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# Iago the Moor Killer: The Geo-Political Context Behind Shakespeare's Othello

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IAGO THE MOOR KILLER:  
THE GEO-POLITICAL CONTEXT BEHIND SHAKESPEARE'S *OTHELLO*.

by

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## **Abstract**

Shakespeare's *Othello* is often viewed as an example of seventeenth century Renaissance binaries. Critics make distinctions when reading the play between hero and villain, Moors and Europeans, and between civilization and barbarity. These definitions are all complicated by Iago's presence in the play. Iago, whose name implies he is actually a Spaniard, frames the play in a geo-political context. Because of Iago's presence, *Othello* provides a picture of England's position in the seventeenth century geo-political climate. Shakespeare is giving his English audience a particular political message.

## **Iago the Moor Killer:**

### **The Geo-political Context Behind Shakespeare's *Othello***

#### **Introduction**

As with many of Shakespeare's works, the premise for his tragedy, *Othello*, was borrowed from a previous work: "The Moor of Venice," by Giraldi Cinthio. Cinthio wrote "The Moor of Venice" as part of a group of stories on marriage within a collective anthology called *Gli Hecatommithi*. "The Moor of Venice" was written specifically as a warning to Italian daughters to respect their fathers. When this familial system was subverted, Cinthio warned, daughters would engage in unnatural relationships—in this instance, interracial marriage, which was seen as monstrous by many white Europeans because black Moors were seen as fundamentally different from them. The hierarchy of race that this story created relies heavily on a dichotomy between black and white, with black Moors being seen as incapable of the civilization and morality presumably achieved by white European Christians. Cinthio's story relies on many of these sixteenth century distinctions—white and black, good and evil, civilization and chaos, Christianity and Heathen—to reinforce a perspective of the world that placed European fathers at the top of the social ladder and all those from different cultures somewhere beneath them. However, when Shakespeare adapts Cinthio, he changes some key parts of the story, particularly by naming Cinthio's Ensign, one of the many characters in the story that Cinthio never identifies by name. By giving the name Iago to the villainous Ensign who causes the majority of conflict within both the play and Cinthio's story, Shakespeare creates a very specific geopolitical message, vastly different from Cinthio's cautionary tale against interracial marriage.

This paper argues that Iago's presence introduces complex seventeenth century geopolitical structures into the play. When this presence is ignored, *Othello* is reduced to a strictly binary categorization of social structures. Critical readings that follow this tendency overlook the deeper level of meaning and critique present in Shakespeare's play. Cinthio's original narrative relies on a purely binary definition of race that makes an interracial marriage unnatural and casts Moors, and other people with darker skin, as intrinsically different from white Europeans. Many modern critics of *Othello* treat the play as though Shakespeare was also working with these types of social distinctions, like Cinthio's split between white and black. Some critics, like A. C. Bradley, argue that *Othello* shows a dualistic image of good and evil, with a struggle between an obvious villain, and a naïve hero. Others, like Michael Neill and Michael Bristol, argue that Iago could be interpreted as either the villain or the hero, and that he was either motivated by hatred, or racism. All of these interpretations rely on defining seventeenth century social constructions, such as race and civilization, as explicitly binary in nature. However, Shakespeare redefines these distinctions by giving Iago a Spanish name, which frames *Othello* as a geopolitical critique by creating a third cultural influence beyond Moor and European. As a play about racial divides and interactions between different cultures, *Othello* is as relevant in a post-modern culture inundated with racial paradigms as it was in early-modern England. Understanding the geopolitical context that Iago's presence provides for the play shows that racial definitions in the seventeenth century were much more complex and nuanced than often realized. Understanding Iago's presence disrupts twenty-first century ideas of seventeenth century identity, because Shakespeare creates a geopolitical message through *Othello* for his English audience that complicates the way modern critics understand seventeenth century social politics and categorizations.

### **Othello's Naturally Skeptical—and Necessarily Racialized—Nature**

In “The Peculiarity of *Othello*,” A. C. Bradley argues that *Othello* represents a clash between good and evil devoid of racial influence, thus identifying the characters of the play with a binary distinction as either a villain or a hero. This reading of the play is contradicted by Othello’s own personal experiences and motivations. Bradley asserts that Othello trusts Iago because he is a very trusting person, that Othello shows “A great openness and trustfulness of nature” (27). The implication is that Othello is naïve because, without any concrete evidence, he decides to trust Iago. Bradley argues that Othello’s race does not factor into his trusting nature because any other person with a similar nature would have acted precisely the same: “If anyone had told Shakespeare that no Englishman would have acted like the Moor, and had congratulated him on the accuracy of his racial psychology, I am sure he would have laughed” (26). Bradley’s argument is that Othello is overly trusting, yet that his racial identity has nothing to do with his eventual downfall. Bradley’s argument casts Othello as an innocent and trusting hero who trusts Iago because he is far too open and accepting. Iago claims that Othello is trusting as well, saying “The Moor is of a free and open nature, / That thinks men honest that but seem to be so, and will as tenderly be led by the nose / as asses are” (1.3.390-393). Despite Iago’s words and Bradley’s assessment, Othello is not presented as a trusting individual. In fact, Othello’s downfall does not come from an implicitly trusting nature, but from a natural skepticism.

Although Bradley’s reading of Othello is of an overly trusting, heroic, character, regardless of his racial identity, Othello is actually very skeptical of his relationships with others; he relies on his reputation to overcome the stereotypes against his race. Othello is fooled, despite his skeptical nature, because Iago’s deception is so thorough that everyone believes in Iago’s honest nature. Cassio says of Iago, “I never knew / a Florentine more kind and honest” (3.1.39-

40). Cassio, as a Florentine, believes that Iago is more honest than even his own countrymen. It is Iago's duplicity that betrays the trust of many of the characters. Othello does not cast himself as a person given to being overly trusting; in fact, he sees himself as being critical, doubting and questioning his relationships with those around him. At many points in the play, he trusts only himself. As he says early in the play, "My parts, my title, my perfect soul / shall manifest me rightly" (1.2.30-31). Othello trusts in his own character and his own reputation and therefore believes that those around him must also respect him. He has earned the right to be respected. The reputation he has built is what Othello can trust, and he only trusts others because he trusts his own reputation and actions. This is even more evident later when he directly connects his own honor with those he trusts. He says to Iago, "I think my wife be honest, and I think she is not. / I think that thou art just, and think thou art not. / I'll have some proof. My name, that was as fresh as Dian's visage, is now begrimed and black / as mine own face" (3.3.384-388). Othello understands that his own skin color means he is an outsider and therefore cannot be trusted by—and should not trust—the Venetians. However, by his actions, he has earned his position, changed his religion, and now trusts his own reputation. His acceptance into Venetian society is evident in the fact that he trusts the Duke to be just towards him, asserting that he can go before the Duke because he trusts himself. This trust is vindicated when the Duke confirms Othello's reputation by telling Brabantio, "If virtue no delighted beauty lack, / your son-in-law is far more fair than black" (1.3.290-291). In other words, the Duke asserts that Othello's virtue has overcome his own outsider status, thus making him as virtuous and trusted as a Venetian. Yet when Othello's trust dissolves, as he begins questioning his relationship with his wife, and he no longer knows who to believe, he connects it with a failure of his own character. Othello can no longer trust those around him. Now he must have proof because his virtue, once perfect, now

reflects the identity dictated by his dark skin color, which he has spent so long suppressing. Thus, Othello's trustfulness is not indicative of an open nature, as Bradley argues; it is representative of a guarded nature. He understands that his complexion does not merit loyalty from those around him. Othello relies on his reputation to overcome his own downfalls and thus trusts the reputations of those around him, including Iago, which is one of the factors that actually leads to his downfall.

Bradley's argument that Iago is simply a cunning villain is directly complicated by Iago's honest reputation, which he has earned from Othello and the Venetian society because of actions he has done to warrant this assessment. Throughout the play, Iago is referred to as "honest," a signifier that seems strange considering his dishonest nature. During the play, Othello shows that he trusts Iago by calling him "Honest Iago" (1.3.295) and by trusting him to take care of his wife. Cassio also uses the same nomenclature, using the specific words "honest Iago" (2.3.312). Othello even calls Iago honest in the midst of Iago's deception: "This honest creature, doubtless / sees and knows more, much more, than he unfolds" (3.3.243-244). Othello perceives that Iago is hiding something, yet instead of questioning it, Othello assumes his honesty and instead presumes that any subterfuge is for the sake of discretion and propriety instead of deception. Even in the midst of the confusion of the last scene, when Othello has murdered his wife and feels betrayed by everyone he once trusted, he says to Emilia, "My friend, thy husband, honest, honest Iago" (5.2.152). Othello thoroughly trusts Iago, even after murdering Desdemona. He trusts Iago when he trusts no one else.

Bradley's claim that Othello's decision to trust Iago is an event without proof is contradicted by the fact that Iago's identification of "honest" is not merely an earned respect from the people of Venice; it is a title accompanying Iago's rank and is a character trait of Iago's



that Othello has personally experienced. As the Ensign, or flag bearer, Iago had to be a man who was honest. Vaughn suggests that “Renaissance military discourses reveal that the honor of the regiment was particularly dependent on the ensign who carried its flag” (43). Iago had to be completely and thoroughly trusted to represent the army effectively. Thus, Iago couldn’t be in his position without having a reputation of honesty. In addition, Othello had also served with his ensign for years, longer than Cassio had even been a soldier. As Iago tells Rodrigo of Cassio, “Mere prattle without practice / is all his soldiership” (1.1.23-25), while he says of himself, “And I—of whom his [Othello’s] eyes had seen the proof / At Rhodes, at Cyprus, and on other grounds, / Christened and heathen” (1.1.25-27). Othello knew Iago, trusted Iago, and called him honest. This was not a flippant assessment but was the result of years of battle in Cyprus and in other uncivilized landscapes. Othello and Iago knew each other, and Othello trusted Iago, not merely because Iago had earned a reputation of being honest, or because it was in his job description, but because Othello knew Iago was honest. As Othello tells the Duke, “So please your grace, my Ancient, / a man he is of honesty and trust” (1.3.234-285). Othello believes Iago because Iago has earned his trust, which is part of the reason that Iago is able to deceive the Moor.

When Bradley argues that Othello is naïve, he ignores textual evidence that Iago’s reputation merited trust, which also complicates a binary distinction between good and evil that Cinthio also displayed in his narrative. In Cinthio’s tale, the Moor is blinded by rage and thus believes the obviously corrupt Ensign. Cinthio describes the Ensign as “a man of handsome figure, but of the most depraved nature in the world” (176). To Cinthio, the Ensign is purely evil, showing an outward image of purity but secretly depraved. Bradley’s argument frames Othello’s decision to trust Iago as an inability to see this depraved character, treating Othello and Iago as if

they were the typological Moor and Ensign of Cinthio. But Shakespeare creates elaborate characters, with Iago's motivation being much more complex than pure depravity and Othello's character much more rational, governed not by rage but by his desire for reputation.

One of the ways that Shakespeare complicates Cinthio's characters into much more complex, more human depictions is by giving them names which depart from Cinthio's typological—and nameless—characters. In his original story, Cinthio did not name the Moor, the Ensign, or the Captain, Shakespeare's Cassio. The fact that Shakespeare picked the names for these characters points to a very purposeful choice on his part. Othello's is the most complicated of the names. It appears that Shakespeare may have invented the name specifically for this character, since there is no reference to the name before Shakespeare's play. Joel Fineman traces the root of the word back to classical roots: "If Shakespeare knew even a little of the little Greek Ben Jonson begrudgingly allowed him, he would most likely have known the Greek Verb *etheló* which means 'wish,' 'want,' 'will,' 'desire'" (106). Fineman argues that this Greek verb acted as the base for "Othello." The use of a Greek base does not seem far-fetched for Othello, the hero of Cyprus and Rhodes. This name points out that elements of Othello's character—mainly his will and desire—are what motivate his actions, not an easily manipulated and overly trusting nature led astray by the cunning white antagonist.

Although Bradley's argument is that Othello's race does not relate to his identity as a tragic hero, Othello's status as a racial outsider is the very thing that twists his desires into jealousy. Othello desires to earn a good reputation, which is necessary for him being accepted by the Venetians. He also desires Desdemona, his eventual wife, which would be the ultimate sign that he had been accepted into Venice despite his race. Thus, when he perceives that she has been unfaithful, Othello's perception of assimilation is undermined. As said earlier, Othello

trusts in his “perfect soul” to see his marriage through the trial against it. To Othello, an upright Venetian’s marriage should never be in question. In addition, an upright Venetian shouldn’t be cheated on, and if Othello’s soul is blameless, then he should be treated like an upright Venetian. The romantic desire Othello has for Desdemona is pure to a fault, as he searches for an unrealistically pure love that Neely calls, “idealistic love, like that of the comedy heroes” (72). Othello’s pure desire for Desdemona is his effort to emulate the kind of love he believes that a Venetian should display. He displays his identity as a Venetian through his love for, and relationship with, Desdemona. When first confronted with Iago’s accusations, Othello answers, “‘Tis not to make me jealous / to say my wife is fair, feeds well, loves company...” (3.3.185-186). Othello asserts that he will not be made jealous simply because his wife treats others with courtesy. To Othello, Desdemona is supposed to emulate his ideal of the Venetian woman, who is devoted to him, but also displays civilized characteristics, like hospitality and courtesy. When Iago does convince him, Othello asks “Why did I marry?” (3.3.244), showing that his desire for his wife trumps his trust in her merit. Othello’s jealousy arises because, if Iago’s accusations are true and Cassio is in a relationship with Desdemona, it would undermine all the things that Othello desires. If Desdemona is cheating on Othello, it a clear sign that she does not respect him as she should respect a Venetian of his reputation. Neely argues that, “cuckoldry invalidates Othello’s military glories” (77). Othello’s military glories have helped him overcome his race. They are what he has built his reputation upon. When he thinks Desdemona has cheated on him, Othello believes his reputation has been spoiled. Desdemona has subverted the hierarchy of Venice. A Venetian’s wife would not cheat on him, and the fact that Desdemona cheats on Othello would show that she no longer saw him as a Venetian, in Othello’s mind. His jealousy

arises because if Cassio has taken his wife, then he has also stolen away Othello's identity as a Venetian.

The problem with Bradley's dichotomy between hero and villain is that it implies that Othello is too easily tricked. However, Othello is provoked to jealousy by physical "proof" that has been manipulated by Iago. Iago warns Othello, "of jealousy! / It is the green-eyed monster, which doth mock / the meat it feeds on" (3.3.167-169). Much of this play is centered on perception. Othello says of Desdemona's integrity, "I'll see before I doubt" (3.3.192). Othello needs physical proof of Desdemona's infidelity before he will distrust her. Near the beginning, Iago sees Cassio and Desdemona whispering and says "With as little a web as this will I ensnare as great / a fly as Cassio" (2.1.167-168). The web Iago will use is more than just Desdemona and Cassio's friendship; it is misperception. Iago will use perceived impropriety as a tool to trick Othello and trap all three. Othello's desire, the strength of will he brings into his relationship with Desdemona, will be corrupted through misperception. Iago is able to manipulate physical proof to create his snare, tricking Othello's sight, which would have fooled anyone, not merely someone who is naively trusting, as Bradley suggests. Despite Bradley's assertion that Othello is naïve and deceived because of his innocence unrelated to race, the play depicts a character that is singularly motivated by his racial identity.

### **Iago's Duplicitous Motivation**

Even setting aside Bradley's argument about the lack of racial motivation in *Othello*, the question of Iago's motivation is still complicated and disputed. Usually, critics argue that Iago falls within a binary distinction as either a well-intentioned racist or a purely evil agitator. Iago directly claims within the text that, like Othello, his motivation springs from jealousy. However, this claim is widely disbelieved because Iago is constantly manipulating his audience. Othello's

jealousy—an extension of his desires—is what entraps him, yet Iago also claims that it is his own jealousy that motivates his actions, a claim that is not usually believed by critics of the play. Although his exact motivations for his subterfuge are heavily contested, Iago asserts that he hates the Moor out of jealousy. In Act 1, he tells Rodrigo “I hate the Moor, / and it is thought abroad that ‘twixt my sheets / h’as done my office” (1.3.377-379). Iago believes that Othello has slept with his wife, which makes Iago desire vengeance upon him. He is also, supposedly, jealous of Michael Cassio, the Florentine whom Othello has appointed as his Lieutenant. Iago says, “He, sir, had th’ election; / and I—of whom his eyes had seen the proof / at Rhodes, at Cyprus, and on Other grounds, Christened and heathen—must be beleed and calmed” (1.1.24-27). Iago stresses that Cassio, whom he looks down upon as a “mathematician,” is little skilled in warfare, and that he does not deserve the position. However, this explanation of Iago’s motivation is unsatisfactory to most critics of *Othello*, since a character so steeped in deception, is most likely deceiving Rodrigo and the audience. In addition, Iago’s assertion that jealousy comes from the eyes complicates this, since he has no visual proof of Othello’s infidelity except for the stereotypes associated with Othello’s dark visage. In the end, Iago’s motivation is unclear, leading to ambiguity about whether Iago is truly evil or is performing his actions for some other reason.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge, the nineteenth century critic, argued that the reason Iago’s explanation of his motives seems incomplete is because Iago does not have justifiable reasons for his actions and is evil without motivation. Coleridge argued that Iago’s soliloquy to Rodrigo is “The motive-hunting of a motiveless malignity” (254). Coleridge’s point is that Iago is trying to justify actions that are not justifiable and are committed out of intrinsic malice, not a rational response. This is an argument that carries through to more modern times. Michael Neill argues

that despite indications that race motivates Iago, race is merely a tool that he creates and manipulates to further some underlying motivation “[Iago’s] racial poisons seem so casually concocted, as if racism were just something that Iago, drawing in his improvisational way on a gallimaufry of quite unsystematic prejudices and superstitions, made up as he went along” (193). Both critics claim that Iago crafts a narrative around his hatred to justify his actions, yet the only phrase about his relationship to Othello that seems even remotely truthful is when he says to Rodrigo, and later repeats to himself when he is alone, “I hate the Moor” (1.1.377) He claims it is because he has been replaced, and he claims it is because of Othello’s supposed affair with his wife, but Iago is constantly manipulating those around him. Coleridge’s argument that Iago is “motive hunting” is an accurate description of Iago in these lines. The only times the audience can trust what he says is when he speaks directly to them, in private asides. As Garber puts it, “Our only onstage confidant is Iago, who repeatedly makes us complicit in his designs, by addressing us in asides and soliloquies” (603). Iago relishes in his lies, knowing that no one can see his design except an audience unable to stop what unfolds and unable to see the complete truth. Although Iago certainly crafts a narrative around his hatred, Coleridge’s and Neill’s claims that this allows the audience a view of absolute evil, thereby creating this picture of Iago as the motiveless antagonist, is disputed by other critics like Michael Bristol.

Despite arguments by Neill and others that race is not Iago’s main motivation because he is simply evil, critics like Bristol argue the opposite: that Iago acts on behalf of a society that defies Othello’s attempts to assimilate because of Othello’s race. Bristol claims in his article, “Charivari and the Comedy of Abjection in *Othello*,” that Iago would have been seen as the hero to Renaissance culture since he reveals the evil nature of a interracial marriage. Bristol describes the Charivari, a renaissance play put on to point out a ridiculous and unnatural marriage. The

groom of the play would be a clown; the “bride,” a crossdresser; and a priest, who displayed the ridiculous and unholy nature of this perverse union. Bristol’s argues that Shakespeare’s play is a charivari, with Othello being played by a clown in blackface and Desdemona a man dressed as a woman. This union is put on display because, according to Bristol, “The marriage of grotesque opposites is no more a private affair or erotic dyad than a real marriage” (347). Bristol claims that the role of the priest, or the “erotic nemesis,” is played by Iago (347). Iago succeeds in his mission in the final scene, where he shows the couple dead on their wedding sheets, which Bristol calls, “the monstrous equivalent of a sexual consummation” (348). In this consummation, the wedding sheets are stained with Othello’s blood, a mockery of the traditional marriage bed. Bristol’s argument is that Iago is a hero because he reveals this ridiculous farce of an inter-racial marriage, shifting Iago to the role of protagonist, yet still relying on the same dualistic divide between good and evil. This reading of the play isn’t textually supported, since nowhere in the play is Iago treated as a hero, and particularly since it is called a tragedy. However, what Bristol does bring to the argument is an alternate reading of the play that considers that race does play a role in Iago’s actions.

Regardless of whether he is constructing a racial dialogue to hide his own evil actions or if he is representative of a racist society, Iago begins the play by immediately constructing a racial dichotomy that frames the action for the audience in a black-versus-white lens. Iago informs Brabantio, Desdemona’s father, that, “an old black ram / is tugging your white ewe. Arise, Arise! Or else the devil will make a grandsire of you” (1.1.85-86; 88). The depiction of Othello as an old black ram, which is a physical description of him as, most likely, older than Desdemona, and black. It carries connotations of sexual violence, as this elder, dark figure defiles the pure white ewe. There is also an instant connection between this reference to the color

black and the devil. For all these reasons, our first perception of Othello is as a sexually craven devilish character. Iago also tells Brabantio that he'll have his daughter "covered with a Barbary horse; you'll have your nephews / neigh to you; you'll have coursers for cousins and / jennets for germans" (1.1 108-110). Iago's speech plays on every stereotype that the English audience held concerning black men and characters, reinforcing and framing these ideas for the audience before Othello is even present on stage. The choice to use words like "tupping" and "covered" suggests a shameful, unnatural type of sexuality. Both are pointedly connected to animal sex. There is a sense of violence, tupping conveying an amount of vulgarity with it and a specific reference to goat sex, whereas covered gives the idea of an eclipse of Desdemona's identity by beastly carnality and impurity.

When Iago constructs his racial dichotomy, he uses particular words and imagery that would have played on seventeenth century stereotypes of black people. Iago twice makes reference to Brabantio's posterity. Firstly, the idea that the Devil would make him a grandsire, and secondly, the connotation that he would have "jennets," a type of Spanish horse, for "germans," or a close family member. Iago is telling Brabantio that his legacy is at stake. Surely, within a Venetian society, a mixed-race child would be reviled as black, and the shame of having one in his family as his heir would have been Brabantio's greatest fear. The picture that Iago gives, of a child of the devil, must at least hint at the true monstrosity that this child would be seen as in Venetian society. Regardless of Othello's nobility or any righteousness that he has shown, any offspring he had with Desdemona would still bring shame to Brabantio and despoil his bloodline. In the end, Iago is suggesting that Othello will defile Brabantio's house, that he will defile Brabantio's daughter, and that he will defile Brabantio's legacy. When interrupted from his sleep, Brabantio asks Iago, "What tell'st thou me of robbing? This is Venice; / My



house is not a grange” (1.1.102). Iago is suggesting that Othello’s presence in Brabantio’s family will make his house into a grange, full of farm animals and uncivilized sex. Moreover, Iago’s rhetoric in these first scenes manipulates the audience and contextualizes the play within a broader discourse on race and identity. The audience is immediately infected by “racial poisons,” as Neill called them. This frames the rest of the action within the play as racialized, even though race is seldom brought up in conversation.

Coleridge argues that Iago’s motives in constructing the racial binary that exists within the play—between Othello’s attempts to assimilate and his skin color—is to shift perspective from Iago’s evil nature, while Bristol argues that Iago is honestly showing Venice the crime of interracial marriage that is being committed. However, within the play this dichotomy does not exist in the way that Iago constructs it. Othello’s nobility is never in question when he is in front of the Duke. On the contrary, there is deference towards him. He receives respect. This contrasts Iago’s attempts to revile Othello based on his racial identity. Othello’s character is strained between two identities because Venice views him in two different ways. In council, he is a war hero, respected and honored, and this is clearly the way he himself wants to be seen. However, in the street, Iago and Rodrigo state every stereotype that would have been held against Othello as a Moor, thus revealing the undertones of how he was perceived. Othello is seen through both these viewpoints in different contexts. This is why Iago’s language is so racially charged: to evoke the most anger from Brabantio by playing on Brabantio’s deepest fears and prejudices. Everywhere else, Iago shows Othello respect and refrains from racial slurs or disparagement. Iago is not motivated purely by racism; he merely uses the racism and prejudices present in society to undermine and destroy the Moor’s identity, purposefully manipulating everyone’s perspective of Othello. In this sense, it is Iago who creates the real binary perspective within the play through

his manipulative words and actions. He shows the audience a racial paradigm and tries to show that Othello will corrupt civilization. Iago's true motivation is a hybridity of the two, undermining Othello because of Othello's race, yet also creating racial dialogue to hide Iago's motivations. The binary that Iago creates through his racially charged soliloquy is broken by Iago himself. Iago's hatred of the Moor and his racist views arise as a result of Iago's identity as a Spaniard, rather than as a result of Othello's black identity.

### **Othello's "Perfect Soul" in the Context of Dramatic Stereotypes**

When Iago uses his manipulative language to deride Othello to Brabantio, he is playing off stereotypes held by English audiences. As already stated, these stereotypes formed a dualistic approach to race, which modern critics still use to understand *Othello*. These stereotypes began with early explorers' accounts of non-white people, which played into how English playwrights would present black characters on stage. In the English mind, the foreigners found during expeditions into sub-Saharan Africa were seen as both uncivilized and savage, but also strangely powerful and occasionally even mystical. They were obsessed with the supposed power of these strange others. Vaughn claims, "Elizabethans were fascinated by travelers' accounts of foreign peoples, especially by tall tales of monstrous creatures, heathen customs, and cannibalism. All were associated with blackness in Elizabethan mind" (52). These accounts cloaked black people in mystery, and even those that did not seem as physically different as the more monstrous creatures were seen as powerful enough to live amongst these mystical creatures that supposedly inhabited sub-Saharan Africa, thus endowing them with hidden strength and powers. These perspectives were continued with black characters on the English stage.

Part of what Shakespeare had to overcome with his presentation of Othello was not only the construction of racial identities present in English society, but also the perceptions of black

characters on the English stage, who were constructed in a very purposeful way. Within his study on the role of black men in English Drama, Elliot Tokson asserts that “Dramatists were more often drawn to the black man than other writers. This occurred [...] because the dramatist could depend on a storehouse of expected audience responses to the appearance of a black man and could work that response for his own end” (20). In the theatrical history, a black man would not only have been considered devilish but would also have been seen as weak and made into a joke. Part of the reason for this portrayal was distinctly purposeful: to make these characters seem less intimidating and powerful. Even those black characters who were not cast as intrinsically evil within early English plays were purposefully made comically weak and deficient. As Anthony Gerard Barthelemy argues, “These virtuous few [black characters] are clearly derived from the more commonly represented stereotype of the villainous Moor, and are, more accurately, versions of that type rather than absolute departures from it” (91). The reasons these black characters were often purposefully made ridiculous was to undermine the raw, savage power that non-white people were supposedly endowed with.

Shakespeare’s *Othello*, in its depiction of interracial marriage, also deals with the European perception of black Moors as sexually perverse. European explorers created this picture of sexually perverse black people partially because the latter walked around naked and did not show European levels of modesty. Tokson explains, “The unashamed display of genitalia, instead of striking the visitors as a sign of innocence, more often than not seemed to them downright depraved and corrupt” (15). This nakedness was paired with the fact that Moors were seen as heathens. Since Christianity was seen as sexually chaste, non-Christians, therefore, would be sexually deviant. This was most obvious because the Europeans saw no adherence to the Christian idea of monogamy, and this led to the perspective that black people were

aggressively sexual and sought multiple partners instead of observing Christian restraint. The mix of sexual depravity with mysterious physical prowess made the black men particularly intimidating to early English audiences, who believed that aggressively sexual black men might seek European women as sexual partners. This was an ongoing idea, that black and Moorish men would corrupt Christian women and would subvert the civilized sexuality of the white men. As Karen Newman asserts of the white characters within *Othello*, “Their preoccupation with black sexuality is not an eruption of a normally repressed animal sexuality in the ‘civilized’ white male, but of the feared power and potency of a different and monstrous sexuality which threatens the white male sexual norm represented in the play most emphatically by Iago” (132). The English wanted to see these Moorish and black characters fail and be ridiculed for their downfalls. The constructed theatrical black character would, therefore, be sexually deviant yet he would also be made impotent or cuckolded by the European protagonists, his sexual deviations made comical, instead of menacing.

Although in *Othello* Shakespeare crafts a story that undermines traditional racial divisions and stereotypes, he used the negative stereotypes of English theatre in the creation of black characters in other plays. Most notably, Shakespeare uses a Moroccan Prince in his play *Merchant of Venice* to enforce stereotypes and make foreigners seem ridiculous. The prince, distinguished merely as Morocco, is a suitor to the rich Portia, who must use a test left by her father to choose a husband. Morocco starts off with a polished speech, which already begins to reiterate some of the prejudices undoubtedly held against Moroccans by an English audience. He begins, “Mislike me not for my complexion, / The shadowed livery of the burnished sun” (2.1.1-2). Morocco tries to tell Portia that his skin color should not be held against him, yet, within the same paragraph, he exemplifies three qualities that are stereotypes about Moors. “Bring me the

fairest creature northward born” (2.1.34), says Morocco, confirming fears that the dark skinned Moors merely desire to steal and possess the women of Europe. Then, he says, “This aspect of mine / Hath feared the valiant; by my love I swear / The best-regarded virgins of our clime / Have loved it too” (2.1.8-11). This statement shows both that his darker skin inspires fear in his enemies and that Moors possess rampant sexuality. He is seen as savage because of his skin, which makes him fearful even to the brave and noble. Also, there is an implication here that he has ravaged and defiled the virgins of his country, either literally or figuratively. Later, he swears by his scimitar, once again reinforcing the idea of him as a savage warrior and as a Muslim using Muslim weapons. Shakespeare uses all these lines to carefully craft an image of the physically and mystically powerful Moor.

In this particular case, within *The Merchant of Venice*, Shakespeare both creates the image of the stereotypical Moor that frightened most Europeans and undermines him, making him seem ridiculous, as many other playwrights had done before him. When presented with Portia’s father’s test, Morocco looks at three caskets of different materials, choosing one made of Gold and passing over the other two. According to the rules of the test, whoever chooses the correct cask, which was made of lead, will be allowed to marry Portia. Morocco’s choice is immediately proven wrong. With all of his trappings, and airs of nobility, Morocco is unable to solve the puzzle. Any sense of civilization he carried with him does not provide him with any cognitive ability, as he is outwitted by boxes. In the end, Portia scathingly says of him, “Let all of his complexion choose me so” (2.7.79). Portia connects the ridiculousness of his attempt and of the undesirability of his skin color. Despite Morocco’s entreaties to ignore his skin color and his assertions that it had often seduced the women of his own country, he could not convince a northern woman that he was noble. Shakespeare thus reinforces the comically inept black

character who had become commonplace within English theatre by having him degraded by a “civilized” European society.

However, when Shakespeare writes *Othello*, he takes this racial stereotype of the black, threatening Moor and pushes against it, thus creating a noble Moor willing to assimilate and complicating the very strict racial boundaries previously constructed. Othello is crafted as a soldier, much like Morocco. In the play, he is treated as a type of secret weapon, a general the Venetians use against their enemies: “A *condottiere* who fights by contract for the Venetian Republic, Othello reflects what European warfare would become” (Vaughn 35). The Duke of Venice himself says to Othello, “Valiant Othello, we must straight employ you / against the general enemy Ottoman” (1.3.48-49). Yet even though Othello is crafted as a strong and capable soldier, the play hardly concentrates on this, since we do not even see Othello fight. In the only scene where battle seems imminent, Othello instructs his friends and enemies to, “Keep up your bright swords, for the dew will rust / them” (1.2.58-59). Othello actively avoids battle, promoting peace instead of acting militaristic. Unlike Morocco, Othello is not arrogant. He is humble. He approaches the rulers of Venice carefully and cautiously, using words designed to bring peace. He carefully measures what he does in order to not threaten the white community. Barthelémy argues that “Though he retains real military power, he does not translate that into a metaphor for sexual prowess” (95). Othello does not use his own physical power to forward any of the aggressive sexuality often associated with Moors. Othello defies all stereotypes, keeping calm, dignified, civilized, and humble. Morocco gloried in his skin color, even saying to Portia “I would not change this hue, / except to steal your thoughts, my gentle queen” (*Merchant of Venice*, 2.1.12). However, Othello tries to fit into white Venice as much as he can. As Joel Altman asserts, “When Shakespeare came to write *Othello*, he fashioned an alien who, unlike

Aaron, Caliban, or Shylock, is an ardent assimilationist” (323). Othello not only assimilates into the community he is joining; he emulates it, showcasing many civilized traits seen as unattainable by a stereotypical Moor.

However, despite Shakespeare’s efforts to create Othello as a non-threatening subversion of stereotypes, he was dealing with a system of racism, like Cinthio’s, one that very purposefully divided Europeans from perceivably non-white people groups. Black characters became more and more common in English drama during Elizabethan England. Particularly in plays, characters seen as darker were typically presented as dark black, without any nuance in lineage or place of origin. As Tokson claims, “To white commentators all nonwhites differed from themselves just as blackness differs from whiteness” (2). This practice of dealing in black/white absolutes was a foundation of English racism. Although there were some nuances in categorization, with different terms being invented for different groups of people, there was a strict divide between black and white. Vaughn claims that, “To the Elizabethan mind, black skin thus denoted extreme Otherness, with overlays of satanic propensity and sexual perversion” (54). The specific hue or lineage did not change perspective on the character, since in Renaissance England all people darker than Europeans were considered black, and thus carried connotations of what the color represented. Often, as suggested by Vaughn, blackness was associated with spiritual darkness and the devil. The color itself was seen as corrupted, while whiteness was synonymous with purity. The way that race was tied to color created a strict binary biologically embedded in Othello, regardless of how Shakespeare presented the character.

The binary that was created between black and white, according to Vaughn, was the result of ideological and spiritual connotations created by the historical and religious tradition of the color’s use. During this time, in Jacobean England, the prevalent theory on blackness was

that it was the result of a heritage of spiritual deficiency. Blackness represented a spiritual darkness, a lack of light, and parallel impurity. It was associated with the unknown: hell and death. Although a black man like Othello may be baptized and a Christian, his color would indicate otherwise. There is also tension in the dramatic history of the color. During the medieval era in England, morality plays, which depicted struggles against sin and Satan for the pious and Catholic audience, often depicted Satan as black. This characteristic carried through to the English Protestant plays of the Renaissance, where racially black people started to be more commonplace on the stage. Ian Smith argues that, “The devil’s black color has a racializing function that permeates the play, extending beyond Othello, to reiterate the profoundly racial ethos of the drama” (12). The connotation that black was the color of the devil shows itself in how Europeans rationalized black identity. They thought that blackness was an indication of a carried heritage of a spiritual curse. Altman argues that, “In reference to scripture, the Moor’s darkness was literally a spectacle of God’s chastisement borne by the descendants of Ham, Noah’s disobedient and lascivious son, condemned to serve his brothers Shem and Japeth” (292). In Renaissance drama, the black Satan of medieval plays was replaced by the spiritually cursed black character, who was seen as equally irredeemable—something that even Othello’s nobility could not overcome.

Othello exists within this strict binary, where his worth is determined by his race, not his actions, and his race, determined by his skin color, comes with insurmountable stereotypes and connotations. As Kyle Grady puts it, “We are required to ‘speak of’ racism as it is in the text, despite the play’s intriguing indirectness about the matter” (69). Yet even though his racial identity appears within the play seldomly, beyond Iago’s opening disparagement of Othello, that racial identity still informs the Venetians’ impression. He cannot appear less dark through any



effort of his own. Despite any righteousness on his part, he cannot escape the way he looks. The tension in his character lies in the fact that his actions and choices—the title he earned and his soul, which is baptized and morally upright—are Venetian, yet his skin color and his heritage still mark him as distinctly different. Although Othello is not ridiculed like Morocco, and although he defies stereotypes by attempting to assimilate, he is still black. As Joel Altman argues, despite Othello's lack of sexual aggression, "His example of racial intermarriage made it clear that the curse of Ham might easily contaminate the 'fair English' and turn them into monsters as well through sexual congress" (293). Even his attempts to assimilate into Venetian society are contaminated by his color, which carries a stereotype of his character that Shakespeare could not completely offset.

Instead of ignoring the dualistic perception of race held by Europeans at that time, Shakespeare creates a black character who challenges the boundaries of racial identity. Knowing that he could not change the way Othello would be perceived physically, Shakespeare plays with stereotypes by creating a black character who actually succeeds in doing all the things English audiences feared he might do. The play opens with Othello marrying a noble white woman, reinforcing the idea that Moors were lascivious and corrupting eligible European women. According to Iago, Rodrigo, and Brabantio, Othello had accomplished this feat by using his dark magic to corrupt Desdemona, a fact which plays off the spiritual connotations of his color. According to Othello, however, he has wooed her through tales of his own mysterious journeys through these far off and savage lands, which is, in a way, a form of mystical, non-European power. However, although the audience is given a Moor that eventually fulfills all the stereotypes surrounding sexual, physical, and mystical prowess, he is not presented as weak or ridiculous. On the contrary, Othello's power is not some savage, mystical, uncivilized force.

Marjorie Garber argues that Othello uses a very specific type of magic: “What is Othello’s witchcraft? Language—the source of ‘charm’ and magic” (596). Othello’s main tool throughout the play is the epitome of civilization and dignity: language, directly contrasting the witchcraft he is accused of. While Shakespeare makes Othello fulfill stereotypes by seducing the white woman, Othello does not do so with his black, evil powers. He does not boast of his sexual prowess. Where Morocco, in *Merchant of Venice* boasts of his many sexual conquests in his homeland, Othello acts more chaste than even the other Europeans in the play. Carol Thomas Neely asserts that “For Othello sex is secondary and potentially either frivolous or debilitating” (72). Othello ignores sexual desires, instead focusing on love as his motivator. Yet, culturally speaking, he still desecrates Desdemona’s sexuality because of his identity as a black Moor.

Othello’s mastery of language separates him from the stereotypes associated with his skin color. Despite his assertions that he is rude of speech and “little blessed with the soft phrases of peace” (1.3.82), Othello uses speech to assimilate himself, and his language, his soft words, give him sympathy with the audience despite the crime that he perpetrates. In regards to his relationship with Desdemona, Othello states that, “She loved me for the dangers I had past” (1.3.166). Othello asserts that Desdemona loved him for the stories that he told her about his savage and dangerous heritage, yet he emphasizes that it is the stories that he told her that compel her. He wins her heart by rhetoric and wit, not merely by his skin color or his courage. The Duke of Venice recognizes this, stating “I think this tale would win my daughter too” (1.3.170). The Duke affirms Othello’s story and confirms Othello’s mastery of language. The Duke uses the word “tale” when describing Othello’s stories, and this carries the implications of a constructed story as much as a factual account. This is what Garber means when she claims that Othello’s witchcraft is language. She also recounts parts of the play where Othello goes

catatonic, losing his ability to speak as he becomes entangled in Iago's net. She claims that, "It is only when Othello loses language, loses this capacity to enchant through speech, that he loses the vestiges of 'civilization'" (597). Language connects Othello to civilized Venice and to the Venetian court.

Even if Othello's language garners him some sympathy from the audience and complicates his identity, many critics point out that the relationship between the dark-skinned Moor and the white, pure Venetian would have been too monstrous a divide for speech alone to reconcile. This reading reinforces a binary system of race within the play. The relationship between Othello and Desdemona creates a sense of perversion, and surely many Venetians would have viewed Othello as being base and lustful in his desires, even if he hasn't used sorcery to accomplish his seduction. This would also have been the perception of Shakespeare's English audience. Michael Bristol describes England's view of this perceived perverse union, arguing that "at the level of surface representation then, the play enacts a marriage between two complimentary symbols of the erotic grotesque" (346). Bristol claims that Othello's blackness and Desdemona's rebellion make them so repulsive that the marriage between them would have been seen as ridiculous. Instead of being seen as romantic lovers, they are ridiculed and critiqued for their diversion from their appointed places in Venetian society, as Bristol argues. Instead of being tragic lovers, like Romeo and Juliet, Othello and Desdemona are being paraded as deviants, much like Malvolio, the Puritan steward in *Twelfth Night*, who is dressed up in ridiculous clothing in front of the audience, and paraded around as an arrogant failure. Bristol's argument relies on this idea that the black versus white binary of English society could not be overcome. Working with this two-sided view of race, Bristol argues that Iago should be seen as hero for undermining the racial perversion that Othello brings to this society. Bristol effectively

disrupts more traditional readings of their relationship, yet his reading relies on there being two sides in *Othello*, the white Venetians, and the black Moor, to reinforce the racial disparity. On the other hand, Iago is neither black nor Venetian. He is a Spaniard. Calling him a hero relies on reading the play as a clash between two sides and his destruction of Othello as a victory for the Venetians. His very presence, however, undermines the binary and creates another category of character who must be dealt with, a fact ignored by critics who concentrate too much on dualistic interpretations of race and identity.

### **Cyprus and Venice Complicated**

Iago's presence not only disrupts the binary of race created by Renaissance Europe; he also disrupts the contrast between the civilized and barbaric that is present in Cinthio. "The Moor of Venice" depicts the clash between chaos and civilization by placing characters from a civilized city into an uncivilized realm of chaos. This paradigm is also present within *Othello*. Cyprus represents chaos and untamed wilderness, in flux between the Venetians and the Turks, who are called "the general enemy Ottoman" (1.3.49) by the Duke of Venice. Marjorie Garber contrasts the civilization of Venice with the barbarity of Cyprus, claiming that "Venice appears to be the place of urbanity and civilization, Cyprus, the borderland where anything can happen, a place of wildness, passion, and rebellion" (589). Many critics pick up on this movement from safety to the unknown, which is one that Shakespeare often employs in his plays. He takes his characters from an area of comfort to an area of chaos and mystery, where anything might happen. This is most evident in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, where the denizens of Athens enter into a forest, and are confronted by fairies and mystical happenings. Another example is in *As You Like It*, where the citizens move from a French court into the forest of Arden, where they experience strange and unnatural events, and a crisis of identity. The main difference in *Othello*

is that Cyprus is not a mystical land of fairies or goddesses, as in these other plays. Cyprus is untamed wild, colonized by the Venetians, but with the potential for unexpected danger and chaos. The strict divide between the known and unknown is complicated within *Othello* because the chaos introduced into Venetian society comes from within, rather than the barbaric setting.

Cinthio's and Shakespeare's versions of the story of a Moor in Venice precede and follow, respectively, Venice's attempt to colonize Cyprus, and these authors' understandings of civilization versus chaos are framed by their particular historical contexts. Shakespeare's adaptation of Cinthio's work was written nearly half a century later, complicating the social hierarchy because by the time *Othello* was written in 1604, the geopolitical structure that Cinthio was familiar with had shifted. In 1565, when Cinthio wrote his tale about The Moor, Venice had recently conquered Cyprus and was trying to colonize it. Nearly half a century later when *Othello* was most likely first performed, in 1604, Shakespeare knew the colonization of Cyprus had failed and that, in the late 1580s, the Turks had won. Cinthio, viewed the Moor similarly to the way Venice viewed Cyprus. They were both wild, and barbaric. Cinthio's *Disdemona* confirms this when she tells the Moor, "You Moors are of so hot a nature that every little trifle moves you to anger and revenge" (178), which reinforces racial distinctions, because anger was seen as a quality of non-white, uncivilized, people groups, while temperance was connected with civilized Europeans. Cinthio describes the Moors as naturally more wrathful than their European counterparts. In Cinthio's text, the raw emotions of the Moor cannot be controlled and instead must be stamped out and made civilized. This aligns with Venice's colonial view of Cyprus during Cinthio's time. Venice saw Cyprus as uncivilized, just as Cinthio viewed The Moor. Vaughn argues that, "According to the colonial paradigm, Cyprus must be possessed by Venice or the Turks –it can't be independent" (32). As a colony of Venice, Cyprus must be rid of the

Turk, who represent a general outside corruption of what Cinthio perceived as the natural order before it can become civilized. Cinthio accomplishes this by killing the Moor and ending the unnatural interracial marriage.

Shakespeare understood Venice's colonial paradigm that Cinthio explored with the benefit of hindsight, knowing that Venice had been unable to hold Cyprus. The entire theme of the uncivilized Moor being stamped out by an imperialistic civilized machine, evident in Cinthio's work, was changed in Shakespeare's. In *Othello*, there is an immediate, exterior threat of invading Turks. In Cinthio, there is no crisis regarding Othello's placement in Cyprus: "The Signoria of Venice made a change in the troops whom they used to maintain in Cyprus, and they appointed the Moor commander" (175). The entire transition is much more passive. The ruler of Venice changes the troops around with no urgency or perceived problem. In contrast, Shakespeare creates an obvious crisis as the Duke of Venice calls specifically for Othello not because he is a commander who could command a peaceful province, but because he is the only one able to defend Cyprus in the middle of this crisis. The Duke dispatches Othello, saying, "Valiant Othello, we must straight employ you / against the general enemy Ottoman" (1.3.48-49), because Othello can protect the Venetian held Cyprus from the Turkish threat. Yet this Turkish threat never arrives, and Cyprus instead is conflicted because of elements inside Venetian civilization.

Shakespeare crosses the distinctions Cinthio created between civilization and barbarity by complicating Othello's character, making him the black barbarian who is also the defender of Venetian civilization. The uncivilized invader of Cyprus never arrives; the only danger comes from within the civilization the Venetians have built on the island. Ian Smith asserts that, "In place of the violent clash of military warfare, the audience is treated instead to Iago's more

covert but no less destructive operations that generate Othello's racial anxiety and self-hate" (109). Iago takes the metaphorical place of the uncivilized Turk. Othello, the soldier who could defend Cyprus in the midst of crisis, is brought-down by the supposedly civilized Iago. Shakespeare uses the context in which he wrote his play to show that, contrary to Cinthio's story, Othello's death is a tragedy, not a victory. In a sense, Cyprus represents Othello himself, as Venice tries to civilize and colonize him, yet in Cinthio's tale, this means killing him outright, whereas in Shakespeare, Othello's death at the hands of Iago might signify the end of Venice's rule of Cyprus. Othello is meant to defend Cyprus, yet dies. The disparity between Cinthio's assessment of the Moor as deserving death, and Shakespeare's as an unwitting victim display the difference of their historical contexts. Cinthio's is a victor. The Moor is dead and Venice controls Cyprus. All vestiges of barbarity are destroyed by civilization. Shakespeare's story is left in uncertainty. Othello is killed, and Shakespeare's English audience is aware that Cyprus is no longer held by the Turk. Othello's death is tragic because he might have been able to protect Cyprus. Cinthio creates an irreconcilable divide between civilization and barbarianism, while Shakespeare's play, written fifty years later, creates a picture that is much more complex, since Shakespeare knew that Cyprus could not be held by Venetians. These viewpoints lead to drastically different assessments of the Moor, which is also present in England's assessment of Venice.

To Shakespeare's English audience, Venice also carried with it very particular connotations that begin to blur the line between civilized and non-civilized locations, particularly because the English saw Venetians as hypocritical in the image they projected to the world. They were supposedly a virgin city of intellectual purity yet were also commonly known for relative sexual promiscuity. There was a set hierarchy within Venetian society that heavily regulated and controlled sexuality. The city was the center of the culture throughout this period. Vaughn argues

that there was a “widespread Renaissance belief that Venice was the epitome of a rationally ordered and prosperous republic” (15-16). England romanticized life in Venice and yet also saw it as far too open, to the point of corruption, in its sexual morality. English definitions of sexual morality were much more restrained than Venetians. One English travel writer who visited Venice, Thomas Coryate, wrote of the Venetian women, “almost all the wives, widows, and maids do walk abroad with their breasts all naked, and many of them have their backs also naked even almost to the middle, which some do cover with a slight linen” (278). To the English, even Venetian garments were seen as promiscuous. Even more shocking were the prostitutes, supported by the nobility and controlled by them to keep their bloodlines pure. Young men could visit the brothels, as long as they made heirs with their wives and didn’t cuckold their fellow nobles. Women in this society were also highly regulated, since Venice’s image as a center of intellectual purity was paired with the reputation of Venice as the virgin city. This tension, between being the virgin city and a city full of state-sanctioned brothels complicates the view of Venice for the English audience of *Othello*. This setting therefore prepares the audience for the introduction of chaos into the civilization, since Venice’s “civilization” was complex to the English perspective.

In some ways, Desdemona reflects the complex identity of her city in her marriage to Othello, confusing dualistic boundaries of civilization and chaos. We learn early in the play that Desdemona is desired by many of the young men in Venice, yet instead of choosing a husband who would please her father, she chooses to disrupt the system by pursuing a warrior. Desdemona should have been a nobleman’s daughter, following the social hierarchy of the city and supporting its virgin image. Behind the façade of white civilization and virgin purity, Desdemona and her city both display the hypocritical sexuality of this society. In this sense,



Desdemona, through her marriage to Othello, reflects Venice and its public prostitutes. As Vaughn asserts, “On one hand, Desdemona is a true Venetian; true, that is, to the city’s whoring image by being unchaste, deceitful, and given to vice. On the other, she has violated the city’s virgin image, disturbing Venetian order and degree and has shown herself to be un-Venetian” (32). Desdemona aligns with Venus, and Venus align with Venice. The hierarchy of the city, constructed to keep the appearance of propriety, is undermined by Desdemona subverting her very carefully plotted position within the society by marrying a dark-skinned outsider. While the entire idea of government-sanctioned prostitution allows men to deviate while staying within the system, Desdemona does not have this opportunity. Instead she subverts the society completely by marrying against her father’s will and, perhaps most importantly, by marrying a non-Venetian. Othello and Desdemona disrupt the vision of Venetian purity. Suddenly, one of the most highly revered Venetian families is defiled, not merely by marrying someone who is not Venetian nobility, but by marrying someone who is not even European. This is the socio-sexual tension that the play starts with, and it confirms England’s idea that, for all its intellectual advances and advantages, Venice was not perfect because it failed in one of its biggest points of pride. The divide between civilization and barbarity that Cinthio forms is complicated within Shakespeare’s work, which provides a different view of social order and chaos.

### **Iago De Matamoros**

The systemic binaries that critics work with in the play—in regards to race, between black and white; in regards to reputation, between Othello and Iago; in regards to civilization, between Cyprus and Venice; and in regards to Iago’s s motivation, between racist and motiveless—are all valid characterizations, but all of these interpretations are complicated by Iago’s identity as a Spaniard, a fact which deconstructs the hierarchy that regards Europeans as

better than Moors. Like his Moor, Cinthio's Ensign was never named in the original story. Shakespeare specifically chose Iago's name, and unlike Othello's, it was a name already steeped in historical context. Immediately, Iago would be recognizable to the English audience as a Spanish name, specifically, according to Pechtar, "the name of the patron saint of Spain, Santiago Matamoros, Saint James the Moor Slayer" (153). In this sense, Iago is seen as a representation of Catholic Spain and, more than that, is tied to the patron saint of Spain, who supposedly supported the Spanish by slaying Moors. When Shakespeare named Iago, he was not working within the paradigm created by Cinthio. Cinthio's paradigm was this very strict series of binaries, that placed the Europeans as better than the Moors, while Shakespeare's choice to make Iago a Spaniard introduces a critique of European identity into *Othello's* Venice.

The complexity a Spaniard adds to the text is particularly relevant because Protestant England was in conflict with Catholic Spain for much of the sixteenth century, a struggle that motivated the English to seek out allies from non-traditional places, even from the land of dark-skinned Moroccans. Although the Moroccans represented a completely different way of life, and religion, they still offered an advantage over Catholic countries, which were not only perceived as trade rivals but also as members of a different faith. England was officially Protestant, while Spain and most of the rest of southern Europe were officially Catholic. In this context, Peter Frankopan explains, "England began to build ties with anyone who was an enemy of the Catholic rulers in Europe" (238). Morocco and even the Ottoman Turks therefore offered unique political and strategic opportunities. For most of the sixteenth century, Catholic countries like Spain and Portugal had control of the oceans with stronger fleets and broader colonial holdings throughout the Americas and Africa. They were also constantly at war with Protestant England. Morocco offered an alliance against England's imperialistic rivals, the Spanish.

Despite the fact that England was seeking alliances with Morocco against Catholic countries, negative stereotypes of Moors still persisted. Yet when Moors were juxtaposed beside a Spaniard in English theatre, both were degraded. In the *Merchant of Venice*, another contender for Portia's hand in marriage is a Prince of Arragon, a province of Spain, who was also turned away empty hand because he chose wrong. After Arragon departs, Portia calls him a "deliberate fool" (2.4.80). Both Morocco and Arragon fail and are seen as fools by Portia. Just as in *Othello*, Shakespeare juxtaposes both the Moor and the Spaniard, and shows that negative theatrical stereotypes transcended racial distinctions. Although English dramas continued to portray stereotypical black Moors on stage, England's relationship with Morocco was in a state of flux during the seventeenth century, which muddled strict divides between European and Moorish identity.

The negative views of black characters in English dramas was indicative of societal racism, which led to political attempts to expel Moors from England. Yet this was passive compared to the persecution of Catholics in England, showing that religious distinctions overcame race distinctions. As time passed, and Moors began to move to England, there was some fear of over population. In 1596, Queen Elizabeth commissioned a series of letters which allowed for the expulsion of some "blackamoors" from her kingdom. One such letter reads, "Her majesty's pleasure, therefore, is that those kind of people should be sent forth of the land" (299). Her orders were that there were too many people already in England, and that Blackamoors did not have a place. However, the edict was not strictly enforced, and many Moors and darker-skinned people remained in England, particularly in urban London. At the same time, Catholics were declared enemies of the state and were vilified. In 1603, when King James ascended to the throne, he persecuted Catholics in force, and this prompted multiple assassination attempts

against him, including the infamous 1605 Gunpowder Plot perpetrated by Catholics. During this period, to be a Moor in England was to be a stranger, prejudiced against and subjugated; yet, to be a Catholic, or from a Catholic country, was to be an enemy of the state. Race was often connected to religion, language, and stereotypes. When European explorers constructed early-modern stereotypes, they pointed at the paganism of Sub-Saharan Africans. Yet, this religious and racial identity shifts in *Othello* as we see a Christian Moor. The Catholics, however, are enemies of the Anglican Church, and a man named after the patron saint of Spain could not escape the Catholic connotations that came with his name.

The racial distinctions, so often emphasized by critics of *Othello*, were ignored by seventeenth century English politicians, who began trans-racial diplomatic relations. An important result of the Moorish-English negotiations was a face-to-face confrontation with noble, dark-skinned Moors, which further complicated racial identities. The treaties between the two countries prompted the visit of Moroccan Diplomat Abd el-Ouahed to London, where he stayed for an approximate six months. (Altman 326). This Moroccan figure showed a lavish, dignified, and respectable side of Morocco. His visit ended in 1601, meaning that his presence in London was most certainly remembered by the audiences of *Othello* in 1604. These London negotiations with Morocco display England's identity crisis. For centuries, Morocco had been the obvious enemy of most of Europe, and an immediate threat. However, now they were a possible tool for England's global supremacy. At the same time, the beginning of Jacobean England also represented a period of establishing what race meant, and certainly the presence of a dignified Moroccan diplomat first-hand would have complicated these early concepts of racial identity. Moors were humanized during a time when the Spanish and the Catholics were demonized and degraded.

The culmination of the political alliance between England and Morocco against Spain was an actual invasion of a Spanish city, which showed England's willingness to turn to less than conventional allies in its religious war against Catholic Europe. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, tensions between the Muslims of North Africa and the Ottoman Empire and the Christians of Europe were extremely heated. England, which had only recently emerged as a global player with the settlements of colonies in the Caribbean and the defeat of the Spanish Armada in the late sixteenth century, needed allies. Frankopan argues that, "Ultimately, England's posturing was framed by a keen awareness that it was in a weak position to exploit the astonishing opportunities that had been created by the great changes of the early sixteenth century" (241). Thus, England sought an alliance with the Moroccan empire. As Vaughn asserts, "English views of the Moroccan king El-Mansour were shaped partly by Orientalism (he and his court were seductive, different, and dangerous) and partly by colonialism (his kingdom might be of use to England in its global enterprises)" (14). The English joined Morocco in a war against Spain, which Nabil Matar called a "jihad against Spain" (21), actually making a coordinated attack together against Cádiz, which is brought up in Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice* when one of the character mentions, "My wealthy Andrew docked in sand, / Vailing her high top lower than her ribs / to kiss her burial" (1.1.27-29). According to Matar, this refers to the *St. Andrew*, the Spanish vice-admiral's ship, which was taken during the invasion of Cádiz. England made multiple agreements with Morocco and the Ottomans at this time, and the political nature of this relationship trumped the racial differences. This led to a complex relationship between England, Morocco, and Spain, a relationship that is replayed in Shakespeare's *Othello*.

Iago's presence in this play points to this geopolitical struggle because, to England, there was not a united European front against Muslim countries. Spain represented an actual threat to

England, while Morocco, and even the Turks, were potential allies against Catholicism. Iago is white, and should be morally good, yet the same way that Othello's identity is misinterpreted by a racial categorization of colors, so is Iago's. The ensign flips the colonial paradigm, not by becoming a Turk, but by being a Spaniard. Historically speaking, the Spaniard killed the Moor. In the late fifteenth century, Spain "reconquered" the Iberian Peninsula, which had been held by a Moorish Kingdom since the eighth century. During this Reconquista, supposedly, Saint James the Apostle rode with the Spanish, earning the title Santiago de Matamoros, or Santiago the Moor Killer. Throughout Spain after this war, pictures of Santiago killing Moors decorated the walls of cathedrals, castles, and churches. Shakespeare's Iago represents this tradition in the play. It is not coincidental that Cinthio's Ensign is renamed Iago and is rewritten to destroy the Moor. It is because he is Iago de Matamoros, Iago the Moor killer. In this way, Iago's identity both lines up with and contradicts critical response to his character's motivation. In one way, Iago aligns with Coleridge's assessment because he has no justifiable cause for his actions. His entire identity exists just to kill the Moor. Yet at the same moment, he is the Moor Killer. His very identity requires that he hate the Moor for being a Moor. In this way, his action is also racially charged, as Bristol argues. Iago becomes the Moor killer so that Shakespeare can craft Cinthio's story to replay a geopolitical conflict, and create a specific political message concerning England's relationships with Spain and Morocco.

As the geopolitical story plays out on the theatrical stage, Shakespeare creates a particular message involving the three identities involved in the production, making a political point for his audience to understand. Desdemona can be interpreted as representing England instead of Venice. Desdemona's rebellion against Venice could be viewed as rebellion against civilized order, or, it could be viewed as England's revolt against the Catholicism of Southern Europe.

This is reinforced by the fact that Desdemona turns to the Moor in her rebellion, just as England turned to the Moroccans and other Muslim countries in its battle against Catholicism, as Frankopan pointed out. Beyond this, Desdemona is, as both Shakespeare and Cinthio wrote her, the innocent victim who would have undoubtedly garnered sympathy from the English audience. She would have been the most relatable character, since the alternatives were a black Moor or a villainous Spaniard. The Moor and Desdemona form an alliance as a married couple, just like the alliance attempted by England and Morocco. The Spaniard, who is the enemy of them both, turns them against each other. The Moor, emboldened and tricked by the Spanish influence, murders Desdemona, then kills himself on her bed. Urvashi Chakravarty connects this to a song that Desdemona recalls before her death, sung by Barbary, her childhood nursemaid. “The affinities between Barbary and Desdemona are clear. In both cases, ‘he she loved proved mad’; as a result, Barbary’s song ‘Will not go from [Desdemona’s] mind’” (27). Desdemona’s Moor also turns mad, unsurprisingly based on contemporary racial stereotypes. However, he is turned that way by the Spaniard. Shakespeare is creating a diplomatic and political discourse in support of the Moorish diplomacy. If the two are separated, the English and Moroccan “jihad,” as Matar called it, dissolves, and Spain is allowed to reign free, with both countries ending up destroyed, just as Othello and Desdemona end up dead at the end of *Othello*.

Iago turns Othello against Desdemona because Iago complicates the binary categorizations within Venice, which Othello relied on to define his own identity. Othello makes numerous claims that assert firm distinctions. He creates the separation between civilized and uncivilized when he tells his quarreling troops, “Are we turned Turks? ... / For Christian shame, put by this barbarous brawl” (2.3.160; 162). This statement creates the distinction between Turks and Venetians, civilized and barbarous. Othello sets up these distinctions himself and reinforces

them throughout the play. When Othello tells Iago, “I think my wife be honest, and I think she is not. / I think that thou art just, and think thou art not” (3.3.384-385), he shows that to him, his wife is either honest or dishonest, and that Iago is either just, or evil. This limited perspective forces a dualistic interpretation, where one option completely excludes the other. If Iago is morally right in his assessment, then Desdemona is a liar. Othello later instructs Iago, “Villain, be sure thou prove my love is a whore” (3.3.359-360). To Othello, if Desdemona has been unfaithful, she is a whore, with no nuance or chance for redemption. Within Othello’s own words, he presents the world as strictly dualistic, with good and evil, and civilization and barbarity, firmly in their place.

In the final scene of the play, Othello shifts his dualistic perspective as he realizes his own role in the crime, and as he understands that his limited view was what led to the tragedy. Lodovico, a Venetian diplomat, finds the scene of Emilia and Desdemona’s dead bodies. He does not condemn Othello, however, and merely says to him “You shall close prisoner rest / till the nature of your fault be known / to the Venetian state” (5.2.340-342). Despite Othello’s obvious crime, he is not villainized like Iago; he is given a chance to speak his case. Fault is given to Othello, but so is the opportunity for redemption through a hearing. However, Othello instead tells his captors, and the English audience, a story: “In Aleppo once, / where a malignant and a turbaned Turk / beat a Venetian and traduced the state, / I took by th’ throat the circumcisèd dog, / and smote him—thus” (5.2.357-360). As he finishes this story, Othello enacts the killing of the Turk by stabbing himself. As he comes to realize his own role in the death of his wife, Othello realizes that he does not fit into the categories he has created. He is neither Turk nor Venetian. He is the Turk killer, just as Iago is the Moor killer. He has killed a Venetian, which is what the Turks were supposed to do, and so now he must kill himself as a stand-in for



the Turks who never showed up. He no longer believes in the binary of good versus evil because he no longer fits into that distinction. Instead, he is both the enemy and the killer of the enemy, manipulated by Iago into this act because Iago's very presence complicates Othello's identity.

Othello enacts the role of Morocco on the global stage and understanding the role that Iago's presence plays in this dramatization of the geo-political struggle helps the English audience define Othello. In the process, the play defines Morocco's role in seventeenth-century global politics. Othello is conflicted at the end of the play. He is in Cyprus to defend the Venetians, then he kills a Venetian. He's been hired to protect Venetians, a *condottiere*, as Vaughn pointed out. He was an outsider, hired as a mercenary to uphold Venetian supremacy. In the English mind, Morocco occupied this role. There was a tool, used by England against Spain. However, Othello becomes so much more than this mercenary. He is welcomed into the society and treated as part of Venice's world. It is only when Othello is tricked by Iago that he begins questioning his place in the world. He had been outsider, and had crossed into civilization. He became jealous because he thought that Cassio had stolen his position within the world from him. It is only at the end that he realizes that he has become the enemy himself. When Iago convinces Othello that Venice is against him, he turns on them. Shakespeare is telling his English audience that England should tell Morocco their role in society. While Spain wants the Moors to be expelled from Europe, England wants Morocco as its *condottiere*. Shakespeare makes it clear that if they do not define Morocco's identity, Spain will, and the strategic ally they have will be wasted. Morocco will see itself as the enemy of Europe, just as Othello saw himself turning Turk, and that, Shakespeare asserts, will only end in tragedy.

## Conclusion

When Cinthio wrote “The Moor of Venice,” he wrote it as a warning that, without guidance, Venetian daughters would be stolen by Moors. He relied on sixteenth century definitions of race and identity to create a hierarchy, which told Venice’s daughters that European Fathers were meant to rule society. Critics of *Othello* picked up on these same distinctions. Some, like A. C. Bradley, explored heroes and villains, arguing against the importance of Othello’s race. This explanation overlooked the fact that Othello uses his reputation to overcome his race, and it is the perceived fragility of this reputation that motivates his jealousy. At the same time, critics like Coleridge and Neill argue that Iago’s claims that jealousy is his motivator is misdirection. This creates an argument between Bristol and Neill, about the racialized nature of Iago’s actions. However Othello ends up defying the theatrical stereotypes held against him, further complicating seventeenth century binaries of race. Shakespeare’s contextual history contradicted traditional definitions of civilization because to 1600s England, Spain was the enemy, and Morocco, which should have been seen as barbaric, was actually seen as an ally. Shakespeare shifts Renaissance binaries, offering modern critics a broader perspective of seventeenth century geo-politics. Shakespeare uses his stage to display an international, imperialistic struggle. He attempts to offer his audience a view of a sympathetic Moor, and a villainous Spaniard, to justify England’s diplomatic relationships.

In the end, Iago’s identity cements him as the real enemy of Venice and Spain as the real enemy of Jacobean England, not Othello nor the Moors, who is written as an outsider rather than as an enemy. Rodrigo, at the beginning of the play, characterizes Othello as an “Extravagant and wheeling stranger of here and everywhere” (1.1.133-134). This is the role Othello plays in this drama. He is not the ridiculous Moor, undermined for his pride, like Morocco in *The Merchant*

*of Venice*, nor is he an evil and corrupt Moor, like in Cinthio's original tale. He is a stranger, a stranger to the English and the Venetians. His color sets him apart, and despite attempts of assimilate, he still belongs nowhere, the oddity of a civilized, Christian Moor. However, Shakespeare takes this character, subject to prejudice because of his race and isolated because of his identity, and juxtaposes him next to Iago, the Spaniard. Othello may be the stranger, but Iago is the enemy. Shakespeare shows his English audience that it is better to align with the stranger and the outsider than to be murdered by the outsider. Shakespeare's villain is the Spaniard, who is destined to kill the Moor, providing empathy for Othello that gives the play a specific geopolitical context. Through broader context, critics can better understand Shakespeare's purpose, and the broader spirit of politics of seventeenth-century Jacobean England. Iago, Othello, and early modern racial and religious politics, were not binary in nature, as modern critics characterize them, but were extremely complicated.

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## Appendix

In September, 2017, I went on a trip to Spain and Morocco through one of SPU's study abroad programs. While in Cordoba Spain, our group visited a Cathedral. It was there that I first saw Santiago de Matamoros. Before Spain's Reconquista of the Iberian Peninsula during the fifteenth century, Cordoba was the home of a massive Mosque. The entirety of southern Spain was ruled by an Islamic kingdom. When Catholic Spain took over the mosque, instead of tearing it down, they built a cathedral in the center, as an imperialistic insult to the Muslim religion. Inside, the walls are desecrated with human faces. The most terrifying and horrendous of these is a stone statue, just to the left of the altar. It is a man dressed in Spanish armor, riding a horse, skewering a Moor with a lance. The man is Saint James, the Moor killer, who supposedly joined the Spaniards in their holy crusade against the Moorish kingdom. Sitting in that cathedral challenged my faith drastically. This was still a holy place for some Christians. As a Christian, I could not reconcile a grandiose and ostentatious monstrosity desecrating the ground that had become the tombs of those who had first held that ground as sacred. It was disgusting and terrifying, and repulsive. Yet it was also enthralling.

I sat for hours, in a different cathedral, contemplating how I could reconcile the heritage of atrocities intrinsic within Christianity with my own convictions regarding my faith. I could say that technically I am a Protestant, and these are Catholic Cathedrals, but that would simply be me making excuses. In reality, to keep my faith, I had to reconcile that any good I was inspired to do because of my faith would be done in the name of the same God that these atrocities had been done in the name of. I wrestled for some time before realizing that I could accept these things as my spiritual heritage, and yet not support them or condone them. This was



the only way I could continue in my faith while seeing the atrocities that that faith had inspired in others.

I'd studied *Othello* leading up to the trip, thinking I would write upon Othello's conflicted identity. While on the trip, I read a footnote in my copy of *Othello* that said Iago's name might be derived from Santiago de Matamoros. After returning home, I searched for sources on Iago's identity, because I thought that might help with my research on *Othello*. When I actually started writing, it soon became clear that the paper I wanted to write was one upon Iago's identity. That is when I settled on writing this paper, on Iago's identity in Venice.

*Othello* is a play that, most certainly, displays an othering effect, as a person is ostracized. Othello may not have been a Muslim during the play, but as we've seen in our modern world, religious difference is often just one facet of defining the enemy. The collection of binaries I describe in this essay are a construction to create an enemy. Cinthio wants to make the Moor the enemy, in the same way that in the modern world, people from middle eastern countries are cast as the enemy. Binary is the tool of Imperialism, as it creates an enemy to fight against. That is why they painted portraits of Moors being killed by Saints in Spanish Cathedrals. To dehumanize them. I discuss Iago in this essay because Shakespeare breaks the binary. He takes three religious groups, three national identities, and three definitions of enemy, and clouds them all. Shakespeare, in a way, deconstructs the colonial ideal that was still being formed around him. I worked on *Othello* because it works with intrinsically religious conflicts, yet hardly mentions religiosity. After my trip to Spain, I saw *Othello* as a way of spiritual healing. It is a critique of the violence of Saint Santiago, because it brings sympathy to the Moor that Santiago was supposed to kill.