ENGLISH RENAISSANCE SOLDIERS
IN
THE ARMIES OF ISLAM

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By the second half of the sixteenth century, Englishmen of the nobility for whom military service was an honorable duty to the sovereign were contending with the decline of chivalry in the "organic scheme" of Elizabethan England (Ferguson 225). "The humanists' political and educational ideals" that they had cherished were drastically changing in what was becoming an "increasingly complex, commercial, and degenerate society" (Ide 4). Simultaneously, the common soldiers, who were conscripted before battles and disbanded afterwards, were viewed as no better than unwanted vagrants with "no meanes to maintaine them selves but by stealinge and lewde practize" (qtd. in Jorgensen, "Theoretical" 476): they were, as Robert Barret wrote in 1598, "corrupt weeds" and "scumme of their countrie" (7). In Elizabethan England, the self-image of both the common and the noble soldier was undergoing irreversible change.

Another change that occurred was in the technology of war. From the middle of the sixteenth century on, English soldiers found that their mastery of archery and battle-axe, pikes, and staves was preventing them from competing with their compatriots and with continental soldiers who were trained in gunnery. Military manuals showed how numerous Englishmen looked down on gunnery as a retreat from the heroic values of medieval Albion; other manuals showed gunnery as innovative and essential.¹ This change particularly affected the common soldiers, since those who could not adapt to the new technology found themselves without employment or income. What exacerbated their condition was the accession in 1603 of James I to the throne of Britain: Jacobean drama widely reflects the dwindling battlefield opportunities for the common soldier after the King signed peace treaties with Spain and the Netherlands, and after he persistently resisted involvement in continental conflicts.

As a result of these transformations in the idealism and technology of war, Elizabethan Englishmen sought service in foreign armies. Such service proved so attractive that the Queen had to intervene to try and put an end to it. In November, 1575, she passed a Bill "prohibiting any of Her subjects from engaging in the service in the Low Countries, or of any other foreign prince or state, as mariners or soldiers" (Calendar, Domestic 1:506). But a Bill could not always deter a desperate soldier in quest of employment or fortune. Just three years
later, a common soldier by the name of John Wanton went to Morocco and became the first English arms dealer openly to reside there and serve the North African ruler by arranging shipments of military hardware from England (Calendar, Foreign, 1578–79 13: 476). In 1584, captain Roger Williams wrote to Secretary Walsingham that unless the latter could help him find work, he would go to Holland and take a letter from “the Prince of Orange to the Turk” to show that he was a soldier (Calendar, Foreign, 1583–84 18: 309).

From the reign of Queen Elizabeth until the Restoration of Charles II, Englishmen joined the armies of the Muslim dominions, both in the Levant and in North Africa. While some of these Englishmen hailed from the nobility, the larger number consisted either of common soldiers who found reliable pay among the Muslims or of seamen and gunners who were captured by Muslims and willingly or unwillingly put to military service. Common to all, however, was their depiction in contemporary histories and dramas as honorable Englishmen: first, they never fought against fellow compatriots—they were with the Turks but not of them; second, they remained devoutly committed to their religion, and practised it even in the midst of the Muslims—they were among the Muslims but not of them. While in other Elizabethan and Jacobean drama there was a separation between the heroism of captains and the cowardice of the common soldiers (Jorgensen, Shakespeare’s ch. 4), in the literature set among the Muslims, both categories of Englishmen shared in honor and military dedication.

The fact that English soldiers chose to serve in Muslim armies might seem at odds with the conclusions of modern critics. Through the templates that have been established by theorists like Edward Said and Stephen Greenblatt, and through critical assessments that employ those templates, the Muslims have been identified as uniformly appearing in English Renaissance imagination as hostile and Other.2 Fundamentally, critics urge, the Muslims were seen as different from English Christendom, apart and opposed to its civilization. Shakespeare may have best summed up this attitude to the Muslims/Turks in his plays, for he alluded to the Muslims only in the context of the military polarization between Christianity and Islam and always presented the Turk as adversarial and inimical.3

Although this adversaraility to the Muslim frequently appears in Renaissance English literature, it was not the only perception of the Muslims. For the realm of the Muslims that the Elizabethan and Jacobean writers depicted not only offered employment but also honorable service. “Your Wars are manly, stout and honorable,” said Sir Anthony Shirley to the Persian Sophie in a play published in 1607, “Your Armes have no imployment for a coward” (qtd. in Sha’ban 226). As a result, Renaissance Englishmen joined the Muslims: “To seeke for im­­ployment/ Hither am I come, renowned Persian./ My force and power is yours: