Orientalizing Famagusta on the English Stage, 1573-1628

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George Gascoigne’s ‘Device of a Masque’ was published only two years after the fall of Famagusta, and it precedes the next English dramatic representation of the city in Thomas Dekker’s Old Fortunatus by sixteen years. In this paper, I will examine Gascoigne’s masque in relationship to the subsequent Famagusta plays, Fortunatus, William Shakespeare’s Othello (1603) and John Ford’s The Lover’s Melancholy (1628), all of which are set in Famagusta. Additionally, I will include John Mason’s The Turk (1610), which is not set in Cyprus but features Eunuchus, a Greek Cypriot victim of Ottoman aggression. I will focus on the somewhat counterintuitive nature of English Famagusta dramatic narratives. One would think that over time the plays would reveal a greater knowledge of Ottomans and European-Ottoman history, especially as the publication record reflects a host of sources in English offering firsthand accounts of the Eastern Mediterranean; instead, only Gascoigne pays close attention to historiography. As such it appears that Famagusta increasingly becomes a literary palimpsest of commonplaces about ancient myth and legend. This very fiction of Famagusta makes it interesting as the city becomes a multivalent reference to love via Aphrodite/Venus; to wealth, through the city’s Crusader past (celebrated by Geoffrey Chaucer and Dekker), and part of a larger construct representing looming anxieties about otherness, empire, and ownership.