

Public Preaching and the Establishment of Virginia, ca. 1609

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Abstract

Numerous sermons were preached and published in the first months of 1609 leading up to the institution of the second charter of England's Virginia colony on May 23 of that year. This intensive public relations campaign emanated from the court, from the Virginia Company itself, and from the City of London: investment was widespread as was public doubt. Given the dismal reports from Jamestown by then well known to Londoners, there was reason for active proselytizing. This essay examines the Virginia adventure as represented in the 1609 London sermons of William Crashaw, Daniel Price, and William Symonds, considering the historical record of the colony and competing cultural discourses, including but not limited to the popular stage.

Keywords: Virginia, Virginia Company of London, Preaching, Sermons, William Crashaw, Daniel Price

1. Introduction

Much has been written and much is known about the later colonial period of Virginia, yet the early settlement period remains less well understood for the simple reason that there is a dearth of evidence of the actual experiences of the colonists, in part due to the strict control of communication and, still more dire, because of the extremely high mortality rate in Virginia prior to and about the time of the company's second charter of 1609 (Barbour, 1969; Kupperman, 2007). Personal documents from the colony are rare and report from the perspectives of colonists such as John Smith and George Percy whose observations and experience reflected their relatively privileged circumstances and the political constraints of their positions (Nichols, 2005; Barbour, 1971).

A useful way of approaching the early settlement period in addition to examining those documents composed in and of Virginia is to attend to the documents of control from the company itself, including public sermons presented and published for the specific purpose of promoting the colony as a profitable and also godly enterprise (Fitzmaurice, 2000; Scanlan, 1999). Early modern sermons remain a largely neglected field of study at present, but these documents were ubiquitous and in quite interesting ways capture not only current issues and the rhetoric of faith and zeal but also the politics of City and Crown (McCullough; Ferrell & McCullough). In the case of the Virginia sermons of Daniel Price, William Symonds, and William Crashaw, close reading and contextualization allows for a unique view into the tensions of the early settlement experience in Virginia as publicly presented in London.

2. Methodology

The present discussion examines a limited body of the fairly significant corpus of sermons published in support of the Virginia Company of London during the colony's difficult early establishment period. Setting these sermons in the context of popular public perceptions of Virginia, particularly as represented on the public stage, and against the backdrop of Company correspondence and documents of control allows for a view of competing discourses related to the colony in and around 1609. At the issuance of the second Virginia charter of 1609, there was reason for doubt that the colony would survive at all, let alone prosper, thus this period was one of significant commercial tension in London and of great risk and suffering for the colonists themselves. The methodology, then, is historicist, firmly based in a range of period primary texts from diverse genres and employing close reading and contextualization strategies characteristic of the New Historicism and Revisionist movements in literary and cultural studies. (Gallagher & Greenblatt, 2001; Veenser, 1987).

3. Virginia a Subject of Satire

Even before the Virginia Company of London was issued its first charter in 1606, the project had its detractors and was subject to public ridicule. In composing *Eastward Ho*, for example, playwrights George Chapman, Ben Jonson, and John Marston perceived and exploited widespread cynicism about Virginia: it was a natural subject for satire (Zwierlein, 2004). One response to this satire on the part of the authorities was to put two of the three playwrights under arrest and set them in jail.

The usual explanation for this eventuality has been the sensitivity of Scots courtier Sir James Murray to a lampoon on the influx of Scots to England under James I, which came as a fairly lively punch line in Act Three (Bach, 1997). What leads up to the offending line is revealing with respect to perceptions of Virginia. Briefly described, the dangerous joke went as follows: planning what was penned as a burlesque voyage to Virginia, Captain Seagull insists of the destination, “A whole country of English is there, man, bred of those that were left there in 79 . . . Indians are so in love with ’hem that all the treasure they have they lay at their feet” (3.3.20-6). Presenting the mercantile desires of the then-emergent Virginia Company in an absurd light, Seagull describes a land of inestimable riches where, “all their dripping pans and chamber pottes are pure gold . . . and for rubies and diamonds, they go forth on holy daies and gather ’hem by the seashore, to hang on their childrens coates, and stick in their capps” (3.3.31-9). Virginia, Seagull insists, is as pleasant a country “as ever the sun shinde on; temperate and full of all sorts of excellent viands”; indeed, Seagull’s Virginia is a place so excellent, he muses, thinking of the Scots, “I would a hundred thousand of ’hem were there” (3.3.44-55).

4. Sermons as Documents of Control

Whether the direct reason for censorship was the affront to the Scots or not—and the evidence, some of it directly from Jonson (Patterson, pp. 25-6), suggests this was the case—is less relevant to my argument than that the transgression came in the form of nationalistic wishful thinking entailing the fanciful transport of recent émigrés to one of the most dreadful destinations readily apparent to the popular imagination: Virginia. This satire of 1605 was prescient; by 1609 it was abundantly clear to Londoners that there were, as William Crashaw put it ever so mildly in his sermon, *A New Yeeres Gift to Virginia*, “discouragements that seeme to attend this present intendment of plantation of an English Colonie in Virginia” (Crashaw, Sig. D3). Not surprisingly, the literature of early Virginia is complex and contradictory and was strictly controlled (Brown, p. 330-1). What is certain is that many of the first-hand reports, some of which for obvious reasons had only limited circulation in manuscript when they were current, present a much different picture of the state of colony than did the Company literature, including the public sermons of Daniel Price, William Symonds, and William Crashaw. These company sermons, as the Spanish Ambassador Don Pedro de Zuñiga saw it, represented an intensified funding campaign for which the company “actually made the ministers dwell upon the importance of filling the world with their religion and demand that all make an effort to give what they have for such a grand enterprise” (Brown, p. 258).

5. The Virginia Company of London and Mercantile Expansionism

In a brief letter to Robert Cecil composed on July 29, 1607 upon his return from the first supply to Virginia, Captain Christopher Newport offered an account of the colony, reporting it was “very riche in gold and Copper, of the Gould we have a say and hope to be with your Lordship soon to show it to His Majesty and the rest of the Lords . . . I will not deliver the expectance and assurance we have of great wealth, but will leave it to your Lordship’s censure when you see the probabilities” (Brown, p. 106). Perceptions of Newport’s success varied. Ambassador Zuñiga, ever watchful of the enterprise and prolific in his correspondence home, was doubtful anything more valuable than timber for masts, pitch, and soil to subject to alchemy was discovered. His analysis: “I think this business will stop” (Brown, p. 110-11) Approximately two years later, Gabriel Archer, having arrived in Virginia during one of the most critical periods of early settlement, reported to the Company that Captain Newport and others had been “much to blame” in their claims of finding plenty, adding “you that be adventurers must pardon us, if you find not returne of Commodity so ample as you may expect, because the law of nature bids us seeke sustenance first, and then to labor to content you afterwards” (Brown, pp. 330-1). The tone of Archer’s letter suggests the desperation affecting the colony at this time and also seems to reflect general cynicism about the Virginia Company itself.

Although his position was of course thoroughly biased, the Spanish Ambassador Don Alonso de Velasco echoes Archer’s position, suggesting in his correspondence that the merchants, the primary financiers of the enterprise, were in need of encouragement (Brown, p. 418). Much of this encouragement came in the form of public sermons. The colonial enterprise to Virginia was, from its infancy and in addition to its obvious adventure-for-profit motives, an inherently godly enterprise (Fitzmaurice, 2003, 2000; Miller, 1948). From the First Charter of 1606, the cause of “propagating . . . Christian religion to suche people as live in darkness and miserable ignorance of the true knowledge and worshippe of God” is consistently presented as the first motive and primary justification in colonizing the new world. It is tempting to view the evangelical and eschatological claims throughout the literature of support for the colonial project as a dubious cover for mercantile expansionism. Without question, much of the literature, particularly the sermons on the occasion of the Second Charter and throughout the period April 1609 - May 1610, exhibits precisely this viewpoint.

The most prominent rhetoric in support of the Virginia Company's aims emerged from a group heavily invested culturally and financially in promulgating the position that mercantilism and spirituality were inseparable (Miller, pp. 504-5).

6. Daniel Price

Shortly after Christopher Newport's July 29 letter to the Earl of Salisbury, on August 24, 1607, the eve of that year's Bartholomew Fair, Daniel Price, a chaplain to Prince Henry belonging to a coterie of enthusiastic preachers John Chamberlain complained of as "pulpit hornets" (Nichols, p. 490, note 1) preached a sermon, *The Marchant*, at Paul's Cross, the site of the most ardent evangelizing on the Virginia Company's behalf in years to come. *The Merchant* is helpful in understanding the perceived and real relationship between godliness and mercantilism that characterized the era and also the adventure to Virginia. In his dedicatory preface to the City's merchants, Price addresses his labors to the "holie and heavenly Merchant carefull in search, happy in successe whom neither the tediousnesse of the way, nor the difficultie of the straites could hinder but that he passeth through the Ocean, with Speede, and gaine, and glorie, Christ being his pilot, faith his sterne, hope his anchor, Conscience his carde, good works his lading, happinesse his landing, and his haven heaven" (Price, Sig. A). The sermon is, as Price proclaims it, a business he was commanded to by the merchants and by God, "a text of traficke, of trading, of buying, of selling, of merchandise, and marting, of gaining, and bargaining . . . of good policie" (Price, Sig. A).

Although Price makes no specific mention of Virginia in this sermon, his intentions on this occasion being to ask blessing for the upcoming fair, the frequency and intensity of maritime metaphors in the sermon are striking and reflect the degree to which matters maritime and colonial pervaded the contemporary mindset and the popular imagination. *The Marchant*, like many sermons of its kind, took an uncompromising stance, arguing for the godliness of mercantilism and mercantile expansion, in this case with the intent to "for ever serve to stoppe the mouths of those traducing and ignorant scepticks who villifie the ingenious endeavors of the best deserving labors in Gods vineyard" (Price, Sig. A2). Small wonder Price's services were requested on behalf of the Virginia Company in 1609. Indeed, Price was among the first to answer the call, preaching just five days after the Second Charter was issued. On May 19, 1609, Price preached his sermon, *Saul's Prohibition Staid . . . with a reproofe of those that Traduce the Honorable Plantation of Virginia* at Paul's Cross. Auditors heard the Virginia enterprise vaunted as "the most worthy Voyage that ever was effected by any Christian, in descryng any country of the world" (Price, Sig. F2).

Despite what Price undoubtedly knew was the exceedingly harsh reality of life in Virginia and the catalogue of extreme difficulties attending the settlement process, Price exhorted that "the present encouragement is exceeding much," consulted on by "Oracles of Counsel," adventured in by the nobility and the City of London, and as pleasing to the philosopher as to the merchant and the Divine (Price, Sig. F2). Yet, Price lamented, "Sceptical Humorists" slowed the enterprise: "Barking countymen traduce it." Like to his clerical colleagues, Price came forth on behalf of industry in godly manner to "examine the lying speeches that have ingloriously vilified . . . the Plantation of Virginia" (Price, Sig. F2). Price's sermon was one of several presented that year which sought to quell doubt about the Virginia enterprise from the pulpit. "It is a Voyage," the sermon reads, "wherein every Christian ought to set to his helping hand, seeing the Angell of Virginia cryeth out to this land, as the Angel of Macedonia did to Paul" (Price, Sig. F3). Such rhetoric from the pulpit in 1609 emphatically positioned actions toward Virginia in terms of the founding of the Christian church and with frequent allusions to the crusades.

7. William Symonds

Prior to the departure of the ill-fated fleet commanded by Sir Thomas Gates in the spring of 1609, William Symonds, a prominent voice in the Virginia literature, preached his sermon, *Virginia Britannia* at Whitechapel before an audience of adventurers. Symonds insists in the dedicatory preface to the text of his sermon "that although I could not satisfie their request that would have me goe; yet I could not omit to shoue my zeale to the glorie of God" (Symonds, Sig. B4). In anticipation of the departure of the Sea Venture and seven other crafts destined to experience and not all survive a forty-hour hurricane en route to North America, Symonds emphasizes the fundamental principle of spreading the gospel informing the foundation of Virginia, asking "ministers to bee careful and willing to spread it abroad, in such good services as this, that is intended" (Symonds, Sig. H3). Symonds' primary concern in his sermon is defending the lawfulness of the project, a major theme in the literature; *Virginia Britannia* equates opposition with insanity, insisting, "if these objectors had any brains in their head, but those which are sicke, they could easily find the difference between a bloody invasion, and the planting of a peaceable colony, in a waste country where the people do live but like deere in heards . . . naked, where they know no God" (Symonds, Sig. C4).

Certainly the desire to communicate the word of God informs Symonds' message but there is also a programmatic adherence to puritan godliness in the spirit of militant Protestantism. As to the Papists simultaneously vying for holdings and goods in and of the new world, Symonds implored "every true hearted Protestant, can frame out an answer unto the objection . . . as for the popish Church, an unruly beast exempt from all good government . . . God will curse them" (Symonds, Sig. G2). Such was the zeal of the men preaching Virginia into being and defending the solvency of the Virginia Company with the "sword of the spirit, which is the word of God" (Symonds, Sig. H2). By the time the second Virginia Charter was issued in May 1609, the Company, more heavily invested than ever, evidently feared not only for its principal but even for the basic survival of the colonists on the James River. Disease, dissention, and local threats were rampant. The *Instructions, Orders and Constitutions* issued to Thomas Gates communicate these concerns in addition to warning of encounters with the Spanish en route and expressing the realization that Jamestown's usefulness as a permanent situation was in grave doubt, as the company specified, "because the place is unwholesome and but in the marsh of Virginia . . . and it is not to be expected that any fortification there can endure an enemy" (Virginia Company to Thos. Gates, 1609).

The colony was of course run under conditions of martial law. As Karen Kupperman has argued in her essay "Apathy and Death in Early Jamestown," "Life in Jamestown seems to have borne some similarity to life in [twentieth century] prison camps": the men, she writes, "were underemployed," "the colonists knew that events could always intervene to cut [supply ships] off," and "more than once the Virginia Company threatened to abandon the . . . colonists" (Kupperman, 1979, p. 31; see also Davidson & Lytle, 1992). For the Spanish ambassador's part, he wrote that the colonists felt they were used as slaves (Brown, p. 458). Letters returned from Virginia were delivered "boxed up and sealed and sent first to the Council . . . to advertise [the Company] accordingly" (Virginia Company to Gates, 1609). In the same year, the Company, having received accounts including those of Captain Samuel Argall's experimental passage and that of Gabriel Archer, issued its *True and Sincere Declaration* of the purpose and state of the colony, reflecting that difficulties at the colony and concern amongst adventurers had the potential to expose "600 of our Brethren by our common mother the Church . . . to a miserable and inevitable death" (Virginia Company of London, 1609; see also Gallagher, 2006).

8. William Crashaw

These commonly known and very serious difficulties aside, "The distance," preached William Crashaw in London on February 21, 1610 (NS), "is nothing to speake of . . . it is the easiest, fastest, and safest that hath been discovered to anyplace . . . so easie, as though God himself had built a bridge for men to passe from England to Virginea" (Crashaw, Sig. E1v). Still, Crashaw, himself an adventurer in the company, presented a list of enemies to the enterprise in his sermon of which there are three: The Devil, Papists, and Players. Crashaw's deployment of these three distinct enemies is one of the unique rhetorical strategies to be found in the literature of justification for the Virginia enterprise (Gallagher, 2006; Hoffman, 2006; Lehnes, 2006; Wiggins, 2006). The colonial action is positioned as a necessary Christian duty, with Crashaw presenting the Devil as enslaving the natural inhabitants of the country who are "kept so many yeeres in thraldome"; conveniently, however, and in the spirit of the gospels, the Devil's dominion is not represented as extended to the "the windes and seas," which from a nautical perspective were among the more fearsome oppositional forces (Jourdain; Strachey). Of the Papists, Crashaw implores, "they maligne and deprave this voyage, and we are well assured that they have filled all corners of this kingdome, with . . . base reports and slanders of this action" (Crashaw, Sig. H2r).

Crashaw's third enemy, Players, posed a different sort of threat: public doubt and unwillingness to adhere to station. "They play with Princes and Potentates, Magistrates and Ministers, nay with God and Religion," reads the complaint: "nothing that is good, excellent or holy can escape them: how can this action? . . . they abuse Virginia . . . they disgrace it" (Crashaw, Sig. H4). There is general agreement that Gates' predicament in Bermuda informed the well-known shipwreck scene at the outset of *The Tempest*—written in or around 1610 (Schmidgall, 1986; Vaughan, 2008); but it is doubtful *Eastward Hoe* had been forgotten—indeed the play was revived in 1613, when Act Three must have been an embarrassment and antagonism on an entirely different level than in 1605, so much death and despair having plagued the colony, reducing the population by mid-1610 from as many as six hundred to perhaps fifty (Barnard, 1992). "Let them play on," Crashaw warns, "they make men laugh on earth, but he that sits in heaven laughs them to scorne; because like the flie they so long play with the candle, til it singe their winges and at last burnes them all together" (Crashaw, Sig. H4).

9. Conclusion

The players had a point in satirizing Virginia, insofar as satire can function as a legal vehicle for commenting upon social ills and manifest hypocrisy.

This is not to suggest the colony did not in time bear the fruits the preachers claimed it would—obviously there was success far beyond early modern English imaginings; but for those who settled Jamestown and its neighboring outposts, godly as the purpose was, the passage to Virginia was anything but “Faire, safe, and easie,” even if those golden words did ease the mercantile conscience and smooth the way for expansionism.

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