Destroyed from Within:

Othello and *Mariam* Reveal Contradictions in Oppressive Views

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Robert Halperin's ambitious essay treats William Shakespeare's canonical work *Othello* alongside the first original play written in English by a woman, Elizabeth Cary's *Tragedy of Mariam*. By comparing both plays with the source material on which they were based, he argues brilliantly that the racialized discourses introduced into both texts work not to endorse but to subvert nascent early modern stereotypes of race and of gender. In both plays, racist and / or patriarchal strictures become unstable signifiers that undermine their own apparent authority. This subtle and compelling essay introduces much-needed nuance into the discussion of two works that have become flashpoints for controversy surrounding the developing ideologies of racialized and gendered hierarchies in early modern England.

—Dr. Christina Luckyj

Shakespeare's *Othello* and Cary's *The Tragedy of Mariam* feature intense racialization and racial abuse that, superficially, align the plays with early modern stereotypes and strictures on women. Both plays are adapted from source materials—*Othello* from Cinthio's *A Moorish Captain* and *Mariam* from Josephus' *The Jewish Wars* and *Antiquities of the Jews*—that do not contain these early modern ideas to the same extent. Without any nuance these additions could simply serve to perpetuate or repeat contemporary notions of race and bodily signification. However, while both playwrights augment their source material with these notions, the additions complicate vulgar stereotyping by challenging the efficacy of such behaviour. In *Othello*, Iago's plot reflects English

fears about the potential political power of Moors, invoking race as a self-defence mechanism. In *Mariam*, the eponymous character's reliance on patriarchal notions of bodily signification—that her body will properly reflect her chastity—proves flawed, as bodily signification operates under a confirmation bias. Both plays illuminate, complicate, and subvert contemporary prejudices through the nuances bound up with their authors' alterations to their source materials.

Shakespeare adds significant pejorative racializations of Othello that are not present in Cinthio and gives new significance to those that are already present by assigning them to different characters. The majority of these changes have to do with the character of Iago (the Ensign in Cinthio), as he becomes the source of the racial issues in *Othello*. The most significant change is that the Bard endows Cinthio's Ensign with the name Iago, which "is the name of the patron saint of Spain, Santiago … also known as Matamoros the Moor-Killer for his role in helping the Spanish to wrest their kingdom back from Moorish invaders" (Luckyj 15). Thus, in his naming of the antagonist of *Othello*, Shakespeare specifically links this villain to a legendary Spanish figure who was famous for murdering Moors. Shakespeare makes two significant, racially charged changes to Cinthio's Disdemona: he makes her a Senator's daughter and he eliminates her explicit racial prejudice. The first alteration elevates the potential scandal of the marriage's miscegenation. Shakespeare's Desdemona is not solely "a virtuous lady of marvelous beauty" (Cinthio 1) but, in *Othello*, her father

wields great political power. Through Brabantio's approbation of the relationship, he politically legitimates it. The second alteration further scandalizes Othello's murder of his wife because, without her prejudices, Desdemona retains a certain innocence and purity. Thus, her murder is even more groundless than in Cinthio because Othello does not suffer racialized oppression or abuse at his wife's hand. In Cinthio, for example, Disdemona says, "you Moors are of so hot a nature that every little trifle moves you to anger and revenge" (5), and the Ensign tells the Moor that Disdemona is taking pleasure in the Captain's company and that this pleasure has increased "all the more since she has taken an aversion to your blackness" (5). In the source material the Ensign is not even racist—he simply relays to the Moor what Disdemona has said about him. Without nuance, these added or altered racial elements could simply repeat common prejudices against black people.

The character of Iago provides an excellent entry into the nuance that *Othello* gives to these racializations. While Iago first introduces the negative stereotyping of Othello in Act I, his initial anger is not rooted in Othello's race but in the elevation of Cassio over Iago himself. Bartels writes that "[W]hat initiates and motivates Iago's revenge is … a legitimate political action of a general who 'had th' election' on his side (1.1.24)[.] … Even as he attempts to prove Othello the outsider, he represents him as an authorizing insider" (450). Therefore, Iago's anger is rooted politically, rather than emotionally or racially (despite his inconsistent assertions about what is 'thought abroad'

[I.iii.378]). This political anger resonates strongly with early modern English fears about the peoples of Barbary, whom writers such as Hakluyt and Africanus depict in their texts as very similar to the English in their civility and manners—"behaviour that might undermine England's claim to a natural dominance and superiority" (Bartels 435). However, these writers simultaneously undermine this sameness because they focus on "exotic differentness" through "subtle demonizations" (Bartels 442). Meanwhile, just prior to when Shakespeare likely wrote *Othello*, a sixteen-man envoy arrived in London from Barbary. Luckyj writes that "this group must have attracted significant public attention; a portrait of the Moorish ambassador shows a dramatically robed and turbaned figure in a dignified, warlike pose" (36). Iago's anger at the political power that a racialized 'outsider' holds exacerbates the potential threat that such a display posed to England's alleged superiority. For Iago, Othello has already pierced through England's tough, white shell and he is an insider rather than an outsider. Iago, then, attempts to delegitimize Othello's political power indirectly by legitimate means: He incites Brabantio's anti-Othello polemic at the Senate, but this attempt fails. When delegitimizing his legitimate power from the outside proves unsuccessful, "Iago attempts to lure Othello into a self-incriminating display of 'alien' behaviour, to 'transform' the general into a rash and irrational Moor by 'transforming' his wife into a whore" (Bartels 451). In other words, Othello's insider status cannot be disrupted by external action because he is already inside; Iago cannot

explode Othello's power, so he decides to make it implode. However, rather than illustrate Othello's inherent racial inferiority, this implosion serves to complicate stereotypes: it displays them as unstable representations based on political fear or, in other words, as constructed for the continuance of established systems of dominance.

Othello's implosion catalyzes around two parallel movements in the play: his attempts to prove Desdemona's infidelity and Iago's attempts to prove Othello an "irrational Moor" (Bartels 447). Iago instigates both movements—the former to ensure the latter—which "highlights … that the demonization of an Other in both cases is, in fact, a defensive move to avert the political disempowerment of the self" (Bartels 447-48). Iago, then, dramatically embodies the aforementioned English political fears: he represents the English and Othello represents the Moors. Thus Shakespeare individualizes a general anxiety about Moorish 'outsiders' subverting English superiority through their potential political 'insider' status. Shakespeare does not merely place this anxiety on stage, but exposes its roots—in the stereotypes of the Moor—"as strategic constructions of the self and not empirical depictions of the Other" (Bartels 447). An early example of Shakespeare's subversion of these stereotypes is Brabantio's speech to the Senate, wherein he avoids specifically objecting to his daughter's marriage to Othello on racial grounds. While Brabantio initially goes to court because of Iago's racist descriptions of Othello as "an old black ram" and a "devil" (I.i.88, 91), he merely names Othello's "country" (I.iii.98) "as proof that the marriage

goes 'against all rules of nature' (ll.97, 101), … [which] suggests 'othering' as a self-defensive maneuver against something that threatens too close to home" (Bartels 449). Moreover, Brabantio's protest is tough to systematize due to its inconsistency, which becomes a motif within the aforementioned parallel movements—attempts to alienate the Other to (re-)gain one's own authority inadvertently undercuts this project itself. In the cases of Othello 'transforming' Desdemona and Iago 'transforming' Othello, this undercutting illuminates or causes their own alienation. Thus, Iago loses his wife and is apprehended by the authorities (V.ii.233,280.sd); and Othello—after murdering Desdemona—is nominally 'Moor' or a pejorative racialized term, and even he repudiates his own name: "That's he that was Othello: here I am" (V.ii.282). Othello is alienated from his own identity, and he finally becomes what Iago has desired since the play's beginning. Othello's implosion transforms him into the monster that others in the play attribute to his colour, but beneath this surface explanation lies Shakespeare's subversion of the stereotypes he invokes. He reveals their foundation in power and self-defence, rather than real racial difference.

Elizabeth Cary, like Shakespeare, fills *Mariam* with racial issues that are not necessarily present in her source material. Josephus clearly depicts the animosity between Mariam and Alexandra on one side, and Salome and Herod on the other, but this animosity is specifically grounded in the Hasmoneans' anger at the Edomites for their role in the murder of Hyrcanus and Aristobulus (*JW* 87). The only mention of racial animosity between them is

found in one line from Josephus' *Antiquities of the Jews*: "*Mariamne* upbraided and publickly reproached both the kings mother and sister, telling them that they were but abjectly and basely borne" (279)[1]. Cary, however, derives much of her play's action from the racial differences between the two families. *The Tragedy of Mariam* takes several liberties, mostly to do with chronology in order to dramatize the history and the focus on racial difference in the play serves a similar effect. Much like *Othello*, though, the addition of these racial elements actually subverts early modern English stereotypes of race. Furthermore, the play deals with these stereotypes especially as they relate to women: "Cary manipulates the terms of the convention by making the culturally pervasive equation of inner purity with whiteness work simultaneously to construct and problematize the conventional ideology of femininity. In a culture where femininity is polarized as literally black or white, women are still unstable signifiers" (Callaghan 176). In other words, the traditional white-supremacist and patriarchal assumption that bodies—specifically women's bodies—will properly signify internal states (i.e., white body means good person, black body means bad person) proves systematically unsound due to its reliance on the constructed notion of race. Cary's augmentation of Josephus with racialized language and abuse reflects her society's prejudices and assumptions back at itself, lifting the ideological veil that shrouds its vision of women and race.

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[1] Reprinted in Weller and Ferguson's *Mariam*.

Throughout *Mariam*, Mariam, and others, insult Salome based on her race and her physical appearance, especially denouncing her lineage's alleged impurity—as part-Edomite she descends from a people whom Israel subdued and incorporated into its religious and cultural identity (though clearly not fully or warmly). Mariam, from the privileged position of a light-skinned 'pure' Jew, readily accepts racial difference as concrete and real. Meanwhile, Salome—who is treated unfairly and insulted based on her perceived racial difference—actually questions these distinct racial categories: "What odds betwixt your ancestors and mine? / Both born of Adam, both were made of earth, / And both did come from holy Abraham's line" (I.iii.240-42). Mariam's refusal to admit this shared heritage allows her to maintain her privileged position in the social hierarchy, but it is not the only source of her status: her physical beauty keeps her above other women—especially Salome—and is the standard against which the men in the play compare other women's beauty. Herod tells Salome that "when to [Mariam] you have approached near, / Myself hath often ta'en you for an ape. / … You are to her a sun-burnt blackamoor" (IV.vii.459-60, 62). Constabarus tells Salome that she no longer blushes (I.vi.378), whereas Pheroras says Graphina's "cheeks [are] as red" as Mariam's (II.i.40). Mariam's appearance "secures her claim" to her superior position (Poitevin 21), while simultaneously securing Salome's position as black and ape-like, particularly when set in relief against Mariam. Moreover, this positioning Mariam/superior/white, Salome/inferior/black—allegedly reflects inner morality,

as Alexandra says: "Was [Herod, so also Salome] not Esau's issue, heir of hell? / … Oh yes, he doth from Edom's name derive / His cruel nature which with blood is fed" (I.ii.100, 103-04). Racial identity, and the colour it gives Mariam and Salome, is alleged to be the source of their moral character. Therefore, because Mariam is racialized as a white, pure blooded Jewess and Salome as black and base-born, they are supposed to be, respectively, good and evil.

However, *The Tragedy of Mariam* challenges these constructed notions of bodies signifying morality because Mariam's beauty—and her reliance on its signification—is her downfall. At the end of the play, Herod suggests that it was Mariam's beauty that had indicated her unchaste nature: "Her heav'nly beauty 'twas that made me think / That it with chastity could never dwell" (V.i.243-44), yet prior to this moment it was her beauty that he loved and praised her for. This contradiction exposes the notion of bodily signifiers as an ideology: the very thing that he praised her for—that made her the ideal woman—becomes the thing that signifies her unchasteness. Moreover, "Mariam actually complies with patriarchal strictures, putting too much credence in the idea that her body will appropriately signify internal states or conditions: 'Who sees for truth that Mariam is untrue? / If fair she be, she is as chaste as fair' (IV.viii.581-82)" (Poitevin 28). Whether Mariam is chaste or not, her beauty is granted disproportionate power: either it signifies her goodness or it signifies her badness. Rather than condemn the reliance on bodily signification, Mariam's downfall challenges it

and illuminates its contradictory nature, insofar as Herod can believe she is both good or evil based on her beauty. In other words, beauty is not a concrete signifier but signifies whatever the person holding power believes it does. Bodily signification, then, relies on a confirmation bias because, based on the action under scrutiny, the body signifies whatever the observer's judgment of said action is—good or evil.

Both *Othello* and *Mariam* take on early modern English notions which serve to restrict Others based on race, gender, or both. Rather than merely incorporating these ideas, the plays complicate and subvert them by revealing their contradictory and self-defeating natures. Iago's and Othello's attempts to defend their own authorities by alienating their respective Others are doomed, and instead reveal or cause their own alienation. Mariam's reliance on her body's ability to properly signify her moral character, which stems from patriarchal norms that have allowed her to maintain her privileged position, results in her death. The play reveals the ideological foundation of bodily signification because Mariam perceives it as the opposite of its historically real function. The signification is constructed in relation to the observer's judgment of whatever action he scrutinizes; what Mariam believes is the objective truth her body reflects is, in reality, based on constructed notions of race and femininity. Thus, both *Othello* and *Mariam* reveal contradictions in oppressive views. It is unfortunate that both plays employ tragic endings to reveal these contradictions, but perhaps death is

such a "bloody period" (Shakespeare V.ii.356) that its deployment necessarily gives an audience pause.

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