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‘Turk Gregory’: Turks and Catholics as Metaphors for Each Other in Shakespeare’s Plays

This paper argues that when constructing an Anglican/English nationhood in his works, Shakespeare uses Turkish and Catholic references as metaphors for each other. The starting point for this reading is Falstaff comparing his deeds in the battlefield to that of ‘Turk Gregory’ when questioned about his idleness by Hal in Henry IV Part I. Critics have read this appellation to refer to Pope Gregory XIII (1572-1585). Although Pope Gregory was as anti-Turk as any other Pope, his primary concern was the supremacy of Catholics over Protestants, to the point of plotting a Catholic takeover in England. Indeed, England was not the only European country that sought to defend itself from Catholic expansion. Historically, in Orthodox Byzantium and Protestant Netherlands, ‘better the turban than the mitre’ and ‘liever Turks dan Paaps’ were rallying cries, which regarded Catholic rule just as, or even more oppressive than that of Turks. When it comes to Shakespeare’s period, the anti-Protestant zeal of Gregory can be considered as one of the grounds of conflation of Turks and Catholics as figures of deception, treachery and barbarism in his works. I will explore how in the history plays in Shakespeare attempts to distance the English crown from the despotism of Ottoman and Catholic empires at the same time. While in the history plays the example of the Ottoman Empire is used as a corrective for the English court, spectres of ‘Turkish customs’ are also in evidence in his Catholic, Mediterranean world, particularly Venice.

Although there are several references to Turks, there are no Turkish characters in the *Dramatis Personae* even in the plays set in the Mediterranean, while French and Italian characters abound without reference to their Catholicism. Turks are censored in absentia, and certain characteristics conventionally attributed to the Turks, such as lechery and superstitious beliefs, are played out by Catholic characters on stage. In that sense, the two figures compliment one another in the construction of ‘the other’ and are somewhat interchangeable as people with lax morals, possibly due to the relaxing climes of the Mediterranean.

The papal states are in many ways on the frontline when it comes to fighting the Turk, however, as history has proven many times, war at such proximity, as wars were back then, also provide, in Fernando Braudel's terms, points of encounter as much as confrontation. The Catholic, Mediterranean, southern Europe, although constantly in battle with the Turk, is no better than the lands of the Sultan when it comes to intrigue and lust. The Levant thus provides a stage in which Shakespeare can put his plays of deception, passion and disguise, a place that is ridden with all kinds of superstition, or barbaric practice whether of the Catholic or Islamic kind.

In his *History of Italy*, published in 1549, William Thomas observed the cosmopolitan nature of the Italian states and said all enjoyed a free way of life 'Even if thou be a Jew, a Turk'. This suggests that non-Christians were a familiar sight on the streets of Catholic, carnival-ridden Venice. The Venetian army itself, as explored of course in *Othello*, was 'served by sundry nations',¹ as explained in Lewes Lewkenor's translation of 'The Commonwealth and Government of Venice'. The Venetians, in Shakespeare, seem dependent on Jews for their enterprises, and are so promiscuous and indifferent to miscegenation that a Moroccan prince who has fought the Turkish army can come and ask a Venetian aristocrat's hand in marriage.

One can only imagine that the world of Venice was more familiar to Shakespeare than that of Constantinople, however, there was, as Nabil Matar points out, enough traffic between the Turkish capital and England as well. His reading of Elizabethan sources puts England almost on a par with Venice when it comes to the multicultural fabric:

[F]rom the Elizabethan to the early Caroline periods Britons [...] entered into an extensive commercial, diplomatic, and social engagement with Turks and Moors of the Muslim empires. No other non-Christian people interacted more widely with Britons than the Muslims of the Ottoman Empire, the Eastern Mediterranean, and the North African regencies of Tunisia, Algeria and Libya, along with Morocco [...] These Muslims were real in a physical and linguistic sense, and represented the most widely visible non-Christian people on English land in this period- more so than the Jews and the American Indians, the chief Others in British renaissance history. The numerical evidence about the concurrent interaction with Jews [...] shows that Renaissance Britons were far more likely to [...] have met a Muslim than a Jew' (Matar, 3).

¹ As quoted in from Bartels*.

Maybe a bit of a tall claim, contested by James Shapiro in 'Shakespeare and the Jews', and Stephen Greenblatt in 'An English Obsession' as Matar concedes. But there you have it, Matar would have us believe that Muslims were no unknown territory — and Turks among them were the ones most readily referred to in Shakespeare. Though Turks may be present discursively, they are, as I have said above, not to be found in plays set either in England or the Mediterranean. Even Venice with all its cosmopolitanism - which, one can argue, was not necessarily the mark of a good society as it is deemed to be today- contrary to the descriptions of the time, seem to lack Turks. Indeed, why would the audience need the Turks when all the excesses attributed to them are already played out by the degenerate Venetians with their masques and their scheming seconds-in-command. It is also worth noting that this cosmopolitanism and these scenes of excess, like in *Measure for Measure*, happens, out of England, 'off stage' so to speak, with Moors and Jews populating catholic edges of Christendom.

With its own budding maritime empire England was trying to define itself as different to the 'commonwealth and state' described by Lewknor, indeed, trying to build its own commonwealth and traditions of state. One space for this construction and definition was Shakespeare's *Henriad*, tracing back a history of Englishness, identifying moments that defined that character. The battle against the French during the reign of Henry Vth on St. Crispin's day is one of those moments, and Shakespeare leads up to it in his *Henriad*. The *Henriad*, I argue, holds a special place in providing a chronicle for the construction of the English nation and perhaps the English character. The plays provide us with the development of Henry IV from prodigal son prince Hal to victorious king on St. Crispin's Day. By the end, the English character wins over the French: the former inherently protestant, the latter Catholic, though the division, in terms of denomination would come in 1534. However, Shakespeare was writing in a Christendom that was already divided into Catholic and Protestant factions and this is reflected subtly in his writing.

One of the starting points for this paper, as I've already said, is the way in which the pope is derided as Turk Gregory in *Henry IV*. The following exchange happens during the battle of Shrewsbury between Hal and Falstaff:

PRINCE HENRY

What, stand'st thou idle here? lend me thy sword:

Many a nobleman lies stark and stiff

Under the hoofs of vaunting enemies,

Whose deaths are yet unrevened: I prithee,

lend me thy sword.

FALSTAFF

O Hal, I prithee, give me leave to breathe awhile.

Turk Gregory never did such deeds in arms as I have

done this day. I have paid Percy, I have made him sure.

While the audience would've understood this to be the current anti-Protestant Pope Gregory XIII it need not be seen as an anachronism, as there have been enough pope Gregorys to fit the description, particularly Gregory VII who had fallen out with another Henry IV, a German one, concerning the church's powers, in the 12th C. Draper says: 'Most editors, following Warburton, take 'Turk Gregory to be Hildebrand, Pope Gregory (d. 1085), because Foxe in his popular Acts and Monuments (1563) had held up both him and the Turks to the odium of all good protestants.'² Foxe also, according the Draper, blames Pope Innocent IV for the Turkish victories of his time.³

One of course doubts if any corresponding volume, as vituperative as the Acts and Monuments, the long polemic about Catholics' oppression of Protestants, was actually written about the Turks at the time, but it is quite telling that a Pope should be equaled to the Turks as target of hatred. It is also important that though a drunkard and a sloth, Falstaff, based on the historical character John Oldcastle, a Lollard who was executed for his anti-popish beliefs, teaches Hal the ways of the world and helps him mix with the people of his country. Thus, the future king of England is being tutored by a Lollard, a category that has prime of place in Acts and Monuments as a group targeted by Catholics and as a group whose sole aim is to return Christian teaching to its original form. Thus, it should come as no surprise that Falstaff utters

² Draper

³ Draper, p. 527

the name of the papal position with that of the Turk, as enemies of the true Christian faith and by extension, or contraction, that of England.

After his wanderings among the lower classes in London and tutelage in the somewhat lapsed protestant saint Falstaff, Hal announces that he shall be more himself and assumes power whilst his father lies in his deathbed. He announces that his prodigal days are over and now a proper English reign - which will soon be fighting popish armies- will begin. Hal takes on a court that has seen many deceptions and fights between brothers and cousins, and he seems determined to put an end to it. With every new king, there follows- as documented in Shakespeare's plays- a shuffling of positions and estates, if not beheadings and exiles. This is the fear that Henry wants to appease, wants to put an end to in the English court. To assure the court that such settling of accounts will not mark his reign, he assures the court:

This new and gorgeous garment, majesty,
Sits not so easy on me as you think.
Brothers, you mix your sadness with some fear:
This is the English, not the Turkish court;
Not Amurath an Amurath succeeds,
But Harry Harry. [...]
I'll be your father and your brother too;
Let me but bear your love, I'll bear your cares:
Yet weep that Harry's dead; and so will I;
But Harry lives, that shall convert those tears
By number into hours of happiness.

This is a court where not Amurath an Amurath succeeds, nor is it the Papal state where Gregory a Gregory succeeds. With the Murat he is making a reference to the several Murats – though not as many as Gregorys- that have ruled the Ottoman Empire. I do not know to what extent Shakespeare was aware of Ottoman court customs, but here he seems to be referring to fratricide. Murad III (1546-1595) began his reign by having his five younger brothers strangled in 1574, much later than Henry's time, but contemporaneous to Shakespeare. While Henry V thus rules out any possibility of fratricide in the English court, many critics, including Harold

Bloom, have viewed the banishment of Falstaff from the court as nothing short of fratricide or patricide.

To let the audience know that Hal is truly reformed and has assumed his true English character as Henry V, Shakespeare makes Harry speaks royally to Falstaff to let him know that he's not welcome in the court any more:

The tutor and the feeder of my riots:
Till then, I banish thee, on pain of death,
As I have done the rest of my misleaders,
Not to come near our person by ten mile.
For competence of life I will allow you,
That lack of means enforce you not to evil:
And, as we hear you do reform yourselves,
We will, according to your strengths and qualities,
Give you advancement. Be it your charge, my lord,
To see perform'd the tenor of our word. Set on.

Thus Falstaff and his crew are banished until a time when they will have reformed themselves, reformed, naturally, towards more protestant behaviour. Having banished the Turkish spectre of assassination, Henry V now turns to the idea of defeating the spectre of the unreformed church on the continent. Lancaster realizes that to become the English king, Henry V will have to lead a campaign against the popish French before the year is out- and indeed, the epilogue tells the audience that Shakespeare will chronicle it:

Epilogue:
If you be not too
much cloyed with fat meat, our humble author will
continue the story, with Sir John in it, and make
you merry with fair Katharine of France: where, for
any thing I know, Falstaff shall die of a sweat,
unless already a' be killed with your hard
opinions; for Oldcastle died a martyr, and this is
not the man.

Falstaff has proven to be one of the most popular characters of Shakespeare, both in

his own time and our own- such that the playwright promises his re-appearance despite his banishment to get more bums on seats for the next play. The public's fascination with the character can be put down to the very duality in Falstaff—modeled after a Protestant saint (the familiarity so strong that Shakespeare has to put in a caveat at the Oldcastle family's request) who indulges in drink and womanizing, as if he were not in protestant England, but in iniquitous Venice where such things happen. Maurice Hunt explores the coexistence of Catholic and Protestant elements in the play, and she argues that the play focuses not so much on the shedding of Catholicism but on the construction of 'A noteworthy blend of catholic and protestant traits'.

This blend, particularly for the future, is hinted at in Henry V, when the king woos the princess whose father is a catholic. After conquering catholic France Henry plans to take over the continent all the way to Constantinople, as he woos his soon to be protestant queen in the most endearing Franglais:

Shall not thou and I, between Saint Denis and Saint George, compound a boy, half French, half English, that shall go to Constantinople and take the Turk by the beard? Shall we not? What say'st thou, my fair flower de luce?

The confrontation with Catholic France will have equipped Henry with the confrontation with the Turk. Indeed, once Saint George has domesticated Saint Denis, the next natural step would be to domesticate the Muslim saints in Constantinople. It is the victory over the Catholic French that'll give Henry this self-confidence. The moment before the victory on St. Crispin day Henry reminds himself and his soldiers who is and what he is fighting for. The fight against the French is so definitive that men who are not on the field that day won't be able to call themselves Englishmen any more. In the battlefield Harry gives an inventory of his kingdom, and men who were not there that day can hold their manhood cheap, along with their Englishness.:

Then shall our names, ~~Harry the King, Orleans, Bedford~~ hold words
~~Exeter, Warwick and Talbot, Salisbury and Gloucester-~~ Be in their flow ing cups freshly
 rememb' red. This story shall the good m a
 by, - From fair isle to the ending of the world, E
 few, we band of brothers; ~~For he that~~ sheds his blood with me e Shall be

ne'er so vile,
themselves accurs'd they were not here,
fought with us upon Saint Crispin's day.

-This day shall gentle Shalobrinktion; A nd
A nd hold their manhoods

Thus, after purging himself and his court from Falstaff's Catholic traces and the barbaric, fratricidal Turkish traits, the English character and the King is formed on the battle field, against the French. Taking on the French and then opening the route to Constantinople is a way in which the English king, at least discursively, puts England on the imperial map. The tension of keeping England free of popish influence and yet expanding towards the Mediterranean makes itself felt in Henry V. This tension is then naturally felt in the way Turks and Catholics are portrayed- the two stereotypes complement each other to form an other than needs to be reformed by the English.

Venice and Falstaff, then, provide two figures in Shakespeare's works that alert the audience to similarities and differences between an English and a catholic way of life. Both stand in for the idea of excess. Venice's excessive wealth drives it into vices and social weaknesses, whereas Falstaff manages to act out excess with what little he has. The other figure of excess, the cruel, vengeful, emotionally unstable Turk, provides the discursive metaphors as to what goes on in Venice and the behavior of Falstaff. Spelling out these catholic, Turkish vices, Shakespeare stages a kind of exorcism on stage, cleansing the English court and country from these vices whilst constructing English traditions of state and sense of commonwealth.

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