

# Elizabethan Orientalism and its Contexts: The Representation of the Orient in Early Modern English Drama

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THE ARTICLE EXAMINES THE TRADITION of Elizabethan Orientalism in relation to the political, historical, and cultural context of that time. By establishing diplomacy and economic link with the Middle-East countries, the interests of intellectuals and artists for Orient increased. The study is focused on the image of the Orient in the Elizabethan theatre, claiming that stereotypes, misconceptions and excesses in the portrait of the Orient seem to be challenged within the Elizabethan drama. It shows that the Orient was not only presented as a negative Other, backward, fanatic and barbarian – the antipode of civilized Europe – but also presents a number of plays which avoid a stereotyped treatment and show a real interest in exploring and understanding it. Examining the Orientalist tradition in the Elizabethan theatre, the author intends to emphasize the multi-sided nature of Orientalism, which significantly shaped the theatre as a dominant Elizabethan public art form.

The studies of scholars and critics investigating Orientalism in English literature have been centered on the 18th century as the golden age for the representation of Oriental character, life and history. In fact, before the 18th, the 16th century – that is the English Renaissance – knew a particular interest in the Eastern world. This interest can be seen in the publication of the first major books on Oriental history, the translation of certain Oriental books and most notably the recurrent production of plays with oriental settings or subjects.

In fact, the Oriental matter marked the very beginning of English Renaissance drama and was constantly present in all its phases of development until its decline with the closing of the theatres in 1648.

[110] From the 1580s up to this date, about fifty plays were produced with plots or sub-plots involving Orientals. Indeed, an examination of the Elizabethan and Jacobean drama reveals that this literary tendency was not only present but also predominant. The fact that a majority of the main Elizabethan and Jacobean playwrights was concerned with this tendency, Marlowe, Shakespeare, Webster, Ford, Dekker, Marston, Greene, etc., is proof enough that the production of Oriental plays constituted a deep literary tradition which influenced the English drama of the period and English literature in general.

In this paper, this tradition of Elizabethan Orientalism is investigated, described and characterized in relation to the historical-cultural contexts that explain and underlie it. The development of relations with Oriental countries through commerce and diplomacy on the one hand, and the confrontation with the Ottomans on the other, constitute the main aspects of such a context. The representation of the Orient on the Elizabethan stage is also linked to and informed by a flourishing travel literature that increased the interest in and fascination with the Eastern world.

The development of relations with Oriental countries must itself be placed within the more general context of Elizabethan England's struggle to take part in the adventure of exploration and trade. The first twenty years of the reign of Elizabeth I were for England a period of intense activity of exploration of the world, and Elizabethan explorers and travelers began an adventure which was a necessary chapter to the ascension of England to international glory. This adventure is famously described by Richard Hakluyt in his three-volume book *The Principal Navigations, Traffics and Discoveries of the English Nation* published in 1589 (Hakluyt 1903–1905). The book particularly highlighted the attempts of the British to discover a northeast or northwest passage to the Orient.

The motivation of this adventure which involved geographers, scientists and navigators was to make of England a great trading country following the example of other European nations. Not aiming to rival with Spain in the New World, it was towards the East that the efforts of Elizabethans turned from the beginning. Even though the first activities of Elizabethan commerce were in countries such as Persia, Turkey



and Morocco, the great ambition of the Elizabethans was initially to discover a North-east passage to the sources of Oriental commerce, India and the Far East as a whole. For this, the Elizabethans had to pass round the Ottoman Empire which barred the way, and second to discover a new route which was not used by the Spanish or the Portuguese. At the beginning of the century, the first English explorers believed in the existence of a North-West passage to India and it was with the Elizabethans that this conviction was changed to the North-East passage. In 1576, Humphrey Gilbert (quoted in Hakluyt 1903–1905) writes:

[111]

There lieth a great sea between it [America], Cathaia and Greenland by the which any man of our country that will give the attempt may with small danger pass to Cathaia, the Moluccae, India and all the other places in the east, in much shorter time than the Spaniard or Portugal doth.

The first expedition which took the North-East direction did not accomplish its initial objective but was the occasion of the first contacts with a Moslem country, Persia. Thenceforth, the Elizabethans abandoned the idea of finding a sea passage to India and chose to exploit this new rout to develop and establish strong bases for commerce with the Moslem Orient. The efforts were mainly turned to founding commercial relations with the Ottoman Empire. Anthony Jenkinson is the name most famously associated with this achievement. His long travel, described by Hakluyt (1903–1905), culminated in a meeting with Soliman the Magnificent in 1553. That meant the beginning of intense relations and exchanges between England and the immense regions of the East under the control of the Ottoman Empire.

Hakluyt's accounts of Elizabethan expeditions and travels translate the spirit that fuelled what was indeed a national enterprise. In the introduction to the book, he writes (1903–1905, 1):

The English nation, in searching the most opposite corners and quarters of the world, and to speak plainly in compassing the vast globe of the earth, more than once had excelled all the nations and

[112]

peoples of the earth. For which of the kings of this land before her majesty had their banners ever seen in the Caspian Sea? Which of them hath ever dealt with the emperor of Persia as her Majesty hath done and obtained for her merchants large privileges? Who ever saw before this regimen an English lieger in the stately porch of Grand signior at Constantinople? Who ever found English consuls and agents at Tripolis, in Syria, at Aleppo, at Babylon, at Basra and which is more who ever heard of Englishmen at Goa before now?

The names of explorers such as Hawkins, Frobisher, Davis, Raleigh meant for the Elizabethans heroes of their nation whose adventures in faraway regions of the world excited their fascination, wonder and patriotism. In *The English Renaissance*, Vivian de Sola Pinto (1951) sums up the mood of this age of exploration and travel: 'The achievements of the mariners and travelers set the whole of the latter part of Elizabeth's reign against a vast background of wonder and enchantment', such is the context of the emergence of Elizabethan Orientalism in the theatre, and this spirit of adventure, achievement and exploration animating this whole generation of Elizabethans found its echo in one of the earliest and most important plays of the period, Marlowe's *Tamburlaine* (written c. 1587; Marlowe 1969a) which is set in an Orient whose frontiers are pushed from the borders of Asia to the farthest end of Africa, and which shows it as a vast realm of dream and conquest.

Furthermore, the beginning and intensification of exchanges with the Orient through trade, travel, diplomacy, learning and the arts was productive of deep influences that placed Orientalism as one of the marking features of the Renaissance. The impact of these intense relations with the Orient on the culture of Europe is so great that many writers contest the conception of the Renaissance as the rebirth of European culture exclusively based on a return to Greek and Roman classical culture. Gerald MacLean (2002) for instance argues: 'The Renaissance can be fully understood only in the light of Christian Europe's relations with eastern and Islamic cultures.' MacLean highlights the connections and cultural influences that linked East with West in the Renaissance and showed how European life and thought were being changed by increasingly intense contact and exchange with the East. As



instances of such exchange are mentioned printing and gunpowder as well as the use of the Arabic decimal system and the translation from Arabic of works of astrology, mathematics, medicine, philosophy and logic. In the arts, the number of works that have an orientalist inspiration witness to an extremely developed interaction between European and Oriental cultures. A striking instance is the famous painting *The Seated Scribe* attributed to Gentile Bellini which shows a Turkish figure and Arabic transcriptions. The Italian painting is then imitated by a Persian painter who produced his own version of the original painting which itself used oriental sources of inspiration. The Renaissance is also a period of the study of oriental languages other than Hebrew and Arabic, which were already known to scholars and the learned elite in the Middle Ages. In literature, the Oriental tales became the fashion after the translation of *The Arabian Nights*.

[113]

The Renaissance was then marked by an interest in the Orient at different levels. It was then quite natural that the Elizabethan theatre, following the general tendency, took the Orient as one of its first and main sources of inspiration. The pioneering work of Christopher Marlowe both in *Tamburlaine* (1969a) and in *The Jew of Malta* (written c. 1589; Marlowe 1969b), as indicative of the characteristic features of the whole tradition of Elizabethan Orientalism, shows that this tradition's use of the Orient is linked first to the context of travel, trade and exploration and second to the background of war against the Turk.

In fact, at the moment when the reign of Elizabeth I began, Soliman the Magnificent was launching terrible assaults at the heart of Europe, propagating general fear from the danger of Turkish invasion. This is widely reflected in Elizabethan drama, most famously in Shakespeare's *Othello* (written c. 1603; Shakespeare 1996) and its background of 'Turkish wars'. The play is otherwise replete with other oriental aspects, not the least being the figure of its tragic hero, the Moor of Venice defending it against its enemies: 'Valiant Othello, we must straight employ you / Against the general enemy Ottoman' says the Duke to Othello (act 1, scene 3, line 48). If during the reign of Soliman the Turkish attacks were at their highest with attacks against Hungary and Malta, and the siege of Vienna (1529), it also knew the first important victory over the Ottomans in the sea battle of Lepanto in 1571. This victory

[114] had a huge impact all over Europe and it is believed to have inspired Shakespeare's *Othello*. The Turkish invasion of Malta created a vivid concern in England. Certain Englishmen even took part in the defence of the island. For the Elizabethan drama, the interest of these historical events was double. It was first a concern for a Christian land facing the danger of invasion by the Turks. Second, the Christian islands of the Mediterranean seemed to constitute a particularly interesting setting for the theatrical representation of the subject of the war against the Turk. Notable examples are *The Jew of Malta* by Christopher Marlowe (1969b) and *Soliman and Perseda* by Thomas Kyd (1955), the latter being inspired by the attack on another Christian island, Rhodes, which was conquered by Soliman in 1522.

The impact of the war against the Turk may also be measured by the increasing effort of scholars to study that Empire, its history, its military and political systems. Thus, a large number of books were written, more than ever increasing the knowledge about the Turks. In England, the most important book on the subject is Richard Knolles's *The General History of the Turks* (1603) published the same year as the production of *Othello* and the publication of a poem by James the First entitled *Lepanto*. Before Knolle's book there were translations from Italian or Latin of a number of Histories about the Ottoman Empire and only some history books written by English historians but based on Italian sources: *Notable Historie of the Saracens* (Curio 1977) translated and revised by Thomas Newton in 1575, and *The Mahometane or Turkish Historie* by Ralph Carr (1600). George Whetstone's book *The English Myrror* (1586) was also largely about oriental history. It is the main source of the first part of *Tamburlaine* (Marlowe 1969a) written in 1587.

It is obvious then that the Turk, and more generally the Moslem Orient, was the subject of study and reflection of scholars and intellectuals of the English Renaissance. For Elizabethan drama, the Oriental theme was encouraged by the availability of sources on the Orient. From travel narratives to the works of historians and geographers, the movement of study and writing about the Orient provided a wide and rich variety of sources to the Elizabethan playwrights. The interest of Elizabethans in history in particular was one of the factors of the success of the Oriental play. Marlowe's *Tamburlaine* (1969a) marks the



beginning of the Elizabethan history play and at the same time the beginning of the Orientalist tradition of Elizabethan drama. Oriental history offered for the new theatre rich potentialities. A Turkish Sultan, a Moorish prince or a Mongolian warrior made a particularly interesting stage hero. Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*, written in 1587 (Kyd 1987), a revenge play also called a tragedy of blood, gives a revealing instance of the Elizabethan playwright's use of the Oriental theme. The main plot of Kyd's play does not refer to the Orient, but the play-within-the-play included is an Oriental play showing an internal tragedy of blood involving Sultan Soliman. The hero Hieronimo's choice of performing an Oriental play is significant; he is an example of the Elizabethan playwright himself making such a choice. He says to the players (act 4, scene 1, lines 84–5):

[115]

Assure you it will prove most passing strange  
And wondrous plausible to that assembly.

An Oriental blood tragedy was believed to succeed because it had the characteristics of strangeness and plausibility. Through his mere appearance on stage, the Oriental character is already physically prominent and strange. Hieronimo insists to his players (act 4, scene 1, lines 144–5):

You must provide a Turkish cap  
A black mustachio and a fauchion.

In terms of moral portrait, the conception that the Orient was a domain where violent passions were naturally unleashed explains the fact that the Orientalist tradition of Elizabethan drama was closely linked to the revenge play or the tragedy of blood. Marlowe's first play shows a first example of the bloody scenes which will so strongly mark all Elizabethan drama. The cruelty of the Turks is surpassed only by the bloody passion of Tamburlaine.

Still, exoticism and the fascination with exploring the world remains an important factor contributing to the popularity of the Oriental play in Elizabethan drama. This is manifest in the rich and elab-

orate portrait of the Orient depicted, showing its countries, peoples, ethnic groups, customs and religions.

[116] The references to Turkey, quantitatively predominant, are not marked by the sense of exoticism that marks the evocation of other Oriental countries. This is explained by the European past of the country, which is perceptible in the names of cities and places mentioned in the plays as part of the territories of the Ottoman Empire. The names of Magnesia, Iconium, Byzantium do not really give the sense of far away exotic lands. The description of Turkish places itself does not seek exoticism and remains vague and limited to adjectives that only refer to the might of the Great Turk, for instance in *Selimus*, written in 1588 (Greene 1961), there are allusions to ‘mightie Empire of great Trebizond’ (line 23) ‘great Samandria / Bordering on Belgrade of Hungaria’ (line 506) and ‘strong city of Iconium’ (line 1159). When the description is more extensive, it is limited to the martial aspect that dominates in the play. Acomat addresses his threats to the imperial city in these terms (lines 1149–50):

Now fair Natolia, shall thy stately walles  
Be overthrowne and beaten to the ground ...

The references to Constantinople reflect the importance of the city and the special place it has in the collective conscience in the West: in *Selimus* it is called ‘faire Byzantium’ (Greene 1961, line 519, 802) and in *Tamburlaine* ‘the famous Grecian Constantinople’ (Marlowe 1969a). Even when it is the capital of the Turk, the names given to it recall its Hellenistic past. Thus in *The Raging Turke*, first performed in 1618 (Goffe 1974), Bajazet calls it ‘great city of proud Constantine’ (line 405). It is recurrently associated with the name of the Turkish sultans to create the image of power and glory: In *Soliman and Perseda* (Kyd 1955) Erastus says ‘the great Turke whose seat is Constantinople’ (act 5, scene 3, line 83), and in *Alphonsus*, first published in 1599, Amurath pompously mentions the name of his imperial city after those of the numerous kingdoms under his control (Greene 1926, act 3, scene 2, lines 836–45):

Bajazet, go poste away apace  
To Siria, Scythia, and Albania,



To Babylon, with Mesopotamia,  
 Asia, Armenia and all other lands  
 Which owe their homage to high Amurack;  
 Charge all their kings with expedition  
 To come and wait on Amurack their King,  
 At his chiefe citie Constantinople

[117]

After Turkey, 'Barbary' is the country in the Orient that attracted most the attention of the Elizabethan playwrights. In *The Battle of Alcazar*, written in 1593 (Peele 1961) in *Famous History of the Life and Death of Captain Thomas Stukeley*, first published in 1605 (Heywood 2007) and in *The Fair Maid of the West*, written in 1610 (Heywood 1968), three plays that are set in Barbary and more precisely Morocco, the Oriental location of the action gets its full importance as it is part of the whole context, theme and local colour created. The main effect that the plays seek to produce is that of a contrast: the presence of English persons in the middle of spectacular events taking place in Barbary. The country is therefore presented to us from the point of view of these western characters living an adventure in an exotic land. Before dying, Stukeley (Peele 1961) recalls his strangely tragic destiny (act 5, lines 1460–2):

Thus Stukeley slaine with many a deadly stab  
 Dyes in these desert fields of Affrica.

The name Barbary is used to refer to North Africa. Yet from the earliest times, the name is also used to connote cruelty, the lack of civility and even paganism. In ancient European languages the term existed as a geographical concept together with the connotation of the Latin word 'barbaria'. In Elizabethan drama, it is first a geographical reference which is not accompanied by specific connotations. Situating the scene of action in Barbary refers first to its location in a region of Africa and of the Orient. The name tends to be associated in the minds of the Elizabethans with adventure and exoticism. One of the particularities seen in it as an Oriental place is that it is at the same time Africa and the Orient. Its inhabitants are referred to as Moors or Barbarians 'This brave Barbarian Lord' (Peele 1961, act 1, line 16). Yet the term Moor is not applied exclusively to the inhabitants of North

Africa. In *The Jew of Malta* (Marlowe 1969b, act 1, scene 1, line 21) for instance, the term is used to refer to a native of the East Indies:

[118] ... the wealthy Moor that in the Eastern rocks  
Without control can pick his riches up

It is obvious then that we cannot think of Barbary each time we have characters called Moors. The men of colour in the plays of Shakespeare provide an interesting example. Aaron in *Titus Andronicus*, written in the early 1590s (Shakespeare 2006), the Prince of Morocco in *The Merchant of Venice*, written in the late 1590s (Shakespeare 1955) and *Othello*, written in 1603 (Shakespeare 1996) are all called by the same term Moor. Yet if the origin of the prince of Morocco is unambiguously precise, it is not the case with *Othello* and less so with Aaron. It is obvious that it is not the colour of the face attributed to these characters that may be taken as a criterion for associating them or not to Barbary or the Orient. From 'the men of Barbary' brought to the war by the Turks and 'whose black faces make the enemy flee' to the King of Fes Mullisheg, the natives of Barbary are represented as negroes that would not be distinct from any other people of Black Africa. The Elizabethan playwrights refer to characters as negroes while giving Barbary as their origin. Therefore the term Moor, meaning most of the time Moroccan, and the term negro are interchangeable. In *The Fair Maid of the West* (Heywood 1968), the King of Morocco's words give an indication: 'Perhaps to our good fate; she in a Negro / Hath sail'd thus to bosom with a Moor' (act 5, scene 1, line 8). In *Lust's Dominion*, written around 1600 (Dekker 1968) Eleazar is 'black as the night' and is called 'blackmoor' and frequently 'negro' but very early in the play he is associated with Barbary and towards the end Barbary is mentioned again, as the history of the wars of the King of Spain is evoked (act 5, scene 1, lines 90–5):

Queen Mother: Your deceast King made war in Barbarie  
Won Great Abdela King of Fesse and father  
To that Barbarian Prince.  
Eleazar: I was but young,



But now methinks I see my father's wounds.  
 Poor barbaria! No more.

This play by Thomas Dekker shows how the appearance of this new stage character, the black-faced villain, was associated from the start with Barbary and that the long occupation of Spain by the Moors, as a marking historical fact still present within the collective conscience in Europe, is an essential element that explains this association. The characters called Moors and given the darkest colour of skin because they are of a vicious nature, the incarnation of the devil itself, can only be connected to these memories and historical events that are so deeply anchored in the collective conscience of Europe. The appearance of The Prince of Morocco in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* (Shakespeare 1955) shows that even when the intention is not to use the blackness of the face as a sign of the blackness of the soul, this physical trait remains the first distinctive aspect of these Oriental characters. Yet, the fact that the Prince of Morocco evokes with such beautiful poetry the sun of his country when speaking about his skin colour, the fact that he asks Portia not to judge him by what his dark face inspires in her, replaces this physical trait at its right place, and calls into question the dominant stereotypical tendency of systematically associating physical appearance with given moral characteristics as the tradition of the black villain perfectly exemplifies. The Prince of Morocco is described as 'tawny Moor', a term used to describe Eleazar, but unlike this latter, the Prince of Morocco is not in the role of villain and neither is Othello, who undeniably constitutes the continuation and the culmination of Shakespeare's calling into question of the stereotypes associated with the representation of Moors on the Elizabethan stage.

On the whole, Barbary and its people greatly fascinated the Elizabethans. It was primarily associated in their minds with adventure and exoticism. By contrast, the few plays situated in Persia depict a surprisingly vague image of the country and the people. Persia obviously had a secondary interest for the Elizabethans. To take the example of *Tamburlaine* (Marlowe 1969a) the author used a rich variety of sources to give a more or less accurate image of the Orient. As for the por-

[119]

[120]

trayal of Persia, he seems to have largely used his own imagination. It is the Persia of the Hellenistic epoch that seems to inspire most of this portrait. Nothing is there to recall the Chiite Persia of the 15th and the 16th centuries, which attracted the attention of Europeans as the only Oriental power capable of resisting the Turks, and which the voyages of Elizabethan adventurers made known in England. We notice that the Persian characters in Marlowe's play are given pagan names (Cosroe, Menaphon, Ortygius, Ceneus ...). These characters strive to renew with the glory and the power of the Persian Empire of their ancestors Cyrus and Darius which are evoked as symbols of the Persian nation. The Persian provinces mentioned are also of the same nature: Media, Mesopotamia, Parthia, and Babylon. The references to the Caspian sea, made famous in the context of European commerce, are perhaps the only element that brings the portrait of Persia back to its real historical context. Tamburlaine speaks about 'the Christian merchants, that with Russian stems / Plough up huge furrows in the Caspian sea' (Marlowe 1969a, act 1, scene 2, line 194). Persia was an important country for European commerce and this has its effect on Elizabethan drama. It is noteworthy that the most important of the products of this commerce, silk, becomes – as gold does for Barbary – the symbol of the country and the typical element of local colour. In *Tamburlaine*, the king of Persia describes himself as 'embossed with silk as best beseems my state' (act 1, scene 1, line 99).

Of contemporary Egypt, the Elizabethan drama represents the period when the Mameloukes dominate the country and neglect the time when the Turks did. In the first, Egypt is presented as a sovereign prosperous nation. The 'mighty Soldan of Egyptia', who in the first part of *Tamburlaine* (Marlowe 1969a) defends Damas against Tamburlaine, is according to the historical background of the play a sultan of the mamelouke dynasty. In the tragedy of *Selimus*, Bajazet refers to the sultan of Egypt using the historical name itself and referring to the Mammalukes (Greene 1961, lines 1854–8):

Had the strong unconquer'd Tonumbey  
 With his Egyptians took me prisoner,  
 And sent me with his valiant Mammalukes,



To be prey unto the Crocodilus,  
It never would have griev'd me halfe so much.

If the reference to the legendary crocodile of the river Nile is here meant to add a local colour, in *Tamburlaine* it is done in a much more original and fascinating way through description of majestic monuments and marvelous landscapes. The Middle East obviously fascinated the playwright and this is reflected in the play's verse (Marlowe 1969a, act 4, scene 2, lines 102–4):

[121]

Now may we see Damascus' lofty towers,  
Like to the shadows of Pyramides  
That with their beauties graced the Memphian fields.

Egypt is also associated with commerce with the Orient. Hence, in *The Jew of Malta*, Barabas says (Marlowe 1969b, act 1, scene 1, lines 45–9):

I hope my ships  
I sent for Egypt and the bordering isles  
Are gotten up by Nilus winding banks;  
Mine argosy from Alexandria,  
Loaden with spice and silks.

In *Friar Bacon*, written c. 1589 (Greene 1973) there is an allusion to 'rich Alexandrian drugs / Fetch'd from carvels from Egypt's richest streights'. In fact the extremely developed commercial exchanges with all the region of the Middle East makes certain cities particularly famous and known in Europe and they are recurrently alluded to in Elizabethan plays. In *Macbeth*, written some time between 1603 and 1606 (Shakespeare 1967b, act 1, scene 3, line 8), there is a reference to 'A sailor's wife ... / Her husband's to Aleppo gone, master / O'the Tiger'. The cities of this region are depicted as opulent and fabulously rich. Hence in these words of Theridamas addressing his soldiers '... this is Balsera, their chiefest hold / Wherein is all the treasure of the land'. Babylon is also one of the cities described in *Tamburlaine* which retains the attention with its

majestic beauty (Marlowe 1969a, part 2, act 5, scene 1, lines 65–72):

[122]

... the stately buildings of fair Babylon,  
 Whose lofty pillars, higher than the clouds,  
 Were wont to guide the seaman in the deep,  
 Being carried thither by the cannon's force,  
 Now fill the mouth of Limnaspaltis lake,  
 And make a bridge unto the batter'd walls,  
 Where Belus, Nenus, and great Alexander  
 Have rode in triumph, triumphs Tamburlaine.

The representation of the relationship between Europe and the Orient in a number of plays takes the form of a union through marriage. The theme seems to have particularly interested Shakespeare since his three plays dealing with the Orient, *Antony and Cleopatra*, *Othello* and *The Merchant of Venice*, are all about stories of love and marriage between Europeans and Orientals. The theme does exist in other Elizabethan Oriental plays, but it is treated in quite a different way. In *The Renegado*, written in 1624 (Massinger 1976), placed within a context of war between Christians and Turks, the marriage between some Christian prince and an Oriental princess aims simply at extending the victory over the Turk to the moral level. The marriage is then accompanied by the confirmation of the superiority of the moral values represented by the Christian characters and a refutation of the Oriental values, culminating in the rejection of Mahomet and his religion as pure imposture. By contrast in the plays of Shakespeare the mixed marriage does not have the function of affirming the superiority of the western values but is motivated by a true desire of meeting the other. The separation between East and West that stands as an obstacle to the marriage is not resolved, as in *The Renegado* for instance, by means of a transformation of the Oriental, her own forsaking of her religion and her people. This separation rather becomes itself a subject of reflection and constitutes in *Othello* as in *Antony and Cleopatra* the very essence of the tragedy: why should East and West be so irreconcilable? In *Antony and Cleopatra*, the love story shows a far more positive image of the East than of its opposite the West even as a system of



values and in moral terms, which is unprecedented in the Elizabethan drama. The superiority of the western moral values, which is always the norm and the model, is totally absent and is thus put into question. Called a Roman tragedy, *Antony and Cleopatra* is undeniably placed within the Elizabethan drama's treatment of the theme of the East-West dichotomy. In fact, Shakespeare gives freedom to his imagination to create a context for the treatment of this theme which is not the immediate context to which the very notion of the Orient refers in the mind of his contemporaries, that is basically the Turk. He chooses to show the Orient through Ancient Egypt and its queen Cleopatra and a poignant tragedy of love. After the accusations against Antony for degenerating into a valueless, effeminate life in Egypt, the first scenes show Antony's own position describing his Egyptian experience as the quest of an ideal he cannot find in Rome. He declares 'kingdoms are clay' and 'here is my space'. The play seems to invite its audience to identify with Antony and his beyond-the-Mediterranean experience. He is presented as having a capacity of discovering new truths about his human essence, outside his western horizon. Thus, in many ways, Shakespeare's tragedy should take a distinctive place within the orientalist tradition of the Elizabethan drama. It has the value of an adjustment. It suggests an alternative way of writing about the Orient, not with the antagonism and rejection that usually prevail. The relation of Antony with the East is a two-way relation.

[123]

In contrast to the sentimentality of the Egyptian life, the ardour and intensity of human feelings, Rome stands for measure and calculation even in sentiments. Octavia, the Roman equivalent of Cleopatra, is the typical example of this image. The repetitive movement of the action between Rome and Egypt, the tensions that the couple lives through, symbolize the reality that stands in front of the two lovers. In fact, they are tragically torn between irreconcilables. The play does not solve this tragic fact through the transformation of a character, as in the other plays. It is not possible for either of the two lovers to cease to be their own self. It is true that Antony rejects Rome and accuses the Romans but he never pretends to cease to be a Roman. With his present to Cleopatra, he sends her an eloquent message (Shakespeare 1967a, act 1, scene 5, lines 42–7):

Say the firm Roman to great Egypt sends  
This treasure of an oyster, at whose foot  
To mend the petty present, I will piece  
Her opulent throne with Kingdoms. All the East,  
[124] (Say thou) shall call her mistress.

The play clearly indicates that it is not Antony nor Cleopatra that should change, but the world in which they live. The love story therefore includes the theme of the conciliation of the two worlds and not the cancellation of the one by the other, or the affirmation of the superiority and victory of the one over the other. As the play ends tragically, the words of the two lovers express the idea that Rome and Egypt have been reconciled even as two opposite value systems. Within the couple the world has ceased to be divided. For Cleopatra, Antony is not emperor of Rome nor King of Egypt, he is ‘the garland of the war’, ‘the demi-Atlas of the earth’ and ‘the arm and burgeonet of men’. In Cleopatra’s dreams Antony reigns over the world (act 5, scene 2, lines 76, 79–80):

I dreamt there was an Emperor Antony ...  
His face was as the heavens, and therein stuck  
A sun and moon, which kept their course and lighted  
The little O, the earth.

In the *Merchant of Venice*, and in *Othello*, it is to the Orient of his time that Shakespeare turns. Yet, the same characteristics that mark his evocation of the Orient in *Antony and Cleopatra*, where the Orient is represented by Cleopatra and ancient Egypt, are there. Involving a questioning of the pre-conceptions and stereotypes, this evocation envisages the Orient as a full-scale entity and fully recognizes to the Oriental persona his/her alterity. Thus the Oriental character is not superficially painted according to preconceived ideas. He has all the chance of reaching the depth that distinguishes the characters of Shakespeare, because his representation enables his soul to appear, as it is not limited to portraying him superficially according to certain stereotypes that in the mind of the audience recall certain preconceptions. Yet, we



notice that in this play there is no mention of or even allusion to the religion of the oriental character, an element which in the other plays appears systematically to determine the image of the character as non-Christian, and very often as the infidel and the enemy. Second, there is the fact that the Prince of Morocco is the enemy of the Turk. We hear him boastfully praise his scimitar which fought sultan Soliman. These two elements of the characterization of the Prince of Morocco seem to be meant to gain him the full sympathy of the audience. The same can be said about the second Moorish character of Shakespeare, Othello. [125]

In sum, even when it is focused on the war against the Turk, the Orientalism of the Elizabethan drama, being expressed in its particular contexts, seems only from the outset to be marked by the voice of the anti-Turkish passion perpetuating treatments that sometimes belong to traditions which mount back to the Medieval Ages. Based on these impressions, most commentators of the Orientalism of Elizabethan drama declare it as simply a continuation of the medieval treatments of the Orient. These judgments are far from giving an accurate image of the multiplicity and complexity of the Elizabethan theatre's treatment of the Orient. Jonathan Burton (2000) is right in contesting the applicability to Elizabethan drama of the seminal theory of Orientalism developed by Edward Said (1978). A profound examination of the multiple and extremely varied treatments of the Orient in Elizabethan drama shows its distinction both from medieval and from eighteenth and nineteenth centuries Orientalism. For instance, the anti-Turkish passion of the moment is most of the time, in one way or another, moderated by a certain detachment of the playwright. Thus, for example in *Alphonsus* (Greene 1926), reconciliation after the battle and the fusion of a reconciling West and an approving Orient; in *Soliman and Perseda* (Kyd 1955) friendship and chivalry between the Turks and the Christians and the love of the Turk for Christian beauty; and in *The Battle of Alcazar* (Peele 1961) the theme of the disillusion of the Christian holy war in Africa. The *Renegado* is the example of the rare cases in which the anti-Turkish passion is given an expression that dominates the description of the Turk all along. The evocation of the Orient is then no more than a scathing attack against the infidel enemy. The

[126] image of the Orient as a fascinating exotic world is associated with a Turkish princess who is herself fighting against the tyranny of the Turks, and who is ultimately saved by the Christians whose religion and moral values she admires and adopts. Yet, such examples of the hostile treatment of the Turk seem to dominate, repeating the same stereotypes; others seem to be there to replace them and to bring to the scene treatments of another dimension and a dramatic art of a different quality.

The evaluation of the images of the Orient portrayed in the Elizabethan drama, shows that, in spite of the stereotype that is linked and explained by a number of facts, the evocations of the Orient form an Orientalism of great interest and which is far from being univocal, or fixed on stereotyped treatments and images. New and original characters for the scene, situations and realities which offer new contexts for the illustration of important motifs and themes of the Elizabethan drama, images and colours which introduce imaginative evasion, the evocation of the Orient greatly enriched the Elizabethan theatre and was in turn affected by its depth and its richness.

The Orientalism of the Elizabethan drama is at its greatest in the treatments where the Oriental is placed in his own truth and alterity and is no longer merely a reference of the West or a catalyst for the vices or the demons within the Western society itself. A true sense of exoticism is perceptible in these plays as much as the willingness to illustrate human truths through Oriental truths which are seen as intrinsic values. The Western values are not necessarily introduced as a canceling superior truth. The evocation of the Orient in the plays of Marlowe (1969a; 1969b), Greville (1973) and Shakespeare (1955; 1967a; 1967b; 1996; 2006) shows a humanism in the sense that they comprehend a profound message on the unity of humanity beyond the divisions that must not necessarily separate and oppose.

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[128]

