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Othello: The Moor and the Metaphor

PHYLLIS NATALIE BRAXTON

ALTHOUGH THE CIRCUMSTANCE of Othello's blackness is often assumed to embody a racial problem, as in K. W. Evans's assertion in "The Racial Factor in *Othello*" that "no analysis of the play can be adequate if it ignores the factor of race" (125), Shakespeare's play itself demonstrates that Othello's color outweighs in significance the element of race.¹ Physical characteristics, of course, help define race, and Othello's black skin and thick lips identify him as a member of the Negroid race, as distinguished from either the Caucasoid or Mongoloid races. The difficulty of determining Othello's specific ethnic background on the basis of textual evidence suggests that those details that relate to race are included for the purpose of lending verisimilitude to the character's black skin color and not for the purpose of describing an ethnic black of any fixed derivation. In this article, I will try, first, to demonstrate the manner in which race is used in the play primarily to support the fact of Othello's black skin color and, second, to suggest a dramaturgical purpose for the character's blackness in light of the ambiguity of his race.

I

The attempt of critics to discover Othello's specific ethnic background has generally resulted in identifying the character as a native of the African continent. A. W. Schlegel, for example, who seems to have initiated the subject of Othello's ethnicity in his *Lectures on Dramatic Art and Literature*, comments that Shakespeare transformed Cinthio's Moor—"a baptized Saracen of the Northern coast of Africa"—into a Negro, whom Schlegel located in the southern regions of Africa (401). A. C. Bradley, in *Shakespearean Tragedy*, similarly accepted Othello as a native of the African continent, even though he

considered it of little consequence “whether Shakespeare imagined Othello as a Negro or as a Moor” (166). In his study of *Othello's Countrymen*, Eldred Jones considers Othello, together with all stage Moors, as natives of the African continent, without specifying the particular location (87).

In an essay entitled “Did Shakespeare Know *Leo Africanus*?” Lois Whitney proposes that Shakespeare drew the salient features of Othello’s portrayal from the work of this early historian, adding that “Shakespeare was describing neither a Moor nor a negro in our modern conception of the terms but a confusion of the two types” (477). M. R. Ridley, in his edition of *Othello*, judges that the evidence about Othello’s origins is “indecisive” (liii). He accepts the description of the black-skinned, thick-lipped Othello as that of an African, but observes that, while the character may look like a “negro,” two words used in connection with Othello—“‘Barbary’ and ‘Mauritania’”—suggest that he may be an Arab from North Africa (liii).

While such criticism tends to assume that Negroes occupy sub-Saharan Africa, whereas Arabs live in North Africa, the suggestion of ambiguity about Othello’s geographical background is not addressed in terms of the significance this feature may have for dramaturgical necessity.

Those sociological and historical discussions of race that include Shakespeare’s *Othello* as a document illustrating Elizabethan racism seem to assume that Othello is an African, but do not concern themselves about the particular region in Africa from which he may derive. In *White Over Black*, his influential study of racial attitudes in the United States of America, Winthrop Jordan simply accepts the character as an example of the average Elizabethan Englishman’s idea of a black African or Moor—Jordan, like Jones, uses the terms interchangeably (37-38). Jordan then ascribes to Shakespeare and his contemporary audiences the pernicious notions about blacks that the playwright had been careful to assign to Iago as an element in Iago’s plot to destroy Othello (37). Like Jordan, Joseph Washington, in *Anti-Blackness in English Religion, 1500-1800*, uses Othello as an example of what he considers the English nation’s antipathy towards blacks (71). In his view, Othello is “deliberately caricatured as an African” (71).

Such views to the contrary, criticism has also taken the position that Othello is white. Mary Preston of Maryland, for example, in her 1869 *Studies in Shakespeare*, declared that “Othello was a white man” (qtd. in Furness 395). Washington judges that Shakespeare created Othello to be “in reality black but in character white” (71). Jonathan Miller, in *Subsequent Performances*, claims dramaturgical necessity for

having presented the white actor Anthony Hopkins as a white Othello in the BBC-TV version of the play so as to minimize the differences between Othello and Desdemona (159).²

Textual evidence, of course, is conclusive that the character is black in color. Othello calls himself "black" (3.3.263) and describes his face as "begrim'd and black" (3.3.387); Iago likens him to "an old black ram" (1.1.88) and refers to him as "black Othello" (2.3.32); Brabantio notes his "sooty bosom" (1.2.70); the Duke, praising Othello's character, tells Brabantio that "your son-in-law is far more fair than black" (1.3.290); and Roderigo initially sets Iago to thinking in terms of race when he characterizes Othello to Iago, by a feature common to native Africans and their descendants, as "the thick lips" (1.1.66).

The unequivocal manner in which Othello's blackness is described in the text suggests that the playwright wanted the character understood as literally black in color, as he seems to be in twentieth-century criticism, just as Aaron in *Titus Andronicus* is literally black in color (*Titus Andronicus* 3.1.205). He is not a light-skinned or "tawny Moor," as is the Prince of Morocco in *The Merchant of Venice* (2.1.1.s.d.), although, according to Bradley, nineteenth-century criticism tended to describe Othello in this way (168).

While insisting that the character is black in color, the text does not point to any one ethnic background for Othello. Features in his portrayal seem to have been drawn from all of the blacks who may have been in England during Shakespeare's lifetime. This would have included Spanish Moors, as well as Africans from a variety of locations on the African continent. Indeed, the playwright seems to have avoided assigning to Othello a specific geographical origin or ethnic background.

Eldred Jones, in *The Elizabethan Image of Africa*, notes that blacks from Africa had been present in England since 1554, chiefly in the capacity of slaves, although he points out that, until the initiation of the triangular slaving voyages in the following decade, Africans also traveled freely between Africa and England (*Elizabethan Image* 15-16).

Africans in Elizabethan England—either slave or free—might have come from a variety of backgrounds, and their skin colors might have varied in shade (Jones, *Elizabethan Image* 16). Whatever the Africans may have called themselves, literature on the subject seems to designate as Negroes those Africans of native African ancestry who predominated in the lands south of the Sahara, although they lived in North Africa as well; they were generally dark-skinned. West Africans might be almost any shade from black to cream. Africans of Arabian ancestry seemed to predominate in North Africa, but dwelt

south of the Sahara also. The prevailing religion in North Africa was Islam; native African religions predominated in the sub-Saharan regions (Bennett 17-25). Jones, in an evident reference to Africans of any background, comments that "not only is it certain that Shakespeare, living as he did in London and being so much a part of his times, would have had the opportunity to see Negroes, it seems impossible that he could have escaped seeing them" (*Elizabethan Image* 16-17). Jones probably did not exclude Arabs of African birth from his observation. He comments on the presence of the Moslem nobleman who had been "sent by the king of Morocco on an embassy" to Elizabeth's court in 1600 (*Elizabethan Image* 35); it does not seem unreasonable to assume that this North African was also seen by Shakespeare. This visit occurred too late to influence the portrayal of Shakespeare's Prince of Morocco in *The Merchant of Venice* but the ambassador's exotic presence could have affected his creation of *Othello*, presented in 1604.

In addition to Africans, Spanish Moors seem also to have been present in England in Shakespeare's lifetime. The Spanish Moors were descendants of those Moslems who rode out of the Arabian peninsula in the seventh century (Abercrombie 87), "carr[ying] Islam across North Africa and into Spain" (Bennett 12). Many African Negroes, converts to Islam, accompanied the Moslem armies into Spain (Bennett 12). As Thomas J. Abercrombie notes, in his article "When the Moors Ruled Spain," these Moorish conquerors, who were not ousted from power until 1492, "brought no women with them. From this heady mix of race and culture sprang the Moorish civilization" of Spain (88). These Spanish Moors seem to be the subject of the decrees which Queen Elizabeth issued in 1599 and 1601 concerning the numbers of blacks in England. In the 1601 decree, the Queen complains that

whereas the Queen's majesty . . . is highly discontented to understand the great numbers of Negars and Blackamoors which (as she is informed) are crept into this realm since the troubles between Her Highness and the King of Spain, who are fostered and relieved here to the great annoyance of her own liege people that want the relief which those people consume; as also for that most of them are infidels, having no understanding of Christ or his Gospel, hath given especial commandment that the said kind of people should be with all speed avoided and discharged out of this Her Majesty's dominions. (qtd. in Jones, *Elizabethan Image* 20)³

In his history of *The Moriscos of Spain*, Henry Charles Lea points out that those Islamic Moors in Spain who had refused, despite the threat of reprisals, to convert to Catholicism had sought assistance from Spain's enemies—France and, later, England (Lea 281-82, 287; see also 292-365). Officially, England denied assistance to the Islamic Moors from Spain (287), but Elizabeth's order seems to indicate that they were in the kingdom, albeit unofficially, where Shakespeare may well have had an opportunity to observe them.

Accustomed to seeing these various dark-skinned people in England, and probably having developed no special attitudes towards them, either disparaging or complimentary, a playwright might have exploited their characteristics in a portrayal of a fictional character who was black in color. Nothing in the text of *Othello* suggests that Shakespeare was concerned with depicting Othello exclusively as an African. The character is not identified in the play as an African. Instead, throughout the play, he is called either by the name "Othello," or, following Cinthio's practice, is designated "The Moor" (Kermode 1198). One might, of course, ask whether the term "African" is simply missing from Shakespeare's customary vocabulary, but in *The Tempest*, he demonstrates that he has no hesitation in describing someone as an African. In that play, on the occasion of the supposed drowning of Alonso's son, during the storm that occurs as the royal family are returning from the wedding of Alonso's daughter, the playwright causes Sebastian to declare to Alonso:

Sir, you may thank yourself for this great loss,
That would not bless our Europe with your daughter,
But rather loose her to an African. (*The Tempest* 2.1.124-26)

Even though the playwright is not specific about Othello's background, critics generally consider that Shakespeare developed the character as an African, and many details in his portrayal can be traced to African sources. Whitney conjectures that Othello is composed of features drawn from both North Africans and sub-Saharan Africans (see above, p. 2). Jones considers that the character is a "blend of characteristics popularly attributed to North African Moors with the color known to be more common in West Africa, and called no more erroneously then than now, black" (*Elizabethan Image* 37). The character's black skin, of course, could have derived from any of the blacks observed in England. The insistence upon "sooty" black skin and upon thick lips suggests that the playwright selected these details from among those Africans who would have provided what

Jones terms the greatest “dramatic contrast” with Europeans (*Elizabethan Image* 41). The character’s claim of descent from “men of royal siege” indicates a background resembling that of that Moroccan nobleman who visited the court in 1600, and, as Whitney demonstrates in her speculative article, Othello’s nobility also seems to parallel the status of the historian Leo Africanus (477),⁴ who converted to Christianity as an adult, after his Moslem parents had taken him to Africa during his childhood when the Moors were finally defeated at Granada (Washington 64-65). Whether or not Shakespeare knew the English translation of Leo’s *History of Africa* (1600), his probable knowledge of the blacks in England would have no doubt provided him with ample information for his portrayal of Othello.

Cultural details in Shakespeare’s portrait of Othello are as ambiguous as are details about the character’s background. Othello’s language, for example, may have been influenced by his conception of Arabic as much as by the playwright’s acquaintance with native African tongues. The copiousness of Othello’s speech has been commented upon in criticism at least since the observation by Thomas Rymer in *A Short View of Tragedy* that “our Noble Venetian[’s] . . . words flow in abundance; no Butter-Quean can be more lavish” (Rymer 139). At least one critic, G. B. Harrison, in *Shakespeare: The Complete Works*, considers that Othello “has some characteristics of the savage [including] a hyperbolic utterance when aroused” (1057), suggesting with his unfortunate locution that Othello’s speech is influenced by native African languages. While it is possible, of course, that Shakespeare was influenced by what he may have known of native African tongues, it is also possible that he found a model for Othello’s language among the Moors, either from North Africa or Spain, and their Arabic, with its “wealth of vocabulary [and] its sonorous sounds” (Abercrombie 107). Othello’s melodious speech seems to imitate these features of the Arabic.⁵

While the depiction of Othello’s background and his language both could have been influenced by knowledge of Africans from any location on that continent, or of Moors from Africa or Spain, some of the details in his portrayal seem to have a uniquely Spanish source. In religion Othello is a Christian. He exhorts Cassio and the other brawling soldiers “for Christian shame” (2.3.172) to cease fighting, and Iago, speaking in a soliloquy, muses about Othello’s wanting Desdemona, even if it means that the Moor has to “renounce his baptism” (2.3.343). This feature in Shakespeare’s portrayal of Othello seems to refer specifically to the Spanish Moors. The conversion of many of the Moors in Spain to Christianity is well-documented in

history (Lea 82-177). Whether great numbers of native Africans became converts to Christianity is doubtful. There seems to have been no exigency in Africa that urged conversion to any religion other than Islam similar to the impetus in Spain for Moors to become Christians.

Similarly, when Othello describes himself as a slave who has been redeemed (1.3.137-38), the detail seems to allude to a situation prevailing among the Spanish Moors. The Moors in Spain were repeatedly enslaved for reasons of war or religion, and often their chief reason for converting to Christianity was to regain their freedom (Lea 27). Africans, on the other hand, seem usually to have been held as bond slaves (Cronon xii-xiii), and bond slaves did not seem to have the option of redemption open to them. It appears, therefore, that Shakespeare had in mind the type of slavery common in Spain when he included this feature in his portrayal of Othello. Brabantio's sneering reference to "bond slaves and pagans" (1.2.99) seems to be an oblique attempt to sully the reputation of the redeemed slave and baptized Christian, Othello.

As with his ancestry and his language, details of Othello's military career and his travels may have been influenced by either African or Spanish sources, or both. The bravery of the Africans is noted by Basil Davidson, who points out in his *The African Slave Trade* that African armies successfully resisted invasion from outside the continent for centuries (27). Leo Africanus praises the Moors in Africa as "brave and noble soldiers" (Whitney 480). The Moors in Spain were also great warriors, as their conquest and long occupation of that land attests. The threat of a Moorish reconquest of Spain remained so real that, in 1570 (Lea 230-65) and again in 1609, the monarchy ordered the expulsion of all non-Catholic Moors from Spanish soil (Livermore 289). This demonstrated military prowess of the Spanish Moors may, therefore, have influenced Shakespeare in describing Othello's military ability as much as any knowledge of African warriors he may have had.

Those details concerning Othello's travels that could have been drawn from African sources suggest that he may have traveled widely, but they do not give any indication of the particular countries to which he traveled or from which he came. The sights that he reports seeing are strange to him; he tells

of antres vast and deserts idle
 Rough quarries, rocks [and] hills whose [heads] touch heaven,

 And of the Cannibals that each [other] eat,

The Anthropophagi, and men whose heads
[Do grow] beneath their shoulders. (1.3.140-45)

Othello does not identify these sights as belonging to any particular country. Geographically speaking, the description could refer to Africa (Jones, *Elizabethan Image* 5) or India (French 808); in the text of the play, these features seem to belong to some vague, unidentified (perhaps, to Othello, unidentifiable) lands. The source for the description is unclear. Ridley suggests that it “seems as idle as the deserts to try to determine whether Shakespeare was primarily indebted to Mandeville or Raleigh [*sic*] or Holland’s Pliny” as a source for such “travellers’ tales” (Ridley 29). Othello, of course, states that he had come to know these places as a traveler (1.3.139). Shakespeare had it within his power to name the lands to which his Moor traveled, as easily as he named, in *The Merchant of Venice*, the Goodwins, where one of Antonio’s ships had been wrecked (3.1.2-4). Dramaturgically, he must have found it necessary to be unspecific about Othello’s travels, just as he was about the Moor’s origins.

The details of Shakespeare’s portrayal of Othello seem to indicate that the character was not meant to be limited to either an African, from whatever locale, or a Moor, either Spanish or African. Unlike Leo Africanus, the historian, who came from a particular place, Granada, and went specifically to Africa and, later, to Italy, Othello is represented as traveling constantly, but to vague, unspecified places, while his homeland is not named. Even the designation of Othello as a Moor is ambiguous. Anthony Gerard Barthelemy’s etymology of Moor, in *Black Face, Maligned Race*, while probably exaggerating the Elizabethans’ total identification of this term with “black African” (1), at least makes it clear that to the Elizabethans “Moor” described “at the simplest level . . . the Other, the non-English, the non-Christian” (17). Although a Christian, the non-Venetian Othello is indeed the Other. But the term “Moor” is vague. According to Abercrombie, Moors never called themselves Moors: “they were Arabs from Damascus and Medina, leading armies of North African Berber converts” (Abercrombie 88). To Elliot H. Tokson in *The Popular Image of the Black Man in English Drama, 1550-1688*, the only definite feature about a Moor was that he was black in color (3). Unlike the terms used to describe characters such as Portia’s suitors—“the Neapolitan prince,” “the French lord,” “the County Palentine” (*The Merchant of Venice* 1.2.39-54), or the Princes of Morocco (1.2.125) and Arragon (2.9.2), all of which indicate the characters’ origins—Othello’s origin is not named. The details in his characterization confirm that Othello

is black in color without making the blackness that of a black of any one particular background.

II

Why does Othello have to be black? When I heard this question at a scholarly meeting, it was raised by a person who probably just wanted an answer. Long accustomed to having black heroes belittled by the dominant culture, I reacted with a barely restrained hostility, demonstrating my susceptibility to the modern tendency to foreground race. On reflection, I realized that the questioner seemed to be trying to place the problem within the context of the fictional world of the play.

Within the context of the fictional worlds of Venice and Cyprus, "Why," as Washington phrases the question, "did Shakespeare choose to develop Othello in the character and action of a black Moor?" (70). Washington's answer was that Shakespeare wanted "to show the particular problems of a black in white society" (72). Yet the playwright seems to have made no effort to create a black of any specific ethnicity. He simply insists upon the character's black skin color.

Shakespeare could be demonstrating, in the nonspecific nature of Othello's background and the ambiguity of the cultural details in his portrayal, that the Other is always mysterious and without clear definition. Once defined, he is no longer the Other. Immediately contradicting this theory is *The Merchant of Venice*, in which Shylock may be defined as the Other. Shylock's background as a Jew is never in doubt. A Jew supposed to be living in Venice in the Renaissance could be assumed to be a resident of the ghetto (Sachar 251). Although he may be the Other in his relationship to the majority of Venetians, he is located securely within a tradition, a culture, and a history. However, Shylock's role does not seem to be designed for the purpose of exploring the character of a Jew but rather of exploiting the characteristics of a usurer.⁶ The dramatic structure called for a character who takes no chances. Shakespeare found such a feature in the character of a money lender, and money lenders at that time were Jewish. Consequently, the playwright wove into his plot the Jewish money lender, apologizing in advance for any implied anti-Semitism by placing in Shylock's mouth a moving plea for understanding (3.1.53-73).

In the same way that Shylock fills a specific need in the dramatic structure by virtue of the usurer's characteristic of absolute caution (while he remains the Other in terms of societal relationships), Othello's color seems to derive from a specific dramaturgical require-

ment. As with Shylock, the playwright does not seem to be exploring the character; he is exploiting one feature—in Othello's case, he is exploiting the black skin color. Other features are included only insofar as they are required to complete a believable portrayal of a black. These other details are drawn from the many blacks who were presumably present in England in Shakespeare's lifetime. From the great variety in the appearance of these strangers, the playwright seems to have selected those physical features which would most clearly distinguish Othello from the native inhabitants of Venice (which was, of course, a way of making the character most alien to an audience of native Englishmen). Othello, therefore, was given black skin and thick lips.

As I have attempted to show, the character is not a black of a particular ethnicity; furthermore, the play does not focus upon his problems as a black in the community. His problems do not seem to be with the community at large: he has the respect of the Duke and the government; he has a sensitive and trusted position as general; he marries a girl who has previously been the object of many suitors of her own race. His problems seem to be confined to Iago's personal animosity toward him. Thus, the thesis that Othello's tragedy derives from his status as the Other is not dramaturgically defensible. Despite his physical identification as the Other, his interaction with the native Venetians (other than Iago) would discourage an interpretation of him as the Other in the sense of an outsider who is totally alienated from the community. In this respect, then, the plot does not require that he be black. He is not white—although, to some critics in the nineteenth century, his personal characteristics may have seemed at variance with certain widely-held notions of the proper traits for a stage black.⁷ The motive of jealousy in the play does not require that he be black. Yet the playwright seems to have gone to extraordinary pains to develop this character so that his black skin color would be clearly understood.

The reason for the character's black skin color should be inherent in the dramatic elements of character and plot. Thus, the need for the Jewish money lender in *The Merchant of Venice* grows out of the demands of character and plot, and Aaron's black skin color in *Titus Andronicus* is dramaturgically necessary and probable because black is usually accepted as the color of the evil that Aaron personifies (3.1.205). The seeming failure of character and plot in *Othello* to yield a dramaturgical purpose for the character's black skin color is perhaps what has led to the critical assumption that the purpose is extradramatic, residing in the audience's response to the relationship

between blacks and whites. When examined, however, even this reason has less validity for Shakespeare's Elizabethan audiences than it has for later audiences viewing the play against the background of bond slavery.

Additionally, the visual and emblematic contrasts provided by Othello's color are insufficient to explain why he is black. Visually, the blackness contrasts with Desdemona's "whiter skin . . . than snow" (5.2.4). But there seems to be little point in providing a visual contrast that does not appear to illuminate the text. Emblematically, the traditional associations with black and white are reversed, as Doris Adler demonstrates in her article on "The Rhetoric of Black and White in *Othello*," so that in the play, as G. K. Hunter observes in "Othello and Colour Prejudice," Iago is represented as "the white man with the black soul while Othello is the black man with the white soul" (151). Moreover, as Adler points out (255), Bianca, whose name translates as "white," with its resonances of "good" and "pure," is so far from being pure that she is characterized as a courtesan, or in Iago's words, Cassio's "whore" (4.1.177). In *Romeo and Juliet*, verbal contrasts, including black-versus-white imagery, support the tragic conflict between the two feuding families; along similar lines, one might assume that the black-and-white contrasts in *Othello* are employed for the purpose of supporting the major theme, but the major theme of the play seems to contradict this notion. Iago and Othello are not equal antagonists as are the families in *Romeo and Juliet*, and as the diametric opposition in a black-versus-white contrast suggests should be the case. Othello is a passive victim who does not recognize Iago as his antagonist until Desdemona is dead and Iago's plot to destroy Othello is irreversible. The seeming divergence between traditional color symbolism and the use of color in *Othello* suggests that color in the play is not used primarily to underscore a conflict between evenly matched contestants.

Othello is destroyed as the result of the machinations of Iago, who is nevertheless not punished within the confines of the dramatic action. Such an absence of predetermined poetic justice demonstrates an arbitrary working of fate. While this theme of the arbitrariness of fate seems to be reflected in the unexpected reversal of the color symbolism, the skin color, as a detail of the characterization of the protagonist, calls for an explanation arising out of both character and plot. Within the great chain of being that the Elizabethans assumed gave order to the universe (Tillyard 25-36), one could find illustrations of the arbitrariness of fate among the meanest creatures of the earth. E. M. W. Tillyard explains in *The Elizabethan World Picture* how

the Elizabethans drew lessons about their own lives by observing these humble creatures:

[T]he Elizabethans looked on the lower end of the chain of being mainly in the light of themselves. Its great variety and ingenuity were indeed testimonies of the creator's wonderful power, but its main function was to provide symbols or to point morals for the benefit of man. The ant was a wonderful creation, but the chief thing was that he was there for the sluggard to go to. (80)

Ben Jonson's *Volpone* demonstrates the manner in which Elizabethans gave dramatic form to such lessons drawn from observation of the lower orders. The behavior of the fictional Volpone, who pretends to be dying in order to expose the rapaciousness of his friends, parallels the *modus operandi* in the legends that Jonson's sources gave him about the fox, who "feigned death in order to catch birds, especially 'ravens, crows, and other birds,' which light near the supposed carcass and are seized" (Nethercot 131).

An easily observable natural phenomenon, which demonstrates the arbitrariness of fate and which requires no confirmation except the evidence of one's eyes, occurs in the action of a spider capturing a fly in its web. The events of *Othello* parallel the actions of the spider in his destruction of the fly. Iago is the spider who, with true "motiveless malignity," seeks the destruction of Othello for a variety of invented reasons, but chiefly for the unspoken reason that Othello, the fly, is his natural enemy. The metaphor, which can be traced throughout the language as well as the action of the play, has been noted by Caroline Spurgeon. In her seminal study, *Shakespeare's Imagery*, she includes a description of the preponderance of animal imagery in *Othello* (336); Spurgeon comments that, in this play,

we see a low type of life, insects and reptiles, swarming and preying on each other, not out of special ferocity, but just in accordance with their natural instincts. . . . This reflects and repeats the spectacle of the wanton torture of one human being by another, which we witness in the tragedy, the human spider and his fly. (336)

Iago's language reflects this metaphor of the "human spider and his fly," while, at the same time, it reveals his method of trapping his intended victims. At one moment, when Iago, Cassio, Emilia, and

Desdemona are engaged in conversation, Iago observes Cassio touch Desdemona's hand, and the ensign murmurs to himself, "With as little a web as this will I ensnare as great a fly as Cassio" (2.1.168-69). Later, in a soliloquy, he declares of Desdemona that "out of her own goodness [will I] make the net / That shall enmesh them all" (2.3.361-62). Iago turns the circumstances of the victim's own life into the material to destroy the victim: Othello's blackness; Cassio's casual action of respect for Desdemona; Desdemona's goodness. Although he is eventually unsuccessful in his plot against Cassio, Iago has included him in his widening plot, as the destruction of everyone seems to have become, for him, an end in itself. As with spiders, his "web" will snare any creature that falls into it.

Iago is portrayed throughout with features peculiar to the spider; details in Othello's portrait conform to the characteristics of the fly. The resemblances between both of these fictional inventions and their counterparts in the insect world are too consistent to be considered coincidental. From his childhood to his death, Othello corresponds in development to a fly. He has been a warrior since the age of seven; in other words, upon his transformation from infancy and early childhood, he has assumed the responsibilities of an adult. In the same way, the fly assumes adult status immediately upon emerging from the larval stage. Othello's residence on islands—areas surrounded by seas—parallels the fly's tendency to inhabit almost exclusively damp places. Othello travels constantly, just as flies are always on the wing; Othello's sonorous and repetitive speech has the droning quality associated with insects such as flies and mosquitoes. Maturity is accompanied, in humans and animals alike, by courtship rituals—Desdemona is attracted by Othello's stories of his wondrous exploits—and the sudden elopement of the sheltered Desdemona with Othello is perhaps not dissimilar to the abrupt mating of the creatures of the wild, which select mates independently of any authority, and depart suddenly from the nurturing habitation without plan or warning. Most significantly, the Moor is helpless to save himself when in the throes of his enemy, Iago, just as the fly is a helpless victim when it is caught in the web of its natural enemy, the spider.⁸

Through this metaphor, Othello's blackness is revealed as a function of both character and plot. The spider's victim is typically some kind of wandering insect who blunders into the spider's web. The spider does not seek out its victim, but when it sees one in its web, it sets out immediately to destroy that victim. The play, therefore, required first of all a character who would be recognized by the audience as someone out of his native element—a wanderer. Persons

with black skin in Elizabethan England could generally be classified as wanderers; Othello is thus depicted with the black skin common to these wanderers, the color of his skin conforming to the color of the spider's most frequent victim, the fly. The spider, who remains in its web awaiting a victim, need only be characterized as a creature on its home grounds, prepared to destroy any unwitting trespasser. In the dramatic structure, therefore, the spider is depicted with the protective coloring of one who is native to the environment; consequently, Iago (a Florentine [3.1.40]), has the white skin of a native of the Italian peninsula. The action of the play dramatizes the manner in which the fly wanders into the spider's web and is destroyed by the spider.

Just as the Holocaust has altered our reaction to Shylock, so that, in recoiling from the horror of recent historical events, we now foreground the humanity of the Jew in the fictive tragedy of *The Merchant of Venice* rather than the caution of the usurer, so the legacy of chattel slavery has affected modern responses to *Othello*. Audiences and critics now try to come to terms with what they perceive as a racial emphasis in the play and, in the process, fail to realize that Othello, as a fictional construct, is an element in the controlling metaphor. In his thoughtful essay on "Othello and the 'plain face' of Racism," Martin Orkin asserts that the play stands against racism. While Shakespeare's play is perhaps less consciously didactic than Orkin claims, the playwright does demonstrate the virulence of racism by having Iago introduce it into the plot as a fatal "poison" (1.1.68), just as the spider injects venom into its victim. Iago gloats as he lets his "medicine" work (4.1.45), just as the spider lets its victim writhe under the effect of the poison.

The playwright lets the punishment of the poisoner remain uncertain, reflecting the manner in which the spider in nature is not necessarily punished for killing the fly. Iago's punishment, if any, which is urged by Lodovico, but left to the discretion of Cassio (5.2.367-69), does not take place within the confines of the dramatic action. Those in the audience who demand retribution are therefore free to conjecture that Iago suffers proper punishment for his evil. The playwright, meanwhile, remains true to the natural order that is demonstrated in the mimetic action when he refrains from actively punishing this "human spider," for nature does not judge as evil a natural force, or treat as evil the natural enmity of one species towards another. If the spider should also be killed as a result of this struggle, it is not in the nature of retribution, punishment, or revenge, but simply another incident in the bitter fight for survival. If the spider is not killed, that also is in the natural order of things. The

destruction of Othello as a result of the machinations of Iago reflects this cosmic struggle, with the absence of predetermined poetic justice in the drama suggesting both the amoral aspects of the natural forces at work and the arbitrariness of an indifferent fate.⁹

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NOTES

¹Norman Verrle McCullough, in contrast to the actor Paul Robeson and director Margaret Webster, both of whom, he asserts, tried to prove that *Othello* is a "play about race," is sure that "*Othello* is not a play of race, and only by following a raceless approach to the play will the reader or viewer discover the true tragic thrill of Shakespeare's play" (*The Negro in English Literature* 47).

²According to James C. Bulman in an article in the *Shakespeare Quarterly*, the original producer of the BBC-TV series, Cedric Messina, had "tried to cast James Earl Jones as Othello but was forbidden to do so by British Equity" (580).

³Jones cites this order to support his theory that the Queen thought the number of African natives in England so great as to create a problem (*Elizabethan Image* 20). That the Queen included not only Spanish Moors but also African slaves in her order, seems evident from her special statement that people who were "possessed of any such Blackamoors" should surrender them (10).

⁴According to John Pory, who, in 1600 had translated Leo's *History of Africa* into English, prefacing it with a biography of the author, Leo's "[p]arentage seemeth not to have bin ignoble" (qtd. in Whitney 477).

⁵Othello's speech before the Senate, in which he relates how his marriage came about, occupies forty-three lines (1.3.127-70). His language frequently includes repetition, in phrases such as the following: "She swore, in faith 'twas strange, 'twas passing strange: / 'Twas pitiful, 'twas wondrous pitiful" (1.3.160-61), and "Put out the light, and then put out the light" (5.2.7), as he utters a thought and returns to utter it again.

⁶Warren D. Smith, who also suggests this idea in an essay entitled "Shakespeare's Shylock," does not follow the notion up for its dramaturgical possibilities (195).

⁷Barthelemy notes that the "overwhelming majority" of black characters presented on the stage in England "between 1589 and 1695 endorsed, represented, or were evil" (72). Characters such as the Moor Muly Mahamet in George Peele's *Battle of Alcazar* were strong, self-confident characters, but as blacks, they stood for evil. The strength and confidence of the evil black characters were perhaps mistaken by Preston in the nineteenth century (see above, page 2) for traits more appropriate for white characters. During the nineteenth century, audiences were probably more accustomed to the representation on stage of the type of subservient, menial blacks that appeared in such popular plays as Dion Boucicault's *The Octoroon* (1859). This new stereotype of the stage black was a result of the crystallization of attitudes developed in an attempt to justify chattel slavery (Jordan 27). This social conditioning is perhaps what caused Preston, "Coleridge, and . . . the American writers" who professed to believe that Othello was a white or tawny Moor (Bradley 168) to allow their critical judgment to falter.

⁸The allegory of spiders and flies was familiar to Shakespeare's audiences from John

Heywood's poem, *The Spider and the Flie*, which had appeared a generation previously in 1556. In the introduction to this long, allegorical work, A. W. Ward reports that, in one reading of the poem, anthropomorphic spiders and flies, representing respectively Protestants and Catholics, fight a war about idolatry, until the head spider—who represents the Duke of Northumberland, the leader of the Protestant plot against the Catholic Queen Mary—is crushed underfoot by the Maid, signifying the beheading of the Duke (Heywood vii-ix). The poem demonstrates how the Renaissance imagination could seriously entertain an insect metaphor that modern audiences tend to deem trivial.

⁹The lesson of an arbitrary fate was probably not lost upon the audience at court for whom the play seems to have had its first performance on 1 November 1604, during the second year of the reign of James I. The description of James's life by Maurice Ashley in *England in the Seventeenth Century* suggests that James was at the mercy of a particularly arbitrary fate. Before he was a year old, the man who was presumably his father, Lord Darnley, was murdered, if not with the actual connivance of James's mother, Mary, Queen of Scots, at least with her approval. James inherited the throne of Scotland as James VI when his mother abdicated and fled to England, where she was eventually executed by Parliament with the consent of her cousin, Queen Elizabeth. Elizabeth provided no heirs to the throne and, on her deathbed, is supposed to have named "our cousin of Scotland" to succeed her, a prize that James secured for himself when he "contented himself with restrained protests" to his mother's execution (9).

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