

# The Oriental in Shakespeare

Mahmoud F. Al-Shetawi\*

- Ph. D. in Modern Drama, University of Illinois, 1983.  
Assistant Professor, English Department. Qatar University.

## Abstract

This paper examines Shakespeare's treatment of the Orient in his drama, highlighting the fact that he depicts the oriental as "other" and the Orient as an exotic place at variance with the Western world. The paper tackles Shakespeare's depiction of the oriental in *The Merchant of Venice* and *Othello*, with minor attention to parallels in *Titus Andronicus* and *Antony and Cleopatra*. Three principal representatives of the Orient, emerge in these works: the Jew, the Moor (or Arab), and the Turk. Shakespeare depicts these characters individually, endowing each of them with traits and physical features appropriate to their respective ethnic and geographic origin. Thus, the Jew is characteristically drawn as cunning, vindictive and greedy; the Moor as foolish, rash and instinctively savage; and the Turk as barbarous, cruel and menacing. However, they are collectively portrayed as outsiders whose values and character conflict with Renaissance thinking and temperament. Eventually, these aliens are rejected, or at best forced to assimilate into the dominant culture they have invaded. For example, Shylock is forced to cancel his own identity as a Jew; the Arab Prince of Morocco is humiliated and expelled; Othello is destroyed.

Orientalists have investigated different periods of English literature, documenting and analyzing how the Orient, its peoples and cultures have been processed and conceived in English literature throughout the ages. The Renaissance period has also been scrutinized from this perspective in an attempt to explore its oriental lore. A body of critical discourse dealing with aspects of Elizabethan orientalism has been produced in the context of the tension between the Ottomans and the West, the fear of Islam and the bitter memories of the medieval Crusades.<sup>1</sup> Drawing on the varied treatment of the Orient in Western thought (especially those lands which today include the peoples and countries of the Middle East), this study attempts to highlight Shakespeare's depiction of orientals in his drama along the lines of thinking laid down in Edward W. Said's *Orientalism* (1978). In this sense, Shakespeare depicts the oriental as "Other" and portrays the Orient as an exotic place completely at variance with the West.

In a revealing study, Dennis Kennedy explores aspects of Shakespearean Orientalism, explaining how Shakespeare has recently been appropriated by non-English speaking countries, especially Japan and China, and comments on the innovative treatment of Shakespeare by foreign theatrical companies.<sup>2</sup> By raising the question of the acculturation of Shakespeare in foreign lands, Kennedy leads one to ask: how does Shakespeare depict the oriental/alien in his drama and poetry? In other words, this redefinition of Shakespeare in various intercultural contexts tempts one to examine the way Shakespeare treats Oriental people and culture in his works. More than any other dramatist of his time, Shakespeare uses Oriental material in his plays and poetry (e.g. "The Phoenix and Turtle"): places and geographical landmarks (e.g. Egypt, Tunis, Tripoli, Aleppo, Tyre, the Nile, Arabia); the flora and fauna of the Levant (e.g. Arabian trees, Arabian horses; the Arabian bird); Oriental people of different cultural and ethnic backgrounds (e.g. Arabs, Moors, Africans, Blacks, Turks, Indians, Jews, Moslems and so forth); and Eastern cultures, politics and regional conflicts, especially those involving Turks and Christians, and Turks and others, for example, Persians.

This paper deals with Shakespeare's treatment of the Orient in *The Merchant of Venice* and *Othello*, with minor attention to parallels in *Titus Andronicus* and *Antony and Cleopatra*. Three principal representatives of the Orient emerge in these works: the Jew, the Moor, and the Turk. Though Shakespeare has lumped these orientals under the term "Other", in fact, he depicts each of these characters individually, endowing them with traits and physical features appropriate to their respective ethnic and geographic origin. Thus, the Jew is characteristically drawn as cunning, vindictive and greedy; the

Moor as foolish, rash and instinctively savage, and the Turk as barbarous, cruel and menacing. However, they are collectively portrayed as outsiders whose values and character conflict with Renaissance values, thinking and temperament. Eventually, these aliens are rejected, or at best forced to assimilate into the dominant culture they have invaded. For example, Shylock is forced to annihilate his own identity as a Jew; the Arab Prince of Morocco is humiliated and expelled, and Othello is destroyed.<sup>3</sup>

The causes of Elizabethan prejudice against the Oriental are too many to be adequately summarized in a short essay, and perhaps need a full-fledged study to treat them adequately. However, one may say in passing that the portrayal of the Jew in a hateful manner is rooted in the legacy of Judaeo-Christian relations throughout history. The misrepresentation of the Turk is both political and religious, emanating from the conflict between Islam and Christianity over the years. The Ottoman Empire posed a real threat in the days of Shakespeare. Paul A. Cantor remarks that "Of all Shakespeare's mature tragedies, it [*Othello*] comes the closest to being set in his own time (the historical Turkish assault on Cyprus took place in 1570)".<sup>4</sup> As to the Moors, the prejudice against them was both ethnic and cultural: they were considered noxious to the health and well-being of the community, and royal decrees were often issued ordering their deportation from the country. For example, in 1601, the Queen expressed her anxiety about the increasing presence of "neggars and blackmoors" in London and issued an edict to transport them outside England.<sup>5</sup> The Jews were not in any better position; as early as 1290, royal decrees were in force forbidding them to live in England.

Among Shakespeare's plays, *The Merchant of Venice* and *Othello* in particular share affinities in the treatment of orientals. It is hard to read *The Merchant of Venice* without having *Othello* in mind, and vice versa. For instance, Venice assumes the same thematic significance in both plays. It is presented as a thriving center of commerce frequently visited by foreigners who reside in it and do business with its people, taking advantage of its cosmopolitan way of life. Shylock and Othello are cases in point; Shylock operates successfully as a money-lender (a banker in the modern sense of the word) being certain that, despite racial prejudice, he will be securely protected by the law. The Duke realizes Shylock's vengeful motives, but it is not in his capacity to break the laws of the city. Antonio understands that:

The duke cannot deny the course of law:  
For the commodity that strangers have  
With us in Venice, if it be denied,  
Will much impeach the justice of the State,  
Since that the trade and profit of the city  
Consisteth of all nations.<sup>6</sup>

Similarly, Othello is another stranger who has been living in Venice for some time (how long, we don't know). He enjoys his sojourn in the city, socializes with its aristocracy and aspires to marry the daughter of a senator. He is aware of the opposition to which this marriage will give rise; but he believes that his utility to the state will override any racial prejudice against him: "My services, which I have done the signiory, / Shall out-tongue his complaints".<sup>7</sup> And he proves to be right; having recognized the expediency of Othello's services to counter the Turkish fleet encroaching against Cyprus, the Duke belittles Brabantio's grievances, condoling the old man in these words: "If virtue no delighted beauty lack, / Your son-in-law is far fair more than black". (I.iii.290) At once the Duke realizes the importance of Othello in the military campaign, relegating Brabantio's complaint to a domestic problem of no consequence. The Duke plays almost the same role in both plays – he presides over the welfare of the community (he could be the same man); and in each play he cannot frighten these much-needed foreigners because of the valuable services they render the state.

Leslie Fiedler discusses Shylock and Othello as strangers in *The Merchant of Venice* and *Othello*, respectively, and discerns some striking resemblances between the two plays. For example, Venice is presented as "a place in which money is power and men rise in the world by wiving it wealthily".<sup>8</sup> Othello marries the daughter of a rich senator, and though money could not be his motive, it is still on the mind of his Venetian detractors. Roderigo says, "What a full fortune does the thicklips owe, / If he can carry't thus!" (I.i.65-66). Iago carries this thought a bit further when he shouts out in the streets,

Awake! what ho, Brabantio/ thieves, thieves, thieves~  
Look to your house, your daughter, and your bags.  
Thieves, Thieves! " (I.i. 78-81)

Iago's outcry is thematically reminiscent of Shylock's clamor after discovering the elopement of his daughter: "Justice, the law, my ducats, and my daughter! / A sealed bag, two sealed bags of ducats" (II.viii. 17-18).

*Othello* was written right after *Hamlet*, and Othello probably shares with that morose northern prince his tragic stature and nobility of spirit.<sup>9</sup> However, in terms of temperament, they are widely different: Hamlet is characteristically contemplative and inquisitive; Othello is instinctive and rash. *Othello* is akin to *The Merchant of Venice* more than to *Hamlet*; Shakespeare must have had the same cast of mind (though not the same mood) where he conceived his problematic comedy some years before. The playwright's choice of foreign characters and his depiction of the oriental theme in both plays are obvious. Dramatically, Shakespeare could have conceived of *The Merchant of Venice* as a tragedy but he ended up writing a comedy. From the beginning and through

the fourth act (the trial scene), the play follows a painful course. The treatment of the Jew is so harsh that the comedy becomes crude and hurting. At the same time, Shylock becomes adamant towards his adversary, Antonio, and determines to extort a pound of flesh from his living body. The game of torture reaches its climax in the trial scene in which the Jew is whetting his knife on the sole of his shoes, and the principals are desperate but helpless. Indeed as several scholars have indicated, *The Merchant of Venice* is difficult to read as a comedy, and Shakespeare probably added the fifth act to mitigate the bleak atmosphere of the play which ends happily with festivities celebrating the wedding of lovers.

On the other hand, *Othello* belongs to the same dejected mood that produced Shakespeare's somber plays. A scrutiny of the play indicates that the playwright could have conceived of the theme of miscegenation comically, but then he ended up writing a tragedy on an issue which is commonly treated as domestic comedy. As we go through *Othello*, we realize the absurdity of the issue at hand, and since nobody is initially hurt in the play (even the Turkish threat is deflected by the weather), things will be just fine. Consequently, celebrations take place in Cyprus on the arrival of the Moor and his bride. Iago's calumnies against the Moor, his pranks with Desdemona and behavior in general are quite comic. For example, the way he outsmarts the dunce Roderigo is very funny. Perhaps the most farcical aspect of the play is the handkerchief scene which is incongruously drawn up in the mode of absurdist drama (dark comedy).

Moreover, as Cantor suggests, the theme of cuckoldry, a central issue in the play, has always been treated in domestic comedies:

Othello seems to have stepped right out of the pages of some great martial epic, yet what he has stepped into is the world of Italian bedroom comedy. It may seem almost blasphemous to speak of comedy and Othello in the same breath, yet as many critics since Thomas Rymer have noted, the subject matter of *Othello* – a man deceived into thinking he has been cuckolded – would normally provide the basis for comedy rather than tragedy. Indeed, by conventional standards, Othello might appear laughable by the end of the play. It is a measure of his heroic stature that he is able to maintain his dignity in circumstances that would make an ordinary man look ridiculous. But it is only by murdering Desdemona and then killing himself that Othello can avoid becoming the laughing stock of Venice. That is to say, it is only by turning his story into a tragedy that Othello can avoid ending up in a comedy.<sup>10</sup>

Finally, Shakespeare draws materials for *The Merchant of Venice* and *Othello* from Ser Giovanni's *Il Pecorone* and Giraldo Cinthio's *Hecatommithi*, respectively. Whether the Bard read his Italian sources in the original, or in a French translation is of little significance to this inquiry. What matters is the fact that the stories Shakespeare borrows from his sources originally came from the East. The story of the pound of flesh was originally an eastern folk tale which took on literary form in the twelfth century. Perhaps the story of an eastern man who murdered his wife out of suspicion that she betrayed him came also from the East.

*The Merchant of Venice* is arguably Shakespeare's most controversial comedy because it treats the Jewish theme and causes the question of antisemitism to be raised. The play has divided critics into opposing camps regarding the playwright's treatment of the Jew.<sup>11</sup> In *The Merchant of Venice*, as in other Elizabethan plays featuring Jews (e.g. *Jew of Malta*), Jews have been dramatically conceived of as eastern aliens, rather like Moors and Turks. This may correspond to feelings of xenophobia in the Elizabethan audience. In this sense, *The Merchant of Venice* is Shakespeare's most representative play in terms of treating the Oriental theme; the playwright presents in one play two Oriental types commonly used on the London stage, namely Jews and Moors. Shylock is depicted as an Oriental personage at odds with his host society, which is predominantly Christian and white. Shylock's 'otherness' is stressed by various means such as his costume and behavior. Shylock is described as wearing Eastern gaberdine, denoting his Jewishness. He tells Antonio: "You call me misbeliever, cut-throat dog,/And spet upon my Jewish gaberdine". (I.iii.106-107)

John Gross claims that the Elizabethan Shylock is delineated as a Venetian Jew of German origin, and for that matter, he speaks without an accent.<sup>12</sup> However, Gross might have missed the point. First, Shylock must have been presented on the stage as a stranger, hence with a thick accent to denote his 'otherness'. Many times in the play, the Venetians call him stranger, alien, and Shylock confirms his foreignness in different situations. Second, Shylock is isolated from his community by his dress which draws the attention of the audience to his oriental origin. For example, when Shylock refers to his "Jewish gaberdine", the audience must have identified him with pictures of Jews that appeared in Elizabethan pictorial books. As Luborsky illustrates, Jews were often drawn as ugly figures wearing costumes of the Near East (Levantine) and in positions associating them with the poisoning of wells, the devil and the crucifixion of Christ.<sup>13</sup>

Moreover, Shylock is suggestively depicted in the play as having dark skin, that is, the color of near Eastern people. Shylock is fully aware of the difference

between himself and 'native' Venetians in terms of color. For instance, in proposing his 'merry' bond, Shylock tells Antonio, "... let the forfeit/Be nominated for an equal pound/Of your *fair* flesh". (I.iii. 146-7) In another situation, Shylock's color is suggested to be dark:

Shylock : I say my daughter is my flesh and my blood.

Salerio : There is more difference between thy flesh and hers,  
than between *jet* and ivory. (III.i.34-36)

Clearly "fair" and "jet" should suggest Shylock's darker, Oriental hue. It must be emphasized here that Shylock is not isolated because of his color, as is the case of the Prince of Morocco, and of Othello. These two remarks about Shylock's skin color should be taken in the context of the Elizabethans' aversion to dark skins.<sup>14</sup> This point gains more significance in the play when the Prince of Morocco realizes that his complexion is objectionable. At the end of the play, the clown is jestingly taken to task for getting a black Moor pregnant.

Shakespeare confirms Shylock's Jewishness in more than one way. Shylock is called 'Jew' many times. In fact, he is addressed by his name only thirteen times, especially when he is flattered and thereby encouraged to forgive Antonio. But he is called 'Jew' more than sixty times. This would suggest that Shakespeare uses Shylock as a stereotype for all Jews. Therefore, the ideas and traits he as a person manifests are connotatively Jewish, Shakespeare never calls Antonio, 'the Christian', but he associates Shylock with his "tribe". Besides, *The Merchant of Venice* has the greatest number of allusion to the Bible of all Shakespeare's canon, and this shows the playwright's thorough knowledge of the Holy Book. The names Shylock, Tubal, Daniel, Leah, Ruth, Jacob, Laban, and Nazareth are associated with the Jewish race and the diaspora: "For sufrance is the badge of all our tribe". (I.iii.105) It should be pointed out that knowledge about the Levant was available to the Elizabethans through different venues, such as the Bible and travel literature, both useful for information and inspiration about the Near East in particular.<sup>15</sup>

Moreover, Shylock persistently asserts his ethnicity. He insists all the time on preserving his identity as a Jew in terms of social intercourse with his host society. For example, he comments on Bassanio's inviting him to have dinner with them (Christians) as follows: "I will by with you, sell with you, talk with you, walk with you, and so following: but I will not eat with you, drink with you, nor pray with you". (I.iii.30-34) Note that homogeneity is fully attained in any society when people of diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds live together and communicate with each other on a communal level. Social and religious occasions are important to bring people together and form a cohesive community. Clearly Shylock refuses to live as a social being in harmony with



his society—he determines his relation with the Christian community by business. Perhaps he does so because he has been mistreated time and again by his Christian neighbors, for no other reason than that he is a Jew. Everywhere in the play, Shylock is hooted down as an alien who should give up his racial identity (as Jessica has already done), or else perish.

Ironically, the Venetians accept Shylock as a money-lender, for there he contributes to the economic stability of the city; at the same time, they reject him as a Jew, associating him with usury.<sup>16</sup> This is the same society that accepts Othello to lead its army and fight its wars against the Turks, but condemns him because he marries Desdemona. In the case of Shylock, the Christians are shown to be hypocritical when it comes to usury which they condemn, and for which they attack the Jew, though they seek his assistance from time to time. Even Antonio, Shylock's arch-enemy, asks Shylock for a loan of money to help Bassanio get married to Portia. Antonio never hesitates to insult Shylock because he charges interest. ("usance") Yet he tacitly admits how important Shylock is to the financial welfare of the community. Then beneath the veneer of religious/social hypocrisy, money-lending is condoned. What bothers Antonio and his fellow Christians is the fact that the money-lender is a Jew and stranger. We notice that Shylock is often called "wealthy Jew" and "stranger" in the play. Where Shylock comes from and how he makes his fortune is not clear in the play. Shakespeare does not bother to give his audience a curriculum vitae of his most renowned (or notorious) aliens, Shylock and Othello. Thus the Bard incurred much of the criticism that has been accumulating on *The Merchant of Venice* and *Othello*, especially in the area of racial discrimination.

In Elizabethan drama, aliens are given epithets that make them feasible targets of abuse. The oriental is depicted as a non-human who is ferocious. For example, Shylock is called dog, and sometimes wolf, suggesting his greediness and heartlessness. Throughout the play, Shylock is addressed as "the Jew dog" (II.viii.14); "most impenetrable cur" (III.viii.18); "inexcrable dog" (IV.i.128); and later Gratiano attacks him in these words:

thy currish spirit  
Govern'd a wolf, who hang'd for human slaughter;  
for thy desires  
Are wolvis, bloody, starv'd and ravenous.  
(IV.i.133-138)

Shylock reminds Antonio that "many a time and oft/In the Rialto you have rated me/About my moneys and usances./.. You called me dog:" (I.iii.101-125) These examples and others suggest that cruelty is regarded as an innate characteristic of the Jew. Shylock's obduracy is fully exposed in the trial scene

in which he refuses to bend to the voice of mercy, saying "My deeds upon my head! I crave the law/The penalty and forfeit of my bond" (IV.i. 204-5). Shylock is also given these epithets: devil, alien, barbarous, other, harsh, all to the effect of creating a vicious picture of the Jew.<sup>17</sup> Shakespeare transfers these same epithets to the other oriental characters in his drama, namely the Moor and the Turk.

The other important Oriental character in *The Merchant of Venice* is the Prince of Morocco, who is derided and humiliated before he exits. However, though Shylock and the Prince of Morocco have been mistreated as aliens, Shakespeare's attitude towards each of them is not the same. Though Shylock refers to his 'tribe', 'nation', signifying his foreignness as he stands aloof in Venetian society, yet he remains a citizen of Venice who has no other home to turn to. Shakespeare is probably suggesting that the Jew should be assimilated into his host society. The Prince of Morocco, however, is a different case. He is distinguished from the other Moors in Shakespeare's canon in the sense that his native land is given – Morocco, that is, he has come from the Barbary States in North Africa. In other words, the Prince of Morocco is instantly recognized as an Arab, and Shakespeare has endowed him with traits that are commonly ascribed to Arabs in terms of physical appearance, details of costume and cultural mannerism.

The Prince of Morocco, who is also used as a type for his race, appears briefly in the play (II.i; and ii. vii). But despite his short debut on the stage, he exerts strong imprint on the imagination of the audience. Shakespeare sets him in sharp contrast to Portia's foreign suitors, who are all white. From the way the Prince of Morocco is portrayed in the play, it appears that the playwright modelled him after a Moor known to the London audience at the time. Commenting on the genesis of *Othello*, Norman Sanders suggests that Shakespeare probably had in mind the Moroccan ambassador to the court of Queen Elizabeth who visited London between August 1600 and February of the following year, and whose appearance with his entourage caused a sensation in the City. Indeed, contemporary descriptions of the Moroccan envoy, whose name is Abd-el-Quhed Messoud, fit the Prince of Morocco. Sanders writes: "During their stay, their dress, customs and behavior caused a scandal which must have caught the attention of all Londoners; and there is still extant the official portrait of the ambassador himself, showing a bearded, hawk-faced, cunning Arab complete with turban, flowing robes, and elaborately ornamented scimitar."<sup>18</sup>

As soon as the Prince of Morocco enters, the audience immediately observe his "otherness" in skin color and costume. The text describes the Prince of Morocco as "tawny"; he is dressed all in "white". Critics have

speculated about what exactly Shakespeare means by "tawny": does it mean dark (olive type), or black (coal-black), or perhaps a mulatto?<sup>19</sup> In my judgment, the Prince of Morocco is not black but dark-skinned, the color of the Berbers and Arabs who inhabit North Africa. Aaron of *Titus Andronicus* (whose name is suggestively Jewish) is definitely black of the "negroid" type, but Othello's color is disputable. The Prince of Morocco is also defined in terms of his dress. He is probably wearing flowing white costumes traditionally worn by Arabs. In some stage productions of *The Merchant of Venice*, the Prince of Morocco is cast as a native Arab. For instance, in an innovative performance of the play mounted in Brazil in 1993, the Prince of Morocco is costumed as an Arab: "He pranced around in turban and white Arab robes – all quite appropriate, except that he also wore red Turkish shoes, which made him look ridiculous."<sup>20</sup>

The Prince of Morocco is also contrasted with the white lady he seeks to marry. However, he is unlike Othello who does not realize his "blackness" at the beginning, and when he does so later in the play, he becomes disgusted by his inferiority, and therefore kills himself.<sup>21</sup> The Prince of Morocco is aware of his racial difference right from the beginning. He expresses his anxiety about his complexion, fearing that Portia will reject him because of his dark skin. He sounds apologetic about the color of his skin: "Mislike me not for my complexion" (II.i.1), which, he says, is the making of the climate in his native land.

The Prince of Morocco is right to fear that Portia (and Shakespeare's audience) will misjudge him because of his race. Portia does not like welcoming him to her court. When she is told of the arrival of the Arab suitor, her very words smack of racism: "... if he have the condition of a saint and the complexion of a devil, I had rather he should shrive me than wive me" (I.ii.120-5). She clearly associates his color with the devil. Othello will also be associated with the devil because he is black (or dark). And when the Prince finally leaves the scene, Portia's comment is racist: "A gentle riddance, – draw the curtains, go – / Let all of his complexion choose me so" (II.vii.78-79).

A scrutiny of Morocco's discourse and the manner in which he presents himself reveals Elizabethan misconceptions about the Moor (Arab) in particular and the oriental in general. The Prince is portrayed as a braggart, sententiously using overblown rhetoric to win the lady of his desire, Portia. Certainly, in the eyes of an Elizabethan audience, Morocco must have cut a foolish figure. In the first place, his quest is rejected outright as his oriental guise is dramatically ridiculed. He appears in flowing white robes to woo a white woman, and he looks at her as a grand prize worthy to be possessed and perhaps added to his harem. What he seeks to attain is miscegenation, which is something horrific to Elizabethans. *Othello* and *Titus Andronicus* are cases in point. The Prince

boasts that the virgins of his native land adore him for his complexion, and by way of convincing Portia to accept him, he brags about his wartime exploits (like Othello), citing to his credit that he "slew" the Sophy of Persia. And then foolishly, like Don Quixote, the Prince brandishes his sword, swearing that he is willing to risk his life just to win her hand.

He does not understand that she is ruled by the will of her deceased father, which means she is not free to choose a husband. Therefore, the Prince has to "hazard" his fortune in the lottery room. There, the Prince proves to be misguided, lacking wisdom; he is easily deceived by the appearance of the golden box. The Prince of Morocco shares one trait with Othello, that is credulity and lack of judgment. Exactly as Othello misjudges Desdemona on the basis of a superficial "ocular proof", Morocco chooses the golden casket, wrongly associating it with the precious person of Portia and his personal worth. Hence his prize is commensurate with his foolishness – a death's head and the scroll that teaches him, "All that glisters is not gold" (II.vii.65).

Alone among the foreign suitors who are used comically in the play, the Prince of Morocco is treated racially. In the exchange between Portia and Nerissa (I.ii.37-125), the suitors are comically reviewed, except Bassanio, who is described as a scholar and soldier, attributes deemed complementary graces in the Elizabethan courtier.<sup>22</sup> The European suitors of Portia are ridiculed for having certain eccentricities. The Prince of Morocco is rejected on racial grounds.

Moreover, Morocco's bravery and self-importance as a great war hero could be just big talk. In fact, his heroic past is debunked by being dramatically juxtaposed with his present foolish behavior and lack of wisdom. Othello is also called valiant, but Shakespeare deflates him when, forced to deal with domestic life, he proves to be wanting in reason. Othello has not engaged in any real battle to test his valor and if we were to accept Iago's opinion of him as a soldier, Othello is, "Horribly stuffed with epithets of war" (I.i.14). In other words, the Prince of Morocco and Othello are depicted as credulous and "stuffed" with military titles. However, Shakespeare handles them differently: the Prince is presented as a comic figure, subscribing to the comic mode of the play; Othello is depicted as a tragic hero in keeping with the spirit of the tragedy.

Shakespeare fully develops the moorish theme in *Othello*<sup>23</sup> which perhaps suggests what would have happened had the Prince of Morocco married Portia. Because *The Merchant of Venice* is a comedy, it is appropriate that the Prince of Morocco should not succeed in his endeavors to marry the white lady. However, in *Othello*, Shakespeare reverses the situation: the Moor marries the woman his heart desires. But the play argues that miscegenation should not have happened, and the culture gap between the North and the South will remain unbridged because of racial barriers. In his wooing speech to Portia, the Prince of Morocco refers to the

North/South temperamental disparity, though he does so to claim that he loves Portia as much as anyone from Portia's North (cold climate). *Othello* also proves that the North and South are incompatible, for the same reasons as those for which the Prince of Morocco has been apprehensive.

Racism is at the heart of *The Merchant of Venice* and *Othello*; the two plays have been widely dealt with from this perspective. *Othello* has drawn a large body of criticism dealing with the question of race and the color of Othello in the context of the Elizabethans' attitude towards people of different complexions.<sup>24</sup> In fact, Shakespeare is ambivalent about the true color of Othello: is he "tawny", that is, olive/dark-skinned, the very color of most Arabs; or, is he an African, having negroid features such as kinky hair, coal-black face?

Shakespeare's treatment of the Moor in *Othello* is also controversial: is Othello noble and tragic like Hamlet; or, is he a villain (he is called villain, devil)? It seems that Othello is a mixture of both; the dramatist has endowed the Moor (who is commonly represented on the Elizabethan stage as a villain) with tragic attributes. Elizabethan drama deals with two kinds of Moors: villains and non-villains. Aaron is a villain, whereas the Prince of Morocco is not. Othello would have been compared in the Elizabethan mind with the Prince of Morocco who is depicted as a foolish braggart, while Aaron is delineated as a villain. In other words, Othello amalgamates nobility and savagery (i.e. the noble savage), standing on the border-line between civilization (i.e. Venice) and barbarity (i.e. Turkey), with Cyprus as a buffer zone symbolically separating these two polar worlds from each other.<sup>25</sup>

Othello is depicted as an Arab from the Barbary States (probably Mauritania); in respect of origin, therefore, he is akin to the Prince of Morocco. It should be noted that the word "Moor" includes Arabs, Africans, and others and the Elizabethans used it interchangeably to mean one or the other. In subsequent stage productions of the play, Othello has been presented as an African, that is, a "nigger", though occasionally he has also been cast as an Arab. Norman Sanders believes that Othello should be an Arab because all racial epithets given to him refer to the Arab race: "For the modern reader, all of these indications of colour and race would almost certainly point to a Negro: but for the seventeenth-century Londoner they could apply equally well to an Arab."<sup>26</sup>

In other words, Othello does not necessarily have "negroid" features, like Aaron, for example. He is dealt with as a stereotype, hence endowed with traits horrific to the Elizabethans. So when he is called "devil", "ram", "barbary horse" and "thicklips", one should consequently not take these epithets literally; they are used metaphorically to "blacken" the man in the Elizabethan

eye. Shakespeare seems to have intended Othello to look much like the Prince of Morocco, who nowhere in the play is characterised as black; but both the Prince of Morocco and Portia express anxiety about his skin color though for different reasons. One should imagine Othello being shouted at by Elizabethan audiences, following the example of Iago and Roderigo.

Some critical attention has been devoted to considering the lexical meaning of the word "Othello" in an attempt to trace Shakespeare's other "unseen" sources of the play. Joel Fineman argues that the name Othello is etymologically related to the Greek verb *ethelo*, which means wish, want, will, desire. Hence, *Othello* is the tragedy of desire.<sup>27</sup> Though Fineman's proposition is carefully discussed, it is still limited to Western culture and falls short of locating the tragedy in the context of its oriental theme. Since the play deals with an aspect of orientalism, it is necessary to trace the name of the hero, and perhaps the story of the play in eastern folklore.

Khalil Mutran, a celebrated Arab poet known for his translations of Shakespeare, translated the play into Arabic in 1912. In his preface to the translation, Mutran explains that Othello must be an Arab whose name is probably derived from the Arabic name, "Utail". When transliterated into a European language, the Arabic name sounds like "Otello". Mutran's argument is accepted among Arab critics, and his rendering of *Othello* as '*Utail* has been subsequently used in every translation of the play.<sup>28</sup> In fact, right from the beginning, Othello has been conceived of as an Arab hero; in the early renditions of the play, Othello is called al-Qa'id al-Maghrabi (the Moroccan Commander).

Though Mutran's views sound far-fetched, one still may speculate that the story of an eastern man who jealously killed his wife on the suspicion that she betrayed him with another man could have entered medieval Latin literary traditions from the East. In this sense, tragic events in the life of the Arab poet, Dik al-Jin from Homs (Syria) and his wife Ward (Rose) are analogous to some details in the story of Othello. Dik al-Jin killed his wife because of jealousy, believing that she had betrayed him with another man.<sup>29</sup> Later, he regretted his rash action, after realizing that the calumny against his wife was the work of a slanderer. He felt so sad that he spent the rest of his life commemorating his sorrow over the loss of his wife in heart-broken verses.

Though it cannot be proved that Shakespeare borrowed his materials for *Othello* from any Arabic source, one may suggest that the tragic story of these unlucky Arab couples could have been prototypes in Shakespeare's Italian sources for the play. Chew indicates that European travellers and merchants who frequently visited the Levant and other oriental places brought back with them exotic tales to entertain an audience at home.<sup>30</sup> Therefore, Othello's

fantastical narratives of adventures and the strange happenings he encountered in his early life which win him the sympathy of Desdemona and eventually her love (I.iii.128-170) could be the kind of yarn that used to be told in taverns by story-tellers and travellers.

*Othello* abounds with allusions to the Arab world. For example, the handkerchief has been viewed as an emblem in Arabic culture. The handkerchief assumes thematic significance in the play because it is used as an "ocular proof" of Desdemona's adultery. It has been "fetishized by Othello as a token of Desdemona's love and fidelity, and loved by her for this reason."<sup>31</sup> In other words, the handkerchief is a fetish which is given as a gift of love, but used later as a tangible evidence of adultery. Interestingly enough the handkerchief is closely related to Arabic folk culture. In some parts of the Arab world, especially amongst rural peasants and bedouins, it is still common practice to give one's beloved a small embroidered napkin as a token of love and loyalty. This piece of cloth (sometimes a scarf) is often perfumed and cherished by the beloved as a remembrance keepsake.

Elsewhere in Shakespeare, the handkerchief is chiefly associated with Egypt, a country that was associated in the mind of Shakespeare and his audience, with magic and witchcraft. For instance, Shakespeare draws up an exotic picture of Egypt in *Antony and Cleopatra* in which the Egyptian Queen is depicted as a sorceress using magic to seduce Antony and enthrall him to her lust. Othello tells Desdemona about the magical power of the handkerchief relating it to Egypt as follows:

... that handkerchief  
Did an Egyptian to my mother give,  
She was a charmer,....  
(III.iv.52-73)

In addition, Othello is accused of using witchcraft to seduce Desdemona and enthrall her mind (I.iii.94-105). This is the opinion of her father and Othello's detractors; they refuse to believe that Desdemona could have accepted Othello as a husband in her right mind; and therefore, they argue, she must have been subjected to Othello's black magic.

The handkerchief is also associated with oriental/African rituals of virginity and marital customs. Using Leo Africanus' *Historie of Africa* (1526) as a frame of reference, Arthur L. Little Jr. sees the handkerchief as a symbol of the marital bed and the "unseen" sexual scene between Othello and Desdemona. Leo Africanus relates certain exotic African customs pertaining to wedding rituals, especially the deflowering of the bride. An old woman usually stands at the door of the bridal chamber, waiting for the bridegroom to consummate the marital

union with his wife. Having done so, he hands her a napkin stained with vaginal blood which she carries around before the wedding guests as a testimony that the bride has been deflowered, and that she has lived a life of chastity.<sup>32</sup> It should be remarked in passing that this marital custom is still common in some parts of the Arab world, especially in remote rural areas and backward villages. The presence of the handkerchief in *Othello*, especially used as a token of love and betrayal, gears the minds of the audience to conceiving of the East as an exotic place at odds with the norms of the civilized world of Venice.

Having established Othello as oriental, Shakespeare endows him with traits that are stereotypically associated with the Orient, "namely the practice of witchcraft, lustfulness, cruelty and credulity", as Hawamdeh has explained.<sup>33</sup> It suffices here to mention that Othello is characteristically depicted as a fool, lacking domestic experience and knowledge of the ways of the world. He realizes his credulity only too late: "O fool, fool, fool!" (V.ii.324). Throughout the play, he is portrayed as naive, an ass easily led by the nose, as Iago calls him. He is also conceived of as a lustful animal. (i.e. a ram, steed) and a beast lacking wisdom. Driven by sexual jealousy, he kills his wife believing that she has betrayed him with another man. Therefore, Othello is shown to be incompatible with Venetian society on a cultural level. Cantor says that "*Othello* is the story of a man who has wandered, and comes to realize that he has wandered, out of his native element and into an unfamiliar and confusing territory."<sup>34</sup> Indeed Othello feels vulnerable in his foreign setting despite his attempt to integrate into it, and he does not understand the disposition of its people. Therefore, he blunders, and gives his arch-enemy, Iago, a fatal opportunity to fall on him.

The large corpus of Elizabethan drama dealing with the Turkish theme indicates that Elizabethan audiences were greatly concerned about Islam and the Ottoman Empire as a living threat to the security of Europe and Christianity at large. Byron P. Smith remarks that "During the Renaissance the attitude toward the Muslims varied with a number of factors. In the early period, fear of the Turks and anxiety over their aggressions caused a hostile attitude to be maintained, and the Turk was looked upon as a monster of iniquity".<sup>35</sup> Marlowe's tragedy *Tamburlaine* best exemplifies the hatred and ill will Elizabethans bore towards the Turks and Moslems alike. To see Bajazet, the Sultan of Turkey, broken and humiliated by the Tartar was a sight most wholesome to the eyes of Elizabethan theater-goers.<sup>36</sup> In Marlowe's *Jew of Malta*, the Jew and the Turk are brought together and presented as enemies of Christianity. Marlowe depicts the cruelty of both Jew and Turk and characterizes them as excessively violent. They are finally defeated and the Christian world is saved from their evil machinations.



Shakespeare was aware of the anxiety the Turk tended to induce in his audiences and therefore, recorded his concern about this issue in his drama. However, for reasons unknown, Shakespeare does not bring the Turk onto the stage in any of his plays. Since Shakespeare creates memorable oriental characters such as Shylock, the Prince of Morocco and Othello, why does he not also present Turkish characters the way Marlowe does in *Tamburlaine* and *The Jew of Malta*? One may guess that, because Elizabethan playwrights have used the Turk exhaustively, Shakespeare realizes that he would not excel in doing so, and any Turkish play of his might be overshadowed by Marlowe's masterpiece.

However, Shakespeare does not completely ignore the Turkish subject. He contributes to the stereotypical image of the Turk in a large body of his drama. For example, allusions and other matters pertaining to the Turk occur in: *King Henry IV*, p. 1 (V.vii.50); *King Henry VI*, p.1 (IV. vii. 73); *King Henry V* (I.ii; V.ii.210); *The Merry Wives of Windsor* (I.iii.80); *Much Ado About Nothing* (III.iv.50); *As You Like it* (IV.iii.33); *Hamlet* (III.ii.270); *All's Well That Ends Well* (II.iii.90); *King Lear* (III.iv.90); *Macbeth* (IV.i.30); *King Henry IV*, p. 2 (V.iii.50); *King Richard II* and others. All references to the Turk in these plays are generally uncomplimentary, denoting in one way or another the barbarity, lust and cruelty of the Ottomans.<sup>37</sup>

Only in *Othello* does Shakespeare expand the Turkish theme. Even here, the Turks do not actually appear in the play (they remain an off-stage business), and Shakespeare delineates them as a heinous foe endangering the security and well-being of Venice. They are treated as "our common enemy" that should be defeated before long if Venice is to live in peace. For this reason, Othello's violation of the cultural barriers is hastily by-passed; and he is dispatched to defend Cyprus against a possible Turkish attack. Shakespeare manipulates in *Othello* all misconceptions concerning the Turks (Moslems), thereby creating a Turcophobia and fear of Islam at large.

To please an audience accustomed to viewing Turks brought to humiliation and defeat, Shakespeare has to do exactly the same: after all the arch-enemy of Christianity, the Turk, is completely destroyed by the storm. Shakespeare is suggestively saying that Providence has interfered to protect the righteous and to drown the infidel. No Christian blood is shed in the defense of Cyprus; the elements of nature have taken care of the enemy Turk. Besides, Shakespeare wants to create a domestic tragedy emanating from miscegenation, implying that misunderstanding, suspicion, and the fear of the Other will always remain to hinder any rapprochement between diverse cultures. This kind of cultural conflict is set against the background of a bigger conflict that takes the form of

military confrontation between the West and the East: Europe versus the Ottoman Empire; Christian versus Moslem; Whites versus Moors.

One should say in passing that the Jew, Moor, and Turk have been widely treated in Elizabethan drama to the exclusion of almost all other oriental nationalities. For example, Persians have been treated only marginally in Elizabethan drama. Curiously enough, they are often represented in a more friendly light on the London stage perhaps for these reasons: First, Persia was far away from Europe and therefore never posed a real military threat to the West. Second, the Persians were often on belligerent terms with the Turks; hence they were indirectly considered as allies to Europe in its fight against Turkey. Smith comments on this issue as follows: "The Persians, in consequence, were looked upon as allies, and efforts were made to cooperate with them against the common foe."<sup>38</sup> It suffices to mention that Shakespeare alludes to Persians only twice in his entire canon: (*The Merchant of Venice* II.i.26; and *King Lear* III.vi.80).

In conclusion, Shakespeare has brought his orientalism full circle in Othello's final speech which he delivers shortly before he commits suicide (V.ii.339-357). In this excerpt, Shakespeare brings to sharp focus his treatment of the Orient not only in *Othello*, but also in the playwright's entire dramaturgy: the Moor (Othello); Moslem culture (e.g. turbaned, circumcised); Arabic matters (e.g. Arabian trees, Aleppo); and perhaps the Jewish theme (Judaean/Indian?). The Moor is Othello, a mercenary in the employment of Venice to fight its enemy, the Moslem Turk who is contemptuously called, "circumcised dog". Shakespeare also draws up an exotic image of the Arab East: 'the place is Aleppo, which was a major trade center in the East counterpoising Venice in the West. (e.g. *Macbeth*, I.iii.3-11). As such, Aleppo must have been visited by foreigners (i.e. merchants and travellers) from the Occident as well. The Venetian beaten by the Turk could be a merchant or a traveller, and the situation clearly shows the animosity between the Moslem Turk and Christian Europeans. Othello sided with the Venetian perhaps because he was a converted Christian at the time. Ironically Othello's phrase "circumcised dog" fits Othello himself. By inference, Othello must have been a Moslem, hence circumcised, before his baptism. Othello identifies himself with the "circumcised dog" whom he stabbed, for now he stabs himself the same way he smote that Turk who "traduc'd" the Venetian state.

Othello is also associated with the East in other ways. First, he is familiar with a certain Arabian tree known for its medicinal gum. The identity of the tree has been the subject of dispute and general critical opinion identifies it as myrrh.<sup>39</sup> By analogy, Othello wants to say that his tears drop as fast and profuse as the flow of medicinal gum from that reputed Arabian tree. Second, the textual ambiguity of

"India/Judaeen" has generated critical controversy. Some critics prefer to read the word as "Judaeen" rather than "Indian", suggesting that Othello has in mind certain events in Jewish history. In this sense, Othello may be comparing himself with Judas Iscariot for betraying Desdemona, who stands for innocence and chastity (and perhaps Christianity). Other critics reject this suggestion, saying in effect that "Judaeen" here is used as an adjective derived from Judaea (Palestine), and therefore, Othello has in mind Herod, that Jewish King who was known for his choleric disposition and violent temper. Significantly, Herod was half-Arab, for his mother was an Arab, and he killed his wife in a fit of anger believing court calumnies that she had betrayed him.<sup>40</sup> This is not the place to dispute these conflicting arguments, nor to argue whether Shakespeare meant Indian or Judaeen. What really matters is the fact that Shakespeare recapitulates the aspects of orientalism treated in his canon in this short passage depicting orientals as "Other" and the Near East in particular as an exotic place.

#### NOTES

1. Bashir Mahmoud El-Beshti, "The Displacement Towards the East: The Oriental in English Renaissance Literature and Culture," Ph.D. Diss. University of California, Berkeley, 1989. Louis Wann, "The Oriental in Elizabethan Drama," *Modern Philology* 12 (1915): 163-187.
2. Dennis Kennedy, "Afterword: Shakespearean Orientalism" in Dennis Kennedy, ed. *Foreign Shakespeare: Contemporary Performance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993) 290-303.
3. It is difficult to find any Elizabethan play that delineates the oriental favorably. For example, the Jew, the Moor, and the Turk, all popular on the London stage, are depicted as strangers in one way or another, having oriental traits and features.
4. Paul A. Cantor, "Othello, The Erring Barbarian Among the Supersubtle Venetians," *Southwest Review* 75 (1990):317.
5. Eldred Jones, "Othello – An Interpretation" in *Othello's Countrymen: Africans in English Renaissance Drama*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965) 86-109.
6. William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice* (III.iii.26-31) ed. John Russell Brown, The Arden Shakespeare (London: Methuen, 1977). Subsequent quotations from the play will be from this edition and cited within the text.
7. William Shakespeare, *Othello*. (I.ii.18-19) ed. M.R. Ridley, The Arden Shakespeare (London: Methuen, 1986). Subsequent quotations from the play will be from this edition and cited within the text.
8. Leslie Fiedler, *The Stranger in Shakespeare* (New York: Stein and Day, 1972) 139. Fiedler discusses Shylock and Othello as strangers pp. 85-136 and 139-167, respectively.
9. A.C. Bradley, "The Peculiarity of Othello" in *Shakespearean Tragedy* (New York: St. Martin's Press, rep. 1985) 142-168.
10. Cantor 297.
11. Peter J. Smith, *Social Shakespeare: Aspects of Renaissance Dramaturgy and Contemporary Society* (London: Macmillan Press, 1995) 149-181; Joan Ozark Holmer, *The Merchant of Venice: Choice, Hazard and Consequences* (London: Macmillan, 1995).
12. John Gross, *Shylock: Four Hundred Years in the Life of a Legend* (London: Chatto and Windus. 1992) 25.

13. Ruth Samson Luborsky, "The Pictorial Image of the Jew in Elizabethan Secular Books" *Shakespeare Quarterly* 46 (1995): 449-453.
14. It should be noted that Elizabethans generally abhorred dark skin color, and this is well demonstrated in Shakespeare's treatment of the subject in his poetical works and plays.
15. Samuel C. Chew, *The Crescent and the Rose* (New York: Octagon Books, 1974) 3-97.
16. W.H. Auden, *The Dyer's Hand and Other Essays* (New York: Random House, 1968). 218-237.
17. Holmer 11-29.
18. Norman Sanders, "Introduction" in Norman Sanders, ed. *Othello*, The New Cambridge Shakespeare (Cambridge University Press. 1989) 11.
19. This issue has been duly discussed by Jones 86-109.
20. Geraldo U. De Sousa, "The Merchant of Venice: Brazil and Cultural Icons" *Shakespeare Quarterly* 45 (1994): 472.
21. Arthur L. Little, Jr, "'An essence that's not seen': The Primal Scene of Racism in *Othello*" *Shakespeare Quarterly* 44 (1993): 304-324.
22. *The Book of the Courtier* by B. Castiglione was translated into English in 1561. It had considerable influence on Elizabethan literature, not excepting Shakespeare and Spenser.
23. Shakespeare tends to follow a certain thematic scheme in delineating oriental characters such as the Jew, Moor and Turk. For example, he makes allusions to the Jew in six different plays, but fully develops the theme in *The Merchant of Venice*. Likewise, the Turk is mentioned here and there, but extensively treated in *Othello*. And the Moor is depicted in *Titus Andronicus*, *The Merchant of Venice*, and *Othello*; but there are uncomplimentary references to the Moor in other plays.
24. *The Merchant of Venice* and *Othello* have been viewed as Shakespeare's (or perhaps his audiences's) racial pronouncement against foreigners and people of different skin complexions, especially Jews and Moors. The two plays have been individually treated and duly considered from this perspective in the various studies cited in the paper.
25. Anthony Gerard Barthelemy, "Ethiops Washed White: Moors of the Nonvillainous Type" in Anthony Gerard Barthelemy ed. *Critical Essays on Shakespeare's Othello*, 91-103. Originally published in Anthony Gerard Barthelemy, *Black face, Malign Race: The Representation of Blacks in English Drama from Shakespeare to Southerne Louisiana*: State University, 1987).
26. Sanders 14.
27. Joel Fineman, "The Sound O in *Othello*: The Real of the Tragedy of Desire" in Barthelemy 104-123.
28. Khalil Mutran, "Introduction" *Utai* (Beirut: Dar Marun 'Abud, 1974) 9-15.
29. Nasib Nashawi, "'Utai al-Injilizi wa Dik Al-Jin al-'Arabi" (The English Othello and the Arab Dik al-Jin) *Al-Doha* 93 (1983): 14-19.
30. Chew 3-54.
31. Harry Berger Jr, "Impertinent Trifling: Desdemona's Handkerchief", *Shakespeare Quarterly* 47 (1996): 236.
32. Little 304-324. Other studies on the relation between Othello and Leo Africanus include: Rosalind Johnson. "African Presence in Shakespeare Drama: Parallels between Othello and the Historical Leo Africanus," *Journal of African Civilization* 7 (1985): 276-287; and T.G.A Nelson and Charles Haines, "Othello's Unconsummated Marriage," *Essays in Criticism* 33 (1985): 1-18.
33. Muffed F. Hawamdeh, "Shakespeare's Treatment of the Moor in *Othello*: An Oriental Perspective," *International Journal of Islamic and Arabic Studies* 4 (1987): 93-119.

34. Cantor 297.
35. Byron P. Smith, *Islam in English Literature* (New York: Caravan Books, 1975) 16.
36. Chew 469-474.
37. The phrase "to turn Turk" is used in Shakespeare (e.g. *Othello* and *Hamlet*) to denote barbarity and other phenomena of cruelty. The phrase may also suggest converting to Islam, that is, heathenism, See N.I. Matar, "Turning Turk": Conversion to Islam in English Renaissance Thought", *Durham University Journal* 86 (1994): 33-41.
38. Smith 17. 504-518 Chew considers the treatment of Persia in Elizabethan drama.
39. Richard Levin, "Othello's Arabian Trees", *Notes and Queries* 31 (1984): 201-202.
40. Nathan Cervo, "Shakespeare's Othello" *The Explicator* 53 (1994): 189-191. See also Richard Levin, "The Indian/Judean Crux in *Othello*", *Shakespeare Quarterly* 33 (1982): 60-67.

