

That's Nobody's Business but the Turks...Or Is It?: An Examination of Jacobean Drama as a Tool to Promote English Imperialism

By: Janelle Mudry

Fear of the “Other,” or that which is different from the dominant culture, whether it be a religious or racial Other, can serve as a strong starting point from which to promote the ideals of that dominant culture, especially if said culture being catered to is the British Empire during the Jacobean era. Although there are some scholars that would argue that England at this point in history was not yet widely imperialist, for the sake of clarity in this paper, the word “imperialist” is going to be used to describe the actions of the British Empire and the characters representing it. Additionally, the words “Muslim,” “Islam,” and “Turk” will be used relatively interchangeably, also for the sake of clarity within this paper. Through an analysis of the actions of both Christian and Muslim characters in Philip Massinger’s play, *The Renegado*, and Robert Daborne’s play, *A Christian Turned Turk*, it can be surmised that the dramatic representations of religious proselytization and conversion within English Renaissance dramas are greatly overexaggerated for the sake of promoting imperialistic, pro-English propaganda.

The Renegado is a 1624 play by English playwright, Philip Massinger, in which a Venetian gentleman disguised as a merchant named Vitelli falls in love with a Tunisian princess named Donusa. However, as Donusa is Muslim, or a “Turk,” their relationship results in them both being arrested. Donusa tries to get Vitelli to convert to Islam, or “turn Turk,” for their protection, but he objects, and she ends up converting to Christianity. *The Renegado* represents Christianity, and by extension, England, as the ultimate positive force overcoming the perceived evils of Islam, and by extension, the Ottoman empire. Immediately in Act One, Christianity is portrayed in a positive light, and in turn, Islam is portrayed negatively. For example, in the opening scene of the play in which Vitelli and his servant Gazet have a conversation about religion in a bazaar:

GAZET. I am bound there
To swear for my master’s profit...and if it be lawful
In a Christian shopkeeper to cheat his father,
I cannot find but to abuse a Turk
In the sale of our commodities must be thought
A meritorious work.
VITELLI. I wonder, sirrah,
What’s your religion?
GAZET. ...I would not be confined
In my belief: when all your sects and sectaries
Are grown of one opinion, if I like it
I will profess myself—in the mean time,
Live I in England, Spain, France, Rome, Geneva:
I am of that country’s faith.
VITELLI. And what in Tunis?
Will you turn Turk here?
GAZET. No, so I should lose
A collop of that part my Doll enjoined me
To bring home as she left it: ‘tis her venture,
Nor dare I barter that commodity



Without her special warrant. (Massinger 1.1)
Vitelli and his servant are demonstrated to be calculating for the sake of obtaining an easy profit; however, these qualities which are typically portrayed as negative are demonstrated with a sense of neutrality, as those being swindled are the Turkish patrons of the Tunisian bazaar. Thus, nearly any action committed by a Christian, barring conversion to Islam, puts them in the right by virtue of being a Christian. Even the character of Antonio Grimaldi, the titular renegado, who had turned Turk and to a life of piracy, is granted divine absolution, so long as he converts back to Christianity and ends his life of piracy (4.1). Christianity is thus the only path towards salvation, both literal and spiritual, regardless of any transgressions committed, be they comic or deplorable.

In addition to broadly anti-Islamic sentiments being immediately represented, *The Renegado* also portrays Islam negatively in a specifically sexist sense in that it characterizes any female Muslim characters as being hypersexual temptresses. For example, Donusa draws Vitelli in, providing him with opulent gifts and wealth, seducing him, and eventually having sexual intercourse with him:

VITELLI. What can be added
To that which I already have received,
I cannot comprehend.
DONUSA. The tender of myself...and in that gift,
Full restitution of that virgin freedom
Which thou hast robbed me of. Yet I profess,
I so far prize the lovely thief that stole it,
That, were it possible thou couldst restore
What thou unwittingly hast ravished from me,
I should refuse the present.
VITELLI. How I shake
In my constant resolution! And my flesh,
Rebellious to my better part, now tells me
...a hermit in a desert trenched with prayers
Could not resist this battery.
DONUSA. Thou...a natural Venetian,
Such as are courtiers born to please the fair ladies,
Yet come thus slowly on?
VITELLI. Excuse me, madam.
...I am so innocent that I know not what 'tis
That I should offer.
DONUSA. By instinct I'll teach thee
And with such ease as love makes me to ask it.
When a young lady wrings you by the hand, thus,
Or with an amorous touch presses your foot,
Looks babies in your eyes, plays with your locks,
Do not you find without a tutor's help
What 'tis she looks for? (2.4)

However, the oversexualization of Donusa, and thus all Muslim Ottoman women, does not exist in isolation. Donusa serves as a direct contrast to Vitelli's sister Paulina, and thus all Christian English women, in that she does not treat her virginity as some sacred aspect of her identity that

needs protected at all costs. Paulina's virginity and Christianity are the first two things mentioned about her and due to these qualities, she is seen as a commodity imprisoned by viceroy Asembeg (1.1). Her resulting unwillingness to compromise her virginity in exchange for some degree of freedom places her, and by extension Christianity, in a place of moral superiority. Furthermore, the religion of Islam is portrayed negatively in that the Muslim characters who hold positions of power are quick to turn to violence whenever Donusa's virginity is compromised. For example, whenever it is discovered that Vitelli has slept with Donusa, they are sentenced to death:

ASAMBEG. Spurn the dog to prison.
[*To Donusa*] I'll answer you anon.
VITELLI. What punishment
Soe'er I undergo, I am still a Christian.
DONUSA. What bold presumption's this? Under what law
Am I to fall, that set my foot upon
Your statues and decrees?
MUSTAPHA. The crime committed
Our Alcoran calls death. (3.5)

In addition to fatal degrees of violence being backed, at the very least in the play, by the religious text followed by the antagonistic Turks, it would be remiss not to acknowledge the fact that, ultimately, both Donusa and Paulina's virginities are owned and protected by men. Both Donusa and her virginity represent just another one of the lavish objects owned by the Turkish powers, whereas Paulina's main goal—and duty as a Christian woman during the time—is to maintain her virginity in order to give it to a Christian man, her husband, to own. In addition to Donusa's aforementioned disregard for the perceived sacrality of her virginity, the violent—religiously-endorsed—response to her loss of virginity, and the kidnapping of Paulina in an attempt to steal hers, further demonize Islam as being consumed by violence, lust, and greed.

The actual conversion process from Christianity to Islam is not present in this play; however, the threat of “turning Turk” is that, while he is locked in prison, Donusa implores Vitelli to convert to her religion in hopes that their lives may be spared:

VITELLI. You speak in riddles.
What burthen, or what mistress? Or what fetters
Are those you point at?
DONUSA. Those which your religion,
The mistress you too long have served, compels you
To bear with slave-like patience...
Be wise and weigh
The prosperous success of things. If blessings
Are donatives from heaven...and that
They are called down and poured on such as are
Most gracious with the great disposer of 'em,
Look on our flourishing empire...and then turn back and see
The narrow bounds of yours...as you have petty kingdoms. And then, if
You are not obstinate against truth and reason,
You must confess the deity you worship
Wants care or power to help you. (4.3)

However, Christianity is once again portrayed as ultimately superior in that it takes Vitelli minimal amounts of proselytization to convince Donusa to convert instead, so that they may have their eternal lives saved:

VITELLI. Your intent to win me
To be of your belief proceeded from
Your fear to die. Can there be strength in that
Religion that suffers us to tremble
At that which every day—nay, hour—we haste to?
DONUSA. This is unanswerable, and there's something tells me
I err in my opinion...
I came here to take you,
But I perceive a yielding in myself
To be your prisoner.
VITELLI. 'Tis an overthrow
That will outshine all victories. O Donusa,
Die in my faith; like me and 'tis a marriage
At which celestial angels shall be waiters,
And such as have been sainted welcome us.
Are you confirmed?
DONUSA. I would be—but the means
That may assure me?
VITELLI. Heaven is merciful
And will not suffer you to want a man
To do that sacred office, build upon it.
DONUSA. Then thus I spit at Mahomet. (4.3)

Both Vitelli's refusal to convert and Donusa's quick conversion are the most explicit representations of Christianity as being superior to Islam within *The Renegado*; it only takes a short speech for Vitelli to convince Donusa to blaspheme against the prophet of the religion she had been following for her entire life. In addition to the represented power of Christianity to change the lifelong beliefs of someone within minutes, Donusa's switching of motivations, and subsequently religions, further characterizes Muslim women as fickle. She first compromises her virginity for a man she had just met, then compromises her lifelong cultural and religious values for the same man.

Although the representation of Islam in *The Renegado* is as predictably negative as would be expected from Jacobean drama, this play is unique in that its representation of Christianity is uncharacteristically Catholic, especially given that, in works from this time, Catholicism was treated with equal, if not worse, animosity than Islam. This observation is echoed by literary scholars:

Although *The Renegado* overtly posits the triumph of Christian spirituality over Islamic carnality, it anchors Christian resistance in Catholic objects, ceremonies, and bodily practices, and repeatedly marks spiritual redemption in outward, visible, and material ways...[t]hese details position the play explicitly against the practices and beliefs of English Protestantism, and yet the play was given official license for public performance and appears to have been popular and uncontroversial in its time (Degenhardt 63).

The representation of Christianity through a specifically Catholic lens directly contradicts the portrayal of Catholicism in other captive narratives from the time, such as *Strange and Wonderful Things Happened to Richard Hasleton in His Ten Years' Travails in Many Foreign Countries*, in which the Spanish Inquisition is shown torturing Hasleton in an attempt to make him convert to Catholicism (Hasleton 85-87). Ironically, Massinger's neutral, if not positive, representation of specifically Catholic Christian traditions does aid in its promotion of English imperialistic ideals, despite Catholicism, like Islam, appearing to be a threat to the country's Protestant culture.

A Christian Turned Turk is a 1612 play by Robert Daborne that follows the mythologized story of historical pirate, John Ward, as he converts to Islam to marry a Muslim woman, Voadia, whom he has fallen in love with, despite her not genuinely loving him; ultimately, this conversion leads to his downfall.

Much like in *The Renegado*, Muslim women in *A Christian Turned Turk* are hypersexualized and portrayed to use their sex appeal to their own advantage to bring about the downfall of the Christian, and otherwise non-Turkish men in the play. For example, the character Benwash, a Jewish man who had converted to Islam, is made a cuckold by his wife, Agar, whom he had obtained by converting to Islam:

BENWASH. I have it, I have it—here, here! Nay
come on, you have come off, I am sure. Here's evidence looks pale to
think but on't...come forward and be hanged! I shall advance you in a rope's
name. You have made no cuckold of me—I made myself one, pandered my own
horns...What think you of this case?

RABSHAKE. I think the serpent crept into a narrow hole and left his case behind him.

BENWASH. Then I am a cornuto!

RABSHAKE. This makes the naked truth appear so.

BENWASH. The best is, the crest is mine own. I paid well for't.

AGAR. Dear husband, pardon me. I will confess. (Daborne 1.12)

Much like Donusa, Agar is characterized as having an unrestrained sexual appetite; however, the primary difference between the two comes from Agar's sense of ambivalence towards the situation, further representing Muslim women as both calculating and immodest. This is likely due to the fact that Donusa eventually converted to Christianity and is thus provided absolution for what would be considered transgressions, such as premarital or extramarital sex. Agar is not afforded this because, like Voadia, her main motive appears to be converting non-Turkish men to Islam.

The portrayal of excessive and unconventional sexuality in Muslim women is further represented by Voadia, Ward's wife, bargaining with Alizia, a woman disguised as a man, asking for sex in exchange for Raymond, Alizia's brother's, safety:

VOADIA. I shall then take your promise. Your brother being
Redeemed, this night I shall enjoy thee.

ALIZIA. This diamond binds me to't—by this I swear.

VOADIA. 'Tis thine. I will bestow it on thee. To tie thy faith
Thou hast his ransom.

ALIZIA. 'Tis here.

VOADIA. About it then. (1.13)

In addition to being portrayed as carnal and lust-driven, Muslim women in *A Christian Turned Turk* are also characterized by Daborne as being cruel and conniving. For example, in a similar

fashion to Agar's relationship with Benwash, Voada only romantically pursues Ward, or rather allows Ward to pursue her, in order to convert him to Islam:

VOADA. I'll be concealed no longer. Know then I love,

But not the man whose daily orisons

Invoke confusion on me, whose religion

Speaks to me an infidel.

WARD. 'Sheart, I am of none—only to feed discourse,

And fill up argument.

VOADA. But you must be of one if you'll enjoy me.

If then your thoughts answer to what you speak,

Turn Turk—I am yours.

WARD. Turn Turk? (1.7)

However, after Ward has converted to Islam for her, Voada's tone changes dramatically and she treats him coldly, revealing that she, in fact, does not love him. Furthermore, she berates him for trying to pursue her romantically:

WARD. Yet see, midst all my miseries I have a friend,

My constant, loyal Voada. Could what we enjoy

Make a man happy, I am not miserable.

Thou com'st to comfort me—I know thou dost.

VOADA. This fellow raves sure. Do you know to whom you speak?

... We know you are a bloody murderer and are repaid

By our just Prophet that hates false runagates.

WARD. ... Thou hast forgot me sure! O look on him

That hath denied his faith, sold all his hopes

To purchase thee his bride.

VOADA. To match with beggary! Know I condemn thee

As a most abject slave, and hate thee more

Than all thy wealth could make me love before. (1.13)

Thus, the Jacobean audience of *A Christian Turned Turk* would associate Muslim women, and by extension Islam as a whole, with an excess of carnality and cruelty, especially in the context of their interactions with Christians. To the English Christian audience, Muslim women were cunning temptresses whose only goals were to fulfill their own sexual appetites and make Christian men stray from their faith and morals.

Ward's actual conversion process from being a Christian to being a Muslim is portrayed through a dumb-show, a brief mimed portion of a play used to convey expository information to the audience, likely because Daborne and other Jacobean English people knew little about the actuality of the religion of Islam. The dumb-show illustrating Ward's conversion represents the Islamic religion as one that bastardizes Christian symbols and sacraments:

After them, Ward on an ass, in his Christian habit, bare headed. The two knights, with low reverence, ascend, whisper the Mufti in the ear, draw their swords, and pull him off the ass... [the Mufti] ungirds his sword, offers him a cup of wine by the hands of a

Christian. He spurns him and throws away the cup, is mounted on the ass, who is richly clad, and with a shout, they exit. (8.1)

The inclusion of the dumb-show taking Christian symbols that would be familiar to the Jacobean audience and perverting them, such as Jesus riding into Jerusalem on an ass and the sacrament of communion, aids in the portrayal of Islam as being deliberately spiteful and blasphemous. This

portrayal, likely intended to shock and enrage the audience, further places Christianity, and thus the English empire, as being superior to Islam and, by extension, the Ottoman Empire.

The portrayal of Christian-to-Muslim and Muslim-to-Christian conversion in *The Renegado* and *A Christian Turned Turk* are highly dramatized and sensationalized for the purpose of promoting the perceived superiority of Christianity, and more broadly, England. However, as would be expected, the way in which religious conversion is represented within these two plays is significantly divorced from reality. For example, chapter 2, verse 257 of the Quran states that “There should be no compulsion in religion. Surely, right has become distinct from wrong; whosoever refuses to be led by those who transgress, and believes in Allah, has surely grasped a strong handle which knows no breaking” (*The Holy Quran*). Although certain cases of forcible conversion to Islam are present both in antiquity and modern-day, such cases are likely the result of the morals of individuals and political movements, rather than holding any true scriptural backing, like would be assumed by Christian audiences during the Jacobean era. Any actual widespread conversion of Christians to Islam during this era were the result of the natural meeting of the cultures due to the spread of the Ottoman empire:

The Turkish threat to Europe assumed a more serious tone as more people established real contact with the Turks and brought some true accounts of the Turkish lifestyle and Islam... following the establishment of the Levant Company in the late sixteenth century, English travellers [sic] to Ottoman territories were amazed by the number of Christians who converted to Islam. (Sahiner 101)

The fear of the Turkish Other caused by the phenomenon of Christians converting to Islam lent itself easily to the promotion of English imperialist propaganda, such as plays like *The Renegado* and *A Christian Turned Turk*.

The most well-known driving factors behind imperialism are the drive for increased political power, economic power, and religious or cultural control. Although the Ottoman Empire, being as big as it was, certainly strived for these things, plays like *The Renegado* and *A Christian Turned Turk* provide insight into how imperialistic propaganda, in favor of the British Empire specifically, worked. Scholar Daniel J. Vitkus would adamantly protest the use of the word “empire” to describe Britain during the Jacobean era, as semantically, it was not technically yet an empire because: “without territorial possession—and without control over colonized bodies—does not an empire make” (Vitkus 6). Other than Britain definitively having colonies during the Jacobean era, the unrelenting positive light in which these playwrights paint England is unmistakably imperialistic in nature (Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopedia). Turks, being members of the Islamic religion, were continuously Othered and portrayed as lusty, greedy, bloodthirsty, and ultimately inferior to Christianity by being characterized as such in pieces of Jacobean media, such as dramas like *The Renegado* and *A Christian Turned Turk*. The Islamic religion, and by extension the Ottoman Empire must be portrayed so negatively that Christianity, and by extension the British empire, can be unambiguously in the right. If enough favor is carried by the English public, as well as enough hatred towards the unfamiliar Other, then future imperialistic endeavors will be met with a significantly more positive reception.

Plays like *The Renegado* and *A Christian Turned Turk* that both cater to and further deepen existing prejudices against the Turkish Other create an ideal manner with which to espouse propaganda. More specifically, propaganda that works in favor of the British empire. Both plays deepen these prejudices by representing the Islamic religion as utterly reprehensible in order to uplift nearly any English action by comparison. A modern critical analysis of these plays provides the insight that the portrayal of Christian to Islamic conversions were wildly

overexaggerated and written from a place of not only disdain, but severe misunderstanding. Furthermore, such analysis provides the insight that the cultivation of such contempt is intentional and critical for Jacobean-era empirical and financial success for both the playwrights and their largest patron, the English crown.

Bibliography

- Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopedia. "British Empire". *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 13 Mar. 2022, <https://www.britannica.com/place/British-Empire>.
- Daborne, Robert. *A Christian Turned Turk. Three Turk Plays from Early Modern England*, edited by Daniel J. Vitkus. Columbia University Press, 2000. pp. 241-340.
- Degenhardt, Jane Hwang. "Catholic Prophylactic and Islam's Sexual Treat: Preventing and Undoing Sexual Defilement in *The Renegado*." *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies*, vol. 9, no. 1, Spring 2009, pp. 62-92. JSTOR, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/30339611>.
- Farajallah, Hana Fathi, and Amal Riyadh Kitishat. "The Self and the Other in Philip Massinger's 'The Renegado, the Gentleman of Venice': A Structural View." *Theory & Practice in Language Studies*, vol. 9, no. 1, Jan. 2019, pp. 118-22. EBSCOhost, <https://doi.org/10.17507/tpls.0901.17>.
- Hasleton, Richard. *Strange and Wonderful Things Happened to Richard Hasleton in His Ten Years' Travails in Many Foreign Countries*. Moodle document, 1595. *The Holy Quran*. Translated by Maulawi Sher 'Ali, Islam International Publications Limited, 2021.
- Masood, Hafiz Abid. "Islam in Medieval and Early Modern English Literature: A Select Bibliography." *Islamic Studies*, vol. 44, no. 4, 2 pp. 553-629, 2005, JSTOR, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20838992>.
- Massinger, Philip. *The Renegado. Three Turk Plays from Early Modern England*, edited by Daniel J. Vitkus. Columbia University Press, 2000. pp. 251-339.
- Sahiner, Mustafa. "The Problematic of 'Turning Turk' in Philip Massinger's *The Renegado*." *Journal of British Literature and Culture*, no. 14, pp. 79-91, 2007, ResearchGate, <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/341926242>.
- Said, Edward W. "From *Orientalism*." *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, edited by Vincent Leitch et al., NY: W.W. Norton and Co., 2010. 2nd ed. pp.1866-1888.
- . "From *Culture and Imperialism*." *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, edited by Vincent Leitch et al., NY: W.W. Norton and Co., 2010. 2nd ed. pp. 1888-1904.

Topinka, Robert J. "Islam, England, and Identity in the Early Modern Period: A Review of Recent Scholarship." *Mediterranean Studies*, vol. 18, pp. 114-130, 2009, *JSTOR*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41163965>.

Vitkus, Daniel J. "Before Empire." *Turning Turk: English Theatre and the Multicultural Mediterranean*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2002, pp. 1-24.