

Research Notes

Royall Tyler's *The Algerine Captive* and the Barbary Orient: An Example of America's Early Literary Awareness of the Muslim Near East

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There stood the infidel of Modern breed, Blest vegetation of infernal seed, Alike no Deist, and no Christian, he; But from all principle, all virtue, free. To him all things the same, as good or evil; Jehovah, Jove, the Lama, or the Devil; Mohammed's braying, or Isaiah's lays; The Indian's Powaws, or the Christian's Praise.

Timothy Dwight,
The Triumph of Infidelity (1788)

The American literary acquaintanceship with the Muslim Near Orient, or the Near East as some prefer to say, in the eighteenth and in the nineteenth century respectively, was principally an enterprise based on indirect encounter and exotic experience. A handful of inquisitive travelers and curious religious missionaries had some opportunity to observe directly, but most authors had to rely on the printed page—books and other sources written by students who had no real chance of penetrating into the Orient first hand. European writers, the British romanticists in particular, played a tremendous role in the formation of the American perception of Muslim thought and character. While part of the problem was fragmentary sources and faulty knowledge, the root cause was the deeply established Occidental preconception of Islam and Muslims, which is a subject that lies beyond the scope of this paper.¹

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¹For an illuminating overview of the Oriental-Western literary relations see Samuel Chew's *The Crescent and the Rose: Islam in England during the Renaissance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1937), Bryon Smith's *Islam in English Literature* (Beirut: American Press, 1939), Raymond Schwab's *La Renaissance Orientale* (Paris, 1950), Norman Daniel's *Islam and the West: the Making of an Image* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1960), and

There was, however, no culmination or concreteness of Orientalism in American literature, for American contact with the Muslim Near Orient was very limited; in effect, we can only think of occasional travelers such as John L. Stephens, George W. Curtis, John Ross Browne, Bayard Taylor, Mark Twain, and Herman Melville,² or of minor religious missions,³ naval and military expeditions against the Barbary pirates,⁴ or of transcendentalists (Emerson, Alcott, and Thoreau) who saw some affinity between Oriental thought—Muslim and otherwise—and their own.⁵ For obvious links of language and culture, Americans, in their turn, took over the older Occidental attitudes of cultural misunderstanding and kept them. Consequently, as we shall see, American literature reflects this by generally perpetuating the firmly established stereotypes and images.

Toward the end of the eighteenth century, literary magazines provided American readers with such exotic Oriental material as "Bathmendi" (1787), "Salyma and Ossmin" (1788), and "Omar and Fatima" (1807).⁶ Benjamin Franklin wrote such shorter works as "A Narrative of the Late Massacres..." (1764), "An Arabian Tale" (1779), and "On the Slave Trade" (1790). But the Barbary Wars (1785-1815) were the first *actual* encounter between the Muslim East and the emerging American republic, marking the initial vital impact of the Muslim Orient on American culture and thus literature,⁷ and the "Barbary Pirates" affair sums up what Americans knew of the Muslim World until the 1970's, the Arab-Israeli wars, the Palestine Liberation Organization, and the Oil Crisis. Cotton Mather, for instance, was concerned with the problems

Dorothee Melitzki's *The Matter of the Araby in Medieval England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977). Edward Said's most pioneering study of the subject, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), intelligently offers an all-encompassing discussion of the word (Orientalism). Said suggests that the word is indicative of Western ideas, beliefs, and learning about the Muslim Near Orient.

²For further information on American travelers to the region see my article "Lured by the Exotic Levant: the Muslim East to the American Traveler of the Nineteenth Century," which was included in the second issue of the *Islamic Quarterly* of 1987.

³For a bird's-eye view of religious and other missions into the Orient, see A.L. Tibawi's *American Interests in Syria, 1800-1901* (London: Oxford University Press, 1966).

⁴James A. Field's *America and the Mediterranean World, 1776-1882* (Princeton University Press, 1969) and David H. Finnie's *Pioneers East* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967) offer an enlightening background about American activities in the Near Orient, military and otherwise.

⁵See my article "Ralph Waldo Emerson and the Muslim Orient," which will appear in a late 1988 edition of *The Muslim World*.

⁶"Bathmendi," *The Columbian Magazine* 1 (Jan.-Feb., 1787): 246-292; "Salyma and Ossmin," *The American Magazine* (May-June, 1788): 363-439; "Omar and Fatima," *The Literary Magazine and American Register* 8 (1808): 5-301.

⁷For a careful examination see Lotfi Ben Rejeb's *To the Shores of Tripoli: The Impact of Barbary on Early American Nationalism* Diss. Indiana University 1981.

created by North African piracy and with the religious missions into the Orient. Here is how Mather, reviewing the difficulties of New England, showed concern as early as 1702:

. . . In the midst of these deplorable things God hath given up several of our sons into the hands of the fierce monsters of Africa. Mahometan Turks, and Moors, and devils, are at this day oppressing many of our sons with a *slavery* wherein they "wish for death, and cannot find it;" a slavery, from where they cry and write unto us, "it had been good for us that we had never been born."

(*Magnalia* [Hartford, 1884], II, 671)

Moved by the reports of American captives who had turned "Turk," Mather employed his "knowledge" of Islam in a work he intended to distribute to the North African Barbary coast, *A Pastoral Letter to the English Captives in Africa* (1698). He advised these captives to exploit the Qur'an in defense of their creed:

If any *Mahometan* Tempters do assault you, Let the words of their own *Alcoran* serve to answer them; The words of the *Alcoran*, (Or Turkish Bible) are: *The Spirit of God hath given Testimony, to Christ, the Son of Mary; He is the Messenger of the Spirit, and the Word of God: His Doctrine is perfect. And Mahomet, in his Alcoran, calls the Gospel expressly, The Right way to Fear God; and says, That God sent the Gospel for no other end, but that they might obtain by it, the Love and Grace of God.*⁸

Suffice it to say that, in their perception of the Barbary Wars, American writers generally relied on traditional European views and stereotypes, and these wars furnished the themes of such works as Sussana Rowson's *Slaves in Algiers* (1794), John Howard Payne's *Fall of Algiers* (1826), Richard Penn Smith's *The Bombardment of Algiers* (1829), Joseph Stevens Jone's *The Usurper* (1855?), and other contemporary literature that generally presented a reductionist view of North African privateering and a horrific image of the "Barbary," which was exaggerated and enlarged.⁹

⁸This passage is quoted in Mukhtar Ali Isani's "Cotton Mather and the Orient," *New England Quarterly* 43 (March-Dec., 1970): 52-53. See, however, the entire article for a broader discussion of Mather's Oriental themes and interests. PP. 46-58.

⁹Such literature includes, as examples, *The American in Algiers* (1797), *Humanity in Algiers* (1801), Joseph Hanson's *The Mussulmen Humbled* (1806), William Ray's *Horrors of Slavery* (1808), Jonathan Cowdery's *American Captives in Tripoli* (1806), James Ellison's *The American Captive* (1812), and Jonathn Smith's *The Siege of Algiers* (1823).

My intent is to fleetingly examine Royall Tyler's *The Algerine Captive* (1797), an overt example of the Barbary-oriented American literature, to see what the Muslim North African, or rather the "Barbary," Orient meant to the fictitious traveler to the region that Tyler uses as his persona. *The Algerine Captive* consists of two concise volumes: the first presents a colorful picture of American life and history; and the second, while concentrating more on Algerian society, life, religion, and beliefs, presents a nationalistic perception of the exotic and the fabulous. Updike Underhill, the hero of the novel, makes his appearance after introductory chapters concerning his ancestor Captain John Underhill. Born in 1762, Updike prepares to enter college in 1780; the project fails, but he acquires respect at least for Latin and Greek. He tries schoolteaching, then decides to become a physician. By 1785 Underhill has completed his training, yet still had to learn how to make his living from his practice without becoming a quack. He starts traveling, and first visits Boston. He meets various types of doctors in the North, then tries his luck in the South, where he sees little except slavery and superstition. As a ship's surgeon, he visits London, and he is appalled by the manner of capturing and treating the African slaves; soon he is made a slave himself by the Algerines. He comments, generally with exaggerations that edge into hyperbole, on the Dey of Algiers and his court, the slave market, the efforts made to convert him, the language of the inhabitants, and their history and present government. He also joins a pilgrimage to Makkah. Underhill briefly dreams of escaping but is deterred by the fear of being caught and punished. He is befriended by a Jew ironically and starts saving in order to pay his own ransom; but when his friend dies, he cannot recover his savings. It takes a coincidence to make Underhill a free man again, and he returns to America after an absence of seven years.

Tyler's novel is, at any rate, essentially a continuation of the captivity narrative,¹⁰ which goes all the way back to the early colonial period of the mid-seventeenth century. Underhill's narrative implies a metaphorical process of creating a genuinely American mythology that suggests patriotic zeal. Given its thematic suggestiveness in the book, captivity is not, however, a central theme. *The Algerine Captive* is also a travel narrative, and Underhill is the first American innocent abroad, who wants to provide the American reader with fabulous information about the "Barbary Pirates" affair, the Muslim East, the Barbary Prophet, and Algerian life in general among other things having to do with Islam.

Underhill, we are told, voyages aboard the American vessel *Freedom* which is bound for Africa to bring slaves. From the very outset, Underhill's

¹⁰See here Roy Harvey Pearce, "The Significance of the Captivity Narrative," *American Literature* 19 (1947):1-20.

sympathy with the slaves and thus antipathy to the horror of slavery, is revealed. When one of the Negro slaves befriends him, Underhill exclaims: "Is this one of those men whom we are taught to vilify as beneath the human species?"¹¹ When Underhill himself is taken into captivity by the Algerines and sold as a slave, he realizes more acutely the values of freedom (even the ship's name becomes symbollic of these values), and his conception of such values is both patriotic and nationalistic.

It was amidst the parched sands and flinty rocks of Africa that thou (i.e., God) taughtest me that the bread was indeed pleasant, and the water sweet. Let those of our fellow citizens who set at nought the rich blessings of our Federal union go like me to a land of slavery and they will then learn to appreciate the value of our free government. (p. 132)

In these circumstances Underhill, as he tells us in the Preface, would be able to "display a portrait [not only] of New England manners, hitherto unattempted," but also those "of that ferocious race [the Algerine Muslims], so dreaded by commercial powers, and so little known in our country" (pp. 28-29). Thus Underhill has the advantage of examining the American perception of the outside world, particularly a world as foreign as that of the Algerians.

In doing so, Underhill becomes aware that "it is the privilege of travelers to exaggerate; but," he adds, "I wish not to avail myself of this prescriptive right. I had rather disappoint the curiosity of my readers by conciseness, than disgust them with untruths. I have no ambition to be ranked among the Bruces and Chastelleaux of the age. I shall therefore endeavor rather to improve the understanding of my reader, with what I really know, than amuse him with stories of which my circumscribed situation rendered me necessarily ignorant" (p. 177). How far from exaggeration Underhill is has to be assessed.

Well on Underhill's way to Madinah, having passed through Arabia Petraea, Tyler's "author," tells us of "Many a dreadful story" which his fellow travelers (not he) asserted. They told of "poisonous winds and overwhelming sands, and of the fierce wandering Arabs who captured whole caravans and ate their prisoners. Many a bloody battle had they fought with this cruel banditti, in which, according to their narratives, they always came off conquerors" (p. 211). The marvelous, the exotic, and the fabulous go hand and hand with the weird. For it was the common tradition of many travelers,

¹¹Royall Tyler, *The Algerine Captive* (New Haven, Conn.: College and University Press, 1970), p. 118. Subsequent references in the text follow this edition.

whether real or fictitious, to report a preconceived picture; what their readers expected to read, not what they actually saw or observed. And rarely did they provide accurate information. And the result is not only a distorted image that the readers gain but an unsympathetic understanding of the Muslim Orient as well.

While defending the verity of the Christian creed against “so detestably ridiculous a system as the Mahometan imposture” (p. 135), Underhill indulges in a series of arguments about the two faiths. In the dialogue between enslaved Underhill and the Muslim Mullah (or priest) attention is immediately drawn to the Prophet and the Qur’ān. The dialogue runs thus:

Author. “You speak well. I will bring my religion to the test. Compare it with the—the ”

Mollah. “Speak out boldly. No advantage shall be taken. You would say, with the Mahometan imposture. To determine which of the two revealed religions is best, two inquiries are alone necessary. First which of them has the highest proof of its divine origin? And second, which inculcates the purest morals? That is, of which have we the greatest certainty that it came from God, and which is calculated to do most good to mankind?”

Author. “True. As to the first point, our Bible was written by men divinely inspired.”

Mollah. “Our Alcoran was written by the figure of the Deity himself. But who told you your Bible was written by men divinely inspired?”

Author. “We have received it from our ancestors, and we have good evidence for the truths it contains as we have in profane history for any historical fact.”

Mollah. “And so we have the Alcoran. Our sacred and profane writers all prove the existence of such a prophet as Mahomet. . . .”

Author. “We know the Christian religion is true from its small beginnings and wonderful increase . . .” The dialogue continues:

Author. “Our religion was disseminated in peace; yours was promulgated by the sword.”

Mollah. "My friend you surely have not read the writings of your own historians. The history of the Christian church is a detail of bloody massacre. . . ."

Author. "But you hold a sensual paradise."

Mollah. "So the doctors of your church tell you . . ." Drawing a parallel which criticizes Christianity too, Underhill allows the Mullah to defend Islam against Christian charges. But at the end, having drawn this parallel between the two religions, Underhill, "disgusted with [the Mullah's] fables" (p. 143), decides to dismiss the entire argument. Even though such questions as the belief in God, the Scriptures, and the Prophets cut across both religions, the fact remains, given the irony of this fiction, that Underhill was better qualified to judge Christianity than Islam.

Back home Underhill declares: "I now mean . . . to contribute cheerfully to the support of our excellent government which I have learnt to adore in the schools of despotism . . . My ardent wish is that my fellow citizens may profit by my misfortunes" (p. 224). Such a statement obviously implies little more than nationalism; it suggests the superiority and integrity of the American political institution and morale that Underhill represents.

Be Underhill's views as they may, these late eighteenth-century ideas present a strongly stereotyped picture of the Muslim Near Orient and have continuities and reiterations well into the twentieth century. Such emphases or assertions seem to have survived in the back of the American mind only to be summoned from a dead past into a recent one as reflected in such books as Kenneth Robert's *Lydia Bailey* (1947), Norman Mailer's *Barbary Shore* (1951), Richard Bulliet's *The Tomb of the Twelfth Imam* (1979), and more recently Leon Uris's *The Haj* (1984).¹²

But that is another story, and this study remains an attempt to encourage a better treatment of the Muslim East.

¹²For further treatment of the subject see my article "In Search of the Orient: The Muslim East on the Contemporary American Literary Scene," *The International Journal of Islamic and Arabic Studies* 3, No. 1 (1986): 43-49.