Captivity and Encounter: Thomas Pellow, *The Moroccan Renegade*

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> …[*A*] *feature of Oriental-European relations was that Europe was always in a position of strength, not to say domination*.[1]
>
> - Edward Said

During the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, European powers came into close contact with a number of vibrant and dominant Islamic cultures. The Barbary Coast of North Africa was an area of particular significance. Due to its proximity to the Mediterranean Sea, North Africa became a zone of British imperial enterprise. The region was of strategic military importance, and because of the strength and reach of the Ottoman Empire, it was also a rich market for overseas trade. Nevertheless, the expansion of the empire into North Africa had considerable consequences for Britain.

Between 1600 and the end of the eighteenth century there were approximately 20,000 British captives in North Africa.[2] Barbary corsair fleets targeted Christian shipping vessels, pillaging the goods and detaining the people on board. Those who had been captured were returned to North Africa and either sold as slaves or imprisoned. While some individuals died in captivity or remained slaves, others managed to acclimatize and enter North African society. A small few were able to escape and return home.

Among those few was Thomas Pellow, an English captive who managed to flee North Africa and tell his story. This paper will examine Pellow's experiences before, during, and after his captivity in North Africa. The primary focus will be on his encounters with his Muslim masters, specifically on the ways in which Pellow responded to slavery, the religion of Islam, and Moroccan society in general. Furthermore, his attempt to re-enter British society, more than two decades after his capture, will also be investigated.

This paper will attempt to prove that while Pellow adapted well to Moroccan society by learning Arabic and adopting Muslim customs, his captivity narrative emphasizes Christian and

European moral superiority over Islam and speaks of his unremitting loyalty to Britain. Moreover, Pellow struggled with a perceived loss of religious and national identity as he tried to re-adjust and re-enter British society. Captivity was a predominant experience in European-Islamic encounters during the early modern period, and as a result, it was the inevitable expense of expanding the British Empire.

A Brief Overview: The Life and Times of Thomas Pellow

According to Pellow's account, his adventure began at the age of eleven during the summer of 1716 when the *Francis*—the ship he was traveling on as a deck hand with his uncle, the vessel's captain, John Pellow, and five other Englishmen—was captured by Salé corsairs just after it had crossed the Bay of Biscay. Two other ships were also commandeered that day, and in total, fifty-two Englishmen were captured and presented to Sultan Moulay Ismail of Morocco as prisoners. Pellow was one of the individuals handed over to the sultan, and consequently, he spent the next twenty-three years as a captive in Morocco.

Shortly after arriving in Morocco, Pellow was forced to convert to Islam. He became a Muslim, learned Arabic, and was assigned a wife from the sultan's harem, with whom he had two children. He then became a personal slave of Moulay Ismail and had the rare opportunity to experience the court of the sultan, witnessing firsthand his notorious cruelty.

Eventually, Pellow was made an officer in the sultan's army and participated in three military campaigns. He led other slave-soldiers into battle and once took part in a slave-gathering expedition in sub-Saharan Africa. Pellow made two unsuccessful attempts to escape and was sentenced to death for each; fortunately, he was imparted a reprieve on both occasions. In 1737, at the age of thirty-three, he attempted to escape again.

During this third attempt Pellow was beaten, robbed, and left for dead. Yet, in July 1738, he managed to flee Morocco by boarding an Irishman's ship. He arrived in England later that summer and made newspaper headlines upon his return. He arrived at his family home on

October 15, 1738 and was reunited with his parents. Within two years of his return and with the help of a local editor, Pellow wrote his account. Published in London, his story was entitled *The History of the Long Captivity and Adventures of Thomas Pellow*.[3] The place and date of his death is unknown.

Pre-Encounter

The Barbary Coast was a term used to refer to the coastal regions of North Africa, which included Morocco, Algiers, Tripoli, and Tunisia. The latter three were regencies or military provinces of the Ottoman Empire. The term 'Barbary' originally referred to the Berbers, a people indigenous to North Africa. The British used the term 'Barbary' to denote the entire area of North Africa, excluding Egypt. Moreover, the term was used to describe a wide variety of people such as Arabs, Berbers, Moriscos, and others.

Morocco was the first non-European country with which Britain had stable diplomatic relations. Yet, while it remained independent of Ottoman rule, Morocco was heavily influenced by it. Furthermore, in the minds of many Britons, Muslims posed a great danger to all of Christendom. According to scholar G.A. Starr, by the seventeenth century, Barbary was the subject of most Englishmen's "exotic nightmare" and the Turk and the Moor were represented as "fabulous villains."[4] Moreover, by the early-to-mid-seventeenth century captivity narratives became a largely Anglophone form of writing, as well as an established and recognized genre.[5]

"Stories are at the heart," wrote Edward Said, "of what explorers and novelists say about strange regions of the world."[6] The same could be said about what captives like Pellow wrote concerning the "strange regions" in which they had been imprisoned. After the expulsion of the Moriscos from Spain in 1609, the number of corsairs rose considerably along with the number of captives. Between 1577 and 1704 there were twenty-two captivity accounts written by former British captives.[7]

These captivity narratives informed the reader that the Muslim world was something to be feared. Thus, the acts of the Barbary corsairs and the oral and written reports about these acts had a significant bearing upon the British psyche. In particular, Pellow's parents were well aware of Barbary corsairs and worried about the Moors. Before Pellow was permitted to board the *Francis*, his uncle needed the consent of his parents. According to Pellow, his parents had concerns about,

> …the Hardships which probably I might, in my so tender years, undergo thereby, and their ominous Fears of our falling into the Hands of the Moors, who were then at open War with us, and had, as they saw by the News Papers, very lately taken some of our Ships; for that it was with the greatest Reluctance and Regret that I obtained their Consent…[8]

Fear of Barbary was ever-present in Britain in the early modern period. By and large, Europeans were not interested in understanding the Islamic world, and in Britain in particular, most people accepted anti-Islamic rhetoric without closely examining the "fearsome" world of Barbary.[9]

Encounter Through Captivity

The majority of European captives in North Africa were invariably faced with the prospect of conversion. In the Barbary States it was quite common among the locals to try and convert Christians to Islam.[10] Many slave owners attempted to force their captives to renounce Christianity and become Muslim. According to social historian Robert C. Davis, contemporary scholars in the seventeenth century have suggested that as many as two-fifths of captives in Barbary converted from Christianity to Islam by the 1630s.[11]

The Muslim masters working to covert their captives would often resort to brutal physical and verbal abuse. Thus, large numbers of European Christian captives converted in an effort to improve their embattled situations. Once converted, the captive generally could not be forced to endure hard labour or be sent to the galleys.[12] Indeed, life was normally better for captives if they abandoned their Christian faith. Nevertheless, many freed captives reported that conversion did not necessarily mean liberty.[13]

Pellow's experience was similar to many captives of Barbary. Shortly after arriving in Morocco, Pellow was given by the sultan to one of his favourite sons, Moulay Spha, a callous individual who detested European slaves. After initially refusing to convert to Islam, Pellow was repeatedly and brutally beaten by Moulay Spha. According to Pellow, "My Tortures were now exceedingly increased, burning my Flesh off my Bones by Fire; which the Tyrant did, by frequent Repetitions, after a most cruel Manner."[14] Eventually Pellow submitted to Moulay Spha and converted to Islam. He received forced circumcision and claims he immediately began calling upon God to forgive him.[15]

Pellow expressed tremendous grief for having to abandon his Christian faith. According to scholar Stephen Clissold, conversion was a momentous decision to make because "the renegade turned his back on his home and family in the knowledge that he would probably never see them again."[16] Pellow was given new clothes and, more significantly, a new identity. He now pledged allegiance to Islam, at least outwardly, and had in turn, ostensibly turned his back on his Christian heritage.

Once converted, Pellow began to study Arabic and adopt Muslim and Moroccan customs. In general, most slaves were disinclined to dress in the local style. Pellow originally refused to wear Moroccan dress and was subsequently beaten until he accepted. Nabil Matar has noted, "Islam overpowered Englishmen by the force of cultural habit."[17] Some captives used language and custom to adapt quickly to their surroundings. It was in the Englishman's best interest to learn the language and customs of North African society.

Pellow's ability to master Arabic allowed him to find work as an interpreter when English diplomats came to Morocco. Nonetheless, during the early modern period, identity was closely linked with language, and language acquisition was regularly associated with cultural assimilation.[18] As we will see below, Pellow's knowledge of Arabic and Muslim customs complicated his attempts to re-enter British society.

Despite being absorbed into North African society and adopting the Moroccan way of life, Pellow is remarkable for his insistence on European and Christian moral superiority. Said has noted that a major part of European culture is "the idea of European identity as a superior one in comparison with all the non-European peoples and culture."[19] It is clear that the majority of captives used their accounts to demonstrate European cultural superiority.

Pellow employs a range of binary oppositions in his work to contrast the law abiding English against the heretical Muslims. In discussing the differences in governance, Pellow observes:

> Here [in Morocco] we may see the dangerous Consequences of ARBITRARY Power, and thank GOD that we are governed by such wholesome Laws … whereby every one is allowed fair Trial in Matters of Life and Death … whereas, those unhappy People who are subject to Arbitrary Tyrants, are To-day rich and great, To-morrow Beggars, often losing their Lives and Estates, all without being heard, or any daring to enquire for why or whereof.[20]

Pellow continues to describe the pre-eminence of English culture, as well as the sanctity of the Christian faith. He later comments on the "strange" and wicked customs and manners of the Moors. As Paul Baepler has argued, in captivity narratives Africans are commonly depicted as barbaric savages, rarely if ever portrayed as noble or exemplary.[21] Despite being part of a Muslim family, Pellow represents Europeans as culturally and morally superior in his tale.

The History of the Long Captivity and Adventures of Thomas Pellow portrays an Englishman's close and tumultuous encounter in Barbary. Pellow's accounts reinforce the notion that the Muslim world was something to fear. Yet, his account also unwittingly reveals the unique opportunities he was afforded while in Morocco. After converting to Islam, Pellow married, had children, found employment, traveled, fought in important battles, and experienced numerous other 'adventures'. Despite it all, Pellow chose to represent Islam and Barbary as culturally and morally inferior to Europe.

Post-Encounter

Prior to his return to England, Pellow may not have fully understood that he was simply trading being an outsider in one society for another. English captivity was widely considered an insult to the state and a threat to allegiance.[22] After more than two decades in captivity, the Britain that Pellow vaguely recalled had changed. Before he formally arrived on English soil, Pellow was viewed suspiciously. When the boat he was traveling on pulled into port, he recalls, "I was denied by the Sentinels, telling me that till they had Orders for my so doing, they would not suffer any Moor to land: *Moor!* said I, *you are very much mistaken in that, for I am as good a Christian (though I am dressed in the Moorish Garb) as any of you all*."[23] Eventually, after proving his identity and completing some official paperwork, Pellow was finally permitted on land.

Large crowds met Pellow upon his return, as people were very curious to see an Englishman that looked so much like a Muslim. He was aware that the community around surrounding him was deeply apprehensive about his return and speculated about the captivity that changed him. According to Pellow, due to his conversion and Muslim dress he had "no Doubt but some ill-natured people think of me so even to this Day: I pray to GOD to forgive them, and that it may never be their mishap to undergo the like Trials."[24] To distance oneself from the dishonour of conversion was complicated for the captive. Moreover, as Matar has observed, anxiety surrounding the return of captives implies identity insecurity in England at this time.[25]

Thus, like other captives, Pellow found it difficult to re-adjust upon returning home. His appearance was shocking to most and not even his parents recognized him when he arrived. Pellow writes, "I did not know my own Father and Mother, nor they me; and had we happened to meet at any other Place … we should no Doubt have passed each other, unless my great Beard might have induced them to inquire further after me."[26] It is likely that his parents were surprised to hear of his conversion.

Upon returning home, most captives gave depositions about their trials. Captives were often eager to tell their story as they attempted to reclaim their national and religious identity. G.A. Starr has argued that a justification for writing was to reaffirm the captive's conviction in Christianity and the English constitution.[27] Pellow's account contains numerous religious analogies, and he describes his experiences using biblical language and imagery. For example, when Pellow first landed, he "fell to my Knees, offering up my most hearty Thanks to Almighty God, for my so wonderful and miraculous Deliverance, and the Sight once more of Christian Land."[28] Pellow also frequently pays homage to the equitable and exemplary British legal system. His work reveals an example of a former English captive writing to emphasize his English national identity and to demonstrate his commitment to the state.

Some captives also took the occasion to condemn Islamic religious practices in their accounts.[29] These accounts were written from the perspective of anti-Islamic fear and conflict and, therefore, should be interpreted in this context. Pellow repeatedly states his disdain for Islam and its practices. He tells the reader of his "utter Abhorrence and Detestation of [Islam]; which, through the ambitious Artifices of cunning and designing Men, hath for so many Ages been so grossly imposed upon them."[30] Accordingly, captivity was a destabilizing force for the budding national identity in England, therefore, captives took the opportunity to undermine Muslims and speak of the absolute superiority of Christianity in their captivity narratives.[31] In doing so, captives hoped to gain the confidence and support of the local community.

Conclusion

One of Said's central arguments is that Europe and the West as a whole responded to the Orient from a position of strength, domination, and control.[32] Yet, as this paper has attempted to demonstrate, captivity narratives challenge Said's thesis. Accounts of captivity, like that of Thomas Pellow, demonstrate that English writers during the early modern period did not and could not write from the perspective of European possession or domination of the Orient.

Moreover, during this period, the English associated power with Islam and viewed Muslims as people to be feared.

As Robert C. Davis has observed, by including the Barbary Coast slavery experience into the grand narrative of European imperialism, it changes and complicates our understanding of it.[33] The accounts of captivity in North Africa also expand our knowledge of cross-cultural interactions. Significantly, Europeans wrote captivity narratives from a position of susceptibility and limitation.

Thomas Pellow's narrative declared a loyalty to Britain and a close relationship to the Christian faith. Yet, the sub-text of his account obscures these declarations. While he claimed his "Britishness" was always essential to him during captivity, his text undermines this claim. For example, Pellow recounts an episode during his final escape attempt when he was asked to cure some peasants of an eye infection. He did so by rubbing ground red pepper into their eyes, which caused them much anguish. Linda Colley has observed that this was not simply a cruel act; on the contrary, Colley suggests, "it was a standard, Moroccan folk remedy for such ailments. An episode which British readers were encouraged to read as anti-Muslim, anti-Moroccan behaviour on Pellow's part, demonstrates in reality the extent to which this one-time Cornishman had assimilated Moroccan folkways."[34] Pellow tried to represent himself as a steadfast Briton, yet his narrative demonstrates that this was not the case and proves that his identity had indeed been transformed by his years in Barbary.

Captivity accounts depict Europeans confronting differences in race, religion, and nationalities and are written from positions of susceptibility. During the early modern period Islam could be neither dominated nor controlled. On the contrary, these stories remind the reader that Islam has long occupied the minds of Europeans and, through captivity and encounter, had a tremendous impact on the culture and climate of Europe.

[1] Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 40.
[2] Linda Colley, *Captives* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2002), 44.
[3] Thomas Pellow, *The History of the Long Captivity and Adventures of Thomas Pellow, in South Barbary.* Edited by Josephine Grieder (New York: Garland Publishing, 1973).
[4] G.A. Starr, "Escape From Barbary: A Seventeenth-Century Genre," *The Huntington Library Quarterly*, XXIX (November 1965), 35.
[5] Paul Baepler, "Introduction," in *White Slaves, African Masters*, edited by Paul Baepler (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1999), 6.
[6] Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993), xii.
[7] Nabil Matar, "Introduction: England and Mediterranean Captivity, 1577-1704," in *Piracy, Slavery, and Redemption*, ed. Daniel J. Viktus (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 3.
[8] Pellow, 5.
[9] Giles Milton, *White Gold* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2004), 167.
[10] Ibid., 84.
[11] Robert C. Davis, *Christian Slaves, Muslim Masters* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 21.
[12] John B. Wolf, *The Barbary Coast* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1979), 164.
[13] Nabil Matar, *Islam in Britain, 1558-1685* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 26.
[14] Pellow, 15-16.
[15] Ibid., 16.
[16] Stephen Clissold, *The Barbary Slaves* (New Jersey: Rowman and Littlefield, 1977), 86.
[17] Matar, *Islam in Britain, 1558-1685*, 28.
[18] Baepler, 42.
[19] Said, *Orientalism*, 7.
[20] Pellow, 103.
[21] Baepler, 38.
[22] Linda Colley, "Going Native, Telling Tales: Captivity, Collaborations and Empire," *Past and Present*, no. 168 (2000), 188.
[23] Pellow, 376.
[24] Ibid., 16.
[25] Nabil Matar, *Turks, Moors, and Englishmen in the Age of Discovery* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 72.
[26] Pellow, 388.
[27] Starr, 46.
[28] Pellow, 374.
[29] For examples see: Edward Coxere, *Adventures by Sea*. Edited by E.H.W. Meyerstein (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1945) and William Okeley, *Eben-ezer: or, a Small Monument of Great Mercy*. (London: Nat. Ponder, 1675).
[30] Pellow, 192.
[31] Matar, "Introduction," 36.
[32] Said, *Orientalism*, 40.
[33] Davis, 193.
[34] Colley, *Captives*, 96.