

Cultural Stereotypes in *Othello* and *The Tempest*: Identity, Race, and the Other

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Abstract—This essay explores how early modern plays use semantic features, particularly physical appearance, to raise questions about identity. In *Othello*, black skin serves as a marker of otherness, positioning Othello as an outsider. His relationship with Desdemona—a union of blackness and whiteness—disrupts Venetian social norms, and by emphasizing this racial difference, the play solidifies Venetian subjectivity. In *The Tempest*, Caliban’s monstrous appearance, coupled with his portrayal as a black slave and potential rapist, constructs his identity as an alien figure. These semantic features in both plays serve to highlight the perceived threat posed by Othello and Caliban’s cross-cultural actions to white European subjectivity, reinforcing a rigid boundary between insiders and outsiders. Through this analysis, the essay demonstrates how early modern drama uses race and physical characteristics to interrogate the construction of identity.

Keywords—identity, otherness, semantic features

I. INTRODUCTION

Cultural stereotypes are prevalent in early modern plays, often functioning as tools to set boundaries between different societies, religions, nations, and races. To explore how these stereotypes are portrayed in the Elizabethan era, it is essential to conduct a comprehensive analysis of how dramatists either exploit or challenge these social constructs. This essay explores cultural stereotypes in shaping issues of identity in William Shakespeare’s *Othello* and *The Tempest*. In both plays, the character Othello and Caliban are distinguished from others by their physical features, which acts as markers of difference and, more importantly, as vehicles for broader cultural and racial stereotypes.

This study aims to explore how the somatic features of Othello and Caliban function as cultural stereotypes that not only define them as “outsiders”, but also serve as threats to the perceived superiority of the European majority. As Ian Smith noted, racial discrimination and inequality are deeply connected to the establishment of whiteness as a dominant social structure [1]. From this perspective, whiteness functions not simply as a racial identity, but as a system of authority maintained through the exclusion of non-European Others. I argue that the rejection of Othello and Caliban by European society stems from an anxiety surrounding identity, particularly the fear that accepting these figures would destabilize established social and racial boundaries.

In *Othello* and *The Tempest*, both characters have distinct features of appearances from the others. And both relate to the negative meaning of blackness. My discussion will first concentrate on Othello’s on-stage portrayal of blackness and the amalgamation of his blackness with Desdemona’s whiteness. And then I will analyze the impact of Othello’s self-fashioning on both himself and Venetian society. After

that, my discussion will move to Caliban’s physical ambiguity, which connects to black stereotypes. By concluding their similarities as “outsiders” I argue that their somatic features pose questions about both the identities of the “outsiders” and “insiders”.

II. ON OTHELLO

The discussion will begin with an exploration of Othello’s physical appearance, with particular emphasis on his dark complexion. This physical characteristic serves to differentiate him from the native inhabitants of the city, thereby establishing a clear division between those insiders and the outsiders. In *Othello*, the representation of blackness is not merely a marker of race, it becomes a cultural stereotype that distinguishes individuals with dark skin from their fair-skinned counterparts. This is often achieved by forcing black-skinned characters to fit into the preconceptions, enabling white characters to maintain their privileged position. By positioning Othello as an outsider, the play reinforces the racial boundaries of Venetian society and upholds the dominant white identity [2]. In other words, blackness can be depicted as a tool to differentiate a cultural minority from the majority or a cross-cultural figure from a group of one specific cultural background. Before delving further into my discussion, it is essential to first define blackness and what black cultural stereotypes means in this context. Then, we will examine how these black stereotypes challenge and shape the identities presented in *Othello*.

The question of what constitutes a Black stereotype necessarily implicates broader inquiries into the formation of cultural and racial imaginaries. As noted by Jack D’Amico in his book, “the perceptions of others, in racial and cultural terms, are controlled by imagination, preconceptions, and experience” [3]. In this sense, the notion of a “Black stereotype” is less a neutral description than a discursive construct: it denotes the accumulation of generalized, reductive, and often pejorative assumptions about individuals marked by black skin, assumptions that function not only as signifiers of racial identity but also as mechanisms of social and cultural differentiation. Importantly, these stereotypes did not emerge in historical background but were mediated through religious, linguistic, and symbolic frameworks that predate modern racial discourse.

Based on this framework, black stereotypes may be understood as generalized and oversimplified assumptions imposed upon black bodies. Such stereotypes function not only as markers of racial difference, but also as signifiers of cultural identity and perceived origin. In early modern discourse, blackness acquired powerful symbolic meanings through both religious and demonological associations [4].

As Michael Neill observes, “The early modern language of color was indelibly marked by biblical symbolism and by primitive fears that associated darkness with evil and death” [5]. Within conventional Christian symbolism, blackness was frequently associated with sin, mourning, and the devil [6]. Similarly, Dympna Callaghan argues that “black skin persisted as the most conspicuous marker of racial difference” [7]. These fears, fantasies, and religious beliefs help explain why Othello is repeatedly associated with demonic imagery by the Venetians throughout the play.

As a central figure in the play, Othello epitomizes black cultural stereotypes. This is notably evident in the words of both Brabantio and Iago. In Act 1, Scene 2, Brabantio accuses Othello of using magic to seduce Desdemona into his “sooty bosom” [5]. Brabantio’s reaction to Desdemona’s marriage to Othello is marked by shock and underscores his awareness of the vast racial and gender differences in a combination black male and a white female.

A maid never bold,
Of spirit so still and quiet that her motion
Blushed at herself, and she— in spite of nature,
Of years, of country, credit, everything—
To fall in love with what she feared to look on? [5].

Similarly, in Act 1 Scene 1, Iago employs metaphors of black animals to refer to Othello, like “old black ram” [5] and “barbary horse” [5]. Iago uses all these figurative descriptions as black cultural stereotypes to suggest that Othello is inferior to the Venetians, and that he is uncivilized and barbaric like an animal.

Atesede Makonnen further examines the portrayal of the inferiority of black skin characters. She suggests that “black faces mask empty or morally suspect hearts, casting black bodies as affective voids incapable of showing or even feeling proper emotion. Black emotion, if it exists, must be of a lesser order” [8]. In essence, “Iago, Roderigo, and Brabantio react within the bounds of a shared cultural understanding that makes Othello a threatening otherness” [9]. This suggests that no matter how highly the state may value Othello’s sincerity and contribution in defending Venice and adherence to societal norms, his blackness remains a symbol that evokes fear and peril among the European citizens [10]. And this notion effectively creates a limitation in Othello’s capacity to shape his own identity and forces him to conform to the prevailing expectations of Venetian society—the expectations to perceive all the qualities of black stereotypes in him and treat him as a menacing outsider.

But how does Othello’s blackness arouse questions about identities among the Venetians? If we shortly put aside the black cultural stereotypes and consider the representation of Othello’s blackness in the play, we may discern the influences in two ways.

The first one centers around a white self/ black other tension in performance [11]. In *Speaking of Moor*, Emily. C. Bartels argues that white is in a dominant position in mainstream theater and film, both dominated by white [12]. In *Othello*, the distinction between Desdemona’s whiteness and Othello’s blackness is emphasized. To contrast with Othello’s blackness, Shakespeare carefully depicts Desdemona’s paleness. For example, “whiter skin of hers than snow | And smooth as monumental alabaster” [5]. The mix of black non-European males and white European

females arouses anxiety about gender and race in Venetian identity.

Another aspect to consider is that Othello’s position as an alien in Venetian society is integral to the process of self-fashioning over both one’s own identity and the identities of others, as a power to control their own or the other’s identity [10]. To establish an insider/outsider dichotomy, the existence of Othello is required. And his existence provides Venetians with an opportunity to ‘govern the generation of identities’ and establish their status as insiders. This dynamic is evident in the Venetians’ negative response to Othello’s language in the Senate.

Despite Iago deliberately shows Othello’s animalistic nature to the public, the latter strives to present himself as polite and composed. And this may echo with the pressures placed upon him to conform to Venetian expectations. In Act 1, Scene 2, Othello displays a measured and conciliatory demeanor in the face of Brabantio’s accusation. He responds to the accusation with civility, stating, “Good signor, you shall more command with years than with your weapons” [5], thereby avoiding further escalation of the conflict.

However, the language he employs in his response is characterized by excessive usage of unusual words, which suggests that he is not a native speaker of the Venetian tongue. Iago comments on Othello’s language style as “Evades them with a bombast circumstance | horribly stuffed with epithets of war” [5]. This suggests that Othello’s attempts at self-fashioning to align with Venetian societal expectations end as a failure. The Venetians desire a clearly defined outsider figure, and Othello’s attempts to fashion himself as an insider do not match their expectations. Consequently, the construction of an artificial outsider figure becomes necessary for their purposes. Even if Othello doesn’t seem to have any other alien features, he will still be treated as an outsider.

It can be argued that Othello came to recognize the necessity of an outsider figure in Venetian society, regardless of whether that outsider was himself or someone else. As a result, he projects his outsider status onto the Turks, emphasizing their otherness in Act 2, Scene 3 [5]. When a quarrel breaks out between Cassio and Montano, Othello criticizes them and questions, “Are we turned Turks? [5]. This remark serves to underscore Othello’s identification with the Venetian side. Even in his final moments leading up to his suicide, Othello continues to align himself with the Venetian identity, declaring:

where a malignant and a turbaned Turk
Beat a Venetian and traduced the state,
I took by th’ throat the circumcised dog
And smote him—thus [5].

By making Othello the outsider according to his otherness, the Venetians have a chance to handle their own identity. And Othello wants to get rid of his fate by setting the Turks as outsiders. However, as an outsider, Othello is destined for destruction at the hands of the Venetians, much like how his intention to destroy the Turks. This echoes what Stephen Greenblatt states in his book: “self-fashioning is achieved about something perceived as alien, strange, or hostile”. The “threatening Other-heretic”, here is Othello— “must be discovered or invented to be attacked or destroyed” [10].

Within the context, it is pertinent to take some time in

thinking about the underlying motivations for the act of self-fashioning and why both Othello and the Venetians need its adoption. Under what conditions would an individual continuously emphasize their own identities and belongings? The answer might be the lack of security or the insecurity of the acceptance of his blackness. Othello's sense of insecurity is not groundless. Apart from Desdemona and Cassio, other key figures within the play consistently draw Othello's attention to his dark skin, thereby reinforcing deeply ingrained cultural stereotypes associated with skin color. This continuous emphasis on racial difference serves as a mechanism by which Venetians exclude Othello from their social framework, denying him as an insider [13]. Simultaneously, Othello finally internalizes this external perspective, ultimately embracing his "alien self", and aligning himself with the derogatory labels of a "Turk" or a dog, and chooses to kill the alien part of himself. Othello's suicide can be understood as a reenactment of a past act to defend Venice's whiteness [14].

The reason for Venetians' fixation on the distinction between white and black skin may stem from a sense of anxiety surrounding the subjectivity of whiteness. The mimicking of blackness can be viewed as an attempt to preserve white superiority and purity. Daniel Vitkus posits that the association of white with beauty and purity and black with ugliness and depravity is a means of enforcing a hierarchical order [14]. The use of black cloth in the productions of Othello serves to reinforce this hierarchy in two ways. First, the black cloth functions as a "corporal supplement signifying black skin" during the stages, which suggests the exotic feature of blackness (as an attachment to whiteness) [15]. Blackness is a "material object devoid of interiority" [11]. Second, "racial impersonation or cross-dressing constitutes a powerful theatrical icon validating white subjectivity" [11]. To clarify, by using white actors to act as black figures, the subjectivity of whiteness is strengthened.

Returning to the subject of whiteness and its subjectivity, we can now apply this framework to Othello's case. As previously noted, Othello attempts to align himself with the dominant white stereotypes to assert his identity as an insider among the Venetians. However, the boundary imposed by his black skin proves to be insurmountable. This failure to fully assimilate into Venetian society ultimately leads to his decision to suicide as a final act of self-identification. Othello's inability to fully find his place in Venetian society can be attributed to the inherent limitations imposed by his blackness.

III. ON CALIBAN

The same boundary set by somatic features also happens in *The Tempest*. Before our discussion, we should simply apply him to human/non-human categories. What is Caliban? Is he a man or a fish? In *The Tempest*, both Caliban's non-humanity and humanity features are well exposed.

Caliban is called with a list of words like "earth", "savage", "monster", and "hag-seed" to indicate his inhumanity as a "devil, a born devil: and later categorized him into "aquatic imaginary" [16]. Trinculo calls Caliban "a fish" based on his smell. [17]. He is half a fish and half a monster, who has "fins like arms" [17]. Or as Abu-Shomar argues that Caliban is

established as "a prototype of the mysterious and incomprehensible evil" [18].

No matter whether he is a supernatural or an animal, his non-human features not only show in his language but also in his behaviors. He has adequate knowledge of this island, using his hands with long nails to dig fruits and grasses to eat. Giorgio Agamben called him "bare life" [19], which echoes Tom Lindsay's comment that, compared with Miranda's spiritual purity and Prospero's humane virtue, Caliban has an "evil, incivility, wild nature" [20].

Although Caliban has such animal-like features, he has humanity. One supporting evidence is that he is potentially educable. As John Kunat argues in his essay that Caliban is a man, whose "untutored humanity is inherently demonic and animalistic" [21]. Prospero and Miranda take efforts to teach him language, educate and civilize him, and this can be done only to a human. In addition, Caliban indeed learns their language and serves them as a slave. Another supporting idea is Miranda's words in her talk with her father that Caliban is "a villain" [17], that she does not love to look on. This comment sets "Caliban is a human" as a premise. Hence, we may come to the conclusion that no matter how he is physically and psychologically distorted, he is affirmed as a human shape.

Caliban, in sum, is indeed a complex amalgamation of bestial attributes and human traits. But why Caliban's identity is so ambiguous? Why Shakespeare extensively depicts Caliban's monstrous physicality? In addressing these questions, I would like to contend that the demonization of Caliban's appearance is intricately linked to his status as an outsider on the island, which is dominantly governed by European influences. The nebulous nature of Caliban's physical characteristics can be understood as a manifestation of the projection of his inherent otherness.

In order to explore Caliban's otherness, we may trace it back to his origin. One of the views originates from an anagram of a linguistic source as the popular explanation of the word 'Caliban'. It is argued that this is a form of "cannibal" and "Carib", through rearranging the orders of the letters [16]. This suggests that Caliban belongs to a race that eats human flesh. Another view is the assumption that the savage represents America's Indians [22]. Meredith Anne Skura summarizes some scholars' thoughts, claiming that "the New World is the representative of the uncivilized human nature, and Prospero represents Europeans who impose old-world stereotypes of innocence and monstrosity on the Native Americans, distorting the perception of hope and fear" [23]. However, if we include Caliban's mother Sycorax into consideration, we know that she was born in Algiers, a city in Africa.

Once in a month recount what thou has been,
Which thou forget. This damned witch Sycorax,
for mischiefs manifold, and sorceries terrible
To enter human hearing, from Algiers [17].

No matter whether we interpret Caliban as a Cannibal, native American, Indian, or black African, there is one thing for sure: Caliban's distorted appearance is a stereotype that functions as Othello's blackness. Caliban is like another Othello, who represents an "other" in the categories we put him in: He is a 'half demon half fish' in the category of the animal; a "savage" stand outside of civilized humanity; a

witch's son versus the European royal family Prospero and Miranda. I argue that owing to this "otherness", Caliban has been deliberately demonized physically to show the differences between him and the "insiders", which reveals "man's timeless tendency to demonize strangers" [23].

Caliban's otherness can also be explored in his blackness as a black slave or a black rapist, that both link to the stereotype of blackness. In our discussion above, blackness is a key feature in Caliban's origin. For instance, the description of Caliban as a "beast" links to early modern English observers' description of Negros in West Africa as "brutish" or "bestial" or "beastly" [24]. This produces a racialized impression of Caliban as a black African slave figure.

Nevertheless, "the language of rape and violation permeates the play" [21]. In Act 1, Prospero accuses Caliban of trying to ripe Miranda, while Caliban replies "Thou didst prevent me- I had peopled else | This isle with Calibans [17]. Another example is when Caliban plans to kill Prospero and talk to Stephano, to emphasize the importance of seizing Miranda. "And that most deeply to consider is | The beauty of his daughter" [17]. And "she will give thee brave blood". As Hilb argues in his essay: "In a context associated with the Western colonial enterprise, Caliban is deeply connected to the social and legal history of the myth of the black rapist" [24]. For one aspect, Caliban historically links to "hypersexual rapist that would be leveled at black men", and the other is a "prejudicial fear of Black men as potential rapists" in the US justice system [24].

IV. CONCLUSION

This study has explored how *Othello* and *The Tempest* construct racialized otherness through bodily representation, blackness, and cultural difference. The analysis demonstrates that both Othello and Caliban are positioned as threatening "Others" whose identities are defined against the norms of white European society. In *Othello*, blackness functions as a visible marker of difference, and Othello's relationship with Desdemona destabilizes Venetian anxieties surrounding racial and cultural boundaries. The contrast between Othello's blackness and Desdemona's whiteness reinforces Venetian subjectivity by defining European identity in opposition to the racialized outsider.

Similarly, in *The Tempest*, Caliban's otherness is constructed through his ambiguous humanity and distorted physical appearance. At the same time, Caliban also exposes the instability of European superiority, since the construction of civilized identity depends upon the continual production of a threatening outsider.

By reading Othello and Caliban comparatively, this study argues that early modern drama does not merely reflect racial prejudice, but actively participates in the discursive construction of race and cultural hierarchy. Shakespeare's plays reveal how racialized bodies become symbolic sites onto which European fears, desires, and anxieties about identity are projected. Therefore, the "other" functions not only as an excluded figure, but also as a necessary counterpart through which European subjectivity is established and maintained.

This study makes three main contributions to Shakespearean and postcolonial studies. First, it offers a comparative reading of Othello and Caliban as racialized

figures, demonstrating how both characters are constructed through bodily and cultural markers of otherness. By placing *Othello* and *The Tempest* into dialogue, the study highlights the shared mechanisms through which early modern texts construct racial difference.

Second, this study extends existing scholarship by examining not only blackness, but also physical ambiguity as interconnected forms of racial representation. The analysis shows that race in early modern drama is produced through both skin color and bodily imagination.

Third, the study contributes to postcolonial interpretations of Shakespeare by arguing that racialized "other" function as discursive tools through which European identity and authority are stabilized. In this sense, the research reveals the mutual relationship between colonial anxiety and the construction of racial hierarchy in early modern literature.

Despite these contributions, this study has several limitations. First, the discussion mainly focuses on textual analysis and does not fully engage with performance history or stage adaptations of *Othello* and *The Tempest*. Different theatrical interpretations may reshape the racial meanings of Othello and Caliban in significant ways.

Second, the study primarily examines race from a postcolonial perspective, while other dimensions such as gender, class, and religion are discussed only to a limited extent. A more intersectional approach may provide a more comprehensive understanding of early modern identity construction.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Ziyun Zhou is responsible for the article structuring, writing and editing.

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