

*Global discourse: Venetians and Turks*

This is Venice; / My house is not a grange.  
(*Othello*, 1.1.106-07)

European distrust of alien cultures was nothing new in 1604. From the ancient Greeks to the present, Edward Said has shown, European culture partly defined itself in opposition to the Orient. Said traces the separation of East and West back as far as *The Iliad* and Aeschylus' *The Persians*. In such texts, he asserts, "A line is drawn between two continents. Europe is powerful and articulate; Asia is defeated and distant."<sup>1</sup> Thus the "motif of the Orient as insinuating danger" was prevalent in Western thought long before the first Crusade,<sup>2</sup> but the rise of the Ottoman Empire turned a motif into an obsession. By Shakespeare's day "the Turk" represented all that was barbaric and demonic, in contrast to the Christian's civil and moral rightness.

Orientalism was not the only discourse that shaped world affairs during the Renaissance. With the exploration of Africa and Asia and the "discovery" of the New World, colonialism profoundly informed European attitudes toward foreign nations. Charles Verlinden explains that colonialization derives from the Latin word "colere," — to cultivate or put to use. From the earliest times, he argues, societies customarily appropriated new territories for their own use.<sup>3</sup> Verlinden further defines colonialization as "a process by which the frontier of a less technologically developed or less organized civilization — and organization is also a technique — yielded before a civilization whose technological equipment was superior."<sup>4</sup> Thus the ancient Greeks pushed into the Mediterranean perimeter; Rome reached as far as

<sup>1</sup> Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon, 1978), p. 57.

<sup>2</sup> Charles Verlinden, *The Beginnings of Modern Colonialization*, trans. Yvonne Freccero (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1970), p. ix.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xiv.

England; the Germanic tribes penetrated into Gaul; and William the Conqueror invaded England, changing its nature forever.

"Medieval colonization," observes Verlinden, "was primarily the work of the Italian city republics, which created colonies first in the Holy Land and then on the remains of the Byzantine Empire along the shores of the Aegean, the Ionian, and even the Black Sea.<sup>4</sup> Strategically located in the eastern Mediterranean, the island of Cyprus was a logical target for any power that wished to engage in trade between East and West. It is hardly surprising that Venice deemed it a crucial imperial possession.

The discourses of Orientalism and colonialism, which thrived in Italy, Spain, and France during the Middle Ages had moved to England by the Renaissance. When Shakespeare wrote *Othello*, both were lively issues in text and diplomacy. For example, during August 1600 a Moroccan envoy to Queen Elizabeth discussed trade relations and a potential joint effort against Spain. Reactions in England were mixed, ranging from the refusal of many mariners to transport the "infidels," to fascination with their exotic qualities. In his review of the extant records, Jack D'Amico found "not one image of the Moroccan, but many images, from the dangerously inscrutable alien to the exotically attractive ally."<sup>5</sup> English views of the Moroccan king El-Mansour were shaped partly by Orientalism (he and his court were seductive, different, and dangerous) and partly by colonialism (his kingdom might be of use to England in its global enterprises). But England's reactions were also animated by her traditional distrust of foreigners on the one hand and by the desire to find an ally against popish Spain on the other.<sup>6</sup> English ambivalence was thus multifaceted, charged with a variety of agendas both private and public.

Even more complicated was England's attitude toward Venice, which vacillated between assertions of similarity and insistence on difference. Like England, Venice was a Christian nation with a mercantile economy, an island that depended on its navy for financial and political security, and a mixed government with imperial

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., pp. xix-xx.

<sup>5</sup> Jack D'Amico, *The Moor in English Renaissance Drama* (Tampa, Florida: University of South Florida Press, 1991), p. 39. See his entire discussion in chapter 1.

<sup>6</sup> See G. K. Hunter, "Elizabethans and foreigners," in his collection of essays, *Dramatic Identities and Cultural Tradition: Studies in Shakespeare and His Contemporaries* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1978), throughout, but esp. p. 14.

aspirations. But Venice was also perceived as alien. As a Catholic, Italian city-state, it was subject to English prejudices and phobias.<sup>7</sup> Formal relations between England and Venice began soon after James I's accession. On 17 November 1603, Venetian ambassadors Piero Duodo and Nicolo Molin arrived in Southampton, the first ambassadors from the Republic of Venice to England in Shakespeare's lifetime. During Elizabeth's reign relations had been poor, and only after her death did the Venetian Senate vote to send formal emissaries to the English monarch. From Southampton Duodo and Molin were escorted by the newly knighted Sir Lewis Lewkenor to Salisbury, near the King's lodgings at Wilton House, and on 30 November, the ambassadors had their first audience with the King. At their second audience, they complained of pirated Venetian ships, a major bone of contention between Venice and England. King James promised to investigate.<sup>8</sup>

James was embroiled at the time in diplomatic maneuvers. Would he end the war with Spain? Would he support the Dutch? Would he successfully expand England's overseas empire? How would he respond to conspiracies against his power at home? He was also intrigued by Venice. Duodo and Molin reported after their audience of 9 December with James that, "with great affability, [he] spoke at length about the Government and the laws of the Republic, and about the splendour of Venice. He praised the wisdom of the Senate, which had preserved the State through so many centuries, and showed profound knowledge of our history."<sup>9</sup> Indeed, as Leeds Barroll observes of the ambassadors' reception, James went to great effort "in order to bestow special honor on these Venetian visitors."<sup>10</sup> James probably meant to flatter the ambassadors, who were disgruntled over poor accommodations at their arrival and spent much of their energy competing with other European ambassadors for regal attention and precedence at court. But the King's remarks also reflect his familiarity with the "myth of Venice," a widespread Renaissance belief that Venice was the epitome of a rationally

<sup>7</sup> See G. K. Hunter, "English Folly and Italian Vice," in *Dramatic Identities*, pp. 103-32; repr. from *Jacobean Theatre*, ed. John Russell Brown and B. Harris (Stratford-upon-Avon Studies, I [1960]).

<sup>8</sup> See Horatio F. Brown, ed., *Calendar of State Papers and Manuscripts Relating to English Affairs, Existing in the Archives and Collections of Venice* (London: Kraus Reprint, 1970), vol. X, pp. 116-19.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 122.

<sup>10</sup> Leeds Barroll, *Politics, Plague, and Shakespeare's Theater* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), p. 61.

ordered and prosperous republic, its experience analogous in many ways to England's.

The myth of Venice<sup>11</sup> had been widely disseminated in England through William Thomas' *Historie of Italie* (1549), and more importantly, Lewis Lewkenor's translation of Gaspar Contarini's *The Commonwealth and Government of Venice* (1599). Thomas had likened Venice's system of government to England's; the Great Council, in particular, resembled Parliament, "for unto it manie matters of importance are appealed, and that [which] it doeth, is unreformable." Like England in the mid-sixteenth century, Venice feared "least civile sedicion might be the destruction of their common wealth."<sup>12</sup> Historian William Bouwsma observes that during the Renaissance, Europe believed "[t]he myth that Venice ideally combined freedom and order and was therefore durable beyond any polity previously known to man."<sup>13</sup> The Venetian Republic was perceived, Felix Gilbert explains, as an example of a society "in which justice ruled, where everyone could live according to his convictions and in which peace, not military expansion, was regarded as the highest good."<sup>14</sup> Many Englishmen of Shakespeare's day saw the Venetian republic as a government like their own — representing ideals of fairness and justice.<sup>15</sup> But although the Venetian Republic had come to stand for an ideally ordered state, a model of "civility," and a mirror of what England aspired to be under James, the Italian city was also a source of anxiety and tension.

If Venice was called a virgin city by many, she was judged a whore by others. To keep their daughters intact and their lineage pure, the city fathers not only condoned but promoted prostitution. In a popular pamphlet of 1611, for example, Thomas Coryat presents for his readers' delectation an engraving of a Venetian courtesan elaborately clothed except for naked and voluptuous breasts; his text explains that because "Venice is famoused ouer all Christendome"

for its courtesans, he deemed it appropriate to insert "a picture of one of their nobler Cortezans, according to her Venetian habites."<sup>16</sup>

In addition to its sexual corruption, Venice the whore was regarded as venal. Ben Jonson's *Volpone* (1606) depicts Venetian merchants and professionals as rapacious men who will sell anything, even their wives, for gain. "At the level of achievement," speculates G. K. Hunter, "they are Magnificos, Avvocatori, etc.; but beneath the Venetian robes lie the predatory fur and feather and membrane of fox and flesh-fly, raven, gor-crow, and vulture."<sup>17</sup> Venice's sophistication could also be read as a sign of its inherent corruption. In *Othello* Shakespeare would capitalize on the entire range of English attitudes toward the "Virgin" city inhabited by courtesans and con artists.

The positive side of the myth seems to be partially the result of Venetian propaganda. During the sixteenth century, after losing much of its power, Venice began an exercise in self-fashioning. It created a "glorifying picture of Venice's virtues and greatness" in the hopes of reestablishing itself as a great power.<sup>18</sup> Lewis Lewkenor was largely responsible for transmitting Venetian myth to England in his 1599 translation of Contarini's *Commonwealth and Government of Venice*, a text that Shakespeare knew and used when he crafted *Othello*.<sup>19</sup> A Cambridge Master of Arts, Lewkenor was fluent in languages. King James knighted him in April 1603 and later instituted a new court office for him, the Master of Ceremonies, "whose function was to look after the lodgings and the general well-being of ambassadors and to grapple with the knotty problems entailed by their inveterate sticking for precedence and etiquette."<sup>20</sup> Lewkenor was appointed to the post by letters patent on 7 November 1605, but it is clear from the Venetian Calendar of State papers that he had been filling this role ever since James arrived in England.

Lewkenor's translation of Contarini was intended to articulate the Venetian myth to an Elizabethan audience.<sup>21</sup> His dedicatory epistle to the Lady Anne, Countess of Warwick, exalts the "virgin city,"

<sup>11</sup> After I completed the primary research for this chapter, I discovered David C. McPherson's *Shakespeare, Jonson, and the Myth of Venice* (Newark, DE: University of Delaware Press, 1990).

<sup>12</sup> McPherson covers the same ground outlined here, dividing the Venetian image into four perspectives: Venice the Rich, Venice the Wise, Venice the Just, and Venice *città gelante*.

<sup>13</sup> William Thomas, *Historie of Italie* (London: Thomas Bertelet, 1549), pp. 78v and 81v.

<sup>14</sup> William J. Bouwsma, *Venice and the Defense of Republican Liberty* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), p. 162.

<sup>15</sup> Felix Gilbert, "Venetian Secrets," *New York Review of Books* (16 July 1987): 37-39; quote from 37.

<sup>16</sup> See Murray J. Levith, *Shakespeare's Italian Settings and Plays* (New York: St. Martin's, 1989), p. 14 for a discussion of English perceptions of Venice.

<sup>16</sup> Thomas Coryat, *Coryat's Crudities* (London: Printed by W. S., 1611), pp. 260-62.

<sup>17</sup> Hunter, "Elizabethans and Foreigners," p. 23.

<sup>18</sup> Gilbert, "Venetian Secrets," 37.

<sup>19</sup> See Kenneth Muir, "Shakespeare and Lewkenor," *Review of English Studies*, NS 7 (1956): 189-89, and T. Spangiel, "Lewkenor and *Othello*: An Addendum," *Notes and Queries*, NS 19 (1972): 127.

<sup>20</sup> E. K. Chambers, *The Elizabethan Stage* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1923), vol. 1, p. 53.

<sup>21</sup> For an enlightening discussion of the myth of Venice especially as it relates to Ben Jonson's *Volpone*, see Jonathan Goldberg, *James I and the Politics of Literature* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983), pp. 74-80.



Figure 1: A Venetian courtesan from Thomas Coryat's *Cruities* (1611).

which, unlike most Italian cities, had never been subject to foreign control. Venice, Lewkenor insisted, was a noble commonwealth, “gloriously shining in the cleere knowledge of her owne incomparable worthinesse ... like a beautifull virgine.”<sup>22</sup> Following Lewkenor’s Epistle are four poetic perspectives on Venice. Edmund Spenser lauds

Fayre Venice, flower of the last worlds delight,  
And next to them in beauty draweth neare,  
But farre exceeds in policie of right. (A3v)

In another poem, Maurice Kissen asserts the Venetian myth at its most idealistic:

Venice inuincible, the Adriatique wonder,  
Admirde of all the world for power and glorie,  
Whom no ambitious force could yet bring vnder,  
Is here presented in her States rare store,  
Where all corrupt means to aspire are curbd,  
And Officers for vertues worth elected. (A4r)

More critical is I. Ashley’s sonnet. Noting the Virgin’s painted face, it predicts:

In these pure colours coyest eyes to please,  
Then gazing in thy shadowes peereles eye,  
Enamour’d like Narcissus thou shalt dye. (A3v)

Ashley was addressing the underside of Venetian myth and articulating English fear of Venetian corruption, its reputation for vice, and the prominence of elaborately gowned and painted courtesans within Venetian polite society. This is not the perspective that Lewkenor wanted to reinforce, as his note “To the Reader” made clear:

*Then what more perfect and liuely pattern of a well ordered Aristocraticall government can there in the worlde bee expressed, then that of their Councell of Prigati or Senators, which being the onely chiefe and principall members of all supreme power; yett haue not any power, mean, or possibility at all to tyrannize, or to peruert their Countrey laues.* (A4v)

The Senators, in Lewkenor’s mind, were the ideal philosopher-rulers. They were “unweaponed men in gownes” who “with such happinesse of success giue direction & law to many mightie and warlike armies both by sea and land.” These “long robed citizens” were honored by the greatest princes of Europe, yet there was “not one among them to bee found that doth

<sup>22</sup> [Gaspar Contarini], *The Commonwealth and Government of Venice*, trans. Lewis Lewkenor (London: Imprinted by Iohn Windet for Edmund Mattes, 1599), sig. A4r.

aspire to any greater appellation of honour, or higher title of dignity than to be called a Gentleman of Venice" (Agr). Like Plato's philosopher-kings, the long-robed citizens ruled by setting aside their baser passions. For, as Contarini argued,

[E]vil shal that commonwealth be provided for, that shal be committed to the government of a man, whom many times those inferior and brutish powers doe perturb, & call backe from the true path of reason... [T]his office of governing assemblies of men should be given to the minde and reason onely. (pp. 10-11)

Lewkenor's preface admonishes the reader to "reade this discourse... with all friendlinesse and favour" because all "the whole world honoreth her [Venice] with the name of a Virgin, a name thought in all places most sacred & venerable, yet in no place more dearly and religiously to be reuerenced, then with us, who have thence deriued our blessednesse" (A4r). Venice's virginity shows not only that it has never been penetrated by foreign powers; it is the sign and semblance of value. Like the patriarch's control over a virgin daughter, the Venetian Senate (and by analogy the English Parliament) ruled its commonwealth by virtue and reason.

The dissemination of the myth of Venice was not confined to Lewkenor's translation. During England's year of dynastic transition and political uncertainty, several texts published in London, including Giovanni Botero's *An Historical Description of the Most Famous Kingdomes and Commonwealthes in the World*, exploited the interest in global affairs. Giovanni Botero outlined the popular conception of the Venetian commonwealth as a system of checks and balances. These included "a prince of greater maestic sitting at the helme of the common wealth, yet both he and his authoritie subjected to the lawes, and therein an Idea of a most excellent monarchie." But Venice was also the "patterne of a well ordered Aristocracie" in the counsell, consisting at the least of three thousand gentlemen.<sup>23</sup>

There is no doubt that Shakespeare was familiar with the Venetian myth.<sup>24</sup> It's even possible that Shakespeare's interest in Venice extended beyond the curious and eclectic artist's search for authentic detail and colorful background. Two days after James first received the Venetian ambassadors, the Chamber Account records that while

<sup>23</sup> Giovanni Botero, *An Historical Description of the Most Famous Kingdomes and Commonwealthes in the World* (London: John Laggard, 1603), p. 117.

<sup>24</sup> Violet M. Jefferey even goes so far as to argue that Shakespeare must have visited Venice. See "Shakespeare's Venice," *Modern Language Review*, 27 (1932): 24-35.

the King was a "Iilton House: "John Henryngs one of his Maiesties players" was paid "for the paynes and expences of himself and the rest of the company in comming from Mortelake in the countie of Surrie unto the court aforesaid and there presenting before his Maiestie one play."<sup>25</sup> This might have been a performance of Shakespeare's new play, *Othello*. Though the Venetian ambassadors were not able to attend, Shakespeare's representation of the Venetian Senate in Act 1 could have been a calculated appeal for their approbation.<sup>26</sup>

So much for wild surmise. We know that *Othello* was performed at Whitehall on 1 November 1604; we know that *The Merchant of Venice* was performed at court on 10 February 1605 and, "commanded by the Kings Maiesty," was repeated on 12 February;<sup>27</sup> we also know that the Venetian ambassadors attended two "masks" or masques at Court during the Christmas celebrations that winter.<sup>28</sup> The *Calendar of State Papers, Venetian* indicates that court productions had political ramifications. They were carefully planned, and those who did the planning knew who would attend and the sorts of plays that would be appropriate. And where the ambassador sat in relation to the King often became a major diplomatic issue. If the Venetian ambassadors had seen a court performance of *Othello*, they might have found Shakespeare's representation of the Venetian Senate and the myth of Venice strangely ambivalent, particularly in its depiction of vulnerability underlying the state's apparent strength.

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*Othello's* first act displays Venetian "civilization" at a time of crisis, imperilled by a threat from the alien Other, the barbaric Turk. Roderigo, the epitome of Venice's "curled darlings," describes Othello in the opening scene as an "extravagant and wheeling stranger / Of here and everywhere." Without a city identification of his own, Othello's sense of self must come from his occupation — peripatetic mercenary, for it is a commonplace of *Othello* criticism that the hero is an alien in Venice and that his unfamiliarity with its

<sup>25</sup> E. K. Chambers, *William Shakespeare: A Study of Facts and Problems* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1930), vol. II, p. 329.

<sup>26</sup> See Barroll's revisionist account of the Venetian ambassadors' visit in *Politics, Plague*, pp. 61-67. Barroll argues that although the King's Men's first court performance is of great interest to us, it "could not possibly have been a central event at the time" (p. 66).

<sup>27</sup> Chambers, *William Shakespeare*, vol. II, p. 331.

<sup>28</sup> See Brown, *Calendar of State Papers*, vol. X, pp. 206-14.

customs contributes to his vulnerability. Set apart by his color and life history, he can never be completely secure in the city he serves.

In contrast to Othello, Venice seems sure of its identity as the play begins – urbane and civilized; as Brabantio exclaims, “This is Venice; / My house is not a grange” (1.1.106–07). Centuries of legal and governmental tradition have defined Venice as the locus of rational judgment. Contarini, for example, claims a special virtue for his city, arguing that “man is by nature made a civil creature.” He enters into civil society in order “to live happily and commodiously . . . [T]he whole reason of civil institution pertaineth, that by the easiest way possible the citizens may be possessors of a happy life.” That happy life can only occur when “the whole commonwealth may seeme accommodated to vertue.”<sup>29</sup> But in the opening scenes of *Othello* the virtuous commonwealth is threatened by the barbarous Turk.

Caught in a liminal zone between Venice’s Christian civility and the Ottoman’s pagan barbarism is Cyprus, a Venetian colony under siege. Cyprus is the frontier, the uttermost edge of western civilization, simultaneously vulnerable to attack from without and subversion from within.<sup>30</sup> Even after the destruction of the Turkish fleet, it remains “a town of war, / Yet wild, the people’s hearts brimful of fear” (2.3.194–95). Cyprus’s geographical and political position mirror Othello’s psychic situation. Like Cyprus, Othello can be colonized by Venice – he can be put to use. But he can never become wholly Venetian. This liminal positioning makes him vulnerable to Iago’s wiles and, like Cyprus, if he is not fortified, he will “turn Turk.”<sup>31</sup>

What enemy imperils the colonial outpost? Throughout *Othello*, characters repeatedly refer to the Turkish threat as if the audience knows just who that enemy is, but the concept of “the Turk” is a good deal more complicated than a simple label indicates. The Venetian ideal of a commonwealth composed of virtuous and happy citizens is partly defined by the thing it is not.

Individuals achieve self-fashioning, in Stephen Greenblatt’s words, “in relation to something perceived as alien, strange or hostile. This threatening other – heretic, savage, witch, adulteress, traitor, Anti-

<sup>29</sup> Lewkenor, trans., *Commonwealth of Venice*, pp. 8–9.

<sup>30</sup> McPherson argues that Shakespeare’s audience was probably well aware that Cyprus had been lost to the Turks thirty-two years earlier. Such knowledge would have cast the Senario scene in an ironic light; it would also make Othello’s death and the loss of his military services a public disaster as well as a domestic tragedy. See *Shakespeare, Jonson*, pp. 79–81.

christ – must be discovered or reinvented in order to be attacked and destroyed.”<sup>31</sup> So too with nations. “It is perfectly natural for the human mind,” contends Edward Said, “to resist assaults on it of untreated strangeness; therefore cultures have always been inclined to impose complete transformations on other cultures, receiving these other cultures not as they are but as, for the benefit of the receiver, they ought to be.”<sup>32</sup> While this phenomenon is apparent in all cultures, it is especially pervasive in Europe’s view of the Orient. And in Shakespeare’s day, the Eastern Other – the Turk – was not only transformed but demonized as well in a European frenzy of fear and hatred that indicate just how threatened the West really felt.

In 1603 the Ottoman Empire controlled most of Eastern Europe and one third of the known world.<sup>33</sup> Venice was a leading bastion of Christian civilization. As a nation of traders, it depended on open sea lanes; to preserve its shipping routes, Venice maintained garrisons throughout the Mediterranean. The security of Rhodes and Cyprus was precarious at best, and in 1572 Venice lost the latter island to the Turks. Not surprisingly, Venetians defined the Turk as irrational, deceitful, and cruel. Lozarro Soranzo’s *The Ottoman*, published in our year of interest, 1603, is a clear example of an anti-Turk tract. According to an entry in Elizabethan handwriting on the Huntington Library copy, Soranzo was a Venetian Senator. The text makes clear that he was the son of Jacomo Soranzo, a Venetian general. His lengthy analysis of the Turkish threat describes Ottoman military strength and its tyrannical government and concludes with a call for Europe to unite its forces and take Constantinople.

Soranzo began his diatribe with a brief characterization of the present Ottoman emperor, Mahomet the Third:

he did there euerie day more and more discover his fiercenesse and crueltie; by causing (sometimes in deed of an indignation and rage, but sometimes of a fantastical humour) the teares of women to be pinched off with hore burning tongues, by putting to death, two thousand *Sofli* (that is to say Schollers) onely, because they had made a sign unto him of some vnchast cogitation, and by killing many other persons, vpon verie light and slender occasions.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning from More to Shakespeare* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), p. 9.

<sup>32</sup> I take this assessment from J. R. Hale, *War and Society in Renaissance Europe, 1450–1620* (New York: St. Martin’s, 1985), p. 16.

<sup>34</sup> Lozarro Soranzo, *The Ottoman of Lazarro Soranzo*, trans. Abraham Hartwell (London: Imprinted by John Windet, 1603), p. 2f.

The Turk was also deceitful. According to Soranzo, they "greatly practise militarie stratagemes, or wilde pollicies in warre, whereby they do vse to mingle deceite with force[.]... and also because fraud and deceite is a thing most proper to a Turke."<sup>35</sup>

Another affront to Christian values lay in the Turk's devotion to war. Christians, argued Soranzo, wage war to attain peace, whereas the Turks "take the onely ende of warre to bee warre," whereby "they have enlarged their Empire."<sup>36</sup> They also are greedy for bribes and gifts; they are, in short, everything Venice prides itself in not being.

More startling still to a late twentieth-century reader, Soranzo expounds a sixteenth-century Venetian version of the domino theory. If the Turk moves against Venice, he argued, eventually all of Italy will fall. If the frontier is not supported by the united forces of Christendom, the Evil Empire will triumph.<sup>37</sup> Soranzo was not alone. Abraham Ortelius reiterates the domino sentiment in his *Epitome of the Theater of the Worlde*, published in London the same year. Like Soranzo, Ortelius fears Mahomet the Third, who took the city of Agria, "and threatens to doe wors if God inspire not the hartes of the Christian Princes vntedeye to resiste him."<sup>38</sup>

Richard Knolles' preface to his 1603 folio, *The Generall Historie of the Turkes*, expressed the same fears:

[the Ottoman Empire,] drunk with the pleasant wine of perpetuall felicitie, holdeth all the rest of the world in scorn, thundering out nothing but still bloud and warre, with a full persuasion in time to rule ouer all, preferring unto it selfe no other limits than the vitermost bounds of the earth, from the rising of the Sunne unto the going downe of the same.

The Turk, claimed Knolles, is a greedy lion, "lurking in his den," ready to devour all. "So perished the kingdomes of Bulgaria, Serua, Bosna, and Epirus, with the famous illands of Rhodes and Cyprus."<sup>39</sup> Knolles, like Soranzo, stressed the Turk's Otherness, embodied particularly in his Mahometan religion and his cruelty. At the siege of St. Elmo on Malta (1565), for example, "The Turkes after they had taken the castle, finding certaine of the knights yet breathing, and but

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 41r.

<sup>36</sup> Abraham Ortelius, *His Epitome of the Theater of the Worlde* (London: Printed for Ieames Shawe, 1603), p. 102v.

<sup>37</sup> Richard Knolles, *The Generall Historie of the Turkes* (London: Printed by Adam Islip, 1603), sig. A5r. Italics removed.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., pp. 75r-v.

halfe dead, first cut their hearts out of their breasts, and then their heads from their bodies; after that they hanged them vp by the heeles in their red cloakes with white crosses."<sup>40</sup>

Of more immediate relevance to *Othello*, Knolles provided a detailed account of the events leading up to the battle of Lepanto, including Selimus' decision to take Cyprus and the debate of the Venetian Senate as to whether their reports of Turkish intentions were reliable and whether they should prepare for war. He then vividly described the battle itself and the ensuing siege at Famagusta, concluding that the fall of the citadel "was the fatall ruine of Cyprus, one of the most fruitfull and beautifull islands of the Mediterranean."<sup>41</sup>

Shakespeare must have read this portion of Knolles' 1,000-page folio, for as Geoffrey Bullough notes, he drew on Knolles for the description of Famagusta, "the glad news of the 'segregation of the Turkish Fleet' (ii.i.10), and the festivities proclaimed by the Herald in ii.2."<sup>42</sup> But even if Shakespeare simply had thumbed through Knolles' volume, he would have seen engravings of vicious Ottoman emperors decked in elaborate turbans. He would also have sensed — by the bulk of the volume if by nothing else — Knolles' fear of Turkish threats to Christian civilization.

Knolles dedicated his tome to King James, praising the monarch's 1595 poem on the Battle of Lepanto, which "set forth the greatest and most glorious victorie that euer was by any of the Christian confederat princes obtained against these the *Ottoman Kings* or Emperors."<sup>43</sup> *His Maiesties Lepanto, or, Heroicall Song* appears in the Stationer's Register immediately after James' accession on 12 April 1603; obviously the printers wasted no time in exploiting English curiosity about their new king. Printed by Simon Stafford and Henry Hook soon after, James' *Lepanto* (first printed in Edinburgh in 1591) is a short heroic poem that celebrates the Christian hero of Lepanto, Don John of Austria. The poem begins epically:

I sing a wondrous worke of God,  
I sing his mercies great,  
I sing his justice heere-withall  
Pow'rd from his holy seat.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p. 803.

<sup>41</sup> Geoffrey Bullough, *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973), vol. VIII, p. 214.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., p. 867.

<sup>43</sup> Knolles, *Generall Historie*, sig. A5r.

The heroic battle "fought in LEPANTOES gulfe," was, in James' words, "Betwixt the baptiz'd race, / And circumcised Turband Turkes."<sup>44</sup> The first scene occurs in Heaven, where Satan taunts God with the Turk's potency. Jehovah responds by sending the angel Gabriel to stir up Venetian resistance. As the Turkish forces mount their attack, he finally succeeds in convincing Venice to act. The poem then recounts the battle, focusing particularly on Don John's personal heroism. James presents the battle of Lepanto as a chivalric struggle between the forces of good and evil, the fight epitomized in a hand-to-hand combat reminiscent of *The Song of Roland* or *The Cid*:

A Turke on him doth with a darte,  
Reuenge his fellowes death,  
Whill time a Turk with arrow doth,  
Shoot through a Christians arme,  
A Christian with a Pike dooth pearce  
The hand that did the harme.<sup>45</sup>

The closing Chorus of Venetians sings praises to God for the city's miraculous deliverance:

Sing praises then both young and olde,  
That in this towne remaine,  
To him that hath releued our necks,  
From Turkish yoaik prophane.<sup>46</sup>

Thus in James' own literary discourse Lepanto was God's victory over the Antichrist. And though his poem was written a decade before his accession, in 1603 it was more topical than ever.

In his first year as king of England, James was forced to examine the Venetian-Turkish conflict from a more practical perspective than he had used in his youthful poem. The newly arrived Venetian ambassadors sought trade agreements to protect their ships from English pirates and Turkish depredations. They feared that the English might negotiate successfully with the Turk and that the English war with Spain would hamper their cause. On 25 December 1603, ambassador Molin wrote to reassure the Doge: "The King

openly shows th... he has no affection for the Turkish alliance, and that he thinks all Christian Princes ought to unite for the destruction of their common foe."<sup>47</sup>

As the documents surveyed here reveal, two types of discourse about the Venetian-Turkish confrontation circulated in early seventeenth-century London: on a mythic level, the conflict was Manichean, symbolic of the universal struggle between the forces of good and evil; on a political level, the conflict was practical, focusing on trade and the balance of power among European nations and allowing for changing alliances and even negotiations with the Ottoman Empire. Both discourses inform *Othello*.

Emrys Jones suggested in 1968 that James' *Lepanto* might have influenced Shakespeare's depiction of Venice and Cyprus. Details in the play, he proposes, "suggest that Shakespeare had the events of 1570-71 in mind," including the conflicting reports received by the Senators, the number of the galleys, and the movement of the Turkish fleet. Jones also noted that "Shakespeare could... have taken for granted a general interest in the Ottoman empire which is very remote from what a modern audience brings to *Othello*."<sup>48</sup> But in his final paragraph Jones backs off with a disclaimer: "it has to be admitted that Shakespeare seems to have no direct indebtedness to James."<sup>49</sup> What does direct indebtedness mean? If it depends only on specific verbal parallels, there is one relevant word cluster: James' "circumcised Turband Turkes" is echoed in Othello's final soliloquy when he describes the "turbanded Turk" as a "circumcised dog" (5.2.349-51), though, admittedly, such racial epithets were standard fare in contemporary discourse about Turks and Ottomites.<sup>50</sup>

More important than verbal parallels, Shakespeare exploits similar perceptions of a global struggle between the forces of good and evil, a seeming binary opposition that in reality is complex and multifaceted. Yet the dramatist undercuts simple categories by making the most deceitful character not a Turk but a Venetian. Just as England must have felt in 1603 that it was entering a new era, with all the anticipation, excitement, and anxiety of a dynastic transition, Shakespeare's Venice rests on a shaky foundation. *Othello* represents, in Nick Potter's words, an "attempt to negotiate the distance and

<sup>47</sup> Brown, *Calendar of State Papers*, vol. X, p. 125.

<sup>48</sup> Emrys Jones, "'Othello', 'Lepanto', and the Cyprus Wars," *Shakespeare Survey* 21 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968), pp. 47-52, esp. p. 51.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 52.

<sup>50</sup> McPherson also notes this verbal parallel. See *Shakespeare, Johnson*, p. 78.

<sup>44</sup> Quotations of *Lepanto* are from James Craigie, ed., *The Poems of James VI of Scotland* (Edinburgh: William Blackwood and Sons for the Scottish Text Society, 3rd series, no. XXII, 1955). The lines cited here are from p. 202.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 238-40.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 248.

tension between order and chaos." Act 1 "shows us the state confronting a potentially shattering disruption, an apparently irreconcilable conflict between one of its leading members and its General, and yet absorbing this threat in the face of a larger threat, the Turkish fleet."<sup>51</sup> When that larger threat disappears, the threat from within surfaces.

\* \* \* \* \*

The Variorum edition notes particular words and phrases used in *Othello's* opening lines to convey the reality of Venice. Desdemona escapes with a "gondolier"; Brabantio, a "Magnifico," calls for "officers of night"; Iago has seen action at Rhodes and Cyprus; the city is caught in a sudden crisis by the advent of the Turkish fleet.<sup>52</sup> As one of the "wealthy curled darlings" of Venice, Roderigo speaks for his class. Had Desdemona not made such a "gross revolt" with an "extravagant and wheeling stranger," Roderigo would not veer "from the sense of all civility" to tiffle with Brabantio's reverence. Though we may later adopt Desdemona's point of view, from Roderigo's and Brabantio's perspective at least, she has violated cultural taboos by marrying without her father's permission, and by wedding a Moor. In the trial scene she shows further subversiveness, asserting that she was "half the wooer" and insisting that she follow Othello to Cyprus.

From one perspective, then, Desdemona and her lascivious Moor have threatened not just Brabantio but the social order. Marriage among the aristocracy of Venice was a carefully controlled political ritual. Contarini reported that "The marriages among the nobility, are for the most part always treated of by a third person, the bride being neuer suffered so much as to behold her future husband, nor he her, till their marriage dower, and all things therunto appertaining, bee fully agreede vpon and concluded."<sup>53</sup> The Venetian aristocracy tried to keep its blood lines pure. Dowers were large, in William Thomas' words, because the nobility wanted "to encrease the noblittie of [their] owne bloude, and by meane of suche alliances to

atrein more habilite to rule and reigne in [their] common wealth."<sup>54</sup> Desdemona's elopement with a wheeling stranger subverts this precarious balance. Brabantio warns:

if such actions may have passage free,  
Bondslaves and pagans shall our statesmen be. (1.2.98-99)

The opposition between Venice and the Turk is foregrounded, as everyone knows, in the third scene of *Othello*. Though Shakespeare may have been confused (or indifferent) about distinctions between the Venetian Council of Ten and the Senate,<sup>55</sup> the dramatist makes clear that the leading rulers of the commonwealth are assembled on a matter of great urgency. The Quarto stage direction reads: "Enter Duke and Senators, set at a Table with lights and attendants." The Duke and Senators immediately respond to varied reports concerning the Turkish fleet. Whether there are 107, 140, or 200 ships, their presence is a danger to Venice, their target more important than their number. The first Senator argues that the Turks' destination cannot be Rhodes; Cyprus is an easier target and more strategic. The preparation for Rhodes must be a diversion. A message from Montano on Cyprus confirms this deduction; the Senators conclude, "'Tis certain then for Cyprus" (1.3.43).

Though this part of Act 1, scene 3 is often cut in performance, it is important for several reasons. It establishes the Venetian Council with its presiding Duke as a thoughtful tribunal that weighs evidence and draws careful conclusions. Venice is the locus of rational deliberation. This scene also demonstrates the urgency of Council business and the realities of sixteenth-century global politics. The colonial outpost on Cyprus must be maintained at all costs; if it falls, the city itself is vulnerable.

The urgency of the crisis also assures the audience that Brabantio's charge against Othello is doomed. Iago has already warned in scene 1 that the state "Cannot with safety cast him" (1.1.148), and Othello has affirmed "My services which I have done the signiory / Shall out-tongue his complaints" (1.2.18-19). Scene 3's opening representation of the violent clash of Venetian forces and "the general enemy Ottoman" (49) makes even clearer that the state needs Othello. He is their chosen protector, the chivalric knight who will rescue Venice from a greedy dragon.

The threat posed by the Turkish fleet calls for extraordinary

<sup>51</sup> Graham Holderness, Nick Potter, and John Turner, *Shakespeare: The Play of History* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1988), pp. 186-87.  
<sup>52</sup> Furness's note on "officers of night" relates Shakespeare's text specifically to Lewkenor's translation of Contarini. See Horace Howard Furness, ed., *A New Variorum Edition of Shakespeare: Othello* (New York: Dover Publications, 1963; repr. of the 1886 Lippincott edition), p. 28.  
<sup>53</sup> Lewkenor, trans., *Commonwealth of Venice*, p. 194.

<sup>54</sup> Thomas, *Historie of Italie*, p. 84-v.

<sup>55</sup> See Levith, *Shakespeare's Italy*, pp. 14-15.

measures. Contarini described the Venetian response to naval crises in his *Commonwealth and Government of Venice*:

[I]f the occasions of the commonwealth doe so require, and that there be a great nauie indeed to bee set out, then there is appointed & proposed over the whole nauie a Capitaine generall with high and preheminent authoritie not onely ouer the same, but also ouer all maritime prouinces in manner as great, as that the Romain Dictator was wont to haue, saue onely that this in all things obeyeth the authority of the Senate, and the decrees of the commonwealth ... [W]hen the Capitaine generall of the nauie shall come to any Citie, ... [t]he authoritie of all the other gouernors for that time ceaseth: and whosoer in whatsoever cause may appeal from any other magistrate to the Capitaine generall: who onely if it shall so please him, may administer justice, dispose of the publike money, and alone himselfe exercise the office and authority of all the rest.<sup>56</sup>

The arrival of the Turkish fleet described in Act 1 is just this sort of threat, and the extraordinary power Contarini described is the authority the Senate proposes to give to Othello. Brabantio hasn't a chance.

It is a sign of Brabantio's prestige that the Duke is willing to interrupt state affairs and listen to his complaint. Confident of his position, Othello can speak with authority of his adventurous life, wooing the Senate with his exotic tales as he had wooed Desdemona. And she confirms his confidence, openly declaring her love. Admonished to be cheerful over the loss of Desdemona, Brabantio reminds the Senate of the relation between one subversion and another:

So let the Turk of Cyprus us beguile,  
We lose it not so long as we can smile[.] (1.3.208-09)

Even if the lovers had not won over the Duke and his Council, the dictates of realpolitik are pressing. The Duke turns from Brabantio to the affairs of state. His switch to prose marks the renewed urgency of his charge:

The Turk with a most mighty preparation makes for Cyprus. Othello, the fortitude of the place is best known to you; and though we have there a substitute of most allowed sufficiency, yet opinion, a more sovereign mistress of effects, throws a more safer voice on you. (1.3.219-23)

The domestic crisis is subsumed into the national interest.

Shakespeare uses the private conversation as a frame for Act 1, concluding, as he began, with Iago's attempt to gull Roderigo with

<sup>56</sup> Lewkenor, trans., *Commonwealth of Venice*, pp. 136-37.

specious reasoning. Like the Venetian state that sees itself as a model of reason, order, and clarity, Iago proclaims, "we have reason to cool our raging motions, our carnal stings, our unbitted lusts" (1.3.322-23). The Moor (like the Turk) is, in contrast, inconstant, changeable in his will. If he is an "erring barbarian" — the overt enemy to Venice — "super-subtle" Desdemona represents the enemy within (1.3.343-44).

Act 2 continues the opposition of Venetian and Turk, serving as a transition from the public emphasis of *Othello's* opening scenes to the private sphere of the temptation scene in Act 3, scene 3. During the second act the Turk is transformed from a military object to a representation of the enemy within. The expression "to turn Turk" dated from the fourteenth century;<sup>57</sup> it could mean to turn into an inhabitant of Turkey, or to become a muslim, or, in a third sense, to be a "cruel, rigorous or tyrannical man; anyone behaving as a barbarian or savage; one who treats his wife hardly; a bad-tempered or unmanageable man."<sup>58</sup> In this sense, Othello does, in fact, "turn Turk."

Act 2 begins with the segregation of the Turkish fleet, a providential sign of God's blessing on the Venetian enterprise. Even so, Turks are on everyone's mind. Iago claims his slanderous badinage about women is true, "or else I am a Turk" (2.1.112). (His penchants for deceit and cruelty will later qualify him in Venetian eyes.) Othello announces that "The Turks are drowned." With the external enemy removed, his attention turns to Desdemona; so does Iago's.

Next, Cassio's drunken disorder disrupts the consummation of Othello's marriage, and, again the public subsumes the private. Angry at being roused from his bed, Othello demands:

Are we turned Turks, and to ourselves do that  
Which heaven hath forbid the Ottomites?  
For Christian shame, put by this barbarous brawl (2.3.151-53)

The antinomy is clear. If we are not Christians, we are Turkish barbarians. Heaven may have dispersed the Turkish fleet, but it cannot control the Turk within.

<sup>57</sup> See Norman Daniel, *The Arabs and Medieval Europe* (London: Longman, 1975), p. 302 for a discussion of the history of the expression.

<sup>58</sup> *OED* (1989 ed.), vol. XVIII, p. 689. *The Policy of the Turkish Empire*, anonymously published, defined "Turk" as "one that is accursed and a vagabond" (London: Printed for John Winder, 1597), p. 7.

On Cyprus the real Venetian enemy is Iago. Nick Potter describes the Ensign as an individual alienated from his society.<sup>59</sup> His role as a critic of Venice turns him into a destroyer. On Cyprus, Venice's liminal outpost, Iago can operate without the checks and balances of Venetian government. On the frontier the underside of Venice can emerge and even dominate, destroying Venice's facade of rational order.

That Venice is the focus in Act 3, where we see an image counter to Contarini's rationally organized commonwealth. Iago plays upon Venice's reputation as the home of courtesans and forbidden lusts.<sup>60</sup> As a stranger to Venetian customs, Othello is moved rapidly from one myth of Venice to another. All Iago has to do is explain:

I know our country disposition well:  
In Venice they do let God see the pranks  
They dare not show their husbands. Their best  
conscience  
Is not to leav't undone, but keep't unknown. (3.3.203-06)

Desdemona has rejected matches of "her own clime, complexion, and degree, / Where to we see in all things nature tends" (3.3.232-33). Her marriage to Othello not only violates the state but the order of nature itself, demonstrating "a will most rank / Foul disproportion, thoughts unnatural" (3.3.234-35).

As Iago toys with definitions established in the play's opening scenes, the terms "Venetian" and "Turk" become increasingly slippery. On the one hand, Desdemona is a true Venetian; true, that is, to the city's whore image by being unchaste, deceitful, and given to vice. On the other, she has violated the city's virgin image, disturbing Venetian order and degree and has shown herself to be un-Venetian. While Iago can describe Desdemona both ways, Othello admits that he is also un-Venetian. He has "not those soft parts of conversation / That chamberers have" (3.3.266-67). He doesn't understand Venetian ways and customs. But in the bifurcated world of the play, it is difficult to maintain liminality. According to the colonial paradigm, Cyprus must be possessed by Venice or the Turks—it can't be independent. If Othello is not Venetian, he must perforce be Turkish. His transformation into Turk begins when he tells Desdemona that an Egyptian charmer gave his father the

missing handkerchief: "Dyed in mummy," this handkerchief denotes Othello's exotic otherness, his Orientalism, his alienation from Christian, hence Venetian, culture.<sup>61</sup>

Desdemona rejects Iago's view of Venice. To her, Venice continues to represent the body politic. Its affairs may have "puddled" Othello's clear spirits by their import, and she fears that the elopement may have affected Othello's career. She begs:

If haply you my father do suspect  
An instrument of this your calling back,  
Lay not your blame on me. If you have lost him,  
I have lost him too. (4.2.43-46)

Desdemona is partly right. Lodovico's sudden appearance with messages from Venice directing that Cyprus be turned over to Cassio is in some sense a rejection of Othello. Now that the threat from the Turk has been destroyed, Venice, as Contarini tells us was customary, takes back the extraordinary powers she had thrust upon her Captain General. Othello is recalled to Venice until the next crisis.

Shakespeare continues to play with the categories he has established. When Othello accuses Desdemona of being a strumpet, she replies, "No, as I am a Christian," but Othello counters that if Desdemona is a Christian, she cannot be that "cunning whore of Venice / That married with Othello" (4.2.81-88). Venice is no longer Christian in Othello's mind; like the Turk, it is heathenish, deceitful, inconstant. Iago has confused the signifiers; words Othello took for granted no longer ring true.

Emilia ruefully observes that Desdemona forsook many noble marriages in favor of Othello, the outsider, the non-Venetian. Not a proper man like Lodovico, he is what Roderigo rightly called him, "an extravagant and wheeling stranger."

Act 5's fatal conclusion brings the Venetian/Turk confrontation to its disastrous closure, collapsing the global struggle of Act 1 into the psychomachic struggle for Othello's soul. Venice—with some help from heaven—can destroy the enemy without, but it can only contain the enemy within. Lodovico, the Act 5 spokesman for the Republic, judges Othello less harshly than the murderer judges himself, claiming that Othello, "that wert once so good," has

<sup>59</sup> Johnny Davis has discovered that the higher grades of mummy were always black. He also notes that betrothal gifts, such as handkerchiefs, were generally viewed as emblematic of the giver. I am grateful to him for sharing ideas from his forthcoming Ph.D. dissertation, "In and Out of Doors in *Othello*" (University of Maryland).

<sup>60</sup> Nick Potter in *Shakespeare: The Play of History*, p. 192.  
<sup>61</sup> See Goldberg, *King James*, pp. 77-78.