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# Othello's Alienation

EDWARD BERRY

Critics have tended to ignore or underplay the issue of Othello's race. The topic of race has always been explosive, particularly when it involves miscegenation, and invites evasiveness. A more significant impulse, however, has been the widespread critical assumption that Shakespeare's plays depict not the particularities but the essentials of the human condition. A.C. Bradley, for example, asserts that "in regard to the essentials of his character" Othello's race is unimportant, and that Shakespeare would have laughed if anyone had congratulated him on "the accuracy of his racial psychology."<sup>1</sup> Robert Heilman calls *Othello* a "drama about Everyman, with the modifications necessary to individualize him."<sup>2</sup> Harold Clarke Goddard argues that Othello is "neither a Negro nor a Moor" but "any man who is more beautiful within than he is without."<sup>3</sup> Jane Adamson claims that Othello's Moorishness "matters only in so far as it is part of a much larger and deeper" issue—the distinction in life between "the 'fated' and the 'free' aspects of the self."<sup>4</sup> This tendency to transcend the particulars of race or culture is not restricted to those critics most sympathetic to Othello, for, in their famous critiques of Othello's egotism and self-delusion, neither F.R. Leavis nor T.S. Eliot even alludes to such matters; both treat Othello's moral flaws as universals.<sup>5</sup> The weight of critical tradition, then, presents a Shakespeare who finds racial and cultural difference insignificant and who assimilates his Moor into the "human" condition.<sup>6</sup>

Critics impressed by the importance of Othello's Moorishness have tended to respond in two quite different ways. Some, like

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Albert Gerard and Laurence Lerner, have argued that Othello is fundamentally savage. For Gerard, "Othello's negroid physiognomy is simply the emblem of a difference that reaches down to the deepest levels of personality. . . . Othello is, in actual fact, what Iago says he is, a 'barbarian'."<sup>7</sup> Laurence Lerner calls *Othello* "the story of a barbarian who (the pity of it) relapses" and concludes that Shakespeare "suffered from colour prejudice."<sup>8</sup> For such critics the play is a study of a character whose innate savagery is disguised by a thin veneer of civilization and Christianity.

A more persuasive and influential response to Othello's Moorishness has been to contrast Shakespeare's treatment of race with that of his contemporaries. Both G.K. Hunter and Eldred Jones, in particular, have argued that Shakespeare invokes the negative Elizabethan stereotypes of Africans only to discredit them. According to Hunter, the play "manipulates our sympathies, supposing that we will have brought to the theatre a set of careless assumptions about 'Moors'. It assumes also that we will find it easy to abandon these as the play brings them into focus and identifies them with Iago, draws its elaborate distinction between the external appearance of devilishness and the inner reality."<sup>9</sup> Jones praises Shakespeare for his "complete humanization of a type character."<sup>10</sup> Despite their emphasis on the issue of race, both Jones and Hunter ultimately take a position very similar to that held by the critics who transcend it altogether. The same can be said of Richard Marienstras's insightful treatment of Othello's alienation and of Martin Orkin's recent and very useful account of racism within the play and within its critical and theatrical traditions.<sup>11</sup> Once such critics conclude that Othello is not a stereotype, he tends to lose his individuality as a Moor and to become a representative of humanity.

Although I agree broadly with the arguments of Jones and Hunter, it seems to me important to appreciate the particularity of Shakespeare's portrait and its resistance both to negative stereotyping and abstract universalizing. There is little question that in choosing Othello for his protagonist Shakespeare sought to create a realistic portrait of a Moor. The protagonist in his source, Cinthio's *Gli Hecatommithi*, is a mere stereotype, noteworthy in Venice only for being black, jealous, and vengeful. Shakespeare's protagonist is not only richly complicated but individualized and set apart from Venetian society in almost every respect—in his blackness, his past, his bearing, and, above all, his language, with its unusual rhythms, grandeur, and exoticism. As Lois Whitney

has shown, moreover, many of Othello's specific attributes probably derive from Shakespeare's reading of Leo Africanus, whose *Geographical Historie of Africa*, translated by John Pory, was published in London in 1600.<sup>12</sup> Whitney shows that Pory's description of Leo's life is remarkably like Othello's. He too was a Moor of noble descent, an inveterate wanderer in exotic lands, a convert to Christianity; he too was once sold into slavery and redeemed. Leo's descriptions of the Moors, in addition, emphasize many of the attributes that critics have noted in Othello: simplicity, credulity, pride, proneness to extreme jealousy and anger, and courage in war.

If Shakespeare depended upon Leo Africanus for such details, he must have been much more interested in "racial psychology" than critics such as Bradley or Heilman suggest. His interest, of course, was not anthropological in the modern sense. As Whitney makes clear, he seems to have constructed not a member of a particular society but a composite "African," a synthesis of details drawn from Leo's descriptions of both "tawny" and "black" Moors. In this, he was doubtless encouraged by the looseness of Leo's own terminology, which blurs distinctions among the various groups he describes. Although such synthesizing may be anthropologically suspect, in an Elizabethan context it represents a progressive movement away from medieval stereotypes to recorded experience. Leo's varied and balanced view of the people of Africa made possible a composite far more complex and balanced than that provided by the familiar negative stereotype. While not ethnographically accurate, such thinking frees one to imagine authentic cultural difference.

If we consider the "African" attributes that Shakespeare probably took from Leo Africanus, we can see in the characterization of Othello complex gestures towards cultural differentiation. Othello's "African" qualities are presented from two sides. Iago calls Othello a "credulous fool" (IV.i.45), for example, but he also alludes to his "free and open nature" (I.iii.399).<sup>13</sup> Othello's pride appears at times as vanity, at times as rightful self-respect. His passionate nature leads to murderous violence, but it also contains deep love and tenderness. His courage serves him well in war but is ill-adapted to the complexities of peace.<sup>14</sup> Othello's reactions to the stress created by Iago do bring to the surface what seem to be latent or repressed aspects of his "Moorishness": his uncontrollable passion, for example, his superstitious interpretation of the handkerchief, or his ritualistic attempt to make the murder of

Desdemona a sacrifice. But neither his character nor the cause of the tragedy can be reduced to some innate savage impulse. Shakespeare's portrayal of Othello takes important steps towards cultural concreteness but does not end in psychological determinism. Othello is neither Everyman nor an inhuman savage.

In responding to Othello, then, it is important to recognize both the concreteness and complexity of his "Africanness." Paradoxically, however, Othello's "Africanness" is crucial to his tragedy not because of what he is, innately or culturally, but because of how he is perceived, by others and by himself. In this sense, *Othello*, like Faulkner's *Light in August*, is a tragedy of perception.

To develop this point, as I shall do for the remainder of this essay, it might help to begin with Tzvetan Todorov's recent book, *The Conquest of America*.<sup>15</sup> Todorov argues that, from the time of Columbus, the early Spanish explorers and missionaries tended to view the New World Indians in one of two ways: either as essentially the same as Europeans and therefore worthy of assimilation; or as essentially different and inferior, worthy of enslavement and destruction. According to Todorov, the Spaniards could not imagine that the Indians might be equally human but culturally different, neither inferior nor in need of assimilation. Failing to recognize the cultural integrity of the Indians, the Spaniards could only project upon them their own values. For them, the Indians were either not fully human, or, if human, merely latent Spaniards, awaiting Christianity and civilization.

Todorov's book is highly speculative and betrays some of the limitations of a non-specialist in the field.<sup>16</sup> Nonetheless, it offers an extremely suggestive paradigm of early colonial attempts to rationalize contact with the "other." Todorov's description of the two opposing ways of defining and ultimately oppressing the "other," moreover, provides a remarkably useful framework for Shakespeare's tragedy. As we shall see, both the Venetians and Othello himself tend to view Othello from one or the other of Todorov's poles. He is either assimilated into Europe or expelled from humanity.

To understand Othello's predicament, one must appreciate not only his "Africanness" but his position as a black man in Venetian society; he is the Moor of Venice.<sup>17</sup> The fact of Othello's alienation is the play's most striking visual effect. One can imagine something of the original impact upon Shakespeare's audience by viewing the Longleat drawing of a scene from *Titus Andronicus*, reproduced in the Riverside edition (Plate 9), in which Aaron the Moor, by

virtue of his intense blackness and physical position, stands alone. Othello's blackness is not only a mark of his physical alienation but a symbol, to which every character in the play, himself included, must respond. The potential impact of his physical appearance upon audiences is suggested by Charles Lamb's frank admission that although he could find Othello admirable in the reading he was only repelled by the figure of a "*coal-black Moor*" on stage; he concluded that the play should be read, not seen.<sup>18</sup> According to Margaret Webster, modern audiences were stunned more constructively by the first appearance of Paul Robeson in the role: "Here was a great man, a man of simplicity and strength; here also was a black man. We believed that he could command the armies of Venice; we knew that he would always be alien to its society."<sup>19</sup>

The most dramatic reactions to Othello's blackness within the play are those of Iago and Roderigo in the opening scene. Their overt and vicious racism provides the background for Othello's first appearance. For Iago Othello is "an old black ram" (I.i.88), "the devil" (I.i.91), and a "Barbary horse" (I.i.111); the consummation of his marriage is a making of "the beast with two backs" (I.i.115-16). Roderigo, who shares Iago's disgust, speaks of Desdemona's "gross revolt" (I.i.134) and the "gross clasps of a lascivious Moor" (I.i.126). As Jones and Hunter have shown, these characters evoke, in a few choice epithets, the reigning stereotype of the African on the Elizabethan stage. Othello is black, and his blackness connotes ugliness, treachery, lust, bestiality, and the demonic. This poisonous image of the black man, as we shall see, later informs Othello's judgment of himself. Although Iago's notorious artistry is usually linked to his capacity to shape a plot, it extends as well to characterization, for the Othello he in many ways creates comes to see himself as his own stereotype.

Although he lacks Iago's sardonic wit, Brabantio shares his imagery of blackness, for his rage at Othello expresses the same racism Iago and Roderigo had incited in the streets of Venice. Brabantio has often entertained Othello and, with Desdemona, listened to his tales. Yet the discovery that his daughter has married the Moor releases in him violent feelings of fear, hatred, and disgust. He accuses Othello of being a "foul thief," of being "damned," of arousing Desdemona's love by witchcraft (I.ii.62), of working against her by "practices of cunning hell" (I.iii.102), of being a bond-slave and pagan (I.ii.99). At the root of his amazement and outrage is physical revulsion; he cannot believe that his

daughter would "run from her guardage to the sooty bosom / Of such a thing as thou—to fear, not to delight!" (I.ii.70-71). This sense of Othello as a revolting object, a "thing," recurs with tragic irony at the end of the play, when Lodovico turns away from the corpses of Othello and Desdemona on the marriage bed and orders, "The object poisons sight, / Let it be hid" (V.ii.364-65). The tragic culmination of Othello's repulsiveness is a sight that must be hidden.

Emilia is an even subtler study in latent racist feeling than Brabantio. Up to the point of the murder, she never alludes to Othello's race; nor is her relationship to him in any way remarkable. She serves her lady, commiserates with her when her marriage turns sour, defends her against Othello's attacks, and generalizes her frustration with him into cynical comments about all men. When Othello confronts her with his murder of Desdemona, however, she explodes with suppressed racial hatred:

*Othello.* She's like a liar gone to burning hell:  
'Twas I that killed her.

*Emilia.* O, the more angel she,  
And you the blacker devil!

(V.ii.129-31)

Even though the emotion of the moment centers upon the fact of the murder, what Emilia reveals about herself in the use of the word "blacker" is startling. Her cynical attitude towards men has apparently masked a revulsion against Othello's blackness. Having exposed his evil, Othello becomes for her a "blacker devil," the phrase revealing that in her imagination he has always been a black devil. He also becomes Desdemona's "most filthy bargain" (V.ii.157), a creature "as ignorant as dirt" (V.ii.164). As she learns more about Iago's responsibility for the crime, Emilia becomes less violent in her outrage—Othello becomes more fool than devil—but she dies with no change in these feelings of abhorrence and contempt. Her savage and reductive outburst of racist feeling at this crucial moment in the play enables audiences to vent and, ideally, to exorcise their own latent hostility, as well as their suspicions that Othello would eventually conform to type. Emilia's violent reductivism may enhance an audience's awareness, even at this point in the play, of Othello's humanity.

Desdemona loves Othello and dies defending him against the charge of her own murder. Yet she is perhaps the subtlest victim of

Venetian racism. Brabantio ascribes her love to witchcraft because he cannot believe that she could otherwise overcome the horror of Othello's blackness—"and she, in spite of nature, / Of years, of country, credit, every thing, / To fall in love with what she fear'd to look on!" (I.iii.96-98). Brabantio's imputation of fear in Desdemona may be in part a projection of his own emotion, but Othello himself later confirms her reaction when he agrees with Iago's assertion that she "seem'd to shake and fear your looks" (III.iii.207). Desdemona too provides implicit confirmation when she tells the Duke "I saw Othello's visage in his mind" (I.iii.252). This implicit denial of physical attraction shows that Desdemona tries to separate Othello's essential humanity from his appearance, but it also shows that she is sensitive to and disquieted by the insinuations that there must be something unnatural in such a love. She does not say that she found Othello's blackness beautiful but that she saw his visage in his mind.

More significant than this, however, is the sense of cultural estrangement that is woven into the love itself. Othello's exoticism is deeply attractive to Desdemona—she loves him for the adventures he has passed—but it also contributes to her undoing. This sense of estrangement helps to explain what to many critics has seemed a paradox in Desdemona's behavior: the contrast between her independence and aggressiveness in Venice and her helplessness and passivity in Cyprus. She is secure among Venetians, insecure and uneasy in her marriage to a man she does not fully understand. Although Iago is wrong in ascribing to her the licentiousness that he calls the Venetian "disposition," she responds to Othello's jealousy with the tragically inappropriate reflexes of a Venetian lady. She attempts to win favor by coyness and indirection—teasing Othello about Cassio, equivocating about the lost handkerchief, asking Emilia to make the bed with their wedding sheets. Such gestures are intensely ironic not just because they tend to work against her but because they reflect her lack of understanding of Othello. In her struggle to comprehend, she turns not to him for explanation but to fellow Venetians—to Emilia, who responds only with cynicism, and to Iago, who responds with hypocritical sympathy. Perhaps the subtlest and most pathetic indication of Desdemona's estrangement comes when she answers Emilia's rhetorical question—"Is he not jealous?"—with, "Who, he? I think the sun where he was born / Drew all such humors from him" (III.iv.29-30). Audiences need not have read Leo Africanus to note the pathetic irony in this, for the linkage between hot climates

and hot passions was an Elizabethan cliché. The cultural gap between Othello and Desdemona confirms John Bayley's observation that the play is "a tragedy of incomprehension, not at the level of intrigue but at the very deepest level of human dealings."<sup>20</sup>

Perhaps the most pervasive sign of Othello's alienation is to be found in the use or, more precisely, the avoidance of Othello's name. The Folio title, *Othello: the Moor of Venice*, presents two alternatives: the one implying assimilation, the other alienation. Within the play, broadly speaking, characters can be divided by their preference for one or the other: the more racist the character, the less the inclination to use Othello's name. Iago refers to Othello by name only five times; he calls him "the Moor" more than twenty times. Roderigo never refers to Othello by name, calling him "the Moor" twice, "the thicklips" once. Brabantio too never uses Othello's name, nor does Emilia; the former calls him "the Moor" three times, the latter, eight. Among these characters the naming of Othello becomes an exercise in reducing the individual to a class, the person to an object. Othello is a "thing" long before the image of his body and Desdemona's "poisons sight."

Characters without overt racial hostility tend to use Othello's name more often, and when they call him "the Moor," as they almost all do, they tone down the label's negative connotations by means of positive adjectives, as in Montano's "the noble Moor" (II.iii.138). Montano uses the name twice, the epithet three times. Cassio uses the name once, the epithet once. Desdemona refers to Othello only once by name, four times by epithet, softening it twice in the phrases "the Moor, my lord" (I.iii.189) and "my noble Moor" (III.iv.26). The only character in the play who restricts himself to Othello's name is the Duke, who does so twice in the "trial scene," for obviously political reasons: he almost ignores Brabantio's entrance, so intent is he upon securing "valiant" Othello's assistance in the present emergency. That even the play's sympathetic characters tend to label Othello "the Moor" betrays the pervasiveness of his alienation. Iago's malicious "I hate the Moor" (I.iii.366) is a far cry from Desdemona's loving, "the Moor, my lord." But even her phrase implies an awareness of difference that estranges. Throughout the play, the naming of Othello keeps an audience subtly conscious of the impossibility of Othello's complete assimilation and gives to his numerous self-references, as in "That's he that was Othello" (V.ii.284), a special weight.

Racial tension of some kind thus affects Othello's relationship with every character in the play, and it operates within the boundaries suggested by Todorov, ranging from Iago's blatant racism to Desdemona's naive and uncertain assimilationism. The central question is how such tension affects Othello. Perhaps one should start with an effect it might have but does not. One possible response to racial antagonism is an aggressive assertion of one's own identity. Shylock never apologizes for his Jewishness but matches his Christian enemies insult for insult. Aaron the Moor in *Titus Andronicus* draws subversive power from a total commitment to his own blackness; in protecting his black child, he challenges Tamora's sons with an assertion of the superiority of black to white—"Coal-black is better than another hue, / In that it scorns to bear another hue" (IV.ii.99-100). Othello never defends his blackness; nor does he defend the religion or culture that lies behind him. The most rootless of Shakespeare's tragic heroes, he has no geographical or cultural anchor to his being. He is not only a convert but has been, from the age of seven, a wanderer; in Roderigo's sarcastic phrase, he is an "extravagant and wheeling stranger / Of here and every where" (I.i.136-37).

Given the lack of information available to Elizabethans on African cultures, even in Leo Africanus, Shakespeare might have had Othello's rootlessness virtually forced upon him; representing a homeless wanderer perhaps offered him a way of dramatizing alienation without the necessity of creating a credible cultural background. If so, Shakespeare turned this ethnographic defect into an imaginative virtue, for Othello's very lack of a cultural identity becomes a powerful ingredient in his tragedy. Othello's alienation goes much deeper than Shylock's, for he is estranged not only from Venetian society but, as a "wheeling stranger," from his own. Perhaps because of this Othello defines his identity from the outside, drawing upon images created by Venetian society—images which, as we have seen, reproduce Todorov's dichotomies. Throughout the play, Othello sees himself either as an exotic Venetian, a convert in the fullest sense, capable of complete assimilation, or he sees himself as a barbarian, worthy of destruction. His failure to break free of this constricting framework, to achieve a true sense of personal identity, is one of the play's most powerful sources of tragic feeling.

Such a claim may seem paradoxical for a character whom critics often accuse of pride and whose first appearance seems to demonstrate a magisterial self-confidence. Othello's first action in the

play is to brush aside Iago's warning of Brabantio's challenge to the marriage. "My parts, my title, and my perfect soul, / Shall manifest me rightly" (I.ii.31-32), he claims. He asserts that his own social status is worthy of Desdemona—"I fetch my life and being / From men of royal siege" (I.ii.21-22)—and that his past services to the state will guarantee his security: "My services, which I have done the signiory, / Shall out-tongue his [Brabantio's] complaints" (I.ii.18-19). Here and throughout the play Othello's language is often rhetorically inflated; Shakespeare even calls attention to this quality in Iago's mocking allusion to Othello's "bumbast circumstance" (I.i.13). The inner cause of this language is not pride, however, as moralistic critics contend, but insecurity of the kind the Player Queen reveals when Hamlet accuses her of protesting too much. Challenged by Brabantio, Othello surely knows that he has crossed a dangerous line; he has, after all, eloped. In asserting so grandly his imperviousness to attack, Othello is not proud and foolishly complacent but, as later events confirm, somewhat naive and secretly insecure.

When his marriage is challenged, Othello rests his defense upon his abilities, his rank, his virtue, and his service to the state. As the attitudes of Iago, Roderigo, and Brabantio make clear, however, none of these is relevant to the most fundamental threat he poses, that of miscegenation, embodied in Iago's nightmarish image of the "beast with two backs." Brabantio calls attention to the disparities in years, social status, and religion that separate Othello from Desdemona, but his anguish centers on the unnaturalness of the marriage; what obsesses him is Othello's "sooty bosom," his status as a "thing." Othello has no defense against such unreasoning hatred, and it is no surprise that he does not recognize overtly the possibility of its existence. The threat of miscegenation is the play's hidden nightmare, and it cannot be overcome by arguments about virtue or service to the state.

Nor is it. What saves Othello's marriage, the "trial scene" makes clear, is not Othello's "perfect soul" but political expediency. Preoccupied as he is by fears of a Turkish attack, the Duke greets Othello effusively, scarcely noticing Brabantio's presence. Upon hearing Brabantio's complaint, he promises him the "bloody book of law" (I.iii.67), but as soon as he discovers that Othello is the accused, he urges moderation and acceptance of the marriage. He accepts the stories of Othello and Desdemona without demur, and once Brabantio capitulates, he pushes on to the military threat that is uppermost in his mind. Brabantio's anger is not mollified; nor

are his charges of unnaturalness answered, merely suppressed. The threat of Othello's blackness cannot be submerged entirely, however, for it surfaces in Desdemona's need to rationalize her attraction—"I saw Othello's visage in his mind" (I.iii.252)—and in the Duke's attempt to placate Brabantio: "If virtue no delighted beauty lack, / Your son-in-law is far more fair than black" (I.iii.289-90). Although the "trial scene" ostensibly vindicates Othello, it actually reveals his vulnerability. The threat represented by Othello's blackness is not extinguished by the Turkish invasion, as Brabantio's parting words make clear: "Look to her, Moor, if thou hast eyes to see, / She has deceiv'd her father, and may thee" (I.iii.292-93).

The implications of the "trial scene" extend throughout the play. Iago carries forward Brabantio's attack upon Othello, with better success, and once the Turkish threat is removed, Othello is left vulnerable both within and without, prey to the complex interaction of psychological and social forces that occasion his downfall. The longstanding critical controversy surrounding the character of Othello, with its tendency to polarize responses into sentimental defenses or moralistic attacks, has done justice neither to the protagonist nor to the play as a whole. If I can do so without adding to this critical reductivism, I should like to focus on a single element in the unfolding of Othello's tragedy which the critical debate has tended to obscure and which does much to explain Othello's tendency towards self-dramatization, his susceptibility to Iago, his fury at Desdemona, and his final attempts at self-justification. This is his anxiety about his blackness.

Othello is often accused of self-dramatization, and at some level the charge is difficult to deny. His account of his courtship before the Duke is certainly dramatic and, despite his disclaimer, rhetorically effective. As he himself admits, moreover, he has used the same skills upon Desdemona, first provoking in her the desire to hear his stories, drawing from her "a prayer of earnest heart / That I would all my pilgrimage dilate" (I.iii.152-53), and then pretending to "consent" (I.ii.155) to the very request he had contrived. In his courting as well as in his defense before the Duke, Othello is rhetorically manipulative.

To see this behavior as self-dramatizing, however, and especially to moralize it as a symptom of pride, is to ignore its underlying cause. In the case of his courtship, Othello's alienation forces him to woo Desdemona indirectly, and only after she has hinted at her attraction. More importantly, what we tend to call self-

dramatization has almost nothing of self in it. Othello tells Desdemona stories. Such tales were the stock in trade of all travellers, and Shakespeare later mocks them in *Antony and Cleopatra*, when Enobarbus regales his fellow Romans with the wonders of Egypt. Through these tales Othello reveals little about himself except, by implication, his rootlessness: he has been a warrior and wanderer since his "boyish days." Desdemona falls in love not with Othello's self but with his adventures: "She lov'd me for the dangers I had pass'd" (I.iii.167). What she responds to is more properly called self-creation than self-dramatization, for through his stories Othello attempts to shape an image of himself that will win acceptance in Venice and, by his own admission, awaken Desdemona's love. Paradoxically, this image does not dramatize difference but identity; it reduces alienation to adventures. Othello presents himself not as an African but as an exotic Venetian. As Stephen Greenblatt has argued, Othello's "identity depends upon a constant performance . . . of his 'story,' a loss of his own origins, an embrace and perpetual reiteration of the norms of another culture."<sup>21</sup>

This kind of self-creation does not represent conscious deception on Othello's part but a belief in the possibility of assimilation; the self he shapes for his audience is that to which he aspires. He is a Christian convert, and the Christian doctrine of the equality of all human souls opens the way to such assimilation. Behind this aspiration, however, lies anxiety—the anxiety of the convert, who struggles to see himself as a member of a community from which he has been alienated. It is this insecurity that Iago exploits to set Othello's downfall in motion.

In Act III scene iii, Iago begins his temptations. He first awakens Othello's suspicions of Cassio, then warns him against the dangers of jealousy. As in Act I scene ii, when Iago had warned him against Brabantio, Othello attempts to brush aside the warning, expressing his faith in Desdemona's virtue and his own worth. His defense of himself, however, merely exposes his inner fears: "Nor from mine own weak merits will I draw / The smallest fear or doubt of her revolt, / For she had eyes, and chose me" (III.iii.187-89). Coming after Brabantio's contemptuous reference to his "sooty bosom," the Duke's allusion to his blackness, and Desdemona's "I saw Othello's visage in his mind," this reliance upon Desdemona's eyes is unnervingly ironic. Desdemona chose Othello not because of but in spite of her eyes, sublimating spiritually the visage Brabantio says she feared to look upon. Othello's allusion to

Desdemona's eyes conveys the inner truth of a Freudian slip: he seizes for his defense a subject of deep anxiety.

Iago senses this anxiety, for he turns immediately to the matter of Othello's alienation. He first establishes his own credentials as an insider, privy to the ways of Venetian women: "I know our country disposition well: / In Venice they do let [God] see the pranks / They dare not show their husbands" (III.iii.201-203). Then he reminds Othello of Brabantio's parting threat, that one betrayal would lead to another: "She did deceive her father, marrying you, / And when she seem'd to shake and fear your looks, / She lov'd them most" (III.iii.206-208). Othello's admission, "And so she did," marks the erosion of his faith in Desdemona's eyes, for he allows that her reaction to his visage might have actually signalled her potential for betrayal.

As Othello begins to rationalize this possibility—"And yet how nature erring from itself" (III.iii.227)—Iago interrupts him and, with unusual intensity, twists his words so that they allude to the unnaturalness of the marriage:

Ay, there's the point; as (to be bold with you)  
Not to affect many proposed 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 disproportions, thoughts unnatural.

(III.iii.228-33)

Iago immediately backs away from this line of thought, for he sees he has touched a nerve in Othello. That he is nearly trapped by his own rhetoric suggests that he himself is moved, carried away by some inner loathing of black sexuality. Whatever his motives, his words remain with Othello, for his insinuation that Desdemona is not only deceptive but sexually perverse, titillated by an unnatural love, later haunts Othello's imagination.

This first phase of Iago's temptation ends with a soliloquy, in which Othello, now deeply suspicious, attempts to find a motive for Desdemona's infidelity. The speech is masterfully evasive:

Haply, for I am black,  
And have not those soft parts of conversation  
That chamberers have, or for I am declin'd  
Into the vale of years (yet that's not much),  
She's gone. I am abus'd, and my relief

Must be to loathe her. O curse of marriage!  
 That we can call these delicate creatures ours,  
 And not their appetites! I had rather be a toad  
 And live upon the vapor of a dungeon  
 Than keep a corner in the thing I love  
 For others' uses. Yet 'tis the plague [of] great ones,  
 Prerogativ'd are they less than the base;  
 'Tis destiny unshunnable, like death.  
 Even then this forked plague is fated to us  
 When we do quicken.

(III.iii.263-77)

In these lines Othello struggles to evade the deepest source of his anxiety. His first thought is of his blackness. And well it should be. His blackness is the cause of Brabantio's opposition to his marriage, it affects the consciousness of everyone around him, and it has just been pressed upon him by Iago's insinuations of Desdemona's unnaturalness. That he goes on to trivialize this impediment, equating it syntactically with his inadequacies in the "soft parts of conversation" or in years, is deeply irrational. He cannot probe the real cause of his anxiety because to do so would be utterly destructive, leaving him with only two options: to embrace his blackness and hurl its beauty and power in the face of his enemies, as does Aaron in *Titus Andronicus*, or to internalize their image of him and yield to self-loathing. Either choice would proclaim his complete alienation. Instead, he places himself within another heroic fiction, this one as fatalistic as the truth but self-vindicating. If cuckolding is the destiny of great ones, then Othello is not alienated but assimilable: his betrayal becomes not the mark of an outcast but of a noble Venetian.

Having been convinced of Desdemona's treachery, Othello projects his self-loathing upon her. In his diseased imagination she becomes, paradoxically, the stereotype of the Moor: cunning, "black," sexually depraved, and diabolic. He calls her at various times a "slave" (III.iii.442), a "lewd minx" (III.iii.476), a "fair devil" (III.iii.479), and a "subtile whore" (IV.ii.21). This transformation of white virgin into "fair devil" is doubly ironic: not only does Desdemona become the opposite of herself; she becomes the image of disgusting sensuality that Iago had conjured up of Othello in the first scene of the play. Infected by Iago's imagery of licentiousness, Othello converts Desdemona into his own alter-ego, subjecting her to the same abuse that Roderigo and Iago had hurled against him in the streets of Venice. Othello's sexual

disgust is thus not merely a "universal" symptom of repressed sexuality, as has often been argued, but is deeply implicated in the specific question of race.<sup>22</sup>

Othello finds Desdemona's betrayal horrifying not only because she corrupts herself but because her "blackness" confirms his: "[Her] name, that was as fresh / As Dian's visage, is now begrim'd and black / As mine own face" (III.iii.386-88). In part, his grief is expressed in fear and rage at the prospect of his lost reputation; the Folio text even replaces "Her name" with "My name" in the above quotation. At its deepest level, however, his anguish derives from his identification of himself, through love, with Desdemona. What he cannot endure, finally, is the loss or perversion of this love:

But there, where I have garner'd up my heart,  
Where either I must live or bear no life;  
The fountain from the which my current runs  
Or else dries up: to be discarded thence!  
Or keep it as a cestern for foul toads  
To knot and gender in!

(IV.ii.57-62)

Desdemona is the pure source of Othello's being: his current runs from her fountain. He cannot dissociate himself from her corruption, therefore, for he takes his life from her. The ultimate horror for Othello is that this pure fountain should become a dark and loathsome place, full of repulsive, bestial sensuality. The knotting toads bring to mind Iago's repulsive image of the beast with two backs, the very nightmare of black sensuality that haunts the imagination of Venice and that Othello has tried to repress.

In the murder scene, what Othello tries to kill is thus in some sense his own blackness. By taking upon himself the role of Justice, he attempts to fulfill his obligation as defender of the state, suppressor of those dark and passionate forces that threaten to undermine it. To maintain this role, he must struggle against his own passion, in his eyes the sign of his susceptibility to the evil Desdemona has committed. Hence he recoils from the loving sensuality her image evokes, a sensuality that might have saved her, and, when angered by her refusal to confess, he tries to stifle the rage that eventually turns his "sacrifice" (V.ii.65) into a murder. The deepest terror of this scene arises not from Othello's violent passion, as it would have if Shakespeare had chosen to dramatize the reversion of a savage to type, but from his steely efforts to suppress his emotion in the interests of a higher law.

The final moments of the play show Othello attempting to absorb the meaning of his terrible deed. His first response is a familiar evasiveness: "Who can control his fate?" (V.ii.265). But this effort to absorb his evil into a heroic "Venetian" self cannot be sustained. Prompted by the sight of the dead Desdemona, he confronts directly the horror of his responsibility and condemns himself to a black and burning hell: "O cursed, cursed slave! / Whip me, ye devils, / From the possession of this heavenly sight!" (V.ii.276-78). His immediate reaction to the murder thus reflects his divided image of himself: he is either doomed like all great men or destroyed by his own blackness.

Othello's final speech attempts to repair this inner division, to assert the emotional truth of the two contradictory self-images that have haunted him throughout the play. In a paradox that can only be resolved in death, Othello becomes imaginatively both the "Venetian" hero, doing service to the state by killing a treacherous Turk, and the treacherous infidel himself: "I took by th' throat the circumcised dog, / And smote him—thus" (V.ii.355-56). This is Othello's final narrative self-creation, but it no more captures an essential self than any of his earlier stories.<sup>23</sup> Neither singly nor together do these images of a "Venetian" hero or "Turkish" savage portray the truth of Othello as a man. Even in his own imagination he cannot see himself as both different and human. He attempts to transcend the constricting framework of assimilation or inferiority not by breaking free of it but by asserting, in death, that its opposite extremes are both true. This gesture cannot be called one of self-recognition, moreover, because both selves are artificial constructs, imposed upon Othello by his own internalizing of the Venetian mentality. Hence the pathos and terror at the heart of his final speech derive ultimately from the fact that Othello is to the end all narrative, and narrative directed from outside. Othello dies in a story he tells, but it is framed by assumptions that deny him an authentic self.

Othello's alienation, then, is central to the play. It is important not merely because Shakespeare portrays Othello as a Moor or because racial tension and anxiety pervade the atmosphere of Venetian society, affecting Othello's relationship with every character and increasing his susceptibility to Iago's appeal; it is important because Othello himself, in his aspirations towards assimilation and anxieties about his blackness, internalizes a false dichotomy that can only dehumanize him. A rootless wanderer, Othello defines himself in Venetian terms, as an exotic European

or a brutal savage, or, in the final paradox of his death, as both. In Todorov's terms, he tries to unite the opposing images of his own oppression.

I have suggested that in representing Othello's "Africanness" without resorting to negative stereotyping of racial difference or to abstract universalizing of the human essence, Shakespeare stretched the mental framework of the age, thrusting upon audiences a more sympathetic understanding of the alien than was customarily available. Shakespeare's most penetrating insight into the nature of alienation, however, does not arise from his characterization of Othello as a Moor, which is inevitably deficient in cultural depth and resonance, but in the way in which the racial atmosphere that Othello breathes determines his own responses to his tragic predicament. The most disastrous consequence of racial alienation for Othello is not the hostility or estrangement of the Venetians but his own acceptance of the framework within which they define him. In his incapacity to break free of this mental construct, to affirm his own identity, as do Shylock and Aaron, Othello becomes a double victim of the early colonial imagination, an alien to others and himself.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>A.C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy* (1904; rpt. London: Macmillan, 1941), p. 187.

<sup>2</sup>Robert Heilman, *Magic in the Web* (Lexington: Univ. Press of Kentucky, 1956), p. 139.

<sup>3</sup>Harold Clarke Goddard, *Alphabet of the Imagination*, ed. Eleanor Goddard Worthen and Margaret Goddard Holt (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1974), p. 81.

<sup>4</sup>Jane Adamson, *"Othello" as Tragedy* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1980), pp. 7-8.

<sup>5</sup>F.R. Leavis, "Diabolic Intellect and the Noble Hero," in *The Common Pursuit* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1952); T.S. Eliot, "Shakespeare and the Stoicism of Seneca," in *Selected Essays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1951).

<sup>6</sup>For an illuminating recent exception, which aligns Othello's marginality with Desdemona's, see Karen Newman, "'And wash the Ethiop white': femininity and the monstrous in *Othello*," in Jean E. Howard and Marion F.

O'Connor, eds., *Shakespeare Reproduced* (New York: Methuen, 1987). I should also except many members of two seminars I organized in 1988-89: one for graduate students at the University of Victoria, the other for colleagues at the annual meeting of the Shakespeare Association of America. My thanks to both groups for ideas that I know I have assimilated but cannot with any confidence now attribute to individuals.

<sup>7</sup>Albert Gerard, "'Egregiously an Ass': The Dark Side of the Moor. A View of Othello's Mind," in *Aspects of "Othello,"* ed. Kenneth Muir and Philip Edwards (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1977), p. 13.

<sup>8</sup>Laurence Lerner, "The Machiavel and the Moor," *EIC* 9 (1959):360.

<sup>9</sup>G.K. Hunter, "Othello and Colour Prejudice," *Proceedings of the British Academy* 53 (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1967):152.

<sup>10</sup>Eldred Jones, *Othello's Countrymen* (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1965), p. 109.

<sup>11</sup>Richard Marienstras, *New Perspectives on the Shakespearean World*, trans. Janet Lloyd (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1985); Martin Orkin, "Othello and the 'plain face' of Racism," *SQ* 38 (1987):166-88.

<sup>12</sup>Lois Whitney, "Did Shakespeare Know *Leo Africanus*?" *PMLA* 37 (1922):470-83.

<sup>13</sup>All citations are to *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974).

<sup>14</sup>Shakespeare's complex handling of Othello's "Moorish" characteristics is analyzed by K.W. Evans in "The Racial Factor in *Othello*," *ShStud* 5 (1969):124-40. Evans argues that "the same Moorish traits that precipitate his [Othello's] downfall later redeem him" (p. 139).

<sup>15</sup>Tzvetan Todorov, *The Conquest of America*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Harper and Row, 1982).

<sup>16</sup>See the critical review by Roberto Gonzalez-Echevarria, "America Conquered," *YR* 74 (1984-85):281-90. Despite its limitations, Todorov's book remains a stimulating and even moving attempt to confront historically a central problem of our time.

<sup>17</sup>Like most contemporary critics, including Eldred Jones and G.K. Hunter, I find that the weight of evidence favors a black over a tawny Othello. Since Shakespeare portrays a composite figure, however, the alternative interpretation remains possible. Norman Sanders provides a useful survey of the problem in the introduction to his edition of the play (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1984), pp. 10-14. For reviews of the theatrical tradition, see Carol Jones Carlisle, *Shakespeare from the Greenroom* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1969), pp. 188-97, and two articles by Ruth Cowhig: "Actors, Black and Tawny, in the Role of Othello—and their Critics," *ThR* 4 (1978-79):133-46, and "The Importance of Othello's Race," *JCL* 12 (1977-78):153-61.

<sup>18</sup>*The Works of Charles and Mary Lamb*, ed. E.V. Lucas, 7 vols. (London: Methuen, 1903), 1:108.

<sup>19</sup>Margaret Webster, *Shakespeare Without Tears* (1942; rpt. Cleveland: World Publishing, 1955), p. 236. For a verbal study of the role of color in the play, see Doris Adler, "The Rhetoric of Black and White in *Othello*," *SQ* 25 (1974):248-57.

<sup>20</sup>John Bayley, *The Characters of Love* (London: Constable, 1960), p. 146.

<sup>21</sup>Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1980), p. 245. Greenblatt's essay focuses not on racial norms but on Iago's manipulation of Othello's belief in the repressive Christian doctrine of sexuality.

<sup>22</sup>See, for example, the essay by Edward A. Snow, "Sexual Anxiety and the Male Order of Things in *Othello*," *ELR* 10 (1980):384-412; although he recognizes the importance of Othello's blackness (pp. 400-401), Snow emphasizes the universality of the portrayal. For a useful and sympathetic review of related approaches, see Carol Thomas Neely, *Broken Nuptials in Shakespeare's Plays* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1985), pp. 107-108.

<sup>23</sup>In a stimulating recent study, *The Properties of "Othello"* (Amherst: Univ. of Massachusetts Press, 1989), James L. Calderwood says of this final speech: "Instead of a core-self discoverable at the center of his being, Othello's 'I am' seems a kind of internal repertory company, a 'we are'" (p. 103).

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