel's staging might remind us of an apparition of the Virgin Mary. The sparks, the sudden illumination, and the supernatural phenomena coming out from Isabel when she covers her body entirely with her black mane, could be referring to it. However, in my opinion, Melville's intention was not exactly to refer to the Virgin Mary, but to her antithesis.

If we take a look at the record of the Virgin's apparition in La Sallette, France (1846) we can understand better what I am referring to: "the Virgin is tall and slender and she wears a white skirt and a white shawl tied to the back". Her countenance is sad, very beautiful, illuminated by a dazzling light" (Giovetti 49). First of all, the virgin is in white clothes, and though she is sad, the description of her face conveys purity and tranquility to us. All this contrasts with Melville's dark description of Isabel's

supernatural transformation, in which the black color of her hair is so intense that he compares it with a Limeean saya, and the way the sparks and illumination come out makes us feel like a little anguished. In short, it could be possible that Melville might be referring to the devil himself when presenting this dark version of the Virgin Mary.

Furthermore, I would like to highlight the following description that the narrator makes about Lucy: “That wonderful, and most vivid transparency of her clear Welsh complexion, now fairly glowed like rosy snow. Her flowing, white, blue-ribboned dress, fleecily invested her” (77). Whiteness and clarity predominate. Upon reading this description one can have feelings of warmth and joy, no signs of distress in it like in the account of the Virgin Mary’s apparition. Therefore, Lucy, as the antithesis of Isabel, could be the real Virgin Mary of the story whose enemy is the dark demon-lady, Isabel.

Pierre’s half-sister is first mentioned (indirectly) when Lucy, while dating Pierre, asks him to tell her the story of the mysterious face again. That mysterious face is indeed Isabel’s face. This request completely spoils the idyllic date of the young lovers, and Pierre complains about it like this:

God help thee, and God help me, Lucy. I can not think, that in this most mild and dulcet air, the invisible agencies are plotting treasons against our loves. Oh! If ye be now nigh us, ye things I have no name for; then by a name that should be efficacious, by Christ’s holy name, I warn ye back from her and me. Touch her not, ye airy devils; hence to your appointed hell! Why come ye prowling in these heavenly purlieus? Can not the chains of Love omnipotent bind ye, fiends? (37-38)

This excerpt demonstrates that the first reference to Isabel is already predefining her demonic nature. In addition to this, later, the narrator relates the first part of the story of Isabel with Satan: “This episode in her life, above all other things,....came over Pierre with a power so infernal and intense, that it could only have proceeded from the unretarded malice of the Evil One himself” (138)

Moreover, the issue of Isabel is associated with Dante’s “Hell.” References to the chapter of the *Divine Comedy* appear first when Pierre, being confused, identifies Isabel’s face with one of the “Inferno’s” characters: “Methinks now the face, the face, minds me a little of pensive, sweet Francesca’s face, or, rather, as it had been Francesca’s daughter’s face; wafted on the sad dark wind, toward observant Virgil and the blistered Florentine” (42). Francesca da Rimini was Dante’s contemporary, a noblewoman who committed adultery with the younger brother of her own husband, Giovanni Malatesta, Lord of Rimini. When Giovanni caught them in bed, he killed them. Francesca and Paolo (Giovanni’s younger brother) are portrayed by the Italian poet as a symbol of lust. Considering this, Isabel is related to the sin of lust, to the act of incest that she may commit with her brother, thus, before she even appears on stage, she already represents an evil being, a being who dwells on the dark side of the world, in hell, like Dante’s Francesca.

With all these proofs, there is the possibility that Melville might be identifying Isabel with the Devil. Thereupon, Lucy, the real Virgin, cannot prevent Pierre from falling under the spell of Isabel, the

dark Virgin, Lucifer himself.

Continuing with the same theory, I will try to explain here how Melville in the Limeean saya scene, through Isabel's evil, managed to introduce a subtle criticism to Spanish imperialism, making use of Lima for it. Lima was devastated after the independence of Peru¹. Therefore, Melville, by referring to the black saya and the obscure Saint Dominick's cathedral in Lima, might be making a subtle allegation against the evil that to Peru meant Spain during the colonial period. So, this could be another reason why the Virgin Mary is corrupted by the evil representation of Isabel. The Spanish Catholicism's beloved symbol is seemingly darkened inside Lima's cathedral, as Isabel is a devilish version of her. Then, Spain's tyrannical rule over Peru might be represented by the dark version of the Virgin, whose name is the same as that of the two Spanish Queens. Once again Isabel is portrayed as the dark and evil side of the world and at the same time this demonstrates Melville's concern about the decline of Spanish imperialism.

It is probable that this concern may be related to the political situation of his time. The 1850's America, through the Manifest Destiny ideology, reviled European imperialism, especially the Spanish one. Relying on this manifest, Americans believed that their brand new democracy was the savior of the world, a world in ruins because of the old imperialism. According to them, one of the regions that needed to be saved with the utmost urgency were the former colonies of the Spanish American Empire. For this reason, they would intervene in Cuba and elsewhere in Latin America. Taking all this into account, I think that Melville, by introducing the city of Lima in that scene, would stealthily be referring to the political situation of the US regarding Latin America inside his portrayal of the dark Virgin Isabel as the evil part of the world.

3. Isabel Banford and Isabel II: their diabolic musical relation.

As I stated above, it could be possible that the dark figure of Isabel under the Limeean saya might be a reference to the Devil himself. In addition to this, the scene of the guitar could be related to Queen Isabel II.

Probably, the guitar played by Isabel before Pierre is a Spanish guitar. From the late eighteenth century in Europe the guitar's popularity had an unprecedented increase. This was due to the evolution of this instrument in its current form, and the emergence of numerous guitar virtuosos (Gura 2, 5). One of them, perhaps the most popular, was the Spanish composer and guitarist Fernando Sor (1778-1839). He was "praised as a performer, entertaining audiences from London to Moscow" (Gura 5). Meanwhile, Antebellum America is characterized by a great musical culture that reached all social strata (Gura 9, 10). Therefore, around the decade of the 1830's Europe's guitar fever moved quickly to the United States, and with it the Spanish guitar (Gura 9). It is possible that because of Sor's and his guitar tutorial method's fame, the earliest American guitar manual (1816) was focused on the Spanish variation of this instrument (Gura 24). Two decades later, when the boom of the guitar was at its peak in the US, we can find the work: *New and Improved Method for the Spanish Guitar*, written by the New York instrument

¹ For further information on the situation of Lima after decolonization, please see my article "Fierce Allegation against Slavery in 'Benito Cereno': Herman Melville's Indirect References to the Slavery Problem and Spain."

maker, Otto Torp (Gura 24). Considering all this, it is not so unusual that Melville introduced a guitar in his novel, and the possibility that the guitar could be Spanish is not remote. In fact, he could have known it as we will see later.

What is the relation of Isabel II with all this? The Spanish Queen had a great fondness for music. During her reign new musical auditoriums were opened in Madrid, and the Zarzuela, the Spanish popular lyrical music, began to succeed (González 217-18). Among the genres represented in the court's theaters when Isabel was a girl, was the fandango (González 216), a kind of folk flamenco dance which is accompanied by the Spanish guitar. So, there is the possibility that Queen Isabel was not only interested in orchestral music but also in popular music, in which the guitar was utilized, as she often went out to see popular spectacles. She played the harp and usually sang in the concerts she organized at the Royal Palace (González 220) but we do not know if she played the guitar. However, it is easy to imagine her doing so, given the interest she had for popular culture in general and popular music in particular. In fact, proof of this is that her daughters, the Princesses Paz and Pilar, were assigned a guitar teacher (Lorenzo 19). This queen's love for popular music could have been known by Melville through Washington Irving. As I pointed out before, Irving lived in Madrid for a few years, so he could have noticed the queen's possible fondness for the guitar and commented on it to Melville. Furthermore, Melville might have known the Spanish guitar through Irving's works. Melville read Irving's texts thoroughly and in one of them, the famous *Tales of the Alhambra*, the Spanish guitar appears:

When his work was over, he would sit on one of the stone benches of the esplanade, strum his guitar, and sing long ditties about the Cid, Bernardo del Carpio and Fernando del Pulgar, and other Spanish heroes, for the amusement of the old soldiers of the fortress; or would strike up a merrier tune, and set the girls dancing *boleros* and *fandangos*. (191)

The guitar that is played by the protagonist of this short story, must be a Spanish one, as he plays music to dance *bolero* and *fandango*, variants of flamenco, a musical genre in which the Spanish guitar is normally used. All this along with the internationally widespread topical image of the Spanish *tocaora*, women guitarists (Lorenzo 16-7), might have led Melville to create the guitar scene whose aim would be to make the readers identify Pierre's half-sister with Queen Isabel represented as a Spanish guitarist. This allows Melville to reinforce the devil-like representation of Isabel Banford as the dark side of the world to where she is dragging Pierre.

Conclusion

The psychological novel *Pierre; or, the Ambiguities* has subtle references to Spain and its Empire that until now have not been detected. The first one is found in the name of one of the protagonists, Isabel Banford. Melville seemingly chose this name for Pierre's half-sister to identify her with two Spanish queens of the same name whom to Melville represent the dark side of the world, as Isabel Banford does.

The second one would be the fact that Lima was introduced in the Limeean *saya* scene and this

could mean that the corruption of Virgin Mary by Isabel's transformation into a demonic Virgin, could imply the horrible consequences of Spanish domination in Latin America. Isabel Banford is portrayed again as the evil part of the world and inside this portrayal the readers could also intuit Melville's preoccupations regarding Spanish empire decline and Latin America decolonization.

Finally, it is probable that Melville, in the guitar scene, associates the figure of Pierre's half-sister with queen Isabel II playing the guitar in order to strengthen the devilish image of Isabel Banford as the dark and impure side of the world.

Although this work was not primarily aimed at making allusions to Spain, it is certain that these allusions are introduced subtly within the framework of the main theme of the book. Moreover, these references are not inserted at random because they have relative importance to the whole meaning of the work, such as Pierre's half-sister's name.

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