Imagining Islam: Early Republican Literature and the Barbary Crisis

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ABSTRACT

In 1794, the United States Congress officially authorized the creation of a national naval force and just ten years later pushed back Tripolitan soldiers on the coast of North Africa. Yet for decades prior to the First Barbary War, Americans had been terrorized by the Barbary pirates who routinely impressed and enslaved sailors before selling them back to the United States for tribute money. As the United States searched for a national image, national imaginings concentrated more and more on comparisons between North Africa and North America. As Protestant Americans felt the threat of Muslim sailors, Islam began to feature more and more in the literature of the nascent nation. In this thesis, I examine four pieces of American literature published between 1787 and 1807 directly featuring Muslim characters, and I relate the works to the United States’ involvement and interactions with North African states. This essay responds to contemporary scholarship utilizing Edward Said’s Orientalism and considers whether or not Said’s writings can be fully applied to the time period of the Early Republic.
1. INTRODUCTION

Between 1785 and 1815, Algerian corsairs, met with little resistance, intercepted
American ships off the coast of North Africa, impressing, imprisoning, and enslaving over
seven-hundred American soldiers in a thirty-year span.¹ To the American populace, Barbary
impressments and the specter of an Islamic world-power were nothing new. For almost a century,
sailors routinely found themselves in North African prisons, oftentimes for years on end before
being ransomed back across the Atlantic, returning to their homes. For the British and French
crowns, ransoms were simply the cost of doing business in the Mediterranean. Now, however,
the newly-minted United States, having just recently shed the yoke of British colonialism and
signed the Treaty of Paris, faced a significant challenge in engaging in transcontinental
commerce without the protection of the British Navy—the largest and most sophisticated fleet in
the world.

While the framers of the increasingly-insufficient Articles of Confederation gathered
behind locked doors and boarded windows to discuss the future of the nascent nation, an
American public grew more and more distressed by the conglomeration of states’ inability to
protect its own interests. Building on a tradition initiated with the publishing of captivity
narratives like Joshua Gee’s, a colonial sailor who spent seven years imprisoned in Algiers, and
the renowned preacher Cotton Mather’s sermon “Glory and the Goodness of God,” American
authors published in large numbers fictional representations of life under Islamic rule in North
Africa and other works inspired by concurrent events. Early Republican readers simply
demanded that their literature be relevant to their lives and teach moral lessons, regardless of the
genre in which it was written. As historian Jan Lewis identifies, “Americans [in the eighteenth

century] drew no clear distinctions between that which was ‘fiction’ and that which was not.”\textsuperscript{2} This was certainly the case with regard to the proliferation of Barbary literature, as fiction written concerning Barbary captivity increasingly centered around moral and political arguments relevant to the United States, such as the political and social rights of women as well as the abolition of slavery.

Barbary impressments and the Muslim world were not just hot literary topics, however. Islam stretched its influence into the very founding of the United States as politicians invoked the religion to score rhetorical points in debates crucial to the structure of the new nation. To begin her essay “Could a Muslim be President?,” Denise A. Spellberg quotes from William Lancaster, a delegate to the North Carolina Constitutional Convention voting against ratification as he objected to the United States Constitution’s lack of religious tests. Antifederalists sought to preserve the most powerful seats in the land to like-minded Protestants. Lancaster’s foresight was that, without any religious test or requirement, it was inevitable for a Catholic or Muslim man to one day become President of the United States.\textsuperscript{3} Spellberg argues that this moment was “a unique moment in American Constitutional history, when Muslims became symbolically embroiled in ... what it meant to be an American.”\textsuperscript{4} Although Spellberg’s argument reveals an apparent ignorance of the fact that thousands of Muslims lived in the former North American colonies, the vast majority of whom were either slaves or former slaves, it nevertheless


\textsuperscript{3} Lancaster’s pronouncement, quoted by Spellberg reads: But let us remember that we form a government for millions not yet in existence. I have not the art of divination. In the course of four or five hundred years, I do not know how it will work. This is most certain, that Papists may occupy that chair, and Mahometans may take it. I see nothing against it.

demonstrates the presence, if perhaps only through abstraction, of Islam and its fundamental role in the founding of the United States and the concept of the federal union.

For decades, if not longer, scholars have recognized the influence that European encounters with Islam have had on the continent, specifically with regard to literature. However, it is only within the past few decades that scholars have begun in earnest to contemplate and enumerate the fundamental influence of Islam in the creation of an American literary culture. Out of necessity, a study of Islamic influences on American literature is extensively primary source-based. Colonial and Early Republican literature often dealt intimately with religion, and as a reflection of the reality around these writers, many times included references and allusions to Islam. As Paul Baepler writes in his introduction to *White Slaves, African Masters*, an anthology of captivity narratives of Americans impressed in North Africa, the history of American citizens or British colonists held as slaves in North Africa is “a largely neglected history despite its continuing importance.”

While Baepler speaks of ‘continuing importance’ with thoughts of twenty-first-century Islamic fundamentalist terrorism in mind, clearly the cultural ramifications of American captivity in Algiers and the United States-Barbary Wars stretch much further. Although interested in the historical and narrative depictions of real-life captivity, Baepler includes two examples within his own collection which are fictional, namely the accounts of two female authors, Maria Martin and Eliza Bradley. In doing so, Baepler presents the possibility of a secondary avenue of historical exploration into this neglected history, a history that demonstrates the prominent role of Islam in the foundation of an Early American literary culture.

Despite Baepler’s assertions of the understudied nature of the Barbary Wars and Barbary captivity, historical literature on the subject spans back at least a century and a half. Published in

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1853, Charles Sumner’s *White Slavery in the Barbary States* purports itself to be the first recorded history of Barbary captivity. Sumner’s *White Slavery* is comparative in nature. He tracks the history of the institution of slavery--beginning with the etymology of “slave” itself--and the role of chattel slavery as far back as Abraham before bringing the Barbary Wars and American impressment into conversation with the contemporary enslavement of Africans in the United States. Many scholars since Sumner have studied and written on Mediterranean and North African slavery, including captive Americans as well as the United States’ response to naval wars with Algiers and Tripoli.

In addition to a documentative history of the United States’ transatlantic struggles of the Barbary Wars, scholars have explored the concurrent role Islam held in the American public’s imagination and psyche. Susan Nance, in her book *How the Arabian Nights Inspired the American Dream, 1790-1935*, examines the influence of the stories of *Arabian Nights* in Early Republican society. Nance’s book scrutinizes American readings and theatrical performances of Islamic/Oriental tales to reveal their influence on American society. Her work is not unlike that of Elizabeth Dillon, who in *New World Drama* demonstrates that the American theater (among others such as the British) was built on the combination of representative ideals reflecting the United States’ place in a larger, colonial context. Nance and Dillon’s works are in many ways supported by the theoretical underpinnings of scholars such as Michael Warner and Jan Lewis, who write on the print and intellectual culture of Early Republican society. Nance and Dillon’s work with stories and stage performances are indicative of what Lewis describes as the larger collective ethos around intellectual and print culture in the Early Republic: a sense of understanding that the medium or literary mode of the distillation of information was of little

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7 Sumner, 19-20.
importance, rather the substantive message of a letter, novel, or performance was judged based on applicability to one's situation rather than its factual veracity.⁸

In the study of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century American literature, Lewis’ claims are essential, as they provide a framework for reading works of fiction as historical documents. Early American scholars like Timothy Marr, an historian concerned with early American interactions with the Muslim world, have identified the larger implications of references to Islam within Early Republican texts. In his introduction to Peter Markoe’s *The Algerine Spy in Pennsylvania*, written in 1787, Marr contextualizes both Markoe’s upbringing to the subject matter of the epistolary novel as well as the comments of Mehmet, the titular spy, to the ongoing debate over the ratification of the Constitution. What Marr identifies in *The Algerine Spy* is a greater representational argument being made by Markoe. Jennifer Margulis, in her introduction to Susan Haswell Rowson’s 1794 play *Slaves in Algiers; or, a Struggle for Freedom*, too contextualizes the character’s imprisonment by the Dey of Algiers. While much literature written during the height of American impressment overseas and the Barbary Wars was sure to be sensationalist in nature, capitalizing on public concern and interest, scholars like Marr and Margulis identify the possibility for American authors to use fiction to make poignant arguments on issues pressing to the Early Republic, such as education, the rights of women, and both American domestic slavery and the international slave trade.

As a result of American interactions with the Barbary States through the eighteenth century, fiction containing references to Islam was certainly not anomalous. Americans were not unfamiliar with. Less common, however, were. Already mentioned are two of the best-known examples in Markoe’s novel and Rowson’s play. Other examples include letters written by

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Benjamin Franklin and the stories of Washington Irving, among others. What this paper seeks to accomplish is to analyze a wide range instances in which American authors give voice to figures of Islam and subsequently situate that voice in a larger, national conversation. An application of the literary and historical theory of scholars like Warner and Lewis complemented by the cultural history practices of historians like Nance and Marr will reveal the manner in which the Muslim voice was a repeated and shared motif among American authors of late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

In the introduction to his 1978 work *Orientalism*, Edward W. Said issued a series of field-altering claims that prompted the reconsideration of decades upon decades of academic work. Operating at his most polemical, Said confronted a Western–and specifically British–tradition of Oriental scholarship that subjugated and “domesticated” the Oriental people and land for the consumption of and study by white European scholars.9 Said’s understanding of the term the Orient encompassed the British and French domination of India, the Levant, and North Africa. Though not himself a historian, Said made many historical claims, writing, for example, that, “historically and culturally there is a quantitative as well as a qualitative difference between the Franco-British involvement in the Orient and-until the period of American ascendancy after World War II.”10 For Americans and Americanist scholars, the wake of Said’s work created interest in a re-examination of not only scholarly practices with regards to “the Orient,” but also a historical re-examination of the United States’ past in order to qualify Said’s claims. This essay will hold tightly to Said’s framework, one in which he defines Orientalism as a strict relationship between Occident and Orient, a relationship “of power, of domination, of varying degrees of a

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complex hegemony” in interpretation and reading of late eighteenth and early-nineteenth American texts centered around Islam and the Orient.¹¹

In 1962, Jürgen Habermas introduced to the (German-reading academic) world for the first time the concept of the “public sphere” (öffentlichkeit). His seminal work, The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society, translated into the English in 1989, traces the history of the bourgeois public sphere—a set of circumstances providing for the ability of private citizens and their government to publicly engage in discourse which created a mutually beneficial set of checks and balances. The public sphere, according to Habermas, gave bourgeois citizens input into their democratic system, promoting republican concepts of individualism, self-governance, and liberty while decreasing and discouraging despotism. Habermas’ multifaceted and transdisciplinary approach to the understanding of the public sphere demarcated and distinguished between different facets of the public sphere. Of special note and importance to this essay is his understanding of the literary public sphere (literarische öffentlichkeit). Habermas wrote that the fundamental action of creating a public sphere was the appropriation of the tools already existing in the “world of letters” and transforming them from a world of private criticism to one of the public.¹² It is for this reason perhaps, that many of the earliest novels, across cultures and languages, were epistolary in form. Habermas wrote on the success of the “mediocre Pamela,” the 1740 bestseller by the Englishman Samuel Richardson, naming it as indicative of the social power and influence of the epistle and the public’s comfort with the genre.¹³ His general analysis of letters, follows a more

¹¹ Said, Orientalism, 13.
¹³ Habermas, The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere, 41.
ontological path than a literary one, an avenue of inquiry that proves useful for a look into the historical role of Oriental epistles.

2. **Peter Markoe and The Algerine Spy in Pennsylvania**

   The Pseudonymized Public Sphere

   Habermas’ thesis on the nature and importance of subjectivity within letters strike at the crux of many arguments made within this “Oriental” literature of the eighteenth century. Early Republican writers capitalized on the growing public knowledge of, interest in, and animosity towards Islam to make arguments about the breadth of an American public sphere. The first example considered in this essay is Peter Markoe’s 1794 epistolary novel *The Algerine Spy in Pennsylvania*. While in many ways adhering to the epistolary and material conventions of the time, the greatest deviation and the central complication of Markoe’s novel was its narrator. Mehemet is the titular Algerine spy whose letters comprise all but three of the entries that make up the novel. I examine the degree to which Peter Markoe’s *The Algerine Spy in Pennsylvania* fits into the frameworks of and functions in concordance with theories already presented on the development of public opinion and intellectual culture within the eighteenth century. An analysis of both the form and content of the epistolary novel shows the manner in which Markoe’s novel was emblematic of the Early Republican literary environment, an environment in which to partake in public life, as the literary critic and scholar Michael Warner explicates in his 1990 book *The Letters of the Republic*, one was either—or even sometimes both—a writer or a reader. Peter Markoe, however, was not simply interested in the “democratization of print,” of the 18th century, to use Warner’s description of the period.\(^\text{14}\) Rather, his *The Algerine Spy in Pennsylvania*

was an Antifederalist satire on the errors of the Articles of Confederation and foolhardy republicanism and also a celebration of the virtues Mehemet witnessed from within Pennsylvania—largely regarding individualism and freedom of religion, expression, and association.

In his essay examining three archetypal examples of the North African figure in Early Republican literature, scholar and critic Jacob Crane focuses his reading of The Algerine Spy in Pennsylvania around the centrality of race to the character development of Mehemet. Crane identifies The Algerine Spy in Pennsylvania as an exploration by Markoe of republican themes and values possible and effective only through the physical and tangible threat that is represented through the explicitly racialized body of Mehemet. Crane, then, describes his analytical practice and understanding of the 1787 novel as situated between two competing literary theories of republican representation, with one side being scholars like Warner who emphasize the world of print culture as the center, while other scholars view acts of public performance and orality as the primary mode of expression and demonstration of power within the early republican world.

Crane’s interpretation of The Algerine Spy in Pennsylvania is contingent on the acceptance and understanding of Mehemet as disembodied and disconnected from the narrative. Among other sections of the novel, Crane parses carefully two framing letters of the epistolary, an “introduction” written not from the perspective of the title character. Integral to Crane’s analysis of the novel is the letters’ purported translation, a plot device constructed by Markoe in order to explain the circumstances by which the letters have become legible for a wider English-speaking and American audience. Crane latches on to this fact, concluding:

we can see the translation of Mehemet’s letters as inextricably linked with the disappearance of his body; the recirculation of the fictional Arabic original in the form of
an English epistolary novel comes hand in hand with the assimilation of the spy’s otherness into the American public.¹⁵

Here, Crane identifies one problematic of both Markoe’s novel and the still-prevailing understanding of the Early Republican period: Markoe, in his fictionalization, portrayed the founding of the United States as a period from which Muslims and Islam were both absent, or at least one in which they played no legitimate role. Certainly, that was the perspective of the delegate William Lancaster, and his assumptions made in constitutional debate underscore his symbolic point regarding a practitioner of Islam holding the highest office in the land. Despite these assumptions, the reality of the eighteenth century was that Muslims well and truly occupied space within the emergent nation. While Spellberg argued that Muslims were a symbolic element of the definition of citizenship within the Early Republic period, it cannot be denied that the institution of slavery was more than a symbol in the creation of the status of citizen. Crane’s essay addresses this reality by tackling what he believes to be the operative technique of Mehemet’s narrative, what he calls the “discursive layering” of foreign modes of identification, namely “linguistic, territorial, and religious,” that constitute the “process of assimilation” for an eighteenth-century Muslim man in the United States.¹⁶ Crane opines that the act of fictional translation and publication of Mehemet’s narrative is the sanitization of a figure of difference—a person that would otherwise be unfit for the public sphere.

The *Algerine Spy in Pennsylvania* no doubt makes numerous arguments on topical political questions and debates: the uselessness of a standing army, the necessity of a navy, the superiority of a unicameral legislature, among others. Yet as previously mentioned, the defining feature of Markoe’s novel is his Muslim narrator. Mehemet, however, by the end of the novel,

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converts to Christianity, complicating any reading of the titular character as simply a symbol antithetical to republicanism and demonstrative of a threat to the country. A further look into Mehemet’s religion, an identifier on which Markoe placed a much heavier weight than any other concept of race or ethnicity within the novel, demonstrates complications to traditional understandings of the Early Republican public sphere. While Crane argues that Mehemet’s assimilation into the American public sphere was contingent on the disappearance of his body, and that Mehemet only “gains access to the public … by passing as a white Christian landowner,” my reading of the novel will instead situate the spy’s phenotypic expression as an irrelevant factor—through the eyes of Markoe—to his inclusion in an American public sphere.  

Instead, in *The Algerine Spy in Pennsylvania*, Markoe laid out a vision of an American public sphere that was centered around principles of self-governance and individualism, all inspired by a Protestant ethic. This Protestant ethic was contingent upon an idea of radical individualism that encouraged, and in fact demanded, the interpretation of all events, literature, etc. for one’s self. All types of authority, in the eyes of Markoe, must derive from the individual and his (the use of which is purposeful) interpretation of any source before him. Government was only legitimate when the individual has a say, and groups encouraging mobbish activity, whether those be political or religious organizations, were dangerous. Markoe’s vision of the burgeoning republic, then, is one that is predominated by the Protestant concept of *sola scriptura*, the idea that scripture alone, and one’s individual interpretation of it, is the basis of salvation.  

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17 Crane, “Barbary(an) Invasions,” 347.

18 I borrow this term from Raúl Coronado, who first described American culture as based around a conception the doctrine of *sola scriptura* in his book *A World Not to Come: A History of Latino Writing and Print Culture*. The metaphor of *sola scriptura* here is apt, as it concerns the private interpretation of a source for one’s self in order to find meaning, much as Warner, Lewis, and others describe the general ethos of the eighteenth-century literary world.
his narrator Mehemet, Markoe argued that the American public sphere must be open to all voices which reflect and encourage the radical individualism of *sola scriptura*, regardless of the source. Markoe as put forth a radical vision of the United States wherein the written word, including the letters of a converted spy from North Africa, were the central point of public debate and discourse. Ultimately, Mehemet’s conversion to Christianity reinforced and underscored Markoe’s understanding and hope for America to be a nation governed by a Protestant tradition of *sola scriptura* wherein the best ideas rise to the top and defeat forces of despotism, tyranny, and coercion.

*The Algerine Spy in Pennsylvania* begins with what is ostensibly an effort to originate and explain the arrival of Mehemet’s narrative and to identify the author of the anonymous text. Markoe’s opening letter of the novel, written through the voice of the Philadelphia printer William Prichard, underscores the importance of anonymity to the literary environment of the Early Republic era. The text itself makes no claim to a known author; the original title page leaves void any identification of Peter Markoe, and the only proprietors of the text explicitly mentioned were the printers, Prichard and Hall of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. In fact, it is apparently Prichard himself who opens the novel, offering an introduction to the text he has entered into the public sphere.\(^{19}\) “Prichard’s” letter, however, served not only as an introduction to the anonymously written text but also an integral part of the novel itself.

The letter begins with an invented story explaining the provenance of the text. “About a fortnight ago a large packet was dropped in my store in the dusk of the evening,” the letter begins, attempting to explain the lack of authorship noted on the title page.\(^{20}\) This scene would

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\(^{19}\) While Prichard’s letter is the first of the novel, there is a note on the back of the title page by one “J B. Smith,” purported “prothonotary of Philadelphia county” who affirms the text as the property of Prichard.

have familiar to early republican readers and a plausible explanation for how the printer acquired the manuscript. Indeed, the sixteen year old Benjamin Franklin utilized this same method to have his “Silence Dogood” letters published without the printer, who was his elder brother, knowing who wrote them. While this fact would not be revealed in print for another half-decade until the publication of Franklin’s autobiography, one can imagine that Markoe—a literary and intellectual figure in the city of Philadelphia—would have been intimately acquainted with the stories and rumors of its most famous resident. Markoe’s opening to his novel, then, was clearly rooted in an already-existing literary tradition. Not only are connections to Habermas identifies the “novel written in letters” as relying on the juxtaposition between the private and public. Prichard’s letter, addressed directly “To the Public,” exemplifies what Habermas identifies as the epistolary “terrain of subjectivity,” an arena in which subjectivity, the “core of the innermost private” is directed and “always already oriented to an audience.”

_The Algerine Spy in Pennsylvania_ was one of many concurrently-published works in the 1780s which utilized anonymous or pseudonymous publication. In fact, it is not irrelevant that Markoe’s novel was concurrent with the publication of the Federalist papers, a series of essays written by framers of the constitution including Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and John Jay. At the moment of _The Algerine Spy in Pennsylvania_’s publishing, the American literary public sphere was inundated with authors publishing under pseudonyms, especially when it came to arguments over important political and government decisions. While Franklin’s Silence Dogood proved a satirical and light-hearted *nom de plume*, playfully jesting at the invented persona’s character, Hamilton, Madison, and Jay used their most significant pseudonym to send a

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21 Warner, _The Letters of the Republic_, 84.

22 Habermas, _The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere_, 49.

23 Habermas, 49-50.
direct political message. “Publius” of the Federalist papers represented a political and historical statement, as the Federalists utilized a Latin name to stress the importance of the source of the newly-minted American republic. By writing under a Latin pseudonym, the authors of the Federalist papers made the claim that they, as the creators of the first representative democracy of the modern era, were in fact the heirs to the Roman Republic. “Publius” also served as the quintessential pseudonym for this study as it made an inherent argument about the nature of political discourse in the United States. “Publius” functioned as a representation of the public sphere and as a statement to the ideal circumstances of literary circulation and intellectual discussion—that names and status needed not be attached to opinions in order to be considered seriously. It is for this reason that Mehemet, the pseudonym Markoe employed for much of his novel, is so notable. The name Mehemet served as the antithesis to Publius; it was neither American, Republican, nor Protestant. Rather, Markoe drew upon a literary tradition, perhaps beginning with the Baron de Montesquieu’s Lettres persanes, wherein Islam and the Orient stood in opposition to Western thought and ideals, yet at the same time, literature from their perspective allowed the Western audience to more accurately and introspectively view themselves and consider their own actions and customs. As an Antifederalist himself, it is not surprising that Markoe would work in such a way to actively and so deliberately subvert the rhetorical practices of the leading and most widely-circulated federalist authors.

The juxtaposition of the private self in public continued in the first letter of the principal narrative, wherein the narrator, Mehemet, announces his intention to sail to North America in order to spy on the newly-independent nation. Mehemet’s letter begins with an affirmation of his Muslim faith as he reports that he has “undertaken an office of the highest consequence to my country and the Musselman faith.”24 Mehemet justifies his mission as a religious duty, writing

that, if successful, he shall “rank with those, who have gained immortal honor in this world, and
the joys of Paradise.”\(^{25}\) Despite the fact that Markoe, through his introductory letters, has already
revealed the status of his novel as a quasi-conversion narrative, Mehemet’s story begins with
such religious fervor. Almost instantaneously, however, Mehemet must cast aside his Muslim
faith and Algerian origins in order to execute his mission. He describes the method of his
obfuscation of identity, writing that to travel unnoticed, he “appear[ed] in the character of a
native of the south of France.”\(^{26}\) “My knowledge of the French language,” he reports, “the
predilection of the citizens of the states for their allies, and the swarthiness of my complexion,”
allows him to successfully pass off his identity as a French traveler.\(^ {27}\) Evident already in this first
entry is the Habermasian understanding of the genre of letters, as Mehemet is, through the
epistolary form, able to display his private self to an American public, all while remaining
anonymous in his contemporary setting. Crucial in this first letter is the subtle inclusion and
reference to physical appearance. Mehemet’s “swarthiness,” his dark complexion, is no
impediment to his disguise. In fact, it seems he needs not alter his racial appearance at all. “I was
a Frenchman,” he writes, attributing his acceptance into the Western world to factors irrelevant to
skin tone (9).\(^ {28}\) Here, Markoe once again echoes the writings of Benjamin Franklin, who in his
1751 essay “Observations Concerning the Increase of Mankind, wrote:

\[
\text{That the Number of purely white People in the World is proportionably very small. All}
\text{Africa is black or tawny. Asia chiefly tawny. America (exclusive of the new Comers)
\text{wholly so. And in Europe, the Spaniards, Italians, French, Russians and Swedes, are}
\]


\(^{26}\) Markoe, 9.

\(^{27}\) Markoe, 9.

\(^{28}\) Markoe, 9.
generally of what we call a swarthy Complexion; as are the Germans also, the Saxons only excepted, who with the English, make the principal Body of White People on the Face of the Earth. I could wish their Numbers were increased.29

Though Franklin, who at this moment in 1751 wrote as a loyal subject of the British Crown, would later reverse many of his political statements, Markoe’s utilization of his racial commentary shows a complication of the idea of The Algerine Spy in Pennsylvania as a simply a depiction of a racialized Oriental other. Rather, any racial commentary by Markoe must be considered alongside an earnest look at sentiments contemporary to the publishing of the novel. Although Franklin wrote that Africa was constituted of entirely “black or tawny” people, clearly Markoe disagreed with that statement. His North African narrator demonstrates a dynamic understanding of race in the eighteenth century. It also, importantly, raises questions about the positioning of Markoe as an entirely Orientalist author. Rather, Markoe, in crafting his narrator Mehemet was acutely aware of the complicated cultural ramifications of a Muslim narrator. At this moment, Markoe, rather than orientalizing the body of Mehemet, actually affirmed what may perhaps have been a disruptive and subversive understanding of the category of race. While Mehemet’s skin color, especially in the context of Franklin’s writing thirty years prior, works to highlight the value Markoe places on language, it leaves unanswered larger questions about race as his novel contains no discourse on chattel slavery or the transatlantic slave trade, a topic that other American writers would soon take up with the utilization of Muslim characters.

Mehemet’s acceptance into an American, although first French, environment is based on his ability to communicate effectively. In describing his first journey, from Algiers to Gibraltar, Mehemet demonstrates the ability of his linguistic knowledge to rescue him from unpleasant

situations. The first ship’s crew, ostensibly British, regard Mehemet, who in their eyes is a Frenchman, with “hatred and contempt.”\textsuperscript{30} Mehemet gains favor, however, through his ability to converse in English, writing “I conversed with them freely in English, which I understand perfectly and speak with tolerable fluency; and very soon conciliated their favor.”\textsuperscript{31} In his very first letter, Mehemet stresses the importance of language and discourse. It is notable that the swarthy spy is shunned not on account of his appearance, but rather his linguistic and national background. To rectify this, Mehemet demonstrates his ability to effectively engage in conversation, asserting that discourse, and the ability to participate in discussion, is the key to acceptance into a public sphere. Mehemet renders moot all other aspects of his identity that may have inhibited him from gaining favor with his fellow sailors once he demonstrates his proficiency in English, the obvious lingua franca of the ship. This unifying role of language is reaffirmed in Letter V, while Mehemet still lodges in Gibraltar. Mehemet here describes his disguise as perhaps lackluster: “In deportment an Algerine, a Frenchman in dress and language, I was at first the object of their amazement; but after the second visit it abated, and I am no longer the theme of their whispers.”\textsuperscript{32} Mehemet describes the abatement of his spectacle as a result of, once again, discourse: “I soon … entered into the spirit of their conversation, which was decently and lively.”\textsuperscript{33} Mehemet’s ability to converse, this time in French, gains him acceptance into a social setting where he was just recently an outsider. By his second visit, he notes his group’s “conversation was as unguarded, as their looks and motions.”\textsuperscript{34} This interaction once again

\textsuperscript{30} Markoe, \textit{The Algerine Spy in Pennsylvania}, 9.

\textsuperscript{31} Markoe, 9.

\textsuperscript{32} Markoe, 27-28.

\textsuperscript{33} Markoe, 28.

\textsuperscript{34} Markoe, 29.
demonstrates the primacy of language and discourse, at least in Markoe’s mind, over other modes of identification in the realm of the public sphere.

Markoe’s Background

Just as a broader understanding of the Early Republican literary environment is necessary for a holistic understanding of the role that *The Algerine Spy in Pennsylvania* plays within its genre and circumstance, a dive into the biography of Peter Markoe himself proves equally enlightening towards the message of his novel. Through Timothy Marr’s introduction to *The Algerine Spy in Pennsylvania*, authored concurrently with the first re-publishing of the novel in over one hundred years, we can understand Markoe as the autobiographical Mehemet. Though not a Muslim himself, Markoe’s upbringing and life journeys mimic some of the experiences of his character. Like Mehemet, Markoe saw the United States through a similar outsider-insider perspective, to use the terminology of Tunisian scholar Lofti Ben Rejeb. In his essay “Observing the Birth of a Nation,” Ben Rejeb positions the character Mehemet as simply a rhetorical strategy, a plot device that allows Markoe to comment on what he sees occurring within the United States. “The outsider was the rhetorical mask of an intellectual elite in a state of introspection, the expression of a critical mind that questioned its own attitudes and values,” Ben Rejeb offers, effectively equating Mehemet’s views and observations with those of Markoe.35

Marr’s introduction offers much in the way of biographical details that help to formulate a coherent map of Markoe’s life and draw connections to that of Mehemet’s. Markoe, like Mehemet, was in many ways a cosmopolitan foreigner. Born on the island of Saint Croix, then

part of the Danish West Indies in the early 1750s, Markoe was by citizenship Danish. As a teenager, he sailed across the Atlantic to study in England. It is perhaps this transatlantic experience that influenced his strong views in support of the creation of an American Navy, an issue that holds a large place within the novel. As Marr offers, Markoe’s upbringing likely “led to a commitment to American democracy that was more transnational than most of his fellow members of the Philadelphia mercantile elite, perhaps encouraging him to identify with the perspective of an alien Algerine outsider.”  

Perhaps no biographical detail is more important to this essay than Markoe’s religious heritage. The son of French immigrants, Markoe was born to a “wealthy sugar-growing family of Huguenot descent,” according to Timothy Marr. The Protestant Huguenot experience in France was one of centuries of religious persecution in which the Protestant minority faced religious violence and forced conversion under the rule of Catholic monarchs. Markoe directly addresses this heritage as he, even though in the voice of the Muslim Mehemet, lambastes “the banishment of the Protestants [which] reduced the internal resources of France in the reign of Louis the XIVth.”  

Markoe, practically outlining the message of the novel, continues, “I shall not attempt a regular dissertation on the fatal effects of religious intolerance, … but in Christian countries, persecution always proceeds from those who are, or at least are supposed to be, the most enlightened.” Markoe’s message here drew upon his religious background, as he prepared the reader for his argument. Clearly, conscious in Markoe’s political mind was the history of

36 Timothy Marr, Introduction to The Algerine Spy in Pennsylvania, xvii.
37 Marr, Introduction to The Algerine Spy in Pennsylvania, xv.
39 Markoe, 14-16.
absolutism in France and the religious restrictions against and repression of non-Catholics. This is not only evident through the aforementioned references to French Huguenots, but also his remarks about Catholicism. Mehemet spurns the “ignorance, sloth, and barbarism” of Catholic Portugal, whose “streets swarm with monks and convents are crowded with nuns.”

Mehemet even reflects on the oppression of the Jewish people by Catholics, stating that “Spain has become tolerant, and Portugal has ceased to be barbarous,” so that the “the Hebrews, which for ages [have] been oppressed by the rude hand of fanaticism, will now spread and flourish anew.”

It is this Huguenot background that supplies much of the basis for Markoe’s doctrine of sola scriptura. Building upon his own Calvinist/Lutheran tradition that emphasized literacy and individual interpretation of holy scripture, Markoe transferred this concept to everyday participation in a political and literary world.

_Mehemet’s Arrival_

Although Markoe utilizes the first letters of his novel to preface the ideological framework of his argument, his discussion of early republican culture and the American landscape begins in earnest, unsurprisingly, with Mehemet’s ultimate arrival in Pennsylvania in Letter XI. It is, after all, only from within the country itself that the outsider can finally become the insider. Before beginning his deconstruction of the culture before him, however, Mehemet reinforces the effectiveness of his disguise, declaring, “when I survey my person in the mirror, I rejoice for two reasons; first, that I resemble a Christian, and secondly, that I am not observed by an Algerine.”

Notable is the ease with which Mehemet is able to disassociate with his religious

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40 Markoe, _The Algerine Spy in Pennsylvania_, 54.
41 Markoe, 35.
42 Markoe, 66.
and national past, as a simple change of clothes and mind permits him to take his first step into
the American public sphere.

In the subsequent letter, Markoe presents his first argument towards the importance and
benefit of a dominating Protestant ethic within the United States. In Letter XII, Mehemet first
reports on the state of the dynamic between individualism and tyranny in Pennsylvania,
comparing it to what he knows from Algiers:

In most nations there are three sorts of tyranny the first civil; the second ecclesiastical;
the third I shall call the tyranny of fashion. The first is well known in Algiers; the second
has been heard of; but the third is altogether unknown. The Pennsylvanians have known
but little of the first, and nothing of the second; but the greater part of them is grievously
oppressed by the last. 43

Mehemet’s initial observations offer praise to the state of Pennsylvania for maintaining a
religiously open and decidedly non-tyrannical system of government. He compares this new land
favorably to his homeland, except for the reign of the latter tyranny. As Mehemet launches into a
polemic against the evils of fashion and popular culture, arguing that it dismisses key values of
individualism and reason, Markoe offers a first glimpse at how the notion of sola scriptura
applies to issues beyond religious freedom. By making an explicit link between religious, civil,
and cultural repressions, Markoe demonstrates the applicability of this core tenet of how he
believes American society should be best structured: a system that caters to individualism and
works to actively prevent the erosion of reason and free choice.

Mehemet’s commentary on tyranny harkens back to an earlier moment in Letter VIII
wherein, despite being hosted fairly and well by a Jewish man in Lisbon, he argues for a
religious inquisition of the world. “I am lodged at the house of Isaac d’Acosta, whose civility

43 Markoe, 69.
makes ample amends for his extreme bigotry. Methinks I hear the exclaim,” Markoe writes, again addressing his American readership directly, “are not bigotry and civility incompatible?” The answer, he opines, is “by no means” so.⁴⁴ Mehemet’s discussion of the prevalence of tyranny of fashion in Pennsylvania is a reminder and caution that even in a state of civility, with neither civil nor religious tyranny, bigotry is possible, and Pennsylvanians must beware themselves. His musings on the tyranny of fashion conclude by offering that many who have fallen victim to the allure of fashion “have gone so far as to set humanity at defiance, and are closely allied to deceit and cruelty.”⁴⁵

Mehemet’s developing understanding of religion in Pennsylvania expands as he witnesses more and more customs before unfamiliar to him. Letter XV, a message to his wife Fatima, describes his first witnessing of Christian worship. “I have lately heard the rhapsody of a female preacher,” he writes, expressing awe and dismay at a woman who, with “her head uncovered … dared” to preach in public.⁴⁶ Mehemet expressed incredulity at the fact that “this woman, such appareled, or, to speak more properly, almost unappareled, preached to a crowded congregation in a civilized country.”⁴⁷ This moment, which the editor Marr notes as referring to the evangelical preacher Jemima Wilkinson of 1782, demands a sophisticated reading of Markoe’s satire. Mehemet begins his letter by reflecting on the “cruel and intolerable” circumstances that have led him to “breathe the same air with profane Christians.”⁴⁸ This letter, then, is clearly one removed from the voice of the author. Mehemet, now apparently holding strong knowledge of


⁴⁵ Markoe, 71.

⁴⁶ Markoe, 83.

⁴⁷ Markoe, 84.

⁴⁸ Markoe, 82.
Christian scripture, objects to the preacher on the basis of the apostle Paul’s teaching: “Although women are forbidden by one of their first Nazarene teachers to speak in their churches, or to appear in them with their heads uncovered, yet this woman, in violation of both these precepts, dared to appear in the manner I have described.” Mehemet follows these objections with a tirade against the comportment of women in public in Pennsylvania, demonstrating the character’s repressive tendencies. Markoe makes clear that these presumptions about the role of women in public life come from a religious standpoint, as Mehemet concludes the letter by writing that “not even the beauty of a Houri can atone for the levity of laughter,” rationalizing his discomfort to this public spectacle on the basis of his own religious customs. Mehemet’s disapproval of the scene before is a direct cause of what earlier he identified as religious tyranny. Markoe’s juxtaposition of two scenes antithetical to tyranny, a woman preaching and a woman laughing in public, both of which greatly upset Mehemet, demonstrates well the link between religious and civil tyranny. Notably, Mehemet objects to both on the basis of religion, both Christianity and Islam, demonstrating the propensity of both, if adhered to in excess, to lead to personal restrictions. Markoe here utilizes his Muslim narrator, contrasting his religious with that he witness to in the United States, to offer a warning against the strict prescription of ancient texts to contemporary times, noting the ways in which such adherence removes rationality from nuanced discussions of societal norms writ large.

Mehemet’s religious edification continues into the next letter, as he reports on his experience within a Quaker meeting. Unknowingly, the spy stumbles into a meeting house, and, unsurprisingly, confusion ensues: “An awful silence prevailed, which I had hitherto imagined

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50 Markoe, 86.
was not numbered among Christian virtues, especially when ladies are present.”  
Mehemet continues by remarking that the faces of the worshipers “affected [him] with horror,” and concludes that he is witnessing “a scene of enchantment.”  
Mehemet’s unease is notable as it demonstrates a discomfort with religious scenes before unknown to him. The Quaker Meeting is a scene of radical Protestant individualism, an act of individual worship and prayer without guidance from an authority, and Mehemet’s fear at witnessing the scene is telling. The threat the Quakers before the Algerine spy pose is in their ability and inclination to authority and spirituality from within themselves, an act contrary to most other hierarchical religious doctrines.

As Markoe continues to dress the spy Mehemet up as a conceit for despotism and tyranny abound, he makes clear through these two letters concerning religion, that the greatest threat to tyranny is a Protestant mindset that values individualism and rejects religion and civil domination by an authority.

**Political and Religious Conversion**

Having addressed the topics of religious freedom and tyranny, Markoe moves in Letter XVIII to the realm of government and politics, commenting on contemporary occurrences that he ultimately views as a danger to the success of the American nation-building project. Mehemet, having adequately reported on the state of affairs in Pennsylvania, turns his attention to other states within the nascent union. Searching for a weak point, the spy raises the issues of Shays’ Rebellion, an insurrection of farmers in Massachusetts headed by Daniel Shays. He reports that “the state of Massachusetts Bay is now convulsed by the desperation of factious individuals,”

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52 Markoe, 89.
and that “an ignorant multitude, headed by Shays, have attempted–they know not what.” While Markoe himself is obviously concerned with the revolting farmers in Massachusetts, to the foreign agent Mehemet, Shays Rebellion is a welcome sign towards the weakness of the country. Indeed, Mehemet’s commentary on an “ignorant multitude” underscores an important point of Markoe’s to the dangers of mob mentality. Armed rebellion and revolt is the antithesis of republican participation, and to Markoe, Shays Rebellion constitutes anything but the public sphere. Markoe here demonstrates his anti-federalist leanings, warning against factionalism while simultaneously demonstrating the dangers of an overbearing federal government intervening in the lives of farmers in Massachusetts.

As Markoe and Mehemet turn their attention to Rhode Island, their description emphasizes the geopolitical power of the Barbary States. “The state of Rhode Island, the least considerable in the union, has hitherto defeated the best commercial plans” of the country, Mehemet reports, emphasizing the degree to which one state can unnaturally and insensibly place obstacles for all twelve other states under the Articles of Confederation. Mehemet’s remarks on Rhode Island and its impediment to the prosperity of the United States are best understood through earlier musings wherein he opines on the “superiority of a single legislature.” Through a series of similes involving a football field, a roasting spit, hen’s eggs, and a wheelbarrow, Markoe argues against the establishment of the Senate in the United States and advocates for a unicameral legislature based on the principle of proportional representation. To Markoe, the introduction of a second legislative body would dilute the efficacy of republicanism, at worst giving minority opinions a disproportionate power in moments of

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54 Markoe, 99.
55 Markoe, 78.
disagreement, and at best serving as “an expensive and useless article.” Mehemet’s observations on Rhode Island, then, underscore the dangers of allowing a minority view to dictate the path of an entire nation, which will inevitably “countenance defection and revolt.” Mehemet’s suggestion of the conversion of the rogue Rhode Island into an “Ottoman Malta on the coasts of America,” while perhaps an exaggeration of any conceivable reality in 1787, is nevertheless a poignant and rhetorically effective demonstration of the dangers of the powers of the mob and undemocratic institutions within the United States.

_The Algerine Spy in Pennsylvania_ ultimately concludes, as foreshadowed by the introductory letters, with Mehemet’s conversion to Christianity and assimilation into American life. The novel ends dramatically with this conversion, as Mehemet rebukes Algiers for the United States, writing:

> And thou Pennsylvania, who has promised to succor and protect the unhappy, that fly to thee for refuge, open thy arms t receive Mehemet the Algerine, who, formerly a Mahometan, and thy foe, has renounced his enmity, his country and his religion, and hopes, protected by thy laws, to enjoy, in the evening of his days, the united blessings of FREEDOM and CHRISTIANITY.

Ostensibly, Mehemet’s rebuke of Islam and acceptance of Christianity is precipitated by a series of convoluted plot twists that include a Rabbi from Lisbon having betrayed him to the Dey of Algiers and his having left him for their gardener and converted to Christianity, herself. These two events, however, can be read instead as mere catalysts to finalize a transformation that has been in process since his arrival in Pennsylvania. Mehemet’s religious conversion is the

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56 Markoe, _The Algerine Spy in Pennsylvania_, 79.
57 Markoe, 99.
58 Markoe, 100.
59 Markoe, 125.
cementing factor that confirms and validates his position within an American public sphere, and the disavowal of his religious and national beginnings are the final steps in that assimilation process.

While Mehemet’s transformation from a Muslim man to a Christian is abrupt, evidence of a gradual shifting of perspective is clear. Most notable is Letter XIV in which Mehemet writes to his Algerian handler, “perhaps you will say I have already caught the infection” after his discussion of Pennsylvania’s legislative system. Mehemet’s conversion, then, was unavoidable. Having been exposed incessantly to a contagious culture so different to his own, Mehemet was without recourse to prevent the infection on individualism, of a Protestant, republican mindset. Indeed, we can track Mehemet’s progress through this transformation in mentality, as in Letter XVII he writes wholly in support of the ideals of Pennsylvania:

The manners and behavior of the people correspond with their government. No man creates or feels terror. The national countenance is therefore mild, and the national deportment manly. There are undoubtedly some unworthy citizens; but the noblest soil often nourishes the most venomous serpents. Of their private virtues I can only say, that benevolence must prevail among a people, who build hospitals and never inquire about a man’s religion. As Mehemet learns more and more about the customs of Pennsylvania and the United States more generally, he cannot help but favorably contrast that which he views before with that from which he has left behind in Algeria. “I have often lamented the situation of our Deys,” Mehemet writes, stating that “the authority of the Dey is founded on the soldiery,” and the Dey himself is

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61 Markoe, 93.
“obliged to act the tyrant.” 62 “What minions of despotism,” he questions, “will deny that authority proceeds from the people.” 63 Mehemet’s musings on authority, just moments before his rejection of nation and religion, are a further demonstration of the spread of his disease.

“Although an Algerine, devoted to the service of my country, you must permit me at times to be the philosopher,” he writes, 64 working to justify his seemingly traitorous remarks by affirming fealty to the Dey and positioning his reports as merely the requirements of his profession as a spy. It is clear, however, that as Mehemet becomes more fully exposed to open and free discussion, he identifies directly with a philosophy of radical republican individualism. Markoe makes clear both the many sources of Mehemet’s conversion as well as the implications of it. Mehemet’s conversion to Christianity has been a lengthy process; it was not, despite appearances, a spur-of-the-moment decision. Additionally, and most crucially, it is Mehemet’s conversion and his renouncement of country and religion that allows his acceptance into an American public sphere and for his letters to be published. Markoe, through his fictional Muslim narrator, creates a vision of the United States wherein, through open and uncensored debate and speech, the best ideas and the will of the people will persevere and rise to the top. Predicated on this entry into the public sphere, however, is a requirement to dispel any authoritarian or despotic allegiances or connections. For this reason, Mehemet must renounce his country and religion, as he has continuously demonstrated their incompatibility with what Markoe understands to be American and Protestant values.

63 Markoe, 107.
64 Markoe, 92.
Historical Reception of Markoe’s Novel

On its own, *The Algerine Spy in Pennsylvania* functions clearly as a late eighteenth-century piece of satire capitalizing on the weakness of the newly-formed United States to protect itself from enemies abroad to make a politically expedient point. Markoe’s main avenue of satire is his title character, the Algerian Spy Mehemet who, while entirely fictional, stood in for 18th-century readers as a representation of what could possibly be a real threat. Simply put, *The Algerine Spy* was timely. It was timely in its critique of the Constitutional Convention, its utilization of a Muslim character, but also of its style. As Lewis and Spellberg demonstrated in their articles, an Early Republic readership utilized their imagination to find relevancy in all manner of topics. A fictional Muslim president could stand in for the possibility of a Catholic executive favoring papal decrees over constitutional processes. While this is an interesting and certainly favorable sentiment to shower upon Early Republican readers, was it really indeed the reality? Did Americans reading *The Algerine Spy in Pennsylvania* actually find it a relevant and provocative piece of literature? Or was it merely a fun and slightly bizarre example of the new and untested genre of novels? In many cases, it seems the answer is the former.

While few primary sources from the 1700s exist reviewing the 1787 epistolary novel, newspaper records of book sales and auctions provide context for the esteem in which the populace held *The Algerine Spy*. One of the earliest confirmations of the reception of the novel is a 1792 clipping from the *Vermont Gazette*, a newspaper in Bennington, Vermont. On October 26, the newspaper ran an advertisement listing the books the printing office had “just received.” Among the titles listed alongside the still-anonymous “Algerine Spy in Pennsylvania” were then-Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson’s “Notes on Virginia,” letters of the ancient
philosopher Junius, Benjamin Rush’s writing on smallpox, and “[Edmund] Burke on French Revolution.” Advertisements like this relay much useful information in contextualizing and addressing not just other primary sources, but the literary landscape of 1792 more broadly.

The *Vermont Gazette*’s advertisement demonstrates the range of Markoe’s novel. In five years, his novel, originally printed in Philadelphia, traveled at least to Bennington, Vermont, and likely much wider. Despite the occurrence of the Constitutional Convention nearly a decade earlier, the novel still remained relevant and held in high regard alongside books by some of the most powerful or most-read in the United States. Indeed, Markoe’s novel is the only work of fiction in the advertisement, signaling that despite the genre, the American public likely generally considered the book to be applicable and of topical interest. Although this advertisement cannot give a detailed expository review of the novel to situate an individual readers’ opinion of the novel, it nevertheless offers contextual details that help create a larger picture of its place in the early republican literary culture. *The Algerine Spy in Pennsylvania*’s place alongside a collection of books consisting mostly of expository essays and Latin classics affirms Spellberg’s and Lewis’ understanding of the early republican literary environment as one that largely made little distinction between fiction and nonfiction.

### 3. Periodical Satire

“The Sufferings of Yamboo”

While Markoe’s epistolary is one of the few full-length novels involving an African Muslim living in the United States, and perhaps the only one framed specifically around that perspective, literature highlighting an Islamic voice continued to appear in the press. A story purported to be told by a Muslim man appeared in a newspaper publishing from August 12, 1790
in the *Columbian Herald*, a newspaper based in Charleston, South Carolina. That day, the newspaper printed a full-page letter written by a man identified only as T.D. of King Street. The letter, which totaled over two-thousand words in its entirety, was two-parted. The first half functioned, much in the way of the introductory letters of Markoe’s novel, to explain the provenance of a Muslim African slave’s autobiography, which the author of the letter had acquired. The second part of the letter was the autobiography itself, entitled, “The Sufferings of Yamboo.” Ostensibly, T.D.’s purpose for sending Yamboo’s letter to the editors of the newspaper was to respond to an earlier story regarding the travels of one M. de Brisson in North Africa, who upon shipwreck was “reduced to among the Arabs of the desert.”

De Brisson’s story, although the readers are never presented with a robust description or summary, appeared to be a captivity narrative in North Africa. T.D. finds irony in this tale, asking, “what right has a man to expect that I should … pity for Mr. de Brisson in Africa, who has himself has at this moment an African starving in the workhouse?” T.D.’s writing, and Yamboo’s story, then, is a response to a captivity narrative. Having heard a story of a white man held captive among Muslims, T.D. penned a letter to demonstrate the hypocrisy of the response to the de Brisson, when the opposite scenario was occurring with regularity in the United States. T.D., out of what appears to be some degree of abolitionism, or at least desire for reform, counters de Brisson’s tale of enslavement with his own: a clearly fictionalized story of an African Muslim enslaved in the United States.

In many ways, “The Sufferings of Yamboo, an African, in South Carolina” adheres to some of the most common tropes of captivity and slave narratives. Yamboo details his arrival in America, his horror at the life that lies before him, and plans an escape. Yamboo is beaten in response and retaliation for his attempts, as he describes his master as “a passionate man” who

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“took vengeance upon us that remained, and seemed determined, that we should make up to him the labour of those who had fled from his power.”

Yamboo’s story highlights and forefronts differences in religion, as well as the Christian hypocrisy of slavery, as he asks, “if, as you Christians say, there is a punishment in the other world [Hell] for the bad men … what had not my master to expect?”

For the author, Yamboo’s religious identity, then, served not only to underscore a unique identity in print, but point out the radical differences between slavery in the United States and that which American sailors faced in Algiers. The name “Yamboo” itself is a markedly-African name, an almost-comical imagination and amalgamation of foreign sounds.

Yamboo’s Arab and Muslim influences are relatively hidden, casually referenced by the author to draw a comparison to the narrative of de Brisson. T.D.’s newspaper article is revealing then, as his fictional imagination of an African slave was marked by religious difference. And although neither Yamboo or T.D. made explicit reference to the Algerian Crisis, the image of a Muslim slave in the United States would have certainly carried with it an implicit comparison to the fate of those ransomed across the Atlantic.

Yamboo’s story ends with a change of master, as T.D., the man telling his story, purchases him. Describing himself as “sinking fast into the grave,” Yamboo is “delighted at the change” of ownership. Despite his unfreedom, Yamboo remains lively about his situation, writing at great length about his happiness and contentedness:

It has pleased God that I should live through all, that a few years of happiness should cheer my latter end, as I have seen the rays of the sun after a long and gloomy day, break out of a sudden and gild the tops of the mountains in my native country. Let us be slaves, but do not let the lowest wretches trifle with our very being—do not leave us to the


68 “The Sufferings of Yamboo,” *Columbian Herald.*

69 “The Sufferings of Yamboo,” *Columbian Herald.*
mercy of overseers, whom you would not trust with a favorite horse—whose delight it is to treat us like brutes, to take from us the time of our natural rest, to cheat us of the poor pittance allowed, to suppress, as an atrocious crime, every instance of sensibility which our wrongs give rise to, and to destroy by a thousand insults, the last remains of human pride. 

While Yamboo is undoubtedly critical of his first master, and perhaps the general treatment of many slaves in South Carolina, he is resolute on the institution of slavery. “Let us be slaves” he writes, not daring to threaten the institution itself. Nevertheless, the publishing of Yamboo’s narrative was met with fierce response and opposition. Two days the editor of the *Columbian Herald* issued a response expressing regret for having “unfortunately displeased several of his readers,” yet stood by the decision to publish the piece. The publishing of “The Sufferings of Yamboo” reaffirmed and continued to demonstrate the way in which the Muslim voice was a tool utilized by writers in the eighteenth century to make complex political arguments in an environment of free, open, and robust discourse. Despite opposition to its publishing, and opposition in South Carolina to any hint of abolitionism in 1790, the editors and publishers of the *Columbian Herald* affirmed the importance of their literary environment by refusing to issue a retraction.

“On the Slave Trade”

Benjamin Franklin’s “On the Slave Trade,” perhaps only by virtue of its author, is, outside of any captivity narrative, the most widely known of any piece of Barbary fiction written in the eighteenth century. Published in 1790 as an open letter to the periodical *Federal Gazette*,

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70 “The Sufferings of Yamboo,” *Columbian Herald*.

71 *Columbian Herald* (Charleston, SC), Aug 14, 1790, 2.

Franklin’s “On the Slave Trade” was an anonymous letter penned under the name “Historicus.” “On the Slave Trade” was Franklin’s comment on the debate over whether the United States should, along with Britain, resolve to ban the international slave trade. Writing as Historicus, Franklin compares a congressman, Mr. Jackson, and his speech defending the slave trade, to that of Sidi Mehemet Ibrahim, “a member of the divan of Algiers, which may be seen in Martin’s account of his consulship, 1687.” Despite this dating of Sidi Mehemet Ibrahim’s speech to 1687, over one-hundred years prior to Jackson’s own speech, the reference to the divan of Algiers was a clear and obvious connection to the then-still-ongoing Barbary conflicts.

Similar to T.D.’s writing in the *Columbian Herald*, Franklin did not himself directly adopt the persona of Sidi Mehemet Ibrahim, or any Muslim character for that matter. As the mediator Historicus, another anonymized Latin-esque identifier which projected knowledge and historical authority, he assigned that role to Mr. Jackson, whose speech “against meddling with the affair of slavery” and reluctance to “mend the condition of the slaves … put [Franklin/Historicus] in the mind of a similar speech” made by the fictitious Sidi Mehemet Ibrahim. The impulse then, apparently, from Franklin was to cast the congressman with whom he disagreed as a villainous and despotic Muslim. Certainly, the comparison was not a favorable one, as not only was Mr. Jackson then associated with an Algerian despot, but also with a manner of thinking inherently outdated and old-fashioned, given the purported 101-year gap in speeches.

Indeed, the image of despot was the very image Franklin projected onto Mr. Jackson. Sidi Mehemet Ibrahim’s speech concerns the debate over the manumission of Christian slaves in


Algiers, and, despite the overwhelming reason and evidence provided to support an end to the practice, he continues the policy of enslavement. The speech ends with Ibrahim proclaiming, “Let us then hear no more of this detestable proposition, the manumission of Christian slaves,” making known the continuance of the slave trade. Franklin concludes, contextualizing the speech he shared, “The result was, as Martin tells us, that the Divan came to this resolution: ‘That the doctrine, that the plundering and enslaving the Christians is unjust, is at best problematical; but that it is the interest of this state to continue the practice, is clear.’”

Franklin’s use of the Muslim voice then, is, in a sense, the most negative one yet. “On The Slave Trade” is an example of Oriental literature in which the figure of the Orient is portrayed not as uneducated or inadequate, but rather as emblematic of an American’s worst impulses and tendencies in governance. Instead of shedding light on the abolition debate from the perspective of an outsider, Franklin authored a character meant to represent what he hoped Americans not to be. This piece of satire, one of Franklin’s latest, continued in the vein that he developed as a sixteen-year-old in his Silence Dogood letters. “On the Slave Trade” asked Americans to make the comparison between the decades of fear that sailors felt under the threat of North African corsairs to the experience of African slaves shipped across the Atlantic and Caribbean.

Together, these two shorter publications offer a contrasting image of Oriental literature to that of Peter Markoe’s novel. Both pseudonymized authors show little reverence for their characters, utilizing them strictly as rhetorical devices and persuasive props. While T.D. may feign some care for Yamboo, the master-slave hierarchy and the institution of slavery are not challenged within the narrative. Yamboo is a caricature of an African slave, and the author and creator of his voice is his owner. Even if his image and story were to conjure images of the


Barbary Coast or ask questions regarding the abolition of slavery, the newspaper article and T.D.’s letter did not dare go that far. “The Sufferings of Yamboo,” while perhaps in part a lament on the status of chattel slavery or the horrors faced by enslaved people, nonetheless worked to position the Muslim world as one beneath or subservient to the United States in a manner not seen through Markoe’s portrayal of Mehemet. Benjamin Franklin’s satire, which was written and published concurrently with “The Sufferings of Yamboo,” functions in a similar manner. While Sidi Mehemet Ibrahim’s speech explicitly evoked the Barbary threat, reinforcing an understanding of the period of time in which North African states and the Muslim world exerted their power over the British and French, Franklin’s dating of the speech works twofold. With the presentation of this fictional speech set a century earlier, Franklin is able to characterize the philosophy of Sidi Mehemet Ibrahim as outdated. While he hopes to cast the despotic Algerian as emblematic of antique thinking, he simultaneously locates the speech as having occurred during a period of time in which the North African states were at their most powerful. Despite Franklin’s depiction of Sidi Mehemet Ibrahim as a wholly negative character, Franklin’s satire is contingent upon an American readership’s understanding of the unparalleled power of Sidi Mehemet Ibrahim and the North African states.

*Washington Irving and Salmagundi*

The latest inclusion in this discussion of Orientalist fiction is Washington Irving’s *Salmagundi; or The Whim-whams and Opinions of Launcelot Langstaff, Esq & Others*, specifically the Mustapha letters. A satirical periodical published between 1807 and 1808, *Salmagundi* prominently features the perspective of a Muslim man residing in the United States. Consisting in large part of letters from Mustapha Rub-A-Dub Keli Khan, a fictional Muslim man
living in New York City, *Salmagundi* operates in a fashion similar to that of Markoe’s novel. Irving’s faux-periodical offered him the opportunity to take on different perspectives in order to comment on the happenings around him, much in the vein described by Ben Rejeb. Where Markoe’s Mehemet was a figure to make an (ultimately unsuccessful religious and) political argument, Irving’s Mustapha is little more than a figure of difference to be ridiculed and dominated.

Mustapha Rub-a-dub Keli Khan’s first appearance is precipitated by the titular Launcelot Langstaff’s description of him, one that immediately sets the tone for how Irving will continue to portray the Muslim man. Langstaff introduce’s Mustapha in the preceding entry to the periodical, writing:

> Among the few strangers whose acquaintance has entertained me, I particularly rank the magnanimous Mustapha Rub-a-dub Keli Khan, a most illustrious captain of a ketch, who figured, some time since, in our fashionable circles, at the head of a ragged regiment of Tripolitan prisoners.77

Immediately striking is Irving’s laughable presentation of Mustapha’s full name, meant as an obvious joke with the inclusion of “Rub-a-dub.” This inclusion, whether meant to satirize the sound of Arabic names or something else, functioned to set the tone for the character of Mustapha. Just as Yamboo’s name elevated his identification with Africa over that of Islam, Irving’s Muslim character became marked as an object of humor, ridicule, and domination. Irving affirmed this final point of domination by informing the reader of Mustapha’s unfreedom. Flipping what had been the historical norm on its head, American sailors in Irving’s periodical had impressed a number of Tripolitans and brought them to the United States.

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Irving’s geographical distinction, his authoring of a Tripolitan prisoner, reflected the contemporary events of the United States. During the last decade of the eighteenth century, American relations with the Barbary states changed drastically. Not only did the United States sign peace treaties with Algiers, Tripoli, and Tunis in 1795, 1796, and 1797, respectively, but Congress had approved the formal creation and chartering of a United States Navy in 1794, as well. Bolstered by the formal institutionalization and nationalization of a naval force, and provoked by a Tripolitan declaration of war, the United States officially entered into a naval battle with the state of Tripoli in 1801, inaugurating the First Barbary War. In the first real test of military might since the rebellious colonies had fended off the British to attain sovereignty and self-governance, the United States proved successful in North Africa. With the conclusion of the First Barbary War, the United States had, for the first time, the geopolitical power to back up claims of superiority over the North African states. The United States proved that the Tripolitan Armada was no longer to be, at least for the moment, an instrument of fear in the eyes of American sailors.

Mustapha’s mission and purpose is similar to that of Markoe’s Mehemet. Mustapha, in his letters to “Asem Hacchem, principal slave-driver to his highness the Bashaw of Tripoli,” reflects on the politics of the United States, acting in many ways like the spy Mehemet. In his first letter, Mustapha takes aim at Thomas Jefferson, the contemporary President of the United States. While at first offering some praise, writing, “this empire is governed by a grand most

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78 Silvia Marzagalli, James R. Sofka, and John McCusker, Rough Waters: American Involvement with the Mediterranean in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries (St. John’s, Newfoundland: Liverpool University Press, 2010), 117-118.

79 Marzagalli et al., Rough Waters, 119.

puissant bashaw, whom they dignify with the title of president,” Mustapha’s next comments satirize the American political process and it results, Jefferson. He writes:

[The President] is chosen by persons, who are chosen by an assembly, elected by the people–hence the mob is called the sovereign people–and the country, free; the body politic doubtless resembling a vessel, which is best governed by its tail. The present bashaw is a very plain old gentleman–something they say of a humorist, as he amuses himself with impaling butterflies and pickling tadpoles; he is rather declining in popularity, having given great offence by wearing red breeches and tying his horse to a post.81

Irving’s description of the United States’ electoral system and its president, through the voice of Mustapha, is full of irony. This satirical description of the system of presidential electors, alongside his portrait of Thomas Jefferson, is especially humorous given its origen. While Mustapha accurately points out the ways in which the nominally democratic United States distills the power of the individual through a complex federal system, his critique falls mostly flat because of his own background. A Tripolitan prisoner, writing to the slave-driver of the Bashaw of Tripoli, has little room to criticize the United States for its undemocratic processes. Additionally, while Irving has long been considered by scholars to be a staunch Federalist in his political leanings,82 Mustapha’s mockery of Jefferson is ripe with irony in a similar manner. Not only does Mustapha offer a rather weak indictment of the president, objecting to Jefferson’s choice of attire and relatively benign occupations, his position as a prisoner of war makes any such criticism laughable. Mustapha’s voice, as made clear by his introduction in the previous letter, is only available as a result of Jefferson’s successes on the coast of North Africa. Irving’s satirization of Jefferson is so humorous not because of Jefferson’s purported actions, whether or


not they be based in reality, but because they originate from a figure so utterly dominated and subjected by the power of Jefferson and his United States.

Irving’s Mustapha, then, can be read as the embodiment of the United States’ domination of North Africa—a reflection of the sudden change in the power dynamics between the two nations. Irving’s work as a celebrated humorist underscores this dynamic. No doubt, Irving utilizes his North African character to confer meaningful insight on the political happenings of the United States, commentary that is emphasized by the juxtaposition of the American system versus the North African and Ottoman. The most poignant example of this is Mustapha’s letter on government, wherein he names the United States a “logocracy, or government of words.”³ Mustapha nonetheless is unambiguously and continuously marked by his unfreedom, a sharp distinction from other examples of the Oriental Insider/Outsider discussed in this essay. The Mustpaha Letters of *Salmagundi* are less the exasperated cry of Markoe for a change in national direction, or the anger of Franklin at the continuation of the dehumanizing practice of the slave trade, and are moreso Irving’s capitalization upon the new-found dominance of the United States for humor and satire.

Through an analysis of *Salmagundi*, I have demonstrated how Irving’s fiction, though similar in style and content to other examples of Oriental fiction, differed from previous works featuring Muslims in America. Indeed, Washington Irving proves a unique and particularly fascinating author as a result of his nonconformance to the genre of fiction. Although perhaps most famous for his short stories, Irving’s most extensive works came in the decades following *Salmagundi* when he came to occupy the role of, at least according to an America mythology, founder of American literature as a distinct idea.⁴ An international author, Irving devoted his

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later years, after the publication of stories like “Rip Van Winkle” and “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow” in 1819 in the collection *The Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent*, to writing and publishing almost exclusively nonfiction. Among these later publications were two immense volumes of historical study: *The Alhambra* (1832) and *Mahomet and His Successors* (1850). Irving’s best selling works of history marked a shift in the author’s genre, but not entirely in subject matter.

One of the two epigraphs to Said’s *Orientalism* is a quotation from Benjamin Disraeli, a former British Prime Minister and novelist, which reads, “The East is a career.”85 Said contextualized the quotation, originating from the novel *Tancred* (1847), as Disraeli’s assertion that “the East was something bright young Westerners would find to be an all consuming passion.”86 “Disraeli’s statement about the East refers mainly to that created consistency, that regular constellation of ideas as the pre-eminent thing about the Orient,” Said writes, establishing his study of Orientalism as the study construct of Western imagination and creation.87 The career of Orientalist, then, was only practical once the Orient was able to be Orientalized. In its 1860 reprint, the editor of *Salmagundi* credited the work with inspiring Irving’s interest in the Muslim world, and described the Mustapha letters as a precursor to those works such as *The Alhambra* and *Mahomet and His Successors*.88 Irving’s role as a historian of the Orient, then, cannot be extricated from his life as a humorist, and his nonfiction works cannot be separated from his Orientalizing satire. In pointing this out, I mean neither to challenge Irving’s histories nor accuse...


86 Said, 13.

87 Said, 13.

him of anything. Rather, I hope to only demonstrate that Irving’s work as a scholar of the Mediterranean and Islam can be directly tied to the United States’ eventual military successes against the Barbary States in the first decades of the nineteenth century. Additionally, in order to adequately trace the history of Islam within American texts in the early republican era, Irving’s life and literary trajectory demonstrate well the connections between an author’s style, subject matter, and the larger political happenings of their context.

4. **CONCLUSION**

Since the publication of *Orientalism* in 1978, scholars across historical fields have argued that Said missed the mark in labeling the relationship between Occident and Orient as one of strict domination of the latter by the former. Others have sought to demonstrate the ways in which his understandings might apply to a larger geographical and temporal context, explicitly with application to the United States and its interactions with the Muslim world pre-World War II. In recent years, both historians and literary scholars have looked towards Early Republican fiction to try and advance these claims. Buoyed by a real foreign threat and the appeal of the Far East, literature of the Orient flourished in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in the United States. Captivity narratives of sailors returned home showed Americans a threat across the Atlantic Ocean on the African continent. The sensationalized impressments captured the republican imagination, and Americans read and wrote all sorts of literature—fiction and non-fiction.

However, as the years progressed, there undeniably occurred a shift in the tenor of American writers in respect to their portrayal of practitioners of Islam and the Orient. While each entry is certainly satire, and satire as a genre demands exaggeration for it to be successful,
meaningful differences between each work can still be made in their treatment of their characters. While Markoe ultimately pits tyrannical Islam against virtuous Protestant Christianity, he nonetheless took care to give his Mehemet an experience that validated his ability and propensity to find a place within the American public sphere. In a similar sense, both “The Sufferings of Yamboo” and “On the Slave Trade” mainly use their Muslim characters highlight the absurdity of outrage at American impressments abroad alongside apathy about the institution of slavery at home. Even Irving’s Mustapha, while humorous and unfree, is the vehicle for pages upon pages of nuanced critique of American society. Literature of Muslims in the United States was simply not a vehicle of dehumanization and imperialism between 1787 and 1806. Rather, Muslim characters appear in print as they offered a unique lense for authors to see the world and reflect upon their country—one that was still creating its own national image. That is why an understanding and consideration of the contemporary literary culture, national politics, and international conflicts proves vital in reading these characters, who are oftentimes more complex than how they might first appear.

My hope is that this paper can work to recontextualize Said’s Orientalism to an American framework in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The Orient of the Early Republic lay in North Africa on the Barbary Coast, but to label every writer on the subject as “orientalist” would be foolish. Said himself, in a moment demonstrating an understanding of the complexities of studying dynamic power relationships between disparate entities, reminds his readers that Orientalism is not “some nefarious ‘Western’ imperialist plot to hold down the ‘Oriental’ world.”

Unfortunately, in the study of texts, even as historical documents, this claim is often ignored or forgotten. What I have hoped to do in my exploration of these texts, all of which contain imbedded within them markers of domination and subjugation, is to demonstrate the

89 Said, Orientalism, 20.
difficulty in prescribing each one of them as “Orientalist” under the framework of Edward Said, and to reevaluate the literary and historical value of Muslim narrators in early republican texts. While my reading of *Salmagundi* perhaps veers closest to this framework, clearly Irving’s life and work as a writer deserve careful attention with regard to their Islamic influence.
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