Chapter 8

“Now will I be a Turke”: Performing Ottoman Identity in Thomas Goffe’s The Courageous Turk

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In the past several years, scholars have devoted increasing attention to representations of the Middle East and of Persian, Moorish, or Turkish characters in early modern English drama. Many of these studies have examined the cultural, political, and economic encounters between the English and Islamic or quasi-Islamic others and the ways in which early modern English writers constituted their own identity through representations of the other. In particular, critics such as Daniel Vitkus have focused on the permeability of the boundaries between the ideological constructs of East and West and the hybrid identity assumed by Englishmen who ventured into what he calls the “multicultural Mediterranean.” Thus, English identity was constituted not only in antithetical contrast to Middle Eastern cultures, but also by the possibility of assimilation into those cultures—of “turning Turk.”

But what happens when playwrights attempt to reverse this perspective, when the world of the play itself—its setting and most of its characters—turns Turk? Several early modern English plays depict Turkish characters and in Turkish settings so that these characters occupy the position of the subject and not the position of the other.
Placing the cardboard villains of Renaissance drama in the position of the protagonists forces the playwright to develop their complexity and make them more sympathetic. If the play is almost entirely populated by Turks, they cannot all be the same, and they cannot all spout moral nonsense; they must have debates, and the debates must have some merit on either or both sides.

Playwrights, I argue, use this shift of perspective to dramatize a sense of radical indeterminacy, not just about English or Turkish national identity but about human identity more broadly. For this purpose, they exploit both the cultural alterity and the stereotypical conventionality of the stage Turk and related figures such as the Moor. In general, these figures tend to share certain stereotypical qualities: they are prone to outbursts of both violent and erotic passion, their passions are changeable and difficult to control, and they are capable of extreme cruelty. In Shakespeare’s *Titus Andronicus*, for example, Aaron the Moor embodies the most negative versions of this stereotype. Apart from his devotion to his illegitimate child, Aaron is extravagantly evil. He concludes the play by repenting any good deeds he may have inadvertently performed and wishing that he could have committed 10,000 more evil deeds (5.3.185–90). While Aaron’s adherence to Moorish stereotypes makes him fascinating as a demonic embodiment of evil, it makes him less interesting as a human being. As we would expect, his stereotypical characteristics reduce our sense of him as a three-dimensional personality with a psychological interiority that resembles our own experiences of ourselves and other people.

Later in his career, however, Shakespeare uses Moorish stereotypes to produce the opposite effect. In *Othello*, the psychological depth of the title character becomes apparent through his increasing conformity to the stock character of the Moor. Under the influence of Iago and his own insecurities, he grows jealous, vengeful, and cruel; he comes to be ruled by his passions. Othello begins in a state where he transcends the racist expectations of characters such as Brabantio, but he ends by fulfilling them. Othello’s closing speech recognizes this: as he recounts his former slaying of “a malignant and a turbaned Turk” (5.2.353), Othello stabs himself and draws an analogy between the two killings. He thereby identifies himself with Elizabethan archetypes of the villainous Moor or Turk. Yet the process of Othello’s degeneration to a stereotype is precisely what produces a sense of his humanity and inner complexity. Iago corrupts Othello only because Othello has subconscious psychological vulnerabilities that stem from his identity as a Moor.