Review Essay

Shakespeare, His Contemporaries, and the Religions of His Time

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In a forty-five year period of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Jonathan Burton in *Traffic and Turning: Islam and English Drama, 1579–1624*, notes that “over sixty dramatic works featuring Islamic themes, characters, or settings were produced in England” (11). The author lists these plays in an appendix to his work (257–58); they include Marlowe’s *Tamburlaine, Parts I and II* (1587, 1588) and *The Jew of Malta* (1592), Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice* (1596) and *Othello* (1604), Robert Daborne’s *A Christian Turn’d Turk* (1610), Webster’s *The Devil’s Law Case* (1619), Fletcher’s *The Island Princess* (1621), and Massinger’s *The Renegado* (1624), among works by Robert Wilson, Kyd, Peele, Dekker, Heywood, and other notable early modern London dramatists. Burton’s study joins a growing list of books and articles about representations of Islam in Elizabethan and Jacobean drama by Emily C. Bartels, Ania Loomba, Nabil I. Matar, Daniel Vitkus, and others. What’s original about this perceptive, well-written, well-researched book involves its analyses of the figure of the Turk and of the Muslim in this drama in the shifting contexts of early modern English economic and political interests and pressures and of male English sexual anxiety arising within conventional patriarchal structures and expectations of women. Also original is Burton’s inclusion of translated Islamic texts that cast new, useful light upon sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Islamic culture and religion, especially as they appear in Islamic writers’ perceptions of the English and other Europeans.

It would be easier without Burton’s book to believe that early modern English playwrights and their audiences only helped fix and reinforce stereotypes of the barbarous, cruel, anti-Christian scourge, the Turk. But Burton tells us, or reminds us, that in the later sixteenth century, Queen Elizabeth and English statesmen and traders cultivated a positive relationship with the Sultan and Constantinople because the Islamic Middle East amounted to a new market for English wool and textiles and for military ordinance. It was also a new source for spice, silk, and other rarities. Moreover, the Ottoman Empire could serve Queen Elizabeth and her subjects as a potential ally, a counter-weight against a common enemy, Catholic Spain. The best chapter in this rewarding book is Burton’s revelation of a new complexity in Marlowe’s *Tamburlaine, Parts I and II* arising from subtle positive images of the Turk competing with, sometimes displaced by, stereotypes of the corrupt markedly Muslim Turk (53–91). The change according to the author has to do with the perception of “Islamic strength threaten[ing] a relatively weak Europe” (54), with an initial dramatic “suspension and [then] activation of anti-Islamic prejudice” (54)—that is to