

The Edification of Sir Walter Scott's *Saladin* in *The Talisman*

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Abstract: *The Talisman*, though one of Sir Walter Scott's lesser known works, garnered attention by its criticism in Edward Said's *Orientalism*. This essay looks at how premature that criticism is by examining Scott's sympathetic portrayal of Saladin in the novel. Indeed, one might attribute a case of "hero worship" to Scott, seeing how unashamedly effusive his admiration of the Sultan is in the text. The essay also argues that while Scott, as a Romantic era novelist and poet, might have been a bit effusive in his praise of Saladin, the fictional Sultan in *The Talisman* is not far removed from the historical ruler in terms of character. Indeed Scott's version of Saladin has dominated Western media even today. The author does make some minor lapses when it comes to a few details. But this essay uncovers the depth of his contextual knowledge and how intelligently he applies it. Furthermore, Scott's portrayal of the Crusaders in the text is often far more accurate than the works of most of his contemporaries and even some authors today. Nevertheless, *The Talisman* should not be necessarily read as an East versus West text or even as a pro-Eastern novel but as the light adventure novel intended by its author.

Key words: Walter Scott; Saladin; Talisman; Crusaders; Orientalism

INTRODUCTION

Orientalism, per Edward Said's canonical text, denotes an artificial dichotomy between Occident and Orient. Certain Western scholars, according to Said, fabricate the East in terms of an entity to be derided and subjugated militarily, culturally, intellectually etc. Accordingly, Sir Walter Scott is one such probable individual with his crusading tale, *The Talisman*. In one particular episode, Sir Kenneth (Prince David of Scotland in disguise), while acknowledging Sheerkohf's (Saladin incognito) excellence, berates him for touting his demonic ancestry and categorizes all Muslims as hell spawn (qtd. in Said 101). These comments incur Said's censure:

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The feeble historicism by which Scott makes the scene “medieval,” letting Christian attack Muslim theologically in a way nineteenth century Europeans would not (they would, though); . . . the airy condescension of damning a whole people “generally” while mitigating the offence with a cool “I don’t mean you in particular.” (101)

Hence shall Saladin always be “first an Oriental, second a human being, and last again an Oriental” (Said 102)? A close reading of *The Talisman* negates such prejudices while displaying a healthy admiration for the Sultan. Indeed Scott - by displaying Saladin as an exemplary character who neither allows his culture to pigeonhole him nor disavows his unique heritage - questions the Crusaders’ prerogative to conquer by exposing their ignobility and iniquity.

DISGUISED RULERS AS A TROPE FOR JUSTICE

The Talisman and Scott’s Indian novel, *The Surgeon’s Daughter* feature the implementation of disguises by monarchs. Scott, in all probability, borrows this feature from the exploits of Harun al-Rashid in *Tales from 1001 Arabian Nights*. Saladin successively takes on the guise of valorous Emir Sheerkohf and learned Adonbec el Hakim before he assumes his true form. Similarly Haider Ali wanders around as a holy man. Though such subterfuge may convey a sense of the exotic, the true motive for such methods can often be misinterpreted. One may speculate that monarchs, by spying on others, gain a sort of voyeuristic pleasure or indulge in their paranoid curiosities. Both conjectures may reason away such an obsession. After encountering King Richard’s wife, Berengaria and cousin, Edith Plantagenet, Saladin confesses to Kenneth, he went forth thither in “disguise, and thereby procured a sight the most blessed that I have ever enjoyed - that I ever shall enjoy, until the glories of Paradise beam on my eyes” (Scott, *Talisman* 223). Haider’s motives stem from his suspicions of Middelmas’ treachery and thus, in the guise of a fakir, he goes on an intelligence gathering mission. However, these explanations overshadow the real reason for such masquerades. True to the spirit of *Arabian Nights*, Scott utilises disguised royals as an agency of nobility and “the fruit of . . . justice” (Scott, *Surgeon’s Daughter* 150). He does not limit such subterfuge to his Eastern characters though. In his classic *Ivanhoe*, King Richard wanders around England incognito as an unknown knight (Black Sluggard) who rights wrongs and gauges the loyalty of his subjects (Scott, *Ivanhoe* 447).

In Sir Richard Burton’s translation of *Arabian Nights*, Harun al-Rashid justifies his nightly expeditions by wanting to “question the common folk concerning the conduct of those charged with its governance; and those of whom they complain we will depose from office and those whom they commend we will promote” (186). This justification stays present, in one form or another, in several other translations. By undertaking such fact-finding missions, Al-Rashid clearly circumvents sycophants, inevitable in almost every government, who blind administrators to realities of life. The caliph then becomes his own “eyes and ears” able to discern the general welfare and consensus of his subjects. Hence he upholds justice. While partaking in the joys and sufferings of common citizens, he exhibits his nobility and maturity as a ruler by being genuinely interested in their social conditions.

On a side note, while the historical Saladin and Haider Ali did not do so, other notable figures have often wandered *incognito*, to better redress wrongs. One such example was President Theodore Roosevelt. When appointed Police Commissioner of New York, one of his responsibilities included stamping out corruption and dereliction of duty. He would often wander alone through the streets, apprehending patrolmen in bars and brothels. For these nightly travails he was aptly nicknamed “Haroun al-Roosevelt” (Howland 45).

Of course al-Rashid was not a solitary example. The unknown authors of *Arabian Nights* would have been certainly familiar with Caliph Omar al-Khattab and his deeds. The second Caliph of Islam would often scour the streets of Medina incognito, informing himself of the miseries and burdens of the common people and putting such iniquities right (Glubb 268). Thus while Scott, unknowingly perhaps but fittingly so, applies disguise as a creative way of dispensing justice through Saladin and Haider Ali, he makes them heirs to an exemplary tradition.

Saladin's disguises enable him to save Kenneth from wrongful execution and then furnish the Scot with the means for redress, while continuing their fast friendship. Various scholars delight in defining this affinity. Margaret Bruzelius's version interprets Saladin as feminising and exoticising Kenneth so he can finally emerge as a mature character (15). Caroline McCracker-Flesher sees Kurd educating Scot to embrace his Otherness in the eyes of the English and thus make *The Talisman* stand out "as a resistant, Scottish tale" (205). James Watt takes a broader view and implies such kinship as indicative of "cultural contact and exchange" (94). One can also shift focus from knight to sultan and contend that such a relationship highlights Saladin's wisdom and egalitarianism.

JUSTICE OF SALADIN

The sultan's sense of equality knows no creed or class distinction. Hakim Adonbec saves Kenneth despite their difference in beliefs, emphasising the point that those who "worship sincerely in the faith of Issa Ben Mariam" (Scott, *Talisman* 31) are entitled to Muslim protection, even if it is on territory encroached by Crusaders. When Kenneth disdains to fly to the Muslim camp because of fears of being forcibly converted, Adonbec reassures him "Saladin makes no converts to the law of the Prophet, save those on whom its precepts shall work conviction" (Scott, *Talisman* 146). Indeed the Hakim, later on in the guise of Sheerkohf as well, offers employment and pelf to the disenfranchised Scottish knight. By refusing such terms, stating mutual incompatibility of Christians and Muslims, Kenneth reveals his ingrained paranoia and bigotry further enhancing Saladin's rationality. Kenneth magnifies his repugnance of equality by requesting Sheerkohf to grant him the apparel of a slave, implying Crusaders have no role in captivity other than servitude. Sheerkohf casts aside such notions of inferiority by defining the Scot as a "noble enemy who met and well-nigh mastered my sword" and "cannot become my slave like him who has crouched beneath it" (Scott, *Talisman* 223). While Richard and Lord de Vaux periodically belittle Kenneth as a Scot and an adventurer of no discernable pedigree, indeed selling him off to slavery, Saladin acknowledges the knight as a human.

Through Hakim Adonbec's wisdom, Scott pays an indirect tribute to Granada's medieval intellectual splendour, which sprouted such physicians as Avicenna. Scott's characterisation of a Moorish hakim seemingly concurs with the historical Saladin's court physician who was also Spanish and none other than Moses Maimonides, famed Jewish philosopher. This coincidence further establishes the sultan's transcendence in wisdom and tolerance as one historian imagines "the philosopher and Saladin exchanging views on the limitations of human knowledge and evil considered as a consequence of free will" (Newby 78).

Scott briefly touches on the concept of "dewan" or the right of an individual to appeal directly to his sovereign in court. Towards the end of the novel, Nectabanus, the dwarf, while still horrified by his witnessing of Conrade's murder, rushes into Saladin's presence. Instead of reviling such behaviour, Saladin sagely remarks, "if thou hast actual wrong to complain of . . . fool or wise, thou art entitled to the ear of a King" (Scott, *Talisman* 283). Indeed while others view Nectabanus as an object of derision and amusement Saladin empathises with his condition in so much as the dwarf confesses, "Nor am I further fool . . . than to make my folly help out my wits to earn my bread, poor, helpless wretch" (Scott, *Talisman* 283)! Amongst all the Christian rulers present in camp, Nectabanus, who fled from Saladin in Jerusalem, appeals to the Sultan's judgement. In doing so, his character develops from being perceived as a bungling fool to one who is sane enough to appreciate Saladin's justice and his humanity. Scott certainly does not embellish this concept of "dewan" as the historical Saladin did indeed permit anyone with a grievance to approach him in court (ed-Din 15).

ORIENTALISING THE DESERT

The Talisman's depiction of geography, while complicated, does come under some criticism. Scott paints a soulful picture of the desert and renders Arabs as romantic wasteland dwelling figures while forgetting they are not as such. In his book, *The Fall of the British Empire*, Colin Cross contends that such nomadic centric views often generated erroneous images:

Specialists called "Arabists" devoted their lives to trying to understand them (Arabs) but rarely succeeded - it required more than a sheep's eye, a Bedouin headdress or, even, a homosexual relationship (T. E. Lawrence) to get properly to terms with them. . . . When "Arabists" returned home from their desert travels they could be sure of attracting audiences for magic lantern lectures. . . Fascinated by what they thought of as the "true Arabs" of the desert, the British took insufficient account of the urbanised middle-class Arabs. (117)

This Bedouin aspect, while not explicitly referred to in most writings about the Middle East, stays nonetheless implicitly present in several forms of literature. Such a perspective indeed falls under Said's notion of preconceived literary themes (3).

Scott definitely subscribes to a romantic Bedouin view by not assigning Saladin to any city. One finds the sultan wandering around in disguise, alone or with caravans. When he shrugs off his disguise, he resides in a sea of tents, chief among them "the black camel-skin tent of a chief of Kurdistan" (Scott, *Talisman* 278). Frequent use of "Saracen" may further this stereotype. The name was first coined around 400 CE when bands of desert Bedouin harassed Rome's Arabian frontiers. Crusaders applied such a term (along with Moor and Turk) to denote Islam's adherents (Saracen). But Muslims never used it amongst themselves. The word signified a desert dweller even though Islam has always been an urbanised religion (Newby 12). While the term "Saracen" may have come about from ignorance, frequent usage has removed most derogatory connotations. The British Army, for example, has named certain versions of armoured vehicles "Saladin", "Saracen" (one model is on display in the compounds of the Army of York) and "Sultan". In all fairness, Scott reserves this term for exclusive use amongst the crusaders thus preserving the historical context as well as showing his contextual knowledge. He slips up just once when Adonbec exhorts Kenneth "to fly to the Saracen host" (Scott, *Talisman* 149) though El Hakim seems to be parroting the knight's words.

Scott, however, does not create a Palestinian wasteland as a mere idyllic setting for his tale. Themes of justice, nobility and austerity, personified in the person of Saladin, find expression in the desert as well. The introductory chapter in *The Talisman* deals with Kenneth riding past once great Sodom and the Dead Sea. Sodom, for its sins, was devastated then buried under salt water and the region purged of wickedness. Thus divine justice prevailed and the site serves as a reminder to curb excesses of character while also demonstrating its continued purification through bitumen and sulphur. After such a demonstration of heavenly might, a verdant oasis serves to hearten travellers. The presence of such abundance after aridity does not provoke gluttony but moderation and an appreciation of the simple necessities of life. While in the company of Sheerkohf, Kenneth clearly professes his admiration of the spring "which bestows its liquid treasures where they are not only delightful, but nearly indispensable" (Scott, *Talisman* 32). This barren land serves as a sanctuary where the sins of man have been cleansed and pilgrims contemplate life through their experiences of such an unsullied sight of sterility juxtaposed to one of fertility.

The desert then acts as a trope for Saladin's virtues. The resemblance between the two culminates towards the end of *The Talisman*. Saladin makes his grand entrance surrounded by his *mamluk* bodyguards. One cannot distinguish the sultan from his entourage. Dressed in unpretentious white clothes he seems "the plainest dressed man in his own guard" (Scott, *Talisman* 262) his garb matching the stark desert of which he is master. Yet close observation reveals him adorned with three gems which, though exquisite, do not seem gaudy and incorporate well on his person. His apparel, indeed his character, resonates with the Palestinian wastelands including the oasis aptly named "The Diamond of the Desert" situated in its midst. Scott does not exaggerate this opulence by granting Saladin palatial establishments or myriads of sycophants and thus may be excused for resorting to such a typical setting.

SCOTT'S PORTRAYAL OF THE CRUSADERS

What of the crusaders? Scott's contemporaries, Kenelm Digby, Robert Southey and Vicomte de Chateaubriand included, painted crusaders in glorious, bloodthirsty terms as if "all Europe was united in a band of brothers to worship the Saviour of mankind" (qtd. in Watt 107). Said indeed cites Chateaubriand's justification for conquest as typical of European imperialism:

The Crusades were not only about the deliverance of the Holy Sepulchre, but more about knowing which would win on earth, a cult that was civilization's enemy, systematically favourable to ignorance, to despotism, to slavery, or of a cult that had caused to reawaken in modern people the genius of sage antiquity, and had abolished base servitude. (qtd. in 172)

Scott firmly establishes Saladin as a civilised and cultured gentleman, learned and equitably disposed to Muslim and crusader alike. One then should remark on how his crusaders fare in *The Talisman*.

Themes of justice and nobility are frequently bandied in the Crusading expedition as well. Despite general guidelines i.e. chivalry, dealing with regulation of such notions, crusaders are free to interpret rules as they see fit. Conrade of Montserrat and Brother Giles Amaury feel justified in undertaking Machiavellian measures to safeguard their privileges. Edith rebukes Saladin and Kenneth for their aspirations to honour, deeming one a "heathen" and another "a worthless renegade to religion and chivalry" (Scott, *Talisman* 245). Nevertheless, Richard of England, as an archetypical crusader, best expresses crusading virtues:

As a prince, he appeared too little familiar with his own dignity; and being often at a loss how to assert his authority when the occasion demanded it, he frequently thought himself obliged to recover, by acts and expressions of ill-timed violence, the ground which might have been easily and gracefully maintained by a little more presence of mind in the beginning of the controversy. (Scott, *Talisman* 114)

Ironically, Scott's rendering of Duke Leopold seems to fit Richard as well. All the typical vices of monarchs seem to flourish in Richard while he seems to exhibit little of their merits. He appears particularly concerned in maintaining his social status as indicated by his treatment of lowly Scottish knight Kenneth. Coeur de Lion veritably shakes with anger and nearly dispatches Kenneth when he learns of the Scot's continued encounters with Edith. Yet Richard has no qualms about marrying her off to Saladin, who is a fellow monarch after all. Hence England's king remains supremely conscious of his blue blood and treats transgressions on his family honour as capital offences.

Chivalric code of conduct and justice distort under Richard's whimsical interpretations. Kenneth's desertion of England's standard to attend to his lady was not a knightly act but dereliction of duty. When Richard sentences Kenneth to death, he is thwarted by wife, cousin and hermit who call on compassion, reason and religion successively in vain attempts to stay his hand. Yet Adonbec knows how to deal with such obstinacy. He appeals eventually not to Richard's sense of virtue but his vice. When Richard contends he must execute laws to which he was "sworn as a crowned king" Adonbec mocks him by stating he seeks not justice but "execution of thine own will" (Scott, *Talisman* 171). As Richard proves intractable, Adonbec proves even harsher by threatening him with infamy:

Through every court of Europe and Asia - to Moslem and Nazarene - to knight and lady - wherever harp is heard and sword worn - wherever honour is loved and infamy detested - to every quarter of the world - will I denounce thee, Melech Ric, as thankless and ungenerous; and even the lands - if there be any such - that never heard of thy renown shall yet be acquainted with thy shame!(Scott, *Talisman* 172)

Afterwards, when Richard tries to make peace with Edith, stating that Kenneth has been reprieved, the lady interprets such an act as unbecoming any sense of equity:

Plantagenet . . . should have either pardoned an offence, or punished it. It misbecomes him to assign free men, Christians, and brave knights, to the fetters of the infidels. It becomes him not to compromise and barter, or to grant life under the forfeiture of liberty. To have doomed the unfortunate to death might have been severity, but had a show of justice; to condemn him to slavery and exile was barefaced tyranny. (Scott, *Talisman* 196)

Richard's tacit approval of slavery confounds Chateaubriand's notion of any emancipating tendencies within the crusading expedition. Not only does this enterprise deny freedom of worship to non-Christian people but its nominal leader sells off free born knights. The Archbishop of Tyre legitimises such traffic stating they "make slaves of heathen captives" but stops short of treating the bondage of Christians (Scott, *Talisman* 89). Yet not only does Richard treat Kenneth as disposable property, he accepts a present of a Nubian Christian slave. He is not an exception for "many of the princes of the Crusade had introduced black slaves into their household, in imitation of the barbarous splendour of the Saracens" while Conrade of Montserrat even jokingly values Saladin's worth at less than "forty pence" (Scott, *Talisman* 197). Thus Chateaubriand's statement of the Crusades as a grand liberating army seems to be laid bare.

The lack of unity seems to be a pivotal factor for the failure of the Third Crusade. Inasmuch the crusaders resemble the stereotypical Arabs Said points out in his quotation of Sania Hamady's *Temperament and Character of the Arabs*:

The Arabs so far have demonstrated an incapacity for disciplined and abiding unity. They experience collective outbursts of enthusiasm but do not pursue patiently collective endeavours which are usually embraced half-heartedly. They show lack of coordination and harmony in organization and function, nor have they revealed an ability for cooperation. Any collective action for common benefit or mutual profit is alien to them. (qtd. in Said 309)

Said seems to have confused crusaders with Arabs as this view seems to exactly describe the campaign. The Christian lords chafe under Richard's highhanded treatment of them. After he recovers, they cheer his impassioned speech for a renewal of the Crusade. Yet they embrace such a reaffirmation half-heartedly as they soon start searching for an excuse to desist from the enterprise. The Crusade then gets bogged down and disbanded proving that the crusaders are altogether incapable of working for their common good.

The multitude of dissenting voices in the crusading enterprise emphasise the curish behaviour of the peers. Every lord, other than Richard, wishes to be rid of this tiresome adventure. Some even engage in treacherous acts such as Conrade and the Templar. Their perfidy even makes them apostatise, albeit jokingly. Conrade swears on "Mahound and Termagaunt, for Christian oaths are out of fashion," (Scott, *Talisman* 190) while Giles Amaury invokes the Islamic name of God while relating a tale. This episode also reflects on the intellectual baseness of the crusaders, which Scott does a magnificent job of illustrating. Medieval Christian scholars termed Muslims pagans who worshipped both the Prophet, whose name was corrupted to Mahound, and Apollo nicknamed Termagaunt (Said 61). Scott displays the depth of his perception and historicity, by not lumping polytheism with Islam but attributing it to the ignorant crusaders. He slips up just once when Adonbec deems the Muslim princes of Spain as "Mohammedan" (implying that Muslims worship the Prophet of Islam) though this may have been a simple oversight on Scott's part. Even Theodoric of Engaddi, respected by the Muslims for his religiousness, curses Mahound and Termagaunt. All this is made more ironic for the crusading camp does have an idolater in their midst, namely the Knight of the Temple whom the plenipotentiaries tolerate even though they strongly suspect him of being a "worse pagan" (Scott, *Talisman* 72) than Saladin.

Thus the crusading aristocracy characterise themselves as a privileged class given to excesses, entitled to hereditary assets and therefore suited to pass arbitrary judgement on those less fortunate or of a different religious persuasion, while often corrupting their own principles for land, largesse or ephemeral visions of honour. Saladin's nobility stems from virtue, knowledge and the dispensation of justice tempered with mercy. In short while Richard et al were born in the purple, Saladin asserts his royalty by his deeds. Scott, who might have based his character of Haider Ali, in *The Surgeon's Daughter*, on the

noble Kurd, neglects to mention both despots were adventurers and progenitors of dynasties. As such, they do not have the luxury of hereditary possessions. Their effectuation of Muslim customs, deemed cruel or exotic by Scott's contemporaries, and their eschewing of Machiavellian practices eventually enhance their glory while Western practices in the novels come across as capricious, biased or illogical even when steeped in traditions such as chivalry and feudalism.

Similarly, through *The Talisman* one cannot relate explicit or "disguised imperialism" (Irwin 143) with crusading. If the inherent intent of conquest lies in the conquerors imposing their civilisation and moral values on their subjects, Scott presents the crusaders as having little or no virtue. Those who have a smattering of merit must be still educated by Saladin. Kipling states that colonisers must attend to their "half devil and half child" (273) dominions; Richard, Kenneth et al with their immature behaviour and "Hyde" like countenances (Bruzelius 10) seem more like rough and roughish yokels whom Saladin cares for like a dutiful monarch. The whole affair appears as a glorified raid, "an undertaking wholly irrational" where "sound reasoning was the quality of all others least estimated" (Scott, *Talisman* 126). Inasmuch the crusaders resemble their pillaging ancestors (Franks, Goths, Vikings) instead of the flower of medieval chivalry.

ORIENTALISING, STEREOTYPING OR EXEMPLIFYING SCOTT'S SALADIN?

Unfortunately, by making Saladin the voice of Islam through his several guises, Scott implies all Muslims to be as virtuous as the noble sultan. The character of Abdallah el Hadgi slightly nullifies this position. Claiming descent from the bloodlines of the Prophet, and having made the Greater Pilgrimage to Mecca thrice, this supposedly pious Muslim nevertheless delights in wine. However in Saladin's camp, he doffs his frivolous nature and behaves most prudently. Should one assume then that Saladin is an exception among his brethren, more Christian than Muslim or an archetype of an Orthodox Muslim? Scott indeed grants him "deep policy and prudence of a European sovereign" hinting that Eastern rulers normally display "cruelty and violence" (Scott, *Talisman* 6). Should one read this statement at face value or as a form of sarcasm on the part of the author? Perhaps Scott introduces El Hadgi to state that like the Crusader camp, the Muslim sphere of influence also contains a wide spectrum of humanity (such as holy hypocrites) though vices abound in a disproportionate manner in the Crusading expedition.

While Scott may be guilty of likening Saladin's virtues to those of an enlightened Western monarch, he firmly places the Sultan in the context of Islam. Several chroniclers often have attempted to furnish the noble Kurd with a Christian background or made him participate secretly in Christian rites (Newby 13). In fiction, H. Rider Haggard, of *King Solomon's Mines* fame, even gave Saladin a half British niece, in *The Brethren*, who exhorts the Sultan to display Christian charity (7). Regardless, Scott decisively makes Saladin a most orthodox Muslim. Towards the climax of the novel, Saladin engages in a long soliloquy where he not only affirms his faith in Islam as a "faithful follower of our Prophet" (Scott, *Talisman* 282) but also rebukes himself for not firmly quashing any hopes others had in his conversion.

CONCLUSION

Notwithstanding fictional constructs, Scott impressively conveys a swashbuckling picture of Saladin consistent with accounts of the historical Sultan. Indeed, Scott's depiction of Saladin has influenced contemporary views of the sultan that are prevalent even today (Riley-Smith 67). While abrogating the myth of Western Crusading, *The Talisman* stands as a testament to one individual and the author's understanding of that individual's heritage; a man admired by Christian and Muslim alike for his virtues, who bankrupted himself by looking after his fellow humans, at whose death the public willingly donated money for his funeral since his coffers were empty and whose wooden coffin now lies in a marble mausoleum donated by Kaiser Wilhelm II.

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