ON TURNING TURK, OR TRYING TO: NATIONAL IDENTITY IN ROBERT DABORNE’S A CHRISTIAN TURN’D TURKE

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As we learn more about the Afro-Asiatic origins of the European Renaissance, the literary and theatrical representation of Arabs, Jews, Moors, Persians, Saracens, and Turks evidences the importance of the cultural representation of Eastern others for the re-birthing of European identity and civilization. For many years scant attention was paid to such tropes by literary scholars, with the exception of Samuel Chew’s The Crescent and the Rose, published in 1937. Now studies by scholars such as Jonathan Burton, Nabil Matar, Patricia Parker, Lois Potter, James Shapiro, Virginia Vaughan, and Daniel Vitkus, among others, are revitalizing interest in the great wealth of literary materials produced for the London stage concerning the terrifying threat of the Great Turk and the dangerous delights of Eastern promise.¹

Here I wish to contribute to this rebirth of interest in Early Modern dramatic writing about the Turks and the Ottoman empire by examining Robert Daborne’s A Christian Turn’d Turke; or, The Tragi-call Lives and Deaths of the two Famous Pyrates, Ward and Dansiker of 1612. Noticed by scholars on several occasions, the textual difficulties presented by the printed copy have not persuaded anyone to offer a full-scale study beyond Daniel Vitkus’s recent modernized edition in Three Turk Plays. To this end, I examine aspects of the language and implicit staging in order to suggest ways in which attention to dramatic design can help with difficult moments in the text. I shall also provide a historicized introduction to “the only play in English that addressed the complex and destabilizing theme of conversion to Islam.”²

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Daborne’s text is notoriously hard to follow: the list of characters does not correspond with the names of those who appear in the character calls; speeches are wrongly assigned; scene changes are sometimes indicated, but stage directions are irregular. Reconstructing implicit stage business from the dialogue is complicated by innumerable asides and frequent compositor’s errors. Chew comments, quite unfairly: “Even when every allowance is made, it is a contemptible piece of work, coarse and scabrous, bombastic and noisy, ill-constructed and confused in style, thought, and intention” (532). Fortunately, in “Preposterous Conversions,” Patricia Parker has recently rescued Daborne’s artistry by her ingenious demonstration of subtleties of language that were clearly illegible to Chew. Moreover, Daborne’s dramatic designs are clear enough: he set out to impose an explicit moral order upon the story of a notorious English pirate in order to render Ward’s very success into a pattern of defeat and death, a pattern rendered inevitable because an Englishman cannot not be English, however hard he may try to “turn Turk.” In Daborne’s moral-nationalist scheme, Ward dies recognizing that, in death, he will be judged as a Protestant Englishman, the very national identity he has been attempting to disown.

An account of Daborne’s dramatic artistry not only helps to fill a gap in the emerging scholarship of the non-European roots of the Renaissance but also demonstrates how historical poetics and dramatic intertextuality work together in constructing notions of national identity by means of an orientalized, indeed Ottomanized, other. By historical poetics, I mean the ways that, loosely based on contemporary reports of “Captain” John Ward, an Englishman who set himself up as a Barbary pirate and did rather well for himself, Daborne’s play abandons knowable facts for convenient fictions in order to achieve a demonstrable moral design. By dramatic intertextuality, I mean the ways that Daborne was not alone in exploring the theatrical potential of characters who “turn Turk” on the Elizabethan and Jacobean stage. I find his play’s highly moral nationalism peculiarly imaginative in using the stage to exploit the possibilities contained in contemporary ambiguities over the concept of “turning Turk” in order to exemplify that being English is not a choice. In Daborne’s moral-nationalist scheme, an Englishman cannot not want to be English, and indeed cannot willingly stop being so.