



Scene from *The Magic Flute* by Ingmar Bergman. Monostatos has allied himself to the Queen of the Night and her ladies: she has promised to give him Pamina if he reveals a secret way into the temple. The Queen plans to annihilate Sarastro and the other priests through “fire and sword” and her followers swear an oath to her. The Queen and her forces of darkness are, however, completely defeated by the temple order, which is compared in the finale to the rays of the sun.

Monostatos, the Moor

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Monostatos, captain of Sarastro's guard and clandestine admirer of Pamina, is a character of frustrated villainy.¹ Duplicitous, cowardly, and often dull-witted, he is bound to a menial social position and blinded by a self-imposed ignorance that prevents him from realizing his ambitions. As an opportunist, Monostatos is entirely unsuccessful—his schemes and machinations never quite pan out. Yet of all the nationalities and peoples he could represent, why is Monostatos cast as a Moor? Why not a Greek or a Jew or a Dane? Is it simply his Moorish background that makes of him a rather odious and pathetic creature, or is there something else in his demeanor or actions or decisions that more correctly locates the source of his contemptuous and strangely tragic character? The answer to these questions is not overly complicated. Monostatos is certainly liable to all the difficulties a Moor would encounter in the household of non-Moors, but it is he who ultimately proves his own undoing by not following Wisdom's path, even when it stretches before his very eyes. Though Monostatos is not the cleverest of men, lack of native intelligence is not his stumbling block; it is his willful indifference to the Right, to the Good, his refusal to see what is to be seen. An entirely self-generated apathy toward the integrity of the person accounts for his foolish and unfortunate course.

As a Moor of complete European invention, Monostatos must be understood within the context of the late-eighteenth-century European imagination. A thousand years before this, however, *Moor* became the term used by the Christian population of Spain to refer to the Muslim invaders who crossed the Strait of Gibraltar from the northernmost tip of Morocco in A.D. 711. By 750, these people of Berber and Arab stock, and

recent converts to Islam from the North African Roman province of Mauritania (hence, *Moor*), laid claim to much of the Iberian peninsula. Though Moorish Spain was never centrally governed or politically stable, Arab immigrants—people highly skilled in hydraulic technology, agriculture, and medicine and learned in all the arts and sciences that flourished in the Arab world, as well as gifted artisans from North Africa—gathered and thrived in the major centers of Moorish Spain in the succeeding centuries. For nearly seven hundred years, they participated in a blossoming civilization and a sophisticated, cosmopolitan life to be found nowhere else in medieval Europe.

The European recapture of Toledo in 1085 marked the beginning of the decline of Moorish rule in Spain, though it was not until the close of the final and gruesomely unsuccessful Crusade in 1204 that the attention of Christian Europe turned more fully toward removing the infidels at their own doorstep. With the fall of Granada in 1492, Islamic dominance in Spain was finally subdued, and the magnificent life that bloomed for centuries under the Moors disappeared.

Monostatos is heir to the great Moorish civilization, though by the late eighteenth century the popular imagination had all but erased the memory of the beauty and grandeur of Moorish life. Many of the Moors had fled Europe, returning to North Africa and other Arab lands, though it was not uncommon to find Moors employed as servants or slaves in the households of prominent European families, especially in Portugal, Spain, and Italy. But within the late-eighteenth-century European imagination, Moors were mostly a fallen and degenerate people, a servile people, a dark people. Were they considered exotic? Perhaps, but certainly not to the extent they were in the mid- to late-nineteenth-century, when Arabic material culture (such as carpets, pillows, carvings, weapons, and platters) became the vogue in European home decor and the choice in costumes for fancy dress parties.

The world in which Mozart and Schikaneder lived viewed Moors as distinctly inferior,² not only because of their religion but more so because of ignoble character traits attributed to Moorish culture—traits that were, of course, part and parcel of the ongoing creation of social boundaries and group identities employed by Europeans in defining themselves against that savage “other.”³ (It must be noted that such a practice is hardly unique to Europeans, but a truly pan-human phenomenon.) And, not surprisingly, these Moorish attributes are well reflected in the literature of the time, especially in what is sometimes termed “that cheaper sort of fiction.” Though not particularly high in literary quality, many of these widely read works offer a compelling portrayal of Moors cast within the web of the popular European imagination of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

Moors in Popular Contemporaneous Novels

Charlotte Dacre's *Zofloya; or, The Moor* (1806), a dark and lurid tale of the nether side of human nature, features a Moorish servant, Zofloya, who works in a wealthy Venetian household. He is described as remarkably handsome, tall, and strong of body, and there is an intense sensuality about him that threatens to overwhelm the mistress he serves. The Moor is an exceptional servant: not only does he do his tasks well, but he even anticipates the specific kinds of assistance of which his mistress stands in need. As the storyline of infidelity and homicide progresses, Zofloya's mistress, Victoria, comes under his charm, then his power, and, finally, his complete control. He enables her to fulfill her murderous intentions by suggesting possibilities, creating opportunities in which foul deeds could be done, and eventually demanding the execution of her designs. Though Victoria's deep sensual desires for Zofloya are never fulfilled, as her life becomes a ruin, and in the moment before her own suicide (abetted by the Moor), she finally realizes the Moor's true identity:

Victoria raised her eyes—horrible was the sight which met them!—no traces of the beautiful Zofloya remained,—but in his place, stripped, as in her dream, of his gaudy habiliments, stood a figure, fierce, gigantic, and hideous to behold!—Terror and despair seized the soul of Victoria; she shrieked, and would have fallen from the dizzying height, had not his hand . . . seized her with a grasp of iron by the neck!

“Dost thou mark, vain fool!” he cried in a terrific voice, which drowned the thundering echo of the waters—“Behold me as I am—no longer that which I appeared to be, but the sworn enemy of all created nature, by men called—SATAN!—’Tis I that lay in wait for frail humanity. . . . I seduce them to my toils. . . . Yes, I it was, that under semblance of Moorish slave . . . —appeared to thee in thy dreams. . . . I found thee, oh! of most exquisite willingness, and yielding readily to all my temptations!”⁴

The hands of the Moor tighten their grasp around her throat and hurl her headlong to her death in the boiling sea. As she falls toward the water, Zofloya, as Moor and Satan, sends his “demoniac laugh” echoing in her ears.⁵

The central Moorish character in Anna Eliza Bray's *The Talba; or, Moor of Portugal* (1831) is a person entirely different in habits and native dispositions from Zofloya. The Talba is a man of servitude, working in a wealthy Portuguese household, but he is also a man of great personal integrity and respected by his master and mistress. In due course, through a series of events, the Talba uncovers a plot to kill his mistress, the future queen. His discovery, however, comes too late to foil the deed, but upon seeing his mistress in her room, still as the night and covered in blood, the Moor

decides he must confront the murderer—the king himself. Bray describes the Talba's strength as follows: "But what tongue shall speak the emotions of the king, when the Talba, the noble-minded Talba, rushed into his presence, and with a generosity of feeling that made the *dark brow* of the Moor shine like an angel of light."⁶ The king is unable to resist the power of the Talba's rebuke, but when Don Pedro, son of the king, raises his hand in grief and anger to slay his father, the Talba disarms him and reproaches the prince:

Wretched man! would you murder your father? Does this become a warrior! a prince! Leave guilt to Allah: he will fully requite it; but dip not thy steel in a father's blood. . . . Sinful in thy own nature, dare not to avenge thyself on him, who, though he has sinned heavily against thee, is still thy father, the author of thy days, thy judge, thy king.⁷

Of all the characters through the entire novel, save perhaps the Talba's mistress, none possesses the nobility and integrity of character of the low-born Moorish infidel.

Robert Montgomery Bird's *Abdalla the Moor* (1839) is the story of a Moor forced to journey from Spain to the New World in the company of soldiers joining Cortes's conquest of Aztec Mexico. Although the disparaging remarks about Moors found throughout the early pages of the text hold true for most of the Moorish servants and slaves (they are scheming and untrustworthy), Abdalla is different. He is of a noble and powerful family and is a Moorish Christian. Many of the Spanish conquistadors are depicted as simple philistines, lusting after wealth and the shedding of "infidel" blood. As a victim of Spanish brutality—his wife was killed by the knight he now serves—Abdalla seeks to aid the Mexicans in their efforts to thwart Cortes, that thereby they might not have to suffer as Abdalla has suffered. Despite his deep-seated hatred of Spanish conquest, Abdalla risks his life to save his master.

In the end, Abdalla forgives his master of the murder but utters his final statement on Christian Spain.

"The standard of Christ," said the Moor, with emphasis, "waves not over the heads of the Spaniards, but the banner of a fiend, bloody, unjust, and accursed. . . . God, whom they traduce and belie in all their actions, has given them over to the punishment of the hypocrites and blasphemers, to sufferings miserable and unparalleled."⁸

As he lies dying, Abdalla brings a crucifix to his lips, denouncing Muhammad and professing his Christianity. "I am of the faith of Christ, and Mahomet I defy. My people shall be followers of the Cross, but they shall sweep away the false Spaniard, as the wind brushes away the leaves."⁹

In his death is the tacit acknowledgment that Abdalla was a far better Christian than the Spaniards he served.

The Stereotypical Moor

In each of these novels, the leading Moorish character is anomalous: not one of them falls squarely within the realm of popular expectations for a Moor. Zofloya is too wicked, the Talba too saintly, and Abdalla, in the end, too charitable, too forgiving, too high-minded, too Christian. These characters aside, however, the Moors in these novels are depicted as being “naturally” indolent, and because of inherent moral weaknesses, Moors are undependable, often incapable of performing skilled tasks, and never to be trusted, since what lurks in the hearts of Moors is treachery, a desire to bare the sword, as did their ancestors in the past, and topple their Christian superiors. They are seen as a people of dark, silent, brooding eyes, swarthy complexions, and facial expressions that mask their true intentions. Yet despite a native tendency toward indolence and shiftlessness, Moors are not unintelligent, for they continually hatch schemes and plots to best their masters, to undo their masters’ designs (an obvious contradiction, as the “indolent” are constantly at work to bring down their masters). Thus their swarthy skin and dark hair and eyes are but extensions of their dark and brooding souls. A Moor must never be trusted because even if he serves well, it is always under compulsion, always under duress. A Moor serves well because of a social, political, and economic condition beyond his ability to change. In popular portrayals, never is there genuine love, compassion, or charity, but always contempt, unwilling acceptance, and steeping disloyalty.

Reflected in the popular European imagination of the time is a race of people who were thought to differ not only in their dark, foreboding appearance, but because they live supposedly without the moral virtues of Christianity—charity, honesty, humility, loyalty, trustworthiness, and purity of thought. And since nothing more could be expected of such people, why assert that it is otherwise? It is in this dreary context that Monostatos lives—and well he seems to fill the bill.

Monostatos’s Faults

Even bearing in mind the playful nature of the opera, Monostatos is nothing if not a “typical Moor.” His actions are consistent most of all in their duplicity. He lies repeatedly, especially to his master, Sarastro, about the well-being of Pamina in his ongoing attempts to subvert Sarastro’s plans for her, and to anyone else who poses a threat to his designs. Indeed,

his precise intentions toward Pamina are never straightforward and honest, but full of subterfuge, for he appears to possess no genuine love or concern for her welfare but a pedestrian sensual desire for her because of her virtuous beauty. As for loyalty and trust, Monostatos, captain of Sarastro's guard, exercises the guards for his own purposes, not his master's. And with what effortlessness does his allegiance shift from Sarastro to the wicked Queen of Night when she lures him with the promise of Pamina (2.30). With an unquestioning stupidity he assists the Queen in creating a plot to capture Pamina and wrest her from Sarastro, never wondering whether the Queen is trustworthy. In nearly all of his actions, Monostatos displays cowardice—be it his flight from Papageno (1.12), his confrontations with Sarastro (1.19; 2.11), or in the scene of his final demise (2.30). In every wit, Monostatos is a Moor!

Can the deficient character of Monostatos be squarely attributed to being a Moor? Certainly when he is spoken of as “the Moor” it is done so in a context of disdain—a simple fact not wasted on Monostatos. That his public standing is clearly understood by him finds its most poignant expression in a quiet moment when he discovers Pamina alone in the oriental garden, sleeping peacefully in the shade. Intending to steal a kiss from her, he utters his sincere conviction that love is just as fervent beneath a swarthy skin as it is in the heart of a white man (2.7). Social prejudice and his Moorish background do not fully account for his actions; neither can Monostatos accurately be viewed as a Marxian revolutionary, fighting against the hegemonic forces of oppression and evil to raise his people to a new level of equality, to usher in a new era of social and economic justice. There is nothing heroic or praiseworthy about Monostatos. And since he is clearly depicted as a moral agent, as a person who makes his own decisions and could just as easily have elected to follow a different path, he is not a social-cultural dupe.

In his major failings, though, Monostatos is not alone: he is hardly the only liar or the only coward or the only duplicitous person with dark intentions. Papageno, the piping buffoon, is also a liar and a coward, but eventually he learns his lesson. Without question, the Queen of Night is the most deceptive, lying, vicious, and selfish character of all—truly a creature of demonic proportion.¹⁰ But like Monostatos, she never learns her lesson. Both she and Monostatos are villainous characters, but the *natures* of their respective villainies are entirely different.

While the Queen of Night is a black and malignant villainess, Monostatos proves to be rather more of a buffoon than a strictly malicious villain. The principal difference between the two is as simple as the difference between knowledge and ignorance, cunning and stupidity. The Queen of

Night is knowledgeable, she understands fully the ways of the world, she knows of the enlightenment available in Sarastro's temple and of his higher ways, but she deliberately rejects the knowledge of Wisdom and Light and betakes herself to scheming against Sarastro, using Pamina as a pawn. She cares nothing for her daughter; instead, the maiden is little more than a tool to be set against Sarastro, whose illumination would fully expose the Queen's dark and miserable life to her daughter. Thus, the Queen's intellectual base of operation is knowledge, and the source of her villainy lies in possessing a good apprehension of Wisdom and Light but willfully rebelling against it—as acquiescence would ruin her worldly power and standing.

Monostatos languishes under a different species of villainy, for he is truly ignorant of a higher way. His motivations and deeds are not diabolical but merely selfish, wanting those things not socially (or morally) allotted him. Though he is keenly aware of the temple and the illustrious persons who inhabit it—those men who have demonstrated the desire and strength of character requisite for enlightenment and who have had it bestowed upon them—he takes no personal interest in it. Of this illumination itself and what, in particular, it represents, he is blissfully ignorant—the matter simply holds no appeal for him. But it is precisely this indifference to illumination of a higher order that constitutes Monostatos's stumbling block. His efforts are so concentrated on what could be called, based on Aristotle's *Ethics*, goods of second intent (the tangible “good” things of the world) that he is blinded to the greater value of goods of first intent (those moral truths and ideas that are key to the life of the soul). In his pursuit of Pamina, he foolishly blames his swarthy complexion for his failures. Through the character of Tamino, the truth of the matter is more clearly established. Tamino may be a handsome



Costume for Monostatos, 1819. Original is at the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin—Preußischer Kulturbesitz Kunstbibliothek.

lad, but Sarastro will never allow him to marry Pamina based on the superficiality of physical appearance; instead, Tamino must demonstrate his worthiness by following the path to illumination with true sincerity and there receive the Wisdom and Understanding that alone will qualify him to take Pamina to wife. Tamino finally sees that this must be so and walks that path. In stark contrast, Monostatos has not the least comprehension of the ways of love and virtue and wisdom, rather, he blames his troubles on his swarthy skin and social position—anything but his own moral character and the agency of his innermost self (2.13).

Indeed, Monostatos is the very embodiment of the commonest of common men, the unthinking and ignoble working stiff who pursues goods of second intent (which Aristotle tells us are not in themselves unworthy—they are necessary, and without them the goods of first intent would be difficult to obtain), all the while believing them to be goods of first intent. Monostatos has made himself incapable of seeing what is of lasting and consequential value. Thus, in the absence of true wisdom and knowledge, he is undeserving of Pamina.

Monostatos, the Moor, is a bungling deceiver, an ineffective liar and double-dealer, a simpleton willing to switch allegiances in pursuit of his desires; yet for all these faults there is something sadly tragic about his character, about his inability to see the writing on the wall, about the wastage of his life. Monostatos chooses to pursue goods of second intent when the goods of first intent—the knowledge, the grand understandings of the purpose and order of life offered to worthy persons by Sarastro—lay before his very eyes, entirely within his grasp (for there is no indication that Monostatos would be denied access to them had his desires been worthy). To a soul blind to the goods of first intent, such knowledge is of little worth, especially when Monostatos compares it to the seduction of a beautiful maiden and potential wealth and power. Herein lies the real source of his villainy: it is not European conceptions of his race or his culture that constitute the fountain of his villainy (these may form a barrier of sorts, though not absolutely as illustrated by the Talba and Abdalla); rather, his own eyes are so strongly fixed on goods of second intent that Monostatos is quite unable to even *recognize* the value of the life of the soul.

In this regard, the character of Monostatos stands as a warning against the consequences of giving oneself wholly to the pursuit of goods of second intent, to the things of the world, to having and getting, and the pillars of modern life: faddism, consumerism, and consumption. Yet perhaps more important than this message, the life of Monostatos is a demonstration that allowing one's moral life to decline because of social prejudice leads to the death of mind and soul—a kind of double warning that no human

circumstance or condition can justify moral and ethical malfeasance, and that once the low path is taken, one inevitably loses one's remaining stock of moral sensibility.

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1. For an ethical interpretation of Sarastro, see Michael Evenden's "Sarastro's Repentance: One Dramaturg's Advice on *The Magic Flute*," in this issue of *BYU Studies*, 162–69.

2. Certainly Viennese audiences would not fail to see in Moors a parallel to the Turks whom they had fought at the Siege of Vienna (1529) and eventually vanquished at the Battle of Vienna (1683).

3. Members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, too, have been "orientalized" and cast as the "savage other" in a long line of popular fiction that dates back to the Victorian era. See Terryl L. Givens, *The Viper on the Hearth: Mormons, Myths, and the Construction of Heresy* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 130–37. Compare *BYU Studies* 40, no. 4 (2001) which features the theme "LDS Scholars Engage Islamic Thought."

4. Charlotte Dacre, *Zofloya; or, The Moor* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997[1806]), 266–67.

5. Dacre, *Zofloya*, 267.

6. Anna Eliza Bray, *Talba, or Moor of Portugal* (New York: J. and J. Harper, 1831), 186.

7. Bray, *Talba*, 189.

8. Robert Montgomery Bird, *Abdalla the Moor and the Spanish Knight: A Romance of Mexico* (London: J. Cunningham, 1839), 112.

9. Bird, *Abdalla the Moor*, 153.

10. For a reading against the grain of traditional interpretations of the Queen of the Night, see Victoria Webb's "The Queen of the Night: A Mother Betrayed," in this issue of *BYU Studies*, 180–88.