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### Returning to Shakespeare's Mediterranean

Even as studies of encounter and exchange between European and Islamic worlds attempt to move away from or problematize theoretical models based on conflict, there remains a persistent urge to view literary and cultural production that depicts such moments of contact through that optic. A recent essay on “the Turk” in the European imaginary begins with the following, “Across the Christian-Muslim frontier during the sixteenth century, the threat of military attack, as well as the ideological war against the alien religion of Islam, preoccupied the consciousness and created a climate of fear in European Christian states” and concludes with “No European Christian could ever forget the clear and present danger posed to his faith and his political autonomy by the Islamic Ottoman Empire across the border.”<sup>1</sup> Disregarding the privileging of religious identity and gender as well as the totalizing terms deployed by the author, we might still take issue the framing of Islam as a religion alien to the Europe. We might also find objectionable the manner in which the article succeeds in foreclosing the possibility of interaction between the Ottomans and “Europeans” (whomever they might be) to anything other than military. I cite this work because it represents a critical commonplace, indexing ways of seeing that continue to reverberate in the popular and critical imaginary. Nonetheless, such modes of inquiry needs must be challenged, and I believe the work of this institute with its focus not just on geography and identity but also on the *longue durée* of encounter within this particular geography does precisely that. Indeed, participation here has helped me consider how such an approach, one that is rooted in English literary studies but takes as one of its routes the Mediterranean, offers a hermeneutics that exposes the connected, sedimented, and cross-cultural nodes of literary production. In fact, a Mediterranean itinerary opens up the space to consider these texts as more than just analogues for events and situations that have meaning back at the center, in England, but rather reveals how these texts as having ideological investments that are particular to a Mediterranean milieu.

From the perspective of the immediate geography of the Mediterranean, England might very well appear to be the hinterland, on the frontier of Mediterranean culture and economy; however, from our readings during the institute we find evidence of English, or more precisely, British, participation and interest in Iberian / Mediterranean culture. While the English have long looked westward (Ireland being their oldest and most problematic colonial venture in the period), they have just as equally turned their gaze to the east (consider the marital alliances between Henry VIII and Katherine of Aragon and Mary and Philip II). Yet the English only really find purchase in the Mediterranean in the late sixteenth century. In 1570 England began formal diplomatic relations with the Ottoman Empire and the Islamic principalities of North Africa.<sup>2</sup> The Levant Company was founded in 1581, and by 1590 trade relations were well enough established for English diplomats to claim, “It is well known that the parts of Italy and Turkey will bear a greater trade than all parts of Christendom now in amity with her majesty.”<sup>3</sup> English ventures in the Mediterranean were driven by mercantile ambitions, and perhaps that might offer

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<sup>1</sup> Larry Silver, “Europe’s Turkish Nemesis,” in *Representing Imperial Rivalry in the Early Modern Mediterranean*. University of Toronto Press (2015).

<sup>2</sup> Historical facts are from Vitkus, *Turning Turk: English Theater and Multicultural Mediterranean*. Palgrave (2007).

<sup>3</sup> Vitkus (26).

one explanation for why many of the plays of the period about this region focus on issues of traffic and trade: for example, *The Jew of Malta*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *The Renegado*, and *A Christian Turned Turk* to name a few, all employ merchants as main characters and illustrate the ways in which voyaging or hazarding into the Mediterranean could be literally enriching. Moreover, these plays betray intense concern about how one form of traffic can slip into another: the commercial into the sexual. Such anxieties while, new and possibly shocking for an English audience, would not have been so in a Mediterranean context, with its long history of various forms of exchange. Indeed as we have seen the transactions in and of bodies frequently goes hand in hand with transactions between bodies. Such moments are often depicted on the early modern English stage; however, because of English foreignness with Mediterranean culture, they are usually cast as demonic or degenerate examples of that culture. With no access to forms of mutual intelligibility the English fall into discursive strategies that read like a form of proto-Orientalism.

Briefly, I would like to consider a play by William Shakespeare and tease out how a Mediterranean methodology might expand the ambit of analysis and interpretation. *The Merchant of Venice* features an explicitly Mediterranean setting, yet beyond the historical Venice of the early modern period, critical analyses of the play haven't considered Mediterranean topoi in their immediate geographic context. English literary historians tend to imbue Shakespeare's Venetian plays with a kind of Englishness, to find in them various allusions to English history, ideas, and culture. But what if, as Sharon Kinoshita has been asking us to do, we took the Mediterranean as more than a backdrop, if we shifted the critical gaze and re-oriented ourselves not toward, an other more English geography and worldview, but considered how and why Shakespeare deploys and interprets the Mediterranean?<sup>4</sup> I cannot here offer a full Mediterranean reading of the play, however, I would like to pause on some critical moments: 1) the scenes in Belmont where Portia has to open her doors to all men who would pursue as mandated by her father's will, and 2) Shylock's demand for justice. Both moments are connected by their expulsion of religious and racial difference. Portia's suitors include a Neapolitan prince, County Palatine, a French lord, an English Baron, a Scottish lord, and a German prince. Significantly, about the English suitor Portia remarks, that "he understands not me, nor I him," exposing the young baron to be somewhat of a country bumpkin within the very cosmopolitan world of Belmont.<sup>5</sup> While Portia's disdain for her English suitor is comic, it exposes English vulnerability in the Mediterranean, not just a lack of experience and exposure to the culture, but also the linguistic barrier they face. The suitors who actually make the hazard for Portia's hand, which is comprised of an elaborate trial in which they must choose the correct casket or chest out of a golden, silver, and leaden one, are it is important to note from the Mediterranean: the Prince of Morocco, the Prince of Aragon, and Bassanio, a Venetian. What interests me in this scene are the actual caskets, we get no description of them in the text, other than the properties that are attached to material from which they are constituted. Might they be like the decorative chests that we have seen in our various museum excursions in and around Barcelona, with a particularly Mediterranean provenance? What kind of symbolic function did such chests serve? Were they simply decorative objects or did they contain some kind of subtext about the giver? I won't find the answers to these questions in the play, because like Portia's dead father, it is mute on the subject. Yet, it might be that such an inquiry into this important object would further expose the

<sup>4</sup> See for example, Kinoshita's PMLA article, "Medieval Mediterranean Literature."

<sup>5</sup> William Shakespeare. *The Merchant of Venice*, in *The Riverside Shakespeare*. Ed. G. Blakemore Evans. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1997. (1.2.68)

mechanisms through which the play discloses its strategies of incorporating or expelling difference. The other scene I would like to consider is the court scene at the center of the play. Antonio, who has rendered a pound of his flesh as collateral to finance his friend, Bassanio must now forfeit it to Shylock. Justice is quite deliberately served by Portia in this scene with Shylock being found to conspire against the life of Antonio and therefore losing not just his property but also his religion. What interests me here is how we might read this moment in a Mediterranean judicial setting. What are the rights of a minority to demand extreme forms of justice? Does a minority have to settle in certain cases? Are there legal precedents for such a conversion? (I don't here mean decrees for mass conversions.) Or is this so far from the of forms of justice that minority groups had access to, that what he have here is another way in which the English are not attuned to the structures of "mutual intelligibility" at work in the Mediterranean.<sup>6</sup> My hope is that an inquiry guided by a Mediterranean methodology would reveal the ways in which the play's geography undergirds the anxiety around conversion that manifests through the turning of the strange into the familiar.

I have presented more questions than I have given answers, but that's because that is where I am at this moment. I hope that as I find my way back to England, the foot of my compass, my interpretations will have been inflected by the Mediterranean routes that we have traversed together.

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<sup>6</sup> Brian Catlos claims that mutual intelligibility is a framework through which we can observe cross-confessional exchange.