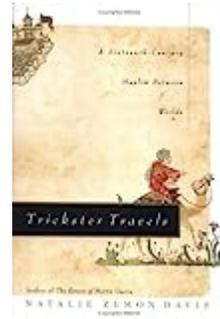




Natalie Zemon Davis. *Trickster Travels: A Sixteenth-Century Muslim between Worlds.* New York: Hill & Wang, 2006. ix + 435 pp. \$30.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8090-9434-9.



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Change, Sameness and the In-Between

Trickster Travels tells the intriguing story of Leo Africanus, born al-Hasan ibn Muhammad ibn Ahmad al-Wazzan, a Moroccan diplomat who was taken prisoner by pirates, baptized into Christianity by Pope Leo X, lived in Italy for nine years, and—as his major scholarly accomplishment—authored the first early modern European geography of Africa. In approaching al-Wazzan’s story, Natalie Zemon Davis adopts the tale of the bird who, whenever he had to pay taxes, switched from life among his flying brethren to life underwater with the fish. In this way, Zemon Davis shifts between al-Wazzan’s Islamic roots and his (outwardly) Christian life, between his life in Italy and his life in northern Africa in the sixteenth century. Her aim is to unearth the cultural, political, literary, and personal complexities that al-Wazzan encountered as a forced convert in a foreign country. Zemon Davis suggests that, as a devout Muslim, al-Wazzan probably always hoped to return to his native land, where he would have been able to once again openly practice Islam. Nonetheless, life as a stranger in a new world likely also held its advantages. In Europe, where most people were ignorant of Arabic culture

and customs and African geography, al-Wazzan was suddenly accorded expert status. Thus, despite his precarious status as an outsider, al-Wazzan would have been able to reach a level of scholarly renown that had been unattainable in his home country.

The book is divided into nine chapters which, in order to examine more closely the complexities of his fate to live in between cultures, focus more or less on separate aspects of al-Wazzan’s life and scholarly activities. After the introduction, the first chapter recounts the life al-Wazzan led prior to his abduction to Italy. Based primarily on his *Description of Africa*, this chapter paints a picture of al-Wazzan as a Granada-born immigrant who was trained in law and had general scholarly interests. Later, as a diplomat to the Sultan of Fez, al-Wazzan traversed the southern and eastern Mediterranean, as well as parts of inner Africa. As occurs throughout the book, Zemon Davis blends in multiple sources on local customs, history, and culture in order to expand upon the scarce factual knowledge of al-Wazzan’s life. Chapters 2 through 8 deal with al-Wazzan’s capture and delivery to

the Pope in 1518, his conversion to Christianity, his place within Italian, European and Christian life, and, most extensively, his literary accomplishments and cultural positioning. Chapter 9 deals with his return to Africa, of which virtually nothing is known.

After regaining some form of private life in Italy, al-Wazzan produced—apart from his famed *Description*—a series of manuscripts on Arabic grammar and prosody. He also wrote on Muslim chroniclers and Malakite law, and he devoted a book to illustrious men. In addition, al-Wazzan worked on an Arabic-Jewish-Latin dictionary and commented on a translation of the Koran. Through these writings, and backed by extensive research, Zemon Davis examines the man that was al-Wazzan, with particular interest in his position as a writer and scholar.

Al-Wazzan's "double life," Zemon Davis suggests, allowed him a relative freedom to act and speak that would have been impossible under different circumstances. Though only a relatively minor official in his homeland, in his new "home" in Europe, al-Wazzan was launched to the status of expert on Islam, Arabic culture and literature, and African geography. Thus, in Europe al-Wazzan could aspire to reach a degree of scholarly fame. Despite the privileges that his expert status brought, Zemon Davis postulates that al-Wazzan probably always hoped to return to Africa. She speculates further that, though living as a "Christian" in Europe, al-Wazzan probably would have sought to remain inwardly true to his cultural roots and would have likewise striven to live as true to Islamic law as circumstances would have allowed. As an outsider—but "Christian"—in Europe, al-Wazzan had the freedom to juxtapose Europe and Africa in such a way as to invert traditional European ideas of right and wrong, of civilized and barbaric. In this way, al-Wazzan could recognize and subtly critique European cultural prejudices in his writings, without offending his readers. Moreover, being in Europe must have freed him to write about certain aspects of Christian culture and custom in a more positive light than he could have done in his homeland.

As Zemon Davis stresses, the main problem in studying the life of this Islamic-Christian bird is the sparseness of available data. His life in Africa is known almost solely through his own account. Al-Wazzan is conspicuously absent from the local administrative records, which Zemon Davis has studied, through either primary or secondary sources. His life in Europe also had to be reconstructed through the few manuscripts that can be attributed to him. Recreating an image on the basis of such

records is by no means straightforward; Zemon Davis deserves credit for bringing together a vast range of sources into what, of necessity, remains an essentially tentative personal history. As someone who works in a field obsessed with results, I find it refreshing to see such an overt admission of the many "woulds" and "mights" that this study must contain as a result of the scant historical record. Zemon Davis explains in the beginning that much of what she wrote is built "from additional sources about ... what he would have been likely to see or hear or read or do" (p. 13). I find it laudable that the very vagueness of such a history is acknowledged from the outset and that the book clings to its conditional phrases quite sternly. On only a few occasions does Zemon Davis state matters as fact, not interpretation. She skillfully recreates a full image of al-Wazzan—not only as a person but also as someone compelled, in both scholarly and personal ways, to inhabit two cultures at once.

Such an approach carries with it two slightly more arduous issues. First, a book written mainly in the conditional tense tends to be a difficult read; it leaves the reader with relatively few anchor points of certainty. But this, in itself, should not detract from the value of this work. Personally, I would much rather muddle my way through an admittedly non-absolute book than face an over-eager presentation of supposition as fact. The second issue, however, is more problematic. Because she lacks more direct sources on al-Wazzan, Zemon Davis turns rather too often to lengthy excursions on matters of politics, history, culture, and literature in a manner that diverts attention from what seem to be the central points of the book. Here the author appears to fall prey to her own acknowledgement of the need for indirect reasoning and deduction, as well as to her broad scholarly gaze, which, in itself, is highly commendable. Becoming quite extended, these side notes often lead the reader down a path whose value becomes increasingly less evident. As an added negative effect, these digressions sometimes mount one possibility on top of another, so as to eventually become increasingly more distanced from both the factual data and from the original topic. These excursions arise frequently throughout *Trickster Travels*, and unfortunately detract from its value. There are times when the reader may start to wonder what the original point actually was.

The epilogue provides the strongest example of this. Creating a hypothetical link between Francois Rabelais and al-Wazzan, Zemon Davis speculates on the position of the two writers towards one another. The result feels more like an exercise in literary and historical hypothe-

sizing than an actual asset to the rest of the book. I did not really see the point of ending on this note. Whether or not Rabelais may have known the works of al-Wazzan (to all appearances he did not) and how one author would have reacted to the writings of the other hardly seemed relevant. Some of the conclusions drawn from the use of the Orient as a theme in Rabelais's work furthermore appeared to undermine the proposed comparison. A more concise epilogue would have been more fitting.

Despite a relative lack of detailed factual sources, Zemon Davis has produced a book that greatly extends its own scope—the person of al-Wazzan—and becomes a wide-ranging work, which provides insight into numer-

ous aspects of the cultures and history of Europe and northern Africa in the sixteenth century. However, given its tendency to lengthy excurses, the book sometimes loses its way. The specialized scholar may feel slightly at odds with what, at times, becomes a more generalized introduction to sixteenth-century politics, Islamic law, and European and African history than a concise study of a specific subject. Like the person she sets out to study, Zemon Davis sometimes hesitates to take a particular stance, opting instead to include everything. While in itself this broad gaze has merit, the results can be distracting, a matter which unfortunately detracts somewhat from the book's readability and which obscures some of its worth.

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