

English Representations of Muslim Characters in the Drama of the Renaissance

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation explores how Muslim characters are portrayed in English literature from the medieval to the Renaissance period, focusing on early modern drama. It traces the shift from the stereotypical Saracen villain in crusading literature to the more complex figures of the Turk and the Moor. The study explores how English playwrights used these characters to express anxieties and address questions of identity, empire, and religious difference.

Focusing on Christopher Marlowe's *Tamburlaine the Great* and William Shakespeare's *Othello*, this research argues that Renaissance drama moves beyond the simple negative depictions of Muslims found in earlier works, offering more nuanced and complex portrayals that still reflect ideological tensions. These plays use storytelling to engage with power, race, religion, and cultural difference. Drawing on historical context, theology, and recent scholarship in medieval and early modern studies, this study shows how Muslim characters act as both reflections and contrasts to English concerns about power, morality, and cultural identity.

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Introduction

From the medieval to the early modern eras, English writers created complex and changing images of Muslim characters in drama and literature. Representations of Muslims—Saracens, Turks, and Moors—were informed by religious and racial ideologies as well as political conflicts and interests. As Jonathan Burton states, English depictions of Muslims varied widely, ranging from “the censorious to the laudatory, from others to brothers”—a claim that challenges other assumptions that representations of Muslims were persistently negative.¹ Other critics, such as Nabil Matar, argue that “simplification and stereotyping were the rules by which Britons represented Muslims.”² Matar also claims that “not a single play about the Muslim Levant and North Africa that appeared in the Elizabethan, Jacobean, or Caroline periods showed the Muslim in a morally heroic and favorable light.”³ However, Burton challenges these claims, arguing that English stage depictions of Muslim “others” were not merely ideologically driven but also diverse and influenced by changing historical contexts.

In my dissertation, I use the term “Other” to describe Muslims, Saracens, Turks, and Moors, who are depicted as fundamentally different from the Christian, English self. “Otherness” goes beyond differences in appearance or belief; it often involves how literature frames these differences as threatening, inferior, or morally corrupt. Sometimes, however, representations deviate from convention, presenting Muslim Others as admirable or as potential partners. Specifically, the Muslim Other in English literature serves to define what Englishness, Christianity, and civility are *not*. Thus, in my research, Muslim Otherness refers to how English

¹ Jonathan Burton, *Traffic and Turning: Islam and English Drama, 1579-1624* (University of Delaware Press, 2005) p. iii.

² Nabil Matar, *Turks, Moors, and Englishmen in the Age of Discovery* (Columbia University Press, 1999) p. 116.

³ *Ibid*, p. 14.

writers used Muslim figures not only to depict outsiders but also to reinforce their own religious, racial, and cultural identity through contrast.

This dissertation explores portrayals of Muslim Otherness in early modern English drama. It examines how writers from the late medieval to early modern periods viewed and showed Muslim identities through religious lenses, racial imagination, and political symbolism. While these depictions often reinforce Christian dominance and authority, they also reveal signs of fascination, sympathy, and even alignment with Muslim characters. As Suzanne Conklin Akbari notes, medieval representations of Islam included a discourse of “religious and bodily difference” that influenced later early modern texts.⁴ Western portrayals of Muslims combined theological criticism with physical stereotypes tied to climate and geography. According to Akbari, this “premodern Orientalism” was not merely a result of ignorance but arose from ideologies that depicted Islam as a “false religion” linked to both spiritual and bodily difference.⁵

Christian views of Muslims, and the language used to describe them, changed notably from the early to late Middle Ages. Initially, these views were shaped by political and geographic conflicts, with Muslims being characterized through militaristic terms. By the twelfth century, however, the focus shifted to a theological perspective, with westerners viewing Muslims as religious adversaries, which influenced later literary representations.

In the English context, premodern conceptions of Muslim difference both gained renewed force and underwent clear transformation during the early modern period. The rise of the Ottoman Empire, as well as the expanding Anglo-Islamic diplomacy, prompted increased interest in the Islamic world. Yet, that interest was marked by both curiosity and anxiety. These

⁴ Suzanne Akbari, *Idols in the East: European Representations of Islam and the Orient, 1100–1450* (Cornell University Press, 2009) p. 9.

⁵ Ibid, pp. 1-3.

encounters provoked both fascination with Muslim societies and fear about their geopolitical and religious threat. As Matthew Dimmock observes, the period “marks a high point in the production of texts of all kinds relating to the Ottoman Empire and a point at which the portrayal of the ‘Turke’ on the stage had achieved an articulacy and a variety that would perhaps be repeated, but would not be superseded.”⁶ Robert J. Topinka similarly emphasizes that during this time, “cross-cultural encounters permeated not only commerce and international relations but diverse elements such as the stage, fashion, horse riding, and sermons.”⁷ This allowed for more layered and ambivalent portrayals of Muslim figures than the simpler, often uniformly negative portrayals of medieval literature.

Gerald MacLean warns that “prejudiced misinformation all too often reappears as fact,” urging scholars to closely examine the specific historical contexts and ideological nuance of early modern representations.⁸ This dissertation examines and builds on the contributions of well-known scholars including Jonathan Burton, Nabil Matar, Suzanne Conklin Akbari, Emily Bartels, and Daniel Vitkus, who have studied how Muslim figures were viewed and depicted by English writers in literature and drama. While these scholars have compellingly discussed the ideological, religious, and cultural factors influencing such portrayals, my study expands their insights by examining Marlowe’s and Shakespeare’s representations of Muslim characters in relation to the specific historical context of the Ottoman Empire’s rise, the Protestant Reformation, and growing Anglo-Islamic diplomatic relations during Elizabeth I’s reign. Instead of exploring these literary works solely through the lens of traditional medieval polemics or

⁶ Matthew Dimmock, *New Turkes: Dramatizing Islam and the Ottomans in Early Modern England* (Routledge, 2016) p. 6.

⁷ Robert J. Topinka, “Islam, England, and Identity in the Early Modern Period: A Review of Recent Scholarship” (*Mediterranean Studies*, 2009) p. 114.

⁸ Gerald MacLean, *Looking East: English Writing and the Ottoman Empire before 1800* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2007) p. 6.

abstract Orientalism, this dissertation situates them within the political realities of the sixteenth century. This approach emphasizes how early modern drama engaged not just with theological ideas and racial biases, but also with the evolving religious and geopolitical interactions with the Islamic world.

Yet, despite these new developments, many early modern portrayals continued to rely on the theological perceptions formed in medieval times. These perceptions created an image of Muslims that persisted and was invoked for centuries. Theologians, especially those associated with crusading ideologies, depicted Islam as a heretical faith and Muslims as spiritually deviant and physically marked others. They used this strategy to incite Christian zeal and rationalize military actions framed as a defense of the Christian faith.

Muslims have been depicted in literature in ways influenced not only by ideology but also by genre, mode, and audience. In literature from the Crusades era, the Saracen is often seen as a debased enemy, with his only good trait being the potential for conversion. Muslims are staged as heretics, idolaters, or demonic forces. However, during the Renaissance, Muslim characters become more complex. While some works maintain a tradition of hostility towards Muslims, others depict them as symbolic figures that reflect contemporary anxieties about empire, religion, race, and identity. This shift also reflects the growing familiarity of English audiences with Muslim societies through travel, trade, and diplomacy.

This dissertation is divided into three chapters. Each chapter traces a phase in the evolving representation of Muslims in English writing from the medieval to the early modern period.

Chapter One explores how Muslims were depicted in medieval times as “Saracens,” figures constructed through biblical heritage, theological misconceptions, and racial differences.

The chapter looks at early Christian writings and polemical texts, including works by Maximus the Confessor and Pseudo-Methodius, which frame Muslims as barbaric invaders and divine punishments for Christian sin. This perspective was based more on religious and ethnic biases than on true understanding. Medieval thinkers and theologians such as Jerome, Augustine, Isidore of Seville, and Bede viewed Arabs—seen as descendants of Ishmael—as pagans and heretics. Thus, after the rise of Islam in the seventh century, Christians continued to use labels like “Saracens” or “Ishmaelites” without distinguishing the actual beliefs and practices of Muslims.

Literary texts such as *The Song of Roland* (c. 1100) and Geoffrey Chaucer’s “The Man of Law’s Tale” (late fourteenth century) reinforce these negative portrayals through themes of idolatry, heresy, and dehumanization. The Saracen is typically depicted as either barbaric and lustful or paradoxically brave, but always portrayed as destined for defeat, conversion, or death. These portrayals reflect the desire of medieval Christians to establish moral and theological boundaries that emphasize their superiority. *The Song of Roland* serves as a literary expression of the ideological culture of the First Crusade. It frames the Christian-Muslim conflict as a justified struggle, where Saracens symbolize threats to Christian values, even when they are sometimes admired for their bravery. Chaucer’s “The Man of Law’s Tale” similarly adheres to the rhetoric of the crusade. It starkly demonizes Muslim characters as violent, lustful, and irrational enemies of Christianity. Chaucer’s tale arguably reproduces the binary of Christian virtue versus Muslim depravity without critique or complexity.

This chapter, while not the main focus of the dissertation, provides important background for understanding the theological, political, and racialized image of the Muslim Other in the medieval imagination—an image that early modern writers would later replicate or challenge. It

argues that the appearance of a theologically charged language in the twelfth century marks a shift in how Muslims were viewed. Muslims were understood not merely as political enemies but as religious heretics or false believers, who posed a threat to Christianity. Popes such as Gregory VII and Urban II played a key role in popularizing the image of the Muslim as an idolatrous and demonic figure, and this image permeated crusade rhetoric and European literature alike.

Chapter Two explores the Renaissance stage, focusing on Christopher Marlowe's *Tamburlaine the Great*. This play presents the Muslim Other not as an external aggressor but rather as an internal schismatic and tyrant. Tamburlaine, a Muslim conqueror, is used to stage a fantasy of intra-Islamic violence and disintegration. By emphasizing fragmentation and infighting within the Muslim world, Marlowe invites his audience to see Islam as self-destructive. The play uses traditional tropes derived from medieval sources but modifies them for an audience that is increasingly aware of the Ottoman threat. Similar to *The Jew of Malta*, Marlowe's depiction of Moors and Turks in *Tamburlaine* reflects England's anxieties regarding empire, power, and its Christian identity. This play echoes familiar polemics while also mirroring the changing diplomatic and economic relations between England and the Muslim world during Elizabeth I's reign. Although Marlowe wrote after the Protestant Reformation—a time characterized by growing interactions with Islamic societies—his play remains predominantly influenced by medieval hostilities. His representation of Muslim characters continues the tradition of portraying Islam as chaotic and inherently violent. Rather than engaging with the Ottoman Empire as a complex political entity or potential ally, Marlowe dramatizes a vision of Islamic collapse and disunity.

Marlowe's adaptation of medieval themes for Renaissance audiences is deeply significant. As the Ottoman Empire became more powerful in the fifteenth and sixteenth

centuries, the perception of the Muslim Other was increasingly influenced by both religious animosity and geopolitical tensions. In *Tamburlaine*, the act of destroying the Qur'an and the brutal treatment of Muslim characters serve as dramatic representations of English anxieties. These instances reinforce a sense of Christian unity while dramatizing a fantasy of Islamic defeat and collapse, a projection of fear onto a powerful political and religious rival. Tamburlaine, with his combination of violence and charisma, does not inspire admiration; instead, he heightens his threat and cruelty. He represents a terrifying Muslim conqueror whose power disrupts the typical distinctions between East and West and whose depiction reflects the deep-seated fear that Islam, rather than being subdued, remained a dominant force on the world stage.

Chapter Three delves into Shakespeare's *Othello*, which marks a significant shift in the representation of the Muslim/Moorish Other. While Shakespeare's earlier depiction of Aaron the Moor in *Titus Andronicus* aligns with medieval notions of blackness and evil, *Othello* presents a more complex and sympathetic figure. Emily Bartels observes that *Othello* has remained central to scholarly debates "not simply because it has long been the most popular (dare I say, the best?) play of the lot and so the most discussed, but also because its Moor is the tragic hero."⁹ By making a Moorish character heroic, deeply moral, and emotional in the play, Shakespeare shows a radical departure from the conventional portrayal of Muslims as irredeemable and unassimilable enemies. The play engages directly with contemporary Anglo-Moorish diplomacy—particularly the 1600 visit of Moroccan ambassador al-Annuri—and reflects the changing religious and political situation of Protestant England, which was seeking alliances with Islamic powers and showing interest in cross-cultural communications.

⁹ Emily C. Bartels, *Speaking of the Moor: From Alcazar to Othello* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009) pp. 159.

Othello's identity as a Christian convert, a respected Venetian general, and an African outsider positions him within competing and often contradictory discourses. He is, at once, a celebrated symbol of integration and an object of deep-seated suspicion. This paradox places him within conflicting narratives of race, religion, and loyalty, forcing him to navigate a white Venetian world that simultaneously welcomes and resists his presence. His struggle and eventual tragedy dramatize the tension between cultural inclusion and exclusion—a dilemma seen in the early modern English encounters with Islam and Muslims.

While *Othello* humanizes its originally Muslim protagonist and grants him qualities such as eloquence, military honor, and moral dignity, it also reveals the persistence of racism and traditional hostility. The play does not entirely reject anti-Muslim sentiment; rather, it recontextualizes it within a more psychologically and socially complex framework. Othello's blackness functions not only as a racial marker but also as a sign of his Islamic origins. His identity is at first admired, but it is increasingly undermined and questioned as the play unfolds. His skin becomes a visible reminder of a religious difference that is overshadowed by his Christian and Venetian identity.

Under Iago's manipulation, that difference is highlighted, perceived as a threat, and eventually leads Othello to identify more with his Muslim and Moorish backgrounds. Othello's tragedy is not the result of innate flaws, but of the pressures imposed upon him by a Christian society that grants him conditional acceptance. His blackness, otherness, and past associations are never fully forgotten, and the cultural forces surrounding him ultimately lead to his downfall. In this way, *Othello* not only challenges conventional portrayals by elevating the Moor to a heroic status, but also exposes the fragility and limits of that elevation. Shakespeare thus

dramatizes how prejudice and systemic exclusion operate, even as he momentarily disrupts these themes.

By situating the analysis of both Marlowe's and Shakespeare's plays within their historical and political contexts, this dissertation seeks to emphasize the instability and complexity of early modern English engagements with Islam. It argues that literary representations of Muslims were as contested, nuanced, and ideologically fraught as the geopolitical encounters from which they emerged.

Together, these chapters argue that representations of Muslim figures in English literature did not follow a single way of demonization or admiration. Instead, they reflected the shifting ideological, theological, and political pressures and conditions of their time. From medieval crusading narratives to Elizabethan cross-cultural relations, Muslim characters acted as reflections for English writers, helping them to navigate their own identities, anxieties, and aspirations. This dissertation thus offers a contextualized study of the Muslim Other that challenges rigid notions of Orientalism and explores the complexity and contradictions in early English interactions with Islam.

By examining the theological characterizations of the Saracen, the dramatic reimagining of Turks and Moors on the stage, and the nuanced representation of the noble outsider, this dissertation contributes to larger discussions surrounding race, religion, and empire in early modern studies. It draws attention to the ways in which medieval identifications and perceptions persisted into the Renaissance, even as they were reshaped by new contexts. Finally, it situates early English drama within a global framework of intercultural contact and ideological struggle.

Chapter I

The Muslim Other in the Medieval Era: The Perception of the Saracen and his Literary Portrayal

For indeed, what is more dire than the evils which afflict the world today? For those who can discern what is more painful than the unfolding events? . . . To see a barbarous nation from the desert overrunning another's lands as if they were their own, and civilization itself being ravaged by wild and untamed beasts who are only bearing the mere appearance of human beings.

Maximus the Confessor¹⁰

In this letter, Maximus the Confessor (580-662), writing from Constantinople, expresses to his friend, Peter the Illustrious, his outrage over the territorial losses Christians were experiencing at the hands of Muslims in the seventh century. His portrayal of Muslims epitomizes the polemical rhetoric of the early medieval era, which relies on traditional perceptions and casts Muslims as a wild, uncivilized, and primitive people coming from the desert to destroy civilized Christian nations. Maximus's letter depicts Muslims without naming them. It also describes them as humans only in appearance. This, furthermore, demonstrates the era's dehumanizing portrayal. Even in instances where Muslims were identified by a name, they were referred to not as "Muslims" but as "Saracens."

"Saracens" was the name medieval Western Christians generally used to identify Muslims. The term originally came from the Greek and Latin words meaning "Arab." It was introduced into Old English in the ninth century, where it generally referred to Arabs or Muslims. By the mid-thirteenth century, the word appeared in Middle English as "Sarasin," and while it

¹⁰ Quoted in Daniel J. Sahas, *Byzantium and Islam: Collected Studies on Byzantine-Muslim Encounters* (Boston: Brill, 2021) p. 242

typically referred to Turks, Arabs, or Muslims, it was occasionally used broadly to mean "pagan."¹¹ The term carried a pejorative connotation, as it was historically associated, both before and after the rise of Islam, with images of the Saracen as wild, uncivilized, and idolatrous.¹² In this chapter, I will use the terms "Saracen" and "Muslim" interchangeably, but with specific contextual considerations: "Saracen" will be applied when discussing the literary portrayal of the Muslim Other, while "Muslim" will be used in reference to the historical context and where discussions should exceed the Christian perception of the Saracen to include broader topics such as the lived realities of Muslims, religious beliefs, and politics. "Saracen" was the term predominantly used by medieval Christians to describe Muslims, in addition to terms less famous like "Ishmaelite,"¹³ while the word "Muslim" was seldom used in that era.¹⁴ Also, it should be noted that my discussion of how "Europe" and "Western scholars" perceived and represented Muslims does not include Iberia/Al-Andalus, as Spain's situation stands apart from the broader European context I examine here.

The failure to distinguish and recognize Muslims as a more specific group or with a term other than the derogatory "Saracens" stemmed from two primary factors. Firstly, a lack of knowledge about Islam among medieval Christians made it difficult for them to recognize Muslims as a distinct and specific group. Muslims before the twelfth century remained on the periphery of Western Christian consciousness because they were geographically too distant from

¹¹ Siobhain Bly Calkin, *Saracens and the Making of English Identity: The Auchinleck Manuscript*. (New York: Routledge, 2005) p. 2

¹² John V. Tolan, *Saracens: Islam in the Medieval European Imagination* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002) p. 4; Emmanouela Grypeou, "'The Abomination of Desolation': Eastern Christian Apocalyptic Literature and the Symbolic Construction of Islam" (*Collectanea Christiana Orientalia*, 2023) p. 61

¹³ This is another pejorative description. The "Ishmaelites" carry "Ishmael's" bad traits, who is described in the Bible and other theological sources as an idolater and as "a wild donkey of a man" who "will be hostile to everyone, and everyone will be hostile to him." See Stephen A. Barney, *The Etymologies of Isidore of Seville* (Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 184; *Genesis: The Creation of the World*, 16:12: 40.
<https://bible.org/sites/bible.org/resources/download/netbible/ondemand/bybook/gen.pdf>

¹⁴ Tolan, *Saracens: Islam in the Medieval European Imagination*, p. 4.

Western Christian scholars, who, because of this fact, showed very little interest in studying the Muslim religion but nevertheless depicted them negatively as part of the generalized group called Saracen.¹⁵ Perceptions of the Saracens were based on religious and ethnic preconceptions rather than actual knowledge of Islam. Christians viewed Islam through the lens of biblical teachings and the writings of early Christian scholars like Jerome, Augustine, Isidore, and Bede, who perceived and thereby showed the Arabs, or the Ishmaelites, as pagan idolaters, savage, and heretics in their writings.¹⁶ Isidore, for example, significantly influenced this terminology by defining Arabs and linking them to biblical narratives, stating, “A son of Abraham was Ishmael, from whom arose the Ishmaelites, who are now called, with corruption of the name, Saracens, as if they descended from Sarah.”¹⁷ Because of this, Christians who encountered or heard about Muslims relied on these pejorative ethnic terms, which were promulgated by those early scholars, to define Muslims. Secondly, medieval Christians benefited from categorizing their Muslim enemies as “Saracens.” Such a categorization reaffirmed the Saracen’s inferiority and enhanced Christian supremacy. As David Blanks underlines, “by debasing the image of their rivals, Western Christians were enhancing their own self-images and trying to build self-confidence in the face of a more powerful” enemy.¹⁸ Furthermore, the implied inferiority of the Saracens justified the crusades carried out against them in later centuries.¹⁹ This also conveniently grouped Saracens with all other non-Christians into a single, morally inferior category, which reinforced their sense of Christian superiority. John Tolan points out that “before

¹⁵ John Tolan, *Medieval Christian Perceptions of Islam* (Routledge, 2013) p. xi.

¹⁶ Tolan, *Saracens: Islam in the Medieval European Imagination*, p. 4; For a more thorough examination of those scholars’ perception of the Saracen, see John Tolan, “‘A Wild Man, Whose Hand Will be Against All’: Saracens and Ishmaelites in Latin Ethnographical Traditions, from Jerome to Bede” (Taylor & Francis Group, 2012) p. 515-530.

¹⁷ Barney, *The Etymologies of Isidore of Seville*, p. 192.

¹⁸ David R. Blanks, *Western Views of Islam in Medieval and Early Modern Europe: Perception of Other* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1999) p. 3.

¹⁹ Jeffrey Cohen, “On Saracen Enjoyment: Some Fantasies of Race in Late Medieval France and England.” (*Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies*, 2001) p. 114.

the rise of Islam, Christians had established categories for the religious other: Jew, pagan, and heretic. When Christians encountered Muslims, they tried to fit them into one of those categories.”²⁰ This implies that the medieval conflation of Saracens with other non-Christian groups in Christian discourse served to reinforce a narrative of Christian moral and religious superiority, establishing a clear distinction between the Christian self and the non-Christian other.

However, the Christian perception of the Muslim Other, along with the language used to describe him, evolved significantly from the early to late medieval eras. In the early Middle Ages, the Christian canonical and papal rhetoric continued to depict Muslims in ways that echoed descriptions from pre-Islamic times, characterized by a lack of accuracy and a tendency toward imaginative and hyperbolic representations. As scholars observe, such a portrayal was often less about reality and more about the “fantasies” of the time.²¹ Moreover, the depiction of Muslims during the time was dominated by perceptions of them as political, geographic and ethnic adversaries, and the language used to describe them was primarily military. Such a perspective is evident in the writings of early medieval writers who described and wrote about the Saracens. Like that of Maximus the Confessor, the depiction of Muslims resembled the pre-Islamic depictions of Saracens: as near-mythical destroyers emerging from the desert to ravage established civilizations. This is echoed, too, in *The Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius* (c. 692), a widely known book written in response to the rise of Islam.²² The book graphically depicts the savagery attributed to Muslims and portrays a vision of the world’s end brought about by their

²⁰ Tolán, *Saracens: Islam in the Medieval European Imagination*, p. 3.

²¹ R.W. Southern, *Western Views of Islam in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962), p. 14; Debra Higgs Strickland, *Saracens, Demons, and Jews: Making Monsters in Medieval Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003) p. 165.

²² Though the author of *The Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius* was a Syrian Christian, the book is recognized by scholars for its “enormous influence in medieval Western Christendom.” It was translated into Greek and Latin across several manuscripts just a few decades following its composition. See *From Constantinople to the Frontier: the City and the Cities*, ed., Nicholas S. M. Matheou, et al., (Leiden: Brill, 2016) p. 261-65.

actions. Muslims, according to *The Apocalypse*, are as wild as their “father,” Ishmael, whom God called “a wild ass.” When the time comes, those “barbarians” will conquer civilizations and consequently cause the starvation of animals and the disappearance of trees and natural beauty. Their barbaric actions will not just extend to men. Women, babies, and priests will be victims of their atrocities, too:

They will stab the [Christian] pregnant women with a sword and snatch babies from their mothers’ arms and smash them, and they (sc. the babes) will be meat for the beasts. They will slaughter the priests after defiling them within the sanctuaries and go to be with women in the venerable and holy places, in which the mystic, bloodless sacrifice is carried out.²³

Not only was that language describing Saracens military and invented; at times, it was vividly dehumanizing. Clerk of Enghien writes that “in the eastern parts are men” who:

have very strange faces
and are men above the waist
but animals in many strange ways below.
Cruel, bad, stinking, and fierce,
They come from adultery.²⁴

In addition to the theological and historical writings, early medieval literature, as Debra Higgs Strickland underlines, portrays the Saracens as “dogs,” “hounds,” and “giants” with eyes behind their heads and large ears to protect them from bad weather.²⁵

²³ Translation by Benjamin Garstad, *Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius. An Alexandrian World Chronicle* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012) p. 41-48.

²⁴ Quoted in Strickland, *Saracens, Demons, and Jews*. p. 8. Clerk of Enghien was a thirteenth century theologian, but as Strickland notes, he was “redrawing” the early medieval perception of Muslims in his description of them and articulating “what had been a fundamental object of Western fascination.”

²⁵ Ibid, p. 159-60.

During the twelfth century, however, recognition of the Islamic religion and an engagement with the theological underpinnings of Islam began to emerge. Islam by the twelfth century had become “the most far-reaching problem in medieval Christendom.”²⁶ The geopolitical and religious threats posed by Islam had to be encountered directly, and the imminent “crusading” against Muslims required a more thorough understanding of their religion. Reliance on anti-Islamic understandings from the early medieval period, whose writers were generally ignorant of Muslim doctrine, seemed impractical. Alternative strategies, such as directly discussing the Islamic faith and refuting its doctrines, were considered more effective.²⁷ This period witnessed the first translation of Quran from Arabic into Latin by Robert of Ketton (1110-1160). Robert’s translation was commissioned by Peter the Venerable as part of the period’s broader efforts to understand Islam for the purpose of refutation.²⁸

Thus, while Western texts of the early medieval period often lacked theological engagement with Islam, sources of the late medieval era delved into its theological intricacies, sometimes even acknowledging commonalities with Christian beliefs. Thus, the theological dimension ascribed to the Muslim identity in theological language reflected a real and an obvious change. Rather than representing an abnormal or primitive non-Christian coming from a remote desert to pollute Christian soil, the Muslim began to be discussed in a theological language that addressed Islam itself, even if in terms of Christianity. The Muslim other began to be portrayed in the twelfth century as an enemy of Christendom, a scourge of God sent to punish Christians for their sins, a follower of a heretical version of Christianity, or a pagan idolater. This theological turn continued to characterize the language describing the Muslim from the twelfth

²⁶ R.W. Southern, *Western Views*, p. 3.

²⁷ Tolan, *Medieval Christian Perceptions of Islam*, p. xii.

²⁸ See Thomas Burman, “Tafsīr and Translation: Traditional Arabic Qur’ān Exegesis and the Latin Qur’āns of Robert of Ketton and Mark of Toledo” (*Speculum*, 1998), pp. 703-705.

century onward. This theological framing of the Muslim Other not only provided a basis for understanding but also considerably amplified the demonization of Muslims. By portraying the Saracen in starkly religious terms as enemies of Christ and as heretics, Christian leaders likely sought to incite a more effective animosity towards them.²⁹ This religious characterization played a crucial role in justifying specifically the coming military campaigns of the Crusades as existential battles for the soul of Christendom, rather than merely political or territorial disputes.

The Perception of the Saracen and its Influence on Medieval Literature

The theological language of the twelfth century contributed to forming an image for Muslims that was “elaborated upon, reworked, and deployed for different purposes for centuries to come,”³⁰ and that language heavily influenced the literary portrayal of the Muslim Other. The first to develop and publicize that image powerfully were the theologians of the time, who, by demonizing and dehumanizing Muslims, wanted to fuel Christian hostility toward them. The popes, for instance, used this strategy to excite Christians’ passions and direct military campaigns against Muslims. Pope Gregory VII (1015-1085), in an unsuccessful attempt to launch a first crusade, wrote a letter in 1074, trying to rally “all who are willing to defend the Christian faith” to march eastward and save Eastern Christians from the “pagan race” of Muslims.³¹ A few years later, Pope Urban II (1035-1099), in his historic speech at the Council of Clermont in 1095, initiated the First Crusade officially, urging Christians to recapture Jerusalem from the “despised and base race” of Turks and Arabs. He introduced the Muslims to his Christian audience as “pagans,” worshippers of “demons,” and “infidels.”³² Pope Urban II's choice of language here is

²⁹ Tolan, *Saracens: Islam in the Medieval European Imagination*, p. 106.

³⁰ Tolan, *ibid.*, p. 70.

³¹ Oliver J. Thatcher and Edgar Holmes McNeal, *A Source Book for Medieval History* (New York: Scribners, 1905) p. 513.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 517.

meant to resonate with the contemporary Christian audience. By describing Muslims as a “despised and base race,” and further as “pagans,” “worshippers of demons,” and “infidels,” Urban framed the conflict in starkly moral and religious terms, capitalizing on existing fears and prejudices to incite a collective Christian response legitimized by perceived divine mandate. The derogatory image of the Saracen as someone who is alienated from God, a follower of a false religion and a “pseudo-prophet,” persisted and was reinforced more than a century later by Pope Innocent III (1160/61-1216) while launching the Fourth Crusade. In a letter calling Christians to crusade in 1213, Innocent III reminds Christians that for centuries they “possessed nearly all the provinces of the Saracens . . . Then a certain son of perdition, Muhammed the pseudo-prophet, arose, and through worldly allurements and carnal delights, seduced many from the truth. His perfidy has persisted even up to the present time, but we have confidence . . . that the end of this beast approaches.”³³ The sentiments of the popes here illustrate a dichotomy of superiority and inferiority, as they frame Christians as rightful and as bearers of the true faith, while casting Saracens as transgressors aligned with a false cause. Furthermore, such language places Christians at the top of a supposed moral and spiritual order, and the Saracens firmly at its nadir. This doctrine of moral and spiritual superiority significantly made its way into the medieval “popular narratives,” such as *The Song of Roland* and Chaucer’s “The Man of Law’s Tale.”³⁴

The Song of Roland recounts the heroic but tragic tale of Roland, a knight serving under Charlemayn, during the Battle of Roncevaux Pass in 778 CE. The relationship between Christians and Saracens in this poem is marked by betrayal, warfare, and religious conflict. Charlemayn’s army, weary from fighting Saracens in Spain, accepts a peace offer from the

³³ John C. Moore, *Pope Innocent III (1160/61–1216): To Root Up and to Plant* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), p. 210.

³⁴ Gloria Allaire, “Noble Saracen or Muslim Enemy? The Changing Image of the Saracen in Late Medieval Italian Literature” (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1999) p. 174-75.

Muslim king Marsile, who promises to convert to Christianity. However, Ganelon, a Christian knight and stepfather of the poem's hero Roland, betrays the Franks by aiding the Saracens in ambushing Roland and his rear guard. Despite Roland's refusal to call for help in time, he dies a martyr's death after a valiant fight against overwhelming Saracen forces. Charlemayn eventually avenges Roland by defeating the Saracen emir Baligant and conquering the city of Saragossa. Ganelon is later put on trial and executed for his treachery.

Known for its "extraordinary popularity"³⁵ as the "most famous French *geste*,"³⁶ *The Song of Roland* represents to scholars a product of the First Crusade's ideological and cultural environment, reflecting the period's focus on defending Christendom via holy war and portraying the Christian-Muslim conflict as a religiously justified struggle tied to contemporary events.³⁷ In the poem, a clear distinction is drawn between the Christian heroes, portrayed as crusaders on a sacred mission (except for the traitor Ganelon, who some critics think plays the role of a Jew³⁸), and their Muslim opponents, depicted as paganistic Saracens who must be either destroyed or converted due to their perceived moral corruption. Roland's later battlefield cry, "Paynims [Muslims] are wrong, Christians are in the right!" (Sayers, 1030) captures the essence of this ideological conflict, reflecting the same dichotomy found in Pope Urban II's comparison between "a despised and base race, which worships demons" and "a people which has the faith of omnipotent God and is made glorious with the name of Christ."³⁹ Both highlight the perceived moral superiority of Christians over Muslims, justifying the crusade as a divinely sanctioned

³⁵ Steven Adam, "Lines of the Kingdom: Bloodshed and the Establishment of the Frankish Christian Identity in *Chanson de Roland*" (Springer, 2021) p. 492.

³⁶ Isabel DiVanna, "Politicizing National Literature: The Scholarly Debate Around *La chanson de Roland* in the Nineteenth Century" (*IHR*, 2011) p. 112.

³⁷ Laura Ashe, "'A Prayer and a Wacry: The Creation of a Secular Religion in the 'Song of Roland'" (The Cambridge Quarterly, 1999) p. 351.

³⁸ See Brewster Fitz, "Cain as Convict and Convert? Cross-Cultural Logic in the 'Song of Roland'" (*MLN*, 1998) p. 812-15.

³⁹ Thatcher, *A Source Book for Medieval History*, p. 517.

struggle. In the poem, the Saracens sacrifice their own sons, engage in acts of “teachery,” and easily “change” their religion “for one of more advantage” (164-192). Moreover, while God and angels favor and assist the Christians, the Saracens “have no love of God” and instead worship three idols: Apollyon, Termagant, and Mahound. (3264-89) The trinity they revere, however, is cast as false and impotent; the Saracens turn against their idols, cursing and tearing them down when they lose the battle against the Christians:

They curse fair France and Carlon they denounce.

Apollyon’s grotto they make for in a rout,

With ugly insults they threaten him and shout:

“Aha! vile god, why must thou shame us now?

Why let disaster befall this king of ours?

To faithful servants a generous lord art thou!”

They snatch away his sceptre and his crown,

By his hands hang him upon a column bound,

And with thick cudgels belabour him and pound;

Then with their feet trample him on the ground.

Termagant gets his carbuncle torn out;

Into a ditch they boot away Mahound. (2582-2593)

In addition to underscoring their impotence and the futility of their worship, this vivid destruction of the idols reflects a medieval Christian perspective that equates the defeat of the Saracens with the triumph of true faith over heresy. The symbolic violence against these false gods reinforces the idea that their worshippers are morally and spiritually inferior, making their conversion or destruction inevitable within the context of this “holy war.” Furthermore, the

poet's employment of this "infernal" trinity that the Saracens worship reflects how medieval Christian theology sometimes viewed the Islamic religion as a distorted and heretical version of Christianity. (3658)

The poem even emphasizes an ethnic distinction between the Christians and Saracens by using a literal black versus white contrast: "When Roland looks on these accursed tribesmen— / As black as ink from head to foot their hides are, / With nothing white about them but their grinders—" (1932-1934). Here, the Saracens' blackness symbolizes their evil and otherness, while the whiteness of their teeth serves to further heighten this darkness, reinforcing the association of black with evil and strangeness. This symbolism draws from a long cultural and historical tradition in which black represented "death and the underworld." Early Christian theologians expanded this symbolism, connecting blackness with sin. Church fathers notably compared the darkness of sin to that of the "Ethiopian." As a result, blackness—and by extension, black people—became linked with "devils and demons," further deepening the association of black with evil.⁴⁰

Yet, the poet's simultaneous glorification of the Saracens might still constitute a paradox and "an anomaly."⁴¹ The knight Margaris, for example, is praised in terms of chivalry and physical attractiveness:

Ladies all love him, so beautiful he is,
She that beholds him has a smile on her lips,
Will she or nill she, she laughs for very bliss,
And there's no Paynim his match for chivalry. (957-960)

⁴⁰ Lynn Ramey, *Black Legacies: Race and the European Middle Ages*. (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2014) p. 28.

⁴¹ Marianne Ailes, "Chivalry and Conversion: The Chivalrous Saracen in the Old French Epics *Fierabras* and *Otinel*" (*Al-Masaq*, 1996) p. 1.

Baligant is similarly strong, handsome, and even white: “broad in his breast and beautifully formed . . . / White as a flower upon a summer’s morn, / His valour proved in battle o’er and o’er” (lines 3178-3182). The Saracen Emir is even depicted as more powerful than the Christian emperor:

The great Emir is full of power and skill;

On Carlon’s helm he lays a mighty hit,

. . .

King Carlon reels and well-nigh falls with it.

But God wills not he be o’ercome or killed. (3605-3612)

Interpreting this paradoxical representation, Lynn Ramey, for example, suggests that the positive portrayal of the Saracen indicates the poet’s acknowledgement of “a certain similitude and even admiration” for the Saracen.⁴² Suzanne Akbari notes that the Saracen is sometimes glorified and endowed with traits similar to those of Christians, positing that the Saracen’s “bodily morphosis” reflects the poet’s attempt at preparing him for “religious conversion.”⁴³ Employing “attractive, European-looking Saracens,” coupled with the text’s desire for their conversion—“Were he [Baligant] but Christian, God! what a warrior!” (3165)—“makes explicit a longing for assimilation.”⁴⁴

However, the text’s stark demonization of the Saracen challenges these assumptions, making the figure of the Saracen in fact hardly admirable or assimilable. The fact that the Saracens are either killed in battle or baptized by coercion indicates that the text does not

⁴² Lynn Ramey, *Christian, Saracen and Genre in Medieval French Literature: Imagination and Cultural Interaction in the French Middle Ages* (New York: Routledge, 2001), p. 12.

⁴³ Suzanne Akbari, *Idols in the East : European Representations of Islam and the Orient, 1100–1450* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009), p. 4.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 156.

prioritize their assimilation. Despite the text's occasional positive depiction of Saracen individuals, none of these individuals are converted and assimilated into the Christian community, which contradicts the presumed intent of assimilation by the poet. Instead, the main goal of the text seems to be the restoration of Christian power and the oppression, rather than the assimilation, of the Saracens. King Charlemayn achieves this purpose by the end of the story, where all Saracen warriors are killed in battle. The surviving Saracens in the city are forcibly baptized after their "mosques" and "idols" are defiled and destroyed:

The Bishops next the water sanctify;
Then to the font the Paynim folk they drive.
Should Carlon's orders by any be defied
The man is hanged or slain or burned with fire.
An hundred thousand or more are thus baptized
And christened . . . (3675-3685)

Before capturing Saragossa, Charlemayn had already fulfilled this mission of re-establishing Christian dominance and subjugating the Saracens in Cordova, where "In all the city no paynim now appears / Who is not slain or turned to Christian fear" (106-107).

Thus, apparently, the positive portrayal of some Saracen characters serves another purpose. When an adversary matches a hero in strength and valor, he helps define and elevate the hero's greatness. As Dean Miller observes on the relationship between literary characters in storytelling and how other characters shape the hero's experience, "The acts and talents of a series of loosely connected characters can support, or occasionally interfere with, the accepted base patterns of the heroic career. Each character plays the role in his own way."⁴⁵ "European-

⁴⁵ Dean Miller, *The Epic Hero* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), p. 242.

like Saracens” in the poem function similarly. They are employed to reinforce the heroic and godly image of the Christians. Power, nobility, and handsomeness, three European traits, are attributed to the Saracens first to underscore their worthiness as adversaries. Then, this “elevation” of the Saracen characters serves to enhance the heroic stature of the Christian knights. While “debasing the image” of the Saracen army—describing it as an idolatrous group of “black” hordes and “sons of the desert, a wild and godless clan” (3250)—illustrates the poet’s reliance on traditional representations of Muslim otherness to “enhance” Christian “self-images,” his artistic departure through the exaltation of other Saracens breaks from these conventions, though still aimed at achieving the same purpose. By depicting the Saracens as “extremely fierce and rash” in battle, and equal or even superior in some traits to the Christians, the poet creates a dramatic tension that magnifies the significance of the Christians’ holy war and their eventual triumph over the Saracens. King Charles, for instance, is shown as truly heroic and deserving of victory because he overcomes a strong and worthy adversary such as the Emir, which intensifies the narrative of good versus evil. This literary technique not only highlights the martial and moral superiority of the Christians but also reflects the medieval ethos of holy war, where defeating a noble and strong enemy underscores the righteousness of the Christian cause. Thus, glorification of the Saracens is not an admiration of the enemy but a deliberate choice to elevate the Christian victory by making the struggle more challenging and, consequently, more heroic. Additionally, through instances like King Charles surviving the Emir’s deadly strikes and defeating such a more powerful Saracen enemy, the poem emphasizes divine intervention, suggesting that God is on the Christians’ side, ensuring their victory through divine support: “King Carlon reels and well-nigh falls with it. / But God wills not he be o’ercome or killed.”

While *The Song of Roland* occasionally recognizes positive attributes of Muslims despite an overall hostile portrayal, Chaucer's "The Man of Law's Tale" consistently portrays them in a negative manner. This consistent unfavorable representation of Muslims in Chaucer's work demonstrates his reinforcement of medieval theological stereotypes. Despite this difference, both poets share a common purpose: reinforcing the medieval and the crusading ideology through their portrayal of Muslims. *The Song of Roland* predates Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* by nearly three centuries, but the crusading fervor it embodies remained deeply influential throughout the fourteenth century. Despite the temporal gap, the cultural and ideological themes of religious conflict and Christian dominance continued to shape literary and political thought during Chaucer's time. Christopher Tyerman states that in the fourteenth century, crusading remained a dominant and influential force in England, shaping royal policies and noble traditions. Monarchs actively participated in or supported crusades, reinforcing crusading as part of the royal legacy and inspiring the involvement of noble families. The influence of crusading permeated not just the monarchy but also military orders and the broader society, becoming an integral part of Christian identity and political life.⁴⁶ Historian Maurice Keen notes that during Chaucer's time, "The crusade was very much in men's minds in England, and was a live issue in political society, among the highest and most influential in the realm."⁴⁷ With regards to Chaucer's attitude toward the crusades, Keen also highlights how Chaucer draws on the historical context of crusading to shape the martial experience of the Knight in *The Canterbury Tales*. He adds that the historical evidence points to Chaucer's support of crusading ideology. Chaucer's close ties with the Scrope family, known for their active crusading service in Prussia and the eastern Mediterranean, is

⁴⁶ Christopher Tyerman, *England and the Crusades 1095-1588* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1988) p. 229-59.

⁴⁷ Maurice Keen, "Chaucer's Knight, the English Aristocracy and the Crusade" in *Nobles, Knights and Men-At-Arms in the Middle Ages* (Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2003) p. 114.

particularly useful in understanding his portrayal of the Knight.⁴⁸ This connection sheds light on the broader crusading ethos present in Chaucer's work.

However, Chaucer's stance on the crusades remains controversial among scholars, as his attitude appears to shift throughout his works. In "The Man of Law's Tale," though, there is no doubt that his characterization of the Muslim Other is hostile, showing his reliance on conventional and stereotypical representations that were common in the fourteenth-century literature. At that time, Saracens continued to be shown often in exaggerated, negative ways—portrayed as foolish, evil, and "bloodthirsty." These depictions did not come from real knowledge of Islam, but rather reflected Christian contempt and ignorance of the Islamic religion. Also, Saracens were presented as monstrous, "treacherous," and always ready for battle, with little depth or individuality, reinforcing old stereotypes about enemies. While occasionally a Saracen might be shown as worthy of converting to Christianity, they were mostly depicted as dangerous and villainous, "resembling the caricatures that cartoonists produce in war propaganda."⁴⁹ This portrayal resonates in "The Man of Law's Tale." While the poem may critique some Christian ideas through individual characters, it ultimately emphasizes the clear divide between the noble, virtuous Christian and the wicked, primitive, lustful, and idolatrous Saracen.

"The Man of Law's Tale" opens with a Saracen sultan falling for Custaunce, a beautiful Christian maiden and the Emperor of Rome's daughter, after hearing about her from Syrian merchants. The Sultan agrees to convert to Christianity to marry Custaunce, despite Custaunce's reluctance. Meanwhile, enraged by her son's religious conversion, the Sultan's mother vows

⁴⁸ Ibid, p. 168-69.

⁴⁹ Beatrice White, "Saracens and Crusaders: From Fact to Allegory" in *Medieval Literature and Civilization*, ed. Pearsall and Waldron (The Athlone Press, 1969) p. 181-82.

revenge. After Custaunce arrives in Syria for the wedding, a tragic feast at the Sultanness' palace results in the massacre of all Christians present, including her son. Surviving alone, Custaunce is set adrift in a rudderless boat, eventually reaching Northumberland. There, the castle's pagan warden and his wife, Lady Hermengild, take her in. Despite the risk, Custaunce converts both to Christianity. A knight, infatuated with Custaunce and spurned by her, murders Hermengild and frames Custaunce. At her trial, King Alla of Northumberland oversees her case. When the accusing knight perishes instantly after falsely swearing her guilt, the onlookers and King Alla convert to Christianity, and Alla marries Custaunce. His mother, Donegild, manipulates messages about their son Maurice's birth, leading to the banishment of Custaunce and her child. Upon his return, discovering his mother's deceit, Alla kills her. Custaunce faces further peril in a new land but is saved by divine intervention. Meanwhile, Rome retaliates against the massacre in Syria. As a Roman senator rescues Custaunce and Maurice, Alla seeks forgiveness in Rome, where the family reunites. The story concludes with their return to England, Alla's death, and Maurice ascending as the Emperor of Rome.

Before delving into a textual analysis, it is important to point to the fact that Chaucer borrows and translates passages from Pope Innocent III's *De Miseria Humane Conditionis* in "The Man of Law's Tale." His familiarity with the Pope's work indicates the Pope's theological influence on him. This may be viewed as further evidence that, inspired by this theological influence, Chaucer adopts the same medieval theological construction of the Muslim Other when portraying his Saracen characters. Though Innocent III's *De Miseria Humane Conditionis* does not concern or discuss the Saracen or his faith, its moralistic framework is employed by Chaucer to condemn the perceived immorality of the Syrian Saracens in his tale. Thus, while reproducing the traditional image of the Saracen in his tale, Chaucer demonizes his Saracens and condemns

them, specifically their depicted “lustfulness,” within the moralistic mold set by the papal dictum of Innocent III. The more than fifty lines borrowed from Innocent III are basically biblical and are intended to “impart a high moral seriousness,”⁵⁰ which Chaucer uses to draw a sharp distinction between the virtue of Christianity, embodied by Custaunce, and the moral corruption of the Saracens.

The Sultan of Syria—the Soudan of Surrye—epitomizes the vice of lust, a theme that one of Innocent III’s borrowed passages condemns.⁵¹ The Sultan’s irrepressible “lust” and “bisy cure” for Custaunce makes him one of the story’s most vulnerable characters, renouncing his Islamic faith and converting to Christianity without hesitation to marry Custaunce. (Chaucer, 177) Meanwhile, to prevent the complications of conversion, his cunning councilors propose alternative sinister solutions including “magic and abusoun,” but all sound impractical. (211-217) When they express their concern over his conversion, the Sultan insists, “Rather than I lese / Custaunce, I wol be cristened doutelees” (225-226). Chaucer’s depiction of the Sultan and his councilors here is consistent with the views of Muslims that depicted them as lacking moral and religious integrity. Not only does the Sultan readily abandon Islam and convert to Christianity; he also immediately shows willingness to fight Islam for the sake of Christianity, which, in addition to highlighting his own capriciousness, casts a light on the tenuous and precarious nature of his Islamic faith:

I saye by tretis and embassadrye,

And by the Popes mediacioun,

And al the Chirche, and al the chivalrye,

⁵⁰ Block, Edward, “Originality, Controlling Purpose, and Craftsmanship in Chaucer’s Man of Law’s Tale” (*MLA*, 1953) p. 585-86.

⁵¹ See Robert Lewis, “Chaucer’s Artistic Use of Pope Innocent III’s *de Miseria Humane Conditionis* in the Man of Law’s Prologue and Tale” (*MLA*, 1966), p. 489-90.

That in destruccioun of Maumetrye,
And in encrees of Cristes lawe deere,
They been accorded so as ye shal heere. (233-238)

This portrayal of the Sultan's lack of conviction in his faith reflects the broader theological rhetoric of the Middle Ages underscored above. That rhetoric often described Islam as a faith centered on idol worship, with Muslims perceived as followers of false deities and their prophet labeled a "pseudo-prophet." Through the characterization of the Sultan and his easily changeable religion, Chaucer seeks to stress the perceived weakness of Islam while positioning Christianity as the superior and only true religion. Furthermore, by depicting Islam as inherently fragile and its follower as easily swayed, Chaucer taps into the prevailing notion that Islam stood in opposition to Christianity. This adversarial framing served to reinforce a sense of Christian moral and religious superiority, casting the Islamic faith as something that could—and should—be easily defeated. The Sultan's quick conversion and willingness to fight against his former faith highlights this perceived instability, suggesting that Islam lacks the steadfastness and truth of Christianity. By presenting Islam in this light, Chaucer aligns with the period's polemical rhetoric aimed at fortifying the ideological and religious boundaries between Christianity and its perceived enemies.

The Saracens continue to be perceived as inferior even after they convert to Christianity. Despite their conversion, promises to destroy "Maumetrye," and new alliance with the Romans, the Sultan and his court remain depicted as inherently inferior to their Roman Christian counterparts, maintaining their original status as "a base race." This sentiment is vividly expressed through Custaunce expressing sorrow over leaving Rome for "barbarous" Syria: "Allas, unto the Barbre nacioun / I moste anon" (281-82). The sultan's degeneracy, furthermore,

renders such a marital match inequitable, for such a union between a “doghter of holy chirche” and a Saracen is morally unacceptable. As Custaunce departs for Syria, the poem heightens this disapproval with numerous stanzas of poignant lamentation, with Chaucer praying to the stars to prevent this unbalanced and morally dubious union:

O firste meving, cruel firmament,
With thy diurnal sweigh that crowdest ay
And hurlest al from est til occident,
That naturelly wolde holde another way,
Thy crowding set the hevene in swich array
At the beginning of this fierse viage
That cruel Mars hath slain this mariage. (295-301)

Custaunce’s eventual consent to wed King Alla following his conversion indicates that her initial refusal to marry the Sultan was not due to his former “pagan” beliefs, as some readers may assume. Instead, it is evident that the Sultan’s Saracen identity, racial inferiority, and perceived inherent barbarism were the primary reasons leading to her refusal. This indicates that Chaucer seeks through Custaunce to solidify the Christian superiority by casting the Muslim’s inferiority as inherent and irreparable.

The contrasting conversions of the Syrian Sultan and King Alla reflect Chaucer’s broader attitudes toward the Saracens. The Sultan’s conversion is portrayed as insincere, driven solely by his “lust” and desire to marry Custaunce rather than by genuine faith. Despite his conversion, his pagan background and the corruption of his court prevent him from achieving true Christian virtue. By contrast, King Alla’s conversion is portrayed as heartfelt and genuine. His acceptance of Christianity reflects a spiritual awakening, aligning him with Christian values of morality and

righteousness. (680-93) Unlike the Sultan, King Alla is portrayed as fit for conversion, showing “compassioun,” and having a “gentil herte” filled “of pitee, / That from his eyen” runs “the water down” (659-661). Alla’s conversion leads to a stronger moral character, and the difference between his and the Sultan’s transformations reveals Chaucer’s belief that Saracens, regardless of conversion, remain morally and spiritually inferior, while non-Saracen rulers like Alla are capable of true religious transformation.

This narrative hierarchy—where Christians are ranked highest in moral and spiritual value, followed by non-Muslim pagans, with Muslims at the lowest level—reflects the medieval Christian worldview that was shaped by historical realities. While the British Isles were eventually thoroughly converted to Christianity, there was no comparable example of large-scale, long-term conversion of Muslims. This context influences Chaucer’s depiction of two conversion stories in his poem. King Alla, a non-Muslim pagan, is portrayed as capable of genuine Christian conversion and moral growth. Conversely, the Sultan’s conversion is depicted as insincere, driven by desire for Custaunce rather than true faith. Despite his conversion, the Sultan’s Saracen identity marks him as spiritually and racially different, preventing full acceptance into the Christian order. Thus, Chaucer’s narrative does more than highlight religious differences; it establishes a clear hierarchy that places Muslims below even non-Muslim pagans. This structure reflects deeper anxieties about Islam and shows a worldview in which racial and religious hierarchies were inseparable and persistent, even after apparent conversion.

Custaunce’s experience as a symbolic crusader in Syria reflects Chaucer’s critique of the mission of assimilating and converting the Saracens, suggesting that the emperor’s plan to use marriage as a tool for conversion and assimilation is misguided. Despite her discomfort and hesitation, Custaunce submits to her father’s “wille,” accepting her role as a crusader and

viewing her journey to the Middle East as a divine mission, “But Crist that starf for oure redempcioun / So yive me grace his heestes to fulfille” (282-84). However, the mission her “imprudent” father gives her ultimately fails, as the Sultan’s conversion is superficial and short-lived, leading to his downfall. (309) Her quick departure from Syrian, a corrupt land serving as a reflection of its Saracen inhabitants, and the failure of her marriage and assimilation mission seem to challenge the idea that Saracens can be easily “assimilated” into Christian society, revealing a medieval notion that conversion through such means is hardly effective or morally sound. This perspective aligns with Lynn Ramey’s observation that “in both fictional and historical accounts,” converts of the Middle Ages “are surrounded by a miasma of doubt about the efficacy or completeness of their conversions.”⁵² Chaucer’s portrayal of the Sultan’s insincere conversion underscores this skepticism, emphasizing that despite efforts to convert them, Saracens remain beyond redemption and salvation. In contrast, when Custaunce travels to Northumbria, another pagan land, King Alla’s conversion is presented as smooth and sincere, and his embrace of Christianity transforms him into a morally righteous ruler. This stark difference in conversions underscores the deep-seated bias in the poem: Saracens, even after conversion, are seen as unfit for assimilation and incompatible with Christian virtue.

While the Sultan epitomizes lechery, his mother, the Soudanesse, embodies the archetypal “barbarous” Saracen. The Saracen’s “barbarism” is invoked frequently by theological speeches and writings of the crusaders to amplify the perceived threat of the Saracen and therefore justify his subjugation. Chaucer introduces the Soudanesse as a “welle of vices” and a “serpent under femininitee,” conspiring through malice to “confounde / Vertu and innocence” of her Christian enemies and orchestrating the murder of new Christian converts, including her own son. (323-

⁵² Lynn Ramey, *Black Legacies*, p. 31.

362) Her actions are shown as being driven by her loyalty to her Saracen faith, to “Maumetrye” and “Alkaron,” which shows that her savagery against converts and “innocent” Christians is derived from the Islamic nature of her religion. When she gathers her councilors to discuss her response to her son’s conversion, she confirms that it is her commitment to her Islamic beliefs that pushes and allows her to take such cruel and murderous reactions, even at the cost of her own life:

“Lordes,” quod she, "ye knowen everichon

How that my sone in point is for to lete

The holy lawes of oure Alkaron

Yiven by Goddes message Makomete.

But oon avow to grete god I hete:

The lif shal rather out of my body sterte

Than Makometes lawe out of myn herte. (330-336)

It is the Soudanesse’s Saracen religion, therefore, that clearly makes up her peerless villainy. While other characters also seek to harm Custaunce, none are portrayed with the same depth of villainy as the Soudanesse, not even the “theef” who tries to rape Custaunce during her escape from Alla. In addition to being a wicked “serpent under femininitee,” the Soudanesse is described as Satan’s instrument to wreck man’s blisses, a “scorpion,” a “wikked goost,” and a “cursed crone” (370-440). This shows the alignment of Chaucer’s text with the medieval theological narratives whose focus is to stress Islamic baseness and portray the Saracen’s wickedness as unparalleled, a strategy whose original purpose is to rally support to contain the Islamic military advances and restore Christian geopolitical influence.

In summary, medieval literature's portrayal of the Muslim Other evolved significantly, shaped by religious, political, and cultural influences. Early medieval depictions often presented Saracens in exaggerated and hostile terms, reflecting fear and lack of knowledge. However, by the twelfth century, the focus shifted to religious conflict, casting Muslims as theological rivals rather than just foreign enemies. This shift is evident in works like *The Song of Roland* and Chaucer's "The Man of Law's Tale." *The Song of Roland*, for example, portrays Saracens in a complex way—sometimes admired but ultimately demonized to highlight Christian superiority. "The Man of Law's Tale," on the other hand, showcases an irredeemably corrupt Saracen, revealing a crusading rhetoric's profound influence.

The Song of Roland's pattern of vilifying Muslims, while occasionally praising them, was used to justify Christian dominance, especially during the Crusades. Church leaders and writers crafted narratives that emphasized Christian moral and spiritual superiority, reinforcing a collective identity against the Muslim Other. The persistence of these themes in medieval literature shows how religious ideas shaped societal views and how literature both reflected and reinforced those notions of Muslim otherness.

Studying these portrayals helps us understand medieval attitudes toward difference and the lasting impact of religious conflict on culture. The stereotypes in these texts were not just tools of propaganda—they became deeply rooted in European thought, influencing later Christian-Muslim relations. By examining these literary depictions, we gain insight into historical and even modern issues of religious and cultural identity.

Chapter II

Cristopher Marlowe's Turks and Moors: Medieval Legacy and Hostility in the Renaissance

From the Crusades onward, Christian Europe cultivated a polemical image of Islam as the threatening “Other.” As I discussed in the previous chapter, medieval churchmen and storytellers portrayed Muslims (“Saracens”) as infidel villains and followers of false idols. These depictions were rife with hostility and inaccuracy. Islam was cast as a false religion—a satanic counterfeit to Christianity. In medieval literature, Muslims were imagined to worship Muhammad or even fictitious gods like Termagant and Mahound, reflecting a complete misapprehension of Islamic monotheism. These Christian polemics sacrificed accuracy and crafted a vilifying portrayal of Islam. Medieval Christians constructed a set of rhetorical attacks that depicted Muslims as savage and barbaric. These hostile attitudes formed a legacy that survived into the Renaissance and beyond. Historian Gilles Veinstein summarizes the continuity of these hostile depictions from medieval to modern times, stating:

The Christians, first those of the East, then those of the West, had rejected Islam from its first appearance and continued to do so throughout the Middle Ages. Initially, they even denied it the status of religion, seeing it only as a heresy or a form of paganism or idolatry. When they had to consider Islam a religion, they could only denounce it, given that Christianity alone was true. In addition to being false, Islam was also a mortal danger: as a universal religion, it claimed to be superior to Christianity and intended to take its place. It was thus imperative to stand up to Islam and combat it by every means. The very survival of Christianity was at stake, and therefore humanity's salvation. Deep-seated hostility and ignorance combined in the Middle Ages to bring forth and spread the most negative and pejorative image of that religion and of the person of its Prophet . . .

The same aversion and the same prejudices predominated in Christian minds during the modern age as well. Theologians themselves were not generally better informed, or more nuanced in their criticisms, or more sophisticated in their arguments than their medieval predecessors.⁵³

The late medieval hostility toward Islam was fundamentally a defensive reaction. After Islam's rapid expansion in the Middle East and the conversion of many formerly Christian populations, European polemicists felt the need to confront Islam's geopolitical and religious threats. By demonizing Islam and dehumanizing Muslims, they encouraged participation in the Crusades and sought to, as Norman Daniel puts it, "confirm [Christian] members in their faith."⁵⁴ Furthermore, Daniel observes that medieval Christians made their opponent's beliefs seem "not only wrong, but so repugnant as to make conversion unthinkable."⁵⁵ The intention was clear: if Muslims could be depicted as depraved heathens led by a false prophet, then Christianity's truth was reaffirmed and large-scale crusades against Islam justified. By the close of the Middle Ages, the stereotypical Muslim (Saracen) in the European imagination was barbaric, lustful, and heretical—the very antithesis of Christian virtue.

These long-standing polemics did not fade in the early Renaissance, as Veinstein notes above; rather, they evolved and intensified in new cultural, political, and theological settings. As Hugh Goddard explains, from the fourteenth century onward, Islam continued to be perceived as a heretical distortion of Christianity, a position rooted in the earlier writings of John of Damascus and sustained through the late medieval scholastic tradition.⁵⁶ This understanding was reinforced

⁵³ Quoted in John Tolan, et al. *Europe and the Islamic World: A History* (Princeton University Press, 2012) p. 163.

⁵⁴ Norman Daniel, *Islam, Europe, and Empire* (Edinburgh University Press, 1966), p. 3.

⁵⁵ *Ibid*, p. 4.

⁵⁶ Hugh Goddard, "Christian Views of Islam" *St Andrews Encyclopaedia of Theology*. Edited by Brendan N. Wolfe et al., (University of St Andrews, 2024) pp. 4-9.

by humanist readings of classical antiquity, which recast Muslims as modern barbarians. While Christian thinkers no longer relied solely on crusade sermons and ecclesiastical treatises, they still approached Islam as a spiritually dangerous rival.⁵⁷

The Ottoman Empire's rise between the mid-fourteenth and mid-sixteenth centuries gave renewed force to traditional Christian polemics against Islam. Emerging from the fragmented political landscape of Anatolia, the Ottomans expanded steadily into southeastern Europe, posing an increasing threat to Christian territories and awakening long-standing fears and theological hostilities. Christian leaders and theologians viewed the growing Turkish presence in the Balkans that began in the fourteenth century not merely as a military danger but as a spiritual crisis.⁵⁸ The defeat of Christian forces at Nicopolis in 1396 and the Ottomans' continued encroachments into Hungary and Wallachia inspired papal calls for renewed crusading. Norman Housley emphasizes that this era saw "the reemergence of the Ottoman Turks as an expansionist power," which turned attention at Church councils toward organizing a military and religious response.⁵⁹ Significantly, the reassertion of Ottoman power not only invigorated but also contained Christian polemics within the geopolitical context of the empire, rather than Islam more broadly. While earlier medieval hostilities had targeted the religion of Islam in extensive theological terms, the Ottoman threat channeled crusading rhetoric and anxieties into the figure of the Turk and the imperial menace he represented. In effect, Christian hostility was now re-focused on the Ottoman Empire as the immediate and embodied threat to Christendom.

The fall of Constantinople in 1453 dramatically intensified Western fears. It sparked renewed crusading enthusiasm and promoted the planning of "crusading schemes" by many

⁵⁷ Nancy Bisaha, *Creating East and West: Renaissance Humanists and the Ottoman Turks* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006) pp. 32-33.

⁵⁸ See Norman Housley, *Religious Warfare in Europe 1400-1536* (Oxford University Press, 2002) pp. 62-65.

⁵⁹ *Ibid*, p. 62.

“statesmen, soldiers, churchmen, and others.”⁶⁰ Also, for Catholic Europe, the symbolic heart of Eastern Christianity being captured by a Muslim power confirmed long-held apocalyptic anxieties. In response, theologians and preachers framed the conquest as divine punishment, and sermons across Europe invoked apocalyptic rhetoric. Housley notes that this moment “confirmed the crusade as the dominant expression of Catholic religious war,” even if actual military campaigns were weak.⁶¹ Preachers like Giovanni da Capistrano, for example, stirred thousands to join crusades and defend Christendom, leading peasant forces to repel the Ottomans at the siege of Belgrade in 1456. Though often poorly organized, these efforts revealed the persistence of medieval ideals of sacred warfare.⁶²

Renaissance humanists launched a cultural and ideological campaign that defined the Ottomans not only as religious enemies but also as destroyers of civilization, relying heavily on conventional tropes. As Margaret Meserve demonstrates, intellectuals drew on classical sources to portray the Turks as modern Scythians—“an unclean and disgusting race, fornicators indulging in every kind of depravity.”⁶³ Nancy Bisaha underlines too that Renaissance humanist thinkers and intellectuals “deliberately chose medieval topics to generate an interest among contemporaries in crusading against the Ottoman Turks.” The “images and rhetoric” that they used exemplify “the continuity between medieval and Renaissance thought.”⁶⁴ Turks were thus cast as enemies of Christian and Greco-Roman heritage alike. Meserve notes that for many writers, the Ottoman conquests signaled “a new dark age, a second death for Homer and Plato,” suggesting that the fall of Constantinople threatened Europe’s humanist inheritance as much as

⁶⁰ Robert Schwoebel, *The Shadow of the Crescent: The Renaissance Image of the Turk 1453-1517* (St. Martin’s Press, 1967) p.5.

⁶¹ Ibid, p. 63.

⁶² For more about the reactions and responses to the fall of Constantinople, see Schwoebel, *The Shadow of the Crescent*, pp. 1-23.

⁶³ Margaret Meserve, *Empires of Islam in Renaissance Historical Thought* (Harvard University Press, 2008) p. 68.

⁶⁴ Bisaha, *Creating East and West*, p. 13.

its religious identity.⁶⁵ Moreover, the fall of Constantinople prompted a renewed wave of apocalyptic thinking that Christian thinkers began viewing Muslims not merely as enemies, but as signs of divine wrath and disruption. Martha Frederiks writes, “Ottoman occupation of the Balkans and central Europe triggered a flood of pamphlets and publications in Europe dedicated to the ‘Saracen scourge’ or ‘Turkish threat’, vilifying the Turkish ‘other’ and calling for crusading campaigns against the ‘Turks’ (a corpus known as *Turcica*).”⁶⁶ These fifteenth-century writers revived medieval tropes of Islamic barbarism, but now framed them within Renaissance concerns over moral and societal decline. Robert Schwoebel similarly emphasizes how deeply entrenched traditional Christian hostility to the Turks remained and persisted into the fifteenth century. He claims that public orators, theologians, and writers regularly portrayed the Turks as “cruel, of savage habits, and enemies of culture.”⁶⁷ Anti-Turkish propaganda, particularly in early print, amplified these views, depicting the Ottomans as demonic forces and signs of the apocalypse.⁶⁸

Protestant reformers of the sixteenth century inherited these polemical traditions. Martin Luther’s treatises on the Turks exemplify a theologically charged rhetoric and show that he “was not immune to the continuing influence of the medieval attitudes that were predominantly negative toward Muslims.”⁶⁹ He condemned the Turks as “enemies of Christ” and interpreted their military advances and victories as divine tests or punishments for the sins of Christendom. In *Reflections on the 95 Theses* (1518), Luther argued that the rise of the Ottoman Empire was

⁶⁵ Meserve, *Empires of Islam*, p. 66.

⁶⁶ Christian-Muslim Relations: A Bibliographical History, ed. David Thomas and John A. Chesworth (Brill, 2015) p.5.

⁶⁷ Robert Schwoebel, “Coexistence, Conversion, and the Crusade Against the Turks” (*Studies in the Renaissance*, 1965) p. 164.

⁶⁸ *Ibid*, 182-184.

⁶⁹ Roland E. Miller, *Muslims and the Gospel: Bridging the Gap* (Minneapolis: Lutheran University Press, 2005) p. 207.

ordained by God, “who is punishing our sins through the Turks.”⁷⁰ This theme persisted in his later works, such as *On War against the Turk* (1529), where he reiterated that the Turks were agents of divine wrath—“the Turk is the rod of the wrath of the Lord our God and the servant of the raging Devil”—representing an existential threat to Christendom.⁷¹ It is clear that despite theological reform and renewed engagement with scripture, Protestants rarely revised the traditional Christian image of Islam. Instead, their reliance on medieval Latin sources and “medieval attitude regarding heretics” ensured the continuity of hostile tropes into the early modern era.⁷² In this sense, Islam in the Renaissance remained, as in the Middle Ages, the typical “Other,” not just politically threatening but religiously subversive—a target of both fear and contempt.

At the same time, Luther also advocated for engagement with Islamic texts in order to refute them. He himself read the Quran in a Latin translation and urged others to learn about “the writings of Muhammed.” In 1543, three editions of a Latin translation of the Quran were republished, each accompanied by a preface written by Luther. In *On War Against the Turk*, he devoted a significant portion of his work to refuting the Quran and highlighting what he saw as its errors.⁷³ In one of his prefaces to the Quran translation, he encourages everyone to read the Quran to be able to expose its theological foundations. He writes,

But in order to do this [refute Islam], it is also useful to study closely the writings of Muhammad themselves. Accordingly, I have wanted to get a look at a complete text of

⁷⁰ Quoted in Hans J. Hillerbrand, et al., *The Annotated Luther: Christian Life in the World (1517 Media, 2017)* p. 338.

⁷¹ Ibid, p. 353.

⁷² Deanna Ferree Womack, “Protestant Portrayals of Islam: From the Reformation to Modern Missions” (*Interpretation*, 2022) p. 145.

⁷³ See Hillerbrand, et al., *The Annotated Luther*, pp. 358-367.

the Quran. I do not doubt that the more other pious and learned persons read these writings, the more the errors and the name of Muhammad will be refuted.⁷⁴

Not only did Luther encourage other Christians to learn about and refute “Mohammadanism,” but he also strongly opposed the ban on the Quran translation that took place during his time, arguing that Christians should study Islam to effectively counter its doctrines.⁷⁵

Luther’s opposition to Islam was closely linked to his broader critique of the Catholic Church. He often likened the Turk to the Pope, portraying both as tools of evil and as parallel threats to the true Christian faith. He stated, “But just as the pope is the Antichrist, so the Turk is the very Devil incarnate. Our prayer, and the prayer of Christendom, is against both—that they would go down to hell.”⁷⁶ By condemning both Muslims and Catholics, Luther cast them as sources of corruption weakening Christendom from within and without. This alignment of the traditional Muslim enemy with Catholics reflects the early Protestant tendency to maintain medieval anxieties regarding Islam while simultaneously reframing the conflict within the emerging Christian religious conflict of the sixteenth century. This reveals how Protestantism initially accepted the old view of Muslims as enemies but adjusted it by treating Catholics as equally corrupt and harmful.

By the sixteenth century, under rulers like Selim I and Suleiman the Magnificent, the Ottoman Empire reached the height of its power, ruling over vast territories in Europe, the Middle East, and North Africa. Their dominance over trade routes, their victories against the Habsburgs, and their naval supremacy in the Mediterranean made them the unrivaled political and religious adversaries of Christian Europe. As Paul Coles notes, the influence exercised by the

⁷⁴ Sarah Henrich and James L. Boyce “Martin Luther,” p. 263.

⁷⁵ Jon Balserak, “The Renaissance Impulses that Drove Theodor Bibliander to Publish *Machumetis Saracenorum*” (The Muslim World, 2017) pp. 690-91.

⁷⁶ Hans J. Hillerbrand, et al., *The Annotated Luther*, p. 363.

Ottoman sultans in the sixteenth century was “absolute and compelling beyond the wildest hopes and imagination of contemporary European rulers.”⁷⁷ This power was deeply unsettling to Christian observers.

In *Islam in Britain, 1558-1685*, Nabil Matar emphasizes that during the sixteenth century, Europeans, including the British, saw Muslims as greatly more powerful and superior, while seeing themselves as “inferior.”⁷⁸ Muslims in the sixteenth century were dominant, particularly due to their military strength and domination of the Mediterranean, by which they could seize Europeans, enslaving thousands, including Britons, and conquer European territories. This enabled Muslims to hold the upper hand and instill fear among Europeans, who felt “humiliated,” exposed, and sometimes forced into submission.⁷⁹

While the Ottomans’ conquests and Islamic identity revived deeply rooted Christian hostilities, their sustained power also provoked a more pervasive reaction: anxiety. European responses were not limited to theological condemnation or crusading rhetoric; political and cultural responses, too, increasingly reflected a profound unease at the comparative weakness of Christendom. The size of Ottoman military success, administrative order, and imperial unity unsettled European observers, who feared that their own political and religious disunity and moral decline rendered them incapable of effective resistance. Nowhere is this anxiety more vividly captured than in the words of Ogier Ghiselin de Busbecq, the Habsburg ambassador to the Ottoman court, who lamented in 1555:

I tremble when I think of what the future must bring when I compare the Turkish system with our own... On their side are the resources of a mighty empire, strength unimpaired,

⁷⁷ Paul Coles, *The Ottoman Impact on Europe* (Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968) p. 39.

⁷⁸ Nabil Matar, *Islam in Britain, 1558-1685* (Cambridge University Press, 1998) p. 3.

⁷⁹ Ibid, p. 4.

experience and practice in fighting, a veteran soldiery, habituation to victory, endurance of toil, unity, order, discipline, frugality, watchfulness. On our side is public poverty, private luxury, impaired strength, broken spirit, lack of endurance and training.⁸⁰

Busbecq's words reveal the contrast between a self-assured Ottoman system and what he saw as a decaying Europe. The anxiety here is about the Turks' discipline, vigor, and unity—qualities Europeans feared they had lost. Thus, the Ottoman Empire not only revived Christian hostility but also triggered a crisis of confidence, forcing Europe to see its vulnerabilities through the mirror of a powerful and united rival.

English Responses to the Ottoman Empire and Islam from the Fourteenth Through the Sixteenth Centuries

Despite different domestic political challenges across these centuries, the English public—including members of mercantile, spiritual, and noble classes—remained deeply aware of and responsive to the Ottoman Empire's power and presence in Europe. News of Ottoman conquests spread widely through chroniclers, travelers, and returning pilgrims, creating a sense of urgency. English merchants, driven by profit and curiosity, traded in eastern Mediterranean markets, maintaining ties with Muslim regions despite religious tensions.⁸¹

Religious zeal also shaped responses. In the pre-Reformation period, crusade preachers and papal agents toured England and Scotland, calling for donations and spiritual support to counter the Turks. Indulgences were offered for financial contributions, and people were urged to “take the cross” or provide material aid in defense of the Christian world. These efforts gained a growing interest, seen in indulgence purchases and donations.⁸² This early public zeal also took

⁸⁰ Quoted in Daniel Vitkus, *Turning Turk: English Theatre and the Multicultural Mediterranean, 1570-1630* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2003) p. 19.

⁸¹ Schwoebel, *The Shadow of the Crescent*, pp. 134-135.

⁸² *Ibid*, pp. 135-136.

the form of direct military involvement. Individual Englishmen took up arms in direct response to these appeals. English and Scottish knights, soldiers, and clerics fought alongside other Christians in the Levant, notably during the defense of Rhodes in 1444. The Order of St. John played a key role, both in rallying support at home and engaging the Ottomans abroad.⁸³ Though state action was limited, these examples show a vibrant, committed public response to the Ottoman threat, marked by zeal and action.

Meanwhile, in the late fourteenth century, Richard II (1377-1399) was directly approached by crusade enthusiasts like Philippe de Mézières, who aimed to inspire an Anglo-French alliance to reclaim the Holy Land. In his *Letter to King Richard*, de Mézières urged the king to end conflicts within Christendom and support the crusading cause. He imagined a renewed alliance between the French and English monarchs as a guiding light for all Christendom: “and by their light all Catholic peoples [toutes les generacions des cretiens catholiques], who until now through war and division have wandered in darkness, will see clearly the straight way leading to Jerusalem.”⁸⁴ Charles VI of France (1380-1422) even suggested that he and Richard II “should undertake a crusade to succour our fellow Christians and to liberate the Holy Land,” indicating how these high-level diplomatic ambitions tried to revive crusading unity.⁸⁵ However, domestic issues in England and the challenge of coordinating alliances hindered the progress.⁸⁶

English rulers from Henry IV (1399-1413) to Henry VI (1422-1461) responded to the Ottoman Empire in a less direct and decisive manner than their European counterparts. Due to England’s geographical distance from direct Ottoman threats and, most importantly, its focus on

⁸³ Ibid, p. 137.

⁸⁴ Mastnak, *Crusading Peace*, pp. 333-337.

⁸⁵ Ibid, p. 337.

⁸⁶ Ibid, pp. 335-336.

supporting “royal wars” and dealing with internal conflicts, involvement in anti-Ottoman efforts was more emotional and diplomatic than military.⁸⁷ Monarchs such as Henry IV, Henry V (1413-1422), Henry VI, and Edward IV (1461-1470) expressed intentions to lead or support crusades but often saw domestic instability as a barrier to action.⁸⁸ However, as Tomaz Mastnak points out, not a single monarch in Europe “had overcome the Latin Christian animosity toward non-Christians (the Muslims in particular) or rejected the idea of the crusade.”⁸⁹ These monarchs supported papal fundraising, gave aid to refugees from Ottoman territories, and encouraged the efforts of military orders like the Knights of St. John.⁹⁰ Yet, this hostility did not always lead to direct action.

During Henry VII’s reign (1485-1509), crusading vision and rhetoric against Muslims remained influential. In 1507, Henry VII reached out to Pope Julius II and King Ferdinand of Aragon, proposing the deployment of English forces against North African Muslim powers. His plan included sending English archers to assist Ferdinand in capturing Muslim-controlled ports and even suggested a broader crusade to reclaim Jerusalem. Although these actions were largely motivated by diplomatic goals, particularly to secure a marriage alliance with Spain, they underscore the enduring appeal of the crusading ideal at the English court.⁹¹

Charlotte Gauthier argues that Henry VII’s involvement was more than symbolic. In fact, Henry VII actively pursued participation in a continental anti-Ottoman alliance, especially after the death of his son Arthur in 1502 disrupted his dynastic plans.⁹² He entered into negotiations

⁸⁷ Jacques Theron and Erna Oliver, “Changing Perspectives on the Crusades” (*HTS Teologiese Studies*, 2018) p. 3.

⁸⁸ Schwoebel, *The Shadow of the Crescent*, p. 138.

⁸⁹ Tomaz Mastnak, *Crusading Peace: Christendom, the Muslim World, and Western Political Order* (University of California Press, 2002) p. 279.

⁹⁰ Schwoebel, *The Shadow of the Crescent*, pp. 138-139.

⁹¹ Charlotte Gauthier, “King Henry VII and the Case of the Missing Treaty: Anglo-Hungarian Crusading Diplomacy Reconsidered” (*Historical Research*, 2024) pp. 225-226.

⁹² *Ibid*, pp. 226-228.

with Ladislaus II of Hungary, resulting in a treaty that explicitly framed their alliance in terms of resisting Ottoman expansion. This proposed alliance employed traditional crusading rhetoric—calling for mutual defense against the “Mohammedans, thirsty for our blood”—and shows that Henry viewed the Ottoman threat as a matter of Christian unity and international stability.⁹³ Henry VII’s diplomacy involved plans to support other Christian monarchs fighting the Turks. This demonstrates that the concept of crusade diplomacy was still an active and strategic principle in Henry’s foreign policy.

A final shift took place during the reign of Henry VIII (1509-1547). During his reign, which coincided with a time marked by an increased threat from the Ottomans, Henry VIII likely adopted the traditional European Christian perspective of viewing the Ottomans as both a religious and political menace. Nevertheless, his policies consistently favored England’s interests over the ideals of a crusade. His alliances, which shifted between France and the Holy Roman Empire, were more concerned with territorial disputes than with countering the Ottoman expansion, even at critical moments such as the 1529 siege of Vienna. His stance mirrored a broader English shift from religious unity to secular governance. Although he maintained anti-Ottoman rhetoric, Henry regarded the Turkish threat as less important than his dynastic goals and domestic issues, especially during his separation from Rome. His rule effectively marked the end of crusading as a central element of English foreign policy, as national interests permanently replaced the medieval concept of a united Christendom’s defense.⁹⁴

During Elizabeth I’s rule from 1558 to 1603, England’s interactions with the Ottoman Empire underwent significant transformation. Unlike the monarchs before her, Elizabeth saw the Ottomans as valuable partners in her larger conflict against Catholic Europe, especially Spain.

⁹³ Ibid, pp. 229-230.

⁹⁴ See Roger Lockyer and Peter Gaunt, *Tudor and Stuart Britain 1485-1714* (Routledge, 2019) pp. 49-53.

After being excommunicated by Pope Pius V in 1570, Elizabeth felt no obligation to follow papal calls for a crusade. Her strategies pragmatically shifted towards the East. She initiated correspondence with the Ottoman sultans. Their cooperation provided English merchants with diplomatic protections and trading privileges within Ottoman territories. As Nabil Matar notes, Elizabeth highlighted their mutual opposition to Catholic “idolatry” and prioritized trade over warfare in these communications.⁹⁵ Yet, despite—or even because of—this diplomatic turn, deep-rooted anxieties about the Turk persisted. Among Elizabethans, the dominant sentiment remained one of fear and apprehension, inherited from earlier traditions.

Long before Elizabeth’s diplomatic shift, English intellectual and religious reactions to the Ottoman presence were already well-established, often portraying the Turk as a divine scourge or using him as a metaphor for immorality. For example, in 1534, Thomas More’s *Dialogue of Comfort Against Tribulation* presented a more conventional and allegorical depiction of the Turk. Writing from the Tower of London, More used the imagined Ottoman invasion of Hungary to explore spiritual resilience under persecution. The Turk is described in stark terms: “this terrible thing, his mighty strength and power, his high malice and hatred, and his incomparable cruelty, with robbing, spoiling, burning, and laying waste all the way that his army cometh.” Yet, More explains, this terror is allowed by God as a response to Christian sins: “the Turk is in few years wonderfully increased, and Christendom on the other side very sore decayed. And all this worketh our unkindness, with which God is not content.”⁹⁶ More also employed the metaphor of the Turk in religious polemics, in which the Turk functions as a mirror for Christian failings. In the *Dialogue*, he equates heretics (Lutherans) and Turks, “there is no born Turk so cruel to Christian folk, as is the false Christian that falleth from the faith,” and

⁹⁵ Nabil Matar, *Islam in Britain, 1558-1685* (Cambridge University Press, 1998) pp. 123-125.

⁹⁶ Romuald I. Lakowski, “Thomas More, Protestants, and Turks” (*The Ben Jonson Journal*, 2000) pp. 200-202.

elsewhere More claims that heretics are “in maner worse” than the Turks.⁹⁷ Protestants, on the other hand, turned this argument around, using the metaphor of the Turk similarly as a marker of falsehood and faithlessness. William Tyndale (1494-1536) accused More of hypocrisy, arguing that “More is ready to kill a Turk... that believeth better in God than he.”⁹⁸

By the mid-sixteenth century, other Protestant views of the Ottoman Empire were shaped by a providential perspective. In 1546, Peter Ashton translated Paolo Giovio’s *Commentario de le cose de’ Turchi*, which depicted the Ottomans as a divine tool to chastise a sinful Europe. This idea was even more strongly echoed in John Foxe’s *Acts and Monuments* (1563), where he included a section called “The Turks’ Story” to illustrate Islamic conquests as “scourge of God.”⁹⁹ Foxe described the Turks as “the wicked and cursed seed of Ishmael,” portraying their triumphs as a result of Catholic corruption.¹⁰⁰ As Christopher Toenjes observes, Foxe incorporated the Ottomans into Protestant historiography to bolster anti-Catholic reform, making the Turk a symbolic agent of “divine justice” against papist Europe.¹⁰¹

Such views continued throughout Elizabeth’s reign. In his 1593 sermon *God’s Arrow Against Atheists*, Henry Smith presents a highly critical and negative view of Islam and its prophet Muhammad. He describes “Mahomets religion” as “a patched” one, “mixt partly with Judaisme, partly with Gentilisme, partly with Papisme, and partly with Christianisme.”¹⁰² Islam, he continues, is a “carnall” religion that focuses on “naturall delights and corporall pleasures,” such as sensual rewards in paradise, multiple wives, and immoral behavior, comparing it to

⁹⁷ Matthew Dimmock, *New Turkes: Dramatizing Islam and the Ottomans in Early Modern England* (Routledge, 2016) p. 27.

⁹⁸ Ibid, p. 31.

⁹⁹ Ibid, p. 80.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid, p. 44.

¹⁰¹ Christopher Toenjes, *Islam, the Turks and the Making of the English Reformation: The History of the Ottoman Empire in John Foxe’s Acts and Monuments*, (Peter Lang, 2016) p. 13.

¹⁰² Henry Smith, *The Sermons of Mr. Henry Smith, Gathered into One Volume Printed According to His Corrected Copies in His Life Time; Whereunto is Added, Gods Arrow Against Atheists* (London:, 1631) p. 43.

Epicureanism and Atheism.¹⁰³ He accuses the prophet of spreading Islam through violence and fraud, enforcing harsh laws that punish dissent with death and promise paradise for killing enemies. Moreover, he dismisses the Quran as a false text, containing “twelve thousand lyes, and the rest was truth by all likelihood very little.”¹⁰⁴ For Smith, Islam is not just a heretical religion; it is morally flawed and completely opposed to true Christianity. Similarly, Richard Knolles’ *The Generall Historie of the Turkes* (1603), describes Muslims as “cruell infidels,” whose religion is simply a “grosse and blasphemous doctrine.” Knolles assumes that “Mahomet” brought about “the great destruction of mankind,” and portrays the Turks as “the champions of Mahometane superstition” and “an obscure and base people.”¹⁰⁵

English literature was not immune to the prevailing anxiety and contempt toward Islam and the figure of the Turk. Elizabethan drama, in particular, absorbed and reflected the long-standing Christian hostilities toward Muslims, channeling them in ways that reflected the changing relationships fashioned under the Queen’s auspices. Indeed, the Elizabethan period witnessed a notable surge in plays dealing with “Turk” themes and characters. Between 1579 and 1624, over sixty such plays were produced. More than thirty plays featuring Muslim characters and Islamic themes or settings were produced in the last decade of the sixteenth century alone.¹⁰⁶ This high production of plays coincided with both the the height of Ottoman power and the emergence of the Turk—now often representative of all Muslims—as a character deeply intertwined with the English reality and imagination.¹⁰⁷ The Turk was increasingly perceived not

¹⁰³ Ibid, pp. 48-49.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid, pp. 50-51.

¹⁰⁵ Richard Knolles, *The Generall Historie of the Turkes from the First Beginning of that Nation to the Rising of the Othoman Familie...* (London, 1621) pp. 1-13.

¹⁰⁶ See Mark Hutchings, “The ‘Turk Phenomenon’ and the Repertory of the Late Elizabethan Playhouse” (Early Modern Literary Studies, 2007) pp. 1-8; and Jonathan Burton, *Traffic and Turning: Islam and English Drama, 1579-1624* (University of Delaware Press, 2005) pp. 257-58.

¹⁰⁷ For more about the term “Turk” and its associations, see Nandini Das, et. al, *Keywords of Identity, Race, and Human Mobility in Early Modern England* (Amsterdam University Press, 2021) p. 276.

only as a foreign adversary, but as a symbol of religious otherness and existential threat. The Elizabethan stage thus became a critical space in which the Muslim Other was not only represented but actively reimagined and filtered through layers of English anxiety and cultural apprehension.

***Tamburlaine the Great* (c.1587)**

It is within this dramatic tradition that Christopher Marlowe crafted his Muslim characters in *Tamburlaine*. Though innovative in form and language, the play nonetheless adheres to the deep-rooted Christian polemical tradition—a tradition shaped by hostility and hatred that consistently cast Islam as the antithesis of Christianity. In *Tamburlaine*, Marlowe engages with this tradition not by situating Christendom directly against Islam, but by dramatizing Islam's internal conflicts and inner fragmentation. Tamburlaine, coded as a heretical Muslim, is depicted as violently conquering fellow Muslim rulers, thus destroying the Islamic world from within rather than from without. This dramatic strategy allows Marlowe to contain the threat of Islam without staging a direct Christian-Muslim conflict. Instead, he stages Islam as self-destructive, fractured, and internally unstable.

By portraying Muslims fighting each other, Marlowe reassures and unifies his English audience, enabling them to view Islam as an external, foreign force weakened by its own divisions. This dramatic maneuver reflects Marlowe's underlying anxiety about the Ottoman Empire—a fear deeply embedded in the English imagination after decades of an unsettling Turkish presence in Europe. In punishing and humiliating the Muslim world through Tamburlaine's character, Marlowe echoes the traditional hostilities toward Islam while projecting his own apprehensions about its global power. What is especially striking is the way Marlowe dramatizes Islamic schism and visualizes it as both a political and theological vulnerability. In

presenting a world where Muslim rulers are defeated by a fellow “infidel,” Marlowe symbolically neutralizes the Islamic threat, presenting its downfall as entertainment and reassurance for his Christian audience.

Tamburlaine is partly based on the story of Timur, a fourteenth-century Central Asian ruler also known as Timur the Lame or Tamerlane. The first part chronicles the journey of Tamburlaine, a low-born Scythian shepherd who evolves into a formidable warlord. His endless ambition drives him to conquer vast territories, including Persia, Turkey, and regions of Africa and the Middle East. The play illustrates his ascent to power through military prowess, cunning, and disregard for moral and religious limitations. Tamburlaine is depicted as a larger-than-life figure who defies both earthly and divine authority. Marlowe’s eloquent language and dramatic monologues underscore themes of dominance, conquest, and human determination.

Tamburlaine’s brutality, exemplified by his imprisonment of his adversary Bajazeth, who is based on Sultan Bayezid I (1389-1402), reveals his merciless nature. The play also delves into the conflict between Tamburlaine’s humble beginnings and his growing aspirations, portraying him as both a heroic and tyrannical figure.

Part II of the play continues to depict the expansion of his empire but shifts its focus to the consequences of his ambition and his battle with mortality. His triumphs begin to feel hollow as he confronts challenges such as his sons’ rebellion, the loss of his cherished wife Zenocrate, and his own deteriorating health. Zenocrate’s demise marks a pivotal moment, exposing a more vulnerable side of Tamburlaine and demonstrating that even he is susceptible to grief. The play concludes with Tamburlaine’s angry defiance of death, including his burning of the Quran and challenge to the gods, but ultimately he cannot escape his mortal fate. His final moments are filled with fury and frustration as he realizes that no amount of power can shield him from death.

Marlowe makes a multifaceted portrayal of a man whose boundless ambition brings both greatness and ruin, prompting audiences to contemplate the cost of ambition and the vulnerability of even the mightiest leaders. The play leaves an enduring impression about the boundaries of human power and the inevitable downfall that accompanies excessive ambition, while drawing inspiration from the historical legacy of Timur the Lame.

Due to its thematic richness and complexity, *Tamburlaine* has consistently attracted scholarly attention. Scholars such as Daniel Vitkus, Matthew Dimmock, and Emily Bartels have probed the play's multifaceted representations, exploring its reflection of religious skepticism, depiction of divine will and religious orthodoxy as antiquated and "unresponsive," and its dramatization of English "anxieties" about Christianity's confrontation with Islam during the sixteenth century. Additionally, these scholars have examined the play's dramatization of the English "imperial fantasies" embodied by Tamburlaine's ambitions of dominance and his subjugation of the play's Muslim characters.¹⁰⁸ Tamburlaine, critics assume, is an outright Christian agent of divine retribution, a "scourge and wrath of God," as he calls himself, sent to punish non-Christian agents.¹⁰⁹ These interpretations underscore the play's wider significance in the early modern discourses on faith, authority, and cross-cultural encounters.

A closer reading of the play, however, reveals that Marlowe voices English anger and frustration with "the Turkish menace" through an intra-Islamic division and Muslim-on-Muslim violence. Rather than portraying Islam as a monolithic enemy, Marlowe crafts a narrative that capitalizes on sectarian divisions within Islam itself, redirecting attention to the fractures existing within the Islamic nations. By doing so, *Tamburlaine* not only expresses Marlowe's own

¹⁰⁸ See Vitkus, *Turning Turk*, pp. 45-57; Dimmock, *New Turkes*, pp. 136-139; and Emily Bartels, "The Double Vision of the East: Imperialist Self-Construction in Marlowe's *Tamburlaine*, 'Part One'" (*Renaissance Drama*, 1992) pp. 3-8.

¹⁰⁹ See Ipek Uygur, "Tamburlaine the Great: 'The Scourge and Wrath of God'" (*Procedia*, 2014) pp. 155-159.

knowledge of Islam as a playwright but also mirrors a broader contemporary Protestant engagement with the religion—particularly the belief that knowledge of Islamic theology was necessary for refutation and containment.

The growing influence of the Ottoman Empire in the sixteenth century compelled Christians to engage more deeply with the Ottoman culture and history, driven by a mixture of fascination, fear, hatred, and envy. According to Samuel Chew,

Englishmen of average education and intelligence had in mind the conquests of Tamburlaine and his humiliation of Sultan Bajazet . . . the fall of Constantinople and the ruthless cruelty of Mahomet the Conqueror; the alternately advancing and retreating tides of Turkish forces in the Balkans . . . the repulse of the Turks from Malta; . . . the growth of piracy in the Barbary states; the hostility of the Turks and Persians; England's establishment of diplomatic commercial relations with the Porte; and the grim fact that largely because of the rivalries of the Christian states no definite and decisive barrier had yet been set up against Islam.¹¹⁰

This preoccupation with the figure of the Turk—his threat and power—also led English Christians to engage with Islamic thought and theology for a couple of reasons. Protestants studied Islam and used it as a means to “differentiate themselves from Catholics.”¹¹¹ By portraying both Muslims and Catholics as adversaries of true Christianity, often equating them as two faces of the same anti-Christ, Protestant Reformers sought to reinforce their Protestant identity and position themselves as the sole adherents of authentic Christian faith. We have seen this in Martin Luther's frequent juxtaposition of the Turk with the Pope, where he framed both as

¹¹⁰ See Jerry Brotton, *The Sultan and the Queen: The Untold Story of Elizabeth and Islam* (Viking, 2016) pp. 5-6; and Samuel Chew, *The Crescent and the Rose: Islam and England During the Renaissance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1937) pp. 103-104.

¹¹¹ Mehmet Karabela, *Islamic Thought Through Protestant Eyes* (Routledge, 2021) p. 1.

threats to Christianity. Also, Protestant Reformers actively encouraged the study of Islam and the Qur'an, not out of admiration, but with the intention of exposing its perceived errors.¹¹²

This pursuit of knowledge about Islam may have extended beyond mere basic theological studies and into the study of intra-Islamic divisions, particularly the Shi'ite-Sunni sectarian conflict—a division that had geopolitical implications, especially in the context of the ongoing Persian-Ottoman wars of the sixteenth century. The Shi'ite-Sunni schism began in the seventh century after the Prophet Muhammad's death. It stems from a disagreement over the prophet's rightful successor: Sunnis support leadership based on the Muslim community's consensus, starting with Abu Bakr as the first Caliph, whereas Shi'ites maintain that only Ali, Muhammad's cousin and son-in-law, and his lineage were divinely chosen to guide the Muslim world. Over time, this religious disagreement evolved into political, social, and military strife, exemplified by the rivalry between the Shi'ite Safavid Empire in Persia and the Sunni Ottoman Empire during the early modern era. Shi'ite leaders often challenged Sunni dominance by reshaping religious teachings and understandings—with some sects within the Shi'ite doctrine even questioning the authenticity of the “Sunni Quran” and the prophecy of Muhammed, though these views are considered extreme—and making Shi'ism the official state faith, while Sunni rulers, especially the Ottomans, saw Shi'ites as both heretics and political dangers.¹¹³ This animosity has fueled

¹¹² Ibid, pp. 1-4.

¹¹³ Ali Shah, a widely recognized Shi'ite scholar, assumes that there is evidence that the Quran is distorted. See Ali Shah, *Alanwar Alnu'manyah* [The Lights of Alnu'man] (Beirut: Ala'alami Press, 1995) p. 357; and Al-Kulainin, another famous Shi'ite scholar, highlights that after the prophet's death, Fatimah, his daughter, whom Shi'ites revere, received another holy scripture through revelations as an alternative to the Quran. See Ali Al-Kulainin, *Al-Kafi* [The Sufficient] (Beirut: Manshurat Alfajr, 2007) pp. 141-142; and on the question on Muhammed's prophecy by some Shi'ites, see Ibn Taimiah, *Minhaj Alsunah Alnabawya* [The Curriculum of Prophet Muhammed's Teachings], (Riyadh: Mohammed Bin Saud Islamic University Press, 1986) p. 27, and Ibn Hazm, *Alfasl fi Alahwaa wa Alaqual wa Alnehal* [An Explanation of the Different Sects and Religions in Islam] (Agadir: Alsalam International Library, 1902) p. 140.

wars, ideological debates, and reciprocal persecution, influencing the Islamic world's geopolitical landscape since the seventh century.

Protestant engagement with Islam by the seventeenth century indicates that acquiring knowledge of the schism was possible. As Mehmet Karabela argues in *Islamic Thought Through Protestant Eyes*, seventeenth-century Lutheran theologians and academics not only learned Arabic and engaged with Islamic theology but also produced more work on Islamic studies than their Catholic counterparts. Their study of Islam included probing into sectarianism within the religion. Karabela highlights that their motivations to study Arabic and Islamic theology included “the expansion of the Ottoman Empire into Europe as well as the collapse of the relative religious unity of Christianity that occurred during the Reformation and after the Thirty Years’ War.”¹¹⁴ Although there is little direct evidence of a Protestant theological effort to study intra-Islamic divisions in the sixteenth century, the same historical pressures—specifically the rise of the Ottoman Empire and the increasing division among Christendom—existed in the late sixteenth century. It is highly probable that Protestants of Marlowe’s time were already engaging with intra-Islamic schisms, whether or not they were aware of these schisms as such. *Tamburlaine*, in this context, can thus be read as more than just a reflection of English fears of Ottoman expansion—it also reveals an intellectual awareness of Islam’s internal conflicts and an attempt to frame them within a Christian polemical discourse.

The evidence—both biographical and textual—that Marlowe had a conception of the Islamic sectarian schism, which he dramatizes in *Tamburlaine* to destabilize the Islamic world and undermine the Turk’s religion, is compelling. First, through his protagonist, Tamburlaine, Marlowe reconstructs a version of the historical Timur the Lame, or Tamurlaine (1336-1405)—a

¹¹⁴ Karabela, *Islamic Thought*, p. 4.

famous fourteenth-century Muslim ruler who called himself “The Sword of Islam.” Timur was widely known as a formidable conquerer as well as one of the world’s most extreme tyrants. He founded the Timurid Empire in Central Asia, governing from his capital in Samarkand. He claimed descent from Genghis Khan, aiming to revive the Mongol Empire under an Islamic framework. He led ruthless campaigns frequently targeting other Muslim countries, such as the Ottomans, Mamluks, and Delhi Sultanate. His conquests extended across Persia, Mesopotamia, India, Anatolia, and the Levant, marked by widespread devastation, including the infamous sack of Baghdad in 1401 and his victory over Ottoman Sultan Bayezid I in 1402.

Timur’s devotion to Islam was obscure and inconsistent; some biographical information associates him with shamanism, a religious tradition whose subjects claim personal connections with supernatural powers. He practiced the same tradition as he grew up, seeking to “foster a personal myth, exaggerating the difficulties of his youth, [and] laying claims to supernatural powers.”¹¹⁵ His association with shamanism was one reason why other Muslims did not consider him a true Muslim.¹¹⁶ At some point in his life, he claimed himself to be a defender and protector of the Shi’ite nations. When he was in Persia, he claimed to the Persians that he was on a holy war mission, determined to destroy the Sunni people. He later fulfilled this promise by massacring citizens of Damascus “on account of their hostility to the Shi’a.” His tombstone in Samarkand now features an invented family tree tracing his lineage back to Ali, the cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet Muhammad, further reinforcing his Shi’ite affiliations.¹¹⁷

Whether Marlowe had direct access to all this historical and biographical details of Timur is uncertain, but the evidence that he was well-informed about the Quran and Islamic theological

¹¹⁵ Justin Marozzi, *Tamerlane: Sword of Islam, Conqueror of the World* (HarperCollins, 2005) p. 3.

¹¹⁶ Ibid, pp. 19-20.

¹¹⁷ Ibid, pp. 55-56.

debates is considerable. Researchers like Jeff Dailey argue that Marlowe accessed information on the Quran and Islamic theological schism through Elizabethan England's intellectual and political channels. The available Latin translations, like Robert of Ketton's 12th-century Quran republished in 1542, and English pamphlets on Islam would have informed him. According to Dailey, Marlowe was also likely influenced by Nicholas of Cusa's *Cribratio Alkorani*, which analyzed the Quran's Christian and Jewish influences, possibly introduced to him through Giordano Bruno.¹¹⁸ Furthermore, his suspected spying for Francis Walsingham might have provided Ottoman and Islamic insights, and Walter Raleigh's focus on Turkish history, alongside English translations of European works on Islam, enriched his knowledge. This knowledge about Islamic history and theology apparently shaped Marlowe's interest in "non-Christian religion" and inspired him to "use controversial religious themes in his dramas."¹¹⁹

Most striking, Marlowe scholars widely acknowledge that his primary historical source for *Tamburlaine* was George Whetstone's *The English Myrror* (1586), a book that recounts intra-Islamic disputes shaping Islamic empires during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. The book documents the story of Ismail I (1487-1524), the founder of the Safavid Shi'ite dynasty of Iran, who, driven by his hostility toward the Sunni nations, "named him self a Prophet, & published an Alcoran contrary to *Mahomets*." *He rejected the Sunni doctrine of Mohammed's prophecy and presented an alternative Islamic scripture, further assembling* "many people, by whose aide" he wanted to fight and overthrow the Turkish Empire, his political and religious rival.¹²⁰ Directly after the story of Ismail, Whetstone relates the story of the historical "Tamerlaine," whose shared enmity with Ismail toward the Sunni world drove him to subjugate Muslim

¹¹⁸ Jeff Dailey, "Christian Underscoring in *Tamburlaine the Great, Part II*" (*The Journal of Religion and Theatre*, 2005) pp. 152-154.

¹¹⁹ Ibid, pp. 154-157.

¹²⁰ George Whetstone, *The English Myrror* (University of Michigan, 2019) p. 75.

countries—such as Egypt, Syria, Iraq, and Palestine—and overthrow “Bajazet the great Turke.”¹²¹ Marlowe’s engagement with these numerous sources on Islamic theological schisms inspired his nuanced representation of the Muslim Other. His Muslim characters are employed in the play as instruments of Christian imagination and polemics—depicting internal conflicts as a way to fracture Islamic unity, exposing Islam’s fragility, and undermining the Ottoman dominance in drama as the preeminent Muslim power.

It is important to add that within the context of the Christian-Muslim conflicts of the late medieval and early modern periods, Persian rulers—including the historical Ismail and Tamerlane—were seen as potential allies against the Ottomans. Europeans sought to weaken the Ottoman Empire by exploiting existing rivalries within the Islamic world. One of their strategies was to form alliances with Persia, the Ottomans’ long-standing enemy. The idea of opening a “second front” against the Ottomans was not new; even before the rise of the Ottoman Empire, Catholics had attempted to convert the Mongols and use them against Mamluk Egypt. Later, this strategy turned to Persia, particularly during the conflicts between the Sunni Ottomans and the Shi’ite Safavid dynasty. European powers exploited the Persian-Ottoman wars, as they saw Persia as a potential counterweight to Ottoman hegemony. European states, especially Venice, France, and the Habsburg Empire, attempted to secure alliances with Persia by sending diplomatic envoys and offering military support.¹²²

By the sixteenth century, England also became interested in engaging with Persia, both for economic and political reasons. Protestant England, aiming to weaken Catholic Spain and limit Ottoman influence in Mediterranean trade, considered the idea of a commercial and military alliance with Persia, particularly during the reign of Shah Abbas I. Abbas, recognizing

¹²¹ Ibid, pp. 80-81.

¹²² See Vaughan, *Europe and the Turk*, pp. 205-208; and MacLean and Matar, *Britain and the Islamic World*, p. 17.

the value of European support, welcomed English and other European merchants, and in return received military aid, including weapons and advisors.¹²³

Marlowe draws on the lives of both Ismail and Tamerlaine, as well as from the Islamic theological controversies and the political atmosphere of the early modern era. He crafts the character of Tamburlaine by combining the historical traits of Ismail and Tamerlaine into a single, multifaceted fictional figure. He depicts Tamburlaine as a ruthless conqueror embarking on a holy mission to humiliate and annihilate the “Turkish world,” starting his campaign of conquests from Persia—a region that held a significant place in the English imagination as an ally against the Ottomans and a fracture from within the Islamic unity. In the play, Tamburlaine’s declaration of his kingship over Persia underscores his strong connection to the region, presenting it as the base from which he launches his mission to dominate and subdue the Turkish and Sunni world. After overthrowing the Persian king Mycetes, Tamburlaine places the Persian crown on his head and proclaims, “Not all the curses which the furies breathe / Shall make me leave so rich a prize as this” (Marlowe 1.2.7.53-54). This declaration underscores his view of Persia as a valuable place, a strategic cornerstone for his ruling ambitions. By securing control over Persia, he positions himself as the dominant force in the East, directly challenging the Ottoman Empire’s claim to Islamic supremacy. Moreover, Tamburlaine’s assertion that his rule over Persia is more certain “than if the gods had held a parliament, / And all pronounc’d me king of Persia” further solidifies his belief in Persia’s central role in his conquest. (1.2.7.66-67) His ambition goes beyond mere territorial expansion—it is an ideological campaign, with Persia as the center of his power to counter and conquer Asia, the center of the Turks and the Sunni world. The fact that his men enthusiastically affirm his rule over Persia, chanting “Long live

¹²³ Vaughan, *Europe and the Turk*, pp. 209-211.

Tamburlaine, and reign in Asia!” demonstrates that his kingship is linked to a broader mission: from Persia, he will dominate the East. (1.2.7.64) Marlowe’s depiction of Tamburlaine’s rise from Persia reflects a larger historical context in which Persia was seen as a crucial ally against the Ottomans. By placing Tamburlaine’s power in Persia, Marlowe aligns him with European aspirations of exploiting Persian power to disrupt Islamic unity and undermine the Ottoman dominance, a persistent cause of English fear and anxiety.

In addition, Marlowe infuses Tamburlaine with elements of shamanism and supernatural power, echoing the mysticism linked to both historical figures of Timur and Ismail. The play frequently highlights Tamburlaine’s connection to celestial and divine powers, where he links his destiny to the “stars,” proclaims divine protection—“And Jove himself will stretch his hand from Heaven / To ward the blow, and shield me safe from harm” (1.1.2.179-180)—and asserts control over fate and fortune, claiming godlike abilities:

I hold the Fates bound fast in iron chains,
And with my hand turn Fortune’s wheel about
And sooner shall the sun fall from his sphere
Than Tamburlaine be slain or overcome. (1.1.2.173-176)

Through these declarations, Marlowe presents Tamburlaine as a figure who defies divine order, asserting dominion over the stars, fate, and even the gods. His characterization aligns with the historical personas of Ismail and Timur, whose religious identities were obscure and often contested. This alignment reinforces the play’s engagement with theological divisions within the Islamic rule and religion, particularly the tensions between different sectarian tendencies.

Furthermore, Marlowe’s representation of Ismail’s theological deviations and his rejection of the Sunni Quran serves as another means to further exploit another Islamic schism.

Tamburlaine, mirroring the role of Ismail, comes as an outsider and seeks to destroy the “Turkish Alcoran” that is held by the Sunni nations. Bajazeth, representing the Ottoman Empire, swears “by the holy Alcaron,” (2.3.3.76) while Orcanes, another Sunni ruler, similarly asserts that the Quran “remains with us”—referring to the Sunni nation and reinforcing their claim to religious authority and the significance of the Quran to the Sunni world. (2.1.3.61) However, Tamburlaine, denying the legitimacy of this Quran, scorns it as the “Turkish Alcaron” and declares his readiness to eradicate it: “where’s the Turkish Alcaron / and all the heaps of the superstitious books / . . . they shall be burnt” (2.5.1.172-175). By having Tamburlaine—a character emerging from within the Islamic world itself—perform this act, Marlowe builds on Ismail’s disparagement of the Quran, not through a Christian blasphemer but through a Muslim character who turns against a version of his own sacred text, reinforcing the play’s broader theme of Islamic division and self-destruction.

Ismail’s claimed prophecy in Whetstone’s book appears to have inspired Marlowe to further capitalize on a schism that he saw within Islamic discourse and theology. The prophecy of Muhammad, a cornerstone of Islamic theology, was frequently targeted by early modern Christian polemicists, who accused the prophet of inventing the Quran and falsely claiming divine revelation. Marlowe seems to engage with this polemical tradition by recasting Ismail’s alleged prophecy as a means to undermine Muhammed’s legitimacy within Islam. Tamburlaine’s oscillation between swearing by Muhammad’s name and openly defying him reinforces this theme of religious destabilization. At one moment, Tamburlaine asserts his belief in Muhammed’s prophecy and sacredness: “For I have sworn by sacred Mahomet” (2.1.6.109). Yet, in another scene, he challenges and mocks Muhammad’s divine authority, demanding proof of his power: “Now, Mahomet, if thou have any power, / Come down thyself and work a miracle. /

Thou art not worthy to be worshipped” (2.5.1.186-188). Marlowe’s representation of this topic, therefore, aims at destabilizing Islam’s foundational pillars and thereby exposing its internal fractures and fragility, suggesting that theological divisions could weaken the Islamic world from within. By making Tamburlaine a reflection of Ismail and Timur, both a believer and a blasphemer, Marlowe underscores the fluidity of his protagonist’s religious identity as a Muslim character, thereby showcasing Islam as a religion rife with doubts and characterized by disunity.

What would be more pleasing to Marlowe’s audience than the humiliation of the “Great Turk,” a figure long scorned and feared? One of the most dramatic scenes in the first part is Tamburlaine’s conflict with Bajazeth—a clash which would have symbolically gratified a Christian audience long hostile to Turks. In their initial encounter, both leaders make religious vows—Bajazeth swears “by Mahomet” and “by the holy alcoran” (1.3.3.92–93), while Tamburlaine invokes “The chiefest God, first mover of that sphere” (1.4.2.15), setting their conflict as not just political but also religious and spiritual. Bajazeth’s “holy priests of heavenly Mahomet” are called upon to curse Tamburlaine, who claims that heaven itself would burn before assisting in his defeat (1.4.2.5–15). Although both are Muslim, Tamburlaine’s defiance of Bajazeth’s religious appeals casts him as a heretical figure who rises above sectarian Islam—superior to Bajazeth’s religious order and chosen by fate.

Notably, Marlowe avoids placing Tamburlaine—the play’s dominant hero—in direct conflict with Christian forces. While Part II includes a short-lived Christian-Muslim conflict between Sigismund, King of Hungary, and Orcanes, King of Natolia, Tamburlaine remains absent from this encounter. Instead, the Christians and Muslims fight among themselves. Baldwin, Sigismund’s advisor, justifies breaking oaths made to Muslim rulers: “No whit, my lord, for with such infidels, / In whom no faith nor true religion rests, / We are not bound to those

accomplishments” (2.2.1.36–38). Yet Marlowe does not fully endorse this rationale. Sigismund’s betrayal is met with divine punishment, and in his final moments, he confesses: “God hath thundered vengeance from on high, / For my accursed and hateful perjury. [...] Let the dishonour of the pains I feel, / In this my mortal well-deserved wound, / End all my penance in my sudden death! / And let this death, wherein to sin I die” (2.2.3.2–8). Thus, while Marlowe critiques Christian hypocrisy and oath-breaking, he also distances Christians from Tamburlaine’s campaign. The title character, a self-fashioned scourge of God, directs his wrath only at Muslims, not at Christians. This distancing mirrors Marlowe’s use of Timur the Lame as a tool of divine punishment primarily against Eastern rulers— a reading consistent with Christian interpretations of Timur as *flagellum dei* (Latin for “scourge of God”), a phrase taken directly from *The English Myrror*.¹²⁴

This logic aligns closely with the Renaissance idea, as noted by C. A. Patrides, that God employs “cruell Kinges, and Bloudy tyrannes” as tools of divine punishment.¹²⁵ The notion that tyrants—whether biblical or contemporary ones like the Ottoman Turks—served as tools of God’s anger was prevalent in early modern thought. “Whatsoever Turks or devils do, ‘they do it by God’” and are “‘suffered by God’” as temporary scourges.¹²⁶ Patrides cites the example of Suleiman the Magnificent, who was often viewed as “the whyppe with the whych the holy and ryghteous Lorde dothe beate and scourge vs for owre vicious lyuynges.”¹²⁷ Tamburlaine’s defeat of Bajazeth, then, becomes a form of divine justice—not carried out by Christians, but by one infidel against another. His violence is directed inward, away from Christendom, toward fellow

¹²⁴ See Thomas C. Izard “The Principal Source for Marlowe’s Tamburlaine” (*Modern Language Notes*, 1943) pp. 414-417.

¹²⁵ C.A. Patrides “‘The Bloody and Cruell Turke’: The Background of a Renaissance Commonplace” (*Studies in the Renaissance*, 1963) p. 129.

¹²⁶ *Ibid*, p. 135.

¹²⁷ *Ibid*, p. 133.

Muslims. G. K. Hunter similarly notes that “Tamburlaine’s destructive power allowed him to govern the world in a stark reference to a Christian God who organizes things to allow heathens to destroy one another in order to prevent their terror from reaching the West.”¹²⁸ Thus, Tamburlaine is not merely a tyrant but an instrument of divine judgment, enacting providential violence that protects the West by annihilating its rivals from within.

The staging of the Sigismund-Orcanes conflict complements this structure. The Christian is shown to be treacherous and his downfall is swift and divine. But Tamburlaine remains untouched by such moral failures. By not involving him directly with the Christian world, Marlowe protects his hero’s mythic status and ensures that his violence is read as righteous and focused on fracturing and destabilizing the Muslim world.

This same violent logic also extends into Tamburlaine’s private life. Tamburlaine’s violence becomes even more disturbing in Part II when he turns it on his own family. This is most clearly seen in how he treats his son, Calyphas, who is unwilling to fight and become as violent as his father. When the boy says he does not want to engage in violence, Tamburlaine calls him a coward, saying he is not worthy of being his son (2.1.3.74-86). Instead of showing any understanding or sympathy, Tamburlaine stabs and kills him with his own hands. (2.4.1.169) He sees mercy as a weakness and views kindness as shameful. In contrast, his other two sons, Amyras and Celebinus, are praised because they follow their father’s violent example. (2.3.2.155) For Tamburlaine, being a good son means being willing to kill. This moment shows how his idea of greatness is built entirely on power and cruelty. Even his own children matter only if they are willing to be violent like him. This act makes it clear that Tamburlaine’s violence is not just aimed at enemies; it engulfs everything, including his own family.

¹²⁸ G. K. Hunter, *English drama 1586–1642: The Age of Shakespeare* (Clarendon Press, 1997) p. 50.

The treatment of Bajazeth is a clear example of how Marlowe intertwines spectacle and ideology. The once-mighty sultan, “dread lord of Afric, Europe, and Asia” (1.3.1.25), who claimed he had “lately made all Europe quake for fear” (1.3.3.166), is reduced to a caged prisoner. Tamburlaine commands him to “fall prostrate... And be the footstool of great Tamburlaine” so he may ascend “into [his] royal throne” (1.4.2.17–19). When Bajazeth refuses and curses him, Tamburlaine walks on him anyway (1.4.2.21–38). His eventual suicide—described by Zabina, his wife, as “his skull all riven in twain! his brains dash’d out” (1.5.2.295)—is not just a tragic end but a symbolic erasure. Zabina’s madness and suicide reinforce Tamburlaine’s total domination. As Johannes H. Birringer explains, Marlowe uses “pure violence” not just for cruelty’s sake, but as a dramatic tool to build Tamburlaine’s mythic image.¹²⁹ His brutality is carefully staged to elevate him above traditional rulers, turning each act of destruction into a performance that reinforces his legendary reputation and symbolic control over the East.

The Moors who appear alongside Bajazeth’s army in the play reinforce Marlowe’s portrayal of Islamic disunity and racialized otherness. These figures are not developed as individuals but act as symbols of a unified Muslim force under the Ottomans that Tamburlaine seeks to destroy. Their silence and lack of distinct identities underscore their symbolic role—they embody an undifferentiated and threatening Islamic presence. While not all Moors are silent—the Kings Morocco, Algiers, and Fess are given lines and participate in the action—their roles are minimal and their presence remains marginalized within the play. The majority of Moorish figures are rendered voiceless and lack dramatic agency. Their degradation is dramatized in one of the play’s most humiliating moments: two Moors are forced to carry the

¹²⁹ Johannes H. Birringer, “Marlowe’s Violent Stage: ‘Mirrors’ of Honor in *Tamburlaine*” (*ELH*, 1984) pp. 233-234.

cage containing the captured Bajazeth (1.4.2). This staging not only emphasizes their political defeat but publicly marks their racial and spiritual subjugation.

This moment aligns with early modern English understandings of Moors as both religious and racial others. As noted in *Keywords of Identity*, the term “Moor” in Renaissance England often referred to African or dark-skinned Muslim individuals, and their skin color was commonly used as a metaphor for sin, barbarity, or corruption. This link between race and moral depravity was widespread, rooted in religious discourse and national identity politics.¹³⁰ English anxieties about Moors were also shaped by historical memory, especially the legacy of the Reconquista—centuries of conflict in which Christian forces reclaimed the Iberian Peninsula from Muslim rule. This prolonged warfare created a lasting cultural link between Moors and perceptions of military danger, religious hostility, and racial inferiority.¹³¹ Emily Bartels notes that although the Moor was a figure of “uncodified and uncodifiable diversity,” English drama often reduced this complex identity to a villainous stereotype, especially when associated with Islamic powers.¹³²

In *Tamburlaine*, Marlowe rejects nuanced portrayals and aligns the Moors with the Ottoman enemy, presenting them as threatening outsiders. Peter C. Herman emphasizes that early modern depictions of Moors were “multiple and contradictory,” shaped by performance context and political agendas.¹³³ But here, Marlowe strips them of voice and agency. They are included only to heighten the spectacle of Tamburlaine’s power and illustrate the internal collapse of Muslim strength.

¹³⁰ Nandini Das, et. al, *Keywords of Identity*, p. 43.

¹³¹ See Tolan, et al. *Europe and the Islamic World*, pp. 27-60.

¹³² Emily C. Bartels, *Speaking of the Moor: From Alcazar to Othello* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009) pp. 5-19.

¹³³ Peter C. Herman, *Early Modern Others: Resisting Bias in Renaissance Literature* (Routledge, 2023) p. 124.

This representation draws from a theatrical tradition that equates blackness with moral depravity. Bartels remarks that stage Moors were frequently characterized as “black in [their] look, and bloody in [their] deeds,” where dark skin functioned as a visible sign of internal vice.¹³⁴ The Moors in *Tamburlaine* reflect this formula: their racialized identity marks them for defeat, and their public subordination—literally bearing the weight of their fallen sultan—symbolizes their complete erasure from the political and moral order of the play.

Although early modern literature sometimes depicted Moors with complexity, Marlowe’s Moors are denied that dimensionality. They are not active characters but rather serve as mere props—silent, shamed, and disposable. Their presence underscores the play’s broader message: Islamic power, especially when associated with dark-skinned allies of the Turk, is destined to fall not by Christian hands, but from within.

This dramatization would have resonated powerfully with a Protestant English audience. It suggested that the feared Ottoman and Islamic forces were already being judged and dismantled by divine will. The imagery of Moors carrying Bajazeth’s cage encapsulates this idea: even those who once supported the most powerful Muslim ruler are now reduced to agents of his downfall. Jennifer Lodine-Chaffey also argues that *Tamburlaine*’s violence is aestheticized—crafted to be visually powerful and symbolically meaningful.¹³⁵ His victims’ bodies are not just casualties but “objects fit for *Tamburlaine*; / Wherein [...] may be seen / His honour, that consists in shedding blood” (1.5.2.494–496). The violence becomes a kind of visual language—a public show of his greatness and control. In *Tamburlaine*, then, the combination of

¹³⁴ Bartels, *Speaking of the Moor*, p. 6.

¹³⁵ Jennifer Lodine-Chaffey “‘Another Bloody Spectacle’: Excessive Violence in Christopher Marlowe’s *Tamburlaine Plays*” (*Marlowe Studies: An Annual*, 2016) p. 94.

blackness, Moorishness, and Islamic affiliation marks these figures as enemies not only of Tamburlaine but of divine order itself.

The massacre at Damascus further demonstrates this fusion of meaning and brutality and the way it is used against ostensibly Sunni Muslims. As Tamburlaine approaches the city, he signals his intentions with three flags: white for mercy, red for bloodshed, black for destruction. By the time his army reaches the walls, the “streamers white, red, black” have been raised, as Zabina later recalls in her madness (1.5.2.305). The Governor, in a final plea for peace, sends a group of virgins in white, “having branches of laurel in their hands” (1.5.1.195). Rather than showing mercy, Tamburlaine orders their deaths, telling his men to “shew them Death” (1.5.2.63). Zenocrate confirms the horror: she saw “the sun-bright troop / Of heavenly virgins [...] on horsemen’s lances to be hoisted up / And guiltlessly endure a cruel death” (1.5.2.320–324).

This is more than just military cruelty—it is emblematic violence. The slaughter of innocent girls becomes a visual message: no plea for compassion, no symbol of purity, will stop Tamburlaine’s wrath. As Matthew Martin explains, Tamburlaine’s violence asserts not just political dominance but “ontological” superiority, erasing his enemies’ symbolic and moral meaning.¹³⁶ Zenocrate adds emotional weight to the scene, describing how “Damascus’ walls [are] dyed with Egyptian blood,” and the streets are “strow’d with dissever’d joints of men” (1.5.2.316–318). This scene fulfills Tamburlaine’s earlier threats of widespread destruction and bloodshed against his enemies, confirming his role as a ruthless punisher of resistance within the Muslim world. (1.4.4.4) Bajazeth once claimed his forces would build “walls and bulwarks” from corpses (1.3.3.170), but it is Tamburlaine who turns that vision into reality. To an English

¹³⁶ See *Staging Pain, 1580-1800: Violence and Trauma in British Theater*, ed. James Robert Allard and Mathew R. Martin (Routledge, 2009) p. 23.

audience, this reversal would be satisfying: the feared Turk is outdone by another Muslim, intensifying the portrayal of Islamic self-destruction.

Tamburlaine's psychological tactics deepen the horror. Zabina's madness—"Fling the meat in his face—Tamburlaine, Tamburlaine! Let the soldiers be buried. Hell! Death, Tamburlaine, hell!" (1.5.2.304–308)—turns the siege into a nightmare. Zenocrate begs for divine pity, asking heaven and earth to "blush" at the "death so barbarous" (1.5.2.345–349). But even her grief becomes part of Tamburlaine's myth. As Lodine-Chaffey explains, the violated body becomes an "artistic artifact of violence," a theatrical device that builds Tamburlaine's image through blood and spectacle.¹³⁷ The murdered virgins, the impaled corpses, and the mad lamentations all contribute to the legend.

Ultimately, Marlowe's depiction of violence fulfills a significant cultural role. It addresses English anxieties about Islam and the expanding influence of the Ottoman Empire by redirecting Muslim aggression inward. Tamburlaine's conquest of Damascus transcends mere military achievement, symbolizing the Islamic world's self-destruction. Instead of highlighting Christian-Muslim warfare, the play emphasizes violent clashes among Muslim leaders. This notion would have reassured Marlowe's Protestant English audience, who were concerned about Ottoman, and more generally Muslim, power. The narrative envisions the Islamic world as fragmented, frail, and collapsing on its own—without any intervention from Christendom. The play avoids depicting a direct Christian-Muslim conflict, centering instead on battles among Muslim rulers. Marlowe pushes Christian characters to the background, making the Muslim world the primary setting for violence and power struggles. By doing so, he absolves the English of any direct involvement in this violence. The East becomes a stage where Muslims annihilate

¹³⁷ Lodine-Chaffey "'Another Bloody Spectacle'" p. 92.

each other, allowing the English to watch from afar. This perspective helps alleviate the fear of Ottoman invasion by implying that the Islamic world is already disintegrating.

For the English audience, this scenario would have been gratifying. Although Tamburlaine is not a Christian, he acts as a punisher of other Muslims. His violence appears justified and even heroic, as it targets figures who posed a threat to England. The play provides the satisfaction of witnessing the Turk's downfall—without requiring any Christian intervention. In this manner, Marlowe offers his audience a narrative where their adversary is punished, their fears are reduced, and their hands remain clean.

Unlike Tamburlaine's brutal treatment of most characters, his relationship with Zenocrate is depicted with notable tenderness. While he humiliates and destroys his enemies, he spares Zenocrate, falls in love with her, and eventually marries her. On the surface, their relationship appears romantic—he crowns her Queen of Persia and speaks to her with reverence. Unlike most other characters, Zenocrate is Marlowe's own invention. As Leslie Spence points out, she does not appear in historical accounts of Timur, and Marlowe created her to act as a moral foil and symbolic device that frames Tamburlaine's brutality in emotional terms.¹³⁸

However, this love story obfuscates the fact that their relationship begins with conquest and coercion. Zenocrate is taken as a prisoner and her initial capture is described by Agydas, one of her attendants, as rape: "When your offensive rape by Tamburlaine, . . . Hath seemed to be digested long ago" (1.3.2.6-8). Mary Beth Rose explains that Zenocrate "revises" this violence by saying, "Although it be digested long ago, / As his exceeding favors have deserved . . . it hath changed my first conceived disdain" (1.3.2.10-13).¹³⁹ In other words, the play turns her forced

¹³⁸ Leslie Spence "The Influence of Marlowe's Sources on 'Tamburlaine I.'" (*Modern Philology*, 1926) p. 197.

¹³⁹ Mary Beth Rose "A Waste of Shame: The Heroics of Marriage in English Renaissance Tragedy" *The Expense of Spirit: Love and Sexuality in English Renaissance Drama* (Cornell University Press, 1991) p. 106.

captivity into a love story, making Tamburlaine's violence seem acceptable because it leads to affection and marriage.

This marriage helps Tamburlaine justify not only his relationship with Zenocrate but also his larger brutal conquests. Emily Bartels argues that Tamburlaine "strategically rewrites the Soldan's defeat as familial victory" by calling him the "happy father of Zenocrate" (1.5.2.449). Instead of showing Tamburlaine only as a ruthless conqueror, the play also presents him as a noble son-in-law. Bartels also notes that Tamburlaine praises Zenocrate for calming "the fury of [his] sword," using her influence to excuse his violence as driven by love. (1.5.2.453)¹⁴⁰ Zenocrate, then, becomes a tool to soften Tamburlaine's image and make his military conquest appear more legitimate and noble.

But while Tamburlaine's love may be genuine, he rarely listens to Zenocrate's pleas. She begs him to spare lives, especially during the massacre at Damascus, but he ignores her. As Rose writes, Zenocrate adds a "moral dimension" to the play, showing compassion and sorrow, but she has "no dramatic power" to stop the bloodshed.¹⁴¹ Her sorrow humanizes the story but does not change its direction. Even after she dies, Tamburlaine treats her body as a relic—wrapping it in gold and carrying it around—not because he listens to her wishes, but because she helps him maintain his grand image.

Bartels also points out that Tamburlaine changes how he speaks depending on his audience. When he is with Zenocrate, he uses words of love and honor; when he is with enemies like Bajazeth, he speaks in violent threats. Bartels notes that "his custom-made persuasions work on Zenocrate" because she responds to his gentle side.¹⁴² But again, this shows that she is used to

¹⁴⁰ Bartels, "The Double Vision of the East" p. 14.

¹⁴¹ Rose "A Waste of Shame" pp. 108-109.

¹⁴² Bartels, "The Double Vision of the East" p. 12.

complete the image he wants to project—a noble ruler who can love and conquer at once. It is also Marlowe who wants this to be part of Tamburlaine’s image for the audience, the dual image of the lover and the conqueror.

In the end, Zenocrate’s role is to make Tamburlaine’s violence more acceptable to the audience. Her royal blood helps him legitimize his rule over Muslim lands. This is consistent with Marlowe’s literary invention, as Zenocrate, modeled perhaps in part on idealized Renaissance or Marian figures, serves to mythologize Tamburlaine and lend aesthetic, emotional, and religious weight to his conquest.¹⁴³ As Bartels explains, Tamburlaine knows how to “mask barbarity” when needed, and Zenocrate is key to that performance.¹⁴⁴ She may feel sorrow and show humanity, but she is not there to challenge his power. Instead, she helps turn his conquests into something that looks noble, poetic, and even divinely approved.

Zenocrate’s role here also resonates with the sectarian framework Marlowe constructs. As the daughter of the Soldan of Egypt, a Sunni leader, she symbolizes a connection to the Sunni world that Tamburlaine aims to subdue and conquer. Her relationship with Tamburlaine, who resembles the historical Timur associated with Shia Islam, symbolically unites rival Islamic sects within a personal and emotional bond. However, this union is characterized by violence and conquest rather than reconciliation, which shows Marlowe’s intent to further humiliate the Sunni world—to whom the Turk belongs—through Tamburlaine’s marriage to a Sunni princess. Tamburlaine’s power thus goes beyond military and political dominance; he controls the Sunni world emotionally as he asserts authority not only over Sunni rulers but also over their daughters and symbolic lineage.

¹⁴³ See *Staging Pain*, ed. James Robert Allard and Mathew R. Martin, p. 23; and Brenda Henry-Offor “In Praise of Zenocrate: Mariolatry in *Tamburlaine the Great I and II*” (*International Journal of Education and Social Science*, 2015) p. 50-57.

¹⁴⁴ Bartels, “The Double Vision of the East” p. 13.

Zenocrate's death represents a major turning point, leading Tamburlaine to face, for the first time, a deeply personal loss. Until this moment, Tamburlaine sees death only as something he controls—something that happens to others through his power. But with Zenocrate's passing, he is forced to deal with death in a personal and emotional way. As Loretta Anna Jungbauer writes, "It is the first time he is confronted with loss on a personal level. This loss triggers a change in Tamburlaine's perception of Death: the collective power of death is replaced by the protagonist's personal confrontation with death itself."¹⁴⁵ His reaction is not acceptance but desperate rage against the heavens. (2.2.4.107-129) He tries to preserve Zenocrate's memory and even to give her a kind of immortality, showing how deeply shaken he is by her loss. This grief reveals a more human and emotional side of Tamburlaine that contrasts with his earlier image as a cruel and unstoppable conqueror.

This emotional shift adds a new layer of morality to Tamburlaine's character. While earlier in the play he is known for his violence and pride, his sorrow after Zenocrate's death shows that he is also capable of love, loyalty, and deep pain. Jungbauer notes that Tamburlaine "tries to immortalise her in his own way," highlighting how much he honors and mourns her.¹⁴⁶ His death does not come at the hands of an enemy but from illness, which makes it feel more personal and less heroic. By having him die of heartbreak rather than battle, Marlowe gives Tamburlaine a more tragic and sympathetic end. He is no longer just the feared "scourge of God," but a man brought down by grief. This change invites the audience to see him not just as a tyrant, but as someone who suffers, loves, and loses like any other human being.

¹⁴⁵ Loretta Anna Jungbauer, "Representation of Death in Christopher Marlowe's *Tamburlaine the Great, Parts One and Two*" (*Eger Journal of English Studies*, 2019) p. 14.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid*, p. 16.

For Marlowe's Christian English audience, this ending would have had a powerful effect. Tamburlaine, who earlier acted as a divine weapon used to punish Muslim rulers, now dies not through violence but because he cannot bear the loss of a beloved woman. This softens his image and makes him more relatable. Marlowe seems to be preparing the audience to accept Tamburlaine's death by first showing his emotional side, full of compassion and love. This makes his fall seem not only deserved but also meaningful. It adds a moral voice to his story and allows the audience to feel pity, not just fear or anger. In this way, Marlowe presents Tamburlaine as both a powerful figure and a tragic one, whose death comes not from his enemies, but from the very love that once gave him purpose. Marlowe's Muslim character, who defeated Turks and their allies, is ultimately celebrated and honored in two ways: first by being granted victory over other Muslims, and second by being allowed an emotional death. This dual portrayal beautifies Tamburlaine's image and makes him more palatable to a Christian audience who would have seen his victories as aligning with their own ideological interests.

To sum up, *Tamburlaine the Great* responds to early modern English anxieties and fears about Islam by depicting its downfall not through a Christian victory, but through internal division among Muslims. Marlowe avoids a direct clash between Christianity and Islam, instead presenting a character with Muslim affiliations and traits—Tamburlaine—who aggressively conquers and shames other Muslim leaders. This allows Marlowe to symbolically contain the Islamic threat, portraying it as a divided and self-destructive force. The play's focus on conflicts within Islam, especially through Tamburlaine's defeat of figures like Bajazeth, mirrors and supports Protestant England's broader effort to distinguish itself theologically and politically from the Muslim Other.

Fear and anxiety are central to this dramatic portrayal. These emotions are not unique to the early modern era; they continue a long-standing medieval hostility toward Islam, rooted in the history of the Crusades and centuries of Christian polemics. Tamburlaine's violent domination of the Muslim world—his symbolic defeat of Bajazeth, his humiliation of the Moors, and his desecration of the Qur'an—serves as an extension of this tradition. His violence is both physical and symbolic, crafted to reassure a Christian audience that the Muslim enemy is not only conquerable but already disintegrating under its own internal weight. The treatment of Bajazeth as a human footstool, the enforced silence and subjugation of Moors, and the massacre at Damascus are all spectacles of humiliation meant to dramatize Islamic weakness and satisfy English audiences.

Zenocrate also plays a role in this ideological narrative. Although she appears compassionate and restrained, her role is to humanize and justify Tamburlaine's violence. Her royal lineage legitimizes his conquests, while her sorrow and pleas for mercy provide a moral voice to otherwise brutal acts. Yet, she is ultimately unable to halt his destruction, reinforcing the notion that even the most virtuous aspects of the East must be absorbed into Tamburlaine's imperial vision or rendered passive. Zenocrate's submission symbolizes the ideological subjugation of Islamic authority and identity within Tamburlaine's imperial vision. Her emotional presence also masks the full horror of Tamburlaine's actions, allowing the play to elevate his cruelty into a form of divine or providential justice.

By shifting the responsibility for violence onto a Muslim conqueror and portraying the downfall of Islam as self-inflicted, Marlowe absolves Christian Europe from direct blame and reinforces its cultural and religious dominance. *Tamburlaine the Great* thus becomes a powerful piece of ideological theater, mirroring historical anxieties about Ottoman power and

symbolically resolving those fears through theatrical destruction. Through symbolic violence, calculated humiliation, and theological commentary, Marlowe's play turns the stage into a site where Christian audiences could observe the disintegration of the Islamic world from a safe and triumphant distance.

Chapter III

Shakespeare's Othello: Changing Attitudes toward Muslim Otherness

It would be a fallacy to claim that contempt and fear were the only sentiments shaping English representations of Muslim characters in the Elizabethan era. Although traditional Christian animosity toward Islam remained dominant—deeply rooted in crusading memory, fear of the Ottoman Empire, and long-standing religious prejudice—the period saw new and more complex views of the Muslim world. While Muslims were hated and feared, they were also admired and envied. Sometimes, they were looked at as models to emulate, potential allies against enemies, and figures with whom collaboration and even cultural integration were envisioned. Yet, this fascination was consistently accompanied by anxiety, revealing a deeper English ambivalence toward Islam as both a formidable other and a religious competitor.

These changing perceptions were influenced by two concurrent phenomena: the emergence of Protestantism and the rise of the Ottoman global power, which together created a mix of fascination and fear that characterized England's complex relationship with Islam. These two related developments led to a significant shift in how the English viewed and portrayed Muslims, especially in the second half of the sixteenth century. This reimagining brought new complexity to the dramatic representation of Muslim characters, whose portrayals often reflected the changing political context and showed a dual sense of fascination and suspicion. Instead of being consistently portrayed as enemies, Muslim characters were depicted with new layers of complexity. As political and cultural perceptions changed, English writers began to explore the Muslim Other not only as an adversarial force but also as a figure of fascination, power, and even alliance, alongside traditional tensions surrounding the idea of otherness and new ones surrounding the potential threat such power represented.

The Protestant Reformation broke the unity of the Christian world, significantly reshaping religious and political dynamics. While still adhering to some traditions of hostility towards Muslims, the newly emerging Protestant ideologies also disrupted established perceptions of Islam as a religious and political adversary. This shift in perception was shaped by several intersecting factors. As one essential factor, Protestants' schism with Catholics and the "bitterness of religious hatred within Christendom," as Maxime Rodinson points out, "made Islam look less extraordinary and less repugnant," thereby reshaping the image of the Muslim Other that had been negatively viewed and portrayed for centuries.¹⁴⁷ With their revolutionary movement under constant threat from Catholic persecution, Protestants saw Muslims as a secondary enemy, which diminished the existential threat Muslims had historically represented in Christian imagination. This created a degree of ideological tolerance, though always with an undertone of ambivalence. Additionally, Protestants' reluctance to ally with Catholics in a war against the Ottomans mitigated that historical Christian-Muslim enmity. Protestants did not want to participate in a crusade spearheaded by the Pope, their most hated enemy. Third, shifting power dynamics in the sixteenth century encouraged Protestants to consider potential alliances with Muslim states to weaken Catholic hegemony in Europe or to gain other economic and political benefits. This reveals an admiration for Islam's political strength that was always accompanied by fear of its religious difference.

While Luther's initial response, as discussed in Chapter II, was largely hostile, relying on conventional conceptions, his attitude toward Islam and the Turks was ultimately ambiguous and inconsistent, lacking the rigidity that characterized earlier Catholic polemic. In fact, Protestant Reformers displayed an inconsistent attitude toward Islam—shifting between outright criticism,

¹⁴⁷ Maxime Rodinson, "The Western Image and Western Studies of Islam" in *The Legacy of Islam*, edited by Joseph Schacht and C. E. Bosworth (Oxford University Press, 1974) p. 31.

tolerance, and hesitant admiration. As Roland Miller notes, Luther's view on Islam was "a mixed one," fluctuating between "vehement condemnation and generous concern."¹⁴⁸ C. Umhau Wolf underlines, too, that while Luther's attitude toward Islam "was partly characteristic of the unfair polemic atmosphere of the age," it was "partly in advance of his age with regard to self-judgment and the urging of tolerance."¹⁴⁹ While Catholic "writers and intellectuals . . . were keen to promote the anti-Ottoman" sentiments,¹⁵⁰ Luther and other important Protestant contemporaries showed "laxity" and a reduced willingness to polemicize or encourage war against the Ottomans. Some Protestants even refused to participate in defensive wars against them, reflecting a departure from the traditional adversarial stance toward Muslims.¹⁵¹ There were Protestants who saw the Ottoman conquest as "a mercy of God," though such a perspective may have seemed radical.¹⁵² Luther himself was criticized for seemingly tolerating the Ottoman aggression, as his writings often discouraged direct military action against the Turks, whose military incursions had reached Europe.¹⁵³ At times, he was accused of siding with the Turks against Catholics. Marcello Marchesi, a seventeenth-century papal author, condemns Luther's manipulative stance and his desire to "see the whole of Christianity go as soon as possible under the Turk, to be able to see the extinction of the name of the Pope. Preaching, therefore, not to resist the Turk."¹⁵⁴ Paul Coles underscores that even Luther's 1528 encouragement of Charles V to wage war against the Turks

¹⁴⁸ Roland E. Miller, *Muslims and the Gospel: Bridging the Gap* (Minneapolis: Lutheran University Press, 2005) p. 207.

¹⁴⁹ Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 207.

¹⁵⁰ Noel Malcolm, *Useful Enemies: Islam and the Ottoman Empire in Western Political Thought, 1450-1750* (Oxford University Press, 2019) p. 60.

¹⁵¹ Adam S. Francisco, *Martin Luther and Islam: A Study in Sixteenth-Century Polemics and Apologetics* (Brill, 2007), p. 43-44.

¹⁵² Dorothy Vaughan, *Europe and the Turk: a Pattern of Alliances, 1350-1700* (Liverpool University Press, 1954) p. 143.

¹⁵³ Gregory J. Miller, "The Turks," p. 153.

¹⁵⁴ Matthew Birchwood and Matthew Dimmock, editors, *Cultural Encounters between East and West, 1453-1699* (Cambridge Scholars Press, 2005) p. 177.

was, similarly, a strategic effort to preoccupy Catholics and “divert the attention of emperor and pope from the business of persecuting Protestants.”¹⁵⁵ These Protestant attitudes marked a notable break from medieval Christianity’s rigid antagonism toward Islam, introducing a more complex interaction with Muslim societies. Instead of uniformly demonizing Muslims as an existential threat, Protestants developed an ambivalent, even conciliatory, approach. Their unwillingness to confront the Ottomans militarily and occasional interpretation of Ottoman conquests as divinely destined reveal a desire to reassess Islam beyond mere polemics. Unlike Catholics, Protestants increasingly perceived Muslims not merely as enemies but as complex political and religious actors whose role in the world could be understood in ways that did not necessitate direct opposition. This evolution in attitudes reframed early modern Europe’s understanding of Islam, paving the way for more nuanced representations of Muslims in literature and theological discourse. As Gregory J. Miller underlines, Luther’s and other Protestant leaders’ ideologies did indeed engender “a reformation in Western understandings of Islam,”¹⁵⁶ and it is the aim of this chapter to explore a concomitant change in dramatic portrayals of Muslim characters.

I do note, of course, that these nuanced perspectives on Islam were not exclusive to Protestants; some Catholic scholars and diplomats had also engaged with the Islamic states positively, particularly when political or economic interests were considered. Some popes, too, had tried to establish friendly relations with Ottoman sultans.¹⁵⁷ However, Protestant attitudes toward Islam evolved over the course of the European and English Reformation, and they are particularly important in addressing the drama. Additionally, the endorsement of Protestant

¹⁵⁵ Paul Coles, *The Ottoman Impact on Europe* (Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968) p. 149.

¹⁵⁶ Gregory J. Miller, “The Turks” *Martin Luther in Context*, edited by David M. Whitford (Cambridge University Press, 2018) p. 152.

¹⁵⁷ Vaughan, *Europe and the Turk*, p. 104.

ideologies by politicians and monarchs of the sixteenth century empowered the Protestant attitude toward Islam, strengthening its impact on cross-cultural interactions and public sentiments. This evolving stance was shaped by factors such as Ottoman military expansion, intra-Christian conflicts, and the growing realization that stable Anglo-Ottoman and Anglo-Islamic relations were necessary to address both internal and global challenges. As Protestantism gained prominence in the latter half of the sixteenth century, it introduced a more pragmatic and, at times, ambivalent approach to Islam, challenging traditional perceptions of Muslims as inherent and existential enemies.

Alongside Protestant ideologies, the growing European awareness of the Ottoman Empire's exemplary policies, organization, and strength played an important role in reshaping perceptions of Muslims during the sixteenth century. This growing awareness was part of a broader phenomenon in which the Ottoman Empire increasingly captured European attention, not merely as a fearful military rival but also as a political and cultural model.

The Empire's religious toleration was a major source of European fascination and admiration. The Ottomans' ability to maintain a secular state and the fact that people of different ethnicities and religions were able to coexist peacefully within the Ottoman-controlled territories positioned the empire as a model that surpassed Europe's own standards of religious diversity, yet also fueled fears that Islam might overshadow Christian Europe. Paul Coles underlines that, when contrasted with the intolerant sectarianism of contemporary Europe, "the very high degree of religious toleration accorded to their [Ottomans'] alien subjects" was "especially notable."¹⁵⁸ In *Six Books of the Commonwealth* (1576), Jean Bodin (1530-1596), a French philosopher and

¹⁵⁸ Paul Coles, *The Ottoman Impact on Europe*, p. 116.

political thinker, testifies to the remarkable religious tolerance shown by the Ottomans, which he views as a practice deserving profound respect and admiration. He writes,

The King of the Turks, who rules over a great part of Europe, safeguards the rites of religion as well as any prince in this world. Yet he constrains no one, but on the contrary permits everyone to live according as his conscience dictates. What is more, even in his seraglio at Pera he permits the practice of four diverse religions, that of the Jews, the Christian according to the Roman rite, and according to the Greek rite, and that of Islam.¹⁵⁹

The Ottomans exercised a powerful fascination and captivated Christian attention through what the Europeans of the time viewed as exemplary morals and justice system. In one of his sermons, Luther, having studied Islam and Ottoman culture, praises aspects of Turkish practices, expressing his wish that Europeans could enjoy such high morals.¹⁶⁰ His description portrays the Ottomans as not only morally superior to Christians but also as more civilized and organized.

The Turks, he writes,

do not drink wine, do not guzzle and become gluttons, as we do. ... [They] do not swear and curse, have great and proper obedience, and propriety against their emperor and lords, and have their governments organized in such a manner as we would love to have in our German territories.¹⁶¹

Similarly, Ogier Ghiselin de Busbecq praises and describes with high regard the Ottoman justice and meritocratic system while explicitly criticizing the European system, presenting the Ottomans as superior in governance and societal structure. Like Luther, Ogier voices his

¹⁵⁹ Jean Bodin, *Six Books of the Commonwealth*, translated by M. J. Tooley (Basil Blackwell, 1967) p. 144.

¹⁶⁰ Luther had vast knowledge about Islam and is said to have even read and tried to translate the Quran. See Miller, *Muslims and the Gospel*, p. 207.

¹⁶¹ Quoted in Hans Schwarz, "Luther and the Turks" (*Unio Cum Christo*, 2017) p. 145.

disappointment in Europeans for their inability to match the Ottomans in valuing merit over birth privilege. He writes,

It is by merit that men rise in the service, a system which ensures that posts should be assigned only to the competent... Those who receive the highest offices from the Sultan are for the most part the sons of shepherds or herdsmen, and so far from being ashamed of their parentage, they actually glory in it, and consider it a matter for boasting that they owe nothing to the accident of birth; for they do not believe that high qualities are either natural or hereditary, nor do they think that they can be handed down from father to son, but that they are partly the gift of God, and partly the result of good training, great industry, and unwearied zeal... These are not our ideas, with us there is no opening left for merit; birth is the standard for everything; the prestige of birth is the sole key to advancement in the public service.¹⁶²

The Ottomans were not only seen as exemplary in terms of tolerance toward difference but also as economic “liberators.” In contrast to the oppressive European feudal and hereditary systems, many European peasants—especially those in the Balkans who lived directly under the Ottoman rule—looked “hopefully” at the Ottomans for offering them material advantages, often welcoming their governance and assisting their conquest of their territories.¹⁶³ Not only did Europeans welcome the rule of the Ottomans; many other Christians, as Daniel Vitkus points out, converted to Islam to take advantage of the “privileges of belonging to the Islamic community.”¹⁶⁴

¹⁶² Coles, *The Ottoman Impact on Europe*, p. 150.

¹⁶³ Coles, *The Ottoman Impact on Europe*, p. 101-113.

¹⁶⁴ Vitkus, *Turning Turk*, p. 31.

The number of conversions was growing so significantly that Christian intellectuals, like Luther, found it alarming and threatening to the Christian social and religious fabric. In his *Preface to the Tract on the Religion and Customs of the Turks* (1530), Luther describes this threat as “the scandal of Muhammadans,” warning against the ability of the liberating nature of the Turkish Islamic ruling system to attract more Christians: “Since we now have the Turk and his religion at our very doorstep,” he writes, “our people must be warned lest, either moved by the splendor of the Turkish religion and the external appearance of their customs, or offended by the meager display of our own faith or the deformity of our customs, they deny their Christ and follow Muhammad.”¹⁶⁵ Writers, too, recognized this disturbing phenomenon of conversions and had to deal with it as a serious matter of “apostasy.” While some concentrated little focus on the topic “for fear of distressing” their readers, others openly addressed this problem, wondering why converts would “voluntarily” renounce Christianity “in despite of any counsel which seemed to intercept them.”¹⁶⁶ At the same time, the increasing number of conversions led those writers to contemplate whether Islam’s appeal signified its superiority and put into question Christianity’s perceived authority and legitimacy. Sir Henry Blount, a seventeenth-century writer, voices this concern that preoccupied both his contemporaries and predecessors. He contemplates, “seeing how many daily goe from us to them, and how few of theirs to us; it appears of what consequence *the prosperity* [emphasis mine] of a cause is to draw men unto it.”¹⁶⁷ In literature, writers expressed this concern by composing propagandistic tales that recounted conversions of Muslims to Protestant Christianity. For example, Meredith Hanmer’s *The Baptizing of a Turke*

¹⁶⁵ Sarah Henrich and James L. Boyce “Martin Luther—Translations of Two Prefaces on Islam: *Preface to the Libellus de ritu et moribus Turcorum* (1530), and *Preface to Bibliander’s Edition of the Qur’an* (1543)” (Word & World, 1996) p. 260.

¹⁶⁶ See Matar, *Islam in Britain* (Cambridge University Press, 1998) p. 22

¹⁶⁷ Ibid, p. 22

(1586), which narrates the conversion of a Muslim to Protestant Christianity, represents, as Matthew Dimmock suggests, “a reaction to anxieties concerning the reverse movement.”¹⁶⁸ Alongside recognition of the Ottomans as exemplars of political order and moral governance, these concerns show that the growing appeal of Islam, coupled with the perceived weakness of Christian states, fueled anxieties in Christian thinkers and writers about a broader transfer of power away from Christendom. That further solidifies the argument that Islam’s image was not static but undergoing transformation. This shift in perspective, from outright hostility to acknowledgement and admiration, demonstrates that the Muslim was no longer viewed solely as a dangerous enemy but as a formidable and, in some respects, an admirable and enviable Other.

Yet, it is crucial to emphasize that the European view of the Ottoman Empire was not solely one of admiration but was deeply ambivalent, combining fascination with Ottoman strengths and fear of their implications. The Muslim Other was not simply seen as admirable; rather, he remained formidable and thus threatening, precisely because of those very qualities that were praised.

This complex perspective is clear in the works of thinkers like Martin Luther and Ogier Ghiselin de Busbecq, who admired Ottoman moral discipline, justice, and merit-based systems but expressed underlying concerns. The more effective and just the Ottoman system seemed, the more it challenged the assumed superiority of Christian Europe. As Paul Coles and Jean Bodin noted, the Ottoman practice of religious tolerance stood in sharp contrast to Europe’s religious conflicts, stirring both envy and discomfort. In other words, admiration and fear reinforced each other. The perception that the Ottomans were morally superior, well-governed, and tolerant

¹⁶⁸ Matthew Birchwood and Matthew Dimmock, editors, *Cultural Encounters between East and West*, p. 46.

created feelings of inadequacy in Europe, leading to a kind of cultural crisis. This prompted scholars and writers to both praise and express anxiety about the Muslim Ottomans.

The growing appeal of Islam, seen in increasing conversions, heightened this ambivalence. For some Christians, Islam's attractiveness posed a serious threat, not just to European governance but to the spiritual authority of Christianity. The anxiety was not simply about military conquest, but about ideological and cultural defeat. Writers like Luther feared that the *very virtues* of Ottoman society would tempt Christians into apostasy. And literary works like Hanmer's *The Baptizing of a Turke* were not just celebrations of Christian success but defensive responses to Islam's unsettling appeal.

Therefore, early modern Christian views of Islam were marked by a dual perspective: the Muslim as both a moral example and a dangerous rival. This ambivalent discourse shows that the image of the Muslim Other was never static, but shaped by conflicting emotions and uncertainties.

English Fascination and Interaction with Muslims during the Sixteenth Century

The sixteenth century also saw a growing English fascination with Ottoman culture. English travelers and merchants like John Eldred (1552–1632) admired the rich and lively life they encountered in Ottoman-controlled territories. During his visit to Aleppo in the 1580s, Eldred wrote:

This is the greatest place of traffike for a dry towne that is in all these parts: for hither resort Jewes, Tartarians, Persians, Armenians, Egyptians, Indians, and many sorts of Christians, and injoy freedome of their consciences, and bring hither many kindes of rich merchandizes.¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁹ Quoted in Vitkus, *Turning Turk*, p. 16.

Eldred's description reflects the English admiration for the Ottoman world's prosperity, diversity, and energy, which stood in contrast to Europe's own divisions.

This fascination even predated Eldred's time and the reign of Queen Elizabeth I, whose rule marked the height of Anglo-Islamic relations and cross-cultural communication. Jerry Brotton, in his study of early modern Anglo-Ottoman relations, highlights a tremendous "Tudor fascination with the Islamic world," which demonstrates the early cultural influence of the Ottoman Empire on Europe. Brotton emphasizes that Henry VIII, along with his court, "enjoyed" wearing Ottoman clothes, with the king frequently appearing in events "appareled in Turkey fashion."¹⁷⁰ England's adoption of Ottoman-inspired styles, which became a symbol of Tudor luxury, reflected its fascination with the richness of the Islamic culture, an attitude notably absent in the medieval English view of Muslims.

Beyond clothing, Tudor merchants imported exotic goods such as silk, velvet, sugar, currants, rhubarb, and textiles, including "Turkey carpets" and embroidered tapestries, which later became common in prosperous Elizabethan homes. The display of Turkey carpets showed prestige and enabled people who possess them "to declare their social superiority." Also, the English people collected and displayed portraits of prominent figures like the Ottoman sultans, and that became a "tradition" in the houses of both the nobility and the middle class.¹⁷¹ Such an appearance of Islamic products in the English daily domestic life reveals the Ottoman culture's impact on England. More importantly, the integration of the Ottoman culture into the English

¹⁷⁰ Jerry Brotton, *This Orient Isle: Elizabethan England and the Islamic World* (Penguin Books, 2017) p. 8.

¹⁷¹ Gerald MacLean, *Looking East: English Writing and the Ottoman Empire before 1800* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2007) p. 28-34.

daily life disrupts the binary that culturally separates the English from the Islamic Other. “When the Other appears in the home,” Robert Topinka writes, “it becomes more less exotic.”¹⁷²

By the mid-sixteenth century, Anglo-Islamic exchanges expanded further through trade and travel, with English merchants, diplomats, and even pirates interacting with Muslim societies from Morocco to Syria. These encounters facilitated not only commercial activity but also the exchange of ideas and cultural practices. Many Elizabethans, upon returning to England, brought with them commodities and new experiences that left a lasting impact on English society.¹⁷³ This growing engagement with and adoption of Islamic influences reveal how the Ottoman Empire served as a source of both admiration and inspiration, as well as a viable alternative to the traditional, strictly adversarial medieval image of Muslims.

The Elizabethan era, in particular, marked a golden age for the Anglo-Ottoman relations and cross-cultural exchange. The Ottomans recognized this positive shift in English attitudes, and, motivated by both religious and political interests, actively invested in fostering ties with Protestant England. Historians have often referred to the Ottomans as “an ally of the Reformation.”¹⁷⁴ Likewise, Elizabethan Protestants were labeled by Catholic critics as the “new turkes” due to their establishment of unprecedented alliances with the Muslim Ottomans.¹⁷⁵

Theologically speaking, Ottoman leaders perceived Protestantism as more aligned with Islamic monotheism than Catholicism.¹⁷⁶ Both groups shared a focus on scripture as the ultimate authority—Protestants through sola scriptura (relying solely on the Bible) and Muslims through the Quran’s divine text—while rejecting Catholic traditions and clerical hierarchies. They were

¹⁷² See Robert J. Topinka, “Islam, England, and Identity in the Early Modern Period: A Review of Recent Scholarship” (*Mediterranean Studies*, 2009) p. 127-28.

¹⁷³ Brotton, *This Orient Isle*, p. 8-9.

¹⁷⁴ See Vaughan, *Europe and the Turk*, pp. 134-135.

¹⁷⁵ Matthew Dimmock, *New Turkes: Dramatizing Islam and the Ottomans in Early Modern England* (Routledge, 2016) p. 162-164.

¹⁷⁶ Miller, *Muslims and the Gospel*, p. 208.

also united in their rejection of religious imagery; Protestants like Calvinists destroyed icons to avoid idolatry, mirroring Islam's strict condemnation of idol worship. In his *Observations on a Libel*, Francis Bacon, Elizabeth I's legal advisor, confirms that Protestant England's favorable relations with the Ottoman Empire stemmed from their shared opposition to religious idolatry. And to confirm her recognition of this theological commonality that rejected idolatry and images, Elizabeth I would include with the materials that she had sent to the Sultan "fragments of broken images." The Ottomans also addressed the Queen as "the chosen among those which triumph under the standard of JESUS CHRIST."¹⁷⁷ This common "religious identity" and ideological alignment were emphasized by writers such as Richard Hakluyt in *The Principall Navigations, Voiages and Discoveries of the English Nation* (1589) and by William Harborne, Elizabeth's ambassador to the Ottoman Empire, who played a crucial role in establishing diplomatic and commercial relations between Elizabethan England and Turkey. In a letter, Harborne appealed directly to the Sultan, reminding him of his religious commitment and urging him to stand firm against their shared Catholic enemies:

Do not let this moment pass unused, in order that God, who has created you a valiant man and the most powerful of all worldly princes for the destruction of idol-worshippers, may not turn his utmost wrath against you if you disregard his command, which my mistress, only a weak woman, courageously struggles to fulfil.¹⁷⁸

Of course, the religious connection between Ottomans and Protestants cannot be separated from political and economic motives. For both parties, their shared "religious identity" would certainly cement their political alliance, which was ultimately forged to undermine and overcome

¹⁷⁷ Matar, *Islam in Britain*, p. 123-25.

¹⁷⁸ See *Cultural Encounters between East and West*, ed. Birchwood and Dimmock, p. 44; and Arthur Horniker, "William Harborne and the Beginning of Anglo-Turkish Diplomatic and Commercial Relations" (*The Journal of Modern History*, 1942) p. 309.

Catholic dominance. From the Ottoman side, supporting Protestant England “was one of the fundamental principles” of foreign policy, for the Ottomans viewed Protestantism as a destabilizing force in Europe.¹⁷⁹ By backing Protestant leaders, Ottomans believed that they would keep Catholic forces preoccupied with internal struggles, and that would hinder a formation of a united front against their Empire. From the Elizabethan side, it was Queen Elizabeth I’s political and religious isolation from Catholic Europe that paved the way for the alliances with the Muslims. Following her excommunication by Pope Pius V in 1570, she was no longer prohibited by papal decrees to engage with Muslim nations. This political relationship facilitated economic partnership.

The economic partnership between England and the Ottoman Empire carried considerable importance, flourishing under agreements known as “Capitulations.” In 1580, Elizabeth negotiated trading rights with Sultan Murad III, leading to the establishment of the Levant Company, which provided English merchants access to Ottoman markets while bypassing Catholic-controlled trade routes. The Ottomans, in return, gained English maritime expertise and valuable goods that strengthened their economy. English merchants established themselves in major Ottoman cities such as Constantinople, Aleppo, and Alexandria, trading textiles, metals, and spices. The Dutch, engaged in their own struggle against Catholic Spain, also secured trade relations with the Ottomans, finding in them a commercial and strategic ally. The Ottomans cultivated these relationships, seeing Protestant merchants as a counterbalance to the economic power of Venice and Spain. While there was no direct military alliance between the Ottomans and Protestant England, their economic and political cooperation significantly weakened Catholic dominance and reshaped sixteenth-century European geopolitics.

¹⁷⁹*The Ottoman State and its Place in World History*, ed. Kemal Karpat (Leiden E. J. Brill, 1974) p. 53-54.

In addition to the Ottomans, the Queen forged trade and diplomatic ties with other Islamic powers such as the Moroccan Sa‘adian dynasty and Persia. These exchanges in trade and diplomacy led to an increasing Muslim presence in England.¹⁸⁰ Unlike other foreign communities, Muslims in Elizabethan England were neither permanent residents nor subjects of the Crown. They maintained their own political and religious identities, arriving as merchants, diplomats, and freed galley slaves rather than as refugees. Elizabeth openly collaborated with Muslim rulers, securing agreements that permitted English merchants to trade freely in Ottoman and Moroccan territories while granting similar privileges to Muslim traders in England. In a 1579 letter to Sultan Murad, Elizabeth assured him: “we will graunt as equall and as free a libertie to the subjects of your highnesse with us for the use of traffique, when they wil, and as often as they wil, to come, and go and from us and our kingdomes.”¹⁸¹ This led to an influx of Muslim individuals from North Africa, the Middle East, and Central Asia arriving in London, engaging in professions such as diplomacy, trade, translation, music, and even domestic service. By the mid-seventeenth century, Muslim merchants and sailors were frequently found in English coastal towns, benefiting from trade privileges and sometimes receiving financial support from the Crown. Their presence reflected England’s increasing engagement with the Islamic world, which played a significant role in shaping the country’s political and economic landscape. Naval cooperation also reinforced these relations, as English captains freed enslaved Muslims from Spanish galleys, sometimes providing them with ships and financial support to return home. In

¹⁸⁰ For more details about the Anglo-Islamic relations and encounters in the Elizabethan era, see Brotton, *This Orient Isle*; Gerald MacLean and Nabil Matar, *Britain and the Islamic World, 1558-1713* (Oxford University Press, 2011); Malcolm, *Useful Enemies*; MacLean, *Looking East*; and Vaughan, *Europe and the Turk*.

¹⁸¹ Nabil Matar, *Turks, Moors, and Englishmen in the Age of Discovery* (Columbia University Press, 1999) p. 20.

1596, English commanders liberated 38 “poore wretched Turks” from Cadiz, clothing and financing their passage to Barbary.¹⁸²

The growing political, religious, and commercial connections between Elizabethan England and the Islamic world not only influenced diplomacy and trade but also significantly shaped how Muslims were imagined within the English cultural consciousness. As interactions with Muslim societies became more frequent and complex, English texts reflected increasingly nuanced portrayals of Muslims. Literature served as a space for exploring these evolving views, where imagination of alliance and integration coexisted with persistent fears of difference and otherness. In literature, the Muslim Other was no longer depicted solely as a savage enemy but often as a figure of dignity, authority, and even tragic potential. However, this shift did not mean full acceptance. Instead, it created a complex discourse where the Muslim was both admired and viewed with suspicion. This ambivalence—both racial and religious—shapes Shakespeare’s portrayal of Othello, where blackness itself signifies not only racial otherness but also Islamic identity, positioning him as both a potential ally and a persistent source of fear.

Othello, The Moor of Venice

It is within this representational space that Shakespeare’s *Othello, the Moor of Venice* emerges.¹⁸³ As a play that places a black Muslim figure at the center of Christian society, *Othello* both reflects and questions the period’s contradictory views: the possibility of integration and alliance on the one hand, and the persistence of racial and cultural anxieties on the other. Importantly, Othello’s blackness serves as more than a racial identifier; it also signals his Islamic heritage. In early modern England, race and religion were closely seen as associated, with

¹⁸² Ibid, p. 20-21.

¹⁸³ In the following discussion, the term “Moor” is used to refer to Muslims, North Africans, and Black people—a composite identity shaped by early modern English perceptions of race, religion, and geography.

Moorish blackness signifying not just difference but also a connection to Islam, which could be both admired and feared.

While Marlowe's *Tamburlaine* portrays Muslim characters as alien enemies and their world as divided and dangerous, Shakespeare's *Othello* depicts the Moor as a noble stranger whose integration into the Christian society is feasible, at least initially. Historically contextualized, the play dramatizes Anglo-Moorish relations by introducing Othello as a potential ally to Christian Venice against Turkish enemies. However, although the play envisions the possibility of cross-cultural harmony and challenges negative stereotypical representations of alterity by integrating Othello, it simultaneously portrays a white society preoccupied with exoticism, as Othello's jealousy and violence, which ultimately lead to his downfall, stem from external racial prejudices and cultural pressures. Othello's skin color acts as a visible marker of his Islamic heritage, initially admired and celebrated but always vulnerable to rejection and hostility within a Christian society.

Thus, while Shakespeare imagines the integration of the Moor into the Christian world, he also dramatizes persistent English fears and ambivalences toward the Muslim Other. Othello's role as a Moor fighting Turks reflects Shakespeare's engagement with a long-standing tradition in which the Ottoman Turks were portrayed as Christendom's greatest enemy. By aligning Othello with Venice in its conflict with the Turks, Shakespeare imagines an alliance between Christians and Moors while simultaneously drawing on familiar narratives of Muslim hostility. In this way, Shakespeare engages with both the old and the new. By casting Othello as a tragic hero wronged by white Venetian society, he aligns with the changing Elizabethan politics that increasingly saw the Moor as a potential ally. Yet, by positioning Othello in opposition to the Turks, he retains the traditional theatrical and cultural representation of the Ottoman Empire as

the archetypal enemy of Christendom. This duality allows Shakespeare to engage with the contemporary political context while still relying on inherited dramatic conventions.

Othello, the Moor of Venice, is a well-regarded general of African descent serving in the Venetian military. Despite being a foreigner and an outsider, he has adopted Venetian culture and converted to Christianity, which facilitates his rise in Venetian society.¹⁸⁴ His status as a Christian convert enables him to participate in the Republic's political and military structures, yet he remains distinct in terms of race and culture. His conversion and military contributions make him both valuable to Venice and a target of suspicion and scheming.

Othello's secret marriage to Desdemona, a noblewoman from Venice, ignites controversy, as their relationship challenges societal norms. While Desdemona's love for him is represented as genuine, Venetian society, including her father Brabantio, views their marriage with discomfort, perceiving Othello as an exotic outsider who has seduced Desdemona through magic. This racial and cultural tension sets the stage for future conflicts. Though he is initially confident in Desdemona's love, Othello's doubts are manipulated by Iago, his ensign, who harbors resentment and schemes against him. Iago takes advantage of Othello's trust, sowing seeds of doubt about Desdemona's loyalty by using a handkerchief—a symbol of their love—as false evidence of her infidelity with Cassio.

As Iago's plot progresses, Othello is consumed by jealousy and paranoia, struggling with his feelings and his role in the Venetian society. His internal struggle worsens as he becomes increasingly alienated from Desdemona and consumed by the perceived betrayal. His previously noble and composed demeanor is overtaken by insecurity and anger, culminating in the tragic

¹⁸⁴ In addition to Iago's remark about Othello's baptism—"To win the Moor—were't to renounce his baptism" (Shakespeare 2.3.363)—the play offers other indications of Othello's Christianity, including his embodiment of Christian virtues, the Venetian state's trust in his leadership, his final speech identifying himself against the Turks (5.2.397-417), and the formal acceptance of his marriage to Desdemona.

murder of Desdemona in a jealous rage. When Iago's deceit is uncovered, Othello realizes the weight of his error. Overwhelmed by sorrow and remorse, he takes his own life, reclaiming his honor in death.

Shakespeare began writing *Othello* only months after the historic visit of Muhammed al-Annuri, the Moroccan ambassador, to Elizabeth I's court in 1600.¹⁸⁵ This visit was an important diplomatic event that continued an Anglo-Moroccan relationship of more than two decades. Al-Annuri, sent by Morocco's Sultan Mulay Ahmad Al-Mansur, came to London to suggest a strong alliance between England and Morocco to oppose their common enemy, Catholic Spain. During his six-month stay, al-Annuri caught attention as he travelled around London, with "so great an assembly of people" surrounding him and his entourage, "as the like hath not been seen in that place before." He appeared "strangely attired and behauioered," maintaining his unique clothing and style, and he attended major cultural events and celebrations, both social and royal.¹⁸⁶

Al-Annuri met with Queen Elizabeth at Nonsuch Palace and later at Oatlands Palace to discuss his plans of strategic alliance. He proposed not only fighting Spain together in Europe but also launching joint English-Moroccan attacks on Spanish lands in the Americas and the East Indies. He promised Morocco would provide soldiers, supplies, and support, highlighting Morocco's key role and strength. This possible partnership between Moroccan Muslims and Protestants aimed to weaken Catholic Spain and was a significant moment in England's relations with the Islamic world, showing how Protestants also used other alliances with other Moorish powers against Catholic enemies.¹⁸⁷

¹⁸⁵ Brotton, *This Orient Isle*, p. 12.

¹⁸⁶ See Brotton, *This Orient Isle*, pp. 1-3; and Matar, *Turks, Moors, and Englishmen*, pp. 33-35.

¹⁸⁷ Brotton, *This Orient Isle*, pp. 3-6.

Al-Annuri's presence also had a cultural impact in London. He was the subject of an important painting, the earliest known depiction of a Muslim figure painted from life in England (**Fig. 1**). The portrait depicts a commanding and powerful figure with a straightforward, assertive gaze.

He stands tall and calm, wearing richly detailed traditional Moroccan attire, a dark beard, and a turban. His big curved sword, characteristic of a North African warrior tradition, hangs at his left side. His presence in London, moreover, is believed by critics to have inspired Shakespeare to write *Othello*.¹⁸⁸

In fact, Anglo-Moroccan communication predated Al-Annuri's visit by decades. England had maintained strong political and economic ties with Morocco since the middle of the sixteenth century. During Elizabeth's reign, specifically, mutual strategic interests against Spain led the Moroccan sultan, Al-Mansur, to view England as a potential ally. Following his victory at the Battle of Alcazar in 1578 and facing pressure from Spanish and Ottoman forces, Al-Mansur began to consider alliances with European powers opposed to Spain, such as England, France, and Holland. England stood out as particularly cooperative, largely because of Elizabeth's urgent need for an ally against Spain. By 1580, Al-Mansur started to communicate with Elizabeth officially, addressing her as the greatest among those who follow the "religion of Christ." In a letter, he assured her that "as you are doing the best to facilitate our affairs there [in England], so will we do the same for you here." Diplomatic ties grew stronger, especially after Elizabeth supported Don Antonio, a claimant to the Portuguese throne who sought refuge in England from Philip II. Both Elizabeth and Al-Mansur understood their shared interest in countering Spanish

¹⁸⁸ See Brotton, *This Orient Isle*, p. 12; and *Shakespeare and Race*, ed. Catherine M. S. Alexander and Stanley Wells (Cambridge University Press, 2000) pp. 1-3.



Figure 1: Portrait of Abd al-Wahid bin Masoud bin Muhammad al-Annuri, Artist unknown, 1600 (The Norton Anthology)

dominance, leading to strengthened diplomatic relations, increased trade, and cultural exchanges.¹⁸⁹

Elizabeth's endorsement of the Barbary Company in 1585 to strengthen trade with North Africa marked official support for closer relations with Morocco. Al-Mansur also strategically exploited Elizabeth's naval success against the Spanish Armada in 1588 as evidence of her capability as an ally who could support his goal of reclaiming the lost Muslim territories of al-Andalus. Cooperation with Elizabeth thus aligned with Al-Mansur's Islamic ambitions, particularly his aim to restore Islam in Spain. Similarly, Elizabeth viewed Morocco as a crucial ally beyond Europe, vital for her political and economic security against Spain. Despite religious differences, both leaders prioritized political, ideological, and military collaboration, indicating a pragmatic approach to religious coexistence when aligned with strategic interests.¹⁹⁰

Also important is the fact that, during Shakespeare's time and in Shakespeare's London, Moors were not entirely unfamiliar figures. In fact, black Moors lived in London, serving in various social roles, many of which were notable and well-documented. Historians have identified records of at least 448 African individuals in Tudor and Stuart England.¹⁹¹ These records show that Africans held numerous roles such as skilled workers, musicians, goldsmiths, and maids, and others. Other records document the births, baptisms, and deaths of dozens of "blakamoors," reflecting not only their physical presence but also their partial integration into the English society. Examples include a "Christian Ethiopian" baptized in 1602 and "Richard a Blakmore" baptized in 1609. Additionally, Africans were prominently present in royal and merchant households, serving figures like Henry VIII and Catherine of Aragon, as well as in the

¹⁸⁹ See Gerald MacLean and Nabil Matar, *Britain and the Islamic World*, pp. 50-51.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid, pp. 51-54.

¹⁹¹ Nandini Das, et al. *Keywords of Identity*, pp. 43.

homes of notable merchants such as Sir Walter Raleigh. Their increasing presence was largely due to England's expanding exploration and participation in global trade, particularly in West Africa and the Atlantic.¹⁹² These historical facts highlight that the actual English familiarity and interaction with black African individuals during the Elizabethan period. This familiarity sharply contrasts with the assumption that Othello's Moorish identity is dramatically and entirely exotic for Shakespeare's audience.

Nonetheless, familiarity does not necessarily mean acceptance. Although black individuals became more visible in Elizabethan England, they were socially marginalized and politically overlooked. As Imtiaz Habib highlights in *Black Lives in the English Archives, 1500–1677: Imprints of the Invisible*, black people's existence was “not legal in the sense that they were not the objects of law but the exceptions of it,” being in a vulnerable and unprotected status.¹⁹³ They were frequently treated as “menial chattels in a shadow population,” neither fully integrated nor officially recognized. In legal cases, such as the Southampton court case of 1547, a black witness was denied the right to testify, for he was not regarded as a full human being.¹⁹⁴ Furthermore, while a few individuals secured employment in noble households or were even mentioned in Queen Elizabeth's records, the general societal attitude fluctuated between fascination and rejection.¹⁹⁵ Michael Guasco also explains that blackness in Elizabethan England was loaded with powerful negative associations: “To refer to someone as black in Tudor and early Stuart England was to cast aspersions on his or her character.” Blackness was linked to “deadly or dark purposes, malignant; pertaining to or involving death, deadly; baneful,

¹⁹² Ibid, pp. 44–45.

¹⁹³ Imtiaz Habib, *Black Lives in the English Archives, 1500–1677: Imprints of the Invisible* (Routledge, 2008) p. 70.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid, p. 64.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid, p. 73.

disastrous, sinister.”¹⁹⁶ Cultural and religious beliefs reinforced the notion that blackness was an immutable stain, as reflected in popular proverbs like “To wash an Ethiop [or blackamoor] is to labor in vain” and biblical verses which declared that a black Moor could no more change his skin than a leopard could change its “spottes.” These racial attitudes extended to the theater, where “black skin proved to be a powerful visual device,” allowing playwrights to contrast white virtue against black villainy: “Blacke best setteth foorth White: Good is most prayed in the reprehension of Evill.”¹⁹⁷ Habib similarly notes that black figures on stage embodied a form of “present-absentness.” They were visible but they lacked true voice or agency, used to articulate English identity by representing the limits of cultural and legal belonging.¹⁹⁸ Thus, by the end of the sixteenth century, petitions and royal proclamations demanded the deportation of “blackamoors,” which indicates a growing English anxiety over their presence.¹⁹⁹ Despite their increasing visibility, black Africans continued to be excluded, their presence recognized but their full and true belonging rejected.

Shakespeare’s *Othello* fundamentally reimagines the figure of the Moor introduced in his source for the play, Cinthio’s *Gli Hecatommithi*.²⁰⁰ In Cinthio’s story, the Moor is a flat character who mainly serves as a warning about the dangers of marrying someone from a different culture or class. He is not given a name, and his character lacks much depth or retrospection. Shakespeare, however, transforms Cinthio’s “wretched Moor” into a humanized, complex character.²⁰¹ This shift from an unnamed, cautionary Moor to Shakespeare’s *Othello* is not just

¹⁹⁶ Michael Guasco, *Slaves and Englishmen: Human Bondage in the Early Modern Atlantic World* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014) p. 105.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid, p. 106.

¹⁹⁸ Habib, *Black Lives in the English Archives*, pp. 17-18.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid, pp. 112-118.

²⁰⁰ A translated version of this original tale can be read in *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare*, ed., Geoffrey Bullough (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973)

²⁰¹ Ibid, p. 246.

about making the story more dramatic; it also changes how early modern English drama could portray Muslims or racial outsiders in a more nuanced way.

In Cinthio's tale, the Moor is a soldier respected for his military skill, but he remains isolated from the culture around him and lacks moral depth. He accepts and believes the Ensign's lies about Desdemona's infidelity without much hesitation. He allows the Ensign to kill her in a cold, calculated way using a sand-filled sock.²⁰² His actions are driven less by personal feelings like jealousy and more by a belief in women's disobedience. Cinthio does not show him as having any moral doubts or regret; he is punished by the state only after his crime is discovered. In this way, Cinthio's story reinforces the idea that Moors are dangerous when brought into direct contact with European society, a cautionary tale rather than a story of tragedy.

Shakespeare, by contrast, makes Othello into a fully developed tragic hero. Othello is noble, articulate, and emotionally complex. At the beginning, he is accepted by Venetian society as both a skilled general and the husband of Desdemona. His fall does not come from a natural tendency to violence or cruelty, but from the ways he is manipulated and the insecurities he has about his race and outsider status. Shakespeare makes Othello's blackness and foreign identity central to his emotional struggle, showing how prejudice and self-doubt slowly destroy his sense of belonging. Unlike Cinthio's Moor, Shakespeare's Othello is not simply punished by the law; he experiences deep remorse and kills himself out of grief and guilt, making him similar to classical tragic heroes. By reconstructing the Moor in this way, Shakespeare goes against the old stereotypes and presents a more complex and human picture of racial and cultural difference.

Shakespeare's *Othello* reflects the changing yet unsettled views of Moors in early modern England but funnels this reflection through a Venetian setting. His representation was likely

²⁰² Ibid, pp. 244-251.

shaped by the increasing English encounters with Moors and diplomatic connections, such as the 1600 Anglo-Moroccan embassy of al-Annuri. These circumstances influence Shakespeare's portrayal of Othello not just as a military leader but as a figure of political and cultural importance. In this regard, Othello becomes a dramatic embodiment of England's political interactions with Muslim powers, a figure shaped as much by diplomatic reality as by theatrical convention.

A key part of Shakespeare's portrayal of Othello is his choice to set the play in Venice rather than England, a decision he also borrows from Cinthio. By placing his Moorish hero in a republic known for its diversity and openness, Shakespeare creates a believable and politically relevant situation for Othello's initial acceptance. Mark Matheson points out that "in *Othello* Shakespeare represents a society in many ways fundamentally different from his own," and he explores these differences with what Matheson calls a "sociological imagination."²⁰³ In contrast to Elizabethan England, Venice was a place where military skills and personal contributions could sometimes matter more than lineage and race.

This setting is very important. Venice provided Shakespeare with an imaginative place to show a racial and cultural outsider like Othello achieving success and social status. The Venetian republic's need for foreign military talent—especially through mercenary generals—opened doors for individuals like Othello. As Matheson notes, Venice's system was based on mixed governance and practical legal approaches rather than absolute rule, which "opened the way for men like Othello."²⁰⁴ In contrast, such opportunities would have seemed unlikely in England's strict social hierarchy, where a black general would not have been accepted.

²⁰³ Mark Matheson, "Venetian Culture and the Politics of *Othello*" *Shakespeare Survey*, ed. Stanley Wells (Cambridge University Press, 1996) p. 123.

²⁰⁴ *Ibid*, p. 125.

Venice functions as a kind of political thought experiment. By placing Othello in a city that offers a stable alternative to the traditional monarchy, Shakespeare explores the idea of integration and its challenges. While Venice recognizes Othello's contributions, it is also a place where the experience of the cultural outsider is complex and unstable. Brabantio's worry that "bondslaves and pagans shall our statesmen be" (1.2.123) shows that even in a republic, racial bias can threaten the state's core values. This tension reflects how Venice, though initially open to Othello's foreignness, also embodies Elizabethan England's own ambivalence toward Muslims: admiration for their power coupled with a persistent anxiety about both their racial and religious differences.

Choosing Venice also adds to the tragedy. Othello comes as a loyal participant in what looks like a society based on merit. In his speech to the Senate, he shows respect for hierarchy, addressing them as "my very noble and approved good masters" (1.3.92). Matheson notes that Othello sees his role more as an obligation of loyalty than a contractual relationship, rooted in "a more nearly feudal conception" of his relationship with the state.²⁰⁵ This mismatch makes him vulnerable, as he seeks loyalty and stability from a republic that relies on negotiation and practicality rather than personal allegiance.

Shakespeare uses Venice as a setting to explore the advantages and risks of cultural integration. While the city facilitates Othello's success, it cannot protect him from the aggressive European power and cultural circumstances that ultimately contribute to his downfall. His loss represents not only a personal tragedy but also highlights larger systemic problems, serving as a reminder that an outsider's status remains vulnerable, even in an ostensibly open society.

Therefore, Shakespeare portrays Venice not merely as an engaging setting but also as a political

²⁰⁵ Ibid, p. 127.

contrast to England, imagining a world where the Moor can experience both celebration and destruction.

By casting Othello as the protector of Venetian—and, by extension, Christian—interests against an Ottoman adversary, Shakespeare reimagines the stage Moor not as a villain but as a potential ally. This is particularly clear when the Venetian Senate refers to him as “Valiant Othello” and entrusts him with the defense of Cyprus (Shakespeare 1.3.56–57), aligning him with the Christian state rather than its supposed Islamic enemy.

This elevation comes with a moral reassessment. The Duke’s statement that “Your son-in-law is far more fair than black” (1.3.331) suggests that Othello’s inherent goodness surpasses external racial prejudices. Consequently, the play challenges the cultural norms of Elizabethan society, proposing that blackness and virtue can exist together.

By doing this, Shakespeare uses Othello to portray both the hopes and perils of cross-cultural interactions. The tragedy does not arise solely from Othello’s difference, but from the fragile nature of his acceptance into a society that is uncertain about racial and religious boundaries. His journey highlights the complexity of an identity that exists between admiration and exclusion.

Shakespeare’s *Othello* contradicts and ultimately tragically realizes the stereotypes of the Moor from that era. On the Elizabethan stage, black Moors were commonly depicted as symbols of ugliness, treachery, lust, and savagery. Jack D’Amico notes that the Moor serves as a “convenient locus for those darkly subversive forces that threaten European society from within but that can be projected onto the outsider,” while also reflecting “those desires and energies that work from within.”²⁰⁶ This dual role allows the stage Moor to express not only outside threats

²⁰⁶ Jack D’Amico, *The Moor in English Renaissance Drama* (University of South Florida Press, 1991) p. 2.

but also inner anxieties regarding identity and morality. In this sense, Othello is more than just a character; he represents a dramatic space where issues of civility, honor, and racial tension are examined.

However, Othello challenges this negative representational legacy from the very beginning. In Act 1, he shows dignity and honor, clearly different from the “poisonous image of the black man” his enemies create.²⁰⁷ When Brabantio, Desdemona’s father, angrily reacts to Othello and Desdemona’s secret marriage, Othello refuses to be the monstrous figure Brabantio imagines has taken his daughter to a “sooty bosom” (1.2.89). Instead, he addresses the Venetian Senate with calmness, eloquence, and pride, confidently stating, “My parts, my title, and my perfect soul / Shall manifest me rightly” (1.2.36-37). Othello does not seem like a fearful outsider; he asserts his noble lineage—“I fetch my life and being / From men of royal siege”—along with his valuable contributions to Venice. (1.2.21-25) His own words and “round unvarnished tale” of love “out-tongue” the biased accusations against him. (1.3.106-end; 1.2.22) As Peter Herman observes, Shakespeare here “confronts anti-Black racism” by giving the Moor’s virtue and voice the power to overcome the “bloody book of law” that could have condemned him (1.3.80).²⁰⁸ Shakespeare’s decision to give Othello both rhetorical control and royal ancestry parallels the image of the dignified Muslim ambassador, a representative of refined civilization rather than foreign barbarity.

Robert Hornback’s analysis of Shakespeare’s racial themes enhances this interpretation by showing how Othello challenges the early blackface tradition that linked blackness with comic foolishness. Hornback asserts that Shakespeare “flouts” traditions that represent “blackness in terms of inherent folly through inept speech,” particularly by giving Othello an

²⁰⁷ Edward Berry, “Othello’s Alienation” (*Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, 1990) p. 319.

²⁰⁸ Peter C. Herman, *Early Modern Others: Resisting Bias in Renaissance Literature* (Routledge, 2023) p. 117.

eloquence that is not only convincing but also profoundly poetic.²⁰⁹ This powerful rhetoric not only confirms Othello's moral and intellectual worth but also subverts the stereotype of the incoherent or foolish black character. Unlike Shakespeare's Aaron, who stands separate from white society, Othello is integrated into the social, political, and religious life of Venice. His connection to Venetian values is significant, making him a respected public figure at first through his eloquence and discipline. As Emily Bartels observes, Othello is "not the sign," but "the mediator," of difference. He brings "the world to Venice and Venice to the world," starting a cultural exchange that "knows no bounds."²¹⁰ His marriage to Desdemona, a white noblewoman, further challenges the fears surrounding interracial relationships. In defending their love, Desdemona claims she saw Othello's "visage in his mind," meaning her love is based on recognizing his true worth, rather than exotic desire. (1.3.287)

Bartels's broader study of *The Battle of Alcazar* provides essential historical context for understanding how *Othello* inherits and reshapes theatrical conventions around Moors. According to Bartels, in Peele's play, the "black" and "barbarous" Muly Mahamet is opposed to the "brave Barbarian" Abdelmelec—a contrast grounded as much in conduct as in racial ambiguity.²¹¹ She argues that the figure of the Moor became an ideological tool for exploring cross-cultural politics and staging the consequences of imperial ambition. She writes, "*The Battle of Alcazar* does create a 'barbarous' black Moor who would become a subtext for stereotype. But it presents that figure ... as part of a race that includes a 'brave' Arabian Moor, whose nobility and success hinge on a sustaining connection to the Turks."²¹² Shakespeare builds on this

²⁰⁹ Robert Hornback, *Racism and Early Blackface Comic Traditions: From the Old World to the New* (Springer International Publishing, 2018) p. 28.

²¹⁰ Emily C. Bartels, *Speaking of the Moor: From Alcazar to Othello* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009) pp. 179-180.

²¹¹ Emily C. Bartels, "The Battle of Alcazar, the Mediterranean, and the Moor." *Remapping the Mediterranean World in Early Modern English Writings*, ed., G. Stanivukovic (Palgrave Macmillan, 2007) p. 107.

²¹² *Ibid*, p. 112.

theatrical heritage but complicates it by situating his Moor at the center of a Christian society and dramatizing his tragic downfall not as a result of inherent barbarism but as a consequence of social alienation and psychological manipulation. In this sense, *Othello* echoes the ideological structure of *Alcazar* but shifts its narrative focus inward—examining how a character defined by racial difference becomes both a defender and a victim of European civilization.

In early modern English culture, blackness represented a contradictory mix of power and subordination. On stages and in courts, black bodies were displayed as symbols of white wealth and status.²¹³ In this context, Othello's initial role as a celebrated general reflects a system in which black people are valued not for individuality but for symbolic utility. As Matthieu Chapman observes, "possession of a black slave was an emblem of riches, rank and fashion," and blackness itself became a spectacle tied to privilege and visibility.²¹⁴ However, this elevated display was inherently unstable. The very act of staging black people in positions of admiration often led to objectification instead of recognizing individuality.

This tension underlies Othello's tragedy. His high status is maintained as long as he serves Venice, but when his personal insecurities weaken his public persona, his blackness shifts from noble to threatening. As a black figure, he is only valued as long as he remains useful and visually impressive. The respect Othello once held turns into fear and rejection. By the end of the play, Othello is no longer seen as a respected leader but as a dangerous outsider. Lodovico, in the final scene, views him as an object that "poisons sight" (5.2.365). This reduction shows how quickly admiration can collapse into disgust. Shakespeare's play shows how society's acceptance

²¹³ See Matthieu A. Chapman, "The Appearance of Blacks on the Early Modern Stage: 'Love's Labour's Lost's' African Connections to Court" (*Early Theatre*, 2014) pp. 77-80.

²¹⁴ *Ibid*, p. 79.

of blackness depends on performance. Once that performance breaks down, the same society turns against the individual it once praised.

Even at the height of Othello's acceptance in Venice, Shakespeare reveals underlying racial tensions. For the Venetians, Othello's skin color symbolizes otherness. When Othello defends his marriage with dignity, Brabantio accuses him of bewitching Desdemona, stating that his daughter has fallen "in love with what she feared to look on!" and labels their union as "against all rules of nature" (1.3.116-119). Iago and Roderigo use bestial and demonic imagery to depict Othello as a demeaning stereotype—calling him an "old black ram ... / tugging your white ewe," (1.1.97-98) a "Barbary horse," (1.1.125) and a "devil" who must have enchanted Desdemona (1.1.100). This derogatory language, as noted by Edward Berry, reflects "the reigning stereotype of the African on the Elizabethan stage," presenting Othello's blackness as something "gross" and frightening.²¹⁵ Such language showcases the wider prevailing attitudes of Elizabethan society. In 1601, Queen Elizabeth I issued a decree to expel "great numbers of negroes and Blackamoors" from England, whom she labeled as "infidels" and a burden on resources.²¹⁶ Being black in early modern England clearly carried a significant cultural stigma, associated with alien infidels and undesired individuals. Nonetheless, Shakespeare deliberately contrasts this with the response of the Venetian Duke and senators, who reject Brabantio's racial suspicions and racist accusations. They evaluate and elevate Othello based on his services and character instead of his skin color, with the Duke concluding that "this tale would win my daughter too" (1.3.197). In this way, the Senate portrays Othello as a man of honor and worth, resisting the common stereotypes of the time. This scene highlights the struggle between bias and pragmatism. Although Othello is publicly honored as Venice's noble hero, the underlying

²¹⁵ Berry, "Othello's Alienation" p. 319.

²¹⁶ See Habib, *Black Lives in the English Archives*, p. 113.

sense of his social isolation is already being cultivated due to the ongoing belief that his identity is fundamentally at odds with societal standards and the natural order.

In Act 2, Othello continues to exemplify the enlightened, assimilated Moor, distinguishing him from earlier negative representations. After a perilous journey, he joyfully reunites with Desdemona in Cyprus, exclaiming, “O my soul’s joy!” (2.1.200) He says that if every storm ended with such a joyful reunion, he could “die, / ... most happy” at that moment. (2.1.205-206) This sincere statement portrays Othello as a devoted husband, celebrating their mutual affection. The Venetian soldiers and officials respect him in Cyprus; he speaks of the “great love” he has found “amongst them” (2.1.225-226). At this point, he appears entirely comfortable. (2.1.228) He is the Moor *of Venice*, not its enemy. It is noteworthy that Othello’s language here is rich and articulate, contrasting with his earlier claim “Rude am I in my speech” (1.3.96). He now eloquently expresses profound joy and the harmony of love. Shakespeare highlights Othello’s noble identity as a cultured, brave warrior-poet capable of love and emotions. This representation was uncommon during a time when black Africans in England were often seen as servile or marginalized, essentially reduced to being servants in households or viewed as an “annoyance” subject to expulsion.²¹⁷ In stark contrast, Othello is both a commander and a lover, standing as an equal to the white nobility. In these early acts, he even earns praise from Governor Montano, who describes him as one that “commands / Like a full soldier” with virtue and authority (2.1.39–40). However, despite this acceptance, cultural pressures disturb Othello’s happiness. Iago cunningly remarks that while Othello and Desdemona are “well tuned” together, he will “set down the pegs that make this music,” indicating his intent to exploit the

²¹⁷ Ibid, p. 113.

insecurities tied to their interracial relationship, which can easily disrupt Othello's sense of belonging. (2.1.218-220)

The following acts mark a significant change in Othello's journey, as Iago gradually begins to manipulate Othello's personal insecurities and drives him to confront the stigma associated with his race. Iago implies that Desdemona may betray Othello, suggesting that it is "unnatural" for her to love someone who is not of "her own clime, complexion, and degree" (3.3.270-273). Othello begins to internalize this doubt. Yet these doubts are not only about racial otherness; they are also about the religious difference that early modern English and Venetian societies projected onto the Moor. Othello's blackness was seen as an external indicator of his Islamic heritage, intensifying Venetian anxieties about loyalty and religious purity. While valued as a potential ally, it was also mistrusted as an alien faith.

He fears that her attraction to him may be contrary to nature, and this suspicion soon reshapes his identity. Building on what Jack D'Amico describes as the tendency of English drama to use the Moor to reflect Western cultural anxieties, we see here that Othello's sense of otherness is no longer just socially projected; it becomes something he accepts as true. His doubts are not merely emotional; they mark the moment when he begins to see himself through the lens of racial stereotype. "Haply, for I am black," he reasons, trying to explain Desdemona's imagined betrayal through his own racial difference (3.3.304). As he adopts White views regarding blackness, his self-assurance begins to decline. This moment is particularly powerful. Earlier, he took pride in his identity as someone of "royal siege" (1.2.25) and a hero of "disastrous chances" (1.3.155), but now he fears his otherness may be a serious flaw. Bartels emphasizes that under Iago's influence, Othello begins "to understand [his] difference as a

liability and to read himself ... derogatorily as Moor.”²¹⁸ He starts to internalize the racist ideas that were once external to him. This aligns perfectly with Iago’s aim to confine Othello to the stereotype of the Moor in his own mind. Iago suggests that Desdemona secretly fears Othello’s “looks” and will eventually regret choosing to marry an outsider. (3.3.239) Such insinuations play on the racist notion (previously expressed by Brabantio) that Desdemona’s love “could err / Against all rules of nature” by choosing a black man. (1.3.118-119) The tragedy lies in Othello, who once dismissed these ideas, now beginning to accept them. “Excellent wretch!” he declares about Desdemona, “Perdition catch my soul / But I do love thee! And when I love thee not / Chaos is come again” (3.3.100–102). These words foreshadow chaos, which soon appears as Othello’s fading self-esteem. He subsequently demands “ocular proof” of his wife’s supposed betrayal and vows that “if she be false, heaven mocks itself,” because such deceit would challenge his understanding of a fair world (3.3.319–412). Once Iago presents the fabricated “proof” of the handkerchief, Othello’s final doubts vanish, leading him to believe that Desdemona is “false as hell” (4.2.48). At this point, his self-image undergoes a significant transformation. He no longer sees himself as the beloved husband or respected general, but as a wronged and vengeful outsider. His anguished outcry—“Her name, that was as fresh / as Dian’s visage, is now begrimed and black / As mine own face”—demonstrates how completely Othello has conflated his identity with the racist symbolism of blackness (3.3.441-443). Desdemona’s supposed wrongdoing becomes “black” in his view, and he in turn perceives his own blackness as a sign of corruption. As Berry notes, Othello’s sorrow and rage are “deeply implicated in the specific question of race,” particularly in the way he imagines Desdemona’s supposed lust as a racial betrayal.²¹⁹ Her perceived sexual “blackness” reinforces Othello’s internalized fear that his

²¹⁸ Bartels, *Speaking of the Moor*, p. 181.

²¹⁹ Berry, “Othello’s Alienation” p. 329.

own race marks him—and now her—as impure. The man who once declared, “My life upon her faith!” (1.3.335), now sees her as a “fair devil,” her whiteness a deceptive cover for immorality (3.3.545). In this moment, Othello fully adopts the racial logic that once targeted him. He sees both Desdemona and himself through the lens of a cultural imagination that equates blackness with corruption and uncontrolled desire.

Desdemona is also caught in the conflict between race and society. Her affection for Othello is viewed not only as unusual, but as dangerous. Karen Newman notes that Desdemona’s decision to love a black man challenges racial and gender norms, placing her in a situation where her desires face punishment for transgressing expectations. She states that Desdemona “is punished for her desire ... which threatens a white male hegemony in which women cannot be desiring subjects.”²²⁰ At the start of the play, Desdemona is portrayed as unusually assertive. In the Venetian court, she boldly defends her marriage, declaring, “That I did love the Moor to live with him / My downright violence and storm of fortunes / May trumpet to the world” (1.3.283–285). This public declaration of love disrupts conventional expectations of female modesty. At the same time, her defiance provokes suspicion. Her father warns Othello, “Look to her, Moor, if thou hast eyes to see. / She has deceived her father, and may thee” (1.3.333–334). What begins as admiration of Desdemona’s independence quickly becomes mistrust. As Othello begins to internalize the racist stereotypes that surround him, he stops seeing Desdemona as someone who truly loves him and instead views her as a “fair devil,” someone who has defied nature. Their tragedy not only stems from others misreading them but also from their own misreadings of themselves. Othello’s trust in Desdemona is central to his identity; when this trust breaks, so does his sense of self. He compares Desdemona to a fountain from which his “current runs,” now

²²⁰ Karen Newman, *Essaying Shakespeare* (University of Minnesota Press, 2009) p. 51.

corrupted into a “cistern for foul toads / To knot and gender in” (4.2.69–72). He struggles to separate her perceived decline from his own identity. Newman highlights that Othello “submits and embraces the dominant values of Venetian culture,” even as those values render both him and Desdemona as monstrous.²²¹ The moment Othello begins to internalize fears and stereotypes marks the rise of his private alienation. He becomes disconnected not only from his beloved but also from the assured self he once embodied.

By the following act, Othello is forced to embody the stereotype that his racist critics have imposed on him: the furious, savage Moor. The nobility and rhetorical excellence displayed in the earlier acts disintegrate into chaotic fury. For example, when Iago tells Othello that Cassio has confessed to sleeping with Desdemona, Othello falls into “a trance” and begins to speak incoherently:

Lie with her? Lie on her? We say “lie on her”
when they belie her. Lie with her! That’s
fulsome! Handkerchief—confessions—handkerchief.
To confess and be hanged for his labor.
First to be hanged and then to confess—I tremble
at it. Nature would not invest herself in such shadowing
passion without some instruction. It is not
words that shake me thus. Pish! Noses, ears, and
lips—is’t possible? Confess—Handkerchief—O, devil! (4.1.45-54)

This breakdown in language marks a significant shift in Othello’s identity—from the composed and eloquent general to a man overtaken by emotion and stereotype. Ian Smith argues that the

²²¹ Ibid, 49.

play here constructs race through its language, pointing out that Othello's decline into fragmented and uncontrolled speech aligns with early modern notions that associate eloquence with whiteness. Smith notes that Othello's loss of rhetorical control is interpreted by Venetian society—and the audience—as a reversion to barbarism.²²² This is echoed by Iago, who calls Othello's condition “a savage madness,” reinforcing early modern stereotypes that associated blackness with emotional excess and savagery. (4.1.69)

Peter Erickson similarly highlights how characters like the Duke and Desdemona unintentionally reinforce racial hierarchy. The Duke's remark that Othello is “far more fair than black” suggests a conditional acceptance, implying that Othello's worth depends on how closely he aligns with white ideals. Desdemona's compassion for the imagined “Barbary”—a black maid who dies singing—unintentionally idealizes and reduces black identity to a mere poetic stereotype (4.3.28-32). Overcome by jealousy, Othello falls into epilepsy, symbolizing his loss of control (4.1.63). When he recovers, he becomes more violent, striking Desdemona publicly (4.1.270) and calling her “that cunning whore of Venice” (4.2.104). This public display contradicts the image of the “noble Moor” that Othello once represented. Lodovico, who had only seen Othello as a wise and composed leader, questions in disbelief, “Is this the noble Moor, whom our full senate / Call all in all sufficient?” when he witnesses the general hit his wife (4.1.299-300).

Shortly before this scene, Othello himself is aware of this transformation. He remarks, “Ay, let her rot and perish and be damned / tonight, for she shall not live. No, my heart is turned / to stone. I strike it, and it hurts my hand,” as if recognizing that he has become something less than human. But right after this, he shifts to the opposite extreme, praising Desdemona: “O, the /

²²² See Ian Smith, “Barbarian Errors: Performing Race in Early Modern England” (*Shakespeare Quarterly*, 1998) pp. 168-169.

world hath not a sweeter creature” (4.1.204-205). These wild shifts indicate a man in conflict with himself. He has internalized the contradictions of Venetian society: valuing Desdemona as an angel one moment and denouncing her as a scheming “whore” the next. Furthermore, in manipulating his innocent wife as if she were an “impudent strumpet,” Othello ironically fulfills the very stereotype Iago used: the Moor as a beast driven by uncontrollable sexual jealousy (4.2.92). As Berry points out, Othello “comes to see himself as his own stereotype,” and as a result, projects this image onto Desdemona, envisioning her as the deceitful, lustful Moor (“black,” “devil”) that he now believes himself to be.²²³

In essence, Othello undergoes an identity exchange. He shifts into the savage while paradoxically perceiving Desdemona as the external threat. This emphasizes how deeply Iago’s racist manipulation has affected him. Othello’s sense of self is now broken. As Alberto Cacicedo notes, Shakespeare’s play prompts the question of “what happens to the sense of self in a stranger who finds himself in an alien, complex, confusing... setting.”²²⁴ Othello’s downfall suggests that once he loses the trust and acceptance he relied on, he turns to the only role society allows for someone of his race: the “savage and libidinous” outsider who acts out violently.²²⁵ Othello’s personal alienation has transformed into complete public alienation. As D’Amico insightfully states, “the imaginative identification with the isolated alien can become a way of exploring the tension between the human image and the cultural-theatrical stereotypes that identify and frame the individual within a given social structure.” But while drama may invite the audience to empathize with the outsider, “the imaginative journey ... may confirm many traditional characterizations of the Moor.”²²⁶ Othello’s rise and fall exemplify this ambivalence.

²²³ Berry, “Othello’s Alienation” p. 319.

²²⁴ Alberto Cacicedo, “Othello, Stranger in a Strange Land” (*Interdisciplinary Literary Studies*, 2016) pp. 15-16.

²²⁵ Herman, *Early Modern Others*, p. 116.

²²⁶ D’Amico, *The Moor in English Renaissance Drama*, p. 2.

Having once symbolized the virtues of Venetian civilization, he becomes, in the end, a mirror for its anxieties. “A society imaginatively engaged with the otherness of the Moor,” D’Amico notes, “is both affirming its identity and testing that identity, confirming its superiority and exploring the limits of its own assumptions.”²²⁷ Othello’s fall reflects that contradiction. His greatness breaks under the pressure of a cultural narrative that leaves him with no alternative ending.

By the end of the play, Shakespeare offers Othello a chance for redemption and self-awareness. Yet he also leaves us with an image of a man deeply and tragically divided against himself. After Othello kills Desdemona in their bed, a moment charged with tragic intimacy, the reality of Iago’s betrayal finally emerges. (5.2.105-300) Faced with Desdemona’s dying declaration of her innocence and Emilia’s testimony, Othello’s fury fades away, giving way to overwhelming regret. He laments, “O fool, fool, fool!” as he realizes he has “thrown away a pearl” by taking the life of his faithful wife. (5.2.382-407) In his final speech, Othello attempts to reconstruct his fractured identity. He implores the Venetians to accurately recount the events without malice: “Speak of me as I am; nothing extenuate, / Nor set down aught in malice” (5.2.402-403). He goes on to describe himself in contradictory terms, as someone who “loved not wisely, but too well; / Of one not easily jealous, but being wrought, / Perplexed in the extreme” (5.2.404-406). These well-known lines illustrate Othello’s struggle to understand how he, a man who valued sound judgment and profound love, became so “perplexed” by jealousy. He acknowledges his lack of wisdom in love while maintaining that he was not inherently jealous or cruel.

This is Othello grappling with his conflicting identities: the honorable Moor and the tragic murderer consumed by delusion. He compares himself to the “base Judean,” who discards

²²⁷ Ibid, p. 3.

a valuable pearl, signifying someone who, due to his own blindness, fails to recognize the worth of virtue, represented by Desdemona. (5.2.407) Following this self-criticism, Othello draws another powerful comparison, recalling a time in Aleppo when he defeated a “malignant and a turbanned Turk” who threatened Venice. “I took by th’ throat the circumcised dog, / And smote him,” he says. After that, he stabs himself. (5.2.413-417) In this act, Othello embodies both the avenger of Venice and the infidel Turk, punishing the “Turk” he feels he has become. This moment reflects a regained sense of agency. He chooses how to end his life, reaffirming the noble figure who once defended the state. He kisses his deceased wife, stating, “I kissed thee ere I killed thee,” and then dies upon that kiss, indicating that he cannot bear to live in a world where he has harmed what he loved most. (5.2.420) In doing so, too, he reclaims the role of the Moorish ally, aligned with Christian order against its perceived enemies, a role that reflects England’s own evolving perception of Moors as not only outsiders but potential defenders of political interests. By recalling his victory over the “circumcised Turk,” Othello confronts the part of himself that Venice has always seen as alien, that is his Muslim identity which is tied to both his blackness and his status as a religious outsider. His suicide emerges as a tragic act of erasing the very Islamic identity that once made him admirable yet also suspect in the eyes of Christian Venice.

Ultimately, though, he submits to the violent role that Elizabethan culture assigns to a Moor: the “circumcised dog” punished for his transgressions. However, he kills himself in a conscious and almost ritualistic manner that evokes pity rather than mere condemnation. Shakespeare leaves Othello’s identity at the moment of death ambiguous. Is he a noble servant of Venice restoring order by punishing himself, or is he tragically giving in to the racist belief that a Moor’s final action can only be one of violence against himself and others? The play does not

provide a definitive answer; instead, it allows the audience to confront the tragic outcome of a great man undone by the conflict of personal passion and cultural prejudice.

Throughout Othello's journey from a respected general to a tragic murderer, Shakespeare effectively highlights how the Moor's sense of self is influenced by his interactions with a society that both admires and distrusts him. Earlier in the play, Othello represents the potential of a Moor of Venice, celebrated for his achievements and ostensibly accepted despite his race. This initial acceptance echoes the positive images of Muslims and the Muslim Other that Elizabethan England could sometimes see and embrace as a figure of power, dignity, and even nobility, as seen in the English admiration for Ottomans and Moroccans that I discussed earlier in this chapter. Yet, this humanizing portrayal was unprecedented during a time when black individuals in England were often regarded as objects to use; Imtiaz Habib's archival research above has shown that London in Shakespeare's day did house a substantial number of blacks, but they remained on the margins of society. Shakespeare brings a character from the margins to the forefront, endowing him with heroic qualities. However, Othello's downfall underscores the precariousness of his assimilation. The cultural pressures surrounding otherness and blackness—fear of miscegenation and cultural integration and deep-seated beliefs that Africans were “infidels” or innately lustful and savage—eventually find their way into Othello's own mind and sense of self. Under Iago's manipulative influence, he begins to embody the very traits (folly, rage, and violence) that literature and tradition associated with Moors. As Sarah Jilani succinctly puts it, Othello “goes from being the mediator of his own racial and cultural difference to the sign of difference itself.”²²⁸ Ultimately, he becomes isolated as a “black ram”—a clear symbol of darkness in a white Venetian society that views his final acts with shock and horror. Yet,

²²⁸ Sarah Jilani, “‘Black’ Spaces: ‘Othello’ and the Cinematic Language of Othering” (*Literature/Film Quarterly*, 2015) p. 105.

Shakespeare permits Othello to express the injustice of his experience. By pleading to be viewed “as I am,” Othello challenges the reductive racial narrative that might define him solely as a devil. He insists that he “loved ... too well,” asserting that his tragedy arises from deep human passion perplexed by manipulation, rather than from any inherent flaws linked to his Moorish identity. It has always been debated whether *Othello* confronts or perpetuates racism. Certainly, as Newman points out, the play illustrates “the extraordinary fascination with and fear of racial and sexual difference” typical of its time and “managed and produced difference” through the very language that labels Othello as “Moor” and Desdemona as “fair.”²²⁹ Nevertheless, Shakespeare does not reduce Othello to a mere stereotype; he presents a fully realized character who wrestles with externally imposed identities. The audience is led to sympathize with Othello’s heroic qualities and understand the psychological burden of his otherness. Ultimately, the play reveals that racism functions as a destructive force. In the end, we grieve for Othello not because he was a foolish Moor, but rather because he was human—noble yet flawed, “one that loved not wisely, but too well.” He was one who fell victim to a toxic blend of individual villainy and societal prejudices.

In conclusion, Othello’s journey—from a confident self-image to tragic self-destruction—reveals the complex views of Moors and Muslims in early modern times. Shakespeare shows Othello as a clear departure from typical Moor portrayals. He is dignified, Christian, rational, and inclusive. He embodies the honorable outsider who seems to have overcome the stigma of being black and an outsider. However, as the story develops, the support for this image diminishes. His respected public persona clashes with a growing feeling of isolation due to prejudice around him. Torn between his Venetian identity and the perception of

²²⁹ Newman, *Essaying Shakespeare*, p. 57.

the “blackamoor,” Othello ultimately falls victim to the very stereotypes he once seemed to have been able to resist and overcome. He turns into the jealous “green-eyed monster” that civilized society feared and becomes a tragic victim of that same society (3.3.196). His final act of suicide—killing the “Turk” within himself—represents a return to his former bravery and a heartbreaking realization that he feels there is no place for a man like him in the world he cherished. This tragic end highlights that his blackness is more than a racial sign; it marks his Islamic identity, which English and Venetian societies could admire for its political and military strength but could never fully accept within the Christian framework. His final act of self-destruction reflects the moment when religious difference, inseparable from racial difference, becomes impossible to bridge. Othello dies tragically aware that he has become a symbol of otherness—a “circumcised dog”—that must be eliminated.

Significantly, Shakespeare’s decision to depict Othello not as an enemy but as a defender of Christian Venice aligns with England’s own diplomatic imagination at the time. Inspired by figures such as the Moroccan ambassador al-Annuri, who proposed alliance with Elizabeth I against Spain, *Othello* reflects a moment when the Moor could be envisioned not as a threat but as a political and moral partner.

Despite Othello’s errors, the very fact that Shakespeare exposes Othello’s inner life—his eloquence, love, jealousy, and regret—compels the audience to reconsider and challenge the simplistic view of blackness as evil. In *Othello*, blackness and difference are not fixed traits but social constructions that Smith argues are “interrogated” by the events of the play.²³⁰ Othello’s story, which starts with celebration and ends in betrayal, reveals the human cost of racism and bigotry. By revisiting the legacy of Peele’s *Alcazar*, Bartels shows how early English drama

²³⁰ Smith, “Barbarian Errors” p. 178.

divided Moors into noble and barbaric categories. Shakespeare's *Othello* tragically merges both figures in one character, dramatizing the psychological struggle of dealing with such conflicting identities. Othello continues to be a significant figure whose rise and decline caution that an Other can be as virtuous (or as flawed) as anyone else, and that it is in fact the power of racism and jealousy, not the inherent nature of the Other, that leads to the "bloody period" of this tragedy (5.2.418). Shakespeare thus uses Othello's journey to confront his society's racial fears while also depicting the tragic decline of a man who, ultimately, can only ask to be understood: "speak of me as I am," as Othello, the Moor of Venice.

Conclusion

This dissertation explores the evolving and complex portrayals of Muslim characters in English literature from the medieval period to the Renaissance. By examining these depictions within their historical, religious, and political contexts, it shows that representations of Muslims were not fixed but changed over time in response to continuously changing circumstances. From the early demonization of Saracens in medieval religious texts to the more nuanced portrayals of Turks and Moors in Renaissance drama, English writers used the Muslim Other to define their own cultural and religious identities and express their fears and anxieties. This study argues that these portrayals were shaped by a dynamic mix of religious beliefs, racial attitudes, and political needs, revealing a complexity far beyond the simple opposition of condemnation or admiration.

Chapter I examines the origins of negative Muslim stereotypes in the medieval Christian imagination, tracing their formation in biblical interpretations and crusading rhetoric. Works like *The Song of Roland* and Chaucer's "The Man of Law's Tale" were influenced by how theologians viewed Muslims, portraying their Saracens as heretical, idolatrous, and barbaric enemies of Christianity, against whom Christian virtue was defined. This chapter highlights how twelfth-century religious language established a lasting framework for later literary portrayals, linking religious difference to racial and cultural inferiority.

Chapter II explores how these medieval views persisted and evolved in the Renaissance, particularly in Christopher Marlowe's *Tamburlaine the Great*. Marlowe's portrayal of Muslims as both destructive and destructible reflects Elizabethan England's fears of the Ottoman Empire's power and its haunting desire to see the Empire's disintegration. Yet, Marlowe's adaptation of medieval stereotypes also shows a new complexity, shaped by England's increasing trade, diplomatic, and religious interactions with the Islamic world. The chapter shows how the

Ottoman threat was framed as both a religious and political challenge, which provokes a deep sense of anxiety shown in Marlowe's depiction of the Muslim Other.

Chapter III focuses on Shakespeare's *Othello*, which marks a significant shift by presenting its Moorish protagonist as a tragic, deeply human figure. Unlike the one-dimensional villains of medieval texts or Marlowe's Moors and Turks, Othello's blackness and Islamic identity evoke both fascination and suspicion. The chapter argues that Shakespeare's positive portrayal of Moors reflects Protestant England's growing diplomatic ties with Islamic powers like Morocco and a rising interest in cooperation and cross-cultural communication. However, the play also exposes the limits of Christian tolerance and the negative impact of racial prejudice, showing that even positive interactions with Muslims could be disrupted by Christian society's anxieties.

Together, these chapters demonstrate how portrayals of Muslims in English literature evolved through the interplay of religious beliefs, racial attitudes, and political realities. Medieval depictions of Muslims as heretics laid a foundation of hostility that persisted into the early modern period. However, the Ottoman Empire's rise, the Protestant Reformation, and England's expanding interactions with Islamic regions prompted a reassessment of these stereotypes. The resulting literature both reinforced Christian superiority and echoed fears surrounding its weakness, causing ambivalence in early modern attitudes toward Muslims.

This study also shows how literary depictions of Muslims reflected English anxieties about their own identity, moral authority, and global role. In Marlowe's *Tamburlaine*, the disunity of the Muslim world is dramatized to unite and gratify an alarmed Christian audience, while in *Othello*, the noble outsider's integration gives the English a chance to envision communication with racial and religious others and his downfall reveals the weaknesses of a

supposedly tolerant Christian society. These works show that portrayals of Muslims were not just expressions of anxiety and fear but also spaces for self-reflection and negotiation.

This dissertation emphasizes the importance of examining Muslim representations to understand the shifting nature of English perceptions of otherness. Medieval and Renaissance texts offer valuable insights into English attitudes toward Islam, while also revealing how depictions of Muslims served as means for writers to navigate their own fears and aspirations. The works of Marlowe and Shakespeare, for example, depict a society struggling to define itself against a formidable and complex Other. Future research could expand on this by exploring how these literary portrayals interacted with actual encounters—through diplomacy, travel, and trade—shaping the developing relationship between England and the Islamic world and the way English people perceived Muslim others.

Additionally, this study challenges the idea of Orientalism as a fixed or uniform concept. By tracing the varied and often contradictory depictions of Muslims across different periods and genres, it shows that early English portrayals of Islam were not simply negative. Instead, they reflect England's real engagement, both theological and political, with the Islamic world and create narratives that sometimes responded positively to these interactions. This fact deepens our understanding of early modern literature and sheds light on how cultural and political encounters continue to shape perceptions of difference and attitudes towards otherness.

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Vita

Adel Alshammari was born in Saudi Arabia in 1990. He grew up in Ha'il region, where he spent his formative years and pursued his early education. He attended the University of Ha'il, earning a bachelor's degree in English Language, which laid the foundation for his academic journey. In 2018, he travelled to the US, Tennessee to further his studies, enrolling at the University of Tennessee. There, he completed both his master's and Ph.D. in English Literature. Alshammari completed his PhD degree, under the advisement of Professor Heather Hirschfeld, in August 2025.