

The Turk's Encounter with Defoe¹

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“BEYAZIT” WAS such a popular name among the Ottomans, who were typically identified in eighteenth-century Britain with the “Turkish Empire” (a European misnomer as the Ottomans never defined themselves along national lines), that two different sultans bore the name along with many members of the dynasty of Osman, the founder of the empire. Both of these sultans enjoyed military and political success. Bayezid I² defeated the Crusaders in Eastern Europe at the beginning of the fifteenth century,³ wreaking havoc on the Continent given the imminent danger of the Turks approaching for the first time before the “fall” of Constantinople, which would occur only three decades later. Similarly, Bayezid II brought thousands of Jews, Muslims, and non-Catholics from the inquisition courts of Ferdinand and Isabella to the Ottoman ports in the second part of the same century.

But when English and European writers named their characters “Beyazid” they did not depict them in such heroic terms. Their interest in any “Bayezid” did not stem from a desire to represent the “Grand Turk,”⁴ but rather to misrepresent him in any possible way as the Turks had to be defeated – if not in the field, at

¹ In certain parts of this essay, I draw on my recent and current studies on Defoe: “The Enlightened Turk: A Discontinuation of Orientalism in Defoe’s *A Continuation of Letters Writ by a Turkish Spy*,” *Positioning Daniel Defoe’s Non-Fiction: Form, Function, Genre*, eds. Aino Mäkikalli and Andreas K.E. Mueller (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, forthcoming) and “How *Novel* is the First Novel?: *Robinson Crusoe* and *Hayy bin Yaqzan*,” The American Society of Eighteenth Century Studies, 40th Annual Meeting, Richmond, Virginia, Mar. 26-29, 2009.

² *Beyazit* is a phonologically Turkified version of the Ottoman *Bayezid*.

³ The Battle of Nigbolu, 1396.

⁴ A title which is used interchangeably with the “sultan” in medieval, early modern, and modern travelogues; a literal translation from the Italians, who had close relations with the *Grand Porte* of Constantinople along with the Genoese.

least on the stage. The result was the revenge of the poet on the page, which overcame the failure of the commander in the field. Christopher Marlowe seems to have particularly enjoyed exploring the defeat of Bayezid in *Tamburlaine the Great* by placing the sultan in a cage in front of another barbarous Turkish ruler,⁵ while Antonio Vivaldi uses the same figure as the tragic character in his very well-known opera. Jean Racine focuses on another Bayezid in a play in which intrigue, love, and bloodshed act as the major characters. After all, this is the setting of Baron de Montesquieu's despotic rulers in *Persian Letters* where no rational leadership is evident. Similarly, in William Rowley's *All is Lost by Lust* or Thomas Dekker's *Lust's Dominion*, the "Turk" always champions as the bestial antagonist. Bayezid was thus only one of many despotic, lustful and irrational Turks foregrounded in Western discourse and generalized in the creation of an exotic East.⁶ "The Turk" was nothing less than a curse word. Shakespeare had Iago say it best: "Nay, it is true, or else I am a Turk" (II.1.117).⁷

As a doctoral student in postcolonial theory and Orientalism, when I first encountered Daniel Defoe's *A Continuation of Letters Writ by a Turkish Spy*,⁸ I remember asking myself, "What kind of bestial Turkish character is going to torture the Western protagonist, or how many harem girls will I find as the concubines of a 'lustful' Turk?" A title with a 'Turk' in it in British literature does not usually suggest anything positive about my culture or history. Yet, Defoe's Mahmut is nothing like the typical Turkish archetype that dominates British literature both before and after Defoe's time. On the contrary, Mahmut is a man of letters, an erudite gentleman in his forties, a devout scholar of sciences educated in many different branches of the humanities as well as physics, geography, etc. Although his name is a Turkified version of the Arabic "Mohammed," the prophet of Islam, he is in no way associated with the image of the "anti-Christ," another common perception in Western literature of the Muslim prophet. In Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy*, Mohammed is condemned to one of the deepest levels

⁵ There is no consistency among the sources about the nationality of Timur. Whereas some identify him as a Mogul, others depict him as half Turkish half Mogul. Still others, like Marlowe, describe him as a Turk.

⁶ For more on Orientalism, see Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1978; rpt. London: Penguin, 2003).

⁷ Shakespeare, *Othello*, in *The Norton Shakespeare*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt et al, 2nd ed. (New York and London: Norton, 2008), 2137. For an extensive analysis of the image of the "Turk" in Shakespeare's plays, see my "Shakespeare and the Turk," *Interactions: Ege Journal of British and American Studies* 18.1 (Spring, 2009).

⁸ The full title is *A Continuation of Letters Written by a Turkish Spy at Paris: Giving an impartial Account to the Divan at Constantinople of the most Remarkable Transactions of Europe, and discovering several intrigues and Secrets of the Christian Courts, especially of that of France; continued from the year 1687, to the year 1693.*

of Hell while in John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, "sultan" (I.348), an Islamic term for "ruler," is one of the titles of Satan.⁹

I was surprised even before I began reading *A Continuation of Letters Writ by a Turkish Spy*, a total of sixty five in four books, because of the unique frontispiece that visually establishes the tone of the work. Defoe seems to copy the picture with slight variations from Giovanni Paolo Marana's *Letters Writ by a Turkish Spy*.¹⁰ A full page portrait accompanying the title page shows a study in which Mahmut, a wise man with fashionable long hair and a beard, poses with a feather pen. This is especially important given the innumerable depictions of the "oriental" figures on paintings such as Jean-Leon Gerome's *Slave Market*, in which men observe a naked girl as they decide whether to purchase her, or Eugène Delacroix's *Death of Sardanapalus* where lascivious sex meets barbarous murder with daggers. However, while Henri Régnault's *Summary Judgment of the Moorish Kings of Granada*¹¹ shows a Moor with a sword in his hand, which he has just used to chop off the head of the criminal who lies in front of us, Defoe's oriental man is a scholar who is simply studying at his desk. On his desk we observe an hourglass of sand, a compass, a ruler, a square and, of course, papers and letters. Just next to him, under his feet, is the globe, signifying the success of his geo-political efforts. Above his head are book-lined shelves, some of which are also visible in Marana's copy as *Alcoran*, *Tacitus* and *St. Austin*, sources that once again represent his education in Islamic sciences, ancient classics, and Western philosophy. Another notable characteristic of the picture is Mahmut's clothing; he is dressed as a monk. In this, Defoe is again indebted to Marana's text, in which the Turkish spy is disguised as a Moldavian priest. Thus the hilarious three-layer structure emerges as Defoe puts himself in the shoes of a Muslim Turkish spy who, in turn, is disguised as a Christian monk.

The multifaceted structure of the Turkish spy's identity represents the psychologically complex nature of a character who is capable of making nuanced and detailed observations about the political, religious, cultural, and social circumstances of many European countries, particularly England and France. These are not the kinds of sweeping generalizations one might expect to find in a text that combines the reverse gaze and an oriental narrator; rather, Mahmut's scholarly approach, especially his Cartesian rationalism, encompasses each and

⁹ John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, in *The Riverside Milton*, ed. Roy Flannagan (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1998), 365.

¹⁰ For an extensive analysis of Marana's text, see Ros Ballaster, *Fables of the East: Selected Tales 1662-1785* (New York: Oxford UP, 2005) and *Fabulous Orient: Fictions of the East 1662-1785* (New York: Oxford UP, 2005).

¹¹ Here I am giving examples exclusively from the French paintings as these are relatively well known rather than their British counterparts. William Allan's *The Slave Market, Constantinople*, Frederick Leighton's *Odalisque*, John Faed's *Bedouin Exchanging a Slave for Armor* are examples of British orientalist depictions. The titles of the paintings indicate the nature of their contents.

every detail he narrates. Here is one such passage, which can be read as the first manifesto against the misleading orientalist narratives written three centuries before Said's *Orientalism*:

These Nazarenes are the most addicted to Fiction and Forgery of any People that ever I met with; it is a received Custom among them, that whenever they have to do with any Sect or Opinion of People, differing from their own, the first thing they go about is, to represent them as monstrous and unnatural, either in Person or in Principle, or perhaps in both; dressing them in ridiculous shapes, and imposing a Thousand stories about them upon the Credulity and Ignorance of the Vulgar.¹²

It would not be as surprising if we were reading these lines in a work written by a real Turkish spy. However, it is Defoe himself who seems well aware of orientalist depictions of the East and is consciously writing against these conceptions. Casting aside national and xenophobic tendencies and distancing himself from related political interests (the essence of many previous and contemporary travelogues about the Middle East), Defoe seems able to observe events in a more objective and disinterested manner, an unusual characteristic in the popularized canon of the era.¹³ His remarks about his own country and religion are as biting and satirical as they can be. Defoe, disguised as a Turkish spy, masquerading as a Moldavian priest, writes that Christianity has been corrupted and the true message of Jesus has been lost, so much so that “their religion is one of the greatest pieces of confusion and Buffoonery on Earth.”¹⁴ He is also quick to note that Muslims also believe in Jesus as a prophet and that Islam conceives of Jesus in relation to the Judeo-Christian culture, thus emphasizing the Biblical common ground among religious groups that is usually ignored or suppressed in orientalist narratives in order to depict Islam as a pagan religion, and Mohammad as the ultimate anti-Christ. Mahmut's references to Moses and his many letters to his Jewish friends in Constantinople also suggest his tolerance of and respect for all these religions, which seems to be missing in the religious atmosphere of most of Europe in the period. The Popish clergy, of course, receive the lion's share of these sharp remarks. Mahmut criticizes these religious men for their “restraint of Liberty” and the “Monastic Severities” which followers practice instead of true

¹² Daniel Defoe, “A Continuation of Letters Written by a Turkish Spy at Paris (1718),” in *Satire, Fantasy and Writings on the Supernatural by Daniel Defoe*, ed. David Blewett (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2005), 43-241; 218.

¹³ I say, “popularized canon” as my studies on a multiplicity of genres from travelogues to letters to many other fictional and non-fictional writings show that there is actually more work like Defoe's *Turkish Spy* which portray positive images of the Turk and which speak more objectively of Islamic cultures. However, these works have been left in the critical shadows. A major part of my research is focused on these texts.

¹⁴ Defoe, “Turkish Spy,” 62.

religion. “Ridiculous” religious worship, such as the beating of kettle-drums and playing fiddles and bag-pipes, are presented as the “greatest buffoonery” in the name of God.¹⁵

Mahmut draws attention to the nuances among different denominations of Protestant Christianity such as Calvinists and Lutherans (which are contrasted with the “Absurdities of Catholicks”) as well as to the clashes among these denominations (none of which he favors) and to the consequent bloodshed in Britain and the rest of Europe. He later suggests that peace, tolerance and understanding are essential if a harmonious consensus is to be reached for a better society by not only depicting the religious problems but also addressing them with contrasting examples from his own lands. He proposes that logic and analytical thinking be privileged instead of superstition and magic, he advises unity and peace instead of conflicts, and he emphasizes discipline and hard work as a step toward a more powerful Britain. Of all the writers of the popularized canon of the eighteenth century, Defoe almost singlehandedly defies all of the stereotypes about the Orient by focusing on a nearly utopic example of the Ottomans to such an extent that the Turkish Empire seems to be the model for the Enlightenment not only for Britain but also for the rest of Europe.

Readers familiar with *Robinson Crusoe* may not be surprised to see Defoe deploying an Islamic model to satirize his own nation, as a more subtle cross-textual and inter-cultural dialogue takes place between his most famous work and the product of an Islamic culture. Although James Joyce once expressed a commonly shared conception about *Robinson Crusoe* by announcing that, in terms of genre, it is the first of its kind,¹⁶ a twelfth century Muslim polymath’s work problematizes this observation. Understanding the connection between *Robinson Crusoe* and the writings of Ibn Tufail helps us to further grasp not only the novel genre but also the cross-cultural exchanges which have long been overshadowed by the “clash” of civilizations, foregrounded in the post-9/11 era.

Ibn Tufail – in full form, Abu Bakr bin Abd al-Malik bin Muhammad bin Muhammad bin Tufail al Qaisi – was an Andalusian-Arab philosopher, mathematician, physician, and statesman, who was known in the West as *Abubacer*, his first name in westernized form.¹⁷ It was a time when almost all of

¹⁵ Ibid., 63.

¹⁶ James Joyce writes “The first English author without imitating or adapting foreign works to create without literary models, [...] to devise for himself an artistic form which is perhaps without precedent, except for the brief monographs of Sallust and Plutarch, is Daniel Defoe, father of the English novel”; see “Daniel Defoe,” in Daniel Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe: A Norton Critical Edition*, ed. Michael Shinagel (New York: Norton, 1994), 320-1. Ian Watt also identifies Defoe’s work as the first example of the novel genre in “From the Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson, and Fielding,” *Theory of the Novel: A Historical Approach*, ed. Michael McKeon (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins UP, 2000), 363-82.

¹⁷ This tradition of long names, being named after one’s father, signifies the reverence for the past and an adoration of what has previously been said and written rather than a crude attempt to be original.

the Middle East, Central Asia, North Africa, and Western Europe were under the influence of Islamic Empires. Philosophers like Averroes, Avicenna and Ibn Tufail speculated about Plato's cave and discussed Aristotelian forms in an attempt to interpret Greek learning in the light of their own religious and cultural beliefs. It has recently been persuasively argued that the heritage of the ancient classics would have been lost had it not been for these Muslim scholars translating them from Greek into Arabic.¹⁸ Yet, there was always a conflict between these philosophers and those who believed in the unquestionable nature of religious scriptures.¹⁹ Ibn Tufail wanted to tell a simple story that would capture the essence of this debate between philosophy and religion and perhaps answer the ultimate question, "Can God be found by the individual without recourse to scripture, the law, and society?" Thus he composed the story of *Hayy bin Yaqzan—Alive, Son of Awake*, about the life of a man on a desert island who tries to find his own unique spiritual path.

Although Ibn Tufail's narrative was first written in the twelfth century, it took nearly half a millennia to be discovered by the English. In 1671, Edward Pocock, Jr. published the Arabic text with his own Latin translation in Oxford. Between 1671 and 1700, several editions of the work were published that formed the basis for subsequent English translations. George Keith, a Quaker, published in 1674 the first English version, which was followed by a more scholarly translation by George Ashwell in 1686. However, it was in 1708 when Simon Ockley translated the text, for the first time from the original Arabic into English—just eleven years before Defoe wrote *Robinson Crusoe*.²⁰ Nawal Muhammad Hassan dedicates the third chapter of *Hayy bin Yaqzan and Robinson Crusoe* to the question of whether Defoe really read *Hayy bin Yaqzan* or not.²¹ Hassan makes two principal points: (1) Defoe's library shows that the writer was highly familiar with many publications by Ockley, the translator and publisher of the most recent version of *Hayy bin Yaqzan* before Defoe wrote *Robinson Crusoe*; (2) Defoe was well acquainted with the Quakers, who, for several decades, used *Hayy Bin Yaqzan* as a sort of guidebook among themselves, since the book

¹⁸ For example, see Gerald Maclean and William Dalrymple, eds, *Re-Orienting the Renaissance: Cultural Exchanges with the East* (New York: Palgrave, 2005).

¹⁹ For more on Islamic philosophy and the connection between Greek tradition and Muslim philosophers see George Saliba, *Islamic Science and the Making of the European Renaissance* (Massachusetts: MIT, 2007) and Oliver Leaman, *A Brief Introduction to Islamic Philosophy* (Malden: Blackwell, 1999).

²⁰ *Hayy Bin Yaqzan* was also translated into Hebrew in the fourteenth century and in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries there were Dutch, German, French and Spanish translations. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Chapman and Hall in London published a new edition of the Ockley translation; in 1972 a new translation was published in New York and another was issued in 1982 in London. The most recent edition was published by Cambridge University Press in 2005.

²¹ Hassan, *Hayy bin Yaqzan and Robinson Crusoe* (Republic of Iraq: Al-Rashid House for Publication, 1980).

depicted the fact that every individual is capable of learning about religion and nature oneself, free from traditional dogma.

I should also add here the well known fact that Defoe wrote most of his works in a considerably short period of time for a multitude of reasons, headed by financial problems, which have been used to explain some of the inconsistencies in his work. This is the main reason that Ernest Bernbaum indicates gravely, “Originals will ultimately be found for all” of Defoe’s “longer narratives.”²² However, the connection between them is not a passive transfer of plots. Rather, Defoe’s is a mediated response to works on similar issues and themes. As much as Defoe’s text echoes Ibn Tufail’s, it also deconstructs, changes and eventually transforms this literary predecessor, and I am more interested in this interactive dialogue rather than claims surrounding indebtedness and originality.

The latter part of the eighteenth century also witnessed numerous publications, editions, and adaptations of *Hayy bin Yaqzan*. Starting from the *The Life and Surprising Adventures of Don Juliana de Tuzz [Trezz]* which turned out to be a plagiarized edition of *Hayy bin Yaqzan* to the 1736 adaptation, *The History of Autonus Containing a Relation how that Young Noble man was accidentally left alone, in his Infancy, upon a desolate Island; where he lived nineteen Years, remote from all Humane Society...* to the 1745 edition, *The Capacity and Extent of Human Understanding*, many stories were influenced, inspired by or adapted from either the Latin version of *Hayy bin Yaqzan*, *Philosphus autodidactus*, or the 1686 English version, *The History of Hai Ebn Yockdan, an Indian Prince: or, the Self-Taught Philosopher*.²³ The aim of listing these bibliographical details is to indicate that Ibn Tufail was very well known in eighteenth-century Britain and many authors of the time produced versions of, or wrote works influenced by his text.

It is true that Defoe’s story is thought to be based on the experiences of Alexander Selkirk, a Scottish mariner who spent four years on one of the Juan Fernandez Islands. However, Selkirk’s case was one of many such incidents at a time of adventurous sea travel. Riad Kocache states, “The Selkirk story was [. . .] no more than the topical peg on which Defoe proceeded to hang his work of imagination.”²⁴ Moreover, the story of Selkirk could only provide the writer with several interesting facts, such as the castaway’s ability to survive on turtles or goats or to make clothing out of animal skins. However, *Robinson Crusoe* is more than the sum total of all these interesting facts. Sutherland claims that “Selkirk’s story gave Defoe the situation of a marooned mariner,” a situation known publicly that

²² Cited in J. Paul Hunter, “The ‘Occasion’ of Robinson Crusoe,” in *Robinson Crusoe*, Norton Critical Edition, 336, and *The Reluctant Pilgrim: Defoe’s Emblematic Method and Quest for Form in Robinson Crusoe* (Johns Hopkins UP, 1966), 9.

²³ For more on these bibliographic details, see Hassan, 135, 6-7.

²⁴ Riad Kocache, “Preface,” in Ibn Tufail, *The Story of Hayy bin Yaqzan*, trans. Riad Kocache (London: The Octagon P, 1982), xi.

helped him to achieve verisimilitude in this new genre. Defoe thus seems to entertain the idea as it enhanced the credibility and the reality of his accounts.

However, as much as Defoe is interested in telling the account of a marooned man on an island, he is also, just as importantly, trying to talk about sin, punishment and eventual redemption; as much as he is interested in action, he centers his narrative on faith. The sequel to the Crusoe story, *Serious Reflections*, delves more into the moral and spiritual aspects of the tale, which lie at the core of Ibn Tufail's story. What it comes down to, therefore, is that there is an organic relationship between the 'Providence Tradition' and the type of episteme which was also valid in Ibn Tufail's time. My ongoing research shows from a new historical perspective that the historic-social contexts of both texts are quite similar. This also explains why there was such an interest in a twelfth-century Spanish philosopher's story in eighteenth-century Britain. It seems also highly probable that Defoe read *Hayy bin Yaqzan*, although there is no direct evidence which suggests this. However, absence of evidence is not evidence for absence. Moreover, even if Defoe had never read the work, there is an inherent substantive and contextual bond between *Robinson Crusoe* and *Hayy bin Yaqzan* and this interactive dialogue is essential to the proper understanding and interpretation of both works.

In my first encounter with Defoe, then, I found myself on a surprising adventure. After initially realizing that he defied the apparent tradition of vilifying the Turkish characters and that a text from Islamic culture may have inspired a novel celebrated in Western tradition as one of the first, I then was surprised to find that while some scholars have studied the connection between *Robinson Crusoe* and *Hayy bin Yaqzan*, other than my own work on the issue, (for example Lamia Baeshen, Nawal Hassan, George F. Hourani, Emily Kugler, and Thomas Lemont),²⁵ these studies have not been integrated into major critical editions of the text.²⁶

My ongoing research also seeks to participate in the deconstruction of another West-East binary that is rooted in the view of the West as individualistic and the East as communal. It is obvious that Ibn Tufail, Averroes and many other Islamic scholars emphasized an individual perception of spiritual beliefs, the type

²⁵ The most comprehensive of these studies are Lamia Mohamed Saleh Baeshen, "*Robinson Crusoe and Hayy Bin Yaqzan: A Comparative Study*," (Diss. U of Arizona, 1986), and Nawal Muhammad Hassan, *Hayy Bin Yaqzan and Robinson Crusoe: A Study of An Early Arabic Impact of English Literature*, (Republic of Iraq: Al Rashid House of Publication, 1980).

²⁶ In the 1993 Norton Critical Edition of *Robinson Crusoe*, to give an example, there is an extensive chapter on "Contemporary Accounts of Marooned Men," another one on autobiography and allegoric history, and yet another chapter on the Puritan culture. There are also more than three dozen literary critiques on the work put in chronological order since the eighteenth century. Most of the critics and writers represented in the volume elsewhere acknowledge *Hayy bin Yaqzan* and its influence on, or at least its connection with, *Robinson Crusoe*. However, in the Norton edition, *Hayy bin Yaqzan* goes unrecognized.

of emphasis that feeds not only Puritanical tradition and Protestant faith, but also the individualism of the novel genre. I do not mean to sound too invested in the correlation between these works of Defoe and Ibn Tufail. A few major differences should be highlighted here to prevent misconceptions. One stylistic element that is fairly unique to Defoe is his matter-of-fact novelistic prose which he introduced as an essential aspect of the novel (as a natural outgrowth of his journalistic career), and it seems for that, only he should be credited. As for the thematic concerns, I have always found it interesting that this spiritual quest of Hayy almost turns into a “Colonization 101” handbook in Defoe’s hands in terms of establishing how to claim a piece of land, mark its boundaries, make use of its products and use the natives in service of the colonizer, which more or less mirrors in a microscopic fashion what happens in the eighteenth century and the consequent golden age of British Imperialism. Here I am particularly thinking about the close spiritual friendship between Hayy and Absal on one hand, and the hierarchical relationship between Crusoe and *his* man Friday (I also always find it fascinating that *Friday* is the most sacred day for Muslims, their Sunday) on the other.

As can be seen, my encounter with Defoe is as complex and nuanced as the observations of Mahmut, the Turkish spy, and as individualistic as Crusoe (or should I say Hayy?). It is quite personal as much as it is culturally-specific, but as I have tried to emphasize throughout this essay, this is the ultimate point. I am reminded here of my interview for a doctoral program I chose not to attend back home in Turkey. I remember very vividly the fury on the face of one of the members of the Admissions Committee when I told him that Shakespeare misrepresents the Turk in his plays.²⁷ To him, and many other scholars around the world, the idea of adopting a cross-cultural approach to the major works of the Canon does not seem appropriate. So, suggesting that *Robinson Crusoe* has been influenced by a previous work, let alone claiming that it is the product of an Islamic culture, may seem somewhat frightening (which explains why many recent critical editions of the text still ignore this relationship, an indication of how deeply rooted the Canon is to the idea of European civilization as an isolated enterprise). But to me, it revitalizes Defoe scholarship in an ever-increasing multicultural and global context. The responsibility of the new generation of scholars is thus to address these issues in a transnational context, particularly when there is invaluable evidence of these connections. At the same time, it is also our responsibility to problematize postcolonial theories of Orientalism so that they reflect in a much more accurate light the true nature of inter-cultural and inter-religious dialogue that seem to have been forgotten or overlooked in the current political debates about the alleged *clash* of civilizations. Or we can just sit down

²⁷ Of course this is a rough statement which itself misrepresents my nuanced study on the issue (but I believe the point is still valid); see my “Shakespeare and the Turk.”

and enjoy watching how Timur the lame beats Bayezid the barbarous sultan. But Defoe's Mahmut would not enjoy it, at all.

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