

‘This Traitor King’: Catholic Treachery and Black Ambition in *The Battle of Alcazar*

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Elizabethan England has been described as a period where ‘general contempt [was] attached almost indiscriminately to the various aliens/ foreigners/ Others/ outsiders’ to its society (Boose 35-6). This essay will investigate what happens when the stage is peopled entirely by ‘various ... outsiders’ to an Elizabethan audience, as in *The Battle of Alcazar*.

The Battle of Alcazar, following Malone’s initial assertion, has generally been ascribed to George Peele. David Bradley discusses the ‘conflict of loyalties within the play, because of Peele’s peculiarly English preoccupation with the legitimacy of rulers’ (134-35). Indeed, the ascription of the play to Peele has relied in part upon a ‘peculiar ... preoccupation’ with English national identity. Despite reservations, John Yoklavich accepts Malone’s attribution: ‘Peele—like the author of *Alcazar*—exhibited with extraordinary zeal the ordinary English prejudice against Roman popes and the Kings of Spain’ (220). Yoklavich’s references to Peele’s national pride are repeated in the introduction to his edition (224-25), and the fact that the nationalistic tone of the play has been used to identify its author is important in trying to account for both the historical responses to, and the dramatic representation of, the battle of Alcazar. For the purposes of this discussion I concur with Malone and Yoklavich.

At the play’s inception, the Presenter maps out the complex historical background to the plot: Abdelmelec is the rightful ruler of Barbary. The king’s nephew, Muly Mohamet, has unsuccessfully attempted to overthrow his uncle before the action commences. The play begins with Abdelmelec’s success in the battle against his would-be usurping nephew. In the course of the play, Muly Mohamet enlists the aid of Sebastian, king of Portugal, to assail Abdelmelec once more. Sebastian in turn elicits a promise of aid from his cousin Philip, king of Spain, and sets off to war in Africa. He is joined by the English adventurer Thomas Stukeley. Stukeley was initially on his way to Ireland with Italian troops to conquer Ireland for the Pope, but is convinced by Sebastian to join the African campaign. The Spanish contingent never arrives. Sebastian and Muly Mohamet are both killed, and their forces defeated. Abdelmelec, too, dies during the battle, and the throne of Barbary passes to its rightful heir, Muly Mohamet Xeth,

Abdelmelec's brother. Stukeley is murdered by his disgruntled Italian soldiers.

The Battle of Alcazar was written between the latter half of 1588 and 1594. It must have been written after the Armada in July 1588, since Sebastian refers to 'the wallowing Ocean... / Whose raging floods do swallow vp [Queen Elizabeth's] foes... / And euen in Spaine...' (II.iv 743-6). The play was printed in 1594, giving a possible six year compositional period. During this time, Peele would have had access to many different printed responses to the historical battle, which took place in 1578. He did stick very closely to some of the contemporary literature about the battle. His sources also contribute to the play's 'nationalistic' tone.ⁱ

This tone is especially notable when we consider the questions, who can be the hero of this play? Who is the villain, and why? What are the possibilities for audience sympathies when the characters in a play comprise Islamic Moors, some of whom are dark-skinned; Spanish, Portuguese, Italian and Irish Catholics; and English traitors to Queen and country, all of whom took part in an historical event that had important implications for the safety of English territory and religion? By investigating some of the historical responses to the events surrounding the battle of El-Ksar el-Kebir ('Alcazar'), and by examining some of the source material and the ways in which it was adapted by the playwright, I hope to shed some light on these questions, in order ultimately to explore the representation of difference on the early modern stage.

Both Moors and Catholics were, in different ways, 'outsiders' to the official Protestantism of Elizabethan England. However, the religious divide between Christians and Muslims was insurmountable compared to the differences between Protestants and Catholics (see D'Amico, Housey, Bovill). Furthermore, Christians albeit of different denominations still could be unified against an illegitimate religion. In 1571 Queen Elizabeth wrote of her English 'rebels' at the Spanish court, of whom Thomas Stukeley was one, that they 'do pretend their departure out of the realm for a matter of religion, when indeed they be neither of one nor the other religion, but given to bestiality' (Simpson 85). The available options are clear; one or other of the brands of Christianity constitutes religion. Anything else is dehumanising. Jack D'Amico illustrates that Islam was always considered a political and spiritual threat in medieval and early modern Europe. However, D'Amico sees 'strong anti-Catholic and anti-Spanish sentiments' as a 'standard variation on the anti-Islamic polemic' in early modern plays (81, 87).

This is reflected in the shared villainy of Philip of Spain and Muly Mohamet in *The Battle of Alcazar*. And whereas Muly Mohamet is eliminated by the end of the play, Philip remains the shadowy 'Catholic king' who was to benefit directly from the historical battle; Spain relatively easily took over the throne of Portugal after Sebastian's death. Muly Mohamet may have been a stage devil, but Philip of Spain represented a tangible threat. The English government's reaction to mobilisation on the Continent for Sebastian's African campaign suggests a real concern with the Spanish-lead Catholic threat in Europe.

The *Calendar of State Papers* tells a particular aspect of the story. Paranoia that Catholic Europe always had the potential to ally against Protestant England, the awareness that both Ireland and Scotland offered potential access into England through religious alliances, and a concomitant fear of invasion concerned the English government to a significant degree. The official response to the arming of the Portuguese and the Pope's provision of the renegade Englishman Thomas Stukeley, illustrates the contemporary English concern with Catholic power.

Indeed, there were frequent attempts to organise a Catholic force to take Ireland from England. Stukeley was a major player in various plans backed by Philip or the Pope, and sometimes including France, in the period preceding the historical battle of El-Ksar el-Kebir. In 1571 and 1572, an Englishman named Oliver King wrote to Cecil twice after encountering Stukeley at the Spanish court, to warn him of Stukeley's plans to conquer Ireland for Philip. Again in 1574, 'Philip ... "entered into the enterprise of making war against England, deposing Elizabeth, liberating Mary, and declaring her the legitimate Queen: he communicated his design to the Pope and the King of France, that each might aid him, according to his kind..."' (Simpson 79-80, 100-101). In 1581 there was another scare of a 'pan-Catholic-inspired invasion' of Ireland (Hadfield 38).

The already extant paranoia was enhanced by the possible threat for England inherent in the battle of El-Ksar el-Kebir. On 11 October 1577 Robert Beale wrote to Walsingham:

Item of the preparation of an army in Portugal, which was said to be against England, as though thereby our side were like to be very much weakened [for war against Spain in the Low Countries], which by reason of the evil will they bear us, on account of the differences of sacrament, I think they verily desire The preparations of Portugal I thought were for Barbary, against the new king of Fesse and Maroco. (CSP no. 323)

The marshalling of Portuguese troops is immediately seen as possible preparation for hostility against England. While Beale 'thought' the preparations were for Barbary, he is prepared to report that they might be 'against England' instead, because there is good reason for the Portuguese to arm against England. The religiously-inspired war in the Netherlands as well as the 'differences of sacrament', exacerbated by Portugal's connections with Spain (not only were they both Catholic, but Sebastian was Philip II's nephew) are good reasons to be watchfully aware. The English were constantly keeping an eye on the Portuguese preparations, and were very distrustful of the official purpose: 'The bruit here [Brussels] is hot of the preparation in Portugal, coloured with an enterprise against the Moors, but destined as they doubt hitherwards ...'(CSP no. 320, October 10 1577).

The perceived threat to England in the Portuguese military preparations, despite the much-avowed intention to head for Africa, became a serious problem for diplomatic relations between the two countries. An aggrieved letter from the Portuguese ambassador to England, Francisco Giraldez, to Sebastian in January 1578 recounts a difficult conversation with Leicester. The English, Giraldez reports, have been warned that Sebastian is allying with Philip and the Pope in arming Irish rebels (*CSP* no. 611, January 25 1578).

This paranoia was not confined to Portugal, Spain or Italy. In February 1578, the English ambassador in France, Sir Amyas Poulet, wrote to the Secretaries from Paris. He reports that there are French preparations at sea, which also might be meant for England (*CSP* no. 654, February 19 1578). The concern caused by the Portuguese preparations, and the English anxiety about a Continental Catholic conspiracy against the English occupation of Ireland extended to the conflict in the Low Countries. Giraldez tells his king that he took the occasion of being asked to stay and dine with Leicester together with an ambassador from the Netherlands to ‘undeceive ... [the States] and assure them that your forces and things connected with them ... were for Barbary, and this I affirmed before Leicester, as I had done to the Queen.’ (*CSP* no. 611, January 25 1578) Nevertheless, the movements of the renegade Stukeley made it impossible for the English to relax, and he was closely monitored. In February 1578 Christopher Hoddesdon wrote to Walsingham from Hamburg that Stukeley,

the counterfeit English Duke,... is now going with soldiers to Portugal; whence some suspicion may be gathered that the preparation for Affrica is meant some other way... It is told me by an archpapist that the great army of ships prepared in Spain and Portugal will divide, one half for Ireland ... (*CSP* no. 651 *bis*, February 17 1578).

Stukeley's involvement in the Portuguese expedition fed the fire, so that his military backing by the Pope and his plans for Ireland become proof of a Portuguese cover-up and a joint Spanish-Portuguese expedition against England. Two days after Hoddesdon's letter to Walsingham, Poulet wrote from Paris to the Secretaries:

I am credibly informed that Stukeley was still at Civita Vecchia on the 28th ult with Italian men and ships furnished by the Pope. Some say these preparations are for an enterprise of the King of Portugal in Africa, others think they will be employed against England. One tells me that Stukeley is certainly coming to Ireland ... (*CSP* no. 654, February 19 1578).

Four days later Hoddesdon again wrote to Walsingham, confirming Stukeley was destined for Portugal with soldiers, 'which may breed a suspicion that the Africa voyage is colourably and deceitfully meant' (*CSP* no 656, February 23 1578). The rumours obviously got so bad that in March the King of Portugal himself wrote to the States-General, 'I entreat you to inform the Queen of England, to whom also I am writing my resolution touching this enterprise ... and to assure her that my designs have reference solely to Africa ...' (*CSP* no 696, March 15 1578). Nevertheless, in May William Davidson was still writing to the Secretaries from Ghent, about 'the King of Portugal's alleged service on Africa' (*CSP* no. 384, May 2 1578).

The threat lay precisely in the potential for alliance amongst England's enemies, and Stukeley was a concern because of his backers. In May Hoddesdon wrote to Burghley, warning him that the King of Spain or the Pope might be behind 'the Portuguese expedition to Africa', and Dr Thomas Wilson of the Privy Council, Secretary of State, wrote to Walsingham in June:

The Lord Deputy and Council in Ireland make sure account of Stukeley's coming... The Queen does not much esteem this conceived fear in Ireland... I pray God that this light esteeming of so lewd a varlet be not hurtful, for although he be of no value for himself, yet he has setters-on, and the Pope being chief, may work great mischief (*CSP* no. 890, May 19 1578 and June 21 1578 respectively).

Once the English authorities were sure that Stukeley was involved in some way, headed for Ireland with Catholic troops, together with the fact of Portuguese naval armament, the whole enterprise acquired the scope of a general anti-English Catholic European plot. When Poulet wrote to the Secretaries that the French were arming for an expedition, he gave reasons for this supposed anti-English alliance. The alleged attack was possibly

in favour of the Queen of Scots; and considering the close understanding between France and Spain, it may be feared that the Spanish preparations mentioned in my last letter will join with the forces of this realm. My news of the embarking of Thomas Stukely with 900 men is confirmed It is easy to see that her Majesty's happy and quiet government is envied; that France and Spain find no better means to reduce their subjects to the lure of their tyrannical will than by troubling the quiet state of our country; that some dangerous mischief is brewing The general opinion concurs that these attempts will be in favour of the Queen of Scots; and this does not impugn the judgment of those who affirm that the enterprise is against Ireland, because no one doubts but that the least spark of division that shall be kindled in any part of her Majesty's dominions may be dangerous to all other parts of her Imperial crown. Thank God she knows it, and wants no means to prevent it (CSP no. 640, February 12 1578).

Poulet's letter contains all the elements found in the English communications about these events. It betrays a consistent tone of paranoia, England's insecurity as a Protestant nation facing Catholic onslaught from without and within, and a strong sense of national pride expressed in Poulet's faith in England's ability to withstand the pernicious plots and in his ascription of Catholic European threatening activity to envy. He also is clear about the perceived threat of Catholic invasion, and designates those powers with the ability to invade England tyrannical. Of course, any help to England's enemies from Englishmen, is traitorous. A month later, once he has ascertained that nothing explosive is in fact about to happen with the French, Poulet writes to the Secretaries, 'And now her Majesty may answer the Spaniard and his English traitorous servants the more boldly ...' (CSP no. 691, March 11 1578). The possibility of usurpation by illegitimate outsiders is understood as pervasive; Poulet tells the Secretaries, 'The subtle malice of this time gives us just cause to fear rather too much than too little, and therefore I would be sorry to remove your jealousies ...' (June 15 1578).

'The subtle malice' of plotting towards usurpation is a concern of *The Battle of Alcazar*. There are at least two characters in the play who seek to be illegitimate rulers. Muly Mohamet and Thomas Stukeley both aspire to thrones that are not theirs by right. However, Sebastian can also be seen to be clamouring for political

power that he should not have, because he supports a rebel. The play's range of possible source material also reflects a concern with the 'jealousies' of national politics.

One important source for the play is clearly John Polemon's translation of Fray Luis Nieto, a Spanish preaching friar who accompanied the Portuguese expedition to Africa and wrote about the battle a year later (Bovill 187). The French translation of the Spanish original was printed in Paris in 1579, Latinised by Thomas Freigius in 1581, and finally Englished by John Polemon in *The Book of Battailles* in 1587 (Bradley 131 ff.). Besides Polemon, Peele possibly had access to the pamphlet, *A dolorous discourse of a most terrible and bloody battel, fought in Barbary*, which may have been a version of Don Duarte de Meneses's text that was circulating in London by October 1578 (Bradely 133; Yoklavitch). He also may have used a propagandist work in favour of the English-sponsored pretender to the Portuguese throne, *The Explanation of the True and Lawful Right and Tytle of the Most Excellent Prince, Anthonie ...* (1585), from which he might have drawn some of the anti-Spanish flavour of the play. In addition he may have read 'Conestaggio's' authoritative account, probably written by Juan de Silva, the Spanish ambassador to the Portuguese court, and an eye witness (Bradley 132-3; Bovill, Yoklavitch).

Peele was very indebted to his sources. Of the 1590 lines of the text, 342 come *verbatim* from sources (Bradley 131). The dramatic text is informed by historical texts, and uses and changes events that were already loaded with significance for an Elizabethan playwright and audience—the defeat of Sebastian increased Spanish power; the English had a trading relationship with Morocco that temporarily faced the possibility of expanding to include a military alliance; and the last Christian Crusade had failed (Housley 118-144).

Peele added characters and subplots that are not found in any of the possible sources. The women in Abdelmelec's court, Stukeley's extended role in the play, and the Spanish treachery are unique to *The Battle of Alcazar*. While this has been noticed and remarked upon by editors of the play (Yoklavich and Bradley both discuss all or some of these additions), the implications have been overlooked. The creation of female nobility allows for the representation of complete noble families as well as a recognisably courtly atmosphere. Stukeley's treachery facilitates discussion about English national identity despite (or perhaps because of) his chequered historical reputation. The 'Catholike Kinge' represents the primary threat to English military and religious autonomy, and as such has to be portrayed as negatively as possible. The negative representation of Philip II also helps to mitigate Sebastian's rash behaviour, and to defer blame for the defeat of the crusading Portuguese.

Similarly, Yoklavich cannot find a reason to explain why the Moor's son is introduced into the first dumbshow, as there is no historical authority to this representation, and 'no significance in the play that follows' (239). However, the presence of the Moor's son, manifestly as bad as his father as illustrated by his own actions in the dumbshow, serves to establish the possibility of a line of evil rulers, and is implicated in the play's emphasis on inheriting the right to rule.

The Battle of Alcazar begins by foregrounding rightful rulership. The Presenter's first words are: 'Honor the spurre that pricks the princely minde, / To follow rule and climbe the stately chaire ...' (I 1-2). The importance of establishing legitimate rulership is integral to the play; the whole first act is devoted to making sure that it is clear who is the legitimate ruler of Morocco. Abdelmelec is given kingly qualities and a courtly situation. This marks him as different from Muly Mohamet, who in the dumbshows and on his first speaking entrance is clearly the villain and pretender to the throne. Skin colour becomes an important marker of villainy and dangerous ambition in the representation of the two would-be rulers of Morocco.

Abdelmelec is marked immediately as Moorish but also 'Curteous and honourable' as Calsepius Bassa calls him (I i 90) by the courtly language he uses, the recognisably courtly structure of his entourage, and the loyalty of his followers. Abdelmelec is regal in his address to the Turkish Bassa, using the designated language of royalty throughout:

Calcepius Bassa ...

To thee and to thy trustie band of men
That carefully attended vs in our camp
Such thanks we giue to thee, and to them all,
As may conserne a poore distressed king
In honour and in princely curtesie (I.i 82-9).

Bassa's reply is politic and diplomatic. The Turks are 'sure friends by our great master sent / To gratifie and to renumerate, /... Thy seruice' (I i 91-6). Abdelmelec is shown to have 'friends'—political and social allies—to whom he is loyal, and for which he is able to reap kingly rewards. The fact that this friend is also the emperor of the Turks makes him powerfully connected. The historical Abdelmelec had grown up in exile amongst the Turks, and had recovered Morocco with Turkish help. But by beginning the play with this presentation of Abdelmelec, Peele is ensuring that the audience is aware not only of the familiarly courtly atmosphere of his train but of his powerful political connections and kingly legitimacy. The first act stages a procession of courtiers to stress the fact that Abdelmelec is 'this rightfull king' (I i 122) who will 'sow the lawfull true succeeding seed' (I i 119). Abdelmelec also mentions that, as he is the rightful ruler of Morocco, the battle was ordained by heaven in his favour. He stresses this divine endorsement, that 'rightfull quarrels ayde / Successfull are ... / In sight of heauen' (I i 131-136).

Abdelmelec 'discourse[s]' on the establishment of his family's kingly line, when he promises his soldiers that he will explain 'The summe of all':

... Descending from the line
Of *Mahomet*, our grandsire
... was the first,
From him well wot ye *Muly Mahamet Xequé*,
Who in his life time made a perfect lawe,
Confirmed with generall voice of all his peeres
That in his kingdome should successiuelly
His sonnes succede ... (I i 131-48).

The law of succession, established by the rightful king with the people's consent, is indeed 'the summe of all', since the action of the play can only operate correctly once we know whose side to be on. Muly Mohamet convinces Sebastian that he is the rightful ruler of Morocco, and it is manifestly important that we are not convinced as well.

Polemon provides a detailed history of Abdelmelec's line, and the play

appears to correspond closely to this version. According to Polemon, the founding father was indeed, 'a certaine *Moore* of the *Mahometicall* superstition', a descendant of the ('damned and cursed false') prophet Mohammed, called Muly Xarif (sig. 63v). His son, Muley Mahamet Xequé, consolidating the empire his father had built, consulted with his court 'that thorough their counsaile, he might the more maturely and wisely set the order for the succession of his sonnes', and 'by common consent' a system was decided upon, which would ensure that his legitimate sons would all have their turn at ruling the kingdom (sig. 64). The line of succession would thus always fall to the oldest living brother (sig. 65v). Muly Mohamet's father, Muly Abdallas, ruled by this system as the oldest brother, but tried 'to abrogate & disanul the law, y^t his Father with the peeres of the kingdome had made, for the succession of the crowne' in order to ensure that his son would succeed him. Abdallas and Muly Mohamet betrayed and murdered the inheriting brothers in turn, until Abdelmelec was next in line according to the law established by their father's court.

Bradley understands this tanist law of succession as by definition jarring with an Elizabethan audience, according to whose usual practices of primogeniture Muly Mohamet (as son of the king) would be the next in line. Thus Sebastian can be excused for interfering because he can be seen to be trying to reinstate the correct line of succession (134-35). However, it seems clear that the first act is designed to establish Abdelmelec as the rightful heir and to discredit Muly Mohamet utterly, so that when Abdelmelec says of Muly Mohamet that he 'wrongfully proclaimes, / His sonne for king' (I i 155-56) the audience will know this is true. Abdelmelec is 'the lawfull true succeeding prince', his 'quarrel iust and honorable', and 'That *Muly Mahamet* the traitor holdes, / Traitor and bloudie tyrant both at once ...' (I i 158-70). Muly Mohamet is 'this damned wretch, this traitor king', on whom 'The Gods shal poure down showers of sharp reuenge.' (I i 161-62)

A large amount of stage time is spent establishing who has the right to the throne of Barbary, and illustrating the villainy of the unlawful pretender. By the time Muly Mohamet turns to Sebastian for help, the audience has seen not only the silent shows of his cruelty in the dumbshows of the first and second act, but has heard the bloodiness and power of his language. The audience has also experienced the true courtliness of Abdelmelec's court, and heard his own gods- and peers-endorsed claim to the throne. Now that the scene-setting is done, only now, does the Presenter say, 'Now listen lordings now begins the game' (II 360).

Muly Mohamet and his son do expound forth on their own rights to the throne. However, they have their say only in the last scene of the third act, by which time it is clear that Sebastian has been fooled by Spanish treachery as well as Negro Moorish deceit, so that the things that have been said about the Moorish rebels have more weight than the things they say about themselves, or Sebastian says

about them.

The play begins by distinguishing the ‘good’ Moor from the ‘bad’. Muly Mohamet’s unlawful ambition is indicated by his colour, which marks him as the villain, a point the play makes clear in its repeated designation of him as ‘Negro’ (see Tokson; Jones, Barthelemy and Hunter see Muly Mahomet as the first evil Moorish protagonist on the English stage). Muly Mohamet’s darkness of skin seems to be historically based—Polemon’s account says his mother was a Negro slave. Other accounts of the battle stress his complexion—he is called ‘the blacke kinge’ throughout *A dolorous discourse* (Bradley 133). The correlation between skin colour and nature is made overt in the sources. *The Book of Battailes* describes Abdelmelec as ‘of ... white face, but intermired with red, which did gallantlie garnish his cheekes, a blacke beard thicke, and curled, great eies and graie’. Muly Hamet, the villain of that book, was

of stature meane, of bodie weake, of coulour so blacke, that he was accompted of many for a *Negro* or black *Moore*. He was of a peruerse nature, he would neuer speak the trueth, he did all things subtelly and deceitfully. He was not delighted in armes, but as he shewed in all battails, of nature cowardly, and effeminate.

The staging of the play suggested by the dramatic plot also makes it clear that Muly Mohamet is black, and Abdelmelec is white (see Barthelemy). The dramatic plot for *The Battle of Alcazar* has been examined by W.W. Greg, who concludes that the quarto is an abridged version of the play (cf. Bradley 127-29). Greg’s and Bradley’s analyses both suggest that only a few actors—possibly just Alleyn as Muly Mohamet, and the actor playing Zareo—could be in blackface as they had to double parts. Furthermore, the text affirms the physical manifestation of an unnaturally bloody disposition. Muly Mohamet is ‘Blacke in his looke, and bloudie in his deeds’ (I 19). The spectacle of Muly Mohamet’s blackness, the spectacle of evil signified by his blackness, is stressed by the Presenter and in the dumbshows, illustrating his violence and capacity for betrayal:

This *Negro* puts to death by proud command
... this *vnbeleeuing* Moore
Murthering his vnkle and his brethren,
Triumphs in his *ambitious* tyranny
... this *vnhappie traitor* king ...
... this *Negro*
... this *tyrant king*
(I 43-61; 33; my emphases)

Muly Mohamet's ambition is evil and his race serves as a marker for his ruthlessness and his unlawful ambition, which make him a tyrant king. The Presenter calls him 'this Negro moore /... this vsurper' (II 310, 315), stressing his colour to the audience in a way that links to his political ambitions. Muly Mohamet is also called 'this ambitious Negro moore', thus combining two epithets of notoriety (III ii 921).

Muly Mohamet's skin colour is overlooked in one important instance in the play and *The Book of Battailes*. The rhetoric of a clash of mighty kings overtakes the racially-marked rhetoric found in all other references to the villain. The Presenter concludes his introduction to the play by allegorising the story. Not only is it the true story of a contemporary event, it is also an event that in its recounting of a tale of rulers reaching for power and being destroyed in the attempt, is 'a modern matter':

Sit you and see this true and tragicke warre,
A modern matter full of bloud and ruth,
Where three bolde kings confounded in their height,
Fell to the earth contending for a crowne,
And call this warre *The battell of Alcazar*. (I 63-7)

Contemporary literature about the battle concentrated on the fact that three kings lost their lives.ⁱⁱ However, Muly Mohamet is so much the villain in the play and in the source material, and a coward to boot, that it seems odd to allow him the glorious status of a slain warrior. Peele may be echoing Polemon's translation where Muly Mohamet, despite being a bad ruler, a liar and a coward, ('a subtile fellow, ambitious, and deceitful'; '*Mahamet* was the first that ranne awaie'), gets the same rhetoric of nobility at the battle's end as the legitimate kings:

These dead bodies of three kings being brought into one Paulion, made an horrible spectacle ... For what more sorrowfull and horrible a sight could there bee, then to beholde three most mightie kings, that died in one battaile, lying together ... whereas all three did aspire to the kingdome of *Marocco*, none of them helde it. But this thing being shut from mens senses, and reserued to the hidden iudgement of Gods maiestie, I doe omit (sigs. 68r, 69, 76r, 81v).

The tone is similar to the Presenter's summation of events. Both accounts convey a sense of the battle that ties it into larger, more mysterious realms than the individual human. The Presenter depicts the story as a 'tragedy', invoking a common motif of fate in tragedy, when he mentions the hubristic reaching up for 'height' and the falling 'to the earth' that ensued after the battle commenced.

Polemon comments on God's judgment of the events which is not available to him. The tone implicitly suggests the involvement of divine providence in the matters of kings. The historical Abdelmelec's Jewish surgeon, in his letter to his brother about the battle, wrote:

Great secret was of God that within an hour dies three kings, two of them of great power; and a greater miracle that a dead king overcame the King of Portugal in so short a space a seems to be enchantment (*CSP* no. 210, August 1578).

The surgeon is referring to Abdelmelec's death in the middle of the battle when he talks of the victory of 'a dead king'. The stage representation of Abdelmelec's death establishes the important image of the dead king overlooking the battle, propped up in his chair. The dramatic point is also historically accurate. Peele's play does not account for Abdelmelec's death, which is sudden, and follows the rumour of defeat. It seems that he dies of a broken heart in the play, his noble nature unable to bear defeat. Polemon and the report by Abdelmelec's physician both detail his illness before and during the battle, attributing it to various causes. Both agree with the play that the rumour of defeat contributed towards his death (Polemon 79r; *CSP* no. 210, August 1578).

The surgeon's account differentiates between the amount of power allocated to the kings, and Muly Mohamet is not a king 'of great power'. However, in the invocation to God, the surgeon includes all three kings. Because of his religion, he is invoking a differently-inflected god, but is equally sure that there is a connection between God's involvement and what he sees as the unusual—he speaks of an 'enchantment'—results of the battle.

Contemporary accounts, then, including Peele's play, understood the events of the battle in terms of God's comment on the situation. All three accounts assume a connection between kings and God, and this suggests exactly how high those who strive for rulership are aiming. It is also an implicit comment on kingly power. The dramatic effect of the presentation of the sacrosanct nature of kingly power overrides the need to mark the villain as the pretender he is elsewhere pointedly referred to as being.

Nature engages in the fray in the final act, when the battle is raging, to make it clear that this is a universe where God is involved in the battle of Alcazar. 'Bloud will have bloud, foul murther scape no scourge', the Presenter tells the audience over the crash of 'lightning flames, / And thunder' (V 1263-66). There are also 'firie starres and streaming comets', 'Fire, fire about the axiltree of heauen' (V 1277-1280). At this point we have another dumbshow. '*Enter Fame like an Angell, and hangs the crownes upon a tree*' (V 1268-9).

Here is another reason why a war between Catholics and Moores in Barbary might be presented as a tragedy of universal proportions to an English audience. As the audience watches the three crowns fall from the tree, the presenter mourns: 'Ay me, that kingdomes may not stable stand' (V 1287). Peele's depiction of the battle expresses the fragility of a kingly position as much as the divine power that goes with it. The dumbshow graphically illustrates this. The crowns are placed by Fame upon a tree and drop off one by one.

The fact that all three rulers are allocated kingly status by their common deaths raises the question, who is the hero of this play? There are four contenders; Yoklavich points out that Sebastian has 223 lines, Muly Mohamet has 210, Abdelmelec has 181, and Stukeley 132. Sebastian, as both a historical and a dramatic figure, poses the problem of justifying his actions heroically. The Presenter begins the play with a summary of its events, and the audience is told to honour princely ambition which:

With great desire inflames the Portingall,
An honorable and couragious king,

To vndertake a dangerous dreadfull warre,
And aide with christian armes the barbarous Moore. (I 3-9)

The Portuguese king, ‘honorable and courageous’, is clearly supposed to be the hero. His ambition, because it is ‘princely’ (that is, it comes from a legitimate prince and is involved in furthering the princely aims of personal glory through military and religious conquest) is to be supported by the audience. He is also to be seen in contradistinction to the Spaniards, who are clearly marked as Catholic in the text (Philip is always designated ‘The Catholike King’) and are betrayers.

Peele tries very hard to make sure that Sebastian behaves heroically in the play. He changes the fact that Sebastian first approached Muly Mohamet twice in *The Book of Battailes*, before Muly Mohamet asks for Portuguese aid:

At the same moment that *Mahamet* did set foorth with his armie against *Abdelmelec*, there came vnto him a noble man Ambassadour from *Sebastian* the king of *Portugall*, who promised him in his masters maiesties name aide against the *Turkes* and his Unkle. But *Mahamet* ... contemned the benefit of the king of *Portugall* But it happened that also at this second munster the king of *Portugal* sent againe an Ambassador vnto him, with Letters, & againe offred him aide against *Abdelmelec* his vnkle. But he made the verie same answere to the second Ambassador that he did to the first At length he was driuen by necessitie (the sharpest weapon) to that which hee hadde before refused, and tooke scorne off: that is, to desire the aide of the kinge of *Portugall* (sig. 68r-69r; 70v-71r).

Muly Mohamet’s trickery of the noble Portuguese king, emphasised in the play, is absent from this source. Sebastian’s crusading zeal is conveyed in the play in his many references to his plan to conquer Africa for Christianity, but his active role in the events in Morocco is played down in *The Battle of Alcazar*. He only helps because he is asked to, and the conquering of Africa for Christianity is a reason to justify the involvement.

The historical battle of Alcazar has been understood as the last of the Crusades. Bradley points out it had the Pope’s official blessing, that a Bull for the Holy War was in Lisbon as early as 1573 (Bradley 130-33; Housley). Accordingly, Bradley sees Sebastian as the hero of the play, as ‘the last chivalric champion of medieval Europe’. The religious differences and the political folly of the Portuguese king were overcome by the ‘simpler emotional response accorded by everyone, including our playwright, to the ideals it evoked of honourable knight-errantry and the embattled unity of Christendom’, another reference to Peele’s partisan tone in this play (Bradley 134). However, it is precisely that a

recognisable amount of energy is spent in the presentation of Sebastian's religious zeal and by other characters in the play, in an attempt to designate him the hero, that makes Sebastian's heroism seem forced.

Sebastian presents himself as a crusading hero. He sees his opportunity for intervention in Africa as 'this holy christian warre' (II iv 659), 'to inlarge the bounds of christendome' (III iv 995). However, the governer of Tangar puts his finger on the problem when he says

... *if* the right rest in this lustie Moore ...
A noble resolution than it is,
In braue Sebastian our christian king
To aide this Moore
Thereby to propagate religious truth,
And plant his springing praise in Affrica.
(III iii 941-7; my emphasis)

The holiness of Sebastian's mission hinges on Muly Mohamet's right to be contending for the throne. Since the whole first act has made it clear that Muly Mohamet is the villain, Sebastian's zeal is tainted by association with the 'wrong' motives.

Furthermore, in order to further this crusading aim, Sebastian sends to Philip for aid. Especially so soon after the Armada, and in a decade fraught with Anglo-Spanish tension, Sebastian's invocation of the Catholike King must have also affected the way in which his Christian forays into Africa were understood at the time, despite unified Christian responses to the Islamic 'threat'.

Nevertheless a valiant attempt is made to present Sebastian's obvious historical faults in a positive light. The Presenter says, at the beginning of Act II, that Muly Mohamet

... furiously imployes,
Sebastians aide braue king of Portugall,
He forward in all armes and chiualrie

Hearkens to his Embassadors, and grants
What they in letters and by words entreate. (II 355-60)

Sebastian's bad judgment is presented in a way that is complimentary to him—he is eager for military conquest, 'forward in all armes', and he is chivalrous, two important kingly qualities. That he has fallen for the ruse of rightful kingship is presented obliquely as his ability to hear (as opposed to be fooled by) Muly Mohamet's ambassadors. He 'hearkens' to the lies that they 'entreat'. *The Book of Battailles* goes even further than *The Battle of Alcazar* in designating Sebastian good-natured in his carelessness. 'The king of *Portugal* as hee was a Prince of noble passing good nature, credited all that *Mahamet* spake, and assented to his petition without conditions, couenants, and sureties.' (sig. 73v) Sebastian could equally have been presented as stupid, but in relation to Muly Mohamet's deceptive evil he is merely amicable and trusting. Peele's play does not allow Sebastian to be quite so gullible as to assent without any guarantees.

The dangerous logic of Sebastian's plan for Christianity in Africa is summed up by Stukeley at his first meeting with Muly Mohamet. Stukeley, a Catholic-backed English rebel, exhorts the Catholic 'hoast, / To fight against the deuill for Lord Mahamet' (III iv 1042-3). One set of religiously-marked others (Catholics) is being called upon to fight with another (Moors) against the devil, when both groups themselves could easily be troped as devilish to a Protestant audience. Sebastian responds to Stukeley with 'cals for warres, /... to plant the true succeeding prince'. Muly Mohamet is patently not the 'true succeeding prince'. Sebastian is completely incorrect when he utters his parting cry for 'This rightfull warre, that Christians God will blesse' (III iv 1048-56).

One Act later, Abdelmelec's messenger calls Sebastian 'the braue and valiant king of Portugall' (IV i 1100) after recounting how he is heading an unsuitable army, low on supplies and badly managed. There is great performance potential for high irony in this speech. The tone, finally inevitable in this scene towards the end of the play, has grown throughout the play's attempt to construct Sebastian as the hero. Sebastian's poor judgment is inescapably obvious when, in the following scene, he dismisses Abdelmelec's well-meaning warning of Spanish treachery with, 'As if our enemy would wish vs anie good' (IV ii 1165).

Abdelmelec is favourably represented in contemporary accounts of the battle as well as in the play. The two main reasons for his nobility in contemporary sources are his respect for and good treatment of Christians and the fact that he is a legitimate and therefore good ruler. This does not mean that because Abdelmelec was a 'good' Moor, that there was necessarily much room in contemporary belief structures, or in the play, for a general sense that Moors could be 'good':

[T]raditional allegiances were far too strong to represent him as other than an honourable exception to the rule of heathenish superstition and ignorance which it was the unique task of Christianity to confront and overcome. (Bradley 133)

Housley agrees that the wider concern with the non-Christian threat meant that their defeat, even by a Catholic power, was more welcome than a Catholic defeat (454). Christianity was still capable of uniting in the face of the broadly Turkish, but also Moorish, threat (the Moors were after all potential religious allies with the Turks, and historically and dramatically, Abdelmelec certainly had Turkish military aid). However, the allocation of blame was not straightforward. The judgement of English officials on news of the Portuguese defeat was not slow to condemn Sebastian. Poulet wrote to the Queen a month after the battle:

the king of Portugal was overthrown in battle in Africa, the greater part of his nobility slain and himself dead or prisoner. This is the reward of covetousness and ambition, and God grant the princes of this country to profit by this notable example (*CSP* no. 232, September 7 1578).

Fremyn wrote to Davidson: ‘As to the defeat of the King of Portugal, it is what often happens to ambitious people’ (*CSP* no. 279, September 27 1578). Ambition is understood in both these accounts as leading to a fall, and Poulet takes the opportunity to moralise to the Queen about the follies of ‘covetousness and ambition’.

The Presenter, in the fourth act, defends Sebastian’s choices: ‘Let fame of him no wrongfull censure sound, / Honour was object of his thoughts, ambition was his ground’ (IV 1072-4). The problem could be with the ground on which he began. While throughout the play there has been a differentiation between Muly Mohamet’s traitorous and tyrannous ambition for political power, and Sebastian’s princely ambition for personal glory, ambition is still a dangerous force. The Presenter declares:

Lo thus into a lake of bloud and gore,
The braue couragious king of Portugall
Hath drenched himself
... sweet Sebastian.
Who surfetting in prime time of his youth,
Vpon ambitious poison dies thereon.
(III 798-807)

Too much ambition is poisonous, even to ‘The brave couragious king of

Portugall’.

The last contender for the title of hero is Thomas Stukeley, an historical figure who excited much contemporary comment.ⁱⁱⁱ Stukeley is treated as honourable and noble by the Portuguese, but he too has an agenda. Stukeley plans to go to the court at Lisbon in order to further his ambition:

There shall no action passe my hand or sword,
That cannot make a step to gaine a crowne,
No word shall passe the office of my tong,
That sounds not of affection to a crowne,
No thought haue being in my lordly brest,
That workes not euerie waie to win a crowne,
Deeds, wordes and thought shall all be as kings,
My chiefest companie shall be with kings,
And my deserts shall counterpoise a kings,
Why should not I then looke to be a kinge? ...
King of a mole-hill had I rather be,
Than the richest subiect of a monarchie,
Huffe it braue minde, and neuer cease t’aspire,
Before thou raigne sole king of thy desire. (II ii 494-509)

Stukeley conceives of kingliness as a quality independent of birthright. ‘Deeds, wordes and thought’, ‘companie’ and ‘deserts’, if they are kingly, he asks, ‘Why should I not then looke to be a kinge?’ Stukeley finds an alternative method to define the right to be a king. Stukeley’s expression of desire for kingly power complicates the question of how to read Stukeley as a character. His commitment to ‘neuer ceas[ing] t’aspire, / Before thou raigne sole king of thy desire’ must have pointed to his alliances with Catholic European powers and his allegedly planned conquest of Ireland. The threat of a Papal- and/or Spanish- backed Catholic invasion of Ireland, enterprises attempted in the past, was more direct and immediate than the goings-on between Barbary and Portugal (Canny). Stukeley exits on these lines, and ‘the Moore’ enters, calling down destruction on all things because of his defeat. Like the living embodiment of what Stukeley’s ambition has summoned up, he rages and curses because ‘What patience is for him that lacks his crown?’ (II iii 537).

The facts of Stukeley’s life as he presents them in his dying speech are historically untrue, but his real presence as a figure in contemporary culture is illustrated by the amount that was written about him in his own time and directly afterwards. Certain sayings, like his reference to wishing to be ‘King of a mole-hill’, so long as he was king of something, became attributed to him.^{iv} Yoklavich gives the details of Stukeley’s life story as well as the contemporary growth of the

Stukeley legend and literature (247-51, 252-56). The most important point for my purposes to come out of this discussion is how Stukely was seen as heroic by many of his contemporaries, in opposition to his presentation in the *Calendar of State Papers* as a 'counterfeit duke' and 'so lewd a varlet'. Gabriel Harvey had written in the margins of his copy of George North's *Description of Swedland, Gotland, and Finland*, which has, according to Yoklavich, the earliest and most authoritative description of Stukeley in its dedication to him. Harvey wrote, 'Captain Stukeley, a fine Courtier, & braue Soldiour. A great man with ye King of France, ye King of Spaine, ye Emperour, & ye Pope: who made him ye General of his warres' (Yoklavich 253). The tone is not religiously inflected: Stukeley's ability to be a good courtier in Elizabeth's court is not seen to conflict with his being a 'great man' to the Catholic courts of Europe. A reading of the *Calendar of State Papers* makes Stukeley out to be a whole-hearted villain, but the popular conception of him was much more varied:

Serious writers with a claim to historical authority paint a prodigal, rebellious Stukley; playwrights, ballad makers, and other popular writes are much more sympathetic toward the English gallant (Yoklavitch 269-70).

Stukeley also functions as a character who facilitates the presentation of English national pride. He is presented by other characters as noble, but is officially a traitor, and speaks about conquering Ireland in terms that would have raised the hackles of many a proud Englishman. He lands in Portugal with his group of 'valiant Catholikes' (II ii 425), sent

To Ireland by pope Gregories command ...
To land our forces there at vnawares,
Conquering the land for his holynesse,
And so restore it to the Romane faith. (II ii 437-41)

Diego Lopis, Govenor of Lisborne, warns them against this in terms that rely on the notion of rightful rulership. An expedition against the rightful ruler of Ireland is dishonourable:

Vnder correction, are ye not all Englishmen,
And longs not Ireland to that kingdome Lords?
Then may I speake my conscience in the cause,
Sance scandall to the holy sea of Rome,
Vnhonorable is this expedition. (II.ii 445-8)

The governor recognises the issue of right; if a land belongs to a ruler, there is no right in an attempt to conquer it. Furthermore, the governor points out that the 'expedition' is 'unhonourable' specifically because it is 'all Englishmen' who are trying to conquer a place that belongs to England's 'Lords'. This makes the expedition not a military conquest, as Sebastian's is to Africa, but treachery. Stukeley makes it clear in his reply that his birth does not constrain him to English loyalty; he 'make[s] it not so great desert / To be begot or borne in any place' (II ii 459-60).

Stukeley is rebuked by Sebastian, who, problematic as the Portuguese king might have been for English audiences, speaks a panegyric to England:

I tell thee Stukley [your ships and men] are farre too weake,
To violate the Queene of Irelands right,
For Irelands Queene commandeth Englands force
Sacred, imperiall, and holy is her seate
Shining with wisdom, loue and mightines
Both nature, time and fortune, all agree,
To blesse and serue her roiall maiestie,
The wallowing Ocean hems her round about
Whose raging flouds do swallow vp her foes
And euen in Spaine where all the traitors dance

Securely gard the west part of her Isle,
 The South the narrow Britaine sea begirts,
 Where Veptune sits in triumph, to direct
 Their course to hell that aime at her disgrace,
 The Germaine seas amongst the East do run
 Aduise thee then proud Stukley ere thou passe,
 To wrong the wonder of the highest God,
 Sith danger, death and hell doth follow thee,
 Thee and them all that seeke to danger her. (II iv 726-60)

Sebastian warns Stukeley against invading Ireland in terms that set out the correlation between Queen Elizabeth and England itself that his speech goes on to explore. Her royal 'right' to Ireland stands to be 'violated' by Stukeley and his men. However, the female bodies of the land and of the queen are too powerful because they both 'commandeth Englands force'. Sebastian conflates the sanctity and imperial nature of her 'seat' with personal qualities, 'wisdom, love and mightines'. The land and the queen become one when he begins to describe the island with, 'The ... Ocean hems *her* round about'. Sebastian goes on to describe Britain's inviolate shores. He traces the land along the 'west part ... South ... the East'. The mapping out here is not to conquer or understand and reveal the land but to illustrate its inviolability. This is very important in the light of the text's slippage where Elizabeth becomes the land herself. In the course of this description of the land's borders, Spain is specifically mentioned. '[I]n Spaine where all the traitors dance' connects Spain to treachery, which the events of the play illustrate as a valid connection, and also makes reference to the recent Spanish naval defeat.

Stukeley's dying monologue is an (historically inaccurate) account of his life. During this speech he addresses the audience directly—'Harke freindes /... Lordings', the only character besides the Presenter who does so. He is the lone Englishman to be represented on the stage in this play, and this direct address could be an acknowledgement of some kind that he is talking to his countrymen. Stukeley is a complex character in terms of the allegiances of the play. Are the audience to sympathise with him as an heroic Englishman despite his mission to reclaim Ireland for the Pope, and his desire to wrest rule away from Elizabeth? He did become a folk-lore hero, despite his unpopular official reputation. Stukeley ends his dying speech with a plea: 'And if thy Countries kindnes be so much, / Then let thy Countrie kindly ring thy knell.' (V i 1499-1500). The request for acknowledgement and forgiveness is couched in a pun on kindness.

At the end of *The Battle of Alcazar*, when Muly Mohamet's body is found he is called, 'the ambitious enemy, /... / The traitor' (V i 1559-62). He was not killed heroically in battle but 'Seeking to saue his life by shamefull flight' he was

drowned when his 'headstrong steed throwes him from out his seate' (V i 1569-72). And he was 'by the heeles ... dragd from out the poole, / And hether ... brought thus filde with mud' (V i 1575-76). So the raging tyrant is reduced to a filthy, dishonoured corpse. But the rightful king Muly Hamet has an even grislier fate in store for his body:

... sith our rage and rigor of reuenge,
By violence of his end preuented is,
That all the world may learne by him to auoide,
To hall on princes to iniurious warre,
His skin we will be parted from his flesh,
And being stifned out and stuft with strawe,
So to deterre and feare the lookers on,
From anie such foule fact or bad attempt. (V.i 1578-85)

The evil Muly Mohamet becomes a scarecrow to frighten the birds of ambition, 'That all the world may learne by him to auoide, / To hall on princes'.

The play ends sententiously, in the graphic image of what happens to those men treacherous and ambitious enough to challenge the rightful ruler to a throne. Contemporary responses to the historical events on which the play was based show that many of the issues dealt with in this play were concerns for those working for the ruling powers. The threat that foreign invasion represented was very real, and is expressed in *The Battle of Alcazar* through the ambition of men marked as dangerous outsiders by their religious or racial difference.

The question who qualifies as a hero, when the choices involve an English rebel, Catholics, and Islamic Moors, cannot be easily answered. In a play concerned with unlawful ambition, Negro treachery and Catholic expansionism, written for an officially Protestant English audience in the last decade of the sixteenth century, many interlinking national fears and prejudices are drawn out. Ultimately this paranoid sense of threatening 'otherness' becomes the theme of *The Battle of Alcazar*, which accounts for the much-commented-upon extreme (defensive?) tone of English national pride.

NOTES

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ⁱAs well as source material which is mentioned later, other examples of contemporary literature about the battle include: George Whetstone, *The English Myrror* (1586): the thirteenth chapter describes the battle; Harrison, *The Tragical Death of Mulay Hamet*; Ed White, *A Brief Rehearsal of the Bloody Battle in Barbary* (1579); Franchi Conestaggio, *The Historie of the Uniting of the Kingdom of Portugall to the Crowne of Castil* (1586): according to E.M. Bovill, the most important contemporary account of the battle, highly critical of the Portuguese. Literature too late to be possible sources for the play, whose existence indicates the popularity of the subject includes: Ro C, *A True Discourse of Mulay Hamet's death* (1609); *A True Historicall discourse of Muly Hamet's rising to the three kingdoms of Moruecos, Fes and Sus* (1609).

ⁱⁱSee Bradley. The extended title of *A dolorous discourse* includes the phrases: *Wherein were slain, two kings (but as most men say) three* A contemporary ballad makes reference to 'three kings in person', emphasising that 'Three kings within this battle died' (Simpson 144-48).

ⁱⁱⁱExamples of contemporary references to Stukeley include: Thomas Westcote, *A View of Devonshire in MDCXXX*; a chapbook, *The Famous History of Stout Stukely; or, His valient life and death* (1638); a pamphlet, *Newe Newes contayning A shorte rehersall of the late enterprise of certaine fugytiue Rebelles: fyrst pretended by Captaine Stukeley* (1579), which contains the earliest printed account of Stukeley's decision to join forces with Sebastian; William Cecil, *The Execution of Justice in England* (1583),

rpt. *Harleian Miscellany* 2 (1809): 137-55; Holinshed's *Chronicles* 3 (1586); Thomas Deloney *The Gentle Craft* (1597-1600, publ. 1648), ch. 5, 'The pleaseant story of Peachey', *Works of Thomas Deloney*, ed. Mann (Oxford, 1912), 170-75; Heywood's *If You Know Not Me Pt II* (1601) contains a discussion about Stukeley; *A Thankfull Remembrance of Gods Mercy*, collected by George Carleton (1624; rpt. 1625, 1627) includes a picture of Stukeley; Collman, *Ballads and Broadsides* (Oxford, 1912), 236-9, contains a contemporary ballad about Stukeley, as does Simpson. Hakluyt refers to Stukeley fighting most gallantly till the last' (Bovill 142). There is also the anonymous play *The Life and Death of Sir Thomas Stukeley. The Battle of Alcazar's* depiction of Stukeley is one of the earliest examples (Yoklavich 271).

iv

Westcote in *A View of Devonshire in MDCXXX* describes Stukeley as wanting to be 'king of a mole-hill', and his pride is mentioned (Yoklavich 272). Simpson refers to Westcote's description as well.