



Writ in the Margins Podcast

Created by the students in REN670: Dramaturgy in the Shakespeare and Performance graduate program at Mary Baldwin University

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Episode Guide

Season 2, Episode 8

The Island Princess: Environmental Peril and Christian Propaganda

Hosts: Nic Holtman and Fallon Smyl

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A note on content: This episode includes references to racism, misogyny, torture, and Islamophobia.

Episode Resources

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Episode Transcript

Fallon : Hello and welcome to another episode of Writ in the Margins! We are your hosts Fallon,

Nic : And Nic! This episode, we're gonna be talking about John Fletcher's *The Island Princess*.

Fallon : We are super excited to discuss this often overlooked play with you, but would first like to put out a quick content warning for you. This episode will have mentions of racism, misogyny, torture, and Islamophobia so please be aware before diving in with us.

Nic : So, first things first, let's delve into the original production, briefly. The King's Men first performed the play in London, in 1621, with only 8 credited actors.

Fallon : Those actors were: John Lowin, John Underwood, William Eglestone, Richard Sharpe, Joseph Tailor, Robert Benfield, George Birch, and Thomas Pollard.

Nic : There are 17 named characters in this show not including Moors, Citizens, and Townsmen. That's gotta be a nightmare to double.

Fallon : It's also important to note that all of these characters would have been played by Englishmen and boys in the time period. So even though *The Island Princess*, Quisara, is the main character, this still would have been a white man or boy at the time.

Nic : Let's keep that information in mind while we get into some deep reading and analysis work.

Fallon : Everything we are going to be focusing on is from Act 2 of *The Island Princess* and as such we are going to be giving you a quick refresher/run-down of the Act in case you haven't read it, so spoilers ahead!

Nic : Act 2 is pretty big for this show. We start with the kidnapped King of Bacan being held captive by the Governor who wishes to trade the King for the hand of Quisara. There is a large amount of imagery in these gloatings from the Governor that we'll be exploring. Following this there is a shift to the edge of the island of Ternate where Armusia, Soza, and Emmanuel have come to rescue the King by lighting the island on fire as a distraction. In the wake of what is

quite honestly one of the best Early Modern action sequences I have ever read, the Governor and guards are distracted, and King is ushered off across the sea back to Bacan to be reunited with his sister.

Fallon : For being only act two and we already have kidnapping, torture, and fire on stage it makes for a bit of a wild ride!

Nic : Oh for sure, and I think once we really break down some of that imagery happening on stage we get a lot more happening.

Fallon : Like what?

Nic : Within the play there is the constant juxtaposition of religions. This is something that has sparked wars for centuries and we still see happening today around the world. Before we get to that, though, I think it would be good to provide a little bit of historical context as to why that juxtaposition is there.

Fallon : Do say more!

Nic : We know that the ruling elite of the four kingdoms of Maluku converted to Islam sometime in the late 1400s; that is the Bacan Islands where the play is set, Ternate, Tidore, and Jailolo. But, Karel A. Steenbrink, notes that by 1557 the Sultan of Bacan had converted to Christianity, likely by Father Antonio Vaz. While Tidore did not convert to Christianity (more specifically Catholicism), they remained distinctly loyal to Portuguese interests, and this created conflict in the region between the once united islands that we see reflected within the play. It's also worth noting that anxieties about Islam were ubiquitous to Early Modern Britain. A particularly relevant passage from Nabil Matar's *Islam in Britain, 1558-1685*, explains that over the course of just a year, 1620-1621 (The year this play premiered) more than a hundred English ships were captured by North African pirates- his source there is *The Negotiations of Sir Thomas Roe*. English ships were being routinely captured by pirates, the crews enslaved, and often strongly encouraged to convert to Islam for the sake of making their lives easier. Now, I want to be very clear here- this is an Islamophobic play. It makes a number of deeply offensive assumptions and accusations against Islam which are not remotely justified, and to be completely clear, England was actively colonizing other parts of the world and committing equal atrocities in this period. I have provided this context not to justify Fletcher's bigotry, but to put it in the historical context that likely contributed to it.

Nic: Now, with all that background out of the way, Fletcher has a really interesting pattern in this play of using language and imagery with overt Christian meanings when he's discussing some of the Muslim characters in this play, specifically the King and Quisara. If we want to stick exclusively to act 2, the first big thing that comes to mind is the first time we see the King. That stage direction is "King appears laden with chains, his head and arms only above." Now, this is a little ambiguous, but assuming that "arms above" refers to his hands being at least at the level of his shoulders, there's a lot of ways he could potentially be chained that would draw on imagery of the crucifixion.

After we first see the king in this condition, one of his guards makes sure to tell the audience how well he's handling the torture. He says the following:

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*"His eyes not sunk, and his complexion firm still,
No wildness, no distemper'd touch upon him,
How constantly he smiles, and how undanted!
With what a Majesty he heaves his head up!"*

This then goes into an extended discussion between the Governor and the King in which the Governor is trying to convince him to give up hope, and the King is refusing, and it's all very 'megachurch Easter pageant.' Like, for some context as to what I mean, the Governor has a huge paragraph where he's trying to convince the King to verbally renounce his sister pretty shortly after he enters- it sounds like this. *"Ye carry it handsomely, but tell me patience,*

*Do not you curse the brave and royal Lady
Your gracious sister? do not you damn her pitty,
Damn twenty times a day, and damn it seriously?
Do not you swear aloud too, cry and kick?
The very soul sweat in thee with the agony
Of her contempt of me? Couldst not thou eat her
For being so injurious to thy fortune,
Thy fair and happy fortune? Couldst not thou wish her
A Bastard, or a Whore, fame might proclaim her;
Black ugly fame, or that thou hadst had no sister?
Spitting the general name out, and the nature;
Blaspheming heaven for making such a mischief;
For giving power to pride, and will to Woman?"*

Fallon : This doesn't seem overtly Christian to me. What's our deeper dive into it Nic?

Nic: You're right, it doesn't necessarily seem overtly Christian on the surface, but it's important to bear in mind that Quisara, the King's sister, converts to Christianity at the end of this play, and Fletcher, as the playwright, knows that. The Governor is asking the King to renounce his faith in his sister, a character who will eventually become a Christian, on the grounds that she is ignoring his current plight. A lot of those ideas sound very... Let's say "evangelical christian-adjacent."

And just to really drive this point home, one of the guards finishes this sequence by saying of the King "He cannot last long, and when he is dead, he is free."

Fallon : Now that does seem a little more overtly Christian.

Nic : These are some of the main examples of this pattern that appear in this Act, but it's a recurring pattern throughout the rest of the play as well. Now, Fletcher is using this for a purpose. I don't necessarily want to claim he's doing it deliberately, but using the language of the play to tie these characters into ideas of Christianity is preparing the audience for Quisara's conversion in the 11th hour of the story. By showing us that they were really (and I'm going to

now verbally emphasize the massive air quotes that I'm doing that the listeners can't see) "Good Christians All Along Who Just Needed To Be Saved."

Fallon : Another lens to be applied to *The Island Princess* is ecocriticism. Christopher Manes and Tiiu Speek describe this ecocriticism as "Nature is silent in our culture (and in literate societies in general) in the sense that the status of a speaking subject is jealously guarded as an exclusively human prerogative. ... The language we speak today, the idiom of Renaissance and Enlightenment humanism, veils the processes of nature with its own cultural obsessions, directionalities, and motifs that have no analogies in the natural world. (Manes 1996) Ecocriticism is an ecological outgrowth of post-structural criticism that studies human representations of nature."

Nic : Interesting. I mean, I get we are on an island and the environment is not often discussed in the world of literary criticism, but how exactly does this fit into Fletcher's play?

Fallon : Within act two there is a lot of connection between the environment and the dangers of religion and the effects that people have on the world within Fletcher's writing. The words that stand out the most in relation to the environment within the play as a whole that can be pulled out are: 35 occurrences of fire (22 in act 2), 8 of flame (6 in act 2), 5 of sea (all 5 in act 2), 1 of ocean (in act 2), 7 of burn (5 in act 2), 8 of water (5 in act 2), 10 of air (5 in act 2), and 71 of fair (12 in act 2). With most if not all occurrences of these words happening in act 2 alone this makes this act stand out in regards to the rest of the play.

Nic : How does this stand out in regards to people's effect on the environment with these choices of words though within the context of the play?

Fallon : Great question Nic! So the major thing that happens within act 2 is a fire on stage to be used as a distraction to allow for the freeing of the King of Bacan right?

Nic : Yeah, it rules.

Fallon : So within this scene the fire is brought to the island from elsewhere as we see from Armusia's lines [...]

*The fire I brought here with me shall do something,
Shall burst into material flames, and bright ones,
That all the Island shall stand wondring at it,
As if they had been stricken with a Comet:
Powder is ready, and enough to work it,
The Match is left a-fire, all, all busht, and lockt close, [...]*

Nic : Does this make the fire part of the colonizing Portuguese?

Fallon : Could be. But as it is used as a tool to destroy part of what the Portuguese have built in Ternate I am a little hesitant to think that that is what Fletcher is implying with stating that with Armusia's 'bringing of the fire' to the island. I think Fletcher clarifies it further only a short while later with the spreading of the fire through the throwing of wine in the Governor's lines [...]

*The flame's more violent: arise still, help, help, Citizens,
Freedom and wealth to him that helps: follow, oh follow.
Fling wine, or any thing, I'll see't recompenc'd.
Buckets, more Buckets; fire, fire, fire.*

This starting of the fire, and expansion of said fire, through human interference is in part a reflection of the turmoil that occurs throughout the play. Whether through religious conflict or personal turmoil, the language of devastation that Fletcher uses towards the island beginning primarily in act 2 is a reflection of the way that the world's environment is being impacted by what is happening.

Nic : This seems like the way that current climate change is affected by both little personal choices, but also massive conflicts and conglomerates.

Fallon : While I don't know if Fletcher was an environmentalist, in the modern sense, to me at least it definitely reads like that with so many mentions of fire, flame, burn, and water, but only in relation to people's choices with these elements. In regards to scholars who evaluate ecocriticism, my reading ties in with this in particular to the two examples previously given quite well. Destruction would never have been brought to the island if Armusia had not brought the fire to the island in the first place. And the fire never would have spread without the folly of man throwing wine, an accelerant onto the fire, creating greater devastation to human and natural life both. Throughout this portion of the act the fire rips through the village causing devastation for the people, but likely also causing devastation for native animal life in the surrounding area through the smoke inhalation, if not physical destruction.

Nic : So interesting to think about the environmental repercussions in a theatrical world. I feel like this would be so difficult to get across when it comes to staging conditions or without giving the audience breathing problems themselves.

Fallon : Definitely would up the danger on the early modern stage to have fire on stage in a wooden theatre. If performed outside, probably okay, but yeah I would be concerned about lighting the entire set on fire for sure. I would love to know how the only modern production tackled this fire on stage problem. I think it would come across better in film personally as the blaze could really be massive through the use of CGI without harming anyone.

Nic : There are a lot of great current director's who would probably love to explore both the religious and environmental hurdles that we've been intrigued by. Someone like Darren Afronksy, Abrar Hussain, or Farah Nabulsi would all be options to create a movie version that focuses both upon religion and the environment. With the latter two being Muslim filmmakers, they would be able to make cuts to the script that Afronksy might not notice, and create a version of the piece potentially less problematic than it exists in now.

Fallon : Speaking of problematic things from *The Island Princess...*

Nic : To finish off our podcast, we would love to talk about the final piece of act two for you, the only song of the show, taking place at the tail end of the act.

Fallon : This song was played upon the re-entrance of the King for the first time after his kidnapping by the Governor. The stage directions for the song are as follows:

Enter Citizens carrying boughs, boyes singing after 'em; Then King, Armusia, Soza, Emanuel; The Princes and train following.

Fallon : The layout of this oddly specific stage direction, of which there are very little in the play to begin with, is reminiscent of the Church of England processions of which Fletcher had been preparing to join before he became a playwright.

Nic : In 1547 processions were banned by the Duke of Somerset (the Lord Protector for King Edward the VI). By 1553 though this would have been reversed by Mary, returning to Catholic processions. When Elizabeth took over, she planned for a Calvinist church with very little pomp and circumstance, but it seems that the ordinary people did not take much to this. This same level of diversity in the Church of England under James as well with the only major change across the board being the publication of the King James Bible of 1611 (the bible still in major use today, by many denominations). While we cannot say for certain the images from around the time of Fletcher's life show Church processions much akin to the description of these stage directions.

Fallon : At the time there was a fascination with the Spice Islands so the cultural appropriation of sound very well may have taken place on stage or it may have been more Western music as they may have had no idea what Eastern music would sound like. We have provided an example of what we think these boughs and boys singing could have sounded like and could potentially be.

[song]

Fallon : In trying to relate to native music they are using European tonal harmony, which in and of itself would not have been accurate at all to the native music, but would have tied in to the Church and what was happening on stage itself.

Nic : We hope that you have enjoyed our deep dive into Act 2 of an Island Princess. This play is problematic, rarely performed, but all together deeply intriguing. Thank you so much for tuning in!

Fallon : And see you next time for Writ in the Margins!

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