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The Impact of the Translation of the Quran on Shakespeare's Plays

Rania Shair

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Abstract

During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the religion of Islam was gaining notoriety in the western world. Islamophobic propaganda was spreading. There was a growing fear in Europe of forced conversion, and this fear was sparked by controversial new translations of the Quran. This fear inspired works of literature during that time period. One of the greatest playwrights in history to be influenced by the Islamophobic propaganda is William Shakespeare.

To understand how Islamophobia influenced Shakespeare's plays in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, one must understand the magnitude of how controversial it was to translate the Quran from Arabic to western languages. The Quran was first translated from Arabic to Latin in 1143 as a way to convert Muslims to Christianity, with the goal of eradicating Islam. It was then retranslated again from Arabic to Latin in 1518. The Quran was then translated from Arabic to French in 1647 and then French to English in 1649. Even though Shakespeare may have been influenced only by the Latin translations of the Quran, because his plays were published on or before 1631, it is important to note these other translations because they illustrate the Islamophobic fears that westerners had during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and the controversy regarding the discussion behind the publication of the translations of the Quran. This controversy magnified Islamophobia and spread throughout every European crevice. As is shown in Shakespeare's plays, literature was not spared. Through the analysis of Shakespeare's *Henry VI*, *Titus Andronicus*, and *Othello*, I argue that Islam was stigmatized during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as a religion that forced conversion, lacked morality, and promoted sexual deviancy.

MONTCLAIR STATE UNIVERSITY

The Impact of the Translation of the Quran on Shakespeare's Plays

by

Rania Shair

A Master's Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of

Montclair State University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

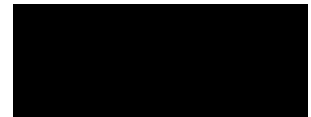
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The Impact of the Translation of the Quran on Shakespeare's Plays

English literature during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries may have been influenced by the translation of the Quran – first from Arabic to Latin, and then from French to English. According to the *International Quran News Agency* (IQNA), the decision to translate the Quran, first from Arabic to Latin, was done to aid the church in the conversion of Muslims to Christianity during the twelfth century. Jeremy Norman in *History of Information* details how the Quran was translated by Robertus Retenensis in 1143, and notes that it did not appear in print until 1542. The translation of the Quran caused widespread controversy and elicited deep-rooted fears that were linked to the idea of conversion. Noel Malcolm's *Useful Enemies: Islam and the Ottoman Empire in Western Political Thought, 1450-1750* explains how the translation of the Quran was used to prevent conversion and spread Islamophobia. He writes, "Within such a framework, study of Islam's holy book on its own terms was not really possible; the Koran was used as a series of pegs on which to hang preconceived criticisms of Islam on grounds of doctrinal error, absurdity, and immorality" (Malcolm 31). The threat of conversion to Islam terrified Protestant people in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, which triggered complex views of moral, sexual, and religious uncertainties in works of literature during that time period.

Shakespeare was one of the earliest authors during the sixteenth century to be influenced by Islam. It is evident in *Henry VI* which was his earliest work (published in 1591) that references Islam¹. Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* and *Othello*, his two works after *Henry VI*, not only reference Islam but have Muslim characters. One point that differentiates Shakespeare from other authors is that *Othello* not only has a Muslim character, but this character also

¹ See Act I, scene 2 lines 140-145.

happens to be the main character in the play. Through an analysis of Shakespeare's *Henry VI*, *Titus Andronicus*, and *Othello*, this thesis is going to focus on how Islam was stigmatized during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as a religion that forced conversion, lacked morality, and promoted sexual deviancy.

Shakespeare's plays were revolutionary as well as influential. His plays reinforce common misconceptions of Islam during the sixteenth century through the incorporation of Islamophobic propaganda that builds on the fear of conversion during that time. Shakespeare's reference to Islam in his works reinforced the people of Europe's fear of conversion. In *The Renegade in English Seventeenth-Century Imagination*, Matar explains the fear of conversion that the English had. He writes:

In the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, English travelers to the Ottoman territories were struck by the sight of Christians who had converted to Islam. These "renegado" Greek, Arab, Albanian, Italian, French and English Christians who had "reined" their religion not only saddened the visitor but frightened him too. With the power of the Turkish army and navy on the rise, English travelers could not but reflect whether they too might one day find themselves subjected to the Muslims and forced or tempted to renounce their faith. (Matar 489)

In *Henry VI*, a negative reference to the Muslim prophet, Muhammed, is made. In *Titus Andronicus* the antagonist of the play is Muslim; and in *Othello* the main character Othello is the Muslim figure. In all of these plays, the portrayal of Muslims and Islam is negative. Shakespeare was a Protestant and was primarily writing for a Protestant audience; and the fear that was plaguing the Protestants of that time was the fear of conversion to Islam.

Islamophobic propaganda during the seventeenth century was used to delegitimize Islam as a religion and to claim that it was fabricated. Noel Malcolm explains why propaganda was used to intentionally make Islam be viewed as outrageous. He writes that “Since it was axiomatic for all Christian writers that Islam was a false religion, it followed that it must be a human creation. And as Muhammed was the supreme prophet of Islam, and the proclaimer—in Christian eyes, the author—of the Koran, it seemed clear that any understanding of Islam’s real nature must depend on an analysis of his motives and actions” (Malcolm 31). Through the analysis of Muhammed’s actions, Christians during that time period could then discredit him. However, to discredit him they would need to make him out to be outlandish. Many false stories circulated about the prophet Muhammed and one in particular made it into Shakespeare’s *Henry VI*. In response to Joan’s proclamations in Act I, scene 2, Charles responds by coupling Joan with the Prophet Mohammed: “Was Mahomet inspired with a dove? /Thou with an eagle art inspired then. / Helen, the mother of great Constantine, / None yet Saint Philip’s daughters were like thee. / Bright star of Venus, fallen down on the earth, / How may I reverently worship thee enough?” (1.2.140-45). The reference to the dove is in a way an insult to the Prophet Mohammed because it was a rumor that was derived from skepticism of the religion. In this rumor it was said that the prophet Mohammed attracted a dove to appear to speak to him by lodging corn in his ear². According to *Information: A Historical Companion*, this slanderous rumor was “a reference to a medieval trope according to which the Prophet placed corn in his ear to attract a dove, as a sign of revelation from the Holy Spirit. By the end of this period, such a polemic may have

² In the edits made by Edward Burn, he references this story in the footnotes on page 140 in *The Arden Shakespeare* version of this play.

persisted in its appeal to some people” (98). The initial discrediting of the prophet Mohammed through the incorporation of the inaccurate rumor casts Islam as an absurd religion.

Islam is then portrayed as a false religion through a reference to Helen, a noble Christian. This reference to Helen is set as a reminder to the people that Christianity is the right and true religion. The need to discredit the prophet Mohammed by spreading rumors originated from the translations of the Quran. In chapter four of *Reading the Qur'an in Latin Christendom, 1140-1560* Thomas Burman explains:

Robert's translation had entered circulation in its original, twelfth-century, form, as we have just seen, framed by a complex system of both polemical and philological glosses, hostile surah titles, and largely anti-Islamic accompanying works meant both to illuminate this difficult text and to control how Christians understood it. It became something of a best seller. The surviving twenty-four manuscripts and two sixteenth-century printed editions attest a wide readership—much wider, at any rate, than the circulation of the other Latin translations combined. (Burman 88)

Like the Latin translation, in the earliest French translation of the Quran, great lengths were taken to discredit the Quran as the word of God—so much so that the title of the Quran, which is *The Quran*, was changed in the translation to *The Alcoran of Mahomet*. This translation adds the prophet Mohammed to the title, which serves as a means to establish the Quran as a false book because Mohammed was known to Europe as the false prophet. In this translation, there is a note added to the Christian readers. The note states: “There being so many sects and heresies banded together against the Truth, finding that of Mahomet wanting to the Muster, I thought good to bring it to their Colours, that so viewing thine enemies in their full body, thou maist the better prepare to encounter, and I hope overcome them” (2). Islam was not widely accepted in England,

and in some cases, it was feared. This fear of the other created outlandish rumors. This is similar to how the English viewed the French as being weak, accusing them of being easily taken in by witchcraft to the extent that they burn Joan at the stake as a witch. The connection to witchcraft is seen also in Act I, scene 1: “Or shall we think the subtle-witted French/ Conjurers and sorcerers, that afraid of him, / By magic verses have contrived his end?” (1.1.25-27). The reference to witchcraft implies anything amoral, dark, and evil³. In these lines, the English are looking to blame the death of Henry V on someone, and they choose the French. Exeter here is playing on the fact the France is devoted to Catholicism. Witchcraft is hinted at in these lines, with the implication that the French are weak and malleable⁴. The same rationale goes for anyone who is influenced by Islam.

The fear of conversion during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries spread like the plague. People were terrified of the “other.” This is attributable to the rise of the Ottoman Empire. In “Turning Turk in *Othello*: The Conversion and Damnation of the Moor” Daniel Vitkus writes:

What has often been forgotten is that while Spanish, Portuguese, English, and Dutch ships sailed to the New World and beyond, beginning the exploration and conquest of foreign lands, the Ottoman Turks were rapidly colonizing European territory. Thus, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the Europeans were both colonizers and colonized, and even the English felt the power of the Turkish threat to Christendom. (Vitkus 146)

³ According to *The Oxford Companion to Local and Family History* “Witchcraft was not primarily associated with the worship and service of the Devil, but with the supposed power to do harm. It offered an explanation of individual misfortunes which could be linked to the malice of a neighbour.”

⁴ Edward Burn’s states that Hall presents the French as likely to be taken by witchcraft but sees it as a token of their weakness and not actual access to the supernatural. See page 117 in *The Arden Shakespeare*.

To the English, the loss of Christian religious observance and practice was akin to the loss of land. As a colonizer, England imposed its religion onto its subjects, and now that the threat of being colonized seemed imminent, they feared the same would happen to them. This is represented in *Henry VI*, in Act III, scene 3, as Burgundy is being reconverted by Joan's speech, he says:

I am vanquished: these haughty words of hers
 Have battered me like roaring cannon-shot
 And made me almost yield upon my knees.
 Forgive me, country, and sweet countrymen;
 And lords, accept this hearty kind embrace.
 My forces and my power of men are yours.
 So farewell, Talbot. I'll no longer trust thee. (3.3.77-84)

An argument can be made that these are some of the most important lines in the play. Burgundy's statement in these lines parallel Joan's association with the Prophet Mohammed and with the conversion of Englishmen. Burgundy in these lines is explaining that he is returning to Catholicism and will no longer help the English. Catholicism is akin to Islam in Protestant England because both religions were considered the enemy. Even though Burgundy is a Frenchman he was allied with the English. His conversion led him to stop aiding the English, which led to the death of Talbot. This fear of conversion was prominent in England because it meant a loss of power, but it also demonstrated the fear that even if a Muslim converted to Christianity, they may convert back. That is why conversions either to or from Christianity could not be trusted and were equally feared. If converts cannot be trusted, then they cannot fully take part in English culture.

The contrast between light and dark is evident in Shakespeare's plays. Light implies purity, righteousness, and morality, while darkness is the antithesis⁵. In *Henry VI* light and darkness are associated with Joan. Joan is the figure Joan of Arc and according to the play she was dark and black before light was bestowed upon her by the Virgin Mary. In Act I, scene 2, Joan states, "And, whereas I was black and swart before, / With those clear rays which she infused on me, / That beauty I am blessed with, which you see." (1.2.84-86). Those who are described in Shakespeare's plays as dark or black are considered either undesirables, amoral, or the other (meaning not English). It is no surprise that in many of Shakespeare's plays, such as *Titus Andronicus* and *Othello*, the color black tends to signify otherness, disgust, and ugliness. In these specific lines, Joan is stating that she was darker before being blessed with a fairer complexion. A great many of Shakespeare's works reference the color black in regard to human features as ugly or othering, and in some cases, like Aaron in *Titus Andronicus*, as evil. Before Joan was blessed, she was considered black and dark but after being blessed by God she was fair and radiantly white. What is radical about this is that all of the Moors are described as black or dark and none of them are considered to be Christian in Shakespeare's plays. Aaron was not considered to be Christian, and neither was Othello (even though he converted). This indicates that race and religion were tightly intertwined.

In *Titus Andronicus*, a major idea is that an oppressed society later becomes violent. The oppressor in this case is Titus Andronicus, who oppresses Tamora, her sons, and Aaron. Yet

⁵ According to *A Dictionary of the Bible* "A powerful symbol mentioned at the beginning (Gen. 1: 3) and the end (Rev. 22: 5) of the Bible for goodness and truth. Hence the Law is described as 'a light for my path' (Ps. 119: 105); 'the day of the Lord' was expected to be light (Amos 5: 18), and people were disconcerted when the prophet predicted darkness. Light and darkness are commonly encountered as antitheses in the Dead Sea scrolls, and this is a feature which they share with the gospel of John; Christ is described as the light of the world (John 8: 12), sent by God who himself is light (1 John 1: 5), and those who are sent by Christ become in turn the light of the world (Matt. 5: 14)."

Aaron is seen as the antagonist, not Titus Andronicus. Aaron is the first Moor (medieval Muslim) character to appear in any of Shakespeare's plays. The character of Aaron in this play is used to represent otherness, immorality, and sexual deviancy. The first mention of Aaron's otherness is made indirectly by Marcus in Act I, scene 1. Marcus states in a conversation with Lucius, "Thou art a Roman, be not barbarous" (1.1.383). In this play, this is the first mention of racial power and signifying non-Romans as barbarous⁶. The non-Roman in this play is Aaron the Moor. Tamora and her sons are not Roman either but because they were acquisitions by Titus they are not represented as "others." However, because Aaron was brought by Tamora, and because he is a Moor, that courtesy is not extended to him. As the play progresses, so does the abhorrence of Aaron. This is seen in Act II, scene 2 in a conversation that Bassianus has with Tamora. Bassianus says: "Believe me, queen, your swart Cimmerian / Doth make your honour of his body's hue, / Spotted, detested and abominable" (2.2.72-74). These lines echo the prejudices against the Moors of that time period. The word "swart" here is another term for black⁷. The word that follows it also is an indicator of Aaron's otherness. The word "Cimmerian" is used to indicate someone who lives in perpetual darkness in the furthest part of Europe.⁸ Aaron is someone who is not only dark but in darkness. Being removed from the light also has religious connotations.

Immorality is prevalent in this play. It is one of the reasons why this play is known to be Shakespeare's most gruesome. Aaron is described as a bloodthirsty individual set on destroying

⁶ According to the Oxford English Dictionary "A person living outside the pale of the Roman empire and its civilization, applied especially to the northern nations that overthrew them."

⁷ Jonathan Bate defines this word in the footnotes on page 213 in *The Arden Shakespeare* version of this play.

⁸ Bates defines this word in the footnotes on page 213 in *The Arden Shakespeare* version of this play. In the Oxford English Dictionary this word is also defined as "Of or belonging to the legendary Cimmerii. Hence, proverbially used as a qualification of dense darkness, gloom, or night, or of things or persons shrouded in thick darkness."

the foundation of the Roman civilization. Shakespeare is drawing a direct parallel to how Europeans viewed the Ottoman empire. Vitkus explains that the Ottoman empire was viewed as a major power that gained its prominence through warfare. He states, “As Ottoman-controlled territory continued to expand during the next two centuries, Western Europeans grew increasingly anxious” (Vitkus 147). This explains why Shakespeare would create Aaron as a character set on bringing destruction. A conversation with Tamora in Act II, scene 2 shows how Aaron is presented as a bloodthirsty individual. He states, “To do some fatal execution? / No, madam, these are no venereal signs; / Vengeance is in my heart, death in my hand, / Blood and revenge hammering in my head” (2.2.36-39). Shakespeare in these lines is demonstrating how bloodthirsty, vengeful, and barbaric Moors are by graphically describing how Aaron feels. This is the first time in the play that we see Aaron acting barbaric. In Act V, scene 3 the stage directions are also a representation of the interpreted (by the editor of the play) prejudices that Shakespeare felt towards Moors (also known as North African Muslims). The stage direction in this scene states that Marcus “[Points to Aaron’s baby.]” It is not referred to as Tamora’s baby. Marcus then says: “The issue of an irreligious Moor, / Chief architect and plotter of these woes” (5.3.120-21). Marcus is blaming Aaron for the birth of the baby not Tamora because Aaron would be the one who is considered impure because of his race and otherness. That otherness is passed down to the child because of the child’s distinctly Moorish features. These lines demonstrate that the original sin here cannot be washed away because blackness is viewed as a stain that cannot be removed. Aaron here is the other and even though he arrived with Tamora, only she is able to assimilate because she is not a Moor. Muslims who converted to Christianity during the sixteenth century were not considered “true” Christians. That is because Arabs were considered to be, according to Malcolm’s *Useful Enemies*, “hot-blooded, sensual

creatures...bloody and cruel” (35) and that “Arab” nature cannot be changed. As I discuss below, this concept is further explored in Shakespeare’s *Othello*.

Islam was presented not only as a religion that lacked morality but also a religion that specifically promoted sexual deviancy. Aaron is presented as sexually deviant because he helps to plot the rape and mutilation of the character Lavinia. Even though Tamora and her sons instigate this, it is Aaron who carries the majority of the blame because of his blackness. In Act II, scene 2, Aaron remarks: “His Philomel must lose her tongue today, /Thy sons make pillage of her chastity” (2.2.44-45). Shakespeare having Aaron spearhead this plot to rape and murder Lavinia, by articulating it, is further proof of his prejudices. This demonstrates how sinful Aaron is, and Islamophobic propaganda presented Islam as a religion that attracted the sinful. In Malcolm’s *Useful Enemies*, he writes that “A more central part of the traditional argument, however, was the idea that Muhammed had cleverly adapted the contents of his religion to the frailty of human nature, thus making it something that passionate, sinful people would naturally choose in preference to the more demanding creeds of Judaism or Christianity” (Malcolm 34). This misrepresentation of the religion of Islam was used to demonstrate that people who converted to Islam are wicked and sexually deviant. The fear of conversion here is linked to sexual deviancy. In the Islamic tradition and law, motivators for the fulfillment of good deeds are marked with promises of unlimited worldly riches such as endless vices (wine, sex, etc.) in the afterlife.⁹ This was unlike anything during that time period, and this marked Islam as a progressive religion. In Islam there is no pledge of celibacy as a sign of piety; Muslims are in

⁹ Hussain, in the article “Six descriptions of heaven from the Quran” references that the Quran states that “the chosen servants of Allah...will have a provision determined—fruits; and they will be honored in gardens of pleasure on thrones facing one another. There will be circulated among them a cup from a flowing spring, white and delicious to the drinkers; no bad effect is there in it, nor from it will they be intoxicated” (Q. 37:40-47).

fact encouraged to marry and procreate, to the extent that the religion states that through marriage half of your doctrine to the religion is completed.¹⁰ In *Early Modern Tales of Orient*, edited by Kenneth Parker, it states in the introduction that “Showing how Arabic was used in the service of Protestant theology as well as of secular interests in England, comes to the conclusion that the seventeenth century was the ‘Age of Arabic’” (4). However, because of this, it also received tremendous scrutiny. An analysis of the French translation of the Quran is required to understand the scrutiny that Islam underwent in the sixteenth and seventeenth century.

According to first French translation of the Quran *The Alcoran of Mahomet* it is written, in the section by Alexander Ross titled “A needful Caveat or Admonition for them who desire to know what use may be made of, or if there be danger in reading the Alcoran” that, “If you will take a brief view of the *Alcoran* you shall find it a hodge-podge made up of these four ingredients. 1. Contradictions. 2. Of Blasphemy. 3. Of ridiculous Fables. 4. Of lyes” (Ross 28). This belief that the Quran is filled with lies and false stories was aimed to ward off conversion to Islam, the same way that the representation of Islam as a religion filled with sexual deviants also repelled conversion.

The connection between conversion and sexual deviancy is prominent in *Othello*. Even though Shakespeare’s first Muslim character appeared in *Titus Andronicus*, *Othello* is the first and only Shakespeare play that portrays the main character as Muslim. One can see this as progress in the evolution of Shakespeare’s plays that reference Muslims and Islam. In *Othello* blackness is coupled with otherness, the fear of conversion is more prominent, and sexual deviance is still a major theme.

¹⁰ Adam Younis in the article “The Price of Half Your Deen” references that we often hear the timeless words of our Prophet Muhammad, peace and blessings upon him, who said “Whoever marries has achieved one half of one’s religion.”

There are many instances in *Othello* where characters reference Othello's blackness without using the word "black" or "Moor." An example is when Desdemona's father Brabantio is furious at his daughter's elopement with Othello. Brabantio states that his daughter will be damned like Othello: "Damned as thou art, thou hast enchanted her!" (1.2.65). The word "damned" is an indirect reference to Othello's skin color because during that time period the devil was often portrayed as black, and black skin was seen as a sign of being evil. In the article "Dark-skinned Satan Has a Long History," Adelle M. Banks writes, "European folklore described Satan as a black man, and the Puritans imported these notions, and raised them during the Salem witch trials of the 1690s." It is also a reference to Othello's religion. Even though Othello has converted to Christianity, he is not able to convert his skin color. He is not viewed as fully Christian because the prejudices of race are intertwined with religion. Strikingly enough, Othello only uses the word "black" twice to describe himself. Both instances are in Act III, scene 3. In the first instance he says, "Haply for I am black" (3.3.267) and the second instance he says, "Her name, that was as fresh / As Dian's visage, is begrimed and black / As mine own face" (3.3.389-91). In these two instances Othello is wondering if Desdemona is unfaithful to him because of his blackness. Othello at the start of the play was confident in Desdemona's love for him. He explains to Iago in Act I, scene 2, "For know, Iago, / But that I love the gentle Desdemona / I would not my unhoused free condition / Put into circumscription and confine / For the sea's worth" (1.2.24-28). However, as the play progresses so does Iago's influence on Othello. Iago represents the common prejudices that people of England had towards Moors. By the end, Othello starts to question whether his otherness, which is what he thinks attracted Desdemona to him, is now tainted. He believes, through Iago's manipulation, that Desdemona cheated on him. Othello is suffering from dysmorphia because he is now viewing his

“otherness”, his blackness, as grotesque and thus absorbs all the stereotypes associated with it which paved the way for him being a “savage.” Othello, who first embraced his otherness and thought that made him unique in Desdemona’s eyes, is shattered by Iago’s manipulation of him. Shakespeare also has Desdemona die to illustrate the complex prejudices of that time. Iago believes that Desdemona committed a social and ethical transgression by marrying Othello. In Act I, scene 1, Iago proclaims to Desdemona’s father, Brabantio,

Zounds, sir, you’re robbed, for shame put on your gown!
 Your heart is burst, you have lost half your soul,
 Even now, now, very now, an old black ram
 Is tupping your white ewe! Arise, arise,
 Awake the snorting citizens with the bell
 Or else the devil will make a grandsire of you,
 Arise I say! (1.1.84-91)

In these lines Iago illustrates the common prejudices regarding mixed race couples and through that illustration he creates the impression that deviating from social and ethnic boundaries will lead to demise. Desdemona married Othello, which is a sexual transgression. That form of sexual transgression that crossed the racial and religious boundaries of the land was always punishable by death in Elizabethan dramas.¹¹

Conversion is a central theme In *Othello*. Othello converts and is absorbed into the Venetian culture, yet his “otherness” is still evident and that ultimately leads to his demise. An example in *Othello* that illustrates Islamophobia is in Act V, scene 2, where Othello says, “Set you down this, / And say besides that in Aleppo once, / Where a malignant and a turbaned Turk /

¹¹ See the *Oxford Companion to Shakespeare* for more details about sexual offences and how they are punished.

Beat a Venetian and traduced the state, / I took by the' throat the circumcised dog / And smote him – thus!" (5.2.349-54). These lines are significant because Othello stabs himself afterwards, which allows the reader to insinuate that he was calling himself the "circumcised dog." This is a reference to the Islamic practice of male circumcision.¹² The use of the word "dog" is derogatory because it implies that the Muslims are barbaric as dogs. Othello identifies himself with the Turks who are portrayed as threats to Venice, which is why he describes killing himself by describing the killing of a Turk. Othello views himself as the only threat left, which is why he views killing himself as an act of martyrdom.¹³ However, it would not have been perceived that way during that time period. Othello's suicide is a visual representation of his damnation in the play, but from the perspective of a Turk it is viewed as martyrdom, which serves as a further example of Othello's otherness.

Desdemona is also implicated in the consequences of conversion. Desdemona married Othello, which is a form of conversion. During that time period, when a woman married, she was no longer considered an individual, but instead an extension of her husband. In her article "Marriage Contract and Social Contract in Seventeenth Century English Political Thought" Mary Lyndon Shanley writes, "The man's role was that of head and governor, the woman's role that of obedient follower. To contract a marriage was to consent to a status which in its essence was hierarchical and unalterable" (Shanley 1). Because she has to be obedient to her husband, she

¹² In the Arden Shakespeare edition of *Othello*, edited by Honigmann, the footnote explains that circumcision was a religious practice among the Muslims.

¹³ Johnathan Brown, in an essay published on the Yaqeen Institute's website, "Is Islam a Death Cult? Martyrdom and the American-Muslim Imagination," that "Those Muslims who die "fighting in the path of God" reside in the highest levels of Paradise. They are not truly even dead. Rather, they are instant immortals, as the Quran says, 'alive, sustained with their Lord' (Quran 3:169). Martyrs' bodies are not even washed for burial in Islam, and they bypass the trials and tribulations of the grave. It is as if they do not have to wait for Judgment Day to reap their rewards."

converted herself into him which conflated a bodily transgression with a spiritual transgression. Based on Iago's views, Desdemona's sexual acts with Othello led to her awful fate of being murdered by him, but also led to her salvation. Through death she was freed and saved from damnation. The name Desdemona in Greek means ill-fated,¹⁴ and she fulfilled that fate through death, thus freeing herself. In Act V, scene 2, Desdemona responds to Emilia's question "O, who hath done this deed?" by saying "Nobody, I myself. Farewell. / Commend me to my kind lord. O, farewell" (5.2.133–34). Desdemona here is asking God to return her to her "kind" which is an indication of her return to home. The only person who is not able to gain this salvation is Othello. This is done intentionally by Shakespeare. In the seventeenth century if you were a male Muslim who converted to Christianity, you were still denied salvation. That is because of the Muslim practice of circumcision. According to Vitkus "Seventeenth-century English Christians believed that adult-male conversion to Islam required circumcision. In their minds circumcision emphasized the sexual significance of the change of faith" (174). Although Othello converted to Christianity, he is not able to be uncircumcised, so he is considered to not be a true Christian man.

Shakespeare wrote *Othello* with Islamic biases in mind. The character Othello suffers from epilepsy, and Shakespeare was inspired by the prophet Mohammed who suffered from seizures as well. In "Turning Turk in Othello: The Conversion and Damnation of the Moor" Vitkus explains "Othello's Epilepsy recalls that of our ur-Moor, Mohammed. Christian polemics against Islam printed in Shakespeare's time frequently maintained that Mohammed was an epileptic who falsely claimed that his seizures were ecstasies brought on by divine possession"

¹⁴ According to the website NameBerry, "The name Desdemona is a girl's name of Greek origin meaning "ill-starred."

(Vitkus 155). Mohammed's epilepsy is interpreted from an Islamophobic perspective as a divine punishment for lechery. Othello has strong desires for conquering, whether that be militant or sexual, and that fits the propaganda of how Islam was portrayed and how the prophet Mohammed was perceived, as a religion filled with war-hungry and sexually deviant followers. In Act III, scene 3, Iago is planting the thought in Othello's mind that Desdemona is having an affair with Cassio. This sends Othello spiraling into violence. Othello says, "To follow the changes of the moon / With fresh suspicions? No: to be once in doubt / Is once to be resolved. Exchange me for a goat" (3.3.181-83). In these lines Othello is disregarding Iago's claim that Desdemona is having an affair, but Iago has already planted the seed. The reference to the changes of the moon foreshadows that Othello is going to drift into insanity and irrationality.¹⁵ The negative images of Islam are reconfigured in the imposture of Iago and the militant fury and frustrated lust of Othello.

In this analysis of Shakespeare's *Henry VI*, *Titus Andronicus*, and *Othello* it is evident that Islamophobia was prominent in Europe in the seventeenth century. Islamophobic propaganda had an influence on Shakespeare's plays, specifically through fearmongering about conversion, sexual deviancy, and immorality. I argue that the stigmatization of Islam during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and the controversy regarding the translation of the Quran, inspired the birth of some of the greatest characters in Shakespeare's plays.

¹⁵ Honigmann, in the Arden edition of *Othello* explains in the footnote for line 181 that the reference to the changes of the moon means "to act like a lunatic."

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