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# Making More of the Moor: Aaron, Othello, and Renaissance Refashionings of Race

EMILY C. BARTELS

IN THE CATALOGUE FOR THE 1983 EXHIBITION OF the Association of Artists of the World contre/against Apartheid, Jacques Derrida offered what he hoped would someday, after the abolition of apartheid, be "Racism's Last Word" ("*Le Dernier Mot du racisme*"), one that would record the name ("apartheid") of what no longer would be there to be named.<sup>1</sup> Derrida's introduction and the exhibition would be the only things left to give the term meaning, or rather, to signal its ultimate meaninglessness and to prove its boundaries false. While the language of racism pretends to be descriptive, Derrida writes, it is instead prescriptive: "It does not discern, it discriminates." It "occupies the terrain like a concentration camp" and "outlines space in order to assign forced residence or to close off borders." It "concentrates" difference as something absolutely and abominably Other.<sup>2</sup> As the allusion to Nazi Germany suggests, within states obsessed with securing their monolithic supremacy, a prime target of racism becomes not the outsider but the insider, the population that threatens by being too close to home, too powerful, too successful, or merely too present.

In Renaissance England the rise of cross-cultural interest and exchange was accompanied by an intensified production and reproduction of visions of "other" worlds, some handed down from classical descriptions, others generated by actual encounters and recorded as travel narratives, others shaped by dramatic and literary conventions already in place. While "racism" as a named ideology emerged only in the early twentieth century, what Michael Neill has described as a "racialist ideology" was taking shape within such representations alongside and "under the pressures of" (Neill suggests) the nation's "nascent imperialism."<sup>3</sup> Whether England's cross-cultural discourse was designed "to mediate the shock of contact on the frontier," to justify colonialist projects or instantiate England's professed supremacy, to explore and exhibit "spectacles of strangeness," or to effect

<sup>1</sup> *Critical Inquiry*, 12 (1985), 290–99. The present essay evolved from a paper presented as part of the seminar "Shakespeare's Aliens" at the Shakespeare Association of America's annual meeting, Austin, Texas (13 April 1988). My thanks go to Edward Berry for orchestrating the event and to all the participants in it, particularly Lynda Boose, for a discussion that encouraged and shaped my project. I am also greatly indebted to Jonathan Goldberg and Julie Solomon, who challenged me to question and reformulate problematic assumptions in earlier drafts.

<sup>2</sup> p. 292.

<sup>3</sup> "Unproper Beds: Race, Adultery, and the Hideous in *Othello*," *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 40 (1989), 383–412, esp. p. 394.

some other conscious or unconscious agenda, its early visions began to outline space and close off borders, to discriminate under the guise of discerning, and to separate the Other from the self.<sup>4</sup>

One such Other was the Moor, a figure who was becoming increasingly visible within English society in person and in print, particularly in descriptions of Africa, in travel narratives, and on the stage. While blackness and Mohammedism were stereotyped as evil, Renaissance representations of the Moor were vague, varied, inconsistent, and contradictory. As critics have established, the term "Moor" was used interchangeably with such similarly ambiguous terms as "African," "Ethiopian," "Negro," and even "Indian" to designate a figure from different parts or the whole of Africa (or beyond) who was either black or Moslem, neither, or both.<sup>5</sup> To complicate the vision further, the Moor was characterized alternately and sometimes simultaneously in contradictory extremes, as noble or monstrous, civil or savage.<sup>6</sup> Consider the difference in Peele's *The Battle of Alcazar* (1588), for example, between Muly Hamet, the prototypical cruel black Moor, and his uncle Abdilmelec, the Orientalized "dignified 'white' Moor";<sup>7</sup> or the differences within Richard Hakluyt's *Principal Navigations* between the "cruel Moores" of one account, who detained Europeans "in miserable servitude," and the two "noble" Moors of another account, one "of the Kings blood," who were themselves taken to England.<sup>8</sup>

Yet although, if not because, the Moor was sometimes assumed to be civilized rather than savage, white or tawny rather than black, he was

<sup>4</sup> See Mary Louise Pratt, "Scratches on the Face of the Country; or, What Mr. Barrow Saw in the Land of the Bushmen," *Critical Inquiry*, 12 (1985), 119-43, esp. p. 121; Steven Mullaney, *The Place of the Stage: License, Play, and Power in Renaissance England* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1988), p. 64. Other important analyses of the strategies and agendas of imperialist texts include: Peter Hulme, *Colonial Encounters: Europe and the Native Caribbean, 1492-1797* (London: Methuen, 1986); Paul Brown, "'This thing of darkness I acknowledge mine': *The Tempest* and the discourse of colonialism" in *Political Shakespeare: New essays in cultural materialism*, Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield, eds. (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell Univ. Press, 1985), pp. 48-71; and Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978). Meredith Anne Skura's "Discourse and the Individual: The Case of Colonialism in *The Tempest*" (*SQ*, 40 [1989], 42-74) offers an interesting challenge to these readings.

<sup>5</sup> For further discussion of Renaissance representations of blackness and Moors, see Anthony Barthelemy, *Black Face, Maligned Race: The Representation of Blacks in English Drama from Shakespeare to Southerne* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1987), pp. 6-10; Elliot H. Tokson, *The Popular Image of the Black Man in English Drama, 1550-1688* (Boston: G. K. Hall and Co., 1982), pp. 2-4; G. K. Hunter, "Othello and Colour Prejudice" in *Dramatic Identities and Cultural Tradition: Studies in Shakespeare and his Contemporaries* (New York: Barnes and Noble Books, 1978), pp. 31-59; Eldred D. Jones, *The Elizabethan Image of Africa* (Charlottesville: Univ. Press of Virginia, 1971); and Winthrop D. Jordan, *White Over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550-1812* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1968), pp. 3-43.

<sup>6</sup> Christopher Miller offers a seminal discussion of this double vision in French depictions of Africa and how it functions as a projection of the European self in *Blank Darkness: Africanist Discourse in French* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1985).

<sup>7</sup> The categorizations of these figures are offered by Eldred Jones in *Othello's Countrymen: The African in English Renaissance Drama* (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1965), p. 49. Shakespeare, too, displays a comparable spectrum of Moors, from the black and ignoble Aaron of *Titus Andronicus* to the noble Prince of Morocco in *The Merchant of Venice*.

<sup>8</sup> *The Principal Navigations Voyages Traffiques & Discoveries of the English Nation: Made by Sea or Over-land to the Remote and Farthest Distant Quarters of the Earth at any time within the compass of these 1600 Yeeres*, 12 vols. (1589; Glasgow: James MacLehose and Sons, 1903-05), Vol. 6, 294 and 137. Unless otherwise noted, all citations of this text refer to Volume 6.

nonetheless circumscribed as Other. For what emerges as a key focus of "othering" within Renaissance depictions of Moors is behavior that paradoxically (but in line with Derrida's comments on racism) showed them too like the English—behavior that might undermine England's claim to a natural dominance and superiority.<sup>9</sup> Two of the most prominent of these representations circulating in England during the mid-sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries were Hakluyt's *Principal Navigations* (1589) and John Leo Africanus's *A Geographical Historie of Africa* (which was circulated throughout Europe, primarily in Latin but also in Italian and French, from 1550 onwards and was translated into English in 1600 by John Pory).<sup>10</sup> While each of these texts produces a multi-faceted Moor, each is marked by a tendency to demonize not only, or necessarily, this Other's exotic customs, appearances, or behaviors but also traits or responses that appear more familiar than strange, more "ours" than "theirs."<sup>11</sup>

As Shakespeare fashions a Moor from the materials of his culture, he creates two figures, Aaron in *Titus Andronicus* and Othello, whose differences reflect the discrepancies and contradictions within those materials.<sup>12</sup> Aaron figures as the consummate villain, who has done "a thousand dreadful things / As willingly as one would kill a fly" (5.1.141–42) and who curses those few days "wherein [he] did not some notorious ill: / As kill a man or else devise his death, / Ravish a maid or plot the way to do it" (ll. 127–29).<sup>13</sup> In contrast, although Othello is (and has proven) more difficult to categorize, he nonetheless emerges as a "valiant" general (1.3.48), clearly above the absolute villainy of Iago. What links these representations together, and to Africanus's and Hakluyt's texts, is that each dramatizes the cultural resistance to normalizing visions of the Moor—*Titus Andronicus* by resistantly demonizing the Moor, *Othello* by exposing such demonizations as resistance. For while Shakespeare stereotypes Aaron as Other, even and especially as he gains power from inside the court, in *Othello* he presents Iago's implementation of a similar process as a self-defensive strategy provoked by the Moor's status as an "insider," not his difference as an "outsider."

## II

Leo Africanus's *A Geographical Historie of Africa* continues to be proffered as an important intertext for *Othello* because of parallels not only between the two texts but between Africanus and Othello.<sup>14</sup> Both are Moors

<sup>9</sup> This claim often emerges within European cross-cultural descriptions. For example, in the popular *Omnium gentium mores*, published in 1520, Johannes Boemus explicitly intends to show "how men haue in these daies amended the rude simplicitie of the first worlde" (translated as *The Fardle of facions* by William Waterman [Printed at London, by Jhon (sic) Kingstone, and Henry Sutton, 1555], sig. A1<sup>v</sup>).

<sup>10</sup> *A Geographical Historie of Africa*, trans. John Pory (London: George Bishop, 1600).

<sup>11</sup> The terms come from Said's formulation of Orientalism.

<sup>12</sup> The Prince of Morocco in *The Merchant of Venice* is a third, but I am focusing here only on major characters.

<sup>13</sup> Quotations of Shakespeare are taken from the Signet editions of these two plays: *Titus Andronicus*, Sylvan Barnet, ed. (New York: New American Library, 1964), and *Othello*, Alvin Kernan, ed. (New York: New American Library, 1963).

<sup>14</sup> Rosalind Johnson makes the most recent contribution to this debate, as she argues that these figures are linked not only because "both are Africans who have been enslaved" but, more importantly, because both texts offer "reproachful indictments" of European imperialists

who have travelled extensively in Africa, who have been Christianized and embraced within European society, and who have become Europe's own very eloquent authorities on Africa. Claims for a precise or intended correlation between Africanus and Othello, or even between the *Historie* and the play, however, seem speculative at best. For one thing, Africanus is strongly identified in England with his Moslem past, whereas Othello's religious past is unclear. For another, while the play's knowledge of Africa or the Moor may correlate with the vision the *Historie* disseminates, that knowledge is part of a larger discourse extending back to classical times and not necessarily limited to Africanus's text.<sup>15</sup> Yet whether or not *Othello* responds directly to the *Historie*, both are clearly connected as part of the same discourse and contribute to the same body of knowledge, although in different ways and to incompatible ends.

From the Renaissance onward the *Historie* has been lauded for its objectivity, perhaps because of its author's extensive firsthand experience in Africa, his inclusion of substantial detail, and his exclusion of the exotic myths—of cannibals, Anthropophagi, “men whose heads / Grew beneath their shoulders,” and the like—commonly reported in contemporary descriptions of Africa.<sup>16</sup> Yet what has also been singled out as particularly vital to the text, by Africanus as well as by critics, is its author's identity as a Moor. Despite its apparent objectivity, Africanus himself admits that his *Historie* is consciously shaped to reflect that identity. But while he insists that his intention is to valorize his African subjects and to affirm and display his loyalty to his African heritage, his strategies work to the opposite effect; for the text produces an author who seems instead to be securing his Christian, European self at the expense of his “Other” identity as a Moor.

Though born in the newly acquired Spanish colony of Grenada, Africanus was raised as a Moslem, in Moslem territories, and he travelled extensively in Africa before being schooled and Christianized in Rome (where he wrote the *Historie*).<sup>17</sup> Before linking the subjectivity of his text to his self-conception, he explains his bias towards his nationality, confessing, “When I heare the Africans euill spoken of, I wil affirme my selfe to be one of

(“African Presence in Shakespearean Drama: Parallels between Othello and the Historical Leo Africanus,” *Journal of African Civilization*, 7 [1985], 276–87).

<sup>15</sup> Johnson, for example, argues that Africanus's Africans “are *not* typical of the ‘beastly lyvyng’ recorded by European Renaissance voyagers” (p. 277); yet neither are those displayed in Hakluyt. Othello's presentation of nations peopled with exotic types such as cannibals reiterates myths frequently rehearsed in classical descriptions of Africa but notably absent in Africanus's *Historie*. Compare, for example, the accounts in Stephen Batman's translation of Bartholomaeus's *De Proprietatibus Rerum* of such natives as the Bennij, who “have no heads, but . . . have eyes fired in theyr breasts” ([London: Imprinted by Thomas East, 1582], p. 224); or the accounts of “strange peoples” and “monstrous shapes” included in Arthur Golding's translations of *The excellent and pleasant worke of Julius Solinus Polyhistor* (London: I. Charlewoode, 1587) and *The Rare and Singuler worke of Pomponius Mela* (London: Printed for Thomas Hackett, 1590).

<sup>16</sup> At the end of his preliminaries, Pory quotes Ramusius (who published the Italian translation of the history), asserting that never before had there been a description of Africa with “information so large, and of so undoubted truth” (sig. E5<sup>v</sup>). In introducing his edition of the *Historie*, Brown seconds this praise and lauds Africanus for his “freedom from superstition and credulity, his absence of prejudice, and his unusual accuracy” (*The History and Description of Africa and of the Notable Things Therein Contained* . . . , trans. John Pory, ed. Dr. Robert Brown [London: Printed for the Hakluyt Society, 1896], p. lxxxvii).

<sup>17</sup> Miller, pp. 12–13 (cited in n. 6, above).

Granada: and when I perceiue the nation of Granada to be discommended, then I professe my selfe to be an African."<sup>18</sup> The dichotomy that he seems to establish here, between a European and an African heritage, is deceptive; for while Grenada had become a Christian, European colony, his upbringing there had been Moslem. (He was, in fact, named "Al-Hassan Ibn Mohammed Al-Wezâz Al-fâsi" and only became "John Leo" after Pope Leo X baptized him in Rome; he was called "Africanus" after his work.) By alternately denying allegiance to Grenada and Africa, he effectively undermines his allegiance to both and distances himself from the two places that mark his non-Christian, non-European past.

This same ambivalence (and perhaps antipathy) towards his past is evident, too, as he describes how he will shape his material. He promises, as a loyal African, to record only the native people's "principall and notorious vices" and to omit "their smaller and more tolerable faults."<sup>19</sup> While he presents this shaping as a means of favoring his subjects, the effect promised and produced by his statement is the amplification of his subjects' faults and the enforcement of their difference. What will be erased—and hence not tolerated—is behavior that qualifies as "tolerable" within his own (Christian, European) social sphere, behavior, that is, which is more "ours" than "theirs."<sup>20</sup> In its execution the plan produces Moors who, though sometimes civil, appear nonetheless as Other, not only because their defining characteristics are represented in extremes but also because they are set forth inconsistently. Africanus describes Barbary, the region identified with the Moors, as "the most noble and worthie region of all Africa" and its inhabitants as a "most honest people," "destitute of all fraud and guile," and "imbracing all simplicitie and truth." Because of their excessive civility and modesty, he reports, "it is accounted heinous among them for any man to utter in companie, any bawdie or unseemely words." Conflictingly, however, as he describes the rampant "venerie" of other groups (the Negroes, Libyans, and Numidians), he adds that "the Barbarians," in their addiction to this "vice," "are the weakest people of them all."<sup>21</sup> What Renaissance readers received as the vision of the Moor within the *Historie* is complicated by John Pory's popular English translation, for Pory renamed the Africans of various regions "Mores" in order to indicate (and to emphasize the presence of) Moslems.<sup>22</sup> Consequently, perhaps the clearest part of this vision is of Africanus himself, who at once claims the Moors as "ours" and rejects them as "theirs" and enforces his own Christian, European present by othering what hits and threatens closest to home: his Mohammedan, African past.

As Pory refashions Africanus's text, he reproduces as well its implicit discrimination; for while lauding its author, he nonetheless "concentrates" Africanus's difference (particularly his religious difference) and closes off borders between the African world and his own. Pory frames the text with an

<sup>18</sup> "The first booke . . .," sig. D4<sup>v</sup>.

<sup>19</sup> "The first booke . . .," sig. D4<sup>v</sup>.

<sup>20</sup> His subsequent suggestion that the Africans "should" be grateful for his omissions is similarly double-edged; for while it positions his subjects (falsely) as informed readers, it contrarily anticipates their response as uninformed and ungrateful, if not uncivil.

<sup>21</sup> sigs. D2<sup>v</sup>, D1<sup>v</sup>.

<sup>22</sup> Barthelemy discusses the confusion resulting from Pory's use of Moor (pp. 15–16, cited in n. 5, above).

introductory letter and a conclusion that make clear his anti-Moslem bias and his use of the text as anti-Moslem propaganda. For him the *Historie* instantiates the "wonderfull work" of a Christian God, the fortuitous result of its author's divinely directed conversion to Christianity from the "accursed religion" of Mohammedism.<sup>23</sup> Yet even as he valorizes Africanus as an exemplary product of Christian, European civilization, he continues to emphasize his difference. He promises the reader that although the author is "*by birth a More, and by religion for many yeeres a Mahumetan*," his "Parentage, Witte, Education, Learning, Emploiments, Trauels, and his conuersion to Christianitie" should make him "not altogether . . . unwoorthy to be regarded."<sup>24</sup> To reinforce Africanus's worth as "a most accomplished and absolute man," Pory compares him to Moses, who "*was learned in all the wisdome of the Egyptians*" just as Leo was learned "*in that of the Arabians and Mores*," and reinforces Moorish inferiority that he simultaneously denies. And not only does Pory emphasize the threat of Mohammedism by adding references to "Mores" throughout; he also amplifies their savagery. He "*maruell[s]*" at how the author ever "*escaped so manie thousands of imminent dangers*" and "*how often was he in hazard to haue beene captiued, or to have had his throte cut by the prouling Arabians, and wilde Mores*."<sup>25</sup> In associating the Christianized and Europeanized author of this "wonderfull work" with a world where Mohammedism and Moors thrive and threaten, Pory keeps Africanus's difference always in view and his assimilation always in check.<sup>26</sup> While his ostensible purpose is to bound off the Other who threatens from "out there," beyond European domains, his framing, like Africanus's own representations, also bounds off the Other who threatens from within.

### III

It is as difficult to determine what qualifies as discourse on the Moor in Hakluyt's *Principal Navigations* as it is to identify such discourse in the *Historie*, precisely because of the indeterminacy of the term. Hakluyt's descriptions of Africa are filled with "Africans," "Negroes," and "Ethiopes" who are not always kept distinct from each other and whose nationality, and sometimes color, ally them with the Moors. Yet the latter are nonetheless given a somewhat separate space within the text. Just as Richard Eden initially maps out the divisions of the continent in his "briefe description" of Africa, so Hakluyt also marks a division within its people: like Africanus but more explicitly, he assigns the Moors to a particular

<sup>23</sup> [iii] and sig. Kk4<sup>v</sup>.

<sup>24</sup> [ii]. Although the title page declares Africanus "a More, borne in Granada, and brought up in Barbarie," in his letter to the reader, Pory encourages us to accept him whether he was "born in Granada in Spain, or in some part of Africa" ([ii]), suggesting uncertainty about Africanus's nationality and making his own use of "More" as a designation of nationality seem tenuous. As a result, the Moor appears vaguely Other except in the matter of religion, where the difference is clearly defined.

<sup>25</sup> [iii].

<sup>26</sup> So too does Brown, as he proclaims Africanus "always at heart a Moslem" and his text evidence of his "happy adaptibility" (p. li). The Moor's "suppleness" (characteristic, Brown writes, of his race) makes him "best fitted" to negotiate with the various (and equally "supple") inhabitants and to explore the potentially threatening interior of the "dark continent" (p. iii).

geographical region, the “hither part” of Africa, which is “now called Barbarie.”<sup>27</sup> Accordingly, it is in accounts of Barbary, for the most part, that Moors appear. Beyond this regional difference their singularity amidst other Africans is less consistent and less clear (and demands an essay of its own). What does seem true in general, however, is that Hakluyt’s Moors appear more civilized than his other Africans. In the narratives that do more than list their presence, these Moors are surrounded by exotic riches and luxurious entertainments and are given authoritative voices.<sup>28</sup> Despite his higher, more civilized, sometimes orientalized, and sometimes Englished status, however, the Moor is no less the object of othering than the other Africans here or within the *Historie*. For here, too, those aspects that might prove the Moor’s authority too similar to “ours” or too legitimate as a competing alternative to “ours” are presented as Other or erased.

England’s campaign to advance its interests in Africa seems to have been directed primarily, at least on paper, towards two key areas of competition: one, religion; the other, politics and economics. It seems no coincidence that what is sabotaged within representations of Moors is their potential to compete with Christian Europe in religious and political arenas. Pory’s vigorous campaign against their “accursed” religion instantiates one of the most commonly expressed attitudes towards Mohammedism. Yet emerging alongside such attacks were also expressions, coming from the highest level of the state, of the compatibility between Christian and Moslem beliefs, both of which included a God and his prophet and which abhorred idolatry.<sup>29</sup> When Queen Elizabeth writes to the Moslem leaders of Turkey, attempting to secure an alliance between her country and theirs, she presents herself as the “most mighty defender of the Christian faith against all kind of idolatries” and implicitly embraces the Turks and their religion as comparably hostile to idolatry.<sup>30</sup> A similar expression emerges in representations of the Moors. In one of the two most detailed accounts of a voyage to Barbary, Edmund Hogan asserts that the ruler, Mully Abdelmelech, bore “a greater affection to our Nation then to others because of our religion, which forbiddeth worship of Idols”; that he lived “greatly in the feare of God”; and that he knew both the Old Testament and the New. His subjects, Hogan adds, called him “the Christian king,” and while it is unclear whether he actually was a Christian, the ambiguity further enforces the compatibility between the two religions.<sup>31</sup>

Although both the demonization and the embrace of Mohammedism in the cases above may have been deployed as strategies for countering the Moslem threat, both amplify that threat by proving Mohammedism either too incontestably different or too appealingly the same. With the exception of Hogan’s

<sup>27</sup> p. 144. These are, in fact, the only people whom he mentions in identifying the various regions and who, therefore, stand out notably. Cf. Eden’s translation of Peter Martyr’s *The decades of the newe worlde* . . . (Imprynted at London by Edward Sutton, 1555).

<sup>28</sup> Hakluyt includes an edict written by Mully Hamet, for example, “to the ende that all men which shall see this present writing, may understand that our princely counsaile wil defend [the English] by the favor of God” (p. 429).

<sup>29</sup> For further discussion of this point, see Samuel Chew, *The Crescent and the Rose: Islam and England during the Renaissance* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1937), p. 104.

<sup>30</sup> Hakluyt, Vol. 5, 226.

<sup>31</sup> “The voyage and ambassage of Master Edmund Hogan to the Emperour of Marocco, Anno 1577” in Hakluyt, Vol. 6, 289. The second most detailed account of the Barbary Moors is Henry Roberts’s description of his 1585 voyage, also in Hakluyt, Vol. 6, 426–28.



account, the descriptions of the Moors in Hakluyt evade these extremes by either ignoring or trivializing Mohammedism.<sup>32</sup> Tellingly, the most prominent account of the Moors' religion describes a group who had migrated to China and who no longer possessed the same degree of wealth, power, and status as the Moors in Barbary. The narrator, an anonymous Portuguese adventurer, defines their faith as little more than a peculiar habit of refusing to eat pork. They "knew so litle of their secte," he writes,

that they could say nothing else but that Mahomet was a Moore, my father was a Moore, and I am a Moore, with some other wordes of their Alcoran, where-withall, in abstinence from swines flesh, they live untill the diuel take them all.<sup>33</sup>

Although these Moors were initially integrated within a community in which everyone was allowed "to worship and folow what him liketh best," when they began to take control and to insist that no one eat pork, they were declared traitors and were killed or enslaved. The narrator concludes that their descendants "have nothing of a Moore in them but abstinence from swines flesh" (though, he adds, some do eat pork in private); yet he presents culinary abstinence as all that made their ancestors Moors in the first place.<sup>34</sup>

Within this account it is the implicitly simpleminded preoccupation with this habit that prevents the remaining Moors from spreading their religion and posing a threat to China, to Europe, or beyond. The narrator emphasizes that they give "no other cause" for their difficulty in converting the Chinese than the difficulty in convincing them to give up pork. He then allows Christianity to triumph in the competition with Mohammedism, a competition that he otherwise suppresses, concluding that "it would be an easie matter" to convert the Chinese to Christianity since Christianity has no such prohibitions.<sup>35</sup> It is difficult to tell whether his conclusion belittles the Chinese (for following the religion with the best menu) or whether it satirizes the Moors' view of what is at issue (food) in religious conversion. Either way, however, the threat of Mohammedism is completely distanced from the Christian world as something absurd or inconsequential at best.

In the political and economic spheres what is obscured or omitted is evidence that might validate the Moors as legitimate and competent competitors for merchandise and power. Unlike descriptions of their African peers, Hakluyt's accounts emphasize instead the familiarizing civility of the Moors. As Hogan awaits reception at "Court," for example, he is greeted by England's own ambassador, John Bampton, and provided a tent "spread with Turkie carpets" and "all things necessarie." The "Emperour," who delights in entertainment, requests that musicians be sent from England and promises that he will provide for all and allow them to "live according to their law and conscience." He later entertains his guests by "ducking with water-Spaniels, and baiting buls with his English dogges."<sup>36</sup>

Yet such evidence of the Moors' Englished hospitality is turned against

<sup>32</sup> By contrast, accounts of other Africans often make a point of their lack of religion or of their idolatry.

<sup>33</sup> "Certaine reports of the mighty kingdome of China delivered by Portugales which were there imprisoned," trans. Richard Willes, in Hakluyt, 295-327, esp. p. 321.

<sup>34</sup> pp. 321-22.

<sup>35</sup> p. 322.

<sup>36</sup> pp. 286, 289, and 291.

them as it is placed alongside—and as an interruption to—their business negotiations, which are consistently characterized as evasive and marked by unexplained delays. Hogan mentions hoping for a “speedier dispatch” as he is brought to court and encounters continued frustrations once he arrives. After a few initial conferences, he finds Abdelmelech lying on a silk bed in his garden, “complaining of a sore leg,” and is subsequently denied further audience on account of the leg. While he does not explicitly question the complaint, he nonetheless undermines its validity by noting that, after their meeting in the garden, the emperor walked around and exercised for two or three hours in his “gallie.” When Hogan made preparations to leave, he brought several “bils” to court, bargaining for a needed supply of saltpeter as well as protection for English merchants. Abdelmelech referred the matter to his two “Alcaydes,” both of whom disagreed about the terms of exchange and one of whom “fell sicke.” Only after several days and several delays was a deal finally made. Even then all Hogan records receiving is saltpeter.<sup>37</sup>

Instead of interpreting these setbacks as part of a two-sided power-play, Hogan merely presents the “facts” and sets them alongside select observations that implicate the Moors as uninterested if not idle, erratic if not cunning, and unreliable if not treacherous. As he mentions Abdelmelech’s professed plans to punish the Spanish (whose ambassador and religion Abdelmelech dislikes) by making their ambassador “dayly” [daily] and “attend twentie dayes after he hath done his message,” Hogan attaches a punitive significance to court-imposed delays, suggesting that the Moor is unpredictably and childishly vindictive. Although he admits that the Spanish and Portuguese are allowed to live and practice their Catholicism in Barbary, he emphasizes their subjugation, surmising that those who came to greet him were there “more by the kings commandment then of any good wils of themselves: for some of them although they speake me faire hung downe their heads like dogs.”<sup>38</sup> He makes clear as well that the position of the English is no less precarious. Although the English ambassador seemed to hold an authoritative position within the court, suddenly and for unspecified “divers causes” he fell into disfavor and was forgiven only after Hogan intervened.<sup>39</sup> Henry Roberts notes, too, that while he was treated with “all humanity” during the three years of his 1585 “ambassage” to Abdelmelech’s brother and successor, Mully Hamet, his departure was inexplicably delayed for almost a month.<sup>40</sup>

As Peter Hulme has demonstrated for similar colonialist narratives, such texts attempt to justify the colonialist cause by positioning the Europeans as always (already) right and the colonized subject as always (already) wrong.<sup>41</sup> The potentially understandable reasons for the Moors’ resistance to the often exploitative demands of imperializing outsiders are never stated. Generally, when the Moor is given a voice within these narratives, it is a voice of acquiescence rather than resistance. Not surprisingly, when Queen Elizabeth authorizes trade in Barbary, she emphasizes the necessity and convenience of the region’s merchandise “for the use and defense” of England and forbids

<sup>37</sup> pp. 286, 290–92.

<sup>38</sup> p. 287.

<sup>39</sup> p. 292.

<sup>40</sup> p. 426.

<sup>41</sup> pp. 420–23 (cited in n. 4, above).

the importation and selling of these goods by any "strangers,"<sup>42</sup> a category that includes the Moors and thereby excludes them from a reciprocal exchange. What is more surprising, however, is that Hakluyt's Moors are shown as happily agreeing with England's claims of priority. Hogan finds Abdelmelech

comformable, willing to pleasure and not to urge her majestie with any demaundes, more then conveniently shee might willingly consent unto, hee knowing that out of his countrey the Realme of England might be better served with lackes, then hee in comparison from us.

(p. 288)

What results is a people whose own competitive claim is erased, whose religion is trivialized, and whose negotiations are presented as unreadable, unreliable, and deceptive. What the subtle demonizations within these accounts seem to accomplish, then, is a heightening of exotic differentness and a hiding of the threatening sameness of the Moor.

#### IV

As Shakespeare contributes to this discourse, he produces two Moors who are situated in a potentially threatening position very near the "inside" of authority and power. He uses that situation in *Othello* as a means of questioning the difference nonetheless imposed upon the Moor. His initial vision of the figure as present in *Titus Andronicus*, however, enforces that difference (and far less subtly than Hakluyt, Africanus, or Pory). For while Shakespeare brings Aaron near the center of the staged court, accords him a voice of eloquence and knowledge, and allows his schemes to shape the plot, he concomitantly keeps the Moor on the outside, literally and figuratively, and both answers and promotes the darkest vision of the stereotype. Ironically, although the play creates a chaos in which distinctions between right and wrong, insider and outsider, self and other are problematically obscured, it does not challenge the racial stereotype. To the contrary, *Titus Andronicus* presents the stereotype as the one reliable measure of difference, the one stable and unambiguous sign of Otherness within a "wilderness" of meanings (3.1.54).

Aaron is the one character in this play whose malignant differentness is consistently recognized and easily categorized by all, including himself and his allies. His references to his distinctive physical attributes—his "woolly hair" (2.3.34) and his "treacherous hue" (4.2.117)—evoke a stock image of the black man, and his intention to "have his soul black like his face" (3.1.205) reinforces the idea culturally linked to that image, that blackness is not merely skin-deep. Comparable associations are also voiced by other characters whose reliability is least in question. For example, as Bassianus comes upon Tamora and Aaron in the forest, he declares the latter a "barbarous Moor" whose "body's hue"—like, by extension, the figure himself—is "spotted, detested, and abominable" (2.3.78, 73, 74). Lavinia

<sup>42</sup> Within the imperialist discourse that Europe imposed on the Caribbean, Hulme argues, "any transgression on the part of the colonial power" is consistently occluded (p. 9).

breaks from her characteristic reticence to second this retort and berates Tamora for enjoying a "raven-colored love" (l. 83).

By contrast, within the court world the alien is not so easily circumscribed, seen either from our perspective or from an onstage view. What puts the play, the state of Rome, and Titus himself in crisis is the breakdown of distinctions between "ours" and "theirs," and the destabilization of legitimating rights. Before Titus hands the rule to Saturninus, the bounds between Romans and Goths are clearly and absolutely in place. As Titus returns from war against the Goths, his Captain announces that the "patron of virtue" and "Rome's best champion" has "circumscribed with his sword / And brought to yoke the enemies of Rome"—Tamora, the Queen of the Goths; her sons; and Aaron the Moor (l. 1.1.65, 68–69). In response to Titus' orders that Alarbus, the noblest prisoner and eldest son of the queen, be sacrificed, Tamora asks the "Roman brethren" to spare him in terms that attempt to obscure the enemy/friend relation and to emphasize the similarity between Goths and Romans (ll. 105 ff.). She begs them to heed "a mother's tears in passion for her son," imploring,

if thy sons were ever dear to thee,  
O, think my son to be as dear to me! . . .  
O, if to fight for king and commonweal  
Were piety in thine, it is in these.

(ll. 107–15)

The civility of Titus' insistence that Alarbus "is marked" for sacrifice and "die he must" is called into question by Tamora's protest against such "cruel, irreligious piety," but his actions nonetheless secure the priority of "Roman rites" and the honor of Rome (ll. 125–30, 143).<sup>43</sup>

When Saturninus takes command, however, the differentiation between the two worlds, between inside and outside, self and other, is disrupted, and with it the idea of right and what is right in Rome.<sup>44</sup> His initial act of taking Lavinia as his queen places the idea of "Roman justice" in crisis, as it brings different interpretations of that idea into a conflict that the play refuses to resolve. For while he has royal prerogative and Titus' parental support on his side (both supported, in turn, by Elizabethan codes), he has Bassianus' prior and (in Bassianus' view) more "lawful" claim to Lavinia against him (l. 299).<sup>45</sup> And while the authoritative Marcus supports the latter on the grounds that "*Suum cuique* [to each his own] is our Roman justice" (l. 280), those grounds offer no clarification of rights.<sup>46</sup> Both Saturninus and Bassianus are, in some way, taking their "own," depending on what kind of prerogative legitimates possession. The policy itself presages just the sort of anarchy and ambiguity Marcus attempts to avert.

<sup>43</sup> While we may feel sympathy for Tamora, her subsequent vengeful turn against Titus redirects our sympathy toward him.

<sup>44</sup> As V. S. Naipaul writes in *A Bend in the River*: "It isn't that there's no right and wrong here. There's no right" (quoted in Jonathan Goldberg, *James I and the Politics of Literature: Jonson, Shakespeare, Donne, and Their Contemporaries* [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1983], p. 1).

<sup>45</sup> See Lawrence Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage: In England 1500–1800* (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), pp. 127–36; and J. A. Sharpe, *Early Modern England: A Social History, 1550–1760* (London: Edward Arnold, 1987), pp. 62–69.

<sup>46</sup> The translation is Sylvan Barnet's, the Signet editor.

Ironically, it is Saturninus' embrace of Tamora that ostensibly "resolves" this conflict—but in a way that sets our impressions uncomfortably at odds with the responses of those onstage. For the characters this resolution brings a re-legitimation of Saturninus' authority, and for us a clear de-legitimation of it. Despite their initial resistance to the sudden advancement of "the subtle Queen of Goths," Titus and his sons and allies again accept the emperor's terms and his queen once Lavinia's fate is no longer at issue (l. 393). Titus, in fact, is offended because he is not asked to "wait upon this bride" by whom he hoped to be "nobly" remunerated, since it was he who "brought her for this high good turn so far" (ll. 398–99). Before further offenses are committed, the entire court participates in a hunt, with no further protest or dissension.

From the audience's view, however, Saturninus' turn to Tamora signals a fatal alliance with the alien, making his own position finally and absolutely Other. While Lavinia may in some respects qualify as "his own," Tamora, as an enemy Goth of another "hue," clearly does not.<sup>47</sup> From his first admission (in an aside to us) that he prefers over Lavinia this "goodly lady . . . of the hue / That I would choose, were I to choose anew," his rule becomes one of duplicity and dishonor (ll. 261–62). Although he pretends to grant Tamora's request that Bassianus and the rebelling Andronici be pardoned, we see an indomitable desire for revenge beneath the facade, as he shows mercy only after Tamora promises to "find a day to massacre them all" (l. 451). Tellingly, throughout the opening crisis the Moor stands beside Tamora, silent but threatening in his silence and his blackness. After Saturninus' regime is securely in place, he gains a voice, and with it the capacity to contrive, control, and corrupt. As he speaks, he becomes the sign that, despite apparent order, Rome has become "a wilderness of tigers" (3.1.54).

While Shakespeare allows the Moor the freedom and ability to manipulate and maneuver close to the court circle, he nonetheless keeps him always an outsider, always the alien whose malice is less directed (and therefore more malicious) than that of Saturninus, Tamora, or her sons. What threatens to undermine Aaron's function as an absolute sign of the Other is his cultural literacy, his knowledge of classical mythology, and his eloquence. Lavinia's mutilation, her loss of tongue and voice, and her dependence upon others (Ovid, Marcus, Titus) to tell her tale enforce the association between self-authorization and language, or rather the loss of language and the loss of self. Deprived of voice, she becomes, as Mary Fawcett has argued, "a mute body to be disputed over." She can combat her alienation only by aligning herself with Philomela and inscribing herself within "the texts of the fathers"—and, in fact, of almost everyone in the play, Romans and Goths alike.<sup>48</sup> Aaron, too, has access to this discourse, which he displays as soon as he begins to speak. He celebrates Tamora's rise to "Olympus' top" (2.1.1) and anticipates "mount[ing] aloft" and "wanton[ing]" with "this goddess, this Semiramis, this nymph," who is "faster bound to Aaron's charming eyes / Than is Prometheus tied to Caucasus" (ll. 21–22, 16–17).

<sup>47</sup> The word "hue" here seems to be used in the sense of "appearance" rather than color, since her sons' fears that the birth of her "blackamoore" baby will "undo" her indicate that she is not black. It is, of course, possible that Saturninus' remarks suggest that she is not white either.

<sup>48</sup> "Arms/Words/Tears: Language and the Body in *Titus Andronicus*," *English Literary History*, 50 (1983), 261–77, esp. pp. 267 and 269.

Yet although his ability to speak of gods and goddesses, to decipher Latin, and to imagine the world as myth integrates him to some degree into the community of Romans and Goths, Aaron's speech simultaneously betrays his malign differentness. For, as he outlines his intentions, he reveals a purposelessness that makes his villainy all the more insidious and, even in this "wilderness," all the more unique. Tamora and her sons pursue obtainable and potentially empowering goals as they begin their reigns of terror: in addition to power, Tamora seeks vengeance against the Andronici for Alarbus' death and dismemberment; her sons seek satiation for their lust (1.1.143). Aaron's motives, however, are as slippery and obscure as are his chances of realizing a change in status. In his opening soliloquy he entertains hyperbolic illusions of gaining power but is unable to sustain an image of himself as dominator. He first places Tamora "above pale envy's threat'ning reach" (2.1.4) and makes "earthly honor wait" "upon her wit" while "virtue stoops and trembles at her frown" (ll. 10–11). Aaron then declares himself her captor and casts away "slavish weeds and servile thoughts" (1.18), as Tamburlaine did before him during his own initial coming-out speech.<sup>49</sup> Yet while Tamburlaine's thoughts aspire far beyond Zenocrate (whom he hopes to win with his display) to an unlimited imperial power, Aaron becomes trapped by what seems an inability to place himself beyond subjugation. He announces that he "will be bright and shine in pearl and gold / To wait upon this new-made empress" (ll. 19–20). He interrupts his thought with a recognition of its limitations ("To wait, said I?"), but he is unable to realign himself with power. He turns instead to envisioning how he will "wanton with this queen" and watch as she, like a siren, charms Saturninus and causes the "shipwrack" of the emperor and his realm (ll. 21, 24). It is she to whom both he and the play give a position of power, a position that he does not and cannot aspire to.

The inconsistency and limitation of his stated goals are further amplified as he meets Tamora in the forest. While she hopes to reenact the amorous "pastimes" of Dido and Aeneas and to "possess a golden slumber," "wreathed" in Aaron's arms (2.3.25–26), he claims to be ruled by Saturn and proclaims, "Vengeance is in my heart, death in my hand, / Blood and revenge are hammering in my head" (ll. 38–39). He is intent on making this "the day of doom for Bassianus," whose "Philomel must lose her tongue," her chastity, and her husband, but gives no indication why (ll. 42–43). His only inspiration for the attacks on Lavinia and Bassianus comes from Chiron and Demetrius' desire to have Lavinia, and his only motive a delight in villainy and violation, particularly though not exclusively of sexual codes. In this ambiguity of purpose, he anticipates Iago, who "justifies" his vengeance on continually shifting grounds. For Aaron, as for Iago, the possibilities of

<sup>49</sup> In displaying his nobility to Zenocrate, the "barbarous Scythian" casts off his shepherd's cloak and proclaims: "Lie here, ye weeds that I disdain to wear! / This complete armour and this curtlet-axe / Are adjuncts more befitting Tamburlaine" (1.2.41–43). Shakespeare's play seems self-consciously to allude to *Tamburlaine* in the previous scene, as Titus protests his son's use of "shall": "And shall? What villain was it spake that word?" (1.1.360); for, as Tamburlaine himself boasts, "Will and Shall best fitteth Tamburlaine" (3.3.41). *Tamburlaine* references are to *The Revels Plays: Tamburlaine the Great*, ed. J. S. Cunningham (Manchester: Manchester Univ. Press, 1981).

advancement, though initially at issue, drop quickly from view, leaving villains whose villainy becomes its own cause.<sup>50</sup>

In speaking and defining (or not defining) himself, Aaron enforces his own alienation even as he appropriates "the texts of the fathers" and particularly as he makes his own text essentially unreadable. What continues to be easily readable is the color of his skin, which keeps him and his son, "the vigor and the picture of [his] youth," from getting too close to the inside (4.2.108). His work is done mostly within the "checkered shadow" (2.3.15) of the forest, and when he appears at court, he remains in a subjugated position. In recounting an event at court, Marcus calls him "the Empress' villain" and calls Saturninus his "master" (4.3.74, 76), and, as Aaron comes to cut off and collect Titus' hand, he calls himself an emissary for his "lord the Emperor" (3.1.150). Although he does father the empress's child, Tamora herself orders that the baby, Aaron's "joyless, dismal, black, and sorrowful . . . stamp [and] seal," be killed (4.2.66-70). Chiron and Demetrius, too, initially endorse their mother's demonization of his "accursed" offspring and allow the baby to live only as Aaron devises a way to keep him, and his blackness, unseen (1. 79). In celebrating his blackness, Aaron himself admits that "all the water in the ocean / Can never turn the swan's black legs to white" (ll. 101-2).<sup>51</sup> He denigrates white as the "treacherous hue, that will betray with blushing / The close enacts and counsels of thy heart" (ll. 117-18). Ironically, however, it is his and his son's blackness that discloses the "close enacts" and evil "counsels" of his heart. Aaron himself recognizes his color difference as alien and ultimately alienating, lamenting (according to report) to his baby son: "Did not thy hue bewray whose brat thou art, / Had nature lent thee but thy mother's look, / Villain, thou mightst have been an emperor" (5.1.28-30).

As the chaos of Saturninus' rule comes to an end, Titus' son Lucius, fortified by an army of Goths, emerges to take command, "to heal Rome's harms and wipe away her woe" (5.3.148). His ability to maintain peace seems somewhat doubtful, however, not only because his insistence that Alarbus be sacrificed provoked Tamora's revenge in the first place but also because his alliance with the Goths reenacts the embrace of the Other that precipitated the initial crisis. The reliability of his new allies seems equally questionable, for in joining with him, they reenact the treason (Tamora's alliance with the Romans) that they claim to be "adveng[ing]" (5.1.16).<sup>52</sup> Indistinguishable here again, as during Saturninus' rule, are the self-securing distinctions between self and Other, ours and theirs.

While the stability of Lucius' rule is uncertain, the status of the Moor is not. The capture and containment of Aaron provides the one sure sign that at least some wrongs have been righted and some order restored.<sup>53</sup> Lucius, not

<sup>50</sup> This is true, too, of Marlowe's Jew of Malta, who prefigures both.

<sup>51</sup> He echoes the ancient proverb that Karen Newman has recently discussed, "to wash an Ethiop white" (" 'And wash the Ethiop white': femininity and the monstrous in *Othello*" in *Shakespeare Reproduced: The text in history and ideology*, Jean E. Howard and Marion F. O'Connor, eds. [New York and London: Methuen, 1987], pp. 141-62, esp. p. 142).

<sup>52</sup> The Goths' expressed desire for vengeance suggests that they will enact what Michael Hattaway calls "the wild justice of revenge" that has already contributed to the chaos (*Elizabethan Popular Theatre: Plays in Performance* [London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982], p. 188).

<sup>53</sup> Following Muriel Bradbrook's lead in characterizing Aaron as " 'half-symbol, half stage

knowing of Tamora's death, anticipates bringing the Moor "unto the Empress' face / For testimony of her foul proceedings" (5.3.7-8). Marcus, too, declares that the "irreligious Moor" will attest to "what cause had Titus to revenge / These wrongs, unspeakable" (ll. 121, 125-26). In both cases Marcus and Lucius produce Aaron as a witness to their "truth" without allowing him to speak. He becomes instead a living image of unspeakable wrongs. Earlier, after Aaron first catalogues his "notorious ill" (5.2.123-44), Lucius demands that the guards "stop his mouth, and let him speak no more" (l. 151). As the Moor is brought onstage for the last time, this sentence becomes his fate. Lucius orders his attendants to

Set him breast-deep in earth and famish him;  
There let him stand and rave and cry for food:  
If anyone relieves or pities him,  
For the offense he dies. This is our doom.  
Some stay, to see him fast'ned in the earth.  
(5.3.179-83)

Aaron is now securely "fast'ned" on the outside; deprived of the voice that might otherwise link him to the inside, his only speech will be to rave and cry for food. The judgment against Aaron provides the spectators on and off the stage with a figure whose difference is clearly and containably different and with a warning against those who might challenge the "truth" about the Moor: "If anyone relieves or pities him, / For the offense he dies."<sup>54</sup>

## V

After a decade that witnessed the prominent state visit of an envoy of noble Moors,<sup>55</sup> the emergence of Pory's translation of Leo Africanus's *Historie*, and a new edition of Hakluyt, Shakespeare again brings the Moor to center stage. This time, however, instead of participating in the othering promoted within these texts and within his earlier play, he 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. As *Othello* centers on the issue of both racial and sexual difference, it draws attention to the conflation of such differences in previous discourse on the Moor; instead of eliding the two to prove the Moor an "old black ram," Shakespeare brings them together to betray the circumscription of racial and sexual difference as an issue neither of race nor of sexuality but of power. The play is structured around a significant link between Othello's attempts to prove his wife a whore and Iago's efforts to prove the rational general an irrational Moor. While Iago instigates the former to effect the latter, the play uses the parallel to prove his terms false, to reveal Othello's decline and Iago's promotion of it as responses based on differences of authority and not of race. What the parallel highlights

formula," Hattaway reads Aaron as "the evil which Lucius must purge from the body politic," though he implies that Aaron "becomes"—rather than always is, as I would contend—"the stage villain" (p. 205).

<sup>54</sup> Aaron himself is neatly and absolutely contained within the earth; but by making the fate of his son ambiguous, the play leaves the threat of Moorish evil ever-present.

<sup>55</sup> Mention of this 1600-01 state visit as well as a copy of the official portrait of the leading ambassador can be found in Norman Sanders's introduction to the New Cambridge edition of *Othello* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1984), pp. 11-12.



is that the demonization of an Other in both cases is, in fact, a defensive move to avert the potential disempowerment of the self.

Admittedly, *Othello's* representation of the Moor encourages readings that reflect the conflicting visions inscribed in contemporary discourse. Criticism tainted by racist biases (including Coleridge's argument that Othello, as the hero, could not have been black and F. R. Leavis's contention that the play shows the Moor "unfit" for a match with Desdemona) has given way to more subtle but no less contradictory assessments of the ways in which the play upholds or overturns racist ideologies.<sup>56</sup> While Karen Newman, for example, argues that although Othello is "both monster and hero," his representation serves to bring out the monstrosity of femininity, Martin Orkin contends that the play "opposes racism" (so clearly, he asserts, that it is banned from South African high schools).<sup>57</sup> Michael Neill, who takes issue with Orkin, suggests that instead of opposing racism, the play effectively invents and illustrates the invention of it, by at once "engag[ing] its audience in a conspiracy to lay naked the scene of forbidden [miscegenist] desire, only to confirm that the penalty for such exposure is death and oblivion."<sup>58</sup>

The play provokes these differences as it, on the one hand, evokes "monstrous" visions of a Moor who falls quickly into monstrous thought and action and, on the other, positions Othello as a "valiant" general, assigns him its most eloquent voice, blames his corruption on an incontestably villainous villain, and allows him to repent. The discrepancies between the various representations and self-representations of the hero are exacerbated by questions that remain unanswered: why, if Othello has been "loved" by Desdemona's father and "oft invited" to his house, do he and Desdemona elope? is he accepted at court as an insider or only treated as such because he is a useful warrior? why does he (along with everyone else) trust "honest Iago"? The play exposes the disturbing power of representation (or misrepresentation) to shape a culture's actions and reactions, as Neill has suggested; at the same time, however, in creating these gaps, it directs our attention to the instability of representation.

It is Iago and not the play itself that attempts to fix the terms of difference, and Iago's terms and not Othello's difference that come under fire. Iago introduces the stereotype of the Moor as a "devil" and "an old black ram" (1.1.88, 85) as part of his attempt to "poison [Othello's] delight," to "throw such chances of vexation on't / As it may lose some color," and to incense Roderigo, Brabantio, and the court against Othello (ll. 65, 69–70). While the ease with which he constructs (and Roderigo and Brabantio endorse) this stereotypical vision suggests its cultural currency, the fact that he uses indirect means to discredit Othello at court suggests that the terms of the stereotype are not acceptable within the dominant setting. Iago's description is immediately undermined when Othello himself appears, a regal, eloquent, and accomplished general hastening to answer the Senate's call and not preoccupied with, in Iago's crude phrase, "making the beast with two backs" (l. 114). Stephen Greenblatt has argued that the Moor's relation to Christian

<sup>56</sup> These critical positions are surveyed in Neill, pp. 9–11 (cited in n. 3, above).

<sup>57</sup> Newman, pp. 141–62; Orkin, "Othello and the 'plain face' of Racism," *SQ*, 38 (1987), 166–88.

<sup>58</sup> p. 30.

society in the play makes him at once "the institution and the alien."<sup>59</sup> Yet Othello seems too much a part of the institution to be alienated within Venice. Whether or not his acceptance at court is dependent entirely upon his military usefulness, he is clearly accepted. At the least, martial prowess takes precedence over race, and even Iago knows better than to demonize the Moor here. As the Duke tells Othello, even though there is a viceroy already in place to wage the campaign against the Turks, "opinion, a more sovereign mistress of effects, throws a more safer voice on" the Moor (1.3.221–23). The Duke dismisses Brabantio's charges against him as "thin habits and poor likelihoods / Of modern seeming" (ll. 108–9). Although the First Senator pursues the complaint and asks whether Othello "by indirect and forced courses . . . poison[ed] this young maid's affections," he also provides an alternative scenario and asks whether Desdemona's love "came . . . by request, and such fair question / As soul to soul affordeth" (ll. 111–14). Othello's response convinces the Duke, without signs of perturbation, that the Moor would have won his daughter too.

Although Brabantio is incited by Iago's terms, he modifies those terms, amplifying the inconsistency within the anti-Moor rhetoric and suggesting indirectly that the sexualized and demonized stereotype of the Moor would not be believed by the Venetian Senate (4.1.242). His articulation of what makes Othello unsuitable as his daughter's husband is markedly unstable, as he continually revises his objection, creating what the Duke deems a "mangled matter" (1.3.171). Brabantio first declares Desdemona a traitor, but, encouraged by Roderigo's acceptance of his claim that there are "charms / By which the property of youth and maidhood / May be abused" (1.1.168–70), he subsequently displaces her alleged deceptiveness onto the Moor and accuses him of witchcraft. These accusations, too, prove unstable. After his first inquiry about charms, Brabantio then accuses Othello directly of "practic[ing] on [Desdemona] with foul charms" (1.2.72) and, in his next account, adds accomplices, declaring that the "spells and medicines" were "bought of mountebanks" (1.3.61). To amplify the offense further, Brabantio redefines the Moor as one whom his daughter "feared to look on," his daughter as "a maiden never bold," and magic as the "practices of cunning hell" (ll. 98, 94, 102). Significantly, he omits the bestial, sexual, and demonic image of the Moor that Iago introduced and instead defines Othello's difference in less racially biased terms. He lists "years, . . . country, credit, everything" as proof that the marriage goes "against all rules of nature" (ll. 97, 101), allowing race to be subsumed under the more neutral category of nationality ("country"), thereby making it no more problematic than anything, or "everything," else.

Not surprisingly, the discrepancies within his representation have prompted a variety of readings of Brabantio—as a "*senex iratus*," as a "sophisticated, civilized Venetian senator, unable to comprehend that his daughter could love and marry a Moor," as a protective and possessive father revolted by the "sexuality revealed by [his daughter's] elopement" and "enraged to have the object of his esteem taken from him."<sup>60</sup> The continual shifts in his position

<sup>59</sup> *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1980), p. 234.

<sup>60</sup> Peter Stallybrass, "Patriarchal Territories: The Body Enclosed" in *Rewriting the Renaissance: The Discourses of Sexual Difference in Early Modern Europe*, Margaret Ferguson,

make any one of these interpretations too unified and stable, for the play refuses to establish a single and specific object of his protest. His objections to the marriage on any grounds are significantly undermined by the fact that he "oft invited" Othello to his house (l. 127) and was enough aware of what those invitations encouraged to anticipate the resulting elopement in his dreams. What his protest does make clear, however, is that Iago's terms of difference are politically incorrect and directly unspeakable at court. Further, it suggests "othering" as a self-defensive maneuver against something that threatens too close to home. While we cannot know what that threat is, whether it involves Othello's race, Desdemona's sexuality, or something else entirely, Brabantio positions himself as one whose authority and "guardage" have been violated (1.2.69). His response is alternately to present Desdemona as a traitor, sure to "betray more men" (5.2.6), and Othello as a practitioner of "foul charms," unsuitable in his years, country, credit, everything.

Brabantio not only unfixes Iago's terms but also highlights a crucial pattern of response that marks both Iago's and Othello's reactions as they too attempt to alienate an Other as a means of securing the authority of the self. Iago's stated objections to the Moor are as inconsistent as Brabantio's, as he first denigrates Othello for choosing Cassio (and not Iago) as his lieutenant, then insinuates what is "thought abroad" (that Othello has done Iago's "office" "'twixt [his] sheets" [1.3.378-79]), and then professes love for Desdemona. While the sexual offense takes on an increasingly prominent place within his self-justifications, it emerges as an unsupported afterthought. His admission that he neither knows nor cares whether the rumors of adultery are true exposes his belief in these latter charges as uncertain at best. Although he subsequently asserts that this suspicion "doth, like a poisonous mineral, gnaw [his] inwards" (2.1.297), he also admits that Othello "is of a constant, loving, noble nature" (l. 289).

Despite his demonizing rhetoric, the difference to which Iago responds is political rather than racial, and the alienation his own rather than Othello's. Instead of an illegitimate deed of a "lusty Moor" (l. 295), what initiates and motivates Iago's revenge is Othello's choice of Cassio as lieutenant—a legitimate political action of a general who "had th' election" on his side (1.1.24) and an action that presses the "ancient" one step (or one lieutenant) further from the center of power. Tellingly, he introduces the Moor neither as a "devil" nor as an "old black ram" but as a proud and bombastic general whose most damaging fault is that he is "horribly stuffed with epithets of war" (l. 13). Even as he attempts to prove Othello the outsider, he represents him as an authorizing insider. Iago admits sending "three great ones of the city" to Othello in order to advance his own suit (l. 7). And while Othello's initial self-defining speech ostensibly establishes the Moor as the Other, it simultaneously positions him as the one from whom Iago takes definition and would like to take power. His protestation "were I the Moor, I would not be

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Maureen Quilligan, and Nancy Vickers, eds. (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1986), p. 136; Alvin B. Kernan, "Othello: An Introduction" in *Modern Shakespearean Criticism: Essays on Style, Dramaturgy, and the Major Plays* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1970), p. 351; and Carol Thomas Neely, "Women and Men in *Othello*: 'What should such a fool / Do with so good a woman?'" in *The Woman's Part: Feminist Criticism of Shakespeare*, Carolyn Ruth Swift Lenz, Gayle Greene, and Carol Thomas Neely, eds. (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1980), pp. 211-39, esp. pp. 216 and 233.

Iago" (l. 54) expresses a conflicted desire to be and not to be the Moor: if he were the noble Moor, he would not have to be the lowly Iago; if he were the detestable Moor, he would not be the self-loving Iago.<sup>61</sup> His equally elusive assertion, "in following him, I follow but myself" (l. 55), disrupts the difference between the follower and the followed and betrays Iago's aspiration to become followed by following. Once again, however, Othello provides the model.

Iago's attempts to demonize and disempower Othello respond, then, not to racial or sexual difference that proves the Moor an inferior outsider but to a political status that makes him the authorizing insider and that threatens to keep Iago in the margins of power.<sup>62</sup> Unable to disrupt that status through legitimate means (because of its own legitimacy), Iago attempts to lure Othello into a self-incriminating display of "alien" behavior, to "transform" the general into a rash and irrational Moor by "transforming" his wife into a whore. Othello begins, consequently, to act in ways that "would not be believed in Venice" (4.1.242) and that prompt the spectators onstage, as well as critics offstage, to endorse Iago's terms. The parallel between these two "transformations," as between his demonizations and Othello's, however, argue otherwise. The obvious fictionality of Iago's insinuations against Desdemona and of his "ocular proof" cautions us against accepting his production of the Moor (3.3.357).<sup>63</sup> More significantly, the pattern of his responses as he launches into this project reflect, clarify, and, ironically, normalize Othello's almost unbelievable suspension of belief in his wife's fidelity and his consequent alienation of her. For just as Iago reads Othello's legitimate military actions as a threat to his own authority, so too does Othello read Desdemona's legitimate wifely actions as a threat to his. And just as Iago reacts against potential disempowerment by attempting to alienate and disempower the authority, so too—though less self-consciously and maliciously—does Othello.

In the opening scenes in Venice, Othello's self-representations betray an anxiety over the self-threatening (or husband-threatening) authority of his (or any) wife. As Brabantio's accusations induce him to explain himself to the court, he anticipates and attempts to assuage any doubts within the Venetian court that his marriage will conflict with his public service, and reveals his own perception that domestication is the enemy (and the military metaphor is his) to his martial role, the role that gives him "life and being" (1.2.20). His assurance to the Senate that Desdemona's presence will not affect his performance as a general—

<sup>61</sup> Greenblatt offers a useful explication of the contradictory implications of the line (pp. 235–36).

<sup>62</sup> For a different, provocative approach to the slippage within Iago's discourse of motives, see Alessandro Serpieri, "Reading the signs: towards a semiotics of Shakespearean drama," trans. Keir Elam, in *Alternative Shakespeares*, John Drakakis, ed. (London: Methuen, 1985), pp. 119–43, esp. pp. 134–43. Serpieri does not give priority—as I think the play does—to Iago's initial explanation of his vengeful motivations but instead reads Iago as "deflect[ing] onto others . . . profound obsessions of which he is not fully aware himself" (p. 135).

<sup>63</sup> Desdemona's innocence has been challenged by some modern critics, but whether or not Iago's representations happen to answer a truth about her, they are exposed as self-consciously constructed. For discussions of her guilt, see Jan Kott, *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*, trans. Boleslaw Taborski (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1964), pp. 118–19; Leslie Fiedler, *The Stranger in Shakespeare* (New York: Stein and Day, 1972), pp. 141–42; and G. Bonnard, "Are Othello and Desdemona Innocent or Guilty?" *English Studies*, 30 (1949), 175–84.

... when light-winged toys  
 Of feathered Cupid seel with wanton dullness  
 My speculative and officed instrument,  
 That my disports corrupt and taint my business,  
 Let housewives make a skillet of my helm,  
 And all indign and base adversities  
 Make head against my estimation!  
 (1.3.263–69)

—equates domestication with loss of military prestige and sets Cupid's arrows against proper control and awareness. While his imagery suggests sexual desire as part of the domestic threat, it is not this alone that he avers.<sup>64</sup> He views marriage itself as a "circumscription" of his "unhoused free condition" (1.2.25–26), which made "the story of [his] life" one of "battle, sieges, fortune," of "disastrous chances," "hairbreadth scapes," and "redemption" (1.3.128–37).

Although Iago successfully turns Othello's attention and his fears to Desdemona's sexuality, it is her non-sexual role as mediator for Cassio that first evokes Othello's anxious resistance and that initiates and enables his subsequent degeneration. The first sign of discord between him and his wife comes as Desdemona insists that he meet and become reconciled with his lieutenant. Othello first defers the matter for "some other time," a time that he refuses to specify; as she castigates him at length for "mamm'ring on," he twice attempts to close the issue by proclaiming that he will "deny [her] nothing," then asking to be left "but a little to [him]self" (3.3.45–85). While we might be tempted to read his reaction as jealousy towards Cassio, Othello shows no jealousy—and, in fact, remains indifferent to Iago's attempts to inspire it—until after this interchange. Immediately before the exchange, Iago notes that Cassio has just stolen away "guilty-like" (l. 38); Othello, however, ignores his suggestion that he "like[s] not that" and inquires only whether it was the lieutenant (l. 37). Even after the confrontation, as Othello tells Iago (at Iago's prodding) that he enlisted Cassio "very oft" as mediator in his courtship, he still shows no signs of jealousy (l. 100). It is only when Iago directly questions Cassio's honesty that Othello begins to understand his ensign's insinuations, to inquire what it was Iago "didst not like," and why he "cried'st 'Indeed?'" when Othello admitted that Cassio was privy to his "whole course of wooing" (ll. 110–12).

Othello's acceptance of this previous triangulation attests to his continued trust in Cassio and suggests that it is not Cassio's relation to Desdemona but his own that problematizes the current situation. While the former situation (in which Cassio mediated for Othello) gave his voice (and Cassio's) dominance over hers, in the second (in which Desdemona mediates for Cassio) the power relation is reversed, making Othello the object of his wife's mediation and subject to her voice. Eve Sedgwick and Leonard Tennenhouse have argued that Renaissance women's roles as mediators "between men" enforced patriarchal authority by rendering women objects of exchange and effectively limiting their agency.<sup>65</sup> Yet regardless of how much or how little

<sup>64</sup> I do not mean to underplay the importance of the fact that the sexual, within this society, can be all too easily appropriated to delegitimize licit activity. Yet to read Othello's anxiety in sexual terms only is to follow Iago's unreliable lead.

<sup>65</sup> *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia Univ.

autonomy such a position actually afforded women, it nonetheless provided them with an occasion to speak and to assume an authority reserved primarily for men—an occasion that was not necessarily perceived by either gender as limiting women's power. As Catherine Belsey has noted, to speak is "to have access to the language which defines, delimits and locates power"; during the Renaissance, for women to speak was "to threaten the system of differences which [gave] meaning to patriarchy."<sup>66</sup> Desdemona herself represents her position between men as one of increased license and authority that competes with Othello's own. She assures Cassio that, although in speaking for him she "stood within the blank of [Othello's] displeasure / For [her] free speech," she will do more on his behalf "than for myself I dare" (3.4.128–31). She, in fact, uses her first act of mediation to speak for herself. As she protests that her request "is not a boon" (3.3.77), she makes clear that sometime she may demand one, warning Othello: "when I have a suit / Wherein I mean to touch your love indeed, / It shall be full of poise and difficult weight, / And fearful to be granted" (ll. 80–83).

In Venice, Othello successfully limits Desdemona's voice, even as he enlists her to mediate for him at court. Although he calls her to come and clear his name of Brabantio's charges, before she arrives he offers his own self-defense, leaving her little to say and little need to say it. His intervening narration puts words in her mouth and thoughts in her mind through an indirect discourse that makes her voice indistinguishable from his. She swore, he reports, that his history "'twas pitiful, 'twas wondrous pitiful" and "wished / That heaven had made her such a man" (1.3.160–62). When she does speak and expresses her desire to go to Cyprus, Othello (with her compliance) immediately undermines her autonomy by imploring the Duke to "let her have [his] voice" (l. 255). In Cyprus, however, as Desdemona mediates for Cassio, her voice is not so easily circumscribed. Although she insists during their initial confrontation that what she requests is for Othello's "peculiar profit," he responds as if her request compromised his own authority and demands to be left "but a little to [him]self" (3.3.79, 85).

His situation, then, resembles Iago's, as both confront a figure whose authority they establish as threatening their own. While Othello does not respond to that situation as consciously or maliciously as does his ancient, his willingness to believe Iago's fictions (which is apparent only after his confrontation with Desdemona) seems similarly predicated upon an anxiety over the potential disempowerment of the self. In mobilizing his thoughts and actions around evaluating "ocular proof" of his wife's alleged infidelity, Othello embraces a "cause" (5.2.1) that enables him to restore his own authority at the expense of a conveniently created Other, to claim the sword of Justice and the "cause" of all mankind (at least those whom Desdemona would otherwise betray) as his own. In demonizing his wife as a whore, Othello delegitimizes and ultimately silences her threatening voice. When she asks that Cassio be allowed to clear her name and that she be allowed to justify herself to God, Othello curtails all further mediation, refusing to let her speak

Press, 1985); *Power on Display: The Politics of Shakespeare's Genres* (New York: Methuen, 1986).

<sup>66</sup> *The Subject of Tragedy: Identity and Difference in Renaissance Drama* (London: Methuen, 1985), p. 191. That women who spoke "too much" were demonized as shrews suggests that speaking women were perceived as a threat to patriarchal power.

or be spoken for. While her problematic claim that she is responsible for her own murder complicates her position, it effectively authorizes his, allowing him to have the last word, at least until the truth is told by someone else's wife.

In his final speech before his suicide, Othello summarizes his story as of "one not easily jealous, but, being wrought, / Perplexed in the extreme" (ll. 341–42). Although he "justifies" his reactions only in terms of a vague perplexity, the play goes further and, through the parallel between his situation and Iago's, normalizes his offense as self-defensive resistance to the disempowerment of the self. While this parallel suggests an incriminating link between the "real" villain and the Moor, it, in fact, turns Iago's demonization against itself and vindicates rather than alienates the Moor. For what is shown as similar here is the apparent threat that incites these figures to demonize an Other, not the resulting offenses. Clearly, Iago is a villain by conscious and remorseless choice, and Othello by unfortunate chance. In aligning their situations, the play proves the Moor different not because he has an innate capacity for evil but precisely because he does not.

At the end of the play, Lodovico, though sympathetic to Othello's plight, instructs Gratiano to "seize upon the fortunes of the Moor" (l. 362). His order sums up what has been enacted in the worlds both on the stage and off, as such terms of difference have been imposed upon the Moor, and his "fortunes" appropriated by those who demonize an Other as a means of securing the self. By exposing this process of appropriation and undermining its terms, *Othello* resists the trend instantiated in *Titus Andronicus* and in prominent non-dramatic representations of the Moor. Its emergence amidst this discourse suggests that the self-authorizing strategies that gave shape to the Renaissance Moor were not only visible but also contested, at least by one play that refuses, boldly and subversively, to "close off borders" and "concentrate" difference and that chooses instead to make more of the Moor.