

Matthew Birchwood. *Staging Islam in England: Drama and Culture, 1640-1685*. Studies in Renaissance Literature 21. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2007. viii + 200 pp. + 4 illus. \$95.00. Review by HUMBERTO GARCIA, VANDERBILT UNIVERSITY.

Prefixed to the 1649 English translation of *The Alcoran of Mahomet*, the translator's introduction stages the Turk as a historical actor who, along with English nonconformists, played a crucial role in the unfolding of seventeenth-century England's constitutional crisis following the regicide of King Charles I. The heresies and blasphemies of Islam present a danger only to the "Christian Reader" who, "too like Turks," "abandoned the Sun of the Gospel" in pursuit of the "strange lights" of "this Ignis Fatuus of the Alcoran" (qtd. in 65). While offering yet another condemnation of "Mahometanism," rehashing medieval Christian legends about the notorious "impostor" of Arabia, this translator alludes to the nonconformist parliamentarian authorities who tried to suppress Alexander Ross's publication of this rival holy book during a turbulent period in which attacks on Islam could be polemically coded as an orthodox royalist assault on the fledgling English Republic. Matthew Birchwood's *Staging Islam in England: Drama and Culture, 1640-1685* foregrounds this forgotten episode in order to argue that cultural encounters with Islam served as a focal lens for reimagining England's national identity, on and off stage, during the age of Revolution and Restoration.

Although the book mainly looks at English plays of the period, as implied in the title, it also considers diplomatic letters, pamphlets, and other polemical genres. For Birchwood, staging Islam in this period implicates playwright, performers and audience "in a show of politicised other worlds that self-consciously and inevitably reflect back on their orchestrators" (14). The mirroring effect of mid seventeenth-century drama, which equally includes non-theatrical works, marks the site of ideological formation. Inherited from Reformation polemics about the dreaded Turk, coded as Catholic or Protestant depending on the writer's religious orientation, the persistent realignment of this Muslim figure with either republicans or royalists testifies to the widespread appeal of the Islamic metaphor, which Birchwood defines as "a set of complex and often contradictory ideas deployed by writ-

ers of every political complexion” (14). In other words, Islam is a flexible point of reference for coping with national anxieties between 1640 and 1685; a malleable literary device used for making sense of the Civil War, the regicide, Cromwell’s dictatorship, the restored Stuart monarchy, the problem of toleration, the succession, and the Exclusion Crisis. As such, *Staging Islam in England* narrates a story of cross-cultural negotiations between England and the Ottoman and Safavid Empires via the channels of trade, diplomacy, and religion. By reading the drama of this period in its specific historical context, this book has the virtue of presenting a compelling counter-narrative to Edward Said’s monolithic interpretation of the East, contributing to ongoing scholarly research about the figurative centrality of Islam in the English literature and culture of the early modern period.

In Chapters two and three, Birchwood examines how the controversial “Alcoran” lent itself to self-contradictory appropriations in Interregnum royalist plays that have received little scholarly attention. Having provided a lucid introduction to seventeenth-century England’s subordinate relationship with the theological, political, and military might of the Ottomans, Safavids, and Moroccans in the first chapter, the second chapter begins with an analysis of *The Famous Tragedie of Charles I*, an anonymous “pamphlet play” published shortly after the execution of Charles I in January 1649 and during the ban on theatre. By alluding to Cromwell’s framing of an “English Alchoran,” *The Famous Tragedie* evokes Ross’s publication in order to forge conflicting identifications between the tyrannical Turk and his counterparts, Charles I and Cromwell, ironically prefiguring the victory of the republican Commonwealth while also trying to contain the defeat of royalist politics after the regicide. Chapter three continues to explore these conflicting identifications in John Denham’s *The Sophy* (1642) and Robert Baron’s *Mirza* (1655), a play that employs the Qur’an as an ideological template for the political, religious, and moral act of translating holy texts, establishing an analogy between the Islamic menace without, and the Cromwellian menace within. Sadly enough, Birchwood never explains why Islam was “most commonly deemed to be republican,” other than referencing the royalist concerns of the translator’s preface and Ross’s “Caveat” to *The Alcoran* as self-explanatory evidence for this assertion (68).

Subsequent chapters examine the increasing politicization of “turning Turk” during the constitutional turmoil of the 1660s and 70s. Chapter four provides an analysis of the production and textual history of William Davenant’s *The Siege of Rhodes* (published in 1663 but performed as a musical recital circa 1656), an ideologically ambivalent two-part play that not only dramatizes the uneasy transition from Parliamentary rule to the restored monarchy but “also addresses the crisis of the playwright’s own apostasy” (105). Thus, the trope of Muslim conversion allegorizes, in complicated ways, the playwright’s (and the nation’s) turncoat status, from a subject of the old Stuart regime, a citizen of the Commonwealth, to a defender of the restored monarchy. Chapter five reads Davenant’s play and Roger Boyle’s *Mustapha* (1668) in the context of emerging enlightenment views of the Turk as formed in the diplomatic writings of Paul Rycaut and the heretical writings of Henry Stubbe, another apostate who switched affiliations from republican to loyalist. Accordingly, Stubbe’s *An Account of the Rise and Progress of Mahometanism*—an understudied pro-Islamic manuscript—is emblematic of the larger domestic conflicts that haunt Restoration drama: the problem of “liberty of conscious,” the legitimacy of universal (restored) monarchy, and the expansion of trade abroad. In Chapter six, these national anxieties, figured in the friend/enemy image of the Turk, take center stage in oriental-themed plays fixated on the Stuart succession, the Popish Plot, and the Exclusion Crisis, a series of constitutional problems that were exacerbated by in-coming news about the failed Turkish siege of Vienna in 1683.

Staging Islam in England is a well-written book that combines historically-informed close readings of key texts with original research. However, the prism of Anglo-Ottoman relations through which Birchwood reads mid seventeenth-century drama is sometimes overbearing and, at worst, one-sided when considering the wider ramifications of Islamic geopolitical forces for English national politics. Fair to say, this book could not have been written without accounting for the prominence of Ottoman Turkey in this period, and yet Islamic modes of government were not confined to this region alone. Although Chapter Three discusses how Safavid Iran served as a competing model of Islamic (Shi’ite) virtue in Baron’s *Mirza*, other chapters say very little about the ways in which dramatic representations of Islam

were mediated by a global web of international and interregional relations that also included Ottoman-dominated Hungary, Muslim North Africa, and Mughal India. For example, Chapter six links the Popish Plot controversy to Hapsburg-Ottoman relations during the siege of Vienna, without mentioning that English debates about a Catholic succession were colored by the radical Protestant politics of Eastern Europe: namely, Protestant Hungary's rebellious defection to the Ottomans under the anti-Catholic, anti-Hapsburg leadership of Imre Thököly, who is frequently featured as Titus Oates's accomplice in anti-Whig polemics. Birchwood never considers this suggestive pairing in his discussion of the Titus-Turk trope. Moreover, he does not discuss the prominent figure of the "Moor" in Restoration plays such as Elkanah Settle's *The Empress of Morocco*, which is analyzed in Chapter six strictly in reference to the "Turk," and John Dryden's *Almanzor and Almabide, or The Conquest of Granada*, a two-part tragedy about the Christian conquest of Muslim Spain in 1492 that is not included in the book. Besides this play, Dryden's *Aurengzebe* could have broadened his analysis by looking at the problem of succession and toleration from the analogous perspective of seventeenth-century India's dynastic struggles.

But these limitations are overshadowed by Birchwood's monumental intervention. Undoubtedly, his pioneering scholarship will be of lasting importance for those who are interested in understanding the reception of Islam in mid and late seventeenth-century drama and culture, a timely topic that has been up to now poorly conceived and too often neglected. As he admits himself, *Staging Islam in England*, although limited in scope, offers a critical framework for studying other Islamic-themed works and canonical playwrights, such as Dryden, within the long-standing dramatic tradition of the "English Turk" as diligently outlined chapter-by-chapter. In the long run, this book revises Whig conceptions of progressive history that, in the wake of British imperialist historiography, have erased the formative role played by Islam in a series of constitutional debates that precipitated the "Glorious Revolution" of 1688.