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Excerpt

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Introduction: Fabricating Mahomet

Mahomet was well known in early modern England. Routinely rejected, reclaimed, defamed, defended and used as a polemical tool, in his various forms Mahomet could be imagined as French, Spanish, German, Arabian or Persian, and he might be Muslim, Protestant or Roman Catholic – but most importantly for this book, he was repeatedly imagined as English, and summoned to appear in England. The bewildering variety of guises in which Mahomet appears in English writings presents a distinctly new perspective on this period. It offers a corrective to those whose work has focused on early modern representations of ‘Islam’ (as well as ‘Turks’ and ‘Moors’), a reminder that for English readers and writers there was no Islam or Muslims, only Mahomet and Mahometans. Mahomet and ‘his’ religion were not simply something alien or ‘other’ but might be imagined as a mutually reinforcing monotheism or even, in some early Enlightenment writing, as an authentic true Christianity. Shared Abrahamic roots connected the two religions, making Mahomet and his doctrine uncannily familiar. What we now call Islam became the ‘dark double’ of Christianity, an encroaching other world, a mirror image enabling a sustained reflection on Christian faults and Christian depravity.¹

Mahometanism had no stable early modern form in the Christian imagination. Instead it was generated out of the competing theological positions, new media, apocalyptic prophesy and fantasies of violence, monstrosity and luxury that informed English conceptions of national and individual identity. Mahomet was the polysemic and enigmatic figure at its centre, heir to a sense of identity inherited from medieval saints’ lives. In the lurid elaboration of his imagined personal life he becomes one of the first ‘celebrities’ of early print. Each European vernacular made him anew in this new medium, but in a post-Reformation English context he gains an extraordinary vitality because – like Henry VIII and

most of his successors – Mahomet was simultaneously a spiritual and secular leader.

Writing about Mahomet and Mahometanism in England in these years was never simply about engaging with those beyond Christendom. It offered a means of cementing and projecting, but also critiquing, English political and religious structures. The emergence and development of an English Mahomet further challenges a twenty-first-century critical impulse to project the Orientalist paradigm backwards; instead, it was the articulation of an uneven conceptual engagement with Islamic peoples, and a complex and unstable post-Reformation world.

I. DECLAIMING MAHOMET

One of the more curious stunts related by the English traveller and self-proclaimed *fakir* Thomas Coryat offers a typically idiosyncratic, but nonetheless revealing, illustration of how the life of Mahomet might be employed. Finding himself before a substantial crowd in ‘a Citie called *Moltan* in the *Easterne India*’ (now Multan in the Punjab province of Pakistan), Coryat delivered the following oration:

What, thy *Mahomet* was from whom thou dost deriue thy Religion, assure thy selfe I know better then any one of the *Mahometans* amongst many millions: yea all the particular circumstances of his life and death, his Nation, his Parentage, his driuing Camels through *Egipt*, *iria*, and *Palestina*, the marriage of his Mistris, by whose death he raised himselfe from a very base and contemptible estate to great honor and riches, his manner of cozening the sottish people of *Arabia*, partly by a tame Pigeon that did fly to his eare for meat, and partly by a tame Bull that hee fed by hand euery day, with the rest of his actions both in peace and warre: I know aswell as if I had liued in his time, or had beene one of his neighbours in *Mecca*, the truth whereof if thou didst know aswell, I am perswaded thou wouldest spit in the face of thy *Alcaron*, and trample it vnder thy feete, and bury it vnder a laxe, a booke of that strange and weake matter.²

Coryat was on the second and last of his great peregrinations on foot – he was England’s famed ‘legstretcher’ – and had arrived in Multan by way of Jerusalem, Aleppo, Ur and Isfahan, recalling this extraordinary confrontation from the relative comfort of Agra, the capital of the Mughal Empire, before thereafter joining the English embassy to Jahangir’s peripatetic court in Ajmer in July 1615.³ By this point he had covered, by his own estimation, some 2,700 miles ‘afoot’. The scale and nature of this undertaking are astonishing, and Coryat was certainly atypical, carefully cultivating his own oddness in print, as his titlepage image riding a camel

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in full English garb demonstrates (Figure 1). His particularly idiosyncratic perspective has been characterised as an endearingly engaged and sympathetic approach to the languages, customs and traditions of those places he passed through and recorded.⁴ All the more surprising, then, is that his attitude to Islam and its prophet was just the opposite of this. In the spectrum of approaches to Mahomet available to early modern English men and women, Coryat occupies the hostile end, regurgitating stale but popular mythologies that were already more than four centuries old in 1615.

The circumstances of the Jacobean English in India offer a sense of how divergent such attitudes might be. This Multan set-piece presents Coryat with an opportunity to play out proudly in person an oft-repeated fantasy of confrontation and confutation that centred on the presumed 'truth' about Islam. Triggered by the accusation that he was a 'Giaur' – an infidel – in his 'extempore' response he becomes a hero in the popular romance mould, defending Christ and destroying the false god Mahomet. His first conceit is to demonstrate that his Muslim accuser is no 'Musulman' at all, for in its true Arabic sense that word 'cannot be properly applied to a Mahometan but onely to a Christian'.⁵ In a self-satisfying disputational reversal, it is Coryat and his fellow believers who are the true Muslims. This is the context for the opening quotation, in which Coryat demonstrates just how false he considers Islam to be – and in refusing to allow his opponents to refer to themselves as 'Musulmen' he deftly reframes Islam as the religion of Mahomet and renames it with the Christian term 'Mahometanism'.⁶ Briefly relating this episode in his own narrative of the English embassy, the chaplain Edward Terry imagines it as a disputation with 'much heate on both sides' (in the original account there is little interaction) and repeats it as a curiosity, an example of Coryat's eccentric virtuosity, focusing solely on this canny inversion of 'Musulman' because Terry 'thought it would have made ... [his] Reader smile'.⁷

Yet there is a serious purpose here. Coryat's strategy requires that he position his audience as Mahometans and not as 'Musulmans'. The centrality of Mahomet as progenitor and prototype opens up a vast body of polemic, much of it stemming from Peter the Venerable's twelfth-century Toletano-Cluniac corpus, the *Risalat al-Kindi*, and the work of Riccoldo da Montecroce, which uses these assumptions to fashion a whole mythology.⁸ It is this pseudo-biography that Coryat rehearses here – 'all the particular circumstances of his life and death', including Mahomet's cynical manipulation of both his wife and the people of Arabia, his elaborately false miracles and his fabrication of the Alcoran with the help of a

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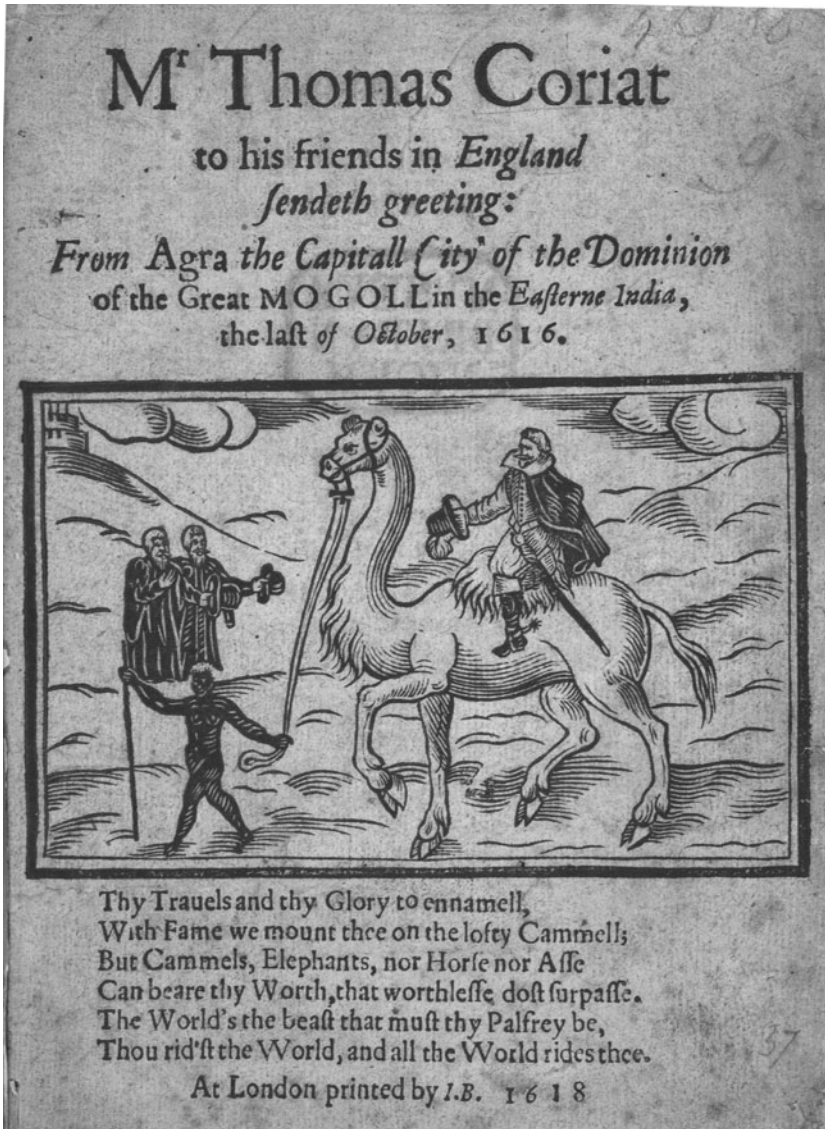


Figure 1. Thomas Coryat, *Mr Thomas Coriat to his friends in England sendeth greeting* (London: I. B., 1618) – titlepage. © The British Library Board, C.32.d.6.

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renegade monk named Sergius.⁹ Coryat's intention is to demonstrate how such a man could never be the legitimate prophet of God. It is a consequence of these foundational deceptions that Mahometan prayers, with their 'vain repetitions & diuers other prophane fooleries [...] doe euen stinke before God' while Christian prayers – whose veracity Coryat can prove – like 'a sweete smelling sacrifice are acceptable to God'.¹⁰

Some revealing assumptions underpin Coryat's diatribe against Mahomet and Mahometans. The brazenly confident assertion that he, along with any educated Christian, knows the details of Mahomet's life 'better then any one of the *Mahometans* amongst many millions' is remarkable (reminiscent, perhaps, of later 'Orientalist' writings) and demonstrates the power of Christian mythologies surrounding the prophet, solidified and repeatedly affirmed through scribal reproduction, anthologisation, translation and transferal to print (as detailed in Chapter 1). The antiquity of this Christian life of Mahomet, coupled with its basis in the work of Muslim converts, generated its supposed authenticity and dominant authority.¹¹ Indeed, Coryat's assertion that he knows the details of Mahomet's life as if he 'had been one of his neighbours' asserts a spurious objectivity apparently unclouded by polemic or propaganda. So Coryat can be confident in the veracity of his knowledge, even when confronted with a substantial crowd of Indian Muslims and, indeed, the millions around the world, because he has no reason to doubt it – everything he has read confirms the established biography of Mahomet. He can also be confident that he knows the life of their prophet better than they do because of the persistent notion that from the beginning common Muslims had been lied to and defrauded by their own priests. Later in the century, Alexander Ross would justify the publication of the first translation of the Qur'ān into English, *The Alcoran of Mahomet* (1649), by affirming exactly this. 'Even their own Wise Men are ashamed' of their holy text, he argues,

and are sorry it should be translated into any other language: for they are unwilling that their grand Hypocrite should be unmasked, or that the Visard of his pretended holiness should be taken off, whose filthy nakedness must appear when he is deusted: they know that words and works of darkness cannot endure the light.¹²

Coryat is attacking the fabricated religion of his 'pseudo-Musulman' disputant to prove his religion false, aggrandising himself and attempting literally to enlighten his assailant. This enlightenment is a final element of the exchange: although Coryat deliberately avoids sectarian language

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(apart from a revealing reference to ‘superstitious mumbling’ in prayer), his mode of address and the assumptions on which it is based point towards a particularly English and Protestant evangelism. Preaching in London in late 1586, Meredith Hanmer called on the English to ‘Let your light so shine before men’, and those Muslims, ‘seeing our good workes, may glorifie our father which is in heaven’.¹³ If that was Coryat’s intention, he had little chance to pursue it. He was astute enough to deliver this declamation in India, where ‘a Christian may speake much more freely then hee can in any other Mahometan Country in the world’, and not in Turkey or Persia where ‘they would haue rosted me vpon a spitt’ for the same speech, and delivers it in Italian, which (as luck would have it) only the Punjabi Indian who called him ‘Giaur’ could understand.¹⁴

Although apparently liked and valued by both Terry and Sir Thomas Roe, the English ambassador to Jahangir’s court, Coryat triggered difficulties in Ajmer, not least because of his inability to adhere to protocol, his fearless self-promotion and his aggressive brand of Protestant Christianity. This was a potent and disruptive combination, particularly in the context of an embassy at a Muslim Imperial court whose instructions were simply to obtain favoured mercantile status. In such circumstances, religious difference was subservient to political and trading concerns, as in earlier English relationships with Moroccan, Ottoman and Persian empires.¹⁵ Any English problems with Mahomet were necessarily (and sometimes ingeniously) overlooked – not every Englishman was as belligerent as Coryat when confronted by Mahomet and Mahometans, as this book demonstrates.¹⁶ Indeed, in total opposition to Coryat, many writers expressed an uncomfortable awareness of how little the Christian world really knew about this elusive figure.

Edward Terry’s recollections of Coryat in India reveal one final incident. Discussing the nature of the Mahometan call to prayer in his *A Voyage to East-India* leads him to recall a similarly antagonistic confrontation:

But to returne againe to those *Mahometan Priests*, who out of zeale doe so often proclaim their *Mahomet*. *Tom Coryat* upon a time having heard their *Moolaas* often (as before) so to cry got him upon an high place directly opposite to one of those Priests, and contradicted him thus. *La alla illa alla, Hasaret Eesa Ben-alla*, that is, no God, but one God, and the Lord Christ the Son of God, and further added that *Mahomet* was an *Impostor*: and all this he spake in their owne language as loud as possibly he could, in the eares of many *Mahometans* that heard it.¹⁷

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Once more we are encouraged to marvel at Coryat's facility with language alongside his capacity for curious stunts that combined English Christian bravery with an unpredictable recklessness. Yet it is revealing that Terry refrains from simply commending Coryat's 'zeale' here, and instead explicitly leaves it to the reader to judge his conduct. As Coryat himself had indicated when reflecting on his own earlier encounter, Terry does acknowledge that undertaking such an attempt 'in many other places of *Asia*, would have cost him his life with as much *torture* as cruelty could have *invented*'. Instead, perhaps fittingly, the locals seem to have taken Coryat 'for a mad-man, and so let [him] alone'.¹⁸

Thomas Coryat's precarious and extreme position in relation to both Thomas Roe's embassy and wider English attitudes towards Mahometanism corresponds with Terry's elusive account of him. The ambivalence here is in part a consequence of Coryat's own abrasive personality, but it also typifies English responses to Mahomet. As this brief account of Coryat, Roe and Terry begins to demonstrate, when written by English men and (less frequently) women in a broadly defined early modern period between 1450 and 1750, Mahomet becomes a defining and often divisive figure. Aside from those celebrated individuals in the interconnected theological and political worlds of Christendom – Biblical patriarchs, saints, potentates – he is the most well known and frequently invoked in this three-hundred-year span. Almost everyone knew of Mahomet. He is depicted in numerous divergent forms in poetry, drama and prose of different genres; he is invoked from pulpits, related in stories, declaimed by travellers and polemically paralleled with Christ, Luther, various popes and almost every English monarch of the period. His image appears in political and religious tracts and pamphlets, in chronicle histories and in English prayerbooks, and hangs on the wall of at least one noble household. In early modern and enlightenment England he is ubiquitous to the point that his invocation becomes a shorthand for a whole range of associations – his Christian biography so familiar that William Shakespeare's King Charles in *Henry VI part 1* (1591) can offhandedly exclaim to Joan of Arc, 'Was Mahomet inspired by a dove? / Thou with an eagle art inspired then' (1.2.140–1); or Thomas Middleton's Vindici in *The Revenger's Tragedy* (1607) can casually remark on the frustrations in persuading a woman from chastity, since 'Many a Maide has turn'd to Mahomet, / With easier working' (2.2.27–8).¹⁹

II. ESTABLISHING A MYTHOLOGY OF MAHOMET

The centrality of Mahomet makes it all the more surprising that he has been largely ignored by the literary critics and historians of this period. This is in some respects a consequence of the ways in which academics divide up history before 1750 – broadly between medieval, early modern and Enlightenment periods – and how a narrative of dominant Christian attitudes towards Islam is stretched across these chronological blocks. There has been a tendency in literary and historical work to assume that the early medieval period, from the earliest recorded non-Muslim encounters with Islam (c. 620) to the circumstances of the Third Crusade (1189–92) and its associated propagandist drive, generates a Christian mythology of Islam that completely dominates Christian discourse until at least the recalibration of the later Enlightenment period. Within this basic narrative a number of writers become canonised, even in a specifically English context: John of Damascus, those texts assembled by Peter the Venerable in the early twelfth century (including the first translation of the Qurʾān completed by Robert of Ketton in 1143), the *Risalat al-Kindi*, Riccoldo da Montecroce, Petrus Alfonsi, the *Chansons*, John Mandeville, Dante Alighieri, Jacobus de Voragine, Desiderius Erasmus, Martin Luther, Christopher Marlowe, William Bedwell, Alexander Ross and the anonymous translator of *The English Alcoran*, Humphrey Prideaux, Voltaire and George Sale. These works (and others) are indeed central to any examination of Christian-Muslim engagement before 1750, but focussing on them exclusively means they are not read critically but rather enlisted to confirm a narrative that cannot reflect the complexity of England's multiple encounters with Islam across this period. All too often the 'early modern' element of pre-1750 history has been glossed over, assumed to be dominated by unchallenged stereotypes from earlier periods, merely a lull before the ferment of the Enlightenment.

The early modern lacuna is particularly pronounced when examining constructions of Mahomet. Those few works that have attempted to cover the full span of Christian engagement with the Prophet Muhammad, most recently Clinton Bennett's *In Search of Muhammad* (1998) and Minou Reeves' *Muhammad in Europe: A Thousand Years of Western Myth-Making* (2000), rely on an assumption of relentless hostility.²⁰ Bennett's text is concerned with a tradition of consistent misrepresentation only in the context of promoting inter-faith engagement, but Reeves' text is firmly based on a tradition of 'consistent distortion', which leads her to assert that the 'demonization of Muhammad lived on in new variations

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throughout the Renaissance and Reformation' while 'the Enlightenment and the Age of Reason also failed to change the stereotype'. It is not until the 'highly contradictory assessment of Muhammad' that emerges in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that any variation in this pattern develops.²¹ The suggestion of defining, unchanging and relentless vitriol towards the Prophet is, I argue, overly simplistic.

The problems of periodisation, coupled with prevailing assumptions about Christian/Islamic engagement, have further had a profound effect on the contours of the field. A few foundational studies appeared in the early and late twentieth century that suggested the complexity of Anglo-Islamic exchanges: Samuel Chew's *The Crescent and the Rose* (1937) alongside Byron Porter Smith's *Islam in English Literature* (1939), and Dorothee Metlitzki's *The Matter of Araby in Medieval England* (1977) with Susan Skilliter's *William Harborne and the Trade with Turkey* (1977).²² Building on this work, recent scholarship has sought to challenge prevailing assumptions about early modern encounter, and a critical push to reclaim 'other' voices was a key element of the New Historicist/Cultural Materialist project of the late twentieth century. The complex alignments generated in the post-9/11 world have further galvanised critical enquiry.

Literary critics and historians working on the relationship between Islam and early modern England (and/or a wider Christianity) over the past decade or so have considerably broadened the field. There are those who have explicitly contested or rethought the application of Edward Said's *Orientalism* to the early modern period, in particular Nabil Matar, Gerald MacLean, Jonathan Burton and Daniel Vitkus. A reconsideration of more specific elements of England's writing of Islam or Muslims has followed and includes work by Emily Bartels, Matthew Birchwood, Linda McJannet, Margaret Meserve and Benedict Robinson. Others have focussed on the implications and character of exchange and encounter between cultures, such as Jerry Brotton and Barbara Fuchs. All have approached the subject in innovative and informed ways, but have largely oriented their studies around ethno-religious identities – the figure of the 'Turk', for instance – to the exclusion of a detailed examination of religious engagement and Mahomet's place within it.²³

Mahomet may be a necessary component in notions of Mahometan 'Turks', 'Moors' and 'Persians', but these groups are absolutely central to early modern English conceptions of Mahomet. Expanding commercial engagement with the Ottomans, Morocco and Persia pressed their representatives (and their faith) to an increasing cultural prominence in the later sixteenth century, particularly following the official codification of

those relationships that began with the Anglo-Ottoman ‘capitulations’ in 1580.²⁴ Large numbers of Christian converts to Mahometanism in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries only made the refutation of Mahomet more urgent.²⁵ It was, however, the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople in May 1453 and the collapse of the Byzantine Empire that brought the ‘Turk’ and his idol/god Mahomet into the despatches, sermons, churches and thus the imaginative landscape of late-fifteenth-century English men and women. The fall of the city signalled ‘a decisive shift in international political power’ but also marked the destruction of a legendary and hitherto inviolable Christian bastion.²⁶ It was endlessly replayed in text and illustration. Reflecting on the crisis, Aeneas Silvius Piccolomini lamented that one of ‘the two lights of Christendom’ had been extinguished: ‘Now the Turks hang over our very heads’.²⁷ As part of an attempt to regain the city five years later, Piccolomini (now Pope Pius II) commissioned Juan de Torquemada to write a book attacking the errors of Mahomet, *Contra errores perfidi Machometi* (1459).²⁸ To attack the ‘Turk’s’ religion was to attack the ‘Turk’. More than any other single factor, it was the fifteenth- and sixteenth-century expansion of the Ottoman ‘Turkish’ Empire that propelled Mahomet into a wider Christian consciousness.

The difficulty in establishing a critical vocabulary in which to discuss early modern engagements with Mahomet, Mahometans and Mahometanism reflects the instability of the terminology used in the period. The work that would seem to offer such a vocabulary, Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1978), has instead been subjected to ongoing critique in the last two decades. Many have recognised Said’s notion of an acquiescent ‘East’ engaged and contained by a dominant ‘West’ to be unsustainable in an early modern context. Similarly, as Jonathan Burton has recently noted, Said’s sense of a broad ‘discursive consistency’ is difficult to maintain when confronted by the multiple forms and contexts of English encounters with the ‘Orient’.²⁹ In the case of Mahomet, there is a range of discursive strands that have their own consistency, and these strands cross, unravel and reform over time. Nevertheless, Said’s metaphor for the ‘Orient’ as a stage on which Western desires are dramatised is a useful conceit when approaching the figure of Mahomet, as are Said’s concepts of citationality and supernatural providentialism, both of which play a key role in the formation and promulgation of Christian mythologies of Mahometanism, and which are nuanced in later chapters.³⁰ In this critical void, many critics have fallen back on terms like ‘Turk’ and ‘Moor’ which reproduce the polemical stereotyping of the playhouse, perhaps reflecting the ongoing dominance of Shakespeare in the wider field.