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The Algerine in the Early American Literature: Context and Pretext

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Abstract

Quite overlooked, if not unheard of, is the early American fiction which deals with the first encounter between the newly-born United States and the Regency of Algiers (1785). Though captivity narratives have been, in general, extensively studied, Barbary accounts do not seem to receive the necessary attention. Hence, the overarching concern of the present paper is to examine the representation of the Algerine in two notable American early works of fiction namely: Peter Markoe's *The Algerine Spy in Pennsylvania* (1787) and Royall Tyler's *The Algerine Captive* (1797). The tension between the two nations was heightened by the capture of two American ships by Algerian privateers which led to a considerable amount of captivity narratives and travel accounts. Such literature can be seen as an inward-gazing medium for its comments on the American status quo as much as it meditates on the Other. Accordingly, this study attempts to highlight the contribution of these early American fictional texts in the construction of a discourse which serves at once for the self-conceptualization of 'the American' and the "othering" of an 'Oriental' culture.

Keywords: Early American Literature, the Algerine, the Barbary States, Captivity Narratives, National Identity.

One is often to learn enough about the early American literature which documents the experience of the early settlers with the natives. No history or literature coursebook trivializes the significance, minor or not, of Indian captivity narratives in portraying the encounter between the two cultures and the resulting impact of such 'interchange' on the overall cultural makeup of the American nation. However, blank_ if not torn_ is the page which corresponds to America's initial encounter with a non-Christian non-European nation *i.e* the Barbary States. Though Barbary captivity narratives were popular at the time of their publication, they seem to have receded into a total state of oblivion. Only a few studies were devoted to the examination of the numerous tales, accounts and fictional works about Barbary captivities, and they often come in the form of anthologies or archives. A searching look at the early phases of America's nation-building reveals undeniable links to the Barbary Coast not only as a land of brusque menaces triggering more cautiousness in its relations abroad but also as an alien culture stimulating inward queries. Much unlike, England's _and broadly Europe's_ cultural proximity to Uncle Sam's household, the Barbary Coast_ allegedly 'a nest of pirates'_ seemed to hover over a world of its own. A world that inspired awe in American

'denizens' by 1785 and compelled them to behold the sight of that other 'transatlantic hill' called Algiers.

It seems that very few could foresee that a commercial sojourn, driving American ships_ for the first time unprotected_ within reach of Barbary authority, might turn into a political crisis and a cultural crossing as well. While the former took ten years to be resolved with a treaty, the latter's impact is less certain though very noticeable in literary texts. The heightened tension between the two nations especially after the capture of eleven more vessels (1793) added to the first two ships Maria and the Dauphin (July 1785) by Algerine privateers was the beginning of a long and intricate episode in the diplomatic relations between the two states. What has come to be called 'the forgotten war' did in effect generate a considerable amount of captivity narratives. Much similar to its attempt to record the American experience with the Indian natives, captivity at the hands of Algerine corsairs and the subsequent 'white slavery' had its share of fictional documentation. So, the literature of that time_ much akin to a semi-autobiographical fiction_ was a kind of transitory trend that flourished for a decade in parallel with the political and military circumstances taking place between the two nations. Through Peter Markoe's *The Algerine Spy in Pennsylvania* (1787) and Royall Tyler's *The Algerine Captive* (1797), some historical insights can be gained along with cultural and social ones.

During such period of turmoil (post Revolutionary War), American writers were induced and intrigued to write about such region in the world of which they knew scarcely anything at all. In view of the corresponding circumstances, both internal and external, surrounding the publication of the afore-mentioned novels one may argue of a broader scope attributed to the texts other than being mere captivity accounts. 'The crossing', it seems, could not have passed as nonchalantly as any other first encounter between two nations distanced by language, religion, system, social mores and an ocean. The first contact between the two was less than unpleasant and_ interestingly enough_ seems to go unnoticed in history records. That is exactly why a fair understanding of the issue in question requires a careful look at its immediate historical circumstances. So the story begins when the United States emerged to the world as a toddling state repudiating the custodianship of Great Britain; while the Regency of Algiers ran the Mediterranean basin back and forth in absolute sovereignty. Their encounter was a turning point (a premature climax) not only in the relations between the two nations but in their destinies as well.

It hardly needs arguing that the study of the past never yields itself readily to nowadays' perceptions. Accordingly, going back to the roots of the conflict between the State of Algiers and the United States leads one back to dig in the particularities of international relations and diplomacy in the 18th C. Tendencies towards "the diffusion of Western norms in constructing agreements and practices of international law across cultural boundaries" did not diminish "the vitality of non-western methods" (Black, 2010, p. 42). This means that establishing diplomatic relations with other nations is a form of abiding to the dictates and conventions of the time on the one hand, and is a sign of recognition to another country's sovereignty on the other hand. Differences in customs, standards and methods from one geopolitical region to another did not halt building bridges. The establishment of maritime relations in the Mediterranean for instance was to a great extent bound to the Barbary

diplomacy of the southern states. The cornerstones of such policy were: imposing passes on sailing ships, signing of treaties, collecting tributes, or otherwise seizure, captivity, ransom or 'slavery'. Many European powers like Spain, France, Holland, Denmark, and Britain had no objection to securing their naval trade through obtaining a 'license' from Morocco, Algiers, Tunis or Tripoli. Though such a practice may seem incompatible with nowadays standards, "but in fact the corsairs were state-owned or state-syndicated, and their practices were not outlawed under the slowly evolving notions of the law of nations ... the entire Barbary enterprise was regulated by foreign nations [from] generation upon generation" (Leiner, 2006, p. 13). It could be called an 'enterprise' because it benefited more than one party. Some "wealthy European kingdoms of northern Europe" took advantage of the inability of other countries to afford enough to pay the Barbary States, so "with a wink and a nod" they ensured imposing their own terms of commerce and business while others' trade is frequently disrupted. Benjamin Franklin for instance admonished the English role in encouraging the Barbary corsairing against American vessels "to prevent our Interference in the Carrying Trade"; it became "a Maxim among the Merchants, that, if *there were no Algiers, it would be worth England's while to build one.*" (Leiner, p.14).

However, in view of the age-long rivalry between the opposite coasts of the Mediterranean (the Crusades, the *Reconquista* and ceaseless other conquests), the North African coast had but to resort to its navy for both commercial and military reasons. Maintaining such code of conduct with both friends and foes became the regulation for its foreign relations. Consequently, a refusal or neglect of such terms was considered as an assault on the state's sovereignty; in answer to which all measures can be taken. This practice, to be noted, is different from piracy which is an outlaw activity directed generally towards ships sailing the high seas. Privateering, however, was an institutionalized practice i.e. under the permission and protection of the state's authority and in accordance with the state's foreign policies as well. In *A Treatise of International Law*, William Edward Hall, who published a number of influential works on international law, maintains that piratical acts are "done without due authority [yet] are acts of war when done under the authority of a state" (Hall, 1890, p. 252). Not to forget the fact that only recently with the re-examination of the context of Barbary privateering that "an important fact that had been previously more or less hidden" was discovered: there existed "an active and effective form of Christian privateering whose most famous practitioners were the Order of Malta" (Panzac, 2005, p. 2). This, of course, is not to efface whatever marred prints such a practice might have left for some but it fairly places the issue within its due circumstances and context. Several historical accounts indeed assert the prevalence of aggressions from both sides:

Even while ordinary commercial exchange flourished in the Mediterranean and Atlantic, both Christians and Muslims practiced captive taking, slave-trading, state-sponsored privateering, and piracy. North African vessels captured European sailors, traders, travelers, and soldiers and brought them to the slave markets in the port towns of Tunis, Algiers, and Morocco. Thousands of Muslims were held prisoner or enslaved by Spain, Portugal, England, Ireland, Wales, Malta, France, and the Italian states (Rojas, 2003, p.164)

Notwithstanding that the realms of politics and policy-making have undergone a drastic change over the course of history, certain axioms remain unaltered. Commerce, for instance, was and still is the jugular vein throbbing in any nation's body of politics. That is why it is no secret that much of the governing stands on trade activities. The latter were lead through ports and sea passages; so placing tributes over the shipping and passing of cargoes became the regulation. Treaties of amity, alliance and commerce existed at large yet they were equally violated as well. Therefore, one ought not to fall under the illusion that relations were based on a strict adherence to norms of conscious commitment and justice. On the contrary, aggression and fraud marred the view back then. In such circumstances, the Barbary diplomacy came into being. Privateering was the retaliatory practice embraced (rather than invented) by the Barbary States. The United States, however, could have scarcely been ignorant of such conventions yet its leaders were not wholly in favor of a conformist stance.

As early as May 1784, the Congress, represented in Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin and John Adams, endeavored to establish peace with the Barbary States. Envoys to Algiers, Tripoli and Morocco were instructed to negotiate treaties of amity and commerce with the states in order to secure the safety of American ships from the maritime raids among other things. Yet, this positive intention was not backed up with adequate financing. That is why the initiative died prematurely. In a peculiar twist of fate, the incident happened just by the time Algiers and Spain signed a truce (which allows the activity of Algerian ships around the Spanish peninsula). This endangered the state of American ships as interdict. The capture of the *Maria* and the *Dauphin* thus came to nobody's surprise. Paul Jones, for instance in a letter to John Jay (by then minister of foreign affairs), warned of a rising danger coming from the regency of Algiers which he deemed as an unjustified hostility amounting to the level of an outright declaration of war on the United States.ⁱ

Prior to this alleged "predatory act", a long debate took place over the foreign policy to be adopted by the United States. While John Adams opted for a pacific and practical view which says that America should follow suit of other nations and pay tribute to the Barbary States in order to secure its trade and avoid a damaging confrontation; Thomas Jefferson fiercely refused to adhere to such conventions and preferred instead to venture into a military act that would presumably release the United States of a financial burden it wouldn't bear for long. He preferred to spend huge amounts of money for warring purposes rather than to submit to the control of privateers which was not easy to curb. To such an end, he attempted to organize a confederacy of European counties to unite against the Barbary States (mostly Algiers) and bring down this code of conduct that has long been passed as unchallenged. However, much to his dismay, the majority of countries refused even to cherish the very idea lest the ramifications of such an action would go excessively out of control (Parker, 2004, p.59). Being thus left to stand alone, the United States had to cope with whatever unpleasantness was to come. The situation was worsened by unprofessional conducts of some envoys (John Lamb) and the diplomatic relations between the two countries reached an impasse by 1793. Consequently, the United States had but to reinitiate its endeavors to come to terms with the regency of Algiers over the ransom of its hostages and the re-establishment of ties once again. After several negotiations, in which the efforts of David Humphreys, Joseph Donaldson, Joel Barlow, James Cathcart and P.E. Skojuildebrand came together, the

conflict was resolved. Eventually, the crisis came to an end and the two parties dissolved their dispute in September 5th, 1795 by signing the Treaty of Peace and Amity. ⁱⁱ

The unceremonious resurgence of captivity narratives as a genre ‘owes’ to the flourishing of journalism and the circulation of newspapers beside the captivities themselves. With the growing interest of public in federal nation and the rapid progress in printing, newspapers not only grew in number but also in influence. “By 1800, the numbers had risen further to 234 regularly published newspapers... From Algiers, the American sailors who had been sold into slavery made full use of the emerging public sphere to call their fellow citizens to their aid” (Dzurec 2009 p736-7). Periodicals and magazines such as *Massachusetts Magazine*, *New York Magazine*, and *Philadelphia Minerva* to name but a few were known to frequently publish updates about the status of captives, negotiations and menaces awaiting crews besides the various accounts of captivity and tales of Barbary. This aimed to quench the natural curiosity to know about the ‘other’ in addition to the financial gain from such popular fiction.

In spite of its irrefutable importance at the time of its reception, Barbary narratives as a genre remains among the least studied literary trends; very few attempted to search behind such ostensible interest in devoted to the first non-European non-Christian culture the United States collided with. Though gaining more credential over the last few decades, captivity studies carve still for a deeper research and more authentic literature other than mere archives and collections. Paul Baepler's anthology *White Slaves, African Masters* (1999), Gordon Sayre's *Renegades from Barbary: The Transnational Turn in Captivity Studies* (2000) and other occasional studies have done a fair work commenting on several of the most eminent literary works published during the period though lacking some rigorous insight into the motives behind such representations. The gap in the captivity studies could be due to the profusion of Barbary tales together with the scarcity of firsthand literature and authentic texts that allow a researcher to establish historical and cultural links between the fiction of the time, its context and its relevance to our present day. Most probably if it were not for the alleged ‘war on terror’ and the insistent revisiting of America’s relation to the Muslim world, no such interest would have resurfaced in the field of academia and literati. That is why the present study endeavors to examine fictional works as Barbary narratives in the hope of reaching an understanding of their historical and cultural particularities.

Between the years 1785 and 1797, Barbary captivity narratives have witnessed an exceeding increase in number and popularity and so in significance. As noted before, the time of publication paralleled some very decisive historical events; this contributed to the distinguishing of Barbary narratives both from other captivity narratives (Indian captivity narratives for instance) on the one hand and from the prevalent cultural conceptions known through oriental tales on the other hand. Several plays, short stories, poems, histories, memoirs and tales were published to satisfy the public’s need for information, ideas and images about this region of the world that is at times referred to as the Orient, the Maghreb or uniquely the Barbary. Peter Markoe’s *The Algerine Spy in Pennsylvania* (1787), Susanna Rowson’s *Slaves in Algiers* (1794), Mathew Carey’s *A Short Account of Algiers* (1794), and Royall Tyler’s *The Algerine Captive* (1797) are among the most important works in this literary tradition. The latter shares verisimilar traits with the Indian captivity narratives, in the sense that both

fictions thrive upon Christian spirituality, honor, redemption, testimony, sacrifice, endurance and the victory of morality over vileness (Baeppler, 1999, p. 44). Notably, the analyses of literary works such as Markoe's and Tyler's are a requisite for the understanding of broader and polemical literary and cultural issues of which the two works are not only exemplary but referential as well.

Of interest is Markoe's alternative title to his epistolary novel: *The Algerine Spy in Pennsylvania: or, Letters written by a native of Algiers on the affairs of the United States of America, from the close of the year 1783 to the meeting of the Convention*. What seems to hold attention is the emphasis put on the timing. The long debate preceding the meeting of the constitutional convention took place from May 14 to September 17, 1787, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. The states delegates were to agree on a set of amendments to the Articles of Confederation in order to secure the establishing of 'a true constitutional republic'. Though the Convention was of paramount importance to the future of the states as a whole the only state which refused to send delegates was Rhode Island. Scholars "typically stress the financial distress and domestic instability within the states (especially Shays's Rebellion in Massachusetts) that led to that meeting" but it was equally important in terms of "international security" (Vile, 2005, p. 279). It seems Peter Markoe's novel falls within the same vein as the author highlights the decisiveness of the moment in fear that heedlessness may cloud the view of many Americans on the threats looming large over their 'nation'. His novel is a collection of letters that is presumably written by a converted Mehemet whose mission is to spy on the affairs of the United States. The reports he sends back to Algiers range from social commentaries to intellectual musings and logistic analyses. The said critiques serve as an indirect self-scrutiny by the author who uses "the wholly imaginary Algiers as a projection screen for problems like slavery and despotism" that he simply "refuses to admit have anything to do with his state" (Andrew, 2014, p. 7). Thus the scathing criticism Mehemet pours on the southern community, the institution of slavery, the social hypocrisy, the snobbishness of aristocrats and the divisiveness of their stance are meant to be seen through the eyes of an outsider and thus acquire a certain extent of unaffected impartiality. Those social ills he points out to define the American community as "a company where the absent had been maligned, a stranger insulted, and a dog caressed; and where more sorrow had been lavished on a monkey, than would have been felt for an expiring child"; a community that is way below his native country (Algiers) where "silence is wisdom and reserve is virtue" (Markoe, p. 36). While the beginning of the novel shows the Algerian society in a slightly more favorable light, the rest of it does not depart from the typically American tone which_ through peaks and valleys_ retains its contempt towards all that opposes and oppresses democracy and freedom. Mehemet observes:

In most nations there are three sorts of tyranny; the first civil; the second ecclesiastical; the third I shall call the tyranny of fashion. The first is well known at Algiers; the second has been heard of; but the third is altogether unknown. The Pennsylvanians have known but little of the first, and nothing of the second; but the greater part of them is grievously oppressed by the last (p.74).

Though issues of education, commerce, industry, agriculture and religion have been subject to keen observation and commentary in the novel, the primary and paramount attention was directed towards national issues. Mehemet's eventual conversion to the ideals of "FREEDOM and CHRISTIANITY" are meant to minimize whatever inconsistencies or shortcomings he sees in the American society and highlight instead what Americans ought to cling to in order to overcome outer menaces. The gist of Mehemet's first-assigned task is pronounced to be the investigation of a possible invasion to the States through Rhode Island. It is not to be overlooked that Rhode Island boycotted the Constitutional Convention that took place in Pennsylvania 1785. In a fictitious report back to Algiers, he asserts that "defenseless coasts, bays and rivers may be plundered without the least risque, and their young men and maidens triumphantly carried into captivity" (P.105). Such an outright threat to the safety and unity of the newly born country coming at a time of reluctance among state delegates to come to an agreement could exert the desired effect on the readers who received the novel among the circulating news of captivities and seizures. Markoe's aim through such fictional work seems to focus on urgent national questions. National identity, communal unity and the construction of a strong cooperative system of governance which may enable Americans to overcome both internal and external challenges were issues that needed to be addressed instantly lest the country would fall back on its knees weak and defeated. "The last war", he confesses, "has convinced these states of two serious truths; they are too strong to be conquered, and too weak to think of conquering others" (p. 96) and so they desperately need to contemplate with a discerning eye their own deficiencies without losing sight of their status as a nation aspiring for 'grandeur'. Voicing those ideas Markoe echoes other nationalist voices "trying to promote national consciousness in economic, cultural, and foreign affairs...and security as matters of national interest that require protection against foreigners (Ben Rejeb, p. 9). Hence, the discourse that is implicitly employed in this fictional work is in effect an advocacy of certain national purposes that make of an 'other' the subject of indirect commentary, criticism and even conspiracy. Positing the Barbary state as a vicious other who is a source of terror that can be blockaded in no other way but a fastidious knit-together policy between states marked an early and interesting divergence from the conventional representation of the Orient. This 'orient' seems different.

Published ten years later, Royall Tyler's *The Algerine Captive* (1797) 'documents' the journey of an American doctor named Updike Underhill through captivity in Algiers. His adventures at home are an opportunity for him to satirize both northern and southern society while his misfortunes in Algiers open a gate for a deeper meditation over the culture and identity of Americans. Though he witnesses an unbearable suffering at the hands of corsairs, his previous assumptions about the Algerian society prove wrong once he lives among them. His meeting with a "Mahometan priest" brings him closer to the understanding of the principles upon which such an oriental culture is built. Though their conversation is embarked on zealous motives, it nonetheless leads to a larger tolerance between the two as the "Mahometan priest" suggests:

Read, then, this spotless book. There you will learn to love those of our faith and not hate those of any other. ... In a word, you will learn the unity of God, which, notwithstanding the cavil of your divines, your prophet, like

ours, came into the world to establish and every man of reason must believe (p.136).

Underhill then seems to gain a clearer image of the cultural particularities and differences each country may have meanwhile achieving a better integration in the Algerian society as a well-acclaimed surgeon. One of the things he admires in such an oriental Barbary state is legal practices. The latter, he deems, are meticulously organized unlike his country where "the lengthy bill of cost, and the law's delay... had taught [him] to view the judicial proceedings...with a jaundiced eye"(p. 189).Such a positive outlook to an alien culture that is closely-associated with 'illegal practices' reflects the author's inclination towards a relationship with the other which needs to be based on tolerance and openness rather than bigotry and prejudice.However, such an understanding comes relatively late in the novel since the protagonist seems at the beginning to have a stereotypical and biased image of Barbary. It is noteworthy to agree here with Battistini's comments on American readers' view of North African states. He explains that unlike "the non-Barbary regions" like Persia, Arabia, and Turkey which were thought of as "objects of fascination and even delight" were exotically romanticized in the Western and American conception, the Barbary Coast however, "emerged as a pragmatic political concern by the mid-1790s" (p.446). So, in a way American readers divided the Orient into two distinct perceptions. He further notes that:

[they]neither ignored the new threat of Barbary nor imagined all Muslims to be like the Algerians. This split awareness of the Muslim world was reflected in fictional treatments. The Oriental tales [were] used to teach a moral lesson. But Barbary captivity narratives, ... spoke to the anxieties that Americans had about travel and trade in the Mediterranean. These Muslims were not to be learned from or appreciated as a distinct cultural entity; they were monsters or buffoons to be fought and tricked (p. 461)

The last statement though largely true does not apply wholly to Tyler's text. By the end of his captivity, Underhill discovers fascinating aspects about the Algerian society. He avows that he "found it to be a vulgar error" to think of all Algerines as polygamous; he adds "it is true they are allowed four by their law ;but they generally find,as in our country,one lady sufficient for all the comforts of connubial life,and never take another,except family alliance or barrenness renders it eligible or necessary". He further asserts that the more he "became acquainted with their customs, the more was I struck with their great resemblance to the patriarchal manners described in Holy Writ" (p.124). These realizations though highlighting the distinction between the fantastic and mysterious Orient known to Americans through oriental tales and the awe-inspiring and candid Barbary Coast often clouded in tales of captivity, brings forward an insightful perspective not about the Algerine community for its own sake but it suggests, through Underhill,that while tolerance is needed to establish good relations with the other it is required first and foremost among his fellow people so that they could go along in one unified federation. He seems to 'advocate a flawed system' rather than promoting internal differences. His concluding words are so telling of such belief "BY UNITING WE STAND, BY DIVIDING WE FALL"(p.226).

Being published in quite decisive (and early) moments in the making of the American nation, the two works are quite exemplary of the America's self-conception and its perception of the other as well. *The Algerine Spy in Pennsylvania* and *The Algerine Captive* though seemingly opposite in views and notions, they nonetheless share a verisimilar purpose that is unity at home. While Markoe's aim to urge his readers to get closely-knit together at a time of tremendous disputes, is achieved through attributing malign attentions to the other (who is eventually converted), Tyler attempts to perpetuate a sense of unison-despite-difference among his people by intriguing his readers to accept and appreciate variety. Markoe's espionage novel warns against foreign plotting and thus repudiates the antagonized culture altogether. In order to preserve the nation's freedom and sovereignty, he uses a Barbary narrative which was the most convenient genre at the time to serve an internal agenda rather than offer a genuine representation of a different culture. Tyler's picaresque tale, on the contrary, seems to consider the cultural gap between an 'Oriental' and a Western society, yet makes of such a glaring difference nonperilous antagonism. His Barbary tale is "distant enough to defamiliarize Western readers, but similar enough to instruct and inspire them" (Battistini, 2010, p. 457). He thereby disproportionately induces his 1797-American readers to attain a proper viewing and coping with domestic differences:

My ardent wish is that my fellow citizens ... If they peruse these pages with attention they will perceive the necessity of uniting our ... strength to enforce a due respect among other nations. Let us, one and all, endeavor to sustain the general government first object is union among ourselves Let us one and all endeavour to sustain the general government. Let no foreign emissaries inflame us against one nation, by raking up the ashes of long extinguished enmity; or delude us into the extravagant schemes of another, by recurring to fancied gratitude (Tyler p.240).

In short, what seemed to be an overlooked incident in history (a mere political crisis faced by an infant state) had far-reaching impacts on the nation's security, navy, trade and diplomacy. Like a blessing in disguise, this served as a stimulus to the yet-numb national consciousness among the majority of Americans which eventually paved the way to the strengthening of their national identity.

Notes

ⁱ <http://docsouth.unc.edu/csr/index.html/document/csr17-0193>

ⁱⁱ For further information about the negotiations and the treaties see:
The Avalon Project at Yale Law School, <http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/diplomacy/barbary.htm>