Chapter 8

Elizabeth I and Persian Exchanges

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Recent scholarship on English relations with the Islamic world during the Elizabethan era has focused on exchange as a way to counter two persistent fallacies: the first, based on medieval anti-Islamic polemics and brought forward into modern “clash of civilization” diatribes, posits an unbridgeable gap between “East” and “West”; the second, drawn from anachronistic applications of the postcolonial critique epitomized by Edward Said’s Orientalism, assumes the West has always dominated the East.1 Seeking to remedy both views, Lisa Jardine’s influential cultural history, Worldly Goods: A New History of the Renaissance (1996), situates Constantinople, renamed Istanbul after the Ottoman conquest of 1453, at the hub of a global network of exchange that constituted the European Renaissance in its cultural, as well as its mercantile, aspects. As she asserts, “in the panorama we are surveying of emerging influences on European culture, the cultural as well as the political might of the Ottomans plays a vital part.”2 With Jerry Brotton, she expands this focus in Global Interests: Renaissance Art Between East and West (2000), whose opening chapter, “Exchanging Identity: Breaching the Boundaries of Renaissance Europe,” examines the Islamicate influences on the Renaissance man’s self-fashioning.3 From this perspective, the Ottoman empire and related Muslim powers no longer seem absolutely “other” to western Christendom nor does the West invariably hold “the relative upper hand” in relation to them.4

The most recent wave of literary and cultural critics to engage Anglo-Ottoman relations during Elizabethan era—roughly, the second half of the sixteenth century—have followed suit in focusing on exchanges with the Islamic world as fundamental to the formation
of an emerging national, and even protoimperialist and protoorientalist, identity. These exchanges cover mercantile activities, imaginative literature, diplomatic politics, and religion, with an emphasis on conversion. Examining Queen Elizabeth’s correspondence with members of the Ottoman dynasty, especially the valide sultan (mother of the sultan), I have engaged this body of criticism by showing how the cultural logic of “the exchange of women” was similarly constitutive of Anglo-Ottoman relations during the 1580s and 1590s. However, for the most part, prior Tudor encounters with the Safavid dynasty (c. 1501–1722), based in the traditionally Persianate regions of Iran and extending into Central Asia, have been neglected. Yet, the voyages of the English merchants attempting to circumvent the Iberian monopoly on global commodity exchange that defines the early modern period first turned northward, ostensibly to discover a new route to “Cathay,” but actually finding themselves in the expansionist Russian empire, the contested Central Asian borderlands, and the Safavid domains. While these voyages spanned multiple Tudor sovereigns, with the first launched under Edward VI (1547–1553) returning to report to Mary I (1553–1558), most of the ventures occurred under the tutelage of Elizabeth I (1558–1603). Elizabeth’s initial correspondence with Muslim sovereigns therefore addressed the Persian court rather than the Ottoman.

These ventures continued for the next two decades under the leadership of Anthony Jenkinson, who began his career as an agent of the Russia Company and became the queen’s ambassador to the courts of Ivan IV of Russia (1547–1584) and Tahmasp I of Persia (1524–1576). Famously, Jenkinson carried letters from the newly crowned queen to the Persian shah on the first official English mission to a Muslim sovereign since the Middle Ages, where he was dismissed as an infidel. Subsequent missions had a better reception, again carrying letters from the queen. Jenkinson’s voyages across Central Asia also gained a Tartar girl for Elizabeth’s court, along with bales of Persian silk and other goods. As previously indicated, only after Persian relations stalled, primarily due to renewed war in Central Asia, did Elizabeth shift her attention to the Ottoman empire, largely at the behest of the merchants of the Levant Company. These negotiations, which led to the lucrative Anglo-Ottoman trading capitulations of 1580, hinged on a series of letters from Elizabeth to members of the Ottoman dynasty, including Sultan Murad III (1574–1595) and the valide sultan, Safiye. This correspondence, which hitherto has not been examined in the context of the earlier letters to the