ISSN 1799-2591 (print); ISSN 2053-0692 (online)
Theory and Practice in Language Studies, Vol. 16, No. 2, pp. 629-638, February 2026
DOI: https://doi.org/10.17507/tpls.1602.28

Oriental Characters on the English Stage: A Product of Misunderstanding?

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Abstract—**Between the Renaissance and the twentieth century, Western dramatists wrote a body of plays about life in the Orient, to be performed for European audiences. These Oriental plays were particularly popular in England. Playwrights drew their information mainly from existing sources. These writers habitually portrayed Muslim characters in ways that not only seriously failed to reflect their actual beliefs, but outright contradicted the fundamental tenets of the Islamic faith. This paper explores the portrayal of Mohammed as a deity and Muslims as polytheists. It attempts to examine whether these misrepresentations of Muslims can be attributed to either grievous misunderstandings or malicious intentions. Although Islamic doctrine clearly emphasizes the nature of Mohammed as a normal human being, we find Muslim characters in the Western dramas elevate him to divine status, attributing to him the capabilities of a god or deity. We likewise find his followers acknowledging the existence of other gods, including those of the Greeks and the Romans, swearing by them and invoking them, despite the fact that those who adhere to the teachings of Mohammed are strict believers in the absolute oneness of God. Dramatists presented to the English audience Muslim characters who display an unnatural mix of Islamic, Christian, and pagan traditions. The result is a confused portrayal that distorts the Islamic identity of those characters. It seems evident that this misrepresentation of the Muslim character as being foreign, extremist, and uncivilized, whether intentionally or through misunderstanding, contributed to the attitudes held by Europeans toward Islam.**

Index Terms—**drama, Muslims, deity, polytheists, misunderstanding**

I. Introduction

Greek mythology features a considerable body of literature and artifacts that are centered upon a huge number of gods and goddesses. The Greeks assigned a god or a goddess to almost every natural phenomenon in their attempt to understand the universe. After the Romans conquered the Greeks in the Hellenistic period, Roman mythology drew heavily on the existing Greek mythology, evidenced by the duplication of many gods and goddesses, albeit with different names. This amalgamation between the two traditions is usually referred to as classical mythology, and the classics are traditionally seen as the basis of a solid education in the West. As the Romans extended their rule from Europe to the East, the classical mythology continued to dominate in these territories until, in the 4th century, the Roman Emperor Constantine I converted to Christianity. With the conversion of the Emperor, Christianity became the official and prevalent religion of the Roman Empire. This demanded that the citizens of the Empire shift from acknowledging tens of deities to believing in one omnipotent God in the form of the Trinity— the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The effective control the Roman Church exercised on ordinary Europeans during the Middle Ages (476 -1450) resulted in Christianity dictating all aspects of life, which inevitably led to the fading of the importance of Greek and Roman mythology for a period of approximately 1000 years.

With the dawn of the Renaissance, Greek and Roman writings returned to the forefront of European minds, as they viewed themselves as the legitimate heirs of the Greek and Roman civilizations. At that time, Greek and Roman writings were translated into different European languages and studied extensively. They were also artistically imitated by European artists, poets, and authors in general. This rebirth of the classical writings is manifested in the extensive influence of ancient mythology on Western culture, arts, and literature. Invoking and addressing Greek and Roman gods and goddesses comes naturally to Europeans as they frequently find those names in Renaissance poetry and hear them from actors on the stage. This mixing of ancient deities with Christian terminology became ever more acceptable as Europeans gradually moved from living strictly religious lives under the Catholic Church to more secular ones, with politics and capitalism playing increasing roles. Taking into account that the concept of monotheism is not strictly established in the minds of the Europeans due to the trinity doctrine, this perception of monotheism gets even hazier with the frequent presence of classical deities in the writings of the Renaissance authors.

The doctrine of Islam, the spread of which started in the Arabian Peninsula in the early seventh century with the message of Prophet Mohammed, is based on strict monotheism. Allah, the Arabic word for God, literally translates as the God. The first and foremost pillar of Islam is to believe in the sheer oneness of Allah: there is no God other than God the Creator, and to strongly reject associating other deities or forces with Him. When Islam started to expand toward Europe in the eighth century, Europeans saw this expansion as a threat to their culture and civilization. This notion encouraged Westerners to study Islamic sources to form a picture of Muslim civilization. However, it was easier, due to language barriers, to concentrate on existing Christian sources which were, at that time, mainly the accounts of European travelers.

Thus, the initial interest in examining Islamic culture ensued from the notion that, due to the imminent threat posed by Islam, Europeans needed to protect themselves against this encroaching danger by countering it by all possible means (Bay, 2025).

Del Balzo (2015) states that the "representations of the Orient on the English stage resulted from the global network that expanded contact across the world and increased the economic and political power of England" (p. 502). In the late 16th and early 17th centuries, England emerged as a colonial power, in addition to France and Spain, soon becoming the third competitor with the Ottoman Empire, a position that manifested itself in clashes between these powers at sea and on land. The animosity that shadowed the relationship between the Ottoman Empire and European countries, generally speaking, blocked the cultivation of the due respect for Islam in Europe and eventually European writers found it convenient to present inaccurate portrayals of this faith and its followers, creating a corpus of works that effectively distorted the image of Islam and Muslims in the minds of the European peoples for centuries. This study is an attempt to explore the un-Islamic notions and expressions that, although they are attached to Muslims and Islam on the stage of Restoration and 18th century, strikingly contradict the basic set of beliefs of Islam. These misrepresentations of the identity of Muslim characters on the English stage are found to contribute greatly to the misconceptions held among the general European population regarding the Islamic faith.

This study also highlights how English dramatists put dialogue into the mouths of Muslim characters that is totally unnatural to Muslim peoples, but is more usually used by non-Muslims whose ideas of God and the creation is a mixture of Greek, Roman, and Christian mythologies. Accordingly, utterances that would be perfectly acceptable if made by non-Muslim characters appear to a Muslim audience highly incongruent, and sometimes blasphemous, when coming from Muslim characters. However, it is essential to note that this phenomenon is exclusive to Oriental drama that became popular in Europe, in general, and England, in particular, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Markley (2008) observes that "the drama of seventeenth and eighteenth centuries cannot be read as a coherent whole, as a well-knit collection of subgenres" (p. 5), i.e. each subgenre has its own peculiarity.

II. A Deity or Prophet?

The first problematic issue to be addressed by the current study is the status of the Prophet of Islam in the eyes of Muslims as opposed to how the Prophet is portrayed in these dramas. In general, to refer to a god or a deity as a founder of a certain religion carries no deviation from the fundamentals of that religion. On the contrary, it adds to the credibility of that faith. Therefore, from a Christian perspective, it is reassuring and convenient to say that Jesus is the founder of Christianity since he is considered by Christians as either an incarnation of God in the body of a human, or as the son of God; in both cases, it entails that he bears the characteristics of God. However, the status quo does not apply to Islam. Muslims believe that Mohammed was a human being charged by God to deliver a message. His role was exclusively limited to delivering the message of Islam, the teachings and doctrines of a faith already established by God. As such, Mohammed, according to his followers, was entirely a human being, a mortal messenger whose capabilities and role ended with his death. This Islamic view of the nature and mission of Mohammed is not acknowledged by Westerners and thus is not reflected in Western drama. Rather, they perceive Mohammed as the founder of Islam, rather than the Prophet of Islam, a problematic misconception which is very apparent in the Oriental drama produced in the Renaissance and well into the nineteenth century. In Oriental drama, Mohammed is depicted as a deity; he seems to present himself as a god, for he decides destinies of individuals. Moreover, his followers describe him as a law giver, invoke him for different matters, and swear oaths by him. In reality, Muslims would not call upon their long-deceased Prophet for aid, but would call upon the one God whose message he conveyed.

Selimus (1594), a play usually attributed to Robert Greene, is "the earliest play extant to be based entirely within the bounds of the Ottoman Empire" (as cited in Bay, 2025, p. 69). The theme of the play, as Bay (2025) remarks, centers on "the corrosive power of unchecked ambition" (p. 69), and the action revolves around the struggle between the sons of Sultan Bajazet over the throne. Selimus, the ambitious youngest son of the Sultan, decides to annihilate his two older brothers, his corrivals for the throne, along with his elderly father, and proclaim himself as the Emperor of the Turks. In their *Representation of the Orient: A Postcolonial Perspective on Robert Greene's Selimus*, Imran et al. (2019) remark that "Right from the outset, we get the impression that Selimus is a Machiavellian, ready to commit patricide" and add that, for him to be consistent with the stereotypical image of the Muslim emperor, his Machiavellianism "will continue throughout the play" (p. 120). Greene (1898) misinterprets Muslim doctrine by writing a character who invokes Mohammed in the belief that he is able to help him in his scheme. In anticipation of his inevitable death for disclosing the plans of Selimus to his brothers Acomat and Corcut, Mustapha, "a high official of Bajazet," appeals equally to both God and Mohammed to save him from the vengeful anger of Selimus:

I do not seek to lessen my offence
Great Selimus, but truly do protest
I did it not for hatred of your Grace,
So help me God, and holy Mahomet; (p. 85)

Since Greene's English audience assume that Muslims look at Prophet Mohammed the way they themselves look at Jesus and the Christian saints, i.e. capable of performing miracles, they find this invocation quite ordinary. However, for Muslims, such an invocation is considered associating partners to God (Arabic: *shirk*), which is viewed in Islam as a

major offence against God. The tradition that began with Greene and his contemporaries in the continent during the Renaissance later became more firmly established and conspicuous in the 17th and 18th centuries.

Almyna, or The Arabian Vow by Manley (1706) is an Orientalist play based on stories related in *Arabian Nights,* which was a very popular work in Europe at that time. The major themes of the play are injustice, female virtue, and tyranny. In the play, Abdella, the heir to the throne, invokes the Prophet Mohammed to lengthen the life of his brother, the Caliph Almanzor. In response to his brother's advice that he needs to "Improve thyself in God, / Walk worthy thy high Station, and our Favour" (Manley, 1706, p. 5) to become worthy of the crown after his brother, Abdella says to Almanzor "Long may our Prophet spare your Noble life. Long may you Govern 'ore this happy People" (p. 5). This invocation from Abdella implies that he believes that Prophet Mohammed has the ability to lengthen the life span of the Caliph Almanzor, in complete contrast to the teachings of Islam that clearly put the life spans of all creatures in the hands of God.

In her preface to Voltaire's play *Mahomet, The Prophet or Fanaticism* (performed in France in 1741 and in England in 1744), Ruthven (2003) contends that Mohammed "appears as a scheming, ambitious, and wicked tyrant, an impostor motivated by lust" and adds "Doubtless it was this wholly negative depiction of the Prophet that secured papal approval for the play by Benedict XIV" (n.p.). Some critics highlight the notion that Voltaire's goal in writing this play was to attack religious institutions in general and the Catholic Church in particular, not Islam and Mohammed per se. Leichman (2018) described the play as "Unapproachable, racist, offensive" (p. 251) with Mohammed being depicted "as a detached manipulator, aware of the power he exercises by means of his fraudulent self-proclamation as prophet" (p. 252). Though it is indicated in its title that "Mahomet" is a prophet, upon reading the play it becomes apparent that the eponymous character is depicted as a god.

In the play, Mahomet does not introduce himself as a god, rather, as a messenger. For instance, he admonishes a group of his followers to "return to people . . . make them adore my God" (Voltaire, 1741, p. 18). However, Voltaire puts words in his mouth and attributes to him achievements that provoke people around him to the extent they see him as behaving like a god. According to the play's storyline, Palmira, Mahomet's slave and prospective wife, has been raised in Mahomet's household as his adopted daughter from her childhood, thus she is well aware that Mahomet is a human being, living as other people in terms of his need for food, drink, sleep etc. Despite this, she appears overwhelmed by a sensation that Mohammed is "a terrifying god" and "evil" (Voltaire, 1741, p. 7). Assuming that Palmira intends a metaphorical rather than literal meaning of the term 'god', this connection between the character of Mohammed and the capabilities of a god serves to distort the image of the Prophet. At one point in the play, to relieve Palmira, who is worried about her lover Seid (prior to discovering that he is her brother), Mahomet says to her "leave to me the task of deciding men's destiny" (Voltaire, 1741, p. 57), thus attributing to himself the power to dictate the fate of those around him, like a god. The last words the audience hear from Mahomet's lips after his closest companions lose faith in him give credence to this notion about him; "I must rule this deluded world like a god" (Voltaire, 1741, p. 62). Hammerbeck (2003) remarks that "Neoclassical and Enlightenment thought tended to discredit Islam, if not condemning it outright. The religion was viewed as a departure from Christianity, a faith formulated by a duplicitous leader (Muhammad)" (p. 2). Hammerbeck views *Mahomet* (1741) as "an index of French and Western ethnocentric thought on Islam since the Middle Ages", asserting that it "plays a pivotal role in Western representation of the Islamic *other* by reiterating and thus perpetuating key ideological and cultural strategies in the ongoing tensions between the Christian and Islamic worlds" (p. 2). Palmira's expressed opinion of Mohammed plays a pivotal role in reflecting Voltaire's anti-Islamic bias. Even in her prayers, Palmira calls on Mohammed - "I invoke Mahomet" (Voltaire, 1741, p. 7) - for peace and security believing that he has the divine power to answer her prayers. Surprisingly, the outcome is the direct opposite; instead of providing her with comfort and serenity of soul, "his name fills my heart with secret terror" (Voltaire, 1741, p. 31). Palmira's terror of Mohammed is effective in presenting the Prophet Mohammed to the Western audience as a malicious god, rather than the wise and gentle Messenger of God recognized by Muslims.

Throughout the play, other characters emphasize this representation of Mohammed as a god, including Omar, one of Mohammed's close companions, and Zopir, a chieftain of the non-believers of Mecca. In his response to Omar's invitation to embrace Islam, Zopir strongly rejects the idea and scathingly asks Omar "Do you really expect me . . . to *worship* an imposter?" (Voltaire, 1741, p. 12, emphasis added). Zopir's statement gives the impression that Mohammed introduces himself to his followers as a god, not as a messenger of God and, consequently, embracing Islam entails worshiping Mohammed. Evidently, even Omar, the staunch Muslim, is confused about the nature of Mohammed. Justifying his decision to embrace Islam and follow Mohammed, Omar tells Zopir "when I saw him act, speak, punish or pardon as a god, I gave my life to his holy work" (Voltaire, 1741, p. 11), a statement that supports Zopir's perception that Mohammed is revered by Muslims as a god. In the character of Seid, one of Mohammed's followers, we find a Muslim who sees Mohammed as a messenger of God, not a god, proven by his faith that the "The god of Mahomet" (Voltaire, 1741, p. 16) will help them in conquering the city of Mecca.

The Christian perception of Jesus seems to have influenced Voltaire as he constructed the character Mohammed in the play. In the Bible, Jesus does not say that he is God but his miracles led many to believe that he was God. For example, in his lifetime, Jesus was able to restore sight to a blind man, heal a paralyzed man, and raise Lazarus from the dead. Furthermore, some statements in the Bible left the Christians divided into factions over the nature of Jesus, a division that persists until the present time. While Catholics and most Protestants view Jesus as God, Jehovah's Witnesses, Unitarians, and Mormons do not. Statements, such as "I and the Father are one" (John 10:30) (attributed to Jesus), and the statement

attributed to the Apostle Thomas upon the resurrection of Jesus "My Lord and my God" (John 20:28), created this confusion around the divinity of Jesus. The characters surrounding Mohammed in Voltaire's play, Muslims and non-Muslims alike, echo the thoughts of the varying Christian factions in their division over the divinity of Jesus. Historically, Mohammed performed some miracles, but in the play he is no more than a charismatic character that succeeds in subduing other tribes. However, his statements leave his followers perplexed whether to consider him a human being or take him as a god; one time they refer to him as a prophet, another time as a god. Mohammed's success and statements, alongside his followers' reactions in these dramas, give a general impression that Muslims from different historical periods have seen the Prophet Mohammed as more than a human being, a belief that is totally contrary to Islamic teachings.

Pix's *Ibrahim, The Thirteenth Emperour of the Turks* (1696), portrays the despotism of the Ottoman emperor Ibrahim and his uncontrolled sexual desire. The Mufti, in the play, says in a moment of distress upon seeing his daughter being raped by the Sultan, "Answer me Prophet, Author of our Laws, /What have I done . . .!" (Pix, 1696, p. 26). To Muslim ears, the Mufti's statement is strikingly blasphemous because it indicates that the faith of Islam was founded by Mohammed, not revealed by God. In the Holy Qur'an, in Surah An-Naml (The Ants), God makes perfectly clear the role of Mohammed, with the two verses: "Nor does he speak of his own desire. It is only a Revelation revealed" (Qur'an 27:3-4). Mohammed was a messenger who had no other role than to convey what was being revealed to him. He certainly had no authority to impose rules or pass laws.

First performed at Drury Lane, London, *The Siege of Damascus* by Hughes (1720) is a play that presents Prophet Mohammed as a deity who can punish and reward. Critics have opined that the play is based on the narrative presented in Simon Ockley's book *The History of the Saracens*, the first edition of the first volume of which appeared in1708. Hughes' name was on the list of the subscribers for volume two of the book, issued in 1718 along with the enlarged edition of volume one, a fact which ultimately indicates that he did have access to volume one (Moore, 1968, pp. 363-365). The action of the play takes place during the caliphates of Abu Bakr and Omar. Although this period was two years, at least, after the death of Mohammed, Muslim characters in the play make utterances that show their belief that Mohammed is somehow still alive and has the ability to reward his followers when they do something that pleases him or punish them when they behave against his will. In other words, Mohammed, in the play, is perceived as a god by some Muslim characters. For instance, in a conversation between Caled and Abudah, two leading officers of the Muslim army, after setting the plans to sack the city of Damascus, Caled says to Abudah, "the prophet will reward your valour" (Hughes, 1720, p. 43). Caled later makes the misleading statement that "the injunction to wage war stems from Muslim Law and religion" (Maciulewics, 2024, p. 84). In spite of his knowledge that Mohammed is dead, Caled expresses the belief that Mohammed watches his followers closely and is able to reward the ones who follow his example. The plan appeals to Caled, who prefers fighting to negotiations with the Romans in Damascus, and thus he encourages Abudah to press forward, reminding him that the reward will come directly from Mohammed. On another occasion, after the failure of their first attempts to defeat the Romans, Abudah, "who shows Islam in a more noble light" (Maciulewics, 2024, p. 84) admits that Muslim officers and soldiers are deviating from the actual goal of the Muslim conquests, which was ultimately to spread their faith, thus, he views the failure of their attempts to conquer the city as a punishment from the Prophet. He tells Caled; "Our angry prophet frowns upon our vices, / And visits us in blood . . . . A boundless lust of rapine guides our troops. / We learn the Christian vices we chastise" (Hughes, 1720, pp. 31-32). This statement by Abudah indicates that the Prophet, although dead, has the ability to observe the misconduct of his troops and therefore punishes them by allowing their enemies to kill a large number of them. On the other hand, Abudah triumphantly thanks Mahomet rather than God upon the capture of Phocyas, one of the Roman army's officers in Syria. Upon seeing the Roman officer in chains, he says, "Mahomet, we thank thee! Now dost thou smile again" (Hughes, 1720, p. 33). On both counts, Abudah displays a belief that Mohammed is alive and is the one who punishes and rewards, a concept that clashes with the very basic doctrine of Islam that Mohammed was a mortal whose mission and life ended with his death.

The same notion is offered in William Davenant's *The Siege of Rhodes* (1656), the play that "has been of interest to scholars in large part," according to Park (2016), "for its representation of the Turk as an early modern emblem of Oriental despotism and excess" (p. 49). Others, such as Birchwood, as Jackson (2022) contends, look at it from a different perspective; Jackson maintains that the two parts of the play "expose the unstable way in which a European masculine identity is constructed against depictions of 'the Other'" (p. 76). Central to the play is the theme of jealousy. Roxolana has long since been Solyman's favorite wife, but her rising jealousy of Ianthe, the recently captured Sicilian lady, propels her to think of overthrowing her husband and installing her son Mustapha on the throne. After struggling against Roxolana's jealousy, Sultan Solyman comments, "At first I thought her by our prophet sent / As a reward for valour's toils; / More worth than my father's spoils;/ And now she is become my punishment" (Davenant, 1656, p. 55). Whether Roxolana is indeed a reward for his successful conquests or a punishment for unknown misconduct is not the matter here; the issue is that the Sultan believes that Roxolana was sent to him by the Prophet. Sultan Solyman is the head of the Muslim State and yet he contradicts an important pillar of his own faith. Across the Oriental plays, several Sultans are portrayed as sharing Sultan Solyman's belief in Prophet Mohammed's ability to act from beyond the grave. Repetition of this concept serves to entrench it in the minds of the English audiences.

Christopher Marlowe's *Tamburlaine the Great* (Part I published in 1587 & Part II in 1589) revolves around the conquests of Tamburlaine, the Scythian shepherd, in the Muslim world. The Scythians, a group of nomadic Iranian peoples, flourished in the Eurasian Steppe from the 9th to 2nd centuries BC and were known for their fierce warrior

culture. Tamburlaine is a seemingly invincible warrior who sacks the Muslim cities one after another. Eventually, he captures Bajazet, the Sultan of the Turks, and subjects him to all sorts of humiliation. Although Tamburlaine was a pagan, the play leaves us uncertain of his faith since he sometimes looks like a pagan who believes in the gods and goddesses of ancient Greece, but other times swears by Mohammed, just like the Muslim characters. Hizam and Guo (2023) remark that Tamburlaine's religion "has become controversial among scholars" (p. 7). For the purposes of the current study, due to this doubt concerning his religion, he will be exempted from the Muslim characters who view Mohammed as a deity. However, Muslim characters, like Bajazet, invoke Mohammed and ask his help or protection in when under duress, giving a much distorted image of Islam and Muslim rulers. Uygur (2014) contends that *Tamburlaine the Great Part I and Part II* were the first plays Christopher Marlowe wrote for the Elizabethan audience with the purpose of "reinforcing the popular sentiment of hatred against the Ottoman Turks" (p. 156). Muslim characters were constructed, according to Uygur (2014), to repel any positive notions about Islam among Western audiences. Bajazet, the Turkish Sultan, is one of those superficially proud Turks who abandon their faith the moment they suffer loss or an injury to their pride. When captured by Tamburlaine, he not only invokes Mohammed to save him from extreme humiliation, but is also derogatory, bitterly calling, "O Mahomet!—O sleepy Mahomet" (Marlowe, Part I, 1589, p. 223). Bajazet's invocation reflects striking ignorance as a Muslim; as head of the Islamic state he should be in no doubt that the Prophet is not a deity who can save him. Worse yet, he hails insults on Mohammed, accusing him of being an impotent deity. Following her husband's example, Zabina laments their unfortunate fate, saying, "Then is there left no Mahomet, no God . . . . nor no hope of end / To our infamous monstrous slaveries" (Marlowe, Part I, 1589, p. 230). Zabina appears to put Mohammed in a position higher than that of God. Like her husband, when the aid is not forthcoming, she turns away from her faith. Historically, Bajazet's reign occurred more than eight hundred years after the death of Mohammed, and still Marlowe's Bajazet and his wife display a belief that Mohammed has the power to come to their aid.

Other Oriental plays bestow upon Mohammed the ability to decide the destiny of his followers. *The Fair Captive* by Haywood (1721) tells the story of a Spanish lady taken prisoner by the Turks. Achmet, one of the Turkish officers, reveals to Daraxa, a young Muslim woman in the Sultan's Seraglio, his concern about the rising danger of Mustapha, the Grand Vizier, on the Sultan's life. Daraxa asserts that she is confident that "Our Holy prophet's care will guard the Sultan" (Haywood, 1721, p. 9). Despite both characters being aware that Mohammed died centuries ago, she still thinks that Mohammed can protect the Sultan from the life-threatening plots of his Grand Vizier. Mustapha is informed by Haly, his loyal eunuch, that the Janissaries "are in arms" and heading towards the palace to avenge Mustapha's tyrannical acts against them. Overwhelmed by a string of devilish plots, Mustapha laments, "All things conspire my Ruin" (Haywood, 1721, p. 71). After Mustapha mistakenly kills his wife Irene, upon seeing her dead body, Haly invokes the Prophet, saying "Oh, Mahomet!" (Haywood, 1721, p. 71). Of course, his invocation should be to God, because it is He, not Mohammed, who controls fate and decides the destiny of people.

In Islam, a Muslim is clearly instructed that, if he wishes to swear an oath, he must swear exclusively by God. Swearing by Mohammed, the heavens, forefathers, or any other power, is considered an un-Islamic practice. The Prophet of Islam said "Whoever swears by any other than God has committed '*shirk*'" (Nawawy, 1274, n.p.). Muslims believe that God can forgive any other sin as He wishes, but the associating of partners with God is unpardonable. In Western culture, it is acceptable for people to swear by other authorities. The phrase "By the saints" is a common interjection found in many scripts, especially those with historical or religious themes, such as *Saint Joan* by George Bernard Shaw (1923). Therefore, the dramatists who put forth the Oriental plays and insisted that Mohammed presented himself as a divine figure, projected this Western conduct on their Muslim characters, making them swear by Mohammed even though such an oath is in stark opposition to their religious beliefs.

Ibrahim, The Thirteenth Emperour of the Turks is the Oriental "exotic tragedy" by which Pix (1696), Lechner (2016) writes, "made her stage début" (p. 367). Lechner (2016) contends that the play hinges on the theme "of the hero's reward and its connection to power and love" (p. 372), whereas Marsden (1999) views the play as a work based on pathos and thus "depends upon a clear dichotomy between the powerful, active oppressor and the passive, suffering victims" (p. 36). In the play, it is not an ordinary Muslim who swears by the Prophet, as some Muslims might do out of ignorance or carelessness, but the Mufti, the highest religious authority in the Muslim state. In Muslim society, it is the Mufti to whom individuals as well as officials turn for guidance and rulings when faced with complicated issues or unclear situations. In his criticism of the luxurious preparations for the arrival of the Sultan, the Mufti says "by our Prophet, what's all this but gaudy Pageantry, / Ill acted Scenes of Pomp and Show, instead of real greatness" (Pix, 1696, p. 1). The Mufti swears by Mohammed, rather than God, giving the impression that Mohammed comes before God in power and status.

Cowley's *A Day in Turkey* (1791) is a comic play that incorporates love intrigues and cultural satire. Like other Oriental plays, it contains cross cultural encounters between European characters held captive and authoritarian Eastern characters who try to impose on them rules entrenched in the Eastern culture. In the play, Ibrahim, the Turkish "Bashaw", utters an oath similar to that of the Mufti in Mary Pix's play when he threatens Orloff, the Russian captive who sneaks into the private chambers of the Bassa to get in touch with his captive wife, saying "Those apartments, Christian, are sacred; and did not I pay some regard to your fame as a soldier, and your rank in the Imperial army, by Mahomet, your life's quick stream should pay me for the insult" (p. 63). Once again, a high-ranking Muslim swears by the Prophet Mohammed, attributing to him a position of power greater than that of God. A similar scene takes place in Haywood's *The Fair Captive* (1721) when Alphonso is found in the Seraglio trying to get in touch with his captive wife Isabella. Interestingly,

Mustapha, the grand vizier, assumes that Alphonso would reverence the Prophet as Muslims do, and thus addresses Alphonso, "By Mahomet! / Tell us, vile Christian, from what curst Impulse / Hast thou attempted this infernal Treason / What impious Motive, fir'd thee to offend / The Sultan" (Haywood, 1721, p. 33).

Close examination of a number of Oriental plays from the Renaissance period, Restoration, and the eighteenth century reveals numerous cases where the Prophet of Islam was portrayed as a god, with divine capabilities. Furthermore, his character was often vilified and presented as a malevolent individual who bore no resemblance to the person that Muslims know and admire. Also, Muslim characters within these plays, including those of high rank and presumably a better understanding of their own religion, were given dialogue that was an anathema to everything they would have believed in. The overall effect was to give a skewed vision of Islam that was misleading to Western audiences and injurious to the followers of the religion.

III. Polytheistic Turks

Due to the immense influence of Classical Greek and Roman writings on the Western culture, English plays are rich with incidents in which Christian characters invoke gods, rather than God. Thus it must have been acceptable to theatergoers to hear a character on the stage invoking or calling on 'gods' for succor. Of course, it is not the case that English dramatists believed in Greek and Roman gods; they used the plural form "gods", however, for artistic and dramatic purposes, often to heighten the power of the rhetoric or to intensify passions like love, fear, jealousy, or anger. Moreover, oaths associated with great and powerful gods like 'Jove', 'Jupiter', 'Zeus', 'Mars', or 'Apollo' were used by characters of high social status (kings, princes, generals etc.) to show sophistication or superiority in learning. That is to say, when a character from the noble class says 'By Jove' or 'By Apollo', he partly aims to say 'I am learned in classical civilizations'. Thanks to the above functions and connotations, playwrights put these oaths indiscriminately into the mouths of characters of all faiths. One such character is Tamburlaine in Marlowe's *Tamburlaine the Great* (Part I published in 1587 & Part II in 1589). The pagan Tamburlaine more than once invokes the gods, not for help or praise, but rather to assert his power and sometimes even to challenge these deities. Thurn (1989) infers that, through his boasts of invincible power and absolute sovereignty, Tamburlaine "poses a threat even to the gods" (p. 8). Apparently Thurn has in mind Tamburlaine in his sickness while drawn in a chariot by captive kings; he, in defiance of the gods, says "What daring god torments my body thus", and then adds "Come, let us march against the powers of heaven, / And set black streamers in the firmament, / To signify the slaughter of the gods" (Marlowe, Part II, 1589, pp. 258-259). His invocations are marked by a wild desire of defiance and challenge. Tamburlaine also refers to specific Greek and Roman gods and goddesses like "Jove", "Juno", "Mars", "Cynthia", and "Jupiter" on other occasions, showing his acknowledgement of these deities, if not belief in them. As a pagan, Tamburlaine is expected to believe in multiple gods even though, being a Mongol, the gods he refers to in the play belong to cultures considerably different from his own. However, such an utterance in Islam, even when its literal meaning is not intended, is strictly forbidden; it is characterized as an unpardonable sin because it associates partners with God.

Gayland, the King of Morocco in Settle's *The Heir of Morocco* (1682), despite being a Muslim, swears an oath to challenge his rival in his love for Artimira: "By *Jove*, I'll face this little daring Rival, This animated clod of Earth and Ashes" (p. 3). Also known as Jupiter, Jove was the chief god of the Roman pantheon. For the King of Morocco to swear by Jove would be most unlikely. In the Quran, the holy book of Muslims, Allah (the Arabic term for God) clearly states that He may forgive all sorts of sins but the one that violates His oneness: "*Allah (God) forgiveth not the sin of joining other gods with Him; He forgiveth whom he pleaseth other sins than this; one who joins other gods with Allah (God) has strayed far, far away from the Right*" (Quran 4:116, p. 252). English playwrights do not, however, observe such a pivotal particularity about Islamic beliefs and thus deal with Muslim characters, in their plays, the way they deal with Christian and pagan ones. In Marlowe's *Tamburlaine the Great* (Part I published in 1587 & Part II in 1589), Zenocrate, the daughter of the Sultan of Egypt, does not differ from Tamburlaine, the pagan, in this respect; she appeals to the "gods and powers that govern Persia" to "strengthen" her lover Tamburlaine who is now the king of Persia, against the Turkish Sultan Bajazet (Part II, p. 222). Furthermore, Bajazet himself, while in captivity, invokes the Roman deity "Jove," instead of God (Allah) to bring total darkness to earth, to raise destructive tempests accompanied with thunderbolts and make Tamburlaine live the terrors of these natural phenomena as a punishment for humiliating him and his wife (p. 231).

What seems most strange to the Muslim spectator is that even the companions of the Prophet, who were the first generation of the Muslim nation and were perceived as adhering most strictly to every facet of the teachings of Islam, invoke gods, instead of God (Allah), in times of distress. Seid, Mahomet's close companion in Voltaire's *Mahomet* (1741), does not turn to God when Mahomet asks him to kill Zopir; he turns to the classical gods of the Greeks and Romans, beseeching them to save him from executing a mission he abhors; "Ye gods, come to my aid" (p. 47), he appeals. If we take Seid's utterance at its surface meaning, the audience is led to believe that Seid's trust in classical gods outweighs his trust in Mahomet's God. To Muslim spectators, this is highly improbable because it renders Seid an apostate.

Another act in parallel with invoking gods or swearing by gods in English drama is invoking or swearing by the heavens. Since swearing directly by God / Jesus was viewed by the Church as blasphemous, and some plays were censored for religious blasphemy, playwrights resorted to substitutes. To preserve the divine aspect of the oath, Christian characters resort to swearing by something related to God, like the soul or heaven. From a Christian perspective heaven is not a mere place, but a divine one since it is indirectly associated with God; it is believed to be the place where God, His angels, and

the souls of the righteous people would be dwelling forever. As it is viewed as a divine place, swearing by heaven, if not acceptable, would, at least, appear less offensive in the eyes of the English audiences. Dramatically, invoking the heavens or swearing by heavens serves as a literary device to intensify or emphasize the passion of the character at the moment of oath taking, simultaneously observing that the appeal be to a divine authority. *Abdelazer* (1676), Behn's "only full-blooded tragedy" (Birchwood, 2020, p. 2), hinges on the encounters between the two heavily divided realms of the Christian and Muslim worlds. Abdelazer, the Muslim character in the play, seems to believe in the existence of multiple gods and thus swears by them like any other Christian character on the stage. He is a Moroccan prince, whom Behn presents to the English audience, Mathew Birchwood maintains, "like an avenger-hero" (Birchwood, 2020, p. 4) because she highlights the inner reason for his revenge— the slaying of his father "Abdela" at the hands of the Spaniards. Commenting on the Queen's claim that she has removed the King so that he can easily have her, he says "it is a blessing Gods languish for" (Behn, 1676, p. 15). When she asks him if he means to marry her, he, once again like Christian characters, swears by the gods to the contrary: "No, by the Gods!— / Not marry me unless I were a king" (Behn, 1676, p. 15). On another occasion, he describes his right for "Vengence" as "noble" and compares it to that of the gods: "Oh glorious word, fit only for the Gods / For which they form'd their Thunder" (Behn, 1676, p. 5). In addition to swearing by the gods, Abdelazer seems well informed in Greek and Roman mythologies, knowing that thunder was one of the weapons used for vengeance and punishment by Zeus. Zeus is the Greek name for the supreme god of the sky, thunder, and lightning, while Jove (or Jupiter) is his Roman counterpart. Abedelazer emphasizes his knowledge of ancient mythology when he responds in outrage to Philip's insult, saying: "Shall I be Calm, and hear my Wife call'd Whore? / Were he Great *Jove*, and arm'd with all his lighting, / By Heav'n I could not hold my just Resentment" (Behn, 1676, p. 14). Throughout the play, Abdelazer refers to'Gods' and 'heavens' and swears by them the same as Christian characters do, leaving only his Oriental name and complexion to set him apart from the Christian characters in the eyes of the English audience.

In early modern England, swearing directly by God was considered blasphemous, and is still so in some Christian sects. Therefore, English dramatists used swearing by the heavens to avoid such blasphemy. Swearing by the heavens was also used at times to emphasize honesty or sincerity. By making Mustapha, the vizier, appeal to heaven in *The Fair Captive*, Heywood (1721) aims to emphasize the intensity of Mustapha's passion for Isabella. He does not know how to gain her love for she is tragically melancholic because she has been taken captive. Not being able to please her, Mustapha is tormented by the "Flame" of his passion for her, saying: "unto ashes soon it will consume me:/ On Isabella's heaving snowy Breast must be quench'd", then he heartbroken says "Heaven!" (Heywood, 1721, p. 26).

From an Islamic perspective swearing by or appealing to the heavens is judged as an unpardonable sin because it is viewed a type of associating partners to God, just like swearing by 'gods' rather than by 'God'. From the Renaissance into the eighteenth century, dramatists do not observe this particularity about the faith of their Muslim characters. Muslim characters seem, to spectators, no different from their Christian counterparts in this regard. Selimus, in Greene's *The Tragedy Selimus* (1594) praises Sinam Bassa for providing him with a proper justification for waging war against the 'Sophy' (Shah) of Persia and the 'Soldan' (Sultan) of Egypt. In doing so, he swears by the heavens: "By heavens, Sinam, th' art a warrior / And worthy counselor unto a king" (p. 79). On another occasion, he pledges to kill his brother for incriminating him in the death of their father, Sultan Bajazet, "By heavens, Corcut, thou shalt sure die, / For slandering Selim with my father's death" (p. 80).

In Settle's *Ibrahim, the Illustrious Bassa* (1676), Mirva, the Muslim maid, attempts to console her mistress Roxolana who is disturbed by the fact that her husband, Sultan Solyman, is now in love with another woman (Isabella), saying; "Doubt not th' Immortal Justice in your Cause, / Since your Apostate Lord his heart withdraws; / Heav'n will Revenge the wrongs to such Saint" (p. 39). Obviously, Mirva here perceives "Heav'n" as a substitute to God. It is heaven, not God, who is going to acquire justice for Roxolana. Sultan Solyman himself swears by heaven. To defend himself before his wife's accusation that he plots for her emotional destruction, he replies, "By heav'n I have no such malice in my thought, / My thoughts flow purer: No Black stream runs here" (p. 37). Solyman, the head of the Muslim state, swears by "heav'n" and not by God, something that would surely be met with disapproval if heard by Muslim spectators. In Voltaire's *Mahomet* (1741), Seid, Mohammed's trusty companion, views heaven as synonymous with "God" as he wonders about the sanctity of the task of murdering Zopir, one of the chieftains of Mecca, as he is requested to do by Mohammed: "If it is heaven's wish, I shall obey. But the cruel obedience! O heaven! At what price!" (p. 45). Once more, when his love Palmira shows her pity for Zopir, he questions the morality of his action by again talking about heaven as one of the incarnations of God "But if it is heaven's command? If I am really serving love and religion?" (p. 47).

Providence refers to the idea of divine guidance or care, often associated with a higher power or God, and the belief that events are orchestrated by this power. From a Christian perspective, 'providence' has to do with God's ability to govern, guide, and sustain. Thus, it is considered divine in the different Christian denominations and thus belief in it becomes inseparable from a Christian's belief in God. Sultan Solyman, in Settle's *Ibrahim, The Illustrious Bassa* (1676), is distinguished from other Muslim characters in the play as a believer in 'providence'. His wife Roxolana commits suicide because of his cruelty and his daughter Asteria is killed when she interferes to protect her lover Ibrahim from her father and his officer Morat Bassa. This series of disastrous events lead Solyman to think that 'providence' works against him; "How strangely I am crost by Providence" (p. 70) he retorts. Solyman's reference to providence is in full harmony with the Christian belief, not with the Islamic one. In Islam, Muslims believe in the existence of ninety-nine characteristics

of God, known as the names or attributes of God, with each one reflecting a certain trait of God. Taking into account the definition of 'providence' as a Christian concept, it is embedded in several names of God in Islam, particularly the Guardian, and the Sustainer. Muslims can take an oath using any of the ninety-nine names of God, but there no such specific term like 'providence' that encompasses them all.

As noted in the first section, European playwrights failed to fully understand the religion of Islam prior to constructing important characters that spoke and acted in ways which all Muslims, and especially those educated Muslims of high rank, would shy away from due to their fear of falling into *shirk* (associating partners to God). The dramatists had access to first-hand accounts of those who had traveled to and spent time in the Orient, but it is suspect that these accounts gave a true and unbiased opinion of the culture they had encountered in the East, especially considering the bitter economic rivalry over the resources that could be tapped in the region. One must wonder whether it was just convenient for Westerners to create a misleading picture of their Eastern contemporaries to avoid the wider public developing any empathetic sentiments to Muslim leaders and their subjects.

IV. Conclusion

The deviation of the Muslim characters from utterances that are deemed acceptable in Islamic theology is not limited to what has been discussed above. Other expressions that conflict with basic Islamic beliefs, such as likening Muslim characters to God, are also found in the corpus of Oriental drama. In real life, Muslims are very cautious not to liken anything to God because there is a verse that renders such comparisons great sins; referring to Himself in the Holy Qur'an, God states plainly: "There is nothing like Him" (25:11). So, for a Muslim character to use such comparisons would be seen as very offensive and blasphemous. Even though it is less commonly found than swearing by Mohammed or by the heavens, some dramatists did write such dialogue for their Muslim characters. For instance, in his attempt to highlight the noble traits of Amurat and elevate his character before the Emperor, the Mufti in Pix's *Ibrahim, TheThirteenth Emperour of the Turks* (1696), describes Amurat as "Godlike General . . . who brings / your conquering Forces back from vanquisht *Babylon*" (p. 3). This is shocking when one considers that such a big deviation comes from the mouth of the highest religious authority of the state, the Mufti. In another place, Sheker Para, Ibrahim's favorite concubine, reiterates the Mufti's words when she says to Amurat "so you methinks, / Too Godlike Hero might look down to love" (p. 12). Amurat is compared by the two Muslim characters to God. Also, in Thomas Southerne's *The Loyal Brother* (1682/1988), Sunamire describes Seliman, the Persian Sophy, to Semanthe as God: "Now, when the Majesty of *Persia* comes, / In all his royalties, and pomp of power, / Like a descending God, to court you to him, / Thus to be seen in tears provokes my wonder" (p. 52).

It is true to say that the error is sometimes a linguistic one, probably due to misunderstanding through oral communication with the Turks. However, it remains a serious problem to a Muslim spectator. Cowley in her play *A Day in Turkey* (1792) and Hodson in *Zoraida* (1779) refer to what is known in the West as the "harem" using the term "haram". In *A Day in Turkey*, Azim, one of the Bassa's officers, asks Alexina, a concubine, to be merry for "Our master is returning from the camp" and he will have time to "devote to pleasure and his haram" (p. 11). In *Zoraida*, Sultan Selim asks Heli, the "Governor of Selim's Haram", to conduct Zoraida, his favorite concubine, "to our Haram" (p. 15). "Haram" and "harem" have two totally different meanings. Whereas the term 'harem' refers to the private quarters of women in a Muslim household, more commonly in wealthy palaces of sultans, princes, and Bassos, the term 'haram' refers to a religiously forbidden thing, deed or saying. A further serious lexicological mistake occurs when the word "iman", which means faith, is used in place of "imam", referring to the leader of prayers or a scholar in Islamic theology. Such mistakes are obviously attributed to the inability of the English travelers to correctly distinguish between spoken words when they communicated with the Turks and recorded them in their accounts accordingly. The Vizier in Cowley's (1792) play also refers to the Mufti as one of the "Churchmen", a term peculiar to Christianity, saying he is "like other Churchmen, instead of prayers, / He studies politics" (p. 14). Obviously, Cowley's ignorance of the appropriate term in Islamic theology made her borrow the Christian term, Churchman, to refer to a Muslim person associated with the Islamic religious institution.

As such, "it was not rare for English playwrights to make grievous errors in the way they constructed the characters of Muslims" (Maciulewicz et al., 2024, p. 74). This ignorance is by and large attributed to the very limited sources that playwrights used to draw on. Unfortunately, this misinformation is passed to the audiences, eventually creating a distorted image of the Eastern culture in the West. Without having alternative sources to refer to, the English audiences were not able to filter the information presented to them in these dramas about the Eastern culture. We must remember that many of the people who saw the plays would have been uneducated, particularly in foreign cultures, and would therefore have taken the content of the plays at face value. The inability to sort out what is fictional from what is real made the gap between the Eastern culture and the English audience nigh on impossible to bridge. Del Balzo (2015) rightly remarks that "Most Britons encountered Eastern regions first through their fictional representations in the Oriental tale and Oriental tragedy" (Del Balzo, p. 503). One of the things that made Greene's *Selimus* appeal to the Elizabethan spectator, as Bay (2025) maintains, is "its portrayal of a distant and mysterious culture" (p. 71). The English public had a growing interest in knowing about the peoples in faraway lands, but they had nothing with which to balance out what they saw on the stage. Thus, the impression made was accepted and internalized, even though in reality there were many serious discrepancies between these entertaining tales and the real lives of the people featured in them.

This paper has sought to examine how European, and especially English, dramatists writing in the late sixteenth century onwards, attempted to open up to spectators the hitherto mysterious world of the Orient by drawing on the accounts of those who had traveled to the East and recorded their experiences. Unfortunately, those travelers had sometimes misunderstood their Eastern hosts, and had sometimes deliberately and maliciously written seriously skewed tales. Consequently, the playwrights presented Muslim characters on stage that misrepresented the Islamic religion, thus causing serious misunderstandings among the audiences of these Oriental plays. The person of the Prophet Mohammed was often maligned, and Ottoman rulers were portrayed as violent, lascivious tyrants who bore no saving graces. Consequently, Western audiences received a tainted view of Islam and Muslims that was perpetuated right into the present day.

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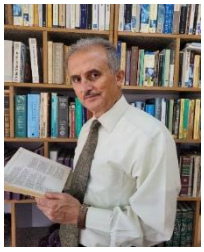

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