my sword" (243–44). Without being overly Freudian, one can see the swords and daggers in this bedroom scene as phallic imagery. Othello reasserts his valor and his manhood by seizing a weapon from the chamber: "A better never did sustain itself / Upon a soldier's thigh" (258–59). With this sword he wounds Iago. Finally, Othello finds a third weapon to use upon himself and, in so doing, to reassert the military, masculine identity he had temporarily lost.

Othello's final speech combines both images of military service that inform the play. First, he asserts his status as a *condottiere*: "I have done the state some service and they know't" (335). His mercenary's contract is that he serve and they reward him fairly. But in the last half of this speech, Othello reverts to the chivalric ideal of military service he had asserted in the Senate scene. By stabbing the "malignant and turbaned Turk," Othello destroys the crusader's traditional enemy, the Infidel who violates the holy sepulcher. Then in a passionate *Liebestod* the crusader affirms his union with the fair and virtuous maiden of chivalric romance, dying upon a kiss. Othello's tragedy is caused, in part, by his adherence to a romantic ideal of military service. The chivalric story that he had fashioned, in Stephen Greenblatt's terms, "the erotic as a supreme form of romantic narrative, a tale of risk and violence issuing forth at last in a happy and final tranquillity,"[57] can not withstand the deceptive practices of a self-seeking cynic like Iago. The Ensign doesn't give a "fig" for the old virtues and seeks only financial gain and power from his service. Othello's lack of exposure to civilian life makes him depend on this man, not his wife, for the truth. While the changing categories embedded in sixteenth-century military discourse do not directly cause the tragedy, they do provide Iago with linguistic tools he can use with Roderigo, Cassio, and Othello. Despite Othello's prowess and professionalism, his old-fashioned view of the world as a battlefield between easily identified good and evil forces blinds him to Iago's verbal legerdemain. Without the ability to penetrate the deceptions of Iago, the true "super-subtle Venetian," Othello can never be the complete model of a modern major general.

[57] Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning from More to Shakespeare* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), p. 243.

CHAPTER 3

Racial discourse: black and white

> If virtue no delighted beauty lack, / Your son-in-law is far more fair than black.
>
> *Othello* (1.3.285–86)

Black/white oppositions permeate *Othello*. Throughout the play, Shakespeare exploits a discourse of racial difference that by 1604 had become ingrained in the English psyche. From Iago's initial racial epithets at Brabantio's window ("old black ram," "barbary horse") to Emilia's cries of outrage in the final scene ("ignorant as dirt"), Shakespeare shows that the union of a white Venetian maiden and a black Moorish general is from at least one perspective emphatically unnatural. The union is of course a central fact of the play, and to some commentators, the spectacle of the pale-skinned woman caught in Othello's black arms has indeed seemed monstrous.[1] Yet that spectacle is a major source of *Othello*'s emotional power. From Shakespeare's day to the present, the sight has titillated and terrified predominantly white audiences.

The effect of *Othello* depends, in other words, on the essential fact of the hero's darkness, the visual signifier of his Otherness. To Shakespeare's original audience, this chromatic sign was probably dark black, although there were other signifiers as well. Roderigo describes the Moor as having "thick lips," a term many sixteenth-

[1] Marvin Rosenberg's *The Masks of Othello* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1961) documents the nineteenth-century penchant for light-skinned Othellos, as does Ruth Cowhig's "Blacks in English Renaissance Drama and the Role of Shakespeare's *Othello*," *The Black Presence in English Literature*, ed. David Dabydeen (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1985), pp. 1–25. For a more recent and theoretical discussion of the impact of Othello and Desdemona's union, see Karen Newman, "'And Wash the Ethiop White': Femininity and the Monstrous in *Othello*," in *Shakespeare Reproduced: The Text in History and Ideology*, ed. Jean E. Howard and Marion F. O'Connor (New York: Methuen, 1987), pp. 143–62.

century explorers employed in their descriptions of Africans.[2] But, as historian Winthrop Jordan notes, by the late sixteenth century, "Blackness became so generally associated with Africa that every African seemed a black man[,] ... the terms *Moor* and *Negro* used almost interchangeably."[3] "Moor" became, G. K. Hunter observes, "a word for 'people not like us,' so signalled by colour."[4] Richard Burbage's Othello was probably black. But in any production, whether he appears as a tawny Moor (as nineteenth-century actors preferred) or as a black man of African descent, Othello bears the visual signs of his Otherness, a difference that the play's language insists can never be eradicated.

Elizabethans were fascinated by travelers' accounts of foreign peoples, especially by tall tales of monstrous creatures, heathen customs, sexual orgies, and cannibalism. All were associated with blackness in the Elizabethan mind, a color that, in turn, suggested negation, dirt, sin and death.[5] From ancient and medieval lore, black meant the demonic. Thomas Wright's *The Passions of the Minde* also associates the color black (in any dark complexion) with sexuality;

> The redde is wise,
> The browne trustie,
> The pale peevish,
> The blacke lustie.[6]

And as the accounts of exploration spread, blackness joined additional signs of Otherness – nakedness, savagery, and general depravity.[7]

[2] See, for example, Leo Africanus' description of the kingdom of Casena, where "The inhabitants are extremely black, hauing great noses and blabber lips." Leo Africanus, *The History and Description of Africa*, ed. Robert Brown, trans. John Pory, 3 vols. (London: The Hakluyt Society), p. 830.

[3] Winthrop Jordan, *White Over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550–1812* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press for the Institute of Early American History and Culture, Williamsburg, VA, 1968), p. 5.

[4] G. K. Hunter, "*Othello* and Colour Prejudice," in his collection of essays, *Dramatic Identities and Cultural Tradition: Studies in Shakespeare and His Contemporaries* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1978), pp. 31–59; repr. from *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 53 (1967), 139–63. Quote from p. 41.

[5] See Jordan's discussion in *White Over Black*, p. 4. More recently John R. Aubrey argues that *Othello*'s references to monstrosity reflect the late-sixteenth-century popular association of blacks with monsters. See his "Race and the Spectacle of the Monstrous in *Othello*," *Clio*, 22 (1993): 221–38.

[6] Thomas Wright, *The Passions of the Minde* (London: Printed by Valentine Simmes for Walter Burre, 1604), p. 43.

[7] For detailed accounts of medieval and Renaissance discussions of blackness, see Eldred Jones, *Othello's Countrymen: The African in English Renaissance Drama* (London: Oxford University Press, 1965); Hunter, "*Othello* and Colour Prejudice"; Elliot H. Tokson, *The Popular Image of the Black Man in English Drama, 1550–1688* (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1982); and Anthony Gerard Barthelemy, *Black Face Maligned Race: The Representation of Blacks in English Drama from Shakespeare to Southerne* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1987).

Renaissance commentators offered two possible explanations for the existence of skin color so different from their own. The quasi-scientific suggestion that blackness was nature's defense against intense tropical sun was quickly but not universally discredited when black men and women in northern climes produced equally black children. The second explanation relied on scriptural tradition and myth. Since George Best provides the most detailed account (and the one most frequently cited by modern commentators), I quote his Discourse from Hakluyt's *Voyages* at some length:

> It manifestly and plainely appeareth by holy Scripture, that after the generall inundation and overflowing of the earth, there remained no moe men alive but Noe and his three sonnes, Sem, Cham, and Japhet, who onely were left to possesse and inhabite the whole face of the earth ... When Noe at the commandement of God had made the Arke and entred therein, and the floud-gates of heaven were opened, so that the whole face of the earth, every tree and mountaine was covered with abundance of water, hee straitely commaunded his sonnes and their wives, that they should with reverence and feare beholde the justice and mighty power of God, and that during the time of the floud while they remained in the Arke, they should use continencie, and abstaine from carnall copulation with their wives; and many other precepts hee gave unto them, and admonitions touching the justice of God, in revenging sinne, and his mercie in delivering them, who nothing deserved it. Which good instructions and exhortations notwithstanding his wicked sonne Cham disobeyed, and being perswaded that the first childe borne after the flood (by right and Lawe of nature) should inherite and possesse all the dominions of the earth, hee contrary to his fathers commandement while they were yet in the Arke, used company with his wife, and craftily went about thereby to dis-inherite the off-spring of his other two brethren: for the which wicked and detestable fact, as an example for contempt of Almightie God, and disobedience of parents, God would a sonne should bee borne whose name was Chus, who not onely it selfe, but all his posteritie after him should bee so blacke and lothsome, that it might remaine a spectacle of disobedience to all the worlde. And of this blacke and cursed Chus came all these blacke Moores which are in Africa.[8]

Chus and his descendants thus bear the double curse of blackness as the punishment for copulation against the patriarch's express

[8] From Richard Hakluyt, *The Principal Navigations Voyages Traffiques and Discoveries of the English Nation* (Glasgow: James MacLehose and Sons, 1904), vol. VII, pp. 263–64.

prohibition: Blackness signifies their unbridled lust and their inner spiritual state – a "naturall infection of the blood." To the Elizabethan mind, black skin thus denoted extreme Otherness, with overlays of satanic propensity and sexual perversion.[9]

Best's account mirrors but does not exactly parallel the version Shakespeare would have read in the Geneva Bible of 1560. In this narrative, Noah was found drunken one night,

> vncouered in ye middes of his tent. And when Ham the father of Canaan sawe the nakedness of his father, he tolde his two brethren without. Then toke Shem and Japheth a garme[n]t, and put it vpon bothe their shulders and we[n]t backward, and couered the nakednes of their father with their faces backwarde; so thei sawe not their fathers nakednes. Then Noah awoke from his wine, and knewe what his yonger sonne had done vnto him. And said, Cursed be Canaan: a seruant of seruants shall he be vnto his brethren. He said moreover, Blessed be the Lord God of Shem, and let Cannan be his seruant.[10] Genesis 9: 21–26

Here the punishment for violating a patriarchal taboo is not blackness but perpetual servitude; the damnable act is not copulation but viewing paternal privities, and the penalty is not in the skin but in slavery. In the Geneva version of Ham's fall, looking itself is perceived as voyeuristic and obscene. Like the sight of Othello's and Desdemona's bodies, it "poisons sight."

This account silently merged with Best's version of Ham's sin; blackness and perpetual servitude coalesced in the Elizabethan mind, a fusion justified by scriptural authority. And in either account, the original cause of the African's differentness was a sexual fall from grace. Blackness became a visual signifier of eternal sin. You could never, as the proverb reminds us, wash the Ethiopian white.[11] Nor could you change his scripturally ordained status of perpetual servitude. Thus blackness and forbidden sex, blackness and heathenism, blackness and slavery – all were linked in the English mind from the earliest descriptions of African people.

[9] As Kwame Anthony Appiah notes, during the Renaissance, both Moors and Jews were considered "unbelievers whose physical differences are signs (but not causes or effects) of their unbelief." Religious Otherness coalesces with physical differences in many contemporary texts, including *Othello*. See "Race," in *Critical Terms for Literary Study*, ed. Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), pp. 274–87; see p. 277. In an essay too recent to be incorporated fully into this chapter, Arthur L. Little, Jr. argues that accounts such as George Best's provided Shakespeare with a "pre-text, what the audience knows before it comes to experience the play," in particular, "the essence of blackness as the savage and libidinous Other." See "'An Essence That's Not Seen': The Primal Scene of Racism in *Othello*," *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 44 (1993): 304–24.

[10] *The Geneva Bible: A Facsimile of the 1560 Edition* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1969), pp. 4–5.

[11] Karen Newman rings the changes on this theme in "And Wash the Ethiop White."

* * * *

Stereotypes about blackness were reified in voyagers' accounts of what they saw in Africa. Nakedness bespoke depravity. *A Trve and Large Discovrse of the Voyage of the Whole Fleete of Ships* records for example that "The people are blacke and goe naked, saiuing that they weare short coates of Seales skinne, and a peece of the same skinne about their members, they are tall of stature, flat nosed, swift in running, they will pick & steale, although you looke on them."[12] *The Fardle of Facions* reported that "The moste part of them, for that they lye so under the Sonne, go naked: couering their privities with sheepes tayles." Along with nakedness went lechery, for "It is the maner emong theim, for euery man to haue many wiues: and the felowship of their wiues, that other use in secret: they use in open sighte."[13] To wit, Ham's voyeuristic sin was seen to be regularly reenacted among his descendants. The explorers who watched the natives watching nakedness apparently did not recognize their own prurient interests.

Ethnocentric travel accounts frequently stressed the bestiality and brutishness of African customs, especially in light of what they assumed was the "civilitie" of their own European customs. An English translation of Philippo Pigafetta's description of the Congo notes cannibalism among the Anzichi:

> For their enemies whom they take in the warres, they eate, and also their slaues, if they can haue a good market for them, they sell: or, if they cannot, then they deliuer them to the butchers to be cut in peeces, and so sold to be rosted or boyled.[14]

Heathens by definition were lustful and brutish, Christians were not. Thus, Pigafetta reports, in the kingdom of Angola "euery man taketh as many wiues as hee listeth, and so they multiply infinitely: But they doe not vse to do in the kingdome of *Congo* which liueth after the manner of the *Christians*."[15]

[12] *A Trve and Large Discovrse of the Voyage of the Whole Fleete of Ships* (London: Printed by Thomas Thorpe for William Aspley, 1603), p. 3.

[13] *The Fardle of Facions Conteining the Auncient Maners, Customes, and Lawes, of the Peoples Enhabiting the Two Partes of the Earth Called Affrike and Asie* (London: Printed by John Kingstone and Henry Sutton, 1555), C3r and E8r.

[14] *A Report of the Kingdome of Congo, a Region of Africa*. trans. Abraham Hartwell (London: Printed by John Wolfe, 1597), p. 36.

[15] Ibid., p. 55.

Native customs were derided for their differentness and used as confirmation of the travelers' own prejudices. Pigafetta, for example, scorned the face markings common among the Agagi nation:

> They doo vse to marke themselues aboue the lippe vpon their cheekes with certain lines which they make with *Iron* instruments and with fire ... [T]hose marks in their faces, it is a strange thing to behold them. For it is in deede a very dreadfull & deuillish sight. They are of bodie great, but deformed and liue like beastes in the fielde, and feede vpon mans flesh.[16]

John Leo, best known as Leo Africanus and a source for Shakespeare's *Othello*, was able to differentiate among the peoples he described. Within his *Geographical Historie of Africa*, translated into English by John Pory and published in London (1600), are accounts of treacherous tawny peoples and virtuous blacks. Leo's comparatively enlightened viewpoint reflects his own origins as an African Moor, albeit one converted to Christianity and living in Italy. His travels and adventures, including temporary slavery, have struck some modern commentators as similar to Othello's.[17] In any event, Leo could describe people "of a black colour" who were also "people of a courteous and liberall disposition, and most friendly and bountifull vnto strangers."[18] Aware that Muslims had a variety of different cultures, Leo classified Africans not only by color but according to town and tribe. Some struck him as civilized, some as savage. Still, Leo accepted and purveyed the biblical explanation of blackness, claiming that "For all the Negros or blacke Moores take their descent from *Chus*, the sonne of *Cham*, who was the sonne of *Noe*."[19] Leo's *Description* does not pursue the negative implications of this assertion, but to the informed Elizabethan reader they would have been clear. Thus, even in Leo's accounts of African people, signals were contradictory.

* * * *

The texts described above were in print at the turn of the seventeenth century, available for the curious who could read. It is difficult to assess the attitudes of those who could not read, but we can examine the visual impressions that informed English Renaissance

[16] Ibid., pp. 204–05.

[17] See Lois Whitney's "Did Shakespeare Know *Leo Africanus*?" *Publications of the Modern Language Association*, 37 (1922): 470–83, and Rosalind Johnson's "African Presence in Shakespearean Drama: Parallels Between Othello and the Historical Leo Africanus," *African Presence in Early Europe* (*Journal of African Civilizations*, 7 [1985]): 276–87.

[18] Pory, trans., *History and Description of Africa*, p. 791.

[19] Ibid., p. 130.

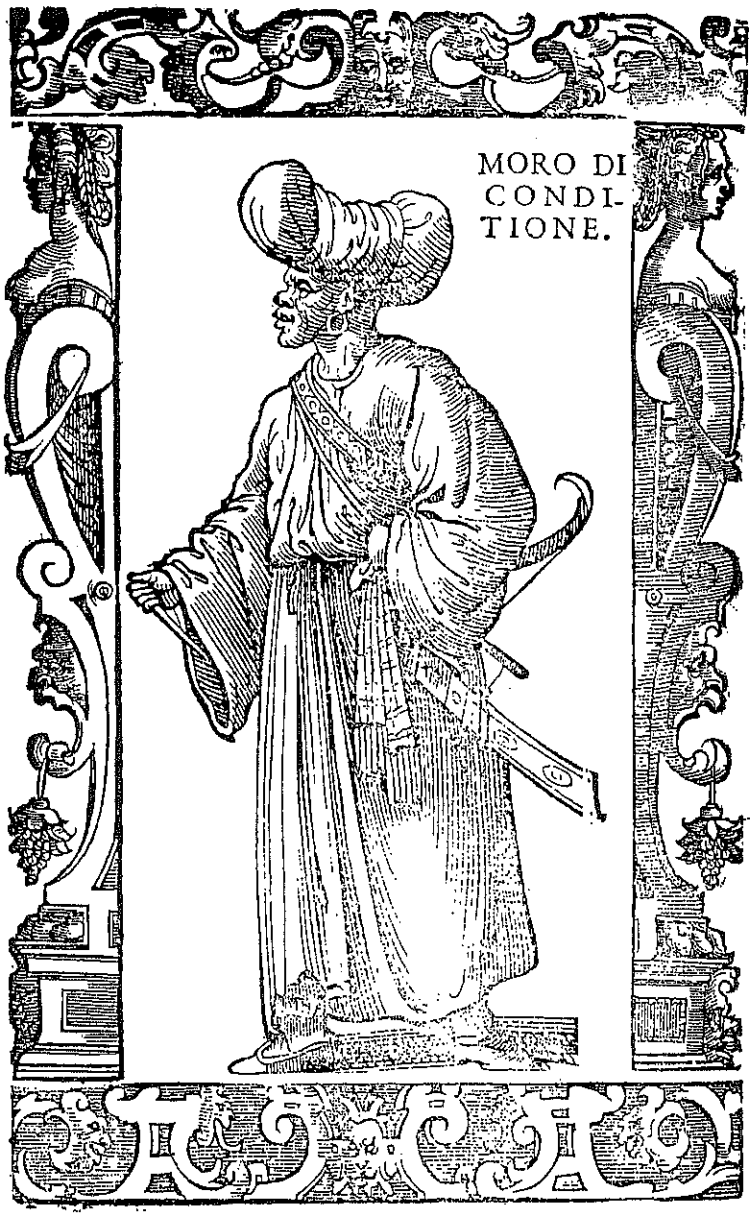

Figure 3: The figure of "A Moor" from Cesare Vecellio's *Degli habiti* (Venice, 1590).

culture in general. There were blacks in England in the late sixteenth century. Their numbers were sufficiently substantial by 1601 for Elizabeth to license sea captain Caspar van Senden to transport all Negroes and blackamoors out of England. The royal proclamation seems to have followed up the Privy Council's attempt four years earlier to transport "such slaves" back to Spain and Portugal.[20] Presumably the earlier effort had failed; Elizabeth deemed it necessary to add her authority to her council's.

Who were these blackamoors and why did Elizabeth seek to oust them from England? Her proclamation declares that they had been carried into England since the late troubles with Spain – presumably as part of the booty brought home from Spanish ships by Drake, Essex, and other privateers. These Africans were almost certainly slaves, perhaps en route to Portuguese and Spanish colonies in the New World before they were seized by the British. In England they probably continued as slaves or very long-term servants. In either case, they took employment away from needy English subjects. In Elizabeth's words, they "are fostered and powered here, to the great annoyance of her own liege people that which co[vet?] the relief which these people consume, as also for that the most of them are infidels hauing no understanding of Christ or his Gospel." People "possessed of any such blackamoors" (i.e., slave owners) were directed to relinquish them under threat of Her Majesty's displeasure.[21]

Some members of Shakespeare's audience may have seen the emissaries from Barbary, led by the Moroccan Ambassador Abd el-Ouahed ben Messaoud, who visited London in late 1600. During their six-month stay, the Moroccans were regarded with mingled curiosity and contempt. Religious animosity spurred the disapproval of many English merchants and mariners, yet, observes Jack D'Amico, "Alongside mistrust and outright dislike of foreigners and infidels we find the grand, if somewhat fanciful, plans for a joint invasion of Spain."[22] Like Othello, the Moroccans were potential allies against a common enemy while remaining ineluctably different. Once the ambassadors departed, plans for a common military enterprise dissolved.

[20] Quoted from *Tudor Royal Proclamations*, ed. Paul L. Hughes and James F. Larkin (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1969), vol. III, p. 221n.

[21] Ibid., pp. 221–22.

[22] Jack D'Amico, *The Moor in English Renaissance Drama* (Tampa: University of Florida Press, 1991), p. 37.

By the time Shakespeare began writing *Othello*, the embassy was a distant memory. Any familiarity most Londoners had with "blackamoors" probably came from slaves and servants, not from "men of royal siege."

By 1603 Londoners had also been exposed to "blackamoors" in public pageants and the theatre. In his study of the popular image of blacks in English Renaissance drama, Elliot H. Tokson observes that "dramatists were more often drawn to the figure of the black man than other writers."[23] He suggests several reasons for this, including the visual impact of the actor's color. The audience, presumably composed of white English men and women and some foreigners, would necessarily view the black character to some extent as different, as Other, as object. And because their perceptions had been informed by negative associations with the color black and by lurid travellers' tales, their white gaze may have verged on voyeurism – a desire to see the black character in the context of illicit sex. Tokson contends that "there is hardly a black character created for the stage whose sexuality is not made an important aspect of his relationships with others."[24] The character's blackness was itself equated with paganism and an exotic but forbidden sexuality. Blackness had shock value. And if the black male character were linked with a white female, the prurient gaze would be even more excited.

Othello's dramatic forebears are well known and have been thoroughly analyzed elsewhere.[25] The three most notable figures, however – Muly Hamet, Aaron the Moor, and Eleazar – warrant attention here because they illustrate the kinds of choices Shakespeare had before him when he crafted Othello. Muly Hamet is a primitive ranter in the early revenge play, *The Battle of Alcazar*. The Chorus presents him in the play's opening lines:

> Blacke in his looke, and bloudie in his deeds,
> And in his shirt staind with a cloud of gore,
> Presents himselfe with naked sword in hand,
> Accompanied as now you may behold,
> With deuils coted in the shapes of men.[26]

[23] Tokson, *Black Man in English Drama*, p. 20.

[24] Ibid., p. 17. Little also describes the imagined scene of Othello and Desdemona coupling as the "sexual site and sight of the play's racial anxieties." See "An Essence That's Not Seen," 306.

[25] See Jones, *Othello's Countrymen*; Tokson, *Black Man in English Drama*; Barthelemy, *Black Face Maligned Race*; and D'Amico, *The Moor*, for full surveys of blacks on the Elizabethan stage.

[26] Cited from the Malone Society Edition, *The Battle of Alcazar*, ed. W. W. Greg (London: Chiswick Press, 1907). Quote from A2r.

Muly Hamet is frequently referred to as "the Negro Moor," his blackness associated with satanic evil. In a dumb show he murders his two younger brothers and his uncle. But despite frequent fits of braggadocio, Muly is a coward who can only succeed by stealth and deceit. As Eldred Jones notes, he "combines the grandiloquent extrovert and the subtle plotter."[27] Muly is a Marlovian overreacher who on his deathbed curses the fatal star that governs his fall. But he also curses his Negro mother: "Curst maist thou be for such a cursed sonne." The curse, of course, is blackness.

In *Titus Andronicus* Aaron continues Muly Hamet's bombastic villainy, but unlike his predecessor, he is no coward. Jones argues that Aaron is individualized and humanized by his passionate defense of his child and that, in his complex intriguing, he may be a forerunner of Iago.[28] Integral to Aaron's defiance of the white world around him is a sense of his own blackness. To Tamora's sons Chiron and Demetrius, Aaron exclaims:

> Ye white-lim'd walls! Ye alehouse painted signs!
> Coal-black is better than another hue,
> In that it scorns to bear another hue;
> For all the water in the ocean
> Can never turn the swan's black legs to white,
> Although she lave them hourly in the flood. (4.2.98–103)

Aaron's paternal concern is also a form of black pride. "Aaron's only allegiance," contends D'Amico, "is to the image of himself seen in his son." Aaron is a father concerned for the future, his villainy mitigated by "the human capacity for survival and renewal."[29] Nevertheless, blackness remains the sign of Aaron's largely unmotivated, satanic villainy. While the play's white characters commit grossly despicable acts, they seek vengeance for injuries to themselves or their families. Aaron does evil for evil's sake. His final lines glorify his villainy:

> Even now I curse the day and yet I think,
> Few come within the compass of my curse –
> Wherein I did not some notorious ill ...
> But I have done a thousand dreadful things,
> As willingly as one would kill a fly,
> And nothing grieves me heartily indeed,
> But that I cannot do ten thousand more. (5.1.125–44)

[27] Jones, *Othello's Countrymen*, p. 43.
[28] Ibid., pp. 52–60.
[29] D'Amico, *The Moor*, pp. 143 and 145.

Aaron's vaunts may be a last defiant gesture at the white world that surrounds him. Though his motives are never clarified, he remains one of – if not the most – interesting characters in Shakespeare's play. Perhaps as Emily C. Bartels notes, his purposelessness makes his villainy all the more insidious.[30] But to many in the white Elizabethan audience, Aaron's blackness would have seemed the immutable signifier of an inherited disposition to evil.

Like his predecessor Aaron, Eleazar of *Lust's Dominion* (*ca.* 1600) is a "striking combination of the Moor as man and as black devil,"[31] who has an illicit sexual relationship with a white woman of higher social status, in this case the Spanish Queen Mother. Like Aaron, Eleazar uses this relationship to gain power. And like Muly Hamet, he is an overreacher in the Marlovian vein. In his first-act soliloquy, Eleazar exclaims:

> Mischief erect thy throne and sit in state
> Here, here upon this head; let fools fear fate.
> Thus I defie my starrs, I care not I
> How low I tumble down, so I mount high.

When confronted with his relationship to the Queen Mother, Eleazar boasts:

> The Queen with me, with me, a *Moore*, a Devill,
> A slave of *Barbary*, a dog; for so
> Your silken Courtiers christen me, but father,
> Although my flesh be tawny, in my veines
> Runs blood as red, and royal as the best
> And proud'st in Spain.[32]

When he is finally ready to mount the Spanish throne, Eleazar emphasizes his military achievements:

> value me not by my sun-burnt
> Cheek, but by my birth; nor by
> My birth, but by my losse of blood
> Which I have sacrific'd in Spains defence. (1794–97)

Later in the play, Eleazar tries to disassociate color and character:

[30] Emily C. Bartels, "Making More of the Moor: Aaron, Othello, and Renaissance Refashionings of Race," *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 41 (1990): 433–54.
[31] D'Amico, *The Moor*, p. 106.
[32] *Lust's Dominion: or The Lascivious Queen*, ed. J. Le Gay Brereton (Louvaine: Libraire Universitaire, 1931). Citations are from lines 260–63 and 227–34 respectively.

> Think you my conscience and my soul is so,
> Black faces may have hearts as white as snow
> And 'tis a generall rule in moral rowls,
> The whitest faces have the blackest souls. (3607–10)

While the Duke of Venice's similar comments to Brabantio are true, here the white/black inversion is false. Eleazar *is* a self-proclaimed villain, his actions in accord with his audience's expectations.

In sum, black roles before *Othello*'s composition in 1603–04 tended to confirm the reports of travelers like George Best. Black skin signified, in addition to visual ugliness,[33] an ingrained moral infection, a taint in the blood often linked to sexual perversion and the desire to possess a white woman – her body, her status, her wealth, or her power. The subversive images of Muly Hamet, Aaron, and Eleazar must have fascinated yet frightened the Elizabethan audience. No wonder all three figures were killed or contained before the play's conclusion.

* * * *

The threat of blackness outside the theatre was not so easily quelled. Elizabeth couldn't oust them; and as the seventeenth century progressed, the numbers grew. Increasingly containment came from the institutionalization of slavery. The English were well aware that the Portuguese had been bringing Africans to Europe since the late fifteenth century and to America since the early sixteenth. The English adventurer John Hawkins joined the slave trade himself during the 1560s. And as Winthrop Jordan observes, "By 1589 Negroes had become so preeminently 'slaves' that Richard Hakluyt gratuitously referred to five Africans brought temporarily to England as 'black slaves'; ... an equation had developed between African Negroes and slavery."[34]

When Europeans first encountered the West African slave trade, they found what was essentially a by-product of tribal warfare. Philippo Pigafetta remarked that the people of the Congo bring "thether with them slaues both of their own nation, & also out of *Nubia*."[35] Once Portuguese and Spanish traders began to collect slaves for shipment to America, the nature of slavery changed. The

[33] Later in the seventeenth century, Bishop Joseph Hall was to describe the sight of a blackamoor as a man "whose hew showes him to bee farre from home, his very skin bewrayes his Climate; it is night in his face, whiles it is day in ours." See *Occasional Meditations* (London: Set by R. H., 1630), p. 93.

[34] Jordan, *White Over Black*, p. 60. [35] Hartwell, trans., *Report on the Congo*, p. 35.

sporadic result of war was transformed into a giant economic enterprise. Pigafetta noted that in Angola

> there is also a greater trafficke and Market for slaues ... then in any place els. For there are yearely bought by the Portingalles aboue fiue thousand head of *Negroes*, which afterwardes they conveigh away with them, and so sell them into diuers parts of the worlde.[36]

In Africa, the slave's status had been more neutral, his possibilities more fluid. Leo Africanus narrates the example of a Negro slave in the kingdom of Gaoga:

> This slaue lying vpon a certaine night with his master that was a wealthie merchant, & considering that he was not far from his natiue countrey, slue his saide master, possessed his goods, and returned home: where haiuing bought a certaine number of horses, he began to inuade the people next adioning, and obtained for the most part the victorie: ... And by this means he tooke great numbers of captiues, whom he exchanged for horses that were brought out of Egypt: insomuch that at length (the number of his souldiers increasing) he was accounted by all men as soueraigne K. of Gaoga.[37]

This Negro warrior's captives were probably sold into slavery, but, as this narrative demonstrates, status within Africa was comparatively liminal. A courageous man like Othello could be captured in battle, sold into slavery, escape, and fight in triumph over his former owners. And as later chapters will indicate, this historical shift to a more rigid, exploitative system influenced future representations of Othello, most dramatically during the nineteenth century.

* * * *

The Renaissance texts surveyed here have often been searched for clues to Shakespeare's conception of *Othello*. They yield no certain conclusions, of course, for the texts themselves are contradictory, combining savage images along with the exotic. Moreover, we can never be certain what Shakespeare retained, let alone read. And even if Shakespeare had only encountered Leo Africanus's book, for example, he might have created different representations from different portions of the text.

It is not surprising, then, that scholars have drawn conflicting conclusions from these materials. For the most part, they agree that the dominant discourse of Shakespeare's culture was ethnocentric in its assumptions about color and foreign customs. They disagree, however, as to what degree Shakespeare shared those assumptions

[36] Ibid., p. 62. [37] Pory, trans., *History and Description of Africa*, p. 835.

and to what extent they informed his tragedy. In 1965 Eldred Jones concluded that "in the end Othello emerges, not as another manifestation of a type, but as a distinct individual who typified by his fall, not the weaknesses of Moors, but the weaknesses of human nature."[38] Two years later G. K. Hunter advanced a similar theme in his seminal lecture on "*Othello* and colour prejudice." The characterization of Othello initially contradicts the stereotype of the black man, Hunter argued, but as the play progresses, Iago succeeds in "making the deeds of Othello at last fit in with the prejudice that his face at first excited."[39] Winthrop Jordan wrote in the following year that Shakespeare did not necessarily accept his society's fears about miscegenation, but that he exploited the theme of black/white sexuality to explode his society's beliefs, particularly "the notion that Negroes were peculiarly sexual men."[40]

Symptomatic of the 1960s new awareness of race, K. W. Evans contended that no analysis of *Othello* "can be adequate if it ignores the factor of race." Iago, he argued, "comes to personify the more virulent aspects of Venetian prejudice against Moors," while Othello reifies the legend of Moorish credulity with "his own superstitious fatalism." Evans concluded that Othello's blackness "is correlated with a character which spans the range from the primitive to the civilised, and in falling partially under Iago's spell Othello yields to those elements in man that oppose civilised order."[41]

Tokson's 1982 survey of black men on the English Renaissance stage does not address *Othello per se*, but his conclusions are equally negative. "A black man," Tokson admitted, "could on rare occasions turn out to be a decent human being, but only if he reached a consciousness and an acceptance of Christian ethics and white manners."[42] The framework in which he appeared remained unabashedly ethnocentric. Anthony Barthelemy's 1987 survey, *Black Face Maligned Race*, argued that the dramatist toyed with his culture's racial stereotypes, but "[h]owever successful Shakespeare's manipulation of the stereotype may be, Othello remains identifiable as a version of that type." As the play ends, Venetian hegemony continues, for "Shakespeare's black Moor never possesses the power or desire to subvert civic and natural order."[43]

[38] Jones, *Othello's Countrymen*, p. 87.
[39] Hunter, "*Othello* and Colour Prejudice," p. 55. [40] Jordan, *White Over Black*, p. 38.
[41] K. W. Evans, "The Racial Factor in *Othello*," *Shakespeare Studies*, 5 (1969): 124–40; quotes from 125, 127, 135, and 139. [42] Tokson, *Black Man in English Drama*, p. 135.
[43] Barthelemy, *Black Face Maligned Race*, p. 161.

Karen Newman was less harsh on Shakespeare in 1987. She contended that

> Shakespeare was certainly subject to the racist, sexist, and colonialist discourses of his time, but by making the black Othello a hero, and by making Desdemona's love for Othello, and her transgression of her society's norms for women in choosing him, sympathetic, Shakespeare's play stands in a contestatory relation to the hegemonic ideologies of race and gender in early modern England.[44]

Michael Neill agreed in 1989, stating that though *Othello* does not directly oppose racism, the play nevertheless "illuminates the process by which such visceral superstitions were implanted in the very body of the culture that formed us."[45] And as recently as 1990 Emily C. Bartels concluded that in *Othello* Shakespeare "invokes the stereotype of the Moor as a means of subverting it, of exposing its terms as strategic constructions of the self and not empirical depictions of the Other."[46]

D'Amico's 1991 analysis of the Moor in English Renaissance drama takes a similar stance. "In *Othello*," he asserts,

> Shakespeare explored the tragic consequences of a cultural frame of reference that made the alien Moor something other than human. Working with the dual image of the noble, tawny Moor and the dark-complexioned devil, Shakespeare revealed how a man could be destroyed when he accepts a perspective that deprives him of his humanity ... Othello is debased by a role that he adopts.[47]

Note that this assortment of critics from varied backgrounds and perspectives agrees on one thing – the stereotype is there, deeply embedded in the text of Shakespeare's play. Their disagreement lies in the analysis of how Shakespeare's text exploits that stereotype. Obviously there is no single answer to this debate, but perhaps a close examination of Shakespeare's lines can illuminate how these contradictory conclusions came into being.

Despite Venice's need for Othello's military acumen, the Venetian outlook in Shakespeare's play is predominantly racist.[48] Roderigo,

[44] Newman, "And Wash the Ethiop White," p. 157.
[45] Michael Neill, "Unproper Beds: Race, Adultery, and the Hideous in *Othello*," *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 40 (1989): 383–412; quote from 412.
[46] Bartels, "Making More of the Moor," 447. [47] D'Amico, *The Moor*, p. 177.
[48] I recognize that some would disagree with me. Edward Washington argues, for example, in an unpublished paper, "'At the Door of Truth': The Hollowness of Signs in Shakespeare's *Othello*," that Venice is more tolerant of others than Othello thinks it is. Martin Orkin also contends that the play's racist sentiment is "to an important degree confined to Iago,

the wealthy curled darling, refers to Othello as "the thick-lips" (1.1.65), and Iago's shouts below Brabantio's window stress the association between blackness and bestial sexuality:

> an old black ram
> Is tupping your white ewe ...
> you'll have your daughter covered with a Barbary
> horse, you'll have your nephews neigh to you, you'll
> have coursers for cousins, and jennets for germans.
> (1.1.89–90, 111–13)

Roderigo describes the Moor as "lascivious," while Iago cries, "the devil will make a grandsire of you" (1.1.92). Iago's purpose, to arouse Brabantio's wrath, is achieved with verbal images of his daughter copulating unnaturally with a bestial creature, a satanic figure of vice and depravity.

Iago also perpetuates the myth of Moors having promiscuous sexual appetites: "These Moors are changeable in their wills" (1.3.336). Clearly Iago thinks of Othello as "an old black ram," who has probably seduced Emilia, which suggests (among other things) envy of powers he imagines to be greater than his own. At this point in the play, suggests G. K. Hunter, "[t]he sexual fear and disgust that lie behind so much racial prejudice are exposed for our derisive expectations to fasten upon them. And we are at this point bound to agree with these valuations, for no alternative view is revealed."[49]

Roderigo and Iago have reason to hate the Moor; the former is a rival for Desdemona's love, the latter believes he has been passed over for promotion. But until Act 1, scene 1, line 82 Brabantio has had no such motive, and his entertainment of Othello in his home might bespeak his openmindedness. Yet he too is prejudiced. Why else would he jump to the conclusion that Othello used witchcraft on his daughter? Only enchantment, he claims, could have made her

> Run from her guardage to the sooty bosom
> Of such a thing as thou – to fear, not to delight. (1.2.70–71)

Though Othello argues eloquently that this is not so, by the middle of the temptation scene he seems to believe it himself. When Iago suggests that Desdemona's decision to shun "many proposed matches

Roderigo, and Brabantio." See "Othello and the 'Plain Face' of Racism," *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 38 (1987): 166–88; quote from 168. But Brabantio is a respected Senator and part of the power structure. I might add that Emilia also shows signs of color prejudice.

[49] Hunter, "*Othello* and Colour Prejudice," p. 45.

of her own clime, complexion, and degree" indicated "a will most rank, / Foul disproportion, thoughts unnatural" (3.3.231–35), Othello remains quiet.

At the play's finale, Emilia's outrage may – as Kent Cartwright has shown – vent the audience's own anger and, perhaps, its racism.[50] When Othello reports that Desdemona's last words are a lie, Emilia cries

> O, the more angel she
> And you the blacker devil! ...
> She was too fond of her most filthy bargain! ...
> O gull! O dolt!
> As ignorant as dirt! (5.2.131–32, 156, 162–63)

Dirt, filth, blackness, and the devil – all are intertwined.

But while racism's voice is heard intermittently throughout the play, Othello denies the stereotype. Unlike Muly Hamet, Aaron, and Eleazar, he is not a manipulative scheming villain. Those characteristics appear instead in the white Venetian ensign, Iago. And other characters in the play speak well of the Moor. Desdemona praises Othello's virtue:

> I saw Othello's visage in his mind
> And to his honours and his valiant parts
> Did I my soul and fortunes consecrate. (1.3.248–50)

On Cyprus Montano reports that "I have served him, and the man commands / Like a full soldier" (2.1.35–36). Iago admits in the midst of his hate

> The Moor, howbeit that I endure him not,
> Is of a constant, loving, noble nature;
> And I dare think he'll prove to Desdemona
> A most dear husband. (2.1.269–72)

Lodovico also expresses the high regard Venice once had for its Moorish general:

> Is this the noble Moor whom our full senate
> Call all-in-all sufficient? Is this the nature
> Whom passion could not shake? Whose solid virtue
> The shot of accident nor dart of chance
> Could neither graze nor pierce? (4.1.255–59)

[50] See Kent Cartwright, "Audience Response and the Denouement of *Othello*," in *Othello: New Perspectives*, ed. Virginia Mason Vaughan and Kent Cartwright (Newark: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1991), pp. 161–76.

As Cassio later remarks, the Othello rewarded by the Venetian Senate was "great of heart," a man respected for military prowess, courage, and steady character. And Othello's initial appearance in Act 1, scene 2 – "Keep up your bright swords or the dew will rust them" – confirmed that judgment.

On the other hand, the Senate is proved wrong. Iago's and Roderigo's prejudices do become reified by the end of the play. Desdemona thinks that Othello "[i]s true of mind and made of no such baseness / As jealous creatures are." He could not be jealous because "the sun where he was born / Drew all such humours from him" (3.4.26–27). But we know that Othello is jealous, a fact that confirms Renaissance stereotypes about Moorish behavior – the sun was believed to create passionate furies, not dry them up. Moors, in fact, were stereotyped as unusually jealous, as in Leo Africanus' oft-cited comment:

> For by reason of iealousie you may see them daily one to be the death and destruction of another, and that in such sauage and brutish manner, that on this case they will show no compassion at all.[51]

When Othello claims that he wants to chop Desdemona into messes and tear her to pieces, he confirms his audience's expectations.

Leo Africanus also reports that Moors' "wits are but meane, and they are so credulous, that they will beleeve matters impossible, which are told them."[52] Iago reiterates this theme in his opening soliloquy:

> The Moor is of a free and open nature,
> That thinks men honest that but seem to be so,
> And will as tenderly be led by the nose
> As asses are. (1.3.381–84)

To a certain extent, the temptation proves Africanus correct, for as many commentators have noted, Desdemona and Cassio could not have committed adultery in the brief time since Othello's marriage.

Othello's epileptic fit demonstrates his passionate nature but it also marks him as the member of an alien race. According to Leo Africanus, "This falling sicknes likewise possesseth the women of Barbarie, and of the land of Negros, who, to excuse it say that they are taken with a spirite."[53]

[51] Pory, *A Geographical Historie of Africa*, p. 154.
[52] Ibid., p. 185.
[53] Ibid., p. 182.

Another source of ambiguity in the play is the connection between blackness and slavery. Othello's narrative of his life to Desdemona includes stories

> Of being taken by the insolent foe
> And sold to slavery; of my redemption thence,
> And with it all my travels' history. (1.3.136–38)

These lines rush by in performance, but set against the context of the nascent English slave trade, they resonate with meaning. And even though Othello is ostensibly a "free" man in Venice, by terms of his mercenary contract, he remains the "servant" of the Venetian state, subject to its commands. His status, in short, is liminal. Yet the final irony of the play is that the white Iago is the one led in chains, the one called "damned slave," the one about to be tortured. Just as Iago turns out to be the white villain with the black heart, he also becomes the true slave while Othello asserts his freedom to choose his own death.

Shakespeare plays with us throughout *Othello*, exploiting stereotypes, arousing expectations, alternately fulfilling and frustrating our preconceptions. Othello's rhetoric, for example, is inherently ambiguous. On the one hand, the "Othello music" is a mark of the hero's greatness,[54] but boastful language is also the mark of Othello's villainous predecessors Muly Hamet, Aaron, and Eleazar. Compare, for example, Othello's

> I fetch my life and being
> From men of royal siege, and my demerits
> May speak unbonneted to as proud a fortune
> As this that I have reached. (1.2.21–24)

to Eleazar's

> Although my flesh be tawny, in my veines
> Runs blood as red, and royal as the best
> And proud'st in Spain. (231–33)

Is this boasting? Or is it an exercise in black pride, an attempt at what Stephen Greenblatt calls "self-fashioning" that empowers the black caught in the grips of a white political system?[55]

[54] G. Wilson Knight coined the term "Othello music" in *The Wheel of Fire: Essays in Interpretation of Shakespeare's Sombre Tragedies* (London: Humphrey Milford [Oxford University Press], 1930), pp. 107–31.
[55] See Stephen Greenblatt, "The Improvisation of Power," *Renaissance Self-Fashioning from More to Shakespeare* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), pp. 222–54.