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Slaves and Subjects in *Othello*

CAMILLE WELLS SLIGHTS

... Shall I say to you,
“Let them be free . . .”? You will answer,
“The slaves are ours.”¹

IN THE LATE-SIXTEENTH AND SEVENTEENTH CENTURIES, England became increasingly involved in the slave trade. During the same period, as numerous scholars have argued, a new form of personal identity developed. I want to suggest that the representation of these phenomena on the early modern English stage shows that they are interconnected. By attending to these interconnections, we can learn a good deal not only about early modern subjectivity but also about our own understandings of liberty and coercion. Using *Othello* as an example, I will argue that emerging understandings of selfhood help to explain ideas and attitudes about slavery and that they in turn illuminate emerging understandings of self.

THE DISENGAGED SELF

In *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* Charles Taylor argues that the form of consciousness emergent in early modern Europe, what he calls the “disengaged self,” was bound up with an ideal of freedom and independence and with a vision of instrumental control of an objectified world and an objectified self. In the traditional view derived from Plato, Taylor explains, “reason can be understood as the perception of the natural or right order, and to be ruled by reason is to be ruled by a vision of this order”; “gaining mastery of oneself, shifting the hegemony from the senses to reason, was a matter of changing the direction of our soul’s vision.” In contrast, the disengaged subject no longer locates the self as an inherent part of a meaningfully ordered cosmos. This subject does not find order in the neutralized universe but constructs it internally: “The new model of rational mastery . . . presents it as a master of instrumental control. . . . The hegemony of reason is defined no longer as that of a dominant vision but rather in terms

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¹ *The Merchant of Venice*, 4.1.93–94, 97–98. Shakespeare quotations follow the *Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans et al. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974).

of a directing agency subordinating a functional domain.”² In this ethic, rational control means the power to objectify the body and the passions; a sense of self-worth depends on the subject’s status as a rational being.

The disengaged self fostered a sense of responsibility and developed a concept of moral and political law which established personal freedom and rights. This self also fostered a felt need to control the experience of the self and the world external to the self.³ The new individualism of the seventeenth century, Taylor argues, replaced an older political concept, in which social communities were taken as givens, with a new concept of political atomism, in which the basic social unit is the individual, whose membership in community must be created. From this concept developed what C. B. Macpherson calls possessive individualism, “a conception of the most basic immunities we enjoy—life, liberty—on the model of the ownership of property.”⁴ Indeed, as Seyla Benhabib has pointed out, the right of property and a man’s authority over his household of wife, children, and servants came to be included among those basic rights.⁵ The autonomous self “generates and . . . reflects an ideal of independence and self-responsibility.” Being “on his own,” he must find paradigms of order within himself.⁶ Individual autonomy, then, was bound up with an ideal of freedom and with individual isolation. The idea of the autonomous self, Benhabib suggests, was most clearly formulated by Thomas Hobbes: “Let us . . . consider men as if but even now sprung out of the earth, and suddenly, like mushrooms, come to full maturity, without all kind of engagement to each other.”⁷

In early seventeenth-century England, the concept of unique, autonomous selves—of men as mushrooms—supported the developing values of privacy and individual liberty; it also created fear of social fragmentation and individual isolation. For example, John Donne’s anxiety about the “new philosophy” takes the form of dismay at a world that has lost “all Relation”:

Prince, Subject, Father, Sonne, are things forgot,
For every man alone thinks he hath got
To be a Phoenix, and that there can bee
None of that kinde, of which he is, but hee.⁸

Donne’s theorizing of social structure grounds hierarchy in the necessity of social relations. His personal letters testify to his own terror of isolation. Writing to a friend about his failure to find a place in the court hierarchy, he insists that failure to “contribute something to the sustentation of the whole” is social death: “to be no part of any body, is to be nothing.”⁹ There is

² Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1989), 121, 143, and 149.

³ See Taylor, 143–76.

⁴ Macpherson, quoted here from Taylor, 196.

⁵ See Seyla Benhabib, *Situating the Self: Gender, Community and Postmodernism in Contemporary Ethics* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 155.

⁶ Taylor, 167 and 193.

⁷ Thomas Hobbes, *The English Works of Thomas Hobbes*, ed. W. Molesworth, 11 vols. (London: John Bohn, 1839–45), 2:109.

⁸ John Donne, “The First Anniversarie: An Anatomy of the World” in *The Complete Poetry of John Donne*, ed. John T. Shawcross (New York: New York UP, 1968), 270–86, esp. 278 (ll. 214–17).

⁹ John Donne, *Letters to Severall Persons of Honour (1651)*, intro. M. Thomas Hester (New York: Scholars’ Facsimiles and Reprints, 1977), 51.

another expression of recoil from self-creating individualism in Milton's portrait of originary evil in a figure who denies divine creation and fantasizes limitless autonomy, claiming to be "self-begot, self-raised."¹⁰

Othello, too, explores the autonomous, atomistic identity emerging in early modern Europe. Roderigo's description of "an extravagant and wheeling stranger / Of here and every where" (1.1.136–37) is a hostile version of Othello's self-description of his "unhoused free condition" (1.2.26). Valuing personal freedom more than family lineage and inherited loyalties, Othello assumes that his position in society derives from conscious choice and service to the state. Unlike such protagonists as Hamlet, Lear, or Macbeth, who are tightly embedded in networks of kinship and feudal allegiance, Othello's sense of personal and social identity is based on individual achievement and merit. He owes his position in Venetian society to personal ability and the chances of war. Though he proudly claims descent from "men of royal siege" (1.22), he sees no disjunction between his origins and his current position; his sense of social identity derives from "My services which I have done the signiory" (1.18).

Venice, famous in Renaissance Europe not only as a cosmopolitan trading center but as a flourishing independent republic, is the appropriate home for a military hero participating in a civic community characterized by values of justice, public service, and individual merit.¹¹ For example, Lewes Lewkenor, on whose translation of Gasparo Contarini's *De Magistratibus et Republica Venetorum* Shakespeare drew for some details of his representation of Venice, has only praise for things Venetian:

their iustice is pure and vncorrupted: their penall Lawes most vnardonably executed: their encouragements to vertue infinite: especially by their distribution of offices & dignities, which is ordered . . . [so that] it vtterly ouerreacheth the subtiltie of all ambitious practises, neuer falling vpon any but vpon such as are by the whole assembly allowed for men of greatest wisdom, vertue and integritie of life. . . .¹²

Contarini attributes the Venetian Republic's freedom and stability to its tradition of devotion to the common good. He warns that history teaches that "sundry commonwealthes . . . [,] by the vndermining ambition and treachery of some their wicked and vnfaithfull citizens, were brought into seruitude and bondage."¹³ In contrast:

our auncestors, from whome wee haue receyued so flourishing a commonwealth, all in one did vnite themselues in a consenting desire to establish, honour, and amplifie their country, without hauing . . . the least regarde of their owne priuate

¹⁰ John Milton, *Paradise Lost* in *John Milton: Complete Poems and Major Prose*, ed. Merritt Y. Hughes (New York: Odyssey Press, 1957), 322 (Bk. 5, l. 860).

¹¹ *Othello* is discussed in the context of English images of Venice in Murray J. Levith, *Shakespeare's Italian Settings and Plays* (New York: Macmillan, 1989); David C. McPherson, *Shakespeare, Jonson, and the Myth of Venice* (Newark: U of Delaware P, 1990); and Virginia Mason Vaughan, "Othello": A Contextual History (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994).

¹² Gasparo Contarini, *The Commonwealth and Government of Venice*, trans. Lewes Lewkenor (London, 1599), sig. A2^r. References in *Othello* to Lewkenor's translation are recorded in *A New Variorum Edition of Shakespeare: Othello*, ed. Horace Howard Furness (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1886), 1.1.200n, 1.3.61n; and William R. Drennan, "'Corrupt means to aspire': Contarini's *De Republica* and the Motives of Iago," *Notes & Queries* 35 (1988): 474–75.

¹³ Contarini, 77.

glorie or commodity. . . [O]ur auncestors delighted not in vaine glorie or ambition, but had only their intentiue care to the good of their country and common profite.¹⁴

Moreover, while he makes clear that Venetian society is hierarchically ordered, with power corresponding to “nobilitie of lineage” rather than to “estimation of wealth,” Contarini insists that political power derives from civic virtue: “all which were noble by birth, or enobled by vertue, or well deserving of the commonwealth, did . . . obtain this right of government.” He continues with a point particularly significant for Othello’s position in Venice: “yea and some forrain men and strangers have bene adopted into this number of citizens, eyther in regard of their great nobility, or that they had been dutifull towards the state, or els had done unto them some notable service.”¹⁵ In setting his play and in identifying his hero as a “Moor of Venice,” then, Shakespeare drew on the humanist myth of Venice, an ideal in which civic virtue produces a powerful, free society that in turn protects and nurtures the honor and freedom of its members.¹⁶

But if in the figure of the Moor of Venice the play celebrates a new kind of hero and a new relation of self to state, it also reveals dangers in the autonomous, self-created identity. The sinister obverse of Othello is Iago, who claims the position of lieutenant on merit—“I am worth no worse a place” (1.1.11)—and offers as proof his service in the field. Like Othello, he values independence from constraints, and, like Othello, he assumes that service rather than birth, rank, or faction should be rewarded and that a position of responsibility in the state constitutes reward. Iago articulates and appeals to the autonomous self’s sense of inviolable privacy when he contemptuously refuses to wear his heart on his sleeve (l. 64) and when, at Othello’s urging to “give thy worst of thoughts / The worst of words” (3.3.132–33), he protests, “I am not bound to that all slaves are free [to]” (l. 135). Of course, to point to continuity is not to claim identity. Iago’s insistence on the right to keep his thoughts to himself is a deliberate manipulation of Othello’s need for frank and open exchange. The contrasts between Othello’s love and Iago’s malice, between Othello’s “free and open nature” (1.3.399) and Iago’s secrecy and hypocrisy, are crucial to the play’s moral economy; but, as self-fashioned autonomous individuals valuing personal freedom and defining themselves by their public service, they share an epistemological space. If Iago was created out of the English stage tradition of Machiavellian villains, Othello was shaped

¹⁴ Contarini, 6–7.

¹⁵ Contarini, 18. Venice relied militarily on foreign mercenaries. Contarini endorsed the practice as allowing citizens to devote time to public life and as preventing the development of military factions among citizens. Machiavelli, in contrast, opposed the use of mercenaries and argued passionately for a citizen militia on the grounds that citizens make the best soldiers and that military discipline teaches civic virtue. See J.G.A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1975), 321–22 and 200–201. Some critics believe that Othello is a hired soldier, while others assume that he is a citizen. For the former position, see Vaughan, 35; for the latter, see Carol Thomas Neely, “Circumscriptions and Unhousedness: *Othello* in the Borderlands” in *Shakespeare and Gender: A History*, Deborah Barker and Ivo Kamps, eds. (London and New York: Verso, 1995), 304. The play does not specify, and I believe that by stressing both that Othello is a foreigner and that he is dedicated to the city, the play conflates Venetian practice with the ideal of the patriot-soldier.

¹⁶ In addition to Contarini and Machiavelli, important civic humanists were Leonardo Bruni, Donato Giannotti, Francesco Guicciardini, and Colluccio Salutati. Pocock’s *The Machiavellian Moment* is a magisterial modern account of the republican tradition.

by the discourse of civic humanism to which Niccolò Machiavelli's *Discorsi* was a major contribution.

ENGLISH SLAVERY

An old woman said that once they were slaves, but now they were free. . . . The small boy was puzzled. . . . He asked the teacher what was the meaning of slave, and the teacher explained. But it didn't make sense. . . . He told the teacher what the old woman had said. She was a slave. And the teacher said she was getting dotish. It was a long, long, long time ago. . . . And moreover it had nothing to do with people in Barbados. No one there was ever a slave, the teacher said. . . . Thank God, he wasn't ever a slave. He or his father or his father's father. Thank God nobody in Barbados was ever a slave. It didn't sound cruel. It was simply unreal.¹⁷

The combination of curiosity, bewilderment, estrangement, and denial experienced by George Lamming's protagonist growing up in Barbados in the 1940s can, I think, help to focus similarly complicated responses to slavery in early modern England. Collections of travel literature such as those of Richard Hakluyt and Samuel Purchas contained accounts of Ottoman slavery; the growth of trade and travel throughout the sixteenth century brought English merchant-adventurers into contact with the actual practice of slavery.¹⁸ English participation in the Atlantic slave trade reached its fullest development in the eighteenth century. But from the 1560s, when John Hawkins made three slaving voyages, trading in human merchandise was highly profitable. In the Caribbean, English colonists were establishing the system of plantation slavery. African slaves were first brought into England itself in the mid-sixteenth century,¹⁹ and the number of slaves increased thereafter. For the most part, slaves were used as domestic servants and entertainers at court and in the households of rich merchants.

Slavery as a material practice, then, was well known. Nevertheless, England tended to see itself, however inaccurately, as a land without slaves. For example, in his *Description of England* (1587), William Harrison wrote:

As for slaves and bondmen, we have none; nay, such is the privilege of our country by the especial grace of God and bounty of our princes that if any come hither from other realms, so soon as they set foot on land they become so free of condition as their masters, whereby all note of servile bondage is utterly removed from them.²⁰

Just as English culture simultaneously promoted and denied slavery, so it exhibited contradictory understandings of the nature of slaves and slavery. In a society where all except the monarch were subjects, and words such as *subject*

¹⁷ George Lamming, *In the Castle of My Skin* (New York: Schocken Books, 1984), 57.

¹⁸ For the following brief summary of English slavery, I have relied primarily on Peter Fryer, *Staying Power: The History of Black People in Britain* (London: Pluto Press, 1984); Alden and Virginia Vaughan, "Racial Slavery in English Renaissance Drama: Historiographical Contexts" (Unpublished paper, 1994); and James Walvin, *Black and white: the Negro and English society, 1555–1945* (London: Penguin Press, 1973).

¹⁹ Walvin dates slavery in England from 1555 (1 and 7), and Fryer from 1570 (5 and 8).

²⁰ William Harrison, *The Description of England: The Classic Contemporary Account of Tudor Social Life*, ed. Georges Edelen (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP for the Folger Shakespeare Library, 1994), 118. Harrison's description seems to be accurate only for Europeans. Nonwhite slavery was legally enforced in England throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries; see Fryer, 113–26.

and *serve* rarely had pejorative connotations, subjection in itself was not disgraceful. Nor did the commodification of people as property provoke violent abhorrence. Several forms of subjection, such as apprenticeship, imprisonment, and marriage, limited movement and entailed property rights. Enslavement through military misadventure, remediable through ransom, was regarded as unfortunate rather than disgraceful. Parish records indicate that collecting money to ransom victims captured and enslaved by “infidel Turks” was a familiar practice in many parts of England.²¹ But this recognition of the actual contingency of slavery coexisted with a concept of the natural slave, incapable of honor.

In early modern drama this combination of familiarity and denial, of pity and contempt is evident. Clever Plautine slaves scheme and plot to the discomfiture of their masters and the delight of theater audiences, and references to cowardly, lying, perfidious, pernicious, base, and murderous slaves crowd the language of insult. Tamburlaine enslaves captive kings and yokes them to his chariot, and the epithet “slave” comes readily to Hamlet’s tongue to express disgust with Claudius and with himself. Yet despite the inscription of slavery in character, metaphor, and staged action, it is curiously effaced and distanced. The force of Hamlet’s self-description as a “peasant slave” and of his self-recrimination for not having “fatted all the region kites / With this slave’s offal” (2.2.550, 579–80) depends on distance from the literal. The beatings the Dromio twins suffer and Caliban’s enslavement bring into dramatic focus the physical violence that is the basis of slavery, but these subjugations are located in ancient Ephesus and on a remote island. On the English Renaissance stage, slavery happens long ago and/or far away.

Othello provides a clear example of the simultaneous foregrounding and distancing of slavery and of viewing slaves with both pity and horrified contempt. Although Cinthio’s story of the Moor of Venice does not mention slavery, Shakespeare’s *Othello* tells Desdemona “Of being taken by the insolent foe / And sold to slavery” and of his “redemption thence” (1.3.137–38). *Othello*’s account, moreover, is not one of shameful subjection but instead forms part of a narrative of valor and triumph. The story of being sold into slavery is one of the “disastrous chances” (l. 134) he has suffered and courageously overcome. As with the “moving accidents by flood and field” and the “hair-breadth scapes i’ th’ imminent deadly breach” (ll. 135, 136), his enslavement and redemption move Desdemona to pity. As with his tales of the “Anthropophagi, and men whose heads / [Do grow] beneath their shoulders” (ll. 144–45), his story of captivity contributes to the exotic image that attracts her to the noble Moor. Winning Desdemona’s love by telling his life story and defending himself against Brabantio’s charges by narrating the courtship are of a piece with *Othello*’s confidence that “My parts, my title, and my perfect soul / Shall manifest me rightly” (1.2.31–32).

Beyond this brief mention in 1.3, there are no references to *Othello*’s enslavement and none to slavery as a historical institution, while the term *slave* recurs frequently as an epithet of abuse. *Othello* in agonized jealousy exclaims, “O that the slave had forty thousand lives! / One is too poor, too weak for my revenge” (3.3.442–43). Emilia speculates that Desdemona has been

²¹ See Roslyn L. Knutson, “Elizabethan Documents, Captivity Narratives, and the Market for Foreign History Plays,” *English Literary Renaissance*, 26 (1996): 75–110; and Carolyn Prager, “The Problem of Slavery in *The Custom of The Country*,” *Studies in English Literature* 28 (1988): 301–17.

slandered by “Some cogging, cozening slave” (4.2.132), and Iago calls Roderigo a “murd’rous slave” as he stabs him during the brawl in the fifth act (5.1.61). In the final scene Montano and Lodovico call Iago a “damned slave” (5.2.243, 292), and, as Othello envisions his damnation, he exclaims, “O cursed, cursed slave!” (l. 276).

SELVES AND SLAVES

The fear and loathing elicited by this construction of the “naturally” base slave registers, I believe, a pervasive anxiety that the development of autonomous subjectivity brings about the dissolution of social relations. The defining characteristic of chattel slavery, as distinguished from other forms of subjection, is the social death of slaves and their natal alienation. According to Orlando Patterson, “[b]ecause the slave had no socially recognized existence outside of his master, he became a social nonperson. . . . Alienated from all ‘rights’ or claims of birth, he ceased to belong in his own right to any legitimate social order.” The antithesis of slavery, then, was not autonomy but belonging, being “embedded in a network of protective power.”²² Saxon law, David Brion Davis observes, regarded the “‘autonomous’ stranger who had no family or clan to protect him . . . as a slave.”²³ As the shoulder note to a sixteenth-century translation of Euripides observes, “Al exiles are like bondmen.”²⁴

In *Othello*, literal slavery is represented not as a manifestation of individual or racial inferiority but as a result of military and financial exigencies. But while Othello’s enslavement is presented merely as an unfortunate mishap in the vagaries of a military life, *slave* as a sign of social death is a term of absolute contempt. Thus when Iago is repeatedly called “slave” in the final scene, the epithet registers his total alienation from human society and justifies inflicting on him “any cunning cruelty / That can torment him much, and hold him long” (5.2.333–34). Both senses of *slave* bear on Othello. In the undramatized past he survived bondage unscathed to achieve a position of eminence and power in Venice. The play unfolds his degeneration from honorable and honored member of Venetian society to a dishonorable slave, a monstrous outsider, and the tragedy lies in the potential for monstrosity within honor.

Iago is able to manipulate his victims so skillfully because he thinks in the same terms they do. In fact, Iago articulates the rationale for self-fashioning and individual responsibility that Othello embodies:

’tis in ourselves that we are thus or thus. . . . the power and corrigible authority . . . lies in our wills. If the [beam] of our lives had not one scale of reason to poise another of sensuality, the blood and baseness of our natures would conduct us to most prepost’rous conclusions. But we have reason to cool our raging motions. . . .

(1.3.319–30)

²² Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1982), 5 and 28.

²³ David Brion Davis, *Slavery and Human Progress* (New York: Oxford UP, 1984), 15.

²⁴ *Iocasta in The Whole woorkes of George Gascoigne* . . . (London, 1587 [STC 11638]), sig. Hi^v. I am indebted for this reference to Joseph A. Porter, “Othello’s Enslavement as a Cultural Lens” (Unpublished paper, 1994).

Othello does not, like Iago, number love among “our raging motions”; but, as several critics have shown, he becomes vulnerable to Iago’s identification of love with lust because he, too, suppresses sensuality, assuring the Venetian senate on his wedding night that “feather’d Cupid” will not distract him from “business” (ll. 269, 271).²⁵ While Stephen Greenblatt’s influential essay traces Othello’s disparagement of passion and sensuality to traditional Christian distrust of sexuality, I want to argue that it has less connection with Christian asceticism than with a neo-Stoic ideal of rational self-control. Othello protests to the senate that his desire for his bride to accompany him is not

To please the palate of my appetite,
Nor to comply with heat (the young affects
In [me] defunct) and proper satisfaction;
But to be free and bounteous to her mind.
(ll. 262–65)

In the terms of Charles Taylor’s analysis, Othello’s account of his attitude toward Desdemona has less in common with an Augustinian concept of two kinds of love, charity and concupiscence, than with a Cartesian ideal of rational control in which one’s desires are objectified and strength of will is the central virtue.

In opposition, then, to the now-dominant view that Othello’s vulnerability lies in his position as an alien, a Moor not fully secure within Venetian society, I see Othello as not merely a Moor in Venice but the Moor *of* Venice, whose deepest values and sense of self are fully consonant with those of Venice’s other inhabitants. The warrior who believes that military service to the state “makes ambition virtue” (3.3.350) is articulating a central tenet of civic humanism.²⁶ Interpreting Othello’s Venetian values as alien cultural norms tenuously adopted can imply that his transformation from defender of justice to murderer is one of a black barbarian emerging from behind his civilized mask and reverting to his savage origins.

Recent scholarship shows that the early modern period was a crucial moment in the history of European responses to black-skinned Africans. Although the concept of scientifically verifiable, biologically distinct races did not gain currency until the nineteenth century, such scholars as Karen Newman, Michael Neill, and Kim Hall have documented the emergence of racist ideas during this period and analyzed their important role in constructions of national and personal identity.²⁷ Similarly, although we need to resist anachronistically imposing on the Renaissance our post-nineteenth-century as-

²⁵ For discussions of Othello’s sexual anxieties, see Edgar A. Snow, “Sexual Anxiety and the Male Order of Things in *Othello*,” *ELR* 10 (1980): 384–412; and Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1980).

²⁶ See Pocock, 132–35; and Quentin Skinner, “The republican ideal of political liberty” in *Machiavelli and Republicanism*, Gisela Bock, Quentin Skinner, and Maurizio Viroli, eds. (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1990), 293–309, esp. 303.

²⁷ Among the growing volume of valuable scholarship on race in early modern England, I’ve found the following especially helpful for studying *Othello*: Emily Bartels, “Making More of the Moor: Aaron, Othello, and Renaissance Refashionings of Race,” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 41 (1990): 433–54; Gerard Barthelemy, ed., *Critical Essays on Shakespeare’s “Othello”* (New York: G. K. Hall and Co., 1994); Edward Berry, “Othello’s Alienation,” *Studies in English Literature* 30 (1990): 315–33; Margo Hendricks and Patricia Parker, eds., *Women, “Race,” and Writing in the Early Modern*

sumptions of racialized slavery, we can see its beginnings. *Black* and *slave* were by no means interchangeable terms in the seventeenth century. As Ania Loomba observes, “the slave population of Europe consisted of Tartar, Greek, Armenian, Russian, Bulgarian, Turkish, Circassian, Slavonic, Cretan, Arab, African (Mori), and occasionally Chinese (Cathay) slaves.”²⁸ But we should not extrapolate too much from such evidence. Just as Iago’s image of “an old black ram” (1.1.88) appeals to an “increasingly biologized idea of race” which Kwame Anthony Appiah has located in the nineteenth century,²⁹ so Brabantio’s cry that “Bond-slaves and pagans shall our statesmen be” (1.2.99) articulates an emerging idea of racialized slavery.

I cannot claim to contribute here to the project of uncovering the roots of racism—the repugnance at physical difference inscribed in *Othello* is already well documented. But I do suggest that attention to the interacting ideas of personal identity and slavery may complicate and illuminate the history of race. Early modern slavery was not racialized, but when the profitability of slave labor in the Americas created a need to rationalize the dehumanization of black-skinned Africans, the drive for control and the fear of isolation that characterize disengaged selves proved useful. Such attitudes encouraged understanding the socially dead slave as inherently other and understanding slavery as the product of natural baseness rather than as a contingent and threatening possibility. Complementing Orlando Patterson’s argument that the practice of slavery is constitutive of the idea of freedom,³⁰ I suggest that the freedom of self-defining subjectivity was constitutive of the ideology supporting racialized slavery.

Still, as Appiah warns, “if it is clear enough how this ideology that will develop into racialism could serve already in the seventeenth century to license the domination of subject peoples, it is also important to mark the differences.”³¹ While race and slavery would eventually be so tightly interwoven that they were seen as naturally inseparable, in the early 1600s they were distinct. *Othello* is a key text in this history not only because it mixes self-identity, race, and slavery in an unstable and explosive combination, but also because they combine only occasionally. This very infrequency suggests that their subsequent identification was not inevitable.

Period (London: Routledge, 1994); Kim F. Hall, *Things of Darkness: Economies of Race and Gender in Early Modern England* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1995); Eldred D. Jones, *Othello’s Countrymen: The African in English Renaissance Drama* (London: Oxford UP, 1965); Ania Loomba, *Gender, Race, Renaissance Drama* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1989); Michael Neill, “Unproper Beds: Race, Adultery, and the Hideous in *Othello*,” *SQ* 40 (1989): 383–412; and Karen Newman, *Fashioning Femininity and English Renaissance Drama* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1991), 71–93.

²⁸ Ania Loomba, “The Color of Patriarchy: Critical difference, cultural difference, and Renaissance drama” in Hendricks and Parker, eds., 17–34, esp. 29. See also Lynda Boose, “The ‘Getting of a Lawful Race’: Racial Discourse in Early Modern England and the Unrepresentable Black Woman” in Hendricks and Parker, eds., 35–54; Peter Fryer, *Black People in the British Empire: An Introduction* (London: Pluto Press, 1989), 63–72; Neely, 303–4; and William D. Phillips Jr., *Slavery from Roman Times to the Early Transatlantic Slave Trade* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1985), 6–7.

²⁹ Kwame Anthony Appiah, “Race” in *Critical Terms for Literary Study*, Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin, eds. (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1990), 274–87, esp. 279.

³⁰ “Before slavery people simply could not have conceived of the thing we call freedom. Men and women in premodern, nonslaveholding societies did not, could not, value the removal of restraint as an ideal” (Patterson, 340).

³¹ Appiah, 279.

The play neither portrays nor evokes stable responses to Othello's blackness. The image of "an old black ram" is more than counterbalanced by references to the noble and valiant Moor. On the whole, Othello's blackness and cultural displacement are correlative of, rather than contrasting with, his role as self-defined, autonomous citizen. Othello is confident of the respect he commands in Venice. Iago manipulates him not through his alien exoticism but through his Venetian need for social order and epistemological clarity. Like his possessive jealousy, Othello's perverted sense of justice is "a monster / Begot upon itself, born on itself" (3.4.161–62).

The ethic of rational control, as Taylor points out, internalized the virtues of the honor ethic. For example, in Descartes generosity—"the central motive of the honour ethic"—means "that strong sense of one's own worth and honour which pushed men to conquer their fears and baser desires and do great things."³² In Othello the honor ethic of the aristocratic warrior has been transformed into the self-esteem of the free man whose reason controls his passion and whose honor entails the defense of the civilized community from all that is barbarous and bestial. When he upbraids Cassio for sacrificing "reputation" for "the name / Of a night-brawler" (2.3.194–96), and when Cassio in disgrace laments that, in losing reputation, he has lost "the immortal part" (l. 263) of himself, Iago finds the grounds for their ruin. Realizing that Cassio, Desdemona, and Othello are not driven by carnal lusts so much as they are motivated by their sense of themselves as participants in a civilized community, Iago exploits their generosity, loyalty, and a sense of self-worth based on responsibly filling positions of trust. He can count on Desdemona's generous and forceful intercession on Cassio's behalf just as he can rely on Othello's "free and open nature." The pernicious brilliance of Iago's destructive scheme is precisely that he turns Othello's strengths against him, perverting his sense of responsibility for the common good into murder, "else she'll betray more men" (5.2.6).³³ Unlike Richard III, who manipulates a pervasive greed for power, Iago turns his victims' virtues into "pitch" (2.3.360); and out of the ideals and qualities they most value in themselves, he makes the net that enmeshes them.

Correlating with Venetian ideals of civic order and justice and of participation in civic life is fear of losing control. Such fear lies behind Cassio's shame at his betrayal of public trust, Brabantio's claim "I am glad at soul I have no other child, / For thy escape would teach me tyranny" (1.3.196–97), and the Venetian senators' methodical preparations for defending their empire against the Turks. All these are in turn continuous with Othello's determination to control himself, Cyprus, and Desdemona.³⁴ To Othello, order in

³² Taylor, 153.

³³ The opposite view, that Iago corrosively dissolves Othello's civilized veneer so that he reverts to primitive savagery, has remained current, although many of the play's acutest critics have, I think, convincingly refuted it. Compare, for example, the following quotations: "to attribute the destructive impulses unleashed in *Othello* to man's 'bestial nature,' to the sexual impulse breaking through the civilized barriers that usually contain it, is to turn the vision of the play on its head. Shakespeare locates the principle of evil and malice at the level of the superego, the agency that enforces civilization on the ego" (Snow, 410); "for the moment he [Othello] has a clothing of civilization over his rough essence, but waiting to erupt at any moment are dark forces—primitive and elemental chaos" (Levith, 32).

³⁴ Like Othello's control of himself and his world, the city-state's control of its empire is tenuous. Although in the play the Turkish threat to Cyprus dissipates in a storm, some members

the state and the cosmos is not so much perceived as imposed: "For Christian shame, put by this barbarous brawl" (2.3.172); "when I love thee not, / Chaos is come again" (3.3.91–92). He experiences Iago's questioning of Cassio's and Desdemona's loyalty as an invasion of his privacy and a violation of his property rights.³⁵ When his sense of control is undermined, the possessiveness inherent in his love becomes explicit: "O curse of marriage! / That we can call these delicate creatures ours, / And not their appetites" (ll. 268–70). As John Donne recognized, "Love is a Possessory affection, it delivers over him that loves into the possession of that that he loves."³⁶ But an identity grounded in control and possession cannot tolerate the vulnerability of *being* possessed, so Othello must destroy love.

By insinuating a hidden threat to Othello's "good name," Iago activates Othello's overwhelming need for certainty and clarity. By defining jealousy as the irrational uncertainty of one "Who dotes, yet doubts; suspects, yet [strongly] loves" (3.3.170), he manipulates Othello into equating rationality with dispassionate examination of evidence leading unambiguously to certain judgment. Once Othello takes a stance as impartial observer of an objectified Desdemona, then generalizations about female sexuality and Venetian social mores replace his own experience of Desdemona and of their love as constituting knowledge.³⁷ Lacking the interdependent order and certainty of love, Othello adopts Iago's dualistic vision of instrumental reason opposed to raging lust. His perception of chaotic animality is a pathological version of Brabantio's fear of witchcraft. Brabantio's theory that Othello could have no power over Desdemona "Sans witchcraft" (1.3.64) reflects the troubling power that the idea of unnatural evil exerted in Renaissance English culture.³⁸ Noting that belief in witchcraft in Europe curiously coincided with a general decline in belief in magic, Taylor suggests that

the obsessional concern with witches, and the spectacular rise of belief in and sense of threat from them, can be partly understood as a crisis arising in the transition between identities. The aspect of possession, of ravishment, perhaps became even more important and obsessional just at the time and to the degree

of the play's first audiences would have known that in fact Venice lost Cyprus to the Turks in 1571. See McPherson, 30 and 79.

³⁵ For discussion of *Othello* in the context of the women-as-property ideology, see Kenneth Burke, "Othello: An Essay to Illustrate a Method," *The Hudson Review* 4 (1951): 165–203; Peter Stallybrass, "Patriarchal Territories: The Body Enclosed" in *Rewriting the Renaissance: The Discourses of Sexual Difference in Early Modern Europe*, Margaret W. Ferguson, Maureen Quilligan, and Nancy J. Vickers, eds. (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1986), 123–42; and James L. Calderwood, *The Properties of "Othello"* (Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 1989).

³⁶ John Donne, *The Sermons of John Donne*, ed. George R. Potter and Evelyn M. Simpson, 10 vols. (Berkeley: U of California P, 1953–62), 1:184.

³⁷ See the illuminating discussions of epistemology in *Othello* in Joel Altman, "'Preposterous Conclusions': Eros, *Enargeia*, and the Composition of *Othello*," *Representations* 18 (1987): 129–57; Stanley Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge in Six Plays of Shakespeare* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1987), 125–42; Katharine Eisaman Maus, *Inwardness and Theater in the English Renaissance* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1995), 104–27; and Naomi Scheman, "Othello's Doubt/Desdemona's Death: The Engendering of Scepticism" in *Power, Gender, Values*, Judith Genova, ed. (Edmonton, Canada: Academic Printing and Publishing, 1987), 113–33. Scheman's essay is particularly insightful in demonstrating the male gendering of the Cartesian disengaged self.

³⁸ For a discussion of the evidentiary procedures in witchcraft trials in relation to *Othello*, see Maus, 110–20.

that the identity was emerging which would break our dependence on orders of ontic logos, and establish a self-defining subject.³⁹

Terror of the irrational and uncontrollable, of being possessed, corroded the identity of the emergent autonomous self.

Othello's efforts to gain certainty become obsessive and self-defeating. The last straw is the loss of the handkerchief, which signifies to him not merely loss of exclusive control of Desdemona but also cultural isolation. In Othello's first account of the handkerchief's provenance, his mother received it from an Egyptian charmer with the promise it would "subdue my father / Entirely to her love" (3.4.59–60), and his dying mother gave it to him to pass on to his wife when he married. In the shorter, second version, his father gave the handkerchief to his mother, and Othello gave it to Desdemona as a "pledge of love" (5.2.214). However we interpret the inconsistencies in the two accounts, the constants are that the handkerchief is a symbol of love, the power of which derives from its connection to Othello's parents. With its loss, Othello, like a slave, has been cut off "from the social heritage of his ancestors."⁴⁰ He kills Desdemona and himself in a desperate effort to regain connection with society through identification with ordered, free Venice.

I am arguing, then, that the early modern English fascination with and occlusion of slavery register the fear that a developing concept of individual autonomy could lead to isolation, that an ideal of freedom conceptualized as control over an objectified self and external world could lead to its opposite. Milton's Satan, claiming total autonomy, is revealed as "not free, but to [him]self enthrall'd."⁴¹ So, too, in *Othello* slavery and freedom transform themselves into each other. Othello's "unhoused free condition" incorporates his period of slavery, but his attempts to defend his honor and to assert total control over Desdemona enslave him to Iago's interpretation of him and his world. Faced with the terrible consequences of his revenge, Othello remembers his earlier potency:

I have seen the day
That with this little arm, and this good sword,
I have made my way through more impediments
Than twenty times your stop.

(5.2.261–64)

But memories of former power lead him to recognize fantasies of autonomy as futile—"But (O vain boast!) / Who can control his fate?" (ll. 264–65). Othello can no longer imagine making his own way through impediments; his mind now is possessed by self-images neither of power and control nor of weakness and defeat but rather of exclusion and isolation:

Now—how dost thou look now? O ill-starr'd wench,
Pale as thy smock! when we shall meet at compt,
This look of thine will hurl my soul from heaven,

³⁹ Taylor, 192.

⁴⁰ The phrase is Patterson's (5).

⁴¹ Milton in Hughes, ed., 328 (Bk. 6, l. 181).

And fiends will snatch at it. Cold, cold, my girl?
 Even like thy chastity. O cursed, cursed slave!
 Whip me, ye devils,
 From the possession of this heavenly sight!
 (II. 272–78)

The terrible truth that Desdemona is chaste and dead means that Othello is damned, a cursed slave.⁴²

Othello was written and first performed in a transitional moment between a world where all people were to some degree subject to others and enslavement was a misfortune anyone might suffer and one where the enslavement of certain groups of people was scientifically justified as natural. The play registers the ambivalence of this transitional period. By representing Othello's tragedy as subjection to "the practice of a damned slave" (I. 292), it records fascination with the idea of slavery as dishonorable abjection. Yet it adds an episode of Ottoman slavery to Othello's past adventures while erasing contemporary European slavery as a social institution: the "many a purchas'd slave" Shylock observed (*MV*, 4.1.90) are nowhere to be seen in Othello's Venice. Such simultaneous effacement of and fascination with slavery were characteristic of English culture. Dramatizing both the empowering dignity and the fragile vulnerability of the self-defining autonomous self, the play embodies cultural anxieties about isolation and illuminates the conditions that in the late-seventeenth century would produce both a flourishing slave trade and theories of inalienable human rights.

Othello, whose honor consists in serving the common good, and Iago, who follows only to serve his own turn, are two versions of the morally and politically autonomous self our liberal traditions have conflated. John Locke's concept of a disengaged self generated ideals of freedom, responsibility, and inalienable human rights. "Slavery is so vile and miserable an Estate of Man, and so directly opposite to the generous Temper and Courage of our Nation," he wrote, "that 'tis hardly to be conceived, that an *Englishman*, much less a *Gentleman*, should plead for 't."

⁴³ But Locke the English gentleman was both an administrator of slave-holding colonies and an investor in the Royal African Company, and he also wrote that slaves "are by the Right of Nature subjected to the Absolute Dominion and Arbitrary Power of their Masters."⁴⁴ Recently such theorists as Quentin Skinner and Chantal Mouffe have argued convincingly that the tradition of civic humanism is potentially useful in addressing the political problems of our own time, providing a way of reconciling a "negative" concept of freedom (i.e., the absence of constraint) with the idea of personal liberty realized through civic virtue and public service.⁴⁵ The figure of Othello, who serves the common good in a culturally diverse and ordered society, gives imaginative force to such arguments. But Othello's

⁴² The phrase "O cursed, cursed slave!" is ambiguous and can also refer to Iago; see Furness, ed., 5.2.339n. In any case, it denotes isolation from human community.

⁴³ John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, quoted here from David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1966), 118.

⁴⁴ Locke, quoted here from Davis, *The Problem of Slavery*, 120–21. See also Fryer, *Black People*, 65.

⁴⁵ Skinner, 293–309; Chantal Mouffe, "Radical Democracy: Modern or Postmodern?" trans. Paul Holdengraber, in *Universal Abandon? The Politics of Postmodernism*, Andrew Ross, ed. (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1988), 31–45.

tragic fall also reminds us that civic humanism assumes a self-possession founded on possession first of military power and then of property.⁴⁶ Though the ideal of freedom through political participation can supplement the purely negative freedom of rights-based liberalism, it does not solve the problems created by possessive individualism and by the disengaged self's alienation from objectified others.

In George Lamming's novel, quoted in section 2's epigraph, the school teacher denies that slavery ever had anything to do with the people of Barbados: "It was in another part of the world that those things happened. Not in Little England." The old people remember slavery and remember that it was Queen Victoria, the "great and good queen," who freed them.⁴⁷ But they fail to remember that, as David Brion Davis points out, "it was not the enslavers who colonized and subjected Africa, but the European liberators."⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Cf. Pocock, 463.

⁴⁷ Lamming, 57 and 56.

⁴⁸ Davis, *Slavery and Human Progress*, xvii.