



Vol. 5, No. 2, Winter 2008, 333-337

Review/Reseña

Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra, *Puritan Conquistadors: Iberianizing the Atlantic, 1550-1700*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006

American Exceptionalism and the Satanic Epic in the New World

Javier Villa-Flores

University of Illinois at Chicago

In *Puritan Conquistadors*, Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra challenges a long historiographic tradition of Anglo-Puritan exceptionalism by showing the strong similarities between Puritan and Iberian (mostly Spanish) discourses of colonization. While recent comparative studies of colonialism such as Patricia Seed's *Ceremonies of Possession* (1995) have argued that European colonizers lacked a common political and legal heritage, Cañizares-Esguerra posits the existence of fundamental continuities between the Iberian and Puritan models of colonization. He bases his conclusions not so much on a revisionist discussion of ideas of sovereignty, dominion, and possession in political terms, but on the reconstruction of such elements in a shared discourse of religious violence. The author

contends that Puritans followed their Iberian counterparts in describing colonization as an ongoing battle against Satan's rule over the New World. This "satanic epic," he claims, informed both groups' justifications of conquest in eschatological, providentialist, and spatial/natural terms. By revealing the Iberian roots of much of the so-called "Puritan mentality," the author aspires to unsettle the current Atlantic paradigm in which colonial Spanish America's intellectual history appears as marginal, derivative, and unoriginal. As he shows in his ambitious and wide-ranging concluding chapter, the stakes of this scholarly debate are high.

The reasons for the book's enigmatic title are made evident in chapter 2, where the author shows that English Protestants borrowed heavily from Spanish epics in the New World to depict their own colonizing efforts as a true *reconquista* against the devil in American lands. Europeans had long battled Satan's temptations to the individual soul, but in the New World the devil was also seen as a powerful external force that attacked the polity through the actions of Amerindians, heretics, witches, and storms. As a literary tradition, the Satanic epic was first advanced in Spanish and Portuguese chronicles, and later embraced by Elizabethans in spite of their criticisms of the Spanish conquest. To be sure, English Protestants followed Las Casas and Creole patriots in presenting the Spanish conquest as demonic, and the conquistadors as Satan's minions. After the 1622 Virginia massacre and the 1637 Pequot War, however, the Amerindians replaced Spaniards as Satan's main ally in Puritan imagination. Scholars such as Richard Godbeer (*The Devil's Dominion*) have long argued that English colonizers developed a distinct "Puritan siege mentality" as a result of these events. Yet Cañizares-Esguerra argues that such mindset was informed by Iberian demonological tropes, for Spanish colonizers evidenced a similar mentality more than a century before.

The author's strategy of examining Puritan demonology using Iberian sources is reversed in Chapter 3, where he studies Puritan tropes to understand Iberian interpretations of colonization and thus deconstruct the "grammar" of their shared demonological discourse. Cannibalism and the geographical mobility of demons are analyzed as part of this discourse. Most important, however, is their conviction that Satan had enjoyed

sovereignty over the New World and that he had enslaved Indians collectively, not individually as in Europe. According to the author, both groups interpreted colonialism as an act of liberation, an exorcism, as prefigured in the Old Testament and carried out with the help of crosses and bibles. Indeed, following in the steps of David Brading's *American Phoenix* (2001), Cañizares-Esguerra shows that Iberians were as interested in interpreting colonization as the fulfillment of events prefigured in the Bible as their English counterparts. In fact, he contends, Juan de Torquemada's *Monarchia Indiana* (1615) should be considered the first typological study in the New World. Iberians were also the first to advance the theory that Satan liked to imitate God in the New World. Decades later, Puritan mainstream theologians such as Joseph Mede would subscribe to such convictions under the influence of Catholic writers José de Acosta and Gregorio García.

Chapters 4 and 5 further explore the similarities between Puritan and Iberian discourses of colonization by dissecting their demonization and sacralization of nature in America. These chapters are the most interesting and innovating of the book, and Cañizares-Esguerra excels at demonstrating that Europeans were convinced that the American landscape was a false paradise controlled by the Devil. According to the author, the colonizers were convinced that Satan could also induce storms, interact with plants (which explained tobacco's demonic addictiveness), and infest the land with serpentine demons. Clearly, such "paradise" needed to be conquered and destroyed if it was to become a thriving spiritual plantation. Colonizers conceived religious conversion as gardening and martyrs were deemed beautiful flowers in God's plantation in the New World. Both Iberians and Puritans subscribed to a discourse of horticultural providentialism, but there were some important differences in their use of gardening tropes. Catholics claimed that God chose animals and plants as miraculous allies of Christ (as in case of the passion flower). Puritans denounced such interpretations as demonic, but they also found the divine in nature by relying on allegorical readings of landscape.

In an ambitious concluding chapter, Cañizares-Esguerra unravels the historiographical and political implications of placing the Spanish

Atlantic at the center of the Puritan colonizing experience in the New World. Like John H. Elliott and Felipe Fernández-Armesto, Cañizares-Esguerra believes that a truly pan-American view of the Atlantic can only emerge from a comparative approach to the study of empires. The new Atlantic historiography has certainly shown hemispheric ambitions, but the intellectual history of colonial Latin America has remained marginal to the Anglo-American core and the great narratives of “Western civilization.” The history of ideas of postcolonial Latin America has also failed to draw the attention of U.S. historians and Atlanticists, who usually see the region as perennially pervaded by crises and petty revolutions. Unfortunately, Latin Americanists themselves have fostered such distorted vision through narratives “saddled with plots seething with tragedy, failure, and dystopia” (232). He concludes by offering his own book as an attempt to find a middle course between the “patriotic excesses” of the historiography of the North, and the “tragic visions” of that of the South.

Although there is a strange irony in reclaiming a place for Latin America in the grand narratives of modernity through a comparative study of diabolism and colonization, the author’s criticisms of Atlantic history are well taken. One could certainly imagine other pan-American narratives stemming from similar comparative studies of colonialism in the Americas. More research needs to be done, however, to prove the circulation of ideas in both directions. It is indeed possible that Milton’s *Paradise Lost* (1667), and Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* (1611) would make better sense if interpreted within the Iberian satanic epic, but it remains to be seen how English literature and Puritan thought influenced the Iberian imagination. It is only natural that a study this ambitious would leave many details aside, but I was surprised by the author’s decision not to engage Fernando Cervantes’ *The Devil in the New World* (1994) in his analysis. Like Cañizares-Esguerra, Cervantes contends that there was a rise of diabolism in the seventeenth century, but he is more skeptical about the uses of the devil to justify European invasion and colonialism. Since Cañizares-Esguerra concludes his book in the 1700s, he is not forced to explain the growing “decline” of diabolism in the eighteenth century as Cervantes does. According to Cervantes, Christian thinkers played down diabolism because

that was the only way to retain a credible image of the devil. It was more a response to an “inner crisis” in theological discourse, than a result of the influence of secularism and the nascent mechanical philosophy. It would be interesting indeed to know if Cervantes’ conclusions apply equally to Puritans and Iberians. A comparative study of the long eighteenth century and the demise of diabolism in American lands would certainly bring us a step closer to a truly hemispheric Atlantic history.