# From Persians to Moors: The Representation of Otherness in the *Persians, Tamburlaine the Great*, and *Abdelazer*

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**Abstract** Aeschylus in *Persians* (472 BC) employed binary opposition to prime its audience with the concept of 'Otherness,' incarnated by their first threat, the Persians, instigating the seeds of Eurocentrism, which later embedded in the canon of classical world literature—particularly the one that solidified in the early modern period. Persians as 'other' doubly-layered during the Renaissance when the West came to know more tangibly about the East via trades, expeditions, and/or colonization. West-East cultural as well as political confrontation evolved, most sordidly, in the representation of the exotic "Orient" and its association with Islam. In this article, Aeschylus's *Persians* is juxtaposed to two early modern plays, Christopher Marlowe's *Tamburlaine the Great* (1588) and Aphra Behn's *Abdelazer* (1676), in order to illuminate how easterners in classical dramatic literature have been portrayed wicked and dangerously threatening to civilizations and civilians

of the West. *Persians* meticulously shows how drama contains political messaging and mirrored the contemporary historical issues of the *polis*. Along with its purpose to educate and entertaini, *Persians* mapped out a way of understanding easterners that provided its audience with an inaccurate image of Persians. This discourse propagated through the centuries until the present day where we see evidence of it in films such as *300.* This malicious representation has continued to modern and postmodern period, especially in drama, film, and cinema.[1]

**Keywords** Aeschylus; Aphra Behn; Christopher Marlowe; Eurocentrism; Otherness.

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## Introduction

Aeschylus's *The Persians* (Πέρσαι) is not only the first complete surviving Attic tragedy dealing with contemporary historical events, but is also the earliest existent text narrating the encounter between the East [Persia] and the West [Greece] in dramatic literature. Aeschylus (525 BC-456 BC), in this play, dramatized the history of the Persians' defeat at the Battle of Salamis—a naval battle in which Aeschylus himself had fought. How trustworthy Aeschylus's narration is in this tragedy lies beyond the horizon of our research simply due to two simple facts: first, this text (as well as many other attic dramas) was a dramatic work with primarily a goal for didactic entertainment. Besides keeping the audience amused, it was meant for educating the Athenians at the time to overcome any pity or fear towards their long-lasting enemy. This aim of catharsis and the quasi-fictional quality of the work in itself justify any historical manipulation that Aeschylus probably implemented in his work. Second, the history of antiquity has been mostly written by the western scholars. Our very attempt of rectifying the history of this account without having a major history source besides Herodotus—whose chronicle tends to favor the

1 This article has been written during Dr Najar's post-doc research at Alzahra University and it has been funded by Vice Presidency for Science and Technology.

perspective of the Greeks—would be regarded as a provoked confrontation by an Iranian scholar whose sense of nationality will end in perturbation. As the archive of the Creco-Persian wars is limited to the texts and archaeological evidence in European narratives, by necessity, makes such an endeavor a one-dimensional research done within a Eurocentric scope. Therefore, we only suffice to approach *Persians* analytically and assess the impact it put on the selected literature of the early modern period including *Tamburlaine the Great* and *Abdelazer*.

*Persians*, as Edward Said has argued in *Orientalism* (1978), is the first 'orientalist' work in the canon. It is in this play that for the first time the image of the eastern people is epitomized from a western perspective.[1] Since the fifth century BCE and through the works of Greek playwrights and historians—including Aeschylus, Herodotus, and Xenophon—a new equivocal discourse established that associated the East [Persia/Asia] with the barbarism, abomination, horror, and excessive corruptive wealth, as well as with aggressive bravery, self-reflexive honesty, and civilization. Indeed, it is through these ambivalent and polarized representations that "the orient is transformed from a very far distant and often threatening 'Otherness' into figures that are relatively familiar [to the Europeans]" (Said, *Orientalism* 21). These familiar people are represented as a nation continuously in decline as in *Persians*. They are introduced as prosperous people who ultimately collapse to the lowest earthly and spiritual levels and finally end up in mundane and pleasure-seeking exertions. This exposure of "Otherness" was not exclusively limited to the Persians, but also to other nations such as the Indians, who were regarded as "a monstrous race" (Childes 6). Elites of the time, namely orators, historians, and playwrights, by such propagations, helped to characterize the easterners as the 'Other' to their own 'Self' and conceptualized their own identity. In the following paragraphs, we evaluate *Persians* to disclose how this seminal tragedy differentiates between the Greeks and the Persians, and how it functions as a womb for the later ideological and territorial annexation of easterners especially during the early modern period that propagated east-phobia via stage-plays like *Tamburlaine the Great* and *Abdelazer*.

Compared to other tragedies of the ancient Greek drama, *Persians* has received less scholarly attention and less theatrical reproductions. *Abdelazer* and *Tamburlaine the Great* have been also overlooked in the modern literary and critical discourses of the early modern period. The reason for their negligence, despite their stylistic and literary competence, is their historical nature as well as their

1 The reason for giving this credit to Aeschylus is that preceding texts of this nature, like Phrynicus' plays, are either lost or fragmented.

performative complicacy, which might does encourage everyone to study them. That being said, handful of research have been conducted on the abovementioned plays separately. Stratos E. Constantinidis' in *The Reception of Aeschylus' Plays through Shifting Models and Frontiers* (2016) maintains that understanding Aeschylus plays are difficult and this is the reason for the contemporary difficulty in re-staging them. Adam R. Beach in "Global Slavery, Old World Bondage, and Aphra Behn's *Abdelazer*" has assessed *Abdelazer* from the perspective of [anti-]colonialism and [anti-]slavery.

Marlowe's *Tamburlaine,* though still understudied, received more scholarship compared to the other two plays understudy in this article. One of the significant essays composed on *Tamburlaine* is "Inferior Readings: The Transmigration of 'Material' in *Tamburlaine the Great*" by Mathew R. Martin in which he focuses on the role and impact of modern editors to shape the new textual bodies of plays. In recent years, with the establishment of post-colonialism as a major critical approach, some research has been done on Marlowe and his plays, yet these studies are beyond our scope for the following study.

The methodology for this research is eclectic. It is a blend of historiography and new historicism as it sheds light on past efforts, which were to manipulate a vision for contemporary audience, to blur out the actual political and ideological aims behind that manipulation. Our historiography is inclined towards post-colonial arguments of Edward Said in that how westerners provided the inaccurate image of the East. We also put our methodology under the umbrella term of hermeneutics. Of course, this approach does not have a single meaning. Going beyond the etymology and the biblical implication of the term that originated its usage in theology, we use it as a science of interpretation in literary criticism to discuss authors' original intents – not simply by marking and remarking rhetorical, allegorical, and/or literary devices, but by digging social, political, and contextual elements of the texts residually. We do not rule out other readings of these plays, yet we merely add up by "filling the gaps"—to use as Wolfgang Iser and Hans-Georg Gadamer's phraseology.

**Persians: Democratic Greece versus Autocratic Persia**

Cultural archives, Edward Said suggests, should be studied "contrapuntally, with a simultaneous awareness both of the metropolitan history that is narrated and of those other histories against which (and together with which) the dominating discourse acts" (*Culture and Imperialism* 51). Therefore, to distance *Persians* from its Eurocentric discourse, we approach it from a 'contrapuntal' perspective. The

Persian Empire was a tremendous force during the sixth, the fifth, and the fourth centuries BCE. Darius I invaded Greece in 490 BCE in order to subjugate the Athenians (Athens and Sparta were the major city-states of Greece at the time) and to expand the territory under his own rule and in response to the Athenians' aid to the Ionians to in their attempt to fighter against the Persian Empire, where they were literally crushed at the Battle of Lade in 494 BCE. Yet, despite outnumbering Athenians in soldiers and in technology, Darius' military forces were shockingly defeated at the Battle of Marathon, where elements of the local terrain worked against them. Ten years later, Xerxes I, following in his father Darius' footsteps, led a naval campaign against Greece, but also shared his father's fate, as the Athenians and their allies flabbergasted the Persian forces by smartly utilizing the local terrain against them. The Battle of Salamis in 480 BCE played a consequential role in the Greeks' mentality, as they came to believe as result that they would be able to oppose even the most powerful forces of their time. These critical battles in the fifth century BCE coincided with the solidification of the Athenian administrative system that applauded democracy and criticized the monarchical systems such as that of the Achaemenid dynasty. Aeschylus masterfully dramatized this divergence as a primary source of conflict in the play.

*Persians* delineates what had happened to the Persians at and after the Battle of Salamis. Aeschylus introduced this war as a touchstone in the cultural/political history of Greece and a watershed in the history of Persia. He endeavored to convey to his audience (which would have included men who had actually fought in these wars) that there is no need to be intimidated by enemies like Persians as they can be defeated again.[1] In 472 BCE, when the play was first produced, the Greeks were still at war with the Persians around Dardanelles, Byzantium, and in Cyprus, and there was always a chance that the Persians would invade Ionia again. Thus, Aeschylus intentionally portrayed the Persian state as internally disordered and in despair so his Athenian audience would face them with more confidence if necessary.

Like almost all other tragedies of the fifth century BCE, *Persians* begins with a [dancing] chorus. The chorus' principal task was to set the mood for the story and to provide a sense of apprehension by recalling the past events and associating them

1 Here, Gayatri Spivaks' notions of the "absolute other" and the "self-consolidating other" come to mind. Although "self-consolidating other" stands in a lower/weaker level than the true "self," it is more recognizable than the "absolute other" for the "self." Albeit Persians were defeated by the Greeks at two consecutive battles (Battles of Marathon and Salamis), they were still a world-dominating power which Greeks could not deny (Read Edith Hall, *Inventing the Barbarian: Greek Self-Definition through Tragedy,* Oxford Classical Monographs, 1989).

with what was happening at the time.[1] choral expositions were also to establish the moral world of the play (Storey & Allen 101). The chorus in *Persians* is no exception. It embodies the Persian elders who are left behind with women and children in Susa while younger men are at war with the Ionians. The chorus interacts with the Persian Queen, the Persian messenger, the ghost of King Darius, and King Xerxes in succession. Its interplay with the members of the royal house alludes to the cultural and sociological importance of the elders in Persia as well as to their significance in counseling the kings and the queens (Ley 9). However, the image that Aeschylus provides for these influential elders are doubly negative. *Persians*' chorus not only attributes pomp and corruption to their own people but also actively tries to plot against their semi-god, the king. The chorus associates the Persians and their land three times with gold:

> We here, from the Persians who are gone
> to the land of Greece, are called 'the faithful',
> and guardians of the palace with its great wealth in gold; (2-4)
> …
> and Sardis with all its gold
> sent off riding in many chariots, (45-46)
> …
> and Babylon with all its gold
> sends a multitude all mixed in a long, sweeping column, (52-53) (Aeschylus: Persians and Other Plays, 2008)[2]

Having gold and being wealthy is a complimenting aspect of life and fosters concepts of comfort and luxury, however in the fifth century BCE and in its imperial sense, it connoted a rich territory that could maintain a fresh army. It meant that soldiers and crews were paid on time and generously. Besides treasury deposits, such an affluent power could afford technology and enough purveyance for super-long expeditions from the east to the west and vice versa. It is why the chorus—after associating Persia with gold—describes its mighty allies: to portray that Persia's tremendous militaristic power was provided both by wealth and foreign connections. The chorus recounts the

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1 For more on this please see Suzanne Saïd, "Aeschylean tragedy," in *A companion to Greek tragedy*. Edited by Justina Gregory. Oxford, Blackwell, 2005: 215–232, p.219.

2 All translated excerpts for *Persians* are from *Aeschylus: Persians and Other Plays* translated by Christopher Collard for the Oxford University Press (2008). The numbers inside the parentheses are the line numbers in the translated English text.

image of the Persian army and the soldiers as such:

> they were invincible archers, and mounted,
> fearsome to see and terrible in battle
> through their spirit's brave confidence; (26-28)
> …
> The sword-bearing peoples of all Asia follow with them
> at the king's dread summons. (56-57)
> …
> the war of invincible bows.
> No one has the tested prowess
> to withstand the great tide of men
> and hold it back with sure defenses—
> one cannot fight an ocean-swell;
> there is no resisting the Persian host,
> a people stalwart in their hearts. (86-92)

With the first glance at these excerpts one may infer that Aeschylus is cherishing the Persian army with elaborating on its magnitude and its brave soldiers. Yes, indeed, he is, but by doing so, he is also creating an antagonism/trauma for his Athenian audience to make them potentially ready for a new war. Despite the positive look of these attributions for modern readers, they produced anxieties and a sense of revenge for the contemporary spectators. By representing Persians as great warriors who could cooperate well with their allies, Aeschylus awakened the necessity of unison and monophony among the Greeks (Ionians, Athenians, and Spartans). This consolidating quality was not just specific to this play; every ancient Greek tragedy attempted to unite its audiences [social identity] to boost the community cohesion.[1] In fact, Greek tragedy was "a manifestation of the city turning itself into theatre, presenting itself on stage before its assembled citizens" (Vernant & Vidal-Naquet 185). One of the motives which reveal Aeschylus' intention to portray a traumatic image of the Persians onstage is that he made his play deliberately theological to provoke the Athenian audience who was very religious—in its mythological sense. The state religion of Persia during the Achaemenid Empire was Zoroastrianism, meaning that the Persians were monotheist, worshiping the creator Ahura Mazda, in

1 For more on this please See Oddone Longo, "The theater of the polis," in the *Nothing to Do with Dionysos?: Athenian Drama in Its Social Context*. Ed. John J. Winkler and Froma I. Zeitlin. Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1990, p.14.

contrast to the Greeks who were polytheist. Having multiple gods and deities, the Greeks would see a discrete god behind every incident. Aeschylus in his play made the Persian polytheist as well—worshiping like the Greeks multiple gods—to allude that their following downfall is due to their hubris (arrogance), which was mainly referred to as an offense by common people towards mythological Greek gods. Along with this religious perspective, Aeschylus also characterized the Persians as autocratic. This further established a binary opposition and *différence* between the Persians and the Greeks. Throughout a scene between the chorus and the queen Atossa,[1] we observe that the Persian monarchial system contrasts with Athenian's direct democracy, what Aeschylus wrote was just as inaccessible to the Persians as Greece was geographically:

> QUEEN. … Yet I have this I wish to learn from you, my friends: where do men say that Athens lies upon the earth?
> CHORUS. Far away, near where the Sun-lord goes down
> when he fades.
> QUEEN. And yet my son desired to capture this city?
> CHORUS. Yes; for then all Greece would become subject to
> the King.
> QUEEN. Have the Athenians so much the fullest numbers in
> its host, then?
> CHORUS. Yes, and such a host as did the Medes great harm
> in fact.
> QUEEN. And what else besides do they have? Sufficient wealth for their houses?
> CHORUS. They have a source of silver, a lode which is their
> land's treasure.
> QUEEN. Are bows and sharp arrows prominent in their hands?
> CHORUS. Not at all: they use spears to stand and fight, and carry shields in heavy armor.
> QUEEN. And who is set over their people as shepherd and
> master?
> CHORUS. They call themselves no man's slaves or subjects.
> (229-242)

1 She is the only woman in the play. Phrynichus first introduced her in the dramatic literature (see Lloyd-Jones, 1990). Also, although she is originally an eastern woman, her role is checked by all the restrictions of Athenian women (see Foley, 2001).

Interestingly, the extract above indicates that Atossa, the most powerful figure left in Susa, does not know where Athens is. This foresaw that the Persians hardly could reach to this geographically far-reaching land. In contrast, contemporary Ionians/ Athenians knew Persia geographically well. The chorus describes their location with a far-fetching concept of the sun, which also foreshadows Atossa's lament for his son's defeat. She says, "yet my son desired to capture this city?" Another point of significance is that the chorus differentiates the Persians from the Greeks in three aspects: first, the Persians have gold, but the Athenians have silver. Second, Persians fight with swords, bows and arrows; the Greeks fight with spears. Last but not the least, the Athenian democracy is contrasted to the Persian autocracy with this statement: "They call themselves no man's slaves or subjects." These details were appreciated by the Athenians who were *philologos* (fond of words) and *polulogos* (full of words), distinguishing them from their Spartan opponents who, more militaristic in nature, were regarded as *brachulogos* (inclined towards few words) (Heath 182). The audience of such a tragedy was by no means only a simple group of theatergoers, but an assembly of people with civic rights and duties who were comparable to juries in law courts—another feature for bragging the Athenian democracy.[1] By watching and judging such dramatic impersonations, this court-like assembly would solidify a discourse ingrained in the Westerners' mind to see the Easterners (the Persian empire) as their everlasting nemesis. As Edward Said maintains, the dramatic immediacy of representation in Aeschylus' *Persians* obscured the fact that the audience is watching a highly artificial enactment of what a non-Oriental has made into a symbol for the whole Orient (Said, *Orientalism* 21). The ones who read the text or saw a revival of the performance a couple of decades after its original production could not distinguish the historical facts from the historical and cultural manipulations inculcated in the text and accepted this dramatic incarnation as veracity. This dramatic, as well as political, manipulation of the image of the East in the West continued throughout the centuries and reached to its apex during the Early Modern period, when the East became also synonymous with Islam.

## ***Tamburlaine the Great*: The Moor and the Turk as the Eastern 'Others'**

With the emergence of Islam in Arabian Peninsula in the seventh century AD and with its fast distribution into Asian and African regions, the Eurocentric animosity of the westerners towards the East escalated. This animosity was expressed via

1 For more on this see Nancy S. Rabinowitz. *Greek Tragedy*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub, 2008.

military invasions like the Crusades, in their socio-political historiography, and through their literary and artistic representations. Just to provide one example of biased western historiography, I call your attention to the Golden Age of Islam between the eighth and the fifteenth century AD that coincided with the expansion of this religion into other parts of the world. It was extended to the [southwest] Europe and hugely impacted its economics, culture, and scientific explorations.[1] During this time, Muslims emigrated to Spain and settled in Granada, carrying with themselves their progressive, intellectual, and rich culture, which was novel to the Europeans. Either by interest or by necessity, Muslims embraced science and developed technology.[2] Yet, Catholic monarchs, taking over Granada in 1492, dispersed the ethnic minorities and attempted to eradicated Islamic culture by destroying their books, translations, and the civilizations that they made during their 700-year rule in Spain, and thereupon called them the "Moors." The term Moor was associated with being an uneducated, naked, dark skinned, savage, treacherous, lustful and bloodthirsty creature.

The Moor was not the sole diabolical 'Other' that the West created to tarnish the image of the East during this period. Turks were also misrepresented and demonized. By the end of the fifteenth century, Christians had lost Byzantium to Turkish Muslims under the rule of the Ottoman Empire. Byzantium, as the nexus between Asia and Europe, was the commercial, cultural, and diplomatic center of the world. After the Turks settled in this city, they re-named it to Istanbul[3] and took control of the major international trades around the Mediterranean and the Black Sea. Catholic Europe, which had seen itself as the dominant world power for centuries, found it unbearable to lose its privileges to its geographical and religious 'Other'. However, newly Protestant England, which had dissociated itself from the Catholic Church and her Catholic allies, made a bold decision to ally themselves with Muslim kingdoms. Elizabeth I recognized the benefits of collaborating with

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1 Yet, a brief survey of European history indicates that majority of this eastern religion is wiped out of the canonical texts and indeed its progressive dimensions are replaced with the concept of the "dark ages" in history books.

2 Arab Muslims were primarily nomads and would read the stars' patterns to find their routes. It was this need that consequently helped them to develop the science of astrology. A simple analysis of what they left in southern Europe best demonstrates their civilized and at the same time modern discoveries. For example, a simple analysis of the Alhambra Castle, fairy-tale palace isolated in history, in Granada indicates the complicity of their architectural aesthetics and arithmetic potentials. Paper-making factories, rediscovery of classical philosophy and translations of classical texts, and development of medicine and medical cares were other souvenirs of Muslims for the West.

3 Indeed, it was first Islam-bol, city of Islam.

the Moroccans and the Ottomans to counter the power of Catholic Spain in the Mediterranean and to gain access to the Levant trade.[1] During the early modern period, "the Ottoman Turks were the dominant imperial power in the Eastern Mediterranean and much of Eastern Europe. By the seventeenth century, they controlled Hungary, the Balkans, Greece, Istanbul and the Anatolian Peninsula, Syria, Mesopotamia, Palestine, the Arabian shore of the Red Sea, Egypt, and the North African littoral from Alexandria to the border of Morocco" (McJannet 1). Surely, in the late 16th Century, as Jonathan Burton puts it, "England's jerry-built military would have been no match for Mughal, Ottoman or Persian forces" (Burton 44). Therefore, it was more reasonable for the English to get along with the Muslims rather than encountering them. It was through militaristic and commercial relationships with the Muslim countries that England revived its lost power in Europe.

But after defeating the Spanish Armada in 1588, England took a dubious attitude towards Muslims for two very simple reasons: first, the war of religion was still ongoing between them and the Muslims. Second, they were frightened to be annexed by the Muslims, who were now closer to the English shores than ever. The strategy they employed was to keep up their good face in trade and in military collaborations, yet they internally propagated that both Turks and Moors were deviant anti-Christian barbarians.

Accordingly, the English began caricaturing and demonizing Muslims in their literature and performative arts. It was mainly through the medium of theatre and in playhouses which the anti-Muslim stereotypes were shaped and solidified.[2] By producing collective derogatory images of Islam and Muslims, Europeans started to project their own new-made easterners, the phenomenon which Said refers to as 'Orientalism'. Jonathan Burton in his book *Traffic and Turning* (2005) identifies 34 plays between 1579 and 1603 and 28 plays between 1603 and 1624 that featured themes, settings, and characters on the English stage that dealt with Arabs, Turks, Moors, and/or Saracens[3]. In some instances, Muslims were referred to as 'Ishmaelites,' "descendants of the biblical Ishmael, or Hagarenes (from Hagar,

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1 For more details on English-Turkish Levant trade see McJannet, Linda, *The sultan speaks: dialogue in English plays and histories about the Ottoman Turks*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006.

2 For racial, sexual, and moral stereotyping of Muslims in Early modern, see McJannet, Linda. 2006. *The sultan speaks: dialogue in English plays and histories about the Ottoman Turks*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

3 A term used for Arabs and Muslims during the Middle Age.

Ishmael's mother)" (Tolan XV). Irrespective if their titles, these Muslim characters embodied a set of fixed stereotypes.

Christopher Marlowe's *Tamburlaine the Great*, first performed by the Admiral's Men in late 1587, is a fictional adaptation of the life of Turko-Mongol Emperor, Timur (d. 1405). Marlowe, the best-known University Wit[1] of the time, by this play implemented a huge change in the Elizabethan drama and influenced his contemporary playwrights—both linguistically and dramatically. His Tamburlaine, unlike his historical Turk predecessors, is a Scythian shepherd who becomes an emperor. *Tamburlaine The Great*, Part I, opens with a scene in Persepolis, the capital of Persia, in which the Emperor Mycetes sends his soldiers to a battle against Tamburlaine, who had sent a gang of bandits to prey on the rich merchants of Persia and other neighboring countries. To defeat Mycetes, Tamburlaine colludes with Mycetes' brother, Cosroe who plots to overpower his brother and become the emperor. After conquering Mycetes, Tamburlaine himself sits on the throne of Persia. Then, he invades the Turks and enslaves their emperor, Bajazeth and his wife Zabina. Tamburlaine releases Bajazeth only to use him as a footstool. This ignominy leads Bajazeth and his wife to kill themselves horribly onstage by hitting their heads against the bars. Tamburlaine continues his conquests in Africa and then heads to Damascus. At the end of Part I, Tamburlaine marries with Zenocrates, the daughter of the Sultan of Egypt, who was on her way to Arabia to marry there. In Part II, Tamburlaine faces his son Calyphas, who does not want to be a conqueror like his father and so his father kills him in anger. The savage Tamburlaine fully enacts his brutality onstage and kills many men, women, and children. In the final act of the second part, Tamburlaine ends burning the Quran disdainfully and claims himself greater than God. Eventually, he falls ill and dies.

Marlowe's *Tamburlaine* was not the first play in the Elizabethan era that portrayed Orientals as its subjects, but it was probably the most acclaimed one to present the Persians and the Turks onstage. Throughout the play, Marlowe created an extravagant imagery and hyperbolic/bombastic language, which were uncommon for his audience. The English had been already introduced to the exotic and lustrous lives of the Easterners via the myths of their medieval literature; however, with *Tamburlaine*, they imagined travelling to the territories of the Turks and the Persians. As Matthew Dimmock writes, "the Muslim bugbear, embodied in the emblem of

1 Oxford English Dictionary defines University Wit as "any of a group of university-educated English poets and playwrights who flourished in the 1580s and 1590s.The writers so classified include Christopher Marlowe, Thomas Nashe, George Peele, Thomas Kyd, Robert Greene, John Lyly, and Thomas Lodge."

the 'terrible Turk', was a familiar one in Tudor England. The turbaned, mustachioed image appeared in textual illustrations, on archery targets, shop and inn signs, and was supposedly used to frighten naughty children" (Dimmock 55). Taking a deeper look at Marlowe's play, one notices his ambivalent take on religious matters of the time. His hero has a shifting nature that makes him attack the Christians in one instance and protect them in another. Tamburlaine's attitude towards Islam is also problematic. In one moment, he curses Prophet Mohammad and burns Quran, but he also changes his mood and advocates Islam. This quirky attitude is more meaningful if you recall the aforementioned history of the Elizabethan England and its curious relationship with Islam and Ottoman Empire. Christian-Muslim relationship in the Elizabethan era was conditional as is in Marlowe's play. Unlike actual historical Tamburlaine who had seen India as a target for wealth and trade, Marlowe's Tamburlaine shows Machiavellian ambitions and sees merchants, Muslims, as well as Christians, targets for ultimate wealth and slavery.

There is another tricky dramatic tweak in Marlowe's play. His Tamburlaine is not a Turk or a Mongol but is a Scythian Emperor who is actually an anti-Turk. He reminds Cosroe of the danger of the Turks at the Persian borders. Instead, the main Turk character of the story is Bejazeth (Bayazid) whom Marlowe first demonized and then degraded to a contemptible man used as a footstool. Unlike Tamburlaine's complicated Muslim character, Bejazeth is a typical Turkish Sultan who is ascribed with stereotypical eastern myths. Sultans in this period, as Makdisi mentions, had "turbans, harems, genies, seraglios, viziers, eunuchs, slave girls, janissaries, and snake charmers" (Makdisi 602). Bejazeth is no exception. Before his captivity, he introduces himself as the Emperor of Asia, Europe and Africa who seems potentially more perilous for the Christian Europeans and the English. The savage Tamburlaine ironically acts as a savior for these Christians as he fights and destroys Muslims. In fact, Marlowe makes Bejazeth the perfect "Other" for the Christians. He is uncivilized, barbarous and apparently inaccessible:

> As many circumcised Turks we have,
> And warlike bands of Christian renied,
> As hath the Ocean or the Terrence Sea
> Small drops of water, when the moon begins
> To join in one her semicircled horns: (Act 3, Scene 1, p.19)
> (Marlowe, 1876)

Marlowe presents Bejazeth as the kinsman of Prophet Muhammad and portrays

him as a ruthless warrior. Bejazeth threatens Tamburlaine, sworn by the name of the Quran, that he will effeminate Tamburlaine if he dares to combat the Turks:

By Mahomet my kinsman's sepulcher
And by the holy Alcoran, I swear
He shall be made a chaste and lustless eunuch
And in my sarell tend my concubines
And all his captains, that thus stoutly stand,
Shall draw the chariot of my empress
Whom I have brought to see their overthrow!
(Act 3, scene 2 22)

However, this illusion of invincibility is soon broken and he is defeated by Tamburlaine. Marlowe, by this narrative, tried to de-traumatize his audience from a potential war, which was ambushed at English shores. Like Aeschylus, Marlowe uses drama to propagate that easterners, irrespective of their barbarity and savagery, are defeatable in wars.

### ***Abdelazer:* The Eastern Barbarity and Lustfulness**

The other noteworthy play that dramatized the notions of war and eastern barbarity is Aphra Behn's only tragedy, *Abdelazer; The Moor's Revenge* (1676), which was first produced at The Duke's Theatre in Dorest Garden in late 1677. This play is an adaptation of an earlier tragedy, *Lust Dominion*[1] (c. 1600), which was based on an actual historical figure, Abd el-Ouahed ben Massood, the ambassador of the King of Morocco. Unlike *Lust Dominion* whose main plot is centered on the lustrous moor Eleazar, *Abdelazer* is more about revenge. Behn's main character is a black man, evil in nature, who seduces the royal Spanish court with his opportunistic plans. Abdelazer, whose ancestors were once the rulers of Spain[2], introduces his motive of vengeance as such:

Abd_. Now all that's brave and villain seize my Soul,
Reform each Faculty that is not ill,
And make it fit for Vengeance, noble Vengeance.
Oh glorious Word! fit only for the Gods,
For which they form'd their Thunder,

---

1 Probably written by Thomas Decker.

2 Indeed, it refers to the Muslims' kingship in southern Spain—Andalusia.

Till Man usurp'd their Power, and by Revenge
Sway'd Destiny as well as they, and took their trade of killing.
And thou, almighty Love,
Dance in a thousand forms about my Person,
That this same Queen, this easy Spanish Dame,
May be bewitch'd, and dote upon me still;
Whilst I make use of the insatiate Flame
To set all _Spain_ on fire.--
Mischief, erect thy Throne,
And sit on high; here, here upon my Head.
Let Fools fear Fate, thus I my Stars defy:
The influence of this--must raise my Glory high.
(Act I, Scene I 13)

Abdelazer's reason for revenge may seem justified as he had lost his kingdom and had been enslaved by the Spanish people; yet Behn characterized him as an uncivilized moor that instead of rationalizing his causes tries to embrace villainy and betrayal. Behn equipped Abdelazer with all the stereotypical characteristics of an invented barbarous Muslim. He is not ashamed and does not refrain from any kind of crime. He whores the queen and betrays her, commits murder, and attempts rape. By having an affair with a lascivious queen, Abdelazer paves his way to the court as an army general and then with mischief plots to overthrow the king. With the help of the queen, Abdelazar poisons the king and starts his revengeful expeditions. Interestingly, Behn villainized Abdelazer by putting demeaning words in his own mouth:

Abd. The Queen with me! with me! a Moor! a Devil!
A Slave of _Barbary_! for so
Your gay young Courtiers christen me--But, Don,
Altho my Skin be black, within my Veins
Runs Blood as red, and royal as the best. (Act I, Scene I, p. 12)
Or:
Abd. I care not--I am a Dog, and can bear wrongs.
(Act I, Scene I, p. 18)
…
Abd. Who spurns the _Moor_
Were better set his foot upon the Devil--

Do, spurn me, and this Hand thus justly arm'd,
Shall like a Thunder-bolt, breaking the Clouds,
Divide his Body from his Soul—stand back—
(Act II, Scene I, p. 21)

By giving these lines to Abdelazer, Behn made a stronger claim that this black Moor accepts his own vicious 'being'. Along with all devilish behaviors, Abdelazer is associated with another forbidden practice, witchery. By linking him to supernatural powers, Behn made him doubly Satanic onstage—aspiring a will to wipe him and people similar to him out of the social context. This yearning to murder Abdelazer is best represented in the final scene when he is stabbed by the Spanish prince Phillip; his corpse is extradited to Morocco to have the Christian land clean almost similar to the finale of the *Lust Dominion* in which all the Moors are expelled from Spain.

Lechery is a characteristic that both Marlowe and Behn attributed to their Muslim characters. Both Tamburlaine and Abdelazer strive to possess a white woman. Tamburlaine robes Zenocrates and forces her to marry him. Abdelazer continues to seduce women despite the fact that he is married. This misrepresentation of Muslims as being voluptuous or lustful may have its root in the Islamic jurisprudence about polygamy, which totally differs from licentious practices. Such man-made sensual and sexual myths about the east and easterners are particularly presented in the portraits of Eastern Harems in the West. The harems[1] in the West incarnate the image of women nakedness, belly dancing, gluttony, and lascivious exoticism. Some of such myths are made due to the inaccessibility of these places to the western strangers that made them fantasize about the interior lives of kings and concubines. In fact, eastern 'harem' could be used as a metonymy for eastern empires, which are tyrannical, absolute, mysterious, glorious, and full of horror. Part of this mythology was made after Christians had lost Constantinople to Turks. By engendering the city to a beautiful Greek female captive, Irene, the image of Mehmet II, the Turk conqueror of Constantinople was carved as a seducer. This mythology fascinated many European playwrights to fantasize the life of these sultans and pursue the Irene narrative in their works.

## Conclusion

*Persians* is a key text in the canon of oriental studies, which has unfortunately been

1 The part of a Muslim dwelling-house appropriated to the women, constructed so as to secure the utmost seclusion and privacy; called also *seraglio*, and in Persia (now Iran) and India *zenana*. See "harem | haram, n.". OED Online. March 2015. Oxford University Press.

understudied in Iran. This play meticulously shows how drama contains political messaging and mirrored the contemporary historical issues of the *polis*. Along with its purpose to educate and entertaini, *Persians* mapped out a way of understanding easterners that provided its audience with an inaccurate image of Persians. This discourse propagated through the centuries until the present day where we see evidence of it in films such as *300* (Zack Snyder, 2007). It is interesting to see that the first surviving Greek tragedy deals with the Orient. Indeed, 'Orientalism' is dramatic in nature and this is why it was developed in tandem with drama. In *Persians*, Aeschylus initiated the discourse of oriental eroticism that in later Western literature would manifest itself as an interest in the exploration of eastern harems and in so-called lavish sexual desires, such as those embedded in *Tamburlaine the Great* and *Abdelazer*. Both of these works evidence how Aeschylus' eastophobic tendencies evolved throughout the time and combined a new elements of Islamophobia, which still promoted appears the western literature today. These religious and socio-political differences continue to add to the fire of this continuing virulent plague.

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