

The Mediterranean World and the ‘Turk’ in Shakespeare’s Representation of the British Empire

Houria HALIL

Department of English, Faculty of Arts and Languages
University Abderahmane Mira
Bejaia, Algeria

Bouteldja RICHE

Department of English, Faculty of Arts and Languages
University Mouloud Mammeri
Tizi Ouzou, Algeria

Abstract

This research explores Shakespeare’s representation of the so-called British Empire in its contact with other jostling empires, most notably the Ottoman Empire in the Mediterranean. To this end, four of Shakespeare’s Mediterranean plays *Othello*, *the Moor of Venice* (1603), *The Merchant of Venice* (1596), *The Tempest* (1611), and *Cymbeline* (1611) are taken under study. By considering the Postcolonial historicist approach developed by literary scholars such as Stephen Greenblatt and Edward Said, the research argues that the issues of imperial relationships in Shakespeare are not solely centered on the transatlantic colony of Virginia, but it was also extended to the Mediterranean basin. The latter, during Tudor England and, later, Stuart Britain had much more trade and diplomatic activity than on the Atlantic seaboard. This economic activity created a cosmopolitan zone of contact wherein people of the Orient elbowed people from the West. This encounter gave rise to a pre-modern form of Orientalism, which is reflected in Shakespeare’s celebration of marital-cum-political endogamous relationships in his four plays mentioned earlier.

Keywords: British Empire, endogamy, exogamy, Mediterranean world, political alliances, representation, Shakespeare’s plays, ‘Turk’

Cite as: Houria HALIL, H., & RICHE, B. (2020). The Mediterranean World and the “Turk” in Shakespeare’s Representation of the British Empire. *Arab World English Journal for Translation & Literary Studies* 4 (4) 72 -83. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.24093/awejtls/vol4no4.6>

Introduction

From the Elizabethan period and throughout the seventeenth century, Britons, from England to Wales and Scotland to Irish settlements increasingly came into contact with the civilization of Islam, best represented at that time by the Ottoman Empire or the Turks. This civilization was experienced mostly through trade in the Mediterranean basin and a growing interest in Arabic and Hebraic studies. The story of Shakespeare’s Elizabethan England and later Stuart Britain with the Orient, written in the early modern era, as a result of their contact, did not run solely as a love story, but also as a story of hostility and armed conflict with contingent alliances in the war-time context of a religiously divided Europe. As all records dealing with human contact across religious, ethnic, linguistic, and national borders, its complexity emphatically gives the lie to those who would see Oriental countries and the West as locked up in perpetual conflicts (Maclean & Matar, 2011).

The tension between the West and the Orient in the pre-modern period began mainly after the decisive victory of the Ottoman Empire over the Byzantine Empire, the world's most enduring European empires, in May 1453. This critical historical event radically changed history, causing a new flare-up of tension between European Catholics and the Ottoman Muslims. Suddenly, the latter acted as a gatekeeper with a monopoly over commerce with the Far Orient. Therefore, while they were seeking to discover other trade routes to get access to Oriental goods, Europeans were obliged to accept the accomplished fact of Turkey as a commercial hub of global industrial, business market activity. Naturally, the Ottomans’ control of the gates to the Orient led to their inevitable military confrontations with European powers. These confrontations came to a head with the expulsion of the Moors from Spain in the last decade of the fifteenth century. The crusading wars of yore, that is to say, the Medieval Christian-Muslim bloody confrontations had taken a new shape in the pre-modern era with its two champions, Spain and Turkey. The latter employed religion as pretexts for reviving the glory of the Roman Empire and Byzantium, respectively. Sustaining this drive to empire building is an economic system based on what some economists came to call the ‘political economy of plunder’ (Jablonski & Oliver, 2013).

The conflict between the Spanish Empire and the Ottoman Empire took a much more complex turn with the religious split between Catholics and Protestants that the Reformation brought it out in the early decades of the sixteenth century. The emergent ideology of nationalism that largely energized the Reformation made religious affiliations less critical, and therefore much more difficult to mobilize than the concept of ‘nation’ as the new religion in a war-torn Europe. In this age, the conflict of interest did not give rise only to a grand-scale warfare, but also to the propagation of piracy and corsair operations. This culminated in the battle of Lepanto in 1576 where the Holy League scored with what looked like a decisive victory to the Ottomans celebrated all over Europe. However, it marked a stalemate wherein the parties in conflict resorted to piracy and corsair activities as another way of making war.

Having inherited a financially ruined, socially divided, and religiously fragmented realm or *imperium* as Henry VIII referred to England, the last Tudor monarch, Elizabeth I, sponsored piracy and corsair activity sometimes openly to parry for the shortage of government funds.

However, this activity was encouraged by Elizabeth I not only to meet the financial needs of her kingdom, but also to counter the Spanish domination of the trade routes and Philip II’s threat to the territorial sovereignty of England. This Spanish menace was fostered by Philip II’s pretence to be the heir to the English throne after the decease of his wife, Mary Tudor. In addition to her support to the corsairs or pirates, Elizabeth I played the card of matrimony to set her two menacing belligerents, France and Spain, at loggerheads. Besides, she opened at the same time diplomatic relationships with the Ottomans in response to the threat of both the abovementioned. Indeed, it was during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I that the diplomatic and commercial relations with the countries along Mediterranean shores, from Morocco to Turkey and even further, were set on the way. These relations culminated in the creation of chartered companies. Among these, we can mention the Turkey Company (1581) renamed later, in 1592, the Levant Company; the Barbary Company (1585); and the East India Company (1600), by far the most important of the companies that received the royal charter to trade with the Eastern regions (Maclean & Matar, 2011).

The next monarch to the English throne, James I, reversed the political rapprochement with the Ottoman Empire that Elizabeth I had established during her long, turbulent reign (1558-1603). This new political episode between Britain and the Ottomans came after the normalization of political relationships with Spain in 1604 at the accession of the Stuart King to the English throne. James I not only sought to revive the mythical Empire of Britain, but also attempted to restore peaceful relations in war-torn Europe through matrimonial alliances. During his reign, James I made the bid to marry his sons, Henry and later Charles, to the princess of Spain. James I’s matrimonial policy turned out to be a partial success. While his daughter Elizabeth was married to the German Palatinate Prince, he never succeeded in getting one of his sons into wedlock with the Spanish princess. Overall, this reshuffling in British foreign policy was translated into attempts to contain the piracy in the Mediterranean through navy patrols. However, despite James I’s aggressive attitude towards the Muslim countries on allegations of piracy, commercial exchange in the Mediterranean basin was never halted. We would say that it even increased in volume.

Corsair activity brought prizes and slaves to the Mediterranean ports to be bought and sold. In doing so, they were paradoxically stimulating the very trade that piracy was supposed to hinder. Corsairs or pirates were indeed responsible for the traumatic experience of enslaved crews and passengers on both the North and South sides of the Mediterranean. Still, it is also true to claim that they made possible close cross-cultural encounters and the flow of capital. The capture of human beings, who were reduced into slavery, primarily covered in reported captivity narratives. These narratives stimulated the interest of the English in those geographic zones of the Mediterranean. Those zones, known as the Barbary Shores, were taken under the Ottoman control. We assume that the reputation of the Mediterranean region as a broad zone of contact for Elizabethan England and Stuart Britain largely justifies the prevalence of the Mediterranean settings in Shakespeare’s drama. It is in this contact zone, where empires elbowed their way to prestige and world dominance, the two distinct ideas of Empire in Tudor/Elizabethan England and Stuart Britain were being shaped, following with contingent political alliances. As a dramatist hired out first to Queen Elizabeth I and then to King James I, Shakespeare holds the mirror to his royal patrons’ singular vision of Empire. For Elizabeth, an Empire is first and foremost, national,

religious and, political sovereignty. In contrast, for James I, an Empire is most of all, a restoration of mythical Britain in all its territorial integrity.

Literature Review

In this research, we would argue that in tackling the notion of Empire in his plays, Shakespeare is not concerned solely with the transatlantic zone of contact as some postcolonial critics (Brown, 1985; Hulme, 1986; Greenblatt, 1989, 1991; Ashcroft Bill et al, 1989; Willis, 1989; Skura, 1989; Knapp, 1992; Gillies, 1994, etc.) are very often prone to claim. This transatlantic-centered reading of Shakespeare in empire studies has overlooked the influence of the Mediterranean as a zone of contact on the vision and representation of Empire in Elizabethan England and Stuart Britain. We would also contend that Shakespeare’s setting of some of his major plays in the Mediterranean must not be offhandedly dismissed. If the Mediterranean region holds such interest for Shakespeare, it is for obvious historical and apparent reasons. One of these is that Italy is the birthplace of the Renaissance, the ideas of which had already reached England/Britain’s shores by the time Shakespeare had assumed the recognized title of a dramatist. The religious rift with the Pope notwithstanding, the Mediterranean is also the seat of ancient Greek cities and the Roman Empire whose celebrated heroes and heroines are deployed by Shakespeare in his Roman and Greek plays to defend the citizenship virtues of a country aspiring to the status of an Empire.

Moreover, the Mediterranean saw the flowering of that ‘primitive’ Christianity under Constantine, which England/Britain yearned to go back to, just as it wanted to restore the Empire of Britain founded by Brutus, grandson of that mythical Trojan founder of Rome called Aeneas. Most importantly, the English and British, under the political, economic circumstances, were forced to ‘look east’ towards the Mediterranean basin wherein the powerful empires of Europe and the Orient were jostling with each other to establish their dominance. And naturally, Shakespeare could not remain blind to the importance that this cut-throat competition for imperial prestige holds for the definition of the place of England/Britain amongst the rest of empires. This representation of Elizabethan England and Jacobean Britain as empires, which would be contended in this research, is carried out mostly in oppositional terms in the sense that it is the most alien. In other words, it is a culturally distant Empire in the Mediterranean where the Ottoman Empire or the Turks provided to it a perfect contrastive foil. This contention will appeal to four significant plays by Shakespeare, *Othello*, *the Moor of Venice* (1603), *The Merchant of Venice* (1596), *The Tempest* (1611), and *Cymbeline* (1611), using a Postcolonial historicist approach.

Accordingly, drawing on the historical and political atmosphere of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, this study aims to re-read the plays mentioned above in the light of the historical/political moment in which they were written and performed. This study principally departs away from the traditional literary studies. It does not focus only on the text but also examines the outside factors (biographical, cultural, historical, political, etc.) that may contribute to the making of a literary work. Moreover, since the focus is placed on the encounter with the ethnic Other, this historicist approach is given a postcolonial touch in its appeal to Edward Said’s orientalist theory.

Results and discussion: Texts in Contexts

In the plays mentioned above, Shakespeare gives many hints as to how Muslims were present in the mind-set and imagination of Londoners. Whether in these plays or the remaining ones, the social, physical, economic, political, and human geography of the Mediterranean basin figures prominently on the stage of Shakespeare’s Globe Theatre. In hindsight, the Mediterranean presence in Shakespeare’s plays written during the Elizabethan period could have a political and economic significance. The Kingdom of England, long ruled by Queen Elizabeth I, was plagued by many severe domestic and foreign problems. The prolonged Anglo-Spanish conflict had plunged the government deeply into debt that demanded the breaking into new markets, including slave trading in Spanish overseas territories, and an international diplomatic offensive to weave alliances with the principal enemy of its enemy, the Ottoman Empire. Religious tensions had reached their heights in the 1570s and the 1580s with the growth of Puritanism and the threat of aggressive Catholic action supported from abroad (Patterson, 1998). These dire circumstances offered Elizabeth I no other alternative but to seek political and economic cooperation and assistance from the arch-enemy of Christendom, the Ottoman Empire. Such a political overture was seized by both hands by the Turks, for as Wood (1964) put it so well, “the Sultan saw in Elizabeth I a potential ally against Spain, and said that he would never expel from his Porte the foes of his foes” (p. 14). In this case, we can assume that it is in this war-time context and the mutual interests, which surpassed religious differences, that Sultan Murad III (1574–95) issued, in 1580, a formal trading license to the English nation as a whole.

Othello holds out a distorting mirrored to all these intricate events. The play was first performed at the court of King James I on November 1, 1604. It was written during Shakespeare’s significant tragic period, marked by the writing and performance amongst other plays of *Hamlet* (1600), *King Lear* (1604–5), *Macbeth* (1606), and *Antony and Cleopatra* (1606–7). *Othello*, which is a play, set in the Mediterranean, intended to portray the wars between Venice and the Ottoman Empire about the island of Cyprus. This can be a hint or suggestions with parallels to Anglo-Spanish relationships. This research reveals the kind of complicated relationships Elizabethan England and later Jacobean Britain entertained with the Turks. *Othello* is the one play in which Shakespeare draws a shifting and condensed image of the ‘Turk’ and the Moor during the Elizabethan and the Jacobean periods due the reshuffling of political alliances in Europe.

As an allegory, the reference to the ‘turbaned Turk’ and ‘most worthy signor’ can be rightly held as a reference to the Ottoman Sultan ‘Grand Signor’, Murad III, and correlatively to the Ottoman Empire that he represents. It is right to note that during the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods, and for nearly two centuries later, the word ‘Turk’ was such an umbrella term that covers a range of meanings included all the ethnic groupings who belong to the Muslim world. *Othello*, the Moor of Venice, was referred to in the play as a ‘Turk’ because of his Turkish origins. Even Europeans, whose behaviors did not conform to the European ways of life, were disparaged as Turks. Hence, whether *Othello* was taken for a converted Moor or a European wearing a disguise as in (black) masques of the type produced by Jonson, we can see that he cannot escape from the extensive reference range of the ideological notion of ‘Turk’. This notion largely accounts for

Othello’s rehearsal of his tragic conversion at the end of the play when he stabs himself to death for doubting the purity of the iconic figure of Desdemona. It has been said that a ‘good Indian is a dead Indian.’ This adage seems to be true for Othello the Turk/Moor, who invites the comparison in the following extensive citation wherein he confesses his guilt:

Soft you; a word or two before you go/ I have done the state some service, and they know’t
– No more of that. I pray you, in your letters,/ When you shall these unlucky deeds relate
speak of me as I am; nothing extenuate,/ Nor set down aught in malice./ Then must you
speak/ Of one not easily jealous, but, being wrought,/ Perplexed in the extreme; of one
whose hand,/ Like the base Indian, threw a pearl away/Richer than his tribe; of one whose
subdu’d eyes,/Albeit unused to the melting mood,/Drops tears as fast as the Arabian trees
their med’cinable gum. Set you down this:/ And say besides that in Aleppo once,/ Where
a malignant turban’d Turk/Beat a Venetian and traduc’d the state,/ I took by th’ throat the
circumcised dog, and smote him – thus. (1997, I. v, pp. 341-355)

Othello’s self-comparison with the ‘base Indian’ or “Judean” was incapable of appreciating European Christian civilization at its real value, and his inherent incapacity to convert to the good faith truly puts him outside the fold. To compensate, he tragically strove to join it by an exogamous, wealthy marriage. We understand that the ‘Turk’ would do better to know that he is out of place in Elizabethan England and Stuart Britain, notwithstanding the out-of-nature alliance that Venice/Tudor England made with the Grand Signor leads us to draw to the suggested parallel between Desdemona and Elizabeth I.

It is worth noting that matrimonial arrangements in the pre-modern period went hand in hand with political interests. As previously observed, history tells us that Queen Elizabeth I, and mainly King James I, more or less dexterously, played at this game in the bridal market. This matrimonial market, as shown in *Othello*, was marked by deregulation since Desdemona is so impressed by the bravery and military might of the old Moor/Turk. Then, she falls in love with him despite all the social uproar that this love arose among the Venetians/English. The heroics of the Moor/Turk made, temporarily at least, the feeble Venetian Senate/English Parliament ready to turn a blind eye to what the public in general and Brabantio, Desdemona’s father, in particular, consider as an unacceptable exogamous or anomalous marriage. In this case, as we understand, Desdemona/Elizabeth I have already had her say in this politically colored type of union with the Moor/Turkish Sultan of the moment. Her consent to a matrimonial/political alliance with the Turk/Moor could by no means be gainsaid by widespread outcry or the Senate in a war-time context like the one in which Venice/England had found itself. Historically, Elizabeth I’s convergence with the Grand Signor in the 1580s is parallel to the rapprochement of Venice/Desdemona with the Turks in the victory of the Holy Alliance League in Lepanto in 1571. Both the English and the Turkish Sovereigns were frowned upon by the rest of Europe, most notably the Catholic part of it, and to all evidence, Shakespeare came round to this view in compliance with James I’s reshuffling of political alliance following his accession to the English throne in 1603.

Contrary to Prince Henry, who advocated the continuity of the aggressive politics in continental Europe, mainly against Spain, carried out during Elizabeth I, James I adopted a peaceful, if not a pacifist stance, seeking to live in concord with the neighboring states, both Catholic and Protestant. However, this pacifism was not abided by when the presumably restored Empire of Britain dealt with the Orient, most notably its Muslim part. Indeed, as soon as he was crowned as the King of England, James I decided to put an end to piracy and corsair activity, that Elizabeth I clandestinely encouraged. This activity constituted a thorn in the Spanish Emperor’s side for a very long time. This fight against piracy was focused mostly on corsair activity in the Southern shores of the Mediterranean on whose corsairs he shifted the blame for the disruption of trade. Corsair activity, which became a major sector of what historians called ‘the economy of plunder’, could not be attributed, as a particular feature or defect, to a specific ethnic grouping. James I’s change of politics eventually led to Robert Mansel’s attack on Algiers in 1620 to redress by force the harm caused to British trade by the increasing depredations carried out by its corsairs.

Naturally, this shift in geopolitical strategy shapes Shakespeare’s representation of characters across ethnic groupings in *Othello*. All exciting love stories, it is true, go wrong. However, in the case of Othello and Desdemona, their love story or romance goes wrong mostly for political and ethnic reasons, somehow in the manner of *Romeo and Juliette*, and with the erasure of the reconciliation scene that marks comedy. Othello and Desdemona’s romance is an exogamous romance decried by the public as a monstrous match though it has been politically validated for military expediency. This public outcry finds its way in Iago’s waking alarm addressed to Brabantio, seemingly not watchful enough of the ‘chattel’ of his Aristotelian type of household:

Zounds, Sir [Brabantio] you’re robb’d; for shame put on your gown;/ Your heart is burst; you have lost half your soul./ Even now, now, very now, an old black ram/Is tuppung your white white ewe./ Arise, arise; Awake the snorting citizens with the bell,/ Or else the devil will make a grandsire of you/ Arise I say. (1997, I. i, pp. 84-90)

The charivari that Iago raises is rife with this type of foul language that characterizes the exogamous relationship of Othello and Desdemona, which is assumed to be ‘bestial’ and devilish, since it defies the natural order of things and norms related to marriage. What we have noticed at this point is that Shakespeare’s motivation of the characters is primarily political, because of the transition context in which the play was written and performed. If the attacks on the unnatural alliance of Othello and Desdemona are explicit in terms of both ethnic belonging and age, the sexual advances of Roderigo, the gulled gentleman, are no less so. Roderigo’s Spanish-sounding name makes the erotic triangle assume a political shape with three characters, Desdemona, Othello, and Roderigo, with suggested spatial parallels: England/Britain, the Ottoman Empire, and the Spanish Empire, respectively. Much has been assumed in critical literature about Iago and what he stands for, overlooking in the process that this character is partly moved to action by the money, the Spanish capital, which he gets from Roderigo to procure him the sexual favors of Desdemona. On the whole, the characterization of Iago is marked by displacement. In the play, he shifts from

a character of comedy in Venice, to a hero of the tragic texts that he weaves himself. It carefully knots in Cyprus, being fully aware of the bad reputation that his country has earned abroad.

In European political literature, Venice is named as Turkey’s courtesan because of the volatility of her diplomacy, which was much more guided by economic interests than moral or religious principles. For example, just after the victory of the Holy League at Lepanto in 1571, Venice hastened to sign a treaty with the Ottomans by accepting to pay tribute to the beaten enemy in exchange for trade advantages in the territories of the Ottoman Empire. This can reflect Tudor England whose Queen was dismissed as a ‘camp whore’ by Philip II, the Spanish Emperor of the time. This dismissal came after Philip II’s unsuccessful attempt to win her hand as a marital replacement for his deceased Catholic wife, Mary Tudor or Bloody Mary, a half-sister of Elizabeth I. Therefore, Roderigo might be a familiar comic character, a dupe that Iago twists around his little finger, and in return for money, he promised falsely to get him in bed with Desdemona. However, in the context of the Spanish-English conflict of the period and how Elizabeth I played the marriage card to avert the Spanish invasion temporarily, Roderigo’s sexual advances are not just things of which Shakespeare invites his contemporary to make a joke. Indeed, he might well be a representative of the many Spanish ambassadors or emissaries, such as Feria. They were kept on the run in the English Court to win Elizabeth I over in the cut-throat competition in the marriage market that she saw a real threat to her and her realm.

Shakespeare’s double plot in *Othello* makes it clear that the exogamous alliance of Queen Elizabeth I with the Ottomans /Turks is mortal in the long term. However, it might have served in a short term to ward off the threat of the Spaniards to the English shores. According to Brotton (2016), “Sir Francis Walsingham’s plan was ultimately successful. The Ottoman fleet movements in the eastern Mediterranean fatally split Phillip II’s Armada” (p. 01). Thus, the storm that dispersed the Spanish Armada along the English shores in 1584 hinted at by Shakespeare in *Othello* in the dispersal of the Ottoman fleet engaged against the Venetian outpost ‘Cyprus’ might be providential. Still, it can surmise that the events might not have taken such a happy turn without the Grand Signor’s military threat on Spanish territories in the Mediterranean. Queen Elizabeth I, the ‘confederate’ of the Turks as the Pope called her, signed a treaty with the Ottomans in 1581. This treaty was received “with outrage and protest by European diplomats, who accused Elizabeth of selling out to the Turkish infidel” (Vitkus, as cited in Waite, 2013, p. 1256). In the final analysis, if marriage, in general, is perceived as an adventure, in *Othello*, it is portrayed as a wild sea adventure foreboding the tragic end of the play. Desdemona and Othello meet in Cyprus as newly-weds. Still, the regained civil peace is short-lived for the couple. Then, it is soon submitted to the trials and tribulations of married life by those very forces, which have hounded them in Venice.

As suggested above, Venice the Serenissima (the Serene) earned the bad reputation of being the Turk’s Courtesan, just as England was called out by the name of perfidious Albion in the international context because of their supposedly diplomatic sleights of hand and infidelities as far as alliances are concerned. In *Othello*, Shakespeare gives a knowing wink at these pejorative epithets attached to the names of Albion (Britain) and Venice. Still, he cares to shift the blame of marital, political infidelity to Othello/ The Turk who is accused of having lacked faith in honor of

his wife, Desdemona/Elizabeth I. Iago’s/Shakespeare’s plot against Othello would have certainly backfired if he had not all too easily given heed to the sexual defamation of Venice and her women. Desdemona’s liberal behavior with males, most notably her friendship with Cassio, Othello’s dismissed lieutenant, is far removed from what Othello expects from women in his original culture. This gap in perceptions strengthened his ocular delusion, leading him gradually but surely to subscribe to Iago’s scandalous gossip that Venice/England and their women are infidels. However, the moment that Othello starts to believe in this defamation and name-calling, he backslides, at least in the eyes of the audience, which holds Desdemona/Elizabeth as an icon of purity and fidelity, to his original state as a terrible and murderous ‘Turk’. In this concern, the play illustrates perfectly the saying that ‘what is bred in the bone will come out in the flesh’.

Only suicide, the supreme sacrifice, can halt Othello’s reversion to his atavistic nature as a ‘Turk’ that he keeps fighting inside himself and outside. Therefore, the tragic flaw of the presumably perfect Othello, that is to say, his *hamartia*, is doubt about Desdemona, portrayed, in the play, as an icon who has misplaced her love in an aging impostor infidel. As a devil incarnate, Iago is a popular figure of the Elizabethan and Jacobean theatre. Still, as a stand-in, for Shakespeare, he is not irredeemable because of the part he played in testing the faith of Othello in Desdemona and in uncovering Othello’s inherent infidelity as a convert. It is noted that Othello is on the point of being recalled to Venice in disgrace with the Senate when he commits the unpardonable sin of murdering his wife. The tragic irony is that the warlike convert Othello recruited to fight on the war front (the extraneous invading Turks (Ottomans and Spaniards) and home. However, by stamping out the disturbance of civil peace, he comes to realize in the final recognition and cathartic scenes that a Turk remains at heart a Turk notwithstanding the enthusiastic show of his conversion. Othello’s confession regarding his preposterousness and suicide, we would say ritual expulsion, come as a welcome relief to fears of miscegenation and pollution of the Venetian/ English/British breed.

Othello’s discharge of his command of Cyprus in a Roman-like manner and his replacement by the Florentine Cassio, whose unconditional love of Desdemona puts his life in jeopardy, give a new historical twist to the play. Britain, as a country, is often imagined as an outpost of the Roman Empire, presumably founded by Brutus, the grandson of Aeneas, the founder of Rome. Through the excellent resistance that opposed the Roman conquest, Britain earned the political recognition of Rome as a sovereign state. James I sought to restore and celebrate this mythical state of Britain in his adoption of the posture as both a peaceful Caesar and Constantine in the war-torn Britain and Europe of the time. In this context, Cassio might easily be regarded as a representative figure of James I, who, through the shift he operated in his political alliances, redeemed the image of the perfidious Albion attached to Elizabethan England because of its desirable exogamous partnership with the Turks. As one of the King’s Men who is familiar with the dirty tricks of politics, Shakespeare/Iago undoes this unnatural alliance, exonerating Desdemona/Elizabeth I from all charges of infidelity and pinning the blame on the infidel ‘Turk’ for the tragic turn that their love story has taken.

At this stage, one has to say that *Othello* is not the only play by Shakespeare that looks askance at politically exogamous alliances of Turks and English/Britain women. In *The Tempest*, we remember, for example, Sebastian’s remonstrance of the King of Naples for having accorded the hand of his daughter, Claribel, to the King of Tunis. “Sir,” he says, “you may thank yourself for this great loss./ That would not bless our Europe with your daughter, /But rather lose her to an African” (1997, II. i, p. 48). For Sebastian, the exogamous relationship seems to be disapproved by nature. On the homebound journey from Tunis, the King’s ship is wrecked by a storm on the shores of Algiers/Britain. Prospero, the Duke of Milan, who has found refuge there in Argiers/Algiers after his deposition by his brother, has provoked the storm through his agent Ariel in the act of revenge. The play climaxes with a reconciliation of the parties in conflict by an endogamous marriage of the King of Naples’s son, Ferdinand, with Prospero’s daughter Miranda. In this play performed in celebration of the union of James I’s daughter, Princess Elizabeth, with Frederick V, the Elector of the Palatinate, Prospero stands for King James I in his use of marital alliances as a strategy for peaceful resolution of conflicts in Europe.

Two other plays can be considered as typical examples of Shakespeare’s oppositional vision of Empire. One of these is *The Merchant of Venice* wherein global trade in oriental goods is contrasted with the triumph of Bassanio, a local gentleman, over his rivals, particularly Prince of Morocco, in the casket contest to gain the hand of Portia, an oblique reference to Elizabeth I. However, without the contest, the play dealing explicitly with the restoration of the Empire of Britain is *Cymbeline*. The latter takes us back to the resistance that the so-called Britons opposed to the Roman conquest. The triumph of the Britons over the Roman military forces of general Lucius at the battle of Milford-Haven can historically refer to Henry Tudor’s landing site in 1485. Then the play finds its climax in the political reconciliation of the Empire of Britain with the Roman Empire through the mediation of Lucius who ultimately receives the royal pardon of Cymbeline.

Cymbeline’s policy of peaceful co-existence in Europe finds an echo in King James I’s European-centred politics. Yet even in this play that tries to re-write the history of England/ Britain in line with the British King’s notion of Empire, the Orient comes into play as to what European emperors should not be or do in lest they resemble the Turks that they combated. This oppositional representation of European empires comes through the mouth of a banished lord called Belarius. He criticises the over-ambitious and proud comportment of European emperors in front of Guiderius and Arvirgus, Cymbeline’s two sons stolen at infancy in retaliation for his banishment. As they prepare to enter a cave in a mountainous country in Wales, Belarius cheerfully addresses his two sons as follows:

A goodly day not to keep house with such/ Whose roof’s as low as ours! Stoop, boys; this gate/ Instructs you how t’ adore the heavens, and bows you/ To a morning’s holy office. The gates of monarchs/ Are arch’d so high that giants may jet through/ And keep their *impious turbans* on without/ Good morrow to the sun. Hail thou fair heaven! / We house i’ th’ rock, yet use thee not so hardly/ As prouder livers do. (1997, II. iii, pp. 1-7, our emphasis)

For the religious Belarius, just as for James I, whose point of view he seems to make his own, the one tragic flaw of European monarchs is their imitation of turbaned Turkish fellow monarchs in their warlike arrogance and strut. Significantly, the two stolen sons of Cymbeline, who soon returned to their father after their tutorial, learned this lesson in humility. Three parallels suggest themselves for Cymbeline’s royal family with King James I: Imogen for Princess Elizabeth, Guiderius renamed Polydore for the warlike Prince Henry and Arvirgarius alias Cadwal for Prince Charles.

Conclusion

It follows from the above discussion that if the Mediterranean basin holds a strategic place in Shakespeare’s plays, it is not solely because it allowed him to ward off censorship as critics are all too quickly prone to claim, but also because it is historically the geographical place that shaped both the Tudor/Elizabethan and Stuart conceptions of Empire in its contact with the Other. The term Other is associated with the ‘Turk’, whose meaning stretched to include Ottomans, Moors, as well as Europeans who show behavioral impropriety as regards normative social and political Euro-Christian codes. As a transitional playwright, Shakespeare adjusts his representation of Empire, toeing the line of his two royal patrons, Queen Elizabeth I and James I, while trying to satisfy the expectations of his audience. Whether in comedies such as *The Merchant of Venice* and *The Tempest*, or tragedies like *Othello*, or historical plays such as *Cymbeline*, the Empire is represented in opposition to the prevalent conception of the ‘Turk’ prevailing in pre-modern times. In the final analysis, Shakespeare’s drama, across genres, portrays imperial relations in normative terms, advantaging endogamous Euro-centric over exogamous imperial relationships in the most crucial contact zone of the pre-modern period, which is the Mediterranean.

About the authors:

Houria Halil has been lecturing on English Literature and Civilization at the University of Abderahmane Mira of Bejaia, Algeria, since 2011. Her research interests are in the pre-modern area with a particular focus on Shakespeare. <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4829-4576>

Bouteldja Riche is a professor at the University of Tizi-Ouzou, Algeria. In addition to teaching, he is a curriculum designer, textbook writer, and author of several books in French and English.

References

- Ashcroft, B et al. *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Postcolonial Literatures*. Ed 2nd, London: Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group, 1989.
- Braudel, F. (1972). *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*. (S. Reynolds, Trans.). London: Harper and Row.
- Brotton, J. (2016). Why we must Thank the Turks, not Drake, for Defeating the Armada. *The Guardian*, p.1.
- Brown, P. (1985). This thing of darkness I acknowledge mine: *The Tempest* and the discourse of colonialism. In J. Dollimore & A. Sinfield, (Eds.), (pp.48-71). Manchester: Manchester University Press.

- Gillies, J. (1994). *Shakespeare and the Geography of Difference*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Greenblatt, S. (1988). *Shakespearean Negotiations: The circulation of social energy in Renaissance England*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Greenblatt, S. (1991). *Marvelous possessions: The wonder of the New World*. Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press.
- Hulme, P. (1986). *Colonial encounters: Europe and the native Caribbean 1492 – 1797*. New York, NY: Methuen.
- Jablonski, R.S & Oliver, S. (2013). The Political Economy of Plunder: Economic Opportunity and Modern Piracy. *The Journal of Conflict Resolution*. Vol. 57, No. 4, (pp. 682-708). California: Sage Publications, Inc. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24545613>. Accessed on 22/03/2020.
- Knapp, J. (1992). *An Empire Nowhere: England, America, and Literature from Utopia to The Tempest*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Maclean, G. & Matar, N. (2011). *Britain and the Islamic World, 1558–1713*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Marshall, T. (2000). *Theatre and Empire: Great Britain on the London stage under James VI and I*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Matar, N. (2005). *Britain and Barbary, 1589-1689*. Gainesville: Florida University Press.
- Matar, N. (2009). Britons and Muslims in the early modern period: From prejudice to (a theory of) toleration. *Patterns of Prejudice*, 43(3/4), 213-231. Routledge: Taylor and Francis Group, 213-231.
- Matar, N. (2000). *Turks, Moors, and Englishmen in the Age of Discovery*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.
- Patterson, W. B. (1998). *King James VI and the reunion of Christendom*. London: Cambridge University Press.
- Riche, B. (2012). William Shakespeare’s Cross-Generic Representation of Empires: A Reconsideration of Some Classic Postcolonial Readings of his Drama. *International Journal of Arts and Sciences*, 5(3), 253-267.
- Said, E. W. (1991). *Orientalism*, London: Penguin Books.
- Shakespeare, W., & Alexander, P. (1997). *The complete works of Shakespeare*. (Ed.). Peter Alexander. London: Harpercollins Pub Ltd.
- Vitkus, D. J. (1997). Turning Turk in Othello: The conversion and damnation of the Moor. *Shakespeare Quarterly*. 48 (2), 145-179. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2871278>.
- Waite, G. K. (2013). Reimagining Religious Identity: The Moor in Dutch and English Pamphlets, 1550-1620. In *Renaissance Quarterly*. Vol. 66. No. 4. The University of Chicago Press and Renaissance Society of America.
- Wood, A. C. A. (1964). *History of the Levant Company*. London: Frank Cass and Co.