

Nabil Matar, *Islam in Britain, 1558–1685*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998. pp. xi, 226.

———. *Turks, Moors and Englishmen in the Age of Discovery*. New York: Columbia UP, 1999. pp. xi, 268.

Since the end of the Cold War, Islam has resurfaced as one of the West's primary Others. Edward Said has shown that Islam has long provided a mirror or foil for the West's self-definition; what these two studies by Nabil Matar powerfully demonstrate is that the role it has played in this process of self-definition has not remained constant. The Islam of *Orientalism* dates largely, argues Matar, from the eighteenth century, when the Ottoman Empire's long, slow decline was already underway. During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, by contrast, Islam was the object of fear, admiration and fascination, "a powerful civilization which [Britons] could neither possess nor ignore" (*Islam* 20). Although England was at this time laying the groundwork for their colonial empire, "In the interactions between Britons and Muslims there was no colonial discourse, practice or goal. Muslims were seen to be different and strange, infidels and 'barbarians,' admirable or fearsome, but they did not constitute colonial targets" (*Turks* 12). In this particular cultural encounter, the English were by no means confident of their superiority.

In these two works, Matar convincingly makes the argument that the place of Islam in the English world picture has not been adequately accounted for in scholarship on the period. This, in spite of the fact that Muslims "represented the most widely visible non-Christian people on English soil in this period—more so than the Jews and the American Indians, the chief Others in British Renaissance history" (*Turks* 3). When scholarship does take notice of Muslims, argues Matar, it often unhelpfully conflates North Africans with sub-Saharan Africans, which "is misleading because England's relations with sub-Saharan Africans were relations of power, domination and slavery, while relations with the Muslims of North Africa and the Levant were of anxious equality and grudging emulation" (*Turks* 7–8). In spite of the ongoing skirmishes between English and Muslim pirates and privateers, Elizabeth's government, shows Matar, had very cordial relations with both the Ottoman Empire and various North African states, particularly the kingdom of Algiers. Both sides, at various points, either expected or asked for military assistance from the other.

Matar's work thus challenges recent, more monolithic accounts of difference within the early modern period, and it also offers ample demonstration that the most familiar view of Muslims, that offered by the Renaissance stage,

is not the only, or even the dominant, view of Muslims in England at the time. The two studies cover overlapping terrain. The earlier study, *Islam in Britain, 1558–1685*, is concerned largely with the representation of Islam or the Muslim world in English writing, whether religious, political or literary. *Turks, Moors and Englishmen in the Age of Discovery* casts a wider net, looking at actual encounters between England and the Muslim world, whether this took the form of Muslim ambassadors visiting London or English pirates being held in slave prisons in Algiers. Ultimately, the argument of the latter book is that the representation of Islam changes significantly in the early modern period, at least partly as a result of England's encounter with the natives of North America.

In *Islam in Britain*, Matar surveys a range of texts that offer representations of Muslim culture, tradition or religion, including sermons, plays, English translations of the Qur'an, alchemical treatises, religious polemic and eschatological writings. Not surprisingly, conversion, whether from Christianity to Islam or the reverse, surfaces frequently. In actual fact, shows Matar, the conversions were overwhelmingly in one direction: the Muslim world offered soldiers and sailors, many of whom converted after being captured, advantages that they could never have in England, including wealth, status, and influence: "Although travelers, captives and chroniclers always made a point of denigrating the convert for renouncing his religion and country, they confirmed that renegades lived in prosperity and wealth: indeed, the over-all portrait of the renegade in their writings is of one who had met with success" (50). On stage, however, they fared rather differently, where the figure of the renegade is used to show "the futility and despair of apostasy" (51), sometimes by changing quite dramatically the histories of actual renegades. Matar argues that playwrights did this in order to "inject fear about the consequences of apostasy" (58), but this raises the question as to why the commercial theatre, which was not an agent of the state, would worry about such a thing in the first place. It is at least equally likely that the stage is playing on some deeper fear or anxiety about conversion, or some desire on the part of the culture at large to believe that the converts were in fact wrong. Given that the renegades were most often the common man, with little hope for advancement in England, it may well be that these anxieties are ultimately about class.

In scientific and philosophical writings, the picture was markedly different. There was a great respect for Arabic learning at Oxford and Cambridge, which both established chairs of Arabic Studies in the 1630s, and "Arabic became an adjunct to a complete university education and, as P. M. Holt has stated, the hallmark of the enlightened Englishman—particularly the man

of science" (87). The Arabic influence is seen most clearly in scientific fields that would rapidly become intellectually disreputable, alchemy and astronomy, but other Arabic texts in translation were also widely read and referred to, including the twelfth-century Sufi work by Ibn Turayl, *Hayy ibn Yaqzan*, and the Qur'an, which first appeared in English in Alexander Ross's 1649 translation.

A third major source of references to Muslim culture included religious polemic (generally of the "even the Turks are better than the Catholics/Protestants/Puritans" variety) and works concerned with conversion to Christianity. Actual missionary activity was low to non-existent (121, 132–7), but the conversion of the Turk nonetheless remained a cherished dream. In the large body of writings both popular and academic that concerned the coming apocalypse, conversion became a millennial imperative; it is in these eschatological writings, argues Matar, that we see "the first anti-Muslim and anti-Arab racism in English thought" (155). Here as elsewhere, Matar's scholarship usefully complicates the accepted picture of the origins of racialized thinking in England. According to the most popular eschatological fantasy, the Jews would resettle Palestine after driving out the Muslims, and then would convert to Protestantism. This represents a significant historical change: "In the medieval period, the Muslim was the 'ally' of the Jew as the object of Christian invective and polemic: by the beginning of the seventeenth century, English writers differentiated the two groups and pitted one against the other" (181). This more sympathetic (or at least utilitarian) approach to the Jews is partly the result of different status of Jews and Muslims within the period: Jews were a scattered and oppressed nation, whereas the power of the Ottoman empire made them largely inassimilable to the European imagination.

The historical shifts in England's thinking about Islam, especially in relation to its Others, is also the subject of *Turks, Moors and Englishmen in the Age of Discovery*. Once again, Matar offers documentation of an amazing range of encounters between England and Islam, whether in London, Istanbul, off the coast of Tangiers or Dover. Here Matar advances the thesis, which he hinted at in the first book, that the changed thinking about the Muslim world is at least partly the result of England's encounter with the natives of North America: "for the first time, Muslims of the Ottoman Empire and North Africa began to be categorized as 'Barbarians' by English (and other European) writers. The use of the term at this stage in the history of Christian-Muslim interaction is striking because in the medieval period, the term had not been used" (14–15). The label, of course, ultimately stems from North American encounters.

The parallel appellation is not the result of any symmetry between the encounters. The book argues instead that calling the Muslims “barbarian” was a psychological compensation, born out of an anxiety produced by encountering a powerful culture that viewed the English as inferior: “English writers and strategists recognized, from the first establishment of the Turkey Company until the Great Migration and well into the rest of the seventeenth century, that their colonial ideology was winning against the Indians but losing against the Muslims; they were enslaving Indians while Muslims were enslaving them” (103). In spite of these striking differences, the English increasingly viewed the two cultures through the same lens, until “By the end of the seventeenth century the Muslim ‘savage’ and the Indian ‘savage’ became completely superimposable in English thought and ideology” (170).

The accusations of barbarism were bolstered in both cases by discoveries of sodomy, but here the argument goes a little astray. Matar shows how ubiquitous the references to sodomy in Muslim lands were in travel literature, but doesn’t really address the accuracy of these observations or what might be revealed by this English fascination with perversion abroad. Behind the argument is the implicit suggestion that things are pretty much the same all over, and the English are simply being hypocritical. The admirable historical and cultural nuance that Matar elsewhere displays is here lost and the argument is further muddled by the assertion that “sodomy” is simply the period’s term for homosexuality (109). This is, interestingly enough, contradicted by Appendix C, which contains an excerpt from Ahmad bin Qasim’s dialogue between a Frenchman and a Muslim; in the dialogue, it is clear that “sodomy” refers to heterosexual anal intercourse (193–4).

In both of these studies, Matar points in a highly illuminating way to the wide gulf that frequently existed between how Muslims figured in the English imagination to what the English actually knew about Muslims through their many encounters. Not least among the valuable lessons we are given is that race and cultural difference in the period are complex and often contradictory matters. And not only are they contradictory, they are not stable across time. The highly schizophrenic relation of England to the Muslim world that is mapped out in these two books, alternately admiring and vilifying, would change as the power of England and its technology grew, and the Ottoman empire began to decline. It was only then that Europe felt to free to mythologize the Orient as it pleased. Opening up what was largely forgotten territory, these works both exemplify and call for a more sensitive approach to the differences and the parallels between the various nations and peoples that England encountered on its way to empire.

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