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**TRACING THE HISTORY OF A METAPHOR: ALL IS NOT  
BLACK AND WHITE IN *OTHELLO***

by Diann L. Baecker

A seventeenth-century reader of Shakespeare's *Othello* thought the play was "very serious, & full of good thoughts, y<sup>e</sup> Plott regular & Tragical, every where well but where he would aim at witt" and that the best scenes were "those y<sup>t</sup> carry on Otello's jealousy."<sup>1</sup> Interestingly, this university-trained reader never mentions Othello's race and apparently does not consider the detail important enough to discuss. For readers and critics coming after him, however, race would become one of the dominant themes in their writings and everything from the relative blackness of the Moor's skin to the barbarity of presenting on stage a black man married to a white woman would be discussed, often to the neglect of other aspects of the play.<sup>2</sup> Many critics, however, fail to recognize that "black" as a signifier for race is metaphorical and that, as a metaphor, it has a fairly recent history. Thus, one scholar can discuss Shakespeare's exploration of racial issues in *Othello* by looking at his use of the words "black" and "white" without realizing the anachronism. Other scholars recognize the metaphorical nature of "black" but assume that it has always been associated with Africans. Lost, at times, in the controversy surrounding a black man's marriage to a white woman is the meaning of the play for Shakespeare and his Elizabethan audience.

In *Othello*, Shakespeare uses the Elizabethans' knowledge of Africans to question stereotypes of both the African and the Englishman, stereotypes which were just beginning to develop in 1604 when the play was written. In doing so, however, he does not focus on skin color, since

<sup>1</sup>G. Blakemore Evans, "A Seventeenth-Century Reader of Shakespeare," *Review of English Studies* 21 (1945) 271–279.

<sup>2</sup>Cf. A. C. Bradley's *Shakespearean Tragedy* (1904; New York 1985) in which he remarks that Othello should not be represented as black since "we do not like the real Shakespeare. We like to have his language pruned and his conceptions flattened into something that suits our mouths and minds. And even if we were prepared to make an effort, still, as Lamb observes, to imagine is one thing and to see is another. Perhaps if we saw Othello coal-black with the bodily eye, the aversion of our blood, an aversion which comes as near to being merely physical as anything human can, would overpower our imagination and sink us below not Shakespeare only but the audiences of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries" (165, n. 1). As regards whether Othello should be presented as a black man or a tawny Moor, recent twentieth-century scholars have generally conceded that the text is explicit about Othello's blackness. For an overview of some of the racial language of early criticism, see the introduction to Anthony Barthelemy's *Critical Essays on Shakespeare's Othello* (New York 1994) 1–18.

the use of “black” and “white” as metaphors for race was not part of the Elizabethan vocabulary. Rather, he explores the differences embodied by Othello and Iago by manipulating the words “honest” and “slave” (as well as their cognates) and playing with the concepts these words would signify for his audience. The metaphors of race which we respond to so strongly were not as loaded with meaning for the Elizabethans. On the other hand, modern audiences do not necessarily read “honest” and “slave” in the same way as Shakespeare’s Elizabethan audience. For them, the word “honest” conjured up images of an honorable person of good moral character (much as it does for us now), while “slave” denoted a contemptible person and not necessarily a person owned by another (in the sense we generally think of the word). In order to understand how Shakespeare manipulated the signs of “honest” and “slave,” it is necessary to read these words with Elizabethan eyes, along with “reading” the appearance of a black man on stage, a sort of walking, breathing sign in his own right. (After all, it must be remembered that this was a *play* for the Elizabethans, not the heavily annotated, printed classic it is now.)

Metaphors have histories. By examining a number of primary sources from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, this paper seeks to privilege diachrony by looking at the history of “black” as a metaphor for race, its opposition to “white,” and in the process to illuminate Shakespeare’s manipulation of the signs of “honest” and “slave,” rather than “black” or “white,” to explore racial differences in the play.

#### THE COLOR OF DARKNESS

“Black,” as applied to race, did not spring up full-blown with all its present connotations at the moment of England’s first encounter with Africa. The period between the mid-sixteenth century (when England began making its first direct contacts with Africans) and the end of the eighteenth century (when the business of selling African slaves was well-established) saw the development of the metaphor of race and, more specifically, the sign of “black” to signify human beings. Two hundred fifty years is a long time—long enough for nationalism to establish itself, long enough for the first seeds of capitalism to sprout, and, finally, long enough for “Africa” to become the vehicle for both of these concepts and Africans to go from being exotic but basically human “negroes,” to being lustful, sinful “blacks,” a shift in signs which is anything but insignificant. “Negroe” and “black” are not synonymous.

Greek and early medieval philosophers considered black to be a primary color, “the oldest, the original color, which was before the Beginning, the ultimate source of all the other colors and of the four ele-

ments—ultimately, *the* primary color.”<sup>3</sup> During the Renaissance, the color came to signify

things primitive or elemental (a black skin, human or animal, is emblematic of lust, for example), negations (a black skin which can’t be washed white also signifies the impossible), sins and virtues of omission, sometimes things old, as in conservative traits, and, in general, things beyond human power to conceive or understand or see or do.<sup>4</sup>

However, “black” was not yet regularly associated with “things malign or sinister.”<sup>5</sup> According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, “black” in the early seventeenth century was associated with wickedness and considered sinister, deadly, and foul. However, “black” and “African” were not yet synonymous. The *OED* notes that “black” was first used as a translation of “Negro” in 1625, but that it was not used metaphorically to represent the race until the latter part of the eighteenth century. The phrase “white man” has an even more recent history. Again according to the *OED*, it was not used to describe an ethnic type until 1604, at which time it was applied to the inhabitants of Peru, and then not again until 1680. Throughout most of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries when the word was used in this manner, it was most often applied to “others” inhabiting foreign lands and in contexts in which it was deemed necessary to distinguish between black and white inhabitants.

In the seventeenth century, Enlightenment philosophy influenced a number of scientific treatises on the nature and origin of the “blackness of Negroes.” One of the first and most influential was Sir Thomas Browne’s *Pseudodoxia Epidemica*, published in 1646. In the sixth book of Browne’s volume, entitled “Concerning Sundry Tenents Geographical and Historical,” he devotes a couple of chapters to the Africans’ color. In chapter ten, “Of the Blacknesse of Negroes,” he asks

why some men, yea and they a mighty and considerable part of mankinde, should first acquire and still retain the glosse and tincture of blacknesse.<sup>6</sup>

He discusses two current theories, that Africans acquire their color because they are scorched by the sun and that they are black because they are cursed by God as sons of Cham. He dismisses the first argument by citing

<sup>3</sup>Linda Van Norden, *The Black Feet of the Peacock: The Color-Concept “Black” From the Greeks Through the Renaissance*, ed. John Pollock (Maryland 1985) 210.

<sup>4</sup>Van Norden, *The Black Feet of the Peacock*, 212.

<sup>5</sup>Van Norden, *The Black Feet of the Peacock*, 212.

<sup>6</sup>Sir Thomas Browne, *Pseudodoxia Epidemica*, ed. Robin Robbins (1646; Oxford 1981) 508.

evidence of other peoples, including Native Americans, who live in the same temperate zone but are not black.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, he rejects the notion that the Africans' color is a curse upon Cham.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, how can the color black be a curse when the Africans themselves do not see it as one? According to Browne, they like the color so much "that they esteem deformity by other colours, describing the Devill, and terrible objects white."<sup>9</sup>

What then is the explanation for the Africans' blackness? Browne suggests several possibilities. First, he questions whether it is possible that the ingestion of certain waters might produce blackness. In support of this theory, he cites evidence from Aristotle, Strabo, and Pliny "who have made a collection hereof, as of two fountains in Baeotia, the one making sheepe white, the other black, of the water of Siberis which made Oxen black, and the like effect it had also upon men, dying not onely the skin, but making their haire black and curled."<sup>10</sup> Another thesis is the "power and efficacy of the Imagination."<sup>11</sup> He cites a story in Hippocrates of "one, that from an intent view of a picture conceived a Negroe" and also a story from Heliodore in which "a Moorish Queene, who upon aspersion of the picture of Andromeda, conceived and brought forth a faire one."<sup>12</sup> A third possibility is that the color started off as something like jaundice, a disease or malformation which once started was passed down through posterity.<sup>13</sup>

Furthermore, there are such people as "artificial Negroes, or Gypsies" who acquire their color "by anointing their bodies with Bacon and fat substances, and so exposing them to the Sun."<sup>14</sup> Finally, however, Browne asserts that the Africans' color is the result of "a spermaticeall part traduced from father unto son, so that they which are strangers contract it not, and the Natives which transmigrate omit it not without commixture, and that after divers generations."<sup>15</sup>

Browne had a tremendous influence on another scientist, Robert Boyle. Boyle wrote books on a number of scientific subjects including one entitled *Experiments and Considerations touching Colours*, which was published in London in 1664. His collected works were first published in 1744 and were very influential. In "Experiments and Considerations

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., 508.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., 518.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., 520.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., 513.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., 513.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., 513.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., 514.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., 514.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., 516.

touching Colours,” Boyle discusses several experiments he made to determine the nature of colors, including white and black. Experiment 11 is less of an experiment and more of a review of the various theories regarding the skin color of Africans. He insists on seeing the blackness of Africans as a natural phenomenon. Relying upon consultations he has made “with authors, and with books of voyages, and with travelers,” he dismisses the idea that the Africans’ color is due to the sun or a biblical curse.<sup>16</sup> In his refutation of blackness as a curse can be heard echoes of Browne:

Nor is it evident, that blackness is a curse; for navigators tell us of black nations who think so much otherwise of their own condition, that they paint the devil white. Nor is blackness inconsistent with beauty, which even to our European eyes consists not so much in colour, as an advantageous stature, a comely symmetry of the parts of the body, and good features in the face. So that I see not, why blackness should be thought such a curse to the Negroes, unless perhaps it be, that being wont to go naked in those hot climates, the colour of their skin does probably, according to the doctrine above delivered, make the sun-beams more scorching to them, then they would prove to a people of a white complexion.<sup>17</sup>

In further support of his theory that color is only a superficial consideration, he cites evidence that the Africans’ color “seems to be but the thin epidermis, or outward skin.”<sup>18</sup> He recounts the tale of an African having contracted either smallpox or measles (he is not sure which) who showed white at the places where the blisters had burst. He also cites the testimony of various doctors who have performed autopsies on Africans.<sup>19</sup>

Thus, the blackness of Africans is a scientific curiosity for Browne and Boyle. They specifically reject theories which link the Africans’ color to such things as curses and reject attempts to associate the color of the Africans’ skin with ideas of deformity. Neither, would I suggest, would most Englishmen living during the seventeenth century associate the darkness of the Africans’ skin with evil or barbarity. If the eighteenth century could come to no conclusion about what “black” means—at a time when the slave trade was well established and much more was known about Africa—how likely is it that the Renaissance could? Linda Van Norden, who, for a number of years, collected examples of color imagery from the Greeks through the Renaissance, says that while on a folk level

<sup>16</sup>Robert Boyle, *Experiments and Considerations Touching Colours*, The Works, vol. 1, ed. Thomas Birch (1664; Germany 1965) 714.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., 717.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., 718.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., 718.

black is sometimes associated with evil, it is done “less so than I would have supposed when I began this study.”<sup>20</sup> When we look at Shakespeare’s *Othello* and see only a black man whose marriage to a white woman appears monstrous, or when we assume that Shakespeare explores issues of racial difference via his use of the words “black” and “white,” we privilege a synchronic—and inaccurate—view of the metaphorical nature of race and risk misreading the play. To say that Shakespeare does not explore the differences between *Othello* and *Iago* by focusing on skin color, however, is not to say that Shakespeare expects his audience to read *Othello* as being no different from *Iago*. To do so would rob the play of all meaning. Shakespeare relies on his audiences’ knowledge of Africans and Moors in constructing his play.

THE SIXTEENTH-CENTURY VIEW OF AFRICA:  
PART FACT, PART FICTION

Elizabethan England was familiar with Africa. Londoners, in particular, had first-hand knowledge of real Africans, many of whom were not known as slaves.<sup>21</sup> The first Africans brought to London were probably five native West Africans brought by a trader named William Towrson in 1554. Towrson brought them to England to learn English so that they could serve as interpreters on later trading expeditions.<sup>22</sup> Later, the queen of England received sixteen members of the Moroccan embassy in June 1600.<sup>23</sup> By the late sixteenth century, there were so many Africans living in London that Queen Elizabeth issued two edicts in 1599 and 1601 ordering their deportation.<sup>24</sup>

In addition to first-hand experience with Africans, Elizabethans read a great deal of travel literature. Several publications strongly influenced the perceptions of Elizabethans towards Africa and Africans. One of the first books, *Mandeville’s Travels*, was published in England in the fifteenth century. Part fact, mostly fiction, the book nevertheless was very popular and became the source of much of the knowledge Elizabethans had of Africa.<sup>25</sup> In 1555, Richard Eden published his translation of Peter Martyr’s *Decades* as well as accounts of Thomas Eindhams’ voyage to Guinea in 1553 and John Lok’s voyage to Mina in 1554–1555. The latter were reprinted in 1577 in Richard Willes’s *The History of Travayle* and in 1589

<sup>20</sup>Van Norden, *The Black Feet of the Peacock*, 212.

<sup>21</sup>Winthrop D. Jordan, *White Over Black* (Chapel Hill 1968) 4.

<sup>22</sup>Jordan, *White Over Black*, 6.

<sup>23</sup>Bernard Harris, “A Portrait of a Moor,” *Shakespeare Survey* 11 (1958) 89–97.

<sup>24</sup>Eldred D. Jones, *The Elizabethan Image of Africa* (Virginia 1971) 17.

<sup>25</sup>Eldred D. Jones, *Othello’s Countrymen: The African in English Renaissance Drama* (London 1965) 5.

in Hakluyt's *Principal Navigations*.<sup>26</sup> Hakluyt's publication proved to be the most influential, as well as the most accurate, account of Africa to date.<sup>27</sup> All of these books, however, faded into the background with the appearance of John Leo's *The Geographical History of Africa*, first published in Italy in 1550 but not widely known to Englishmen until John Pory's translation of it in 1600. An examination of some of this early travel literature will reveal not only the ways in which England tried to understand Africa but the striking similarities between its characterization of Africa and its depiction of other countries, dispelling the theory that England automatically assigned Africans an "evil" character because of their skin color. In fact, the English were equally condescending to all other countries; they found Africans to be no more nor less exotic and barbaric than the Russians.

One of the first books about Africa available in English was William Prat's *The Discription of the countrey of Aphrique*, published in 1554. It is the first volume of an ambitious plan to describe all of the parts of the world, including Asia, Europe, and the New World. However, only this first volume was ever completed. It is an impressive look at the history of Africa from the formation of the earth itself and the creation of the first human beings, to what was for Prat present day Africa. His purpose in doing so was twofold. Not only did he believe that travel brings knowledge, he also sought to improve the morals of his countrymen:

I have gathered together, as well the new and fresh, as also the ancient examples both good and evil serving to this purpose, to the end that they may present unto thee things virtuous and of honor as evil and vicious, thou mayste follow those things which lead to virtue, and require discretion to shun that which doth intend to reproach and filthiness.<sup>28</sup>

His focus, however, is clearly on providing new knowledge simply because he believes that the "knowledge of diverse nations is greatly to be delighted in and profitable."<sup>29</sup> Throughout the book, Prat's own enthusiasm for travel literature is evident.

Most of the information about Ethiopia in Prat's book can be recognized as pertaining to Egypt, in particular. For instance, Prat notes that the Ethiopians have a system for writing in which their letters are not symbols,

<sup>26</sup>Jones, *Othello's Countrymen*, 8, 9.

<sup>27</sup>Jones, *Othello's Countrymen*, 14.

<sup>28</sup>William Prat, *The Discription of the Countrey of Aphrique*, intro. Lillian Gottesman (1554; New York 1972) 17–18.

<sup>29</sup>*Ibid.*, 33–34.



but rather the representation of the outward parts of men and creatures.<sup>30</sup> What he is attempting to describe, of course, is hieroglyphics. He also writes that they have holy books, a legal system, and that the children learn geometry, arithmetic, and reading.<sup>31</sup> Another important characteristic of their society, one which compares favorably with England, is the degree to which they honor their king.<sup>32</sup> Prat maintains that the English, who know God, are more evil than the infidels because the former show disrespect to their queen whereas the infidels honor their rulers.<sup>33</sup>

The reliability of many of these passages vary. While the passages about Egypt are fairly accurate, many of the other parts are simply fantastical. In listing the various commodities of Africa, Prat includes such things as gold, wood, elephants, lions, leopards—and unicorns and dragons.<sup>34</sup> Richard Hakluyt's publication fifty years later would provide England with a more accurate view of Africa.

Hakluyt's *Voyages and Discoveries: The Principal Navigations, Voyages, Traffiques and Discoveries of the English Nation* was first published in England around 1589–1590. An expanded edition was published sometime between 1598 and 1600. It consists of a collection of travel narratives painstakingly gathered over several years. Like Prat, Hakluyt had more than one purpose in mind when he published his work. In the epistle dedicatory of the first edition, Hakluyt urges colonization in America as a way to employ England's youth, enrich England while increasing her domain, and “reduce many pagans to the faith of Christ.”<sup>35</sup> Hakluyt's work was widely read and there is evidence that Shakespeare drew some of the material for his plays from Hakluyt.<sup>36</sup>

The narratives contained in the book do not deal exclusively with Africa. Together they illustrate the homogenous response of England to inhabitants of other countries. England viewed many other nations, besides Africa, with some degree of contempt or, at the very least, as exotic lands to be explored. Throughout, the travelers are careful to list things which they consider to be signs of civilization: towns, houses, literacy, and weaponry. The various commodities of the countries, the religious

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., 61.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., 95, 100, 109.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., 63.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid., 77.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid., 65.

<sup>35</sup>Richard Hakluyt, *Voyages and Discoveries: The Principal Navigations, Voyages, Traffiques and Discoveries of the English Nation*, ed. Jack Beeching (1598–1600; London 1972) 37.

<sup>36</sup>Jack Beeching, introduction to *Voyages and Discoveries: the Principal Navigations, Voyages, Traffiques and Discoveries of the English Nation* by Richard Hakluyt (London 1972) 24, 27.

practices of the inhabitants, their dress (or, in warmer parts of the world, their lack of clothing), as well as their color, all find their place within the narratives as well. Interestingly, skin color is not given as much attention as dress and housing. The presence of towns and the building materials used in construction are the most important indications of civilization for the English.

Hakluyt includes accounts of several voyages made by the English along the northern coast of Russia during the sixteenth century. In one, “The voyage of Master Anthony Jenkinson, made from the city of Moscow in Russia, to the city of Bokhara in Bactria, in the year 1558,” the focus of the narrative is in detailing evidence of civilization. Jenkinson describes with approval the town and castles of Murom and Kazam. A little further north, in the land of the Tartars who follow the Islamic religion, things deteriorate. Here, “town or house they had none, but lived in the open fields . . . and when they remove they have houses like tents set upon wagons or carts, which are drawn from place to place with camels.”<sup>37</sup> Even worse, “every man hath at the least four or five wives besides concubines.” They do not have money, but only barter and “they delight in no art nor science.” Perhaps because of this lack of civil behavior, Jenkinson also declares that they “are seditious and inclined to theft and murder.”<sup>38</sup> He goes on to say that:

I could have bought many goodly Tartars[] children, of their own fathers and mothers, a boy or a wench for a loaf of bread worth sixpence in England, but we had more need of victuals at that time than of any such merchandise.<sup>39</sup>

Siberia is no better. Here, again, they have no money. In addition, they are warlike, are shepherds, and “given much to theft and murder.”<sup>40</sup> The city of Bokhara in the land of Bactria is better: “The city is very great and the houses for the most part of earth, but there are also many houses, temples and monuments of stone sumptuously builded, and gilt, and specially bath stoves so artificially built, that the like thereof is not in the world.”<sup>41</sup> Later, on the voyage home, the men encounter difficult seas and Jenkinson writes that they were extremely afraid that their ship would be broken up upon the coast:

For although we should have escaped with our lives the danger of the sea, but

<sup>37</sup>Hakluyt, *Voyages and Discoveries*, 78.

<sup>38</sup>*Ibid.*, 78.

<sup>39</sup>*Ibid.*, 79.

<sup>40</sup>*Ibid.*, 79.

<sup>41</sup>*Ibid.*, 85.

if our bark had perished, we knew we should have been, either destroyed, or taken slaves by the people of that country, who live wildly in the field, like beasts, without house or habitation.<sup>42</sup>

These passages illustrate the regard the Englishmen had for houses and buildings made of stone. These were the hard, permanent signs of civilization to them.

The narratives of voyages to Russia, India, and the New World are remarkably similar to those about Africa and South America. The same concerns about housing, literacy, and commodities are present although skin color and dress are more prominent in the narratives. Some of the descriptions of Africa are far more fantastical than the narratives about Russia or even South America, suggesting that some of them were still being based primarily upon older written materials. For example, a traveler to Guinea in the year 1554 reports, accurately, that the impression that an elephant's tusks grow up from their bottom jaw is incorrect. However, he then goes on to say that elephants "have continual war against dragons, which desire their blood because it is very cold: and therefore the dragon lieth in wait as the elephant passeth by."<sup>43</sup> Presumably, while he has seen actual elephants he includes some myth in his story, although it is marginally possible that there was some African animal, now extinct, which resembled a dragon to the Englishmen. Certainly he is not the only person to remark upon the presence of dragons in Africa.

As for the people, this same explorer says that they go naked but wear a lot of gold and ivory jewelry, thus combining comments about the civilizing signs of the natives and the presence of precious commodities. The narrative of John Hawkins, on the other hand, contains more explicit reference to skin color. He voyaged to the coast of Guinea and the Indies of Nova Hispania in 1564. He notes that in some parts of Africa, the people are "tawny, having long hair without any apparel, saving before their privy members."<sup>44</sup> At Cape Verde, the people "are all black, and are called negroes, without any apparel, saving before their privities."<sup>45</sup> In Santa Fe, the Indians are of "colour tawny like an olive."<sup>46</sup> Hawkins traveled as far as Florida where he again takes care to describe the houses and the dress of the natives. He also notes that there are some "negroes" living with the Indians. He lists the commodities of the country as including such animals as "deer, foxes, hares, polecats, conys, ounces, and

<sup>42</sup>Ibid., 88.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid., 68.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid., 105.

<sup>45</sup>Ibid., 106.

<sup>46</sup>Ibid., 107.

leopards” and reportedly “lions and tigers as well as unicorns.”<sup>47</sup>

During this time, the term used most often to refer to Africans is “negroes.” Occasionally, they are referred to as “black slaves” or having “black complexions” but generally speaking “black” is always used as an adjective directly attached to a noun. Thus, the evidence from the sixteenth century shows the English to be at least as interested in the dress, housing, and religion of the Africans as they are in their skin color. In fact, a great deal of their writings about Africa focused on the commodities which could be extracted from the country, commodities which did not include, for the most part at this time, slaves.

An important point to keep in mind is that the English viewed Africa (and Africans) in much the same way as they viewed other foreign lands and their inhabitants. Descriptions of Russians, for example, do not vary remarkably from descriptions of Africans in these travel narratives. Venice was certainly no Russia, but to assume that Shakespeare’s audience would have identified with the Venetian Iago simply because of his white skin would be a mistake.

#### OTHELLO’S BLACK SKIN/IAGO’S BLACK HEART

Doris Adler, in her essay on the rhetoric of *Othello*, focuses on the words “black” and “white,” saying that the play seeks to exonerate the black-skinned Othello by making him metaphorically white. She notes that Othello is called “fair” by Desdemona, and that she in turn is referred to once by her husband as being “black.” In addition, Adler points out that Bianca’s name means “white” and that she is called the “fair Bianca,” all of which is ironic considering that Bianca’s character is a whore. Moreover, the “blackness of the devil” is transferred to Iago at the end of the play.<sup>48</sup> However, as evidence from sixteenth and seventeenth-century sources reveals, these words would not have held the same racial connotations for Shakespeare as they have for later audiences.

The words “black,” “blacker,” “blackest,” and “blackness” are only used a total of eleven times in the entire play, most of the references occurring early in acts 1 and 2. The first instance is the infamous line where Iago tells Brabantio that “Even now, now, very now, an old black ram / Is tugging your white ewe” (I.i.88–89).<sup>49</sup> As Adler is correct in noting, here the blackness of Othello is directly contrasted with the whiteness of Desdemona. In act 2, Iago proposes to drink a toast with

<sup>47</sup>Ibid., 115.

<sup>48</sup>Doris Adler, “The Rhetoric of ‘Black’ and ‘White’ in *Othello*,” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 25 (1974) 248–257.

<sup>49</sup>William Shakespeare, *Othello*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans, *The Riverside Shakespeare* (Boston 1974). All further citations of *Othello* are from this edition.

Cassio in honor of “black Othello” (II.iii.32), and later in act 3, Othello will call himself “black” (III.iii.263). However, other uses of the word “black” in the play are generally used to describe the quality of foulness, as when Iago refers to “blackest sins” (II.iii.351). Moreover, “white” and “whiter” are hardly used in the play at all. “White” appears only twice, the first time in the above-mentioned passage wherein it is coupled with “ewe,” and once in act 2 where it is used as a pun for “wight,” i.e., person (II.i.133). “Whiter” does not appear until the fourth act when Othello says that he will not spill blood on Desdemona’s skin, which is “whiter . . . than snow” (V.ii.4). Therefore, while Adler’s primary argument—that Shakespeare wishes the audience to understand that appearances are deceiving—is essentially correct, it appears that the words “black” and “white” are not where this manipulation of signified and signifier occurs.

In 1951 William Empson came closer to the solution in his essay on Shakespeare’s use of the word “honest.” As he notes, “honest” or “honesty” is used in the play a total of fifty-two times and he says that there is “no other play in which Shakespeare worries a word like that.”<sup>50</sup> Most of the time the word is addressed to or applied to Iago, either by others or by himself (usually in an ironic sense). Once, in act 5, Othello applies the word to himself when, as he is contemplating suicide, he asks “why should honor outlive honesty” (V.ii.245). Interestingly, “slave” is also used most often to refer to Iago. Again, Othello uses the word to describe himself once in act 5 (“cursed, cursed slave!” [V.ii.243]). However, this is the only time the word is ever applied to Othello, while Iago is called a slave three times in act 5 and once referred to indirectly as a slave in act 4.

The word “honest” has long referred to persons who are respectable and who have honorable motives and principles. The *OED* notes that it was early used to describe all persons of good moral character, and that regarding speech and actions, it referred to those which were candid and truthful. As Empson notes, however, the word began to change around the seventeenth century.<sup>51</sup> By 1634, the *OED* notes that the word was applied to persons who were ingenuous and frank about their own character, whether that character was good or bad. While at times, as Empson says, it appears that Shakespeare is playing with this latter meaning of the word, it appears more often that he is manipulating the older sense of the word as meaning “truthful” and “honorable.” The word “slave” has also undergone a transformation over the years so that it now generally refers only to persons who are the property of another. However, in Shakespeare’s time

<sup>50</sup>William Empson, *The Structure of Complex Words* (1951; New Jersey 1979) 218.

<sup>51</sup>*Ibid.*, 218.

it was also frequently used as a term of contempt. The *OED* lists several instances of Shakespeare using the word in this way. It appears then, that “honest” and “slave” are more likely candidates for the signs which Shakespeare deliberately manipulates in order to explore the significance of racial difference.

In “*Othello: An Essay to Illustrate a Method*,” Kenneth Burke suggests an ideal paradigm for a Shakespearean tragedy. The first act should set up the situation. Act 2 is designed to give the audience a better understanding of the characters and functions to move the plot forward. Act 3, on the other hand, contains the peripety, the sudden change of circumstances, or as Burke puts it, the place where “The Trap is Laid.” Act 4 is the “pity” act, and act 5, of course, provides the resolution.<sup>52</sup> Burke says that this general structure can be applied not only to plot but to the “structure of terms” in a play.<sup>53</sup> It is also in the fifth act, as Burke notes, that the playwright must insure that the hero “dies well” and the villain is “branded.”<sup>54</sup> If “honest” and “slave” are, indeed, the two central terms in this play through which Shakespeare manipulates the arbitrary association between signified and signifier, then their use should follow Burke’s pattern, reaching its pinnacle in the third act, and its resolution in the fifth.

As noted above, “honest” or “honesty” is used fifty-two times in this play. Iago refers to himself, or is referred to, as “honest” five times prior to act 2, scene 3. In act 1, Iago mocks men as “honest knaves” who obediently serve a master only to be “cashier’d” when old (I.1.49). He says that he is not one of these men and goes on to tell Roderigo that he will never wear his heart upon his sleeve, saying “I am not what I am” (I.1.65). In scene 3, Othello calls Iago a man of “honesty” to whom he will entrust his wife’s safe conveyance to Cyprus (I.iii.284). Ten lines later he calls Iago for the first time “Honest Iago,” an epithet he will use frequently throughout the play.

According to Burke’s paradigm, the action begins picking up speed in act 2, to eventually reach its peak in the third act. In the last scene of act 2, Iago’s plot is fully underway. He gets Cassio drunk and subsequently dismissed as Othello’s lieutenant. In addition, he convinces Cassio that the way to get back into Othello’s good graces is through the intervention of Desdemona. The trap is almost set now. It is not surprising then that, whereas there are only a total of five references to Iago’s alleged honesty up until now, the final scene of act 2 alone includes six such references plus one instance of the word applied to Cassio and two instances when

<sup>52</sup>Ibid., 170–175.

<sup>53</sup>Ibid., 176.

<sup>54</sup>Ibid., 178.

the word is used to mean “truthful” (II.iii.353, II.iii.141, and II.iii.341).

As Burke predicts, act 3 sees the words “honest” and “honesty” used more frequently (by far) than in any other act. Of the twenty-three usages, thirteen are directly or indirectly applied to Iago. This includes Cassio’s assertion that he has never met a Florentine as “honest” as Iago, as well as Desdemona’s assertion that Iago is “honest” (III.i.40, III.iii.5). Interestingly, Iago’s honesty is now set against assertions regarding the honor of Cassio and Desdemona. Burke notes the importance of minor characters in providing a “sufficient range of analogies” with which the overall tension of the play is represented.<sup>55</sup> While Desdemona is certainly not a minor character, she nevertheless functions in this act in tandem with Cassio. Together they provide another analogy for determining Iago’s character. The truthfulness of Cassio’s and Desdemona’s honesty throws the falseness of Iago’s in relief.

Interestingly, while it is in act 3 that the use of the words “honest” and “honesty” reaches its crescendo, it is here also that the word “slave” is first introduced. “Slavery” is mentioned only once prior to this, and this is the part in act 1 where Othello describes how he was “sold to slavery” (I.iii.138), although he does not refer to himself as a slave (or a former slave) at this point. When the word “slave” is first used to describe a person, it is used by Iago in the derogatory sense to refer to himself. He also uses it in the same speech to refer figuratively to the money in his purse as “slave to thousands” (III.iii.135, 158). Later, after Cassio has disgraced himself and Othello is beginning to suspect that Iago’s lies about Cassio are true, Othello refers to Cassio as a “slave,” again using it as a term of contempt (III.iii.442). In fact, Shakespeare uses this figurative meaning of the word throughout the play, never using it to refer to a person actually owned by another person. The word will be used once in act 4 to obliquely refer to Iago (IV.ii.132), and then not again until the fifth act.

The use of the word “honest” in act 4 follows the same general pattern. It, or its cognate “honesty,” is used only six times, although interestingly Shakespeare does not use the word to directly refer to Iago. At one point Iago does say (truthfully) that it “is not honesty in me to speak” and Emilia says that she wishes “in every honest hand a whip” to punish whoever has been plotting against Othello, not realizing yet that it is her husband (IV.i.277, IV.ii.142). These are the only two references to Iago, the latter one quite oblique. Instead of Iago, it is Desdemona to whom the word is applied. Four times in scene two, within the space of sixty lines, Emilia tells Othello that Desdemona is honest, Othello asks Desdemona to swear

<sup>55</sup>Ibid., 179.

she is honest, and Desdemona herself confirms it. Act 4 truly is the “pity” act.

Finally, act 5 provides the resolution of the play in which Iago is revealed for the villain he is and Othello, as Burke predicts, is allowed to die well. If perchance the audience misses the fact that all of the play with signifiers is about to be resolved, Shakespeare gives them one obvious clue. In act 5, scene 1, the “fair” Bianca—Cassio’s whore—tells Emilia that she is as “honest” as Emilia (V.i.122). While Emilia has unwittingly, and perhaps even stupidly, played a role in Iago’s plot, she is probably not the whore Iago suspects her to be and she is certainly not of the same character as Bianca. This is only one of seven times that the word is used, and only one of two times it is not applied to Iago. By this time, Othello has killed Desdemona and desperately wants to believe that he has done an honorable thing, that she is the whore Iago has convinced him she is. He refers to Iago five times as “honest,” the last time doubling up on the word, calling him “honest, honest Iago” (V.ii.154). Of course Iago is not now, nor has he ever been, honest except perhaps, as Empson suggests, in the newer sense of the word as a hale and hearty fellow.

In act 5, Iago’s true character is revealed. It is Iago who is the slave. The word “slave” is used five times in act 5. Iago calls Roderigo a slave once, and Othello, in despair, uses it once to refer to himself (V.i.61, V.ii.276). The rest belong to Iago. In scene ii, after Iago’s plot has been discovered, after Othello has killed Desdemona and Iago has killed Bianca, after there is no longer any doubt about Iago’s character, Montano brands him a “damned slave” as he chases after Iago (V.ii.243). Lodovico uses the same epithet, chastising Othello for falling “in the practice of a damned slave” (V.ii.292). Several lines later Lodovico again refers to Iago as a slave. Interestingly, the last use of the word “honesty” is reserved for Othello who, referring to himself, asks “why should honor outlive honesty” (V.ii.245).

Thus, Shakespeare’s use of these two terms follows the general paradigm set up by Burke to describe Shakespearian tragedies, a pattern which he says can also be applied to the terms used in a play. Considering all fifty-two uses of the words “honest” and “honesty” and the ten uses of “slave,” “slaves,” or “slavery,” it appears that Empson is correct in saying that Shakespeare worries these words, particularly the former, in such a way that they must be the most important terms for him, far more important than “black” and “white.” These latter words did not have the power to arouse in the Elizabethan mind the same stereotypes which we associate with them now, the same stereotypes brought to mind for them by “honest” and “slave.”



## CONCLUSION

In *Othello*, Shakespeare explores race relations by playing with his audiences' expectations of what Othello signifies. He accomplishes this, in part, by also playing with the audiences' assumptions of an honest man, revealing Iago to have a very "dark" soul, indeed. While, for the reasons cited above, Shakespeare would not have put this conflict in terms of black and white, it is obvious that he intends to deconstruct the opposition of Europeans and Africans. Shakespeare appears to understand that in "language we deal with the world at the level of signification, not with material objects themselves,"<sup>56</sup> thus the importance of such words as "honest" and "slave" which signify much more than is first apparent.

Shakespeare lived during an interesting period in regards to race relations between Englishmen and Africans. Contact with Africa and actual natives of Africa was yielding a wealth of information about what was, at least to Londoners, a strange and exotic place. Since extensive participation in the slave trade by the English did not occur until well into the seventeenth century, the initial contact was not made on an economic basis with the African already prejudged as a slave.<sup>57</sup> The African was still a person, albeit an exotic one, and not a commodity. Elizabethans knew Africans living in England who were not only servants, but also property holders and taxpayers. Shakespeare thus was relatively free to explore what it meant to be an African and also, consequently, to explore what it meant to be an Englishman.

At some point, in our discourse of "black and white," we have forgotten that we are not talking about real people, only of metaphors. As Frantz Fanon has said, "what is often called the black soul is a white man's artifact."<sup>58</sup> One result of privileging a synchronic view of the metaphors of race is that we have spent a couple of centuries discussing Shakespeare's play in terms of "black" and "white," forgetting that metaphors have a history and that, in this instance, these words did not have the same racial connotations for Elizabethans as they have for us.

It would be inappropriate to argue that Shakespeare was an early spokesman for racial equality, but at least we can recognize his willingness to explore issues of racial difference by exposing the play between the Moor and the European as signs and their corresponding significations. Anthony Appiah notes that

Under Sausserian hegemony, we have too easily become accustomed to

<sup>56</sup>Terry Eagleton, *William Shakespeare* (Oxford 1986) 97.

<sup>57</sup>Jordan, *White Over Black*, 4.

<sup>58</sup>Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York 1967) 14.

thinking of meaning as constituted by systems of differences purely internal to our endlessly structured *langues* . . . Even if the concept of race *is* a structure of oppositions—white opposed to black (but also to yellow), Jew opposed to Gentile (but also to Arab)—it is a structure whose realization is, at best, problematic, and, at worst, impossible.<sup>59</sup>

In his portrayal of Othello and Iago, Shakespeare seems to recognize the problematic nature of race and he explores that problem, not through references to skin color, but through the words “honest” and “slave” and all the concepts those two words connote. If we recognize race, especially as it is expressed in skin color, as a metaphor which should be considered

<sup>59</sup>Anthony Appiah, “The Uncompleted Argument: DuBois and the Illusion of Race,” in *Race, Writing, and Difference*, ed. Henry Louis Gates (Chicago 1986) 35.

diachronically, perhaps we can get a little closer to the play as Shakespeare intended his audience to “read” it.

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