

"Washington Irving's Andalusia and the American Imagination"

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This brief essay will introduce Washington Irving (1783-1859) and Andalusia, a region in southern Spain with a culturally rich Islamic heritage, to both teachers and students. In the process we will see how Irving's fascination with Andalusia created some of the first representations of Islamic culture to Americans in the nineteenth century.

Washington Irving was one of the first major American writers to achieve international stature. Though he is known for his many famous stories and tales, including "Rip Van Winkle" and the "Legend of Sleepy Hollow" (The Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon, 1820), Irving was also one of the first Americans to travel and marvel at the splendor of one of Spain's most culturally rich and ethnically diverse areas, Andalusia. He visited Andalusia in 1829 and traveled throughout the region with Prince Dolgorouki, a Russian minister to the Court of Persia. For a time, the two were even in residence at the famed Alhambra palace.

Andalusia is composed of eight provinces, stretching from the south-east to the south-west of Spain. Andalusia represents a true crossroads of cultures whose rich history can be traced back to its Islamic past. The Muslim rulers of Andalusia, mostly Berbers and Arabs who came from North Africa, crossed the Strait of Gibraltar and occupied the Iberian Peninsula in 710. After their arrival in Andalusia they conquered most of the Peninsula in the span of a mere four years and eventually established one of the world's most sophisticated civilizations.

The speed with which the Muslims conquered and civilized Spain is surprising. This was due, in part, to the monotheistic nature of both Islam and Christianity: since pre-Islamic Spain was predominately Christian, the Moors did not have to battle idolatry

in order to make monotheism prevail. Once established, Islamic culture thrived in the Peninsula for over 700 years.

Irving was fascinated by the remnants of this rich civilization and published a collection of writings about his stay in Andalusia entitled, The Alhambra (1832), named after a palace of the same name that was built in the XIII century by the Moors. His writings interspersed his own musings as he traveled the region with short historical narratives that he researched in the libraries of Andalusia and folktales. These shifting genres are not marked differently, bleeding his observations, scholarly findings, and imaginative tales into one literary work. The past and the present, fact and fiction came to be blended together.

Describing the subjects of his writings on Andalusia, Irving said he wrote of its “half Spanish half Oriental character; its mixture of the heroic, the poetic and the grotesque; to revive the traces of grace and beauty fast fading from its walls; to records the regal and chivalrous traditions concerning those who once trod its courts and the whimsical and superstitious legends of the motley race now burrowing among its ruins.”

Irving's fascination with Islamic Spain brought us one of the first popular accounts of Islam to the United States. In the tale, "Legend of the Arabian Astrologer" from The Alhambra, for example, we see the depiction of "a Moorish king named Aben Habuz" who was spellbound by a young and beautiful Christian princess whose "dark eyes were like sparks of fire on the old yet combustible Aben Habuz" (15). The young Christian princess' beauty and wiles ultimately destroy Aben Habuz's kingdom as foretold by the king's astrologer, leaving only the Alhambra as a symbol of Islamic greatness; a greatness subjugated by Christianity. The forces of Christianity and Islam face off in Irving's tale and allegorically reinstate both Christian supremacy and Islamic submission. In this tale history blends with fiction and the author's own imagination to reinforce Western religious tradition and cultural values. This process of reinforcing the supremacy of Western values has been called "Orientalism": the process by which the West justifies itself to itself by conflating history with fiction and ideology (Said).

Untangling Ideology from history provides an important way to analyze how writers in general and Irving in particular -- as the first great American writer

according to some literary critics (Weatherspoon Boden and Rubin-Dorsky) -- fashion the "Orient" to an American audience desirous of news, tales and peoples from abroad. This is important because it allows us to determine whose values, religion(s) and cultures are over-determined and whether this is desirable in a multicultural America perched on the edge of the new millennium.

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