



Daniel J. Vitkus, ed. *Piracy, Slavery, and Redemption: Barbary Captivity Narratives from Early Modern England*. Introduction by Nabil Matar. New York: Columbia University Press, 2001. xvi + 376 pp. \$30.50 (paper), ISBN 978-0-231-11905-4; \$78.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-231-11904-7.



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Christian Captives in the Islamic World

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The story of Christian captivity in Islamic North Africa emerged as a written English genre during the early modern period in stunning personal accounts called Barbary captivity narratives. These historical narratives provided English readers with some of their first detailed impressions of North African culture, although the general story of Barbary abduction must certainly have been well known as captives' relatives pleaded for public ransom funds and redeemed captives recounted their experiences. *Piracy, Slavery, and Redemption* collects seven of the twenty-three accounts that were written between 1577-1704, and Matar's nuanced introduction situates the narratives in the hostile context of the ancient Christian/Islam conflict.

The fact that until the end of the 1620s more Britons lived in North Africa than North America is largely overlooked, and historians have concentrated instead on the looming prizes of the New World rather than the allure and danger of the Barbary states. North African privateers—largely driven by western maritime technology and renegade captives from Europe—regularly cap-

tured English and colonial sailing vessels, and the captives were frequently exchanged for much needed hard currency. The slave traffic, of course, ran in both directions as British and Maltese corsairs captured “Barbary Pirates,” and the exchange of captives became regularized and an important aspect of the Mediterranean economy. Matar theorizes that the North African conflict received little attention by contemporary writers simply because Europeans were often overpowered at sea and, as he has shown in his earlier work, Christians regularly converted to Islam.

The experience of the British Barbary captive was by no means monolithic. Many suffered terrible depredations—torture, malnourishment, backbreaking labor—but, as Matar points out, captives could also be well treated. They were, after all, valuable investments. William Okeley's Algerian master, for example, provided Okeley with a small market stand, and Okeley was expected to earn his keep as a merchant. After many years, Okeley would eventually escape Algiers in a collapsible boat he furtively constructed while out of his master's sight.

Okeley's narrative, what he calls an "Ebenezer," is heavily imbued with biblical overtones and scriptural references, and the account itself speaks to the ideological struggle between Christianity and Islam that the captivity scenario provokes. The captive's ordeal was not only physical, it was clearly spiritual, and a British captive had to actively resist the lure of conversion and the easier life promised to a renegade who "took the turban." His identity as a Christian and Briton was under attack, and those who survived to write their stories framed their accounts as titanic struggles in which the superiority of the West and Christianity won out over the decadent world of the infidel. For their part, Barbary privateers saw themselves as "religious warriors" and the slaves they captured as a righteous reward for fighting the Christian infidels.

In addition to expressing an extremely political view of North African Muslims, the British captives (like their American counterparts, incidentally) also critiqued their own government. Matar notes: "The narratives written during the Elizabethan period praised the queen and her government for arranging the release of captives or assisting them upon their return to England, while texts written under James obliquely criticized an indifferent monarch and an inefficient admiralty" (pp. 34-5). These accounts, like most captivity or slave narratives, present a dual perspective of the complex foreign "other" and the altered view of the captives' home world. What emerges in Matar and Vitkus's anthology, then, is an intricate, sometimes even contradictory story of cross-cultural contact that influenced national identities.

In this anthology, as in his previous books, Matar's writing is extremely well researched, and he has brought to light new historical sources to balance these chiefly polemical accounts. His introduction goes a long way to explain the captor's perspective without diminishing the captives very real suffering. For instance, Matar suggests that many of the corsairs chased and captured Christians purely for financial gain and to support "faltering na-

tional economies" (p. 12), while others believed themselves to be engaged in a holy conflict. Regardless of the motivation, Matar explains, many captives suffered terribly while others were treated with kindness or at least benign neglect. This measured perspective gives us a clearer sense of the varied nature of Barbary conflict. Daniel Vitkus performs an admirable service in his selection and annotation of these narratives as well as in the seven appendices. We currently have very little publishing information about these narratives, so Vitkus's bibliography is an important contribution to gauging the material reach of these accounts.

Absent from Matar's discussion, however, is a more detailed examination of how the Barbary conflict influenced British literary projects. He mentions that unlike Spain (as well as France, by the way) there is no British drama that concerns captivity. The anthology, however, includes two British ballads in the appendices, and one is left to wonder about the impact of these narratives on the formation of the early British novel. Robinson Crusoe, for example, had been a Barbary captive before he found his deserted island. Recently, Joe Snader, *Caught Between Worlds: British Captivity Narratives in Fact and Fiction* (University Press of Kentucky, 2000), advancing the work of Nancy Armstrong and Leonard Tennenhouse, has suggested that the beginnings of the British novel can be traced to just the type of narratives that can be found in this collection. To fully appreciate the value of what Matar and Vitkus have done, we will eventually need further literary research and debate as to the significant impact these narratives likely had on the British imagination.

Piracy, Slavery, and Redemption is an important and welcome addition to the growing body of research on early contact between North Africa and the West. Those studying the conflict between Islam and Christianity as well as the imperial battles between North Africa and Britain will find their work a useful starting point.

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