

# FASHIONING IDENTITIES AND BUILDING AN EMPIRE: THOMAS GAGE'S *THE ENGLISH-AMERICAN* (1648) AND ENGLISH PURITAN PROTO-COLONIALISM<sup>1</sup>

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91

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## Abstract

Thomas Gage, a seventeenth century English priest, traveler, and scholar was the first non-Spanish person to settle in, and travel extensively through, the Spanish Main. After his twelve-year experience as a Dominican in, mostly, Mexico and Guatemala, he returned to England and, after recanting, published his very popular *The English-American, his Travail by Sea and Land, or, A New Survey of the West-India's* (1648). The success of this book (which rapidly went through several editions and translations) was mostly due to its coincidence, both in aim and content, with early seventeenth century English colonial ambitions—especially as devised by Oliver Cromwell in his so-called Western Design of 1655—to which it actively contributed. Gage's successful retrospective construction of himself gained him a relatively influential position in Cromwell's failed project to replace the Spaniards in the New World. In this paper I will examine how Gage's insufficiently studied narrative influenced Cromwell's military project, and will also focus on how this and similar writing produced a number of precarious and self-cancelling identities from which he tried to profit.

**Keywords:** Thomas Gage, travel narrative, Spanish America, Oliver Cromwell, Protectorate, Western Design, *The English-American*, identity, Anglo-Spanish relations.

## Resumen

Thomas Gage, sacerdote, viajero y estudioso inglés del siglo diecisiete, fue la primera persona de origen no español en establecerse en, y recorrer, la América española. Tras pasar doce años como dominico en, principalmente, México y Guatemala regresó a Inglaterra donde, tras renegar del catolicismo, publicó su muy celebrado *The English-American, his Travail by Sea and Land, or, A New Survey of the West-India's* (1648). El éxito de este libro (que fue rápidamente reeditado y traducido a diversas lenguas) fue consecuencia de su sintonía –tanto en objetivos como en contenido– con las ambiciones coloniales inglesas de principios del siglo diecisiete, y más concretamente con las diseñadas por Oliver Cromwell a través del plan conocido como ‘Designio Occidental’ de 1655, a cuyo desarrollo contribuyó Gage. La construcción personal, de carácter retrospectivo, que ejecutó con éxito Gage le permitió gozar de una posición relativamente influyente en el fracasado proyecto de Cromwell para reemplazar a los españoles en el Nuevo Mundo. En el presente artículo pretendo examinar cómo el mencionado texto de Gage, hasta la fecha poco estudiado, influyó en el proyecto militar de Cromwell; además, analizaré el modo en el que tanto éste como otro escrito de Gage de naturaleza similar produjeron una serie de identidades mutuamente contradictorias de las que el autor intentó beneficiarse.

**Palabras clave:** Thomas Gage, narrativa de viajes, América española, Oliver Cromwell, Protectorado, Designio Occidental, *The English-American*, identidad, relaciones anglo-españolas.

## 1. Introduction

On the front-page of his most important work, *The English-American, his Travail by Sea and Land, or, A New Survey of the West-India's* (1648), Thomas Gage (ca.1600-1656)<sup>2</sup> informed his readership, following the conventions of travelers’ narratives, that he had produced a “Journall of Three thousand and Three hundred Miles within the main Land of America”, in which he described cities (“in former times, and also at this present”) and regions from “St. Iohn de Ulhua” through Mexico and Guatemala to Costa Rica (Gage 1648: front page). Also, he announced that he would explain his “strange and wonderfull Conversion” (from Catholicism to Puritanism) and his return to England, and he promised to provide “a Grammar, or some few Rudiments of the Indian Tongue, called, Poconchi, or Pocoman” (Gage 1648: front page). However, it was a special kind of travel narrative, since there was something extraordinary about Gage’s personal story that, as witnessed by the book’s success, did not pass unnoticed for most readers: no Englishman had

been allowed, to that day, to settle or travel throughout Spain's colonial possessions in America and, consequently, until Gage's eye-witness account was published all references to the Spanish New World were based, at best, on second-hand references and translations, and frequently on semi-legendary fabrications.

To be sure, Gage's book was not discursively original, as it belongs to a relatively well-known minor genre of first-person writing in the early modern period. It can be best described as an autobiographical and retrospective anti-Spanish travel narrative of a propagandistic nature. The book had the implicit purpose of establishing new links between Gage and Puritan Cromwellian England, and cancelling old (Catholic, pro-Spanish) ones. This subgenre was popularized by Lewis Lewkenor who, still in the late sixteenth century, wrote *A Discourse of the Usage of the English Fugitives, by the Spaniard* (1595).<sup>3</sup> What Gage's *English-American* offered as new was a first-hand account, or an eye-witness narrative, not only of "the Spanish Navigation to those Parts", as he likewise explained, but also, and this was even more remarkable, "of their [Spaniards'] Dominions, Government, Religion, Forts, Castles, Ports, Havens, Commodities, fashions, behavior of Spaniards, Priests and Friers, Blackmores, Mulatto's, Mestiso's, Indians; and of their Feasts and Solemnities" (1648: front page).

93

Gage explained that the book, completed in England after having stayed twenty five years away from his native country (twelve of which he spent in Spanish America), was based on the notes he had taken on the spot, either in America or Spain, during those years in which he was a Dominican priest and a subject of the King of Spain and, arguably, still a Catholic (1648: dedicatory epistle). Why a Dominican priest in America should be interested in observations such as the nature and strength of Spanish military fortifications and defenses, possible lines of supply and composition of standing regiments, neither Gage himself nor the book ever explained. As could be expected, when Gage offered this information to the Puritan government it caught the eye of Oliver Cromwell no less, especially after Gage sent in 1654 a memorial, based on his 1648 book, and entitled "Some Briefe and True Observations Concerning the West-Indies, Humbly Presented to his Highnesse, Oliver, Lord Protector of the Commonwealth of England, Scotland, and Ireland, [by mr. Thomas Gage]". This memorial, as we will see, seems to have precipitated Cromwell's plans.

In this article I will examine both texts by Gage, i.e. his *English-American* and "Some Briefe and True Observations", in the context of both Gage's self-historicized and retrospective life-adventure and the social, economic and religious complexities of Cromwell's England. This will allow me to determine the actual relevance of Gage's writings as important pillars of Cromwell's ill-conceived 1655 expedition. Furthermore, I will explore Gage's multiple personas (as Catholic and

Puritan, priest and military informant, Spaniard and English man), the way he constructed himself and his unflinching ability to betray others and self-fashion his various identities in the context of Cromwell's, and England's, complex processes of transformation on the road to building an 'empire somewhere'.<sup>4</sup>

## 2. English (Proto) Colonial Aspirations, Oliver Cromwell and Thomas Gage

In his *Discourse of Western Planting* (1584), Richard Hakluyt explained to Queen Elizabeth and to the circle of friends among whom this text originally circulated why Spain's claims in relation to America were illegitimate. The reason was, Hakluyt argued, that these claims were based on Columbus being "stirred contrary to honesty to playe on bothe handes, and to deale with the princes of Spaine before he had received the kinge of Englandes resolution" (1993: 91). These lines, which could easily be explained as part of Hakluyt's (and Elizabethan) ideological investment in the questioning of the legal status of Spain's possessions in the New World, depict Columbus as the Machiavellian opposite of the neo-stoic plain-dealer. However, Hakluyt's explanation also tries to exonerate Henry VII, and by extension the Tudors, of negligence for their marginal role in the proto colonial race led, so far, by the Spaniards and the Portuguese. It was only Columbus' double dealing, Hakluyt reminds the readers, that had prevented England from becoming, like Spain, a kingdom for which, according to Philip II's motto, *Non sufficit orbis* (i.e. the world is not enough).

Hakluyt was an Elizabethan subject and, consequently, he cannot but blame Columbus' deceitfulness, instead of Henry VII's inaction, for what, at the time, was considered a catastrophic historical failure. More than sixty years later, in his dedication of the *English-American* to the Lord General of the Parliamentary army Sir Thomas Fairfax, Thomas Gage shows that this issue was still present in English political, social, economic and cultural preoccupations. Writing in the midst of a Revolution that would radically transform many English institutions, and being relatively free to criticize the Tudor monarchy, Thomas Gage explains to Fairfax how that "narrow hearted" Tudor (i.e. Henry VII) "living in peace and abounding in riches, did notwithstanding reject the offer of being first discoverer of America, and left it unto Ferdinando of Arragon" (Gage 1648: dedicatory epistle).

Hakluyt's account of the origins of the Spanish empire in fraud and deceit, which we might relate with early forms of the Spanish 'Black Legend',<sup>5</sup> has to be linked to what English propagandists of imperial aspirations were starting to attempt even before England had an actual empire: the promotion of a new world of which the English, still apprentices when compared to the Portuguese or the Spaniards,

wanted a share. Although this empire was still inexistent, and all early attempts to create it had failed (hence Jeffrey Knapp's "empire nowhere", which emphasizes the utopian nature of such a project in the first half of the sixteenth century [Knapp 1992]) several authors, especially after the 1580s, persevered and eventually succeeded in the production of an imaginary realm. This semi-fictional space, according to these authors, was there for the taking, since it was only thinly populated by inefficacious and morally deficient Indians, Spaniards and Portuguese.<sup>6</sup>

The English seventeenth century ideological and discursive (narrative) construction of an empire trying to emulate the Spanish and the Portuguese is, undoubtedly, a complex and sophisticated process. Firstly, as Richard Helgerson has argued, both England and the world had to be reinvented in order to "make them fit for one another" (2000: 153). Then, both Iberians and Indians had to be constructed as "the others against which the English national self could be measured, contrasted, and even created" (Borge 2007: 209). Finally, England had to be discursively produced (through sermons, plays, pamphlets, or travel narratives) as a "different kind of colonial power", one willing, unlike the Spaniards, "to create a new, more virtuous, social order in the New World" (Borge 2007: 209). This concern with producing an English self which functioned as an inverted image of Spanish colonial cruelty -and Gage's narrative is a case in point- mostly responds (but is not limited) to a preoccupation with the proliferation, outside Protestant England, of what was perceived as religious heretical practices, moral depravity and inhuman behavior.

95

One apparently minor example of an ideological distortion of England's rivals may suffice to show how this process worked: Gage's *English-American* produces a critique of Indian and Spanish eating habits as a metaphor of moral vacuity: although he had acquired a taste for many of these exotic foods (chocolate in particular), Gage claims that Spanish-American food is only apparently nutritious and tasteful. Eventually, it is not what it promises to be, just like Spanish Catholics. To provide his unlikely comparison with additional authority Gage tells a (probably apocryphal) anecdote attributed to Queen Elizabeth in which the Queen emphasizes a metaphorical relation between food and morals:

Which I have heard reported much among the *Spaniards* to have beene the answer of our Queene *Elizabeth of England* to some that presented unto her of the fruits of *America*, that surely where those fruits grew, the women were light, and all the people hollow and false hearted. (1648: 44)

It may be argued that Gage's narrative falls outside early Elizabethan attempts to build an empire and that it cannot, consequently, be examined under a similar light. However, when we approach Cromwell's mid-seventeenth century projects

to overthrow the Spanish in America and compare it to the late Tudor confrontation with Habsburg Spain we find that, first, both political constructs were strongly driven by a similar economic project: although admittedly they were at a different stage of development, both involved a sense of the importance of mercantilism and of the balance of trade, of the accumulation of wealth, and of the development of shipping. Both also shared a strong anti-Catholic (and anti-Spanish) Protestant or Puritan religious zeal (Williamson 2005: 227-231). To be sure, Cromwell's Elizabethan outlook has been the matter of much discussion for the last century and a half. Frank Strong famously claimed as early as 1899 that "Cromwell was Elizabethan. He belongs with Raleigh, Gilbert and Hakluyt. The whole aspect of the West Indian expedition is Elizabethan" (Strong 1899: 233). George Bauer also held the same view: "His [Cromwell's] ideal was an anachronism- a heritage of the Elizabethan era" (1902: 46). More recent authors, like David Armitage, have similarly approached Cromwell's Western Design as a religiously inspired colonial attempt to supplant the Spanish in the West Indies (1992: 542), not unlike post-Armada Elizabethan anti-Spanish thrusts.

96

On the other hand, historians such as Arthur Williamson have emphatically denied Cromwell's indebtedness (or link of any kind) to Elizabethan proto-colonial endeavors. Instead, he suggests that Cromwellian political projects should be seen as defensive and anti-imperialistic, devised with the sole intention of "open[ing] up trade rather than seeking total hegemony within the region" (2005: 247; see also Kupperman 1998: 90-91; Knoppers 2000: 106-108). For Williamson, Cromwell was a progressive thinker genuinely concerned with liberating and protecting the Amerindians from Iberian (i.e. Portuguese and Spanish) mistreatment; he was —Williamson claims— earnestly committed to freeing the world from Habsburg tyranny in order to replace it not with an alternative empire but with the global expansion of free trade and free thinking (2005: 248-250).

The problem with Williamson's view of Cromwell is that it not only appears to be naïvely one-sided, but it also seems to ignore much criticism and various accounts of Cromwell and of his politics by Oliver's contemporaries (who do not portray him at all as Williamson's champion of anti-imperialism). As has been more recently argued, "Cromwell was universally mistrusted", by foes and friends alike (Worden 2010: 59). On the other hand, today it seems that the unproblematic analyses of Cromwell as a ruler guided by either Protestant zeal or by economic interest (Beer's graphic opposition between those who see Cromwell as a "commercial traveler" and those who portray him as a "Puritan Don Quixote" (1902: 46-47)) miss the point since they ignore the complexities of Oliver's motivations and historical and personal contradictions. As Blair Worden has argued, Cromwell's politics were characterized by a "pervasive and persistent ambiguity" (2010: 63).

This persistent ambiguity and Cromwell's contradictory approach to his (political, religious and economic) mission, plus some vague link with the Elizabethans, would be a fitting description of Thomas Gage, himself a champion of ambiguity, deceit, and self-justification. Frank Strong, unlike contemporary scholars who seem to ignore Gage's involvement in some of Cromwell's plans, has suggested this connection: "[i]t is entirely possible that the connecting link between the Elizabethans and Cromwell was *The English-American* [...], by Thomas Gage" (1899: 233).

Whereas Gage, as explained above, originally dedicated the first (1648) edition of his *English-American* to Sir Thomas Fairfax, when Fairfax ceased to be one of the leaders of the English Revolution, Gage prepared his 1654 memorial ("Some Briefe and True Observations"), which he sent to Cromwell. But although based on the *English-American*, the memorial is a very different text. Unlike his travel narrative, this much shorter text mostly concentrates on the reasons why England could and should replace Spain in the New World colonies, highlighting the moral justification for such a move. As it seems, it arrived in the nick of time, since Cromwell was then projecting his Western Design, the military plans to oust the Spaniards from America and replace them there: either as the new colonial power (as Strong or Armitage would have it), or in order to save Amerindians from Iberian tyranny and open up New World trade (Williamson). Whatever the case, John Thurloe's *State Papers* make clear the centrality of Gage's report: his memorial was one of the few documents that Cromwell examined in order to proceed with his failed English expedition jointly led by Venables and Penn (Cromwell [1654] 1742: 15-28; Gage [1654] 1742: 46-63; Strong 1899: 235-240).<sup>7</sup> It is also known that Cromwell had requested another similar report by the Governor of Barbadoes, Colonel Thomas Modyford, which is included in the *Calendar of State Papers* as *A paper of col. Muddiford concerning the West Indies*. Modyford, who had been asked for advice on account of his experience in the Caribbean, devised a different approach (i.e. invade the mainland rather than go for the islands first, as Gage sustained), but —and this is evidence of Cromwell's trust in Gage's information— his alternative plans were discarded in favor of those suggested by the author of the *English-American* (Gage 1742 (1654): 59-63).<sup>8</sup>

Gage's "Some Briefe and True Observations Concerning the West-Indies", although —according to John Thurloe's *State Papers*— presented to Cromwell in December 1654, must have reached the Protector several months earlier according to some internal evidence<sup>9</sup> and was prepared, as explained above, as a summary of some sections of Gage's longer narrative from 1648 (In Birch 1742: 55-59). Luckily enough for Gage, this report happened to emphasize most of Cromwell's economic ideas, which were themselves heavily influenced by the so-called early mercantilists, namely Thomas Mun and, especially, Gerald de Malynes. In very general terms, early mercantilists were bullionists, i.e. economists who held the

notion that bullion was the major (and only genuine) source of wealth, and that a positive balance of trade was an index of economic success.<sup>10</sup> Most of all, these early mercantilists conceived of foreign trade as a zero-sum activity, that is, one in which a given nation only benefits at the expense of others. Malynes was actually the authority on which Sir Ralph Maddison, Cromwell's main economic advisor, based his celebrated *Great Britain's Remembrancer* of 1640 (reprinted in 1655). Cromwell's economic policy, based on these writings, manifested a clear concern with trading connections and commercial capabilities (Williamson 2005: 252) that went beyond the mere accumulation of bullion. Indeed, Cromwell's policies introduced or promoted the regulation of the money markets, the monopolistic control of trade, the establishment of a high exchange rate, some restraint on foreign imports and, especially, the expansion of markets through the creation and/or consolidation of free ports all over the world (Davies 2002: 223-233).

Cromwell also criticized the activity of unscrupulous merchants and usurers who were believed to have devalued the currency merely for personal gain. However, it must be noted that Cromwell inherited and participated of a general consensus which, after centuries of prohibition against the payment of interest, accepted some forms of interest (not exceeding 8% per annum, after the 1621 Act), which he understood as essential for the growth of the English economy, although "it gave a clear indication of the divorce of ethics from economics under the pressure of an expanding economic system" (Lipson [1931] 1956: xxi). To be sure, this confrontation between ethical concerns and economic ambition also seemed to inform both Cromwell's politics and Gage's *English-American*.

Furthermore, the British Republic developed a project in which the decline of the crown seemed to be linked to the creation of a new global power based on what aspired to be a coherent colonial policy. Cromwell's Britain, unlike the *empire nowhere* of the sixteenth century, seriously challenged the Spanish Habsburgs and, at least to some extent, the Dutch. Whether Oliver aspired to become the Emperor of the West Indies or not, his Western Design certainly was an attempt to build a British Puritan commonwealth (Williamson 2005: 246-254). For all these ambitious projects, ousting protectionist Spaniards from the Indies seemed to be a *conditio sine qua non*.

### 3. Thomas Gage's Writings and Puritan Self-fashioning

Gage's memorial (unlike his *English-American*, which is subjected to the chronology of a life narrative) is quite aptly structured following a discursive logic that, as it seems, gained Cromwell's trust. After a very revealing preliminary clarification (I will return to this) Gage starts, significantly, by stating what is in this for England: "Your highnesse his humble servant [...] hath observed the



Austrian pillar's strength to bee in the American mines; which being taken away with Austria, Rome's triple crowne would soone fall and decay" (1742 (1654): 46-47). In other words: by ousting the Spaniards from America Cromwell would seize Spain's major source of wealth, would damage her trade, and indirectly would damage Rome. Interestingly, no less than the regicide Thomas Chaloner, who was Gage's friend, in his verse introduction to the *English-American* rapturously states the same idea:

Where English Colours ne'r did fly before.  
Your well-built Ships, companions of the Sunn,  
[...]  
Shall plough the Ocean with their gilded Stems,  
And in their hollow bottoms you convey  
To Lands inrich'd with gold, with pearls and gems.

(Gage 1648: Prefatory poem)

However, even Chaloner himself seems to realize that some moral justification is needed: "But above all, where many thousands stay/Of wronged *Indians*, whom you shall set free/From *Spanish* yoke, and *Romes* Idolatry" (Gage 1648: Prefatory poem). Indeed, Gage, both in his report to Cromwell and in his travel narrative, tries to fashion an alternative explanation for this action, basing the moral justification for this unmotivated attack on a, so far, friendly nation. Thus, he argues in the memorial that:

[...] no people more sinfull then the Spaniards in America, both greate and small, viceroyes, judges, and poore pesants, who in general sinne, and hide not their sinne, as the prophet saith, but sinne publicly, sinne like beasts uncontrowledly. (1742 [1654]: 47-50)

Then Gage goes on to describe how easy it would be for England to take Spanish America due to the inadequacy of Spaniards: their laziness, the weakness and poor quality of Spanish defenses, and the predictable cooperation of "Mullatos, Negros and Indians", who —Gage believed— would support any foreign power who promised to free them from the cruelty of the Spaniards (1648: 52). Finally, Gage gives precise details (a summarized version of his detailed explanations in the *English-American*) of where, when and how to attack the West Indies (52-63).

Cromwell's own rationale behind the Western Design can be best discerned from his *Commission to General Venables*, included in the *Calendar of State Papers*. From that document we can discern that he was aware of Gage's travel narrative, since he reproduces, sometimes in almost exactly the same terms, Gage's reasoning. Arguably, and this seems to be supported by the *Commission*, the central motives

in Cromwell's West Indian expedition were of an economic nature (Battick 1972: 72-84; Strong 1899: 230; Williamson 2005: 252).<sup>11</sup> The importance that, in this expedition, Cromwell gives to international trade can easily be understood if we remember that in this document he justifies his sudden attack on a friendly nation<sup>12</sup> by complaining, first of all, about how the Spaniards "prohibited all other nations to have any trade, commerce, or correspondence with those parts", i.e. the West Indies, and also how English interests were being damaged since the Spaniards were "threatening the ruin and destruction of all the English plantations in those parts" ([1654] 1742: 15-16). In line with Cromwell's preoccupations, and with his analysis published in the memorial, Gage makes reference in his *English-American* to the importance that trade had acquired in, very specifically, Peru and Mexico, and how the Chinese and the Dutch had surpassed the Spaniards in this activity, from which all of them had obtained much profit (1648: 55-57).

But, like Gage and Chaloner, Cromwell himself also seems to need some form of moral or ethical dressing for this expedition: namely, a religiously inspired urge to confront Spanish cruelty and to protect the natives. The Spaniards, Cromwell explains in his *Commission to Venables*,

100

hath not only exercised inhuman cruelties upon the natives [...] [Spaniards] hath, contrary to the laws of all nations, by force of arms, expelled the people of these islands from several places in America, whereof they were the rightful possessors, destroying, and murdering many of their men, and leading others into captivity; and doth still continue all manner of acts of hostility upon us, and the people aforesaid in those parts, as against open and professed enemies. ([1654] 1742: 15-16)

'The cruelty of the Spaniards' is one of the more common phrases in Gage's travel narrative, and in the early modern period, it certainly figured largely in criticism of Habsburg Spain made by English writers and eventually became part of its Black Legend. Yet, Gage translates moral and ethical concerns into political and military expediency: Spanish cruelty to Indians, he argues, may become England's best ally: "Some Indians choose rather to die by pining away willingly, then to be subject to the Spaniards oppression and cruelty" (Gage 1648: 139). Apparently Gage convinced Cromwell that there was a real possibility that Indians and *Criollos* (the "natives of the Countrey", born of Spanish parents, as Gage explains [1648: 9]) would start a rebellion against the Spaniards on account of their cruelty. It is difficult to know whether Gage actually believed this himself, but —whatever the case— it seems he was mostly interested in fashioning a consistent narrative that would convince Cromwell (Thompson 1958: xvi-xx). Gage, as could be expected, often alludes to this idea (1648: 25-26, 62-67, 74-77), which Cromwell seems to have introduced in his plans, according to his *Commission to General Venables*, as more than a working hypothesis.

But Gage's narrative does more than just provide the framework for Cromwell's military design. For Gage, the *English-American* is his best chance to make a name for himself as the best-informed man in England on Spanish America. Consequently, he introduces a number of reflections (warnings, simple descriptions, or criticism) on a diversity of topics ranging from the serious and deep: from how the Church of England should avoid making the same mistakes he had seen in Roman Catholicism (Gage 1648: 67-68), to the salacious (Spaniards "disdaining their wives for the *Mulattas*" [1648: 57], or the "love of Nuns too powerfull over Fryers" [1648: 14]), and the exotic (the sixteenth chapter is entirely devoted to "Chocolatte and Atolle" [1648: 106-111]). Then there is inevitably the atrocious behavior (the 'cruelty') of the Spaniards (1648: 138, 167) and, as already explained, the military situation of Spanish America: especially Mexico, Guatemala, Nicaragua, and Portobello (1648: 104-106; 118-138; 185-187; 196).

Close observation of military and strategic features was a (quantitatively speaking) surprising activity of Gage's. This is not sustained by the text alone: there is a record of one Thomas Gage who was arrested in London in 1617, brought before the Privy Council and soon released. The Thomas Gage who would later write the *English-American* was in London at the time (as a matter of fact, just arrived from St Omer and about to leave for Valladolid), and this makes Norman Newton conclude that this was 'our' Thomas Gage, who would have been released in return for serving as a spy (some early modern version of a counter-intelligence agent) (1969: 199-203).<sup>13</sup> This was not uncommon at the time, and would account for much of the unorthodox nature of his writings. It seems that his behavior did not pass unnoticed: the author of the *English-American*, in this travel narrative, tells of a Spanish priest at Chimaltenango who "feared rather that I might come as a spie, to view the riches of that their Country, and betray them hereafter to England" (Gage 1648: 117). Interestingly, Gage does not comment on this assumption, which he glosses over. On the other hand, one of the few editors of Gage's book, J. Eric Thompson, dismisses the idea as far-fetched (1958: xxvii). It may also be that Gage had become a self-employed spy once in Guatemala: disenchanted by what he saw, he would have decided to take detailed notes of everything he considered of potential value, and these were the kind of notes a spy would take: data concerning rivers, ports, fortresses, military defenses, the allegiance of Indians, Creoles, etc. (Newton 1969: 202-203).

However, although Gage's *English-American* may be interpreted as primarily an attempt to move Cromwell and Gage's English readership against Spain and Rome and, secondarily, as an uncommon travel narrative full of economic, military and strategic observations, it also works on a different level. This additional discursive and rhetorical dimension involves mixing claims of moral duty, geo-political and

military aims and economic efficacy with the author's own retrospective justification with his Puritan readership in mind. In this sense the text, which finishes with Gage's renunciation of Roman Catholicism in 1642, operates firstly as a narrative attempt to justify his various betrayals: of the Jesuits when he abandoned them for the Dominicans; of the Dominicans when he decided to stay in Mexico rather than go on the Philippines (as he had committed himself to do); of Catholicism, which he renounced after two decades as a priest; and of Spain when he decided to encourage and assist Cromwell's unmotivated attack on Spain.<sup>14</sup>

As a matter of fact, the uncertainty surrounding Thomas Gage's life and writings (mostly exemplified by his betrayals and retrospective justifications) and the ambiguous nature of much of what he wrote (as a traveler, priest, or spy, or a combination of all these roles), as well as the semantically loaded statements of Chaloner or Cromwell, all suggest—at the very least—a remarkable complexity and a fluid personality. Gage artfully fashioned a personal narrative (notably through his *English-American*) in order to justify to an English and Puritan readership an unacceptable past as a Catholic priest that he all the same managed to turn to his own advantage. That he was able to turn to his advantage the very factors that—as he knew well—could destroy him qualifies Gage as one of those early modern self-fashioning characters who, in Stephen Greenblatt's well-known description, prove able to “drive themselves toward the most sensitive regions of their culture, to express and even, by design, to embody its dominant satisfaction and anxieties” (1980: 6-7). As Greenblatt concludes: “They all embody, in one form or another, a profound mobility” (7), a description which clearly fits Thomas Gage.

Gage and his adventures is thus a representative of what might be called ideological and geographical mobility. Like one of Greenblatt's celebrated examples, namely the Protestant preacher William Tyndale, Gage also experienced “a passage from Catholic priest to Protestant, [...] from obscurity to the dangerous fame of a leading [former, in Gage's case] heretic” (Greenblatt 1980: 7), and from England through Spain to the New World and back again. Gage's pseudo-detached narrative, also in a manner resembling Greenblatt's description of self-fashioning processes, suggests a certain continuity between literature and the objective description of reality, crossing the boundaries between “the shaping of one's own identity, the experience of being molded by forces outside one's control, the attempt to fashion other selves” (1980: 3). Gage, who had already re-fashioned his own life narrative in order to accommodate it to various personal peripeteias, produced a text which was intended to work as an ultimate confessional testimony in which his Catholicism was presented as a past mistake already atoned for. But, whether he wanted it or not, Gage always retained some markers of his past allegiances. Paradoxically enough, the more he tried to make a name within Cromwellian Puritan England,

the more he had to rely on his Catholic and Spanish past. Hence, the title of his narrative and also his self-styled identity as the 'English-American', which in seventeenth century England actually meant the 'Anglo-Spaniard'. According to Edmund Campos, Gage's American identity "speaks to the difficulty of asserting stable identities both in Europe and abroad" (2009: 188).

Gage's conversion is a case in point. When narrating his conversion to Puritanism, Gage admits how his past life had always been based on some form of self-fashioning, which he metaphorically links to the Dominican habit. It is ironical, as Campos has argued, that Gage should eventually identify himself as a Protestant by his Dominican alb. "It's a move —Campos writes— that by its very poetics casts doubt on the possibility of a definitive conversion" (2009: 191), it problematizes the reliability of his new allegiances and upsets his careful construction of what was intended to be his last, stable, identity. Gage explains:

But I applying the Allegory of this black and white habit otherwise unto my selfe, and in the outward black part of it seeing the foulnesse and filthinesse of my life and Idolatrous Preisthood [...]; and in the white inward habit considering yet the purity, and integrity of those intentions and thoughts of my inward heart, in pursuance whereof I had left what formerly I have noted, yea all *America*, which, had I continued in it, might have been to mee a Mine of wealth, riches and treasure; I resolved here therefore to cast off that hypocriticall cloak and habit, and to put on such Apparell whereby I might no more appeare a Wolfe in sheepskin, but might goe boldly to my Country of *England*. (1648: 203)<sup>15</sup>

103

Gage's conversion narrative disturbingly oscillates between the abstract moral lesson to be learned through the "Allegory of this black and white habit", and the most convincing practical terms emphasizing the difference existing between the covetousness he attributes to Catholic priests and the restraint predicated upon Puritans. Gage recants Catholicism and leaves America, he claims, despite the Catholic promise of immense wealth should he stay in the New World. Since Gage's text has been produced retrospectively, we can find a similar characterization of the immoderate Catholic love of riches from the very first pages, when he explains how "the Indians wealth [...] hath corrupted the hearts of begging Fryers" (1648: 4). To be sure, negative references to the accumulation and the use of money, and more specifically to greed as a typically Catholic sin, frame the *English-American*. Gage opens his text with a condemnation of the Pope's power and his granting of plenary indulgencies, which he links to the abundance of "money and rich bribes" (1648: 3). This is immediately followed by a reminder of the "many thousand pounds" spent by cities like Barcelona or Valencia, and Spain as a whole, to ensure the canonization of characters such as "Raimundus de Pennafort, [...] Ignatius Loiola, and Franciscus Xavier" (1648: 3). Furthermore, Gage denounces "the Popes policy [that] sucks out of England our gold and

silver” (1648: 3), presenting what originally appeared to be an ethical dilemma as a geo-political problem. From here, it follows logically that he closes his narrative with a reference to the economic balance obtained, i.e. the money he was able to amass during his twelve years as a missionary. Hence, Gage provides a detailed explanation of how he employed his money —“nine thousand peeces of eight” (1648: 181)— which he partially turned “into pearls and some pretious stones”, hiding some in his bags, and sowing the rest into his quilt (181).

Ironically enough, in one final twist of fortune, his loot is stolen from him by Dutch pirates on the way to Spain, and so Gage loses “within one halfe houre” everything “I had got in twelve yeers space” (1648: 189). But Gage’s project involves emphasizing his new allegiances, and he is ready to do this even accepting his misfortune as a deserved punishment for past sins as a Catholic priest:

[...] it was the will of my heavenly Father to take from me what so unlawfully by superstitious and idolatrous Masses, by Offerings unto Idols and Statues of Saints I had got amongst the *Indians*. I offered in lieu of those former offerings my will unto my Lord Gods will, desiring him to grant mee patience to bear that great losse. (Gage 1648: 190)

104

For the reader, Gage offers this final metaphorical cleansing of his past sins: in order to launch out on his new life after his Catholic past Gage needed a fresh starting point. Without it he could not be born again to his new faith stemming given the material evidence of his Catholic perversion. That he is robbed by Dutch pirates, themselves runaways from Spanish oppression, conveniently closes Gage’s process of regeneration, part of which had to do with aiding Cromwell to dislodge the wicked Spaniards from the New World.

#### 4. Conclusion

What we learn from a close examination of Gage’s writings is that his life-adventure involves an interplay of moral, religious, economic, political and personal concerns, some of which are emphatically displayed while others are carefully hidden. In other words, all throughout his narrative, self-fashioning processes have to be combined with constant self-cancellation, and both acts constitute the bulk of his fictional character. This character, which we can only partially retrieve from a historical point of view, cannot be understood outside the urge to build a succession of various public identities, and the subsequent need to escape from them.

This is one of the reasons why the intellectual encounter between Gage and Cromwell, through Oliver’s *Western Design* and Gage’s writings, cannot surprise us: Gage’s constant self-fashioning, his betrayals, conversions and recantations,

shared some of the political expediency of the man for whom “ambiguity approached an art form”, and who consistently showed “a face of power”, “of [...] pervasive and persistent ambiguity” (Worden 2010: 64, 63). Cromwell’s was a national project to build an empire, or at least to dislodge one, in order to find England’s place in the context of proto-colonial endeavors within an emergent global seventeenth century, whereas Gage’s was a personal attempt to find his own place in the world, be it as Jesuit, Dominican, Anglican or Puritan. Gage’s *English-American* and “Some Briefe and True Observations” (his memorial), as we have shown, provided Cromwell with the necessary information and encouragement from, he believed, someone who stood as close as you could get to a Spaniard without being one. Cromwell’s projects, like Gage’s, ended in failure, but both shared an aspiration for change: his country’s history (Cromwell) and his own identity (Gage). This is why the *English-American* has this hybrid, confusing look of travel narrative, spiritual autobiography, and politico-military report. Just like, Gage explains, the *tiburón*, which some mistake for the *caiman*, or —more appropriately given Gage’s confessed passion for it— *chocolata*, the New World and Hispanic marker which, like Gage’s allegiances, nobody knew for sure whether it was drink or food.

## Notes

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<sup>2</sup>. The Gages were an old family of committed Catholics from Surrey and Sussex. Sir John Gage (1479-1556), Thomas Gage’s great-grandfather, was very close to Henry VIII, and although he never questioned royal supremacy he always remained an adherent to the Old Faith and opposed the Protestant party that came into power with Edward VI. With the accession of Mary Sir John returned to the court, and supported her mar-

riage to Philip II of Spain. His son, Robert Gage, was an MP for Lewes, and one of his grandsons, also called Robert, was implicated in Anthony Babington’s plot for the assassination of Elizabeth and the release of Mary Queen of Scots, for which he was tried and hanged in 1586. His other grandson, John (Thomas Gage’s father), married Margaret Copley, Sir Thomas Copley’s daughter (the Copleys were another notorious recusant Surrey family). Both John Gage and his wife suffered several imprisonments and came close to being executed on account of their committed Catholicism, but were always saved by their influential friends, the Howards (although they and their family quite literally paid a high price for this protection, losing most of their estate to the Howards). All the Gage sons were militant Catholics: most notably, Sir Henry Gage fought for Spain in the Netherlands and later became

one of the leading Royalist Generals. Our Thomas Gage, the second son, was educated to be a priest and, following the tradition of many English Catholic families, he was sent first to the Jesuit school of St Omer (near Calais, then part of the Spanish Netherlands), and later to Spain, to Father Parson's English Jesuit School at Valladolid (where he arrived not later than 1617). For reasons unclear, he eventually abandoned the Jesuits and joined the Dominicans, a decision for which his father disowned him. In 1625 he left Valladolid and was accepted in the Dominican house in Jerez de la Frontera, where he joined a Dominican mission to the Philippines. Once he had landed in Veracruz, he decided to stay in Oaxaca, Chiapas and Guatemala, where he settled for twelve years. When he returned to England in 1637, and again for unclear reasons, he turned to Protestantism, preaching his sermon of recantation in 1642 (Aguilar 1946: v-xxii; Stephen 1889: 20, 349, 355; Bindoff 1982: 150-172).

106 <sup>3.</sup> Like Gage, Lewis Lewkenor was a Catholic from Sussex who eventually became a Protestant in exchange for information about Catholic exiles (Whitfield 1964: 123-133).

<sup>4.</sup> I borrow, conveniently adapted, this concept from Francisco Borge, who had taken it from Jeffrey Knapp's 'empire nowhere' (Borge 2007: 45-46; Knapp 1992).

<sup>5.</sup> As several authors have argued in the past decades, the Black Legend is –roughly speaking– the careful distortion of early modern Spain, in order to justify her alleged moral disqualification and better fight her political, military and –for a few decades– economic supremacy. See Edelmayr (2011), see also the seminal Juderías ([1914] 2013).

<sup>6.</sup> Francisco Borge has brilliantly explained this process in his insightful *A New World for a New Nation* (2007). See also Knapp (1992), and Jones (1952).

<sup>7.</sup> Gage, who had been given a Rectory at Deal in 1651 as a reward for his recantation and services to the Puritans, was sent as Chaplain to the expedition. After English defeats at La Hispaniola, Gage died in 1656 in Santiago (Jamaica), the only island

the English managed to take (Tejera 1988; Aguilar 1946).

<sup>8.</sup> Frank Strong has already argued that there were two other major influences brought to bear on Cromwell's Western Design: the New England clergyman and minister of the Massachusetts Bay Colony John Cotton, and Roger Williams, the Reformed theologian. Both shared with Cromwell a strong belief that the Spaniards had to be driven from America for political and religious reasons (Strong 1899: 238-240).

<sup>9.</sup> This internal evidence involves, mostly, the fact that Gage, referring to the attack on Spanish possessions, writes that "[n]othing can be acted upon the maine land untill October" (60), which would make no sense if Gage had sent the report in December. Also, the abrupt beginning of the memorial suggests that it was intended as a reply to Cromwell's government. Finally (although this is indirect evidence) if we accept that Cromwell's expedition was heavily influenced by Gage, the memorial cannot have been sent in December, when most arrangements had already been made.

<sup>10.</sup> The first time that the term 'balance of trade' appeared in print was, according to Glynn Davies, in Edward Misselden's *The Circle of Commerce or the Balance of Trade* (London, 1623), and it was borrowed from Italian book-keeping terminology (Davies 2002: 228).

<sup>11.</sup> Even Williamson, who insists that Cromwell's major (and almost exclusive) aim was to put an end to all kinds of imperialism, eventually concedes that "imperialism [represented by Habsburg Spain] and anti-imperialism [Cromwell's England] would necessarily be cast in terms of commerce" (2005: 252).

<sup>12.</sup> It must be emphasized that the attacks on La Hispaniola first, and Santiago later, were launched "without declaration of war or notice of any kind" on Spain, a country that not only was at peace with Britain but had been the first nation to recognize the new Republic (Strong 1899: 232).

<sup>13.</sup> Newton also notes that Gage claimed to have met Portuguese Jews, and these were actively disseminating Protestantism as a way to weaken Roman Catholicism;



Cromwell in fact employed some Jews as informants, Carvajal, de Cáceres and Dormido, for example (1969: 199-203).

<sup>14</sup>. It must be noted that, in order to make a name for himself within the Reformed Church, once he had recanted, he also betrayed his previous Catholic friends, sending at least Father Bell and Father Wright to

their deaths, and contributing to the death sentence of Archbishop Laud (Ross 1946: xx-xxv; Aguilar 1946: xxii-xxvi).

<sup>15</sup>. The metaphorical comparison between the friars' cloaks and the wolves "cloathed with sheeps skins" is repeatedly employed throughout the narrative: see for example Gage 1648: 82.

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