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'The English Fury' at Mechelen, 1580

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ABSTRACT
The late sixteenth-century religious wars prompted a Protestant movement within the Elizabethan regime that sought state-sanctioned military intervention in aid of the Dutch rebels. Printed military news also became a popular genre during this period. This article seeks to re-examine the journalistic legacy of soldier-poet Thomas Churchyard through a close reading of his 1580 account of the English pillaging of Mechelen by a group of English mercenaries. Churchyard's text was the product of his connections to interventionist statesmen and the widespread vilification of Spaniards. His pamphlet utilised popular motifs that vindicated religious violence and exploited inchoate notions of journalistic credibility.

On 9 April 1580, a group of English soldiers waded through deep water, in some places up to their necks, as they approached the walls of Mechelen in Flanders. They were part of a mixed mercenary force under the command of John Norris, hero of Rijmenam and veteran of Ireland, and were tasked with capturing the Spanish-held town. Norris was attached to a larger force of Walloon and Scottish soldiers – a multinational entente reflecting the heterogeneity of late sixteenth century warfare. The men came under fire from the stout Spanish defenders; the attackers' boats were sunk, men drowned, and causalities sustained from firearms as the assaulting force pressed forward with their scaling ladders. Norris' men entered the town through a lightly defended gate and eliminated the enemy occupiers with 'greate courage', 'valiance' and 'the pushe of the pike'.[1] What followed this victory was a terrible pillaging, as the men sacked, plundered, and terrorised the local population. This event would later become known as the 'English Fury', eponymous of the infamous Spanish furies at Antwerp (1576) and the various towns sacked throughout the Duke of Alva's 1572 campaign. The 'English Fury' was reported back in England as the victory of

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[1]Thomas Churchyard, *A Plaine or Most True Report of a Dangerous Service,* (London: John Perin, 1580).

Mechelen by the soldier-poet Thomas Churchyard in his news pamphlet *A Plaine or Moste True Report* (1580).

The embryonic state of news reporting during the Elizabethan period has been well documented. David Randall's work has increased our understanding of how early modern notions of credibility in news accounts changed and developed over time, particularly as authors responded to calls for further proof and veracity in their accounts from the reading public.[2] News - particularly military accounts - evolved from eloquent prose and references to the author's honour to a more 'plain' journalistic style that emphasised eyewitness testimony and multiple verifiable sources with the oversight of a 'commercial professional' editor.[3] These changes began to occur during the late 1580s and by the 1620s small collections of broadsheets that contained succinct accounts of recent events named 'corantos' were beginning to resemble the modern newspaper format. Thus, Churchyard was writing within an inchoate genre in which modern notions of journalistic integrity were not fully articulated nor adhered to. Despite this, Churchyard has often been described as both a 'proto-field reporter' and 'journalist'.[4] Thomas Woodcock's comprehensive biography of Churchyard describes him at one point as a man who 'works hard to distinguish himself from the traditional figure of the braggart soldier or *miles gloriosus*', a man dedicated to 'accurate reporting', and possessing 'journalistic instincts'.[5] Churchyard himself claimed that he 'hadde rather followe the truth of the matter, than the flatterie of the time'.[6] However, a close reading of *A Plaine or Moste True Report* forces historians to confront this appraisal of Churchyard's probity. His pamphlet is rich with religious allegory, patriotic rhetoric, and 'alarum' pertaining to the imminent threat of Spanish invasion. He plays upon certain established motifs within a corpus of contemporary printed works in order to appeal to a virulent strand of patriotic militarism that emerged within the English audience's popular imagination. Churchyard's work melds the perceived veracity of 'plain' and 'true' military news with a political agenda that advocated English military intervention in the Dutch revolt, a topic under much contemporary debate within the Privy Council and the burgeoning public sphere of print.

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[2]David Randall, *Credibility in Elizabethan and Early Stuart Military News* (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2008).

[3]Ibid., p.108 & p. 151.

[4]Sheila Nayar, *Renaissance Responses to Technological Change,* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), p. 122; M.A Shaaber, *Some Forerunners of the Newspaper in England, 1476-1622,* (London: Frank and Cass, 1929), pp. 227-228.

[5]Thomas Woodcock, *Thomas Churchyard: Pen, Sword, and Ego,* (London: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 205 & p. 204.

[6]Churchyard, *True Report*, p. 3.

The Protestant interventionist party within the Queen's council, headed by the Earl of Leicester and Francis Walsingham, were pressing Queen Elizabeth I to pursue open hostilities with Spain throughout the 1570s. These requests were denied due in part to Elizabeth I's financial prudence and religious moderation, resulting in small deniable expeditions to the Low Countries. Pressures from outside of the court came in the form of printed interventionist propaganda and calls for aid from continental Protestants. In 1579 the influential *Vindiciae Contra Tyrannos* was published in Basel, which reflected on the ethics of resisting tyrants and supporting religious allies.[7] Churchyard was connected through patronage to Christopher Hatton, who was promoted to the Privy Council in 1578 and aligned with Leicester's interventionist policy:

> Spain … we ought justly to fear … he will then, no doubt, with conjunct force assist this Devilish Pope to bring about their Romish purpose. Let us not forget that his sword is presently drawn, and then with what insolent fury this his victory may inflame him against us, in whose heart there is an ancient malice thoroughly rooted … therefore we ought not only timely to foresee, but in time most manfully resist the same.[8]

Churchyard had also worked under Leicester during the Queen's entertainment at Kenilworth in 1575 and had written a performance piece for the Queen's entertainment in Norfolk in 1578. Churchyard's play contained thinly veiled references arguing against the Queen's controversial proposed marriage to the Duke of Anjou, and it is thought that Leicester was influencing the entertainment behind the curtain.[9] Churchyard was also connected to the key interventionist statesmen Francis Walsingham, as in 1577 he served as his letter-bearer and diplomatic contact in the Low Countries.[10] In 1581, there is evidence to suggest that Churchyard operated as a double agent or carried out some 'piece of service' within the Scottish court, seemingly at the behest of Hatton.[11] It was in the middle of this flurry of state activity

[7]Anon, *Vindiciae Contra Tyrannos,* (Basel: Thomas Guérin, 1579); an English translation of Book IV appeared in 1588; H. P., *A short apologie for Christian souldiours,* (London: John Wolfe, 1588).

[8]Nicholas Harris Nicolas, *Memoirs of the life and times of Sir Christopher Hatton,* (London: S & J Bentley, Wilson & Fley, 1847), p. 159.

[9]Thomas Churchyard, 'The Shew of Chastity', in Thomas Churchyard, *Discourse of the Queen Maiesties entertainement in Suffolk and Norffolk,* (London: Henry Bynneman, 1578); Susan Doran, *Monarchy and Matrimony: The Courtships of Elizabeth I,* (London: Routledge,1996), p. 150.

[10]Woodcock, *Churchyard*, pp. 184-5.

[11]Nicolas, *Memoirs*, p. 173.

that Churchyard penned his *Plaine or Moste True Report* in 1580, which was dedicated to the ascendant military commander John Norris.

Churchyard tacitly embeds religious allegory into the narrative of the reported battle and presents a fawning account of his dedicatee. Once the English had breached the town and were engaged in combat with the defenders, Churchyard describes Norris' one-to-one battle with a friar named 'Brother Peter'.[12] This zealous friar 'had put on a resolute mynde, either to kill Maister Norrice, or els to bee slaine hym self'. Churchyard reports that the two fought 'brauelie', as the friar lunged at Norris with a halberd and struck his cuirass. Norris 'revenged' these blows and 'dispatched' the friar, whose death prompted the surrounding Spanish soldiers to cry '*misericorde*' (mercy).[13] Churchyard's inclusion and description of this episode personifies aggressive Spanish Catholicism within the nature and implicit religiosity of Brother Peter. The friar is senseless and unrelenting in his attack on Norris, aiming to kill the commander or die trying. The threat of Catholic Spain as a 'tyrannical', expansionist universal monarchy, so often touted in anti-Spanish print, is anthropomorphised in this friar.[14] Norris, in contrast, is composed and defends himself after taking the friar's blows upon his armour. Again, the subtext of Spanish aggression is met with a decisive defensive strike from England. The message is redolent of Hatton's comments to Walsingham: 'we ought not only timely to foresee, but in time most manfully resist the same'.[15] Churchyard presents this seemingly chivalric episode as the climax of the narrative. The nuanced backdrop of geo-political tension and Protestant-Catholic animosity is narrativized in a hand-to-hand battle in which Norris, and thus England, scores a resounding victory.

The tacit religious metaphor becomes more explicit as Churchyard begins to tap into familiar anti-Catholic motifs and Hispanophobia. The friar is referred to as a 'lusty limlifter', suggesting Spanish sexual depravity, a contemporary trope associated with the consistent vilification of Spanish practices in their colonies and on the battlefield; a 'black legend' that was perpetuated by English print and emphasised Spanish brutality and iniquity.[16] Churchyard further contrasts Spanish debauchery with English benevolence as he recalls a nunnery 'in the toune ready to be spoiled'.[17] Norris, on hearing that this nunnery also contained English women 'defended them from harme,

[12]Churchyard, *True Report*, pp. 10-11.
[13]Ibid., p. 11.
[14]Anon, *An ansvver and true discourse to a certain letter lately sent by the Duke of Alba,* (London: Henry Middleton, 1573).
[15]Nicolas, *Memoirs*, p. 159.
[16]Ibid., p. 10; William Maltby, *The Black Legend in England: The Development of Anti-Spanish Sentiment, 1558-1660,* (Durham, N.C: Duke University Press, 1971).
[17]Churchyard, *True Report,* p. 17.

and sette them free'.[18] This description normalises the notion of violence against Spaniards or Catholics as Norris' act of mercy was only spurred by the presence of English nuns. The brutal crimes against the local population by Englishmen are glossed over and Norris is instead the focus of Churchyard's approbation. Norris' clemency is compared to that of Alexander the Great, referencing Plutarch of Chaeronea's account of the mercy that Alexander showed to Darius' wife and daughters.[19] The use of classical anecdotes flatters Norris and appeals to a humanist audience that adulated classical heroes and used them as the basis of contemporary martial practice. Churchyard goes on to edify his readers and paradoxically compares Norris' perceived clemency to the barbarity of less virtuous commanders:

> Surely greater honor is gotten by vusing victorie wiselie, then by overthrowing a multitude with manhoode, without shewying mercie and gentilnesse. A conquerer by repressing crueltie by courtiesie, is had in admiration of his verie enemies, and a victor without virtue and pitifull consideration, is hated eming his freends, and despised generally emong all kinde of people.[20]

Churchyard's moralising prose was based upon the well-known atrocities committed by the Spanish Army of Flanders during their 1572-3 campaign, during which Mechelen, Zutphen, Haarlem, and Naarden were sacked. Alva's notorious 'Council of Blood' was also responsible for executing over 1,000 political and religious enemies during his attempt to quash the rebellion, although this figure was exaggerated in Protestant sources to more than 20,000.[21] George Gascoigne's *The Spoyle of Antwerpe* (1576) helped perpetuate the black legend and Elizabethan England's Hispanophobia.[22] The sack of Antwerp struck a chord in England's popular imagination and play's such as *A Larum for London* (1602) accentuated the incident's grotesque violence in what William Maltby describes as a 'deliberate attempt to arouse patriotic sentiment'.[23] Churchyard's rectitude was not extended to England's enemies in his prior text *Churchyard's Choise* (1579), as he explicitly described the torture and terror tactics employed against the Irish on campaign.[24] Nor did Churchyard condemn his own dedicatee when he was involved in the slaughter of hundreds of civilians, women, and children, at the Rathlin Island massacre in 1575.

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[18]Ibid., p. 17.
[19]Ibid., p. 18.
[20]Ibid., p. 18.
[21]Maltby, *Black Legend*, p. 48.
[22]George Gascoigne, *The Spoyle of Antwerpe,* (London: Richard Jones, 1576).
[23]Anon, *A Larum for London, or The Siedge of* Antwerpe, (London: William Ferbrand, 1602); Maltby, *Black Legend*, p. 53.
[24]Thomas Churchyard, *A generall rehearsall of warres, called Chucrhyardes Choise,* (London: Edward White, 1579).

The paradoxical nature of the black legend is that it was used to justify these kinds of atrocities against Catholics and Spaniards. Churchyard justifies the pillage of Mechelen in religious terms, stating that the English exclusively targeted religious buildings: they 'searched for cloisters and religious places' so that 'no masse should bee songe … for wante of gilted challices, and golden copes'.[25] In Churchyard's view, the religiously sanctioned violence of the English was a noble act in contrast to the Walloon and Scottish soldiers who were merely pillaging for the 'best booties'.[26] Churchyard used these themes to appeal to the latent Hispanophobia in Elizabethan society and presented the English as on the offensive, successful, and ultimately righteous in their destruction of Catholic objects. Churchyard creates a justifiable conflict in which 'glorious victorie' for the English could be won.

Norris is also depicted as an ideal commander as he leads his men from the front 'not as a Collonell, but as a common Soldiour … through thicke and thin, where moste daunger appeared'.[27] Norris' ability to fight in the midst of the action contributes to his depiction as a valiant commander and suggests an appealing camaraderie that is shared within his unit of brave Englishmen. He presents the English soldiers as superior in courage and combat to any other nation and commends their 'labour, charge, courage, readinesse, and warlike mindes'.[28] Churchyard's focus is squarely on English achievements and the foreign commanders of the non-English contingents, Fammai and Temple, are presented as incompetent. During the first stages of the assault, due to 'some negligence' and the failure of the Fammai and Temple's troops, the attack was almost called off. This 'forced Maister Norrice and the power with hym' to take the initiative and 'advance themselves towardes the enemie'.[29] Churchyard later bemoaned the fact that Fammai received the title 'Governor of Macklin', despite the fact that the English 'did most of the service, and deserves therefore the moste honor'.[30] This chauvinistic rhetoric eulogizes Churchyard's dedicatee and suggests that the incompetence of foreign allies necessitates the aid of England's courageous soldiers and adroit commanders to achieve victory.

Churchyard ends his text with an explicit reference to the theme of Spanish aggression, impending invasion, and the need for intervention in the Low Countries. He states that the fall of Mechelen should awaken those Englishmen not already cognisant of the looming Spanish threat to the peril they are in:

[25] Churchyard, *True Report*, pp. 15-16.
[26] Ibid., p. 15.
[27] Ibid., p. 14.
[28] Ibid., p. 2.
[29] Ibid., pp. 6-7.
[30] Ibid., p. 12.

> Macklin bothe wonne and loste, which commyng to light and to the open eye of the worlde, showes that all tounes, fortresses, and holdes (be thei never so strong) are subject to sodain overthrows and in the diuine disposition of the Almightie, who visiteth a nomber of our neighbours, with many kinds of calamities, to make vs beare in mynde his Omnipotente power, and our own dueties to God and our Prince.[31]

The ease with which towns could fall reminded London's residents of their own vulnerabilities, and Churchyard's allusion to English 'dueties to God and our Prince' frames the struggle against Spain as a religious obligation and civic duty. Churchyard was playing on a familiar Protestant literary trope that warned of the impending destruction of London due to the city's sins.[32] William Birch's *A Warnyng to England* (1565) compared London to the doomed biblical cities of Sodom, Gomorrah, Jerusalem, and Nineveh.[33] Birch warned that, if the 'wickedness', 'covetousness, glutony, and filthy lust' of London continued, the city would be 'cleansed'. John Barker's 1569 ballad was part of a broader genre concerning Jerusalem's 'destruction' and drew comparisons between London and Jerusalem during its Roman siege, referring to the inhabitants' 'whoredom, pride, and covetousness'.[34] Gascoigne's *The Spoyle of Antwerp* partially blamed the city's ordeal on the sins of Antwerp's citizens, suggesting that England should 'avoid those synnes, and proud enormities, which caused the wrath of god to be so furiously kindled'.[35] Churchyard too directly contributed to this genre of 'alarum' with his text *A Warning to the Wise* (1580), published just days after *A Plaine or Most True Report*.[36] Four years later, John Smith's play 'The Destruction of Jerusalem' (1584) was performed by the Coventry guilds, illustrating that this trope was prevalent throughout the Elizabethan era.[37] Churchyard utilised these well-established themes and incorporated the fear of religious damnation with the threat of Spanish invasion;

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[31] Ibid., p. 20.

[32] Tessa Watt, *Cheap Print and Popular Piety, 1550-1640,* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 96-98.

[33] William Birch, *A warning to England, let London begin: To repent their iniquitie, & flie from their sin,* (London: Alexander Lacie, 1565).

[34] John Barker, *Of the horyble and woful destruccion of Jerusalem,* (London: Thomas Colwell, 1569).

[35] Gascoigne, *Antwerpe,* pp. 43-45.

[36] Thomas Churchyard, *A Warning to the Wise,* (London: John Allde & Nicholas Lyng, 1580).

[37] John Smith, 'The Destruction of Jerusalem' (1584), in Beatrice Groves, *The Destruction of Jerusalem in Early Modern English Literature,* (Oxford: University of Oxford Press, 2017).

this implicitly called for moral reform at home and an aggressive military policy abroad. Churchyard ends his text with a message to those back in England, urging them to join or support the brave Englishmen who fought:

> The Englishmen … are more to bee commended then thousandes of those that stood a farre of, and gave but the lookyng on … you maie see by the sane some meene are happie, not onely to passe through many perilles, but likewise to liue long, and make theim selues and their soldiours ritche: and cause the fame of their countrie to be spred as farre as the winde can blow, or the sunne maie shine.[38]

The fledgling state of Elizabethan news reporting meant that truth and veracity were imprecise and often subjective terms. It can be contended that Churchyard was not committed to 'accurate reporting' and manipulated the events at Mechelen to increase both the honour of his countrymen and dedicatee, and further a religiously motivated interventionist agenda.[39] Churchyard's own experiences as a soldier and his association with a military milieu of influential statesmen forged a text that was heavily imbued with the author's own prejudices and deeply rooted in a multiplicity of popular cultural motifs. This included religious allegory, xenophobia, righteous violence, and a nascent form of militaristic patriotism. Churchyard's writings exist in a liminal space between varying styles of news reporting. His turgid and allegorical prose predates the plainer style of succeeding news reports and is evidently propagandistic, yet it arguably contributed to the formation of an enduring Elizabethan military identity based on religion, 'honour', and national rivalry. However, as Churchyard's text displays, this identity was a shallow veneer that concealed and attempted to justify a dark legacy of war crimes and inexpiable violence, a legacy that the 'English Fury' at Mechelen epitomises.

[38]Churchyard, *True Report*, p. 20.
[39]Woodcock, *Churchyard,* p. 205.