

A Critical Discourse on Exploring Washington Irving's Motive in the Representation of Arabesque Tradition

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Abstract

Washington Irving was the first American to gain international recognition for his remarkable creation, *Rip Van Winkle*, and is the best known and best loved of American folklore characters. Washington Ring was not only a brilliant historian, but he was also a superb biographer. During his first three and a half years in Spain, he spent a lot of time reading extensively. The majority of his time was spent at the library, and the subjects of his research notes were Arabs and Arab culture. In this study, we will investigate the personal and cultural factors that led Washington Irving to write about the Arab world. While travelling, Irving "thought of producing a collection of tales of various places made of legends," as he wrote in his journal. A closer examination reveals deeper connections between the two endeavours (gathering legends and developing a pan-history) than it at first appears. A list of Irving's Arabesque works should show how important they are in relation to the rest of his work and how much reading and research went into them. This research will utilise Irving's extensive readings to provide a historical context for the major traditions that will be examined, while also providing an overview of the current condition of orientalism in relation to Arab culture. To illustrate Arab culture, I will analyse every facet of Orientalism in Irving's works (settings, satire, history, fiction, etc.) and see how they relate to the study of Arabic literature. This work will encourage future researchers to conduct a thorough examination of Irving's background research that compelled him to write his other works.

Keywords: Washington Irving, Orientalism, Arab Culture, *The Arabian Nights*, *Civil War in Granada*, *The World Displayed*, Moorish historians.

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INTRODUCTION

Washington Irving's first three and a half years in Spain, beginning in 1826, were the most productive of his long career as a writer. At the outset of this time period, he conceived the idea of writing an epic cycle in the grand romantic style, a collection of works depicting the rise and spread of Islam, the Arab civilization in Spain, the *Reconquista*, the travels of Columbus, and the conquest of Mexico. He spent nearly all of his time in the libraries of his friend and host, Obadiah Rich, the Jesuit College at San Isidro, and the King during his first two years there, as evidenced by his notebooks. Throughout the course of the book, Irving mentions his current research on a number of historical figures, including Christopher Columbus, the Cid, Don Roderick, 'Abdal-Rahman, al-flakam, al-Mansfir, Muhammad, the Umayyad dynasty, and Montezuma. Whether the idea for the project came during this time of intensive reading and research or

whether it was the reason for all this study, Irving took it seriously enough to spend more time in the libraries of Seville, Granada, and Cordoba; to write *The Conquest of Granada* and the major parts of *The Alhambra*, and to attempt to learn the Arabic language in order to use authentic sources.

Let's pause here to think about how far-reaching Irving's actions really are. Irving's magnum opus, philosophical system, dream, or whatever you want to call it, would start with the life of the Prophet of Islam. It would span the ten centuries between the fall of the ancient empires and the rise of modern Western civilization. It would connect, at least implicitly, the rise of Spain as a world power to the flourishing of science and culture under Muslim rule. Similar to *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* for Gibbon and *The Ruins* for Volney, with elements of *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, this work would have a profound impact on Irving.

When put into a more realistic context, Irving's epic cycle would make use of previously written works. If he wrote a history of Islam up to the conquest of Spain, finished his *Granada*, and organised the incidental material into a series on the Muslim and Christian dynasties up to 1492, he would only have to conclude the project by writing about the conquest of Mexico and decorating the whole with appropriate collections of tales and sketches. Certainly, there was a plethora of printed and manuscript material at his disposal, and he had brought with him to Spain the skeletons of *The Arabian Tales*.

A Discourse on Washington Irving's Representation of Arabs

"I have always read everything relating to the domination of the moors with great delight."

(Washington Irving)

Spain and Irving

It is fortunate for the study of America's first man of letters that he lived long enough to write enough and leave enough letters, notebooks, and journals to provide a very complete picture of his activities, readings, travels, acquaintances, present events, and states of mind. By keeping meticulous notes, Irving the recorder lets us in on his reading habits, travels, and the impact certain works of art had on him. This gives us insight into his personal preferences as well as the tastes of his generation. His work often deals with orientalism in one way or another. This holds true not only at his time of maximum exposure in Spain, but also throughout his entire life, from his early years as a young man to his peaceful retirement in Sunnyside. Through Irving's own experiences, I believe it is feasible to construct a reasonably accurate picture of orientalism in Europe and America throughout the first three or four decades of the nineteenth century. There will be a three-part breakdown of time: before Irving's second voyage to Europe in 1815; the eleven years between Irving's second trip and his arrival in Spain in 1826; and Irving's tenure in Spain and beyond.

Irving's formative readings

Irving frequently alludes in his fiction, letters, and journals to those readings that had become such an indelible aspect of his memory and sensibility, particularly during the many romantic feelings characteristic of Irving of *The Sketch Book* and *The Alhambra*, when he would meditate, with that undefinable mixture of regret and Wordsworthian tranquilly so typical of the age, on the lost days of his childhood. *The Arabian Nights*, *The Civil War in Granada*, stories from *The World Displayed*, and a group of Moorish historians whom Stanley Williams called "the beguilers of his [Irving's] youthful hours" would frequently appear in Irving's daydreams.

Role of the Arabian Nights

When Irving was around the age of ten or twelve, he began reading *The Arabian Nights* for the first time. This means that Antoine Galland's refined but abridged translation must have been the basis for the version he read at the time and the many times he read it later. It was this translation that became an instant and phenomenal success in Europe in the eighteenth century, that made the names Scheherazade, Sinbad, and Aladdin part of the collective consciousness, and that spawned an unbelievable number of imitations, spoofs, and stage adaptations, flooding Europe with collectibles from the Middle East and North Africa. American printers continued to produce editions of Galland's *Arabian Nights* to meet the rising demand, adding to the many English and French translations already on the market. Eleven editions appeared in Boston, New York, Hartford, Philadelphia, and Providence during the course of six years, from 1794 AD to 1800 AD. It's likely that Irving found some of his favourite stories in anthologies aimed at younger readers, like the ones below.

Irving likely found some of his favourite stories in anthologies aimed towards children like the following: The Reverend Mr. J. Cooper's translation of Galland's French version of *The Arabian Nights* includes his own thoughtful commentary on each tale.⁵ After being profoundly influenced by his first reading of *The Arabian Nights*, Irving spent the rest of his life following the publication of fresh translations as ancient texts were discovered. References to the stories appear throughout his body of work. In many cases, they will serve as a means of communication, helping to define a range of imaginative states.

The Civil War in Granada and its effect on Washington's style

The persona *The Civil War in Granada* was just as fascinating, exotic, colourful, and creatively exciting to young Irving as the one in the novel. Here were all the elements of the historical romance genre that a young lad like Irving could want in a book: chivalry, adventure, local flavour. With the benefit of hindsight and more study thirty-five years after first reading the book, Irving pondered:

- From earliest boyhood, when, on the banks of the
- Hudson, I first pored over the pages of old Gines Perez
- de Hyta's apocryphal but chivalresque history of the
- Civil war in Granada, and the feuds of its gallant
- Cavaliers, the Zegrís and Abencerrages, that city has
- Ever been a subject of my waking dreams; and often gave
- I trod in fancy the romantic halls of the Alhambra.

The literary tradition to which Irving would eventually be connected in Europe may be traced back to this book, as will be demonstrated below. Irving's early fondness for *The Civil Wars in Granada* is best understood by considering the connections he made with the book. For one, Irving the young reader must have made the connection between a fantastical setting recounted in legendary-historical terms and a real, tangible location. Irving spent his life reading at historic locations that held sentimental or mythological significance for him from his early education. As a result, I believe that neither "Sleepy Hollow" nor "Westminster Abbey" could have been written without having first read *The Civil Wars in Granada*, in which a sense of place is intricately intertwined with a sense of history and a sense of the fantastic. Second, I believe Irving's thinking was influenced by Perez de Hita's romance, which I believe made a connection between the eastern world of *The Arabian Nights* and the western world of the historical romance. To this end, Irving's orientalism retained a European, mediaeval, chivalric air. More than just symbolic touchstones, *The Civil Wars in Granada* and *The Arabian Nights* inspired Irving to learn more about Spain, the Orient, and the rest of the world through literature.

Moorish manuscripts

Stanley Williams notes that in Irving's childhood, the author read and appreciated the works of various Moorish historians. Williams, however, fails to provide any attribution to any of these historians. Insights from Irving's other works, such as *Salmagundi* and *Knickerbocker*, suggest that the author had access to a translated copy of the proceedings of "The Academie Royale des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres" (a French learned society devoted to the humanities). The two-volume work is entitled: *Accounts and Extracts of the Manuscripts in the Library of the King of France*... (London, 1789). These volumes (and, of course, those in the original series) contained the results of the studies of prominent French orientalists. The vast majority of the pieces were reviews of recently translated Arabic manuscripts, featuring extensive translation excerpts. In *Knickerbocker* (page 29), Irving discusses al-Masudi and his work *Murudj al-Dahab* (or Golden Prairies), which he had only seen in *Accounts and Extracts*... because it had never been published. He could hardly have neglected to read the other articles in the same book, which were commentary on al-Nisaburi, al-Sadiqi, and Ibn al-Athir. Ibn al-Khatib, whose name Irving came up with in Pérez de Hita, is mentioned again in Irving's writings, as is the poet and anthologist Abu al-Faraj al-Isbahani. The next part will focus on how many of these sources Irving actually used. The fact that Irving had encountered actual Arabic translations and what became known as "scientific orientalism" thirty years before he travelled to Spain is adequate for the objectives at hand.

Travel Anthologies

Irving's biographers have also noted that he owned and read frequently a compilation of travel narratives titled *The World Displayed*, which was published in America in 1795. The *Histoire Générale des Voyages* was followed by a slew of travel anthologies like this one, which aimed to elevate the status of the genre by collecting the best and most well-known trip accounts. Irving's *The World Displayed* was deemed an "inexhaustible treasure" by Pierre Irving, who proclaimed that he would rather read it than do his homework. The collection covers more than a century and includes not only the famous voyages of discovery (Columbus, the conquest of Mexico and Peru, Drake, Vasco de Gama, Magellan, etc.), but also more than a dozen narratives of travel in the Muslim East.¹⁶ Although widely varying in quality, accuracy, and perspective, these accounts range from Morocco to India and frequently include lengthy discussions of Islam and Islamic culture. You can get a feel for the material from the two examples provided. *A Faithful Account of the Religion and Manners of the Mahometans. in Which Is a Particular Relation of Their Pilgrimage to Mecca, ...* by Joseph Pitts and Jean de Thévenot's

- Travels in the Levant, containing an account of the
 - Islands of the Levant, a particular description of
 - Constantinople, the seraglio, the mosques, the manners
 - And customs of the Sultan and his affairs of state, and
 - Also, the dress, religion and burials of the Turks;
 - Together with their military and civil government,
 - Distribution of justice and modes of punishment
- (Volume VI)

While Irving excitedly read the stories in *The World Displayed*, travel writing had already been around for almost a century. The stories Irving chose to include in his anthology attained classic status because of the collection itself and its French forerunner. Subsequently, only works that had already become well-known on their own merits were selected. This should give you an idea of how well received the material is. To paraphrase what Pierre Martino and others have said, "a prime factor in the vogue of literary orientalism" was the proliferation of travel writing. Simply picking up a magazine from any time in Irving's career, especially *The Analectic Magazine*, which Irving edited from 1813 to 1815, is enough to demonstrate the widespread interest in and importance of travel writing at the time. Included in Volume I are "A Review of Price's Retrospect of Mohammedan History," "Observations on the Oriental Apologue," a sketch of the "Seraglio of the Grand Seigneur," "An Account of the Dancing Girls of the East," and a number of short writings. It's noteworthy that these were chosen from previously published works, both in full and in part, and that they were reprinted in other

magazines, because it shows how popular this genre was and how much people wanted to see more stories with familiar stock oriental elements (seraglios, dancing girls, etc.).

CONCLUSION

As editor, Irving was inevitably involved in the selection of articles and extracts. Therefore, he must have understood more than the selected things and enough about distinctions in quality to navigate through the mass of oriental content in the publications and present his readers with what he believed to be the pearls. So, in addition to his travels and time spent in Spain and numerous Middle Eastern nations, he also relied on a wealth of reading material to help construct the backdrop within which his mind operated.

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