READING WHAT ISN'T THERE: EMPIRICISM, DELUSION, AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF RACE AND RACISM IN *OTHELLO*

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Introduction

In *Othello* by William Shakespeare, Brabantio, a Venetian father angered by his daughter Desdemona's decision to elope with Othello the Moor, says bitterly to his new son-in-law, "Look to her, Othello, if thou hast eyes to see / She has deceived her father, and may thee."[1] The phrase "look to," instead of "look at," implies that Othello's sight can somehow control Desdemona—he can read her figure as a signifier and control her meaning. The issue of interpretation as passive observation versus interpretation as active construction of meaning is crucial to the entire drama, as the play's focus on jealousy and delusion turns on the hero's confusion between appearances and reality—Othello's reading of the world is in crisis.

At the same time, the audience must figure out how to read the figure of Othello onstage, in terms of his tragic fall and his Otherness. To a degree, the choice is made for them, as productions of the play portray Othello in ways that reflect the mixed and changing attitudes toward the "Other" in the Anglo-American world. For instance, after a century of Othellos played by white men in blackface, London actor Edmund Keane portrayed him as a "tawny" Arab Moor.[2] This style became the traditional portrayal, so much so that even though Iago refers to "black Othello," Samuel Coleridge claims in a lecture from 1819 that Othello could not possibly ever, ever be black: "As we are constituted, and most surely as an English audience was disposed in the beginning of the seventeenth century, it would be something monstrous to conceive this beautiful Venetian

[1] William Shakespeare, *Othello* ed. Edward Pechter (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2004), I.iii.290-291. All subsequent quotations of lines from Shakespeare are from the Norton Edition.
[2] Michael Neill, Introduction to *Othello* ed. Michael Neill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 47.

girl falling in love with a veritable negro."[3] Sir Laurence Oliver's blackface performance and choice a West Indian accent is still the subject of scholarly debate.[4] More contemporary times productions of the play cast an African-American actor to play the role. These varied choices in casting and portrayal reflect the players' concern with how the audience of a specific cultural and historical moment will interpret racial difference onstage. Even Coleridge's statement, offensive as it is to a twenty-first-century reader, contains the qualifier, "As we are constituted," and acknowledges the role of the audience's preconceived notions, or prejudices, in reading the character of Othello.

At the same time, the play forces the audience to confront its own expectations of Othello's character, based upon his Otherness, against the hero's actions within the play, so that they must reconsider the process by which they read his blackness and his character. This problem is reproduced within the reality of the play, when Othello struggles to read the world correctly and separate other people's prejudices from his own self-regard. These prejudices center on two related myths: the myth of inferiority of the Other, and the myth of Desdemona's infidelity. Theoretically, Othello's inferiority as a man and a husband might cause, and perhaps even justify, Desdemona's adultery—her adultery, then would be a sign of his unworthiness; Othello's appraisal of Desdemona would inevitably influence his own self-appraisal. This paper analyzes how Othello's interpretation of the world interacts with the audience's interpretation of Othello to produce a verdict on the status of the "Other."

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[3] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, "Comments on Othello," in *Lectures and Notes on Shakspere and Other English Poets by Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. T. Ashe, *Othello,* ed. Edward Pechter (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2004), 231.

[4] Emily Bartels describes the confusion over whether Olivier's Othello was West Indian or West African, and this confusion indicates the degree to which Olivier's performance is now regarded as projecting a generalized, stereotypical blackness that exists in the racist's mind. (Emily Bartels, *Speaking of the Moor*, [Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008], 60).

The topic of race during the Early Modern period has itself been a matter of contention, as the modern notion of race as a hereditary, biological trait has its origin in the much-later Linnaean taxonomies of 1735.[5] Darwinian theorists facilitated the consolidation of scientific racism that characterized the nineteenth century and onward.[6] The notion of racial difference as species-difference in humans would not have been the prevailing thought in Shakespeare's day; other categories of difference would have been just as important. Roxann Wheeler's book *The Complexion of Race* provides a nuanced study of racial attitudes prior to the nineteenth century, and her reading of *Robinson Crusoe* shows how Defoe's hero cycles through several categories of difference: English versus non-English, Christian versus non-Christian, white versus non-white, and savage versus civilized.[7] A systematic racial hierarchy had not yet been established by the time *Othello* was first performed.

Still, some critics have identified the notion of racial essentialism as already present in the text, and Leah Marcus identifies a prescient change in racial theory even between different versions of Shakespeare's play:

> What Othello does, and much more explicitly and powerfully in F than in Q, is enact a process by which skin colour comes to be associated even by Othello himself with innate differences that demand his subordination or exclusion. On this view, the play is a powerful laboratory in which many of the stereotyped racial attitudes that were to dominate the culture later are allowed to coalesce.[8]

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[5] Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London: Routledge, 1992), 24-25.
[6] Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (London: Verso, 1993), 8.
[7] Roxann Wheeler, *The Complexion of Race* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000), 89.
[8] Leah S. Marcus, "The Two Texts of *Othello* and Early Modern Constructions of Race," *Textual Performances: The Modern Reproduction of Shakespeare's Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 30.

To be sure, Marcus' term "laboratory" implies experimentation, or uncertainty of outcome. The coalescence of modern Western racism is not a foregone conclusion, but one of many possibilities contingent upon future cultural change—this racism is not presented within the play as having the teleological inevitability the audience might associate with "truth." The play forces the audience to look at Othello, "his Moorship," and then consider how they are looking at him.

The question, then, is if, in the absence of a systematic racial theory, blackness carries any weight as a signifier. In the third act of the play Othello identifies himself as black, but literary historians are quick to point out that even in this instance his origins remain ambiguous—before the late-eighteenth century, the term "black" was used to refer to a non-European person with dark skin or a white European with dark eyes with or without dark hair.[9] Additionally, the term "Moor" could mean "both North Africans and Sub-Saharan Negroes…it could also be deployed as a religious category denoting all Muslims (regardless of their ethnicity), or used as a loose descriptor of colour, embracing on occasion even the inhabitants of the New World."[10] Labelled as both black and a Moor, Othello occupies a space where these two slipping categories overlap, designating the hero a generalized Other whose difference is manifest in his physicality, but who does not inhabit any racial category that exists now. Dympna Callaghan remarks on the subject, "On Shakespeare's stage, blackness marked sheer difference […] Blackness,

[9] Lara Bovilsky, *Barbarous Play: Race on the Renaissance Stage* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 17-18.

[10] Michael Neill, " 'Mulattos, 'Blacks, and 'Indian Moors,': *Othello* and Early Modern Constructions of Human Difference," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 49 (1998) 364.

whether natural or cosmetic, was defined by an anterior whiteness just as the exotic in Renaissance systems of representation functioned as accident rather than essence."[11]

Some of the less contemplative characters, such as Roderigo and Brabantio, may take these assumptions about the Otherness and inferiority of blackness as a matter of course, but whether these images are vindicated on the level of "metadrama" is less obvious.[12] In "'An essence that's not seen': the Primal Scene of Racism in *Othello,* " Arthur Little, Jr. argues,

> The ongoing interplay between response and creation is what I mean more broadly by the "primal scene." The "primal scene of racism," then denotes the site (as well as the sight) where an audience at one and the same time reactively and proactively constructs the signification of race—in this instance, blackness. I am insisting on a noncausal relationship: an audience does not simply become reflexive *after* blackness is visualized. Response and creation are concurrent.[13]

By suggesting that the play offers the visualization of blackness as a construct, Little goes further in the consideration of blackness than writers such as Stephen Greenblatt, who rejects the importance of "blackness," which he puts in quotation marks, but still refers obliquely to "his own origins."[14] Greenblatt appears to believe that Othello intentionally deracinates himself to welcome "an embrace and perpetual reiteration of the norms of another culture," and at the same time suggests that Othello is less savvy and intelligent,

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[11] Dympna Callaghan, "'Othello was a White Man': Properties of Race on Shakespeare's Stage," *Alternative Shakespeares, vol. 2*, Ed. Terrence Hawkes (New York: Routledge, 1996), p. 196.

[12] Edward Washington, " 'At the Door of Truth': The Hollowness of Signs in *Othello*," *Othello: New Essays by Black Writers*, ed. Mythili Kaul (Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1997), 170.

[13] Arthur Little, Jr.; "'An Essence that's not Seen": The Primal Scene of Racism in *Othello*," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 44:3 (Autumn 1993) 305.

[14] Stephen Greenblatt, "The Improvisation of Power," in *Renaissance Self-Fashioning from More to Shakespeare* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2005), 242-245.

more "dim" than Venetians such as Iago.[15] Such a supposition would suggest that there is something about Othello's "origins" or essential nature that persists and re-emerges to precipitate Othello's breakdown. Categories of difference emerge from readings even when critics attempt to bypass them entirely. Little, for his part, investigates how racist images are constructed even when, or, more accurately, especially when the audience is in a similar denial of their own prejudice.

Still, Little is reluctant to give the audience or the play itself much credit, assuming that in both contexts, blackness is synonymous with and limited to an image of barbarism and essential inferiority. He posits that this reductive attitude about race is what precipitates Othello's tragic fall at the hands of another: "It is Iago who most adroitly pushes Othello towards the (re)discovery of his black origins […] returning Othello to the horror of his relationship with Desdemona."[16] For Little, Shakespeare's drama inscribes anti-black sentiments and, in the process, makes Othello a victim of the play's own prejudice.

To be sure, Othello does not begin the play echoing or even seriously responding to such sentiments, instead disregarding color and presenting the relationship between appearance and identity as the result of personal behavior in adherence to cultural norms. Othello is confident that he will be exonerated because of his exemplary performance for the Venetian state: "My services, which I have done the signiory, / Shall out-tongue his complaints."[17] This comment contains the cynical suggestion that as a favorite of the government, Othello is above indictment for any transgressive behavior. Additionally, though, he hints at something more essential to his state of being: "My parts, my title, and

[15] Greenblatt 243.
[16] Little, Jr. 316.
[17] *Othello* I.ii.18-19.

my perfect soul / Shall manifest me rightly."[18] His brave military accomplishments, examples of his personal virtue, make him who he is, and these talents and accomplishments—his "parts"—are so central to his identity, his inner life, that they manifest in his outward person, his physical "parts." The visibility of his soul is crucial as the play begins as a sort of improvised trial scene, in which physical evidence is key in exonerating Othello's personal character. Describing his interiority, Katherine Maus writes that Othello "assumes that the soul is a visible as parts and title to anyone who cares to look.[19] He believes his character is transparent.

Transparency and Legibility: How Othello Reads Himself and the World

In describing his own transparency, Othello goes from interior to exterior and bypasses the surface of his body—he does not mention his own blackness once in the First Act. In Othello's scheme of legibility, color difference and the idea of color-based hierarchy do not signify anything. Some critics have pointed to Othello's enslavement as a sign of his black identity, but this assumption neglects the historical fact that white people of European descent were captured by North African pirates and sold into slavery. Many of these Europeans ended up assimilating into North African culture and adopted Arabic or "Moorish" names.[20] Hence, the term "slave," does not, anymore than "Moor," necessarily imply blackness. Of course, a white person who had integrated into a new non-European culture would still be seen as foreign or exotic, and for her part, Emily Bartels believes the reference to slavery and Othello's story as a whole "gives voice to an

[18] *Othello* I.ii.31-32.
[19] Katherine Eisaman Maus, "Proof and Consequences: Inwardness and its Exposure in the English Renaissance," *Materialist Shakespeare: a History*, ed. Ivo Kamps (London: New York, 1995), 171.
[20] Nabil I. Matar, *Islam in Britain, 1558-1685* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 40-41.

uncircumscribed non-European identity and presence."[21] Othello's story leaves open the possibility of several different classifications, and also establishes his identity as one based on professional accomplishments, obviating any essential connection between race and conduct.

Obliterating the obstacle of color, Othello thus regards his own subjectivity as legible to others, and to him, people can be themselves legible signifiers of internal realities. Desdemona, for one, represents much more to him than romantic success. During the trial scene, the Duke makes clear that Othello is indispensable in their war against the Ottomans; when Othello describes how his stories won over Desdemona, the Duke remarks, "I think this tale would win my daughter too."[22] He acknowledges that Othello's career accomplishments make the Moor attractive without the aid of witchcraft. Edward Washington points out how the Venetian governors concern themselves with the truth behind false appearances, and they realize that one of the reports of the Turkish military maneuvers is designed "to keep us in false gaze."[23] Given this keen interest in veracity, the Duke's approval of Othello's conduct signals their belief that what he says about himself is a true reflection of his inner nature. Othello's marriage is recognized in part because they believe Othello is who he says he is. Cassio remarks of the general, "He hath achieved a maid that paragons description and wild fame."[24] More than just a conventional trophy wife, Desdemona embodies an affirmation of Othello's accomplishments for Venice, the same accomplishments that he considers to be the

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[21] Emily Bartels, "Othello on Trial," *New Casebooks: Othello* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004), 150.
[22] *Othello* I.iii.170.
[23] Edward Washington, " 'At the Door of Truth': The Hollowness of Signs in *Othello*," *Othello: New Essays by Black Writers*, ed. Mythili Kaul (Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1997), . *Othello* I.iii.19.
[24] *Othello* II.i.61-62.

substance of his identity. Desdemona herself is proof to Othello that what he thinks of himself is true.

In Othello's case, then, identity is the result of performative speech; he counters Brabantio's racist diatribe with his own personal narrative. It would stand to reason, then, that Othello might expect others to constitute themselves through similar speech, and that such speech would therefore possess a quality of transparency: what ones says about oneself would be a reflection of the truth. Iago sneers that Othello is of an "open nature / That thinks men honest that but seem so."[25] Not only is Othello of an "open nature," but Othello thinks nature is open, with the character of the persons around him transparent, their motivations clear in their actions, the causes of their actions thus clearly present in the signs around him.

This theory of legibility is deceptively simple, as it threatens to elide the complexity of Othello's self-understanding. Othello's search for confirmation in Desdemona's eyes involves a process of mirroring, in which Othello looks to his wife to return his gaze and reflect back to him a coherent, virtuous self. Desdemona's resonse to his storytelling accomplishes this feat, as she admits she "saw Othello's visage in his mind, / And to his honors and valiant parts / My soul did consecrate."[26] Othello's disparate "parts," namely his diverse adventures and military feats, are crystallized into a whole, "sufficient" person and reflected back to him as a fulfillment of his desire to be.[27] Desdemona's status as a trophy wife and as proof of his social acceptance strengthens the

[25] *Othello* I.iii.390-391.
[26] *Othello* I.iii.250-252.
[27] Ludovico calls Othello "all-n-all sufficient," and Edward Washington makes much of this phrase, adding that "The balance of the struggles between Iago and Othello hangs not only on the play's tragic outcome but also on the fate Othello has carefully built up for himself." (*Othello* IV.i.260; Edward Washington, "At the Door of Truth: the Hollowness of Signs in *Othello*," *Othello: New Essays by Black Writers* [Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1997], 170).

value of the images she projects, but once her reputation is diminished these images would lose value. Also, once her behavior fails to match her reputation, and her character loses semiotic coherence, and her ability to reflect back any image back to Othello dissolves.

Othello has implies that the signs that represent anterior realities are self-evident, and make themselves obvious to the passive observer, so that no *active* interpretation is necessary. Things speak for themselves, almost literally. During the "trial scene," however, Brabantio's accusations betray the problem of interpretation through the "passive" reception of signs. "Damned as thou art," he thunders at Othello, "thou has enchanted her; / For I'll refer me to all things of sense."[28] Such observations show the limits of empirical thought: what is first thought to be self-evident is only evident when guided by an anterior assumption—in this case, the assumption that black people are physically undesirable. This bigoted notion contextualizes and organizes Brabantio's individual observations, such as the "sooty bosom," to construct a coherent meaning: an ugliness so thoroughgoing it can only be made attractive through witchcraft. Even when signs appear to impress their meanings upon the viewer, the viewer participates in constructing meaning by bringing to bear different elements of his subjectivity and inscribing them on the figures before him.

Inscription: the Breakdown of Self-Evidence in Othello's Epistemology

The projection and incorporation of assumptions, such as that of white supremacy, shows how the individual's distinct subjectivity, or "mind's eye," impresses

[28] *Othello* I.ii.63-64.

itself on the world, shaping signs, inscribing them, even penetrating their mystery. Karen Newman remarks on the gendered language of such active interpretation:

> Both the male-dominated Venetian world of *Othello* and the criticism the play has generated have been dominated by a scopic economy which privileges sight […] Desdemona is presented in the play as a sexual subject who hears and desires, and that desire is punished because the none-specular, or non-phallic sexuality it displays is frightening and dangerous.[29]

Newman notes the connection between active, visual interpretation and phallic penetration in *Othello*, where male characters strive to penetrate or impress upon signs to give them meaning; thus, when Othello beholds his wife, he asks "Was this fair paper, this most goodly book, / Made to write "whore" upon?"[30] Newman claims twice in her chapter that Othello imagines the "goodly book" with the word already on the page, but his rhetorical, questioning tone suggests he imagines writing the word himself.[31] Othello, then, ends up inscribing adultery on Desdemona, in the same fashion that the lesser characters inscribe inferiority on Othello. The change in Othello's vision of Desdemona reflects the weakness in a certain empirical mode of interpretation, and this change will also influence how Othello thinks of himself in terms of intersubjective mirroring.

Critics have remarked on the similarities between Othello's epistemology and the theories of British empiricists such as Francis Bacon.[32] Elizabeth Gruber notes that "Othello shows himself to be a fledgling empiricist when he explains how he plans to

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[29] Karen Newman, "'And Wash the Ethiop White': femininity and the monstrous in *Othello*," *Shakespeare Reproduced: the Text in History and Ideology*, eds Jean E. Howard and Marion F. O'Connor (New York and London: Methuen, 1987), 152.

[30] *Othello* IV.ii.73-74.

[31] Elizabeth Gruber, "Insurgent Flesh: Epistemology and Violence in *Othello* and *Mariam*," *The Upstart Crow* 24 (2002) 72-80. Elizabeth Hanson, "Brothers of the State: *Othello*, Bureaucracy and Epistemological Crisis," ed. Lena Cowen Orlin (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 125-147.

[32] John C. Briggs, "The Problem of Inartificial Proof: Othello Peers into Bacon's Universe," *The Ben Jonson Journal* 10 (2003) 161-177.

seek proof of Desdemona's guilt."[33] The emphasis of empiricism on *observation*, however, does not mean that Othello is content to passively observe signs as they occur. Rather, he will seek them out, looking for signs to occur in different situations, as the results of different causes. The most efficient way to do so is to *create* the circumstances that will produce the sign.

Bacon's mandate to experiment and obtain measurable evidence places a stronger emphasis on the philosopher's state-of-being, for not only must the natural philosopher exist to observe the world and record phenomena, but the natural philosopher must take an *active* role and interact with the world. "Bacon followed the maxim that our knowledge about nature, and our method of winning that knowledge, is governed by what we can *do*."[34] In an essay on violence and knowledge in *Othello*, Gruber quotes Bacon: "Nature exhibits herself more clearly under the trials and vexation of art than when left to herself."[35] The active manipulation of nature to produce measurable results can be seen as violent; torture, as a specific kind of violence, can more often than not produce the information the natural philosopher desires. The active, violent role of the investigative scientist stands at odds with the ideal of passively receiving "unmediated" knowledge. This contradiction inhabits the character of Othello, as he tortures the evidence around him in pursuit of the interpretation he desires, all the while insisting that he merely perceives what is there, believing Iago's claim, for instance, that the reappearance of her

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[33] Elizabeth Gruber, "Dead Girls do it Better: Gazing Rights in *Othello* and *Oronooko*," *Literature Interpretation Theory* 14 (2003), 101. Gruber makes a similar statement in "Insurgent Flesh," 396.

[34] Ian G. Stewart, "The Ironic Modernity of Francis Bacon," review Stephen Graukoger *Francis Bacon and the Transformation of Early-Modern Thought*; *Metascience* 12 (2004), 69.

[35] Elizabeth Gruber, "Insurgent Flesh: Epistemology and Violence in *Othello* and *Mariam*," *Women's Studies* 32 (2003), 393. William Eamon also uses this quotation of Bacon's in *Science and the Secrets of Nature*, however, neither Gruber nor Eamon cite specifically where this quotation originates.

Desdemona's handkerchief in Bianca's hand "speaks against her with / The other proofs."[36]

This hermeneutic agency, which has the power to construct signs and meanings that were previously not there, illuminates the tensions in Francis Bacon's conception of the "natural philosopher," or scientist. In order to perceive nature correctly and interpret its signs, we would have to revert to a "prelapsarian state" where, unencumbered by false ideas or "Idols" that we inherit from our culture and our psychology, we "know things as they are with an unmediated knowledge."[37] In eradicating the Idols, Bacon seeks to abolish the intellectual prejudices that obscure our vision. Bacon admits that "Man prefers to believe what he wants to be true" and that

> The human understanding from its own peculiar nature willingly supposes a greater order and regularity in things it find, and though there are many things in nature which are unique and full of disparities, it invents parallels and correspondences and non-existent connections.[38]

An abolition of Idols is supposed to prevent the observer from fabricating such connections, so that nature can reveal herself in her spontaneity and supposed autonomy.

Othello's situation with respect to Bacon is complex. On the one hand, Othello believes that nature is completely legible and transparent, and mediation is not warranted; on the other hand, Bacon admits that this prelapsarian state is unattainable, and the closest one can get is a state-of-being that requires the natural philosopher to "reform their behaviour" to avoid seduction by false beliefs and emotions; the scientist must

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[36] *Othello* III.iii.441.
[37] Stephen Graukoger, *Francis Bacon and the Transformation of Early-Modern Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 127.
[38] Francis Bacon, *The New Organon*, Eds. Lisa Jardine and Michael Silverthorne (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), XLV.

recreate himself.[39] Method, Stewart writes, "was not for Bacon an exercise in epistemology, if by that one means a logic independent of ontology."[40] Our understanding of the world and the nature of our being are interdependent, so it follows that when our understanding of the world changes, so does our understanding of ourselves.

Truth of knowing influences truth of being, and vice versa. Similarly, the problem of torture as a mode of investigation is its circularity: the natural philosopher can continue to violate nature *until* it produces the sign he anticipates, thus reinforcing his own prejudices. John Briggs notes the potential for manipulation of what Aristotle calls "in artificial forms: confessions extracted under torture, and signs that present themselves as alarms or stains outside the speaker's art to make them."[41] The agency of the natural philosopher in manipulating, or torturing, nature is such that the signs "outside the speaker's art" can, in fact, emerge as the result of his creation, rendering the proof's autonomy a fiction. Thus, while Baconian philosophy dismisses prejudice in the form of idols, he creates an opportunity for the natural philosopher to "idolize the instruments and principles of its iconoclasm."[42] Idolizing visual proof, Othello neglects to interrogate the significance of signs such as the errant handkerchief. Instead, he projects his own assumptions of Desdemona's adultery onto the evidence before him, ensuring the same paranoid conclusion.

Given that Othello values physical evidence for acquiring knowledge, and subsequently demands tangible proofs of Desdemona's adultery, one may wonder why in

[39] Graukoger 127.
[40] Stewart 69.
[41] Briggs 165.
[42] Briggs 162.

other contexts he relies on hearsay or verbal affirmation, and expects others to do the same. For instance, Othello's tales of adventures with cannibals and other exotic creatures are supposedly what wins over Desdemona, even after he says that his worthiness is *manifest* or visibly apparent in his very being. In his process of self-construction, Othello attributes to his speech the power of actualization—in declaring himself to be a hero, he becomes one, and this reality is manifest. Othello thus conflates physical evidence with hearsay, so that at times, believing something is the same as seeing it. Iago capitalizes on this conflation, as Knapp remarks that "he only succeeds when his narrative moves Othello to accept the *verbal* account *as if it were* the ocular proof he demanded."[43] He accomplishes this deception, not because Othello is gullible and foolish, but because Othello already has had experiences in which powerful, effective speech did seem to create visibly sensible signs, and it was as if his own words themselves were visible.

This error is particularly understandable when one remembers Iago's deceptive language. Othello calls him "honest Iago," and the audience may snicker, but when Iago declares "I am not what I am," it is easy to accept this impossible statement without interrogating what he really means.[44] This slippage in the category of physical evidence or "ocular proof," points to another complication in the seemingly straightforward process of knowledge-through-observation. It also opens the door for assumpations or prejudices, presented as declarations with performative qualities, to influence the perceptive evidence before the observer.

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[43] Italics are Knapp's. (James A. Knapp, "Archival Revelations and Aesthetic Response," *Poetics Today* 24:4 [2003], 712).

[44] *Othello* I.i.62.

The possibility for breakdown in Bacon's method and reversion to the idols of prejudice suggests that Othello's confusion is not the result of "naïveté" or being "dim."[45] His problem is not that he, as an outsider, is incapable of fully understanding the emerging modern approach to epistemology. Rather, it is *because* he is so fully committed to a scientific Western attitude concerning knowledge that he becomes deceived. It is not Othello the Moor but Othello the Venetian who is deceived, and his subsequent internalization of certain delusions and prejudices of his adopted culture show how he is not the victim of "who he is" but of the hypocrisies of those around him.

Active interpretation, then, has a function either of penetration or inscription, and this power of inscription can actually force signs into being, guided by prejudices, or judgments made with the desire that they be corroborated. At one point Emilia complains to Iago that Othello "hath so bewhored" Desdemona.[46] The verb "bewhore," can mean to call someone a whore, or to make her one, or in this case, possibly both; using the same performative quality he had when describing himself in Act One, Othello transforms Desdemona through a speech act.

Othello's Jealousy

Why would Othello be so determined to prove Desdemona is a whore, rather than prove her fidelity? Here he must confront the impossibility of proving a negative—Othello can try to find out whetheror not Desdemona *has* committed adultery, but he can't set out to prove that she *hasn't*. Proof of adultery proves she is an adulterer, but

[45] Greenblatt 238.
[46] *Othello* IV.ii.117.

lack of such proof does not necessarily mean she is *not* an adulterer. Iago realizes this difficulty when he taunts Othello,

> The cuckold lives in bliss
> Who, certain of his fate, loves not his wronger;
> But O, what damned minutes tells he o'er
> Who dotes yet doubts, suspects yet strongly loves![47]

Once Othello gets an inkling of suspicion, he is stuck in a mire of uncertainty between knowing Desdemona to be faithful and knowing her to be a whore. There is no way back to the trusting side; Othello cannot prove that she never, *ever* has committed adultery. It is, however, possible to find clues and indications of specific adulterous relationships, such as the one he (with Iago's help) constructs between Cassio and Desdemona. In search of certainty, Othello needs and wants to know that his wife has been unfaithful.

The solution, then, as Iago himself implies in his reference to the "cuckold in bliss," is to secure new meanings to extant signs, and retrace the connections between signifier and signified, in nature and in oneself. Othello himself acknowledges how much depended upon his relationship with Desdemona, remarking, "But I do love thee! And when I love thee not, / Chaos is come again."[48] The transition from the security of love and trust passes through a period of chaos and confusion—if Desdemona is not the embodiment of all his achievements, what is she?—until Othello resolves to prove the opposite of love: infidelity.

The driving force behind this transition is jealousy, and Michal Markowski explains how jealousy can operate as a system of knowledge and interpretation:

> Jealousy is the hermeneutical phenomenon as such, because in the passionate intercourse between the self and the world, which comes up instead of a theoretical and

[47] *Othello* III.iii.149-151.
[48] *Othello* III.iii.92.

> indifferent point of view, the exigency of interpretation appears to prove that signs do not mean what they say, that given sense is not simply given but rather given for interpretation, or overlooked.[49]

Jealousy, as hermeneutic, deals with two levels of separation: separation between lovers, and separation between the jealous lover and the world. For Othello, his alienation from Desdemona is *part* of his separation from the world, for if Desdemona is not the prize he thought she was, he did not earn her or the Venetians' respect, then he is not the accomplished warrior and respected citizen he thought he was. All of his suppositions about himself and the world are dismantled, with no new narrative to take their place.

Markowski continues, "Jealousy appears when signs have lost their transparency and the hiatus between essence and appearance renders our essential control impossible."[50] Initially, Desdemona claimed and appeared to be loyal and in love with Othello; now there are signs that contradict that premise. A narrative of adultery would restore the connection between seeming and being: Desdemona would appear unfaithful precisely because she is. The audience, who stand outside of Othello's head, may know this jealousy to be a delusion, but in this case it is a delusion that helps correct or prevent a complete loss of subjectivity and cognitive breakdown.

Iago's manipulation of signs is readily apparent in his scheming with the handkerchief; in other occasions, however, he is not so much an agent as a reflection of Othello's own hermeneutic agency. When Othello sees Cassio suddenly depart from Desdemona, he asks Iago, "Was not that Cassio parted from my wife?" and Iago replies, "Cassio, my lord? No, sure, I cannot think it / That he would steal away so guilty-like, /

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[49] Michal Pawel Markowski, "Shakespeare's *Othello*: Jealousy and Hermeneutics," *Textual Ethos Studies or Locating Ethics,* eds. Anna Fahraeus and AnnKatrin Jonsson (New York: Rodopi, 2005), 120.
[50] Markowski 126.

Seeing your coming."[51] Here Iago merely confirms to Othello a discrepancy between what he sees and what he believes to be true: Cassio is Othello's second-in-command, and Cassio is loyalty to Othello, so Cassio would not run away guiltily when he sees his commander enter a room. But he did, and Othello must find an explanation that will reconcile with this discrepant sign.

Othello's exclamation, "Noses, ears, and lips! is't possible? Confess? Handkerchief? O Devil!" illustrates the extent of his epistemological collapse.[52] With his belief in Desdemona's fidelity shaken, the signs before him, such as her facial features and her lost handkerchief, start to fragment and lose coherence—they swirl in chaos around him. As a result, they cannot reflect back to him a coherent essence, and so his self-understanding deteriorates along with the world around him. The fiction of Desdemona's adultery, and its implications for Othello's suitability as a mate, fills this hermeneutic vacuum and reconstitutes Othello's selfhood.

Even as Iago fancies himself a master-manipulator, it is *Othello's* fierce drive to understand reality that relegates *Iago* to the role of reflector:

> Othello: is [Cassio] not honest?
> Iago: Honest, my lord?
> Othello: Honest? Ay, honest.
> Iago: My Lord, for aught I know.
> Othello: What dost thou think?
> Iago: Think, my lord?
> Othello: "Think, my lord?" By heaven, thou dost echo'st me
> As if there were some monster in thy thought
> Too hideous to be shown. Thou dost mean something.[53]

Significantly, when Othello demands to know what Iago thinks, the "villain" replies only be echoing the hero. When Iago is alone onstage or speaking in an aside to the audience,

[51] *Othello* III.iii.38-40.
[52] *Othello* IV.i.39-43.
[53] *Othello* III.iii.103-111.

he appears to be fully in control of the other characters; when engaging with Othello, on the other hand, he appears merely to reflect the anxieties Othello projects outward. This schizophrenic quality in Iago speaks to the strength of Othello's interiority and his ability to aggressively interpret the people around him, turning Desdemona into a slut and Iago into a parrot.[54]

In an odd way, then, Othello's and Iago's motives are parallel, as they both manipulate Iago into manipulating. Iago is the one who explicitly acknowledges the figurative power of jealousy as a hermeneutic: "As I confess it is my nature's plague / To spy into abuses, and oft my jealousy / Shapes faults that are not."[55] He slyly admits that jealousy can fabricate a narrative to suit a disturbed or disturbing, discrepant sign; of course, the stability that Othello's delusion would give would evaporate if Othello identifies the delusion as such. This bit of reverse-psychology, then, drives Othello to *prove* that his jealous fantasy is correct, and he is not deluded. Of course, Othello goads Iago in the first place, telling him that he was "conspiring against thy friend" otherwise.[56] Even as he exists as his own autonomous malicious presence, Iago also stands as a projection of Othello's jealousy.

Recognizing Othello's hermeneutic agency helps us re-contextualize the audience's relationship with him. In "Renaissance Self-Fashioning," Stephen Greenblatt posits that Othello's unfashioning is wholly the product of Iago's "improvisations." He contends that Shakespeare "seems to acknowledge, represent, and explore his affinity to

[54] The choice to name the villain's pet parrot "Iago" in the animated Disney production *Aladdin* reflects the extent to which Iago's status as an echo of a stronger personality is acknowledged in wider culture.
[55] *Othello* III.iii.169-171.
[56] *Othello* III.iii.145.

the malicious improviser," referring to the scheming Iago.[57] Supposedly, the space for such sympathetic connections—between Iago, Shakespeare, and even the audience—opens up in Iago's "improvisations," or "inner narratives—shared, that is, only with the audience."[58] Of course, these stories only *promise* to explain Iago's real motivations, and the extent of his truthfulness, ultimately he never delivers: "What you know, you know."[59] The audience, then, is left pondering what happened, trying to read the scene before them for meaning. Greenblatt does not recognize how Iago's opacity actually puts the audience in the same position as Othello: trying to make sense of what they see before them, and matching up visible signs to suspected causes.

Racism: Delusion and Spectacle

For indeed, suggestions of subjectivity—of multiple truths, interpreted from different subject-positions—also shake Othello's (self-)understanding to its very foundation. Othello admits himself, "He that is robbed, not wanting what is stol'n, / Let him not know't, and he's not robb'd at all."[60] Othello recoils at the notion that you cannot know what you don't know, and that consequently, things may not be what they seem; this notion questions all of our knowledge, of the world and consequently ourselves. As it is impossible to prove one or any infinite number of negative possibilities, Othello must settle on the one narrative that he thinks he can verify, the

[57] Greenblatt, 252.
[58] Greenblatt 236.
[59] *Othello* V.ii.308.
[60] *Othello* III.iii.343-344.

possibility of adultery. Thus, when Othello commands Iago, "Be sure of it, give me ocular proof," he expresses his *desire* for his worst fear to be true.[61]

Of course, this new narrative, which resolves the epistemological alienation Othello experiences when he can no longer "read" the world, brings about a new set of social and cultural alienations. Othello's affections are alienated from Desdemona, to be sure, but Othello also distances himself from society by acknowledging his blackness and accepting the negative stereotypes associated with it. No longer an "other" from his "desired world," as Markowski puts it, Othello does "Other" himself from his adopted social world:

> Haply for I am black,
> And have not the parts of conversation,
> That chamberers have, or for I am declined
> Into the vale of years—yet that's not much—
> She's gone, I am abused, and my relief
> Must be to loathe her.[62]

This moment is the first time Othello mentions his own blackness, and it is at a moment when he considers it as a motivation for Desdemona's adultery. This consideration suggests two possibilities: either Desdemona rejects him for his blackness because she's a bigot, or she rejectes him because there *is* something essentially bad about his blackness. The second line of the passage, with its conjunction "and," suggests either a causal or concomitant relationship between his blackness and his lack of eloquence; either way, blackness takes on negative connotations, at least in Othello's mind. Othello discounts the age difference between them, saying "That's not much," leaving race as the only significant, perhaps insurmountable obstacle between the two lovers. Having almost concluded that Desdemona cheated on him, and did so because he was black, he admits it

[61] *Othello* III.iii.360-361.
[62] *Othello* III.iii.265-270.

will be a "relief" to "loathe" her. This relief is congruent with the relief Markowski identifies when a jealous person feels he understands, and belongs in, the world. Through speech Othello has re-constituted himself as an Other whose alterity implies inferiority and motivates disloyalty.

Othello's jealousy and sense of racial inferiority are two cooperative delusions that he employs to restore coherence to the worlds around him, and in doing so they construct a new, coherent (if less edifying) sense of self. This new reading of the world does, of course, revise the understanding he derives form his interactions with Desdemona. The oscillating movement of this hermeneutic—moving out of the self to interpret the world, then returning to interpret the self—becomes apparent in Othello's appreciation of the handkerchief. When Othello sneers to his wife, "Your napkin is too little," he rejects her affection for him of which the handkerchief is a symbol.[63] Emilia notes that the handkerchief was the first token of *his* affection and esteem, then, is a rejection of his own esteem reflected back to him; how that the certainty of Desdemona's virtue is gone, he can no longer trust the self-affirming sentiments she reflects back to him. If she is no longer worthy, then he has no reason to believe he is worthy either. This loss of ontological security precipitates his adoption of external prejudices against his own blackness; for the first time, Othello considers the possibility that he is the monster Brabantio describes. At which point, the notion of racial hierarchy becomes a notion crucial to Othello's epistemology and racism is absorbed and constructed onstage as the result of desperate delusion.

Prejudice demands that one reads the other in an aggressive, reductive fashion, and one has to wonder whether Othello's adoption of anti-black sentiment signifies a

[63] *Othello* III.iii.289.

vindication of such attitudes, or whether Shakespeare deliberately exposes the nature of prejudice for audience critique. In arguing for an anti-racist play, critics have pointed to a reversal of color-based stereotypes: white characters, specifically Iago, Brabantio, and Roderigo, are hypocritical, selfishly-driven, and violent.[64] Even Iago himself recognizes the irony, describing the union of "an erring barbarian and a super-subtle Venetian."[65] As the Moor from "Barbary," Othello has a tendency to wander, or stray, both geographically and epistemologically; generally speaking, "errors" occur as accidents, which suggests that Othello's paranoia arises out of being reasonably mistaken, rather than out of a racially-programmed tendency toward pathological jealousy.

While downplaying the notion of an ingrained pathology that would mark Othello as an exotic or Other to the English audience, Iago actually manages to exoticize the Venetian Desdemona. As an important trade city in the Mediterranean, Venice was known in the Early Modern period as the meeting point of Western and Eastern cultures, and significant numbers of Jews, Moors, and other "Oriental" minorities lived in Venice.[66] This cultural history complicates the ease with which an Early Modern English audience would have been able to simply put themselves in the place of the Venetians; in many ways they would have appeared as exotic as the Moor Othello. Indeed, when Iago refers to Desdemona as the "super-subtle Venetian," he indicts her (and his) nationality, not gender, as the cause of her supposedly deceptive behavior. This notion of "subtlety" as trickiness, or distinct lack of appreciation for truth and clarity, calls to mind Edward

[64] Washington 182.
[65] *Othello* I.iii.352.
[66] Bartels 158.

Said's *Orientalism*, in which he cites the Western construction of the Orient and its "habit of inaccuracy."[67]

Iago constructs Desdemona, then, as the Oriental figure the audience cannot trust, and portrays Othello as a hero who, though a "barbarian," attempts to understand the world through a "Western" hermeneutic. This logic posits that Othello's reading of Desdemona would be more accurate if *she* lived up to European standards and were more straightforward in her behavior.

Whether or not Iago himself truly believes in Desdemona's super-subtlety cannot be known, but for his part, Othello does appear committed to an epistemology that resembles Bacon's philosophy, and this implies that he has become naturalized to Venetian culture and adopted some of its features that, when presented onstage, are meant to be recognized by the audience in their own culture. Othello's status as a naturalized subject is significant, as the breakdown of his empiricism into an imaginative projection of jealous, self-loathing fantasies demonstrates the limits of induction and other elements of what would, much later, be called "pure reason." Further, in adhering to interpretive methods familiar to the audience, Othello shows that he is not an overly gullible or naïve foreigner who fails to understand the superior, more sophisticated Venetians. Rather, he is a reasonable person surrounded by unreasonable people. Martin Orkin recognizes the extent to which Othello's deception is understandable: "Shakespeare demonstrates that in an imperfect world human judgment can never penetrate beyond the optic of deliberately deceptive discourse."[68]

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[67] Edward Said, *Orientalism*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 8.
[68] Martin Orkin, "Othello and the 'Plain Face' of Racism," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 38:2 (1987) 177.

The Duke of Venice also represents values that he audience would recognize as their own, as he demands from Brabantio a "more overt test," or concrete proof, rejecting the "thin habits" or veils which, in a supposedly "Oriental" fashion, obscure truth.[69] In many ways the Duke represents Venice as it would like to think of itself, as the state in which officials strive to "ferret out the truth and have a clear sense of justice."[70] They strive to overcome superficialities and misdirection, and judge Othello on his evident virtues—seen in his service to the state and the effective storytelling—over Brabantio's inarticulate, hysterical accusations. This ideal diminishes, however, with the Duke's parting words: "If virtue no delighted beauty lack / Your son-in-law is more fair than black."[71] The Venetian's suggestion that Othello's virtue makes him a white man in a black man's body demonstrates how he is willing to make judgment, based on personal observation *and* still keep color-based stereotypes in operation. In other words, the Duke fails his own standard of fair judgment, a standard imputed to Venetian culture at large and a standard to which Othello himself subscribes. Othello's descent into delusion illuminates the problems that exist in an over-reliance on physical evidence, or signs, and his internalization of the prejudices circulating throughout his immediate social setting reveals how much Venetian culture has failed him.

Even the so-called "racist" Venetians can help complicate any assumptions about the racial attitudes of the play itself. Millicent Bell, for instance, helpfully points out,

> Someone like the stupid Roderigo, who has failed to get Desdemona even to glance at him, will refer to the "gross clasps of a lascivious Moor" when he attempts to arouse Brabantio against Othello. Iago works this vein when he portrays Othello as someone of mere impulse […] Perhaps

[69] *Othello* I.iii.107-109.
[70] Washington 179.
[71] *Othello* I.iii.287-288.

> the same promptness to such presumption has infected the minds of some of the play's readers ever since, despite Shakespeare's exposure of the motives of Iago and Roderigo in seizing so readily upon the ancient stereotype of the "lusty Moor."[72]

At the beginning of the play, Iago refers to "his Moorship," and "the Moor," but Roderigo is the first, with his "thick-lips" epithet, to describe racial difference in morphological and essentialist terms.[73] Iago then responds to this prejudice, saying dismissively, "These Moors / are changeable in their wills."[74] Such a statement essentializes Othello by virtue of his nationality. On the other hand, when Iago is alone in a later scene he admits, "The Moor, howbeit that I endure him not, / Is of a constant, loving, noble nature."[75] This discrepancy suggests that the negative comments Iago made about Othello's race before were said for Roderigo's benefit. Roderigo, in such an instance, would be Iago's audience *within* the scene, and the audience watching the play sees how Iago tells Roderigo what he wants to hear, irrespective of what Iago believes to be true about Othello. This kind of blatant pandering forces the audience to recognize its own racial prejudices for what they are: judgments made without regard for evidence or truth.

For indeed, Iago's change in sentiments, which depends upon who else shares the stage in a given scene, reveal his anti-black sentiments to be nothing more than what they first appear to be: personal insults of Othello's character, aimed at stoking the hatred of other characters. His deliberate use of this prejudice counters any notion that Iago hates blackness on a subconscious level, and that he hates blackness for its function as a

[72] Millicent Bell, "Shakespeare's Moor," *Raritan* 21:4 (Spring 2002), 9.
[73] *Othello* I.i.63.
[74] *Othello* I.iii.343-344.
[75] *Othello* II.i.282-283.

psychoanalytic metaphor for his own unworthiness.[76] Iago, who is not delusional, does not associate blackness with vice or inferiority when considering the matter for himself, and Othello only accepts the idea of inferiority once he is delusional. The play, then, does not support the idea of Othello's blackness as a symbol for "bad," nor does it reduce Othello to a projection or construction of Iago's own (white) subjectivity.

Conclusion

Much of *Othello* scholarship focuses on how the hero reads proof, and other critics focus on the presentation of racial difference within the text and onstage. The problems of proof and race are connected in that they both involve the adoption of an aggressive hermeneutic, which constructs the signs that the subject accepts as self-evident. In this way empiricism turns in on itself, and causes Othello to become deluded about his marriage and his identity. He imagines Desdemona's infidelity and accepts it as truth, and with Iago's prompting, creates the stigma of blackness in his own mind and accepts that as truth as well. In the process, the audience is forced to watch how racism gets constructed out of duplicity and delusion, begging the question of the validity of their own prejudices which we have heretofore blithely accepted as fact. When signs make themselves plain to us, we must ask ourselves whether that is really the case, or if we are projecting our own ideas onto these signs. What are we seeing and how do we see it? When Brabantio snidely asks Othello to "Look to her, Othello, if thou hast eyes to see," we might want to ask ourselves the same question.

[76] Janet Adelman, "Iago's Alter Ego: Race as Projection in *Othello*." *Shakespeare Quarterly* 48 (1997), 142.

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