Aaron, Othello, and Caliban: Shakespeare’s Presentation of Ethnic Minorities in *Titus Andronicus, Othello, and The Tempest*

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This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the Research Honors Program in the Department of English

Marietta College

Marietta, Ohio

April 24, 2013
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Acknowledgements

For an undergraduate English major, attempting to analyze the works of William Shakespeare offers a special challenge. Scholars have studied and interpreted Shakespeare’s plays for many years and finding my own voice within the discourse on these plays was a year and half long endeavor. If it had not been for the continued support from many individuals, this Honors Thesis project would not have been possible.

First, I would like to thank Dr. Joseph Sullivan, who served as the advisor for this project. What began as a project for his Shakespeare class turned into a summer investigation, and then finally, transformed into this thesis. Dr. Sullivan’s willingness to guide my research, meet with me regularly, and push me to keep working has proved invaluable. I sincerely appreciate his belief in my ability to do more and to do better.

I would also like to thank Dr. Nicole Livengood for her endless support and feedback on this project. She voluntarily served as a member of my Honors Thesis Committee and I cannot thank her enough for the time she spent reading and re-reading my work. She has pushed me to become a better writer and editor, and thus, a better scholar.

I would like to thank Dr. Alane Sanders, Dr. Dave Brown, and all those who serve as the Research Honors Thesis Committee. It is because of their belief in Marietta College students’ abilities to complete scholarly research as undergraduates that this program exists.

Lastly, I would like to thank all the friends and family who encouraged me throughout this project. They patiently listened as I enthusiastically tried to discuss the deeper meanings within Shakespeare’s plays. Without all of the aforementioned people, this Honors Thesis project would not have been possible.
Abstract

This thesis will analyze the ways in which Shakespeare presents three different characters, all of whom represent ethnic minorities in the plays. Aaron from *Titus Andronicus* and Othello from *Othello* are the Moors. *The Tempest’s* Caliban is described as a monster, but is a blend of species and thus, the dominant characters treat him as a slave. Aaron, Shakespeare’s earliest Moor, is depicted as a villain in the play. *Othello*, written later in Shakespeare’s career, depicts a Moor who is misled into murdering his white wife, Desdemona. Caliban, described as the most hideous, attempts to rape a white woman but ultimately fails and attempts to assert ownership over the island on which he lives with the white woman and her father. Over time, Shakespeare’s black characters and their circumstances have become more complicated, inevitably complicating the reader’s reaction towards the character. Aaron fits many black stereotypes but also rejects the notion that black equates to inferiority to white. Othello fits fewer racial stereotypes as he represents nobility and loyalty throughout Shakespeare’s later play. Caliban’s ambiguous physical appearance or heritage allows readers to ascribe various ethnic minority groups to his character and thus, readers graft their own meaning onto the character in order to see whatever it is they want to see in the play. This thesis project will investigate Shakespeare’s presentation of these minority male characters, as well as analyze the ways they do or do not fit racial stereotypes. The project will also address directorial choices of characterization by analyzing the presentation of Aaron, Othello, and Caliban in various live performances.
Part One: Introduction to Race in Renaissance England

In late 16th century, an influx of dark-skinned Africans moved into England and racial tensions drastically increased. Those with dark skin experienced discrimination and were not welcomed by all Englanders. Although the theatre served as a popular form of entertainment, black actors were forbidden from taking the stage. When William Shakespeare wrote *Titus Andronicus* in 1592, he created a black character that the audiences in the 16th century may have despised due to the evil destruction he wreaked on others in the play. Aaron the Moor belongs to an ethnic minority and becomes enslaved to the Roman Empire. Eleven years later, Shakespeare wrote *Othello*—a play with a Moor protagonist who, like Aaron, remains an outsider to the dominant society. Othello, however, contradicts many black stereotypes that lead the reader to reconsider popular views of the “other”. By the time Shakespeare wrote *The Tempest*, the othered character challenges the stereotypes associated with various minority peoples, such as Native Americans in the New World, Africans, or black natives of the West Indies. Because Caliban does not explicitly represent one group of othered people, 16th century readers graft their own meaning onto Caliban in order to argue for colonialism. Modern audiences, on the other hand, graft meaning onto Caliban to suggest that he represents all the oppressed and mistreated people who experienced the negative consequences of racial profiling. *Titus Andronicus*, *Othello*, and *The Tempest* demonstrate the ways in which the issue of race and integration of the minority into the dominant society can be complicated. Audiences living in Renaissance England would have seen Aaron and Othello in a very different way than modern audiences. Due to progress in civil rights for people of color in the United States, modern audiences may view these characters with more sympathy regarding their outcast positions in society.

When analyzing the role that race plays in *Titus Andronicus* and *Othello*, it is first critical to understand how racial diversity was perceived and handled in Renaissance England by both its
citizens and its lawmakers. When Europeans began to explore the East in search of gold, ivory, slaves, and other resources, they developed routes that allowed easier and faster travel and trade. Many of these routes cut across the Mediterranean and towards the Northern parts of Africa (Dizdar, Karakuzu, and Toker 128). In 1544, John Lok captured five Africans and brought them to England to serve as interpreters in order to establish trade relations between Africa and England (“Studying Africa”). Over the next fifty years, thousands of African slaves and freed blacks moved to England; many of them lived in London—where William Shakespeare was busy making his name as a successful playwright.

During the period of William Shakespeare’s childhood and adolescence, Africans living in England emerged as an important issue that government officials addressed. In the late 1400s and throughout the 1500s, the slave trade developed in England (Ungerer 20). Ungerer explains that the majority of the black Africans in England during the late 1500s were enslaved, Moors from North Africa, and others were freedmen; all black Africans, regardless of legal status, were commonly referred to using the blanket term blackamoor (20). The increase in the black African population in England increased the nation’s anxiety about the possibility of interbreeding. To appease the alarmed Englanders, Queen Elizabeth I claimed the black population posed a threat to the economy of England and attempted to expel all Africans from England in 1596, 1599, and then again in 1601 (Ungerer 29). These expulsion acts failed because the free black people refused to self-deport and the wealthy owners of slaves were unwilling to give up their servants, especially during the time when the slave trade remained an unregulated market. Thus, the African population in England did not disappear, nor did the tension surrounding issues of race in England.
For the English, Sub-Saharan Africa appeared as a mysterious land filled with people they knew little to nothing about. Englanders shared what they knew about the African people using stories and legends that originated from travel tales; these tales resembled fairy-tales more so than realistic encounters with African people (Deroux 90). Thus, Englanders viewed anyone who came to England from the seemingly strange lands of Sub-Saharan Africa as a black mystery, with the emphasis on the word black. Often, Englanders referred to black-skinned people as Moors. In *The Norton Shakespeare*, editor Katharine Maus notes that during classical times, the term Moor referred to a person from Mauretania, located in northwest Africa. Later, however, the Moor referred to Islamic Africans of Arab descent. During the time that Shakespeare wrote *Titus Andronicus*, the word became a blanket term for all Africans with black skin (Maus 410).

Because most Englanders knew little about the parts of Africa from which many black Englanders originated, all black-skinned people were regarded as Moors and were characterized not by their personalities, but by the color of their skin. Many Englanders denied that slavery occurred in England, while others owned slaves or partook in the slave trade in order to gain wealth. The freed blacks in England often faced discrimination and racial stereotypes. This mixture of experiences and opinions on how race in England should be handled made for an interesting response to plays such as *Titus Andronicus*, *Othello*, and *The Tempest*—plays that centered on outcasts living in a white society. While Shakespeare’s othered characters become decreasingly stereotypical in the plays, this allows for readers to graft on their own meaning and thus, create a new interpretation of the plays. *Titus Andronicus*’ Aaron fits many racial stereotypes but begins to redeem himself before the play’s close. *Othello*, on the other hand, breaks racial stereotypes at the beginning of the play and represent an othered character who holds respect in society. In *The Tempest*, the othered character loses all indication that he fits or
breaks stereotypes because readers do not know what historical context or society Caliban lives in. Therefore, readers can graft their own meaning onto the character and recognize Caliban as an othered character who attempts to seek revenge and re-establish himself as an individual. Shakespeare’s portrayal of these Moors and the ways in which various audiences react to their actions provides insight into the ways in which editors of the text, actors on stage, and historical developments have complicated over time our reception of how race is presented in these plays.

**Part Two: Titus Andronicus’ Aaron the Moor**

As racial issues took center stage in England’s news during the 1590s, Shakespeare saw an opportunity to stand in the spotlight as well. He brought along with him Aaron the Moor, whose ambiguous heritage highlights ‘otherness’. Shakespeare’s first tragedy, *Titus Andronicus* featured the black Aaron as the play’s villain at the same time that England experienced an influx in black immigrants. According to Ungerer, “This was the moment for Shakespeare to step in to make an attempt to defuse the situation by confronting his contemporary audiences with the extraordinary figure of Aaron, a literate African,” (31). The Moor remains a challenge for critics to pin down due to his ambiguous origin and his malevolent role in the play. Because the term ‘Moor’ has various meanings, Aaron’s origin sparks much debate. Due to the large population of Berber immigrants from North Africa living in England, many readers interpret the term *Moor* to mean that Aaron came from Africa. Ross Brann, author of “The Moors,” writes that today’s scholars often use the term to refer to race, specifically African origin rather than Arab identity (310). However, Brann also suggests that the term can refer to a North African or the Iberian Muslim culture. The stage directions provide the only knowledge readers have of Aaron;
Shakespeare simply calls him “the Moor” and thus, leaves the reader to make his/her own suppositions about the origin of the character.

Although Aaron first enters the play as a prisoner of war with Tamora, Queen of the Goths in 1.1, the audience cannot derive a sufficiently informed impression of his character when he speaks later in the play. Aaron has no voice until 2.1. Margaux Deroux notes that Aaron’s silence signifies his lack of voice (96). When Aaron finally speaks his mind, he says, “Now climbeth Tampora Olympus’ top, / Safe out of fortune’s shot, and sits aloft, / Secure of thunder’s crack or lightning flash, / Advanced above pale envy’s threat’ning reach” (Shakespeare 2.2.1-4). His sudden articulation demonstrates his struggle to gain an identity and his desire to occupy his role as more than a silent and obedient slave.

Aaron’s initial speech shapes the reader’s impression of his character and immediately highlights his sexual desires thus, linking him with common stereotypes surrounding his black skin. Later in his first soliloquy Aaron expresses a compulsion to equal his lover’s position in society as Tamora marries the emperor, but instead he must remain cut off from her socially and physically because he continues to serve as a slave. He says to himself, “Then, Aaron, arm thy heart and fit thy thoughts / To mount aloft with thy imperial mistress, / And mount her pitch whom though in triumph long / Hast prisoner held fettered in amorous chains” (2.2.12-15). Africans were often associated with having excessive sexuality (92). Throughout the play, Aaron alludes to many sexual references about his physical relationship with Tamora. The 16th century audience members watching this play were not likely shocked at the many sexual comments made by Aaron because people often perceived Africans as sexual deviants.

Because Aaron never has the opportunity to express himself or his culture, audience members interpret his character based primarily on skin color and the stereotypes associated with
his blackness. In addition to sexual deviancy, readers also interpret Aaron’s darkness to signify sadness, madness, and violence (Deroux 97). At no point throughout the play does Aaron refer to his place of origin, his memories, or his culture. The dominant society stripped away Aaron’s identity by refusing to recognize his freedom, his right to express himself, or his intelligence. Although he acts as subject and lover to Tamora, societal structure would never allow the two to legally marry. When Tamora marries Saturninus in Act One, she becomes empress of Rome, while Aaron remains a slave. As a result of this enslavement, Aaron receives no opportunity to express himself freely or to reveal elements of his culture or history. The audience, therefore, focuses on his appearance and what that might suggest about his personality and behavior.

Characters throughout the play force the sole identity as a black man onto Aaron because they do not view him as an individual person. Instead, they see only his dark skin and thus, they call to him by using his skin color and not his name. Even his beloved Tamora continuously refers to him as her “sweet” or “lovely Moor” (Shakespeare 2.3.52, 189). Aaron serves only as a commodity in the Roman Empire; his role in the community is simply to wait on the rulers, although the reader never sees the Romans utilize him even in this objectified role. Thus, as he gains more power through manipulation and deceit, he seeks revenge against those who cast him as inferior. Aaron cannot remain oblivious to the prejudices the dominant society members felt towards him. Aaron witnessed first-hand the dominating forces of Rome as they conquered the Goths and immediately enslaved the Moor at the close of the war. Unlike Tamora, Aaron had no social mobility and his frustration towards those who oppressed him surfaces when he recognizes that he is in a position to get revenge against his oppressors. For Aaron, slavery under the Roman Empire barred him from acting as an individual. It reduced him to the status of commodity.
Aaron embraces the black identity that the members of the dominant society assign to him so that the dominant society will recognize his intelligence. He fits the black stereotypes as he begins to implement his revenge. Therefore, his violence and destruction may signify his attempt to leave his mark on Rome (Deroux 97). Furthermore, Aaron’s blackness could represent Rome’s suppression of many other territories and peoples. Carolyn Sale explains that Aaron serves not only an African character who symbolizes race at the end of the 16th century, but that he represents a number of suppressions related to both Rome and Britain (26). Aaron symbolizes all those who have lost their voice and individualism to the oppressive Romans. Aaron gives voice to all who were stripped of their ability to speak out and he lashes out against the dominant society on behalf of all who were taken over and made inferior under the shadow of the Roman Empire. Because Rome depended heavily on slavery to harvest fields, run business errands, and help in the households, any revolt of slaves could quicken the decline of the already falling empire. Although not all slaves were treated brutally, many of them experienced humiliation. Slave owners often treated their slaves worse than they treated animals.

In order to assert any power, Aaron plots his revenge against the dominant society of the Romans. Unlike Shakespeare’s other Moor, Othello, Aaron expresses no loyalty to the state. He recognizes that he will forever remain an outsider and the society does not recognize him as deserving of basic human rights. Therefore, his revenge plot allows him to fight the powers that hold him down. His first chance to plot against the Romans occurs when Demetrius and Chiron fight over Lavinia’s love. Aaron’s encouragement for the two men to force Lavinia to give herself over to both of them leads not only to Lavinia’s rape, but also to her disfigurement. In the shaded forest, Aaron’s wicked plot to lash out against the dominant society unfolds. When Aaron and Tamora share an intimate moment in the forest while everyone else partakes in a hunt,
Tamora describes the landscape: “Here never shines the sun, here nothing breeds / Unless the nightly owl or fatal raven” (2.3.96-97). Under the cover of this darkness, Aaron unveils to his lover his sinister attitude towards the Roman Empire. Darkness in this scene again equates to malevolence and violence.

In addition to the relationship between black skin and violence, Aaron’s black skin also associates him with a lack of intelligence and perhaps suggests why the Roman rulers failed to recognize his ability to overthrow their society. Aaron’s intelligence throughout the play likely surprised the audiences of Elizabethan England. Aaron demonstrates his knowledge of classic literature and often alludes to Greek mythology. According to Ungerer, this literacy does not coincide with the London play-goers’ views of the black African slaves they likely knew (40). The Englanders may have snickered at the black man on stage who made references to classic literature. After all, how could a slave have access to education, let alone become more knowledgeable than the fair-skinned characters on stage? Aaron also serves as the mastermind behind the plot to throw Rome into chaos. He acts as the brain and Tamora and her sons play the part of the “instruments of destruction” (Taylor 139). Furthermore, Aaron’s speech throughout the play does not resemble the linguistic variety that would have been used by uneducated slaves would have used. Instead, Aaron’s soliloquies exemplify William Shakespeare’s brilliant mastery of verse (Maus 404). Shakespeare’s presentation of Aaron suggests that dark skin does not equate to stupidity, and perhaps audience members refused to accept Shakespeare’s social commentary. Instead, the play provided an opportunity for audience members to laugh at the Moor’s expense and deem Aaron’s intelligence and compassion in the play not only impossible, but ironic as well.
The justification characters in the play offer in defense of the killing of blacks resembles the justifications that the Englanders likely made for enslaving Africans and the stripping away all of their human rights. The characters argue that blacks deserve the violence that befalls them because they themselves represent violence and ignorance. In Act Three, Marcus strikes at a fly and Titus becomes furious with his brother. Marcus tries to justify his action by saying that “it was a black ill-favoured fly, / Like to the Empress’ Moor” (3.2.66-67). Titus quickly changes his attitude and not only condones Marcus’ behavior, but also takes Marcus’ knife and strikes at the fly. According to Howard Choy, this scene demonstrates how people try to justify killings in the name of race (46-47). Titus justifies his action when he says that they can kill a fly that is like a “coal-black Moor” (3.2.77). The Romans openly admit that they do not like the Moor, often making negative comments about Aaron’s racial background.

Aaron’s relationship with Tamora demonstrates his lack of agency and fuels his desire to seek revenge upon the dominant society because while she has social mobility, he will never gain the same mobility. Other characters in the play and Englanders during the 16th and 17th centuries would have been perceived the sexual relationship between the two as taboo. According to Katharine Maus, both Romans and Goths would have found the interracial love affair of Aaron and Tamora scandalous (404). Both characters remain outsiders in the dominant society of the Roman Empire and exist in society exclusively in positions of servitude, stripped of all social and political power. Tamora, who previously served as the Queen of the Goths, becomes a prisoner of war. Aaron, on the other hand, served Tamora before the Romans conquered the Goths and thus, he remains a slave even when the Queen marries Saturninus and becomes the empress of Rome. Because Titus and Saturninus never recognize Aaron’s human value and Aaron possesses no social mobility, the Moor responds by acting out against the society; he
wishes to seek revenge against those who forced him to suppress his personality, desires, and voice. His persistent physical relationship with Tamora serves as an act of rebellion against the Roman Empire. If caught, both would face accounts of treason and likely death. Their adulterous and treasonous interracial relationship echoes the fears of the 16th and 17th century Englanders.

Although Aaron’s murderous plots against the Andronici remains inexcusable, the character may earn some sympathy from audience members when he defends his race against the Romans. The villain must be held responsible for the rape and disfigurement of Lavinia and inadvertently, her death, the murders of Bassianus and a nurse, the deaths of Martius and Quintus, the loss of Titus’s hand, and eventual death of Tamora. Despite his long list of offenses, Act Four provides the first look at a more sensitive side of Aaron. When a nurse brings Aaron’s son to him, she refers to the babe as miserable, black, and loathsome and tells Aaron that Tamora wants him to use his dagger to kill the child (4.2.66-67). Aaron finally cries out in frustration, “[I]s black so base a hue?” (4.2.71). He refuses to allow others to deem his skin color a fault. Aaron raises a valid question about the fairness of referring to his child’s complexion (or racial origin) in such a degrading manner. The boy’s skin color does not mean he belongs at the bottom of society’s hierarchy. Aaron even tells the nurse that having black skin is better than having skin of another color (4.2.98). For the first time in the play, Aaron stands up for his race and verbally argues against the oppression of black people.

The love and compassion that Aaron illustrates when he verbally and physically defends his son counteracts the early modern conceptions that blackness directly correlates to violence and chaos (Deroux 100). Not only does Aaron defend his race, but he also attempts to save the life of his child, marking a shift in his character and perhaps marking the beginning of his redemption. Throughout Acts Four and Five, Aaron attempts to keep his son safe from the
swords of the Romans. He takes the child from the nurse and draws out his sword against Tamora’s sons and the nurse, he threatens revenge against anyone of Rome who harms the child, and pleads with Lucius to save the baby. The Goth that caught and turned Aaron in explained to Lucius that the soldier had overheard Aaron trying to soothe the baby and plotting to send the boy to stay with a Goth who would look after him (5.1.20-39). Aaron’s attempts to save the life of his son sharply contrast Titus’s willingness to kill his own son earlier in the play. Shakespeare’s subtle comparison between the two characters calls into question the concept of civility as the black character acts with more morality than the white dominant character in the play. Aaron’s plea for someone to protect his son transforms him into a character for which a reader may feel sympathy. After all, he tries to save the life of a child.

For many people who experienced this play for the first time shortly after Shakespeare wrote it, Aaron’s violence towards the Romans may have seemed like an overreaction. Modern audiences, however, may be more likely to recognize the injustice that Aaron experienced as a slave because of the history of the American Civil War and civil rights history. Katharine Maus writes that Shakespeare makes Aaron’s point of view comprehensible and that readers may even find Aaron’s side of the story attractive (404). Why should Aaron submit to the Roman Empire when he committed no crime except maintain his relationship with Tamora? Aaron’s subjugation to the Roman society was based on the color of his skin. Is it unfair to expect Aaron to be stripped of his racial identity and categorized as subhuman based on his skin tone and not wish to punish those whose ignorance have led to this social injustice? Audiences living in Elizabethan England might have answered very differently than would most modern audience members living in the United States of America today.
Modern audience members—particularly in the United States—may not have been so quick to laugh at Aaron’s circumstances or to deem him violent and barbarous simply because of his skin tone. The United States had an economy that was heavily reliant on the slave trade and thus, has a long history of inequality and racial discrimination. The country’s constitutionally protected civil liberties, such as the right to vote and access to education, make it difficult for people to watch or read a play that involves the uprising of a slave without feeling sympathy towards the oppressed. With the Civil Rights Movement beginning in 1948, the United States of America recognized the ignorance of assuming that black skin correlates with incompetence, violence, and sexual deviance. Thus, although Aaron’s actions are extreme and audience members may not forgive his behavior, they are more likely to sympathize with Aaron based on his circumstances than would audiences in England in the 16th and 17th centuries.

The variations in modern American productions and their treatment of the final act of *Titus Andronicus* illustrate the various interpretations of Aaron’s actions. At the onset of 5.1, stage directions indicate that Aaron enters with his son in his arms. Lucius orders the hanging of the baby and then the hanging of Aaron so that the Moor must endure the sight of his dead son (5.1.51-52). Aaron begs Lucius to “save the child” and offers to admit all of his wrongdoings if only they will let the baby live (5.1.53-56). This moment offers Aaron a chance at redemption among the audience’s popular opinion, even if it will not save his life in the play. The reader may begin to hope that the Romans will spare the life of the innocent child. In 5.3, however, what happens to the son of Tamora and Aaron remains unclear. Marcus announces, “Behold the child” (5.3.118). Then, stage directions near the finale of the play indicate that some enter with Aaron. This suggests that the Andronici have taken the baby away from Aaron. The last order regarding Aaron is that he should be set “breast-deep in earth and famish[ed]” (5.3.178). The final dialogue
of the play comes from Lucius, who orders Tamora’s body be fed to the beasts and the birds (5.3.197-199). Thus, no stage directions or dialogue refers to the baby after Marcus draws attention to the child in line 118. This ambiguity allows for a variety of interpretation of the final scene of *Titus Andronicus*.

As a result of the uncertain fate of Aaron’s son in the play, many directors and producers have staged the scene in drastically different ways. In the BBC film version of the play, Young Lucius holds the coffin of the baby and stares at the corpse of the child as guards lead Aaron, who cannot look away from his child until Marcus closes the coffin. Young Lucius slowly looks up with a saddened expression upon his face (*Titus Andronicus*). This moment of sympathy by Young Lucius demonstrates that the cruelty of the infanticide was extreme and that the child, regardless of his skin tone, was only an innocent babe. In Taymor’s production, the end scene shows Young Lucius gaze on the baby, take it out of a cage, and walk out of the courtyard into the rising son, thus ending with an image of hope (Choy 50). Taymor’s interpretation alludes to the idea that the youngest generation for both the Romans and the oppressed people may join together in harmony, regardless of their skin color. According to Aparna Khastgir, the child “may be associated with innocence, with family and future, with multi-racial tolerance, breaking the seemingly endless cycle of vengeance” (44). Not all productions end with this same hopeful scene, however. Others end with the image of Aaron in the ground or the baby dead in the coffin. As illustrated, some interpretations of the ending of the play suggest little or no hope for Rome’s restoration of order remains while other interpretations suggest that the oppressors and the oppressed may join forces and become equals.

Regardless of the fate of the baby in the final act of the play, it is evident that the punishment of Aaron and Tamora exhibits Rome’s oppressive role. When Romans disobey, their
punishment is death; however, they are quickly killed. As members of the dominant society, their deaths are issues more humanely because they do not linger in pain. When Mutius attempts to help his sister by allowing her to escape Saturninus, Titus attacks and kills him (Shakespeare 1.1.286-289). Later in the play, Quintus and Martius are accused of murdering Bassianus. As punishment, the rulers behead them (3.1.233-239). Although the Romans are sentenced to death, they do not endure the suffering and cruelty that Aaron must face as the Romans bury him alive and then starve him. Lucius orders, “There let him stand, and rave, and cry for food. / If anyone relieves or pities him, / For the offence he dies” (5.3.179-181). Not only must he endure the slow suffering of withering away famished, but Lucius deems him so villainous that none may feel pity. Lucius references the raven as he describes how Aaron will suffer, again linking Aaron to melancholy and evil. This end scene highlights that Aaron was always an outcast. In original productions of the play, the actor playing Aaron would have been placed in the trap set in the middle of the stage and would have been left there for several moments while the rest of the performers concluded the performance with a dance (Sale, 46). The audience would have faced Aaron as he remained trapped. While the other characters were singing and/or dancing at the end of the show, Aaron remained with only his solemn face showing. This ending would highlight that the black character never assimilated into the dominant society of Rome and that his death restored order.

When the play was performed in England in the 16th and 17th centuries, audience members would have been unlikely to claim race to be a major theme of the play. Instead, the cunning black Moor would have seemed appropriate to serve as the antagonist of the play. Elizabethan England society would have found Aaron humorous because many of them would not have believed that a black slave could be nearly as smart or competent as Aaron. The
treatment of the Moor by the Romans resembles the oppression that black Africans were experiencing in Elizabethan England. Aaron had no civil liberties and was never allowed to integrate into the dominant society. Instead, his skin tone automatically casted him as an outsider and in the end, led to a brutal and painful death. Modern audiences likely feel more sympathetic towards Aaron, recognizing his intelligence and his attempt to protect his son at the end of the play. This results from modern societal notions that all men are equal, regardless of skin tone. Although readers cannot excuse Aaron’s actions, the oppression that he endured provides modern audiences with an identifiable reason to sympathize with the character. Aaron’s character demonstrates the complications related to interpreting Shakespeare’s black characters when read through a modern lens 200 years after the play’s premiere.

Part Three: Othello the Moor from Othello

By the time Shakespeare began writing Othello in 1603, his popularity as a playwright had significantly grown throughout England. The royal court often summoned his company, The Kings Men, to perform. His most popular plays in England were his comedies, such as The Comedy of Errors and As You Like It. When Shakespeare wrote Measure for Measure in 1603, however, he entered into a phase of tragedies and what are now referred to as problem plays. It was during this darker period of Shakespeare’s career that he once again returned to the concept of race, shining the spotlight on a Moor in his play Othello. Othello’s jealousy and violence reflect Elizabethan beliefs regarding the behavior of black people and thus, the play reveals racial tensions occurring in England at the time. Modern audiences, however, recognize the ways in which Othello reprises black
stereotypes because he represents physical self-control, uses eloquent speech, resists succumbing to jealousy, and seeks justice and thus, readers instead view Othello as a victim in the play.

Like Titus Andronicus’ Aaron, Othello’s origin remains unclear and the reader must rely on other characters’ discussions in the play to detect any clues regarding his appearance and origin. In the opening scene of Othello, the play’s antagonist Iago speaks with Roderigo, a Venetian gentleman. Iago makes the first reference to Othello when he says, “This counter-caster, / He in good time must his lieutenant be, / And I—God bless the mark!—his Moorship’s ensign” (1.1.30-32). Before the reader knows the name of the man who has upset Iago, he/she knows he is a Moor. Throughout the first scene, Iago makes several more references to Othello by calling him Moor. This term again raises the question: is he of African or Arab origin? Roderigo comments on Othello’s “thick-lips” (1.1.66) and many characters throughout the play refer to Othello’s skin as black. Thus, many modern readers infer that Othello is from Africa. However, seventeenth-century Londoners would have been just as likely to read these lines and think of Othello as Arab. When Iago compares Othello to a “Barbary horse” (1.1.112-114), readers would have instantly thought of an Arabian steed.

Furthermore, people used “barbarian” to refer to Abd el-Ouahed, the Moorish ambassador of the Barbary States to the court of Queen Elizabeth I in 1600 (Sanders 47). As a result of the various interpretations, Othello, like Titus Andronicus’ Aaron has been perceived and played as a man of African descent and a man of Arabic descent.

While Othello’s origin remains unclear, Shakespeare evidently desired to present a sense of otherness and the audience understands his outcast position in the society in their first impression of the Moor. Regardless of Othello’s homeland, he acts as a foreigner living in Venetian society. Roderigo refers to him as “an extravagant and wheeling stranger” (1.1.137). Venetian rulers overlook Othello’s otherness because he serves as a valiant soldier whose knowledge and bravery aids Venice in war. Furthermore, 1.3 illustrates Othello’s worth to the military. When Desdemona’s father Brabanzio discovers that she married the Moor behind his back, he seeks justice in the senators and
the Duke of Venice. Although these government officials listen to both Brabanzio and Othello’s explanations of the situation, they immediately turn their attention back to the affairs of the state, requesting that Othello lead an expedition to Cyprus. While Othello’s otherness may provoke discrimination or dislike from citizens of Venice, it also makes him a better equipped soldier because he has traveled the world. Although he acts as a crucial commodity in times of war, the society will never fully accept him; he was not born in Venice, nor does he physically look like the Venetians.

As Londoners watched the production of *Othello*, they too could immediately recognize Othello’s otherness and connected him with the others living in England at the time. Othello stood out on stage because his character was the only one covered in black stage makeup, but audience members also associated Othello’s otherness with the otherness they saw in the blackamoors living in their own community. Londoners knew as much about the mysterious homelands of these blackamoors as readers know about Aaron’s homeland—almost nothing. Aaron and Othello’s blackness made audience members associate these characters with proneness to extreme jealousy and anger, courage in war, bizarre behavior, and magic (Dizdar, Karakuzu, and Toker 133). Many Londoners would see these same qualities in the blackamoors they had seen living in their own country. Othello’s “oriental otherness” of amused audience members (Dizdar, Karakuzu, and Toker 133). Regardless of his country of origin, Othello was not from England or Venice, and as a result, the other characters in the play and the audience members immediately recognized his otherness.

Although Othello seems to represent many stereotypes regarding black men, the play reduces the role of race in comparison to the source material found in Giraldi Cintho’s novella *Gli Hecatommithi* written in 1565. Cinthio’s protagonist was a Moor living in Venice, and like Othello, he married the lovely Disdemona against her parents’ wishes. Shakespeare makes many significant changes from the original text, however. First, he elaborates on various elements of Othello and Desdemona’s differences. While Cinthio focuses on the difference of race, Shakespeare adds that the couple differs in “nature, / of years, of country, credit, everything” (1.396-97). Although
Shakespeare’s characters address Othello’s race many times throughout the play, the playwright emphasizes that everything about Othello and Desdemona contrasts in almost every way possible. Furthermore, Shakespeare complicates the story by adding an unstable Venice that is at war and must move to Cyprus for battle. In Cinthio’s Venice, there was “no external reason or precedent for the Moor’s vulnerability except his own hot nature” (Skura 313). Othello’s jealousy and downfall are more easily linked to the color of his skin, suggesting that a white man would have resisted.

“Cinthio’s Moor is an anomaly, but Shakespeare’s is surrounded by Iago’s equally vulnerable white victims”, writes Skura (314). Thus, in comparison to Cinthio’s novella written nearly forty years earlier, Shakespeare’s play reduces the role of race.

While Giraldi Cinthio’s Moor fits many of the stereotypes associated with blackamoors, Shakespeare’s Moor often breaks these same stereotypes. Although Shakespeare had an abundant supply of racist or proto-racist material, he seemed to use almost none of them to develop his protagonist (Skura 300). Othello physically looks like a stereotypical Moor. He has “thick-lips” (1.1.66), black skin (2.3.27-28), and “fear[ful] to look on” (1.3.98). His behavior, however, breaks many of the stereotypes associated with his black skin. First, Othello breaks the stereotype that black skin equates to lustfulness. Iago calls Othello a “lusty Moor” (2.1.282) and when Iago and Roderigo tell Brabanzio about Othello’s secret marriage to Desdemona, he tells him that his “daughter and the Moor are now making the beast with two back” (1.1.117-118). Iago suggests that Othello and Desdemona have already consummated the marriage. Othello proves him wrong when he openly admits in 2.3 that they have not yet had sexual intercourse. He even postpones the act when a brawl breaks out between Cassio and Montano. This starkly contrasts Aaron’s lust for Tamora in Titus Andronicus and readers can begin to recognize the significant difference between the two Moors. Othello’s willingness to put the state’s affairs before his sexual relationship with his wife demonstrates both his sexual restraint and his loyalty to the state—both attributes that Aaron never
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exhibited. Thus, later in Shakespeare’s career, his Moor molds less to fit the stereotypical black man and instead represents a sophisticated and steadfast soldier of Venice.

Othello’s eloquence, along with his vast knowledge of the world and warfare, demonstrates that he is an intelligent man, which also counters what many thought about Moors. Black people were deemed inferior intellectually. When Othello must defend his marriage to Desdemona in front of the Duke of Venice and Senators, he speaks for forty-one lines about the ways in which he wooed her. He describes the way in which he would tell the stories about his days of traveling, including tales of being captured, sold into slavery, seeing caves, deserts, and rolling hills, and encountering cannibals. Desdemona loved to hear these stories and she fell in love with him (1.3.128-169). After hearing Othello’s beautiful speech about the many adventures he has experienced, the Duke replies, “I think this tale would win my daughter, too” 1.3.170). Thus, the characters in the story and the readers recognize the Moor’s (and Shakespeare’s) ability to creatively express his ideas.

In addition to having sexual restraint and intelligence, Othello also breaks the stereotype that black skin equates to jealousy as he refrains from immediately believing his wife has committed adultery. Although Othello’s jealousy of and distrust for Desdemona leads to his downfall at the end of the play, it takes five acts for him to become filled with the jealousy that Iago has whispered in his ears for so long. In fact, when Othello begins to act strangely and lashes out at Desdemona, Lodovico of Venice cannot believe it is the same Moor he once knew. He asks if it can be the same person who once was unshakeable and full of virtue (4.1.261-264). Even Desdemona defends Othello, saying that she is glad that her beloved Moor does not get jealous the way that most people do and she associates his personality with the place where he was born (3.4.23-27, 29). By making the connection between Othello’s lack of jealousy and his homeland, Desdemona presents a paradigm shift suggesting of being jealous because is a Moor, Othello is not jealous because he is a Moor. This would be opposite to what the London audience members would have thought if they accepted racial stereotypes as truth. Once again, Othello does not fit the stereotypes.
Othello’s lack of several typical “black” characteristics distinguishes him from Aaron in Titus Andronicus. While Othello exhibits sexual restraint, a lack of jealousy, and the ability to integrate at least slightly into the dominant society, Aaron fits these racial stereotypes. He has sex with Tamora in the woods while others hunt, he is jealous of Tamora’s ability to marry into the dominant society, and he is never allowed to integrate into Roman society. Both Othello and Aaron are commodities to the dominant society, but Othello at least recognized as being intellectually valuable while Aaron is never seen as more than a slave. Aaron does not fit all racial stereotypes, however. Both Othello and Aaron speak eloquently and both demonstrate their intelligence, although Aaron uses his to wreak havoc on Roman society. Aaron uses his stereotypical characteristics against the dominant white society. Othello and Aaron show the audience that racial stereotypes are not always accurate and that many stereotypes can backfire and leave you looking foolish.

Iago’s motives for his malicious plan to unravel Othello remain unclear throughout the play. While his hatred for the Moor is obvious, his true motives for unraveling Othello’s world are less apparent. The most widely believed motive is that Iago wanted revenge on Othello for not choosing him to be the lieutenant and instead choosing Cassio. While recapping the main plot of the story, Thomas Rymer attributes all of Iago’s hatred towards this jealousy of being picked over for a promotion (107). Indeed, the beginning of the play shows Iago’s frustration that Othello favors Cassio as he vents to Roderigo in 1.1. When Iago later sees the opportunity to make Othello jealous using Cassio’s close relationship with Desdemona, he seizes the chance to have revenge against both characters.

While there is no doubt that Iago disapproves of Othello’s favoritism towards Cassio, there is also evidence that suggests that his motives may have been based on racist sentiments. During his opening conversation with Roderigo, he does not mention Othello’s name but rather refers to him by his race. He is the one who refers to Othello’s relationship with Desdemona as
bestial and reminds everyone that Othello is a “stranger” (1.1.137). When Iago talks with the heartbroken Roderigo about Desdemona’s choice to marry a black man, he says that Desdemona cannot possibly stay long with the Moor because when “she is sated / with his body, she will find the error of her choice” (1.3.342-343). Iago is trying to comfort Roderigo, but this passage also suggests that Iago himself is jealous that Desdemona has chosen the Moor. Furthermore, Iago says, “But for my sport and profit, I hate the Moor, / And it is thought abroad that ‘twixt my sheets / He has done my office” (1.3.368-370). The Moor has taken Iago’s place and is regarded with more respect than Iago is given in his own society. Desdemona recognizes Othello’s and sees him more fit for her mate than the white Iago. The ensign feels betrayed by Othello for not promoting him, his society for respecting an outsider more, and Desdemona for choosing a black man as her husband. It is Iago’s pleasure then to see Othello, Desdemona, and that state thrown into chaos through his malicious scheme.

Although excusing Othello’s murder of Desdemona is nearly impossible, there is evidence that Othello was not completely to blame for his spiral into madness. Othello trusted Iago and he placed all of his confidence in the man who had proved his faithfulness to Othello’s marriage by helping him uncover the ‘truth’ about Desdemona and Cassio. A.C. Bradley notes that Othello did not mistrust Iago as a result of his own stupidity because nearly everyone else believed Iago to be in excess of honesty (142). Even if Iago had not had the reputation of being a truthful man, it would have been unnatural to not believe his warnings, as it was a friend’s duty to tell if a man’s wife was being unfaithful. Furthermore, Othello and Desdemona were newly married and there is little evidence that suggests that the couple knew each other well. Othello had won her over with his life story and she had loved him “for the dangers” he had passed (1.3.166), but the two had never lived together until they arrive in Cyprus. Additionally,
Othello’s awareness that he is an outsider in Venetian society is enough to make him question if he truly understood the desires and behavior of white women. Bradley writes that Othello recognizes that “he is not an Italian, nor even a European; that he is totally ignorant of the thoughts and the customary morality of Venetian women; that he had himself seen in Desdemona’s deception of her father how perfect an actress she could be” (143). It is completely plausible for Othello that Iago understands what is going on better than he does. After all, Cassio and Desdemona have spent moments alone together and she is fervently requesting that Othello forgive Cassio for fighting while on duty. The final evidence that Othello needs to believe that his wife has been unfaithful is provided when he sees Cassio with the handkerchief that Othello had given Desdemona and which she had ‘lost’ earlier in the play. Given all the evidence that Othello has, who would not question his/her partner’s faithfulness?

The union between the white woman and black man incites racism in the play and initiates Iago’s revenge plot. Iago makes the first racial reference to the relationship between Desdemona and Othello when he tells Brabanzio of the interracial couple. Iago says, “Even now, now, very now, an old black ram / Is tupping your white ewe” (1.1.88-89). Iago’s famous line presents Othello and Desdemona’s relationship as animalistic and highlights their racial differences. Iago intends to enrage Brabanzio by explaining that Othello’s bestiality threatens Desdemona’s purity and makes her beast-like as well. Brabanzio, who previously invited Othello over “oft” and loved him before he knew of his daughter’s love for the Moor, suddenly dislikes Othello and is infuriated that Desdemona would choose someone so unequally matched (1.3.128). Roderigo, who previously had no issues with Othello, suddenly unleashes racial slurs regarding the Moor when he discovers that the woman he most desires is in love with a black outsider. It would add to the fury of both Brabanzio and Roderigo that the Venetian rulers do not punish Othello for his secret marriage to the white woman. For Elizabethan audiences, who may have had a fear of miscegenation, the council’s decision regarding
the validity of the marriage carries great weight; their decision is the model for how the audience will judge the marriage (Smith 17). Perhaps when the council deems the marriage legal and believes that no foul play existed during the wooing of Desdemona, they recognize the possibility that love between persons of different races can exist within their society.

Historically, records indicate that readers have been shocked and aggravated about the relationship between a black man and a white woman regardless of the council’s approval of the union (Dizdar, Karakuzu, and Toker 135). It is especially disturbing to Elizabethan audiences that Desdemona has previously denied worthy “proposed matches / Of her own clime, complexion, and degree, / Whereto we see in all things nature tends” (3.3.234-236). Audience members likely agreed with Iago when he rants that Desdemona’s preference for the black Othello makes her foul and that her thoughts must be unnatural. Her whiteness was darkened when she engaged in a romantic relationship with a Moor.

Shakespeare verbalizes the fears of Elizabethan audience members when Iago upsets Brabanzio with images of his future grandchildren portrayed as animals because of their inherited blackness. In “Reading Othello’s Skin: Contexts and Pretexts”, Skura writes that records discuss marriage between black and white people in a casual manner and that records now being uncovered suggest a surprising number of interracial marriages during the time when Shakespeare wrote Othello (303). Londoners must have known that black and white people intermarried, but they likely hoped it would not happen to their sons or daughters. Thus, Othello and Desdemona’s relationship represents the possibility that an interracial marriage can exist and it is primarily the interference of the jealous white man who causes the marriage’s downfall.

For Elizabethan audiences, however, the fear of interracial marriages occurring within their own families threatened their own reputations among other Londoners. Wing-chi Ki explains that in a mixed marriage, it was traditionally believed that the blackness of the parent’s
sperm or seed would dominate over the white sperm or seed, both in physical appearance and in behavior (173). In Elizabethan society, mixed marriages were not desirable because they could taint the racial iconography and blacken the dominant white society (Wing-chi Ki 173). Iago continues, “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” (1.1.112-115). This greatly moves Brabanzio because the inherited blackness of his future grandchildren, nephews, and cousins will reflect back upon him. Thus, Desdemona’s relationship with Othello not only ruined her reputation, but it also ruins her father’s reputation and threatens to disturb society’s order by breeding bestial biracial offspring. Because of the increase in black Londoners and their refusal to leave despite the rising tensions, Thomas Rymer wrote that this story may be a caution that young ladies may run away with Blackamoors without their parents’ consent (107). Thus, Iago’s commentary on miscegenation mirrors the sentiments of many London audience members who feared interracial relationships might taint their family lineage.

Although the marriage ultimately fails and ends in Desdemona’s death, jealousy incited by the envious white man drives Othello’s madness and the Moor claims justice as his motive for killing his wife. Othello’s search for justice once again establishes his moral character, despite his overwhelming emotion throughout the scene. Othello’s desire to prevent the shedding of blood illustrates his love for Desdemona and his resistance to act violently (5.2.3-4). Therefore, he chooses to smother her rather than stab and permanently scar her body. As he reflects on her beauty, he almost loses the ability to kill her but he musters the nerve once again by saying aloud, “Yet she must die, else she’ll betray more men” (5.2.6). Desdemona’s infidelity may ruin the lives of other men if he does not stop it; thus, he takes justice into his own hands. Just as Aaron did not trust that justice would be served against the wrong-doers in Roman society,
Othello does not take the chance that justice will not be served in Venetian society. Both characters received criticism from white society members for their aggression. Aaron wants to protect all those whom Rome could conquer and oppress, although revenge serves as his main motive. Othello wants to protect all the men that Desdemona may seduce or deceive and he acts with love even as he kills her. While Othello smothers Desdemona, he cries out that he is cruel but merciful and that he would not have her “linger in [her] pain” (5.2.97). When Othello later realizes Desdemona’s innocence, he becomes the judge of his own conscience. He finds himself guilty and transforms into the executioner as he takes his own life. Heilman writes, “[J]ustice is served finally by the death of the judge” (191).

After the death of Othello, the reader’s attention turns to the fate of Iago, the villain responsible for the chaos in this Venetian society. The last time the reader hears from Iago occurs when he refuses to go into detail about his scheme. He says, “Demand me nothing. What you know, you know. / From this time forth I never will speak word” (5.2.309-310). These words echo the final words of Aaron in Titus Andronicus, as he declares that he will not repent for all that he has done. Both act as villains in the plays and resemble each other in many ways. Aaron and Iago both remain in the lowest class in society and seek revenge throughout the plays. Aaron, a black character, however, longs to assert himself as powerful, while Iago’s motivations seem to develop out of envy and hatred. Both antagonists show no atonement for their actions; yet, Aaron at least draws sympathy due to his enslavement and his lack of social mobility. Readers feel little compassion for Iago, even as Lodovico says that the Governor may decide whatever kind of torture to inflict upon the criminal (5.2.377-379). Iago’s jealousy, spite, and racism fuel his desire to wreak havoc; thus, his offenses would be tried as hate crimes today, evoking little sympathy, particularly from modern audiences.
Productions of *Othello* place differing amounts of emphasis on race through the portrayal of Othello. This, in turn, elicits a wide range of emotions from audience members. In its original performance by Shakespeare’s company, Othello would have been played by a white actor in blackface and audience members would have known that black actors were not permitted in the theatre company. Understanding that they were not actually watching white characters discriminate against a black man because of his skin color would have mitigated some of the tension surrounding the concept that the protagonist was a strong, intelligent Moor. However, many audience members felt unease that they could find themselves sympathizing with a black man who killed an innocent woman. Still, a commentary on the play from 1610 stated that many play-goers were moved to tears during the final scene of the play (Hall 22). Many critics felt that the play presented domestic violence as magnificent and thus, found the play repulsive.

The production of Othello has undergone many changes over the years, especially in 1833 when London audiences saw Othello played by a black actor for the first time. New Yorker Ira Aldridge, who was of African descent, took the stage as Othello and because a black man was finally playing a black man, a new link between signs and meanings formed (MacDonald 232). The experienced Shakespearean performer had been a member of the African Theatre founded in the United States in 1821. At the African Theatre, riotous audience members often threw crackers on the stage and made jokes with the actors throughout performances (MacDonald 232). Thus, it came as no shock for Aldridge when many Englanders were not thrilled with his performance as Othello. One critic said that the actor’s presence blurred the boundaries between reality and theatrical illusion (MacDonald 232). As a result, it upset many Englanders that a black man stood in such close proximity to white women and Iago’s racial jokes made made many play-goers feel uncomfortable.
London audience members were not the only ones who were not completely comfortable with the concept of a black man harming a white woman. During one performance of *Othello* in Baltimore, a soldier fired his weapon and then broke the arm of the man playing Othello because he did not want to see him hurt Desdemona (deGravelles 159). Because racial stereotypes suggested black men acted as sexual deviants, many viewers transferred their fears of sexually violent black men onto Othello. The play is also notorious for causing more outbursts from the audience than any other of Shakespeare’s plays (Roux 23). These outbursts were not always aimed at Othello’s blackness or the murdering of Desdemona. In 1825, one audience member stood up and shouted obscenities at Iago for lying throughout the play. The audience member then threatened to hurt the man after the show (deGravelles 159). This demonstrates that audience members *could* relate to a noble black character, such as Othello, regardless of the racial tensions. Perhaps it is the intense emotional response that the play elicits that makes it a popular show.

Laurence Olivier’s 1965 color film production forever changed the portrayal of Othello when his blackface performance enraged many viewers. Olivier had already received a lot of criticism when his blackface makeup rubbed off onto the white Desdemona (played by Maggie Smith) during a stage production (Arogundade). In his autobiography, Olivier described the great lengths he took to put on his black make-up, emphasizing the need to have glistening dark, dark skin with the whites of his eyes standing out. He practiced his walk and his speech, suggesting that the black character would act and sound differently than the white characters on set. Released during the Civil Rights Movement in the United States, the film’s racial content brought to light the black stereotypes and infuriated many viewers who found Olivier’s representation of Othello highly offensive. When Iago first informs Othello of his suspicions that
Desdemona has not remained faithful, the viewer watches Othello (Olivier) transform from the noble soldier to the crazed African Moor. Othello listens and hands his garments to Iago as the villain attempts to enrage the black soldier. By the end of the scene, Othello walks around the room wearing only a loose white robe and speaks to himself in fragmented spurts of rage. This transformation depicts Othello as returning to his savage state and he begins speaking in riddles and less like the Venetians. Olivier suggests that the black character is showing his blackness as he spirals into madness and acts more like the other. After the release of Olivier’s *Othello*, many directors, especially in the United States, chose to cast black actors to play the black character in order to avoid the accusations that the character mocked black people everywhere.

Sixteen years later, the BBC version of *Othello*, directed by Jonathon Miller, portrays Othello’s race more ambiguously. While the language of the film does not differ from Shakespeare’s text, Othello does not appear to be black. He has very dark, curly hair that distinguished him as the ‘other’ in comparison to the other men in the play who all wear their white hair in a similar fashion. Othello stands out because he looks different, even though he does not appear to be African or Arab. This deemphasizes the role of race in the play while still creating a sense of ‘otherness’. Later in the play, when Cassio talks about Desdemona in Othello’s arms the night they should consummate their marriage, the rest of the men chuckle (*Othello*). The idea of the black man and white woman does not appear to bother the rest of the men. This version does not make many changes to the original text, but the lack of stage directions in the text allows for the director to make his own decisions regarding the body language and actions of the characters throughout the scene. Director Jonathon Miller chose to make race more indeterminable and focused instead on Iago’s malice and Othello’s downward spiral into madness.
In 1997, Jude Kelly produced a photo-negative version of the play in which all the actors were black except Othello which highlighted the language regarding race in the play. In this version of Othello, Kelly did not change the language of the play; as a result, the film highlights the ridiculousness of racial stereotypes. This play was produced at the time when a large debate regarding color-blind casting was taking place. Color-blind casting meant selecting actors against racial expectations (Hall 28). Many critics argue that the audience will identify too much with Othello if a black actor is cast. The modern audience might sympathize with the Moor because of his inferiority to the Venetians (deGravelles 160). Other critics argue that the character of Othello is only believable when performed by a black actor. This debate continues today, although most modern Othellos are played by dark-skinned men of African descent.

Modern adaptations of the film also spark debate regarding the racial issues of Othello. Tim Blake Nelson’s 2001 film, O, is loosely based on Shakespeare’s Othello. Nelson presents Othello as a star basketball player at a prestigious preparatory school. Julia Stiles plays the innocent ‘Desi’, daughter of the school’s headmaster and Josh Hartnett plays ‘O’. The film portrays O as a jock with a large ego and during a private conversation the two lovers, O tells Desi, “I pulled you because I’m that kind of nigga” (O). When Desi jokingly uses the term ‘nigga’, O explains that she cannot say it because she is white. The film also sparks debate when O imagines seeing Mike (Cassio) in the mirror while making love to Desi and O becomes very forceful, hurting Desi and refusing to stop even when she begs him. This scene infuriates many audience members because his refusal to stop represents sexual assault or even rape and thus, perpetuates the racial stereotype that black men are sexual deviants. Desi speaks the thoughts of many audience members when she asks Emily if she would be so concerned if O was white (O). At the end of the film, O blames Hugo (Iago) for the murder of Desdemona because he has
twisted his head up. He also refers to him as a “white mother f***er”, adding to the intensity regarding race in the film (O).

Many other productions of Othello demonstrate that directors, producers, and actors interpret the play’s text and characters in various ways using historical context to understand and various themes of the play. During early stage productions of Othello, audience members may have laughed at the play because they knew Othello was actually a white man wearing black makeup and Desdemona was truly a young man wearing women’s clothing. Later, many audience members became distressed at the thought of a white woman being defiled by a black man and when a black actor played Othello, the racial slurs became even more uncomfortable for many viewers. Modern adaptations reflect current political and social beliefs. For example, O demonstrates that even though black citizens now have the same rights as white citizens, not everyone accepts integration and racial discrimination and stereotypes still exist. While some versions place more emphasize on race than others, it is undeniable that racial themes emerge in all versions of the play. In all the film versions, both Aaron and Othello are treated as inferior because of their skin color, and this oppression leads to actions that harm both the Moors and members of the dominant society. Othello, however, breaks many racial stereotypes and suggests the similarities between black and white people. Some, however, fail to acknowledge these similarities and instead portray Othello as a savage and violent while others recognize that Iago is in fact the savage. Shakespeare offers a Moor who represents the possibility that noble black men exist and can play an important role in society if racist or jealous white men do not interfere or act against them.
Part Four: The Tempest’s Caliban

When William Shakespeare wrote The Tempest in 1611, his career as a playwright was approaching its end. Possibly the last play that he wrote on his own, audience members viewed The Tempest as the author’s farewell to the theatre. New Historicists, however, often view the play as a reflection of the English’s colonization throughout Ireland. Although England conquered parts of Ireland in 1395 under the rule of Richard II, the government in the mid-1500s decided to conquer Ireland in its entirety (Takaki 893). Many Englanders saw the Irish as savage, drunkards, and lazy. The Irish stereotypes began with Gerald of Wales, who wrote discriminatory remarks about the Irish in order to justify the Norman invasion of Ireland in the 12th century. These stereotypes remained as England set out to conquer Ireland. English playgoers witnessed the stereotypes associated with the “wild Irish” in plays such as Sir John Oldcaster (1599) and Honest Whore (1605). Audience members might have then linked the savage Caliban with the Irish.

Aaron and Othello exist within a specific historical context as indicated in the stage directions and physical descriptions of their black skin. In contrast, The Tempest’s Caliban represents an “othered” character freed from these historical contexts and this supernatural and monstrous character remains more abstract and allegorical. Readers and directors, however, often assign Caliban to a specific historical period in order to give the character and the plot layered meaning. Perhaps the character’s role in the story remains unintelligible unless we graft this history or deeper representation onto him. For many directors, the ‘other’ must represent a historically othered people, such as Africans, Native Americans, and native tribes from the West Indies. Grafting new meaning onto the original play raises the question of authorization. Does Shakespeare remain the author if the grafted meaning does not correspond with his intended
meaning in the 1600s? These questions apply most to *The Tempest* due to its ambiguity regarding setting and Caliban’s physical appearance. Directors adapt the play to reflect attitudes regarding oppressive historical events that occur after Shakespeare’s lifetime and the play’s meaning shifts over time. This meaning, however, creates a more intriguing and relevant play for modern audiences.

Postcolonial critics often relate the play’s setting and theme of colonization with the English exploration in the West Indies. While private English excursions worked to colonize Ireland, many European expeditions travelled to the New World to establish colonies. Only five years before Shakespeare wrote *The Tempest*, the Virginia Company of London established the Jamestown settlement. By 1611, the first contacts with Native Americans occurred but conflicts between the tribes and the settlers had not escalated to the intense warfare that would occur in 1637 during the Pequot War (Takaki 895). While many Londoners knew of and possibly read about the excursions to the New World, the Native Americans were not yet transformed into savage or stock characters in English plays. Some English colonizers in America, however, noted that the Indians reminded them of the Irish. They referred to the Indians as savage and thus, they “projected the familiar onto the strange, their images of the Irish onto the native people of America” and the Indians were incorporated into the English definition of *savagery* (Takaki 895). The English’s conflation between the Native Americans and the Irish in their image of savage and wild characters such as Caliban may have presented a variety of marginalized peoples to audience members.

*The Tempest* offers no insight into the location or time period that would situate the plot within a historical context. In *Titus Andronicus*, readers know the plot occurs during the decline of the Roman Empire and Aaron classifies himself as a Moor. We know Othello also classifies
himself as a Moor and plays an active role in the war between Venice and the Turks in Cyprus. *The Tempest*, however, occurs outside of a place or time with which readers can immediately connect. Antonio, Prospero’s brother and the Duke of Milan, travels to Italy after attending the wedding of Alonso’s daughter in Africa. The ship wrecks onto Prospero’s Island, although readers do not know where the island exists in reality. Some critics assume the island must be a part of the Bermudas based on the pamphlets. However, Alonso’s ship would have travelled far off-route to have reached the Bermuda Islands on their return from Africa. Regardless, Shakespeare provides no sign of the location of the island in relation to real-world geography. Due to the supernatural elements in the play such as Prospero’s magic, Ariel the faerie, and Caliban’s monstrous characteristics, it is possible that the play occurs on an island outside of this world.

Readers may refer to travel literature from the 1600s to make predictions as to the setting Shakespeare had in mind when he wrote the play. In 1609, a fleet of nine ships encountered an intense storm that led to the loss of one vessel. The remaining eight arrived in Jamestown, Virginia later that year (Graff and Phelan 116). Authors William Strachey and Sylvester Jourdain documented the frightful storm and noted that it lasted twenty-four hours. One ship landed upon an island and after briefly exploring the land, the passengers determined the islands to be dangerous and dreadful; therefore, they referred to the land as “the Devil’s Islands” (123). The shipwreck might have provided Shakespeare with the idea to strand Prospero and Miranda on Caliban’s island. Other travel narratives described the natives that the explorers encountered on expeditions to the New World, Africa, and the West Indies. These narratives provide explanations for the English belief that colonization remained critical to the physical and spiritual well-being of the indigenous peoples, as we see when Prospero reminds Caliban in the
play that he brought art and language to the monster. In addition to civilizing the othered peoples, white explorers also insisted that they should bring these savages to Europe in order to place them on displays for entertainment and “educational,” purposes. In *Othello*, we see the white society commodifying the Moor and his knowledge and placing his eloquent speech on display as they marvel at the intelligence possessed by a dark skinned man. In *The Tempest*, we see Shakespeare return to this concept as the characters attempt to commodify Caliban and place him on display.

Because the play offers no real explanation of the setting, many readers attempt to graft meaning onto the play through a deep analysis of Caliban’s appearance. The character list at the beginning of the play describes Caliban as “a savage and deformed native of the island, Prospero’s slave” (Shakespeare 3064). For 17th century audience members, appearance implies much about a person’s character and virtue. For Aaron and Othello, black skin implied a black soul. By contrast, Caliban’s savagery implies a lack of intellect and a need for civilization. The reader first learns of Caliban in 1.2 when Prospero provides a brief history of Caliban’s mother, the witch Sycorax who yielded from Algiers (the capital of Algeria in Africa). Prospero reveals that when he arrived on the island he found “a freckled whelp, hag-born—not honoured with / A human shape” (1.2.285-286). This “freckled whelp” receives no voice until the middle of 1.2 when Prospero calls the slave in to fetch more wood. “There’s wood enough within,” replies Caliban obstinately to Prospero’s command (1.2.317). The audience’s first impression of Caliban forms from his dismay at having to comply with his master’s demands. His lack of voice mirrors Aaron’s lack of voice in *Titus Andronicus*, and demonstrates their oppressed statuses as slaves within the dominant society. Caliban’s words, like Aaron’s, immediately fill will violence when he finally has the ability to speak. He curses Prospero: “As wicked dew as e’er my mother
brushed / With raven’s feather from unwholesome fen / drop on you both! A southwest blow on ye / And blister you all ‘er!” (1.2.324-327). Audience members who relate Caliban’s savage appearance and role as a slave to the Irish savages or African slaves would not be surprised by this display of violence. After all, this aggressive behavior demonstrates his need for a master who can perhaps reform him and teach him civility.

Postcolonialists often interpret Caliban’s next remark as his attempt to regain his rightful power and land and to assert himself as more than a commodity. Caliban tells Prospero, “This island’s mine” (1.2.334). As Prospero admitted to Ariel previously in the act, Caliban indeed owned the island as it passed on to him when his mother died. Because Caliban could not talk and did not resemble Prospero or Miranda, they deemed him a monster—and inferior. Although they originally stroked him and loved him (as one would a pet) and taught him to speak, Prospero never embraces the idea that Caliban might be seen as intellectually human. Stefano and Trianculo regard Caliban in the same manner when they first encounter him in 2.2. They immediately refer to him as a “monster” despite the fact that Caliban speaks to them in their own language. Stefano notes that he would like to “keep him tame and get to Naples / with him” so that he can give him to the emperor (2.2.65). This illustrates their belief that regardless of the fact that Caliban can speak and does so more eloquently than they can, his appearance makes him monstrous and thus, he shall remain inferior to them. This scene immediately reminds the reader of Othello and his ability to use eloquent speech and like Othello, Caliban remains a commodity to the white men. They fail to recognize his intellect and his ability to act as more than a wheelbarrow for their firewood. Again, appearances suggest to the characters the intellectual and spiritual capabilities of a person (or person-like creature) regardless of what he/she might say.
While Prospero, Trinculo, and Stefano all comment on Caliban’s ugly appearance, not all characters refer to his looks, nor does he allow the comments to greatly affect him. Caliban accepts himself just as Othello accepted his black skin, even as others such as Iago made cruel comments. For example, the jester and the butler make comments about Caliban’s monstrous appearance as they try to make jokes at the expense of a vulnerable creature (Sharp 275). Caliban, however, ignores these remarks and focuses on the tasks at hand. Othello, too, disregards the constant references to his black skin and instead concentrates on helping in the war or sorting out his marital troubles. The racial comments or jokes about appearance cast the othered characters as inferior. Regardless of the other characters’ intentions, Caliban remains unmarred by the others’ unkind remarks. In 2.2, the jester and servant call Caliban “monster” sixteen times and also refer to him as “moon-calf” which suggests deformity (2.2.100). He remains oblivious to the continuous name-calling and cruel remarks regarding his foul smell and deformity and never stoops to the cruel characters’ level.

The ambiguity in both Caliban’s physical descriptions in the play’s character list and the commentary from others throughout the play allows painters and actors to portray the creature very differently. Sharp notes that the character’s deformity could not be too severe or he could not appear on stage (275). Miranda suggests during the play that Caliban could be a man when she refers to Ferdinand as the “third man” that she has ever seen, indicating that her father and Caliban were the first two (1.2.448-449). Miranda’s judgment, however, must be called into question due to her inexperience with and naivety regarding people and the world in general. She remains unable to place creatures into neat classifications and may mirror Londoners’ confusion as to how to treat the black people living in their city. Other characters also fail to accurately classify Caliban. Trinculo comments that Caliban smells like a fish but looks like a man struck
by a thunderbolt (2.2.24-25). Later, Trinculo refers to him as “half a fish and half a monster” (3.2.26). The only characteristic of his appearance readers know for certain is that Caliban has legs and long nails. His appearance then allows for a variety of interpretations. Alfred Kubin’s lithograph of Caliban from 1917 portrays him as a cave man. Arthur Rackham illustrated Caliban in 1909 to appear entirely mythical with webbed feet, a long tail, furry body, and a dog-like face. Many actors such as Sir Frank Benson from a 1900 production in London and Beerbohm Tree from a 1904 production in Australia portray Caliban as a human-ape hybrid. In all cases, Caliban appears to be part human and part beast. If looked at through a racial lens, these images perpetuate the stereotype that anyone who is not white must be inferior and closely related to animals. These very different interpretations of the character also demonstrate the ease with which readers and directors can ascribe new meaning to the play’s ambiguously described characters and setting.

Like Aaron and Othello, Caliban commits a heinous crime against a member of the dominant society. His attempted rape of Miranda solidifies his inferior position in the small society on the island and castes him as a slave from that point forward. In 1.2, Caliban attempts to assert his position as owner of the island and says that he loved Prospero, shared his island with him, and then in return cannot see the island and must live in a “hard rock” Prospero’s responds that he loved Caliban until he tried to violate Miranda (1.2.350-351). Caliban’s actions, like Aaron’s plot against Lavinia’s chastity, demonstrate his desire to usurp the ruler to salvage what little power he can. Caliban, who never experienced art or language before the arrival of Prospero, knows little of virginity and the social standard that young women should remain pure until they marry. Prospero knows that Miranda must remain a virgin if she wishes to assimilate into civilization in the future and thus, Caliban’s attempt to rob her of this virtue infuriates him.
Corona Sharp suggests that the attempted rape represents Caliban’s desire to claim a wife and challenge Prospero’s strength (276). Once mated, he could procreate and pass his genes on to young Calibans to populate the island and re-conquer the land. Unlike Aaron and Othello, Caliban did not understand social norms or laws that forbade him from acting based on his physical instincts. With no government or religious law to follow, Caliban followed the law of nature.

Unlike Aaron and Othello, Caliban does not inflict physical pain or violence in order to seek revenge. The text provides no indication that Caliban would not love Miranda or that the monster resorts to unnecessary violence. In fact, the most violent action audience members see on stage occurs when he suggests to Stefano and Trinculo that they steal Prospero’s books, kill him, and then make Stefano and Miranda king and queen of the island (3095). Even as Caliban plots against Prospero, he never suggests that he will act violently but instead calls upon the jester and the servant to carry out the plan for revenge. Despite Caliban’s poor lack of judgment during his offense against Miranda, other characters throughout the play raise the question as to which characters represent civility. Gonzalo comments that if he told others in Naples that he found people of the island “who though they are of monstrous shape, yet note / their manners are of more gentle-kind than of / our human generation,” no one would believe him (3.3.30-34). Caliban the monster perhaps exhibits manners more gentle than many of the characters in the play. Although he curses his oppressor who punishes him with physical torture, he never curses his new master Stefano. Instead, he obediently drinks when he is told and he assures his master that the strange sounds they hear will not hurt them. His plot against Prospero’s life provides the only means of escape for Caliban from a cruel oppressor who stripped him of his land and freedom.

Caliban breaks the stereotype that the other is unintelligent as well as violent. In 4.1, the slave urges Stefano and Trinculo to quit stealing and focus on the murder but the two drunken
fools ignore his advice. Caliban pleas, “We shall lose our time, / and all be turned to barnacles, or to apes / with foreheads villainous low” (4.1.244-246). This scene illustrates Caliban’s reasonable and well-thought out plan and judgment. Caliban also places himself in a higher social class by using inclusive language with the Italians. He says “we” and “all” to reinforce that if they do not continue with their plan, Prospero will turn them all into animals. Then Caliban will no longer act as slave because he will no longer be inferior. Interestingly, Caliban attempts to scare the two men by suggesting they might be turned in ugly apes, implying that he does not currently appear so hideous and that his social class reigns over the beasts. This scene highlights both his intelligence and his social status as superior to animals but inferior to the jester and servant, who fail to exhibit any sense of great intellect.

Like Othello, Caliban’s intelligence often matches that of members of the dominant society and shows his ability to learn and change as a dynamic character throughout the play. Othello’s language included beautiful imagery and artful rhythm. His long speeches throughout Othello surpassed those of Iago and showed his advanced language skills. Similarly, Caliban’s language demonstrates his mastery of the language Miranda taught him. His speech, especially his claim that the island belongs to him in 1.2, incorporates irony and vivid imagery. His speech equals that of Prospero and shows that he not only understands all that Miranda taught him, but he can also use the language creatively to express his emotions and imagination. Furthermore, during the play Caliban is transformed from an uneducated monstrous creature to a highly intelligent, free inhabitant of the island. Corona Sharp writes that Caliban goes through four stages of human development in consciousness wherein he first acts on animal instinct, then engages in intellectual learning and understanding, forms concepts and passes judgments, and finally expresses concern for others and makes his own decisions regarding actions (268). This
transformation into a fully conscious character reveals itself when Caliban repents in the final act of the play. Prospero offers his forgiveness for the attempted murder and Caliban’s submission to Stefano as a new master and Caliban responds that he will learn from his mistakes and he curses himself for taking Stefano “for a god” (5.1.300). This shows Caliban’s comprehension and acceptance of the laws of the civilized Italians. When all other the characters leave the island (except perhaps Ariel) at the end of the play, Caliban will make his own decisions and thus, reaches the fourth level of human development in consciousness although he remains a marginalized character and will forever be treated as an “other” unless he finds a herd, tribe, school, flock, etc. of creatures like himself.

While many critics interpret the marginalization of Caliban as a symbol of imperialism, other critics argue that Prospero’s rule on the island demonstrates a “model of the good ruler than a model of the imperialist colonizer” (Graff and Phelan 96). The debate between New Historicists and Postcolonial critics continues as both schools of criticism work to find deeper meaning within the play. Many historicists argue that the author’s beliefs regarding slavery reveal themselves through the protagonist’s words. The Postcolonialist critics often claims that Caliban’s plea for freedom mirrors the sentiments and desires of the native peoples in the New World and the West Indies who were dominated during European explorations. Ania Loomba, for example, suggests that when Prospero claimed the island as his own, he represented racial plunder and suppression of black culture. He inflicted upon the creatures of the island white social hierarchy and failed to give voice to both the black or othered culture and the women (Loomba 394). Perhaps Shakespeare was demonstrating the negative consequences of suppressing other cultures and inflicting white patriarchy onto a culture of non-white people. Historical critics, however, argue that Shakespeare, as a member of the expanding English world,
would have approved of enslavement and thus, views Caliban’s oppression as natural in the
ordering of the hierarchy throughout the play. Editors Gerard Graff and James Phelan summarize
the debate between the two literary theories (termed Traditional Professor and Postcolonialist
Professor) in *The Tempest: A Case Study in Critical Controversy*:

Traditionalist professor argues that Postcolonialist Professor and similar critics
are guilty of forcing political issues on the play in order to advance their preferred
social agenda. For Traditionalist Professor, Postcolonialist Professor’s reading is
anachronistic, attributing modern political attitudes about the evils of European
expansion and colonization to a work written centuries before such attitudes had
come into existence. For him, the reading ends up distorting the play.” (96)

The debate, then, continues; do post-colonial interpretations and productions of the play force
modern attitudes upon the 17th century play and thus, transform the play’s meaning into
something entirely different than that which Shakespeare intended? Or do historical readings of
the play too presumptuously assume that the attitude of the author matched the attitudes of
England’s majority?

The debate between the Postcolonial and the New Historical schools of theory also raises
the question of authorization and whether or not adapting Shakespeare’s plays alters a sacred or
timeless work or simply represent one interpretation. Indeed, educators deem the plays timeless
as Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet, Hamlet,* and *Macbeth* remain commonly taught works in
high school curriculums in the United States. Adaptations on film, however, have also made their
way into the classroom. *O,* the 2001 film directed by Tim Blake Nelson adapts *Othello* to a high
school scenario and is therefore often taught in English classes. Despite the film’s large emphasis
placed on race that does not explicitly appear in the original play, the film received positive
reviews. The success of Shakespeare productions directed by Julie Taymor also demonstrates the popularity of the plays regardless of the changes made to the original text.

The BBC’s straight-forward production of *The Tempest* minimizes race by portraying Caliban more as an animal that barely resembles a human. This contrasts Taymor’s more modern production in which Caliban is played by a black actor and looks very much like a human. In the BBC version, actor Warren Clark plays Caliban in what Cartmell calls a “simple, undemanding reading of the play” (79). This safe reading portrays him as a beast. The actor, covered in thick fur remains on the ground throughout most of the film and often positions himself far away from Prospero in the frame so that the physical violence in Prospero’s words cannot be acted out. This version minimizes the discussion regarding race in the play and instead emphasizes the animalistic qualities of Caliban. This greatly contrasts with Julie Taymor’s 2012 *The Tempest* in which Djimon Hounsou plays Caliban. Born in The Republic of Benin located in West Africa, Hounsou plays a dark-skinned Caliban who greatly resembles a human with the exception of several strange white sections on his scaly skin. He walks on his legs and even wears clothing (although minimal). While the play’s setting remains outside of time or space, Taymor fails to escape the post-colonial context that Caliban represents “the other” in race. During the film, Caliban impersonates a gorilla; film critic Alan Stone writes in the Boston Review, “Taymor has returned him to the status of the alien other, a primitive beast, not a human being. His only moment of human dignity is a silent face off with Prospera toward the end of the play in a scene invented by Taymor” (2011). Thus, modern audiences recognize Caliban as the stereotypical othered black person and feel more sympathy for the oppressed character than audiences in London during the play’s debut.
The portrayal of Caliban in live or filmed productions demonstrates the various meanings grafted onto the play by directors. The physical appearance of Aaron and Othello in plays and films have changed over time due to the freedom to interpret the term “Moor” in various ways. Furthermore, Postcolonialists apply deeper meaning to the plays, especially the ambiguous play *The Tempest* in order to represent marginalized peoples through Caliban. Readers and directors interpret Caliban as a symbol for African slaves, Native Americans, or the Irish. These interpretations, although upsetting to those who believe in preserving the original text and performing it as it would have appeared on the London stage in 1611, offer deeper meaning to a play with few descriptions regarding the setting and appearance of characters. Although adaptations often seem absurd (such as setting the play on a spaceship), they force viewers to look at the play in a new, creative manner. Because readers can never truly know what Shakespeare intended Caliban to symbolize, they make their own meaning out of the play and modern interpretations can help make the play relevant to the modern reader’s own life. Caliban, therefore, can represent the marginalized African slave, the mocked homosexual older man, or simply a mythical beast from a different world. Caliban represents the freedom for readers to graft deeper meaning onto the characters and setting while remaining true to Shakespeare’s original words.

**Part Five: Conclusion and Future Research**

Throughout Shakespeare’s career, he incorporated othered characters who represent the racial concerns of London audience members. In *Titus Andronicus*, Aaron the Moor fits many black stereotypes and acts as the play’s villain as he attempts to seek revenge against the
opppressive Romans. Later in Shakespeare’s career, he returns to the Moor as he depicts Othello as a noble soldier in Venice who breaks many of the same stereotypes that Aaron fit. Both Moors act out against the dominant society, but evoke sympathy from audience members due to their outcaste positions in society and the racial prejudices they endure. Aaron acts out to assert power and establish identity as a slave and Othello kills out of jealousy incited by a villainous white member of the society. In both plays, Shakespeare plays with stereotypes regarding skin color and allows the characters to both fit and break many of these stereotypes. Thus, he calls attention to the possibility that skin color does not determine someone’s ability to act out in violence or in lust.

In *The Tempest*, Shakespeare provides no historical context that aids audience members in understanding the peoples that the othered characters represent. Instead, the readers can graft on their own meaning to Caliban the monster. This demonstrates the shifting notions of civility and calls into question the classification system used in England as the country experienced an influx of black people and colonized throughout the world. Caliban, therefore, represents the “savages” throughout the globe or the oppression of those who look or act differently than the dominant culture. The interpretation of the othered characters relies primarily on the historical context in which the reader finds him/herself. As historical contexts change, the meaning grafted onto Caliban changes as well and thus, Shakespeare’s play remains a living text.

In the future, I would like to focus on the female characters in these plays and their relationships with othered characters as well as focus on their positions within society. Further research would focus on *Titus Andronicus*’ Tamora, *Othello*’s Desdemona, and *Measure for Measure*’s Isabella. These women represent female obedience within patriarchal relationships and societies. Thus, gender differences can also create othered characters, as these plays
demonstrate. Further analysis would analyze how these women behave within these societies, focusing on scenes where they perhaps challenge societal norms and the consequences of these behaviors.
Works Cited


