CHAPTER 30

Persian Virtues
Hospitality, Tolerance, and Peacebuilding in the Age of Shakespeare

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Discovering virtues espousing cooperation between diverse cultures and religions seems impossible in an "age of persecution" known for witch hunts, interconfessional massacres on the streets of Paris, and burning dissenters at the stake. Yet, it is such ostensible hostility that prompts early-modern writers to develop conceptions of toleration and conceive of acts of hospitality toward others often via unexpected channels. From the mid-sixteenth century, English humanists, poets, and playwrights summon ancient Persia in their didactic and literary works as a paradigm for virtuous conduct in a pluralist society. This chapter considers how the virtues of toleration and hospitality toward others are comingled and housed in early-modern conceptions of Ancient Persia, and how this enduring rhetoric associated with the ancient empire animates a collaborative virtue discourse found in Shakespeare's enigmatic reference to Persian clothing in *King Lear*.

Persian Paradigms of Hospitality

In Plutarch's "Life of Themistocles," the exiled Athenian general tests the limits of hospitality when he arrives in Persia with a desperate behest for Artaxerxes I, the son of his long-time opponent, Xerxes: "I come prepared to receive the favor of one who benevolently offers reconciliation, or to deprecate the anger of one who cherishes the remembrance of injuries. But do thou take my foes to witness for the good I wrought the Persians, and now use my misfortunes for the display of thy virtue rather than for the satisfaction of thine anger."[1] Themistocles approaches the Persian monarch

[1] Plutarch, *Plutarch's Lives*, trans. Bernadotte Perrin, Loeb Classical Library, vol. 2 (W. Heinemann, 1914), 28.1–2, 77. The country's name in English was officially changed from Persia to Iran in 1935. It is still appropriate, however, to identify Iranians as Persians and the language as Persian in the English language with Fārsī (فارسی) as its endonym.

fully aware of the alternative outcomes of "reconciliation" or "anger"; he is, after all, a master architect of the Greco-Persian wars (499–449 BCE), renowned for orchestrating the successful and decisive naval battle against the Persians at Salamis and championing the growth of the Athenian navy which ultimately led to Xerxes' defeat at Plataea. Despite his integral role in preventing the invasion of Greece by the Persian Empire and his subterfuge in achieving his ends, he nevertheless appeals to the king's "virtue" and presents Artaxerxes with a choice that calls upon the inherent drama of the hospitable wager: embrace the foreigner, risk sheltering a stranger that puts himself and his realm in danger, or turn him away. Ultimately, the astonished yet elated Persian monarch accepts the uninvited guest and potential political asset into his realm, and further grants Themistocles' request to learn Persian to converse with the king in his native tongue.

This scene of individual empowerment in a foreign court, intercultural hospitality, and the elevation of the virtue of the vernacular appealed to both Baldassare Castiglione and the English translator of *The Courtier,* diplomat Sir Thomas Hoby, who elaborates on this embrace of the foreigner in his opening epistle:

> THEMISTOCLES THE NOBLE ATHENIEN IN HIS BANISHEMENT Entertayned moste honourablie with the king of Persia, willed vpon a time to tell his cause by a spokesman, compared it to a piece of tapistrie, that beyng spred abrode, discloseth the beautie of the woorkemanship, but foulded together, hideth it, and therfore demaunded respite to learne the Persian tunge to tell his owne cause.[2]

In unfolding his art, his vernacular translation, for public viewing, Hoby, like Themistocles, finds refuge within the Persian analogy; the English tongue follows the "Persian tunge" in its "beautie" and "woorkemanship," in its ability to "tel [its] own cause" and house the prodigal courtier within English lands. Mirroring Themistocles' request before Artaxerxes, the English translator transports himself to a Persian presence that has established its concomitant dedication to receive the unknown hospitably, hoping therefore to inspire the same reception in his contemporary benefactor.

The opening dedication of Hoby's 1561 translation follows a pattern familiar to English humanists – that of invoking Persian hospitality in their linguistic endeavors to contribute to the public good. While the convention of Anglo-Persian political analogies in English prose texts pre-dates Elizabeth's

[2] Baldassare Castiglione, *The courtyer of Count Baldessar Castilio diuided into foure bookes. Very necessary and profitable for yonge gentilmen and gentilwomen abiding in court, palaice or place*, trans. Thomas Hoby (Wyllyam Seres, 1561), 3.

realm, it is in the first full decade of Elizabeth's rule that ancient Persian monarchs and their largess become rhetorical anchors around which discussions of English hospitality – in the various spheres of politics, education, and religion – rests. Magnifying the virtue of hospitality alongside toleration discourse is particularly salient in the turbulent years following the Elizabethan Religious Settlement of 1559 when such amicable exchanges where not only visions of peace and harmony in an increasingly pluralistic state, but also political reminders that ecumenical tolerance – enacted and envisioned as hospitable acts in a distant time and place – benefits the commonwealth.

The early-modern turn to admiring virtues within the Persian Empire is largely attributable to humanist readings of classical texts including Xenophon's *Cyropaedia* and Plutarch's *Lives* coupled with early-modern understandings of Persia and its biblical heritage found in the books of Daniel, Ezra, and Esther. Persian monarchs are esteemed for their embrace of foreigners, from King Xerxes' interreligious marriage with Esther to Cyrus the Great's biblical acts of liberation of the oppressed Jews under the Babylonian captivity. Cyrus' propagation of the right to religious liberty was foundational to his ideology as a Zoroastrian ruler striving toward establishing "order or rightness" (*Arta*) alongside happiness and perfection (*frasha*) in his kingdom.[3] The ancient Persian dedication to creating order in a diverse kingdom is captured in both Cyrus' acts of religious restoration and the formation of gardens and the concept of paradise as translated into Greek from the Old Persian *pairidaida*.[4]

Significantly, despite this sense of conceptual intimacy with the ancient Persian virtues of toleration and hospitality toward foreigners, the English had little familiarity with early-modern Safavid Persia. The few Anglo-Persian exchanges of the period, from 1561 until the first official embassy to

[3] Jenny Rose, *Zoroastrianism: An Introduction* (I. B. Tauris, 2010), 37–39. Touraj Daryaee elucidates archeological examples from Mesopotamia that confirm Cyrus' toleration and acceptance of local deities and religion in "Religion of Cyrus the Great," in *Cyrus the Great: An Ancient Iranian* King (Afshar Publishing, 2013), 16–27. See also Amélie Kuhrt, *The Persian Empire: A Corpus of Sources from the Achaemenid Period.*, vol. I (Routledge, 2007). Persian practices of hospitality, etiquette, gift-giving, and courtesy are intertwined in centuries long theory and practice found in the spiritual writings of Zoroastrianism, Persian mysticism, and texts such as the twelfth century Qābūs nāma. Similarly, influential Islamicate literature, such as the widely read poem Gulistan, or Rose Garden (1258), by Saadi' Shirazi, can be seen as foundational in promoting the concept of adab as a holistic and ideal mode of refinement encompassing proper behavior, politeness, and education in the aim for communal harmony. See Sholeh A. Quinn, Persian Historiography Across Empires: The Ottomans, Safavids, and Mughals (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

[4] This foundational notion of unity in diversity influences Thomas Browne's seventeenth-century botanical, *The Garden of Cyrus* (1658). On the symbolism of the gardens in ancient Persia, Rose explains that the gardens were an earthly reflection of an orderly realm allied with the truth and goodness of Ahura Mazda, the good lord in *Zoroastrianism,* 57–63.

Persia in 1626, tested the parameters of tolerance and hospitality, leading rather to widely circulated but often dubious vignettes from travel reports, particularly relating to the adventures of the infamous Sherley brothers. Thus, with inconsistent contemporary information on Persia, long-standing virtues wed to ancient Persia dominate the English imaginary, manifesting in the drama of the period. While the relationship of page and stage is mutually reinforcing, with the latter providing the matter for staging while developing in response to changing conceptions of religious tolerance in the period, it is the stage that enables a fictional temporality of hospitability between religions and cultures that both actors and audience provisionally inhabit. That Persia – both fictive and literal – is a place that can host such transformations of historical materials into fiction speaks to its inherent vivacity and hospitability as a fertile space of figurative potential that goes beyond the emblematic use of Persian monarchs in humanist prose.

Shakespeare's Persian Tom

In their distance from historical circumstance and in the conscious foregrounding of certain attributes associated with Persia in classical and biblical source material, often Persian figures in early-modern drama can be seen as conceptual foreigners rather than representations of historical figures and, as such, provide a literary paradigm for interreligious exchange not found within other narratives of global exchange such as those relating to Anglo-Ottoman trade and diplomacy. While the early-modern performance of "turning Turk" is often depicted as an act of apostasy, rebellion, and untrustworthiness in the drama of the period, transforming into a Persian frequently uplifts the non-Persian character in physical, social, and spiritual degrees while bettering his or her environment, particularly when such changes occur under non-tragic conditions. Indeed, adopting a Persian persona via clothing and customs is often a largely beneficial transformation enabling a change in status and an appreciation of hospitality between cultures on the part of the transformed. For instance, during the assumption of a Persian persona, the non-Persian character is empowered to aid the Persian realm, as in the case of Cratander, the Ephesian captive in the Caroline Drama, *The Royall Slave* (1636), whose presence rescinds the Persian practice of executing a prisoner of war as part of the degrading custom of "mock-kingship," or Robert Sherley who exposes the perfidy of the Persian king's court attendants in the adventure romance, *The Travels of the Three English Brothers* (1607).

In Shakespeare's *King Lear*, when Edgar, disguised as Poor Tom, assists Lear on the heath by figuratively eschewing three imagined barking dogs,

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Lear acknowledges Edgar's service in this instance of solidarity between two abject souls: "You, sir, I entertain for one of my hundred, only I do not like the fashion of your garments. You will say they are Persian; but let them be changed" (3.6.38–40).[5] Lear's delusional lament on Edgar's clothing informs us of the presence of another persona for Edgar, either a hidden Persian figure or an Englishman dressed as a Persian, possibly a soldier or an ambassador, graciously aiding Lear in his imaginary canine confrontation. The idea of Persia Shakespeare invokes in Lear's dialogue with Poor Tom clearly associates Edgar's service to the sovereign with an established sense of hospitality intertwined with courtly practice found in humanist prose, yet the textual placement of the allusion suggests a deeper and more dynamic engagement with hospitable acts as part of the play's contribution to early-modern discourses on paths to collective peacebuilding. The invocation of the Persian persona in *Lear* follows from earlier scenes wherein Lear addresses Edgar as the "good Athenian" (3.4.170), the "learned Theban" (3.4.147), and his "philosopher" (3.4.166), beseeching him to judge the imaginary trial of his daughters before transforming into a Persian garbed figure as part of the many personas Lear envisions for Edgar as Poor Tom.[6] In this vein, Lear's imaginary yet profound visions of Edgar subtly unite conceptual Greeks and Persians in service to the aging king, as an interlocutor, a fair-minded judge, and a soldier, revealing not only Shakespeare's interest and knowledge of Persian and Greek sources but also a fictional narrative of historical revisionism through the textual proximity of Greek and Persian references.

Historically, Greeks and Persians have been depicted in Western literature as quintessential enemies, the source of the Manichean paradigms of "us" and "them," the representational entities of East and West, the beginning of the so-called clash of civilizations, and the warring parties Herodotus memorializes in his *Histories*.[7] However, in *Lear*, on a conceptual and metaphorical level, in theory and in fictitious practice, we witness the capacity of drama to stage a transformation of perennial foes – Greeks

[5] Shakespeare cited from *Complete Works*, ed. Stephen Orgel and Albert Richard Braunmuller (Penguin, 2002).

[6] Although different in tone and purpose, a reference to Thomas Preston's play on the Persian King Cambyses appears in *I Henry IV*, when Falstaff comedically assumes the role of King Henry to prepare prince Hal for his meeting with his father: "for I must speak in passion, and I will do it in/ King Cambyses' vein." 2.4.373–374.

[7] Edward Said attributes the origins of Orientalism to Aeschylus' *The Persians* and Euripides' *The Bacchae*: "A line is drawn between two continents. Europe is powerful and articulate; Asia is defeated and distant." Orientalism (Vintage, 1979), 42–57.

and Persians – into agents of mutual assistance to a downtrodden king while simultaneously adumbrating the sociopolitical capabilities necessary for collective peace.[8] In anticipation of later seventeenth-century toleration theory and Kantian conceptions of perpetual peace based on conditions of cosmopolitan hospitality, in this scene, Shakespeare's Greco-Persian allusions gesture toward an understated reservoir of peacebuilding potentialities based on hospitable interactions uniting conceptual figures of ancient empires and civilizations, and alerting thereby the reader to a possibility of a hidden global history that is capable of inspiring more than division and domination.

[8] For a compelling historical revision of the "clash of civilizations" thesis, see David Cannadine, *The Undivided Past: Humanity Beyond Our Differences* (Alfred A. Knopf, 2013). Timothy Harrison and Jane Mikkelson's concept of "assemblage across worlds" accounts for a vibrant, multifaceted view of early modern practices and conceptualizations of the world and world literature. See "What Was Early Modern World Literature?" in Modern Philology, vol. 119, no. 1 (The University of Chicago Press, 2021), 166–188.