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The Role of Islam in Shakespeare's Othello

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CONTENTS

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS	2
INTRODUCTION.....	3
CHAPTER 1: HISTORICAL BACKGROUND.....	14
1.1 Economic and Diplomatic Interactions.....	14
1.1.1 Jenkinson and the Muscovy	14
1.1.2 Edmund Hogan and Barbary Ties	18
1.1.3 Harborne and Levant Company	23
1.1.4 Dallam's Gift to the Sultan	26
1.1.5 The Sherley Brothers in Persia.....	28
1.2 Cultural Perceptions and Cross-Cultural Contacts.....	32
1.2.1 Image of Islam in English Culture	32
1.2.2 Conversion, Fear, and "Turning Turk"	36
1.2.3 <i>Venice</i> and the Islamic Other	43
1.2.4 Early Drama and Literary Encounters before <i>Othello</i>	48
CHAPTER 2: RELIGION, RACE, AND OTHERNESS IN <i>OTHELLO</i>	53
2.1 Who Is "The Moor"?.....	53
2.2 Prejudice and Marriage	58
2.3 Othello's Handkerchief.....	62
2.4 Tragic End.....	66
CHAPTER 3: CHANGING CRITICAL AGENDAS.....	76
3.1 Early Twentieth-Century Criticism.....	76
3.2 Race and Colonial Readings	80
3.3 Performance and Representation	84
3.4 Contemporary Debates and Islamophobia	92
CONCLUSION	104
BIBLIOGRAPHY	110

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

- Figure 1. Map illustrating operations at sea during the Battle of Lepanto, 1571 p. 44
- Figure 2. George Noble, after Josiah Boydell, *Othello* Act 5, Scene 2, 1800 p. 70

Introduction

Islam is everywhere and nowhere in Shakespeare's *Othello*. It is rarely named as a formal religion, and Othello himself is never clearly identified as a practicing Muslim. However, the play's context is shaped by traces of Islamic culture and history, threats, and political reality. An Ottoman invasion of Cyprus, the repeated references to Moors and Turks, as well as terms such as Barbary, Aleppo, circumcision, conversion, and "turning Turk" place Othello into a Mediterranean world, characterized by religious conflicts and exchanges between Christians and Muslims. Islam in this case is not merely an accessory element in the setting of the play but the silent frame against which the drama depicts such notions as difference, loyalty, sexuality, violence, and inclusion.

The title of my thesis, "The Role of Islam in Othello," underscores Islam's important contribution to Shakespeare's tragedy. Even though there are no overt Islamic characters or symbols in Othello, the Islamic tradition shapes its context, thereby affecting the plot development and the characters' identities. At that time, the image of the "Moor" was associated with the person's North African origins, Barbary, the Mediterranean area under Ottoman rule, conversion, and the heritage of the Islamic world. In this regard, the Venetian people refer to Othello as a Moor because he belongs not only to a particular nation but also to a broader cultural framework in which racial, religious, geographical, and political aspects intersect.

For this reason, this thesis does not treat Islam as a minor topic in *Othello*. Instead, it argues that Islam is one of the major forces that organizes the play's conflicts. Islam appears through the military threat of the Turks, through the fear of conversion, through the suspicion attached to Othello's marriage, and through the final image of the "turban'd Turk" whom Othello claims to have killed in Aleppo. These references show that the tragedy is not only about

jealousy. It is also about how Christian Venice imagines the Islamic other, how it depends on a Moorish general while fearing the meanings attached to him, and how Othello finally internalizes the violent logic of the society that never fully accepts him.

Traditional interpretations of the play focus on some fundamental and universal feelings such as jealousy, love, trust, betrayal, and tragic miscalculations. One of them presented by Bradley defines Othello primarily as a tragic figure who has been victimized by a villain because of his trusting soul (Bradley 1904). Thus, one may say that in this case, the central development in the story is psychological since Othello moves from love and belief to suspicion, distrust, and destruction. Another interpretation developed by G. Wilson Knight analyzes the plot in the context of symbolism, atmosphere, and poetic qualities with the main emphasis made on Othello's romantic greatness and extreme sensitivity (Raw 2017). The mentioned interpretations can help understand the play's significance better; however, the key problem here is the lack of attention to Othello as a Moor.

This thesis accepts the importance of race-conscious readings. However, it also argues that race alone is not enough. In the early modern period, race and religion were not separate categories in the modern sense. A figure like Othello could be racialized through skin color, but also through geography, religion, culture, and imagined association with Islam. The word “Moor” carried all of these meanings together. Therefore, to understand Othello fully, we must read race and Islam together.

The word “Moor” is central to this argument. It is one of the most repeated and powerful labels in the play. Yet it is also unstable. Historically, “Moor” could refer to North Africans, Muslims, Berbers, Arabs, Black Africans, or people connected with the Islamic Mediterranean. Jonathan Brann shows that in medieval Christian discourse the Moor was often represented

through a mixture of racial, religious, and moral meanings. The Moor could be imagined as African, Muslim, demonic, barbarous, or spiritually dangerous (Brann 2009). Farah Karim-Cooper similarly emphasizes that the term's lack of precision is part of its power. Because "Moor" is vague, it can absorb many anxieties at once, such as blackness, Islam, sexuality, magic, barbarity, and foreignness (Karim-Cooper 2023). In *Othello*, this instability becomes tragic. Othello is never allowed to be simply himself. He is continually translated by others into the figure of "the Moor."

This process begins before Othello appears on stage. Iago and Roderigo do not introduce him as a respected general or a husband. They introduce him through racial and animal imagery. He is "the thick-lips," "an old black ram," and a "Barbary horse." These phrases are not only racist insults. In addition to this, Othello is associated with Barbary, North Africa, and the Islamic Mediterranean region. It is important to emphasize the metaphorical significance of the phrase "Barbary horse." This figure of speech combines elements of racial identity, sexuality, geography, and fear. At first sight, Othello's marriage with Desdemona is viewed as animal defilement, meaning that an intrusion from another world and culture has violated a Christian family.

Against this background, it becomes obvious how historically justified is the connection drawn by Shakespeare. During the second half of the sixteenth century and the first decades of the following century, England expanded its diplomatic relations with Islamic countries. English merchants, travellers, and diplomats had varied experiences with the Ottoman Empire, Safavid Persia, Morocco, and others. According to Jerry Brotton, Elizabethan England had a complex attitude toward the Islamic world. It was also practical, strategic, and commercial. England needed new trade routes and political allies, especially because Catholic Spain was a major

threat. As a result, Elizabethan diplomacy sometimes looked toward Muslim rulers as possible partners against Catholic power (Brotton 2016).

Such a historical background created a significant contradiction within English culture. On one hand, Islam was often referred to as a false, violent, sensual, and dangerous religion in Christian literature. Muslims were depicted as infidels, Turks, Moors, Saracens, barbarians, or heretics. At the same time, English merchants and ambassadors had to communicate with Muslim powers. Ottoman, Moroccan, and Persian states offered financial resources, luxuries, military techniques, and diplomatic opportunities. Islam was perceived negatively but positively, condemned and yet admired, and considered an enemy of England in terms of Christianity, but at the same time part of the world that made England successful.

The drama *Othello* fits perfectly into such a controversial world. Though *Othello* is set in Venice and Cyprus rather than England, it addresses English fears about the Mediterranean. The importance of Venice was evident since it was located between Christian and Muslim empires and was known as a rich and well-organised city. Furthermore, Venice has always been associated with interaction with the Muslim world. It lost its colony of Cyprus to the Ottoman Empire in the 1570s, and when Shakespeare used *Othello* in the capacity of defense against the Ottomans, he did not use a neutral military setting but rather put it into a symbolic map of Christian-Muslim confrontation.

As it has already been said, Venice needs the Moor. This character is necessary since he is a skilled fighter who protects a Christian state from the enemy, namely the Ottomans. However, Venice does not entirely trust this man; it tolerates him as long as he performs his professional duties, but threatens him as a future husband. Thus, *Othello* is respected as a fighter

for Venice, whereas at the same time, as the Moor, he is viewed as undesirable and dangerous because of his close relations with a Venetian woman.

It is the marriage between Othello and Desdemona that proves to be the most sensitive and crucial issue concerning Islam, racial differences, and social fears. Brabantio accuses his daughter of betrayal and insists that she could not marry the Moor of her own will. The man is sure that Desdemona was seduced, hypnotized or bewitched, thus, making clear that his accusations go beyond ordinary father's reaction. In particular, he expresses his attitude towards the Moor as a man who uses supernatural forces and represents something unnatural for Christians. The only way to overcome such a dilemma is a public confession.

Islam plays a considerable role in the work, even though it is not directly mentioned. Early modern Christian discourse often associated Islam with sensuality, polygamy, sexual excess, and danger to Christian women. In Othello, the Moorish marriage triggers these associations since Iago makes the characters imagine their relationships in terms of invasion, that is, 'a Barbary horse' mounting a 'Venetian ewe'. The marriage becomes the problem, not because of Desdemona's disobedience, but because of the intrusion of foreign elements into her private life and the lives of all those related to her family.

The fear of conversion also plays an important role in the play. In early modern England, the phrase “turning Turk” referred to conversion to Islam, but it also meant betrayal, moral collapse, and the loss of Christian identity. Many Europeans did convert to Islam in the Mediterranean world, sometimes because of captivity, slavery, piracy, economic advantage, or social mobility. For English writers, this created a frightening possibility: Christian identity might not be stable. A Christian could become a Turk. A European could become part of the

Islamic world. As Daniel Vitkus argues, early modern drama repeatedly used the figure of the Turk to explore anxieties about conversion, desire, and cultural transformation (Vitkus 2003).

In *Othello*, this anxiety appears in one of the play's most revealing lines: "Are we turn'd Turks?" Othello asks this after the drunken brawl in Cyprus. On the surface, he is rebuking Christian soldiers for behaving violently. But the line carries a deeper meaning. It suggests that "Turkishness" is not only an external identity belonging to the Ottoman enemy. It is also a possible condition into which Christians can fall when they lose discipline, reason, or moral order. The Turks are defeated by the storm before any battle occurs, but the fear of the Turk does not disappear. Instead, it enters the Christian community itself. The enemy outside becomes a fear inside.

It is important because the movement is crucial to the tragedy's structure. On the one hand, Venice has to face an external enemy – the Turkish fleet. Once this obstacle is overcome, the anxiety turns on Othello. Even though the protagonist is not a Turk and a faithful servant of Venice, as a Moor, he is still considered a representative of the very same Islamic world that he is expected to fight. That is what makes his position tragic since he is forever doomed to remain what he is to others.

The manipulations are based on Othello's vulnerability as a person. Instead of constructing prejudices, the villain has to make use of something that already exists in Venice. This way, all of the manipulations are related to such preconceptions as the following ones: Moors were considered sexually excessive; black people concealed moral decay inside themselves; foreign men threatened white women; no matter how hard one tried, an outsider could never become an insider; it was easy to change faith or morals of anyone. Thus, Iago leads the protagonist to view his wife through this prejudiced Venetian perspective.

The example is illustrated by Othello being led to believe in the handkerchief's significance. As a material object, this piece of fabric means nothing. However, under Iago's manipulation, it becomes an embodiment of sexual treachery. In this case, the man begins to see something that exists only in Othello's mind. Actually, Othello's perception resembles prejudice because it implies that evidence exists after suspicion has arisen. Therefore, it might be said that Othello suffers from his own illusions about Desdemona as much as about anything else.

The murder described at the end of the tragedy is related not only to the concept of jealousy. There also exist the notions of purity, defilement, and punishment. In terms of this scene, whiteness symbolizes purity, innocence, and Christian values. The Moor's color and nationality represent the exact opposite things mentioned above. Thus, the last part of the drama might be understood as an embodiment of this contrast. It should be noted that this visual symbolism is rather traditional in interpretations of Othello. In addition, the use of blackface by white actors playing Othello makes it more evident.

As seen at the end of the tragedy, Islam plays a critical role in it. The Moor wants to be remembered as someone who had loved his wife "not wisely but too well". However, the protagonist also mentions his deeds in Aleppo when he witnessed the beating of a Venetian by a Turk. After the insult, Othello says that he has killed the latter, grabbing him by the throat. In order to prove this point, the Moor takes his sword and stabs himself. One of the interpretations implies that this act allows Othello's reputation to be restored.

However, it might also be considered self-destruction caused by the necessity to separate the Christian Venetian from the dangerous Moorish Muslim. In such a situation, Othello has to kill the Turk and himself, thereby identifying his two roles – Venetian and Turkish. In this

context, the final act represents a tragic situation in which one must destroy oneself to prove loyalty to Venice, thereby destroying the other.

The final act strongly demonstrates that Islam's role in the play should not be underestimated. Indeed, the tragedy ends with Othello identifying himself as the protector of Venice on one hand, and its enemy, the Turk, on the other. Despite his attempts to divide these figures inside his personality, the man fails and dies. His suicide should be considered as the manifestation of the inner fear of Venice.

This thesis also engages contemporary debates about Islamophobia. Deepa Kumar's work is useful because she explains Islamophobia not only as individual hatred of Muslims, but as a wider political and cultural system that produces Islam as a threat (Kumar 2012). Although Kumar writes about the modern world, her ideas help clarify the structure of suspicion in *Othello*. Islamophobia often works by imagining the Muslim as both an Shi'a–Sunnia split external enemy and an internal danger. In *Othello*, the Ottoman Turks first appear as the external enemy attacking Cyprus. But after the storm destroys them, the fear of Islam turns inward and attaches itself to Othello. He becomes a kind of internal stranger: necessary to the state, yet never fully trusted by it.

This does not mean that the thesis simply applies a modern concept to an early modern play without caution. The word "Islamophobia" belongs to a modern critical vocabulary, and Shakespeare's world was different from ours. However, the structure of anti-Islamic fear is not only modern. Early modern Christian Europe also imagined Islam as violent, sensual, irrational, false, and threatening to Christian order. By using Islamophobia carefully as an analytical lens, this thesis can show how *Othello* dramatizes a pattern that remains recognizable: the transformation of Muslimness, or Islam-associated identity, into a sign of danger.

In addition, the thesis's focus does not entail substituting race for Islam. Rather, the thesis posits a complex intertwining of race and religion in the drama. Racialization occurs in the context of the Islamic other, and the threat of the Islamic identity gains greater significance in that it is associated with the black body. He cannot be defined through any one term. The tragic narrative requires the convergence of blackness, Moorishness, masculinity, exoticism, Christianity, Islam, and Venetian hegemony. He cannot be doomed due to jealousy and savagery innate to him; rather, it is because such meanings were predestined for him in this world.

The first chapter of this thesis provides the historical and cultural background for this argument. It examines Elizabethan England's contact with the Islamic world through trade, diplomacy, and political alliance. It discusses figures such as Anthony Jenkinson, Edmund Hogan, William Harborne, Thomas Dallam, and the Sherley brothers to show that England's relationship with Muslim powers was practical, complex, and contradictory. This chapter also explores English perceptions of Islam, the fear of "turning Turk," Venice's symbolic role, and early modern drama before *Othello*. Its main purpose is to show that Shakespeare wrote in a culture where Islam was not distant or irrelevant. It was part of England's commercial, diplomatic, theatrical, and religious imagination.

The second chapter is an inquiry into *Othello*, exploring the concept of "the Moor" and what it means, how it functions, and why it matters in the play. Specifically, the discussion focuses on how the term consolidates racial, geographical, and theological discourses. In addition, the chapter discusses how *Othello* and Desdemona's marriage represents a turning point in Venice's reception of *Othello*. Finally, this chapter interprets the tragedy's resolution as a moment when *Othello* internalizes the Christian-Islamic opposition that has been informing his story since its beginning. The core claim here is that jealousy cannot be the sole reason for

Othello's demise. On the contrary, his jealousy arises out of a specific social context characterized by prejudices towards Moors and Islam.

Chapter three reviews changes in the approaches to studying the play over time. Firstly, it explores how twentieth-century criticism, represented by Bradley and Knight, de-emphasised questions of race and Islam, thus universalising Othello. Then, the discussion turns to recent race and colonial critique, showing how they re-focused attention back onto questions of blackness and Islamophobia in Othello. Next, the study addresses the performance history and Islamophobic discourse in contemporary times, proving that the figure of Othello is continuously evolving due to new interpretations of race and Islam in theatre. Thus, the message of this chapter is that Othello can be understood in different ways because its meaning is dependent upon historical context, the physical appearance of an actor playing the role, and the cultural anxieties raised by the play.

In summary, the proposed thesis argues that Islam is among the major organizing factors in Othello. However, Shakespeare's drama does not address theological disputes but rather symbols and settings associated with Islam. These include the Ottoman threat, the figure of the Turk, the geography of Barbary and Aleppo, fears of conversion, and the ambiguity of Moorish identity. As a result, the play offers a story of Christian Venice that depends on an Islamic Other, despite never fully accepting him. Othello is respected, although mistrusted, valued, but not welcomed, Christianized, yet inseparable from the Turks.

Consequently, to analyze Othello from an Islamic perspective does not mean ignoring its psychological intricacies or racial conflicts. On the contrary, it is necessary to understand them better because their existence is conditioned by suspicion about Islam in society. Othello is driven by prejudices towards Muslims. His marriage is judged according to racial and religious

taboos. His suicide represents the violence of a Christian society that defines itself through Islamophobic imagery. In other words, Othello's tragedy does not result from the exposure of an innate Moorish nature, but from the society's construction of him as a Moorish and Islam-associated other whose presence is already imagined as dangerous.

CHAPTER 1: HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

1.1 Economic and Diplomatic Interactions

1.1.1 Jenkinson and the Muscovy

The final years of the sixteenth century presented Elizabethan England with the situation of diplomatic estrangement and limited economic opportunities. The French and Spanish peace in the 1559 Treaty of Cateau-Cambr sis was negotiated at the expense of the Protestants and limited the English merchants' engagement in the European economy (Brotton 2016). The government and the Muscovy Company altered their trading policy to identify new routes that would circumvent those controlled by the Catholics. The policy shift of the English not only provided them with diverse trading opportunities but also introduced English officials, factors, and writers to the Islamic world, ranging from the Ottoman Levant to Persia. The political theology of Islam, particularly the Shi'a–Sunni split, was introduced into English politics and eventually into the literary culture of the period.

English understanding of Islam during Elizabeth's early years came through merchandise and display. In 1553, the young mercer Anthony Jenkinson, whom we judge to be one of the greatest of the Elizabethan travelers, arrived in Aleppo. Aleppo was one of the chief western terminals of the Silk Route and a global middleman point of exchange for Iranian silk and Indian spices (Brotton 2016). He watched the movement of Sultan Suleyman's army as it advanced against the Safavids. His account remains fixed on cloth, uniforms, and dance as firmly as it does on steel: "Janissors in silk, the lordly cavalry shining, the sultan mounted upon a goodly white horse, adorned with a cloth of gold" (Brotton 2016) that Islamic imperial authority was a textile as well as a military fact, English audiences first experienced through their wallets and their

eyes. Nonetheless, behind this display lay a religious conflict that English audiences at this point only partially grasped (Brotton 2016).

The Ottoman campaign Jenkinson observed was the late installment of an even older struggle for leadership of the umma following the Prophet's death. The early wars of the city (fitna), the establishment of Umayyad authority, and the deaths of Husayn at Karbala constituted the foundational grammar of both Shi'i and Shi'i and Sunni narratives of their own identities: the Sunnis of electoral assent and tradition, the Shi'is of divinely ordained lineage and eschatological promise (Brotton 2016). In the year 1501, the Safavid ruler Isma'il killed this theology of Shi'i difference and made statecraft when he took Tabriz, declared Twelve Shi'ism the state's creed, and declared himself the awaited messianic Mahdi. His belligerent behavior inaugurated many centuries of conflict. Shia Muslims & their opponents, in particular the Ottoman Turks, who declared them heretics & attacked them because of their religious beliefs (Brotton 2016). Western powers seized this cartography of the Islamic world opportunistically. The city of Venice & the Portuguese & eventually English monarchs investigated the possibility of an anti-Turc hegemony through Persia's Shi'ism: mapping Ismael's religiosity through metaphors involving the holiness of the Virgin & thereby rendered their own Asia Minor policy intelligible to Christians (Brotton 2016).

During the years from 1557 through 1558, Jenkinson secured extraordinary access at the court of Ivan IV, which created a fragile passage through the Caspian via the great rivers of the White Sea (Brotton 2016). In late 1560, Jenkinson returned to London amid shifting political realities. Mary had died, and Elizabeth, pursuing a Protestant solution, weighed the home circumstances against the Continent's distrust (Brotton 2016). The Muscovy Company and the government calculated that a shrewd engagement of Persia might offer benefit and/or leverage.

Elizabeth composed simultaneous letters to the "Emperor of Russia" and to the "Great Sophy of Persia" (Shah Tahmasp Muzaffar King of Persia) soliciting safe conduct and trade (Brotton 2016). The Shah's domain might be imagined as the world of the Achaemenid Empire of old; in reality, the king was a Muslim ruler who ruled over a Shi'i shrine-based state (Brotton 2016).

Politics rather than geography had come to impede the progress of the English. The imperial secretaries in Moscow had been holding them up for audiences, and the English had been met at each turn by the Safavids' awareness of Ottoman and Venetian objections to English encroachments that might weaken trade (Brotton 2016). Nevertheless, Jenkinson had no difficulty gaining the Caucasus passes to reach the city of Ardabil in the fall of 1562 and reported the tomb of Isma'il I and its importance to the devotion of the Safavids (Brotton 2016). In Qazvin, the newly chosen imperial capital, Jenkinson at last gained an audience with Shah Tahmasp.

The interview was a confessional exercise of diplomatic theatre. Tahmasp asked him why Elizabeth's letter was written in Latin, Hebrew, and Italian; asked which of the Christian princes had real power; and asked Jenkinson to explicate his religion. The Englishman declared himself a Christian, not a 'Musselman,' avowing his belief in Jesus 'the son of God,' before the two Muslim rulers: Tahmasp and the Sino-convert king David XI of Georgia (Brotton 2016). As a result, Jenkinson was denied the trade agreement he had asked for and was effectively expelled from court (Brotton 2016).

Jenkinson's failure was no rhetorical gesture. The politics of Ottoman succession affected the shah's decision-making. Following the infamous strangling of his son, Mustafa, in 1553, Süleyman's remaining son Bayezid, fled to Persia. Tahmasp first took him in but eventually handed him back to the Ottoman rulers. He was promptly garroted in 1562, only after a new

peace treaty had been mutually finalized (Brotton 2016). In this configuration of power politics, the shah had no reason to alienate the Ottoman court in favour of this untested English merchant from the north. Merchants from the Ottoman side at Qazvin made the same point clear to the shah: an English alliance would be ruinous to their trade (Brotton 2016).

Jenkinson retired to Shirvan, gained hospitality and safe passage from the formidable governor Abdullah-Khan Estajlu, and returned to Moscow with Persian clothes and jewels. He reciprocated with gifts of Persian garments and precious stones, and improved trading rights (Brotton 2016). He passed the winter in Russia, entered the White Sea in July of 1564, and, after "great and extreme dangers," arrived in London in September, three and a half years after his departure (Brotton 2016). The ledger of this mission reads: unparalleled access to Süleyman, Ivan, and Tahmasp; the strict boundaries of confessional geopolitics; and the understanding of being overly friendly to the Ottomans at an early point when later access to the Safavid court was diminished (2016). Even survival itself might depend upon the little notice the great Muslim rulers took of peripheral England – an odd but unimportant entity to them (Brotton 2016).

The Muscovy Company carried on. Edwards's successor, Jenkinson, had secured many of the concessions denied to him, but the trade route continued to bleed English factors: Turks, Persians, and Tatars engaged in enough battles and kidnappings to provoke the odd murder (Brotton 2016). Meanwhile, the impact of these incursions extended its reach across the culture. The courtly records of the performance of "Our dear and well-beloved woman Ippolyta the Tartarian" in the performance of 1564 can be attributed only to Aura Soltana, who "came from the land of Tartars" and affected a fashion that reflected the dress of the Spanish in her shoes (Brotton 2016).

Jenkinson retired rich in the late 1570s. Looking back, his story linked the imagination of London to Russia and Persia, shifting the location of Islam from abstract concept to tangible network of powers and pieties. Jenkinson's exploits had not been overlooked. William Warner's *Albion's England*, published in 1586, featured him as a hero who defended the general welfare in the name of Elizabeth (Brotton 2016). However, his exploits were already being overtaken by the trend of English merchants turning from the perilous Muscovy-Caspian route to the closer Muslim coasts of Barbary 'time to do business with the Moors,' as the story dutifully ends (Brotton 2016).

In conclusion, Anthony Jenkinson's travels represented the dawn of England's long and intricate relationship with the Islamic world. Jenkinson's sojourn within the Ottoman and Safavid courts illustrated the opportunities and limited options of English foreign policy at this time, due to religious conflicts and the need to safeguard political and commercial interests. Jenkinson's experience introduced Islam directly to England, which revolutionized their remote understanding of this religious phenomenon. The direct encounter of Jenkinson's England with Islam would soon impact Elizabethan foreign policy and trade concepts, as well as literary representations of Islamic culture. The English merchants who first engaged in trade within the region of the Barbary Coast and North Africa had prior knowledge of Islamic religious beliefs due to their familiarity with the early modern trading world, in which various communities did business while engaged in rivalry.

1.1.2 Edmund Hogan and Barbary Ties

The English understanding of "Barbary" extended beyond philology, ethnology, and simple mercantile interest. The term had two main origins: the Greco-Latin idea of the "land of barbarians" and the Arabic word "Berber," used to describe the native peoples of North Africa

(Brotton 2016). However, the meaning of “Barbary” extended beyond geography, since it also carried moral, racial, and religious connotations. Early modern thinkers racialized both skin and geography, and often viewed climate as shaping human character (Dadabhoy 2024). As with racial classification, religious description was also geographic: regions under Islamic rule acquired particular significance as Islam expanded beyond the Arabian Peninsula (Dadabhoy 2024). In the early modern period, the southern and eastern Mediterranean were largely under Muslim control, especially that of the Ottoman Empire and the Saadi rulers of Morocco, reinforcing the association between Islam and Mediterranean geography in the European imagination. The term “Barbary Coast,” referring to Morocco, Algiers, and Tunis, derived from the region’s pre-Arabic and pre-Islamic Indigenous peoples, the Amazighs or Berbers, who were described by both Arab conquerors and later English observers as “barbarians,” a label that increasingly combined geographic, racial, and religious meanings. Although Elizabethan English understandings of “Morocco” could be geographically imprecise, referring at times to both a kingdom and a coastline, there was no confusion about one geopolitical fact: Morocco was the only region of North Africa that remained independent of Spanish or Portuguese rule (Brotton 2016).

In the 1550s, a group of English investors began financing expeditions to the Atlantic ports of Morocco. In 1551, Thomas Wyndham organized an exploratory trading mission in which the English exchanged linen, wool, and metal goods for Moroccan sugar, dates, and almonds. The investors behind this mission later contributed to the establishment of the Muscovy Company (Brotton 2016). Unsurprisingly, these English ventures provoked the hostility of their Iberian rivals. The English were accused of transporting “pikes and armour,” and later voyages were said to carry “all sorts of munitions of war,” a charge that blurred the distinction between

legitimate trade and arms smuggling and was used to justify denying English trading rights (Brotton 2016). These complaints were rejected under Edward VI and later under Elizabeth I, who neither accepted Portuguese monopoly claims nor recognized Morocco as Portuguese territory when asked in 1571 to forbid English trade there. Instead, Elizabeth upheld Morocco's right to trade with whichever powers it chose (Brotton 2016).

At the same time, developments within Europe were narrowing the ideological context in which alliances with Muslim powers became possible. The papal bull *Regnans in Excelsis*, issued by Pope Pius V in 1570, excommunicated Elizabeth and instructed her subjects to withdraw their obedience from a "heretic queen" (Brotton 2016). In this setting, the Oath of Supremacy of 1559 had already established Elizabeth as the "supreme governor of the Church of England." As religious and political tensions deepened, Protestant England increasingly came to see Catholicism, and especially Catholic Spain, as a more immediate threat than Islam.

For many years, the privileges of Christian merchants living and trading under Muslim rule in the Levant had been regulated through Venetian and French treaties known as the capitulations. By the late 1560s, however, Protestant England had begun to pursue relations with Muslim powers outside the established framework of Catholic mediation (Brotton 2016). A number of developments contributed to this shift, including the Ottoman succession of 1566, the Mediterranean campaigns of Selim II, and the Morisco crisis in Spain, all of which formed part of a wider process of political realignment that unsettled Philip II and altered the balance of power in the region (Brotton 2016). Within this changing context, Morocco emerged as England's nearest and most promising Muslim ally.

By the mid-1570s, English merchants had come to regard earlier ventures in Morocco, including those associated with Thomas Hogan, as insufficient for their expanding ambitions.

They increasingly viewed Moroccan trade not as an isolated commercial activity but as part of a broader strategy to gain access to Ottoman markets. In 1572, Hogan had sent his factor, John Williams, to investigate reported deposits of Moroccan saltpetre, or potassium nitrate, a vital ingredient in gunpowder and a scarce commodity in Europe (Brotton 2016). Williams returned with samples of notably high quality, which were presented in 1575 before Lord Burghley and the Earl of Leicester. Their favorable response led to official approval for the export of shot, cannonballs, and “munition powder” (Brotton 2016). At the same time, political developments in Morocco made such trade even more significant. In 1576, the Saadian prince ‘Abd al-Malik, who had lived under Ottoman protection and had become familiar with Ottoman statecraft, defeated his nephew ‘Abdallāh Muhammad near Fez with Ottoman support and took the throne (Brotton 2016). As a ruler aware of the weakness of his financial position, ‘Abd al-Malik viewed English trade as a useful counterweight to the ambitions of Spain and Portugal. Hogan, in turn, stressed the strategic value of this connection, arguing that the “Moroccoers” could offer English merchants a quicker and safer route to the Levant than the difficult northern passage previously attempted by the Muscovy Company (Brotton 2016).

The queen furnished Hogan with a formal letter of introduction and detailed instructions. He departed from Portsmouth on 6 May 1577 and arrived at Safi fifteen days later, where he was welcomed by English merchants and Moroccan officials (Brotton 2016). By the end of the month, he had reached Marrakesh, and in June he was granted an audience with ‘Abd al-Malik. Hogan read the queen’s letter in Spanish, which was then translated into Arabic. ‘Abd al-Malik responded graciously through a Spanish interpreter, promising the goodwill of his kingdom (Brotton 2016).

Hogan secured a guarantee that English ships sailing along the Barbary coast and through the Straits of Gibraltar into the Levant would enjoy safe-conduct and free-trade privileges, thus ensuring English merchants secure passage from Moroccan waters into Ottoman territories (Brotton 2016). He also obtained 300 quintals, about 13 tons, of saltpetre, without any explicit reference to the exchange of weapons in return. In his letters, Hogan emphasized the sultan's hostility toward Spain and repeated the claim that 'Abd al-Malik valued the Queen of England above the rulers of Spain, presenting him as a natural ally (Brotton 2016). At times, these letters went even further, implying that the Moroccan ruler was almost "Protestant at heart" because of his opposition to papal supremacy and the Inquisition. This was clearly a form of diplomatic flattery, designed to make an alliance with a Muslim ruler more acceptable to English consciences (Brotton 2016).

Hogan's success also had wider effects within England. It encouraged London merchants to pursue similar privileges in Constantinople. Edward Osborne and his factor William Harborne sought Ottoman commercial protections that would eventually develop into the English capitulations and the rise of the Levant Company by the end of 1577–78, allowing English merchants to travel and trade more securely as non-Muslims abroad (Brotton 2016). In this way, the Moroccan embassy helped generate a wider Anglo-Islamic commercial framework.

However, two major limitations soon emerged. First, English uncertainty over the arms trade had not disappeared. Although Burghley and Leicester had authorized the export of shot and cannonballs in 1575, Elizabeth's formal policy prohibited Hogan from concluding direct armaments agreements: his success rested on saltpetre and safe-conduct, not on an open weapons trade (Brotton 2016). Second, Moroccan politics remained unstable. The deposed ruler, living in exile in Ceuta under Portuguese protection, proposed to Sebastião I of Portugal that they invade

Morocco, restore him to the throne, and make him a Portuguese vassal. Impulsive, deeply religious, and eager to acquire the glory of a crusading king, Sebastião readily agreed (Brotton 2016).

In 1578, Sebastian of Portugal invaded Morocco but was disastrously defeated at Alcácer Quibir by the larger forces of ‘Abd al-Malik. The battle killed three kings, caused devastating Portuguese losses, and later gave rise to the myth of Sebastianismo. For England, the event weakened hopes for a lasting Protestant-Muslim alliance, but it also pushed English policy toward a more pragmatic relationship with Islamic states based on trade, diplomacy, and opposition to Catholic Spain.

1.1.3 Harborne and Levant Company

After the disaster of Alcácer Quibir, Walsingham rapidly redirected English strategy. As Morocco became an unreliable alliance and Spain expanded its influence through the Portuguese succession crisis, he increasingly turned toward the Ottoman Empire. In late 1578, he drafted the “Memorandum on the Turkey Trade,” arguing that direct commerce with Ottoman territories would strengthen the English navy, widen the market for English goods, reduce dependence on Catholic intermediaries, and improve England’s commercial and political position against France, Venice, and Spain (Brotton 2016). To implement this policy, England needed a capable representative at the Ottoman court.

That representative was William Harborne, a merchant from Norfolk who had already gained experience abroad through Edward Osborne and the London cloth trade. In August 1578, even before the catastrophe at Alcácer Quibir, Harborne set out overland with Joseph Clements and a servant, partly to avoid the surveillance of Mediterranean powers. At the Polish border, he encountered an Ottoman diplomatic entourage led by Mustafa Beg returning from negotiations

with Murad III. This allowed Harborne to enter Ottoman territory under official protection, and by 28 October 1578, he had reached Constantinople. His arrival marked the convergence of private commercial initiative and public diplomatic ambition that Walsingham had envisioned (Brotton 2016). Two years later, this development acquired a more formal institutional shape when letters patent were granted to English merchants trading with Turkey, a step that eventually led to the formation of the Levant Company (Bent 1890).

Harborne entered a city that embodied the scale and prestige of Ottoman imperial power. Constantinople was a vast, religiously diverse metropolis as well as a major political, architectural, and commercial centre. Diplomacy in such a setting depended heavily on translation, since communication often passed through Latin or Italian into Ottoman Turkish; this made negotiation vulnerable to misunderstanding, yet it also created opportunities for flexibility and strategic mediation (Brotton 2016). Harborne's first major move was a formal petition to the grand vizier, Sokollu Mehmed Pasha, concerning the murder of a servant and the theft of goods in Lvov. Yet the petition went beyond personal redress: Harborne also requested safe-conducts for English merchants across the eastern Mediterranean and the right to export lead to England. In this way, he simultaneously recognized Ottoman authority, sought compensation, and transformed a private grievance into a matter of state interest (Brotton 2016).

Soon after, the Ottoman chancery sent a formal *hukm* to Elizabeth, inviting English merchants to enter and remain in the Sultan's dominions and implying a level of privilege comparable to that already enjoyed by French and Venetian traders. Around the same time, Mustafa Beg encouraged the idea of closer Protestant-Muslim cooperation, suggesting that some figures at the Ottoman court saw confessional coexistence as a viable political strategy (Brotton 2016). Elizabeth responded by presenting herself as a fellow monotheistic ruler opposed to

idolatry, while also requesting expanded trading freedoms and the release of English captives. In doing so, she offered a tentative but important acknowledgment of Ottoman political authority within a wider framework of international law (Brotton 2016). However, negotiations were disrupted by the assassination of Sokollu Mehmed Pasha in 1579, which weakened the pro-Western faction at court and forced Harborne to begin again with new officials (Brotton 2016). Despite strong French opposition, Harborne eventually secured the 1580 capitulations, which granted English merchants freedom of trade, tax exemptions, legal protections, consular rights, and safeguards against forced conversion. In return, Elizabeth officially supported a select group of merchants, and Harborne's mission became the first substantial step toward permanent English representation at the Ottoman Porte and the later development of the Levant Company (Brotton 2016).

The capitulations immediately stimulated Anglo-Ottoman trade. English merchants exported strategic materials such as tin, lead, and bell metal, while Harborne built an extensive network from Galata to Syria, North Africa, and the Black Sea. At the same time, the legal framework of Levant trade became more structured through the emergence of an English company with monopoly and consular powers (Brotton 2016). Yet this fragile success was threatened in 1581 by the actions of the English captain Peter Baker, who turned pirate and attacked Ottoman subjects. His piracy provoked outrage among Ottoman, Venetian, and Catholic authorities and transformed a commercial problem into a political and religious crisis. England's opponents used the incident to depict Anglo-Ottoman cooperation as an anti-Christian conspiracy, and Murad III responded by revoking the English capitulations and restoring French privileges (Brotton 2016).

The Baker crisis exposed the instability of the early Protestant-Ottoman understanding. In response, Walsingham and Burghley relied on apology and formalization. Elizabeth wrote to Murad asking him not to withdraw his favor from English merchants, while Ottoman officials indicated that privileges could be restored if England sent a proper royal ambassador to the Porte (*Elizabeth's Letter*). Harborne, exhausted and deeply in debt, left Constantinople in July 1581, but the crisis had clarified an essential lesson: stable Anglo-Ottoman relations could not depend solely on informal agents or private merchants. They required a more durable diplomatic and institutional framework, supported by both the Crown and the merchant company. In this sense, Walsingham's shift from Morocco to the Ottoman court laid the foundations for a longer-lasting Anglo-Ottoman relationship and for the eventual consolidation of the Levant Company (Brotton 2016).

1.1.4 Dallam's Gift to the Sultan

Murad III's death in January of the following year transformed English diplomacy by exposing it to succession politics and the harem influence that Barton had worked so hard to understand. The English trusted Barton's hard-won credit at the Ottoman court to be automatically transferred to Barton's successor, Henry Lello. However, Henry's nervously impatient behavior and tactless approach to Ottoman politics raised doubts about the possibility that such privileges could no longer be taken for granted (Brotton 2016). London decided that the English had to refashion their relationships according to the Ottoman model: through magnificent gifts demonstrating their respect and admiration for the Ottoman court and its power (Brotton 2016).

The package assembled by Elizabeth and the Levant Company was truly impressive. a ceremonial coach for Safiye Sultan and a mechanical organ commissioned from Thomas Dallam

of Lancashire and minutely escorted through the Ottoman court, personally accompanied by Thomas Dallam for Sultan Mehmed III (Brotton 2016). The reasoning was straightforward and astute. The presents might circumvent French objections at the Porte, delight Safiye, who had been an advocate of English interests, and turn the financial power of the merchants into political capital through the recently concluded capitulations (Brotton 2016).

The presents were transported aboard the Hector and soon found themselves in the city of Constantinople on 28 August 1599. The Venetian bailo's message regarding the cargo was mixed: "There were presents of an organ cunningly made like a clock, furnishings for the sultana's apartment, and numerous cloth suits, some of which had been spoiled by the sea" (Brotton 2016). However, the worst part of this cargo was the organ's damaged condition. It took the organ maker weeks to restore it, though this did nothing to ease the English representative's concerns that his hoped-for title of ambassador might pass him by (Brotton 2016).

On the 25th of September 1599, the mysteries of the Topkapı seraglio had been opened to Dallam and the reassembled organ. As the bells rang out, the trumpets blared, and the organ pipes sang their sweet song, rendering the Ottoman Sultan Mehmed III entranced and clamouring for them to play longer. The Englishman's joy at this conquest was short-lived, as the Ottoman Sultan's officials asked him to remain and work at the Ottoman court. He had even been invited to peek at the harem and a rare glimpse into the harem before sneaking off to return to the Hector (Brotton 2016).

The display proved effective. Safiye repaid the compliment with cloth of state and jewels, but even more valuable was the letter ratifying the terms of the Anglo-Ottoman trading arrangements. The formal acknowledgement of privileges from Mehmed ensured English

merchants had the protection of capitulations and that Elizabeth's presents had purchased not only display but also policy (Brotton 2016).

The same network which had opened doors could also be lethal. The Jewish kira of Safiye, who had been so valuable a fixer at court and had played a part in the management of the exchange of gifts, was lynched by the imperial cavalry in sympathy with the anti-harem and financial corruption movement of the times. This illustrated the vulnerability of English interests when they rested on individuals within the Ottoman court (Brotton 2016).

A glance at the story of Dallam's journey demonstrates that the Elizabethan government's engagement with the Ottoman Turks was as reliant on direct interaction as on written agreements. A craftsman and artist, no sooner arrived in the company of the city's merchants and the queen's theatre than he found himself able to traverse the length and breadth of the known world from the streets of London to the innermost circles of the imperial court in the Ottoman Empire, transforming technical ingenuity into diplomatic capital (Brotton 2016). The account also reveals the imperial version of one-way trade that England clearly understood. In the Ottoman Empire, presents secured trading rights; in England, the imported merchandise of the same imperial provenance, Ottoman luxury goods, including carpets, silks, and Iznik ceramics, indexed the ambitions of its own middle class. Its taste is bound inseparably to its imperial policy through the consumption of the same precious things (Brotton 2016). Finally, this case also illustrates a cycle of events to which Elizabeth's English Company ultimately succumbed, but which had its beginnings during this period.

In short, the organ built by Dallam not only entertained an Ottoman sultan, but also served as a diplomatic tool. Instead, the organ linked craft and statecraft when its ingenuity and

performance recreated an Anglo-Ottoman compact at a time when ordinary ambassadorial negotiation proved insufficient (Brotton 2016).

1.1.5 The Sherley Brothers in Persia

The Sherley brothers, and especially Sir Anthony Sherley, represent one of the most striking and ambitious examples of English diplomacy, self-promotion, and overseas adventure in the Elizabethan period. They came from a prominent but troubled English family whose fortunes had sharply declined. Their father, Sir Thomas Sherley, had been imprisoned for financial mismanagement and embezzlement, and the family consequently lost much of its wealth and status. Anthony's elder brother, Sir Thomas Sherley Jr., became known for failed piratical ventures and repeated moral scandal, while his younger brother, Robert Sherley, was later detained in Persia as a political hostage of Shah Abbas I in connection with Anthony's activities (Brotton 2016).

In 1598, Anthony Sherley set out from Venice on a mission that would ultimately prove disastrous. He did so without Queen Elizabeth's authorization, presenting himself as the head of a diplomatic venture first to the Ottoman Empire and then to Persia (Brotton 2016). As Anthony Parr notes, both the Levant Company and the newly established East India Company viewed Sherley's expedition with suspicion, since it threatened to interfere with their trade routes and monopolies. To finance the journey, Sherley extorted money from English merchants in Constantinople and Aleppo, thereby securing the funds to continue eastward (Brotton 2016). By 1599, he had arrived at the Safavid court. At that moment, Shah Abbas was engaged in military conflict with the Uzbeks in the northeast and was simultaneously preparing for renewed confrontation with the Ottoman Empire. Sherley was therefore received with interest and favor,

since Abbas was actively restructuring his military and was open to new diplomatic relationships (Brotton 2016).

In Persia, Sherley encountered Shi'ism, the official religious ideology of the Safavid state, which stood in clear opposition to Ottoman Sunni orthodoxy. Within this framework, Christ was respected as a holy figure and prophet, though not above Muhammad, who was regarded as the final and greatest prophet (Brotton 2016). Sherley appears to have interpreted Shah Abbas's religious policy as highly strategic and politically calculated. In his view, Abbas used religion as an instrument of unity and state consolidation, suppressing internal division and particularly weakening Sunni influence. Sherley's own Christian assumptions shaped the way he read these policies, yet he also recognized that the Safavid-Ottoman religious divide could be politically useful. It encouraged him to imagine an alliance between Shah Abbas and the Christian powers of Europe against the Ottoman Empire. From Sherley's perspective, this would create a shared front against what he represented as Ottoman tyranny and might even support the broader project of recovering territories lost to Ottoman expansion (Brotton 2016).

Sherley's relationship with Shah Abbas soon produced diplomatic consequences. He received titles and maintenance at the Safavid court, and Abbas decided to send him to Europe as an unofficial Persian envoy. In 1599, Sherley departed with an entourage composed of Persians and European friars, traveling first to Moscow. At the Russian court, he was briefly detained on suspicion of espionage, though he was soon released, partly because of his forceful personality and confidence (Brotton 2016). From there, Sherley's ambitions became increasingly grandiose. He wrote back to England with reports of possible leagues and treaties of friendship, even involving the Mughal emperor Akbar. Yet he failed to regain Elizabeth's support and instead moved restlessly across Europe. In 1600, he arrived in Prague, where he proposed to Emperor

Rudolf II a magnificent Christian-Persian alliance against the Ottomans, but the scheme quickly collapsed under the weight of its own impracticality and ambition (Brotton 2016).

Sherley's decline accelerated in the years that followed. In 1601, he traveled to Rome to seek the favor of Pope Clement VIII, but his constant disputes with the Persian envoy Ali Beg reduced the mission to confusion and embarrassment. The Pope sided with the Persians and reportedly described Sherley as "a liar, though a great talker and well informed" (Brotton 2016). The execution of his chief English patron, the Earl of Essex, destroyed whatever hope remained of restoring his political influence in England. Thereafter, Sherley drifted from France to Italy and then to Spain, his reputation increasingly damaged by accusations of fraud, financial dishonesty, and even witchcraft. By 1603, his conduct had become erratic and increasingly desperate. Forced out of Venice, he spent the rest of his life in poverty and obscurity in Spain (Brotton 2016). His career thus traces a dramatic fall: from celebrated Persian envoy and ambitious diplomatic entrepreneur to disgraced adventurer, undone by arrogance, instability, and fantasies of power.

Although the Sherley brothers failed to achieve their political ambitions, their careers left a lasting legacy in early modern English culture. Their exploits were retold in plays, pamphlets, and propagandistic narratives that blurred the line between diplomacy and theatrical performance. As Anthony Parr observes, by the early 1620s, their adventures had already entered the dramatic tradition through works such as *The Three English Brothers*. Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* also appears to contain a recognizable reference to Sir Anthony's Persian venture in its allusion to receiving money from the "Sophy," a term Elizabethan audiences would have readily understood as referring to Shah Abbas and, by extension, to the Sherleys' activities in Persia.

The Sherley brothers' travels from Elizabethan England into the Islamic world reveal the unstable intersection of ambition, religion, diplomacy, and self-fashioning in the early modern period. Their encounter with the Safavid court marked an important moment in early Anglo-Persian relations, not because they established a durable alliance, but because they helped shape English perceptions of Persia as both a diplomatic possibility and a theatrical space of intrigue, religious difference, and political ambition. In this sense, the Sherleys remain significant not only for what they attempted to accomplish politically, but also for the way their story entered the English cultural imagination.

1.2 Cultural Perceptions and Cross-Cultural Contacts

1.2.1 Image of Islam in English culture

This chapter examines English perceptions of Islam in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, a period marked by intensified Anglo-Islamic contact and a corresponding growth in literary and print representations of Islamic societies (Vitkus 1997). During these decades, English attitudes toward Islam were shaped by a complex mixture of fear, fascination, hostility, and curiosity. Encounters with the Ottoman Empire, in particular, had a deep impact on the English political and cultural imagination. On the one hand, England increasingly recognized the importance of commercial and diplomatic relations with powerful Muslim states; on the other hand, the military strength of the Ottoman Empire and its difference from Christian Europe continued to provoke anxiety, especially when viewed alongside the threat posed by Catholic Spain (Heidari and KOÇ 2015). These geopolitical tensions influenced English literary culture, including Shakespeare's plays, in which Islamic figures and societies were often imagined through a mixture of inherited prejudice and immediate political relevance (Danson 2002). As

Tilwani argues, English drama frequently represented the “Oriental” Muslim through highly ideological stereotypes, portraying him as barbaric, violent, lustful, cowardly, or unreliable in ways that reflected the social, economic, and cultural pressures of the time (Tilwani 2020). Such representations helped construct Islam as a threatening “other” within the English theatrical imagination (Barin 2010). They were also reinforced by the widespread fear of “turning Turk,” a phrase that reflected anxieties about conversion, religious instability, and cultural contamination in early modern England (Vitkus 1997).

Jerry Brotton’s *This Orient Isle* is especially useful in showing how these distorted understandings of Islam were inherited and reshaped across the sixteenth century. Early modern Christians were often unable, or unwilling, to understand Islam as an independent monotheistic faith. Instead, many treated it either as a form of paganism or as a Christian and Jewish heresy, condemning what they perceived as idolatry and mocking the Prophet Muhammad as a false prophet who deceived his followers with promises of sensual paradise and miraculous deception (Brotton 2016). At the same time, early modern Christian writers often blurred religious, ethnic, and geographic categories when referring to the Islamic world. Terms such as “Moor,” “Arab,” “Turk,” and “Saracen” were frequently used with considerable flexibility, often functioning less as precise descriptions than as broad signs of non-Christian difference (Brotton 2016). This unstable vocabulary helps explain why terms such as “Turk” and “Moor” appear in Elizabethan drama as overlapping markers of religious and cultural alterity. In *Othello*, for example, such terminology contributes to the ambiguous construction of the protagonist as both integrated into and excluded from the Christian world of Venice.

Brotton further shows that some of the leading thinkers of the Christian tradition interpreted Islam through the lens of their own confessional struggles. Figures such as Martin

Luther and Erasmus could describe the “Turk” as a divine punishment for the divisions of Christendom, linking Islam to paganism, heresy, and moral corruption even while using the image of the Turk polemically against their Catholic or Protestant enemies (Brotton 2016). In this way, Islam functioned less as a religion understood on its own terms than as a theological and ideological shorthand through which Christians expressed fears about their own corruption, instability, and fragmentation (Brotton 2016). In addition, Elizabethan drama repeatedly casts Muslims as infidels, barbarians, pagans, and racial others, turning the Islamic world into a dark mirror against which Christian and increasingly “white” identity could define itself. Such dramatic constructions reveal how religious and racial differences became intertwined on the English stage.

Yet the sixteenth century also witnessed an unprecedented degree of practical interaction between England and Islamic powers. This more complicated reality challenges any purely one-dimensional picture of Islamic hostility. As Brotton demonstrates, even under Mary Tudor, English policy was shaped by commercial necessity, especially in response to Spanish and Portuguese trade monopolies. English merchants sought alternative markets and routes, and the activities of the Muscovy Company, as well as voyages toward Cathay, gradually brought England into contact not only with Russia and West Africa but also with Safavid Persia and other Islamic polities (Brotton 2016). In other words, trade with Muslim states was not simply tolerated; it was often encouraged by the Crown despite continuing religious suspicion and polemical hostility. This contradiction is vividly captured in the world map commissioned by Mary and Philip. On the one hand, the map marks the Mediterranean with Ottoman flags and North Africa as “Mahometania,” reflecting Christian fears of Islamic power; on the other hand, it also expresses the possibilities of an increasingly interconnected world shaped by maritime

expansion and geopolitical pragmatism (Brotton 2016). As Brotton suggests, Mary and Philip themselves had to negotiate complex political relations in a Europe fractured not only by Protestantism but also by competition among Catholic powers, a context in which engagement with Islamic states could become strategically useful.

This inheritance passed to Elizabeth, who came to the throne in a kingdom whose Protestant identity had itself been described by Catholic critics as a form of heresy close to Islam, yet which had already begun to develop commercial links with the Islamic world. Recent scholarship by Sharif Mohammad Shahidullah and his co-editors expands this point by emphasizing Islam's constructive role in the making of early modern English culture. Rather than existing in total isolation from Islamic societies, Elizabethan England maintained political, mercantile, cultural, and even religious ties with a wide range of Muslim states, including the Ottoman, Moroccan, Safavid, and Mughal empires. English merchants traveled from Aleppo and Algiers to Baghdad and Surat, returning not only with luxury goods but also with new techniques, forms of knowledge, medical practices, and cultural experiences that contributed to transformations within English society itself. Islam therefore occupied a central place in many aspects of English economic and cultural life, even as popular attitudes toward it continued to oscillate between fascination and horror (Shahidullah 2025).

This contradiction is especially important for understanding English drama. Literary and theatrical texts were shaped both by the memory of crusading hostility and by the ideological force of Orientalist fantasy, with Muslims often racialized as non-white and religiously marked as infidels even when they were admired for courage, political intelligence, or military power. Shakespeare's plays participate in this same tension. Ottoman and Moorish figures may at times be represented with dignity, authority, or nobility, yet their status as non-Christians remains

central to how they are perceived and remembered on stage. Here, Akbari's emphasis on parody, distortion, and inherited fantasy is particularly useful. The English stage did not reproduce the realities of Islam; rather, it reworked older Christian images of Muslims while incorporating new impressions brought back by merchants, ambassadors, and travelers. In this sense, *Othello* embodies a powerful tension between medieval inheritance and early modern encounter. The play draws on older fears of Muslim sexuality, violence, miscegenation, and the "Turk" as religious and political threat, yet it also reflects a world in which Christian Europe was increasingly entangled with Islamic powers through diplomacy, trade, and even conversion. Othello, as the "Moor of Venice," thus stands at the intersection of intimacy and difference: he is both inside and outside the Christian political community. Early modern English culture inherited from the Middle Ages a deep reservoir of distorted images of Islam, in which Muslims were imagined as idolaters, heretics, and barbarians. At the same time, the political and economic pressures of the sixteenth century brought England into closer contact with the Ottoman, Moroccan, Persian, and Mughal worlds than ever before, opening new possibilities for alliance, exchange, and cultural transformation.

1.2.2 Conversion, Fear, and "Turning Turk"

What does it mean, in the world of *Othello*, to "turn Turk"? The phrase is not merely an insult uttered in a moment of anger. Rather, it condenses a long history of anxiety about conversion, loyalty, religious identity, and moral collapse. When Othello asks, "Are we turn'd Turks?" (*Othello* 2.3.175), he is not only rebuking his drunken men; he is also invoking a powerful cultural vocabulary in which "Turk" signifies violence, disorder, apostasy, and the unsettling possibility that the enemy may already exist within the Christian self.

In early modern English, the verb *to turn* was itself heavily charged. It could mean to change, to reverse oneself, to betray one's word, or to convert from one faith to another. This last meaning is especially important in the phrase "turn Turk." In a religious culture shaped by confessional conflict, *turning* often carried the weight of salvation or damnation. The Marian formula "turn, or burn" captures the brutal force of this logic: to turn was not simply to alter one's opinion, but to abandon one's faith under threat of destruction. Within this framework, "turning Turk" came to crystallize English anxieties about apostasy, moral corruption, and the seductions of Islam. Thus, when Othello asks whether the Venetians have "turn'd Turks," the phrase activates not just an ethnic insult but a deep religious and cultural fear.

These anxieties had a long history. As Filiz Barin notes, anti-Turkish preaching had circulated in Christian Europe since the Crusades, helping to consolidate an image of the Turk as an immoral barbarian and Islam as a false and dangerous religion promoted through deception (Barin 2010). Ottoman expansion into the Balkans, followed by the conquest of Constantinople in 1453, reinforced the sense that the Turks represented an immediate and growing threat to Christian Europe (Barin 2010). By the sixteenth century, the Ottoman Empire dominated much of the eastern Mediterranean and North Africa, as well as key overland and maritime trade routes. For the English, who stood at the margins of continental power but were increasingly drawn into Mediterranean politics and commerce, the Ottoman Empire appeared at once militarily formidable, economically attractive, and religiously unsettling (Barin 2010).

This produced, as Barin describes, an ambivalent image of the Turk. The Ottoman world could be admired for its wealth, power, discipline, and administrative sophistication, even as it was feared as a conquering rival whose success exposed Christian weakness (Barin 2010). Daniel Vitkus makes a similar point when he argues that English representations of the Turk

were shaped not from a position of secure superiority, but from the fear of being conquered, captured, or converted by a more powerful Muslim empire (*Turning Turk* 6). Ottoman luxury goods, spices, silks, carpets, and fine textiles circulated through European markets and intensified this ambivalence: the Turk was represented as barbarous and cruel, yet the Ottoman world was also a source of fascination, wealth, and desire (Barin 2010). In this sense, “Turkishness” already existed before *Othello* as a category structured by both attraction and repulsion.

Religious polemic sharpened this ambivalence into demonization. In crusade rhetoric and later Reformation writing, the Turk was repeatedly cast as the enemy of true religion, until such portrayals hardened into enduring prejudices (Barin 2010). During the sixteenth century, “Turkishness” also became a polemical category within Christian Europe itself. Thomas More compared Martin Luther unfavorably to “the great Turk,” suggesting that Lutheranism was in some ways more dangerous than Islam because it offered dangerous liberty and moral license to the laity. Protestant writers, in turn, directed similar language against Catholics, portraying papal tyranny as another form of “Turkishness” and sometimes representing the Pope as more dangerous to Christendom than the Turk himself (Barin 2010). As Vitkus shows, English Protestant discourse frequently linked the Devil, the Pope, and the Turk as allied forces threatening to draw Protestant souls into damnation through tyranny, sensuality, and corruption.

Within this ideological environment, “turn Turk” became a loaded metaphor. As Barin explains, from the late sixteenth century onward, the phrase increasingly came to mean conversion to Islam, even though the term “Turk” still retained ethnic and political associations alongside its religious meaning (Barin 2010). Because Ottoman power dominated the European imagination, “Turk” often functioned as a general marker for Muslim identity, regardless of a

person's actual ethnicity. As a result, "turn Turk" came to signify not simply ethnic transformation, which was impossible, but religious defection, moral betrayal, and the abandonment of one's proper social and spiritual self (Barin 2010). Christian writers added to this confusion by referring to converts to Islam simply as "Turks," rather than using more precise religious terminology. In popular discourse, the phrase accumulated a cluster of negative associations: lust, deceit, violence, barbarity, and disloyalty. These associations would later prove highly relevant to the representation of Othello.

Yet "turning Turk" was not only a metaphor. It also referred to a real and widespread phenomenon of conversion in the early modern Mediterranean. Economic hardship, captivity, slavery, piracy, and the hope of advancement led many European Christians to embrace Islam. As Robert Darby observes, many captured Europeans found the conditions of life in war-torn Christian Europe so harsh that service under Muslim rulers could appear materially preferable, even attractive. Nabil Matar similarly argues that such conversions were sufficiently common in the sixteenth century to become a recognizable social pattern rather than an exceptional event (Matar 2008). Lawrence Danson notes that the Ottoman court itself included many converts of Christian origin, including interpreters, soldiers, and officials, whose transformation into "perfect Turks" was understood in English discourse not as social adaptation but as a disturbing form of self-loss (Danson 2002). The phrase "turn Turk," then, carried a paradoxical force: it referred to a supposedly fixed and alien identity, yet that identity could be entered by Englishmen and women through conduct, loyalty, or conversion.

This logic recurs throughout early modern drama. In Robert Daborne's *A Christian Turn'd Turk* (1612), John Ward converts to Islam not from sincere belief but from a combination of greed, lust, and expediency. As Lois Potter argues, the play represents conversion less as an

inward spiritual transformation than as a theatrical display shaped by fear, desire, and pressure from circumstance. The spectacle of conversion becomes dramatically powerful precisely because it turns a religious act into a visible performance of moral collapse. Yet the play also reveals its own contradictions: although it warns against apostasy, it cannot fully suppress the material and emotional attractions of the Islamic world. In Potter's formulation, such drama reasserts the boundaries of confessional difference even as it acknowledges the lure of Barbary and the Mediterranean.

Othello must be read within this same Mediterranean culture of "turning Turk." As Vitkus suggests, the play is structured by a series of linked transformations, from Christian to Turk, from virgin to whore, from virtue to corruption, and from grace to damnation. Othello's tragedy is therefore not merely psychological; it is also theological and cultural. His collapse is shaped by anxieties about racial otherness, religious instability, and the fear that identity itself may be reversible. From the beginning of the play, Othello is associated with Turkish and Islamic imagery. His marriage to Desdemona is described in terms of theft, seizure, and piracy, while Brabantio reacts to the union not only as a personal violation but in language that resonates with fears of Ottoman expansion. As Vitkus observes, the analogy between Othello's "stolen marriage" and the Turkish threat to Cyprus expresses a wider anxiety about the seizure of Christian power, property, and women by those imagined as outsiders and infidels.

Shakespeare intensifies this relationship by setting the action against the Ottoman threat to Cyprus. Historically, the Turks had already taken Cyprus in 1571, but in the play, their fleet is destroyed by a storm before battle can occur. Barin argues that this reversal offers a compensatory fantasy, an imagined Christian victory where history had delivered defeat (Barin 55). Yet the storm does not remove the Turks from the play. Instead, it internalizes them. Once

the external Ottoman threat vanishes, Turkishness reappears as a moral and psychological possibility within the Christian world itself. This is the force of Othello's cry during the drunken brawl: "Are we turn'd Turks, and to ourselves do that / Which heaven hath forbid the Ottomites?" (*Othello* 2.3.175–76). As Danson notes, the line brings the Turk into the bodily and social space of Christian culture, suggesting that the violence Christians fear in others may already be present within themselves (Danson 2002).

The line is especially revealing because it nearly collapses the distinction it seeks to enforce. On one level, Othello uses "turn'd Turks" as shorthand for cruelty, disorder, and barbarity. On the other hand, the comparison is unstable, since drunken brawling is itself forbidden in Islamic law. As Vitkus points out, the scene ironically attributes to the Turks a form of behavior more typically associated in the play with Christian indiscipline. The moment thus exposes the fragility of the Christian-Turkish binary. Barbarity is no longer safely located outside the Christian world; it emerges from within. The danger is not only the invading Turk but the possibility that Christian identity itself may be corrupted from the inside.

Othello's own identity remains suspended within this volatile space. His account of being "taken by the insolent foe / And sold to slavery, of my redemption thence" (*Othello* 1.3.136–37) links him to the Mediterranean circuits of piracy, captivity, ransom, and conversion described by Vitkus and Danson. The play never clarifies whether Othello was originally Muslim, whether he later became Christian, or whether his "redemption" refers only to physical liberation or also to spiritual conversion. This ambiguity is crucial. As Vitkus suggests, Othello resembles the figure of the renegade: a man whose history implies that he has already crossed boundaries once and may do so again (Vitikus 1997). His racialized description as a "Barbary horse," together with the

representation of his marriage as a kind of seizure, places him within the wider discourse of Turkishness, piracy, and unstable allegiance.

Vitkus pushes this reading further by describing *Othello* as a “tragedy of damnation,” in which Othello’s psychological unmaking also signifies spiritual apostasy. Under Iago’s influence, Othello transforms Desdemona in his imagination from faithful wife to sexual traitor. That imagined sexual fall then produces his own moral and religious fall, as he moves from Christian commander to a figure increasingly associated with tyrannical jealousy, violence, and Ottoman despotism. In this reading, the discourse of “turning Turk” binds together sexual anxiety, masculine insecurity, and confessional dread. The fear is not only that a woman may become unfaithful, but that male loss of control will precipitate a deeper collapse of identity, loyalty, and salvation.

The final act makes this logic explicit. After killing Desdemona, Othello attempts to narrate himself one last time through the story of a “malignant and a turban’d Turk” who “beat a Venetian and traduced the state” (*Othello* 5.2.352–53). By stabbing himself as he recalls killing that Turk, Othello symbolically executes the Turkish self within him: “I took by th’ throat the circumcised dog, / And smote him thus” (5.2.355–56). In early modern English discourse, conversion to Islam was often imaginatively linked to circumcision, which writers could represent as both sexual excess and emasculation (Vitkus, “Turning Turk in *Othello*” 169–70). Othello’s final gesture therefore stages both punishment and self-condemnation. He kills the Turk he believes he has become, but he does so only after having already crossed into murder, spiritual collapse, and irreversible loss.

In this Mediterranean world, actual converts to Islam coexisted with literary figures of conversion and internal betrayal. Othello belongs to both histories. He is a loyal servant of a

Christian state, yet one whose identity is always shadowed by the possibility of another turning toward Turk, toward apostasy, toward a self the play condemns yet cannot entirely separate from the world it inhabits.

1.2.3 Venice and the Islamic Other

When *Othello* unfolds in Venice, the setting does far more than provide a simple geographical backdrop. Shakespeare places the play within a cultural and political landscape already charged with meaning for early modern audiences. For English writers and playwrights, Venice represented a dazzling combination of wealth, trade, diplomacy, and cosmopolitan exchange. It was imagined as one of the great marketplaces of the world, a city where different peoples, languages, and faiths came into contact through commerce and political negotiation (Galery 2018). At the same time, Venice occupied a precarious position between Christian Europe and the Ottoman Empire. Its long history of treaties, truces, and commercial arrangements with the Turks, especially after the loss of Cyprus in 1573, gave it a reputation for political cunning, though also for moral ambiguity in the eyes of other Europeans (Vitkus 1997). Shakespeare's choice of Venice is therefore highly significant: it is a space in which boundaries of race, religion, and political loyalty are not fixed, but constantly tested and renegotiated.

This section explores how the Venetian setting shapes the Senate scenes, *Othello*'s dispatch to Cyprus, and the play's repeated comparison between Venetian authority and Ottoman power. It argues that the play probes the limits of Venetian rationality, tolerance, and civic order, while *Othello*'s rise and fall expose the vulnerabilities hidden beneath the celebrated "myth of Venice." To understand why Venice matters so deeply in *Othello*, it is necessary to recall what Venice represented at the time Shakespeare was writing. In the late sixteenth century, Venice had recently endured the War of Cyprus and lost the island to the Ottoman Empire after the fall of

Nicosia and Famagusta between 1570 and 1573. Even the Christian victory at Lepanto in 1571 did not reverse this outcome. By the 1573 peace settlement, Venice had ceded Cyprus to the Ottomans and agreed to pay a substantial indemnity of 300,000 ducats, underscoring the limits of Venetian power in the eastern Mediterranean. What followed was not renewed holy war, but a tense and pragmatic coexistence. From 1573 onward, Venice and the Ottomans maintained an uneasy peace through diplomacy, negotiation, and mutually necessary commercial arrangements. By the time *Othello* was first performed, around 1603, Cyprus had been under Ottoman rule for roughly thirty years, and Venice had long since adapted to a world in which it had to coexist with, rather than defeat, Ottoman power. As Daniel Vitkus notes, Venice had concluded peace with the Turks in 1573 and renewed commercial arrangements again by 1595 (Vitkus 1997).



Figure 1. Map illustrating operations at sea during the Battle of Lepanto (Greece) on Oct. 7, 1571

This geopolitical position shaped both Venice's internal identity and its broader European reputation. Historians have long described the "myth of Venice" as a carefully cultivated image of the Venetian state as uniquely stable, prosperous, and well governed: a republic characterized by security, order, and political wisdom. In English Protestant culture, Venice could therefore be imagined as a rational and comparatively tolerant state, situated between two threatening extremes: papal Rome on one side and Islamic power on the other (Vitkus 1997). Yet this image of balance depended upon a continual process of negotiation with precisely those forces from which Venice claimed to distinguish itself. Lawrence Danson shows that, from the perspective of English Mediterranean experience, Venice formed part of a larger network of Levantine exchange, linked through trade, diplomacy, and travel to places such as Aleppo and other Ottoman centres. It was both a front line of Christendom and a necessary mediator with the so-called enemy. Maria Clara Versiani Galery, drawing on Foucault's concept of heterotopia, similarly describes Venice as a theatrical "other space" in which multiple communities and moral codes converge in unstable but carefully managed balance. In this sense, Shakespeare's decision to place a black Moorish general within Venetian service and to send him to defend Cyprus against the Turks is anything but incidental. Historically and symbolically, Venice was already a place sustained by its economic ties to the Ottoman world, even as it feared Ottoman expansion; a place that prided itself on tolerance while depending on outsiders such as Othello without ever fully incorporating them. It is precisely this Venice, wealthy, vulnerable, politically independent, and deeply entangled with Islam, that provides Shakespeare with the ideal setting in which to question race, religion, loyalty, and the possibility of "turning Turk."

If Venice represents the western pole of Mediterranean trade, Othello's final speech shifts the play imaginatively eastward toward Aleppo. In its closing moments, the play no longer remains confined within the republican space of Venice, but opens onto a wider Levantine geography:

In Aleppo once,
Where a malignant and a turbaned Turk
Beat a Venetian and traduced the state,
I took by the throat the circumcised dog,
And smote him, thus (*Othello* 5.2.362–66)

Why Aleppo, of all places? On first glance, the city seems strangely absent from the rest of the play, appearing only at the end like a fragment from an unexplained past. Yet this apparent distance is precisely what makes it significant. As E. A. J. Honigmann suggests Aleppo appears as an almost ghostly eastern city, a sign of a history that has remained closed to the audience. Michael Neill sees such moments as part of the play's larger fascination with hidden offstage action and obscured histories. But Lawrence Danson reminds us that, for Elizabethan audiences, Aleppo was not a vague Oriental fantasy. It was a real and increasingly familiar point on the routes of Levant trade, well known through travel writing and mercantile reports. John Eldred's account of 1583, for instance, describes the route from Tripoli to Aleppo as a major artery of international commerce, populated by Venetians, Genoese, Florentines, French, Sicilians, Ragusans, and, increasingly, English merchants. Hakluyt presents Aleppo as a place of security where merchants from various parts of Christendom enjoyed freedom of conscience and brought a wide range of rich merchandise to market. William Biddulph likewise describes Aleppo as a

city of many languages and peoples, where Italian functioned as a common lingua franca among Christians (Danson 2002).

Through these travel narratives, Aleppo emerges as an eastern counterpart to Venice, a cosmopolitan commercial centre where religious and ethnic identities intersect in complex ways. It is a city where Jews, Armenians, Persians, Turks, Arabs, Tartars, Indians, and multiple kinds of Christians meet through trade, negotiation, and shared urban life. In the English imagination, Aleppo could therefore function as a “Venice of the East,” a site in which categories such as Moor, Turk, Christian, Muslim, black, white, and tawny became less fixed than English polemic often suggested. Within such a framework, Othello’s reference to Aleppo does more than recount an episode of punishing a “malignant Turk.” It evokes a Mediterranean world in which Christian and Muslim, Venetian and Moor, self and other, are brought into close and unstable contact. The anecdote stages not merely a conflict between civilization and barbarity, but a confrontation between rival and overlapping forms of identity, allegiance, and imperial order.

Taken together, Venice and Aleppo show that *Othello* is fundamentally a Mediterranean tragedy rather than a narrowly English one. Venice represents the self-image of a rich, disciplined, and rational republic positioned between papal authority and Ottoman power. Aleppo, by contrast, offers the image of an Ottoman commercial city marked by diversity, mobility, and negotiated coexistence. Shakespeare places Othello between these two exchange zones and, in the end, relocates his final act of self-judgment from Venice to Aleppo. In doing so, the play unsettles the binaries that structure early modern English thought: Christian and Turk, West and East, black and white. Venice itself profits from the empire it fears, while Aleppo demonstrates that religious and racial belonging in the Mediterranean world is fluid, negotiated, and unstable. Geography in *Othello* is therefore not mere local color. Venice and

Aleppo are form-shaping spaces through which the play explores conversion, otherness, and the uncertain, provisional nature of identity itself.

1.2.4 Early Drama and Literary Encounters Before *Othello*

The decades leading up to *Othello* witnessed the rapid rise of London's commercial theatres alongside the expansion of English trade and political contact with Muslim powers. The establishment of purpose-built playhouses such as The Theatre and The Curtain from 1576 onward transformed drama from a marginal activity into one of the most popular forms of urban entertainment. At the same time, preachers continued to denounce the stage as a site of lust, idleness, and heresy. Because of local hostility, many of London's playhouses were built in the liberties of Bankside, where brothels, bear-baiting arenas, and theatres existed side by side. In these marginal yet vibrant districts, audiences made up of apprentices, merchants, and foreign residents, including "strangers" from North Africa, the Ottoman Empire, and elsewhere, watched plays that converted England's new encounters with the Islamic world into narratives of danger, seduction, violence, and adventure (Brotton 2016).

One of the earliest plays to dramatize this emerging world was Robert Wilson's *The Three Ladies of London* (1581). Through allegorical figures such as Lady Love, Lady Conscience, and Lady Lucre, Wilson links the moral corruption of London to the expanding networks of international commerce. Foreign goods arriving from Italy, "Barbary," Turkey, and "Jewry" are represented not simply as commodities, but as carriers of usury, fraud, and religious error. Muslim merchants and Italian Catholics function in the play as signs of both economic opportunity and spiritual danger, suggesting that contact with Islamic powers might enrich England materially while simultaneously threatening its Protestant identity (Brotton 2016).

Christopher Marlowe's *Tamburlaine the Great* (first performed in 1587) greatly expands this theatrical pattern. Drawing only loosely on the historical figure of Timur, Marlowe creates a Scythian shepherd who rises to conquer Persia, Russia, the Delhi Sultanate, Syria, Aleppo, Damascus, and finally the Ottoman sultan Bayezid I. Tamburlaine is a charismatic overreacher who horrifies and fascinates audiences in equal measure through his ambition, violence, and symbolic destruction of the Qur'an. Formally, Marlowe's use of blank verse (unrhymed iambic pentameter) replaces older dramatic rhythms with a forceful rhetorical style that helped establish the fame of "Marlowe's mighty line." Religiously, the play remains deeply ambiguous. At times, Tamburlaine appears almost as a Protestant scourge of the Turks; at others, he assumes the role of an atheist who mocks all gods, including the Prophet Muhammad, while drawing on surprisingly detailed knowledge of Islamic traditions, such as the Qur'anic tree of Zaqqūm (Brotton 2016).

Marlowe's influence on Shakespeare should not be understood as a matter of direct plot borrowing. Rather, it takes the form of intertextual dialogue. Shakespeare adapts Marlowe's dramatic innovations, particularly blank verse, the rhetoric of overreaching ambition, and the representation of inner conflict, from a different generic and ideological position. Although Marlowe's surviving canon is relatively small, his influence on Shakespeare is considerable. Shakespeare's plays repeatedly echo Marlovian concerns across tragedy, comedy, and history. Arthur Humphreys, for instance, reads *The Jew of Malta* and *The Merchant of Venice* as two distinct dramatic responses to mercantile culture and religious difference in Mediterranean settings, connected by strong affinities without implying direct imitation (Humphreys 1987). Similarly, recent scholarship has suggested that *Doctor Faustus* served as an important model for Shakespeare in exploring temptation, self-division, and moral crisis (Pasquini 2025). In the

history plays, Meredith Skura argues that *Richard II* revisits problems already explored in Marlowe's *Edward II*, especially the theatrical challenge of representing a vulnerable monarch and the politics of deposition (Skura 1997).

At the same time, English drama found “foreignness” particularly useful for staging European confessional and geopolitical fears. Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* belongs to this same theatrical environment. Although the exact date of the play remains debated, it certainly predates its recorded performance in 1592, and its themes become clearer when placed within the atmosphere of growing anti-Spanish anxiety in the late 1580s and 1590s (Mulryne 1996). In Mulryne's reading, “Spain” is not merely a realistic location but a metaphorical setting for a corrupt and corrupting world in which time and revelation expose hidden crimes and produce moral retribution. The Iberian setting, shaped by dynastic politics and marriage alliances, transforms the promise of order into a spectacle of disorder, a vision that would have resonated with audiences increasingly concerned by the Spanish threat. What matters here is that the theatre's representations of political and religious enemies could overlap. Anti-Spanish hostility could exist alongside, and sometimes reinforce, broader habits of interpreting international conflict through religious difference, a logic that also shaped later dramatic constructions of Islam and the Moor (Vitkus 2003).

After the success of *Tamburlaine*, other playwrights quickly recognized that Islamic settings and characters could function as powerful dramatic engines. One of the most important examples is George Peele's *The Battle of Alcazar* (c. 1589), which dramatizes the battle of Alcácer Quibir in Morocco in 1578 and, as Brotton notes, is the first English play set entirely in Morocco and the first to place a Moor at the centre of the English stage (Brotton 2016). The play opposes the legitimate ruler, “Abdelmelec, king of Morocco” to his usurping nephew “Muly

Mahamet the Moor.” Drawing on contemporary ethnographic distinctions, Peele differentiates between “white or tawny Moors” and “black Moors” and translates this theory directly into stage practice. The actor playing Muly Mahamet reportedly appeared in burnt cork, oil, and black gloves, becoming a demonic “blackamoor,” while Abdelmelec appears as a virtuous “tawny Moor” clothed in white robes (Brotton 2016). As Bartels argues, this marks an important step in the racialization of the Moor on the English stage: complexion, religion, and political legitimacy are woven together so that blackness, Islam, and tyranny become linked, while a lighter-skinned Moor is made to appear safer and more compatible with English commercial interests (Bartels 2008).

Yet *The Battle of Alcazar* does not neatly resolve these tensions. In the final scenes, almost all of the central figures die, and the only survivor is Muly Mahamet Seth, who would later become Elizabeth I’s Moroccan ally. In the play itself, however, he does little more than order the mutilation of Muly Mahamet’s corpse and arrange a Christian burial for the Portuguese king Sebastian (Brotton 2016). There is no chorus to impose a final moral judgment. Instead, the audience is left to navigate among the pompous Abdelmelec, the devout but defeated Sebastian, the scheming Muly Mahamet, and the opportunistic English mercenary Stukeley. In Vitkus’s terms, this is the “multicultural Mediterranean” brought onto the stage: a world of unstable alliances in which Christians, Muslims, and Europeans continually renegotiate power, commerce, and belief, and where the possibility of “turning Turk” or shifting loyalties always remains present (Vitkus 2003). Peele’s play therefore demonstrates that the Islamic world could serve not only to demonize the Moor but also to stage England’s own contradictory desires for both alliance and distance.

By the early 1590s, this combination of faith, ambition, and ethnicity had become standard theatrical material. Political histories, travel narratives, and printed sermons about Turks, Moors, and Persians supplied London's playhouses with stories of tyrannical sultans, redeemed captives, apostates, and holy war. Brotton notes that between 1576 and 1603, more than sixty plays featuring Turks, Moors, or Persians were staged, and of the roughly thirty performed between 1587 and 1593, at least ten openly acknowledged their debt to *Tamburlaine* (Brotton 2016). Robert Greene's *The First Part of the Tragical Reign of Selimus* (c. 1588–90) offers a clear example. In that play, Selim I, the Ottoman sultan, murders his brothers and poisons his father Bayezid II in a ruthless struggle for power, combining Tamburlaine's violent overreaching with an explicitly Ottoman setting (Brotton 2016). As Vitkus argues, such "Turk plays" allowed English audiences to work through anxieties about empire, cruelty, and religious difference in a fictional but highly sensationalized form (Vitkus 2003).

Taken together, these pre-*Othello* plays develop a recognizable stage grammar for representing the Islamic world and its European counterparts. Foreign courts become dramatic laboratories for testing English fears about trade, empire, confessional difference, and unstable identity. By the time Shakespeare wrote *Othello*, the theatre had already trained its audiences to interpret Mediterranean settings through overlapping languages of religion, race, and political threat. These are the conditions that make the figure of the Moor both intelligible and volatile on the Jacobean stage.

CHAPTER 2: RELIGION, RACE, AND OTHERNESS IN *OTHELLO*

2.1 Who Is “The Moor”?

In *Othello*, “the Moor” never functions as a simple label for geographic origin. It is instead a historically layered signifier, one already burdened in early modern Europe with a wide range of meanings. The term reaches back to Roman North African geography, absorbs the memory of medieval conflict between Christian and Muslim worlds, and acquires renewed force in Renaissance oppositions between the “civil” and the “barbarous” (Brann 2009; Karim-Cooper 2023). As a result, “Moor” can simultaneously suggest skin color, regional origin, ethnicity, religion, and moral character. It is precisely this instability that gives the word such power in the play. The term does not simply describe Othello; rather, it repeatedly produces him as a figure of difference; a man whom Venice can admire for his military value while continuing to suspect his social, sexual, and spiritual integrity.

Farah Karim-Cooper identifies this instability as the source of the term’s force. For her, the lack of precision in “Moor” is not a weakness but a form of social power, because classification does not always depend on specificity. On the contrary, vague but loaded terms often work most effectively when they allow speakers to impose order, make assumptions, and justify predictions without needing exact knowledge (Karim-Cooper 2023). This chapter approaches “the Moor” not as a stable identity to be decoded, whether North African, sub-Saharan, Muslim, convert, or otherwise, but as a historically stratified signifier whose instability enables it to absorb multiple anxieties at once. In *Othello*, that instability allows the term to gather together signs of Barbary, Turkey, witchcraft, blackness, and civilizational threat.

Jonathan Brann's work is especially useful for tracing the earlier history of this process. He shows that the term "Moor" was not neutral in its development. In medieval Iberian texts, it rapidly accumulated racialized, moralized, and religiously charged meanings. In the thirteenth-century *Primera crónica general*, for example, the Moors are described through exaggerated images of blackness, speed, cruelty, and deceit. Such writing does not merely describe an enemy; it turns bodily appearance into a sign of moral danger, making enemy identity seem visible, natural, and self-evident (Brann 2009). Brann's point is not only that blackness enters the discourse, but that it enters as part of a larger logic in which race, religion, and hostility become mutually reinforcing.

A related intensification appears in the *Poema de Fernán González*, where the Moor is given an explicitly religious and demonological charge. Brann notes that the poem presents Moors as idolaters, practitioners of spells and charms, and followers of demonic teachings; they are associated with the occult, with devils, and with forms of false religious power that threaten Christian order (Brann 2009). In these traditions, "Moor" moves far beyond any narrow ethnic or geographic definition. It becomes a Christian polemical term that fuses Africanness, Muslimness, and spiritual danger into a single category of opposition. By the thirteenth century, Brann argues, "Moor" and "Christian" had become increasingly fixed opposites in Castilian culture, articulated through language that was at once political, racial, religious, and moral (Brann 2009). This helps explain why the term remained so portable and powerful in later European discourse; it was already broad enough to absorb multiple forms of alterity.

The term's association with "barbarous" and "Barbary" further strengthens this semantic pressure. In classical usage, *barbarian* originally referred to foreignness and unintelligible speech, but in Renaissance discourse it increasingly became part of a moral geography dividing

the “civil” from the “uncivil.” Karim-Cooper shows that in early modern English usage, “barbarous” was often mapped onto the Barbary Coast and onto “Barbary Moors,” while still carrying older associations with ineloquence, roughness, cruelty, and lack of civility (Karim-Cooper 2023). In this sense, “barbarous” does not merely describe behavior; it racializes and moralizes groups through the places with which they are associated. The relationship between “Moor” and “barbarous” is therefore crucial: “Moor” supplies the figure, while “barbarous” supplies the evaluative judgment that turns that figure into a civilizational threat.

Taken together, Brann and Karim-Cooper show that “the Moor” is not a timeless or singular identity. The term begins in Roman and North African geography, develops through early Iberian usage, and hardens in Christian historiography into a broad label for Muslims, increasingly saturated with racial description and narratives of illicit or demonic power (Brann 2009). By the early modern English period, that long history meets an expansive and unstable lexicon in which “Moor” can stretch across phenotype, geography, and religion while still functioning as a coherent emblem of alterity. It also intersects with “Barbary” and “barbarous” within a moral vocabulary that ranks people on a civilizational scale (Karim-Cooper 2023). In *Othello*, this slipperiness becomes a dramatic method. Shakespeare takes a word already capable of signifying blackness, North African location, and Islamicate affiliation, and puts it to work as a social instrument on stage.

This is why the question of Othello’s identity cannot be solved simply by locating him on a map. What matters is not whether he can be definitively classified as one thing or another, but how the word “Moor” circulates in the play as a technology of sorting, suspicion, and containment (Bartels 2008; Karim-Cooper 2023). Karim-Cooper notes that Iago’s method depends heavily on repetition: he returns obsessively to “the Moor” in order to keep Othello’s

otherness active even in scenes where Othello possesses rank, dignity, and institutional authority (Karim-Cooper 2023). The play opens with precisely this mechanism already in motion. Before Othello appears, he is constructed through a set of degrading and racialized names that fuse blackness to sexual alarm. Roderigo reduces him to “the thick-lips” (*Othello* 1.1.66). Iago then transforms marriage into bestial violation: “an old black ram / Is tupping your white ewe” (*Othello* 1.1.87–88). The logic intensifies in the phrase “your daughter cover’d with a Barbary horse” (*Othello* 1.1.110–11), where “Barbary” functions as more than a geographical reference. It moralizes flesh as barbarity and turns racialized desire into a sign of pollution (Karim-Cooper 2023).

The language of these early scenes also evokes older associations of demonic influence and monstrous generation. Read in light of Brann’s medieval materials, the movement is familiar: “Moor” slides easily from bodily difference into spiritual suspicion (Brann 2009). This is why the play’s racial language should not be treated as merely casual abuse. It is part of a larger historical discourse in which blackness, Islam, sexuality, and moral danger have long been linked. Eldred Jones and later critics helped demonstrate the importance of this background, but Butcher’s reading remains especially useful because it resists the attempt to soften the racial force of Shakespeare’s naming. For Butcher, the play’s repeated references to Othello as black cannot be dismissed as vague “swarthy”; they belong to a deliberate economy of language that repeatedly marks him through explicit blackness (Butcher 1952). This pattern continues well beyond Iago’s opening outbursts. Brabantio recoils from Othello’s “sooty bosom” (*Othello* 1.2.70), while even the Duke’s apparent praise “your son-in-law is far more fair than black” (*Othello* 1.3.290) still relies on a chromatic scale in which blackness remains the negative term.

One of the central ironies of the play lies here: Venice can value Othello as a soldier and yet continue to recast him as a racial threat. The term “Moor” gives the Venetian world a way to admire and fear him at the same time, without altering its deeper structures of exclusion. Butcher is also helpful regarding the debated reference to “Mauritania” (*Othello* 4.2.229). Some critics have taken that place-name as evidence that Othello is a “swarthy Moor” from Mauritania and therefore not black in the stronger sense. Butcher rejects this move, arguing that the play’s repeated black markers cannot be neutralized by a single geographic reference (Butcher 1952). The point of “Mauritania” is not that it solves Othello; rather, it demonstrates the double capacity of the term. It places him within a North African horizon while still allowing the Venetian imagination to insist on blackness as the visible sign of danger. That is exactly the semantic flexibility Karim-Cooper identifies as the enduring power of “Moor” (Karim-Cooper 2023).

Taken as a whole, *Othello* becomes the place where the long history of the word “Moor” is reactivated as domestic tragedy. Brann shows how the term hardens historically into a Christian polemical category that fuses Africanness, Muslimness, and moral threat (Brann 2009). Karim-Cooper shows how early modern English usage preserves that instability while making it socially decisive: “Moor” can slide across phenotype, geography, and religion while still authorizing confident hierarchies and exclusions (Karim-Cooper 2023). Butcher, meanwhile, shows how Shakespeare turns that instability into a practical stage mechanism through repeated naming, so that “the Moor” becomes not simply what Othello is called, but the means through which others define what can be believed about him sexually, spiritually, and politically (Butcher 1952). In this sense, Islam in *Othello* is not only a question of Othello’s private creed or personal origin. It is embedded in the word’s cultural grammar. “The Moor” is the name through which Venice keeps translating Othello into an outsider, and through which the play stages the

convergence of racial formation, Islamicate association, and civilizational fear as the precondition of its tragedy.

2.2 Prejudice and Marriage

In *Othello*, marriage is far more than a private bond between two individuals; it becomes a public institution through which Venice interprets race, religion, and fear. Before Desdemona can speak for herself, the city has already recast her choice as contamination, theft, or enchantment. This act of interpretive violence makes prejudice the governing language through which the marriage is understood.

The union between Othello and Desdemona is framed as a racial and sexual crisis even before either of the lovers is allowed to define it. Iago's description of Othello as "an old black ram / Is tugging your white ewe" (*Othello* 1.1.87–88) does more than insult him. It establishes a way of reading the relationship in which blackness is associated with dangerous sexuality and interracial desire becomes a threat to social order. From the opening moments of the play, prejudice is not a rhetorical excess placed around the marriage from the outside; it is the very condition that makes the marriage appear improbable and scandalous in the eyes of Venetian society.

That logic becomes institutionalized in the Senate scene. Brabantio cannot comprehend how his daughter could "fall in love with what she fear'd to look on" (*Othello* 1.3.98), and so he refuses to acknowledge the intelligibility of her choice. Instead, he explains the marriage through coercion and illicit means:

She is abused, stol'n from me, and corrupted
By spells and medicines bought of mountebanks;
For nature so preposterously to err,

Being not deficient, blind, or lame of sense,
Sans witchcraft could not. (*Othello* 1.3.60–64)

When the Duke asks Othello, “Did you by indirect and forced courses / Subdue and poison this young maid’s affections?” (*Othello* 1.3.111–12), the range of available explanations becomes clear. If Desdemona truly loves Othello, then the state assumes that such love must have been produced either by force or by witchcraft. As Filiz Barin argues, this scene reveals how early modern Venetian-Christian ideology protects itself against an unacceptable possibility: that Desdemona might freely choose the racial and cultural “other” (Barin 2010). Her desire is therefore recast as enchantment, captivity, or violation, as though intimacy with Othello were equivalent to attachment to an enemy or captor. Prejudice does not merely oppose the marriage; it furnishes the very rationale by which the marriage becomes legible to the state.

Jack D’Amico’s reading of Brabantio helps to clarify the ideological stakes of this refusal. For Brabantio, Desdemona’s choice disrupts the assumed unity of paternal authority, social value, and civic reason. Her consent, together with Othello’s valued role in Venetian service, is still not enough to make the Moor “fair” in Brabantio’s eyes (D’Amico 1991). As a result, Desdemona herself becomes estranged; by choosing Othello, she is made an outsider to her own family, and that break cannot simply be repaired by the Duke’s conventional attempts at reconciliation. Particularly important for an Islam-focused reading is D’Amico’s observation that Brabantio’s sense of loss is implicitly aligned with geopolitical loss. He can no more accept the loss of his daughter than the state can accept the loss of Cyprus to the Turk, because custom, not love, remains the fixed standard of judgment (D’Amico 1991). In this way, the play places Desdemona’s marriage within a wider Mediterranean political imagination shaped by Ottoman rivalry, unstable loyalties, and the persistent fear of “the Turk.”

Even when the Senate provisionally legitimizes the marriage, Desdemona must still answer the prejudices through which it has already been interpreted. She attempts to relocate judgment away from visible difference and toward inward value when she says that she “saw Othello’s visage in his mind” (*Othello* 1.3.252). Farah Karim-Cooper reads this as a strategic appeal to an idea of internal beauty that might counter what Venice treats as Othello’s natural blackness (Karim-Cooper 2023). Yet the scene also makes clear that Desdemona’s love is not independent of difference; it is mediated through it. She listens with a “greedy ear” and “devour[s] up” Othello’s stories (*Othello* 1.3.148–49), and those narratives of travel, danger, captivity, and survival are inseparable from his racialized position in the world. As Karim-Cooper emphasizes, Desdemona is drawn not simply to Othello’s virtue in the abstract, but to the heart that has endured these extraordinary experiences and to his power to recount them (Karim-Cooper 2023). The marriage thus enters the play under a structural paradox: Othello is desirable precisely because he is marked as extraordinary and different, yet that same difference is repeatedly invoked to insist that the marriage cannot be genuine unless it has been produced by coercion.

D’Amico’s discussion is also useful for understanding Iago’s role within this larger ideological system. Iago does not invent prejudice out of nothing. Rather, he exploits an already existing cultural framework in which Othello’s marriage is perceived as anomalous, unstable, and socially threatening. In his hands, the marriage becomes a “portent” a sign that seems to endanger the fixed norms of Venetian society because it exposes the tension between private choice and public expectation in matters of race, lineage, and social order (D’Amico 1991). Importantly, D’Amico notes that Shakespeare does not stage Iago’s manipulation primarily through explicit anti-Islamic doctrine. Instead, Iago mobilizes racialized fantasies of the Moor as

a barbarian figure whose difference is imagined as a deviation from civilized norms (D'Amico 1991). Even when doctrinal hostility toward Islam is not directly foregrounded, the marriage remains structured by a Mediterranean political imagination formed in relation to Ottoman power, in which racial otherness and anxieties about cultural difference can function as proxies for religious alterity.

This contradiction becomes the psychological condition of the marriage itself. As Peter Hollindale argues, the tragedy develops through the widening gap between what the lovers believe about one another and what Venice believes about them, between private trust and public interpretation, between intimate truth and social readability (Hollindale 1989). Desdemona's love rests on the belief that affection can move beyond custom; Venetian society, by contrast, treats the match as fundamentally beyond belief, and it is precisely this disbelief that makes Iago's insinuations plausible. Once Othello begins to demand certainty, prejudice furnishes the standard by which evidence is judged. In that moment, "proof" becomes the substitute for trust, and the marriage begins to collapse under the pressure of a social logic that has distrusted it from the start.

In the end, prejudice makes the very idea of union uninhabitable. Venice is willing to benefit from the Moor's service, but it cannot sustain the possibility of genuine intimacy with him. The marriage is therefore never allowed to remain simply a marriage. It is continually translated into a problem of race, legitimacy, and public order. Prejudice becomes the medium through which the relationship is judged, tested, and finally transformed into the fatal logic of certainty. In this sense, the tragedy of *Othello* lies not only in Iago's manipulation or in Othello's jealousy, but also in the fact that the marriage itself is from the beginning embedded in a cultural system that cannot imagine such a union without turning it into a threat.

2.3 Othello's Handkerchief

Othello's handkerchief is not a minor prop but the play's most dangerous form of "evidence": a small textile that turns suspicion into certainty. Othello treats it as the condition of marital stability, an object that must be guarded, preserved, and controlled so that love is translated into a rule of possession. Ian Smith argues that this is precisely why the handkerchief matters for race and religion: it becomes a portable stand-in for Othello himself, carrying an African and Egypto-Islamic genealogy into the Venetian bedchamber and making the marriage legible through an object marked as foreign in origin and meaning (Smith 2013).

"Give me your handkerchief." (Othello 3.4)

The bluntness of Othello's demand is revealing. The handkerchief is not requested as a sentimental reminder but demanded like proof. It is the kind of object that can be produced, displayed, transferred, and therefore weaponized exactly what Iago needs to convert insinuation into a "fact." Smith's intervention begins by challenging a critical reflex that repeatedly pulls the handkerchief back into an English domestic world: critics often presume it is white, and then treat its embroidered "strawberries" as evidence of familiar English needlework, which re-centers Desdemona's body and a red-and-white purity aesthetic (capillary blood and "white flesh") as the handkerchief's primary meaning (Smith 2013). That domestication matters because it dulls the play's insistence that the token is not "home-grown" at all, but routed through African and Egyptian histories.

"That handkerchief / Did an Egyptian to my mother give; / She was a charmer ..." (Othello 3.4)

Othello's "origin story" does not place the handkerchief inside Venice or even Europe; it begins with an Egyptian woman described as a "charmer," a figure whose knowledge sits on the boundary between expertise and witchcraft. Smith stresses that this genealogy is not decorative;

it establishes “rules of ownership, safekeeping, and fidelity” that are transmitted through maternal inheritance and then imposed upon Desdemona, the only non-African link in the chain (Smith 2013). The handkerchief therefore imports into the marriage an Islamicate-coded provenance that Venice can desire as exotic commodity while simultaneously fearing as non-Christian contamination.

“‘Tis true. There’s magic in the web of it.

A sibyl, that had numbered in the world

The sun to course two hundred compasses,

In her prophetic fury sewed the work.

The worms were hallowed that did breed the silk,

And it was dyed in mummy which the skilful

Conserved of maidens’ hearts.” (Othello 3.4)

What makes the token especially unsettling is that Othello emphasizes its manufacture: sewing, silk production, and dyeing “There’s magic in the web of it” (Othello 3.4). The speech fuses craft and enchantment so tightly that “magic” becomes inseparable from material practice: the object is powerful because it is made crafted, processed, altered. Smith insists that Shakespeare’s wording matters here: “dyed” is not a vague synonym for “stained” or “soaked,” but a technical claim about added color, which undermines the long critical habit of imagining a naturally white cloth (Smith 2013). The handkerchief’s “magic,” then, is not an abstraction; it is embedded in the chemistry and labor of textiles. “It was dyed in mummy ...” (Othello 3.4) This is the line where love and death are chemically fused. Smith reconstructs “mummy” (*mumia*/*mumiya*) as a substance associated with bitumen and embalming—black, viscous matter that entered European markets as a medical commodity, increasingly imagined as the dark liquid conserved from

bodies and eventually as the bodies themselves (Smith 2013). The point is not merely that mummy is “exotic,” but that its material properties press toward blackness: Johnson’s gloss describes mummy as a thick, opaque “liquor” of a “blackish” color, making “dyed in mummy” a literal instruction for darkness (Smith 2013). Reading the line this way reorients the handkerchief away from an assumed white purity-token and toward a black textile whose color is born from embalming, extraction, and preservation—death processed into dye. “Make it a darling like your precious eye.” (Othello 3.4) Othello’s command to cherish the cloth intensifies the paradox: this “darling” object is dyed in corpse-material and “conserved of maidens’ hearts.” The token binds a fantasy of chastity (“maidens”) to an extraction logic that is anything but innocent purity becomes an ingredient, not an essence. Smith argues that this is precisely where the handkerchief becomes a “visible metonym” for Othello, a black textile whose death-derived dye makes it resonate with the racialized meanings attached to Othello’s body, so that Desdemona’s possession of it is also a form of carrying “black African love” into the center of Venetian domestic space (Smith 2013).

The mummy detail also draws the play into a wider early modern discourse about cannibalism and “barbarism.” Smith notes the cultural anxiety that medicinal mummy could be understood as a form of consuming human remains, and he emphasizes the hypocrisy this exposes: Europeans could consume corpse-matter as “medicine” while imagining cannibalism as the sign of racialized others (Smith 2013). Within Othello, that contradiction sharpens the ideological violence of the plot: the very material Europeans desire and circulate becomes the pretext for confirming fantasies of Moorish monstrosity once it is attached to Othello’s body and marriage. “So will I turn her virtue into pitch.” (Othello 2.3) Iago’s phrasing becomes more legible in Smith’s frame. “Pitch” belongs to the same black bituminous register as mummy: it is

a language of darkening and contamination that imagines virtue as something that can be turned black. Smith reads this as part of the play's racial logic: Desdemona's sexuality is narratively "blackened" not through evidence of her desire but through the circulation of a blackened object associated with Othello (Smith 2013).

Smith then ties the handkerchief to the theatre's own technologies of racial representation. Early modern performance often fabricated blackness through textiles black cloth and related materials functioning as an "epidermal prosthesis," a manufactured surface that makes "the Moor" visible (Smith 2013, 5–6). In this context, a handkerchief dyed in mummy echoes the image of embalmed bodies wrapped in darkened linen and becomes metatheatrical: it reminds the audience that race, onstage and in the plot, is materially produced (Smith 2013). The handkerchief is therefore not only symbolic; it belongs to a material economy in which blackness is literally made by dye, cloth, and display.

Overall, the handkerchief functions less as a romantic keepsake than as a material mechanism that makes "purity" readable and therefore punishable. Smith shows that the common tendency to imagine a white, domesticated handkerchief redirects racial meaning onto Desdemona's body and sustains an Anglo-European purity aesthetic. But Shakespeare's own language emphasizes manufacture and dyeing: "dyed in mummy" ties the cloth to embalming, black bitumen, and corpse-medicine, fusing love with death and grounding the handkerchief's blackness in material substance. In this frame, the token becomes Othello's portable double, and once it circulates among men, it turns suspicion into "proof," enabling jealousy to harden into fatal certainty.

2.4 Tragic End

The final movement of *Othello* functions as a public lesson in the making and unmaking of racial and religious identity. In the last act, the tragedy does not simply depict the destruction of Desdemona and Othello as individuals; it also dramatizes the violent cultural work through which a Christian society secures itself against the figure of the non-Christian stranger. What appears on the surface as jealousy gradually reveals itself as a structure of racial and religious sorting. In this structure, the marriage bed becomes a border: between Christian purity and imagined Islamic depravity, between white femininity as protected property and black masculinity as danger, and between the promise of inclusion in Venice and the ever-present possibility of expulsion from it (Karim-Cooper 2023).

This chapter reads the tragic end through Islam, not because the play frequently names Islam directly, but because its moral vocabulary and stage imagery repeatedly mobilize the Christian/infidel opposition that shaped English perceptions of the Ottoman Empire, Morocco, and the Mediterranean more broadly. As the scholarship on “turning Turk” has shown, conversion anxiety was not a marginal concern in early modern England. It was a cultural obsession, deeply entangled with trade, piracy, diplomacy, and the fear that the Christian subject might be seduced or compelled into Islamic affiliation (Vitkus 1997). In *Othello*, however, this anxiety is not merely a topical background. It becomes a tragic mechanism. Othello is repeatedly forced back into the figure of the “Moor” as an Islamic threat, even while he serves Christian Venice with loyalty and distinction. Critics have therefore read the final scenes as moments of religious identity crisis, in which Othello attempts to recover a morally intelligible Christian narrative for himself while simultaneously revealing how deeply he has internalized the oppositions that define him as alien (Johanyak 2019).

Karim-Cooper locates a crucial turning point in Act 4, Scene 1, where Othello's anguish becomes so intense that "language gives way to the body" (Karim-Cooper 2023). This moment matters because it shows how racial difference is translated into civilizational difference. The rhetorical mastery that once secured Othello's place within Venice begins to fail. His speech fragments, becomes repetitive, and loses authority. Karim-Cooper argues that this collapse into ineloquence must be read alongside racial stereotypes that associated African speech with rudeness, irrationality, and a lack of self-command. Othello's body and voice are thus no longer interpreted as signs of honorable suffering or emotional crisis; instead, they are re-read according to a pre-existing discourse in which blackness signifies moral and spiritual disorder.

This shift becomes visible when the handkerchief returns as an obsessive trigger and Othello's fit is staged as a form of public humiliation: "I tremble at it... Is't possible? Confess! handkerchief! O devil!" (*Othello* 4.1.39–43). Although the line does not explicitly invoke Islam, its logic echoes a Christian demonology that has long treated the foreign object, charm, or "medicine" as evidence of spiritual danger. Earlier in the play, the handkerchief had already been framed as an inherited object marked by foreignness and quasi-magical power. In Act 4, it becomes the device through which Othello is pushed into the very stereotype that Venice can recognize and condemn. The stage direction, "[He] falls in a trance," turns private suffering into a public spectacle. As Karim-Cooper notes, Shakespearean drama contains other bodily collapses, but Othello's fit is specifically racialized; his loss of consciousness is made to signify something about blackness itself (Karim-Cooper 2023). This is one of the central operations of the play's racial-religious logic; it converts inward crisis into outward diagnosis and reads bodily breakdown as proof of inherent defect.

Iago's response intensifies this diagnostic gaze. Rather than helping Othello, he responds with a delighted command: "Work on, / My medicine, work!" (*Othello* 4.1.44–45). The line is chilling because it casts Iago as a counterfeit priest or physician, administering a "medicine" that is in fact rhetorical poison. Karim-Cooper compares this cruelty to recognizable scenes of anti-black violence, in which the suffering of a black man is met not with care but with suspicion, derision, and the insinuation that his distress confirms his own irrationality or criminality (Karim-Cooper 2023). In *Othello*, however, the "medicine" is not only personal manipulation; it is ideological treatment. It pushes Othello toward a "truth" that Christian Venice is already prepared to believe that the Moor is naturally disordered, and that his marriage to a white Christian woman can only end in corruption and violence.

This is where the scholarship on "turning Turk" becomes structurally important. Vitkus argues that the play repeatedly stages Othello as a figure vulnerable to conversion, whether in a strictly doctrinal sense or symbolically, through the way he is made to "revert" to the identity Venice fears (Vitkus 1997). The trance is not a literal moment of conversion, but it is a theatrical moment of reclassification. Othello becomes visible, to others and to the audience, as a body slipping back into the category of the non-Christian other.

Immediately after this collapse, the play choreographs a scene of misrecognition. Iago questions Cassio about Bianca in a way that makes Othello hear the exchange as if it concerned Desdemona. Karim-Cooper emphasizes how rapidly this drives Othello from grief into fantasies of bodily fragmentation and ritual punishment (Karim-Cooper 2023). At first, he imagines violence in dismembered form: "chop her into messes!" (*Othello* 4.1.196). Soon, under Iago's guidance, this fantasy becomes more intimate and more symbolic: "strangle her in her bed — even the bed she hath contaminated" (*Othello* 4.1.204–05). This is one of the most important

lines for understanding Islam's place in the play's tragic imagination. The word "contaminated" does not merely express jealousy. It frames sexuality as pollution and turns the marriage bed into a site where purity has been stained. Early modern Christian polemic frequently represented Islam as a contaminating force associated with illicit sexuality, misrule, and corrupted law. Within that broader cultural context, the force of the line cannot be separated from the symbolic meaning of Desdemona's whiteness and Othello's Moorishness. Even though Othello is a baptized general in Venetian service, the discussion of his marriage repeatedly returns to a fantasy of Christian purity threatened by foreign invasion (Clegg 2006).

The tragedy also makes clear that this is not merely Othello's private fantasy. It becomes a public spectacle in which the state itself witnesses and judges the Moor's "fall." When Lodovico sees Othello strike Desdemona, he responds: "Is this the noble Moor whom our full senate / Call all in all sufficient?" (*Othello* 4.1.264–65). The phrasing is crucial. Othello had been "all in all sufficient" because he occupied a role Venice could manage: the disciplined outsider, useful to the state, loyal to its military order, and legible within its civic structure. But that status was never the same as unconditional belonging. The moment he begins to resemble the stereotypes Venice already associates with him, violent, uncontrolled, sexually jealous, he becomes recognizable as the figure the state had always feared might lie beneath the surface. Karim-Cooper describes this as "the beginning of the end," because Othello is now visibly "slipping into stereotype" before the eyes of Venice (Karim-Cooper 2023).

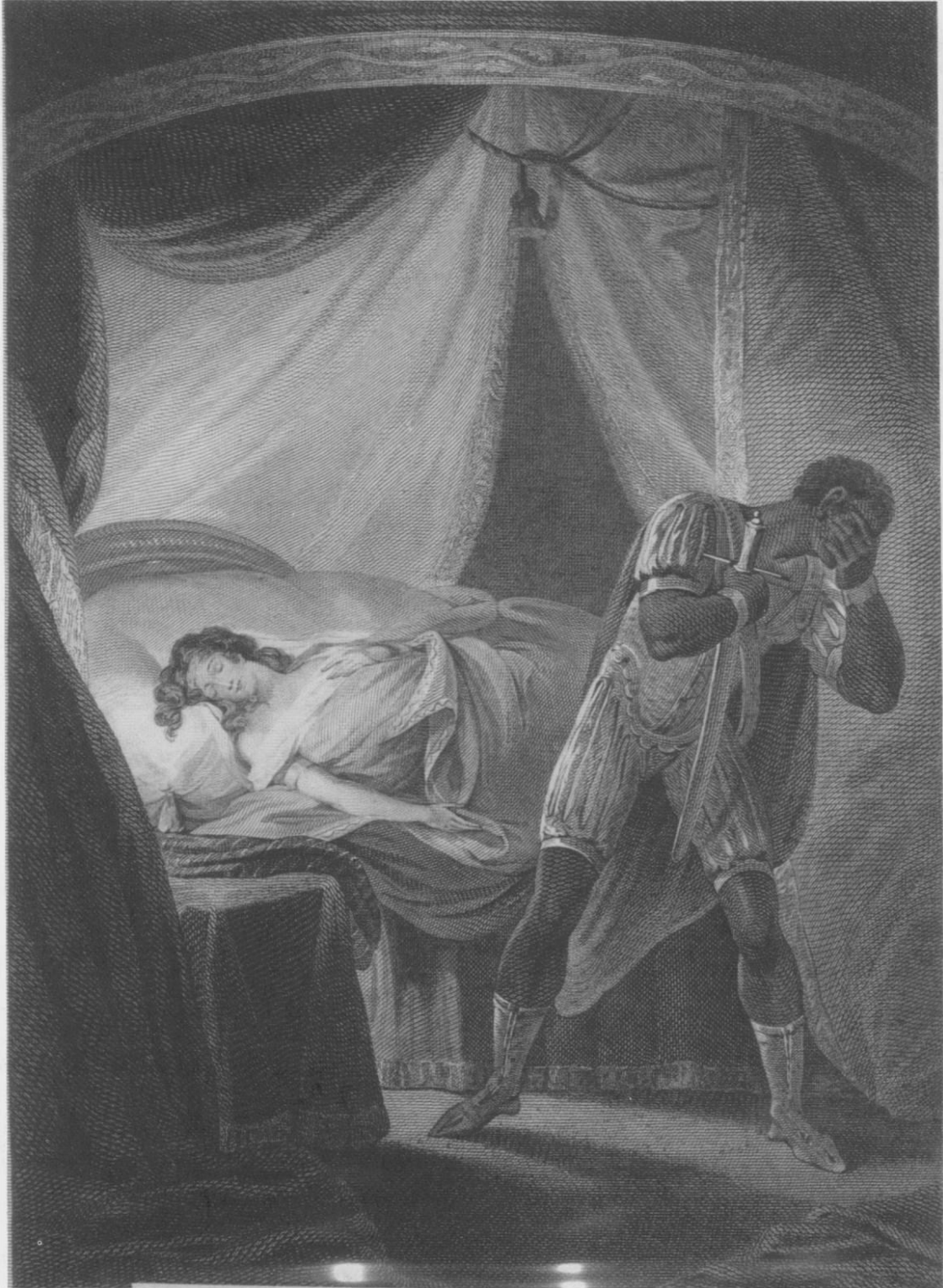


Figure 2. George Noble, after Josiah Boydell, *Othello Act 5, Scene 2*, 1800, etching and engraving

From the perspective of Islam's role in the play, the implication is stark. The Moor's assimilation is reversible. It can be granted provisionally and withdrawn by public consensus. Significantly, it is withdrawn through a narrative centered on sexual danger and polluted white femininity, a narrative that maps easily onto early modern Christian fears of the Muslim other as a threat to women, lineage, and communal purity (Matar 1998). Yet Karim-Cooper also introduces an important complication: Shakespeare does not simply map whiteness onto goodness and blackness onto evil. Instead, he shows how these meanings are strategically worn and manipulated. The play gives Iago the language for this directly: "When devils will the blackest sins put on / They do suggest at first with heavenly shows / As I do now" (*Othello* 2.3.346–48). The line is crucial because it reveals how Christian-looking surfaces can conceal devilish intent. Karim-Cooper links Iago to the cultural figure of the "white devil" fair in appearance, corrupt within, familiar from sermons such as Thomas Adams's *The White Devil* and from tragedy such as Webster's play of the same title (Karim-Cooper 2023).

This matters because it shows that early modern moral discourse could detach color from fixed essence and reattach it to performance, behavior, and purpose. Iago, as a "white devil," is inwardly black in moral intention, while Othello, described earlier as "far more fair than black," can be symbolically whitened only so long as he performs successfully within elite Venetian space (Karim-Cooper 2023). This instability in the meaning of color mirrors the instability of religious identity as imagined in early modern culture, something that could be worn outwardly, betrayed inwardly, or lost under pressure. As Degenhardt argues, early modern drama repeatedly stages conversion and resistance not as purely theological events, but as social performances subject to surveillance and reinterpretation (Degenhardt 2010). Color, in this sense, becomes a language for reading the soul, and religion is never far from that reading. If whiteness stands for

Christian virtue, then the “white devil” becomes a nightmare figure: one who looks like virtue, speaks like virtue, and yet embodies corruption. Iago succeeds precisely because Venice is prepared to trust the familiar insider, the man marked by whiteness, over the outsider, the Moor. The tragedy exposes not only racial prejudice, but a religious logic of suspicion in which the stranger is presumed dangerous while the familiar may hide evil in plain sight.

The play’s treatment of Desdemona is central to this logic. From the opening scene onward, she is positioned as a figure of white value through a contrast that is at once racial, moral, and religious: “an old black ram / Is tupping your white ewe” (*Othello* 1.1.87–88). From that moment on, Desdemona is repeatedly praised through terms that link fairness to goodness: she is “fair,” “gentle,” precious, virtuous, and idealized. These are not neutral compliments. They participate in a cultural system in which white skin functions as the visible sign of inward purity, a logic reinforced by Renaissance beauty ideals, portraiture, and Christian iconography (Karim-Cooper 2023). The tragedy depends on this system, because jealousy can only become convincing once the audience is made to believe that virtue is something visible and therefore something that can be stained.

This is why Iago describes his work through a pigment metaphor: he will “turn her virtue into pitch” (*Othello* 2.3.355). Karim-Cooper reads this as a literal movement from white to black, a rewriting of Desdemona’s body as though it were a surface to be marked (Karim-Cooper 2023). The play reinforces this metaphor later when it imagines her as “fair paper” and a “goodly book” written over with the black inscription of “whore” (*Othello* 4.2). At the level of plot, this is misogynistic slander. At the level of racial-religious structure, it is the transformation of the Christian woman into a contaminated figure and thus one who may be punished. Karim-Cooper further shows how Desdemona is made to “change color” in Othello’s imagination: she becomes

first a paradoxical “fair devil” (*Othello* 3.3.48), then simply “devil” (*Othello* 4.1.239), and finally an “impudent strumpet” and “cunning whore of Venice” (*Othello* 4.2). This progression matters because it shows how quickly Christian virtue, coded through whiteness, can be revoked and replaced with demonic language. Once that language attaches itself to her, violence can be imagined as a form of purification.

In this context, the final bedchamber scene is inseparable from the racial and religious symbolism that has structured the play throughout. Early modern English discourse often imagined Christian identity as the guardian of lawful sexuality and chastity, while Islam was stereotyped as sexually excessive or morally lax. Karim-Cooper notes that medieval and Renaissance art frequently depicted holy figures in light or white pigments and devils in black, reinforcing a symbolic order in which color carried spiritual meaning (Karim-Cooper 2023). This helps explain why *Othello*’s violence can be staged not only as personal tragedy but as an imagined defense of moral order.

The scene in Desdemona’s chamber has long been understood as intensely lyrical, and its theatrical afterlife confirms how powerfully it has been visualized as a confrontation between luminous white femininity and dark foreign masculinity. Karim-Cooper notes early reports of audiences weeping or crying out during performances, while later accounts, from Pepys to nineteenth-century spectators, repeatedly frame the scene through color contrast: Desdemona’s pale body set against *Othello*’s dark and despairing figure (Karim-Cooper 2023). *Othello*’s own lyricism intensifies this visual theology. When he approaches Desdemona with the language often associated with “Put out the light, and then put out the light,” he imagines the murder as the extinguishing of a flame. Karim-Cooper reads the scene as one staged in candlelight, with Desdemona’s pallor glowing beside *Othello*’s darkened face (Karim-Cooper 2023). In a culture

that links whiteness to virtue, that glow is not merely beautiful; it is accusatory, as though her skin itself bears witness against him.

The poetry of the scene is therefore inseparable from its violence: “Yet she must die, else she’ll betray more men. / Put out the light, and then put out the light!” (*Othello* 5.2.6–7).

Shakespeare gives Othello a language of tenderness at the very moment he resolves to kill. The candle imagery frames Desdemona as luminous and almost sacred, as though her body were a living emblem of fairness as virtue. Yet this reverent rhetoric is also a rhetoric of ownership and punishment. Her death is imagined as necessary because her sexuality has been recast as a future danger. The contradiction is structural: the scene invites admiration for poetic refinement while staging the logic of femicide, in which imagined female sexual threat becomes justification for elimination (Karim-Cooper 2023). The word “must” transforms violence into duty, while “betray” turns Desdemona from a person into an abstract risk. In this way, the scene places moral meaning directly onto the female body as a communal sign. Desdemona’s “fairness” becomes visible evidence of the virtue that must be defended, purified, or preserved from contamination.

Reading the scene through Islam clarifies why the murder is repeatedly staged and remembered as more than intimate violence. Desdemona’s body becomes a site onto which communal fantasies about purity, belonging, and threat are projected. If she represents white virtue within a Christian symbolic order, then her marriage to the Moor can be imagined as a scandal against racial and cultural boundaries, one expressed in early modern discourse through fears of mixture, infiltration, and the fragility of Christian social order (Karim-Cooper 2023). This anxiety overlaps with England’s expanding contact with Muslim powers, where trade and diplomacy generated fascination even as they intensified fears about permeability, affiliation, and cultural “turning” (Clegg 2006).

In the final minutes of the play, the action shifts from murder to narration. Othello tries to tell a story about himself that the Venetian state can still recognize as morally intelligible. The exposure of the handkerchief plot collapses the fiction that had governed his judgment; Iago refuses to speak, and Othello turns violence inward (Karim-Cooper 2023). Yet even this final act of self-destruction is framed through the language of hierarchy and stereotype. The phrase “base Indian” (*Othello* 5.2.345) is particularly revealing, because it shows Othello interpreting himself through a European colonial vocabulary in which non-European peoples are marked by failed judgment and incapacity to recognize value. The tragedy lies not only in his having been deceived but also in his now narrating his loss through the very hierarchy that has always threatened to define him. He does not merely regret; he adopts the language of racialized inferiority at the moment of self-recognition. Internalized racism thus becomes one of the drama’s final forms.

The racial logic of the ending is not confined to Othello’s body. The play also constructs whiteness as a powerful racial default, especially through Desdemona’s fairness and the obsessive concern with her chastity (Karim-Cooper 2023). This reshapes the meaning of tragedy itself. The catastrophe is not only the destruction of a marriage, but the destruction generated when whiteness is treated as sacred property and blackness as a threat to that property, an arrangement historically sustained by Christian imperial and civilizational self-understanding. In this context, the earlier praise that Othello is “far more fair than black” signals only conditional assimilation: the Moor can be counted as “fair” only so long as he succeeds in elite white space. Once the marriage collapses, the state and its representatives watch him “return” to the stereotype they were always prepared to believe.

CHAPTER 3: CHANGING CRITICAL AGENDAS

3.1 Early Twentieth-Century Criticism

Early criticism of *Othello* generally approached the play as a tragedy of the human condition, rather than as a text shaped by racial, religious, or geopolitical tensions. What mattered in this tradition was not Othello's position as a Moor within a Christian European society, but his role as a tragic hero whose inner life reveals broader truths about love, jealousy, evil, and suffering. In this sense, early critics did not simply ignore race; instead, they absorbed it into a wider language of moral psychology, symbolism, and universality. This tendency is particularly clear in the work of A. C. Bradley and G. Wilson Knight, whose readings shaped much of early twentieth-century Shakespeare criticism.

Bradley's approach is especially important because it places character and inward experience at the centre of tragedy. For him, tragic action grows out of human motives and recognizable emotional processes, but at the same time points beyond them to something larger, something mysterious about suffering, destruction, and the limits of human control (Bradley 1904). Tragedy, in Bradley's view, is both psychologically understandable and ultimately unsettling, because it suggests that human life contains forces that cannot be fully explained or contained.

This is particularly evident in his reading of Othello's jealousy. Bradley insists that Othello is not naturally jealous; rather, jealousy develops within him as a result of both external manipulation and his own emotional structure (Bradley 1904). Othello's trusting nature, combined with his tendency to feel things absolutely, means that once doubt enters his mind, it cannot remain partial or uncertain. It quickly becomes total. As a result, jealousy is treated not as

a social or cultural phenomenon, but as an internal psychological crisis. The tragedy is therefore located primarily inside Othello himself: a movement from trust to suspicion, from love to destructive certainty. The external world, Venice, its attitudes, and even Othello's racial difference, remains largely in the background, serving mainly as a stage for this inward collapse.

A similar pattern appears in Bradley's treatment of Iago. He rejects the idea that Iago represents an abstract or inexplicable form of evil and instead seeks to explain his actions in human terms. Iago's behaviour is linked to feelings of resentment, wounded pride, and a frustrated sense of superiority (Bradley 1904). This makes him psychologically intelligible, but it also narrows the scope of interpretation. The focus remains on individual motive and character, rather than on the larger cultural and racial structures within which Iago operates. The play's conflict becomes a clash of personalities and moral forces rather than a drama shaped by historical and social tensions.

Bradley's reading of the ending reinforces this emphasis on inwardness. Othello's final recognition of his mistake and his decision to take his own life are seen as restoring a form of tragic dignity. Although he commits a terrible crime, he is not reduced to simple villainy. Instead, his ability to understand what he has done and to judge himself becomes a sign of his remaining nobility (Bradley 1904). Tragedy, in this sense, is not just about destruction, but about the fall of a great soul that still retains moral awareness. This interpretation, however, also pushes the play toward universality. Othello becomes less a historically specific figure and more a representation of human greatness and human error in general.

More broadly, Bradley's method tends to shift the focus of interpretation away from concrete actions and social conditions toward inner experience and psychological response. While this allows for a rich and compelling reading of character, it also makes race less visible.

Othello's identity as a Moor is not denied, but it is no longer central; it becomes absorbed into his personality rather than treated as a defining social reality.

If Bradley emphasizes psychology and inward conflict, Wilson Knight pushes interpretation in a different but related direction. His readings are less concerned with argument or historical context, and more with atmosphere, symbolism, and emotional experience. For Knight, Shakespeare is not primarily something to be analyzed, but something to be felt. Meaning emerges through patterns of imagery, sound, and mood, rather than through social or political explanation (Raw 2017).

In Knight's reading, Othello is not approached as a specific historical figure navigating a racially charged environment, but as a symbolic and imaginative presence. His language is seen as rich, musical, and elevated, expressing a world of romance, intensity, and beauty. Othello becomes a figure associated with adventure, passion, and a kind of poetic grandeur. As Raw explains, Knight turns Othello into a symbol of "romantic adventure" and "exotic beauty," emphasizing the aesthetic and emotional experience of the play over its historical context (Raw 2017). This perspective elevates him, but it also removes him from the historical realities that shape his identity. His difference remains visible, but only as an aesthetic quality, something exotic, colourful, and emotionally powerful, rather than as a meaningful social condition.

Knight's broader method makes this displacement even clearer. By encouraging readers to engage with the play on an emotional and symbolic level, he reduces the importance of social context, political structures, and even consistency of character. The play becomes an imaginative experience rather than a historically grounded text. As a result, questions of race are not directly addressed; instead, they dissolve into atmosphere and symbolism (Raw 2017). Othello's Moorishness remains present, but its cultural and political implications are largely overlooked.

Taken together, Bradley and Knight represent two major tendencies within traditional Shakespeare criticism. Bradley focuses on character, motive, and psychological depth, while Knight emphasizes symbolism, mood, and imaginative experience. Despite these differences, both approaches share a key assumption: that Shakespeare's greatness lies in his ability to transcend specific historical contexts. In both cases, *Othello* is valued most when it appears universal.

The consequence of this approach is not that race and religion disappear entirely, but that they are pushed to the margins. Othello remains "the Moor," yet his Moorish identity is treated either as secondary to the real drama or as a kind of aesthetic colouring. It is not understood as a central structure shaping meaning. This shift is not accidental; it is produced by the methods of traditional criticism themselves, which privilege universality, inwardness, and symbolic interpretation over historical specificity.

For this reason, traditional criticism now appears insufficient for a study concerned with Islam, race, and representation. Its limitation is not simply that it "fails to talk about race," but that it operates within a framework that associates value with universality and universality with abstraction from difference. Within such a framework, focusing on Othello's racial and religious identity can seem reductive or overly contextual. From a contemporary perspective, however, this abstraction is itself ideological. It turns a historically marked figure into a universal one, and in doing so, it obscures the role that racial and cultural difference plays in the tragedy.

Traditional criticism remains important not because it provides a complete account of *Othello*, but because it reveals the assumptions that later criticism must challenge. It shows how universality can function as a way of stabilizing the canon, and how difficult or uncomfortable aspects of identity can be transformed into psychology or symbolism. The development of

postcolonial and race-conscious criticism can thus be understood as a direct response to this earlier critical tradition.

3.2 Race and Colonial Readings

For much of its critical history, *Othello* was approached as a tragedy of universal human emotions: jealousy, love, trust, deception, and the collapse of judgment. In this tradition, Othello was often read primarily as a noble tragic hero whose downfall resulted from psychological vulnerability. His tragedy was understood as the story of a great man who is manipulated by Iago, loses command over himself, and destroys what he loves most. Such readings helped establish the play's emotional power, but they often treated Othello's racial and cultural difference as secondary. His identity as a Moor was acknowledged, yet it was frequently absorbed into a broader idea of "otherness" or used as a symbolic sign of alienation rather than examined as a historically specific racial and religious marker.

Later criticism gradually changed this emphasis. Instead of seeing race as an external feature added to a universal tragedy, race-conscious and postcolonial readings show that Othello's blackness and Moorishness are central to the way the tragedy works. The play does not simply present a man who happens to be an outsider; it shows the social process by which he becomes one. Venice praises Othello as a soldier and depends on his military service, but that acceptance remains conditional. He is valuable when he defends the state, especially against the Ottoman threat, yet his marriage to Desdemona brings his differences into the intimate spaces of family, sexuality, and inheritance. At that moment, the Moor, who was useful to Venice, becomes disturbing to it.

This shift in criticism is important because it moves the focus from Othello's supposed inner weakness to the world that surrounds and defines him. Iago's language does not create

racism from nothing; it activates prejudices already available in Venetian and early modern European culture. Before Othello appears on stage, he is described through animalistic and racialized images: the “old black ram,” the “Barbary horse,” and “the beast with two backs.” These images do more than insult him. They teach others to see his marriage as unnatural, excessive, and contaminating. Brabantio’s reaction follows the same logic. He cannot imagine that Desdemona freely chose Othello, so he explains her desire through magic, drugs, and corruption. The problem is not simply that Othello is foreign, but that his foreignness becomes unbearable when it enters the Venetian household.

Michael Neill’s reading is central to this development in criticism. In “Unproper Beds: Race, Adultery, and the Hideous in *Othello*,” Neill argues that the play is filled with racial feeling and that the marriage bed becomes the most intense symbol of this anxiety. The bed is disturbing because it gathers together the fears of interracial intimacy, adultery, sexuality, and social disorder. For Neill, the final command, “Let it be hid,” is not only an attempt to conceal the dead bodies, but also an attempt to hide the spectacle of racial and sexual mixture that Venetian society cannot bear to face (Neill 1989). In this sense, the tragedy exposes the fear that lies beneath Venice’s apparent civility: the fear that the outsider has crossed from the battlefield into the bedroom.

Arthur L. Little Jr. develops this argument by showing that Othello’s blackness becomes something the play continually tries to interpret. In “‘An Essence that’s Not Seen’: The Primal Scene of Racism in *Othello*,” Little explains that the play treats blackness as both visible and invisible. Othello’s body is visibly black, yet Venetian society behaves as if this visible difference must reveal some hidden inner truth. The Duke’s statement that Othello is “far more fair than black” tries to separate moral virtue from skin color, but the play gradually shows how

fragile that separation is. Othello is drawn into a world where blackness is made to signify danger, sexuality, violence, and hidden disorder (Little 1993).

What makes this reading especially powerful is that it refuses to treat Othello's collapse as proof of his natural savagery. Rather, the play shows how a racist culture can produce the figure it claims merely to discover. Iago first imagines Othello as an animal, a devil, a sexual threat, and an outsider; then he manipulates him until Othello begins to act within the very script imposed on him. Racism becomes circular: it creates an image, pressures the victim into crisis, and then reads the crisis as confirmation that the image was true all along. Othello's tragedy is therefore not only psychological; it is also social and ideological.

Ambereen Dadabhoy's *Shakespeare through Islamic Worlds* deepens this section by showing that, in early modern English thought, race was closely connected to geography and religion. Dadabhoy explains that religious identity was often articulated through geographic origin, and that places such as Tunis, Algiers, Morocco, the Barbary Coast, and the Ottoman Mediterranean were imagined as spaces of Muslim and racial otherness (Dadabhoy 2024). This is directly relevant to *Othello*, because the word "Moor" does not signify only skin color. It evokes a wider Mediterranean world associated with North Africa, Islam, conversion, military conflict, and non-European differences.

Through this lens, Othello's identity becomes more complex. He is a Christian general serving Venice, but his Moorishness continues to connect him to an Islamic and African geography in the Venetian imagination. The final allusion to the "turbaned Turk" in Aleppo reveals this tension. At the conclusion of the play, Othello attempts to define himself by invoking his identification with Venice through his account of fighting one of its enemies, who happened to be a Muslim. By immediately turning and killing himself, however, he also becomes an object

of that same violence. As such, he becomes both the protector of Venice and the alien enemy that must be destroyed. This tragic conflict represents the impossibility of Othello's situation, he cannot completely transcend the meanings attached to his body, even as he serves the interests of Christian Venice.

Thus, race and colonial readings demonstrate that Venice constructs Othello through contradictions, admiring yet suspicious of him, needing yet excluding him, and, even while making him a symbol of Christianity, defining him through images associated with the Moor and Islam. Even the heroism connected to his military service cannot save him from suspicions rooted in racial prejudice. Rather, it is precisely his marriage to Desdemona that reveals the extent to which Othello is both accepted and rejected by Christian Venice.

This critical shift does not mean that the psychological dimension of the play disappears. Othello's jealousy, pain, and insecurity remain essential to the tragedy. However, race-conscious criticism shows that these emotions do not develop in an empty space. They are shaped by the world around him. Iago's manipulation succeeds because it speaks in a language that Venice already understands: the language of racial hierarchy, sexual suspicion, religious otherness, and fear of the foreign body. Othello's mind breaks, but it breaks under the pressure of a society that has never fully allowed him to belong.

In this way, *Othello* becomes more than a universal tragedy of jealousy. It becomes a tragedy of racialization. The play shows how an outsider is produced, watched, desired, feared, and finally destroyed by the culture that claims to value him. The movement from universal criticism to race and colonial criticism is one of the most important developments in the study of *Othello*: it allows us to see that the Moor's tragedy is not only that he believes Iago, but that he lives in a world already prepared to believe the worst about him.

3.3 Performance and Representation

There is a moment in Keith Hamilton Cobb's play *American Moor* when a Black actor stands on a stage auditioning for the role of Othello, speaking Shakespeare's lines to a white director he cannot see, a disembodied voice in the dark. The actor knows his Shakespeare. He knows the words. But the world around him does not know how to receive him, and so the audition becomes something far larger than a casting call. It becomes a reckoning. Cobb's play, discussed at length by Farah Karim-Cooper in *The Great White Bard* (Karim-Cooper 2023), captures with painful precision what is at stake when we ask not only what *Othello* means, but what it means to *perform* it, and for whom, and by whom, and under whose authority. The argument of this section is that the meaning of *Othello* is not a fixed quantity embedded in Shakespeare's text and waiting to be discovered by attentive readers. It is produced, contested, and transformed every time the play is staged. Race, religion, and the figure of the Islamic Moor are not merely written into the script; they are materialised through bodies, costumes, makeup, and the dynamics of the theatrical space itself. To understand *Othello* fully, we must understand its performance history.

When Shakespeare's company, the King's Men, first performed *Othello* around 1604, there was no Black actor available to play the Moor, nor would there be for more than two centuries. The role fell to Richard Burbage, the company's leading man, who darkened his face with a concoction of burnt walnut shells, oil, and cork (Karim-Cooper 2023). This was standard practice in the Elizabethan theatre, where racial identity was communicated through a toolkit of visual and aural codes: face paint, turbans, false beards, accents, gestures, and costume. As Karim-Cooper explains, these conventions transformed the stage into a mechanism for producing fantasies of racial otherness, offering audiences vivid imaginings of Moors, Jews, and Turks that

were built almost entirely from "myth, stereotype and fantasy" rather than from lived encounter (Karim-Cooper 2023). For most Elizabethan playgoers, the Moor on stage was the only Moor they would ever encounter.

This matters enormously for a reading of *Othello* attentive to Islam, because it means that Othello's Islamic and North African identity was, from the very beginning, a white construction. Burbage did not draw on any authentic knowledge of Moorish culture, Islamic faith, or North African life when he stepped onto the Globe stage. He drew on circulated images — woodcuts from books like Cesare Vecellio's 1590 compendium of peoples and costumes, or Nicholas de Nicolay's *The Navigations into Turkey* (1585), which provided illustrations of "a Merchant Jew," a "Physician Jew," and various Moorish and Turkish figures (Karim-Cooper 2023). The turban, the scimitar, the darkened face: these were the visual grammar of the Islamic other on the English Renaissance stage, and they encoded not knowledge but anxiety, the anxiety of a Christian nation defining itself against an Islamic world it both feared and depended upon commercially.

Karim-Cooper asks us to pause and imagine what it was like for Richard Burbage as he prepared to play Othello backstage at the Globe in 1604. He had already been praised for his performance as the Moor the previous year. He knows the role well. A tirewoman helps him with his makeup; another actor nearby smears a similar concoction onto his skin to play the Prince of Morocco. The plot, the list of scenes and entrances, is pinned to the wall. There is no time for extended rehearsal in this busy repertory theatre. Burbage shifts his voice, his accent, his gait. He is about to "impersonate any ethnicity," something "early modern audiences would not have winced at in the way modern audiences should" (Karim-Cooper 2023). That final observation is not a casual aside. It is an indictment. What the Elizabethan theatre normalized, the casual

impersonation of racial others by white Christian actors for white Christian audiences, would go on to shape the reception of *Othello* for the next four hundred years.

Before Othello ever appears on stage, his identity has already been performed by Iago. Karim-Cooper draws attention to a striking structural feature of the play's opening: the phrase "the Moor" appears over forty-five times, a relentless repetition designed to ensure, as she puts it, that we never forget his "otherness" even for a brief moment (Karim-Cooper 2023). This is not just a textual observation. It is a performance instruction. Every time an actor playing Iago spits out "the Moor" at Brabantio's window, telling him that Othello is "an old black ram" tugging his "white ewe," that he is "the devil" who may make a "grandsire" of him, that Brabantio's daughter will be covered with "a Barbary horse" he is not merely conveying information (1.1.87–88, 110–112). He is performing racial fear. He is teaching the audience how to see Othello before they have seen him.

Karim-Cooper's analysis of this moment is sharp. Iago invokes "Barbary" North Africa, the world of Islam and the notion of barbarousness in the same breath, agitating Brabantio's anxiety about miscegenation through the dehumanising logic of animal imagery (Karim-Cooper 2023). The horse, the ram, the beast: these are not random insults. They are the traditional vocabulary of anti-Islamic and anti-African discourse in early modern Europe, the language through which the Christian West reassured itself of its own civilisational superiority. And when an actor delivers these lines on stage, he does not merely quote that discourse. He enacts it, gives it breath and body, makes it immediate and visceral for an audience sitting in the dark. The performance does not illustrate the play's racism; it *is* the racism of the play, made live.

This is why directors who insist that race is just "one of" the play's themes, alongside jealousy, military honour, or domestic abuse, miss something fundamental. As Karim-Cooper

states plainly: "race is the very motor of this play" (116). Othello is employed by Venice precisely because the Turks are closing in on Cyprus, and the threat of Islam is a military reality in the world of the play (120). He is tolerated so long as he is useful; he is the "model minority" allowed into the elite spaces of Venetian society because his military genius serves the state's interests against its Muslim enemies. But this tolerance is always conditional, always contingent, always one crisis away from collapse. Directors who downplay race do not produce race-neutral productions. They produce productions in which whiteness is so thoroughly the default perspective that its partiality becomes invisible, and in doing so, they add, as Karim-Cooper puts it, "another layer of oppression for Black actors, making it all the more intolerable to watch" (134 area).

It is not only Othello's body that is racialised in performance. Desdemona's whiteness is equally a performance and equally a political act. Karim-Cooper asks her students to consider "just how white Desdemona is meant to be and to what extent her whiteness is vulnerable" (Karim-Cooper 2023, 135). This is a question that text-based criticism tends to flatten, but performance makes it urgently visible. When Burbage played Othello in blackface, and a boy actor played Desdemona in whiteface, the physical proximity of their faces on stage, in moments of tenderness, intimacy, and, finally, murder, made the colour binary not a metaphor but a material reality. Karim-Cooper even notes the intriguing physical possibility that the makeup used on the two actors might have literally transferred or stained during the couple's intimate exchanges (Folger excerpt). The racial anxiety of the play was, in this sense, written on the actors' skin.

The climactic image of the murder scene crystallises everything. Karim-Cooper describes it memorably: "a white, luminous Desdemona lies on the bed, while the tortured darkened face of

Othello hovers over her sleeping body" (Karim-Cooper 2023: 130). This image, repeated across four centuries of stage and screen history, is not simply dramatic. It is the visual embodiment of white Europe's deepest racial fear: that the Black, Muslim other, however civilised and useful, will ultimately destroy white purity. The play pauses at this moment, distracted by Desdemona's whiteness. "Yet I'll not shed her blood / Nor scar that whiter skin of hers than snow," Othello says (5.2.3–4). Even in the act of murder, whiteness is the frame through which everything is perceived. And in performance, this is not abstract. An audience sees it. They feel it. They are implicated in it.

The historical record of audience responses confirms just how powerful this stage picture has been. When the King's Men performed the play at an Oxford college in 1610, the scholar Henry Jackson wrote that the sight of "the celebrated Desdemona slain in our presence by her husband... entreated the pity of the spectators by her very countenance" (Karim-Cooper 130). In 1660, Samuel Pepys recorded that a woman sitting beside him "cried out to see Desdemona smothered." In the nineteenth century, William Charles Macready's performance was so charged that when he "thrust his dark, despairing face through the curtains of the bed," a female spectator reportedly "hysterically fainted" at the sight (Karim-Cooper 2023, 130). These responses are not simply evidence of good acting. They are evidence of how deeply the colour-coded logic of the play, Black body threatening white body, penetrates the sensory and emotional experience of watching it.

The entrance of Ira Aldridge onto the Covent Garden stage in 1833, the first Black actor to play Othello in the play's professional history, changed the terms of this racial theatre in ways that the existing system had no framework to absorb. As Joyce Green MacDonald has shown, Aldridge's presence "forged a new link between signs and meanings," undoing the long tradition

in which blackness on stage was always a white actor's costume, always a performance that the white actor could remove (MacDonald 1994). With Aldridge, the Moor's body was not a disguise. It was a fact. And that fact proved deeply threatening to the cultural order that had grown comfortable with its white-authored productions of blackness.

The discomfort did not disappear. It persisted and intensified as more Black actors took on the role in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Karim-Cooper's discussion of Keith Hamilton Cobb's *American Moor* brings this discomfort into the contemporary moment with devastating clarity. Cobb's actor protagonist articulates the impossible position of the Black man auditioning for Othello in a white theatrical institution: he knows, with perfect composure and self-possession, exactly what he is worth, exactly what he brings to the role, and he also knows that this composure, this self-possession, "has forever been disquieting to white men when they see Black ones wearing it" (Karim-Cooper 2023: 112). He must play the game of civility, smile at the director's comments, and contain within himself the accumulated weight of centuries of racial history. Playing Othello, for a Black actor, is never simply playing a character. It is a confrontation with one's own racialised existence.

Hugh Quarshie, who played Othello for the Royal Shakespeare Company in 2015, had years earlier posed the question that has haunted the role ever since: should Othello be played by a Black actor at all? His concern was not abstract. If a Black actor embodies the role as Shakespeare wrote it, jealous, credulous, violent, ultimately destroyed by his inability to sustain the dignity required to survive in the white world, does he not risk "making racial stereotypes seem legitimate and even true"? Does he not "encourage the white way, or rather the wrong way, of looking at black men, namely that black men, or 'Moors', are over-emotional, excitable and unstable"? (Karim-Cooper 2023, 115). These are not rhetorical questions. They are the live

ethical dilemmas that every Black actor faces when he approaches the role, dilemmas that no amount of text-based scholarship can resolve, because they are rooted in the embodied experience of performing race on a stage before a predominantly white audience.

Cobb's answer to this dilemma was not to refuse the role but to transform it, speaking back to Shakespeare, to the white theatrical institution, and to the accumulated weight of privilege that surrounds both. "I spoke back," Cobb wrote, "a cardinal transgression of the American order since the time slaves first learned English. I was honest, adamant, and indicting, and I apologized for nothing". This speaking back is itself a kind of performance, a performance not of Othello but of the Black actor's own selfhood, his refusal to be absorbed without remainder into the white theatrical tradition's construction of the Moor.

The performance history of *Othello* cannot be separated from the broader colour-coded culture within which the play was written and has been staged. As Karim-Cooper demonstrates, an Italian artist's manual translated into English in 1598 defined the symbolic meanings of colours in terms that illuminate *Othello* with uncomfortable precision: black, it stated, was "a sign of madness and folly... because fools and madmen are over-charged with black choler," while whiteness represented "simplicity, purity, and elation of the mind"; a white man was interpreted as "a good and sincere man" (Karim-Cooper 2023:134). These are not marginal cultural attitudes. They are the ideological infrastructure within which Shakespeare wrote, within which his actors performed, and within which his audiences sat and watched and felt. As Peter Erickson has put it, "the concept of color as an ethnic marker is present even if the word race is not used to denote it" (Karim-Cooper 2023:134).

This colour-coding is not merely a historical curiosity. It has structured every production of *Othello* from Burbage's first blackface performance to Orson Welles's 1952 film, nostalgically

described in a 2022 *Guardian* article as "the best screen outing" of the play despite its use of blackface (Karim-Cooper 2023:149). The casual persistence of that nostalgia, the willingness, even in the twenty-first century, to celebrate a blackface performance as definitive, tells us something important: that the cultural work of racialising the Moor, of insisting on the visual contrast between black and white as the play's central dramatic engine, has never fully ceased. It has simply become less visible, more politely disguised under the language of theatrical tradition and artistic excellence.

What emerges from this performance-centred reading of *Othello* is a fundamental challenge to any approach that treats the play's meaning as a purely textual matter. The Moor's Islamic and North African identity, his otherness, his foreignness, his position as the necessary enemy-turned-servant of Christian Venice, has never existed only in the words Shakespeare wrote. It has been produced, night after night, century after century, through the bodies of actors, the decisions of directors, the reactions of audiences, and the cultural assumptions that all of them carry into the theatre. When Burbage darkened his face with burnt walnut shells, he was not illustrating a theme. He was enacting a cultural logic. When a white director in the dark tells a Black actor auditioning for *Othello* that he was "doing great," he is not simply giving feedback. He is exercising the institutional authority that the play's long history of white authorship has granted him.

And when, in the closing scene, *Othello* stands over Desdemona's white body and hesitates, distracted by the shimmer of her skin, the meaning of that hesitation is not settled by what Shakespeare wrote. It is made new, and newly dangerous, or newly liberating, or newly ambiguous, by who is wearing the darkened face, who is watching, and what the world outside the theatre currently makes of the encounter between an Islamic Moor and a white Venetian

woman. As Karim-Cooper insists, "race runs deep within the structures of Venetian, and by extension European/English society. It is part of the psyche of the play and it permeates the experience of each character" (Karim-Cooper 2023:135). And in performance, that psyche is made flesh. It breathes. It kills. It weeps. And it leaves the audience, if they are paying attention, with far more than they brought in.

3.4 Contemporary Debates and Islamophobia

The study of race has been highly influential in contemporary analysis of *Othello*. This is quite understandable, considering that Othello's character is marked by physical differences, distrust, and racially tinged language throughout the play. It becomes evident from the beginning that Othello is not simply viewed in terms of his identity as a husband, soldier, or Christian convert but instead is presented as black, animalistic, sexually threatening, magical, and foreign. It can be seen in Brabantio's shock at his daughter's union with Othello and in the repeated use of terms like "Moor." For this reason, modern critics have rightly treated *Othello* as one of Shakespeare's most important plays for thinking about race, racial formation, and the construction of the outsider.

However, one limitation of some contemporary criticism is that it often interprets Othello's identity primarily through a modern black/white racial binary. This is especially visible in approaches shaped by modern American racial history, where Othello is often placed within the framework of anti-Black racism and white supremacy. This reading is powerful and necessary because the play clearly participates in the racialization of blackness. Yet it can become too narrow if it treats Othello's identity only as a question of blackness in the modern sense. In the early modern Mediterranean world, the category of the "Moor" was not only racial. It was also religious, cultural, geographical, and political. It could refer to North Africans,

Muslims, converts, Arabs, Berbers, and other figures associated with the Islamic Mediterranean. Therefore, to read *Othello* only through the lens of modern anti-Black racism risks losing the religious and Islamic meanings that also shape his position in Venice.

This does not mean that race should be dismissed or replaced by religion. Rather, the point is that race and religion in *Othello* should be read together. *Othello* is racialized not only because of his skin color, but also because his body carries the memory of Islam, conversion, and Christian-Muslim conflict. Being called a Moor positions him within a tradition of European thought that is characterized by fear of Muslims and the Islamic world. In early modern Venice, there was no isolated Christian city-state but rather a highly interconnected entity in its relations with the Mediterranean, including links with the Ottoman Empire and North Africa. In this context, it becomes impossible to consider the character of the Moor outside the realm of the fears related to Muslim military capabilities, religious conversion, miscegenation, and contamination.

Several critics of early modern race have shown that racial identity in Shakespeare's period cannot be understood solely through modern biological race. Ania Loomba argues that early modern ideas of difference were shaped by overlapping discourses of color, religion, sexuality, gender, and colonial expansion (Loomba 2002). Similarly, Kim Hall shows that blackness in early modern English culture was not a neutral physical description, but was connected to moral, religious, economic, and imperial meanings (Hall 1995). These approaches are useful because they prevent us from reducing *Othello* to one category. His blackness matters deeply, but it becomes meaningful inside a wider network of religious, imperial, and sexual fears. The term "Moor" therefore does not simply describe his appearance; it gathers together anxieties about race, Islam, foreignness, and unstable belonging.

This is where Islamophobia becomes an important critical lens. Islamophobia does not only mean personal hatred of Muslims. It also refers to a wider system of representation in which Islam is imagined as violent, irrational, backwards, sexually threatening, and incompatible with Christian or Western civilization. Deepa Kumar's analysis is useful here because she shows that Islamophobia is not simply a cultural prejudice; it is also a political language used by states and empires to define enemies, justify violence, and present domination as security or civilisation (Kumar 2012). This point helps to understand that Islamophobia works on the basis of recasting Muslim identity as one representing a threat. To understand Othello in this context, it is important to note that it does not portray Islam simply by referring to Turks and Muslims, but also marks Othello's body and identity as Islamic. Kumar develops this point further by comparing contemporary Islamophobia with the political logic of McCarthyism.

McCarthyism not only attacked actual communists; it created a political atmosphere in which suspicion itself became a weapon. People could be marked as disloyal, dangerous, or un-American through association, rumour, or ideological accusation. Kumar argues that the "green scare" works in a similar way. The Muslim, or even the person associated with Islam, becomes a figure of suspicion whose loyalty must constantly be proven (Kumar 2012). It is important in relation to an academic interpretation of Othello because Othello's devotion as a Christian soldier and his public image are not enough to protect him against this imaginative equation of Moorishness, Islam, and menace.

Kumar's argument regarding the "green scare" is especially relevant here due to the way he shows how Islamophobia moves from a perception of an outside threat from Muslims to fear of Muslims among us. In the period right after 9/11, Muslims as the enemy were seen as being located "out there," in places like Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, or the Middle East. According to

Kumar, by the end of the decade following 9/11, the discourse of Islamophobia had moved towards “homegrown terrorism.” In this new discourse, the Muslim threat was no longer only beyond the borders of the nation; it was imagined as already inside the nation, hidden in neighborhoods, universities, mosques, workplaces, and even families (Kumar 2012). This inward turn is central to her concept of the “green scare,” a phrase that deliberately recalls the Cold War “red scare.” Just as communists were once imagined as secret enemies inside American society, Muslims after 9/11 were increasingly represented as domestic suspects whose ordinary presence could be interpreted as a security threat.

This shift from the external enemy to the internal enemy is highly relevant to *Othello*. Venice also defines itself through an external Muslim enemy, represented by the Ottoman Turks. The threat posed by the Turks at the start of the play is seen as external to Venice. It is Othello’s responsibility to defend the Christian state from this external threat. But after the Turkish fleet is destroyed in the storm, the fear of Islam does not disappear. Instead, it shifts inwards towards Othello. While it is true that Othello is not a Turk and is officially part of the Christian community, as a Moor, he can be associated with the same Islamic threat that Othello was summoned to combat.

Kumar strengthens this argument by showing that Islamophobia is not simply the product of isolated extremist voices. She criticizes the idea that Islamophobia is merely the work of a small fringe group. Instead, she argues that it is sustained through a wider institutional matrix involving neoconservative intellectuals, Zionist organizations, the Christian far right, ex-Muslim public figures, think tanks, media institutions, law enforcement, and the security apparatus (Kumar 2012). This is crucial, as it shifts the analysis from being prejudiced toward a particular individual’s view to understanding how institutions create structures. The Islamophobic narrative

is an institution in itself, which can be seen to manifest itself in policy rhetoric, media discourse, schools, university curricula, and even fear. Therefore, with Kumar's theory in mind, Othello becomes a tragedy not only in terms of the hatred of Iago but also because the Venetian social structure makes it very easy for him to do what he does.

This point is especially important for understanding the difference between Iago's crude racism and Venice's more official, respectable forms of conditional tolerance. Iago and Brabantio express open hostility, but the Duke and Senate appear more rational and pragmatic. They do not reject Othello outright because they need him. Their acceptance of him is contingent upon his usefulness, not his equality. Kumar's analysis of institutional Islamophobia is useful here. Contemporary Islamophobia need not take the form of explicit hostility but may be evident in state discourse on matters of security, protection, surveillance, tolerance, integration, and loyalty (Kumar 2012). Similarly, Venice need not label Othello as an enemy to render him conditionally acceptable. It can honor him as a military servant while still preserving the social imagination that marks him as alien.

Kumar's analysis of neoconservative Islamophobia is also useful here. Kumar shows how figures such as Frank Gaffney, Daniel Pipes, Robert Spencer, David Horowitz, Steven Emerson, and David Yerushalmi helped produce the image of Islam as an organized civilizational threat. Their rhetoric often presents Muslims as secretly infiltrating American institutions, using mosques, student associations, charities, legal advocacy, and community organizations as fronts for extremism (Kumar 2012). The underlying principle is that the daily activities of Muslims appear threatening because they are viewed as a political agenda concealed by the same. The scenario is similar to that in Othello, in which normal activities are viewed with apprehension.

Othello's marriage is no longer seen as his personal affair but as a plot to invade the home of Venice. His words are perceived as a magical incantation.

Kumar's discussion of anti-Sharia campaigns and conspiracy theories further demonstrates how Islamophobia turns law, religion, and ordinary community life into signs of danger. In the contemporary United States, anti-Muslim activists promoted the idea that Muslims were attempting to replace American law with Sharia law, even when there was no realistic evidence for such a threat (Kumar 2012). This is significant because the fear does not need to be factual in order to be politically powerful. It only needs to be repeated, circulated, and institutionalized. In *Othello*, Brabantio's accusation that Othello used magic follows a similar logic. There is no evidence that Othello bewitched Desdemona. Yet the accusation is plausible to Brabantio because Othello's racialized and Moorish identity has already made him available to fantasies of unnatural power. Suspicion does not follow evidence; evidence is created by suspicion.

The role of media in Kumar's chapter also helps explain how public narratives are formed. Kumar argues that Islamophobic ideas often move from right-wing media into mainstream media, where they are repeated in more respectable forms. Claims about mosques, Muslim organizations, or "radicalization" circulate through television, newspapers, political speeches, and expert commentary until they become part of common sense (Kumar 2012). This process is useful for reading Iago's role in the play. Iago does not simply lie; he manages interpretation. He controls what Othello sees, how he sees it, and what meaning he attaches to it. The handkerchief becomes powerful not because it is strong evidence, but because Iago creates a context in which it can be read as undeniable proof. Like propaganda, Iago's language transforms uncertainty into certainty.

Kumar's concepts regarding the role of education and propaganda in security operations are also relevant here. For example, she mentions the fact that Islamophobic "experts" were hired to instruct police and security services on how to treat Islam as a threat (Kumar 2012). This is because Islamophobia is a concept that combines emotions with a particular kind of knowledge. It becomes professionalised, institutionalised, and presented as expert knowledge. In *Othello*, the same applies to Iago's lessons to Othello on how to interpret events. Othello is trained to be suspicious and taught how to read Desdemona's behaviour (words, actions, silence, and a handkerchief) via paranoid interpretation. The tragedy revolves around the theme of perverted perception. Othello does not experience any natural emotions but, rather, acquires a particular way of seeing reality, colored by racism and misogyny.

Another interesting concept from Kumar is that of "native informers" and ex-Muslims working as public intellectuals. She suggests that certain ex-Muslims and/or Muslims working in the public sphere are promoted as people capable of proving Islamophobic allegations (Kumar 2012). People like Ayan Hirsi Ali, Irshad Manji, Azar Nafisi, Ibn Warraq are considered insiders capable of saying that Islam is oppressive, repressive and inconsistent with modern democratic values. However, Kumar does not deny that the mentioned issues do exist in Muslim-majority societies. The problem is that such claims usually arise from a particular historical and socio-political context to assert Western superiority or justify intervention in the domestic affairs of other countries. From this perspective, women's rights and human rights become a tool of the empire.

Such a perspective is useful for interpreting *Othello*'s last speech. At the end, Othello calls himself a "black ram", the loyal servant of Venice, and a turbaned Turkish man that he once murdered. Here, we can speak of internalised ideology in *Othello*. He tries to convince

others and himself of the correctness of his actions, speaking as if he were the State's representative, hostile to Othello all along. The Moor tries to prove his loyalty by killing the Turkish foe residing inside himself. With this understanding of Kumar's book, it is possible to conclude that Othello can only be recognised as a loyal subject by destroying the Muslim part of himself that Venice associates with foreignness and menace.

The notion of "liberal enablers" suggested in Kumar's work is also useful to make a distinction between racist and enlightened views towards Islam. Kumar mentions that some liberal writers tend to reproduce the ideology of fear and hatred in a more sophisticated manner. They stop referring to Islam directly but discuss "Islamism" instead, presenting it as a new totalitarian menace and drawing analogies between it and fascism, Stalinism and Nazism (Kumar 2012). Even if such claims seem less harsh, they can also serve as justification for war, surveillance and imperialism. This information is relevant because Venice positions itself as the centre of civilisation and reason. Not all its violence manifests openly, but often, it comes under the guise of rationality, self-interest, military necessity and masculine responsibility.

Edward Said's analysis of Orientalism is relevant too. The author argues that Western perceptions of the Orient portray the Orient as irrational, violent, sensual, barbaric, and inferior, thereby positioning the West as rational and civilised (Said 1978). Of course, this kind of thinking was characteristic of a later epoch than Othello's story, but the play also explores the themes of East and West, Christians and Moors. The image of a civilised Christian city is partially constructed through contrasts with the images of Turk, Moor, and Islam, which are depicted as a threatening force. But the play also suggests that such an identity of Venetian civilization is fragile.

Nabil Matar's work on Islam in early modern England further supports this reading by showing that English and European ideas about Muslims were shaped by real political contact with the Ottoman Empire, North Africa, diplomacy, trade, captivity, and conversion (Matar 1999). Islam was not merely a distant fantasy; it was part of the political imagination of early modern Europe. Jerry Brotton similarly emphasizes that Elizabethan and early modern English culture developed through contact with Muslim powers, especially through diplomacy and trade with the Ottoman and Moroccan worlds (Brotton 2016). These contexts matter for *Othello* because the play emerges from a world in which Christian Europe both feared and depended on Islamic powers. Othello's identity as a Moor belongs to this mixed world of conflict, service, contact, and anxiety.

Daniel Vitkus also argues that early modern drama often represents Islam, conversion, and the Ottoman world as sites of both fear and fascination (Vitkus 2003). This is important because *Othello* does not simply reject the Islamic world; it depends on it imaginatively. Venice defines itself through opposition to the Turk, but it also relies on Othello, a Moor, to defend it. The play exposes a contradiction within Christian Europe: it fears the Muslim or Islam-associated outsider, yet it also depends on figures connected to that world. Othello's tragedy emerges from this contradiction. He is necessary to Venice, but his necessity does not produce equality. It produces conditional acceptance.

Emily Bartels's work on Moors in early modern drama helps clarify this instability. Bartels argues that the figure of the Moor in Renaissance drama was flexible and contradictory: he could be admired, feared, exoticized, demonized, or used to define European identity by contrast (Bartels 2008). Othello fits this instability perfectly. He is noble and eloquent, but also vulnerable to being reimagined through stereotypes of barbarism and danger. Venice needs him,

but it also keeps him symbolically separate. This ambivalence is central to the tragedy. While Othello is certainly alien to Venice, he is a conditionally included member of this community. He is welcomed when it is convenient and poses no threat to the supremacy of Venice. However, when he claims membership in Venetian society through marriage, he becomes a threat and is persecuted as a result.

This notion from Kumar is particularly relevant to the conclusion of this chapter. According to her, Islamophobia is not some exotic feature of the modern world which operates on its own. Islamophobia is present in universities, think tanks, politicians, security apparatuses, right-wing and mainstream media, conservative movements, and public opinion as well. The "matrix of Islamophobia" provides insights into how ideology moves between different institutions to shape normality. Applying this approach to the analysis of Othello helps us understand the play not as an account of individual cases of discrimination, but as a tragedy made possible by an entire socio-cultural setting. Brabantio, Iago, the Senate, Venetian policies on military affairs, Christians' animosity towards Turks, conventions of marriage, and racial epithets constitute a certain ideological complex around Othello. Iago's plot succeeds because he manages to exploit latent anxieties embedded in the complex.

One reason for Othello's constant vulnerability is his ambivalent position within this socio-cultural structure. Despite having undergone a ritualistic baptism and converted to Christianity, Othello's Islamic background leaves indelible traces in his identity and, consequently, in Venice's as well. Othello is welcome to serve as a soldier if it benefits Venice, but he does not belong culturally to it. From this perspective, Othello resembles the so-called "domestic Muslim enemy", although this description would be incorrect in terms of his actual religious beliefs. Othello is a domestic Muslim only in the sense of his being an alien, tolerated

and exploited by the ruling establishment. He is part of the system while being marked as an enemy.

The ambiguity of Othello's status and identity is evident from the very beginning. While Brabantio accepts his subordinate status as a military commander, he cannot tolerate him as a son-in-law. Venice can rely on the abilities of Othello, but the latter's involvement in the private life of citizens and their families provokes outrage. It appears that even if his intention was to marry Desdemona honestly, Brabantio could not imagine how such a thing was possible. The only explanation he had been able to find for their union was some form of witchcraft or hypnosis. Thus, Othello's body was dangerous even before he did anything wrong.

This is why the concept of Islamophobia should not replace race in the study of *Othello*, but should deepen it. Race and religion are not separate categories in the play; they are mutually reinforcing. Othello is racialized through religious difference, and he is religiously suspected through racial difference. His blackness makes his Christianity appear unstable to Venetian eyes, while his Moorish and Islamic associations make his racial difference appear more threatening. The tragedy of the play depends on this intersection. Othello's identity cannot be understood through a single category.

Kumar's argument is useful because it shows how Islamophobia turns fear into a justification for political control. In the contemporary context, this fear justifies surveillance, war, policing, and the silencing of dissent (Kumar 2012). In *Othello*, fear also organizes power. Fear of the Turk justifies military mobilization. Fear of the Moor justifies social exclusion. Fear of female sexuality justifies patriarchal control. Fear of betrayal justifies violence. These fears overlap in Othello's body, turning him into the site where Venice's anxieties about race, religion, gender, and empire converge.

Kumar also suggests that Islamophobia can be challenged through collective resistance rather than accepted as a fixed social reality. She argues that Islamophobia can be challenged by grassroots movements, progressive activism, students, ordinary people, and communities who refuse the politics of fear (Kumar 2012). This is useful for a contemporary reading of *Othello* because it reminds us that interpretation itself can resist inherited structures of suspicion. To read Othello only as naturally jealous, naturally violent, or naturally unstable risks repeating the very logic that destroys him. A more critical reading must ask how he is made vulnerable by the society around him. His tragic fate does not result from uncovering the Moorish nature of his being. His identity is marked by his difference from the dominant culture, by his suspicion toward it, and ultimately by his adoption of the very concepts that marginalise him.

Thus, the most relevant interpretation of Othello in today's context is no longer an either-or choice between a racial or religious perspective. Modern racial studies have convincingly mapped out how Othello is situated within the ideology of racial exclusion, white paranoia, and anti-Black racism. At the same time, Kumar's insight into the historical context of Islamophobia enriches the discussion. For instance, the Moor is constructed not simply as an embodiment of the racial other but also as an agent of the imaginary relationship of Christian society with Islam, conversion, strangeness, and internal threat. Thus, Othello becomes part of a much larger cultural history wherein race, religion, colonial expansion, sexual politics, and political paranoia are intricately interrelated.

CONCLUSION

This thesis has argued that Islam plays a central but often indirect role in Shakespeare's *Othello*. At first sight, the play seems to be mainly about jealousy, love, manipulation, and personal tragedy. Othello is often remembered as the noble husband who believes Iago, kills Desdemona, and then destroys himself after discovering the truth. However, when the play is read through its historical, religious, and cultural background, it becomes clear that Othello's tragedy is not only private or psychological. It is also shaped by the Christian Mediterranean world around him: a world that fears Islam, depends on contact with Muslim powers, and reads the figure of the Moor through inherited ideas of religious and racial difference.

The first chapter showed that Shakespeare was writing during a period of strong contact between England and the Islamic world. Elizabethan England was not isolated from Muslim societies. English merchants, travelers, and diplomats encountered the Ottoman Empire, Morocco, Safavid Persia, and other Islamic powers through trade, diplomacy, and political negotiation. These contacts were not always hostile. In fact, England often looked toward Muslim powers for commercial opportunity and possible political alliance, especially against Catholic Spain. At the same time, English culture continued to inherit older Christian fears of Islam, in which Muslims were often imagined as infidels, barbarians, sensual figures, or enemies of Christian order. This contradiction is very important for understanding *Othello*. Islam was feared, but it was also useful; it was condemned, but it was also part of England's real economic and diplomatic world.

These conflicting attitudes towards the Moor are manifest in the play's setting. While Venice is portrayed as a threatened Christian city-state by the Ottoman Turks, it still requires the Moor, Othello, to defend itself. Hence, the fundamental paradox of the tragedy: Othello is

essential to Venice, but he will never be fully embraced by the city-state. He is valued as a military leader but reviled as a husband. He can help protect the Christian civilization from its Muslim foe, but as soon as he marries Desdemona and enters an ordinary Venetian household, his Otherness becomes disturbing. Therefore, it becomes clear that Venice tolerates Othello only as long as he is useful to it.

Chapter two examines the semantic content of the term "Moor." It is important to emphasize that this word is crucial to the thesis since it conveys far more meaning than simply being a racial label. In the early modern period, the word "Moor" referred to ideas of blackness, North Africa, Barbary, Islam, conversion, foreignness, and threat. As a result, Othello's identity cannot be understood in terms of contemporary notions of race. Blackness is relevant, but his Moorish identity places him in the Islamic Mediterranean. For Venice, he is not just a dark-skinned man, but a figure shaped by the cultural imagination of Moors, Turks, Muslims, and foreigners.

It helps explain why Othello's marriage to Desdemona causes such a scandal. It is not considered a romantic affair between a couple. Rather, right from the start, Othello and Desdemona's union is presented by Iago and Roderigo as a bestial act. Brabantio finds it impossible to believe that his daughter would freely love Othello. Therefore, he accuses the Moor of using witchcraft or drugging her. These reactions indicate the extent of discrimination in the world of the play. Othello's Otherness makes love impossible for him, and Venice refuses to imagine intimacy with the Moor in any other way.

Islam is important here even when it is not directly mentioned. Early modern Christian culture often connected Moors and Muslims with fears of sexual excess, contamination, conversion, and danger to Christian women. In *Othello*, these fears gather around the marriage.

Desdemona's white Christian body becomes a symbol of purity, while Othello's Moorish body is imagined as foreign, dangerous, and polluting. The marriage therefore crosses more than a personal boundary. It crosses a racial, religious, and cultural boundary that Venice wants to protect.

In addition, the idea of "turning Turk" provides additional insight into the tragic fate of the main hero. In early modern English society, the concept of "turning Turk" implied not only conversion to Islam, but also betrayal, moral decline, and losing one's Christian faith. While the threat posed by the Turkish fleet dissipates after it is destroyed by the storm, the fear of the Turk persists. On the contrary, it acquires a new form since Othello's question about whether "Are we turn'd Turks?" implies that Turkishness cannot be seen as an external enemy. It describes violence and moral disintegration among Christians.

At the end of the play, the connection between Othello and this idea becomes evident. The statement made by the main character about the "turban'd Turk" killed in Aleppo is among the most obvious examples of the importance of Islam in the tragedy. According to the main character, he has killed a Turk for attacking a Venetian citizen and offending Venice. In his final act, he destroys himself to demonstrate his devotion to the city. However, by making himself an enemy and destroying him, Othello proves that the Moor has become what he was supposed to fight against, a foreigner, a representative of the Islamic religion.

Thus, the play's conclusion illustrates the cruelty of Othello's position. The Moor has served Venice all his life, protecting its citizens and trying to become a member of society. Nevertheless, at the end of the play, he can only see himself through the prism of Venice's perception of foes and outsiders. As a result, Othello has internalized the fear of the society towards the Moor and the Turk.

The third chapter showed how critical approaches to *Othello* have changed over time. Earlier critics often focused on Othello's jealousy, nobility, and psychological weakness. These readings are useful because they explain the emotional power of the play, but they often make race, religion, and history seem secondary. Later critics shifted attention toward race, colonialism, blackness, and performance. This thesis agrees that race is central to the play, but it argues that Islam must also be brought clearly into the discussion. Othello's blackness and his Moorishness are connected. His racial difference is intensified by the Islamic meanings attached to the figure of the Moor.

The performance history of *Othello* also confirms that his difference has always been visible and political. For centuries, white actors performed Othello in blackface, turning the Moor into an image created by white Christian theatrical culture. Later, when Black actors such as Ira Aldridge played the role, the meaning of the play changed because Othello's body on stage was no longer simply a costume or fantasy. Modern productions continue to show that *Othello* is not only a text to be read, but also a performance of race, religion, fear, and power. The figure of the Moor remains difficult because he forces audiences to confront how difference is represented and consumed.

The discussion of Islamophobia in the final chapter also helps connect the play to modern questions. Of course, *Othello* belongs to the early modern period, and it would be too simple to treat it as if it were written in the modern world. However, modern theories of Islamophobia help us recognize a pattern that is already visible in the play: the transformation of Islam, or Islam-associated identity, into a sign of danger. Venice first fears the external Muslim enemy, the Ottoman Turk. But after the Turks disappear, that fear turns inward and attaches itself to Othello.

He is not a Turk, and he is not clearly Muslim, but the Islamic meanings attached to the Moor never fully leave him.

Therefore, this thesis has argued that Islam should not be treated as a small background theme in *Othello*. It is one of the structures through which the play understands otherness. Islam shapes the meaning of the Moor, the fear of the Turk, the anxiety of conversion, the politics of Venice, the suspicion surrounding marriage, and the violence of the final scene. At the same time, this does not mean that race becomes less important. On the contrary, reading Islam in the play makes the racial meaning of Othello stronger and more complex. His blackness matters, but in the early modern world it is connected to religion, geography, and culture. He is not only black; he is the Moor. And the Moor carries the memory of Islam.

To summarize, Othello is more than a tragedy of jealousy but also of exclusion. The Moor enjoys the honor of Venice but only under conditions. He is honored for being able to fight and protect Venice but at the same time feared for the fact of being married. He helps Venice fight the Turk, but at the same time he cannot escape being the Islamic other, whom Venice fears so much. Therefore, Shakespeare's tragedy shows that a community can both honor an outsider and annihilate him, use him while still denying him citizenship, and fear an outside enemy but then make him internal.

Therefore, Islam's presence in Othello is significant and effective. It plays an essential part in the historical, geographical, linguistic, symbolical, and violent aspects of the play. First of all, Islam explains why Othello enjoys honor and at the same time inspires suspicion. Moreover, it supports the idea that Othello's marriage is perceived as a threat and clarifies why Othello's death is connected to the "turban'd Turk." Othello is doomed not because of the depiction of Moorish violence as such but due to his existence in a community that has already been

convinced that the Moor is dangerous. Eventually, Othello internalises this fear, letting his imagination act upon him. Thus, Islam is not only present in Othello but forms part of its destructive system.

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Declaration on the Use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) Tools

The undersigned KIMIA DADJOO student ID number 902163, enrolled at Ca' Foscari in the Bachelor's/Master's Degree Programme in Master's Degree in European, American and Postcolonial Languages and Literatures, author of the final paper/degree thesis The Role of Islam in Shakespeare's Othello, thesis supervisor SHAUL BASSI, aware of the penalties provided for in Article 76 of the Consolidated Act set out in Presidential Decree no. 445 of 28 December 2000, and of the loss of benefits provided for in Article 75 of the same Consolidated Act in the event of false or misleading statements, under his/her own responsibility pursuant to Articles 46 and 47 of Presidential Decree no. 445 of 28 December 2000,

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