

Hoenselaars Images of Englishmen and Foreigners

Images of Englishmen
and Foreigners
in the Drama
of Shakespeare
and His Contemporaries



Images of Englishmen and Foreigners in the Drama of Shakespeare and His Contemporaries

A Study of Stage Characters
and National Identity
in English Renaissance Drama,
1558–1642

A. J. Hoenselaars



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*This book is dedicated
to the memory of*
Henricus Albertus Hoenselaars

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1

Introduction

“Forged in the deceitfull Mint of their own braynes”

In recent years, various schools of criticism have occupied themselves with images of identity and alterity in English Renaissance drama. This interest has already led to a reassessment of the dramatists' presentation of the Turk, the Moor, the Ethiopian, the black man and the New World savage. To Englishmen these were new and exotic foreigners. They had lived beyond the periphery of Europe until the unprecedented mercantile and colonial expansion during the Renaissance effectively brought them within the sphere of the Old World and instigated those processes of definition and evaluation in which the dramatists shared. Analysis of such characters has proved of particular interest in view of the politico-economic forces that brought them to the attention of early modern Europe. Careful study has revealed new facets of ideologies that, it now appears, Renaissance dramatists examined critically within the confines of their art.¹ Moreover, British “foreigners” such as the Scots, the Welsh and the Irish have not lost their appeal for critics. The image of the Irish has continued to arouse particular interest, not only because it illustrates an expansionist ideology within a European context, but also because the persisting politico-religious strain between England and Ireland has continued to fuel the polarization process involving conceptions and images of cultural and national identity.²

In view of the considerable research into the stage images of these exotic and local foreigners, it is surprising that the presentation in English drama of continental foreigners like the Spaniards, the Italians, or the French, the foreigners of the Old World, has been largely neglected and has not invited a comparable reassessment within the context of criticism recognizing the binary correlation between images of the self and of the other, between auto-images and hetero-images.³ The primary aim of this study is therefore to consider the portrayal of Englishmen and continental foreigners in Elizabethan, Jacobean, and Caroline drama. By studying the various types of presentation and the interaction between them against the immediate historical background and within the context of the then current intellectual

climate, I hope to trace, within a European context, the English dramatists' developing sense of identity and alterity between 1558 and 1642.

The study of composite national images in literature, their fortunes and misfortunes, may be hazardous. As early criticism on the subject reveals only too clearly, the subjectivity and prejudice involved in the construction of the original images could lead the critic to soil his hands by openly supporting instances of antiforeign prejudice expressed in the text.⁴ Alternatively, he could, within a post-Romantic nationalist and colonialist ideology, be tempted to propagate as timeless such assumed national merits as these:

The mighty national character which fills so vast a space in modern history, the human type which seems destined ultimately to predominate upon the globe, is made intelligible and familiar to all the other families of mankind by Shakespeare. . . . This strange and vigorous English character, most unlike the characters of all the nations that had before given laws to literature, suddenly enters into literature, and competes for supremacy there in the person of Shakespeare.⁵

Recognizing the ideological chauvinism embedded in such prewar utterances cautions the critic to observe a scrupulously fair measure of objectivity when analyzing stage characters with various nationalities, the function of their costumes, or the projected effect of the language they speak, as well as the fortunes or misfortunes of these characters within the context of a particular plot. Caution is needed above all in addressing that most fundamental though also most complex of stage character constituents: namely, national character traits. No modern critic, for example, would care to take issue with Greenough's assertion that "tracing in brief outline certain formative influences that went into the making of these 'characters of nations' [reveals] forces at work that seem ill calculated to promote the discovery of any serious truth."⁶ Modern critics would prefer to concur with his allegation that one may be "assured of respectable company if one decides to be systematically skeptical on this whole subject" (244). The nearly general acceptance of views such as Greenough's was no doubt accelerated by the Second World War, which broke out several years after he voiced his skepticism; and the fact that the Holocaust itself is often explained from the perspective of a fatal clash between auto-images and hetero-images largely accounts for the unparalleled vigor with which phenomena such as stereotyping, group prejudice, and national character have been and continue to be anatomized in the social sciences.⁷ Inevitably, the humanities did not remain unaffected by these developments, and new methods were needed to address the problem of composite national images in literary texts. This newly skeptical trend resulted, among other things, in the emergence of the subdiscipline of

comparative literature known as image studies. *Emergence* is the appropriate word here in view of its initial struggle for recognition as a valid discipline. It was a struggle during which the discipline, for a while, ironically threatened to fall into the widening rift between the allegedly national schools of French and American comparatism. However, after refuting the perhaps understandable postwar charge that the study of "images" or "mirages" in literature could reduce comparative literature to a handmaiden of the social sciences and an advisory board for securing peaceful international relations, image studies has now developed into a creative and prolific critical approach in comparative literature studies.⁸

Image studies has generated a range of methodological tenets and insights that, for reasons to be explained, grants the Europeans and foreigners in English Renaissance drama new topicality while safeguarding the critic against any form of inopportune involvement or national bias. Image studies resolves the issue surrounding the doubtful truth value of national images in literature by approaching them as diegetic rather than as mimetic elements of the text.⁹ By concentrating on the textual expression of an image rather than its assumed reference to empirical "reality," it becomes possible from a supranational stance to study definitions of national character without the need to address, for example, the imponderable question of whether the Renaissance Spaniard was really as proud as he appeared to be when presented on the London stage in *The Three Lords and Three Ladies of London* (1588), on the Amsterdam stage in Bredero's *Spaanschen Brabander Ierolimo* (1618), or even in the Spanish picaresque novel *Lazarillo de Tormes* (ca. 1554). Moreover, the new discipline moves beyond merely cataloguing such characteristic traits as valor, chastity, drunkenness, lechery, pride, jealousy, and gluttony. Recognizing a binary relationship between images of identity and alterity, image studies are able to explore the ways in which one nation's view of the character of another provides an insight into its own self-estimate as well. In other words, an analysis of the contiguity and interrelationship between auto-images and hetero-images in literary texts helps to reveal what may be termed the constituent elements of a national ideology. Finally, the study of images along these lines has served to modify commonly held views about the longevity of the stereotypes in terms of which the concept of national character tends to be defined. As Leerssen has successfully illustrated for the Anglo-Irish literary confrontation, such image-constructs are not immutably fixed:

... the relationship between auto- and hetero-image is not one of static polarity. ... the images themselves are subject to extreme vicissitudes (taking place, all the same, within the basic parameters of the underlying native-foreign polarity) and the relation between them is, if any, a dialectical one, where auto-

and hetero-images sometimes polarize in mutual antagonism, sometimes impart certain characteristics to, and mutually influence, each other. (*Mere Irish & Fior-Ghael*, 10)

I hope to demonstrate that these observations about the evolution of national images and about the bilateral influence that accompanies the process are supported and corroborated by the images of Englishmen and European foreigners presented in native and nonnative settings in English Renaissance drama. A careful analysis of both groups, and a comparison between them, reveals that defining traits were not rigidly distributed among the representatives of nations on stage. Instead, there was a state of flux induced by a range of events, both domestic and foreign. In addition, as the Englishman's auto- and hetero-images evolved, a transfer between them became operative, as traits appertaining to the former were increasingly attributed to the latter and *vice versa*.

This process of change was facilitated by the diegetic function assigned to stock national traits within a normative theory of poetics. It was, moreover, furthered by a rarely recognized tendency to question the validity itself of constructs of national character. For a proper assessment of the dramatic images in flux, therefore, it is useful briefly to survey the formation of concepts of national character and their status within the contexts of normative poetics and the theory of climate. An additional evaluation of prose treatises critical of the process of defining representative national types enables one to appreciate and recognize more clearly the dramatists' increasingly iconoclastic methods of portraying national character on stage.

It is difficult to establish just when the notions about Englishmen and foreigners used by the dramatists to compose many of their stage images first appeared. Indeed, recorded references may well postdate the popular conception of stock national traits. It is beyond doubt, however, that such attitudes existed before they surfaced in early Tudor drama and gained such popularity in the drama written under Elizabeth and her successors.¹⁰ The earliest written allusions date from the thirteenth century; in the political and satirical songs of this period, images of national character emerge like blueprints for the Renaissance dramatists.¹¹ Already at this early stage traits such as flattery, guile, faithlessness, and effeminacy were occasionally attributed to the French male; and the conviction was voiced that the French might be cured of their lechery if they came to England. By the middle of the fifteenth century, the Italians, and the Lombards in particular, were already being reproached for their financial dealings as well as for their sly trading policies, which included importing worthless goods and exporting valuable materials in return. Such anti-Italian sentiments contained the germs of the character of Mercatore in Robert Wilson's *The*