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## TURKISH WOMEN AND THE AMAZONS IN RENAISSANCE ENGLISH DRAMA

Süheylâ Artemel<sup>a</sup>

### ABSTRACT

In Robert Greene's play *Alphonsus of Aragon*, there is an identification of Turkish Women with the mythical Amazons. The play, a medley of heterogeneous elements taken from chivalric romance, crusading literature, pseudo historical narrative and mythology, aimed at entertaining audiences by presenting incredible and extraordinary events. However, the identification may have been inspired by comments made by medieval and contemporary travel accounts on the location of the Amazons and the traditions of Turkish women fighting on horseback - e.g., Bertrandon de la Broquière's description of Turcomans accompanied by an armed woman mounted on a horse, and the XVth century English merchant, Anthony Jenkinson's descriptions of Süleyman the Magnificent's entry into Aleppo, with women mounted on horses and carrying arrows in their hands. Although the historical justification provided for the identification of Turkish women with Amazons could at best be described as conjectural, it is interesting to note that the theme of women fighting on horseback is an element that goes back to ancient Turkish folklore and is found in early literary and historical documents.

In Robert Greene's *Alphonsus King of Aragon* (?1588, p. 1599) based on pseudo-historical events involving the Turks,<sup>1</sup> Fausta, the wife of the Turkish Sultan 'Amu-

<sup>a</sup> Assoc. Prof. Dr., Dept. of Language and Literature, Boğaziçi University.

<sup>1</sup> The *Comicall Historie of Alphonsus King of Aragon* was based on a fictitious story built into the framework of the relations of Turks with the historical king of Naples and Aragon, who lived between 1385-1458 and came into conflict with the Turks chiefly because of the support he gave to Scanderbeg, the revolted Prince of Albania; cf. İ. H. Uzünçarşılı, *Osmanlı Tarihî* (Ankara, 1949), II, 64-69. It is believed that Greene may have made use of the accounts of two Italian chroniclers, Bartolommeo Pazio and Vespasiano de Bisticci. J. C. Collins, in the introduction to his edition of the play, notes that *Alphonsus* had "like James IV of Scotland, so little relation to historical fact that it is scarcely possible to identify the *Alphonsus* who gives it its title. There can, however,

rack', is pictured as the Queen of the Aragon who leads her army of women -"all her maydens in array"- to aid her husband in his battle against the "Aragonians". The action has, in fact, a comic reversal; at the beginning of the play there is an estrangement between husband and wife, and Fausta's first reaction is to fight her own husband at the head of her army. However, later on, calmed down by Medea, the sorceress, she decides to help him instead. When she is told that Sultan 'Amurack' is taken prisoner by Alphonsus, she comforts her daughter, Iphigina, in high-flown declamatory style.

It is not words can cure and ease this wound,  
 But warlike swords; not teares, but sturdie speares.  
 High **Amuracke** is prisoner to our foes.  
 What then? thinke you that our **Amazones**,  
 loynd with the forces of the **Turkish** troupe,  
 Are not sufficient to set him free?

(V. ii), 11. 1571-1576

Iphigina, the young and beautiful Turkish princess overcomes Alphonsus not, apparently, by strength of arms but by having roused in him the passion of love. In a scene, clearly imbued with comical overtones, where Iphigina is seen as pursuing Alphonsus with a drawn sword, he explains that he is not fleeing her out of cowardice nor because he is too proud to fight a woman;

But loue, sweete mouse, hath so benumbed my wit,  
 That though I would, I must refraine from it.

(V. iii). 11. 1598-1599

However, Iphigina persists,

Come on, i'faith, Ile teach you for to know  
 We came to fight, and not to love, I trow.

(V. iii). 11. 1607-1608

The Amazons are eventually defeated by Alphonsus who takes both Fausta and Iphigina as prisoners. The play ends happily with peace being made between the Turks and the Aragonese, and with the prospect of the crown of the two countries being united through the marriage of Alphonsus and Iphigina.

In the play where exotic and mythical elements combine to produce an atmosphere of romance and phantasy, the presentation of Turkish women as Amazons was

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be little doubt that Greene's hero, so far as he corresponds to reality, is Alphonso the First of Naples and the Fifth of Aragon (1385-1454), though Greene was quite capable of confounding him, as perhaps he did, with Alphonso I, King of Aragon and Navarre, surnamed El Batallador, who died in 1134." Cf. *The Plays and Poems of Robert Greene* (Oxford, 1905), i. 75-76; and I. Ribner, "Greene's Attack on Marlowe: Some Light on Alphonsus and Selimus," *Studies in Philology*, LII (1955), 162-71. All quotations from Greene are from the edition prepared by J. C. Collins.

no doubt intended both to amaze and amuse the audience.<sup>2</sup> However, the establishment of a connexion between Turkish women and the Amazons was not wholly an invention. It had its sources in contemporary travel literature. Although the origins of the Amazons were traced by the ancient Greeks to a society of women inhabiting lands bordering on Scythia, by the Maeotian lake, around the Caucasus or in Anatolia on the banks of the Thermodon (T. Terme),<sup>3</sup> their country could not be definitely identified, like the abode of the legendary Christian king of the Middle Ages, Prester John, who was by some writers imagined to live in Asia to the East of Tartary and by others to reign in Ethiopia. One of the popular texts where Elizabethans could find an account of the Amazons was *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville*,<sup>4</sup> who placed them near Chaldea, in an area roughly corresponding to modern Syria. The location of the mythical Amazons in this region by Mandeville has an interesting parallel in Bertrandon de la Brocquière's *Travels* (written c. 1438),<sup>5</sup> where he records how he met with an armed woman on horseback near Hama, a city on the Orontes in W. Syria. The identifications of the Amazons with Turkish women in Renaissance drama may have partly derived from such early accounts. De la Brocquière relates the incident as follows,

Half a league from Hama, we came to the river, and crossed it by a bridge. It had overflowed, although there had not been any rain. Here I wished to give my horse some water,... On the opposite side of the river is a long and vast plain, where we met six or eight Turcomans, accompanied

2 The play may have also been intended as an illustration of the 'pagan' character of Ottoman society, particularly by showing the manner in which Moslems were supposedly engaged in practising magic and idolatry. A mosaic of heterogeneous elements, *The Comicall Historie of Alphonsus* gives free reign to the fancy and was almost certainly a pastiche parodying Marlowe's *Tamburlaine*. Cf. I. Ribner, "Greene's Attack on Marlowe: Some Light on *Alphonsus* and *Selinus*," *ut cit.*

3 According to Euripides, the Amazons dwelt round Maeotis (or Lake Azov); describing the journey of Hercules to their country in order to fetch the girdle of Hippolyte, he writes, "Then he [Hercules] went through the waves of heaving Euxine [Black Sea] against the mounted host of Amazons, dwelling round Maeotis, the lake that is fed by many a stream..." (Hercules, 348-429, trans. E. P. Coleridge). In Homer's *Iliad*, Priam relates how he had once fought the Amazons as the ally of the Phrygians during their invasion of the country, (*Iliad*, iii. 188-198). Cf. *Great Classical Myths*, ed. F. R. B. Godolphin, (New York, 1964), pp. 82-83, 172. During the Trojan War, they fought as allies of the Trojans; Achilles, who killed their Queen Penthesilea, mourned for her, overcome by her youth and beauty. The Amazons were believed to be women who fought on horseback with bows and arrows and who tolerated no man to live in their territory. It has been noted that the Amazons provided painters and sculptors with subject matter (e.g. Polyclitus' "The Amazon"), but that they were comparatively less extensively written about in poetry and in drama. However, references are made to them by Homer, Aeschylus, Pausanias, Pindar and other classical writers. The story of Theseus and the Amazon Queen Hippolyta was treated both by Chaucer in *The Knights Tale*, and later by Shakespeare in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

4 *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville*, the authenticity or authorship of which is still debated, was largely a compilation of accounts given on Turkish and Middle Eastern lands by medieval pilgrims and Marco Polo. It was first printed in English in 1499 by Wynkyn de Worde. Other editions followed, perhaps the best known to the Elizabethans was *The Volage and Travayle of Syr John Maundeville* published in 1568.

5 Bertrandon de la Brocquière, a knight and councillor of the Duke of Burgundy wrote his account after his return from a pilgrimage to Jerusalem in 1432-33. See *Voyage d'outremer et retour de Jérusalem en France par la voie de terre, pendant le cours des années 1432 et 1433 etc.*, ed. Legrand d'Aussy, and trans. T. Johnes, 1807. De la Brocquière's account has been edited by T. Wright in *Early Travels in Palestine*, 1848, (reprint. New York, 1968).


by a woman. She wore a tarquais\* like them, and, on inquiring into this, I was told that the women of this nation are brave, and in time of war fight like men. It was added, and this seemed to me very extraordinary, that there are about thirty thousand women who thus bear the tarquais, and are under the dominion of a lord, named Turcgadiroly, who resides among the mountains of Armenia, on the frontiers of Persia.<sup>6</sup>

A source from where Elizabethan readers could have another impression of the tradition of women warriors may have been the account given by Anthony Jenkinson of Süleyman the Magnificent's entry into Aleppo in 1553 containing a description of the women in his train who, though not fully armed like the Turcomans, still bore 'little bowes in their hands' as part of the official pageantry.

After him folowed sixe goodly yong ladies, mounted upon fine white hacknells, clothed in cloth of silver, which were of the fashion of mens garments embrodered very richly with pearle and preclous stones, and had upon their heads caps of Goldsmiths worke, having great flackets of haire, hanging out on each side, died as red as blood, and the nailles of their fingers dled of the same colour, every of them having two eunuches on each side, and litle bowes in their hands, after an Antike fashion.<sup>7</sup>

The tradition of portraying Eastern women as Amazons continued in Stuart Drama. In *The Two Noble Ladies and the Converted Coniurer*, acted at the Red Bull some time between 1619-23, Miranda the daughter of the Egyptian Sultan, dresses and fights as an Amazon. In William Cartwright's *The Lady Errant (1635-38)* set in Cyprus during the Cretan War, the ladies fight to control the state and thus show that they can wield the "fauchion". It is notable that the "fauchion" which is another name for the scimitar, the Ottoman curved sword was a stage property for Amazons in Masques performed at Court during Elizabethan's reign. In these masques, just as in Greene's play there was freedom in combining mythological personages with Oriental figures. A masque performed in 1578/79 in front of the French Ambassador in the Court had Amazons holding "antick fawchons and shieldes" in their hands, but also a troocheman or a trudgeman, the Interpreter who also had, as a figure, oriental connections derived from travel accounts.<sup>8</sup>

These performances may have appealed to the passion of the Renaissance for colour, spectacle and exotic splendour. Perhaps, this was one of the reasons why Greene and his contemporaries combined mythological and Eastern elements in their dramatic work. However, despite the fact that there is very little historical evidence to justify Greene's identification of Turkish women with the Amazons, it is interesting to note that the tradition of women warriors formed an authentic part of Turkish

\* The word 'tarquais' found also in the French version, derives from Persian  *târkes*

Turkish *târkes*, medieval Latin *tarcasius*, XIIIth century French *tarchois*. The modern French form is *carquois*, a quiver.

<sup>6</sup> *Early Travels in Palestine*, p. 312.

<sup>7</sup> R. Hakluyt, *The Principal Navigations, Voyages, and Discoveries of the English Nation (1598-1600)*, McLehose edition, Hakluyt Society, Extra series, 1903-5, V, 105-108.

<sup>8</sup> For an account of the masque see A. Feuillerat, *Office of the Revels in the Time of Queen Elizabeth (Materialien)*, ed. Bang, xxi, 1908), 287. 4. The dragoman (truchman or trudgeman) was the name given to official interpreters employed in the Ottoman state, *targuman* or *tercümân*.

folklore itself and had its sources in the social customs of pre-Islamic society. We can illustrate this with some examples drawn from *The Book of Dede Korkut* about the ancient Oghuz Turks, taken down and put together probably not later than the beginning of the fifteenth century.<sup>9</sup> In two stories, "How Prince Uruz Son of Prince Kazan Was Taken Prisoner" and "Boghach Khan Son of Dirse Khan," the mothers go out to search and to rescue their sons at the head of their own group of fighters composed of women. Lady Burla the Tall mounts her black horse and, "with her forty slender maidens accompanying her," joins her husband in his battle against the "infidels", in order to redeem her son from their hands. Dirse Khan's Lady also goes in search of her son, who is treacherously wounded in the snow-capped Kazilik Mountain, accompanied by her forty maidens.<sup>10</sup> Another evidence for the value attached to martial skill in women is the fact that a man had to compete with his prospective wife and to beat her at riding, archery and wrestling before he could be accepted as a suitable husband.<sup>11</sup> In fact, we find in the story of "Kan Turali Son of Kanli Koja," that Kan Turali will marry the woman who will outstrip him in riding and in the attack against the enemy. He describes his ideal bride as the woman who "before I reach the bloody infidels' land she must already have got there and brought me back some heads."<sup>12</sup>

Although this paper cannot claim to give a full account of the characterization of Turkish women on the Elizabethan stage - which is infinitely more complex than the image suggested here - it is hoped that by concentrating on a very particular and less emphasized aspect, some light may be cast on an area of cultural relations where western and Turkish literary traditions partly converge.

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<sup>9</sup> Translated, with an introduction and notes, by G. Lewis, (The Penguin Classics, 1974). See the Introduction about problems of dating. The quotations from *The Book* are from this edition.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 35, 103.

<sup>11</sup> In the story of "Bamsi Beyrek of the Grey Horse," Beyrek addresses his betrothed in the words, "Daughter of Khans, did I not rise up in the morning twilight?... Did you not summon me to your side?/Did we not race our horses over the plain?/ Did my horse not outstrip yours?/ When we shot, did I not split your arrow?/Did I not throw you when we wrestled?...". *Ibid.*, p. 84.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 117.

## TÜRK KADINLARI VE AMAZONLAR

## ÖZET

Robert Greene'in (?1558-1592), *The Comicall Historie of Alphonsus King of Aragon* (?1588, basıldığı tarih 1599) adlı piyesinde Türk kadınları ile mitolojinin kadın döğüşçüleri Amazonlar arasında bir bağlantı kurulmuştur. Değişik öğelerin -şövalye masalları, tarihsel hikâyeler, mitolojî- bir araya gelmesinden oluşan ve daha çok eğlendirmeye yönelik, gözahıcı sahneler ve inanılmaz olaylar sergileyen bir piyeste böyle bir benzetmenin yapılması aslında şaşırtıcı olmayabilir. Ancak, devrin yazıları incelendiğinde bu benzetmenin zayıf da olsa bazı olaylardan kaynaklandığı anlaşılır. Örneğin, XV. asır seyyahlarından Bertrandon de la Brocquière, Suriye topraklarından geçerken at üstünde, ok ve tirkeş taşıyan bir Türk kadını gördüğünü ve Türkmenlerin kadınlardan oluşan ordularının olduğunu anlatır. Onaltıncı asır İngiliz taciri, Anthony Jenkinson ise, Sultan Süleyman'ın Haleb'e girişinde haremdeki kadınların at üstünde ve ellerinde oklar taşıyarak padişahı izlediklerini canlı bir biçimde çizer.

Hernekadar efsanevi Amazonlar ile tarihteki Türk kadını arasında bağlantı kurmak bir tahminden ileri geçemezse de, bu temanın eski Türk efsane ve yazılarında da ele alınmış olması konuya daha ilginç bir boyut kazandırmaktadır.