Turning Turk in *Othello*: The Conversion and Damnation of the Moor

Daniel J. Vitkus

Are we turned Turks, and to ourselves do that
Which heaven hath forbid the Ottomites?
(2.3.151–52)¹

The tragedy of *Othello* is a drama of conversion, in particular a conversion to certain forms of faithlessness deeply feared by Shakespeare’s audience. The collective anxiety about religious conversion felt in post-Reformation England focused primarily on Roman Catholic enemies who threatened to convert Protestant England by the sword, but the English also had reason to fear trepidation about the imperial power of the Ottoman Turks, who were conquering and colonizing Christian territories in Europe and the Mediterranean. English Protestant texts, both popular and learned, conflated the political/external and the demonic/internal enemies, associating both the Pope and the Ottoman sultan with Satan or the Antichrist. According to Protestant ideology, the Devil, the Pope, and the Turk all desired to “convert” good Protestant souls to a state of damnation, and their desire to do so was frequently figured as a sexual/sensual temptation of virtue, accompanied by a wrathful passion for power. As Virginia Mason Vaughan has recently shown in her historicist study of *Othello*, Shakespeare’s Mediterranean tragedy, set at the margins of Christendom but at the center of civilization, “exploits . . . perceptions of a global struggle between the forces of good and evil, a seeming binary opposition that in reality is complex and multifaceted.”²

*Othello*, like the culture that produced it, exhibits a conflation of various tropes of conversion—transformations from Christian to Turk, from virgin to whore, from good to evil, and from gracious virtue to black damnation. These forms of conversion are linked by rhetorical parallelism, but from the perspective of English Protestantism, these correspondences were not merely metaphorical: the Flesh, the Church of Rome, and the Turk were all believed to be material means for the Devil to achieve his ends. Conversion to Islam (or


² Virginia Mason Vaughan, *Othello*: A contextual history (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994), 27. Vaughan’s chapter “Global discourse: Venetians and Turks” makes apparent the importance of Turkey in the imaginative geography of Stuart England (13–34). Her work on *Othello* is part of an emerging effort among scholars of early modern drama to look beyond the New World and historicize English culture in relation to the rest of Europe, the Middle East, and Africa.
to Roman Catholicism) was considered a kind of sexual transgression or spiritual whoredom, and Protestantism proclaimed the same judgment—eternal damnation—for all those who were seduced by either the Pope or the Prophet.

Shakespeare’s Othello draws on early modern anxieties about Ottoman aggression and links them to a larger network of moral, sexual, and religious uncertainty which touched English Protestants directly. In part, the idea of conversion that terrified and titillated Shakespeare’s audience was a fear of the loss of both essence and identity in a world of ontological, ecclesiastical, and political instability. Othello’s loss of identity is caused by his misidentifications of Iago, Cassio, and Desdemona. The Moor fails to know Desdemona, and she is converted in his mind from virgin to whore. His fear of female sexual instability is linked in the play to racial and cultural anxieties about “turning Turk”—the fear of a black planet that gripped Europeans in the early modern era as they faced the expansion of Ottoman power.

Until recently, historicist analyses of Shakespeare’s texts have tended to read representations of the Other according to a teleological historiography of Western domination and colonization. Stephen Greenblatt’s location of Shakespearean drama in the context of a nascent colonialism, closely followed by the flood of “New World” scholarship that marked the five-hundredth anniversary of Columbus’s voyage to the Indies, established and maintained the critical practice of reading all English Renaissance texts as the products of a strictly proto-imperialist culture that looked across the Atlantic toward its American colonies-to-be. Greenblatt and other new historicists have used a Western imperialist discourse belonging to later centuries, sometimes quite anachronistically, to frame readings of Renaissance texts. What has often been forgotten is that while Spanish, Portuguese, English, and Dutch ships sailed to the New World and beyond, beginning the exploration and conquest of foreign lands, the Ottoman Turks were rapidly colonizing European territory. Thus, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the Europeans were both colonizers and colonized, and even the English felt the power of the Turkish threat to Christendom.

By the beginning of the seventeenth century, at the same time they were developing the trade in African slaves, the English faced the problem of British subjects—men, women, and children—being captured and enslaved by “Turkish” privateers operating in the Mediterranean and the northeastern Atlantic. This crisis led English writers of the early modern period to produce

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demonizing representations of “the Turk,” not from the perspective of cultural domination but from the fear of being conquered, captured, and converted. As Anglo-Islamic contact increased during the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, the English fascination with Muslim culture, especially the power of Islamic imperialism to convert Christians to Turks, was intensified by and recorded in an outpouring of texts that dealt with Islamic societies in North Africa and the Levant. In England the early to mid-seventeenth century saw an explosion of printed material concerned with the Barbary pirates and the Ottoman Turks, indicating the sharpened interest that accompanied the rise in English commercial activity in the Mediterranean. Othello derived much of its anxious suspense and lurid exoticism from the contemporary English perception of Turkish might and the English engagement with the perilous Mediterranean world. The Venetians’ anxieties in the first act—the sense of urgency and dread aroused when “The Turk with a most mighty preparation makes for Cyprus” (1.3.219)—would have reminded Shakespeare’s audience of the Ottoman Turks’ waxing power. Rooted in a history of holy wars and crusades, of Islamic conquest and Christian reconquista, the fear of the Islamic bogey was well established in the European consciousness. This long-standing fear and animosity reached one of its high points in 1453, when the Turks captured Constantinople. As Ottoman-controlled territory continued to expand during the next two centuries, Western Europeans grew increasingly anxious. Apart from the successful defense of Malta in 1565 and the defeat of the Turks by a Christian navy at Lepanto in 1570, the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries comprised a period of seemingly inexorable expansion for the Ottoman Empire (Figure 1).

One might assume that people in England felt safely removed from any direct Islamic threat, but in fact early modern English authors frequently refer to the menace of the Ottoman conquerors in terms that express a sense of immediacy. An example of this is the series of common prayers for delivery from Turkish attack which were directed by the English ecclesiastical authorities in the sixteenth century. For example, during the Turkish siege of Malta in 1565, one English diocese established “a form to be used in common prayer” which asked God


7 Of course, some of these authors’ statements are designed to make their subject matter sound exciting and important, but the tone of alarm goes beyond mere catchpenny rhetoric.
to repress the rage and violence of Infidels, who by all tyranny and cruelty labour utterly to root out not only true Religion, but also the very name and memory of Christ our only Saviour, and all Christianity; and if they should prevail against the Isle of Malta, it is uncertain what further peril might follow to the rest of Christendom.8

When the news reached England that the Turkish siege of Malta had been lifted, the archbishop of Canterbury ordered another form of prayer to be read “through the whole Realm” every Sunday, Wednesday, and Friday.9 This text refers to “that wicked monster and damned soul Mahumet” and “our sworn and most deadly enemies the Turks, Infidels, and Miscreants,” expressing thanks for the defeat of the invaders at Malta but warning of catastrophic consequences if the Turkish campaigns in Hungary should succeed:

if the Infidels . . . should prevail wholly against [the kingdom of Hungary] (which God forbid) all the rest of Christendom should lie as it were naked and open to the incursions and invasions of the said savage and most cruel enemies the Turks, to the most dreadful danger of whole Christendom; all diligence, heartiness, and

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8 From “A Form to be used in common prayer . . . to excite all godly people to pray unto God for the delivery of those Christians that are now invaded by the Turk,” reprinted in Liturgical Services of the Reign of Queen Elizabeth: Liturgies and Occasional Forms of Prayer Set Forth in the Reign of Queen Elizabeth, ed. William Keatinge Clay (Cambridge: University Press, 1847), 519–23, esp. 519.

9 From “A Form to be used in common prayer . . . To excite and stir all godly people to pray unto God for the preservation of those Christians and their Countries, that are now invaded by the Turk in Hungary, or elsewhere,” reprinted in Clay, ed., 527–55, esp. 527.
fervency is so much the more now to be used in our prayers for God's aid, how far greater the danger and peril is now, than before it was.  

These campaigns were largely successful, and the Ottoman armies advanced until a truce was signed in 1568. During the 1590s, however, the Turks again launched major offensives on the Hungarian front, and the war was ongoing at the time that Othello was written and performed in London. Although the naval battle of Lepanto was hailed as a major setback for the Turks, it had no lasting impact, and Turkish territorial gains in the Mediterranean soon resumed.  

Two years after Lepanto, the Turks took Cyprus. Nonetheless, the singularity of a Christian force successfully united against a Turkish armada aroused a strong response throughout Europe. In distant Scotland, King James himself wrote a heroic poem celebrating the triumph at Lepanto.  

The opening lines of James's poem describe the "bloodie battell bolde, / ... Which fought was in Lepantoes gulfe / Betwixt the baptiz'd race, / And circumsised Turband Turkes" (Il. 6–11). As Emrys Jones has demonstrated in his seminal article "'Othello', 'Lepanto' and the Cyprus Wars," there are verbal echoes of these lines in Othello's suicide speech.  

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10 Clay, ed., 527.
11 On the strategic effect of the Turkish defeat at Lepanto, see Andrew C. Hess, "The Battle of Lepanto and its Place in Mediterranean History," Past and Present 57 (1972): 53–73.
12 James I, The Lepanto of James the sixt, King of Scotland in His Maiesties Poeticall Exercises at vacant hours (Edinburgh, 1591), G3–L4. James's Lepanto was written circa 1585, first published in Scotland in 1591, and then reprinted in London at the time of his accession to the English throne in 1603.
13 See Emrys Jones, "'Othello', 'Lepanto' and the Cyprus Wars," Shakespeare Survey 21 (1968): 47–52; compare Othello, 5.2.349–52, with the passages from Lepanto.
In limping verse, the king’s poem stresses the heroic role of the Venetians and presents the battle as a divinely inspired mission. God decides that he has had enough of the "faithless" Turks and sends the archangel Gabriel to rally the Christians of Venice:

No more shall now these Christians be
With infidels opprest, . . .
Go quicklie hence to Venice Towne,
And put into their minds
To take revenge of wrongs the Turks
Haue done in sundrie kinds.
''(ll. 80–91)

After the victory, a chorus of Venetian citizens gives thanks to God for having "redeem'd" them "From cruel Pagans thrall."

Performed several times at court during the early years of James’s reign, Othello was in line with some of the new king’s interests. The play also catered to a contemporary fascination with Moors and Turks, piqued by the presence at the English court between August 1600 and February 1601 of a Moroccan embassy of sixteen "noble Moors." We see this fascination manifested again in Ben Jonson and Inigo Jones’s Masque of Blackness, presented at court on Twelfth Night, 1605, when Queen Anne and other aristocratic women appeared in blackface as "noble Moors." In the 1608 sequel to that masque, the Masque of Beauty, the Moorish masquers are "converted" from black to fair by the virtuous power of the monarch.

As the work of Samuel Chew and Nabil Matar has shown, English anxiety about the Turks—and their power to convert Christians—was intense. Richard Knolles’s Generall Historie of the Turkes, first printed in 1603, refers in its opening pages to "The glorious Empire of the Turkes, the present terrore of the world." During the sixteenth century, a stream of reports had arrived in England from abroad testifying to the success of the Turks’ military campaigns in both the Balkans and the Mediterranean. While on a mission to Vienna in 1574, Hubert Languet wrote to Sir Philip Sidney on 26 March:

These civil wars which are wearing out the strength of the princes of Christendom are opening a way for the Turk to get possession of Italy; and if Italy alone were in danger, it would be less a subject for sorrow, since it is the forge in which the causes of all these ills are wrought. But there is reason to fear that the flames will

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14 See Norman Sanders’s comments in the introduction to his New Cambridge edition of Othello, 1–51, esp. 2.
16 See Chew, 100–149; and Matar, "‘Turning Turk’: Conversion to Islam in English Renaissance Thought," Durham University Journal 86 (1994): 35–41. English feelings about Islam and the Turks were complicated by commercial interests. In a pageant written for the Clothworkers’ Guild, on the occasion of the inauguration of Ralph Freeman as Lord Mayor, Thomas Heywood gave these lines to Mercury: "The potent Turke (although in faith adverse) / Is proud that he with England can commerce" (Londini Emporia, or Londons Mercatura [London, 1633], B3). At the same time, Protestant religious polemic, written by those who had no direct interest in the Turkey trade, could sound like this: "the turke and antichrist differ not but as the devil differeth from hel’" (quoted here from J. R. Mulryne, "Nationality and language in Thomas Kyd’s The Spanish Tragedy" in Maquerot and Willems, eds., 87–105, esp. 93–94).
not keep themselves within its frontier, but will seize and devour the neighbouring states.\textsuperscript{18}

In the following year, in the dedication to his translation of Curio’s \textit{Sarracenicæ Historiae}, Thomas Newton wrote: “They [the Saracens and Turks] were indeede at the first very far of from our Clyme & Region, and therefore the lesse to be feared, but now they are euen at our doores and ready to come into our Houses. . . .”\textsuperscript{19} Curio reacts typically to the Ottoman menace, calling in his preface for a crusade:

[If the Christians] would ioyne in one and liue together in Christian league, no doubtie, \textit{Constantinople} might be agayn recovered and annexed to the Romane Empire . . . that Sathanical crew of Turkish lurdens might be expulsed and driven to trudge out of all \textit{Europa} . . . But beholde, euen at our dores and ready to come into our houses, we haue this arrogant and bragging helhound, triumphyng ouer vs, laughyng at our misfortunes, reioycinge to see vs thus to lye together by the eares, and gaping in hope shortlye to enjoy our goods and Seigniories.\textsuperscript{20}

Thomas Procter warns, in 1578, that “the Turkes in no longe time, haue subdued . . . kinges and countreyes, and extended their Empyre . . . into all the three partes of the worlde, & yt prosecuteth and thrusteth the same further daylie.”\textsuperscript{21} Procter calls on Englishmen to undertake large-scale military training and thus be prepared to meet this growing threat. Robert Carr, in his 1600 translation \textit{Mahumetane or Turkish Historie}, sees a kind of Turkish domino effect at work:

We see this daily increasing flame, catching hould of whatsoeuer comes next, still to proceed further, nor that the insatiable desire of dominion in these \textit{Turkes} canne with any riches be content, or with the gauyning of many mightie and wealthy Kingdomes be so settled, but of what is this daye gotten, to morrow they build a new ladder whereby to clyme to the obteyning of some newer purchase.\textsuperscript{22}

The anonymous \textit{Policy of The Turkish Empire} reports that “the terror of their name doth euon now make the kings and Princes of the West, with the weake and dismembred reliques of their kingdomes and estates, to tremble and quake through the feare of their victorious forces.”\textsuperscript{23}

Perhaps the authors quoted above speak out of a collective psychology of fear that transcends the rational facticity of geographic distance, but English fears of “the Turk” were not entirely paranoid or hysterical. By 1604, when \textit{Othello} was first performed, there had been extensive, direct contact with Muslim pirates—both in the British Isles and in the Mediterranean, where English merchant ships sailed with greater frequency after trade pacts with both the Barbary principalities and the Ottoman sultanate were signed.\textsuperscript{24} \textit{Othello} was written at a time when English commerce in Muslim entrepôts


\textsuperscript{19} Newton in Augustine Curio [Curione], \textit{A Notable Historie of the Saracens}, trans. Thomas Newton (London, 1575), A3*.

\textsuperscript{20} Curio, B4*–C1*.

\textsuperscript{21} Thomas Procter, \textit{Of the knowledge and conducte of warres} (London, 1578), v.

\textsuperscript{22} \textit{The Mahumetane or Turkish Historie}, trans. R. Carr (London, 1600), 112*.

\textsuperscript{23} \textit{The Policy of The Turkish Empire} (London, 1597), A3*.

such as Constantinople, Aleppo, Alexandretta, Tunis, Tripoli, and Algiers was expanding rapidly and the threat of Muslim pirates in the Atlantic and the Mediterranean was on the rise. The power of Muslims was brought home when “Turkish” pirates from the North African regencies began to raid the Irish and English coasts in the early seventeenth century. According to one historian’s recent assessment, pirates from the Barbary ports captured, “on average, 70 to 80 Christian vessels a year between 1592 and 1609.” English captives taken by the Barbary pirates were sold into slavery or held for ransom. Faced with the growing problem of Christian captives who “turned Turk” in order to gain their freedom, the English authorities adopted a strategy to prevent such conversions, using sermons to condemn the practice of conversion to Islam. Two such sermons, one preached by Edward Kellett on the morning of 16 March 1627 and one that afternoon by Henry Byam, urged the endurance of suffering or even Christian martyrdom rather than conversion: better to die than to turn Turk.

In the second sermon, Byam claims that some converts to Islam actually switched back and forth between religious identities:

many, and as I am informed, many hundreds, are Musselmans in Turkie, and Christians at home; doffing their religion, as they doe their clothes, and keeping a conscience for every Harbor where e they shall put in. And those Apostates and circumcised Renegadoes, thine they haue discharged their Conscience wondrous well, if they can Returne, and (the fact vnknowne) make profession of their first faith.

Such returned renegades were thought to comprise a kind of unseen menace lurking in the ranks of the Christian commonwealth, concealing their double identities. In 1635 a “Form of Penance and Reconciliation of a Renegado” (promulgated by Bishop Hall and Archbishop Laud) was established for those who wished to confess their apostasy and be reinstated in the Church of England.

Post-Reformation anxiety about conversion produced a discourse about “renegadoes” and “convertites” which applied to those who converted to Catholicism as well as those who turned Turk, with the interest in Christian-Muslim conversions clearly related to contemporaneous polemical writings about Protestants and Roman Catholics who renounced one brand of Christianity for the other. English Protestant texts associated both the Pope and

25 According to Hebb, “by the early 17th century the character of the operations of the Barbary pirates had changed dramatically” (15). Increasingly, they used “tall ships” instead of galleys, and they began to move out of the Western Mediterranean into the Atlantic, taking captives from places as far north as Iceland.

26 Hebb, 15.

27 See Edward Kellett’s and Henry Byam’s sermons, published together as A Returne from Argier. A Sermon Preached at Minhead in the County of Somerset the 16. of March, 1627, at the re-admission of a relapsed Christian into our Chrche (London, 1628). Another sermon of this kind is William Gouge, A Recovery from Apostacy (London, 1639), also delivered on the occasion of a readmission into Christianity from Islam.

28 Byam, 74.


30 See the discussion of conversion and religious controversy in James Shapiro, Shakespeare and the Jews (New York: Columbia UP, 1996), 131ff. “In their enthusiasm to undermine the positions
the Ottoman sultan with Satan or the Antichrist. Despite dire warnings from their religious leaders, many Christians converted from their original faith to Protestantism, Roman Catholicism, or Islam for economic reasons. Others converted as a survival strategy—to avoid martyrdom, persecution, or discrimination—and not as a result of heartfelt religious conviction. John Donne, who was himself a "convertite," was sensitive to this issue and mentions it in his "Satire 3" on religion. Donne’s poem eroticizes the drama of religious schism and conversion, sexualizing the relationship between Christian worshippers (personified as men) and various branches of Christianity (personified as women). The pursuit of "true religion" becomes a search for the possession of a pure female body in a world full of "whores" and "preachers, vile ambitious bawds." Bishop Hall uses similar language to condemn Jesuit priests who were trying to make converts among the English: "if this great Courtezan of the World [the Roman Church] had not so cunning panders, I should wonder how she should get any but foolish customers."

Whether lauded or condemned, religious conversion was frequently described in erotic terms: converts to Catholicism were accused of sleeping with the papal "whore of Babylon" and spiritually fornicating with the Devil’s minions. In the story of the seduction of Redcrosse by Duessa in Spenser’s


The Pope and the "Great Turk" or "Grand Seigneur" (as the Ottoman sultan was called) were frequently equated, conflated, or compared in antipapal literature. An important example of this occurs in John Foxe’s Acts and Monuments, which includes a lengthy “history of the Turkes," recounting “their cruell tyranny, and bloudy victories, the ruin & subversion of so many Christen Churches, with the horrible murders and capititue of infinite Christians” (Acts and Monuments of matters most speciall and memorabill, happening in the Church, with an universall history of the same, 2 vols. [London, 1596], 1:675). Foxe goes on to declare that “the whole power of Sathan the prince of this world, goeth with the Turkes” (1:675), and he calls for a fortification of the spirit to strengthen the faithful against Turkish expansion: “though the Turke seemeth to be farre off, yet do we nourish within our breasts at home, that [which] may soon cause vs to feele his cruell hand and worse, if worse may be, to overrunne vs: to lay our land waste: to scatter vs amongst the Infidels...” (1:677). Foxe’s narration of the Christians’ resistance to Ottoman expansion ends with a ten-page section on “Prophecies of the Turk and the Pope, which of them is the greater Antichrist" (1:701–10), and the concluding paragraph of this section gestures toward a distinction between papal and Turkish evil; but ultimately Foxe declines to discern the difference:

... in comparing the Turk with the pope, if a question be asked, whether of them is the truer or greater Antichrist, it were easy to see and judge, that the Turk is the more open and manifest enemy against Christ and his church. But if it be asked, whether of them two hath bin the more bloody and pernicious adversary to Christ and his members: or whether of them hath consumed and spilt more Christian blood, he with sword, or this with fire and sword together, neither is it a light matter to discern, neither is it my part here to discusse, which doe onely write the history, and the Actes of them both.

(1:710)


124.
Faerie Queene, Book I, the false beauty of Spenser’s Duessa represents the allure of Roman Catholic images, and the capture and imprisonment of Redcrosse (signifying the Pope’s control over British Christians before the Reformation) results from a sexual encounter with Duessa at the Fountain of the Unchaste Nymph. Throughout Spenser’s epic, papal power and wealth are figured as “oriental” prostitution.

The transformation of Othello, the “Moor of Venice,” from a virtuous lover and Christian soldier to an enraged murderer may be read in the context of early modern conversion, or “turning,” with particular attention to the sense of conversion as a sensual, sexual transgression. Othello’s love and his faith in Desdemona are turned to hate because he believes, as he says to Emilia, that “[Desdemona] turned to folly, and she was a whore” (5.2.133). Here Desdemona’s alleged infidelity is, for Othello, a “turning,” as it is when he says to Lodovico, “she can turn, and turn, and yet go on, / And turn again” (4.1.244–45). Othello seems to be thinking of a physical turning of her body taking place in the imaginary bed where “she with Cassio hath the act of shame / A thousand times committed” (5.2.210–11). To kill Desdemona is to put a stop to this image of perpetual sexual motion: “Ha! No more moving? / Still as the grave” (ll. 94–95), says Othello, satisfied that her adulterous turning has been stopped.

In early modern English to turn could mean to change or transform, to convert, to pervert, to go back on one’s word, or to turn through space. The Oxford English Dictionary, among the many definitions and citations that are pertinent to Othello, gives a citation for the transitive verb form of turn: “To induce or persuade to adopt a (different) religious faith (usually with implication of its truth or excellence), or a religious or godly (instead of an irre- ligious or ungodly) life; to convert; less commonly in bad sense, to pervert.” As an example, the OED cites a threat used by Roman Catholic persecutors during the Marian period: “So would they say to all Protestants, . . . Turn, or burn.”

In the scenes that lead up to Desdemona’s murder and Othello’s suicide, the trope of turning (in the sense of conversion) occurs frequently as the effects of Iago’s evil are felt and Desdemona, once Othello’s “soul’s joy,” becomes a “fair devil.” Othello accepts the circumstantial evidence against Desdemona as Iago makes good his boast that he will “turn [Desdemona’s] virtue into pitch” (2.3.327). Converting Desdemona’s virtue, Iago “turns” Othello until Othello’s “heart is turned to stone” (4.1.173) and his mind is “Perplexed in the extreme” (5.2.342). “I see you’re moved” (3.3.226), declares Iago; and once Othello is moved, doubt and retreat seem no longer possible.

“My bloody thoughts with violent pace / Shall ne’er look back, ne’er ebb to humble love” (ll. 458–59), says Othello in the Pontic Sea speech, giving rhetorical force to his irreversible turn from love to hate. “Being wrought,” Othello cannot stem the tide of his vengeanceful passion. “It is not words” that

34 Oxford English Dictionary, prep. J. A. Simpson and E. S. C. Weiner, 2d ed., 20 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 18:701. Shakespeare uses the word turn in a similar sense when the Pucelle comments on Burgundy’s betrayal of his English allies in 1 Henry VI: “Done like a Frenchman—turn and turn again!” (3.3.85). This line is thought to be an interpolated reference to Henry of Navarre and his conversion to Roman Catholicism.
shake him but rather the false image in his mind of Cassio making love to Desdemona. Crying "O devil!" he falls, in 4.1, into "a trance." Othello's epileptic fit is a kind of sexual swoon, an impotent mockery of the climax he imagines Cassio experiencing. At the same time, the fit is a libidinous version of the religious ecstasy that would characterize a soul-shaking conversion experience. Othello's perturbed spirit is "o'erwhelmed" (l. 74) by the revelation of "honest" Iago's truth about Desdemona. The Moor's ordeal in 4.1 parodies the physical collapse that accompanies an episode of divine or demonic possession—he kneels with Iago, falls down, and then undergoes a seizure like those experienced by other prophesying victims of "the falling sickness," a malady associated with both sacred and Satanic inspiration.35

Othello's epilepsy recalls that of the ur-Moor, Mohammed. Christian polemics against Islam printed in Shakespeare's time frequently maintain that Mohammed was an epileptic who falsely claimed that his seizures were ecstasies brought on by divine possession. According to John Pory's 1600 translation of Leo Africanus's Geographical Historie of Africa, a text that Shakespeare seems to have consulted when composing Othello, Mohammed claimed to have "conversed with the angell Gabriell, vnto whose brightnes he ascribed the falling sicknes, which many times prostrated him vpon the earth: dilating and amplifying the same in like sort, by permitting all that which was plausible to sense and the flesh."36 Anti-Islamic propagandists claimed that Mohammed's need to account for his epileptic seizures was the original motive for what became a claim to divine inspiration.

In an extraordinary passage from Edward Kellett's 1627 sermon against renegades, Mohammed's epilepsy is explained as a divine punishment for lechery:

That great seducer Mahomet, was a salacious lustfull Amoroso; and his intemperate lasciuiousnesse, was wayted on by infirmities and sicknesses correspondent to his lewdnesse. . . he, for his lust, and by it, was tormented with the Great falling-sickness; and that disease, is a plague of an high-hand; and in him, a testimonie of a very sinfull soule, in a very sinfull body. For, whereas it is appointed for all men to die once, Heb.9.27 for that one first sinne of Adam; Mahomet, who had so many, so great sinnes, was striken also with many deaths. For, what is the Falling-Sickness, but a reduplication, a multiplication of death? He fell with pine, looked ugly, with a foming mouth, and wry-distorted countenance in his fits. He

35 Even as late as the eighteenth century, Europeans continued to believe that epilepsy or "the falling sickness" was brought on by demonic possession. Other medical authorities argued, following humoral theory, that an excess of black bile in the body caused the fits (for the latter explanation, see Robert Burton, The Anatomy of Melancholy (Oxford, 1621), Part 1. For a discussion of the early modern understanding of epilepsy and the long-standing association between epilepsy, prophecy, and possession, consult Owsei Temkin, The Falling Sickness: A History of Epilepsy from the Greeks to the Beginnings of Modern Neurology, 2d ed. (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins UP, 1971).

rose with horror, like a pale carcase, and lukewarme corpes, betweene the liuing and the dead. He was the But against which the Almighty shot his arrowes: bearing the image and figure of an Apostata in his body by relapses; and the torments of a vessell of wrath, in his soule, for his Imposturage.37

In Western European texts, from the medieval to the early modern period, Islam was usually defined as a licentious religion of sensuality and sexuality. A long-standing tradition of anti-Islamic polemic denounced the religion of Mahomet as a system based on fraud, lust, and violence. Kellett’s attack on Islam includes a colorful but commonplace description of Mohammed’s imposture:

Let Mahomet be branded for a Iuggler, a Mount-bank, a bestial people-pleaser... which Mis-belief he hath established by the sword, and not by Arguments; vpheld by violence and compulsion; or tempting allurements of the world; forcing, or deluding the soules of men, rather than perswading by evidence of veritie.38

It is possible to see these highly negative images of Islam reconfigured in the imposture of Iago and the militant fury and frustrated lust of Othello. The fraudulent persuasions of Iago, whose false revelation deludes Othello’s soul “rather than perswading by evidence of veritie,” lead the Moor into “Misbelief.” In the guise of angelic informer, Iago plants a diabolical sexual fantasy in the mind of the Moor. Iago is a fiend disguised as an angel, describing his own theology as the “Divinity of hell!” and explaining that “When devils will the blackest sins put on, / They do suggest at first with heavenly shows / As I do now” (2.3.317–20). Iago is the evil angel who communicates a false message to Othello, inspiring him with distempered passion, urging and justifying acts of cruelty and violence. Together they kneel in prayer, and Othello makes “a sacred vow” to “heaven” (3.3.461–62) which is really a deal with the Devil, who will possess him eternally. Through false inspiration and “with heavenly shows,” Iago brings on the “conversion” of Othello, and that conversion is dramatized as a fall into a bestial, sex-obsessed condition.

Edward Aston, in The Manners, lawes and customes of all Nations, claims that the “incredible allurement” of Islam has been Mahomet’s “giving to his people free liberty and power to pursue their lustes and all other pleasures, for by these meanes, this pestilent religion hath crept into innumerable Nations.”39 One of the “tempting allurements” offered by Mahomet to his

37 Kellett, 23. Kellett also refers to “Mahomet, that Rake-shame of the World... the Rausher of his Mistresse, the known Adulterer with one Zeid...” (20). In Byam’s sermon, given later the same day, the Prophet is described in similar terms:

he was... the very puddle and sinke of sin and wickednesse. A thief, a murderer, and adulterer, and a Wittall. And from such a dissolute life proceeded those licentious lawes of his. That his followers may auenge themselves as much as they list. That he that kills most Infidels, shall have the best roome in Paradise: and hee that fighteth not lustily, shall be damned in hell. That they may take as many Wives as they be able to keepe. And lest insatiable lust might want whereon to feed, to surfeit, he alloweth diuorce upon euery light occasion. He himself had but eleuen Wives, besides Whores; but the Grand-Signior in our daies kept three thousand Concubines for his lust.

(62–63)

38 Kellett, 23.

39 Edward Aston, The Manners, lawes and customes of all Nations (London, 1611), 137.
followers was an infamous orgiastic paradise in the next world, described sarcastically in Byam’s sermon as follows:

[In Mahomet’s] Paradise, the ground thereof is gould watered with streames of Milke, Hony and Wine. How there his followers after the day of Judgement, shall have a merry madd world, and shall neuer make an end of eating, drinking, and colling wenches. And these (if you will beleue it) are sweete Creatures indeed; for if one of them should spet into the Sea, all the waters thereof would become sweete.

Christian writers not only criticized Islam for offering sensual pleasure to the virtuous as a reward in the next life; they also condemned the sexual freedom allowed in this life under Muslim law. Islamic regulations governing concubinage, marriage, and divorce were misunderstood and reviled by Western Europeans. According to Leo Africanus, the religious law of Mohammed “looseth the bridle to the flesh, which is a thing acceptable to the greatest part of men.” Africanus and others claimed that the attraction of conversion to Islam—and the reluctance of Muslims to convert to Christianity—stemmed primarily from the greater sexual freedom allowed under Islamic law.

Given the conventional association made by European Christians between Islam and promiscuity, it is not surprising that the English expression “to turn Turk” carried a sexual connotation. Significantly, we find a series of contemporary uses of this phrase in the English drama of the early seventeenth century, where its meaning is “to become a whore” or “to commit adultery.” In Philip Massinger’s The Renegado, A Tragaecomedie, for example, when the heroine Paulina threatens to convert, saying “I will turne Turk,” Gazet’s bawdy rejoinder makes the usual connection: “Most of your tribe doe so / When they beginne in whore.” In an earlier play, Thomas Dekker’s The

40 Compare Mandeville’s Travels, where the description of Islamic religious practice and doctrine does point to beliefs that Christians and Muslims hold in common; but when it comes to the Muslims’ description of paradise in the Koran, Mandeville condemns it as one of the greatest and most absurd errors of the “saracens”: “if they are asked what paradise they are talking about, they say it is a place of delights, where a man shall find all kinds of fruit at all seasons of the year, and rivers running with wine, and milk, and honey, and clear water; they say they will have beautiful palaces and fine great mansions, according to their deserts, and that these palaces and mansions are made of precious stones, gold and silver. Every man shall have four score wives, who will be beautiful damsels, and he shall lie with them whenever he wishes, and he will always find them virgins” (The Travels of Sir John Mandeville, ed. C.W.R.D. Moseley [London: Penguin, 1983], 104). Mandeville’s narrative was frequently reprinted in sixteenth-century England and was still received in Shakespeare’s day as a factual account; it was also included in the first edition of Hakluyt’s Principal Navigations (1598).

41 Byam, 64. See also Donne’s “Elegy 2: To his Mistress Going to Bed,” in which the speaker compares a sexual experience to “A heaven like Mahomet’s paradise” (12–13 [esp. l. 21]). The Turks, and especially the Ottoman sultan with his harem, were proverbial for lust. For example, Edgar in King Lear refers to sexual indulgence, claiming to have “outparamour’d the Turk” (3.4.91–92).


43 Africanus, 381.


45 See also the use of this phrase in Much Ado About Nothing, where Margaret tells Beatrice that she suspects her of loving Benedick: “Well, and you be not turn’d Turk, there’s no more sailing by the star” (3.4.57–58).

46 Philip Massinger, The Renegado, A Tragaecomedie (London, 1630), L3’.
Honest Whore, the man who has inspired Bellafront to forgo prostitution warns her not to relapse, even though he rejects her advances:

tis damnation,
If you turne turke againe, oh doe it not,
Th[o] heauen cannot allure you to doe well
From doing ill let hell fright you: and learne this,
The soule whose bosome lust did neuer touch,
Is Gods faire bride, and maidens soules are such:
The soule that leaueing chastities white shore,
Swims in hot sensuall streame, is the diuels whore.47

A similar usage occurs in John Marston’s The Dutch Courtezan. When Franschina, a Dutch prostitute living in London, is abandoned by the man who has “converted” her from a common whore to a loyal mistress, she asks: “vat sal becom of mine poore flesh now, mine body must turne Turke for 2.d. O Diuila, life a mine art, Ick saill be reuengde, doe ten thousand Hell damme me, Ick sal haue the rogue trote cut. . . .”48

Writers of the time frequently compared reformed prostitutes to religious “convertites.” In fact, there were nunneries on the Continent made up of “converted” whores. Under convertis, the OED cites Randle Cotgrave (1611) “Filles repenties, an order of Nunnes which haue beene profest whores; Convertis.” And it defines convertite as “A reformed Magdalen,” quoting Bishop Jewel’s 1565 attack on the toleration of whorehouses in Rome, where Jewel links this allowance to the issue of celibacy: “If they turne and repent, there are houses called Monasteries of the Convurrites, and special prouision and discipline for them, where they are taught how to bewaile their vnchaste life so sinfully past over.”49

Though post-Reformation England lacked nunneries, plays and stories about “converted” prostitutes were popular.50 At the time of Othello’s first performances, there was a contemporaneous fashion for plays that dramatized life in the stews or featured reformed prostitutes.51 These plays include Thomas Middleton’s Blurt, Master-Constable (1602) — set, like Othello, in Venice — Michaelmas Terme (1607), Your Five Gallants (1608), and A Mad World, My Masters (1608); Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher’s The Woman Hater (1607); Edward Sharpham’s The Fleire (1607); as well as Marston’s Dutch Courtezan and Dekker’s Honest Whore. (The latter appeared in its second

47 Thomas Dekker, The Honest Whore (London, 1604), G2*-G3*.
48 John Marston, The Dutch Courtezan (London, 1605), C3*.
49 OED, 3:874. Donne uses the word convertite in two of the poems he wrote while in France, Of the Progress of the Soul. The Second Anniversary and the verse epistle “A Letter to the Lady Carey, and Mistress Essex Rich, from Amiens” (218–31 [1. 518] and 251–33 [1. 7]). In both of these poems, Donne refers ironically to those who convert to Catholicism for material gain. A note in W. Milgate’s edition tells us that “. . . in French converti was a name given to beggars who made a profession of their change of religion in order to extract alms from passers-by” (John Donne, The Epithalamions Anniversaries and Epicles, ed. W. Milgate [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978], 176n).
50 For one example of this genre, see the section entitled “The conversion of an English Courtizan” in Robert Greene’s Disputation betweene a Hee Conny-catcher and a Shee Conny-catcher (London, 1592).
printed edition under the title *The Converted Curtezan.* Shakespeare’s *Measure for Measure* (1604), written at almost the same time as *Othello*, also refers to scenes of brothe life.

Many of these comedies include plots or subplots in which a penitent whore either falls in love with or is married to one of the male characters. A male “wittol” is sometimes tricked into marrying the “honest whore,” and this duped husband thus becomes an instant cuckold. Othello becomes convinced that he is just such a cuckold and dupe, and the conventional elements of the whore-cuckold plot do seem to have been in Shakespeare’s mind when he wrote his “domestic tragedy.”\(^\text{52}\) Both “honest” and “whore” are key significers in the text (“honest whore” is the sexual equivalent of Othello’s racial oxymoron “noble Moor”). Cuckoldry and jealousy, basic concerns of comic drama in seventeenth-century England, are central to the action of *Othello*, where Iago plays the cony-catcher and Othello imagines himself to be a cuckold who is deceived by a “super-subtle” Venetian courtesan. The case of Desdemona is a tragic inversion or parody of the pattern of the reformed courtesan. Though Othello calls her “that cunning whore of Venice” (4.2.88), she is “honest.”

In one of his soliloquies, Iago depicts Othello as a lust-driven dupe, whose idolatrous worship of Desdemona makes him vulnerable to apostatical backsliding or conversion by a courtesan:

...for her

To win the Moor, were’t to renounce his baptism,
All seals and symbols of redeemed sin,
His soul is so enfettered to her love,
That she may make, unmake, do what she list,
Even as her appetite shall play the god
With his weak function.

(2.3.309–15)

The same “weak function” that led him to worship Desdemona will allow him to “renounce his baptism” and convert (or revert) to the cruel ways of the Turk. Othello’s supposed propensity for religious instability is, at the same time, a libidinal weakness like that attributed to the Islamic convert.

The alleged sexual excesses of the Muslims were linked to those of the Moors or black Africans, who are frequently described in the Western tradition as a people naturally given to promiscuity.\(^\text{53}\) Leo Africanus says of the North African Moors that there is “no nation under heaven more prone to veneric...”\(^\text{54}\) Othello, the noble Moor of Venice, is, as we shall see below, not to be identified with a specific, historically accurate racial category; rather he is a hybrid who might be associated, in the minds of Shakespeare’s audience, with a whole set of related terms—*Moor, Turk, Ottomite, Saracen, Maho-


\(^\text{54}\) Africanus, 38.
metan, Egyptian, Judean, Indian—all constructed and positioned in opposition to Christian faith and virtue. More than being identified with any specific ethnic label, Othello is a theatrical embodiment of the dark, threatening powers at the edge of Christendom. Othello’s identity is derived from a complex and multilayered tradition of representation which includes the classical barbarian, the saracen or “paynim knight” of medieval romance, the blacka-moor, and (an early modern version of the medieval types of lust, cruelty, and aggression) the Turk.

For spectators at the Globe, the stage Moor (a “white” actor in blackface) was essentially an emblematic figure, not a “naturalistic” portrayal of a particular ethnic type. As John Gillies reminds readers of Othello, “the sharper, more elaborately differentiated and more hierarchical character of post-Elizabethan constructions of racial difference are inappropriate to the problems posed by the Elizabethan other.” Nonetheless, a carefully historicized analysis of terms such as Moor and Turk can help us to reconstruct more fully what Othello signified in the historical linguistic context of early seventeenth-century England.

Looking particularly at the significance of Othello’s epithet, “the Moor,” G. K. Hunter describes how this term was understood:

The word ‘Moor’ was very vague ethnographically, and very often seems to have meant little more than ‘black-skinned outsider’, but it was not vague in its antithetical relationship to the European norm of the civilized white Christian.

In various texts early modern Europeans characterized the Moors of Iberia and North Africa as a treacherous, aggressive, and unstable people. Leo Africanus describes the Moors as honest and trusting but jealous and given to passionate, vengeful rage when wronged. In Gli Hecatommithi Cinthio has Disdemona say “...you Moors are so hot by nature that any little thing moves you to anger and revenge,” and Shakespeare’s Iago tells Roderigo “These Moors are changeable in their wills” (1.3.336). Othello’s changeabili-


56 John Gillies, Shakespeare and the geography of difference (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994), 32. According to Gillies’s study of the Shakespearean “mythology of geographic difference” (10), Othello is both “other” and “voyager.” He is also the figure of the barbarian, from outside the circuit of civilization. The periphery of civilization was defined by the Romans as the orbis terrarum or orbis terrae (literally, “the circle of lands”), and the civilized center defines itself against the periphery, with which it is fascinated. “Monstrous, savage and barbarous” races inhabit the marginal spaces: this mythology establishes “the link between monstrosity, margins and sexual ‘promiscuity’” (13).

57 G. K. Hunter, “Elizabethans and Foreigners,” SS 17 (1964): 37–52, esp. 51. On the early modern etymology of Moor, see Barthelemy, whose conclusions confirm those of Hunter: “Moor can mean... non-black Muslim, black Christian, or black Muslim. The only certainty a reader has when he sees the word is that the person referred to is not a European Christian” (7ff).

58 See Chew, 518–21.

ity is linked to his “exorbitance” (Gillies’s term) and to his ambiguous status as a Christian Moor and a mercenary whose loyalty is for hire. He is, in the words of Iago, “an erring barbarian” (1.5.43) who has strayed from his natural course into the civilized, super-subtle environment of Venice. As a “noble Moor,” Othello is a walking paradox, a contradiction in terms. He is a “purified” and Christianized Moor, converted to whiteness, washed clean by the waters of baptism. Or at least it appears so at first. But the play seems to prove the ancient proverb “ab luis Aethiopem, quid frustra” as the Moor shows his true color—demonic black, burnt by hellfire and cursed by God.60

We may infer from Iago’s comment at 4.2.216 that Othello is a native of Mauritania, but the play makes it clear from the beginning that Othello is or has become a Christian. Shakespeare may have known from Pory’s translation of Leo Africanus that some Moors “are Gentiles which worship Idols; others of the sect of Mahomet; some others Christians; and some Jewish in religion.”61 Popular knowledge of Christian and Jewish minorities under Islamic rule was limited, however, and early modern parlance often demonstrates the English Protestants’ misunderstanding of Islam’s ethnic and political complexity. The words Moor and Turk, for example, were sometimes used to refer specifically to the people of Morocco or Turkey, but more often they signified a generalized Islamic Other.62 English popular culture, including drama, rarely distinguished between Muslims: the Moors of Barbary were often called Turks, and, in spite of their iconoclastic monotheism, Muslims were still condemned as “pagan idolaters” by many writers. A few people among the educated classes of Shakespeare’s England might have known that not all of the Barbary Moors were unenlightened pagans or even benighted “Mahometans,” but most English were unaware of the Muslim rulers’ policy of religious toleration, which allowed Jews, Christians, and Muslims to live together peacefully within the same community. This policy differed radically from that of England, where the norm was religious persecution and where very few Jews or Muslims were permitted to maintain residence.

In Spain, too, persecution and intolerance were the rule. After the Reconquista, the Morisco inhabitants of Spain and Portugal provided an example of Muslim Moors who were officially converted and baptized but who engaged in covert Islamic practices and were increasingly regarded with suspicion by the Spanish Church.63 Because he is a Christianized Moor, a mercenary Morisco,
Othello, like the Moors of Spain, is suspect and liable to relapse. His race and his religious identity, his nobility and his Christianity are all questionable. Othello’s oxymoronic epithet, “the noble Moor,” signifies a split identity, something unstable and unnatural. Othello’s religious affiliation at the time of the play is Christian, but his origins are unclear. Indeterminacy and instability of identity form the common denominator for understanding his character. He is a kind of renegade and thus an object of suspicion in a play about suspicion.

When Othello tells “Of being taken by the insolent foe / And sold to slavery; of my redemption thence” (1.3.136–37), are we to understand that he was a Christian Moor taken captive by Islamic corsairs, perhaps the renegades of Barbary, and then “redeemed” by Christians? Or did his “redemption” involve a conversion from Islam to Christianity? The text does not answer this question, but the text does identify Othello with the renegades themselves. On several occasions Iago associates Othello with renegade pirates, calling him a “Barbary horse” and referring to his elopement as an act of piracy; “he tonight hath boarded a land carrack; / If it prove lawful prize, he’s made for ever” (1.2.50–51). Like a “Barbarian” pirate or a lusty Turk, Othello has secretly and suddenly deceived Brabantio and stolen away with Desdemona, Brabantio’s prized possession.

The play’s first act presents a clear analogy between Othello’s successful theft of Desdemona and the Turks’ equally treacherous attempt to steal Cyprus: “So let the Turk of Cyprus us beguile, / We lose it not so long as we can smile” (1.3.208–9), says Brabantio, equating Othello with “the Turk” and protesting that “if such actions as Othello’s stolen marriage “may have passage free, / Bondslaves and pagans shall our statesmen be” (1.2.98–99). Brabantio exaggerates for effect, but his fear that “Bondslaves and pagans” might beguile their way to power, command, and possession reflects a real concern about the growing strength of Islamic sea power, much of that power based on galleys manned by slaves or renegades and sometimes commanded by renegade captains or admirals.64

In fact, the Venetians’ willingness during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries to allow free passage in the Adriatic to the Turks in exchange for trade concessions and access to Ottoman ports had placed them in a controversial position in the eyes of their Christian co-religionists, especially those who heeded the Pope’s call for a general crusade against the infidel. At the time that Shakespeare was writing Othello, the Venetians were enjoying a period of peace and good relations with the Ottoman sultanate, while the Hapsburgs were engaged in a long, exhausting war against the Turks (1593–1606). Throughout this period the English government was on friendly terms with the Ottomans.65

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64 The most famous renegade admiral was Aruj, known as Kheyr-ed-Din (or Barbarossa), a Greek who converted to Islam and rose to command the Ottoman fleet in the Mediterranean. He was the founder of the corsair center at Algiers, where construction of the Great Mole began under his sponsorship in 1529.

65 The English had been granted commercial capitulations by the sultan, allowing trade in the Levant, in May of 1580. See S. A. Skilliter, William Harborne and the Trade with Turkey, 1578–1582:
The peace treaty that Venice concluded with the Turks in 1573 relinquished Cyprus, and, in 1595, the Venetians reaffirmed and expanded their commercial alliance with the Ottomans in yet another treaty. These agreements were partly the result of Venetian resistance to papal pressures. (The quarrel between Venice and the Pope was observed with great interest by the English, who expressed strong support for the Venetians.) From the English Protestant point of view, Venice was a sphere of tolerance and rationality located between the twin tyrannies of papal superstition on one hand and Islamic “paganism” on the other. During the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, the English foes of Spanish/papal hegemony looked favorably on Venice because of its strong resistance to counter-Reformation papism and to the power of the Jesuits. In the imaginative geography of early modern England, Venice stood for wealth, commerce, multicultural exchange, political stability, wisdom and justice, tolerance, neutrality, rationality, republicanism, pragmatism, and openness. In fact, Venice was attempting to carry out a peaceable yet profitable trade in an economic sphere that was ruled by violence. The English, like the Venetians, were eager to establish and sustain trade links with areas under Islamic rule. Nonetheless, most Londoners would have thought of the Ottoman sultan or “Grand Seigneur” not as a commercial partner but as the absolute ruler of an empire that menaced all Christendom.

As the Ottomans began to dominate the eastern Mediterranean, the traditional notion of a marriage between Venice and the sea led to jokes about the Turk cuckolding the impotent Venetian patriarchs or raping the Venetian virgin. A 1538 sonnet by Guillaume DuBellay makes this point:

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67 Protestant polemics against Roman Catholicism frequently equated Islam and Roman Catholicism (see Chew, 101). The notion of Islam (the religion of “Moors,” “Mahometans,” and “Saracens”) as a variety of pagan idol worship began in romance tradition (in the Chanson de Roland the Islamic knights worship an unholy trinity of idols—Mahound, Apollin, and Jupiter) and had a remarkable persistence among educated Europeans. See Norman Daniel, Heroes and Saracens: An Interpretation of the Chansons de Geste (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 1984), 263–64. Spenser, for example, draws on this tradition when presenting Roman Catholic lawlessness, joylessness, and faithlessness in the form of three Saracen knights in Book I of The Faerie Queene.
Mais ce que l'on en doit le meilleur estimer
C'est quand ces vieux coquz vont espouser la mer,
Dont ilz sont les maris, et le Turc l'adultere.
(But that which you must find does best adorn her
Is when those cuckolds old go wed the sea.
Venetians husbands then, the Turk the horner.)\(^{70}\)

The longevity and supposed civic virtue of Venice’s republican government led to a conventional comparison of Venice with virginity. David McPherson, in his study of the English “myth of Venice,” shows that “writer after writer identifies her preservation of her liberty (freedom from domination by a foreign power) with sexual chastity.”\(^{71}\) But this virgin bride of the Mediterranean needed the protection of virile foreigners. According to Fynes Moryson,

the Gentlemen of Venice are trayned vpp in pleasure and wantonnes, which must needs abase and effeminate their myndes. Besides that this State is not sufficiently furnished with men and more specially with natieue Commanders and Generalls, nor yet with victuals, to vndertake (of their owne power without assistance) a war against the Sultane of Turky. This want of Courage, & especially the feare lest any Citizen becoming a great and popular Commandant in the Warss, might thereby have meanes to vsurpe vppon the liberty of their State, seeme to be the Causes that for their Land forces they seldome haue any natieue Commanders, and alwayes vse a forrayne Generall.\(^{72}\)

The desperate lack of manly leadership in Venice is dramatized in the first act of Othello, where an alien is given charge of the protection of the Venetian empire against the Turk. To the English audience this reliance on a Moorish renegade-type like Othello would have been almost as shocking as the elopement and miscegenation permitted by the Venetian senate.

To the people of Shakespeare’s London, the Mediterranean maritime sphere, including Cyprus and the Venetian territories, must have seemed like a violently unstable sea of troubles—and yet one where vast fortunes could be made by trade and plunder.\(^{73}\) It was the ultimate free market, in which privateers under many different flags took what they could by force. The English translation of Nicholas de Nicolay’s Nauigations, peregrinations and voyages, made into Turkie contains a typically sensational account of the Turks’ and Moors’ piratical activities:

The most part of the Turkes of Alger, whether they be of the kings houshold or the Gallies, are Christians renied, or Mahumetised, of all Nations, but most of them, Spaniards, Italians, and of Pruience, of the Ilands and Coastes of the Sea Mediterane, giuen all to whoredome, sodometrie, theft, and all other most detestable vices, lyuing onely of rouings, spoyles, & pilling . . . and with their

\(^{70}\) Quoted here from McPherson, 32 (McPherson’s translation).

\(^{71}\) McPherson, 33. See also Vaughan, 16–21.


\(^{73}\) English and Dutch merchantmen were increasingly successful in this environment (due in large part to superior nautical technology) at the expense of Venetian seapower and prosperity; see Tenenti, 56–86.
practick art bryng dayly too Alger a number of pore Christians, which they sell vnto the Moores, and other merchauntes of Barbarie...”

Again, we see that “Turks” are not necessarily from Turkey proper—anyone who “turns Turk” and joins the Muslim pirates is associated with a group that is imagined as radically heterogeneous and, at the same time, united in evil.

The Mediterranean littoral in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was a place where international alliances shifted rapidly and territorial changes were constantly taking place, including trade agreements and mutual-defense pacts between Christian and Muslim leaders. Furthermore, the widespread practice of piracy was increasingly a free-for-all in which multi-ethnic crews fought each other for spoils, the strong preying on the weak. Many Christian sailors and ship captains had “taken the turban,” formally converting to Islam in order to enjoy the freedom and protection of the Barbary ports in North Africa, while corsairs manned by Christian crews roamed the Mediterranean attacking both Christian and Muslim targets. In many cases it was the temptation of lucrative employment that motivated Christian sailors and soldiers to turn Turk and become renegade pirates or join the Ottoman army. All of this was a source of fascination and bewilderment to the English, citizens of a relatively homogeneous and isolated nation.

The choice of Cyprus as a setting for much of the play is Shakespeare’s (Cinthio’s text not referring to such a locale), and there are particular features of the island that make it well suited for Shakespeare’s imaginative geography. The voyage from Venice to Venetian Cyprus constituted a journey from the margins of Christendom to a surrounded and besieged outpost (Figure 2). According to Knolles, “The Venetians had euer had great care of the island of Cyprys, as lying farre from them, in the middest of the sworne enemies of the Christian religion, and had therefore oftentimes determined to haue fortified the same...” If we look at a sixteenth-century English map of the Mediterranean world, we find Cyprus in the extreme southwestern corner, encircled by Egypt, Syria, and Turkey (Figures 3 and 4).

Shakespeare’s play does not provide a historically accurate representation of the real invasion of Cyprus by the Turks in 1571 or of any other Ottoman attempt to conquer the island. As noted above, Cyprus was formally ceded by Venice to the Turks in 1573 after three years of futile resistance, including

76 See Tenenti, 16–31; Wolf; and Fisher.
77 See Matar, “‘Turning Turk,’” 37.
78 Knolles, 847.
79 Cyprus was conquered by crusaders under Richard Coeur de Lion in 1190. It was controlled by the Lusignan dynasty until the island was annexed by the Venetian republic in 1489. During the fifteenth century the Mamluks raised armies and attacked Cyprus on several occasions, most notably in 1429, when an invading force sent by Sultan Baybars conquered Nicosia and forced the Lusignan monarchs to pay an annual tribute. When it fell to the invading Turks under Sultan Selim II in 1571, it was the last remaining “outre-mer” territory conquered by the Frankish crusaders which was still in Christian hands. See George F. Hill, A History of Cyprus, 4 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1940–52).
Fig. 2: Giovanni Francesco Camocio, *Isole famose porti, fortsez, e terre maritime sottoposte alla Ser[emissa]ma Sig[no]ria di Venetia, ad altri Principi Christiani, et al Sig[n]or Turco...* (Venice, [1574]), 70. Printed just after the Venetians ceded Cyprus to the Turks, Camocio's map shows the island surrounded by Turkish territories in which armies are gathering for attack. From the Folger Shakespeare Library Collection.

Fig. 3: Detail from Abraham Ortelius, *Theatrum Orbis Terrarum* (Antwerp, 1595), map following p. 110. Both Ortelius's map and the Geneva Bible map in Figure 4 were among the cartographic images of Turkey and the eastern Mediterranean best known to English readers of Shakespeare's time. Here Cyprus appears surrounded by the Turkish Empire, with the coastal area from Egypt to Asia Minor resembling a monstrous maw ready to swallow Christian territory, including Venice. From the Folger Shakespeare Library Collection.

Fig. 4: *Holy Bible* (Geneva, 1560), map following p. 69. Versions of this map appeared in many English Bibles of the mid- to late-sixteenth century. This particular map, reproduced from the first edition of the Geneva Bible, is placed between Acts and Paul's First Epistle to the Romans. From the Folger Shakespeare Library Collection.
bloody sieges at Nicosia and Famagusta.\textsuperscript{80} This was thirty years before \textit{Othello}
was first performed in London.\textsuperscript{81} Thus English audiences watching a play set in 
Cyprus under Venetian rule could have interpreted this setting as a vul-
nerable outpost destined to be swallowed up by the Turks and converted to
Islamic rule.\textsuperscript{82} “Our wars are done” and “the Turkish fleet . . . are drowned”
(2.1.20, 17–18) would have had an ironic ring for an English audience that
knew of the Turks’ victory over the Venetians and the long-standing Ottoman
possession of Cyprus.

The sensational context of military conflict between Christians and Mus-
lims, Italians and Turks, is dramatized in the first scene of the play when Iago
tells Roderigo that Othello has fought with Iago “At Rhodes, at Cyprus, and
on other grounds / Christian and heathen” (1.1.29–30). The sense of ur-
gency in Venice, the fears of its leaders faced with the Turkish threat, is the
force that sets the breathless action of the plot in motion. It is as if Othello has
already left Venice before we meet him:

\begin{quote}
\textit{. . . for he’s embarked}
With such loud reason to the Cyprus wars,
Which even now stands in act, that, for their souls,
Another of his fathom they have none
To lead their business. . . .
\end{quote}

(ll. 148–52)

When we do meet Othello in the second scene, we see the duke’s messengers
finding him even more swiftly than do Brabantio’s urgently roused forces.
The Turkish threat to Cyprus is “a business of some heat” (1.2.40), and the
third scene continues to emphasize a sense of impending invasion as the duke
calls for immediate mobilization: “Valiant Othello we must straight employ
you / Against the general enemy Ottoman” (1.3.48–49). Othello and the
Christian Venetians are described as moving instantly in a direct line to the
defense of Cyprus, while the shifting Turks resist interpretation by moving in
a “backward course” which then turns from Rhodes toward Cyprus: “now
they do restem / Their backward course, bearing with frank appearance /
Their purposes toward Cyprus” (ll. 38–39). The syntax makes their move-
ments unstable and contradictory, implying the retention of a morally ques-
tionable backwardness even as they redirect their course “toward Cyprus.”

The absent Turks, who never appear onstage but are defined as a powerful
threat just beyond the boundaries of the action, surround the play with their

\textsuperscript{80} After a bloody siege, Nicosia was taken in September of 1570, its inhabitants put to the sword
(Knolles claimed that more than fourteen thousand Christians were slain), its wealth pillaged,
and many of its citizens taken as slaves. Famagusta followed, after a courageous resistance. Knolles
reports that Mustapha, the Ottoman general, betrayed the governor and officials who came into
his camp to parley, killing and torturing all of them (848–68). Emrys Jones shows how some of
Shakespeare’s lines echo Knolles’s account of the Turkish invasion of Cyprus, and Jones claims
in his conclusion that “Shakespeare had the events of 1570–1 [on Cyprus] in mind” when
composing \textit{Othello} (50). For a contemporary account of the siege of Famagusta by an eyewitness,
see Nestore Martinengo, \textit{The True Report of all the Successe of Famagosta}, trans. William Malin
(London, 1572).

\textsuperscript{81} The play also refers to Rhodes as a potential target for Turkish aggression (1.3.14–35). It was
taken by the Ottomans in 1522 and was still in Turkish hands when Shakespeare wrote \textit{Othello}
eighty years later.

\textsuperscript{82} See the section entitled “Of Arms and Beards: The Loss of Cyprus and the Myth of Venice”
in McPherson, 75–81.
unseen presence. The urgent preparation for war presented in the first act sets up the expectation of a heroic confrontation between Othello's army and the treacherous Ottoman horde. This dramatization of Venetian panic played on the widespread fears about Turkish expansion and conversion: the specific uncertainties felt by the Venetians in the play (where will they attack? Rhodes or Cyprus?) convey a sense of dread that was felt even in England. The first act of Othello thus prepares the audience for a dramatic blockbuster of global scope (like Marlowe’s Tamburlaine plays), involving one of the greatest oriental despos all time, the Turk of Istanbul.84 The play then begins to build frustration by violating the generic expectations raised in Act 1. James Calderwood points to the correspondence between coitus interruptus and the miles interruptus in Act 2:

[the audience is] led to expect a battle, to look forward to experiencing some measure of the pomp and glory and the downright violence that Othello speaks of later. But then, inexplicably, the Turks vanish in an offstage tempest, the battle comes to nought, and we must content ourselves with this weak piping time of peace.

... the impulse to battle is displaced onto sex, issues of state divert into domestic channels, and violence to others turns reflexive. ... The fatal bedding of Desdemona consummates the marriage and our aesthetic expectations at once. With Othello standing in for the Turk, and Desdemona for Cyprus, everyone rests content in the perfection of form.85

The frustrated male violence that was initially directed at the Islamic Other is turned on the feminine Other, forming a link between military aggression and sexual transgression, between the Turkish threat to Christian power and the contamination of female sexual purity.

In Othello the fantasy of divine protection keeps the Turks from encircling Cyprus. The storm that prevents the Turkish fleet from invading Cyprus in the play is a fictional version of the providential storms that protected the English from Spanish armadas in 1588, 1596, 1597, and 1598.86 (“‘God breathed and they were scattered’” was a motto inscribed on one of Elizabeth’s Armada medals.87) The idea of a tempest sent by God against the invading fleet of an evil empire is found in providentialist propaganda directed against the Spanish and the Turkish powers (who were often associated in a Protestant historiography that found causal connections between the rise of papal tyranny or

83 The marginal menace of the Turks frames the action in several of Shakespeare’s plays set in the Mediterranean, including Othello, Twelfth Night, Much Ado About Nothing, The Taming of the Shrew, and All’s Well That Ends Well. In these plays this offstage power is associated with piracy, captivity, and war.
84 In fact, there were a number of plays written in early modern England which featured “the Great Turk.” Those extant include [Thomas Kyd], The Tragedie of Solomon and Perseda (1599); [Greene], The First Part of the Tragical Raigne of Selimus (1594); Fulke Greville’s closet plays, The Tragedy of Mustapha (1609) and Alaham (ca. 1598–1600); John Mason, The Turke. A worthie tragedie (1610); and two plays written by Thomas Goffe, The Raging Turke, or Baisetz the Second (1631) and The Cowragious Turke, Or, Amvrath the First. A Tragedie (1632). See Simon Shepherd’s chapter “Turks and Fathers” in his Marlowe and the Politics of Elizabethan Theatre (Brighton, UK: Harvester Press, 1986), 142–77.
86 On the connection between these armada-dispersing tempests and the one in Othello, see Bullough, ed., 7:213–14.
corruption and the coming of Islam as a divine scourge). Cyprus was like England in being a “beleaguered isle,” victimized by an “Eastern” foe bent on the extirpation of Christian rule.\(^{88}\)

But the Turkish demon is not so easily exorcised from Shakespeare’s play, and the destructive energy and cruelty of the Turk is repressed only temporarily and soon returns, appearing within the Christian community. When the drunken affray instigated by Iago disturbs Othello’s “balmy slumbers,” he emerges from his nuptial bed to speak these lines:

Are we turned Turks, and to ourselves do that  
Which heaven hath forbid the Ottomites?  
For Christian shame, put by this barbarous brawl.  
(2.3.151–53)

These words imply, first, that “heaven” has providentially intervened on the side of the Venetian navy, preserving their ships while dispersing and perhaps destroying the Turkish fleet; second, that the Turk’s own religion prohibits drinking and brawling; and, third, that Christian order has been converted to Islamic violence. Multiple ironies here point to the conversion that Othello is about to undergo.

This conversion occurs in a text that relentlessly employs the Christian language of damnation and salvation, and in which “diabolical imagery” is used in almost every scene.\(^{89}\) This is part of the play’s rootedness in the morality-play tradition, though the morality play of \textit{Othello} is a tragedy of damnation, not a divine comedy, and it ends with the triumph of the Vice, that “demi-devil” Iago, who has won another soul for Satan.\(^{90}\)

In the speeches that immediately precede the killing of Desdemona, the Moor’s references to Christian mercy and to the salvation of his wife’s soul are highly ironic, given his own lack of mercy. Othello enters professing pious concern and attempting to confer the sanction of divine justice on the act of murder. “It is the cause, it is the cause” (5.2.1), he intones, in an effort to justify the execution of an accused adulteress.\(^{91}\) Othello presents himself as an

\(^{90}\text{Bernard Spivak explores this pattern in \textit{Shakespeare and the Allegory of Evil: The History of a Metaphor in Relation to His Major Villains} (New York: Columbia UP, 1958).}\n
\(^{91}\text{Of course, the punishment of an adulteress was stopped by Christ in a biblical scene that resonates ironically with the religious language of the murder scene and with Othello’s claim to be “merciful.” The final verse of John 8:1–11 reads: “And Jesus saide vnto her, Neither doe I condemne thee: Goe, and sinne no more” (\textit{The Holy Bible, Conteyning the Old Testament and the New} [London, 1611], K2). The Elizabethan homily “Against whor dome and adulterie” refers to allegedly severe punishment for adultery among various Islamic peoples: “If anye amonge the Egyptians hadde bene taken in adulterie, the Lawe was, that he shoulde openly in ye presence of}
agent of divine retribution and male honor who is forced to enact a terrible but righteous punishment—"else she'll betray more men" (l. 6). Presuming an absolutist infallibility, Othello tries to play the priest and asks for Desdemona's confession. Despite his efforts to maintain calm and control, the scene ends in jealous rage, with Othello hastily stifling Desdemona's last request to pray.

As he finishes the murder, Othello again takes up the pose of divine agent and minister, declaring, "I that am cruel am yet merciful" (l. 88). These words represent attributes of both the Old Testament and the New Testament deity. (Modern audiences might also hear in this line an echo of the Islamic epithet for Allah, the compassionate and merciful.) The Moor sees himself as a "scourge of God," come to mete out cruel but necessary punishment for Desdemona's "sin" (l. 53). His appropriation and perversion of Christian ritual may be seen as a horribly misguided attempt to rationalize and sanctify his bloody deed in the name of religion. Here, Othello's religious rhetoric reminds us of the allegations against Mahomet, who was accused of perverting religious doctrine to justify his own violent and lustful ways.

Othello's irreligious assumption—or presumption—of an absolute power over life and death demonstrates his conversion to a kind of oriental despotism or tyrannical lordship. In this, the character of Othello partakes of a stereotype developed by Western authors—the representation of the "cruel Moor" (l. 247) or bloody Turk, especially the sultan or slavemaster who hastily enacts a violent, arbitrary, and merciless "justice." The Islamic prince is frequently represented in early modern texts as a tyrant who rules by will and appetite, committing rash acts in the name of honor or false religion. This sort of stock character has a long history, going back to the Moorish villains of the romance tradition and the stage tyrants of medieval drama. Once Othello gives way to his jealous will and "tyrannous hate" (3.3.450), the audience sees him transformed into a version of the Islamic tyrant.

In particular, the murder of Desdemona by the Moor would have reminded audiences of the story of the sultan and the fair Greek, Irene, an exemplary tale of Islamic cruelty which features an Ottoman emperor (usually Amurath

all the people bee scourged naked with whipps, vnto the number of a thousande stripes, the woman that was taken with him had her nose cut off whereby she was knowen euer after, to bee a whore, and therfore to be abhorred of all men. Among the Arabians, they that were taken in adulterie, had their heads strike[n] from their bodies. . . . Amonge the Turks even at this day, they that be taken in adulterie, both man & woman are stoued [stoned] straight waye to death without mercie" (Certaine Sermons appointed by the Queens Maiestie, to be declared and read . . . [London, 1595], L3r–L4r).

92 The word lord occurs repeatedly in this scene, with Desdemona referring to Othello as her lord and husband in the quarto text and calling on the Lord God. Just before her death, Desdemona addresses Othello as "my lord" five times, and Emilia refers to him by this title more than ten times. In the quarto text Desdemona cries "O, Lord, Lord, Lord" as she is smothered, and her final words are "Commend me to my kind lord. O farewell!" (5.2.126).

93 Take, for example, the character of Mullisheg, King of Fez, in Heywood's The Fair Maid of the West. Or, A Girle worth gold. The first part (London, 1631), who declares,

If Kings on earth be termed Demi-gods,
Why should we not make here terrestriall heaven?
We can, wee will, our God shall be our pleasure,
For so our Mecan Prophet warrants us.

(47)
I or Mahomet II) who must choose between masculine, military “honor” and attachment to a Christian slave with whom he has fallen in love. This story was dramatized on the London stage in at least four different versions during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. It was printed in both prose and verse forms and was widely disseminated. 94 One version of this tale is staged in Thomas Goffe’s The Courages Turke, Or, Amurath the First, written circa 1613–18 for performance by Oxford University students. Goffe’s play follows the standard plot but changes the name of Irene to Eumorphe. 95 Though The Courages Turke was written after, and influenced by, Shakespeare’s Othello, the story it tells was well known long before Shakespeare wrote his play. Significant to my argument are the correspondences between Amurath and Othello and between Irene/Eumorphe and Desdemona, which demonstrate the “Turkish” character of Othello and allow us to see how Desdemona would have been recognized as the victim of Islamic-erotic tyranny.

In a scene that draws heavily on Othello, for example, Amurath kisses the sleeping Eumorphe and is tempted by her beauty, but he is worried that “The Christians now will scoffe at Mahomet” if he allows his “manly government” to be weakened by his infatuation with her. 96 Urged on by his tutor (who appears disguised as the ghost of Amurath’s father), Amurath persuades himself to kill Eumorphe by imagining that she will cuckold him:

For thinke this (Amurath) this woman may
Prostrate her delicate and Ivory limbs,
To some base Page, or Scul, or shrunk up Dwarf:
Or let some Groome lye feeding on her lips,
She may devise some mishapen trick,
To satiate her goatish Amurath,
And from her bended knees at Meditation,
Be taken by some slave to th’ deepe of Hell 97

He then calls in his captains and nobles to have them witness the “spectacle” of his masculine strength and untempted honor, which enable him to resist “intemperate Lust” by killing the woman on whom he dotes. 98 Before slaying her, however, he asks his witnesses if they, too, are not tempted by her beauty:

Now, which of you all is so temperate;
That, did he find this Jewell in his Bed
(Vnlesse an Eunuch) could refraine to grapple,
And dally with her? 99

They all confess their attraction to her and agree that nothing could make them destroy such beauty, were she theirs. Hearing this, the sultan, in a rage,

94 See Chew’s thorough reconstruction of the origin and reproduction of this narrative in early modern England (478–90). The tragic story of the sultan and the slave girl was staged in a lost play by George Peele (“the famous play of The Turkish Mahomet and Hyrin the fair Greek’’); in Goffe’s The Courages Turke; in Lodowick Carlell’s The Tragedy of Osmond the Great Turk; and in Gilbert Swinhoe’s The Tragedy of the Unhappy Fair Irene (Chew, 483).


96 Goffe, The Courages Turke, D2" and D2".

97 Goffe, The Courages Turke, D3".

98 Goffe, The Courages Turke, D4" and D3".

99 Goffe, The Courages Turke, D4"–v.
grabs a sword and swiftly cuts off the head of the sleeping Eumorphe. He then holds up her bleeding head while saying to his men, “There, kisse now (Captaines) doe! and clap her cheeks.” “Now,” announces Amurath, “shall our swords be exercised, / In ripping up the breasts of Christians. . . . for he surely shall / That conquers first himselfe, soone conquer all.”100 Despite this prediction, Amurath’s beheading of Eumorphe leads not to a long and glorious career but to his imminent death and eternal damnation.

In Goffe’s Epilogue the audience is asked to applaud and thereby help assure the damnation of Amurath and the other Turks, who are crossing to the underworld over the river Acheron:

And as they pass, with ioynd streightk sink the barge
Which have receav’d the Turkes blacque soule in charge
All heer wish turkes destruction our hope stands
That to their ruine you’le all set your hands.101

The Great Turk joins his “Predecessors,” and the audience participates in sending Amurath to hell.

The Courageous Turk suggests that when English readers and spectators thought of Moors and Turks, they imagined them as rash and violent oppressors who made it a point of religious and military honor to kill innocent women. Both Amurath, the “courageous Turk,” and Othello, the “noble Moor,” exhibit a masculine “courage” which they direct against a demonized femininity. Both believe that they are nobly resisting the temptation of a “damned shore” whose feminine charms and wiles will supposedly weaken their military “virtue.” Both Othello and Amurath believe that their minds have been hardened against soft, feminine enticements that would master them. “Thinke you my minde is waxie to be wrought[?],” asks Amurath, as he prepares to decapitate Eumorphe.102 The irony is that Amurath, like Othello, has been “wrought” upon by a male follower who succeeds in turning him against the virtuous woman he loves and in bringing on his death and damnation. In both cases dramatic irony exposes the murderer’s misogynist code as damnable and deadly to himself.

In Goffe’s tragedy, “foure Fiends, framed like Turkish Kings, but blacke” arise from the “hell” under the stage to curse Amurath and predict his damnation.103 These infernal figures are damned souls, and like the actor playing Othello, they are disturbing representations of blackness combined with Turkish puissance, but the anxiety they provoke is eased, in Goffe’s play as in Shakespeare’s, by the reassuring fact of their eternal punishment.104 Othello’s damnation is explicitly announced in the final scene. According to Emilia, for example, Othello’s blackness (contrasted with Desdemona’s white innocence) is the mark of a devil damned: “O, the more angel she, / And you the blacker devil!” (5.2.131–32). By the end of Shakespeare’s tragedy, Othello’s skin color has become the external, carnal sign of an internal, spiritual con-

100 Goffe, The Courageous Turk, E1.
101 The Epilogue from which this quotation is drawn does not appear in the 1632 printed text of The Courageous Turk, but O’Malley has transcribed it from a privately owned manuscript of Goffe’s play and included it in her edition (171).
104 See Barthelmy, 4.
dition, as the fire and smoke of his passionate jealousy tarnish the mirror of his soul.

In his final speeches Othello turns away, first from the divine judge toward his adversary, Iago; then, when that adversary is revealed to be the Devil, Othello turns to his auditors, onstage and in the audience, to persuade them of his honorable intentions. This “turning” is a form of apostrophe, addressing the enemy he has become:

... in Aleppo once
Where a malignant and a turbaned Turk
Beat a Venetian and traduced the state,
I took by th’throat the circumcision’d dog
And smote him thus.

(ll. 348–52)

The language here suggests a circular cutting, as Othello turns on himself and plunges the sword into his own bowels, forming a circle with body and weapon.105

Circumcision, according to Protestant theology, is an Abrahamic practice, abrogated by the coming of Christ and the new covenant:

as the Jewes haue shewed themselves most obstinate in the blindness of their hearts by the retaining of this ceremonie and their olde traditions: so the Turkes likewise, no lesse vaine in the idlenesse of their owne imaginations, haue and doe vsne Circumcision, as a speciall token or marke of their fond and superstitious sect. ...106

Seventeenth-century English Christians believed that adult-male conversion to Islam required circumcision.107 In their minds circumcision emphasized the sexual significance of the change of faith, imagined both as a kind of castration or emasculation and as a sign of the Muslims’ sexual excess—the reduction of the phallus signifying the need to curtail raging lust.108 For Othello to cut himself reiterates the ritual cutting of his foreskin, which was the sign of his membership in the community of stubborn misbelievers, the Muslims. To smite “the circumcision’d dog” is at once to kill the “turbaned Turk” and to reenact a version of his own circumcision, signifying his return

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105 After completing work on this article, I came across an essay by Julia Reinhard Lupton which confirms and complements many of my comments on circumcision in Othello; see Lupton, “Othello Circumcised: Shakespeare and the Pauline Discourse of Nations,” Representations 57 (Winter 1997): 73–89.

106 The Policy of The Turkish Empire, 22.

107 See, for example, the circumcision scene in Robert Daborn’s play A Christian turn’d Turk (London, 1612), F2–F3. According to Nicolay, those who change “from baptism to circumcision,” converting to Islam from Christianity, bring upon themselves the “eternall perdition of their soules” (69). Kellett takes verse 5:2 from Paul’s epistle to the Galatians as his text: “If ye be circumcised, Christ shall profit you nothing”; he also refers to the renegades’ “staying and ingranying of the Christal clere-sauing water of Baptisme, with the bload of Circumcision” (1 and 18).

108 At the end of Heywood’s play The Fair Maid of the West, the clownish tapster, Clem, foolishly asks to receive the “honour” of an appointment as Mullisheg’s “chiefe Eunuch” in the royal harem and discovers his folly when he is about to be castrated (see 60–63, esp. 62 and 61). In that play and in other English representations of Christians converting to Islam, there is a confusion of castration and circumcision, of eunuchs and renegades who “turn Turk.” See also Shapiro’s comments on the theological and cultural significance of circumcision in his chapter entitled “The Pound of Flesh” (113–30).
to the "malignant" sect of the Turks and his reunion with the misbelieving devils. 109

The play's recurrent references to hell and damnation lead the audience to consider the eternal consequences of Othello's suicide for his soul. Suicide, for a Christian, is a faithless act of despair, bringing certain damnation. Having told Desdemona "I would not kill thy soul" (l. 32), Othello goes on to kill his own soul by taking his own life, once again usurping God's power over life and death. Taken out of context, Othello's suicide might be interpreted as a noble act in the tradition of pagan heroes like Antony; but read in the context of the play's persistently Christian language of divine judgment, it merely confirms his identity as an infidel—an irascible creature whose reckless violence leads him to damnation.

The desperate grief that Othello expresses just before his suicide may be called a "Judas repentance." And indeed, in his despair Othello compares himself to that circumcised renegade and suicide, "the base Judean" (if we follow the Folio text [TLN 3658]). 110 Judas's suicide, according to Byam's sermon, was prompted by the Devil's eagerness to see Judas damned: "Yea I know some that tell vs how for this very cause [fear of a last-minute repentance leading to salvation] the Deuill hasted to take Judas out of this life, least knowing that there was a way to turne to Saluation, He might by penance recouer his fall." 111

The English Protestant "Homily of repentance, and of true reconciliation vnto God" warns that those who "onlye allowe these three parts of repentance, the contrition of the heart, the confession of the mouth, and the satisfaction of the worke," will not receive divine mercy. 112 In the homily, repentance is repeatedly figured as a turning. True repentance is defined as "the conversio or turning again of the whol man vnto God, from whome wee goe away by sinne." 113 The opening sentences of the homily declare that repentance is essential to prevent "eternall damnation." There are "foure principall pointes, that is, from what we must returne, to whome wee must returne, by whome wee maye bee able to convert, and the manner howe to turne vnto GOD. . . ." 114 Rather than turning to God and asking for His mercy, Othello disregards the words of the homily: "they doe greatly erre, which donot turne vnto God, but vnto the creatures, or vnto the inuention of men, or vnto theyr owne merites." 115 Like Judas, Othello exhibits a self-destructive remorse (as opposed to true repentance and humble submission to God's will); like Judas, Othello is damned for his betrayal of innocence.

Damnation is the fate Christians liked to imagine for all those who followed the path of Islam. Robert Carr's comments in The Mahumetane or Turkish Historie typify English beliefs about how God will judge the Muslims: "the

\[109\] It is interesting to note that in Aleppo for a Christian to strike a Muslim was a crime punishable by death, and that the only way for a Christian to avoid the penalty would be to convert; see Matar, "'Turning Turk,'" 35.


\[111\] Byam, 68.

\[112\] The Secondse Tome of Homilies (London, 1595), Kk6v.

\[113\] The Secondse Tome of Homilies, Kk2v.

\[114\] The Secondse Tome of Homilies, II3v and II4v–II5v.

\[115\] The Secondse Tome of Homilies, II6v.
Mahumetans, who [,] misled by the iyes of that wicked Imposter, and following his damned positions, dueruting from the eternall path of saluation, are car-
ried headlong in their misbeliefe to hell torments, and everlasting damnation. . . "\textsuperscript{116} According to Knolles, the religion of "the false Prophet Maho-
met, borne in an vnhappy houre, to the great destruction of mankind" had not only "desolat[ed]" the Christian Church but had created a vast popula-
tion of Muslims who would all be damned, "millions of soules cast headlong into eternall destruction."\textsuperscript{117} Part of Western Europeans’ fascination with Islam and the Turks was a feeling that their awesome power, raised by the wrath of God, would experience an equally awesome punishment in the form of mass damnation. In Kellett’s view the same fate awaited the renegade: “By not adhering to Christ, by wauring thy beliefe, by disclayming thy vow in Baptisme, by professing Turcisme, thou hast sold heauen, art initiated into hell, and hast purchased onely a conscience, frighted with horror.”\textsuperscript{118}

A baptized Moor turned Turk. Othello is “doubly damned” for backslid-
ing. Sent out to lead a crusade against Islamic imperialism, he “turns Turk” and becomes the enemy within. He has “traduced” the state of Venice and converted to the black Muslim Other, the Europeans’ phobic fantasy: Othello has become the ugly stereotype. His identity as “the noble Moor of Venice” dissolves as he reverts to the identity of the black devil and exhibits the worst features of the stereotypical “cruel Moor” or Turk—jealousy, violence, mer-
cilessness, faithlessness, lawlessness, despair. Faced with this terrible identity, one that “shows horrible and grim” (l. 202), Othello enacts his own punish-
ment and damns himself by killing the Turk he has become.

\textsuperscript{116} Carr, 113\textsuperscript{3}.
\textsuperscript{117} Knolles, “The Avthors Indvction to the Christian Reader,” A4\textsuperscript{v}–A6\textsuperscript{v}, esp. A4\textsuperscript{v}.
\textsuperscript{118} Kellett, 16. Samuel Rowlands’s epigram on the renegade pirate Ward also underscores the connection between conversion to Islam and damnation: “Perpetuall flames is reprobates Re-