

Hellish Discourses: Shakespeare's Richard III and Greene's Selimus*

Şeytani Söylemler: Shakespeare'in III. Richard ve Greene'in Selim Karakterleri

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Abstract

The early modern period in England produced a great number of plays dealing with history. Chronicles published during this period played a significant role in the appearances of these plays as they provided playwrights with necessary materials. The aim of these chronicles was partly to legitimize Tudor power and stir up nationalistic feelings among the English nation. Following the excommunication of Queen Elizabeth and the defeat of the Spanish Armada there appeared an interest in the writing of history plays which seems to have met the popular demand on part of the public for the satisfaction of their nationalistic feelings. Written by the majority of the playwrights of the period, histories were not confined to English history plays alone but included plays dealing with the orient and mainly the Ottoman Empire.

Written to justify Tudor ascension to English throne, early modern historiography provided Shakespeare with sufficient materials to bring on stage one of his most famous villains, Richard III. The character of Richard, both in *Henry VI Part 3* and *Richard III* plays is drawn as such that his defeat by the earl of Richmond, later Henry VII at the end of the battle of Bosworth, is welcomed by the Elizabethan audience. Similarly, Selimus, in Robert Greene's play *Selimus*, is presented on stage as a villain who has a great lust for power and who defies both religion and moral values.

Both Richard III and Selimus are fratricides who will stop at nothing before they get their hands on the English and the Turkish crowns respectively. Shakespeare's presentation of Richard III contributes to the formation of the early modern discourse for the justification of Tudor power and Greene's presentation of Selimus contributes to the formation of the evil image of the Turk, prevalent since the medieval times. The aim of this article, through both textual and contextual

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analyses, is to explore the creation of an atheist tyrant, Selimus, in Robert Greene's *Selimus* and transformation of this tyrant into a Machiavellian villain, Richard III, by Shakespeare. It will be argued that both characters are presented on stage as devils incarnate.

Keywords: *Richard III*, *Selimus*, Presentation of the "Turk", Machiavellian, History.

Öz

Erken modern dönem İngiltere'sinde, tarih ile ilgili bir çok tiyatro oyunu üretilmiştir. Bu dönemde yazılan vakayınameler yazarlara gerekli kaynakları sağlamak suretiyle tarihi oyunların ortaya çıkmasında önemli rol oynamışlardır. Vakayınamelerin bir amacı da Tudorların gücünün yasallaştırılması ve İngiliz halkı arasında milliyetçi duyguların uyandırılması olmuştur. Kraliçe Elizabet'in afarozu ve İspanyol Armada'sının yenilgiye uğratılmasını takiben halkın milliyetçi duygularının doyurulması konusundaki taleplerini karşılayacak türden bir tarihi oyun yazma ilgisi ortaya çıkmıştır. Dönemin oyun yazarlarının çoğu tarafından kaleme alınan tarihi oyunlar sadece İngiltere tarihi ile sınırlı kalmamış doğu ve özellikle de Osmanlı İmparatorluğu'nu da konu edinmiştir.

Tudor Hanedanı'nın tahta geçişini haklı çıkarmaya yönelik yazılan erken modern dönem tarihçiliği Shakespeare'e en ünlü "kötü" lerinden birisi olan III. Richard'ı sahneye taşıyabilmesi için yeter sayıda kaynak sağlamıştır. *VI. Henry 3. Bölüm* ve *III. Richard* oyunlarındaki Richard karakteri öyle bir çizilmiştir ki, onun Bosworth savaşında daha sonra VII. Henry olarak tahta geçecek olan Richmond Kontu tarafından yenilgiye uğratılması Elizabeth dönemi izleyicileri tarafından ayakta alkışlanmıştır. Benzer şekilde, Robert Greene'in *Selimus* oyunundaki Selim (Yavuz Sultan Selim) karakteri de güce susamış, dini ve ahlaki değerleri hiçe sayan bir "kötü adam" olarak sahneye taşınmıştır.

Hem Richard hem de Selim sırasıyla İngiliz ve Osmanlı tahtını ele geçirmeden hiçbir şekilde durdurulamayacak kardeş katilleri olarak betimlenmiştir. Shakespeare'in III. Richard tasviri Tudor Hanedanı'nın tahta geçişini yasallaştıran erken modern dönem söylemine katkı yaparken, Greene'in Selim tasviri de, Orta Çağ'dan beri süregelen, "kötü Türk" imajının yaratılmasına katkıda bulunmuştur. Bu makalenin amacı, metinsel ve bağlamsal çözümleme yoluyla Robert Greene'in ateist ve zorba Selim karakterinin Shakespeare tarafından III. Richard olarak Makyevelist bir "kötü"ye dönüştürülmesini irdelemektir. Her iki karakterin de şeytanın vücudunda gelmiş hali olarak betimlendiği de tartışılacaktır.

Anahtar kelimeler: *III. Richard*, *Selimus*, "Türk" tasviri, Makyevelist, Tarih.

English drama before the Reformation was national in the sense that it was "thoroughly incorporated into the universal social life of the nation" (Holderness, 1992, p. 117). It covered the "complex structural totality of social life in town and country, village and hall, metropolis and province" (Holderness, 1992, p. 117). An example for this type of drama is the morality plays of early Tudor period which took place as a common social activity participated in by all social classes of the nation (Southern, 1980, pp. 69-70). However the Tudor state intentionally and systematically produced a national culture which would express, confirm and naturalise its own power, and the literature, particularly the chronicles and the drama written in this period played an important role in

promoting this intention. Such patriotic prose chronicles as those by Raphael Holinshed (1577) and John Stow (1580); or verse chronicles by William Warner (1586) and the additions of 1587 to the *Mirror for Magistrates*; and works such as Richard Hakluyd's *The Principall Navigations, Voyages and Discoveries of the English Nation* (1589-1600) were written with a possible aim of raising consciousness for national unity by rewriting past events and emphasising the glory of Tudor Dynasty (Holderness, 1992, pp. 120-122).

In terms of politics, the growing sense of national unity gained momentum when Queen Elizabeth was excommunicated by a papal bull in 1570. Although Pope Pius V's aim was to replace Elizabeth with the Catholic Queen of Scots, Mary Stuart, his attempt failed as the English people sided with their queen who became a symbol of English nationalism. Additionally, the defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588, which meant a decisive victory against the Catholic Spain, further contributed to the growth of nationalistic feelings among the English (Mattingly, 1959, p. 20). Hence, parallel to the political and religious developments in England, there seems to have begun an interest in the writing of history plays which appear to have met the popular demand on part of the playgoing public for the satisfaction of their national sentiments. There is no doubt about the popularity of history plays during, roughly, the last quarter of the sixteenth century. From (c. 1586), the estimated date of composition of the anonymous play *The Famous Victories of Henry V* to the early years of James I, when they began to disappear, the number of history plays "accounted for more than a fifth of the plays written, sharing the popularity of 'the multiform romantic drama' with which they overlapped" (Salingar, 1993, p. 62). William Shakespeare, Robert Greene, Christopher Marlowe, George Peele, Thomas Dekker, Thomas Heywood, and Michael Drayton were among the major contributors to this vogue.

This popularity of history plays, however, was not confined to English histories alone. The rapid Turkish expansion throughout Europe in the same period also created a growing interest in the Turks and their history. The Turks posed a continuous threat to Christian monarchs in Europe and none of the countries in Europe felt safe from its possible invasion (Wann, 1915, p. 430). For the English public, then, the Turk was not simply an imaginary "evil" but a nearing Islamic power threatening both their existence and religion. Hence, there appeared, between the years 1586 and 1611, 32 plays dealing with the orient, mainly the Ottoman Turks. Many playwrights such as Marlowe, Greene, Peele, Dekker and Shakespeare who wrote English history plays also wrote plays dealing with the Turks. Most of these plays, like the patriotic chronicles and history plays, also played significant roles in both the growing sense of national unity in England—since Turks were a serious threat to all Europe—and the creation of the evil image of the Turk (Şahiner, 2008, pp. 139, 143).

Written to justify Tudor ascension to English throne, this early modern historiography provided Shakespeare with sufficient materials to bring on stage one of his most famous villains, Richard III who "dominates the stage with his demonism" (Pearlman, 1992, p. 429). The character of Richard, both in *3Henry VI* and *Richard III* plays is drawn as

such that his defeat by the earl of Richmond, later Henry VII at the end of the battle of Bosworth, is welcomed by the Elizabethan audience, leaving no doubt whatsoever in the minds of the public that Tudor ascension to the English crown was not only right but also of necessity. His unmatched villainy in the plays brings this character very close, if not fully, to Antichrist. Similarly, Selimus, in Robert Greene's play *Selimus*, is presented on stage as a villain who has a great lust for power and who defies both religion and moral values. His evilness is justified even more easily because he already belonged to the much hated religion, Islam, and the much feared and hated race, the Turk. Both Selimus and Richard III are fratricides who will stop at nothing before they get their hands on the Turkish and English crowns, respectively. Although Shakespeare was true to his sources just as Greene was to his, the facts of history contradict with both characters of the plays. Richard III is handled unfairly by Shakespeare¹ just as Selimus was by Greene². Shakespeare's presentation of Richard III contributes to the formation of the early modern discourse for the justification of Tudor power, and Greene's presentation of Selimus contributes to formation of the evil image of the Turk, prevalent since the medieval times (Patrides, 1963; Jones, 1978). The aim of this article is to explore the creation of an atheist tyrant, Selimus, in Robert Greene's *Selimus* and transformation of this tyrant into a Machiavellian villain, Richard III, by Shakespeare. It will be argued that both characters are presented on stage as devils incarnate.

Greene's *Selimus*, it is generally agreed, was written in 1588 and Shakespeare's *3Henry VI* and *Richard III* were written in 1591-92 and 1593-94 respectively. Following the production and performance of *3Henry VI* on stage in 1592, Greene attacked Shakespeare, in his pamphlet *A Groats-worth of Wit* by parodying a line from this play (I. iv. 137), as an "vpstart Crow, beautified with our feathers, that with his *Tygers hart wrapt in a Players hide*, supposes he is as well able to bombast out a blanke verse as the best of you" (qtd. in Cairncross, 1989, p. xli). Shakespeare did not respond to this attack in the same manner as Greene, however, his answer did come in the form of a play, *Richard III*, after the death of Greene. He developed the character of Richard in *Richard III* to such an extent that "no figures in the plays thought to precede this play" (Pearlman, 1992, p. 411). In fact, Shakespeare's answer to Greene in the form of a play reminds us of Richard's own words in *3Henry VI* when he throws a decapitated head on the stage and says: "Speak thou for me, and tell them what I did" (I. i. 16). Similarly, Shakespeare throws onto the London stages a play that speaks for him and tells everyone what he did. Hence, *Richard III* appears as the best answer to Greene's attack in which Richard as a character surpasses Selimus in Greene's *Selimus*. In fact, with the character Richard,

¹ See, for example Susan E. Leas. "Richard III, Shakespeare, and History", where she also gives an annotated bibliography. Leas argues that Shakespeare "would have wished to glorify Queen Elizabeth's grandfather Henry Tudor, belittling his enemy Richard III. He probably believed that he was presenting a truthful picture of the last Plantagenet's reign. But to accept this version is to overlook the facts of history" 1215.

² Greene was also true to his sources when he wrote *Selimus*, but we know that the sources he consulted during the composition of this play were in contradiction with the facts of history. For a more objective description of Selimus, see, Uzunçarşılı's *Osmanlı Tarihi: İstanbul'un Fethinden Kanuni Sultan Süleyman'ın Ölümüne Kadar*, 238-248.

Shakespeare “introduced the new political atheism into historical drama, making it clear that this play would not merely exploit the allegorical tradition but would also amplify and supplement its traditional abstractions with a modern horror” (Pearlman, 1992, p. 423). Richard himself claims: “I can add colours to the chameleon, / Change shapes with Proteus for advantages, / And set the murderous Machiavel to school” (*3Henry VI*, III. ii. 191-193). Indeed, compared to his “skills at intrigue and villainy, the infamous Machiavelli is but a schoolboy” (Pearlman, 1992, p. 423). The “political atheism” of *Richard III*, mentioned by Pearlman in the above lines is already matched in *Selimus* in terms of the hellish discourses it contains. In 1603, about fifteen years after *Selimus* was written, part of Selimus’s famous soliloquy (ii. 75-136) where he discloses his devilish character, was brought to the trial of Sir Walter Raleigh under the title, “Certaine hellish verses devysed by that Atheist and traitor Ralegh as it is said” (Jacquot 1953, p.1-2) in order to prove his atheism. These lines defy the concepts of kingship and God as “mere fictions” (*Selimus*, ii, 102; Certain hellish verses, 27). Both Selimus’s soliloquy and the fifty-nine lines of the poem “Certain hellish verses”, allegedly written by Raleigh, are identical. The only difference is in the line that follows. Selimus claims: “[a]nd if they were not, Selim thinks they were” (ii, 103). In the “hellish verses”, the word Selim is replaced and the line reads as “and if they were not yet (I thinke) they were” (28). Jacquot argues that the lines of the poem “indicate fairly clearly that Ralegh’s enemies used the text of the play” (5) as an evidence for his atheism.

Both plays have their differences—we do not find the “psychological depth” (Pearlman, 1992, p. 411) in *Selimus* that we find in *Richard III*—but they also share a great deal in common. The major characters of the plays, Selimus and Richard, both commit fratricide and infanticide; Selimus kills both his brothers Corcut (xxii. 81-85) and Acomat (xxix. 30-31), and Richard kills his brother Clarence (I. iv. 225-268) and causes the death of Edward IV. These are the kind of crimes that can never be accepted in any religion or in any society. McCullen Jr. claims that “fraternal hatred might cut one off from the mercy of God temporarily, fratricide has upon it a curse that marks the guilty one as a hopeless outcast from both men and God” (1952, p. 335). Once Richard and Selimus cross the line by killing their brothers, they become the devils incarnate belonging to two different countries and capable of the most extreme sins.

In the opening scene of *Selimus*, Bajazet, Selimus’s father, talks about his three sons. While Corcut is described as a philosopher (i. 80-81) and Acomat as pompous (i. 82-83), Selimus is described as a warrior (i. 84-85). In Shakespeare’s plays *Henry VI parts 1,2 and 3* and *Richard III*, the duke of York also has three sons (Ruthland having been killed as a child); George (Clarence), Edward and Richard. Edward, like Acomat in *Selimus*, is also presented as amorous (*King Richard III*, I. i. 62). But the real striking similarity is between Selimus and Richard. Selimus, his father claims, “follows wars in dismal strife / And snatcheth at my crown with greedy claws” (i. 84-85). Even before his appearance on stage, we are informed that Selimus’s “hands do itch to have the crown, / And he will have it—or else pull me [Bajazet] down” (i. 177-178). Furthermore, Bajazet describes Selimus as a sea “into which run nought but ambitious reaches, / Seditious complots, murther, fraud and hate” (i. 179-181).

In his soliloquy Richard also declares:

Why, then, I do but dream on sovereignty;
Like one that stands upon a promontory,
And spies a far-off shore where he would tread,
Wishing his foot were equal with his eye,
And chides the sea that sunders him from thence,
Saying, he'll lade it dry to have his way:
So do I wish the crown, being so far off;
And so I chide the means that keeps me from it;
And so I say, I'll cut the causes off,
Flattering me with impossibilities.
(*3Henry VI*, III. ii. 134-143)

The causes he is referring to are the imprisoned King Henry VI, his son and Richard's own brothers Clarence and Edward. Just like Selimus who is ready to eliminate all obstacles on his way to the Turkish crown including his father and brothers, Richard is ready to do the same to all those who keep him "from the golden time I look for" (*3Henry VI*, III. ii. 127). While working his way towards his goal:

I'll make my heaven to dream upon the crown,
And, whiles I live, to account this world but hell,
Until my mis-shaped trunk that bears this head
Be round impaled with a glorious crown.
(*3Henry VI*, III. ii. 168-171)

Fraternal loyalty is absent in the worlds of Selimus and Richard. Both characters commit fratricide easily because they do not care about right and wrong. Selimus claims that: "[t]he names of gods, religion, heaven and hell, / ... / Of father, mother, brother, and such like / ... / ... are but policy / To keep the quiet of society (ii. 98-115). His words remind us of the Marxist discourse developed by Althusser under the name of "Ideological State Apparatuses". Althusser, echoing Selimus's words, claims that people are made to learn what it is to be a father, mother, daughter etc. through ideological practices (1971, pp. 121-150). Selimus rejects all those concepts since they teach obedience and submission. There is no place for such sentiments in a man who has his eyes at the very top, who wants it all.

Similarly, Richard, having killed Henry VI in London, declares:

I have no brother, I am like no brother;
And this word 'love,' which graybeards call divine,
Be resident in men like one another
And not in me: I am myself alone.

Clarence, beware; thou keep'st me from the light:
(3*Henry VI*, V. vi. 80-84)

In fact, in the Q1 version of 3h6, these lines appear as: "I had no father, I am like no father, / I have no brother, I am like no brother" (qtd. in Pearlman, 1992, p. 427). This, in a way strengthens the possibility that Richard might have committed patricide, like Selimus, had his father lived longer.³ It appears that "the destruction of social and political order through fraternal strife is a fundamental aspect of the ethics and the tragic structure of *Richard III*" (McCullen Jr., 1952, p. 337) and *Selimus*. The divine things Richard refers to do not mean anything to either of the two characters. Like Richard, Selimus will also lock up divine laws in their case because he:

[c]ount[s] it sacrilege to be holy
Or reverence this threadbare name of "good".
Leave to old men and babes that kind of folly;
Count it up of equal value with the mud".
(i. 15-18)

Selimus is determined to get the Turkish crown even if it meant killing his own father. When he is reminded by Sinam basa of "hell and a revenging God" (ii. 186) he says, "Tush Sinam, these are school conditions, / To fear the Devil or his curs'd dam!" (ii. 187-88). Neither character seems to worry about the devil because they seem to be devils incarnate themselves. They both defy not only religion but also God and, in a way, assume the role of the Devil. Richard claims that he is capable of acting like the Devil:

Why, I can smile, and murder whiles I smile,
And cry 'Content' to that which grieves my heart,
And wet my cheeks with artificial tears,
And frame my face to all occasions.
(3*Henry VI*, III. ii. 182-185)

The bitter longings of Richard and Selimus are reminiscent of the evil characteristics usually attributed to the Devil. There is "malice," the desire to hurt someone in Richard's words; there is "deceit," the desire to fool people to take advantage; there is "hypocrisy," the desire to look otherwise than one really is; and there is "envy," the desire to take

³ For a contrary argument, see Ian Frederick Moulton's "A Monster Great Deformed": The Unruly Masculinity of Richard III." Referring to Richard's character in the *Third Part of Henry VI*, he claims that "Richard is clearly shown to be capable of affection and deeply devoted to his father" and his "devotion to his father marks him as an orderly subject of the patriarchy and as a member of a masculine community, linked by bonds of loyalty to both his father and his brothers" (1996: 260). It is impossible to agree with Moulton since Richard declares his evil plans to get rid of his relatives who might constitute a threat for his advancement to the crown towards the end of the *Third Part of Henry VI*.

what belongs to someone else⁴. When Richard is about to order the death of his brother Clarence in *Richard III*, he claims that he is able to mask his villainy “[w]ith old odd ends stolen out of holy writ; / And seem a saint, when most I play the devil” (I. iii. 337-338). Selimus answers Sinam Basa in a similar fashion when he is reminded of heaven and hell: “An empire Sinam, is so sweet a thing, / As I could be a devil to be a king” (ii. 203-204). Similarly, Richard, on the question of whether an oath must be honoured reminds his father “How sweet a thing it is to wear a Crowne / Whitin whose Circuit is Elizium” (*3Henry VI*, I. ii. 29-30).

When Selimus is given the Ottoman crown by his father to crush the rebellion of his brother Acomat, he is determined to make sure that there is no one left to claim it back once he is through with the rebellion. So he plans the death of his father with the help of a Jew, Abraham, who is to poison Bajazet. He then orders a series of quick executions to strengthen his position as the sole ruler of Turks. He orders Hali Basa to strangle his brother Corcut in Magnesia. He will kill Acomat himself and continue with the executions of Acomat’s two sons, Amurath and Aladin, and his sister Solyma (xvii. 117-124). Likewise, after his two brothers’ death, Richard starts a series of quick executions of the possible obstacles on his way to English crown. He then defends himself for these executions:

What, think You we are Turks or infidels?
Or that we would, against the form of law,
Proceed thus rashly to the villain’s death,
But that the extreme peril of the case,
The peace of England and our persons’ safety,
Enforced us to this execution?
(*Richard III*, III. v. 41-46)

In fact, Richard’s question is already a reference to the play, *Selimus*. His attempt to justify his case by referring to “the extreme peril of the case” obviously fails as the audience is aware of his ulterior motives. The Elizabethan audience were by this time obviously used to watching performances of plays dealing with the Ottoman Turks, like *Selimus*, where the Turks were presented as devilish killers, but how they took it is not so obvious, since Richard representing the English Palace makes the two nations look identical with his actions. The audience must have experienced mixed emotions after seeing the two plays. On the one side there is the Turkish Palace being ripped apart by fraternal strife and on the other there is the English Court experiencing exactly the same strife which they detest. It is a possibility that they saw Richard more like a Turk than an English king. So the answer to Richard’s question that “[w]hat, think you we are Turks or infidels?” would probably be “yes” by the spectators.

⁴ In Mark 7: 21-23 (New International Bible), it is stated that “...from within, out of men’s hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly.”

In the two plays, both characters are continuously referred to as “devils” who are “unfit for any place but hell” (*Richard III*, I. ii. 109). Lady Anne calls Richard a “dreadful minister of hell”, a devilish slave; Queen Margaret calls him a “murderous villain”, a “slave of nature and the son of hell” and a “cacodemon” (*Richard III*, I. iii. 118-144). In the play *Selimus*, Bajazet calls Selimus “unnatural” several times (i. 215, v. 78, xviii. 118), a “devil” (ii. 204) and “a fawning monster” (iii. 27) who is “born to be a scourge” (iii. 35). While Selimus at the end of the play likens himself to a basilisk that springs from an ibis when he is through with his mission of getting rid of all royal family, Richard, in *3Henry VI*, promises that he will “slay more gazers than the Basilisk” (III. ii. 187). Richard, like Selimus, is “a criminal of the first rank. ... He attains his goal through cunning, lies, impudence and hypocrisy, and especially through a mass of the blackest crimes” (Goll, 1939, p. 23).

Both Selimus and Richard receive many curses, throughout the plays, and prophesy for their death places. Richard would die in Bosworth field and Selimus in Chiurli where he had his father poisoned. We do not know what kind of a death Greene would have planned for Selimus since he had not written the second part of the play as he promised, but, we do know that the prophesy about Richard is fulfilled as he died in the Bosworth field crying “A horse! a horse! my kingdom for a horse!” (*Richard III*, V. iv. 13).

To conclude, at a time when religious conflicts between Protestantism and Catholicism as well as conflicts between Protestantism, Catholicism and Islam were at their peak, both Richard III and Selimus are presented as devils incarnate, each contributing to a different end for the Tudor dynasty. With his play *Selimus*, Robert Greene introduces an atheist tyrant who is identified with the devil. Obviously, Greene had plenty of sources in the form of histories, tracts and stories for the formation of Selimus’s character. Two of such sources that Greene consulted⁵ while writing *Selimus*, for example, were Thomas Newton’s translation of Augustino Curione’s *Sarracenicæ Historiæ Libri III* written in 1567 and Peter Ashton’s 1546 translation of Paolo Giovio’s *Comentarii della cose de Turchi* written in 1531 (Vitkus, 2000, p. 18), in which the Turkish expansion in the sixteenth century was considered as God’s unleashing of the Devil. The portrayal of Selimus, then, contributes to the prevalent concept of the Turk as evil enemy in early modern England as well as contributing to the creation and preservation of nationalistic sentiments. With his play *Richard III*, Shakespeare introduces another atheist tyrant whose evilness surpasses any character including Selimus. He develops Richard into a villain who dominates the early modern English stages. Richard’s end, along with many other history plays also fulfils the justification of Tudor ascension to the English throne.

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⁵ For more sources for the play *Selimus* see, Vitkus, p. 18.

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