At the close of the fifteenth century, just as Christopher Columbus was initiating European colonization into a new world, the Muslim presence remained a significant factor in the old. Indeed, we know that a new wave of Islamic expansion was then rising in Anatolia, the southwestern and anciently civilized section of Turkey where, from 1300 on, the beginnings of an Ottoman empire had gradually been coming into play. Progressing from the status of a local Anatolian grouping to a state comprising a number of Anatolian cities, the Ottoman surge had grown to a cosmopolitan power.1 Significantly, its polity did not embrace that three hundred-year-old pax Islamica that had governed the Mediterranean since the twelfth century. Instead, the new Ottoman entity has been described by historians as dynamic and aggressive, penetrated from its very origins with a sense of what warlike jihad that had characterized the Islamic outreach of the eight century, seven hundred years previously.2 The purpose of this essay is to deepen our understanding of how the development of Ottoman influence in the Mediterranean helped to configure the cultural history of early modern England as manifested in several “alien” plays (my term) of the 1590s. Because there is no simple cause / effect relationship that yokes English affairs with those of the Mediterranean, I wish to approach this issue by isolating several events that may provide a suitable framework for analysis.
Just prior to 1485, the year in which Henry VII established the Tudor dynasty, Mehmet II, “The Conqueror” (of Byzantium), had become master of the Mediterranean coast of southeastern Europe, as well as of Greece and Albania in the environs of the Adriatic and the Aegean. He now planned to move against the east coast of Renaissance Italy. In 1481, the Ottomans captured the port of Otranto, on the heel of Italy’s east coast, and also Apulia, a move described by Guiccardini. But at this point, fortunately for Europe, Mehmet died suddenly and was succeeded, after a considerable political struggle, by his son Bayezit II. The conflict over the succession precipitated such a crisis in the Ottoman Empire that their military forces were obliged to withdraw over the western back to Albania. That this situation represented a narrow escape for western Europe is emphasized by Bernard Lewis, who notes the ease with which, only fifteen years after this voluntary Ottoman withdrawal, French forces moved down through Italy, conquering with little trouble the Italian states, one after another (pp. 31–2). Given this weakness of the Italian states, persistence by vastly superior Ottoman forces in the same regions could have accomplished much more, configuring a situation quite different from that now termed “The Italian Renaissance.” Indeed, the rest of Europe might have found itself associated in the fifteenth century with an Italian peninsula, where, in the words of the anonymous Ottoman historian who chronicled the earlier capture of Otranto, “The [Italian] temples of idols became mosques of Islam and the five-fold prayer which is the watch call of Muhammed, upon him be peace, was sounded.”

Notwithstanding this lost opportunity, the Ottoman Empire attained the peak of its power over the Mediterranean during the lifetimes of Shakespeare’s and Marlowe’s parents, and its status as an early modern superpower continued even well beyond the lifetimes of the playwrights. As is well known, the Ottoman apogee occurred under Suleyman the Magnificent, who had inherited the throne from his father Selim I in 1520 and ruled until 1566, through the early years of the reign of Elizabeth I. Indeed, Elizabeth’s long monarchy witnessed four successive Sultanates: that of the legendary Suleyman, of his son Selim II (1566–74), of Murad III, also known as Amurath (1574–95), and of Mehmet III, often called Mohamet (1595–1603). During her reign, the dominating Ottomans even indirectly empowered Muslim (non-Ottoman) naval forces from North Africa to penetrate into the Atlantic where their ships conducted raids close to the British Isles. Indeed as late as 1627, eleven years after Shakespeare’s death, Muslim corsairs would raid Iceland, taking several hundred