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"Ocular Proof": Race, Religion, and Gender in The Merchant of Venice and Othello

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Abstract

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Edward A. Cooper

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Abstract

This project is a study of the development of early modern racial categories in England—focusing on religion and skin color as primary modes of demarcation interwoven with other prevalent categories of language, ancestry/blood, nationality, and gender—as illuminated in William Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* and *Othello*. Religion and skin color, then, are the primary modes of racializing individuals in early modern England and characters in Shakespeare's works. This essay studies the context of racial difference as present in English and European rhetoric, art, theater, and exploration. Given this context, the paper explores the poetic geography of Venice as present in the economic ramifications of the term "bond" in both *Merchant* and *Othello*. It then investigates English imperial desires alongside fears of invasion and miscegenation. Alongside these topics, the project addresses "ocular proof" which serves as a cultural methodology for demonstrating racial hierarchies. Shakespeare questions this technique by illustrating the flaws of visual evidence.

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Introduction

When I told my grandmother about this project, it conjured up a memory from her childhood in 1940s New York City. She told me that when she would go to the bakery, she would always see a dessert called an "Othello" or "Othello Layer Cake" (or *Othellolagkage* in Danish). It was a vanilla sponge cake with a chocolate frosting—white on the inside, black on the outside. By only looking at this cake, you may or may not be able to assume the type of cake. After all, if the outside is chocolate, might the inside be chocolate as well? But as anyone who has eaten cake knows, that could not possibly be a necessarily accurate assumption. Even by only the sight of the Othello cake, it is impossible to know much about it. Is that dark coating a chocolate icing? It could also be espresso/coffee, or a "Mexican" chocolate with cinnamon, or even a combination of any of these flavors. On top of this, we could not state with any certainty the contents of the cake underneath the icing. Furthermore, the Othello Cake is a layered cake. Different versions of the cake could contain layers of marzipan, vanilla crème, and macaroon in addition to the vanilla sponge cake and chocolate or cocoa glaze.[1] There are a variety of

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[1] I found it difficult to locate much information on Othellolagkage, and I could not find any scholarly material on the cakes. There are some recipes online, only a few of which are in English. I found no recipes in the following major baking cookbooks: *The Essential* New York Times *Cookbook: Classic Recipes for a New Century*, edited by Amanda Hesser; *Mastering the Art of French Cooking*, by Julia Child, Louisette Bertholle, and Simone Beck; *Baking*, by Dorie Greenspan; and *Baking Chez Moi*, by Dorie Greenspan. The knowledge I have of the cakes are

layers and multiple ways of assembling them, which ultimately means—though it seems obvious—that all Othello Cakes are different and unique. The name of the cake, now, brings us to Shakespeare's play. The variety and assemblage of the layers of the cake mirror the complexity of racialization to which Othello is subjected and contribute to a colonization that is also present in the scholarship of Shakespeare's plays. Much as the cakes are traditionally a Danish delicacy for special occasions, Shakespeare's racial plays—including *The Merchant of Venice* and *Othello*—have become the subject of prominently white or European institutions which ultimately white-wash these plays and the narratives of their racialized characters.

Much like the Othello Cake, we cannot easily categorize Shakespeare's Othello by the sole factor of his appearance. In other words, his race, religion, and nationality are ambiguous or unidentifiable categories which cannot be determined based on his appearance alone. Despite this, the Venetians are quick to presume and place labels on Othello which subsequently leads to misunderstandings of his character based solely on racial stereotypes. The Venetians impose constructed values based on "ocular proof" (*Othello* 3.3.361), where the visual is not just evidence but is demonstrative of facts beyond what the observable can dictate, a problem which often leads to inaccurate conclusions. Inaccuracy is a problem for the characters in *Merchant* and *Othello* as well as for scholarship of these two plays. When I was first introduced to these texts as an undergraduate student at Lafayette College, my Shakespeare professor Ian Smith

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from my short conversation with my grandmother and the two online recipes by Anderson and Gitte.

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described an encounter he once had at a conference while presenting a paper on *Othello*. As he concluded his analysis of racial prejudice in the play and how it impacts Othello's psyche, a man from the audience declared that *Othello* is not about race. Having not been asked a question, Professor Smith moved on to other questions. The man, however, once again decided to interject his belief that the play is not about race.[2] A plethora of scholarship, in opposition to this man's claims, demands that the rhetoric of the play directs the subject of *Othello* (and *Merchant*, for that matter) to race relations, based largely on the presence of and emphasis on stereotyping of the minority characters.

Despite the large volume of scholarship on the presence of race in Shakespeare's plays and the early modern period, I think it is important to restate the necessity and place of this type of study. Kim F. Hall, Ania Loomba, and Joyce Green McDonald are only a few of the prominent scholars who write extensively on the presence of race in early modern literature, specifically in *Merchant* and *Othello*. In the introduction to her edited volume *Race, Ethnicity, and Power in the Renaissance*, MacDonald establishes the relevance of racial studies in early modern literature and highlights the continued impact this racial construction has had on modern America. By establishing this conversation, MacDonald argues that a variety of representations of race—skin color, religion, nationality, etc.—were relevant markers of identity and difference in the early modern period as a result of European imperialism and the emergence of the transatlantic enslavement of African peoples. Therefore, she claims, race is a relevant and important

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[2] See Smith's "We Are Othello" (119) for further discussion on this encounter and its relevance to racial scholarship in Shakespeare Studies.

topic of analysis for early modern literary works. While this is an ongoing conversation present in numerous contemporary scholarly works, Peter Erickson's article "The Moment of Race in Renaissance Studies" specifically demonstrates the depth and insight of the relevance and significance of studying race in early modern literature, including Shakespeare's works.

This project is a study of the development of early modern racial categories in England—focusing on religion and skin color as primary modes of demarcation interwoven with other prevalent categories of language, ancestry/blood, nationality, and gender—as illuminated in William Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* and *Othello*. Religion and skin color, then, are the primary modes of racializing individuals in early modern England and characters in Shakespeare's works. As these plays demonstrate, the poetic geography of the Mediterranean influenced the growth and development of English imperial expansion and mercantile capitalism. The Mediterranean, serving as a location for cross cultural encounters, facilitated the English social construction of the self and Other. Using multivalent, pre-existing notions of fairness (white/English/Christian) and blackness (black/Other/demonic), the English formulated a social body politic by racializing and violently objectifying the Other. As Kim Hall argues,

> Descriptions of dark and light, rather than being mere indications of Elizabethan beauty standards or markers of moral categories, became in the early modern period the conduit through which the English began to formulate the notions of 'self' and 'other' so well known in Anglo-American racial discourses. (2)

In this context, the English construct the Other as a specific term used to deem particular groups to be non-English—or, when convenient, non-European—by associating them

with blackness, where the Other embodies "the traditional association of blackness in conventional Christian symbolism with death and mourning, sin and devil" (Hall 4).

Both *Merchant* and *Othello* examine the boundaries of these constructed racial categories via their protagonists Shylock and Othello. These two characters demonstrate the ambiguity of blackness as a socio-political mechanism, where their demise is a systematic demonstration of a supposedly natural division of superior and inferior bloods. As the historical Other, and in the wake of the Spanish Inquisition, Shylock's Jewishness reflects traditional religious understandings of difference in England. Othello, contrastingly, highlights newer and still developing categories surrounding skin color in addition to his Muslimness, Turkishness, and Africanness as embodied by the term "Moor." Two women in the plays, Jessica and Desdemona, navigate gendered divisions of fairness and blackness. As compared to Othello (as the Moor *of Venice*), Jessica's conversion to Christianity highlights the intersection of gender and religion, showing different expectations and standards for men and women. Jessica's location in Belmont and Othello's death at the conclusions of their respective plays illustrate the gendered differences of conversion; yet questions remain about the extent of Jessica's conversion. Desdemona emulates the opposite approach, as she begins the play as an emblem of fairness but is blackened by her agency and marriage to Othello. As such, miscegenation becomes a category of analysis in both plays, where the marriage of a white man to an Othered woman is, in practice, a form of conquest, and the marriage of an Othered man to a white woman is a threat as a form of rape and invasion.

Shakespeare's plays therefore highlight the dichotomy which his nation has constructed to define Englishness via the exclusion of all that is non-English, much as Edward Said suggests via his Orient/Oxidant divide in *Orientalism*. I contend that this division is concretized as a product of "ocular proof," where all racial categories are considered visibly identifiable and therefore present proof of the racial inferiority of the Other. This formula of difference presents early modern English fairness in distinction to a variety of kinds of blackness (based on skin color—non-white, religion—non-Christian, blood/ancestry—non-Anglo-Saxon, language—non-English, and nation—non-English). Shakespeare reproduces this array of racial categories to problematize the early modern English social construction of the self and Other, taking issue with this definition of Englishness in violent opposition to the Other, and questioning the validity of "ocular proof" of the inferiority of blackness. Regardless of the apparent visibility of these categories today, the people of Shakespeare's England would have understood their ability to "see" all of these in an individual's physical appearance as demonstrated by the audience's applause at Shylock's failure in the trial scene and their assumption of Othello's capacity for violence and evil—moments that are visually produced on stage, most emphatically in the opening scene of *Othello*, to enact stereotypes and demonstrate the conquest of the Other. Shakespeare, however, contends with this ability to so explicitly and easily delineate these differences and the subsequent demonization of those deemed non-English in *The Merchant of Venice* and *Othello*.

Cross-cultural encounters during the early modern period informed the English understanding of the intersectionality of race, religion, and gender. As part of a proto-

colonial racialization, these racial categories depict constructed differences as described and discovered by geographical exploration and mercantile capitalistic trade in the Mediterranean. This process of identity formation served to define both Englishness and non-Englishness. Early modern uses of the word "race" were sometimes broad and sometimes precise depending on whether it was more beneficial to blur or exaggerate differences. The *OED*'s entry on "race" has several definitions (dates of first appearance are in parentheses): "A group of people belonging to the same family" (1547); "An ethnic group, regarded as showing a common origin and descent; a tribe, nation, or people, regarded as of common stock" (1572); "A set or class of people who share a characteristic attitude or other feature" (1549); "Either of the sexes (as distinct from the other)" (1558) ("Race, n.6"). These definitions suggest that the variety of uses for the term was significant in that a race could become any group considered as the Other and consequently ascribing characteristic differences to those groups.

Many recent postcolonial Shakespeare scholars have provided extensive research to demonstrate early modern racial divisions. Ania Loomba highlights skin color, religion, and community as the major categories of difference (*Shakespeare, Race, and Colonialism* 6). While skin color is more obvious, these categories all conflate visual confirmations of difference. Religious groups today maintain stereotypical physical demarcations, such as Jews supposedly having long/large noses or Muslim men having brown skin, black beards, and wearing turbans. Loomba points out the intersectionality of gendered and sexual physical distortions in early modern renderings of racial difference: "Jewish men were said to menstruate, Muslim men to be sodomites, Egyptian women to

stand up while urinating, and witches and Amazons to be kin to cannibals" (7). Additionally, physical difference can also inform categories of community—what I would specify as nationality, language, and blood/ancestry. Today, consider how some might declare that they can tell the difference between peoples of different East Asian countries, that Chinese, Koreans, Vietnamese, etc. are either taller, have rounder faces, have a more 'pallid' skin color, etc. These are arbitrary distinctions that have no basis in fact and only serve to highlight physical difference to identify "superior" physical features, just as the Spanish racial purity laws at the time of the Inquisition sought to identify racial purity or *limpieza de sangre*—with an emphasis on the *cleanliness* of the blood, a common trope which is also relevant to the proverbial phrase: "to wash an Ethiop black."

In conjunction with Loomba's scholarship, Ian Smith's *Race and Rhetoric in the Renaissance: Barbarian Errors* and Lara Bovilsky's *Barbarous Play: Race on the English Renaissance Stage* confront rhetoric as a means of early modern division and pay special attention to the stage as a place of racial discourse. Smith highlights the significance of the Renaissance as a return to classical literature for the humanists. In this return, he illustrates the recovery of the concept of barbarism and its subsequent development in the early modern period. He then confronts the English Renaissance stage as a place of the exchange of ideas surrounding racial categorization and ultimately oppression. Concurrently, Bovilsky argues that the formulation of racist ideologies and social empirical interests articulated racial categories in blatantly derogatory terms. In investigating Shakespeare's plays, she shows that they constituted this language as a

means of questioning the relevance and usefulness of such differentiation. The place of the stage provides a crucial tool for examining social groupings, definitions of the English self and Other. Because of its ability to bring the concern of the cross-cultural encounter to London and the presence of rhetorical denigration, the stage reveals imperialism as a central building block of racial differentiation in early modern England.

In establishing and reinforcing these racial differences in their culture, the English identified and further defined the various Other racial categories, formulating these groups against Englishness, which they began to define within each category: skin color - white, religion - Christianity or the Church of England, nation - England, language - English, etc. This means of poetic geography—the mapping of space and place to for political purposes, especially to indicate difference through visual, physical, geographical "proof"—renders subjects of a nation typically as male and nations themselves most often as female. Thus, the category of gender inserts itself in cross-cultural sexual relations, where the English relish the expansion of Englishness into other lands (both mercantile expansionism as a mode of proto-colonialism and intercourse with and the impregnation of Othered women) as a feature of the growth of their empire. This notably functions alongside conversion of the female subject, i.e. Jessica, who converts from Judaism to Christianity, a trade which "benefits" her social status. It is significant that at the conclusion of *Merchant* she is in Belmont with the rest of the Christian characters, celebrating the happy ending of their comic plot. Contrastingly, when the gendered roles are reversed, Othello's marriage to Desdemona is portrayed as a rape and demonstrates the fear of Christian conversion, "turning Turk." This phrase in addition to

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the term "Moor," together demonstrate the overlapping nature of these racial categories, where both refer to a variety of features, often ambiguous and often contradictory. Turk refers to someone from Turkey or the Ottoman Empire who has some shade of darker skin and is likely Muslim. Similarly Moor refers to someone from either the Middle East or Africa—some would argue potentially even India—who is not Christian but not necessarily Muslim and could have any array of darker skin, likely either "tawny" or "black." Othello, as a Moor, is this ambiguous racial other. When convenient, for example, his presence in Venice can mirror the Turks and their invading fleet of ships, although he never is described as necessarily Turkish. His stories of his past adventures and military triumphs continue to confuse and complicate his background, allowing him to slip between racial groups. Shylock, however, does not slip between groups, but he does have many ambiguous traits which he shares with the other characters in his play, particularly Antonio. The Jew has one major visual difference: he is circumcised. Their similarities, though, complicate the ability to distinguish the two racially as demonstrated by Portia's question as to "which is the merchant and which the Jew" in the trial scene.

These four characters (Shylock, Othello, Jessica, and Desdemona) demonstrate the varying and various boundaries between fairness and blackness, the English and the Other. This dichotomy of white and black informs all racial categories but becomes more concrete and purposeful in addressing skin color. As early modern England gained an increasing interest in visual culture (theater, clothing, jewelry, etc.), the visual garnered an association with proof. This notion was prevalent throughout English society and culture: in *The Masque of Blackness*, the daughters of the River Niger need to wash their

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skins white to demonstrate their beauty, significantly on the shores of "Albion;" on the

streets, a person's clothes demonstrated their social status; on the stage, it was not

uncommon for cloth—or often animal skins—to be wrapped around the actor, covering

the skin, to demonstrate or represent dark-skinned characters; and prominent jewelry or

jewels—such as the Drake Jewel—employed the symbols of exotic lands or even the

busts of black people to demonstrate power and/or wealth. Shakespeare's *The Merchant

of Venice* and *Othello* problematize the myth of "ocular proof," where the central

characters of the plays cannot be categorized neatly as the contemporary visual culture

demands. Significantly, Portia confuses Shylock and Antonio in the trial scene.

Additionally, Othello enters the play—following a detailed racialized and stereotyped

account of his character—where his skin color serves as proof of his savagery despite his

immense eloquence and his regality with the Duke and Brabantio. Shakespeare parallels

this to the handkerchief as inaccurate forms of visual evidence. Next, Jessica looks and

acts the part of convert, but she fails to hear the "sweet music," an issue that her

counterparts ignore due to a lack of visual evidence. And, finally, Desdemona shows a

sort of "turning Turk" as she maneuvers from the embodiment of fairness to being marred

by blackness. While there are many ways in which Iago paints her as a convert-traitor,

the most striking moment of the failure of ocular proof comes when Iago designs her

unfaithfulness to Othello by the "fact" of the handkerchief. While the other major

characters and the audience attempt to prove the differences of these characters through

ocular proof, the visual evidence actually provides compelling arguments for their

similarities and identifies other characters—such as Iago and Bassanio—who are a more serious threat to Englishness and English power.

In the first section of this thesis, I will outline the context of racial difference—as described above—in Shakespeare's contemporaries. I will delve further into the rhetoric of difference, emphasizing the terms "Jew" and "Moor" and how they denote difference in the racial schema of early modern England. I will then use this rhetorical analysis to examine: (1) works of early modern visual culture (such as the Drake Jewel and Raphael's *Saint George and the Dragon* as well as the presence of textiles in the period), (2) accounts of English explorers and the reports of their findings (prominently: Richard Hakluyt's compilation of travel narratives), and (3) plays (such as Ben Jonson's *Masque of Blackness* and Christopher Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta*).

My second section will discuss the geography of *Merchant* and *Othello*. I will investigate the setting of Venice in the plays as a place of cross-cultural, mercantile discourse and intercourse, where economic transactions (various forms of "bond") result in the chaos and resolutions of the plays, whether verbal or sexual. I will discuss variant spellings and meanings of the word "bond": emphasizing Antonio and Shylock's bond, wedding bonds and rings or "bands," and "bound" as it conflates destiny/choice with economic hazard or risk.

Thirdly, I will convey how England's imperial desires produce a fear of invasion and miscegenation, made manifest by the persecution of the male Other and conquest of the female Other. Shakespeare elucidates these modes of imperialism in his plays: persecution in the trial scene of *Merchant* and Iago's Inquisition in *Othello* and conquest

in the conversion of Jessica in *Merchant*. As "ocular proof" demonstrates social

renderings of absolute racial difference, Shakespeare contends that the visual is not

absolute, providing visual evidence to question the fairness/blackness racial dichotomy of

early modern England.

A Context of Racial Difference: Rhetoric, Art, Theater, Explorers

"If he have the condition of a saint, and the complexion of a devil, I had rather he should shrive me than wive me" (*Merchant* 1.2.106-8).

Above, I have discussed the variety of racial differences and means of human divisions. But how are these divisions manifested? How are they created, and how are they maintained? Daryl Palmer explains: "To raise questions of 'race' in this period is to talk not of skin color but of intercultural contact and contracts, the cultivation and exploration of ethnic differences" (37). Cross-cultural contact—and, as Palmer notes, economics—fuels the exploration of difference. As the English expanded their mercantile reach throughout the Mediterranean, they cultivated their ideas of difference. In this refinement, they attempted to concretize difference through their rhetoric.

The English, and Europeans as a whole, had a lengthy history with Jewish peoples. Keeping in mind that the Spanish Inquisition was only a century prior to the writing of *Merchant* and that Jews had previously been formally expelled from England, travel and trade reinvigorated the image of the Jew in early modern England. Saskia Zinsser-Krys states that Jewish stereotypes of the period included: missing emotions, lying, malice, sorcery, stubbornness, and simplemindedness (96-100). But the most present stereotype of Jews, like today, is an obsession with money. Even Shylock's first line is about money: "Three thousand ducats, well" (1.3.1).

This combination of stereotypes is damaging in that it yields the Jew as a sub-human[3] with evil and immoral tendencies. In *Merchant*, the Venetian characters are quick to demonize Shylock along these stereotypes. Antonio mocks Shylock to Bassanio: "Mark you this, Bassanio, / The devil can cite Scripture for his purpose. / An evil soul producing holy witness / Is like a villain with a smiling cheek, / A goodly apple rotten at the heart. / O what a goodly outside falsehood hath!" (1.3.89-94). As a "devil," "evil soul," and "villain," Shylock is "rotten at the heart" and produces "falsehood" when he recites scripture. Shakespeare problematizes and perhaps confuses this degradation because falsehood has a "goodly outside." This quote from Antonio comes just after Shylock has quoted the bible, specifically the story of Laban's sheep, a tale about the intermingling and interbreeding of black and white sheep. Antonio's response clearly condemns Shylock and his interpretation of scripture but reveals a concern of outward appearance in that—like the Othello Cake—the inside and outside do not match.[4] James Shapiro points out that one of the "accepted stereotypes of Jewish racial otherness" was "the belief that Jews were black" (171). This blackness, to Antonio, pertains to Shylock's soul, but the ambiguity of stating that "Jews were black" allows racial degradation to overlap in ways that are both visible and invisible.

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[3] Jews were also frequently called "dogs": Shylock: "Thou call'dst me dog before thou hadst a cause, / But since I am a dog, beware my fangs" (*Merchant* 3.3.6-7); Barabas: "they call me dogge" (*Jew of Malta* 2.3.24).

[4] Antonio, however, glosses over their one key physical difference, Shylock's circumcision, a point which I will discuss later.

Despite Antonio's concession that Shylock has a similar outer appearance to himself and other Venetians, this was an uncommon approach. Playwrights frequently attempted to illustrate physical differences between Jews and Christians.

> Although Elizabethan and Jacobean English authors tried to define Jews with different categories in terms of profession, physiology, religion, race and language, encounters with real-life Jews in foreign countries muddied their notions rather than clarifying them; therefore, the difference made between Christians and Jews did not seem as conclusive as the writers might have hoped. (Zinsser-Krys 101)

Taking his audiences into a fictional Venice, Shakespeare furthers this racial confusion when Shylock, defying his stereotype of being money-hungry, refuses six thousand ducats for the three thousand owed him (4.1.84-87).

Many scholars over-look this point and often argue the opposite, declaring that Shylock's greed grows throughout the play. These scholars argue that after learning of his daughter's conversion, Shylock is most concerned with his loss of money, not of his daughter. These arguments further Antonio's racist discourse, reinforcing stereotypes and ignoring critical plot-points. These scholars falsely reproduce Shylock's sorrow, just as Solanio does: "My daughter! O my ducats! O my daughter!" (2.8.15). Shylock does not speak these lines. They are spoken for him by a character who has sought to mock him throughout the course of the play. While Shylock does seem to be upset at his lost money, he seems most hurt that it was "stolen by my daughter" (2.8.21). Many scholars re-enact Solanio's presentation of Shylock and claim that the emphasis is on his ducats, reinforcing the Jewish stereotype that Shylock is money-obsessed, an effort which propagates a history of grasping for innate differences between Jews and Christians. My reading stands in sharp contrast to this "ducat-version." The speaker and the language

both indicate that Shylock has genuine concern over the loss of his daughter. I assert that Shylock should not be read via his stereotypes as an inherently greedy and increasingly greedy character. Instead, we should identify the ways in which other characters in the play indicate and exaggerate his greediness, for that is the villainy present in the play.

Let us return to Shapiro's understanding that "Jews were black." For the English, this label provided versatility. "In the Christian tradition, whiteness is desired, blackness is condemned. White is the color of the regenerated, of the saved; black is the color of the damned, the lost" (Barthelemy 3). White can be associated with God, angels, and heaven, while black can be associated with the devil, evil, and Hell. People who are identified as black or with blackness are therefore devilish, evil, and hellish. In addition to Jews, the English significantly identified Moors with blackness, but the distinctions between each of these groups were often confusing or unclear. Lara Bovilsky states that "names and categories of racial groups are unstable" (14). Just as there can be some confusion in physically discerning racial differences between Antonio and Shylock, the term Moor conveys difference without specificity. "Uses of the word 'Moor' to describe both light- and dark-skinned Africans, Muslims and non-Muslims, as well as Asians, Arabs, Native Americans, and Jews" (Bovilsky 14) both allowed for a versatile Other and provided degrees of uncertainty. Despite any ambiguity, the English waged a violent cultural war against Jews and Moors as black subjects.

We now turn to the term Moor, and how it colors Othello in the eyes of the European characters in *Othello* and the play's original English audience. Othello, notably, is absent from the play's first scene, where he is also not mentioned by name. Rather, the

other characters, notably Iago, refer to him as "Moor" and discuss him with disdain. The

first significant reference to the quality of his character is Iago calling him "Moorship"

(1.1.33). Resonant of the word worship, Moorship turns the value placed in the respect of

"your worship" into a denigration based on the qualification of Moor. Flipping prestige

into racial subjugation, Iago brings forward the significance of racial categorization to the

play. Early modern "racial theories encompass specific beliefs about nationality,

language, psychology, intellect, religion, morality, vocation, class, gender and sexuality"

(Bovilsky 10). By using the term Moor, Iago translates Othello's figure, presently absent

on the stage, into a character built on stereotypical theories: "The designation 'Moor'

very often stood alternatively for many of these categories [of Others], especially as it

became a general term for the ethnically, culturally, and religiously strange" (Hall 7).

Anthony Gerard Barthelemy adds:

> We can identify by the word *Moor* people of many different races and different
> religions. *Moor* can mean, then, non-black Muslim, black Christian, or black
> Muslim. The only certainty a reader has when he sees the word is that the person
> referred to is not a European Christian. (7)

Iago highlights Othello's foreignness as a Moor to draw attention to his differentiation in

as many ways as possible and in the most negative way possible.

Shakespeare employs the term Moor to conflate a variety of racial distinctions. He

wants to frame Othello as an amorphous Other capable of representing any and all

outsiders, highlighting a potential fungibility of blackness in early modern England.

Within this term, however, lies several distinct connotations, stereotypes which can be

mapped onto Othello. Most significantly, as Ania Loomba points out, he "ultimately

embodies the stereotype of Moorish lust and violence" (*Shakespeare, Race, and*

Colonialism 95). Othello's supposedly innate lustfulness fuels his incapability of loving

Desdemona, and, vice versa, his "characteristic" lack of love fuels this lust.

Simultaneously, as a general, he shows his violence, and, due to his purportedly inbred

violence, he naturally rises to his position as general. The most detailed introduction of

Othello's character (both his figure and quality), comes when Iago broadcasts Othello

and Desdemona's marriage to Brabantio:

> IAGO: Zounds, sir, you're robbed; for shame, put on your gown;
> Your heart is burst; you have lost half your soul;
> Even now, now, very now, an old black ram
> Is tupping your white ewe. Arise, arise;
> Awake the snorting citizens with the bell,
> Or else the devil will make a grandsire of you. (1.1.87-92)

This speech outlines the theories of Moorishness for the audience. Iago declares Othello

to be a thief ("robbed" and "lost"), physically different ("black"), animalistic ("ram"),

lustful and sexual ("tupping"), and "the devil" himself. His description comes together to

paint a damaging portrait of a man not worthy of being given his own name, summed up

by derogatory language and the term "Moor."

Evidently, the stereotypes and rhetoric surrounding the uses of the terms "Jew"

and "Moor" create a hazardous environment for non-white subjects in early modern

England. In addition to the speech surrounding these racialized groups, cultural

productions of Jewishness and Moorishness provide visual evidence to demonstrate an

individual's association with these categories. Stage productions of *Merchant* might don

Shylock in black robes to associate him with blackness, have the actor wear a wily beard

to demonstrate his insanity or tendency toward evil, or stage Shylock at a desk counting

his money to illustrate his identity via this Jewish stereotype. Stage productions of

Othello will either label him a "Negro" or "Arab" Othello, using a combination of cosmetics, such as blackface, and costuming to demonstrate his "nature." However, the most striking "ocular proof" in either play follows Iago's highly racialized speech quoted above. After the audience hears a description of Othello's character, he appears on stage, and they understand that his skin color mirrors this description.

These visual pieces of evidence which demonstrate to the English audience the blackness of Shylock and Othello are part of a larger scheme imbedded in early modern visual culture, consisting of a variety of artifacts such as jewelry, art, textiles, and, of course, the stage.

> Artifacts, and the acts of creating, collecting, and admiring them, are themselves mechanisms for fashioning the body and identity, situating the self within a social order, defining the visual otherness of race, ethnicity, and gender, and establishing relationships of power over others based on exploration, surveillance, and insight. (Hulse and Erickson 2)

The following artifacts demonstrate and propagate the hierarchies of power which delineate means of otherness in early modern England.

This project of subjugation is part of a larger goal of English imperial expansion, one which was reflected in cultural artifacts. "These pictures … are not art for art's sake; still less art for God's sake; they are rather art for the sake of power, wealth, and lineage—for the sake of dynasty" (Dalton 178). For Queen Elizabeth I, the most prominent artifact "for the sake of dynasty" was the Drake Jewel. Elizabeth gave Sir Francis Drake the Drake Jewel as a reward for services, most likely in 1588 for his role in the defeat of the Spanish Armada. The Jewel consisted of a two-layer cameo of a black emperor and a white woman on the front and a miniature of Queen Elizabeth I opposite a

phoenix on the back. These images on the Jewel symbolize a variety of conceptions of power meant to validate Elizabeth's rule and dictate her dynastic image of an expanding empire. The phoenix, a symbol of cyclical life, immortality, and resurrection, is the most easily recognizable image (with the exception of Elizabeth's likeness). "For Christians [the phoenix] came to symbolize the life, death, and resurrection of Christ, as well as chastity" (Dalton 183-84). Elizabeth therefore embodies both the ideals of Jesus Christ and the Virgin Mary, providing her divine right as a Christian monarch. In addition to this Christian symbolism, the phoenix and the black and white busts reconfigure classical Greek (specifically Trojan) and Roman iconography to promote England as the new Rome and a descendent of the great Troy, ultimately signaling the return of the Age of Saturn or the Golden Age. "For Elizabeth the realization of that ideal [of the return of a Golden Age] would result in her being recognized as the Sacred Empress or the Una; in alchemy it signified successful pursuit of the Philosopher's Stone" (Dalton 196). The phoenix is additionally a parallel image to the Philosopher's Stone, promoting everlasting life for Elizabeth and her English Empire. As for the Jewel's two-layer cameo,

> The black emperor represents Saturn, imperial ruler of the Golden Age. The woman in profile behind him is the imperial Virgin Astraea who will restore Saturn's reign. As the sovereign who inaugurates the new Golden Age, Elizabeth embodies both Astraea and her predecessor Saturn. (Dalton 202)

Furthermore, Saturn's embodied blackness requires Elizabeth's whitening and ultimately her imperial *renovatio* or restoration of the Golden Age. The return of the Golden Age, as demonstrated by her divine right and worth in the Christian tradition and her divine inheritance of Saturn's empire in the Roman tradition, would legitimize Elizabeth's dynastic project.

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In addition to validating English imperial desires, the Jewel sought to invalidate the empires of the English enemies, particularly Spain whom Drake helped defeat. "Anti-Spanish rhetoric in England often made note of Spain's ill-defined—and therefore dubious—racial origins: these twin heads may be a sign of that mixture" (Hall 222). Despite the Spanish monarchy's claims of their blue blood, the kingdom at large had a history of racial mixture, what would condemningly be called miscegenation, a major concern to the English. But this adamant claim of superiority over the Spanish would position England as the dominant imperial force in the world. The presence of the black and white busts also represents Elizabeth's desire to rule over both black and white subjects, a global imperial vision. The Drake Jewel is an artifact which serves to proclaim English imperial greatness and English superiority while condemning blackness.

While the monarchy sponsored the Drake Jewel, there are many other cultural artifacts produced by prominent artists who produced their works either independently or through sponsorship from elite and wealthy aristocrats which illustrate the enfranchisement of white Englishness and the demonization of blackness as antithetical to English imperialism. Raphael's *Saint George and the Dragon* is a prominent example of this phenomenon in visual art, though for a general European vision of dominance rather than an English one. This painting depicts the knight Saint George in dark armor atop a magnificently large white horse killing a dominated dark dragon while a haloed white woman in a red dress looks on. The painting's color scheme depicts a contrast of white and dark.

> The dark hue of Saint George's armor is external and intended for its apotropaic value, as the massive, dominant whiteness of the horse confirms. By contrast, the

dragon, the conquered and despised Other, is coded negatively with regard to color. Whiteness, with its incipient racial connotations, is celebrated as victorious and virtuous. (Erickson, "God for Harry, England, and Saint George" 330)

The woman in the background bears a halo, adding to the religious connotations present in the dominance of the white knight. The valiant triumph of the white knight and horse over the black dragon instigates and perpetuates the woman's piety. Just as whiteness was integral to the arrival of the Golden Age for Elizabeth in the Drake Jewel, it is equally pervasive in *Saint George*.

We now turn to the theater to consider the influences of racial ideologies on costuming in early modern plays. Valerie Traub examines the racialization of place and habit: through

Racial, class, and gendered coordinates, the human form is placed on a conceptual grid, localized not only by the land it inhabits, but by what the early moderns called *habit*. … *Habit* thus synthesizes the separate, yet closely related concepts, *costume* and *custom*, *manners* and *morals*. (51)

As I will discuss later, land and place play a crucial role in informing early modern racial ideologies. But alongside this, the concept of habit informed the racialized characters on stage. Traub merges notions of costume and custom, manners and morals, all of which can be observed in the original staging of Morocco in *Merchant* and the significance of the handkerchief in *Othello*.

Even though Morocco is a fairly minor character, his presence on stage is memorable. As the quote in the epigraph to this section suggests, Portia is concerned with Morocco's "condition" and "complexion," the first of which could be synonymous with manners and morals, the second of which could be in line more with costume and custom. While Morocco is pleasant—and, in fact, "saintly"—his skin color is undesirable

to the point of being devilish. What Ian Smith calls "the textile black body" is the most

striking of Morocco's original costuming. In addition to the use of blackface, early

modern theaters employed "alternative techniques of staging blackness … the use of

black cloth and, to a lesser extent, animal skins for racial imitation in performance"

(Smith "The Textile Black Body" 170). Morocco's black skin would have been a

fabrication, a costume which might serve to paint him as more animal than human.

Furthermore, there is an economic factor in costuming. By purchasing products which are

strung together to form a black body, the staging and costuming of Morocco makes

blackness mercantile.

> The prosthetic textile body, completely fabricated of parts, is a composite mimic-man and stands apart as a defamiliarized object inviting critical reflection regarding its own alienation. Moreover, the details of cost … and the remunerations made to the artisans reinforce the idea of a textile body whose prosthetic pieces manifest its materiality, its *thingness*, an objectification grounded in and subject to the laws of commerce and economics. (Smith "The Textile Black Body" 174)

In addition to the costuming of his blackness, the character dresses "all in white"

(*Merchant* 2.1.0.2), which contrastingly both highlights his black skin and illustrates his

purity in manners and morals. But this problematizes the notion of an exterior evil

embedded in his dark "complexion," a subtle moment where Shakespeare questions the

significance of skin color and the differentiation between "condition" and "complexion,"

the value of "habit" itself.

Similarly, the handkerchief in *Othello* illustrates a cultural connection between

women and tokens which demonstrate their sexual purity and fidelity.

> Domestic textiles simultaneously evoke a chaste yet eroticized body, but the play extends their significance to represent the female body and behavior *as* a piece of

cloth … by making female identity as malleable as cloth, so that it derives its shape not from women's work and affiliations. (Frye 222)

but from cultural ideologies which Iago perpetuates and enforces. The handkerchief

becomes a symbol evoking a textile female body, where tokens of fidelity represent

women's honor. For Desdemona, the white handkerchief and her white bed sheets mirror

her chastity and fairness, while the strawberries embroidered on the handkerchief

symbolize the blood she is expected to produce upon the consummation of her marriage

and the fruit she is meant to bear—children. Whether or not she and Othello have yet

consummated, there remains a social expectation that the symbolic implications of the

red fruit are linked to the whiteness of the linens and therefore Othello as her husband. As

Cassio holds the handkerchief, he appears to demonstrate that the strawberries and their

redness are a product of his sexual relations with Desdemona, made all the worse by the

sweetness of the fruit. When Othello sees Cassio with the handkerchief, he sees the

"ocular proof" which he had asked Iago to produce for him. Shakespeare is critical here

of the supposed proof that this image relays, as he asks his audience to reconsider the

ocular proof of colored and therefore racialized and sexualized images including

Othello's blackness and even the validity of the category of blackness.

In the simulation of Morocco's black skin, Othello's black barbarism, and

Desdemona's faithlessness, Shakespeare presents a variety of layers of staged

simulations. As Dympna Callaghan points out, in early modern England, there are

> Two distinct, though connected, systems of representation crucially at work in the culture's preoccupation with racial others and singularly constitutive of its articulation of racial difference: the display of black people themselves (exhibition) and the simulation of negritude (mimesis). (77)

These plays in particular emphasize the simulation of negritude—the occasion of being

black, meaning they do not exhibit actual racial others. Instead of presenting actual black

Africans on stage as Morocco and Othello, theatrical productions would have employed

cosmetics or textiles as a proxy for black skin and therefore blackness, calling attention to

the fungibility of blackness and the performance of race. Similarly, Desdemona's

femininity would have been represented by symbols of femininity such as wigs and

textile fabrics, i.e. dresses.

> Traversing intricate structural continuities and discontinuities between exhibition
> and mimesis in the complex representational economy of Renaissance England,
> femininity (rather than actual women) is itself used to trope racial difference –
> whiteness – and plays a pivotal if problematic role in the relation of race and
> sexuality. (Callaghan 78)

As such, cosmetic practices highlight "the relation between race and gender in drama,

showing how whiteness becomes visible in an exaggerated white and, crucially, feminine

identity" (78). The production of racialized and sexualized mimic-men highlights

Desdemona's purity—whiteness—in contrast to the supposedly inherent blackness of

Othello and Desdemona, making her "transgressions" all the more damaging. However,

with Shakespeare's knowledge of the simulation of femininity and blackness, of gender

and race, I argue that the emphasis in *Othello* on ocular proof is meant to be a criticism of

this mimetic structure and the purported knowledge which necessitates it.[5] Consider that

Morocco, Othello, and Desdemona were all white men.

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[5] See Fuchs for a discussion of the mimetic structure of the development of the English empire as
consciously constructed in the image of Rome, particularly as empire is concerned with the
fabrication of the Other.

In plays of the English Renaissance,

Racial experience appears almost routinely in myriad tales of interracial relationships and successful cross-racial disguises, facilitated by and entangled in proximate discourses of conversion, class transgression, troubled national boundaries, and narratives of physical and moral degeneracy. (Bovilsky 3)

The presentation of race in a moral conversation was a form of political commentary, one which prominent playwrights exhibited in popular plays and often with great flair. "The Renaissance employed spectacles—including spectacles of exemplary violence, spectacles of monarchical display, and the spectacles of the public stage—as crucial elements of social control and ideological dissemination" (Howard 4). While I believe that Shakespeare contends with the racial ideologies of his period, Christopher Marlowe and Ben Jonson are two prominent playwrights whose plays iterate the racialization of the Other, promoting whiteness and condemning blackness in its multiple forms.

Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta* (written in 1590, first published in 1633) primarily engages with the racialization of religious categories, as the primary villain is Barabas the Jew in the context of the invading Islamic Turks. To introduce the present evil, the play begins with a prologue featuring Niccolò Machiavelli, or Machevil:

MACHEVIL: But whither am I bound, I come not, I,
To read a lecture here in *Britanie*,
But to present the Tragedy of a Jew,
Who smiles to see how full his bags are cramb'd
Which mony was not got without my meanes.
I crave but this, Grace him as he deserves,
And let him not be entertain'd the worse
Because he favours me. (Marlowe 0.28-35)

After presenting the audience with the certainty of a stereotypical Jew on the stage—with an emphasis on Barabas's obsession with money and villainy—Machevil slyly tells the

audience to despise the Jew, just as Iago does for Othello. In the spelling of the two

characters' names, it is apparent that Marlowe intends to conflate the speaker of the

prologue with a literal representation of evil, or a mock-evil, and the titular character with

barbarism.

Despite this villanization, Barabas, by all initial appearances, could easily be

misidentified as a regular subject of Malta. But it is apparent that *The Jew of Malta*

played a significant role in the characterization of the differentiation of Jews from

Christians. In *Merchant*, Shylock mentions "the stock of Barabas" (4.1.292), perpetuating

an understanding of Jews as one extended family: "Jews represent a closed bloodline and

are (1) all related to one another, and (2) never related to the Venetians (or the Maltese,

or the English, or to Christians in aggregate)" (Bovilsky 72). Barabas's lack of kin

relation to the rest of the integrally signals that he is not Maltese, therefore relegating him

to the status of alien.

> The alien is perceived by the authority either as that which is unformed or chaotic
> (the absence of order) or that which is false or negative (the demonic parody of
> order). Since accounts of the former tend inevitably to organize and thematize it,
> the chaotic constantly slides into the demonic, and consequently the alien is
> always constructed as a distorted image of the authority. (Greenblatt 9)

Thus Barabas takes on characteristics of his compatriots, just as Shylock does in

Merchant. Yet the other characters in each play are quick to racialize the Jewish men,

perhaps out of a fear based on the moment of perceived similarity.

> The power generated to attack the alien in the name of the authority is produced
> in excess and threatens the authority it sets out to defend. Hence self-fashioning
> always involves some experience of threat, some effacement or undermining,
> some loss of self. (Greenblatt 9)

The work done by the Maltese to persecute Barabas consequently results in the initial loss

of the kingdom to the invading Turks, an extreme threat that is paralleled in Shylock's

defeat in court by the manipulation of Venetian law and in Othello's demise at the hands

of the "honest" Iago. Ultimately, Marlowe's play condones the attack of the alien,

suggesting: "To undoe a Jew is charity, and not sinne" (Marlowe 4.4.90).

Next, we turn to Ben Jonson's *The Masque of Blackness* (1605), which, as a

masque rather than a theatrical play, serves a more specific purpose. "Masques and

pageants primarily seek to advance or to endorse religious, moral, cultural, or political

ideas" (Barthelemy 18). The masque was performed at the court of King James I with

Queen Anne and other women of nobility as the masquers. To cover their white skin, the

ladies wore blackface, of which it is the plot of the masque to remove. The River Niger

has brought his black-skinned daughters from Africa to England in search of a land which

will suit their beauty. Having found England (Britannia) after traversing increasingly

"white" lands, they have found a land of a better "clime." There were two common

beliefs about the condition of blackness in early modern England. The first, as codified in

Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, is that Apollo's son Phaethon lost control of his father's chariot,

causing the sun to come too close to the earth, where it happened to scorch the skin of

those in Africa—making blackness an accident (23-31). As such, blackness was a

condition of the skin which could be removed by "washing the Ethiop white" (making

blackness dirty and in need of cleansing). Niger's daughters, then, require a land which

does not burn their skin and allows them to wash themselves white. In England, "their

beauties shall be scorched no more" (Jonson 249).

As England becomes the land to restore the beauty and fairness of the daughters, the plot reflects the gendered construction of racial geographies. According to early modern gendered ideologies, "women ought to be purer, more virtuous, and fairer than men; shown or suspected not to be, they are represented as concealing or figuring forth a compromising blackness" (Bovilsky 51). Desdemona is a strong example of the feminine association with compromising blackness. Contrastingly, however, Niger's daughters have already experienced this denigration and seek to physically demonstrate their purity, virtuousness, and fairness.

> The language of fairness was associated specifically with women and thus becomes a key factor in the issues of sexuality and gender difference that also inform the development of racial distinctions in this period. The bodies of white English women become the map upon which imperial desire and national identity are marked. (Hall 177)

Therefore, the female body became a signifier of the connection of geography and skin color in the understanding of fairness and blackness. By Niger's daughters coming to England to cleanse their bodies and become white, Jonson fuels English imperial desires of conquering (black) Africa by demonstrating (white) English superiority.

Ethiopia summarizes Jonson's vision: "You shall your gentler limbs o'er-lave, / And for your pains perfection have" (Jonson 335-36). While the message here is that by the daughters washing their bodies in English waters, they will have white and therefore perfect skin, this theory is foundationally inaccurate. It is quite obvious to us, twenty-first century readers, that black skin is not a condition of dirtiness to be cleaned and cannot be removed by washing, but the people of James's England would have also known this. Carolyn Prager notes: as early as 1545, documents such as *Biblioteca Eliotae* detail "the

story of the pointlessly washed Ethiopian … to illustrate the barren outcome of unnatural pursuits;" such stories "[describe] the beleaguered African as both bond and black, … insisting that the figurative African is also a slave" (259). Perhaps this was contentious, and Jonson's masque articulates a desire for foreigners to be able to come to England to purify and whiten themselves—perhaps a manifestation of the European desire to convert the Other to Christianity. More likely, however, Jonson understood this "pointlessness," and his masque demonstrates the nature of the black body as unintelligent and labor-based. Even in a fantastical scenario where the black body could be washed white, it requires extensive efforts of continual washing, specifically "laving," which is ironically close to "slaving." As such, *The Masque of Blackness* informs King James of the variety of ways in which the English are superior to the subjects encountered by English mercantile trade in the Mediterranean and off the Atlantic coast of Africa. The masque further speaks to the mindset of the English people on "aliens," particularly those with darker skin, making it unsurprising that the audience anticipates the alien-Jew Shylock to be a villain in *Merchant* and the alien-Moor Othello to defer to an apparently more "natural state" in *Othello*.

Many scholars are hesitant to declare or blatantly decry that the English had significant contact with the Other, particularly Jews and Moors. A purported lack of contact would fuel misconceptions and stereotypes and lead to the undoubted villainy of Barabas and Shylock and the inferiority of Othello's and Niger's daughters' black skin. There is, however, strong evidence that Londoners would have encountered African traders on the streets and at market. Certainly the nobility would have had plenty of

interaction with black or "tawny" servants, entertainers, and foreign ambassadors. However minimal or extensive these interactions would have been, it is significant to note that England had a strong traveling and trading presence on the global stage and in the Mediterranean in particular. In this setting, English travelers had significant interactions with other cultures and peoples, and they often wrote about these moments. Richard Hakluyt collected and published three volumes of travel narratives as a means of documenting and in an attempt to explain the rest of the world to the public. Problematically, much of the public was not literate, which is part of the reason that theater was so popular. As a result, there was a significant correlation and dialogue between the political commentary of travel narratives/colonial writing and fictional material in early modern England.

The Principal Navigations Voyages Traffiques & Discoveries of the English Nation by Richard Hakluyt, often called *Principal Navigations* or *Hakluyt's Voyages*, presents the strongest examples of the mindset of English travel and trade in the late sixteenth century. While this collection of documents is a form of propaganda, it is not primarily about great explorers or military conquerors. The collection does contain some of this, though, such as the attempts of Martin Frobisher to discover a Northwest Passage in North America and Francis Drake's accounts of the defeat of the Spanish Armada. Instead, for most of the accounts, "in keeping with a tradition that was to dominate England through most of its history, the aim of the voyages was trade" (Blacker 2). A prominent example with the lengthy, yet still abbreviated, title "The first voyage of the right worshipfull and valiant knight sir John Hawkins … made to the West Indies 1562"

details Hawkins's trafficking of African slaves to the Caribbean in 1562. With the title itself—he is "worshipfull" and a "valiant knight"—Hakluyt guides the reader to appreciate and respect Hawkins and his voyage. The account focuses heavily on aspects of trade, specifically emphasizing the value and quantity of merchandise and the best places for the sale of said merchandise: "Negros were very good marchandise in Hispaniola, and that store of Negros might easily bee had upon the coast of Guinea" (Hakluyt 113). With the purpose of the journey established, Hawkins

> Passed to Sierra Leona, upon the coast of Guinea, … and got into his possession, partly by the sworde, and partly by other meanes, to the number of 300. Negros at the least. … With his praye hee sayled over the Ocean sea unto the Iland of Hispaniol. (Hakluyt 114)

As highlighted by Prager, above, the English associated black Africans with bondage and slavery, allowing Hawkins to violently capture "300. Negros at the least" as "marchandise" and his "praye." With this mindset and its development over the course of half a century, it is unsurprising that audiences of *Merchant* would expect Antonio, a merchant, to dominate the socially-black Shylock and would be enraged when Shylock attempts "partly by the sworde" to extract a monetized (thought non-valuable) pound of flesh and that Othello as a black man becomes Iago's "praye."

Poetic Geography: Venice and the Economics of the "Bond"

"Who chooseth me, must give and hazard all he hath" (*Merchant* 2.7.9).

In the last section, I argued that Shakespeare wrote *Merchant* and *Othello* into a period of extreme racial prejudice. Jewelry, art, and theater are primary aspects of popular culture which contain images of and perpetuate racial mythologies. In Hakluyt's *Principal Navigations* and the travels and trades of which he documents, I have identified poetic geography as a foundational tool of early modern racial production. Poetic geography is the presentation of space and place using specific rhetoric to further a particular purpose. In its most simplistic manifestations, poetic geography informs the racialization of the River Niger in Jonson's *Blackness*, where the character is the place, is the geographical entity of the river itself. In this presentation, Jonson conflates the black bodies of both Niger and his daughters with their place of origin, and as they migrate northwards and eventually come to England, the land itself helps to alter their physical appearances. Another strong example is in Hakluyt, where John Hawkins associates the black slaves with their source in Guinea, the sailing across the ocean, and their place of sale in Hispaniola. As such, the black bodies maintain specific purposes within each corresponding place: hunted prey, cargo, and goods at the market.

In order to consider the manifestations of such a poetic geography, the English first needed to construct a mental geography to envision how space and place intersect with racial imagery. Caterina Albano states, "A mental map is central to the organisation

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of cartographic description, informing the process of inclusion and exclusion whereby a map is made to serve certain interests" (90).[6] Through the excluding practices of cartography, the drawing of borders, the English developed their imperial vision of superior and inferior lands and therefore the bodies that dwell there.[7] The project of this cartographic practice catalogues physical difference as and in both race and gender. While bodies are incredibly racialized by place, as discussed in the previous paragraph, land itself takes on gendered characteristics. Beyond simply referring to a nation and land as a feminine entity, the project of imperialism dictates that foreign territories become objects of sexual desire to be impregnated—or, more specifically, raped.[8] Imperialism associates land, especially "potential colonies with the female anatomy—that is, the land becomes feminine" (Sanford 53). Just as the land is available for English mapping and conquest, "the female body itself is treated in many respects as a territory to be mapped and conquered" (Sanford 53). As a result, Jessica, as an Othered woman in need of conversion, is a territory to be mapped and conquered, which Lorenzo accomplishes by their marriage; marriage, consequently, is a tool for sexual conquest and reterritorialization. In addition, Desdemona is a symbol of whiteness, including the land

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[6] Sanford also notes: "Besides pictorial or graphic representations, … the cognitive or mental map is another important underpinning of the literature of place" (3).

[7] "Miming the grammar of latitude and longitude that organizes the cartographic idiom itself, maps in this period begin to imply that bodies themselves may be terrain to be charted" (Traub 49).

[8] "The eroticisation of land and the specialisation of the female body thus confirm how anatomy and geography function as reciprocal models for delineating the 'mental maps' through which both corporeality and space could be categorised and represented" (Albano 104).

of Venice (or, perhaps England) itself; by marrying Othello, she betrays her nation, and Othello purportedly rapes both his wife and her homeland. The territorialization of the body is part of a larger English imperial ideology via geographical study which contributed to a "sense of superiority and separateness," (Cormack 63). With the English Channel as a sort of hyper-border, the English easily distinguished themselves from the rest of the world. The separation provided a heightened sense of superiority.

Perhaps poetic geography is most prominent in works of literature, particularly on stage, where space and place can be physically seen and therefore provide greater meaning, often "proof." John Gillies introduces the theater itself, particularly Shakespeare's Globe Theatre, "as a kind of map: a quasi-cartographic product of the same type of cosmographic imagination which produced the world maps of Ortelius and Mercator" (Gillies 70). As the Globe, it served to bring the outside world to England. Similar to a map, it provided physical representations of the outside world. "Theaters often performed some of the work of maps, by gathering and presenting peoples and scenes from various parts of the world" (Sanford 23). In fact, the theater may have done a better job in this, as it provided insights into the culture, peoples, and images of other parts of the world that a map itself could not (even though maps of the period often included some images, most frequently of monarchs, to represent foreign lands or provide more information about them). In considering the setting of the plays already discussed in this essay, it is clear that a variety of playwrights considered foreign lands to be integral to their works. Marlowe situates *The Jew of Malta* in Malta, Jonson considers movement from sub-Saharan Africa all the way to England, and Shakespeare locates *Merchant* in

Venice and Belmont and *Othello* in both Venice and Cyprus. These plays share the common ground—or water—of the Mediterranean as a central landscape on which to discuss English racial and imperial politics.

The Mediterranean, and Venice in particular, is central in the English world-image, with early maps containing Europe, Africa, and Asia surrounding the sea. Even as the English understanding of geography improved, the Mediterranean remained the primary location of cross-cultural encounters. Venice, perched on the edge of the sea, was a city which expressed this centrality and the exchange of both merchandise and ideas which occurred there. Norma Sanders contends that Venice was a city "which gazed in two directions: towards civilised Christianity and towards the remote eastern world of pagan infidels, the Turks, and the mighty power of Islam" (18). Similarly, Andrew Hadfield argues that *Othello* "represents the ideal republic of Venice as the last bastion of European civilization pitted against the lure and danger of the barbarous and exotic Orient" (201). While these scholars present important ideas about the boundaries established in the setting of Venice in the two Shakespearean plays, they fail to fully demonstrate the threat of the Other. Venice does not solely represent an East/West, Orient/Occident dichotomy as articulated here, nor does it solely express a black/white, Africa/Europe division. Rather, Venice expresses a range of concerns that the English held regarding the Other from Africa, whether "black" or "tawny;" the invasion of Islam from the Ottomans and the east; and the supplanting threat from the European Other, especially European Jewry.

This array of perceived threats is territorial in nature, making it about both land and women. In the Shakespeare plays, Venice serves as a stand-in for England with an emphasis on the English imperial values of mercantile trade.

> The English saw Venice not simply as a place for female deviance, but also as an ideal republic and hub of international trade. Whereas female 'openness' was dangerous and immoral, political and mercantile openness was much admired by an England in search of overseas markets and colonies. (Loomba, *Shakespeare, Race, and Colonialism* 103)

The openness of Venice problematizes the values imbedded in English trade when juxtaposed to the "dangers" of female openness. Arthur L. Little argues that the imperfection of Venice as a mirror for England solves this concern for the English audience. "Venice figures as an imperfect picture of England, the inheritor of classical Rome's imperial self-fashioning but not its cultural and racial purity, its true virginity— its cultural and racial whiteness" (69). As both mercantile empires compete for the claim of "inheritor of classical Rome," the English consider themselves more culturally and racially white than the Venetians and therefore more worthy of that title. Little extends his argument, providing Othello and Shylock as examples of Venice's perceived inferiority. "The vital presence of Othello in Venice's making of war, or of Shylock in its conducting of commerce, underscores the city-empire's crisis of identification" (Little 70). This crisis in the plays lies in the issues of English identification present in England at the time. While most of his contemporaries are adamant that Jews and Moors have no place in English society (or must at least serve a subordinate role), Shakespeare contends that an intercultural exchange or existence is not unnatural or abhorrent and certainly not

an invasive threat. In contrast, the white characters who persecute the Others are the sources of villainy within *Merchant* and *Othello*.

In the English mental map, Venice is in the center of the world. It is the middle ground between Europe, Asia, and Africa. In addition to the significance of the cross-cultural encounters taking place, Venice is a point of economic contact. Early modern England's power came from their global trade networks. Therefore, money is a necessity, and borrowing money allows for greater investments and ultimately immense monetary gain. Venice, as an imperfect mirror of England, is a Catholic city-state. At this time, it was illegal for Catholics to charge interest on borrowed money, a staple for the emerging English capitalist structure. It is important to consider, then, that the English audience may have had a difficult time relating to Antonio, "The Merchant of Venice" who does not take out or provide loans at interest, and Bassanio, a lord who is deeply indebted to his friend with no hope of paying him back on his own. To further the audience's confusion about the essence of the characters in *Merchant*, Shylock enters the play by echoing Bassanio. "This appropriation of another character's words at the moment of dramatic introduction blurs the distinctions that one expects to obtain between Bassanio and Shylock, noble Christian and miserly Jew" (Rosen 68). This mirroring problematizes the ability to distinguish between the characters and between good and evil. Venice, as the place of economic contact, highlights the characters' similarities and only distinguishes their singular economic difference in loaning money.

Simultaneously, it is apparent that this difference in economic practice is religious in nature, one which the audience can quickly identify as an embodied difference. While

scholars often ascribe to the narrative that Shylock pursues and advocates for the redemptive pound of flesh, Antonio and Bassanio actually pursue the debt bond as a way to formally assuage Shylock's concerns of repayment. Antonio offers a penalty for a forfeiture of the bond (1.3.129), and upon Shylock's listing of the terms of the bond, Bassanio and Antonio call Shylock's offer and deal "kindness" (1.3.135,145). The Christians provide Shylock's penalty so that Antonio will not brake his "custom" and be forced to engage in usury; the pound of flesh, therefore, is a "merry sport" (1.3.138), a joke of sorts. Following Shylock's exit in the scene, Antonio calls him "gentle Jew" and so kind that he will turn Christian (1.3.170-71). In their pursuit of the bond, Antonio and Bassanio force themselves into a physical deal which illuminates the connection between ownership of body and flesh with the term "bond." Lindsay M. Kaplan expands on this affiliation:

> In borrowing money from Shylock with a debt bond, rather than on interest, Antonio places himself in the power of a Jew who gains ownership over the debtor's body when the loan is forfeited. … While ostensibly referencing the financial agreement into which the two entered, the terms ['bound' and 'bond'] carry the etymological sense of slavery. ("Constructing the Inferior Body" 162)

Conversations about the black body and enslaving Africans make apparent the association of "bond" with slavery and ownership in both contemporary pieces and scholarship about the period. But the dual-meaning of the bond to which Antonio and Shylock agree expresses a Christian concern of conversion. "The spectre of circumcision hovers over Shylock's threat to cut Antonio's body, a procedure that would transform the Christian into a Jew" (Kaplan, "Constructing the Inferior Body" 163). Instead of the much-discussed fear of "Turning Turk," Antonio is left with the fear of Joining the Jews.

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The pound of flesh is therefore a euphemism for circumcision, a ritual cutting of the flesh

which provides a physical signifier of male Jews.

In addition to the debt bond, *Merchant* contains another significant type of bond,

a ring (or band, allowing a slippage between "band" and "bond")—more specifically, a

wedding ring. The wedding ring has long been a symbol of commitment and faithfulness,

similar to tokens of fidelity, such as the handkerchief in *Othello*.[9] In that play, the

handkerchief is stolen and becomes the basis of severe mistrust and ultimately murder. In

Merchant, however, the owners of the rings give them away, seemingly voluntarily, yet

the breaking of the vow is met with little consequence. Many scholars discuss the

readiness of Bassanio and Gratiano to break their bonds and give their rings to Portia and

Nerissa disguised as the doctor and his clerk. Though less prominent, it is equally

important to acknowledge Jessica's parting with her dead mother's ring. Upon hearing

that his daughter traded away the ring for a monkey, Shylock says that he "would not

have given it for a wilderness of monkeys" (3.1.93-97). But nothing else comes of this.

Jessica is simply scorned for her actions, and she is not even present for these words (nor

will she likely ever hear them). Similarly, Portia and Nerissa merely rebuke Bassanio and

Gratiano for so easily parting with their rings. Portia criticizes them: "If you had known

the virtue of the ring, / Or half her worthiness that gave the ring, / Or your own honour to

contain the ring, / You would not then have parted with the ring" (5.1.199-202). Notice

how each line concludes with "the ring," providing added emphasis on the point of the

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[9] Emilia: "I am glad I have found this napkin: / This was her first remembrance from the Moor.
… For he conjured her she should ever keep it, / That she reserves it evermore about her / To kiss
and talk to" (*Othello* 3.3.292-98).

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speech: do not part with the ring. Portia also emphasizes what the ring symbolizes: "virtue," "worthiness," and "honour." As Portia has also just helped orchestrate the destruction of Antonio and Shylock's bond, Shakespeare highlights the unethical nature of the law (another type of bond—between government and governed) which serves to subjugate and harm, sometimes violently, those deemed Other or black while perpetuating a problematic structure based on Englishness as whiteness. Shylock is critical of Bassanio and Gratiano for their faithlessness to their wives: "These be the Christian husbands" (4.1.278-291). Yet these characters are ultimately prosperous and realize a comedic end of the play. Despite the return of the rings and the happily intact marriages, they have not seemingly made better on their vows, only restated the ones they already made and broke. In Gratiano's concluding lines, "the ring loses the significance of female integrity and agency that Portia and Shylock accorded it; instead, the woman's sexuality is commodified into an object that her husband controls, and her identity is subsumed to his" (Kaplan, "Others and Lovers" 356). The conclusion of *Merchant* serves to perpetuate what today we would call white male patriarchy, what Shakespeare would simply call English whiteness or fairness.

Above, Kaplan notes the correlation of "bond" and "bound" to slavery, which is an economic enterprise informed by racialized bodies. In the analysis of Hakluyt, we see how space and place present a conflation of the naturalness of black bodies (based on their place—both geographically and hierarchically) and the economic value of those bodies. We could say that Hawkins determined that these bodies were bound to be slaves, just as they were, on his ship, bound for Hispaniola. In *Merchant* and *Othello*, the

characters venture out of Venice to Belmont and Cyprus, respectively. In a comedy,

Belmont stands as a green world and bears witness to "hazard," "risk," and "choice"

which provide the characters with economic benefits. Although Belmont ironically

conflates these benefits with a sense of destiny. Cyprus, a tragic location, proves its

natural might as a storm destroys the Turkish fleet, and Othello ponders how natural his

marriage to Desdemona could be: "And yet how nature erring from itself –" (3.3.229).

This play, however, is not about economics. Rather, it is about purging racial impurities,

and therefore it provides little to no room for mercantile "hazards."

Merchant poses a classic fairy tale image of the "damsel in distress" or the

"princess in the tower." Belmont, or Beautiful Mountain (or Mountain of Fairness),

houses Portia who is to be won via a "game of chance," the three caskets. This game,

however, problematizes and confuses the notions of chance and choice.[10] William H.

Sherman argues that the financial world of credit and risk—apparent in the casket game

and the Antonio-Shylock bond—is part of a social movement which transfers agency

away from divinity and monarchy toward the merchant.

> England's gradual transition from agrarian feudalism to venture capitalism during
> the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries brought with it a reconfiguration of social
> relations, new mechanisms of financial exchange (involving new forms of credit
> and risk), and an increasingly prominent role for individual entrepreneurs in
> overseas trade. (116)

Even though Bassanio is accorded the title of "lord" in the Cast of Characters, he is a sort

of underdog in the competition for Portia (and, significantly, her vast wealth). Bassanio is

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[10] "The linguistic evidence paints an even broader picture of a culture coming to terms with the
idea that risk and chance are phenomena separate from specific instances of Divine will and are
subject to economic and philosophical definition" (MacInnes 45).

in debt and can only go select a casket because of Antonio's (actually Shylock's) money. Compared to her other suiters—princes, barons, etc.—he is much less impressive. But the shifting roles of individual entrepreneurs—I read Bassanio as a merchant taking a financial risk for an immense monetary gain: Portia's wealth—provides Bassanio a sort of new-age advantage. With this decentralization of power, however mild or extreme it may be, Shakespeare's world identifies particular individuals who are eligible for the benefits of English imperial mercantile trade.

The three caskets game demonstrates the shifting tide of English politics by questioning the destiny or fate of events—what is bound to happen—by providing certain characters agency in the process—agreeing to their own bond. While Morocco, pointedly, has no agency in the game, Portia and Bassanio are playing on their own terms. Many scholars choose to focus on Portia's disdain for her inability to "choose" her husband: "O me, the word 'choose'! I may neither choose who I would, nor refuse who I dislike, so is the will of a living daughter curbed by the will of a dead father" (1.2.19-21). This reading provides a strong gendered difference, especially as the notes of the caskets state the ability for the suitors to make a choice: gold casket: "Who chooseth me, shall gain what many men desire" (2.7.5); silver casket: "Who chooseth me, shall get as much as he deserves" (2.7.7); lead casket: "Who chooseth me, must give and hazard all he hath" (2.7.9). This reading, however, fails to consider the immense influence Portia has over the process. Portia discusses how she wishes to teach Bassanio to choose right (3.2.10-11), and upon his arrival, she brings in a choir to help Bassanio by singing a song about "fancy" in which the first three lines rhyme with lead and which includes the line: "fancy

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dies / In the cradle where it lies" (3.2.63-72). Clearly, Portia chooses Bassanio. The note

in the correct casket emphasizes the importance of this moment: "hazard." Hazard or risk

is integral to early modern English mercantilism. "English expansion was sustained

through unprecedented forms of capital investment by merchants whose primary concern

was to harness the increasingly abstracted power of capital flow" (Vitkus, "The Common

Market" 23). Bassanio engages in a form of economic investment in the series of

borrowings that occur between him, Antonio, and Shylock for his journey to Belmont.

Vitkus notes the association of capital mercantilism with English expansion. Significantly

the individuals who may participate in this system of capital flow are English subjects

who are not metaphorically gold or silver but rather lead. This moment demonstrates the

economics of choice which is available to the English and denied to the Other. While the

English have the agency to enter into their own bonds, the Others are still bound to their

states of "natural" inferiority.

Jonathan Burton shifts this conversation from the term "bond" to the term

"trafficking." Trafficking indicates the nature of mercantile exchange during the period,

particularly in the Mediterranean.

> We should consider thinking of early modern cultural intercourse not only in
> terms of dominating colonialism, but also in terms of *trafficking*, a term used at
> the time to describe mercantile enterprises and one that more clearly recognizes
> the exchanges and negotiations … that forever changed both European and non-
> European cultures. (59)

Burton's emphasis on trafficking is pertinent to the exchanges and negotiations of general

trade and further expounds upon the presence of the trading of enslaved Africans. As

such, the term bond is still highly relevant as it also indicates the bondage of slavery.

Trafficking, however, indicates a movement of goods and therefore space and place. While not necessarily definite places, the liminal space of the Mediterranean indicates a placelessness of certain goods, particularly the bodies of enslaved Africans. While undeniably "African," it is evident through the term "Moor" that uncertainty and fluidity of identity are essential features of relegating blackness to realms outside of England.

Imperialism: Invasion, Miscegenation, and Expelling the Other

"Nay, take my life and all, pardon not that: / You take my house when you do take the prop / That doth sustain my house; you take my life / When you do take the means whereby I live" (*Merchant* 4.1.370-73).

Early modern English imperialism racialized and sexualized the world. This project was useful in validating efforts to conquer other parts of the world and simultaneously revealed the vulnerability of England to imperial conquest by other nations (namely, the Ottoman Empire). *Merchant* and *Othello* employ Venice, the middle-ground between the English and the Ottomans, to consider the vulnerability of English counter-conquest. "Venice, like England and classical Rome, could more vividly imagine the threat to its borders as a threat of rape" (Little 68). The conflation of land and women provides the opportunity for outsiders to pose a legitimate threat to the land and nation through miscegenation. Palmer interrogates miscegenation in the economic context which it exists for the English, as it refers "to all the ways that people and things 'pass into traffique,' mingle and form attachments" (37). Palmer's use of the concept of "trafficking" incites an economic transaction to cross-cultural encounters as well as sexual relations, forms of intercourse. The verbal and economic exchanges of traffic and trade inform sexual encounters. For Bassanio, the pursuit of monetary gain—from her dowry—drives his suit for Portia, all the while implicating the necessity of financial hazard. Othello, likewise, has an economic purpose in Venice. His employment as a

military general provides him the opportunity for social intercourse with the people of Venice, including Desdemona. But much as Desdemona and Venice are linked by the imperial association of femininity with land, Othello's marriage to Desdemona is a rape of the land and an assault on Venice itself.

To the early modern English audience, this threat of miscegenation and simultaneous conquest is visible in nature. As discussed above with the terms "Jew" and "Moor," categories of Others indicated physical differences. Race, here, comes to indicate a potential speciation, and miscegenation is not just interbreeding but cross-breeding. Sujata Iyengar uses the term "'racialism' to refer to the mistaken notion that such visible differences demonstrated speciation, … that such supposed species could be ranked hierarchically, and that they should not intermarry" (Iyengar 14). Racialism denotes the threat of conversion and conquest. Whereas the English could observe these products of imperialism, they were concerned about their own vulnerability.

The Spanish allusions in *Othello*[11] suggest an English concern for—or at least a consideration of—the Spanish imperial legacy. As traditional rivals, perhaps the English wondered: "How can our empire be better?" Following the conclusion of the Reconquista, Christian reclamation of Iberia from Islamic rule, the Spanish Inquisition indicated a violent insistence on white superiority. Reclaiming the Iberian Peninsula took the Christians hundreds of years. The first Muslim armies crossed the Straights of Gibraltar in 711, and it took until 1085 for a Christian king to reclaim any cities on the

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[11] The three primary examples are: (1) The destruction of the Turkish fleet parallels the destruction of the Spanish Armada; (2) Iago is the Spanish name for James; (3) Othello stabs himself with a "Spanish sword."

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peninsula. By 1492, Ferdinand and Isabella famously conquered Grenada, the last

remaining Muslim kingdom. Throughout this period, Jews, Muslims, and Christians all

went through a series of forced conversions and sometimes massacres. By 1492,

however, the Spanish Christians had instituted their concrete policy of forced Jewish

conversion or expulsion, the Inquisition. They applied the measure to Muslims, as well,

in 1502, although the biggest mass expulsion of Muslims was not carried out until 1609-

14.[12] This series of forced conversions and expulsions was part of a Spanish project of

hierarchizing blood, where pure-blood or blue-blood white Christians were superior to

those "dirtied" by Jewish and Muslim interbreeding. Loomba describes the problems with

the conversion-based practices of the Inquisition. In Spain,

> Conversion was officially required of Jews and Moors, yet it was culturally
> frightening precisely because it called into question the boundary between insider
> and outsider. … Religious conversions also signal the possibility of a reverse
> traffic whereby Christians convert to another faith, another identity, and this was a
> pervasive fear all over Europe. (*Shakespeare, Race, and Colonialism* 105)

Othello and *Merchant* demonstrate this fear of unstable racial categories, where a Jewish

and Moorish presence in Venice—especially a "Moor of Venice"—threatens national

identity and allows for the conversion of white women.[13] As such, Shakespeare's plays

highlight this lack of visible differentiation.

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[12] See García-Arenal for a detailed history of the presence of Jews in Spain during Muslim rule
and Christian conquest. See Harvey for a detailed history of the Muslim presence in Spain after
Christian reconquest. Both of these sources detail the occupations, quality of life, and degrees of
conversion regarding the variety of Jewish and Muslim communities in Spain during this period.

[13] Loomba comes to a similar conclusion: "This is precisely the dynamic that Shakespeare plays
upon in both *Othello* and *The Merchant of Venice*, where Moors and Jews are dangerous precisely
because they are 'of Venice', and where that danger is mirrored by the possibility that Christian
maidens will become part of alien households" (*Shakespeare, Race, and Colonialism* 105).

The full, original title of *Othello—Othello, The Moor of Venice*—incites English

concerns of national identity along with invasion and conquest. Part of the premise of the

play is that Othello must lead the Venetian army against the invading Turks, meeting

them at Cyprus. There is a major storm or tempest on the sea, however, as the fleets

converge upon the island. At the beginning of the second act, a gentleman in Cyprus

announces: "Our wars are done: / The desperate tempest hath so banged the Turks / That

their designment halts" (2.1.20-22). Typically in Shakespeare, a major storm indicates the

instability of the natural order, social order, or of the course of the plot of the play. This

storm could therefore indicate the chaos of Othello's status itself, the chaos of the

military confrontation, or of other sorts of problems within the social order—including

villainous characters. The storm rages on, though, even as the Turks are destroyed.

Through this subtle point, Shakespeare indicates that the invasive threat of the Turks is

not an inherent cause of concern or chaos for the English. The storm continues as Othello

makes his way to the island. Cassio prays, "O, let the heavens / Give him defence against

the elements" (2.1.44-45). By inciting heaven, Cassio indicates a Christianity/nature

duality which serves to protect Othello, in this case ignoring his Moorishness. Nature has

destroyed the enemy Turkish fleet, but the heavens will save Othello. The storm

eventually wanes as Othello approaches the island. The world comes back into order

MacDonald emphasizes the domesticity of women as a racial concern: "The domestication of women and their sexuality facilitated the accomplishment of explicitly racial goals" (MacDonald, "Black Ram, White Ewe" 190). "Brabantio is perhaps even more distressed that Desdemona has chosen a black man who will degrade his lineage than he is that she has dared to choose for herself" (192).

upon his safety, so the chaos indicated by the storm must lie in another character. This

raises the question: Who is ultimately responsible for his demise? If it were natural—

based on his racialization—he too would have died in the storm. His survival should be

visual proof of divine desire for his existence and prosperity.[14]

As I will explore later, Iago initiates a sort of Inquisition against the racialized

body, especially against Othello. Iago's actions directly contradict the natural and divine

suggestions of Othello's worthiness as the nature of the play suggests.

> Shakespeare's suspension of the Turkish aggression forces us to recognize that
> conflict continues as a major issue but in the form of an internal 'race war'
> initiated by the play's resident racist, Iago. In place of the violent clash of military
> warfare, the audience is treated instead to Iago's more covert but no less
> destructive operations that generate Othello's racial anxiety and self-hate. (Smith,
> "We Are Othello" 109)

But even before the destruction of the Turkish fleet, Iago instigates his racial war with

Othello, using Brabantio as a pawn to formally position the Venetian nobility against

Othello. Iago's efforts are initially unsuccessful. When Brabantio challenges Othello in

the Duke's court for "stealing" his daughter, the Duke and court of Venice stand by

Othello due to his reputation and history.

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[14] "Shakespeare's *Othello* draws on early modern anxieties about Ottoman aggression and links them to a larger network of moral, sexual, and religious uncertainty that touched English Protestants directly. In part, the idea of conversion that terrified and titillated Shakespeare's audience was a fear of the loss of both essence and identity in a world of ontological, ecclesiastical, and political instability. Othello's loss of identity is caused by his misidentifications of Iago, Cassio, and Desdemona, the Moor fails to know Desdemona and she is converted in his mind from virgin to whore. His fear of female sexual instability is linked in the play to racial and cultural anxieties about 'turning Turk'—the fear of a 'black' planet that gripped the Europeans in the early modern era as they faced the expansion of Ottoman power" (Vitkus, *Turning Turk* 78).

Interestingly, the potentially similar Duke and court in *Merchant* exhibit far less power in Shylock's trial than with Brabantio's quarrel with Othello. Arguably the impact of the court remains the same in both plays, but the Duke in *Merchant* relies heavily on the input of a learned "doctor" (presumably a lawyer or legal scholar). The called-upon Doctor Bellario is absent, providing a letter for his cousin Portia to represent the law, disguised as Balthasar. Portia, who disguises herself and falsely claims the title of doctor to provide the court with a learned opinion, stands in direct contrast to Shylock who remarks: "I stand here for law" (4.1.142).[15] The legal doctor should be the emblem of legality, not the villain of the play. Portia's manipulation of the law, to me, is a blatantly villainous act which ultimately dismisses the evidence of a natural division between Christians and Jews in favor of a socially constructed one. Kaplan concurs: "While Portia successfully deploys the law that insures Christian physical, and thus social, superiority, in doing so she reveals the constructed nature of this supposedly inherent status" ("Constructing the Inferior Body" 156). Kaplan's emphasis on physical differentiation significantly highlights the confused physical differences between Antonio and Shylock: "Which is the merchant here and which the Jew?" (*Merchant* 4.1.170). Portia's confusion ultimately highlights the lack of inherent, physical differences between Christians and Jews, especially as denoted by the term Jew as discussed above. Portia's "recourse to human law effectively scuttles the theological foundation for the idea of a divinely imposed Jewish inferiority and the embodied difference it was meant to secure" (Kaplan, "Constructing the Inferior Body" 156). Portia depicts the extent to which the law, as a

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[15] Shylock carries balances—the scales of justice (4.1.251-53).

social construct, can be manipulated to be "fair" for Venetians and bent to inhibit and denigrate the Other.

The play highlights a double standard as to how the law is applied. Antonio claims that Venetian law stands for equality, blind to cultural, ethnic, and religious distinctions: "The Duke cannot deny the course of law; / For the commodity that strangers have / With us in Venice, if it be denied, / Will much impeach the justice of the state" (3.3.26-29). Antonio is specifically speaking here about the bond. He and Bassanio understand that they will have to forfeit the bond, leaving Antonio's life at the hands of Shylock. But the Duke cannot deny Shylock's pursuit of a pound of flesh, according to Antonio, because equality of law is important, particularly for such a multinational place of trade like Venice. Portia, at the trial, bends the law to enact punishment upon Shylock as an "alien."

> PORTIA: If it be proved against an alien
> That by direct or indirect attempts
> He seek the life of any citizen,
> The party 'gainst the which he doth contrive
> Shall seize one half his goods, the other half
> Comes to the privy coffer of the state,
> And the offender's life lies in the mercy
> Of the Duke only. (4.1.345-52)

In contrast to Antonio who emphasizes the "justice of the state" as the law must be applied equally to both citizens and foreigners alike, Portia indicates that the law contains clauses which apply only to non-Venetians, to "aliens." The law considers Shylock, who clearly is a Venetian for all practical purposes—he lives in Venice, has raised his daughter in Venice, and conducts his business in Venice—to be an outsider. It is problematic, then, for the law to apply equally to both Venetians and "aliens" yet also

contain aspects of the law which only pertain to "aliens." Shakespeare highlights this double standard, indicating that constructed difference renders social inequality. Rather than a natural or divine illustration of the superiority of whiteness and inferiority of blackness—including Jewishness—*Merchant* indicates that Venetian law, as a socially constructed system is made to benefit those determined to be "Venetian" and subjugate those determined to be Other. "That [Portia] must rely on secular law—a human construct—instead of divinely ordained prophecy indicates the play's rejection of the religious concept of Jewish inferiority" (Kaplan, "Constructing the Inferior Body" 168). But the play maintains that a notion of Jewish inferiority persists which necessitates conversion. Both Shylock and Jessica convert in the play, though neither for religious purposes. Instead, the two convert to perpetuate Christian wealth.

Shylock's conversion is supposedly an act of mercy. Portia initiates this dialogue with her famous "mercy" speech in which she asks Shylock to be merciful and not claim his debt (4.1.180-201). When he insists upon the pound of flesh to which he is owed, Shylock falls into Portia's legal trap. She manipulates the law to punish Shylock for seeking to kill or harm a citizen of Venice. Subject to the penalty of death, the Duke pardons Shylock, which, in this case, is a merciful gesture. Different from today's notion of a pardon—exempt from all punishment—this pardon is a ruling on the degree of the sentence, disallowing the death penalty but allowing other means of punishment. As such, his estate is considered forfeit: half to the state and half to the victim, Antonio. Shylock, defeated, begs: "Nay, take my life and all, pardon not that: / You take my house when you do take the prop / That doth sustain my house; you take my life / When you do

take the means whereby I live" (4.1.370-73). In the rising capitalist context of this play,

Shylock argues that by taking his money, the state takes away his livelihood and

therefore his life. Death would be the merciful option. Instead, the ruling stands and

Antonio continues this falsely merciful scheme. Antonio asks of the court that in place of

his fine, half of the monies of Shylock's estate are bared "upon his death unto the

gentleman / That lately stole his daughter" and that "he presently become a Christian"

(4.1.376-86). With that, the Venetians convert and defeat Shylock.

It is difficult to argue whether or not the original English audience would have

found the mercy of the court to be in good faith. The audience may have taken issue with

the conversion of a community that is largely indistinguishable from the rest of Venice

(or England). Especially in Spain, the upper classes, or the blue-bloods, were fearful of a

potential infiltration of their blood lines and their national boundaries by undercover

Jews, or Conversos.[16] All converted Jews, however, posed some sort of threat, just as the

proverbial Ethiop washed white. What natural boundaries exist between racial groups if

conversion or a bath is sufficient to transcend these divisions? As such, Shakespeare's

audience may have celebrated the entirety of Shylock's punishment which forces him to

convert and takes away his money and goods. This is not a typical Christian conversion.

Palmer identifies a problem here: "Typically, conversion preserves either goods or lives.

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[16] Most scholars use the term "Marranos" here instead of "Conversos." The former tends to refer to those of Jewish descent who pretended to convert to Catholicism but maintained Jewish practices in the home, and the latter mostly refers to those who truly converted. I, however, prefer to use "Conversos" for both categories, as it simply means converts. "Marranos," contrastingly, is a derogatory term which translates to pigs and takes on additionally offensive meanings for a Jewish community who would not have eaten pork.

But here, Shylock loses everything" (59). This conversion is a conquest, where Venice not only ensnares Shylock but also purges his land of its value. Furthermore, it is a conversion which continues to differentiate Shylock from Christian Venetians. If blue-blood elites who converge upon Belmont—the geographical emblem of fairness—exemplify whiteness, then an impoverished Converso (perhaps confined to the ghetto) embodies blackness.

Despite this conclusive note to the scene, the play continuously threatens to erase the boundaries of differentiation between Christians and Jews. For Shylock and Antonio, an erasure of racial differences would mean physical violence upon their bodies, particularly through a simultaneously literal and figurative circumcision. Shylock's quest for Antonio's pound of flesh, to be cut out near the heart, is a circumcision of the heart. With the heart as a symbol of Antonio's Christian soul, the removal of flesh around the heart would effectively convert his soul to Judaism. This is particularly alarming, since the removal of flesh would likely kill Antonio and ultimately deny him access to heaven. At the conclusion of the trial scene, however, Antonio threatens Shylock with an uncircumcision through conversion. A baptism—restorative, healing, and completing— would effectively uncircumcise Shylock, providing him with a figurative regrowth of flesh. Despite the moral connotations of each scenario to the early modern English audience, Shapiro notes: "A threatened circumcision of the heart and a baptism that figuratively uncircumcises" would, in effect, result in an erasure of "the literal or figurative boundaries that distinguish merchant from Jew" (130). While the conclusion of the trial scene finds a way to physically differentiate Shylock and Antonio, there are far

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too many moments throughout the play which confuse the two for the audience to leave the theater comforted.

Jessica's conversion, an elaborate process, provides further confusion about the ability to convert and questions regarding innate differences between racialized religious groups. Jessica, revealing her plan to run away with Lorenzo, demonstrates the lack of a connection between "custom" and "manners." "Alack, what heinous sin is it in me / To be ashamed to be my father's child! / But though I am a daughter to his blood / I am not to his manners. O Lorenzo, / If thou keep promise, I shall end this strife, / Become a Christian and thy loving wife" (2.3.15-20). She refers to the "strife" or conflict between her "blood," which is denigrating, and her "manners," which are purifying. Judaism, which colors her blood and custom, is impermanent to Jessica. She has determined that she will match her manners to Lorenzo's custom by converting and becoming a Christian wife. Further complicating Jessica's racial identity, Lorenzo reads a letter which Jessica has written him. Lorenzo, after reading the letter, notes Jessica as especially "fair" and "white" (2.4.12-14). The letter details "what gold and jewels she is furnished with" (2.4.31). As such, Lorenzo says she is Shylock's "gentle daughter" (2.4.34). Conventional wisdom postulates that Jessica, as a female Other, is a territory available for Lorenzo's conquest. She is therefore a malleable object, convenient to Lorenzo for trafficking along with the "gold and jewels she is furnished with." The phrase "gentle daughter" signals a duality between a tempting object currently in the possession of Jewishness and a "gentle" (a Christian). The phrase provides this slippage between Jewish territory to be sexually claimed by a Christian man and Christian convert.

Yet there is this addendum: Christian *convert*. Does that signal that someone is a Christian, a convert, or something in between? In the final act of the play, Lorenzo and Jessica, happily married, are sitting in Belmont listening to music. Lorenzo says, "Such harmony is in immortal souls" (5.1.63); as the heavens and its orbs make music, the world and good Christians live in harmony and will upon their deaths in heaven. But Jessica replies, "I am never merry when I hear sweet music" (5.1.69). Since Jessica cannot enjoy the music, representative of the heavenly orbs, her conversion may be incomplete, invalid, or otherwise unsuccessful. Carole Levin and John Watkins explain the English association of music with goodly English Christians:

> For the English, the belief that they could truly compose, understand, appreciate, and make beautiful music was part of their sense of superiority. These attitudes were coupled with a belief that those who were 'other,' those who were different, could not appreciate or create beautiful music and thus were that much less truly human or able to reach toward heaven. (102)

Therefore, because Jessica does not appreciate the "sweet music," she remains Other, "much less truly human."[17] Contrastingly, she remains in Belmont, and her marriage to Lorenzo helps to conclude the comedic plot of the play which would seem to indicate a successful Christian conversion. But with compelling evidence for both conclusions, it is impossible to determine if Jessica successfully converted. Zinsser-Krys adds: "The reader or spectator never learns if the conversion was actually successful – this question must have also riddled an Elizabethan audience, which was innately skeptical about Jewish converts" (210). Thus, we return to the problem of the phrase "Christian convert."

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[17] Lancelot foreshadows this conclusion, telling Jessica that she is damned and that marriage and conversion may not be sufficient for mercy in heaven (3.5.1-29).

Above, I highlighted the problems with the understanding of the conversion, but it is apparent from Zinsser-Krys's analysis that we should also question the direction of the conversion. She labels such individuals Jewish converts—those who have converted from Judaism—while I have labeled these people as Christian converts—those who have converted to Christianity. The simultaneous ability for each phrase to implicate conversion of individuals to and from either religion would have provoked, to the early modern English audience, a fear of retribution or counter-imperialism, where an English (or Venetian) woman could be "converted" from Christianity, or, more broadly speaking, "turned Turk."

Like Jessica, Desdemona embodies both fairness and blackness. Due to her lineage, she maintains a sort of emblematic status as the Virgin of Venice, but her agency, and, specifically, her choice of Othello as her husband, dirties her image. "Desdemona the white Venetian daughter becomes, as it proceeds, the sexually tainted woman traditionally condemned as 'black,' … releasing the 'demon' within her own name" (Parker 95). In addition to her marriage to Othello, she further demonizes or blackens herself in her "witty" exchange with Iago and her unfortunate petitioning for Cassio as he holds her metaphorically bloodstained handkerchief. All three of these prominent moments are examples of sexualized exchanges which implicate women in compromising positions, concerning both national and marital fidelity.

Iago demonstrates this fairness/blackness contradiction by providing a series of descriptive paradoxes of women. His first, I believe, is a comment on Desdemona: "If she be fair and wise, fairness and wit, / The one's for use, the other useth it" (2.1.128-9).

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Female fairness is linked to Desdemona as the goddess figure, but Iago asserts that fairness is meant to be used (with a pun on "wit," which can mean either cleverness or vagina): "Female fairness is intended to be damaged in this way ('for use'), setting out, witty or foolish, to undo itself" (Bovilsky 38). "Undo" and "use," of course, refer to sexual use. Her fairness, then, transforms into blackness, as several characters—including Iago and Othello—begin to disregard her for her lack of purity. Iago confronts black and blackness, signifying female promiscuity: "If she be black, and thereto have a wit, / She'll find a white that shall her blackness fit" (2.1.131-2). The first line here, particularly in the employment of the term "wit," correlates the ideas of blackness and sexually promiscuous or "used" women. Whiteness then, in the second line, becomes a sort of perceived cure or salvation for a woman's blackness. Desdemona, therefore, is in danger of sexual corruption, where her fairness is tainted by association with blackness and implied sexual "use." Meanwhile, as she initially embodies a sort of ornamentalism in her fairness, "Desdemona's whiteness is instrumental in producing the negative connotations of Othello's blackness. At the same time, however, Desdemona's agency … leads directly to her progressive and virulent racialization in the play" (Bovilsky 39). Paradoxically, she is the white goddess ("fair and wise") as a contrast to Othello's blackness and then also the black whore ("black, and thereto have a wit") who has been undone and diminished to drag down Othello by association. Significantly, this exchange occurs in the middle-ground setting of Cyprus. Iago ensnares Desdemona by the overlapping and contradictory concepts of whiteness and blackness, graying his

perception of her, causing her to become both goddess and whore, depending on the necessary or opportune perspective.

Iago does much of his work and manipulation in what many call the temptation scene in Act 3. He begins his groundwork by underlining his efforts, dictating to the audience what he is going to do to Othello. His primary assault will be on Othello's reputation: "Good name in man and woman, dear my lord, / Is the immediate jewel of their souls" (3.3.155-56). While a jewel can be stolen for the gain of the thief, Iago seeks no personal gain; he only desires Othello's demise: "But he that filches from me my good name / Robs me of that which not enriches him / And makes me poor indeed" (3.3.160-62). Iago wishes to do more than make Othello poor, though. He utilizes Desdemona's fairness as his point of leverage, suggesting her dishonesty, faithlessness, and undoing to transform and taint her image. By first doing this, and hinting at her theoretical blackness, Iago intends to translate these ideas onto Othello. To make Othello distrust Desdemona and see her in such a negative light, Iago wields "jealousy: / It is the green-eyed monster" (3.3.167-68). After all, Iago paints this image onto Othello. He uses the word three times—in lines 148, 167, and 178—before Othello even says it once. Much like in the opening scene of the play, Othello comes to embody the character which has been prepared for him. Eager to work this idea further into Othello's character, Iago presses the issue, which ultimately elicits Othello's request for the "ocular proof."

Following the introduction of his plan, Iago illustrates the reasons for Othello to be jealous. His primary target is the notion of Desdemona's attraction to Othello as unnatural. After mentioning that Desdemona's attraction to Othello had previously been

called "witchcraft" (3.3.213), Iago guides Othello to believe it: "I see this hath a little dashed your spirits" (3.3.216); "I am to pray you not to strain my speech" (3.3.220); "My lord, I see you're moved" (3.3.226). In this sequence, Iago suggests several times that Othello should be upset and hints at the possibility of making more meaning out of, or "straining" his words. Othello is therefore prompted to consider this possibility: "And yet how nature erring from itself" (3.3.229). Following this concession, Iago drives home the point, being the one "to strain my speech" and enlarge the meaning:

> IAGO: Ay, theres' the point: as, to be bold with you,
> Not to affect many proposèd matches
> Of her own clime, complexion, and degree,
> Whereto we see in all things nature tends—
> Foh! one may smell, in such, a will most rank,
> Foul disproportion, thoughts unnatural. (3.3.230-35)

In highlighting the unlikelihood of Desdemona's attraction to Othello, Iago has stirred up and created jealousy. Quite blatantly, Iago claims that not only is Desdemona's sexual desire ("will") generally disturbing and unruly ("rank"), but it is extraordinarily perverse, being of "foul disproportion, thoughts unnatural." These errors in her thought, he argues, originate in her denial of Brabantio's "proposèd matches" to men suited for her based on their skin color. Not matching this description, Iago tempts Othello into being suspicious. Ultimately, Iago displaces Othello from himself, such that Othello wonders why Iago "hath thus ensnared my soul and body" (5.2.299). Ultimately reduced, he is no longer even Othello, the noble general and great orator: "That's he that was Othello: here I am" (5.2.281).

Iago's, while acting alone, acts in accordance to early modern English racial ideology. He is primarily representative of English society, displaying the racial ideology

present in Shakespeare's England. Intriguingly, there is a strong argument to be made that Iago is Spanish. As an outsider of England himself, he is quickly able to garner insider status and even be considered incredibly "honest" due to his white skin. But as everyone in the play immediately trusts him, he is allowed to exhibit qualities that they condone as English, such as his manipulation of Othello and Desdemona. Shakespeare questions the validity of such tampering, creating a space to examine shortcomings in English social order and the potential benefits of interacting with foreign cultures. The established issue that Shakespeare criticizes emerges from the English fear of differentiation and the lack of active conformity from the outsider: "The operations of patriarchalism seek to extend the control and authority of man as father over women, and white man as father over black men and women. Both black people and women are in need of guidance, yet both threaten to elude and disrupt it" (Loomba, *Gender, Race, Renaissance Drama* 45). Their disruption of social standards, embedded in Othello's climbing of the social ladder and Desdemona's agency, ultimately illuminates Iago as the executioner of English social standards. As the above Loomba quote suggests, Iago is present as a shepherd, ready to kindly guide Othello and Desdemona; and when they step out of line, as they constantly "threaten to elude and disrupt" their guidance, Iago, as "control and authority," will step in to guide them back to properly behave. Significantly, however, Iago exudes corrupt morality, and Othello demonstrates good will and nobility. It is important, then, to note that the characters are all happy to blindly trust Iago, and the audience may have been quick to do the same.

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Conclusion

"You that choose not by the view" (*Merchant* 3.2.131).

Ocular proof. The phrase appears in *Othello* in a moment of dramatic irony. We, the audience, understand that Desdemona has remained faithful to Othello and that Cassio had nothing to do with his possession of the handkerchief. Yet Othello sees the fact that Cassio has the handkerchief as proof that Desdemona has been unfaithful. Much as we understand this staged—and murderous—mistake of relying solely on ocular proof, we must understand Iago's racist agenda, based in ocular proof, as a mistake.

> Iago repeatedly reconfigures the meaning of 'race' and emphasizes the incriminating transparency of blackness to negatively color what the Moor perceives and how he is perceived. Yet what gives Iago's corrosive—we would say 'racist'—discourse both its challenge and its edge, and what contributes crucially to the drama's defining tension, is the all too likely prospect that a Moor *in* Venice could be as well a Moor *of* Venice. (Bartels 159)

But Shakespeare contests the social concern of the difference between "in" and "of." Iago, despite his Spanish name, is ostensibly Venetian. Iago has orchestrated the deaths of several significant characters: Othello, the general of the Venetian army; Desdemona, the emblem of Venice; and Emilia, his wife. And, notably, he has disallowed any sort of definitive re-establishment of public order at the conclusion of the play. While Cassio is expected to punish him, we do not see it, providing Iago with the possibility of acquittal. Most readers understand Iago to be a villain, but not all readers understand the

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significance of the racialized dogma which he perpetuates and which could potentially inspire an audience.

Othello places an emphasis on "reputation." Cassio, removed from Othello's service, tells Iago, "Reputation, reputation, reputation! O, I have lost my reputation! I have lost the immortal part of myself, and what remains is bestial. My reputation, Iago, my reputation!" (2.3.242-44). This quote foreshadows Othello's loss of reputation, as Iago forces the spotlight onto his general at the moment where "what remains is bestial." Significantly, Portia parallels this purging of "the immortal part" of the self when she highlights Shylock's legally fair demands for a pound of Antonio's flesh in a moment which frames him as a ravenous, bloodthirsty villain. For a long time, many audiences and scholars have understood Shylock in this manner, demonstrating the ramifications of this loss of reputation. Remember that Antonio and Bassanio initially considered Shylock to be a reputable money-lender and good business partner, even though they did not like him. These efforts by Venetians to purge their city of the reputations of hard-working, racialized individuals should reflect poorly on their city and society. "Ultimately, at its core Othello is a domestic tragedy, and in the end, we cannot really tell where Venice's story stops and the Moor's story begins, so seamless and boundless is the cross-cultural exchange that Shakespeare stages" (Bartels 190). While Bartels speaks only of Othello, her statements stand for both plays. Her use of the word "exchange" is significant in that it iterates a monetary goal, a desire for profit. For a mercantile economy like Venice's (and England's), killing or merely denigrating foreign or "transplant" merchants inhibits economic prosperity.

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On the one hand, it is economically detrimental to denigrate Othello and Shylock.

On the other, it is simply immoral. Near the conclusion of Othello, Lodovico asks,

"Where is that rash and most unfortunate man?" Othello, still alive, replies, "That's he

that was Othello: here I am" (5.2.280-81). Othello's claim that he "was Othello" indicates

the extent of the damage Iago's Inquisition has had even on living Others. Just as Patricia

Parker highlights Desdemona's fall as a release of the "demon" within her name,

Othello's fall has released the "hell" within his. Othello, concerned that this hell will be

the extent of his reputation, asks for his true story to be told:

> OTHELLO: I pray you, in your letters
> When you shall these unlucky deeds relate,
> Speak of me as I am; nothing extenuate,
> Nor set down aught in malice. Then must you speak
> Of one that loved not wisely, but too well;
> Of one not easily jealous but, being wrought,
> Perplexed in the extreme. (5.2.336-42)

The last line indicates an overwhelming confusion. While Othello is "perplexed" about

the fidelity of his wife, the audience is confused about Othello's "nature." Many scholars

argue that Othello loves or trusts the wrong characters and that he expresses an

extreme—some say innate ("fatal flaw")—jealousy. These conclusions stand in direct

opposition to Othello's telling of the events. Those who maintain that Othello embodies

these inherent characteristics ignore the fact that he has been "wrought." Someone else

made him this way. When Othello asks the dignitaries to "speak of me as I am,"

Shakespeare indicates that there are people, especially in the audience, who are likely to

tell many different and misinformed versions of this story. "Speaking 'of' Othello thus

has multiple overlapping meanings: speaking for him or on his behalf; speaking about

him; and, because of Othello's blackness, speaking about race" (Smith, "We Are Othello" 112). It is our duty, as scholars and readers of this play, to accurately portray Othello's narrative, keep his story present, and consider the racial implications of this story.

Othello's story dictates the racial discussion I have presented in this paper. But it is through *Merchant* that we can understand the roots of the visual culture which permeate early modern English racial ideologies. As perpetuated by art, textiles, and theater, visual culture informs our understanding of mercantile capitalism in the Mediterranean. Cross-cultural encounters paralleled the increasing traffic of English merchants. In these interactions, the English developed a firmer sense of Englishness, what they called whiteness. But this was most easily done by concretely identifying what was Other, all that was blackness. These racial ideologies, paralleled with an increasingly visual culture, informed the notion of absolute physical, natural racial differences. Shakespeare's plays challenge these ideologies, especially problematizing the notion of ocular proof. In *Merchant*, the correct casket in Belmont, lead, has a scroll which praises "you that choose not by the view" (3.2.131).

While you might read my analysis and find that Shakespeare is complicit in the brutalities enacted in these plays, I argue that Shakespeare wrote *The Merchant of Venice* and *Othello* to problematize how members of his audience, as representative of English society at large, are complicit in the brutalities of subjugating and extorting those who they identify—and believe they can ocularly prove—as Other than English in order to further the mercantile goals of English imperialism.

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