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**Scrutinizing Stereotypes and Exploring the Margins:
Shakespearean Culture and Society in *Othello* and *The Merchant of Venice***

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Abstract of the Thesis

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Critics argue that the character Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice* adheres to stereotypes of the Jewish population, and the character Othello in *The Tragedy of Othello* adheres to negative stereotypes of Africans. In order to understand Shakespeare's portrayal of complex characters such as Shylock and Othello, the characters must be examined as a multidimensional representation of human nature, and not as isolated individuals in a drama. When placed in original historical and cultural context, *Othello* and *The Merchant of Venice* both offer a critical social commentary on two minority groups during the Renaissance: Africans and Jews.

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Examining the Shakespearean Character

Critics often accuse Shakespeare of being blatantly racist. These accusations are made without an adherence to the Shakespearean character, isolating the characters and labeling them as stereotypical portrayals of a particular underrepresented population. Two characters located at the heart of this debate are Shylock and Othello. Critics argue that the character Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice* adheres to stereotypes of the Jewish population, and the character Othello in *The Tragedy of Othello* adheres to negative stereotypes of Africans. While these statements, loaded as they are, may have some validity behind them, understanding the true function and nature of Shakespeare's characters is far more complex than these accusations let on.

In order to understand Shakespeare's portrayal of complex characters such as Shylock and Othello, the characters must be examined as a multidimensional representation of human nature, and not as isolated individuals in a drama. Shylock and Othello cannot merely be extracted on the basis of stage appearances and actions, but must be positioned on a grander scale, which takes into account their overall function and examines their interactions within *The Merchant of Venice* and *Othello*, and then steps even further away from the text, examining how these characters fit into a historical perspective of Shakespearean society.

In *Social Shakespeare*, Peter J. Smith argues that "what we are actually doing when we watch, teach and act [Shakespeare's] plays is nothing less than rejuvenating and re-experiencing racist texts" (Smith 150). Similar sentiment is expressed with the open accusation that Russ McDonald makes in *The Bedford Companion to Shakespeare*: "Was Shakespeare himself a racist? Strictly speaking, almost certainly. The culture that

produced him had little acquaintance with and little sympathy for what modern cultural theorists have come to call the other” (McDonald 277).

The key to understanding and comprehending Shakespeare’s portrayal of minorities, or the other in society, is to look at the latter part of McDonald’s argument, and turn to the culture surrounding Shakespeare’s plays. Shakespeare himself was not a racist, but was merely portraying the common views of society on stage, which many have come to interpret as racist stereotyping. When these so called stereotyped characters are dissected, and viewed as multi-dimensional figures, an alternate perspective prevails; a perspective that does not reinforce stereotypes and convey racist ideals, but rather questions them.

Shakespearean Culture: Realism and Cultural Superiority

Minorities in society have always been stigmatized and victimized for straying from societal norms. Because these individuals drift from the currents of the masses, they are often categorized as the other by the majority of the population. But those individuals lingering on the margins of society vary with time, geographical location, and current events. During one decade this particular group may comprise the majority of the population and be the dominant figure in society, such as the white Anglo Saxon male in England, and then in another age this person can quickly become a minority, cast out onto the fringes of society.

William Shakespeare cannot be read through a modern lens without distorting the social implications and moral messages his dramas sought to provide to their Renaissance audiences. *Othello* and *The Merchant of Venice* both offer a critical social commentary on two minority groups during the Renaissance: Africans and Jews. From a modern

viewpoint of racial consciousness, these minority groups are undoubtedly portrayed with racial stereotyping. Shylock the Jew is portrayed as a cheap and inhumane man who cannot perceive the worth of goods without monetary value. Othello, the Moor, is portrayed as a bewitching seducer incapable of authentic love merely because of the color of his skin. The portrayals of the cheap Jew and beastly African are stereotypes which have long plagued Jewish and African populations. Although on the surface these portrayals may appear to be racist, a deeper scrutiny will prove that in *Othello* and *The Merchant of Venice*, Shakespeare was conveying societal beliefs during the time period, rather than seeking to defy these stereotypes by presenting all human beings as equal.

Culturally and geographically speaking, England remained an extremely isolated region during Shakespearean times. The nation was homogenous, composed mainly of “the descendants of Northern Europeans. Representatives of other races and nations were comparatively rare...the island’s geographical isolation created a cultural insularity, and even xenophobia, unique in Europe” (McDonald 276). Foreigners were generally regarded as objects of curiosity, whose presence was often rare in English society. It is speculated that Shakespeare himself “had probably never encountered practicing Jews, since they had been deported from England in the Middle Ages” (Maus 1081). Africans were similarly scarce in Elizabethan society, and were usually encountered only through trade and commerce. Even in this sector of life, however, African presence in England was both rare and new. “The Spanish and Portuguese had had commerce of various kinds with the African continent for hundreds of years, England for less than a century” (McDonald 276). Despite England’s emerging commercial relationship with Africa, “Londoners (although probably not their country cousins) were occasionally exposed to

visiting Africans” (McDonald 276), but foreigners still maintained their status as figures of curiosity, outsiders in a predominantly white and Christian community.

Adding to England’s isolation from other cultures is the fact that travel, especially for the lower and middle classes, was extremely rare during the sixteenth century. “Travel was a strenuous and potentially dangerous business in sixteenth century England...The roads connecting the capital with the rest of the kingdom were fairly primitive, designed for pedestrians or single riders; coaches were seldom used outside London at this period” (McDonald 220). Harsh conditions and costly lodging made traveling outside of London a luxury reserved for upper classes and nobility. This category excludes most of Shakespeare’s audience (the groundlings, for example) from experiencing other cultures firsthand unless they came directly to London.

In 1600 *A Geographical Historie of Africa* was published and received with widespread popularity. The writing quickly “became the single most authoritative travel guide on Africa for the next three centuries” (Hall 29), and the European population became fascinated with the geographic region the guide presented. Although with its publication the English became fascinated with African culture, the guide also reinforced a specific portrayal of Africans as being unruly and extremely sexual. It essentially “gave England a model for controlling the ‘meaning’ of Africa and the seemingly inexhaustible difference it represented” (Hall 29). The publication drew a clear distinction between English and African cultures, and those who had never been in contact with the region or its inhabitants associated Africans with barbarism and sexuality as portrayed in *A Geographical Historie*. Leo Africanus, the author of the travel guide, describes Africans as widely primitive, and comparatively different from English civilization: “some are

gentiles who worship idols...with their wives and children they lead a vagrant and rough life in the deserts, using tents instead of houses...they are very troublesome to both their neighbor-inhabitants and also to merchants” (Africanus 6). Echoes of these stereotypes depicting Africans as primitive members of uncivilized tribes that practice witchcraft continuously reverberate throughout *Othello*. In the very first scene of the play numerous references are made to Othello’s African heritage. Iago refers to Othello as a “Barbary horse” (1.1.124) after the region of Africa. He also informs Brabantio that Desdemona and Othello “are now making the beast with two backs” (1.1.130-31), associating Othello with animalistic sexuality in a society where sex is viewed as a means of procreation rather than pleasure. In addition to Iago’s comments, Roderigo also calls him a “wheeling stranger of here and everywhere” (1.1.151-52), portraying Othello as an unruly wanderer, and also stressing the fact that he is foreign, and an outsider.

In the sixteenth century, race united and alienated individuals, creating categories of “we” and “they.” The neat categories that were established inevitably “began to nurse the fetish of Anglo-Saxonism” (Barzun 108). As both religious and racial differences began to divide and unify; people in society began to believe that personal character was directly related to race and religion. In *From Dawn to Decadence*, Jacques Barzun states that “almost all educated westerners believed in the root idea that race equals character...the best men of letters kept explaining art, temperament, or destiny by some casual or extended reference to race” (579).

This division could be seen in all spheres of life and society from quaint social gatherings to royal edicts. Race, religion, and alienation were current themes in art and literature, as well as in politics. Queen Elizabeth issued several edicts during her reign

that banished both Africans and Jews from England. In January 1601, a year after the English fascination with Africa was initiated by *A Geographical Historie*, Queen Elizabeth Licensed Casper Van Senden to deport all Africans from England. In this royal proclamation, Queen Elizabeth declares that she “is highly discontented to understand the great number of Negroes and blackamoors...who are fostered and powered [in England]” (Hughes 221). In this royal edict Africans are described as “infidels having no understanding of Christ and his gospel” who are a “great annoyance of her own liege people” (221). It further states that Queen Elizabeth requires that all English subjects must assist Casper Van Senden and his men in the transporting of all Africans out of England.

A similar language is echoed in Elizabeth’s edict of 1576 which enforced the deportation of all people in the kingdom considered “vagabonds or rogues,” which is then further identified as all those who are not her natural born subjects. The edict demands that “all persons that by the laws of this realm may be taken for rogues and vagabonds...that they and every one of them do within two days next after the publishing of this proclamation depart...and from thence to repair to the countries and places where they were born” (Hughes 416). After issuing this royal proclamation which created dissonance throughout a societal harmony and clearly defined social boundaries, Queen Elizabeth reissued the same proclamation “Enforcing Statues against Vagabonds and Rogues” in February of 1596 (Hughes 157).

The issuing and enforcing of these royal proclamations sent a message of cultural intolerance for anyone non-English straight from the throne. The very language identifies all people who deviate from the norms of English society as vagabonds, infidels, and

barbarians who do not belong in society. These labels and ideas are all reflected throughout *The Merchant of Venice* and *Othello*, as Shakespeare explores what it means to belong in society.

No Shakespearean character can be examined in isolation, and Shylock and Othello are no different. These complex characters are not to be evaluated in isolation, as if in a box, but rather on a grander, all encompassing scale which takes numerous social and historical factors into effect. Therefore, in order to consider whether or not Shakespeare's portrayal of minority figures was blatantly racist, all of the factors that contribute to a social identity must be considered, and the play must be viewed as a whole work, and not judged on several lines or scenes in the play. Othello and Shylock must not be examined and critiqued as isolated characters in a literary masterpiece, but rather, extracted from modern times and placed into the environment and conditions under which they were created. It is only then that an accurate judgment of character stereotyping can be made.

Shylock The Jew

Much of the criticism surrounding the portrayal of Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice* centers on the Jewish stereotypes, and harsh actions the other characters have towards Shylock because of the mere fact that he is Jewish. Smith argues that "*The Merchant of Venice* was appropriated and deployed in the cause of Nazism" (150), citing that Hitler used the play as Anti-Semitic propaganda, which "contributed directly to the extermination of Jews" (150), the basis of his argument being that in *The Merchant of Venice* "Shylock is insulted as a Jew" (152).

While I can see the historical connection to Anti-Semitic propaganda, propaganda is, by definition, false and exaggerated. It is something used to sway opinion favorably or unfavorably to one side. While there are definitely stereotypes portrayed through Shylock in the play, such as Jewish people being cheap and thrifty, nothing in the drama tells people to try and exterminate the Jews. The audience is presented with a highly unlikeable human being through Shylock, who also happens to be Jewish. But not all Jews in the play are portrayed and regarded in the same light as Shylock. The Jewish population also consists of Jessica and Tubal, who are two very likable Jewish characters.

This accusation is indeed broad and pointing blame at Shakespeare for something that occurred centuries after *The Merchant of Venice* was written. Shakespeare undoubtedly had an enormous impact on society, but Shakespeare's portrayal of Shylock was manipulated and contorted by Nazi propaganda, used to help justify the extermination of innocent Jews. Shakespeare himself cannot control how his work is manipulated and portrayed by extremist groups any more than one can control the weather. The fact that the Nazis utilized Shylock as a means to justify their actions is by no means a testament to Shakespeare's racism towards the Jewish population. It is merely one of the many examples where literature and art has been manipulated and distorted by evil.

Although Cohen will argue that "The Merchant of Venice seems to [him] a profoundly and crudely Anti-Semitic play" (Cohen 53), I agree more with the sentiments of Barton and Suchet. When analyzing *The Merchant of Venice*, "One must forget modern anti-Semitism and concentrate on the play as writ'" (Smith 151). When regarding the character Shylock, "we're not here to talk about anti-Semitism but about character" (Barton 170). Human nature is what is essentially examined through all of Shakespeare's

characters, regardless of race or religion. “Shakespeare always makes nature predominate over accident; and if he preserves the essential character, is not very careful of distinctions super induced and adventitious. His story requires Romans or kings, but he thinks only on men” (Johnson 204).

Shylock’s function in *The Merchant of Venice* is more important than what is said about him. He must be regarded as an individual, without bias, and not just as a Jewish man living in a predominantly Christian society. Understanding Shylock’s role in *The Merchant of Venice* requires that an analysis of Shylock be done on a grander scale, one in which Shylock is portrayed not only for his religion, but also as an individual man in a society driven by commerce and greed.

The Merchant of Venice takes place on the small island of Venice. Surrounded by water, Venice geographically remains isolated from the rest of Italy. This sense of isolation permeates onto the island and into the existing communities, where the people are clearly divided and distinguished by their religious beliefs. Venice is portrayed as a locale where religious identity is interwoven with social identity. The characters therefore belong to one of two Venetian communities: that of the Christians, or that of the Jews. The majority of the population is Christian, making Jews on the island a small and alienated minority group.

Shylock’s Jewish community consists of his daughter, Jessica, and Tubal, whom he refers to as another of his “tribe” (2.9.66-67). Much of the commentary about Judaism is done through Shylock and Jessica, for Tubal remains a minor character with little to no social interaction with the Christian community. Like Shylock, Tubal remains isolated from the Christian community, yet he also stays away from Shylock. Shylock describes

Tubal as being “one of [his] tribe”, yet Tubal chooses to avoid one of the few members of his extremely tiny religious community. The Christians in the play openly express their dislike for Shylock “The Jew”, while Tubal “The Jew” gets by on the outskirts, seemingly unnoticed without any hostility from the Christians, indicating that their dislike for Shylock stems not from his religious beliefs, but because of his evil nature.

The Christians also have no problem with Shylock’s daughter, Jessica, either. Shylock is juxtaposed with Jessica, who is referred to as a “beautiful pagan” and “sweet Jew” (2.3.10-11). It is because of her gentle nature, that she will be saved from Judaism by Lorenzo, a Christian. Throughout the play she is referred to as exceptional by all of the members in the Christian community, and willingly wants to convert to Christianity. In Jessica’s aside she says to Shylock, “If my fortune be not crossed, / I have a father, you a daughter lost” (2.5.56-57). Jessica considers herself fortunate to get away from her father, paralleling Tubal’s desire to stay away from Shylock.

All of the sneers made at Shylock throughout the course of the plot are directly associated with his religious values. He is called “villain Jew” (2.8.4) and “dog Jew” (2.8.13) by Solanio. His former servant, Gobbo, refers to Shylock as “master Jew” (2.2). The constant references to Shylock’s religious affiliation make it impossible to separate his religion from his personal identity. Even in the court of law, the Duke pities Antonio, a fellow Christian in the case labeled as “the controversy between the Jew and Antonio the Merchant” (4.1.154-55). Unlike “Antonio the Merchant” who is identified by his occupation, Shylock is defined only for his religious affiliation, labeled as “The Jew” and the other in the Christian society.

It is in this case of “The Jew” versus “The Merchant, however, that Shylock loses references of religious affiliation, and is depicted as a horrible human being. The Duke refers to Shylock as “an unhuman wretch, / Uncapable of pity, void, and empty/ From any dram of mercy” (4.1.4-6). Although these are harsh words, there is no implication that Shylock’s nature is associated with his religious beliefs. In the trial, Shylock is judged as a person, “an unhuman wretch”, but not as a Jewish man amongst Christians. As a person, he is driven by his greed and has wretched demands that could very easily be categorized into murderous retaliation.

During the trial, Bassanio offers to pay his bond to Shylock “ten times o’er, on forfeit of my hands, my head, my heart” (4.1.208-209). Shylock refuses the offer, and demands that he get “a pound of flesh, to be by him cut off nearest the merchant’s heart” (4.1.229-30). This strays from the stereotypical portrayal of Jewish people being cheap and thrifty. Shylock makes it clear that no monetary value can replace his desire for revenge and Bassanio’s murder. He is willing to forfeit his entire life’s savings to the whim of revenge.

Shylock is not defined by the other characters as an individual, but rather for his religious values. Religious affiliation remains the societal caliber of measurement, which infiltrates into all spheres of life, even those that have little to do with religious faith. From Shylock’s personal affairs involving his daughter Jessica, to business matters involving his servant, Gobbo, Shylock cannot shake the stigma associated with his Judaic tradition. Even in the official courts, Shylock still cannot manage to separate his religious and social identities. He is seen as Jewish in all matters and spheres of life. To other characters in the play, he has an immediate assumed personal nature that is directly

associated with his religion. Shylock remains locked and defined into a characterization of what it means to be Jewish, rather than his actual personal values. It is only in matters outside of the social sphere that he is separated from his Jewish affiliation. All that remains once this is taken away is an evil man.

When Antonio comes to Shylock asking for a loan in Act 1, Scene 3, Shylock confronts him regarding his behavior and attitude:

In the Rialto you have rated me
About my monies and my usances
Still have I borne it with a patient shrug...
You call me misbeliever, cutthroat dog,
And spit upon my Jewish gabardine,
And all for use of that which is mine own...
You that did void your rheum upon my beard,
And foot me as you spurn, a stranger cur...
What should I say to you? Should I not say,
Hath a dog money? Is it possible
A cur should lend three thousand ducats? Or
Shall I bend low, and in a bondman's key
With bated breath, and whispering humbleness,
Say this: Fair sir, you spat on me on Wednesday last,
You spurned me such a day, another time
You called me a dog, and for these courtesies
I'll lend you thus much monies? (100-122)

Antonio has continuously called Shylock a “misbeliever” and a cut throat dog. In the past he has spat directly in Shylock’s face, at his Jewish beard, and kicked him to the curb like a stray dog. Shylock has chosen to remain calm and take no action. In this scene on the Rialto, however, Antonio wants a loan from Shylock, so he is approaching him as Shylock the moneylender/usurer. Shylock immediately views this advantageous position as an opportunity for revenge. Even though he does not have three thousand ducats to lend, he decides to give it to Antonio anyway under extreme conditions that would enable him to either multiply his investment, or kill Antonio. Shylock purposely jeopardizes his own financial situation, in the hopes that Antonio will not be able to pay the bond, and he will get the sweet revenge of a pound of his flesh. This is the action of an extremely evil man, who does, in fact, act more like “a cutthroat dog”, than a man of faith.

Shylock is continuously labeled as vicious, cheap and thrifty by the other characters. Antonio reminds Bassanio that he is “fighting with a Jew” (4.1.70-71), who is stubborn (73-4), so his efforts to appease Shylock will remain fruitless. Rather than attribute Shylock’s nature to his personal character, Antonio proclaims that it is Shylock’s “Jewish heart” (80) that makes him stubborn and thrifty. But Shylock’s words at the trial scene and other instances throughout the play stray away from the idea that it is Shylock’s “Jewish heart” that makes him a villain.

These instances humanize him, defining Shylock by his human nature, rather than his religion. When Solanio asks why he wants a pound of Antonio’s flesh, Shylock’s response indicates that he is a man intent on seeking his revenge:

To bait fish withal. If it will feed nothing else, it will feed my revenge. He hath disgraced me, and hindered me half a million, laughed at my losses, mocked my

gains, scorned my nation, thwarted my bargains, cooled my friends, heated mine enemies, and what's the reason? I am a Jew. Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions, fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer as a Christian is? If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you poison us, do we not die? And if you wrong us, shall we not revenge? If we are like you in the rest, we will resemble you in that. If a Jew wrong a Christian, what is his humility? Revenge! If a Christian wrong a Jew, what should his sufferance be, by Christian example? Why, revenge! (3.1.45-60)

In this soliloquy, Shakespeare humanizes Shylock, portraying him not as “a Jew” but rather, as a man intent on getting his revenge. Shakespeare also highlights the fact that the struggle between Shylock and the Christians is not merely a dislike, but a conflict of values in a society where religious values determine social belonging.

Despite all this proclaimed abuse, Shylock still lends Antonio the three thousand ducats, denying the thrifty Jewish stereotype, and openly addressing his hostility toward the Christian community. Although Shylock is certainly a money conscious man throughout the course of the play, this is not an implication that he is cheap and thrifty. Lending money and collecting on the interest rates is how Shylock earns a living and, essentially, survives. All businessmen, regardless of religious beliefs, take caution in their business dealings. Shylock must be cautious with his money lending, because his survival depends on it. Despite the fact that smart money decisions are essential to Shylock's survival, he still lends Antonio the money that he does not have, in the hopes that he can buy revenge.

This is not a smart investment on Shylock's behalf, and clearly depicts revenge as a priority which takes precedence over financial stability and frugality.

Shylock strays from the Jewish stereotypes each time he conveys his priorities. Shylock's time on stage is limited. Although he constantly remains a topic of conversation, he only appears in five scenes throughout the play. Shylock is portrayed mainly through what the other characters say about him, and is portrayed as being concerned chiefly with money. Being that most of the conflict revolves around Shylock's monetary contract with Antonio, this is just as natural as the way that Antonio, as a merchant, is chiefly concerned with his ships at sea.

Shylock is a Venetian money lender, who makes a living off of the interest he collects when his loans are repaid. Even with such a money-conscious frame of mind, Shylock still recognizes the lack of monetary value placed on sentiment. When Jessica leaves with her mother's ring, it is revealed that she trades it away in a careless exchange for a monkey (3.1.100-01). Shylock is devastated, not for the ring's monetary worth, but for the sentimental value that was lost in the careless trade: "Thou torturest me, Tubal. It was my turquoise, I had it of Leah when I was a bachelor. I would not have given it for a wilderness of monkeys" (3.1.102-104). Tubal's revelation of what has become of Leah's engagement ring tortures Shylock not because of the monetary value of the ring, but because of the personal history behind it. Not once does Shylock mention a reference to the monetary value behind the ring, but refers only to the sentiment associated with it, which he would not trade if someone offered him an entire wilderness of monkeys for it.

This is one of the few interactions that take place between Tubal and Shylock. As Tubal gives Shylock news of Jessica from Genoa, Shylock cries out in pain: "thou

stick'st a dagger in me" (3.1.94) and "Thou torturest me" (102). Tubal comes to Shylock as a bearer of bad news. He tells Shylock about Jessica's disregard for the ring, as well as her careless spending, and then leaves. Tubal is well aware that this will upset Shylock because of his personal ties to the piece of jewelry and his frugal nature, but does not attempt to soften the bad news. Tubal merely informs Shylock, without censoring any details, indicating that their bond is more through common affiliation at what Shylock refers to as "our synagogue" (110), rather than a close friendship.

Shylock's stressing of the sentimental value of Leah's ring and the apparent disregard his daughter Jessica, the "exceptional Jew," has for it, speaks volumes about their relationship. Shylock would have undoubtedly stressed the sentimental value he had for the ring, and Jessica's disregard for it can be viewed as an act of rebellion, or defiance of her father's values. This correlates directly with her decision to disregard his Jewish faith and marry a Christian man. Jessica is continuously portrayed by the Christians in *The Merchant of Venice* as an "exceptional Jew," who will be saved by the grace of a Christian marriage. Although this may seem to have tones of religious superiority, according to Christian ideology during the Renaissance, Jessica's soul would be saved because she converted to Christianity from Judaism. The greatest mission of a Christian during this time was to save the souls of non-believing infidels, or anyone non-Christian. To a predominantly Christian audience, it would have been common belief that Jessica was good and pure for becoming religious and following Jesus Christ.

Within the Venetian community in *The Merchant of Venice*, there is clearly a social divide dictated by religious beliefs. There are two groups that indicate belonging and non-belonging. All those who are Christian belong, and those who are non-Christian are

alienated. Although Shylock's "Jewishness" is magnified throughout the play, by the numerous references made to his religious faith, it does not go unmentioned that the majority of characters in the play are Christian. Portia's association with Christianity is just as amplified as Shylock's association with Judaism. Portia is deemed as a woman "of wondrous virtues" (1.1.162) by all of her fellow Christians, and is deemed as extremely pious, making constant references to her faith such as when she tells her servant, Nerissa, "In truth I know it is a sin to be a mocker" (1.2.51).

In Act three, Scene four, Lorenzo remarks that Portia has "a noble and true conceit of godlike amity" (2-3). Portia, realizing what is going to happen to her fellow Christians if she does not intervene, tells Lorenzo:

I have toward heaven breathed a secret vow,
To live in prayer and contemplation,
Only attended by Nerissa here,
Until her husband, and my lord's return.
There is a monastery two miles off,
And there we will abide. (27-32)

As soon as Portia is away from Lorenzo she informs Nerissa of her plans to go with Nerissa to the court in Venice, informing Nerissa that "dressed like men" (62) they will go to court to defend Antonio. Throughout the following scenes Portia appears in court as Balthazar, the "young doctor of Rome" (4.1.153), and a savior who eventually, according to Christian beliefs, saves Shylock's soul by converting him to Christianity.

Within the Venetian community, faith is perceived more as a social status or a mark of belonging, rather than an actual spiritual and religious practice. In Portia's search for a

husband it is made clear that all those in the community who are non-Christian do not belong, not only the Jewish population. In Act 1, Scene 1, Bassanio confesses his feelings for Portia to Antonio: “For the four winds blow in from every coast renowned suitors...and many Jasons go in quest of her...had I but the means to hold a rival place with one of them” (167-173). Bassanio is intimidated by the status of the men who come from all over the world to court Portia, and knows that he cannot compare to them because he does not have the rank of nobility or financial status that they possess.

Although these men are of nobility and high social ranking, Portia is more concerned with where they are from. When Nerissa asks Portia about a French Lord that came as a potential suitor in Act 1, Scene 2, she proceeds to mock the man continuously for several lines. As Nerissa inquires about the rest of Portia’s suitors she describes them as an English Baron (60), Scottish Lord (69), and The Duke of Saxony’s Nephew (75-6). Although all of these potential husbands are of high social standing, Portia remains uninterested: “If he have the condition of the saint, and the/ Complexion of the divel, I had rather he should shrive me/ Then wive me” (115-17). Her statement indicates that it is more important to her to marry a man within her own community, who shares a common background. All of these suitors may be very eligible bachelors, ranked with nobility and status, but they are outsiders to her Christian community. They may be nobility, but they are from England, Scotland and Saxony. They are not Christians.

Portia’s interactions with the non-Venetian men who come to court her illustrates the fact that the characters in *The Merchant of Venice* “find it hard to deal with those different from themselves: their society is based as much on the exclusion of the alien as on the inclusion of the similar” (Maus 1083). Portia continues to mock every suitor based

on origin, openly acknowledging that all non-Venetians, not just Shylock, are the other in Venetian society. When she meets Bassanio, although he is not of nobility, he belongs to her Italian-Christian community, and immediately falls for him, regardless of the fact that his financial standing in society does not match hers. Portia is more concerned with common background and heritage than social standing.

Shylock is identified as the common Christian enemy in the play by Antonio when he asks Shylock: “when did friendship take/ A breed for barren metal of his friend” (126-27). Throughout the play the Christians are quick to help one another, but also disregard Shylock with just as much speed. Antonio helps Bassanio win Portia’s hand by using his credit to obtain three thousand ducats from Shylock (1.1), but proudly acknowledges spitting and kicking Shylock: “I am as like to call thee so [a dog] again,/ to spit on thee again, to spurn thee too” (1.3.123-24).

In Act 1, Scene 3, Antonio references the Christian commandment to love thy neighbor as well as thine enemy. He says to Shylock, “If thou wilt lend this money, lend it not/ As to thy friends...But lend it rather to thine enemy” (125-28). The Christian community represented in *The Merchant of Venice*, does not abide by this rule in its entirety. While they clearly support and love the people within their Christian community, everyone with different beliefs, such as Shylock or Portia’s foreign suitors, is excluded from this commitment to compassion and unconditional love. It is important to remember, however, that according to popular Christian belief at the time, anyone non-Christian was not ‘thy neighbor’ until they were saved (or Christian).

Portia, in the spirit of helping her fellow Christians, disguises herself as Balthazar, and helps ensure that Bassanio and Antonio receive a judgment from the Duke that is in their favor. Disguised as Balthazar, Portia cites the law as stating:

If it be proved against an alien
That by direct, or indirect, attempts
He seek the life of any citizen
The party 'gainst the which he doth contrive
Shall seize one half of his goods, the other half
Comes to the privy coffer of the state,
And the offender's life lies in the mercy
Of the Duke only 'gainst all other voice. (346-53)

Under this legal judgment, Shylock is clearly identified as an “alien” of society, a definition that is legally binding. The bond that entitles Shylock to a pound of Antonio's Christian flesh, places him at a major disadvantage from a legal standpoint. For in cutting someone's flesh, the debtor would surely die, and if by some miracle the debtor managed to live, there would undoubtedly have been a considerable amount of blood shed in the process of cutting flesh. “Balthazar” tells Shylock that he may take his bond of a pound of flesh, “But in the cutting it, if [he] dost shed/ One drop of Christian blood, [his] lands and goods/ Are by the laws of Venice confiscate” (305-308). Portia's assistance and judgment at the trial result in the loss of Shylock's money, as well as a forced religious conversion from Judaism to Christianity.

Although this may seem harsh, let us not forget that this is the same man who wanted to murder Antonio by using his knife to carve out his flesh. By converting to Christianity,

Shylock would be “saved” in the eyes of the Christians, and would be forced not to disown Jessica. Considering Shylock’s intent to kill, Portia’s sentence is not all that demanding. It merely “forces Shylock to behave as a Christian citizen and father should: to worship in a Christian church, to grant money to his daughter, to recognize the difference between spiritual and economic well-being” (Maus 1087).

In *The Merchant of Venice*, Shakespeare questions the stereotypes of Jewish people in Elizabethan society. Although Shylock is presented by the Christian community as an unhuman and alienated infidel, Shakespeare humanizes Shylock, and justify his actions as being out of the harsh treatment and abuse he has encountered from the Christian community. By means of a thorough and all encompassing analysis of the characters and their various interactions, *The Merchant of Venice* is seen not as anti-Semitic, but rather as a social commentary on the complex interactions between people of different values. Shylock is just as judgmental of the Christians as they are to him, but takes his abhorrence to another level and desires death as retaliation. No one can deny that a man who wants to shave off the flesh of another man for sheer revenge is evil. The difference is that Shylock is a minority in society, so his evil nature is associated with that which excludes and makes him the other: his religion. But, Shylock is not evil because he is Jewish, nor is he Jewish because he is evil. All the accusations made toward Shylock in the play are true, but are embedded in his Jewish identity, which cannot be separated from his social identity. Through Tubal and Jessica, Shakespeare demonstrates that characteristics within all communities vary. Tubal and Jessica may be Jewish, but they are still good people within that community. Shylock, in all his evilness, is nothing more than a product of societal exclusion and non-belonging. Any man,

regardless of religious affiliation, would not take kindly to those who have deemed him unworthy of societal acceptance. It just so happens that in *The Merchant of Venice*, this man is Jewish.

Othello the Bewitching Barbarian

Shakespeare's *Tragedy of Othello* has elements of witchcraft surrounding a stereotypical portrayal of Othello, the African Moor. Othello is categorized as lazy, barbarous, sexual and unruly, yet deviates from these stereotypes throughout the play. Through the marriage of Desdemona and Othello, Shakespeare depicts Elizabethan views of interracial marriages and relationships, as well as the powerful influence that the taboos of witchcraft had during the sixteenth century.

Although the theme of witchcraft and black magic is a dark current that runs through the play, it is through Brabantio's accusations during the trial scene that Shakespeare's association of witchcraft to explain interracial marriages becomes most apparent. Brabantio, upon the discovery that his daughter Desdemona has married Othello, declares:

Damned as thou art, thou hast enchanted her
For I'll refer me to all things of sense,
If she in chains of magic were not bound,
Thou hast practiced on her with foul charms,
Abused her delicate youth with drugs or minerals
That weakens motion. (1.3.63-75)

Brabantio cannot understand how his daughter can love “such a thing as [Othello]” (1.3.70). In order to explain how his daughter could possibly love an African, he accuses Othello of enchantment and witchcraft, claiming that black magic altered Desdemona’s perception of not only marriage, but of Othello’s appearance as well. Brabantio rationalizes that his daughter’s love for Othello must be the result of witchcraft. In Act one, Scene three, he states that Othello has seduced Desdemona by casting spells in order to win her love. According to Brabantio’s perception of their union, Desdemona, “being not deficient, blind, or lame of sense/ Sans witchcraft could not” (63-4) possibly love Othello because he is not of the same race.

During the seventeenth century in England witchcraft was regarded as a serious crime, and the penalty was death. It was regarded as a sin from which there was no redemption, and fear of the supernatural led to the publication of numerous texts on witchcraft and the nature of witches. Through aggressive witch hunting and documents, society and the institutions at power depicted their fear of the power of witchcraft.

One such document, the *Malleus Maleficarum*, also known as “The Hammer of Witchcraft” served as the basic authoritative code against witches. The manifesto, which follows Catholic ideology, warns of the dangers of witchcraft. It speaks not only of potions and charms, and their potential dangers, but also mentions antidotes to counteract the spells of witches.

Brabantio’s inability to define his daughter’s love for Othello, along with Desdemona’s rejection of all the wealthy prospective husbands in society, leaves him trying to reason with her strange and altered behavior. He accuses Othello of witchcraft and black magic, and Othello is then forced to prove that Desdemona’s desire for him is

not the result of witchcraft, but love. Since Desdemona's attitude towards marriage has changed, Brabantio turns to witchcraft as the source for the abrupt change in his daughter, and to explain the unexplainable: how his daughter could love an African.

To a modern audience, "the affinities between the witch-hunter's dread and a lover's enthusiasm or a believer's piety may at first glance seem strange, but in fact the former is merely a paranoid reflection of the latter" (Mazzio 336). Brabantio's reaction to Desdemona's behavior and choice of marriage is a reflection of the fears of witchcraft and interracial relationships that ran rampant throughout Elizabethan England.

The trial of Othello is similar to the aggressive witch-hunting and suspicions that were widespread in England during the sixteenth century. During the trial scene, Brabantio forces Othello to explain the unexplainable, and demands to know why his daughter has strayed from societal norms and expectations. Brabantio's accusations of witchcraft in the trial scene echo these fears and seventeenth century witchcraft ideologies, as he accuses Othello of altering Desdemona's perception of his hideous appearance, and tricking her into marrying him.

Othello and Desdemona are one of Shakespeare's most passionate couples. Their passion is outwardly noticed by the people around them. Before Othello leaves for Cyprus he tells Desdemona "I have but an hour of love, of worldly matters, and direction to spend with thee" (1.3.340-42). Othello makes this declaration of passion directly after the trial, unashamed to do so, in front of others. People in Elizabethan England feared the power of passion just as much as they feared witchcraft, and often linked the two through love spells and charms.

The magical handkerchief that Othello gives to Desdemona during their courtship is one such charm. In Act 3, Scene 4, when Desdemona tells Othello she has lost the handkerchief, he is extremely disappointed. Othello describes the handkerchief as a unique and magical heirloom, that he feels is responsible for his mother and father's love, declaring that "There's magic in the web of it" (81) when Desdemona questions the truth of his tale. His mother held onto it through her marriage, believing it would charm her husband into remaining devoted to her, and only passed it to Othello at death. Othello believes that the same will happen for him and Desdemona.

Othello informs Desdemona of the handkerchief's magical properties to scare her. Desdemona is aware that the handkerchief was a gift from Othello's mother, but was never before aware that it had the ability to keep a lover faithful and devoted. Othello warns Desdemona that "To lose 't or give 't away were such perdition as nothing else could match" (3.4.79). When Desdemona tells Othello she cannot find the handkerchief, he cannot respond to any of her explanations or reasoning. Instead, he repeatedly exclaims "The Handkerchief!" for several lines, curses, and then storms off the stage (3.4.103-115).

Desdemona accidentally drops the handkerchief in Act 3, Scene 3, as she exits the stage with Othello. This goes unnoticed by the lovers, but Emilia finds it, exclaiming "I am glad I have found this napkin/.../My wayward husband hath a hundred times/ Wooed me to steal it" (334-37). She gives the handkerchief to Iago, who then plants it in Cassio's room during the next scene. When Othello sees Cassio with the handkerchief, he immediately views it as confirmation of Desdemona's infidelity exclaiming "handkerchief---confessions---handkerchief" (4.1.45).

Othello's incident with the handkerchief demonstrates how easily people can be beguiled by appearances. Instead of examining it or exploring possible ways Cassio could have gotten the handkerchief, Othello immediately assumes that the handkerchief is evidence of Desdemona's infidelity. Once Othello believes he has concrete evidence, he finally begins to believe Iago's manipulative lies, despite Iago's perception of Othello as being easily beguiled. With the handkerchief, the seeds of jealousy continuously planted by Iago during the course of the play begin to take hold. The audience knows that all conclusions that Othello makes based on the appearance of the handkerchief are false. We know that Desdemona drops the handkerchief accidentally in Act 3. We are also aware that the handkerchief is planted in Cassio's room by Iago and that this is just his way of getting physical evidence to support the seeds of jealousy that he plants into Othello's mind.

After the immediate association of interracial marriage with witchcraft in *Othello*, Shakespeare begins to allow his characters and plots to unfold. Othello is portrayed as an African straying from standards and stereotypes. He is described as valiant and honorable (1.3.55-56), and his occupation makes him an important staple to the general function and structure of Venetian society.

Prior to the trial, Brabantio is confident, depicting a clear racial divide in Elizabethan society. He feels that the Duke will judge in his favor because Othello is an outsider:

The duke himself,
Or any of my brothers of the state,
Cannot but feel this wrong as 'twere their own.
For if such actions may have passage free,

Bondslaves and pagans shall our statesmen be. (1.2.119-23)

Brabantio immediately assumes that the court officials will take his side because they are social equals.

When the trial actually occurs, however, the Duke quickly changes his tune regarding the accusations, and neglects to side with Brabantio. The senator seconds the Duke's judgment, completely disregarding the witchcraft accusation, and the common practice of utilizing it to explain the inexplicable, such as an interracial love affair. The senator of the court considers it quite possible that Desdemona's attraction to Othello is natural (132-33) and not the result of black magic. In *Othello* the courts appear to be in Othello's favor despite the fact that he is a racial minority in society. Although Othello may be a different race, he is a Christian and essential to the structure of Venetian society. As a moor and general he is needed for combat. The Duke's judgment at the trial shows that the need for protection on the extremely vulnerable island of Venice is more important than a difference in Race.

Although Othello is a minority, he is still of high social standing, and has white men serving beneath him. He is an extremely important fixture in Venetian society, and holds the prestigious position of the "special mandate for the state affairs" (1.3.86). As a general in Cyprus, he has numerous white gentlemen serving under his direction, who eagerly respond to his orders with replies lacking any racial biases. "We wait upon your lordship" (3.2.7) is their reply to his command, even though it he is clearly the minority in the predominantly white population. Othello is viewed as a man and a general, rather than an African outsider. Cassio is happy to serve Othello and has no problem with his marriage to Desdemona, regardless of the fact that he is not of the same race.

Before Othello married Desdemona, Brabantio used to question Othello about his life, longing for explicit details (1.3.150). It is precisely her father's fascination with Othello's adventures that attracted Desdemona to Othello. At the trial, Othello recounts the first time he told Desdemona he loved her, an event that occurred immediately after one of his tales:

She wished she had not heard it, yet she wished that heaven had made her such a man. She thanked me,
and bade me, if I had a friend that loved her,
I should but teach him how to tell my story,
And that would woo her. Upon this hint I spake.
She loved me for the dangers I had passed,
And I loved her that she did pity them.

This is the only witchcraft I have used. (1.3.187-195)

After Desdemona hears Othello's adventurous stories, she cannot help but fall in love with him. By placing him in comparison with "a friend" who encounters similar dangers, it is implied that Desdemona falls in love not with Othello himself, but rather with his exotic nature. The Duke portrays Othello as having won Desdemona through his exoticism, stating, "I think this tale would win my daughter too" (197), and implying that most women would have reacted in a similar fashion when presented with a man of such exotic and foreign nature.

The setting of the play surrounds Othello in mystery. The plot begins on the Italian island of Venice, but after three scenes, Desdemona and Othello quickly leave Italy for the island of Cyprus. The action is moved "from Venice to the Island of Cyprus...giving

it an even more exotic coloring with stories of Othello's African past" (Mowat xiii). The action of the play remains in Cyprus until the tragic deaths of Othello and Desdemona ultimately bring an end to their marriage.

The island of Cyprus has significant historical value. In *Things of Darkness*, Cyprus is cited as "a typical stop for pilgrims on their way to the holy land as well as a center for international trade, that was known as the seat of Venus" (Hall 190). Cyprus was directly associated with exoticism, international trade, and the goddess of love. Shakespeare does not randomly choose the island of Cyprus for his setting, but rather uses it to symbolize all he wants to portray. By setting *Othello* in Cyprus, Shakespeare presents Othello as exotic, central to trade and commerce and war in Venetian society, while simultaneously praising him for being different in an atmosphere considered to be the seat of love.

Throughout *Othello*, Shakespeare does not let the audience forget Othello is black. There are countless references made to the color of his skin. Through the course of the play he is referred to as "Black Othello" (2.3.30). The term "black" then continues to be associated with both evil and tarnished objects. Later in the scene, Othello states that passion "collied" his judgment (220). The term "collied" implies darkened or tarnished judgment, but literally means something that is blackened by coal. Later in Act 5, Scene 2, Emilia describes Othello as Desdemona's "most filthy bargain" (192), stating "O, the more angel she, and you the blacker devil" (160). Through her description she portrays black as evil and tarnished. Even Othello directly associates the color of his skin with Desdemona's tarnished reputation, as he declares that her chastity is "now begrimed and black as mine own face" (3.3.442-43).

Iago often describes Othello in a barbarous and animal-like fashion, illustrating how race can be used as a tool of manipulation. Iago describes him as a “barbary horse” (1.1.125) and tells Brabantio “you’ll have your nephews neigh to you” (126), implying that Desdemona’s children with Othello will be animalistic. This link is directly associated with Barbary, a region of Africa clearly indicating that Othello’s animalistic and barbarous nature is a natural derivative of his race.

Through Iago’s manipulation, Othello is portrayed as naive and ignorant, a man easily beguiled and manipulated. Iago describes Othello as being very trusting in nature, stating that “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” (1.3.442-445). Othello is categorized by Iago as an individual who is naive, ignorant, and trusting, and therefore an easily manipulated ploy in his plan.

Othello continues to be labeled as barbarous and ignorant throughout the course of the play. Even Othello describes himself as being “rude in speech” (1.3.96) and unworldly and ignorant (101-04). As the plot of *Othello* unfolds however, we come to see that despite these outward categorizations, Othello is anything but naive and barbarous. Evidence strikes us immediately in Act 1, Scene 1, when Iago reveals that Othello has chosen Cassio as his Lieutenant, and second in command. Iago tells Roderigo:

Three great ones of the city,
In personal suit to make me his lieutenant,
Off-capped to him; and by the faith of man,
I know my price, I am worth no worse a place.

But he, as loving his own pride and purposes,
Evades them with a bombast circumstance,
Horribly stuffed with epithets of war,
And in conclusion,
Nonsuits my mediators. For “Certes,” says he,
“I have already chose my officer”...

One Michael Cassio, a Florentine (9-20)

Even though three Venetian nobles recommended that Othello select Iago as his lieutenant, Othello goes against their wishes and selects Cassio instead. Although Iago has previous battle experience, Cassio is a skilled arithmetician, and Othello selects him based on his intelligence and ability to assist in strategy, rather than in combat. He supports his choice based on previous war experience, and inevitably makes the smarter choice. The nobles cannot see through Iago’s façade, but Othello realizes that there are other more qualified candidates for the position. He does not even consider their recommendation, and the Venetian officials comply with his decision. In this circumstance, Othello is portrayed as being more intelligent than the officials who foolishly recommend Iago.

The way the officials regard his decision to elect Cassio as his lieutenant indicates the level of respect Othello has within Venetian politics. Contrary to Othello’s claims of ignorance, he is a trusted general by the Venetian officials. Senator Lodovico refers to Othello as “the noble moor, whom our full senate call all in all sufficient” (4.1.297-98), indicating that the senate regards Othello as a highly competent general, capable of making smart decisions. The senate would not trust Othello if he had not had prior

success as a general. A general must be smart and strategic in order to be a successful warrior. An ignorant warrior is one who would most likely end up dead in a battlefield, not commanding defense.

Beyond Stereotypes

Although Othello is presented through stereotypical beliefs of Africans in Elizabethan England, Shakespeare also simultaneously challenges these ideas that associated Africans as exotic and barbarous creatures. Unlike Shylock, Othello is portrayed as humane throughout the play, the accusations made by Brabantio and Iago proved false. Although Africans and Jews alike were marginalized in Shakespearean England, Othello still remains central to the plot, while Shylock is a somewhat minor character. Othello is undoubtedly marginalized in Venetian society, similar to the way Shylock is, but unlike Shylock, he remains a main character, crucial to the storyline. The entire plot revolves around his downfall, and upon his death the story ends.

Although both Shylock and Othello are marginalized in *The Merchant of Venice* and *Othello*, as both plays evolve it becomes clear that human nature has nothing to do with religious affiliation and race. Through Shylock, Shakespeare portrays human nature as a quality that is innate, regardless of religious affiliation. People are evil not because of their religious affiliation, but rather because it is a quality they possess. *Othello* further questions the categorizations and labels within society, commenting on the duality of appearances which is constantly questioned and challenged through the play.

When these two characters are examined in all their multi-dimensional glory, taking into account their functions within their respective fictional societies, as well as what they

represented to Shakespearean audiences, it becomes clear that Shakespeare does not portray Jews or Africans negatively. Through Shylock and Othello, Shakespeare challenges the Jewish and African stereotypes that prevailed during the seventeenth century, portraying race and religion as mere parts of the whole human being. While these two factors may dictate place in society, Shakespeare makes it abundantly clear that they are no indication of human character. In *The Merchant of Venice* and *Othello*, Shakespeare questions the validity of stereotypes, and ultimately explores what it meant to belong in Elizabethan society, commenting not on race or religion, but human nature.

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