ANTI-THESIS

Antagonist Images of the Turk in Early Modern European Games

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"The Turk" is a multifaceted concept that emerged in the late Middle Ages in Europe, and has gained new faces over the course of time until today. Being primarily a Muslim, the Turk usually connoted the antichrist, infidel, and the ultimate enemy. With such attributed qualities, the concept influenced European art and literature by providing a subject with negative visual and textual representations. Current scholarly corpus about representations of the Turk sufficiently investigates the subject, yet, without offering different reading and conclusion. This paper aims at introducing a new perspective to the image of the Turk by shedding light on its representations in early modern European board games and playing cards; thus, contributing to a nouvelle scholarly interest on the image of the Turk. It argues that, belonging to a familiar but relatively obscure world of games, board games and playing cards have the potential to reinforce an antithesis to the negative image of the Turk.

Keywords: Image of the Turk, Board Games, Playing Cards, Early Modern Period, the Ottomans

The earliest representation of the Turk in art appeared in Venetian Quattrocento paintings as a result of the increasing commercial activities of Venice, which played a role as the main connection between Europe and the Levant (Raby 17). The perception of the image of the Turk varied depending on the conflicts between Venice and the Ottomans, usually provoked by religious and political propaganda. Gentile Bellini's circa 1480 portrait of Mehmed the Conqueror, who conquered Constantinople, is one of such rare early examples that reflected an appreciation of an *incognito* enemy before the early modern period, which had faded over the course of time as tensions increased. Bellini, who started a short-lived early Renaissance Orientalism, was commissioned by Mehmed II, whose private patronage was "eclectic with a strong interest in both historical and contemporary Western culture" (Raby 7).[1] The formation of the Holy League of 1571 against the Ottomans was celebrated in Venice with a procession in which "the *Gran Turco* [was represented] as a huge dragon with a crescent on its head" (Gombrich 63). Similarly, the 1683 Battle of Vienna, which marked a decisive victory for European forces over the Ottomans, was glorified by commissioned artists who symbolized the Turk in like manner. Such celebrations

inspired not only artistic but also ludic expressions.[2]

The Turk, with all these qualities, became a part of cultural productions in art and literature. Their terrible image was re-produced by artists and writers who needed an antagonist in their works. Winning a war against the Turk was glorified in paintings depicting enslaved Turkish soldiers, broken scimitars and Ottoman flags on the ground. Titian's 1573-75 "Allegory of the Battle of Lepanto" represents an example of such a depiction commemorating victory against the Turk. Robert Daborne's 1612 play "*A Christian Turn'd Turk*" expressed a deep anxiety of Christians' conversion to Islam. Religious conversion was regarded as the most gruesome victory that Turks could gain at a personal level.

The image of the Turk from the point of view of the Europeans has been broadly investigated by researchers from different fields whose views have been revolving around unfavorable connotations attributed to the Turks from the time they became a topic in Europe in the 15th century. These connotations are so strong that it seems impossible to propose a different reading that claims otherwise, due to the fact that the repetitive negative image in historical sources is highly ubiquitous. Delicate yet significant new approaches have yielded a more multifaceted image that argues for a revision to the simplistic dichotomy of a positive Europe vs. a negative Turk. As a researcher on this topic, I find the image of the Turk in early modern European board games and playing cards particularly promising, bearing the potential to provide a counterargument to the mainstream image of the Turk in other media as well.

Considering the long history of wars between the Ottomans and the Europeans, the image of the Turk may have emerged out of a perception of fear, threat and aggressive military conditions. Thus, according to many scholarly publications, the Turk was seen as the enemy, antichrist, infidel, barbarian, and terror of the world. Despite the growing interest, early modern writers' insufficient knowledge about the Ottomans consolidated an imagined Turk that was widely circulated in many early modern publications. James Hankins states that he collected more than four hundred texts on the necessity of a crusade against the Turk, written by more than fifty humanists and printed between 1451-81, and this number is by no means complete (Hankins 112). In parallel, Ottoman advances in Balkans, especially in the 15th century, attracted not only publications, but also translations of documents regarding the Turks.[2] In spite of this, early modern humanists situated the Turk into a different context by classicizing them in accordance with classical antiquity, as a result of which the Turk was identified with Scythians (the epitome of barbarism).[3] The humanists' insufficient knowledge on one hand, and their growing interest about the Turk on the other, resulted with an imagined Turk. This approach of the humanists towards "the Turk" resonates with what Stephen Greenblatt calls "engaged representations": representations override the objective knowledge, as a result of which the points of departure (in our case, of the humanists) are the very imagination (of the Turk). Studies on how wide the image of the Turk spread to the world with European colonialism and missionaries and how fragmented it could get in relation to the geographical and cultural distance show that the image of the Turk travelled faster than the Turks themselves.[4]

However, there are examples in representations of the Turk in the early modern period suggesting differing views which should not be disregarded. While traditional historiography claims that Muslim communities became inexistent in Europe after the Spanish Reconquista, this notion of a homogenous Europe has been criti-

cized by Tijana Krstic. Krstic collected the ever-present Muslim strata in Europe under four groups: slaves and captives, merchants, diplomats and travelers, and scholars (Krstic 671-693). Although slavery and captivity are closely related to wars, these groups had constant interaction with the two parties beyond militaristic practices. The intensity of diplomatic "networks of contacts" and the Ottoman "go-betweens" in the Mediterranean polities highlighted by Emrah Safa Gürkan are novel scholarly contributions to this end (Gürkan 107-128). Anders Ingram's thorough inspection of the frequently referenced works of Richard Knolles on the Ottomans, on the other hand, reveals that while addressing the Ottomans as "the terror of the world", this early modern English historian had a different mindset that the current scholarship has neglected in its interpretation. (Ingram, p.3) This recent research on the familiarity with Turks and Muslims necessitates a reevaluation of the earlier consensus of a purely negative image of the Turk, which will be conducted in an exemplary fashion on the level of card and board games in this article.

The Turk as a Biblical Enemy

Early modern board games and playing cards form a part of cultural production expressing reflections of the society in a

Figure 1: Meister PW's playing cards; Turkish King and the Over Knave. The British Museum, Inv. Num: 1878,1012.41, 1878,1012.24.

ludic way (Jessen 102-103). Thanks to the developments in printing technology pioneered by Johannes Gutenberg, early modern European societies could access printed playing cards and board games, with playing cards in particular enjoying an unprecedented popularity. Since the production of pictures on the playing cards required skillful woodcut and etching artists, unique pieces of art were produced in this medium by leading German Renaissance artists, some of whom also were engaged in the production of other genres such as Biblical illustrations. The image of the Turk was reflected in their exotic and uncanny appearance on most

of the cards. In this regard, Albrecht Dürer's contribution to the early depictions of the Turk is both paradigmatic and controversial. As Raby noted in his "Venice, Dürer and the Oriental Mode" (25), during Dürer's first visit to Venice in 1495 through 1505, all Orientals in his works (mostly Biblical characters) were Ottomans, wearing distinctive Ottoman headwear such as the turban, *taj* and *börk*. However, he also drew Turks in compliance with exoticism and by no means derogative.[5] His Orientals influenced other woodcut artists and card makers alike in establishing a "German" image of the Turk.[6]

One of the earliest German woodcut artists was Meister PW, whose initials appear on a number of works. Although little is known about him, he lived and produced his woodcuts in Cologne in the last half of the 15th century. Besides illustrations for the Bible, he produced playing cards, among which a round deck is the most notable. Produced around 1500, this round deck of cards has five suits, some of which contain the first known depictions of the Turk on a playing card: a Turkish King, Over Knave (*Ober*) and Under Knave (Unter) (Figure 1). The almost identical appearance between Meister PW's Turks and Dürer's demonstrates that the former was familiar with the Orientals depicted by the latter.[7]

Peter Flötner (1490-1546), another German card-maker, introduced the Turk in his deck to German card players as the King of Hearts. The Turkish King and his deputy were depicted murdering three children (Figure 2). As Rainer Schoch argues in "Das Flötner'sche Kartenspiel", it is reminiscent of the biblical story "The Massacre of the Innocents". Behind the figures, an army camp can be seen with tents and soldiers, who are in celebration. The rest of the cards in the deck portray a carnivalesque world with imaginary situations, absurdity, and ordinary people, as well as

Figure 2: Peter Flötner's 1535-1540 playing cards; Turkish King of Hearts on the bottom right. The British Museum, Inv. Num: 1900, 0127.2.1-48.

royalties from around the world: the King of Denmark, King of Native Americans, and the Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire (Maximilian I or Charles V). The presentation of the Turkish King card in this fashion shows a contradiction with the other images in the deck, in terms of composition and religious references.

Nonetheless, the Turkish King represents power, fear and threat.

In conclusion, the German depictions of Turks on early modern playing cards draw on a vestimentary iconography first apparent in Dürer's work and connect the Turk iconographically with negative figures of biblical salvation history.

The Static Turk

Giuseppe Maria Mitelli (1634–1718), a Bolognese artist, produced his board games and caricatures during a period when the Ottomans and the Europeans (mainly the Habsburgs and the Venetians) were engaged in a number of military conflicts. Mitelli illustrated the Turk as the enemy, generally representing bad luck and the least possible advantage. Turks are static and cannot be chosen to play, in some instances even positing the Turk as the opponent against which all the players play to win the game. With these qualities, Mitelli's Turks constitute fundamental differences from that of the above-mentioned German playing cards.

Mitelli's "The Game of the Eagle (Il gioco del aquila)", for instance, was published some time after the 1683 Battle of Vienna (Figure 3). According to the game's instructions, the players put coins into the circle in the center of the page. Depending

Figure 3: Giuseppe Maria Mitelli's Game of the Eagle; after 1683. The British Museum Inv. Num: 1852, 0612.458.

on the number of eyes on the dice thrown by the players, they either pay coins to the pot or take coins from the pot. The possible combinations of eyes on the dice are represented as contestants in a European-Turkish struggle. The Ottoman commanders, who are the result of a throw of dice containing at least one dice with one eye, bear the letter P.1, which means paying out one coin. The sole exception in this is the Pasha of Vidin, who has the minimum dice combination (1-1): When throwing his dice combination, the player pays 3 coins. On the other hand, the Imperial Eagle protects all European commanders under its wings. All of them bear the letter T.1, meaning the player should take 1 coin from the pot. A double six dice combination will take all the coins as they correspond to the combination of the Imperial Eagle.

The depiction of the Turks in the game is strikingly grotesque, with grades of grief and astonishment visible on their faces. The Turk in the center, presumably the Sultan, is chained up like all the other Turks. The Imperial Eagle holds the chains of the enslaved Pashas. In marked opposition, the chivalric European commanders are protected by the Eagle.

The Knightly Turk?

Although fewer in number, some board games and playing cards represent a markedly different image of the Turk. The Turk in these games bears neither negative aspects, as in the German tradition, nor are they static, as in the games of Mitelli discussed above. On the contrary, they are part of the game and placed on an equal level with Europeans. This contradiction derives in part from the complexity of the gaming world that may sometimes manifest its own reality: enemies in reality can become friends in games.[8] Interestingly, some of the best examples of such games belonged to the elites of Habsburg Empire, which had to undertake a long-lasting conflict-centered relationship with the Ottomans throughout the early modern period.

A prime example of this tradition is a chess set produced in southern Germany around the mid-16th century (Figure 4). The chess board has an unconventional 8 × 15 squares and 53 chess pieces, which raises doubts as to whether it was ever played. The pieces include winged stal-

Figure 4: Chess set with Turkish, Spanish and German figures; 16th Century South Germany. Kunsthistorisches Museum Wien, Inv. Num: PA 34 and PA 772

Figure 5: A game piece representing Sultan Süleyman, 16th Century Augsburg. Kunsthistorisches Museum Wien, Inv. Num: 3859

lions with black, yellow and red colors on their wings, Turkish figures with shield and mace, Spanish figures and a German king and queen. This unique set implies that the Turk is part of a combined army of Europe. Moreover, the Turk fights against a common enemy together with his European friends. In other words, the perception of the Turk in this set manifests an antithesis to the image of the Turk in some sort of opposition that has been discussed so far.

A similar perspective can be seen in a set of a board game called langenpuff, which was played with counters and dice. The counters in this game resemble medallions and were perhaps produced by medallion artists of the time. The example in Viennese Kunsthistorisches Museum is comprised of 27 counters, who all are rendered in the shape of royal persons of the 16th century, among whom Sultan Süleyman (1494-1566) is also present (Figure 5). Produced around 1535-40 in Augsburg, the counter illustrates the Ottoman sultan in a realistic way, refraining from any negative depiction. In parallel with the above chess set, the counter is a part of the game on equal terms with the other pieces/peoples.

A curious deck of English fortune-telling cards is also worth mentioning in this context (Figure 6). Dateable to the early 1700s, the deck was produced and sold by a London-based stationer called John Lenthall and comprises the typical 52 cards in 4 suits (hearts, diamonds, clubs and spades). The King cards represent four biblical rulers (Holofernes, Pharaoh, Nimrod and Herod), and the Queens represent four famous women from ancient times (Proserpina, Semiramis, Dido and Clytemnestra). The Knaves include, as inscribed on the tops of the cards, Cupid, Wat Tyler, John Hewson and a certain Mahomett in an Oriental costume. Other cards include a number of implications for

Figure 6: Some of the cards from Lenthall's fortune-telling cards. Mahomett in bottom-left, early 18th century. The British Museum Inv. Num: 1896, 0501.942

fortune-telling and astrological signs, like zodiac diagrams (Wayland 12-21).

From the instructions written by Lenthall on the "Use" cards, the knaves, who hold three books in their hands, lead the player to a zodiac card before finding the answer. Mahomett is, accordingly, a guide that takes the player from one stage to another

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in search of his/her fortune. From this perspective, in terms of composition and functionality within the game, Mahomett does not bear a negative connotation.[9]

In conclusion, the image of the "positive Turk" in the examples presented in this article forms an antithesis to the well-known and widespread negative image of the Turk. Although the image is multifaceted and cannot be generalized by a simplistic dichotomy, the overall conflictive nature of the relationship between the Ottomans and Europe caused both positive and negative imaginations in the minds of early modern Europeans. In this context, it should be noted that the image of the European in early modern Ottoman literature was predominantly negative. Europe, seen as the land of the infidels (dār-ı küffār) was the ultimate enemy opposing Islam.[10]

The fact that the positive examples discussed above come mainly from more expensively wrought games played (or exhibited) by the European aristocracy allows the question of whether this positive image was restricted to aristocratic circles, which also showed great interest in Oriental fashion.[11] In this context, the predominance of a negative image of the Turk in games presumably played by common people suggests a more negative perception of the Turk in these social contexts. As in other instances, the arbitrariness and complexity of the gaming world seem to have accommodated different opposed traditions in the representation of the Turk, as presented in this paper.

Notes

[1] The Ottoman defeat against a European coalition resulted in large celebrations that helped change the Ottomans' invincible image and increased the sense of a united Europe. The 1571 Battle of Lepanto, for example, temporarily united the Catholic powers of Europe; Habsburgs, Venetians and the Papal States. Although the battle did not stop the Ottoman advance and power, the spectacle of its celebration went beyond the battle so as to cause a downfall of the invincible image of the Turk (Jordan; Gombrich 62-8). The 1683 Great Siege of Vienna comprised even more diverse European forces than that of Lepanto, and the victory was celebrated as in post-Lepanto celebrations. There are two known decks of cards thematizing the 1683 Siege of Vienna, published in Vienna in the beginning of the 17th century (Witzmann "Das Spiel Der Mächtigen", British Museum Inv. No:1896,0501.251).

[2] Robert Schwoebel states that, due to the curiosity emerged in Europe about the Turk, the 1480 Ottoman siege of the island of Rhodes, for example, covered three history books, one of which was printed ten times between the years 1480-83 and translated from Latin to Italian, English and German languages. See, Schwoebel, "*The Shadow of the Crescent: The Renaissance Image of the Turk*", B. de Graaf, Nieuwkoop, 1967.

[2] Nancy Bisaha employs a closer analysis on the question of the Turk in early modern humanist writing, rooting the issue from the medieval tradition of crusade literature as a genre, which was re-devised by humanists at the expense of their humanist views. See, Bisaha, "*Creating East and West: Renaissance Humanists and the Ottoman Turks*", University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 2004.

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→ 3 As Paulino Toledo claims, there had already been an image of the Turk in 16th century Chile carried by the Spanish *Conquistadors* long before the Turks travelled to Chile. See: Toledo, "Türkler ve Hıristiyanlar Arasında" Adlı Komedide Türk İmgesinin Biçimlenmesi" in Kumrular (Ed.) *Dünyada Türk İmgesi*, Kitap Press, Istanbul, 2005; "*İslam Korkusu: Kökenleri ve Türklerin Rolü*", Doğan Kitap Press, Istanbul, 2012.

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5 A comparison of Dürer's 1508 Martyrdom of Ten Thousand and 1523 portrait of Süleyman the Magnificent clearly shows different approaches to the subject: while the former thematizes the Turk in a religious enemy context, the latter implies curiosity.

6 Dürer's Orientals included some irrelevancies to their original appearance, which were also copied by German artists. Similarities between his Orientals' footwear, for instance, can be followed in figures 1 and 2, made by different artists.

7 See Dürer's "*The Whore of Babylon*" for a better comparison.

8 See Caillois "*Man, Play and Games*"; and Huizinga "*Homo Ludens*".

9 This can be better explained by the fact that England followed a different, rather neutral, pathway in its relationship with the Ottomans than other Continental countries. In search of access to Mediterranean waters, England formed an alliance with the Ottoman vassal state of Morocco. Nabil Matar states that during the early 17th century, there were so many British workers in North Africa that they established their own lobby.

10 A reflection of the Turk in art shaped by a shared trading interest in early modern Netherlands was discussed in Michael Wintle "Islam as Europe's 'Other' in the Long Term: Some Discontinuities" in *History*. *The Journal of the Historical Association*, 2016, pp. 42-61.

11 For the European interest in Oriental dress and motives, see Charlotte Jirousek "More Than Oriental Splendor: European and Ottoman Headgear, 1380-1580", in *Dress* 1995 (22) pp: 22-33; Onur Inal "Women's Fashions in Transition: Ottoman Borderlands and the Anglo- Ottoman Exchange of Costumes" in *Journal of World History*, Vol. 22, No. 2, pp: 243-272; "Turquerie". *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin*, *New Series*, Vol. 26, No. 5, 1968, pp. 225-239.

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