

Christopher Columbus: Man of Destiny, Man of Desperation

It seems Columbus had ever considered himself the exact man for this job: the great “Discoverer” of the Indies. Derived from the medieval origins of his faith, it was a predestined and divine appointment of exploration and dominion that he took very seriously. The coincidence of his name may also be ordained by providence. Though the etymology of the word *colonize* has clear Latin roots, one need only to hear his name in Spanish – Cristóbal Colón – to infer (or conflate) a deeper understanding of what that word has come to mean to posterity. Columbus and colonization are now synonymous with the violent, genocidal, and racist narrative that, like the Spanish Conquistadores, came to dominate the landscape of the earliest years of European settlement in the Americas. The two words are hand-in-glove, but as paired they write a story that is altogether different than what was seemingly intended by the explorer himself. This is because rather than the looming specter of oppressive European patriarchy Columbus has come to represent, in reality he was a complex and ambitious man, living in complicated times, without the true force of power and autonomy that has been latterly ascribed to him. The danger here is to focus the full wrath of modern judgement and hate upon one figurehead, to conflate his objectives with what happened later, and to mistake his intentions, motives, and actions as being blanketly nefarious. Though couched in the religious and cultural bias of his time and not necessarily altruistic, they were not entirely as evil as is now perceived. Christopher Columbus was a tool of a liminal culture, one balancing on the knife edge superstitious medievalism and

progressive early modernity. As such, he exhibits the myriad facets of European culture, directives, religion, and interests, up to and including an image of himself as divinely chosen for the blessing of ushering in the new age. That this is what indeed happened is both beside and central to the point.¹

Many years later, during his third voyage, Columbus would reiterate his divine appointment to the exalted place of “Discoverer” of the Indies through an emotionally charged appeal to one of Queen Isabel’s ladies. This was a moment he was faced with his greatest public trial and Columbus exercised his gift of rhetoric to its highest potential. Unleashing a charm offensive of no small value in his letter to Juana de la Torre, he begins, “If it is new for me to complain against the world, its habit of ill-treating me is an old one.” These are loaded claims that imbue an understanding of the perpetual positioning himself as an underdog alongside the relative silence, submission, and subservience he has maintained in the cruel, unjust world he paints. The refracting colors of context throughout this letter are importantly kaleidoscopic – ever shifting and forming conclusions new. There is an element of the unknowable of his character to be sure: Oviedo, a contemporary of Columbus describes him as “handsome and well-built,” and “extremely intelligent.” Most importantly to illuminate the dual nature of his character is the contemporary assessment that, “he was charming when he wished to be and very testy when annoyed.” And so it was that in 1500, during his third voyage, having heard reports of

¹ See Wey Gómez, Nicolás. *The Tropics of Empire: Why Columbus Sailed South to the Indies*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2008, 11, for the persistence of his moniker: Discoverer. For evidence of this special, providential relationship, see Columbus, Christopher, and editor/translator J.M. Cohen. *The Four Voyages of Christopher Columbus: Being His Own Log-book, Letters and Dispatches with Connecting Narrative Drawn from the Life of the Admiral by His Son Hernando Colón and Other Contemporary Historians*. London: Penguin Books, 1969, 293. Later, in his fourth voyage, he would recount how God communed with him, even during a particularly difficult trial while contending with an acute bout of illness: “His mercy is infinite. Thine old age will not prevent thee from attaining all thy great objects. He has many mighty heritages to bestow...Now He has shown thee the reward for the anguish and danger thou has endured in the service of others.”

Columbus' potential treasonous behavior, the Catholic Monarchs dispatched a judge to dispossess him of his position and wealth, and to send him back to Spain. It is upon this disgraced return to court, humiliated and fettered, that he found the inspiration to pen a rebuttal-cum-emotional appeal, delineating all the abuses tolerated during his appointment. Optically, that he refused to be released from the chains his nemesis Bobadilla had insisted upon was as much to feed his pride as a demonstration of his understanding the power of symbolism had in the juridical field. In this letter to a lady, he delineates the character of men he perceives as his accusers with broad strokes. They are "adventurers," without the balancing agency of wives or children, and fight him as if he "were an infidel." Furthermore, they barter in the marketplace for indigenous women as human traffickers. "There are many merchants who go about looking for girls; some of nine or ten are now on sale, but whatever their age they command a good price." Indeed, his charm and testiness would be on full view for the world and for posterity, and Columbus thus rewrote the humiliation of imprisonment and the question of his honor into a story of redemption. The condemnation of illicit trade was therefore an external reflection of his internal piety. As a medieval man on the threshold of two epochs, honor, piety, and the proof thereof were paramount in public esteem and social currency.²

² See the letter at Columbus, *The Four Voyages*, 265-76. For his quest to reach the Indies, see Wey Gómez, *The Tropics of Empire*, 3. For his quote in the letter addressed to Juana de la Torre, see Columbus, *The Four Voyages*, 265. Oviedo quotes about his physical appearance and personality, Columbus, *The Four Voyages*, 27-8. For the context of his clashes with settlers, see Columbus, *The Four Voyages*, 19. For his commitment to being a wronged man and willingness to go the extra mile in proof of his martyrdom to the cause of his monarchs, see: Columbus, Christopher, and editor/translator J.M. Cohen. *The Four Voyages of Christopher Columbus: Being His Own Log-book, Letters and Dispatches with Connecting Narrative Drawn from the Life of the Admiral by His Son Hernando Colón and Other Contemporary Historians*. London: Penguin Books, 1969, p. 264. His son Hernando states, "Afterwards, however, when they were at sea, recognizing Bobadilla's malice, the captain wished to release the Admiral from his chains. But the Admiral would not consent. Since the Catholic sovereigns, he said, had commanded him in their letter to do whatever Bobadilla might order to be carried out in their name, and the chains had been put on him by their commission and authority, he was unwilling for anyone else but their Highnesses to exercise judgement in this matter. In fact he was determined to keep these chains as relics to remind him of the way in which his many services had been rewarded; which is more or less what he did. For he kept them always in his room and wished them to be buried with his bones." For Columbus' quotes regarding the low persons arriving as settlers, see Columbus, *The Four Voyages*, 267. Also see Brading, D. A. *The First America: The Spanish Monarchy*,

Although he has been described as a “Genoese of no great lineage, education or attainments” and inept in management of his men, Columbus clearly sees himself as an unjustly wronged servant of his monarchs, and as seen with the chains he overtly licks his wounds with a flair for the dramatic. Whether or not he was guilty of what he claims were “the slanders of disaffected persons” is perhaps unknowable, though for their part the monarchs released him from his fetters and allowed Columbus to return west on a fourth voyage some time later. However, whether the ill-treatment he complains of are a manifestation of his own mismanagement of position or the jaundiced eye with which his contemporaries viewed him is speculation. Clearly, he understands himself to be an outsider, and he was not wrong. Not only was he an Italian in a society where they sat on the lower half of the social scale, but he was of Portuguese extraction. Having lived in that country for many years, he first petitioned the Portuguese Crown for the funding for his exploration west. In the Age of Exploration, as the countries of the Iberian Peninsula vied for hegemony in trade routes, once commissioned, Columbus had explicit instructions from the Spanish crown to remain in the area demarcated by Papal directive – sailing west from the Canary Islands across the sea and not delving further south towards the torrid belt previously in the purview of the Portuguese. That he did, indeed, sail southwest and not due west is of interest. What compounds that interest is his staunch refusal to believe that the lands he “found” on the other side of the Atlantic were not the “Indies.” After all, Don Ferdinand and Doña Isabel were the “Catholic Monarchs,” and presumably Columbus was sent to “Cathay” (China) and “Cipangu” (Japan) to search for more souls to be converted to Christianity. Gold, land, and labor were seemingly secondary to the crusade against infidels. This, indeed, is another kaleidoscopic refraction of his multidimensionality. Clearly, Columbus

Creole Patriots, and the Liberal State, 1492-1867. Cambridge [England]; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991, 17. Regarding the quote about sales of girls in the marketplace, see Columbus, *The Four Voyages*, 271.

was a conundrum; his character mercurial and multifaceted. In a world where the calculus of esteem rested upon specific sets of bona fides, most of which were a matter of birthright, Columbus was a foreigner and unknown, petitioning for and attempting to maintain a position of authority based on very little proof of merit or veracity. As is shown in Las Casas' transcription of his logbook he was able to be duplicitous. In his nimble toeing around the geopolitical quandary of purporting to sail west while in reality he was sailing evermore southerly, he shows his keen skills of obfuscation. Lastly, in his evident inability to discern that he was nowhere near "India" while yet showing particularly adroit skills in navigation Columbus demonstrates his double-dealing. Given the truth of these lies, how is it possible to read his words and take anything at face value? Even given his contempt for the settlers in the expanding colony, what evidence is there that he did not also take part in the illicit trade of women? The absence of proof is not proof, and though the Catholic Monarchs perhaps knew this, Columbus was nevertheless convincing or creating an equally unclear picture of the state of the colony whereby he was released from charges. That said, given the nebulous nature of his background, up to and including his religion, parentage, and name—that important device that leads to murkiness in the modern mindset—how can anyone claim to have discovered the man who believed himself to be (and actualized this belief), a man of destiny?³

³ For his Genoese provenance, see e.g. Columbus, *The Four Voyages*, 11. In regards to his difficulty in trusting and management of his men, see Columbus, *The Four Voyages*, 15. For his flair for the dramatic, see e.g. "buried with chains," as above. Columbus discusses the difficulty of dealing with disaffected settlers in Columbus, *The Four Voyages*, 271. Columbus' Portuguese connections are deep: Restall, Matthew. *Seven Myths of the Spanish Conquest*. Updated edition. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2021, 7. "Columbus had profound Portuguese connections. Although he was Genoese and the sponsor of his voyages across the Atlantic was Queen Isabella of Castile, Columbus spent much of his life from the 1470s on in Portugal. In the late 1470s he married the daughter of a Portuguese Atlantic colonist, and he repeatedly sought royal Portuguese patronage before and after first approaching the Castilian monarch." Perhaps it is this continued involvement with the Portuguese crown that eroded the trust of the Catholic Monarchs and led to his imprisonment during the third voyage. For Columbus' "southing," see: Wey Gómez, *The Tropics of Empire*, 3-4. For his reason for traveling west to reach the east, see e.g. Brading, *The First America*, 13. "As he himself wrote: 'For the prosecution of the enterprise of the Indies, I did not profit from reason, nor mathematics, nor maps of the world: in all things what Isaiah foretold has been fulfilled.' That an ignorant layman rather than a great divine had been chosen for this purpose was all the more proof of the hidden

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Brading, D. A. *The First America: The Spanish Monarchy, Creole Patriots, and the Liberal State, 1492-1867*. Cambridge [England]; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991.

Columbus, Christopher, and editor/translator J.M. Cohen. *The Four Voyages of Christopher Columbus: Being His Own Log-book, Letters and Dispatches with Connecting Narrative Drawn from the Life of the Admiral by His Son Hernando Colón and Other Contemporary Historians*. London: Penguin Books, 1969.

Restall, Matthew. *Seven Myths of the Spanish Conquest*. Updated edition. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2021.

Wey Gómez, Nicolás. *The Tropics of Empire: Why Columbus Sailed South to the Indies*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2008.

Analysis:

These three “beefy” paragraphs would constitute an excerpt from an essay attempting to discern some of the personality traits of Columbus, up to and including the duality of his character. Considering his periodization in an era split between Medieval and Early Modern, with the constituent morals and belief systems, he would need to exhibit flexibility and fluidity in all facets of his life. Furthermore, the consistent belief that he was inherently evil, racist, or genocidal is also called into question. In this essay, I would discuss more in-depth his relationship to women, especially Queen Isabella, as well as his inability to diplomatically resolve conflicts with his subordinates. It is my belief that some of these difficulties flow from a deep mistrust of people, especially considering his own marginality in the social hierarchy of the day. I have done my best to incorporate many of the readings from our class, and have included quotes as appropriate in text, and in the footnotes.

design of Providence.” And also, Columbus, *The Four Voyages*, 37. “...your highnesses decided to send me, Christopher Columbus, to see these parts of India and the princes and peoples of those lands and consider the best means for their conversion.” Throughout Las Casas’ transcription of Columbus’ log-book, it’s clear he annotates one set of leagues traveled for his own reckoning and another set for the sailor, and never the twain shall meet. See Columbus, *The Four Voyages*, 37-76.