

The Jews, Royall Tyler, and America's Divided Mind

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Anyone who reads literature soon becomes inured to unfavorable comments about the Jewish people. Chaucer includes a libelous story about the Jews in his *Canterbury Tales*. Shakespeare was deliberately antagonistic in his portrayal of Shylock. Even in more recent times, Jews have often been portrayed with a kind of benign contempt. Without apologizing for the unfairness of these portrayals, we should realize that writers, like everyone else, are deeply influenced by the prevailing opinions of their times.

In regard to the Jews, the American mind is divided between toleration and prejudice. The attitude toward the Jewish people of Royall Tyler (1757-1826) is an early example of America's divided mind. Tyler's novel, *The Algerine Captive* (1797), depicts the first Jewish characters in American fiction. Tyler, a major figure in the history of American literature, graduated from Harvard in 1776 and then served briefly in the Revolutionary War. He also assisted General Benjamin Lincoln in suppressing Shays' Rebellion (1786-1787). While on military business in New York City, Tyler wrote *The Contrast*, the first American comic drama to be professionally produced—in 1787—in this country. Later, he moved to Vermont, where he practiced law, served as assistant judge on the Vermont Supreme Court, and was chief justice of that court from 1807 to 1813. Tyler continued his literary activities throughout his life. He wrote several other plays, including three unproduced dramas based on Old Testament stories—*The Origin of the Feast of Purim*, *Joseph and His*

Brethren, and *The Judgement of Solomon*. Tyler also contributed poetry and short essays to a variety of journals. His fictional series of letters from a young American in England was published as *The Yankey in London* (1809).

BRETHREN OF THE HUMAN RACE

Next to *The Contrast*, Tyler's major literary achievement is his novel *The Algerine Captive*. This was the twentieth novel to be published by an American. It was the first American novel to be republished in England and the first American novel to include Jewish characters—in this case, two.¹ As *The Algerine Captive* shows, Tyler's attitude toward the Jews reflects the prejudices of his times, although Tyler does have some moments of insight into the situation of the people he is discussing. As for the two Jewish characters in this illustration of America's divided mind, one is depicted in a generally tolerant manner. The other is depicted as mercenary and treacherous.

The Algerine Captive is a first-person narrative which, as its subtitle indicates, describes "The Life and Adventures of Doctor Updike Underhill." Book I of the novel tells about Underhill's ancestry, his upbringing, and his education. Also included is a wry account of Underhill's experiences as a teacher and the story of his entry into medicine, with some particularly trenchant satire upon the healing profession. Finally, Underhill sails as a ship's doctor and describes the slave ship on which he served. Underhill's attitudes towards slavery and the slave trade reflect Royall Tyler's essential decency and honor.

Underhill is appalled at the cruelty of the slave trade. He abhors his own connection with such a patently immoral enterprise. He prays:

. . . to a merciful God . . . who hath made of one flesh and one blood all nations of the earth, that the miseries, the insults, and cruel woundings I afterwards received when a slave myself may expiate for the inhu-

¹ See Louis Harap, "Fracture of a Stereotype: Charles Brockden Brown's Achsa Fielding," for an assessment of the first female Jewish character in American fiction. Achsa Fielding, in Brown's *Arthur Mervyn* (1799, 1800), is also "the first Jewish character in American literature to be located in the United States." Harap's article appeared in *American Jewish Archives*, XXIV (1972), 187-92.

manity I was necessitated to exercise toward these, MY BRETHREN OF THE HUMAN RACE. (p. 110, Tyler's capitalization)²

The reference to Underhill's slavery is explained in Book II of *The Algerine Captive*. Underhill is captured by Algerian pirates and becomes a slave in Algeria. Like Underhill, it is worth noting, Royall Tyler's uncle, Thomas Tyler, had been captured in 1703 by the infamous Barbary Coast pirates. Thomas Tyler was never heard from again.

Along with the comments on the slave trade, Underhill's humane attitude is further illustrated by a long section in Book II describing the life of Mohammed and the nation of Islam. At the conclusion of these chapters, toleration is stressed in Underhill's comments about Christians and Moslems: "If each would follow the obvious dictates of his own scripture, he would cease to hate, abominate, and destroy the other." (p. 187)

THIS CUNNING RACE

If only the same generous instincts had influenced Tyler when he came to write about the Jews! Book II, Chapter 28, of *The Algerine Captive* is entitled "Of the Jews." The first part of this chapter is a basically unfavorable depiction which accepts the stereotyped beliefs prevalent in Tyler's day. Underhill describes how he occasionally wandered into the Jewish section of Algiers. He refers to the wealth gathered by the Jews, "This cunning race." (p. 197) The Jews, Underhill asserts, have compensated for the loss of their homeland through the accumulation of riches and "now solace themselves with a Messiah whose glory is enshrined in their coffers." (p. 197)

As the chapter continues, its tone subtly changes. Underhill explains that the Jews, forbidden to hold public office, have become the most trustworthy subjects of the ruler of Algiers. He explains that, because the Jews have been "prevented in most countries from holding landed property, and in almost all from filling offices of power and profit," they have become proper instruments to do the "mean drudgery of despotic courts." (p.

² All quotations from *The Algerine Captive* are based on the version edited by Don L. Cook (New Haven, Connecticut: College and University Press, 1970).

197) Here the commentary rises slightly above the prejudices of the time to an understanding of the circumstances of history.

Underhill then goes on to tell how the Jewish population of Algiers had once been threatened with extinction. The cause was a renewal of the old blood libel that began in medieval England with William of Norwich and Hugh of Lincoln.³ The narrator refers to this libel as a "horrid tale, which should have been despised for its absurdity and inhumanity. . . ." (p. 198) Few commentators in the late eighteenth century are so direct and explicit in rejecting these terrible allegations. Underhill subsequently mentions the "usurious exactions of particular Jews." (p. 198) The word "particular" suggests that usury is not general to the Jews, but is the practice of a limited number. Again, the reference shows a surprising awareness of the Jews as victims of social and economic restrictions.

The narrator of *The Algerine Captive* displays a somewhat kindly attitude in describing one individual Jew, Adonah Ben Benjamin, with whom Underhill becomes friendly. Underhill is accosted by Adonah, "an old man in mean attire," who seeks the doctor's help for his ailing son. (p. 201) Underhill accompanies the old man to Adonah's wretched-looking house. Inside, however, he sees a home of great comfort. His host dresses himself in the finest linen while the doctor reclines on a silken couch. The two men drink wine together. Underhill cures the son, whose name is never given. The father is grateful and advises Underhill to save money with which to purchase his freedom. Adonah volunteers to serve the doctor as his banker. The Jew Adonah is portrayed as decent and trustworthy, but his son, whom Underhill has saved from death, is not portrayed as trustworthy. After his father dies, this "artful Jew" cheats Underhill out of the money which Adonah had been holding for the physician. (p. 205) Underhill grows despondent. His hope of achieving freedom has been frustrated by the very man he had cured.

Underhill accompanies a party travelling to Jerusalem, Medina, and Mecca. Among the travellers is Adonah's son. On

³ "The Prioress's Tale" in Chaucer's late fourteenth-century *Canterbury Tales*, although unaccountably set in Asia, appears to be based on the alleged events concerning Hugh of Lincoln.

the return trip, Adonah's son is once again stricken, and Underhill once again saves the young man. This time, the son promises to repay the doctor's money and to assist him in escaping from slavery. The young man now advances Underhill funds with which to escape—and arranges for the American's departure. At night, Adonah's son accompanies Underhill to a dark beach, takes a fond farewell of him, and the doctor is rowed aboard a ship. There Underhill finds that Adonah's son has deceived him. The doctor has been sold into further slavery: "I had been played a villainous trick, and had exchanged a tolerable slavery for one perhaps more insupportable. . . ." (p. 221). What hurts a Jewish reader most of all about the deceit practiced by Adonah's son is the title which Tyler gives this chapter about perfidy: "The Gratitude of a Jew." (Book II, Chapter 36, pp. 220-22)

Eventually, Underhill is rescued from the ship and goes home to America. The novel ends with a Federalist statement: "BY UNITING WE STAND, BY DIVIDING WE FALL." (p. 224, Tyler's capitalization) Thus concludes a novel distinguished by its interest and humor, its strong abolitionist sentiment, and its acceptance of the brotherhood of all men. At times, it is clear, Royall Tyler had shown himself able to rise above the prejudices of his environment. Tyler as narrator expressed ideas about religious toleration (within the context of Christianity, of course) in the early chapters of *The Algerine Captive*. While discussing his ancestor, Captain John Underhill, Updike Underhill deplored the early colonists' lack of freedom to worship as they wished.

A TOUCH OF TOLERANCE

In 1794, one of Tyler's columns for the *Farmer's Weekly Museum* (which became the most widely read journal in the young nation) expressed a sentiment in favor of religious toleration. "As the world grows enlightened, religious toleration takes place. . . . It was long supposed that uniformity was necessary in religion, for the support of it.—This is now found not to be the case."⁴ As assistant judge of the Vermont Supreme Court, Tyler

⁴ "The Saunterer, No. IX," *Farmer's Weekly Museum* (August 1, 1794); reprinted in Marius B. Peladeau, ed., *The Prose of Royall Tyler* (Montpelier and Rutland, Vermont: Vermont Historical Society and The Charles E. Tuttle Company, 1972), p. 295.

rendered a major decision in 1802 which asserted that slaves could not be held as property in Vermont. In 1817, he published a work entitled *The Touchstone, or a Humble, Modest Inquiry into the Nature of Religious Intolerance*. While the last known copy of this work has, unfortunately, disappeared, Tyler's breadth of vision, as well as his humorous acceptance of humanity despite its foibles, would seem to indicate that the judge would have argued strenuously against religious intolerance.

In *The Algerine Captive*, however, Tyler does not often rise above prevailing stereotypes about the Jewish people. Blacks and Moslems alike can read *The Algerine Captive* with a sense of satisfaction. They are treated respectfully. Only the Jewish reader emerges with bruises. True, Tyler writes a surprisingly strong rejection of the blood libel, that "horrid tale which should have been despised for its absurdity and inhumanity. . . ." Tyler also subtly implies that not *all* Jews are money lenders, but his essential description of the Jews is that of a people devoted to the accumulation of wealth. Tyler's depiction of Adonah's son as mercenary and treacherous suggests that this young man's behavior, his "gratitude," is all that can be expected of the entire group to which he belongs.

Royall Tyler was a fine and decent person. He was well educated, a clever writer, incisive in his views about human nature, a patriot, an outstanding jurist, and an all-around good person. Nevertheless, the Jewish reader of *The Algerine Captive* must gird himself for unfair treatment. Tyler was a man affected by the ideas which surrounded him. Although we can take solace in his rejection of the blood libel, at the same time Tyler accepted, repeated, and perpetuated typical prejudices. Tyler, in his own way, was as much a captive as was his fictional prisoner, Updike Underhill.

Perhaps we can learn from the attitudes of this early American writer something that will help us to understand the attitudes of America today. In regard to the Jews, Royall Tyler is an early example of America's divided mind—a touch of tolerance and a touch of prejudice.