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FROM *CONFESSIO* TO CALDERÓN DE LA BARCA: THE LITERARY EVOLUTION OF ST. PATRICK'S BIOGRAPHY AND THE QUESTION OF HIS LEGACY

Abstract: In the following text, I will discuss the gradual erosion of historical accuracy in connection to a series of hagiographic texts concerning the biography of Saint Patrick, Ireland's patron saint. I will outline each one against a wide historical and cultural backdrop and subsequently ascertain whether or not the changes that hagiographers introduced over the centuries have been detrimental to his legacy. The texts I have chosen to analyse can be separated into two major time periods: the first being the trio of works that construct the absolute basics of the Saint Patrick legend, all originating from the 5th to 7th centuries, which are the autobiographical *Confessio*, with its heavy focus on relaying a Christian moral about sin, and the historical sources Bishop Tírechán's *Account of St. Patrick's Journey* and Muirchú's *Life of St. Patrick*. With these early hagiographic texts serving as reference points, I will, however, primarily study two Spanish Patrician works from the 17th Century: Pérez de Montalbán's 1627 work *Vida y Purgatorio de San Patricio* and Pedro Calderón de la Barca's play *El purgatorio de San Patricio*, or *The Purgatory of Saint Patrick* in its English translation. Within my analysis I will determine whether or not the changes integrated into his story by Montalbán and Calderón in fact matter to the overall legacy of Saint Patrick in the modern-day and if they had any lasting impact to readers, bearing in mind that both texts, more or less, retain the essentials of his Christian message and promote him as an exemplary spiritual figure within history.

Keywords: *St. Patrick; hagiography; Ireland; Pedro Calderón de la Barca; revisionism.*

The life of St. Patrick is difficult or even impossible to ascertain precisely, owing to his birth being close to the beginning of a period in history called the "Dark Ages". A historical text called the *Annals* records Patrick's arrival in

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Ireland in the year 432, one year after the first attempted (but failed) Christian evangelical mission led by bishop Palladius (Paor 118). It is estimated by the Patrician scholar Liam de Paor that Patrick was likely born in the year 415, he was kidnapped and made into a slave in Ireland between the years 430-31, he escaped captivity in 437, and he lived once more in Britain in the 440's. He was then made a deacon in 445, a priest in 450, and a bishop in 460 (89-90). Paor hypothesises that Patrick died in 493, in accordance or agreement with the date given by the *Annals* (95). The two extant writings we have by St. Patrick are the *Confessio*—commonly titled *St. Patrick's Confession*—and the lesser read, yet important, *Letter to the Soldiers of Coroticus*. (The *Confessio* is written to be read by a general audience but the *Letter to the Soldiers of Coroticus* was written on behalf of the Irish people). The *Confessio* was first found in 807 located within a historical text called the *Book of Armagh* and most historians attribute it to St. Patrick himself, although they are keen to note that the text is very likely to have become corrupted and greatly embellished. The text's heavy focus on St. Patrick's trial for sinfulness, when he was about 45 years old, explains its title—the *Confessio*. Patrick's purpose for writing is arguably to “confess” this sin openly to a wide audience and so if biographical detail appears it is for the sole purpose of its being relevant to Patrick's understanding and adoption of Christian dogma. Overall, Paor writes that it doesn't provide us with Patrick's “exterior” history but his “interior” history (88). Two additional early sources from the 7th century are Bishop Tírechán's *Account of St. Patrick's Journey* and Muirchú's *Life of St. Patrick*, two priests whose “main objective was to use Patrick to enhance the prestige of the church of Armagh” (Duffy 54). Tírechán and Muirchú's texts are not Biblical in style but in fact have elements of peril and excitement within powerful storylines, making them well suited to artistic adaptation. Bishop Tírechán's *Account of St. Patrick's Journey* uses the *Confessio* as a source for much of its content but it introduces the story of Patrick's difficulties with the pagan Irish king Loguire, who is not solidly recorded as a monarch in Irish history. Muirchú's *Life of Saint Patrick* is much more bloody and mythical in style and retells information about King Loguire and his association with druids and “inventors of the dark arts” (Paor 179). It includes a plot involving an attempted poisoning of Patrick, and so on (186) which prompts him to invoke a curse which kills all but four of the king's court. The king becomes a Christian following a threat by Patrick that God will kill him otherwise (187).

Moving forward in time and location, Pedro Calderón de la Barca's 17th

century Spanish play *El purgatorio de San Patricio*, or *The Purgatory of Saint Patrick* is, however, a particularly interesting hagiographic text to study in relation to St. Patrick owing to the radical inaccuracies and characterological reworking it possesses. This essay will trace Calderón's sources, detailing the progression of biographical alterations throughout history, and will finally evaluate whether or not all of these "errors" damage the artistic integrity of the play itself and in turn St. Patrick's legacy. To begin with, unfortunately, Calderón's personal knowledge about Patrick's life story is difficult to ascertain for several reasons; the first being because of his close usage of Pérez de Montalbán's hagiographical text *Vida y Purgatorio de San Patricio* throughout his play, eschewing other more established works. That he chose to use only one source of reference could indicate a lack of extensive Patrician reading on his part. Secondly, there are no attempts within *The Purgatory of St. Patrick* to revise the anachronisms and biographical errors within *Vida y Purgatorio de San Patricio*, which brings out immediate suspicion that Calderón simply did not know enough about St. Patrick's life to question Montalbán's changes, and he therefore accepted them at face value as the official story. The likelihood is slim, however, that Calderón, a Spanish priest, thought that Patrick was a native Irishman, as Montalbán claims, and not a Briton. He would have been informed of St. Patrick's life, no doubt, through the proliferation of Patrician texts that had existed in Europe since the 12th century, most of whom being based upon Jocelin of Furness's *The Life of Saint Patrick (Vita sancti Patricii)*.

Pérez de Montalbán's 1627 work *Vida y Purgatorio de San Patricio* is, for the most part, unique in the Patrician canon for its awkward re-writing of his origin story. It is difficult to say precisely how much it altered the understanding of St. Patrick's biography in Spain, or for how long. *Vida y Purgatorio de San Patricio* was "met with immense success" upon release (Calderón, *The Purgatory* 7) and had countless reprinted editions, including expanded and "improved" material in the fifth impression (ibid.). It was also translated into French, Dutch, Portuguese, German and Italian within the next ten years or so (ibid.) so the erroneous information found within it did not find itself isolated only to Spain and the Spanish language. Interestingly, however, save a selection of extracts located within Maccarthy's 1873 translation, it has never appeared in English, which makes for a curious hypothesis. Owing to the greater national connection to Saint Patrick in Ireland and overall knowledge about him because of the country's oral tradition, it is likely that Montalbán's work would have been received with

incomprehension and even anger upon any attempt of its dissemination throughout the land in the 18th century. Montalbán's change to Saint Patrick's origin story is major in scope since its retelling of where he was born leads to an unforeseen number of basic problems concerning geographical logic, but most significantly it irrevocably damages the significance of Saint Patrick's mission to evangelise Ireland due to a serious series of historical inaccuracies. That said, however, Montalbán's changes to Saint Patrick's story were almost certainly unintentional and resulted most likely from a misreading of the sources he based his work upon, coupled with serious, but understandable, unfamiliarity with the commonly believed falsehood that Patrick was Irish. Chapter 1 of *Vida y Purgatorio de San Patricio* begins:

Between the north and west is situated the Island of Hibernia, or Ireland, as it is at present more usually called. It was once known as the Island of Saints, because its inhabitants were ever ready to shed their blood in the lists of martyrdom [...]. In this island there was a village with a few inhabitants, called Emptor, which the sea, like a cincture of snow, not only encircled but appeared to bind. Here was born a youth of such virtuous dispositions that he seemed to belie the promise of his years, since virtue and adolescence are not easily reconciled. (Calderón, *The Purgatory* 105-6).

Much of Montalbán's work, according to Denis Maccarthy, is "chiefly based upon a 1624 text titled *Florilegium Insulae Sanctorum, sue vitae et Actae sanctorum Hiberniae*¹ (*A Collection of Insular Saints: the Lives and Deeds of Irish Saints*) by Thomas Messingham" (8), who was an Irish priest from a seminary in Paris.² However, in the case of retelling the story of Patrick's place of birth, Messingham very clearly positions it in Britain, as laid out in the opening extract:

Extitit vir quidam Calphurnius nomine, filius Potit, Presbyteri, Brito natione, in pago Taburnia vocabulo, hoc est tabernaculorum campo, eo quod Romanus exercitus tabernacula fixerit ibidem, fecus oppidum Emphthor degens mari Hibernico collimitans habitatione. (Messingham 3)

Messingham's first chapter is almost identical to the Patrician work the *Life of Saint Patrick* by Jocelin of Furness, a hugely influential hagiographical text

¹ *A Collection of Insular Saints: The Lives and Deeds of Irish Saints*.

² Peggy O'Brien corroborates this by stating that "Messingham's "chief authority [was] the *Life of Saint Patrick* by Jocelin" (O'Brien 56).

which, amongst other content, introduced the myth that St. Patrick expelled all the snakes from Ireland, as part of a Christian allegory.

There was once a man named Calphurnius, the son of Potitus, a presbyter, by nation a Briton, living in the village Taburnia (that is, the field of the tents, for that the Roman army had there pitched their tents), near the town of Emphthor, and his habitation was nigh unto the Irish Sea. (O'Leary 2273)

Why Montalbán wrote that St. Patrick was born in *Ireland* is therefore difficult to absolutely determine since he used other aspects of the origin story, outlined in both Messingham and Jocelin's texts, to the letter. This involves St. Patrick's father being married to a French lady called Conchessa, who was related to Saint Martin of Tours (Calderón, *The Purgatory* 106; O'Leary 2273; Messingham 3). Although, In Jocelin and Messingham's sources, Conchessa is the niece of Saint Martin of Tours but according to Montalbán, she was his sister. However, there is unfortunately no definite modern location for where Emphthor may be and it has led to "considerable controversy" amongst Patrician scholars (Calderón, *The Purgatory* 105).

The birthplace of Patrick being Emphthor or "Nemthur" is traditionally attributed to the hymn of Saint Fiacc (*ibid.*), but this is contrary to information given in Saint Patrick's own *Confessio* whereupon he states that he was born in "Banaventaberniae" (Duffy 11). All these confusions facilitated, or at least failed to correct, Montalbán's mistake that Emphthor was in Ireland and it was this error alone that brought about a series of new errors and unintentional strange biographical occurrences. The most jarring aspect resulting from Saint Patrick being a native Irishman, not a Briton, in *Vida y Purgatorio de San Patricio* is that it does not make total sense that he is a Christian, owing to Ireland being a pagan country prior to 432, according to the *Annals of the Four Masters* (Paor 118) when his own evangelical mission is said to have commenced. Montalbán, through sheer necessity, and so as to explain this irregularity, states that Patrick became a Christian because he had a French mother. Calderón iterates this within Saint Patrick's speech in Act I scene 2:

A French lady, I was born,
Unto whom I owe (oh, happy

Re-writing, Re-imagining the Past (IV)

That 'twas so!), beyond my birthright of nobility, the vantage
Of the Christian faith, the light
Of Christ's true religion granted
In the sacred rite of baptism [...] by the Church" (Calderón, *The Purgatory*
17).

However, it is, no matter how Montalbán explains it, an unlikely occurrence that Patrick's family practiced Christianity in Ireland, even if his mother was French. It additionally lessens his necessity to carry out a mission in his country if indeed Christian churches were already established. Next, there is the issue of Saint Patrick's abduction by pirates which occurred, in the *Confessio*, when he was a teenager by Irish raiders who attacked the coast of Britain and pillaged the towns there. This is unanimously told in all subsequent Saint Patrick origin stories, including Montalbán's own source Messingham (Messingham 7-8). Messingham's tale is near identical to Jocelin's version in chapter XIII of his text (O'Leary 2425). Montalbán, however, in a very awkward reworking of the tale, *had* to change the entire narrative concerning the pirates in relation to their identity and eventual actions in order for his text to make sense. Firstly, the pirates change nationality, which is evident in Calderón's play when Saint Patrick states that the captain of the ship was called Philip de Roqui (Calderón, *The Purgatory* 19). He is called Filippo de Roqui in Calderón's original text, which indicates Spanish, Portuguese or even Italian origin (Calderón, *El purgatorio* 11), which is strange in itself since pirates from these countries were rare around Irish shores. Montalbán's next attempt to rectify his erroneous narrative fails to convince, however, no matter how it is phrased. Saint Patrick, in Act I scene 2 of Calderón's play, states that the foreign pirates wanted to sell him to the Irish king as a slave (Calderón, *The Purgatory* 19; Calderón, *El purgatorio* 115), but their plans were scuppered because God crashed their ship against the rocks during a storm, sparing only his life and Luis Enius's. Historically, in the 5th century, Irish raiders sold young men from Britain as slaves throughout the country, but there is no evidence that foreign pirates would have, or could have, kidnapped Irish men from their own soil and then sold them to royalty. These Spanish, Portuguese or Italian pirates were enemies of Ireland, so any plan for them to sell Patrick to his own king, after raiding the country's coastline extensively, would seem to be an act of madness and it would lead to their certain deaths in the Irish court. However, Montalbán had to develop this narrative regardless of its

obvious lack of logic since it was necessary to somehow situate Patrick into his lowly position as a shepherd in the northwest and orientate his text with the earlier sources more successfully. The only additional problem, story-wise, was to convincingly explain why the Irish king did not free Patrick when he was rescued from the sea in Act I scene 2, but this is resolved elegantly. This is because it allowed Montalbán to introduce the character of the evil Pagan king Egerius and immediately define him as the antagonist to Patrick. In all Patrician sources, beginning with Bishop Tírechán and Muirchú's accounts, the King of Ireland, Loguire, meets Patrick in the year 432 when he arrives in Ireland to begin his Christian mission. As a pagan, he strikes up an immediate antipathy to Patrick and he attempts to maintain the old religious traditions of the country, in particular to keep his two daughters, Fidelm and Eithne, from converting to the new faith. His often violent and evil actions set up King Loguire as a devil-like figure whom Saint Patrick fights against and defeats with God at his side, which serves as allegory within the stories. Montalbán's account of King Loguire makes him the very man who sold Patrick into slavery as a shepherd, on his own island no less, and as a consequence his evil character is further exaggerated. It can be said, therefore, that despite Montalbán's narrative being at its core somewhat flawed, the character of the King of Ireland did receive an unintentional boost in terms of his importance in Patrick's own story and his heightened deviousness does make him a much more engaging antagonist. It is for this reason that we can somewhat overlook certain errors that Montalbán made concerning Saint Patrick's birthplace and origin story, and we can even focus on crediting him with an unexpectedly engaging narrative of his own which would lead to a very satisfying adaptation within Calderón's play.

On the topic of characterisation, in Acts 2 and 3 in particular of the *Purgatory of Saint Patrick*, a protagonist emerges separate from Saint Patrick called Luis Enius, or Ludovico in the original Spanish version. His incorporation into the play is directly connected to chapters 6 through 9 of Montalbán's *Vida y Purgatorio de San Patricio*, which retells his salacious life story (Calderón, *The Purgatory* 108) with dramatic details, involving murder, rape and pillaging. The later chapters record his journey into the eponymous Saint Patrick's Purgatory, a "vast darksome cave" (66) found on an island in Lough Derg that houses an entrance to the underworld that contains Hell and Purgatory. Luis's story arc is one that leads from him being an immense sinner through to him becoming a saint on earth. It is through him that the Christian moral is told that no man's

sins can be considered unforgivable by God and that even the most evil people can potentially become the most saintly of all. Naturally, Luis makes his journey with the spiritual aid of Saint Patrick. Montalbán's characterisation of him is derived from Messingham's text (132), however, he also used sections from the *Tractatus de Purgatorio S. Patricci*, "written by Henry of Saltrey in around 1190" (Levin 71). Both retell the mythical story of a soldier called Owain who having sinned terribly in his life during the First Crusade decides to enter into Saint Patrick's Purgatory to cleanse his soul, being well aware that if he is not truly penitent he will perish there in the flames. The story was "well known in Spain by the fourteen century" (ibid.), having originated in multiple Patrician texts (Calderón, *The Purgatory* 132-3). However, Calderón based his own characterisation of the knight closely upon Montalbán's "wild" (132) and violent retelling of the figure and he additionally adopted the new name Ludivico, which was changed to suit the Spanish audience. This is rather strange since he, in all versions of the tale, is either English or Irish (111). That said, this is the only dubious change that we can credit to Montalbán in regards to this story, and it is in essence a minor one. The remainder of the anachronisms in *The Purgatory of Saint Patrick* are attributable to Calderón alone and they are epic in scope in relation to time frames. It is difficult to see past them as not being harmful since they essentially provide an audience with misinformation laid out in rich detailed poetic form. What we must therefore ask ourselves is whether or not the anachronisms in Calderón's play damage Saint Patrick's legacy in any way, and the answer is not easy to judge. Contrary to all previous sources, including *Vida y Purgatorio de San Patricio*, *The Purgatory of Saint Patrick* is set in the 12th Century, during the time of the Second Crusade (1147-1150) in a grand chronological shift forward from the historically accepted time period for Saint Patrick's life. Luis reveals this during his introduction speech in Act I when he says that he was once a soldier who served under King Stephen of England (1135-1147) during the Civil War (Calderón, *The Purgatory* 23). This change is entirely Calderón's design and creates extremely anachronistic and problematic content within his play which is impossible to avoid or explain. The major issue is, of course, his radical rewriting of history regarding the date when Ireland became a Christian country. Instead of 432 being the date of Saint Patrick's arrival on Irish shores, to begin his mission, it happens over 700 years later. Calderón's play, we must also remember, is replete with the serious, numerous biographical errors that it inherited from its source text *Vida y Purgatorio de San Patricio*. This means that

reading *The Purgatory of Saint Patrick*, or seeing it in performance, makes for an occasionally baffling experience to all those who have prior knowledge of Saint Patrick's biography located elsewhere. The reason Calderón fixed the time period of his play in the 12th Century, however, is because of characterisation and his decision to make Saint Patrick and Luis Enius contemporaries. By transporting him into the world of knights and Christian historical events of the time period, Calderón presents a new perspective on the era and positions Saint Patrick as a desperately needed spiritual saviour figure in what was a dark period of sin and debauchery. Furthermore, Patrick and Luis, owing to their shared "Irish" identities and similar ages, are positioned by Calderón as twin-like figures within the play representing light and dark, with one embodying saintly goodness and the other being evil incarnate. This characterological design lends balance to the work and by uniting the men in this contrary opposite relationship it strengthens the primary arc in the play, which is the journey that Luis makes from being a sinner through to entering Saint Patrick's Purgatory and re-emerging with a redeemed Christian soul. Therefore, it can be said that although Calderón's shifting of Saint Patrick's chronology creates obvious historical problems, overall the play improves in terms of its character structure and its narrative design, which becomes more cohesive and directly emotive.

To conclude, *by and large*, the changes that Montalbán and Calderón introduce into their Patrician texts are not harmful to Saint Patrick's legacy. If we are to value their often misleading representation of Saint Patrick pedantically then clearly there are serious problems in both that should be brought to full attention. However, in terms of capturing the spiritual essence and pure and noble Christian example that he represents most of all, they are complete successes. It is therefore somewhat missing the point to criticise them out of hand for being texts that are essentially representative of their time in terms of containing accidental translation and transcription errors and the commonly employed practice of Hispanicising names and titles. It is unlikely, to say the least, that either has damaged Saint Patrick's reputation and legacy in any way, but rather they have achieved the opposite and triumphed in spreading his message throughout Spain and Europe through translation. Ultimately, it is Patrick's overall Christian message that must be preserved and represented through his great acts of faith, charity and love. Any deviation from this ecclesiastical model or his symbolic attachment to Ireland is evidentially "forbidden" within any biographic or artistic portrayal of him. However, clearly

much freedom outside of these limits exists for hagiographers and dramatists to retell this great saint's life. This is reflected in the Irish people's own willingness today to position Patrick within a host of anachronistic and imaginative settings. His Christian identity and symbolic Irishness, in short, hold strong at all times bringing unification to the people with great patriotic pride regardless of absolute "historical accuracy".

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³ This public domain Kindle version of *The Purgatory of Saint Patrick* is part of a larger English translation collection of Calderón's plays, but it is edited to appear only by itself. It is available at this link: <https://www.amazon.com/Purgatory-Patrick-Pedro-Calder-C3-B3n-Barca-ebook-dp-B0082XV588/dp/B0082XV588/ref=mt_other?_encoding=UTF8&me=&qid=>