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'By Mortus Ali and our Persian gods': Multiple Persian Identities in *Tamburlaine* and The Travels of the Three English Brothers

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'By Mortus Ali and our Persian gods': Multiple Persian Identities in *Tamburlaine* and *The Travels of the Three English Brothers*

'Before a study of the impact of Persian and Mughal Muslims on Renaissance England is conducted — a project that has yet to be undertaken — an investigation of the impact of the Turks and Moors of the Ottoman Empire and North Africa must be completed'.¹ In the same year that Nabil Matar made this statement and championed the study of early modern Anglo-Islamic interaction and literary reception in the so-called 'Turkish plays', Linda McJannet insisted on '[b]ringing ... a Persian' into the scene.² Inspired by Parr's long-overdue edition of *The Travels of the Three English Brothers*,³ McJannet's article surveyed the bulk of writings on matters Persian in relation to Renaissance drama. Her discussion of Robert Baron's closet drama *Mirza* in particular drew attention to the multiple discourses of Persia (Islamic and otherwise) embedded in the text.⁴ In what follows I attempt to endorse an awareness of multiple Islamic identities in this era against another exclusivist yet prevailing trend that at the cost of marginalization of distinct historical identities settles 'on the designation "Turkish" plays ... as it was used in the early modern period, to signify all Muslim peoples' including 'Arabs, Moroccans, Persians, Indians, and the Muslim peoples of South East Asia'.⁵ In fact, as I shall argue, no study of individual Islamic identities and their impact on early modern English theatre is satisfactory or complete without an awareness of the interrelations between those identities and the complexities that such interrelations would create for a London audience familiar with diversified modes of religious discourse.

Although recent scholarship affirms that 'English representations of Islam were complex and nuanced' and far from 'simplification and stereotyping' commonly believed since Chew's study,⁶ there is a critical tendency to overlook such diversity. This reductive approach is often based on two grounds: first, that 'Islam, and "Turkishness" were often considered synonymous in early modern parlance';⁷ second, that 'the plays' understanding of Islam is mediated by England's commercial and political connections with the Ottoman Empire', especially trade via the Levant route.⁸ The doctrinal implications of

various Islamic denominations, however, such as the place of the Quran in Islamic religious liturgy — as opposed to, for instance, the tradition of ‘ahl al-beyt’⁹ or the principle of ‘furu al-din’¹⁰ — need to be more closely considered in order to distinguish between Persian and Turkish Islamisms during the Renaissance. Likewise, the importance of non-Levant trade routes which led to or passed through Persia calls for a reassessment. Certain texts of the period do make distinctions between Sunni and Shi’a forms of Islam; the critical trend, however, is to explain away the very existence of the nuance as an Orientalist construction that caters to the popular imagination. In his analysis of two pseudo-conversion tracts about the Safavid kings Isma’il and Abbas I, for example, Adam Knobler contends that ‘to an audience unlettered in distinctions between Sunnî and Shi’a, or unaccustomed to hearing of Muslims in a favorable light, conversion to Christianity was the only reasonable explanation for cooperation’.¹¹ In its representation of contemporary Persians as pro-Christian pagans hosting Robert Sherley, Middleton’s pamphlet ‘Sherley His Entertainment’ offers an identical refashioning of the other: ‘it was thought fit that (the Persian himself confessing and worshipping Christ) aid should be required at the hands of the Christian princes in the Persian’s behalf, against so barbarous, so ambitious and so general an enemy’ (ll. 89–92).¹²

Nonetheless, as I shall argue in this essay, as early as Marlowe’s *Tamburlaine*, learned literature was aware of a distinct Persian Islamic identity, and with the publication of John Day, William Rowley, and George Wilkins’s *The Travels of the Three English Brothers*, which dramatizes the sensational visit and embassy of the Sherley brothers to the court of Abbas I, the most prominent and internationally active of the Safavid Shahs, this distinct identity entered the public sphere and occupied the popular imagination of Londoners with unprecedented intensity. Furthermore, I will suggest that the great political, cultural, and ideological changes which overtook Persia with the rise of the Safavid dynasty (1502–1736) led to confusion among the very Persians who underwent massive conversion as well as among their English contemporaries regarding Persian beliefs and world-views. The survival of older belief structures and practices can partly explain the misunderstandings and corruptions of received knowledge in the so-called Orientalist reconstructions of early modern Persians. Responding to allegations of the ‘proto-Orientalist’ camp¹³ that the Islamic stereotypes were created primarily in literature, particularly in drama (as opposed to government documents, commercial exchanges, etc.), McJannet proposes that ‘the need to invent dialogue for [the Turks] in dramatic works might have permitted — even encouraged — playwrights to

challenge the stereotypes present in histories and travel writing'.¹⁴ I endorse this view, for Persian characters as well as Ottoman, and I argue further that, within the span of half a century, the poetic imagination of English dramatists from Marlowe to Day and company and ultimately to John Denham accommodated modes of Islamic discourse hitherto un-witnessed on the London stage. As an alternative to the Orientalist readings of Western reconstructions of the East, I propose that the ambiguous religious polyphony assigned to Persians during this period draws on a range of ideological and cultural markers relevant to Safavid Persia.

Tamburlaine Part I and *Part II* have often been considered 'Turkish plays', and, strangely, little critical emphasis has been put on the significance of the Persian locale and characters within the plays; after all, it is the Persian diadem which is tossed about. One reason for this lack of attention may be the ambiguity surrounding the apparently anachronistic Persian characters. Some critics have identified contemporary Persia with that actually seen in the play: 'Clearly, the Tamburlaine plays were meant to provide pleasure in the spectacle of Tamburlaine defeating the imperial power that Knolles calls the "present terror of the earth," the Turk, and in subduing other Islamic potentates such as the Persian emperor and the sultan of Egypt'.¹⁵ Surprisingly, there is no evidence provided by Marlowe to support the idea that the Persian emperor was one of the rival 'Islamic potentates'! Indeed, Marlowe's erasure of the Persians' Islamic ideological stance is a curious shift which anticipates Middleton's *Persians* more than two decades later. Like Preston's *Cambyses*, Marlowe's Persians anachronistically identify with the Achaemenid capital, Persepolis, without exercising the corresponding religious rites or discourses. Historically, however, when Timur (Tamburlaine) began his career in 1360, the political map of Persia was a patchwork with no central government or empire as such in power. The only thing that the dynasties of Mongolian, Iranian, Turk, and Arab origins and the nomadic powers that ruled the realms of the former Mongol Ilkhanid dynasty had in common was the surviving Persian culture.¹⁶

Building on his audience's familiarity with ancient Persia, Marlowe curiously endows Tamburlaine with a familiar Alexandrian image of Persian kingship: 'Is it not passing brave to be a king, / And ride in triumph through Persepolis?' (*ITamb* 2.5.53–4).¹⁷ Usumcasane's response is indicative of Tamburlaine's frame of thought throughout the play: 'To be a king is half to be a god' (56). The assertion prompts the Persian Theridamas to reveal his philosophy of kingship: 'A god is not so glorious as a king. / I think the pleasure

they enjoy in heaven / Cannot compare with kingly joys in earth' (*1Tamb* 2.5.57–9). This scene is one of several in which Tamburlaine, the Scythian shepherd by descent, seeks to affiliate himself with Marlowe's Persia. A few lines later in a gesture typical of nomadic temperament he promises the spoil to his generals: 'Why then, Theridamas, I'll first essay / To get the Persian kingdom to myself; / Then thou for Parthia, they for Scythia and Media' (*1Tamb* 2.5.81–3). Tamburlaine's generosity has a limit; although all is to be shared, Persia remains for 'himself'. It seems as if it is not Persia which is going to be annexed to Scythia but the other way round. Two scenes later, King Tamburlaine wearing Cosroe's crown seeks affirmation for his new identity: 'Theridamas, Techelles, and the rest, / Who think you now is king of Persia?' and they respond, 'Tamburlaine! Tamburlaine!' (*1Tamb* 2.7.55–7). From this moment on Tamburlaine's Persian pretensions abound; he challenges even his own godhead Mars, 'the angry god of arms', over 'this diadem' (*1Tamb* 2.7.58–60); he makes Zenocrate queen of Persia (*1Tamb* 5.1.489–95); in several references it is his Persian army and crown which become the terror to the Turk (*1Tamb* 3.1.45–9 and 3.3.252–60, *2Tamb* 3.5.3–7); and the Persian gods are summoned to help him against the Turk (*1Tamb* 3.3.189–94). Finally, scolding his effeminate son Calyphas, Tamburlaine sets the conditions for whoever wishes to 'wear the crown of Persia': he must bear a 'mind courageous and invincible', a head with 'deepest scars' and a breast with 'most wounds' (*2Tamb* 1.3.73–5).

There is evidence that Marlowe was not singular in his representation of Tamburlaine as a self-made Persian king, for not without hesitation Don Juan of Persia, a contemporary of Marlowe, enlists the invading Timur in the line of Persian monarchs.¹⁸ The question of Tamburlaine's self-fashioning as a Persian monarch in an imaginary Persia, however, seems to be part of a larger textual ambiguity which enclaves the crux of the protagonist's shifting ideological positions. Diverse interpretations have been offered to make sense of Tamburlaine's relation to Islamic divinity, particularly regarding the book-burning scene toward the end of part two. Daniel Vitkus offers a viable solution:

Tamburlaine seems to have moved from one image of Mahomet to another. His attitude toward Mahomet shifts from one of the two images of Muhammed prevalent in early modern Europe to the other: the first is the notion of Mahomet as a pagan god or idol, the deity worshipped by the "Saracens" (in the *Chanson de Roland* and other romance narratives), and the second is the conception of

Muhammed as a heretic and fraud, a renegade Christian who built a powerful new heresy in Arabia, an “imposture” allegedly cobbled together from plagiarized scraps of Judo-Christian theology.¹⁹

In the context of early modern Persian-Ottoman conflicts and Tamburlaine’s adopted Persian identity, however, an alternative to the first image of Mohammed as a deified prophet suggests itself: namely that of Mohammed as a Sunnite godhead, a prophet overtly venerated and deified by the Turks, in contrast to the Sufi and Shiite veneration of Ali over the three caliphs. Vitkus’s second conception of the prophet is reminiscent of Dante’s placement of Mohammed in the ninth bolgia within the eighth circle of inferno for the heresy of schism.²⁰ Dante’s punishment of Ali for the same heresy is likewise typical of Europeans’ misunderstanding of sectarian conflict over issues of hierarchy, submission, ‘isma’, and ‘valayat’²¹ in multiple forms of Islam. For Dante’s medieval readers unlettered in the particulars of Islamic rules of ‘imamat’ and succession, Ali’s punishment, being ‘cleft in the face from chin to forelock’ by a devil, was symbolic of what the schismatic apostate had inflicted on the true religion (28.32–3).²² Islam in this sense was taken as an offshoot or deviation of Christianity just as Shi’ism was supposedly a falling away from the dominant Sunnite Islam. Although Marlowe’s Tamburlaine makes no reference to Ali or the Shi’a faith, the fact that Timur’s tomb, allegedly by his commission, drew his lineage to Ali must have been part of circulated knowledge. Furthermore, historical documents relating to the end of the fifteenth century and the beginning of the sixteenth demonstrate that throughout the Turkaman and Timurean territories, particularly in the capitals, Shi’a communities predated the Safavids.²³ In its tacit staging of the Persians’ ideological stance and the confusion surrounding Tamburlaine’s shifting religious identity, Marlowe’s text both epitomizes pre-Safavid disjointed Persia immediately before its Islamic reformation and plays down Timur’s alleged Shi’a identity.

In the words of John Gillies, *Tamburlaine* is a ‘poetic geographic text’ in which Marlowe fused ‘the Renaissance wish-dream of global empire with the Timur myth’.²⁴ Like Gillies’s notion of the over-arching geographic text, the figure of Tamburlaine himself seems to have functioned not only as an alter-ego for an anti-Turk Protestant audience but also as a prelude to dramatic representations of contemporary Persians embodied in the figure of the Sophy, for the Sophy was a hybrid figure: for the most part unwittingly Zoroastrian in culture, yet Muslim by faith; begotten from a Georgian Christian mother,

raised in a predominantly Sunni community, but promoting the Shi'a cause; Sufi dervish by lineage, now a King with practical policy for governing a nation. The ambiguous hybridity registered by Marlowe's popular play and its protagonist seems to have anticipated and inspired the advent of the complex Safavid phenomenon on the English stage. Marlowe's Scythian-turned-Persian-turned-Muslim-turned-anti-Turk gave place to the image of Robert Sherley, who went to Persia with aspirations to convert that country and came back as the first ambassador from Islamic Persia to Christian England. In the play that celebrates his exploits, the Persians are assigned a more nuanced religious discourse, namely that of institutionalised Shi'ism.

At the beginning of Day, Rowley, and Wilkins's *Travels of the Three English Brothers* (1607), the Chorus appears on stage as a Prologue in the attire of Fame, as Parr's textual apparatus informs us.²⁵ The favourable device of 'Fama Bona' as well as the extensive metaphor of the cook 'dressing a fowl' in the text of the prologue not only function as an apology for any deviation from historical fact — 'the loss of feathers and the gain of sauce' — but also commit the authors to some taste of 'truth'.²⁶ Published a few years after the play, Middleton's panegyric on Robert Sherley employs a similar device in the metaphor of the text as a 'robe': 'Reader, this Persian robe, so richly woven with the praises only of Sir Robert Sherley (thy countryman) comes to thee at a low price, though it cost him dear that wears it, to purchase so much fame, as hath made it so excellent' (ll. 10–13).²⁷ The economy of conversion and hybridity seems to govern both texts as they oscillate between entertaining travel genre and true report, a generic hybridity which also corresponds to two extremes, namely the fictional reconstruction of the other and its factual representation. The multiple ideological discourses of the Persians (and by extension of the Europeans) provide sufficient grounds for a counter-argument to the so-called Orientalist hypothesis. In this approach not all misrepresentations of Islamic others in the text are perceived as 'the dressing on the fowl'. In spite of its familiar corruptions and/or misrepresentations of historical facts — typical of representations of exotic others on the London stage — this play is an early example of Western popular awareness of the multiple identities which coexisted in Safavid Persia.

Perhaps no other English play with Muslim characters has given such strong voice to the ancient Persian traditions of Mazdaism or Zoroastrianism, and not without cause. Although the Safavid dynasty, especially in its later years, suppressed traditional religious minorities — Zoroastrians and Jews in particular were widely persecuted in Isfahan, Yazd, and Shiraz — there was,

and still is, sufficient cultural evidence to trace Mazdaism's lasting influence on the Persians' socio-political-cultural identities. Apart from classical texts, early modern English travelers to Persia could have received knowledge of and exposure to the old religion through several mediums in spite of the forced Islamicization of the populace.²⁸ From the Zoroastrian symbols embedded in the Islamic architecture of Shah Abbas I's capital, Isfahan, to Nowruz, the official celebration of the Persian new year at the advent of spring and several other festivities, to the flags and emblems of the Safavid dynasty, Mazdaist images and symbols had significant presence in the nationalist-Islamic regime that found it useful to associate itself with the power of the ancient Persian monarchs. Contemporary histories testify that the Shi'a Shah was fond of promoting the ancient Persian rites and would tenaciously observe them even when they overlapped with significant Islamic events; in 1611 he decided not to forsake the new year's festivities when Nowruz coincided with 'ashura' — the anniversary of Husayn ibn-Ali's martyrdom in 680.²⁹

In *The Travels*, particularly in the Persian-English-Ottoman exchanges of scene 2, the dramatists introduce the major proto-Mazdaist image of the Sun to establish the discursive regime for the pagan Persian identity. Assured of his standing before the king after the the victory over the Great Turk's army and the Sophy's promise to hear him out, a promise that he solemnizes by swearing to 'the eye of heaven' (2.162), Sir Anthony raises the issue of an Anglo-Persian alliance against the Turk. The Sophy's question 'What profit may this accrue to us?' (2.187) prompts the following exchange:

Sir Anthony. Honour to your name, bliss to your soul.
 Halibeck. Dishonour unto both, my sovereign
 Shall you, whose empire for these thousands of years,
 Have given their adoration to the sun,
 The silver moon and those her countless eyes
 That like so many servants wait on her,
 Forsake those lights? Perpetually abide
 And kneel to one that lived a man and died? (2.188–95)

What follows is a vigorous conversion debate between the advocates of 'that glorious lamp' (2.202) on one side and the Christian on the other. This scene is typical of the debates the Safavid kings attended in which their 'sadrs' and prized Shi'a 'ulama' from Jabal 'Amil performed feats of logic and Islamic philosophy. What is striking in this scene is not the anachronism of Mazdaism in

the Persian court but the precision with which the revered Mazdaist symbols, the Sun and the Moon, are demystified for an English audience. Halibeck, the Husayn 'Ali Beg of *Don Juan of Persia*, plays the role of the religious courtier/minder bringing out his best. Though he anachronistically champions the Zoroastrian cause, his standard argument for the Sun and the Moon corresponds to 'the gravitational force (friendship) between the sun and the moon described in Khorshed Nyaish, ... [where] the sun is seen as a fructifying agent, giving life, whereas the moon is seen as a conceiving agent receiving the rays of the sun'.³⁰ Eventually the free play of discursive voices causes the release of interpretive tensions within the play, perhaps not necessarily beyond the grasp of certain members of the audience. On the one hand, Sherley's drama of conversion intended for early modern English audiences succeeds when Calimath and Halbeck's 'resistance to Christian aid and the deliverance ... looks blindly perverse' as Parr suggests.³¹ On the other hand, Halibeck's savvy recognition of the ideological discontents of the Persian-Christian alliance brings the Western imperialist discourse down on its head, for through this debate scene emerges the silent paradox of Anthony Sherley's textual participation in the Safavid persecution of a Persian religious other, namely the minority Zoroastrians of the kingdom. Such anachronistic Mazdaist discourse corresponds further with Middleton's Persian robe in his preface to 'Sherley His Entertainment', in which he criticizes 'their religion which they have observed of old, doing worship and reverence in their upright zeal to the Sun, the Moon, Venus, Fire, Earth, Water, and Winds, erecting neither alters nor statues, but in open fields offering their sacrifices, which sacrifices were superstitious and full of idle ceremonies too tedious to be here rehearsed' (ll. 316–21).³²

In addition to this discourse, what the two above-mentioned texts have in common is an interest in the motif of conversion. The authors exercise various degrees of religious tolerance in their depictions of the exchanges between the Sophy and the Sherleys. Like the debate scene in *The Travels*, the conversion discourse prevalent in the circulating accounts of Shah Abbas I in Europe functioned on two levels. On the one hand it negotiated the European ideal of a Muslim king joining the Christian league against the Turk, not just in arms but also in faith. On the other it demonstrated the anxiety and political-religious allegations surrounding the conversion of prominent Europeans, the now-converted Catholic Robert Sherley included. According to *The Chronicle of Discalced Carmelites*, 'hoping much from the alleged indications of Abbas I's personal inclination towards the Christian religion, [from]

tales woven round activities and talk of the monarch wrongly understood, or greatly exaggerated by those irresponsible observers', Pope Clement VIII communicated and dispatched a number of briefs to the Shah and his court, one of which was addressed to the ruler's Georgian consort, mother of Safi Mirza, dated 24 February 1601.³³ Quoting St Paul on the infidel husband's sanctification by the faithful wife, the pope also acknowledged the ancient flourishing of Christianity in pre-Islamic Persia.³⁴ The fact that the Carmelite friars were, in spite of their differences with the local Armenians of Julfa, welcomed by the Shah and established their Mother house — the first of its kind in the east for all the missionary work of the 'Reformed' Order³⁵ — in the new capital testifies to Abbas I's religious tolerance and his good rapport with Christians.³⁶ Of course, such tolerance normally excluded the Sunnis as the arch-rivals.

In addition to the prominent display of Mazdaist imagery, *The Travels* strongly identifies the Persians with Shi'ism in contradistinction to the Sunnite Ottomans, particularly toward the second half of the play. The standard marker for this opposition is the promotion of the practice of the defamation of the first three Caliphs during the Safavid era. Several Safavid Shi'a clerics promoted the defamation ritual; among them 'Mir Husayn [the maternal grandson of al-Karaki, the leading scholar during Isma'il II's reign] clearly suggests the interdependence of "dissociation from" and "cursing of" Sunnite figures in Shi'ite faith'.³⁷ An example of this dissociation can be found early in scene 7:

| | | |
|----------|---|----------|
| Persian. | Join Mortus Ali then with Mahomet, That slew your prophets Omar and Uthman, And by a snowy camel went to heaven, And yet you shall find grace in Persia. | (7.20–3) |
|----------|---|----------|

The reference to the sectarian strife over the right of succession to the caliphate provides another opportunity for displaying Shi'a-Sunnite conflict in the play. In line with the play's larger conversion theme, and a few lines before this pre-execution conversion scene, Robert Sherley seems to have little care for 'Christian clemency' as he plays the 'Persian substitute' (7.14–15). Clearly the Englishman's promotion of the Persian deity whom he now pretends to 'adore' is justified because it is a conspicuous dissociation from the Turkish religion. The passage is also significant for its rare juxtaposition of competing contemporary (mis)conceptions of Safavid Shi'ism; whereas Sherley's

deification of Mortus Ali entails a denial of Mahomet, his Persian comrade offers a more authentic perspective of the Shi'a faith by urging the Turkish prisoners not to renounce the prophet but to join his successor in his worship, should they desire to live and win grace in Persia.

Probably more important than the identity games played among the king's minions is the paradoxical convergence of religious discourses embodied in the character of the Sophy himself. In *The Travels*, the Sophy often swears by 'Mortus Ali'³⁸ and other Persian gods and deities (1.87–8, 11.1, 11.15). While such paradoxical juxtaposition is ahistorical, it does reflect the subconscious, ideological convergence of pagan and Shi'a elements in the Safavid monarch as the absolute head of the body politic. Roger Savory has identified three bases for the legitimacy claims of Safavid shahs. The first is 'farr' or 'kingly glory' which was 'the ancient theory of the divine right of Persian kings'.³⁹ The second was 'the claim of the Safavid shahs to being the representative of the Mahdi' by descent from the seventh Shi'a Imam, Musa al-Kazim. The messianic role adopted by the shah through this claim made any opposition to him a sin, and he himself would be said to enjoy 'ismah' or infallibility. The third was the office of 'irshad'; 'the Safavid shahs were able to insist on the absolute obedience of their Sufi followers by virtue of the relationship known as 'pir-muridi'.⁴⁰ No wonder the ancestral claims of Shah Isma'il, the founder of the Safavid kings, were widely circulated to connect the king through his father to the prophet via the seventh Imam, as well as to the Sassanian kings via Husayn, revered grandson of Mohamed who had married Shahr-Banu, daughter of Yazdagird, the last of the Sassanians. Furthermore, as Uruch Beg relates, Isma'il boasted that he sprang from the loins of Persian kings through his mother Martha, the daughter of Uzun Hassan.⁴¹ Thanks to the Safavid propaganda machine and the group of Shi'a scholars imported from Lebanon's Jabal 'Amil to theorize the political and religious exigencies of the Shah's legitimate rule, the Safavid emperor was received among both his subjects and the aliens as a potentate fit to oppose the Turk. Indeed this was the quintessential characteristic of Safavid Shi'a doctrine at its inception. Out of the legitimacy argument — the Sophy having been derived from both the ancient Persian kings as well as the descendants of Ali — was born what religious scholars have called institutionalized Shi'ism. Traditionally the history of Shi'ism has been divided into two eras: one which continued from the first Hijri century to the advent of the Safavid period in the sixteenth century in the Gregorian calendar. The 'alavi' Shi'a of this age has been called the 'Islam of progress' as opposed to Sunnism or

the 'Islam of institution'; this is the age of reform and progress of Shi'ism. The second period extends from the time of the Safavids to the present and is recognized as the period in which the Shi'ism of 'progress' became one of 'institution'.⁴²

Informed by proto-Iranian discourses this mode of Shi'ism having put on its Persian royal attire during the early modern period captured the English popular imagination through numerous historical accounts, travel narratives, and plays. Whereas at the turn of the century the Franciscan friar accompanying Anthony Sherley had put on Persian robes to avoid the enmity of Lutherans in Stade, as related by the Shi'a Catholic, Uruch Beg,⁴³ a few decades later it was John Denham who dressed his political allegory of Charles I in Abbas's robes. Recalling the now familiar image of Middleton's hybrid 'famous English Persian',⁴⁴ Denham's *The Sophy* could now in its reversal negotiate the political facts of an England at the verge of collapse. In the words of Theodore Howard Banks, it was not difficult 'to see in the Persian king, Charles cut off from his people and surrounded by his "evil counsellors"'.⁴⁵ If for Marlowe's audience Persians in their nostalgic anachronism signified England's imperialistic dreams, for Denham's elite and popular audiences alike, the dire state of Persia depicted in the play anticipated a collapsing empire closer to home. Contrary to Marlowe's remote Persians, however, Denham's familiar figures seemed only remotely Persian.

To conclude, the period between 1587 and 1642 can be registered as a turning point in the cultural and literary history of England in terms of its reception and awareness of an emerging Islamic other, Persian Shi'ism. This time-frame was not arbitrarily chosen. From Marlowe's Elizabethan *Tamburlaine Part I* to Denham's Caroline *The Sophy*, the English image of the Persian experienced continuous adjustments. While before *Tamburlaine*, the standard Persian stereotype was a classical pagan figure, inherited through Roman and Greek texts, after Marlowe's play the London stage, haunted by the expansionist Ottoman Empire and inspired by Tamburlaine's defeat of the latter, was forced to reassess an emergent yet ambiguous Islamic rival. Subsequently, in *The Travels of the Three English Brothers*, English imperial and messianic projects converged in a subtext of multiple identities unique to the Safavid Persia. The play captured many of the socio-political exigencies that energized the emergence of Persia as a powerful, independent Islamic state, one which invested in its Iranian legacy in order to define itself in contradistinction to Ottoman Sunnite hegemony. When the London playhouses were closed in

1642 no such hegemony dominated the theatres, and familiar Persian characters trafficked the stage much like fellows at home.

JAVAD GHATTA

Notes

- 1 Nabil Matar, *Turks, Moors, and Englishmen in the Age of Discovery* (New York, 1999), 4–5.
- 2 Linda McJannet, ‘Bringing in a Persian’, *Medieval and Renaissance Drama in England* 12 (1999), 236–67.
- 3 John Day, William Rowley, and George Wilkins, *The Travels of the Three English Brothers, Three Renaissance Travel Plays*, ed. Anthony Parr (Manchester, 1999), 55–135.
- 4 McJannet, ‘Bringing in a Persian’, 239.
- 5 Jonathan Burton, *Traffic and Turning: Islam and English Drama, 1579–1624* (Newark DE, 2005), 264.
- 6 *Ibid.*, 11.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 13.
- 8 *Ibid.* At the risk of discounting ‘the possibility of discursive regimes specific to Saracens, Turks, and Persians, in the English imagination’, Benedict Robinson takes a similar approach with respect to the Persian Islamic figures in Anthony Munday’s *Zelauto*. Robinson further insists that all of these terms of difference emerge out of ‘a structuring representation most powerfully associated with the “Saracen” of medieval romance’. See Benedict S. Robinson, *Islam and Early Modern English Literature: The Politics of Romance from Spencer to Milton* (New York, 2007), 33.
- 9 That is, the household of the prophet.
- 10 That is, the subsidiary practices of religion such as ‘hajj’ (pilgrimage to Mecca) or ‘salat’ (the daily prayer); not ‘ossol al-din’ or the fundamental principles: ‘tawhid’ or oneness of Allah, ‘adalat’ or justice, ‘nubuwwat’ or prophethood, ‘imatat’ or leadership, and ‘qiyamat’ or the day of judgment.
- 11 Adam Knobler, ‘Pseudo-Conversions and Patchwork Pedigrees: The Christianization of Muslim Princes and the Diplomacy of Holy War’, *Journal of World History* 7.2 (1996), 197.

- 12 Thomas Middleton, 'Sir Robert Sherley His Entertainment in Cracovia', Daniel Vitkus and Jerzy Limon (eds), *Thomas Middleton: Collected Works*, gen. eds Gary Taylor, John Lavagnino, and John Jowett (Oxford, 2007), 674.
- 13 Exemplary of this critical stance is Richmond Barbour's perspective. Barbour uses the accounts of the Indian journeys of Coryate and Roe to demonstrate that despite increased actual contact with the East, 'London's literary and theatrical cultures continued to purvey stereotypic visions of Turks and Moors. This happened not only because domestic absorptions held considerable momentum, dramatic plots enjoyed demonic antagonists, and eastern ventures required ongoing levies of capital and personnel; but also because traveler's reports were crafted to domestic purposes'. Richmond Barbour, *Before Orientalism: London's Theatre of the East, 1576–1626* (Cambridge, 2003), 194.
- 14 Linda McJannet, *The Sultan Speaks: Dialogue in English Plays and Histories about the Ottoman Turks* (New York, 2006), ix.
- 15 Daniel J. Vitkus, 'Marlowe's Mahomet: Islam, Turks, and Religious Controversy in *Tamburlaine, Parts I and II*', in *Turning Turk: English Theater and the Multicultural Mediterranean, 1570–1630* (New York, 2003), 50.
- 16 The three regional powers controlling larger portions of former Persia during Timur's invasion were the Kartid kings of Herat; the Muzaffarid dynasty in central Iran, Fars and Kerman; and the last Mongol pretenders to the Ilkhanid throne in Mazandaran. See Beatrice Forbes Manz, *The Rise and Rule of Tamerlane* (Cambridge, 1989), 11.
- 17 Christopher Marlowe, *Tamburlaine the Great*, ed. J.S. Cunningham (Oxford, 1981).
- 18 Uruch Beg (1560–1604) was the first in rank of the four secretaries who accompanied Shah Abbas's ambassadors Husayn 'Ali Beg and Sir Anthony Sherley to the European courts in 1599. A native of Persia and a Shi'a Muslim, his conversion to Catholicism in Valladolid was sponsored by Queen Margaret, second cousin to King Philip III and granddaughter to emperor Ferdinand I. Uruch Beg was renamed Don Juan of Persia upon his baptism as he relates in chapter eight, book three of his *Relaciones*, a personal diary written in Persian on the journey to Europe. First published in Spanish in 1604, it offered a unique inside view of the court of Abbas and provided recent political history of Safavid Persia to Europeans. The *Relaciones* was first translated and published in English as *Don Juan of Persia* in 1926. See Juan de Persia, *Don Juan of Persia: A Shi'ah Catholic 1560–1604*, trans. and ed. Guy Le Strange (New York, 1926), 96.
- 19 Vitkus, 'Marlowe's Mahomet', 50–1.
- 20 It has been stipulated that 'there was a belief current in the Middle Ages that Mohammed was an apostate Christian, perhaps even a cardinal'. See Charles S. Singleton

- (trans. and ed.), *The Divine Comedy: Inferno and Commentary*, 2 vols (Princeton, 1970), 2.503.
- 21 In Islamic terminology 'isma' (عصمت) and 'valayat' (ولایت) stand for infallibility and divine authority respectively.
- 22 Singleton, *Inferno*, 1.295.
- 23 The circumstances of the authorship of *روضه الشهداء فی مقاتل اهل البيت* (Rozat-al Shohada Fi Maghatel Ahl-al bayt) by Kamal-al Din Husayn ibn 'Alī Beihaghi Sabzevari (known as Vaez Kashefi) support this view. This book was commissioned by Morshedoldole Abdollah as a guide to the rituals commemorating Husayn's martyrdom on 'ashura', a significant day in the Shi'a calendar. See منصور صفت گل (Mansur Sefatgol), *ساختار نهاد و اندیشه دینی در ایران عصر صفوی: تاریخ تحولات دینی ایران در سده های دهم تا دوازدهم هجری قمری* [Religious Institution and Thought during the Safavid Iran: The History of the Development of the Religious Structure in Iran 16th–18th Century] (Tehran, 2002), 136.
- 24 John Gillies, 'Marlowe, the *Timur* Myth, and the Motives of Geography', in John Gillies and Virginia Mason Vaughan (eds), *Playing the Globe: Genre and Geography in English Renaissance Drama* (London, 1998), 226.
- 25 The figure Fame is missing from the quarto. Parr seems either to accept A.H. Bullen's emendation on this matter or to infer that the Chorus's appearance as Fame in the epilogue of the Q text should counterbalance the prologue. John Day et al., *The Travels*, 59 n to l. 0.1.
- 26 Ibid, 5–15.
- 27 Middleton, 'Sir Robert Sherley', 673.
- 28 Even today the predominant Iranian Shi'a identity is not devoid of familiar Zoroastrian traditions and cultural practices. It remains for social anthropologists to verify the impact of intensive Islamicization on the resurgence of Zoroastrian values and rites among Iranian communities.
- 29 In 1611 when the first day of spring happened on Friday the sixth of 'Muharram', Shah Abbas first performed the grieving rituals for the martyred imam, Husayn ibn 'Alī, the third imam, and then as Iskandar Beg Monshi has related in *تاریخ عالم آرای عباسی* (*The World-adorning History of Abbas*), he attended the festivities in 'Naqsh-i Jahān' square'. See نصر الله فلسفی (Nasrollah Falsafi), *زندگانی شاه عباس اول* (*The Life of Shah Abbas the First*), 5 vols (Tehran, 1985), 2.713.
- 30 Ramiyar Karanjia, 'Understanding Parsi Customs in the Light of Zoroastrian Religion', <<http://tenets.zoroastrianism.com/pcustm33.html>>, accessed 8 February 2009, 10.
- 31 John Day et al., *The Travels*, 75, n to ll. 196–8.
- 32 Middleton, 'Sir Robert Sherley', 676.

- 33 *A Chronicle of the Carmelites in Persia and the Papal Mission of the XVIIth and XVIIIth Centuries*, 2 vols (London, 1939), 1.84.
- 34 *Ibid.*, 1.88.
- 35 *Ibid.*, 2.724.
- 36 Abbas did not always treat Christians with favour. There are several accounts of forced conversions and persecutions that coincided with and may have been related to the Hormuz conflict in 1622. Two instances of persecutions targeting the Armenians of Chaharmahal and Julfa predated the tragic persecution of the five Persian converts who had been baptized at the Carmelite convent in Isfahan during the previous four years. The new prior of the Carmelite convent summarizes the situation: '[W]e are in the country of the greatest tyrant the Church has had since it began until our own times: for the methods he adopts are taken from hell. Since our arrival he has had enslaved 39 villages, and had the wives of Christians given to Muslims, and those of Muslims to Christians ... things that may not be done according to the Quran, say his Persian and Muslim luminaries' *Ibid.*, 1.255–8.
- 37 Rula Jurdi Abisaab, *Converting Persia: Religion and Power in the Safavid Empire* (London, 2004), 47.
- 38 'Mortus Ali' is an Anglicization of 'Mortaza Ali'. مرتضی / مرتضا, Mortazā (adj.) (arc.) accepted, elected, chosen. See حسن انوری (Hasan Anvari) (ed.) فرهنگ بزرگ سخن (*The Great Sokhan Dictionary*), 8 vols (Tehran, 2002), 7.6855. Ali: 'Ali ibn-abi-Tālib, fourth of the Caliphs born at Mecca c 600 was Mohammed's son-in-law. Ali became the first Shi'a 'imam' and was called 'Mortaza' as Allah was said to be pleased in his being chosen as the prophet's successor.
- 39 Middleton's Persians also benefit from this unbroken royal pedigree: 'For their kings, the golden line of them is drawn out of one family'. See Middleton, 'Sir Robert Sherley', ll. 321–2.
- 40 Roger Savory, 'The Safavid Era', Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Hamid Dabashi, and Seyyed Vali Reza Nasr (eds), *Expectation of the Millenium: Shi'ism in History* (Albany, 1989), 169.
- 41 *Don Juan of Persia*, 107.
- 42 علی شریعتی (Ali Shariati), تشیع علوی و تشیع صفوی (*Alavi Shi'ism and Safavid Shi'ism*), مجموعه آثار (*Collected Works*), 35 vols, (Tehran, 1980), 9.37.
- 43 *Don Juan of Persia*, 265.
- 44 Middleton, 'Sir Robert Sherley', l. 360.
- 45 John Denham, *The Poetical Works*, ed. Theodore Howard Banks (Ann Arbor MI, 1969), 47.