

Ottoman Sultans in English Drama Between 1580 - 1660

1580 - 1660 Yılları Arası İngiliz Tiyatrosunda Osmanlı Sultanları

*Sıla Şenlen**

Abstract

As the British were becoming more familiar with the Ottoman Turks, many English playwrights of the Renaissance Period composed plays about the Ottoman Turks. One of the 'Turkish' topics employed by the British playwrights was the Ottoman Sultans. They tended to concentrate on the Ottoman Sultans reigning from 1360 to 1603, such as Murad I, Murad III, Bayezid I, Bayezid II, Mehmed II, Selim I, Süleyman I and Mustafa.

Keywords: Theatre of the English Renaissance Period, Ottoman Sultans, Historical Plays

Özet

Rönesans Dönemi İngiliz tiyatro eserlerinde Osmanlı Türk Sultanlarını konu alan birçok oyun vardır. Bu oyunlar, genel olarak 1360-1603 yılları arasında hüküm sürmüş Osmanlı padişahlarını sahneye taşımıştır. Bu padişahlar I. Murat, III. Murat, I. Bayezid, II. Beyazıt, II. Mehmed, I. Selim, I. Süleyman ve oğlu Mustafa'yı kapsamaktadır.

Anabtar Sözcükler: Rönesans Dönemi İngiliz Tiyatrosu, Osmanlı Sultanlar, Tarih Oyunları

As a result of the Ottoman Empire's multiple attacks on Europe and Christian cities, both the elite and general audience in Britain were becoming more and more familiar with 'Turkish' (Ottoman) history and rulers. In composing 'Turkish' plays, dramatists depended mainly on chronicles for their historical material, but combined it with popular notions about the Turks and fantasy to conclude the plot in a Christian victory.

Most of the plays about the Ottoman Turks employed plots about the Ottoman Sultans well-known in Europe. The English playwrights of the Renaissance Period tended to concentrate on the Ottoman Sultans reigning from 1360 to 1603, namely, Murad I, Murad III, Bayezid I, Bayezid II, Mehmed

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II, Selim I, Süleyman I and Mustafa. In dealing with Sultans, the dramatists generally combined stereotypical images traditionally associated with the Turks such as their 'evilness', 'lust', 'treachery' and capability of 'double-dealing' with the information their spectators knew about the subject based on the numerous publications on the life and military actions of Ottoman rulers. In this respect, this paper presents an overview of the portrayal of the Ottoman Sultans on the British stage between 1580-1660.

The earliest Ottoman Sultan to be dramatized in English drama is Murad I as 'Amurath' in *The Couragious Turk, or Amurath the First* (1615-23) by Thomas Goffe¹. The first two acts show the infatuation of Amurath for Eumorphe, a concubine, and the circumstances of her murder by him. The rest of the play illustrates the conquest of Servia (Serbia) and Bulgaria, and Amurath's murder by Cobelitz, a wounded Christian captain.

Murat III appears in George Peele's *The Battle of Alcazar* (1588-89)². The plot revolves around Abdelmelec, who is seeking revenge on his evil nephew. Amurath sends his janissaries and Calcepius Bassa to serve Abdelmelec in the war. Although Amurath is depicted as being the son of 'Soliman' (Sultan Süleyman I) in *The Battle of Alcazar*, he is actually his grandson. Throughout the play Amurath is praised several times, with attributes or titles such as 'mightie', the 'Emperor of the East', the 'Emperor of the World' and 'God of earthly kings'. Also the sub-plot deals with the English, and King of Portugal, who have come to Africa to plant the Christian faith.

One of the earliest examples of the representation of Bayezid I appears as 'Beyazeth' in Christopher Marlowe's *Tamburlaine the Great, Part I* (1587)³. *Part I* of the two-part drama, is based on the battle of Angora (Ankara) and the captivation of Bayezid with his wife. In *Tamburlaine the Great, Part I*, Tamburlaine's victory over the 'Turkish' army results in the captivation of Bayazeth (Beyazid) and his wife, Zabina. The rest of the play is set in Tamburlaine's palace where Bayazeth and Zabina are publicly subjected to ridicule. He is chained and kept in an iron cage, fed with left-overs and used as Tamburlaine's footstool, while Zabina is made a servant. Bayazeth, not being able to withstand such insults commits suicide by smashing his head on the metal bars, and is followed by his wife. Although the characters and events in the play seem extremely theatrical, the highlights of the events are mostly

¹ Thomas Geoffrey, *The Couragious Turk, or Amurath the First, and The Raging Turke, or Baiazet the Second*, The Malone Society Reprints, Oxford: Oxford University Press: 1963; reprinted 1974.

² George Peele, *The Battle of Alcazar*, edited by Khalid Bekkaoui. Fez: Moroccan Cultural Centre: 2001.

³ Christopher Marlowe, *The First Part of Tamburlaine the Great*. In *Christopher Marlowe: The Complete Plays*, edited with an introduction by J.B. Steane. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd. 1969; reprinted 1980, p. 101-179.

historic, apart from the changes made to the original names in some cases. Another play about Beyazeth II is Thomas Goffe (Geoffrey)'s *The Raging Turke, or, Bayazeth the Second* (1613)⁴. The play presents a series of plots involving intrigues and treacheries between Bajazet II, his three sons, bashas and generals.

The next sultan to be portrayed is Selim I, also known as Selim 'the Grim'. He ascended the throne of the Ottoman Empire by forcing the abdication of his father, Beyazeth II, and by killing his brothers. He also defeated the Mamluks in Syria and Egypt, and thus assumed the title of 'Caliph', a religious title equivalent to the vice-gerent of the Prophet. With this title, he became the recognised religious head of forty million of his 'subjects' and the spiritual and temporal head of the empire. In this respect, he gained control over the holy cities of Mecca and Medina. Selim I appears in the anonymous play *Selimus, Emperour of the Turkes* (1588)⁵ concerning the death of Bajazet II by means of poison, administered by Selim, and the execution of his two brothers Corcut and Acomat. He also appears in Christopher Marlowe's *Jew of Malta*⁶ first performed in 1589-90. Although the play centres around the Jewish character Barabas, Selim 'Calymath' comes to Malta to collect the ten years tribute and the plot revolves around getting rid of this problem.

The next Sultan to be dramatized in history is Mehmed II (Mahomet), also known as Mahomet 'Conqueror'. The plays incorporate sections from the legend of Mahomet and Irene. In this legend, 'Mohamet' (Mehmet II) falls in love with Irene, or 'Hyereene', a Christian captive in Constantinople, and thus neglects his duties as a ruler. Then he kills her to prove that his duties are more important and thus regains his control over the janissaries. This subject has been first portrayed by George Peele in the *Turkish Mahomet and Hyrin the Fair Greeke* (1594) which has been lost⁷. Also Gilbert Swinhoe's *Unhappy Fair Irene* (written 1640; printed 1658)⁸. The play is set in 'Hadrianople' (Constantinople). Irene, a Christian captive rescued from the hands of a common soldier, is presented to Mahomet by a captain. The sultan falls in love with her and summons a Mufty to marry them. Irene asks him to delay it for a week and is granted this request, but in fact, she has secretly arranged for her lover, a Greek nobleman named Paeologus, to meet her at the city gate and escape. In the

⁴ Thomas Geoffrey, *The Courageous Turke, or Amurath the First, and The Raging Turke, or Baiazet the Second*, The Malone Society Reprints, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963; reprinted 1974.

⁵ Daniel J. Vitkus, *Three Turk Plays from early Modern England*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2000.

⁶ Christopher Marlowe, *Jew of Malta*. In *Christopher Marlowe: The Complete Plays*, edited with an introduction by J.B. Steane. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd., 1969; reprinted 1980, p.341-431.

⁷ Samuel Chew, *The Crescent and the Rose*, New York: Octagon Books Inc. 1965. p. 483

⁸ Gilbert Swinhoe. *The Tragedy of the Unhappy Fair Irene*, London, 1658.

meanwhile, Irene puts off the Sultan with fair promises, who becomes more and more infatuated with her. As a result, he neglects his responsibilities and the Janissaries beat upon the palace door. Mohamet, in order to restore their trust in him kills Irene. Paeologus, returning to meet her and escape, finds her corpse and commits suicide.

Another play resembling the legend of Mohamet and Irene is Lodowick Carlell's *Osmond the Great Turk*⁹, subtitled *The Noble Servant* (1638) The central plot revolves around the love triangle between an Emperor Melchoshus, Osmond the royal slave and Despina as the Christian slave in an unnamed captured city. Osmond saves Despina from the hands of two janissaries, to whom the Emperor falls in love. Although Osmond and Despina secretly love each other, but when Despina confesses her love Osmond rejects her due to his loyalty to the Emperor. The Emperor becomes more and more occupied with the slave, and thus the janissaries conspire against him. Melchoshus, to regain his control over them, slays Despina.

The best known Ottoman Sultan in Europe, due to the duration of his rule and the boundaries of the Ottoman Empire in his reign, is Süleyman the 'Law-maker'. Sultan Süleyman first appeared as 'Solyman' in the Latin play *Solymanidea Tragodia* (1581) of unknown authorship. The play opens with a prologue by the ghost of Selymus (Selim), the father of Solyman, in which he foretells the ruin of his house through the crime of Rhode, against her stepson. Solyman is disturbed by his son Mustapha's popularity. Rhode, Selymus' mother, after consulting a wicked official named Roxanes, tries to direct events in order to win Selymus the throne, by creating hatred for Mustapha in Solyman's heart, instead of imprisoning him. Then Rhode and Roxanes bring accusations against Mustapha, he is deprived of his offices; but an old vow made by the Sultan is his supposed safeguard against capital punishment. However, he is poisoned without Solyman's knowledge. Mustapha has a dream where Mahomet tells him that he will be with him in Paradise in three days, which Mustapha interprets to mean that he will ascend the throne in the promised time. An interview follows between Solyman and his son, and the Sultan convinced of Mustapha's loyalty and innocence, countermands an order he has given for his execution. However, a messenger arrives, telling Solyman that twelve eunuchs have strangled Mustapha¹⁰.

Another two tragedies in which Süleyman appears are Thomas Kyd's *Soliman and Perseda* (1589-1599)¹¹ and William Davenant's *The Siege of Rhodes*¹²

⁹ Lodowick Carlell, *Osmond the Great Turk*, Introduction by Allardyce Nicoll, The Berkshire Series II. Berkshire: The Golden Cockerel Press, 1926.

¹⁰ Samuel Chew, *The Crescent and the Rose*, New York: Octagon Books Inc., 1965. p. 500-501.

¹¹ Frederick S. Boas (ed.), *The Works of Thomas Kyd*, Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1955.

(1656)¹³. More than fifty years separate the first production of Thomas Kyd's *Soliman and Perseda* (1598-9) and Davenant's *The Siege of Rhodes* (1656), but both deal with Sultan Süleyman and the historical background of the siege of Rhodes. After an unsuccessful siege in 1480, the Ottomans captured the island of Rhodes in 1523 and ruled it until 1912¹⁴. This event which took place in the reign of Sultan Süleyman horrified Christendom. In both tragedies, Süleyman occupies a central role with Ibrahim Eraste (Erastus in Kyd's play, and Alphonso in Davenant's) and Perseda, a fictional character. Eraste was a slave of young Süleyman when he was governing Magnesia and rose to become his constant companion and vizier when he became a Sultan. However, in the midst of a brilliant career as general, administrator, and diplomat, Eraste was killed by Süleyman's command in 1536.

In *Soliman and Perseda*, Perseda, a young maiden of Rhodes, laments the absence of her lover Erastus, a Rhodian knight. She sees Lucina wearing the chain which she had given Erastus and unaware that Erastus lost it and the chain was found by Lucina's lover, Perseda accuses Erastus of unfaithfulness. Erastus, on his attempt to regain the chain, causes the death of Lucina's lover and flees to Constantinople. Perseda decides to follow Erastus but is captured by the Turks, and is presented to Soliman. On laying eyes on her, the Sultan falls in love with her, but she rejects him threatening to commit suicide. At that moment Erastus arrives on the premises and the long lost lovers are reunited. Soliman promises their marriage and the couple leave for Rhodes. Soliman, still devoured by passion, and mortified at having allowed Perseda to leave, listens to Brusor, his counsellor, who suggests that he should get rid of Erastus by charging him with a crime. Erastus is called back by Soliman for a visit and, on his arrival, is accused of treachery and is beheaded. Perseda, to avenge his death, disguises herself as a man and puts up a brave resistance against the Turks. As the Turks advance to the walls of Rhodes, Perseda appears and defies them. She then falls but, before dying, she kills Soliman by kissing him with poisoned lips.

The latest Ottoman personage to be dramatized in Renaissance drama is Mustafa, Sultan Süleyman's son, in Fulke Greville's *Mustapha* (1608)¹⁵. Greville's play is a closet drama¹⁶ about the closing years of the reign of Süleyman the

¹² The first part of *Siege of Rhodes* was performed in 1656, while the second part was produced after the Restoration in 1661, and a longer version of both parts was published in 1663.

¹³ Janet Clare (ed.), *The English Republic 1649-66: Plays and Entertainments*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002.

¹⁴ In 1309, knights of St.Jean of Jerusalem, formed a strong fleet in order to protect the South Mediterrean against the Ottomans.

¹⁵ Fulke Greville, *Mustapha*, in *Poems and Dramas of Fulke Greville*, Vol.II, edited by Geoffrey Bullough, Edinburg: Oliver and Boyd, 1939.

¹⁶ A play intended to be read, rather than acted on stage.

'Magnificent' and the murder of his eldest son Mustapha. In 1553, Süleyman caused the death of his son Mustapha under the influence of evil counsellors and his wife Hurem (Khourrem). This was an act that exemplified 'Turkish cruelty'.

The Ottoman Sultans reigning between 1360-1603, were personages that were popularly illustrated in English Drama between 1580-1660. The plays concerning the Sultans mostly elaborate upon the most negative fictions that Christians and society had fabricated about the Turks. Turkish rulers portray characteristics of an 'ideal' ruler, such as civility, kindness, generosity and tolerance, but they are also not far off from being scheming, tyrannical and unscrupulous.

Their representation resembles allegorical characters symbolising the Orient, the East or Islam. They are compared to Christian characters, who are the embodiment of Christian doctrines and the difference between Turkish Sultans and Christian personage are traced on many social, religious and political levels, such as their understanding of religion, law and politics¹⁷.

¹⁷ For a detailed illustration of the representation of the image of the Turks. See. Sıla Şenlen. "Rönesans Döneminde Osmanlı-İngiliz İlişkileri ve İngiliz Tiyatrosunda Türk İmgesi", *Littera*. Cilt XIX, Haziran 2006 (Ankara), s. 87-92.

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