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Not What England Is: How Robert Daborne and Thomas Coryat Contribute to Early Modern
Discourse on the East

In the Renaissance period, the English had dreams of an empire, but in this period they were not yet a major global power. The most powerful global force at the time, however, was the Ottoman Empire. Being a small Island in the face of a major global power that represented all they wanted, the English had complicated feelings about the Ottomans. In much of their travel literature, English travel writers, like Thomas Coryat in a piece, from a collection called *To His Friends in England*, titled “The Copy of a Speech I made to a Mahometan in the Italian Tongue,” projected a sense of fear and disdain onto the Ottoman’s by discounting their core religion, Islam, as blasphemous in nature. English playwrights, like Robert Daborne in a Christian turned Turk, did similarly, except, they added an air of emasculation and femininity to the Ottomans and their religion through female villains and depictions of circumcision. The renaissance travel catalog and plays about travel work together to form a discourse about the Ottoman Empire and Islam, marking them as enemies of both Christianity and rivals of England. “The Copy of a Speech,” and “A Christian Turned Turk” both contribute to the early modern discourse on the Ottoman empires and the Eastern world, but Coryat’s piece does so using the sonic color line and theological reasoning that rejects Islam, the core Ottoman religion, and others Muslims; while Daborne’s play takes a more dramatic and reactionary approach depicting core traits of Islam as emasculating and feminizing the Ottoman’s through the use of primary female villains, allowing

both Coryat and Daborne to contribute to what would be the early modern foundations of modern day Orientalism in their othering of Islam and conflation of religion with nationality, making the worst thing an English man can do converting to Islam.

In “The Copy of a Speech I Made to a Mahomettan in the Italian Tongue,” Thomas Coryat draws a sonic line between himself and Islam by making a speech to an Indian Muslim in Italian. English Professor Jennifer Lynn Stoever defines a concept called the sonic color line. The sonic color line is the racial barrier we create through our perceptions of sound. Stoever uses the examples of music and voices in the United States being defined as black and white, like rap music or deeper more mature voices being associated with black people. There are assumptions being made and lines being drawn as one listens and perceives. Language can also be a creator of lines, through accents being apparent when speaking another’s language, or the presence of different languages (Stoever 4-13). In this speech Coryat appears to cross over a sonic color line. Coryat, though a polyglot, is a native English speaker, while the man he makes the speech to is a native speaker of Turkish, as noted by the fact Coryat points out the interaction was sparked when “...[the man] upon the occasion of a discourtesie offered unto [him] by the said Mahometan in calling [him] Giaur, that is infidel” (Coryat 18). “Giaur,” according to *Etymonline*, is the Turkish pronunciation of the Persian word gaur. Like Coryat states, the word means infidel, and was commonly used by Ottoman Turks to refer to those that did not practice Islam, namely Christians. It was used with Christians so much it eventually came to be synonymous with them (“Origin and History of Giaour”). “Giaur” is a sonic marker, and indicator of a color line, it is a commonly used Turkish word that is meant to demean Christians, but Coryat being a speaker of Persian recognizes the word, and in the spelling he uses, he recognizes the Turkish pronunciation. He marks the man he is speaking to as a Mahometan, both

crossing and creating a line. Since the word means infidel a religious conflict is also being initiated, that Coryat takes into the Italian language. In speaking Italian with the man, Coryat sonically isolates himself and the man as “[he] pronounced the speech before an hundred people, whereof none understood it but himself” (Coryat 18). In Isolating himself with the man in the Italian language Coryat crosses the sonic color line so there is only himself and the man, and since they are speaking a language that is neither of their first, sonic markers of a foreign speaker apply to both of them, equalizing them. However, Coryat states “... the reason [he] spake to him in Italian, was because he understood it, having been taken slave for many years since by certain Florentines” (Coryat 18). Coryat is speaking the language of this man’s former slave masters, so in crossing the sonic color line into the equalizing Italian language, Coryat is actually drawing a new line where he is the superior and the Indian man is the inferior, sonically reduced to a slave. Coryat others the Muslim and positions himself above him, where he started below him, being an Englishman speaking to a man in possible Ottoman territory, showcasing the English want to rise above. Daborne does something similar in his play.

In “A Christian Turned Turk” Robert Daborne, like Coryat, positions England above the Ottoman empire, by feminizing them through making aspects of their core religion, Islam, emasculating. Unlike Coryat, Daborne is not using sonic lines to raise England up, instead he uses Gender lines. In a scene in the play, pirate Jack Ward, is converted to Islam in a dumb show, which is a silent performance done through pantomime. In this dumb show Ward is “...brought to his seat by the Mufti, who puts on his turban and robe, girds his sword, then swears him on the Mahomet’s head, ungirds his sword...” (Daborne 198). In literature, swords can be often used as a symbol for a male’s nether regions, and a key part of converting to Islam is being circumcised. According to the notes in an online version of *Merchant of Venice*, “in the

twentieth century circumcision has often been described as a symbolic form of castration or emasculation” (“Elizabethan Ideas About Circumcision”). The removal, or ungirding, of Wards sword in the dumbshow can be read as the removal of his penis, making the act of converting to Islam emasculating and adding a feminine air to the religion. The play is not called “A Christian Turned Mahometan (Muslim)” it is called “A Christian Turned Turk,” which means Ward is not just giving up his religion or masculinity, he is giving up his nationality. In conflating religion with nationality, the whole of the Ottoman empire is feminized and emasculated, as it is assumed all Muslims are circumcised. Where Coryat uses the sonic marker of a man’s former Slave master’s, Daborne uses gender roles to push the Ottoman’s and Islam beneath England, making them out to be unmasculine through a key part of their religion, and equating the religion with the nationality. Despite the difference approaches, Coryat and Daborne are both contributing to a discourse and established tradition in tearing down the Ottomans.

In placing the Ottomans beneath the English, both Coryat and Daborne are making the English jealously of the Ottoman’s known. According to Daniel J. Vitkus, literary critic and editor, the early modern interpretations of Islam are coated in jealousy and fear. Because the Ottoman’s were the largest global power of the time, it was feared by Western Europe that Islam would overtake Christianity. Many nations, like England, had dreams of building up their own empires, and so they were jealous of what the Ottoman’s had, and fearful that they would be conquered before they could make those dream real. Fear of Islam goes back to the middle ages, in which writers would portray Mohammad as a mad tyrannical chieftain, and his followers as savage barbarians obsessed with conquest and enslavement. There was also scholarly abolishment of Islam and the Ottoman’s, where medieval theologians would study Islamic scripture in order to refute with Christianity and claim the religion itself was blasphemous. These

traditions continued into the Renaissance period, as seen in Coryat and Daborne's work, creating a discourse about the Ottoman's, (Vitkus 258-260). Coryat and Daborne, in setting the Ottoman's below the English, contribute to the growing discourse on them.

Thomas Coryat contributes to the established Ottoman discourse, as mentioned by Vitkus, through theologically dismissing Islam. In "The Copy of a Speech" Coryat makes a distinction between what he calls a Musulman (Muslim) and a Mahometan. He makes this distinction after being called a giar, telling the man he his speaking to, "[he] [was] a musulman and thou art a Giaur. For by that Arab word Musulman thou dost understand that which cannot be properly applied to a Mahometan but onely to a Christian" (Coryat 19). The claim Coryat seems to be making here is that Christians are true Muslims, and Mahometans, followers of Mohammad who are Muslim, are the real infidels. Coryat, in the same passage asserts, "...there are two kinds of musulmen, the one an Orthomusulman, that is a true Musulman which is a Christian and the other a Psuedo-musulman that is a false Musulman which is a Mahomentan" (Coryat 19). Coryat claims that Christians are true Muslims, or worshippers of God, and what he calls Mahomentans, are not. Mahometan, contains the early modern spelling of Mohammad, Mahomet, so a Mahometan would be a follower of Mohammad. Coryat is asserting here that the Ottoman followers of Islam are not following a God, but rather a man in the form of the prophet Mahommad. According to Vitkus, this is an assertion that even medieval scholars have made, claiming Ottoman Mulsims worship Mahommad and not God (Vitkus 258). In othering the Ottoman's the English are making the case that they worship the true God, and are therefore holy, while the Ottoman's do not, and are therefore unholy. With Coryat making this assertion to a man, in a language used by his slavers, it is almost like he is implying Europeans have a right to be above the Ottomans. A discourse is being established, that looks similar to Orientalism, in

which the East is what the West is not, however this is taken further by Daborne's feminization of the Empire.

With Coryat already establishing the Ottoman Empire as beneath England, Daborne's play confirms Coryat's assertion by feminizing the Ottoman Empire with the female villain Voada. According to literary critic Edward Said, historical depictions of the East focus on the female aspects. This can be in the form of oversexualizing the women, or giving female qualities to the broader East in order to weaken it and make it seem like Western intervention is necessary, playing into the toxic Western obsession with masculinity, and the need have things exist in a binary. The idea that Eastern women are different than those in the West also acts as a justification for Western curiosity (Said 39-57). Thinking about where this idea comes from, as Said pulled from historical sources. Voada acts as an early representation of Western interest in Eastern women. Voada is seductive and demanding, the opposite of British women who should be quiet and compliant. It is Voada who convinces Ward to convert to Islam and lose his masculinity. Voada is often seen pulling Ward along using seductive powers to convince him to throw away his Englishness and become Turk by converting to Islam, telling Ward "...you must be one if you'll enjoy me. If then your thoughts answer to what you speak, turn Turk – I am yours" (Daborne 193). Voada is promising Ward her body if he betrays his country and turns Turk. In early modern England, men are expected to lead and control women, but in this case a woman is controlling a man. Voada has much influence over Ward's actions and is one of the more active Turkish characters. In a female present being a major one, the Ottoman empire is made to look weaker than England, as they have women who can easily control men, and a man who is easily seduced is often seen as morally weak, and the woman impure. Daborne, like Coryat, is using what he believes England is not to define the Ottoman empire.

Coryat and Daborne's pieces both juxtapose the Ottoman Empire against England to raise the English up and put the Ottoman's down by contributing to discourse on the Empire out of jealousy and fear creating a foundation for what Orientalism will be built upon. Looking back at these two texts, one can see the formation of a viewpoint based on sexualization, some misogyny and inferiority complexes. In wanting England to be more, Coryat's travel narrative and Daborne's play work in tandem to characterize the Ottoman Empire as less than England. Showing that all the things England is not, the Ottoman's are, however, one thing the Ottoman's are that the English wanted to be was a major power. Fear mixed with jealousy creates an interpretation of a land that is not entirely real, but for the English was the truth.

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