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CHAPTER 19

The Orientalist Shakespeare and Othello the Turk

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Lord, be our strength and towre:
As from the Turke, so shiel us, Lord,
From force of popish power[1]

In his book *Orientalism,* Edward Said discusses orientalism as "the corporate institution for dealing with the orient –dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient."[2] In this paper Shakespeare's *Othello* will be analyzed based on the above description. Othello, "the abuser of the world" as Shakespeare puts it, represents the Turks and the orient stands for Turkey. Like many orientalists, Shakespeare creates an outsider protagonist who is a Turk having a special role to play *inside* Europe.

In his play, while Othello is called a Moor, an investigation of English notions of Turks, and of English policies in regards to Turkey, suggests that Othello was actually a Turk, and would have been viewed as such by English audience of the time. Shakespeare's plays are important indicators of Elizabethan beliefs and attitudes toward Islam in general and Turks in particular. Analysis of the images of Turks portrayed in Shakespeare's plays can reveal Elizabethan views of the Turks, both favourable and unfavourable.

England was interested in the Turks for two primary reasons. First there were anxieties over Turkish military strength and fear of Turkish invasion. The second factor was the fascination toward the Turks, a consequence of Turkey's richly legendary past. This initial curiosity fuelling England's interest in the Turkish people and customs later gave way to formal diplomatic relations designed to further the interests of England during times of political and financial need. England did not look at the Ottoman Empire as a friend but rather as a necessary evil. England needed the military support and the wealth generated by the Levant trade. England's diplomatic relations with Turkey formally began in January 1583, when Queen Elizabeth's first accredited ambassador to Turkey, Sir William Harborne, set sail for Istanbul. The continued political and economic relations between the two countries were instrumental in increasing the number of chronicles, history books, travel accounts and memoirs written about Turkish people and culture. For the most

[1] John Phillips, "A Friendly Larum," *Selected Poetry Chiefly Devotional of the Reign of Queen Elizabeth*, ed. Edward Farr (Cambridge: Parker Society, 1845, part ii,531) and New York: Johnson Rerint Corp. 1968.
[2] Edward Said, Orientalism (New York: Vintage Books, 1979) 3.

part, these books were subjective and biased, useful as a means of denouncing the Turks. Like most Elizabethan playwrights, Shakespeare, borrowed from these historical recordings, chronicle books of the time to create themes, characters, plots, action and setting for his plays to serve audience expectations. In this regard a conscious reading of *Othello* shows that, to satisfy audience expectations, Shakespeare chose to ignore history and omitted more than he borrowed from prevalent chronicles, in order cater to his countrymen's prejudiced beliefs, thus bolstering their misconceptions about Turks and Muslims in England and in Europe.

Shakespeare borrowed the background for his play *Othello* from Giraldi Cinthio's *Gli Hecatommithi* and made the sub-title of his play *The Moor of Venice*. In the opening of the play, the word 'Moor' is insistently repeated to define Othello. Both being seen as foreign and as infidels Moors were analogous to Turks. In his story, Cinthio calls Othello *un Moro*, in Cinthio's language a Moro meant a dark skinned person. For Elizabethans of the time, the word Moor "was very vague ethnographically, and very often seems to have meant little more than 'black-skinned outsider', but it was not vague in its antithetical relationship to European norm of the civilized Christian."[1] During Shakespeare's lifetime, the distinction between a 'Moor' and a 'Negro' was obvious to Elizabethans. As stated earlier, England and the Ottoman Empire's economic and political relationship began with Sir William Harborne's success in getting a grant from the Sultan. With this twenty two articled trade grant, William Harborne opened new doors to an excellent market in Ottoman domains for England. Thus, when *Othello* was first performed in 1604, English merchants had already been trading in the Ottoman realms, from Constantinople to Allepo, Alexandretta to Tripoli including Algiers. "The power of Muslims was brought home when 'Turkish' pirates from the North Africa regencies began to raid the Irish and English coasts in the early seventeenth century. ...Pirates from the Barbary ports captured, 'on average, 70 to 80 Christian vessels a year between 1592 and 1609'." [2] Because of the rapidly increasing commerce between England and the Ottoman Empire, many English merchants and travellers had been in extensive and direct contact with the various populations lived within the borders of Ottoman Empire. Because of this contact, Shakespeare and his audience were very informed about the difference between a 'Moor' and a 'Negro.' Thus, it is obvious that Shakespeare intentionally chose *The Moor of Venice* as the sub-title for his play, instead of *The Negro of Venice*. In his book, *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare*, Bullough writes about an alternate suggestion that "In 1544 Captain Francesco da Sessa, called 'the Moor', was brought in chains from Cyprus, where he was serving in the army…This 'Moro' was not a 'Moor' but a dark-skinned European."[3]

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[1] G. K. Hunter, "Elizabethans and Foreigners," *Shakespeare Survey 17* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1964) 37-52.
[2] Daniel J. Vitkus, "Turning Turk in Othello: The Conversion and Damnation of the Moor," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 48. 2 (Summer, 1997):152.
[3] Geoffery Bullough, *Narrative and Dramatic Soures of Shakespeare*. 8 vol. (London: Routledge& Kegan Paul, 1967-75) vol.7, 196.

Shakespeare could not create a 'Negro" protagonist in an environment that was so hostile towards 'Negroes' to the extent that their deportation was ordered by Queen Elizabeth in 1596 and 1601. However, Shakespeare uses fifteen references such as "thick-lips" and "sooty-bosom" that would describe Othello as "black" rather than a 'Moor." According to Calderwood and Toliver Elizabethans used the color 'black' loosely, which actually meant brunette.

> *No one ever accused the Dark Lady of the Sonnets or Beatrice in Much Ado (both whom Shakespeare at times described as "black") of being Negroes. In Titus (IV, ii, 52) and The Merchant (III, V, 42-44) Moor and Negro seem to be confused, but these plays were written some ten years earlier, if indeed Shakespeare wrote the former play at all. In Troilus, written about the same time as Othello, he accurately refers to a negress as a: blackmoor" (I, I, 80), and so seems to make the proper distinction. In short, the one evidence for negroid Othello is Roderigo's name-calling: and this seems hardly to out-weigh the evidence that Shakespeare, by the time that he wrote Othello, must have known the difference between a negro and a Moor, especially as he depicts Othello's character as so typically Moorish, and therefore most prone to jealousy.*[1]

Thus it is difficult to identify Othello with a historically accurate racial category. In *Othello,* the reader learns that Shakespeare's protagonist was baptized and converted to Christianity when he came to Venice. It probably means that Othello was initially a Muslim. Thus, Othello in the eyes of Shakespeare's audience can be a Moor, a Turk, an Ottoman or a Muslim. All of which are in contraposition with Christianity and a threat to the land of Christians. Creating such a protagonist, Shakespeare, however, intentionally prefers not to search Othello's origins and identity as a Muslim as he disregards anything related to Islam, including the exotic culture of the Turks that was described many times by the Elizabethan travellers and historians. Being an Elizabethan, Shakespeare seems to be in accord in sharing the general Christian contempt for Islam and thus rejects Muslim culture by not including any key words, such as Koran, mosques and Mohammed in any of his plays. Often when dealing with Shakespeare one should pay more attention to what he omitted rather than what he borrowed.

According to Riad, an alternate possibility for the mention of Aleppo in Othello's final soliloquy was that he was a Turkish Moor. This seems likely for several reasons. Shakespeare may have imagined Othello as a Berber, an inhabitant of Barbary, which was located on the coast of Northern Africa. After the Berbers invaded Spain and captured it for Islam they were known as Moors.[2] So the Moor represented the Elizabethan other or the Christian other

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[1] James L. Calderwood, *The Properties of Othello*, (Amherst: U of Massachusetts Press, 1989).

[2] Nadia M. Riad, *A Critical Old-Spelling Edition of the Tragicall Raigne of Selimus*. Ph.D. diss., (Queen's University: Queen's UP, 1994).

that can only be signified by an abstraction of Islamic other. This Islamic other who is a threat to Christians could be best represented only by a Turk.

To gain his spectators' sympathy Shakespeare created a hero who was a Christian. While he was a 'Turk,' a 'Moor,' he was nonetheless different from native Venetians: he was not one of them, but he was a Christian.

> *Most English were unaware of the Muslim rulers' policy of religious toleration, which allowed Jews, Christians, and Muslims to live together peacefully within the same community. This policy differed radically from that of England, where the norm was religious persecution and where very few Jews or Muslims were permitted to maintain residence. In Spain, too, persecution and intolerance were the rule.*[1]

Othello had been born into a royal line and had to escape his native land, which was the most expedient way to save his life, since Ottoman rulers fearing coups or assassination were well known for killing their close relatives, especially their brothers. For example, Sultan Selim I (1512-1520) came to the throne after the death of (the previous Sultan) Beyazit's two elder sons. In order not to get too much reaction from his audience, Shakespeare had to convert a Turkish protagonist to Christianity, and fill his lines with Christian allusions and ideas. Even though Othello is a Christian, at the end of the play he shows himself still a vicious Turk. Not born a Christian, but converted, at the end of the play he remains a Turkish infidel at heart.

One of the most debated issues encountered in criticism of *Othello* deals with the time period during which the play supposedly took place. In his article *Othello, Lepanto and the Cyprus Wars,* Jones argues that the year was approximately 1570 AD.[2] This was the year of the Turkish attack on Cyprus, which ended in victory for the Turks in 1571. However, a comparison of the surrounding historical events with the text of Othello suggests that Jones's hypothesis was inaccurate. For example, in Act I, scene iii where the Duke and the Senators discuss whether the Turks are attacking Cyprus or Rhodes, thus, imply that the time period had to include this event. This scene portrays the senator expressing doubts about the accuracy of the report that has just arrived stating that the Turks were preparing to attack Rhodes. The Siege of Rhodes, nevertheless, remained within the memory of many audience members at the time of Othello's initial performances, as the following contemporary account has witnessed:

> *...But at length the Turks shamefully gave over the assault, and abandoning the island, directed their course toward Cyprus. For Mustapha...had before appointed Piall Bassa at a time prefixed,*

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[1] Daniel J. Vitkus, "Turning Turk in Othello: The Conversion and Damnation of the Moor," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 48.2 (Summer 1997) 161.

[2] Emry Jones, "Othello, Lepanto and the Cyprus Wars," *Shakespeare Survey* 21 (1968).

to meet him at the Rhodes, and that he that came first should tarry for the other, that so they might together saile unto Cyprus.[1]

When the Ottoman Empire made war on Cyprus in 1570, they had already held Rhodes almost half a century. The first attempt to occupy Rhodes, in 1479 by Sultan Mehmet II, had failed. However, the island was later taken under Sultan Suleyman I in 1522. Therefore, the period of the play must be around 1522, when there were speculations about the siege of the two islands. 'The Turk with a most mighty preparation makes for Cyprus' (Act I, Scene iii), establishes the crisis in the Council-chamber, and employment of Othello. The statement "…valiant Othello, we must straight employ you against the general enemy Ottoman" must be at the time just before the fall of Cyprus in 1570, and thus indirectly establishes the year when the events of the play were supposed to have taken place. What we see then, is that Shakespeare telescoped the action of the two invasions, in actuality separated by several decades, into events occurring almost simultaneously.

Another example of the influence of contemporary chronicles on Shakespeare's knowledge of Turkish history is also present in Act I, scene iii in which Duke and the senators comparing different reports of the number of Turkish galleys. In his book, *General History of the Turks*, Knolles verifies these different reports that the Duke and the senators are discussing in regard to the number of Turkish galleys.

Mustapha at the Rhodes met with Piall, as he had before appointed. The whole fleet at that time consisted of two hundred gallies, amongst whom were divers galliots and small men of war.[2]

'Two hundred gallies' is the number that Shakespeare very carefully retains as the final lines of the discussion. This was done to inform the audience that the second Senator possessed the correct information. Interestingly enough, although Shakespeare follows the details of the accounts of the Turkish battles very closely, he diverges from the truth on some important matters. For example, unlike the historical reality of these events, he modifies the outcome to show the Turks defeated by a storm at the end of the Cyprus war. This alteration may have been a purposeful attempt on the part of Shakespeare to appeal to King James I. After Queen Elizabeth's death, the theatrical company for which Shakespeare wrote plays fell under the patronage of James I, who was known for his anti-Turkish sentiments and who published a heroic poem *Lepanto in* 1591. In the poem, Lepanto celebrates the great naval victory won by the Christian countries against the Turks. The loss of Cyprus unites Christendom against the Turks. This alliance included Venetian, Genoan, Spanish and even Papal forces that defeated Sultan Selim II's ships at

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[1] Samuel C. Chew The Crescent and the Rose. (New York: Oxford UP, 1937) 496.
[2] Richard Knolles, *The Generall Historie of Turks. From the First Beginnings of that Nation to the Rising of the Othoman Familie: with all the Notable Expeditions of the Christian Princes Against Them*, (London:Adam Islip, 1603) 236.

a naval victory on 7 October 1571. The victory at the Battle of Lepanto was very important to Christians for Lepanto was not merely a massive victory for the Christians; it was the only Christian victory over the Turks during the sixteenth century.

Why a Turk was chosen to defend Cyprus against the Turks? In about two and a quarter centuries the Turks had united the entire eastern and southern Mediterranean region into one empire. North Africa, Egypt, Syria, Arabia, the Tigris-Euphrates valley, Armenia, Asia Minor, Greece, the Balkan Peninsula, a large part of modern Austria-Hungary and of Russia were under the Turkish authority.[1] To arrest the retreat from the Turks, unity among Western leaders was a must. Being aware of this fact, King James tried to establish and maintain peace among the Christian leaders because the main reason for the great victories of the Turks was their unity. Since the Turks were also great fighters, the best way to prevent any attacks was to divide them against themselves, like the divided Christians. Peter Ashton, in his *Shorte Treatise Upon the Turkes Chronicles*, talks about policy of the Persian Sophy, who threw down the Mohammedan Temples and asserted Shi'a loyalty to Ali.[2] This Persian Sophy's tactic brought about the Shi'a and Sunni division to Islam, creating a great rift in Islam (that continues even today) but never sufficient to prevent the Turks from further victories. So in various ways officials, historians and travellers suggested new tactics on how to create disunity in the Ottoman Empire. Shakespeare alludes to that by having a Turkish Moor command fighting against the Turks. Therefore, Othello as not only a Turk, but also a Christian soldier, is an acceptable protagonist for the London stage. Choosing a converted Turkish soldier as a protagonist who is not an infidel, Shakespeare gives life to an anecdote that was Turkey's worst nightmare, popularly shared among Westerners to show the unity among the Turks. According to this narrative,

> *A combat ...performed by two persons of quality of the Turks, wherein one of them was slain, the other party was converted before the council of Bassaes; the manner of the reprehension was in these words: How durst you undertake to fight one with the other? Are there not Christians enough to kill? Did you not know whether of you should be slain, the loss would be the Great Seigneours?*[3]

Othello, as a great commander of Turkish origin, who had fought in many different and dangerous lands, who had converted to Christianity, and who, like many Venetians as well as Londoners, hated the Turks, now in fighting against his own kind, becomes much more immediate and important to the Elizabethan audience, who more greatly feared Turks than Moors (Moroccans). Also, Shakespeare knew that having a foreigner fighting for Venetians would be very

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[1] Albert H. Lybyer, *The Government of the Ottoman Empire in the Time of Suleiman the Magnificent*, (Cambridge: Harvard UP, London: Henry Frowde, Oxfors UP,1913) 6.
[2] *A Short Treatise upon the Turke's Chronicles*, Trans. Peter Ashton. (London, 1546).
[3] *The Charge...touching Duells*, 1614; James Spedding, *The letters and the Life of Francis Bacon*, ed. (1890,iv) 404f., Samuel Chew, *The Cresent and the Rose*, 108.

acceptable to his audience, since England's army was made of and commanded by experienced foreign soldiers, "many depraved, brutish soldiers from all nations under the sun…the Greeks, Turks, Tartars, Almains, Germans…who had come there…to have a good time under the king of England, who by nature was too hospitable to foreigners."[1] Shakespeare adapts this English army tradition to Venetian culture and makes Turks' fear of division happen through a converted Turk, Othello, by showing the Ottomans defeated at the end even though, it is through the storm. Even though the audiences do not see a war between the Turks and the Venetians, the division works. Turks are defeated. So, the Ottomans disappear from the stage. They are drowned at sea. Having shown how to defeat the Ottomans, Shakespeare shifts his focus to characteristics of a Turk. In Act II, scene iii, just after the outbreak of the fight staged by Iago, with Othello's lines, Shakespeare not only shows pro-Christian anti-Turkish sentiments, but also, to demonstrate the character of the Turks, has Othello asking:

Are we turned Turks, and to ourselves do that
Which heaven hath forbid the Ottomites?
For Christian Shame put by this barbarous brawl!

With his lines Othello not only reminds his soldiers of the strategic significance the unity of Islam had for the Turkish military, a theory fashionable at the time, but also criticizes the multiple divisions of Christendom as an outsider, a Turk.

Another source for Shakespeare's 'are we turned Turk' could be coming from the accounts of Hakluyt's *Principle Navigations* (1598), which was also very well known by Elizabethans. In his book, Hakluyt talks about some Englishmen's voyage to Tripolis in Barbarie, relating how they were put in prison, with two of the Englishmen sentenced to death, then, pardoned, and then how the king immediately after changed his mind, and had them executed. The narrator of the story, Sanders, declares the infidel Moor king was not trustworthy, how he did not keep his word and changed his mind. Sanders also talks about an Englishmen who offered to 'turn Turk' to save his life, but was executed after he changed his faith. The others, including the author, were sentenced to slavery. Later, with the intervention of the Queen with the great Turk himself, the prisoners were released. The conduct of the king of Tripolis was of the kind that established the 'Muslim Moor" as a shifty and untrustworthy character. Shakespeare reverses the same story, and makes a Turk, Othello, in order to save his life, turn Christian in his play. Shakespeare further engages Hayklut's famous chronicle in act I, scene iii, with Iago's lines "These Moors are changeable in their wills" to analyze the character of the Turks.[2] At the end of the play Iago's accusation would come true as towards the end of the play noble Othello, like the king of Tripolis, changes from a loving husband to a jealous murderer. Othello once again becomes and acts

[1] M. B. Davies, ed., "Boulogne and Calais from 1545 to 1550", by Elis Gruffedd, Fouad I *Bulletin of the Faculty of Arts* 12 (1950).
[2] Richard Hakluyt, *Pricipal Navigations*, ed., Edmund Goldsmid, (London:1598) 352-353.

like a Turk, a shifty and untrustworthy Turk. Shakespeare's final reference to Turkish people in *Othello* occurs in act V, scene ii, and the last scene before Othello stabs himself.

> *...That in Aleppo once,*
> *Where a malignant and a turban'd Turk*
> *Beat a Venetian and traduc'd the state,*
> *I took by the throat the circumcised dog,*
> *And smote him-thus. (Stabs himself).*

As one of the most important moments in *Othello*, critics have subjected this final statement to a number of analyses and interpretations. For example, in his article *Egregiously an Ass: The Dark Side of the Moor: A view of Othello's mind*, Albert Gerard attempts to explain the complexity of the soliloquy stating,

> *There is a link between the pearl, the Venetian and Desdemona: taken together, they are an emblem of beauty, moral virtue, spiritual richness and civilized refinement. And there is a link between the "base Indian", the "malignant Turk" and Othello himself: all three are barbarians: all three have shown themselves unaware of the true value and dignity of what lay within their reach. Othello has thrown his pearl away, like the Indian. In so doing, he has insulted, like the Turk, everything that Venice and Desdemona stand for...He remains a barbarian to the very end, and condemns his own soul to the everlasting torments of hell in obeying the same primitive sense of rough-handed justice that had formerly prompted him to kill Desdemona.*[1]

In contrast, Robert B. Heilman's analysis of the same speech, presented in his article *Othello: The Unheroic Tragic Hero*, concludes "Ironically, Othello's analogy-in which, as earlier, he plays for the stock response of Turkophobia-also has the effect of making him a malignant dog."[2] However, neither of these analyses describes Shakespeare's reasons for Othello's reference to Aleppo.

As mentioned earlier, the first English embassy in Turkey was established in Istanbul in 1583 and William Harborne was the first official ambassador to Turkey. In 1586, during Harborne's term of office, a consulate was established in Aleppo. With Harborne's help, Aleppo became a convenient hospice and sometimes a place of refuge from the frequent racial and religious clashes that occurred in a city where Christians of the East and West met with Turks, Jews, and Arabs. Aleppo was the place where English travellers had the opportunity to observe the manners and customs of a variety of people from around the world.[3]

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[1] Albert Gerard, "Egregiously and Ass: The dark Side of the Moor: A View of Othello's Mind" *Shakespeare Survey Vol.10*, (New York: Cambridge UP, 1957) 20.
[2] Robert B. Heilman, *Othello: The Unheroic Tragic Hero.* (193).
[3] Chew, *The Crescent* 157.

In Aleppo, wither the adventurers went across the mountains from Antioch, George Manwaring had to endure just such a humiliating outrage as Parry remembered, for a Turk took him by the ear and marched him up and down the street while the bystanders threw stones at him and spat upon him.[1]

It is quite possible that Shakespeare intended to describe this incident when he scripted the lines spoken by Othello, telling how a malignant turban'd Turk beat a Christian in Aleppo. And thus Othello, the good Christian Moor who had been a great soldier, defending Venetians in many places including the Ottoman land, defended Manwaring, the poor Venetian. However, at the end of the play Othello realizes, by killing Desdemona, he had 'turned Turk'. To prove his devotion to his Christianity and to protect Venice from this 'circumcised dog,' as he once did in Aleppo, Othello kills himself.

With this play Shakespeare presents the characteristic of Turks by using a Christian, a soldier and a Turk as his protagonist, since he is not an infidel his audience could sympathize with the hero, as barbaric, untrustworthy and with the beginning of the play he shows that the Ottomans are defeatable. With *Othello* Shakespeare finds a way to confront and ease his audience's Turkophobia. The final image of Othello at the end of the play shows how Shakespeare catered to the popular sentiments of his Elizabethan audience. Even though, he was aware of the historical fact and of other cultures via the history books and published journals available to him, Shakespeare chose to cater to his countrymen's prejudices and further fuel their misconceptions about the Turks, helping establish the racist image of Turk and Muslim in England and in Europe. At the end of the play Elizabethan's worst fears of the Turks, shared by Europeans in general, are justified.

To serve audiences expectations, Shakespeare created a Christian, and a Turkish Moor protagonist in a period when Elizabethans idealized warriors, to show that it is possible to defeat the Turks by getting to know their characteristics and weaknesses, as Shakespeare showed through his protagonist, and by dividing them among themselves. *Othello* must motivate Elizabethans to rise above their pessimistic Turkophobia, during an era when many writers called their people to 'wake up' and recover their lost glory. Turks were always portrayed as enemies and infidels, because the audience so expected and even Shakespeare was not courageous enough to stand against *that.*

[1] Chew *The Crescent* 245.