



Nabil Matar. *Britain and Barbary, 1589-1689.* Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2005. xiii + 241 pp. \$59.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8130-2871-2; \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8130-3076-0.

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The Barbary Origins of the British Empire

This extraordinary book completes Nabil Matar's three-volume trilogy on the beginnings of Britain's empire, focusing on British relations with the Barbary states of North Africa. The Barbary coast, Matar persuasively argues, was the defining region for British imperial identity, and the British occupation of Tangier (1662-84) was the model, more so than Ireland or North America, for the British empire that encompassed India and Hong Kong.

England's engagement with the Barbary states, Matar persuasively argues, was crucial to the transformation of British imperial ideology. Under Elizabeth I, British merchants formed trading companies that sought markets and products. Elizabeth's death in 1603, and a civil war in Morocco that same year, ended the period of British co-operation with the Moroccan monarchy. James I intervened more directly into the affairs of trading companies, adopting the Spanish government's model of intervention in commerce. King Charles I was unable, or unwilling, to protect British commerce—and even British coastal communities such as Bristol and Plymouth—from the ravages of Barbary corsairs; this was one reason British merchants drove him from the throne. Some in Parliament called for war against Turkey, and, during the reign of Cromwell, Turkish ships supplied royalist forces in Ireland.

Charles II, in addition to receiving the Portuguese garrison as a wedding gift from the family of his bride, Catherine of Braganza, sent the British fleet against Algiers and so gained control over the western Mediterranean. Though Britain's possession of Tangier was brief, it was regarded as the beginning of a British empire in Africa. During the two decades of occupation, the British colony there replicated British life, trying to create a miniature London impervious to the Moorish world around it. Unlike the imperial ventures in America or in Ireland, in North

Africa the British encountered powerful and well-organized societies which could not be simply conquered. Tangier was a middle ground for the British imperial idea, between the trading companies which brought the British into Asia, and the occupation and conquest of British America.

Matar tells his story chronologically, rather than thematically, so we can see these shifts and changes in British perceptions and policies. Unlike other scholars and popular writers who have explored the relationship between Euro-Americans and the Barbary states, Matar also mines the archives of Morocco, and is conversant enough with Morocco's own history to tell the story from the perspective of both Europe and North Africa.

Although the story proceeds chronologically, each chapter does have its particular theme. Chapter 1, "The Moor on the Elizabethan Stage," gives a superb analysis of the Moors who appeared in Shakespeare's "Titus Andronicus" (first performed ca. 1594) "Merchant of Venice" (1596), and, of course, "Othello" (ca. 1604). But Matar argues convincingly that these Moors were not "just a product of literary invention, the European legacy of race discrimination, or biblical denunciations of the sons of Ham: they were a direct result of England's diplomatic initiative into Islamic affairs and of the negotiations and collusions that took place between Queen Elizabeth and Mulay Ahmad al-Mansur" (p. 13). He takes each of these plays at the time it was written and performed, showing how the arrival of a Moroccan emissary in London, and the tangle of British-Spanish-Moroccan politics, played into the drama. Caliban from "The Tempest" (1611), the son of an Algerian sorceress, made his stage appearance after James I began to distance Britain from Barbary politics.

In addition to Shakespeare, Matar looks at other British plays. Thomas Heywood's "The Fair Maid of

the West” is perhaps the most interesting from the standpoint of changes in British policy and ideology. Heywood wrote the first part around 1600, roughly at the same time Shakespeare was writing “Othello,” and Elizabeth I was engaged in a subtle diplomatic relationship with Mulay al-Mansur, emperor of Morocco. In the play, an Englishwoman named Bess and her lover Spencer, an English sailor, find themselves in a Moroccan port. While this is a dangerous place, Bess finds a protector in the Moroccan ruler Mullisheg, with whom she makes a treaty (pp. 33-35).

Thirty years after writing the play, Heywood wrote a sequel, “Fair Maid of the West, Part Two” (1631), in which Bess and Spencer, married in Morocco, now have to fight off the lustful advances of Mullisheg and the corruption of Moroccan society, though ultimately they reconcile with the King who sends them back to England enriched with gold (pp. 53-54). Thirty years later, the novelized version of the play elevates Bess and Spencer and reduces Mullisheg and the other Moorish characters to insignificance (p. 135). John Dryden’s “Conquest of Granada” (1670-71), a play that remained popular through the eighteenth century and written as the British were occupying Tangier and attacking Algiers, and “Don Sebastian” (1689) reduce the Moorish characters to insignificance. Also, in these later plays, the Moorish characters’ religion comes to take on more importance, and to set them apart (p. 169). The British perception of the Moors had changed significantly in the century since Shakespeare had the Prince of Morocco court Portia and the Venetians call on the military services of Othello.

Matar’s second chapter, “Imperialism, Captivity and the Civil Wars,” shows how Charles I’s ineffectiveness in dealing with the growing problem of piracy in the 1620s led the affected merchants and sailors to seek redress from Parliament. Merchants and sailors from the East India and Levant Companies were particularly impacted by the Barbary corsairs. The King’s policy, to use the British fleet against Spain rather than the corsairs in the Mediterranean, seemed, to the merchants and sailors, an indifference to their plight. In 1641, when news reached London that Algiers and Tunis held four to five thousand captives, and were preparing for more attacks, Parliament responded with a bill for the relief of captive sailors (p. 65). Parliament, not the King, would act as the protector of the British merchant and sailor (p. 68).

In chapter 3, “Barbary and British Women,” Matar argues that the political crisis “led to a dramatic change in the role of women,” who took it upon themselves to launch petition drives and campaign for the release of their husbands, brothers, and sons (p. 76). Women organized and acquired a political agency through their actions. There were also some bizarre episodes, such as the plan by the East India Company to marry off the daughter of an English gentleman to the sultan of Sumatra, as it would be “beneficial to the [East India] Company” (p.106), or the idea that, since in the mind of English men their women were more desirable to the Moors than any other, English prostitutes could be sent to Algiers in exchange for British sailors, with one English woman being worth six of the English men (p. 94).

And then there is the story of the fifteen-year-old English girl sent to Barbados in 1685. She was one of four women taken by the Moroccans, and not redeemed. Who was she? Was she an indentured servant or a prostitute? Why was she sent? When her virginity was discovered, she was taken to the Emperor, Mulay Ismail, who wanted her for his harem. She resisted, and was beaten and ultimately subdued. Or was she? She bore two children to the emperor, one of whom, Muhammad al-’Alem, later took the throne. And, though the women in Mulay Ismail’s harem generally were replaced after the age of thirty, this woman (anonymous in the English records, but known in Barbados as Balqees, the Arabic name for the Queen of Sheba, or “Lella Sultana Odima” or “the English woman”), continued to dress in the English style and travel with her husband the emperor. When Queen Anne sent a new ambassador to Morocco in 1713, among the gifts sent were “A Rich Crimson Velvet” sedan chair for the “Darling sultaness a Native of England” (pp. 100-102). Had she stayed in England or made it to Barbados in 1685, it is unlikely Queen Anne would have sent her a sedan chair.

While European and American literature are full of stories of captives held in the Barbary states, there are no first-person accounts of Moors held as captives in Europe. And yet there were thousands of Moors taken captive by the European powers. According to Matar, their stories do not survive because very few of them returned to their native lands. In his fourth chapter, “Moors in British Captivity,” Matar recovers what he can of the stories of Moorish captives. He also notes the different kinds of captivity in Barbary. A slave (*’abd*) was purchased, while a captive (*’aseer*) was held for ransom. Slavery (*’ubadiyya*)

and captivity (*asr*) were different institutions. All of the North African states were engaged in the trans-Saharan slave trade, as well as trade in gold and other goods. The capture of European sailors was a different facet of the economy (pp. 114-115). For Matar, though, the real focus of this chapter is on the European enslavement of Moors. Europeans did not differentiate between the status of their captives; raids by European powers in retaliation for the piracy of Morocco or Algiers and the bombardment of the North African cities were among the factors, he argues, in the economic and political decline of these polities in the eighteenth century (pp. 131-132).

In addition to his final chapter, which treats the British occupation of Tangier and campaign against Algiers, Matar provides three appendices, including the captivity narrative of John Whitehead, written at the behest of Hans Sloane, and Edward Dummer's 1685 "Voyage into the Mediterranean Sea."

This book, and the others in Matar's trilogy, should shape our understanding of the relationship between Europe, America, and the Barbary states. This is the kind of book all historians should aspire to write. Our world today was shaped by these events of the seventeenth century.

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