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# SLANDER, RENAISSANCE DISCOURSES OF SODOMY, AND *OTHELLO*

BY ROBERT MATZ

“I think you think I love you,” Iago tells Cassio, who because of his fight with Roderigo and Montano has just lost the love of his general Othello.<sup>1</sup> How do we understand the exchanges of love in *Othello* that encompass not just male-female bonds but male-male bonds as well? And how do we understand these bonds of love, too, as they are involved in the ambiguity, uncertainty, betrayal, and accusation that Iago’s comment implies: “I think you think I love you”? In this essay I want to consider the ways in which *Othello* puts at stake not only the regulation of desire between men and women, but also between men. I want to argue that the regulation of male same-sex desire reflects on male political relationships, since this desire cements these relationships but may also be invoked—accusatorily—to disrupt them. I also want to consider how the accusation of illegitimate male-male desire intersects with other forms of desire in the play that are subject to similarly ambivalent construction as the products of conflicted and transitional social forms. For what Foucault calls the “utterly confused category” of sodomy indeed confuses, or rather fuses, a number of relationships in *Othello* that cross boundaries of gender, race, and status, and that the play at once represents, gives play to, and regulates.<sup>2</sup>

While much fine work has explored the construction and regulation of female sexuality in *Othello*, less has focused on male-male desire in the play.<sup>3</sup> Sexuality has primarily been read in terms of male-female relationships, thereby sustaining the assumption that only heterosexual desires exist.<sup>4</sup> However, the object of a consideration of male-male desire in *Othello*, and in Renaissance studies more generally, should not be to identify the “homosexual” in the text. Rather, this desire needs to be understood together with the institutions that support, solicit, and regulate it, and in terms of the particular social contexts that determine the way it is represented. In these aims, I follow historian Alan Bray and the developing work of queer theory in Renaissance studies, in two important assumptions: first, that the realms of the sexual and the social are not cordoned off from one another, and, second, that the early

modern period recognized no distinct homosexual, or therefore heterosexual, identity. While “sodomitical” relations were condemned, sodomy was a category that could proscribe more acts than sex between men (such as adultery, bestiality, and witchcraft), and it was a sin to which all—not a distinct minority—might succumb. Moreover, the condemnation of male-male “sodomitical” sex existed in an uneasy overlay with high praise for male-male friendships.<sup>5</sup>

The anxiety about sexuality in *Othello* may be understood within this framework. Just as marriage is a public, social institution that within the early modern period increasingly depended on the idea of the private affection of husband and wife, so, as Bray has argued, did the primarily male public institutions of Renaissance England function through personal alliances of affection. As Bray argues, “friend” (or “lover”) was a term that in the Renaissance included and frequently overlaid political and affective alliance: to be a powerful man’s “bedfellow” was to have a most valuable political access—and honor.<sup>6</sup> The highly praised alliance of friendship was frequently eroticized, yet what kept (or did not keep) the celebrated closeness of friendship from appearing to be the sin of sodomy was not the degree of physical contact, but the appropriateness of the relationship. Just as in marriage desire should follow proper alliance and social status, so too in male friendship. One’s political enemies or men seen as social climbers (Bray’s example is Francis Bacon) could be called sodomites. Sodomy was not a category; it was an accusation. But, as Bray also argues, by the more socially mobile late sixteenth century, almost any political relationship might be vulnerable to this accusation.<sup>7</sup> As the structures of feudal vassalage gave way to bourgeois marriage, so too did the social institutions that most completely legitimated male-male desire. Thus reading *Othello* within the history provided by Bray (as well as through the deconstructive reading practice that has found productive Bray’s understanding of “sodomy” as a contingent and motivated *representation* of a relationship) provides an important way of discussing not only male desire within *Othello*, but also *Othello*’s own relentless concern with representing relationships, a concern figured most frequently in Iago, whose representations are always accusations, weapons.<sup>8</sup>

*Othello* begins with the social complaint that Bray outlines. Passed over for the position of lieutenant that Othello has awarded to Cassio, Iago complains that “preferment goes by letter and affection / And not by old gradation, where each second / Stood heir to th’ first” (1.1.36–38). Yet Iago himself earlier remarks that in order to get the lieutenantcy, “three great ones of the city” made “personal suit” to Othello on his

behalf (1.1.8–9). As the reference in these lines to “personal suit” and “affection” suggests, Iago’s social complaint opens out to questions of personal relationship and desire. So too Iago locates his general’s proper estimation of him in the conventional source of affection in Renaissance love poetry, Othello’s “eyes,” which “had seen the proof” of Iago in war (1.1.28). Given such implications of public and personal favor, it is not surprising that Iago’s accusation of Othello’s misplaced love for Cassio seems within the narrative logic of the play to generate Desdemona’s “misplaced” love for Othello. “For she had eyes,” Othello remarks, echoing Iago, “and chose me” (3.3.189).

This implication of marital and military plots extends to Iago’s and Cassio’s mediation of their relationships to Othello through Desdemona. Cassio seeks to regain his general’s favor through Desdemona’s agency; Iago imagines exacting his revenge against Othello by cuckolding Desdemona. Both Iago’s and Cassio’s relationships to Desdemona may be construed sexually, but neither turns out to be. Cassio is presumably not having sex with Desdemona, and Iago never carries out his plans to cuckold Othello. And this is exactly because it is indeed Othello and not Desdemona who is the primary object of Iago’s and Cassio’s desire. *Othello*, as has frequently been noted, is a play in which everyone stands in for, or represents, someone else, and because the person who stands in for you may also take your place, this exchangeability makes highly fraught the erotic/political suits constantly pursued in *Othello*.<sup>9</sup> To understand this “standing-in” I draw on Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s notion of the homosocial triangle, in which two men mediate their relationship through shared bonds with a woman.<sup>10</sup> Such a dynamic is suggested by the fact, which we learn only in the third act, that Cassio was go-between in the love suit of Othello and Desdemona (3.3.70–73). If the plotting Iago can convincingly imagine a situation in which Desdemona is the go-between for Othello and Cassio, but really loves Cassio, is it equally the case that in making Cassio the go-between for Desdemona and Othello, the play can also imagine a plot around an erotic bond between Cassio and Othello?

Yet this is not to suggest that the relationship between Desdemona and Othello simply stands in for the relationship between Cassio and Othello. (And indeed Sedgwick’s account of erotic triangles, while emphasizing the importance of attending to differences in power among men and women, also suggests that each figure in the triangle may potentially be an active agent.)<sup>11</sup> Nor is the putatively misplaced love of the marital plot just a figure for the misplaced love of the military one. Rather, because the institution of friendship in early modern culture is

no more simply public and political than marriage in that culture is simply private and affective, and because early modern culture does not divide sexual identity as hetero- or homosexual, there is no fixed distinction between friend and spouse in *Othello*. In both the marriage plot and in the homosocial military that Othello heads everyone loves Othello and seeks his love in turn: Desdemona at the beginning of the play figures a privileged access to Othello that everyone in *Othello* wants and loses.

Thus Iago, in seeking to discredit Cassio, also seeks to displace Desdemona as Othello's "bedfellow," an intimacy that is both personal and political. Iago himself recognizes the nature of this intimacy when he counsels Cassio to urge Desdemona to urge Othello to return Cassio to his own position as Othello's love ("Cassio, I love thee, / But never more be officer of mine" [2.3.248–49]). Desdemona now has the privilege of love that Cassio—but also Iago—has lost, and hence is best positioned to return him to it: "Assure thee, / If I do vow a friendship, I'll perform it / To the last article. My lord shall never rest, / I'll watch him tame, and talk him out of patience; / His bed shall seem a school, his board a shrift, / I'll intermingle everything he does / With Cassio's suit" (3.3.20–26). While Desdemona's language in these lines resonates with two discourses about women and wives circulating in the text—that of the shrew or the whore—it would be wrong, I think, to view this passage exclusively in those terms, which function to regulate the authority of the woman in a way that these lines, at this point in the play, resist. Rather, Desdemona's own conception of the institution that structures her action is that of friendship. Though the friendship here is extended to Cassio and not Othello, Desdemona's understanding of her action in its terms rightly places her, as Cassio intends, within the network of male friendships that also structure the play. Desdemona's invocation of friendship suggests that the potentially fraught relationship between erotic and political favor in the play is not merely a "female" problem, one best embodied in the figures of the bed-lecturing wife or female prostitute (nor, I would add, do Desdemona's lines suggest only erotic access, though they include it). Rather, if the wife's access to the husband can be understood under the rubric of friendship, so too can the relationship of friend be understood under the rubric of marriage. Hence the scene in which Othello shifts his loyalty from Cassio and Desdemona to Iago ends with a vow of homage between Iago and Othello that also recalls a marriage ceremony: "Witness that here Iago doth give up / The execution of his wit, hands, heart, / To wrong'd Othello's service!" (3.3.465–67). Desdemona serves a friendship and

Iago marries Othello. Desdemona assumes Cassio's privileged access to Othello, while Iago assumes Desdemona's.

Such overlays of desire provide a context for Iago's description of Cassio's dream, one of the most strikingly homoerotic moments in the play (and indeed its most extended representation of sex):

I lay with Cassio lately,  
And being troubled with a raging tooth,  
I could not sleep.  
There are a kind of men, so loose of soul,  
That in their sleeps will mutter their affairs;  
One of this kind is Cassio.  
In sleep I heard him say, "Sweet Desdemona,  
Let us be wary, let us hide our loves";  
And then, sir, would he gripe and wring my hand;  
Cry, "O sweet creature!" then kiss me hard,  
As if he pluck'd up kisses by the roots  
That grew upon my lips; [then] laid his leg  
[Over] my thigh, and [sigh'd], and [kiss'd], and then  
[Cried], "Cursed fate that gave thee to the Moor!"  
(3.3.413–26)

This passage recalls the fact that men in Renaissance England regularly slept together—as Iago and Cassio do here—and that, as Bray argues, whom one shared a bed with had not only sexual but also political implications. Intimacy means access, of the sort that Cassio assumes Desdemona has when he asks her to intervene with Othello on his behalf. One could say that in this dream Cassio fantasizes that he had the same access to Desdemona that he now has to Iago. Yet while within this dream Iago stands in for Desdemona, the dream itself reflects a situation in which Desdemona herself serves as a means of access to Othello. As we know, in courting Desdemona, Cassio is really courting his general. That this dream indeed figures Cassio's desire for Othello's love is suggested too by the male-male eroticism realized in Cassio's sighing, his passionate kissing of Iago and his laying of his leg on Iago's thigh.

Yet we need to note further that this dream is really Iago's, not Cassio's. The supposed desire between Cassio and Desdemona substitutes even more clearly for the desire that Iago continually pursues and is pursuing in telling the dream: his own desire to win back Othello's love. As we have seen, Desdemona serves as stand-in in this relationship, either as a means of revenge when Iago imagines sleeping with her to get at Othello, or as the negative object of a male bond, the common enemy for Iago and Othello. It is not surprising then that this scene ends

with the marriage/vow of homage between Iago and Othello (3.3.465–67). If Iago's desire follows Cassio's (or constructs Cassio's in its own image), it is because the structures of triangulated relationships in this play are such that everyone can find himself or herself in the sentence "Cursed fate that gave thee to the Moor!" Indeed the real referent of this sentence must be other than that suggested by the adultery plot, since that adultery presumably does not occur, and instead serves as a screen for the conduct of other relationships. These relationships might include not only Desdemona's displacement of either Cassio or Iago as Othello's "fair warrior" (2.1.182) but also Cassio's displacement of Iago for the lieutenantcy, and Iago's impending displacement of both Cassio and Desdemona from being the recipients of Othello's love. Even Brabantio, who "lov'd" Othello (1.3.128) before his daughter did, might speak these words.

Iago thus achieves his desire to replace either Desdemona or Cassio as Othello's intimate. But what particularly interests me is the way in which Iago achieves this bond with Othello at the same time that he plays on anxieties in Renaissance England over the contradictory valuation of such bonds. What makes the circulation of desire in *Othello* strikingly resonant with Bray's argument is not so much how this desire coincides in terms of the plot with Iago's ambition, but rather how the play as a whole reflects the way male-male desire was regulated within a homosocial order. For even as Iago pursues his eroticized bond with Othello, he polices this eroticization in the figures of Cassio and Desdemona.

Before pursuing the implication in *Othello* of the languages of adultery and sodomy, however, I want to note that the relationship of these languages, as with the relationship between the marital and martial plots in the play, should not be understood allegorically. The former does not merely provide the cover for the latter and, importantly, I am not arguing that we should see in the female Desdemona the boy actor beneath. And this is the case not only because boys are not objects of same-sex desire in the play (Othello is), but also because Desdemona's threat in the play lies in the way she often actively participates, as I have suggested, in the sexual and social relationships in which she is involved. Far from effacing the woman—as some readings of Sedgwick's argument have implied—same-sex desire may rather be seen to participate in the same troubling of the normative institutions of marriage and the traffic in women that determines both the subordination of women and the regulation of any non-married sexuality.<sup>12</sup>

Accordingly, if sodomy was the name for the excoriated form of same-

sex desire, the category of sodomy in the Renaissance was associated as well with heterosexual adultery, or any relationship that violated the natural, that is social order.<sup>13</sup> Charges of adultery and illicit male desire are related in the play because Iago's manipulation of anxieties about male friendship coincides with his manipulation of anxieties about the role of the wife within the nuclear family. As Emily Bartels has argued in relationship to gender and race in the play, the socially inferior Iago plays on anxieties about women or blacks in order to prop up his own authority.<sup>14</sup> One could add to this argument that the anxieties Iago plays on are created by cultural contradictions. As Lawrence Stone has suggested generally and Valerie Wayne has noted with particular reference to *Othello*, the emergent ideology of the affective nuclear family uneasily encouraged both mutuality between the husband and wife and the latter's strict submission to the former.<sup>15</sup> To the extent that Desdemona's role as relative equal to her husband may already be seen as a violation of the patriarchal order, she is almost immediately redescribed in the play in the more egregious and hence ultimately unoccupiable position as her husband's superior—the captain's captain or general's general (2.1.74; 2.3.314–15). A marriage in which the wife does not properly subordinate herself to the husband is unnatural; Iago's accusation of adultery further marks the “sodomitical” nature of such an unnatural relationship. Playing on contradictions between the values of mutuality and hierarchy in marriage, Iago transforms the mutuality of wife and husband into the wife's superiority, the wife's superiority into disobedience, and disobedience into adultery. Desdemona as “fair warrior” (2.1.182)—the relative equal of her husband—becomes in Iago's vision an adulteress, thereby both misogynistically sexualized (no longer a warrior but a woman) and discredited (no longer a fair woman but a foul one).

Indeed, while I have argued that the public/private character of the institutions of marriage and friendship allows the play's crossings between them, I would suggest as well that the degree to which the play emphasizes these crossings also bespeaks tension around both institutions, each of which is seen not just to cross but to transgress some boundary. As Desdemona in becoming Othello's friend becomes too public and too much Othello's equal, so Iago's assumption of the position of wife implies an intimacy inappropriate because of Iago's social illegitimacy. And in addition to a specific instance of social transgression, Iago's inappropriate intimacy may also suggest the way in which weakened feudal bonds were replaced by marriage and the family as those political institutions that would regulate state subjects, and



limited to heterosexual adultery, since friendship names Leontes's as well as Hermione's relationship to Polixenes and since Polixenes's supposed adultery with Hermione means as much the betrayal of Leontes by Polixenes as by his wife.<sup>17</sup> It is worth noting, too, that while in contemporary speech the word "friend" can mark a limit to intimacy ("just friends"), in the Renaissance discourse in which Leontes speaks "friendship" has no such limits, but instead suggests the opposite possibility of a deepening emotional and sexual intimacy.

Given this broader range of meaning, it is not surprising that Leontes turns from his first suspicions of adultery to a further musing on the ambiguous signs of his wife's friendship.<sup>18</sup> Similarly, the dialogue between Othello and Iago quoted above suggests not only anxiety about the "mingling" of male friendship and "unauthoriz'd" desire, but also that the ambiguous relationship between the two would always require interpretation, as the series of rapid questions between Iago and Othello suggests. The language of adultery in *Othello* recalls Bray's argument about friendship and sodomy that the "signs of the one were indeed sometimes also the signs of the other" and that this ambiguity meant that charges of sodomy could always be used as a weapon against those who shared friendship.<sup>19</sup> In *Othello*, Iago's accusations of adultery always focus on ambiguous signs (most famously, the handkerchief), and Iago describes himself as one whose "nature's plague" is to "spy into abuses" (3.3.146–47).<sup>20</sup> But "spying" is not quite the right word, for what Iago more often does is to re-present behavior that is already public, as when Iago transforms Cassio's courtly behavior toward Desdemona into lechery:

IAGO: Didst thou not see her paddle with the palm of his hand? Didst thou not mark that?

RODERIGO: Yes I did; but that was but courtesy.

IAGO: Lechery, by this hand; an index and obscure prologue to the history of lust and foul thoughts.

(2.1.253–58)

Iago's accusation depends on the sign or "index" of an uncertain meaning. Just as actions that signified the highly praised relationship of friendship could be transformed into the signs of sinful sodomy, so here Iago transforms the meanings of actions that could be construed as an honorable display of courtliness into a "history of lust and foul thoughts." Indeed, to the extent that we can read Iago's charges of adultery in terms of charges of sodomy (or rather to the extent that they are part of

the same discourse), *Othello* bears out Bray's argument that charges of sodomy did not depend on the existence of a sexual relationship between men (which, as Bray notes, is not to say such sexual relationships did not exist), but on its usefulness as a charge against political enemies.<sup>21</sup> Like misogyny, the energies of homophobia can be wielded for political ends.<sup>22</sup>

If this politics is that of the English state ordered by the affective patriarchal family and disordered by social mobility (with, for example, Iago as self-fashioning "new man") it is also that of the state increasingly involved in political and trade relations with non-European peoples. Significantly, that a discourse of sodomy informs Iago's charges of adultery against Cassio and Desdemona is suggested not only by the structure of those charges—their dependence on signs to be interpreted—but also by Iago's accusation of the unnatural love between Othello and Desdemona. While Iago's shout that "Even now, now, very now, an old black ram / Is tupping your white ewe" (1.1.88–89) uses the language of bestiality, the latter frequently included under the category of sodomy in the Renaissance, his accusation emphasizes through this language the "unnatural" sex between races.<sup>23</sup> "And yet how nature erring from itself" (3.3.227), as Othello will later put it. The beastly and "unnatural" love between Desdemona and Othello recalls but does not simply provide a screen for English concern about same-sex desire. Rather, if desire for the racial or cultural other was unnatural, it was in part because the other was accused of practicing unnatural sex. Bray observes English society's

readiness, even eagerness, to recognise homosexuality in an alien context . . . in marked contrast to its reluctance to do so within. Several travellers wrote detailed and horrified accounts of the homosexuality they witnessed in relatively more tolerant societies: William Lithgow on southern Europe and Moslem Turkey and North Africa; Thomas Herbert on Persia and the Far East; and George Turberville, Elizabeth I's ambassador to Russia, on homosexuality among the Russian peasantry.<sup>24</sup>

Whether and in what terms these other societies were "relatively more tolerant" of same-sex desire would require separate consideration. What seems more readily supportable in terms of Bray's own argument is that English accusations of the tolerance of homosexuality could be a way of asserting the unnaturalness of these anti-Christian (or anti-Protestant) cultures. *Othello* projects same-sex desire within English culture onto racial and cultural others, but this is not because the play functions as a

return of the repressed. Rather, *Othello* is written in the terms of a discourse of sodomy that in the increasing encounters between Europe and racial or cultural others would be used to demarcate difference between the foreign and the familiar.

And yet sodomy was also the Italian vice, not wholly foreign, especially when, as in *Othello*, Venice can also figure England. Relationships of foreign and familiar, and the cultural and racial hierarchies these relationships would preserve, appear untenable in the liminal and fluid locales in which *Othello* takes place: the port of Venice, the island of Cyprus, the London theater. In these places Brabantio loved to hear Othello speak, as did his daughter, as does the Duke, and as, presumably, do the English spectators. While the discourse of sodomy in *Othello* marks the difference between the European and non-European, it simultaneously marks in the play the transgression of the differences it would define.

This transgression is overdetermined, a product first of all of the way the same-sex relationships othered as sodomy in traveler's tales or in *Othello* find their source in relationships of friendship that obtained in England. Moreover, such tenuous difference between the foreign and the familiar suggests the way in which emergent colonialism might depend on a nervous relationship with non-Europeans who were seen, in the formulation of Homi Bhabha, as "not quite/not white," on the one hand not too threateningly different from white Europeans, but also threatening to become too similar to them—a "them" whose own fractured "not quite" identity would also trouble the demarcation of difference.<sup>25</sup> In her analysis of Leo Africanus's *A Geographical Historie of Africa* as a discursive context for *Othello*, Emily Bartels suggests the importance of this dialectic to the subject of Shakespeare's play. Bartels observes that the desire for assimilation and the assertion of difference both functioned in European discourse about Africa as ways of addressing the threat of racial or cultural otherness, particularly as the figure of the Moor occupied an indeterminate place between "African" and "European." Moreover, Bartels importantly observes that the English government had foreign policy (anti-Spanish and Catholic) and trade reasons for alliance with Moors even as it tried to maintain leverage in these relationships by asserting English cultural difference and superiority.<sup>26</sup> Interracial love in *Othello* addresses such contradictory drives for assimilation and alliance on the one hand, and difference on the other, in part by expressing the point at which the foreign becomes too familiar as the sin of sodomy. Yet if this sin regulates such contradictory drives it also marks the failure of regulation, since the eroticization of

this contradiction suggests not just the possibility of transgressing difference but the desire to do so. As Iago puts it, in his effort to maintain slipping boundaries between African and Venetian, “When she seem’d to shake and fear your looks; / She lov’d them most” (3.3.207–8). Othello’s own more positive version of this crossing of boundaries, that Desdemona loved his “passing strange” stories (1.3.160), suggests further the transgression of racial or cultural difference in the particular context of its representation on the English stage. For it is on the stage where these questions of the relationship between European and non-European are most immediately played out for Shakespeare, and in ways that directly engage the desires or fears of the play’s spectators, their reactions to “passing strange” stories or “looks.” Even to the extent that the tragedy of *Othello* ideologically represents the disastrous consequences of allowing the foreign to become too familiar, in doing so the stage itself makes the foreign familiar, unpredictably giving play to and even soliciting desires it can never fully control. Finally, the theatrical context of *Othello* may also return us to the social disorder with which we began, and that we might now locate particularly in the rhetorically, theatrically, and economically mobile playwright, whose sonnets engage the discourses of love and favor while displacing anxieties about sexuality and betrayal in that discourse to a dark lady, one who appears as a condensation of the figures of Othello and Desdemona.

The “unnatural” crossing of racial, gender, and sexual boundaries abroad, then, also reflects unnatural crossings of status at home, located in the play particularly in the character of Iago. Iago’s evocations of sodomy both express and delegitimize Othello’s “unnatural” rise to power in the Venetian state, while these evocations also both reflect and enact Iago’s own social illegitimacy. It is Iago, after all, who usurps Cassio’s presumably rightful place as Othello’s lieutenant. In employing the discourse of sodomy Iago uses accusations about such “unnatural” desires to cement his own relations with Othello at the expense of those he makes other: the masculine woman, the black man, the sodomite. Yet if Iago scapegoats Othello, Desdemona, and Cassio for his own “unnatural” desires he is also scapegoated in turn. In his final subjection to Venetian state authority, and in his promised torture, Iago too is punished along with all those who might potentially violate the order of Venetian culture—or rather expose its contradictions. For what Patricia Parker describes as the “preposterous events” of *Othello*, a reversal of the orders of status, gender, sexuality, race, and logic, are most intensely described as such by Iago, whose position within the play, and certainly

at its end, is not fully legitimated.<sup>27</sup> And this is because what is at stake in *Othello*, as I have been suggesting, is not only the preposterous against right order, simple reversals against “proper” authority, but rather conflicts within the institutions that would produce that authority. Thus if on the one hand “preposterous” events in *Othello* occur exactly because they lie within possibilities created by normative social structures (for example in the overlay of friendship and “sodomitical” relationships), then on the other hand the regulation of the “preposterous” could itself be seen dangerously to threaten those structures. Marriage, friendship, and commerce with non-Europeans are hardly unproblematic institutions in *Othello*’s Venice, but neither could the Venetian state do without them.

The conflicting imperatives to promote and regulate these institutions suggest the reason for Iago’s ambivalent position as the preposterous uncoverer of the play’s “preposterous events.” While Iago’s accusations work to eliminate tensions that arise from contradictions within Venetian culture, as a partial outsider himself Iago also functions within the narrative logic of the play to keep the hands of “proper” Venetians clean even as he does their work. The Venetian senate—in the person especially of Cassio—then resumes control in a context in which both internal and foreign “Turks,” including Iago as an always deniable fall guy, are no longer a threat: “Cassio rules in Cyprus” (5.2.332). The military dominance of Venice remains with no dependence on a black general; the homosocial order of Venice remains, presumably cemented by women, but without the threat of a woman who herself participates in its exchanges; and the homosocial order remains too without the threat of misalliance or the recognition of homosexual desire as the homosocial order’s (un)natural other. Yet these proper orders, as I have been arguing, may never be fully realized. Even Cassio is an outsider as well as an insider, a Florentine, not a Venetian, “a fellow almost damn’d in a fair wife” (1.1.21), or without one, and the play never returns from the island of Cyprus. Or of England?

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#### NOTES

Thanks to Devon Hodges and Teresa Michals for their generous help with this essay.

<sup>1</sup> *Othello* in *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974), 2.3.311. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text by act, scene, and line number. Further citations of Shakespeare are to the Riverside edition unless otherwise noted.

<sup>2</sup> Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: An Introduction* (1976), trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1980), 75.

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<sup>3</sup> There is some discussion of the issue in Patricia Parker, "Fantasies of 'Race' and 'Gender': Africa, *Othello*, and Bringing to Light," in *Women, "Race" and Writing in the Early Modern Period*, ed. Margo Hendricks and Parker (New York: Routledge, 1994), 99–100; and Patricia Parker's "Preposterous Events," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 43 (1992): 207–209; Bruce Smith, *Homosexual Desire in Shakespeare's England* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1991, 1994), 61–64; Graham Hammill, "The Epistemology of Expurgation: Francis Bacon and *The Masculine Birth of Time*," in *Queering the Renaissance*, ed. Jonathan Goldberg (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 1994), 234 n. 4; and Nancy Gutierrez, "Witchcraft and Adultery in *Othello*: Strategies of Subversion," in *Playing with Gender: A Renaissance Pursuit*, ed. Jean R. Brink and Maryanne C. Horowitz (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1991), 3–18.

<sup>4</sup> On the latter point, and for valuable remarks about how to think about homoerotic desire in the period, see Valerie Traub, *Desire and Anxiety: Circulations of Sexuality in Shakespearean Drama* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 91–116. For some important feminist readings of the play see Ania Loomba, *Gender, Race, and Renaissance Drama* (New York: St. Martin's, 1989), 38–63; Ruth Vanita, "'Proper' Men and 'Fallen' Women: The Unprotectedness of Wives in *Othello*," *SEL: Studies in English Literature, 1500–1900* 34 (1994): 341–56; Emily Bartels, "Making More of the Moor: Aaron, *Othello*, and Renaissance Refashionings of Race," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 41 (1990): 433–54; and Traub, 42–46.

<sup>5</sup> Alan Bray, "Homosexuality and the Signs of Male Friendship in Elizabethan England," *History Workshop Journal* 29 (1990): 2, 3–8.

<sup>6</sup> Bray, "Friendship," 4. On the rise of the affective marriage, see Lawrence Stone, *Family, Sex and Marriage in England, 1500–1800*, Abr. ed. (New York: Harper and Row, 1979), 97–98.

<sup>7</sup> Bray, "Friendship," 8–15.

<sup>8</sup> On the importance of understanding "sodomy" as the contingent but motivated representation of a relationship, see Jonathan Goldberg, *Sodometries: Renaissance Texts, Modern Sexualities* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1992), esp. 18–20.

<sup>9</sup> See for example Parker, "Fantasies of 'Race' and 'Gender,'" 92–93, on the pun on "lieutenant," as well as Julia Genster, "Lieutenancy, Standing in, and *Othello*," *ELH* 57 (1990): 785–809.

<sup>10</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1985), 21–27.

<sup>11</sup> Particularly relevant to the argument here are her comments about the figure of the woman in the sonnets (36).

<sup>12</sup> For example, Jonathan Gil Harris's recent account of desire for Cleopatra as a cover for male-male bonds finds it necessary to discount any ways in which Octavia or Cleopatra are *not* simply subordinated in the relationships they triangulate ("'Narcissus in thy face': Roman Desire and the Difference it Fakes in *Antony and Cleopatra*," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 45 [1994]: 419). Harris's emphasis on the way in which Cleopatra is "boyed" at the end of the play (423) fails to note that the play doesn't give us the comic ending that Cleopatra imagines. Moreover, one could argue further that what Harris calls male narcissism, in which women stand in for and are erased by men, rather than being continuous from the homosocial to the homoerotic (with homoeroticism, rendered in stereotypical terms as narcissistic, implicitly intensifying this narcissism?) is instead disrupted by the "disorderly" sexualities of the play. Unregulated male-male desire (including Antony's desire for Cleopatra as his best "squire") coincides with Cleopatra's prominence as a non-married woman (however much her unregulated

sexuality and gender roles are also compromised in the play). Traub (105) and Goldberg (in "Romeo and Juliet's Open Rs," in *Queering the Renaissance*, 226–28; and in *Sodometries*, 105–43) provide important critiques of assuming just continuity between homosociality and homosexual acts, and particularly of assuming that homosexuality produces the effacement of women and effeminization of men by faking women.

<sup>13</sup> Bray, "Friendship," 3. See also his *Homosexuality in Renaissance England* (London: Gay Men's Press, 1982), esp. 14–16.

<sup>14</sup> Bartels, esp. 452–54.

<sup>15</sup> Stone, 101–5; Valerie Wayne, "Historical Differences: Misogyny and *Othello*," in *The Matter of Difference: Materialist Feminist Criticism of Shakespeare*, ed. Wayne (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1991), 153–79. Desdemona's own sense of her active involvement in a network of "friendship" suggests on the one hand the way Desdemona's character might be shaped by the residually medieval role of the independent and politically active aristocratic woman, a role Joan Kelly argued passed away in the Renaissance domestication of the aristocratic or bourgeois woman in marriage ("Did Women Have a Renaissance?" in *Women, History, Theory: The Essays of Joan Kelly* [Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1984, 1986], 19–50). On the other hand, to the extent that the lure of the Protestant affective marriage was the mutual fellowship of husband and wife, the active authority of Desdemona's friendship might suggest as well the way an emergent discourse of mutuality might also resist the subordination of wife to husband, or make that subordination not so different from that of a man to his lord, a relationship that, though hierarchical, was also mutual.

<sup>16</sup> According to some courtly love doctrine, a married woman could demonstrate her chastity by keeping the "caresses" of her lover short of intercourse (Ruth Kelso, *Doctrine for the Lady of the Renaissance* [Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1956], 172). But as the editor of the Arden Shakespeare points out, even innocent courtly lovers who find themselves in bed more frequently keep their clothes on (*Othello*, ed. E. A. J. Honigmann, Arden Shakespeare [New York: Routledge, 1995], gloss at 4.1.3–4). While one could argue that it is within Iago's character to give as sensational a version as possible of courtly love, I don't think such a character-based observation would completely account for the total play of meaning in the text, which would include, for example, the connection of this question to Iago's account of Cassio's dream.

<sup>17</sup> *The Winter's Tale*, 1.2.107–8, 108–9. Similarly, Camillo as Leontes's servant is associated with Hermione, comes under suspicion in the same way and with the same intensity as she does, and is passed between Leontes and Polixenes as Hermione might be. It seems significant, too, that Camillo is married off to Paulina at the end of the play, hence making a heterosexual couple of the two characters who have been important loci of same-sex bonds, Camillo with Leontes and then Polixenes, and Paulina with Hermione, whom Paulina has cared for for sixteen years.

<sup>18</sup> *The Winter's Tale*, 1.2.111–19.

<sup>19</sup> Bray, "Friendship," 8.

<sup>20</sup> Iago's politically motivated role as spy into sexual abuses recalls Bray's discussion of the charges of a "paid informer" whose report on the activities of men involved in the Essex rebellion included charges of sodomy.

<sup>21</sup> Bray, "Friendship," 13–15. Although reading ambiguities around courtliness as ambiguities around the meaning of male friendship might seem to allegorize the heterosexual relationships in a way I have been warning against, I think it is important to recognize that these relationships depend of course not on actual characters but on textual effects that may well be determined by a more general underlying concern with

regulating sexual relationships, particularly when the categories “heterosexual” or “homosexual” do not seem to divide this concern (men had courtly relations with one another too, for example), and when, moreover, the male-female relationships in the play seem so “mingled” with male-male ones. Charges of adultery and sodomy are both forms of slander.

<sup>22</sup> On homophobia exploited as a political weapon, especially within homosocial groups, see Sedgwick, 124–27.

<sup>23</sup> On the inclusion of bestiality under the category of sodomy, see Bray, *Homosexuality*, 14.

<sup>24</sup> Bray, *Homosexuality*, 75. My argument here follows that of Patricia Parker’s in “Fantasies of ‘Race’ and ‘Gender,’” 99–100; 95–96. I would only emphasize the way same-sex desire functions in *Othello* not as projection of European desire or as a return of the unconscious repressed onto the cultural other, but as one of the discourses by which the other is made “other”—a completely fraught one of course, since it draws on that which is familiar to Europe and England as well.

<sup>25</sup> See Homi Bhabha, “Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse,” *October* 28 (1984): 125–33. I take my general sense of the need to understand Othello’s racial and cultural identity within this dialectic from Jyotsna Singh, “Othello’s Identity, Postcolonial Theory, and Contemporary Rewritings of *Othello*,” in Hendricks and Parker (note 3).

<sup>26</sup> See Bartels, esp. 438–39.

<sup>27</sup> Parker, “Preposterous Events,” 208–11. As Parker notes, though, Iago’s reasoning is, in her own terms, “preposterous” (208). Here I follow Bartels’s argument that Iago’s claims cannot simply be identified with those of the play as a whole (448–49), as Parker seems to do. I would agree rather with Parker’s related work on *Othello* (see note 24), which emphasizes not just reversal but the way the language of sodomy in *Othello* points to “contradictions at the heart of the civilized or ‘civil’” (“Fantasies of ‘Race’ and ‘Gender,’” 100).