11. Discordant Visions: Spain and the Stages of London in 1823

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Abstract
This essay focuses on the presence of Spain on the London stage in 1823, the year of the French invasion that brought about the end of the liberal regime in Madrid. It specifically examines parliamentary debates (the theatre of politics), the Spanish Fete at Covent Garden, and ‘Spanish’ works performed in the patent theatres, especially the only two original Spanish-themed productions of that year – the operatic melodrama Cortez; or, The Conquest of Mexico and the farce Spanish Bonds; or, Wars in Wedlock. As these different spectacular manifestations reveal, British Romantic-era culture delineated Spain (and its former American colonies) by combining dissonant, ideologically charged materials which brought into focus conflicting political and cultural questions relevant to British, European and global contexts.

Keywords: Spain, Spanish America, theatre, politics, empire, finance

Reporting to the Prime Minister, Lord Liverpool, from Villa Fermosa in Portugal on 7 May 1811, in the midst of the anti-Napoleonic Iberian campaign, the then Viscount and future Duke of Wellington insisted that, while Portugal should constitute ‘the foundation of all […] operations in the Peninsula’, Spain should be ‘the theatre of them’.1 If the phrase ‘theatre of war’ was common enough in the language of warfare, Wellington’s use of it in relation to Spain has specific connotations, since early-nineteenth-century British culture insistently perceived and imagined the country, its history and its culture through a variety of forms of theatricality and spectacularity. During the

1 Gurwood, Dispatches, vol. 7, p. 511.
Peninsular War (1808-1814) Spain was a theatre in the military sense, as well as in a more generally cultural and imaginative one; it continued to be so in the later period of 1815-1823, characterized by Ferdinand VII’s restoration and repressive rule, the trienio liberal, and the onset of the década ominosa. Throughout this extended phase, Spain emerged in Britain as an object of scrutiny, debate and (cultural, diplomatic and military) intervention. As conveyed by Wellington’s interlinking of ‘theatre’ and ‘operations’, it was a space of observation (a theatre in the etymological sense of a ‘space for seeing’) and agency coalescing a wide range of images and tropes, old and new, that made up a multiformal and uneven construct.

Oscillating between fascination and attraction, anxiety and hostility, Spain in Romantic-era British culture was a contradictory cultural geography threaded through with lines of continuity, discontinuity and transhistoricity gathering momentum around specific moments or episodes. In addressing this nexus, the present essay examines representations and uses of Spain in different moments of 1823. Through this micro-historical lens, it traces a web of dissonant manifestations of Spain within a variety of spectacular modes and theatrical forms crucial to the development and consolidation of discourses about it in early-nineteenth-century Britain. This essay therefore also contends that, far from limiting its scope to the local and ephemeral, the micro-analytical focus instead highlights wider-ranging phenomena, with single dates significantly illuminating longer historical phases, and local events functioning as indices of global trends.

The stage was a major site for the production and dissemination of images of Spain as a conflicted cultural geography in the period between 1808 and the end of the constitutional monarchy decreed by the Holy Alliance at the 1822 Congress of Verona. As Susan Valladares has noted in relation to the Peninsular War years, the stage ‘capture[d] the range of contemporary responses’ to the conflict, a fact utterly consonant with a cultural context saturated by theatre and spectacle such as the Romantic age. In Gillian

2 On Spain as a locus of intervention, see Saglia ‘Iberian Translations’; on the thematic continuities between the Peninsular War and events of 1820-1823, see Saglia and Haywood, ’Introduction’; and for in-depth examinations of British political, literary and cultural engagements with Spain in the década ominosa, see Beatty and Laspra-Rodríguez, Romanticism, Reaction and Revolution.

3 In his exploration of nineteenth-century French historical fiction and the ‘formation of the spectacular historical imagination’, Maurice Samuels discusses the process whereby ‘the spectacle [...] fixate[s]’ on the past, ‘rendering it as a static image that is then offered for consumption as entertainment’ (The Spectacular Past, p. 13). While the cultural phenomena examined in this essay largely conform to this process, their theatrical nature does not produce static but rather highly mobile representations.

4 Valladares, Staging the Peninsular War, p. 3.
Russell's words, the age was generally ‘preoccupied to the point of obsession with the theatre as an institution and with the theatricality of social, political, and personal behaviour’, while political life in particular was fundamentally ‘shaped by theatrical models’. In light of this inclusive notion of theatre and spectacle, what follows addresses constructions of Spain within a spectacular continuum in which its multiple valences were reworked into a discursive mixture of philia and phobia, a conflicted body of knowledge involved in networks of power and authority, fascination, and speculation.

Spain on the Westminster stage

The Iberian country was a focal point in Britain's international politics from early April to late September 1823. In October 1822 the leaders of the Holy Alliance at the Congress of Verona had authorized France to invade Spain, where a civil war between liberals and absolutists had been raging in several regions, suppress the constitutional regime, and restore the crown's full powers. The Duke of Angoulême and his army of ‘One Thousand Sons of St Louis’ crossed the border on 17 April 1823. Catalonia and the Basque country were soon 'liberated' and San Sebastián taken. Madrid capitulated on 23 May. By then, government had already moved to Seville, and in June it sought shelter in Cadiz, which would then be besieged by the French as in 1810-1812. On 31 August the invaders captured the bay fort of Trocadero, an event which paved the way for the city's surrender on 23 September and the end of the war.

As the spectacle of liberal Spain's downfall concentrated the gaze of Westminster in mid-to-late 1823, the role of stage manager devolved upon George Canning, who had succeeded Robert Castlereagh as foreign secretary after the latter's suicide in 1822. The beginning of his mandate was variously involved with the Hispanic world. At the Congress of Verona he took measures to protect British commercial interests in Spanish America, while a couple of months later, in December 1822, he refused to grant recognition to the Spanish American colonies that were gradually gaining independence, while making sure that British commercial agents were present in those territories. If Canning's official intention was not to embarrass Spain, it

6 On Spain as spectacle in Peninsular War poetry, see Saglia, 'El gran teatro'.
7 Stites, Four Horsemen, p. 109.
was clear that Britain’s interest in these markets was as strong as ever. The 1823 invasion of Spain complicated this transatlantic picture even further. Angoulême’s campaign and the fall of Cadiz could bring about a French expedition to the New World aimed at subduing the rebellious colonies and putting Bourbon princes on new thrones there. Seeing any extension of French influence as a danger, Canning kept events in the Peninsula under constant scrutiny.8

Shortly after the French army crossed the border on 7 April, the question of Spain was brought up in Parliament. On 10 April the Spanish Royal Family arrived in Seville followed by government and the Cortes, which resumed session on 23 April. The next day King Ferdinand VII declared war on France. On 28 April 1823 Canning gave a lengthy speech in the House of Commons in response to a motion advanced by members of the opposition criticizing the government’s lack of intervention in the affairs of Spain to prevent or mitigate French action, as well as decrying the fact that governmental envoys ‘advised the Spanish government [...] to alter their Constitution, in the hope of averting invasion’.9 In his reply and vindication of government proceedings, the foreign secretary presented the details of the case, retraced diplomatic contacts and shifts in the political debate, and dramatized the plight of Spain by placing it on a geo-political and cultural stage which, as his speech unfolded, acquired both Continental and global dimensions.

Canning carefully treaded the fine line between the non-interventionism consonant with Britain’s post-Waterloo foreign policy and indirect intervention in the affairs of Spain. The latter position appears distinctly in such remarks as ‘We quitted Verona [...] with the satisfaction of having prevented any corporate act of force or menace, on the part of the alliance, against Spain’ (p. 368) and ‘I think it will be conceded to me, that we should have incurred a fearful responsibility, if we had not consented to make the effort, which we did make, to effect an adjustment between France and Spain, through our mediation’ (pp. 368-369). Highlighting Britain’s mediating role, the foreign secretary cast Spain as an arena with high geo-political stakes. In geo-cultural terms, instead, what emerges most significantly from his minutely detailed, defensive account is the progressive widening out of the sphere of relevance of the Spanish question. Whereas some diplomats and politicians believed that ‘the quarrel with Spain’ is a ‘French quarrel’ (p. 373),

8 For a detailed account, see Ward and Gooch, Cambridge History, vol. 2, pp. 64-68.
9 Canning, Select Speeches, p. 358. Subsequent references, by page number, are in brackets in the text.
the foreign secretary stressed how French ministers saw it as a much more
general problem, and René de Chateaubriand, the representative of France
at Verona, defined it a question ‘toute Française, et toute Europeenne’ (p. 374).
For Canning, the consequences of the affairs of Spain were Continental in
the widest sense, since their effects ‘would touch even Great Britain’ and
be felt ‘to the very extremities of Europe’ (p. 379). Expanding his scope
further, he observed that the situation in Spain bore on ‘the general state
of the world’ (p. 383). As Canning gradually increased the relevance of
the Iberian country as a geo-political and diplomatic theatre, he awarded
it global proportions which, from Britain’s perspective at this juncture,
primarily concerned Spanish America.

A year after the conclusion of the French campaign in Spain, in December
1824 Canning predicted that the South American countries of the Spanish
Empire would eventually be ‘free and English’. 10 On 12 December 1826 he
famously returned to this question in a speech on the ‘Affairs of Portugal’,
where he recalled his intervention of 28 April 1823 before delivering one
of his most memorable pronouncements. Reminding his audience of how
the invasion of Spain three years before had dealt a serious ‘blow to the
feelings of England’ (p. 466), he now vindicated the fact that, instead of
seeking immediate redress to this ‘affront’ and ‘disparagement’ (p. 466),
he had aimed to render Spain ‘harmless in rival hands’ and ‘valueless to
its possessors’ (p. 466), the French. He then linked the events of 1823 to the
new contexts of 1826 by declaring: ‘I sought materials of compensation in
another hemisphere […] I resolved that if France had Spain, it should not
be Spain “with the Indies”. I called the New World into existence to redress
the balance of the Old’ (p. 467). 11

In light of the developments of 1823, these well-known words throw into
relief a construction of Spain and Spanishness filtered through a panoramic
geo-political vision endowed with theatrical and spectacular features.
Illuminating an intersection of national concerns and international interests,
they stress the global impact of the affairs of Spain over a time span ranging
from 1808 to 1823 and then 1826, within a frame in which earlier ancien
régime conditions of a dynastic and diplomatic nature interweave with
the concerns dictated by mutating political and economic conditions.
In his perorations Canning delineated Spain as an object of scrutiny and
observation (in his 1823 speech, he enjoined his audience to ‘Look at the state

10 Cain and Hopkins, British Imperialism, p. 246.
11 On Canning and the process of recognition of the Spanish American republics, see Ward
and Gooch, Cambridge History, vol. 2, pp. 73-78.
of Spain', p. 379) and as a site of intervention. In the process he decisively, if implicitly, cast it as a pawn in the game conducted by Britain and the main Continental powers. Viewing the country in terms of amity and support, on one hand, and self-interest, on the other, Canning extolled its heroic resistance against Napoleon’s *grande armée*, while at the same time hinting at Britain’s aspirations over its former American colonies. Exploring and debating diplomatic, political, military, and economic questions, his speeches of 1823 and 1826 convey the status of Spain as a moving show or a mobile spectacle requiring a wise blend of action and inaction, intervention and non-intervention. By the same token, these speeches fully participate in contemporary modes of constructing Spain as they turn it into a global spectacle through repeated oratorical performances in the theatrical space of Westminster.

### Spain in the playhouses

Moving across London, from the stage of Westminster to the nearby theatres, reveals further performative and spectacular manifestations of Spain. The 1822-1823 seasons of the patent houses of Covent Garden, Drury Lane and the Haymarket presented a variety of works on Spanish themes or with Spanish features, which offered a wealth of contrasting images of the Iberian country. The same was true of occasional entertainments that were part and parcel of the continuum of production and consumption of the visible typical of early-nineteenth-century London.

A revealing instance of these entertainments was the ‘Spanish fete’ held at Covent Garden on 4 July to gather funds in support of the effort of the Spanish government against the French invasion. On 30 April, the Cortes in Seville had decreed the creation of a ‘Liberal Foreign Legion’ made up of units, in each army, composed of foreigners present in Spain and willing to fight for the legitimate cause. In the spring of the same year a Spanish Committee was created in London by a group of mainly Whig and radical politicians, including John Cam Hobhouse, Joseph Hume, John Bowring, Thomas Moore and Thomas Perronet Thompson. The committee started to collect funds for the Spanish patriots and the ‘Liberal Foreign Legion’ by organizing different initiatives, among which was the ‘Spanish fete’ at Covent Garden.

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Initially intended to be given at Almack’s, and then moved to Covent Garden given its political character, the fancy ball was presented by the Theatrical Observer as a means to channel sympathy and raise funds for Spain’s ’just and noble’ cause against France. In advertising the event, this periodical sought to increase the enthusiasm of prospective participants and donors by inviting them to imagine their reaction to ‘foreign interference with our own liberties’. It also anticipated that the fete would offer the ‘grandest scale of magnificence’ and be graced by the ‘nobility, beauty, and fashion of the metropolis’.

On the evening, the interior of Covent Garden presented an impressive coup d’oeil: it was profusely hung with banners; the pit was boarded over on a level with the stage, while the stage area was occupied by a tent supported by pillars; between the pillars was a picture ‘representing the King’s excursion to Scotland’ (in 1822); two bands were in attendance and space was set aside for quadrilles. The Edinburgh Annual Review confirmed that ‘everything was well and theatrically arranged’. And yet, the overall effect was not particularly Spanish. Advance publicity specified that ‘pains [were] taken’ by the organizers ‘to give this entertainment a political character’, and so it was expected to be a grand Spanish display in a theatre decorated with ‘emblems of “the Spanish cause”’, ‘soul-stirring mottos’, and ‘filled with a throng of “the friends of the Spaniards”’. In the end it was no such thing. The venue, which was hardly full, did not feature specific ‘mottos, inscriptions, emblems, or allegories’ about Spain, so that, as the commentator in the Edinburgh Annual Register lamented, attendees ‘forgot the Spanish cause altogether’. The picture of George IV’s trip to Scotland was conspicuously unrelated to ‘the country for which the profits of the Fete were intended’.

The masquerading, too, was not particularly Spanish in character. Few people wore disguises and, mixed among the usual Persians, Chinese, and sailors, were only a few ladies wearing Spanish costumes or adorned with Spanish-inspired accessories (such as a ‘chapeau or veil, suspended from the crown of the head, and gracefully flowing down the shoulders’).

15 Ibid.
16 ‘The Spanish Fete’, p. 2
17 ‘Spanish Fete – Covent Garden’, p. 2.
19 Ibid., p. 262.
20 Ibid., p. 262.
21 ‘Spanish Fete – Covent Garden’, p. 2.
22 Ibid.
Among the men, there were only ‘a few Spaniards in full costume’. To be sure, some real Spaniards attended the event, but they and their nation’s plight were lost in the general merry-making: ‘Admiral Jabat (the Spanish Ambassador) and the Duke of San Lorenzo […] appeared to feel that their cause was completely forgotten by the gay and animated groups by whom they were surrounded’. A half-hearted staging of Spain to gather support for its effort against the return of absolutism, ‘[a]s a measure of finance’ the fete was ultimately a ‘miserable failure’, though, as an entertainment, it gave ‘general satisfaction’.

However disappointing both ideologically and financially, the fete at Covent Garden is a relevant episode in the context of 1823 because of its interweaving of spectacle, fashion, and politics, as well as for promoting a supportive intervention in the affairs of Spain through fund-raising. From a cultural perspective, it highlights the importance of spectacle and theatre to the formation of conceptions of Spain in early-nineteenth-century Britain. Support for the country is mobilized through a kind of spectacular entertainment in which Spain traditionally featured as an inspiration for masquerade costumes, which were themselves based on conventional stage costumes for Spanish dons, donnas and duennas – mostly drawing on sixteenth- and seventeenth-century attire, as with the (male) cloak, ruff, and slashed doublet. Yet the fete did not merely feature masquerade costumes: the fact that some women wore items of fashion associated with Spain may be linked to the politically motivated vogue for Spanish dress styles and accessories inspired by the Spaniards’ exploits during the early years of the Peninsular War. Therefore, as staged at the Covent Garden fete, the country is visually connected to age-old clichéd costumery as well as to contemporary fashion and consumer practices: in both cases, support for the cause of Spain is ostensibly carried out by ‘wearing’ it. This support, however, is also hollowed out by the playfulness implicit in the costumes and fashionable items themselves, and by the traces of hostility attached to the male ruff-and-doublet attire harking back to long-lived stereotypes of Spanish haughtiness and braggadocio, as well as diplomatic deviousness and conquistador-style ruthlessness.

24 Ibid., p. 263.
25 Ibid., p. 263.
27 See the fashion plates and descriptions in the issues of Rudolf Ackermann’s Repository of Arts, Literature, Commerce, Manufactures, Fashions, and Politics published during the Peninsular War.
In other words, in the performative space of Covent Garden on 4 July 1823, wearing Spain and donating to its cause became ways of showing solidarity for, as well as taking part and intervening in, its current plight. At the same time, these actions reduced the country to an ephemeral show, an unstable collage pieced together through an ambivalent cultural operation in which unfriendly stereotypes clashed with good intentions, and spectacularity and consumption invalidated political awareness and effective engagement.

If we now turn to consider what Covent Garden, Drury Lane and the Haymarket staged between late 1822 and late 1823, there emerges a steady succession of Spanish-themed plays. By way of example, the listings in John Genest’s 1832 Some Account of the English Stage testify to the presence of a significant number of works from the repertoire – from Thomas Otway’s Venice Preserv’d (1682) and Richard Brinsley Sheridan’s Pizarro (1799) to Susannah Centlivre’s Wonder! A Woman Keeps a Secret (1714) and George Colman’s The Mountaineers (1795). This preponderance of tried and tested favourites confirms the long-term hold of repertoire over the Spanish imagination of British audiences, since all of the Spanish-themed plays performed in 1822-1823 tended to reinforce conventional images of the country and its people. There were only two new offerings with a Spanish theme in the period in question: the farce Spanish Bonds; or, Wars in Wedlock and James Robinson Planché and Henry Bishop’s operatic melodrama Cortez; or, The Conquest of Mexico. Neither contributed to challenging or correcting long-established images of Spain.

First performed on 2 August, Spanish Bonds ran for only one night: the audience damned it by hissing so loudly that its final part was completely inaudible. While reporting on its failure, the play’s earliest commentators also remarked on the familiarity of this kind of Spanish fare: ‘we expected a good deal of humor – some allusions to passing events – plenty of good situations, with a reasonable proportions of equivoque’. Utterly predictable, the farce proved to be an unimaginative rehash of the well-worn ingredients of ‘Spanish’ comedies of sentiment and intrigue. As the London Magazine remarked: ‘Love and jealousy, the inseparables in Spanish plots, made up the two acts.’

The production boasted some of the best comic performers of the period – among them John Liston in the role of an old Spanish father, ‘frilled like a

29 Genest, Some Account, vol. 9. For details, see the appendix to this essay.
‘bantam’, and John Harley as a servant.\footnote{Ibid., p. 322.} The plot revolved around a Spanish couple whose daughter, Isabella, is in love with the young and handsome Don Felix, yet also the object of the unwelcome attentions of an unpleasant older suitor. Intrigue is provided by a miniature of Isabella, lost by Felix and found by the older man. After some contrivances devised by the latter, who is favoured by Isabella’s mother in her running battle against her husband, and thanks to the decisive intervention of the servant played by Harley, the old man’s artifices are unmasked and the young lovers united. In reality, the plot was so complicated, indeed so excessively convoluted, as ‘to defy unravelling’.\footnote{Ibid., p. 322.}

Commentators did not miss the opportunity of linking this expendable entertainment to contemporary political and economic events. The \textit{London Magazine} compared the failure of the play to the dwindling fortunes of Spain’s liberal regime: ‘The plot was Spanish – and the Spanish are not in luck just at this time.’\footnote{‘Haymarket Theatre’, p. 22.} Critics also hinted at the financial meaning of ‘bonds’ and, particularly, the unreliability of the bonds issued by Spain. The \textit{London Magazine} noted that, as with the interest rates of Spain’s bonds, the farce ‘rose but to fall’,\footnote{‘The Drama’, p. 321.} while for the \textit{Literary Gazette} those bonds were ‘mere waste-paper’ and the play a waste of time.\footnote{‘Drama’, p. 527.} These witticisms drew upon the fact that, inevitably, the bonds of the liberal Spanish government were hard hit by the events of 1823 and rapidly lost their value. The \textit{London Magazine} documented this inexorable descent in its issue for December 1823: ‘SPANISH BONDS of 1821, which were 37 in June, have been as low as 22; and November 18th, 25 $\frac{3}{4}$; Spanish Bonds of 1820, in June, at 47, were at 36 on the 8th of November.’\footnote{‘The Funds’, p. 673.} Similarly, the subtitle ‘Wars in Wedlock’ itself did not merely refer to the marital or sentimental tensions so common in Spanish-themed comedy, as in Sheridan’s \textit{The Duenna} (1775) or Hannah Cowley’s \textit{A Bold Stroke for a Husband} (1783). It also represents a none too subtle attempt to capitalize allusively on the condition of the Iberian country and the immediate associations which audiences would have drawn between ‘Spain’ and ‘war’.

First performed on 5 November, \textit{Cortez; or, The Conquest of Mexico} was more successful and, as a mainpiece, the product of an entirely different kind of theatrical speculation. With music by Henry Bishop and a text by
James Robinson Planché, it was a mixture of melodrama and opera acted twelve times in its full form, then reduced to two acts and acted five more times.38 In fact, this relatively short run was a financial failure for what had been conceived as a lavish production meant to rival W.T. Moncrieff’s melodrama *The Cataract of the Ganges*, which had debuted at Drury Lane on 27 October as an accompaniment to that evening’s new mainpiece, Henry Hart Milman’s tragedy *Fazio*, and had proved a major success running to 54 performances during its initial season.39

In early November, the situation of Spain was very different from that in early August, as the subjugation of the country by the French was by then complete. In its issue of 8 November 1823, the *Literary Gazette* remarked that ‘the gradual subsiding of the storm in Spain has left the Newspapers almost newsless’.40 This ironic comment was printed just a few paragraphs after an extensive account of *Cortez*, yet another play in the history of English drama and theatre about the Spanish conquests in America, presented to the readers as ‘a sort of Musical Melodrame, not altogether devoid of interest, but at the same time not entitled to rank above mediocrity’.41

Though not set in Spain, *Cortez* was fully part of the discursive investments that had been accreting around the country during the year, and was thus highly pertinent to the transatlantic concerns central to Canning’s foreign policy and parliamentary interventions. In this respect, the play is a manifestation of that nexus of circum-Atlantic performativity defined by Joseph Roach as a locus of operations of displacement, refashioning and transference aimed at ‘self-definition by staging contrasts with other races, cultures, and ethnicities’.42 In *Cortez*’s initial run, the dazzling mise en scène, colourful scenery and new music made strikingly present its figuration of imperial aspirations in the New World, which, in turn, re-echoed and reinterpreted Britain’s draw to Spanish America as repeatedly debated in Parliament and the press.

The main plot centres on Hernán Cortés – here Cortez – and his expedition from Cuba to the coast of Mexico and, then, inland to Montezuma’s capital. The first contact with the locals is followed by the episode of Cortez’s burning of the fleet to prevent his men from abandoning the enterprise. In his advance into Mexican territory, the conquistador is accompanied by

38 Genest, *Some Account*, vol. 9, p. 249.
39 On this competition, see ‘Covent Garden’, p. 718.
Marina, the Mexican woman also known historically as Doña Marina and La Malinche, who acted as his translator (in the play, Cortez passionately loves Marina, who reciprocates his feelings). When the Spaniards are attacked by the Tlascalans, the latter are defeated and accept the Europeans’ superiority. Marina, however, is abducted and destined for a human sacrifice in Cholula, and is then rescued by Cortez and his men who attack and subjugate the sacred city. The action also features a subplot about the love of the brothers Xocotzin and Acacix for the beautiful Amazitli, who promises her hand to the more heroic and patriotic of them. After Acacix wins the contest, Xocotzin vows revenge, even threatening to rape Amazitli, but is eventually neutralized. The play concludes with the arrival of Cortez at Mexico City and his meeting with Montezuma, who bows to the Spaniards’ power and accepts them as the new masters of the country.

A composite theatrical product, *Cortez* was devised so as to activate all possible attractions for contemporary audiences. Planché reworked John Dryden’s 1665 *The Indian Emperour* (which provides the subplot of the brothers’ love contest), as well as drawing on historical sources on the conquest of Mexico in line with his own promotion of accuracy in costumes and settings (the printed text abounds with explanatory notes). The performance also capitalized on spectacular grandiosity, exotic touches, equestrian acrobatics, and some of the most outstanding performers of the period, among whom Thomas Potter Cooke, John Fawcett, and the first equestrian artist of the age, Andrew Ducrow. Musically, it featured original compositions by Bishop, as well as adaptations from Mozart and Rossini. Though audiences appreciated Bishop’s efforts and one piece in particular became extremely popular (the ‘round’ ‘Yes, ’tis the Indian drum’, Act I, sc. 1), the critical reception of the play’s music was decidedly mixed.

Inevitably, this major investment in spectacularity was an ideologically loaded operation. If ‘its gaudy and attractive neighbour’, Moncrieff’s *Cataract of the Ganges*, was about empires clashing in the East, *Cortez* dealt with imperial expansion in the West, and in highly topical and alluring Spanish America at that. However, its engagement with the theme of empire presents unexpected complexities, as it is built around the situation of an aspiring empire confronting an established one. The two groups of characters – the Europeans and the Americans – embody these clashing imperial trajectories. The Spaniards are moved by ‘avarice and enthusiasm’,
their greed conveyed by the generic, mythological image of a land whose ‘rivers [...] have waves of silver rolling over sands of gold’, while the natives are presented as devoted to ‘the immolation of human victims’ to the ‘monstrous idols’ held up by their ‘sanguinary and ignorant priesthood’.\(^46\) This encounter and collision of empires is in full view from the outset. Whereas Montezuma’s subjects enter bearing gifts symbolic of peace and plenty, the Europeans distribute trinkets and glass necklaces, as well as an ‘ominous offering’ – a sword for the emperor (p. 7). The contrast is then reprised in the exchange of ritualized performances. As the Mexican women dance and the Spanish soldiers react with undue arousal, Cortez orders the latter to give the natives a taste of the ‘Spanish mode of salutation’ (p. 8). Accordingly, the foot soldiers take up their weapons and undertake military manoeuvres; the cavalry then rushes on stage at a gallop, terrifying the Mexicans, who break into a chorus:

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\begin{align*}
O, \text{ sight of wonder! – sight of fear!} \\
\text{What monsters to our eyes appear?} \\
\text{Half men, half beasts. – The earth with dread,} \\
\text{Trembles, beneath their thundering tread!}\quad &47
\end{align*}
\]

The Spaniards subsequently ‘discharge their muskets in the air which completes the alarm of the Mexicans, who fly in disorder from the scene’ (p. 8). Two tribal leaders or caciques stay behind and answer this provocation with threats aimed at Cortez:

\[
\begin{align*}
The \text{ guardian divinities of Mexico will avenge this mockery of their power!} \\
\text{Fly from their wrath, while yet thou mayest! Fly, ere their invincible serv-} \\
\text{ants, Montezuma and his countless warriors, are compelled to propitiate} \\
\text{them with thy blood, and that of thy presumptuous followers!} (p. 9)
\end{align*}
\]

The clash of empires has started, and neither side is presented as weak or guiltless.

As the play concludes with Montezuma’s acceptance of the invasion, it stops just before the actual conquest of Mexico, unlike Dryden’s Indian Emperour, which ends with the Spaniards’ complete subjugation of the country and Montezuma’s suicide. In Act III, sc. 5, when Cortez and his

\(^{46}\) Planché, Cortez, pp. 14, 16, 18. Subsequent references, by page number, are in brackets in the text. 
\(^{47}\) Ibid., p. 8.
men come within sight of the capital, the emperor meets them with an impressive procession on the causeway leading to the island where the city rises. This is a long parade of the kind that was extremely popular in theatres at the time, and re-echoes the relevance of such moments for spectacles with epic aspirations. The lengthy sequence develops through a succession of ‘Mexican girls, strewing flowers’, ‘Nobles of Mexico, in rich dresses’, ‘Warriors, bearing standards, ensigns, &c.’ among which are ‘the arms of Montezuma – a griffin, with a tiger in its talons’, ‘three Lords bearing golden wands’, and finally Montezuma himself, leaning on two subject kings ‘under a canopy of green feathers ornamented with gold’, while the rear is brought up by ‘warriors, inhabitants of Mexico, &c.’ (p. 49). When the procession comes to a halt, Montezuma addresses the Spaniards with words expressing submission to their power:

I accept the embassy of the King who sends you, and lay my empire at his feet. Since from the signs we have observed in the Heavens and what we have seen of you the period seems to have arrived when the predictions of our ancestors seem to be fulfilled – namely that there should come from the earth men different in person and in habit from ourselves to rule over this country.49

Cortez replies with an amicable speech, saying that the king of Spain ‘desires to be your friend and confederate, not by virtue of those ancient rights to which you have alluded, nor for any reason than to open a communication between the two monarchies, and join in lasting amity their respective rulers’ (p. 50). He then invites his followers to rejoice in unison: ‘Let one joy reign in all bosoms, and celebrate this glorious and happy union of the Old and New Worlds’ (p. 50).

Putting forward ideas of transcontinental cooperation based on a transatlantic confederation, these words unexpectedly come at the climax of a play that has been developing along different lines. In actual fact, they revise Cortez’s much more ominous declarations in Act I. There, addressing his soldiers to strengthen their determination, he tells them: ‘The eyes of the old world are upon you; the new one is in your grasp’, while reiterating that his aims are ‘glory’ and ‘wealth’ (p. 16). Placed at opposite ends in the play, these contrasting depictions of the encounter of the ‘old’ and ‘new’ worlds encapsulate a significant portion of its ideological import.

49 Planché, Cortez, p. 50.
As it departs from historical record and the precedent of Dryden’s Indian Emperour, where Montezuma fights the Spaniards, is imprisoned and tortured, and dies, Cortez conjures up a peculiarly distinct figuration of empire. Mexicans and Spaniards are neither good nor bad per se: if Spanish ambitions are reprehensible, the Mexicans are a violent and imperializing people, too; an overreaching imperialist, Cortez is heroic and magnanimous, as well as passionately in love with Marina. A far from straightforward text, Cortez plays repeatedly with ambivalences. The Black Legend and Hispanophobia are present in it, but also kept in check; and so is the figuration of Mexican barbaric rituals, since not all Mexicans conform to the stereotype of the bloodthirsty barbarian. In fact, the play seems to centre on the representation of a land available for conquest, indeed even awaiting conquest as its own historical fulfilment. Cortez depicts the collision of two worlds which eventually turns into a fated encounter leading to a mutually beneficial confederation. Yet, since the story of Cortés and Montezuma was well known to audiences, this encounter also reads as a narrative of the inevitability of imperial conquest and subjugation. In turn, the idea of an imperial pax hispanica imposed through, and accepted because of, the conquerors’ technological and military superiority effects a union of the old and new worlds which allusively reworks the key terms of Canning’s South American doctrine. The play’s use of ‘old’ and ‘new’ in a context of conquest and expansion, though also of cooperation and exchange, significantly condenses British designs over Spanish America.

The conclusion of Cortez effectively chimes with Britain’s policies towards Spain’s crumbling American empire: Castlereagh had promoted measures that would cast the British as auxiliaries and protectors rather than as conquerors in the eyes of the would-be independent South American territories; and Canning continued in this line, favouring persuasion rather than coercion, involvement through commerce, capital, and culture rather than conquest – an approach that was all the more expedient after the short-lived occupations of Buenos Aires and Montevideo in 1806-1807 had shown the difficulties of formal imperial involvement in these territories. Thus, the play advances a view of informal empire that would reach its climax with Britain’s gradual recognition of independent Spanish American countries during the 1820s.50

Moreover, as Rebecca Cole Heinowitz notes, Cortez is a ‘thinly veiled allegory of contemporary British speculation in Spanish America’, which

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was a hotly debated question at the time of the play's premiere.\footnote{Heinowitz, \textit{Spanish America}, p. 206} Tellingly, in the issue of the \textit{Weekly Register} for 22 November 1823, William Cobbett published a ‘Letter to Canning’ about his South American policies, and Mexico, in particular. There he takes the foreign secretary to task for refusing to acknowledge the independence of the former Spanish colonies and accuses him of secretly organizing military preparations to force them (especially Mexico) to return to the Spanish fold. He also denounces the fact that these states had raised loans in London and, since the global ‘money mart’ of the capital’s stock exchange unscrupulously encouraged investors to ‘buy and sell the stock’ of these countries, the ‘Jews and Jobbers of London would very soon be the owners of all South America’.\footnote{‘To Mr. Canning’, pp. 464, 472.} The first Spanish American bond was advertised in the British press in 1822 and, whereas Spanish bonds declined in value over the same period, Spanish American ones rapidly became the object of a widespread craze.\footnote{Leask, \textit{Curiosity}, p. 301.} A mere few days after the premiere of \textit{Cortez} the press announced that the first Mexican loan, to the amount of £5 million, would soon be available for subscription.\footnote{Heinowitz, \textit{Spanish America}, p. 185.} (Interestingly, therefore, both new Spanish-themed plays of 1823 were in some way connected with bonds.) As Heinowitz points out, the play’s finale, with its stress on mutually beneficial relations between Spain and the New World, declares that ‘the conqueror’s success implies that of contemporary investment in Spanish America’ and, in turn, of Britain’s informal imperial practices.\footnote{Ibid., p. 208.} At the same time, though, the conclusion leaves open the question of the more aggressive and destructive kind of conquest represented by Cortés’s later, and unstaged, change of tactics.\footnote{A contemporaneous spectacularization of Mexico, also linked to financial speculation and explicitly connected with Cortés’s expedition, was the exhibition on ‘Ancient and Modern Mexico’ organized by the entrepreneur William Bullock at the Egyptian Hall on Piccadilly in April 1824 (see Leask, \textit{Curiosity}, pp. 300-314; Heinowitz, \textit{Spanish America}, pp. 208-209).}

Offering an exotically spectacular recreation of the origins of Spanish colonialism in America, Planché’s and Bishop’s \textit{Cortez} gestures allusively to current interests in Spain and its American colonies, and especially their relevance to geo-political and geo-cultural discourses and practices in and about 1823. It reveals a continued fascination with Spanish history and its transatlantic offshoots, while transfiguring British geo-political projections
both at a European and a global level. In the process, it testifies to a constant interplay of positive and negative images of Spain that take on contextually specific meanings within the rapidly shifting international panorama of the early to mid-1820s.

More generally, Cortez confirms that the different performances of Spain examined in this essay draw a variegated picture of the country as a space of (actual or possible) intervention and thus a playing ground for British diplomacy, military power, or financial investment; but also as the receiver of funds for its ‘patriots’, and as the metropole of a dissolving American empire focusing the attention and interests of Britain and its European competitors. Within this prismatic focus, Spain becomes a site of cultural construction in which the visual plays a central role: it is an imaginative geography delineated through highly effective visual modelling and experienced visually in different locations – from Westminster, the Haymarket, and Covent Garden, to the periodicals and playtexts – all of which are pervasively spectacular and spectacularizing.

From a methodological point of view, concentrating on a discrete cultural moment, such as a significant year, reveals the advantages of micro-historical analysis as a way of throwing into relief localized and strategic practices within the wider-ranging process of imagining Spain in Romantic-era British culture. It makes visible the Spanish construct as a mosaic of discourses, objects, texts, performances, and modes of subjectivity, all ideologically and politically charged within a context of specific developments and transformations. More widely, this approach teaches us how to look at this process from a multiple perspective and to deal with Hispanophobia and Hispanophilia from suitably contextualized vantage points. The value of the theatrical and spectacular angle lies in that it highlights how Spain is not merely present on the page or in visual depictions, but also functions through performative, ‘moving’ figurations – both in the sense of moving before an audience on a stage and of affecting them. The benefits of this approach for our interpretations of constructions of Spain are considerable. Reading the theatrical and spectacular manifestations of the Iberian country through a restricted focus such as that offered by London in 1823 discloses once again a multiple and discordant image, an eminently unstable script made up of dissonant, old and new, materials, and a moving performance which throws into relief conflicting political and cultural questions, the import of which ranges from the British sphere to wider European and global panoramas.
Works Cited

Primary sources


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Genest, John, *Some Account of the English Stage, from the Restoration in 1660 to 1830*, 10 vols (Bath: H.E. Carrington, 1832).


‘To Mr. Canning. On the Preparations which he is said to be making with regard to South America’, *Cobbett’s Weekly Register* 48 (22 November 1823), pp. 448-501.


Secondary sources


Appendix: Spanish-themed plays in London’s patent theatres (1822-1823)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Theatre</th>
<th>Reference in Genest</th>
<th>Play information</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10 October</td>
<td>Covent Garden</td>
<td>Venice Preserved. Jaffier = C. Kemble : Pierre = Abbott : Belvidera = Miss Lacy from Dublin, her 1st app. in London</td>
<td>Thomas Otway, <em>Venice Preserv’d; or, a Plot Discover’d</em> (1682)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1822</td>
<td>Drury Lane</td>
<td>Rolla = Young: – with Giovanni in London</td>
<td>Richard Brinsley Sheridan, <em>Pizarro</em> (1799); W.T. Moncrieff, <em>Giovanni in London; or, The Libertine Reclaim’d</em> (1817)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19 November</td>
<td>Covent Garden</td>
<td>Don John. 2nd Violetta = Miss M. Tree, 1st time</td>
<td>Thomas Shadwell, <em>The Libertine</em> (1676)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1822</td>
<td>Drury Lane</td>
<td>Venice Preserved. Jaffier = Kean : Pierre = Young : Belvidera = Mrs W. West</td>
<td>Otway, <em>Venice Preserv’d</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29 November</td>
<td>Drury Lane</td>
<td>Busy Body. Marplot = Harley : Sir Francis Gripe = Munden : Sir George Airy = Cooper : Miranda = Mrs Davison</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16 December</td>
<td>Covent Garden</td>
<td>Macready acted Pierre.</td>
<td>Otway, <em>Venice Preserv’d</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>1822</td>
<td>Drury Lane</td>
<td>Revenge. Zanga = Young : Alonzo = Cooper, 1st time : Leonora: Mrs W. West</td>
<td>Edward Young, <em>The Revenge</em> (1721)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19 December</td>
<td>Covent Garden</td>
<td>Brother and Sister. Pacheco = Meadows</td>
<td>William Dimond, <em>Brother and Sister</em> (1815)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1822</td>
<td>Drury Lane</td>
<td>Never acted there, Marriage of Figaro. Count Almaviva = Elliston : Figaro = Liston : Antonio = Harley : Cherubino = Mrs H. Hughes, 1st time : Susanna = Miss Stephens : Countess = Mrs Austin</td>
<td>W.A. Mozart, <em>The Marriage of Figaro</em> (in Henry Bishop’s adaptation, first performed at Covent Garden in 1819)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 March 1823</td>
<td>Covent Garden</td>
<td>Never acted. Julian […] this T. was written by Miss Mitford</td>
<td>Mary Russell Mitford, <em>Julian, A Tragedy in five acts</em> (1823)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Date</td>
<td>Theatre</td>
<td>Reference in Genest</td>
<td>Play information</td>
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<tr>
<td>31 March 1823</td>
<td>Covent Garden</td>
<td>Never acted. Vision of the Sun, or the Orphan of Peru – this Melo-dramatic tale of enchantment (as it is called) was acted 40 times – it is founded on the Peruvian Tales – the songs, with some description of the scenes, are printed</td>
<td>Charles Farley, <em>The Vision of the Sun</em>; or, <em>The Orphan of Peru</em> (1823) [actually set in pre-conquest Peru]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 April 1823</td>
<td>Covent Garden</td>
<td>Duenna. Father Paul = Bartley</td>
<td>Richard Brinsley Sheridan, <em>The Duenna</em> (1775)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 May 1823</td>
<td>Drury Lane</td>
<td>Young's bt. [benefit] Venice Preserved, with Marriage of Figaro (compressed) and Devil to Pay. Jobson = Dowton : Nell = Mrs Davison</td>
<td>Otway, <em>Venice Preserv'd</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 June 1823</td>
<td>Covent Garden</td>
<td>Miss F.H. Kelly acted Belvidera, and Lady Racket for her bt. [benefit]</td>
<td>Otway, <em>Venice Preserv'd</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19 June 1823</td>
<td>Haymarket</td>
<td>Marriage of Figaro. Almaviva = Vining</td>
<td>Marriage of Figaro (in Henry Bishop's adaptation)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24 June 1823</td>
<td>Covent Garden</td>
<td>Mountaineers. Octavian = C. Kemble : Floranthe = Miss Foote, 1st time : Agnes = Miss Love, 1st time</td>
<td>George Colman the Younger, <em>The Mountaineers</em> (1793)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 October 1823</td>
<td>Covent Garden</td>
<td>Much ado, and Rosina</td>
<td>Shakespeare, <em>Much Ado about Nothing</em></td>
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### Table

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<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Theatre</th>
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<th>Play information</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>17 October 1823</td>
<td>Covent Garden</td>
<td>Venice Preserved. Pierre = Young</td>
<td>Otway, Venice Preserv’d</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 November 1823</td>
<td>Covent Garden</td>
<td>Never acted, Cortez, or the Conquest of Mexico</td>
<td>James Robinson Planché, Henry Bishop, Cortez; or, The Conquest of Mexico</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 December 1823</td>
<td>Drury Lane</td>
<td>Pizarro. Elvira = Mrs Bunn, 1ˢᵗ time</td>
<td>Sheridan, Pizarro</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: John Genest, *Some Account of the English Stage, from the Restoration in 1660 to 1830*, 10 vols (Bath: H.E. Carrington, 1832), vol. 9, pp. 159-250.

### About the Author

**Diego Saglia** is Professor of English Literature at the University of Parma and a member of the steering committee of the ‘Anglo-Hispanic Horizons 1780s-1840s’ research network. One of his main interests is the theme of Anglo-Hispanic literary and cultural relations in the Romantic period, especially in key figures such as Lord Byron, Felicia Hemans and Robert Southey. He has published widely on this topic in international journals, besides his study *Poetic Castles in Spain: British Romanticism and Figurations of Iberia* (2000), his critical edition of Southey’s *Roderick, the Last of the Goths* (2012) and the co-edited collection *Spain in British Romanticism 1800-1840* (with Ian Haywood, 2018). His latest monograph is *European Literatures in Britain, 1815-1832: Romantic Translations* (2019).