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Othello and Africa: Postcolonialism Reconsidered

Emily C. Bartels

EVERY time I teach *Othello,* whether to graduate students or to undergraduates, I must always start with the question of racial bias and where that bias enters the play and our readings of it. "Must" because, in my experience, the majority of students assume that Othello's problems start in Venice, where, as a Moor, he can only be an outsider. There is, of course, evidence in the play for this assumption. By the end of scene one, Roderigo and Iago have called "the Moor" (whom they never name) "the thick-lips" (I.i.66), "an old black ram" (88), "the devil" (91), "a Barbary horse" (111–12), "a lascivious Moor" (126), and "an extravagant and wheeling stranger" (136), and have accused him of "making the beast with two backs" (116–17) with Brabantio's "fair" (122) daughter, Desdemona.[1] By the end of scene two, Brabantio has joined vehemently in the fray, to accuse the "foul thief" (I.ii.62) of "practi[cing] on" Desdemona "with foul charms" (73) and drawing her to his "sooty bosom" (70), of being "an abuser of the world, a practiser / Of arts inhibited and out of warrant" (78–79). And in scene three, the duke orders Othello to Cyprus to fight against the Turks, as if happier to expend Moorish than Venetian blood.

Yet although these expressions may suggest an undercurrent of racial bias that makes them especially effective for underhanded personal and political maneuvers, that bias does not determine Othello's position in the court or on the stage. To the contrary, the racial epithets of the opening scenes—the stereotypes that classify and condemn Othello as a black man—help place Roderigo, Brabantio, and Iago outside polite society, the vulgarity of their sexual imagery calling their otherwise respectable social and political standing into question.[2] And, although Othello's commission may invoke the European practice of hiring Moors as mercenary soldiers, that practice does not necessarily prove bias against the Moor.[3] In fact, the duke also con-

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[1] All quotations from *Othello* come from the New Cambridge Edition of the play, ed. Norman Sanders (Cambridge, 1987).

[2] I was once asked by a journal editor not to quote Iago's reference to "the beast with two backs" because the phrase was too vulgar.

[3] One interesting case of this sort in England was that of "Sir Peter Negro," who was

siders enlisting two Italians for the job—Marcus Luccicos, who is unavailable, and Montano, who governs Cyprus but, according to the duke, knows less about it than does Othello.

Readings that find seeds of racial prejudice in *Othello*'s Venetian society are not necessarily wrong, but the subject is deeply complicated both by the competing and slippery meanings of "race," in this period and after, and by the play's own series of mixed messages that at once provoke and thwart our desires to understand where race figures in the representation.[4] Why then do students so often tend to simplify this story? What compels them to locate absolutely where the lines of bias lie and to overlook competing factors that, in a less racially focused text, they might see? Why does this boundary making persist in an era of postcoloniality, when critics are determined to "[bear] witness to the unequal and uneven forces of cultural representation" and "to reveal antagonistic and ambivalent moments within the 'rationalizations' of modernity"?[5]

Part of the problem is, I think, in the model that underlies postcolonial conceptions of cultural identity and cross-cultural contact—a model drawn, in studies of the early modern period, from colonial histories. As a school, postcolonialism, like cultural studies before (and behind) it, means different things to different critics. What unifies its attempts to look at how texts translate both within and across cultures is a desire to break apart Eurocentric conceptions of "hegemonic 'normality'" and to draw long-lost attention to the voices, societies, and histories those conceptions have silenced.[6] That process has opened up cultural voices to a sort of cross-cultural dialogism, recovered traces of the Other in the self, the self in the Other, and emphasized the flexibility and negotiability of cultural borders. But although postcolonial critiques have begun to read difference into identity, they continue to read identity as difference, as the contested product of colonial encounters in which the West was always on top. They continue, that is, to recreate the history of silenced voices through only one model of cultural exchange: one in which European domination is both the motivating force and the inevitable outcome.[7] What is new, for example, in Edward

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hired, with other mercenaries of "mixed [partially African] blood," to fight against the Scots between 1548 and 1550; see Folarin Shyllon, *Black People in Britain, 1555–1833* (London, 1977), 8 n. 2.

[4] On the slipperiness of race now see Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "Editor's Introduction: Writing, 'Race,' and the Difference It Makes," and Anthony Appiah, "The Uncompleted Argument: Du Bois and the Illusion of Race," in Gates, ed., *"Race," Writing, and Difference* (Chicago, 1985), 1–20, 21–37.

[5] I quote here from Homi K. Bhabha's description of what postcoloniality is all about; see *The Location of Culture* (London, 1994), 171.

[6] Ibid.

[7] See, for example, Edward W. Said, "Secular Interpretation, the Geographical Element, and the Methodology of Imperialism," in Gyan Prakash, ed., *After Colonialism: Imperial Histories and Postcolonial Displacements* (Princeton, 1995), 21–39; Vijay Mishra and Bob Hodge, "What Is Post(-)colonialism?" and Ania Loomba, "Overworlding the 'Third World,'" in Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman, eds., *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader* (New York, 1994), 276–90, 305–23. Loomba does argue against continued invocations of colonialism's polarities, but her subject is "oppositional" discourse (310).

W. Said's postcolonial revision of *Orientalism* is that "Western dominance" (which seemed before to be the only player in the Orientalist game) was always opposed, and frequently defeated, by "some form of active resistance."[8] What remains is the sense that interactions between East and West were always and exclusively part of a drive for or against domination.

In early modern studies, historians and anthropologists have begun to challenge the conquest model and, in Natalie Zemon Davis's words, "the necessary but overpolarized twosome of 'domination' and 'resistance'" that comes with it.[9] But in literary fields, that model has continued to prevail, first under the aegis of new historicism and now of postcolonialism, especially when the subject is race. Critics, it is true, have moved beyond the abstractions limiting foundational studies on race, overturning the once automatic equation of race and blackness, reminding us that "race" in the Renaissance meant such things as lineage, clan, and species and bringing issues of gender and class into intersection with it.[10] Yet in general this work tends to start with struggle and work backward—to read identity through conflict, cross-cultural encounters through conquest, race through racism.[11] When the history of Africa is brought into the picture, what gets prominence is the development of the Atlantic slave trade, which feeds neatly into a history of racism but which would not come to define England's relation to Africa until the Restoration.[12]

Readings based implicitly or explicitly on a domination narrative may be problematic even in studies of periods and societies where imperialism has taken hold either as an ideology or as a practice.[13] Yet they are certainly so in the case of early modern England, known in its own day for trailing far

[8] Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York, 1994). As Robert J. C. Young has pointed out, one of the most frequently voiced objections to Said's *Orientalism* (New York, 1979) has been that it erased the historical "reality" and the "obligation to address the reality" of the colonized domain; see Young, *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture, and Race* (London, 1995), 160.

[9] Davis, "Iroquois Women, European Women," in Margo Hendricks and Patricia Parker, eds., *Women, "Race," and Writing in the Early Modern Period* (London, 1994), 243–58. See Karen Ordahl Kupperman, *Settling with the Indians: The Meeting of English and Indian Cultures in America, 1580–1640* (Totowa, N. J., 1980); Nicholas Canny and Anthony Pagden, eds., *Colonial Identity in the Atlantic World, 1500–1800* (Princeton, 1987); and Neil L. Whitehead, "The Historical Anthropology of Text: The Interpretation of Ralegh's *Discoverie of Guiana*," *Current Anthropology*, 36 (1995), 53–74.

[10] Witness the difference between Kim F. Hall, *Things of Darkness: Economies of Race and Gender in Early Modern England* (Ithaca, 1995), or Hendricks and Parker, eds., *Women, "Race," and Writing*, and earlier studies, such as Eldred Jones, *Othello's Countrymen: The African in English Renaissance Drama* (London, 1965), or *The Elizabethan Image of Africa* (Charlottesville, Va., 1971); Elliot H. Tokson, *The Popular Image of the Black Man in English Drama, 1550–1688* (Boston, 1982); or Anthony Gerard Barthelemy, *Black Face, Maligned Race: The Representation of Blacks in English Drama from Shakespeare to Southerne* (Baton Rouge, La., 1987).

[11] See, for example, Ania Loomba, "The Color of Patriarchy: Critical Difference, Cultural Difference, and Renaissance Drama," and Margaret Ferguson, "Juggling the Categories of Race, Class, and Gender: Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko*," in Hendricks and Parker, eds., *Women, "Race," and Writing*, 17–34, 209–24.

[12] For the most recent example see Hall, *Things of Darkness*, esp. 1–24.

[13] For a lively demonstration of the inadequacies of such formulations for the Victorian period see Margery Sabin, "The Suttee Romance," *Raritan Quarterly*, 11 (1991), 1–24.

behind its European rivals in overseas expansion. In the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, conquest did not necessarily provide the order of the day, at least not the only order. England was then only beginning to come to terms with non-European cultures, to see how their economies might be integrated with England's own, to learn what would make colonies stick.[14] The relation of the English adventurers to the peoples they encountered was anything but fixed. So too was the idea of identity itself, which may not have been so closely tied to difference in this pre-psychoanalytic era, when individuation happened also through the embrace of familiar roles.[15] Imperialist ideologies and prospects were already in the air, but they were enmeshed in a cloud of unknowing; their means and ends and their eventual predominance were anything but clear.

The exchange between England and Africa in the early modern period—an exchange that, I hope to show, is absolutely critical for our understanding of early inscriptions of race—reminds us how experimental and disjointed England's overseas activities were, how fractured its visions and random its advances. The instance of Africa also makes us question the predictability and inevitability of the outcome—the long history of oppression that was, when viewed through what preceded, not always in the cards.

The dark continent. One thing that scholars repeatedly emphasize about Africa is that it was for early modern Europeans the great, unfathomable icon of darkness. Rumor had it, up to the early fifteenth century, that "any Christian who passed [Cape] Bojador"—the southernmost point explorers had reached on the West African coast—"would infallibly be changed into a black, and would carry to his end this mark of God's vengeance on his insolent prying."[16] The "insolent prying" continued nonetheless, and step by step, from 1415 onward, Portuguese mariners made it beyond that first awesome obstacle and around the next, the Cape of Good Hope, in much the same color they started in. Yet although it would not be until 1878, when Henry Stanley (of Stanley and Livingstone fame) entitled his account of an expedition to Africa *Through the Dark Continent,* that Africa would officially become "the dark continent," exploration of the African interiors, as well as major portions of the coast, remained tightly limited well into the eighteenth century.[17]

[14] See Carole Shammas, "English Commercial Development and American Colonization, 1560–1620," in K. R. Andrews et al., eds., *The Westward Enterprise: English Activities in Ireland, the Atlantic, and America, 1480–1650* (Liverpool, 1978), 151–74.

[15] I have written more about this point in "Breaking the Illusion of Being: Shakespeare and the Performance of Self," *Theatre Journal,* 46 (1994), 171–85.

[16] C. Raymond Beazley, *Prince Henry the Navigator: The Hero of Portugal and of Modern Discovery . . .* (London, 1895), 171, quoted in James A. Williamson, *A Short History of British Expansion,* 2d ed. (New York, 1931), 56.

[17] The *Oxford English Dictionary* gives Stanley's account as the first appearance of the phrase (New York, 1981), 11. On the emergence of the idea of the "dark continent," see Patrick Brantlinger, "Victorians and Africans: The Genealogy of the Myth of the Dark Continent," in Hendricks and Parker, eds., *"Race," Writing, and Difference,* 185–22. See also Sara Blair, *Henry James and the Writing of Race and Nation* (Cambridge, 1996), 15–59.

Contemporary documents had their limits too. Early maps, while demarcating myriads of coastal ports, filled in the continent's interiors with pictures of subjects, warriors, and kings in black and in white "African" and "Arabian" drag as well as in outlines that obscured their race, gender, and even species—markers that did not necessarily distinguish Africa from any place else.[18] Accounts of Africa, even from "eyewitness" sources (such as those collected in Richard Hakluyt's *Principall Navigations*), described its various peoples and regions in terms that were either bafflingly specific or confusingly abstract, providing a list of parts unlocated in a geographically meaningful whole or a whole conflicting or overlapping with its parts. "Africa" designated a full continent as well as a region within that continent, and although the term "African" was available—and had begun to be employed—by the 1560s, African peoples were described largely in discrete, regionally or racially specific groups as Negroes, Ethiopians (or Ethiopes), and Moors, with "African" coming into usage to designate any of these parts but not, in the Renaissance, the whole. Even then, the apparent specificity was only an illusion. Ethiopians were at once the peoples of Ethiopia as well as any black Africans. And Moors, the most renowned of African subjects, came in a choice of colors (black or tawny), religions (Christian, Muslim, pagan) and ethnicities (African, Arabian, even Spanish).[19]

Yet Africa was no "new world." It had been "the third part of the world" (after Asia and Europe) since classical times; histories and cosmographies had carried it conceptually into the Renaissance.[20] Too, Europe had long been engaged in economic exchanges with North Africa, where African, European, and Eastern trades all converged. From the early fifteenth century through the end of the sixteenth, the Portuguese, who would later serve as guides for England's first African ventures, maintained a number of forts on Africa's west and east coasts.[21] Although much of Africa's interior remained

[18] An excellent, though early, example is the Catalan map of Northwest Africa (1375) included in Gomes Eannes de Azurara, *The Chronicle of the Discovery and Conquest of Guinea,* trans. Charles Raymond Beazley and Edgar Prestage, vol. 1 (London, 1896). See too the map of Africa from the *Diogo Homem Atlas* (1558), part of which is reprinted in John William Blake, ed., *Europeans in West Africa, 1450–1560,* vol. 1 (1942; reprint, Nendeln/Liechtenstein, 1967), the map included in Hakluyt, *Principall Navigations, Voiages and Discoveries of the English Nation* . . . (London, 1589), and Abraham Ortelius's world map from the *Theatrum Orbis Terrarum* . . . (Antwerp, 1570). On traditions of mapmaking, which come into play as well, see Richard Helgerson, *Forms of Nationhood: The Elizabethan Writing of England* (Chicago, 1992), 107–47.

[19] I discuss this confusion further in "Imperialist Beginnings: Richard Hakluyt and the Construction of Africa," *Criticism,* 34 (1992), esp. 520–25, and "Making More of the Moor: Aaron, Othello, and Renaissance Refashionings of Race," *Shakespeare Quarterly,* 41 (1990), 433–54.

[20] See, for example, *The Rare and Singular worke of Pomponius Mela* . . . , trans. Arthur Golding (London, 1590); *The excellent and pleasant worke of Julius Solinus Polyhistor,* trans. Golding (London, 1587); Stephan Batman, *Batman uppon Bartholome, his Booke* . . . (London, 1582); and Heliodorus, *An Aethiopian History* . . . , trans. Thomas Underdowne (1587; reprint, London 1895).

[21] Thomas Wyndham's voyage to the Guinea coast in 1553, for example, was led also by the Portuguese Antonio Pinteado. See Kenneth R. Andrews, *Trade, Plunder, and Settlement: Maritime Enterprise and the Genesis of the British Empire, 1480–1630* (Cambridge, 1984), 101–15, and Williamson, *Short History of British Expansion,* 83–84.

untouched by Europeans throughout the early modern period, such contacts made more information available than the confusion within and between contemporary documents makes it seem.

Still, to look at the "darkness" that was Africa, one would not think that Africa had already become so much a part of Europe's past or England's (and Europe's) present, would not think that it would play as crucial a part in England's imperialist future as it, in fact, did. The New World, which had little history in comparison to Africa, as far as Europe and England were concerned, got a much fuller treatment in Hakluyt and inspired a kind of ethnographic description—in, for example, Sir Walter Ralegh's *Discoverie . . . of Guiana*—that Africa did not get from English authors until Richard Jobson's *The Golden Trade* of 1623. Why then was Africa, which was much older and closer to England, conceptually left in the dark? Why did its fabled gold not produce a Columbus, a transatlantic gold rush, or, before 1623, a Richard Jobson? Why did the early slaving initiatives John Hawkins undertook in the 1560s lie fallow for almost a century before English entrepreneurs followed suit and put Africa on the map as a crucial link in a triangulated Atlantic trade? Why did Europeans treat Africa as an undiscovered country long after they had "discovered" and "developed" it?

Given Europe's contacts with Africa through the ages, the darkness that surrounded the continent in the Renaissance seems to have been put there, to a certain extent, by choice—a choice conditioned by other priorities. The darkness made room for strategic othering in texts, such as the *Navigations,* with an imperialist bent.[22] It also suggests that, although England's first wave of overseas activity included Africa, Africa was never the primary object of those efforts. Instead, it figured in England's consciousness as a place of passage, more detour than destination—a place to go *through* rather than *to.* Greater gains beckoned in the East, where (instead of Africa) Christopher Marlowe imagined "the wealthy Moor" "without control" could "pick his riches up" (*The Jew of Malta,* I.i.21–22), and in the West, where "incalculable gold" awaited.[23] Next to these troves, Africa paled. In addition, from a practical point of view, Africa's western coast was, in effect, already taken by the Portuguese and by the Catholic Church, which, by papal bulls, authorized the Portuguese presence.[24] Yet there was no official, or even unofficial, English position on Africa, as there was, if only vaguely, on the East and as there would be, with time, in the New World, no policy or rationale for policy on going in or staying out. Africa lay too far outside the center of England's expansionist outlines, it seems, to need one.

The English came to Africa most immediately through the Portuguese, who opened Europe's way to its coasts in the early fifteenth century and ruled

[22] Bartels, "Imperialist Beginnings," 517–38.

[23] Quotations from Marlowe are from J. B. Steane, ed., *Christopher Marlowe: The Complete Plays* (London, 1986). The second quotation here is from "The Letter of Columbus (1493)," in Peter Hulme and Neil L. Whitehead, eds., *Wild Majesty: Encounters with Caribs from Columbus to the Present Day: An Anthology* (Oxford, 1992), 15.

[24] My thanks to Karen Kupperman and Kim Hall for these suggestions.

the external trade there until the end of the sixteenth century. Although the Portuguese established settlements on the coasts and attempted to tap into the well-endowed, though well-guarded, trade of the sub-Saharan interiors, Africa was never their sole object. The prize was rather the East, with its spices, silks, and precious stones.[25] At first, the Portuguese targeted Africa's northern ports, where African, European, and Eastern goods converged. As they then moved in stages down Africa's western coast, they continued the quest for gold and eventually engaged in a substantial gold and slave trade in Guinea. Still, one key impetus for these advances was also a desire to find a direct sea route to India. Once the Portuguese got around the Cape of Good Hope (in the late fifteenth century) and within reach of India, their activities escalated: they launched an unprecedented series of annual expeditions and established enough outposts on Africa's east coast to command the Indian Ocean and thus the Eastern trade, outposts that they held until the next century, when the Dutch moved in and forced them out. From their new positions, the Portuguese continued the quest for African gold, but their efforts also continued to be directed toward Asia.[26]

This is not to say that the Portuguese did not also direct some hopes toward Africa. Prince Henry the Navigator, who initiated the first wave of activity on the continent, seems to have set his official sights as much on finding Christian allies—and the great Christian emperor, Prester John—as on making quick profits. Too, Portugal's entrance into the gold and slave trades fostered interest in Africa that grew by what it fed on and resulted not only in trading posts but also in prosperous sugar plantations on the island of São Tomé, just off Africa's western coast. Ultimately, the plantation effort and the slave trade they fostered were superseded by similar projects the Portuguese carried to Brazil, where the demand for slaves and the production of sugar were vastly greater. And by the time the English entered the field, in the 1550s, Africa's importance to Europe's evolving world picture depended on accomplishments elsewhere. Even now, the achievements by which we mark the "age of discovery" are Columbus's 1492 voyage to the New World and Vasco da Gama's 1498 voyage to India—achievements that depended on the revolutionary navigational skills the Portuguese acquired during ventures to Guinea and that, now as then, overshadow those ventures.[27]

[25] As J. D. Fage writes: "Europeans were more interested in Asia than they were in Africa. Apart from gold, Africa was not known to produce many of the commodities that Europeans desired, nor was it known to have much in the way of organized civilizations with which it would be worth establishing commercial relations"; see *A History of Africa,* 3d ed. (London, 1995), 217. I dispute the final part of his claim below.

[26] Fage argues that the Portuguese acquired African goods in order to have a commodity to market in the East, where there was little demand for European products; ibid., 215–43, esp. 223. For more on the Portuguese progress down Africa's western coast, see Philip Curtin, "Africa North of the Forest (1500–1880)," in *African History: From Earliest Times to Independence,* 2d ed. (London, 1995), esp. 157–60. See also Fage, *History of Africa,* 215–43. On the Portuguese interest in Asia, see Williamson, *Short History of British Expansion,* 58.

[27] Compare Williamson, *Short History of British Expansion,* 57–58, who favors the Christian motive, and Fage, *History of Africa,* 222, who favors the economic one. On the import of the sugar plantations, see Curtin, "Africa North of the Forest," 184. On the significance of the Guinea voyages, see ibid., 155–56, and Michael Craton, *Sinews of Empire: A Short History of British Slavery* (London, 1974), 5.

When the English came to Africa with these histories behind them, they too had their primary sights set elsewhere. Their first recorded expeditions, led by Thomas Wyndham in 1551 and 1552, were directed to the multicultural trading centers of Morocco, where the English may have already been trading for some decades before.[28] These undertakings, though backed by men (Sebastian Cabot probably among them) who would be or had been regulars on the adventure circuit, had no official organization behind them. Those going east, however, did. In 1552, the first of England's merchant companies, the Merchant Adventurers of London, which had originated under Henry IV, was revived and chartered; its primary purpose was to find a northeast route to Asia, and it merited more organization and finance than any effort to reach Africa.[29] The second wave of expeditions (led by Wyndham in 1553, John Lok in 1554, and William Towerson in 1555–1558) targeted the Guinea coast; yet, although many of their backers would become members of the Muscovy Company (chartered in 1555), for Africa there was still no charter company. The Guinea voyages were financed one by one, by temporary syndicates, as if there were no future in them. Although the English may have been attracted to Guinea's gold, their efforts came at a time when the Turks were taking over North Africa, shutting down access to Eastern goods, and cutting the main lines east. The Guinea efforts stopped in 1567 (with George Fenner's voyage), though a couple of ventures to Benin would follow. But, tellingly, once the Turks were defeated at Lepanto and ways east again opened, the English renewed their attention to the Levant and East India trades. Not until James's reign did interest in Africa revive and an African company organize—the Company of Adventurers of London, chartered in 1618—but even then without much sustained success; not until 1631 did the English establish their first permanent outpost there.[30] Under Charles I, the English did make headway into the African trades and had some success with sugar plantations. But African projects did not strongly take hold until after the Restoration, when they fell under the wing of the East India Company.[31]

What put Africa centrally on the map was, of course, the slave trade, so much so that (as suggested above) literary critics have read Africa's and England's early history through it, crediting the English with much more foresight than they possessed as they began to explore the possibilities Africa had to offer. Hawkins tried his hand at slaving in the 1560s, with three voyages, but their promise was so limited that no one followed up until almost a century had passed.[32] Even if the English could have seen a prosperous future

[28] Concerted efforts to establish trade links did not begin until 1551, with Wyndham's first expedition, but the English seem to have been venturing sporadically to Morocco earlier; see Williamson, *Short History of British Expansion,* 82. Andrews, *Trade, Plunder, and Settlement,* 101–15 (which I draw on below), gives an excellent account of England's early expeditions to Africa.

[29] Williamson, *Short History of British Expansion,* 86.

[30] Craton, *Sinews of Empire,* 30.

[31] See Williamson, *Short History of British Expansion,* 162–63.

[32] Useful accounts of the evolution of the slave trade include Craton, *Sinews of Empire;* James A. Rawley, *The Transatlantic Slave Trade: A History* (New York, 1981); Gary B. Nash, *Red, White, and Black: The Peoples of Early America* (Englewood Cliffs, N. J., 1982); Paul E. Lovejoy,

in slaves, they would have seen it through the lens of other prospects, namely the "development" of the New World. For both Hawkins's early slaving experiments and the Atlantic slave trade that followed were triangulated: their primary objects lay, as far as the English were concerned, not with Africa, but with the Americas. Even as England began to settle itself into a colonialist role, Africa remained secondary in its calculations and projections.

Representations emerging with this history tell the same story. Renaissance readers could find texts—such as Leo Africanus's *History and Description of Africa* (translated in 1600), Joannes Boemus's *Fardle of Facions* (translated in 1555), and the cosmographies of Pomponius Mela and Julius Solinus Polyhistor—that gave Africa a prominent place in the world. But by and large, the texts that did came to England through translation from other places and other historical moments. Whatever politics came to bear on their visions, their authors were not writing out of—and writing Africa into—a context of massive global realignment; their worlds were not so pressured by enterprising neighbors clamoring to take the newly tapped resources for themselves. England in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, however, was faced with the prospect of either affirming or forfeiting its place as a global power. With the Portuguese, Spanish, French, and Dutch aggressively making claims over more and more of the world, the English found themselves backed into a corner and dared to come out. These pressures should have guaranteed some capitalizing on Africa as Other, if Africa really was a target of domination and if the assumption that targets of domination were routinely othered holds true. But they, in fact, did not.

English discourse was, of course, already filled with stereotypes of Africans as embodiments of evil, blackened by sin, driven by lust, and hungry for murder and revenge. Such images were augmented by an othering of another sort—by idealizations of a Christian Ethiopia, headed by a Prester John figure. Yet these impressions had an obvious imaginative edge. Prester John, for example, had been around for far too many centuries to be real. Too, the terms of the negative stereotypes were commonly applied to such a broad range of Others—from Africans to black magicians to sodomites to Jews—that their validity had to be suspect. And it seems no coincidence that the most popular targets of both positive and negative stereotyping were the Ethiopians, a people whom the English for decades knew only from texts, not from experience. Such representations formed part of a discourse that, however much it might be "anxiously repeated," could never fully mask its imaginative outlines.[33]

Transformations in Slavery: A History of Slavery in Africa (Cambridge, 1995); and Robin Blackburn, "The Old World Background to European Colonial Slavery," in this issue. On Hawkins's failure, see Andrews, "The English in the Caribbean, 1560–1620," in Andrews et al., eds., *Westward Enterprise,* 103–23.

[33] Bhabha, "The Other Question: The Stereotype and Colonial Discourse," *Screen,* 24 (1983), 18 (quotation). On negative stereotypes of Africans see Alden T. Vaughan and Virginia Mason Vaughan, "Before *Othello:* Elizabethan Representations of Sub-Saharan Africans," in this issue. Shakespeare's Aaron is an excellent case in point. On the double-sided nature of the African picture see Christopher L. Miller, *Blank Darkness: Africanist Discourse in French* (Chicago, 1985), esp. 14–48.

If anyone wanted the latest scoop on Africa, hot off the press, the place to turn was Hakluyt's *Principall Navigations* (1589, 1598–1600), which brought the English expeditions to Africa—and Africa as a reality—into England's (literate) public domain. That reality is notably disjointed, sometimes contradictory and elusive, but it nonetheless—and *consequently*—challenged the stereotypes as they had not been challenged before. Hakluyt's mission was to push the English court toward an imperialist future by crafting England's spotty record overseas into an extensive history of continued progress.[34] Yet although we might expect to find Africa, therefore, pinpointed among other targets of English domination, its relative weakness to England's strengths stressed as a theme, we do not. Within some of the accounts of Africa that theme does, of course, poke through. But more pervasively, across the *Navigations*—especially in those places where Hakluyt's hand shows most (in the prefacing, selection, and arrangement of materials)—the representations of Africa do *not* feed into the imperialist agenda that defines the whole. They stand, instead, outside it, Africa's place in the story left surprisingly open rather than, as in stereotype, preemptively closed.

From the start, Hakluyt pressed Africa to the sidelines of his imperialist aspirations. In the preface to the second edition, he built up England's accomplishments by comparing them to Europe's record, acknowledging others' achievements only to assert England's as better. "Wil it not in all posteritie be as great a renowme unto our English nation," he asked,

> to have bene the first discoverers of a Sea beyond the North cape (never certainly knowen before) and of a convenient passage into the huge Empire of Russia . . . ; as for the Portugales to have found a Sea beyond the Cape of Buona Esperanza, and so consequently a passage by sea into the East Indies . . . ? Be it granted that the renowmed Portugale Vasques de Gama traversed the maine Ocean Southward of Africke: Did not Richard Chanceler and his mates performe the like Northward of Europe?[35]

In this catalog, Africa is pivotal as the touchstone for Europe's advances. Yet it appears not only as the place the Europeans have bypassed and surpassed to reach eastern lands and seas but also as the place the English, by going northward instead of near it, have, even more impressively (as Hakluyt would have it), bypassed and surpassed.

The African expeditions do figure in the *Navigation*'s vision of England's achievements, though Hakluyt did not include all the documents pertaining to Africa that he had on hand and so made smaller an already small body of material.[36] Yet clearly the New World was the primary object

[34] See esp. Helgerson, *Forms of Nationhood,* 151–91.

[35] "The Preface to the Second Edition, 1598," in Hakluyt, *Voyages . . .* , introduction by John Masefield (1907; reprint, London, 1962), 20. All quotations from Hakluyt hereafter referenced in the text and notes come from this edition unless otherwise noted.

[36] See Williamson, "Richard Hakluyt," in Edward Lynam, ed., *Richard Hakluyt and His Successors* (London, 1946).

of his imperialist hopes. Before the publication of *Navigations,* Hakluyt had been preoccupied with New World projects and had already produced two texts devoted to them, *Divers voyages touching the discoverie of America and the Ilands adjacent unto the same* (1582) and the *Discourse concerning western planting* (1584). In the *Navigations,* he reiterated this interest, organizing the New World materials to give them a unique priority and coherence. In each edition, Hakluyt arranged the narratives chronologically and geographically. He began far back in England's past (with the travels, in the first edition, of "Helena, the Empresse, daughter of Coelus, King of Britaine and mother of Constantine the great" in 337 and, in the second, of King Arthur in 517) and moved toward the present, dividing what follows into three expansive regions, partitioned relative to England: South and Southeast, North and Northeast, and West, Southwest, and Northwest.[37] In the first edition, the New World narratives are grouped together and compose the latter section; in the second edition, they appear in a separate volume, displaying, its subtitle announces, what has been "performed to every part of America hitherto knowen or discovered by any Christian." Hakluyt reversed the order of the first two sections between the two editions, but in both the America narratives come last, providing the culminating moment of a move through time and space, from past to present, East to West, Old World to New.

In content, too, the section maintains a clear and directed focus. Granted, a number of the New World documents begin with the search for a Northwest Passage, Asia being the target for initial voyages west as it was for those to Africa.[38] Too, the New World was actually divided into several distinctive regions, which the accounts differentiate. Still, the section is unified by an overriding theme of discovery, a sense that the parts all contribute to a "new world" and their unfolding to a new world order upon which England could, and should, leave its mark. Account after account is tied to the next by the idea of "possession," a word whose omnipresence within the section is highlighted by its absence elsewhere.[39] Take us to whatever part of the mainland or islands they will, the narratives give England an urgently reiterable—and distinctively American—mission: to discover and possess.

Africa, in contrast, had no such identity, no distinct or coherent place, in Hakluyt's imperialist trajectory. Instead of having a volume or even a section to themselves, the materials on Africa are split between two sections, the one on the West and the other on the South, neither of whose focus is Africa. The New World is the center of concern in the narratives on the

[37] From the table of contents of Hakluyt, *The Principall Navigations Voiages and Discoveries of the English Nation* . . . (London, 1589), vol. 1, ed. David Beers Quinn (Cambridge, 1965).

[38] I owe thanks to Benjamin Braude for commenting on this point.

[39] See, for example, Henry VII's "letters patents" to John Cabot (5:83); Hakluyt's own "Notes" to Martin Frobisher's company (5:165-66); Elizabeth's letters patents to Ralegh (6:115–16); and Ralegh's "Discoverie of . . . Guiana" (7:286). Stephen Greenblatt has posited wonder as "the central figure in the initial European response to the New World" and has linked it in the Renaissance to the idea of possession; see *Marvelous Possessions: The Wonder of the New World* (Chicago, 1991), 14.

West, and when Africa figures in them—in accounts of Hawkins's slaving voyages to the West Indies, for example, or Sir Francis Drake's travels to the South Seas—it is as a pit and provisions stop, not as a destination, a discovery, or a target of opportunity.[40] And although a few New World narratives provide some of the fullest accounts of Africa we ever get, others give us Africa (Barbary or Guinea) almost in name only. The result is a scattered and unpredictable vision of Africa's import, made worse by the well-consolidated depiction of the New World, eclipsing Africa's chance at fame.

The situation is not much better in the section on the South, despite the fact that it includes a cluster of narratives concentrating exclusively on Africa (though a cluster broken up by long narratives on the Near and Far East).[41] Throughout the section, even in some of the Africa material, it is the East, the first main target of England's overseas enterprises, that gets top billing. One of the first documents pertaining to activities in Africa is a letter written by James Alday, a moving force behind England's Moroccan trade, to Michael Locke, a key backer. Hakluyt included the letter, its heading suggests, as evidence of the voyage initiating—and Alday's claim to have invented—that trade. Yet the letter testifies less to interest in Africa than to interest in the East. Alday's ostensible purpose is to explain why he ducked out of the Barbary voyage (an attack of "the great sweate") and to express his desire, which he assumes Locke shares, "to prosecute the olde intermitted discoverie for Catai [Cathay]" (4:32), the East's "unspeakeably rich" paradise (1:465).

Moreover, the trade that gets priority throughout the section is that of the Levant, which was enjoying new surges of interest—and also detracting attention from Africa—when the *Navigations* came out.[42] In the second edition, Hakluyt prefaced the section with a new dedicatory epistle praising, promoting, and putting on the table as crucial to English expansion "the happie renuing and much increasing of our interrupted trade in all the Levant" (1:42). Underscoring that agenda, he added, right before the main cluster of Africa documents, several newly available documents on the Turks. One, an account of a voyage to Constantinople and Syria (in 1593–1594), describes an exchange of gifts between Queen Elizabeth and the emperor of Turkey and, in doing so, takes the occasion to detail at some length the power and pervasiveness of the Turks, tallying up available troops, their sites of conquest, and their ability to "[glory] in the taking of all Christendome" (4:13)—takes occasion, that is, to make clear what the English are up against, whether amicably or inimically, and where their efforts should be directed. Hakluyt did not necessarily (or, given his interests, probably) situate these new materials as he did with a conscious eye to the ways they framed the representation of Africa. Yet they nonetheless take the edge off African ventures, which seem thus to be slipped in between the cracks of England's dominant concerns.

[40] See the representation of Africa in, for example, the three accounts of Hawkins's third slaving voyage (6:296–98, 336–39, 7:53–55) and the account of the Drake voyage (8:87–90).

[41] See, for example, the description of Japan by R. Willes (4:191–209).

[42] The Turkey Company got its charter in 1581, shortly before the emergence of the first edition, and, before the appearance of the second, was rechartered as the more prominent Levant Company (in 1592); see Williamson, *Short History of British Expansion,* 53.

England's experiences in Africa, as these representations tell the tale, were so mediated by the Portuguese that the accounts ostensibly on Africa focus instead on Anglo-Iberian relations. Richard Eden was the first to publish reports on African voyages (to Guinea)—as merely an appendix to his translation of Peter Martyr's *Decades of the newe worlde* (1555)—and in Hakluyt they compose a major part of the Africa cluster. Yet they really tell the story of the Portuguese. Eden made clear that the English could only get to Africa through the Portuguese, the "Lordes of halfe the world," who, he noted, had gotten to know the eastern part of Africa because of their "voyages to Calicut" (4:38). It was around *their* position (not that of the Africans) that he tried to come to terms with England's own. Acknowledging that those who did the work of "discovering and conquering . . . such landes ought by good reason to have certaine privileges," he insisted that it was "agaynst good reason" "that such as invade the dominions of other should not permit other friendly to use the trade of marchandise in places neerer, or seldome frequented of them, whereby their trade is not hindered in such places" (36). Eden did not suggest that Africans had rights to their land and trade, but neither did he propose dispossessing them. Rather, he sorted out England's (to him) due privileges on the grounds of Portuguese claims, which he meant not to question but, without hindering, to share. Further, his tale of the first Guinea voyage (led by Wyndham in 1553) centers on Antonio Pinteado, the venture's "expert Pilot" (4:39), who had been one of Portugal's top navy commanders but who had defected to England in 1552. Of most concern are the ways Wyndham ("a terrible Hydra" [40]) and others on board mistreated Pinteado, fighting with him over the itinerary from point to point, calling him "Jew" (41, 44), reducing him to the status of a cabin boy, and ultimately causing him to die "for very pensivenesse & thought that stroke him to the heart" (44). If there is a moral to the story, it is that a Portuguese in the hand is worth two Englishmen in the bush. What the Africans are worth, beyond some instances of lucrative trade, is neither clear nor central to the account.

In the placement and priorities as well as the prefacing of the narratives, then, Hakluyt's *Navigations* suggest what the events it records were telling: that Africa was not, like the Americas, a crux of English expansion, but was instead a sort of tangent to a vast unraveling world history, dominated rather by the New World and the East. Its perceived importance to that history was as fragmented, indeterminate, and obscure as the telling of its story.

This is not to say that Africa did not matter, but rather that it mattered in ways that cannot be explained by the expectations postcolonialism, despite its attempts to break apart colonial constructs, continues to impose on disenfranchised worlds. Though Africa became increasingly the object of exploitation, it was not initially the *target*—and so, not a place the English needed to find or plant sodomites or cannibals, which peopled New World texts,[43] not

[43] If Greenblatt is right that Europe left its mark on the New World by possessing its marvels, these figures too may have contributed to the sense of possession.

a heart of darkness that imperializing English writers needed to fill with unspeakable horrors, not a terrain that needed to be demonized to be responsibly dominated, at least not yet. Critics frequently cite the catalog of Others—troglodytes, anthropophagi, and the like—included in the account of the second Guinea voyage, as in Othello's exotic autobiography, to characterize early modern representations of Africa.[44] Yet the images in Hakluyt—and, outside Othello's narrations, in *Othello*—are more wide-ranging and less estranging. The natives do stand out in their nakedness, but one can only wonder how strange this would seem to a people desperate to find new markets for their cloth.[45] The most "beastly" figures that appear in the Guinea account and across the *Navigations* more broadly appear in ways that highlight their textual origins.[46] Granted, there are some "savages" in reports of encounters, but they are more the exception than the rule, especially in contrast to the New World accounts, where "Savages" or "Salvages" (usually capitalized) are everywhere. Too, although these New World figures stand out largely (not always negatively) as autonomous subjects, Africa's "savages" frequently have the Portuguese behind them, prompting their unfriendly behaviors.[47] And although the few Negro women who do surface are characterized by very long breasts,[48] it is in Venice, in an account of a voyage to Jerusalem, that women become "monsters" (3:75), ostensibly for wearing eighteen-inch platform shoes.

In fact, not only is Africa *not* sensationalized into a marketable Otherness, but Hakluyt's picture presents parts of Africa (Barbary, in particular) as a reassuringly developed region. Part of what drew the Portuguese—and after them, the English—to Africa was that it was already "civilized," that it had several internal networks of trade already in place long before any Europeans arrived. The Portuguese were, after all, looking for a quick fix of profit, and the easiest way to get it was to tap into established lines of exchange. When direct attempts to do so failed, they sold their shipping ser-

[44] The account is of John Lok's voyage in 1554–1555, included in Hakluyt (4:47–65).

[45] For an excellent discussion of the English response to nakedness in the New World see Karen Ordahl Kupperman, "Presentment of Civility: English Reading of American Self-Presentation in the Early Years of Colonization," in this issue.

[46] See the references to Africa's "beastly savage people" that appear in Robert Baker's poetic accounts, "The first voyage of Robert Baker to Gunie . . . ," and "The second voyage to Gunie . . . ," in Hakluyt, *Principall Navigations,* ed. Quinn, 130–42. That these are (notably stylized) poems underscores their literary edge, and that Hakluyt chose to exclude them from the second edition, along with the more fantastic materials from Mandeville, renders the persuasiveness of their terms suspect; see Vaughan and Vaughan, "Before *Othello*." On the ways the fictionality of these figures does or does not play into their impact see Mary B. Campbell, *The Witness and the Other World: Exotic European Travel Writing, 400–1600* (Ithaca, 1988), esp. 122–61; Peter Mason, *Deconstructing America: Representations of the Other* (London, 1990), esp. 13–38; and Michel-Rolph Trouillot, "Anthropology and the Savage Slot: The Poetics and Politics of Otherness," in Richard G. Fox, ed., *Recapturing Anthropology: Working in the Present* (Santa Fe, 1991), 17–44.

[47] See Bartels, "Imperialist Beginnings."

[48] Jennifer Morgan presents a lively discussion of representations of "othered" breasts in "'Some Could Suckle over Their Shoulder': Male Travelers, Female Bodies, and the Gendering of Racial Ideology, 1500–1770," in this issue.

vices to the Africans and, by transporting goods from one part of the continent to another, profited then as middlemen to African trades rather than as independent merchants.[49]

The English were likewise after fast and easy profits. If Carole Shammas is right, it was not until James's reign (after the first wave of African ventures had ceased and headway into the Americas had been made) that colonization became "commercialized"—that is, that the English began to place their bets on the development of new commodities, new markets, and new networks of exchange. Before that point, they modeled their actions on their own martial history, experiences in Ireland, and the example of the Portuguese (especially in Africa), looking to profit from already excavated resources and going for the gold, literally and figuratively, through rather than against African (as well as Portuguese) establishments. Indeed, English aggression in African domains was as (if not more) likely to be aimed against the Portuguese as against Africans.[50]

More than anything, as the Hakluyt documents tell it, Barbary provided the English a reliable refuge, a place where voyagers could count on the Moors to cooperate with them in trade, provide them with necessary sustenance for their ventures, and help them fend off the attacks of competing Europeans. The account of Wyndham's second voyage to Barbary (in 1552) shows the English going directly to what seems an established anchoring spot ("Zafia, or Asafi") in order to "put on land part of our marchandise to be conveied by land to the citie of Marocco" (4:33–34), by means so routine they required no detailing. The English then "refreshed" themselves and moved on to the next port of call, Santa Cruz, where they discharged more goods "well accepted by the Moores" (34), with such success that the voyagers stayed in the area for three months. The story is not all smooth sailing. At one point, the Moors take sides with the French against the English, but only until the English insist that they "had bene there the yere before, & came with the good leave of their king in marchants wise" (34). Too, the Moors are, to some degree, blurred into the background: the goods are "conveied" to Morocco (in passive voice), and the "towne" offers support, seconded by the authority of the ethnically unidentified "Viceroy," "Sibill Manache" (34). Still, the Moors' assisting presence comes through obliquely here and directly in other documents. Elsewhere, for example, we hear how the English, drained by "a fierce assault" of the Spanish (4:382), repaired to Barbary, where they found "the people," though "Moores and heathen," "wonderous favourable" and received from them "fresh water and al other necessaries" as well as "such good intertainment, as if we had bene in any place of England" (382).[51] Hakluyt himself used the fact that the Spanish and Portuguese had long sustained "ordinarie confederacie and traffike with

[49] See Curtin, "Africa North of the Forest," 157.

[50] "English Commercial Development and American Colonization, 1560–1620," in Andrews et al., eds., *Westward Enterprise,* 173. Shammas does not make the link to Africa, though the list of models is hers. See Shammas, "English Commercial Development," 172. See also Andrews, *Trade, Plunder, and Settlement,* 101–15.

[51] I have argued that the account of Edmund Hogan's 1577 visit to the court of Mully

the Moores" (1:43) as a defense against objections to England's "new trade with Turkes" (42).[52]

Even as late as the 1620s, when the English had already begun to colonize the New World and to realize the limitations of reliance on indigenous economies, representations continued to give the Moors the upper hand in Anglo-African trade. Jobson insists that one "neede not search written bookes" to find out about the gold trade of Ethiopia,

> but talke or discourse with any Marchant of this City of London, who have yearely trade and commerse in *Barbary,* . . . and inquire of them, whence the *Moore* of *Barbary* hath that rich gold, he makes his Chequens of, and they will tell you, there is no gold growing, within the confines of *Morocco,* or *Fesse,* . . . but that the great aboundance of that rich gold they have, is fetcht and brought into the Country, by the naturall inhabitants, for which they undergo great travailes, onely by land wherein they do passe great desertes of sand, with much danger, as appeares by the losse they receive many yeares, of diverse both of their people, and Cammels, yet so commodious is their trade, and followed with such great dilligence and government, that amongst themselves, none are admitted but principall persons, and by especiall order, without entertaining any other nation, what respect or familiarity so ever, they have gained amongst them.[53]

It is "the *Moore* of *Barbary*" and the "naturall inhabitants" who clearly have what it takes to make the trade work, despite the serious "danger" it poses, and only they who decide, "with such great dilligence and government," who can or cannot partake of their "commodious" commerce.

Jobson's text is known primarily for its bold-faced statement against slavery—that his was "a people who did not . . . buy or sell one another, or any that had our own shapes"—a pronouncement frequently cited for its idealism or naïvete. Yet his perspective seems idealist and naïve only if we look back at it through the outcome, through the history of slavery and racism that followed. Before Jobson, and for some time after, Africa showed no signs of becoming a colony, or Africans of becoming the hottest commodity on the market. Even when the Atlantic slave trade got substantially under way, the English (like the Portuguese) were buying Africans from Africans, treating only some natives as objects, others as fellow merchants. And, if John Thornton is right, Africans in the New World—where the

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Abdelmelech, emperor of Morocco, shows the Moor as cunning and manipulative ("Making More of the Moor," 440–42); yet even in it one can see the Moor also enabling negotiations between his people and the English (see 4:156–62).

[52] See "The Epistle Dedicatory to Sir Robert Cecil in the Second Volume of the Second Edition, 1599" (1:37–46).

[53] Jobson, *The Golden Trade; or, A Discovery of the River Gambra, and the Golden Trade of the Aethiopians* (London, 1623), ed. Walter Rodney (London, 1968), 3. I am grateful to Kathleen M. Brown for calling my attention to this text.

English encountered them most—formed their own communities and kept their culture from total subjugation, albeit in disenfranchised terms.[54] It would not be until then—until the English had settled parts of the New World and transported and encountered Africans there—that Africa's role in England's future, and its place within racist and imperialist discourses, would begin to become clear. Before then, despite the popularity of stereotypes and in the face of the news about real ventures, the range of meanings Africa could hold remained significantly open to suggestion.

Returning, then, to *Othello,* the paradigms of postcolonialism, and the reading of race, we may ask how an understanding of where Africa fit, or did not fit, into England's early expansionist enterprises can change the ways we view representations of African subjects such as Othello the Moor. If Africa's displacement from narratives of domination opens up its meanings, how is that openness manifest in *Othello*?

For starters (and I can only make a start here), if we free ourselves from targeting Othello as the necessary victim of cross-cultural power plays, we can recognize much more play within his part. Othello is, as the subtitle announces, "the Moor of Venice"—not, say, the Moor of Barbary, a place invoked in the name of Desdemona's mother's maid, or the African, a term Shakespeare used a few years later in *The Tempest.* We can infer from the references to Othello's blackness that he is of African origin; yet it is only Iago (along with those—Brabantio and Roderigo—whom he provokes) who is anxious to nail that blackness down, to turn it into what we would call a racial stereotype and use it as an absolute marker of cultural difference, a sign that Othello is not "of Venice." Shakespeare, to the contrary, denotes Othello flexibly, particularly along ethnic lines, as a Moor who is simultaneously of Venice.

Othello is so integrated into Venetian society that he can set the terms of both military and social action. He appoints his own officers, over the candidate (Iago) that "great ones of the city" (I.i.8–9), if we can believe Iago, press him toward, and he determines where and with whom Desdemona will live, against the protests of her father. Yet at the same time, Othello is always the Moor—not just in others' potentially biased eyes but also, proudly, in his own. He elopes with a woman who he says was attracted to his escapades in an Africanesque landscape and who calls him "the Moor" (I.iii.244), and he uses his heritage as a trump card to defend his honor—once when Iago accosts him with news of Brabantio's ravings and again when he answers those ravings in court. And even though Brabantio, in stereotyping the Moor as a demon and a witch, seizes on that heritage as a point of vulnerability to prove his guilt, for Othello it is a point of pride.[55] What we have then is neither an alienated nor an assimilated subject, but a figure defined by two worlds, a figure (like Marlowe's Jew of Malta) whose ethnicity occupies one slot, professional interests another, compatibly.

[54] Jobson, *Golden Trade,* 160. On Jobson's naïvete about slavery, see, for example, Craton, *Sinews of Empire,* 56; Andrews, *Trade, Plunder, and Settlement,* 115. See Thornton, *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World, 1400–1680* (Cambridge, 1992).

[55] See esp. Othello's comments on his noble birth, I.ii.19–24.

Such terms, from a postcolonial perspective, might seem conflicted, with one identity competing against the other within a vexed cultural conjunction. Yet the Renaissance had other models, which suggested otherwise. For centuries, foreigners had lived in England, orchestrating most of the country's trade, and English factors also took up residence in foreign domains for like purposes. And although the records are severely limited, we know that Moors did live in England in the early modern period and that English factors lived in Barbary.[56] For Othello, then, to be "of Venice"—to have a dual, rather than divided, identity—is finally not so strange, so suspect, or so charged.

What *is* strange—and made strange in the play—is that others attempt, by invoking stereotypes, to make Othello's position so. By bringing the Turks into the picture and then wiping them out of it, Shakespeare not only defines Othello through his military occupation and preoccupation; he then releases him from it, signaling to us that the Moor can play other parts and allowing his tragedy—like Hamlet's before him and Lear's after him—to revolve rather around psychic struggles. Shakespeare also sets Venice—and Iago's actions in Venice—within an imperialist context, the introduction and erasure of the Turks focusing everyone's attention on Cyprus and so on Venice's colonialist rule there.[57] Although we might expect Iago's racially loaded brand of character defamation to play well in this context, it does not. Rather, the play suggests "racism"—the inscription of ethnic stereotypes—as an *obstacle* to survival in an imperialist world, rather than as an ally.

In the first place, Iago's bias is deeply personal—deeply embedded within the unreadable interiors of his mind—to the extent that it ultimately becomes him and becomes as unfathomable, motiveless, and malignant as he is. It also poses as much of a threat to Venice's safety as the Turks. Importantly, Shakespeare sets Iago's assaults against Othello in conflict with Venice's defense against the Turks, each poised to undo the other, the one building up Othello where the other breaks him down. Iago's accusations send Brabantio running, rabidly, to court where the conflict plays out, to prove Othello the bewitching "abuser of the world." And there, Shakespeare situates the attacks as an unwelcome interruption to the duke's attempts to mobilize against the Turks. Brabantio himself admits that his "particular grief" "engluts and swallows other sorrows," leaving him with no concern for "the general care" (I.iii.54–55, 57), despite his position as senator. And the duke repeatedly tries to get back to his more important political business by resolving the domestic crisis at once, handing "the bloody book of law" (I.iii.67) over to Brabantio before the facts—notably, the name of the

[56] For a sense of their legal and economic status, see, for example, the charter "granted unto forreine marchants by king Edward the first" in 1303 (Hakluyt, 1:112–17), or Edward II's letters to Norway's king regarding English merchants living (and arrested) in Norway (Hakluyt, 1:117–22). See also Williamson, *Short History of British Expansion,* 14. For the history of blacks in England see Shyllon, *Black People in Britain.* The newest study, Gretchen Gerzina's *Black London: Life before Emancipation* (New Brunswick, N. J., 1995), adds little to what we know about the situation in the Renaissance but provides interesting life histories of London blacks in the 18th and 19th centuries. For an example of an ambassador in Barbary see the account in Hakluyt of Edmund Hogan's journey to Morocco (4:156–62), where John Bampton was stationed.

[57] I am indebted to Martin Orkin for pointing out that rule.

accused—are in, and then, when the culprit turns out to be Othello, trying to dismiss the charges as "thin habits and poor likelihoods / Of modern seeming" (I.iii.108–9).[58] Even if the duke is merely supporting Othello to use him, these exchanges show the defamation of the Moor as a serious threat to Venice's defense and safety—like the Turkish invasion itself.

Like the Turkish invasion itself: the parallel is not incidental to the play's representation of racist speech but crucial. For Iago's and Brabantio's sort of outburst counters not just the way the Venetian court treats the Moor, their "valiant" general (I.iii.47), but also the way it treats the Turks, the much detested "general enemy" (48). The Turks were commonly vilified as deceivers through the (unfounded) accusation that they disguised their real targets by heading falsely toward Rhodes—(a sort of "here they go again" trope). Shakespeare gives the Venetians every opportunity to fall for the stereotype by rendering it true, by having the Turks actually head for Rhodes when their real target is Cyprus. Notably, however, the court does not bite but instead carefully sizes up the Turks' movement. "When we consider / The importancy of Cyprus to the Turk," one senator reasons (urging circumspection):

> And let ourselves again but understand
> That as it more concerns the Turk than Rhodes,
> So may he with more facile question bear it,
> For that it stands not in such warlike brace,
> But altogether lacks the abilities
> That Rhodes is dressed in. If we make thought of this,
> We must not think the Turk is so unskilful
> To leave that latest which concerns him first,
> Neglecting an attempt of ease and gain
> To wake and wage a danger profitless (I.iii.19–30).

Instead of reading (or misreading) the fake advance on Rhodes as an abstract sign of bad character, the senators treat it as a case-specific and skillful strategy. And because they do, because they "make thought" of the situation, they successfully (though, ultimately, needlessly) anticipate the actual target, grounding their defense on reason and reality, not (like Othello's accusers) on fantasy and phobia. Iago, of course, invokes a stereotype, using the idea of "turning Turk" to indicate the most in faithlessness. But he stands alone, trying to turn flexible identities into inflexible stereotypes, leaving the stage with a prescription for prejudice—"what you know, you know" (V.ii.300)—that is unsettling at best.[59]

The only other exception is Othello, who, after being "Iagonized," tries to make sense of his own story by inveighing against the Turk. In stabbing himself, he imagines that he is killing "a malignant and a turbaned Turk," who "beat a Venetian and traduced the state" and whom he typecasts as a

[58] The duke tries also to obviate the need to hear Desdemona's testimony by insisting that Othello's story "would win my daughter too" (I.iii.170).

[59] As Bhabha suggests, stereotypes can only masquerade as inflexible, since their ostensibly rigid terms differ from iteration to iteration; Bhabha, "Other Question."

"circumcised dog" (V.ii.349–51).[60] Here, in an image, is racism turned to, and into, an imperialist cause. Yet the result is the confusion and collapse of both sides, self and Other, Venetian and Turk, friend and enemy. Indeed, Othello's figuration emerges in and as a glaring moment of misreading. Not only is it preceded by his literally incredible self-portrait as "one that loved not wisely, but too well" (V.ii.340), but also his evocation of the external situation highlights his distance from it—from the fact that his fate hangs not on the imperialist crisis that was so neatly avoided but on the perverse conflicts manufactured from internal, inscrutable biases. Though in stereotyping himself, he attempts to clarify his tragedy, he instead underscores its unreadability and leaves us with a crucial question: What does Othello's identity as a Moor—which he leaves out—have to do with anything?

To ask the question is not to whitewash the story and bypass the issue of race, though that has happened in criticism and on the stage, with an answer of "nothing" rather than "everything" in mind. It is not just we who are asking, but the play, which thus exposes how open the Moor's place in England's conceptual fields was. *Othello* cannot see what—the oppressive force of colonialism—is coming.[61] But Shakespeare does anticipate the conjunction of racism and imperialism, the coincidence of racially loaded othering and an externally threatened state, enough to set the two side by side and explore what happens. What happens is that racist inscriptions stand as an impediment to imperialist success, a result that Shakespeare plays out, pivotally, around the figure of the Moor. The presence of Africa and its subjects, in all their infinite variety, breaks up the possibility for England of a clean imperial sweep, posing instead from the start a complicated nexus of relations that could not fall easily under or into a racist or imperialist regime. And that Africans became the most vigorously regulated and subjugated of all England's Others should ultimately come to us as a surprise.

If we look forward, then, from these representations to England's translation of African slavery into the New World slave societies that vastly limited the flexibility and freedom of black slaves, what we see is not a linear or inevitable progression from expansionism to racism, exploration to domination.[62] Rather, we see a radical disjunction between a world that would acknowledge and embrace a Moor of Venice to one that would rather put him in chains, like a circumcised dog. And it is with that disjunction that our postcolonial stories, our understanding of how "race" became race and racism, need to begin.

[60] His attempt to compare himself to a "base Indian" or "Judean" (V.ii.343) works similarly.

[61] Jyotsna Singh makes this point in "Othello's Identity, Postcolonial Theory, and Contemporary Rewritings of *Othello*," in Hendricks and Parker, eds., *Women, "Race," and Writing*, 287–99, esp. 291.

[62] On the difference between slaveowning societies (like Africa) and slave societies (as in the New World) see Philip D. Morgan, "British Encounters with Africans and African-Americans, circa 1600–1780," in Bernard Bailyn and Morgan, eds., *Strangers within the Realm: Cultural Margins of the First British Empire* (Chapel Hill, 1991), 157–219.