Jews and Muslims in Marlowe’s *The Jew of Malta* and Shakespeare’s *Othello*

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In this paper, I will discuss the representation of Jewish and Muslim characters in Marlowe’s *The Jew of Malta* and Shakespeare’s *Othello*. The approach I will follow throughout this paper is the New Historicist one; i.e. relating the plays to the historical and political background in which they were written. In this regard, I will argue that the seemingly friendly relationship between England and the Muslim world during the reign of Queen Elizabeth played a significant role in the way both Jews and Muslims were represented on the London stage. Queen Elizabeth, whose throne was threatened by the Pope of Rome and the Catholic King of Spain, had to seek an alliance with some strong party who would help her. She found refuge at the then mighty Ottoman Sultan.

When it comes to the representation of Muslims and Jews in Marlowe’s The Jew of Malta and Shakespeare’s Othello, I found that the friendly relation between the Muslim world and England helped in representing Muslim

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characters in a favorable way than their Jewish counterparts. Shakespeare was objective in representing his ‘others’ while Marlowe was subjective.

[Key Words: Islam, Muslims, Islamophobia, Jews, Jewish, Orientalism, Marlowe, Shakespeare, Othello, Barabas, Elizabeth, Elizabethan, Turks, Cyprus, foreigners, Moors, Shylock, Bajazeth, Tamburlaine, Ithamore, blacks, Negros, Sulieman, Selim I]

I. Introduction

Shakespeare and Marlowe were born in the same year, 1564, but while Shakespeare lived until 1616 Marlowe died in 1593 when he was only twenty nine years old. The Elizabethan Era, the period in which Shakespeare and Marlowe lived, was different from our day and age in many aspects and it represents a turning point in the history of England, and Europe in general. It is not the purpose of this paper to examine how Shakespeare and Marlowe represented foreigners and strangers in their plays since this is beyond the scope of such a short paper. Rather, I shall quickly run through the points of relevance to our topic; the representation of Jews and Muslims. While Marlowe was not fair to his ‘others’ whether Jews or Muslims, Shakespeare went counter to the established stereotypical norms of his age when it came to representing ‘others’ on the English stage, be they Muslims, Jews or whoever. Shakespeare’s Othello and Shylock are among the most amiable others in Elizabethan drama.