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**‘Mislike me not for my complexion’: Assimilation and
Integration in Shakespeare’s *Othello* and *The Merchant of
Venice***

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Introduction: Assimilation and Integration

In both *Othello* and *The Merchant of Venice*, Shakespeare presents the struggles faced by outsiders as they attempt to live, and thrive, in Venetian society. The way in which immigrants adapt in order to survive in new cultures is an increasingly urgent issue in our modern, globalised world. Processes of acculturation undergone by outsiders in Shakespeare's plays closely resemble those of diasporas today. The appearance of racial and religious 'others' on the early modern stage was intended to better delineate 'Englishness': Ania Loomba writes that Englishness was 'defined, in part, in opposition to everything *not* English' (her emphasis).¹ While the original purpose of Shakespeare's foreigners may have been to uphold nationalistic images of the white English 'self' against the dark, foreign 'other', they assume renewed importance to modern readers, who are not motivated by the racist narratives that pervaded sixteenth century Europe. *Othello* and *Shylock* are the 'wheeling strangers' (1.1.134)² of renaissance Venice, which was 'both a city and a world', according to David McPherson.³ It was a real-life epicentre of foreign trade - complete with 'cosmopolitan atmosphere' and 'men from all parts of the world' – but also an imagined place constructed by Shakespeare; a mirror in which his audience glimpsed a distorted reflection of their own society.⁴ Present-day audiences experience this same hideous reflection, and are reminded of the existing inequalities in our world. Applying modern sociological research to Shakespeare's early modern texts exposes distinct parallels in the treatment – or, more specifically, mistreatment - of foreigners in the sixteenth century and foreigners in the twenty-first century. Modern day immigrants face the same oppositions to their acculturation, and struggle against the same uneven, Eurocentric distributions of power when they are forced to build their lives in alien cultures.

Though the words 'integration' and 'assimilation' are often conflated, the OED reveals noticeable differences between the two terms. Integration is defined as the 'equal membership of a common society' for 'persons previously discriminated against on racial or cultural grounds', as well as the 'composition of a whole by combining the separate parts or elements'.⁵ Assimilation also has several meanings according to the OED, including 'the action of making or becoming like', 'the state of being like, similarity, resemblance, likeness'

¹Ania Loomba, 'Outsiders in Shakespeare's England' in *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare*, ed. by Margreta de Grazia and Stanley Wells, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p.149

² All quotations taken from William Shakespeare, *Othello*, ed. by E. A. J. Honigmann, (London: Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare, 1997), in the form (Act no. Scene no. Line no.).

³ David C. McPherson, *Shakespeare, Jonson and the Myth of Venice*, (London: Associated University Press, 1990), p.30.

⁴ David C. McPherson, p.13.

⁵ 'Integration' in *The Oxford English Dictionary Online*, [<https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/97356?redirectedFrom=integration#eid>].

and 'the becoming conformed *to* or *with*'.⁶ These definitions suggest that assimilation relies upon some form of 'other' representing a goal for *change* – 'making or becoming like' – while integration does not. The OED also offers definitions for each term in Psychology: the term integration means 'the harmonious combination of the different elements in a personality', while assimilation means the acquisition of new ideas 'by interpreting presented ideas in relation to the existing contents of [the] mind'.⁷ In these psychological definitions, integration converges differences while assimilation is about building something new from what already exists.

These terms have also been defined in contemporary sociological research. According to Jens Schneider and Maurice Crul, '*assimilation* linguistically implies a referent to which immigrants and/or their offspring can become *similar*', while "'integration' includes *structural* aspects of incorporation into society, especially with regard to educational achievements and access to the labour market' (their emphasis).⁸ Christopher Houtkamp claims that assimilation relies upon the 'complete adaptation of the minority to the majority culture'⁹, while integration is defined by John Berry as 'an acculturation strategy wherein both heritage and majority cultures are valued'.¹⁰ It seems that the implications of the various OED definitions are echoed in sociological research – assimilation is about changing oneself to resemble the majority, while integration is about the combination and equality of minority and majority cultures. Peter Kivisto argues that assimilation has a 'psychological dimension', suggesting that the process of changing oneself takes its toll internally, and that assimilation is bound up with the sense of self.¹¹ Integration, however, relates closer to external positions in the public sphere of society. I will argue that the crucial difference between Othello's and Shylock's experience of Venice, and their participation in Venetian society, rests upon these two terms: Othello attempts to assimilate, while Shylock attempts to integrate.

⁶ 'Assimilation' in *The Oxford English Dictionary Online*, [<https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/11934?redirectedFrom=assimilation#eid>].

⁷ 'Integration' and 'Assimilation' in *The OED Online*.

⁸ Jens Schneider & Maurice Crul, 'New insights into assimilation and integration theory: Introduction to the special issue', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 33:7, (2010) 1144-1145.

⁹ Christopher Houtkamp, 'Beyond Assimilation and Integration: The Shift to 'National' and 'Transnational' Inclusion', *Acta Universitatis Sapientiae: European and Regional Studies*, 8:1, (2015), 73-87, p.75.

¹⁰ John Berry, quoted in Houtkamp, 'Beyond Assimilation and Integration', p.83.

¹¹ Peter Kivisto, *Incorporating Diversity, Rethinking Assimilation in a Multicultural Age*, (London: Paradigm Publishers, 2005), p.6.

Assimilation: 'Begrimed and Black'

Christopher Houtkamp argues that 'in order for assimilation to succeed, immigrants need to forsake their cultural identity', and similarly, Milton Gordon suggests that assimilation means the elimination of 'characteristics of foreign origin'.^{12 13} This highlights the violent aspect of rejecting part of one's own self that accompanies assimilation. While characters like Shylock and Morocco resist this kind of self-censoring, Othello and Jessica are willing - eager, even - to shed those parts of themselves that are not accepted by Venetian society.

According to Robert Park, those with distinct 'racial hallmarks' - such as Othello's black skin - struggle to assimilate within new dominant cultures.¹⁴ Kim Hall discusses the 'the dualism of good and evil' associated with 'tropes of blackness' in the early modern period, and Othello struggles to escape this binary throughout the entire play.¹⁵ Franz Fanon writes that the black man 'becomes whiter as he renounces his blackness', and Othello attempts to reject his blackness by apologising for it.¹⁶ When he states: 'Haply for I am black/ And have not those soft parts of conversation/ That chamberers have' (3.3.267), he enforces renaissance beliefs in this symbolism of blackness as a nebulous negative. His blackness, by his own admission, mars his speech. However, Othello's claims that he is 'rude' in speech (1.3.82) conflict with his reports of Desdemona '[devouring] up [his] discourse' 'with a greedy ear' (1.3.150); he clearly must have some oratory skill, or else he would not have 'won' (1.3.94) his wife. Othello's assertion that his distinctive 'racial hallmark' is a handicap proves that he views his own qualities through the racist eyes of the Venetians, yet it is clear he is, in reality, just as articulate as them. After the speech for his defence, the Duke admits Othello would 'win [his] daughter too' (1.3.172) with his magnificent tales; it is not only Desdemona who is impressed by his eloquence. The Duke's assertion to Brabantio that his 'son-in-law is far more fair than black' (1.3.291) enforces Renaissance beliefs in the dichotomy between light and dark - Othello's qualities align him closer to the paleness of their skins than with the blackness of his own. Elliott Butler-Evans states that 'Othello's distancing and negating of the black self' eventually leads to 'a total negation of the self', and this suggests that it is Othello's desperation to assimilate that ultimately drives him to

¹² Christopher Houtkamp, 'Beyond Assimilation and Integration: The Shift to 'National' and 'Transnational' Inclusion', p.79.

¹³ Milton Gordon, 'The Nature of Assimilation', in *Incorporating Diversity, Rethinking Assimilation in a Multicultural Age*, p. 98.

¹⁴ Robert E Park, 'Racial Assimilation in Secondary Groups' in *Incorporating Diversity, Rethinking Assimilation in a Multicultural Age*, ed. by Peter Kivisto, (London: Paradigm Publishers, 2005), p.37.

¹⁵ Kim F. Hall, *Things of Darkness - Economies of Race and Gender in Early Modern England*, (New York: Cornell University Press, 1996), p.6.

¹⁶ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, (London, Pluto Press, 2008), p.9.

suicide.¹⁷ The part of assimilation involving the rejection of his obvious differences leads Othello to a state of fractured self – though he mimics the comportment of the Venetians, he cannot escape the indelible blackness of his skin and what it symbolises in this new culture.

When Othello claims in act three that Desdemona, once as pure and white as 'Dian's visage, is now begrimed and black/ As [his] own face' (3.3.390), he refutes the belief that lightness of skin aligns with morality. His certainty that she has been an unfaithful wife challenges the early modern narrative equating fairness with moral purity. Despite this, Othello uses the corporeal blackness of his 'own face' as the terrible standard with which to compare Desdemona's infidelity, and this reveals the extent to which he has absorbed the racist ideas of the Venetians. Edward Berry writes that because Othello 'defines himself in Venetian terms', he sees himself either as 'a convert in the fullest sense, capable of complete assimilation, or he sees himself as a barbarian, worthy of destruction'.¹⁸ In this moment, it is clear that Othello views himself as worthy of destruction – the 'knives', 'poison' and 'fire' (3.3.391) he envisages may be intended for Desdemona, but as he has likened her transgression to his 'own face', they must be for himself too. This perhaps reflects Othello's tragic moment of anagnorisis – though he believes Desdemona to have acted wrongly, he is still black and evil, while she remains white and pure – and here his attempts to assimilate into a culture that perceives him as fundamentally wrong seem futile. In this way, the 'conflict of black and white' in the play becomes an internalised conflict between Othello's black skin and his attempt to resemble the white Venetians around him.¹⁹ He can never hope to assimilate because he cannot escape his crime: being black. His attempts to assimilate necessitate the destruction of his own self.

In *The Merchant of Venice*, the Prince of Morocco addresses the colour of his skin and the associations that accompany it in his first speech: 'Mislike me not for my complexion' (2.1.1)²⁰. His assertion that he 'would not change this hue' (2.1.11) shows an unapologetic acceptance of his blackness that contrasts with Othello's self-hatred. This demonstrates Morocco's aversion to an assimilation that would erase his identity, and instead a willingness to integrate while retaining his differences. However, when Morocco deliberates over the silver casket, he is forced to 'weigh [his] value' (2.7.25) and decide whether or not he

¹⁷ Elliott Butler-Evans, "Haply, for I Am Black": Othello and the Semiotics of Race and Otherness' in *Othello – New Essays by Black Writers*, ed. by Mythili Kaul, (Washington: Howard University Press, 1997) p.148.

¹⁸ Edward Berry, 'Othello's Alienation' in *Understanding Racial Issues in Shakespeare's Othello: Selected Critical Essays*, ed. by Solomon Iyasere and Marla Iyasere, (New York: Whitston Publishing Company, 2008), p.198.

¹⁹ S. E. Oguide, 'Literature and Racism: The Example of *Othello*' in *Othello – New Essays by Black Writers*, p.162.

²⁰ All quotations taken from William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, ed. by John Drakakis, (London: Arden Shakespeare, 2010), in the form (Act no. Scene no. Line no.).

deserves Portia. He is hesitant, and though he claims to be her equal 'in fortunes', 'graces' and 'qualities of breeding' (2.7.33), he chooses not to gamble on what 'he deserves' (2.7.23). Tamotsu Shibutani and Kian Kwan assert that the stranger always 'finds it difficult to conceive of himself as being worthy of genuine affection from' white women.²¹ This underlying fear explains Othello's willingness to believe Iago's lies about Desdemona's infidelity, without any real 'ocular proof' (3.3.363), and Morocco's hesitation over the silver casket could reveal the same internalised self-doubt. Morocco's incorrect casket selection actually saves him from Othello's fate. When Portia announces 'Let all of his complexion choose me so' (2.7.79), it is clear that she shares the racist views of the Venetians. If Morocco had married her, the only way to bring his wife satisfaction would be to assimilate - and distance himself from his own blackness - into a culture which despises him.

Feng Hou and T. Balakrishnan also argue that non-visible minorities find integration processes easier than visible minorities, and if this is true, Shylock and Jessica would find assimilation into Venetian culture easier than Othello and Morocco.²² According to James Shapiro, however, Jewish converts to Christianity often practised their own religion in private, and Jewishness therefore became 'a role to be assumed or shed'.²³ Indeed, the invisibility of Jewishness was something that made it more threatening to Christians. When Salanio describes Shylock as a devil 'in the likeness of a Jew' (3.1.20), Shakespeare alludes to the early modern audience's fear that there were Jews among them, simply 'in the likeness' of Christians: this suggests that in so forcefully promoting assimilation, the Venetians actually encourage *dissimulation*, where Jews duplicitously convert, becoming 'counterfeit Christians'.²⁴ This fear, according to Shapiro, intensified efforts to distinguish Christian-ness from Jewishness.²⁵ When Shylock articulates the similarities between Christians and Jews – 'fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons' as Christians (3.1.53) – rather than generating human sympathy for Shylock, Shakespeare intensifies the anxiety surrounding an artificial - and invisible - assimilation of Jewish people into Christian society. In this way, the stark differences that Othello and Morocco wear on their skins pose less of a threat to the Venetians than the imperceptible differences of Shylock and Jessica.

Unlike Shylock and Morocco, Jessica is eager to distance herself from her Jewish identity and assimilate into Venetian society. Bovilsky asserts that Jessica possesses the 'female

²¹ Tamotsu Shibutani and Kian Kwan, 'Assimilation into the Larger Society' in *Incorporating Diversity*, p.62.

²² Feng Hou and T. R. Balakrishnan, 'The Integration of Visible Minorities in Contemporary Canadian Society', *The Canadian Journal of Sociology*, 21:3 (1996), pp. 307-326, p.322.

²³ James Shapiro, *Shakespeare and the Jews*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), p.20.

²⁴ Shapiro, *Shakespeare and the Jews*, p.155.

²⁵ Shapiro, *Shakespeare and the Jews*, p.18.

ability to be bodily assimilated into her husband's family', suggesting that the consummation of Jessica and Lorenzo's marriage facilitates a corporeal change in Jessica, altering her sufficiently enough to be considered 'Christian'.²⁶ James Shapiro also argues that Jewish women could more 'easily cross the religious boundaries' than their fathers, because the religious difference of Jewish males is 'physically inscribed' in their 'circumcised flesh'.²⁷ Both Bovilsky and Shapiro's arguments explain Jessica's alienation from her father, as his Jewish identity is far more concrete than hers. Jessica attempts to counter the physical, genetic link between herself and Shylock: '...though I am a daughter to his blood,/ I am not to his manners' (2.3.18), just as Othello attempts to reject the physical presence of his own skin. Jean Feerick, however, argues that during the Early Modern period, it was 'blood rather than skin colour' that was 'the somatic referent anchoring [the] system of race'; this would suggest Jessica's Jewishness is inescapable, regardless of her desires to distance herself from it.²⁸ When Shylock exclaims that his daughter is his 'own flesh and blood' (3.1.33), Salarino retorts that there is more difference between his 'flesh and hers than between jet and ivory' (3.1.35). Shylock's skin assumes a figurative blackness because he is unwilling to convert and assimilate, unlike Jessica, who is eager to escape her Jewish identity. Kim Hall writes that dark and light 'became in the early modern period the conduit through which the English began to formulate the notions of 'self' and 'other'', and by invoking this imagery here, Shakespeare firmly paints Shylock as 'other', even to his own daughter.²⁹ Salarino's alignment of Jessica's 'flesh' with ivory here is merely superficial – she is still a 'stranger' (3.2.236) after marrying Lorenzo; her whiteness is only skin-deep. Despite marrying a Christian man, Jessica will never be able to fully assimilate into Venetian society because she cannot escape her own Jewish 'blood', just as Othello cannot erase his skin colour.

²⁶ Lara Bovilsky, *Barbarous Play: Race on the English Renaissance Stage*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), p.86.

²⁷ James Shapiro, *Shakespeare and the Jews*, p.120.

²⁸ Jean Feerick, *Strangers in Blood: Relocating Race in the Renaissance*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010), p.10.

²⁹ Kim F. Hall, *Things of Darkness*, p.2.

Integration: 'Hath a dog money?'

While assimilation appears to demand impossible changes of foreigners, such as eradicating colour from their skins, or washing inherited genetic information from their blood, integration is built upon far more tangible goals. Schneider and Crul associate integration with '*structural* aspects of incorporation into society' (their emphasis), such as contribution to society through work or educational achievements.³⁰ This suggests that integration is more concerned with the public dimension of life in a new society, and concerns the external identity rather than the internal sense of self that is linked to assimilation. Both Shylock and Othello hold occupations that are integral to Venetian society, and thus fulfil Schneider and Crul's definition of integration. However, Elizabeth Anderson states that unlike assimilation, 'integration does not view disadvantaged communities as the only ones that need to change' and instead 'aims to transform the habits of dominant groups'.³¹ The continuous stream of racist language from Iago and Roderigo throughout *Othello*, and overt anti-Semitism in *The Merchant of Venice*, suggests that Shakespeare's Venetians are a dominant group that remains resistant to change, despite demanding change of the foreigners that enrich their society. Though the changes involved in integration are associated with public rather than private life, they are no less divisive and damaging than those associated with assimilation.

According to Elliott Barkan, 'the person who has integrated has 'begun to crystalize dual (or multiple) identities' that enable them to interact with both the majority and minority culture - in Shylock's case, these dual identities are formed around his private and public lives.³² Shylock is comfortable interacting with Christians to do business – 'I will buy with you, sell with you, talk with you' (1.3.31) – but his private life remains strictly separate and Jewish – 'I will not eat with you, drink with you nor pray with you' (1.3.34). Despite this attempted separation between his personal and private identities, Shylock's occupation as money lender and usurer remains distinctly associated with his Jewishness. John Drakakis writes that in the early modern period, the usurer was considered the 'antithesis of all humane Christian values' and in this way, Shylock's Jewish - and non-Christian - identity is inseparable from his occupation.³³ When Portia asks 'which is the merchant here, and which the Jew?' (4.1.170), it is clear that Shylock's heritage eclipses his occupation, and suggests that 'Jew' is a byword for 'usurer'. The Venetians make it impossible for him to divide his personal and private lives because they so forcefully assert links between his mode of business and his religion. In this way, Shylock's private life, his religion and heritage, finds its

³⁰ Schneider and Crul, 'New insights into assimilation and integration theory', p.1144.

³¹ Elizabeth Anderson, *The Imperative of Integration*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), p.115.

³² Elliott Barkan, 'Race, Religion and Nationality in American Society' in *Incorporating Diversity, Rethinking Assimilation in a Multicultural Age*, ed. by Peter Kivisto, (London: Paradigm Publishers, 2005), p.190.

³³ John Drakakis, 'Introduction' in William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, p.17.

way into the public sphere in Venice where it is attacked – Antonio calls Shylock 'misbeliever' and a 'dog' (1.3.107), and spits on him – despite the Venetians' reliance upon his contribution to society. Shylock exposes their hypocrisy when he asks 'Hath a dog money?' (1.3.117), and it is clear that he is more aware of racism within Venetian society than Othello is. The abuse he endures proves that foreigners are forced to keep their own culture firmly behind closed doors, for fear of being ostracised for their differences, and present a version of themselves that conforms to the majority culture in public. If integration necessitates the splitting of ones' identity in half, then it demands as drastic changes of foreigners as assimilation does.

Lauren Garrett writes that in *The Merchant of Venice*, the bond between Antonio and Shylock is 'an instance of interest rather than usury', and here Shylock adopts a traditional 'Christian model of lending'.³⁴ After their deal is struck, Antonio calls Shylock a 'gentle Jew' (1.3.173) (with 'gentle' here audibly signifying 'gentile').³⁵ Antonio's phrase highlights the ease with which Shylock is able to adopt a Christian mode of business, and evokes the fears of 'counterfeit Christians' that Shapiro examines.³⁶ By declaring: 'what a goodly outside falsehood hath!' (1.3.98) in an aside to the audience, Antonio enforces the idea that integrated individuals who practise their religions and cultures in private are duplicitous. Integration is therefore not an extensive enough change for the anti-Semitic Venetians who believe in the polarity between Christian 'goodness' and Jewish 'evil'. During the court scene, the Duke tells Shylock 'We all expect a gentle answer, Jew' (4.1.33), and this reveals that Shylock is not free to switch between Jewish and Christian identities as he wishes. He is instead eventually forced by the majority culture to reject his original cultural identity, and assimilate, when his culture is no longer beneficial to them. When the Venetians force Shylock to convert to Christianity, it is as if they have killed him – he is absent from the play thereafter. He pleads: 'You take my life/ When you do take the means whereby I live' (4.1.373), and the 'means whereby' he lives suggest his way of life, and his religion, as well as his financial means. Anti-Semitic beliefs drive the Venetians to weaponize assimilation in order to exterminate any traces of Jewish culture from their society, as it becomes clear to them that integration is not enough to eradicate Shylock's culture.

Curiously, the boundaries between Jewish and Christian culture in early modern Venice were not so clearly defined, according to David Nirenberg. He asks: 'how can a society built

³⁴ Lauren Garrett, 'True Interest and the Affections: The Dangers of Lawful Lending in *The Merchant of Venice*', *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies*, 14:1 (2014), pp. 32-62, p.33.

³⁵ John Drakakis, in William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, (1.3.173n.).

³⁶ Shapiro, *Shakespeare and the Jews*, p.155.

upon "Jewish" foundations of commerce, contract, property, and law consider itself Christian?'.³⁷ This suggests that it is the large scale success of Jewish integration into structural aspects of Venetian society that renders it so threatening to Christians, especially Christian businessmen like Antonio. Antonio and Shylock are presented by Shakespeare as archetypal symbols of Christianity and Judaism, supposedly diametrically opposed and embodying the 'good/evil' dichotomy his audiences fervently believed in. However, by polarising them so drastically, Shakespeare actually exposes similarities between them. Their occupations are linked commercially, with each role dependent upon the other. Indeed, Walter Lim writes that 'merchant-usurers played a significant role' in commercial life in the sixteenth century - even their professions were once conjoined.³⁸ Shylock despises Antonio for his religion - 'I hate him for he is a Christian' (1.3.38) - and similarly, Antonio's hatred of Shylock is religiously motivated - 'The devil can cite Scripture for his purpose' (1.3.94). These similarities have dual meanings; they either serve to highlight Antonio's mistreatment of Shylock as deplorable, or 'Jewish', or to humanise Shylock and give him 'Christian' attributes. William Bernard classifies integration as each culture being 'changed by association with the other', and the similarities between Shylock and Antonio suggest that each character has been affected by the alien culture of the other.³⁹ Shylock's disappearance from the play after his forced conversion could demonstrate that he functions simply to embody the pervasive early modern narrative of anti-Semitism. Another reason for his disappearance - far more disturbing for Shakespeare's audience - could be that after his conversion to Christianity, Shylock remains exactly the same person as before. As the similarities between Shylock and Antonio show, he has already assumed many Christian qualities; by removing him from the play, Shakespeare avoids the conundrum of whether his character could be altered by a forced conversion. Shylock and Antonio's similarities suggest that the vilification of integrated Jews in Venice will eventually amount to the destruction of Venetian society, as they are so dependent upon Jewish culture for its success.

Othello seems to have integrated into Venetian society more successfully than Shylock at the opening of *Othello*; Edward Washington points out that he is 'well liked, much respected, and welcomed into the homes of Venetian aristocrats like Brabantio'.⁴⁰ As a general, Othello, like Shylock, plays an integral role in Venetian society. His military prowess clearly defines

³⁷ David Nirenberg, 'Shakespeare's Jewish Questions', *Renaissance Drama*, 38 (2010), pp. 77-113, p.82.

³⁸ Walter Lim, 'Surety and Spiritual Commercialism in The Merchant of Venice', *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, 50:2, Tudor and Stuart Drama (2010), pp. 355-381, p.356.

³⁹ William Bernard, "The Integration of Immigrants in the United States", Unesco, 1956, p.2, quoted in Milton Gordon, 'The Nature of Assimilation' in *Incorporating Diversity*, p.100.

⁴⁰ Edward Washington, "'At the Door of Truth": The Hollowness of Signs in *Othello*', in *Othello - New Essays by Black Writers*, ed. by Mythili Kaul, (Washington: Howard University Press, 1997), p.171-172.

him as equal, and in some cases superior, to the white Venetians around him. Emily Bartels argues that it is his position as a black man 'very near the 'inside' of authority and power' that threatens characters like Iago and Roderigo, who are peripheral to power.⁴¹ Othello's successful integration into Venetian society is, however, strictly limited to the public sphere of his occupation. Unlike Shylock, Othello does not develop 'dual identities' that are split between public and private life, because he does feel compelled to interact with his own heritage.⁴² Eliot Butler-Evans states that the term 'Moor' signalled 'a generalized and vague exotica' to early modern audiences.⁴³ Othello is equally vague about his own background, touching upon 'slavery', 'cannibals' and 'men whose heads/ Do grow beneath their shoulders' (1.3.145) in his incredible stories to Desdemona. His lack of a clearly defined private identity suggests that by distancing himself from his heritage, the only identity he is able to inhabit in his private life is that of a respected Venetian soldier. Othello compares 'the flinty and steel couch of war' to his 'thrice-driven bed of down' (1.3.231) shortly after attempting to convince Brabantio he is a worthy husband for Desdemona. This is a strange time to compare his bed to a battleground in front of his father-in-law, and the incongruity of this comparison shows that Othello orientates his private life around the only part of Venetian life he has been allowed to belong to: war. Othello's remote connection to his heritage suggests that he wishes from the start of the play to fully assimilate, rather than integrate, into Venetian culture.

⁴¹ Emily C Bartels, 'Making More of the Moor: Aaron, *Othello*, and Renaissance Refashionings of Race', in *Understanding Racial Issues*, p.249.

⁴² Elliott Barkan, 'Race, Religion and Nationality in American Society' in *Incorporating Diversity, Rethinking Assimilation in a Multicultural Age*, p.190.

⁴³ Elliott Butler-Evans, 'Haply, for I Am Black' in *Othello – New Essays by Black Writers*, p.143.

Intermarriage: 'O treason of the blood!'

If assimilation represents an internal change in foreigners adapting to new societies, and integration represents external changes associated with public life, marriage is an institution that intersects both these processes. Christine Peters writes that in the early modern period, 'marriage was always as much an economic and social alliance as a religious one', demonstrating its permeation of both external and internal dimensions of life.⁴⁴

In *The Merchant of Venice*, marriage for Lorenzo seems to be an economic proposition, rather than a crusade for Jessica's conversion or a romantic affair. Leslie Fielder claims that *The Merchant of Venice* is a play 'in which not being, but getting married'⁴⁵ is the focus; Grantiano echoes this with his claim that all things 'Are with more spirit chased than enjoyed' (2.6.14). In Jessica and Lorenzo's relationship, the 'getting' – or possessing - of Jessica is foregrounded. The language of theft and possession dominates their union; Lorenzo pronounces himself a 'thief' (2.6.24) who shall 'take [Jessica] from her father's house' (2.4.31) along with whatever 'gold and jewels she is furnished with' (2.4.33). Conversely, their union signals mostly loss for Jessica: she must abandon her home and her father - 'I have a father, you a daughter, lost' (2.6.55) - and 'gild' (2.6.50) herself with her father's ducats in the process. 'Gild' here audibly evokes her guilt at stealing from her father, an emotional crisis that Lorenzo does not have to suffer.⁴⁶ Bovilsky writes that in *The Merchant of Venice*, Christian 'open-mindedness' to assimilation 'is proportional to the extent of their prospect of gain', and it is clear that Lorenzo will gain financially from their marriage.⁴⁷ When Jessica tells Lorenzo: 'catch this casket; it is worth the pains' (2.6.34), she suggests that the material wealth she brings to their union will make up for the 'pains' Lorenzo must endure by marrying a Jew. According to Hall, the resolution of the play is focused on 'not merely the proper pairing of male and female, but the redistribution of wealth from women and other strangers to Venice's Christian males'.⁴⁸ In this way, Jessica's intermarriage becomes more focused on the stealing of wealth from the villainised Shylock than breaking down the borders between cultures.

While Lorenzo's desire to marry Jessica seems to be economically motivated, Othello's marriage to Desdemona represents his efforts to be socially accepted into Venetian society.

⁴⁴ Christine Peters, Gender, 'Sacrament and Ritual: The Making and Meaning of Marriage in Late Medieval and Early Modern England', *Past & Present*, 169 (2000), pp. 63-96, p.64.

⁴⁵ Leslie A. Fielder, *The Stranger in Shakespeare*, (London: Croom Helm, 1973), p.86.

⁴⁶ John Drakakis, in William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, (2.6.50n.).

⁴⁷ Lara Bovilsky, *Barbarous Play: Race on the English Renaissance Stage*, p.79.

⁴⁸ Kim F. Hall, 'Guess Who's Coming to Dinner? Colonization and Miscegenation in "The Merchant of Venice"', *Renaissance Drama in an Age of Colonization*, 23 (1992), pp. 87-111, p.99.

Patrick Hogan claims that Othello's marriage to Desdemona is his strongest link to Venetian society. If this is true, then Othello's rage at the possibility of Desdemona's infidelity is not necessarily sexually driven, but because the breakdown of his marriage would sever 'the one link connecting him with the Venetian community'.⁴⁹ However, I would argue that Othello's place in Venetian society rests not upon his marriage, but upon his military success. He is called 'Valiant Othello' (1.3.49) before the Duke is aware of his marriage to Desdemona. Othello is confident that his 'parts', 'title' and 'perfect soul' (1.2.31) will protect him from Brabantio's false accusations, and his confidence rests upon the respect he has earned from his military services in Venice. Dorothea Kehler writes that 'by eloping, Othello demonstrates his awareness of social boundaries and chooses to transgress them'.⁵⁰ This reveals that while Othello is confident in his position in society as a military asset, his interpersonal position within society is far more precarious. He knows that, as a black man, he would never receive Brabantio's approval to marry Desdemona; though Brabantio thinks Roderigo is ridiculous, he exclaims 'O, would you had had her!' (1.1.174). Even Roderigo would be a better son-in-law than an 'old black ram' (1.1.87). Jacquelyn McLendon writes that according to Fanon, 'in a society in which the white male is the only recognized frame of reference for humanity, to possess what is his is, for the black man, to become human'.⁵¹ In this way, Othello's clandestine marriage to Desdemona is his attempt to gain a status within Venetian society as a human being, not just a soldier. The fact that the marriage happens in secret - off-stage and unseen by characters and audience – enforces the idea that it is seen by Venetian society as a transgressive and dishonourable union. The deceit that Othello and Desdemona's marriage is built on proves that Othello can only integrate into the public sphere of Venetian life. He can never hope to truly assimilate because he is a soldier, rather than a human being, to the Venetians.

Many sociologists still regard intermarriage as the 'ultimate' signifier of successful integration.⁵² Othello's intermarriage, however, done in secret and without Brabantio's blessing, can hardly be seen as evidence that he has integrated. Emilia references it as Desdemona's 'most filthy bargain' (5.2.153), reducing it to an underhand and duplicitous transaction. In fact, Othello's marriage provides Iago with the perfect opportunity to

⁴⁹ Patrick C Hogan, 'Othello, Racism, and Despair' in *Understanding Racial Issues in Shakespeare's Othello: Selected Critical Essays*, ed. by Solomon Iyasere and Marla Iyasere, (New York: Whitston Publishing Company, 2008), p.146.

⁵⁰ Dorothea Kehler, 'Othello and Racism', in *Understanding Racial Issues*, p.158.

⁵¹ Jacquelyn Y. McLendon, 'A Round Unvarnished Tale': (Mis)Reading Othello or African American Strategies of Dissent, in *Othello – New Essays by Black Writers*, ed. by Mythili Kaul, (Washington: Howard University Press, 1997), p.126.

⁵² Sayaka Osanami Törngren, Nahikari Irastorza and Miri Song, 'Toward building a conceptual framework on intermarriage', *Ethnicities* (2016), 16:4, pp. 497–520, p.507.

undermine Othello's position in society, and he capitalises on the fear of miscegenation in his attempts to infuriate Brabantio. Kim Hall acknowledges that Renaissance allusions to the modern term 'miscegenation' came in different forms – the word 'mulatto' for example was used to describe the offspring of interracial couples – nevertheless, this kind of reproduction was still seen as transgressive, despite being referred to by different terms.⁵³ When Iago cries 'you'll have your daughter covered with a Barbary horse; you'll have your nephews neigh to you' (1.1.110), his implication is that Othello's blackness will sully Brabantio's bloodline. If, as Jean Feerick argues, race in the early modern period 'refers to a social system built in, around, and through the symbolics of blood', the importance of Othello's blood becomes even more heightened after his marriage to Desdemona.⁵⁴ Iago's attention to reproduction in his assault on Brabantio – 'an old black ram/ Is tupping your white ewe!' (1.1.87); 'the devil will make a grandsire of you' (1.1.90) - is intended to remind Brabantio that his blood and Othello's blood are now conjoined, not only in the public social sphere of Venetian society, but also genetically. Brabantio's outcry 'O treason of the blood!' (1.1.167) may allude to Desdemona's rejection of familial duty, or her transgressive sexual desire for Othello, as Honigmann suggests.⁵⁵ However, it must also assume a racial significance, especially in light of Iago's choice of words: it signals Brabantio's fury at the inevitable contamination of his white, or 'pure', genes. This opposition to Othello's right to marry Desdemona, and the particular fear of him reproducing with her, demonstrates the hopelessness of Othello's attempts to assimilate on a human level from the very start of the play.

The fear of racial contamination from foreigners is present in both plays, culminating in Venetian resistance to intermarriage. In *The Merchant of Venice*, Lancelot declares: 'I am a Jew if I serve the Jew any longer' (2.2.105), implying that one can become Jewish by association, and that it resembles a disease that can be caught and passed on through contact. The consummation of marriage represents a most intense form of physical contact, and thus Lorenzo must fall victim to the transmission of the Jewish 'disease'. When Lancelot taunts Jessica, and tells her she is still 'damned' (3.5.5) despite marrying a Christian man and converting, he declares that 'the sins of the father are to be laid upon the children' (3.5.1). While he appears to be alluding to Shylock's 'sin' of being Jewish, which he has passed onto Jessica, Lancelot may also be implicating Lorenzo's transgression of marrying a Jew, and the sully of his bloodline with his wife's Jewish blood. Lorenzo's retort to

⁵³ Kim F. Hall, 'Guess Who's Coming to Dinner? Colonization and Miscegenation in "The Merchant of Venice"', p.106n1.

⁵⁴ Jean Feerick, *Strangers in Blood: Relocating Race in the Renaissance*, p.12.

⁵⁵ E. A. J. Honigmann, in William Shakespeare, *Othello*, (1.1.167n.).

Lancelet's taunts – that 'the Moor is with child' by him (3.5.36) - reveals that the fear of miscegenation underlies this entire exchange. After her marriage to Lorenzo, Jessica is referred to with increasingly negative connotations - Salarino brands her Lorenzo's 'amorous Jessica' (2.8.9) and Grantiano calls her Lorenzo's 'infidel' (3.2.218), one who does not follow Christianity. Despite her marriage, Jessica is not accepted as a virtuous Christian woman, and is seen instead as an 'amorous' sexual deviant. The Venetians continue to view Jessica as infectious, and this is coloured with allusions to her sexuality because of the fear of the racial contamination she may cause. Michael Pantazakos writes that in *The Merchant of Venice* 'the Jew has but two methods of engaging in a social dynamic with Christians: conversion or death', but it seems that even after conversion, Jessica remains excluded from Christian society.⁵⁶

Anxieties about race, marriage and contamination permeate the final, crucial scenes of *Othello*. According to Michael Neil, in *Othello*, the bed was a symbol '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.'⁵⁷ In this way, the bed's brazen centrality to the murder scene at 5:2 alludes not only to Desdemona's fictitious marital infidelity, but more urgently to the actual transgression of Othello and Desdemona's interracial union. Othello's preoccupation with preserving Desdemona's whiteness while killing her – 'I'll not ... scar that whiter skin of hers than snow' (5.2.4) – references again the Renaissance dichotomy of light and dark, and suggests that Othello believes her white skin will leave her dead body virtuous and pure once more. Edward Washington writes that 'Othello's dependence on image at the expense of truth, reality and hope... is the "cause" of his downfall', and if this is true, it is because the racist narrative that surrounds him in Venice has forced him to assign more importance to image and the exterior than truth and reality.⁵⁸ Othello perversely believes that Desdemona will somehow remain pure and alive in his memory, and therefore immortal, if he leaves her white skin unblemished - 'I will kill thee and love thee after' (5.2.18) – which demonstrates his obsession with appearance over reality. If their marriage bed is a symbol of their real interracial union, rather than the imagined infidelity of Desdemona, Othello's proclamation that Desdemona's bed 'lust-stained, shall with lust's blood be spotted' (5.1.36) actually alludes to his own transgressive sexuality. The only lust their marital bed is stained with is their supposedly unnatural, interracial lust, and the blood that covers it eventually

⁵⁶ Michael Pantazakos, 'Shylock's Forced Conversion', *Cardozo Studies in Law and Literature*, 5:2, pp.338-356, p.341.

⁵⁷ Michael Neill, 'Unproper Beds: Race, Adultery, and the Hideous in *Othello*' in *Understanding Racial Issues in Shakespeare's Othello*, p.18.

⁵⁸ Edward Washington, "'At the Door of Truth": The Hollowness of Signs in *Othello*', in *Othello – New Essays by Black Writers*, p. 187.

includes his own. The image of their marital bed covered in corpses is one that serves to enforce the widespread resistance to intermarriage and miscegenation in the early modern period. Shakespeare uses this disturbing image to warn that these unnatural unions can only end violently, again proving that Othello can never hope to assimilate into Venetian society.

Conclusion

Although Shylock and Othello are forced to change themselves in order to live in Venetian society, these changes are not enough to enable them to integrate or assimilate. Othello's attempts to assimilate are doomed from the start of the play. He can never hope to eradicate the blackness of his own skin, and his absorption of the racist narrative that surrounds him culminates in his suicide. Though he is welcomed by the Venetians as a soldier, they do want him to assume the status of a human being by marrying Desdemona. Shylock's wish to be integrated into Venetian society, free to practise his own culture in private, does not satisfy the Venetians. By forcing him to convert – and assimilate – they destroy his identity, and he silently disappears from the play. Inevitably, assimilation results in self destruction, while integration leads to the destruction of the self by others. Characters who attempt to retain their cultural differences, like Morocco, are shunned, and characters who attempt to reject their cultural differences, like Jessica, are also shunned. It seems that no amount of change forced upon foreigners is enough to erase their status as 'other'. Attitudes towards intermarriage expose the intensity of racial hatred that existed in the early modern period, and the widespread opposition to miscegenation proves that the struggles faced by foreigners are also to be suffered by their children.

Though assimilation appears at first to be a far more damaging acculturation process than integration, they both demand that foreigners censor themselves in drastic ways to be accepted into new societies. The fact that modern sociological research lends itself so well to Shakespeare's early modern plays reveals a disturbing lack of progress in our societies, four centuries later. The mass migration of people across the world in recent years means that Shylock and Othello's suffering is felt universally. The choice between 'conversion or death' faced by immigrants and refugees today is an even more brutal one than in Shakespeare's time; many die before they get to choose, and those who survive are met with racism, violence and incarceration.⁵⁹ The inescapable closeness of Shakespeare's plays to modern day realities proves that there is much progress to be made before the assimilation and integration of foreigners engenders equality.

⁵⁹ Michael Pantazakos, 'Shylock's Forced Conversion', *Cardozo Studies in Law and Literature*, 5:2, pp.338-356, p.341.

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