Mending the Moor on the Early Modern English Stage: The Rise of Shakespeare's Black Tragic Hero

Marcos S. Vargas

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.montclair.edu/etd

Part of the English Language and Literature Commons
MONTCLAIR STATE UNIVERSITY

MENDING THE MOOR ON THE EARLY MODERN ENGLISH STAGE:
THE RISE OF SHAKESPEARE'S BLACK TRAGIC HERO

by

Marcos S. Vargas

A Master's Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
Montclair State University
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of
Master of Arts in English

August 2007

College of Humanities and Social Sciences
English Department

Thesis Committee:

Dr. Naomi Conn Liebler
Thesis Sponsor

Dr. Leslie Wilson
Committee Member

Dr. Monika Elbert
Committee Member

Dr. William Rosa
Associate Dean

August 15, 2007

(date)

Department Chair
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost I thank God. Without Him I am nothing. I wish to acknowledge Naomi Liebler who nurtured my love for Shakespeare unlike anyone else. Under her tutelage, I learned how humbling the pursuit of "mastery" can be. For that, I am eternally grateful. I thank Leslie Wilson for his invaluable insight. I thank Monika Elbert; her involvement in this project is immensely appreciated. Finally, I wish to thank my family for their love and support. I carry on the torch.
ABSTRACT

Shakespeare’s two inverse representations dealing with the black male Moor—Aaron (*Titus Andronicus*) and Othello (*Othello*)—can figure prominently in a reading of his stage treatment of those notions of racial differences in the early modern era. By retracing early modern histories which affected the early formation of race and by emphasizing the popular representations of race on the early modern English stage, this study seeks to answer whether Shakespeare’s own treatment of race was typical or, in fact, anomalous for his time. Using re-conceptualized vocabularies of race laid out by recent early modern race scholars, this study applies that groundwork in order to better understand Shakespeare’s visible preoccupation with race.

The paper begins with a look at early modern England’s construct of the racial Other through travelogues and rhetorical handbooks. It follows with an examination of the significant early representations of blackness on the early modern English stage; George Peele’s *The Battle of Alcazar* (1589), Thomas Dekker’s *Lust’s Dominion* (1599), and Ben Jonson’s *The Masque of Blackness* (1605). The finale provides a reading of Shakespeare’s black male Moors in *Titus Andronicus* c. 1593-94, *The Merchant of Venice* c. 1596-97, and (as his only black tragic hero) *Othello* c. 1603-04.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction: The Moment of Race in Renaissance Studies  1

Chapter 1. Early Modern Reconstructions of the Moor as the Racial Other  8

Chapter 2. The Evil and Ugly Moor on the Early Modern Stage  21

Chapter 3. Mending the Moor: The Rise of Shakespeare’s Black Tragic Hero  33

Works Cited  55
The study of race in the English early modern period has finally grown enough legs to stand on its own as a valid topic for Renaissance studies. Early modern race critics vigorously argue for its inclusion as a legitimate focal point for our understanding of both the literature and its historical moment. They connect what was an increasingly racially diverse population with germinating nationalistic discourses. Nascent studies of race in the Renaissance, however, took only a cursory approach to racial difference in the period.

Such early efforts are exemplified by the typically historical approaches of Bernard Harris and G.K. Hunter. Harris’s “A Portrait of a Moor” (1958) and Hunter’s “Elizabethans and Foreigners” (1964) provide early historical evidence into Elizabethan England’s contact with foreigners while failing to deal directly with the race question in at least modern theoretical ways. In her introduction to Alexander and Wells’ *Shakespeare and Race*, Margo Hendricks points out some of their strengths and shortcomings:

For both Harris and Hunter, though in differing ways, the literary text encapsulates the assumptions, expectations and representations that define the Elizabethan notion of race and, as a consequence, provides the idea with its historical and thus empirical meaning. Only in their subtle avoidance of the more vexing issue dancing liminally on the periphery of their analyses – is Shakespeare “racist”? – do these essays appear “dated”.
That is, neither author directly engages the implications of his findings for questions about authorial subjectivity and its text. (5)¹

Although Harris’s and Hunter’s works pre-date race theory and may be dated by their lack of racial theorizing, recent race criticism is indebted to the pair for opening different realms of possibilities into Shakespeare’s knowledge of foreigners. Despite falling short of pronouncing how the artist’s own possible first-hand contact with foreigners might have influenced his *oeuvre*, these seminal works do at the very least point to the larger societal influence on his contemporaries.

It was not until Eldred Jones elucidated the extent of the African presence in Elizabethan society through his seminal work, *Othello’s Countrymen: The African in English Renaissance Drama* (1965), that scholars became increasingly open to the possibility that Shakespeare’s treatment of race sprung from first-hand accounts and experiences. Scholars like Ruth Cowhig, David Dabydeen, and Robert Fleissner soon followed, “insist[ing] on the actual existence or social awareness of black people in Tudor and Stuart England” (Habib 1). Their attention to this new social awareness makes for a much more plausible reading into its effect on the text itself. Peter Erickson notes how this more recent contrast with previous manifestations renders race more significant:

In the first phase, the study of race was conducted by comparatively few scholars on a basis of individual interest and effort; in the present phase, the growth in the number of scholars committed to the topic of race has

¹ Kim Hall expresses similar skepticism about historical delving into race in her introduction to *Things of Darkness*: “Ironically, despite their interest in the ‘alien’ or ‘marginal’ in English culture, many of the more prominent new historicists have paid little more than cursory attention to the role that both gender and racial assumptions played in developing notions of identity. Although they have brought heretofore unseen populations to literary analysis, they provide little guidance in understanding the complexities of early modern racial discourses” (14-15).
created the sense of a more concerted collective level of activity with a more powerful cumulative force. Seen in the context of the overall field of Renaissance studies, the scholars of the first phase succeeded in putting race on the map but as a relatively peripheral, even marginal, topic. What is new about more recent work is the way it places race at the center of attention as a major organizing category for the period as a whole. (33)

With a greater focus on the black population in Elizabethan England, early modern race scholars are more aware of its effect in the era. Thus, recent early modern race criticism is now capable of positing the racial Other within the scope of a larger social context.

One of the obstacles early modern race theorists inevitably encounter is the idea that the concept of racism is primarily derived from histories spanning from the outset of the slave trade to its abolition in the late nineteenth century.2 Anthony Appiah, for example, tends to see racialized modes of differentiation as nonexistent in the early modern period (Erickson 27-29).3 Ronald Takaki discusses antebellum American society as projecting racism abroad. Early modern race scholars countered with an insistence on the Elizabethan preoccupation with skin color as a mode of cultural difference. Margo Hendricks, Anthony Barthelemy, Michael Neill, Kim Hall, Emily Bartels, Joyce Green

---

2 Medievalist Paul Freedman has made a strong argument for the medieval period in the conversation about the origins of racism. David Brion Davis quotes Freedman in his discussion: “Medieval Europeans also elaborated Aristotle’s argument that many human beings are simply born and constructed to do heavy toil. And especially in France, serfs and peasants were ‘often depicted as dark-skinned or “black,” either by reason of their labor in the sun and their proximity to the earth, or as a sign of their overall hideousness’” (761).

3 Appiah downplays the presence of Jews and Moors as significant in early modern literary production: “We should begin by recognizing that in Shakespearean England both Jews and Moors were barely an empirical reality. And even though there was a small number of Jews and black people in England in Shakespeare’s day, attitudes to “the Moor” and “the Jew” do not seem to have been based on experience of these people. Furthermore, despite the fact that there was an increasing amount of information available about dark-skinned foreigners in this, the first great period of modern Western exploration, actual reports of black and Jewish foreigners did not play an important part in forming these images” (277).
Macdonald, Martin Orkin, to name a few, write on the topic of blackness as its own form of Otherness in the Renaissance and lend credence to the idea that race was a primary concern in the early modern period. While the debate between early modern race critics and more modern race theorists has, at times, sought to derail interest and momentum in the early modern period as a precursor of modern racism, other theorists have posited the problem as a question of terminology and what Ania Loomba calls “the vocabularies of race.” To that extent, recent early modern race theorists have come to alter their use of these vocabularies to better fit into modes that are more appropriate for an early modern reading into race. As Loomba puts it:

As we begin to historicize these ideas, the question also arises whether our contemporary vocabularies are at all adequate for analyzing the past. Are words such as “race” or “racism”, “xenophobia”, “ethnicity”, or even “nation” useful for looking at community identities in early modern Europe? Some of these words were coined only later and others, such as “race”, did not necessarily carry the meanings they now do. Even when we use modern-day meanings of words such as “nation” or “race” emerging in the early modern period, it is important to remember that older or competing meanings did not vanish overnight. *(Shakespeare 2)*

Loomba’s statement suggests that several of our modern-day terminologies and vocabularies dealing with race had their advent in the Renaissance. While it is unfair to equate early modern views of racial differences with modern notions of racism, recent early modern race critics have been able to apply their understanding of early modern insights into the racial Other using modern vocabularies of race.
Another hurdle scholars have had to jump in order to counter charges of anachronism involves competing notions of Otherness in the period. While the concept of race itself had not yet attained full discourse status in the early modern period, its seeds—colonialism, commercialism, nation building, and constructs of human differences—were already providing early modern England with a racially charged language with which to operate. Otherness was growing as a distinction based in ethnicity, religion, language, and geography. It is no coincidence that the Other was being classified based on distinctions of color as well. Although the early modern period promoted racial discourse through the performance of race in language and representations of the Other, Arthur Little Jr. cautions against a modern understanding of the meaning of race in the period: “It is worth noting from the outset that ‘race’ in the early modern era ... works less as a stable identity category than as a semiotic field, one as infinitely varying as the cultural discourses constituting what we have come to identify as the early modern era or the Renaissance” (1). However, Little goes on to defend its importance even in the early modern context: “None of this, however, should be taken to argue that race in Shakespeare’s day is less stable or real, that is, any less a discursive device, than it is in our own cultural moment” (1). The debate over the fear of anachronistic discussions of race in the early modern period has led scholars like Appiah to question the viability of this branch of study; however, the trend of recent early modern race scholarship has settled on its efficacy due largely to its tangible insight into the processes of the construction of the racial Other in the midst of colonialism, commercialism, and nation building.
The current state of early modern race studies has made significant strides in the debate surrounding the relevance of race in the Renaissance. Early modern race theorists have gained a new level of legitimacy for their subject by arguing for race as a central device in early modern England’s efforts to procure for itself a national identity. Erickson identifies a “moment of race” in Renaissance studies that can re-envision the early modern period as never before: “The current effort to add race to the agenda of major Renaissance topics holds open the potential for reframing the Renaissance on a scale not yet envisioned in the early initiatives of feminist criticism or new historicism” (36). The moment for race studies in the Renaissance has indeed finally arrived.

The following discussion greatly benefits from the groundwork that these scholars laid out, allowing for a study of race in the Renaissance through re-conceptualized vocabularies of race. This study applies that groundwork in order to better understand Shakespeare’s visible preoccupation with race. By retracing early modern histories which affected the early formation of race and by emphasizing the popular representations of race on the early modern English stage, this study seeks to answer whether Shakespeare’s own treatment of race was typical or, in fact, anomalous for his time. Through its focus on the figure of the Moor, especially in distinguishing the black male Moor, this research suggests some conclusions as to his development as a racial Other.

The paper begins with a look at early modern England’s construct of the racial Other through travelogues and rhetorical handbooks. It follows with an examination of the significant early representations of blackness on the early modern English stage: George Peele’s *The Battle of Alcazar* (1589), Thomas Dekker’s *Lust’s Dominion* (1599), and Ben Jonson’s *The Masque of Blackness* (1605). The finale provides a reading of
Shakespeare's black male Moors in *Titus Andronicus* (c. 1593-94), *The Merchant of Venice* (c. 1596-97), and (as his only black tragic hero) *Othello* (c. 1603-04). Finally, this study suggests that Shakespeare's two inverse representations dealing with the black male Moor—Aaron (*Titus Andronicus*) and Othello (*Othello*)—figure prominently in a reading of his stage treatment of those notions of racial differences in the early modern era.

---

4 The dates for the Shakespearean works provided throughout this paper reflect the suggestions of the editors of their respective Arden editions. A more involved analysis of the dating is beyond the scope of this study.
Early Modern Reconstructions of the Moor as the Racial Other

The classification of "Moor" proves problematic for any probe into early modern constructs of race. Qualifying Moorish simply as African, black, or even Muslim is an endeavor doomed to error. As Emily Bartels points out, "The term 'Moor' was used interchangeably with such similarly ambiguous terms as 'African,' 'Ethiopian,' 'Negro,' and even 'Indian' to designate a figure from different parts or the whole of Africa (or beyond) who was either black or Moslem, neither, or both" ("Making More" 434). The term "Moor" and its Spanish equivalent "Moro" most likely are derived from the Greek Mauros referring to the people of ancient Mauritania (now making up Morocco and Algeria) who were of Arab and Berber descent and practicing Islamists (Barthelemy 8). The "Moros" who conquered Spain in the eighth century were not dark-skinned or black at all but either tawny or white. In fact, the dark stereotype surfaces later as an additional deprecatory element to compliment the already negative associations with Islam. Loomba writes: "Both blackness and Islam had been the target of hatred as well as fascination in medieval Europe, but the sources of this antipathy were not necessarily identical. However, Islam and blackness were regarded as overlapping categories for Christians from the Crusades onwards" (Shakespeare 46). What resulted in this merging of color and religious differences was a "creature" whose intersections figured prominently in his "othering."

Although the Moor is traditionally associated with someone of North African descent; the term itself has become an amalgam of geography, ethnicity, skin-tone, and religion. Michael Neill expands on the indeterminacy of the term:

1 For a fuller etymology of the term "Moor," see Bartheley (1-17).
Insofar as it was a term of racial description, it could refer quite specifically to the Berber-Arab people of the part of North Africa then rather vaguely denominated as "Morocco," "Mauritania," or "Barbary"; or it could be used to embrace the inhabitants of the whole North African littoral; or it might be extended to refer to Africans generally (whether "white," "black," or "tawny" Moors); or, by an even more promiscuous extension, it might be applied (like "Indian") to almost any darker-skinned peoples—even, on occasion, those of the New World.

("Mulattoes" 364)

While geographical origins, ethnicity, and even skin color played a prominent role in building the Moorish figure, the religious distinction remained initially the most important qualifying element of the Moor. Neill mentions that "Moor" became such an encompassing religious category that it was impossible to distinguish the Muslim inhabitants of Southeast Asia from those of the Spanish-controlled Portuguese East Indies since both were habitually called Moors ("Mulattoes" 365). The large number of possible categories for a Moor meant that, in early modern constructs of the Other, he was a hybrid figure imbued in complete alterity. It is vital to clarify the source for all of these inconsistencies; the inaccuracies that surfaced in conjunction with early familiarity with the Moor are greatly responsible for not only their various identities but also for their being converted into an Other. Perhaps most serious of all are the pejorative associations these inaccuracies produced. These associations eventually become popularized and exploited in the literature of the time. What surfaces as significant causes for the systematic "othering" and eventual racialization of the Moor are the early
moderns' involvements in colonialism, commercialism, and nation-building. The travelogues and literature of the time play prominent roles in this "othering."

A small number of classical texts about Africans were available in English long prior to the middle of the sixteenth century; these were highly reductive and unreliable as sources of insight into the African continent and its people (Vaughan and Vaughan 21). These classical texts served to whet the Elizabethans' interest in human differences found in Africa but it was the early travel tales that primarily provided the Elizabethans with some of their earliest insights into what they called the "dark continent" (Vaughan and Vaughan 22).

One such putative authority is *The Voyages and Travailes of Sir John Maundevile* whose final printing in the Elizabethan era came in 1583 (Vaughan and Vaughan 22). According to Alden and Virginia Vaughan, Mandeville overemphasized the dark pigmentation of Africans and offered fantastical descriptions of oddly-shaped people and other exotica (22-23). Kim Hall comments on the somatic interest contained in Mandeville's text:

While Mandeville exhibits a degree of cultural relativism in his views on color... the body is still a prime signifier of cultural difference. A reader of Mandeville would see Africa as a place not only of grotesque bodies but of continual abrogation of European models for gender, marriage, and rule. (26)

---

2 Alden and Virginia Vaughan comment: "Ancient texts, especially the works of Herodotus and Pliny the Elder, were readily available in Greek or Latin and were translated into English during the sixteenth century. The information they imparted about Africans was usually unsophisticated and unreliable, but it—along with bits of cultural observation—introduced English readers to the issue of body color that would become a major theme of early modern authors" (21).
These physical abnormalities found in Mandeville reflect a key trope in the “othering” of the African from European norms. Its mythical and erroneous descriptions served “as England’s popular baseline of spatial and human geography until the late sixteenth century; although its primacy waned rapidly thereafter, its residual influence persisted for at least another century” (Vaughan and Vaughan 22).3 Alden and Virginia Vaughan mention ensuing accounts that inevitably followed these early travel narratives:

> By gradual but increasing contrast, the secular-minded explorers who succeeded them in the last quarter of the sixteenth century as England’s chief sources of geographical information were more ethnographic, more precise, and generally more truthful. The new breed of chroniclers was hardly disinterested, of course—their principal concern was to garner riches from the East and West Indies—and they were surely not free of mythic preconceptions. Yet standards of reportage were changing; Renaissance curiosity encouraged a reliance on experiential knowledge and a skepticism, however imperfect, about ancient, unverified assumptions. (24)

Although subsequent reports of Africa from Renaissance explorers did show a marked improvement in ethnographic accuracy, the resulting depictions of Africans may have proven more harmful in the long run because the new information gleaned from these explorative accounts likely contributed to the fantastical stereotypes already existing.

3 Other notable examples include William Waterman’s *The Fardle of Facions* (1555), an English translation of Johan Boemus’s *Omnium gentium mores* (1520) which had been previously included in William Prat’s *The Description of the Countrye of Aphrique* (1554). Waterman’s *Fardle* helped to heighten the stereotypical nakedness and thus licentiousness of the African. These hyperbolic descriptions constituted for what passed as the closest semblance to detail ethnography of Africa and Africans for the Elizabethans for most of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, thus making them widely accepted notions (Vaughan and Vaughan 23).
Moreover, these accounts often sought to seduce readers by forwarding absurd theories about the differentiation of skin color and other outward physical features (Vaughan and Vaughan 24-25). Explanations of the black pigmentation of the African’s skin varied from biblical accounts to witchcraft. The subsequent demonization of black skin through attacks on appearances, religious practices, and even language was likely a great contributor to racial “othering” in the period.

One of the most prominent of all the travel narratives for the Elizabethans is Richard Hakluyt’s *Principal Navigations, Voyages and Discoveries of the English Nation* (1589, 1598-1600) which aimed to encourage English enterprise. This highly critical and imposing work was full of vituperative commentary against the African and further fueled the growing fear and resentment of black skinned people. Hakluyt’s collection of travel tales complicated black/white binarism through its incendiary attacks on the differences of the Africans, many of them once again focusing on color. Alden and Virginia Vaughan comment:

The persistent message about Africans in *Principal Navigations* is that they are remarkably dark, frequently untrustworthy or dangerous, and radically different not only from the English but, implicitly, from all other humans. And the specific qualities—physical, political, social, religious—that set them apart are invariably painted in deeply pejorative tones. (33)

---

4 George Best’s *True Discourse of the late Voyages of Discoverie* helped to popularize the notion that black skin was a result of Noah’s son Cham disobeying his father’s proscription on sex (Vaughan and Vaughan 27). See also Braude for insight into the misappropriation of this claim.

5 Emily Bartels disputes the claim that Hakluyt sensationalized the African in “Othello and Africa: Postcolonialism Reconsidered” (49-61).
Hakluyt’s *Principal Navigations* clearly delineated many of the observable and unobservable differences between the English and the African. Hakluyt’s willingness to accentuate the differences between England and Africa is not surprising considering his overall message of English colonialism in the New World and the East. He saw Africa as a necessary evil to be overcome in order to further English exploration; thus, his depiction of Africa as the “dark continent” expressed a sense of urgency for the need of “light.” Hall states:

> The dark/light dichotomy becomes the dividing line for both the “known” and the “civilized” worlds. Although the impulse of the travel narrative is not only to divide the dark from the light but to bring as much as possible “to light,” Africa in the Hakluyt narratives remains both unknown and uncivilized because it is written as ultimately “unknowable.” (48)

By serving as an elusive space, Hakluyt’s Africa becomes significant only in relation to England. The use of the black/white dichotomy plays an important role in the immediate “othering” of the Africans in terms visible to all.

In 1600, John Pory’s translation from Italian into English of John Leo Africanus’s *A Geographical Historie of Africa* (1523) almost instantly increased the Elizabethans’ familiarity with the Moor.⁶ According to Anthony Barthelemy, Pory’s translation also served to forever make synonymous the term “Moor” with “African” and consequently “black”:

> Pory chose Moor rather than African as the common name for a large group of diverse peoples who inhabited the African continent. While it

---

⁶ For a contrasting look at this text I suggest Bartels’ “Making More of the Moor” and Jonathan Burton’s “‘A Most Wily Bird.’”
may be impossible to determine his purpose in so doing, we can recognize the results of his choice. He endowed these peoples with the common heritage contained in the word *Moor*. They no longer simply share a land mass; they shared the traditional prejudices and characterizations belonging to the *Moor*. (13)

Given the already increasing demonization of Africa’s exotica, the misrepresentation of the term “Moor,” making it inclusive to the continent and all of its inhabitants (regardless of skin tone), further damaged an already ambiguous nomenclature. “Moor” continued to intersect identities of geography, color, ethnicity, and religion.

Africanus, a former Muslim, strived to provide an objective picture into Africa but his message was ambivalent due to his inextricable identity as a Moor and his desire to secure his Christian-European place (Bartels, “Making More” 436). What resulted added to the pejorative associations of the African by identifying these as “Moor.” Bartels explains:

He promises, as a loyal African, to record only the native people’s “principall and notorious vices” and to omit “their smaller and more tolerable faults.” While he presents this shaping as a means of favoring his subjects, the effect promised and produced by his statement is the amplification of his subjects’ faults and the enforcement of their difference. What will be erased—and hence not tolerated—is behavior that qualifies as “tolerable” within his own (Christian, European) social sphere, behavior, that is, which is more “ours” than “theirs.” In its execution the plan produces Moors who, though sometimes civil, appear nonetheless as
Other, not only because their defining characteristics are represented in extremes but also because they are set forth inconsistently.

(“Making More” 437)

Africanus’s accounts were tinged with a self-interest which at times led to his distancing himself and, in the same vein, the African (the Moor in particular) from a European sense of the decorous. The Historie joined in the “othering” of the Africans but, to a greater extent, made the Moor implicit in that chorus. Hall observes that in aligning himself with the European, Africanus distanced himself from his African roots: “Leo seemingly shares with his European audience a disdain for the darkest African peoples, and he introduces judgments that juxtapose negative assessments of their appearance with disapproval of cultural practices” (30). Pory’s own agenda in his translation further complicated things by celebrating Africanus’s conversion through the vilification of his Muslim past. Under Pory’s hand, the Historie read like a virtual mea culpa of Africanus’s Muslim past and subsequently of his Moorish background. Through his merging of the term “Moor” with “African,” Pory helped to forever fuse blackness with Islam in association with the Moor (Barthelemy 13-16).

Africanus’s description of the Barbary region also forever identified the Moor with North Africa and the “Barbarian.” This term was, in turn, infused with religious Otherness as well thanks to the translation’s stereotyping of Barbarians (or Moors) as exclusively black Muslims. According to Bartels, Pory was essentially following European anti-Islamic patterns aimed at excusing Africanus' Muslim past: “Pory frames the text with an introductory letter and a conclusion that make clear his anti-Moslem bias and his use of the text as anti-Moslem propaganda” (Making More” 437-38). The ethnic
stereotyping by Pory of Moors, or Barbarians, as black and Muslim stuck and eventually would tinge the language itself with representations of Otherness as both a religious and regional distinction, not to mention one of color.

Language’s role in distinguishing the Moor as the Other cannot be overlooked. Ian Smith’s study of the performance of race through language in early modern England traces the importance of eloquence in the formation of the ideal Elizabethan subject. According to Smith, through rhetorical handbooks such as George Puttenham’s *The Arte of English Poesie* (1589) and John Hoskins’ *Directions for Speech and Style* (1599), a direct correlation was made between proper rhetorical mastery, mental stability, and power: “Hoskins’s *Directions* was an influential handbook written to aid aspirant Englishmen in realizing class advancement, status, and power within English society. The acquisition of eloquence—the performative opposite of barbarism—thus coincided with a nationalist project and the emergence of a teeming, competitive society of men…” (169). Smith argues that the inability to command language at its highest eloquence was categorized as “barbarism,” an already acknowledged classification of Otherness (168-74). As part of a growing nationalist discourse, language was utilized to differentiate the Other from “real” Elizabethans. At the same time, this growing nationalism played a large part in the developing racial discourse, assigning further differences to any and all forms of Otherness, including language. As Smith writes, “Language then, is a cultural sign through which race relations in England can be traced…. Through a network of linguistic evolutions within various textual and rhetorical performances, the nation-subject and its excluded other—the ‘barbarian,’ the foreigner and stranger—are produced as racialized” (173). The performance of language itself, within the framework of a
growing nationalism, can be credited as a racial determinant in early modern England. Using Smith’s theoretical approach, we will see how this newly established notion of barbarism, with its religious and linguistic fusion of Otherness, provides Shakespeare with a launch pad from which to present his discourses on race.

England’s thrust for nation building would necessitate an expanded discourse on Otherness. Increasing contact with the outside world provided early modern England with significant glimpses of not solely who those Others were, but who they were themselves. The black/white dichotomy surfaces as a convenient litmus test for those who are English and those who are not. The distinction made through color affords the Elizabethans the opportunity to look within and identify their own whiteness. Bartels comments on the response these opportunities received:

In Renaissance England the rise of cross-cultural interest and exchange was accompanied by an intensified production and reproduction of visions of “other” worlds, some handed down from classical descriptions, others generated by actual encounters and recorded as travel narratives, others shaped by dramatic and literary conventions already in place.... Whether England’s cross-cultural discourse was designed “to mediate the shock of contact on the frontier,” to justify colonialist projects or instantiate England’s professed supremacy, to explore and exhibit “spectacles of strangeness,” or to effect some other conscious agenda, its early visions began to outline space and close off borders, to discriminate under the guise of discerning, and to separate the Other from the self.

(“Making More” 433-34)
Colonialism, by its nature, necessitated a distancing of what was new and unknown from what was traditionally English. This selectivity centered on racial differences produced through increasing differentiations like ethnicity, religion, language, and inevitably color. Thus, racial differentiation begins to take hold in England due particularly to the rise of nationalist, commercialist, and colonialist projects.

English society was affected by colonialism and commercialism from within as well. According to Loomba, between 1562 and 1568, “blackamoors” were brought to England by the hundreds (“Sexuality” 798). The rise of the Empire created the need for specific laws for foreigners living within the state; thus, the advent of xenophobia played a significant role in early modern constructs of race. Elizabeth herself was not exempt from this condition, as Loomba indicates:

The black presence was both perceived and constructed as a threat to the state. Royal proclamations and state papers nervously point to the “great numbers of Negroes and blackamoors in the country, of which kind of people there are already too manye”. Queen Elizabeth’s correspondence with the Privy Council, seeking to deport eighty-nine black people, is significant. A warrant issued on 18 July 1596 contrasts black or “those kinde of people” with her white subjects or “Christian people”… But Elizabeth’s communiqué also crucially puts forward the argument that blacks will create unemployment, “want of service,” for her white people.

---

7 Although the perceived total varies, Ruth Cowhig claims that there were “several hundreds of black people living in the households of the aristocracy and the landed gentry” (qtd. in Loomba, “Sexuality” 798).

8 Daniel Vitkus makes an interesting observation on how foreign infusion was received in English society: “English anxieties about cultural pollution, miscegenation, or religious differences were often embraced and internalized as English culture began to absorb and articulate those differences as part of its own process of self-identification” (22-23).
Elizabeth’s initial deportation and expulsion letter highlighted the religious differences with the “infidels.” However, in subsequent correspondence those differences were expanded to include other natural distinctions including color; a black/white dichotomy was easiest to establish once initial efforts to base the “othering” in strict religious terms failed (Bartels, “Too Many” 313-19). With the realization of Other comes implicitly the understanding of Self. The budding Empire’s growing nationalism was being fueled by an exceptional growth in self-definition; the result is evident in its diminution of the Other through an increasingly hostile racial construct.

Of significance after Elizabeth’s initial open letter to the Lord Mayor of London in 1596 was the seeming advent of a color-based racism previously missing (Bartels, “Too Many” 313-19). While her first letter seemed to be more politically and economically motivated, the subsequent letter in 1601 showing her dissatisfaction with the continual presence of these “blackamoors” is tinged with racial differentiation (Bartels, “Too Many” 313-19). The primary complication that arose with the deportations stemmed from the existence of a double-edged sword economically for England since most of the black foreigners were laborers (Bartels, “Too Many” 313-19). While unemployed subjects would gain from the deportations, the “masters” who benefited from the black labor would lose; Elizabeth saw herself needing to better articulate the differences between the blacks and the English (Bartels, “Too Many” 313-19). After forwarding religious and cultural differences to little or no avail, Elizabeth turned to a more racialized language, hoping to situate the obvious blackness as one of

---

9 Emily Bartels details a prisoner exchange between England and Spain that spurred the decree. See “Too Many Blackamoors: Deportation, Discrimination, and Elizabeth I” (305-13).
the primary reasons for the deportation (Bartels, “Too Many” 313-19). The “othering” generated by nationalism, colonialism, and commercialism centered squarely on color, culminating in a color-based racism as Bartels expounds:

Thus, in this document as not before, blacks acquire their own negative attributes as a “kinde of people.” It is no longer expediency and circumstance that make their deportation from England “reasonable” at a particular historical moment. They, by virtue of their innate and collective characteristics, their blackness and their profitable faithlessness, are a race, a people, that “should be with all speed avoided and discharged out of … Her Majesty’s dominions.” (“Too Many” 318)

Implicit in the reference to “blackamoors” is of course the figure of the Moor. It becomes evident that by 1601 “Moor” had grown from a primarily religious moniker to a color-based distinction as well. The figure of the Moor had become increasingly identified through his blackness and the black Moor’s popular representation would figure prominently in this burgeoning construct. Through the intersection of religious and color-based differences, the “othering” of the Moor had resulted in a figure whose differences were neither compatible with the nationalistic project nor completely welcomed within that discourse.
The Evil and Ugly Moor on the Early Modern English Stage

At first glance, the representation of the black Moor on the early modern English stage might seem limited at best. However, considering the interest this figure was generating in and out of English society, his increasing presence on the popular and court stages was inevitable. Similarly inevitable was the creation of a prototypical villainous characterization born of the associated pejorative material. The villain, for example, a direct inheritor of the medieval vice, carried the evil connotation of blackness with little effort from the allegorical to mimetic stage (Barthelemy 74). Clearly the popular conceptions and misconceptions surrounding the black Moor, stemming from colonialism and other nationalistic projects as we have seen, would also find their way onto the popular stage. Little could match the black Moor’s exoticness on the stage or his established racial stereotypes and associations with evil. Therefore, it is not surprising that early representations of the Moor on the Elizabethan stage were generally negative. An exception can be made, however, for Shakespeare’s handling of the figure during this period through his Elizabethan plays dealing with the Moor: Titus Andronicus and The Merchant of Venice, as we shall see in the next chapter. Later on, during the early years of the Jacobean period, Shakespeare would return with his most powerful representation of the tainted Moor in his Othello. Even though the early modern stage provided for a limited sampling of black Moorish representation, that small sampling is imbued with clear enough evidence of popular notions of the black Moor at the time. This evidence

---

1 For an interesting discussion of how the vice develops into the villain see Barthelemy (72-76).
corroborates what various materials, particularly the travelogues, reveal about the systematic “othering” of the Moor.

A few years before Shakespeare’s earliest contribution to this theatrical discourse, George Peele’s play commemorating a battle fought in Barbary between King Sebastian of Portugal and King Abdelmelec of Morocco would provide for an archetypal treatment of the black Moor on the Elizabethan stage. While not only drawing a clear distinction between tawny Moors and black ones, *The Battle of Alcazar* (1589) created the stage stereotype of the villainous black Moor in the character of Muly Mahamet, a stereotype that would be retained for the most part at least until *The Merchant of Venice*. In the play, Muly Mahamet aligns himself with King Sebastian against his uncle Abdelmelec and collaborates in the Portuguese’s downfall. More significant are the associations with the popular thought of the time that this villainous character conjures. These associations paralleled the popular stereotype of the evil black Moor. Eldred Jones explains: “These figures were usually embodiments of villainy, needing no elaborate psychological reason for their character; they were bad because they were black. In the symbolism of the age, they were equated with devils” (*Elizabethan Image* 48). Thanks to the established associations of the black Moor with evil, Peele had little trouble characterizing Muly Mahamet the way he did. Quite simply, black could easily be equated with evil.

Peele’s play opens up with an immediate example of Muly Mahamet’s villainous vein. In the first dumb show we witness Muly Mahamet slaughtering his younger

---

2 Christopher Marlowe’s *Tamburlaine Parts I and II* (1587-88) is traditionally thought to present the earliest representation of the black male Moor on the popular stage. The Kings of Fez, Morocco, and Argier appear as tributaries in *Part I* and have no great dramatic involvement. A fuller treatment of some of the ambiguously black characters found in both parts, although intriguing, remains beyond the scope of this study.
brothers and his uncle in a coup for the crown. Just before this murderous attack, the Presenter sets a clear tone for the Moor’s representation throughout the play.

The passage to the crown by murder made,

Abdallas [Muly Mahamet’s father] dies, and leaves this tyrant king;

Of whom we treat, sprung from th’ Arabian Moor,

Black in his look, and bloody in his deeds;

And in his shirt, stain’d with a cloud of gore,

Presents himself, with naked sword in hand,

Accompanied, as now you may behold,

With devils coated in the shapes of men. (228)

The negative tone set here is accomplished through language and with the aid of the established popular trope of the black Moor as dirty and evil. Thus, black skin can go hand in hand with black deeds since blackness was commonly recognized as the devil’s livery. We can also witness the associations with devils that Muly Mahamet’s assistants (also black Moors) inherit. The murders accomplished, what begins to take shape is a clear division between good and evil, black and white. Abdelmelec’s pursuit of the crown is justified largely by his distinction as a white or tawny Moor, unlike Muly Mahamet whose blackness plays a vital part in his characterization as a doomed villain.

Another key trope Peele utilizes in staging Muly Mahamet is the villainous trait of duplicity. Such double-dealing is displayed through the use of stereotypes which carefully align Muly Mahamet as the Moorish Other. Evidence of this is seen in Muly Mahamet’s treacherous use of King Sebastian, a Christian king. As Muly Mahamet seeks the aid of King Sebastian of Portugal, he prepares for the King’s own demise, clearly
distancing himself from the Portuguese through religious differences. Here the Moor reveals some of his ulterior motives:

Now have I set these Portugals a-work
To hew a way for me unto the crown,
Or with their weapons here to dig their graves...

Drive forward to this deed this Christian crew,
And let me triumph in the tragedy,
Though it be seal'd and honour'd with the blood

Both of the Portugal and barbarous Moor. (IV.ii.70-79)

Muly Mahamet gains satisfaction from the Portuguese effort on his behalf and the sacrifice of Christian blood that effort will entail. Once more, the Moor’s religious associations are implied here. Part of his villainy is his existence as the religious Other; thus, the religious “othering” that the Moorish figure lends plays right into the hands of the playwright. Muly Mahamet’s duplicity is carefully woven in the context of both somatic and religious differences. This “barbarous” Moor as he calls himself is a product of religious and color-based differences, two characteristics associated with duplicity.

Peele never shies away from his depiction of not only the color distinctions separating the main characters but the religious ones as well.

In the end, Sebastian realizes his error in placing too much trust in the duplicitous Moor: “False-hearted Mahamet, now, to my cost, / I see thy treachery, warn’d to beware / A face so full of fraud and villainy” (V.i.68-70). Once again, Muly Mahamet’s deeds are associated with his appearance and religion. Implicit in Sebastian’s words here is his tardy understanding that he never should have trusted the Moor’s faith or his blackness,
two fixtures of his villainy. Throughout the play, the audience is given a clear insight to
the reason behind Muly Mahomet's unbelievable villainy. It is this understanding
between playwright and audience that benefits most from the popular notions of the Moor
at the time. It is also an important indicator of those very notions. Peele picks up from the
historical material available to him and his culture and in so doing creates an archetype of
the villainous black Moor for the popular stage. Barthelemy states:

[Peele] rejuvenated for the popular stage in England a metaphor which,
without exaggeration, profoundly and adversely affected the way blacks
were to be represented on the stage for years to come. By validating the
revived metaphor with historical facts, Peele gave it renewed vitality. In
its newest form, the metaphor informed the actual historical facts, making
the historical event allegorical and the allegory real. (78)

Thanks to Peele's pioneering efforts, the popular stage came to reproduce and circulate
the stereotype of the black Moor.

A decade after Peele's *Battle of Alcazar* and almost simultaneously with the
publication of Pory's translation of Africanus's *Geographical Historie* (1600), Thomas
Dekker's *Lust's Dominion; or The Lascivious Queen* (1599) continued the tradition of the
negative representation of the Moor on the early modern stage. Dekker's play about
Eleazar the Moor's transgressions (both political and sexual) in and around the Spanish
court brought the villainous black Moor once more into the spotlight (Shakespeare's *Titus
Andronicus* had previously presented the character some five years earlier, as will be
observed in the next chapter). *Lust's Dominion* played on the Spanish history of the
Moorish presence and the miscegenation that resulted in Moriscos, or Moros mixed with
Spaniards, and on the anxiety these histories of racial mixing could produce.

Miscegenation created an unnerving quandary for the early moderns in that its merging of the Other with the Self threatened the very heart of the emerging nationalistic construct. Dekker’s play vilified the black Moor but in a matter that was consistent with the information gleaned from the travelogues. Like Peele’s *Battle of Alcazar*, Lust’s *Dominion* can be used to better examine the perceived status of the black Moor at the time and the anxiety the figure produced.

The play immediately opens with a rejection of the lascivious Spanish Queen by Eleazar, her lover. Their bed has not only been a place of racial transgression but also one of sexual degradation as the Queen’s dying husband is cuckolded by the Moor. Eleazar’s capricious denial of the Queen’s lust is accompanied by rhetorical nuances that catch even the Queen off guard: “Where has thou learn’d this language? That can say / No more but two words; away away: / Am I grown ugly now?” (I.i.63-65). The Queen’s surprise at Eleazar’s newly revealed linguistic prowess is consistent with Ian Smith’s assessment of the role that language plays in the formation of the Other. The play’s opening is indicative of Eleazar’s “barbarian” roots; from this point forward his machinations take over and thus the Queen’s perception of his change in language reminds the audience of his cunning. What is also important to consider here are the implications of Eleazar’s immediate response to the Queen: “Ugly as hell” (I.i.66). Black being a synonym for ugly and devil, Eleazar’s remark serves to invert his and the Queen’s roles. Once again, although he is sometimes described as being tawny and other times as black in the play, the more important implication here is the threat that miscegenation presents to the binarism of the Other and the Self.
In the very same scene, Eleazar responds to his father-in-law’s accusation of keeping the Queen as a concubine by outlining some of the stereotypes of the time: “The Queen with me, with me, A Moore, a Devil, / A slave of Barbary, a dog; for so / Your silken Courtiers christen me, but father / Although my flesh be tawny, in my veines, / Runs blood as red, and royal as the best / And proud’st in Spain” (I.i.151-56). Although he describes himself here as being tawny, the associations he makes using the deleterious stereotypes imbue him more with the attributes of a black Moor. (He later makes more specific reference to his blackness: “Oh! Would my face, / Were of Hortenzo’s fashion, else would yours / Were as black as mine is” [V.i.274-76].) Eleazar’s statement points to a greater acknowledgment of himself as the Other, although he refutes society’s casting him as such. Even the play’s ambiguity about pigmentation illustrates that associations of Moors as “black” do not necessarily denote skin color. The greater connotation links blackness with evil and ugliness. The villainous trope followed in these early modern plays for the Moor is vital for these associations to stick, revealing prevalent attitudes of the time.

Eleazar also displays his duplicity in following his own evil ambitions:

I’le follow you; now purple villany,
Sit like a Roab imperiall on my back,
That under thee closelyer may contrive
My vengeance; foul deeds hid do sweetly thrive:
Mischief erect thy throne and sit in state
Here, here upon this head; let fools fear fate,
Thus defie my starrs, I care not I
How low I tumble down, so I mount high.  

(l.i.172-79)

Eleazar’s villainy here is not only characterized by his ambitions but also by his cunningness. Once more the notion that a Moor cannot be trusted is propagated here in Eleazar’s evil rant. Throughout these villainous representations of the Moor we can clearly outline the figure’s need to operate subversively (as an Other) against what constitutes the inside or Self. Although he is precariously situated in the political inside through his favored military prowess and relationship with the Queen, Eleazar understands that his skin will eventually push him out. His only resort is to play the duplicitous villain and garner whatever safety and security he can for himself. These double-dealings of sorts play directly into the nationalistic anxieties of the early modern audience distinguishing Other from Self. Take, for instance, these lines in which Eleazar’s duplicity about his involvement in imprisoning Philip and Hortenzo intersect with a greater theme touching both character and audience:

Who I imprison them?  
I prize their lives with weights, their necks with chains,  
Their hands with Manacles? do I all this?  
Because my face is in nights colour dy’d,  
Think you my conscience and my soul is so,  
Black faces may have hearts as white as snow;  
And ’tis a generall rule in morall rowls,  
The whitest faces have the blackest souls. (V.iii.4-11)
Although he is clearly lying, Eleazar's feigned indignation here invokes a paradox for the audience in the possible contemplation of his logic (Barthélemy 111). Could it be possible that “black faces may have hearts as white as snow”? Indubitably, the audience would not fall for Eleazar’s guise here; however, it creates an interesting irony as Barthélémy points out:

> The irony of this situation falls heavily on the Moors because Eleazar most certainly lies about his own soul and conscience. His invocation of the theatrical tradition only indicts him further, as it further complicates the matter because the dramatic tradition to which he refers uses blackness as a sign of evil. But Eleazar claims here to be real. He, in fact, is attempting to say that this is not a play and that therefore an allegorical reading of his blackness is inappropriate. Of course, his attempt only accentuates the obvious. *Lust’s Dominion* is a play, and Eleazar has even less credibility in the dramatic world than he hopes to claim. Ironically, his role has been predetermined by the very tradition he invokes to liberate him from suspicion. For Eleazar and his kind, their moral roles have been determined, and that determination is witnessed by the blackness on their faces. (111)

In a manner not seen in *The Battle of Alcazar*, *Lust’s Dominion* seems to utilize the Moor’s stereotypical duplicity to bring into question some of the very material available to the audience that helped form that stereotype. However, the evidence seems clearly to show that blackness, as a conventional theatrical trope, has too many cultural
complications to allow for such inquisitions. Perhaps in the hands of a more skillful playwright like Shakespeare this trick could be pulled off.

Pejorative associations with blackness continued throughout much of the late Elizabethan era and the early Jacobean court. On Twelfth-night in 1605, Queen Anne requested a masque be performed where she and her court could take on the appearance of blackamoors. Barthelemy argues that although nonmimetic in nature, a masque’s allegorical attributes can shed light on the extent that type characterization plays in the more mimetic popular drama of the time:

In the allegorical universe of the masques and pageants, the type characterization of blacks reveals the station that they are assigned in the family of man, in the structure of the universe, and in relationship to God. Ultimately such characterization placed blacks into a single camp in the great moral conflict between good and evil. In allegorical and nonmimetic drama, we are able to see the type characterization of blacks in its purest form. (19)

Ben Jonson’s *The Masque of Blackness* (1605) and its companion piece *The Masque of Beauty* (1608) sought to play on the opposing binary of blackness and beauty being propagated at the time. Through such highly allegorical productions, the culture’s perceived notions that fashion blackness as the antithesis of beauty and good are better revealed.

---

3 I am grateful to Naomi Conn Liebler who pointed out to me Anne of Denmark’s Nordic origin. The greater implication here can be seen in the juxtaposition of color and of considerable somatic differences. Returning to Eleazar’s assertion, “Black faces may have hearts as white as snow” (V.iii.9), one can see the interesting conundrum Jonson faced in portraying a blackness (or ugliness) that was only skin deep and redeemable. Barthelemy makes an interesting argument for Jonson’s solution to this problem by claiming Jonson turned to the logic found in *Song of Songs* and Plato’s *Symposium* (21-26).
Jonson’s own introduction to *Blackness* makes mention of the play’s use of some of the material found in the popular travel tales:

Pliny, Solinus, Ptolemy, and of late Leo African, remember unto us a river in Ethiopia famous by the name of Niger, of which the people were called *Nigritae*, now Negroes, and are the blackest nation in the world. This river taketh spring out of a certain lake, eastward, and after a long race falleth into the western ocean. Hence, because it was her majesty’s will to have them blackamores at first, the invention was derived by me, and presented thus. (48)

Jonson’s initiative in sifting through the travel tales is far from unique; the preoccupation with color that *Blackness* offers is indicative of the popular thought of the time. The play’s plot suggests the need to wash the blackness off Niger’s daughters (who had been just recently scorched black by the sun) through England’s (James I’s) power, illustrating the ugly/beauty and evil/good dichotomies at play during the time. Since it is only through a baptismal cleansing that Niger’s daughters could be turned beautiful once more, the plot’s suggestion that blackness is incompatible with goodness is layered into the aesthetic concerns of the play (Barthelemy 25). Aethiopa, the moon goddess, instructs Niger on England’s ability to “cleanse”:

Ruled by a sun that to this height doth grace it,
Whose beams shine day and night, and are of force
To blanch an Ethiop, and revive a corse.
His light sciential is, and, past mere nature,
Can salve the rude defects of every creature. (lines 223-27)
Of course, the notion of England’s ability to “blanch an Ethiop” is firmly rooted in the building of Self by way of “othering.” Here, blackness is clearly seen as a “rude defect” and England’s thoughtful benevolence in bringing light to the darkness can be interpreted as the nation-building project at work. In a time where outsiders were increasingly a part of English life, the nation had to assert its hegemony by imposing its brand of Self on the Other. By skillfully casting the Other as ugly and evil, the English Self can be projected as the proper way to live in true beauty and goodness. In the sequel three years later, *The Masque of Beauty*, the whitening of the black skin is accomplished and the ugly has been beautified. Moreover, evil is defeated by the purifying power of white.

Perhaps noticeably absent in this discussion so far is Shakespeare’s own villainous black Moor, Aaron in *Titus Andronicus*. While Aaron’s representation can also be categorized as evil, Shakespeare’s handling of the villainous black Moor is subtly different from those discussed here. One such nuance visible through Aaron is his willingness to take up the cause for blackness. In prescribing blackness as beautiful (as we shall see), Aaron distances himself from the typical stage representation of the black Moor. Shakespeare engages his audience in a discourse on blackness that is arguably atypical for his time. Through his black Moors (Aaron, Morocco, and Othello), Shakespeare attempts to “mend” the evil and ugly representations of the Moor found on stage and in the popular representations of the time. Beginning with Aaron, Shakespeare’s Moors defy the representations we have observed in this section.
Mending the Moor: The Rise of Shakespeare’s Black Tragic Hero

Approximately two years after Peele’s *Battle of Alcazar*, Shakespeare wrote *Titus Andronicus*, one of his Roman plays and his first contribution to the stage representation of the complex Moorish figure. Traditionally credited as his first tragedy, *Titus* offers us a view of Rome in transition as Saturninus, the eldest son of the recently deceased emperor, vies for the throne against his younger brother Bassianus. The play also introduces us to Aaron, a Moor, imbued with many of the stereotypes attributed to black Moors in the early modern period: he is lascivious, traitorous, murderous, and cunning. Like Muly Mahamet, his predecessor in *Alcazar*, Aaron emerges as the consummate villain, intersecting two kinds of Otherness, racial and national.

Through his licentious relationship with Tamora (Queen of the Goths), Aaron gains access to the center of power as she becomes Rome’s empress. Tamora begins as much an outsider as Aaron. Her status as an outsider may have mitigated some of the audience’s concerns about miscegenation because she begins equally as far from the center as Aaron. From both an Elizabethan and a Roman perspective, Goths are as alien a group as Moors. Naomi Liebler states: “The term *Goth* was deployed generically in Shakespeare’s time to signify “barbarian,” especially barbarians of Eastern origin and of fierce reputation” (“Getting it All Right” 272). Of course, Moors were also commonly recognized as barbarians. Unlike Eleazar and the Spanish Queen in *Lust’s Dominion*, Aaron and Tamora’s miscegenation does not initially transgress romanitas, or what it means to be a Roman, because they were both situated outside of Rome. It is only after Tamora becomes empress that the pair’s affair affects the Roman inside. For the first time in his stage representation, the black Moor was not the sole villain on the stage, nor is his
race the cause for that villainy. While Aaron’s physical and racial features are undeniable—“fleece of woolly hair” (II.ii.34), “black like his face” (III.i.206)—it is his more subtle features, notably his concealed hatred for the inside of power, or Rome, that Shakespeare uses to complicate those racial attributes: “Vengeance is in my heart, death in my hand, / Blood and revenge are hammering in my head” (II.ii.38-39). Aaron is a villain because he delights in his villainy, not because he is black.

Aaron’s villainous ambition to move closer to the center of power threatens the inside of the Roman state. Portrayed very much like an unruly dog let loose on the streets of Rome—“Ay, like a black dog, as the saying is” (V.i.122)—as he himself acknowledges, Aaron compounds his hatefulness with many of the early modern attributes of Otherness associated with the black Moor.¹ Aaron’s relationship to Tamora challenges Elizabethan notions of Other and Self by interracially coupling two outsiders scheming to move closer to the center. For a society that valued setting clear demarcations between the Other and Self, this must have been alarming to the Elizabethans. Neill writes: “This was a culture whose own expansionism, ironically enough, generated fears of a hungrily absorptive otherness which were expressed in complementary fantasies of dangerous miscegenation, degeneration, and cannibalistic desire…” (“Mulattoes” 363). The Elizabethans’ worst fears were put on display through Aaron, a black villain who infiltrates the inside of the state, as he proudly admits: “And now, young lords, was’t not a happy star / Led us to Rome, strangers and, more than so, / Captives, to be advanced to this height?” (IV.ii.32-34). Here Aaron addresses Chiron and Demetrius (Tamora’s sons) who are outsiders as well. Once again, Shakespeare does

¹ Aaron’s representation resembles the accounts of the black Moor propagated by the early travelogues being read by the Elizabethan audience. As has been noted, these travel narratives illustrate the new colonial discourse on race in presenting the black Moor as extremely dangerous, untrustworthy, and evil.
something different in *Titus* (compared to other early modern stage representations of the villainous black Moor) by not having the discourse on Otherness be centered solely on Aaron’s blackness. Shakespeare seems to have greater aspirations for his villainous black Moor. By juxtaposing Aaron’s villainy with that of Tamora and her sons, Shakespeare is less intent on attributing evil solely to blackness. His discourse centers primarily on villainy and Otherness in general and the different forms they could take. His purpose for this will soon come into focus.

Although Shakespeare’s project to “mend” the Moor in *Titus* deals less with blackness as the root of all evil, it is clear that he is familiar with the racial discourse of his time. Shakespeare’s Moor is tinged with all the markings of the early modern racially constructed Other as evidenced in *Alcazar* and *Lust’s Dominion*. He is deceitful:

> If that be called deceit, I will be honest
> And never whilst I live deceive men so.
> But I’ll deceive you in another sort,
> And that you’ll say ere half an hour pass.

*(III.i.189-92)*

He takes great pleasure in his villainy:

> O, how this villainy
> Doth fat me with the very thoughts of it.
> Let fools do good and fair men call for grace,
> Aaron will have his soul black like his face.

*(III.i.203-06)*

He is dangerous:
Why, so, brave lords, when we join in league
I am a lamb - but if you brave the Moor,
The chafed boar, the mountain lioness,
The ocean, swells not so as Aaron storms.

(IV.ii.138-41)

He lacks remorse:

Tut, I have done a thousand dreadful things
As willingly as one would kill a fly,
And nothing grieves me heartily indeed
But that I cannot do ten thousand more.

(V.i.141-44)

We see evidence here of the racial traits associating the black Moor with evil.

Shakespeare complicates these characteristics, however, by presenting a black villain who practices villainy notwithstanding his race. The figure of Aaron is perversely villainous, but what needs to be examined is the extent to which his Otherness is different from that of any other outsiders in the play (Tamora, Demetrius, or Chiron). Here the treatment of race affords us a critical lens to this particular problem. Aaron’s Otherness is clearly on display, visible to all through his physical Otherness and his adherence to the racial stereotypes of the time. Bartels writes:

Aaron is the one character in this play whose malignant differentness is consistently recognized and easily categorized by all, including himself and his allies. His references to his distinctive physical attributes—his “wooly hair” (2.3.34) and his “treacherous hue” (4.2.117)—evoke a stock
image of the black man, and his intention to “have his soul black like his face” (3.1.205) reinforces the idea culturally linked to that image, that blackness is not merely skin-deep. (“Making More” 442)

In performing the racial stereotypes already attributed to him, Aaron distinguishes himself through his racial Otherness, apparently qualifying his villainy within a framework consistent with the racial discourse of the Renaissance. However, while Aaron displays his race through stereotypically villainous tropes, his cognizance of these racial attributes signify a different intent. This racial awareness by Aaron manifests the existence of a larger racial discourse and perhaps a desire to usurp it. In distinguishing Aaron’s Otherness through race in a play dealing with Otherness, Shakespeare brings to focus those racial stereotypes and the biases responsible for associating them with evil.

Others also launch racial epithets at Aaron signifying a similar awareness of racial Otherness. Lucius makes constant reference to Aaron’s blackness as a mark of the devil: “the incarnate devil” (V.i.40), “fiend-like face” (V.i.45), “accursed devil” (V.iii.5), “unhallowed slave” (V.iii.14). Marcus echoes the stereotype of the Moor as an infidel: “irreligious Moor” (V.iii.120), “misbelieving Moor” (V.iii.142). All these deleterious remarks reflect the popular beliefs of the time. Shakespeare’s treatment of race here suggests his willingness, at least, to participate within that discourse at this early point of his career.

As discussed earlier, Ian Smith has noted that language plays an integral part in the construction of Self in early modern England. He points out that an important distinction of being on the inside of the nationalistic discourse is the superior handling of language in comparison to those who are on the outside, or the Other (169). In this
respect, Aaron, once more, complicates our understanding of the Other/Self binary, and consequently of race. Aaron’s eloquence defies all definitions of Otherness and places him close to the inside of Roman power; in other words, the Self of Elizabethan society. This is surely a frustrating feat for his enemies to accept in that they are not accustomed to the Other handling language so skillfully. Simply put, the Other should not be so eloquent. The paradox is evident in the following exchange:

*Lucius:* Bring down the devil, for he must not die
So sweet a death as hanging presently.

*Aaron:* If there be devils, would I were a devil,
To live and burn in everlasting fire,
So I might have your company in hell
But to torment you with bitter tongue.

*Lucius:* Sirs, stop his mouth and let him speak no more.

(V.i.145-51)

Lucius’ frustration with Aaron’s words is significant here because it borders on fear. Clearly the tongue-lashing Aaron effects on Lucius and others goes beyond idle threats. In this manner, Aaron is able to appropriate the dominant language of the inside, or the Self, in a way that torments those who choose only to view him as an outsider, or Other. Once again, recalling Smith’s discussion of language, we can only imagine with what surprise Elizabethans must have received Aaron’s linguistic deftness. Smith points to this very appropriation of the dominant language by the Other as a form of deliberate inversion by Shakespeare to challenge the dominant racial discourse: “By disrupting the expected representations of race, Shakespeare reintroduces the figure of the preposterous,
creating a deliberately inverted paradigm that radically questions Elizabethan racial hierarchies” (178). Smith’s premise here that Shakespeare is intentionally questioning racial hierarchies is an interesting one. Is Shakespeare in fact interested in subverting the representations of race in modern England? The introduction of a blackamoor child, born of the miscegenation between Aaron and Tamora, may bring us closer to an answer to that question.

Aaron’s defense of his child should not be surprising considering his efforts to empower blackness (for better or for worse) throughout the play—“...is black so base a hue?” (IV.ii.73)—nor should the eloquence with which he does so be shocking:

My mistress is my mistress, this myself,
The vigor and the picture of my youth.
This before all the world do I prefer,
This maugre all the world will I keep safe,
Or some of you shall smoke for it in Rome.

(IV.ii.109-13)

Aaron’s tenderness towards his child is rooted in the same understanding of racial constructs that allows him to survive in a society quite opposed to his race. Through his eloquence, Aaron utilizes language as his most powerful tool in making an Other into a someone or Self. In the same manner, he appropriates the dominant language once more, this time for his son. The imperative voice Aaron uses in this passage is intent on giving the “picture of [his] youth” a clear affiliation with the Self. It is a language that refuses to be ignored; it seeks to place the child’s Self, born on the outside, immediately in the inside. Aaron’s rescue of his child also echoes the “fly scene” in Act III:
Titus: What does thou strike at, Marcus, with thy knife?

Marcus: At that that I have killed, my lord – a fly.

Titus: Out on thee, murderer. Thou kill’st my heart …

A deed of death done on the innocent

Becomes not Titus’ brother. Get thee gone …

Marcus: Alas, my lord, I have but killed a fly.

Titus: ‘But?

How if that fly had a father and a mother?

How would he hang on his slender gilded wings

And buzz lamenting doings in the air.

Poor harmless fly,

That with his pretty buzzing melody

Came here to make us merry, and thou hast killed him.

Marcus: Pardon me, sir, it was a black ill-favoured fly,

Like to the empress’ Moor. Therefore I killed him.

Titus: Oh, Oh, Oh!

Then pardon me for reprehending thee,

For thou hast done a charitable deed …

Yet I think we are not brought so low

But that between us we can kill a fly

That comes in likeness of a coal-black Moor.

(III.ii.52-79)
Titus’ indignation—quickly replaced by a sense of satisfaction at knowing the fly was black and “ill-favoured”—reflects the contempt for the Moor in the early modern period. Shakespeare also reveals a sense of irony behind those notions of race pervading the early modern period. Although Titus seems to have learned the value of life after witnessing his daughter Lavinia’s mutilation, he hypocritically makes the Moor an exception. Titus is initially inclined to equalize himself and the fly’s parents until Marcus reminds him of the difference that blackness makes. Aaron’s protection of his son answers Titus’ inquiry—“How if that fly had a father and a mother?”—and challenges his take on blackness.

The birth of Aaron’s child is significant in the promise it has for the Other. As Naomi Liebler has stated: “Tamora’s coupling with Aaron and the birth of their interracial child simply extends the blurring of distinctions already set in motion” (“Getting it All Right” 277). Aaron’s and Tamora’s progeny marks the point where Otherness diverges. While Tamora rejects the child and orders he be killed, Aaron is determined to be left alone with his son. He believes his offspring signals the culmination of his project to bring his race closer to the inside, or Self. His new determination is evident in the following passage:

Come on, you thick-lipped slave, I’ll bear you hence,
For it is you that puts us to our shifts.
I’ll make you feed on berries and on roots,
And fat on curds and whey, and suck the goat,
And cabin in a cave, and bring you up
To be a warrior and command a camp.
(IV.ii.177-82)

Using the heavily racial language assigned to him, “thick-lipped slave,” Aaron appropriates its deleterious suggestions and lifts it into an eloquence that “puts us to our shifts.” Aaron’s promise to “save my boy, to nurse and bring him up” (V.i.84) suggests an even greater significance to the birth of his son. Shakespeare, through Aaron’s performance of language, rejects some of the contemporary notions of blackness of his time. Aaron’s desire that his child grow to “be a warrior and command a camp” may foreshadow Shakespeare’s greater project in handling race ten years down the line, in Othello. Perhaps it is possible that from the arms of this black villain a future black tragic hero may arise, one who will, in fact, “be a warrior and command a camp.”

Although Marlowe should be credited with the first nonvillainous representation of the black Moor on the Elizabethan stage (the Kings of Fez, Morocco, and Argier) in Tamburlaine Part I, Shakespeare’s Prince of Morocco (just a few years after his portrait of Aaron) is significant as a transitional figure between his two inverse representations of the Moor. While Morocco’s stage time in the The Merchant of Venice is brief, his eloquence is worth noting for an understanding of Shakespeare’s treatment of race. Merchant affords us a valuable glimpse of Shakespeare’s evolving thinking on race—and indeed on a range of distinctions of Otherness beyond the scope of this paper—between his two more prominent plays dealing with the Moor.

Morocco’s dignified entrance is immediately followed by an eloquent yet apologetic speech:

Mislike me not for my complexion,

The shadowed livery of the burnish’d sun,
To whom I am a neighbour, and near bred.

(II.i.1-3)

From the outset, Morocco demonstrates a keen awareness of the impression his hue leaves on Portia. Like Aaron before him, Morocco’s eloquence presents an immediate contrast with his appearance in much the same way his tawny or black skin contrasts with his white clothing. 2 His words situate him geographically (like his moniker) into the very heart of the racial discourse of the time. 3 While Morocco’s speech opens as an apology for his complexion and race, he continues in a vein more suited to his princely status:

Bring me the fairest creature northward born,
Where Phoebus’ fire scarce thaws the icicles,
And let us make incision for your love,
To prove whose blood is reddest, his or mine.

(II.i.4-7)

Morocco’s request of Portia here appropriates those notions of racial difference available to the early moderns. In challenging the redness of blood, Morocco goes to the very heart of racial “othering” in the Renaissance. He concludes this speech by reaffirming his race’s merits:

I tell thee lady this aspect of mine
Hath fear’d the valiant,—by my love I swear,

---

2 The Arden edition includes the stage direction at the start of Act II, scene i, as follows: “Enter [the Prince of] Morocco (a tawny Moor all in white)....” The editor, John Russell Brown, points to the significance of Morocco “who claims he is as good as anyone else, dress[ing] in the colour of sanctity” (32). Barthelemy sees this as evidence that Morocco is more black than tawny: “I am inclined to believe that Morocco is fully black, primarily because of the visual contrast his black skin would make with the white and presumably exotic clothes” (148).

3 Loomba comments that “the belief that blackness was a result of hot climate goes back to the Roman writer Pliny’s Natural History...” (Shakespeare 53).
The best-regarded virgins of our clime

Have lov’d it too: I would not change this hue,

Except to steal your thoughts my gentle queen.

(II.i.8-12)

Far from being braggadocio, these lines establish an interesting parallel between nobility and beauty for blackness that may be unique to Shakespeare. Like Aaron doting on his child, Morocco claims blackness as beautiful, a notion not visible on the Elizabethan stage outside of Shakespeare. Recalling Aaron’s prediction for his offspring—“to be a warrior and command a camp” (IV.ii.177-82)—these lines also secure a sense of nobility that is opposite to evil by way of appealing to the Renaissance sense of valor. Morocco’s lines here and his brief stint in Merchant foreshadow Othello and perhaps Shakespeare’s greatest treatment of race. As in his project in Titus, Shakespeare “mends” the Moor in Merchant by using the popular representations of the figure available to him and giving it universal relevance that is not limited solely to blackness.

Sometime around 1603-04, Shakespeare returns with another displacement tragedy dealing with the black Moor. In Othello, the dichotomy between the Other and the Self takes immediate center stage through the play’s subtitle, “The Moor of Venice,” an obvious allusion to Othello’s Otherness. As in Titus Andronicus, Shakespeare engages early modern racial discourse by presenting the figure of an outsider on the inside. Once more, Shakespeare problematizes Otherness by making Othello a Turk turned Christian (like Leo Africanus), though this is implicit rather than explicit in the play, who now, as a hired mercenary, defends Venice against his former co-religionists. In the context of
English colonialism, commercialism, and nationalism, Othello’s various Otherness is
critical to Shakespeare’s treatment of race in this play, as Neill tells us:

*Othello* is a play full of racial feeling—perhaps the first work in English to
explore roots of such feeling; and it can hardly be accidental that it
belongs to the very period in English history in which something we can
now identify as a racialist ideology was beginning to evolve under the
pressures of nascent imperialism. (“Unproper Beds” 394)

England’s relationship to Venice makes that setting even more significant. A major
English trading rival, Venice in the 1600s was a city that “attracted foreigners of many
races, being Europe’s most important trade link with north Africa and the East”
(Honigmann, ed., Arden *Othello* 8-9). Setting *Othello* in a city known for its openness to
foreigners and Others, allowed Shakespeare an unprecedented look at race and what
constitutes Otherness. By intersecting various kinds of Otherness—race, religion, class—
Othello challenges Venetian tolerance for the Other, especially when that Other comes
uncomfortably near to the Self. Picking up where *Titus* and *Merchant* leave off, *Othello* is
Shakespeare’s greatest treatment of race.

Unlike Aaron, who was a villain and never got title billing in *Titus*, Othello plays
the title role of the tragic hero, a significant difference for the audience in Shakespeare’s
time. Liebler discusses the important role of the hero: “Tragedy presents the contestation
of a range of social and political values in conflict in a fictive but recognizable
community. The protagonist is constructed to embody all of those values, constructive
and destructive, which in the course of the play become polarized” (*Festive Tragedy* 21).
Thus, the emergence of a black protagonist as hero who embodies the community’s
values—and in this case also its inherent if problematic diversity—is remarkable considering that figure’s ambivalent role within that community. The importance of the Venetian setting comes into focus here. While Shakespeare’s *Othello* constitutes the first and only instance of a black tragic hero in his *oeuvre*, it completes a trajectory begun with Aaron and continued in the Prince of Morocco who served to inform his Othello in many ways. Perhaps Shakespeare’s return to this model reflects the changes in the racial discourse of his time, or perhaps Shakespeare sought to induce change.

As “The Moor of Venice,” Othello’s transgression in Christian Venetian society is grounded not only in race but in religion as well. If as a Turk converted to Christianity, Othello’s proximity to the inside of the state is surprising. If a born Christian, “taken by the insolent foe / And sold to slavery” (I.iii.138-39), then rescued and redeemed, his journey is remarkable. With ambiguous affiliations to the Ottoman Turks, Othello’s Moorish identity aligns him with those very striking attributes of a Barbarian (Vitkus 92). As we have seen, *barbarism* had emerged as signifying a religious Other, partly through Pory’s translation of Africanus. Initially, it seems Othello’s positive attributes seem to make up for the religious uncertainties of his past. However, his religious Otherness does return to haunt him towards the end of the play, as the action of this drama is to slowly expose all of Othello’s demarcations of Otherness.

What transpires during the interval of over a decade since *Titus* has great significance for Shakespeare’s treatment of Otherness in *Othello*. Bartels mentions:

---

4 Vitkus comments: “Othello’s religious affiliation at the time of the play is Christian, but his origins are unclear. Indeterminacy and instability of identity form the common denominator for understanding his character. He is a kind of renegade and thus an object of suspicion in a play about suspicion” (92).
After a decade that witnessed the prominent state visit of an envoy of noble Moors,\(^5\) the emergence of Pory’s translation of Leo Africanus’s *Historie*, and a new edition of Hakluyt, Shakespeare again brings the Moor to center stage. This time, however, instead of participating in the othering promoted within these texts and within his earlier play, he invokes the stereotype of the Moor as means of subverting it, of exposing its terms as strategic constructions of the self and not empirical depictions of the Other. (“Making More” 447)

In invoking this supply of new stereotypical materials made available to him during the past decade, Shakespeare challenges them in his construction of Othello. By returning to the Moor, Shakespeare shapes that Otherness differently from before. In Othello, he conceives an Other who is capable of acknowledging his Otherness while not fully subscribing to it. Othello’s proximity to the inside results from his ability to skillfully maneuver around Venetian racial constructs. This is not to say that he assimilates; rather, he appropriates the racial parameters assigned to him. Like Aaron and Morocco, Othello values his blackness; however, unlike his predecessors, Othello is better situated—through his military prowess and racial maneuvering—to bring it to the forefront.

Equipped with a new awareness on the subject, Shakespeare’s handling of race in *Othello* is aimed at challenging the very discourse on which it is based.

Once more, Ian Smith’s discussion of language affords us a powerful critical lens with which to observe Shakespeare’s handling of race in this play. Othello’s eloquence, like Aaron’s, is strikingly opposed to the characteristics of the Other. However, unlike Aaron, Othello’s mastery of eloquence is not utilized to force him into the inside but

\(^5\) See Harris’s “A Portrait of a Moor.”
rather to coax others away from associating him with barbarism. This is evident in Othello’s stirring apologia to the senate, where he attempts to dissuade his listeners from Brabantio’s accusations of a barbarian who uses “spells and medicines bought of mountebanks” (I.iii.62).

Rude am I in my speech
And little blest with the soft phrase of peace,
For since these arms of mine had seven years’ pith
Till now some nine moons wasted, they have used
Their dearest action in the tented field,
And little of this world can I speak
More than pertains to feats of broils and battle,
And therefore little shall I grace my cause
In speaking for myself. Yet, by your gracious patience,
I will a round unvarnished tale deliver
Of my whole course of love....

(I.iii.82-92)

Othello’s eloquence here is tinged with irony as he claims himself to be “rude in speech.” More significantly, however, his calm and palliative delivery strikes a vast contrast to the venom Aaron spills. The confidence with which he addresses his audience is intended not only to remove any evidence of barbarism but also to demonstrate to his listeners his rhetorical mastery, and hence, solidify his place in the inside. Smith sees this not as assimilation but as a control tactic: “Othello believes that by speaking eloquently, transcending the limitations of linguistic and cultural barbarism, he can control both the
production and reception of his narrative and secure a place within this racially split society” (177). His performance of language strives to eliminate all thoughts of an “erring barbarian” (I.iii.356) and to make him a mainstay in Venetian society. In Othello’s version of the eloquent Moor, Shakespeare attempts to further subvert the early modern belief in linguistic stereotyping. Through Othello’s speech, the Other is presented more like the Self; Otherness is masked through these words. As Smith indicates, this presents a complicated view for the audience: “If barbarians are those who cannot speak the master language, here Shakespeare provides us with a most paradoxical figure: the barbarian who not only speaks well but who stands out as eloquent, for Othello’s characteristic feature is his eloquence” (175-76). While Aaron frequently spewed evil, Othello as a noble figure and tragic hero is primarily characterized by his eloquence for peace. Even through the similarities he shares in language with Aaron, Shakespeare finds a way to draw stark contrasts.

Othello earns his heroic status not solely through his combat deeds but through his ability to convert his Otherness into the very Self of Venetian society. We are reminded that it is in this manner that he is able to win Desdemona and place himself on the cusp of the Venetian inside: “She loved me for the dangers I had passed / And I loved her that she did pity them” (I.iii.168-69). Loomba writes: “We must remember that Othello actually emphasizes his difference in order to bridge it and win Desdemona. His ‘magic’ consists of invoking his exotic otherness, his cultural and religious differences as well as his heroic exploits, which involve strange peoples and territories” (“Sexuality” 807). It is through this emphasis on his Otherness that Othello manages to capture the hearts and minds of his fellow Venetians, much as Morocco hopes to accomplish with
Portia. Through a fearless self-objectification as Other, Othello heroically makes his Otherness the tool for inclusion within Venetian society. This presents Iago with a significant obstacle to overcome in seeking his revenge on Othello. Iago must usurp Othello’s appropriation of Other by becoming an Other himself. In doing so, Iago hopes to deflect Othello’s assimilated Otherness and return it to where he feels it ultimately belongs, the outside. In speaking of Iago, Smith states: “It is he who will attempt to limit Othello’s geographical intrusion into Venetian culture and to punish the excess of verbal and racial transgression” (177). Iago must appropriate a racial Otherness in order to push Othello out (as he does even with other white characters, notably Cassio, a “Florentine”). Iago gives us fair warning of this inversion early on in the play: “I am not what I am” (I.i.64).

As his first recourse to inversion, Iago invokes the stereotype of the lascivious black Moor. By illustrating Othello’s transgressions of race and sex, Iago hopes to stir Brabantio’s ire and at the same time begin to move Othello towards the outside. In provoking Brabantio’s deepest fears about his daughter with a blackamoor –

Even now, now, very now, an old black ram
Is tupping your white ewe! Arise, arise,
Awake the snorting citizens with the bell
Or else the devil will make a grandsire of you.

(I.i.87-90)

– Iago manages to wake a discourse on race previously repressed by the Venetians. For the early modern English, however, the miscegenation being trumpeted here is particularly disturbing, made more so by Othello’s paradoxical nearness to the inside. In
hammering away at the point—"You’ll have your daughter covered with a Barbary horse; you’ll have your nephews neigh to you, you’ll have coursers for cousins and jennets for germans!" (I.i.109-12)—Iago is able to affect Brabantio so deeply that he brings the case forward to the court. This is important in that Iago cannot accomplish this by himself since he is not himself on the inside. In a twist of irony, Iago is more of an outsider than Othello, something that he cannot accept. However, in his attempt to “out” Othello, Iago places himself ever further away from that inside.

Iago’s duplicity can be said to follow the very racial stereotypes that he uses. His evil disposition attributes to him more of the early modern views of blackness than are even visible in Othello. Ian Smith, who refers to this as the “Mooring of Iago,” suggests Shakespeare’s purpose in this project:

By attributing black stereotypes to Iago, Shakespeare challenges the reading of otherness as a paranoid displacement of anxieties and exposes as false the supposed mastery and superiority of the European Self over the alien. The play gives witness to the vacuous metaphysics of a European culture that fears its own undoing from the trace of the Other, the Moor. (181)

In his quest to sink Othello by challenging and exposing his Otherness, Iago exposes those very constructs of race held by the early modern English. Through an inversion of Iago and Othello, the play interrogates notions of barbarism and even whiteness in Shakespeare’s audience.

Neill comments:
One of the terrifying things about *Othello* is that its racial poisons seem so casually concocted, as if racism were just something that Iago, drawing in his improvisational way on a gallimaufry of quite unsystematic prejudices and superstitions, made up as he went along. ... It is a technique that works close to the unstable ground of consciousness itself; for it would be almost as difficult to say whether its racial anxieties are ones that the play discovers or implants in an audience as to say whether jealousy is something that Iago discovers or implants in Othello. ("Unproper Beds" 395)

Evidently, Iago does not concoct anything new in this play; rather he simply manipulates existing racial stereotypes at his disposal; as he admits: "we work by wit and not by witchcraft" (II.iii.367). In unearthing the existing racial constructs available to him, Iago manages to slowly convince Othello that the Otherness he so proudly flaunts is a detriment that shakes his standing in the inside.

When Othello asks for ocular proof to Desdemona’s alleged deeds—"make me to see’t" (III.iii.368), "I’ll have some proof" (III.iii.389)—he may likewise be asking for evidence of his own Otherness. As Iago spins his treacherous web, Othello begins to view himself no longer as just an alien Other but as a racial Other: “Haply for I am black / And have not those soft parts of conversation / That chamberers have” (III.iii.267-69). While he has always acknowledged his blackness, Othello here attributes his Otherness to his hue. The community, as well, is beginning to reflect Othello’s increasing racialized view; Emilia calls him “the blacker devil” (V.ii.129.) In the end, when Othello takes his own
life, he recasts himself in the role of the Other standing outside (as a Turk) of the Venetian inside:

Set you down this,
And say besides that in Aleppo once,
Where a malignant and a turbanned Turk
Beat a Venetian and traduced the state,
I took by th’ throat the circumcised dog
And smote him—thus!

(V.ii.349-54)

Othello’s return to barbarism and religious Otherness comes at a high cost. In denouncing his Christianity and re-identifying himself as the religious Other, a Muslim Turk, Othello has succumbed to the image of Otherness that Iago has prescribed for him. Jonathan Burton observes that, “As a Christian, Othello is taught the tripartite equation of dark skin, religious error and sexual excess. As a man of color in a white-dominated society, he is consequently prone to a brand of self doubt founded in what Fanon terms ‘affiliation neuroses’” (57). In the end, Othello’s fall has less to do with Iago’s machinations than with the racial construct he all the while acknowledged but is incapable of overcoming; as Iago admits: “I told him what I thought, and told no more / Than what he found himself was apt and true” (V.ii.172-73).

***************

Finally, as we have seen, the reading of race is an important tool into understanding early modern views of the Moor. While the concept of race was in its
infancy during the early modern period, the circumstances prescribing the differentiation between the Other and the Self were already in place. Shakespeare’s handling of race went through its growing pains; while his initial treatment of the subject adhered to the racial discourse of the time, as he returns to the Moor he further complicates the way the Renaissance receives the figure.

In “mending” the Moor, Shakespeare applied a unique treatment to the representation of a figure imbued in Otherness. Challenging race in the Renaissance entailed a calibrated assessment of racial currents at the time and a subversive approach to those currents on stage. With the birth of Aaron’s child, Shakespeare began his challenge to the racial discourse of his time. With the Prince of Morocco, one can see the changing perspective on the part of the artist. With Othello, his only black tragic hero, came a new view of race that would visibly contest the dominant racial discourse. As Liebler states:

The focus of tragedy is upon the action of the whole represented community.... The wide-angle lens invites analysis of the structures of society, its constituencies, as the subject of the tragedy, not “this man” or “this woman” or even “man,” but the human community, human beings in community. (49)

In the end, perhaps the tragic hero’s fall signals a realization on the part of the playwright that his world was not yet ready for heroic performances of blackness. However, a mark was left.
Works Cited


---. “Getting it All Right: *Titus Andronicus* and Roman History.” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 45.3 (Autumn 1994): 263-78.


