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## The other interracial marriage in *Othello*

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This paper argues that the character of Emilia might be both read and cast as a black woman, and considers the interpretive and performative possibilities in such a move. First it considers the present-day uses of such a reading and discusses the ways that modern theatre practitioners have experimented with race in casting *Othello*. Then it suggests a sort of thought experiment: imagining a Jacobean performance tailored to the interests of the new royal family—specifically Anne’s interest in black entertainers—a performance that in Emilia gives us possibly the first depictions of an African woman on the English stage and an exploration of the racial and gender dynamics in not one, but *two* interracial marriages.

**Keywords:** Othello; Emilia; race; alterity; casting; African; subaltern; performance; theatre

“Virginia Woolf once searched for Shakespeare’s sister,” Celia Caputi Daileader writes (13). “I would like to ask, where is Othello’s sister?” The answer that she and several other critics arrive at is that Othello’s sisters have been “pointedly erased” (Smith, “White Skin,” 52) from history, and that their erasure has everything to do with sex. Playthell Benjamin may say that “Shakespeare shows a definite interest in the exotic charms of interracial sex” (97), but in his examples he cites only one particular type of interracial sex: the black male/white female pairing. While this pairing seemingly represented “the epitome of the romantically transgressive story,” the other possibility, the white male/black female union, is “conspicuously absent” (Boose 42).<sup>1</sup>

Absent on the surface, yes, but perhaps hidden, and critics have been busily recovering various Dark Ladies, with all their sexual implications, within both the Shakespeare canon and early modern history. T.S. Eliot wrote, “[About] anyone as great as Shakespeare, it is probable that we can never be right ... [but] if we can never be right, it is better that we should from time to time change our way of being wrong” (qtd. in Ogude 151). In that vein, I would like to suggest another potential Dark Lady of Shakespeare, this one hidden in plain sight in a play that is all about race. I propose that “Othello’s sister” is present in Othello’s very own play – not Bianca, the character sometimes cast with a woman of colour playing her, but Emilia. Was Emilia black?

Actually, the question should be written as “was” Emilia “black”?, and in truth, I want to be perfectly clear that I am not arguing that Emilia “was” “black”: “was” in the sense that we can know precisely how the character was first staged (we cannot); “black” in the sense that such a term would denote for early moderns the same racial category that it

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does for us (it would not). However, what I am arguing is that the possibility is not closed off that Emilia could be racially different from Iago, and that understanding her as such serves to illuminate the play for audiences in the here and now – in short, that this reading has both interpretive implications for scholars and also performative implications for theatre practitioners. While there is historical, structural, and textual evidence to suggest that such a reading has always been available, I can find no indication that critics have ever before considered it. Theatrical practitioners have been more adventurous in experimenting with the racial landscape of the play, although less so in the specific direction of exploring an interracial dynamic between Iago and Emilia. What I want to suggest, as a kind of thought experiment or a strategically against-the-grain reading, is that theatre practitioners may have stumbled upon a legitimately Jacobean performance option, one that holds not only considerable potential for current productions but also implications for scholarship. A black Emilia, married to a white Iago, is, critically speaking, a completely new Emilia, and a completely new – and even more richly meaningful – *Othello*.

### “If she be black...”

Much scholarly work in the 1990s was devoted to historicizing race in the early modern era. “Black,” “white,” and “golden” already existed as descriptions of complexion, but these broke across class, gender, and moral lines far more regularly than they did across groups we would now recognize as different races; moreover, “white” and “black” were backed by hundreds of years of history as non-racial moral markers. Early modern people understood that geographically distant groups possessed different complexions, but complexions were not the same as races. Nor were geographically linked groups; heliotropic theory held that race was tied to one’s latitude and proximity to the sun, but exploration, travel, and intermarriage complicated and eventually overturned that theory. Rather, ideas about skin difference were both distinct from and interwoven with ideas about gender, morality, nation, location, and class. Religion also played a role, as “Moor” (Muslim) and “blackamoor” became intertwined.<sup>2</sup> Ania Loomba rightly characterizes the swirling interplay of all these meanings as a “cocktail” (*Shakespeare, Race, and Colonialism*, 92) of out-group<sup>3</sup> stereotypes. This was the situation long before Britain ever saw its first Africans.

Shakespeare’s fascination with blackness is obvious: 13 plays, plus *The Passionate Pilgrim* and the Sonnets, feature explicit references to “blackamoors,” “Ethiops,” or “Moors.”<sup>4</sup> This fascination may stem from direct acquaintance. With their exoticism and dramatic colouring, Africans were in demand for dances and royal entertainment, which put them in the same orbit as theatre professionals; moreover, by 1600 black servants were “fashionable” in London and black prostitutes may have been working in the streets of the Globe’s neighbourhood.<sup>5</sup>

There are two elements of early modern attitudes toward race that I especially want to highlight: the curious fact that the racial meanings of “black” and “white” are not precisely contemporaneous; and the difficulty of recovering attitudes toward black women. Through careful analysis of dates, Gary Taylor (45) argues persuasively that “white” simply *did not exist* as a racial category for Shakespeare. “Black” as a racial category predates “white” as one by roughly a century – “black” was being used in this sense at least as early as William Dunbar’s 1507 line “nou of an blak I will indytt.” “White,” however, was only used for the first time in 1613 to describe the English people

as an ethnic group (Bartels, “Too Many Blackamoors,” 318; Neill, “‘Mulattos,’ ‘Blacks,’ and ‘Indian Moors,’” 369). This century-long gap between the racial senses of “black” and “white” is exquisitely important for interpreting plays like *Othello*.

Beliefs about blackness and the nature of sub-Saharan people also involved ideas about their sexuality. Virginia Vaughan (35) says that sailors’ accounts of African nakedness and sexual practices gave Africans an aura of “exotic but forbidden sexuality.” The medieval divine Peter of Abelard wrote Heloise the eyebrow-raising lines, “Moreover it often happens that the flesh of black women is all the softer to touch though it is less attractive to look at, and for this reason the pleasure they give is greater and more suitable for private than for public enjoyment,” which leads Ania Loomba to observe, “The beauty of black women increasingly began to represent the paradox of sexual desire, its power as well as its shame” (*Shakespeare, Race, and Colonialism*, 61–62, 123).<sup>6</sup>

These ideas about blackness – its causes, its exoticism, its political meaning, and its sexual charge – form what Arthur L. Little, Jr. calls the “pretext” of *Othello*, “what the audience knows before it comes to experience the play,” (“An Essence That’s Not Seen”, 305) and recovering that pretext has been the focus of much important work. Nevertheless, Imtiaz Habib (277) observes, “Much of this scholarship on race ... has made visible only the Tudor black male.” *Othello*, *Titus Andronicus*, *Lust’s Dominion*, and other plays depict white women with black men, but could the reverse have appeared on the stage as well? Daileader speaks of what she terms “the flip-side of Othellophilia: that is the suppressed counter-narrative of the black woman seduced or raped by a white man or men” (*Racism, Misogyny, and the Othello Myth*, 15). She asks,

The most widely read, canonical narratives of inter-racial sex have involved black men and white women, and not black women and white men. Why? ... [H]istorical fact simply does not bear out the myth that women of color are sexually repugnant to white men. If anything, the opposite. (7)

According to Lynda Boose (45–46), the children of black female/white male partnerships, by following the mother’s coloring, threatened beliefs about male dominance and as a result the pairing itself became taboo, rendering black women “unrepresentable.” Other critics find the paucity of African women in literature (especially positive portrayals) more politically motivated. Kim Hall reads “dark” ladies – their allure as well as their danger and treacherousness – as a metaphor for the riches and risks of colonial exploitation, including sexual exploitation,<sup>7</sup> and Winthrop Jordan remarks trenchantly, “It is apparent that white men projected their own desires onto Negroes: their own passion for Negro women was not fully acceptable to society or the self and hence not readily admissible” (qtd. in Barthelemy 121). Obviously, I am citing here some attitudes that postdate Shakespeare. How can *Othello* be read in the light of attitudes and events centuries in the future? However, the points are important because what has happened in black/white race relations since Shakespeare has profoundly shaped our reluctance to see women of colour in his work.<sup>8</sup> The “erasure” of which Boose speaks is not his – it is ours. Margo Hendricks astutely asks, “What if, in attempting to sort out the significance of early modern English literature to a post-World War II global political economy, we have misread, or not read at all, some of the signs of racial thinking present in that literature? (qtd. in Smith, *Barbarian Errors*, 170)” We must be careful not to read into Shakespeare what is not yet there – i.e. whiteness as a racial category; but we must be

equally careful not to read out of Shakespeare, because of our racial guilt, what actually is there – the African men and (especially, for my purposes) women who lived and worked in early modern London.

In a chapter of Ayanna Thompson's *Colorblind Shakespeare*, Angela Pao writes

With Othello being routinely played by a black actor after the 1960s, in subsequent decades new devices were needed to strike the audience's sensibilities sufficiently to generate new insights into the nature and functions of racial identity. One of the most effective strategies has been to alter the racial composition of the rest of the cast of characters (29).

In her own book, Pao defines conceptual casting as “an ethnic, female, or disabled actor cast in a role to give the play greater resonance” (4) and declares

When their full potential for producing meaning is realized, conceptual approaches to casting belong to a different order of signification: they move a production from the field of artistic representation to that of cultural criticism ... It is precisely when issues of race are involved that “the theater” is revealed as a site, or more accurately as multiple sites, for the contestation of cultural power and as a potential location for restructuring the social and symbolic orders (30–33).

What I am calling for with Emilia is conceptual casting, just as Virginia Vaughan, Sheila Rose Bland, and Hugh Quarshie have called for colour-conscious conceptual casting of Othello in order to galvanize audiences and to use theatres as sites for cultural criticism. Ania Loomba asserts, “The endless critical debates about Othello's precise skin color, one may recall, often strain to deny its political importance....That play also demonstrates both the divergences and alliances between *different sorts of patriarchy*” (*Women, “Race,” and Writing in the Early Modern Period*, 30, emphasis mine). When there are two interracial marriages on stage at the same time, one a vilified, poisoned one between a black man and a white woman, and one an unremarked-upon one between a white man and a black woman, then virtually *every minute* of the play forces audiences to notice complicated racial and gender hierarchies that normally go unquestioned. Iago, we notice, feels entitled to choose a black partner for himself, but Desdemona's choice violates both racial and gender norms in Iago's eyes. (Who, after all, in American history has most viciously policed relationships between white women and black men? Slaveholders and their descendants – white men who were sexually involved with black women and who had their own racial and sexual guilt to avoid.) Casting a woman of colour as Emilia can seem to mask Iago's villainy from other characters. She unwittingly gives him cover, allowing us to see (literally) why Othello trusts him, while simultaneously causing audiences to realize, probably with no small discomfort, the extent to which Iago's racial and sexual attitudes persist today.

The shift in casting that I propose is a technically simple one (i.e. hiring a black actress instead of a white one), yet it activates a deeply complex and challenging new response in the audience which might re-energize productions of the play. Stage productions cannot but take place in the temporal, carrying all the racial and gender baggage of the past four centuries with them, just as their audiences carry it within themselves, and thus have the ability to use the play as a way to critique and interrogate that shared past. I am no fan of punk-rock *Hamlets*, or high-school *Othellos* for that matter. But to ask the audience to forget everything they know about contemporary race

and gender is to cripple their potential as audience members, who co-create with actors the shared imaginative space, time, and experience of a play.

A handful of productions have experimented with casting both Iago and Emilia as black, for various reasons, but I have found only two modern productions that cast an actress of color as Emilia against a white Iago: Cheek by Jowl's world-touring production in 2004 and Peter Sellars' 2009 production.<sup>9</sup> Ironically, neither production drew attention to Emilia and Iago as an interracial marriage. Cheek by Jowl pioneered colour-blind casting in British classical theatre in the 1980s, as they mention in their press and education materials. By highlighting the colour-blindness of their casting, what they accomplished was essentially to order the audience not to see at all the race of the woman playing Emilia. The strange, studied invisibility of Jaye Griffiths' race as Emilia reminds one that it is not enough for an actress to be a woman of colour. To borrow an idea from Judith Butler's theory of performativity, she must also perform colour if that is to be an element of her characterization. Unfortunately, Cheek by Jowl's tacit (and completely unintentional) message of "ignore the minority" proved all too easy to follow. Virtually all reviewers obeyed – if they noticed, in the middle of a play about one interracial marriage, that they were actually seeing two, they obligingly did not mention it. The two reviewers who broke this rule both made rather telling comments about it. An Australian reviewer confused Emilia and Bianca and bizarrely shifted blame for (and indeed also appropriated for his own use) the play's most racist language, writing, "Othello is not the only Moor in this Venice. Iago's wife Bianca is possessed of a similarly 'sooty bosom,' which gives Iago's pandering to Rodrigo's racist fantasies an entirely new edge" (Dunne). An American reviewer speculated that in casting African-British actress Jaye Griffiths that "perhaps the director wanted to lessen the racial motivations" (Bacalzo). Clearly, neither of these reviewers was prepared – nor did Cheek by Jowl's production prepare them – to consider the possibility that racists, too, may have interracial relationships. Their blind spot here is the same one that has kept white male/black female relationships invisible for centuries.

*Can a racist love a woman of color?* Strom Thurmond remained close to the biracial daughter he fathered with an underage black maid in his family's home, even as he was running for President on a segregationist ticket. Thomas Jefferson wrote some truly heinous things about blacks in *Notes on the State of Virginia*, yet descendants of his relationship with Sally Hemings strongly believe it to have been a love match. Some Jefferson-Hemings descendants identify racially as black, and some as white, given different paths taken by their grandparents and great-grandparents. Shay Banks-Young, a black descendant through Madison Hemings, told me that every time she spoke about the Jefferson-Hemings relationship, "the rape question" came up – and, she noted, always raised by white women in the audience. Eventually she came to believe that while the white women *thought* they were exhibiting "sisterhood" by identifying sympathetically with the relatively powerless Hemings, what Banks-Young thought was actually happening was that they were unconsciously limiting the scope of the Jefferson-Hemings relationship, foreclosing the possibility of love, because ultimately they were unwilling or unable to see black women as truly loveable.<sup>10</sup> On stage, Iago's relationship with Emilia can be played as both racist *and* loving – I have seen Emilia staged as a brassy, bawdy match for Iago until the end, when she is as shocked as everyone else by his duplicity, and I believe this interpretation has as much or more warrant in the text than the battered-wife Emilia that has become popular. A director could suggest that Iago married her partly in a bid to get closer to Othello, to gain the lieutenantcy he so longs for. But this

staging certainly need not “lessen the racial motivations,” as the American reviewer of Cheek by Jowl’s production thought. On the contrary, it can be done to simultaneously intensify and complicate the questions of race, gender, sexual attraction, marriage, and motivation. A racist, genuinely in love with a woman of colour, is challenging for both actors and for their audiences, and it is a historical reality. About playing Othello, Ben Kingsley once said,

Only those who have played Othello know how uniquely distressing the role can sometimes be. When the barriers dissolve, when pressures on the actor and the dilemma of the character fuse into a subjective pain in front of your audience then these are dark nights, and no amount of applause can set the actor free. The very soul seems metabolized. The play smolders on in the body and brain until the early hours (qtd. in Marks 106).

I believe this kind of intensity is available for the actress playing Emilia – and through her, available for her audience as well.

### “Haply, for I am black”

So far, I am only pointing out the potential for audiences that might be unlocked by casting an actress of colour as Emilia, an act of conceptual casting of the sort that is already sometimes done in modern productions. (It is perhaps worth observing that in virtually every production of *Othello*, screen as well as stage, Emilia is darker at least in hair color than Desdemona. Even within a spectrum of racial whiteness, we have always accepted that Desdemona is the fairer of the two. All I am suggesting is taking that existing pattern to its logical conclusion.) The reason I also want to see this done on classical stages like the Globe and the Blackfriars is that I believe there could be a Jacobean precedent for it, one visible now only through the slenderest of clues. It is always worth remembering that we have virtually no evidence of how any single character in Shakespeare appeared on the early modern stage, in terms of either makeup or costume. So this is my thought experiment: imagining a Jacobean performance tailored (like *Macbeth*) to the interests of the new royal family, a performance that in Emilia gives us one of the first depictions of an African woman on the English stage and an exploration of the racial and gender dynamics in not one, but two interracial marriages.

Although masques featuring African dancers and musicians date back to Henry VIII, the sovereign with the most intense fascination for black performers was Queen Anne, wife of James I. Having already been entertained by four young Africans dancing naked in the snow to celebrate her marriage to James (the dancers died of pneumonia), Anne commissioned Ben Jonson to write, with her authorial guidance, a masque in which she (seven months pregnant at the time) and her ladies in waiting appeared in greasepaint as blackamoors. *The Masque of Blackness* was staged in the winter of 1604–05, two months after *Othello* played at court. Anne and her ladies appeared as six “dusky daughters of Niger,” who sought the British king to turn them white.

However spectacular it may have been, the masque was “disastrous” for the queen’s reputation. “The ladies’ blackness,” writes Bernadette Andrea, “invoking dis-ease in the court audience, thus becomes the embodied site of sexually- and racially-charged cultural fantasies and fears” (266). Part of the scandal of *Masque of Blackness* was that it depicted the “daughters of Niger” as coming to Britain to put themselves under the control of white men – ostensibly the paternal and platonic control of James the king, but the suggestion of sexual contact was impossible to completely eradicate, especially with a

heavily pregnant leading lady, causing Andrea to diagnose the “dis-ease” of the spectators as being in part due to uncomfortable sexual fantasies.

*Othello* was in repertory – and was popular there – at the same time that the queen’s masque was providing scandal and gossip for London society. According to Tiffany Stern, plays in repertory were revised in order to keep them fresh and timely, often by the playwright himself. In fact, she singles out *Othello* as a particular example of just this kind of reworking: “Revisions have been made to *Othello*, revisions that suggest a Shakespeare who cannot leave his text alone once he has the chance to rework it” (55). In their book *Producible Interpretation*, Judith Milhous and Robert Hume write, “A playscript should be interpreted as what it is – a vehicle to be completed in performance – not as an aesthetic object complete in itself” (ix). This is a commonplace for theatrical practitioners, but ideally it should be equally true for literary interpreters, and there is no reason to think it wasn’t true for the King’s Men. Further, as Dymrna Callaghan notes, “the representation of race on the Renaissance stage is fundamentally a matter of stage properties” (196).<sup>11</sup> Makeup and costuming leave little to no trace, either on the text or in history.<sup>12</sup> Our records of playgoing in early modern London are woefully fragmentary, and only chance comments by diarists capture details like a character’s dress, gesture, or appearance. It would have been an easy matter – and one virtually untraceable for modern scholars – for Shakespeare’s troupe to have decided to play to Anne’s known interest by featuring a black woman (meaning, of course, a player who was neither of the two). It need not have been consistent, nor done with the first performance, but could have been added and dropped according to fashion or whim, so long as the text could bear either reading – in fact, it could have been added specifically for the court performance. Nor is it necessary that Emilia be named explicitly as a Moor, blackamoor, African, etc.; that would limit the play’s flexibility for later revivals. Barthelemy observes of George Peele’s *The Battle of Alcazar* (1588–89),

If Muly [Mahamet] is black, why then is there no mention of it? The text surely need not mention something that would be obvious to the audience. The sex of characters is not always mentioned, so why should the race, particularly when it is obvious and well-known? (90)

There is, indeed, no textual reference to Emilia being African or Moorish. However, there is also no textual reference to her being Anglo or Venetian. A critic who wished to argue with my hypothesis would be at a loss, textually, to prove that Emilia’s race is the same as Iago’s or Desdemona’s. The assumption that she is Caucasian – or “white,” or “golden,” or, in the play’s own parlance, “fair” – rests on nothing more than reflexive Anglo-normativity.

In a two-month span of court performances, *Othello* played on 1 November 1604, followed by *The Masque of Blackness* on 6 January 1605, and *Love’s Labor’s Lost* with its blackamoor musicians sometime between 9 and 14 January (Chambers, IV.119). Of course, if the staging of African characters is indeed the thematic connection, then *Othello* would have been included because of Othello’s blackness, not Emilia’s. Nevertheless, this schedule hints at the intensity of the court’s fascination and may have encouraged at least a temporary maximization of black characters. I am not positing a firmly, eternally African Emilia. I am arguing an Emilia who can be *either* African or Venetian, precisely because she is undefined, whose potential Africanness may have been a staging experiment or an alteration specifically for court performance, and whose flexibility offers us options as it may have offered the King’s Men options. Milhous and

Hume observe, “A playscript is a bundle of potentialities, and a production is not only a completion of one of those potentialities but also a suppression of the others” (5). Different productions complete and suppress different potentialities, for any number of reasons and on any number of occasions, and makeup and costume can be changed on short notice without altering the script – as long as the script is sufficiently flexible. Meredith Skura asks an interesting series of questions about the nature of theatrical representation: “What did an audience see when Othello came on stage? An escaped slave? A stereotyped stage Moor? Othello? An Englishman? Burbage in blackface?” (308) What I want to know is, what did they see when Emilia came on stage?

### “How if she be black and witty?”

Loomba calls Shakespeare’s plays “an extraordinarily powerful ... conduit” (*Shakespeare, Race, and Colonialism*, 5) for creating and disseminating ideas about race, partly because other early modern playwrights picked up on and embroidered his themes. In arguing that Emilia can be read as a woman of colour, I want to consider John Marston’s *The Tragedy of Sophonisba* (1606). It premiered two years after *Othello* and featured a black maid named Zanthia, who Barthelemy calls “possibly the first ... black woman on the stage” (124). Zanthia inaugurates the tradition of black maids that Imtiaz Habib has analyzed, and some of his observations about the type seem applicable to particular moments in *Othello*. That Marston borrowed from *Othello* is obvious. Syphax’s opening speech on reputation (1.2) is reminiscent of Iago and Cassio’s discussion of the subject (2.3.256–65). Act one, scene two of *Sophonisba* opens with an “unpinning” scene, in which Zanthia’s words about women’s behaviour being circumscribed by men’s expectations slightly echo Emilia’s speech about adultery. In the same scene, the hero Massanissa is interrupted on his wedding night by the state council sending him to war, and his new wife Sophonisba speaks openly to the council about her desire for her husband and her wish to accompany him. From here the plays diverge, since the decision is made that Sophonisba will stay behind. Zanthia betrays her mistress to the lust of the villain Syphax; Barthelemy says of this betrayal, “The reward the Moor anticipates for her treachery is sexual intimacy with the villain; she hopes to purchase pleasure, luxury, with her mistress’ virtue” (125).<sup>13</sup> No matter how sympathetic one wants to be to Emilia, and no matter how much blame ultimately rests with Iago, the fact remains that in stealing the handkerchief, Emilia is the one who betrays Desdemona. Critics are nearly unanimous that her motivation in doing so is, essentially, “sexual intimacy with the villain” – that is, she longs for a little affection and positive attention from her own husband. Marston borrows plot and speech elements from Shakespeare; I believe he also borrows the character of a black or Moorish maid. Thus, the two performance events that most closely follow chronologically and are most thought to be influenced by *Othello*, *The Masque of Blackness* and *The Tragedy of Sophonisba*, both feature not black men (who were already common on stage), but black women. It is a most curious coincidence indeed unless we are willing to entertain the possibility that Jacobean viewers, at least in some performances, may have seen a black woman in *Othello*.

Of Zanthia and also Zanche from Webster’s 1612 play *The White Devil*, who scholars have believed to be the earliest extant depictions of African females in early modern drama, critics have observed that they act as negative reflections of “compliant white womanhood” (Habib 281). Lynda Boose says that these women “literalize the patriarchal fear of the darkness of female sexuality” (47). Habib says that Zanthia is the reverse of

Sophonisba's "patriarchally transgressive but otherwise exemplary white womanhood" (287). These observations are equally applicable to Emilia *vis-à-vis* Desdemona, particularly at the moment of Emilia's speech on adultery (4.3.85–102). Habib says these figures – and I argue that Emilia, if not in the premiere then in revised repertory performances, is their progenitor –

[offer] vital opportunities for ... recovering an elided black female subjectivity from the interstices of early colonial English literary history. Historically obscured, culturally blackened, textually marginalized and critically ignored, [these women invoke] inevitably the poetics of the subaltern (278–79).

Emilia, no matter how she is cast in a production, invokes the subaltern both rhetorically and dramatically. Nothing in her speech or her actions contradicts Habib's descriptions of subaltern characters; this interpretation of her role suggests that she is a powerful signifier of race overlooked by critics.

There are historical reasons why a black female character might have been particularly interesting or timely for Shakespeare's audiences. There are structural reasons in *Othello* why that character might more profitably be Emilia than Bianca. Loomba writes:

The 'central conflict' of the play then, if we must locate one, is neither between white and black alone, nor merely between men and women – it is rather between the racism of a white patriarchy and the threat posed to it by both a black man and a white woman. But these two are not simply aligned against white patriarchy, since their own relation cannot be abstracted from sexual or racial tension. Othello is not merely a black man who is jealous, but a man whose jealousy and blackness are inseparable. Similarly, Desdemona's initial boldness and later submission are not discordant in the context of her positions as a *white* woman and a *white woman*. There is thus a tripartite and extremely complex relationship between black man, white woman, and the state (*Gender, Race, Renaissance Drama*, 49, emphasis in original).

In Loomba's "black man, white woman, and the state" there is also what we now see (anachronistically) as a white man: Iago, who as a soldier and as an echo of Brabantio's opposition partially represents the state. Thus, in the set of racial and gender binaries of white man/black man, white woman/black woman, that leaves only the black woman to be accounted for. In the pair of marriages of Othello/Desdemona and Iago/Emilia, it leaves only Emilia.

Many critics have noted the way in which *Othello* makes use of comic conventions. Teresa Faherty singles out the way that "Emilia and Iago's low comedy marriage, juxtaposed with the high comedy romance of Desdemona and Othello, creates an on-going 'upstairs-downstairs' motif" (184). If Emilia is read (or cast) as black, then the inverted marriage of comedy is truly inverted in every way. The full set of racial and sexual binaries can be filled – although, again, the concept of "white" is our own partly anachronistic one. I say "partly" because even if whiteness was not yet considered a racial category for the English, Shakespeare was nonetheless well aware of the visual effects of staging, and a pair of couples, one half of each in blackface, presented a visually striking motif.

Karen Newman sees the play as "structured around" miscegenation, not only physical but also what she terms "rhetorical miscegenation" (144–45), citing the slippery and polysemous ways that "white" and "black" and related words (i.e. "fair" and "foul") are

used. She cites the “ironically named” Bianca as Desdemona’s opposite, embodying Desdemona’s “blackened whiteness” (153). Bianca, though, is a side character who never exchanges a single word with Desdemona. The sense of opposites is much stronger if one reads Emilia as Desdemona’s opposite. Speaking of historical shifts in Othello’s colour, Ben Okri says that “to reduce the color is to diminish the force of the sex. Working together they can be quite unbearable” (qtd. in Loomba, *Gender, Race, Renaissance Drama*, 41). Casting an actress of colour as Emilia doubles the force of Okri’s observation.

The occasional casting of Bianca as black has, I think, acted as a herring (a red one, that is) that has kept scholars from considering the far stronger candidate of Emilia as the representative of Desdemona’s “blackened whiteness.” First, unlike Emilia, Bianca is explicitly termed “fair,” when Cassio greets her as “my most fair Bianca” at 3.4.167. Second, through the eighteenth and nineteenth century Bianca’s character and subplot were frequently cut entirely from productions, while Emilia is too integral to the play’s action to ever be cut. If Bianca is structurally intended as Desdemona’s opposite, then it seems implausible that she should be so dispensable, while the other indispensable female character is dismissed as merely a maid. The purpose of a dramatic opposite is that they act as a mirror image, a character similar in many ways to another character – identical, even – who nonetheless makes different choices than their counterpart and reaps the consequences of those choices (which may be different than those of the mirror image or ironically the same). Like Desdemona, Emilia is from Venice (Bianca’s home has been debated). Like Desdemona, Emilia is married to a soldier. Like Desdemona, Emilia travels to Cyprus. Like Desdemona, Emilia has a jealous husband. Like Desdemona, Emilia is unjustly suspected of an affair. And like Desdemona, Emilia dies at the hands of her husband. She differs from her mistress in standing up to Othello and speaking frankly about sexuality and adultery, but her forthrightness nevertheless leaves her murdered next to murdered Desdemona, the mirror images united in death.

There are some very curious moments in the history of *Othello* criticism that seem, when put together, to suggest that on an unconscious level, audiences have sensed that somehow there was a black woman missing from the play, even suspected that Emilia might be that woman. Virginia Mason Vaughan (87) analyzes Zanthia as follows: “Zanthia’s frank sexuality is crucial for the construction of Sophonisba as the chaste heroine because the Moor deflects anxieties about female desire onto herself, accentuating her mistress’s white virtue” (87). From Thomas Rymer<sup>14</sup> to the Victorian age, fastidious male critics have sometimes expressed dismay over Desdemona’s freely expressed desire for the “rites” (1.3.257) of her marriage; John Quincy Adams informed actress Fanny Kemble that Desdemona’s death was “a very just judgment on her” for her sexual appetites.<sup>15</sup> One may argue that Bianca exists to deflect the sexual anxieties of the audience, but clearly, she hasn’t successfully done so over the centuries. The fact that the condemnation remains suggests either that Shakespeare removed this safety valve deliberately, to heighten the audience’s discomfort and thus engagement with the play; or that the deflection that should be present in the person of a blackamoor maid, in exactly Emilia’s position, is in fact missing, allowing the sexual anxieties to rise to the surface. The adultery speech does exactly what Vaughan says it should do – its frank sexuality contrasts Emilia with the chaste Desdemona, but when Emilia is read or staged as white, the deflection then fails. Curiously, a playbill for the first American staging of *Othello* (1765 in Newport, Rhode Island) described Emilia as “a good example to all servants ... and all persons in subjection” (qtd. in Edelstein 357). It is a slender clue indeed, but it might point to a barely remembered stage history. Eighteenth-century

America was exquisitely aware of the distinction between white servants and black slaves, much more so than we are today when we read the word “subjection.” The writer of this playbill, for whatever reason, chose to call Emilia (and not Othello) to the attention of servants and, specifically, of slaves. Clearly, her position and her loyalty make her of interest to servants. But what was it about Emilia that made her of unique interest to slaves?

In a much-quoted line, Barthelemy writes, “The black Moorish woman stands as a symbol of everything evil and low. Legitimately she functions in the community solely as a waiting-woman, illegitimately as a bawd and whore” (123). Critics have never assigned a greater context for the brothel scene than its intrinsic meaning as a display of Othello’s obscene, paranoid fantasies. The fact that other black women on the stage acted more directly as bawds suggests that Shakespeare either inaugurates this depiction, here in the brothel scene with Emilia, or that he is making an inter-theatrical allusion to other early modern characters, now lost, who establish the black-maid-as-bawd role that Zanthia would continue a few years later. Like other Moorish women in early modern drama, Emilia functions legitimately as a waiting-woman, and Othello directly and plainly accuses her of functioning illegitimately as a bawd.

Of course, if Emilia is a woman of colour, then that offers a whole new perspective on Iago and his motivation. Kim Hall expands on the first part of Barthelemy’s statement about black women standing for “everything evil and low,” adding that for the white men sexually involved with her, she acts as “an external representation of the spiritual state of the man who embraces her” (189). This state is one that defies social norms yet pays for that defiance with anxiety and racial ambiguity. White men having sex with black women may be playing out white society’s fantasies of domination and control over subalterns (Little, *Shakespeare Jungle Fever*, 148), but in that moment of sexual connection, they become themselves racially commingled. In the “curious alchemy” that invariably identifies biracial persons like Barack Obama as black, white plus black always equals black (Daileader, *Racism, Misogyny, and the Othello Myth*, 16). Moreover, Loomba points out that “England’s colonial ventures were not the result of its having achieved a confident and secure national identity. Colonial ambitions are often generated by anxieties about national identity” (*Shakespeare, Race, and Colonialism*, 13). Thus, Iago, in his colonizing of Emilia’s body, is both racially suspect himself and racked with anxiety about his adulteration, an anxiety so disturbing that the only response is to turn it outward, into aggressive hatred of Othello.

In his perceptive article “Unproper Beds: Race, Adultery, and the Hideous in *Othello*,” Michael Neill explores the complex connections between adultery and adulteration. Iago, he argues, works assiduously to redefine Othello and Desdemona’s marriage as “an act of racial adulteration, violating the natural laws of kind; in this way the marriage is systematically confused with Othello’s and Cassio’s supposed adulterous couplings with Emilia” (399) – an interesting linking of ideas in that Neill never suggests that Emilia may be read as a Moor herself, and *Emilia’s* adultery is hardly the question of adultery so central to the play. The point of the article is the close connection between the transgressive mixing of adultery and the transgressive mixing of Othello’s marriage; of course, Iago succeeds in conflating the two in Othello’s mind, with disastrous results. Neill writes

In the seventeenth century adultery was conceived (as the history of the two words reminds us) to be quite literally a kind of adulteration – the pollution or corruption of the divinely

ordained bond of marriage, and thus in the profoundest sense a violation of the natural order of things. (408)

Strangely, Neill seems almost unconsciously aware of the argument I am making here, without ever himself bringing it out explicitly. At one point, he speaks of “the sense that Iago so carefully nurtures in Othello of his own marriage as an adulterous transgression” (407) – it is clear that “his own” refers to Othello, but one could easily read this phrasing as referring to *Iago’s* own marriage. He also refers to “Iago’s fantasies of sexual adulteration” (399) and concludes (speaking of Othello and Desdemona), “Only murder, it seems, with its violent rapture of possession, can break such a spiral [of jealousy]; but it does so at the cost of seeming to demonstrate the truth of all that Iago has implied about the natural consequences of transgressive desire” (406). Neill does not mention that Iago’s marriage, too, ends in murder. If Emilia is a woman of colour, then every word of Neill’s argument refers equally to Iago’s own marriage: he copes with anxiety and guilt by displacing them onto Othello, and Emilia’s murder is also a consequence of *his* transgressive desire. Barthelemy picks up on this: “That Iago rather than Othello is obsessed with sex is startling because sex is conventionally the black man’s preoccupation. ... Iago never ceases to project onto others his own overriding sexual interests as he reveals his own sexual anxieties” (151).

It is a critical truism that Iago slips repeatedly from character to character. His statement “Were I the Moor, I would not be Iago” (1.1.57) expresses what Emily Bartels calls “a conflicted desire to be and not to be the Moor” (“Making More of the Moor,” 450). In fabricating Cassio’s dream and in the kneeling, vow-exchanging conclusion to the seduction scene (3.3), he slips into Desdemona’s place. In fact, it is significant that the character Iago “borrows” most is that of Desdemona – his counterpart, I believe, in being married to a Moor. When he paints his vivid fiction of Cassio’s dream to Othello, in the dream, Neill observes, “‘Desdemona’ is only ‘Iago’” (“Unproper Beds,” 400). This slipping into Desdemona’s role has sometimes been read as homosexual (to the detriment of some productions of the play – reviewers rarely seem to think the interpretation works well on stage), but it has never been read as what it equally can be: racial. I would argue that Iago parallels Desdemona in that he too is the European partner in an interracial marriage, and Emilia and Othello parallel one another as both racial Others and as Iago’s victims, the people he seduces then destroys. Interpreted as white, Emilia is cut out of the diabolical triangle of Othello, Desdemona, and Iago; read as a woman of colour, she becomes a lens that reflects and refracts all the play’s characters and themes in startling new ways.

Textually, the key scenes for me are the dock scene (2.1) and the final scene (5.2). However, there are several smaller moments in the text that take on fresh meaning when re-imagined with not one but two interracial marriages at the heart of the play. Iago’s description of Cassio as “a fellow almost damned in a fair wife” (1.1.20) provoked five pages of notes from H.H. Furness speculating as to Cassio’s marital status and the soul-killing power of a beautiful woman. But what Iago is most jealous of regarding Cassio is what Cassio has that Iago doesn’t – the lieutenantcy, “a daily beauty in his life,” and possibly, a “fair” wife – Emilia is the only woman in the play who is never called “fair.” Roderigo calls Othello “an extravagant and wheeling stranger, / Of here and everywhere” (1.1.138–39). Iago is also a soldier, Othello’s ensign; he speaks of his own service “at Rhodes, at Cyprus, and on other grounds, / Christened and heathen” (1.1.28–29). Iago too is a wheeling stranger of here and everywhere. John Rolfe brought his wife Pocahontas to

England, arriving just weeks after Shakespeare's death, and it doesn't take more than a quick survey of military bases to realize that soldiers still regularly take wives native to foreign lands they've visited.<sup>16</sup>

The highly racialized and sexualized banter between Iago and Desdemona on the docks when she arrives in Cyprus is frequently analyzed for the dizzying puns, inversions, and multivalent meanings deployed by "fair" and "foul." Iago's ironic praise of women roughly divides women into quadrants based on axes that run from "foul" to "fair," which have both racial and moral overtones, and "foolish" to "wise." Into the quadrant marked "fair and wise" we can place Desdemona, since that is the first piece of "praise." It is also a direct response to her question, "Come, how wouldst thou praise me?" (2.1.127). But in which category does Emilia belong? After fair and wise, there are three more "types" of women: "black and witty," "fair and foolish," and "foul and foolish." We assign "fair and wise" to Desdemona. Why do we never assign a set of qualities to Emilia? Critics treat her as invisible in this exchange, even though she is standing beside the two of them and participates in the conversation. Iago's categorizing is universal – all women belong somewhere on the two axes, at least as he sees it, so Emilia must belong to one of the three remaining categories. Once Desdemona has been praised, it seems logical to turn to Emilia next. In no small part this is because she is the only other woman on the stage. From a staging standpoint – always a vital consideration for Shakespeare – it makes very little sense to praise Desdemona, then turn to one or two abstract, imaginary female "types" not on the stage, and only then to return to Emilia. Nor does it make sense to have Emilia simply staring into space as though none of Iago's universal characterizing applied to her. However, it makes perfect stage sense to praise Desdemona, then turn to Emilia, and only then move on to more abstract women. The next type presented for Iago's praise is "black and witty." Iago's praise could suggest an interracial marriage:

If she be black and thereto have a wit,

She'll find a white that shall her blackness fit. (2.1.135–36)

Neill glosses "white" here not as a racial term, but as the centre of an archery target, with a pun on "wight," and "black" as suggesting pubic hair. It seems to me that "black," at least, can bear some racial reading here, and possibly "white" as well. The first use of "white" as a racial marker occurs in 1613 when two writers simultaneously use the term. Samuel Purchas refers to the "tawney Moore, black Negro, duskie Libyan ... [and] whiter European" (Neill, "'Mulattos,' 'Blacks,' and 'Indian Moors,'" 369 – note that "black Negro" seems to be a fully developed notion as opposed to his somewhat tentative description of Europeans as white), and Thomas Middleton's pageant *The Triumphs of Truth* features a "king of the Moors," who says, "I see amazement set upon the faces / Of these white people" (411–12).<sup>17</sup> Discussing this coinage, Gary Taylor writes, "If the word *white* constructed and defined a new social category, then that category did not exist before the word *white* created it" (25). I wish to complicate this a bit. I do agree that the category of whiteness is constructed only after *Othello*, indeed after Shakespeare's career is wholly over. However, for these first racial uses of "white" to be intelligible to their hearers, the word must already have undergone a slippage in meaning from its earlier status as a gender, moral, and class marker – that is, it must have been made available for newer alternate meanings. I think Iago's lines above are precisely one moment – perhaps

the first moment – of such slippage. I want to be quite clear that I do not believe that in the couplet above “white” bears the fully racialized meaning of a European male (especially not solely). It does not. It cannot. Neill’s archery pun is fully operational. So is “wight.” But as the audience thought of archery targets and pubic hair, they *heard* “wight” (and of course, they also heard “white,” the actual word in the line) and *saw* Iago, a “non-black” character and, I believe, a black Emilia next to him, as they along with “white” Desdemona waited for “black” Othello. They also heard the entire exchange, playing on black, white, foul, and fair.<sup>18</sup> The word “white” in this couplet does not have an overtly racial meaning, but it begins to unmoor, so to speak, the word from its previous meanings. It begins the slippage that creates a sort of subterranean awareness, so that in 1613 when both Purchas and Middleton use the word in a racial way, readers and audiences know exactly what they mean.

Returning to the dock scene, Emilia herself asks, “How if fair and foolish?” Iago’s answer is

She never yet was foolish that was fair,  
For even her folly helped her to an heir. (2.1.138–39)

In Shakespeare’s version of Cinthio’s tale, Iago and Emilia are apparently childless. This seems to exclude her from this category, the only other category on the “fair” side of Iago’s spectrum (and as Neill says in a gloss in his Oxford edition, “In this play the term ‘fair’ (like ‘foul’) is probably never without a racial loading”). Iago’s soliloquy at the end of the dock scene shows him musing once again on lust and sexual jealousy. He says of Desdemona

Now do I love her too,  
Not out of absolute lust (though peradventure  
I stand accountant for as great a sin) (2.1.290–92)

Neill does not attempt to define which of his myriad sins Iago might be considering. Some critics have taken it as an admission of thwarted desire for Desdemona, a leftover element from Cinthio’s source story; could Iago instead be equating himself and Desdemona, saying that he and she both stand accountant for the *same* “sin,” that of marrying outside their Venetian community? This is how I read the line – he sees her as standing accountant for the sin of marrying Othello, and he himself stands accountant for the same sin of marrying Emilia. Later, in 3.3, he will say

Not to affect many proposed matches  
Of her own clime, complexion, and degree,  
Whereto we see in all things nature tends –  
Foh! One may smell in such a will most rank,  
Foul disproportions, thoughts unnatural –  
But pardon me: I do not in position

Distinctly speak of her. (3.3.234–40)

Of course, he intends for Othello and the audience to take him as speaking of Desdemona, despite his unctuous denial, but it is, I believe, *himself* that Iago is speaking of. He has already, more than once, recognized his own thoughts and plans as monstrous, hellish, and unnatural – this is an echo of the same language that he uses about himself in other soliloquies (1.3.395–96 and 2.3.341–44). He has used similar terms about himself less than a hundred lines earlier, when Othello questions his suspicions about Cassio and Iago replies,

Utter my thoughts? Why, say they are vile and false –

As where's that palace whereinto foul things

Sometimes intrude not? (3.3.141–43)

The muted racial loading of “foul” here, along with Iago’s strongly negative words describing himself and his thoughts, hints again at his own racial ambiguity and his agonized anxieties over it. His use of the same words for his own thoughts and those he slyly attributes to Desdemona also serves as another way to link him with her; he is about to slip into Desdemona’s place in Cassio’s dream and in his “marriage” to Othello. Just as it is his will that is most rank, his thoughts that are most unnatural, it is Iago who has not affected a match of his own “clime, complexion, and degree.”

At the end of the dock scene, Iago ends his soliloquy by reiterating his suspicion that Othello and Emilia have had an affair, and this time he adds Cassio to the mix. Strangely, though, the way Iago characterizes his suspicions that Othello and Cassio have been with Emilia is remarkably passive (“I fear Cassio with my nightcap too”). Early modern condemnations of promiscuity lay virtually all the blame on women and their “lightness” (to use a word that illustrates just how slippery colour terms can be), but Iago never blames Emilia (and hardly involves her at all) in his fantasies of cuckoldry – rather, he seems to fear that she has been a victim of the universal sexual privilege over black women that he himself has employed. Such sexual privilege was not so ... *developed* ... in Shakespeare’s time as it would be in colonial and antebellum America, but it was already nascent – during Sir Francis Drake’s 1577–80 circumnavigation, his crew impregnated at least one African woman and abandoned her on a convenient island.<sup>19</sup> And Octavius Caesar, as Lemuel A. Johnson (30) puts it, “expands the frontier of what is permissible in the sexual exploration of the alien and the exotic” when he says knowingly in *Antony and Cleopatra*, “Let us grant it is not / Amiss to tumble in the bed of Ptolemy” (1.4.16–17). Another small moment in which reading Emilia as African might lend new resonance to a line occurs in Desdemona’s Willow Song scene (4.3), when she reminisces that her “mother had a maid called Barbary” (4.3.25); Neill notes how the alternate form of Barbara evokes once again the Barbary Coast of Africa and might suggest that the maid was black.

As a character, Emilia is sometimes interpreted as a bawdy older woman in the vein of Nurse in *Romeo and Juliet*. As such, one would expect her speech to be forthright and her manner straightforward. At the beginning of the brothel scene (4.2), Othello seems tempted to treat her as a confidante when he questions her about Desdemona’s behaviour. Emilia’s reply is both bold and familiar:

I durst, my lord, to wager she is honest,  
 Lay down my soul at stake: if you think other,  
 Remove your thought; it doth abuse your bosom. (4.2.13–15)

In her blunt advice, clearly Emilia is neither intimidated by Othello's military greatness nor abashed by his foreignness. A small but perhaps telling circumstantial point: throughout the play, Othello speaks directly to Emilia far more than most title characters speak to waiting women.

Cassio, on the other hand, seems oddly formal and uncertain in Emilia's presence. On the dock, he greets Emilia with a kiss, then says,

Let it not gall your patience, good Iago,  
 That I extend my manners. 'Tis my breeding  
 That gives me this bold show of courtesy. (2.1.100–02)

After he is cashiered, he again apologizes to Iago for his dealings with Emilia, saying, "I've made bold, Iago, / To send in to your wife" (3.1.31–32), in his hopes that she will "procure access" (3.1.34, anticipating the brothel scene) to Desdemona for him. Speech habits like these contribute to the understanding of Cassio as foppish, but he never speaks this way to (or about) either Desdemona or Bianca. Twice, he carefully acknowledges Iago's dominance over Emilia. This certainly works as exaggeration on Cassio's part in order to underscore *his* social dominance over Iago, in the same way that Iago's own obsequiousness conceals contempt. But it also works to make Cassio seem strangely uncomfortable around Emilia, to make her seem somehow foreign, at least to his experience.

Emilia's great speech is her defense of adulterous wives, below (Table 1). Several critics have noticed the similarities it shares with Shylock's powerful "Hath not a Jew eyes?" and it is worth seeing the two speeches side-by-side to see how deep the similarities go – the rhetorical questions, the appeal to common humanity, the theme of reciprocity (including the mid-speech appearance of "revenge") and the final line about "instruction." Shylock is absolutely a racial Other; the close resemblance of Emilia's speech to his hints that she may be as well. Years later, in *The Knight of Malta*, blackamoor maid Zanthia defies the villain with "If I be devil, you created me" (4.2.160). Habib says of this defiance

In resonant echoes of the famous words of Shakespeare's Shylock and Caliban as they return the persecutory violence of their masters back upon them, this moment marks the fullest development of the blackamoor maid figure's resistant subalternity. (291)

I believe that Emilia stands alongside Shylock and Caliban and Zanthia – all racially non-white characters – here. She uses the same subaltern reasoning and rhetoric as they do and she automatically positions herself as a subordinate outsider who copies the behaviour of one who dominates her. This is not simply the subalternity of womanhood – neither Bianca nor Desdemona utter lines like the final words of Emilia's speech. Regardless of how a theatrical production may cast Emilia, she always embodies a subaltern subjectivity, the "elided ... marginalized" subjectivity of Habib's black women.

<p>But I do think it is their husbands' faults          If wives do fall: say that they slack their          duties,          And pour our treasures into foreign laps,          Or else break out in peevish jealousies,          Throwing restraint upon us; or say they          strike us,          Or scant our former having in despite –          Why, we have galls; and though we          have some grace,          Yet have we some revenge. Let          husbands know,          Their wives have sense like them; they          see, and smell,          And have their palates both for sweet          and sour          As husbands have. What is it that          they do,          When they change us for others? Is it          sport?          I think it is. And doth affection breed it?          I think it doth. Is't frailty that thus errs?          It is so too. And have not we affections,          Desires for sport, and frailty, as          men have?          Then let them use us well: else let          them know,          The ills we do, their ills instruct us so.</p>	<p>He hath disgraced me, and hindered me          half a million; laughed at my losses,          mocked at my gains, scorned my nation,          thwarted my bargains, cooled my          friends, heated mine enemies, and          what's his reason? – I am a Jew. Hath          not a Jew eyes? Has not a Jew hands,          organs, dimensions, senses, affections,          passions; fed with the same food, hurt          with the same weapons, subject to the          same diseases, healed by the same          means, warmed and cooled by the same          winter and summer as a Christian is? If          you prick us do we not bleed? If you          tickle us do we not laugh? If you poison          us do we not die? And if you wrong us          shall we not revenge? If we are like you          in the rest, we will resemble you in that.          If a Jew wrong a Christian, what is his          humility? Revenge. If a Christian wrong a          Jew, what should his sufferance be by          Christian example? Why, revenge. The          villainy you teach me I will execute, and          it shall go hard but I will better the          instruction.</p> <p style="text-align: right;"><i>(Merchant of Venice, 3.1.49–68)</i></p>
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*(Othello, 4.3.85–102)*

Table 1. Comparison of lines by Emilia and Shylock.

The powerful final scene finds Othello and Emilia alone in the bedroom over Desdemona's body, and Emilia goes toe-to-toe with the battle-hardened general. She has tremendous emotional strength in this scene, and I imagine it as two outsiders who, away from the expectations of Venetian society, are being fully themselves. When she discovers that he has murdered her mistress, Emilia does burst out with "blacker devil" (reverting to an image from morality plays), "gull," "dolt," and "ignorant as dirt." But to assume her "whiteness" – an anachronistic concept anyway – on the basis of this is to overlook the fact that Othello himself has cursed his visage and will identify himself with a dog before long.

"Filth" may be the most racially charged word in a play full of them, and it is applied to both Othello and Emilia (Othello himself actually introduces it at 5.2.156, referring to Desdemona's supposed "filthy deeds," which perhaps reflects some of Neill's mingled adultery/adulteration). At 5.2.164, Emilia cries, "She was too fond of her most filthy

bargain.” She clearly means it as a racial insult,<sup>20</sup> and Othello clearly takes it as one. He is shocked by it, able only to reply “Ha?” (5.2.165), to which Emilia then says “Do thy worst.” Between this line and Emilia’s self-interrupted “Thou hast done a deed – / I care not for thy sword” (5.2.171–72) Othello has drawn his sword on her; the exact placement of the stage direction usually follows the interrupted line, but is a matter of editorial choice. “Do thy worst” would be an equally valid place to put it, since that line is also Emilia’s defiance of an apparent threat. That would mean that he draws upon hearing “filthy” thrown back at him – either way it is a matter of but a moment, and “filthy” seems to mark a turning point in their confrontation (it also immediately follows Emilia’s revelation that Iago “lies to th’ heart”). Critics always take “filthy” as a racial keyword here, and reasonably so – it seems clear that both Emilia and Othello realize she has gone too far. However, less than 100 lines later, Iago’s last words to Emilia are, “Filth, thou liest!” – and no critic gives the word the same meaning as it possessed eighty lines before. If “filth” is *always* a racial epithet at line 164, why is it *never* taken as one at line 238? Neill calls it “ironic” that Emilia hurls an insult she soon hears. I do not believe that there is anything ironic about it – it is intended as a racial epithet *both* times it’s uttered.

As she pieces together Iago’s plotting, and the role she played in it, Emilia’s stunned, reeling repetition of “my husband?” from lines 149 to 159 can be underlined by a self-reflexive gesture of the actor: touching her hand to her chest to ask, “The man married to a black woman?” As she realizes the racial hatred buried in her husband’s soul, the heartbreak in this moment could be devastating, as could the look that passes over her face in the moment before her death, when her husband calls her “filth.”

My argument for reading Emilia as a Moor is not airtight. There is no textual smoking gun, no diary entry from an early modern playgoer describing the character’s makeup or staging. I cannot give you, dear reader, “ocular proof.” However, I believe that there is enough circumstantial evidence for scholars to consider the possibility that Emilia, who may not have been initially conceived as racially different from her husband, could have been changed, by Shakespeare, to be so during the play’s life in repertory – a change that vanished with the Restoration but nevertheless left suggestive clues behind. The possibility is not closed off by the text or by historical description. Emilia’s race is completely undefined in the text, and this play of all plays demands that we forego habitual cultural assumptions of “white until proven otherwise.” The question must remain problematically, productively open. Even were this not the case, our modern constructions of race and gender make an African Emilia a powerful casting choice now. Thus, this reading works both as a literary lens and as a theatrical option.

*Othello* hinges on Emilia. Carol Thomas Neely states, “Emilia, stealing the handkerchief, is catalyst for the play’s crisis; revealing its theft, she is catalyst for the play’s denouement” (151). In the mid-nineteenth century, the actress portraying her sometimes received higher billing than her Desdemona counterpart (Potter 52). Julie Hankey writes that

Emilia’s feminism has attracted special interest in modern times, but already in 1902 [Herman Charles] Merivale saw that “the lucky actress of that little part” could command the sympathy “denied to all the rest”. When Sybil Thorndike played it in 1930, she dominated the play. (*Othello* 158)

Nevertheless, she is woefully ignored by scholars. In 1977, during the full flower of feminism, Neely described herself as “an Emilia critic,” calling her “dramatically and symbolically the play’s fulcrum” (134). It took nearly two decades for another major critic to stand with her, when Mason Vaughan acknowledged herself as an Emilia critic as well, “for I see her as one of Shakespeare’s most remarkable creations” (89n). Emilia *is* a remarkable creation, in ways I believe we have not yet fully realized, and I hope many more Emilia critics will appear to help give her the critical attention she deserves.

## Notes

1. There is, of course, the Cleopatra/Antony relationship, but Daileader and others have observed that the role of Cleopatra is almost always taken by a white actress and that even critically, Cleopatra’s degree of racial difference from Antony has been minimized.
2. Emily Bartels observes, “The term ‘Moor’ was used interchangeably with such similarly ambiguous terms as ‘African,’ ‘Ethiopian,’ ‘Negro,’ and even ‘Indian’ to designate a figure from different parts or the whole of Africa (or beyond) who was either black or Moslem, neither, or both” (“Making More of the Moor,” 434).
3. For whatever else Africans were, they were most certainly “other” to Elizabethans, even without a coherent theory of race. Ian Smith writes, “Recent critical debate focuses on the potentially anachronistic meanings attributed to race in the period, but Elizabethan obsessions with skin color and its origins, for example, whether quasigenetic, heliotropic, or divine, make clear the English concern with a semiotics of blackness that is everywhere translated into cultural difference” (“Barbarian Errors” 170).
4. Not counting, of course, the references to the feature of the English countryside termed “moor,” although *Hamlet*’s “Could you on this fair mountain leave to feed / And batten on this moor” (3.4.65–66) has been read as racial (note the contrast of “fair”). See Parker, “Black Hamlet.” Also not counted are the sundry iterations of “fair,” “foul,” “black,” and potentially “white,” which occur throughout the canon.
5. Imtiaz Habib has identified many men and women of African or Moorish background in Elizabethan London. See Skura, “Reading Othello’s Skin,” 303; see also Habib’s “‘Hel’s Perfect Character,’” especially pages 281–82, which include a detailed listing of Africans in London with a particular focus on women. Of course, there may have been many more than Habib’s research can trace. Early modern records are patchy and particularly underrepresentative of the serving classes. Elizabeth’s expulsion letter of 1596 says, “Those kinde of people may be well spared in this realme, being so populous” (Bartels, “Too Many Blackamoors,” 312), but there is no telling what number that may describe. For a history of black performers from Henry VIII in 1510 to James I, see Jones, *Othello’s Countrymen*, 28–30. Cedric J. Robinson cites Peter Fryer’s assertion of the popularity of black servants, in “The Inventions of the Negro,” 333. The 2011 Oscar-nominated movie *The Help* reminds us that this “fashion” only ceased in the last 50 years, and we still harbor considerable nostalgia (however ambivalent) for it. Bernadette Andrea discusses black prostitutes in “Black Skin, The Queen’s Masques,” 257, and see Duncan Salkeld, *Shakespeare Among the Courtesans*, especially chapter 6.
6. The racial identity of the Dark Lady of the Sonnets has been a matter of much debate (some of it centered on the tantalizingly named Amelia/Emilia Lanier); Loomba (*Shakespeare, Race, and Colonialism*, 63) says that the Dark Lady’s promiscuity “resonates with the figure of the lascivious ‘Ethiope’... that circulated in travel tales and other discourses of the period.”
7. See also McClintock, *Imperial Leather*, for the idea that foreign cultures were gendered feminine and sexualized during the age of colonial expansion, in part so that Britain could itself be gendered masculine and therefore dominant.
8. Of this reluctance, Salkeld dryly observes that the assertion that a black prostitute/madam, Lucy Negro, might be Shakespeare’s Dark Lady was “a bold and radical suggestion in the year Hitler became Chancellor of Germany, and so it remains today” (130). That attitudes have changed so little over the course of 80 years suggests that something is at work even in editors of good heart and good intentions, if only awareness that society is still unready to consider the suggestion simply as one among many.

9. Peter Sellars made an interesting choice in 2009 when he cast both Othello and Emilia as Latino rather than black, with Puerto Rican-American actors John Ortiz as Othello and Lisa Colon-Zayas as Emilia. Sellars made clear that the Othello/Emilia affair feared by Iago is real, which seems to call attention to the heritage that they alone onstage share. He illustrated the theme of ominous forces at work and alludes to the handkerchief's Egyptian magic by having Emilia doing Santeria rituals. This was a move that confused critics, but it certainly might be seen as underscoring the racial difference between Emilia and the white characters of both Desdemona and Iago.
10. Personal conversation; 13 February 2001.
11. Ian Smith, "White Skin, Black Masks," 43–44, details the various techniques, both clothing and make-up, used to create black characters. Potter 29–31, also discusses different types of blackface makeup.
12. Callaghan (200) cites Margaret Ferguson ("Juggling the Categories"), who in turn cites Barthelemy, to suggest that when women took the stage in the Restoration, they were not "allowed" to wear blackface. Arthur L. Little, Jr. (*Shakespeare Jungle Fever*, 163) also cites this line of Ferguson's. Ferguson is discussing the shift that Imoinda undergoes, from being African in Aphra Behn's novel to being white on the stage in Thomas Southerne's adaptation. None of the authors cite an original document making any such rule official. Ferguson herself writes that she is uncertain about Barthelemy's conclusion, and seems to lean toward it being more a practice than a rule. Other scholars have claimed actresses were too vain to wear the heavy makeup. "Vanity" was readily accepted by (generally male) scholars despite a marked lack of evidence, and is still sometimes assumed today – perhaps because it plays into tropes about women in general and female actors in particular. Either way, by 1787 this tradition/rule must have faded: George Colman the Younger's *Inkle and Yarico* features not one but two female blackface roles (or black and brown, Wowski being apparently African and Yarico being Native American). If Emilia was staged as an African woman at any point during *Othello*'s long and popular life in repertory prior to 1642, then one reason that this history has not come down to us may be the apparent Restoration-era distaste for women in blackface. At any rate, it remains unclear whether the waning of black female roles in the Restoration was a matter of rule, habit, actor preference, or audience preference.
13. In a footnote, Barthelemy makes a startling observation about early modern black characters: "It should be noted that in every play but *The Fair Maid of the West, Part II*, when a black character, either male or female, is involved sexually with another character, that character is white." More than one playwright seems to have been intrigued by what Callaghan calls "the fascinations of alien femininity" (200). Strangely, however, Barthelemy discusses George Peele's *The Battle of Alcazar* without taking notice of Calipolis, "wife of the Moor" (i.e., Muly Mahamet). There is not much reason to believe that Calipolis is white. Three times, Muly affectionately calls her "faire," but if she is indeed racially white, certainly no character comments on her relationship with Muly, and Peele does not employ the extended wordplay on "fair" that causes scholars to give the word the racial load it carries in *Othello*. That may make Calipolis the first black woman on the stage in a surviving play, by more than fifteen years over the characters of Zanche and Zanthia cited by both Barthelemy and Habib (and of course also over Emilia).
14. Rymer sniped, "There is nothing in the noble Desdemona that is not below any country chamber-maid with us."
15. Kemble, an ardent abolitionist, was deeply offended by Adams' racism, but on hearing it she immediately seized on what would be an extremely daring staging choice, both then and now. As quoted in Lynch: "Did I ever tell you," she wrote to a friend, "of my dining in Boston ... and sitting by Mr. John Quincy Adams, who, talking to me about Desdemona, assured me ... that he considered all her misfortunes as a very just judgment upon her for having married a 'n---r'? ... Her mind immediately turned to ways that Shakespeare's play ... could be made perfectly topical ... 'I hate the n---r,' given in proper Charleston or Savannah fashion, I am sure, would tell far better than 'I hate the Moor.' Only think ... what a very new order of interest the whole tragedy might receive" (161).
16. This pattern appears elsewhere in Shakespeare as well, in the form of royal marriages that are also indicative of military victory: Antony's relationship with Cleopatra and (non-racially)

- Henry V's wooing of Katherine – in both cases soldiers take sexual partners from lands they've conquered, with all the implications of domination embedded therein.
17. All references to Middleton are from Taylor and Lavagnino, *Thomas Middleton: The Collected Works*.
  18. David Schalkwyk says of the dock scene, "In a context in which 'white' and 'black' have such a clearly racial import it would be perverse to deny that the same signifiers here do not resonate with the use of black and white elsewhere in the play as markers of race" (12).
  19. Referring to Iago's suspicions, Emilia says that some squire "made you to suspect me with the Moor" (4.2.151), which may sound odd if Emilia herself is African; however, this could be either an attempt to align herself with Iago as his wife or it could be a marker of intra-racial difference – as Emily Bartels points out, "Moor" could refer to one who was African, or Arabic, or Muslim, or both, or neither.
  20. Would a black Emilia utter a racial insult? Considering her emotional distress, and considering the debate over the use of racial epithets in rap music, it would certainly be a playable choice for a modern actress.

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