

Sexualization of Islam in Turk plays

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Students of literature are often taught critical frameworks as isolated methods of inquiry. It actually makes sense: in order to analyze a subject fully and carefully, the methodology needs to be clear. But in real life, these distinctions are not cut and dry. One's embodiment is mostly a messy site of conflated markers of gender, race, sexuality, and class. It's therefore important for me to show students how to trace these markers intersectionally—that is, I want them to see not just how our past and present is connected, but how constructions of identity and difference are not singular.

I introduce students to this mode of thinking through the reading of Turk plays. It is important for students to understand the plays in terms of both the history of sexuality and the construction of race.

Teaching the history of sexuality in the West, by necessity, starts with introducing the concept of sodomy. While the term today is often used synonymously with male homosexuality, in the early modern period, “sodomy” was a theological and legal term referring to any non-reproductive sex acts considered “against nature.” This included same-sex and cross-sex anal and oral sex. As a crime against, and transgression of, the natural, sodomy was often associated with foreign lands and people—while English Christianity was seen as the epitome of the natural. This association was especially applicable towards Turks and the people of the Mediterranean.

After the Reformation, England—newly excluded from the Catholic league—sought to foster ties with the Ottoman East. From the 1580s onwards, English merchants, diplomats, and travelers entered the Ottoman lands and reported social and cultural life there. These accounts generated a rich body of literary and dramatic representations, especially what we call Turk plays—plays such as *A Christian Turn'd Turk*, *The Renegado*, *Selimus*, *Tamburlaine*, and most known to students, Shakespeare's *Othello*. These accounts did not depict Muslim sexuality directly but instead associated it with sodomy to contrast English norms.

Studying these texts together reveals patterns in the representation of the Mediterranean world: eunuchs, beautiful boys, harems, and circumcised men and so forth—this is an imagined world where racial and religious differences are marked through skin color, clothing, and turbans. Muslim, Jewish, and Black people are often conflated and represented as failing in heterosexual norms. Racialized men of different religions are associated with homosexuality and effeminacy, and women with masculinity, lesbianism, witchcraft, and most frequently, with adultery. They are depicted as cheaters who are dissatisfied with their circumcised husbands.

In these plays, racial difference is sexualized, and sexual difference is racialized. Interracial and cross-religious relations are set to fail in heterosexual unions, and are marked as sodomitical and by extension, even bestial.

Take Shakespeare's *Othello* for example. Othello's racial and religious difference is blurred by the derogatory epithet "Moor"—a term signifying non-Christian and non-white people of mostly North African descent. After being trapped in Iago's racist plot and murdering his wife Desdemona, Othello identifies himself with a reference to circumcision: "In Aleppo once," he says, "Where a malignant and a turbaned Turk / Beat a Venetian and traduced the state, / I took by th' throat the circumcised dog / And smote him thus." Othello destroys the Turkish figure he has created by stabbing himself. But why does he use circumcision to demarcate his difference?

A few years before this play was staged, King James I wrote a poem titled “Lepanto” about the Ottoman defeat at the Battle of Lepanto where he sets “circumcised Turban’d Turkes” fighting against “the baptiz’d race.” Circumcision and turban are racial markers of a religious difference.

Othello’s Black, “Moorish” body and his sexual function as an extension of it is presented as a problem in white Christian Venice. Iago’s racist account of sex between Black Othello and white Desdemona marks interracial sex as a scandal of bestial sodomy: “an old black ram / Is tupping your white ewe.” Iago animalizes Othello as “a Barbary horse” whose sexual performance would bear unnatural, monstrous children: “coursers... jennets.” Othello’s use of “circumcised dog” as a curse to defamiliarize and dehumanize himself before his suicide not only reduces him to the level of disposable animals but reconnects his racial and sexual difference by conflating the circumcised man and castrated dog.

In many early modern Turk plays, the circumcised male body is marked by racial and religious difference and rendered a sodomitical failure. These are texts that allow students to dissect the complicated layers of othering through sexuality and race.

Once students can trace these constructions in the early modern past, they begin to see how unstable these markers of difference are in the present. This is one of the most rewarding aspects of teaching the literature and history of the distant past. Students leave the course understanding that the seemingly universal and inevitable norms of our world—like race, gender binary, patriarchal oppression, heteronormativity—are, in fact, not universal or inevitable. Studying the past allows us to see alternative routes that were available but not taken in the past—meaning, we didn’t have to end up where we are today. And we don’t have to settle for and maintain a path we didn’t choose.