The Rhetoric of Black and White in Othello

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As a white teacher of black students at Howard University in 1969 when the heightened sensitivity to and the justified rebellion against the pejorative values and racial overtones of black in our language and literature had reached an explosive pitch, I found the preparation of Othello an arduous but illuminating exercise. The repeated use of the terms black and white, with various but always polarized meanings, and the relationship of those terms to other suggested and dramatized elements of the play required, indeed demanded, a full explication of the terms and of Shakespeare's use of them in Othello. Such an explication suggests that the complex and confusing values of black and white are used to reinforce the theme of man's tragic blindness in Othello.

The terms black and white have been complex and confusing since the beginning of the language, and Shakespeare seems to have fully exploited their complexity within Othello. According to the OED, the origin of the word black is obscure, but seems to be related to the verb Blaekan, "to burn, or scorch," and is used for that color of charcoal which is the total absorption, or the total absence of light; however, the original term, blac, is so close to blâc, meaning shining white—the total reflection or presence of light—that the meanings of the two are not always distinguishable,¹ even by context. This early confusion of the literal, denotative meanings of the terms is a vivid precursor of possible confusions available by Shakespeare's day when both black and white could be accurately used for a wide variety of specific denotations, each with its own range of connotations. Shakespeare not only employed various meanings of the terms and their connotations literally and metaphorically, but also persistently applied the connotations of one meaning of black to another meaning of black. In addition, the conflated and confusing values of black that resulted from this treatment are heightened by a similar treatment of the opposite values of white, or, more often, fair.

Within Othello, black is used with five explicit denotations, and white or fair is posed in each instance, either explicitly or by suggestion, as the opposite quality. First, black is used as a color designation for the darkest hue, "an old black ram" (I. i. 88)²; white, as the opposite, designates the lightest hue: "white ewe" (I. i. 89). Second, black is used to designate a Moor, a Negro, one of

¹ Examples cited from Middle English. See paragraph 7, under Black, OED.
African origin: "the black Othello" (II. ii. 29); *white* is suggested for European counterparts, as in Othello's reference to Desdemona, "that whiter skin of hers than snow" (V. ii. 4). Third, *black* is used to describe a brunette, "black and witty" (II. i. 131), and both *white* and *fair* are used to describe a blond, "fair and wise" (II. i. 129), "a white that shall her blackness fit" (II. i. 133). Fourth, *black* is used to denote the soil of filth or grime, "Her name . . . is now begrimed and black" (III. iii. 386-87), and by suggestion, *white* is clean or unsoiled. Fifth, and finally, *black* is used for the morally foul: "blackest sins" (II. iii. 334), "black vengeance" (III. iii. 447); and *fair* is used as an aspect of virtue: "If virtue no delighted beauty lack,/Your son-in-law is far more fair than black" (I. iii. 289-90).

While only two of the meanings of black—literally soiled or morally foul—evoke a specifically negative response, the other meanings had accumulated negative connotations that Shakespeare could draw on. The proverbial black sheep, the black and burning pit of hell, and the black devil of legend, illustration, and dramatic representation served as elements to combine the meanings of *black* as a simple color designation and *black* both as grime or filth and as morally foul. Shakespeare draws on these associative values when he has Emilia say to Othello, "And you the blacker devill!" (V. ii. 130). He further stresses and reinforces the evil values of the color *black* by using "the black sheep" in the grossly sexual image, "Even now, now, very now, an old black ram/ Is tupping your white ewe" (I. i. 88-89), and by using the ominous black bird of evil omen: "As doth the raven o'er the infected house/Boding to all!" (IV. i. 21-22).

*Black* as a racial designation, like *black* the color, was a negatively charged word. Even without Eldred D. Jones’ excellent account of the Elizabethan view of Africans, many of the ingredients of the pejorative stereotype of the African are discernible in *Othello*. The African is considered ugly,

such a thing as thou, to fear, not to delight  
(I. ii. 71)

For nature so preposterously to err  
Being not deficient, blind, or lame of sense,  
(I. iii. 62-63)

lascivious,

To the gross clasps of a lascivious Moor,  
(I. i. 127)

an unnatural mate for a European,

Not to affect many propos'd matches  
Of her own clime, complexion, and degree,  
Where to we see in all things nature tends—  
(III. iii. 229-31)

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a practitioner of forbidden arts,

Thou hast enchanted her,
(I. ii. 63)

of a volatile, even savage nature,

Dangerous conceits are in their natures poisons;
Which at the first are scarce found to distaste,
But with a little act upon the blood
Burn like the mines of sulphur,

(III. iii. 326-29)

and clearly not as polished or as cultivated as Europeans of a similar class,

Haply, for I am black
And have not those soft parts of conversation
That chamberers have.

(III. iii. 263-64)

Obviously these are not the attributes of Othello, who is attractive enough to
win Desdemona, of such a continent nature that he considers “the young
affects/In me defunct” (I. iii. 263-64), of such a “constant, loving, noble nature”
that even Iago thinks “he’ll prove to Desdemona/A most dear husband”
(II. i. 283-85), practitioner only of the magic art of winning words, at which
he has clearly surpassed his Venetian rivals, and no more subject to lethal
passion than Cassio or Roderigo, both of whom are incited to violence by Iago.
But the negative connotations of blackness, which are neither in the simple
denotation of the word, nor in the character of Othello, are available to super-
impose upon the racial description, black.

The third designated meaning, black as a dark-haired person, like the first
two, also connotes qualities or values which are the result of taste or preference
rather than the inherent qualities of the class designated. The black, or brunette,
was considered less attractive, less fortunate, than the fair, or blond. According
to Iago, “If she be black, and thereto have a wit/She'll find a white that shall
her blackness fit” (II. i. 132-33). Unlike the fair, she will have to use wit to find
a suitable mate. In addition, the black in this passage is made to share con-
notations of black as literally and morally unclean by means of a rhetorical
exchange of terms. In the interchange between Desdemona and Iago, Iago is
charged to praise first the “fair and witty,” then the “black and witty,” then
the “fair and foolish,” and, lastly, not the expected “black and foolish,” but,
instead, the “foul and foolish” (II. i. 129-35). Foul as a synonym for black as
either literally or morally unclean is substituted for black as a brunette with
the effect of making the earlier uses of black equivocal. The substitution of one
meaning of black for another, the equivocal use of synonymous terms, and the
yoking of attributes of one meaning of black with those of a different meaning
of black are used throughout the play with the effect of confounding and
intensifying the value of black whenever it is used in any sense.

In the opening scene, before the audience meets Othello, a number of racially
pejorative references are made, the stereotyped lasciviousness is intensified by a series of bestial associations, and the black of race and the black of devil are combined. Roderigo emphasizes Othello's Negroid features in his lines to Iago: "What a full fortune does the thick lips owe/If he can carry't thus!" (I.i.66-67). The xenophobia, implicit in the distaste for non-European features, is made explicit in Roderigo's description of Othello to Brabantio:

Tying her duty, beauty, wit, and fortunes  
In an extravagant\(^4\) and wheeling stranger  
Of here and everywhere.  

(I. i. 134-36)

Brabantio's cry, "O treason of the blood" (I. i.168), suggests both the unnatural rebellion of a dutiful daughter and the assumed unnatural union of African and European, particularly when it is followed by Brabantio's immediate question about foul practices:

Is there not charms  
By which the property of youth and maidenhood  
May be abused?  

(I. i. 170-71)

The gross sensuality of the stereotypical image, used by Roderigo to inflame Brabantio's outrage, "To the gross claps of a lascivious Moor" (I.i.125), is not only reinforced by the persistent sexual references, but also given bestial implications by the repeated use of animals, black animals, and African animals:

Even now, now, very now, an old black ram  
Is tupping your white ewe,  

(I. i. 88-89)

You'll have your  
daughter covered with a Barbary horse; you'll have  
your nephews neigh to you; you'll have coursers for cousins, and gennets for germans.  

(I. i. 110-13)

The blackness of the devil and the blackness of Othello, the unnatural union of evil with good, and of African with European, are made identical with the simple substitution: "Or else the devil will make a grandsire of you" (I. i.91). When the audience meets the noble Moor, his blackness has been verbally linked with ugliness, the strange and unnatural, gross animal sensuality, and the evil of the devil himself.

Brabantio reinforces the negative associations when he confronts Othello by applying a synonym for black as dirty to the racially black Othello, "O thou foul thief" (I.ii.62); by assuming that black Othello like the black devil is

\(^4\) Extravagant, according to the OED, means "that wanders out of bounds; straying, roaming, or vagrant"; this passage is cited as an illustration. Bentley glosses the word as "expatriate."
damned, "Damned as thou art" (I. ii. 63); by assuming that Othello, in compliance with the stereotype, has used forbidden arts, "thou hast enchanted her" (I. ii. 63); and by stressing his own support of the general belief in the unnaturalness of the union of black and white,

For I'll refer me to all things of sense . . .
Whether a maid so tender, fair, and happy . . . .
Would ever have, t'incure a general mock . . . .
(I. ii. 64, 66, 69)

_Fair_, in this passage, is ambiguous; is Desdemona white, blond, beautiful, virtuous, or all of these? Brabantio adds the quality of soiled or dirty to the already overloaded significance of Othello's blackness in the passage, "Run from her guardage to the sooty bosom" (I. ii. 70), further stresses the association of Othello and the devil by apprehending Othello in terms more applicable to the devil, "For an abuser of the world, a practicer/Of arts inhibited and out of warrant" (I. ii. 78-79), and combines the associations of ugliness, unnaturalness, and the diabolical in his accusation before the Duke:

For nature so prepost'rously to err,
Being not deficient, blind, or lame of sense,
Sans witchcraft could not,
(I. iii. 62-64)

... and she—in spite of nature,
of years, of country, credit, everything—
It is a judgement maimed and most imperfect
That will confess perfection so could err
Against all rules of nature, and must be driven
To find out practices of cunning hell
Why this should be.
(I. iii. 96-102)

Othello, through his own words and Desdemona's testimony, is exonerated and given the blessing of the council, but blackness is not. The Duke's concluding words, "If virtue no delighted beauty lack;/Your son-in-law is far more fair than black" (I. iii. 289), poses _fair_ and _black_ as opposites; _fair_ is beautiful and virtuous; black is ugly and evil. The black-skinned Othello is exonerated as being metaphorically white.

With the playful interchange between Desdemona and Iago at the beginning of Act II, the negative connotations of _black_ as brunette are subtly fused with the evil complex of blackness established in Act I, first in the presumption that fair is superior to black; second, in the substitution of "foul" for the expected "black" in posing "foul and foolish" (II. i. 140) against "fair and foolish" (II. i. 135); and, finally, in the suggestion of the lines, "If she be black, and thereto have a wit,/She'll find a white that shall her blackness fit" (II. i. 132-33). The assumption that a clever black, i.e., a brunette, seeks union with a white, i.e., a blond, echoes the questions raised about the union of the black Othello
and the white Desdemona. In addition, the quibble on the word white,\(^5\) pronounced the same as *wight*, a person, suggests that *black* designates a non-human that seeks unnatural union with a human.

As the action progresses, the ugly, satanic connotations of black are blatantly reinforced by direct statements, such as Iago's to Roderigo,

> Her eye must be fed; and what delight shall she have to look on the devil?
> (II. i. 214-15)

loveliness in favor,

... manners, and beauties; all which the Moor is defective in,

(II. i. 226-28)

and by the association of black with passion, wrath, drunkenness, and then the combination of these with the devil. Othello describes the effect of passion on his better judgment as one of blackening: “And passion, having my best judgement collied”\(^6\) (II. iii. 196). Wine, which collies or blackens Cassio’s judgement, and the effects of wine are described by Cassio in terms of the devil, who is black:

> It hath pleased the devil drunkenness to give place to the devil wrath,
> (II. iii. 283-84)

Every inordinate cup is unblest, and the ingredient is a devil.

(II. iii. 294-95)

However, it is not the metaphorical devil, but the literal “Divinity of Hell” (II. iii. 333) that is summoned by Iago, who then sets forth the dichotomy of *black* and *white* as good and evil in two powerful contrasts,

> When devils will their blackest sins put on,
> They do suggest at first with heavenly shows,
> (II. iii. 334-35)

> So will I turn her virtue into pitch.
> (II. iii. 343)

With the negative values of *black* and the positive values of *white* fully established, Iago gives warning that foul will seem fair, and fair will seem foul; black will seem white, and white will seem black.

Until this point in the play, only those with self-serving reasons have viewed

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\(^6\) *Collied*, according to the OED, means “begrimed; blackened; darkened, murky.”
Othello as metaphorically black: Roderigo, Iago, and Brabantio. From this point in the play, when Iago begins to exploit Othello's tragic blindness, Othello begins to describe himself in terms of the racial stereotype, and to describe Desdemona as metaphorically black. After describing Desdemona in terms that suggest the whiteness of skin, beauty, and virtue, "To say my wife is fair, feeds well, loves company... ./Where virtue is, these are more virtuous" (III. iii. 183-185), Othello, himself, suggests their union was unnatural: "And yet, how nature erring from itself" (III. iii. 227). Iago, catching the edge of Othello's self-doubt, and blackening Desdemona's virtuous appetite, sets forth the full ugly image which Othello is ready to accept as reality:

Ay, there's the point! as (to be bold with you)
Not to affect many proposed matches
Of her own clime, complexion, and degree,
Whereo we see in all things nature tends—
Foh! one may smell in such a will most rank,
Foul disproportions, thoughts unnatural—

(III. iii. 228-33)

Othello, blinded in his better sight and seeing as his enemies see, concludes,

Haply, for I am black
And have not those soft parts of conversation
That chamberers have.

(III. iii. 263-65)

After a moment of doubt that anyone so literally fair could be metaphorically black, "If she be false, O, then heaven mocks itself" (III. iii. 278), Othello draws on the blackness of filth to describe Desdemona's name and his own face:

Her name, that was as fresh
As Dian's visage, is now begrimed and black
As mine own face.

(III. iii. 286-89)

Iago adds the fuel of the handkerchief to the fire of Othello's blind rage, and Othello calls for, "black vengeance, from the hollow hell" (III. iii. 447), swears "by yond marble heaven" (III. iii. 460), evoking the image of both whiteness and hardness, and like the black and evil devil asks for means to kill the white-skinned black devil:

Damn her, lewd minx! O, damn her! damn her!
Come, go with me apart. I will withdraw
To furnish me with some swift means of death
For the fair devil.

(III. iii. 476-79)

Othello, so often called devil himself throughout the early part of the play, now uses "devil" repeatedly in reference to Desdemona. On taking her hand, he comments, "For here's a young and sweating devil here/That commonly
rebels" (III.iv.42-43). He cries, "O devil" (IV.i.43), as he falls into a trance after reiterating the ingredients of his poisoned vision of her. He calls her "Devil" as he strikes her before Lodovico (IV.i.233), and repeats, "O devil, devil!" (IV.i.237), as he sends her from them. When he finally comes to confront Desdemona with his irrational accusations, he does so in terms of damnation and devils:

Come, swear it, damn thyself;  
Lest, like being one of heaven, the devils themselves  
Should fear to seize thee. Therefore be double-damned—  
Swear thou art honest.  

(IV. ii. 35-38)

Desdemona, seen by Othello as a black devil, is fair and beautiful like one of heaven; therefore, Othello fears the literal black devils might fear to lay hands on her, and asks her to further blacken herself with evil by lying about her adultery. The battery of negative connotations of black used in contrast to the beauty of whiteness against Othello in Act I is now used by him in his tirade against Desdemona. Patience, described as a young, roselipped Cherubin, is asked to turn her "complexion" toward Othello's plight and "look grim as hell" (IV.ii.62-64). After comparing Desdemona's honesty to black flies copulating in the shambles (IV.ii.66-67), Othello again sees her whiteness and beauty, "Who art so lovely fair" (IV.ii.68), and, in an image that combines white as a color, a clean page, and virtuous content, and black as the opposite of these, asks about Desdemona, "Was this fair paper, this most goodly book./Made to write 'whore' upon?" (IV.ii.71-72). He then bids his black cheeks to become black furnaces to burn her white modesty to black cinders (IV.ii.74-75).

Othello, the black-skinned, is called "fair" by the Duke; Desdemona, the fair-skinned, is called "black" by Othello; Bianca, who is described as, "A hus-wife that by selling her desires/Buys herself bread and clothes" (IV.i.94-95), bears a name that means "white," and is called the "most fair Bianca" (III.iv.171) by Cassio. Bianca has the blackened reputation Iago would give to Desdemona, yet she is called "white" and "fair." A fair whore, named Bianca, is a further complication in the dramatic rhetoric of black and white.

Desdemona's whiteness—literal, beautiful, and metaphorical—is nowhere more powerful evoked than in Othello's lines before he kills her:

Yet I'll not shed her blood  
Nor scar that whiter skin of hers than snow,  
And smooth as monumental alabaster.  

(V. ii. 3-5)

The image of her whiteness, as an angel, is hurled by Emilia at Othello, along with the compounded images of black, now used to describe the state of his own damned soul. Emilia calls Othello "the blacker devil" and repeats that he is a devil (V.ii.132-33). Othello, himself, says, "O I were damned beneath all depth of hell" (V.ii.138), and, still believing in Iago, defends his honesty with a vivid image that evokes another sense of black: "An honest man he is and hates the slime/That sticks on filthy deeds" (V.ii.149-50). Emilia echoes his
adjective and hits with double meaning in declaring of Desdemona, “She was
too fond of her most filthy bargain” (V. ii. 158), and selects a grimy term to
use as a comparison for his ignorance: “O gull! O dolt!/As ignorant as dirt!”
(V. ii. 164-65). Only with the full realization of Desdemona’s innocence and
his own guilt does Othello see Desdemona’s whiteness as heavenly, and he then
commends himself to the blackness of hell and devils. The whiteness of her
face and dress, the coldness that suggests the whiter snow, the unblemished
chastity, the fairness of the heavenly sight, are contrasted with the blackness
of fiends, devils, and hell itself:

Pale as thy smock! When we shall meet at compt,
This look of thine will hurl my soul from heaven,
And fiends will snatch at it. Cold, cold my girl?
Even like thy chastity.
O cursed, cursed slave! Whip me, ye devils,
From the possession of this heavenly sight!
(V. ii. 274-79)

Othello’s blackness is now neither African nor devil, but that of the victim,
dammed to hell.

The blackness of the devil, once the air is cleared by tragedy, belongs not to
Othello, but to Iago, and when Othello says, “I look down toward his feet—but
that’s a fable./If that thou be’st a devil, I cannot kill thee” (V. ii. 286-87) he is
stating, in yet another way, a theme that has been dramatized throughout the
play: man is tragically unable to recognize good or evil; the devil cannot be
identified by cloven hoofs, nor is the black man devil. Eyes cannot see that the
black Othello is not the devil, or that the white and honest Iago is. Iago is
blind to Emilia’s fair honesty that dies in order to bring his evils crashing
around him. Othello is blind to Desdemona’s white innocence. Desdemona is
blind to Iago’s black heart, Othello’s black passion, and, most of all to her own
blindness. Man’s better eyes, his reason, also fail him; black Othello, knowing
his blackness is not what it seems to others, can all the more easily believe that
Desdemona’s whiteness is not the emblem of virtue others assume it to be.
Much that man has been taught to believe, such as being able to identify the
devil by his cloven hoofs, is fable: black is not always evil, but black can be
evil; all called white are not fair, but some are lovely fair. The verb, see, sounds
insistently through the play along with dozens of related words—“look to your
wife” . . . “Look to’t” (III. iii. 194-96)—but man cannot see clearly, and his
blindness damns him. Black and white are used with the confused values of
fable and reality: it is a fable that the devil is black, yet black Othello is damned
by killing his wife; it is a fable that white is the color of virtue, the fair Bianca
is a whore, and yet the virtuous Desdemona is lovely fair. Black and white,
used with the confused values of fable and reality, reinforce, rhetorically, the
tragic theme of Othello.

The use of this explication in the Shakespeare classroom at Howard Uni-
versity serves three valuable purposes. First, it affords an objective and natural
occasion for discussing the historical origins and background of the polarized
values of black and white and for demonstrating the way language has con-
fused the concept of race and, conversely, how racial values have further confounded the values of the words. Second, it serves as an effective introduction to the elaborate craft of Elizabethan rhetoric as it is employed in drama. And, finally, it is a vivid illustration of the seeming artlessness of Shakespeare's art. What could seem more natural than frequent references to black and white in a play—with Othello as hero and Desdemona as heroine? What could be more complex than Shakespeare's elaborate verbal and dramatic structure built of words shaped by rhetoric into compounded equivocation, images of words and sight that capture the multiple suggestions and carry them to senses and emotions, and characters moving through darkness to darkness with their eyes sealed up like oak? I owe a special debt of gratitude to my Howard students who through their own sensitivity to black and white allowed me, in part, to see with their eyes, feelingly, and come to see another dimension of Othello.

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