

Iago's Orientalism: Imperial Discourse in *Othello*

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Abstract: *The debate about how Othello treats race, imperialism, and Arabs has gone on from Rymer in the Seventeenth Century until the present day. This essay surveys the critical heritage on this theme and then focuses its analysis on the language of the play, considered in terms of Edward Said's theories in Orientalism and Culture and Imperialism, to determine whether Shakespeare himself held racist and Orientalist views. This analysis finds the source of the play's Orientalist and imperialist language and attitudes in one character, Iago. The criticism then turns to examine the operation of Iago's Orientalism and finds the play very conscious of the textual nature of such distortion and control of discourse. Othello's tragedy results, in this analysis, from directed misreading and consequent misinterpretation of internal texts like the handkerchief. Further, Iago's imperial discourse about blacks and Arabs is seen to connect to his misogynistic attitudes towards women, while Othello's misreadings connect him to the play's women (for example, when he shares his misreading of the handkerchief, which represents his Arab heritage, with the play's most maligned woman, Bianca). The study concludes by showing how one women-- Emilia, Iago's wife--speaks back to the reductive and exploitative discourse that causes the tragedy.*

1. Introduction

For centuries critics have projected their own racist and imperialist attitudes onto *Othello*, beginning with Thomas Rymer who, in 1693, ridiculed the improbabilities of making “the *Black-amoor*” into a general and having him marry not “some little drab” but “the Daughter and Heir of some great Lord.” Part of Rymer’s rant, however, contributes to my analysis of Iago’s Orientalism: he notes that Shakespeare would have us believe that “all the Town would reckon it a very suitable match” (2003:45-46). Except for Iago himself and a few remarks in Act One by a Roderigo and a Brabantio primed by Iago’s bestial images of interracial love-making, no one else in the play takes a racist position. Charles Lamb, in 1811, however, finds the interracial “wedded caresses of Othello and Desdemona” “extremely revolting” (2004:221). Coleridge, later in the nineteenth century, solves Rymer’s problem of the play’s improbability by stating, against all evidence (e.g. Othello’s statement, “I am black” [3.3.262]), that Shakespeare never meant Othello to be a Negro (2003:48-49). Racist attitudes continue in modern criticism, most infamously with M.R. Ridley’s Introduction to his Arden edition of 1958 but also in arguments from black critics, such as S.E. Ogude who sees *Othello* as “an undisguised expression of racism” (1997:165). Ogude argues that a black actor playing Othello is “an obscenity” because “Othello suffers from an overwhelming inferiority complex, which is seen as part of his racial heritage” (1997:163).

Albert Gerard, on the other hand, does not object to this purported racial stereotyping in the play but affirms it. For him, “Othello’s negroid physiognomy is simply the emblem” of the intellectual deficiency that defines the hero and causes the tragedy (1977:13). Gerard recognizes that the play deals with “the clash of two cultures, which occurs in the mind of Othello” but argues that Shakespeare does not emphasize that theme “as a modern dramatist would” (1977:14) and that Othello “remains a barbarian to the very end” (1977:20). For Arthur Little, *Othello* is a “drama of *raptus*, of bride theft—of rape” which brings into focus “the threat racial mixing poses to the state’s national and imperial destiny” and “the horror of the black man raping the white woman” (2000:86-93). Thus a major problem in reading *Othello* is resisting the rhetoric of Iago who “enjoys a privileged relationship with the audience” and whose “discourse of knowledge . . . annexes not only the other characters, but the resisting spectator as well, into his world and its perspective” (Newman 1994:132).

In a book based in Edward Said’s theories in *Orientalism*, Rana Kabbani takes up the clash of cultures idea in *Othello*, but, unfortunately, she takes much the same position as Ogude and Gerard and falls prey to Iago’s influence:

Although Shakespeare “whitewashes” Othello by making him a servant of the Venetian state, a soldier fighting for a Christian power and, most importantly, a killer of Turks, he still remains a savage. . . . The play ultimately condemns the idea of inter-racial sex, for such intercourse can only lead to tragedy. . . . The black man cannot simply be allowed to “tup” the “white ewe” uncurbed; both must be punished for such transgressions, even when their mutual affection draws a cautious amount of sympathy for them (1986:20).

What Kabbani fails to see is that the racist language she quotes about the love affair has a single specific source in the play, Iago, and that Othello’s suicide significantly coincides with his account of killing the Muslim Turk. Also based in Said’s theories, my reading sees *Othello* as an examination of racist, Orientalist and imperialist attitudes rather than an apology for them. Recent critics accord a rather “cautious amount of sympathy” to such an anti-imperialist reading of the play.

Michael Neil provides a history of criticism and performances as they relate to Othello’s blackness and the race theme (2005:38-46). He also comments on how “the clash of civilizations between Christendom and Islam” would be in the minds of Shakespeare and his audience:

The burgeoning empire of the Ottoman Turks had pushed rapidly westward, overwhelming the Christian strongholds of Rhodes (1530) and Cyprus (1573), besieging Malta (1565), and twice invading Hungary before the century was over . . . Othello is a Christian convert. . . . Yet it can hardly be an accident that his nemesis is given a Spanish name that recalls . . . Sant’ Iago Matamoros (Saint James, the Moor Slayer). . . . [Iago’s] evil seductions compel the Christianized Moor, in symbolic terms at least, to “turn Turk” and to become the “circumcised dog” (5.2.298) whom only suicide can destroy (5.2.350-54) (2005:47).

Therefore, Neil concludes that “the treatment of the hero was inflected by fear of the Islamic other.” We might follow this line of thought to see Othello as overanxious not only about his relation to his new religion and its prohibitions about sex (see Greenblatt 1982, below) but also about his former religion, Islam. This is another factor in his marginality, his anxious state of selfhood, between two cultures and religions. In the suicide scene, the Muslim he kills becomes, by the metonymy of his mirroring action, himself. The Islamic Othello is the last part of the great man to die, as the fallen hero whose “occupation’s gone” (3.3.354) becomes his own past, “he that was Othello” (5.2.280).

According to Neill, recent criticism has not settled the question of whether *Othello* ends affirming its characters’ and audience’s racism. However, the play’s racist point of view seen as Iago’s point of view alone opens a Saidian means of analysis that yields a more definitive result. Iago is much the sort of artist in the text that Hamlet is, except in an evil cause--the construction of a master narrative that affirms racism, imperialism and anti-feminism. It is his Orientalist/imperialist guidance that creates the racial issue that is, according to Neill “absolutely central to the tragedy of *Othello*” (2005:38).

Othello may be finally convinced of his own racial inferiority, but that is not the Othello that we remember. We recall, as does Lodovico, “the noble Moor whom our full senate/ Call all in all sufficient” (4.1.264-265). Othello is the great tale-teller, the master of elemental imagery, the creator of the *Othello* music, the poet within the text, according to G. Wilson Knight (1961). The poet, the ardent, idealistic lover and the man of just authority and efficient action: this is Othello before he begins his descent into non-being in the third act to become, in the end, only the text of his final tale, of killing a Muslim, that elides with his suicide. Othello does not have a sense of his own inferiority as an inherent tragic flaw, not at all. Clearly, he is *taught* this idea of himself by Iago. Iago is an agent of imperialism by means of Orientalism—changing the native’s story and having him accept it as the truth. Other characters do not show racist attitudes and, in fact, debate the racial issue, bringing the essential questions into the open, as does the Duke in 1.3 and Desdemona in 1.2. G.K. Hunter (1978) argues that Shakespeare arouses our own latent racist attitudes, by means of Iago, only to overturn them with the reality of Othello. Other characters, such as Cassio, Emelia, Montano and Lodovico, are unconcerned about race. And, since both Roderigo and Brabantio have Iago’s words put into their mouths, the sole source of racism and Orientalism is Iago. Iago spreads his poison, practicing his web-weaving, to Roderigo and Brabantio as a prelude to the main action of the play in Cyprus, when Iago will destroy his master, his mistress and his wife by putting words into Othello’s mouth.

Stephen Greenblatt sees that Iago has the power to manipulate a narrative and thereby takes advantage of Othello’s need to closely follow a certain narrative--a strict Christian doctrine that saw pleasure in marital love as a sin (1982:37-59). Greenblatt also says that “Iago’s attitude toward Othello is . . . colonial” (1982:38). Terry Eagleton sees the tragedy as the manipulation of

Othello's world as text: "In his paranoid jealousy, the world becomes a text which can be endlessly interpreted and misinterpreted" (2010:90). We shall examine how very explicitly Shakespeare makes the creation of texts an important element of his plot. Carol Nealy sees the play as a "patriarchal tragedy" in which men's "heroic violence against each other" destroys romantic love (1982:89-94). Ania Loomba, writing on "*Othello* and the Racial Question," makes the relationship between racism and sexism causal: "Othello is a victim of racial beliefs precisely because he becomes an agent of misogynist ones" (2002:91). As we shall see, the play's feminist themes parallel and overlap its consideration of colonialist attitudes.

Loomba shows how Shakespeare complicates and problematizes the racial, cultural and sexual issues. She points out that contemporary writers, such as Robert Burton, described southern men as given to excesses of lust and jealousy; but he includes not only Africans like Othello but also Italians, which is everyone else in the play. Besides, it is Desdemona who proclaims publicly her sexual passion for her husband (1.3.243-254) and tells Emilia that the passion of jealousy was extracted from Othello's character rather than inflamed by the hot climate where he was born (3.4.30-31). Contemporary writers also stigmatized Venice for the promiscuity of its women, but Desdemona is faithful and unable to even speak the word "whore" (Loomba 2002:91-111). Neill argues that *Othello* situates the question of race amidst a host of possible attitudes that were available to the early modern audience and that "far from capitulating to the emergent popular chauvinism that it documents so well, it exploits the continuing fluidity of contemporary ideas to hold the question of color up to scrutiny, rendering the meaning of the protagonist's blackness intensely problematic" (2005:50). I take a more forthright position, along with Martin Orkin, "The play, *as it has always done*, continues to oppose racism" (1987:168). Only one character, Iago, manipulates the narratives of racism (black=evil), anti-feminism and Orientalism in *Othello*; and thus none of these attitudes, including racism (the most debated problem), is the defining pattern of the play. In fact, in the unmasking and condemnation of Iago, these attitudes are defeated.

2. An encounter narrative

In *The Conquest of America*, Tzvetan Todorov asks the question why the encounter of one culture with another must lead to domination, violence and the destruction of the weaker culture. The discovery of America was the "most astonishing encounter of our history"; and it was also, with 70 million dead out of a population of 80 million (in 50 years!), the "greatest genocide in history" (1984:3-13). Todorov notes pointedly, "We are all the direct descendants of Columbus" (1984:5).

In *Orientalism* (1978) Edward Said asks a related but more specific question: What sort of representation of the other results from the encounter between European and Arab cultures? In *Culture and Imperialism* (1994) he broadens this inquiry to the encounter between Western nations and the Third World. Said's topic is how the imperial power controls the discourse of and

about the encounter with the colonized culture as a means of domination. In *Culture and Imperialism* he notes that as scholars we have come to see the problem of "representation and representations--their production, circulation, history and interpretation"--as central to our contemporary concerns; but we do not often consider this problem, as he puts it, "in its full political context, a context that is primarily imperial" (1994:56-57). Because of its debasing of discourse through simplifications, stereotyping, omissions and the assumption of superiority by one side of a dialectical relationship, and above all because of the violence used to assert this assumption, the question of empire is the central question for humanist scholarship.

Othello is an encounter narrative like the Spanish chronicles and native accounts of Cortes' conquest of Mexico that Todorov examines, like Bradford's *History of Plymouth Plantation* and like *The Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano*. The Moor, who is black, Arab, Muslim and African encounters the dominant Venetian culture and meets, finally, with disastrous results. At the beginning of the play, he has assimilated to his adopted culture to the extent of becoming a very successful soldier and marrying a woman from one of its prominent families. Yet he has just sidestepped temporarily the violent encounter which, when it comes, takes the personalized shape of Iago.

The depths of Othello's encounter with Venice, where it leads him to his destruction, is with the language and the mores of the country--with its discourse, its modes of representation. These Iago uses to master and destroy him, for Iago is a master Orientalist who not only devises the story of the colonial other but even succeeds in selling that story to the native. He portrays Othello as a black African Moor, interprets him even to the Moor himself; and (as an all-round councilor and cultural guide) he interprets the signs of Venetian life to Othello: "I know our country disposition well" (3.3.201). He becomes Othello's source of truth, including the truth about himself as husband, Moor and African; he tells Othello what is "natural." He is the custodian in the play of the word "nature."

3. Combining Orientalist and misogynist discourse

Iago destroys by means of representation. But how does Shakespeare regard this Orientalist discourse within his own? Is this an Orientalist text in Said's terms or an anti-Orientalist text, such as *Rasselas* (see Campbell 1994)? The question arises because the character of Othello that Iago so skillfully misleads is essentially the one that Shakespeare creates. Iago reads the hero well. The answer lies in how closely Shakespeare examines this discourse of imperialism within his text and how he places his own discourse in relation to it. In *Rasselas* Johnson questions the narrative discourse which is used to represent Arabs in English in his time. Likewise Shakespeare takes as a theme the nature of Orientalist discourse itself or, more generally, any dominant imperial discourse, since he includes women among the victims of its domination. He demonstrates the destruction of the colonized other by means of textual misrepresentation.

Iago's Orientalism works, of course, which is indicative, since he is the consummate villain. The villain of the play reads Othello and weaves a "web" or

text out of empty "sign[s]" of the eternally other black man and "the lusty Moor" (2.1.295):

The Moor is of a free and open nature,
That thinks men honest that but seem to be so;
And will as tenderly be led by th' nose
As asses are. (1.3.390-393)

Iago becomes a cultural advisor to Othello, as one who has succeeded in reading the Venetian character and that of its colonized others, blacks and women. Othello's foolish faith in Iago's "honesty" includes an idea of Iago as a scholar of human nature, a kind of homespun anthropologist:

This fellow's of exceeding honesty,
And knows all qualities, with a learned spirit
Of human dealings. (3.3.257-259)

Iago's imperial policy, which is all a matter of analytical discourse, succeeds by reading the Moor well enough to sell him on a reading of Venice which ends with Othello reading his wife as "that cunning whore of Venice/ That married with Othello" (4.2.88-89). He manipulates Roderigo, Brabantio, Cassio and Desdemona along the way, but always with the same underlying essentialist discourse: men and women are ruled by lust; "these Moors are changeable in their wills" (1.3.342-343) and are "lusty"; it is unnatural for people of different cultures and colors to be attracted to one another; all women betray their husbands. Of particular interest to us are Iago's opinions on race, gender, and cultural essences.

The language of racism in the play is established by Iago and his confederate Roderigo in the first act and connected to a motif of animal imagery established by Iago. Roderigo speaks of Othello as "the thick lips" (1.1.63) and "a lascivious Moor" (1.1.123). However, in waking Brabantio, Iago develops the figurative language which specifically demeans Africans in relation to whites and, as is his wont, makes the demeaning an animalized sexual process:

Even now, now, very now, an old black ram
Is tupping your white ewe. Arise, arise!

Or else the devil will make a grandsire of you. (1.1.85-88)
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 gennets for
germans. (1.1.108-111)

Your daughter
and the Moor are making the beast with two backs. (1.1.113-114)

Iago plants the image of the black beast attacking the white woman, inspiring Brabantio, in speaking to Othello, to refer to "the sooty bosom/ Of such a thing as thou" (1.2.69-70). Allied to his racist discourse is a cultural analysis of Venice and its relation with non-Venetians by which Iago convinces Othello that his wife

is unfaithful *because* she loved him, since it is unnatural to love those of other races or cultures:

[Of Desdemona, to Roderigo] Her delicate tenderness will find itself abused, begin to heave the gorge, disrelish and abhor the Moor. Very nature will instruct her in it and compel her to some second choice. (2.1.230-234)

Othello. And yet, how nature erring from itself--
Iago. Ay, there's the point, as (to be bold with you)
Not to affect many proposed matches
Of her own clime, complexion, and degree,
Whereto we see in all things nature tends—
Foh! one may smell in such a will most rank,
Foul disproportion, thoughts unnatural. (3.3.227-233)

However, racist stereotypes do not hold in the play as a whole. Early on the Duke repudiates Brabantio's accusations and questions the validity of a black=evil and white=good formula "If virtue no delighted beauty lack/ Your son-in-law is far more fair than black" (1.3.284-285). Also, even though Iago uses the racist formula of black = evil to further his manipulations of the other characters, the essence of his art is to make the opposed colour values indistinguishable, for he believes in nothing:

Divinity of hell!
When devils will the blackest sins put on,
They do suggest at first with heavenly shows,
As I do now. . . .
So will I turn her virtue into pitch,
And out of her own goodness make the net
That shall enmesh them all. (2.3.350-362)

As with his ditties about the black and the fair ladies (2.1.130-156), Iago's color comments not directed at Othello problematize the relationship of black and white to morality. After the meeting of the Senate which ends Act One, with Brabantio back in Venice, racism exists only underground in Iago's manipulation of Othello. There are no more racist exchanges between Roderigo and Iago, and no other characters exchange essentialist remarks, *except about women*. We shall see how Emilia, who calls Othello "ignorant" and "dull" for falling for Iago's lies, speaks the truth that has been covered over by imperial discourse.

In a psychological colonization Iago's "low and gloomy images" "invade [Othello's] speeches" (Morozov 1977:24). By means of linguistic imperialism, Iago converts Othello's mind to self-hatred and to the hatred of women. This is the basic method of imperialism: to devalue the native except as an imitation of the imperial self (and a poor one). Othello picks up the racial and cultural stereotyping from Iago and considers this as a cause for Desdemona's supposed betrayal:

Haply for I am black
And have not those soft parts of conversation

That chamberers have . . . /
 She's gone. (3.3.262-266)
 My name, that was as fresh
 As Dian's visage, is now begrimed and black
 As mine own face. (3.3.383-385)

Iago's language is a type of the arrogance of imperial discourse that Said describes in *Culture and Imperialism* as treating "the whole of world history as viewable by a kind of Western super-subject" (1994:35); his accounts of people, races, gender and cultures are, in Said's words, "separating, essentializing, dominating and reactive" (1994:37).

4. Does Shakespeare share in Iago's discourse?

Four points argue against this: First, the opposition of black and white is disrupted by such remarks as the Duke's to Brabantio about Othello being "far more fair than black." The Duke refers to Othello's blackness within the cultural norm, but paradoxically Othello does not live up to the stereotype that equates black with inferiority. Iago himself does much to relativize the concept of black versus white, since he is so eager to spin gold into straw, love into murder, virtue into pitch. There are also Iago's joking remarks to Desdemona at the beginning of Act Two about a woman who is "black and witty": "If she be black, and thereto have a wit,/ She'll find a white that shall her blackness fit" (2.1.129-131)—a reverse image of Desdemona and Othello.

Secondly, Shakespeare makes Iago the villain and Othello the hero. Most important and a corollary to the second point, since Iago is a villain of discourse, Shakespeare gives his play a reflexive turn in treating the themes of language, discourse and interpretation. He does this most explicitly in the story of the handkerchief, the deceptive signifier of Desdemona's guilt. Finally Shakespeare associates women with his protagonist and gives them a voice in response to Iago's destructive discourse. The rest of this essay concerns the play's focus on texts and its presentation of Emilia, Iago's wife, as a voice for the victims of imperial discourse.

5. The story of the handkerchief

Othello is about cultural misreadings; quite literally so: writing is the figurative focus of Othello's tragic death; and the plot turns on the question of one signifier, the handkerchief. Othello struggles with the Madonna and the whore problem. Desdemona is *so* fair. She is an angel, a thing of heaven—or, a whore! The handkerchief becomes the signifier that will decide Othello's dilemma over (his) woman.

In the story of the handkerchief, we see the operation of a text within the text of the play—a text which has different meanings for different characters but with all its meanings controlled by Iago. Emilia sees it as a way of pleasing her ever-jealous, disapproving husband. When it comes into his hands, Cassio likes the design and asks his lover to reproduce it—to the detriment of his affair with

Bianca, who sees it as a gift from a rival lover. The handkerchief defines the characters' relationships, a sort of precis within the play. It is a text to be copied and published abroad (both Cassio and Emilia want to make copies). It is the key element of "the net/ That shall enmesh them all" (2.3.361-362). All fall into his verbal "net": Roderigo, Cassio, Desdemona; all accept Iago's readings, as does Othello. The crux of his web of signifiers is the handkerchief: "There's magic in the web of it," says Othello to Desdemona, unconsciously echoing Iago's "web" of discourse to "ensnare Cassio," Desdemona and Othello (2.1.166-167). However, the handkerchief has a significance that originates outside of Iago's web; it represents Othello's cultural identity.

This is a play ultimately about reading and writing and especially imperialist writings about black African Arabs and women. Iago's plot is to catch everyone in his net--to get Cassio to persuade Desdemona to plead for him and make Othello read this pleading as proof of her preference for her adulterous lover. All the threads of his plot interlace in the handkerchief as fabric and text: "I will in Cassio's lodging lose this napkin,/ And let him find it. Trifles light as air/ Are to the jealous confirmations strong/ As proofs of Holy Writ" (3.3.318-321).

The handkerchief will prove the text of "truth" about the Moor and his woman, while Iago's reading of it is imaged as the poison which he feeds his enemy:

The Moor already changes with my poison;
 Dangerous conceits are in their nature's poisons,
 Which at the first are scarce found to distaste,
 But with a little, act upon the blood,
 Burn like the mines of sulphur. I did say so:
 Look, where he comes! (3.3.322-327)

Iago's mastery of Othello is managed by "conceits," that is, by language. At this point in the plot, that mastery is shown to be complete, since what Iago says ("I did say so") becomes acted out by Othello's poisoned mind which, Iago mocks, no medicine can ever cure. At this point Othello enters the scene in agony as if "on the rack," as he says (3.3.332). This is the moment when Iago's play within a play takes over the main plot.

Thus *Othello* is a text very conscious of itself as language, just as Othello is of his life as a potential text in his suicide speech:

I pray you, in your letters,
 When you shall these unlucky deeds relate,
 Speak of me as I am. Nothing extenuate,
 Nor set down aught in malice. Then must you speak
 Of one that loved not wisely, but too well.
 (5.2.336-340)

How people are represented in discourse is a matter of concern throughout the play. When Othello hits Desdemona in public and generally acts the fool before his superior, Lodovico wonders if "the letters [did] work upon his blood/ And

new create this fault" (4.1.275-276). This is a pleasurable text for those that look for literature to be about the operation of language. It is a play in which the dialogue considers the effects of letters and the exact meaning of words such as "black," "honest" "nature" and "whore"; and in which the villain talks about what it means to act like a villain (2.3.336-362). Iago starts this ball rolling by using the magic word, "sign" in a quite Saussurian way, calling into question its relation to any specific signified: "I must show out a flag and sign of love,/ Which is indeed but sign" (1.1.153-154)

But the play focuses on a particular sort of signs used to misrepresent the colonial other to the imperial culture and to himself. In his suicide speech designed for "your letters," Othello identifies himself with his colonial origins, with "the base Judean, [who] threw a pearl away/ Richer than all his tribe" and with "the Arabian trees" that drop "their med'cinable gum" as fast as he drops tears (5.2.343-347). This story of Othello as Arab is also embodied in the handkerchief which Iago uses as a device to indicate Desdemona's guilt.

The handkerchief is the sign of the signifier, the symbol of "letters," a kind of the mirror of and in the text. As a signifier, it is not fixed to a signified but travels from hand to hand, gaining different meanings in each context; the main use of its fluid significance is in Iago's weaving of a discourse of intellectual colonization by reinterpreting this token of love. However, the handkerchief is a central signifier of this encounter narrative, this encounter of discourses, and one important aspect of its significance is Othello's identity as African and Arab. When Othello demands that Desdemona produce the missing handkerchief, he embroiders it with stories of his family and his culture. That this cultural history is used against him to bring about the tragedy through misreading is a significant aspect of this mirror in the text. Othello's fantastic stories about himself are the quality which won Desdemona's love; and he describes the handkerchief as the token/charm of their love, the signifier that determines events rather than just representing them:

That handkerchief
 Did an Egyptian to my mother give.
 She was a charmer, and could almost read
 The thoughts of people. She told her, while she kept it
 'Twould make her amiable and subdue my father
 Entirely to her love; but if she lost it
 Or made a gift of it, my father's eye
 Should hold her loathed and his spirits should hunt
 After new fancies. She, dying, gave it me,
 And bid me, when my fate would have me wived,
 To give it her. (3.4.55-65)

Thus the handkerchief carries the story of Othello's cultural and family origins; it is the marker of his African identity. It was his first gift to Desdemona and, so, is also a symbol of that which originally won her love, his ability to tell exotic stories:

'Tis true. There's magic in the web of it.
A sybil, that had numbered in the world
The sun to course two hundred compasses,
In her prophetic fury sewed the work;
The worms were hallow'd that did breed the silk,
And it was dyed in mummy which the skillful
Conserved of maidens' hearts. (3.4.69-75)

This is an Eastern tale to thrill any young girl's heart but with a heavy touch of Gothic gore, the image of maiden's hearts foreshadowing Desdemona's "sacrificial" death.

Desdemona is sacrificed to a reading of the Moor, of Venice and of women which the villainous Iago sells to Othello. Iago's success in poisoning Othello's mind and completing "the net/ That shall enmesh them all" is marked by his accomplishment in having Othello adopt his reading of the handkerchief which is the very text of Othello as Moor, as African, as son of his parents, as lover, as soldier and storyteller. Iago subverts to his own purposes this text, within Shakespeare's text, which represents the actuality of the colonial other. That it is a mirror of the text is significant, for Shakespeare, in his self-consciousness of cultural discourse, dramatizes how the racist, essentialist, sexist discourse of bigotry and hatred can take over a text, even his own. But Iago is the chief interpreter of the play, and so it is his reading of this handkerchief, "spotted with strawberries" as he says (3.3.432), which carries the day.

If family and folk legends are the stuff of Othello's embroidery, what are the strawberries with which Iago decorates the text of the handkerchief, what is the texture of his web? In keeping with its nature as a reflexive narrative image, one strawberry on Iago's version of the handkerchief is the handkerchief itself and Cassio wiping his beard with it (3.3.434-436). Iago makes the story of the handkerchief the story of Othello's cuckoldry. He reads the handkerchief as a pornographic tale which includes the image of Othello reduced to a voyeur: "Would you, the supervisor, grossly gape on?/ Behold her topp'd?" (3.3.392-393). From Cassio wiping his beard, Iago's embroidery of the handkerchief proceeds to the image of Desdemona "naked with her friend in bed/ An hour or more, not meaning any harm" (4.1.3-4), then to his play on the word "lie"--"With her, on her; what you will" (4.1.35); and finally, to continue the story, Iago proposes to "make [Cassio] tell the tale anew:/Where, how, how oft, how long ago, and when/ He hath, and is again to cope your wife" (4.1.86-88). One other lewd strawberry in Iago's handkerchief text is the homosexual scene in which Cassio straddles and kisses Iago while dreaming of Desdemona, spectral evidence of Desdemona's guilt (3.3.410-423). In the scene where Bianca confronts Cassio about the handkerchief, while Othello spies on them, Iago merely lets the handkerchief, thus embroidered with lurid images, work its magic, so that Othello's "unbookish jealousy must conster" the scene "quite in the wrong" (4.1.103-105). Again we see Othello as the victim of misreading as

directed by Iago--a misreading that overwrites and supersedes the story of Othello's native culture. In his mastery of the handkerchief, Iago handles the signifier itself, which takes on a life of its own. Bianca's reading of it as a sign of betrayal, the whore's jealousy, confirms Othello's mis-reading and seals his fate. In losing control of the meaning of the handkerchief Othello loses everything.

The handkerchief as signifier migrates from one signified to another, as it passes from hand to hand; it shifts from love token to magic charm with its own traditional and familial legend to proof of adultery. In its significance as the marker of Othello's otherness as Moor and African, its oral tale and Oriental legend contrast with the letters which give the "unbookish" hero a headache. Iago is Othello's reading teacher who teaches him to misread Venice, himself and his wife. The imagery insists on this relation of the tragedy to language:

Was this fair paper, this most goodly book, Made to write "whore" upon?
(4.2.70-71).

The story of the handkerchief thus marks the destruction of the identity of Othello as other to the Venetian imperium; its use to bring about his downfall is an allegory of Orientalism --the destruction of a people by superimposing a villainous reading over the medium of the native culture, a hateful, merciless and violent domination of the sign itself, the means of discourse.

Bianca, who is represented as a whore by Iago and Cassio, links with the fate of the "naturally" excluded black man, gaping on at the scene. Othello reads the text as proof of betrayal, as she does. That it is Bianca's performance, her interpretation of the handkerchief, which convinces Othello identifies the protagonist with the play's one actual "whore"; his response to it reflects that of the hysterical woman. This unmaning by association is foreseen in Othello's remark earlier that he may prove Desdemona's "haggard"; i.e. her courtesan (3.3.259). The loss of narrative which indicates the absence of the colonial subject is thus associated with the subject's loss of self ("Othello's occupation's gone" [3.3.354]) that becomes figuratively a loss of gender as well. The absence of the true character of the colonial other is filled with Iago's story of the handkerchief but also, in a sense, by the subplot concerning women. Only there do we find resistance and rebellion against the destructive dominant discourse.

Beside the identification of Othello as interpreter with the play's most maligned woman and his earlier self-description as a "haggard" or courtesan, the animal imagery connected to the Moor at the beginning of the play attaches to the women, when Iago refers to them as "guinea hen[s]" (1.3.310) early in the play and again towards the end. Bianca is called a "monkey" by Cassio (4.1.129) and Desdemona is compared by Othello to a "crocodile" (4.1.246) and to "goats and monkeys" (4.1.263). Here women are made the equivalent of animals as was the black Moor in the early scenes of the play. The theme of woman as victim is further connected to the Orientalist theme by Desdemona's story of the maid who died for love (4.3.26-33) which presages her own death. The maid's name, Barbary, recalls Iago's image of interracial love as having Desdemona "covered with a Barbary horse" (1.1.108-109), a reference to North Africa.

The point of Iago's discourse on women has been to reduce them all to whores as a means of destroying Othello. His own wife he suspects with Othello and Cassio; Bianca he calls a strumpet outright and Desdemona will be made to seem a lustful adulterous schemer by the interpretation he will put on her good deeds. Women are as much the victims of his essentializing imperialist discourse as is the Moor. However, the women speak back to the dominant discourse, as when Bianca says "I am no strumpet" (5.1.122), but mainly in the words of Emilia.

Emilia is an interesting figure who, although killed in the end by Iago, reveals the truth to Othello before she dies--correcting all his misreadings, taking Iago's place as his reader's guide, revealing the true nature of his tragedy. Her importance is signified by her body's place on the bed, beside Othello and Desdemona. She speaks the truth of the charmed handkerchief: "I will not charm my tongue; I am bound to speak," she tells her threatening husband (5.2.181), and to Othello: "O thou dull Moor, that handkerchief thou speak'st of/ I found by fortune, and did give my husband" (5.2.222-223). Emilia becomes Othello's schoolmistress at the end; she shows that all the evils that have occurred are not, in her husband's words, "the fruits of whoring" (5.1.116) but the fruits of Othello's misinterpretations due to Iago's misrepresentations. But most important is the speech she makes alone with Desdemona before the tragic conclusion which answers the dominant discourse on women with a feminine discourse on men. First she images the dominating relation of men over women as a kind of imperialistic cannibalism: "They are all but stomachs, and we all but food;/ They eat us hungerly, and when they are full,/ They belch us" (3.4.104-106). After this discourse of rebellion she answers Iago's image of jealousy as "the green-eyed monster, which doth mock/ The meat it feeds on," where the "cuckold" husband is the victim (3.3.165-167), with her own image of a monster born specifically *without* sexual contact: "Jealous souls . . . / are not ever jealous for the cause, / But jealous for they are jealous. It is a monster/ Begot upon itself, born of itself" (3.4.158-161). Her image recalls and comments on Iago's image of his plot as "engendered" in his mind to bring on a "monstrous birth" (1.3.394-395). Before the murder of Desdemona she again uses the eating motif as she tells the story of betrayal and "restraint" from the woman's point of view.

Let husbands know
 Their wives have sense like them.
 They see, and smell,
 And have their palates both for sweet and sour,
 As husbands have. What is it they do
 When they change us for others?
 Is it sport? I think it is.
 And doth affection breed it?
 I think it doth. I 'st frailty that thus errs?
 It is so too. And have not we affections?
 Desires for sport? And frailty? as men have?
 Then let them use us well; else let them know,

The ills we do, their ills instruct us so. (4.3.96-106)

Emelia has a strong contrapuntal voice in the play; in her speeches the victim of the imperial discourse represents herself in her own words.

6. Conclusion

Othello concerns itself with cultural misreading, makes its villain the agent of lies about Venice, women, blacks and Moors which are essentialist, exclusivist and very effective; Iago's successful Orientalist imperial discourse and cultural analysis are thereby destructive, symbolically, of the fabric of the hero's native culture and, actually, of the inter-racial and inter-cultural marriage with which the play begins. However, Shakespeare makes us aware of the operation of this imperial discourse specifically in regard to native culture through the story of the handkerchief and, by aligning his Arab protagonist with women, gives a voice to those who are obscured or obliterated by the dominant forces of representation.

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