FROM THE INSTRUCTOR

In crafting this masterful essay, Mari Rooney used her skills as a researcher and analyst to revitalize persistent questions about *Othello* and offer some intriguing new answers. I would bet that you have read or seen *Othello* and have some opinions about it—but have you read the contemporary Renaissance tragedy *All's Lost by Lust* that similarly represents "Moorish" men? Or George Best's 1578 account that "I myself have seene an Ethiopian … taking a fair Englishe woman to Wife"? What about the bizarre descriptions of northern Africa from a German encyclopedia that Londoners read in translation after 1581? With impressive firsthand research into texts like these, Mari reinserts *Othello* firmly into its original historical context, and thus she arrives at a deep understanding of the ways the play responds to sixteenth- and seventeenth-century discourses about race, gender, nationalism, and more. That research (impressive enough by itself) provides raw material for her own imaginative interpretations, and that's what allows us all to see the play anew; in her argument, Iago emerges as more than just Shakespeare's skillful portrayal of jealousy and villainy. Instead, Mari's essay demonstrates how the complex psychology of the character creates an ideological force-field where broad cultural problems intersect with old narrative tropes to fashion new socio-political possibilities. According to her argument, the play uses Iago to not merely *represent* racist prejudices, masculinist insecurities, and rhetorical constructions of non-Englishness, but to test them, critique them, re-evaluate them, and even weaken them.

Liam Meyer
WR 150: Shakespearean Controversies

FROM THE WRITER

Many critics focus on the use of monstrous language and the inclusion of racist ideologies in Shakespeare's *Othello* (a play I have studied previously and thus grown to love) as an indication of the play's desire to emphasize Othello's status as a Moor and a foreigner. However, my paper examines the antagonist Iago and, specifically, how his characterization as a villain criticizes the racist ideologies, racial stereotypes, and xenophobic fears he expresses in the play. I claim that the play condemns early modern English perspectives on race by presenting Iago as a villain and then placing racist language in his mouth and citing racist ideologies as the motivation of his actions. As the sixteenth-century audience's hatred for Iago grew, the play compelled them to question the validity of the mechanisms Iago employs to destroy Othello and thus, to reevaluate their own beliefs on race, miscegenation, and foreign peoples. I believe the play possesses continued relevance today as we grapple with the ongoing challenges of racism and xenophobia across the globe.

MARI ROONEY is a rising sophomore majoring in classical civilizations and minoring in computer science and archaeology. She grew up in southern Connecticut and lived for two years in New York's Hudson Valley. An ardent Shakespeare devotee, she enjoys reading, watching, and performing in his plays. Hoping to travel the world one day teaching English while learning about other languages and people, Mari finds issues of cultural exclusion and xenophobia extremely concerning. She would like to extend many thanks to her high school writing instructors Carolyn Huminski and James Thompson for their guidance and support. She would also like to acknowledge her WR 100 professor, Lilly Havstad, for introducing her to college writing and, in some ways, inspiring the focus of this paper. Lastly, Mari thanks Liam Meyer, her extraordinary WR 150 professor, from the bottom of her heart, for being encouraging and helpful and, most importantly, for urging her to enter this contest.

MARI ROONEY
The Tony Wallace Award for Writing Excellence

"FALL'N IN THE PRACTICE OF A DAMNED SLAVE": RACIAL IDEOLOGY AND VILLAINY IN SHAKESPEARE'S *OTHELLO*

In a chapter from his book *The Moor in English Renaissance Drama*, Jack D'Amico asserts that some Renaissance-era plays encouraged their predominantly white European audiences to reevaluate their own views on outsiders, particularly Africans, as well as the validity of their belief in their own superiority. I suggest that Shakespeare's *Othello*, more so than any of the plays D'Amico discusses, similarly sought to challenge the racial and xenophobic ideologies of its audience and, by extent, Renaissance England. My analysis of select examples of 16th century discourse*s* on race and Africans illuminates the foundation of these racist and xenophobic ideologies, namely: since Renaissance England's sense of social order demanded the supremacy of white men, any cultural space for black male empowerment seemed dangerous. Moreover, according to these texts, such as George Best's *A True Discourse of the Late Voyages of Discouerie*, miscegenation posed the worst threat since mixed children jeopardized white homogeneity and superiority. These documents demonstrate how white men employed racist language to emphasize the otherness and inferiority of Africans, creating an ideological justification for their own superiority and thus maintaining societal order. In contrast*,* the play criticizes the racist and xenophobic ideologies of Renaissance England by associating them with the villain, Iago, an immoral and corrupt representative of white male identity.
Therefore, *Othello* ventriloquizes racist discourses, but ultimately reveals the flawed nature of the societal order that such discourses and ideologies attempt to uphold or restore.

In her paper on the role of cosmetics in the creation of racial identities in Renaissance England, Kimberly Poitevin suggests that Renaissance England's "preoccupations with … the penetrating powers of blackness gesture toward a larger concern about the vulnerability of English or European borders to foreign goods and persons" (Poitevin 80). Reports on Africa and Africans from the 16th century reveal how stories regarding "the penetrating powers of blackness" fueled concerns about Europe's "vulnerability" to outsiders and the consequences of miscegenation. Best, an English chronicler, includes the following anecdote in his 1578 book *A True Discourse of the Late Voyages of Discouerie*:

> I myself have seene an Ethiopian as black as cole brought into Englande, who taking a fair Englishe woman to Wife, begatte a Sonne in all respectes as blacke as the father was, although England were his native Countrey, and an English woman his Mother: whereby it seemeth this blacknesse proceedeth rather of some naturall infection of that man, which was so strong, that neyther the nature of the Clime, neyther the good complexion of the Mother concurring, coulde any thing alter, and therefore we cannot impute it to the nature of the Clime. (29)

Best's explanation for the cause of blackness, though no less erroneous than the hypothesis it seeks to disprove (that black skin comes from overexposure to the sun), reinforces the supposed

inferiority of black skin and its potentially dominating qualities. His use of the term "infection" suggests that black skin possesses both negative and contagious properties. Furthermore, his claim that the "infection" of the father's blackness consumed the mother's "fairness" and "good complexion" corroborates the belief that blackness had the potential to dominate whiteness. Thus, as Kim F. Hall asserts in her book *Things of Darkness: Economies of Race and Gender in Early Modern England*, "Best's anecdotal evidence … articulat[es] the cultural anxieties—about complexion, miscegenation … and, above all, 'Englishness'—brought out by the presence of blacks" (Hall 11). Hall explains these cultural anxieties, stating that the English associated fairness and whiteness with "Englishness" and blackness with the racial "other": a black person could *not* be English. Therefore "to include" a miscegenated child "in the nation [England] would be to break the desired homology between land, skin, and group identity, thereby overturning the associations of England with whiteness and fairness" (Hall 12). Moreover, to accept such a child as genuinely English posed a threat to the contemporary white-dominant system as the child, despite being partially black, would possess white status. Thus, miscegenated marriages represented the possibility of white dilution and black empowerment, both of which imperiled white English men's sense of societal order: their own supremacy.

In the play, Brabantio voices the belief that miscegenation will lead to the decline of white superiority when he claims that "if such actions" (i.e., the marriage of Desdemona and Othello) "may have passage free, / Bond-slaves and pagans shall our statesmen be" (1.2.121-3). Though the meaning of this line may be interpreted in many ways, I suggest that Brabantio expresses his fear that mixed marriages, particularly between black men and white women of the higher classes, would lead to a disordered government controlled by men descended from slaves and non-Christians. Building on the fears Brabantio expresses, Iago bemoans Desdemona's choice "not to affect many proposed matches / Of her own clime, complexion, and degree, / Whereto we see in all things nature tends" and claims that "her will, recoiling to her better judgment, / May fall to match [Othello] with her country forms / And happily repent" (3.3.269-73). Iago's words belie the early modern English belief in the unnaturalness and chaos of miscegenated marriages. Furthermore, he states the necessity of Desdemona's unfaithfulness as it will allow her to "happily repent" from the sin of her miscegenated marriage and reestablish the proper order of English society in which white women do not marry black men. Thus, Iago's mission to destroy Othello appears as both a personal vendetta and a perverted attempt to salvage white hegemony.

The early modern English sense of order, in which white men possess the highest level of sociopolitical power, stood in stark contrast to the perceived disorderliness of the African continent. Hall explains that travel accounts from Renaissance England emphasized the disorderly landscape of Africa and the chaotic characteristics of its black people, creating a "new nervousness about skin color and cultural 'disorder'" (28). The 16th century encyclopedist Konrad Lykosthenes, in a description of the so-called African *anthropophagi*, or those "who doe eat mans flesh," writes that "they have no lawes, neither is there any judge among them, but live at their own pleasure" (Lykosthenes 7). Lykosthenes' portrayal of Africans as lawless peoples who engage in taboo activities perpetuates the image of Africa as a place of chaos—a place where people did not obey the "lawes" of nature *or* society. Due to such reports of Africans, African-ness and "blackness beg[an] to represent the destructive potential of strangeness, disorder, and variety" (Hall 28). Miscegenation would bring African disorderliness directly into English society and allow for the empowerment of black men, therefore mixed marriages themselves represented a challenge to societal order. The English felt threatened by the presence of "disorderly" Africans in England, a fact corroborated by

several royal proclamations, issued at the turn of the 17th century, which mandated the immediate deportation of "Negroes and blackamoors" ("Licensing" 221). One proclamation from 1601 states that a "great number of Negroes and blackamoors…are fostered and powered here [England], to the great annoyance of her [the Queen's] own liege people that which covet the relief which these people consume, as also for that the most of them are infidels having no understanding of Christ or his Gospel … shall be with all speed avoided and discharged" ("Licensing" 221-2). The document illustrates the intensely negative feelings the English possessed towards Africans. Furthermore, the proclamation reveals that these feelings stemmed from the belief that the apparent enfranchisement and empowerment ("fostered and powered") of Africans would jeopardize the dominating authority of the white English. Additionally, the complaint that they "hav[e] no understanding of Christ or his Gospel" further demonstrates the English fear of African disorder—these "Negroes and blackamoors," because of their status as "infidels," could not fit into the structure of England's Christian society and they must therefore be removed from it.

Iago's intention to, in a sense, remove Othello, whom he perceives as a political and sexual rival, parallels with the early modern English elite's desire to deport the "blackamoors." In the opening scene of the play, Iago complains that Othello has chosen another man as his lieutenant and maintained Iago as merely "his Moorship's ancient," a term the Folger editors define as "the lowest-ranking commanding officer in the infantry" (Mowat fn. 35 on p. 8). Iago cites this denial of his political ascension as the reason for his hatred of Othello and his wish to "serve [his] turn upon him" (1.1.45). Later, in Act 2, Iago reveals his secondary reason for his hatred: "I do suspect the lusty Moor / Hath leaped into my seat" (2.1.316-7), an allusion to Othello sleeping with Emilia, Iago's wife. Thus, Iago's intentions of "put[ting] the Moor / At least into a jealousy so strong / That judgement cannot cure" (2.1.322-4), fueled by his insecurity in the face an empowered black male, indicate a determination to ruin and potentially eliminate Othello.

Iago, in his attempt to disempower Othello, depicts him as bestial and animal-like, drawing on the cultural misconception of Africans as monstrous and subhuman. This misconception appeared as the result of 16thcentury literature on Africans, such as Konrad Lykosthenes' 1581 book *The doome warning all men to the iudgemente*, which reports that "Aethiops" were (allegedly) "black men [*that*] have four eyes" and were "mouthed as a Crane, the other part of the heade like a man" (Lykosthenes 6-7). By describing these "Aethiops" as part animal, Lykosthenes contributed to the image of Africans as monstrous and "deformed" (7) creatures, rather than people. Moreover, suggesting that the "Aethiops" have "strange" (7) and animal-like characteristics perpetuates the belief in their supposed inferiority. Lykosthenes' use of the word "that" where a modern writer would have used "who" reveals his conception of black people as non-human and further indicates a desire to separate these Ethiopians from Europeans.

According to James Aubrey, the play utilizes monstrous imagery for the same purpose as Lykosthenes does: to emphasize the otherness of Africans—in the case of the play, Othello. However, I argue that *Othello* includes the imagery to scrutinize how Iago uses contemporary associations between monsters and Africans to denigrate and discredit Othello, much as white English men employed the same imagery to disparage and alienate Africans. Iago warns Brabantio that "an old black ram / Is tupping [his] white ewe" and thus "the devil will make a grandsire of [him]" (1.1.97-98, 100). Iago employs contemporary associations between Africans and animals in calling Othello a "ram" and, a few lines later, a "Barbary horse" (1.1.125), and he demonizes Othello by referring to him as "the devil." Iago couples these associations with the dichotomy of "black

ram" and "white ewe" to emphasize Othello's otherness, the racial difference between him and Desdemona, and the unacceptability of their socially-disruptive marriage. The racist ideologies Iago voices coming from another character would fail to strike the audience as anything other than commonplace. However, because of Iago's obvious villainy, his use of these ideologies, and the ideologies themselves, appear questionable, even deplorable.

Othello's scrutiny of racial stereotyping, racist language, and xenophobic ideologies belongs to a genre-wide shift that occurred in Renaissance-era dramas, which were beginning to encourage their audiences to reconsider their society's perceptions of Africans and the validity of white superiority. D'Amico claims that another 16th-century play, also starring a lead "Moorish" character, *All's Lost by Lust* "[made] a tentative step toward representing a complex society of which the Moor is a part, and toward opening up the audience to more challenging ways of imagining their relationship to the outsider" (D'Amico 98). D'Amico argues that *All's Lost by Lust* offers its audience a brief opportunity to reflect on themselves by providing the perspective of a Moor, who makes a negative, but logical, assessment of Europeans. However, D'Amico acknowledges that *All's Lost by Lust*, despite its momentary reversal of societal perspectives, continued to perpetuate negative depictions of Moors, thus contributing to preexisting beliefs of African bestiality, disorderliness, and inferiority. I argue that *Othello* extends *All's Lost by Lust's* fleeting attempt at subversion by vilifying Iago, a mechanism which also serves to oppose the prevailing negativity towards Africans that persisted in *All's Lost,* amongst other plays. Much as these other plays equate African-ness with villainy to discourage miscegenation and black empowerment, *Othello* associates racially motivated hatred and xenophobic ideology with Iago, who embodies immorality and masculine insecurity, to undermine the legitimacy of this hatred and ideology. Furthermore, Iago's status as a white European and his close relationship with the audience suggest that he represents the populace of Renaissance England, and thus as the play condemns Iago's deeds it scrutinizes the xenophobia and racial stereotyping of Renaissance English society.

The revelation of Iago's villainy in the final act presents the culmination of the play's subversion: by displaying the other characters' criticism of Iago's actions towards Othello, the play condemns not only villainy, but the racist ideology associated with that villainy as well. Lodovico calls Iago a "viper" (5.2.335) and a "Spartan dog" while Montano refers to him as "a most notorious villain" (5.2.286) and "a damned slave" (5.2.290). Furthermore, though Othello has just murdered his wife, the play emphasizes Iago's culpability rather than Othello's. Lodovico asks Othello, "O thou Othello, that wert once so good / Fall'n in the practice of a damned slave, / What shall be said to thee?" (5.2.342-4), to which Othello responds, "An honorable murderer, if you will, / For naught I did in hate, but all in honor" (5.2.346-7). Lodovico's words acknowledge Iago's responsibility for Othello's actions, thus attributing the blame to Iago rather than "good" Othello. Of more significance, Othello's claim that Iago's crimes stemmed from his "hate," rather than honor, creates an association between Iago's method, the use of racist ideology, and hatred and dishonor. A sense of this hatred and dishonor color Lodovico's final words, spoken to Iago: "Look on the tragic loading of this bed. / This is thy work" (5.2.426-7). As Lodovico invites Iago to "look on" the victims of his machinations, the play invites the audience of Renaissance England to examine the consequences of an attempt, driven by racial bias and xenophobia, to reestablish their society's sense of order: white supremacy and homogeny. While Iago's successful elimination of both Othello and Desdemona may represent the restoration of order within the play, the play itself disrupts the order of Renaissance England by questioning the morality of a society that values an order which subsists on racially motivated hatred and xenophobia.

My reading of *Othello* contradicts earlier interpretations of the play as a cautionary tale about the threat of race-mixing and the inherent evil of Africans—I recognize the profound subversive work the play performed within the context of 16th century Europe and acknowledge the foundation of its continuing relevance. *Othello* provides insights on the racist ideologies and xenophobic attitudes of early modern England; however, the play suggests that these ideologies and attitudes, while prevalent, did not enjoy universal support. The play employs compelling characters and creates sympathetic situations as a matrix in which to explore the possibility of more positive, progressive views on foreigners and otherness, while condemning the contemporary negative perspectives on the subject. Due to the diverse and extensive audience *Othello*attracted in early modern England and Shakespeare's ability to write authentic characters, the play possessed a profound power to shape audience perspectives and challenge societal standards.

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