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MATTHEW DIMMOCK

*Tudor Turks: Ottomans Speaking English
in Early Modern Sultansbriefe*

How did “the Turk” speak in early modern England, and what form did that voice take? Certainly by the late sixteenth century English readers and audiences could encounter an Ottoman voice in a number of different places, emanating from a sequence of Ottoman sultans. English men and women read speeches in chronicle histories; they copied the letters of the “Grand Signor” into their commonplace books; some were even able to hear a “Turk” publicly express his desire to be baptized into the English Church, albeit in Spanish. Many more read the accompanying sermon in print.¹ They might also hear the voices of Ottoman refugees and liberated captives on city streets, and the expostulations of sultans and their subjects resounding from London playhouse stages and from travelling players in the provinces. Such voices incorporate regal, intelligent, aggressive, belligerent, pathetic, and tyrannous registers—but are never accented, unlike those of strangers closer to home—and on printed page as well as stage they are often manipulated to damn and undermine themselves.² In all these forms the voice of the “Turk” was commonly heard in late Elizabethan London. The situation earlier in the century was very different.

The “scenically strutting and furious vociferation” of the “Great Turk” on the stage—the most prominent and certainly the most spectacular example of the Ottoman voice in England—is conventionally assumed to begin with the first part of Christopher Marlowe’s *Tamburlaine the Great*

1. Meredith Hanmer, *The Baptizing of a Turke* (1586) is the earliest extant example of such a baptism and its accompanying sermon. The final pages record the ritual itself.

2. As discussed by Linda McJannet in *The Sultan Speaks: Dialogue in English Plays and Histories about the Ottoman Turks* (Basingstoke, 2006), 106–15.

(1587).³ Yet this distinctive voice has earlier Tudor antecedents and was heard in England much earlier than Marlowe's Sultan Bajazeth. For when Tamburlaine characteristically declaims "Tush, Turks are full of brags" (I 3.3.3) he is referencing a trope that reaches back to the beginning of the sixteenth century in English and before in Latin, German, and Italian texts. This essay traces that lost lineage through two Henrician texts, one print and the other manuscript, that present the voice of the Ottoman despot, and draw on an extensive Germano-Italian *Sultansbriefe* ("Letters of the Sultan") tradition in which the sultan's voice is ventriloquized in a series of letters to Christian princes and to the Pope. I argue they demonstrate the existence of a late English flourishing of this long-standing genre, and that the Ottoman "Turkish" voice they present is a complex satirical phenomenon, the manifestation of a continental fashion that is nuanced, even reinvented, in an English context.

II

News from the Turk

In 1518 the Antwerp printer Jan van Doesborch produced a short quarto text for the English market that responded to a perceived demand for international news; specifically of major battles and information about the Ottoman "Turke."⁴ His chosen title was prolix but accurate: *The copie of the letter folowyng whiche specifyeth of ye greatest and meruelous visyoned batayle that euer was sene or herde of and also of the letter yt was sent frome the great Turke vnto our holy fad[er] ye pope of Rome*. This was an innovation, the first of its kind: thereafter the reproduction and public dissemination of ostensibly private letters in print and in English would become widespread. It was not long before "every news event" seemed to merit "its own letter," drawing upon fictions of travel for their veracity.⁵ Van Doesborch

3. Mark Hutchings, "The 'Turk Phenomenon' and the repertory of the late Elizabethan playhouse," *Early Modern Literary Studies* 13 (2007), 1–39. See also Hutchings' recent elaboration of his conclusions in *Turks, Repertories, and the Early Modern English Stage* (Basingstoke, 2017). All quotations from the two parts of Marlowe's *Tamburlaine* come from Christopher Marlowe, *The Complete Plays*, ed. Mark Thornton Burnett (London, 1999).

4. Recorded in *Netherlandish Books: Books Published in the Low Countries and Books Printed Abroad before 1601*, ed. Andrew Pettegree and Malcolm Walsby, 2 vols. (Leiden, 2011), 1.375. This text is STC 5405 and ESTC S105104. The ESTC notes that the supposed French original has never been traced.

5. Alan Stewart, "Letters," in *The Oxford Handbook of English Prose 1500–1640*, ed. Andrew Hadfield (Oxford, 2013), 417–33 (425). See also James Daybell, *The Material Letter in Early Modern England: Manuscript Letters and the Culture and Practices of Letter-Writing, 1512–1635* (Basingstoke, 2012), 201–03 and John-Paul Ghobrial, *The Whispers of Cities: Information Flows in Istanbul, London,*

was certainly keen to draw upon the authenticating potential of travel to buttress as well as to decorate his volume, for he chose to preface each letter with an image of a courtly post in the act of delivering despatches. The effect is twofold: depicting the act of delivery asserts the fresh immediacy of the international news the letters carry; and in visually presenting the diplomatic letter as a necessarily guarded and close transaction between prominent individuals—as the secret business of a courtly elite—it also highlights the privileged, even clandestine access that this volume purports to offer.

Of the two letters that van Doesborch reproduces, the first is a fairly conventional battle-relation sent by Bartholomé de Clereville to a friend. The second is more peculiar, and is the only extant example of its kind in print and in English in the sixteenth century: an aggressively assertive letter sent from a “great Turke” (the title given in Christian texts to the Ottoman sultan) named “Marboryn Ramosyn” to an unnamed Pope. It begins with an extravagance that would later become typical: in later Elizabethan print forms, correspondence from non-Christian potentates would become so thoroughly defined by an excessively grand opening flourish that it would later be widely imitated and parodied. Such a flourish echoed diplomatic convention that had developed out of Mongol, Fatimid, Mamluk, and Ottoman contexts, albeit one refracted through repeated translation and careful editing by Christian scholars, polemicists, and printers, as in Hakluyt’s *Principall Navigations* of 1589 and 1598–1600.⁶ Routine expressions of Ottoman sovereignty, for instance, were larded with convoluted appellations referring to renown: the sultan might be simply of great renown—*sultan-i azim al-şan*—and a variety of honorifics could also follow the required list of territories conquered, such as *azmetlu* (great, august) and *izzetlu* (glorious, esteemed).⁷

The second van Doesborch letter follows the same formula, borrowed from the circulation of such letters in manuscript: the Ottoman ruler “Marboryn” opens with the declaration of an illustrious lineage that is entwined with geographies both close and distant. He is “sone of the grete

£ Paris in the Age of William Trumbull (Oxford, 2013). Von Doesborch was very much part of this international trade, keeping a shop or agent in London besides his printing house in Antwerp.

6. The Mongol, Fatimid, Mamluk and Ottoman contexts are detailed in Doris Behrens-Abouseif, *Practising Diplomacy in the Mamluk Sultanate: Gifts and Material Culture in the Medieval Islamic World* (London, 2014). On the presentation of such letters in Hakluyt’s *Principall Navigations*, see Susan Skilliter, *William Harborne and the Trade with Turkey 1578–1582* (Oxford, 1977), 93–101.

7. As discussed extensively in Rhoads Murphey, *Exploring Ottoman Sovereignty: Tradition, Image and Practice in the Ottoman Imperial Household, 1400–1800* (London, 2008): see particularly 84.

kinge Olifernes” and is by “the grace of ye great god Mahounde descendyd of ye hye lyne.” He is “captayne of Tartaryne,” “Baron of Turkye,” and “prince of ye hebrues”; he is “Emperour of parygone of the londes of hungary and of walericque / of ye londe of Sury unto paradys terrestre.” Pointedly he is also “atcheuer of Constantynople / and of the cristen londes.”⁸ The letter goes on to demand that the Pope—the “grete preste of Rome”—and his allies withdraw a planned crusade pressed by the Knights of Rhodes. If they do not, Marboryn threatens to “comme and visite you wyth .lxvi. noble kynges of ours” and “do wyth your te[m]ple of Rome as we haue done wt sant Sophys te[m]ple at Constany[n]ople” thanks to the grace of “our great god mahounde.”⁹ One of the Pope’s allies is identified only as a “yonge kyng” whose head “Marboryn” intends to “stryke of” in “ye best cite of his royalm.” To further prove his power and magnanimity this “great Turke” then references accompanying gifts: “the first is plate golde / the seconde is clothe of golde / the thyrde is ryche orient perles wt precyous stones.” The letter is signed off, again according to the standard form, from “our grete cite of Chayne / in ye yere .vi.M. and of our reigne the .x. yere” (A3v-A4).¹⁰

For all its apparently authentic bluster and adherence to epistolary convention, the letter is entirely fictional. There was no Ottoman sultan named “Marboryn Ramosyn” or anything like it, although this may not have been apparent to English readers, for whom the name would have certainly signaled something Turkish: the fictional “turke of Machometts lawe” who speaks in John Rastell’s *A new boke of purgatory* (1530) is named “Gyn-gemyn.”¹¹ His self-identification as “atcheuer of Constantynople” implies he stands as a surrogate of Mehmed II (“the Conqueror,” 1432–1481), who had led a westward campaign culminating in the capture of that city in 1453 and later established a foothold on the Italian peninsula at Otranto in 1481. However Mehmed never conquered “Sury” (Syria): that region fell to the remarkable expansionary thrust led by his grandson Selim I (1470–1520),

8. Bartholomé de Clereville, *The cople of the letter* (Antwerp, 1518), A3v.

9. The number of 66 kings is presumably a reference to the Antichristian “Number of the Beast” (666) in chapter 13 of the Book of Revelation.

10. The significance of the date given is difficult to divine: it may well be an attempt to approximate the Islamic Hijri calendar, reminding readers of the alien dating system used by the Ottomans. It is nonetheless inaccurate, for 994 AH corresponds to 1585 in the Gregorian calendar, decades after the publication of this text.

11. John Rastell, *A new boke of purgatory* (1530), A2v. On this text and its contexts see Matthew Dimmock, *New Turkes: Dramatizing Islam and the Ottomans in Early Modern England* (Aldershot, 2005), 35–38.

who led the Ottoman army into Persia in 1514, and into Anatolia and Kurdistan in 1515, and who destroyed the Mamluk sultanate in Syria, Egypt, and Arabia in 1516–1517. Together these campaigns brought the Ottomans to an extraordinary prominence in early modern Christian affairs and in the mental landscape of men and women across Christendom, and in the process motivated the creation of van Doesborch's letter.

But all is not what it seems. There is a strong flavor of the messianic, millenarian universalism associated with Timūr (1336–1405)—another conqueror of Syria—and the Timūrid dynastic line in the opening invocations, and the curiously antiquated nature of the geography invoked in the letter signals even earlier contexts.¹² This is hinted in the reference to Nebuchadnezzar's fearsome general Holofernes from the Book of Judith, and may well refer not to the conquests of an Ottoman or Timūrid ruler, but to those of a Mamluk: perhaps even to Sultan Baibars (or Baybars, 1223–1277), part of whose Arabic name—*Rukn al-Din Baibars*—might just conceivably have been transliterated and repeatedly reformed over time into “Ramosyn.” Baibars defeated the forces of the Seventh Crusade, led by King Louis IX of France (perhaps the “yonge kynge” referred to in the letter—he was twelve when he ascended the French throne and in his thirties when he departed on the Seventh Crusade), held off the Mongols, and expanded the Mamluk sultanate from its base in Egypt across Syria and the wider Levant.¹³ The splendor of his court, coupled with his military prowess and the subsequent alliances he struck with Christian Frankish kingdoms, brought him fame within Christendom as the Soldan or Sultan of Damascus, and he (or one of his successors) is therefore also a further possible surrogate for van Doesborch's “great Turke.”¹⁴ These earlier contexts are suggested by the elaborate presents the “great Turke” details: the coupling of gifts with aggressive correspondence was common between Crusader kingdoms and their Mamluk foes, and the offer of cloth of gold refers to a fabric that became the staple of diplomatic exchange in the post-Mongol Eurasian world.¹⁵ What the letter presents is a polemical composite: an

12. Ahmed Azfar Moin, *The Millennial Sovereign: Sacred Kingship and Sainthood in Islam* (New York, 2012) discusses this aspect of Timūr's legacy.

13. These details are drawn from (and elaborated in) M. Cecilia Gaposchkin and Sean L. Field, ed., *The Sanctity of Louis IX: Early Lives of Saint Louis by Geoffrey of Beaulieu and William of Chartres*, tr. Larry F. Field (Ithaca, 2013) and M. Cecilia Gaposchkin, *The Making of Saint Louis: Kingship, Sanctity, and Crusade in the Later Middle Ages* (Ithaca, 2008).

14. Behrens-Abouseif, 6–7.

15. Behrens-Abouseif, 25; see also Thomas T. Allsen, *Commodity and Exchange in the Mongol Empire: A Cultural History of Islamic Textiles* (Cambridge, Eng., 1997).

ahistorical mingling of motifs from multiple Islamic rulers from very different contexts, each celebrated for their military accomplishments and feared for the threat they posed to Christian territories.

Such rough layering of histories and geographies suggests the repeated updating of an original text with little concern for contradiction or anachronism, setting renowned Ottoman conquests upon Timūrid and Mamluk to exploit the currency of recent events and, perhaps, the credulity of English readers. An example of the following year does precisely the same: *Here begynneth a lytell treatise of the turkes lawe called Alcaron* appeared from the Fleet Street press of Wynkyn de Worde and is a similarly rough retooling, in this case of the episode concerning “Machomet” in the *Travels* of the fictional Englishman Sir John Mandeville. Interpolating a new and more polemical opening, in which the Saracens of the original are transformed into contemporary “Turkes,” de Worde repeatedly affirms violence to be at the core of “Mahometan” belief, in stark opposition to Christianity.¹⁶ As in van Doesborch’s letter of the previous year, the renewed emphasis on violence is surely a response to Selim I’s rapid and considerable expansion of Ottoman domains in the campaigns of 1514–1517, and the urgent appetite for information it generated. A similar but more extensive burst of English printed texts followed the great Ottoman siege of Vienna in 1529 by Suleiman I (“the Magnificent”) and again they were predominantly repackaged or newly translated versions of works that were in some cases centuries old—most prominent amongst these was Christopher St German’s *Here after followeth a lytell treatyse agaynst Mahumet and his cursed secte* of 1531.¹⁷ New information on the Ottoman court, its rulers and their history would not appear in English until the very end of Henry VIII’s reign, in the mid-1540s, with Peter Ashton’s translation of Paolo Giovio’s influential *Commentarii delle cose de Turchi* (1535) as *A Short Treatise vpon the Turkes Chronicles* (1546), another volume originally prompted by the Ottoman campaigns of 1526 and 1529.

Van Doesborch claims that his letter had been despatched from the (fantastical) Ottoman city of “Chayne” to the Papal court at Rome, passing through an Antwerp print house to England, travels that represent a further

16. Wynkyn de Worde, *Here begynneth a lytell treatise of the turkes lawe called Alcaron* (1519?), A2. The nature and purpose of the reworking of Mandeville is discussed further in Matthew Dimmock, *Mythologies of the Prophet Muhammad in Early Modern English Culture* (Cambridge, Eng., 2013), 53–56.

17. This text was only recently identified with St German: Richard Rex, “New Additions on Christopher St German: Law, Politics and Propaganda in the 1530s,” *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 59 (2008), 281–300.

layer of fiction. However, this letter has a far more convoluted set of travels over a much longer timescale than even its initial readers could have imagined, for it is the latest and only extant English printed example of a *Sultansbriefe* tradition that flourished in Italy and central Europe throughout the later medieval period.¹⁸ A detailed consideration of the origins of such letters and the ways they were used explains some of the peculiarities of the van Doesborch edition, but also how this material could be transformed in English contexts to manipulate the sultan's voice anew.

III

Sultansbriefe

Throughout Christendom there was a huge market for letters between Christian and non-Christian princes from the fifteenth into the early seventeenth centuries, a phenomenon that presages and anticipates the primary business of later news networks and the proliferation of "public diplomacy" across Europe.¹⁹ The most celebrated and controversial was Pius II's letter to Mehmed II, *Epistola ad Mahumetem* (1461), to which many other examples are physically attached in both manuscript and print.²⁰ Writing in the wake of the fall of Constantinople, Pius attempted to coax the "illustrious prince of the Turks" to follow the example of Constantine and convert to Christianity. He contacts Mehmed "not with hatred nor do we threaten your person, although you are an enemy of our religion and press hard on Christian people with your weapons. We are hostile to your actions, not to you" and reminds the Ottoman ruler of their theological proximity. Mehmed should reflect upon Christ, "whom the Mohammedan law in which you were born calls a holy man, a great prophet, son of a virgin, and famous for his miracles."²¹ Scholars have long

18. Bettina Wagner, "Sultansbriefe," *Deutsche Literatur des Mittelalters, Verfasserlexikon* 11 (2004), 1462–68.

19. Carmen Espejo, "The Prince of Transylvania: Spanish News of the War against the Turks, 1595–1600," in *News Networks in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Joad Raymond and Noah Moxham (Leiden, 2016), 512–41 (512); Helmer Helmers, "Public Diplomacy in Early Modern Europe," *Media History* 22 (2016), 401–20 (402–03).

20. On the letter see Nancy Bisaha, "Pius II's Letter to Sultan Mehmed II: A Re-examination," *Crusades* 1 (2002), 183–201; on the binding, see Karoline Döring, "Beautiful Daughters and Rich Tournaments: Pleasures of the East in Correspondences between Ottoman Sultans and Christian Princes in the 14th and 15th century," in *Mittelalter. Interdisziplinäre Forschung und Rezeptionsgeschichte* 7 (2013), mittelalter.hypotheses.org/2064, 8–10.

21. Quoted in Nancy Bisaha, *Creating East and West: Renaissance Humanists and the Ottoman Turks* (Philadelphia, 2004), 149–50.

debated the status of Pius II's letter. Did he ever intend for it to be sent, or was it instead designed to impress upon Christian readers this crusade-enthusiast's frustrations over Christian apathy and highlight the dangers Mehmed posed?²² The tensions and contradictions in the letter—and the lack of any evidence that it was sent—suggest the latter is more likely, as Nancy Bisaha has convincingly argued, making it another fake diplomatic letter concerned with Christian/Muslim relations.

The *Epistola ad Mahumetem* was a gift to the compilers of *Sultansbriefe*. Working in the late nineteenth century Wilhelm Wattenbach suggested that the earliest examples of these fictional letters from Muslim rulers to Christendom stem from the years 1291–1314, and are categorized as *Epistola Soldani*: threatening letters from Balthasar, the Sultan of Babylon (a city identified with Cairo in these earlier periods), ridicule the Pope for his territorial greed and warn of the impending slaughter of the crusader armies.²³ In a compression of histories and geographies characteristic of the genre, Balthasar is loosely based on the Biblical regent Belshazzar, son of King Nabonidus, who in the Book of Daniel sees writing on a wall that prophecies the fall of Babylon (5.1–30). Further examples of letters from the Sultan of Babylon—in two extant cases addressed to Christopher of Denmark and Frederick III—offer his daughter's hand in marriage because she has already converted to Christianity and he wants rid of her. As negotiator he sends the legendary Prester John, his son-in-law. Others invite Christian monarchs to a great tournament to be held in Babylon. Aside from the early print incarnations of the *Epistola Soldani*, the most widely circulated versions of *Sultansbriefe* are, however, later examples: and it is these that are most often connected with Pius II's letter. The *Epistolae Magni Turci* comprises a cluster of fictional letters to various Christian figures purporting to be from Mehmed II but written by the Italian humanist Laudivio Zacchia. They are “a curious mishmash of historical allusions, principles of humanitarian law, morals, aphorisms, truisms and platitudes,” and less relevant to the histories I am tracing here.²⁴ The *Epistola Morbisani*, however, is probably the most popular strand of the *Sultansbriefe*, and is indisputably the source of van Doesborch's English letter of 1518. It originates in the mid-fourteenth century, apparently written by a “Sultan

22. This question is considered in Bisaha, *Creating East and West*, 151–52; and in Margaret Meserve, *Empires of Islam in Renaissance Historical Thought* (Cambridge, Mass., 2008), 35–37.

23. Wilhelm Wattenbach, “Fausse correspondance du Sultan avec Clément V,” *Archives de l'Orient Latin*, tome II, ed. Comte Riant (Paris, 1884), “Documents,” 297–303.

24. Döring, 4.

Morbisanus" to the Pope, although the name also appears as "Morbasanus, Amorbisanus, Marbassian, Morbosiano, and so on": it is clearly the origin of the forename of the mysterious "Marboryn Ramosyn."²⁵

In the *Morbisani* version the sultan belligerently warns the Pope against prosecuting a crusade against him. He proclaims an illustrious Trojan lineage back to Priam, Antenor, and Aeneas (a lineage therefore shared, as he points out, with the Italians), and argues that their mutual reverence for Christ should be a source of peace between them. Finally, the sultan turns to threats: if the Pope continues on his crusading course, "Morbisanus" and his allies will completely destroy them.²⁶ For obvious reasons, the circulation of this letter was reinvigorated by the fall of Constantinople to the Ottomans, and later versions update it to clearly align this "Morbisanus" with Mehmed II. Thereafter enterprising Roman printers began to place it alongside Pius' *Epistola ad Mahumetem* so that it reads like a bombastic response to that letter. The interconnection of the two was so well established in the mind of one Italian reader that he wrote out the entirety of the "Morbisanus" letter in his copy of Pius' works.²⁷

A strong seam of satire runs through these letters. Some appear to have been designed to express skepticism regarding the nature and aims of crusade (holy war is a unifying feature of most *Sultansbriefe*); others to ridicule Pope and sultan alike.²⁸ This certainly seems to have been the case in the numerous examples translated from the original Latin into German in the years preceding Luther's 95 *Theses* (1517), as reformers began to conflate Ottoman and papal threats. Others articulate a prevailing Christian fear of Ottoman, Mamluk, or Persian aggression, a fear punctured in some examples through an accentuation of the banal bombast of these exchanges, finding comedy in the exaggerated epistolary conventions and projected voices of alien potentates. There are further examples of *Sultansbriefe* that, in contrast, are treated as if authentic and are collected and/or bound in ways that suggest they were sold as news. In both cases the great appeal of the letters was surely the unique access they purported to give the reader to the voice of the otherwise distant and impenetrable "great Turke" or "Soldan." Any satirical intent is certainly downplayed in van Doesborch's English version of the *Epistola Morbisani* in favor of the authenticating

25. Meserve, 35.

26. Meserve, 35–36.

27. Identified in Döring, 10–11.

28. Meserve, 35–36.

gestures outlined above—the post images; the previous letter; the format and title of the volume. England’s position on Christendom’s northern periphery, the absence of any earlier printed versions of this particular letter, and the urgency of recent Ottoman expansion meant that if carefully packaged English readers would be unlikely to question its veracity.

To labor a distinction between those *Sultansbriefe* read as if real and those that were transparently satirical is perhaps to misinterpret them. There is an alternative approach to their reception that avoids a potentially misleading bifurcation between authenticity and fiction/satire, and that involves thinking of them as manifestations of wonder and strangeness. If the voice of the sultan in these letters is understood as—following Jonathan Sell—an “exophoric representation,” then it becomes a kind of marvel, a means of signaling a world beyond the realities of its Christian readership.²⁹ The marvelous is a category capacious enough to accommodate comic, satirical, and authentic readings, and this approach is affirmed by the contexts in which *Sultansbriefe* were encountered. They are repeatedly found bound together in print and manuscript with copies of Mandeville’s *Travels*: the prominence of the Sultan of Babylon’s voice in that text may reflect the emergence of this new genre in the early fourteenth century—see, for instance, the copy of a Latin letter from “Balthazardy” to the Pope appended to an early fifteenth-century French manuscript of Mandeville in British Library Royal MS 20 BX, f. 10b.³⁰

Sultansbriefe are also often bound together with Prester John’s celebrated letter to Christendom, another text concerned with travel-knowledge and communicating the marvelous. Indeed the strand most widely represented in England before the 1518 von Doesborch letter is the *Epistola Soldani* in a version that appears in a printed *Itinerarius incunabula*, one that begins with the fabulous Asian travels of the fictional fourteenth-century Dutch cleric Johannes Witte de Hese and includes the “*Epistola Johannis Soldani ad Pium papum secundu*,” a subsequent reply falsely ascribed to Pius II, and Prester John’s “*De ritu et moribus Indorum*.” Editions of this book—*Itinerarius Johannis de Hese presbyteri a Iherusalē[m]*—

29. Jonathan Sell, *Rhetoric and Wonder in English Travel Writing, 1560–1613* (Aldershot, 2006), 16. It is also noteworthy that Von Doesborch, the first printer of an English *Sultansbriefe*, was also clearly interested in wonders, and also produced *Of the new lan[n]des and of ye people founde by the messengers of the kynge of porty[n]gale* (Antwerp, 1510?).

30. On such contexts see Bettina Wagner, *Die ‘Epistola presbyteri Johannis’ lateinisch und deutsch. Überlieferung, Textgeschichte, Rezeption und Übertragungen im Mittelalter. Mit bisher unedierten Texten* (Tübingen, 2000), and Döring, 9.

were printed in Deventer in 1499, 1504, and 1505, and in Cologne in 1500: numerous copies remain extant. Reading these *Sultansbriefe* alongside the marvels recorded by medieval travelers emphasizes the lack of any distinction between the literary forms used to articulate wonder in these earlier periods.

Another, later version of the *Epistola Soldani* circulated in northern Europe in the later sixteenth century through the many printed editions of *Des Chroniques* of Enguerran de Monstrelet, originally written in the mid-fifteenth century. In this case sent by a Sultan of Babylon named “Baldadoch” and dated 1427, this version invites the princes of Christendom to convert and recognize his authority or face the consequences. Its presence in England is signaled by the English translation that remains in the commonplace book of Elizabethan soldier-courtier Sir Edward Hoby, a volume completed around 1596.³¹ But what do each of these versions of the tradition imply about the travels of the texts themselves? As in Hoby’s case, the distribution of *Sultansbriefe* tends to be depicted as a centrifugal phenomenon, flowing outwards from the centers of production, adaptation, and circulation in Italy and the German states, following the postal routes of the first circulating news texts, the diplomatic *avviso*.³² This narrative presumes England and the English to be peripheral and credulous, far from such centers. Although the van Doesborch letter may have been modified slightly for the demands of an English readership it otherwise remains close to its continental forebears, and the Hoby version is a direct translation of a French original. The sole English print example is nevertheless an important adaptation: Karoline Döring argues that print versions of the *Epistola Morbisani* are defined by their adherence to the specific name “Morbisanus.”³³ Yet not all *Sultansbriefe* had to travel to England. There is one previously unknown manuscript example written in English that explicitly reflects on the complex dynamics of the late Henrician court and which demonstrates a willingness to play with (if not flout) the conventions of the genre: a late and peculiarly English flourishing. It is a letter from “Balthazar the Emperour of Babylon” and is addressed directly to “Henry the 8th king of England.”

31. “Letter from Baldadoch the Soldan of Babilon to all Christian princes, anno 1427,” BL Add MS 38823, f. 47v. Hoby probably translated from either the 1572 or 1593 editions.

32. Discussed in Joad Raymond and Noah Moxham, “News Networks in Early Modern Europe,” in *News Networks*, ed. Raymond and Moxham, 1–16.

33. Döring, 9.

IV

From Babylon to London

Amongst the Lansdowne manuscripts in the British Library is a folio miscellany, Lansdowne MS 775, that is dated to the very end of the sixteenth century, compiled in several hands. Its 193 leaves cover a wide variety of subjects, from genealogy and the English aristocracy (with a particular focus on the Order of the Garter) to celebrated legal cases and detailed descriptions of other countries—Lower Germany, Hungary, Spain, the “German Empire,” France, and Turkey—alongside lists of Spanish and Portuguese nobility. It also includes copies of some of Francis Bacon’s essays, Henry VIII’s will, a letter from Elizabeth I to James VI of Scotland, and a short life of “Mahomett and the howse of the Ottomans” copied from the “History and Tyranny of the Turks” section added to the 1570 edition of John Foxe’s *Actes and Monuments*, “technically the first English history of the Turks.”³⁴ These are not unusual subjects for English miscellanies which, although by definition “multifarious,” often demonstrate a predilection for royal letters, in particular those associated with James I, Elizabeth I, and Henry VIII.³⁵ The specific purpose of Lansdowne MS 775 is difficult to determine, but a pedagogic context seems most likely. It is concerned with subjects one would expect to inform the instruction of provincial Elizabethan gentlemen, and epistolary templates were used by schoolteachers in this period: although, as James Daybell notes, “the distinction between education and entertainment” is often “unclear.”³⁶ Some sort of instruction is implied by the multiple hands in which these documents are copied in a relatively short space of time—the text includes the signatures of Edmund Thurston, Edmund Skorie, John Clarke, and three times John Levitt or Lvyt “de purleigh,” or Purleigh in Essex, who is probably the same man described as a gentleman in an Essex will of 1629, around thirty years later.³⁷

Toward the end of the volume, between Bacon’s essays and “A pedegree of the union of the houses of York and Lancaster” there is what the British Library catalogue describes as “a bantering epistle.” As it is the

34. McJannet, 58.

35. Daybell, 196, 203.

36. Daybell, 205, 207.

37. John Levitt, “Will of John Levitt of Purleigh, Gentleman,” Essex Record Office D/AEW 18/303.

only extant example of a truly English *Sultansbriefe*, the letter warrants close examination. It is reproduced in the miscellany without annotation or comment, and begins,

Balthazar by the grace of Mahound king of kings, lord of lords, Emperour of Babylon, Steward <of> Hell, Porter of paradise Constable of Jerusalem, fflower of the whole world, And Cosen to the great god. If ye lyst to knowe why I am king of kings, for I have vnder my ptection xxxviii kings crowned / And why I am lord of lords, for I am souldan of Surry & Emperour of Babylon for that I hav wedded the Emperours daughter w^{ch} is heare, & I am porter of Paradise, for I have in keeping the Strayte of the wayters which cometh from paradise where no man may com without my lycenc, & why I am Steward of Hell for I have domynion of Mahound & wyld spyrits, I hav certayne clarkes in my Realme that bringeth them to me in what lykenes I wyll have them. And why I am fflower of the world, for that I have that in my keeping that all Christian people pray-seth that is the holy crosse that your lord dyed on, which may not be gotten wthout my licence.³⁸

This opening clearly indicates that the anonymous compiler of this letter was well versed in the *Sultansbriefe* tradition, yet it is unlike any so far recorded. The model is that of the early and widely circulated *Epistola Soldani*, in which Balthasar proclaims his power, critiques the Pope's motives, and threatens bloody retribution if a crusade is to take place. The standard early version is reproduced by Wattenbach, and has obvious similarities: aside from a long list of territories, from "Babiloniorum" to "Ethiopum," in the Wattenbach version Balthasar proclaims himself as follows:

Balthasar dan illustris filius, Soldanus Rex Babiloniorum, Assiriorum, Samaritanorum, Egipciorum, Allexandrinorum, Bardorum, Elamitarum, Ciliciorum, Indorum, Bragmannorum, Persarum, Moabitarum et Ethiopum, Prepositus paradisi terrestris Custoque spelunce crucifixi, Rex Iherosolimitanus, Affrice et Asie dominusque barbarorum ab oriente ad occidentem, Rex regum, Princeps principum, dominus dominancium, Nepos deorum, dominus ab arbore arida usque ad flumen paradisi et ad montem magnum Ararath, Timor

38. "Letter from Balthazar," BL Lansdowne MS 775, ff. 164v–165 (f. 164v).

et angustia inimicorum, Consolacio paganorum, Persecutio christianorum . . .³⁹

[Balthasar the illustrious son, Soldan King of the Babylonians, of the Assyrians, Samaritans, Egyptians, Alexandrians, Barodians, of the Elamites, of Sicilians, of the Indians, the Bragmannites, Persians, Moabites and the Ethiopians, the Provost of the terrestrial Paradise, Custodian of the cave of the crucified one, the King of Jerusalem, of Africa and Asia, and Lord of the barbarians from the east to the west, the King of kings, the Prince of princes, Lord of lords, Grandson of the gods, the Master from the dry tree to the river of Paradise, even to the great mountain of Ararat, the terror and anguish of his enemies, consolation of the pagans, persecution of the Christians . . .]⁴⁰

Balthazar lauds his earthly and divine appellations and possessions: he is Provost of the earthly paradise, but also King of Kings and grandchild of the gods. Given the purpose of his letter, he is furthermore necessarily the consolation of the pagans and persecutor of the Christians. The opening of such letters could be even more grandiloquent: in the widely circulated French version of the letter reproduced by Enguerran de Monstrelet—the one Edward Hoby translated into his commonplace book (and whose version follows below)—Sultan Baldadoch is,

filz Daire, connestable de Jhérico, prévost de Paradis terrestre, nepveu des Dieux, roy des roys, prince des princes, Soudan de Babilonne, de Perse, de Jhérousaïem, de Caldée, de Barbarie, prince d'Africque et d'Ircanie, seigneur de Siche, des Anites, des Payens et des Maritans, maistre Anthipotel, advoué de'Amazone, gardien des Isles, doyen des abbayes, commandeur des temples, froisseur des heaumes, fendeur des escues, perceur de haubers, rompeur de harnois de plates, lanceur de glaives, effrondeur de destriers, tresperceur de presses, destruisieur de chasteaulx, fleur de chevalerie, sangler de hardiesce, aygle de largesse, crémeur des ennemies, espérance d'amis, recouvreur des desconfis, converseur des Juifz, occieur des Chrestiens, gardien des Sarrazins, estandart de Mahomet, seigneur de tout le monde.⁴¹

[sonne of Aire, Constable of Ierico, Prouost of the terestriall paradise, Neuewe of the godde[s], King of kinge[s], Prince of prince[s],

39. Reproduced in Wattenbach, 299.

40. My translation.

41. Reproduced in *La chronique D'Enguerran de Monstrelet en deux livres avec pièces justificatives 1400–1444*, vol. 4 (Paris, 1860), 283–84.

Soldan of Babilon, of Ierusalem, of Chaldie, of Barbarie, Prince of Affrique, and Animal of Arcadia : Lord of Sithia, of the Ainces, Pagans, and Maritans, maister of Achipotel, aduorred by the Amazons, Warden of Isles, Deane of Abbies, Comannder of temples, Crusher of helmette[s], Cleauer of shields, Percer of Tabbards, burster of harness and holde[s], Parter of swords, ouerthrower of barbed horses, thruster thorough of throngs, Destroyer of Castells, Flower of Chiualrie; a wild boar in hardiness, An eagle in bountefulnes, a terror to his enemies, a hope to his friends: recouerer of the discomfited, standard of Mahomet, Lorde of the whole worlde.⁴²

Parisian editions of Monstrelet's text appeared in 1503, 1512, and 1518, and seem likely to have been at least one of the inspirations for the Lansdowne MS 775 author when writing their opening. In both later letters the classical and biblical geographies of Wattenbach's example give way to something more fantastical (adored by Amazons; warden of the Isles); a development accompanied by a yet more hyperbolic tone (crusher of helmets; overthrower of war-horses) and a new universalism. Further evidence can be seen in the shared references to Mahomet and to knightly codes: flower of chivalry and Lord of all the world in Hoby's version of Monstrelet become the rather garbled "flower of the whole world" in the Lansdowne miscellany text. As in each of these examples, the Lansdowne Balthazar speaks as Oriental despots were expected to speak, but with some elements simplified and others added. Territory is less prominent, but there is a new infernal dimension borrowed from the popular *Malleus Maleficarum* (first published in Speyer in 1487) that is not present in other *Sultansbriefe*, and integral to the letter's conception of "Mahound's" religion.

The *Malleus* and its ideas gained particular prominence in the first half of the sixteenth century, when this letter was most likely composed.⁴³ Early versions of the *Epistola Soldani* make no mention of the Prophet at all—reflected in the earlier Balthasar's repeated identification as a pagan in the Wattenbach version—and although it may be indebted to the Monstrelet version, the vision presented in Lansdowne MS 775 is more in keeping with notions of "Mahound" the "Nygromancer" that were circulating in

42. "A Letter sent from [Baldadoch] the Soldan of Babilon to all Christian princes, anno 1427," in Sir Edward Hoby's Commonplace Book, BL Add MS 38823, f. 47v. With thanks to Tomasz Kowalczyk.

43. A prominence demonstrated conclusively in Simon Davies, "Witchcraft and the Book Trade in Early Modern England" (PhD diss., University of Sussex, 2013), 106–18.

early sixteenth-century England. Such a conception of Islam is implied in the 1518 van Doesborch letter but is explicit in the near-contemporary *Here begynneth a lytell treatise of the turkes lawe called Alcaron*. The English Balthazar's infernal aspect may also reflect the Antichrist fervor that gripped the English in the late 1530s and 1540s, exemplified in the dialogue between Lucifer and Beelzebub at the heart of Bernardino Ochino's *A tragoedie or dialogue of the vniuste vsurped primacie of the Bishop of Rome* (1549). The frequency with which Sultan Balthazar is associated with the terrestrial paradise is, however, a relic of earlier cosmographies in which Eden was placed in the East, and two of the four rivers that flow from it (Genesis 2.10–14) were identified with the Tigris and the Euphrates, the latter “the river on which Babylon was built.”⁴⁴ So not only was the holy city of Jerusalem, its relics (including “the holy crosse”), and numerous other Biblical sites under the sultan's control, so was the Garden of Eden itself.

Although the widely lamented loss of holy sites and the inefficacy of later crusade initiatives are raised in previous examples of the *Epistola Soldani* in order to chastise the papacy, with Balthasar in such cases acting as a mouthpiece for internal Christian dissent, Lansdowne MS 775 initially appears to eschew such strategies in order to accentuate boastful bombast and to cultivate absolute difference.⁴⁵ It appears that in the wake of 1453 and subsequent Ottoman expansion there was little appetite for the articulation of any theological common ground. Yet, following the elaborate opening address, Balthazar moves in another unexpected direction: “And I am Cosen to the great god for vsing of my great Lowlery I myght hav byne in England for I am a Christian man as you be. I went to Roome & from there to Rhods & professed the Souldaynes ffayth & was a personable man, he brought me into the Souldons house & I was mad vsher of his Hall & Steward of his whole lands & he dyed & I maryed his wyfe, & she dyed, & I mari-ed the Emperours daughter of Babylon & his heyer, & therof becam the Souldon of Surry” (ff. 164v–65r). The assertion of kinship to God derives directly from the opening claims of the earlier *Epistola Soldani*, but Balthazar's reference to his “great Lowlery” signals a striking departure. The letter began with an unequivocal assertion of adherence to “Mahound,” but now Balthazar reveals he is a Christian man just like King Henry: indeed for his “lowlery” or Lollardy—and

44. Alessandro Scafi, “Mapping Eden: Cartographies of the Earthly Paradise,” in *Mappings*, ed. Denis Cosgrove (London, 1999), 50–70 (52).

45. On this, see Sophia Menache, *Clement V* (Cambridge, Eng., 1998), 117–18.

thus his heresy—he might well have been English.⁴⁶ This is certainly a jibe at Henry’s expense: a later reference to “Edward Prince of Wales” dates Lansdowne MS 775 to between Edward’s birth in 1537 and Henry’s death in early 1547, so it was penned some years after Henry’s break with Rome in 1534. King Henry and his subjects are thus slyly identified with heresy and with an avowed Muslim enemy of the Christian faith.

Following his admission of Lollardy, Balthazar’s letter turns stranger. Readers are confronted with a short biography that collapses history into geography: from Rome he travelled eastward to Rhodes which, he suggests, was then under the control of the “Souldayne” with whom he found employment before the latter’s death. The most likely candidate for this ruler is the Ottoman Sultan Suleiman—widely known across Christendom—but he was very much alive in the 1540s (he died in 1566). A sultanate gained through marriage is then superseded by an empire Balthazar gains through the same means, but the identity of the Emperor of Babylon whose daughter he marries is difficult to divine. He seems unlikely to be Shah Tahmasp, the contemporary Safavid ruler of Persia, whose power and territory did not match that of his Ottoman antagonist. Instead the explicit reference to Babylon seems intended to conjure one of the celebrated Achaemenid Persian rulers of antiquity, most likely Cyrus the Great, who had famously conquered Babylon in 539 BCE, (ironically enough) disenfranchising and killing Belshazzar in the process.⁴⁷ This would make sense of his becoming “Souldon of Surry” (Syria). Although Selim I took Syria in the Ottoman campaigns of 1516–1517, in the letter Balthazar explicitly gains it when he becomes heir to this Emperor of Babylon. No Safavid had ever controlled Syria, nor is this likely to refer to the Assyrian Belshazzar’s brief control of Syria (he acted as regent for his father), but it was one of the territories conquered by Cyrus the Great in 539 BCE. As in van Doesborch’s letter, a specific identification is neither intended or required: the effect of overlaying these different periods and individuals is to populate an imagined and timeless Near East, a location above all familiar to Christian readers in both pre- and post-Islamic contexts, with undifferentiated composite conquering warlords to indicate the scale of their power and brutality but also the continuous threat they were presumed to pose to Christendom in the present.

46. The authority on Lollardy in this period is J. A. F. Thomson, *The Later Lollards 1414–1520* (Oxford, 1965).

47. Related in full in R. P. Dougherty, *Nabonidus and Belshazzar* (New York, 1929).

One further biographical model invoked here is that of “Mahound.” From the earliest examples Christian polemicists had fashioned and re-fashioned an elaborate false biography for the Prophet of Islam that demonstrated there could be no divinity or divine sanction in his life or theology. One strand of this tradition widely reproduced well into the sixteenth century asserted Christian origins. In the B-text of William Langland’s *Vision of Piers Plowman* (c. 1379) it is related as follows: “This Makometh was Cristene man, and for he moste noght ben a pope, / Into Surrie he soughte, and thorough hise sotle wittes” he “in mysbileve men and wommen broughte” (B.xv.398–9, 409).⁴⁸ The later C-text of the poem goes further: “Men fyndeth that Makamede was a man ycrystned, / And a cardinal of court a gret clerk with-alle, / And persuede to haue be pope pryns of holychurche” (C.xviii.165–7).⁴⁹ This narrative presents “Mahound” as a type of Antichrist, cynically marrying his way into power and fabricating a sub-Christian sect in Syria once he had been frustrated in his quest for the papacy.⁵⁰ The dynamics of Balthasar’s flight from Rome and sequence of marriages into power in Syria may well have been drawn from this source. The result is a rich and strange blurring of different contexts—Assyrian, Babylonian, Ottoman, Islamic, all filtered through a Biblical lens—that draw attention to the letter’s artifice and its polemical intent whilst simultaneously asserting a valid contemporaneous relevance.

Balthasar concludes with a flourish that once again presents a twist on the standard model of the *Epistola Soldani* tradition. He writes, “And so I send now to you Henry the viii king of England ffrance & Ireland, & to your Edward Prince of Wales, yf ye wyll wedd my daughter I wylbe a christian man wth all my Realme & Regions & they that wyll not shalbe burned & I wyll get my daughter viii myllions of <fyne> gould & pay all in Sovraignes & I shall deliver vnto you the Holly Crosse that your lord died on & the Speare that smote him to the harte wth many other Relics that I have in my keeping & I shall make ye Emperour of xviii kinges lands & so fare ye well” (f. 165r). In two much earlier examples of the *Epistola Soldani* the fictional sultan had offered his daughter’s hand to Christian monarchs because she had converted to Christianity and was

48. The original is quoted from William Langland, *The Vision of Piers Plowman* [the B-text], ed. A. V. C. Schmidt (London, 1995).

49. Quoted in Dorothee Metlitzki, *The Matter of Araby in Medieval England* (New Haven, 1977), 199.

50. Dimmock, *Mythologies*, 14.

thus disposable. In Lansdowne MS 775, the same offer—if accepted—will instead result in Balthazar's conversion and the forced turning of all his subjects to Christ. The conversion of the Ottoman sultan, often via a Christian or formerly Christian wife, was an oft-repeated fantasy amongst Christian divines, and was vigorously pursued by the later English clergyman Hugh Broughton, amongst others.⁵¹ The prospect of a marriage between an English monarch and an Ottoman princess is also reminiscent of another curious and much earlier text, the fourteenth-century *King of Tars*, and a broader medieval tradition of Islamic-Christian marital union which that text exemplifies.⁵² In the letter to Henry, the offer triggers a litany of extraordinary promises: a vast dowry of eight million gold sovereigns (by way of contrast, Anne of Cleves's waived dowry had been one hundred thousand gold florins); the holy cross and the spear which pierced the side of Jesus (a reference to the Christian relics once housed in Byzantium); and an empire in the East.⁵³ How could Henry refuse?

There is, alas, no evidence that Henry VIII saw this letter—indeed, it seems highly unlikely that he did. In striking contrast to the von Doesborch printed letter from the “great Turke,” this English manifestation of the *Sultansbriefe* was initially circulated in manuscript, a mode of “scribal publication” in which satire at the king's expense was possible.⁵⁴ There are likely to have been many more copies in contemporaneous circulation, the result of a stage of “private unrestricted copying,” that are no longer extant and of which Lansdowne MS 775 is a late example.⁵⁵ It is probable that the continuing controversy surrounding the idea of an English monarch in correspondence with the “Turk”—let alone the Antichrist—prevented its eventual publication. Indeed this may have given the letter more than the simple antiquarian appeal of Henrician satire,

51. Hugh Broughton, *The Works of the Great Albionean Divine* (London, 1662), 717.

52. In *The King of Tars*, however, it is a Christian princess who marries a Muslim king, and who eventually brings about his conversion. On this theme in medieval writing, see Metlitzki, *The Matter of Araby*, 136–40.

53. The nature of Anne of Cleves's dowry is discussed in Retha M. Warnicke, *The Marrying of Anne of Cleves: Royal Protocol in Early Modern England* (Cambridge, Eng., 2000), 110. Those Christian relics held in Byzantium are identified in Helen C. Evans, “Byzantium: Faith and Power (1261–1557),” in *Byzantium: Faith and Power (1261–1557)*, ed. Evans (New York, 2004), 5–16 (13–14).

54. Originally Harold Love's term: see Harold Love, *Scribal Publication in Seventeenth-Century England* (Oxford, 1993).

55. Daybell, 190.

for in the 1580s and 1590s a correspondence flourished between Elizabeth I and the Ottoman Sultans Murad III and subsequently Mehmed III, upon which the continuing currency of this letter may be a kind of commentary.⁵⁶

By the early 1540s, when this letter was likely written, Henry was extracting himself from matrimony with Anne of Cleves and was about to embark on the short-lived marriage to Catherine Howard. For the Antichrist-like Emperor of Babylon to offer his daughter's hand is another joke at Henry's expense: the reference to a dowry and the international context suggest it may have been written immediately after the humiliating collapse of the Cleves union in the summer of 1540. Satirically or otherwise, the letter also reflects Henry's own interests in geography, in sartorial spectacle, and in the material products of Islamic cultures beyond Christendom. His royal palaces were adorned with over five hundred carpets "of Turkey making," some of which accompanied him when he travelled.⁵⁷ He also commissioned a sequence of garments in the "Turkey style."⁵⁸ At a Westminster mummary in February 1510 Henry and his entourage had dressed as "Turks, Russians, Prussians and Moors" and for a marriage ceremony in July 1536 Henry rode through London "in a masque of Turkish garments."⁵⁹ The latter case, which took place as Henry was being castigated as the "second Turk" in many Christian courts for his divorce and break with Rome, offers another context for the satirical intent of Lansdowne MS 775.⁶⁰ Yet an alliance with the Ottomans or any other Islamic ruler was by no means an impossibility for Henry at this point. Francis I of France signed just such an arrangement in 1535, emphatically drawing the Ottomans into the factional politics of Christendom, and Henry's declaration of war against France in 1543 was in part justified because Francis had omitted the "duetie and office of a good christian prynce" by having "for a long time and season ayded the great Turke."⁶¹ Despite its infernal spirits and its inventive geographies, and like

56. The early part of which is discussed, reproduced, and contextualized in Skilliter, 49–200.

57. Henry's collection is explored in Gerald MacLean, *Looking East: English Writing and the Ottoman Empire Before 1800* (Basingstoke, 2007), 34 and in John Mills, "The Coming of the Carpet to the West," in *The Eastern Carpet in the Western World: From the 15th to the 17th Century*, ed. Donald King and David Sylvester (London, 1983), 11–23 (19).

58. Henry VIII's taste for the "Turkey style" is explored further in Matthew Dimmock, *Elizabethan Globalism: England, China and the Rainbow Portrait* (New Haven and London, 2019), 226–27.

59. Ian Lancashire, *Dramatic Texts and Records of Britain: A Chronological Topography to 1558* (Toronto, 1984), 191, 264.

60. Dimmock, *New Turkes*, 20–48.

61. Quoted in Dimmock, *New Turkes*, 42.

the 1518 van Doesborch epistle, the Lansdowne miscellany letter had a powerful contemporary charge.

V

Legacies

These two English *Sultansbriefe*—one rarely discussed, the other completely unknown—can now be seen as remarkable manifestations of a long tradition that places the fictional epistle at the heart of Anglo-Christian negotiations and conceptions of news in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. Old modes gain new urgency: the repeated layering of new information mingles histories and geographies to create farrago forms that in turn mold perceptions, fictions, and policies. Whether read as news or satire and in print or manuscript *Sultansbriefe* purported to open up diplomatic channels and to reveal the voice of the “great Turke” or “Souldayne.” The result is a compressed, distorted, and inherently malleable version of the world beyond Christendom which is authorized by epistolary convention and populated by belligerent potentates locked in timeless Saidian repetition.⁶² Although increasingly designated “Turkish,” the composite nature of this voice and the folding of multiple histories into specific places—Syria, Babylon, Constantinople—has a curiously deracinating effect. At a moment when new elisions of stock, people (*gens*), nation (*natio*), and place were enabling ever more exclusionary conceptions of racial identity in England and elsewhere in Europe, the “Turk” that emerges from the *Sultansbriefe* tradition defies either easy categorization or easy othering.⁶³ This was a familiar register that demanded recognition: the exemplary voice of a peerless despot that was simultaneously a reflection of the heterogeneous Euro-Asian empire these sultans governed, and a foil to the influential model of ethno-religious purity concurrently being pursued in sixteenth-century Iberia. The voice these letters showcased had lasting influence in other, more immediate ways, shaping the character and sound of the “Eastern” tyrant on the early modern English stage, and is initially recognizable in the Assyrian voices of Persian plays such

62. Edward Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* (1978; rpt. Harmondsworth, 1995), 96.

63. These developments and the associated shift in terminology are considered in different ways (and with different conclusions) in Robert Bartlett, *The Making of Europe: Conquest, Colonization and Cultural Change 950–1350* (London, 1993), 197–98, 236–42; and in Ania Loomba and Jonathan Burton, *Race in Early Modern England: A Documentary Companion* (Basingstoke, 2007), 1–28.

as *The Wars of Cyrus* (1576?).⁶⁴ This same voice, more fully realized, then becomes conspicuously Ottoman in English plays later in the century, beginning with its first great staging in Marlowe's *Tamburlaine the Great*.

For Christian readers the most remarkable element of the extraordinary life of the Turco-Mongol warlord Timūr was not his rise from shepherd to become "arch-monarch of the world" (*II* 4.1.150), but rather his diversion of the Ottomans from their siege of Constantinople and comprehensive destruction of their armies at the Battle of Ankara (1402). The extent of Timūr's inclination to Christianity differs across Greek and Latin sources, but his intervention just as that Eastern Christian bastion was about to fall was widely interpreted as confirmation of a Christian God's hand in human affairs.⁶⁵ Marlowe draws on such material when introducing the Ottoman Sultan Bajazeth at the beginning of his third act, unwilling to be distracted from "our dreadful siege / Of the famous Grecian Constantinople" (*I* 3.1.5–6). Yet Bajazeth knows of Tamburlaine's rise and ambition and—in a passage that is Marlowe's invention—immediately dispatches a messenger to insist that Tamburlaine confine himself to Asia. Among the first lines spoken by a "Great Turk" on an English stage, this ultimatum sounds strikingly like the opening of a *Sultansbriefe*:

Tell him thy lord the Turkish emperor,
Dread lord of Afric, Europe, and Asia,
Great king and conqueror of Graecia,
The ocean Terrene, and the coal-black sea,
The high and highest monarch of the world,
Wills and commands (for say I not 'entreat')
Not once to set his foot in Africa
Or spread his colours in Graecia,
Lest he incur the fury of my wrath. (*I* 3.1.22–30)

64. See in particular the initial words of the Assyrian general Gobrias in *The warres of Cyrus King of Persia* (1594), B1. The play is thought to have been written by Richard Farrant, but its date is a source of dispute. Brawner and others insist it was composed in the late 1570s, whereas Wiggins makes a strong case for a later date, around 1588, which would mean an entirely different relationship between Cyrus and the first part of *Tamburlaine*. See Richard Farrant, *The Wars of Cyrus (1594): An Early Classical Narrative Drama of the Child Actors*, ed. J. Brawner (Urbana, 1942), Martin Wiggins in association with Catherine Richardson, *British Drama 1533–1642: A Catalogue; Volume II: 1567–1589* (Oxford, 2012), 435–36, and Wiggins' earlier articles on the topic.

65. The evidence for this is collected in *Christopher Marlowe: The Plays and their Sources*, ed. Vivien Thomas and William Tydeman (London, 1994), 82–168. Only one of Marlowe's potential sources—Conrad Clauserus' translation of Laonicus Chalcocondylas, *De origine et rebus Turcorum* of 1556—refers to a provocative letter sent from Bayazid to Timūr, which insults the latter's wife and gives him justification for war. Although obscure, it may have been Marlowe's inspiration, but

Unlike earlier letters this message is not intended for a Christian recipient, but it otherwise shares the tone and structure of standard *Sultansbriefe*. The often-noted sympathy Marlowe's Tamburlaine has for Christians—present in numerous sources, and exemplified in *I* 3.3.44–54—may well have been dramatically heightened by his use of this tradition. Bajazeth begins by outlining the vast extent of his domains and then warns of the folly of prosecuting war against him, in a tone disdainfully incredulous that anyone dare challenge him. Like Marboryn Ramosyn he does not “entreat”; he “commands.” This same tone continues into the following lines:

Tell him I am content to take a truce
Because I hear he bears a valiant mind.
But if, presuming on his silly power,
He be so mad to manage arms with me,
Then stay thou with him; say I bid thee so;
And if before the sun have measured heaven
With triple circuit thou regret us not,
We mean to take his morning's next arise
For messenger he will not be reclaimed,
And mean to fetch thee in despite of him. (*I* 3.1.31–40)

In the same manner as the earlier composite sultans, Bajazeth graciously offers peace if his demands are met, acknowledges a shared respect for martial valiance, and ends with a threat of contemptuous destruction if he is ignored. By 1587 Marlowe could conceivably have acquired copies of actual letters from the Ottoman Sultan Murad III to Elizabeth I, but unlike those letters he follows a pattern and a tone of belligerent threat intrinsic to the *Sultansbriefe* tradition, and which itself owes something to the considerable impact of the Timūrid conquests, and those of the Mongols before them.⁶⁶ Nowhere else could he access such a voice, for in none of Marlowe's sources does Sultan Bayazid speak.⁶⁷ So successful is its communication of a specifically Eastern imperial aggression and

it is very different from Bajazeth's letter in the play which follows the *Sultansbriefe* tradition. See Thomas and Tydeman, 142–43.

66. Letters from the “Great Turk” to Elizabeth were already circulating in manuscript long before Hakluyt's editing and reproduction of them in 1589. For instance, the one-time Mayor of Leicester, John Herrick, wrote to his son William, a goldsmith in London, in July 1585. In that letter he thanks William for sending him a copy of a letter “sent to ye Queens majesty from the Great Turk” and refers to others in his possession: Bod MS Eng hist.c.474, f. 78.

67. McJannet, 65–71.

despotism that Marlowe adapted this voice for each of the major roles in the *Tamburlaine* plays, developing a self-aggrandizing rhetoric—something Emily Bartels identifies as the “chief heroic currency” of his two-part epic—that occasionally teeters on the edge of parody, as in the self-inflation and contemptuous mocking that marks the meeting of Tamburlaine and Bajazeth (*I* 3.3.61–165).⁶⁸ The success of this voice is demonstrated in how quickly it became a fixture on the English stage, and how other dramatists then sought to mock what Ben Jonson called its “furious vociferation” as, for example, Shakespeare would explicitly do in the absurd bombast of Pistol in *2 Henry IV*.⁶⁹ It is furthermore no accident that Tamburlaine’s final orgy of violence takes place in and around Babylon, a suitably apocalyptic location, but also a city central to two centuries of *Sultansbriefe*. These voices, the composite figures that speak them, and the different versions that resound in those “Turk plays” that followed, are a further legacy of these satiric sultanic epistles.

The hitherto unknown permutations of the *Sultansbriefe* tradition in Tudor England demonstrate the extent to which English writers and readers could engage with such material in playful and unexpected ways, from early sixteenth-century print to late Elizabethan “Turk plays.” Documents that originate as wonderful polemical ventriloquisms become comic and satiric; histories coalesce; new forms of print-news emerge. The oblique and fantastical realm enabled by this kind of fictional epistle proves extraordinarily malleable: the Pope can be defied; a sultan can be both Lollard and Mahometan; and Henry VIII might marry a sultan’s daughter. But it might also be transmuted on the English stage into an apparently authentic diplomatic mode of communication enabling one supreme potentate to chastise another. All are generated by the remarkable power of the defiant voice that these letters articulate, a voice that demands engagement on its own terms and which posed insistent, fundamental questions about the difference between those within and those without Christendom.

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68. Emily Bartels, *Spectacles of Strangeness: Imperialism, Alienation, and Marlowe* (Philadelphia, 1993), 67.

69. Ben Jonson, *Timber, or Discoveries* (London, 1640), N4v. The most obvious example of Shakespeare ridiculing the voice associated with the “Turk play” through Pistol appears in act two, scene two of *2 Henry IV*, where he quotes directly from a series of plays of that genre.