The Moors?

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Medieval Iberia and its "multicultural" situation occupy a special place in the literary imagination of various writers inclined to find it appealing for reasons of their own time, place, and cultural condition. *Zofloya or, The Moor* (1806) by Charlotte Dacre, *The Manuscript Found in Saragossa* (c. 1815; trans. 1996) by Jan Potocki, Washington Irving's *Tales of the Alhambra* (1832), *Leo Africanus* (1988) by Amin Maalouf, *The Death and Life of Miguel de Cervantes* (1991) by Stephen Marlowe, Tariq Ali's *Shadows of the Pomegranate Tree* (1992), Salman Rushdie's *The Moor's Last Sigh* (1995), are only a few of the more inspired works of fiction written in European languages set in or drawing upon images, figures, and themes from medieval Iberia. In particular, they offer evocative representations of a highly cultured people identified as *Moors*. Surprisingly, "Moor" and "Moorish" are employed regularly in academic circles and in popular culture without much question or reflection. Yet Andalusi Arabic sources, as opposed to later Mudejar and Morisco sources in Aljamiado and medieval Spanish texts, neither refer to individuals as Moors nor recognize any such group, community or culture. Just who were they? And what is the significance of their name?

Unlike relatively stable terms of Roman provenance inherited by Christians such as "Arab," "Ishmaelite," and "Saracen," "Moor" is problematic because of its shifting significance. Isidore of Seville, who died well before Islam came to Iberia, follows Roman usage in referring to northwest Africa as Mauritania (from which *maurus/moro* is derived) on account, he says, of its inhabitants' blackness. Similarly, the Visigothic chronicler John of Biclaro refers to the inhabitants of pre-Islamic North Africa as Moors (Wolf 1990: 64).

The so-called *Mozarabic Chronicle of 754*, written by a Christian living in al-Andalus under Muslim rule and the earliest surviving account of the events of 711, speaks of the invading force of Muslims without racial animus as "Arabs and Moors" (Wolf 1990: 131). These texts suggest that early on "Moor" signified "Berber." African origin is clearly marked in this usage, but apparently as a geographic and ethnic rather than racial signifier.

Later documents authored in the Christian kingdoms of Iberia attest to the complete transformation of "Moor" from a term signifying "Berber" into a general term for Muslims living in Iberian territory lands conquered recently by Chrisitans and secondarily, for Muslims residing in what was, or was since left of al-Andalus. For example, the *Chronicle of Najera* (twelfth-century Leon) refers to [c]Abd al-Rahman I, the Umayyad *amir* of mid-eighth century al-Andalus, as "King of the Mauri," and to [c]Abd al-Rahman III, the tenth-century Umayyad Caliph, as "the (consummate) Maurus." An elegiac passage from the thirteenth century *Primera cronica general* (Chapter 559 *General Chronicle of Spain*) recounts the events of 711 for what is construed as the (temporary) downfall of "Spain" in that year. The text testifies that semantic transformation of "Moor" was not nearly as benign as some readers have assumed:

> *their faces were black as pitch, the handsomest among them was black as a cooking pot*, and their eyes blazed like fire; their horses swift as leopards, their horsemen more cruel and hurtful than the wolf that comes at night to the flock of sheep**.** *The vile African people…* (Smith 1988: 19)

Here the historiography sponsored by Alphonso X of Castile shares a vocabulary developed across the Pyrenees in the early twelfth-century *Chanson de Roland,* wherein the Saracen Abisme is stigmatized as brutish on account of his race ("In all that host was *none more vile than he*, With evil vice and crimes he's dyed full deep...And *black is he as*

melted pitch to see. Better he loves murder and treachery Than all the gold that is in Galicie...” (emphasis mine) [*Song of Roland*, 113; Sayers 1975: 108].

The thirteenth-century *Poema de Fernan Gonzalez* composed by a monk in the vicinity of Burgos endows the semantic and figural arc of “Moor” with a peculiar but related significance. Treating the exploits of the notorious al-Mansur (Almanzor) of late tenth century al-Andalus, the poem recounts how the goodly Count instructs his retinue in the perfidious practices and beliefs of the Moors who “do not take God as a guide, but the stars; they have made of them a new Creator...There are others among them who know many charms, and can create very evil simulations with their spells; the devil teaches them how to stir up the clouds and the winds. They associate the devil with their spells, and join up with them to form covens; they reveal all the errors of people now dead, and *the treacherous dark ones* (*carbonientos*=“coal-faced”) who hold council together (Smith 1988: 54; 57-59 [l. 478]). The Count’s prayers for the intervention of the patron Apostle Santiago *Matamoro*s, “the Moor slayer” redeem the Castillians from al-Mansur’s nefarious grip (Smith 1988: 55, 59; [l. 557]). And in this text, the racial dehumanization and religious demonization of Moors very nearly converge.

From the *Poema de Fernan Gonzalez* and the *Primera cronica* we learn that “Moor and Christian” form a clearly established opposition in thirteenth-century Castile. This dichotomy is also evident in the medieval Spanish expression “*ni moro ni christiani*” (“no one”) and apparent in the perfectly wrought symmetry of line 731 in the first Cantar

of the *Poema de mio Cid* ["The Moors called on Muhammad and the Christians on St. James."] (Hamilton and Perry 1984: 60-61). The "Moor" in these and other texts of similar provenance underscores for Christians not only the Muslims' religious and cultural otherness but also and more particularly their "foreign," *African* origins, their misplaced and thus temporary presence as outsiders without roots in Castile. Having come from another, darker place, "the Moors" surely belonged somewhere else. It was not much of a conceptual leap for Christians of Castile and Leon (and Aragon, Catalonia, Navarre and Galicia) to believe that "Spain" could not find itself as a nation until such racial and religious others vanished or were forced to disappear incrementally, as eventually happened in the late fifteenth through early seventeenth centuries.

Because of its potent connotations, "Moor" arguably served as the principal linguistic vehicle for repressing Muslims and suppressing the indigenous nature of the Andalusi Muslim cultural heritage. It enabled Christians in thirteenth-century Castile to dismiss the substantially mixed Andalusi Muslim population and its own Mudejars as foreign and to disregard the extent of social and cultural ties among all Andalusis, including Muslims from Africa. As such, the term Moor signifies Christian longing for a world of religious, cultural, ethnic, and political unity rather than diversity.

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