

Performing Conversion in Early Modern English Drama: Interpretations and Limitations

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Abstract:

This study attempts to offer a glimpse into the trope of conversion to Islam on the early modern English stage and pays particular attention to the different interpretations of conversion/turning Turk. The study situates conversion in its historical context and explains the cultural anxiety in Britain regarding the possibility of British subjects converting to other belief systems. Unlike what critics such as Bergeron, Burton, and Vitkus argue, the study clarifies that conversion/turning Turk does not always reflect fear and anxiety about Islam. It is more reflective of domestic concerns rather than historical enmity towards Islam. In a way, the anxieties that surround any discussion about conversion in the plays under discussion can be indicative of the domestic sensitivity towards conversion as an idea. When discussing conversions in plays like Shakespeare's *Othello*, Christianity, but not Islam, is the specific concern of the discussion. In *Othello* and Iago's comments about conversion, they aim to stress the moral and theological superiority of the Christian faith over other religions. In plays like Massinger's *The Renegado* and Daborne's *A Christian Turn'd Turk*, conversion happens due to apparent personal defects in Christian characters. Furthermore, anxiety over conversion stems from the established relationship between sexual misbehaviour and conversions. The study concludes by examining the complexity of dramatizing conversion in the early modern period, especially when compared with conversion in prose texts.

Keywords: Conversion, English Drama, Renaissance, Shakespeare, Turning Turk

1. Introduction

The possibility of "turning Turk", a term that describes British subjects that convert to Islam, created recurring cultural anxiety on the early modern English stage. This issue gives insight into the reasons behind the cultural uncertainty and anxiety of the period. Although the term "turning Turk" has been overgeneralized, the complexity of the term is revealed through a close reading of several early modern English plays. As this study clarifies, "turning Turk" refers to various implications in connection with the speaker, context, or the writer, including the writing medium: prose vs drama. It does not necessarily have one particular meaning. To get a better understanding of the implications of the term, it is important to consider the role of religious, political, and social factors in shaping the term throughout the years of early encounters between the Muslim world and Britons. In this essay, the various interpretations of dramatic usage of "turning Turk" are discussed in the works of three early modern playwrights, namely, William Shakespeare, Robert Daborne and Philip Massinger.

First, the complexity of the term "turning Turk" can be comprehended by thoroughly understanding the historical context of these plays. Dramatic representations of religious concerns over conversion represented the fierce internal and external forces that endangered the newly founded Church in post-Reformation England. The Roman Catholic tide was the major internal threat for the Protestant nation. From the perspective of Protestant England, the Roman Catholic Church was a big threat trying to forcefully convert Protestants to Catholicism (Marotti, 1999). In addition to that domestic tension, England was also exposed to an external threat in the shape of the ever-expanding Ottoman Empire. This created a new dimension to the growing fear of conversion or "turning" in Renaissance drama. The Ottomans launched successful campaigns into Eastern Europe, capturing new Christian territories in the early decades of the seventeenth century. Thus, English national uneasiness was reflected in various types of texts where the links between Islam and Catholicism were portrayed as the main enemies of England. The Protestant ideology of the period was, in a way, established on such kind of association.

Daniel Vitkus explains that Protestants believed that the Turk, the Pope, and the Devil were devising means to subject Protestants to damnation (Vitkus, 1997, p.145). It was common in the dramas of the era to see enemies of Protestantism attempt seducing good Protestants to convert.

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2. Conversion and Multicultural Mediterranean

On the domestic sphere in England, the religious quarrels between Protestantism and Catholicism were far from being resolved; therefore, presenting a rich subject for commoners and men of letters alike. The domestic anti-Catholic discourse in England instilled the idea that England was always under the threat of being converted by other European Roman Catholic Churches. External Roman Catholic powers, such as France, Spain and Papacy, were the primary source of the domestic worries about religious conversion experienced in England after the Reformation (Dillon, 2006, p.162). As a consequence, English Catholics were persecuted and threatened by the Protestant majority. The English kicked against Catholicism on the ground that the Pope wanted to use the "Papal Bull *Regnans in Excelsis*" to declare Queen Elizabeth a heretic and, consequently, depose her. In fact, religious anxiety in England was further heightened by the numerous actions of the Vatican that clearly demonstrated attempts to impose religious authority on England (Munoz, 2012, p.87; McGrath, 1967, p.69). In addition, the Catholic threat was highlighted in many military conflicts between England and European Catholic powers, the Anglo-Spanish wars for instance. The collective national memory of the English clearly recalled the years 1585–1604, and 1625–1630 when England fought against the Spanish for its existence. Following Queen Elizabeth's persecution of Catholics, there was a relatively less hostile policy against the Catholics under the reign of King James from 1603 to 1625 (Willson, 1959, pp. 148-9). However, this did not stop the Parliament from introducing more anti-Catholic acts. The Popish Recusants Act passed by Parliament in May 1606 required English subjects to swear an Oath of Allegiance to deny the authority of the Pope over the English Church. Catholics who swore the Oath of Allegiance received "conciliation" from James (Willson, 1959, p.228).

The expansionist policy of the Ottoman Empire of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries was a source of great fear and unrest. The European conceptions of Islam were always influenced and shaped by the Christian Reconquista in Spain, the Islamic conquest in Eastern Europe and the still-living memories of the Crusades. Centuries of Islamic attempts to advance westward were concluded by the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople in 1453. Owing to their frequent activities, the Ottomans were able to capture new territories in the Mediterranean and Eastern Europe during the sixteenth century. The English and other European nations on the frontlines became increasingly anxious as a result of this expansionist ideology. The rising Ottoman Empire stood as an equal match to the other European countries.

Although the English shores were relatively safe from the Ottoman tide, the Islamic military threat caused serious tension throughout England itself. References to the imminent dangers of the Ottomans were very common in English records. In sixteenth-century England, many prayers were ordered by the Church to warn against the Ottoman invasion (Schmuck, 2010, pp. 457-8). Because of this impact of Islamic threat on the Christian prayers, the growing concern of English authorities over foreign matters became known to even the common people. As records about renegades increased in the country, it was very common to hear sermons against renegades in Muslim lands. In a similar vein, Scotland also felt the echoes of the Ottoman danger. In 1591, a heroic poem was written by King James of Scotland in celebration of the victory at Lepanto over the Ottomans (Vitkus, 1997, p.148). The poem provides a narration of the divine help the Venetians got in defeating the "faithless" Ottomans. Paradoxically, the Ottoman serious menace to Christendom made King James celebrate the triumph of his old enemies, the Catholic Holy League that conquered the Ottoman army.

Besides the attack from the Ottomans, other Islamic threats had a substantial impact on England. England, as well as other European superpowers of the seventeenth century, were increasingly interested in Mediterranean trade, particularly the African slave trade (Wheat, 2010, pp.2-3). This trade got England exposed to new problems, such as Mediterranean piracy, though it also availed the country of new commercial partners. There was a fight between the Moors, Turks, and Spanish for the control of the flow of trade in the northeastern Atlantic and the Mediterranean. The Turks and the Moors enslaved or captured many British travellers and sailors, especially those who sojourned close to the Islamic shores. Several stereotypical representations of "the Turk" were formulated by early modern English writers as a result of this hostile environment. The English's raising fears of being forcefully converted or enslaved by their Muslim enemies enflamed national concerns and anxiety.

At the time the plays under consideration were performed, there was an increasing number of contacts between Muslim and English ships in the Mediterranean as well as on the British Isles. The chances of striking a commercial deal with the Levant prompted English ships to sail more frequently in the Mediterranean, and as a result, were likely to get attacked by Turkish and Barbary ships. On the other hand, the English and Irish coasts were the targets of the Turkish navy (Vitkus, 1997, p.152). Moreover, the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries were marked by stories of pirates capturing English nationals. In some cases, Christian captives were usually locked up in prison for ransom or sold into slavery (MacLean & Matar, 2011). The captivity narrative of Thomas Sanders regarding his expedition to Tripoli in 1584, for example, presents a comprehensive description of the life of Christian hostages in Barbary during the latter decades of the sixteenth century.

It is noteworthy, as well, to clarify that rivalry and violence were not the only things the Mediterranean was known for. Despite the military struggle for control over the Mediterranean, merchants from East and West were still willing to benefit from the commercial opportunities in the region. During the reign of Elizabeth I, England and the Barbary States had a significant improvement in their trade and diplomatic ties (Vaughan, 2008, p.57). For instance, even in the face of a Papal ban, England developed strong economic ties with Morocco (Bartels, 2008, p.24). An ambassador was sent to the court of Queen Elizabeth I by Mulai Ahmad al-Mansur, the Moroccan ruler, to discuss the mutual interests of both governments in 1600 (Vaughan, 2008, p.57). In an attempt to build diplomatic relations with the Ottoman Empire, in 1578, Queen Elizabeth I sent an ambassador to the court of Sultan Murad III. This led to the signing of a treaty of commerce in 1580. During the remaining period of the Queen's reign, several diplomats were sent from both sides.

3. Results And Discussion

3.1 Conversion in *Othello*

During the Renaissance, the "collective tension" experienced in England over conversion was dramatized on stage in many canonical plays like Shakespeare's *Othello*.² Through the use of historical and textual clues and examples, Vitkus points out that the tragedy of *Othello* is basically a play of conversion. According to Vitkus, the kind of conversion implanted in the play was that of "faithlessness", which was an issue of national concern (Vitkus, 1997, p.145). Vitkus argues that the play demonstrated the intense fear in England about the power and ability of Muslims to convert Christians. In more than one instance in his essay, Vitkus clearly assumes that the question of Islamic conversion is the basis for the entire theme of the play. While it is obvious that conversion is a subject matter here, I diverge from Vitkus' argument in the sense that conversion is not always concerned with an external threat. Unarguably, the play obviously reflects the threat of the Ottoman's onslaught on the Christian states, which comes along with the danger of conversion, but the Ottomans make no physical appearance on stage. This shields the Christians from the danger of conversion and invasion and reduces the fears about "turning Turk". Remarkably, the use of Christian religious language in addressing the subject of conversion in the play introduces a moral dimension to the message underlying its composition. What is understood here, I believe, is that, for the spectators of the play, the major concern is always Christians and Christianity instead of the Ottomans and Islam.

In line with Vitkus' argument, Bergeron (2010) points out that the fear about the apostasy of Christians is clearly evident in Shakespeare's tragedy. In *Othello*, Iago tries to affirm his views about women saying, "Nay, it's true, or else I am a Turk" (Shakespeare, 1984, II.i). While this may seem like an unintentional comment, Bergeron assumes that Iago's words are indicative of the Renaissance mentality concerning viewing conversion, especially to Islam, as a complete evil. I believe that, while there is some kind of tension about conversion in Iago's statement, the attitude of a true Christian is what is really expressed in his speech. Iago contrasts with the Turkish code of behaviour to underscore the Christian code of behaviour. Iago is ready to back up his claim with an expression of his truthfulness that emanates from his religion.

In the play, Othello warns his troops of the dangers of infighting and dissent by linking such actions to lack of true Christian faith and apostasy in one of his speeches to them:

From whence ariseth this?
 Are we turned Turks? And to ourselves do that
 Which heaven hath forbid the Ottomites?
 For Christian shame, put by this barbarous brawl!
 He that stirs next, to carve for his own rage,
 Holds his soul light; he dies upon his motion. (Shakespeare, 1984, II.iii)

From Bergeron's (2010, p.267) viewpoint, the aforementioned lines suggest that "turning Turk" was a nightmare to Christians. Bergeron believes that the scene expresses the great anxiety over conversion that was widely experienced in the early modern period. On the contrary, I believe the issue here is not about Islam or conversion to it. As I earlier highlighted in Iago's speech, the focus is on Christianity as a religion whose followers are required to imbibe a certain code of behaviour.

Othello's words suggest that Christianity is associated with civilization and a code of behaviour that is considered to be the antithesis of the primitive *Other*. Here, "turning Turk" does not mainly refer to anxiety about Islamic threat as Bergeron assumes. Shakespeare is concerned with ways of behaving in cultural mannerism, which again highlights the moral and dedicatory aspect of the play.

² For more about Shakespeare and Mediterranean settings, see P. Cantor's "The Shores of Hybridity: Shakespeare and the Mediterranean", and M. Alshetawi's "The Oriental in Shakespeare".

Remarkably, no other clear allusion to conversion in the play creates more uneasiness and tensions about the "Turk" than Othello's last lines in the play. Othello ends the play with the following remarks:

Set you down this.
 And say besides that in Aleppo once,
 Where a malignant and a turbaned Turk
 Beat a Venetian and traduced the state,
 I took by th' throat the circumcisèd dog
 And smote him—thus. (Shakespeare, 1984, VI.ii)

The national tension and fear of encountering Muslims deep in the Islamic world are clearly reflected in the words Othello used in describing how he killed a Turk in Aleppo. As a matter of fact, such feelings can be found in several accounts and records of violent and, usually, fatal clashes between Muslims and English subjects in the early modern period. Perhaps, the anxiety expressed in Othello's purposeful phraseology can be justified only in light of the numerous records about such fatal encounters, which I previously discussed in this paper. Again, Othello's intention is not necessarily concerned with condemning Islam *per se*; instead, it was a final attempt to stress his Christian identity.

3.2 Conversion in *The Renegado* and *A Christian Turned Turk*

The meaning of conversion or "turning Turk" in early modern drama, as I proposed earlier, varies according to contexts and speakers. In *The Renegado* (1630) by Philip Massinger, the Christian Paulina feigns that she intends to "turn Turk". Consequently, the Christian Gazet brings to bear the connection between prostitution and apostasy, "Most of your tribe doe so / When they beginne in whore" (Massinger, 2014, V.iii). Along the same line, Donusa gives an illustration of a similar perception of Islam as a sensual religion. Before she converts to Christianity, Donusa declares, "We enjoy no more / That are of the Ottoman race, though our religion / Allows all pleasure" (Massinger, 2014, V.iii). The threat imposed on the vulnerable Christian subjects is concerned with the sexual implication of conversion to Islam in the early modern era and the anxiety that such scenes seemed to arouse. However, I argue that the alarming danger that overwhelms Christian women in these scenes is the loss of Christian faithfulness, virginity, and chastity, irrespective of the faithless direction chosen by the character. In this regard, "turning Turk" is viewed as a danger to Christian morality.

In the same vein, regarding my reading about conversion in *Othello*, I believe that the planned conversion of Paulina does not cause much anxiety about Islam, even in the presence of a potentially antagonistic audience. Paulina's moral strength is a typical illustration of the sturdiness of Christianity as a religion that places itself above other religions. This can be seen clearly in the scene where Donusa tries to convert Vitelli to Islam. The discussion about "conversion" dissolves into a theological assault on the "juggling prophet" and his religion (Massinger, 2014, IV.iii). Vitelli says he would rather die than take a backward stride to Turkish bondage. The victory of Christianity ends the polemics between the two religions, which ultimately erases all possible tensions of the threat of "turning Turk". On the other hand, the Baptized Donusa is filled with joy that her soul is free from "Blind ignorance and misbelief, / the cruellest prison," which is often affiliated with "False prophet/Impostor Mahomet"(Massinger, 2014, V.iv). Massinger's emphasis on the moral capacity of Christian characters who succeed in overturning the threat of conversion in the opposite direction waters down any possible anxiety or uneasiness about "turning Turk" in the play.

The subject of conversion in early modern drama is given a much more focused treatment in plays like Robert Daborne's *A Christian Turned Turk* (1612). The play vividly applies contemporary knowledge about the threats that travellers and merchants faced in the southern and eastern coasts of the Mediterranean. Even though the nightmares of Spanish piracy were brought to an end by the peace treaty between England and Spain in 1604, the danger of Moorish "piracy" and the Turkish navy continued to be a problem for the English. Practically, captive and pirate narratives became an ideal platform for presenting the tales of Christians accepting Islam.

In Daborne's play, Ward's conversion is one of the rare cases where a Christian "freely and willfully" converts to Islam, and as such, it is one of the most challenging issues addressed by scholars who deliberated on his apostasy (Matar, 1998, p.57). Conversely, Burton (2002, p.48) contends that, while the historical John Ward, indeed, "turned Turk" and is viewed as a renegade in the drama, Daborne "would never let his mysterious character neglect the Christian faith".

Rather, Daborne uses Ward's character in theological arguments with Muslims and renegades, where he supports Christianity and rejects every justification made in favour of apostasy by his opponents. Although Ward definitely finds the Turkish Voada appealing, the Christian hatred and rejection of apostasy is deeply rooted in his soul. And this is the reason Burton hypothetically claims that Ward was "not in any way taken or tempted by

Islam" (Burton, 2002, p.48), which I consider as a valid reading. In other words, even if we overlook Ward's conversion, his apostasy is not at all interpreted as a form of inferiority or weakness of the Christian faith, but rather what should be blamed here is the natural human tendency and weakness for engaging in vices.

4. The Dilemma of Dramatizing Conversion

The problems that Daborne had in dramatizing apostasy on stage shed light on one of the major dilemmas that undermined the talents of playwrights in the early modern period and shaped their portrayal of conversion. Tackling such a thorny issue that clearly has some elements of blasphemy in front of a potentially hostile audience was no easy task. Moreover, the challenge of presenting conversion scenes on stage was further compounded by the censorship forced on theatrical publications. Unlike playwrights, historians and other prose writers had little need for modifications and fewer complications in carrying out their mission. The historian had more freedom and independence because of the "safe distance" between him and his readers. For instance, it is impossible to compare the observations of the historian, Richard Knolles, with those seen on his contemporary stage. Richard Knolles (who died in 1610) was best known for his writings about the Ottoman Empire, which is regarded as the first major English description of the Ottomans. For early modern England, Knolles' *Generall Historie of the Turkes* (1603) became a major archive of in-depth reports about the political and military dimensions of the Ottoman Empire. Contemporary fanatic views about Turks and the Ottomans can be found in most parts of his book. He extensively wrote about the deception inherent in the Turks' religion, including the emergence of Islam and its Prophet.

Given that the resentment towards the Ottomans was not a strange occurrence in early modern England, our concern here is Knolles' respect for the considerable achievements of the Ottomans and his accounts about Christians "turned Turk". There is a comprehensive discussion about the Empire's background that aided its achievements in the section with the title "A Briefe Discourse of the Greatness of the Turkish Empire." Owing to its intense and relatively unbiased description of the great Ottoman Empire, the chapter is "a compilation of its best pages with a display of an excellent narrative skill, massive power of characterization, a fascinating ability to make huge volumes of refractory material clear, and sometimes real elocution" (qtd. in Bergeron, 2010, p.262). There is hardly any match between Knolles' admiring description about the "greatness" of the mutual foe of England and Christianity and its contemporary stage. Similarly, in Frauncis Billerbege's *Straunge Newes from Constantinople* (1585), the historian openly writes about the rising number of Christians who "euery day seeing the prosperous ssuccesses of the Turkes . . . and contrariwyse, perseuing the miseryes of the Christians, beginne to revolt: and receiue the irreligious impietie of Mahumet, denying Christes religion" (qtd. in Burton, 2002, p.52). Because of the considerable freedom he enjoyed, the historian was able to explore various topics and opinions about conversion that playwrights dare not discuss.

The relatively secure environment enjoyed by prose writers like Knolles allowed them to express original ideas regarding the *Other* as well as conversion. Usually, only a minority of well-educated people, who were more open to eccentric observations about the *Other*, had access to new publications during the early modern English period. Thus, challenging the religious and cultural bigoted representations about the Turks was not a too-risky task for prose writers.

On the other hand, playwrights like Robert Daborne had to be extremely innovative to manage the tensions and hostilities that could be initiated by conversion scenes. A dumb-show presentation of the conversion scene is employed in Daborne's *A Christian Turn'd Turk* to overcome this obstacle. In a way, the use of the dumb show is targeted at reducing the chances of further violating the feelings of the Christian audience. Silence and the magical overtones of the show included a supernatural element in the scene and beclouded the reality behind Ward's story. In fact, this can be seen as a tactic the author employed in performing one of the most difficult scenes (i.e., willful conversion) ever seen in early modern drama.

The techniques that English dramatists used in their works in an attempt to address the problematic issue of apostasy are not limited to dumb shows only. Comic scenes also reduced tension and anxiety when the trope of conversion is presented. In plays like Philip Massinger's *The Renegado*, as well as in Thomas Heywood's *The Fair Maid of the West, Part I* (1631), the audience's attention is always directed away from the action of conversion to the hopeless efforts of the comic character to evade circumcision or castration.

This strategy prevents any possible criticisms from the audience since comics takes the place of conversion. Burton (2002, p.57) supports this view as he argues that the anxiety conversion created on stage is assuaged by the numerous jokes about circumcision and castration, just like the repeated puns about "best piece" and "precious stones". To a large extent, the risks and complexity of presenting conversion on stage were always carefully and attentively handled by early modern English dramatists to avoid violating the audiences' feelings.

In several other cases, English playwrights chose to be on the safe side with their audiences. In various conversion scenes, characters conveyed their intention to the audience and made it known that they were simply feigning conversion. For example, In Massinger's play, Paulina makes a pretence of conversion by telling Asambeg that she "will turn Turk" (Massinger, 2014, Viii). Instead of kicking against or expressing disgust at such blasphemies, the audience would appreciate Paulina's actions because they fully understand her intentions. Feigned conversions became a performative tool to guarantee audiences that the whole thing was just a survival strategy that would protect a Christian's life. This would also enable the playwright to avoid getting his work rejected by the censor who had the power to forbid the text or pass its performance. The censorship of drama in the early modern period was another major challenge for the talented early modern playwrights. Needless to say, censorship increased as drama had an immense impact on a society shifting from religion to secularism.

5. Conclusions

The implications of the term "turning Turk" or the action of conversion to Islam seem to be overgeneralized by critics who have addressed this issue. In this light, the study shows that conversion has no definite interpretation in early modern drama. The multiple meanings of the term are revealed by the many religious, political and social factors that were involved in shaping the term. Vitkus' assessments, as well as those of other critics of the religious tensions about conversion, does not cover all sources of anxiety about the term. Conversion or "turning Turk" varies across contexts, writers, and characters. For instance, Christianity, but not Islam, is specifically the concern of discussion about conversion in *Othello*. Othello and Iago's comments about conversion are more centred on Christianity than on Islam. Othello and Iago employ conversion to stress the moral and theological superiority of the Christian faith over other religions. Their use of reference to other doctrines not only supports their arguments but also buttresses the uprightness of their religion. The supremacy of the Christian cultural code of behaviour over other codes is underlined by the play's general discourse. In a way, English playwrights established their own identity and understanding of the *self* through their depictions of the *other*.

In other dramas, like Massinger's *The Renegado*, potential tensions about apostasy do not emanate from a sincere feeling of Islamic danger but from the relationships between sexual misbehaviour and conversions. On the contrary, the feigned conversions displayed by some characters spark off delight and, sometimes, admiration for the Christian who is able to protect his life from barbaric enemies. In these cases, the audience's possible fears about the scene are eclipsed by feelings of religious pride. However, our present perception of the issue faces further challenges from other writers. Daborne's analysis of the issue of conversion is very controversial and complex. A clear case here is Ward's complicated apostasy in *A Christian Turn'd Turk*. The theological arguments Ward had with Muslim characters show that he is not defeated, regardless of whether he really converts to Islam or not. Ward displays a strong faith in Christianity and its superiority over other doctrines.³ Hence, Daborne was careful not to link the apparent defects in Ward's behaviour to Christianity but to his personal weaknesses.

The challenges that English dramatists faced in the early modern period were brought into focus by the complexity of dramatizing conversion at that time. Compared to their dramatist counterparts, prose writers were able to write more freely about conversions because of the "safe distance" they enjoyed from their audiences. English playwrights had to contend with the direct hostility of their audiences as well as with authority censorship. The fact that the actors or composer could be attacked by a raging audience during the show, especially if the presentation violated social or religious codes, made it a risky mission.

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³ Remarkably, perhaps, this trend to emphasize the superiority of Christianity over other belief systems (including Islam) was less felt in the second half of the seventeenth century. For more about this topic see M. Alnwairan's "Muslims and Political Allegory in Elkanah Settle's *The Heir of Morocco*."

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