Curiosity Without Limits: Natalie Zemon Davis and Her Subject in *Trickster Travels*

He fled his birthplace in Granada and grew up in Fez. Born Al-Hasan ibn Muhammed ibn Ahmad al-Wazzan around 1486-88, he first crossed the Mediterranean as a young child. Later, known more simply as al-Hasan al-Wazzan, or al-Hasan ibn Muhammed, or even just as al-Wazzan, he traversed the Maghreb and then, once again, the Mediterranean as a traveler, diplomat, ambassador, representative, and emissary of his adopted North African homeland. Captured by a Spanish pirate, sailing as a captive and, upon arrival in Italy, becoming a gift to Pope Leo X, al-Wazzan soon disappeared, transformed by baptism into Joannes Leo (de Medicis), Leo Africanus, Giovanni Leone, and Yuhanna al-Asad. New name, new location, new profession. In Rome, Yuhanna al-Asad, the convert, scholar, advisor, translator, and author, navigated between worlds. Without a ship or a caravan, but with access to the Vatican Library, the upper echelon of Church officials, and the multilingual, multireligious milieu of scholars, he negotiated the confluences and contradictions of the Mediterranean. Until. Until European rivalries and the looming threat of the Ottoman Empire tore apart the Italian peninsula. Looking to escape the crush of religio-political conflict or perhaps exercising a long-held desire to return to his roots, Yuhanna al-Asad slipped back across the sea, turning once more into al-Wazzan, settling perhaps in the middle ground between Cairo and Fez, in Tunis. Perhaps.[1]

With a limited but tantalizing source base, Natalie Zemon Davis draws out the story of al-Wazzan/al-Asad, "a sixteenth-century Muslim between worlds" in *Trickster Travels*. Guided by published and unpublished manuscripts as well as "baffling silences" in the historical record, Davis contextualizes known information and speculates about the unknown in order to build the

[1] Natalie Zemon David, *Trickster Travels: A Sixteenth-Century Muslim Between Worlds* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2006).

life history of the "shadowy figure" she understands as a "trickster traveler." Al-Asad's books, notably *La Descrittione dell'Africa* (*The Description of Africa*, originally titled *Libro de la Cosmographia et Geographia de Affrica* in its 936-page manuscript form) but also *The Epitome of Muslim Chronicles*, *The Faith and Law of Muhammad according to the Malikite School of Law*, and *The Lives of Arab Scholars*, as well as his unpublished manuscripts on Arabic grammar and "illustrious men" among Arabs (along with a smaller treatise on five illustrious Jewish men) and his contributions to both the Latin translation of the Qur'an and the creation of an Arabic-Hebrew-Latin dictionary, comprise the core texts through which Davis reconstructs the mind of her subject. If al-Wazzan's writing provides the sketch of his life, then historical work on the culture, society, politics, and religion of sixteenth-century Italy, Spain, France, the Ottoman Empire, the Levant, and North Africa comprise the paint that colors in his portrait.[2]

The overarching context, the conflict between Rome and Constantinople, or more broadly Latin Christendom and the growing Islamic-Ottoman empire, explains why a notorious Spanish pirate would recognize the bounty of a North African envoy acquired in the eastern Mediterranean. In an era "packed with political and religious change and conflict," those who could be persuaded, pressured, or tortured into relinquishing strategic information about the opposing regime were (in some cases quite literally) worth their weight in gold. Imprisoned in the Castel Sant'Angelo, al-Wazzan seems to have found solace in the Vatican Library, whose records reveal that the Muslim prisoner's borrowing privileges. Seen as "'truly learned'" by his Church interrogators, al-Wazzan reoriented himself away from his role as an emissary to the court of Sultan Selim toward his role as a charge of the Holy See of Pope Leo X.[3]

[2] Ibid., 4-5, 88, 94, 90, 241-3, 12-3.

[3] Ibid., 54-6, 12, 57-62.

About a year and a half after being captured, al-Wazzan accepted Christianity–and a new name, Joannes Leo, or Yuhanna al-Asad in Arabic[4]–under the watchful eyes of a triad selected by the pope himself: Paride Grassi, bishop of Pesaro; Giovanni Battista Bonciani, bishop of Caserta; and Gabriel Fosco, archibishop of Durazzo. In addition to the group that catechized al-Wazzan, three other ranking Church officials played significant roles in al-Wazzan's baptism and subsequent life on the Italian peninsula: Bernardino Lopez de Carvajal, cardinal of Santa Croce; Lorenzo Pucci, cardinal of Santi Quattro; and, most importantly, Egidio da Viterbo, cardinal of Santo Bartolomeo. With Carvajal working to unify Christians against Turks, with Pucci ensuring that converts honored their new religion, and with Egidio urging the creation of a global Christendom, the three cardinals serving as godfathers to al-Asad were, as Davis, observes "all eager to efface the religion into which he had been born." Egidio, a humanist Augustinian dedicated to the conversion of Muslims and Jews, not only learned Arabic from his godson but also introduced al-Asad to Elijah Levita, a Jew working on Hebrew and Aramaic texts. Ensconced in Egidio's circles, al-Asad encountered a polyglot of scholars in and around Rome. In Bologna, he met the émigré Jewish physician, Jacob Mantino, with whom he collaborated on an Arabic-Hebrew-Latin dictionary. Around this time, al-Asad also wrote two language books, one on Arabic grammar and one on Arabic prosody. "His stay with the Jewish physician," writes Davis, "confirmed for the North African faqih the creative move of his Italian years: beyond transcription, beyond commentary, beyond translation, to become an author of his own."[5]

Completed in 1526, al-Asad's major work, *Libro de la Cosmographia et Geographia de Affrica*, offers the most comprehensive and the most elusive clues into the author's experiences,

[4] Following Davis' conventions, I use al-Wazzan to refer to the North African in his pre-baptism and post-Europe years and use al-Asad to describe the convert during his nine years in Italy.

[5] Davis, *Trickster Travels*, 62, 64-5, 70-1, 84-7.

values, and beliefs. Written in fairly simple Italian but conforming to narrative structures and genres common to Islamic scholarship, the draft manuscript of *Cosmography and Geography* exhibits traces of dueling religious, literary, and regional traditions and practices. As a bestseller and the central text of al-Asad's corpus, the published and translated versions "shape[d] European visions of Africa" and undergird Davis' reconstruction of the life and mind of its author. By reviewing the content of al-Asad's vision of Africa as well as his stylistic choices, Davis diverges from early scholars who assessed the publication in "fragments, rather than considering it as a whole or the author's literary practices." Indeed, Davis draws attention to the alterations made by Ramusio, the first publisher, explaining that "some of [the revisions] change his [al-Asad's] content and self-presentation in ways consistent neither with the Arabo-Islamic views he would have brought with him from North Africa, nor with the attitudes and sensibilities he developed during his Italian years." The notion that al-Asad would have drawn on both his North African roots and his Italian residence derives directly from his narrative. The "double vision" identified by Davis reflects al-Asad's self-description, illustrated through a story borrowed from *The Book of the Hundred Tales*. Like the avian-fish who flies until the bird-king collects taxes and then, as an amphibian-bird, swims until the fish-king collects taxes, so too does al-Asad commit to both telling the truth *and* "mov[ing] strategically between different cultural positions." In this way, al-Asad inhabits the characters of "the traveling narrator and the trickster vagabond." Committed to truth as he alone knows it, al-Asad sets out to tell a story palatable to Egidio, his Italian cardinal godfather, and acceptable to the North African *ulema* he may yet again encounter. Strategically diplomatic even when he lacks the formal title of ambassador, al-Asad, in Davis' formulation, "moved between different politics, made use of different cultural and social resources, and entangled or separated them so as to survive,

discover, write, make relationships, and think about society and himself." Even when al-Asad physically stood still, he mentally traveled across the sea and land, invoking traditions with which he grew up as well as those he recently assimilated.[6]

Davis' analysis of *Cosmography and Geography* lies at the center of *Trickster Travels*: it represents the strength of her imaginative vision and forms the foundation of her argument about al-Asad's identity, role, and historical importance. An exploration of al-Asad's linguistic and literary choices, according to Davis, reveals the nuance of his writing and demonstrates his cognizance of (or hope for) multiple audiences for his magnum opus. On the one hand, the emphasis on geography, travel, and history in al-Asad's *Geography* parallel several narrative genres common to Islamic publications. On the other hand, he adapts rather than mimics these forms. For example, travel writing, specifically that which recounted voyages of discovery, was known as a rihla; al-Asad describes his adventures and realizations but not in the comprehensively linear manner of a rihla.[7]

Likewise, Davis suggests, al-Asad made careful choices about specific words. While *Geography* described the contours of the African landscape, it also portrayed the people who inhabited the land. As such, the work delves into the worlds of Islam, an arena about which many Europeans were curious but a slippery terrain for the new convert. Reading the manuscript, Davis sees al-Asad striving for balanced treatment of his forebears, a strategy that would not have endeared him to Latin Christendom's elite, a group itching to conquer and convert its Muslim neighbors. Yet al-Asad conspicuously uses the Muslim calendar, expressing dates not in the number of years since the death of Christ but in the number of years since the Hijra (Muhammed's trek to Mecca). Although al-Asad rarely refers to Muhammed as the Prophet, a

[6] Ibid., 94-8, 4, 7, 97, 12-3, 109-10, 105, 11.

[7] Ibid., 98, 102-3.

certain offense in the eyes of the Church, he subverts the contemporary standard *Macometto*, referring to him as *Mucametto*. The subtle switch of an "o" for a "u" renders the pronunciation closer to the sounds of Arabic and, according to Davis, suggest a quiet form of code-switching. Attuned to the proclivities of his Church godfathers but well-versed in Islamic law, al-Asad may have cloaked his inner Muslim in the robes of the Church, a practice known and accepted by Islam as *taqiyya*: a "precautionary dissimulation of one's faith and religious practices under circumstances of coercion." Yet if this conjecture explains al-Asad's writing tactics, why, Davis rightfully asks, did he remain in Italy for so long? Why did al-Asad leave only when the threat of war turned real?[8]

These are, of course, questions to which no clear answers exist. As she has throughout the book, Davis engages in speculation, trying to imagine the treats Renaissance Europe would have offered al-Asad. The 1527 Roman census provides one possibility: if the only listed Joannes Leo refers to Yuhanna al-Asad—a plausible explanation given that it was his baptismal name—then al-Asad maintained a household of three, a triad that Davis suggests included a wife and a child. Just as Davis can only hypothesize why al-Asad makes the rhetorical choices he did, so too can she only surmise why al-Asad may have remained in Italy, that he is the Joannes Leo on the census, and whom the household listed may have included. Here, as she consistently does throughout the narrative, Davis carefully delineates what she knows from what she infers, in this case off-setting her claim with "I speculate." As she underscores in the introduction,

> My strategy is to start with the persons, places, and texts that good evidence affirms or suggests he knew, and build from additional sources about them what he would have been likely to see or read or hear or do. Throughout I have had to make use of the conditional—"would have," "may have," "was likely to have"—and the speculative "perhaps," "maybe." These are my invitations to the reader to follow a plausible life story from materials of the time.

[8] Ibid., 157-8, 188.

In the case of al-Asad's family life, Davis lays out the information she has (the census, a reference to a Venetian Joannes Leo in other documents who does not appear in the Roman census, the permissions he would have needed to marry, the models to which he would have looked for ideals of family life) and then takes the reader step-by-step through her thought process, culminating in her assessment that al-Asad lived with a woman and a child. In other words, she transparently demonstrates her method of determining al-Asad's family life from the evidence she has available. By signposting the limits of her sources and explicating the manner in which she reads them, Davis justifies her method; hers is a responsible and contextual rendering of al-Asad's life that is at once imaginative *and* scrupulous, lively *and* grounded.[9]

Inasmuch as *Trickster Travels* relays al-Wazzan/al-Asad's life history, the book makes an argument through narrative. Acknowledging that her "trickster bird" is an "extreme case" rather than a representative figure, Davis asks two questions: "What kind of person invites silence in his own societies and times? What kind of an author leaves a text with mysteries, contradictions, and inventions?" The answer, she asserts—sometimes implicitly and sometimes explicitly—is a man who occupied two worlds; who "bore witness to the possibility of communication and curiosity in a world divided by violence"; who reveled in European scholarship while manipulating North African genres; who maintained a "double identity…[by] find[ing] equivalents…locat[ing] places where worlds seemed to converge"; and who relished experimentation without fully relinquishing control, knowledge, and allegiances. Yet *Trickster Travels* is more than a portrait of a man capable of sustaining multiple identities in dueling

[9] Ibid., 211-5, 13.

locales; to illuminate al-Wazzan/al-Asad, Davis immerses us in the sixteenth-century Mediterranean world, teaching us more about the time period and region than about her hero.[10]

Al-Wazzan plays the role of hero (a term Davis uses in the beginning of the book but drops over the course of the book) precisely because the "autobiographical nuggets" he dropped into his manuscript exude trickster charm, exemplify the possibility of deep cross-cultural immersion, and extend the horizon lines of Muslim-Christian interaction in the sixteenth century. The atypical al-Wazzan provides a lens through which to re-examine the social, cultural, and religio-political boundaries of the Mediterranean. For example, Davis emphasizes that while al-Asad wrote about Muslims and Christians in a balanced, neutral, and detached manner, publishers and subsequent translators altered the text to elevate Christianity and demean Islam. The comparative work that Davis must do in order to make meaning out of al-Asad's texts tells us relatively little about his intent and significantly more about the context in which he wrote. That publishers and translators would resist the author's characterizations contributes more to a description of the larger milieu than about al-Asad's mind. Similarly, Davis turns to the prevailing practices and norms of sexuality in Islam and Christianity to enhance the legibility of al-Asad's attitudes toward women and sexuality. As an *unrepresentative* case, al-Asad illuminates the cultural exchange that makes him stand out; his atypicality demands that Davis determine, comprehend, and explain the conventions with and against which he worked.[11]

Through al-Asad, Davis insists on the fluidity of boundaries in the sixteenth-century Mediterranean world. Even if al-Asad and the small circle of Jews with whom he associated represented an elite few who could traverse religiously demarcated space, Davis implies, they demonstrate the possibility and viability of border crossing. *Trickster Travels* is a sympathetic

[10] Ibid., 13, 260, 217, 223.

[11] Ibid., 103, 155, 182, 196-211.

and hopeful rendering of a man, a milieu, and a region that resisted circumscribed limits characteristic of both the Church and the growing Islamic Empire.[12] Why does this matter? In *Under Crescent and Cross*, Davis' Princeton colleague Mark Cohen argues that Jews living under Islamic rule could be both marginal and integrated, an impossible position for Jews living under Church dominion. Whereas Cohen studies the contact zones between Jews and Christians and between Jews and Muslims separately in order to assess how and why they differed, Davis focuses on the actual points of contact. Ironically, Rome offered one of the few hospitable spaces for inter-religious mingling, albeit between a converted Muslim, several Jews, and many Christians. Nevertheless, as Cohen makes clear in his work, antagonistic historiographical narratives about religious cooperation or competition feed contemporary political stomachs. To aver, as Davis does, that religious obstacles could be overcome is also to argue that such obstacles can continue to be overcome. Likewise, al-Asad's double vision, even if temporary and ultimately muted by his return to North Africa, offers an example that others can (and perhaps should, according to Davis) emulate.[13]

Indeed, in Davis' appraisal of al-Asad's *Illustrious Men* manuscript, she writes, "Yuhanna al-Asad created vivid portraits of learned men, sometimes well-substantiated by memory and whatever notes he had brought with him to Italy, sometimes improvised, approximate, or simply made up. Even with their mixture of what he believed as a fact and what he knew was fabulation, they opened up a world of scholarship for Europeans." So too does

[12] There was, of course, no single Islamic Empire. The burgeoning Ottoman Empire would conquer parts of Southern Europe, the Levant, and North Africa but even prior to Ottoman rule, the Maghreb maintained Islamic practices even without a hierarchical Church structure to structure society.

[13] Ibid., 103; Mark Cohen, *Under Crescent and Cross: The Jews in the Middle Ages* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994). Cohen's work provides an apt comparison not only because Davis cites him but because he and Davis co-taught courses and collaborated on a research project. It is therefore reasonable to think that Davis drew upon his work in developing *Trickster Travels* (see, Natalie Zemon Davis, "A Life of Learning," (Charles Homer Haskins Lecture given at the American Council of Learned Societies Annual Meeting, Philadelphia, PA, May 2, 1997).

Davis do the same for her modern reader: she creates a "vivid" portrait of al-Asad, sometimes based on solid evidence and sometimes based on grounded imagination, through which she opens up the a world of sixteenth-century scholarship to academics and the lay public alike. In so doing, Davis implies that the meandering, hybrid path of her trickster hero may well provide a model for contemporary boundary crossing as well as for resuscitating limitless curiosity.[14]

[14] Davis, *Trickster Travels*, 93.