EMBRACING THE OTHER: SHAKESPEARE AND RACIAL TOLERANCE

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By
Elizabeth Lasley Cameron

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Approved By:

Reader #1

Reader #2

Faculty Advisor
Abstract

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Cameron, Elizabeth Lasley

University of Dayton

Advisor: Dr. Alan Kimbrough

Shakespeare's plays, such as *Othello*, offer compelling reasons for embracing the Other. This becomes apparent when *Othello* is juxtaposed with other plays such as *The Merchant of Venice*, in which the marginalized Jew, Shylock, becomes the Other. Shakespeare blurred the binaries in *Othello* and other works, such as *The Merchant of Venice*, to maintain that the rigid definitions of the Self and the Other are fallacies. Shakespeare recognizes that there will be differences, but he also recognizes that there will be similarities. Also, he communicates to the audience that a whole group of people cannot be given an oversimplified definition. Shakespeare uses this blurring of binaries in *Othello* to show the audience that society constructs the Other, even if that construction is only a farce created to maintain the illusion of order and safety.
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Embracing the Other: Shakespeare and Racial Tolerance

Issues of race in Shakespeare’s plays have received scholarly attention since the middle of the twentieth century. Othello, for example, has become the center of these studies because those who find the play racist argue that the character Othello is credulous; a man of color, made a fool of by the clever Iago. This argument is usually coupled with myriad examples of racist lines from the play. These scholars are simply stating the obvious. Othello is a credulous character and many of his surrounding characters do in fact use racist rhetoric. These aspects of the play are undeniable. Yet, these oversimplified analyses disregard aspects of the play that subvert rather than support racial stereotypes and racism. Indeed, Shakespeare’s plays, like Othello, offer compelling reasons for embracing the Other. This becomes apparent when Othello is juxtaposed with other plays such as The Merchant of Venice, in which the marginalized Jew, Shylock, becomes the Other.

Shakespeare embraces the Other in both The Merchant of Venice and Othello; Shakespeare opposes racism by revealing the farce of racist binaries. Binary oppositions were, according to scholars, created to position Jews and Africans in Early Modern England at a safe distance from the English Self. The English used binary oppositions not only to keep their distance from the Other, but also to abuse the Other. As Kim F. Hall argues, keeping distance from the Other was essential to avoid chaos: allowing an Other to penetrate England’s sense of order could lead to society’s spiraling out of control into chaos. This
attempt to create an oversimplified definition of the Other has been present throughout the world’s history and continues today. Yet, many people at the time opposed this racism and prejudice, and Shakespeare did so covertly and creatively.

In any discussion of race and the Other, it is essential to clarify working definitions. The Other refers to any group viewed by a particular individual, group or society as a whole, as categorically alien and different. In the History plays, for example, Shakespeare reveals that the Scottish, Welch, French, and Irish were also defined individually as binary opposites to the English Self. This essay, though, will focus its analysis on Shakespeare’s representation of the Jewish and the African Others.

To further establish working definitions, race and racism are terms that are not only new but also ambiguous. Because the term “racism” is quite new, using the term in a discussion of Shakespeare poses a challenge, especially considering the fact that the term did not appear until 1936. The Oxford English Dictionary defines “racism” as “the theory that distinctive human characteristics and abilities are determined by race.” Despite the fact that the term “racism” is, in fact, a relatively new term, not one used in the early seventeenth century, the concept was definitely present in Early Modern England. Furthermore, scholars who discuss Othello as a work of racism or anti-racist play, work with this definition. Shakespeare explores otherness in Othello to oppose common racist tendencies in Early Modern English society.
It is essential to explore the myriad definitions of race and racism, and to establish my own definitions, before discussing Shakespeare's approach to the subject. As simple as it may seem to define a term such as "racism," it is, in fact, extremely complex. While race actually should refer to biological characteristics, it usually refers to religious and cultural differences. In Early Modern England and in our society today, prejudice focuses on the latter type of difference and this prejudice is defined as racism. Ania Loomba points out that in the civil war in Rwanda between the Tutsis and Hutus, the victims saw the attack as racism, despite the fact that the civil war between the two groups was not based on color. Loomba also explores the caste systems in India. Even though caste is not determined by race, some argue that this system is an example of racism. Citing the journal Genome Research, Loomba finds that "the upper castes [in India] have a higher affinity to Europeans than to Asians, and the upper castes are significantly more similar to Europeans than are the lower castes" (Loomba 3). Writers in Genome Research argues that the caste system should be seen as a form of racism, while other writers in Genome Researcg argue against this notion because the caste system is based on social issues rather than on biological issues. The fact is that although the biological issues signify a difference, the difference that fuels racism is cultural and not biological. It is arguments such as this, Loomba asserts, that "remind us that race is a highly malleable category which historically has been deployed to reinforce existing social hierarchies and create new ones" (3).
This ambiguity surrounding the definition of race will continue to promote discussion and argument among scholars; however, racism has less to do with the biological notion of race than with a fear of another way of life. As Loomba points out, most racism has focused on religious, cultural or class differences. This reality alone discredits the notion that racism should only be considered a biological prejudice. Loomba agrees: “What we call race does not indicate natural or biological divisions so much as social divisions which are characterized as if they were natural or biological” (3). The characteristics identified, for example, in the travel narratives of Shakespeare’s day were not color-oriented as much as socially-oriented. The ideas of sexual unruliness, jealousy, superstition, anger and violent tendencies imply social, not biological fears. Racism is a fear of a certain element of human essence that many believe is determined by race.

The English Self, white members of English society, was threatened during Shakespeare’s time period because of an increase in trade between Africa and England.

Racism relies more on cultural, class or religious issues than biological signifiers. The biological issues, such as skin color, are simply the signs that indicate those cultural, class or religious differences. This type of racism was demonstrated during Shakespeare’s time period, and that he protested against with his work. In Shakespeare’s day threats to the cultural, religious and societal norms that governed Early Modern English society than with the literal blackness of the Africans. The difference that was perceived as a threatening chaos was simply summarized by blackness. The same is true today. Societies are not
afraid of the biological differences; rather, society fears cultural, religious and class differences. Those can be threatening to the established social order. Likewise, the Jew, in Early Modern England, was a target of extreme racism. Racism directed at Jews was, and still is, religiously driven; however, the Jewish people were treated as another race. Notwithstanding cultural and biological signifiers. In essence discrimination lies in the religious difference.

The Jew was the most commonly defined Other in Early Modern English society. Because of a long history of anti-Semitism in England (and of course around the world). According to The Riverside Shakespeare, by the time Shakespeare was born, Jews had already experienced exploitation and marginalization for hundreds of years. Jews had been banished from England for hundreds of years by the time The Merchant of Venice was even written in approximately 1597. The most discriminated race in Early Modern England, Jews who lived in England, hid their identities (The Riverside Shakespeare 284). Sylvia Tomasch argues in “Postcolonial Chaucer and the Virtual Jew” that “the Jew’ was central not only to medieval English Christian devotion but to the construction of Englishness itself” (244). The English, Tomasch explains, defined themselves as those who banished the Jews. This is geographically illustrated in medieval art and literature as the Jew is often the representative Other even after the Jews’ banishment from England. Tomasch uses the term “virtual Jew” to describe the tendency of the Early Modern English “to make integral connections between imaginary constructions and actual people, even when they exist only in a fabricated past or a phantasmatic future” (252). The
virtual definition, though it claims to define the actual reality, does the complete opposite: "the virtual ‘surrounds the realm of the actual in a system of reality,’ thereby creating a simulation that, by seeming to be more authentic than the actual, may be mistaken for it" (253). The virtual definition is not created from any true Jewish representations. Tomasch references Homi Bhaba who argues that race is “a reflection constructed by means of such processes as ‘reversal, enlargement, editing’” (254). The English Self is thus defined by this virtual definition. For example, Tomasch points out that the English often referred to themselves as the "true Israel/verus Israel" and as possessing "Hebrew truth/Hebraica veritas" (254). By was by claiming that Jews were not the true Israel, Christians could then claim to be the “true Israel.” The virtual Other enhanced the English sense of self. Furthermore, the Jews were defined as a binary opposite; they were not considered the “true Israel” expelled from England in 1290 (254). Shakespeare proves himself to be radical in regards to his approach to The Jew, which makes it even more likely that he was in fact attempting to oppose racism against the African as well.

The relationship between race and Judaism is practically interchangeable according to Shakespeare’s representation of the concept in The Merchant of Venice. While conversion to Christianity should serve as a “cure” for a character like Jessica, Shylock’s daughter in The Merchant of Venice, it seems that her blood cannot be denied. At first glance it appears that Jessica’s problems are in fact solved. Yet, Lorenzo makes a statement that places Jessica’s Judaism in the race category. He tells Jessica, immediately before Shylock is forced to
convert to Christianity, that the only way for Jessica to actually become Christian would be for her to have a different father: “Truly I think you are damned. There is but one hope in it that can do you any good, and that is a kind of bastard hope[...] Marry, you may partly hope that your father got you not, that you are not the Jew’s daughter” (III.v.4-9). This argument takes into account that Jessica seems to believe her marriage to Lorenzo is equivalent to a conversion.

Her dream is somewhat realized, according to Janet Adelman in the essay “Her Father’s Blood: Race, Conversion and Nation in The Merchant of Venice,” but only through a moment of fantasy. Since the only way to escape her Judaism is to have been begotten by a Christian father, Lorenzo plays with words to accomplish the task, even if for only a moment: “If a Christian do not play the knave and get thee, I am much deceived” (II.iii.11-12). Adelman analyzes this line as a clever pun: “By securing get as beget and eliminating the temporal illogic, F2’s reading underscores the way in which Lorenzo’s pun answers Jessica’s fantasy of escape from her father’s house” (6). This pun gives Jessica, even if for only a moment, the Christian father she needs to truly escape her Jewish identity. Adelman asserts that at this moment Lorenzo is both possessing her as a husband and begetting her as a father. This fantasy through word play allows Jessica to feel an actual conversion as possible; though, as Lorenzo already pointed out, she would need another father to ever truly escape her race.

The term “race” refers to Jessica’s Judaism because the Jewish people were considered a different race in Shakespeare’s time. If the issue were simply a religious one, Jessica would only have to convert and marry Lorenzo to escape
prejudice. Yet, Jessica seems to be continuously discriminated against by her fellow characters. In some cases she is downright ignored. Bassanio and Portia, for example, barely even acknowledge Jessica’s existence. Belmont, according to Adelman, is a stand-in for England, with its virgin queen, and Jessica is treated as an outsider by the stand-in English. Portia and Bassanio never even address Jessica directly. When Portia does say her name, she speaks directly to Lorenzo and simply makes reference to the woman who accompanies him: “you and Jessica” (III.iv. 38). Furthermore, Graziano’s line “Cheer yon stranger, bid her welcome” implies that Jessica is standing apart from the rest of the character. “Yon,” Adelman asserts is simply used as a stage direction, implying this “stranger” is distanced and isolated from the other characters on stage (6). All this implies that Jessica’s race is inescapable. Nothing she can do will deny her race. It is in her blood.

Shakespeare focused on blurring the binary opposites created to define entire races of people; he did not focus on emphasizing differences. This is not only true in Othello, but also in The Merchant of Venice. The fact that Shakespeare’s radicalism can be found in various works, further supports that Shakespeare did, in fact, write Othello with the goal of creating a work of social protest. Despite the fact his works of protest are not explicitly radical does not make them any less radical. According to Harold Goddard in The Meaning of Shakespeare, Shakespeare buries his blurring of binaries below the surface, appropriately. Furthermore, according to Jonathan Dollimore in Radical Tragedy, because of prodigious censorship in Medieval England, many writers had to be
discreet in their radical approaches: “Given the censorship, it is not surprising that we find in the drama not simple denunciation of religious and political orthodoxy (though there is that too) so much as underlying subversion” (Goddard 25). A thorough analysis of The Merchant of Venice make it apparent that the binary definitions are being challenged by Shakespeare.

For example, when Portia enters the courtroom, she asks, “Which is the merchant here and which the Jew?” (IV.i.150). Goddard, approaches the play as opposing racism; he asserts that Portia’s intent is to simply identify the plaintiff and defendant, but the line emphasizes the difficulty in distinguishing between merchant and usurer (88), the Self and the Other. If Shakespeare were attempting to highlight racial differences, as Hall asserts, distinguishing between Antonio and Shylock would be a simple task for Portia.

Stephen Greenblatt agrees with Hall, asserting that Shylock is represented as the Other. Greenblatt, like Hall, believes Shakespeare focuses on differences. Shylock, he argues, is not a participant in Venetian society and his house is stark and cold (43). Greenblatt contrasts Shylock with Portia: "But her special values in the play are bound up with her house at Belmont and all it represents: its lit garden, enchanting music, hospitality, social prestige[...]her world is not a field in which she operates for profit, but a living web of noble values and orderliness" (43). Hall and Greenblatt fail to look at the myriad other instances in Shakespeare’s plays in which racial binaries are in fact blurred.

Although Greenblatt’s and Hall’s assertions assess Shakespeare’s work as intentionally racist, other scholars find the work to be in opposition to racism.
According to Harold Goddard, in his analysis of *The Merchant of Venice* in *The Meaning of Shakespeare*, the reason for Antonio's hatred toward Shylock is simply because “[...] he catches his own reflection in his face” (88). This argument is difficult to prove, considering Antonio does not provide indications that his hatred is a result of a spied similarity. However, it is quite possible Antonio sees the similarities between himself and this Other. Since it is quite apparent the two men have similarities, it is extremely possible that Antonio hates Shylock for his similarities. Whether Goddard’s assertion accurately identifies Shakespeare’s intention or not, there is no denying that the two men are similar and fail to represent the binary opposites the audience would have anticipated. Goddard points out that both men have dedicated their lives to the same purpose: “To what has Antonio dedicated his life? Not indeed usury. But certainly to moneymaking, to profits. And profits, under analysis, are often only ‘usury’ in a more respectable form” (88). Merchants in Italian society could simply buy a noble status. Their whole lives were driven towards making money. This is strikingly similar to the life of a usurer. Both men were capitalists, which, within a context of a feudal society and audience, would bring the two men closer together by definition than Antonio would have liked. Goddard asserts that the blurring of binaries is intentional and thus opposes the normative definitions of race in Shakespeare’s England. Shakespeare blurs the lines between good and evil, the Self and the Other, in *The Merchant of Venice*, just as he does in *Othello*, to contradict society’s constructed definitions.
Lastly, the concept of mercy is present throughout the trial, especially according to the disguised Portia: "The quality of mercy is not strained. It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven upon the place beneath. It is twice blest: it blesseth him that gives and him that takes" (IV.i.181-184). Although Shylock is reluctant to be merciful with Antonio, Portia is merciless in the final outcome of the trial. Portia's manipulation of the trial, takes away half his goods and grants the other half to the state, but also forces him to convert to Christianity (IV.i.345-390). Antonio plays a part in this merciless approach to Shylock; he asks that he be given the money that would otherwise have been granted to the state, so that he can give it to Lorenzo and Jessica (IV.i.384-387). This resolution leaves Shylock with nothing. Gratiano states the obvious: "Thou hast not left the value of a cord" (IV.i.363). In essence, Shylock could not even afford to buy the rope to hang himself. Although Gratiano's statement is obvious hyperbole, it is true in the sense that the ruling has left Shylock with nothing. They have taken his life, just as Shylock attempted to take the life of Antonio. They have taken his religion, and thus his community and his wealth: "Nay, take my life and all![...] You take my house when you do take the prop that doth sustain my house. You take my life when you do take the means whereby I live" (IV.i.371-374). Here we see Antonio and Shylock reflecting one another: they both would have taken the other's life without hesitation, and Antonio did indirectly take Shylock's life without hesitation. Shakespeare opposes the tendency of the English to construct those definitions to protect their own sense of Self. Martin Orkin discusses this tendency in "The Plain Face of Racism": "Literate Englishmen[...] concerned with
the apparent disintegration of social and moral controls at home’ were on occasion inclined to project their own weaknesses onto the outsiders, to discover attributes in others ‘which’ they found first, but could not speak of, in themselves” (167).

The only way for Shakespeare to “get away” with this radical approach was to use the Venetians as stand-ins for the English. The simple fact that the Italian characters would have spoken English on stage would have caused those characters to be viewed as English. The English disagreed with certain aspects of Italian society. For example, the role of Merchants in Italian society, which is portrayed in The Merchant of Venice, was considered strange and inappropriate. Merchants in Italian society were not working class, as they were in England. Merchants could simply buy a noble status, which was not considered proper in English society (Rutter 196). Shakespeare chooses a Merchant and an Italian to act as a stand-in for the English in The Merchant of Venice because for an English audience this would be easier to digest. If Shakespeare had openly blurred the binary definitions between Jews and the English or Africans and the English, his plays would never have been approved for the stage by the monarchy; they definitely would not have been well-received by audiences. It is apparent that the Italians are in fact stand-ins for the English because there are no distinctly Italian stereotypical attributes assigned to the Venetian characters. On the Elizabethan stage, other than the fact that the Venetian characters would have been labeled Italian, the characters would otherwise seem English. Furthermore, according to Tom Rutter in his article, “Merchants of Venice in a
Knack to Know an Honest Man, the Italians represented the future of English commerce: "[t]o the English, and particularly to Londoners, Venice represented a more advanced stage of the commercial development they themselves were experiencing; I would suggest that Venice also represented the logical outcome of the greater social mobility that irked or excited many English" (200). Thus, the English saw their future selves in the Italian society; this fact further reveals that the English would have related to the Venetian characters on the English stage.

At the time Shakespeare wrote Othello, in approximately 1604 according to The Riverside Shakespeare (1246), the African was becoming the primary group defined as the Other in Early Modern England. The tendency in Early Modern England to separate the English Self from the African Other was rooted in the fact that the English hoped to use Africa for economic gain and to thus compete economically with other countries. By defining the Other and the Self using completely binary definitions, this endeavor would not only seem justified, but safe. The English wanted to take control of what they perceived as “chaos”/Africa, so to prevent it from affecting their own “orderly” culture: “The use of Africa and blackness as signs of disorder is the first step in preparing for Europe’s ordering and later exploitation of Africa’s human and natural resources” (Hall 28). John Pory’s translation of Leo Africanus’ A Geographical Historie of Africa, which came out in 1600, “contributed to the developing sense of the unruly and diverse sexuality of Africans; and it gave England a model for controlling the ‘meaning’ of Africa and the seemingly inexhaustible difference it represented” (Hall 37). In addition to the stereotypes of unruliness and diverse
sexuality of Africans, Africans in this narrative are attributed characteristics such as jealous, treacherous, libidinous and barbarous (Orkin 167).

According to Martin Orkin in “Othello and the ‘plain face’ of Racism,” Africans started to appear in England around 1554, around the time Shakespeare was born: “By 1601 there were enough black men in London to prompt Elizabeth to express her discontent ‘at the great number of Negars and blackamoors which are crept into the realm since the troubles between her Highness and the King of Spain’” (167). The sudden influx of Native West Africans combined with the increase in trade between England and Africa was responsible for the fact that difference became fascinating to early modern Europeans, which is evident in the myriad forms of literature published: “In Shakespeare’s day, as Europeans searched for new markets and colonies abroad, they became culturally more open, and yet in many ways more insular” (Loomba 4). Ania Loomba describes the role of Africans in Early Modern Europe: “They began to bring in foreign slaves, and to trade with outsiders, but also to expel those they considered ‘foreign’ from within their own nations” (4).

Thus there were two things occurring in regards to other cultures during Shakespeare’s day: more was being learned about other cultures, but this led to intense feelings of superiority and a need to insulate their own culture to protect it from these foreign influences. Racial difference during Shakespeare’s time was imagined in terms of an inversion or distortion of ‘normal’ gender roles and sexual behavior—Jewish men were said to menstruate, Muslim men to be sodomites, Egyptian women to stand up while urinating, and witches
and Amazons to be kin to cannibals. Patriarchal domination and gender inequality provided a model for establishing (and were themselves reinforced by) racial hierarchies and colonial domination. (Loomba 7)

The ideas of race, according to Loomba, that have prevailed for the past 400 years were established during Shakespeare's time. If this is the case, modern conceptions of race and early modern conceptions of race are in fact more similar than one might expect.

Scholars have been making assertions, from as early as the middle-twentieth century, regarding whether Shakespeare's Othello is racist, not racist, or opposing racism. In Kim F. Hall's Things of Darkness: Economies of Race and Gender in Early Modern England, she posits that the racist discourse of the travel narratives—John Pory's translation of Leo Africanus' Geographical Historie of Africa (1600), Abraham Hartwell's A Reporte of the Kingdome of Congo (1597) and Richard Hakluyt's Principal Navigations (1589)—is directly reflected in the renaissance literature, drama and political discourse in Early Modern England. Hall focuses much of her literary analysis on Shakespeare asserting that the racist rhetoric used in the travel narratives is echoed in his works. Hall asserts that Shakespearean works such as The Merchant of Venice focus on cultural and racial difference (87). It is analyses such as Hall's that seem to lack a close reading of the text.

Martin Orkin asserts that Othello is in fact a work that opposes racism; however, he argues, it is essential to recognize the racism within the play and its purpose because "silence about prevailing racist tendencies in Othello criticism
actually supports racist doctrine and practice” (166). He also recognizes that color prejudice was definitely a reality of the time. This is aspect of Shakespeare’s society is revealed in Othello and in The Merchant of Venice; both plays have racist characters. Orkin attributes this color prejudice in Early Modern England to the Protestant Reformation in England, “with its emphasis upon personal piety and intense self-scrutiny and internalized control, facilitated the tendency evidenced in Englishmen to use people overseas as ‘social mirrors’” (167). The literature of Shakespeare’s day and earlier does in fact reflect the racist tendencies of the time, he posits, but in contrast to Hall’s analysis, Orkin contends that Shakespeare’s writing was in fact radical when it came to issues of race. Othello is destroyed, according to Orkin, as a direct result of racism and abuse of the legal process. Shylock’s destruction is a similar to Othello’s. He is destroyed because the society in which he lives turns against him because of his race. Furthermore, he eventually falls at the hands of Portia as she abuses the legal process.

Edward Berry also sees Othello as a work that opposes racism. In “Othello’s Alienation” he asserts that Othello is actually a representation of the human condition. His flaws represent the moral flaws of all individuals. This is precisely how the play opposes racism. Othello is a human being. Othello opposes most African stereotypes, and only falls into the stereotypical role of the African when Iago’s manipulation takes hold. Harold Goddard agrees that Othello is represented as a human being. He argues that Othello is “neither a Negro nor a Moor [but] any man who is more beautiful within than he is without”
Goddard's assertion that Othello is not actually a black man perpetuates racism within the text. Can Othello be black and a representation of the human condition? If the work is in fact opposing racism, Othello must be both black and a representation of the human condition. He must be a character with whom any human being can find a common ground. Goddard's analysis implies that the reason the binary definitions of race are blurred is due to the fact that Othello is not actually a representation of a black man. It does not make logical sense that Shakespeare would have created an "everyman" character as a black man if he were not intending for that character to be viewed as both human and black. This is an example of Shakespeare's radicalism at its best; he put a black man on stage whose character was so similar to his racist comrades that binary definitions became blurred. The same blurring of definitions is present in *The Merchant of Venice*. The binary definitions are blurred in the text and Shylock is definitely represented as a human being. Shylock even reminds the audience that he is the same as his oppressors: "[Antonio] hath [...] scorn'd my nation, thwarted my bargains, cool'd my friends, heated mine enemies; and what's his reason? I am a Jew. Hath not a Jew eyes? [...] heal'd by the same means, warm'd and cool'd by the same winter and summer, as a Christian is?" (III.i. 55-64).

Despite the reminders of Shylock's and Othello's human condition, there is racism within the plays. The racism is used to communicate a message about racism and race. As Martin Orkin stated in his article "Othello and the 'plain face' of Racism," there is racism in the play, though the play itself is not racist;
furthermore, that racism within the play must be addressed and discussed for progress to be made. The racism in *Othello* lies in the fact that Othello’s comrades are apparently threatened by the lack of difference between the Other and themselves. This is demonstrated in their constant attempts to define him as different. The racist characters project their desired definition of a “Moor” onto Othello and eventually construct Othello into the quintessential archetype of the Other. Without this distinct separation between the definitions of the Other, Othello, and the Self, the Venetians, chaos threatens their sense of order.

Othello and the Venetians’ indefinable natures and demonstration of both characteristically “good” and “evil” characteristics, emphasizes the truth of chaos and the farce of order by demonstrating the concept that individuals and groups cannot be defined as “good” or “evil.”

Furthermore, Shakespeare uses racist characters in *Othello* to illustrate the Early Modern English attempt to define the English Self by defining the Other as the quintessential contrast, to thus separate themselves from the Other. The characters in the play are constantly attempting to define Othello by his Otherness because they recognize similarities between themselves and Othello. Despite the fact that Othello is in many ways characterized as different—his complex background, and his blackness—the racist characters in the play attempt to define Othello as the Other by using racist rhetoric when addressing and making references to him. One reason they do this is because they, like Antonio in *The Merchant of Venice*, recognize similarities between themselves and the Other, Othello. Leo Africanus’ description of the Moors in his
Geographical Historie of Africa, a work that many scholars believe Shakespeare used as a source for his character Othello, includes characteristics such as simplicity, credulity, pride, proneness to extreme jealousy and anger, and courage in war (Berry 317). It is important to note that although many critics who support the assertion that this is a racist play recognize the presence of these characteristics in Othello’s character, they fail to recognize the presence of these distinct characteristics in two of the play’s most racist characters: Iago and Roderigo.

The racist characters actually embody the stereotypical African qualities. When Iago first tells Brabantio of his daughter’s new marriage, he uses specific rhetoric to attempt to define Othello as the Other. This attempt comes after he expresses extreme jealousy and anger over Othello’s promotion of Michael Cassio. Iago is angry because he has to take commands from this Other, and because he has no ownership or control over Othello. Iago is also jealous of Othello’s sexuality i.e., power: “Iago uses racism against an individual whose skills, ability, and success in crucial ways exceed his own. And he uses it as a tactic—when he believes it may afford him some material advantage over the man whom he wishes to control and if possible destroy” (Orkin 186).

This “outrageous” scenario threatens Iago’s sense of order; he is threatened by the chaos that Othello represents: “This counter-caster,/He, in good time, must his lieutenant be,/And I—God bless the mark!—his Moorship’s ancient” (I.1.28-30). Iago cannot believe he will be this “Moor’s” underling; it is outrageous. Shakespeare begins the play by establishing first that Iago has
characteristics of the stereotypical African: extreme jealousy and anger. Iago’s extreme jealousy and anger is mostly aimed at his missed promotion and the fact that he has to take orders from a “Moor.” I assert that it is not only Iago’s jealousy and extreme anger that cause him to plot a tragic downfall for his “friend,” but he also demonstrates a fear that Othello, the Other, may be more like him than stereotypical definitions allow. He demonstrates this fear in his incessant attempt to define Othello as the Other: “an old black ram is tupping your white ewe” (I.i.85-86). Iago also characterizes Othello as “the devil” (I.i.88) and tells him that “your daughter will be covered with a barbary [moorish] horse” (I.i.108). Iago exaggerates Othello’s Otherness by characterizing him as evil/the devil, and makes it a point not to mention Othello by name but always references him with a term that carries with it the connotation of the Other: “barbary” and “Moor.” He never once calls Othello by name so as to separate him from himself and his fellow Venetians as inhuman.

His attempt to define Othello as the Other can also be seen in his constant referencing of Othello with animal references: “I am one, sir, that comes to tell you your daughter and the Moor are making the beast with two backs” (I.i.112-113). He tells Brabantio about the kinds of grandchildren this “beast” will produce: “You’ll have your nephews neigh to you/ you’ll have coursers for cousins/ and gennets for Germans” (I.i.109-111). He is so different, he is not even human. Iago finds comfort in this game of definition.

Roderigo also demonstrates characteristics of extreme jealousy and anger in Act I, which are characteristically African. Yet, Roderigo even
demonstrates uncontrollable passion as he throws all his money away in a vain attempt to win Desdemona for himself; he also demonstrates credulity because he trusts Iago too readily. Much like Iago, Roderigo has a need to define Othello as the Other; he may also be seeing his own reflection in Othello's face. Defining Othello as the Other helps to give him hope for his own sense of order which has been threatened by the invasion of what he sees as chaos. This battle for Desdemona is not really about Desdemona; it is about the fact that he too has been "oppressed" by the Other. This throws off Roderigo's sense of order and motivates his extreme actions for the duration of the play. Roderigo's attempts to define Othello as the Other are less extreme than Iago's, but no less obvious. He never references Othello by name but only as "thick lips" (I.i.63), "a stranger" (I.i.133), and most frequently as "the Moor" (I.i.56).

Brabantio, in response to the news of his daughter's betrayal, approaches Othello with racist assumptions. He assumes that Othello must have charmed his daughter; there is no other explanation according to Brabantio for her interest in a marriage with the definitive Other: "thou hast practiced on her with foul charms" (I.i.72). He also attempts to define Othello as the Other to maintain his own sense of order which has indeed been threatened by the invasion of the Other (i.e., chaos) into his life:

If she chains in magic were not bound,/whether a maid so tender, fair and happy,/so opposite to marriage that she shunned/The wealthy, curled darlings of our nation,/would ever have to incur a general mock,/Run from her gaurdage to the sooty bosom as such a thing as thou[...]. (I.i.64-68)
Notice he references Othello as “thing” and their marriage as “opposite” to what any sane Venetian woman would want for herself, and his bosom as “sooty.” He also makes it a point to identify Dedemona as “fair” which is not only defined as beautiful but also pale (Hall 40-55). Thus, Brabantio sets Othello as far apart from himself and his family by definition as he can. He also, like Roderigo, does not refer to Othello by name but most commonly as “the Moor.” Part of Brabantio’s desperate need to define Othello as the exact opposite to himself may include his own fear of seeing his reflection of the Other in Othello’s face. Leo Africanus, for instance, confirms sexual unruliness but aims it mostly at women (Hall 25-40). Fathers have no control over their daughters’ sexuality in Africa, according to Leo. In Shakespeare’s Othello, Desdemona demonstrates this characteristic when she marries Othello without asking for her father’s blessing. This demonstration of sexual unruliness by his own daughter brings chaos into his own home and sparks Brabantio’s desperate attempt to separate the Other from the Self.

To fully understand the extent to which Iago, Brabantio and Roderigo’s perceptions of Othello in the beginning are unrealistically binary, we must analyze the character of Othello that is presented to the audience before he becomes a creation of Iago’s intense need to define him as the Other. Othello’s eloquence is a characteristic that definitely threatens Iago in his attempt to define Othello as the Other. Othello does not demonstrate the stereotypical “barbarism” that is expected of the African. Iago refers to Othello as an “erring barbarian” in an attempt to fit Othello into the definitive African stereotype. It is obvious this is
a desperate attempt because when Othello finally appears in Act I, scene iii, he demonstrates the exact opposite of this “barbarism.” Barbarism is defined in the Oxford English Dictionary as “rudeness or unpolished condition of language.” Deborah Cartmell points out that “Othello must be proficient in white discourse in order to succeed in white society. But it is not only how he speaks, but what he says that is music to the white men’s ears” (138). Othello does show characteristics of the white man, but he maintains characteristics of the African as well. One stereotypical characteristic of the African that Othello did keep for Othello was that of the superstitious African.

In Othello, Shakespeare demonstrates that without this distinct separation between the definitions— the Other, Othello, and the Self, the Venetian— chaos threatens the Venetian sense of order. One of the major arguments among critics who approach Othello as a work of anti-racism is the degree to which Shakespeare characterized Othello as the white man. Edward Berry argues against critics who argue that “Shakespeare invokes the negative Elizabethan stereotypes of Africans only to discredit them” (316). Berry looks for a happy medium: “It seems to me important to appreciate the particularity of Shakespeare’s portrait and its resistance both to negative stereotyping and abstract universalizing” (316). I agree with this assertion, because if Shakespeare had attempted to characterize Othello completely as the white man, the anti-racist argument would not have been effective and he would have been implying that there was something wrong with any difference. However, by characterizing Othello with a mixture of similarities and differences, as well as
surrounding characters, he proves that the rigid definitions are constructions of society.

It is important to point out another ongoing debate in regards to the characterization of Othello as “in between”: Was Shakespeare actually defining Othello as the Other by giving him both similarities and differences? Ania Loomba explores the debate in her article, “‘Local-manufacture made-in-India Othello fellows’: Issues of Race, Hybridity and Location in Post-Colonial Shakespeares.” In this article, Loomba explores two contrasting approaches to the issue: Home Bhabha’s and Franz Fanon’s. Homi Bhabha, for example, argues against Franz Fanon’s “Black Skin, White Masks,” in which Fanon emphasizes the colonized Other as a binary opposite to the colonizer. The difference between the two is not rigid, but...

a doubling, dissembling image of being in at least two places at once...It is not the Colonialist Self or the Colonized Other, but the disturbing distance in between that constitutes the figure of colonial otherness—the White man’s artifice inscribed on the Black man’s body. It is in relation to this impossible object that emerges the luminal problem of colonial identity and its vicissitudes. (Loomba 144)

While Fanon characterizes any mimicry of the colonizer as a tragedy, Bhabha argues that it is actually a “subversion of authority” (114). Furthermore, Bhabha argues that “intercultural and interracial crossovers [. . .] are all interpreted as challenging cultural or ideological fixity” (144). Thus, Shakespeare’s
representation of Othello as “in between,” according to Bhabha, would be radical rather than racist, as Fanon’s interpretation of the in-between state would find.

The racist characters see this blurring of binaries with their own eyes and out of fear they work to push Othello into the role expected of him through their rhetoric. Iago, however, needs more. Iago’s need to destroy Othello is driven by the fact that he cannot control him. He is jealous of Othello’s marriage and powerful position. Iago’s scheme is what, in the end, constructs Othello into the credulous, passionate, and prideful African. The fact that Othello’s fulfillment of the stereotype is constructed by Iago implies that the stereotypical African is a construction of society. This makes sense when readers/viewers take into consideration the very real need in Shakespeare’s day to create binary definitions between the Self and the Other to feel safe and guilt-free embarking into Africa. Shakespeare was simply pointing out the fact that society creates the rigid definitions, which as readers/viewers can see in Othello are unrealistically binary. Furthermore, society pushes the Other to fulfill stereotypes at all costs to avoid finding any similarities between the Self and the Other. Thus, the Other is a cultural construction according to Shakespeare’s play.

Many critics who see Othello as a work of racism find it difficult to accept Othello’s credulity. In defense of this argument, I must point out that there are many credulous characters throughout Shakespeare’s works who are not African: King Lear, Roderigo, King Claudius of Hamlet, Richard II and you can even find credulous characters falling at the hand of Richard III. Credulity is not an isolated trait reserved for the African Othello, and Shakespeare makes that
clear by blurring definitions. Othello's credulity is even warranted. Because he had every reason to trust Iago who was his best friend. In addition, Iago is an excellent actor as he constructs the crumbling walls that surround Othello. "I am not what I am," he tells Roderigo. Furthermore, Othello is not the only character who believes Iago's lies; Desdemona, Emilia, Cassio, and even Roderigo are pawns in his game and fall very easily for his charade. Roderigo is the most credulous in that he actually sees how great an actor Iago can be and yet never considers that he too could be a pawn in Iago's game. In essence, Othello has every reason to believe his friend and thus his basic nature cannot be interpreted as foolish, yet he is made to look like a credulous fool.

Iago's construction of Othello as the definitive Other does not stop there; Iago creates the jealousy that drives Othello to destroy himself. At the beginning of the play there is no hint of jealousy in Othello. When Brabantio warns him that "if she deceived her father, she may thee" (I.iii.254), Othello does not show any signs of concern. Furthermore, even when Iago first begins planting the seeds of jealousy in his "best friend's" heart, Othello rejects any possibility of his wife's indiscretion. When the jealousy does start to become a part of Othello, it is obvious that he does not know what to do with this emotion. He has seizures and begins to fall apart in every sense. Othello appears to be so uncomfortable with this emotion that it implies it is not a basic part of his nature. Jealousy appears to be a basic part of Iago's nature, however; Iago has control of his jealousy and uses it to construct Othello into the Other. It is out of this jealousy that Othello's excessive pride springs. Iago's jealousy forces Othello into a
downward spiral that eventually forces him to demonstrate the very characteristics society expects from him: credulity, jealousy, and excessive pride.

By Act III, Othello appears to have lost his identity. He is no longer himself; he is a construction of Iago's game. Othello reveals his lost sense of Self when he refers to himself in third person: "Where should Othello go?"

Furthermore, even before Othello kills Desdemona, he sees his identity slipping: "Farewell: Othello's occupation's gone." According to Millicent Bell in "Shakespeare's Moor," "the collapse of personal being he is already experiencing is inseparable from the loss of occupation" (5). In Frantz Fanon's "Black Skin, White Mask," he posits that a "normal" white child, who grows up in a "normal" family, will enter the white world to thus find him or herself "once more among the same laws, the same principles, the same values" (142). The nation is simply an extension of the family. This creates a difficult situation for minorities: "A normal Negro child, having grown up within a normal family, will become abnormal on the slightest contact with the white world" (142). Even when there is complete identification with the white man on the part of the Black man, the Black man is constantly on guard, which may cause offensive or aggressive behaviors (144-145). Fanon's assessment of the behavior of the oppressed supports why Othello feels he has lost himself, and why he loses control so quickly. Othello, despite the fact that he is characteristically similar to the white world, is on guard before any conflict has arisen. Fanon posits that this kind of reaction is "the consequence of the replacement of the repressed [African] spirit in the consciousness of the slave by an authority symbol
representing the Master, a symbol implanted in the subsoil of the collective group and charged with maintaining order in it as a garrison controls a conquered city” (145). Fanon argues that it is this replacement of consciousness that causes even a highly educated Black man to be on his guard before there is any conflict in sight. Othello would have been on his guard from the very beginning, despite his powerful position. Thus, when the conflict presents itself, Othello loses himself and becomes simply a construction of the society that has projected its expected definitions of the African onto him.

Shakespeare’s radical nature as a writer has been noted by many scholars; furthermore, it is important to note that he was not the only writer of the time period who was challenging the established English identity: “Both confronted [Marlowe and Shakespeare], as no dramatist ever had before them, the crucial issues of man’s position in the universe at a time in history when old conceptions of universal harmony, order and degree were breaking down under the pressure of an awakening and expanding world” (Ribner 1). Shakespeare’s reputation as a radical writer makes it increasingly unlikely that Shakespeare was approaching the race issue without the intention of making a statement.

Dollimore explores the radical nature of the Elizabethan and Jacobean Tragedies as a whole: “a significant sequence of Jacobean Tragedies, including the majority of Shakespeare’s, were more radical than has hitherto been allowed” (3). Dollimore explores the nature of the Elizabethan and Jacobean Tragedies around 1600 and describes the time period as an important catalyst for the English revolution of 1642. He calls the writing of this time period “the greatest
intellectual revolution the world has ever seen" (3) and cites Raymond Williams who indicates that the Elizabethan and Jacobean drama revealed “a form of total crisis” (3). Every dominant theme of the plays Dollimore explores in Radical Tragedies reveals a challenging of the established conception of order. Dollimore explores Shakespearean works such as Troilus and Cressida and Marston’s Antonio Plays to reveal the subversive nature of the late-Elizabethan and Jacobean Tragedies: “Running through Marston’s dramatization of this process [characters’ alienation from society] are attitudes to human identity, to revenge and to providence which are radical” (29). Dollimore notes these same themes in Troilus and Cressida as well. The characters’ identities in Marston’s Antonio Plays and Shakespeare’s Troilus and Cressida “are not defined by some spiritual or quasi-metaphysical essence, nor, even, a resilient human essence” (29). Instead, Dollimore notes, the characters’ identities are shaped by their society; they are a construction of the social forces which they are forced to confront. This theme is seen in Othello as well. Othello is in many ways constructed by Iago’s manipulation. It is essential to note Dollimore’s analysis of the writing of the time period because if we are to believe Shakespeare was a radical writer, it is difficult to fathom that his radicalism was not a part of a much bigger picture. As Dollimore proves, Shakespeare’s radical writing was a part of a movement of radical writing that defined Elizabethan and Jacobean Tragedy at the turn of the century.

Hall argues that Shakespeare and many of his fellow writers were in fact racist. Hall points out that the English need to protect the culture from foreign
influences led to definitions of beauty in terms of “white” or “black”; this attempt only added to the preexisting Christian association of blackness with death, mourning, sin and evil: “Thus traditional terms of aesthetic discrimination and Christian dogma become infused with ideas of Africa and African servitude” (4). Hall argues that Shakespeare intentionally uses the definitions of beauty to perpetuate the separation of the African Other from the Self: “In Shakespeare’s A Midsummer Night’s Dream, Lysander rejects his ‘dark’ lover, shouting, ‘Away you Ethiop!’ and ‘Out, tawny Tartar’ (III.ii.257 and 263)” (1). Although his dark lover is simply a brunette, this rhetoric, according to Hall, creates a false dichotomy between light and dark, white and black. Hall argues that sexual politics, race, imperialism and slavery “form a prominent set of subtexts to the play,” as she attempts to prove with examples such as the one she provides from A Midsummer Night’s Dream; however, Shakespeare’s use of black and white to refer to one’s degree of beauty was simply a reflection of the very real English tendency to define beauty in these terms. To assert that Shakespeare inserted these particular words to intentionally perpetuate racism is impossible to prove considering these terms would have been incredibly common in renaissance England. That these definitions of beauty were originally created to separate the African from the English Self is extremely likely, but as this rhetoric became increasingly common in Renaissance England it was simply a habitual way of referring to beauty. The rhetoric is racist, but to assert that Shakespeare intentionally included the rhetoric to perpetuate racism becomes extremely
unlikely when one looks closely at works like *Othello* and *The Merchant of Venice*.

Hall's reliance on Shakespeare's references to light and dark is challenged by R.F. Fleissner in "*Othello* as 'Faire' and Aaron's Child as 'base': Analogous Problems inConsulting the 'Oxford English Dictionary.'" Fleissner asserts that many of the OED definitions are flawed. He points out that the line "'If Vertue no delighted beautie lacke,/your son-in-law is far more faire than Blacke' is apparently misassigned in the OED" (1). In the OED, the second line is cited under faire as an adjective and defined as light as opposed to dark. This definition, according to Fleissner, disregards the context of the line; he asserts that the meaning is that Othello is either handsome or equitable. Fleissner cites Doris Adler of Howard University who claims that "faire" actually means virtuous. He goes on to point out that the original meaning of "being fair" was "making a good impression" (1). Hamlet is also described as "faire": "Faire and Warlike form" (1.1.47). This example provides little to no evidence that the reference to "faire" has any racial significance. Furthermore, in the first line of the first Dark Lady sonnet, "In the ould age blacke was not counted faire," "faire" once again does not seem to be used with any reference to skin color; to do so, Fleissner points out, would be repetitive. Many scholars would continue to argue that simply having the definitions of beauty or ugliness associated with white and black is a form of racism. I agree that the definition may have been created by racist tendencies, but this play on words is not proof of racism on Shakespeare's
part. As Fleissner points out, the rhetoric was not only common, but was more commonly used to refer to beauty and first impressions than skin color.

The Duke in the *Venetian* tragedy would hardly be engaging in merely lighthearted punning at such a somber point in *Othello*. The paronomasia involved may initially appear to be of the uncomic sort. His point is that Brabantio should realize that the Moor acted both fairly and squarely, hence did not resort to underhanded witchcraft (as had been suspected) to gain the hand of the pale-skinned Desdemona. In short, *Othello* had been equitable and had presumably not taken undue sexual advantage of his white bride. After all, the Duke is trying to alleviate Brabantio's trepidation, not exacerbate it. (Fleissner 1)

In essence, it is impossible to label Shakespeare a racist due to light and dark reference in his rhetoric, a common grounds for the assertion. Furthermore, Shakespeare blurred the binaries in *Othello* and other works, such as *The Merchant of Venice*, to maintain that the rigid definitions of the Self and the Other are fallacies. Shakespeare recognizes that there will be differences, but he also recognizes that there will be similarities. Also, he communicates to the audience that a whole group of people cannot be given an oversimplified definition. Shakespeare uses this blurring of binaries in *Othello* to show the audience that
society constructs the Other, even if that construction is only a farce created to maintain the illusion of order and safety.
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