Unproper Beds: Race, Adultery, and the Hideous in *Othello*

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> There is a glass of ink wherein you see
> How to make ready black-faced tragedy.
> George Chapman, *Bussy D'Ambois*, 4.2.89–90

I

THE ENDING OF *OTHELLO* IS PERHAPS THE MOST shocking in Shakespearean tragedy. "I am glad that I have ended my revisal of this dreadful scene," wrote Dr. Johnson; "it is not to be endured."[1] His disturbed response is one that the play conspicuously courts: indeed Johnson does no more than paraphrase the reaction of the scandalized Venetians, whose sense of the unendurable nature of what is before them produces the most violently abrupted of all Shakespearean endings. Though its catastrophe is marked by a conventional welter of stabbing and slaughter, *Othello* is conspicuously shorn of the funeral dignities that usually serve to put a form of order upon such spectacles of ruin: in the absence of any witness sympathetic enough to tell the hero's story, the disgraced Othello has to speak what amounts to his own funeral oration—and it is one whose lofty rhetoric is arrested in mid-line by the "bloody period" of his own suicide (5.2.353). "All that's spoke is marred," observes Gratiano, but no memorializing tributes ensue. Even Cassio's "he was great of heart" (l. 357) may amount to nothing more than a faint plea in mitigation for one whose heart was swollen to bursting with intolerable emotion;[2] and in place of the reassuring processional exeunt announced by the usual command to take up the tragic bodies, we get only Lodovico's curt order to close up the scene of butchery: "The object poisons sight: / Let it be hid" (ll. 360–61).[3] The tableau on the bed announces a kind of plague, one that taints the sight as the deadly effluvia of pestilence poison the nostrils.

The congruence between Dr. Johnson's desperately averted gaze and Lodovico's fear of contamination is striking; but it is only Johnson's agitated

[1] Quoted in James R. Siemon, " 'Nay, that's not next': *Othello*, V.ii in performance, 1760–1900," *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 37 (1986), 38–51, esp. p. 39.

[2] See Balz Engler, "Othello's Great Heart," *English Studies*, 68 (1987), 129–36. All *Othello* quotations are from the New Penguin edition, ed. Kenneth Muir (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1968). All other Shakespeare quotations are from *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974).

[3] The exceptional nature of this ending is also noted by Helen Gardner, "The Noble Moor," in Anne Ridler, ed., *Shakespeare Criticism 1935–1960* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1963), pp. 348–70, esp. p. 366.

frankness that makes it seem exceptional. It makes articulate the anxiety evident almost everywhere in the play's history—a sense of scandal that informs the textual strategies of editors and theatrical producers as much as it does the disturbed reactions of audiences and critics. Contemplating the "unutterable agony" of the conclusion, the Variorum editor, Furness, came to wish that the tragedy had never been written;[4] and his choice of the word "unutterable" is a telling one, for this ending, as its stern gestures of erasure demonstrate, has everything to do with what cannot be uttered and must not be seen.

The sensational effect of the scene upon its earliest audiences is apparent from the imitations it spawned[5] and from the mesmerized gaze of Henry Jackson, who left the first surviving account of *Othello* in performance. He saw *Othello* acted by the King's Men at Oxford in 1610 and wrote how

> the celebrated Desdemona, *slayn in our presence by her husband*, although she pleaded her case very effectively throughout, yet moved us more after she was dead, when, *lying in her bed*, she entreated the pity of the spectators by her very countenance.[6]

More than any other scene, it was this show of a wife murdered by her husband that gripped Jackson's imagination; but even more disturbing than the killing itself seems to have been the sight of the dead woman "lying in her bed"—a phrase that echoes Emilia's outrage: "My mistress here lies murdered in her bed" (5.2.184). For Jackson, the *place* seems to matter almost as much as the fact of wife-murder—just as it did to the nineteenth-century Desdemona, Fanny Kemble, when she confessed to "feel[ing] horribly at the idea of being murdered *in my bed*."[7]

The same anxious fascination is reflected in the first attempts to represent the play pictorially: it was the spectacle of the violated marriage bed that Nicholas Rowe selected to epitomize the tragedy in the engraving for his 1709 edition; and his choice was followed by the actors David Garrick and Sarah Siddons, wanting memorials of their own performances.[8] In the great period of Shakespeare illustration from the 1780s to the 1920s, the bedchamber scene was overwhelmingly preferred by publishers and artists, whose images combined to grant it the same representative significance as the graveyard in *Hamlet* or the monument in *Antony and Cleopatra*—as if announcing in this display of death-in-marriage a gestic account of the play's key meanings

[4] The Variorum *Othello*, ed. H. H. Furness (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1886), p. 300; quoted in Siemon, p. 39.

[5] Sensationalized bedchamber scenes that seem indebted to *Othello* include Lussurioso's murderous irruption into his father's bedchamber in *The Revenger's Tragedy* (c. 1606), Evadne's heavily eroticized murder of the king in *The Maid's Tragedy* (c. 1610), and the climactic bedroom scene that forms part of Ford's extensive reworking of *Othello* in *Love's Sacrifice* (c. 1632). Shakespeare himself appears to play on recollections of his own coup de theatre in the bedroom scene of *Cymbeline* (c. 1609); and it is treated to a parodic reversal in Fletcher's *Monsieur Thomas* (c. 1615), where the humiliation of the comic protagonist is accomplished by means of "*A bed discovered with a* [female] *black More in it*" (5.5.2, s.d.), provoking his Emilia-like cry, "Rore againe, devill, rore againe" (l. 41).

[6] Quoted in Julie Hankey, ed., *Othello*, Plays in Performance Series (Bristol: Bristol Classical Press, 1987), p. 18, italics added.

[7] Quoted in Hankey, p. 315, italics added.

[8] See Norman Sanders, ed., *Othello*, New Cambridge edition, (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1984), p. 48.

(Figs. 1–5).[9] Both graveyard and monument, however, in their different ways help to clothe the tragic ending in traditional forms of rhetoric and ceremony that mitigate its terrors, shackling death within a frame of decorum. What makes the ending of *Othello* so unaccountably disturbing and so threatening to its spectators is precisely the brutal violation of decorum that is registered in the quasi-pornographic explicitness of the graphic tradition. The illustrators' voyeuristic manipulation of the parted curtains and their invariable focus upon the unconscious invitation of Desdemona's gracefully exposed body serve to foreground not merely the perverse eroticism of the scene but its aspect of forbidden disclosure.

Even more striking is the fact that these images were often designed to draw readers into texts whose bowdlerizing maneuvers aimed, as far as possible, to conceal everything that their frontispieces offer to reveal. While they could scarcely contrive to remove the scandalous property itself, late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century editors sought to restrict the curiosity that the final scene gratifies and to obscure its most threatening meanings by progressively excising from the text every explicit reference to the bed.[10]

Predictably enough, an even more anxious censorship operated in the theatre itself, where, however, its consequences were much more difficult to predict. In the most striking of many effacements, it became the practice for nineteenth-century Othellos to screen the murder from the audience by closing the curtains upon the bed. This move was ostensibly consistent with a general attempt at de-sensationalizing the tragedy, an attempt whose most obvious manifestation was the restrained "Oriental" Moor developed by Macready and others.[11] But the actual effect of the practice was apparently quite opposite, raising to a sometimes unbearable intensity the audience's scandalized fascination with the now-invisible scene. Years later Westland Marston could still recall the "thrilling" sensation as Macready thrust "his dark despairing face, through the curtains," its "contrast with the drapery" producing "a marvellous piece of colour";[12] and so shocking was this

[9] The art file at the Folger Shakespeare Library, for example, contains 109 illustrations of individual scenes in the play, no fewer than 40 of which show Act 5, scene 2: the bed is invariably the center of attention and often occupies the entire space. For further discussion, see Paul H. D. Kaplan, "The Earliest Images of Othello," *SQ*, 39 (1988), 171–86.

[10] The process of cutting can be traced in Hankey. Already by 1773 Bell's edition had removed the exchange between Iago and Othello at 4.1.3–8 about Desdemona's being "naked with her friend in bed"; while in 1829 Cumberland's acting edition found it necessary to take out Desdemona's instructions to Emilia, "Lay on my bed my wedding sheets" (4.2.104). Macready followed the Cumberland text in finding any reference to the physical reality of the wedding night as indelicate as the word "whore" itself. Thus at 2.3.26 his Iago could no more be allowed to wish "happiness to their sheets!" than to envisage that happiness in "he hath not yet made wanton the night with her" (ll. 15–16). Predictably, most versions from Bell onwards cut the more lurid details of Iago's fantasy of lying with Cassio and its strange sexual displacements (3.3.418–23); more surprisingly, not one Desdemona from Macready's time until the early part of this century was permitted to greet Othello in the murder scene with "Will you come to bed, my lord?" (5.2.24). Even her promise to Cassio that Othello's "bed shall seem a school" (3.3.24) was thought too strong meat for eighteenth-century Dublin and for English audiences after John Philip Kemble's production of 1785.

[11] For an account of the Orientalizing process that culminated in Beerbohm Tree's confident pronouncement that "Othello was an Oriental, not a negro: a stately Arab of the best caste," see Hankey, pp. 65–67, esp. p. 67.

[12] Westland Marston, *Our Recent Actors*, quoted in Hankey, pp. 64, 317.

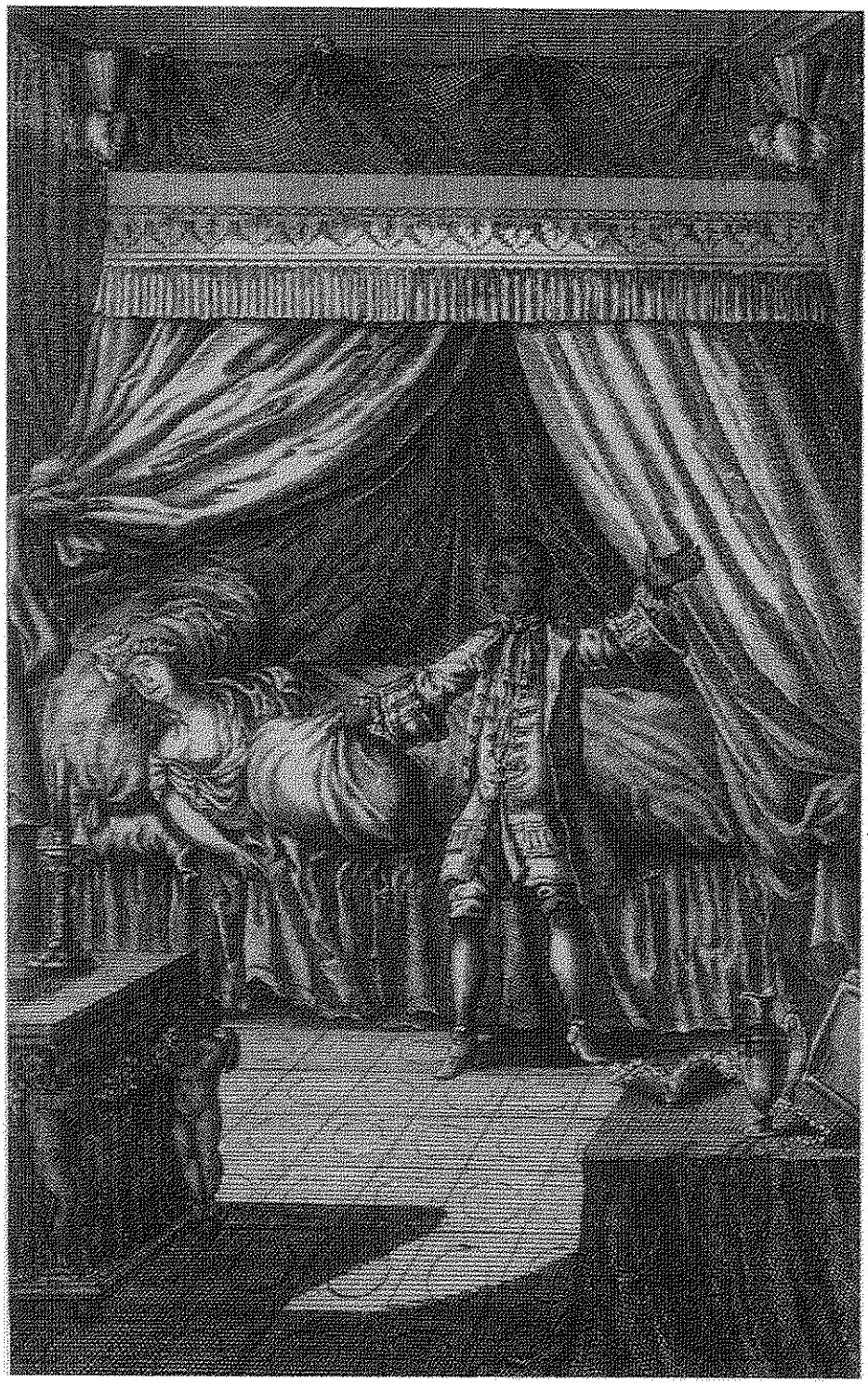

Fig. 1: François Boitard (?), from Tonson's 1709 edition of Shakespeare.

Fig. 2: Philippe Jacques de Loutherbourg, 1785.

Fig. 3: Metz, 1789.

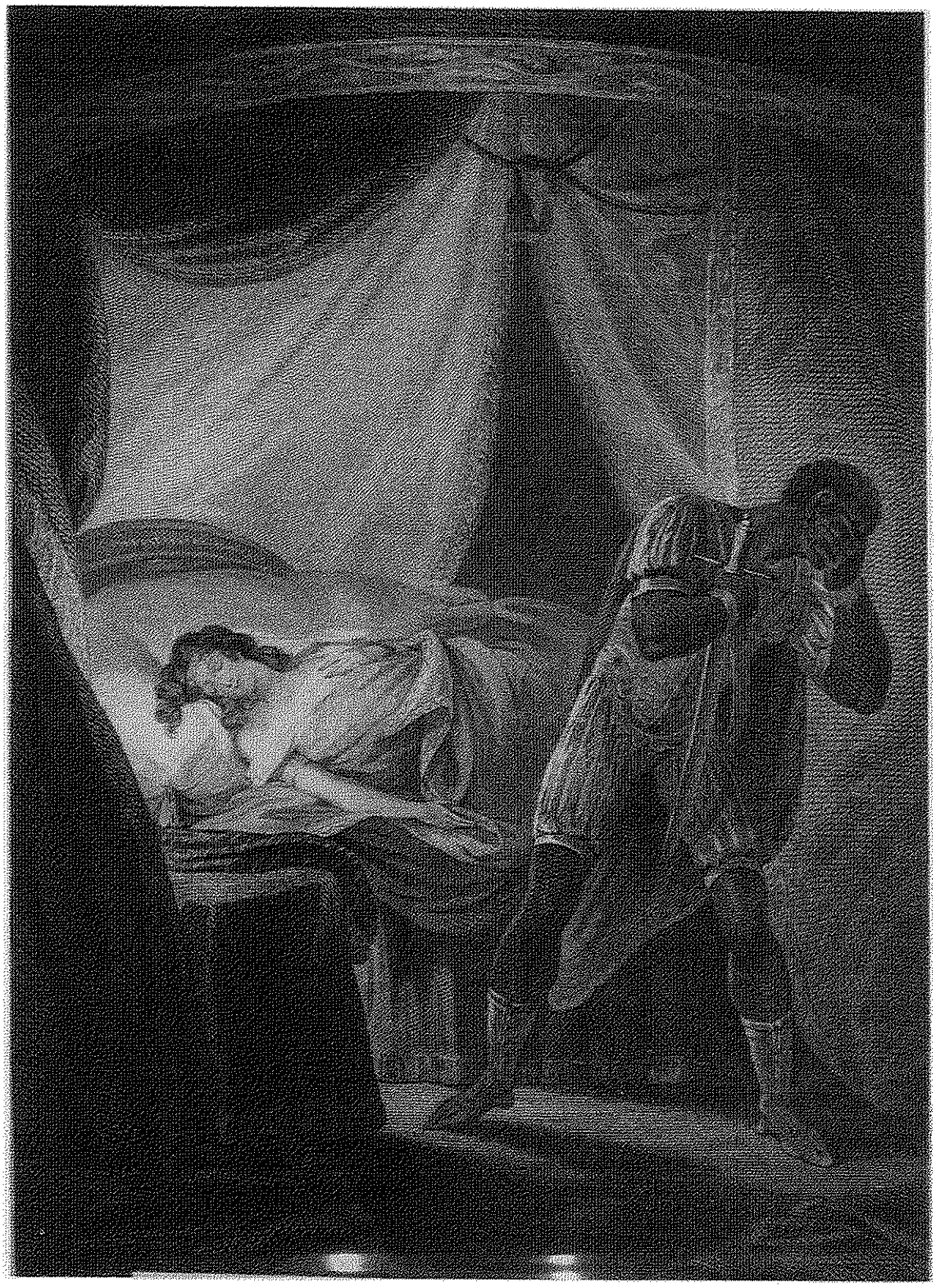

Fig. 4: Engraved by George Noble from a painting by Josiah Boydell for The Boydell Gallery, 1800.

Fig. 5: Engraved by William Leney from a painting by J. Graham for The Boydell Gallery, 1799.

moment, according to John Forster, that in his presence a woman "hysterically fainted" at it.[13]

The reasons for so extreme a reaction can be glimpsed in the offended tone of the Melbourne *Argus* critic, attacking an 1855 production that had flouted this well-established convention: "[The] consummation," he indignantly insisted, "should take place behind the curtain and out of sight."[14] The revealing word "consummation," when set beside the "hysterical" reaction to Macready's "marvellous piece of colour,"[15] suggests that the bed was so intensely identified with the anxieties about race and sex stirred up by the play that it needed, as far as possible, to be removed from the public gaze. Yet the effect of such erasure was only to give freer play to the fantasy it was designed to check, so that the violent chiaroscuro of Macready's blackened face thrust between the virgin-white curtains was experienced as a shocking sado-erotic climax. It was, of course, a stage picture that significantly repeated an off-stage action twice imagined in the first half of the play, when Othello, first in Venice (1.2) and then in Cyprus (2.3), is unceremoniously roused from his nuptial bed. The unconscious repetition must have had the effect of underlining the perverse eroticism of the murder just at the point where the parting of the bed-curtains and the display of Desdemona's corpse was about to grant final satisfaction to the audience's terrible curiosity about the absent scene that dominates so much of the play's action.

For all their ostentatious pudency, then, the Victorian attempts at containing the danger of the play's ending reveal a reading unsettlingly consistent with the most sensational recent productions, like Bernard Miles's 1971 Mermaid *Othello* or Ronald Eyre's at the National in 1979, with their extraordinary emphasis on the significance and visibility of a bed.[16] It is a reading in which the stage direction opening 5.2, "*Enter . . . Desdemona in her bed*," announces ocular proof of all that the audience have most desired and feared to look upon, exposing to cruel light the obscure erotic fantasies that the play both explores and disturbingly excites in its audience. Forster's story of the woman who fainted at the sight of Macready's "dark despairing face" records a moment when (despite more than half a century of bleaching, "civilizing," and bowdlerizing) a subterranean image erupted to confirm the deep fears of racial/sexual otherness on which the play trades—fears that are

[13] William Archer and Robert Lowe, eds., *Dramatic Essays by John Forster and George Henry Lewes*, quoted in Hankey, p. 64.

[14] Quoted in Hankey, p. 317. This critic's reaction was echoed in the murmurs of dissatisfaction with which the audience greeted Rossi's 1881 London performance, when the Italian actor strangled his Desdemona in full view of the audience (see Siemon, p. 47).

[15] To some observers Macready's restrained, gentlemanly, and dignified Moor seemed "almost English" (Hankey, p. 66); but the startling color contrast of this scene seems to have acted as a disturbing reminder of Othello's blackness and therefore (to the Victorian mind) of his savage sexuality.

[16] Both directors introduced the bed early, making it into the centerpiece of the brothel scene; and Miles, whose production notoriously highlighted the sexual suggestiveness of the murder with a naked Desdemona, emphasized the perverse excitements of the earlier scene by leaving Iago and Roderigo at the end "to argue amongst the discarded bedclothes and around the bed itself. . . . [while Roderigo handled] the sheets in rapture." Eyre transposed this piece of stage business to his Othello at the beginning of the scene: Donald Sinden was directed to pull the sheets from Desdemona's laundry basket, throw them about the stage, and then at the line "This is a subtle whore" (l. 20) press the soiled linen to his face—"sniffing [at it] like a hound," according to one reviewer. See Hankey, pp. 291, 281.

made quite embarrassingly explicit in the feverish self-betrayals of a nineteenth-century Russian literary lady reacting to Ira Aldridge's performance of the part. In her account the play exhibits nothing less than the symbolic rape of the European "spirit" by the "savage, wild flesh" of black otherness:

> A full-blooded Negro, incarnating the profoundest creations of Shakespearean art, giving *flesh and blood* for the aesthetic judgment of educated European society. . . . How much nearer can one get to truth, to the very source of the highest aesthetic satisfaction? But *what is truth*. . . ? As the spirit is not the body, so the truth of art is not this profoundly raw flesh which we can take hold of, and call by name and, if you please, feel, pinch with our unbelieving, all-feeling hand. . . . Not the Moscow Maly Theatre, but the African jungle should have been filled and resounded with . . . the cries of this black, powerful, howling flesh. But by the very fact that that flesh is so powerful—that it is genuinely black, so naturally *un-white* does it howl—that savage flesh did its fleshly work. It murdered and crushed the spirit. . . . one's spirit cannot accept it—and in place of the highest enjoyment, this blatant flesh introduced into art, this *natural* black Othello, pardon me, causes only . . . revulsion.[17]

It is as if in Macready's coup the strange mixture of thrilled agitation, horror, and shame voiced here became focused with an unbearable intensity upon the occupation of the bed, where the transgression of racial boundaries was displayed as an offence punishable by death:

II

The racial fear and revulsion lurking beneath the ambiguous excitements of the theatrical and pictorial traditions is made crudely explicit in an early nineteenth-century caricature, apparently of Ira Aldridge's Othello, published as Number 9 in the series *Tregear's Black Jokes* (Fig. 6). The caricaturist sublimates his anxiety at the scene's sexual threat through the burlesque device of transforming Desdemona into an obese black woman, her snoring mouth grotesquely agape. The racialism paraded here for the amusement of early nineteenth-century Londoners is rarely so openly exhibited, but it has tainted even the most respectable *Othello* criticism until well into the present century. A sense of racial scandal is a consistent thread in commentary on the play from Rymer's notorious effusions against the indecorum of a "Blackamoor" hero,[18] to Coleridge's assertion that Othello was never intended to be black and F. R. Leavis's triumphant demonstration that Othello was never intended for a hero.[19] It is as apparent in A. C. Bradley's nervously

[17] N. S. Sokhanskaya ("N. Kokhanovskaya") in a letter to the Slavophile newspaper *Dyen* (1863), quoted in Herbert Marshall and Mildred Stock, *Ira Aldridge: The Negro Tragedian* (London: Rockliff, 1958), pp. 265–66. See also Siemon, p. 45, for English reactions to the scene "that [mimic] the language and strategies of pornography."

[18] Thomas Rymer, *A Short View of Tragedy* (1693), quoted in Brian Vickers, ed., *Shakespeare: The Critical Heritage*, 6 vols. (London and Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1974), Vol. 2, 27.

[19] F. R. Leavis, "Diabolic Intellect and the Noble Hero," in *The Common Pursuit* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1952), pp. 136–59. For acute analyses of the racial assumptions underlying Leavis's approach, see Hankey, pp. 109–16, and Martin Orkin, "Othello and the 'plain face' of Racism," *SQ*, 38 (1987), 166–88, esp. pp. 183–86, now incorporated in his *Shakespeare Against Apartheid* (Craighall, South Africa: Ad. Donker, 1987). Both show how much Leavis's interpretation contributed to Olivier's version of the tragedy.

Fig. 6

footnoted anxiety about how "the aversion of our blood" might respond to the sight of a black Othello[20] as it is in Charles Lamb's frank discovery of "something extremely revolting in the courtship and wedded caresses of Othello and Desdemona."[21] "To imagine is one thing," Bradley protests, "and to see is another," making painfully explicit his reaction against what Edward Snow describes as the play's insistence upon "bringing to consciousness things known in the flesh but 'too hideous to be shown.' "[22] For the neo-Freudian Snow, however, these forbidden things are the male psyche's repressed fears of female otherness, which the accident of Othello's race "merely forces him to live out with psychotic intensity."[23] It is clear, however, that for Bradley it was precisely Othello's blackness that made the play's sexual preoccupations so upsetting.

For Coleridge the idea of a black hero was unacceptable because blackness was equivalent to savagery and the notion of savage heroism an intolerable oxymoron. His application of critical skin-lightener began a tradition of sterile and seemingly endless debate about the exact degree and significance of Othello's racial difference, on which critics dissipated their energies until well into the present century—M. R. Ridley's still-current Arden edition

[20] *Shakespearean Tragedy* (1904; rpt. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1985), p. 165 n.
[21] Quoted in Hankey, pp. 65–66.
[22] "Sexual Anxiety and the Male Order of Things in *Othello*," *English Literary Renaissance*, 10 (1980), 384–412, esp. p. 387.
[23] p. 400.

(1958), with its ludicrous attempt to substitute "contour" for "colour" as the principle of discrimination, being only the most disgraceful recent example.[24] Since Coleridge, arguments about race in *Othello* have almost invariably been entangled, more or less explicitly, with arguments about culture in which gradations of color stand for gradations of "barbarity," "animality," and "primitive emotion." If the dominant nineteenth-century tradition sought to domesticate the play by removing the embarrassment of savagery, the most common twentieth-century strategy has been to anthropologize it as the study of an assimilated savage who relapses into primitivism under stress. This was essentially Leavis's solution, and one can still hear it echoed in the New Cambridge editor's admiration for the weird mimicry of Laurence Olivier's "West African"/"West Indian" Othello,[25] which he describes as a "virtuoso . . . portrait of a *primitive* man, at odds with the sophisticated society into which he has forced himself, *relapsing into barbarism* as a result of hideous misjudgement."[26]

At the other extreme stand revisionist readings like Martin Orkin's, which have sought to rehabilitate the tragedy by co-opting it to the anti-racist cause, insisting that "in its rejection of human pigmentation as a means of identifying worth, the play, as it always has done, continues to oppose racism."[27] Orkin's is an admirably motivated attempt to expose the racialist ideology underlying various critical and theatrical interpretations of the tragedy, but Shakespeare would surely have been puzzled to understand the claim that his play "opposes racism," cast as it is in a language peculiar to the politics of our own century.[28] It would no more have been possible for Shakespeare to "oppose racism" in 1604, one might argue, than for Marlowe to "oppose anti-semitism" in 1590: the argument simply could not be constituted in those terms. Julie Hankey, indeed, contemplating the pitfalls presented by Shakespeare's treatment of racial matters, concludes that his construction of racial difference is virtually beyond recovery, having become after four hundred years hopelessly obscured by a "patina of apparent topicality."[29]

[24] See M. R. Ridley, ed., *Othello*, Arden edition (London: Methuen, 1958), p. li.

[25] The geographical referent of Olivier's mimicry significantly varies in different accounts of the production: Hankey, for example, refers to his "extraordinary transformation into a black African" (p. 111); Sanders praises "his careful imitation of West Indian gait and gesture" (p. 47); while Richard David speaks of "Olivier's . . . 'modern' negro, out of Harlem rather than Barbary" (*Shakespeare in the Theatre* [Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1978], p. 46). The embarrassing conclusion must be that Olivier's much-praised fidelity to detail was simply fidelity to a generalized stereotype of "blackness."

[26] Norman Sanders, p. 47, italics added. Sanders almost exactly paraphrases Laurence Lerner's account of the way in which "the primitive breaks out again in Othello," which Orkin uses to exemplify the way in which even liberal South African critics of the play find themselves reacting to it in terms of the paradigms of apartheid (pp. 184–85). Olivier himself declared that Othello "is a savage man," adding hurriedly, "not on account of his colour; I don't mean that" (Hankey, p. 109); but it is a little difficult to know quite what else he could have meant—especially in the light of reviewers' reactions to his mimicry of negritude, which concluded "that Othello's brutality was either of the jungle and essentially his own, or that, as one of Nature's innocents, he had taken the infection from a trivial and mean white society" (p. 111). Whatever the case, the choice is simply between noble and ignoble savagery. For a good account of the ideas behind the Olivier production and critical reactions to it, see Hankey, pp. 109–13.

[27] p. 188.

[28] The word "racism" itself dates from only 1936, and "racialism" from 1907 (*OED*).

[29] p. 15.

Hankey's position has at least the merit of historicist scruple but seems in the end evasive, not unlike those liberal critiques that rob the play of its danger by treating Othello's color simply as a convenient badge of his estrangement from Venetian society[30]—in effect a distraction to be cleared out of the way in order to expose the real core of the drama, its tragedy of jealousy.[31] But the history that Hankey herself traces is a testimony to the stubborn fact that *Othello* is a play full of racial feeling—perhaps the first work in English to explore the roots of such feeling; and it can hardly be accidental that it belongs to the very period in English history in which something we can now identify as a racialist ideology was beginning to evolve under the pressures of nascent imperialism.[32] In this context it is all the more curious, as Hankey notices, that Henry Jackson in 1610 seemed utterly to ignore this aspect of the tragedy, presenting it simply as a drama of wife-murder whose culprit is described in the most neutral language as "her husband." We cannot now tell whether Jackson was blind to the racial dimension of the action, or thought it of no interest or merely too obvious to require mention. But I want to argue that his attention to the bed suggests a way round the dilemma posed by this odd silence: to explain why the bed should have caught his eye is to begin to understand theatrical strategies for thinking about racial otherness that are specific to the work's own cultural context. If Jackson elected to say nothing about these matters, it may have been because there was for him no real way of voicing them, in that they were still in some deep sense *unutterable*. But they were there on the bed for all to see.

What is displayed on the bed is something, in Othello's own profoundly resonant phrase, "too hideous to be shown" (3.3.107). The wordplay here (unusually, in this drama of treacherously conflicting meanings) amounts to a kind of desperate iteration: what is *hide*ous is what should be kept *hidden*, out of sight.[33] "Hideous" in this sense is virtually an Anglo-Saxon equivalent for the Latinate "obscene"—referring to that which is profoundly improper, not merely indecent but tainted (in the original sense) or unclean; and that which should also, according to Shakespeare's own folk-etymology, be kept

[30] Here I include my own essay "Changing Places in *Othello*," *Shakespeare Survey*, 37 (1984), 115–31; I ought to have noticed more clearly the way in which racial identity is constructed as one of the most fiercely contested "places" in the play.

[31] Honorable exceptions include Eldred Jones, *Othello's Countrymen: The African in English Renaissance Drama* (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1965); G. K. Hunter's celebrated lecture on "Othello and Colour Prejudice," *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 53 (1967), 139–57; Doris Adler, "The Rhetoric of *Black* and *White* in *Othello*," *SQ*, 25 (1974), 248–57; G. M. Matthews, "*Othello* and the Dignity of Man," in Arnold Kettle, ed., *Shakespeare in a Changing World* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1964), pp. 123–45; and Karen Newman, " 'And wash the Ethiop white': femininity and the monstrous in *Othello*," in Jean E. Howard and Marion F. O'Connor, eds., *Shakespeare Reproduced: The text in history and ideology* (New York and London: Methuen, 1987), pp. 141–62.

[32] For more recent theoretical accounts of the evolution of a discourse of "Englishness" and "otherness" as an enabling adjunct of colonial conquest, see Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago and London: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1980), pp. 179–92; David Cairns and Shaun Richards, *Writing Ireland: colonialism, nationalism and culture* (Manchester: Manchester Univ. Press, 1988), chap. 1, "What ish my Nation?" pp. 1–21; and Anne Laurence, "The Cradle to the Grave: English Observation of Irish Social Customs in the Seventeenth Century," *The Seventeenth Century*, 3 (1988), 63–84.

[33] The wordplay, which may well reflect a folk-etymology, occurs elsewhere in Shakespeare: see, for example, *Twelfth Night*, 4.2.31 ("hideous darkness"), and *King John*, 5.4.22.

unseen, *off-stage*, hidden.[34] The play begins with Iago's evocation of just such an obscenity; it ends by seeking to return it to its proper darkness, closing the curtains that Iago first metaphorically plucked aside. In his frequently perceptive study of *Othello*, Edward Snow, observing that the play's "final gesture is on the side of repression," goes on to stress how necessarily that gesture is directed at the bed: "it is not just any object that is to be hidden but the 'tragic lodging' of the wedding-bed—the place of sexuality itself."[35] But Snow's own strategy expressly requires that he himself suppress the anxiety that attaches to the bed as the site of racial transgression—the anxiety on which depends so much of the play's continuing power to disturb.

III

One of the terrifying things about *Othello* is that its racial poisons seem so casually concocted, as if racism were just something that Iago, drawing in his improvisational way on a gallimaufry of quite unsystematic prejudices and superstitions, made up as he went along. The characteristic pleasure he takes in his own felicitous invention only makes the effect more shocking. Iago lets horrible things loose and delights in watching them run; and the play seems to share that narcissistic fascination—or perhaps, better, Iago is the voice of its own fascinated self-regard. The play thinks abomination into being and then taunts the audience with the knowledge that it can never be *un*thought: "What you know, you know." It is a technique that works close to the unstable ground of consciousness itself; for it would be almost as difficult to say whether its racial anxieties are ones that the play discovers or implants in an audience as to say whether jealousy is something that Iago discovers or implants in Othello. Yet discovery, in the most literal theatrical sense, is what the last scene cruelly insists on. Like no other drama, *Othello* establishes an equivalency between psychological event (what happens "inside") and off-stage action (what happens "within"); thus it can flourish its disclosure of the horror on the bed like a psychoanalytic revelation.

The power of the offstage scene over the audience's prying imagination is immediately suggested by the irritable speculation of Thomas Rymer, the play's first systematic critic. Rymer spends several pages of his critique exposing what he regards as ludicrous inconsistencies between what the play tells the audience and what verisimilitude requires them to believe about the occupation of "the Matrimonial Bed." The time scheme, he insists, permits Othello and his bride to sleep together only once, on the first night in Cyprus, but "*once* will not do the Poets business: the *Audience* must suppose a great many bouts, to make the plot operate. They must deny their senses, to reconcile it to common sense."[36]

Rymer's method is taken to extraordinary extremes in a recent article by T.G.A. Nelson and Charles Haines, who set out to demonstrate, with a mass of circumstantial detail, that the marriage of Othello and Desdemona was

[34] The proper derivation is from *caenum* = dirt; but the imagery of Carlisle's speech in *Richard II* clearly seems to imply the folk-etymology from *scaenum* = stage: "*show* so heinous, *black*, *obscene* a deed" (4.2.122); see also *Love's Labor's Lost*, 1.1.235–39.

[35] p. 385.

[36] Rymer, quoted in Vickers, Vol. 2, p. 43.

never consummated at all. In this previously unsuspected embarrassment is to be found an explanation for the extreme suggestibility of the hero, and thus the hidden spring of the entire tragic action.[37] Their essay is remarkable not for the ingenuity of its finally unsustainable argument about the sequential "facts" of a plot whose time-scheme is so notoriously undependable, but for what it unconsciously reveals about the effect of *Othello* upon its audiences. Their entire procedure mirrors with disturbing fidelity the habit of obsessive speculation about concealed offstage action, into which the play entraps the viewer as it entraps its characters. Nelson and Haines become victims, like the hero himself, of the scopophile economy of this tragedy and prey to its voyeuristic excitements.

Recently, Norman Nathan has attempted a point-by-point rebuttal of Nelson and Haines, the ironic effect of which is to entrap him in the very speculation he wishes to cut short. "If a lack of consummation is so important to this play, why isn't the audience so informed?" he somewhat testily enquires.[38] An answer might be—to make them ask the question. *Othello* persistently goads its audience into speculation about what is happening behind the scenes. This preoccupation with offstage action is unique in Shakespeare. Elsewhere, whenever offstage action is of any importance, it is almost always carefully described, usually by an eyewitness whose account is not open to question, so that nothing of critical importance is left to the audience's imagination. But in *Othello* the real imaginative focus of the action is always the hidden marriage-bed, an inalienably private location, shielded, until the very last scene, from every gaze.[39] This disquietingly absent presence creates the margin within which Iago can operate as a uniquely deceitful version of the *nuntius*, whose vivid imaginary descriptions taint the vision of the audience even as they colonize the minds of Brabantio and Othello:

> IAGO: Even now, now, very now, an old black ram
> Is tupping your white ewe. . . .
> you'll have your daughter covered with a Barbary horse. . . . your daughter and the Moor are now making the beast with two backs.
> (1.1.89–90, 111–12, 116–18)

It is important that this fantasy, in which all the participants in this scene (Iago, Roderigo, and Brabantio) participate, should have the characteristic anonymity of pornography—it trades only in perverted erotic stereotypes ("fair daughter" and "lascivious Moor" [ll. 123, 127]). Since the audience is exposed to these obscenities before it is allowed to encounter either Othello

[37] T.G.A. Nelson and Charles Haines, "Othello's Unconsummated Marriage," *Essays in Criticism*, 33 (1983), 1–18. Their arguments were partially anticipated in a little-noticed article by Pierre Janton, "Othello's Weak Function," *Cahiers Élisabéthains*, 7 (1975), 43–50, and are paralleled in William Whallon, *Inconsistencies* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer; Totowa, N.J.: Biblio, 1983). I regard my own willingness to take these arguments seriously ("Changing Places in *Othello*," p. 116, n. 1) as further evidence for the point I am making.

[38] "Othello's Marriage is Consummated," *Cahiers Élisabéthains*, 34 (1988), 79–82, esp. p. 81.

[39] This aspect of the play is recognized by Stanley Cavell in *Disowning Knowledge In Six Plays of Shakespeare* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1987): "My guiding hypothesis about the structure of the play is that the thing *denied our sight* throughout the opening scene—the thing, the scene, that Iago takes Othello back to again and again, retouching it for Othello's enchafed imagination—is what we are shown in the final scene, the scene of murder" (p. 132). See also James L. Calderwood, *The Properties of* Othello (Amherst: Univ. of Massachusetts Press, 1989), p. 125.

or Desdemona in person, they serve to plant the suggestion, which perseveres like an itch throughout the action, that the attractive public face of this marriage is only the mask for something unspeakably adulterate. The scenes that follow contrive to keep alive the ugly curiosity that Iago has aroused, even while the action concentrates on Othello's public magnificence, on Desdemona's courageous resistance to patriarchal authority, and upon idealized affirmations of the love between them.

Act 1, scene 2 opens with the entry of Othello and Iago "*with torches*," the torches serving as a reminder of the hero's sudden arousal from his marriage bed, so that Iago's probing "are you fast married?" (l. 11) is implicitly a question about consummation. With Iago's bawdy innuendo to Cassio, "he tonight hath boarded a land carack" (l. 50), it continues the fitful illumination of that offstage scene. This lurid vision of the bed, kindled again in Brabantio's jealous outrage, may contaminate even the idealizing language of Othello—the high rhetoric that contrasts "My thrice-driven bed of down" with "the flinty and steel couch of war" (ll. 228–29); and it invites a prying curiosity about the "rites" of love acknowledged in Desdemona's touching erotic frankness:[40]

> if I be left behind
> A moth of peace, and he go to the war,
> The rites for which I love him are bereft me. . . .
> (1.3.252–54)

But it is not until the soliloquy after Roderigo's exit that Iago's diseased preoccupation with Othello's bed begins to reveal a fascination deeper and more brooding than mere strategem requires:

> I hate the Moor,
> And it is thought abroad that *'twixt my sheets*
> He's done my office.
> (1.3.380–82, italics added)

The office between the sheets is Iago's characteristically debased version of Desdemona's "rites for which I love him"; with its reduction of lovemaking to the right and duty of a patriarchal place-holder, it equates adultery with Cassio's usurpation of Iago's place as Othello's "officer," seeing in both a kind of illicit substitution or counterfeiting for which the deceits of his own "double knavery" are merely a just requittal.

Retrospectively regarded, Act 1, built as it is around the boisterous and threatening disruption of a wedding night, has something of the character of one of those satiric rituals (rough musics, charivari, and skimmingtons) by which society expressed its disapprobation of transgressive marriages and adulterous liaisons.[41] And the storm that ensues, with its ominous division of

[40] Nelson and Haines, for example, use her lines as prime evidence for the non-consummation of the marriage on its first night (p. 13).

[41] Among the grounds cited for such exhibitions of popular censure were "a great disparity in age between bride and groom . . . or the fact that the husband was regarded as a 'stranger'. . . . Charivaris thus stigmatized marriages in which bride and groom . . . failed to maintain a 'proper distance' "; see Daniel Fabre, "Families: Privacy versus Custom" in Philippe Ariès and Georges Duby, gen. eds., *A History of Private Life*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer, 3 vols. (Cambridge, Mass., and London: Harvard Univ. Press [Belknap Press], 1987), Vol. 3 (*Passions of the Renaissance*), 533. For English forms of the charivari, see David Underdown, *Revel, Riot and Rebellion: Popular Politics and Culture in England 1603–1660* (Oxford: Clarendon Press,

the bride and groom, might be read as confirming its threats, mimicking the erotic violence always latent in the dangerous translations of a wedding night and liable to be released by any unsanctioned match. The happy reunion in Cyprus, however, makes it seem as if a particularly testing rite of passage has been successfully negotiated, a suggestion supported by the elated sensuality of the language in which Cassio imagines it—

> Great Jove, Othello guard,
> And swell his sail with thine own powerful breath,
> That he may bless this bay with his tall ship,
> Make love's quick pants in Desdemona's arms . . .
> (2.1.77–80)

—and seemingly confirmed in Othello's joyous eroticization of his triumphant arrival:

> If after every tempest come such calms,
> May the winds blow till they have wakened death,
> And let the labouring bark climb hills of seas,
> Olympus-high, and duck again as low
> As hell's from heaven. If it were now to die,
> 'Twere now to be most happy. . . .
> (2.1.179–84)

But the exhilarated poetry of the scene is undercut by the sardonic presence of Iago, who greets his general's arrival with a typically reductive pun ("The Moor! I know his *trumpet*" [l. 174, italics added]) and who remains after the general exeunt to focus attention on the hidden scene of marital celebration:

> When the blood is made dull with the act of sport, there should be, again to inflame it and give satiety a fresh appetite, loveliness in favour, sympathy in years, manners and beauties: all which the Moor is defective in. Now for want of these required conveniences, her delicate tenderness will find itself abused, begin to heave the gorge, disrelish and abhor the Moor. Very nature will instruct her in it and compel her to some second choice. . . . Lechery, by this hand. . . . When these mutualities so marshal the way, hard at hand comes the master and main exercise, th'incorporate conclusion.
> (2.1.220–28, 249, 252–54)

With its concentration on the imputed grotesquerie of racial mésalliance, this speech is almost an exact repetition of Iago's first scene with Roderigo, and like that scene it ends with a soliloquy, with Iago brooding on the adulterous violation of his own sheets: "I do suspect the lusty Moor / Hath leapt into my seat. . . . I fear Cassio with my night-cap too" (ll. 286–87, 298).

Thus when Act 2, scene 3 opens with Othello and his bride preparing once again for bed—

> Come, my dear love,
> The purchase made, the fruits are to ensue:
> That profit's yet to come 'tween me and you
> (ll. 8–10)

1985), pp. 99–103. The grotesque animal imagery of Iago's speeches outside Brabantio's house echoes the horned masks and animal heads of the wild procession paraded at the offender's windows (see Underdown, p. 101).

—the suggestion of a new beginning is already bitterly ironized. Their departure is at once the occasion for Iago's prurient commentary:

> He hath not yet made wanton the night with her; and she is sport for Jove. . . . And, I'll warrant her, full of game. . . . What an eye she has! Methinks it sounds a parley to provocation. . . . And when she speaks, is it not an alarum to love? . . . Well, happiness to their sheets!
>
> (ll. 15–26)

In terms of Iago's unfolding plot, this is largely superfluous. More important is its dramatic function—together with the carefully offhand suggestion of racial outrage in the "black Othello" (l. 29)—in concentrating the audience's imagination once again upon the erotic act in the bedroom. In this way the speech helps to prepare us for the interruption of the second bedding by the rough music of a "dreadful bell," the "black sanctus" that accompanies the second of Iago's charivari-like improvisations, with its weird travesty of nuptial disharmonies ("Friends all but now . . . like bride and groom / Devesting them for bed: and then . . . tilting one at others' breasts / In opposition bloody" [ll. 173–78]).[42]

Up to this point in the play, Iago's operation has been principally aimed at converting the absent/present bed into a locus of imagined adultery by producing Othello's abduction of Desdemona 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 and with the vindictive counter-adultery that Iago briefly contemplates with Desdemona. More generally it is projected as being of a piece with the usurpation of "natural" rights in Cassio's appropriation of the lieutenancy owed to Iago. The audience can become deeply implicated in this network of interlocking prejudices and suspicions just because it is Iago's habit to work by implication and association; feelings and attitudes that would hardly survive inspection in the light of reason are enabled to persist precisely because they work away in this subterranean fashion. The accomplishment of his plan, though it means bringing "this monstrous birth to the world's light" (substantially from Act 3, scene 3, onwards), never fully allows the audience to escape this entanglement. To the extent that it takes the form of a sinister parody of the ingenious symmetries of revenge tragedy (the biter bit or the adulterer cuckolded), his plot allows us a certain ironic distance, a space in which the villain is subject to our judgment; but to the extent that it actually continues the process of realizing Iago's fantasies of sexual adulteration, culminating in the hideous ocular proof of the final scene, it traps us in a guilty involvement.

In the temptation scene (3.3) the "secrets" that Othello sees himself patiently excavating from Iago's mind are already horribly present to the audience—not just because we are party to the villain's plotting but because these ugly conceits in some sense echo the secret and unscrutinized imaginings he has planted inside our heads. As the monster at the heart of the psychic labyrinth is brought to light, the confession of Iago's hidden thoughts gradually slides into the revelation of Desdemona's hidden deeds—

[42] For a full discussion of the charivari-like aspects of this scene, see Nelson and Haines, pp. 5–7.

> In Venice they do let God see the pranks
> They dare not show their husbands.
> (3.3.200–201)

From that hint of invisible vice, the tempter edges, with his technique of elaborate *occupatio* rhetorically exhibiting what he repeatedly insists can never be shown, into the scopophile excitements of erotic encounters evoked in increasingly lurid visual detail. The tupping ram of Act 1, scene 1, makes its reappearance in another promiscuously mixed gallery of copulating beasts:[43]

> Would you, the supervisor, grossly gape on?
> Behold her topped? . . .
> It were a tedious difficulty, I think,
> To bring them to that prospect. Damn them then
> If ever mortal eyes do see them bolster
> More than their own! . . .
> It is impossible you should see this,
> Were they as prime as goats, as hot as monkeys,
> As salt as wolves in pride, and fools as gross
> As ignorance made drunk.
> (ll. 392 ff.)

The still merely verbal but powerfully suggestive metonym "bolster" gives way to the ruthlessly detailed night-piece in which Iago claims to have become an unwilling partner in Cassio's dream of fornication. Once again nothing is shown—the love act is merely a sleeping fantasy, "Desdemona" is only "Iago." Yet this doubly fictive scene of adultery is made to seem doubly adulterate by the homoerotic displacement of the kisses that grow upon Iago's lips—kisses that themselves disturbingly mirror the one real adultery of the play, the seduction of Othello in which Iago is at this very moment engaged.[44] The revelation is given an extra stamp of authenticity by being presented as Cassio's unwitting self-betrayal in a moment of compulsive secrecy: "Sweet Desdemona, / Let us be wary, let us hide our loves" (ll. 416–17). Iago's invention seems to part the curtains to display not merely the hidden scene but hidden thoughts themselves.

It is not, however, until the second temptation scene (4.1) that Iago is ready to move to a direct evocation of Desdemona's adultery; and here, for the first time, the bed itself comes into full imaginative view, providing the climax of the brutally brief passage of stichomythia on which the scene opens:

> IAGO: Will you think so?
> OTHELLO: Think so, Iago?
> IAGO: What!
> To kiss in private?
> OTHELLO: An unauthorized kiss.
> IAGO: Or to be naked with her friend *in bed*
> An hour or more, not meaning any harm?

[43] "Topped" here is simply a variant of "tupped," a verbal form deriving from the dialectal "tup" = ram (*OED*).

[44] I have analyzed the adulterous character of the temptation scene in "Changing Places in *Othello*."

OTHELLO: *Naked in bed*, Iago, and not mean harm?
(4.1.1–5, italics added)

In the peculiarly concrete vividness with which those two naked bodies on the bed are made to flash out of the darkness of uncertainty onto the screen of Othello's fantasy, this becomes a moment of rhetorical dis-covery—a counterpart to the physical discovery of 5.2. It is what—together with the triumphantly reintroduced detail of the handkerchief, that visible sign of Desdemona's hidden self[45]—provokes the crisis of the scene:

OTHELLO: Lie with her? Lie on her? . . . Lie with her! Zounds,
that's fulsome! Handkerchief—confession—
handkerchief!
(ll. 35–37)

Imaginatively linked to the stained sheets of the wedding bed, as Lynda Boose and Edward Snow have shown,[46] and connected with the exposure of secrets by its former owner's magical ability "almost [to] read / The thoughts of people" (3.4.57–58), the handkerchief stands for "an essence that's not seen" (4.1.16). As it renders the invisible visible and the private public, it proves the natural unnatural and property itself "unproper": "There's millions now alive / That nightly lie in those unproper beds / Which they dare swear peculiar" (ll. 67–69). Thus it confirms the grotesque propriety of the fate that Iago, relishing his fictive symmetries, decrees for Desdemona: "And did you see the handkerchief? . . . Do it not with poison; strangle her in her bed, even the bed she hath contaminated" (4.1.172, 206–7).

From this point on, as Othello moves towards his murderous final exposure of those "villainous secrets" for which Emilia is "a closet lock and key" (4.2.21), the bed becomes more and more explicitly the "place" upon which the action is centered. Above all it provides the emotional focus of Desdemona's two scenes before the murder, where (as though in unconscious collusion with Othello's fantasies) she perfects her tableau of murderous consummation. Its hidden program is supplied by the fashion, increasingly popular among aristocratic women in the early seventeenth century, for having one's corpse wound in the sheets from the wedding night:[47]

Prithee tonight
Lay on my bed my wedding sheets, remember,
And call thy husband hither.
(4.2.103–5)

DESDEMONA: He hath commanded me to go to bed,

[45] For the handkerchief as "the public surrogate of secrecy," see Kenneth Burke's suggestive "*Othello*: An Essay to Illustrate a Method" in Susan Snyder, ed., Othello: *Critical Essays* (New York and London: Garland, 1988), pp. 127–68, esp. p. 160.

[46] See Snow (cited above, n. 22) and Lynda E. Boose, "Othello's Handkerchief: 'The Recognizance and Pledge of Love,' " *English Literary Renaissance*, 5 (1975), 360–74. See also Nelson and Haines, pp. 8–10. Peter Stallybrass ("Patriarchal Territories: The Body Enclosed" in Snyder, *Othello*, pp. 251–74, esp. pp. 254, 269) identifies the handkerchief as a social symbol connected to the policing and purification of bodily orifices. Some useful historical perspectives on its significance are suggested by Karen Newman (cited in n. 31, above), pp. 155–56.

[47] See Clare Gittings, *Death, Burial and the Individual in Early Modern England* (London and Sydney: Croom Helm, 1984), pp. 111–12.

And bade me to dismiss you. . . .
Give me my nightly wearing, and adieu.
We must not now displease him. . . .
EMILIA: I have laid those sheets, you bade me, on the bed. . . .
DESDEMONA: If I do die before thee, prithee shroud me
In one of those same sheets.

(4.3.12–24)

There is something oddly somnambulant about Desdemona's preparation for her death, as there is about Othello's conduct of the murder. It emerges particularly through the repetition compulsion associated with the wedding sheets, equating sheets and shroud, marriage-bed and death-bed, that mirrors the murderous repetition of Othello's vow: "Thy bed, lust-stained, shall with lust's blood be spotted" (5.1.36). The suggestion of automatism can work as it does only because of the remorselessly cumulative effect of the play's gestures towards the absent presence of the bed. The scope of the action appears to narrow progressively, closing ineluctably through these later scenes upon the final disclosure: "*Enter Othello, [with a light,] and Desdemona in her bed.*"[48] The appearance of the bed from within the curtained alcove at the rear of the stage envisaged in the Folio direction signals a moment of quite literal *discovery*, when the hidden object of the play's imaginative obsession at last stands revealed. The torch plays its part in this symbology of revelation. Like the torches that accompany Othello's first entrance from the marriage-chamber in 1.2, it recalls the emblematic brands of Hymen. In common with so many of the play's images of light and dark, however, its traditional significance is inverted, or at least radically confused; for the bringing to light of the hidden scene of Othello's fantasy corresponds to the simultaneous and deliberate occlusion of his reason: "It is the cause, it is the cause, my soul: / Let me not name it to you." To name his motive would be to render it liable to scrutiny, but Othello cannot bear the thought of what he then might see: "put out the light" (5.2.1–2, 7). The scene is rhetorically framed by gestures of repression ("Let me not name it to you," "Let it be hid"), as the tableau at its center is physically framed by the curtains that finally close upon it.

It would be laboring the point to demonstrate in detail the centrality of the bed in the play's denouement. The pattern of alternating revelations and concealments in the final scene is enacted through and largely organized around the opening and closing of those bed-curtains which, like theatrical inverted commas, figure so conspicuously in representations of the final scene (ll. 1, 105, 121, 361). In the murder on the bed, with its shocking literalization of Desdemona's conceit of wedding-sheets-as-shroud ("thou art on thy death-bed" [l. 52]), the nuptial consummation that the play has kept as remorselessly in view as tormentingly out of sight achieves its perverse (adulterate) performance. It is on the bed, moreover, that Othello (in the

[48] I give the stage direction in its Folio form, with the necessary addition (in square brackets) of Q1's torch. It is not clear whether the bed is merely to be displayed inside the discovery space or to be thrust forward onto the main stage. Economy of design favors the former alternative, theatrical effectiveness the latter, which is supported by Richard Hosley in "The Staging of Desdemona's Bed," *SQ*, 14 (1963), 57–65. Hosley further suggests that Lodovico's final order may have been a signal for the bed to be "drawn in" again, making his gesture of effacement even more absolute.

quarto stage direction) throws himself, as though in a symbolic reassertion of the husband's place, when he first begins to glimpse the depths of Iago's treachery (l. 197). His place is symbolically usurped in Emilia's request to "lay me by my mistress' side" (l. 235), and its loss is cruelly brought home in the despair of "Where should Othello go?" (l. 269). He can reclaim it finally only through a suicide that symmetrically repeats Desdemona's eroticized murder:

> I kissed thee, ere I killed thee: no way but this,
> Killing myself, to die upon a kiss.
> (ll. 354–55)

The action of the play has rescued Othello and Desdemona from the calculated anonymity of Iago's pornographic fantasies, only for the ending to strip them of their identities once more: for most of the final scene, Othello is once again named only as "the Moor," and it is as if killing Desdemona had annihilated his sense of self to the point where he must repudiate even his own name ("That's he that was Othello: here I am" [l. 281]). Lodovico's speech reduces the corpses to the condition of a single nameless "object"—"the tragic loading of this bed" (l. 359), "it"—something scarcely removed from the obscene impersonality of the image in which they were first displayed, "the beast with two backs" (1.1.117–18).[49] Like a man rubbing a dog's nose in its own excrement, Lodovico, as the voice of Venetian authority, forces Iago (and the audience with him) to look on what his fantasy has made ("This is thy work" [5.2.360]). But Iago's gaze is one that confirms the abolition of the lovers' humanity, and it thereby helps to license Lodovico's revulsion: "let it be hid." In that gesture of concealment, we may discern the official equivalent of Iago's retreat into obdurate silence: "Demand me nothing. What you know, you know: / From this time forth I never will speak word" (ll. 300–301). Iago will no more utter his "cause" than Othello can nominate his; what they choose not to speak, we might say, Lodovico elects not to see.

IV

In so far as Lodovico voices the reaction of the audience, he articulates a scandal that is as much generic as it is social. It was precisely their sense of the play's ostentatious violation of the laws of kind that led Victorian producers to mutilate its ending. From the late eighteenth century it became usual to finish the play on the heroic note of Othello's suicide speech, tactfully removing the Venetians' choric expressions of outrage and dismay, as if recognizing how intolerably Lodovico's "Let it be hid" serves to focus attention on what it insists must not be attended to. By diverting the audience's gaze from this radical impropriety, the cut was meant to restore a semblance of tragic decorum to the catastrophe.[50] Other cuts sought to disguise as far as possible the erotic suggestiveness of the scene: in particular Othello's "To die upon a kiss" was almost invariably removed so as to ensure

[49] The relation between names and identity in the play is sensitively analyzed by Calderwood, pp. 40–45, 50–52.

[50] For a suggestive discussion of ideas of propriety and property in the play, see Calderwood, pp. 9–15.

that at the curtain Desdemona's body would remain in chaste isolation upon a bed "unviolated by Othello's own bleeding corpse."[51] In this way the significance of the bed might be restricted to the proper monumental symbolism so solemnly emphasized in Fechter's mid-century production, where it was made to appear "as portentous as a catafalque prepared for a great funeral pomp."[52]

Of course Shakespeare's ending does play on such iconic suggestions but much more ambiguously. When Othello's imagination transforms the sleeping Desdemona to "monumental alabaster" (5.2.5), his figure draws theatrical power from the resemblance between Elizabethan tester tombs and the beds of state on which they were modelled.[53] But his vain rhetorical effort to clothe the violence of murder in the stony proprieties of ritual is thoroughly subverted by other conventional meanings that reveal the bed as a site of forbidden mixture, a place of literary as well as social and racial adulteration.

If the first act of *Othello*, as Susan Snyder has shown, is structured as a miniature romantic comedy,[54] then the last act returns to comic convention in the form of cruel travesty. For the tragedy ends as it began with a bedding —the first clandestine and offstage, the second appallingly public; one callously interrupted, the other murderously consummated. A bedding, after all, is the desired end of every romantic plot; and Desdemona's "Will you come to bed, my lord" (5.2.24) sounds as a poignant echo of the erotic invitations which close up comedies like *A Midsummer Night's Dream*: "Lovers to bed" (5.1.364). But where comic decorum kept the bed itself offstage, consigning love's consummation to the illimitable end beyond the stage-ending, the bed in *Othello* is shamelessly displayed as the site of a blood-wedding which improperly appropriates the rites of comedy to a tragic conclusion.

The result, from the point of view of seventeenth-century orthodoxy, is a generic monster. Indeed, just such a sense of the monstrosity of the play, its promiscuous yoking of the comic with the tragic, lay at the heart of Rymer's objections to it. Jealousy and cuckoldry, after all, like the misalliance of age and youth,[55] were themes proper to comedy; and the triviality of the handkerchief plot epitomized for Rymer the generic disproportion that must result from transposing them into a tragic design. The words "monster" and "monstrous" punctuate his attempts to catalogue the oxymoronic mixtures of this "Bloody Farce," a play he thought would have been better entitled "the

[51] Siemon, p. 50.

[52] Henry Morley, *The Journal of a London Playgoer*, quoted in Hankey, p. 307. Fechter was the first to remove the bed from its traditional central position to the side of the stage, where he placed it with its back to the audience. If this was intended to diminish the threat of the scene, it apparently had the reverse effect, as Sir Theodore Martin complained, "bringing it so far forward that every detail is thrust painfully on our senses" (quoted in Siemon, p. 40).

[53] The sense of this connection clearly persisted into the Restoration theatre: Rowe's illustration for *Antony and Cleopatra* (1709) shows the dead Cleopatra in her monument lying on what is evidently a bed, but in a posture recalling tomb-sculpture. It was not for nothing that the marriage-bed became a favorite model for so many Elizabethan and Jacobean dynastic tombs, where the figures of man and wife, frequently surrounded on the base of the tomb by their numerous offspring, signify the power of biological continuance, the authority of lineage.

[54] *The Comic Matrix of Shakespeare's Tragedies* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1979), pp. 70–74. See also Cavell, p. 132.

[55] The misalliance of youth and age in the play is treated by Janet Stavropoulos, "Love and Age in *Othello*," *Shakespeare Studies*, XIX (1987), 125–41.

Tragedy of the Handkerchief."[56] Iago himself, as the inventor of this "burlesk" plot, was the very spirit of the play's monstrosity: "The *Ordinary* of *Newgate* never had like Monster to pass under his examination."[57] Much of the force of Rymer's invective stems from the way in which he was able to insinuate a direct connection between what he sensed as the generic monstrosity of the tragedy and the social and moral deformity he discovered in its action: the rhetorical energy that charges his use of "monster" and "monstrous" derives from their electric potency in the language of the play itself. It is clear, moreover, that for Rymer ideas of literary and biological kind were inseparable, so that the indecorum of the design was consequential upon the impropriety of choosing a hero whose racially defined inferiority must render him incapable of the lofty world of tragedy. "Never in the World had any Pagan Poet his Brains turn'd at this Monstrous rate," declared Rymer; and he went on to cite Iago's "Foul disproportion, thoughts unnatural" as a kind of motto for the play: "The Poet here is certainly in the right, and by consequence the foundation of the Play must be concluded to be Monstrous. . . ."[58]

Rymer's appropriation of Iago's language is scarcely coincidental. Indeed it is possible to feel an uncanny resemblance between the scornful excitement with which Rymer prosecutes the unsuspected deformities of Shakespeare's design and Iago's bitter pleasure in exposing the "civil monsters" lurking beneath the ordered surface of the Venetian state. It is as if the same odd ventriloquy which bespeaks the ensign's colonization of the hero's mind were at work in the critic. It may be heard again in Coleridge's objection to the play's racial theme: "it would be something *monstrous* to conceive this beautiful Venetian girl falling in love with a veritable negro. It would argue a *disproportionateness*, a want of balance in Desdemona."[59] Even G. K. Hunter, in what remains one of the best essays on race in *Othello*, echoes this revealing language when he insists that "we feel the *disproportion* and the difficulty of Othello's social life and of his marriage (as a social act)."[60] For all Hunter's disconcerting honesty about the play's way of implicating the audience in the prejudice it explores, there is a disturbance here that the nervous parenthesis, "as a social act," seems half to acknowledge. The qualification admits, without satisfactorily neutralizing, his echo of Iago—for whom, after all, concepts of the social (or the "natural") serve exactly as useful devices for tagging sexual/racial transgression.

"Foul disproportion, thoughts unnatural" (3.3.231) is only Iago's way of

[56] Rymer, quoted in Vickers, pp. 54, 51. Jonson seems to anticipate Rymer's mockery in the jealousy plot of *Volpone* (1606) when Corvino denounces his wife: "to seek and entertain a parley / With a known knave, before a multitude! You were an actor with your handkerchief" (2.3.38–40). In a paper exploring the relations between *Othello* and the myth of Hercules, "Othello *Furens*," delivered at the Folger Shakespeare Library on February 17, 1989, Robert S. Miola has suggested that the handkerchief is a version of the robe of Nessus; such ludicrous shrinkages are characteristic of comic jealousy plots—as, for example, in the transformation of Pinchwife's heroic sword to a penknife in Wycherley's *The Country Wife*. Certain objects become grotesquely enlarged to the jealous imagination or absurdly diminished in the eyes of the audience—it is on such disproportion that the comedy of jealousy depends.

[57] Rymer, quoted in Vickers, p. 47.

[58] Rymer, quoted in Vickers, pp. 37, 42.

[59] T. M. Raysor, ed., *Shakespearean Criticism*, 2 vols. (London: J. M. Dent, 1960), Vol. I, 42, italics added.

[60] "Othello and Colour Prejudice," p. 163, my italics.

describing the feelings of strangeness and wonder in which Othello discerns the seeds of Desdemona's passion for him: "She swore, in faith 'twas strange, 'twas passing strange, / 'Twas pitiful, 'twas wondrous pitiful" (1.3.159–60). Like *Romeo and Juliet*, the play knows from the beginning that such a sense of miraculous otherness, though it may be intensified by the transgression of social boundaries, is part of the ground of all sexual desire; what Iago enables the play to discover is that this is also the cause of desire's frantic instability. That is why the fountain from which Othello's current runs can become the very source out of which his jealousy flows.[61] Much of the play's power to disturb comes from its remorseless insistence upon the intimacy of jealousy and desire, its demonstration that jealousy is itself an extreme and corrupted (adulterate) form of sexual excitement—an incestuously self-begotten monster of appetite, born only to feed upon itself, a creature of disproportionate desire whose very existence constitutes its own (natural) punishment. The more Othello is made to feel his marriage is a violation of natural boundaries, the more estranged he and Desdemona become; the more estranged they become, the more he desires her. Only murder, it seems, with its violent rapture of possession, can break such a spiral; 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.

Iago's clinching demonstration of Desdemona's strangeness makes her a denizen of Lady Wouldbe's notorious metropolis of prostitution, the city that Otway in *Venice Preserved* was to type "the whore of the Adriatic":[62] "In Venice they do let God see the pranks / They dare not show their husbands." It produces in Othello a terrible kind of arousal, which finds its expression in the pornographic emotional violence of the brothel scene—"I took you for that cunning whore of Venice / That married with Othello" (4.2.88–89)—where it is as if Othello were compelled to make real the fantasy that possessed him in the course of Iago's temptation: "I had been happy if the general camp, / Pioners and all, had tasted her sweet body" (3.3.342–43). It is an arousal which his imagination can satisfy only in the complex fantasy of a revenge that will be at once an act of mimetic purgation (blood for blood, a blot for a blot), a symbolic reassertion of his sexual rights (the spotted sheets as a parodic sign of nuptial consummation), and an ocular demonstration of Desdemona's guilt (the blood-stain upon the white linen as the visible sign of hidden pollution): "Thy bed, lust-stained, shall with lust's blood be spotted" (5.1.36).[63] In this lurid metonymy for murder, Othello's mind locks onto the bed as the inevitable setting of the fatal end to which his whole being, as in some somnambulist nightmare, is now directed; and it is an ending that, through the long-deferred disclosure of the scene of sexual anxiety, can indeed seem to have been inscribed upon Othello's story from the very beginning.

In order fully to understand the potency of this theatrical image, it is

[61] For an account of the social basis of these contradictions, see Stallybrass, pp. 265–67.

[62] For the opposite view of Venice, described by the traveler Thomas Coryat in *Coryat's Crudities* as "that most glorious, renowned and Virgin Citie of Venice," see Stallybrass, p. 265.

[63] A curious sidelight is cast on nineteenth-century attempts to contain the scandal of the play's ending by the habit of having Othello finish off Desdemona with his dagger on "I would not have thee linger in thy pain"—a piece of stage business which must have heightened the sado-erotic suggestiveness of the scene (see Siemon, pp. 46–47).

necessary to see how it forms the nexus of a whole set of ideas about adultery upon which Othello's tragedy depends—culturally embedded notions of adulteration and pollution that are closely related to the ideas of disproportion and monstrosity exploited by Iago. The fact that they are linked by a web of association that operates at a largely subliminal level—or perhaps, more precisely, at the level of ideology—makes them especially difficult to disentangle and resistant to rational analysis,[64] and that is an essential aspect of the play's way of entrapping the audience in its own obsessions. It is above all for "disproportion"—a word for the radical kinds of indecorum that the play at once celebrates and abhors—that the bed, not only in Iago's mind but in that of the audience he so mesmerizes, comes to stand.

V

Contemplating the final spectacle of the play, G. M. Matthews produces an unwitting paradox: "All that Iago's poison has achieved is an object that 'poisons sight': a bed on which a black man and a white girl, although they are dead, are embracing. Human dignity, the play says, is indivisible."[65] But if what the bed displays is indeed such an icon of humanist transcendence, then this ending is nearer to those of romantic comedy—or to that of *Romeo and Juliet*—than most people's experience of it would suggest: why should such an assertion of human dignity "poison sight"? Part of the answer lies in the fact that Matthews, in his desire for humane reassurance, has falsified the body count. To be fair, it is quite usual to imagine two bodies stretched out side by side under a canopy—and this is how it is commonly played. But if Emilia's "lay me by my mistress' side" (5.2.235) is (as it surely must be) a dramatized stage direction, there should be three.[66] The tableau of death will then recall a familiar tomb arrangement in which the figure of a man lies accompanied by two women, his first and second wives; and read in this fashion, the bed can look like a mocking reminder of the very suspicions that Iago voiced about Othello and Emilia early in the play—a memorialization of adultery. It would be absurd to suggest that this is how Lodovico or anyone else on the stage consciously sees it; but, for reasons that I hope to make clear, I think the covert suggestion of something adulterous in this alliance of corpses, combined with the powerful imagery of erotic death surrounding it, helps to account for the peculiar intensity of Lodovico's sense of scandal. The scandal is exacerbated by the fact that one of the bodies is black.

Jealousy can work as it does in this tragedy partly because of its complex entanglement with the sense that Iago so carefully nurtures in Othello of his own marriage as an adulterous transgression—an improper mixture from which Desdemona's unnatural counterfeiting naturally follows. "[I]t is the dark essence of Iago's whole enterprise," writes Stephen Greenblatt,

[64] Kenneth Burke beautifully observes the power of inarticulate suggestion in the play: ". . . there is whispering. There is something vaguely feared and hated. In itself it is hard to locate, being woven into the very nature of 'consciousness'; but by the artifice of Iago it is made local. The tinge of malice vaguely diffused through the texture of events and relationships can here be condensed into a single principle, a devil, giving the audience as it were flesh to sink their claw-thoughts in" (p. 131).

[65] "*Othello* and the Dignity of Man," p. 145.

[66] Significantly, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century promptbooks reveal that Emilia's request was invariably denied.

". . . to play upon Othello's buried perception of his own sexual relations with Desdemona as adulterous."[67] Despite his teasing glance at the play's moral rhetoric of color ("dark essence"), Greenblatt is really concerned only with notions of specifically sexual transgression according to which " 'An adulterer is he who is too ardent a lover of his wife.' "[68] But this perception can be extended to another aspect of the relationship in which the ideas of adultery and disproportionate desire are specifically linked to the question of race.

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.[69] Its unnaturalness was traditionally expressed in the monstrous qualities attributed to its illicit offspring, the anomalous creatures stigmatized as bastards.[70] A bastard, as the moral deformity of characters like Spurio, Edmund, and Thersites and the physical freakishness of Volpone's illegitimate offspring equally suggest, is of his very nature a kind of monster—monstrous because he represents the offspring of an unnatural union, one that violates what are proposed as among the most essential of all boundaries.[71]

It is Iago's special triumph to expose Othello's color as the apparent sign of just such monstrous impropriety. He can do this partly by playing on the same fears of racial and religious otherness that had led medieval theologians to define marriage with Jews, Mahometans, or pagans as "interpretative adultery."[72] More generally, any mixture of racial "kinds" seems to have

[67] p. 233.

[68] Greenblatt, p. 248, quoting St. Jerome. Compare Tamyra's prevarication with her amorous husband (whom she is busy cuckolding with Bussy) in Chapman's *Bussy D'Ambois*: "your holy friar says / All couplings in the day that touch the bed / Adulterous are, even in the married" (3.1.91–93).

[69] In addition to their usual technical sense, "adulterous" and "adulterate" came at about this time to carry the meaning "corrupted by base intermixture"; while by extension "adulterate" also came, like "bastard," to mean "spurious" and "counterfeit" (*OED*, adulterate, *ppl. a*, 2; adulterous, 3; bastard, *sb.* and *a*, 4. See also adulterate, *v*, 3; adulterine, 3). Thus Ford's Penthea, who imagines her forced marriage to Bassanes as a species of adultery, finds her blood "seasoned by the forfeit / Of noble shame with *mixtures of pollution*" (*The Broken Heart*, 4.2.149–50, italics added).

[70] So, by one of those strange linguistic contradictions that expose cultural double-think, an illegitimate son could be at once "spurious" and "unnatural" and a "natural son." When the bastard, Spurio, in a play that performs innumerable variations on the theme of the counterfeit and the natural, declares that "Adultery is my nature" (*The Revenger's Tragedy*, 1.3.177), he is simultaneously quibbling on the idea of himself as a "natural son" and elaborating a vicious paradox, according to which—by virtue of his adulterate birth (*natura*)—he is naturally unnatural, essentially counterfeit, and purely adulterous. A very similar series of quibbling associations underlies the counterfeiting Edmund's paean to the tutelary of bastards in *King Lear*: "Thou, Nature, art my goddess" (1.2.1 ff.).

[71] When Ford's Hippolita curses her betrayer, Soranzo, for what she regards as his adulterous marriage to Annabella, she envisages adultery's monstrous offspring as constituting its own punishment—"mayst thou live / To father bastards, may her womb bring forth / Monsters" (*'Tis Pity She's a Whore*, 4.1.99–101)—a curse that seems likely to be fulfilled when Soranzo discovers the existence of the "gallimaufry" (heterogeneous mixture) that is already "stuffed in [his bride's] corrupted bastard-bearing womb" (4.3.13–14).

[72] *OED*, adultery, 1b. It scarcely matters that Othello's contempt for the "circumcised dog" he killed in Aleppo shows that he sees himself as a Christian, since "Moor" was a virtual synonym for Muslim or pagan; and it is as a "pagan" that Brabantio identifies him (1.2.119).

been popularly thought of as in some sense adulterous—a prejudice that survives in the use of such expressions as "bastard race" to denote the "unnatural" offspring of miscegenation.[73] More specifically, Iago is able to capitalize upon suggestions that cloud the exotic obscurity of Othello's origins in the world of Plinian monsters, "the Anthropophagi, and men whose heads / Do grow beneath their shoulders" (1.3.143–44); even the green-eyed monster that he conjures from beneath the general's "civil" veneer serves to mark Othello's resemblance to yet another Plinian race, the Horned Men (Gegetones or Cornuti).[74] In the Elizabethan popular imagination, of course, the association of African races with the monsters supposed to inhabit their continent made it easy for blackness to be imagined as a symptom of the monstrous[75]—not least because the color itself could be derived from an adulterous history. According to a widely circulated explanation for the existence of black peoples (available in both Leo Africanus and Hakluyt), blackness was originally visited upon the offspring of Noah's son Cham as a punishment for adulterate disobedience of his father.[76]

In such a context the elopement of Othello and Desdemona, in defiance of her father's wishes, might resemble a repetition of the ancestral crime, confirmation of the adulterous history written upon the Moor's face.[77] Thus

[73] In seventeenth-century English the word "bastard" was habitually applied to all products of generic mixture: thus mongrel dogs, mules, and leopards (supposedly half-lion and half-panther) were all, impartially, bastard creatures; and this is the sense that Perdita employs when she dismisses streaked gillyvors as "Nature's bastards" (*The Winter's Tale*, 4.4.83). In Jonson's *Volpone* the bastard nature of Volpone's "true . . . family" is redoubled by their having been "begot on . . . Gypsies, and Jews, and black-moors" (1.1.506–7). Jonson's location of this adulterate mingle-mangle in Venice may even suggest some general anxiety about the vulnerability of racial boundaries in a city so conspicuously on the European margin—one apparent also in *The Merchant of Venice*.

[74] John Block Friedman, *The Monstrous Races in Medieval Art and Thought* (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1981), pp. 16–17. Calderwood notes the resonance of Othello's lodging at the Saggitary—or Centaur (1.3.115)—stressing the monster's ancient significance as a symbol of lust, barbarism, and (through the Centaurs' assault on Lapith women) the violation of kind (Calderwood, *The Properties of* Othello, pp. 22–25, 36).

[75] See Newman, "Femininity and the monstrous in *Othello*," pp. 145–53; Elliot H. Tokson, *The Popular Image of the Black Man in English Drama, 1550–1688* (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1982), pp. 80–81; Friedman, pp. 101–2; and Calderwood, *The Properties of* Othello, p. 7.

[76] Flouting his father's taboo upon copulation in the Ark, Cham, in the hope of producing an heir to all the dominions of the earth, "used company with his wife . . . for the which wicked and detestable fact, as an example for contempt of Almightie God, and disobedience of parents, God would a sonne should bee borne whose name was Chus, who not onely it selfe, but all his posteritie after him should bee so blacke and lothsome, that it might remaine a spectacle of disobedience to all the worlde. And of this blacke and cursed Chus came all these blacke Moores which are in Africa" (George Best, "Experiences and reasons of the Sphere . . . ," in Richard Hakluyt, *The Principal Navigations, Voyages, Traffiques & Discoveries of the English Nation*, 12 vols. (1598–1600; rpt. Glasgow: J. MacLehose, 1903–5), Vol. VII, 264.

[77] The association of blackness with adultery is also encouraged by a well-known passage in Jeremiah, where the indelible blackness of the Moor's skin is analogized to the ingrained (but hidden) vices of the Jews: "Can the blacke More change his skin? or the leopard his spottes. . . . I have sene thine adulteries, & thy neyings, y filthines of thy whoredome" (Jeremiah, 13:23–27, Geneva version). In the context of *Othello*, the passage's rhetorical emphasis on discovery is suggestive, as is the Geneva version's marginal note, "Thy cloke of hypocrasie shal be pulled of and thy shame sene." A second marginal note observes that the prophet "compareth idolaters to horses inflamed after mares," a comparison that may be echoed in Iago's obscene vision of Othello as "a barbary horse" (1.1.112). I am grateful to my colleague Dr. Kenneth Larsen for drawing this passage to my attention.

if he sees Desdemona as the fair page defaced by the adulterate slander of whoredom, Othello feels this defacement, at a deeper and more painful level, to be a taint contracted from him: "Her name that was as fresh / As Dian's visage is now begrimed and black / As mine own face" (3.3.383–85). Tragedy, in Chapman's metaphor, is always "black-fac'd"; but Othello's dark countenance is like an inscription of his tragic destiny for more reasons than the traditional metaphoric associations of blackness with evil and death. Iago's genius is to articulate the loosely assorted prejudices and superstitions that make it so and to fashion from them the monster of racial animus and revulsion that devours everything of value in the play. Iago's trick is to make this piece of counterfeiting appear like a revelation, drawing into the light of day the hidden truths of his society. It is Iago who teaches Roderigo, Brabantio, and at last Othello himself to recognize in the union of Moor and Venetian an act of generic adulteration—something conceived, in Brabantio's words, "in spite of nature" (1.3.96): "For nature so preposterously to err, / Being not deficient, blind, or lame of sense, / Sans witchcraft could not" (1:3.62–64). Even more graphically, Iago locates their marriage in that zoo of adulterate couplings whose bastard issue (imaginatively at least) are the recurrent "monsters" of the play's imagery: "you'll have your daughter covered with a Barbary horse; you'll have your nephews neigh to you, you'll have coursers for cousins, and jennets for germans" (1.1.111–14). Wickedly affecting to misunderstand Othello's anxiety about how Desdemona might betray her own faithful disposition ("And yet how nature erring from itself—"), Iago goes on to plant the same notion in his victim's mind:

> Ay, there's the point: as, to be bold with you,
> Not to affect many proposèd 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 *disproportion, thoughts unnatural.*
> (3.3.226–31, italics added)

If at one moment Iago can make infidelity appear as the inevitable expression of Desdemona's Venetian nature, as the denizen of an unnatural city of prostituted adulterers, at another he can make it seem as though it were actually Desdemona's marriage that constituted the adulterous lapse, from which a liaison with one of her own kind would amount to the exercise of "her better judgement" (l. 234)—a penitent reversion to her proper nature. The contradictions, as is always the way with an emotion like jealousy, are not self-canceling but mutually reinforcing.

In this way the relentless pressure of Iago's insinuation appears to reveal a particularly heinous assault on the natural order of things. Not only in its obvious challenge to patriarchal authority and in the subversion of gender roles implicit in its assertion of female desire,[78] but in its flagrant transgression of the alleged boundaries of kind itself, the love of Desdemona and Othello can be presented as a radical assault on the whole system of differences from which the Jacobean world was constructed.[79] The shocking

[78] See Newman, passim; and Greenblatt, pp. 239–54.

[79] Whether or not one accepts Foucault's notion of the sixteenth century as the site of a major cultural shift in which a "pre-classical *episteme*" based on the recognition of similarity was

iconic power of the bed in the play has everything to do with its being the site of that assault.

In early modern culture the marriage bed had a peculiar topographic and symbolic significance. It was a space at once more private and more public than for us. More private because (with the exception of the study or cabinet) it was virtually the *only* place of privacy available to the denizens of sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century households;[80] more public because as the domain of the most crucial of domestic offices—perpetuation of the lineage—it was the site of important public rituals of birth, wedding, and death. In the great houses of France, this double public/private function was even symbolized by the existence of two beds: an "official bed, majestic but unoccupied," located in the *chambre de parement*, and a private bed, screened from view in the more intimate domain of the bedchamber proper.[81] Everywhere the same double role was acknowledged in the division of the bridal ritual between the public bringing to bed of bride and groom by a crowd of relatives and friends, and the private rite of consummation which ensued after the formal drawing of the bed curtains.[82] Part of the scandal of *Othello* arises from its structural reversal of this solemn division: the offstage elopement in Act 1 turning the public section of the bridal into a furtive and private thing; the parted curtains of Act 5 exposing the private scene of the bed to a shockingly public gaze. The scene exposed, moreover, is one that confirms with exaggerated horror the always ambiguous nature of that "peninsula of privacy": "the bed heightened private pleasure. . . . But the bed could also be a symbol of guilt, a shadowy place [or a place of subterfuge], a scene of crime; the truth of what went on here could never be revealed."[83] The principal cause of these anxieties, and hence of the fiercely defended privacy of the marriage bed, lay in the fact that it was a place of licensed sexual and social metamorphosis, where the boundaries of self and other, of family allegiance and of gender, were miraculously abolished as man and wife became "one flesh."[84] Because it was a space that permitted a highly specialized naturalization of what would otherwise constitute a wholly "unnatural" collapsing of differences, it must itself be protected by taboos of the most intense character. In the cruel system of paradox created by this play's ideas of race and adultery, Othello as both stranger and husband can be *both* the violator of these taboos and the seeming victim of their violation—adulterer and cuckold—as he is both black and "fair," Christian general and erring barbarian, insider and outsider, the author of a "monstrous act" and

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replaced by a "classical *episteme*" based on the recognition of difference, it seems clear that the definition of racial "difference" or otherness was an important adjunct to the development of national consciousness in the period of early colonial expansion. See the work by Cairns and Richards, Laurence, and Greenblatt (cited above, n. 32).

[80] See Danielle Régnier-Bohler, "Imagining the Self" in Ariès and Duby (cited above, n. 41), Vol. 2 (*Revelations of The Medieval World*), 311–93, esp. pp. 327–30.

[81] See Dominique Barthélemy and Philippe Contamine, "The Use of Private Space" in Ariès and Duby, Vol. 2, 395–505, esp. p. 500.

[82] See Lawrence Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500–1800* (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), p. 334; and Georges Duby and Philippe Braunstein, "The Emergence of the Individual," in Ariès and Duby, Vol. 2, 507–630, esp. p. 589.

[83] Régnier-Bohler, p. 329.

[84] The archaic spells that form part of the convention of epithalamia and wedding masques testify to a continuing sense (albeit overlaid with a show of sophisticated playfulness) of the marriage bed as a dangerously liminal space in the marital rite of passage.

Desdemona's "kind lord."[85] As the most intimate site of these contradictions, it was inevitable that the bed should become the imaginative center of the play—the focus of Iago's corrupt fantasy, of Othello's tormented speculation, and always of the audience's intensely voyeuristic compulsions.

At the beginning of the play, the monstrousness of Desdemona's passion is marked for Brabantio by its being fixed upon an object "naturally" unbearable to sight: "To fall in love with what she feared to look on! / . . . Against all rules of nature" (1.3.98–101). At the end she has become, for Lodovico, part of the "object [that] poisons sight." The bed now is the visible sign of *what has been improperly revealed* and must now be hidden from view again—the unnamed horror that Othello fatally glimpsed in the dark cave of Iago's imagination: "some monster in his thought / Too hideous to be shown" (3.3.106–7); it is the token of everything that must not be seen and cannot be spoken ("Let me not name it to you, you chaste stars" [5.2.2]), everything that the second nature of culture seeks to efface or disguise as "unnatural"—all that should be banished to outer (or consigned to inner) darkness; a figure for unlicensed desire itself. That banishment of what must not be contemplated is what is embodied in Lodovico's gesture of stern erasure. But, as Othello's quibble upon the Latin root of the word suggests, a *monster* is also what, by virtue of its very hideousness, demands to be *shown*. What makes the tragedy of *Othello* so shocking and painful is that it engages its audience in a conspiracy to lay naked the scene of forbidden desire, only to confirm that the penalty for such exposure is death and oblivion; in so doing, the play takes us into territory we recognize but would rather not see. It doesn't "oppose racism," but (much more disturbingly) illuminates the process by which such visceral superstitions were implanted in the very body of the culture that formed us. The object that "poisons sight" is nothing less than a mirror for the obscene desires and fears that *Othello* arouses in its audiences[86]—monsters that the play at once invents and naturalizes, declaring them unproper, even as it implies that they were always "naturally" there.

If the ending of this tragedy is unendurable, it is because it first tempts us with the redemptive vision of Desdemona's sacrificial self-abnegation and then insists, with all the power of its swelling rhetorical music, upon the hero's magnificence as he dismantles himself for death—only to capitulate to Iago's poisoned vision at the very moment when it has seemed poised to reaffirm the transcendent claims of their love—the claims of kind and kindness figured in the union between a black man and a white woman and the bed on which it was made.

[85] Othello is made up of such paradoxical mixtures—at once the governing representative of rational order and the embodiment of ungovernable passion, cruel and merciful, general and "enfettered" subordinate, "honourable murderer"—he is an entire anomaly. See Newman, p. 153: "Othello is both hero and outsider because he embodies not only the norms of male power and privilege . . . but also the threatening power of the alien: Othello is a monster in the Renaissance sense of the word, a deformed creature like the hermaphrodites and other strange spectacles which so fascinated the early modern period."

[86] For discussion of the "satisfaction" that the final scene grants an audience, see Calderwood, pp. 125–26.