



# Renegades in Othello

Complexity of identity in “The Moor of Venice”

# Notes based on recommended readings:

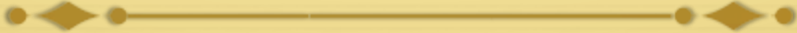
- ✦ Daniel Vitkus, "Turning Turk in Othello: The Conversion and Damnation of the Moor," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 48:2 (Summer 1997), 145-176.
- ✦ Nabil Matar and Daniel Vitkus, *Piracy, Slavery, and Redemption: Barbary Captivity Narratives from Early Modern England* (NY: Columbia UP, 2001).
- ✦ Emily Bartels, *Speaking of the Moor* (Philadelphia: Upenn UP, 2008)
- ✦ Leo Africanus, trans. J. Pory, *Geographical History of Africa* (1600)

# England and Islam



- ✦ Spain and Catholicism = most immediate antagonists
- ✦ Ottoman empire
  - ✦ Political and military threat to Europe
- ✦ Morocco (Barbary principalities)
  - ✦ Source of saltpetre (for gunpowder)

# Europe and “the Turks”



- ✦ 1565: Successful defense of Malta
  - ✦ “if the Infidels...should prevail wholly against [Hungary] (which God forbid) all the rest of Christendom should lie as it were naked and open to the incursions and invasions of the said savage and most cruel enemies the Turks, to the most dreadful danger of whole Christendom...”
- ✦ 1570: Christian navy defeats Turks at Lepanto, celebrated by James 1 in verse



# James 1

## on Lepanto victory

... the bloody battell bolde

...  
Which fought was in Lepanto's gulfe  
Betwixt the baptized race  
And circumcised Turband Turkes

Compare with Othello:

And say besides that in Aleppo once,  
Where a malignant and a turbaned Turk  
Beat a Venetian and traduced the state,  
I took by the throat the circumcised dog,  
And smote him, thus. [5.2.349-53]

(See Emrys Jones's essay in *Shakespeare Survey*, 1968)

# Ottoman power



1571 Ottomans invade Cyprus

1573 Venetian treaty with Ottoman empire relinquishes Cyprus (Othello's attempt to defend Cyprus known to be a lost cause by the play's original audience)

1595 Venetians confirm and expand commercial treaty with Ottomans against papal wishes (with British support)

# Morocco-English relations



1551 Thomas Wyndham's *The Lion* sails to Barbary coast

1577 Abd al-Malik writes to Elizabeth I, who sends Edmund Hogan as ambassador

1578 Ahmed Al-Mansur defeats Portugal at Battle of Alcacer

1581 Elizabeth approves naval grade timber exchange for saltpetre

1585 Barbary Company established: 12 year trade monopoly

# Banishing blackamoors



## ✧ Elizabeth I

- ✧ 1590s a decade of failed harvests, famine, poverty, vagrancy
- ✧ 1594 “of late divers blackamoors brought into this realm, of which kind of people there are already here to manie... [T]hose kind of people should be sente forth of the land.”
- ✧ 1596 Caspar van Senden to deport and exchange/sell to ransom English prisoners held by Spain & Portugal
- ✧ 1601 “highly discontented to understand the great number of Negroes and blackamoors which (as she is informed) are carried into this realm...”



# 1601 Proclamation

WHEREAS the Queen's majesty, tendering the good and welfare of her **own natural subjects, greatly distressed in these hard times of dearth**, is highly discontented to understand the great number of Negroes and blackamoors which (as she is informed) are carried into this realm since the troubles between her highness and the King of Spain; who are fostered and powered here, **to the great annoyance of her own liege people that which co[vet?] the relief which these people consume**, as also for that the most of them are infidels having no understanding of Christ or his Gospel: hath given a special commandment that the said kind of people shall be with all speed avoided and discharged out of this her majesty's realms; and to that end and purpose hath appointed Casper van Senden, merchant of Lubeck, for their speedy transportation, a man that hath somewhat deserved of this realm in respect that by his own labor and charge he hath relieved and brought from Spain divers of our English nation who otherwise would have perished there.

# Moorish Ambassadors to the English court

1589 Mushac Reyaz  
(aka Marzuk Rais)

**1600 Abd el-Ouahed  
ben Messaoud**  
embassy of 16 Moors  
in total

(a model for  
the noble Moor?)



# Leo Africanus

Al-Hasan ibn Muhammad al-Wazzan al-Fasi

c.1494-1554

Captured, forcibly converted to Christianity by Pope Leo X

Author of “A Geographical Historie of Africa”  
(Pory English trans. 1600)

Another model for Othello?





# Othello's storytelling

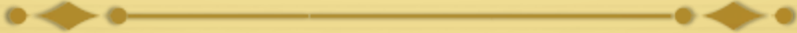


Wherein I spake of most disastrous chances,  
Of moving accidents by flood and field  
Of hair-breadth scapes i' the imminent deadly breach,  
Of being taken by the insolent foe  
And sold to slavery, of my redemption thence  
And portance in my travels' history. (1.3.134-9)

(Shares some features of al-Fasi's story)



# Barbary pirates



70-80 Christian vessels captured per year

between 1592 and 1609

captives sold into slavery or held for ransom

slaves could be freed if converted to Islam

# Images of “Barbary torture”





# Renegades



“The most part of the Turkes of Alger, whether they be of the kings houshold or the Gallies, are Christians renied, or Mahumetised, of al Nations, but most of them, Spaniards, Italians, and of Prouence, of the Ilands and Coastes of the Sea Mediterane, giuen all to whoredome, sodometrie, thefts, and all other most detestable vices, lyuing onely of rouings, spoyles, & pilling ... and with their practick art bryng dayly too Alger a number of pore Christians, which they sell vnto the Moores, and other merchauntes of Barbarie...”

Nicholas de Nicolay, *Nauigations, peregrinations and voyages, made into Turkie*, trans. T. Washington the younger (London, 1585).

# “Turn” = change faith



"To induce or persuade to adopt a (different) religious faith (usually with implication of its truth or excellence), or a religious or godly (instead of an irreligious or ungodly) life; to convert; less commonly in bad sense, to pervert." (OED)

Roman Catholic threats during the Marian period: "So would they say to all Protestants, . . . Turn, or burn."



# Obsessed with turning...



Iago: I follow him to serve my turn upon him. 1.1.42

Othello: Are we turn'd Turks, and to ourselves do that  
Which heaven hath forbid the Ottomites? 2.3.35-6

Iago: So will I turn her virtue into pitch,  
And out of her own goodness make the net  
That shall enmesh them all. 2.3.361-3

# Obsessed with turning...



No, my heart is turned to stone 4.1.184-5

Ay; you did wish that I would make her turn:  
Sir, she can turn, and turn, and yet go on,  
And turn again; and she can weep, sir, weep;  
And she's obedient, as you say, obedient,  
Very obedient. Proceed you in your tears. 4.1.254-8

Turn thy complexion there,  
Patience, thou young and rose-lipp'd cherubin,—  
Ay, there, look grim as hell! 4.2.62-4

I pray you, turn the key and keep our counsel. 4.2.94

Othello: She turn'd to folly, and she was a whore. 5.2.131