



# The Lustful and Despotic Turk in Western Literature from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment

**إعداد**

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While interest in Islam declined during the second half of the fourteenth and the beginning of the fifteenth centuries with the failure of the crusades, the Islamic challenge began to mount again with the rise of another Muslim race, the Ottoman Turks, to power. The rise of the Ottomans and their encroachment upon the European soil occasioned a resurgence of the antagonistic responses to Islam, informed by fear and apprehension. At the same time, the growth of trade and the development of economic and diplomatic ties between the European states and the Ottoman Empire were accompanied by a flux of Europeans visiting the Ottoman provinces and reporting with considerable accuracy on the different conditions in the Empire. The new first-hand experience in the travel accounts of the seventeenth century, however, did not help dispel the wrong ideas or reverse the Western negative attitudes toward Islam. As the older stereotypical images of sensuality and violence were superimposed on new representations of the Turkish identity; the resultant was the widely accepted view, throughout the Renaissance period, as particularly evident in the depiction of Turkish characters in English drama, of the lustful and cruel Turk. However, alongside this negative view, the Ottoman Empire was also admired as a model of bureaucratic efficiency and military prowess.

A more informed image of Islam slowly and timidly found its way in some of the Enlightenment's attempted reappraisals. In addition to the theological polemical writings and the more secular accounts of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, as found in the travelers' accounts and the historical works, there emerged a new dimension that came to inform the Westerners' views of the Muslim Orient.

With the translation of the *Arabian Nights*, the exotic image of the East as the land of riches, unrestrained pleasures, and wild adventures gained ground.

As a result of the Turkish menace, a heightened preoccupation with Islam appeared in the writings of European theologians, dramatists and poets. The success of the Ottomans raised a challenge for both Catholic and Protestant writers; theological explanations for the Turkish victories were needed, and preachers engaged themselves in the conflict, trying to interpret the confrontation in religious terms, to appease the rising fears of the populace, and to rally the European powers against the enemies. "Even the secularization of Europe from Renaissance times onward did not diminish this hostility to Islam," as the eminent historian Bernard Lewis admits, adding that "it might have been expected that the revival of learning in Europe and the growth of scientific history would have brought about a more impartial view and a less prejudiced approach. In

fact, they did not. Prejudice, as so often has been swollen by ignorance. (From Babel 116) “Ill-will,” Lewis notes, “usually outlives religious belief.” Indeed a great deal of malice and ill-feelings have blinded Western observers during the sixteenth century, marring the objectivity in their treatment of Islam and the Muslims. One of the early contributions to the knowledge about the Turks was Richard Knolles’ *General History of the Turks* (1603), considered to be the first attempt at a general history (Lewis, *Islam and the West* 72). Although Knolles did not know Turkish, he was able to draw upon the contemporary literature on the subject of the Ottomans that scattered in the several European languages that he knew. The general impression Knolles’ conveys in his book is that of the Turks’ barbarism and cruelty, and he voices the European sense of fear of Turks in his description of them as “the present terror of the world.”

Propagandist aims were largely behind the shaping of a fearful and repulsive image of the Turkish Muslims. The image of the licentious, cruel, and tyrant Turk acquired the negative associations of the medieval image of the Saracen. The term “Saracen” itself came to be replaced by the term “Turk” as representing and encompassing all Muslims. Unlike the consistently negative associations of the former, however, the term “Turk” acquired a great deal of complexity and inconsistency in its significance, matching the complex array of political,

economic, and cultural factors that determined the European–Turkish relations. Feelings of fear mingled in European culture with those of admiration for the military feats, the economic power, and the civilizing advancements of the Ottomans. Lust and despotism, however, were the two main qualities ascribed to the Turk. One way the Reformation influenced the European attitude towards Islam was that the internal religious strife became the paramount concern of the European powers. But as the Turks increasingly became a fearful military threat, the concern with Islam surfaced again, affecting even the religious debate between Catholics and Protestants. Catholics often likened the Protestant creeds to Islam and Protestants to Muslims. And the same charge of Islam was used by Protestants against Catholics. This association of Islam with an unorthodox form of Christianity is reminiscent of the medieval description of Islam as a Christian heresy. On the other hand, for the Protestants, the Pope of the Catholic Church became Antichrist.

The Antichrist tradition developed in Spain and medieval Europe with respect to Islam and Prophet Muhammad continued to be applied to the new enemy of Christianity. But under the impact of the Catholic–Protestant division, the Antichrist rhetoric was manipulated in the propagandistic war between the Catholics and Protestants. In most Protestant polemics, Catholicism or the Pope of Rome is identified with Antichrist. Islam came to be

associated with Catholicism, and as both were the enemies of the Protestants, both were considered types of Antichrist. Throughout the sixteenth century, the Catholics are often compared in cruelty and irreligion to Turks.

To “turn Turk” was a common term that reflected the tendency among many Europeans in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries to pursue fortunes and to seek for better opportunities in the coasts of Barbary and in the ports of the Ottoman Levant. Thousand others were taken captives by the Ottomans and transported as slaves to Constantinople. Either tempted or compelled, many of them joined the Turks, became partners of the corsair pirates, or converted to Islam. The renegades resided in the world of Islam and prospered as they pursued many careers in the Ottoman Empire. They even served in the Ottoman navy and army; in a letter to the Pope in 1606, the Turkish Sultan boasted that he had 30,000 Christians in his army who “are the founders of our artillerie, and other Instruments of warre” and all of whom are “Renegados” fighting “in defence of our lawe, and with us to conquer your country” (qtd. in Mater, *Renegade* 489). Conversion to Islam was a serious problem that troubled the Europeans that it figured prominently in dramatic works of the period. Apostasy for the sake of material advantages was depicted in these works as a heinous crime that entailed divine punishment; the renegade was

regarded as a Faustian villain who sold his soul in exchange for worldly success.

Two dominant components of the European image of the Muslim Turk, as depicted by all types of writers, were those of lust and arbitrary rule. Eastern despotism was a general fault of all eastern nations, a distinctive mark setting them apart from the Europeans. Thus, several contemporary political philosophers, along with travelers and historians, commented on the political system of the Ottoman Empire, presenting it as the model of despotic government. Nicolo Machiavelli (1469 – 1527), in *The Prince*, was the first to compare the monarchic system in Europe to the tyrannical rule of the Ottoman Empire: “All the Turkish monarchy is governed by one ruler, the others are his servants” (15). Such early observations helped establish the idea of the Muslim Orient as inherently despotic and opposed to Western democracy.

Along with despotism, lust was the other main vice associated in the European mind with the Turks. “Even more pervasive and persistent than the image of the capricious despot,” Bernard Lewis notes, is that of the lustful and licentious Turk, whose alleged sexual prowess and practices have been described in what has sometimes amounted to pornographic literature and art. Rampant sexuality was an old accusation leveled by Europeans against their eastern neighbors. Already in

antiquity, some Greek and Latin authors had made this point against the Saracens. The theme cropped up occasionally in Byzantine and Crusading times about the Muslims and deepened when Ottoman tolerance of foreigners brought greater numbers of Europeans to the lands of Islam. (*Islam and the West* 82)

The prevalence of the theme of lust can be observed in the obsession of European writers with conditions of the *harem* and their inhabitants in Islamic countries, which often reflected their lack of knowledge and the propensity towards producing an exotic picture of the insatiable licentious Turk and the carefree wanton woman, an imaginative, mysterious colorful picture that addressed the imagination of the European male and appealed to his instincts.

The picture of the Ottomans was not however totally abhorrent. For instance, according to Faroqhi, “the vision of the Ottoman polity relayed by the Venetian ambassadors, whose views were to become crucial for European political thinking down to – in some cases – the twentieth century, began to change from admiration to abhorrence only around 1600” (24). Along with the negative theological image surviving from the medieval period depicting Muslims as the hideous infidels, there existed a secular image of the Turkish Empire as an admirably powerful and efficient military and political power. The extensive trade and diplomatic relations that developed between the



English and the Ottoman Empire during the sixteenth century helped ameliorate the negative attitude towards the Turks. With the establishment of the Muscovy Company in 1553, largely concerned with the trade with Persia and the Levant Company in 1581 for enhancing trade with the Ottoman Levant, new channels of information about the Islamic East became available. In English literature, the representation of Islam and the Muslims was thus the product of complex factors: religious, political, and economic. Although the theological view continued to be influential, it was no longer the dominant one; the flow of information that came with the travelers, traders, and diplomats found its way into the public knowledge about the Muslim east. The new source of information drawing upon a first-hand experience of the Islamic world worked somewhat as a corrective to the erroneous information inherited from the Middle Ages. Travelers' accounts of the Islamic east introduced new elements of thinking about Islam and the Muslims as their interest was not chiefly religious; in addition to the religious beliefs and customs, a new interest in the contemporary conditions and lives of people, their manners and customs, and their traits, became of much interest to them as well as to the reading public.

European diplomats, merchants, and travelers to the Islamic world during the seventeenth century played a great role in enhancing the Europeans' knowledge about the Muslims.

Trade with such European states as Venice, the Netherlands, France and England developed considerably during the seventeenth century. In spite of the frequent wars with Venice, the Ottoman diplomatic and trade relations with the city were better than with any other European state (Faroqhi 141). The Frenchmen, enemies of the Habsburgs, were, as such, considered possible allies of the Ottomans, and capitulations were issued granting trade privileges for the French; the same applied to the Dutch before them. The English commercial and diplomatic relations with the Ottoman Empire grew steadily during the second half of sixteenth century, partly through Queen Elizabeth's attempts to secure an anti-Spanish alliance with the Sublime Porte. By the end of the seventeenth century, trade with the Ottoman Empire accounted for one fourth of the total English overseas trade (Matar, *Islam in Britain* 11).

### ***Dramatic Representation of the Turk***

The large number of English plays by dramatists of the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods attests to the anxious and deep interest in Islamic themes and characters and reflects the variety of attitudes towards the fearful Turks. As early as 1915, Louis Wan made a list of 47 plays dealing with Islamic themes published during the period from 1579 to 1642 (164-66), and Jonathan Burton also listed the names of 58 dramatic works with Islamic characters, themes, or settings between 1579 and 1624

(*Turned Turk* 311–312). “The way that English dramatists, preachers, theologians and others confronted Islam and Muslims,” Matar points out, “was by fabricating images about them by arranging protagonists and geography in a manner that was disembodied from history and cultural surroundings” (*Islam in Britain* 20). While the plays written on Islamic characters are often based on historical facts and real encounters with the Turks, as related by diplomats, travelers, or captives, the playwrights usually departed from actuality and allowed themselves to concur in the collective notions often bent on the demonization of Muslims and widespread in popular culture. In the dramatic representations of the Turks, an imaginative terrain totally divorced from the cultural and political world of reality, the English playwrights gave full rein to their imagination to construct an imaginary enemy of their creation on the stage. The Turk of the English stage is intended to stir the audience’s fear and indignation and to fulfill Europeans’ unrealized dream of vanquishing that formidable and victorious enemy, in a way that reminds us of the always defeated Saracens of the medieval *Chansons de Gestes*. The stereotypical qualities associated with Turks and Moors – their cruelty, lust, aggression, and despotism – figure prominently in the Renaissance dramatic works dealing with Islamic themes and characters. English playwrights such as George Peele, Christopher Marlowe, Robert Greene, Thomas

Kyde, Fulke Greville, John Heywood, Robert Daborne, Philip Mssinger and Willian Shakespeare, all tried their hands at this popular type of plays, sometime referred to as “Turkish plays.”

The **vogue** of presenting Turkish figures on the English theatre owes much to Christopher Marlowe’s *Tamburlaine I and II* (1587–88). Marlowe’s sultan, however departs from the conventional image of the Turkish sultan in English drama and from the historical portrayals of Bajazeth, as Marlowe introduces him without the conventional attributes associated with Turkish characters such as rage, lust, treachery, and cruelty. Bajazeth is presented as the powerful enemy of Christianity, besieging Constantinople and “all glutted with the Christians’ blood” (*Part II. I. i. 14*). Far from echoing the Saidian paradigm of the “ineradicable distinction between Western superiority and Oriental inferiority” (*Orientalism* 44), the play reflects that the actual balance of power was in favour of the formidable Turks. Nabil Matar, Mathew Dimmock, and Jonathan Burton have convincingly shown the inapplicability of Said’s approach to the early modern period. Matar, in *Islam in Britain and Turks, Moors, and Englishmen*, demonstrates that sixteenth-century England was not in a superior position to the Turks and that the literary representation of the Turks cannot be explained as proof of the Saidian orientalist approach. For Burton, Marlowe’s representation of Turkish strength is “representative of actual

Turkish strength,” and “the two *Tamurlaine* plays interrogate European responses to that power” (*Image of the Turk* 127). Thus the Sultan’s boasting of his triumphs over the Christian forces resonates with the apprehensive spectators, worried over the Turkish threatening of Constantinople:

*We hear the Tartars and the eastern thieves,  
Under the conduct of one Tamburlaine,  
Presume a bickering with your emperor,  
And think to rouse us from our dreadful siege  
Of the famous Grecian Constantinople.  
As many circumcised Turks we have,  
And warlike bands of Christians renied,  
As hath the Ocean or the Terrene sea  
Small drops of water when the moon begins  
To join in one her semicircle horns.  
Yet would we not be braved with foreign power,  
Nor raise our siege before the Grecians yield  
Or breathless lie before the city walls. (Part I. III.iii.2–15)*

The several references to the Turkish superior power “that lately made all Europe quake for fear” (*Part I. III.iii.135*) are indicative of the actual fears of the English people of the Ottoman threat.

The play also voices the European satisfaction with the continuity of the Persian–Turkish conflict, which many considered as a way of easing the Turkish pressure on Europe. The “conflict

between Ottoman and Persian,” Dimmock explains, “gradually began to be seen in different forms as a division that Christian powers might profitably exploit” (138). Hence the association between Tamburlaine’s distraction of the Turks and the Persian distraction is clear in the play. Tamburlaine is seen as the scourge of God against the Ottomans, and his victories over the Ottomans and his humiliation of the Ottoman Sultan are gloated over by the English spectators as a source of vicarious pleasure. In his challenge of the Turks, Tamburlaine is seen as acting on behalf of the Christians against both the Ottomans and the corsairs of Barbary:

*I that am termed the scourge and wrath of God,  
The only fear and terror of the world,  
Will first subdue the Turk, and then enlarge  
Those Christian captives which you keep as slaves,  
Burdening their bodies with your heavy chains,  
And feeding them with thin and slender fare,  
That naked row about the Terrene sea,  
And, when they chance to breathe and rest a space,  
Are punished with bastones so grievously  
That they lie panting on the galley’s side,  
And strive for life at every stroke they give.  
These are the cruel pirates of Argier,  
That damned train, the scum of Africa,*

*Inhabited with stragglng runagates,  
That make quick havoc of the Christian blood.  
But, as I live, that town shall curse the time  
That Tamburlaine set foot in Africa. (Part I. III. iii. 44–60)*

Negative references to Islam abound in Marlowe’s play. In one of the play’s most notorious scenes, Tamburlaine, who becomes Christian, orders the burning of the “Turkish Alcaron / and all the heaps of superstitious books / found in the temples of that Mahomet.” In addressing the Prophet, Tamburlaine reiterates the medieval erroneous belief that Muslims worshipped him:

*Thou art not worthy to be worshipped  
That suffers flames of fi re to burn the writ  
Wherein the sum of thy religion rests . . .*

. . . . .

*Well, soldiers, Mahomet remains in hell; (Part II. IV. i. 187–96)*

In all of Shakespeare’s works, the conflict between Europe and Islam comes to no sharper focus than in *Othello*. William Shakespeare’s *Othello* is probably the most ambiguous and intricate representation of the essence of being a Turk, “Turkishness,” during the Renaissance period. Critical response to the play has varied from considering it an expression of Shakespeare’s intolerant and negative portrayal of Muslims, represented by the play’s eponymous character, to the view that

Shakespeare is holding the mirror to his society and to humanity, showing the dangers of prejudice and intolerance. According to B. J. Sokol, *Othello* may best be described as ‘anti-racist’. That is, in it, Shakespeare neither overlooks ‘racism’ nor endorses it, but severely warns against it (139), and that it “shows at large tendencies contrary to denigrating Turks” (140).

*Othello*, the black Moor, is a valiant general in the state of Venice whose aid is needed against the Ottomans’ imminent invasion of the Venetian colony of Cyprus. The sense of the impending danger of the Turks looms large at the beginning of the play, providing a sense of urgency and setting the action in motion. Shakespeare’s information on the Venetian–Turkish conflict probably derives from *The History of the Turks* by Richard Knolles (Neill, 18) while the ethnographic observations in *Geographical Historie of Africa* by Leo Africanus (ca. 1492–ca.1550) could be considered the source of Shakespeare’s understanding of the Moors (Burton, *Traffic* 233). *Othello* was published in 1603, responding to the growing popular interest in and anxiety about the Turks and Moors, an interest that was occasioned by a visit to London by a Moorish embassy of sixteen Moorish personages (Vitikus, *Three Turk Plays* 150). While the play highlights the European racial bias – expressed in the inventory of racial comments vilifying and defaming the Moor – it is evident that this treatment is most probably not endorsed by



Shakespeare himself. It is mostly the exasperated general Iago who voices an explicitly racial stereotypical view of Othello, depicting him as a black Moor, lascivious (1.1.135), erratic and changeable outsider (1.3.352–353), and a different Other.

Emphasizing his blackness, the colour of Satan, as a racial marker of the Moors, along with other character flaws, Shakespeare makes Iago voice the traditional Elizabethan ethnographic conception of the Moor, invoking the diabolical association of black, the colour of their skin. Thus, Iago calls him “an old black ram” (1.1.88) and “black Othello” (2.3.32); Brabantio refers to his “sooty bosom” (1.2.70); the Duke, praising Othello, tells Brabantio that “your son-in-law is far more fair than black” (1.3.290). Emilia signals the correlation with the damned black devil: “O, the more angel she, / And you the blacker devil!” (5.2.131–32). The diabolical association of blackness, Vitkus points out, has been an essential part of stereotyping the Muslim Other and demonizing Islam:

Whether imagined as a dark-skinned African Moor, or a robed and turbaned Turk, the external appearance of the Islamic Other was often read as a sign of spiritual darkness or barbaric ignorance. This point may be linked to one more aspect of Western stereotyping – the representation of Saracens, Moors, and Turks as embodiments of evil. The stereotype of the devilish Moor or cruel Turk was sometimes

employed to demonstrate the supposed iniquity of Islam, and to portray Muslims as agents of Satan. (*Three Turk Plays*, 5)

However, while Othello's blackness reveals certain prejudices shared by the other characters with the English audience, it seems to make little contribution to the development of action or to constitute an essential element in Othello's character. Shakespeare, while engaging the public views of race and colour, shows their irrelevance to the making of a person's character. In other words, the play is an implied rejection of racial prejudice; Shakespeare's position seems to have been above his society's mainstream ways of thinking about race. Othello's colour and his other racial markers are meant to resonate with the English spectators, who would associate him with a composite construct, signifying ominous otherness and evoking fear and anxiety. Othello can thus be seen as a hybrid who might be associated, in the minds of Shakespeare's audience, with a whole set of related terms—Moor, Turk, Ottomite, Saracen, Mahometan, 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 "pajnim

knight” of medieval romance, the blackamoor, and (an early modern version of the medieval types of lust, cruelty, and aggression) the Turk. (Vitkus, *Turning Turk*, 159–60)

Othello is seen to embody qualities that are associated in the European mind with the Turks, namely despotism, lust, and cruelty. Thus, he is the “cruel Moor” (1. 247), venting murderous “tyrannous hate” (3.3.450) against Desdemona in the name of honour. Othello’s ruthless murder of Desdemona and the Turkish invasion of Cyprus reinforce each other, accentuating the dread of Islamic cruelty and violence: “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.” As Othello stands for the Turks, Desdemona becomes identified with Cyprus. In assuming the role of divine agency and retribution, Othello sees his act of murder as the lawful execution of a righteous punishment upon a sinful adulteress (Vitkus, *Turning Turk*, 169).

Othello’s gradual regression from a valiant opponent of the Turkish aggression against Christendom into a merciless and vengeful murderer is interpreted as a conversion, a turning Turk:

A baptized Moor turned Turk, Othello is “doubly damned” for backsliding. 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, mercilessness, faithlessness, lawlessness, despair. Faced with this terrible identity, one that ‘shows horrible and grim’ (1. 202), Othello enacts his own punishment and damns himself by killing the Turk he has become. (Vitkus, *Turning Turk*, 176)

The double Turkish threat is thus perceived both in the Turkish invasion, which disappears with a sudden twist of providential fate as the Turkish fleet is drowned by a tempest, and in the internal danger of turning Turk, which proves more imperceptible and more enduring and hence more dangerous. The essential defining quality of “Turkishness,” the play indicates, is not the outward appearance or blackness, but the inward temperamental qualities. As such, “Turkishness” turns out to be a potential danger within Christianity itself; the degeneration of a Christian into acquiring Turkish, that is Islamic, traits is conceived as an internal threat lurking inside the very heart of Christendom.

Several English playwrights also wrote about the danger of turning Turk that *Othello* warns against. In plays like *A Christian Turn'd Turke* (1612), by Robert Daborne (ca. 1580 – 1628) and Philip Massinger's *The Renegado* (1624), the danger of conversion and the fate of renegades seem to be, as the titles indicate, at the centre of the authors' concern. The renegade as a literary type differed from the Moor or Turk in that while the latter two represented the external threat, the former represented the internal threat:

As the Moors represented all that was 'oriental' and alien to England, so did the renegade represent the internal evil that threatened Christendom. Indeed, what was speciously dangerous about the renegade was that he was no swarthy Moor or contorted Papist or necromancer but a common English or Irish or Welsh man who willfully renounced God and monarch and "turned Turke." No wonder that dramatists were at pains to punish him, even if by so doing they sacrificed the truth. (Matar, *Islam in Britain* 52)

Ominous to the future of Christianity, the renegade had to be vanquished on the stage:

As a dramatic type, the renegade did not serve to vilify Muslims, as the "Moor" had done, but to embarrass, reprimand, and warn Christians. Unlike other villainies in the popular imagination, however, apostasy pointed towards a

fearsome historical inevitability: as Christianity had replaced Judaism, so would Islam replace Christianity. Because the renegade was proof of that ominous possibility, English writers either defeated or reconverted him. In the imagination of seventeenth-century England, Christianity could not but be victorious (Mater, "Renegade" 502)

Thus, while in Daborne's renegade in *A Christian Turn'd Turke* dies a terrible death, Massinger's renegade in *The Renegado* returns to Christianity.

However, in addition to its indication of betrayal of the Christian faith and treason against Christendom, "turning Turk" suggested "the incorporation of the Turks' stereotypical features, which include aggression, lust, suspicion, murderous conspiracy" (Vitkus, *Three Turk Plays* 2). Not only does the term reveal the sense of abhorrence towards the act of betrayal, but also echoes all the negative associations of the word "Turk." As such, the renegade was a form of indirect condemnation of Islam, not less effective than the direct representation of Muslim characters.

### ***The Enlightenment's Reassessment of Islam***

The eighteenth century signals a considerable change in the Western attitude towards Islam and its prophet. The development of a secular view of history during the age of Enlightenment, resulting in a new approach to the Prophet as a historical figure, informs the period's treatment of Islam and its

history. Islam came to be seen as a form of natural religion, free of the superstitions of Christianity.

Anew recognition of the positive role of Islam in world history also appears in the new histories.

The eighteenth century witnessed a shift of power balance in favour of the Christian West. A steady decline in the Turkish military power is signaled by the defeat of the Turks in the battle of Lepanto in 1571. In 1683, the failed siege of Vienna was another major turning point. The Turks were then obliged in 1699 to sign the humiliating Treaty of Karlowitz, in which they conceded to surrender parts of their territories to European powers. Whereas, as Edward Said notes, “from the end of the seventh century to the battle of Lepanto in 1571, Islam in either its Arab, Ottoman, or North African and Spanish form dominated or effectively threatened European Christianity” (*Orientalism* 74), now the threat of Islam ceased to trouble Europe. “Once the physical threat of the Ottomans was withdrawn,” Hasan Baktir comments, “the hostility against the Ottomans was transformed in Europe into a more liberal ground which broke away from the traditional image of the Ottoman Orient in English literature” (80).

In addition to the change in the balance of power, two factors affected the treatment of Islam during the age of Enlightenment. First, there was the increasing aversion towards all religions, which represented to the men of the Enlightenment

a major challenge to the spirit of rationality they cherished. Second, there was the new relativistic outlook on all world cultures and religions, according to which Christianity's claim to superiority came under scrutiny. However, in spite of the change in the European climate of opinion about Islam and the remarkable decline in hostility towards it, the images of the lustful and despotic Turk persisted in English literature during the eighteenth century.

### ***Eighteenth-Century Travel literature***

The accounts of the travelers of the eighteenth century continued to help shape the new picture of Islam and Muslims that dared the prevalent view of Islam as a totally contemptible religion. Such richly illustrated volumes as the *Travels* of Thomas Shaw published in 1738 and Richard Pocock's *Description of the East* (1743, 1745), shed new light on the culture, customs, religious practices, and the flora and fauna in Muslim countries.

The most interesting travel work from that period, however, is written by an aristocratic woman whose feminist tendencies were reflected upon her depiction of oriental women. Lady Mary Wortley Montagu's *The Turkish Embassy Letters*, published posthumously in 1763, records the observations of Lady Mary Montagu during her stay in Constantinople in 1717 and 1718 with her husband, Edward Wortley Montagu, the British ambassador to the Ottoman Empire. The letters are written from



the unique vantage point of a woman who had access to places which men were not able to reach and tackling feminine issues not discussed before.

“For the first time in Western travel writing about the Orient,” Kader Konuk remarks, “exclusively female spaces became subject to the gaze of a European traveler” (393).

Montagu learned Turkish and was admitted into the homes of the Turkish elite, conversing with men about religion and culture and observing the manners and fashions of women. Being a woman of a high social rank, she not only had access to the *harems* when she was invited to visit Turkish court ladies, but also to women’s public baths. In addition to being an eyewitness, Montagu was also well versed in the writings of other authors, such as Richard Knolles, Paul Rycout, and Jean Dumont, whom she never fails to disprove on a variety of issues, constantly repeating that her account of the Orient is more accurate and reliable than those of her predecessors. On one occasion, she dismisses previous descriptions of the Turks as generally so far removed from the truth, and so full of absurdities ... They never fail giving you an account of the women, whom it is certain they never saw, and talking wisely of the genius of men, into whose company they are never admitted; and very often describe mosques, which they dare not even peep into. (189)

In another letter, she insures her friend Abbot Conti that previous accounts of the east were inaccurate for a variety of reasons (111). Boasting of the privileges of class and sex that she had over male travelers of lesser social rank, Montagu says, “You will perhaps be surprised at an account so different from what you have been entertained with by the common voyage writers who are very fond of speaking of what they don’t know” since it is a rare thing “that a Christian would be admitted into the house of a man of quality; and their haram are always forbidden ground” (164).

Montagu’s letters show a particular interest in the conditions of Turkish women under Islam. First, she corrects the “vulgar” notion that Muslims believed that women did not have souls, and consequently had no place in Paradise.

Women, she corrects, though considered in Islam “not of so elevated a kind, and therefore must not hope to be admitted into the Paradise appointed for the men,” however, they will have a separate place in Paradise “destined for souls of the *inferior* order” (194, my italics).

Montagu explains that Marriage is the ideal state for women; they are created to give birth to children and to take care of them, and an unmarried woman is a useless one. Since a woman who dies unmarried “is looked upon to die in a state of reprobation ... Many of them are very superstitious, and will not

remain widows ten days, for fear of dying in the reprobate state of an useless creature” (193–94). About divorce, Montagu repeats another piece of mistaken theology, very probably taken from Rycout (2, 59), namely that a man who would like to bring back his divorced wife could have that only by “permitting another man to pass a night with her” (193). The implication of this degrading notion is that the Turks treat their women as mere sex objects without dignity or any respect for themselves or their bodies.

Moreover, a man who permits a stranger to sleep with his wife before he marries her is just a mere brute. Montagu also implies that Turks practice adultery, the only description for the disgraceful conduct described here.

The most famous passages in Montagu’s letters are those in which she talks about the freedom of Turkish women, compared with the confinement of European women. Denouncing the untruth and even the “stupidity” in the accounts of previous travelers who “lament the miserable Confinement of the Turkish ladies,” Montagu boldly asserts that they are perhaps more free than any ladies in the universe, and are the only women in the world that lead a life of uninterrupted pleasure, exempt from cares, their whole time being spent in visiting, bathing, or the agreeable amusement of spending money, and inventing new fashions. (244)

Montagu's praise turns out to be actually a satire of the care-free and simpleminded eastern woman. In another letter, she provides other reasons why Turkish women enjoy more liberty than their Western counterparts. Under the disguise of the veil, Turkish women have the freedom of movement without being recognized, even by their husbands: "This perpetual Masquerade gives them entire Liberty of following their Inclinations without danger of Discovery" (135). Anna Secor remarks that Montagu turns "the metaphor of the veil, one of Europe's most enduring symbols of the presumed backwardness and oppression of the Orient" into "a source of liberty" (392). The freedom that Montagu ascribes to Turkish women here is that of pursuing their sensual pleasures unnoticed and without fear; the veil actually becomes a symbol of sexual freedom. Relying on the associations of licentiousness of the word "masquerade," Montagu confirms the views of the lustful and promiscuous women of the Orient, rather than praising their liberty.

As for polygamy, Montagu observes that although "their Law permits them four wives, but there is no instance of a man of quality that makes use of this liberty, or of a woman of rank that would suffer it" (136). Here too her defence is lacking because it is based on the choice of women and men of social rank who shun polygamous marriage, rather than on showing the rationale behind the legislation.

Montagu is extremely impressed by the civility, majesty and grace of the ladies in the *harems*, of the wives of the grand vizier and his lieutenant. The accounts of her visits to those *harems*, the good manners of the Turkish ladies she met there, and the magnificence and beauty of their houses subvert the traditional image of the barbarous Turk: “and you may believe me,” she writes, “that the Turkish ladies have, at least, as much wit and civility, nay liberty, as among us” (246).

Montagu’s recurrent references to the beauty of such Turkish women as Fatima, the kahya’s lady, whom she lavishly praises for her extraordinary beauty, her gorgeous clothes, and her politeness runs against the common discourse of racial differences, but it also appeals to her correspondents’ expectations and their curiosity about Oriental women. The Oriental *harem* was one of the most visited themes in Western accounts of the Muslim Orient. According to Leslie P. Peirce,

We in the West are heir to an ancient but still robust tradition of obsession with the sexuality of Islamic society. The *harem* is undoubtedly the most prevalent symbol in Western myths constructed around the theme of Muslim

sensuality. One of the most fertile periods for the production of texts and images treating this theme was the late sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries, and the most frequent subject the court of the Ottoman sultan. (3)

In addition to her erotic allusions in describing her visits to the baths in Sophia and Constantinople, her accounts of the fabulous opulence and extravagance of the *harems* draw upon images of the imaginary world of the sensual and exotic Orient of the *Arabian Nights*. Besides, the detailed descriptions of the dresses of women, the precise accounts of the furniture, the precious utensils and napkins, and the grand architectural motifs create a sense of verisimilitude that invoke the atmosphere of the *Nights*. In the *Turkish Letters*, Montagu seeks to present, through the authority of the writer as an eyewitness, a confirmation of the contemporary orientalist discourse that the *Nights* helped create:

This you will say, but too like the Arabian tales – these embroidered napkins!

And a jewel as large as a turkey’s egg! – You forget, dear sister, those very tales were written by an author of this country, and (excepting the enchantments) are a real representation of the manners here. (220–21)

Montagu, according to Anna Secor, “sought, in her journey to Turkey, the actualization of these Oriental tales,” by conflating “the imaginary Orient and the world she finds around her” (384–85). Thus, while purportedly endeavoring to demolish the unauthentic and legendary material that previous travelers propagated about the Orient, Montagu helped to foster the

mythical and imaginary orientalist discourse born out of the budding romantic outlook of the eighteenth century.

Montagu's defiance of the discourse of difference between the sophisticated European and the uncultured barbarian Turk is heavily qualified by her own text.

Montagu's admiration of Turkish and Arabic poetry, music, and architecture attests to the artistic refinement of the Turks and their cultural sophistication, invalidating the image of the savage and uncultured Turk. However, her praise of Turkish arts is often qualified by descriptions that enclose them within the discourse of the *Noble Savage* rather than establish them as the product of a rational and superior intelligence that would match the Western mind. She is very pleased with the Arabic poetry that Achmet Beg reads to her, although it sounds to her different from English verse (99). Yet, the Turkish poetry she translates in a letter to the famous English poet Alexander Pope expresses, in her description, such "violence of passion, which is very seldom felt amongst us" (152).

Notwithstanding Montagu's relativistic and avowedly unbiased approach to the Orient, there is no denying the fact that her letters bespeak the same notions about the Orientals that she claims to deny. "The manners of mankind do not differ so widely, as our voyage-writers would make us believe," she professes, and in another letter, she tells Abbot Conte that

Orientals are not inferior, but rather different: “You see, Sir, these people are not so unpolished as we represent them.

‘Tis true, their magnificence is of a different taste from ours, and perhaps of a better.” However, the comparison that follows replicates the deep-seated orientalist dichotomy of Western rationality and Oriental irrationality:

I am almost of opinion, they have a right notion of life. They consume it in music, gardens, wine, and delicate eating, while we are tormenting our brains with some scheme of politics, or studying some science to which we can never attain, or if we do cannot persuade other people to set that value upon it we do ourselves ... I allow you to laugh at me for the sensual declaration in saying, that I had rather be a rich effendi, with all his ignorance than Sir Isaac Newton with all his knowledge. (262)

While seemingly praising the Oriental outlook, she sets two views of life against each other for us to compare. On the one hand there is the realm of the Orient, of idyllic bliss, the carnal pleasures of eating and drinking, opulence, and ignorance.

On the other hand there is the Western realm of political intricacy, science, and knowledge. She half-heartedly allies herself with the sensual world of the rich ignorant effendi, to the rejection of Isaac Newton.



The same ambivalent treatment runs through all the letters. Thus, while, in some places, she defends the Turks against the charge of cruelty, in other places, she depicts horrible images of extreme cruelty. On the one hand, she applauds the Turks' "humanity" towards their slaves, declaring that they are "not naturally cruel," and do not deserve the "barbarous character we give them" (248). On the other hand, she describes their cruelty in one letter after another. For instance, she tells us how people would punish a minister whom they resent:

None of our harmless calling names! But when a minister here displeases the people, in three hours time he is dragged even from his master's arms.

They cut off his hand and feet, and throw them before the palace gate, with all the respect in the world; while the sultan (to whom they all profess an unlimited adoration) sits trembling in his apartment, and dare not revenge his favourite. (125)

On the whole, Montagu's dissociating herself from the inherited orientalist discourse about the lustful and despotic Turk is belied by her ambivalent text. Instead of revising the Western convictions about Muslims, she confirms those firmly implanted preconceptions and prejudices she brought with her to the land of Islam. Partaking in the newly-born Romantic orientalism, equally misleading in representing the Muslim East, though less antagonistic in tone, she perpetuates the misrepresentation

process, by virtue of her preconditioning by the climate of opinion of the early eighteenth century. While the cultural atmosphere into which she was born resulted in the relinquishment of certain ideas about Islam, it still favored the continuation of many debasing stereotypes of the Muslims and their religion.

### *The Oriental Tale*

The French translation of the *Arabian Nights* done by Antione Galland between 1704 and 1718, along with the English translations based on it, and the German translation by Bohse–Talander in 1730, were of a tremendous impact upon the European mind, literary sensibility, and artistic taste during the eighteenth century.

Heralding the Romantic Movement, the tales played a great role in countering the austere rationality of the Age of Reason with their appeal to the senses and their display of unbridled imagination. A wave of enthusiasm for the exotic oriental settings and the oriental dreamy realms of opulence, inhabited by lascivious women and fierce men, spread throughout Europe. Thus, one of the major results of the publication of the *Arabian Nights* in Europe was that it added force to the conceptual image of Muslims as voluptuous and of Islam as encouraging self-indulgences and endorsing sexual license. The vogue of the *Arabian Nights* resulted in the translation of more oriental tales in addition to stimulating a host of literary imitations. Montesuiieu's

*Persian Letters* (1721), Voltaire's *Zadig* (1748), Samuel Johnson's *Rasselas* (1759), Oliver Goldsmith's *Citizen of the World* (1762), William Beckford's *Vathek* (1789) are some of the best examples of this genre.

Montesquieu's epistolary novel, *Persian Letters* is an example of how Oriental material was often appropriated to focus on European religious and political issues. To evade censorship, the book adopts the technique of foreign observers, two Persian visitors to France, Uzbek and Rica, to comment on the social and political institutions of France. The letters exchanged between the two Persian visitors and their wives, servants, and friends at home allows the writer to make fun of the conditions in France and to criticize all forms of religious and political despotism. The letters present a picture of the Oriental seraglio as a site of confinement, repression, and cruelty. As such, the *harem* represents one aspect of political repression, which was Montesquieu's main concern. Muslim social and political systems were not the target of Montesquieu's sarcasm, but they were rather used as a disguised means of attacking the despotic regime in France while. "Preoccupied with its own forms of monarchical absolutism," Leslie P. Peirce notes, "Europe elaborated a myth of oriental tyranny and located its essence in the sultan's *harem*" (3).

William Beckford's *Vathek* (1789), originally written in French, exerted a great influence on the works of oriental romanticism such as Byron's oriental poems, Thomas Moore's "*Lallah Rookh*," and Robert Southey's "*Thalaba the Destroyer*."

*Vathek* is the product of a lifelong concern with the Orient, a deep interest that led him to diligently preoccupy himself with learning Arabic, hiring an Arab tutor by the name of zemir for that purpose. The *Arabian Nights* was an early source of inspiration for Beckford, along with a huge repository of oriental material that he found in his father's library, including the oriental material brought by Lady Mary Montagu's son. Beckford's erudite explanatory notes to *Vathek* attest to Beckford's familiarity with the most important works of orientalist scholarship available at his time, primarily Sale's translation of the Qur'an and his *Preliminary Discourse*, d'Herbelot's *Bibliothèque Orientale*, in addition to the *Arabian Nights*.

The notes aim at giving a sense of authenticity and legitimacy to the narrative.

Presenting the narrative as a history of an actual caliph also adds to the sense of genuineness of the world described.

In William Beckford's *Vathek* (1789), the Muslim Caliph Vathek is a despotic ruler, who is given to a life of indulgencies of all kinds. In search of hidden treasures and forbidden knowledge, he seeks the help of the Giaour, who promises to

help him have access to the treasures of pre-adamite kings. In return for the devil's assistance, Vathek had to abjure Muhammad. On his way to Istakhar to arrive at the promised treasures, he meets the lovely princess Nouronihar, who forsakes her lover Gulchenrouz and agrees to accompany him in his quest. When Vathek and Nouronihar reach the promised place, they meet Eblis, the Arch-devil. His heart enveloped in flames, Vathek is informed by the Giaour that he is in "the abode of vengeance and despair," to suffer as other votaries of Eblis. The end of the story records its lesson:

Such was, and such should be, the punishment of unrestrained passions and atrocious deeds! Such shall be, the chastisement of that blind curiosity, which would transgress those bounds the wisdom of the Creator has prescribed to human knowledge; and such the dreadful disappointment of

that restless ambition, which, aiming at discoveries reserved for beings of a supernatural order, perceives not, through its infatuated pride, that the condition of man upon earth is to be – humble and ignorant. Thus the Caliph Vathek, who, for the sake of empty pomp and forbidden power, had sullied himself with a thousand crimes, became a prey to grief without end, and remorse without mitigation: whilst the humble, the despised Gulchenrouz passed whole ages in undisturbed tranquility, and in the pure happiness of childhood. (150–51)

The inevitable punishment for the illegitimate search for “forbidden power” is the subject of the tale. The Faustian pact with the devil for the appropriation of forbidden knowledge and power, a Western theme that is most famously treated by Goethe in the celebrated drama of *Faust* in 1808, is presented in *Vathek* as an oriental tale adorned with the exotic oriental atmosphere that was in vogue in the late seventeenth century and endowed with the Islamic paraphernalia that would give it roots in the Muslim East.

In spite of the author’s claim to historical authenticity, *Vathek* actually partakes in the orientalist gross misrepresentation and sensational stereotyping of the Orient. The notes, as well as the novel itself, do not depart from the established image and the mistaken and crude misconceptions about Islam and the Muslim Orient. Both the text and the notes abound in wrong ideas about the Islamic faith and overflow with all forms of historical inaccuracies. One of the salient features related to Islamic belief in the story is the position of the Prophet Muhammad.

Throughout the novel, Muhammad assumes the status of the omnipotent and powerful deity. He resides in the seventh heaven, watching over the behavior of people. Muslim characters in the book invoke and beseech him, or ask him for forgiveness, a repetition of the old medieval notion of Muhammad as God. Muhammad presides over and frowns upon the conduct of the

irreligious Vathek. The omniscient Muhammad tells the Genii that Vathek is doomed. The predominance of Muhammad in the minds of the characters and the complete absence of references to Allah is a disturbing quality in the novel that entirely disagrees with the basic principles of Islamic faith, in which Muhammad is the prophet of God, not the founder of the faith or the God of Muslims.

The depiction of Hell at the end of the novel also disagrees with the picture of Hell as described in the Qur'an. Eblis himself is depicted as an awesome and admirable presence:

His person was that of a young man, whose noble and regular features seemed to have been tarnished by malignant vapours. In his large eyes appeared both pride and despair: his flowing hair retained some resemblance to that of an angel of light. In his hand, which thunder had blasted, he swayed the iron sceptre, that causes the monster Ouranbad, the afrits, and all the powers of the abyss to tremble. (139)

Many of the informative notes are at least inaccurate and in many cases deceptive.

The note about the position of the "caliph" in Islam, for instance, presents him as a sacred person. On the authority of Habesci and d'Herbelot, the note tells that this Islamic title comprises the character of "prophet, priest, and king; and is used to signify the

Vicar of God on earth” (153). The representation of the Muslim ruler as sensual, corrupt, dissolute, despotic, “much addicted to women and the pleasures of the table,” shares in the commonplace perception of the Muslim Orient as the land of despotism and carnal lusts. By the Islamic standards, the image of the Muslim Orient in *Vathek* is wide of the mark, and the representation of Islam is totally incorrect and even blasphemous.

Beckford’s purpose was not to present a realistic image of the world of Islam but rather to create the illusion of a hedonistic, exotic, and erotic Orient populated by a mixture of the bizarre characters of Genii, Afrits, mullahs, and eunuchs, inhabiting the most exotic locale. The description of the caliph’s five palaces built for the gratification of all the senses, aims at creating a superb atmosphere of the world of the hedonistic Orientals. The caliph is surrounded with all the richness and splendor of the Orient of the *Arabian Nights*. In the palace of “the Eternal or unsatiating Banquet,” the most exquisite dainties were supplied both by night and by day, and the most delicious wines flowed forth from fountains. In the “The Temple of Melody,” music flowed incessantly. In “The Delight of the Eyes,” curious objects, pictures, and statues, collected from all corners of the earth are arranged. “The Palace of Perfumes” is dedicated to all the perfumes, aromas, and fragrant flower of the world. The fifth



palace, “The Retreat of Mirth,” was inhabited by “troops of young females, beautiful as the Houris, and not less seducing” (8–9). The vivid description of the lush and verdant setting, a world of extravagant luxury, uninhibited joys, forbidden and unrestrained diabolic desires was part of the legacy of the *Arabian Nights* in the Western imagination. The resultant highly imaginative picture appealed to an enthusiastic audience yearning for release from the strict rule of reason and inflamed their fancy by stories of wonder and mystery about remote lands and strange people.

Whereas the Turkish menace triggered a wave of hostility against Islam in the West, as reflected in a large number of dramatic works on Islamic themes and Muslim characters, mostly Turkish; the intensity of antagonism and hate decreased considerably with the waning of the Ottoman threat during the eighteenth century. The growth of trade was another factor that worked towards a better understanding of Islam and the conditions in the Muslim world. First-hand knowledge that reached the West with the merchants and travelers was effective changing the western attitudes towards Islam. However, in literature of both the Renaissance and the eighteenth century, the stereotypical image of the Turk defies change: the image of the lustful and despotic Turk remains fixed in European mind. The Turk of the eighteenth century travel literature and oriental tales is not far removed from his counterpart in Elizabethan drama.

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