‘Barbary’ Mahometans in Early American Propaganda: A Critical Analysis of John Foss’s Captivity Account

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Abstract

This article analyzes the first immigrating images of the North African ‘Mahometan’ in the American imagination via John Foss’s (1798) captivity account. It examines the agenda-led discourses and ‘othering’ images establishing the ideological split between the notion of the American “us” and the Muslim “them” through various discursive associations in John Foss’s (1798) *A journal, of the captivity and sufferings of John Foss; several years a prisoner at Algiers: together with some account of the treatment of Christian slaves when sick:-- and observations of the manners and customs of the Algerines*. The account’s embedded myths, stereotypes, and clichés served as the ‘West’s’ first impression of the Muslim ‘corsair’; they rendered more vivid the perceived aberration of the ‘Orient,’ and they reinforced the symbolism of strength and glory forcefully associated with the newly nascent America. The article further discusses the breadth of circulation and propagation of the constructed ‘West-Orient’ disparity and the celebration of the confrontation with the ‘othered’ enemy. American venues—e.g. museums, galleries, and circuses—as well as works of art—e.g. novels, paintings, and cartoons—constituted a major accomplice in the dissemination of the propaganda in the American public space.

Keywords: captivity accounts, Barbary States, North African corsairs, Islamophobia, propaganda, othering

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