

Nabil Matar. *Britain and Barbary, 1589–1689*.

Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2005. xiv + 242 pp. index. append. bibl. \$59.95. ISBN: 0–8130–2871–X.

In recent years, Nabil Matar's work has considerably improved our knowledge of the relationships between North Africa and Britain in the early modern period. His new book *Britain and Barbary 1589–1689* is the third installment of a masterfully-researched and crisply-written trilogy on the topic (*Barbary* was the name used in European texts to designate North Africa). Here as in his previous books (*Turks, Moors, and Englishmen in the Age of Discovery* and *Islam in Britain 1558–1685*), Matar considerably enriches our understanding of the very current issue of the relationship between Europe and Islamic countries. Relying on a variety of sources, both published and unpublished, literary and archival, in European languages as well as in Arabic, his work sheds a new light on the culture of Britain at a crucial time of its evolution toward becoming a world power. Great tales are sketched here, worthy of the most action-packed adventure novel. Matar does sometimes take the time to follow at length the trajectories of some of the characters involved in the many dramas of that time: the Englishwoman who became the Sultana of Morocco, the numerous British sailors who went to seek a new career in Algiers or Sale.

His goal is, however, far more ambitious than the recreation of colorful and dangerous times in the history of the Atlantic and Mediterranean worlds at the crossroads. Matar aims at measuring the impact of Barbary, real and imagined, on the culture and the history of Britain, and at inscribing the place of North Africa in British practice and thinking at a time when empire was in everybody's mind. He argues forcefully that the analysis of literary and political documents — particular attention is given to the plays written during that period, from Shakespeare to Dryden — shows a drastic change in the British attitude toward Barbary during the century under study, as a direct consequence of the evolution of the power relations between the two regions, and between Europe and Islam. Two periods have to be distinguished, the shifting point being the Interregnum.

At first, the British, fearful of the powerful Ottomans and of the gold-rich Moroccan Sultan, worked to engage in trade and diplomatic relations with the Islamic countries. In the mid-seventeenth century, the power of the British navy and technology far surpassed that of North Africa. This imbalance led to a paradigm shift in the British attitude toward Barbary, symptomatic of a larger change of perception and action by the British with regard to the Islamic countries. This is the time when Britain becomes a dominant force in the Mediterranean. Matar insists on the necessity of a study that would carefully chronicle the change brought by this new reality. This conception goes against the view of a monolithic and timeless Orientalism, supposed to pervade all images of Islam in Europe at all times, a view that is in urgent need of revision.

Another crucial issue is at the heart of the book: Matar seeks to situate the

relations between Britain and Barbary in the much-discussed issue of the fashioning of English identities during the pre-imperial period. He argues that Barbary played an important part in that process, alongside the more widely recognized roles of Ireland and America. Special attention is given to British women, both captives' relatives and captives themselves, and their changing agency due to those circumstances. Indeed, the question of piracy and slavery between the two nations, which has inspired so many texts and studies, is very carefully handled. Matar's analysis helps illuminate a historical problem still fraught with misunderstandings, showing that both piracy and slavery were far from being specific to North Africans. In fact, the evidence, as well as a number of other studies, demonstrate that North Africa was far more deeply harmed by European corsairs than the opposite.

In sum, this book is an important contribution to our understanding of the mutual political and cultural impact of interaction between Britain and Barbary, peaceful or violent; it also helps us understand the larger issues of the complex historical relationships between Europe and Islamic countries. There is no need to stress how important it is to have solidly researched studies on this subject rather than harmful mythologies.

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