

Allegorical Implications of Regicide and Restoration in William Whitaker's *The Conspiracy* (1680)

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Abstract: *William Whitaker's The Conspiracy or Change of Government (1680) establishes many historical and political parallels related to the great political tensions over the succession question in Restoration England. The Conspiracy, which is based on actual accounts of the history of the Ottoman Empire, comments on one of the most complicated political allegories of the Exclusion Crisis period. Written in a time of great controversy over the succession issue, the play can be seen as an allegory of the dethronement and execution of King Charles I and the restoration of his son, Charles II.*

Key words: *Restoration Drama, William Whitaker, Regicide and Restoration , Exclusion Crisis, Ottomans on stage.*

Introduction

Ignored by many researchers in the field of political theatre of the English Restoration period, Whitaker's play shows striking historical and political parallels related to the succession question in England. In fact, it is surprising to discover how little criticism has been written about this play. *The Conspiracy* presents one of the most complicated political allegories of the Exclusion Crisis period. The play is based on actual accounts of the history of the Ottoman Empire with some modifications in certain aspects of the plot. The actions of *The Conspiracy* concern the dethronement and execution of the Ottoman Sultan Ibrahim (r. 1640- 48) and the subsequent enthronement of his son Mehmed IV. Historically, Sultan Ibrahim came to power after the death of his father, Sultan Murad IV, in 1639. Ibrahim was the only surviving adult male in the succession line. The period of his short rule turned to be a series of catastrophes and troubles. During Ibrahim's short life as Sultan, the empire was controlled by a group of corrupt advisors. In fact, corruption and internal uprisings drove the treasury into bankruptcy. In addition, the Sultan's campaign against the Venetians over the island of Crete proved to be catastrophic militarily and financially (White, 2011, p.211). Mass discontent of the Sultan's rule was developed into the 1648 Revolution that ended in the execution of the Sultan and the enthronement of his six-year-old son Mehmed.

Succession-related anxieties are figured in the actions of all the characters in the play. In fact, in the midst of the succession crisis of England, Whitaker's play has to be considered very politically relevant. An audience used to intense use of allegory on stage could hardly have miss the many parallels Whitaker established between the Ottoman succession crisis and England's

own crisis. As Bridget Orr (2001) argues, "Contemporary audiences expected heroic poems to be allegorical, offering several layers of meaning, and could be expected to recognize that such texts had multiple significations" (p. 11).

Whitaker's play was performed at the Duke's Theatre in 1680 while England was experiencing significant political controversy and partisanship. During the early 1680s, the fears of a potential Catholic monarch grew as Charles's heir, the Duke of York, was an openly known Catholic. In response, Parliament struggled to exclude the Duke from succession. The Earl of Shaftesbury, among other opposition leaders, attempted to ensure the exclusion of any future Catholic heir from ascending to the English throne. The King dissolved the Parliaments of 1680 and 1681 to prevent the passing of the Bill. The opposition involved the whole nation in a continuous agitation by playing on the strong fears raised by the Popish Plot. Mass demonstrations were organized in London to urge the King to call a new parliament. Charles ignored such petitions and ruled without a sitting parliament until his death.

A Brief Plot Review

The plot of the play revolves around schemes, dissent, and conspiracies at the Ottoman Sultan's court. The play presents the helpless Sultan Ibrahim and Sultana Formiana, who are surrounded by wicked plotters. Among the plotters is the Queen mother, Kioseme, who has already eliminated three sons, and now is plotting to murder the Sultan with the help of an ambitious rebel, Bectas. Flatra, the Sultan's sister, and Melek, the Grand Vizier, conspire to kill the Sultan, too. Flatra pretends to love Melek only for the sake of his assistance in performing her scheme. After the failure of his plan to murder the Sultan in the royal garden, Bectas leads an uprising with the help of other ambitious leaders in the Janissaries. When the news of the rebellion is delivered to the Sultan and Sultana, Oglar Pasha, who served the Sultan for a long time, offers to protect the Sultana in the absence of the Sultan. Oglar turns out to be a traitor too and in vain attempts the Sultana's virtue and honor. Taking advantage of the chaos the rebels caused, Melek stabs the Sultan to win both Flatra and the throne. Flatra is stabbed by Melek who then repents his evil deeds. Eventually, loyal subjects support the legitimate heir, Mahomet, and save the empire. The young Sultan condemns all rebels to their fate, and the Queen mother is imprisoned in a dark dungeon.

Critical Analysis and Discussion

Susan Owen (2000) brands Whitaker's play as "the most fervent and wholehearted royalist play of the Exclusion Crisis" (p.162). Whitaker's royalist sympathies are presented early in the prologue to the play:

And for the Men of business in the Nation,
Let them begin a Thoro Reformation.
Let 'em leave Faction, Jealousies and Fears.
Leave setting us together by the Ears.
Let Corporations leave Petitioning,
And learn all due Allegiance to the King.
Let Politicians too not be so hot
To swear that a Spring-tide's a Popish-Plot. (pp. 17-24)

Whitaker's satirical lines are aimed at Whig exaggerations in regards to the truth behind Titus Oates popish plot. The "Popish Plot," which broke out in 1678, engaged in scaremongering tactics over the impending Catholic danger. In 1678 Titus Oates, an Anglican clergyman, warned of a Popish conspiracy to kill Charles designed to hasten James's succession. Oates claimed that he was recruited in a Jesuit plot to kill the unsuspected King. Oates added that all the money needed to carry out the scheme had been raised by foreign Catholics, some of them in relation with Louise XIV of France. Oates's fabricated plot acquired great national credibility and attracted more attention to the sensitivity of the succession issue (De Krey, 2007, p. 141). The Popish Plot scare that erupted after 1678 hastened the emergence of the two major political parties that quarreled over the succession issue. By the beginning of the 1680s, the Exclusion Crisis was still dominating the political scene in England. The Crisis resulted in the emergence of the Tory and the Whig parties. From their side, the Whigs tried to exclude the Duke of York from the throne because he was publically known with his Catholic faith as well as his favoring of absolutism. Jones (1961) states that the Whigs were mostly alarmed against the increasing possibilities that once the Duke ascended to the English throne, English liberties and the Protestant religion would be endangered (p. 4). The leaders of the Whigs attempted to pass the Bill more than once, but were faced by the King, proroguing or dissolving the Parliament. On the other hand, Tories opposed the Whigs and their endeavors to pass the Bill. Tories supported the Stuart brothers and their right to rule the country. Tories warned of the menacing danger of a new civil war initiated by the Whigs' ambitious attempts to interfere in the succession process. In the prologue of his play, Whitaker calls on people to show their obedience to the King and avoid both factions and exaggerated fear of the Plot. While the play itself is designed to highlight the dangers of rebellion, civil war, and faction by allegorizing the story of the regicide of Sultan Ibrahim, Whitaker modified some historical incidents to allude to certain political incidents specific to his age.

Whitaker's play can be read as an allegorical retelling of the history of English Civil War and the breakdown of the Stuart hereditary succession. The English Civil War (1642–1651) that both Boyle and Whitaker referred to was a series of military conflicts between English Parliamentarians and Royalists. The conflict was initiated by what the Parliament considered an absolute tyranny during the King's Personal Rule (1629–40). Between 1642–46, the war pitted

the supporters of the Long Parliament against the Royalist who fought with King Charles I. After the final defeat of the King, the war was resumed in 1649 between supporters of the young Charles II and supporters of the Rump Parliament. Eventually, the Royalists' defeat at the Battle of Worcester ended the war in September 1651. Some of the direct outcomes of the war were the execution of Charles I, the exile of his sons, and the replacement of the monarchy with the Commonwealth of England and, at a later stage, the Protectorate. The war further strengthened the position of Parliament in English political system.

As an allegorical retelling of the history of English Civil War and the interruption of the notion of English succession, *The Conspiracy* stages the regicide of Sultan Ibrahim at the hands of rebels and the eventual restoration of his son to the throne. Kevin Sharpe (2013) argues that Whitaker chose Charles I as a more suitable model for his royalist allegory to avoid the weaknesses of Charles II (p. 225). In this case, Sultan Ibrahim and the young queen, Formiana, stand for Charles I and Queen Henrietta Maria. This argument can be supported by the parallels that can be drawn between the dramatic characters and the Stuart royal couple. Sultan Ibrahim/Charles I is represented as an example of nobility and courage, despite the hints at some of the failings of his reign. The Mufti describes Ibrahim as "So pious and so good" (p. 21). The Sultan is also brave. He stands firm against the advancing rebels and shows no willingness to retreat. When Solyman Aga, the Chief Eunuch, advises the Sultan to leave the court for safety, the Sultan replies,

Shall the Grand Seignieur e're be said to flie?
No, flight's too mean a thing for Majesty.
On that will all their innocence be built;
So their Rebellion will become my guilt. (p. 20)

The Sultan is fully aware of his mission and responsibilities towards his nation and decides to defend his throne.

Similar to Boyle's depiction of the legendary traits of Charles I, Whitaker – whose prologue shows zealous Tory attitudes – hints at the Tory's recurring depiction of Charles I as a royal martyr. Susan Owen (1996) explains that usually Tory playwrights claimed a superior position over the Whigs through their continuity of their cause with the interrupted role of the "sainted martyr Charles I" (p. 111). In harmony with Owen's observation, the young Sultan Mahomet narrates a dream he had in which the murdered Sultan appears as an angel with wings "upon his shoulders" (p. 49). Moreover, in harmony with the classic royalist portrayal of Queen Henrietta Maria – a good example is the characters of Ianthe in Davenant's *The Siege of Rhodes* – Sultana Formiana, is portrayed as the perfection of chastity and virtue (Owen, 1996, p.126). When Kara asks Oglar about his attempts to seduce the Queen, Oglar admits that the Queen is an unlikely candidate for infidelity:

Kara. But prithee to the business with the Queen;
Come, come, I know you have succesful been.
Oglar. No faith, she's vertuous obstinate and Chast;
I but in vain my time and spirits waste;
So ignorant she was and Inocent,
She hardly knew what my addresses meant. (p. 4)

Formiana can be regarded as a virtuous example of Stuart queens. Even during the most dangerous moments in the play, the Queen keeps true to her morals and stays faithful to her lord. She neglects the approaching raging rebels and scorns Oglar's lustful proposal to enjoy her love, saying:

And if I grant what you expect to have,
I more destroy, than I can hope to save:
I know the Sultan twenty deaths would choose,
Rather than I one vertuous thought should lose:
Nor shall our Annals e're of me record,
She lost her honour to preserve her Lord. (p. 22)

In fact, lust was one of the recurring traits of rebels in Tory writings. Owen (1996) refers to the fact that Tory writings during Exclusion Crisis tended to demonize Whigs by attributing to them characteristics of excess sexual desires and lust (p. 174). The major motive of Oglar's treachery in the play is his lust for the Sultana.

Whitaker's play copies more royalist tropes of the era in the sequence of its portrayal of the rebels (Owen, 1996, p. 135). All the rebels and conspirators are motivated by uncontrolled ambition for power. Flatra, Kioseme, Melek, Bectas, and other courtiers are driven by a strong ambition to ascend the throne and rule the vast empire. Flatra, in the course of urging Melek to murder the Sultan, expresses the nature and power of ambition:

Rash, Loving fool go peirce the *Sultans* breast,
He grows too lazy, and takes too much rest.
Ambition! what a powerful God art thou?
To thee the best and mightiest Monarchs bow;
Thy nature is immense, and knows no bounds,
Thy unconceivable Idea drowns. (p. 11)

Usurping the throne and interrupting the succession process is the goal of all the villains in the play. Flatra describes the situations as follows:

The Janizaries of our party are,
And Kiosem the Empire hopes to share;
The discontented Saphées are our friends,
All plot the Sultans fall for different ends, (p. 10)

Whitaker places great emphasis on the danger of rebellion against the state, the people, and the succession line. For the Restoration audience, rebellion recalled the bitter memories of the Civil Wars of the 1640s. Owen (2002) points out that Tory writers used to accuse Whig politicians of pushing the nation into another 1641 (p. 130). Similar to Boyle's *The Tragedy of Mustapha*, Whitaker's *The Conspiracy* plays on the national fears that the stubborn political campaign against the legitimate heir would cause more partisanship and dissent. The unsettled political life of the Restoration period may justify the continuity of the themes that appeared in both early Restoration Exclusion Crisis era plays.

Whitaker presents in his play a group of statesmen who only care for their private interests, ignoring the dangerous outcomes for the state and the people. In the play, the Divan assembles and conspires to crown Solyman, the Chief Eunuch, instead of the legitimate heir, young prince Mahomet. The Divan's interference in the succession process may refer to the Parliament's calls – especially Whig members – during the Exclusion Crisis years to introduce a more politically acceptable heir to the throne. In fact, Whigs considered the names of Mary, Queen of Netherlands and James's daughter, and the Duke of Monmouth, Charles's eldest illegitimate son, as possible substitutes to James (De Krey, 2007, pp. 164-5). Bectas's dialogue with Kuperli reveals a similar scheme at the Sultan's court:

To morrow, at a General *Divan*,
We have resolv'd to Crown young *Solyman*:
What with the present Sultan we shall do,
Is not decreed; we leave it, Sir, to you [Kuperli]. (p. 45)

Interestingly enough, the play follows the Tory tradition of mocking Whig rabble-rousing which started with the early tensions of the 1640s (Owen, 1996, p. 149). Whitaker highlights the dangers of this aspect of Whig behavior throughout the performance. The mob who breaks into the Sultan's court are easily stirred up by the play's villains, Bectas and Kara. By criticizing Whig agitation, Whitaker warns of the disastrous consequences of mob dissatisfaction. The mob scene in Act II highlights the critical outcomes of provoking the masses to protest the state's order and discipline. The angry mob attacks the royal court shouting, "Justice, Justice, Justice" and "His Head, his head, his head" (p. 25). This scene was not unfamiliar to an audience who were still living with the memories of the regicide of Charles I in 1649. Struck by the speed and power of the rebellion flames, the Sultan cries,

Oh horrid Traitors to my Crown and Name!
The City Rages in Rebellious Flame:

The Commons are encourag'd by the Peers,
Vizier and Bectas head the Mutiniers (p. 20)

The following scene, in which the Sultan is murdered, is worth further investigation for the sensitivity of the act of regicide for Restoration spectators. Whitaker must have had a hard time figuring out a way to perform the execution of the Sultan. While the historical Sultan Ibrahim was executed by a formal Act, Whitaker's Ibrahim was stabbed by the villain Melek. Dramatizing decapitation was a thorny issue, especially in front of Restoration spectators who might have recalled the beheading of their "martyr king." Whitaker chose to avoid such anxieties as his play was prepared to be performed at the Duke Theatre where members of the royal family such as the Duke of York, and the King himself used to attend shows. A beheading scene in front of Charles I's sons could have summoned unpredictable royal responses.

In a similar fashion to Boyle's *Mustapha*, Whitaker's play is not void of some criticism of monarchy. Susan Owen (1996) points out that it was not unexpected from a loyalist writer to express his/her dissatisfaction with the court's inability to reward the service of loyal subjects (pp. 75-76). In the play, Kuperli hints at the general royalist anxieties about Charles's ingratitude towards the loyal service of those who stood all the time with their king and his successor,

My Lords, in States men I've observ'd it oft,
The smooth and oily only swim aloft;
While those who of their Princes safety think,
And not their own; turn solid fools, and sink. (p. 41)

Such feelings of anxiety over the court's ingratitude towards loyal subjects are usually combined by a dissatisfaction with the court's indulgence towards former enemies. Ispir warns of the dangers of the double-faced rebels who would turn against the Sultan at the first chance:

Go, Traytors, go! their Visage still retains,
Under that Loyal Paint, Rebellious stains:
When they again a fit occasion find,
You'll see which way the Villains are inclin'd. (p. 41)

Susan Owen (1996) sets up a number of Tory tropes that Restoration Tory playwrights implemented in their writings. Tropes like rebels' ambition, the importance of establishing Protestant religion, rebels' lust, and the theme of national pride were used by Tory playwrights to support their standpoint against their opponents. Owen explains that some of these tropes were used also by Whigs with opposite association (p. 182). Whitaker implements another Tory trope in his play that emphasizes the burdens of kingship (Owen, 1996, p. 127). In a sense, highlighting the difficult tasks of kings presents their position as undesirable. Thus, this trope, in particular, aroused pity and sympathy among the audience. Succeeding a king or participating in carrying the burdens of kingship would appear as less attractive and, consequently, could deflect attention from the anxieties of the succession question. Owen (1996) argues that this trope is found in numerous Restoration royalist works (p. 127). In Whitaker's play, the young Sultan

Mahomet tells his mother of the huge difference between kings' burdens and the common worries of subjects,

Madam, Alas! I find the Dreams of Kings,
And those of Subjects, are far different things;
Before some sport my Childish Soul possest,
Which now I find with manly cares deprest:
Then did I entertain my mind with toys;
But now I dream of things unfit for Boys. (p. 48)

Kings become victims of their positions as guardians of the people and state. Whitaker reminds his audience that while common people enjoy the peace of mind, their monarch worries about the great issues and concerns of the state. This image serves the cause of royalists in the sense that it presents the position of kings and princes as full of hardships and responsibilities, and as a result, developed a sense of sympathy and respect for their duties.

The sources of Whitaker's play are not known for sure, but apparently, his version of Sultan Ibrahim's regicide was based on a relatively accurate and detailed account of the regicide of the Sultan. Historically speaking, Eli Kohen (2007) points out that the Queen Mother, Kosem, gave consent to her son's execution as she considered him responsible for dissent and faction in the empire (p. 142). Perry and Cook (1976) refer to the rivalry between Kosem and Walid Turkhan, the mother of the young Sultan Mahomet IV, after the murder of Ibrahim. Each one of the strong Sultanas tried to play a major role in deciding the name of the new Sultan (p. 155). This atmosphere of plots and conspiracies over the succession in the Ottoman Empire summarizes the political scene during the Exclusion Crises period. During that time, the name of the future successor of the English crown was the reason for the majority of political controversy and tensions.

In order to further emphasize his message about the succession issue, Whitaker presents some fictional characters in his play. For example, the third major female character, Flatra, appears to be fictional. There is no mention of any role of any of Ibrahim's sisters in the contemporary political quarrels of the Ottoman Empire. In fact, this is not the only modification that Whitaker makes in his version of the regicide of Sultan Ibrahim. Whitaker presents nothing about the madness of the Sultan. Sultan Ibrahim, "The Mad," as he was labeled by historians, ruled from 1640 until 1648 and suffered from mental and psychological disorders. In fact, he had been caged for years before he ascended to the throne (Halman and Warner, 2007, p. 131). In *The Conspiracy*, such ungraceful characteristics of Sultan Ibrahim are ignored and replaced with almost perfect traits that meet an ideal personification of the martyr king. By praising a former monarch, Whitaker strengthens the legitimacy of the present one. This nostalgic remembrance takes the audience to the tragic past of the kingdom and warns of the catastrophic consequences of interrupting the heredity succession.

Conclusion

In sum, the play comments on the contemporary political controversy over the succession question and reflects on the sources of dissent and faction that endangered the nation. As the bonds between the king and a large part of the political nation were broken during the Exclusion Crisis, the story of Sultan Ibrahim and his court came to reflect the antagonism between those who supported the king and those who plotted against the Stuart brothers and sought to interrupt the succession process. In such a poisonous atmosphere, distrust ruins all bonds between royalty and the subjects.

Remarkably, the playwright does not abandon the optimistic spirit of the early Restoration period. Whitaker makes use of the *Restoration* theme; restoring a king to his rightful throne. In the play, the character of Sultan Mahomet can be seen as a representation of Charles II. Mahomet is presented as a young and brave prince. Just like Charles II, Mahomet is restored to the throne after rebellion and regicide. Mahomet restores order and ends bloodshed and chaos caused by the wicked rebels. Tory polemics considered Charles II as the new hope of the nation and the true defender of the English people.

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