



AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF BEIRUT

ENTERING THE BODY: READING EARLY MODERN  
LITERATURE THROUGH ISLAMIC THEOLOGY

by  
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## AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

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This thesis reconsiders the dominant discourse that not only imposes an Orientalism onto the early modern period but solely regards the monolithic divorce between East and West. This thesis reads early modern English literature without “project[ing] a dichotomy between a superior Christian Occident and an inferior Islamic Orient onto the early modern period” (Garcia 4). I read the early modern period’s literature through a Muslim theological lens as I strive to reconsider the East/West division by taking into account Abrahamic religious connections joining the religions of Islam and Christianity. An approach that highlights the already existing “connected history” lying between the Abrahamic religions of Christianity and Islam is adopted in order to cease treating “Islam as a ‘religion’ distinct from Judaism and Christianity” (Garcia 12-13). This thesis undoes the marginalization Islamic theology has witnessed in scholarly works on the early modern period. I look at the dissection of the flesh in Marlowe’s *Tamburlaine the Great* and Shakespeare’s *Othello* and *Antony and Cleopatra* through a Muslim theological lens. The use of Muslim theology, Quran and Hadith, in reading the dissection of the body in early modern literature reveals that characters provide knowledge, attain revelations and acquire resolutions to their problems through the opening of their flesh.

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# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

Islam is the religion of the cut: the incision that opened Prophet Mohammad's chest and prepared him for the reception of God's message. Many claim that Islam "of all the great religions of the human race was born sword in hand" and has thus always relied on the sword (Chirol 48). The Bedouins of the desert say "the history of the sword is the history of humanity" and "if there were no sword there would be no law of Mohammed" (Zwemer 109). However, the cut preceded the sword in Islam. Prior to the sword, Islam was founded on a cut and an incision that opened and purified Prophet Mohammad's chest. The cut targeted the body of the Prophet where a "future text would come into being" and prepared Mohammad for the reception of God's message (Benslama 13). This cut was neither invasive nor brutal. Rather, this cut, the dissection and the opening of the flesh, became the foundation for Islam.

This thesis will also begin with cutting and dissecting bodies of literature to read bodily cuts and dissections within those texts through a Muslim theological lens. Opening and dissecting the body in early modern literature will be read through the Quran's Surat Al-Sharih that describes the opening of Prophet Mohammad's chest. In fact, *sharih* in Arabic means to explain speech, expand a thing by explaining, cut and dissect the flesh long thin pieces. The Quran's *sharih* associates the act of opening and entering the body with revealing knowledge and providing explanations. In the Quran, the dissection of a body accompanies or is immediately followed by an explanation or a revelation. I seek to adopt the Quran's *sharih* that is performed on the body of the Prophet to apply it to textual bodies of early modern English literature. This *sharih* or dissection will first allow us to open and expose textual bodies to the medium of

Muslim theology to trace and read the dissection of the body on stage through a Muslim optic. Instead of using a Christian lens to examine the opening of the body on stage, I will read the dissections by employing Muslim theology.

### **A. Islam and the Early Modern Period**

Before I employ Muslim theology to read early modern English literature, it is important to note that the west has stereotyped Muslims as sexually insatiable and repressed barbaric communities. Even when the perceived influence of Islam on early modern English literature is examined, Islam is never presented as a religion in itself. Islam is often associated with customs that are not inherently Muslim where “through a process of misperception and demonization, iconoclasm becomes idolatry, civilization becomes barbarity, monotheism becomes pagan polytheism” (Vitkus, “Early Modern Orientalism” 207). Therefore, it is truly essential to carefully outline this thesis’ definition and use of Islam. I am solely interested in Muslim theology which derives from both the Quran, the holy book of Islam, and according to Muslims, contains the words of Allah, and the Hadith<sup>1</sup>, the sayings of Prophet Mohammad. This thesis will focus on Islam’s “fundamental elements: the Muslim religion as faith, dogma, and rite, anchored in the phenomenon of revelation found in the Koran and the tradition of the Prophet’s words and deeds” (Benslama 6).

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<sup>1</sup> Hadith is composed of two aspects which are the text of the report (the *matn*), which contains the actual narrative, and the chain of narrators (the *isnad*), which documents the route by which the report has been transmitted. The *isnad* literally means support since it presents the reliance of the hadith specialists upon it to determine the authenticity or weakness of a hadith. The *isnad* consists of a chronological list of the narrators. Each narrator mentions who they heard the hadith from, until mentioning the originator of the *matn* along with the *matn* itself.

## **B. Dissection**

This thesis uses the Quran's Surat Al-Shareh and Surat Yusuf to explore the relationship between the act of dissecting the flesh and penetrating the body with the providing of knowledge, revelations and resolutions. Rather than viewing the dissection of flesh or of bodies of literature as an invasive procedure performed on both human and textual bodies, I seek to examine dissection as the body's yearning to provide knowledge, attain revelations and acquire resolutions to conflicts. Surat Al-Shareh narrates the opening of the Prophet's chest which prepared him for the acquiring of Islamic knowledge. Surat Yusuf discusses the life of Prophet Yusuf and the attainment of a revelation through the dissection of the flesh. Opening the body makes the giving of knowledge and the attainment of revelations possible in the Quran. The Quran's *sharih* has a double meaning that is crucial to this thesis as it will demonstrate the body on stage as the recipient of the *sharih* (penetration/dissection) and as the giver of the *sharih* (knowledge). The body is not merely the recipient of foreign meaning systems because its dissection allows it to provide knowledge about itself on the European stage.

## **C. The Use of Quran**

Some claim that reading early modern English literature in relation to Muslim theology requires evidence for the writers' knowledge or contact with Islam or the Quran. Mallette in "Muhammad in Hell" writes that "Two translations of the Qur'an into Latin were made [...] Robert of Ketton translated it in 1142-43 for Peter the Venerable, and Mark of Toledo made his version in 1210-11" (215). "This first complete translation of the Qur'an into any Western language" was prepared for an audience of "Latin Christians attempting to convert to Muslims" (Burman 704). This

first translation by Robert of Ketton became a “best-seller” and was “the standard version of the Qur’an for European readers from the time of its translation down to the eighteenth century” (Burman 705). Latin translations of the Quran did exist during the early modern period which certainly allowed writers and scholars to have access to it. However, whether writers of early modern literature had access to the Quran or not does not have much impact on my research. I do not seek to prove using historic documentation that writers such as Marlowe and Shakespeare read the Quran, had access to it or even had any minimal knowledge about Islam. Instead, I use a Muslim interpretive model that treats Islam as an Abrahamic religion sharing connections with Christianity to read early modern literature. The dissection of the body on stage is read through the Quranic text to examine how the opening of the flesh is the means to give knowledge, attain revelations and arrive at solutions.

#### **D. Opening the Body During the Early Modern Period**

Opening the human body was of particular significance during the early modern period. Indeed, this historical period witnessed the preservation of the human body which was carried out through the opening of the flesh for the consumption of bodily substances. Bodies were dissected for the extraction of Mummy: medicinal corpse matter and “old and new embalmed bodies from the Middle East, as well as more recently preserved European parts” (Noble 22). Corpse pharmacology involved the dissection and opening of the body to extract substances for medicinal purposes where “bodily matter such as urine, feces, blood, fat, and bone were deployed in the name of health” (Noble 3). The opening of the body in the early modern period was performed

for extracting medicinal matter and providing knowledge on the anatomy of the human body.

The Quran presents the opening of the body as a sacred act upon which the religion of Islam was founded. It is important to note that *sharih* or the dissection of the human body had a significant role in the early modern period. It was praised due to the healing powers that extracted bodily matter were believed to have in addition to the desired sight of discovery it offered. The practices and the context in which the dissections took place to learn about the anatomy of the human body reveal the theatricality of this procedure. Similar to a theatre, the dissection was viewed by an audience of 200 persons where some even had to pay a fee to “witness the proceedings” (Sawday, “The Fate” 114). The dissection began with the lighting of candles to draw attention to the corpse. Even though the performance of opening the body was not displayed on a stage, the lighting of candles ensured that it was the centre of attention. Instead of drawing the curtains on stage, the spectacle began with the lighting of candles which oriented and fixated the gaze towards the procedure.

The individuals undergoing the dissections were freshly executed criminals receiving a further inscription of punishment on their bodies by the anatomist. During this spectacle of dissection, the criminal corpse was “the passive object of contemplation [...] while the lecturer reads from the classical corpus of medical texts.” However, a transformation in the role and importance of the dissected body takes place overtime. The dissected body later becomes superior due to the “site of discovery” and knowledge it offers for medicine (Sawday, “The Fate” 120). Sawday analyzes illustrations of anatomical dissections in which the corpse is seen to sanction the performance, join the anatomist for “a shared end” and desire its own dissection (“The



Fate” 123). Those illustrated corps portray dissection as a desired need for the conduction of medical discoveries instead of a bodily violation or disruption (Sawday, “The Fate” 126). The dissected body occupies a superior role due to the knowledge that the opening of the flesh provided. The dissected corps in the early modern period and the body on the European stage desire their own dissection. In early modern English literature, the centre shifts from the dissection, *sharih*, of the body, to the body’s desire for *sharih* to provide knowledge, attain revelations and acquire resolutions for conflicts.

#### **E. From Orientalism to Islam and Christianity’s Connectedness**

The opening of the human body resembled a staged performance during the early modern period. This performativity was achieved through the lighting of candles that fixate and orient the gaze towards the corpse in addition to an audience that pays a fee to observe the proceedings. I will examine the staged dissected body in Shakespeare and Marlowe’s work. This thesis neither aims to justify the ways in which Muslims were perceived during the early modern period nor present their relationship with Christian Europe as one of conflict. This thesis is unconcerned with the monolithic divorce between East and West which works such as Said’s *Orientalism* explore. Rather, I seek to rethink a time period based on instances of overlaps and interactions to focus on “the notion of sharing the past while avoiding false universals [...] [to] find the seeds of anti-colonial perspectives, transcultural understanding, and self critique” (White 500).

This thesis employs Muslim theology to read early modern English literature without “project[ing] a dichotomy between a superior Christian Occident and an inferior Islamic Orient onto the early modern period.” I decline this projection in an attempt to

resist the common approach of considering the “West [as] the prime mover and the East its passive beneficiary” (Garcia 3). Geographical, political and religious relationships won’t be viewed through an East/West lens that divides, fragments, alienates and others. Instead, I will be considering those relationships by treating “Afro-Euroasia as an integrated whole” to de-emphasize the over inflated East/West division (Garcia 4). This East/West division is often linked to a failed encounter at one specific moment in time, or rather, an encounter that revealed an impossibility of establishing a connection where Said writes, “[T]he European encounter with the Orient [...] turned Islam into the very epitome of an outsider against which the whole of European civilization was founded” (Said 71). This quote treats Europe and the Orient as two unconnected separate wholes that occupy distant hemispheres and share a momentary failed encounter. It overlooks their geographical, political and religious connections.

This thesis will move “beyond Orientalism” by ceasing “to treat Islam as a ‘religion’ distinct from Judaism and Christianity” (Garcia 12-13). It will de-emphasize the East/West division by taking into account Abrahamic religious connections. However, I will not use Garcia’s “inclusive, nonessentialist paradigm” to bring Islam and Christian Europe together since the word “inclusive” points out the need to include that which is foreign, alien and outside (Garcia 22). The East/West binary will not be de-emphasized through an “inclusive” approach that indirectly reaffirms Islam’s position as a distant other. Rather, I de-emphasize this binary through an approach that highlights the already existing “connected history” lying between the Abrahamic religions of Christianity and Islam (Garcia 25).

I examine a connection between the Muslim Quran and Europe’s Christian early modern English literature. Islam and Christianity share their birth from the Roman

Empire and “the figure of Abraham, the father that monotheism places at the beginning, or *entête*, ‘Father - of – Genesis’” (Benslama 72). The figure of Abraham undoes the Eastern and Western binary because he is placed at the origin and the birth of monotheistic religions sharing a “common heritage [...] rooted in the monotheistic tradition of the patriarch Abraham” (Kimball 37). Indeed, Islam is neither “historically [n]or theologically exterior to Christianity” (White 499). Islam and Christianity share overlaps and connections in addition to having Abraham as their common site of birth. Exploring early modern literature using the Quran is founded on Islam and Christian Europe’s “connected histories as opposed to ‘comparative histories’” (Subrahmanyam 745). By reading early modern literature through the lens of Muslim theology, I seek to examine, diagnose and test a dialogue, between texts. Muslim theology is employed in order to delve into literary texts and trace unexplored dialogues between the Quran and early modern works. I am not interested in delving into writers’ experiences, knowledge or contact with Islam. I will be only dealing with texts and the potentials that will be unveiled when using Muslim theology.

## **F. Thesis Plan**

This thesis will examine the dissection and the permeation of the body in Marlowe’s *Tamburlaine the Great* and Shakespeare’s *Othello* to then trace this *sharih* in *Antony and Cleopatra* using a Muslim theological lens that employs the Quran’s Surat Al-Sharih and Surat Yusuf. Moving from bodily dissections in *Tamburlaine the Great* that offer knowledge and the opening of the flesh in *Othello* that provides revelations, I will show that characters in *Antony and Cleopatra* desire the penetration of their flesh in order to attain relief and elevation.

The first chapter of this thesis comprises a general overview of the literature on Islam and Early Modern literature. The second chapter explores Marlowe's *Tamburlaine the Great* where the opening of the body will be examined through a Muslim lens to see Tamburlaine's desire to provide knowledge through his body's *sharih*. The third chapter explores Shakespeare's *Othello* and specifically the ways in which the opening of the body situates and grounds the reception of a revelation in *Othello*. The fourth chapter will look at *Antony and Cleopatra* to see how the characters resort to the opening of their flesh as a means to find a resolution to their problems. The connected history joining Islam and Christianity will allow the employment of the Quran to read early modern plays. This use of Muslim theology reveals that entering the body through either penetration or dissection, *sharih*, is not presented as a lack or a bodily lacuna. Rather, in those literary works, dissections become a site of production through which characters give knowledge, attain revelations and reach solutions.

## CHAPTER II

### LITERATURE REVIEW AND METHODOLOGY

Early modern scholars focus on presenting the early modern period's failure to treat Islam as a religion. They explicate Islam's link to customs and stereotypes that are not inherently Muslim and strive to provide reasons for such associations. Those scholars read the encounter between early modern Europe and Islam as failed and the relationship between the East and West as one of division and conflict. Islam and the early modern period's misunderstandings, stereotypes, divisions and conflicts become founding pillars for reading the period's literature in relation to Islam. Indeed, scholars read early modern literature in relation to Islam based on Muslim stereotypes and/or geographical and religious divisions. However, a number of scholars tackle the literature in relation to the Muslim religion by proving that early modern dramatists had access and knowledge to Islam and the Quran.

#### **A. The Failure to Treat Islam as a Religion**

Critics probing the early modern period's relation to Islam investigate in the early modern period's failure to treat Islam as a religion. Robinson explains that "Europe has always refused to treat Islam as a religion at all" (5) while Burton states that "scholars regularly disregard the fact that Islam was a religion" ("English Anxiety" 36). Islam was associated with evil, where Martin Luther "described Catholic theology as an Islamicization of Christianity" and added in *Table Talk* that "the Turk [was] the flesh of antichrist" (qtd. in Robinson 44). Robinson explains that Protestants believed that Islam was a "divine punishment" (45-46) and the Pope, the devil and the Muslim

sought to lead Protestants to damnation through sexual temptation and a “wrathful passion for power” (Vitkus, “Turning Turk” 145).

### ***1. Islamic Quran and Doctrine***

The available information on “Islamic religious doctrine and practice” had almost no resemblance to Islam (Vitkus, “Early Modern Orientalism” 216). Even the translation of the Quran, the founding pillar for Islamic theology, was far from objective. For instance, Matar explains that that Ross translated the Quran for the specific purpose of allowing Christians to realize the religious conflict with the “Mahometans” whom he defined as the “enemies of the Cross of Christ” (*Turks, Moors* 163). Vitkus highlights that this information was, however, considered “real” and “served as the only readily available means for understanding [...] Islam” (“Early Modern Orientalism” 207). However, Ahsan disagrees and explains that Christians were in contact with Muslims, and Islam was not a mystery. Ahsan believes that it is specifically the “propaganda against Islam” which constructed this misunderstanding of Islam so as to make this religion “the Devil's own creed and Muslims, the Devil's disciples” (196). Islamic theology was seen as “the root of all evil” and misinformation about Islam was due to either “complete ignorance” or a “gross distortion of facts” (Ahsan 24). For instance, Burton highlights the misconceptions about essential theological grounds in Islam mentioned in travelers’ accounts such as “that Islam has *eight* commandments” while in reality the Quran clearly mentions five (“Emplotting” 24-25). In addition, texts in the early modern period depicted the abuse of women as essentially Islamic (Andrea, *Women and Islam* 90). According to Maclean and Matar, Britons often learned about those misconceptions from writers who sought to refute

them in order to “celebrate England and Englishness” (Maclean and Matar 31).

Similarly, other elements of the Muslim religion were misunderstood and disfigured.

## ***2. Prophet Mohammad***

Scholars show particular interest in presenting the distorted image Prophet Mohammad had in early modern literature (Al-Olaqi 178). Indeed, Islam’s Prophet Mohammad had a demonized image during the early modern period. For instance, William Bedwell wrote a tract in 1615 entitled “Mohammedis Imposturare” in which he examines the “blasphemous seducer Mohammed’s [...] forgeries [and] falsehoods” in the “cursed Alkoran” (qtd. in Vitkus, “Early Modern Orientalism” 217). Furthermore, Richard Grafton translated a French text on the Ottomans “The Summe of Mahoumetes Doctrine” where the Prophet is compared to the “Antichrist, a serpent, an adder, and a wolf” (MacLean and Matar 31). Prophet Mohammad was believed to be a deceiver armed with “improbable fictions, above all the fiction of the Qur’an as an inspired text” (Robinson 166). He was also a “frenzied visionary or an impostor manipulating an enthusiastic people” (Robinson 175). Mohammad was portrayed as a violent man used by a “scheming monk [...] to spread heresy” and convince Arabs “that he is the messiah” (Moran 23). Some believed that he was a Roman Catholic cardinal who failed to be elected pope. Others thought he was a poor camel driver who learned from a Syrian monk how to create a religion from Christian and Jewish doctrines to lure Arabs with miracles and black magic in order to convince them that he was God’s chosen prophet (Vitkus, “Early Modern Orientalism” 217). Many spoke of Mohammad’s epileptical raptures, ecstasies, revelations of Angels and “immoderate fasting that drives him into a perfect Lunacy” (Robinson 164). Not only were Islam’s religious doctrine,

Quran and Prophet disfigured, but associating Islam with customs that are not inherently Muslim further scarred Islam's image.

## **B. Islam and Stereotypes**

### ***1. Circumcision***

Islam was linked to practices that are not inherently Muslim such as circumcision. It is important to note that circumcision was not introduced by Islam and is neither exclusively Muslim nor theologically mandatory in the religion of Islam. Indeed, it is “a primitive custom and an old Arabian tradition” also found in 6000 year old mummies, “Egyptians, Kalahari bushmen, Australian aborigines and other African communities.” In fact, “the first definite account [of circumcision] appears in Genesis (Chap. 17), in which the covenant is made between God and Abraham, stating: ‘And he who is eight days old shall be circumcised among you, every male throughout your generations’” (Rizvi, Naqvi, Hussain and Hasan 13). The practice is not mentioned in the Quran and is a tradition “attributed to the Prophet Abraham” (El Sheemy and Ziada 276). Circumcision is believed by only one Islamic school of thought to be obligatory, the Shafiite school of thought. Other schools of Islamic thought recommend it but “none consider it a precondition of being a Muslim.” Indeed, an uncircumcised individual will “not be considered non-Muslim only because he is uncircumcised” (El Sheemy and Ziada 276). However, during the early modern period, Islam was associated with circumcision which in turn was conflated with castration, emasculation and sexual excess. The need to reduce the penis indicated the essential need “to curtail raging lust” (Vitkus, “Turning Turk” 174). MacLean and Matar explain that the “Turban and circumcision went together” as they both made the salvation of man impossible in



Christian eyes (220). Furthermore, circumcision paved the way for homosexuality due to “its slippery relationship to castration” (Degenhardt, *Islamic Conversion* 83). Another Muslim stereotype worth exploring is sexual excess.

## 2. *Sexual Pleasures*

### a. Life

Scholars have been greatly interested in examining the association of Islam with sexual excess. Hawkes explains that as absurd as it might sound to people today, early modern Europe did believe “that Islam was a religion that promoted sensuality” (145). Western European texts portrayed Islam as “a licentious religion of sensuality and sexuality” (Vitkus, “Turning Turk” 156). Muslim men were thought to be sexually excessive, Muslim women were seductively charming, and Islam had a “general permissiveness toward sexual promiscuity” (Degenhardt, *Islamic Conversion* 102). Many believed that Islam provided “easier access to sexual pleasures and monetary wealth” (Degenhardt, *Islamic Conversion* 3). For instance, Elizabethan literature depicted sexually insatiable Moors (I. Smith 179). Sexual excess and repression characterized Islam in addition to “the notion of a veiled, hidden lust that masquerades as virtue and chastity” (Vitkus, “Early Modern Orientalism” 223). The Harem was not considered a cultural factor; rather, it was seen as an Islamic element and a “theological component” that represented the sexually exotic, erotic and sensual (Maclean and Matar 38).

### b. Afterlife

Sexual excess was another trait that characterized the Muslim after life. Accounts on Islam described the Muslim heaven or “Mahomet’s paradise” as a space

for “sexual and sensual delights with its nubile houris, rivers of wine, and luxurious gardens” upon which Christians based the frame of “difference between Christian salvation and the debased pleasures supposedly offered by Islam” (Robinson 149). Christianity offered salvation and access to the true heaven but “Islam dreamt of bodily pleasures” (Robinson 150). For instance, the “erotics of the garden” is presented in Mandeville and Marco’s works depicting Islam as a “carnal perversion of Christianity” and a religion of lure and seduction (Robinson 164-165). Islam was criticized by Christian writers for the sexual rewards it offered in the afterlife and the “sexual freedom [it] allowed in this life” (Vitkus, “Early Modern Orientalism” 223). The difference between Islam and Christianity became a sexual one, where Christianity “identified with heterosexual monogamy” and Islam “with sexual slavery, sodomy, and the harem” (Robinson 143).

### **3. *Homosexuality and Sodomy***

Islam’s association with homosexuality and sodomy that were considered “obvious in the domain of Islam as the midday sun” (Matar, *Turks, Moors* 118) have been quite interesting for scholars. For instance, Calvert explained that Muslims must be sodomites because they deviated by following a false prophet. Even though “the widely read Purchas in [...] *Pilgrimage* (1613) [stated] that Muslim law was ‘contrary’ to that sin”, English people continued to believe in the link between Islam and sodomy. In 1648, Calvert wrote that the Quranic paradise promised “Muslims pleasures of the flesh including ‘lusts of Boyes’” (Matar, *Turks, Moors* 115). During the early modern period, the preacher Meredith Hanmer described Islam as “Mahometical Sodomits” and equated sodomy with homicide to convince people with Muslims’ eternal damnation

(qtd. in Matar, *Turks, Moors* 114). Matar explains that it was expected for writers about the Muslim world to talk about sodomy and Muslim sodomites in “captivity accounts, drama, travel and, much less frequently and significantly, in government documents.” The “degeneracy and deviance of the Muslims” was enjoyed as a spectacle for the European audience (Matar, “*Turks, Moors*” 114). Interestingly, many reasons and justifications are given to the portrayal of the Muslim in such a deviant manner.

### **C. The Reasons for Islam’s Deviant Image**

Critics have been dedicated to justifying the construction of Islam’s demonized image. Vitkus believes that such a portrayal of Islam was due to a misunderstanding in Muslim laws that govern “concubinage, marriage, and divorce” (“Early Modern Orientalism” 223). However, Matar argues that English writers intentionally “constructed [this] sexual and military identity of the non-Christian/Indian [Native American] Other” as a means to clearly define themselves (*Turks, Moors* 16). He adds that Muslims were considered sexually deviant because sexual excess was believed to be due to either geography as Nicolay suggested, or social organization and political structure as Rycout explained (*Turks, Moors* 124). According to Matar, Muslims were portrayed as sodomites because homosexuality was an “open secret” for Britons. He highlights that “Muslims must have appeared as a gift from heaven” for writers too afraid of exploring homosexuality within their own society to examine it in the Muslims’ life (*Turks, Moors* 125). Muslims were further Othered by attributing sodomy to them which served to prove “that Muslims had no family structure, no ‘natural’ sexuality, and therefore no place in the civilized world” (Matar, *Turks, Moors*

126).Indeed, sodomy and sexual deviance outlined the division “between the Christian, civilized Briton and the Muslim ‘barbarian’” (Matar, *Turks, Moors* 113).

Hawkes explains that writers of the early modern period demonized Islam because of their “anxieties about their own psychological condition” (Hawkes 158). On the other hand, Vitkus proposes that the reason for “the distorted image of Islam” was due to the superiority of the Muslims (“Early Modern Orientalism” 210). In addition, since “fear, hostility, and prejudice” constructed the West’s view of Islam (Hitti 49), Islam was misrepresented “in spite of the availability of more accurate information” (Vitkus, “Early Modern Orientalism” 208). Matar explains that Britons “produced a representation that did not belong to the actual encounter with the Muslims.” Instead, they constructed the Muslim as Other by “borrow[ing] constructions of alterity and demonization from their encounter with the American Indians [Native Americans]” because the Muslims were not defeated the way that the Native Americans were. Britons borrowed those Native American traits and attributed them to the Muslims in order to “situate [the Muslims] in a world view convenient to their colonial and millennial goals.” This way, Britons presented the Muslim as the deviant, barbaric Other (Matar, *Turks, Moors* 15). Ahsan points out that “tales of horror and cruelty of the Muslims [...] must have contributed to the development of an antagonistic attitude of the West toward the Eastern people” which took place when European captives escaped the Muslim lands and went back to their countries (96). Andrea considers that early male travel writers demonized the Muslim in order to “institute the division between the supposedly despotic gender relations in the Islamic world and the reputedly paradisaical conditions for women in England” (*Women and Islam* 83). The presentation of the Muslim in such a horrific manner was done to force English women to support

“patriarchal agendas” (Andrea, *Women and Islam* 85). Indeed, the ways in which scholars discuss the reasons Islam acquired such a horrific image during the early modern period paves the way for us to examine the depicted clash between the Muslim east and Christian Europe.

#### **D. East and West: Failed Encounter**

Critics nowadays present the encounter between the Muslim East and the Christian West as a failure. Bate describes this encounter as “the clash” of two civilizations (14), while Wheatcroft believes that the mere meeting of Islam and Christendom “seemed to engender violence” (28). Robinson presents Europe’s encounter with Islam as a momentary clash when he writes that “the very possibility of ‘the West’” was dependent on “the early modern encounter with Islam” (Robinson 180). The construction of the European identity as Fuchs believes relied on “the confrontation with Islam” (Fuchs 2-3). Similarly, Burton describes the relationship between Europe, the continent, and Islam, the religion, as “complex and unsettling” (“Anglo-Ottoman” 152) as the encounter allowed the growth of a horrifying version of the “Muslim” (MacLean and Matar 25). In addition, Draper states that the clash between the East and West is justified and eternal because it extends from the Crusades to the Balkan wars and “the naval fighting and piracy that plagued Mediterranean commerce” (523). Presenting Islam’s relationship with Europe as a failed encounter at one specific moment of time overlooks geographic, religious and political connections. This assumed failed encounter instituted a relationship based on division and animosity between a Muslim East and a Christian West.

## E. Divisions and Conflicts

Scholars have extensively examined the East/West and Muslim/Christian division the early modern period witnessed. Fuchs explains that Islam was “the satanic other of Christian Europe” (122) where the West constructed this image of the Muslims as a “photographic negative of the self-perception of an ideal Christian self-image” (Blanks and Frassetto 3). B. Smith describes Islam as “an alien religion” that Christians formed prejudices about due to “the memory of the crusades [and] the growing power of the Turkish empire” (1). The war between Christians and Muslims had a long history extending from the Crusades to “struggles over the Mediterranean islands of Rhodes, Malta, Crete, Sicily, and Cyprus” (Degenhardt, *Islamic Conversion* 9-10). Matar believes that this animosity is due to a “political, geographical, and religious identity that both protected and separated [the Muslims] from the Christian Other” (*Turks, Moors* 19). He explains that the struggle between “Christianity and Islam, between honest Christian traders and infidel pirates” was the essence of England’s relationship with North Africa (Matar, *Turks, Moors* 151). The Muslim/Christian struggle was a “Manichean struggle” in which the demonization of Islam was based on the “absolute power of Islamic culture” embodied in an Islamic ruler, sultan or a king, or in other words, “an unjust, tyrannical, and oppressive power” (Vitkus, “Early Modern Orientalism” 218). For instance, Father Bartolome de las Casas, “the ardent defender of the infidel Indians in the Americas,” believed that the Christians needed to be at war with the Muslims to retrieve Jerusalem and “to drive the ‘Moors’ from Spain.” He described the Muslims as the “enemies of the faith, usurpers of Christian Kingdoms” (qtd. in Wheatcroft 185-186).

Scholars recreate a division between Islam/Christianity and East/West. For instance, Wheatcroft creates a division between East/West and Muslim/non Muslim through his terminology. He uses the word “infidel” in his work and states “I make no apology” for such usage, as he believes that it is the way in which “the Christians referred to Muslims” during the early modern period (19). He imposes the usage of the word “infidel” onto the early modern period and transplants this imposition to our current time through his book. The usage of “infidel” not only inflicts a Muslim/Christian animosity on the early modern period, but also feeds the creation of a larger gap between the Muslim/Christian relationship in today’s world. He highlights the opposition existing between the East/West, North/South and Islam/Christianity (Wheatcroft 28). Even though Wheatcroft admits that there is a “problem of terminology” that envelops his book (19), this awareness neither justifies nor dilutes the problem of approaching early modern relationships through clear cut religious and geographical divisions and outlines.

While Wheatcroft recreates a division through his terminology, further division can be traced when Vitkus employs Orientalism to outline the East/West division during the early modern period. He believes that during the medieval and early modern period there existed an orientalism that “demonized the Islamic Other” (“Early Modern Orientalism” 209) which led to the “misunderstanding of Islamic society and religion” (“Early Modern Orientalism” 226). Similarly, Andrea creates an East/West division when she examines a feminist Orientalism in early modern works. She defines this type of Orientalism as the act of displacing the “source of patriarchal oppression onto an ‘Oriental’, ‘Mahometan Society’” in order to allow the British society to see and “contemplate local problems without questioning their own self-definition as

Westerners and Christians” (*Women and Islam* 78). Fuchs, on the other hand, creates a division through her complete disregarding of the Muslim east when she examines the relationship between the Muslim east and Europe. She believes that her “focus on Europe” will help in examining its “self construction in relationship to Islam” (12).

As Burton highlights, Matar refuses to adopt “a rigid self/other binary” as he is interested in “cross-cultural exchange” between Christian Europe and the “Islamic Levant/North Africa.” However, Matar in fact recreates a self/other binary when he looks at “the works of Arab writers [...] as a corrective contrast to those of European travelers” (“Emplotting” 35). Similarly, Danson presents his desire to “complicate the oppositions- East versus West, Ottoman versus European, Muslim versus Christian” (1), but he strikingly remains within the imprisoned framework of the Muslim as Other when he states that the “English idea of Islam [...] encompass[es] a range of othernesses” (4). Indeed, early modern scholars are quite dedicated to examine the relationship between East/West and Islam/Christianity. They truly strive to read those relationships through different lenses which at times creates an imposes a division onto the early modern period.

#### **F. Reading Early Modern Literature Based on Muslim Stereotypes**

Critics’ interpretations of early modern literary works in relation to Islam employ and reinforce the Muslim stereotypes discussed earlier in this literature review. Matar clearly explains that Britons treated Muslims the same way they treated any other European (*Turks, Moors* 42), where Britons ate at the same tables with visiting “Turks” in London, took Muslims to the Hajj in Mecca, traded with them in Mediterranean harbors and fought in Muslim armies (*Turks Moors* 6). As Matar states, these



interactions raise “the fascinating possibility of a community infrastructure” (*Turks, Moors* 30). However, Ahsan does not take those relationships into consideration and assumes that there was a uniform hatred against Muslims when she writes “the hatred against the Muslims was so strong in those days that, had [Shakespeare’s] Othello been a Muslim, the fact of his religion would have been capitalized and thrown in his face” (158)

## ***1. Othello***

### **a. Circumcision**

Shakespeare’s *Othello* has often been read by attaching Muslim stereotypes to Othello. Vitkus reinforces the attachment of Islam with the cultural practice of circumcision when he argues that Othello reenacts his own circumcision when he cuts himself. Vitkus believes that Othello “reiterates the ritual cutting of his foreskin, which was the sign of his membership in the community of stubborn misbelievers, the Muslims. To smite ‘the circumcised dog’ is at once to kill the “turbaned Turk”” (“Turning Turk” 174). Reading *Othello*, Boyarin claims that circumcision is a “theological orientation” of the Muslim religion (260). However, Ahsan presents a different interpretation on Othello’s circumcision. She comments on the stereotype of circumcision and explains that Shakespeare’s words in *Othello* “‘the circumcised dog’ are words that should not leave one in any doubt as to Othello’s faith.” Ahsan explains that “A Muslim would never use such an expression for another Muslim” and therefore “Shakespeare’s Othello is beyond doubt a Christian.” She again attaches the circumcision stigma to the religion of Islam in order to argue for Othello’s religious affiliation (Ahsan 160).

b. Prophet Mohammad

In addition, Vtikus adopts stereotypes on Prophet Mohammad when he reads Othello as one whose “epilepsy recalls that of the ur-Moor, Mohammad.” He bases his interpretation on the belief “that Shakespeare seems to have consulted” texts by “Christian polemics against Islam printed in Shakespeare’s time” that described Mohammad as an epileptic (“Turning Turk” 155). Similarly, Moran employs stereotypes on Prophet Mohammad to argue that Othello and the Prophet are men of violence and the sword (23).

c. Islam: A Race and a Pagan Religion

Ian Smith does not treat Islam as one of the three monotheistic religions because he employs the image of Islam as a pagan religion to argue that Shakespeare “attributes to Iago the vices attached to Moors” making Iago a pagan which is “a designation typically reserved for Islamic Moors” (180). Boyarin attaches a set of stereotypes to Islam while investigating into the secret of Othello’s penis. Islam is evident to him in Othello’s honor killing, turban, thick lips, monstrosity and dark skin. Throughout the article, Othello is Desdemona’s desired “religious and racial Other” (Boyarin 260). Othello is the “Barbary horse, whose penis is a horse’s. But he is a Barbary horse [...] and hence a circumcised one” (Boyarin 257). Boyarin presents stereotypes of race, sexual excess and physical features as signs for the Islamicization of Othello. Similarly, Moran argues that Othello’s suicide or his “moral and spiritual collapse” is a “reversion or conversion to Islam” as it “confirms to stereotypes of the black or Muslim other.” The authors conflate, merge and combine racial blackness and

the religious affiliation to Islam as prerequisites for being “violent, jealous, gullible [and] mercurial” (Moran 23).

## **2. *Tamburlaine the Great***

Islamic stereotypes have been employed to read Marlowe’s *Tamburlaine the Great*. Focusing on *Tamburlaine the Great*, Burton states his plan to “emphasize misapprehension in early modern accounts of cross-cultural exchange” (“Emplotting” 35). However, he in fact employs and takes for granted misapprehensions and stereotypes attached to Muslims when he explains that Tamburlaine’s burning of the Quran equates “virulent anti-Islamicism with the sort of cruelty and violence early modern Europeans associated with Islam.” Burton indeed assumes that the early modern audience associated the cruelty of Tamburlaine’s burning of the Quran to Muslim aggression (“Anglo-Ottoman” 150). Instead of seeking to detach “misapprehension” of “cross cultural exchange,” he reinforces an animosity between the European Christian and the Muslim Other by assuming that the early modern audience attached a notion of violence with Islam.

## **G. Reading Early Modern Literature Based on Division**

### **1. *Conversion***

Scholars’ readings of early modern English literature and Islam are founded on the relationship of Othering, division, animosity and conflict between Western Christian Europe and the Muslim East. While Lupton believes that Christianity and Islam are “world religion[s], not a race” and do not “belong to any civilization as either its special heritage or its colonial weapon” (84), Degenhardt states that between Christians and

Muslims there emerged “racial distinctions” (Islamic Conversion 27). Degenhardt employs these divisions as she examines the treatment of Islam as race and outlines differences between Islam and Christianity which were established on stage through “particular terms for conversion (as well as for its resistance and redemption)” (Islamic Conversion 6).

## **2. *The Desire to Undo/Escape Orientalism***

Other scholars state their desire to undo the Orientalism ascribed to the early modern period but they cannot seem to escape the East/West binary. Andrea explains that “masculinized tropes” of ‘renegade’ and ‘turning turk’ are adopted by “scholars seeking to challenge the transhistorical application of Said’s *Orientalism* to the early modern period” (*Women and Islam* 4). She interestingly argues that Manley develops a counterorientalist stance by refusing to provide a “feminist orientalist contrast” between the oppressed Muslim woman and the free born English one (Andrea, *Women and Islam* 99), where various scenes of polygamy serve “to locate [patriarchal oppression] at the heart of English culture” instead of having it elsewhere (Andrea, *Women and Islam* 116). Andrea counters Orientalism by taking a feminist route. However, this in turn confirms the existence of an orientalism prior to Manley’s feminist counterorientalism during the early modern period which in turn divides and fragments the East/West relationship, again.

Burton escapes adopting an Orientalism to the early modern period. In “Christopher Sly’s Arabian Night” he explains that those interested in “Shakespeare’s relationship to the Islamic world” constantly evaluate “Shakespeare’s place in the history of orientalist discourse” (2). He explains that there are two different approaches

where “the first standpoint emphasizes that European powers, and particularly England, were in no position to dominate the East either textually or materially.” The second approach argues that “the early modern period, was in fact the crucible in which Orientalism was formed and a period in which European texts on the East were characterized by what can be called ‘nascent Orientalism’” (Burton, “Christopher Sly’s” 2). While the East and West are read “in terms of their allegedly irreconcilable traditions and values” Burton escapes this division by reading *The Taming of the Shrew* together with *The Arabian Nights* to “highlight their similar approaches to a common story type” (“Christopher Sly’s” 6). Joining those two texts based on their common story type, Burton seeks to recognize “Shakespeare as a cultural and social bridge uniting the “East” and the “West” in the landscape of global culture” (“Christopher Sly’s” 6). By resorting to a “common story type” as a bridging thread, Burton in fact stresses the irreconcilable differences between East and West which ignores geographical, religious and political connections.

### **3. *Reading Shakespeare***

Vitkus explains that scholars tend to read Shakespeare’s works by employing a “teleological historiography of Western domination and colonization” and use a “Western imperialist discourse belonging to later centuries” (“Turning Turk” 146). This statement is indeed interesting as it seems that Vitkus attempts to escape the East/West division, conflict and power struggle. However, Vitkus fails to escape this binary as he then adds that during the early modern period “Europeans were both colonizers and colonized.” With those words he recreates a division, an animosity and a border line between East/West (Vitkus, “Turning Turk” 146).

Scholars often read Shakespeare's Othello as an Other and as evidence for the East/West division during the early modern period. Al-Garrallah, for instance, presupposes, takes for granted and imposes an East/West division onto the early modern period when he argues that the "affinity between [the Quran, *The Arabian Nights* and *The Tempest*] [...] indicates how *The Quran* and *The Arabian Nights* transcend cultural borders in that they cross the imaginary dividing line between the West and the East" (13). Indeed, in such a statement he assumes that a "dividing line" existed between the East and West during the early modern period. Boyarin supports the existence of the East/West division during the early modern period as he reads Othello as an Other and explains that Desdemona's desire for the Other through Othello presents "the nearly sexual attractiveness of Islam" (Boyarin 257). Ghazoul believes that Shakespeare "presented an outsider in Europe" through Othello. She further highlights Othello's Otherness by arguing that he is an "Arab" (1). Similarly, Lupton Others Othello when she explains that his threat is due to his Muslim religion and circumcised penis which were "much more threatening for early modern audiences than that of a darker skinned, pagan Othello, because of the imperial threat associated with the Ottoman empire" (qtd. in Degenhardt, *Islamic Conversion* 57). Lupton situates her analysis of Shakespeare's *Othello* on the notion that Othello is Other as she explains that Islam was Christianity's "disturbing neighbor" (73). Edward Said Others Othello in *Orientalism* when he explains that "the Orient and Islam are always represented as outsiders having a special role to play inside Europe" (72). Ghazoul adds that Said presents Othello as the "abuser of the world" and as "an example of intrusion" (10). Indeed, scholars read Othello as Other and present these interpretations as proof for the division between East/West and Islam/Christianity.

#### **4. Marlowe and Milton**

Marlowe and Milton's works are further read through a notion that presents a division that supposedly existed during the early modern period. Burton explains that Marlowe's Bajazeth's enters *Tamburlaine the Great* as "an ardent confirmation of Europe's anti-Turkish, anti-Islamic fears and stereotypes" ("Anglo-Ottoman" 141). With those words, not only does Burton present a division between Europe and the religion of Islam, but his interpretation further reinforces stereotypes of animosity through his repetition of "anti" in "anti-Turkish" and "anti-Islamic." Similarly, Garber fortifies an Islamic/Christian hatred when he explains that critics have been unsure how to tackle Tamburlaine's burning of the Quran which he describes as "reasonably gratifying to a Christian audience" (304). Vitkus explains that "In *Paradise Lost*, Evil comes from the East: Satan is an oriental monarch (Lucifer, the shining one-the Eastern morning star) whose proud ambition to defeat God and the angels is analogous to the aggressive imperialism of Eastern emperors such as the Ottoman sultan" ("Early Modern Orientalism" 219). Vitkus equates evil and Satan with "Eastern emperors" whereby he reads Milton's works through an East/West border that he carves onto the early modern map, again. When scholars did not read early modern English literature through a lens that divides East/West and Islam/Christianity, they strived to present those works as evidence for authors' access and knowledge about Islam.

#### **H. Authors' Access and Knowledge about the Quran**

Other scholars have taken a different route to read Islam and early modern literature. They have been interested in examining authors' knowledge and opinion on

Islam and the Quran by looking at their works. Al Gharrallah examines the links between Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, the Quran and *The Arabian Nights* to propose that Shakespeare might have had knowledge about the Quran and *The Arabian Nights*. He draws connections between the Quran's Joseph [Yusuf] and Shakespeare's Prospero and believes that the "Quranic Solomon, Prospero and the Solomonic legends in *The Arabian Nights* can in many ways be viewed as similar" (Al-Garrallah 1-5). The Quran's Joseph and "dislocated characters [in *The Tempest*]" transcend sexual desire and experience similar gender encounters (Al-Garrallah 4). He observes similar allusions to the Quran and *The Arabian Nights* in *The Tempest* and believes "that the first two texts stand behind the third" and thus "Shakespeare may have read those texts" (Al Garrallah 13). Ahsan on the other hand, draws attention to Shakespeare's ignorance of the Islamic faith because the dramatist in *The Merchant of Venice* "puts the words 'Some god direct my judgment!' (II.vii.13) in the mouth of the Prince of Morocco." Ahsan believes Shakespeare was ignorant about Islam because a Muslim, the Prince of Morocco, believes in one God and would never say "some god" (169). Draper explains that Shakespeare offers little about the religion of Islam as "The words Mohammed, Moslem, Islam, Koran, Allah and Mecca nowhere appear. Occasionally he touches on the practical teachings of the faith: he knows that Turks are 'circumcised'" (524). Similarly, Ahsan highlights that Shakespeare barely touches upon Islam in his works and "Koran or mosque or prayers, appear nowhere in his plays. There is only one allusion to Mahomet in the First Part of Henry the Sixth" (171). Scholars have looked at the Milton's works to trace the author's interest and knowledge about Islam.

Maclean believes that Milton viewed Islam and the Ottoman Empire to be "extreme examples of how false belief enabled, justified and supported imperial



tyranny” (186). Since Milton rarely refers to Islam or the Ottomans, Western scholars do not pay attention to “Milton’s treatment of Islam and the East” (Maclean 184). Maclean examines Milton’s writing and believes that it shows the poet’s disinterest in Arabic, Islam or the Ottomans because his references to them are “stereotypical [...] and exoticizing” at a time when an English version of the Quran was available and Arabic was taught at Cambridge (184). However, he believes that Milton was not ignorant or uninterested in Islam and the debates on “religious toleration, political freedom and national identities” (MacLean 181). Maclean delves into Milton’s knowledge of Islam and the Ottomans and how it impacted the creation of *Paradise Lost*’s Satan that is similar to the Islamic rebel angel Iblis (180-181).

Marlowe’s access to and knowledge of the Quran has been an interesting study for many scholars. Al-Olaqi looks at Marlowe’s *Tamburlaine the Great* to propose that Marlowe mentions the tree of Zaqqum as the place of “criminals in hell as it is in the Qur’an” and therefore the dramatist had knowledge of the Quran and he “fully copied from [the] original copy” (185). Wolf believes that Marlowe was knowledgeable about the Quran because some “quotations from the Qur’an are explicit quotations from one or another medieval version” (qtd. in Al-Olaqi 188).

Critics have examined dramatists’ knowledge of Islam by looking at their identities, personal experiences and readings. Ahsan explains that Marlowe would be knowledgeable about the greatest work on Muslim history if he did read Knolle’s *The Generall Historie of the Turkes* (1603) as Dick proposed (128). However, Ahsan believes that the dramatist did not want to learn about Islam even though great works on Islam and Muslim history were available, because it would present the East in a way that would not satisfy the taste of the audience which was essential to the plays’ success

(140). Al-Olaqi explains that “Marlowe was ill-informed about the Islamic institutions”

(184). However, Garber finds it difficult to examine Marlowe’s knowledge of the Quran, highlighting that at the library of Marlowe’s College at Cambridge, Corpus Christi contains a Quran that was obtained after the playwright’s death (305).

Scholars have constructed theories concerning authors’ true identities, interests and opinions on Islam. Scholars’ interest in examining Shakespeare’s knowledge of Islam has driven some to question his identity where Ahmad Faris Al-Shidyaq argued that Shakespeare was an Arab whose real name was Shaykh Zubayr (Ghazoul 9). Maclean doubts Mitlon’s disinterest in the publication of the English translation of the Quran in 1649 (185). He supports Awad’s attempt to show the similarities between Mitlon’s religious beliefs and Islam whereby he examines the dramatist’s knowledge and opinion on Islam to see its impact on the dramatist’s “sense of history, more particularly his sense of empires in history” (Maclean 181-182). Matar explains that Thomas More was deeply interested in Muslim imperialism and “the islamicization of Europe” (*Turks, Moors* 9). Scholars have indeed looked at authors’ works, readings, opinions, identities and interests as a means to outline those dramatists’ relationship to the religion of Islam during the early modern period.

Works on Islam and the early modern period center on the failure to treat Islam as a religion during that time. Islam is presented as a demonized threat equated with the devil and the antichrist. Other works discuss and justify the association of Islam with stereotypes and customs that are not theologically Muslim such as circumcision, sexual excess, homosexuality and sodomy. Due to this presented barbarity of the Muslim through the thirst for blood, sexual perversity and circumcision, it is not surprising to examine works that depict Islam’s encounter with Christian Europe as a failure.

Furthermore, the relationship between the East and West that scholars examine is based on clear division and conflict.

Works on early modern literature and Islam have been based on Muslim stereotypes, the failure to treat Islam as a religion, Islam and Christian Europe's failed encounter and the East/West conflict and division. Islam is never treated as a religion when analyzing early modern English literature. When scholars try to approach Islam as a religion, they merely search for evidence on dramatists' knowledge or opinion about the Quran and Islam.

## **I. Methodology**

### ***1. Abraham: Connecting Islam and Christianity***

I seek to examine a connection between the Muslim Quran and Europe's early modern literature. Islam and Christianity share their birth from the Roman Empire and the figure of Abraham: the father of monotheistic religions (Benslama 72). The figure of Abraham undoes the Eastern and Western binary because he occupies the origin and the birth of monotheistic religions sharing a "common heritage [...] rooted in the monotheistic tradition of the patriarch Abraham" (Kimball 37). Indeed, Islam is neither "historically [n]or theologically exterior to Christianity" (White 499). Islam and Christianity share overlaps and connections in addition to having Abraham as their common site of birth. The exploration of early modern literature using the Quran is founded on Islam and Christian Europe's "connected histories as opposed to 'comparative histories'" (Subrahmanyam 745).

### ***2. The Use of Muslim Theology***

Muslim theology is employed in order to delve into literary texts and trace unexplored dialogues between the Quran and early modern literary texts. Delving into writers' experiences, knowledge or contact with Islam will not be a concern in this thesis. I will be only dealing with texts and the potentials that will be unveiled when using Muslim theology.

This thesis will read bodily cuts/dissections within early modern texts through a Muslim theological lens. Opening and dissecting the body in early modern literature will be read through the Quran's Surat Al-*Sharih* that describes Prophet Mohammad's opening of the chest. In fact, *sharih* in Arabic means to explain speech, expand a thing by explaining, cut and dissect the flesh long thin pieces and penetrate the body through the deflowering of a virgin (Lane 1530). The Quran's *sharih* associates the act of opening and entering the body with revealing knowledge and providing revelations. In the Quran, the dissection of a body accompanies or is immediately followed by an explanation or a revelation. I seek to adopt the Quran's *sharih* that is performed on the body of the Prophet to apply it to textual bodies of early modern English literature.

### **3. Thesis Plan: Using the Quranic Sharih**

This *sharih* will first allow us to open and expose textual and theatrical bodies to the medium of Muslim theology to trace and read the dissection of the body on stage through a Muslim optic. I will examine the staged dissected body in Shakespeare and Marlowe's works. This thesis looks at the dissection, *sharih*, of the body and the body's desire for penetration to provide *sharih*, knowledge and attain revelations and resolutions. This thesis neither aims to justify the ways in which Muslims were perceived during the early modern period nor present their relationship with Christian

Europe as one of conflict. In addition, it is unconcerned with the monolithic divorce between East and West. Rather, I seek to rethink a time period based on instances of overlaps and interactions in order to adopt “the notion of sharing the past while avoiding false universals [to] find the seeds of anti-colonial perspectives, transcultural understanding, and self critique” (White 500).

This thesis employs Muslim theology to read early modern English literature without “project[ing] a dichotomy between a superior Christian Occident and an inferior Islamic Orient onto the early modern period.” I decline this projection in an attempt to resist the common approach of considering the “West [as] the prime mover and the East its passive beneficiary” (Garcia 3). Geographical, political and religious relationships won’t be viewed through an East/West lens that divides, fragments, alienates and others. Instead, I will be considering those relationships by treating “Afro-Euroasia as an integrated whole” so as to de-emphasize the overinflated division between East/West and Islam/Christianity in order to explore their “connected histories” (Garcia 4).

This thesis moves beyond Orientalism by ceasing “to treat Islam as a ‘religion’ distinct from Judaism and Christianity” (Garcia 12-13). Instead of looking at an East/West division, I take into account Abrahamic religious connections. The connected history joining Islam and Christianity legitimates the employment of the Quran to read early modern plays. The employment of Muslim theology reveals that entering the body through either penetration or dissection, *sharih*, is desired by the body as it is the means through which characters provide knowledge, attain revelations and acquire resolutions.

I would like to finally note that my aim at de-emphasizing the overinflated East/West division by creating a dialogue between the Muslim Quran and early modern English literature might encounter resistance from Muslim believers. Indeed, providing

my own interpretation of the Quran in this thesis might be perceived by some Muslim believers as an Orientalist “plot.” As Goddard argues, “some Muslims from a Sunni background may be ‘fundamentalist’” as “they may explicitly condemn critical study of the Quran, condemning it as an Orientalist plot to subvert Islam” (158). It is important to state that even though my interpretation of the Quran is indeed supported by Hadith and Arabic lexicon, I neither claim to voice them from a Muslim believer’s perspective nor do I adopt an Islamic reading of the Quran inherent to a specific Muslim school of thought.

## CHAPTER III

### ANATOMY THEATRE AND THE MUSLIM SHARIH IN *TAMBURLAINE THE GREAT II*

Scholars have closely examined Tamburlaine's perceived divinity in Christopher Marlowe's *Tamburlaine the Great*. This chapter reads Tamburlaine's attempt to further extend this divinity as he seeks to provide knowledge by opening his flesh whereby he models the dissection of Prophet Mohammad's chest that prepared him for the reception of the Quranic knowledge. I use Islamic theology and specifically the Quran's Surat Al Sharih in reading this scene. The double meaning of *sharih*, to both open the flesh and give knowledge, is essential in my analysis. Prophet Mohammad received the Quranic knowledge through the *sharih*, dissection, of his chest. Tamburlaine models this Prophetic *sharih* as he seeks to give knowledge to his sons by cutting his arm. By highlighting that anatomical dissections took place during the early modern period in anatomy theatres, I demonstrate that Tamburlaine constructs his own anatomy theatre, a theatre within a theatre on Marlowe's stage, to teach his sons on wars and wounds by opening his own flesh.

Tamburlaine presents himself as divine and possessing godly powers. Moore believes that, throughout the play, Tamburlaine challenges authority to assert "his own divine nature" (125). Tamburlaine ascribes characteristics of sublimity and immortality to himself when he states: "I speak it, and my words are oracles" (3.3.101). He presents the power he possesses as he threatens to "burn city after city" and "feels he is above all law" (Camden 434-435). After ravishing "one of the conquered towns" he places a pillar with an inscription "This towne being burnt by Tamburlaine the great, Forbids the

world to build it vp againe”<sup>2</sup> (Camden 435). Tamburlaine believes that “there is no god greater than his individual self” (Moore 125) as he only “listen[s] [...] to the divine voice within” (Moore 136). Indeed, Tamburlaine further sublimates his being when he compares himself to God and “identifies himself as the ‘scourge’ of another, higher God” (Moore 125). He takes on “godly powers when he is merely mortal” (Burnett, “Tamburlaine: An Elizabethan Vagabond” 315). His perceived divinity is further highlighted when he threatens to “invade heaven after Zenocrate’s death”, “challeng[es] Mahomet by burning the Koran” and “mock[s] the powers of the gods” (Burnett, “Tamburlaine: An Elizabethan Vagabond” 313-314).

Scholarship tackles Tamburlaine’s divinity through a Christian lens. Greenfield believes that when Tamburlaine cuts his own arm, he seeks to emulate divinity to further extend his perceived sacredness and God-like traits. Greenfield explains that Tamburlaine’s auto-dissection “echoes several aspects of the iconography of Christ.” Tamburlaine’s desire to have his sons search his wound “parodies Thomas’ exploration of the wound in Christ’s side,” “Pilate’s hand washing and the sharing of Christ’s blood” and “communion.” The moment when Tamburlaine cuts his arm could be compared to the image of “the Virgin touching the sacred heart.” Greenfield traces these “Christian resonances” which “underline Tamburlaine’s conviction of the sacredness of his person [...] [as] he sets out to discover more about his exceptional body” (240). Knowing that many scholars have traced and acknowledged the existence of Christian theological elements in the act of cutting his arm, I propose reading this moment in the play by adopting a Muslim interpretative model that unveils Tamburlaine’s plan to extend his divinity by providing knowledge through his wound. Instead of employing a

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<sup>2</sup> Part II, 3.2.17-18.



Christian lens that considers elements of communion and stigmata, I use a Muslim optic to trace the operation of the Quran and Hadith's *sharih* in Tamburlaine's dissection of his arm.

Before employing a Muslim lens of *sharih* to read Tamburlaine's dissection of his arm, it is essential to trace the significance of this bodily dissection in Islam. The opening of Prophet Mohammad's chest preceded and prepared him to receive the Quranic text whereby "the cut precedes the beginning of Islam" (Benslama 14). After Prophet Mohammad's chest was dissected, he received the Quranic text in which Islamic knowledge resides, through the Angel Gabriel, after which he recited it to friends who recorded and disseminated it. The dissection of the Prophet's chest prepared him for Prophecy and the reception of Quranic knowledge. Prophet Mohammad's reception of the cut situated the reception and the giving of the Quranic knowledge. Benslama explains that "the opening (*fath*) and the withdrawal of flesh from the child Muhammad's heart [...] foreshadows the fact that the Koranic text will be based on withdrawal"; however, I would like to consider the ways in which the dissection of the body, Prophet Mohammad's chest, precedes and grounds the reception of the Quranic word and knowledge (33). The notion of providing knowledge through the opening of the body is evident in Marlowe's *Tamburlaine the Great*. Tamburlaine seeks to provide knowledge, *sharih*, through dissecting his own body, *sharih*, as a means to accentuate and advance his perceived divinity, sublimity and God-like traits. Instead of reading Tamburlaine's cutting of his arm through a Christian lens that examines the elements of Christ's stigmata and communion, I use a Muslim lens that will employ the Muslim *sharih* to read Tamburlaine's opening of his body which reveals that Tamburlaine goes so far in trying to provide knowledge through his body's

*sharih* that he constructs an anatomy theatre within the play of *Tamburlaine the Great*, a theatre within a theatre, to further prove his sublimity.

#### **A. Using Islamic Theology to Read Tamburlaine's Dissection**

I employ the relationship between the dissection of Prophet Mohammad's chest and his providing of Quranic knowledge in reading *Tamburlaine the Great*. This connection between opening the flesh and giving knowledge is analyzed in the scene when Tamburlaine seeks to teach and provide knowledge to his sons on wars and wounds by dissecting his own arm. In this scene, the opening of Tamburlaine's flesh, *sharih*, precedes the giving of knowledge, *sharih*, on wars and wounds to his sons. Indeed, it is through this dissection, *sharih*, that the giving of knowledge, *sharih*, comes into being. The Quran's Surat Al-Sharih and other instances of *sharih* in the Quran and Hadith are employed to examine the opening of Tamburlaine's body in *Tamburlaine the Great II*. Surat Al-Sharih in the Quran narrates the opening of the Prophet's chest which prepared it for the acquisition of Islamic knowledge. In the Quran, the body is the recipient of *sharih* (penetration/dissection) that allows it to become the giver of the *sharih* (knowledge). *Sharih* in Arabic means to dissect, open the body and cut the flesh long thin pieces. In addition, *sharih* means to explain and give knowledge. It is important to note that the double meaning of the Quran's *sharih* is crucial for reading *Tamburlaine the Great*.

My use of the Quran to read Tamburlaine's dissection of his arm is unconditioned by Marlowe or Tamburlaine's religious affiliations. Indeed, Tamburlaine's religious identity is unclear and questionable as his "religious identity simply shifts with the plays' shifting circumstances" (Burton 139). Burton explains in

“Anglo-Ottoman Relations and the Image of the Turk” that Tamburlaine’s religious affiliation is ambiguous because he “defend[s] and attack[s] Christendom, swear[s] by Muhammad at one moment and def[ies] him the next (139). Since an undeniable ambiguity characterizes Tamburlaine’s relationship to religion, I do not use the Quran to read this instant in *Tamburlaine the Great* to argue or specify a religious affiliation for Tamburlaine or Marlowe. Rather, my use of the Quran’s *sharih* to read Tamburlaine’s dissection of his arm springs from the desire to examine a connection between the Muslim Quran and Christian Europe’s early modern literature. Indeed, Islam and Christianity share their birth from the Roman Empire, and Abraham the “Father - of - Genesis” (Benslama 72). The figure of Abraham highlights the connection between Islam and Christianity because he is placed at the origin and the birth of monotheistic religions which share a “common heritage [...] rooted in the monotheistic tradition of the patriarch Abraham” (Kimball 37). Indeed, Islam is neither “historically [n]or theologically exterior to Christianity” and using the Quran to read early modern literature should thus not be striking as Islam and Christianity share overlaps, connections and Abraham as their common site of birth (White 499). Exploring early modern literature using the Quran is founded on Islam and Christianity’s “connected histories as opposed to 'comparative histories'” (Subrahmanyam 745). Understanding the connections between Islam and Christianity allows us to seize reading all geographical, political and religious relationships through an East/West lens that divides, fragments, alienates and others. Instead of solely reading the relationship between Islam/Christianity and East/West as one of division and animosity, I examine these relationships by treating “Afro-Euroasia as an integrated whole” in order to reconsider the division between East and West (Garcia 4).

However, it is important to note that I do not seek to treat Afro-Eurasia or even the religions of Islam and Christianity as “flat terrain[s]” by refuting “the notion of difference” (759). By employing Muslim theology to read *Tamburlaine the Great II* I do not seek to flatten and disregard the difference between Islam and Christianity. Rather, I seek to go back to the Abrahamic connection that joins the religions of Islam and Christianity. Indeed, as Derrida explains, the “Abrahamic resists the West’s cultural, political and linguistic monopoly over prophetic history” (Garcia 1). This thesis values and returns to the emergence of the religions of Islam and Christianity through their “Roman Occidentality” and their “contracted [bond] with the Abrahamic relations” (Derrida 9). Acknowledging the birth of Islam and Christianity from the Abrahamic presents these two religions as overlapping and connected religions that make the use of the Quran to read early modern literature seem neither absurd nor alien.

Islam and Christianity have often been disconnected and detached through a notion that ascribes Islam to the East and Christianity to the West. This notion constructs the “West [as] the prime mover and the East its passive beneficiary” (Garcia 3). For instance, Edward Said presents an essential religious difference between the Christian West and the Islamic East when he writes that “[T]he European encounter with the orient [...] turned Islam into the very epitome of an outsider against which the whole of European civilization [...] was founded” (70). However, Garcia explains that Islam is “intergral to Judeo-Christian history” (17), and Brown challenges approaches that ascribe a difference between East and West as he believes that Islam is a component of the prophetic history of Western Europe (369). As such, I seek to employ Brown’s notion of acknowledging Islam as a constituent of world history and monotheistic religions (369). By viewing Islam as a religion not separate and distinct

from Judaism and Christianity (Brown 269), the “Islamic East” will cease to be considered “as a distinct ‘religious’ civilization” where Garcia calls for “an inclusive, nonessentialist paradigm” (22). However, I will not be employing Garcia’s “inclusive, nonessentialist paradigm” to bring Islam and Christian Europe together since the word “inclusive” points out the need to include that which is foreign, alien and outside (Garcia 22). The East/West binary will not be by passed through an ‘inclusive’ approach that indirectly reaffirms Islam’s position as a distant other. Rather, I sidestep this binary through a “connected history” approach that highlights the connections lying between the Abrahamic religions of Christianity and Islam (Garcia 25). Considering the existence of a connected history between the religions of Christianity and Islam will allow me to employ Muslim theology to read the opening of Tamburlaine’s body in *Tamburlaine the Great II*.

## **B. Sharih in the Quran**

### ***1. Background***

Before using the Quran’s *sharih* to read Tamburlaine’s self dissection, it is important to first explore the notion of *sharih* in the Quran. The Quran’s Surat *Al-Sharih*<sup>3</sup> starts with the phrase “‘Alam Nashrahâ Laka Şadraka<sup>4</sup>” or “Have we not performed the ‘sharih’ on your chest”<sup>5</sup>. *Sharih* in Arabic means to explain speech, to expand a thing by explaining and to cut and dissect the flesh long thin pieces. The Quran’s *sharih* associates the act of opening and entering the body with revealing

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<sup>3</sup> Quran. 93:1

<sup>4</sup> Have We not opened for thee thy bosom (Maulawi 740).

<sup>5</sup> Translation mine.

knowledge. Opening Prophet Mohammad's chest is believed to have taken place when he was young. Benslama explains that at the age of four, Prophet Mohammad "had a terrifying vision of three men clothed in white, who opened his chest and tore out his heart, thereby bringing about the removal of the dark flesh" (12-13).

Hadith presents different stories on the ways in which the *sharih* of the Prophet's chest took place. Juynboll explains that this incident has different versions and is associated with different stories (692 footnote 4). Ibn Is'haq quotes Halima<sup>6</sup> who said that Prophet Mohammad and his brother were with lambs behind the tents when his brother came running and said "Two men clothed in white have seized [Mohammad] and thrown him down and opened up his belly, and are stirring it up." Halima explained that they "ran towards [Mohammad] and found him standing up with a livid face" saying "two men in white raiment came and threw me down and opened up my belly and searched therein for I know not what" (Rahnamaei 32). Another Hadith<sup>7</sup> narrates that the Prophet said

While I was with a brother of mine behind our tents shepherding the lambs, two men in white raiment came to me with a gold basin full of snow. Then they seized me and opened up my belly, extracted my heart and split it; then they extracted a black drop from it and threw it away; then they washed my heart and my belly with that snow until they had thoroughly cleaned them.

(Rahnamaei 33)

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<sup>6</sup> Prophet Mohammad's wet nurse.

<sup>7</sup> Ibn Ishaq relates the Hadith on the authority of a learned person, Khalid b. Ma'dan, who heard it from one of the Apostle's companions.

According to Sahih of Muslim<sup>8</sup>, a Hadith narrated by Anas explains that “the extracted black drop was the portion of Satan in the Prophet’s heart. At the end of this narrative, Anas mentions that he himself used to see the mark of that splitting on the chest of the Prophet” (Rahnamaei 32-33). The *sharih* of the Prophet’s chest is thought to have also taken place during Israa. According to the Zuhr’s traditions<sup>9</sup>, Prophet Mohammad narrated the incident of Israa, the “night journey to Jerusalem, and the Miraj, the ascent into heaven” saying

While I was still living in Mecca, (one day) the roof of my house was broken open and Jibril descended through the aperture. He opened up my chest and washed the hole clean with Zamzam water. Next he brought a golden bowl filled with wisdom and belief and poured it out into my chest, where upon he closed it up again.” (Juynboll 691)

According to Sahih of Muslim, Sunni books of Hadith and Sira<sup>10</sup> mention that the story of “the splitting of the Prophet’s chest took place several times.” The first time was when he was three years old, the second one occurred when he was ten, “the third one at the time of his Commission, and the fourth at the time of the night journey and his ascent to heaven. The narrators attempt to justify the repetition of the story as increasing his glory” (Rahnamaei 36). It is important to highlight that it is the opening of Prophet Mohammad’s chest which prepared him and grounded the reception of knowledge in the Quranic text.

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<sup>8</sup> The story is narrated through a chain on the authority of Anas b. Malik.

<sup>9</sup> With a strand on the authority of Anas b. Malik Abu Dharr.

<sup>10</sup> The life of Prophet Mohammad.

## 2. *Providing Knowledge*

*Sharīh* in Arabic refers to both incising the flesh and the providing of knowledge. The *sharīh* of the Prophet's chest is not merely a dissection or an opening; it is a marking or an engraved inscription. The Prophetic body is a canvas upon which knowledge, *sharīh*, was inscribed. This *sharīh*, the dissection, formed a scar, an inscription, on the prophetic body. The scar is in fact an inscription, an inscription of knowledge, resulting from the dissection of the Prophet's chest. This scar provides knowledge on Mohammad's prophethood and foreshadows his reception of the Quranic word/knowledge.

The inscription on the Prophetic body is a recording of knowledge. Writing or the recording of knowledge first took place through penetrating surfaces. In fact, the very early alphabets were inscribed on stone, clay monuments and tombs using sharp utensils. It is through this procedure of engraving on stone that these alphabets became permanently placed and recorded. The alphabets were inscribed and carved by penetrating surfaces and bodies in order to leave a mark that resists erasure. Inscriptions and engravings of Phoenician, Greek and Roman alphabets and numerals resisted climatic change that would have washed them away if they were merely recorded on a surface with paint or ink. The prophetic body was inscribed with knowledge through the penetration of his flesh. The scar resulting from the opening of Prophet Mohammad's body formed an inscription that provides knowledge on his prophethood and foreshadows his future reception of the Quranic knowledge. It is through the opening of the Prophet's chest, *sharīh*, (which not only opened but also carved and inscribed the chest), that knowledge, *sharīh*, was inscribed. The prophetic body becomes a canvas upon which knowledge is inscribed through the scar the *sharīh* created. The *sharīh* of



the Prophet's chest is indeed a literal inscription on the flesh. The Prophet's dissection is an inscription of knowledge through the scar the *sharih*, dissection, creates. This inscription foreshadows Prophet Mohammad's future reception of knowledge, *sharih*, in the Quran.

### C. Dissection

Instead of employing a Christian lens that reads Tamburlaine's cutting of his arm as an echo of Christ's wounds and stigmata<sup>11</sup>, I use a Muslim optic to read this instant in relation to the opening of Prophet Mohammad's chest. Indeed, "Tamburlaine's conviction of the sacredness of his person" (Greenfield 240) motivates his construction of a theatre within a theatre and specifically an anatomy theatre in which he cuts his arm to provide knowledge thus imitating Islam's Prophet Mohammad. Tamburlaine seeks to teach his sons through the opening of his body. He aims to further sublimate his being by emulating Prophet Mohammad's opening of his chest.

Tamburlaine sets up his anatomy theatre when speaking to his sons he says

View me, thy father, that hath conquered kings

And with his host marched round about the earth

Quite void of scars and clear from any wound

That by the wars lost not a dram of blood

And see him lance his flesh to teach you all

*He cuts his arm* a wound is nothing, be it ne'er so deep

blood is the god of war's rich livery

now look I like a soldier, and this wound  
As great a grace and majesty to me  
As if a chair of gold enameled  
Enchas'd with diamonds, sapphires, rubies  
And fairest pearl of wealthy India  
[...] come boyss, and with your fingers search my wound  
and in my blood wash all your hands at once  
while I sit smiling to behold the sight,  
Now my boys, what think you of a wound. (3.2.110-130)

Tamburlaine begins the dissection of his arm after his son Calyphas expresses his fear of being wounded, saying “but this is dangerous to be done; / We may be slain or wounded ere we learn” (3.2.93-94). At that moment Tamburlaine decides to teach his son about wars and wounds. Tamburlaine offers to provide *sharih*, knowledge, to his son about war and wounds by performing an auto-*sharih* or an auto-dissection. Tamburlaine goes so far with his desire to teach through his body’s wound, that he constructs a theatre within a theatre, an anatomy theatre, on Marlowe’s stage.

### ***1. Dissection During the Early Modern Period***

Dissection during the early modern period was of particular significance as it offered knowledge about the human body in a theatrical manner. Prior to reading the dissection of Tamburlaine’s arm, it is important to first explicate that dissecting the human body was neither an alien nor a foreign concept to the early modern world. Indeed, dissection had a particular significance during the early modern period as there

was a “commitment [...] to the dissection of human bodies” (Greenfield 233). The dissections were made “theatrical” through the “formation of permanent anatomy theatres” (Alvarez 45). The practices and the context in which the dissection took place to learn about the anatomy of the human body can reveal the theatricality of this procedure. Benedetti’s 1493 text on anatomy describes that in an anatomy theatre the audience was “organized ‘according to rank’ with a Praefectus” who ensured “the proper placement of spectators” and “supervise[d] the proceedings.” Professors of Anatomy, the Rectors of the City and the University, the Councilors, members of the medical college and representatives of the Venetian nobility occupied the first row at the anatomy theatre. The second and third rows were reserved for students. The other rows further away from the center of the anatomy theatre were for an audience “who had paid a general admission fee to watch the demonstration.” The theatre was dark and only “lit by two chandeliers with four candles in each, and eight candles held by students around the gurney” (Alvarez 40).

The dissection began with the lighting of candles to draw attention to the corpse. Even though the performance of opening the body was not displayed on a stage, the body’s “elevat[ion] on a lift” and the lighting of candles ensured that it was the center of attention (Alvarez 40). Instead of drawing the curtains on stage, the spectacle began with the lighting of candles which oriented and fixated the gaze towards the procedure. Brockbank highlights that anatomical dissections were more of a “theatrical occasion than a lesson” (qtd. in Alvarez 41). Flute players accompanied the dissection and “the anatomy amphitheatres were typically flanked by rooms serving food and wine” (Alvarez 41). Alvarez adds that public dissections were scheduled in the month of January “in order to coincide with the carnival period” (41). For instance, Rembrandt’s

*The Anatomy Lesson* (1632) presents the public dissection of “a corpse by Dr. Nicolaas Tulp at the Weigh House in Amsterdam,” which took place at a “guild hall with furniture, art, and medical instruments” (Alvarez 36). Even though the anatomy theatres were indeed a theatrical space that attracted all sorts of viewers, they were still spaces in which physicians and students acquired knowledge about their “trade and endeavored to understand the internal structure and organization of the human body” (Sawday, “The Fate” 111). Marlowe’s Tamburlaine performs his dissection in an anatomy theatre as this setting presents the utmost form in which dissection theatrically provides knowledge.

#### **D. Tamburlaine and the Early Modern Anatomy Theatre**

##### ***1. Providing Knowledge***

As Tamburlaine resorts to the construction of an anatomy theatre on Marlowe’s stage to provide knowledge, it is essential to trace the elements that construct this anatomy theatre when Tamburlaine cuts his arm. Similar to an anatomy theatre that was viewed by students and professors who attended for learning purposes, Tamburlaine expresses right before he cuts his arm that the purpose of his dissection is to “teach” his sons (3.2.114). As *sharih* in Arabic means the providing of knowledge, Tamburlaine aims to teach, explicate and provide knowledge through the cutting of his flesh. As Greenfield explains, Tamburlaine “recognizes an opportunity for a new glory” as he “instruct[s] [his son] Calyphus” (240). Indeed, imitating the prophetic *sharih* to provide knowledge serves to extend Tamburlaine’s perceived divinity.

##### ***2. The Gaze***

Similar to early modern anatomy theatres viewed by an audience of 200 persons where some even had to pay a fee to “witness the proceedings” (Sawday, “The Fate” 114), Tamburlaine’s anatomy theatre is observed by his three sons. Furthermore, Tamburlaine is also being viewed by the audience who paid a fee to watch *Tamburlaine the Great*. Tamburlaine’s anatomy theatre and Prophet Mohammad’s *sharih*, contain multiple viewers. The Quran speaks to Prophet Mohammad saying “have we not opened for thee thy bosom”<sup>12</sup> or more accurately, have we not performed a sharih on your chest. The “we” in this expression first refers to God who refers to himself in the plural in the Quran. However, it is important to highlight that this “we” indicates the several contributors to this incident. Every reader of this Quranic phrase becomes a contributor to this incident as the gaze gets oriented to look at the Prophet’s dissection and *sharih*. In addition, as the Hadith also point out, the dissection of the Prophet’s chest was performed by two men clothed in white. The presence of the two men shows that the dissection involved/s several gazes and spectators. The Quranic “we” refers to God, the two men who performed the Prophet’s dissection and to every reader of this Sura.

Tamburlaine seeks to attract a multiplicity of gazes as it is the spectators “who create the spectacle.” Those viewing Tamburlaine’s dissection, his sons and the audience of *Tamburlaine the Great*, are “participant[s], an[d] important actor[s]” as they “follow a story [and] construct the total figure of all of the signs engaged concurrently in the performance” (Oberstein 23). Tamburlaine directs his sons right before and after performing the cut: “*View* me, thy father” (emphasis mine, 3.2.110), “And *see* him lance his flesh” (emphasis mine, 3.2.114) and “Now *look*” (emphasis mine, 3.2.117). Tamburlaine directs his viewers who are the sons and the audience to “view”, “see” and

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<sup>12</sup> Quran 94.1 (Maulawi 740).

“look” at his dissection. Tamburlaine says “view” and “see” just prior to cutting his arm so as to orient the gaze towards him. After the cut is established, he refuses to lose the gaze directed towards his dissection and asks his viewers to “look.” When Tamburlaine cuts his arm he is indeed observed by the audience and his sons as “the actors on the stage are at the same time spectators, spectators who observe what is happening in the space where theatricalization is taking place and send back to the audience, after its inversion, the message they receive” (Ubersfeld 28). The multiplicity of gazes oriented towards Tamburlaine’s dissection further highlight the theatricality of this procedure whereby the gaze is essential and takes part in the construction of the anatomy theatre.

### ***3. The Desire to Open the Body***

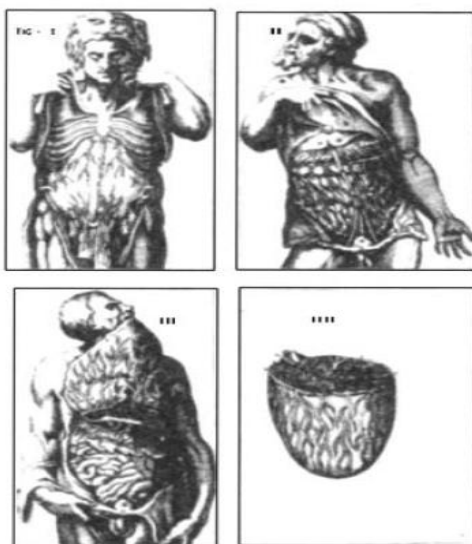
Tamburlaine’s desire to cut his arm as a means to provide knowledge allows us to further read this scene as an anatomy theatre. The body’s desire to be dissected was an essential component of the anatomy theatre during the early modern period. Sawday analyzes illustrations of anatomical dissections in which the corpse is seen to sanction the performance, join the anatomist for “a shared end” and desire its own dissection (“The Fate” 123). Dissection in the early modern period is portrayed as a desired need for the conduction of medical discoveries instead of a bodily violation or disruption (Sawday, “The Fate” 126). Anatomical figures during the early modern period and Tamburlaine on Marlowe’s stage are portrayed to desire their own dissection.

Tamburlaine is seen to desire his body’s dissection when he expresses his comfort and acceptance of it by saying “A wound is nothing” (3.2.115). Tamburlaine shows his desire for dissection when he describes the wound as “grace and majesty” (3.2.118). Receiving a dissection is portrayed as a glorifying experience like that of sitting on a

“chair of gold” embellished with “diamonds, sapphires, rubies” and pearls (3.2.119-121). This notion of glorifying dissection is present in Islam. Islam associates characteristics of glorification with opening the flesh as it is dissection that glorified Prophet Mohammad and prepared him to be prophet. After Tamburlaine finishes dissecting his arm in front of his sons, he asks them to search his wound while he sits “smiling to behold the sight” (3.2.128). Tamburlaine’s “smiling” after having dissected his arm reveals the pleasure and pride he takes in wounding his flesh as it is the means to accentuate his divinity and god-like traits.

#### 4. *Tamburlaine and Anatomical Figures’ Auto-dissection*

Tamburlaine’s performance of his own dissection is similar to the anatomical figures portrayed during the early modern period. Sawday describes images of anatomical dissections that are depicted to take part in their own dissection. He explains that these figures are “shown to be actively involved in the process of demonstrating their own anatomies” (Sawday, “The Fate” 126).



*Figure 1: Self-demonstrating Figure from Juan de Valverde de Hamusco, Anatomia del corpo humano (2nd edn, Rome, 1560), Ill, p. 94 (British Library copy) (Sawday, “The Fate” 124).*

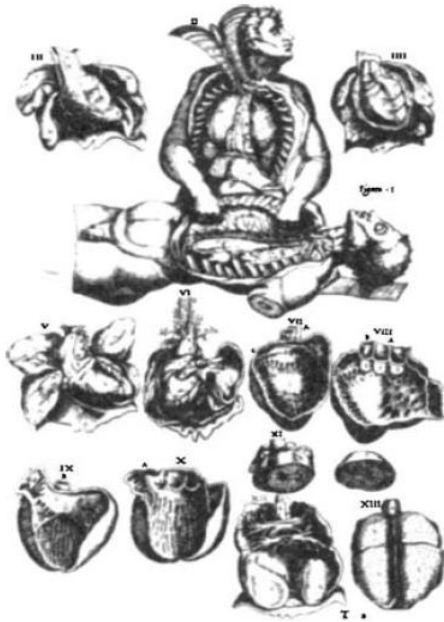


Figure 2: The Anatomised Anatomist from Juan de Valverde de Hamusco, *Anatomia del corpo humano* (2nd edn, Rome, 1560), Ill, p. 94 (British Library copy) (Sawday, “The Fate” 124).



Figure 3: Self-demonstrating Figure, from Andreas Spigelius, *De humani corporis fabrica* (Venice, 1627), p. 57 (BL copy). (Sawday, “The Fate” 124).

Figure 1, 2 and 3 are striking due to the “cooperation of the figures” which is similar to Tamburlaine who chooses to dissect his own arm (Sawday, “The Fate” 125). Just like Tamburlaine who performed his own dissection, these figures present dissected bodies actively exposing their own anatomical dissections. Tamburlaine’s cutting of his arm and figures 1, 2 and 3, present the dissection of living humans and not of corpses. Similarly, the dissection of Prophet Mohammad’s chest, *sharih*, was performed while he



was wide awake. Prophet Mohammad was witnessing the procedure of his own dissection as he described and carefully narrated it. The Prophet said “they seized me and opened up my belly, extracted my heart and split it; then they extracted a black drop from it and threw it away; then they washed my heart and my belly with that snow until they had thoroughly cleaned them.”<sup>13</sup>

Indeed, it seems that the anatomized bodies are so willing to undergo dissection that there seems to be “complicity between anatomist and Corpse.” By dissecting his own arm, Tamburlaine highlights “that now there is no longer any need for an anatomist” as he is willing and has the ability to become his own anatomist (Sawday, “The Fate” 126). Similar to Figure 2 that depicts an anatomized anatomist, Tamburlaine is both the anatomist and the body being anatomized where “the anatomist and the corpse have become as one, merging into one another” (Sawday, “The Fate” 126). Tamburlaine is the body, the subject of dissection, and the anatomist at once. He self-dissects and performs his own *sharih* independent of an anatomist where we clearly sense “the absent anatomist or the corpse which is its own anatomist” (Sawday, “The Fate” 126). Tamburlaine does desire and perform his own dissection on a constructed anatomy theatre as a means to provide knowledge by reaching the sublimity of prophets and Gods.

### **E. The Significance of the Theatre within a Theatre**

It is truly significant that Tamburlaine constructs an anatomy theatre on Marlowe’s stage. This theatre within a theatre reveals Tamburlaine’s extreme desire for divinity as he strives to give knowledge through the opening of his flesh, thereby

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<sup>13</sup> Ibn Ishaq relates the hadith on the authority of a learned person, Khalid b. Ma'dan, who heard it from one of the Apostle’s companions

imitating Prophet Mohammad's *sharih*. Freud explains that when one has a dream during his dream, "the dream within another dream speaks the truth" (Ubersfeld 27-28). Similarly, the "theatre-within-the theatre does not convey reality but rather what is true" (28). The theatre within a theatre presents a moment of unmasking. The anatomy theatre that Tamburlaine sets on Marlowe's stage in fact reveals what Ubersfeld calls a "truth" about Tamburlaine's being (27-28). His desire to imitate Prophets and attain their divine power is seen in that anatomy theatre, that theatre *on* Marlowe's stage, when he tries to open his skin to provide knowledge as the model of Prophet Mohammad. The dissection of Prophet Mohammad's body grounded the reception and the dissemination of that knowledge. The opening of Tamburlaine's body precedes and makes the giving of knowledge about wounds and wars to his sons possible.

## **F. Conclusion**

Tamburlaine's desire to cut his arm as a means to provide knowledge, emulating the dissection of the Prophetic body which grounded the giving of knowledge through the Quran, stems from his insatiable desire for power and divinity. Ornstein explores Tamburlaine's insatiability for attaining power. He even explains that the "crown is no medicine for Tamburlaine's dying fury, nor is it, even in *Tamburlaine, Part I*, an adequate object for Tamburlaine's essentially metaphysical longings" (1379). Throughout the play, Tamburlaine seeks what is higher and more sublime as "it is not enough for Tamburlaine to subdue the monarchs of the earth." Rather Tamburlaine "Ultimately and inevitably [...] must set his standards against the heavens" (Ornstein 1380). In *Tamburlaine the Great I* a theme that constantly recurs is "man challenging or displacing the gods." Furthermore, in *Tamburlaine the Great II*, "Tamburlaine threatens

to turn his cavalieros against the heavens.”<sup>14</sup> Finally, when Tamburlaine “feels his fatal illness, he promises to "march against the powers of heaven" to "slaughter the gods"<sup>15</sup> (Ornstein 1380 footnote 11). Interestingly, Moore argues that Tamburlaine’s cutting of his arm further “distance[s him] from the material world” which he in turn embraces as an “opportunity to reinforce his transcendental identity” (Moore 132). Indeed, Tamburlaine’s cutting of his arm springs from his desire to attain a greater glory and sublimity as he models the Prophetic *sharih* to provide knowledge through his body. Tamburlaine constructs this anatomy theatre to sublimate himself by presenting the opening of his body as a site for providing knowledge. Tamburlaine’s auto-dissection provides him with the ultimate power as he is both the anatomist and the subject of the dissection. Tamburlaine is the anatomist holding the knife and carving the flesh to explore. In addition, he is the man being explored or rather the flesh that offers knowledge and discoveries.

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<sup>14</sup> *Tamburlaine the Great Part I* (1.4.103-106)

<sup>15</sup> *Tamburlaine the Great Part II* (5.3.48-50).

## CHAPTER IV

### REVEALING THE FLESH-ATTAINING REVELATIONS: READING *OTHELLO* AND SURAT YUSUF

Chapter three adopted a Muslim interpretative model to trace the operation of the Quran and Hadith's *sharih* in the dissection of Tamburlaine's arm. Tamburlaine seeks to provide knowledge through the opening of his body, *sharih*, and constructs an anatomy theatre within the play of *Tamburlaine the Great*, a theatre within a theatre, to further prove his sublimity. This chapter explores the notion of opening the human body in Shakespeare's *Othello* and the Quran's Surat Yusuf. This exploration will be conducted by examining how the elements of cloth and blood interact in fabrics: the handkerchief in *Othello* and the shirt in Surat Yusuf. The breaking down of the element of blood in each fabric requires the opening of the body's fabric. This very opening of the flesh situates the reception of a revelation. In this chapter, I examine the ways in which the opening of the body situates and grounds the reception of a revelation in *Othello* and the Quran's Surat Yusuf. In order to examine the opening of the body required for the release of blood, that substance which stains fabrics in each work, it is first important to explore scholars' striking interest in the crucial fabric in *Othello*, the handkerchief.

Scholars have been greatly interested in reading the handkerchief in *Othello* but have been "unable to justify its enormous importance", insisting that "the point about the handkerchief is precisely the triviality of this object" (Boose, "Othello's Handkerchief" 360). Indeed, "that the handkerchief's essence resides in its actual insignificance is the solution favored by the majority of scholars" (Boose, "Othello's Handkerchief" 360 footnote 2). Boose further adds that the handkerchief is continuously

linked to a sexual symbol (366), as Shakespeare presented the viewers of his plays with a “recognizable reduction of Othello and Desdemona’s wedding-bed sheets, the visual proof of their consummated marriage” (“Othello’s Handkerchief” 363). She believes that the central issues of marriage and justice are “those which the handkerchief will ritually express” (“Othello’s Handkerchief” 362). On the other hand, psychoanalytic interpretations read the handkerchief as a symbol of breasts and the strawberries as nipples, while others view “the handkerchief as a penis” and the “strawberries as the glans” (Boose, “Othello’s Handkerchief” 371). However, Burke argues that the strawberry spotted handkerchief symbolizes Desdemona’s genitalia (198) while Yachnin reads the handkerchief as the recognized ‘ocular proof’ of Desdemona’s adultery (202). Neill treats the handkerchief and more specifically the “detail of the handkerchief” as a “visible sign of Desdemona’s hidden self.” The handkerchief is believed to be “‘an essence that’s not seen’ (4.1.16),” as it makes that which is invisible visible and the private public (Neill 401). Scholars believe that the handkerchief provides and presents the readers and the viewers of Shakespeare’s play with that which is hidden, concealed and invisible. In this chapter, I examine the ways in which the blood spotted fabrics, in *Othello* and Surat Yusuf, decompose to ground my interpretation of the opening of the body essential for the release of blood and the reception of a revelation.

This chapter reads Shakespeare’s *Othello* along with Surat Yusuf in the Quran. Surat Yusuf is “Sura 12” and “the longest uninterrupted story in the Quran” ( Mir, “The Quran as Literature” 60). Fabrics in fact join these two works: the handkerchief in *Othello* and the shirt in Surat Yusuf. Each piece of fabric, the shirt and the handkerchief, experiences a breaking down/decomposition of the elements that it is made up of. Surat

Yusuf presents the breaking down of the initial two elements that make up Yusuf's shirt: the cloth and blood. Similarly, *Othello* witnesses the breaking down of the handkerchief's initial elements: the cloth and the blood since the handkerchief is "dyed in mummy" (3.4.72). I argue that in *Othello* and Surat Yusuf the decomposition of the element of blood in the handkerchief and the shirt anticipates the opening of the flesh. The blood that stains the handkerchief and the shirt reappears the moment the flesh is opened. Indeed, those fabrics foreshadow the release of blood which is only made possible through the opening of the body. Then, it is through this very opening of the body, of Othello in *Othello* and of the women in Surat Yusuf, that a revelation is acquired by the receiver of the cut.

This chapter begins by tracing the initial elements that each fabric, the handkerchief and the shirt, are made up of. I then trace the ways in which the elements decompose throughout each narrative. The decomposition of the blood element in *Othello's* handkerchief and Surat Yusuf's shirt will be a main focus in this chapter as the release of blood requires the opening of the body which in turn prepares for the reception of a revelation. This revelation is grounded in the opening of the fabric of the human body, foreshadowed in the stained fabrics, the shirt and handkerchief, and anticipated in Prophet Mohammad's opening of the chest which prepared him for the reception of the Quranic revelation.

#### **A. Surat Yusuf: The Initial Condition of the Fabric (Shirt)**

The initial state of Prophet Yusuf's shirt is portrayed in Surat Yusuf during the incident in which Yusuf's brothers "use intrigue to achieve their objective" of getting rid of Yusuf by throwing him in a well (Mir, "The Quranic Story of Joseph" 2). The

brothers are jealous of Yusuf as they sense that their father Jacob “feels that, among all his sons, [Yusuf] alone is qualified to carry on the Abrahamic tradition after him” (Mir, “The Quranic Story of Joseph” 8). The brothers conspire to get rid of Yusuf as their father Prophet Jacob favors him. Yusuf’s brothers say “Truly, Joseph [Yusuf] and his brother (Benjamin) are loved more by our father than we [...] Kill Joseph or cast him out to some other land [...] One from among them said: "Kill not Joseph, but if you must do something, throw him down to the bottom of a well, he will be picked up by some caravan of travelers.”<sup>16</sup> The brothers ask their father if they can take Yusuf with them to play. In fact, they were seizing that chance to throw Yusuf in a well. They said to their father, “O our father! Why do you not trust us with Yusuf, when we are indeed his well wishers? Send him with us tomorrow to enjoy himself and play, and verily we will take care of him.”<sup>17</sup> The brothers take Yusuf with them, throw him in a well and return back home alone without Yusuf and say “O our father! We went racing with one another, and left Joseph by our belongings and a wolf devoured him; but you will never believe us even when we speak the truth.”<sup>18</sup> All that the brothers bring back is therefore Yusuf’s shirt soaked in blood. At this very point in the Quranic narrative, the condition of Yusuf’s shirt is clearly portrayed. The narrative later on witnesses the breaking down of those very elements in the shirt, the cloth and blood.

It is this iconic shirt, or more precisely the elements of this shirt, that circulate throughout Surat Yusuf. The shirt the brothers brought back was soaked with false

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<sup>16</sup> Quran 12:8-10 (Gemeiah 71).

<sup>17</sup> Quran 12:11-14 (Gemeiah 72).

<sup>18</sup> Quran 12:17 (Gemeiah 73).

blood, “They brought his shirt stained with false blood.”<sup>19</sup> The shirt the brothers handed to Jacob was whole, not ripped and only soaked in blood as Jacob sarcastically says “What a merciful wolf! he ate up my beloved son without tearing his shirt!”<sup>20</sup>. It is this shirt the sons hand to Prophet Jacob as evidence for Yusuf’s death that reveals to us the initial state of Yusuf’s shirt. That shirt is whole (not ripped), made of cloth and stained with blood. The cloth that the shirt is composed of and the blood it is stained with are the elements that break down and decompose throughout the narrative of Surat Yusuf. It is these very elements making up Yusuf’s shirt that disintegrate in Surat Yusuf: the cloth and the blood. The decomposition of the cloth element serves to prove Yusuf’s innocence while the decomposition of the blood serves to first justify Zulaikha’s desire for Yusuf and then punish, humiliate and stain the women that were gossiping about her.

### **B. The Handkerchief in Othello: The Initial State**

After examining the initial state of Yusuf’s shirt, it is now important to trace the condition of the handkerchief in *Othello*. Similar to the shirt in Surat Yusuf, the handkerchief in *Othello* is of great importance as it reveals Othello’s desire to contain and possess Desdemona. Boose explains that Shakespeare’s theatre rarely had stage props as “characters and their speech alone usually direct the drama” and therefore “the repetitive appearance of any stage prop must be considered as symbolically significant.” *Othello’s* handkerchief is present throughout “the entire drama and connects within its symbolic fabric the motive forces of the play” (Boose, "Othello s Handkerchief" 361).

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<sup>19</sup> Quran12:18 (Gemeiah 73).

<sup>20</sup> Quran12:18 (Gemeiah 73).



Shakespeare presents the readers of his play and the viewers with “a highly visual picture of a square piece of white linen spotted with strawberry-red fruit.” The strawberry embroidery is believed by Boose to be “emblematic of virgin blood [...] both visually and metaphorically” (“Othello’s Handkerchief” 362). However, I would like to invite the reader to consider the blood that the handkerchief is in fact dyed in (3.4.72). As Othello hands the handkerchief to Desdemona he explains that the handkerchief “was dyed in mummy, which the skillful, / Conserved of maidens’ hearts” (3.4.72). The handkerchief is not merely spotted with blood symbolized by the strawberries but is rather dyed and soaked with mummy or the blood of virgins’ hearts. Noble explains that mummy is the flesh and excretions of the human body that were distributed and consumed during the early modern period (1-2). He highlights that the “virginal female body” was the “most efficacious and valuable form of mummy (15). This handkerchief is thus composed of both cloth and virginal mummy. This chapter will look at the decomposition of the white cloth and the blood (or mummy) the handkerchief was dyed in. The handkerchief is broken down into those two independent elements, cloth and blood, proving that this handkerchief is undoubtedly “the center around which the rest of the tragedy inexorably whirls” (Boose, “Othello’s Handkerchief” 368).

### **C. Surat Yusuf: Breaking the Shirt**

Yusuf’s shirt is composed of both cloth and blood where the cloth is the first element to break down. Yusuf’s shirt in fact gets torn by Zulaikha, Al Aziz’s wife, who “tries to win Yusuf’s heart- a case of sexual love” (Mir, “The Quranic Story of Joseph” 2). After the brothers throw Yusuf in a well, Yusuf gets saved by a caravan that was

getting water. They sell Yusuf into slavery in Egypt where he is eventually bought by Al-Aziz who occupied a position equivalent to a Minister of Finance in today's world. As Yusuf grew older, the wife of the chief minister Al-Aziz, Zulaikha, who bought Yusuf as a slave, grew fond of him. The Quran describes a moment of temptation that Zulaikha carefully plans out for Yusuf as she plots to seduce him.

Zulaikha closes all the doors of her palace, traps Yusuf and tries to tempt him but however fails as the Quran states "And she, in whose house he was, sought to seduce him (to do an evil act), she closed the doors and said: 'come on, O you.' He said: 'I seek refuge in Allah (or Allah forbid)! Truly he (your husband) is my master! He made my stay agreeable! (So I will never betray him)'"<sup>21</sup>. Yusuf does not fall into the seduction, refuses to have sexual contact with Zulaikha and rushes to the door to escape. As Zulaikha runs after him and gets hold of his shirt, a piece of the shirt gets torn in her hand as "frustration in satisfying her lust leads her to act aggressively" (Mir, "The Quranic Story of Joseph" 10). The door at that moment is opened by her husband and the Quran explains that "they raced with one another to the door, and she tore his shirt from the back. They both found her lord (her husband) at the door"<sup>22</sup>. At that moment, Zulaikha takes on the role of the victim as she says to her husband, "What is the recompense (punishment) for him who intended an evil design against your wife, except that he be put in prison or a painful torment?"<sup>23</sup>. Zulaikha plays the victim of Yusuf's sexual desires to force her husband into believing that Yusuf was sexually abusing her.

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<sup>21</sup> Quran 12: 23-24 (Gemeiah 75).

<sup>22</sup> Quran 12:25 (Gemeiah 76).

<sup>23</sup> Quran 12:25 (Gemeiah 77).

Yusuf however expresses to Al-Aziz, “It was she that sought to seduce me”<sup>24</sup>. Zulaikha and Yusuf provide conflicting tales as to who is the victim of the other’s sexual desires.

These conflicting tales get resolved by the evidence Yusuf’s torn shirt provides. Indeed, “a witness of [Zulaikha’s] household bore witness saying: ‘If it be that his shirt is torn from the front, then her tale is true, and he is a liar! but if it be that his shirt is torn from the back, then she has told a lie and he is speaking the truth!’”<sup>25</sup>. The tear in the shirt reveals the victim in this incident. More precisely, the exact position of the tear indicated which of the two was forcing the other into sexual contact. Yusuf’s shirt was definitely torn at the back as Zulaikha clung to him while he tried to escape so “when he (the husband) saw his (Yusuf’s) shirt was torn at the back; (her husband) said: ‘Surely, it is a plot of you women! Certainly mighty is your plot! O Joseph! turn away from this! (O woman)! Ask forgiveness for your sin. Verily, you were of the sinful’”<sup>26</sup>. Indeed, Al-Aziz uses the evidence of the torn shirt, the torn cloth, to learn that his wife is at fault where “upon weighing evidence, he is quick to figure out that the attempt at seduction was made by his wife” (Mir, “The Quranic Story of Joseph” 11). It is this breaking of the shirt, this very tear that Zulaikha performs on Yusuf’s shirt, that serves as proof for Yusuf’s innocence and the falseness of her accusations. The first element in Surat Yusuf’s shirt to undergo decomposition is the cloth. Indeed, this decomposition is in fact the tear which is in turn employed in this Quranic narrative to prove Yusuf’s innocence.

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<sup>24</sup> Quran 12: 26 (Gemeiah 77).

<sup>25</sup> Quran 12: 26-27 (Gemeiah 77).

<sup>26</sup> Quran 12: 28-29 (Gemeiah 77).

#### **D. *Othello*: The Decomposition of the Cloth**

Similar to Surat Yusuf, the first element in *Othello*'s handkerchief to undergo decomposition is the cloth. While the cloth in Surat Yusuf breaks to prove Yusuf's innocence, the cloth element in *Othello*'s handkerchief expands to become the bed sheets that receive Desdemona's murder. The readers and viewers of the play "follow the strawberry-spotted handkerchief as it moves from hand to hand and which metaphorically turns into the wedding sheets on the bed where Othello strangles Desdemona" (Frye 242). Indeed, as Frye explains, "In Shakespeare's *Othello* [...] handkerchiefs, sheets, [...] become intertwined with violence" (215) as the cloth of the handkerchief expands to embody the very bed sheets upon which Desdemona is murdered. The cloth in the handkerchief emerges and expands in this scene to situate and receive the smothered Desdemona as she bids Emilia to "lay out the fatal wedding sheets" (Boose, "Othello's Handkerchief" 37) which is the very fabric that would receive Desdemona's murder.

##### ***I. Reason for the Murder***

It is important to note that Othello murders Desdemona as he believes she is unfaithful and "thinks himself to have good, proper, and adequate ground for action" (Frye 341). *Othello* is indeed a play presenting a "veritable banquet of cooked-up male jealousy" (Howe 780), which drives Othello into smothering Desdemona. Othello's jealousy, doubt and suspicion regarding Desdemona's infidelity motivate this act of murder to present us with a play on "infidelity-inspired femicide" (Howe 774). Therefore, the murder of Desdemona is triggered by Othello's suspicion and jealousy. The murder scene is characterized by elements that reveal Othello's desire to contain

Desdemona's body. Othello seizes the murdering of Desdemona as a chance to preserve her body and possess her. Nowotny explains that for Othello this killing is

to answer every need of his nature that he recognizes: the need for punishment, for abstract justice, for the restoration of the ideal image of Desdemona by an atoning sacrifice, and, one might add, a need deeper than all these, the need to *possess* her again-for murder is now the only act of *possession* open to him. (Emphasis mine, 341)

I draw attention to Othello's desire to in fact possess Desdemona by murdering her. The murder scene or rather the elements at play in this iconic scene pinpoint Othello's desire to possess her by preserving her body which is evident in the scene's elements: the wedding bed sheets and the absence of any bodily penetration.

The bed sheets are the stretched handkerchief that conceal, cover and preserve Desdemona's body for Othello. In addition, the absence of any bodily penetration or piercing in Desdemona's murder serves to further contain and leave her body intact. Indeed, the bed sheets and this absence of bodily penetrations serve to explicate Othello's desire to possess Desdemona by preserving her body.

## ***2. Cloth as Concealment***

The handkerchief is the token joining Othello with Desdemona. In the play, the handkerchief breaks down into two elements: cloth and blood. The first element the audience perceives is the substance of the handkerchief, the cloth, as it emerges in the murder scene to expand, situate and literally receive Desdemona's murder on the fatal wedding sheets. The fabric in this scene is an element of containment, concealment and preservation. The bed sheets that receive the murdered Desdemona serve to not only

veil her dead body but to also leave it contained. The bed sheets are not the only element of concealment as the bed curtains that Othello closes after smothering Desdemona when he says “Let me the curtains draw, *He closes the bed curtains*” (5.2.113) further cover and veil her body. Desdemona’s murder on those bed sheets is indeed significant. The cloth, that which conceals and contains her body, along with the act of smothering Desdemona without piercing or penetrating her flesh serve to reveal Othello’s desire to preserve her body as chaste.

### **3. *Smothering as Containing***

Othello’s desire to preserve Desdemona’s body is not only evident through the use of the cloth but also in his act of smothering her. The way which Othello chooses to kill Desdemona by smothering her on her wedding bed sheets is indeed significant as it reveals his desire to contain and preserve her body. Othello utters throughout the play “I’ll tear her all to pieces” (3.3.438) and “I’ll chop her into messes” (4.1.196) and “O blood, Iago, blood” (3.3.458) in which we see Othello’s desire to in fact dismember Desdemona, to open her flesh and dissect her. However, in the murder scene, he does not pierce her body and instead leaves it intact where “the murder [...] leaves no blood” (Frye 226).

The notion of preserving Desdemona’s body haunts her death scene. This preservation is manifested in the absence of a dagger or a sword that could penetrate her body to kill her. Othello clearly states his desire to leave her body intact when he says “Yet I’ll not shed her blood / Nor scar that Whiter skin of hers than snow” (5.2.3-4). Indeed, this scene presents the viewer and the reader of this play with a focus on the actions of “those with the power and skill to execute, violate, penetrate, dissect, and

embalm the bodies of virtuous women, thus forever ensuring their *preservation in a state of chastity*” (Noble 135, emphasis mine). Othello chooses to kill Desdemona by smothering her without penetrating or piercing her body with a sword or a dagger to maintain the containment of her body and its preservation “in a state of chastity” (Noble 135).

#### **4. *Murder Scene: Othello’s Desire to Preserve, Contain and Possess***

This murder scene witnesses an absence of rupture, penetration and bloodletting. Rather the murder is portrayed as an act of preservation and concealment manifested in the cloth and the absence of any rupture of the flesh. Even though Neill explains that murder at that moment demonstrates Othello’s “violent rupture of possession”, it is important to note that such a rupture does not take place (406). The murder occurs without any form of rupture or piercing. Rather, Othello’s smothering of Desdemona leaves her body intact. In addition, the bed sheet’s cloth (the stretched handkerchief) further provides elements of preservation, concealment and containment in this scene. Indeed, this scene allows us to examine the ways in which the decomposed element of the cloth in the handkerchief serves to fulfill Othello’s desire in preserving Desdemona’s body. The handkerchief’s cloth is stretched to become the very bed sheets, specifically the wedding sheets, which receive Desdemona’s murder. Those bed sheets along with the absence of any bodily penetration in this scene present Othello’s desire to evade dissection in order to conserve Desdemona’s body as chaste.

#### **E. The Blood Element**

I examined the decomposition of the cloth element in *Othello*'s handkerchief and Surat Yusuf's shirt. The cloth in *Othello*'s handkerchief is decomposed to situate and receive Desdemona's murder. It serves to present and execute Othello's desire in concealing and keeping Desdemona's body intact as he chooses to in fact murder her without piercing her flesh but by smothering. In Surat Yusuf, the shirt's cloth gets ripped as Zulaikha grabs Yusuf's shirt while he tries to escape her trap of seducing him. It is this very tear in the cloth, on the back of his shirt, which proves Yusuf's innocence. In Surat Yusuf, the cloth reveals Yusuf's innocence while in *Othello* it serves to present and reveal Othello's ultimate desire in preserving and containing Desdemona's body.

Indeed, we see how fabrics in both works undergo the decomposition of their initial elements. Those elements are employed in each narrative as key components. Now, I examine the decomposition of the blood element in each fabric that requires the opening of the flesh. The breaking down of the element of blood takes place through the dissection of the body for the blood to be shed. It is through these very bodily openings that a revelation is received in *Othello* and Surat Yusuf. In both works, the reception of a revelation through a *sharih*, a dissection, echoes Prophet Mohammad's opening of the chest, *sharih*, that prepared him for the reception of the Quranic revelation.

#### **F. Blood in Surat Yusuf**

Zulaikha acquired an ill-reputation amongst women in her community after attempting to seduce Yusuf. Rumors were spreading Zulaikha, the wife of Al-Aziz in Egypt, was seducing Yusuf her slave. She planned to reveal to those women the temptation that Yusuf's beauty spurred as according to Hadith Yusuf's beauty was so great as "Beauty consists of ten parts: five are with hawwa (i.e. Eve), three with Sara



(i.e. the wife of Abraham), one with Yusuf (i.e. the son of Jacob), and one part with all other people” (Juynboll 434). Zulaikha revealed to the women the seduction of Yusuf’s beauty by establishing a cut on the women’s flesh in order to make them bleed by the mere sight of Yusuf. Indeed, the decomposition of the second element in the shirt, blood, takes place through the cutting of the women’s hands. This very opening that permitted the release of blood prepares the women to receive a revelation on the seduction Zulaikha was experiencing in front of Yusuf’s beauty.

Zulaikha planned for shedding those women’s blood as a means to prove to them the inability to resist Yusuf’s beauty and reveal the temptation she underwent. The tear on Yusuf’s shirt proved him to be a victim of her sexual desires which resulted in a severely damaged reputation for Zulaikha as women started saying “The wife of Al-Aziz is seeking to seduce her (slave) young man, indeed she loves him violently; verily, we see her in plain error.”<sup>27</sup> This gossip allows Zulaikha to start planning to subject “the women to the same temptation she faced” (Gemeiah, “Stories of the Prophets” 77). She invited the women to a banquet:

So when she heard of their accusation, she sent for them and prepared a banquet for them; she gave each one of them a knife (to cut the foodstuff with), and she said (to Joseph): "Come out before them." Then, when they saw him, they exalted him (at his beauty) and (in their astonishment) *cut their hands*<sup>28</sup>. (Emphasis Mine)

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<sup>27</sup> Quran 12: 30 (Gemeiah 77).

<sup>28</sup> Quran 12: 31 (Gemeiah 78).

Zulaikha invites the women who were gossiping about her to a feast and hands each of them a knife as a utensil for eating. It is with these knives that Zulaikha offers that the women cut their hands. By giving “each one of them a knife”<sup>29</sup>, Zulaikha carefully planned and prepared for the women’s self-dissection. These very cuts that the women perform on their hands reveal and prove their inability to resist Yusuf’s seduction. The women’s inability to resist Yusuf’s beauty becomes visible through the cut, the bleeding and the scar the cut will eventually leave. Furthermore, the cut is not only an evidence of the women’s infatuation with Yusuf’s beauty but also a revelation for the women themselves on the temptation and seduction Zulaikha experienced. Indeed, after seeing Yusuf and cutting their hands, the women said “how perfect is Allah (or Allah forbid)! No man is this! This is none other than a noble angel.”<sup>30</sup> The incisions on the hands that caused bloodletting proved the women’s inability to resist Yusuf’s beauty. Furthermore, it is through those cuts that the women are able to receive the revelation regarding the temptation Zulaikha experienced.

Even though Zulaikha did not have any sexual contact with Yusuf as she was unable to convince and lure Yusuf into it, she was still shamed in her community for desiring him. However, during the banquet, Zulaikha transfers this shame onto the women who harm and cut their hands by just looking at Yusuf as she indeed “works out a scheme with the avowed aim of shaming her rival ladies” (Mir, “The Quranic Story of Joseph” 10). The letting of blood, the second element present in Yusuf’s shirt, takes place during this incident. The release of the element of blood is established through a self-dissection using a knife that provides the women with a revelation regarding the seduction Zulaikha experienced and punishes them for harming Zulaikha’s reputation.

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<sup>29</sup> Quran 12: 31 (Gemeiah 78).

<sup>30</sup> Quran 12. 31 (Gemeiah 78).

Indeed, this dissection that the women perform becomes a punishment. Sawday explains that punishing humans is the “secondary purpose of the anatomy lesson. Within this punitive framework, punishment and public dissection are twins, continually linked to one another” (Sawday 47). The public dissection of humans is accompanied by a punishment for the body. In Surat Yusuf, as the women receive the revelation regarding the inability to resist Yusuf’s beauty, they are simultaneously performing a public self-dissection in which they are all being punished for producing and circulating harmful gossip about Zulaikha. The dissection at this moment serves to situate a revelation on Yusuf’s beauty, shame the women through the scar on their body and punish them for blaming and stirring gossips on Zulaikha.

Indeed, Zulaikha’s sexual penetration with Yusuf did not take place. However, this penetration is transferred onto the women’s bodies. The evidence of this penetration, of the sin that Zulaikha was blamed for (and did not perform), takes place on the hands of the women in the banquet. These cuts and the bleeding on the women’s hands justify Zulaikha’s desires for Yusuf and situate the reception of a revelation on the temptation Zulaikha experienced. In addition, the cuts shame the women as they prove the women’s inability to resist Yusuf’s beauty. After the women cut their hands, Zulaikha says “This is he (the young man) about whom you did blame me (for his love) and I did seek to seduce him, but he *refused* (Emphasis mine).”<sup>31</sup> Zulaikha and the women share their inability to resist Yusuf’s beauty. It is only after the cuts and the bleeding are established on the women’s bodies that Zulaikha announces her past attempt in seducing Yusuf and his refusal. Mentioning Yusuf’s refusal is significant as it portrays Zulaikha as innocent since Yusuf refused to submit to her. Unlike Zulaikha

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<sup>31</sup> Quran 12: 32 (Gemeiah 78).

who is still pure and unpenetrated by Yusuf, the women become the wrongdoers as their bodies do get penetrated.

The cuts and the bleeding on the women's hands prove their faultiness as their bodies get penetrated by the mere sight of Yusuf. The release of blood in this narrative, the second element in Surat Yusuf's shirt, situates the reception of a revelation regarding the temptation Zulaikha underwent for years. Indeed, this revelation is undeniable due to the opening of the flesh, the release of blood and the scar the opening of the body with a knife creates. It is through that bodily cut, like Prophet Mohammad's opening of the chest, in which a revelation comes into being. The women can no longer gossip about Zulaikha, shame her or ridicule her desire for her slave Yusuf as those women's bodies are literally scarred with evidence on their inability to resist Yusuf's beauty.

### **G. *Othello*: Blood**

While the release of blood in Surat Yusuf allows the women to receive a revelation on the temptation Zulaikha experienced in front of Yusuf's beauty, Othello receives his revelation on Desdemona's innocence through his bodily cut, his circumcision. It is through this bodily opening causing the release of blood that Othello receives the revelation on Desdemona's innocence. In fact, Othello only reveals his circumcision at the very end of the play in what Lupton calls "Othello's final autobiography" (80) when he says

And say besides that in Aleppo once,  
Where a malignant and a turbaned Turk  
Beat a Venetian and traduced the state,

I took by th' throat the circumcised dog

And smote him thus

*He stabs himself (5.2.361-365).*

Othello reveals that he is circumcised in this final scene. His circumcision, and here I adopt what Lupton calls “the cut that (re)circumcises Othello” (84), in this final scene is a bodily cut releasing the element of blood present in the handkerchief. Even though Frye states “So situated, the strawberries on the handkerchief can be neither copied nor erased any more than the stains on a wedding sheet” (Frye 231), it is important to note that the blood symbolized by the strawberries decomposes as it is released the moment Othello’s (re)circumcision is revealed at the very end of the play. It is in this very cut, this opening of the body through circumcision, similar to the women cutting their hands in Surat Yusuf, that Othello receives his revelation regarding Desdemona’s innocence and his misjudgment. Frye states that “the handkerchief and bedsheets in *Othello* [...] ask us to consider the extent to which the male appropriation and interpretation of women’s textiles silence the women [...] and allow men violent access to the female bodies that they seek to possess” (232). Frye believes those textiles are fully dominated and controlled by the male figures in the play. However, it is important to realize the power the handkerchief has over Othello during his final autobiography. The blood that the handkerchief is dyed in decomposes through Othello’s (re)circumcision in his final scene to reveal that it is through that cut that Othello learns about Desdemona’s innocence.

The knowledge about Desdemona’s innocence is attained through the circumcision that Othello had once received and chooses to reveal and recreate right before his death as he (re)circumcises himself by uttering “circumcised dog” (5.2.364).

Indeed, Frye states that the readers/viewers of the play “follow the strawberry-spotted handkerchief as it moves from hand to hand and which metaphorically turns into the wedding sheets on the bed where Othello strangles Desdemona” (242). The handkerchief decomposes into two elements, the cloth and the blood. As Frye states, the cloth expands and “turn[s] into the wedding sheets” that receive Desdemona’s murder (242). I would like to add that the blood stained handkerchief asks us once more to follow the trajectory of its decomposition. In fact, the blood decomposes in Othello’s final autobiographical scene through Othello’s (re)circumcision. The blood is the medium through which Othello believes Cassio’s counter story “that bursts [...] from him” which in turn unveils Desdemona’s innocence (Cavell 133).

### ***1. The Counter Story***

Once Cassio offers Othello a counter story on his relationship to the handkerchief, Othello immediately believes his words. Cassio says:

I found it in my chamber,  
And he himself confessed it, but even now,  
That there he dropped it for a special purpose,  
Which wrought to his desire. (5.2.329-332)

It is important to indicate, as Cavell explains, that there is an undeniable “rapidity with which [Othello] is brought to the truth, with no further real evidence, with only a counterstory (about the handkerchief) that bursts over him, *or from him*, as the truth” (133, emphasis mine). Othello chooses to believe Cassio’s counter story that signals Desdemona’s innocence. I would like to shed light on Othello’s reception of this counter story that, as Cavell puts it, bursts “from him” (Cavell 133). Indeed, it is from

the cut, from the cut that circumcision creates, that a revelation on Desdemona's fidelity emerges. It is from a cut releasing the decomposed blood in the handkerchief that Othello embraces Desdemona's innocence to believe it instantly.

The rapidity with which Othello changes his mind regarding Desdemona's infidelity to believe Cassio's counter story is truly striking. It is essential to pay close attention to Othello's final words right before stabbing himself when he says "I took by the throat the circumcised dog / And smote him, thus" (5.2.364-365). The circumcision is indeed the very final aspect that he mentions prior to stabbing himself as it is through that bodily opening that he is able to receive the revelation. Even though Frye states that *Othello's* Desdemona "find[s] it difficult to use textiles to prove [her] worth and virtue" (221), it is through the blood on the handkerchief which decomposes in Othello's (re)circumcision that a truth "bursts [...] from him" (Cavell 133). As we have seen in *Othello*, Othello's circumcision first releases blood that the handkerchief is dyed in and then creates a wound, a bodily opening, from which a revelation on Desdemona's innocence emerges. The decomposition of the element of blood in the handkerchief requires the opening of the body from which a revelation on Desdemona's innocence comes into being. The handkerchief, the first element in this chain, is responsible for creating the wound from which an image of an innocent Desdemona emerges.

## ***2. Othello's Suicide for Misjudging Desdemona***

Indeed, as Nowotny in "Justice and Love in Othello" explains, *Othello* is "a drama of an error of judgment" (340). I propose that Othello's error in judging Desdemona's infidelity is only revealed through Othello's opening of his body by means of his reference to his circumcision. Lupton states that in Othello's suicide

speech, “Othello's drawn sword at once points outward to circumcision as the trait identifying the object of his scorn, and reflexively returns it onto Othello's own body as the very means of death, a final stroke that cuts off his life” (83). Lupton reads Othello’s reference to circumcision as an object of “scorn” and disdain whereby Othello commits suicide as a means to punish his low circumcised self.

Instead of reading the circumcision as a trait that others Othello and stigmatizes him, I employ a Muslim theological lens that reads the opening of the body, Othello’s (re)circumcision, as a site from which a revelation comes into being. Othello utters the phrase “circumcised dog” (5.2.364) which (re)circumcises him right before committing suicide. It is through his circumcision, his bodily opening, that he receives the revelation on Desdemona’s innocence since he decides immediately afterwards to punish himself with death for misjudging her. Instead of reading Othello’s suicide as a punishment for his “otherness” whereby his circumcision is again fused with Islam, I suggest reading that moment as the punishment he inflicts on himself for misjudging Desdemona which is only revealed to him through his bodily opening, his (re)circumcision.

### ***3. Othello’s Self Dissection: (Re)circumcision***

Even though Marchitello explains that “Othello would search the anatomized female body for the ocular proof of chastity: Desdemona’s intact hymen” (4), Othello however does not penetrate her body, does not dissect or anatomize her as he desires to leave her body intact and chaste. Rather, he transfers the desire to dissect and penetrate the flesh by uncovering, revealing and exposing the bleeding unhealed wound of his circumcision, at the very end of the play right before committing suicide. Indeed, it is



that bodily opening through which Othello receives the revelation on Desdemona's innocence and decides to punish himself with death for misjudging her.

#### **4. *The Circumcision***

Scholars have indeed been drawn to the very last scene in *Othello* when Othello articulates his circumcision and says "I took by the throat the circumcised dog" (5.2.405). This moment has been read as an instant revealing Othello's racial and religious identity. Lupton reads this moment as a signal for "Othello's departure from Christianity" (80) while Boose believes that Othello presents his circumcision as the "final, inclusive sign of his radical Otherness" ("Racial Discourse" 40). Boyarin views this moment as a clear statement of Othello's race since the "alleged thick lips and dark skin seem less significant a marker of his indelible identity than his hidden penis." He argues that Othello's circumcision is "as important-or even a more important -as a signifier of his 'race' than the color of his skin" (255). Boyarin believes that when Othello utters "Where a malignant and a turban'd Turk / Beat a Venetian and traduced the state / I took by the throat the circumcised dog" (5.2. 403-406), Othello in fact reveals that circumcision is "the very sign and emblem of a 'malignant and turban'd Turk.'" Othello denies "his own circumcision" to construct "himself as Christian" (Boyarin 258). Cavell invites the reader to "attend to the perception that Othello is the most Christian of the tragic heroes" (129). Indeed, Othello's circumcision has always been considered a marker for his religious affiliation.

Scholars tie Othello's Circumcision to religious and racial affiliations because circumcision is thought to be linked to Islamic theology. However it is important to acknowledge that circumcision is not inherently Muslim and was not introduced by

Islam. Circumcision is neither exclusively Muslim nor theologically mandatory in the religion of Islam. Rather, it is a custom that dates back thousands of years B.C in North African communities. The practice of circumcision is not even mentioned in the Qur'an and is a tradition "attributed to the Prophet Abraham" (El Sheemy and Ziada 276). However, "the first definite account [of circumcision] appears in Genesis (Chap. 17), in which the covenant is made between God and Abraham, stating: 'And he who is eight days old shall be circumcised among you, every male throughout your generations'" (Rizvi, Naqvi, Hussain and Hasan 13).

Circumcision is mentioned in a Hadith<sup>32</sup> for Prophet Mohammad where it is equated and mentioned along with practices related to personal hygiene as he says "Five practices belong to the *fitra*<sup>33</sup>: circumcision, shaving the pubes, paring the nails, plucking the armpits, and clipping the moustache" (Juynboll 605). Only one Islamic school of thought considers circumcision as obligatory, the Shafiite school of thought. The other schools of Islamic thought recommend it but "none consider it a precondition of being a Muslim." Indeed, an uncircumcised individual will "not be considered non-Muslim only because he is uncircumcised" (El Sheemy and Ziada 276) and an individual can be circumcised and not Muslim or Muslim and not circumcised. Based on Islamic theology, the uttered circumcision by Othello at the very end of Shakespeare's play cannot indicate or determine his religious affiliation.

Rather than viewing Othello's circumcision as an indication of his religious affiliation, I read Othello's own circumcision as his opening of the body through which he receives the revelation regarding Desdemona's fidelity. Many claim that Othello's "I

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<sup>32</sup> Sayings and practices by Prophet Mohammad.

<sup>33</sup> Arabic word *meaning* 'disposition', 'nature', 'constitution', or 'instinct'.

took by th' throat the circumcised dog / And smote him thus / *He stabs himself*" (5.2.364) is evidence for his Islam. His utterance of "circumcised" allows him to receive the revelation about Desdemona's fidelity as he then decides to commit suicide to punish himself for misjudging her. Othello's self-anatomization and opening of the body through his (re)circumcision provide him with "a metaphoric visualization that will guarantee certainty" (Marchitello 3). Indeed, this opening of the body constructs the body as a sight of revelation where "the inquiry into the body as it is displayed in dissection and performed in the science of anatomy – the inquiry, that is, into the body as an object of knowledge" (Marchitello 5). Othello's body offers him knowledge about Desdemona's innocence. Othello is circumcised and it is through his (re)circumcision that an investigation takes place for a revelation to come into being. However, it is important to note that this revelation that emerges from the cut, Othello's (re)circumcision, is induced by a counter story that Othello chooses to believe.

## **H. Conclusion**

Textiles in Surat Yusuf and Shakespeare's *Othello* come to envelope and guide the resolutions within each work. The shirt in Surat Yusuf and the handkerchief in *Othello* decompose into cloth and blood to serve the overall narrative trajectory. While the cloth in Surat Yusuf served to reveal Yusuf's innocence, the cloth in *Othello* served to reveal and fulfill Othello's desire in containing, enveloping, concealing and leaving Desdemona's body as chaste. On the other hand, the release of blood in Surat Yusuf through the women's cutting of the hands served to situate the reception of the revelation regarding the years of temptation Zulaikha faced in front of Yusuf's beauty. The release of blood in *Othello* takes place through a circumcision that he performs on

himself at the very end of the play right before committing suicide. It is through this very bodily cut, this revived, unhealed and bleeding wound, from which Othello receives the revelation regarding Desdemona's innocence.

In both narratives, the reception of a revelation is achieved through the opening of the body. Prophet Mohamad receives the Quranic revelation after the opening of his chest, *sharih*. Similarly, the women in Surat Yusuf receive the revelation on the seduction Zulaikha experienced in front of Yusuf's incomparable beauty through the cuts on their hands. Othello's revelation on Desdemona's innocence and his misjudgment is received through a *sharih*, his bodily self-circumcision. Indeed, the release of blood, staining the handkerchief and the shirt, requires the opening of the body in both *Othello* and Surat Yusuf. It is thanks to those textiles that a cut is created, blood is released and a revelation comes into being.

## CHAPTER V

### DESIRED DISSECTION in *ANTONY AND CLEOPATRA*

After reading the providing of knowledge through the *sharih* of Tamburlaine's arm and the reception of a revelation through Othello's *sharih*, this chapter will be concerned with reading the *sharih*, the dissection of the flesh, as a desired incision through which characters believe a resolution for their conflicts would come into being. *Sharikh* resolves the characters' problems and regains their losses in Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*, and specifically in Antony and Cleopatra's suicide scenes. Indeed, I read dissecting the flesh in *Antony and Cleopatra* in a positive manner even though much has been written about the negativity of those suicides. Farrell, for instance, explains that in Antony's suicide "self-destruction is more overtly aggressive in [his] fantasy of slaying Caesar by slaying himself. Ordering Eros to kill him, he vows, 'Thou strik'st not me, 'tis Caesar thou defeat'st' (4.15.68)" (79). Farrell then questions Cleopatra's suicide and wonders if her "suicide [is] a victorious apotheosis or one last tricky act of escapism" (80-81). On the other hand, Cunningham states that "most critics have concentrated upon Cleopatra, holding that since her self-expression is psychologically inconsistent, the resolution of the tragedy is unrealistic and confusing" (9). However, he argues that "the final actions of Antony and of Cleopatra do not conform to Christian teaching as to how men should meet death; but their deviation is constantly measured against that teaching" (16). Farrell reads Antony's suicide scene as violent. While Cunningham states that many read Cleopatra's suicide as chimerical and intangible, Farrell considers this scene as malicious and vicious. Cunningham explicates that the reading of Antony and Cleopatra's suicide scene is often read in terms of its digression from Christian teachings. In this chapter, I do not seek to prove that Antony

and Cleopatra's death scenes comply with Islamic and/or Christian teachings. Rather, I attempt to read those death scenes through a Muslim theological lens<sup>34</sup> that considers *sharih*, the dissection of the flesh, as an operation creating bodily openings that provide guidance and satisfaction after conflicts and obstacles. It is indeed essential to highlight that the welcoming of bodily openings is not alien to Christian early modern Europe. When Christ performs the opening of his flesh through the breaking of the bread during the last supper, he demonstrates a sanctioned dissection of the body through which life and guidance are given. Islam and Christianity are monotheistic religions that embrace bodily cuts and incisions, proving that Islam is neither "historically [n]or theologically exterior to Christianity" (White 499) as they share overlaps and connections.

My reading of Antony and Cleopatra's *sharih* as a positive procedure is indeed not an alien concept for Christianity. In this chapter, I read the suicides and specifically the opening and the penetration of the body, *sharih*, through a Muslim interpretive model. I use a Muslim optic based on the Quran and Hadith's *sharih* to read the opening and the dissection of Antony and Cleopatra's bodies that is interpreted as a procedure that provides relief and solutions. By using the Muslim *sharih*, I demonstrate that those characters resort to the opening and penetration of their flesh as a means to find a resolution. Antony dissects his flesh to regain his nobility and Cleopatra penetrates her body using the asp to restore her sexual satisfaction.

#### **A. Islam and Christianity: Opening the Body**

Possible remonstrations might arise concerning the use of a Muslim lens to read the opening of the flesh in Shakespeare's Roman play *Antony and Cleopatra*.

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<sup>34</sup> This lens considers specifically the Muslim Hadith and Quran.

Objecting the use of a Muslim interpretive model for reading Antony and Cleopatra's suicide scene is indeed not surprising since even the use of a Christian lens for reading such a Roman play has been opposed. I will adopt Cunningham's logic regarding any "possible objections to the imposition of" Islamic and Christian principles upon "explicitly pre-Christian" and pre-Islamic "materials." Indeed, as Cunningham states, it is essential to remark that Shakespeare is "habitually guilty of this practice [of] always thinking in Elizabethan terms." He states that this is "obvious as to need no special argument." Cunningham points out to "'Anachronisms' [that] have been frequently remarked throughout the plays" which has "demonstrated that Shakespeare participated in the contemporary tendency to view the past in terms of the present" (10). Indeed, *Antony and Cleopatra* is not a Roman play written in Roman times. Rather, this Roman play has been written and constructed during the early modern period that was exposed to both Islam and Christianity. Those two Abrahamic religions share a connected history and played an undeniable concrete role during the early modern period. It is thus neither striking nor surprising to consider the ways in which the religious conditions of early modern Europe participated in the construction of Shakespeare's Roman play *Antony and Cleopatra*. Before reading the dissection of the flesh in Antony and Cleopatra's suicide scenes, I demonstrate the importance of the concept of *sharih*, opening the flesh, in both Islam and Christianity.

### ***1. Sharih in the Quran***

Opening the body is depicted in the Quran and Hadith as a procedure that provides guidance, nobility, resolutions and relief. I consider the opening of the body, *sharih*, in *Antony and Cleopatra* as a procedure the characters resort to in order to attain

their losses. The two characters strive to find resolutions to their conflicts through the dissection of their flesh. These moments emerge via a Muslim theological lens that considers *sharih*, opening and penetrating the body, as a means to attain peace and relief after a conflict. The Quranic Sura narrates the following:

Have We not performed a *sharih* upon your breast? And removed from thee thy burden. Which did gall thy back? And raised high the esteem in which thou art held? So, verily, with every difficulty, there is relief.

Verily, with every difficulty there is relief. (Quran 94: 1-6)

The Quran presents the notion of *sharih* that provides relief evident in the repetition of “with every difficulty, there is relief.” These verses are addressed to Prophet Mohammad and “describe [the] purification of the heart as [a] preparation for [the] receipt of the divine message” (Rahnamaei 35). This opening of the flesh and specifically the Prophet’s chest is a procedure that is believed to not only have given him purity but also relief in that it “removed from thee [Prophet Mohammad] thy [his] burden” and “Surely there is ease after hardship.” In addition, these verses highlight that the *sharih* of the Prophet’s chest provided him with nobility and elevation as it “exalted thy [his/Prophet Mohammad’s] name.”<sup>35</sup>

While Prophet Mohammad gained relief and nobility from the *sharih* of his chest, the Quran depicts Moses asking God to open his chest to attain relief from burdens. Moses fled Egypt and spent ten years on land that the Pharaoh does not control. God asks Moses to return and face the corrupt Pharaoh. At that moment, Moses implores God, saying “My Lord, open out for me my breast [perform a *sharih*].”<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Quran 94 (Maulawi 740).

<sup>36</sup> Quran 20:25 (Maulawi 354).



Moses asks God to perform a *sharih* in order to gain assurance and relief. Opening and penetrating the chest at this moment is portrayed as a means of gaining peace and assurance due to the fear that Moses felt for facing the Pharaoh. Permeating, penetrating and opening the flesh are directly associated with the providing of a resolution through assurance after conflicts. This notion is further evident in the Quranic phrase “Is he then whose bosom Allah has opened [performed a *sharih* upon] for the acceptance of Islam [...] *like him who is groping in the darkness of disbelief?* Woe, then, to those whose hearts are hardened against the remembrance of Allah! They are in manifest error.”<sup>37</sup> This Quranic verse highlights that a chest that has undergone *sharih*<sup>38</sup> is a blessed one while one that is “hardened” and resistant to penetration is deemed faulty. Furthermore, the Quran explicates, “So whomever Allah wishes to guide, He expands his bosom<sup>39</sup> [performs a *sharih* upon his breast] [...] and as to him whom He wishes to *let go* astray, he makes his bosom narrow *and close*, as though he were mounting up into the sky.”<sup>40</sup> Indeed, these Quranic verses associate the *sharih*, the opening, dissection and penetration of the breast, with the attainment of guidance, elevation, relief and assurance after conflicts.

Commentators have explored the significance of *sharih* in the Quran. For instance, Al Qurtubi analyses the Quran’s Surat Al Sharih explaining that the *sharih* is associated with the softening of the heart and its instilment with wisdom, knowledge,

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<sup>37</sup> Quran 39:22 (Maulawi 542).

<sup>38</sup> In this context, *sharih* can mean both opening the body and dilating one’s bosom for the acceptance of what was good and truthful (Lane 1530).

<sup>39</sup> Maulawi interprets this *sharih* as a means for one to accept Islam (Maulawi 156).

<sup>40</sup> Quran 6:125 (Maulawi 156).

belief and faith<sup>41</sup> (*Tafsir Al Qurtubi*). Ibn Kathir's interpretation of Surat Al Sharih likewise explains that *sharih* leads to an enlightened and expanded chest. In a Hadith on the dissection of Prophet Mohammad's chest, Prophet Mohammad narrates the incident of his chest's dissection saying "they split open my chest without the spilling of any blood or any pain where one of the two men asked the other to extract rancor and envy. A clot was removed and mercy and Clemency were instilled" (*Tafsir Ibn Kathir* 430). According to Muslim belief, the opening of the body, the performing of the *sharih* on Prophet Mohammad, prepared him to become a prophet. It elevated his status by instilling in him peace, relief and prophetic traits. The desire for opening the body is further seen when Moses implored God for a *sharih* to guide and solve his difficulties<sup>42</sup>. In addition, Christianity perceives the opening of the flesh in such a sanctified manner. Jesus' flesh was opened as a means to offer life. The opened flesh of Christ is then consumed in the Eucharist to offer life. Indeed, in both Christianity and Islam, the opening of the body is a sanctified act. In Christianity, life is given through the opening of the flesh and in Islam the opening, *sharih* of the flesh, gives guidance, resolutions and elevation. The physical opening and penetration of the flesh, *sharih*, for the attainment of resolutions will be employed in reading Antony and Cleopatra's desires to penetrate their flesh.

## **2. *Sharikh and Christianity***

Islam's *sharih*, dissecting and opening the flesh, is not a concept that is alien to Christianity. Indeed, Islam and Christianity sanction this notion of dissecting the flesh

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<sup>41</sup> Hadith told by Anas Bin Malek from Malek Bin Sasa'a.

<sup>42</sup> Quran 20:25 "My Lord, open out for me my breast, And ease for me my task" (Maulawi 354-355).

as they have “the figure of Abraham [as] the father that monotheism places at the beginning, or *entête*, ‘Father - of – Genesis’” (Benslama 72). Opening the body is of essential importance in Christianity. Jesus says “The bread that I shall give is my flesh (sarx), for the life of the world” (6.15 St. John). Jesus equates his flesh with bread or rather states that the bread is his flesh in: “And he took bread, and when he had given thanks he broke it and gave it to them, saying, ‘This is my body which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me’” (Luke 22:19-20). As Jesus breaks the bread, he breaks open his body and tears his skin and flesh to expose what is within and then offers it. The offered bread or broken flesh is life. The Eucharist is a reenactment of Christ’s instruction at the Last Supper. The consumption of the Eucharist, Christ’s broken flesh, instills life in the consumer. Indeed, the opening of Jesus’ flesh which takes place through the breaking of the bread is a bodily opening and dissection that gives life. It is through that breaking of the flesh, through the opening of his body, that the giving of life becomes possible whereby Jesus says “I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. And the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh” (John 6:51). Before *sharih*, the opening of the body, was an important concept in Islam, it was indeed significant in Christianity. The Eucharist is the reenactment of Christ’s instruction during the Last Supper of consuming his broken flesh in the broken bread. It is thanks to that precise bodily opening, the breaking of the bread, that life gets instilled in humans according to the Christian faith. Indeed, the opening of Jesus’ flesh is consecrated in Christianity as it offers life once that dissected flesh is consumed through the Eucharist.

### ***3. Opening the Flesh in Islam and Christianity***

Islam is a religion based on the cut, the *sharih* performed on Prophet Mohammad's chest from which a revelation came into being. Similarly, Christianity is a religion based on incisions, wounds and bodily openings where "the fascination with the wound of Christ in itself became so marked that artists might substitute a picture of the wound on its own for the whole body of Christ with the wound" (Meskill 54). We can indeed see that in Christianity, the opening of the body, the opening of the flesh of Christ (bread) is an iconic sacred instant of giving and offering life.

The opening of the body is embraced in the Christian scriptures and specifically in "St Paul's comparison of the church to the individual members of one body, and secondly, (and more daringly) in the act of self-demonstration performed by Christ at the Last Supper when his own body was distributed amongst those present" (Sawday, "Dissecting the Renaissance Body" 130). Indeed, Sawday emphasizes that this opening of the body is a "divine scope of anatomy" where the dissected and "opened body" is "not violated but sanctified - as though Christ's injunction at the Last Supper had been given its most complete and literal interpretation" (134). The opening of the flesh is sacred for Islam and Christianity and truly significant in the early modern period's anatomy scene.

## **B. Opening the Body During the Early Modern Period**

The early modern period witnessed a significant shift in the depiction of bodily dissections. At first, Renaissance art portrayed torment and agony as a result of bodily dissection (Sawday, "Dissecting the Renaissance Body" 113). For instance, the story of Marsyas portrays "a contest in which one of the contestants is transformed into the subject of a living dissection as a punishment for transgression" (113). Anatomical

investigations and “the final tearing apart of the criminal body after death within the confines of the anatomy theatre is of the greatest importance to any study of the history of anatomical discovery in the early-modern period” that presents the brutality of dissection (115-116). However, the portrayal of the dissected body undergoes a significant shift. The body is then depicted to desire its dissection and having its “inner recesses opened to the public gaze” which shows “this willing compliance” to demonstrate its inner substance (123).

The body in early modern illustrations is portrayed as either willing to be dissected or performing its own dissection where we can see “the compliant figure and the self-dissective figure.” Indeed, the body performing its own dissection “is a graphic example of the willing acceptance of anatomical dissection” due to the “compelling intellectual excitement” of anatomy (Sawday, “Dissecting the Renaissance Body” 126). Indeed, this tolerance for dissection is evident in “The Vesalian Figures” where “the most extreme levels of dissection” are “released from the confining space of the anatomy theatre” to occupy images of natural scenery (127).

Opening the flesh is not only depicted as desired but as natural as well:

The presence of the landscape as well is at least as important as the dissected cranium. The body is slowly merging into that landscape. By leaning the body against a curiously anthropomorphic tree (which, on close inspection, is revealed as having been pruned in its upper branches as though it were echoing the pollarding which the body has undergone), the artist seems deliberately to have set out to blur the distinction between the body and the earth, rocks, pebbles and clouds which form the setting. At the far left of the frame is a shattered tree stump,

suggestive of fragmentation once more, while the right arm of the figure seems already to have undergone a transformation and become a piece of solid rock rather than flesh. (Sawday, “Dissecting the Renaissance Body” 127-128)



*Figure 4: Dissected Figure in a Landscape*, from Charles Estienne and Estienne de la Riviere, *De dissectione partium corporis* (Paris, 1545) (Sawday, “The Fate” 128).

In Figure 4, the merging of the dissected body with natural scenery presents the naturalness of opening the flesh. The dissection of the body is not only deemed natural but as also instinctual. The dissected body blends with the natural background where the viewer senses the turning of “the earth into a body, in much the same way that, in Estienne's image of the dissected corpse, body and earth merge into one another.” Indeed, even the pebbles that lie on the ground appear to be splinters and sections broken from the rock-like body. The image portrays “the return of the body to the earth from which, in theological terms, it sprang” (Sawday, “Dissecting the Renaissance

Body” 128). Entering the body is depicted as desired and sanctified due to the “naturalness of dissection” (128). The dissection is now perceived as “divinely sanctioned” as it is no longer an invasive intervention but rather an assistance in the “natural process of decay and dissolution which the body is, in any case, inevitably fated to undergo” (129). Indeed, Sawday proposes that Christianity’s “injunction to ‘know yourself’ could be taken literally” to “establish a clear case for the anatomist as working under the force of a divine commandment” (129). In Jesus’s dissection of his body through the breaking of the bread to give life, Prophet Mohammad’s splitting of his chest to receive the Quranic revelation and the anatomical scene of the early modern period, opening the flesh is not only depicted as a desired natural act but as a divinely sanctioned one as well. This acceptance for dissection and more so, the desire to open the flesh, is traced in Shakespeare’s Antony. Antony’s opening of his flesh is read using the Quranic *sharih*. Employing the Quranic text in this scene allows us to see how dissecting Antony’s body is desired because it is the means through which he restores his lost nobility.

### **C. Antony’s *Sharih*: Desiring his Wound**

Antony embraces the wound, the cut and the opening of his flesh, as it becomes the means through which he strives to restore his nobility. Antony prepares for his own suicide by striking his body after believing that Cleopatra is dead. In this scene “the emphasis falls repeatedly on his nobility, as he determines to imitate those finest qualities which Cleopatra has just exhibited” in her suicide (Hamilton 250). Antony utters “Come then-for with a wound I must be cured” (4.15.78) as he desires a wound, a *sharih*, that opens his flesh. Eros refuses to submit to Antony’s order of striking him

with his sword. Instead, Eros strikes himself and Antony says “Thrice nobler than myself” (4.15.95). It is with these very words that we see Antony attaching noble traits with *sharih*.

Antony directly associates dissecting the flesh with nobility. Indeed, establishing a wound on the flesh elevates Eros’ status and makes him noble. Interestingly, the connection between dissecting the body, *sharih*, and nobility and elevation is also traced in the Quran’s Surat Al Shareh. This relationship between opening the body and elevation is seen in “And We exalted thy name.”<sup>43</sup> Prophet Mohammad became a prophet only after the dissection, *sharih*, was established on his chest. The *sharih* is a bodily dissection that preceded and grounded the prophecy and nobility of Mohammad. Indeed, it is through this *sharih*, through this very opening of the flesh, that Antony believes the restoring of his nobility could be attained. The literal opening of the flesh becomes the method for obtaining nobility and elevation as it is what characterizes Prophet Mohammad’s *sharih* and Jesus’ stigmata and breaking of the bread (his body). Even though Antony fails to *properly* strike himself, the cut he establishes on his flesh is capable of restoring his nobility.

After Eros strikes himself instead of Antony, the latter tries to strike himself with the sword but fails. Antony falls on his sword and utters “How? Not dead? Not dead” (4.15.103). Antony fails to direct a proper strike at his flesh that would end his life saying “I have done my work ill, friends” (4.15.105). After failing to receive Eros’ strike first, Antony’s own strike also fails to end his life. However, the wound Antony establishes on his flesh becomes the very site through which he restores his nobility in triumph: “Antony’s [valour] hath triumphed on itself” (4.16. 17). It is only after this

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<sup>43</sup> Quran 94: 4 (Maulawi 740).



bodily opening is established that he senses the restoration of his lost nobility and valor as he attains the cure he sought with a wound when he said “for with a wound I must be cured” (4.15.78). Antony succeeds in attaining the cure to his lost nobility through the triumph his wounds creates.

Indeed, it is essential to understand the significance of the wound, or the *sharih*, in this scene. The cut on Antony’s flesh is the site through which he restores his nobility. Even though Leinwand states that Antony’s wounded degenerating body “has no mind of its own; it is *insignificant*” (127), it is important to note that wounds and bodily openings are the sites through which Antony believes his nobility is restored. On the other hand, Spencer believes that in the last scenes “the tragedy injects its paradoxical stresses through Antony’s conclusion, just before his suicide, that ‘with a wound’ he ‘must be cured (4.15.78)’” (376). Spencer conceives this moment of obtaining a cure through a *sharih*, or a bodily opening, as paradoxical. However, reading this instant through a Muslim theological optic that views the opening and the penetration of the flesh as an act that provides elevation, relief and a resolution allows the reader to capture the essence of the ‘cure’ Antony was referring to. As the Quran specifies that it is through the *sharih*, the opening of the flesh, that guidance and elevations are attained, the wound on Antony’s body is the exact site through which he triumphs and restores his nobility and valour.

#### **D. Cleopatra’s Sharih: The Penetration Using the Asp**

While Antony sought to be cured with a wound to restore his nobility, Cleopatra desires the opening of her flesh and specifically its penetration, using the asp, to gain sexual satisfaction after Antony’s death. The asp, “an age-old symbol of healing

as well as of evil”, is an important contributor in this scene, as it offers Cleopatra a cure in the form of sexual satisfaction and venom that ends her life (Kinghorn 104).

Cleopatra seeks comfort in the form of sexual satisfaction by the *sharih*, the opening of her body. The Quranic meaning of *sharih*, a dissection of the body that provides relief, is employed in analyzing Cleopatra’s suicide scene. Cleopatra desires the wound, and not any wound, but a penetration that restores her sexual satisfaction with an asp after the loss of Antony’s sword, that which contained and represented their sexuality.

### ***1. The Containment of Sexuality in the Sword***

Sexual desire in *Antony and Cleopatra* is transferred into speech. Sexual desire performs what Foucault calls the transformation of “every desire, into discourse” and is bounded by the word “sword” that can be communicated publicly (1650). The sword satisfies the characters’ sexual desire to speak about sex but at the same time leaves it coded and contained. Indeed, the sword does not simply “represent both sexuality and martial valor,” does not only “bridge both worlds” of Rome and Egypt (Wolf 330) and is not merely a tool that represents sexuality but a means to contain, control and employ sexual desire. In *Antony and Cleopatra*, sexual desire is no longer “simply condemned or tolerated but managed, inserted into systems of utility, regulated for the greater good of all” (Foucault 1652). Sex is bounded and managed by its concealment in the sword. The sword becomes useful as a symbol of sexual desire and the phallus. In addition, the sword is secured, established and constantly used for military purposes. This ability of the sword to reflect both power and the phallus is traced in Dollimore’s “*Antony and Cleopatra: Virtus under Erasure*” where military and sexual power is “symbolized

phallicly of course in the sword” (259). The sword in *Antony and Cleopatra* conceals sexual desire and employs it in the political domain.

## **2. *Cleopatra’s Loss of Sexual Satisfaction After Antony’s Death***

Antony’s death marks the loss of the sword and consequently Cleopatra’s loss of sexual satisfaction. When Antony dies, Cleopatra’s words become sexually oriented. The instant Antony dies, Cleopatra’s words are characterized with five utterances of the letter “t” in “The crown o’ the’ earth doth melt. My lord” (4.16. 64, emphasis mine). The repetition of the letter t in those words reveals her desire for the sword that certainly does look like the letter t. She then says: “The soldier’s pole is fall’n young boys and girls,” which indicates the misery she is in due to Antony’s forever unattainable erection that is symbolized by the “pole” (4.16.66). Furthermore, this sentence is characterized by its beginning with the letter t that looks like the sword. However, the rest of the sentence witnesses a repetition of the letter l five times. The letter l somewhat looks like a sword but certainly does not function like one due to the absence of the handle. The repetition of the letter l, the dysfunctional sword, reveals Cleopatra’s awareness of the loss of the sword as a symbol of their sexuality.

Cleopatra’s sexual desire at the moment of Antony’s death is even more emphasized when she says, “And there is nothing left remarkable, / Beneath the visiting moon” (4.15. 67-68). It is important to keep in mind that throughout the play Cleopatra associates herself with the moon. As Cleopatra says “beneath the visiting moon,” she shows that “there is nothing left remarkable” underneath her body. Cleopatra’s body needs to be on top of Antony’s in order for her to be sexually pleased. Antony’s death marks Cleopatra’s loss of sexual satisfaction and thus she decides to wound her flesh as

a means to regain what is lost. After Antony's death, Cleopatra faints, or as Iras expresses "She's dead too, our sovereign" (4.16.71). Cleopatra then revives with a desire, the sole desire, of attaining satisfaction after Antony's death. Cleopatra tries to regain her sexual satisfaction in which her cure lies through the *sharih*, the opening and penetration of her body, with the asp.

### 3. *Cleopatra's Aspic Sharih*

Antony and Cleopatra strive to attain their independent cures through a wound. Antony expresses that with a wound, a wound that penetrates his flesh, a *sharih*, he must be cured (4.15.78). Cleopatra's cure is attained using the asp that not only wounds and penetrates her flesh but also symbolizes Antony's lost phallus and provides her with sexual satisfaction. The reader senses Cleopatra's desire to have her flesh opened when she utters "If knife, drugs, serpents have, / Edge, sting, or operation. I am safe" (4.16.27-8). These lines reveal that Cleopatra could have used different tools to commit suicide. The knife would open her flesh and the drug would mingle with her internal organs without any bodily penetration. However, Cleopatra chooses the serpent for her suicide as it provides her with the opening of the flesh, specifically its penetration, while also being a sexually satisfying phallic object for masturbation.

#### a. Cleopatra's Suicide: A Recapitulation of Antony's

Antony and Cleopatra associate their bodies' *sharih* with nobility. Antony desires his body's *sharih* to regain his nobility and Cleopatra believes that the asp performs a noble act: "What poor an instrument, / May do a noble deed! He brings me liberty" (5.2.37). Cleopatra believes that Antony would "praise [her] noble act"

(5.2.284) of penetrating her flesh with the asp. The asp performs a bodily opening, a *sharih*, on Cleopatra's flesh through which she desires a cure to come into being. Indeed, as she applies the aspic on her breast, Cleopatra utters "with thy sharp teeth this knot intricate,/ of life at once untie" (5.2.303-4). With the asp's sharp teeth Cleopatra desires a bodily opening on her flesh to untie her knots, problems, conflicts and sufferings in order to attain a cure. Similar to Antony who desires a wound to be cured, Cleopatra desires this bodily penetration with the asp's teeth as she "welcomes 'the stroke of death' because like 'a lover's pinch', it 'hurts, and is desired' (5.2.298-299)" (Spencer 376). Cleopatra believes in the nobility Antony saw in *sharih*. Both characters believe that it is through this opening of the flesh that their conflicts and struggles will be resolved and a cure is attained. Indeed, "Cleopatra's death is a recapitulation, with variations, of Antony's" (Williamson 249). The variations Williamson refers to are the erotic elements embedded in Cleopatra's suicide scene when she tries to utilize the asp to sexually satisfy her.

#### b. Sexuality in Cleopatra and the Asp

Cleopatra uses the asp that penetrates her body to regain her sexual satisfaction. After Antony's death, the sword becomes meaningless and loses its symbolism. The sword that used to contain and bound Cleopatra's sexual desire is no longer existent. Cleopatra then tries to satisfy herself sexually by masturbating in public and penetrating her body with the asp. Cleopatra's masturbation is symbolized by the placement of the asp between her breasts. The asp is sexualized and presents at this very moment the phallic tool that penetrates Cleopatra's body to provide her with satisfaction. Indeed, her death scene "is full of physical detail, of touching and handling

[...] she encourages [the asp] as she might encourage a clumsy lover: 'Poor venomous fool, / Be angry, and despatch'(5.2.305-306)" (Leggatt 100).

In the scene that joins Cleopatra with the asp, the eroticism could be traced from the moment the clown tells Cleopatra "I wish you joy o'th'worm" as he offers her the asp (5.2.278). Cleopatra handles the asp as a tool that gives her satisfaction. The tool that penetrates and wounds her body is the one that gives her sexual pleasure and ecstasy where "at the very moment when the physical suffering is most acute, a complex and confusing amalgam of emotional responses to the spectacle is recorded." The asp penetrates her flesh, releases its venom and emerges as "an object of erotic longing" (Sawday, "Dissecting the Renaissance Body" 113). Cleopatra desires a death through sexual penetration as she says "the stroke of death is as a lover's pinch, / which hurts, and is desired" (5.2. 294-5). Cleopatra equates the stroke of death to "a lovers pinch,/ which hurts and is desired" (294) that is "interpretable as a defloration symbol" making "the entire spectacle [...] bathed in eroticism" (Kinghorn 107).

Cunningham highlights that "death itself is constructed as a sensuous experience" at the moment of Cleopatra's suicide (16). Cleopatra employs the asp in this scene as an object that restores her lost sexual satisfaction after Antony's death. The asp that wounds her flesh, that creates a *sharih* "Here on her breast, / There is a vent of blood, and something blown-, / The like is on her arm" (5.2.347-8), is also the very phallic object that Cleopatra uses to open her flesh and regain her sexual satisfaction. Restoring Cleopatra's sexual satisfaction is only attained through the penetration and the opening of the flesh that the asp creates. Indeed, this satisfaction and relief that Cleopatra attains is evident in Caesars' words "she looks like sleep" (5.2.344). After Caesar observes that Cleopatra looks like sleep, Dolabella notices the "blood" and the

wound created by the asp on Cleopatra's arm and breast. Indeed, Dolabella's words directly associate Cleopatra's sleeping appearance with the wound she finds on Cleopatra's flesh. The openings on Cleopatra's flesh created by the asp's penetration allow her to regain her sexual satisfaction. She reaches an orgasm that makes her go to "sleep." Cleopatra does not commit suicide and does not die but rather experiences an orgasm, a sleep or a *petite mort*<sup>44</sup> after the reception of her *sharih* by the asp. This wound, or *sharih*, that cured Cleopatra by offering her sexual satisfaction is specifically located on Cleopatra's breast, the site where Moses desired a *sharih* to gain guidance and comfort in his struggles and where Mohammad received the *sharih* to become prophet.

## **E. Conclusion**

Marlowe's *Tamburlaine the Great* and Shakespeare's *Othello* unveiled *sharih*'s ability to give knowledge and provide a revelation. Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* tackles characters' desires to attain nobility and relief by dissecting their flesh, *sharih*. Antony seeks to regain his nobility through a bodily opening that he creates on his flesh with his own sword. It is through this wound that Antony attains his lost nobility and elevation. Similarly, Cleopatra seeks to perform a *sharih* using the asp that would penetrate, puncture and wound her body for the attainment of relief in the form of sexual satisfaction. The asp is the tool which Cleopatra uses to "return to the body which has been more than confiscated from her, which has been turned into the uncanny stranger on display" after she loses the sword with Antony's death (Cixous 2043).

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<sup>44</sup> It means "the little death" in French and is an idiom and euphemism for orgasm.

Once Cleopatra loses her body she becomes “reduced to being the servant of the militant male, his shadow” (Cixous 2044). Cleopatra is turned into a mere shadow that imitates Antony’s desire to be cured with a *sharih*, a wound. Cleopatra employs an asp that can wound her to regain relief and satisfaction and provide her with the lost phallic sword. Even though Dollimore writes that “Antony has been subjugated by Cleopatra,” we here see Antony’s power over Cleopatra. This power is through his sword, his phallus. Antony’s control over Cleopatra is ironically revealed at his death with the loss of the sword since the sword and Antony are directly connected. Once Antony is dead, Cleopatra loses the sword and thus her sexual satisfaction and becomes alienated towards her body. Antony and Cleopatra utilize and seek their bodies’ *sharih* to regain their losses. Indeed, this *sharih* is both desired and sanctioned in Islam and Christianity. The Quran presents the opening of the flesh as a desired procedure that provides nobility, relief and satisfaction, and Christianity sanctions the opening of the body in Christ’s breaking of the bread that offers life. Antony performs the *sharih* on his own flesh to restore his nobility while Cleopatra desires the opening of her body to reach a cure with sexual satisfaction, her *petite mort*.



## CHAPTER VI

### CONCLUSION

This thesis looked at bodily dissections in Shakespeare and Marlowe's works by performing a dissection on those literary works. This dissection within a dissection, like "the dream within another dream [that] speaks the truth" and the "theatre-within-the theatre [that] does not convey reality but rather what is true" (Ubersfeld 27-28), reveals a truth. However, since the use of 'truth' could be indeed problematic in this respect, I choose to use the term "layer." Whether this layer that the dissection of characters' flesh reveals is a truth or not, is not of any significance to my argument. Rather, I highlight the ways in which dissection in literary works reveals a layer that I chose to examine through a Muslim theological lens. The bodily dissections within these dissected literary works reveal a layer in those plays. This concealed layer is unveiled once the use of Muslim theology is executed. It is this theoretical lens of Muslim theology that traces, reads and appreciates the dissection of the body which in turn paves the way for exploring new raw terrains in Shakespeare and Marlowe's works.

By employing the Quran's *sharih*, we can read Tamburlaine's dissection of his arm as a procedure that he undertakes to sublimate his being to such an extent that he in fact constructs a theatre within a theatre to provide knowledge through his wound. Prophet Mohammad and Tamburlaine give knowledge through their bodily openings. Tamburlaine permeates his flesh as a means to provide knowledge which echoes Prophet Mohammad's offering of Quranic knowledge through his chest's *sharih*. The ability of *sharih*, the opening of the flesh, to give and offer, is further traced in Shakespeare's *Othello* when read along with the Quran's Surat Yusuf. In both works, the opening of the flesh allows a revelation to come into being as it is through Othello's

wound, his very circumcision, that he receives the revelation on Desdemona's innocence and then chooses to punish himself with death for misjudging her.

Surely, instead of viewing the opening of the flesh as a lack, an absence, a void or a withdrawal that permeates the wholeness of the body and disfigures a perfect creation, through the use of Islamic theology, the Quran and Hadith, we can trace how the opening of the flesh is an action of production, of overflow and excess. More precisely, the opening of the flesh creates a site of giving and receiving with the obliteration of the impermeability of the flesh through dissection. The opening of the flesh that offers knowledge and the reception of revelations are respectively evident in Marlowe's *Tamburlaine the Great* and Shakespeare's *Othello* where the *sharih* of the flesh makes the giving of knowledge and the reception of a revelation possible.

This thesis' primal goal is to swim against the current stream of westernizing Christianity and Easternizing Islam by showing that both monotheistic religions, Islam and Christianity, sanction the opening of the flesh. Islam sprung from Prophet Mohammad's opening of the flesh, the dissection through which the Prophet received the holy message of the Quran. Jesus' breaking of the bread is an instant of opening the flesh through which his body was broken open to give life. Christianity, Islam and the early modern period's anatomy scene sanction the dissection of the flesh. Shakespeare's characters in *Antony and Cleopatra* seek the opening of the flesh as a last resort to attain a cure and regain their losses. Antony strives through his body's *sharih* to regain his nobility while Cleopatra seeks to attain her sexual satisfaction through the permeation of her flesh with the asp. The opening of the body is not depicted as aggressive, invasive or evil, but rather, as both Christianity and Islam view the opening of the flesh, as a desired action that would offer satisfaction, relief and elevation.

This thesis stated from its initial stage that it is unconcerned with tackling the monolithic divorce between an inferior Muslim East and a superior Christian West. Employing Garcia's "history of connectivity" comes to support and justify this goal. Orientalism, that which tackled the alienated, fragmented and Othered nations, races and religions, in turn theoretically fragments, divides and alienates any attempt in drawing a connection between Afroeurasia, or what Orientalism calls "East and West." Indeed, viewing the early modern period solely through the lens of Orientalism promotes the tendency to view and understand this period through the breaks and splinters that Orientalism in fact creates. Taking the perspective that considers Orientalism the sole lens for looking at the relationship between early modern period Europe and Islam makes the reading of Afroeurasia through Abrahamic religious connections absurd. However, those Abrahamic religious connections preceded Said's Orientalism and indeed can eclipse such a methodology. The return to Abrahamic religious connections, to that primordial figure of Abraham, the father of monotheistic religions, should not really require any justification. However, for the religious about Said's Orientalism, I justify reading the early modern period's literature using Muslim theology by referring to a history of connectivity. This undeniable continuation between Christianity and Islam lies beneath the fragments Orientalism addresses and indeed *creates* .

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