

Spain according to American Literature in the Seventeenth to the Nineteenth Centuries: a History of Love and Hate.

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Abstract

The concept of a reactionary and religiously fanatic Spain was often used in American Literature. The negative image of Spain in America was originated by the so-called Black Legend, a campaign of discrediting the Spanish Empire orchestrated by its enemies, England and Flanders in the sixteenth century. The Black Legend created a Hispanophobic tradition in England which was transmitted to its colonies in America. Nevertheless, the image of Spain in American literature was not totally negative. For although the Spaniards did not have good propaganda in the colonies during the seventeenth and part of the eighteenth centuries, it is certain that a romantic vision of Spain rose in the nineteenth century American literature, driven by a much larger number of American travelers to that country and the rediscovery of Spanish literary classics, and embodied in works by such figures as Washington Irving, William Prescott, Henry Longfellow and William Dean Howells.

The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate through the image of Spain constructed by American Literature that the emotional and cultural relations between both countries were very deep and that the feeling of enmity did not prevail so much.

Keywords : Black Legend, Spanish Empire, American Literature, Spanish-American cultural relations.

Introduction

The concept of an obscurantist, reactionary and religiously fanatic Spain, where the Holy Tribunal of the Inquisition exercised a coercive power over people, was often used in American Literature. The negative image of Spain in America finds its origin in the so-called Black Legend, a campaign of discrediting the Spanish Empire orchestrated by its enemies, England and Flanders in the sixteenth century. The Black Legend created a Hispanophobic tradition in England which was transmitted to its colonies in America.

Nevertheless, it would be a great mistake if we believe that the image of Spain in American literature was totally negative. For although the Spaniards did not have good propaganda in the colonies during the seventeenth and most of the eighteenth centuries, it is certain that in nineteenth century American literature a romantic and mysterious vision of Spain rose, driven by a much larger number of American travelers to that country and the rediscovery of Spanish literary classics, and embodied in works by such figures as Washington Irving, William Prescott, Henry Longfellow and William Dean Howells.

The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate through the image of Spain constructed by American Literature that the emotional and cultural relations between both countries were very deep and that the feeling of enmity did not prevail so much.

1. Spain and its empire under the magnifying glass of early colonial literature: the beginning of a dual feeling.

During the seventeenth century, when the first English colonies were established in North America, it is certain that the vision of Spain and its vast empire in literature was negative. The Spaniard was seen, according to historian William Wayne Powell, as a treacherous, lascivious, cruel, greedy and totally intolerant being. Sometimes he took the form of a hooded inquisitor, ill-behaved (Powell 7).

The origin of this negative and dark vision of Spain has its origin in the infamous Black legend. The first glimpses of a negative image of the Spaniards in Europe can be observed in various travel books about Spain written by Italian authors in the fifteenth century and the beginning of the sixteenth century (Powell 9). They began to spread the archetype of the treacherous, tenebrous and infinitely arrogant Spaniard (Powell 10). However, Hispanophobia in Europe spread much more strongly since the second half of the sixteenth century, because of anti-Spanish propaganda from the official printing presses of the two greatest enemies of the Spanish Empire of the time, Elizabethan England and the Protestant Low Countries. This propaganda was focused on the treatment of the Spanish Empire towards Native Americans and the actions of the Inquisition both in Europe and America, further reinforcing the image of the ruthless and treacherous Spaniard. This information about Spain and its procedures was frequently distorted and sought to end the overwhelming power of Spain. But it was this adulterated information that created the Black Legend and boosted Hispanophobia in Europe.

Anti-Spanish propaganda was also introduced to the English Colonies in America, particularly from the second half of the seventeenth century. It was made possible in part thanks to the English translations of Father Bartolomé de las Casas's *A Brief Account of the Destruction of the Indies* published in 1552, a distorted and exaggerated vision of the conquest of America. This Spanish Dominican friar was one of the most famous proponents of the Native American's rights, to the extent that the Spanish Crown enacted laws for protecting them, as shown by the abolition of Indian slavery. In 1542 although the "Brief Relation" was just one of the tracts that Las Casas wrote in order to convince Charles V that the Spaniards had committed a great number of atrocities during the conquest, it was the most widespread book of all his works across Europe. In Powell's words, this treatise "is still the handbook for those wanting to prove, or most willing to believe in a unique Spanish depravity" (Powell 33) and, of course, the enemies of the Hispanic Monarchy used it as a source for their horrendous anti-Spanish pamphlets.

The translations of the Las Casas' treatise, for example the one entitled *The Tears of the Indians*, made by John Phillips in 1656 and dedicated to Oliver Cromwell (Lawson-Peebles 70), were brought to America by the settlers, and thanks to this and the anti-Spanish propaganda issued by the English government, the violence of the Spanish conquest of America became part of the imaginary factors of American Literature.

Meanwhile in England, after the death of Queen Elizabeth, relations with Spain had softened with the promise of the marriage of the son of King James I, Prince Charles, with Princess Mary of Austria, sister of the heir of the King of Spain. However, there was still a strong anti-Spain faction that opposed to the "Spanish Marriage" and propelled a huge and bitter anti-Spanish propaganda (Powell 105). At this time

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the radical anti-Catholic preacher, Thomas Scott stands out. According to Powell, Scott was a popular character who wrote scathing criticism against Spain, and his convinced fusion of anti-Catholicism and anti-Spanish feelings contributed much to internalize the synonymy of these terms in the English. In the English literature of the time we can also observe satires towards “The Spanish Marriage” and towards personalities of the high Spanish politics like the Count-Duke of Olivares (Powell 109). An example of this is the satirical drama *A Game at Chess* (1624) by Thomas Middleton. In this work, set in a chess game, many of the Spanish politicians of the moment, such as Olivares, the Spanish ambassador in London, Count of Gondomar or the very King of Spain are satirized and ridiculed.

Francis Bacon, Lord Chancellor of England, also did not hold Spain in high esteem, for in his famous work *Considerations Touching a War with Spain* (1624), he justifies such war to curb the aggressive expansionist policy of the Spanish Crown and thus avoid an hypothetical overthrow of England by the Spaniards:

“This kingdom [England] hath cause of just fear of overthrow from Spain (...)

Is it nothing that the crown of Spain hath enlarged the bounds thereof within this last six score years, much more than the Ottoman’s? I speak not of matches or unions, but of arms, occupations, invasions. Granada, Naples, Milan, Portugal, the East and West Indies; all these are actual additions to that crown (...)

They have, this day, such a hovering possession of the Valtoline, as an hobby hath over a lark: and the Palatinate is in their talons: so that nothing is more manifest, that this nation of Spain runs a race still of empire, when all other states of Christendom in effect a stay. (509)

At the same time, voices against the monopolistic trade policy of Spain in America were heard, and among them was Bacon’s (Powell 111).

All this negative thinking in England about Spain had its resonance in the colonies so that, along with the circulation of Las Casas’ book, it gave rise to Hispanophobia in America. Nevertheless, the English colonists could not ignore the existence of a rich culture in New Spain (Mexico), since they were their southern neighbors (Williams 12). Trade with Mexico was so fruitful that many New Englanders commenced to learn Spanish. However, according to Williams, interest in Spain was not limited to practical reasons such as this, but there would be others, such as the settlers’ reading of Spanish literature. Williams speculates that this might be possible because of the existence of Spanish dictionaries in the inventories of several American libraries of the time (Williams 13). It is known that figures of colonial society such as William Bradford or Ralph Wormley had Spanish literature classics on the shelves of their private libraries. Moreover, the two most outstanding figures in New England’s literature, Samuel Sewall and Cotton Mather knew Spanish perfectly. Both of them wrote some works in Cervante’s tongue, and even though their purpose was rather more religious than scholarly, like in Mather’s *La fe del Cristiano en veinticuatro artículos enviada a los españoles*, *The Faith of the Christian in twenty-four Articles Sent to the Spaniards* (1699), they opened the way towards the admiration of

Spain and its culture that would culminate in the nineteenth century (Williams 19, 20). Thus, a passionate vision of Spain began to be coined, in total contrast with Hispanophobia.

2. Towards the foundation of the Republic: the increase of influence of “Things Spanish” in eighteenth century American literature.

In the 1730s a Spanish-English war was waged around the permission for Great Britain to trade directly with the Spanish colonies in America, including the sale of black slaves. Spain was defeated and it was forced to surrender juicy prerogatives to Britain with regard to the slave trade with Spanish America.

Although after this war Spain was weakened in the Atlantic, the English still considered this country as an important enemy, as it was proved during the revolt in New York in 1741. This uprising, which had as objective to burn the city's British Fort George, was formed by a multiethnic and multinational mob. There were also Spanish mulattoes and negroes. The British authorities feared that a Spanish fleet from Cuba would come to help their compatriots in the revolt, and it would have done so if the insurrection would had not started almost two months earlier (Linebaugh and Rediker 174-210).

All this and especially the settlement of the Spaniards in Louisiana in 1767, one of the resolutions of the secret Franco-Spanish treaty of Fontainebleau in 1762 (Calloway 141), followed by numerous Spanish incursions into other territories of the Mississippi Valley made the Americans have a negative idea about them (Williams 21).

In the last decades of the eighteenth century, the Black Legend was totally assimilated by the Anglo-American imaginary. Scholars, like the Scottish reverend and historian William Robertson, were in charge to enliven the bad reputation of Spain in North America. For instance, Robertson, through his work *The History of America* (1777-1796), re-emphasized the fact that the Spaniards had only come to enrich themselves with American gold, and that they were not intended to contribute anything to the continent (Aribi, Senouci, 1):

“In comparison with the precious metals, every bounty of nature is so much despised, that this extravagant idea of their value has mingled with the idiom of language in America, and the Spaniards settled there, denominate a country rich, not from the fertility of its soil, the abundance of its crops, or the exuberance of its pastures, but on account of the minerals which its mountains contain” (323).

On the other hand, in the eighteenth century, the Spanish Empire, in spite of being weakened, now had a large presence in North America, as most of the Southwest of the territory was under its possession. As a result of this, Spanish towns, with their typical architecture, began to proliferate, the Spanish educational system was adopted in these areas and, of course, numerous Spanish words were introduced into American culture (Williams 22). All this and an even more intense trade with South America made Spain become an important agent in North American issues. This is the reason why eminent figures of the time like Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson and John Adams spent part of their

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time analyzing Spanish statesmen (Williams 23).

After independence, Louisiana had become the border between the newly created Republic and the Spanish Possessions in North America. The Spaniards, to preserve this colony from American attacks, signed another secret treaty with the French, in which Louisiana was ceded to them. On the other hand, the US really wanted to trade with the Spanish American colonies, but strict Spanish monopolistic legislation prevented it by legal means, so they had to make use of contraband (Brewer 15, 16). Thus Spanish-American relations became even more difficult. The US now considered Spain a real threat, hence, by 1800, American people had a great curiosity in relation to Spain and its culture (Williams 23).

Because of all this, high American government officials, such as John Adams, Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson, could communicate themselves in Spanish. They thought that, in this way, they could better understand the Spanish idiosyncrasy (Williams 23). Although these three eminent figures comprehended the importance of Spanish in America, Jefferson was the most dedicated to its dissemination. In 1818, in the Rockfish Gap Commission, in which the basis for the foundation of the University of Virginia was established, Jefferson designed a program of teaching modern languages in which Spanish occupied the second place in importance, only surpassed by French (Vilar 116). Jefferson had already this idea about the Spanish language from years before, as can be seen in this 1787 letter addressed to the Virginia politician Thomas Mann Jr.:

“With respect to modern languages, French, as I have observed, is indispensable. Next to this, Spanish is most important to an American. Our connection to Spain is already important, and will become daily more so. Besides this the ancient part of American history is written chiefly in Spanish.” (177)

In another letter dated in the same year and addressed to another Virginia politician Peter Carr, Jefferson expresses his idea concerning Spanish language in similar terms:

“Spanish. Bestow great attention on this, and endeavor to acquire an accurate knowledge of it. Our future connections with Spain and Spanish America will render that language a valuable acquisition. The ancient history of that part of America, too, is written in that language” (238).

In fact, the number of students of Spanish in America in this century was on par with that of Italian and surpassed that of German. Therefore, the study of this language, due to the importance of Spanish America in the US, as we can observe in Jefferson’s reflections, had a certain importance in the time. The study of this language led to an interest in Spanish literature and other cultural aspects, a fact that was also mirrored in the American literature of this epoch. Many works used Spanish themes, but the image of the country in them was dual. On the one hand Spain was considered as an exotic but cruel and fanatic conqueror, a vision inherited from the Black Legend. This is the case of the French nationalized American writer John Hector St. John de Crevecoeur, who in an essay entitled “A Sketch of the Contrast

between the Spanish Colonies and the British Colonies,” carries out a rather negative description of the Spanish rule in South America:

“In South America, they are taught, on religious accounts, to despise other nations; this and their laws of trade cut off that necessary Intercourse which now constitutes the greatest glory of Europa and of the English colonies. Their government, jealous and tyrannical, must inspire them with congenial sentiments; their cruelty to the natives must perpetually cherish that spirit of arrogance and pride for which they are so remarkable.” (309)

On the other hand, the poetry of the time projected an image of Spain totally different from that of the prose. The lyrical creations of the moment presented the conquerors as romantic heroes, and although the authors sometimes fraternized in their works with the Indians, everything was impregnated with a halo of splendor related to Spain and its great venture in America (Williams 37, 38). Here stands out Joel Barlow with *The Visions of Columbus* (1787) and *the Columbiad* (1807), both epic poems on the discovery of America by the Spaniards. To this must be added the revitalization of the figure of Christopher Columbus in this century, thanks to the great accessibility to his biographies (the one written by his son Hernando and the one by De Las Casas). This provoked a torrent of epic lyrical works on the Great Admiral. The highest representatives of this current were Philip Freneau and Barlow himself (Williams 40, 41).

In this century, apart from the negative image of Spain related to the Black Legend, we can already notice that there was a literary tendency for the mystification of Spain, in particular for its conquest of Central and South America. This will culminate in the next century in a literary stream of total adoration and fervor towards Spain and its colonies in America.

3. Nineteenth Century American Literature: the consolidation of the passion for Spain

The first half of the nineteenth century was characterized by the expansionist policy of the United States over the former territories colonized by the Spanish: Florida, New Mexico, Texas and California. The ideology that drove this imperialist policy, Manifest Destiny, used the Black Legend to justify itself. In most cases it appealed to the incapacity of the Spanish government and the cruelty with which the Spaniards treated the natives as a justification to invade and annex these territories.

Nonetheless, from the 1830s Spanish culture became an important source of topics in American literature. Spanish heritage in the American Southwest stimulated the interest in the histories of the conquest of this region by the Spaniards, creating a certain folklore around this subject that was a constant background for American authors (Williams 212). The result of all this was a prolific literary production on these themes (Williams 212). In this captivating Southwestern Spanish past were based a great number of lesser novels written in this period, like Charles W. Webber's *The Gold Mines of the Gila* (1849) or Augusta J. Evans' *Inez: A Tale of the Alamo* (1855) (Williams 213).

But the great impulse that provoked a real fever for Spain was the publication in 1829 of one of the

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culmed works of Washington Irving, *Chronicle of the Conquest of Granada*. From this moment, a great number of Spain worshipers would emerge, and they would describe the country as a distant, exotic, romantic and mythical place. In short, Spain would have a positive opinion in the literature of this time. Irving and his immediate imitators, William Cullen Bryant and James Fenimore Cooper, wrote about Spain in a romantic and exotic tone that could not be found in the previous centuries (Williams 217, 218). We can observe it in this description of the City of Granada by Washington Irving:

“In the center of the kingdom lay its capital, the beautiful city of Granada, sheltered, as it were, in the lap of Sierra Nevada, or Snowing Mountains (...) The houses had gardens and interior courts, set out in orange, citron and pomegranate trees, and refreshed by fountains, so that the edifices ranged above each other up the sides of the hills, they presented a delightful appearance of mingled grove and city” (22, 23).

This description translates the reader to an exotic Granada, reinforcing its status as the mythical capital of the Nasrid Kingdom, heroically reconquered by the Spanish.

Authors as famous as Nathaniel Hawthorne also professed devotion for Spain, in this case for Cervantes. According to George Parsons it is possible that Hawthorne studied the work of this Spanish author before leaving university (Parsons 129), and this is reflected in his essay, "Civil Banquets," in which the narrator, deciding not to follow the protocol of the other diners, makes this reference to *Don Quixote*: “I did not care to do so, however, because, as Sancho Panza’s dip out of Camacho’s caldron, any sort of potluck at such a table would be sure to suit my purpose” (376).

It is known that Edgar Allan Poe studied French at the University of Virginia, and it might be possible that he also enrolled in Spanish and Italian courses, but there is no documentation about it, only Williams states that he studied Spanish at that University (Williams 217). The fact is that Poe did know Spanish, and it is probable that he acquired the knowledge of this language by reading Spanish literature or by practicing it in the taverns of New York, Philadelphia and Baltimore (Vilar 134). Poe, therefore felt great admiration for certain Spanish literary classics, like Cervantes, Quevedo and Lope de Vega (Williams 217). For this reason he never neglected his Spanish and maintained correspondence with the most important Hispanists of the time like Longfellow, Prescott, Irving and Russell Lowell (Vilar 135). All this influence of Spanish authors can be observed, according to Williams, in works like “Morella” (1835) and “The Pit and the Pendulum” (1842) (Williams 217). Poe frames the latter in a cell where the Spanish Inquisition has imprisoned a condemned man to death and describes the torture to which he is subjected. In spite of his love for Spanish literature, in this work Poe uses the preconceived ideas of the Black Legend, reinforcing the idea of a fanatic Spain, whose reflection is the Inquisition:

“I was sick, sick unto death with a long agony; and when they at length unbound me, and I was permitted to sit, I felt that my senses were leaving me. The sentence, the dread sentence of death, was the last of distinct accentuation which reached my ears. After that, the sound of the

inquisitorial voices seemed merged in one dreamy indeterminate hum (...) I saw the lips of the black-robed judges. They appeared to me white, whiter than the sheet upon which I trace these words, and thin even to grotesqueness; thin with the intensity of their expression of firmness, of immoveable resolution, of stern contempt of human torture.” (1)

Herman Melville, another worshiper of *Don Quixote*, whom the narrator of his short story “The Piazza”, calls “the sagest sage that ever lived” (107), introduced many references to Spain in his works. These references usually mirror, often symbolically, the decline of the Spanish empire because of its misgovernment, as can be observed in this famous scene of “Benito Cereno” (1855) in which Babo uses the flag of Spain as a kind of curtain: “The castle and the lion, exclaimed Captain Delano, why, Don Benito, this is the flag of Spain you use here. It’s well it’s only I, and the king that sees this, he added with a smile” (200). Another example of Spanish misgovernment critic is the story of the “Dog-King Isle”, included in “The Encantadas”(1854), in which an exiled Spanish-Cuban attempts to create a society on one of the Galapagos Islands, but he does not succeed in having this idea prosper because he had put into practice the same form of authoritarian rule imposed by the Spanish in America. In my opinion, Melville uses the decline of the Spanish empire as a resource in his works to give a warning to his compatriots, imbued by the spirit of the Manifest Destiny, of what could happen if they continue their expansionist policies in South America. Moreover, in Williams’ words “Melville’s sense of the glory and disintegration of the Spanish Empire in America becomes a factor in his symbolism and in his thinking of the contemporary world” (Williams 226). Therefore, I do not think that Melville thought negatively about Spain and its culture, in fact, as Williams asserts, *Moby-Dick* has a rather quixotic structure (Williams 225). He just uses the theme of the decline of the Spanish empire to create a symbolism that reflects his opinion about the epoch in which he lived.

After the civil war, a pro-Spanish current develops, especially in California since the gold Rush and to a lesser extent also in Florida. This revival of things Spanish included the reconstruction of Spanish buildings in these regions, and a review of Hispanic culture and politics. In literature the view also changes, as this quotation of Walt Whitman shows: “It is time to realize that there will not be found any more cruelty, tyranny, superstition, &c., in the résumé of the past Spanish history than in the corresponding résumé of Anglo-Norman history” (Weber 10, 11). In this revival of the Spanish culture it is necessary to mention Francis Bret Harte’s novels, in which he takes as reference the life of the Spaniards of California.

Around the same years the influence of Prescott’s works led to a time of even greater interest for Spain and its culture. In this period William Dean Howells, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and James Russell Lowell stand out as the three greatest scholars on Spain and its literature in this century. Howells was a great connoisseur of Cervantes’ works, and he carried out a campaign of approach to the Spanish realists, such as Juan Valera, Emilia Pardo Bazán and Vicente Blasco Ibañez. This campaign served to make known this literary stream and these authors in the United States (Williams 235, 236). Longfellow was a professor of French and Spanish at Harvard, and according to Williams he mastered the latter so

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much that he made a magnificent translation of *Coplas a la muerte de su padre* of the Spanish writer and soldier, Jorge Manrique (Williams 249). He had a very dreaming and romantic vision of Spain (Williams 249, 250). Russell Lowell excelled in poetry, which, indeed used more Spanish themes than even the prose. Lowell was ambassador to Spain in the last quarter of the century, and as result of this experience he wrote several poems on Spanish themes, and the most notable of them is *The Nightingale in the Study* (1867), in which we can observe his passion for Calderón de la Barca (Williams 252).

In the last quarter of the century Mark Twain published his two most famous novels, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876) and its sequel *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884), which have great quixotic influence. According to Arturo Serrano Plaja, the character of Tom Sawyer, an orphan boy with great imagination who tries to reconcile his day by day with his reading of a fantastic world of chivalry, could be a direct literary descendant of Alonso Quijano. However, Twain does not pretend to copy Cervantes, so he creates a character who is a child, and therefore his dreamy personality is more in line than in an adult (Serrano 23). Thus, Sawyer would be a more coherent version of the Knight of La Mancha. On the other hand, the honest and full of common sense Huck could be a kind of American Sancho Panza (Williams 233). In the light of all this it might be said could say that Twain is the continuator of the lineage of Cervantes in America.

Nineteenth century American literature is characterized by a constant that is repeated throughout this epoch, the use of Spanish themes. At this time, the Black Legend is still alive, but with an almost insignificant force, giving way to a romantic and mythical vision of Spain. In addition, there is a revitalization of Spanish literary classics, especially, Cervantes, whose influence permeates much of the literary works of this period.

Conclusion

It can be concluded that there are two different visions of Spain embodied in the three first centuries of American Literature, a dark and negative one that might be associated with the colonial era and the “Black Legend”, and on the other hand a period of fervor for Spanish history and culture translated into a romantic and passionate vision of that country, corresponding, in my opinion, to the first years of the American Republic and to the nineteenth century. Of course this does not mean that there was no Hispanophobia in the latter epoch; it did exist but with much less intensity.

Therefore, the image of Spain in American literature is a story of love and hate, demonstrating that Spain and the US, although geographically far away, are emotionally closer than people can think. The connection between South America and the US, the American’s interest in Spanish literature and history (probably aroused because of the many American travelers that went to Spain in this period, especially in the last quarter of the 18th century and in the 19th century) are essential issues to understand the vision of Spain that was forged in American literature. A vision that was not all negative, but not all positive either, like life itself.

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