Othello and the Body in Transformation

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I

1. Shakespeare's Othello, a number of critics have pointed out, fosters a disparaging view of non-European peoples and cultures. Critics who argue this position are on firm ground, for in the play the West is undoubtedly defined as the source of rationality, and the East as the source of irrationality, something that can quickly be made apparent by considering Othello's comments on Cassio's brawl with Roderigo and the tumult following it in light of Iago's somewhat hackneyed remark that 'we have reason to cool our raging motions' (I.iii.330–31). Roused from his nuptial bed, Othello breaks in upon the scene with the exasperated question, 'Are we turned Turks?' (I.iii.169). He goes on to describe his lieutenant's behavior as 'monstrous' (I.iii.216), a term Iago had earlier suggested should be used to describe Othello. If to allow our 'raging motions' to supplant our reason is to turn Turk, the word 'Turk' is a synonym for unreason, or that which is monstrous by definition; the word 'European,' by implication, is a synonym for reason.

2. Because of his origin outside the West, many critics have concluded that Othello is an Other by definition and that the play should be regarded as a racist text. Determining if this is the case is more complicated than such critics would have us believe. Representations of non-Europeans that are essentially negative are, as Edward Said argues, 'self evident; the tense they employ is the timeless eternal' (Said 1979, 72), whereas in Othello, Turks, or non-Europeans, are not unvaryingly represented as irrational heretics, nor are Europeans unvaryingly represented as rational Christians. Categorizing someone as a Turk, or a Moor, it is true, is tantamount to categorizing that person as an Other, but individuals are able to traverse the boundary that separates Turks from Europeans. The first act, in fact, is intent on presenting Othello's sameness, and few Venetians, including Iago, regard Othello as anything other than noble.

3. Perhaps the most obvious case of a character, besides Othello, who transgresses the boundary separating Turks from Europeans is Iago, who lays the ground for proving himself a Turk in Act I, scene i. 'Were I the Moor, I would not be Iago' (I.i.56), he announces in the speech that concludes, 'I am not what I am' (I.i.65). While it would be fallacious to argue that he is the Moor because he is not what he is (since he could be a number of other people or things), Iago later limits the field of possibilities and identifies himself as a Moorlike character. Referring to his plot against Othello, he remarks 'I have't, it is engendered! Hell and night [the devil's surrogates in the context] / Must bring this monstrous birth to the world's light' (I.iii.402–3). Iago identifies himself as a Moor here, since in his view, as he establishes in the play's opening lines, the progeny of Moors are – just as his plot is – the monstrous progeny of the devil.

4. Iago returns to the question of his symbolic identification with non-Europeans in Act II. After slandering his wife, Emilia, and women in general, he announces, 'Nay, it is true, or else I am a Turk' (II.i.14), assuring his listeners that his arguments are grounded in reason. Both Emilia and Desdemona belie Iago's misogynist commentary. Emilia may be more practical than Desdemona. She would commit adultery for the whole world but otherwise she is as faithful to Iago as Desdemona is to Othello, something evinced by her silent handling of the handkerchief – at least prior to Desdemona's murder, when she renounces her
practicality in order to help produce justice. Women are not necessarily what Iago says they are, and his arguments — grounded as they are in what Francis Bacon calls the Idols of the Tribe — prove he lacks reason. Iago, then, is 'a Turk' by his own standards.

5. The ability of Othello and Iago to exchange the symbolic positions that the audience expects them to hold implies that cultural otherness is not the same thing as racial otherness, and the implication is confirmed by Renaissance medical thought, oddly because of the connection that was made between culture and what we would call biology. Medical discourse in Shakespeare's age connected biological difference to cultural difference, assuming that bodies living in different cultures were physically different. Marsilio Ficino thus notes in the Book of Life (1489), a health guide chiefly addressed to students, that 'differences in . . . customs, of course, are seen in the fact that what is poison to a Persian is good for the heart in Egypt' (Ficino 1996, 49). The difference referred to by Ficino, as we will see, was thought to be neither innate nor permanent: the connection between biology and culture was predicated upon the assumption that the human organism was affected on a biological level by the cultural milieu that it inhabited. In the following pages, I want to argue — with reference to this medical discourse, which has been ignored by critics who have set out to explain the Renaissance understanding of cultural difference — that the problem of Shakespeare's play, Othello's becoming an unsuitable husband for Desdemona, is a consequence of a physical and cultural transformation in his body, as well as his mind. Othello, according to this argument, embarks upon a real and symbolic journey from otherness to sameness and back to otherness.

6. We may never actually observe Othello's initial otherness, yet the play's first scenes seem to re-enact his transformation from a Turk into a Venetian, simultaneously calling attention to his primary difference and demonstrating that this difference has been rendered inconsequential, skin deep so to say. Roderigo and Iago introduce Othello in terms that would have led those in Shakespeare's audience to expect his character to confirm their assumptions about Moors, at least as they were presented on the English stage. Roderigo's role here, as throughout the play, seems minor: his keeping of decorum makes him less effective than Iago in turning Brabantio against Othello. Yet Roderigo plays a significant role in the scene: his decorum adds an air of reason to his voice, making his representation of Othello appear all the more reliable. His citation of the Renaissance stereotype of the 'lascivious Moor' (I.i.124) thereby insures that Iago's image of 'the beast with two backs' (I.i.115) signifies miscegenation rather than just functions as another sign of Iago's 'dark, sexual revulsion' (Greenblatt 1980, 251). Meanwhile, Iago draws upon the full power of his rhetorical, if indecorous, skills. Calling Othello a 'black ram' (I.i.85), aligning him with 'the devil' (I.i.90), and branding him a 'Barbary horse' (I.i.110), Iago employs the same technique that he will use to convince Othello that Desdemona is a whore. That is, he draws upon truisms to slander the people he is attacking in order to turn his listeners against them (See I.iii.129–46 for an account of Brabantio's previous love of Othello).

7. The approach Iago takes to turn Brabantio against Othello may mirror the approach he takes to turn Othello against Desdemona, yet the effect of his demonization of Othello is very different from the effect of his demonization of Desdemona, at least from the perspective of Shakespeare's audience. Those in the audience have already had a chance to learn about Desdemona by the time Iago begins to slander her and are in a position to reject Iago's characterization of her. They know that Othello is being abused. But as the play opens, they know nothing about Othello, and Iago is saying what they are expecting to hear. When Othello does appear, they have therefore been anticipating the arrival of the monstrous creature Iago has described, but they are disappointed. Othello has absolutely nothing in common with Iago's 'black ram'. He is reasonable rather than monstrous, more reasonable than Brabantio and his followers,
who resemble the drunken Cassio of Act II scene iii more than the self-possessed Moor. Othello's presence alters the perception of those whom he has been placed before, who must re-evaluate their idea of his character, if not Moors in general, and accept the category 'fair Moor'.

8. To produce an audience capable of getting beyond its idea of a Moor and seeing Othello, Shakespeare combines the manoeuvre that Bolingbroke employs (as it is described in Henry IV Part I) to make his presence seem more substantial with the manoeuvre Hal employs to legitimize his kingship. 'Had I so lavish of my presence been,' Henry IV remarks, 'Opinion . . .'

Had still kept loyal to possession,
And left me in reputeless banishment,
A fellow of no mark nor likelihood.
By being seldom seen, I could not stir
But like a comet I was wonder'd at. (III.ii.39 & 42–7)

Had Shakespeare been lavish with Othello's presence in the first scene, he would have risked allowing those in the audience to identify Othello on their own terms, since their assumptions about Moors would have hindered their ability to see who he has become. He would have then been obliged to take a defensive posture before them and refute the ideas that they had drawn upon to define who he is. 'We think,' to misquote a famous Shakespearean line, 'the Moor doth protest too much' may well have been their response. As things stand, they first encounter Othello in conference with Iago, who avows that he had nothing to do with what happened underneath Brabantio's balcony. Iago is the one who feels obliged to contest the view of his character that the audience has likely developed. He assumes the stance we might have expected Othello to assume, and Othello is allowed to present himself in positive terms. By holding the Moor back and permitting the audience to identify with Iago – the one who articulates the opinions it is likely to hold – Shakespeare manages to situate its members in the same defensive position in which Iago has been placed, while Othello coolly stands above the situation, unabashed by the fray building up around him.

9. Othello is thereby able to break 'through the foul and ugly mists /Of vapours that did seem to strangle him . . . [and] show more goodly, and attract more eyes /Than that which hath no foil to set it off' (I Henry IV, I.ii.197–8 and 209–10). Just as the nobles' disapproval of Hal in Henry IV Parts I and II adds lustre to Henry V's presence when he ascends the throne and proves everyone wrong, the audience's preconceived notions about Othello add lustre to his appearance – simply because the contrast between those notions and his character is so striking – and Shakespeare's audience is persuaded into taking him into its good graces. In the course of a few scenes, Othello is transformed, conceptually speaking, from a lascivious black ram into a self-possessed man, and the audience becomes a group that can accept a Moor as a heroic figure. Those who continue to regard Iago's view of Othello as accurate renounce reason in favor of opinion and, in the play's terms, 'turn Turk' themselves.

10. The success Othello has with Desdemona demonstrates, perhaps more clearly than any other element in the play, the completeness of his transformation, or what could be called his acculturation. But the courtship does more than simply prove his sameness. The transformation observed and experienced by Shakespeare's audience stages the transformation of Othello into a Venetian, something that is suggested by the similarity between the audience's encounter with him and that of Desdemona. The audience's
waiting for a Moor at which it can cry 'O Monstrous! Monstrous!' (III.iii.429) – to quote Othello's cry upon hearing Iago's account of Cassio's dream – emulates Desdemona's initial experience of Othello as someone, in Brabantio's words, whom 'she feared to look on' (I.iii.99), while the effect that his presence should produce in the audience emulates Desdemona's coming to admire and love him.

11. More significantly, the means by which Othello achieves success with Desdemona discloses the process by which acculturation, as it was understood in the Renaissance, is produced. Courtship and acculturation are analogous processes: in the former case, the spouse is incorporated into the familial corporate body, and in the latter, an individual is incorporated into the political body, or the cultural corporate body. The explanation of the courtship process offered in _Othello_, however, is filtered through and obscured by Brabantio, who is blind to Othello's worth. To clarify what is revealed by Brabantio's explanation, we will need to read what is said about Othello and his courtship of Desdemona in the light of what Egeus says about Lysander and his courtship of Hermia in _A Midsummer Night's Dream_.

12. Both Brabantio and Egeus accuse the men with whom their daughters are in love of using witchcraft, but their complaints are not exactly the same. Brabantio expects his auditors to charge Othello with a crime, while Egeus does not. The magic Brabantio accuses Othello of using is, then, different from the magic Egeus accuses Lysander of using. The most obvious difference is that Othello, unlike Lysander, is said to have used 'spells and medicines bought of mountebanks' (I.iii.62). His alleged use of illicit magic is evinced by the change that Desdemona has undergone. She has been, according to Brabantio, completely 'translated,' in the Renaissance sense of metamorphosed, and her manner of marrying is proof of this translation. She was 'A maiden never bold, / Of spirit so still and quiet that her motion / Blushed at herself' (I.iii.95–7). That Othello is a Moor is further evidence of Desdemona's alteration. Nature could not 'so preposterously . . . err / [his daughter] Being not deficient, blind, or lame of sense' (I.iii.62–63) and allow an attraction to arise between them, unless he had used 'some mixtures powerful o'er the blood / Or with some dram conjured to this effect' (I.iii.105–6).

13. Brabantio assumes that Europeans cannot naturally be attracted to non-Europeans. His assumption is, of course, belied when Desdemona arrives and proves that she 'was half the wooer' (I.iii.176). But if he is wrong about the compatibility of the Moor and his daughter, his remarks disclose, if only obscurely, something much more basic about the natural laws that govern the attraction, in both an emotional and physical sense, of lovers in the Shakespearean cosmos, laws to which Iago twice makes reference. Trying to convince Roderigo that Desdemona is in love with Cassio, Iago notes that Othello lacks 'loveliness in favour, sympathy in years, manners and beauties' and 'for want of these required conveniences, her delicate tenderness will find itself abused' (II.i.227–31). Later, attempting to get Othello to question the purity of Desdemona's character, he explains why Brabantio thought 'twas witchcraft' (III.iii.214) that led his daughter to marry him, pointing out that she rejected 'proposed matches' with those

Of her own clime, complexion and degree,
Whereeto we see, in all things, nature tends –
Foh! One may smell in such a will most rank
Foul disproportion, thoughts unnatural. (III.iii.233–37)

What Iago tells Roderigo may contradict what he tells Othello: he represents Desdemona as pure, when he is speaking with Roderigo, whereas he represents her as corrupt, when he is speaking with Othello. Yet in both speeches, he draws upon the same system of beliefs to make his point, the one which
Brabantio had drawn upon when he had offered witchcraft as an explanation for his daughter's revolt. Indeed, when Iago tells Roderigo that Desdemona will soon find herself abused, he may be directly alluding to Brabantio's accusation. According to ancient folk belief, as the late-seventeenth-century minister Robert Kirk reports, those who procure love through the use of 'philters . . . [or] by spels or words (as well as by other meretricious arts) . . . [will find] how soon they lasciviously converse . . . all that love dies into ane envenomed Spite' (Kirk 1976, 101). Whatever Iago may believe – and he likely believes neither what he tells Cassio nor what he tells Othello, since he acknowledges that Othello will 'prove to Desdemona / A most dear husband' (II.i.288–89) – he expects his listeners to suppose that Othello is an Other and that only like can be attracted to like. Those accepting these suppositions are required to admit that Desdemona is either a pure soul who will come to detest Othello or a corrupt woman who will, like all corrupt women, fall into the arms of another man.

14. Both Iago and Brabantio are drawing upon what could be called the doctrine of the three loves. According to this doctrine, there is a 'natural, [a] sensible, and [a] rational love' (Burton 2001, vol. III, 15). Natural love is a principle that determines that a body 'tends,' to use Iago's word, to be attracted to bodies with which it shares a natural sympathy; sensible love, also a product of sympathy, is that love which people have in common with 'brute beasts' and is produced for 'the pleasure they take in the act of generation . . . for the preservation of the species . . . for mutual agreement . . . for custom, use, and familiarity'; rational love 'is proper to men . . . and appears in God, angels and men' (Burton 2001, vol. III, 16). This doctrine relies on the existence of a cosmos that is governed by what Michel Foucault, quite some time ago, called 'the four similitudes.' They are analogy, convenience, emulation, and sympathy, the last three of which govern the processes that cause love to arise between individuals and bodies to be transformed. 'Convenience' dictates that bodies that are in proximity will influence and come to resemble each other; 'emulation' stimulates resemblance between objects that are separated by distance; 'sympathy' is the principle that allows objects to influence each other and produces the other similitudes. But as Foucault's term indicates, a sympathetic relation must already exist between two objects before its wonders work.

15. The apparent impossibility of there being a pre-existing sympathy between Desdemona and Othello – because of differences in age, manners, and complexion – is what leads Brabantio to think that his daughter has been corrupted by witchcraft. That is why demonstrating that Desdemona was 'half the wooer' clears Othello of the charge of conjuring. Her participation proves that his love was the product of a pre-existing sympathy. That such is the case does not entirely refute what Brabantio observes, however. Desdemona is not the girl he knew. From being someone who blushed at herself, she has become one who not only stands up for herself and her husband in front of the Senate but who is also bold enough to declare her intention of joining in 'The rites' (I.iii.258) for which she loves her husband. These rites are not merely sexual rites, but the right of 'sharing [Othello's] life,' as the Arden editor indicates when he notes 'right and rite' were interchangeable spellings' (Arden Edition, 151n). Desdemona is objecting to the notion that she should be left at home, a 'moth of peace' (I.iii.257); going to Cyprus is a means of partaking of her husband's function and becoming, at least vicariously, a warrior, the 'fair warrior' (II.i.179) Othello greets on the docks in Cyprus. Having fallen 'in love with [the] text' (Girard 1979, 193) that is Othello, as René Girard puts it, she now becomes a participant in this text and is translated herself. Courtship is the procedure by which this translation is effected, and it involves not only the translation of the text that is Desdemona but also of the text that is Othello.

16. Egeus makes the same point about Lysander and Hermia. Lysander, he complains, 'hast given [Hermia]
rhymes / . . . interchang'd love-tokens . . . / And stol'n the impression of her fantasy' (I.i.28–9, 32). Keeping in mind that Theseus tells Hermia that she is 'but as a form in wax / By [her father] imprinted' (I.i.49–50), Egeus' complaint can be interpreted to mean that Lysander has replaced the imprint upon her fantasy that she had received from her father and supplied her with a new one. An affinity between the two lovers has thereby been formed. Note that Egeus – although he does mention that his daughter has been 'bewitched' (I.i.27) – does not, as Brabantio does, consider what has happened to his daughter unnatural. Lysander, Egeus understands, has merely taken advantage of a pre-existing sympathy and strengthened it by means of the principle of convenience. This is an important point, for Egeus' acknowledgement of the naturalness of his daughter's love implies that Hermia's fantasy has not been completely altered. Hermia, as Desdemona proves to be, was 'half the wooer'. Love-tokens, we will recall, were interchanged.

17. Hermia and Lysander's courtship, in other words, is a process relying on a principle of exchange. Exchanging objects that they have been in contact with – or that they have been influenced by – the two lovers influence, in the magical sense of this term, each other, and a relationship based on similitude comes into being. For Egeus, the love-tokens are not simply tokens of affection, just as in Othello the handkerchief is not 'simply . . . a love-token given by Othello to Desdemona and . . . treasured by her' (Newman 1991, 91). The love-tokens are items with magical import. Lysander also, and no doubt more importantly, is in contact with Hermia and influences her with his rhymes in a much more direct manner. By means of the power of convenience, to use Foucault's term, a relationship grounded in emulation develops, as is suggested when the two lovers are left alone and participate in an exchange that sounds very much like a monologue (see I.i.132–49). Both their fantasies have been transformed; they are now ensnared in the bonds of love.

18. 'Fantasy,' as Egeus uses the word, does not mean imaginative thought. In the context of Renaissance magical belief, the term refers to a half-physical, half-spiritual apparatus in the human body. It is, as Ioan Couliano explains,

an apparatus which . . . is engaged in codifying [messages received by the five sensory organs] so that they may become comprehensible. Called phantasia or inner sense, the sidereal spirit transforms messages from the five senses in phantasms perceptible to the soul. (Couliano 1987, 5)

The fantasy is 'the sidereal spirit,' what Couliano also calls 'the phantasmic pneuma,' or 'blood,' which travels through 'the arteries of the human being' (Couliano 1987, 6). This blood – which is the term Brabantio uses to discuss what Egeus calls the fantasy – contains 'phantasms', or the imprints received from the senses, and it serves two functions, transmitting information between the body and the soul, as Couliano explains, and accommodating an individual's body to other bodies in the world, as Cornelius Agrippa implies in a chapter of The Three Books of Occult Philosophy (1531) concerned with how 'the mind change[s] the body.' 'A vehement cogitation,' Agrippa writes:

whilst it vehemently moves the species, pictures out the figure of the thing thought on, which they represent in their blood, [or phantasy, as it is later called] and the blood impresseth from itself, on the members [of the body] that are nourished by it, as upon those [members] of the same body, so upon those of another's. (Agrippa 1997, 201 Emphasis added)

Agrippa is discussing the threefold process by which thought affects the body: a thought emerges, is pictured in the blood, and is then imprinted upon the body. The last phrase of the quoted passage relates the process to social interaction, revealing that when one transmits an idea, the idea comes to be imprinted
on the body of the person to whom it is transmitted. 'Words,' Agrippa goes on to note, 'are the fittest medium betwixt the speaker and the hearer, carrying with them not only the conception of the mind, but also the virtue of the speaker' (Agrippa 1997, 211). The speaker and the hearer, in other words, come to share the same virtues, or qualities. In this way, individuals, body and soul, are accommodated to the people with whom they speak – hence the emphasis that Egeus places on Lysander’s giving Hermia rhymes and that Othello places on the act of storytelling.

19. Social interaction, in short, alters the 'blood,' and the body is radically altered. Robert Burton can thus claim, 'custom doth alter nature itself' (Burton 2001, vol. I, 230). Just as thoughts can change bodies, customs affect the nature of the bodies that follow them. Bodies also, according to Ficino, influence each other simply by their proximity to one another. The elderly, he points out, can slow the decay of their bodies by living 'among people who are healthy and friendly and of a similar nature to [theirs], especially if these people are a little younger' (Ficino 1996, 59). Socrates, he goes on to note, lived so long because he kept the company of young people with whom he was in sympathy. If one's company is younger and has a sympathetic nature, its health and youth will influence one's body, improving health and slowing decay.

20. Hermia and Desdemona have become, through the power of convenience, less their fathers' daughters and more what I would like to call, for lack of a better term, the soul mates of their respective lovers. Both, nonetheless, remain daughters in some sense, for they continue to defer, if only in minor ways, to their fathers. Hermia does so when she tells Lysander to 'teach [their] trial patience' (I.i.152) and submit to Egeus, until he can be convinced to give up his objections, whereas Desdemona does so when she tells Brabantio, 'I am hitherto your daughter' (I.iii.185), acknowledging, if only faintheartedly, his authority. Tellingly, Brabantio's response to his daughter's few words is to give up his complaint: it has been proved unfounded. Both women demonstrate that the sympathetic relationship that they had with their fathers continues, even though they each call attention to the fact that their fathers' influence is no longer dominant. Marriage, as Shakespeare conceives it, is not an institution in which a woman replaces her father's authority with that of her husband; it is rather a conjoining of two families in one. This element of the Renaissance view of marriage is even made evident in the founding myth of the Tudor dynasty, as it is presented in Edward Hall's *The Union of the Two Noble Families of Lancaster and York* (1548), the rhetoric of which, as Patricia Parker notes, 'is the rhetoric of movement from division to unity . . . effected by the joining in matrimony of Richmond and Elizabeth' (Parker 1996, 110).

21. Beliefs about the influence of bodies and customs on one's nature led some to ponder the effects of travel on one's body. In *A Comparative Discourse of the Bodies Natural and Political* (1606), for example, Edward Forset, a lawyer and a minor hermetic philosopher, writes:

It is well noted of some Philosophers, That if a Scythian were in an instant transported into Indian, he could not possibly live: so if without an orderly passing by a meane, the state from one extremity should be altered to another, it would certainly infer a dissolution and dissipation of that it was before. (Forset 1606, 64)

While Forset's intent here is to show that a change that comes too quickly causes bodies, political as well as natural, to dissipate, he is also making a point about the nature of cultural differences and the effects of travel on the body. Assuming what Ficino assumes when he claims that something is poison for the members of one culture and medicinal for the members of another one, Forset takes for granted that
bodies from different cultures are antipathetic. At the same time, he implies that those who come in contact with antipathetic cultures, or who establish a convenient relationship with a new environment, become sympathetic to those living in it, at least when the contact is established gradually. If it could be instantaneous, the effects of the antipathetic environment on the traveller would be fatal. That individuals do not die when they come into contact with foreign cultures, the implication seems to be, is because of an alteration in their bodies that takes place as they pass through cultures that are more convenient to the culture toward which they travel.

22. Othello's status as a Venetian, according to the tenets of this doctrine of cultural transformation, is a consequence of his living in Venice. But Othello does not remain a Venetian for the entire play. He turns Turk in Cyprus. Considering Forset's discussion of the effects of travel, it would be easy to attribute this change to his move from Venice to Cyprus – a physical and psychological passage 'from organized society . . . [to an] encounter [with] the forces of barbarism' (Kerman 1963, xxv and xxvii), as Alvin Kerman describes it – but something more complicated is happening in the play. Among those who travel to Cyprus, Othello, with the exception of Cassio for a brief and critical moment in Act II, is the only one to 'turn Turk.' He turns, just as Cassio does, because of the influence Iago has over him. As Stephen Greenblatt has shown, Othello becomes 'enmeshed' (Greenblatt 1980, 233) in Iago's narrative, just as Desdemona has become enmeshed in his. For Greenblatt, the dynamic of Iago's and Othello's relationship is evidence of Shakespeare's realization that social texts are fictionalized constructs. Shakespeare's audience, I would argue, would have regarded it as evidence that bodies become inscribed, through the magical power of words, within a narrative and are consequently transformed.

23. While commenting upon the change that Othello suffers, Iago himself calls attention to the transformative nature of his narrative powers, using almost the exact terms that Agrippa uses to discuss the transformative power of words:

   The Moor already changes with my poison;
   Dangerous conceits are in their natures poisons
   Which at the first are scarce found to distaste
   But with a little art upon the blood
   Burn like the mines of sulphur. (III.iii.328–32)

Iago may use the term 'conceits' instead of 'words', the term Agrippa uses, but according to both Iago and Agrippa, speech works upon a hearer's blood, and, as the play confirms, transmits the qualities of the speaker to those who listen to him or her. That Iago's qualities are transmitted to Othello has recently been observed by Frank Kermode. 'Before the temptation scene,' he writes, 'it is impossible to imagine Othello using the vocabulary of Iago' (Kermode 2000, 181), but during and after it, he begins not only to echo Iago (see Kermode 2000, 171 and 174) but also becomes 'infected[ed] with [Iago's] . . . disgust' with sex (Kermode 2000, 176). Desdemona notices the change too, and describes her husband using almost the exact terms that Iago uses to describe himself. 'My Lord is not my lord' (III.iv.125), she realizes almost immediately after Iago's tempting of Othello, and we might be prompted to remark, 'Were Othello Iago, he would not be himself.'

24. Othello's transformation back into an Other is thus more a consequence of his contact with Iago than a result of his removal from the Venetian social world, although this removal surely facilitates Iago's ability to influence him so powerfully, since Othello was undoubtedly often in contact with his lieutenant in Venice.
That the Europeanized Moor ceases to be 'far more fair than black' (I.iii.291) and 'turns Turk' under the influence of the European Iago would have been experienced as exceptionally paradoxical by an early-seventeenth-century audience who had expected Othello to be monstrous when he arrived on stage, especially since the East, despite Othello's metaphoric fairness and Iago's metaphoric Turkishness, continues to represent the source of Otherness in the play. What is perhaps even more paradoxical is that Iago is able to manipulate those around him because of their assumptions about the East and all things Eastern. His control of the discourse produced by these assumptions is, in part, the source of his power, and the irrationality he is able to generate has its origin in that discourse. The very thing that initially encourages those in the audience to identify with Iago and categorize him as one of them proves, as the East is meant to do, to negate reason.

25. The European quality of the self that Othello becomes remains evident even as the play concludes, for this self is not what Shakespeare's audience would have imagined his pre-Venetian self to be. His irrationality may oblige us, following the nomenclature of the play, to classify him as a Turk, but he does not become the embodiment of the stereotype that Iago and Roderigo had introduced in the first scene. His irrationality derives from his very unMoorlike disgust with sex. His monstrousness, after all, is a symptom of his puritanical obsession with Desdemona's chastity. At the beginning of the play, Othello assures the Venetian senators that Desdemona's presence in Cyprus will not cause him to scant their 'serious and great business' (I.iii.268) and debunks the notion that he is a 'lascivious Moor'. At the end of the play, he continues to debunk this notion, for his inability to imagine copulation without also imagining monstrosity is what causes him to act like the monstrous Moor lodged in the imagination of the audience.

26. Othello himself marks the ambiguous status of his identity with his final act. 'In smiting himself, he recognizes that he has now become the Turk' (Bate 2001, 15). Yet he continues to project his 'public image . . . as the defender of Christianity' (Bate 2001, 15). As he kills himself, he also assumes the position of one who takes 'by th' throat the circumcised dog / And [smites] him' (V.ii.353-54). Othello is simultaneously a Christian and a Turk. Similarly, Iago, as Othello recognizes, is simultaneously a devil – a word Iago earlier had used as a synonym for Turk – and a real European. The symbolic significance of the categories 'Turk' and 'European' has been retained, since no alternative category into which either Iago or Othello could fit has been created, and been rendered uncertain, since the West has proved to be a possible origin of the irrational Turk. 'There are,' Dympna Callaghan observes, 'no authentic "others" . . . of any kind, only their representations' (Callaghan 1996, 193), on the Elizabethan stage, because all parts are played by white men. Shakespeare would no doubt find this observation too simple. By refusing to allow us to determine if it is the white Iago or the black Othello who represents the authentic other, he suggests that the notion of the authentic other, as Callaghan defines it, is itself dubious.

Notes

1. The reason/unreason opposition manifests itself in a number of ways. Vitkus discusses it in terms of the play's 'various tropes of conversion – transformations from Christian to Turk, from virgin to whore, from good to evil, and from gracious virtue to black damnation' (Vitkus 1997, 145) – all of which can be discussed in terms of reason and unreason, because reason, it is constantly observed throughout the period, is what is divine about humans.
1. 'Othello is,' Karen Newman proclaims, 'a monster in the Renaissance sense of the word' (Newman 1991, 88). See also Michel D. Bristol's 'Charivari and the Comedy of Abjection in Othello' and James R. Andreas's 'Othello's African American Progeny.' There are, of course, dissenting voices. Emily Bartels, for instance, argues that 'It is Iago and not the play itself that attempts to categorize Othello as a monstrous creature' (Bartels 1990, 448). See also Martin Orkin's 'Othello and the "Plain Face" of Racism.' Perhaps the strongest indication of the power of those readings that find racism in the play is the fact that Bartels, after reviewing her arguments from the Shakespeare Quarterly piece in a later essay, announces that '[r]eadings that find seeds of racial prejudice in Othello's Venetian society are not necessarily wrong,' although she adds the caveat, 'the subject is deeply complicated both by the competing and slippery meaning of "race" . . . and by the play's own series of mixed messages' (Bartels 1997, 46). Determining the nature of the play's racial discourse is, in fact, fraught with difficulties. As Jonathan Bate notes, 'The primary meaning of the term "Moor" in early modern English was as a religious, not a racial, identification: Moor meant "Mohamedan," that is Muslim' (Bate 2001, 14). He thereby suggests that religious difference is the true source of Otherness in the play. Nonetheless, Bate goes on to observe that '[t]he second Elizabethan sense of the word "Moor" was specifically racial and geographical; it referred to a native of Mauretania, a region of North Africa corresponding to parts of present-day Morocco and Algeria' (Bate 2001, 15).

3. The jump that I make from Turks to non-Europeans in general is perfectly consonant with Renaissance thought. Even Nabil Matar, who warns against 'the imprecision with which North African Muslims and sub-Saharan Africans have been conflated and identified' (Matar 1999, 6), has argued that the English employed the 'repository of "images and analogies" from its classical knowledge of the Mediterranean' (Matar 1999, 102), especially the Muslim Mediterranean, to discuss all non-European people, Native Americans for example. Shakespeare reverses the move described by Matar. Othello employs the idea of the Native American to describe his descent into irrationality, calling himself 'one whose hand, /Like the base Indian, threw a pearl away' (V.ii.344–5). Dympna Callaghan also observes that 'in Renaissance court and public theatre, blackface concealed under the sign of negritude a host of ethnicities from Eskimo to Guinean' (Callaghan 1996, 196).

4. While Turks and Moors could be distinguished in the mind of the English, both the word 'Turk' and the word 'Moor' could be used to designate Muslims in general. The two words could thus be synonyms. For an extensive consideration of the use of the words 'Turk' and 'Moor,' see Daniel J. Vitkus (1997). See also Matar's introduction to Turks, Moors, and Englishmen in the Age of Discovery, Jonathan Burton's ' "A Most Wily Bird": Leo Africanus, Othello and the Trafficking in Difference,' (62n), and Bartels' 'Making More of the Moor'.

5. According to Iago, Othello is 'of a constant, loving noble nature' (II.i.289). This is powerful evidence of Othello's sameness, for if 'Iago is,' as Newman argues, 'a cultural hyperbole who does not oppose cultural norms so much as hyperbolize them' (Newman 1991, 85), Iago's description of Othello as one of 'noble
nature' is surely indicative of how Shakespeare expects the audience to regard him. That Othello must be seen as an analogue of a European to be acceptable is piece of Renaissance nastiness that shouldn't be ignored, but this nastiness, I would argue, is a product of what Edward Said calls Orientalism, not racism.

6. Iago's precursor in Shakespeare's oeuvre, as Bartels argues in 'Making More of the Moor', is Aaron, the Moor whose motiveless villainy is the force that shapes the plot of Titus Andronicus (Bartels 1990, 442 and 445).

7. Matar notes that the othering of the Muslim in Renaissance England 'was chiefly undertaken within literary and theological contexts' (Matar 1999, 13).

8. The myth of the lascivious Muslim was a commonplace in early seventeenth-century England. In Philip Massinger's The Renegado (1630), the phrase 'turn Turk' is even used to suggest 'conversion to habitual indulgence in sexual sin' (see v.iii.152 and the accompanying note in Vitkus 2000, 331), as well as conversion to Islam.

9. This characterisation of Desdemona's initial fear is confirmed, when Iago, almost certainly recalling Brabantio's comment, reminds Othello that 'she seemed to shake, and fear [his] looks' (III.iii.210), and Othello admits, 'she did' (III.iii.211).

10. For an account of the relationship between the body politic and culture and the analogy between the political body and the familial corporate body, see Albert Roll's The King's Two Bodies in the Age of Shakespeare (Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2000), especially chapter 2 and chapter 4.

11. In 'Making More of the Moor' Bartels argues that Brabantio's allusions to Othello's conjuring are confused and contradictory (Bartels 1990). Brabantio's account, however, is quite consistent with Renaissance belief; if he is, as I maintain, attempting to explain what Othello must have done to generate an attraction between himself and Desdemona. If Othello had used magic, his charms and medicines would have altered Desdemona's constitution and made her sympathetic to the Moor. I will discuss the power of charms, or words, below. That medicines were believed to change the nature of the body has been established in a recent essay by Daniel Carey. 'A debate,' he has shown, 'took place in English Medical circles over the consumption of exotic medicines . . . Critics [of imported drugs] insisted that they were
not [suitable to the English constitution], that the risk of contamination should be avoided at all costs; overindulged in, alien remedies posed the threat of debilitating or altering the native constitution' (Carey 1997, 40).

12. Sympathy is not allowed to go unchecked. If it were, the world would be reduced 'to the featureless form of the same' (Foucault 1973, 24) and the differences between things would disappear. For this reason, sympathy is checked by antipathy -- what Burton calls 'natural hate' (Burton 2001, vol. III, 16) -- the force maintaining 'the isolation of things and prevent[ing] their assimilation' (Foucault 1973, 24).

13. Some critics regard the ascription of magical power to the handkerchief as evidence of Othello's Otherness. Jonathan Burton has argued, for instance, that 'Brabantio's imagination of a conjuring Othello' is a marker of race and religious difference (Burton 1998, 56); Ana María Manzanas argues that Brabantio's 'claim that Othello had used magic immediately places the African character in the kingdom of otherness where he belongs as a barbarian and outsider' (Manzanas 1996), and Anthony Gilbert, although he discounts readings of Othello that stress the problem of race, manages to contribute to their force when he refers to what Othello says about the handkerchief as '[t]he primitive, alien elements in Othello's speech and thinking' (Gilbert 2001). The significance attributed to a belief in magic is quite odd, not simply because Egeus also seems to ascribe magical powers to love-tokens, but because magical thought was a powerful element of European Renaissance belief systems, as the following anecdote reveals. 'In 1562, "a certain image of wax, with a great pin stuck into it about the brest of it" was found in Lincoln's Inn fields. The discovery coincided with Elizabeth's attack of smallpox. In fear of Evil designs on the Queen's life, the Privy Council dispatched messengers . . . to [John] Dee for . . . countermagic' (Dobin 1990, 3). Another example of magical thinking, one that is perhaps more relevant to the context of Othello, can be found in Massinger's The Renegado. An object with a function very similar to the one Othello ascribes to the handkerchief appears in this play. Paulina, who is being held prisoner by Asambeg, the viceroy of Tunis, has 'a relic . . . which has power . . . To keep the owner free from violence' (I.ii.147 & 149), that is, from being raped, and both the Turk Asembeeg (see II.vi.162-63) and the European Francisco acknowledge the power of this relic.

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