



David Humphreys

*A Connecticut Wit in Queen Maria's Court:  
David Humphreys on the Happiness, Future  
Glory and Industry of America*

*Lara Duarte*

*Universidade Católica Portuguesa*

*A word is dead when it is said,  
some say.  
I say it just begins to live  
that day.*

Emily Dickinson<sup>2</sup>

**A** proud American, not born and reared in Hartford, like Twain's Connecticut Yankee, but close enough, Derby native David Humphreys, one of a group of American writers collectively known as the Hartford Wits, did not sustain a blow to the head caused by a man armed with a crowbar, named Hercules, mysteriously awaken in Camelot and somehow become a minister in King Arthur's court – because he is not a fictional character. He was, however, accidentally appointed minister resident to the Court of Lisbon in 1791; and, like Samuel Clemens' Mr Morgan, would also come to realise the folly of partaking of the overly romanticised ideas of battle and chivalry surrounding America's early foreign policy – some would say a lot of its later foreign policy too – but that is a matter to be settled elsewhere.

As in *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, a word of explanation is required.

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<sup>1</sup> Lara Duarte is a senior member of the Universidade Católica Portuguesa Research Centre for Communication and Culture (CECC). She was Assistant Professor of North-American Culture and English at the Catholic University of Portugal (UCP) for many years and holds a Ph.D. in North-American Literature (University of Lisbon), an M.A. in English Studies (University of Lisbon) and a Post-Graduate Degree in Conference Interpreting (Universidade Autónoma de Lisboa/EU Commission). Her interests include Early American poetry, American culture, post-colonial literature and culture studies. She has published a number of papers on nineteenth-century American Poetry and Culture. In addition to lecturing, she is an EU ACI and interprets regularly in Portugal and abroad for national, regional and international organisations. She has also been a guest interpreter trainer at Universidade Autónoma de Lisboa and Universidade do Minho.

<sup>2</sup> Adapted from a paper presented at the 33rd Annual Meeting of the Portuguese Anglo-American Studies Association (APEAA), held at UCP, Lisbon, on 20-21 September 2012.

"International political economy is a growth industry," writes Helen Milner in her essay "International Political Economy: Beyond Hegemonic Stability" (1998, p. 112), and, according to the "the hegemonic stability theory,"<sup>3</sup> a stable and open world economy requires the dominance of one country, or leading power, "to coordinate and discipline" other countries and ensure the conditions conducive to economic growth (1998, p. 113). In other words, economics and politics dovetail. Paradoxically, free trade and economic growth would seem to require a hegemon, without which lack of stability and protectionism take root. By most accounts, throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century that hegemonic power was still Great Britain. Yet, as early as the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the United States were debating how to secure commerce and navigation in the Mediterranean sea and exercise leadership to prevent "the depredations of the piratical states on the coast of Barbary" from spreading to the Atlantic, weighing whether, in the words of Thomas Jefferson in his 28 December 1790 "Report on American Trade in the Mediterranean", "to obtain peace by purchasing it" or "to vindicate their commerce by arms."

From the very inception of the American Republic in 1776, the United States had to contend with the piracy-as-diplomacy policy of the four main North-African powers, known collectively as the Barbary States – Algiers, Tunis, Tripoli and Morocco. For the Americans, independence was as much about commercial freedom as natural rights but, barely one year after the Treaty of Paris (1783) recognised the United States as an independent state, the Moroccan capture of the brig *Betsey* and the taking of her crew captive, followed by the Dey's demand for a peace treaty, including payment of a tribute to prevent the future taking of American merchant ships, drove home the harsh reality that economic independence was not a direct corollary of political emancipation.

The new nation deemed the way of peace to be most in line with its founding principles but the original choice of appeasement over war belied its claim to

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<sup>3</sup> For more on the "hegemonic stability theory," cf. Charles Kindleberger, *World in Depression, 1929-39*.

exceptionalism in the defence of such natural rights as liberty and equality for, in reality, as Robert Weisbuch has argued in his book on the self-conscious rise of American literary nationalism, *Atlantic Double-Cross*, albeit in the grips of revolutionary fervour, the country had yet to debunk the old traditions and habits masquerading as universal (p. 59) and free itself from the yoke of British influence, the Atlantic no Lethean stream.<sup>4</sup> For those who believed it to be, survival in the New World, it quickly became apparent, depended on doubling back and repeating the journey countless times, the Barbary conflicts, "an extension of America's War of Independence" (Lambert, p. 8), a painful reminder that free trade, based on equality and reciprocity, was not welcome in a mercantilist world still faced with the "ungentle laws and customs" invoked under the "divine right of kings" (Twain, "Preface").

Paradoxically, as historian Frank Lambert asserts in his book *The Barbary Wars: American Independence in the Atlantic World* (2005), "by demanding the full measure of independence at home, the American states undermined the independence of America in the Atlantic World" (p. 27). Dominance without dominion, they were set to discover, is hard to come by.

## II

Probably best known as the man standing behind George Washington in US Capitol Rotunda painting "Washington Resigning His Commission," by John Trumbull, and as aide-de-camp to the President during the Revolutionary War, rather than as the man of letters and literary celebrity he also was, David Humphreys was one of the first American diplomats entrusted with the task of making peace with the Barbary powers. As Commissioner Plenipotentiary charged by George Washington in 1793 and 1795 with negotiating and concluding Treaties of Amity and Commerce with Algiers and Tripoli, Humphreys, soldier, statesman, poet, "belov'd of Washington" (Humphreys, Vol. 1, p. i) would play an instrumental role in American foreign policy in the Mediterranean. This paper aims to chart his poetic and political course on the

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<sup>4</sup> "The Atlantic is a Lethean stream, in our passage over which we have had an opportunity to forget the Old World and its institutions" (Thoreau, "Walking", p. 662).

subject of Barbary from his arrival in Europe in 1790 to the signing of the Treaty of Tripoli.

From as early as 1782, Humphreys appears to have had little doubt as to whether "paving the way with gold or cannon balls" (Eaton, p. 85) would best help deal with the corsairs. As he saw it, upholding the unalienable rights of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, enshrined in the Declaration of Independence, demanded robust military action in the face of perfidy. His intensely patriotic poetry repeatedly makes reference to America's particularly difficult relations with Algiers in often quite ferocious terms.

In verses he penned in 1782, entitled, "A Poem on Industry. Addressed to the Citizens of the United States of America," Humphreys questions rhetorically, "In proud Algiers, shall Freedom's Sons be slaves?" before directing his attention to his countrymen and asking:

"At home—can Freeman, lapp'd in silken ease,  
Not hear the groans that load the eastern breeze;  
Or hear unmov'd, absorb'd in sordid gain,  
The dreadful clanking of the Captive's chain?" (1794, pp. 18-19).

Deliberately seeking to touch a raw nerve, he persists – "Was it for this—in Britain's angry hour—/You met, undaunted, far superior pow'r?" (p. 19) – before calling the "brave Citizens" of America to arms.

"Woe to proud Algiers;" he writes in 1785, "to your princes woe!" the tone reminiscent of the prophets of old. These are but a few of over four hundred lines of over four hundred lines from another of his poems, which bears witness to the depth of the anger caused by the capture of American merchant ships and their crews in the Mediterranean, a feeling fuelled by the growing suspicion among his countrymen that Great Britain was at least in part to blame for the disruption of American trade:

Woe to ye people! woe, distress, and fears!  
Your hour is come to drink the cup of tears:  
A ghastly paleness gathers on your cheeks,  
While mem'ry haunts your ears with captive shrieks;

Then stifled conscience wak'ning dares to cry,  
"Think on your crimson crimes, despair and die." –  
Then ruin comes, with fire, and sword, and blood,  
And men shall ask, "where once your cities stood?"  
(Humphreys 1968, p. 59)

Clearly a new alliance was on his mind, for two of the last four stanzas of a poem published one year earlier, "A Poem on Industry. Addressed to the Citizens of the United States of America" (1784), are dedicated to and celebrate Portugal for its ancient seafaring prowess and leadership. Whereas Algiers is "proud," (p. 18) Lusitania, portrayed as being at the helm of an advancing army, is "bold" for having taken the lead in forging commercial ties between nations:

BOLD in the van, lo! LUSITANIA sails,  
And spreads her canvas-wings to prosp'rous gales;  
That daring Pow'r when Europe's spirit pin'd,  
No danger dreaded, and no toil declin'd.  
Nor must that patriot Prince, forgotten, sleep,  
HENRY, who rous'd the genius of the deep;  
Explor'd the path for commerce o'er each main,  
And link'd the nations in a golden chain. (p. 21)

### III

Prior to the Revolutionary War, American products had been transported mainly in British bottoms but also on American ships carrying British-backed passes of safe conduct, and had enjoyed the protection of the British Navy. That protection had been withdrawn. Many now believed that, if not actively encouraging the Barbary marauders to attack vessels flying the American flag, Britain was at the very least seeking to undermine American trade by signalling they would not protect the merchants if attacked (Cutting, pp. 66, 67). To add insult to injury, given the growing insecurity in the region, British maritime insurance underwriters refused to provide policies to ships sailing without British colours and a pass, and there were reports of

British complicity in allowing the corsairs, strongest beyond the Strait of Gibraltar, to roam farther, along the British coast, so they could capture American ships setting sail from Britain's ports (Lambert, pp. 47, 48).

In his *Short Account of Algiers*, published in 1794, Mathew Carey squarely lays the blame for the piracy at the feet of the British, denouncing them for "plunging our fellow-citizens into slavery" (p. 44), but most historians today agree that at least some of the blame for the escalation of the situation in the Mediterranean must be attributed to the Americans themselves. The post-war Articles of Confederation had been designed to keep a check on central government. Lacking the powers to collect taxes, Congress could only ask the states for money, and they were more intent on protecting their own individual interests than on worrying about the longer-term implications of not having a strong foreign trade policy.

Until, that is, as Humphreys' remarkable invective against the "miscreants" in "On the Happiness of America" reveals, public sentiment dictated otherwise, swinging in favour of a stronger Congress. Two events were behind the groundswell of opinion. In the summer of 1785, Algerine corsairs intercepted the schooner *Maria* as it passed Cape St. Vincent, and, a week later, the *Dauphin*, "50 leagues Westward of Lisbon" (Jefferson, 1 June 1792), enslaving the crews and, whereas, in the case of Morocco, the treaty finally agreed and ratified on 18 July 1787 secured safe passage for American sailors through the Strait of Gibraltar without any engagement for future tributes, the case of Algiers was an altogether different matter. The Dey demanded a ransom payment in exchange for the release of the American captives, his duplicitous ways incensing the Americans and renewing the debate in the U. S. over the country's policy toward the Barbary States and the need for a national government with enough coercive power to deal with them.

As word spread of the taking of American freemen by the Barbary pirates, the clamour for concrete and effective action to be taken increased. Americans began to rally around the cause, calling for speedy and more decisive action on the part of the government, petitions were signed and fundraising events thrown in a bid to help free their enslaved countrymen. Public pressure further increased as first-person accounts of the captivity began to emerge in the form of correspondence from some of the men

held in Algiers. Slave captivity narratives and tales of woe rose in popularity. Susanna Rowson's historical play *Slaves in Algiers, or A Struggle for Freedom*, was performed to popular acclaim for the first time in June 1794. The first American edition of *Robinson Crusoe* (1719)<sup>5</sup> appeared that same year. By 1795, there were at least a dozen more editions of the book, in which Crusoe is captured by Turkish pirates known as the Salé Rovers (after the Moroccan port).

Little wonder then at the tone used by Humphreys in "On the Happiness of America." In the poem, he decries, in great detail, the torture of freemen at the hands of the Barbary "rovers" and issues a resounding call to arms but, above all, as one contemporary review states, he "execrates" the pirates of Algiers "with as much spirit as he panegyrises his countrymen" ("Humphrey's Poem on the Happiness of America", p. 363):

Infernal furies on those monsters haunt!  
Pursue the foot-steps of that miscreant crew,  
Pursue in flames, with hell-born rage pursue!  
Shed such dire curses as all utt'rance mock  
Whose plagues astonish, and whose horrors shock!  
Great maledictions of eternal wrath,  
Which like heav'n's vial'd vengeance, singe and scathe!  
Transfix with scorpion stings the callous heart!  
Make blood-shot eye-balls from their sockets start!  
For balm pour brimstone in their wounded foul;  
Then ope, perdition! and ingulf the whole!  
(p. 53)

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<sup>5</sup> Although commonly referred to as simply *Robinson Crusoe*, the book's complete, original title stirred the imagination of the Americans (bold face added): *The Life and Strange Surprizing Adventures of Robinson Crusoe, of York, Mariner: Who lived Eight and Twenty Years, all alone in an un-inhabited Island on the Coast of America, near the Mouth of the Great River of Oroonoke; Having been cast on Shore by Shipwreck, wherein all the Men perished but himself. With An Account how he was at last as strangely deliver'd by Pirates.*



It would be years before the Barbary issue was resolved and the poem, a continuum of 1,094 lines through nine editions, originally entitled "On the Happiness of America", would, in its tenth and final form be reduced to half its size. The first 678 lines of the original poem were left untouched. The remaining lines, including the eleven above, became the core of "A Poem on the Future Glory of the United States of America" (*italics added*; Cifelli: pp. 50-52).

#### IV

In 1791, David Humphrey's is, quite incidentally it would appear, appointed Minister Resident to the Court of Lisbon, thus becoming one of his country's first ambassadors to a foreign country. George Washington's original intent was to send Humphreys on a secret mission to Europe to obtain "any interesting public intelligence" in London, to pave the way for establishing formal diplomatic ties with Lisbon and, in view of the imminence of war between the House of Bourbon and Great Britain, to brief William Charmichael, U.S. *chargé d'affaires* in Madrid, on the decision to forge an alliance with Spain, given the importance of securing rights to the Mississippi River, a commercial waterway of vital importance to American economic growth. "[T]o every other person" but his official contacts in Lisbon and Madrid, the Chevalier Pinto and Mr. Charmichael, he was "to appear as a private traveller," avoiding "all suspicion of being on public business." Even Chevalier Pinto, Luís Pinto de Sousa Coutinho, the Portuguese Secretary of State for War and Foreign Affairs, he was instructed, "need not know" of the journey to Madrid and was to be "made to understand" it as "a journey of curiosity" ("To the U.S. Secret Agent [Col. David Humphreys]", p. 181).

Queen Maria, realising the Americans were preparing to suggest an exchange of diplomats of a lower grade than she desired, *chargé d'affaires*, hastened to appoint a minister resident from the court at Lisbon to the United States, knowing full well diplomatic courtesy would oblige the Americans to do the same. Not wishing to "disgust a government so friendly and so interesting" to the United States, George

Washington appointed David Humphreys Minister Resident, averring that the change of grade would not make the mission more expensive.<sup>6</sup>

It was just as well, as it turned out, because, while the Americans had been locked in their own domestic political battles, the situation in Barbary had deteriorated. In a letter published in the *Boston Mercury*, Richard O'Brien, the enslaved Master of the *Dauphin*, seized 6 years earlier, even went so far as to urge Congress to obtain peace with Algiers otherwise the United States would remain, in his words, the "dupe and buffoon" of all Europe.<sup>7</sup> Portugal had proved to be a friendly nation, "checking the passage of the Algerine corsairs into the Atlantic Ocean" and furnishing "occasional convoys to the vessels of the United States, even when bound to other ports than her own,"<sup>8</sup> but, in October 1793, Portugal and Algiers agreed a truce, allowing the corsairs to enter the Atlantic freely and the attacks against American vessels multiplied – eleven vessels were taken in one month alone (Lambert, 75). Congress, this time, did not tarry and now, with constitutional backing, immediately allocated funds to purchase a peace and free American captives. More importantly, on 27 March 1794, it chose hard power over soft, authorising (Naval Documents, Vol. 1, p. 69) the President to establish a naval force for protection against the corsairs. It fell to David Humphreys, appointed commissioner plenipotentiary, to impress upon Algiers and Tripoli what the consequences of not negotiating a peace would be.

## V

On 4 November, 1796, the United States of America signed a Treaty of Peace and Friendship with the Bey and Subjects of Tripoli of Barbary, a similar treaty having been signed with the Dey of Algiers the previous year.<sup>9</sup> The original treaty book contains fourteen right-hand pages of Arabic text, with the English translation on the corresponding left-hand pages, signed or initialled by Joel Barlow, agent

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<sup>6</sup> In the words of the President, reporting to the Senate, "This embarrassment seems to have rendered the difficulty completely insurmountable" (Washington, "Special Message," February 18, 1791).

<sup>7</sup> *The [Boston] Mercury*, March 18, 1794.

<sup>8</sup> Washington, "Special Message," February 28, 1795.

<sup>9</sup> "Treaty of Peace and Friendship, Signed at Tripoli November 4, 1796."

Plenipotentiary, or Consul General, at Algiers. In addition to the Articles of the Treaty, there is a "Note" of the tributes, payments and presents delivered to the Bey of Tripoli; a "Receipt" of further gifts and the "Approval" of the Treaty by David Humphreys, containing the proviso that it was subject to final ratification by the President, following the consideration and advice of the Senate. It was the twelve articles of the Barlow translation, submitted to the Senate by John Adams, which prevailed.<sup>10</sup>

There was only one problem. The contents of Article 11 are nowhere to be found in the Arabic version of the Treaty.<sup>11</sup> It reads:

As the government of the United States of America is not in any sense founded on the Christian Religion,—as it has in itself no character of enmity against the laws, religion or tranquility of Musselmen,— and as the said States never have entered into any war or act of hostility against any Mehomitan nation, it is declared by the parties that no pretext arising from religious opinions shall ever produce an interruption of the harmony existing between the two countries.

Albeit by negation, religion had just been placed at the centre of the economic growth arena. The tension was complete. Economics, politics, religion. The US was not a Christian state like the European hegemons of previous centuries had been, Article 11 seems to suggest. That, however, is a matter for another paper.

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<sup>10</sup> *A Century of Law-Making for a New Nation*, pp. 18-19.

<sup>11</sup> "The eleventh article of the Barlow translation has no equivalent whatever in the Arabic" ("The Annotated Translation of 1830").

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## RESUMO

Para Helen Milner, a "economia política internacional é uma política de crescimento" (1998) e, de acordo com a "teoria da estabilidade do crescimento", para a economia mundial ser estável e aberta, tem de haver um país dominante, uma potência líder, que coordene e discipline os restantes países, assegurando-se, assim, as condições necessárias para o crescimento económico. Durante o século XIX, segundo a maioria das opiniões, esse *hegemon* foi a Grã-Bretanha. Contudo, no início do século XVIII, ainda se debatia nos Estados Unidos como proteger o comércio e a navegação no Mediterrâneo e impedir que os Corsários da Barbária actuassem também no Atlântico, procurando-se perceber se a paz, nas palavras de Jefferson, deve ser obtida a qualquer custo: "to obtain peace by purchasing it [or] vindicate their commerce by arms" (1790). Este ensaio procura percorrer as formas encontradas por David Humphreys, tanto como poeta como político, para transformar a alteridade americana oitocentista em hegemonia, e como o fez a partir de Lisboa, na qualidade de ministro residente em Portugal e enviado especial de George Washington, incumbido da tarefa de negociar a concluir Tratados de Amizade e Comércio com Trípoli e Argel.

## PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Alteridade, hegemonia, pirataria, Connecticut Wits, Tratados da Barbária

## ABSTRACT

For Helen Milner, "international political economy is a growth industry" (1998) and, according to the "growth stability theory", a stable and open world economy requires the dominance of one country, or leading power, to coordinate and discipline other countries and ensure the conditions conducive to economic growth. By most accounts, throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century that hegemon was still Great Britain. Yet, as early as the 18<sup>th</sup>

century, the United States were debating how to secure commerce and navigation in the Mediterranean Sea and prevent the Barbary pirates from entering the Atlantic, weighing whether, in Jefferson's words, to obtain peace at any cost: "to obtain peace by purchasing it [or] to vindicate their commerce by arms" (1790). This paper aims to explore the ways in which David Humphreys, as both poet and politician, helped shape 19<sup>th</sup>-century American alterity into hegemony and how he did so from Lisbon, as First Minister from the United States of America to Portugal and Commissioner Plenipotentiary charged by George Washington with negotiating and concluding Treaties of Amity and Commerce with Tripoli and Algiers.

#### KEY WORDS

alterity, hegemony, piracy, Connecticut Wits, Barbary Treaties

