TROUBLING VICE:
STIGMA & SUBJECTIVITY IN SHAKESPEARE'S AMBITIOUS VILLAINS

BY

THOMAS E. SIMONSON

A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of

WAKE FOREST UNIVERSITY GRADUATE SCHOOL OF ARTS AND SCIENCES

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

English

May 2019

Winston-Salem, North Carolina

Approved By:

Sarah Hogan, Ph.D., Advisor

Olga Valbuena, Ph.D., Chair

Susan Harlan, Ph.D.

Dedication

For those chief Virtues, my wife and children,
and my parents, ever my guiding lights.

Acknowledgements

This project would not exist without the generous members of my committee, especially Sarah Hogan, whose patience I have not deserved, and whose interventions have been so instrumental. I am grateful, too, to Susan Harlan, who has been welcoming and encouraging ever since my first visit to Wake Forest. Lastly, I am grateful to Olga Valbuena, who introduced me to many of the Shakespeares I had long sensed within his plays. Her open door and warm conversation have always been a comfort and delight.

I would also like to acknowledge the past and present teachers and professors who have encouraged me to pursue English, even when it seemed to make no sense to do so in my position: Ted Simonson, Cindy Creech, Ben Utter, Ben Butler, Lara Vetter, Malin Pereira, Juan Meneses, Maya Socolovsky, Jeffrey Leak, Melissa Jenkins, and Gale Sigal, whose kindness in my first weeks at Wake I will never forget.

I am thankful to the friends and family near and far who have supported me throughout this process. Their humor and empathy have been vital lifelines over the past two years, especially that of Monique Foy, the truest of friends, and my sister, Susanna, both of whom have always believed in me and who put up with me when others would have grown impatient; my friends from UNC, Sara Eudy and Shelby LeClair, who stayed in touch through every meltdown and panic attack to get to the jokes on the other side; and to the two kindest friends I've been blessed with at Wake, Maddie Gallo and Tyler Jagt, for always listening and laughing, retaining the sincerity of their characters, and proving themselves the actual best.

In supporting me every step of the way, I am inexpressibly grateful to my parents, at once my friends and my role models. Without them I would be lost: their prayer, counsel, and encouragement has sustained me during this time, just as it has throughout my life. Thank you, Mom and Dad, for going above and beyond, for leading by example, and for loving your family extravagantly.

Above all, I owe my deepest gratitude to my wife and children, who have been far more patient and understanding than anyone else has needed to be. Theirs are the smiling faces that have always awaited my return from long nights of tutoring and writing, and theirs are the forgiving spirits that have endured the worst of how I've responded to the trials of earning this degree and writing this thesis.

Their demonstration of love has been the most humbling and rewarding aspect of it all.

Table of Contents

Dedication ii

Acknowledgements iii

Abstract v

Introduction: The Trouble with Villains vi

Theoretical Considerations x
Chapter Overviews xii

Chapter 1: Contextualizing Vice 1

Conventions of the Morality Drama 3
Vice Ascendant 10
Villainous Usurpation 19

Chapter 2: Reexamining Blackness in *Titus Andronicus* 26

The Hermeneutics of the "Moor" 29
Stigmatization in the Text 37
"Will"ful Blackness 43
Tempering Recuperation 55

Chapter 3: Counterproductive Motives in *Othello* 61

Iago's Resentment 64
Luxuriant Perpetuation 70
Transgressive Desire 79

Coda: Evaluating Villainy 90

References 93

Vita 100

Abstract

Opening with the figure of Richard III, who alludes to the stage Vice of the morality plays preceding later Elizabethan and Jacobean drama, I trace Shakespeare's engagement with the Vice figure across two plays featuring the most infamous of his ambitious villains, *Titus Andonronicus*'s Aaron and *Othello*'s Iago, who present mirrored images of patriarchal power structures. My project troubles the traditional hermeneutics of the Vice in relation to villainy by paying careful attention to Aaron and Iago's delegitimization through the context of Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble*, which emphasizes the prediscursive ontologies that patriarchal institutions inscribe upon the individual. In doing so, I do not separate either villain from their respective play's robust evocations of the Vice; on the contrary, I celebrate these dramaturgic and historical threads of influence in order to explore the ways in which Shakespeare's works build on and expand the potential encapsulated in the swaggering Vice figure. I begin with a chapter briefly covering the history of the morality play before moving to an analysis of the Vice's ascendancy and endurance beyond the confines of the homiletic genre of his origin. His linguistic agency I use as a hermeneutic key in reading anew Aaron and Iago, who insistently evoke and yet distance themselves from the Vices in their transgressive soliloquys and speeches. In this regard, my analysis posits that the Shakespearean villain reimagines the Vice as a distinctly human villain, as motivated by discernible ambitions as they are indicted for inappropriate excesses of familiar sinful desires. Accordingly, I trouble essentialized readings of their villainy in asserting that both figures rebel against social constructions they find confining, as though the Vice of the morality plays at last has been granted the stage to usurp the subjectivity – and not merely the significance – of a protagonist. In making this claim, however, I qualify my recuperation of villainy throughout by examining the ways in which both villains fail to present meaningful alternatives to the systems against which they rebel. This becomes most notably apparent by positioning their careers of revenge against the fates of the women in each play, a perspective calling into question their ultimate success in posing challenges to patriarchy's function of assigning, then confirming, prediscursive vice or Otherness.

Introduction: The Trouble with Villains

In 1592's *Richard III*, the Duke of Gloucester narrates an act of deception by offering a conspiratorial aside to the audience: "Thus, like the formal vice, Iniquity / I moralize two meanings in one word" (*R3* 3.1.100-1).[1] The Duke's metacognitive commentary alludes to his proximity to the equally deceptive, and similarly beguiling Vice figures of Renaissance moral interludes. The allusion facilitates the audience's association of the Duke with the allegorical personifications of the morality dramas, as if to encourage a hermeneutic conflation of Shakespearean villainy with the Vice's axiomatic wickedness. It has been tempting for centuries to categorize Richard and his villainous counterparts in this way, insofar that loquacious and disturbing villains like *Titus Andronicus*' Aaron and *Othello*'s Iago are understood to evoke the streamlined simplicity of the allegorical Vice, tellingly juxtaposed with the realistic subjectivity adumbrated by, and ostensibly reserved for, Shakespearean protagonists. Ironically, the defining characteristic of these villains– their disarming eloquence– encourages this critical tendency, even as it simultaneously presents compelling evidence that the villains demonstrate the same verisimilitude to humanity as the protagonists, albeit in significantly less virtuous fashion.

We might tentatively observe that the situation presents a juxtaposed pair of interpretive pitfalls. On the one hand, the essentialism informing Coleridge's rather tiresome assertion that Iago possesses a "motiveless malignity," e.g., heralds those discourses that perhaps indulge a historicist fixation on the dramaturgic ancestry of the villains. The epistemological assumption foregrounding Coleridge's remark codes the villains as stock

[1] All quotations from *Richard III* are from *The Bedford Shakespeare: Based on the New Cambridge Edition*, edited by Russ McDonald and Lena Cowen Orlin (St. Martin's, 2015).

Vice figures "upon whom a conventional human nature has been superimposed," as Bernard Spivack has offered (33). On the other hand, resisting this fixation can prompt an over-correction, a mistake to which contemporary theoretical approaches are perhaps especially prone to make, whereby the "modern preference for the ironic and subtle over the allegorical and didactic bristl[es]," as Alan Dessen describes, "at the suggestion of any connection between such 'primitive' material and Shakespeare's plays" (2). To do so initiates "a scheme of inappropriate teleology" that assumes that the morality plays "aspired to be like the plays of the Shakespearean period," as Edgar T. Schell & J. D. Shuchter have helpfully enunciated (vii).

It is perhaps obvious to observe that a better route lies somewhere between these poles, but to trace that route requires that we embrace the historical threads of dramatic convention connecting the morality plays to their successors. Additionally, we must also avoid the temptation to emphasize the "ironic and subtle" components of Shakespeare's texts so far that we psychologize the villains' subjectivity as though it existed *prior to*, rather than only existing *within*, the text itself. We must not diminish the influence of the Vice of the morality plays, but this in turn must not restrain us from uncovering the nuanced elaboration of the morality tradition that Shakespeare (and his contemporaries) effected. As we shall see, the dramaturgic function of the villains under consideration *does* recall conceptualizations of the Vice's inexplicable malignity, but the language of the plays offers a powerful contrast of psychological verisimilitude and tenable subjectivity.

The crucial factor supposedly absent from the villains has long been regarded as their paucity of motives, which renders the Shakespearean villain a mere reiteration of the Vice, which in turn arises from the Clown and Fool roles of medieval festivals and pageants. Such readings note the morality plays' continued presence on and enduring influence over the

dramatic stages of England during the last decades of the 16th century, despite the elevation of Elizabethan drama near the turn of the century. The question of motive, however, serves as an ideal entry point to the dialogue between these two dramaturgic contexts. The morality plays' paucity of attention to the Vice's motives seems to occasion the Elizabethan playwright's cognizance of a new obligation to present possible motives for consideration, however implausible they seem. In this regard, those moments depicting the villain at work, like that of Richard III mentioned above, are especially noteworthy, as they echo the strategies of the Vice to raise the specter of inherent wickedness, even as the references to motive quicken that specter, fleshing it out in the form of a villainous subjectivity.

Before proceeding, I will address my use of "subjectivity" in order to contextualize my approach to the texts, as the term foregrounds the differences between axiomatic Vices and their augmented successors, even as it necessitates theoretical approaches that seem anachronistic. In their collection *Post-Colonial Shakespeares*, Ania Loomba and Martin Orkin admirably address these concerns by observing that although "it is certainly true that we must not flatten the past by viewing it entirely through the lens of our own assumptions and imperatives," it is also not "desirable, or even possible, entirely to unhook the past from the present" (6). In this regard, my close reading of two Shakespearean villains, Aaron and Iago, willingly examines them as informed by the Vices forming their precedent *and* as having anticipated the increasingly nuanced understanding of subjectivity in Renaissance discourses.

In this regard, the linguistic and dramaturgic consideration of the Vices that links them to the villains also separates them from the same, as Emily Bartels surmises in observing that "within such roles as the revenger or the villain, […] the idea of agency, of the subject's ability to act as and on a self, is at once most vital and most vexed" ("Breaking" 175). The Vices were compelled to operate as they did by playwrights' adherence to the

generic conventions of the morality drama. The villains, however, undertake what Felicity Rosslyn refers to as "an immense *effort* of defiance," in that the "real enemy is not, as stated, the world's injustice, but something more impalpable and deep-seated: the amount of information about the world that is not being taken account of" (3; my emphasis). The plays would have us believe, on one level, that "the world's injustice" is embodied by the villains themselves. Conversely, the villains articulate a contesting narrative, in which the "impalpable and deep-seated" problems are the social systems against which they rebel. This is the dramaturgic reconceptualization of the villain encoded within the potential of the dissembling Vice. Whereas the latter served as the dramatist's "tool to single out what is wrong with an entire society," the former became the figure who railed against a subterranean fault that he perceives has illegitimated him, and which he attempts to correct via linguistic and physical violence (Dessen 34).

This action is evidenced in the villains' recourse to rhetorical reversals that challenge a systemic normalcy from which they are excluded. Accordingly, their conquests inevitably take shape as campaigns of personal elevation, a consideration that does not correspond to the ambitionless Vices of the morality plays. It was the symbolic figure of Mankind who was ambitious in the morality play; the Vice facilitated that figure's downfall, not his own promotion. We must therefore re-examine the vengeful projects of villains like Aaron and Iago, in which what matters is not only the impression of an imbalanced or innate sense of evil but also their insistent challenges to the prescriptive systems that have indicated their status. In this regard, they *do* resemble the Vice, for they are apprehended as "Villain" before their first vocalizations, either via the appendages to their names on the *dramatis personae* or via other characters' descriptions of them. Accordingly, when they *do* speak, both inscribed

and extradiegetic audiences filter them through the lens of inscribed wickedness, a hermeneutic phenomenon emphasizing a "prediscursive" stigmatization.

Theoretical Considerations

In articulating a "prediscursive" stigmatization, I refer to the work of Judith Butler to employ a key theoretical perspective that will inform this project's literary analyses of the texts in question. In 1990's *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Butler conceptualizes gender as the performances individuals embody in accordance with the codification of bodies inculcated within social structures. Butler implicates patriarchy as that system luxuriating in a totalitarian mismanagement of signification, such that the values inscribed upon gendered bodies are interpreted as the prediscursive ontologies those bodies inevitably express. We are gendered, in effect, before we have a say in the matter. Our say in the matter, moreover, is delimited to performances reifying one of either of the two predetermined and binaristic options we have already been assigned. The "discursive" or performative capacity of gender (as it is confirmed through learned behavior) stems from the supposed *pre*discursive veracity of difference. This fabrication empowers the pronouncements issued by patriarchal figureheads, as Butler explains: "gender is not to culture as sex is to nature; gender is also the discursive/cultural means by which 'sexed nature' or a 'natural sex' is *produced* and *established as 'prediscursive,'* prior to culture, a politically neutral surface on which culture acts" (7; my emphases). The paradoxical collapsing of that which is *produced* with that which is *inherent* is precisely that de-personalizing autonomy against which Aaron and Iago rebel.[2]

[2] In making this statement, I in no way mean to imply that either of the villains under primary consideration for this project are the only figures worth observing in reference to Butler's work. Accordingly, I temper my analyses in chapters 2 and 3 by addressing the women of the play in the context of this paper's argument, and

In Butler's project, this wielding of power is linked to the administration of Order via the Lacanian Symbolic, insofar that the provenance of masculine authority linguistically "institutes […] culturally intelligible genders" (28). Feminist theory, she points out, actualizes a "critical re-elaboration of Lacan, [which] theorizes the feminine […] as the repudiated/excluded [entity] within that system, [that] constitutes the possibility of critique and disruption of that hegemonic conceptual scheme" (28). This duel between inscribed ontology and lived identity presents, as Butler points out, a potential for subversion via the very components of identity patriarchy is most concerned to prediscursively identify. Without this preemptive subjugation on the matrix of gender, what takes shape, Butler argues, is a "subversive sexuality that flourishes *prior* to the imposition of a law, *after* its overthrow, or *during* its reign as a constant challenge to its authority" (29; author's emphases). Herein is the central utility of Butler's text for my purposes in this project; in saying that Aaron and Iago challenge conceptualizations of axiomatic evil, the effect should be less a calling into question of whether their actions are wicked or plausible than a recognition that their self-identifications negate prediscursive projections assigned to them.

Before proceeding, a key counter-argument should be addressed: as men, despite varying degrees of real or imagined ostracization, surely Aaron and Iago enjoy similar privileges to those wielded by the patriarchal figures within each play? While this is true, and such considerations will be addressed throughout each chapter of this thesis, the objection does not negate the effect of their being interpreted as exclusively villainous subjects. Indeed, if the classical model of the hermeneutics augured by the Vice is correct, and they are stock figures without motive or subjectivity, then they are entirely excluded from

---

in relation to Butler's work in particular. I will provide a fuller picture of this maneuver in the chapter summary below.

subjectivity. Yet Richard's allusion to the Vice points to the metacognitive dramaturgy characterizing almost all of Shakespeare's villains, who inevitably resent someone or something. Their vice are may appear as the starting point of their subjectivities within each play, but what they actually say always suggests that their actions are in response to a slight or injustice beyond their control, whether it is Edmund or Don John's attention to bastardy, Aaron's to the stigma surrounding his color, or Iago's resentment over being passed over for Othello's lieutenant. Accordingly, my thesis proposes that these villains are composed with a subjectivity that operates in dialogue with not only the de-personalizing effect of the Vice tradition, but also the textual stigmatization cited by the villains and evidenced by the plots the plays. At the same time, in recognizing these characters' gendered privilege, I do not propose a recuperation, but a *qualification* of the villainy under discussion, which will in part be accomplished by paying careful attention to how each figure reinforces the codification of gendered difference, despite the alternatives they offer to other sectors of hegemonic delegitimization. In this way, my project will extend Butler's attention to the gendered body as a challenge to the Symbolic, reimagining vice not as the dramaturgic shorthand emblematized by the villains but as the prediscursive ideologies defining them as such within the play. Additionally, I will evoke Butler in each chapter by discussing the villains' limited capacity to meaningfully critique the systems of patriarchy depicted in the plays.

Chapter Overviews

Before analyzing *Titus Andronicus* and *Othello*, I will devote my first chapter to a historicist examination of Shakespearean villainy's roots in the conventions of the morality drama. I will gesture to the *Pyschomachia* of Prudentius as the forerunner of the morality in order to demonstrate the genre's homiletic utility in indoctrinating dramatic audiences

according to the religious imperatives of the Catholic, and later Protestant, churches. In both cases, the morality drama serves as the sermonic antidote of instruction for audiences reconciling spiritual imperatives with the confines of corporeal experience. As Greg Walker indicates, the "medieval self was […] fundamentally conflicted, and it was the business of the Morality drama to explore that conflict and influence its resolution" (209). I will then turn to an examination of the Vice figure specifically, which I argue overcomes the strictures of his generic home in order to influence the succeeding dramaturgy of Shakespeare's time. The Vice's dramatic potential takes shape via his dual benefits to dramatists "as an entertainer *and* as an allegorical index to the central issues of the play" (Dessen 28). I will conclude by returning to the figure of Richard III in order to summarize the adaptations to the Vice tradition that the villains enable. Discussing Richard will also facilitate my transition in chapters 2 and 3 to a focus on Aaron, Iago, and their roles' relationship to villainous prediscursivity.

In Chapter 2, I will begin with *Titus Andronicus'* Aaron as an example of a dramatic figure whose villainy is most clearly understood as tied to– and reflective of– his biological subjectivity. A historicist relation of the signifying power of blackness will thus open the chapter, in which I will explore the manner in which "images of blackness […] did more than produce ideologies of whiteness– they also helped legitimize actual exploitation of black peoples and nations," as Loomba reminds us (10). I will therein explicate the functions of the term "Moor," appended to Aaron's name in the play's *dramatis personae*, by calling attention to its unstable signification but underscoring its unavoidably negative use as a pejorative in the play. As described by the editors of *The Bedford Shakespeare*, "'Moor' was an imprecise term in the Renaissance, sometimes referring to skin color, sometimes to nationality, and sometimes to religion" (1106). In turning to the play, I will investigate the

instances in which Aaron's race repeatedly becomes apprehensively conflated with interpretive denunciations of his character, insofar that blackness becomes associated with "all that must be expelled, contained, or dominated," as Margaux Deroux enunciates (86). I will then consider Aaron's responses to these conditions, which involve a physical resistance that works in harmony with his linguistic rejection of the terms affixed to his body. Finally, I will temper any recuperative conclusions by addressing Aaron's attention to each of the women in the play to argue that he perpetuates the stigmatizing effects of the very system he opposes.

Finally, in my third chapter, I will turn to Iago, a figure not associated with stigmatic readings of the Othered body in the manner of Aaron, but one who challenges nonetheless notions of prediscursive worth through the matrices of his militaristic and romantic affiliations with Othello, Desdemona, and Cassio. That his resentments stem from social statures not rooted in the body has encouraged critics and audiences alike to essentialize Iago as Vice or evil personified. Complicating matters is the set of seemingly untenable motivations Iago presents, namely his militaristic ambitions and the need for sexual revenge. Rather than dismissing these as irrelevant or insufficient explanations for Iago's behavior, I will rely on deconstructive readings of Iago's speeches to suggest that he follows the precedent of Aaron in his violent reaction against that which he perceives as delegitimization. I will argue that Iago does not merely covet the lieutenantship he was denied (nor the revenge for possibly being cuckolded), but another more intimate affirmation afforded by the very figure he moves to punish: Othello himself. Through the medium of language, Iago exacts his revenge and remediates the lack of Othello's favor in the truest of "wife for wife" exchanges: he usurps from Othello the authority of naming and determining his position.

To conclude, I will emphasize how the stigmatization of the villains in these works actually demonstrates the inherited, learned vice of the invariably masculine abuse of power within patriarchal structures. Far from *inherent* vice, the inversions and reversals of Aaron and Iago follows a pattern of representational violence foregrounding the social structures of each play. In affirming the motives expressed by the villains in the plays, I posit that Shakespeare's understanding of subjectivity reflects an augmented awareness of the ramifications of linguistic power afforded to patriarchal leaders. The monologic precision of the morality play, which necessitated that even the Vices participate in the homiletic strategy of the dramatist, thus fade in the advent of Elizabethan dramaturgy such as Shakespeare's. Instead of being co-opted to affirm the virtues they denounce, the villains instead function as an interrogation of the system codifying them as stigmatized and evil others. In this way, neither figure under consideration can be reduced to a self-affirming figure of vice; instead, both are agents of usurpation, adopting the tactics of the Vice in conquests of responsive and vengeful correction. Ultimately, then, the plays indict less the villains than the hierarchical binaries responsible for their generation.

Chapter 1: Contextualizing Vice

While historians generally concur that the Vice figure and the morality dramas in which he appeared dominated Elizabethan stages from the mid-16th century until the 1580s, it is considerably more difficult in articulating the precise origin of what had become, by Shakespeare's time, an immediately recognizable dramatic "type." The simplest answer has often been the *Pyschomachia* of Prudentius,[3] the fifth-century poet whose Latin poem formed the basis for the form of allegory that has come to share the work's name. The psychomachia, as Prudentius originated it, narrates the conflict between the agents of Heaven and Hell over the fate of the human soul. Personification enabled the poet to explicate what was essentially a metaphysical Holy War through the juxtaposed incarnations of virtues and vices, each of whom was an allegorical representation of a certain component of good or evil. Allegory, the pinnacle of figurative language, ironically served as the very means for Prudentius to depict such a conflict, even as it served as the form that would "allow the human being to become an acting, self-reliant subject" within that conflict, as Eva Kimminich has indicated (83). Kimminich associates Prudentius's use of allegory with his "insistence on an absolutely free will," insofar that mankind's shifting spiritual allegiance makes use of the figurative utility of allegory, which offers readers a "pictorial representation" of a spiritual battle (79).

The *Pyschomachia* and Prudentius' method of personification would go on to form a template for the succeeding centuries of medieval allegory, in which the Christian church became deeply invested in the potential of allegorical narrative to materialize the

[3] Perhaps best summarized in Chapter 3 of Bernard Spivack's *Shakespeare and the Allegory of Evil*.

consequences of its cosmic– but inescapably intangible– doctrinal precepts.[4] In his influential study *Shakespeare and the Allegory of Evil*, Bernard Spivack articulates that "the language of personification became the means to render this invisible struggle explicit and its unseen soldiery vivid" (77). As Kimminich has observed, however, the utility of allegory also allowed it to continue to adapt from the medieval era's "principal concern of medieval thinking, man's spiritual welfare, [which was] deeply rooted in the dichotomy of the generally negatively defined body and the positively evaluated soul," to the "increasing sensitivity" of morality dramas, which displayed a "more acute psychological observation and analysis of human conduct and the motivations behind the way people behave or misbehave" (77). While the morality plays explored these motivations in reference to a symbolic "mankind" figure afflicted by Vices and counseled by Virtues, the nuanced verisimilitude of the later Elizabethan and Jacobean dramaturgy engaged with these questions most compellingly in the context of the villains themselves, not only their victims.

This chapter will work to establish relevant historical considerations of the morality plays in order to re-examine in the following two chapters two such villains. I will discuss the conventions structuring the morality tradition in order to demonstrate the inevitable elevation of the Vice over his dramatic counterparts. I will conclude by resuming my discussion of Richard III in order to emphasize how Shakespearean drama emerges in dialogue with, although not in reiteration of, the traditions of the morality plays.

[4] Cf. Schells and Shuchter xv.

Conventions of the Morality Drama

While Aaron and Iago's motives continue to consternate critics, no such hermeneutic vexation apparently afflicts the Vice, who functions in the morality play without motive because of his allegorical identification with a given sin and human flaw. Even in the earliest morality plays, though, the seeds of the later dramaturgy's interrogation of motive is present, as evidenced by the titular figure of *Mankynde* (c. 1465-70),[5] who is tempted from his spiritual and physical labor of tilling the land by Titivillus, a Vice who coaxes him to indulge the impulses of the flesh and abandon his work. The joys of the present are imagined as certifying Mankynde's eventual damnation, as the drama hastens toward the "naked terror" of impending death (Schell and Shuchter 111). The need for Mankynde to repent, however, first appears via a speech that applies pressure on the spiritual imperative the play works to inculcate:

> My name ys Mankynde. I haue my composycyon
> Of a body and of a soull, of condycyon contrarye.
> Betwyx hem tweyn ys a grett dyvisyon;
> He ŝat xulde be subjecte, now he hath ŝe victory.
> Thys ys to me a lamentable story
> To se my flesch of my soull to haue gouernance. (194-9)[6]

Titivillus's prioritizing of luxury is reflected in Mankynde's angst, the "lamentable story" of humanity, a state of being in the morality plays understood as one of constant juxtaposition between a seemingly incompatible "body and […] a soull." According to medieval conceptualizations, in this arrangement the flesh must be mortified by a sovereign and

[5] As dated by Greg Walker, who interprets the references in the play to coinage as belonging to the reign of King Edward IV (Walker 258).
[6] All quotations from *Mankynde* are taken from Greg Walker's anthology, *Medieval Drama* (Blackwell, 2000).

faithful adherence to spiritual dicta. Prudentius's homiletic strategy found sustained resonance in early modern dramas, which functioned in part as a fixture of "the great popular education movement launched by the Catholic church in the early thirteenth century" (Schells and Shuchter xv). Upon these pulpit-stages, dramatists of the late 14th century adapted the personifying import of the psychomachia for the stage, each indulging in his own "distinct didactic agenda within an Orthodox Christian outlook" (Walker 209).

As P. Happé points out, this history is mingled with the lingering influence of pagan folk festivals and pageants– akin to the mingled "interchange of Christian symbols and holy places with those of heathen and folk-cultures which [transpired] in the middle ages" (175). Whereas the oral dramas of the medieval era reflected the "primitive concern for the generative influences which provided life to man himself, […] the coming of Christianity played an important part […], [as] the new religion's […] festivals tended to be superimposed upon the dates of the old festivals" (162-3). Emerging in the wake of a distinctively oral tradition, then, the history of the morality plays should be qualified by a recognition of the relative paucity of extant texts. Having elegantly prepared the key morality plays for an anthology in 1969, Edgar T. Schell and J. D. Shuchter preface the collection with the admission that "we do not know what percentage of the actual corpus of plays is represented by the surviving texts" (xv). The printed texts that we do have, moreover, might be conceptualized as anomalies of a transitional genre, a palimpsest of Christianized re-imaginings of the pagan drama and premonitions of the secular and refined dramaturgy of the Elizabethan era, by which time Shakespeare and his contemporaries would have grown up seeing the morality plays performed.[7] The few extant texts thus serve as vital components

[7] Schell & Shuchter xix

in tracing an emerging print culture, on the one hand, and constitute on the other a narrative of transition, despite the ongoing utility of drama to offer moral instruction.

As moralizing adaptations of the pagan past, the endurance of the folk plays and morality plays as the dramaturgic inheritors of Prudentius can be traced to a source within the earliest records of Renaissance drama, the Paternoster play. As Spivack relates it, this late 14th century pageant took shape, "apparently," as an allegorical conflict between "the Seven Deadly Sins and the Seven Christina virtues, and [was] dramatized in cyclical pageants that displayed these two sets of moral personifications in allegorical competition for the human soul" (60).[8] From these earliest dramatized performances of the Holy War sprang a tradition that would dominate English drama for the next one hundred and fifty years. In the intervening time, the morality plays displayed one of four general themes, variously organized by scholars but perhaps most helpfully so by Spivack: the Summons of Death, the Debate of the Soul and Body, the Parliament in Heaven, and the fourth, that of the Psychomachia, which becomes the central bough from which the others spring and invariably can be traced to (63). As Schells and Shuchter paraphrase, the unity amongst all the dramas lies in the progression of their homiletic structure, which begins with Innocence, falls to Temptation, and degenerates as Life in Sin; the effect of this descent is then neutralized by Repentance, and ultimately is reversed by Salvation (1).[9]

The effect, by the time of the later Renaissance, was that of the categories of allegory and psychomachia collapsing into each other, in that allusive and personifying techniques in

[8] Tempe E. Allison traces the ambiguous references to "the" Paternoster play cited by Wyclif prior to 1384 to other dramas, but the defining characteristic betraying this one as a morality lay in the records' confirmation that the play "dealt with vices and sins in conflict with the virtues; […] it was a play to be heard as well as seen (not dumb show)," which emphasizes its popularity, as "it continued to be performed at intervals for nearly two centuries" (790).

[9] Walker offers the following structure, slightly modified: Innocence, Temptation, Corruption, Repentance, Redmption (210).

literature became inescapably *spiritual* texts, while personification became the favorite instrument of these texts' didactic imperatives, such that "each moment of the performance was a transparent allusion and solemn exhortation to every member of its audience" (Spivack 103). The morality plays thereby frequently effected an elision of the distance between the generalized "Mankind" figure and the men and women of the audience, who Schells and Shuchter emphasize are also "tugged at by vices and virtues, in danger of hell and in hope of heaven," as "the conditions under which the plays were performed […] tended to prevent the development of a sharp distinction between the world of the play and the real world of the audience" (xii; xi). This certainly seems to be the case when Satan himself addresses not only those present onstage but the audience of *Enough Is As Good As A Feast*.[10] He admonishes "*all you* worldly men, that in your riches do trust, / […] Occupy yourselves in my laws while ye be here" (1452; 1455; my emphasis).[11] Satan goes on to promise both inscribed and extradiegetic audiences that

> *You* shall have all things as this Wordly Man had.
>
> […] Yea, and after death I will provide a place
>
> For you in my kingdom forever to reign.[12]
>
> You shall fare no worse than doth mine own grace–
>
> That is, to lie burning forever in pain. (1451-66; my emphasis)

In the same way, Mankind laments at the close of *The Castle of Perseverance* (c. 1390-1405) not only the corrosive effect of the World on his own fate, but that of those observing the

---

[10] Attributed to William Wager, c. 1560-70.

[11] Save *Mankynde,* which I quote from Walker as noted above, all succeeding quotations from morality plays are from Schell and Shuchter's volume (Rinehart, 1969).

[12] It is fitting that Satan speaks these lines, dramatically ironizing the words of Christ in John 14:2-3: "In my Father's house are many dwelling places: if it were not so, I would not have told you: I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go to prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself, that where I am, there may ye be also" (GNV).

drama, cautioning them, "The wit of this World is sorrow and woe. / Beware, good men, of this gyse! / Thus hath he served many on mo" (2900-2). That members of the audience might imagine themselves included in that "many on mo" serves as the impetus for this public and metadramatic warning.

This utility, however, did not make allegory exclusive to religious contexts, contrary to the rigid allegorical structure of Prudentius' template. The morality play, rather, adapted and endured throughout the secularizing currents of the Renaissance via a transition, eloquently outlined by Spivack, that saw a change in "emphasis […] from Christian eschatology […] to consideration of human life in its own terms of success or failure" (62). Schell and Shuchter counter that "while [the morality plays] turn during the sixteenth century toward secular issues, they do so with a strong religious bias" (vii). They do, however, employ considerations of this gravitation toward secularization in organizing the morality plays into distinct periods.[13] The initial period, from roughly 1390-1475, encloses the earliest extant texts and forms the template for all that follows, perhaps best by the examples of *Mankynde*, described above, and *The Castle of Perseverance*, which traces the entirety of the human lifespan to emphasize the titular theme of perseverance as a vital component of leading a moral life. The second period, from 1490-1535, is characterized by an increasing incorporation of nascent humanism, of which *Everyman* (c. 1490) is the most notable example. Narrating the summons of death, *Everyman* somewhat surprisingly endures as the archetypal morality play, despite its surprising *lack* of Vice figures.[14] The morality plays of the third period are characterized by dueling Protestant and Catholic polemics responding to the reigns of Henry VIII and Mary Stuart, respectively– of which *Respublica* (1555) is an example.

[13] Schell and Shuchter xvi-xix

[14] Which, perhaps, may explain the intriguing choice of the original printer to describe the work as "a treatise […] in the manner of a moral play" (Walker 281).

Allegorizing the reign of Mary Tudor, *Respublica* transposes a monarch for the mankind figure in the titular widow, who "mourn[s] Good Government, prosperity, and God" and is led astray by councilors standing in for the vices (344). The fourth and final period extends from Elizabeth I's accession to the twilight of her reign in 1585, when Marlowe, Johnson, and Shakespeare would be seeing morality plays such as *All for Money* (1577) at the peak of the genre's popularity. This final example, remarkably encompassing four distinct narrative sections of contrasting dramatic styles, reiterates in each sequence the judgment reserved for the "inordinate love of money" (1461) as a moral, civic, political, and intellectual sin.

Thus, the dramatists of the later Renaissance employed the psychomachia in *de*creasingly religious fashion, serving instead the broader demand for popular dramas which, if not traditionally secular, nonetheless offered *moral* rather than exclusively spiritual instruction. Later examples of the genre, like Shakespeare's own works, sated the growing appetite for a realistic theatricality that applied increased pressure on the sermonic function of the morality plays. The ongoing utility of the morality drama therefore lay not only in the resonance of the allegorical format with spiritual dicta, but in its ability to sustain moral instruction alongside theatrical entertainment, enabling the simultaneity of early modern audiences both learning and being entertained. This theatrical component, it perhaps goes without saying, is the signature deviation from Prudentius' precedent, but in affording the stage to Virtues *and* Vices, the "mankind" figure is neither the superior dramatic figure nor the one best encapsulating the potential of free will. The vices, or, more generally, those figures opposed to the virtues, insistently occupy the central position of the dramas.[15]

[15] Even *Everman*, which lacks vices of the traditional sort, boasts an abundance of other figures (Beauty, Strength, Discretion, Five Wits, *and* Knowledge) who are juxtaposed with Good Dedes, as each of the former figures abandons Everyman in anticipation of his entry into the grave: "Now may I true frendes se. / They have forsaken me, everychone: / I loved them better than my Good Dedes alone" (855-7).

Respublica serves as a remarkable example of the displacement of the mankind figures dramatic centrality by the Vices. As Alice Hunt has articulated, the title of the play (and the widow protagonist named Respublica) derives from the Latin phrase *res publica*, which she translates as the "common weal"– or public affair– that allegorizes the monarchical state (347-8). Yet the play's author, Nicholas Udall, spends much of the play's energy "grinding a specific religious and political axe" in colorful depiction of the vices as figures of the Reformation (Schells and Shuchter 236). Despite their ostensibly central position as the subject whose free will was under conquest, the morality plays' Mankind figures (and the later analogues such as the titular figure of Respublica) arguably emerge as negligible placeholders within an unequal, tripartite cast. Fittingly, the Vice to which Richard III refers is the distinctive and most recognizable member of that grouping, perhaps because he was the source and encapsulation of each distinctive facet of the morality drama. He was the sovereign of the play's humor, leading the minor vices' raucous physical gags, and, as their most eloquent member, his linguistic fervor excelled in varied puns, deceits, and other tricks. As Greg Walker has indicated, the Vice's linguistic proficiency is the foregrounding of his agency and significance: "while the battle for the soul of Mankind is fought over issues of personal morality, language itself provides the most effective weapon employed in the struggle, and the principal indicator of its progress" (259). In this regard, the Elizabethan trinity of Clown, Fool, and Villain all reveal his watermark of influence, especially in their dark humor and provocative insight.[16]

[16] In making this claim, I concur with Tempe E. Allison, who traces the comic trademarks of each of these roles to their earliest roots in the Vice (801).

Vice Ascendant

Integral to his ascendancy was the Vice's paradoxical collaboration with the Virtue against which he dueled– for both figures contributed to the homiletic communication of the morality play's thematic message. The Vice's contribution, however, resists the monologic position of the play by his capacity to speak in opposing registers. On the one hand, he falsely counsels and beguiles the mankind figure onstage; on the other, he illuminates for the audience his own subterfuge. In *The Castle of Perseverance*, e.g., Lust-Liking, who has been summoned to beguile Mankind with the prospect of being "rich and in great array," (495), ends his speech by declaring that anyone desiring what he offers "must needs, over all thing, / Evermore be covetous: "*Non est in mundo dives qui dicit 'habundo*'" (495; 505-6).[17] Lust-Liking attempts to ironize the proverb, making greed the necessary precondition for, paradoxically, obtaining one's desires, despite the expression's true meaning, which is to call attention to the insatiable effect of greed. Similarly, Folly in the same play mocks divine wisdom as foolishness in order to blasphemously reverse the meaning of "*Sapientia penes Domini*" (520).[18] In Folly's mouth, wisdom is folly, and folly wisdom.[19] Therein, the tension of the Vice's double-speaking maintains the didactic function of the *Psychomachia*, but the template provided by Prudentius is already challenged by the morality plays' reliance upon the Vice, who dangerously ironizes allegory in his seamless roles as "aggressor, homiletic preacher, and the humorist of the morality plays" (Spivack 135).[20]

The Vices' dramatic elevation over mankind and the virtues thus occurred by default. As the recipient of both the Vice's and Virtue's exhortations– but never their initiator– the

[17] "There is not a rich man in the world who says 'I have enough.'"
[18] "Wisdom belongs with God."
[19] Cf. Proverbs 15:2: "The tongue of the wise useth knowledge aright: but the mouth of fools babbleth out foolishness" (GNV).
[20] Cf. Happé 180-1.

symbolic mankind figure becomes something of an intrusive non-entity on the stage of the morality plays, in that he neither instigates the plot nor narrates it. Rather, the juxtaposed Virtues and Vices, in coaxing him to their side, bring about the action of the plot, an indication of the invariably homiletic nature of the morality plays due to the senses of moral "movement" toward the side of either Vice or Virtue.[21] Theatrical "movement," unsurprisingly, favors the transgressive Vices, who offer excess in lieu of restraint, sinful *acts* in lieu of penitent turning away from the same. Lust-Liking and Folly's utility in *The Castle of Perseverance*, accordingly, is prompted by their presentation of precisely what Mankind desires, namely to "be rich and of great renown" (571).[22] In order to obtain what they offer, World stipulates "God's service thou must forsake, / And wholly to the World thee take, / And then a man I shall thee make, / That none shall be thy peer" (596-600). In order for the plot to progress, i.e., the mankind figure must either be enticed toward goodwill or beguiled to ruin, but the instigating force was always brought about by the Vice, whose appearance near the beginning of the drama alerted the audience to his central significance.

L. W. Cushman refers to this appearance as a singularly "important *event* in the play, […] equivalent to the introduction of […] life and spirit, […] characterized by noise and bluster" (118). In a sense, his appearance and blasphemous expostulations bookend the morality plot, in that his instigating appearance contrasts with the moralizing sermon offered by a figure of moral authority at the close of the drama. Near the beginning of the epic *The Castle of Perseverance*, Flesh exclaims of Lechery and Sloth that they are "noble, truly I trow, /

[21] Cf. Spivack, who explores this at length in the third chapter of *Shakesepeare and the Allegory of Evil*.
[22] The Vices' reservoir of what the Mankind figures desire extends, in macabre fashion, to material items, not just metaphysical "goods" like social position or slothfulness or other indulgences of the flesh. In *Mankind*, for instance, at the peak of his misery, Mankynde begs for a rope to hang himself. Myscheff answers immediately: "Anon, anon, anon! I haue yt here redy" (800). I observe the same darkly humorous recourse to objects, which are always uncomfortably available to the worst persons, in Aaron and Iago: the former produces a dagger when Titus must lose his hand, as well as the letter and gold necessary to implicate Titus's sons; Iago, of course, procures Desdemona's handkerchief and produces proof of its being lost as soon as Othello refers to it.

Mankind to tenyn and tricken a tide" (252-3). Referring thus to their ability to "tenyn and tricken" both the Mankind figure of the drama and the general assembly of the audience, the Vices assert their function as soon as they appear. This attention to both audiences– within and without the play– prompts a counterpart figure, such as the Doctour at the close of *Everyman*, to assuage the spiritual damage wrought by the Vice, cautioning the audience to remember "this morall men my have in mynde. / Ye herers, take it of worth, olde and Yonge" (902-3). The same effect– albeit somewhat altered in the quiet intensity of the Elizabethan soliloquy– alerts the audience immediately of Aaron, Edmund, and Iago's significance via their mutually infamous opening speeches. The villains' import, then, can be traced to what Happé identifies as "the Vice's central function [as] the antagonist of the hero in the morality plays" (191). Intrigue enters through *his* presence, reflecting the homiletic core of the morality drama and ostensibly the tenuous free will of mankind– created for good, but easily led astray.

The Vice dominated the cast members in the morality drama who personified opposed Virtues, as well. That the Vices end the plays in defeat should not be cited as a challenge to this observation, however, any more than it can serve as evidence for a limit to their dramatic appeal or utility. The ascendancy of Vice over Virtue on early modern stages was one rooted in dramaturgic resonances that favored entertainment over the homiletic function it served: "Proclaiming the moral superiority of virtue, [the morality plays'] uniformly demonstrated the dramatic superiority of vice. […] The former sought to dominate the conscience, but the latter actually dominated the stage" (Spivack 123). This, rather than any particular moral or religious issue, constitutes what Robert C. Jones describes as the "apparent problem" posed to the morality plays by the Vices' tendency to "steal the show from the wholesome but tiresome virtues" (45). The defeat of the Vice in most

morality plays becomes something of a dramaturgic necessity, in addition to a moral one, but in dominating the stage, the drama ends less by the Vice being overcome than by the mere prospect of his absence. Provocatively, the action ends not because nothing more will happen and the battle has been won, but because the Vice is no longer onstage to provoke the action to continue.[23]

Given these considerations, the assortment of Vices in the morality plays began to centralize into one entity, increasingly encoded as the onstage leader most attuned to the potential of his dramaturgic "type." In *The Castle of Perseverance*, e.g., it is Belial (or Satan) who commissions the chief vice, the World, but the World in turns is the overseer of the other vices: Sir Covetous he refers to as "*my* treasurer" (768); Backbiter is his "Messenger"– commanded to "do now thine use" (774-5). Tempe Allison points out that this arrangement leads to the chief vice "gradually absorb[ing] the functions of the others, until in the late morality plays the vice appears as a single figure under various names," instantly recognizable despite the alterity of his representations (801). Excelling all other vices, the assortment of personifications beguilingly forms a discrete entity, superseding his subordinates and even the Devil himself who traditionally commissions him.[24] In 1577's *All For Money*, accordingly,

---

[23] I will return to this point in the succeeding chapters as I examine the conclusions of *Titus Andronicus* and *Othello*. If, as James Edward Siemon explains, the "punishment" for villains at the end of a comedy "is that he cannot come to the party" (438), then at the end of the tragedies, I will emphasize that the cessation of dramatic action can only occur once the villain is no longer able to speak.

[24] These associations with the Devil should not, of course, indicate that the present study finds them interchangeable, insofar that the Devil remains an actual being who is represented on stage, whereas the Vices are "allegorical representation[s] of human weaknesses and vices," dramatic figurations of the abstract, rather than symbolic representations of the actual (Cushman 63). Spivack, too, separates the Vice from a Devil character because the latter frequently relies on separate dramaturgic traditions that favor the Vice's linguistic showmanship (132). Their relationship, he concedes, *does* involve a mutual orientation *against* the Virtues, and this understandable similarity of moral position (if not of dramaturgic utility) leads Dessen to helpfully offer that although "the late moral play Devil is often a comic, blustering figure, […] the association between the two figures […] is prominent both in the extant plays and the memories of the next generation" of Elizabethans (22). This becomes especially apparent in *Titus Andronicus* and *Othello*, when the dramaturgic conventions of the Vice become conflated with the spiritual significance of the Devil's subjectivity. He takes on, in effect, the duties of the Vice and simultaneously manifests his duly motivated antagonism to not just the Virtues, but mankind in general, which he associates with his own elevation. The obvious example is Marlowe's villain in

the recognizability of the Arch-Vice enables a single sinister figure to dominate each of the four sections of the drama. In Schells and Shuchter's assessment, *All for Money* "takes the final step of eliminating the redemptive central figure, the Mankind character, altogether, and plac[es] the Vices at the center" (419).

The boundless agency of the Vice overtakes the homiletic "movement" of the early morality plays in favor of indulging his capacity for generative theatricality. In the humorous yet horrific opening section of *All for Money*, the vice Money feigns sickness, as though "smitten with a dart" (152). No sooner do the words leave the Vice's mouth than he describes himself as impregnated,[25] exhorting the lesser vices to act as midwives: "Help to hold my stomach, / I swell now more and more. / I must either vomit or else I shall burst in two" (164-5). The singular extant edition includes the stage directions indicated by its author, T. Lupton, who indicates that although Money appears to vomit, "Pleasure shall appear from beneath and lie there appareled," as though having just been delivered (181). Successive offspring follow as Pleasure begets Sin onstage before Sin fathers Damnation.[26] The play's theme, announced in the homiletic benediction of Godly Admonition at the play's close as the "inordinate love of money" (1461), indicates the full dramaturgic capacity of the Vices, as "inordinate" in their faults as they are spontaneously generative in their expression of the same.

His dramaturgic function as a syncretic type mirrored his elevation over those former casts of his subordinates, but it also demonstrates why the Vice endured beyond the context of the morality plays. *All for Money's* fixation, as it were, on the dramatic potential of the Vice

---

Doctor Faustus, who, like Aaron and Othello, anticipates Milton's Satan in harboring the conviction that mankind's ruin will accomplish his own benefit.

[25] Especially given the phallic connotations of "dart," which Partridge associates with the euphemism "dart of love" (91; 97).

[26] *All for Money* 210-90.

emphasizes how these figures supersede the need for allegorical plots with the character-driven movement instigated by increasingly nuanced subjectivities. Vice's autonomy, it would appear, displaces the centrality of Mankind's free will, insofar that the audience may identify with the abstract symbol of mankind they witness onstage, but it is their own ear that the Vice, the most privileged speaker in the number of lines devoted to him, has been whispering in between his riotous commandeering of the stage. The vices, in effect, foreshadow the villains' usurptive tendency to assume the role of protagonist, challenging the mankind figures as competing figures of equally potent wills. This becomes apparent, too, by the morality plays' eventual shorthand signification for the Vice on the dramatis personae or cast of characters, a precedent that Elizabethan drama would follow in appending appositives such as "the Villain" to the respective character occupying such recognizable positions within the drama. The first usage of "the Vice" attached to a particular character of the morality plays occurs in 1530, according to Spivack (140), while Francis Hugh Mares points to Avarice in *Respublica* as the first figure referred to as "the Vice" within the dialogue of a morality drama itself– understood by both the characters onstage and the audience as the title for an individual syncretizing the various vicelike traditions of the clown, the fool, and the "the person addicted to the grosser forms of worldly pleasure" into the "tempter in the morality" (26).[27]

His gradual monopolization of the morality stage parallels the transmutation of the morality plays into the realistic style favored by dramatists at the close of the 16th century. Far from abandoning the morality drama's chief figure of personification, though, the succeeding dramaturgic traditions imported conventional aspects of the Vice due to the coalescence of dramaturgic benefits that the figure's history betrays. As Robert Withington

[27] Cf. Steenbrugge 14

has reflected, the Vice transformed in synchrony with the localized customization of the moral drama: "as pictures of contemporary life crept into these plays to make their preaching more effective, [the Vice] absorbed comic characteristics which added buffoonery to his viciousness, so that, before the end of medieval times, he was a potential clown *and* villain" (525; my emphasis). This combination of dramaturgic functions heralded the nuanced subjectivity sought by Elizabethan characterization, even as it facilitated the diminishment of homiletic values in favor of purely dramatic ones. This centralization and autonomy of the Vice is doubtless the reason for Richard III's allusion, mentioned earlier but worth returning to now with fresh insight.

The playwright's direct reference to the Vice is remarkably significant. While references to *a* vice– a given sin or flaw "in" a character, i.e.– are abundant in Shakespeare, Richard's is one of only two instances that I have found in Shakespeare's plays that mentions *the* Vice as a discrete character. In addition to that of Richard, the second usage occurs via *Twelfth Night*'s Feste, who sings:

> I am gone, sir,
>
> And anon, sir,
>
> I'll be with you again,
>
> In a trice,
>
> Like to the old Vice,
>
> Your need to sustain;
>
> Who, with dagger of lath,
>
> In his rage and his wrath,
>
> Cries, ah, ha! to the devil. (4.2.126-31)

Feste's song alludes to the Vice via a simile, like Richard, but recalls different aspects of the tradition. The younger Vice of the morality plays is now "the old Vice," whom Feste has replaced, and in promising to return, Feste addresses the audience to assure them it is "your need" he will sustain, in the manner of the Vices supplying the earthly needs for pleasure and sin expressed by Titivillus in *Mankynde*. Crying "'Ah, ha!' to the devil," too, ironizes the homiletic tradition of the morality plays, for it is the sanctimonious Puritan Malvolio that Feste arguably makes an equivalent exclamation to. Richard and Feste's allusions both, significantly, rely on the definite article "the" to summon the figure of the Vice, referring to the centralized identity of the leader of the vices within the morality plays rather than the less concrete vice*s* at his disposal. Richard III's reference is of greater use to us here, however, in that it is spoken by a villain more evocative of the moral/allegorical weight of the Vice than Feste, whose embodiment encompasses the trickster wordplay of the Vice but demonstrates none of his malevolence. Speaking in an aside to the audience, the dramatist and his character each summon the image of the proficient deceiver of stock wickedness, but also the dramatic figure with, arguably, the greatest agency on the English dramatic stage before Shakespeare's time. This would appear to alert the audience to Richard's proximity to the Vice's singular wickedness, a shorthand form of self-elevation itself that is further augmented by the Duke's provocative intrigues.

Paradoxically, though, Richard's allusion– perhaps the single most revealing instance of Shakespeare's engagement with the Vice tradition– effects a double movement of association and *dis*association. Richard utilizes a simile to introduce the association with the Vice, yet the personified vices of the morality plays are essentially speaking metaphors, enacting and vocalizing the seamless chain of reference between their name and their nature– a phenomenon that personification enables but one that allegory makes mandatory.

In this regard, the vice Richard refers to, Iniquity, would refer to himself as Iniquity, actualizing and animating a metaphor through his self-identification.[28] Iniquity naming himself thus, however, is not equal to Richard's allusion *to* a personification, which falls notably short of the energy encapsulated in a personified figure's vocalization of his metaphoric identity. Richard refrains from stating that he *is* Iniquity, or any particular vice, for that matter. Furthermore, he is only like the Vice– and their proximity is not mentioned by him because of a synchronicity in their natures, but in their tactics: "like the Vice, […] I moralize two meanings in one word." The simile exists only to indicate to the audience the performative nature of what he is doing, not some ontological irreducibility defining who he is. The allegorical certainty of the Vice's self-definition has been replaced by a speaking subject describing himself in similar fashion, to similar effect, yet with none of the static seamlessness of the conventional moral allegories. Rather, Richard's very act of speech demonstrates the extension of the Vice's dramatic potential as a "type" whose showmanship and agency insistently beckon toward autonomy, but who is restrained from achieving the same because of his stock function in allegorical systems and the paucity of motive.

The Duke's allusion, we might conclude, thus does not settle the question of his association with the Vice, but merely broaches it– making the connection but concomitantly emphasizing the disparities. After all, the tradition of the morality plays in which Richard emerges can be thought of as directly referenced, not directly reproduced– a qualification augmented by the second line: in moralizing "two meanings in one word," Richard refers to the Vice's characteristic use of puns and other linguistic slippages. Less directly, however, the

[28] When the vice figures depart from this self-referentiality, it is only to affirm the metaphor they embody further, as occurs when *Respublica*'s Avarice decides to attach the epithet Policy to himself in order to deceive others. His motive for doing so is the very greed for which he is named, and which prompts the act of re-naming to "speed all my purposes and yet escape blame" (350).

lines point to the Vice's enduring dramatic appeal as the chief source of the morality plays' crude humor *and* as the provocative catalyst for much of their plotlines' necessary intrigue. But the morality plays operated with a generic incentive to utilize moral (if not consistently religious) irreducibilities: allegory's function circumscribes a given Vice's words and actions as only those that connote and denote the brand of sin of which he is the personification, since "the whole purpose of the Vice is to illustrate his name and nature and to reflect upon the audience the *single* moral idea he personifies" (Spivack 134; my emphasis). Withington troubles the tidiness of this description slightly, pointing out that the Vice "looked out for his own fortune, though [he was] not strictly a parasite; […] he served the Deadly Sins, or the World, the Flesh, and the Devil, but he was not a mere servant" (528). While Withington's insight seems to separate, slightly, the Vice from the metaphoric attribute he animated, Spivack is probably correct in concluding that the allegorical structures prompting his appearance and governing the Vice's hermeneutics are never quite overcome… Were there any cracks in this system, the personification would fail, and the allegorical force of the morality plays would be rendered impotent. If Vice suggested anything *other* than his particular name in a given play, the dramatic form of the morality plays as a genre would cease to function.

Villainous Usurpation

Yet Shakespeare's texts indicate just such a departure from these confinements, insofar that the realistic quality of Elizabethan drama may welcome allusions to the historical tradition of the Vice, but this summons can never enable him to coexist in the playwright's dramaturgic context. His presence in Shakespearean drama is that of a specter, adumbrated but never given flesh by his successors. It is in this regard that we must read villains like

Richard, who are evocative of the vices, but who are not seamless reiterations of the Vice intruding on otherwise realistic drama. The delicious irony of this observation is that it was the Vice's stock characterization as the figure of the most dramatic and linguistic energy that seems to augur the Elizabethan and Jacobean style of psychological verisimilitude. Imported into what he portended, the Vice is recalled by the villains in the manner of an homage that is more stylistically referential than psychologically congruent. This may be observed as the natural consequence of Elizabethan drama's reimagining of the Vice figure as a subject himself. If the Vice rose to be the enduring and capital member of the cast in the morality plays– "engaging the spectators [in] the representation of the very vices that it is the play's business to make the audience reject" (Jones, "Sport" 45)– then the villains are not a lack of representational subjectivity but an *abundance* of it.

The traditional (and all too easily dismissed) motivating factors for the villains that Shakespeare's plays present confront the audience with subjectivities that echo the Vice's abundance of a particular, human deficiency signaled by their name. They are "too much in the flesh," which is to say, they herald the truest sense of what it is to be a doomed human, rather than an innate incarnation of evil. Such potential was arguably destined to be explored, given the audience's uncomfortable but pleasurable complicity with the Vice, as Robert Jones elaborates: "insofar as the vices' mirth is theatrically successful, […] the audience is put in the position of laughing at the representation of his own ruin" (46).[29] Richard III's allusion to the Vice, consequently, does not suggest that he possesses an innate wickedness that separates him as the villain and renders him an axiom of evil, devoid of

[29] Cf. Dessen, who argues that "the entertainment function of the Vice-comedian *is* to be found in the late moral drama and *is* remembered" in Elizabethan drama, such that the audience vacillates between identifying with the Vice/villain's through raucous camaraderie, and corrective rejection of the same on moral/spiritual grounds (22).

humanity. Rather, the willful indulgence of his worst impulses creates the abundance of vice prompting the allusion. Interestingly, the recourse to an axiomatic figure becomes the very means by which the Duke emphasizes his own subjectivity, demonstrating the perils of free will in a manner far more compelling, relatable, and tempting than that of the Vices.

This observation underscores the elevation of the villains over the Vices, in that dramaturgic utility evolves into dramatized subjectivity. What separated the Vice from his audience– that he was compelled to behave the way he did– progresses into the villain's proximity to the moral dilemmas faced by the members of their audience. This is not to challenge the critical commonplace that medieval audiences did identify with the Vices, however; as Kimminich notes, the identificatory exchanges between audience and Vice are precisely those encounters that religious and moral symbols of the era also effected; they "stimulated a critical look at the self and at the coherence of the Christian conception of the world. […] By the fifteenth century, the formerly abstract allegorical figures representing the vices became exact character studies which referred the human being to his own responsibility for his actions" (Kimminich 84). To that end, the villain's inherent wickedness emphasizes the free will that has made motive largely irrelevant in wake of the devastating moral chaos they have descended into. Contemporary interpretations– especially those that are potentially recuperative– should take a less myopic view, emphasizing not how insufficient the motives of a villain like Iago are, but what other factors in the play are at work that call those motives into question and contextualize them.

In the morality plays, of course, what we now would look for as "motive" was rather a forced performance of allegorical, didactic, and dramaturgic imperatives. As Cushman reminds us, the Vices are driven neither by individualistic "motives of revenge" nor the ostensibly innate "wish to populate hell; [their] attacks appear never to have ulterior aims"

(77). In the case of the drama of the late sixteenth century, however, the Vice or Vices association with the villains calls motive into question not because it is has not been explained, but because we deem it insufficient. Accordingly, in the context of their respective plays, Aaron and Iago each suggest unitary pillars of wickedness, but the playwright's attention to motive in each of their cases, as revealed by themselves and corroborated by those around them, indicates the refinement of English drama during the period. They also, however, each carry the best dramaturgic qualities of the Vice into their contemporaneous dramatic conventions, as Shakespeare retains their signature recourse to linguistic subversion, their delight in violence and deception, and their disarming intimacy with the audience.

In some regards, that intimacy has even more effect in the drama of the late 16th century than it does in the raucous interplay between Vice and audience in the morality plays. As Robert Jones has pointed out, a significant departure between the morality plays and the drama of the succeeding eras lies in the Vice's addresses to the audience *but the absence of* the audience's homiletic rejection of the Vice's invitation: the villains "no longer jostle us, taunt us about our behavior toward them, or invite us to join in their activities as their earlier counterparts in the [moral] interludes had done" (63). As an example, we might point to Avarice in *Respublica,* who charges both audiences with the following rhetorical questions:

> Is not Opression each where sore hated?
>
> And is not Flattery openly rated?
>
> And am not I, Avarice, still cried out upon?
>
> […] But changing your ill name fewer shall reprove you,
>
> As I mine own self, where my name is known

Am right sore assailed to be overthrown.

But doing so as I will now counterfeit my name,

I speed all my purposes and yet escape blame. (339-41; 346-50)

Avarice's questions surely elicited jeering and the audience's public rejection, yet his words powerfully anticipate both the tactics and advantage of the villains, who far more openly appropriate methods of deceit with arguably less mitigating humor. Rather than suffering to be "known" and consequently "overthrown," the villains counterfeit far more than their allegorical name, and thus drastically increase their transgressive potential "and yet escape blame." Additionally, the effect of this lack of the audience's answer to a villain's expressing similar sentiments to Avarice's above is one infinitely more problematic: it indicates that the villains' soliloquys, far from being publicly rejected, may be *privately* accepted. The audience has escaped the morality plays' tradition of performative aversion to the Vice and is free to recognize their worst impulses in the representations onstage.

As speakers, however, an additional component unites these extensions of the Vice trope even as it poses a challenge to the notion of axiomatic figures on the dramatic stage. Shakespearean villains represent a challenge to the perpetuation of social order, namely marriage in the comedies and right governance in the tragedies.[30] In this regard, they can be likened to the figure of Satan, whose inverted cosmology negates the design augmented by the conceptions of Order permeating Shakespeare's corpus.[31] Yet given the play's emergence

[30] Cf. James Edward Siemon's "The Canker Within: Some Observations on the Role of the Villain in Three Shakespearean Comedies." Siemon points out that "the principal effect of the complex plot" of Elizabethan/Jacobean drama is to "bring the villain to the fore and to introduce as a major theme of the play the nature of evil. […] The ideal villain is [thus] one who stands apart from the society of the lovers and who can, therefore, be easily disposed of when he is of no further use" (427). The disposal Siemons refers to, of course, does little to enervate the tremendous impact the villain has in the context of each play.

[31] Stanley Edgar Hyman' study of Iago, *Iago: Some Approaches to the Illusion of His Motivation*, emphasizes the same by indicating that stage villains by the first decade of the seventeenth century possess a "need to perpetually war against love and happiness, trust and virtue, harmony and beauty, and all other manifestations of order and value" (Hyman 8).

within the secularizing momentum of the Shakespearean drama, even the most notorious of the playwright's villains cannot be equated to religious irreducibilities in the manner of the early morality plays. Even without the homiletic calls to the audience to reject what the Vice/villain emblematizes, "somehow the villain remains their spokesman, under cover of his complete unacceptability," as Rosslyn deduces (11). She continues, "he knows a fact too taboo to be spoken, that perfection"– or virtue– "is not human, and innocence is lack of knowledge and therefore a weakness (11). They enact what Sin in *All for Money* describes as his grandfather, Money's, "great power and might / that such a crooked matter so quickly can make straight" (974-5).[32] The blasphemous agency that Sin celebrates constitutes, thus, what Rosslyn concedes as villainy, but qualifies as "*heroic* villainy" (11).

Accordingly, what we might extrapolate from this tradition is Shakespeare's employment of the Vice as challenges to hegemonic order. The very hallmarks of Vice that would have been heralded by their particular names in the context of the morality plays are here the transgressive potential, fully actuated, of free will, doubt, and that quality diametrically opposed to the virtue the play attempts to convey. It is for this reason that we can acknowledge– but need not limit our analyses to– critical tendencies to merge Vice and villain indiscriminately. After all, the Vices only enact what they name, but the villains rename what they enact. They call into question who and what falls on either side of good/evil dichotomies. We will see this inversion throughout both *Titus Andronicus* and *Othello*, from Aaron's perverse confession of wickedness in the closing scene of *Titus* to Iago's gynophobic descriptions of heterosexual sex. Their revenge is only worth mentioning

[32] The image of crooked and straight paths is key in both Old and New Testaments. Of the former, consider Isaiah 45:2, which states, "I will go before thee, and make the crooked straight" (GNV). In the New Testament, Paul the Apostle confronts Elymas, a sorcerer, thus: "O full of all subtlety and all mischief, the child of the devil, and enemy of all righteousness, wilt thou not cease to pervert the straight ways of the Lord?" (Acts 13:10 GNV).

if one emphasizes their exultation in the transgressive alternatives that they propose. What each of these figures rebel against is not exclusively the injustices perpetrated against them, but the overarching social systems that license such injustices in the first place.

Chapter 2: Reexamining Blackness in Titus Andronicus

In many ways, Aaron's opening soliloquy in *Titus Andronicus* serves as a pivotal moment instigating much of the drama's plot, although it occurs after he has been silent on stage for 425 lines of the opening act.[33] He devotes the first 11 lines to praise for Tamora, likening her to a goddess who "climbeth Olympus' top" and "sits aloft, / secure of thunder's crack or lightning flash" (1.1.500-2).[34] Aaron reserves the second half of the speech for himself, however, appropriating his lover's elevation in wedding Saturninus as an opportunity for himself. Tamora's sexual desire for him, ironically, enables him to banish "slavish weeds and servile thoughts," while she remains fettered in "amorous chains" (1.1.517). His remarks echo Tamora's stratagem to utilize Saturninus's attraction to her as a means of self-elevation, in which the balance of power favors Tamora's subversive manipulation of the emperor. Aaron, however, augments the displacement of the emperor's power by emphasizing how his own commodification (as the source of the "charming eyes" that Tamora desires) will enable him to "shine in pearl and gold" (1.1.515; 520).[35] Arriving, as it were, on Olympus's peak with Tamora, Aaron underscores the effect of his elevation: no longer the slave obligated "to wait" on the queen, he will "wanton" with the goddess, luxuriating over her in the same manner that she does over Saturninus.

---

[33] The First Quarto includes the speech in Act 1 and concludes just before Titus enters to announce the hunt; the First Folio, however, organized Aaron's address as the opening of the second act.

[34] All citations will be from the Arden edition of *Titus Andronicus*; I follow editor Jonathan Bate's lead in assigning Aaron's soliloquy to the opening act.

[35] An interesting parallel regarding pearls precedes Aaron's choice of them as the ideal signifier in which he will re-adorn himself to reflect his elevation: Belial in *The Castle of Perserverance* remarks, "Prise is my prince, in pearls i-pight" (209).

The image of climbing aptly depicts what will become Aaron's signature tactic of converting subjugation to authority, infiltrating and repurposing the very systems designed to keep him disempowered. He is an ideal figure with which to begin a study of Shakespeare's engagement with the Vice tradition as his will thrives not in effecting the spiritual unraveling of a victim – the allegorical Vice's chief purpose – but in displacing the arrangement of power that has favored his victims. Aaron's ambition enables him to supersede allegory's confinement, insofar that the Vice's identity is prediscursively dictated and delimited by the homiletics of allegory, but Aaron's troubling of what is coded as his own prediscursivity dramatically accentuates, instead, his subjectivity. Biblically speaking, he is the transgressive individual vocalizing the heresy described by the Apostle: "Shall the thing formed say to him that formed it, 'Why has thou made me thus?'" (Rom 9:20, GNV).

Aaron's ambitious ascent, accordingly, operates via a demand to change the terms of his signification. His soliloquy engages with this idea, tellingly clarifying that in making use of Tamora's ascent, it is *he* who "will be bright, and shine" (1.1.519). This attention to color and light forms a precedent to a theme that his speeches return to throughout the play by which Aaron actively resists the implications of blackness in Elizabethan England. If his opening soliloquy feels like the beginning of much of the play's drama, then his initial silence could be said to reflect the space reserved for blackness – the silent and uncontested prediscursive space that Aaron troubles as soon as he is afforded speech. Before he can speak, however, the play and audiences write *for* him, as Margaux Deroux has indicated: "his dark presence and silent demeanor initially link Aaron to a shadow: a blackness moving behind the actions of others" (96). The appendage of his subtitles (as Tamora's lover and a "Moor") governs his identification in the same manner that the Vice's name would have predisposed audiences to expect whatever indiscretion he personified. Jeanette White argues that Aaron's body thus

communicates long before the actor or character does: "even before he ever says a word, he stands out conspicuously by color as a menacing figure whose sinister presence bodies ill" (345).

In speaking, then, Aaron immediately troubles the signification already installed by the play's beginning, which is corroborated by his long silence in the opening act. The opening soliloquy affords him the opportunity to reject the shadows, just as he instigates a radical alteration of how his body will be perceived: no longer confined to darkness and silence, he will be bright and shining because he will assault the position reserved for whiteness, which, in turn, he relegates to the status of "pale envy" (1.1.503).[36] In this way, the "slavish weeds" are transposed with "pearl and gold," just as the "servile thoughts" of Aaron's relegation to the shadows in the opening scene will be exchanged for the visible, audible space of the soliloquy.[37] The following sections of this chapter will follow the same progression: having emphasized Aaron's initial silence onstage, I will discuss Elizabethan notions of blackness and the Moor before turning to the play to examine the numerous instances of Aaron's racialized stigmatization. Following the premonitory threads of his soliloquy, I will then investigate Aaron's responses to stigmatization and his recourse to violence as challenges to patriarchy's reliance on prediscursive notions of identity. Lastly, I will temper this recuperation of Aaron's villainy by examining Aaron's interactions with the women of the play – especially Tamora – to conclude with a consideration of his unwitting perpetuation of the very structures that stigmatize him.

---

[36] It should be emphasized that Aaron reserves racial envy *for whiteness* throughout the play; which is to say, his attention to light and color do not indicate a desire to transform black to white, but to associate blackness with the denotation reserved for whiteness. Cf. *TA* 3.1.205-6 and throughout 4.2, when Aaron issues racialized invectives to Chiron and Demetrius.

[37] Although Aaron only linguistically re-dresses himself, the moment is unmistakably transgressive because, as Jean Howard has emphasized, the signifying power of clothing, when misaligned with its wearer's status, has the effect of destabilizing "fixed hierarchies within the social order, [which are then] no longer reliably marked, visually. The resulting confusion seems ontologically intolerable" (166). Cf. Walker 2

The Hermeneutics of the Moor

Shakespeare's signal to the audience that Aaron is a Moor guides them to interpret the villain in the context of Elizabethan ontological projections onto both black skin and Moors, entities which frequently collapsed religious apprehension of Islam with stereotypes reserved for dark skin. Accordingly, the term is rich in ambiguity, at times "referring to skin color, sometimes to nationality, and sometimes to religion" (*Bedford* 1106). As Ania Loomba has helpfully enunciated: "the term 'Moor' […] could mean both 'Muslim' and 'black' [as] Islam and blackness were regarded as overlapping categories for Christians from the Crusades onward" (45-6).[38] The Oxford English Dictionary defines the term as indicative of a North Africans figure of Berber and Arab descent, adding that the Moors had conquered the Iberian peninsula in the 8th century but had been driven out at the close of the 15th, roughly a century before the time when *Titus Andronicus*' is believed to have first been performed ("Moor," [OED]). Yet these denotations form only a generalized geographic identification; the term's connotations are for more important for our causes here, as they insistently circle themes of supposedly nefarious character and deficient humanity. Emily Bartels draws attention to this mutual clarity and vagueness, affirming that Renaissance notions of the Moor could be "vague, varied, inconsistent, and contradictory," but adding that blackness and Islam were consistently culturally encoded as evil (434-5). Indeed, the term functions within the play as a form of depersonalization, in that most of the play's speakers obviate Aaron's name by using instead "the Moor." The definite article echoes not only Aaron's subtitle on the *dramatis personae* but also the adumbration of "the Vice" that survives from the morality plays, such that Aaron is spoken *to* as though he is spoken *of*.[39]

[38] Cf. Bartels 434

[39] The Goths refer to Aaron by his name, but the Romans do not. The notable exceptions occur when they appear to be appealing to Aaron's better nature, as though granting him subjectivity when it matters most. This

Given the term's encompassing of hegemonic anxieties concerning dark skin, Africa, and Islam, the play's extradiegetic audiences would have been involved in the same "considerable confusion [as to] whether the Moor is a human being or a monster" (Alexander and Wells 112). This slippery signification gestures to the central conduit of Othering: difference was interpreted as ontological and irreconcilable, manifesting prediscursive qualitative hierarchies. Stephen Greenblatt has discussed the function of the theatrical stage as the means of early modernity's negotiation with alterity that reassuringly policed it into complacence: the stage's "public uses of spectacle […] impose[d] the normative ethical patterns on the urban masses" (50). *Titus Andronicus*, like England itself, engaged with the encounter between a culturally monolithic Self and its complementary not-Self, as Imtiaz Habib explicates, "the rise of racial discourse in early modern England is intimately connected to the rise of popular drama in the early colonial reign of Elizabeth I. […] The multiplicity of racialized representations in the popular English drama between 1587 and 1640 testify to the onset of a discourse" traditionally assigned to the mid-17th century (17).

Habib's use of "racial discourse," like my own, may elicit the objection that an anachronistic terminology implicates our criticism of the play. Joyce Green MacDonald reminds us, however, that the issues of semantics should not deter us from what is topically of great interest in contemporary, ethical approaches to Shakespeare, and especially to figures like Aaron: "being black was not just about skin colour, but about a vast array of meanings that constructed racial thinking even before the concept of race was born" (*Women and Race* 44). Margaux Deroux, too, rejects the supposed mutual exclusivity of attention to

---

occurs in 3.1 when Titus asks for Aaron to convey his agreement of Saturninus's terms, and at 4.2.55 when Tamora's Nurse refers to him as "gentle Aaron" as she tells him they are "all undone" lest he comply with Tamora's order to kill the child.

racial discourses in Shakespeare and historicist tenability; she argues that the hermeneutics of skin color in the early modern era clearly anticipate, if not foreground, the racial doctrines of the subsequent centuries:

> the African in Europe during the Renaissance period became a palimpsest: a parchment effaced of all individuality and history (reduced to simply a 'base' color), upon which might be constructed ideas of Otherness. [While] racialism had not yet been established during the early modern period, […] English people formed notions of blackness from what color concept and physiology dictated. (90-1)

Deroux' awareness of "color concept and physiology" is admirably demonstrated in her observation that, in the Renaissance, "color was treated allegorically […] and these associations intersect with early efforts to understand the physical body and psychology of the mind" (68; 88). A useful analog can be found in *All for Money*, in which the figure of Judas enters "like a damned soul, in black" (Schells and Shuchter 469). The simile suggests that the figure's damnation is both signaled by and confirmed in this singularly loathed color the actor playing Judas has been shrouded in. Judas's morose appearance emphasizes what Deroux discusses as the color-coded system of humoral theory in fashioning early modern subjectivity: blackness was associated with black bile, the "carrier and expression" of "choler and melancholy, [which] occupied the most unstable and base positions" in humoral frameworks" (88-9). The correct order of the various humors is understood as the only means of health and correctly-modulated virtuous behavior, a status forestalled in the black subject's preponderance of the dark humor.

Analogously, early modern discourses on blackness suggest Elizabethans felt they were faced with the task of purgation. Just as an individual would seek to expel black bile

from the body, the English entertained similar imperatives to remove black subjects from their shores, especially London. The tremendous growth of the city in the sixteenth century was accompanied by a small but growing population of black servants, as Alison Sim has chronicled in *Masters and Servants in Tudor England*. Sim points to this as the result of the precedent set by John Locke, who in 1554 installed a black servant in his home. The practice grew as wealthy households sought to obtain similar individuals as "exotic curiosities" (Deroux 90).[40] Akin to objects or other souvenirs from colonial outposts and exploratory ventures, these individuals formed what was essentially a class of "unofficial" slaves, argues Habib, relegated to the status of "personally possessed servants" (24). Aaron's invasion of center stage, analogously, reflects the contemporaneous cultural anxiety of Elizabethan whites perceiving the growth of this body of individuals, to the extent that Queen Elizabeth I would issue a series of proclamations designed to rid England of the entire population of black individuals, "undesirable outsider[s], who in the words of Shakespeare's own monarch had 'crepte' in […] to the white metropolis" (Habib 24). In this respect, Aaron's significance to Shakespeare's audiences is one of explicitly *racial* dimensions and one of distinctly *English* significance "to be addressed in English terms" (Ndiaye 65).

These considerations of England's local situation also recall the other cultural discourses engaging with nascent racial terminology and questions of subjectivity. The era's popular adventure and travel writing arguably influenced and informed the playwrights of London as much as their stages did the audiences in attendance. As Bartels points out in her discussion of Richard Hakluyt's 1589 *Principal Navigations*, these discourses sought to "justify the colonialist cause by positioning the Europeans as always (already) right and the colonized

[40] Cf. Sim 35

subject as always (already) wrong" (441).[41] Bartels' description echoes what we have earlier discussed in the context of Butler's prediscursivity, insofar that blackness was increasingly understood as "always (already) wrong." The qualitative nature of these assumptions applied pressure on the traditional climatic theory of skin color, which Ania Loomba has insisted was already being challenged by Shakespeare's time (54). Conventional discourses on black skin held that the heat of the sun on the African continent resulted in the darker skin characterizing its inhabitants, but as one of the narratives compiled by Hakluyt demonstrates, instances of miscegenation in England between black servants and white English subjects applied pressure to the theory.

A remarkable example occurs in the seventh book of Hakluyt's *Navigations*, in which George Best reflects on the ostensible potency of the father's blackness, which has diminished the whiteness of the mother: "it seemed this blackness proceedeth rather of some natural inflection of that man, which was so strong, that neither the Clime, neither the good complexion of the mother concurring, could anything alter" (Hakluyt, 7:262). Best's apprehension of innate blackness conveniently evolves the climate theory during a time when questions of difference instigated theorizations of blackness that were unmistakably qualitative, even as the incipient terminology of race entered the lexicon. The "natural inflection" of the black man Best apprehends relies on the negative associations of the adjective, forming the negative half of a binary with the white woman's "good complexion," which is insufficient to overcome the infiltrating influence of the father's skin color on the miscegenated baby's physiognomy.

Representations of individuals like Aaron are thus especially valuable for their depiction of early modern England's discourses on minorities, for although "in numerical

[41] Cf. Habib 22

terms there were few Turks, or Africans, or Jews in England," as Loomba reminds us, "representations of them are crucial for understanding the culture as a whole and its changing relationship with the rest of the world" (10). That relationship was inscribed by prediscursive frameworks that narrated the value of essentialized conceptualizations of subjectivity, such that the inchoate racialism of the late 16th century established a hermeneutics of blackness implicating Aaron as what White dubs the "prototype" of "the inherently evil, vile, and villainous Moor whose soul could never be washed white" (341). This narrative, in effect, replaces the actual content we would expect to find in ethnographies not functioning as propaganda for the hegemonic majority. Aaron thus replicates the function of the Vice in that long initial silence of the opening act: although voiceless, his body functions as the personification of blackness as it was imagined by Elizabethans, inculcated by all that has been communicated about Aaron's skin before the play even begins. This, in turn, reflected English society's ignorance of the histories of the black individuals already in subservience in London.[42]

The dramatic stage, therefore, became the space in which gaps in understanding others could be (erroneously) filled. As Loomba indicates, "by 1600, eighteen to twenty thousand visits were made each week to London playhouses. The bulk of these visitors got their images of foreign people from the stage, rather than from […] real-life interactions, [as] the theatre deeply shaped English imagining of outsiders" (8). In embodying outsiders, moreover, a key reservation should be addressed: as it was white male actors who portrayed all of Shakespeare's characters – including racial figures and women – how seriously can we explicate the play's signification and stigmatization of blackness? If actual black subjects were not presented onstage, and thus were not permitted to represent themselves, does this

[42] Cf. Deroux 96-7; White 347; Loomba 82

in some way mitigate the text's negative orientation toward blackness? Answers in the affirmative are not supported by the performance history of early modernity: as Loomba reminds us, actors had long before participated in the tradition of "blacking up," yet despite the varied dramatic conventions of the genres that featured this practice – among them "Mummers' plays, miracle plays, and morris dancing" – blackness "was a central part of the representations of the grotesque, the evil, or the exotic" (17). Blackness thus connoted the Other in a long history of denoting various figures we have come to understand in reference to that term. Furthermore, on the Elizabethan stage of the late 16th century, the effect of white actors taking on blackness usually brought about the opposite of an ameliorative effect: the black character, such as Aaron, was reviled as though he were a black subject, *and* the actor in question frequently endured some form of ostracization and public disapproval for doing so.[43] As if in tandem with Best's apprehensions about the potency of black skin, audiences frequently associated actors playing such roles as transgressive figures granting a voice to what would otherwise be relegated to silence.

This will not be surprising if we consider *Titus Andronicus* as the young playwright's ambitious attempt to work though "the larger cultural imperative to dissever, that is, to create distinctions between the self and the other," as Kingsley-Smith describes it (107). Actors who embodied that imperative might have enabled the audience to ponder this imperative, but they simultaneously trouble the very injunction to "dissever," seemingly bridging the gap between differences that early modern discourses were compelled to affirm as innate. John Bulwer's *Anthropometamorphoses: Man Transformed or the Artificiall Changeling Historically Presented* of 1653 proves especially noteworthy in this regard. Bulwer postulated that the innate qualities of blackness were reflected not only in the biological sources

[43] Cf. Loomba 28

imagined by George Best, but also in the very *will* of black subjects. Bulwer hypothesized that Moors indulged an "apish desire to change the complexion of their bodies," which led them to color themselves black,

> and so from this artifice the Moors might possibly become Negroes, and this complexion, first by art acquired, might be evidently maintained by generation, and by the tincture of the skin, as a spermatical part traduced from father to son. For thus perhaps this which at the beginning of this complexion was an artificial device, and thus induced by imagination, having once impregnated the seed, found afterward concurrent productions, which were continued by climes, whose constitution advantaged the artificial into a natural impression. (Bulwer 469)

Loomba discusses this passage as a notable distinction between early modern conceptions of "Moors" and "Negroes," but her conclusion resonates with my application of Bulwer's text: she finds that Bulwer gives voice to a supposition that "imagination has the power to alter the body genetically" (64), a transgressive potential that performers painting themselves could have been perceived as entertaining.

Aaron's status as a black Moor, thus, functions to an almost corrosive extent, implicating the actor(s) who portrayed him rather than absolving blackness of some of its negative potential. Aaron presented "for the public an instructive illumination and exposure of the incurable perfidy of the black subject hidden in its midst, a symbolic confirmatory examination of the civic treachery and sexual riot that popular travel literature ha[d] already paradigmatically suspected him to possess" (Habib 25). Habib's comments offer a helpful transition to the many examples suggesting that the play, like Aaron, operates in full

cognizance of what the audience has "suspected him to possess" long before his speech and actions appear to corroborate such suspicions.

Stigmatization in the Text

Aaron's relationship with Tamora serves as the genesis for much of the play's stigmatization of blackness; whereas Aaron's opening soliloquy frames the queen of the Goths as his amorous prisoner, the Romans and eventually the Goths malign their pairing via racialized discourse that implicates Aaron as the contaminating entity who brings about the Empress's – and Rome's – debasement. Bassianus and Lavinia, encountering the lovers in the woods, vocalize an inversion of Aaron's promotion from "slavish weeds" to the splendor of "pearl and gold." Feigning confusion in espying Tamora, Bassianus describes her as unrecognizably tainted: "Who have we here? Rome's royal empress, / unfurnished of her well-beseeming troop?" (2.2.55-6). This description of Tamora evokes shameful nudity and puns on "beseeming" to allude to Tamora's falsely "seeming" chastity, compromised in Aaron's presence. Juxtaposed sardonically via simile with Dian, Tamora earns Lavinia's condemnation too;[44] she taunts the Empress by avowing her "goodly gift in horning" only to presume that "your Moor and you / are singled forth to try experiments" (2.2.68-9). Lavinia's degrading euphemism for Tamora and Aaron's lovemaking echoes the utilitarian references to sex offered in Aaron's opening soliloquy, but it leaves no room for either Tamora's political elevation or Aaron's appropriation of the same. Her charge, like Bassianus's, operates entirely from the sense that Tamora forfeits her imperial stature and sexual honor by associating with a Moor.

[44] Bassianus clarifies that Tamora is "habited *like*" the virtuous goddess (2.2.57). We observe in this simile the same effect discussed in Richard III's allusion to the Vice: it is a reference that concomitantly distances the subject from what it is being compared to.

Bassianus, in turn, makes clear that Aaron's transgressive influence over the Empress begins with– and thus can never overcome– his blackness:

> Believe me, queen, your swart Cimmerian
> Doth make your honour of his body's hue,
> Spotted, detested and abominable.
> Why are you sequestered from all your train,
> Dismounted from your snow-white goodly steed,
> And wandered hither to an obscure plot,
> Accompanied but with a barbarous Moor,
> If foul desire had not conducted you? (2.2.72-9)

What seems to prompt Bassianus's invective is Tamora's compromising of her marital chastity, which should be reserved for Saturninus, yet his attention turns with an insistent bias to commentary on Aaron's *color* and its erosive immorality. Bassianus's racialized charges indicate what White observes as the text's insistent reminder "that Aaron's personal script is pre-penned by a tense society that rationalizes and makes comprehensible his supposed inbred penchant for evil" (350). "Swart" and "Cimmerian" compound to emphasize the dreadful "hue" Saturninus apprehends in Aaron's skin:[45] "swart" denotes blackness while "Cimmerian" a region far from Europe, imagined as also far from the sun, and consequently shrouded in darkness, like its inhabitants.[46] There is also a clear element of class-based disdain in Bassianus allusion, which has prompted several critics to remark on the unstated reality apparently governing Aaron's fate: namely, that he is a slave of sorts to Tamora, and

[45] A marked contrast to Saturninus's remark on Tamora's being "the hue / that I would choose were I to choose anew" (1.1.265-6). Loomba points out that Tamora appears "white though foreign" (84); I agree, insofar that her racial identification is not interchangeable with Aaron's blackness.
[46] Bate 172.

additionally that he might be a captured slave from the lower portion of Africa.[47] Noémie Ndiaye most laudably unpacks the reference, finding within Bassianus's pejorative a complex and nuanced commentary on Aaron's blackness, "for *cimarrones* were runawy African slaves in the early modern Spanish Americas" (66).[48]

Bassianus's reference to Aaron's "hue" as "spotted, detested, and abominable" thus renders Tamora's "honour" in similar, corrupted fashion, promulgating the physical violence that opens the play into the realm of representational violence. Cynthia Marshall has commented aptly on the "sheer disrespect shown the physical self in the play, such that […] the basic integrity of the human form is disregarded" (206). Marshall refers to the abuses against the flesh that actually occur, but the same tendency – initiated by Titus' slaughtering of his sons – spills into the imagery Bassianus and Lavinia employ against Aaron. Augmenting his earlier image, Bassianus concludes by asserting that Tamora has "dismounted from [her] snow-white goodly steed" to, in effect, be mounted by a "barbarous Moor," who becomes the black antithesis of the snowy steed, equally animalistic but unmistakably racialized. This is especially evident given Lavinia's mocking exhortation, "Jove shield your husband from his hounds today: 'Tis pity they should take him for a stag" (2.2.70-1). Following her remark on Tamora's propensity to cuckold Saturninus, this comment serves as an allusion to the Ovidian myth of Actaeon's horning, in which Diana punishes him with horns, the symbol for cuckoldry, and facilitates his being hunted by his own dogs. Saturninus, the cuckold in question, thus risks being hunted by his hounds; however, Lavinia and Bassianus both spend the duration of this encounter emphasizing

[47] Habib 24; Ndiaye 65; Loomba 79

[48] Yet, as Ndiaye is quick to point out, English audiences would not be predisposed to contemptuously reject a *cimarrone* on principle, because of their institutional opposition to the Iberian practice of slavery; however, "Bassianus is using the term *cimarrón* to bring Aaron back to the original slave status from which he has been trying to distance himself, as an insult" (67).

Aaron's animalistic and debased color, which enables Lavinia's comment to sustain a second, subversive meaning by implying that the Moor is the "husband" (or sexual partner) whose debased appearance will make him a likely target for the hounds mistaking him "for a stag" (2.2.71).

The play thus indicates via this template that Aaron's position is one of unique revulsion, superseding all other differences within the play's cognizance. With Tamora and Saturninus's union, the dissimilarities between Romans and the Goths fade, but they each remain firmly opposed to any materialized or open union with Aaron. Kingsley-Smith connects this to the audience's probably "conflicting sympathies" between the Roman conquerors of antiquity and the isle's ancestral ties to the Goths; the latter group, notably, join the Roman position in balking at the prospect of identification with Aaron, who remains a "stubbornly distinct and unassimilable" villain (114-5). Aaron is the only figure whose "malignant differentness is consistently recognized and easily categorized by all, including himself and his allies. Bartels affirms, finding that even Aaron's self-referentiality "evoke[s] a stock image of the black man, [and] reinforces the idea culturally linked to that image, that blackness is not merely skin deep" ("Making More" 442). Unlike the play's other instances of violence and stigmatization – such as the initial Roman resistance to the Goths and Titus' slaying of his own and Tamora's sons, which are encoded as disruptive and extraordinary circumstances – Aaron's eventual crimes are foretold as inevitable based on the apprehension of his hue.[49]

Even Titus' hate for Tamora and her sons becomes superseded by his righteous fury against Aaron, who appears to the patriarch to have a monopoly on an exclusive version of

[49] Much like the fly of 3.2, which Marcus kills due to its "black ill-favoured" color; "therefore I killed him," he concludes (3.2.68-9). Titus's response, in thanking him for this "charitable deed" (3.2.71), suggests that Marcus has rendered a service, preventing the crime that would occur in letting the black creature live.

wickedness. Tamora, Demetrius, and Chiron, presenting themselves before Titus' house as Revenge, Murder, and Rape, are thus an insufficient rendering of Titus's woes: observing them, he reflects,

> Well are you fitted, had you but a Moor;
> Could not all hell afford such a devil?
> For well I wot the empress never wags
> But in her company there is a Moor. (5.2.85-8)

The stigmatizing effect of Titus' rhetoric works on two levels. On the first, Tamora's presentation of herself and her sons as Revenge, Rape, and Murder is incomplete without the *black* devil who is the fourth and chief figure in their personified assembly of evil, such that his absence renders them almost comically unrecognizable. Beyond this lies a more suggestive reading, however: if the empress "never wags / but in her company there is a Moor," then the implication is that Tamora, whom Titus *does* recognize, *is* accompanied by a devil, unseen. Failing to ascertain a black figure, Titus expresses a consternation at the lack of what must be involved for Revenge, Rape, and Murder to harass him. Were Aaron present, "it were convenient" in order for Titus to identify him as the very figuration of the villainy Tamora, Chiron, and Demetrius possess, but do not physically demonstrate the way he would have us believe Aaron does.

Aaron is the play's manifestation of this ideological conviction, insofar that regardless of his motive and the complicity of other agents, *he* is the "chief architect and plotter of these woes" simply because he is an "irreligious Moor" (5.3.120-1). Collectively, the diatribes discussed above constitute Aaron as the abstract of all evils, his very body

synecdoche of malevolence itself.[50] As though to answer the premonition of his name, the speakers' commentary on Aaron's body – and, by consequence, his nature – thus anticipates racialized discourse to interpellate the Moor as the incongruent entity effecting the trauma of the play. That their insults take on religious language, though, is perhaps more suggestive than the earlier discussion of the term "Moor" suggests. As Habib clarifies, Aaron is "doubly demonized" in that he is a "Moor with the *Jewish* name, identifiable in no source but directly evocative of the additional racialization potential of anti-Semitic dramatization popularized by Marlowe's *Jew of Malta*" (Habib 20; my emphasis).[51] Aaron's "irreligious" quality, then, is not that he lacks religion, but that he lacks the *true* religion.

These associations with the devil – the chief figure of "irreligion" within, ironically, religious frameworks – raise the specter of the Vice in *Titus Andronicus*. In Aaron, Vice appears to have coalesced in the physicality of the black subject, as Aaron may not be written as literal personification in the manner of the morality plays, but he is *interpreted* as such by both the play and its society of speakers. He can therefore not be the embodiment of a given vice, but he is an avatar of Elizabethan hermeneutics of blackness. He is a subject relegated to the status of an object, and a symbol (or embodied object) that troubles any verisimilitude of subjectivity. Yet Aaron, for all his swaggering exultation in the violence of his acts and the agency of his words, does not position himself in the same way, emphasizing

[50] The one exception, aptly, is excludes itself as grounds for an objection: when Titus refers to Aaron by exclaiming "did ever raven sing so like a lark?" at 3.1.158-60, we might counter that the play favors ironic similes such as that of Bassianus's at 2.2.57.

[51] Emily Bartels has discussed this as an important departure from those historical discourses aligning Mohammedism and Christianity, which sometimes found common ground in diplomatic settings such as the Elizabethan court due to their mutual loathing of idolatry ("Illusion of Being" 438-9). Such affinity evaporates in the play, however, in the stigmatizing association of blackness with both Islam (through the figure of the Moor) and Judaism (through Aaron specifically). Loomba discusses this as the intersection of religious and nascent racial Othering characteristic of early modern culture in England, in that "the two religions that were Christianity's closest rivals– Judaism and Islam– were treated as the handiwork of the devil. Religious and literary texts as well as popular culture depicted Muslims, Jews, and the devil as black" (Loomba 27).

instead that the correspondence between his actions and the projections we have explored above is one that he *elects* to enact. Whereas the Vice's villainy lay in swaying or tempting a victim representing mankind in general, Aaron makes it clear that his own soul hangs in the balance when faced with his own worst impulses: "Let fools do good and fair men call for grace, / Aaron will have his soul black like his face" (3.1.205-6). The earlier discussion of color imagery from Aaron's opening soliloquy resurfaces here, where Aaron juxtaposes the "fair men" (associated with morality and religiosity) with himself not *because* of his blackness, but because he "will[s]" his flesh to reflect his malevolent intent. The pun on "will," indicating Aaron's desire and agency in thwarting the Andronici, suggests that without this conscious decision to proceed on his planned course, there would be no correspondence between his soul and what Elizabethans associated with the color of his face.

"Will"ful Blackness

Critics have responded to this metacognitive tendency in Aaron's vocalizations in different ways. White observes that "Aaron is fully cognizant of the fact that he is vilified because of his ethnicity and thus is predetermined to be Satan's ally" (336), a comment that points to the vital distinction between the prediscursive determination Aaron perceives as having been inscribed upon his flesh and his troubling of the same. We might put some pressure, then, on stances such as Deroux's, who stipulates that Aaron "looks to the master narrative within which he has been inserted. […] to understand his own blackness. […] Aaron is only allowed to function within the framework that early modern thought provides for blackness, and thus, the only way he can become self-actualized is by embodying blackness to its fullest extent" (97). Deroux's comment recalls the homiletic actualization of personified figures in the morality plays, who can only animate what they name and embody,

but Aaron's attention to his own ability to *become* what he embodies to others represents a significant evolution of the Vice into the villain. His blackness is inscribed by those around him, but is transgressively *performed* (to echo Butler) via an agentive capacity that the Vices express but are never free to choose.

Of course, the vital moment from the play demonstrating this to be true occurs when Aaron's decision is to *not* embody blackness as it has been inscribed by sparing his newborn son. Aaron alone recognizes the child as *not* already implicated by assigned blackness, and his response immediately opposes his prior course of violent self-elevation. As Eldred Jones posits, in all other instances in the play, "Aaron's choice of evil is deliberate. There is implied in his behavior a conscious turning away from grace, which is presumed to be open to him" (54). His child, accordingly, represents just such an opportunity to turn toward grace, which ironically places him at odds with those around him. The Nurse, commissioned by Tamora to deliver the child for slaughter, speaks for white Romans and Goths in stating that the empress has delivered "a devil" (4.2.66). Aaron's mocking response apparently prompts the Nurse's clarification, in which she indicates in no uncertain terms that the child is

> A joyless, dismal, black and sorrowful issue
>
> […] as loathsome as a toad
>
> Among the fair-faced breeders of our clime.
>
> The empress sends it thee, thy stamp, thy seal,
>
> And bids thee christen it with thy dagger's point. (4.2.68-72)

For his part, Aaron acknowledges the child's color but continues the recuperation of blackness from his soliloquy, referring to the child in affectionate terms: "Sweet blowze, you are a beauteous blossom, sure" (4.2.74).

Aaron's reaction becomes even more startling in recalling a similar scene from *All for Money*, in which Sin has given birth to Damnation. Beholding his child, the vice snipes:

> He is the worst-favored knave that ever was born;
>
> […] When I look on him methinks him to be too evil-favored,
>
> Yet the crow thinks her blackbirds of all other the fairest.
>
> But I cannot love him if I should be hanged;
>
> Thou are never like, son, of me to be kissed. (291-300)[52]

Aaron, of course, offers to be hanged himself in order to save the son loathed by the Romans and Goths alike, a marked contrast to Sin loathing his own ill-favored child. He interprets his child in a fashion diametrically opposite to the others, who, along with Shakespeare's audience, probably felt that "Aaron's offspring were more to be feared than Aaron himself," as Kingsley-Smith reminds us, for the threat of miscegenation was not in a perpetuation of blackness, but in blackness' ostensible ability to infiltrate whiteness and pure lineages (116).[53] George Best's infamous articulation of this paranoia in his 1578 *True Discourse of the Late Voyages of Discouerie* provides an example of the threat Aaron's "sweet blowze" poses to the Roman court, and, by extension, to the English audiences in attendance: "I my selfe haue séene an *Ethiopian* as blacke as a cole brought into *Englande*, who taking a faire English woman to Wife, begatte a Sonne in all respectes as blacke as the Father was, although *England* were his natiue Countrey, & an English woman his Mother" (29). Best's consternation echoes the anxieties reported by the Nurse and Tamora's sons,

---

[52] As related in chapter 1, *All for Money* features several of these self-reproductive births among the Vices, anticipating Aaron's epithets for the child ("this myself, the vigour and the picture of my youth" (4.2.109-10), images all of spontaneous reproduction.

[53] In the play, this is best emblematized by Aaron's narration to his child, "Did not thy hue bewray whose brat thou art, / Had nature lent thee but thy mother's look, / Villain, thou mightst have been an emperor" (5.1.29-30).

who cannot stomach the black child's skin in the context of his "natiue Countrey," the Rome in which they now luxuriate.

The prediscursive qualities the Nurse interprets on the babe's skin, however, are reversed by Aaron, who views a child as not yet compelled to perform according to a racialized script. His refusal to slay the child contrasts powerfully with Titus' earlier acknowledgment to Marcus that the blackness of a fly confirms its culpability, not to mention Titus' own flippant murders of his sons. In this way, Aaron's villainy is unmistakably motivated and clearly defined as a resistance to – and inversion of – the system he senses will soon erase the subjectivity of his newborn son. It takes shape as the unique threat that he poses to the assembly onstage and in the theatre. As Bartels articulates, Aaron's rhetorical proficiency catalyzes the potential of his resistant will, insofar that his "cultural literacy, his knowledge of classical mythology, and his eloquence" prevents his function as "an absolute sign of the Other," an analogous position to the personifying shorthand of the Vice ("Making More" 444). As a villain, Aaron's actions respond to and challenge the assignment of his nature. When he does embody it, it is a performance of responsive awareness akin to the concept of "double consciousness" W. E. B. Du Bois articulate centuries later: "it is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt" (2).[54] This phenomenon remains quite detached from the Vice's performance of what he allegorically already is and what he must therefore remain. Aaron advances this position in his interrogation of conceptual binaries and the linguistic structures enabling them: extending the opening soliloquy's recuperation of

[54] I thus concur with Loomba, who posits that "Aaron's attitude anticipates certain strategies of defiance among twentieth-century black political movements, such as their appropriation and inversion of terms such as 'bad,' or their endorsement of violence as a strategy of fighting back" (81). Cf. Gordon Ross Smith 12.

blackness, Aaron narrates something directly opposite of the pre-existing racial hierarchy. It is not enough to assert that blackness is *not* "so base a hue" (4.2.73), e.g., he must issue the inverse association of baseness with the color foregrounding such binaries: whiteness itself.

We see this most clearly in his diatribes against Chiron and Demetrius at 4.2, an exemplary scene in its revelation that Aaron's alliance with the Goths has had absolutely no effect on the racial stigmatization instigated by the Romans and adopted by the Goths once the child is born. Confronted with the tawny visage betraying their mother's guilt, Tamora's sons mimic Bassianus and Lavinia's conflation of Tamora's sexual impropriety with the very body of the black subject that signifies her compromised chastity. Chiron implicates Aaron by charging him with having "undone our mother" (4.2.77), indicting his blackness to pass a sentence against the child Demetrius terms the "accursed offspring of so foul a fiend" (4.2.81), a "tadpole" by which their mother "is for ever shamed" (4.2.87; 114). Demetrius' recourse to animal imagery recalls Marcus' association of Aaron with the black fly, and Chiron symmetrically pronounces the same sentence on the babe that the Tribune named for the fly: "It shall not live" (4.2.82).

For his part, Aaron responds to these attacks with a challenge that utilizes the same approach, yet it operates to the opposite effect: the black babe does not inspire a self-loathing,[55] but a revulsion toward the "sanguine, shallow-hearted" nature of the "boys" who seek to end its life (4.2.99). It is vital to observe that Aaron's charge against the brothers – ersatz sons-in-law of his tutelage throughout the play – responds not to the innate qualities of their flesh (its whiteness), but to the *will* governing their behavior, which in turn associates

[55] Arguably unlike the image of Sin condemning his son Damnation in *All for Money*, quoted above.

their whiteness with the cruelty he opposes.[56] Aaron insistently privileges *will* as the determining factor that should govern the hermeneutics of human subjectivity. Hearing of Tamora's loathing of the child, we can observe his disassociation from Tamora in defense of the child, and his racially inflected implication of her sons, accordingly, follows their *will*ingness to carry out their mother's plan. It is they who have become black. Chiron and Demetrius thus earn Aaron's most significant rebuttals, which become far more transgressive than his earlier innocuous insult during their "petty brabble" of longing for Lavinia (1.1.561), as though he were chastising naughty children.[57] In 4.2, however, when they threaten his child, they are the emasculated "boys" he renames with stinging appositives: "ye white-limed walls, ye alehouse painted signs" (4.2.99-100).

This constitutes a rhetorical repurposing of the sexual and gender-based stigmatizing associations white oppressors began to attribute to blackness. As Loomba reminds us, in the mouths of colonial whites, blackness "was imagined in terms of an inversion or distortion of 'normal' gender roles and sexual behavior – Jewish men were said to menstruate, Muslim men to be sodomites, Egyptian women to stand up while urinating, and witches and Amazons to be kin to cannibals" (7). In Aaron's response, therefore, he could be said to return the dehumanizing language of those who liken him to a devil and his child to a tadpole with the intentionally even more degrading association with material objects. As mere "walls," the image of Chiron and Demetrius that Aaron creates relies on the pun of "limed" with "limbed," such that their external whiteness is affected and synthetic. They are but "alehouse painted signs," an insult that indicates a cheapness of quality. Their whiteness,

[56] Consider too 3.1.205-6, where Aaron chides "fair men" not for an innate goodness but the hyprocisy of these associations when it is there will, like his own, that compels them to "call for grace," the very thing he rejects.
[57] Significantly, Aaron had then demonstrated respect for Tamora's sons, referring to them as "lords" (1.1.544).

in effect, is an empty sign, signifying value but denoting concealed, degraded objects.[58] Aaron's phallic eye perceives beyond the fleshly surface of his enemies to articulate a reversal of prediscursive ontologies.

In referring to these figurative signs, moreover, we should remember that Aaron's approach utilizes and manipulates the signification of material objects to the same effect. Depositing the gold under the tree that will serve as Bassianus's tomb in 2.2, e.g., he explains to the audience in the opening of the scene

> He that had wit would think that I had none,
> To bury so much gold under a tree
> And never after to inherit it.
> Let him that thinks of me so abjectly
> Know that this gold must coin a stratagem
> Which, cunningly effected, will beget
> A very excellent piece of villainy. (2.2.1-7)

As though conspiring with the audience, Aaron narrates a transformation of the gold into villainy itself. Rather than "inherit[ing]" the gold, Aaron invests in the symbolic meaning of the object within a system of signification that he rearranges: producing the bag of gold in the context of his forged letter, Aaron implicates two of the Andronici even as he makes a mockery of all who would think of him "so abjectly" as to suppose his agency is as limited as his assigned social stature in Rome. Kingsley-Smith finds this resort to violence a "kind of therapy" at work throughout the play, insofar that it serves as "a means of reclaiming agency, of achieving an integrated self, and of projecting one's own suffering onto the person who

[58] Interestingly, blackness to Aaron "scorns to bear another hue" (4.2.102), suggesting that it resides above the clumsy signifying role he reserves for whiteness.

caused it" (109). This may be the effect of Aaron's resort to violence, but some have been less convinced that it constitutes a motive. Bartels, for her part, remarks that Aaron is "intent on making this 'the day of doom for Bassianus," but is troubled that Aaron "gives no indication why," concluding that "his only motive [is a delight in villainy and violation" (445). If Tamora's ascent will enable Aaron's own rise, however, then Bassianus represents a threat, albeit indirectly, to Aaron, who seeks not gold, but the position it connotes were he to be robed in the opening soliloquy's "pearl and gold."

The Bassianus and Lavinia plots and Aaron's manipulation of objects emphasize just how precarious the villain's ascent was. The initial order established in the conclusion of the first act seems tenuous, in that two marital matches were made in the space of moments, no less than three candidates for emperor were vetted publicly, and Aaron has only just alerted the audience that Tamora's marriage to Saturninus will be capitalized upon by him in order to reverse his own subjection. For this reason, his guidance of Chiron and Demetrius to rape Lavinia is actually a form of self-preservation: intervening in their public brawling, he asserts "this petty brabble will undo *us all*" (1.1.561; my emphasis). He alerts the boys to the vulnerability of their position – and his own – by reminding them "the palace [is] full of tongues, of eyes and ears" (1.1.627). It is in this context, then, that we must observe that Aaron's target in the forest is whatever and whomever can threaten his elevation, especially whomever "thinks of me so abjectly" (2.2.4). As if to answer the indefinite referent of this remark, the very targets of his schemes, Bassianus and Lavinia, then enter and vocalize the first instances of the play's racialized discourse. They, in effect, become the victims suffering

Aaron's enrichment via villainy, which "doth fat [him] with the very thoughts of it," a direct appropriation of the position of scapegoat normally reserved for Aaron (3.1.206).[59]

Like the gold, the "fatal-plotted scroll" becomes much more than an object within the villain's devious plotting. Forged and false, the letter nonetheless materializes a truth that emboldens Saturninus's unshakable conviction that Titus's sons' guilt "is apparent" (2.2.292). Pointing to the letter and the gold, the emperor indicts Martius and Quintus on the charge inscribed by the seeming nature of the objects Aaron has utilized to disrupt their proper signification. The social order of the play, in turn, radically alters following an outsider's rupturing of the sovereignty of white patriarchs governing the Symbolic. Aaron's will is the "cunningly effected" catalyst that prompts the gold's "beget[ting] a very excellent piece of villainy." The use of birth imagery here structurally bookends the later description of his dalliances with Tamora as producing the "piece of villainy" that the empress's Nurse apprehensively believes will render them "all undone" (4.2.56). Much like Iago's "monstrous birth" (1.1.),[60] Aaron's manipulation of objects brings about a state of ruin contrary to birth; the "excellent" nature of his villainy constitutes his enemies' ruin and death.

The culmination of this threat occurs in Aaron's later torture of Titus himself, extorting the patriarch's hand in exchange for the heads of his sons. Ostensibly as an emissary for Saturninus, he promises Titus "for thy hand / Look by and by to have thy sons with thee" (3.1.201-2). Whether Aaron is Saturninus's agent or acts independently, the effect of his exchange with Titus mirrors that of the manipulation of the gold and forged letter: Aaron establishes that the forfeiture of a hand will certify Titus' sons' pardon, as "the

[59] Images of fattening are frequently in the morality plays. Consider Belial in *The Castle of Perservance*, who remarks "with these faytouris I am fed– in faith I am fawe" (212-3). Myscheff in *Mankind* similarly exclaims, "Of murder and manslawter I haue my bely-fyll" (638-9).
[60] *O* 1.3.402-3. All citations from *Othello* will be from the Arden edition, edited by E. A. J. Honigmann.

ransom for their fault" (3.1.157). Titus complies, insisting it will be his own hand, emphasizing a connection between this part of his body and his sons: he stipulates that Saturninus should bury the hand, while his sons he will reclaim from their death sentence. Aaron, in arranging this barter, alludes to its consequence, clarifying "their heads I mean" (3.1.203) will be returned for Titus' hand. Titus' association of his sacrificed hand with his sons' lives is reversed, as Aaron severs an instrument of writing and phallic power from the patriarch and returns the favor with the surest signs of Titus' disempowered status: the heads of his sons. The hand is not a "ransom for their fault," but payment for the decapitated heads, a commodification that neuters the generative capacity of Titus' hand. The procreative instrument that "warded [Saturninus] from [a] thousand dangers" (3.1.195-6) is effectively castrated, an action mirrored in the excision of his sons from the family line.

Aaron usurps the authority of the patriarchal father through this symbolic castration. Additionally, as a Moor, Aaron's villainy presents another source of vast apprehension for Elizabethan audiences: that of circumcision. Daniel Boyarin has compellingly enunciated the ideological threat of circumcision associated with Moors in the context of another of Shakespeare's black protagonists, Othello. Boyarin interprets the Muslim and Judaic custom as one of special anxiety for Englishmen, who feared the loss of foreskin as a spiritually transgressive association with the enemies of Christendom (255). In *Titus Andronicus,* Aaron represents the same threat, but unlike Othello, he actually undertakes a form of circumcision against the Roman patriarch by severing Titus's hand. Beheading Titus's sons, too, adumbrates the procedure, made even more horrific by the Moor's gleeful return of the prized portion after it has been rendered useless. The same horror is evident when Aaron tosses back Titus' phallic hand, "in scorn to thee sent back," as the Messenger describes the return (3.1.238). The same messenger, bearing the heads of Titus' sons, remarks that the

"woe" of Aaron's "sports" is worse than that occasioned by remembering his own father's actual death (3.1.239-41), which continues the association of Aaron's castration/circumcision of the patriarch with death, the antithesis of the phallus' ostensibly generative capacity.[61]

This usurpation of Titus's patriarchal position, furthermore, horrifically ironizes the testing of Abraham in Genesis 22. Called to sacrifice his son Isaac to God, Abraham proceeds in faith to tie his son to the altar and is only prevented from lighting the pyre by the intervention of an angelic messenger. Abraham's test of obedience measures, in effect, his morality through the matrix of his fatherhood, itself long forestalled as the patriarch awaited God's intervention in enabling his wife Sarah to conceive. Aaron's parodies this trial to the opposite effect, making a mockery of Titus's inefficient morality, which he rewards by rendering equally inefficient Titus's phallic instrument. Paradoxically, Aaron's sacrifice to save his own son is successful, despite the dreadful context of the villain's morality. As Ndiaye contextualizes, "there is little doubt that the scene when Lucius sets up to lynch a defenseless baby constituted a moment of intense pathos in the theatre" (71). Even if this were not the case, the scene recalls Abraham's trial because of Titus's inability to save his sons. It is Aaron who ends the play with a child spared, perhaps because he offers not a hand but a willingness to die in the child's stead, a direct inversion of Titus's indiscriminate willingness to murder his offspring.[62]

Lucius, too, serves as a surprising moral foil for Aaron in the same manner as his father: sentencing Aaron's child to death, the man who will close the play as emperor

---

[61] This reading stems, from the term "Moor" and its associations with Islam as the embodiment of the stereotypical "terrible Turk" discussed in Edward Said seminal study, *Orientalism* (6). Marcus' application of "irreligious Moor" (5.3.120) and "misbelieving Moor" (5.3.142) to Aaron thus denote note atheism but the "wrong" religion of foreigners, especially Muslims.

[62] Cf. White 354-6

parallels Titus's rash turning on his sons in the opening scene of the play. Despite the racialized aversion the audience had for Aaron, and regardless of whether or not their sympathies were stimulated by Lucius' demand, Aaron's self-sacrifice indicates that he occupies the moral high ground and that Lucius is the empowered arbiter of *in*justice.[63] Ndiaye makes the case for this even more tenable by pointing out that Lucius ignores the Roman precept of *partus sequitur ventrem* ("that which is brought forth follows the womb"), by which a child's rights are determined from his maternal line (69). The son of an Empress, Aaron's child thus constitutes a racialized "interruption [of] the rightful royal lineage" (70). It is arguably for this reason, not a morally just correction of Aaron's assigned or performed wickedness, that Lucius condemns father and son to lynching. Attempting to preserve his own privileged fate, however, Lucius unwittingly instigates the moral elevation of Aaron himself.

Far from a manifestation of allegorical evil, Aaron thus concludes the play as an embodied challenge to the hegemonic order governing the play's social, linguistic, moral, and racial structures: his linguistic assault on Titus, the Romans, and Goths extends to his manipulation of material signs to execute violence against his enemies, ultimately in shaking the spiritual foundation of the play. Consider his words in the closing scene, which constitute an inversion of the confession of faith:

> I am no baby, I, that with base prayers
> I should repent the evils I have done. […]
> If one good deed in all my life I did
> I do repent it from my very soul. (5.3.184-9)[64]

[63] Cf. Deroux 100-1

[64] Probably an intentional contrast to the morality plays, in which repentance is the affirmative and restorative act necessary for redemption. Before Everyman repents, e.g., Good Dedes enters the stage "crawling," unable

Rejecting the offer to repent, significantly, negates the authority of moral and spiritual truth as represented by their chief agent at the close of the play: Lucius. At the same time, Aaron's rhetoric forces the patriarchal figure to recognize *him* in a way that distinctly troubles the restoration of order characteristic of the close of Shakespearean tragedy.

The success of Aaron's conquest can be found in his securing a promise of the soon-to-be emperor's pardoning of Aaron and Tamora's child, itself secured on the strength of Lucius' faith: "Even by my god I swear to thee," he assures Aaron (5.1.86). Habib points out that Aaron's ability to extract an oath from Lucius actually has the force of an "invocation […] to test and probe Lucius's moral integrity, to in fact 'adjust' *Lucius's* psychic life (the semantic codes of his belief systems) to include Aaron" (31; author's emphasis). In the paucity of Aaron's conversion, therefore, it is Lucius whose faith is altered in the very scene ostensibly ensuring Aaron's re-regulation within a racialized system of order. The one unmistakable act of Aaron's goodness, then, secures something akin to his own survival through the babe, allowing him to end the narrative in defiance of the very figure guaranteeing his heir will endure. It is Lucius who closes the play as the irreligious tyrant, ironically indicted for holding his "bauble for a god" (5.1.79), an allusion to idolatry that emphasizes Aaron's triumph over Lucius' morality even as it contemptuously dismisses the hypocrisy of his racialized ideas of virtue.[65]

Tempering Recuperation

Aaron's success must not remain unqualified, however, for despite the triumphs of his refutation of the faith, authority, and ostensibly innate superiority of his white

---

to walk (486), but after Everyman scourges himself and repents of his sin, Good Dedes stands and exclaims he is "delivered of my skyenesse and wo!" (619-20).

[65] Iago, interestingly, refers to Bianca as a "bauble" in similar fashion at *O* 4.1.134

counterparts, Aaron cannot be said to offer a compelling alternative to the very system he troubles. In this respect, the somewhat lazy tendency of criticism that fixates upon his wickedness might be reconsidered as we conclude our analysis. My reading does not implicate Aaron on the traditional fronts of his more notorious crimes. I have addressed those, ironically, to recuperate him to an extent from those readings which reductively impose the morality drama upon him as the only means of understanding Shakespearean villainy. What remains is to qualify Aaron's success as an agent of subversion by determining what abuses of power he inherits from the very model he opposes. This is nowhere more readily apparent than in the prediscursive status that, despite his position as a Moor, he is unable to perceive as equally inscribed and subjugated: that of the women in the play. Butler's work thus bookends our analysis and warrants a closing look at Aaron's recourse to the same violence against – and cyclical subjugation of – Tamora, Lavinia, and the Nurse.

Aaron's opening soliloquy, which we have discussed as foreshadowing his ambitious attempts to subdue his white competitors, takes on added significance in observing his pivot from the mode of admiring blazon to an address to himself:

> arm thy heart and fit thy thoughts
> to mount aloft with thy imperial mistress,
> and mount her pitch whom though in triumph long
> has prisoner held. (1.1.511-4)

Noting the careful progression of these lines reveals Aaron's true regard for Tamora: mounting "with" his mistress, Aaron adjusts the image of coeval partnering in the following line, when he promises to "mount her pitch." Drawing from falconry terminology, the bird's mounting its pitch indicates that it has reached the highest point of flight. Yet it is at this moment – at the very pinnacle of Tamora's flight, i.e. – that Aaron troubles the image with

the phrase that follows. "In triumph long," Aaron "hast prisoner held" Tamora, as "fettered in amorous chains"—images all that negate the sense of flight earlier ascribed to Tamora and that replace the falconry image in "mount[ing]" to the more commonplace and bawdy associations with copulation. Tamora's ascent is effectively erased in the answering image of hegemonic masculinity, which seeks to commodify a woman's body in order to perpetuate phallic authority.

Reframing their relationship as one of sexualized bodies, Aaron describes himself mounting the very being who is enabling his ascent. The "envy" he earlier describes as "pale" thus takes on a gendered tone not initially present: for in keeping Tamora bound with "amorous chains" by his "charming eyes," Aaron utilizes Tamora's desire against her, closing the soliloquy with an image of himself alone empowered while Tamora is likened with the other "pale" individuals envious of Aaron's ascent. The sexual union with Tamora evoked by the mounting, in turn, accomplishes a reversal of their fortunes: the effect of Aaron's banishing of the "slavish weeds and servile thoughts" (1.1.517) brings about the reference to Tamora as "faster bound […] than is Prometheus tied to Caucasus" (1.1.514-6). His own ascent *must* bring about a corresponding descent of the female counterpart: disrobing himself of the nomenclature of inchoate racialism, Aaron adopts the discourses of patriarchal privilege and phallic authority. Tamora closes the soliloquy as little more than a depersonalized and lovesick step-stool for Aaron, who subjects her to the very commodification his ambition reassigns.

Tamora's body becomes the means of signifying and certifying his agency in precisely the same fashion that Lavinia's will be commodified to do so later. Sexual and marital union with Titus' daughter is proposed as the ideal means to secure an amicable conclusion to the disputes over the Empery, and inappropriate access to her Aaron himself

describes as sufficient to bring about a mutual undoing (1.1.561). The same recourse to co-opting a female body is what brings about Aaron's opportunity to wage the conflicts related above, perhaps best encapsulated in his correcting his role as one who will "wait" on Tamora to one who will "wanton" with this queen" (1.1.520). As though reminding himself that he has forsworn "slavish weeds and servile thoughts," Aaron assumes the patriarchal position that disdains even Tamora's queenly position as inferior to his own. In this sense, we disagree with Bartels, who concludes of the moment that "he is unable to realign himself with power. He turns instead to envisioning how he will 'wanton with this queen.' […] It is she to whom both he and the play give a position of power, a position that he does not and cannot aspire to" ("Making More" 445). Aaron indeed does not aspire to Tamora's position, because he recognizes and climbs to a position above her: union with Tamora ensures his survival, even as it catalyzes his own control over her.

Aaron's recourse to sexist discourses of womanhood thus implicates his own subscription to the prediscursive ideologies rendering both women as Other, given the frequently overlapped Elizabethan apprehensions of the female body, sexuality, and subjectivity. As Loomba has described, their stigmatization is not distinct from his own: "when Europeans first ventured abroad, alien races were routinely described in terms that were commonly used to define women at home—as hyper-sexual, emotional, fickle, duplicitous, wild, jealous, and of inferior intelligence" (32). From Aaron, then, we hear the description of Tamora in terms corresponding to those Loomba cites. Nowhere is this more evident than his cynical terms for her sexuality, which he rejects as governed by Venus at 2.2.29 and concomitantly relegates to "feminine" realms of the body and base desires. Saturn, on the other hand, he posits as the god characterizing his own desire, a suggestive displacement of the Roman emperor, Saturninus himself, who shares the god's name.

We thus cannot concur that Aaron "entertains hyperbolic illusions of gaining power but is unable to sustain an image of himself as dominator," as Bartels posits ("Making More" 445). Regarding Tamora, he is afforded the one example of agency a Shakespearian audience would have found permissible: that of controlling the female "tiger" of which he is the male counterpart, according to Lucius (5.3.5; 5.3.194). This is of the utmost importance, as Loomba points out, because unlike Lavinia, Tamora's willfully indulgent sexuality is arguably more transgressive than even Aaron's ambition: "Tamora's sexuality is especially threatening because she is a powerful older woman. […] Tamora's sexuality and maternity together threaten a social order which decrees that women should be subordinate to fathers and husbands" (86). Tamora has a husband but is hardly subordinate to him, while her dalliance with Aaron cuckolds Saturninus. These sexual relationships corroborate the stereotypes Aaron gives voice to in his interpellation of her as Venus, but his own dalliance with her effects the necessary policing of that sexual agency reserved for men.

This precedent extends horrifically via Aaron's involvement in the plot to rape Lavinia. We have discussed above Aaron's motivations for arranging the rape to secure his own and the Goths' position in Rome, but like Tamora's, Lavinia's body becomes the collateral upon which the security of Aaron's new position rests. Like Titus, he offers Lavinia to whom he will in order to certify the arrangement of political power that suits him. Titus ignores Bassianus's prior claim to support Saturninus's proposal to wed Lavinia, and Aaron poses the rape as the means of perpetuating the arrangement that is most advantageous to him. Left unguided, Chiron and Demetrius' access to Lavinia would upend the social order that has just been established. Aaron's solution to this problem mirrors his own arrangement with Tamora: the female body in question must not only be managed (akin

to Tamora's "chains" and "fetters"), but must also be dispensed with in order to perpetuate the hegemonic arrangement of gendered power.

The same logic dictates his murder of the Nurse, who might have been spared had Aaron not ascertained the threat in her living "to betray this guilt of ours" (4.2.151). This murder, too, silences the Nurse by usurping control over her body, and provides an apt image to close with, as it characterizes the dynamic of Aaron's rebelling against the suppressive forces aligned against him as well as his willingness to employ the same methods against the women of the play. Bartels has discussed Lucius' gagging of Aaron as a restoration of social order, for in arranging afterward for Aaron to die slowly, Lucius attempts to ensure that Aaron's "only speech will be to rave and cry for food" ("Making More" 447). But Aaron's closing position is one of relative *privilege* compared to that of the three women: not only can he appeal to others, which he has already successfully done throughout the play, but there is also no guarantee that someone will not take pity on him. Aaron's tongue is by far his most effective weapon, and it is the vital instrument of which Lavinia has been robbed even before her death, and which all the women are eventually robbed of when they are murdered. The women's speeches appear to seal their doom, whereas Aaron's insistently forestalls his own. Lucius in effect guarantees that the villain will remain actively vocal, possessed of the instrument that enabled his earlier interrogation of the racialized hierarchies of the Symbolic. However effective Aaron's intervention, it thus fails miserably as an alternative that will forestall the problems he and the play's women share.

Chapter 3: Counterproductive Motives in Othello

"Did you perceive how he laughed at his vice?" Iago queries in mock horror of his general, Othello, having successfully sabotaged his rival, the lieutenant Cassio (4.1.168). Iago himself, of course, is the only figure laughing at vice within the play, especially his own. His metacognitive delight in deception clearly recalls the Vice, and his "psychomachic role would have been unmistakable to Elizabethans," as Arthur Kirsch summarizes (733). Yet Iago's swaggering success has also been compared to the Devil.[66] Many of *Othello*'s extradiegetic audiences have followed the lead of the play's inscribed audience, which ultimately seems unable to think of Iago as anything less than a figuration of Satan, transplanted to the stage with Vice-like inexplicability. Marvin Rosenberg aptly responds that readers must not be duped into such irreducibilities, conceding that although the playwright "needed a wicked man, a betrayer, a villain, […] it was this plot function only that he borrowed for Iago. The rest is Shakespeare's" ("Defense" 151). As Shakespeare's most iconic villain, Iago's motives have consternated critics for centuries, their changing discourses mirroring his mercurial soliloquys. In those speeches, he upends the direct revelation of the Vice with contradictory admissions and a flippant exploration of his worst impulses. To that end, I would emphasize that Iago's blending of the Vice and Devil traditions provides an apposite image of the bifurcation of critical opinion, divided as to whether Iago's motives are fabrications or not.

The situation of villainy in *Othello* is particularly compelling in continuing our discussion of the legacy of the Vice. The hierarchy of *Titus Andronicus* has, in effect, been reversed, insofar that it is Iago, a white man, whose position suggests one of servitude, rather

[66] Cf. Bloom 139, Scragg 53-65, Kirsch 733.

than Othello, Aaron's counterpart racially speaking. The prediscursive villain of *Titus* has been replaced with the figure of an esteemed general who has superseded – at least on some level – the bias against his color. The passionate Italian, in turn, responds as Aaron did, lashing out against his social superiors by asserting his own superiority. As Janet Adelman has expressed, Iago "calls up the action of the play as though in response to [a] sense of injury," believing himself "chronically slighted and betrayed" (127; 133). These responses adapt the stigma lingering over Othello's race, assault the elevated stature of Cassio's position, and implicate each of the play's women on the basis of a gendered critique of their sexuality. Iago reverses the dramatic structure of comedy, insofar that having opened with a recent marriage, *Othello* rapidly devolves via his disruption of the heterosexual marriage ostensibly securing the social order. The entropy of the play forestalls a meaningful consummation of Othello and Desdemona's marriage and instead initiates the "insupportable, […] heavy hour" of counterproductive doom and death—horrific conditions described by Othello as an "eclipse / of sun and moon, that th'affrighted globe / should yawn at alteration" (5.2.97-100).

Yet the ancient is far from an agent of moral correction: as a villain, his role is to effect the opposite.[67] Shakespeare, accordingly, is obligated to contextualize his villainy via another, quite unrelated inferiority of prediscursive dimensions. The play's adumbrations of homoerotic potential, always verbalized by Iago, serve to replace the miscegenated union at the heart of the play, as Iago's libidinal energy fittingly manifests as a counterproductive influence infiltrating Othello and the play itself.[68]

---

[67] Scragg emphasizes the disjunction of amoral Vices and immoral villains by terming Iago, if the former, an "unmotivated seducer," and if the latter, a definitively "motivated antagonist." She favors the second reading as, of course, do I (53).

[68] Valences of this position have been explored by Stanley Edgar Hyman, who reads Iago as psychoanalytically attracted to both men and women in the play by the repression of his homosexual desire ("Motivated" 372).

I attempt here to avoid two missteps in positioning my own reading of Iago's homoerotic speeches in the context of these discourses: first, the useless and unproductive avenue of imposing 21st century hermeneutics backward to recuperate or otherwise fetishize Iago's sexuality; second, the hypercorrection of excising Iago's language – which is insistently homoerotic – from our understanding of his character. As a dramatization of subjectivity, after all, the language of the play must foreground everything we say in response to it. It is my view that the sexual and homoerotic components of Iago's speeches work to dispel notions of the ancient's agenda as motiveless and inexplicable, especially when considered in conjunction with the complicating factor of race. I do not take the view, as Earl L. Dachslager would have it, that such "explanations – attempts to rationalize and justify Iago's behavior on non-dramatic grounds – serve to destroy the very efficacy and supremacy of Iago's role as a dramatic villain" (4). I would amend this thesis by observing that Iago's fragmentation and contradiction indeed make him human, but his own (and the playwright's) attention to the need for explanations of his villainous behavior necessitates the very process Dachslager would have us believe is pointless.[69] To that end, I do not intend to make the problematic argument that Iago's proximity to homoerotic desire is the source of his villainy, nor the anachronistic one that he is a self-repressing homosexual. Rather, the unmitigated *excess* of his desire for Othello is the reservoir of his infamous envy, which reveals itself in his

Janet Adelman steers this position away from its homophobic impulses by observing a more nuanced internal psychosis of racial projection as manifesting Iago's behavior, notwithstanding the homoerotic charge she notes that his speeches do contain (130). More recently, Ben Saunders offers a captivating reading of Iago's fixation with anality, but favors the view of Iago as a corrective force construed as a villain. His work is in active dialogue with the resistant stances of Jonathan Dollimore and Bruce R. Smith, who both reject notions of a homosexual Iago, explaining that the issue is not one of terminological vexation but of historical inaccuracy and presentist projection (Dollimore 157-62; Smith 61-3). Alan Bray adds that there was a clear distinction in the early modern era between these conventions of homosocial friendship and actual sexual immorality (25).

[69] I will more fully engage with this question at the opening of the third section of this chapter.

violent resistance to the confinements of his social position, the sexuality of women, and those unions with Othello preventing his own.

I will defend these explanations in this chapter by first examining Iago's resentment of the social class his military rank denotes, but which his affiliation with whiteness enables him to assault due to Othello's preference for Cassio. I will then examine Iago's contempt for heterosexuality and his distrust of women as the necessary foregrounding for a re-examination of the language he uses in relation to Othello, which is always expressed with an erotic undercurrent that counterproductively forestalls the heteronormative social order. I aim to demonstrate the ways in which Iago engages with the prediscursive matrices at work in the play – both racial and sexual – to manipulate those around him in order to accomplish his revenge and achieve the deeply personal goals of social promotion and increased intimacy with Othello. Additionally, I intend to discuss Iago's cognizance of the stigmatizing benefits (and disadvantages, to an extent) that his patriarchal privilege presents. These objectives will inform my reconsideration of Iago as a villain oscillating between rejection and perpetuation of the systems in which he, Othello, and the play's women are caught.

Iago's Resentment

However viable, Othello's preference for Cassio as his lieutenant appears in the play as the initiating factor of Iago's villainy. The play opens in the middle of an apparent argument over the issue between Iago and Roderigo, the former complaining that "three great ones of the city, / in personal suit to make me [Othello's] lieutenant" (1.1.6-7), have been unsuccessful in procuring for him the lieutenantship. The learned and dignified Florentine Michael Cassio has been chosen instead, prompting Iago's ominous oath, "by the faith of man / I know my price, I am worth no worse a place" (1.1.9-10). Referring to his

"worth," Iago betrays an acute fixation on the connection between prediscursive "worth" and the social stature or "place" that should be reflective of it.[70] Yet Shakespeare carefully avoids restricting this comment to Iago's longing for the lieutenantship, instead ensuring that the comment could refer either to Cassio or Othello's own position as the overseeing general. Othello's "loving [of] his own pride and purposes" (1.1.11) prevents Iago's rise in rank, and it is clear that Iago resents the general as much us, if not more, than his actual competitor, Cassio.[71]

Both of these superiors suggest that Iago's position as an ensign signifies little more than a subservient social inferior, triggering the ancient's insecurities and prompting his resentment. In the same manner – though very differently inflected – as Aaron, something like stigmatization accompanies Iago before the play begins, but in an unexpected way. While like Aaron he bears the appellation of "villain," he also is named as "Othello's ancient or ensign," the suggestion of possession echoing the descriptions of domestic servants. Exacerbating this effect is the slippery signification of the military title of ancient, which, as Frankie Rubenstein notes, connotes the bawd and whore (11).[72] Iago's own revulsion at the title serves as more compelling evidence when he caustically emphasizes that Cassio has gained the lieutenancy, lamenting of himself in the same breath, "and I, God bless the mark, his Moorship's ancient!" (1.1.32). In Iago's vision, the true "price" he commands far excels the signifying "mark" that being a mere ancient suggests.

---

[70] By the play's end, of course, Iago's victims will have their faith shaken as a result of the ancient's quest for his proper "place," given their consternation at his devilish success.

[71] Conflation of Othello's rank with Cassio's elevation is rewarded when the latter replaces the former at Cypress, as Othello balefully relates "Cassio shall have my place" (4.1.261). Referring to his military position, Othello simultaneously gestures to the supposition of Cassio's cuckolding of him with Desdemona, as his "place" in the marriage bed has been usurped.

[72] Rubenstein explores this in the many associations between the word and the pandering Nurse of *Romeo & Juliet* before discussing its evidence in *Othello*, in which Iago purports to pander for Roderigo in securing Desdemona's favor.

As bearer of the colors, Iago's position is one of subservience, representing *another* figure's authority on the canvas his body bears and the tasks that his body performs. Bearing the flagpole of a master, figuratively, the ancient likens the responsibility to "the curse of service" (1.1.34), a status of relegated subjectivity encouraging those around him to frequently bypass his name in favor of epithets affirming his negligible status.[73] Notably, when Othello *does* use the Iago's name, it is to instruct him to "go to the bay and disembark my coffers" (2.1.197), a task originally reserved for servants in Latin comedy, and one suggesting that the general relies on the ensign "almost as a personal servant," as E. A. J. Honigmann glosses in the Arden edition of the play (176). Dachslager ignores these conditions in maintaining, "of all Elizabethan dramatic villains, Iago is the least publicly motivated, the least concerned with gaining politic advantage" (6). We might respond that while Iago refrains from seeking Othello's position or another of more transgressive and tangible "political advantage," his desire for the lieutenantship *does* represent an elevation of his social stature, even if only in sparing Iago the indignity of the work he is assigned and which his position mandates.[74]

That Iago loathes the role of ancient may be contextualized, too, by the play's commentary on the baseness of this rank, which becomes conflated with a prediscursive moral inferiority. Even if the playwright rejected such a doctrine, he allows *Othello* to represent the currency of the idea through Emilia's verbalizations when she suspiciously castigates the villain she senses to be at work when Desdemona comes under suspicion:

> I will be hanged if some eternal villain

[73] Of the examples when these substitutions are clearly accompanied by a relegation of Iago to an inferior class, consider Cassio's remarks at 1.2.49 and again at 2.1.95; Othello's at 1.3.123 and again at 1.3.284; Ludovico, arguably having forgotten the name entirely by the time he appears in Cyprus, defaults to the same at 5.1.52.
[74] This becomes especially apparent at *O* 2.3.1-8, in observing that Cassio slightingly delegates duties assigned to him to Iago, thoughtlessly luxuriating in a position reflecting the prediscursive advantages of a gentleman.

Some busy and insinuating rogue,

Some cogging, cozening slave, to get some office,

Have not devised this slander. (4.1.132-5)

The dramatic irony of this moment lies not only in the extradiegetic audience's knowledge that Iago is the "eternal villain" in question, but also in the sense that we are instructed by Emilia to interpret the villain's ambitions as those of a "slave."[75] The effect is compounded when she indicts "some such squire" as being the figure who could convince her husband of her infidelity (4.2.147).[76] The play implies, via the scattered relation of motives in the villain's soliloquys, that Iago convinces *himself* of such things, and we are thus encouraged to read the villain in terms of similarly class-based stigmatization as Emilia's. Even more tellingly, Iago informs Othello in his characteristic mixture of deception and honesty that it is his "nature's plague / to spy into abuses, and oft my jealousy / shapes faults that are not" (3.3.149-51). Iago affectedly makes this admission, but the audience understands it as an unwitting confession of his innate inferiority—a "nature" predisposed to imagine slights, despite the clear instances of class-based delegitimization we have discussed above.

These observations prompt the adjustment of our attention to the public esteem seemingly associated with Iago, as he frequently earns complimentary adjectives recognizing his honesty and goodness. These are consistent enough for Rosenberg to remark that "nowhere in the lines or implied action is it suggested that Othello, either consciously or unconsciously, is less than fair to his ensign" ("Defense" 148). As we have seen above,

---

[75] Underscored, too, by Montano's assurance that he will pursue Iago, "that same villain, / for 'tis a damned slave" (5.2.240-1), insofar that Iago's villainy ostensibly reflects his status as a "damned slave," rather than initiating a downfall in stature, which is the effect for Othello, damned by quite another quality.

[76] In implicating the supposed squire for turning her husand's "wit the seamy side without" (4.2.147), Emilia's description offers a telling contrast to Iago's own earlier description of Roderigo as being rendered inside out by love at 2.3.48-9: "my sick fool, Roderigo / whom love hath turned almost the wrong side out."

however, what is "fair" or appropriate for Iago's rank does not forestall his resentment or suggest that he is not subject to wounded pride. Accordingly, the praise offered by those around him is not without complication, which also gestures to, conversely, an underlying conviction of Iago's inferiority. For his part, Cassio seems to speak for each member of the play duped by Iago in remarking that he "never knew / a Florentine more kind and honest" (3.1.40-41). Honigmann glosses this by observing that Shakespeare might have omitted Iago's earlier identification of Cassio as a Florentine at 1.1.19-20, positing that "if he did, Cassio is naively ignorant that Florence, the home of Machiavelli, was not generally thought a centre of honesty; if not, he praises Iago as if a fellow countryman, and also misunderstands him" (207). I would offer a third possibility, however: while Cassio surely misapprehends Iago, entirely ignorant of his villainy, this necessitates, in a sense, that his remark is condescending because the lieutenant compares the ensign to the Florence of Machiavel to emphasize the personal advantages of Iago's kindness and honesty, which can be so easily appropriated for Cassio's own benefit.

This becomes more likely in view of Iago's position as the unequivocally superior rhetorician in the play, whatever the benefits of Cassio's bookish theoric may have presented in gaining the lieutenancy. As Ken Jacobsen has observed, "the play can […] be characterized as a struggle between a traditional conception of warfare and an emergent, highly rationalized military 'science,' the former being displaced by the latter" (502). In this contest of "rhetorical generalship," the play presents a "surprising twist: Iago, the 'ancient,' is the master orator/strategist, while Othello, the putative general, is treated as Iago's subordinate" (505). Iago's resentment, accordingly, and whatever delegitimization he feels, thus have a contextualization on some level with his actual superior rhetorical qualifications

over Cassio, and, unmistakably, the general himself.[77] In the Machiavellian mode of the play, his linguistic promise is the one with the most potent future, and the military rank that would reflect that potential has been denied him.

The ensign's subservience, thus, is necessarily performative, both self-serving and self-*pre*serving.[78] Iago draws attention to this pliancy, self-consciously assuring Roderigo that his obsequious obedience to the Moor serves a larger, subversive purpose: "I follow him to serve my turn upon him" (1.1.41). But the ensign's willingness to do so indicates that this is his only method of advancement, since "preferment goes by letter and affection"—euphemisms for the inscribed superiority of the upper classes and the camaraderie between those of higher ranks (1.1.35). Iago's ability to ascend into this region is a violation of the order expected of him as an obedient subordinate whose "honesty" and "goodness" ideally would serve to render him depersonalized and ready for duty. Following Cassio's reassignment of his assignments to Iago at 2.3, Iago's subjectivity is slightingly commodified: "this is my ancient, this is my right hand, and this my left" (2.3.109-10). Speaking as though Iago is not present, Cassio's drunken honesty juxtaposes his actual candor with the performative readiness to obey that warrants Cassio's objectification of the ancient.

Honigmann makes note of this in gesturing to the 1640 *Orthoepia Anglicana*, in which Simon Daines instructs gentlemen to refer to their social inferiors in similar fashion, appending a condescending adjective (such as "good") suggesting a moral virtue only to emphasize their diminished stature (85). William Empson's influential *The Structure of Complex*

---

[77] We thereby grant a fresh perspective to those traditional recuperations fixating on Iago's military resentment, cited but dismissed by Rosenberg as those proceeding from a "frontline soldier passed over for an example of the less popular type of book soldier. […] Othello's action in this appointment […] would suggest to the Elizabethans that he is at fault as a general" ("Defense" 147-8). Iago's qualifications are not necessarily reliant upon his being a frontline soldier, as Jacobsen argues, and his resentment of Cassio's promotion thus becomes doubly justified: Cassio is outranked by Iago's wit and is even less likely to have seen battle than Iago.
[78] Cf. Adelman 129. Adelman signals that Iago's turn to racialized language against Othello, as an example of this point, is notably defensive– not merely retaliatory for an offense, imagined or otherwise.

Words concurs, explicating "honest" as a component of epithets that operated as "an obscure social insult as well as a hint of stupidity" (219). The play's language operates in this way to render Iago a similarly stigmatized servant of sorts, especially considering the ironic adjustment of the actual signification of terms like "honest" and "good" when Iago is at the height of his deception. By that point, his victims use both adjectives in a sense far more in tune with their traditional denotation of virtue, and thus of subjectivity itself: Othello remarks that "this fellow's of exceeding honesty / and knows all qualities, with a learned spirit, / of human dealings" (3.3.262-4), a compliment quite removed from the smug, earlier observation that Iago is "most honest" after Cassio assures him that the ensign "hath direction what to do" (2.3.4; 6). Initially, then, he is the subservient simpleton who is "honest" and "good" not because acts of lying or disobedience are beneath him, but because he is beneath the complex subjectivity reserved for a deceiver or figure of authority.

Luxuriant Perpetuation

As the chief figure of that authority, Othello serves for Iago as the source of his resentment against a system of class offering him little mobility and rewarding the advantages of those in a superior position.[79] The general has seemingly negated the ancient's racial advantage, just as Cassio has rendered the same meaningless via his own advantages over Iago. Some combination of Cassio's birth or education has arguably secured his place, and Othello's virtuous bravery has warranted his title, but Iago's own position appears to be

[79] Potentially ironic, considering Othello's initial elevation over the racial structures. Yet Othello is described as having escaped the confines of the position reserved for those of his race by the virtue of his character and bravery, as seen in the "court" scene of 1.3 and the interrogation of his marriage to Desdemona. Iago, of course, possesses quite an unrelated skillset, which has gone unrewarded. His resentment toward Othello may, in fact, partially be the result of his awareness that Othello has escaped a diminished social sphere, while the ensign has thus far remained unsuccessful.

ossified until he wages a campaign of deceptive usurpation. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the troubling perpetuation of prediscursive stigmatization Iago effects in employing racialized and sexist discourses. This is especially apparent in the rhetoric the ancient employs against Othello in leading the other men to doubt the general. His assault of the general's qualifications circles the idea of a racial inferiority that makes Iago's own rank seem ludicrous and backward.[80] Iago's obsequious epithets in Othello's presence contrast with the pejorative enclosed in his objection to being "his Moorship's ancient" (1.1.32).[81] To attain the rank of lieutenant, Iago need not humiliate Othello, but his resentment in having been passed over in favor of Cassio prompts a vengeful response that capitalizes on the racial vulnerability of the general's elevated militaristic rank.

It is Iago, therefore, who incites Brabantio's racial hatred by framing Desdemona's marriage to Othello in terms of animalistic perversion and sexual corruption, provocatively describing the general as "an old black ram" (1.1.87), a "Barbary horse" (1.1.110), and a "lascivious Moor" (1.1.124) who will deflower the "fair daughter" of Venice (1.1.120). As Adelman has argued, this constitutes an abuse of power on Iago's part that exacerbates the racialized language: his dramaturgic revelations at the opening of the play render "the audience […] inevitably complicit in [Othello's debunking: before we meet [him], we are utterly dependent on Iago's and Roderigo's descriptions of him" (125). This markedly separates Iago, initially, from the leaders of Venice, who also refer to Othello via the same

[80] Harold Bloom helpfully summarizes the confusion sometimes cited by scholars in defining Aaron's race by questioning whether he is "an African black man, or is he a Berber or Arab?" Bloom contextualizes this indeterminacy with the varied individuals the playwright probably observed at court during this visit of the Morrocan ambassador (along with his entourage) in 1601-2, a few years before the date generally assigned as *Othello*'s first performances in 1604. Following the lead of my points in Chapter 2, I do not know whether the point must be resolved, as the point my analysis relies on is not whether Othello is an Arab "or" a Moor, but that his status as a racialized Other is what Iago capitalizes on in the speeches I analyze over the following pages.

[81] This Shakespearean coinage sarcastically alludes to similar terms of less ambiguous (or potentially insulting) meaning, such as "kingship" (Honigmann 117).

racialized epithet, but qualify the term by praising him as "the valiant Moor" who has been assimilated "against the common general enemy Ottoman" (1.3.49-50).[82] Yet their former praise is negated following the success of the ensign's revenge, insofar that Othello "wert once so good" but has "fallen in the practice of a *cursed* slave," as Ludovico surmises (5.2.288-9; my emphasis).[83] The effect of Ludovico's use of "cursed" relies upon the sense of Othello having been bound to, in effect, inevitably end in this tragic state of affairs, as though corroborating Iago's hateful earlier comment to Roderigo that "these Moors are changeable in their wills" (1.3.347). A changeability of wills, as it were, certifies an inability to meaningfully ascend into the realm of genuine or innate virtue. As parroted by Iago, these discourses indicate that any of Othello's redemptive capacities are in tension with his innate propensity for choleric disorder.

Othello, in turn, enacts the pattern of behavior inscribed by Iago. He acknowledges that the ensign "teachest me" (5.1.33) in the manner of the tempting Vice, but Othello's words, like Aaron's, echo the performative utterance of free will: arise, black vengeance, from the hollow hell / yield up, O love, thy crown and hearted throne / to tyrannous hate" (3.3.450-52).[84] In dethroning love, the abused general issues an imperative of "black vengeance" to "arise" from hell. His attention to temporality and place emphasizes the distance between the black subject and supposedly innate wickedness, despite reinforcing the Elizabethan stereotypes of these behaviors corresponding to a "black" visage. Bloom discusses this in terms of the tragedy's horrific depiction that "Othello's mind is hopelessly

---

[82] Cf. 5.2.350-4, when Othello ends his own life by recalling his slaying of "turbanned Turk" to defend a Venetian.

[83] The same pattern is evident in Emilia's turn to racial contempt after discovering her dead mistress: "She was too fond of her most filthy bargain," she states to Othello (5.2.153).

[84] *TA* 3.1.205-6: "Let fools do good and fair men call for grace, / Aaron *will* have his soul black like his face" (my emphasis). Aaron's intentional focus on the *will* that enables a correspondence in his behavior and visage, explored in Chapter 2, I find echoed in Othello's imperative address to blackness.

inferior to Iago's" (23), but I find the general's agentive adoption of Iago's doctrine the same challenge to prediscursive inferiority that Aaron vocalizes, as well as the one Iago rebels against.

That Iago triumphs only demonstrates that Othello is corruptible, not innately corrupt*ed*,[85] and the inscribed audience of the play seem as surprised and disheartened by the events as those of *Titus Andronicus* are aghast at – but never shocked by – Aaron's behavior. The playwright's attention, in both cases, is squarely on the imbalance that triggers a villainous subjectivity, whether unwilling or intentionally performed. After all, Othello himself indicts inordinate love – which he has dethroned – as the source of his undoing, because he "loved not wisely, but *too* well" (5.2.342). This constitutes for the audience a choleric imbalance of the humors reflected in Aaron and Iago. Othello's love, of course, is really an abundance of envy that manifests as excessive revenge. The language of imbalance characterizes his insulting reference to Cassio during one of his torturous interrogations of Desdemona: "had all his hairs been lives / my great revenge had stomach for them all" (5.2.74).[86] The proximity of this allusion to Aaron suggests that the beleaguered Moor follows his ensign's tutelage in Vice, a pattern contributing to Iago's influence as the father of discord, usurping linguistic valences of patriarchal privilege.[87]

Iago's manipulation of Cassio, on the other hand, relies on sexist discourses that mock his competitor through associations with women. As we shall see, there are additional components to his attention toward Cassio that merit further comment in articulating Iago's

---

[85] Maus emphasizes this by indicating that Iago serves as the corrupting force constituting blackness of character, which Othello internalizes: the general "suffers from a kind of empathetic excess, fatally accepting a European outlook when it is least in his interests" (44).
[86] Cf. Note 53 for the resonances of this line with *Titus Andronicus* and the morality plays.
[87] Analogously, Aaron "instructs" Chiron and Demetrius: "Indeed, I was their tutor to instruct them. / […] That bloody mind I think they learned of me" (*TA* 5.1.98; 101).

homoerotic desires, but for now, I would emphasize that in punishing the Florentine for enjoying a superiority over him, Iago's tactics rely on patriarchal stigmatization of women. Interestingly, this stems from an attention to Cassio's appearance. Iago's dismissal of his counterpart's handsomeness recalls Aaron's refutations of the beauty of whiteness in *Titus Andronicus*. Instead of fixating on his whiteness, which Iago could be said to share, Iago famously (and perhaps unconvincingly) attacks Cassio's qualifications in order to enervate the quality of Casio's handsomeness: Iago describes the lieutenant as "proper," reflecting that Cassio's visage is "framed to make women false" (1.2.391; 397). What this appearance signifies, however, is not only the sexual immorality Iago carelessly attributes to women, but also the disdainful privilege of Cassio's role as an inactive "arithmetician" (1.1.18), an Epicure who "never set a squadron in the field / nor the division of a battle knows / more than a *spinster*" (1.1.21-3; my emphasis).[88]

These associations with women serve as Iago's rejection of Cassio's advantageous appearance; more to the point, however, is how the lieutenant, in Iago's imagination, "hath a daily beauty in his life / that makes me ugly" (5.2.19-20). While Cassio is present, Iago cannot help appearing undesirable by consequence, both in reference to military rank (if Iago ever had a chance for the lieutenantship) and appearance, but the conflation of Iago's coveting of both Cassio's rank and his visage takes on new weight in recalling that above all, the "place" Iago has alerted us that he most desires (and is most assured of his worthiness to occupy) is the one at Othello's right hand. The figure fairer still than Cassio, of course, is Desdemona, and her position relative to Othello is equated with Cassio's military rank. The scope of his envious rampage adjusts, therefore, to implicate Othello's wife.

[88] That Iago himself likely has not seen much in the way of battle does not negate this point. On the contrary, it demonstrates his willing appropriation of patriarchal discourses of masculinity in order to delegitimize his counterpart, regardless of his own failure to embody the standards he employs.

If Iago has admitted that his "jealousy" is what "shapes faults that are not" (3.3.149-51), his diatribes against Othello and Cassio have proceeded from the slights and ersatz stigmatization we have discussed above. In Desdemona, however, we surely encounter the first of Iago's entirely innocent targets. He admits freely that she is blameless, in fact, but nonetheless vows to "turn her virtue into pitch / and out of her own goodness make the net / that shall enmesh them all" (2.3.355-57). On the one hand, this discernibly recalls the Vice, as well as Satan, in Iago's exultation in the substitutive capacity to render what is holy and virtuous execrable and damnable.[89] On the other, it dramatically configures the stigmatizing effect of prediscursive inscription upon the female body and female sexuality at work within all patriarchal systems.[90] Despite his conviction of Desdemona's innocence, Iago banters with her freely with bawdy humor, carelessly implicating her within his sweeping condemnations of the female sex, which he summarily dismisses as "players in your housewifery, and housewives in… / your beds" (2.1.112-3). Faithfully rehearsing Elizabethan discourses of women's unfaithfulness, to be sure, enables Iago's manipulation of Othello, and their utility in his discriminatory purposes is accurately summed up in Emilia's tragic observation that men "are all but stomachs, and we all but food" (3.4.105).[91]

As was the case of his racialized rhetoric, Iago's consummate recitation of the apprehension of female sexuality is adopted by those in the play, initially in Brabantio's seamless continuation of Iago's racialized insults of Othello with the condemnation of his

---

[89] In enacting that substitution, Iago (like Aaron) augments the classical effect of *dissimilitudo* that Schells & Schuchter associate with the Vice, who accomplishes the same in rendering his victims unlike himself, as it were. The root of this transformation is moral compromise that extends to the physiognomy of the individual, creating an "unlikeness resulting from marring through sin what is made in God's image" (xxv).

[90] Saunders has argued, conversely, that this is not Iago's awareness and appropriation of stigmatization, but his monologic reiteration of the same as a figure of hegemonic correction: "for Iago […] the very order of things dictates that the consequence of unnatural sexual indulgence is always a violent emptying out" (154). For Saunders, this view of sexual excess has little to do with Iago's own attractions to Desdemona or the men.

[91] Tellingly exacerbated in her own personal reflection that she is "nothing, but to please his fantasy" (3.3.303).

own willful daughter. As Katherine Eisaman Maus reflects, "Iago exploits the slipperiness of the language of monstrosity to especially perverse effect […] mak[ing] Desdemona's 'unnatural' devotion to her black husband evidence for her 'monstrous' infidelities" (43-4). The entropic energy of the Vice's corrosive wit finds an able successor in Iago, insofar that Emilia herself follows his lead when her husband senselessly targets Bianca after the failed assassination of Cassio: "I do suspect this trash / to be a party in this injury" (5.1.85-6), he stipulates, only for Emilia to concur "O fie upon thee, strumpet!" (5.1.121). Even more disturbingly, while implicating Othello in bringing about Desdemona's fault, at the very peak of her pity, she nonetheless slights Desdemona for remaining fatally and "too fond" of her "most filthy bargain" (5.2.153).

What these diatribes unveil is more, however, than a standardized contempt for women.[92] Iago's continual abuse of Emilia and his ultimate insults to her in front of a dead Desdemona suggest a sincerely held revulsion for women, just as Iago's ready implication of Desdemona does.[93] But Desdemona is not comparable in word or deed to Bianca or Emilia, so the question endures as to why Iago includes her within his scheme if not because of her threatening position to Iago, parallel to Cassio and mutually closer to Othello. Only the laziest of interpretations contents itself with the maxim that Iago's vengeful fury is irrational and does not discriminate in selecting his targets. Dachslager points out that such an explanation is insufficient, given Iago's carefully restrained tactics against Othello, for "destroying him will surely fail to gain Iago any political status" (7). More importantly, Iago

[92] Such a simple explanation might be proposed, at most, for Iago's castigation of Bianca, who is apparently a prostitute, and whose name suggests this possibility more firmly still. Additionally, his own contempt for her is one of the few instances of sexist insults against women not initiated by Iago; Cassio, arguably, shoulders the blame in this case.

[93] In Emilia's case, we should perhaps note that Iago seems to have suspected his wife's liberality of opinion on the matter of her sexuality, which she relates in detail at 5.1 just before Desdemona's death. The playwright gives voice to Emilia's admirable convictions that female immorality is no more condemnable than that of their husbands, for though wives "have some grace / yet have [they] some revenge" (5.1.91-2).

spares Othello the worst excesses of his vengeance because his actual targets are the competitors for Othello's favor: Cassio *and* Desdemona, not Othello himself. His racialized verbal abuses of Othello, we might point out, mainly serve to sever Othello from Desdemona.

If the terminology of heteronormativity serves only to shroud quite another sexual subjectivity, Iago's performed racial diatribes effect a similar cloaking of his *desire*, not revulsion, for the general, just as his (almost comically) numerous protestations of "hate" for the Moor in the play's opening scene begin to collapse in depicting something close to infatuation. Were it not for the potential of the sexual imagery he employs elsewhere, and which we have just been discussing, we would be on less sure footing in concluding that Iago opens the play *burdened* to convince Roderigo of his hatred for Othello. Rather cleverly, Shakespeare phrases Roderigo's doubt by referring to hate in language that echoes the phraseology of love: "thou told'st me / thou didst hold him in thy hate" (1.1.5-).[94] But in remembering that the military position has been conflated with the marital in Iago's case, the delegitimizing effect of Othello's preferment of Cassio and Desdemona readily catalyzes the mingling of Iago's desire with his deadly resentment, especially in the context of racialized stigma, with which the ensign may be struggling anyway. As both a male and a black subject, then, Othello may represent the abject object of Iago's affection, and Iago's earlier comments thereby serve not to illegitimate, but further contextualize the love he bears Othello. They are not presented to overthrow the general or indict him for being a Moor and a general both—nor should we suppose this is Iago's unspoken intention.[95] Rather, what

[94] To hold someone "in thy hate" emphasizes the proximity between the states of falling in love and the love object then falling in the lover's hate, for in the 16th century, to "fall in hate (with)" indicated a progression of emotions ("hate"). The implication is that Iago's comments on the general follow his being neglected for the lieutenantship, not a state of ongoing loathing.
[95] Cf. Dachslager 7, Adelman 128

the play presents us with is a pattern of vengeance initiated against Cassio due to Iago's coveting the "place" of the lieutenantship and reflected in the attack of Desdemona, who occupies the same position on a marital schema.

Having secured Cassio's downfall, the ensign thus moves to usurp Desdemona, significantly replacing Othello's marriage to the fair daughter of Venice with a new union. Kirsch articulates that Iago's antipathy toward the existing marriage is rooted in envy, as "his deepest animus" is reserved for the couple whose "'free and open nature' makes them capable of proving him wrong"' (734). Before his recourse to sabotage in alerting Brabantio, after all, the lovers were in a position of triumph if the motivations I posit are accurate: Iago is neither the lieutenant, nor is he in a position of meaningful closeness with Othello. Thus, in vowing "I am your own forever" (3.3.482), the ensign answers Othello's granting him the promotion with something suspiciously close to a marital vow, a potentiality underscoring the homoerotic tension that Iago's speeches sustain throughout the play. Not that we are compelled to read Iago as a decidedly queer figure: the ersatz marriage he effects with Othello appears to suffice in lieu of an actual physical relationship. Yet the fact that he yearns for precisely this arrangement rather than an overthrow of Othello suggests that there are more motives at work than the indignation against blackness Iago recites early in the play or the resentment of his own relatively base social stature.

A desire for Othello, which would be anything but clearly defined onstage or unambiguously verbalized, emerges as the vital subtext of the play, and it explains the major deviations Shakespeare elected to take from his source, the *Hecatommithi* of Giouanbattista Giraldi Cinthio. In Cinthio's original, the Ensign figure actually does adore the Desdemona

counterpart, and his sexual jealousy and desire for her motivates his villainy.[96] Shakespeare, however, contributes Iago's sexual anxieties in a drastically alternative orientation. Desdemona is not the object of possessive desire but the intermediary figure occasioning (as much as Cassio does) Iago's insecurities and hunger for both their positions. His approach subversively substitutes himself into the position reserved for prediscursively more legitimate counterparts—a handsome lieutenant and a wife, namely. Shakespeare's inventive insertion should not come as a total surprise: adapting a tragedy, he cannot allow a holistic or honorable Iago to be the one to re-establish order by correcting the inappropriate union of the black general with a Venetian daughter. Since this is precisely what the play *must* accomplish in order for the didactic energy of tragedy to be sustained, an additional valence to Iago's character was necessary. Shakespeare's solution contributes vastly to the reservoir of Iago's libidinal angst and forms the impetus for his explosive villainy. It is to the play's evidence of this claim that I will now turn.

Transgressive Desire

This move should not be misinterpreted as a claim that Shakespeare associated homosexuality with prediscursive vice, as even cursory considerations of the playwright's other works suggests otherwise. As I have indicated, in the Shakespearean context of the plays under observation, vice proceeds from the superfluity of a given fault. The fault is assigned to innate predispositions to vice, but villainy emerges only in the superfluity of a fault that is decidedly human and socially motivated. In this context, *Titus Andronicus* and *Othello*, therefore, do not reiterate the concept that blackness constitutes evil, e.g., but that

[96] Cf. Hyman's "Iago: Psychoanalytically Motivated" for a longer discussion of these differences, in which Hyman discusses the Ensign of Cinthio's text as "motivated by normal heterosexual jealousy" and love for the Desdemona counterpart (369), as opposed to Iago's homoerotic counterpart.

systems *inscribing* blackness as evil resolve self-fulfilling prophecies, despite the nuanced gradations of Aaron and Othello's moral identification. In other words, we cannot presume that blackness denotes wickedness any more than we can put Aaron and Othello in the same category of moral behavior. Accordingly, I do not intend to suggest that Iago becomes a villain simply because the play supports a homoerotic reading. We cannot make him a rule of Shakespearean queerness, to make one example, due to the vital dissimilarity between, e.g., his character and the two Antonios of the comedies (*Twelfth Night* and *The Merchant of Venice*) because he is a villain—neither of them are. Yet each of these examples function as a disruption of a racialized and/or heteronormative model of Order, although in vitally discrete ways, as Aaron and Iago are figures possessing inordinate amounts of transgressive anger, choler, or indeed, lust and love.

Gesturing to these additional texts prompts me, too, to address concerns of terminology and anachronism in turning to Iago's sexual motivations. I have mentioned above my agreement with the historicist objection to imagining homosexual identification as a component of Elizabethan subjectivity, and I do not mean to preclude in the space that follows suggestions that Iago longs for a homo*social* bond with Othello of the sort chronicled by Jonathan Dollimore and Bruce R. Smith, who both categorize such sentiments as entirely normative and even esteemed in Renaissance contexts.[97] However, I follow the holistic approach of Alan Bray in acknowledging that although "the term 'homosexual' did not exist in 1611, […] the crucial question [is] 'Did its equivalent?'" (14).[98] Bray posits an affirmative answer, contextualizing early modern sexualities as encompassing activities of

[97] Dollimore 157-62, Smith 61-3

[98] Matz points out that although "the early modern period recognized no distinct homosexual, or therefore heterosexual, identity[,] the condemnation of male-male 'sodomitical' sex existed in an uneasy overlay with high praise for male-male friendships" (260-1).

buggery and the sodomite, but vitally amending these concessions to observe that what these both "represented – and homosexuality was only [one] part – was rather the disorder in sexual relations that, in principle at least, could break out anywhere" (25). Such a qualification enables Ben Saunders's nuanced approach to the issue, which discusses Iago's obsessive fixation with anality but precluding his actual involvement in homosexual activity.[99] Saunders reacts, in part, to the post-Freudian impulse to essentialize Iago into a repressed homosexual, insofar that critics either collapse this identity with villainy, in Iago's case, or emphasize that his homosexuality excuses in some way his villainy.[100] Perhaps the best way forward is to adopt the summary of Matz, who affirms "sodomy was not a category; it was an accusation" (262), a reflection offered in recognition that homosexual behavior had a place in the Renaissance, but its currency as a political discourse was invariably complicated by male-male friendship models on the one hand, and the converse "deep horror" that Bray observes was reserved for homosexual behavior when it was exposed and associated with villainous *additional* behaviors (25), which is precisely the situation in *Othello*.[101]

In this respect, Iago's insulting descriptions of women take on new weight given his desire to enact a substitution for the ideal represented by Desdemona. His initial attention to this goal arises in the context of his supposition that Othello has cuckolded him. Yet he

---

[99] Saunders justifies this separation of anality from discourses of homosexuality by expressing his unwillingness to indulge in what he perceives as anachronistic criticism, which in this context he additionally feels easily becomes simultaneously homophobic (151).

[100] For an example of the former, Hyman's assertion that Iago's "strong repression" of his latent homosexuality *alone* makes his misogyny explicable is probably the best example (381); of the latter, André Green's reading might be emblematic, as he asserts: "before we accuse him of vulgarity […] we should rather recognize at this point the mark of homosexuality in Iago's jealousy" (104).

[101] Betteridge discusses this at length, summarizing the situation thus: "in the early modern period sodomy emerged at moments of political and religious tension when an explanation was needed for social antagonism and conflict" (5). In dialogue with Matz's description of an agentive "accusation" of homosexuality standing in for cultural attention to (or avenues for) public non-heteronormative bonds (of which classical models of male-male friendship are a part), he states that "at any moment acts and indeed desires that were homosexual could be suddenly and violently inscribed into the discourse of sodomy. This inscription made these acts, and the men who engaged in them, suddenly aberrant and perverse" (6).

references only vaguely the rumor that Othello has slept with his wife, Emilia: "It is thought abroad that twixt my sheets / he's done my office" (I.iii.373-374). He envisions the unique arrangement that will bring about his revenge, asserting: "Nothing shall content my soul / till I am evened with him, wife for wife (II.i.281-285). Hyman clumsily asserts that this revelation constitutes "the common homosexual fantasy […] of two men symbolically uniting sexually by sharing the body of the same woman" ("Motivated" 372), but Iago's vengeance demonstrates a beguiling slippage from the prototypical form of vengeance, which would seek copulation with Desdemona as the symmetric exchange rendering justice. Rather, Iago plots her death, foreshadowing the set of exchanges that will be manifest in Desdemona and Emilia's paired deaths and his own union (however temporary) with Othello, alive but unprocreative.[102] Accordingly, the most compelling revelations in the play occur not in instances of dramatic irony, when Iago relates something the audience knows that his listeners do not, but when he relates something that escapes his own attention that the playwright seemingly intends only for us.

For this reason, those moments when Iago *does* reference sexual attraction must be reconsidered, especially given the paucity of attention he pays to Desdemona as a sexual prospect. His diatribes against women's sexuality notwithstanding, the villain signposts a complicated sexual identity in which he postures a fury at the thought of "the lusty Moor" leaping "into my seat"– or, ostensibly, access to Emilia's body in the bed reserved for their marriage rights (2.1.275-6). Eric Partridge describes this as Othello's usurpation of "Iago's place in Emilia's bed (133), yet by the first decade of the 17th century, one's "seat" had been

[102] If such a symmetry between Iago's soliloquy and the play's conclusion seems presumptive, we might point to the playwright's overlay of Iago's deception with his insight. As J. P. Vander Motten describes it, the effect of a play in which "villainy [is] the subject" employs "deceit for its method," prompting us to investigate Iago's speeches especially for fresh readings (423).

used to describe the part of the body upon which we sit, prompting the secondary reading of Iago's attention to anal imagery ("seat", [OED]).[103] When contextualized with the word's other denotations of social stature and political position, the ambiguity of "seat" becomes even more intriguing, for the vagina (arguably the foci of Emilia's bed) was occasionally conflated in gynophobic early modern discourses with anality. Iago's seat, it follows, is as much a reference to his wife's genitals as to his own alternative receptacle of Othello's "leap." In this regard, he confesses that "the thought whereof […] doth, like a poisonous mineral, gnaw my innards" (2.1.279-80), for "gnaw" has traditionally indicated the corrosive effect of mastication, yet the term referred also to the effects of passion as early as the 13th century ("gnaw", [OED]).

As Maus has indicated of him generally, "Iago functions as a sort of poet of monstrosity, lovingly dwelling on the gross issue, the monstrous birth, the unnatural thought, the palace into which foul things intrude" (42). Iago, we might add, applies pressure on feminine images of birth and sexuality in the "monstrous" form Maus refers to, which is to say he presents a radical alternative that challenges heteronormative modes of Order. The image becomes a remarkable evolution of the moment in *All for Money* when Money becomes spontaneously pregnant with Pleasure. At the very moment Money, the arch-vice of the play, feigns moral compunction, he is impregnated, calling to the minor vices: "Help to hold my stomach, I swell now more and more" (164-5). As a substitute for Desdemona, Iago thus receives the deposited "thought" of Othello, which consumes him, gnawing his innards.[104] Saunders has explored this "notoriously difficult" moment of Iago's soliloquy by

[103] Cf. Adelman 129; Saunders, notably for an essay on anality, demurs from making this connection a sexual one (150, 155).
[104] Cf. Saunders, who makes the case for a connection between Iago's "erotic paranoia" and his fixation with the purgation of "anality" (155); Adelman 129.

pointing out that many performances excise the lines, a sanitizing tactic adopted, e.g., by Kenneth Branagh's populist film version.[105] That the playwright included the lines, to Saunders, is hugely significant, especially given that the information arrives via soliloquy, which was conventionally encoded as a form of *truthful* communication to Elizabethan audiences: "Iago confesses, retracts, and perhaps confesses again, until falsehood becomes the only essential truth of his character. With no one left to lie to, Iago lies to himself" (155). While I agree with Saunders readily that Iago's conflation of truth with falsehood provides the characteristic authenticity I have been discussing in reference to the villain, I do not find Iago lying to himself so much as to others. That his deceit of others is as effective as it is prevents him from ever having to deny something they catch on to.

That the ensign describes this "thought" in such sinister fashion does not foreclose the possibility of the comment's revelatory import;[106] after all, "the sin which dare not speak its name" had no chance of being depicted onstage.[107] At best, it would be suggestively and provocatively adumbrated, in this case by the very figure of deceit and revelation upon whom the play's secrecy relies. The very individual who mocks the "wretched fool / that lov'st to make thine honesty a vice" is the fool in question (3.3.378-9). Iago's language, carefully calibrated to sustain this reading while never mandating it, proves to be a hermeneutic key to the play in establishing the motives the villain himself circles, but never intentionally articulates without a layer of obfuscation, as suggested by Joan Lord Hall, who finds in the Iago's speeches an "interior development rather than casual motive hunting, [for

[105] Ironic, considering the otherwise indulgent application of homoerotic energy highlighted by Branagh's portrayal of Iago.
[106] As Kirsch makes plain in his admission that "Iago is a liar," which he qualifies by asserting the veracity of Iago's soliloquys, especially, and advocates a hermeneutic cautiousness that bears in mind when Shakespeare would have us doubt the villain, almost as an exception, rather than a rule (725).
[107] A commonplace leading Matz to reflect that even if we detect homoerotic tension in Iago's speeches, our concern should not devolve into the sleuthing attempt to "identify the 'homosexual' in the text" (261).

Iago] is suffering from acute jealousy and sexual paranoia" (79). The jealousy, as it turns out, is not of his wife, but of his general. I depart from Hyman in this respect, who believes that Iago "unconsciously loves both Othello and Cassio, and that love is repressed […] and turned into hate" (369). Iago's sexual motivations are specifically targeted to Othello, and consequently the position he most desires is not only the lieutenantship, but one of sexual partnership with the general specifically. His love is not "turned into hate," but it does distort itself into a willingness to employ racial stigma in order to sabotage Othello's marriage with Desdemona and remove her from the position he desires.

It is impossible to grasp an accurate portrait of Iago's sexual desire without recognizing the enmeshed view he holds of both Desdemona and Cassio as competition for a pairing he instinctively believes is his right, despite his cognizance that either configuration violates the standards seeking to restrain him. This is helpfully depicted in the sublimely Freudian fever dream Iago conjures for Othello in order to implicate both his militaristic and marital rival. As though materializing his malice as well as his desire, he intimately whispers to Othello:

> I lay with Cassio lately,
> And being troubled with a raging tooth
> I could not sleep.
> There are a kind of men so loose of soul
> That in their sleeps mutter their affairs.
> One of this kind is Cassio.
> In sleep I heard him say, 'Sweet Desdemona,
> Let us be wary, let us hide our loves.'
> And then, sir, he would gripe and wring my hand,

Cry, 'O sweet creature!' and then kiss me hard,

As if he plucked up kisses by the roots

That grew upon my lips; then laid his leg

Over my thigh, and sighed, and kissed, and then

Cried, 'Cursed fate that gave thee to the Moor.' (3.3.416-27)

In this narrative, Iago both reveals and conceals himself by substituting his own body for Desdemona's, thereby fashioning himself as desirable to Othello.[108] The image he plants in Othello's mind of Desdemona and Cassio is inherently unstable, depicting instead the taboo and homoerotic image of two men in instinctive or uninhibited passion: Cassio plucks kisses from Iago "by the roots," laying his leg over his thigh to recall images of Roman frottage amongst soldiers. Rather than Desdemona, it is Iago who is the substituted figure of desire in this fantasy, longing for Othello, and the object of his rival's inefficient wooing, since fate has given the ensign to the Moor. Rather than simply claiming to have seen Cassio and Desdemona in a scene of intimacy, or claiming that Cassio mentioned her in his sleep, Iago's relation of the dream functions as a means of sexual access to Othello, in which the ensign is the penetrating figure implanting the sensuous image through the receiving ear of the general.[109] This is Iago at his most Vice-like in practice but also his most human in terms of a flawed, human subjectivity. As Dessen reminds us, the tactics of the Vice represented a "paradigm that was still available and […] could be used for one scene rather than an entire play" (18), a comment that underscores Shakespeare's reshaping of dramaturgic conventions

[108] Hyman indicates that Iago "has turned himself into a Desdemona for Cassio's sexual enjoyment on the surface of the spurious dream, and for Othello's in the latent content" ("Motivated" 376). I concur with Hyman's attention to Iago's displacement, but I object to the idea of Iago refashioning himself as female. Every aspect of the dream relies on homoerotic tension that utilizes Desdemona as an analogy in order to follow the dictates of the superego, which prevents Iago from communicating his desire unambiguously, just as the paucity of language for sexual identification in the Renaissance also does.

[109] Hyman offers, "the image of pouring anything into the ear […] is a strongly sexual […] one" ("Motivated" 371).

into the realism of more nuanced subjectivity. Bloom accordingly describes the scene as indicative of "Shakespeare's singular power to contaminate *us*" too, querying "how many of us could withstand him?" (79; my emphasis). The spellbinding efficacy of Iago's dream thus captivates Othello, even as it figures Iago's intentions ever more clearly.

The scene is richly characteristic of Iago's fusion of dissembling with honesty, of intentional and unintentional irony, in a way quite missed by those who maintain that Iago fails to make any definitive statements to guide the audience. Dachslager posits that "in *Othello* little or nothing is [made public], certainly little or nothing from Iago" (9). Yet the dream is arguably the chief example of Iago making something decidedly public: he reveals himself as the figure of desire in the dream, speaking what the audience might hardly dare imagine, in the same fashion that he utters the supposed sexual treachery of Desdemona, exposing it for Othello. Iago exposes himself in the fashion of a masquerade, which, in essence, is the format most conducive for safely making oneself public. The dream is the catalyst for his transgressive resort to substitution, which negates Desdemona from the scene while appropriating her name, in the manner of a cautious superego mediating Iago's longing to relate the scene without heteronormative buffers. Indeed, his management of the scene is the surest sign of a subconscious reality he has yet to acknowledge, as made clear in his paranoid relation of Cassio as such a one "so loose of soul / that in their sleeps mutter their affairs." Of the affairs Iago relates, of course, there is every reason for him to appropriate the lieutenant's call to "hide our loves" in order to shroud the play's clearest representation of counterproductive desire in the cloaking of heteronormativity.

After all, the only manner in which Iago can articulate this subjectivity is through subterfuge and secrecy, and in observing this principle at work, his language, we must conclude, operates on a literal level of dramatic revelation, but also on an additional plane of

unwitting confession. In alluding to his right to be Othello's lieutenant, and to occupy ever closer innocuous positions at Othello's side, he dissembles, yet is never able to fully obscure from view, his motives of sexual concealment and expression. Adelman observes in this tension a fragmentation of Iago's consciousness that borders on the psychotic, perceiving "everywhere" sexual and social unions that he believes "exclude and diminish him. And in response, he effectively neutralizes the erotic potency that mocks his own lack" (129). Consider his damning claim to Roderigo, that, "I never found a man that knew how to love *himself*. Ere I would say I would drown myself for the love of a guinea-hen, I would change my humanity with a baboon" (1.3.314-7). Iago, on the surface, claims he would forfeit his human dignity and nature itself before valuing the love of a woman over the love of himself. The homoerotic connotation of Iago loving himself is augmented by his frustration at never having seen a man "that knew how" to exist in such a way, despite having lived for 28 years (1.3.313). Arthur Kirsch has discussed Ephesians 5:28-32 in reference to this play, which exhorts husbands to love their wives as their own bodies, for a man hating his own flesh cannot appropriately love a wife or consecrate himself to her (721). But Kirsch refrains from applying the text to Iago, who states he hasn't found a man who *can* love himself properly. Iago alone loves his own body, in a queer and transgressive irony, in lieu of loving Desdemona, as it were. The ensign is only too aware of the paucity of models available to him in the context of male/female desire.

For this reason, his consolation of Roderigo to refrain from indulging his lust becomes the cautious reflection of a man who is excluded from such indulgence altogether. He assures his gull that "we have reason to cool our raging motions, our carnal stings, our unbitted lusts; whereof I take this, that you call love, to be a sect or scion. […] It is merely a lust of the blood and a permission of the will" (1.3.324-330). Kirsch discusses this as

evidence of Iago's being "Desdemona's sexual as well as spiritual antagonist, [as] she luminously represents a union of affection and desire, [but] Iago wishes to reduce love" to the animalistic concept he imparts to Roderigo (734). Iago *is* figured as a sexual antagonist, yet Kirsch may not go far enough in juxtaposing the villain with the martyred heroine, as Iago's comment reiterates the contempt for heterosexual copulation that Iago's relationship with his wife suggests, and that his banter with Desdemona explicitly states.[110] But there is the additional sense that prediscursivity of desire is governed by, ironically, the "permission of the will." Accordingly, an unrequited or unfulfilled love or desire, such as his is bound to remain, will appear purer than the "lust of the blood" he finds in Roderigo's hungry, common pursuit of Desdemona. Who more qualified to make such a claim than a man who has not permitted himself to embrace his "carnal stings" or "unbitted lusts"?

It is not necessary for Iago to be aware of this in order for the events of the play to be triggered by him as they are. While the actions he takes have rendered Iago, from the onset, a villain, he is not a symbolic pillar of vice, despite the play's closing suggestion that he sustains comparisons to the devil himself. In the words of Rosenberg, in his book *The Masks of Othello*, "impressionists are entitled to their impressions [of a vague Iago], but they fail to do justice to Iago's flesh-and-blood qualities" and vices—he is a "better dramatic character than that" (167). Rather, Iago as written by Shakespeare is a subject of class-based stigma as well as a paranoid subject attempting to avoid the depersonalizing effect of two twinned potentialities: the recognition of the inscribed audience (and himself!) of his true motives, and the complete disidentification with the same. His haphazard jostling of these two positions challenges prediscursive models of normalcy and repurposes deception, paradoxically, as the truest means of revelation.

---

[110] Cf. Hyman 370

Coda: Evaluating Villainy

What are we to conclude of these instances of villainy? Hovering between articulation and defacement, Aaron and Iago alike become the agents for the playwright to trouble prediscursive vice. The plays expose supposedly innate evil as, in effect, the prediscursive hermeneutics informing the societies against which Aaron and Iago rebel, insofar that racial and sexual differences are created and employed by patriarchal authority to dictate the behavior of others. Shakespeare's commentary points to race, accordingly, as a matrix of Otherness, in that Iago's mercurial sexuality is subsumed by the larger and more threatening binary of racial difference. As interpreted by his audiences, both would connote the nature of various vices, but the dramatic burden of the later Elizabethan era in these plays, at least, is to rationalize villainy via deviant subjectivities that are aberrations of familiar humanity. The verisimilitude of his drama thus retains the dramaturgic relish of the Vices but reimagines it in the context of figures who are recognizable not merely for their role as villain, but for their (mis-)management of the same moral and ethical questions facing the audience. Shakespeare thus both perpetuates the dramatic tradition and applies pressure on it.

As a villain, ultimately, Iago accomplishes the same objective we have discussed in terms of Aaron in perverting the structures of order at work in the play in both linguistic and physical senses of substitution. Whereas Aaron denatures whiteness and exalts instead the very innate qualities of blackness prompting Titus's revulsion at the fly, Iago castigates heteronormativity even as he adopts its trappings in order to effect a social fluency and mobility; he amends the "tragic loading" of Desdemona and Othello's bed (5.2.203) only to

install an equally excluded combination of bodies primed for the copulation of disorder.[111] Plotting his vengeance, the ancient provocatively announces, "I have't, it is engendered! Hell and night / must bring this monstrous birth to the world's light!" (1.3.402-3). The utilization of maternal energy emphasizes the monstrosity of villainy's birth, which Iago promises to deliver[112] under cover of darkness as a foil to the "world's light"—an alterity pregnant with potential as much as it is imbued with the embittered motives of his social and sexual frustrations.

Who, then, has triumphed, if Iago has successfully delivered the villainy he has promised, and which the long dramaturgic history of the Vice has also foretold? Iago appears unable to be killed, crowing "I bleed, sir, but not killed" when Othello finally stabs him (5.2.283). In *All for Money*, the same ominous ability to endure is imagined of the arch-Vice, Money, when the minor vices exclaim, "Be of good cheer, of this I am sure, / You cannot die so long as the world doth endure. / […] Money may be sick, but he never will be dead" (155-6; 160). Like Aaron, Iago thus concludes the tragedy in a paradoxical situation of mutual foreclosure and victory. Unable to die, he also is unable to be controlled. A confession will never leave his lips: "Demand me nothing," he concludes (5.2.300), a rebuttal culminating in deafening silence, just as Aaron answers the call for repentance not with a confession, but an ecstatic recitation of his misdeeds and the shocking disavowal of anything good he has done, "if one good deed in all my life I did" (5.3.188).

Iago and Aaron's obstinacy in the closing moments of both plays demonstrates the transgressions they *will* to embody, a situation dramatically imposing the spiritual import of the psychomachia onto the Elizabethan stage, on the one hand, and distancing it

---

[111] *O* 5.2.203: "Thy match was mortal to him," as Gratiano indicts Desdemona.
[112] *O* 2.1.127-8: "My muse labors / and thus she is delivered."

simultaneously, as the preceding chapters have attempted to articulate. Subverting the structures of class and the tenuous hierarchies of the Symbolic, both men present compelling challenges to prediscursive notions of subjectivity and ontology, yet both fail to create or potentialize realities different from their own. Inverting hierarchies, after all, merely reifies the system enabling them. Neither figure, therefore, can be said to have triumphed in the way most meaningful to their own objectives.

References

Adelman, Janet. "Iago's Alter Ego: Race as Projection in Othello." *Shakespeare Quarterly* 48.2, 1997, pp. 125-44. *ProQuest.*

Alexander, Catherine, M. S. and Wells, Stanley. *Shakespeare and Race.* Cambridge University Press, 2000.

Allison, Tempe E. "The Paternoster Play and the Origin of the Vice," *PMLA*, vol. 39, no. 4, 1924, pp. 789-804. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/457248.

Bartels, Emily C. "Breaking the Illusion of being: Shakespeare and the Performance of Self." *Theatre Journal*, vol. 46, no. 2, 1994, pp. 171-85.

---. "Making More of the Moor: Aaron, Othello, and Renaissance Refashionings of Race." *Shakespeare Quarterly*, vol. 41, no. 4, 1990, pp. 433–454. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/2870775.

Best, George. *A true discourse of the late voyages of discouerie, for the finding of a passage to Cathaya, by the Northvveast, vnder the conduct of Martin Frobisher Generall deuided into three books* (1578)." In *The Principal Navigations, Voyages, Traffiques, and Discoveries of the English Nation*, n.p., 1578.

Betteridge, Thomas, editor. *Sodomy in Early Modern Europe.* Manchester University Press, 2002.

Bloom, Harold. *Iago: The Strategies of Evil.* First Scribner hardcover edition., Scribner, 2018.

Boyarin, Daniel. "Othello Othello's Penis: Or, Islam in the Closet." *Shakesqueer: A Queer Companion to the Complete Works of William Shakespeare*, edited by Madhavi Menon. Duke UP, 2011.

Bray, Alan. *Homosexuality in Renaissance England.* Morningside edition, Columbia University Press, 1995.

Bulwer, John. *Anthropometamorphoses, Man Transformed: or the Artificial Changeling.* London, 1653.

Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Routledge, 2006.

"Castle of Perseverance, The." *English Morality Plays and Moral Interludes*, edited by Egar T. Schell and J. D. Shuchter. Holt, Rinehart and Winston, New York, 1969. pp 1-110.

Cushman, L. W. *The Devil and the Vice in the English Dramatic Literature before Shakespeare.* Frank Cass, 1970.

Dachslager Earl L. "The Villainy of Iago: 'What You Know, You Kow.'" *CEA Critic*, vol. 38, no. 3, 1976, pp. 4–10. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/44375936.

Daines, Simon. *Orthoepia Anglicana* (1640). *English Linguistics, 1500-1800; A Collection of Facsimile Reprints*, vol. 31, issue 31, 1967, 122 pp.

Deroux, Margaux. "The Blackness Within: Early Modern Color-Concept, Physiology and Aaron the Moor in Shakespeare's 'Titus Andronicus.'" *Mediterranean Studies*, vol. 19, 2010, pp. 86-101. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/41167029.

Dessen, Alan C. *Shakespeare and the Late Moral Plays*. University of Nebraska Press, 1986.

Dollimore, Jonathan. *Sexual Dissidence: Augustine to Wilde, Freud to Foucault*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991.

Du Bois, W. E. B. *The Souls of Black Folk*. New York: Dover Publications, 1903.

Empson, William. *The Structure of Complex Words (1964)*. Harvard UP, 1989.

"Everyman." *Medieval Drama: An Anthology,* edited by Greg Walker. Blackwell, Oxford, 2000, pp. 281-98.

Geneva Bible, The: A Facsimile of the 1560 Edition with an introduction by Lloyd E. Berry. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 15601969. Print.

"gnaw, v." *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, March 2019,

www.oed.com/view/Entry/79487. Accessed 30 March 2019.

Green, André. *The Tragic Effect: The Oedipus Complex in Tragedy*, translated by Alan Sheridan, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1979

Greenblatt, Stephen. *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1980.

Habib, Imtiaz. "Racial Impersonation on the Elizabethan Stage: The Case of Shakespeare Playing Aaron." *Medieval & Renaissance Drama in England*, vol. 20, 2007, pp. 17–45. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/24323012.

Hakluyt, Richard. Ed. *The Principal Navigations, Voyaiges, Traffiques and Discoveries of the English Nation*. 12 vols. Glasgow: J. Maclehose and Sons, 1904.

Hall, Joan Lord. *Othello: A Guide to the Play*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1999. Print.

Happé, P. "The Vice and the Folk-Drama." *Folklore*, vol. 75, no. 3, 1964, pp. 161–193. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/1257975.

"hate, n." *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, March 2019, www.oed.com/view/Entry/84550. Accessed 30 March 2019.

Howard, Jean E. "Renaissance Antitheatricality and the Politics of Gender and Rank in *Much Ado About Nothing*." *Shakespeare Reproduced: The Text in History and Ideology*, edited by Jean E. Howard and Marion F. O'Connor, Taylor & Francis Group, 2013, pp. 163-188.

Hunt, Alice. "Mary Tudor's Coronation and *Respublica*." *Interludes and Early Modern Society: Studies in Gender, Power, and Theatricality*, edited by Peter Happé. Rodopi, New York, 2007, pp 331-52.

Hyman, Stanley Edgar. "Iago Pyschoanalytically Motivated." *The Centennial Review*, vol. 14, no. 4, 1970, pp. 369–84.

---. *Iago: Some Approaches to the Illusion of His Motivation*. New York: Atheneum, 1970.

"innards, n." *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, March 2019, www.oed.com/view/Entry/96237. Accessed 30 March 2019.

Jacobsen, Ken. "Iago's Art of War: The 'Machiavellian Moment' in Othello." *Modern Philology*, vol. 106, no. 3, 2009, pp. 497–529. JSTOR, doi:10.1086/605074.

Jones, Eldred. *Othello's Countrymen*. London: Oxford UP, 1965.

Jones, Robert C. "Dangerous Sport: The Audience's Engagement with Vice in the Moral Interludes." *Renaissance Drama*, vol. 6, 1973, pp. 45–64. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/41917107.

Kimminich, Eva. "The Way of Vice and Virtue: A Medieval Psychology." *Comparative Drama*, vol. 25, no. 1, 1991, pp. 77–86. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/41153500.

Kingsley-Smith, Jane. (2008), *Titus Andronicus*: A Violent Change of Fortunes. *Literature Compass*, 5: 106–121. doi: 10.1111/j.1741-4113.2007.00510.x

Kirsch, Arthur. "The Polarization of Erotic Love in 'Othello.'" *The Modern Language Review*, vol. 73, no. 4, 1978, pp. 721–740., www.jstor.org/stable/3727589.

Loomba, Ania. *Shakespeare, Race, and Colonialism*. Oxford University Press, 2002.

---. and Martin Orkin, editors. *Post-Colonial Shakespeares*. Routledege, 1998.

MacDonald, Joyce Green. "'The Force of the Imagination': the Subject of Blackness in Shakespeare, Johnson, and Ravenscroft." *Renaissance Papers*, SRC, 1991.

---. *Women and Race in Early Modern Texts*. Cambridge, 2002.

"Mankind." *Medieval Drama: An Anthology,* edited by Greg Walker. Blackwell, Oxford, 2000, pp. 258-80.

Mares, Francis Hugh. "The Origin of the Figure Called 'The Vice' in Tudor

Drama." *Huntington Library Quarterly*, vol. 22, no. 1, 1958, pp. 11–29., www.jstor.org/stable/3816153.

Marshall, Cynthia. "'I Can Interpret All Her Maryr'd Signs': *Titus Andronicus*, Feminism, and the Limits of Interpretation." *Sexuality and Politics in Renaissance Drama*, edited by Carole Levin and Karen Robertson. Lewiston, NY: Mellen, 1991. Pp. 193-213.

Matz, Robert. "Slander, Renaissance Discourses of Sodomy, and *Othello*." *ELH*, vol. 66, 1999.

Maus, Katharine Eisaman. "Proof and Consequences: Inwardness and Its Exposure in the English Renaissance." *Representations*, no. 34, 1991, pp. 29–52. *JSTOR*, doi:10.2307/2928769.

Ndiaye, Noémie. "Aaron's Roots: Spaniards, Englishmen, and Blackamoors in *Titus Andronicus*." *Early Theatre*, vol. 19, no. 2, 2016, pp. 59–80. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/90018447.

Partridge, Eric. *Shakespeare's Bawdy*. 3rd ed., Routledge, London, 1968.

"Respublica." *English Morality Plays and Moral Interludes*, edited by Egar T. Schell and J. D. Shuchter. Holt, Rinehart and Winston, New York, 1969. pp 1-110, pp 235-307.

Rosenberg, Marvin. "In Defense of Iago." *Shakespeare Quarterly*, vol. 6, no. 2, 1955, pp. 145–58. JSTOR, JSTOR, doi:10.2307/2866395.

---. *The Masks of Othello: The Search For The Identity of Othello, Iago, and Desdemona by Three Centuries of Actors and Critics*. Berkeley: University of California, 1961.

Rosslyn, Felicity. "Villainy, Virtue and Projection." *The Cambridge Quarterly*, vol. 30, no. 1, 2001, pp. 1–17. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/42967899.

Rubinstein, Frankie. *A Dictionary of Shakespeare's Sexual Puns and their Significance*. 2nd ed., St. Martin's, New York, 1995.

Said, Edward W. *Orientalism*. New York: Pantheon, 1978.

Saunders, Ben. "Iago's Clyster: Purgation, Anality, and the Civilizing Process." *Shakespeare Quarterly*, vol. 55, no. 2, 2004, pp. 148–76. JSTOR.

Scragg, Leah. "Iago– Vice or Devil?" Muir, Kenneth, & Philip Edwards, eds. *Aspects of Othello: Articles Reprinted from Shakespeare Survey*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1977.

"seat, n." *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, March 2019, www.oed.com/view/Entry/174373. Accessed 30 March 2019.

Shakespeare, William. "King Lear." *The Arden Shakespeare: King Lear,* edited by R. A. Foakes. Methuen Drama, London, 1997.

---. "Othello, the Moor of Venice." *The Arden Shakespeare: Othello,* edited by E. A. J. Honigmann and Ayanna Thompson. Bloomsbury Arden, London, 2016. Print.

---. "Richard III." *The Bedford Shakespeare: Based on the New Cambridge Edition*. Eds. Russ McDonald and Lena Cowen Orlin. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2015. Print.

---. "The Tempest." *The Arden Shakespeare: The Tempest, Revised Edition,* edited by Virginia Mason Vaughan and Alden T. Vaughan. Bloomsbury, London, 2011.

---. "Titus Andronicus." *The Arden Shakespeare: Titus* Andronicus, edited by Jonathan Bate. Routledge, Croatia, 1995. Print.

Schell, Egar T. and J. D. Shuchter. *English Morality Plays and Moral Interludes*. Holt, Rinehart and Winston, New York, 1969.

Siemon, James Edward. "The Canker Within: Some Observations on the Role of the Villain in Three Shakespearean Comedies." *Shakespeare Quarterly*, vol. 23, no. 4, 1972, pp. 435–443. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/2868682.

Sim, Alison. *Masters and Servants in Tudor England.* Gloucestershire, 2006.

Smith, Bruce R. *Homosexual Desire in Shakespeare's England.* Chicago and London: U of

Chicago Press, 1991.

Smith, Gordon Ross. "The Credibility of Shakespeare's Aaron." *Literature and Psychology*, vol. 10, 1960, pp. 35-9.

Spivack, Bernard. *Shakespeare and the Allegory of Evil: The History of a Metaphor in Relation to His Major Villains*. Columbia UP, 1958.

Steenbrugge, Charlotte. "The Functions of the English Vice and Dutch Sinnekens: A Comparison." *Early Theatre*, vol. 13, no. 2, 2010, pp. 13–41. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/43498960.

Vander Motten, J. P. "Iago at Lincoln's Inn Fields: Thomas Porter's The Villain on the Early Restoration Stage." *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, vol. 24, no. 3, 1984, pp. 415–428. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/450536.

Walker, Greg. *Medieval Drama: An Anthology*. Blackwell, Oxford, 2000.

Webb, H. J. (1951). The Military Background in *Othello*. *Philological Quarterly*, 30, 40. Retrieved from http://go.libproxy.wakehealth.edu/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.go.libproxy.wakehealth.edu/docview/1290963198?accountid=14868

White, Jeannette S. "'Is Black So Base A Hue?': Shakespeare's Aaron and the Politics and Poetics of Race." *CLA Journal*, vol. 40, no. 3, 1997, pp. 336–366. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/44324979.

Withington, Robert. "The Ancestry of the 'Vice'." *Speculum*, vol. 7, no. 4, 1932, pp. 525–529. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/2850428.

Vita

Thomas Eric Simonson arrived at Wake Forest after spending more years than he'd care to specify working toward an Associate's and Bachelor's degree while working full-time and raising a family. Before that, he was home-schooled and spent most of his adolescence reading. A proud community college student, he pursued a career in English after being encouraged by the teachers at Mitchell College. Heartened by the diverse community he encountered on this first college campus, he enrolled at UNC Charlotte and spent several years focusing on African-American, Latinx, Immigrant, and World Literatures. Upon entering graduate school, his focus shifted to the early modern era, a transition prompted, in large part, by his adoration of Shakespearean drama. The prose and poetry of the period proved equally compelling, especially that of Milton and Spenser. He is sincerely grateful for those professors at Wake who opened their doors to him and his cohort-mates. It is his fervent desire to enter a Ph.D. program in the near future, where he hopes to further amend his propensity for volubility, which, as the preceding pages suggest, constitutes his greatest Vice.