

“Against their forren foe that commes from farre”: Shakespeare and Orientalized Persia

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ABSTRACT:

The history of Western creation of stereotypes of Persia and the Persians goes back to Aeschylus’ The Persians where he described Persia (and metonymically the Orient) as a zone of terror and irrationality, of excess and the demonic; these stereotypical images were later intensified in the works of such major Renaissance figures as Ludovico Ariosto, Edmund Spenser, Christopher Marlowe, William Shakespeare, John Milton, etc. The present paper examines textual representations of Persia and the Persian in the works of the Bard in order to explore the underlying proto-orientalist style of thought, which has not been uncommon in those times. The textual representation of the Orient in general and Persia in particular is mostly imaginary, driven by fantasy and desire.

Keywords: Orientalism, Shakespeare, Persia, Ottoman, Stereotype.

I. Prologue

Shakespeare's plays have been keenly receptive of postcolonial readings, the Bard having dealt with many of the key concepts of postcolonial theory such as identity, race, and otherness ahead of most early modern authors. Many Shakespeare scholars have explored the concepts of race and otherness in plays as diverse as *Titus Andronicus* (Aaron), *Antony and Cleopatra* (Cleopatra), *The Merchant of Venice* (Shylock and the Prince of Morocco), *Othello* (the Moor), etc; however, the present paper aims to examine the representation(s) of yet another of these keywords—namely, the Orient in general and Persia in particular. A major question that arises therefore is how the Orient and the Orientals are represented in Shakespeare's oeuvre.

There are many references in Shakespeare's plays to things traditionally or stereotypically associated with the Orient: Persian attire, Arabian perfume, palm trees, the phoenix, magic and the supernatural, Orient pearl, and so on. There are also references to oriental people: Moors, Ottoman Turks, Persians, Egyptians, Arabs, and Tartars. Nonetheless, any examination of Shakespeare's Orient must be contextualized within the Renaissance proto-Orientalism.

II. The *Imagined Zone*: The Orient in the Early Modern Era

Elizabethans were interested in tales of exotic adventures, and playwrights tried to feed this hunger. It is not shocking that the main playwrights of the era have written at least one play dealing with the Orient and the Orientals.

If there ever was a time in the world's history when the eyes of Europe should have been turned to the Orient, the sixteenth century was that time. And if there ever was a period in which interest in the East was not merely one of curiosity or novelty, but an active interest made necessary by the conditions of the time, it was the Elizabethan period. (Wann 184)

There are of course many reasons behind such a widespread attention to exoticism. Early 16th century was the era of expansionism, when many travelogues were written and became available to the public: Richard Eden's *The History of Travell* (1577) and Richard Hakluyt's *Principal Navigations, Voyages and Discoveries of the English Nation* (1589) are two famous examples. Colonial exploitation of the rich natural resources in other lands was prominently foregrounded:

English readers were invited, in Hakluyt's pages (and later in the collections edited by Samuel Purchas) to look at the rest of the world from a shared perspective, to believe in their com-

mon investments in overseas travel, trade, and colonization, and to enjoy the prospect of their future global success. (Loomba, *Shakespeare* 12-13)

The growth of interest in writing exotic travel-ogues is in fact one offshoot of the rise of the concepts of nationhood and commonwealth during the early Renaissance. In *Forms of Nationhood: The Elizabethan Writing of England* (1992) Richard Helgerson underscores the linguistic and literary construction of nationhood (10). This discursive formation of national identity is mainly powered by two strategies: construction of sameness (assimilation) and difference (dissimilation). Assimilation is intra-national and dissimilation extra-national. Shakespeare's famous eulogy of England in *Richard II* ("This royal throne of kings, this sceptred isle ... This blessed plot, this earth, this realm, this England" [II. i. 40-50]) is one literary example of intra-national assimilation. A literary example for dissimilation is Sir Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516), where the Renaissance Humanism offers a blueprint for colonial exploitation—later reflected in Shakespeare's *Tempest* (circa 1611). One other example is Shakespeare's *The Merry Wives of Windsor* (circa 1602) where "Falstaff describes one of the women he fancies as 'a region in Guiana, all gold and bounty' and announces his intentions to make simultaneous love to two women thus: 'They shall be my East and West Indies, and I will trade to them both'" (Loomba, *Shakespeare* 14).

This Eurocentric ideology of the early modern era is also reflected in *Othello* (1603), where the other side of the world is depicted as an exotic place where "...cannibals that each other eat, / The Anthropophagi, and men whose heads / Do grow beneath their shoulders" (I. ii. 143-145). The anxiety of black presence is felt all through the play — "the character of Othello confirms the cultural prejudices of the time ... [when] the color black was associated with the demonic" (Mason 70-73). In 1601, Queen Elizabeth I issued the expulsion of blackamoors from England, for she was "highly discontented to understand the great numbers of Negroes and blackamoors ... who are fostered and powered here, to the great annoyance of her own liege people, ... [and] for that the most of them are infidels having no understanding of Christ or his Gospel" (cited in Loomba, *Shakespeare* 52). At the end, the excuse is religious. Religion has long been (mis-)used as an ideological state apparatus for the development of imperial projects—an idea that goes a long way back in history.

In the aftermath of the fall of the Roman Empire and the rise of Islam in the 7th century, the binary opposition of East/West took a new form: Christianity/Islam. Afterwards, the Crusades ensued. In 1095, Pope Urban II at the Council of Claremont "informed the audience that the latest Christian defeats (in Anatolia) were a consequence of human wickedness" and added:

Therefore go forward in happiness and in confidence to attack the enemies of God [the Muslims]. ... They have made Asia, which is a third of the world, their homeland—an area justly reckoned by our fathers as equal to the two other parts both for size and importance. ... There remains Europe, the third continent. How small is the part of it inhabited by us Christians! (cited in Macfie 17-18)

The opposition of Christianity/Islam, amplified by the threat of the Ottoman Empire of Sultan Suleyman, is felt in Shakespeare's *Othello*, Marlowe's *Tamburlaine the Great*, etc. Therefore, for many years this multifaceted conflict between Europe and Asia endured. Stereotypes and negative images of the Orient and the oriental came to infiltrate the western discourse of knowledge. And Shakespeare was no exception: "the meanings of Shakespeare's plays were both derived from and used to establish colonial authority" (Loomba and Orkin 1).

III. The Case of Persia

The division of the known world into a binary of the West versus the East dates back to the fifth century BC: "for the Greeks the essential dichotomy laid between East and West, Persia and Greece, Asia and Europe" (Macfie 15-16). Further, "when Herodotus' histories were translated into English in the sixteenth century, Persia emerged as an enemy of ancient Greek culture and civilization"

(Masood 8). Persia, in this context, denoted an exotic land much famed for its lavish splendor and arbitrary authority — all that was antithetical to European values.

Here I shall examine the representations of Persia and the Persians in Shakespeare's work, and will show how literature has been deployed for discursive construction of knowledge about the East—a discourse fueled by fantasy and desire.

The history of Western stereotypes about Persia goes back to the time of classical Greece and Aeschylus' *The Persians* (circa 470 BC) where the Persians are depicted invariably as the hostile 'other'. The same frame of mind could be seen in later works such as Thomas Preston's *Cambises* (circa 1560), Christopher Marlowe's *Tamburlaine the Great* (1587), Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* (1590-6), Thomas Moore's *Lalla Rookh* (1817), James Morier's *Haji Baba of Ispahan* (1824), and so on. And all these representations share one point: the use of (racial and cultural) stereotypes. These stereotypes reinforced the exotic image of the Persians in the minds of European readers. But how do these racial/cultural stereotypes work?

According to Homi K. Bhabha, the function of stereotype "as phobia and fetish" is that it "threatens the closure of the racial/epidermal schema for the colonial subject and opens the royal road to colo-

nial fantasy” (Bhabha 104). This clearly explains why Bhabha urges us to consider the notion of stereotype in terms of fetishism (Bhabha 106). The “structural link” that, according to Bhabha, exists between racial stereotype and fetishism is secured by a Freudian reading of the concept in Said’s *Orientalism*. For Said, stereotypes are practical apparatuses in the hands of the homogenizing discourse of colonial power. Freudian fetishism is also a kind of “fixation on an object that masks the difference [anxiety over the lack] and restores an original presence [desire for similarity]” (ibid.).

Now let us examine the use of such stereotypical images in Shakespeare’s work. References to Persian and the Persians can be found in seven of Shakespeare’s plays, namely, *King Lear*, *The Comedy of Errors*, *King Henry VI*, *Henry IV*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, and *Twelfth Night*. These references fall mainly into two groups: either they allude to the ancient Achaemenid Kings (Cambyses, Darius and Cyrus) to exemplify the greatness of power and lavish luxuriousness, or they mention the contemporary Safavid Kings, especially the Great Sophy, Shah Abbas I (who reigned from 1588 to 1629) in order to warn the Christian world “against their forren foe that commes from farre,” (Spenser 138) as in Thomas Haywood’s *The Four Prentices of London* (1594) in which “Sophy the Persian” is pictured as a sworn enemy of Christendom who must be eliminated. *The Comedy of Errors* alludes to Persia as a land

of wealth and riches, a good place for a Western man of wit to gain a fortune quickly and easily. So when in the play the Second Merchant finds Angelo in financial trouble, he advises him to head towards Persia to be able to repay his debts,

SECOND MERCHANT. You know since Pentecost the sum is due,
and since I have not much importun'd you;
nor now I had not, but that I am bound
to Persia, and want guilders for my voyage.
Therefore make present satisfaction,
or I'll attach you by this officer. (IV. i. 1-6)

The Orientalist stereotype of heading due east to get rich is an ingrained motif in literature of the West, where the orient is supposed to be a land of opulence—the most memorable literary example is perhaps Rudyard Kipling's novella "The Man Who Would Be King" (1888), which is an imperial allegory.

In the same vein is the reference to "Persian attire" in *King Lear*, where Lear to Edgar does say:

You, sir, I entertain for one of my hundred;
only I do not like the fashion of your garments. You will say
they are Persian attire, but let them be
changed. (III. vi. 39-41)

The reference to luxurious "Persian attire" does in fact reflect the fashion for robes of embroidered

silk arrived in London along with an embassy of British merchants and adventures headed by the Sherley brothers (early in the reign of James I). Allusions to travels of Robert and Anthony Sherley to Persia appear in Shakespeare's plays here and there, and contextualizing their significance is useful.

Hafiz Abid Masood locates the "origins of England's interest in Persia as early as the reign of Henry VIII" (2); Sir Thomas Wyatt, Masood continues, mentions a Robert Brancetour as "the first Englishman in Safavid Persia, a forerunner of Anthony Jenkinson and other Muscovy company agents who went to Persia in 1560s and 1570s as well as the more celebrated Sherley Brothers who reached Persia towards the end of the sixteenth century" (Masood 5). The mission of these envoys was to convince, or better said to provoke, the Great Sophy (the Shah of Persia) to rise and stand against the Ottoman Turks who were a fatal threat to Christian Europe. In *The Generall Historie of the Turkes* (1603) Richard Knolles, with prejudice to the interests of Christian Europeans, discusses Anglo-Ottoman relations in the early modern era and calls the Ottomans heretics and devils and their empire the "terror of the world ... thundering out nothing but still blood and warre" (n. pag.).

Therefore, for the safety of their own land and also for maintaining their own pivotal role in Mediterranean trades, the English stirred the Persians into

fighting the Ottomans. The age-old colonial policy of “divide and rule!” was employed to inflame sectarian differences; the Persians were Shiite and the Ottoman Turks were Sunni, and igniting their schism would have been beneficially important for the Europeans, because Persia would act as a buffer to fend off Ottoman’s threats to Europe. That is why the Shirley brothers were sent to the court of Shah Abbas; their mission was to help train the amateur army of the Safavids. They even received a generous pension from the Persian court, to which Shakespeare alludes in *Twelfth Night*:

FABIAN (to Sir Toby). I will not give my part of
 this sport for a pension of
 thousands to be paid from the sophy. (II. v.
 148-9)

The second reference to the Sophy in the play is made by Sir Toby, describing the bravado of a soldier:

Why, man, he’s a very devil. I have not seen
 such a firago.
 I had a pass with him, rapier, scabbard, and all,
 and he gives me
 the stuck-in with such a mortal motion that it
 is inevitable; and on the
 answer, he pays you as surely as your feet hits
 the ground they step on.
 They say he has been fencer to the sophy. (III.
 iv. 232-6)

These references show the prevalent interest in the

accounts of the adventures of the Sherley brothers (in about 1601) as ambassadors to the Shah. Shakespeare therefore has been familiar with these narratives.

Another allusion to the rivalry of the Great Sophy of Persia and Sultan Suleyman of the Ottoman Empire appears in *The Merchant of Venice*, where the Prince of Morocco speaks to the wise Portia as follows:

Therefore I pray thee lead me to the caskets
to try my fortune. By this scimitar,
that slew the Sophy and a Persian prince,
that won three fields for Sultan Solyman,
I would o'er-stare the sternest eyes that look,
outbrave the heart most daring on the earth,
pluck the young sucking cubs from the she-
bear,
yea, mock the lion when a roars for prey,
to win thee lady. (II. i. 23-31)

The Ottomans have been, since the Middle Ages, a constant threat to the Christian world; especially in the 16th century and under the leadership of Suleyman the Magnificent they reached the height of their power. Fear of the Turks is reflected in the literature of the time. Spenser in *The Faerie Queene* speaks of “faithless Sarazin all armed to point,/ In whose great shield was writ with letters gay/ Sans foy” (Book I, Canto II). He symbolically urges “the feeble Britons” to “uproar and mightily defend / Against their forren foe, that commes

from farre” (Book III, Canto III). Shakespeare in *Othello* describes the threat of Saracens for Cyprus which was at that time a protectorate of Venice. Nonetheless, Persia and the Ottoman Empire were not the same; they were rivals. However, they were generally taken to be alike—categorized under one single rubric of “enemies of Christian crusaders.” And this is expected of colonial discourse which is homogenizing; it uses general categories like oriental versus western: “underlying these categories is the rigidly binomial opposition of ‘ours’ and ‘theirs,’ with the former always encroaching upon the latter (even to the point of making ‘theirs’ exclusively a function of ‘ours’)” (Said 227). However, “such a category is not so much a way of receiving new information as it is a method of controlling what seems to be a threat to some established view of things” (Said 59).

IV. Epilogue

English drama of the early modern period was informed by external threats to national identity, by the anxieties attached to the threat of Islamic conversion, by the impending menace of the Ottoman Empire to Europe; Marlowe’s *The Jew of Malta* (1590), Shakespeare’s *Othello* (1603), and Robert Daborne’s *A Christian Turned Turke* (1612) particularly depict the dual threat of the Turks in conquering both land and religion.

In that situation, England used Persia as a counter-

weight to the threats of the Ottomans; the Sherley brothers came to the court of Shah Abbas as English ambassadors to persuade, or rather provoke, the Shah of Persia to wage war against the Muslim Turks of the Ottoman Empire and thwart their advances into the Christian Europe. A short while later again Persia was used by the British to take back the Strait of Hormuz (Ormus)—a strategic shipway for transporting spice, etc.—from another colonial power, Portugal (in 1622). These colonial adventures were not unknown to major Renaissance writers. Shakespeare has alluded to the rivalry of Persian Sophy and Ottoman Suleyman in *The Merchant of Venice*; the Bard had been familiar with the colonial adventures of the Sherley brothers (*Twelfth Night*). Yet in almost all these Early Modern narratives we can see a partial view of the east (especially of the Middle East) on the basis of an ontological distinction between the Occident (the self) and its other, the Orient. The textual representation of the Orient in general and Persia in particular is mostly imaginary, driven by fantasy and desire.

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