

CHAUCER'S IMAGE OF SPAIN

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It has often been said that Geoffrey Chaucer used his wide reading, his experience as courtier, diplomat and civil servant, and his acute observation of daily life to give us an extraordinary picture of the medieval world. And indeed, his writings abound with references to places, people, historical events and customs of different countries and societies that he was quite familiar with. There are many books and articles about the French and Italian influence on Chaucer, or the classical sources in his work. And one cannot help asking: "What about Spain?" "What sort of Spanish references does Chaucer insert in his writings?" "What image of Spain does he present?"

After only a quick look at Chaucer's poetry the reader will realize that the references to Spain do not appear so often as those to other places like France, Italy or the Middle East. Spanish life and culture had therefore little influence upon Chaucer. Nevertheless, from time to time he alludes to Spanish towns, materials, objects, buildings and to certain famous Spanish writers and other outstanding figures.¹

Some biographers, historians and literary critics state that Chaucer might have visited Spain in 1366. They mention a safe conduct issued by the king of Navarre in February 1366 to Geoffrey Chaucer with three unnamed companions, to allow him to travel through the kingdom. It has been suggested that the trip to Spain might have been some sort of diplomatic mission from the Black Prince's court in Aquitaine to

¹ References to such classical figures as Seneca or Lucan are not taken into account here; although they were born in Spain they are usually considered part of the Latin culture.

that of Navarre or to the court of Pedro in Castile.² Anyway, we do not really know whether Chaucer visited Spain or not, but if he did, what could have been an interesting journey left little mark on him, because in his work he does not show any special interest in the country.

In Chaucer's love visions and early poems we hardly find any reference to Spain. The narrator of the *House of Fame* seems to be the only one who includes a couple of them in the description of his dream. In Book III he finds a mountain of ice with a castle on top and he says that there was not a higher one in Spain,³ assuming this to be a mountainous country with a reputation for extremely high medieval castles. Then, inside the building he saw different people playing beautiful music of various forms on bagpipes, oboes, shams, and many other wind instruments; and among those expert musicians were all the famous trumpet players from Catalonia and Aragon (1245-50).

The Canterbury Tales, on the other hand, covers more aspects of Spanish culture. In *The Franklin's Tale*, for instance, there is an allusion to the Toledan tables (1273), those astronomical tables invented by scholars from Toledo and very much used in Chaucer's time to calculate the moving positions of planets and stars⁴. In this tale a magician uses his Toledan tables to bring about a flood tide and cover up the rocks of the coast; he does it for a young man to whom a married lady playfully agreed to make love if he could remove all the rocks from the coast. The Toledan tables then are not shown here as a scientific instrument used by a serious astronomer, something that would imply that the scientific level of the country where the tables come from was high, but as a tool used by a magician in a supernatural operation to commit an evil act or as the Franklin calls it: "*a superstitious cursednesse*" (1272).

Another reference to Spain in *The Canterbury Tales* reveals that Chaucer took a very poor view of Spanish wine. The Pardoner speaks of the illegal adulteration of wines by the London vintners and ironically suggests that the strong cheap Spanish white wine from Lepe is to be found mixed with the expensive and delicate wines of Bordeaux or La Rochelle because the vineyards are close together (562-72).

² For accounts of such a possible journey see John Gardner, *The Life and Times of Chaucer* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977), pp. 152-153; Derek Brewer, *Chaucer and His World* (London: Eyre Methuen, 1978), pp. 86-89; Joseph Strayer (ed.), *Dictionary of the Middle Ages*, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1983), III, p. 280; George Kane, *Chaucer* (London: Oxford University Press, 1984), p. 12; S. S. Hussey, *Chaucer: An Introduction*, 2nd ed. (1971; rpt. London: Methuen, 1985), p. 4.

³ F.N. Robinson, ed., *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, 2nd ed. (1933; rpt. London: Oxford University Press, 1968), I, 1110-7. All quotations from Chaucer are taken from this edition and have been made, in parentheses, within the body of my text.

⁴ These tables were originally compiled by the eleventh-century Spanish-Islamic astronomer Al-Zargali, but the most widely known were those prepared in the thirteenth century under the direction of Alfonso X el Sabio, King of Castile and Leon.

Chaucer's expert knowledge of wines and the vintners' illicit practice is no doubt due to the fact that his father was a wine merchant himself. However, Chaucer was not very familiar with Spanish geography since the vines of Gascony in the southwest of France are certainly near Spain, but more than 700 miles far from Lepe. The wines from the neighbouring kingdom of Navarre might have crept subtly in the French wines, but not those from Lepe, a town in the south of Spain.

If Spanish wine was not very popular in fourteenth-century England, it seems that Spanish leather had a better reputation. In the detailed description of Sir Thopas' external appearance we learn that he wears very good and expensive clothes, and accordingly his shoes were made of Cordovan leather (732). For centuries Cordova had been a very important city in Spain and its woven silks, elaborate brocades, jewellery and leather work were highly appreciated throughout Europe and the East. It is not strange then that a rich Flemish knight should display Cordovan leather. However, what might be considered a positive reference to a first-class Spanish item, gives rise to negative connotations when we realize that Chaucer's real intention in Sir Thopas was to make fun of this grotesque Knight of Flanders by means of a ridiculous presentation.

In *The Canterbury Tales* Chaucer also mentions another Spanish name in a negative context: Roncesvalles. The Pardoner is presented as being "of Rouncivale" (670). Since he was an Englishman, he could hardly belong to the Augustinian abbey of Nuestra Señora de Roncesvalles in Navarre. The reference then must be to the hospital of the Blessed Mary of Rouncivale near Charing Cross in London, which was a subordinate house or cell of the same Order established in Spain.⁵ It seems that pardoners of Rouncivale were notorious for their dishonesty, falsehood and corruption in the fourteenth century⁶, as Chaucer's character would prove later on in his tale. Moreover, an educated fourteenth-century English person should immediately associate the name of Roncesvalles with the destruction of Charlemagne's army and the legend of the hero Roland recounted in the epics *La Chanson de Roland* and *Roncesvalles*, a popular legend of death and treachery that Chaucer cites several times in his works.

Other Spanish references in *The Canterbury Tales* show us that some of its characters have visited the country for different reasons. This is the case of the Knight, who had been to Algeciras, on the south coast of Spain (56-7). He took part in the siege and capture of this town, helping Alfonso XI of Castile to overthrow the king of Granada around 1344. In this age it was quite common for knights to be engaged in wars far from England in exotic countries, fighting against the infidel.

⁵ See the explanatory notes in Robinson's edition of Chaucer's work, p. 667.

⁶ See Muriel Bowden, *A Reader's Guide to Geoffrey Chaucer* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1964), p. 73.

Chaucer's knight, in fact, had fought in some of these places such as the mysterious eastern Mediterranean and the wild lands of the Baltic, as well as Moorish Spain.

The Shipman has also been to Spain several times. In the *General Prologue* we hear that he is an experienced navigator who knows everything about the seas between the English city of Hull and the Spanish port of Cartagena (401-4); he also knows all the havens from the island of Gotland, off the coast of Sweden, to the Cape of Finisterre, and every creek in Brittany and Spain (407-409). He was not only a skilful mariner, but a thief and a pirate with no pity for his victims, ready to attack others at sea and drown all the prisoners. These victims would surely be Spanish sailors since English seamen had often devoted their lives to acts of piracy against Spanish merchant ships in the second half of the fourteenth century.⁷ Chaucer's presentation of this character does not sound severely critical, or at least not so incisive as that of other rascals in the book; and furthermore, when the Shipman ends his tale the Host calls him "Sire gentil maister, gentil maryneer!" (437). All this might imply a certain kind of approval of this Shipman's practice of piracy against foreign property, something which extended later on into the Elizabethan Age with such individuals as Sir Francis Drake or Sir Walter Raleigh, names that a Spanish history book would present as pirates, and an Englishman would regard as heroic admirals.

The Wife of Bath also came to Spain and visited the popular shrine of St James of Compostella in Galicia (466). She went there because she was an enthusiast of pilgrimages and at that time Santiago was one of the most important spiritual centres of Western Christendom, attracting thousands of pilgrims every year. She had also visited other sacred places such as Jerusalem or Rome, and other famous European pilgrim resorts. The veneration of holy places was one of the oldest expressions of Christian popular piety; nevertheless, such journeys were not always devotional acts to which spiritual benefits were attached, but a safe and easy way of travelling for pleasure.⁸ In fact, The Wife of Bath, as she confessed in the prologue of her tale (551-9, 654-8) did not join those expeditions for the sake of devotion; her real motive was that she enjoyed travelling abroad in gay company. If she lived in this day and age, she would come to Benidorm, or any other typical Spanish tourist resort area, on one of those package holidays organized by many English travel agents.

The heroine of *The Man of Law's Tale*, Constance, might also have stopped off in Spain during one of her adventurous voyages. In the third part of this tale we

⁷ For some comments on this question see Luis Suárez Fernández, *Navegación y comercio en el Golfo de Vizcaya: Un estudio sobre la política marinera de la casa de Trastámara* (Madrid: C.S.I.C., 1959), p. 73.

⁸ For some discussion of this point see Luis Vázquez de Parga, José María Lacarra, J. Uría Riu, *Las peregrinaciones a Santiago de Compostela* (Madrid: C.S.I.C., 1948), I, pp. 71-72.

are told that, after her stay in England and just before sailing through the Strait of Gibraltar (945), she reached a heathen land where she could see a castle. The name of this land is not given, but from the description of her journey we might deduce it to be Spain or the Iberian Peninsula at least, where, at the time the story is set, the sixth century, some people had still not been converted to the Christian faith.⁹ The image Chaucer gives of the inhabitants of this country is not very favourable. They do not help Constance, an exiled woman who has been sailing with a little child for years, they just come down to the shore to look on (911-2). And to top it all, later that night the steward of the castle tries unsuccessfully to rape the poor woman (913-24). It is therefore a wild unfriendly place where cruelty and lechery prevail.

With regard to Spanish literary sources used by Chaucer or names of outstanding Spanish figures mentioned in his work, we do not find a long catalogue of celebrities. In the *General Prologue* he includes the name of Averroes in a long list of medical authorities of all times that the Doctor of Physic is familiar with (429-434). It is interesting to see this influential philosopher from Cordova (1126-1198) named among the most famous physicians of antiquity, such as Hippocrates, traditionally regarded as the father of medicine, Galen, the founder of experimental physiology, or Rhazes, one of the most celebrated physicians in the Islamic world. It is of course true that Averroes learned medicine and was the personal physician of the caliph, but he is more widely known for his series of commentaries on Aristotle's works and on Plato's *Republic*, and as the philosopher who integrated Islamic traditions and Greek thought.¹⁰

The longest reference to a Spanish character are sixteen lines dedicated to the death of Pedro I of Castile (1350-69) inserted as one of the "tragedies" in *The Monk's Tale*. Chaucer addressed him as "O noble, O worthy Petro, glorie of Spayne," (2375). One may wonder what "nobility", "worthiness" or "glory" Chaucer could see in a king who is generally known as "the Cruel"; a king who was the protagonist of one of the ugliest blood feuds in the history of Spain, felt contempt for the medieval chivalric code and shocked Christian Europe with his atrocities.¹¹ His half brother, Enrique of Trastámara, ousted him from his throne and, after several battles, Pedro was defeated and killed at Montiel in 1369. This is the murder Chaucer laments in his poem. Of course, he had some very good reasons for expressing sympathy for Pedro: England supported this king and the Black Prince came to Spain to fight with

⁹ Recared (586-601) was the first Visigothic king to convert to the Catholic faith, and with him most of the Gothic nobles and people.

¹⁰ See Miguel Cruz Hernández, *Abu-l-walid ibn rusd (Averroes): Vida, obra, pensamiento, influencia* (Córdoba: Publicaciones del Monte de Piedad y Caja de Ahorros de Córdoba, 1986) or Oliver Leaman, *Averroes and his Philosophy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988).

¹¹ He used to execute his captives, both women and men, including two of his half brothers. For a particularly good account of Pedro's behaviour see the *Chronicles of Pero López de Ayala*, ed. José Luis Martín (Barcelona: Planeta, 1991).

him against the pro-French Enrique at the battle of Najera in 1367; at that time Chaucer was in the service of John of Gaunt, who was married to Pedro's daughter, Constanza, and claimed the throne of Castile; besides, Chaucer's wife became lady-in-waiting to Constanza when she married the English prince. It is understandable then that Chaucer showed Pedro as the "hero of the piece".

As far as quotations from Spanish writers are concerned, we find six references to Pedro Alfonso in his *Tale of Melibee* (1053, 1144, 1189, 1218, 1309, 1566). In this prose tale Chaucer tried to epitomize what the great moral, religious and philosophical treatises of all times stated about the topic of revenge, quoting from a large selection of authorities such as St Paul, St Augustine, St Gregory, Seneca, Cicero, etc.. Pedro Alfonso was a baptized Jew of Aragon originally known as Moses Sefardi, who in the twelfth century wrote the oldest European collection of novellas entitled *Disciplina Clericalis*. Nevertheless, it is very likely that Chaucer did not know this Spanish writer firsthand, since his *Tale of Melibee* is a translation of the French *Livre de Melibée et de Dame Prudence*, generally attributed to Renaud de Louens, which is in turn an abridged translation of the thirteenth-century Albertano of Brescia's *Liber Consolationis et Consilii*. The same could be said about the two quotations from Isidoro de Sevilla included in *The Parson's Tale* (89 and 551), which again Chaucer might have translated from other continental sources¹², and the theories of chivalry embodied in his Knight, which seem to be taken from a French manual translated from a Latin version of *Le livre del orde de cauayleria* (c. 1276) written by the Catalan mystic and missionary, Ramón Llull.¹³

Taking all these facts into account, we are led to believe that Spain was rather an unknown country to Chaucer. He showed little insight into the contemporary Spanish cultural and literary world. It seems that Chaucer was not familiar with the outstanding Spanish writers of his time, though *El libro de buen amor* by Juan Ruiz, the religious narrative poetry of Gonzalo de Berceo and the *Conde Lucanor* by Don Juan Manuel show some thematic and formal features that bring Chaucer's work to mind.

Moreover, Chaucer's image of Spain is rather negative in general. It appears to be a violent nation where traitors kill their noble kings, an exotic land where distinguished English knights come to fight against the infidel, a wild territory where poor foreign girls can be easily raped, a place where you would not dare drink white wine, or a curious country where such magic devices as Toledan tables are designed. But not everything is so bad. It looks as though we are good at building high castles, making leather shoes and playing the trumpet. And, of course, this is the ideal place

¹² See explanatory notes in Robinson, p. 766.

¹³ See Robert P. Miller (ed.), *Chaucer: Sources and Backgrounds* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 180.

for holidays, a place where people like the Wife of Bath would come to have a good time.

Chaucer's reasoning when offering this image of Spain might be attributed to the political and cultural situation of the time. On the one hand, diplomatic relations between England and Spain were very strained in the second half of the fourteenth century. From 1369 to 1389 the Castilian king Enrique II is deeply involved in the Hundred Years' War against England. The Franco-Castilian navy was continually raiding the English coast and threatening the country with invasion.¹⁴ In the same period, the Duke of Lancaster, John of Gaunt, through marriage to Princess Constanza of Padilla, claimed the crown of Castile and tried to invade Spain. It is quite logical then that Chaucer, an English court poet and civil servant who worked for different members of the royal family, should take a biased stance. He had to be on good terms with the Black Prince, John of Gaunt and the ruling class in general; in fact, some of his poems were written to compliment or please them.

On the other hand, although Castile was fully integrated into fourteenth-century western European life and culture, Spanish civilization in general was still rather marginal in a country like England where the literary background was dominated by French and Italian authors. Although some Spanish names rank among the greatest philosophers, theologians, historians, translators, and poets of the Middle Ages, Chaucer preferred French, Italian and classical sources. Similarly, most of his foreign characters and settings were also French, Italian or classical figures.

Spain was then ignored, misunderstood or indirectly referred to. And this, one regrets to say, is still quite common even now, in the twentieth century. In David Lodge's *Small World*, for instance, we learn that one of the familiar discomforts of conferences held in British provincial universities is the rather inferior Spanish sherry, with a bullfight and a flamenco dancer on the label, served at the receptions.¹⁵ And according to a Times correspondent in Madrid, last summer Fidel Castro was invited to speak in Oviedo, which is, he says, the capital of Galicia.¹⁶

¹⁴ For accounts of these raids see Suárez Fernández, pp. 28-48.

¹⁵ David Lodge, *Small World* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1985), pp. 3-4.

¹⁶ David Adams, "Castro Is Set to Dominate Summit Stage in Madrid", *The Times*, 23 July 1992, p. 11.