



## Justifications of colonialism within colonial literatures

Patrick Hayes

Through colonial literature, authors attempt to weaponize texts to endorse and justify colonial action. In this essay, I will analysis the methods through which authors attempt to develop this justificatory discourse, through an analysis of texts ranging across contrasting colonial contexts. Edmund Spenser's "*A View of the State of Ireland*" [1596] focusses on Elizabethan Irish colonial policy, justifying an aggressive enforcement of colonialism. Emma Roberts' "*The Rajah's Obsequies*" [1830] calls for a similarly proactive colonialism in 19<sup>th</sup> century India, focussing, however, specifically on the Hindu practise of Sati. H.G Wells' "*The Island of Dr Moreau*" [1896] presents an allegoric commentary on the colonial activity of the later 19<sup>th</sup> century, holding a more ambiguous approach to the other two texts. In my analysis I will attempt to highlight continuities of the justificatory colonial discourse, that extend beyond these contrasting contexts and views.

"*A View of the State of Ireland*" presents Edmund Spenser's radical wishes for a violent inquisition of Ireland, challenging previous failings of the Elizabethan colonial policy. He frames his views through a dialogue between two men- Irenius, a man with extensive colonial knowledge and experience, and Eudoxus, a man interested in colonial politics however limited in knowledge. Irenius hence becomes the mouthpiece of Spenser's radical views and vector for his justificatory discourse.

Throughout "A View", Spenser attempts to dehumanise the Irish people, as a means to justify colonial action and morally legitimise violence. Patricia Palmer describes how 'dehumanizing the enemy... eases the way... for guilt free massacre.'<sup>1</sup> On this basis, the violence Spenser calls for is reliant on a carefully constructed image of the Irishman as both culturally and racially inferior. Spenser's work offers a unique colonial discourse, in that we see a white man attempt to justify the subordination of his fellow white man. As such, Spenser is unable to rely on traditional binaries of black, white, and brown, to develop the Irish man as the 'Other.' Instead, he must engage in a more complex and subtle process, where the Irish man's humanity as a white human is undermined, subverted, and stripped. Spenser achieves this by developing a brutalised and savage image of the Irish people. For example, he describes the practise of cannibalism where 'they did eate the dead carrions' and collectively refers to their 'licentious barbarisme.'<sup>2</sup> Similarly, Spenser attaches animalised descriptions to the Irish, stripping them of their humanity. In his discussion of Irish boodies, for example, Irenius describes how they would 'live in herds' and 'live more licentiously then they could in townes,' at one point likening them as 'like a steere.'<sup>3</sup> Irenius

<sup>1</sup> Patricia Palmer, "'An headlesse Ladie" and "a horses loade of heades"', *Renaissance Quarterly*, 60:1 (2007), 22-57 (p. 34).

<sup>2</sup> Spenser, *A View of the State of Ireland*, ed. by Andrew Hadfield and Willy Maley (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1997), p. 101; *View*, p. 20.

<sup>3</sup> *View*, p. 55; *View*, p. 56.

## Justifications of colonialism within colonial literatures

here takes a traditional cultural aspect of the Irish identity and attaches animal aspects to it, converting the Irish cultural identity as not only 'other', but abjectly alien and inhuman. Katarzyna Lecky describes how Spenser 'justifies England's right to subjugate them by stripping them of their humanity.'<sup>4</sup> By likening the Irish race to animals, Spenser achieves this stripping of humanity and paves the way for his later call that 'all these evils must first be cut away by a strong hand'.<sup>5</sup>

However, implication of the Irish as subhuman, and thus legitimately subjectable to violent oppression, is not enough individually to justify English colonial action. Within the text, Spenser also undergoes a process wherein the English are directly implicated as the "answer" to this issue of Irish savagery. Irenius stresses the natural inclination of the Irish to return to their savage ways- that 'being straight left unto themselves... they eftsoones forgot what before they were taught.'<sup>6</sup> Spenser therefore develops the Irish as a people naturally inclined to their backward ways and thus requiring English enforcement to ensure their attachment to civility. Jean Feerick points to the development of a 'model' of English civility in the text and so following this thinking it is clear Spenser attempts to create a clear division between the savage Irish and civil English. The English coloniser is placed in a superior position, where the savage Irish should look upward and seek to emulate this English model of civility.<sup>7</sup> Irenius goes as far as suggesting 'the English were, at first, 'as stoute and warlike a people as ever the Irish' but suggests that they underwent a similar process of reform that 'brought unto that civility.'<sup>8</sup> Spenser here implicates England as the model for Ireland, by suggesting Ireland might one day follow a similar progression. In likening the current state of Ireland to the past savagery of English societies, he maintains his discourse enforcing the backwardness of Ireland, whilst shining light on the possibility for Irish progression. In the most simplistic terms- if England did it, so can Ireland. Irenius stresses how 'evill people, by good ordinances and government, may be made good,' thus highlighting the possibility that, through English intervention, the Irish might be elevated from their depravity.<sup>9</sup>

Spenser, however, does not solely rely on communicating Irish inhumanity. John Walter describes how Spenser 'distinguishes between an inviting and potentially profitable land and an uncivilized and degenerate people who misuse it.'<sup>10</sup> Rather than approach Ireland holistically, Spenser engages in a two thronged approach where he attacks the inhabitants of Ireland whilst preserving the moral and physical virtue of Ireland itself. In doing so, he leaves open the possibility of reclamation of Ireland and its potential to benefit the metropole. In this sense, Spenser's discourse positions English colonial action as a pragmatic necessity, to liberate the lucrative Irish land from its backward Irish custodians. Irenius describes Ireland's 'goodly rivers, replenished with all sorts of fish most abundantly' and 'goodly woods even fit for builing of houses and ships.'<sup>11</sup> Similarly, he stresses the 'soyle it selfe most fertile' and 'most milde and temperate' climate, pointing to Ireland's strong agricultural conditions.<sup>12</sup> Sarah Hogan describes an attempt to not only 'civilize' the Irish, but

<sup>4</sup> Katarzyna Lecky, 'Irish Nonhumanness and English Inhumanity in A Vewe of the Present State of Ireland', *Spenser Studies*, 30 (2015), 133-150 (p. 133).

<sup>5</sup> *View*, p. 93.

<sup>6</sup> *View*, p. 16.

<sup>7</sup> Jean Feerick, 'Spenser, Race, and Ire-land', *English Literary Renaissance*, 32:1 (2002), 85-117 (p. 93).

<sup>8</sup> *View*, p. 21.

<sup>9</sup> *View*, p. 93.

<sup>10</sup> John Walters, 'Human, All Too Human: Spenser and the Dangers of Irish Civilization', *Spenser Studies*, 30 (2015), 151-165 (p. 154).

<sup>11</sup> *View*, p. 27.

<sup>12</sup> *View*, p. 27.

also to 'absorb Ireland into the English economy.'<sup>13</sup> In such a view, the text is not necessarily concerned with a moralistic opportunity to offer civility, but instead focusses on the lucrative opportunity foreign lands offer. The text certainly complies with such an economic understanding, with Irenius' statement of wishing to settle 'an eternall peace in that countrey, and also to make it very profitable to her Majestie' revealing the financial motivations behind Spenser's thinking.<sup>14</sup> Through this process, we can locate the ambivalent nature of justificatory colonial discourse, wherein the writer must simultaneously attack the foreign land as inferior and socially decadent, whilst retaining the attraction of the land for potential colonial purpose. Rather than collectively depict Ireland holistically as ungodly or morally lost, he stresses its raw potential, enabling a depiction of Ireland as a 'goodly countrey utterly wasted,' open to the uplifting influence of English civility.<sup>15</sup>

Emma Roberts' poem "*The Rajah's Obsequies*" follows a very similar pattern to Spenser, wherein she calls for swift, violent action through colonial activity, whilst preserving the beauty and "potential" of the land itself. However, whilst Spenser relies on an educated, superior analysis of the Irish race and culture, Roberts focuses on one specific aspect of Indian indigenous culture, as a means to employ a rallying cry for western intervention. She presents an observation of the practise of Sati, a Hindu practise wherein a widow would immolate herself, joining her husband in enjoyment of the afterlife.<sup>16</sup> Despite this more specific colonial perspective, continuities can still be identified between the works of Roberts and Spenser.

Through both female characters, Roberts voices a desperate plea for western liberation in India. Roberts develops both women as angelic and helpless, observing 'both are so fair' whilst describing the 'sweet seraphic smile' of one.<sup>17</sup> This description operates in contrast to Roberts' reference to the 'unholy law' and 'dismal rite' of Sati.<sup>18</sup> Through the voice of the women, Roberts weaponizes both as a means to voice her opposition to Sati. Whilst the first woman is described as willing within the process, claiming 'the privilege divine' and complying 'blithely', Roberts undermines her speech, commenting that she seems to be in 'some blest trance.'<sup>19</sup> As such, Roberts suggests the young woman has been disillusioned by the Indian patriarchy and culture, engaging her as example of the psychological manipulation women are subjected to. The other woman presents a wholly indicative voice toward Sati, defiantly singing she complies only 'because these hands are all too weak to break my sex's bands.'<sup>20</sup> The woman then goes on to sing one last rallying cry out to anyone whom might 'avenge the wrong' and 'draw the sword', warning that 'all the hundred thrones of Hindostan before the west's pale warriors shall bow.'<sup>21</sup> Roberts here directly pits the white, western colonizer as liberator of the brown Indian woman, in opposition to the brown patriarchy of India, complying with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's interpretation of British

<sup>13</sup> Sarah Hogan, 'Utopia, Ireland, and the Tudor Shock Doctrine: Spenser's Vision of Capitalist Imperialism', *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies*, 42:4 (2012), 461–486 (p. 471).

<sup>14</sup> *View*, pp. 133-134.

<sup>15</sup> *View*, p. 27.

<sup>16</sup> Lata Mani, *Contentious Traditions* (California: University of California Press, 1998), p. 1.

<sup>17</sup> Emma Roberts, *Oriental Scenes, Dramatic Sketches and Tales, With Other Poems* (Calcutta: Norman Grant, 1830), p. 27; *Oriental Scenes*, p. 33.

<sup>18</sup> *Oriental Scenes*, p. 35; *Oriental Scenes*, p. 29.

<sup>19</sup> *Oriental Scenes*, p. 31; *Oriental Scenes*, p. 30; *Oriental Scenes*, p. 33.

<sup>20</sup> *Oriental Scenes*, p. 34.

<sup>21</sup> *Oriental Scenes*, pp. 36-37.

### Justifications of colonialism within colonial literatures

colonial activity wherein 'white men are saving brown women from brown men.'<sup>22</sup> British colonial action is thus justified as a necessity to liberate the female victims of Indian savagery.

Roberts' depiction of Sati therefore equally presents the Indian culture as backward and murderous, whilst calling for the intervention of western "liberators", thus justifying English colonial activity in India. However, the wider issue and debate around Sati reveals a gaping hole within colonial discourse. Jeanette Herman describes the initial reluctance to abolish Sati as a result of English anxieties over their power.<sup>23</sup> Herman describes how, having recognised the importance of Sati within Hindu culture, English officials feared interfering in its practise may have triggered a riot, or damaged English control. As such, Herman reveals the extent to which power and control were often held in higher esteem than the 'civilising mission' Roberts presents. Roberts' text therefore reveals the ambiguities of colonial justification. Whilst she is evidently shocked at the practise she experiences, it is clear that the civilising mission she endorses was more an opportunity to sustain and justify English colonial presence, rather than liberate Indian women. The female victims of Sati may have been liberated through English colonial intervention, but this simply transferred their subordination toward the hands of white colonists instead.

Roberts therefore attacks the Indian practise of Sati, presenting India's people as savage and requiring colonial intrusion; however, she preserves a more positive description of the land of India itself. She therefore follows Spenser's pattern of developing a detachment between the savage people and the lucrative foreign land. In the poem's beginning, Roberts stresses the natural beauty of India, adopting a picturesque style that develops the land as attractive to her English readership. Máire Ní Fhlathúin agrees, pointing to Roberts' utilisation of the picturesque style as a means to make 'India safe by allowing the reader sight only of those unthreatening elements that can be accommodated within a familiar aesthetic setting.'<sup>24</sup> For example, Roberts describes the 'smiling earth' and 'blue skies', with an almost mystical aspect to the 'sparkling waves' of the rivers.<sup>25</sup> As with Spenser, there is also reference to the lucrative natural resource of India, pointing to the 'fertile plains' and 'waving woods.'<sup>26</sup> As the poem progresses, Roberts deliberately perverts this utopian description of India. The 'sparkling' rivers become 'with living victims prophaned' and the 'glowing temples' become instead the 'reeking courts' stained with 'streams of blood.'<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, the 'blue skies' once described as with 'not a cloud o'er' are now 'blackening' with the 'polluted' smokes of the Sati fires.<sup>28</sup> Through these contrasting descriptions of India, Roberts suggests the perverting nature of Indian society on the otherwise idyllic and lucrative land. She develops a deliberate separation between the natural face of India and the people that pervert it, suggesting that it is not only the female victims of Sati who are captors of the "backward" Indian culture, but the natural and innocent beauty of India itself. Robert's therefore calls for not only the liberation of Indian women, but

<sup>22</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', in *Can the Subaltern Speak?: Reflections on the History of an Idea*, ed. by Rosalind Morris (Columbia: Columbia University Press, 2010), p. 48.

<sup>23</sup> Jeanette Herman, 'Men and Women of Feeling: Conventions of Sensibility and Sentimentality in the Sati Debate and Mainwaring's "The Suttee"', *Comparative Literature Studies*, 42:2 (2005), 223-263 (p. 224).

<sup>24</sup> Máire Ní Fhlathúin, 'India and women's poetry of the 1830s: femininity and the picturesque in the poetry of emma roberts and letitia Elizabeth Landon', *Women's Writing*, 12:2 (2005), 187-204 (p. 188).

<sup>25</sup> *Oriental Scenes*, p. 22.

<sup>26</sup> *Oriental Scenes*, p. 23.

<sup>27</sup> *Oriental Scenes*, p. 24.

<sup>28</sup> *Oriental Scenes*, p. 24.

liberation for the Indian land. Ní Fhlathúin further develops the absence of any Indian people in the poem's opening description, describing therefore a 'portrayal of a colonized land as ownerless, its riches there for the taking.'<sup>29</sup> Such a reading reveals the broader positioning of Roberts' poem within the wider justificatory discourse of empire. Roberts is not only writing in order to shine a light on the abhorrence of Sati, but to present a version of India that is open for colonial interaction.

Unlike both Roberts' and Spenser's texts, H.G Wells produces a far more ambivalent approach to colonialism within "*The Island of Dr Moreau*." The text presents the story of a disgraced medical practitioner, who travels to a distant island, in order to pursue his ambitions of elevating animals toward humanity through vivisection. As such, whereas Roberts and Spenser discuss colonialism through a direct frame, Wells tackles the issue through a complex allegory. The text is, however, valuable in understanding colonial discourses, providing a more critical analysis of colonialism, and justifying a more refined form.

Through Dr Moreau, Wells represents a traditional western colonizer, whose attempts to bring humanity to animals represents western attempts to spread civility. As such, Moreau's justification for his experimentation can be taken as symbolic of western justifications of colonialism. The doctor describes his actions as completing a 'humanizing process' and "stamping" the 'human form upon them.'<sup>30</sup> As such, Moreau approaches his experiments in the same vein as colonialists like Spenser- positioning themselves as a superior existence, who bestow a correct form of humanity upon a lower being. Moreau is pushed by his own 'intellectual desires', highlighting the extent to which his intellectual superiority enables and justifies his experimentation and subordination of the beast people.<sup>31</sup> As in the traditional colonial system, seen in both Spenser and Roberts, Moreau attempts to outline a hegemonic mode of humane existence which the lower beast peoples aspire to fulfil. For example, they are 'told certain things were impossible, and certain things were not to be done' whilst being forced to strictly abide by laws such as 'not to go on all fours.'<sup>32</sup> In influencing these strict laws, which challenge the creation's animalistic inclinations, Moreau outlines an aspirational form of civility, under which the animals can be controlled. Mimicking the English civility that both Spenser and Roberts contrast to savage peoples, Moreau locks his creatures within a system of unattainable rules, where they must battle their natural animalistic urges so as to follow a contradictory mode of existence. This communicates how colonial systems are able to both develop and maintain themselves- by depicting and enforcing an idealised form of existence, which another race can be held against and subordinated as the 'Other' under.

The ending of Wells' novel, however, appears to suggest Wells' anti-colonial views. The island's beasts began 'reverting very rapidly' back to their animalistic forms, appearing to suggest that Wells believes colonial action cannot change peoples, with the eventual overthrow of Moreau appearing as a rallying opposition against colonial powers.<sup>33</sup> However, I believe Moreau's text provides a criticism of the current nature of colonialism rather than an outright opposition to colonial practise itself. This understanding is based on

<sup>29</sup> Máire Ní Fhlathúin, p. 189.

<sup>30</sup> Herbert George Wells, *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (London: Penguin, 2005), p. 67; *Moreau*, p. 82.

<sup>31</sup> *Moreau*, p. 75.

<sup>32</sup> *Moreau*, pp. 80-81; *Moreau*, p. 59.

<sup>33</sup> *Moreau*, p. 123.

### Justifications of colonialism within colonial literatures

the belief that Wells believed in positive aspects of colonial activity but was instead opposed to the often-shocking use of violence and racism. For example, in his analysis of Wells' support of a world state, John Partington highlights aspects of colonialism which Wells supported and wished to preserve within his own ideologies. Partington, for example, points to the fact that while calling for improved treatment of colonial people 'Wells was also adamant that the industrialized nations should not lose access to the precious resources of their former colonial lands.'<sup>34</sup> Furthermore, in his essay, 'World Education', Wells outlines his belief in education as a means to improve lower societies. He describes how 'there are no backward race', as all races serve as opportunities for education, which stands as the 'supreme task before our awakening minds.'<sup>35</sup> To suggest that "*The Island of Dr Moreau*" aims to call for an end to colonialism is therefore ignorant of Wells' unique views. The novel instead pushes a refined justification of empire, that points out the potential for technologically advanced societies to 'educate' other cultures, whilst opposing the violent elements of colonialism. This is realised in the text through the specific nature of Moreau's failing. Moreau's science is developed as successful, with creations like M'ling providing examples of his success. As such, Wells leaves the science of Moreau mainly uncriticised; Moreau's ambitions to bring intelligence to lesser beings aligned with Wells own belief in a world education system that could bring about intellectual equality. It is, however, the lack of morals and use of violence by Moreau that Wells attacks. Through Prendrick, Wells objects to the violence Moreau treats his creatures with, as he exclaims 'poor brutes! I began to see the viler aspect of Moreau's cruelty.'<sup>36</sup> Moreau and Montgomery constantly revert to weaponry, to enforce violence over the creatures, reflecting Wells' objections to violent oppression in colonial practise at the time. For example, in 'The Rights of Man in South Africa', Wells describes his disgust at the violent treatment of black people in South Africa, claiming that 'the more you decivilize them, the more savage and vindictive and merciless will the conflict be.'<sup>37</sup> Such a statement correlates with Moreau's downfall- his mistreatment of the animals and reliance on violence ensure that his end is equally as bloody and violent. Wells instead believed in a universal freedom from unsolicited violence, describing in 'The Universal Right of Man' that 'no one shall be subject to any sort of mutilation.'<sup>38</sup> As such, it is important to consider the specific context in which Wells presents his view of colonialism. Rather than take the ending at face value as revealing a general opposition of colonial activity, the ending must be considered in conjunction with Wells' own faith in the potential benefits of colonialism and world education.

Across all three texts we can therefore see continuities of justificatory colonial discourse. Roberts' narration, *Irenius* and *Dr Moreau* all rely on a construction of an idealised form of civility, that is opposed against a savage 'Other', in order to justify their colonial activity. Roberts and Spenser particularly reveal the extent to which colonial discourses will revert to similar means of justification, despite existing in contrasting periods. Both texts rely on a development of a savage people, who are detached from their own land within the text- with the foreign land being preserved as lucrative and holding "potential." Wells' text follows a different line to Spenser and Roberts, voicing criticism of colonialism.

<sup>34</sup> John Partington, 'H.G. Wells and the World State: A Liberal Cosmopolitan in a Totalitarian Age', *International Relations*, 17:2 (2003), 233-246 (p. 236).

<sup>35</sup> Herbert George Wells, *'42 to '44: A Contemporary Memoir Upon Human Behaviour During the Crisis of the World Revolution* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1944), p. 98.

<sup>36</sup> *Moreau*, p. 95.

<sup>37</sup> Wells, p. 70.

<sup>38</sup> Wells, p. 47.

**Patrick Hayes**

However, in doing so, the text allows an understanding of how a discourse might present a justification of a colonialism different to the violent form presented by Spenser and Roberts.

## Bibliography

Edmund, Spenser, *A View of the State of Ireland*, ed. by Andrew Hadfield and Willy Maley (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1997).

Feerick, Jean, 'Spenser, Race, and Ire-land', *English Literary Renaissance*, 32:1 (2002), 85-117.

Herman, Jeanette, 'Men and Women of Feeling: Conventions of Sensibility and Sentimentality in the Sati Debate and Mainwaring's "The Suttee"', *Comparative Literature Studies*, 42:2 (2005), 223-263.

Hogan, Sarah, 'Utopia, Ireland, and the Tudor Shock Doctrine: Spenser's Vision of Capitalist Imperialism', *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies*, 42:4 (2012), 461-486.

Lecky, Katarzyna, 'Irish Nonhumanness and English Inhumanity in A Vewe of the Present State of Ireland', *Spenser Studies*, 30 (2015), 133-150.

Mani, Lata, *Contentious Traditions*, (California: University of California Press, 1998).

Ní Fhlathúin, Máire, 'India and women's poetry of the 1830s: femininity and the picturesque in the poetry of emma roberts and letitia Elizabeth Landon', *Women's Writing*, 12:2 (2005), 187-204.

Palmer, Patricia, "'An headlesse Ladie" and "a horses loade of heades": Writing the Beheading', *Renaissance Quarterly*, 60:1 (2007), 22-57.

Partington, John, 'H.G. Wells and the World State: A Liberal Cosmopolitan in a Totalitarian Age', *International Relations*, 17:2 (2003), 233-246.

Roberts, Emma, *Oriental Scenes, Dramatic Sketches and Tales, With Other Poems* (Calcutta: Norman Grant, 1830).

Spivak, Gayatri, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', in *Can the Subaltern Speak?: Reflections on the History of an Idea*, ed. by Rosalind Morris (Columbia: Columbia University Press, 2010).

Walters, John, 'Human, All Too Human: Spenser and the Dangers of Irish Civilization', *Spenser Studies*, 30 (2015), 151-165.

Wells, Herbert George, *'42 to '44: A Contemporary Memoir Upon Human Behaviour During the Crisis of the World Revolution* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1944).

Wells, Herbert George, *The Island of Doctor Moreau*, (London: Penguin, 2005).