Source and Intent in Middleton's *Sir Robert Sherley*

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One of the more curious corners of Thomas Middleton's varied career is occupied by a pamphlet he wrote in 1609, bearing the descriptive title:

Sir Robert Sherley, Sent Ambassadour in the Name of the King of Persia, to Sigismond the third, King of Poland and Swecia, and to other Princes of Europe.

His Royal entertainment into Cracovia, the chiefe Citie of Poland, with his pretended Comming into England.

Also, the Honourable praises of the same Sir Robert Sherley, given unto him in that Kingdome, are here likewise inserted.¹

Robert Sherley, the youngest of the three celebrated travelling brothers,² had left the court of Shah Abbas I of Persia in February 1608, after a stay of some ten years, to journey to various European leaders, his mission being to enlist their support for Abbas' continuing struggles against Sultan Ahmed I of Turkey. He had gone first to Moscow, and thence to Cracow, where he spent the winter of 1608–9. In the spring he continued to Prague, where in June he was made a Count Palatine by the Holy Roman Emperor Rudolph II, and to Rome, where Pope Paul V made him a count of the sacred palace of the Lateran in September. His next major stop was Madrid. He had intended to go directly to England from there, but the Spanish appear to have frustrated his attempts to depart, primarily in an effort to block the trade agreements he intended between Britain and Persia. Thus, though he had hoped to travel to England late in 1609, it was not until the summer of 1611 that he was finally able to extricate himself from virtual house arrest in Spain and proceed to his homeland.

In early 1609, however, he was expected in Britain, and Middleton's pamphlet appears to have been a piece of advance public relations work aimed at paving the way, at least with the general public, for Sherley's mission to James' court.

Middleton's pamphlet opens with a laudatory introduction praising, among other things, travel (it encourage unity, leagues, concord among nations), Englishmen (they are great travellers), and Robert Sherley (he is a travelling

Englishman). The introduction then turns to Sherley's honours at the Persian court, particularly that of being chosen by Abbas to travel through Christendom uniting princes against the heathen Turk, and goes on to praise Sherley as the perfect man for the mission, being both traveller and Christian. Finally, the introduction turns to the magnificence of Sherley's reception in Poland, preparing the way for the praises presented to him there which, translated, make up the main body of *SRS*.

This main body consists of four Latin anagrams on Sherley's name, developed into a set of encomia on the name and the negotiation of Robert Sherley, in the course of which Mercury resigns to Sherley his post as chief messenger, Christian kings are exhorted to join this holy war with zeal equal to the Persians', the Turks are reviled, Sherley's virtue, fortune and rhetorical skill are lauded, England is made to lament Sherley's long absence, and so on.

Middleton then turns to a brief section on Persian life and manners, treating in rapid succession religion, regal discipline, fortifications, official policy on propagation, military training, diet and dress. At the end of this section he introduces one Master Moore, who appears to be Sherley's advance man for the English campaign. *SRS* then concludes with an example of the original Latin praises of Sherley, which Middleton attributes to Andraeas Loeaechius, a Polish scholar. The truth of the matter is that the entire main section of *SRS* is the work of Loeaechius, known in Poland as Lechowicz, and in Melrose, Scotland (his place of origin), as Andrew Leech. Juliusz Krzyzanowski, in 1949, identified Leech's Latin pamphlet, *Encomia Nominis & Negocii D. Roberti Sherlaeii* (Cracow, 1609), as Middleton's main source.³ It must have been published soon after 1 January, 1609 (the entertainments it contains took place in November, 1608), whereupon Sherley immediately dispatched his agent, Master Moore, to carry a copy to London and have it published there as advance publicity for the imminent mission. Middleton tells us nothing more about Moore than that he came dressed in Persian garb, and subsequent scholars have added nothing to our knowledge of the man. Middleton seems to have been engaged, either by the Sherley family or by Moore himself, to translate and refine the *Encomia*, and he did so very quickly, for his own pamphlet was in print before 30 May, 1609, on which date its publisher, John Budge, paid a fine for having had it printed without permission.⁴

An additional source for *SRS*, not previously noticed, is the fifteenth book of Strabo's *Geography*, from which Middleton created his brief appended description of Persian life. The choice of Strabo is significant, as will be shown later, for Middleton could have used any of several contemporary English descriptions of Persia, but chose, instead, a work written circa 17–23 A.D., well before Mohammed and the rise of Islam. He seems to have used a Latin translation of Strabo, probably that of Guarini of Verona and Gregorio of Tiferno (*De Situ Orbis Libri XVII*), which went through thirteen editions between 1469 and 1652.⁵

One is tempted to wonder why Middleton, a major playwright, minor poet, occasional pamphleteer, friend of the City fathers, and possibly Puritan sympathiser,⁶ chose to get involved with a campaign by a Roman Catholic on behalf of an infidel Shi'ite.⁷ Middleton's only other pamphlet of 1609 is *The Two Gates of Salvation* (also known as *The Marriage of the Old and New Testament* and as *God's Parliament House*), a collection of Protestant devotional readings setting parallel passages from the Old and New Testaments opposite one another to demonstrate the efficacy of Old Testament prophecy. It is a safe and soporific job of work. *SRS* is only slightly more invigorating, but it does seem, at first glance, rather a risky piece of publishing. The Sherley family was not in good odour in official England, despite the popular folk-hero status of Robert and his brothers, whose anti-Turkish exploits had already been celebrated in several pamphlets as well as a play.⁸ Robert's father, Sir Thomas Sherley of Wiston, was near bankruptcy. The oldest son, Sir Anthony, like Robert a sometime servant of Shah Abbas, appears to have offended King James, and was barred from return to England altogether. And the middle brother, the younger Sir Thomas, after several years in Turkish prisons, had only recently been released from prison in England, where he had served time for meddling in the Levant trade. For Middleton to attach himself to a set of encomia lauding Robert Sherley and his Persian cause, then, and to dedicate his work first to the elder Sir Thomas, then on a cancel to the younger, might seem both impolitic and out of character.⁹

We must not, however, rest too heavily on Middleton's loyalty to fixed ideological positions. He seems, throughout his career, to have written for pay when the opportunity presented itself, and such an opportunity was very probably at hand here. Possibly Master Moore brought with him some sort of honorarium from Robert himself. Possibly, too, Middleton angled for more in his two dedications. (A third possibility, knowing Middleton's earlier luck with patronage, is that Moore gave him nothing, but assured him of support from the Sherley family, who turned out to be in no position to provide any!)

Nor, for that matter, should we underestimate the pragmatism that informed even Puritan attitudes to foreign affairs involving Catholics and pagans. John Cartwright, in *The Preacher's Travels* (1611), may stand as an exemplar:

Two of the most mightie and warlike Princes among the Barbarians, the great *Turke* and the *Persian*, are now in armes one against the other; stirred up thereunto by two of our Country-men, Sir *Anthonie Sherley*, and Master *Robert Sherley* his brother.

A warre not onely like to be long and bloudie, but also very commodious and of great opportunitie to the Christian Commonweale: for that it doth graunt and give leasure to divers parts of Christendome to refresh themselves, and to increase their forces, much weakned, both by the Great Turkes warres; and most of all by their civill dissentions at home.¹⁰

Cartwright has no illusions about Abbas, seeing him as a cruelly Machiavelian prince, and a "professed Mahumatine" (I4v), but the possibility of a respite from Turkish tyranny overrides any qualms he might otherwise have about supporting a Persian-European alliance and the Sherley mission:

We cannot denie but that both the Embassies of Sir *Anthonie Sherley*, & also of *M. Robert* his brother are of great importance, & that a combination of so great forces together would soone have delivered many poore Christians of their miseries, the world of it ignominy, & mankind of that monster of Turkish tyranny, that hath too long raigned & laid the earth desolate. (K4)

(One might compare the Elizabethan attitude to Tamerlane, seen as heroic in that he halted a Turkish threat to Christendom.)

It is likely that Cartwright's views on the Sherley campaign were in line with those of most Protestants. Given this supportive attitude, given the popular interest in the Sherleys, and given the likelihood that the pamphlet had some income attached to it, we should be less surprised that Middleton agreed to be the hired pen and add a title of his own to the burgeoning Sherley bibliography.

We should not be surprised either that Middleton handled his sources in ways intended to make Sherley and his Persian mission more palatable to the intended English audience.¹¹ He does not make numerous changes in Leech's pamphlet, but those few he makes are significant and consistent. In the first place, the pamphlet's most obvious Roman Catholic features are removed. Lines praising Pope Paul V as the source of all holy wars and the potential converter, by force, of all Islam, disappear altogether. An address to "Pauli V Pont. Max. unā & Regum Christianor" becomes merely "all Kings in Christendome" (B4v). And in the second place, Leech's praise for Sherley's loyalty to Persia is excised, no doubt because it would seem treasonous to an English reader. (Indeed, when Sherley finally did arrive in England, his insistence on Persian dress and his refusal to doff his turban in the presence of the King caused no little scandal.) So Leech's little piece "Ad Suam Libertatem," in which Sherley is made to boast that the greatest imaginable freedom lies in serving the all-powerful Shah of Persia, does not find its way into Middleton's *SRS*.

Middleton's alterations of Leech for propagandistic purposes are sometimes as simple as making sure that an unmarked reference such as "Mahumetigenum" is given the kind of colouring that would activate the anti-Turk reflexes of the common English reader: he translates this one as "that hel-hownde broode of Mahomet" (B4). The over-all impression of Middleton's handling of Leech, then, is that he preserves almost all the praise of Sherley and the Persian mission, adding virtually nothing of his own, but making adjustments or subtractions at points where the pamphlet's pro-Rome or pro-Persia attitudes seem likely to offend.¹²

Middleton's second source, the *Geography* of Strabo, is interesting by virtue of its very choice. A number of English travellers had recently been in Persia, and had brought back descriptions of the luxury and cruelty of the court of Abbas, the practices of Shi'ite Mohammedanism, and so on. Middleton's decision not to employ one of these contemporary accounts, but to turn instead to a second-hand description some 1600 years out of date, seems related to his effort to make of the Persians tolerable allies. The ruse seems rather disdainful of the acumen of the general reader, given the current popularity of exotic travel literature and of the Persian-based Sherleys. Nevertheless, Middleton chooses Strabo, and takes advantage of a pre-Mohammedan Zoroastrian Persia to soften potential English objections to any sort of alliance with Islam, even Shi'ite Islam. Middleton is thus able to depict Persian religion without mentioning Mohammed. That religion is, of course, pagan, worshipping "the Sunne, Moone, Venus, Fire, Earth, Water, and Winds" (C3v), but it is austere, and it shares with contemporary puritanism in eschewing idolatries such as altars and statues (translating Strabo's "*Persae nec statuas, nec ars [aras] erigunt*" [525]). Middleton skims over most Zoroastrian religious practices as described by Strabo, dismissing them as "superstitious, and full of idle Ceremonies" (C3v), thus not really compromising himself, but achieving what he sought to, namely to make the Persians seem more like Protestants than like Turks in their religion.

Middleton now turns to the firmness of Persian rulers. His more conservative contemporaries, in the wake of the Essex and Gunpowder incidents, were very aware of the possibility of treason, and apt to approve an amount of rigour in the maintenance of law and order. Thus Middleton retains and ornaments Strabo's description of Persian rulers as swift to punish any form of treason. Strabo's terse "*Qui non paruerit, capite et brachio amputato proiciitur*" (525) becomes:

So severe their lawes are in effect, to the punishing of all rebellious treasonable and disobedient people, that whosoever hee bee that is found repugnant in the least demeanour to the will and affection of the King, hee is presently ceazde upon by the Tormentors, his head and armes chopt off, and with his detested body throwne into some common field, without eyther grave or covering. (C3v)

One can imagine the Jacobean moral majority nodding in sage approval.

The usual view of Persian life was that it was luxurious and hedonistic, qualities unlikely to win approval in any corner of Protestant England. Samuel Chew reports that "to say of any sort of luxury that the Persians might envy it was as much as to say that it was unparalleled."¹³ By lifting from Strabo the spartan diet of Persian boys in military training and transforming it into the common diet of the whole country, Middleton is able to create an image of Persian self-discipline and simplicity far removed from the usual pictures, and surely more attractive to his audience:

Their victuals for the most part, by which the common sort of people are fed and doe live by, are Acorns and Hedge-peares, their Breade course and hard, their Drinke the running Springs. (C4)

He does not go so far as to ascribe such a diet to the court, but in choosing to remain silent about court diet altogether he once again deflects disapproval, leaving the reader only with a positive sense of the unadorned nature of Persian existence.

Middleton also uses Strabo to revise the usual English disapproving titillation on the subject of Persian polygamy. Strabo is perfectly matter-of-fact: "Ducunt uxores quam plures, et multas pellices alunt, propagandae sobolis gratia" (525). Middleton adjusts this somewhat, deleting the concubines ("pellices"), and underlining the patriotic stress on off-spring:

And so much they do detest Sterility and Barrennesse, that from the highest to the lowest they take many wives in marriage, counting the fruitfull propagation of the Empire, the onely happinesse they can rayse to it. (C3v)

To strictness of religion, firmness of ruler, austerity of diet, then, is added patriotic propagation, and in these virtues can be seen the makings of a very acceptable ally indeed against the "hel-hownde broode of Mahomet." Middleton does not hide all the facts about Persia. Even in this section he mentions the wealth of the rulers and the striking richness of dress. But on the whole, he uses Strabo to create a picture of remarkable austerity.

In his introduction, Middleton had already gone one important step further in the adjustment of attitudes to Persia. He followed Anthony Nixon's lead in playing down the personal Mohammedanism of Shah Abbas and making much of his (sometime) tolerance of Christians. Nixon had claimed that Robert Sherley

labours the King very much to christianisme, to which (it is said) he lends such attentive eare, that he doubteth not, but by Gods assistance and his good perswasions, he may in time bee brought to become a Christian.¹⁴

Middleton claims, with no basis in fact, that this conversion has now been effected:

It was thought fit (the Persian himselfe confessing and worshipping Christ,) Ayde should bee required at the hands of Christian Princes in the Persians behalfe. (B3)

As John Cartwright says, in another context, of Abbas' supposed Christianity:

That the King (a professed enemie to the Name of our blessed Saviour) should bee the God-father [of Sherley's child]; this certainly is more fitte for a Stage, for the common people to wonder at, then for any mans private studies. (K3v-K4)

And Robert himself, writing to Sir Anthony about Abbas in 1605, says:

beleewe me in all his actions, he publisheth to the world the hatred he bears to the name of Christians, for everie daie he maketh slaves of the poore Armenyans, which are daile brought like Sheepe into every markt, burnyng and pulling downe all Churches to the great infamie of all the Christians that live heere, which doth shewe great despitfullnes, for although the turke is a great enemy, yet doth he tollerate them, and let them live freely in his Contrey.¹⁵

Under the circumstances, Middleton's decision to convert Abbas must be propagandistic in intent. And the tack he took was not new, for Samuel Chew, in *The Crescent and the Rose*, says that English factors in Persia tried the same device when reporting to their employers at home:

Their aim to establish cordial or at least workable arrangements between English and Persian merchants led some of them to take note of any characteristics of Shi'a Mohammedanism that appeared to link it with Christianity and separate it from the orthodox Sunni Mohammedanism of the Turks. This tendency was perhaps strengthened by the idea, intermittently present in the minds of European statesmen, that an alliance might be effected between Persia and Christendom against the Ottoman Empire.¹⁶

Middleton's handling of the Sherley assignment, then, can be seen to be distinctly calculated, though hardly subtle. He anticipates his audience's objections and takes steps to make the whole subject more attractive. As has been suggested, these steps give little credit to the awareness or good sense of this audience. In light of current claims for Middleton's anti-aristocratic popularist political beliefs, so supercilious an attitude to the intelligence of the common reader must seem a surprise. But as has already been said, nothing of this sort should surprise us in Middleton. His alliances seem to be many and shifting. While there are recurrent and constant motifs in his work, there is no clear sense of his being the consistent voice of any one party in the political, religious and social unrest that was growing in England. Here, if I interpret the events correctly, he takes on a commissioned assignment, coolly sizes up the intended audience, makes the necessary choices and adjustments of source material, and produces a workmanlike, if off-hand, piece of professional public relations.

As a final note, it should be mentioned that when the Sherley mission finally did reach England its failure there was dismal.

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Notes

1 The pamphlet (STC 17894, 17894.5) was printed by J. Windet for John Budge. Hereafter it is abbreviated SRS.

- 2 Useful accounts of the Sherleys are to be found in D.W. Davies, *Elizabethans Errant* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1967), Boies Penrose, *The Sherleian Odyssey* (Taunton: Wessex Press, 1938), and Evelyn Philip Shirley, *The Sherley Brothers* (Chiswick: Charles Whittingham, 1848).
- 3 T.L.S. (12 August, 1949), 521. The pamphlet survives in an unique copy at the Ossolineum Library in Wrocław. I am grateful to the Director of the Ossolineum, Dr Janusz Albin, for providing photographic copy of the pamphlet, and to Ross Arthur for assisting with the translation. Lechowicz is identified as Andrew Leech by Th. A. Fischer, *The Scots in Germany* (Edinburgh: Otto Schulze & Co., 1902), p. 231.
- 4 Court Book C, *Records of the Court of the Stationers' Company 1602 to 1640*, ed. William A. Jackson (London: the Bibliographical Society, 1957).
- 5 W. Falconer, in *The Geography of Strabo*, trs. H.C. Hamilton and W. Falconer (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1854), III.xxiii. For the following discussion I depend on *Strabonis De Situ Orbis Libri XVII* (1557), which I have compared with Isaac Casaubon's *Strabonis Rerum Geographicarum Libri XVII* (1587). Page numbers in my discussion refer to the 1557 edition.
- 6 See Margot Heinemann, *Puritanism and Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980).
- 7 Boies Penrose (*The Sherleian Odyssey*, 179) denies that Sherley ever did more than flirt with Catholicism. But E.P. Shirley, in *The Sherley Brothers*, says, "There seems indeed every reason to believe that both husband and wife [Robert and Teresia], in common with their brother Anthony, ... lived and died in the Roman Catholic Faith" (99). The fact that Sherley was honoured both by Rudolph II and by Pope Paul V suggests something more than a mere flirtation. Antonio de Gouvea, an Augustinian appointee to Persia, claims to have converted Robert to Catholicism in Persia in September, 1602 (*Relaçam em que se tratam as Guerras e Grandes Victorias que Alcançou grãde Rey da Persia Xá Abbas do grão Turco Mahometto, & seu fillio Amethe*, Lisboa, 1611, G3). There is no way of knowing whether Gouvea is being truthful, but it would seem that we have very considerable material suggesting Sherley's Catholicism, and very little to deny it.
- 8 See Anthony Sherley, *A True Report of Sir Anthony Shierlies Journey* (London, 1600); William Parry, *A New and Large Discourse of the Travels of Sir Anthony Sherley* (London, 1601); Anthony Nixon, *The Three English Brothers* (London, 1607); John Day, William Rowley and George Wilkins, *The Travailes of the Three English Brothers* (London, 1607).
- 9 It is pleasant to speculate that the new dedication to the younger Sir Thomas was occasioned by nothing more sinister than Middleton's confusion when advised by Moore to dedicate his work to Sir Thomas Sherley. The elder Sir Thomas, as mentioned earlier, was in difficult financial straits, and unlikely to prove a liberal patron.
- 10 Cartwright, *The Preacher's Travels* (London, 1611), A2v.
- 11 That that audience was seen as general and relatively unsophisticated, rather than as primarily official and courtly, is implied by the decision to turn to the vernacular, rather than retaining the Latin of the originals and simply adding a Latin introduction. It is impossible to know whose decision this was: Middleton's own, the Sherleys', or John Budge's. But clearly *SRS* was designed to appeal to a wide audience, whether for a broader base of popular support or simply for bigger sales.
- 12 One of the details Middleton elected *not* to subtract was Leech's designation of Robert Sherley as *Eques Angli*. A knighthood was thus conferred on a man who was never knighted in England, and whose honours in Prague did not come until 2 June, 1609, when *SRS* was already in print. Middleton might have made an uninformed assumption, understandable in the light of James I's open hand with knighthoods, but the real possibility is that he enhanced his hero in the eyes of the general reader by keeping what he knew was a fictitious title. Throughout Sherley's career there continued to be uncertainty in official England as to whether his knighthood should be allowed.
- 13 Samuel Chew, *The Crescent and the Rose* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1937), p. 235.
- 14 *The Three English Brothers*, K4v.
- 15 Cited in E.P. Shirley, pp. 56–7.
- 16 Chew, p. 223.