

6-1-2006

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### Recommended Citation

Bourget, Carine (2006) "The Rewriting of History in Amin Maalouf's *The Crusades Through Arab Eyes*," *Studies in 20th & 21st Century Literature*: Vol. 30: Iss. 2, Article 3. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4148/2334-4415.1633>

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# The Rewriting of History in Amin Maalouf's *The Crusades Through Arab Eyes*

## **Abstract**

This paper analyzes the narrative strategies that shape Maalouf's rewriting of the history of the Crusades, examines why considerations of the problems inherent to the historiographical act are relegated to the background, and how Maalouf links his text to politics contemporary to its writing. I argue that while Maalouf brilliantly deconstructs the Western image of the Crusades as a heroic time by documenting the barbarity of the Crusaders without falling into the pitfall of simply inverting the terms of the dichotomy, the agenda driving his rewriting of this historical period leads him to partially repeat what his book is supposed to undo, witness the erasure of women in a book whose goal is to unearth a neglected perspective. Moreover, I contend that while most of the book painstakingly details the power play between and among the Crusaders and the Arabs that debunks the ideology of clash of religions and civilizations, the very brief epilogue, which draws parallels between the past and contemporary Middle Eastern politics but omits to mention key events of the nineteenth and twentieth century, tends to fall back in the very essentialism that the main narrative opposes.

## The Rewriting of History in Amin Maalouf's *The Crusades Through Arab Eyes*

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Amin Maalouf, a Lebanese writer who won the prestigious Goncourt prize in 1993 for his novel *Le Rocher de Tanios*, has received little attention from scholars of Francophone literature in the United States. As a Christian Arab exiled in France since 1976, Maalouf occupies a pivot point between his country of exile and his region of origin. In his "examination of identity" in the essay *Identités meurtrières*, Maalouf underlines the paradox of being a Christian with Arabic, the sacred language of Islam, as his native tongue (23-4).<sup>1</sup> These "multiple belongings" (*Identités* 40) that characterize "border people" (*Identités* 46) afford him a singular vantage point from which to take a fresh look at the historical period of the Crusades from 1096 to 1291.

The title of *The Crusades Through Arab Eyes* problematizes the notion of objective historiography, and makes explicit Maalouf's intent: to adopt the perspective of those who underwent the Crusades, which in Western eyes are still seen as a great epic. Indeed, the term "crusade" in today's English, is used, as is *croisade* in French, to refer not only to the historical military expeditions to the Near East, but also to denote any well-intentioned though possibly overzealous campaign for a worthy cause, and as such often carries a positive connotation. Maalouf's objective in his book is not simply to set the historical record straight: his rewriting of history is also intended as a commentary on contemporary politics. In this paper, I explore three questions: how narrative strategies shape Maalouf's counter-history; why considerations of the problems inherent to

the (re)writing of history are relegated to the background; and what motivates the rewriting of history in *The Crusades Through Arab Eyes*, given that the historiographical act takes place within a specific context and can be politicized.

As Linda Hutcheon puts it, there is a distinction to be made between events of the past and the historical facts drawn from them: "Facts are events to which we have given meaning. Different historical perspectives therefore derive different facts from the same events" (*Politics* 57). Because Maalouf writes in French, one can assume that his target audience is a Western reader to whom he wants to show a different version of the facts conventionally derived from the events that took place in the Middle East during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.

Again, the title of Maalouf's book places it in opposition to others written on the same topic. Texts published by medievalists prior to the 1980s were mostly titled "The Crusades" or "History of the Crusades," and purported to present a global, objective picture of these historical events.<sup>2</sup> In contrast, Maalouf specifies in his title that he will examine the period from a restricted point of view. Maalouf's title thus challenges the supposed unicity of history that previous historical works on the Crusades seemed to take for granted. And while some European historians by mid-twentieth century had come to a more critical appraisal of the Crusades, there remained a gap between scholarly and popular views (Constable 2). Maalouf does not explicitly situate himself vis-à-vis his subject, hiding, instead, behind the first person plural "we" of academic narrative. However, his purpose is made clear in the Foreword, and while Maalouf did not have at the time of publication of *The Crusades Through Arab Eyes* the renown he now enjoys, his name as author is easily identified as Arabic.<sup>3</sup> The prologue and epilogue both emphasize his intent to set forth a little-known perspective and the influence it has had on interpreting contemporary events.

Michel de Certeau and Hayden White, among others, have emphasized how the telling of the past is linked to contemporary ideological, political, or cultural factors (Hutcheon, *Poetics* 120-22). In his seminal text *The Writing of History*, de Certeau argues that any return to history reflects preoccupations contemporary to its writing:

Nor could anyone believe, as much as historiography might tend to have us believe, that a 'beginning' situated in a former time might explain the present: each historian situates elsewhere the inaugural rupture, at the point where his or her investigations stop. . . . In fact, historians begin from present determinations. Current events are their real beginning. (18/11)

According to de Certeau, the outcome or end of the story (the present) determines how the beginning (the past) of the story will be told (and which beginning as well). In Maalouf's text, there is no one-way movement between past and present: they are interconnected. The chronological move from past to present is made clear by the geographical changes illustrated by the two maps that frame the narrative: the first one appears right after the cover (and before the title page) and shows the Middle East with the boundaries of the Frankish states circa 1128; the second one, at the very end of the book, shows the borders of the Middle East after 1948. However, in the foreword Maalouf states that he chose the period of the Crusades because "those two centuries of turmoil . . . shaped the West and the Arab world alike, and . . . affect relations between them even today" (9, Rothschild, Foreword). Thus, the author starts from contemporary relations between the Arabs and the West as a contextual background for his research on the history of the Crusades, while in the epilogue he refers to the past he narrated as the root of contemporary tensions. The present context triggers a quest for the origin of a contemporary problem on which the past will shed light. The beginning and the end are inextricably interwoven, since the past will explain the present, which itself determines how and which part of the past is told.

Like its author, *The Crusades Through Arab Eyes* is a hybrid: neither a scholarly historical book, nor a novel, nor a historical novel, although it has elements of all three. While reviewers called it a historical essay (as Maalouf did himself during an interview; see Sassine 25), the author in the foreword presents it as the "true novel" of the Crusades between quotation marks. This may be an allusion to the Goncourt brothers' preface to *Germinie Lacerteux* (1865), in which they state: "the public loves fictitious novels! This is a true novel" (5, Chestershire 5). What Maalouf's text has in common with the first

naturalist novel, which featured a woman from the working class as the main character, is that both works are based on real events and purport to tell stories from a class or ethnic background previously denied the spotlight. These scare quotes also underline the oxymoron created by juxtaposing the terms novel and true, simultaneously revealing and effacing the distinction between them, and reminding us of de Certeau's definition of historiography, that "Historiography (that is, "history" and "writing") bears within its own name the paradox—almost an oxymoron—of a relation established between two antinomic terms, between the real and discourse" (5, Conley xxvii). In addition to stressing the fact that historiography is itself grounded in history, scholars following in the wake of White have emphasized the commonality of features shared by historical discourse and literature. Every historical narrative is a linguistic construct that uses rhetorical devices to create a discourse of explanation and persuasion out of events or data. Narrative techniques and rhetorical figures shape the historical account and require analysis.

Maalouf's stated desire to write the "true novel" of the Crusades shows that this work is not a new history book and acknowledges the apparent contradiction between the title (the Crusades according to one perspective), and the statement that this is an accurate account. His book is about how the Arabs who lived through the Crusades narrated and transmitted that experience to future generations, since the Arab historians quoted by Maalouf are contemporary to some of the events they relate. In a preamble to the section "Notes and Sources", Maalouf offers the only commentary on his approach: "It was obviously essential to consult them [historical narratives] in weaving the Arab testimony, which is inevitably fragmentary, into a continuous account covering the two centuries of the Frankish invasions" (285, Rothschild 268). The two classic (European) works that he cites are Grousset's and Runciman's. Clearly, Maalouf relies on Western historians to piece together the Arab testimonies scattered among annals and chronicles. As Franz Rosenthal explains, Arab historians wrote annalistic historiography, which simply records bare facts under a succession of individual years, with the exception of Usamah Ibn Munqidh, who wrote a memoir of his personal experiences. However, the Western scholars Maalouf cites also relied on the Arab chroniclers.

Likewise, Maalouf draws from all sources available to him, medieval Arab as well as contemporary Western historians. This underscores the fact that the same sources can yield different historical accounts, and that records are often insufficient or contradictory. As Chaim Perelman puts it, "We can know the past only from the traces of it that remain" (qtd. in Gossman 293). The overtly controlling narrator in Maalouf's text acknowledges the limitations of his project on several occasions. For example, there are two versions of the events that will push Saladin to lift the siege at Massiaf, a fortress in Syria. Maalouf adds before narrating the second version: "Exactly what happened in the land of the Assassins that August of 1176 will probably always remain a mystery" (199, Rothschild 182). Although most of the story proceeds in the narrative present or "historical present," as it is often referred to in French and English, which gives the impression of immediacy and objectivity because narration seems to occur simultaneously with the events and thus preclude any interference from temporal distance), it alternates with passages that either anticipate or allude to future events or to the future consequences of what was just narrated. For example, the last chapter of the third part ends with these words: "The epic of the powerful state founded by Zangi seems over. In fact, it has only just begun" (155). This is an example of what Genette calls "repetitive prolepsis" which plays a role of announcement and creates a short-term expectation in the mind of the reader, since it is terminated in the chapter that follows it (*Figures III*). Maalouf ends the second part by quoting an Arab historian who uses the same device:

Discussing this critical period of Arab history a century later, Ibn al-Athir would write with good reason:

With the death of Tughtigin, the last man capable of confronting the Franj was gone. The latter then seemed in a position to occupy all of Syria. But God in his infinite kindness took pity on the Muslims. (122, Rothschild 105)

This prolepsis within a prolepsis underlines the fact that Maalouf's narrative strategy inscribes itself in the tradition of Muslim historiography. In *The Crusades Through Arab Eyes*, most chapters end with some sort of foretelling of events that maintains the reader's

interest; Maalouf presents us with a retrospective view of the past and interprets each event accordingly. These prolepsis remind us that the rewriting of history is grounded in the here and now of the historian, and that this applies to the medieval sources as well, which are already interpreted accounts of the events they relate. As Christopher Tyerman notes, “most medieval written primary sources were exercises in interpreting reality, not describing it” (99).

The anecdote about the crusaders’ cannibalism strikingly illustrates how context affects historiography. de Certeau has argued that any writing of History takes place in History: “There exists a historicity of history, implying the movement which links an interpretive practice to a social praxis” (29, Conley 21). The cannibalism that occurred at Maara is narrated in several Frankish chronicles of the time, where the army’s chiefs ascribed it to hunger, as well as in European history books of the nineteenth century. However, the incident is usually occulted in the twentieth century.<sup>4</sup> In the “Notes and Sources,” Maalouf alludes to the civilizing mission project to explain this phenomenon (287), but does not dwell on the issue. By relegating his comment to a note outside the main body of the text, Maalouf avoids the pitfall pointed out by Arif Dirlik in an essay about Eurocentrism and History: “Critics of Eurocentrism inspired by cultural studies spend more time on what Euro-American writers and theorists have had to say about the rest of the world than they do speaking of the societies at hand, which further displaces the latter from the historian’s attention” (250).

Maalouf’s subversion of the dichotomy he himself established in the title by choosing to quote Frankish over Arab sources to tell this episode does pose a problem however, for contrary to what the book sets out to do, it is the Franks we hear. Maalouf quotes the chronicler Raoul de Caen: “*In Ma’arra our troops boiled pagan adults in cooking-pots; they impaled children on spits and devoured them grilled*” (55, Rothschild 39). Maalouf also quotes another Frankish chronicler, Albert d’Aix, as well as an excerpt from an official letter sent by the chiefs of the army to the Pope (39-40). This is not a case in which the only remnants of the past are to be found in the Franks’ chronicles (either because of extermination or destruction of documents). Although historians point out that only a few Arab accounts of the first Crusades have been preserved, one can find a



brief mention of the Franks' cannibalism in an Arab source (Kemal-eddin) translated by Michaud in his *Bibliothèque des Croisades*: "The Franks, racked by dearth, were reduced to feeding themselves from cadavers and animals they could get" (vol. 4: 7). Maalouf knew this source, since Kemal-eddine's text is listed in the "Notes and Sources." One can see two possibilities to explain Maalouf's choice: the quotations attributed to the Frankish chronicles contain more gruesome details, which accentuate the barbarism of the perpetrators, thus contributing to Maalouf's reversal of civilized and barbarian. Second, reliance on the Franks' own writings obviates disbelief by the French reader, as if acknowledgment by the very people who committed it should attest to the veracity of such a horrendous act.

It is evident from his statement about the cannibalism episode that Maalouf, whose passion for history permeates most of his novels, is well aware of the issues involved in any writing of history, in particular the subjectivity of the historian, who weaves various sources into a coherent narrative, and the literariness of historiography. However, he uses none of the metafictional devices that disorient the reader at the level of the narrative, and which are often found in postcolonial and postmodern writings to dramatize the issue of how one can know and write the past. Maalouf does use narrative strategies that underscore the literariness of the process of writing history, but his text is not paralyzed by constant self-reflexivity, nor does it pretend to have the scientific objectivity of positivist historiography by presenting itself as a novel. Maalouf has a story to tell, and it takes priority over epistemological questions about historical discourse.

In order to tell the victims' point of view in French, the language of the crusaders' descendants, various lexical changes are required. Maalouf borrows the word *Franj*, an Arabic word still used nowadays in dialectal Arabic to designate the French, and Westerners by extension. The introduction of this Arabic word into the French language creates a feeling of strangeness for the Western reader concerning his own identity, thus forcing him to see himself (or herself) with the Other's eyes.<sup>5</sup> In commenting on the Arab chronicler Ibn al-Athir by summing up a lengthy quotation with "These Franj are crazy, the Mosul historian seems to be saying" (89, Rothschild 73), Maalouf alludes to the popular *Astérix* series, where

the phrase “these Romans are crazy” is frequently put in the mouths of resisting Gauls (who have been construed as the ancestors of the French), referring to the Roman assailants. In addition to grounding Maalouf’s analyses in twentieth-century popular culture, this appropriation ironically underlines the position of the Franks as invaders.

Perhaps more radically, Maalouf repeatedly presents the point of view of the victims excluded from official French history by reversing the referents of the dichotomy “civilized” / “uncivilized.” In a chapter entitled “An Emir Among Barbarians” (Rothschild), Maalouf turns generally accepted ideas upside down by calling the crusaders non-civilized beings compared to the Arabs. He does justice to the advance of the Arab civilization over the Frankish one in areas ranging from hygiene to law, and quotes at length the Damascene chronicler Usamah Ibn Munqidh, who is shocked by the Franks’ backwardness. Maalouf quotes a long excerpt from Ibn Munqidh in which two Frankish doctors are shown to be more effective at killing their patients than curing them (147-48), but makes no mention of two other cases of successful Frankish treatment that Ibn Munqidh reports right after the passage quoted by Maalouf (Ibn Munqidh 162-63). While both sides recognized the superior medical skills of Arab physicians (Hallam 86), Maalouf’s selection presents a more uniform view of the Franks than the source he draws from. Derrida argued that a phase of reversal is necessary to deconstruct an imposed hierarchy:

I strongly insist on the necessity of the phase of reversal, which people have perhaps too swiftly attempted to discredit. . . . To neglect this phase of reversal is to forget that the structure of the opposition is one of conflict and subordination and thus to pass too swiftly, without gaining any purchase against the former opposition, to a *neutralization* which *in practice* leaves things in their former state. (qtd. in Culler 165)

It is a necessary step to show the Franks as barbarians to deconstruct the Western image of the Crusades as a heroic, glamorous time before these two centuries can be evaluated in a balanced manner. Thus the sensitivity and humanity of some Muslims leaders are emphasized in contrast to the crusaders’ savagery. Maalouf relates

how in similar situations the Arab leaders were magnanimous while the crusaders were cruel. For instance, he contrasts the brutality of Renaud de Châtillon, who tortures the patriarch of Antioch and mutilates the Greek priests of Cyprus (156), to the humanitarian response of Saladin, who, moved to pity by the cries of a Frankish woman whose daughter was kidnapped, orders that the latter be found and restored to her mother. On another occasion, Saladin's generosity and magnanimity when he liberates the Frankish poor without asking for a ransom, and frees King Guy in exchange for a promise (on which the latter will renege) contrasts with the lies of the Franks, who resort to false religious propaganda to obtain reinforcements, and to Richard the Lion Hearted's cruelty when he massacres prisoners while in a similar situation Saladin had had Franks released (210-11). Other exactions by the Franks include the pillage of Constantinople during which they killed priests and monks and looted churches, and the sack of Jerusalem's holy places in 1099, during which the Eastern Christians were evicted, the Jews burned in the synagogue, and the Muslims massacred. To this day, Arabs contrast the brutal taking of Jerusalem by the Franks in 1099 to the peaceful seizure of Jerusalem by Omar Ibn al-Khattab in 638 (51). However, Maalouf does not portray only magnanimous Muslim leaders facing cruel crusaders. Although Frederic II is considered an exception, Maalouf lingers on this emperor, king of Germany and Sicily, who speaks Arabic, admires Muslim civilization, respects the Islamic religion, despises the barbarous West, and who will carry on an intellectual correspondence with the Emir of Cairo (226-30).

*The Crusades Through Arab Eyes* ends with a word whose import is immense in Arab culture: "there can be no doubt that the schism between these two worlds dates from the Crusades, deeply felt by the Arabs, even today, as an act of rape" (283, Rothschild 266). Rape has become a commonplace metaphor for conquest and colonization, and by using this trope Maalouf echoes the current trend in medieval historiography of viewing the Crusades as the first wave of European imperialism in the Middle East.<sup>6</sup> However, one can see another reason, grounded in Arab culture, for this choice of metaphor. Although in the Middle Ages women on both sides were considered the property of their male guardians, and sexual violence against them was an attack on men's honor, in the twentieth

eth-century Western world rape has become a woman's issue since, as Kathryn Gravdal suggests, women are no longer the property of men (144). This, however, is not the case in contemporary Middle Eastern culture, where crimes of honor continue to shed women's blood to wash away the shame brought about by their allegedly (un)willing illicit sexual conduct. Rape, a crime punishable by death in some Arab countries, dishonors the victim's whole family. But despite the similarity in the way rape was perceived in the Middle Ages by both parties, the Franks' behavior seemed more liberal towards their womenfolk compared to the Arabs, who were baffled by the fact that Frankish men let their wives interact with men, sometimes rather intimately. Maalouf quotes Ibn Munqidh's indignation upon observing that a Frank will let his wife converse alone with another man (148). Another incident narrated by Ibn Munqidh to corroborate his point (but not included by Maalouf) tells how a Frank had his wife's pubic hair shaved by a man (165-66). These incidents show that a similar concept of honor does not translate into comparable behavior for both parties. While the French no longer tie a man's honor to the sexual behavior of his female relatives, this principle exists to this day in the Middle East, and may explain the choice of the comparison between the Crusades and rape to describe the psychological impact of the invasions on Arabs.

Rape is mentioned several times in the narrative, usually as the price that women have to pay for belonging to the defeated (11, 29, 173). Once, it is alluded to in a letter by the caliph al-Adid to Nouredin asking for help:

In an effort to move the son of Zangi, the Fatimid sovereign enclosed some locks of hair with his missive. *These*, he explained, *are locks of hair from my wives. They beseech you to come and rescue them from the outrages of the Franj.* (185, Rothschild 169)

Women's voices are reduced to body parts, which are given voice by their husband who uses them as tokens to appeal for help. The word "outrage," which in a general context means a grave insult, takes on the meaning of rape in French when applied to women. It emphasizes the fact that rape is a crime that affects women specifically, and suggests that the Crusades were no exception to the fact that "In war time, rape has always been more than a rhetorical figure"

(Higgins, *New Novel* 108). The metaphor of rape relegates women to a silent, victim role, whose sufferings are significant only for the consequences they entail for their husbands' honor. And while the actual crime affects women first and foremost, the specific distresses that women endured are left out of the narrative.

Rape can be linked to the process of story telling. Lynn Higgins points out that "in fiction and life, rape is a special kind of crime in relation to narrative.... Murder is not a crime whose noncommission can be narrated. Rape, on the other hand, can be discursively transformed into another kind of story. This is exactly the sort of thing that happens when rape is rewritten retrospectively into "persuasion," "seduction," or even "romance" ("Screen/Memory" 307).<sup>7</sup> In a fascinating study, Kathryn Gravdal has shown "the cultural habit of conceptualizing male violence against women as a positive expression of love" in French medieval texts (20). Rape is also a common trope in Orientalist discourse. Edward Said points out that "the relation between the Middle East and the West is really defined as sexual ... The Middle East is resistant, as any virgin would be, but the male scholar wins the prize...." (*Orientalism* 309). With a similar comparison that underlines unequal power distribution, Maalouf stresses the discursive violence of narratives that have portrayed the Crusades as an epic with heroic characters carrying out a noble goal, and the influence they have had in shaping the popular Western imagination about that era. The violence has been two-fold: on a literal level, as in any war, and on the discursive level. In a case of rape, if "the question is not *who committed* the crime, but *whether a crime occurred at all* (Higgins, "Screen/Memory" 307), the issue at stake in Maalouf's work is how the Crusades have been written into history and passed on as a glorious era despite the ideological prejudices that engineered them and the crimes committed.<sup>8</sup>

The rape trope used by Maalouf only emphasizes the absence of Arab women's perspective on the Crusades, for *The Crusades Through Arab Eyes* is a tale told by men about men. Only two women are briefly mentioned by name in Maalouf's narrative; both seized power and belonged to the elite. The first is Alix, daughter of the King of Jerusalem, who betrayed her father after her husband's death by trying to forge an alliance with Zangi (ruler of Aleppo and Mosul) in order to stay in power in Antioch. The other is Chajarat-



ad-dorr, whom Maalouf portrays as a passive pawn in the hands of the Mamelouks, but who nevertheless stands out in the history of Islam as the first woman to be a ruling queen (*Croisades* 240-1). In *Sultanes oubliées*, Fatima Mernissi gives us a completely different account of Chajarat-ad-dorr's reign, in which the latter appears as a clever decision-maker, well aware of the limitations imposed on her by her gender, yet determined to circumvent them (145-62).<sup>9</sup>

One could argue that Maalouf, by refraining from describing rapes and other crimes at length, does not indulge in the narrative acts of which Aram Veaser accuses New Historicists, whose historical accounts that detail atrocities are said to have obscene or pornographic intentions, and teach only obedience and despair (qtd. in Rosello 5). However, Maalouf also passed over the few Arab women whose participation and resistance during the Crusades have left traces in records. Although he can be credited with having brought to light the Arab male viewpoint on this period, he shows no particular concern about the women's.<sup>10</sup> While the absence of women's perspectives can be attributed to the lack of written testimony by them, some women's heroic deeds stood out enough to figure in Ibn Munqidh's memoirs, whom Maalouf quotes extensively on other issues. In his memoirs, Ibn Munqidh describes a couple of Muslim women warriors, another who kills her husband who had betrayed the Muslims to the Franks, and another who captured three Franks (153-59); he also gives an account of a woman who drowned after trying to escape from the Franks who took her captive (179). Maalouf ends up repeating in part what his own book is supposed to undo: by omitting what Arab women did and thought during the Crusades, he silences them out of History.

If we accept the view that a religious motivation was the engine of the Crusades (to take the Holy Land back from the "infidels"), one may wonder why Maalouf did not entitle his book "The Crusades as seen by the Muslims." Maalouf, himself a descendant of the Arab Christians who were doubly discriminated against during the Crusades, does not fit in the Manichean view of a Christian West against a Muslim Orient. The fact that ethnicity is foregrounded in the title challenges the view of the Crusades as a confrontation between two religions. On the one hand, Maalouf includes the Christians of the Orient on the side of the oppressed, since they were in fact twice

victimized on several occasions. The double discrimination against Arab Christians is evident in the battle of Antioch: expelled by the Muslim Arabs for fear that they would betray them to the Western Christians, they were not welcomed with open arms by the crusaders, who treated them as inferior subjects and at best suspected them of sympathizing with their Muslim compatriots (as occurred when the Oriental Christians sided with Saladin during the seizure of Jerusalem in 1187). Arab Christians in other instances, such as the Copts during the seizure of the town of Bilbeis, were massacred along with the Muslims (*Croisades* 168). However, Maalouf remains silent about instances in which Oriental Christians welcomed or helped the crusaders (see for instance Grousset 1934: 117, 151, 156).

Maalouf depicts a multi-ethnic society and highlights the dynamics of power that refute the vision of one homogeneous civilization fighting another. He describes alliances between Arabs and Franks, between Byzantines disappointed by the Franks and Arab emirs: emirs made deals with Franks against other emirs. Even the Frankish princess Alix, who never knew Europe and felt "Oriental," rebelled against her father by trying to forge an alliance with Zinki in 1130 (*Croisades* 131). The description of the alliances that are forged and broken during these two centuries shows the complexity of the political situation of the Arab world at the time, divided into numerous small kingdoms at war with each other.<sup>11</sup> This instability reveals personal interests of the leaders that could prevail over religious or ethnic affiliations. The first Arab historians of the Crusades reported the series of wars with the Franks as one among other events happening at the time; they used the ethnic term "Franks" to designate the invaders, thus casting the invasions neither in a religious, nor civilizational light. Indeed the term "crusader" will not appear until the mid-nineteenth century (Sivan 10). Tyerman shows that up to the end of the twelfth century there is no clear distinction between pilgrims and crusaders (20-21), nor a universally accepted term to describe crusading activity, and this was the case until modern times (49-55).

Although what came to be labeled Crusades was recorded as Frankish wars and invasions under the Arab chroniclers' quill, the latter clearly did frame the conflict as religious by identifying them-

selves as Muslims and calling on God. The epigraphs that introduce each of the six parts that compose the book, all quotes from Arab chroniclers or leaders fighting the Crusades, can be seen as an implicit comment on historiography. Maalouf's use of citations contrasts with Runciman's, one of his European sources, who starts all chapters of his three-volume *History of the Crusades* with quotes from the Bible chosen to establish a link between Biblical events taken out of context and medieval times.<sup>12</sup> In Maalouf's text, each epigraph summarizes the content of the part. For instance, the quote from Saladin, which contrasts the fierceness of the Franks with the passivity of the Muslims, frames the part that deals with the invasion (part I). These quotes fulfill most of the four functions attributed to epigraphs by Genette: commentary and justification of the title, commentary on the text itself (whose meaning it emphasizes), support of one's text thanks to the presence of a famous author's name, and a sign of culture and filiation, linking one's text to a specific intellectual and cultural tradition (*Paratexts* 156-60). These quotes are also striking in that the authors cited are well grounded in their religion, some calling upon God for the safety of their community; they see themselves as Muslims belonging to a homogeneous community of believers and not as Arabs. However, they contrast with the content of the various sections of the book in the sense that they create the false impression of a united, homogeneous Muslim world. Thus, while the quotes do inscribe Maalouf's narrative in the Arab cultural tradition and give it legitimacy, they highlight the discrepancy between the ideology they perpetuate (a united Muslim community threatened by Christians) with the actual facts (divided Arab leaders who fail to join forces against a common threat).

In *The Crusades Through Arab Eyes*, Maalouf demonstrates that civilizations are neither monolithic nor immutable by reminding his readers that Muslim culture was tolerant towards others well before the Western world was. Maalouf's text illustrates how civilizations have been in contact and have borrowed from each other well before the era of globalization, by emphasizing the Arabs' numerous (and often ignored) contributions to Western civilization. He dispels the simplistic view of the Crusades as a battle between Christendom and Islam, just as nowadays many intellectuals are attempting to refute the Manichean thesis of the clash of civilizations. In fact, one



can read *The Crusades Through Arab Eyes* as a book proleptically countering Samuel Huntington's influential *Clash of Civilizations*. Criticized by Said for having "journalism and popular demagoguery rather than scholarship or theory [as] his main sources" ("Clash" 571), Huntington's essay, which first appeared in *Foreign Affairs* in 1993, and subsequent book, claim that non-Western civilizations (Islamic and Confucianist in the lead) are the potential enemies of the post-Cold war era, when conflicts no longer divide along ideological lines, but are determined by culture.<sup>13</sup> Whereas Huntington's not so hidden agenda, according to Said, is to maintain American dominance over the world, or, according to Marc Crépon, to trigger a fear of Islam and China in the American reader (65-66), Maalouf's work intends to make one side understand the other better, and to promote a dialogue between cultures.

While most of *The Crusades Through Arab Eyes* is devoted to showing how the Arabs experienced these events, the temporal indeterminacy of the title leaves room for the perspective to broaden in the epilogue, which sets out to expose the Crusades through end-of-twentieth-century Arab eyes. Hutcheon points out that the forewords and afterwords that frame nonfictional novels underscore the "particular perspective that *transforms*" (*Politics* 82). The epilogue does not anchor the text in the narrow context of France (where Maalouf has been living) with its immigrant population and the frustrations that were to be expressed by the Arab minority in the 1983 "marche des Beurs," but in the larger international context of Middle Eastern politics.

Maalouf directs attention to the parallels that are commonly drawn in the Arab world between events of the twentieth century and the Crusades. This relationship between the barbarous Middle Ages and our so-called civilized present is commonplace in the Levant, in whose view events past and present resemble each other: thus Anwar Sadat is viewed as a traitor in the direct line of al-Kamel (who gave Jerusalem to Frederic II), and Israel as a new crusader state (265). Therefore, Maalouf's implicit goal is not only to remind the reader of what happened from the Arabs' point of view, but also why it is crucial to remember that distant past now: to emphasize that one should learn from the past because history has a dangerous tendency to repeat itself.

Crusading historiography continues to be influenced by the context in which it takes place. Crusading ideology continued in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (Constable 6). The Crusades were then discredited in the eighteenth century for their fanaticism (Tyerman 111), but with the renewal of interest in the Middle Ages that ensued in the nineteenth century, came the beginning of scholarly research about them (Siberry, "Images" 372). Contemporary historians have linked this scholarship to the colonization taking place at the time. For instance, Michaud's interest in the Crusades in the nineteenth century seems in part to have been stimulated by his study of Napoleon's expedition to Egypt (Siberry, *New Crusaders* 8). As Elizabeth Siberry shows, historians, artists, and aristocrats established a continuity between the French colonization of Algeria, which began in 1830, and the medieval expeditions (*New Crusaders*: 82, see also Tyerman 117). When war broke out between the Druze and Maronites in Lebanon in 1860, Napoleon III called for a crusade to help the Christians (Siberry, *New Crusaders* 83). The use of crusade terminology continued in the twentieth century, and was used during WWI when the Palestine campaign with the capture of Jerusalem in December 1917 by Allenby was described as a crusade (Siberry, *New Crusaders* 87). Contemporary historians acknowledge that interest in the Crusades nowadays is still influenced by political and ideological interests (Constable 2; Siberry, *New Crusaders* x; Armstrong 386); Karen Armstrong makes the case for the Crusades as a direct cause of today's conflict in the Middle East (xiii). Indeed, this renewed interest dates from the early 1950s and coincides with the creation of the state of Israel (Riley-Smith 5); there is even a debate among historians over whether or not the crusader states should be regarded as colonies (Constable 20), or, as some Israeli scholars see it, as the "first European colonial society" (Tyerman 123). E. Sivan notes that all Arab scholars see a parallelism between the Crusades and current events, whether it is framed as a religious contest between Islam and Christianity, a civilization conflict of East and West, or as a first phase of Western imperialism in the Arab world (11-19).

Maalouf's agenda leads him to make choices open to question regarding the historical events he chooses to discuss. For instance, he does not mention the crusades that were waged as the *Reconquis-*

ta of Spain, with the fall of Cordoba in 1236 and Seville in 1248.<sup>14</sup> Whereas Maalouf chose the period of the Europeans' incursions in the Levant, with the sack of Jerusalem as culminating point, Bernard Lewis (a prominent Orientalist historian) sees the last years of the seventeenth century (marked by the second siege of Vienna) as the determining moments of the relations between the Muslim world and Europe (304). Each side sees the time when it was threatened or invaded by the other as the determining point in future relations, forgetting when it was itself the attacker, and thereby putting the blame on the other by privileging certain events over others. Where the historian situates himself determines which time frame will be considered as the beginning. However, to give a full account of the relationship between the Europeans and the Arabs, one should go back to the initial point of conflict (the conquest of Spain in the eighth century and the advance of the Arabs up to the French town of Poitiers), and include all subsequent confrontations.

Maalouf's subordination of his project to a political agenda prevents him from treating at length historical figures who embody the crossing of civilizations and who will later become central to his work.<sup>15</sup> The fact that *The Crusades Through Arab Eyes*, his first published book, does not dwell on the implication of mixed unions during the Crusades, and the fact that "transculturation [was] common in medieval Mediterranean cultures" (Kinoshita 114)—a lot of which happened through concubine slaves—is striking in the light of his subsequent fiction, pervaded by a concern with the meeting of cultures in history, minorities, and border people. Even more puzzling is the fact that the non-Arab background of some key "Arab" leaders and heroes of the fight against the crusaders is presented in the epilogue as one of the factors in the decline of the Arab world, as a sign that the latter had lost control over its destiny.

Although in the end the crusaders will be chased from the Levant, Maalouf does not present the Arabs as victors. Moreover, one can wonder, along with Mireille Rosello, about the purpose of writing the victims' history. As she points out, "if the triumphalism of official history always at least partially serves the interests of the 'oppressors,' it does not necessarily follow that (historical) justice will be served by replacing the victor's story with that of the victim" (5-6). The historical distance allows Maalouf to see the Crusades as the

beginning of a long series of incursions of the West into the Middle East. In the epilogue, he draws up a brief assessment in which the Arabs are seen as victims, since the Crusades are the starting point for the rise of Western Europe while Arab civilization, which was the most advanced at the time, begins its decline.

Although the history of the Crusades serves as an allegory of the present, with Arab leaders still unable to unite against a new invasion, the danger of this epilogue is that it comforts the Western reader in his/her position of superiority. As Sharon Kinoshita points out, "the Middle Ages have long served as a repository of the abject and the exotic against which modernity is constructed" (111). So while the French reader will no doubt acknowledge the barbarism of her/his ancestors, the superiority of contemporary Western civilization will nevertheless be confirmed, as if the torch of progress had been passed from the Arabs' hands to the crusaders', as Maalouf himself insinuates (264). Although the view of history repeating itself is pessimistic, the idea that the crusaders will be expelled could provide an optimistic note. However, Maalouf quickly downplays the 1291 Arab victory over the Franks, thereby cutting short the hope that there might be another victory in sight. One of Maalouf's rhetorical questions poignantly underscores the parallels between then and now: "How can one distinguish the past from the present in the struggle between Damascus and Jerusalem for control of the Golan or the Bekaa?" (283). The creation of the state of Israel has had a tremendous impact on Lebanon's internal affairs, because of the Palestinian refugees and the PLO moving its headquarters to Beirut in 1970. The ensuing civil war that was still raging at the time Maalouf embarked on his project, as well as Israel's invasion of Lebanon, Maalouf's native country, the year prior to the publication of *The Crusades Through Arab Eyes*, constitute the backdrop to his revision of the Crusades.

While this grounding of the author's writing corresponds to what de Certeau has termed the "repoliticization" [which] will consist in 'historicizing' historiography" ("History" 215), the epilogue undermines the project of the book. Given the brevity of the five-page epilogue, some of its oversimplifications seem inevitable. The terms Arabs and Muslims are sometimes used interchangeably, although Arabs (among whom there are Christian and Jew-

ish minorities) comprise only about twenty percent of the Muslim population nowadays, and despite the diversity of Muslim countries (which extend from Morocco to Indonesia). Maalouf uses an image whose swift generalization about the Muslim world could use some nuances: "Assaulted from all quarters, the Muslim world turned in on itself. It became over-sensitive [to the cold] ..." (282, Rothschild 264). The sensitivity-to-cold-weather metaphor reduces political and imperial moves to a natural climatological phenomenon, against which Muslims could only adopt a defensive attitude. The detailed accounts in the book, that took great care to underscore the divergences and the power plays among various Muslim leaders during the times of the Crusades, contrast sharply with the broad generalizations presented in the epilogue, which sweep away the complexity that characterizes the Muslim world of the end of the twentieth century.

Maalouf brilliantly unsettled past constructions of the Crusades that informed popular perceptions of them in France without falling into the trap of simply inverting victims and villains, but his sketchy explanation of the popular view of the heritage of the Crusades in the Arab world presented in the epilogue does not do justice to the complexity of the events and politics of the twentieth century alone (admittedly, this would require another book).<sup>16</sup> Moreover, given that Maalouf states that the Arab world is still a prisoner in the same shackles that caused its fall (lack of democratic institutions, problems of succession), one can see it as subject to a fatality, and create a defeatist feeling, even though one of the factors mentioned is debatable.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, Maalouf perpetuates uncalled-for stereotypes: after quoting the Turkish man who tried to assassinate the Pope in 1981 because the latter was "supreme commander of the Crusades" (283, Rothschild 265), he comments: "it seems clear that the Arab East still sees the West as a natural enemy" (283, Rothschild 265-6). The adjective "natural" disregards the very real political events that have fostered resentment in the Middle East and essentializes the difference between East and West. This last sentence silences the plurality of voices and aspirations that exist in the Arab world, privileging anti-Western movements whose discourse is similar, as Crépon demonstrates, to Huntington's theory of the irreducibility of conflicts between different civilizations (54). While the first siege

of Vienna by the Ottoman armies (a Muslim empire, though led by the Turks) in 1529 is mentioned as a sign (albeit deceitful) of the victory of the Muslims, there is no mention of the nineteenth-century colonization of the Maghreb, nor of the French mandates in Lebanon and Syria at the beginning of the twentieth century, as if there had been no continuity in the Western imperialist moves in the region. Indeed, the borders of the contemporary map that closes the book, drawn by imperial powers, are indelible traces of a colonial past. This very continuity (briefly alluded to in the phrase “In a Muslim world under constant attack” [283, Rothschild 265]) could have been emphasized as a probable reason why the Crusades are felt, “*even today*, as an act of rape” (emphasis mine), to emphasize that the cause of that sentiment can be attributed to twentieth century conflicts, and not just to distant history. Maalouf puts all the blame on the Muslim world by citing examples of the two extreme tendencies of forced Westernizations (such as Turkey) alternating with fundamentalism (Iran), but fails to mention how Western powers have been direct or indirect contributors to these developments. By stating that “the Arab world cannot bring itself to consider the Crusades a mere episode in the bygone past” (283, Rothschild 265), Maalouf casts the Arab world as hopelessly unable to move forward.

### Notes

I would like to express my gratitude to Laurence M. Porter for comments on an earlier version of this article.

1 Unattributed translations are mine.

2 See Grousset, Runciman, and Oldenbourg.

3 “The I of historiography is supposed to be that of the writer whose name appears on the book cover” (Carrard 87).

4 Grousset’s *Histoire des Croisades* passes over the case of the crusaders’ cannibalism in silence, Runciman’s *A History of the Crusades* briefly alludes to it (vol. I: 261), and Oldenbourg’s *Les Croisades* treats it as a mere rumor



deliberately spread by the crusaders to spread terror (131).

5 At the time of the Crusades the word *Franj* seems to be a milder equivalent of the term “sarrasin” (Saracen), which was used during the Middle Ages to designate Muslims. *La chanson de Roland* (*The Song of Roland*) is a representative example of the derogatory connotations conveyed by the word “sarrasin” (who represents the pagan enemy).

6 “The violation of an individual woman is *the* metaphor for man’s forcing himself on whole nations” (Robin Morgan, qtd. in Higgins 1996: 108).

7 One could argue that murder can also be narrated into rather different kinds of story (such as premeditation, self-defense, accident, or suicide).

8 In *Orientalism*, Said quotes Chateaubriand: “The Crusades were not only about the deliverance of the Holy Sepulchre, but more about knowing which would win on the earth, a cult that was civilization’s enemy, systematically favorable to ignorance [this was Islam, of course], to despotism, to slavery, or a cult that had caused to reawaken in modern people the genius of a sage antiquity, and had abolished base servitude?” (172).

9 That text was prompted by Benazir Bhutto’s defeated opponent’s indignation in 1988 that no Muslim state had ever been ruled by a woman. Mernissi, a Moroccan sociologist, set out to unearth women who did govern during the history of the Muslim world.

10 One could also specify that the viewpoints presented are those that were recorded by historians who were close to authorities, or to those in power, and who themselves belonged to the elite. These accounts are what has shaped the current popular Arab view of the Crusades.

11 The same applies to the crusaders, who were not all Franks.

12 Runciman’s negative appraisal of the Crusades was published as early as 1954, and his quotes ground his work in a Christian framework. The reason he declares the Fourth Crusade (“against Christians”) the greatest crime against humanity (130) is that the Byzantine Empire had shielded Europe from Muslim advances. His conclusion that the Crusades are a “long act of intolerance in the name of God, which is the sin against the Holy Ghost” (III 480) is of course grounded in Christian theology.

13 Huntington’s theory enjoyed a renewal of interest as the Western media grappled to comment the September 11, 2001 attacks (Crépon 8-9). Said

forcefully debunks Huntington's notion that civilizations are monolithic and homogeneous, and points out how Huntington's view of a rigid separation among civilizations does not stand up ("Clash" 587, see also Crépon 3-61).

14 Simon Lloyd mentions that Urban II urged the Catalan nobles to fulfill their crusade vows in Spain during the first crusade (39).

15 See for instance *Léon l'Africain* (1986), *Samarcande* (1988), *Les Echelles du Levant* (1996), *Le Périple de Baldassare* (2000).

16 The Arabs are not romanticized. Maalouf reports the killings committed by Turks (151) and massacres committed by the Muslims when the Franks are expelled (273).

17 Indeed, one can easily find fault with his sweeping statement that the Arabs were unable to create stable institutions and that the situation when civil war erupts with the death of a king is much the same nowadays.

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