

Oriental Matter Revisited: Representations of the “Turk” in Robert Greene’s *Selimus*

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ABSTRACT

From the definitions provided by Edward Said in his *Orientalism*, it is possible to divide western oriental discourse into two different phases: one covering the early modern period up to eighteenth century which demonizes and misrepresents the East, and the other, arguably still in effect, which, in Said’s words, dominates and restructures it. The representations of the Turks in the early modern plays assume a tone which is different from the representations of the other eastern races. The Turks, unlike other “inferior” oriental races, are represented in the early modern writings as the “grand evil” whose infidelity and apparent power are such a great threat to the Christian world that they must be stopped and destroyed. Through analyses of Anglo-Turkish encounters in the early modern period, this paper aims to examine and explore the meanings encoded in the (mis)representations of the Turks in Robert Greene’s play, *Selimus*. It will also be argued that the pre-eighteenth century English approach to the Ottoman Turks can be defined as a process of demonization and misrepresentation rather than domination and restructuring.

Key Words: Robert Greene, *Selimus*, Oriental discourse, Ottoman Turks, representation.

ÖZET

Oryantal Meselesine Yeniden Bakış: Robert Greene’in *Selimus* Oyununda “Türk” Tasviri

Edward Said’in *Orientalism* adlı eserindeki tanımlarından, Batı Oryantal Söylemi’ni iki farklı döneme ayırmak mümkündür. Bunlardan ilki, Doğu’nun yanlış tasvir edildiği ve şeytanlaştırıldığı dönem olan erken modern dönem ile onsekizinci yüzyıla kadar olan zamanı kapsar, ikincisi ise, Said’in deyişiyle Doğu’yu egemenliğine alan ve yeniden yapılandıran dönem olan onsekizinci yüzyıldan başlayıp hala sürdüğü varsayılan dönemdir. Erken modern dönem oyunlarındaki Türk tasviri diğer Doğu ırklarının tasvirlerinden

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farklılık göstermektedir. Diğer oryantal ırkların tersine, dinsizlikleri ve üstün güçleriyle Hristiyan dünyasına büyük bir tehdit oluşturan Türkler erken modern dönem yazılarında durdurulması ve yok edilmesi şart olan “Büyük Bela” olarak gösterilmiştir. Bu çalışmanın amacı, erken modern dönemdeki Türk-İngiliz çatışmaları ile Robert Greene’in *Selimus* oyununda Türklerin yanlış tasvirindeki anlamları incelemektir. Bu bağlamda, onsekizinci yüzyıl öncesi dönemde İngilizlerin Osmanlı Türklerine yaklaşımlarının egemenlik kurma ve yeniden yapılandırmadan ziyade şeytanlaştırma ve yanlış tasvir etmeye yönelik olduğu tartışılacaktır.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Robert Greene, *Selimus*, Oryantal söylem, Osmanlı Türkleri, tasvir.

Ever since the early modern period, Europe, “especially Western Europe has imagined itself politically, philosophically, and geographically at the centre of the world” (Goffman 4-5). Goffman further claims that “Europeans and neo-Europeans in America and elsewhere have routinely judged art, literature, religion, statecraft, and technology according to their own authorities and criteria” (5). This attitude has been designated as “orientalist” and has predisposed even some historians to consider not only the Ottoman Empire but also other societies and ideas judged “non-western” as peripheral to the harmony of European countries (Goffman 5). They have defined the “East,” mainly the Islamic world, as “orient,” and the west, that is Europe, the “occident.” The Western Oriental discourse created and sustained the East and Islam as the inferior “other” for the West and Christianity. This practice is called the orientalisering of the “Orient” by the West and it has been mainly achieved by representations of Islam, the Ottoman Turks, and the Arabs in the Western world (Said 31-67). Orientalism, as Edward Said puts it, “derives from a particular closeness experienced between Britain and France and the Orient, which until the early nineteenth century had really meant only India and the Bible lands” (4). In fact, Said takes the late eighteenth century as the starting point of western Orientalist discourse and defines Orientalism “as a western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient” (3). So, according to Said, it is possible to talk about two different periods of the western orientalist discourse: one covering the early modern period up to the eighteenth century which demonizes and misrepresents the East, and the other, arguably still in effect, which, in Said’s words, dominates and restructures the Orient by an enormous “systematic discipline” (3). Since the scope of this paper is limited to the representations of the Ottoman Turks in the early modern England, it will focus on pre-eighteenth century encounters of the Turks² and the English. In this regard, I shall be arguing that the representations of the Turks in the early modern plays assume a tone which is different from the representations of the other eastern races. The Turks, unlike other “inferior” oriental races, are represented in the early modern writings as the “grand evil” whose infidelity and apparent power are such a great threat to the Christian world that they must be stopped and destroyed.

2 The words “Turk”, “Ottomans”, “Turks” and “Ottoman Turks” will be used interchangeably throughout the article.

Through analyses of Anglo-Turkish encounters in the early modern period, this paper aims to examine and explore the meanings encoded in the (mis)representations of the Turks in Robert Greene's play, *Selimus*³. In this context, it will be argued that the pre-eighteenth century English approach to the Ottoman Turks can be defined as a process of demonization and misrepresentation rather than domination and restructuring.

It is not easy to imagine whether the Turks were aware that they would be changing the future of the world when they conquered Constantinople in 1453. We do know, however, that this event and its aftermath had such an impact on the European concept of the Turk that consequently the word "Turk" came to cover Islam. In other words, the West in general and England in particular started to see Islam as only one of the constituent elements moulded within the broader concept of the "Turk". In fact, the correspondence between Sultan Murad III and Queen Elizabeth I that was included in the two versions of Richard Hakluyt's *Principal Voyages and Navigations of the English Nation* point to a concept of the Ottoman Turk who is treated as a respected equal rather than an inferior "other" (Burton 130-131). Unlike the other oriental races that were not respected at all because of their "inferiority" to the West, Turks were strong, and their power rather than their race provided the respect that Burton refers to.

For the English people in the early modern period, stereotypical features of the Turks included "aggression, lust, suspicion, murderous conspiracy, sudden cruelty masquerading as justice, merciless violence rather than 'Christian charity,' wrathful vengeance instead of turning the other cheek" (Vitkus 2). The dominant discourse, thus, "demonized" the Turks, with whom Islam was identified, not only by teaching and preaching but also through representations (or rather misrepresentations) in history books and public/private stages, as well as by social practices. This kind of "rigorous Christian picture of Islam was intensified in innumerable ways, including – during the Middle Ages and early Renaissance – a large variety of poetry, learned controversy, and popular superstition" as well as stage representations (Said 61).

Apparently, the stage representations of Turkish and Islamic power took place during a time when the Turkish Empire was expanding rapidly throughout Europe. Between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries, the Turks posed a continuous threat to Christian monarchs in Europe. While they were "establishing their first permanent colonies in the New World", the Christian monarchs were, at the same time, "facing the threat at home of being colonized by the Ottoman Turks" (Vitkus 6-7). For the English theatregoers, then, the Turk was not simply an imaginary "evil" but a nearing Islamic power threatening both their existence and religion.

³ Unless otherwise stated, all references to the play are from Daniel J. Vitkus' edition of *Three Turk Plays from Early Modern England*.

There is no doubt about the popularity of the "oriental matter," especially the Ottoman Turk, during the early modern period in England. The appearance of 47 plays dealing with the oriental issues between the years 1579 and 1642 testifies to this. Louis Wann divides this period into four main groups in which the second group, extending from 1586 to 1611, is clearly the most significant one since 32 plays out of 47 were written in this period (424-426). The fascination with the Ottoman Empire led even the significant English playwrights of the period such as Marlowe, Greene, Peele, Dekker and Shakespeare to write plays dealing with the Ottoman Turk and Islam. Wann claims that:

With the plays of the period distributed thus widely among the important playwrights of the time, we are justified in the assertion that the production of oriental plays was not due to the fancy of any one author or group of authors, but that the interest of the Elizabethans was so considerable as to induce a majority of the main playwrights to write at least one play dealing with oriental matter. (427)

The number of sources available for the playwrights may also give us a clue about the popularity of the subject. Joseph von Hammer lists 3.176 items in his *Geschichte des osmanischen Reiches* (1827), over 1.600 of which were likely to have been known to the Elizabethan writers. Apparently, these sources were mainly histories, but there were also poems, ballads, tracts, pamphlets, and stories. In fact, "the history of the Turks was a perfectly 'safe' subject in every European book-market in the sixteenth century. The Ottoman Empire was the mightiest in the world, and interest in the doings of the Turks was naturally intense (Wann 430)".

It appears, in Wann's study, that histories, written during the early modern period, generally were the sources consulted by playwrights who took as their subject matter the Ottoman Turks (432). The playwrights, in the majority of the cases, represented both the events and characters as they found them in these sources. But, how reliable were these sources? Did the historians record the events and people as accurately as possible by following certain scientific methods? Obviously not, as Louis Wann explains:

Needless to say, history was not then written in the scientific spirit. Each historian copied from his predecessor, with or without acknowledgement, and felt no compunction in coloring the narrative to increase its interest, or in mingling legend with fact, with the result that his successor honestly accepted the whole as fact and so transmitted it to his successor with his own embellishments. (434)

The representations of events and characters in the early modern oriental plays, then, are mostly reflections of previous works that are themselves reflections of even earlier works. This naturally creates a lack of objectivity in the handling of the events and the

oriental characters in plays as well as in other types of works. Wann's argument finds its echoes in Edward Said's *Orientalism* where he claims that:

Every writer on the Orient (and this is true even of Homer) assumes some Oriental precedent, some previous knowledge of the Orient, to which he refers and on which he relies. Additionally, each work on the Orient *affiliates* itself with other works, with audiences, with institutions, with the Orient itself. The ensemble of relationships between works, audiences, and some particular aspects of the Orient therefore constitutes an analyzable formation—for example, that of philological studies, of anthologies of extracts from Oriental literature, of travel books, of Oriental fantasies—whose presence in time, in discourse, in institutions (schools, libraries, foreign services) gives it strength and authority. (20)

This is certainly true about writing the history of the Turks, however, one wonders whether the same things can be said of the histories of, say, Romans, Greeks or the Germans. Were the historiographers as free in their handling of the events and people as they were with the east in general and Turks in particular? We know from the false depictions of both history and life of the Ottoman Turks that they were not. Furthermore, Wann finds an excuse for the playwrights of the early modern period for misrepresenting the Ottoman Turks: “if Elizabethan dramatists erred in presenting false pictures of history or life, the blame was not theirs but that of the historians they followed,” (438) a remark that overlooks the intellectual capacity of the early modern playwrights.

The analysis of the 47 plays concerning the oriental matter mentioned earlier shows a far greater interest in Turks than any other race. Turks appear in 31 plays out of 47 outnumbering by far the rest of the races including Western Christians, Moors, Eastern Christians and Persians (Wann 439). This is attributed to more frequent contact of the westerners with the Turks who were much more renowned and notorious than the other eastern races (Wann 439). Turks were by far the greater enemy, compared to other Islamic races, to be feared. Samuel Claggett Chew in his *The Crescent and the Rose: Islam and England during the Renaissance* talks about the great fear in England of the Turkish expansion. Apparently, this fear was so strong in the early modern period that the news of any Christian victory against the Turks and Islam was a cause for rejoicing. When, for example, the Ottomans raised the long siege of Malta in 1565, “the Archbishop of Canterbury set forth a form of thanksgiving to be used thrice weekly for six weeks” (Chew 124). Likewise, an anonymous English tract, *The Policy of the Turkish Empire*, printed in 1597, declares that “the excessive heights of their [Ottomans] greatness... the terrour of their name... doth even now make the kings and princes of the West... to tremble and quake through the fear of their victorious forces” (qtd. in Chew 133). This fear continued even after 20 years of this remark as the Turks were at the very doorsteps of England, indeed, in October 1617, a Turkish pirate ship was captured in the Thames estuary (Chew 363).

These fears and worries gave way to different forms of reactions in the Christian world. No country in Europe dared any direct military campaign against this powerful "enemy." Although several plans were drawn by the European countries in order to "liberate all the conquered Christian territories" right down to the Holy Land, they were never realized (Eliav-Feldon 62). **They did succeed, however, in creating a collective consciousness** among their people against the Turks and their religion Islam through representations of Turkish characters in all kinds of writings including drama. In England, the stereotypical features attributed to Turks were frequently represented on the Elizabethan and early Stuart stages. Many plays appeared during this period representing Turkish "cruelty" and "violence." Along with Shakespeare's *Othello*, Vitkus lists the best known of these plays as, Marlowe's *Tamburlane, Parts I and II* and his *Jew of Malta*, George Peele's *Battle of Alcazar* and *Soliman and Perseda*, Robert Greene's *Alphonsus, King of Aragon*, and his *Selimus* and *Orlanda Furioso*, *The Famous History of the Life and Death of Captain Thomas Stukeley*, Thomas Dekker's *Lust's Dominion*, Thomas Heywood's *The Fair Maid of the West, Part I*, Thomas Goffe's *The Courageous Turk* and *The Raging Turk*, John Fletcher and Philip Massinger's *The Knight of Malta, The Renegado*, Thomas Middleton and William Rowley's *All's Lost by Lust*, and Robert Daborne's *A Christian Turned Turk* (2).

Greene's *Selimus, Emperor of the Turks*, had the full title in 1594 printed edition as *The First Part of the Tragical Reign of Selimus, sometime Emperor of the Turks, and grandfather to him that now reigneth*. Although the title indicates a sequel in which Selimus will appear in another play, there is no evidence that a second play was ever written. There is also no record of the author of the play *Selimus* but it is generally agreed that it was written by Robert Greene around 1590 (Vitkus 16-18).

The play presents the cruel and violent actions of Selimus, the Ottoman prince who kills his brothers Acomat and Corkut, and dethrones and poisons his father Bajazet on his way to attain sole rulership of the Ottoman Empire. The play lacks historical accuracy with regards to the events that took place in the history. It is historically not true, for example, that Selimus murdered his father or that Bajazet was poisoned. These appear to have been inserted by the author to emphasize the point of Turkish "cruelty."

The first scene of the play opens with the lamenting of Bajazet about his late situation concerning the greed of Selimus and the future of the Ottoman Empire. In the same scene, through the words of Bajazet, the audience is prepared for an unmatched "tyrant," Selimus, whose "hands do itch to have the crown./ And he will have it—or else pull [Bajazet] down./ Is he a prince? Ah no, he is a sea,/ Into which run nought but ambitious reaches./ Seditious complots, murther, fraud, and hate." (1.77-80). In fact, these characteristics, attributed to Selimus here, were part of the dominant religious and political discourse in which the stereotypical features of the Turks were represented in early modern England. Hence, in the second scene, Selimus does not prove his father wrong in the judgement of his son

as he reveals his true intentions to Sinam Bassa. If Bajazet does not hand over the crown to Selimus, his “right hand is resolved/ To end the period with a fatal stab” (2. 166-167). From the very beginning, we learn that he is a Machiavellian, ready to commit patricide. When Sinam Bassa reminds him of the “revenging God” who would punish him for his sins after his death (2.185-186), Selimus defies both God and religion, concluding that “An empire, Sinam, is so sweet a thing,/ As I could be a devil to be a king” (2.203-204). It was a commonplace in the early modern popular fiction and drama to represent Turks as unjust, tyrannical and lusty pagans associated with Satanism. The Ottoman Sultan Selimus, with his greedy lust for power, then, becomes “a typical example of this kind of oriental despotism” (Vitkus 11).

In the play, Bajazet, knowing his son Selimus’ true intentions, refuses to give him a hearing although out of fear he agrees to give him “great Samandria,/ Bordering on Belgrade of Hungaria” (3.64-65) as a gift. Selimus is not happy with Bajazet’s answer and even angry with the idea of receiving Samandria because it is not fully Bajazet’s yet. In fact, it is a problematic area and Selimus thinks his father wants his death. Hence, he is determined that “Since, ... [Bajazet] is so unnatural to me,/ I will prove as unnatural as he” (4.24-25). Selimus uses both Bajazet’s refusal to speak to him and the implication he finds in the Samandria gift as pretext to the war he has been planning against his father. The two armies fight at the battle near Chiurlu and the Sultan is victorious, and Selimus barely escapes, promising revenge. It will not be long before he gets his chance for revenge. One of the other princes, Acomat, who also has a great lust for power, sends a messenger to his father to hand over the crown to himself. When he is refused, he attacks his nephew, Prince Mahomet, the Beylerbey of Natolia, the son of his deceased eldest brother Alemshae. Acomat “massacres” both Mahomet and his sister Zonara along with 6000 citizens of Iconium. In addition to this, when Bajazet sends Aga as a messenger to persuade Acomat to lay down his arms, he pulls out Aga’s eyes and cuts off his hands on stage. This bloody act on stage, which was one of the characteristics of Senecan Tragedy, emphasized the cruelty of the Turkish villain who is capable of any crime whatsoever. This last deed, in the play, actually foreshadows both Acomat’s doom and Selimus’ revenge. Bajazet, extremely moved by his messenger’s ill treatment in the hands of Acomat, forgives Selimus, makes him the commander of janissaries and sends him to kill his brother. At this point, the audience is prepared for not only a fratricide but also a filicide because, although Acomat is killed towards the end of the play by his brother Selimus, it was Bajazet who gave the order to Selimus.

Once Selimus becomes the commander of janissaries, he seizes the opportunity to first proclaim himself the emperor of Turks and then plots his father’s death. In accordance with the anti-Semitic sentiment in the early modern period, the agent he uses for his plan to poison his father is a “cunning” Jew, called Abraham, who “will venture anything for gold” (17.100). So far, Selimus has proved his villainy, cruelty and Machiavellianism, which will continue throughout the play, as expected from a Muslim emperor. Now is

the time to complete the demonization process by refusal of religion and denial of faith. When all is set for the poisoning of his father and Abraham, the Jew, agrees to his plan, Selimus soliloquies:

So this is well: for I am none of those
That make a conscience for to kill a man.
For nothing is more hurtful to a prince
Than to be scrupulous and religious.
(17.139-142)

Jonathan Dollimore claims that speeches like this one throughout the play contain a "fascinating discourse on atheism and one which takes up the debate on the ideological dimension of religion" (85). Analysing the play from a cultural materialist viewpoint, it is indeed possible to argue that the play may persuade "an audience that religion *was* indispensable for maintaining the social order while at the same time casting serious doubts as to its veracity" (Dollimore 86). Nevertheless, it is not Christianity in this case on which serious doubts has been cast but Islam. Thus, an audience would more likely relate the atheism Dollimore talks about to Islam rather than their own religion Christianity. After all, Selimus is not a king of England but a Sultan of the Ottomans who are represented on the English stages as the despotic evil race.

At the funeral following his father's death, Selimus makes a show of grief to "blind his subjects' eyes" (20.1), although his heart "cast in an iron mould / Cannot admit the smallest dram of grief, / Yet that I may be thought to love him well, / I'll mourn in show, though I rejoice indeed" (20.6-9). He is depicted as a heartless, inhuman creature closer to Satan than to human beings as, indeed, the stage direction implies. At the funeral, the audience is asked or told to imagine "the temple of Mahomet", representing a mosque, which was commonly known to the English audience as "a temple, imagined as a shrine dedicated to the worship of the idol, Mahomet" (Vitkus 146).⁴ In the early modern popular fiction and drama, Mahomet was shown as a deity who was "often made part of a heathen pantheon that also includes Apollin, Termagant, and other devilish idols" (Vitkus 9). Thus, Selimus, the Turkish emperor, is depicted as a worshipper of devil and his religion as Satanism. This, in fact, points to the western stereotyping and representation of the Turk as embodiment of evil. "The stereotype of the devilish Moor or cruel Turk was sometimes employed to demonstrate the supposed iniquity of Islam, and to portray Muslims as agents of Satan" (Vitkus 15).

Throughout the play, Selimus continues to kill and massacre everyone not sparing women and children who might have any relevance to the Ottoman crown. However, in Scene 22, his paganism and Satanism is challenged, and he is invited to "true faith", that

⁴ See Vitkus, note to Scene 20, p. 146.

is Christianity, by his very brother Corcut who, apparently, was converted to Christianity by some Christians on his disguised runaway from Selimus. Historically, Corcut's conversion to Christianity is not true. Indeed, he ran away from his brother in disguised form together with his slave and hid in the caves waiting for a chance to escape abroad to Europe. They were discovered by some peasants and arrested. He was, then, strangled in his sleep on the way to Bursa (Uzunçarşılı 251). **In the play, however, before Selimus has his brother strangled, Corcut prophesies that Selimus will meet his death in Chiurlu since he killed his father there. Corcut, as a "true Christian" does not fear death or crave for pardon but warns Selimus that if he does not change his "greedy mind" (22.77) his soul will be tortured in "dark hell" (22.77). Corcut is then ready to give his saved soul to the Christian God: "Thou God of Christians,/ Receive my dying soul into thy hands" (22.83-84). None of these, in fact, stir any emotions in Selimus, whose response to the death and dying speech of Corcut is:**

What, is he dead? Then Selimus is safe
And hath no more corrivals in the crown.
For as for Acomat he soon shall see
His Persian aid cannot save him from me.
(22.85-88)

There is no sign of humanity or religiousness in Selimus, who, even after killing all his co-rivals in the crown and massacring many others, goes on to describe himself at the end of the play as a Basilisk (29.44-57), and intends to invade all neighbouring countries (29.62-76). He likens himself to the legendary "ibis", a bird that was believed in popular legends to eat up poisonous snakes "but then lay eggs from which basilisks would hatch" (Vitkus 147). He is first "ibis" who removes the venomous snakes, Bajazet and Acomat, and then becomes the murderous basilisk.

To conclude, then, the representation of Turks as unjust, tyrannical and lusty pagans associated with Satanism seems to be prevalent in the early modern period. Although Goffman, differentiating the attitudes of northern from the Mediterranean Europe as well as western Europeans with first-hand experiences who "often regarded it [the Ottoman Empire] with respect", claims that this was not a fixed attitude of the west in general, he accepts the fact that the tendency of "historians to envisage the Empire as ignoble and antithetical to 'refined' Western standards undoubtedly has obscured the nuances of Ottoman civilization" (5-6). Hence, influenced by the earlier writings and the information provided by those historians, the play *Selimus* appears to be mirroring the general concept of the Turk and Islam in early modern England which at the same time becomes itself a tool for the demonization of both Islam and the Turk. And it is this concept of the Turk that forms a great part of the pre-eighteenth century oriental discourse, which sees the Turk as the grand evil that must be destroyed rather than a weak race that must be "dominated, restructured" and finally controlled.

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