"O blood, blood, blood": Violence and Identity in Shakespeare’s *Othello*

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At the moment when Othello finally becomes fully convinced of Desdemona’s infidelity, he cries out “O blood, blood, blood.”1 Because early modern writers participate in a collective cultural attempt to stabilize existing categories of difference by attaching them to fixed biological characteristics, one might be tempted to understand the visceral and seemingly unsophisticated nature of this utterance as a sign of Othello’s atavistic descent into murderous rage, his barbarous nature emerging from beneath his heroic self-presentation.2 Understanding the word “blood” in this light evokes the entire apparatus of biological determinism that develops over the course of the early modern period in which “blood” dictates rank, culture, and identity itself.3 However, focusing on the burgeoning language of biological determinism obscures the persistent centrality of violence, also implicit in the word “blood,” in early modern constructions of self that continue to rely on humoral ideas of bodily fluidity.4 This single word encapsulates the tensions between these two modes of self-understanding—one that sees blood as stable and another that understands it as constantly in flux. Not simply a marker of barbarism, blood and the violence it connotes is a flexible form of self-fashioning that Othello uses to repair his understanding of the world shattered by Desdemona’s purported infidelity and to negotiate this tension between stability and fluidity.

Recent critics have persuasively shown the implication of the play in a burgeoning racialism that focuses on skin color as a measure of moral worth.5 However, this system of difference is not yet fully instantiated and competes with a much different understand of biology that threatens the biological stability often associated with the notion of blood. As Jean Feerick explains, while the early modern understanding of the word “race” relies primarily on notions of bloodlines, the physiological fluid itself is seen as in constant flux and danger of degeneration. Thus, “Early modern racial ideologies . . . articulate with compelling force what modern racial ideologies seek to bury: the ever-present prospect of racial reversibility.”6 Ian Smith similarly notes the instability present in early modern racial ideologies and understands skin
color as a means of stabilizing categories of difference, encapsulated in the notion of barbarism, that are based on varying degrees of linguistic facility. To be a barbarian is by definition to be one who is lacking the ability to use language and is hence, bestial. Smith attributes focus on the “apparent biophysical fixity of color” as a means to buttress classical tropes of barbarism “whose inherent weakness is linguistic adaptation.” Othello, whose linguistic facility wins over Desdemona and secures his defense before the Duke, is a prime example of the sort of linguistic adaptation that makes barbarism an unstable category of difference. In this reading, Othello returns to a barbarous state under pressure: lacking other means of persuasion he resorts to wanton violence and savage cruelty. Smith’s reading, by opposing civilized rhetoric and barbarous violence, presumes that the play and Elizabethan culture more broadly work ultimately to stabilize modes of ascribing difference and the identities on which they are based. This fixity in turn serves as the foundation for humanist ideas of selfhood as individual and autonomous. Shakespeare’s play, however, dramatizes the tension between a social system that values stability and one that relies on flexibility, valorizing one as much as the other.

Because “blood” is implicated equally but distinctly in both the stabilizing force of biological determinism and the fluid nature of humoral physiology, this single word both highlights and embodies the tension between these two systems of difference—one that sees flexibility as dangerous and another that acknowledges and negotiates fluidity. Surely, Othello’s cry is one of anguish that signals the breakdown of the previously firm foundations of his sense of himself, assiduously constructed through linguistic performance. However, even as this cry is a recognition of Desdemona’s infidelity and the extreme cognitive dissonance it causes, understood in terms of chivalric violence, it is also solution to the very set of problems posed by Desdemona’s infidelity. In fact, precisely because blood is implicated in multiple overlapping and competing understandings of corporeal and social order, chivalric violence serves a reparative function at the heart of the play. Rather than understanding the play as ultimately marginalizing chivalric virtue at the expense of a burgeoning valorization of mercantile skills, this article demonstrates how Othello deftly uses the chivalric codes of combat to repair the damage done by Iago.

Many readers have refuted the racial essentialism of the play but fail to account for the importance of violence in these constructions of difference and the consequent understanding of self in the play. For modern readers, embedded in a culture that easily, almost instinctually, understands “blood” as the bearer of both inherited difference and racial essence, the violent connotations of the word all but disappear. However, I would argue that Othello’s anguished cry suffers from a surfeit rather than a dearth of meaning, bringing to the surface not Othello’s essential savagery but the centrality of violence
in early modern structures of meaning. If modern readers have difficulty separating “blood” as a signifier of lineage from “blood” as a signifier of race, in an early modern context separating lineal claims and bloodshed poses as many if not more difficulties. Whereas in modern understandings of the term “blood” automatically signifies inheritance in both a familial and racial sense, the echo of “blood” as “bloodshed” is almost inescapable in these texts. Othello’s attempts to restore the integrity of social identity and corporeal person implied by his notion of “blood” draw on chivalric notions of combat, and thus make manifest the violent connection between word and deed absolutely central to the Venetian social order. Othello’s cry, then, is not primarily an expression of his essential savagery but of the way that he intends to utilize bodily damage to restore his own and Desdemona’s integrity.

Not only do early modern medical texts, including Robert Burton’s *Anatomy of Melancholy* and Thomas Geminus’s reproduction of Vesalius’s *Epitome* present blood as central to the healthy functioning of both body and state, they emphasize both its unifying properties and its ability to connect body and soul as sources of identity. These unifying properties reveal how the multiple meanings of the term connect to one another. “Blood,” whether it is understood as “vital spirit,” “bloodshed,” “the seat of emotion,” or “lineage,” represents the physical grounding of social identity. This physical grounding relies not, as modern notions of race do, on a sense of biological fixity, but on relationships between word and deed created through violence.

The term “blood” bears the weight of these multiple meanings throughout the play. Desdemona’s supposed infidelity questions the collocation of nature, will, and social status implicit in the early modern understanding of blood, disturbing the relationship between these terms that is created through constitutive forms of bodily damage. Though “blood” as it is used to describe Desdemona’s betrayal is the source of unbearable psychic dissonance for Othello, blood in the sense of “bloodshed” is also the solution to that problem. In response to her purported betrayal, Othello re-imagines his sense of integrity, basing it on the ability of violent acts to connect word and deed. Examining the use of the word “blood” throughout the play, as I propose to do here, reveals that the play’s central issues—namely race, sexuality, and violence—are encapsulated in this one polysemous utterance that reveals a conception of identity rooted in violent action rather than fixed bodily essence. What Othello makes manifest in murdering Desdemona is not the fundamental racialism of Elizabethan society that assumes he must be savage and thus, prone to impulsive violence, but its reliance on violence to connect word and deed, meaning and reality. His resort to violence is neither a repressed racial essence surfacing nor a simple reversion to chivalric values. Rather, it is a compromise between two social systems. By exploring how Othello’s conception of the body informs our understanding of the violent
action in the play, I will begin to elucidate the delicate balance early modern thinkers negotiate between these social systems and its relationship to a contemporary discourse of the body.

I

The conception of the body with which Othello begins, and which he attempts to repair in the final acts of the play, bears upon his conception of self. Over the course of the play, Iago introduces a new epistemology that fundamentally relies on a fixed corporeality to determine individual identity and bears much in common with modern conceptions of race that figure race as a biological essence expressed in behavior, rather than as an essence created by that behavior. It is this conception of self that enables Iago infamously to claim "I am not what I am" (1.1.64), invoking an individual essence from which his outward performance deviates. Many critics see the play as participating in the emergence of such an idea of self and difference in which biological essence is relatively fixed, limiting the control that an individual has over her self-presentation. Readings of the play that see Othello as participating in the increasing resort to biological fixity as dictating racial difference see Othello’s bloody acts as sign of his barbaric essence emerging. However, this narrative elides the type of thinking with which Othello begins that relies on combat to unify corporeal and social ideas of self.

Othello begins with a conception of self rooted equally in chivalric combat and humoral ideas of the body. These ideas see the body, self, and environment as consisting of a fluid set of humors that mutually influence one another. In such a conception, violence is not the mere violation of an inviolable individuality but a means of ensuring harmony between body, self, and social position. Othello sees his heroic acts as creating this sort of integrity, invoking an idea of body and self that bears much in common with early modern ideas of race that critics such as Mary Floyd Wilson and Daniel Vitkus, using geo-humoral theory and narratives of conversion respectively, argue was not nearly as stable as modern ideas of biological fixity would suggest. However, once he has been confronted with blood’s instability in the form of Desdemona’s infidelity, he resorts to racialist thinking that relies on biological stability in his search for “ocular proof.” His fundamentally violent response is simultaneously a product of his desire for essence and appearance to be in line and also for essence to be visible in performed acts, rather than hidden deep in a man’s physical being, demonstrating the uneasy coexistence of these two competing ideas of self.

Having been confronted with an epistemology that sees selfhood as dictated by an internal essence, an epistemology that critics, such as Kim Hall,
see in the kind of racialist thinking operating throughout the play, Othello attempts to restore his conception of self, which sees acts rather than essence as determinative. He does not simply wish to make interior essence visible but to create his idea of himself in unifying acts of prowess. This response, then, is not violent simply because he only knows how to act in a violent fashion, either because of his race or because of his chivalric identity, but rather because of the ways that violence specifically is able to restore wholeness to his fractured identity. His identity as a warrior, like his identity as a Moor, is not significant because of its predisposition to violence but because of its insistence on both physical and mental integrity. Thus, rather than seeing Othello’s violence as a consequence of his essential biology, either because he is a soldier or a black man, I see his use of violence as stemming from its unique ability to make essence and performance one and the same, as they were for Othello prior to Iago’s manipulations.

Othello relies on violence to repair his fractured sense of self, just as he relies on martial prowess to unify his own identity when he is questioned before the Duke, conceiving of blood as unifying social and individual identity. If his uttering of the word “blood” prefigures the violence against Desdemona, it also represents the restoration of her integrity in those acts. To reduce this conception to simple biological determinism, as the reading that sees Othello’s acts as atavism does, collapses the rich set of early modern associations with the term “blood,” obscuring the idea of identity at work in the play. In fact, racialism—the notion that Othello possesses a racial essence that might conflict with his social performance—is precisely the problem. His use of violence, rather than being a regression into barbarism, is a reparative measure intended to restore the unified conception of identity imagined in the early modern understanding of “blood.”

II

Starting with Desdemona’s betrayal of her father, which undermines the stability of “blood” as a source of identity, the characters in the play consistently struggle with competing conceptions of identity and difference. Othello’s anguished cry encapsulates these struggles in a single repeated word, “blood.” The twenty-one other uses of the word “blood” in the play manifest the stakes implicit in how one understands this one term. Brabantio initially calls upon the multifaceted notion of blood in the first scenes of the play to describe Desdemona’s marriage to “the Moor” as a disruption of her corporeal and spiritual integrity. He presents Desdemona’s chastity as a form of integrity that cannot be shattered except by force. This force is conceived of in terms of “some mixtures powerful o’er the blood / . . . / that [Othello] wrought upon her” (1.3.105–7). Taking her physical and spiritual integrity as
a fact, Brabantio uses it as incontrovertible evidence that a crime has been committed, that coercion was necessary to get Desdemona to concede to marry Othello. He pleads before the Duke that "It is a judgment maimed and most imperfect / That will confess perfection so could err / Against all rules of nature" (II. 99–101). Because her perfection is a certainty, her actions must have been coerced to have deviated so far from the rules of nature. Her integrity should be inviolable and can only have been breached by force. This integrity encompasses her entire individual and social being. Brabantio wonders that,

A maiden never bold  
Of Spirit so still and quiet that her motion  
Blushed at herself; and she, in spite of nature,  
Of years, of country, credit, everything,  
To fall in love with what she feared to look on?  

(ll. 95–99)

He understands her nature, age, national origin, and reputation—in short everything about her—as functioning in complete harmony. In presenting her abduction as an assault against her blood, Brabantio suggests that her blood is the seat of this unified identity.

This notion of subjective harmony is in line with one of the most prominent early modern conceptions of the way that blood functions, represented by the works of Thomas Geminus and Robert Burton, among others. According to Thomas Geminus's English version of Andreas Vesalius's anatomy, the blood as it is decocted in the heart is "spirite, more clearer, bryghter, and subtyller, then is any corporall thynge, compounded of the foure Elementes, for it is a thynge that is a meane betwene the bodye and the soule, and therefore the Philosophers lyken it rather to a heauenlye thynge then to a bodelye thynge." In this context, blood is that which unites the body and conveys the identity of the soul. This conception persists into the seventeenth century when the physician George Thomson described blood as "the immediate instrument of the soul . . . sweetly uniting all the parts of the Body for the conspiration of the good of the whole." He, thus, conceives of the blood as the basis for both a psychological and a corporeal identity that unifies and pervades the entire individual. He sees no distinction between what later thinkers would understand as the psychological, what he calls the soul, and what will become the physiological. The blood is an "immediate" instrument, admitting little distinction between its material and immaterial qualities. In his Anatomy of Melancholy, Robert Burton describes blood, saying that is "a hot, sweet, temperate, red humour . . . whose office is to nourish the whole body, giving it strength and colour . . . And from it spirits are first begotten in the heart, which afterwards by the arteries are communicated to
As in Thomson's description, Burton conceives of blood as dispersed throughout the body, a conception all the more powerful for its inclusion in a work directed not at trained anatomists but at those who might be unfamiliar with certain physiological terms. Furthermore, Burton describes the blood as the source of "Spirit . . . a most subtle vapour, which is expressed from the blood, and the instrument of the soul, to perform all his actions; a common tie or medium betwixt body and soul." As Burton describes it, the blood offers a physiological basis for the soul and all its actions, unifying psychological and physiological sources of identity that later writers understand as distinct.

Brabantio understands the violation of Desdemona as perpetrated against her "blood" in this comprehensive sense. The "mixtures powerful" act specifically not only against her physical body but against her blood. Othello, then, has attacked her entire identity, both social and physical, conceived of corporeally as her blood. This conception of the crime simultaneously figures it as a violent assault against her person—Othello has wrought something upon her—and as a property crime that violates the "natural," patriarchal economy—the rules of nature have been transgressed. Bringing into relief the almost imperceptible slippage between these two crimes, Brabantio argues before the Duke that he has been the victim of theft. When a senator asks Brabantio if his daughter is dead, Brabantio responds:

> Ay, to me:
> She is abused, stolen from me and corrupted
> By spells and medicines bought of mountebanks,
> for nature so preposterously to err.

(II. 60–63)

He not only responds to the senator's question affirmatively, claiming that she is dead, but goes further to say she has been stolen and abused, envisioning the crime simultaneously as a physical assault and as a theft. In fact, the slide from assault, a violation of Desdemona's bodily person, and theft, a violation of patriarchal order, naturalizes the patriarchal order, connecting it to a physical reality. Thus, "blood" for Brabantio unifies identity situating Desdemona's gender, rank, and person in biological fixity. The resort to the unifying of properties of blood offers to Brabantio a possible explanation for what otherwise would appear inexplicable—the unstable erring of "nature" presumed in Desdemona's marriage to Othello.

Only if the abuse Desdemona suffers is clearly psychological as well as physical can Brabantio restore his conception of the relationship between Desdemona's character and her behavior. This idea is consistent with the same medical texts that understand blood as uniting body and soul in one undifferentiated whole. These texts also conceive of medicines as having both physi-
ological and psychological functions. For instance, Burton proposes a long series of remedies for melancholy that include not only “Philosophical and Divine precepts, [and] other men’s examples” but also, though he warns against their improper use, medicines and simples. Thus, the crime in Brabantio’s mind must be perpetrated against Desdemona’s otherwise stable blood as representative of her bodily but also her spiritual identity. Furthermore, in representing the crime as a theft, Brabantio figures it as an attack against Desdemona’s social identity and the communal order to which it belongs. The theft is a transgression of the patriarchal order that is naturalized by treating it as an assault that attacks her person and her social position embodied in her blood.

Whether Brabantio presents the case as a physical assault or a social and psychological attack, the crime remains a sexual one. Infamously, Iago’s call to arms warns Brabantio that “an old black ram / Is tupping your white ewe!” (1.1.87–98). In Iago’s crass admonition, the crime is understood as a problem of miscegenation, of a mixing of bloodlines. Characters repeatedly associate blood with sexual passion, as when Iago suggest that Desdemona’s feelings for Othello will fade when “the blood is made dull with the act of sport” (2.1.225). Brabantio makes no distinction between theft, assault, and miscegenation. Invoking the supple language of early modern physiology, he instinctually calls the crime “a treason of the blood” (1.1.167)—a phrase that draws together these multiple perceptions of the crime. He imagines Othello’s action as an assault perpetrated against both the physical and social person of Desdemona located in her blood. It is both a violent attack and a theft. Moreover, it encompasses the sexual violation of Desdemona and the purported conjuring that enabled it. Sexual violation involves miscegenation and hence a distortion of nature just as the “mixtures powerful o’er the blood” changed Desdemona’s fundamental identity causing her “perfection so to err against all rules of nature.” Both are treasonous in an early modern sense—that is, they transgress the natural order in which Desdemona would fear to look upon so spirited an individual as Othello. Brabantio resorts to this formulation of a crime perpetrated against her blood, treating theft, assault, and sexual congress as one crime, and thereby naturalizes the relationship between Desdemona’s body, behavior, and social identity.

However, the phrase “treason of the blood” also tempts one to a more sinister reading. Though Brabantio suggests that in fact treason has been committed against Desdemona’s blood—that is against her social and physical person—one could just as easily read the phrase as suggesting that her blood has committed treason, usurping the governing power of her otherwise stable perfection. Early modern treatments of the blood as often usurping reason would tend to support this reading. In certain respects, Brabantio’s focus on the supposed “mixtures powerful” that have tainted her blood subtly suggests this reading, but subsequent uses of the term “blood,” notably by Iago, offer
an even more persuasive context for it. Iago suggests that love is "a lust of the blood and a permission of the will" (1.3.335–36), envisioning blood and the identity it conveys as subservient to the will. In the context of such a formulation, Desdemona’s blood has behaved treasonously, usurping the governing power of the will.

This understanding of treason is readily available in the early modern imaginary that saw an analogy between the king’s rule over the commonwealth, a man’s governance of his household, and the governing function of reason over the individual. Again, texts such as Burton’s support such a reading. In his preface “Democritus to the Reader,” Burton writes:

As in human bodies (saith [Boterus]) there be divers alterations proceeding from humours, so there be many diseases in a commonwealth, which do as diversely happen from several distempers, as you may easily perceive by their particular symptoms. . . . But whereas you shall see many discontents . . . rebellions, seditions, mutinies, contentions, idleness, riot, epicurism . . . that kingdom, that country, must needs be discontent, melancholy, hath a sick body.

Following Boterus, Burton directly compares the physiological sickness of melancholy, with its imbalanced humors, to a seditious nation. Thus, Desdemona’s body is both a kingdom suffering under a treasonous usurpation and physically ill, having its humors out of balance. The phrase “treason of the blood” encapsulates not only the perception of the crime as both a physical assault and a theft but also the perception of it as a violent overthrow of the governing power of reason and hence, of the social order. Thus, “blood” comes to imply not just individual identity but social order. Brabantio’s invocation of the “mixtures powerful o’er the blood” restores his shattered sense of the social order by relocating Desdemona’s identity in her corporeal person, naturalizing the ideas of culture and rank that her transgression disturbs.

III

This multiplicity of meanings that hovers around every use of the term relies as much on the naturalizing power of violence that connects theft and assault as it does on biological determinism. Understood in this context, Othello’s cry “O, blood, blood, blood” is far more than a desperate and inarticulate expression of pain. Rather, it is an astute encapsulation of the full import of Desdemona’s supposed betrayal as well as its solution. As such, it suggests the important role that violence rather than biological determinism in terms of either lineage or race plays in securing both individual identity and social order. Othello is as invested in patriarchy as Brabantio is but sees that patriarchy as relying on valorous acts of combat rather than on sexual
purity and emerging ideas of biological difference. “Blood” for Othello does not merely connote biological determinism but rather implies the process by which matter, or in modern terms biology, becomes identity through combat. Desdemona’s supposed infidelity disturbs the notion of identity fixed in violent acts that her father and Othello espouse. Having used Desdemona’s infidelity to unravel Othello’s sense of himself, Iago offers an essentialist epistemology much like the one to which Brabantio resorts, as the solution to the disruption her infidelity poses. However, Othello ultimately rejects this solution to corporeal instability and returns to acts of bodily damage to stabilize his sense of himself.

The language of blood as “wrought upon” tends to highlight the instability that Desdemona’s sexuality makes manifest. Such language disrupts essentialist notions of identity within the play by making blood a changeable object of action rather than a stable source of identity. Whereas Brabantio’s use of the phrase is meant to evoke an image of integrity breached, two other uses aim at describing or, what is more, effecting a psychological change, conceived of corporeally. Upon his arrival in Cyprus, Lodovico wonders at Othello’s treatment of Desdemona saying “Is it his use? / Or did the letters work upon his blood, / And new create this fault” (4.1.274–76). As Brabantio did with respect to Desdemona’s behavior, Lodovico assumes that a change in blood can effect a fundamental change in personality. The letters work on the blood to change Othello’s expected bearing. Similarly, Iago describes his actions against Othello as “Dangerous conceits [that] . . . with a little act upon the blood” (3.3.329–31). Tellingly, both instances figure words—the tool that Othello admits to using to woo Desdemona—as wreaking the kind of havoc on the blood that Brabantio sees in Desdemona’s changed behavior. All three characters—Iago, Brabantio, and Lodovico—recognize actions against the blood as causing a change in personality at once physical and psychological. Blood in these instances is not a fixed essence but a changeable fluid.

Desdemona’s marriage ultimately brings Brabantio to the horrible realization not that blood incontrovertibly dictates her identity but, quite the opposite, that her blood is not a stable marker of identity, that it can in fact be wrought upon by mere words. His language moves from the violent overthrow of her person to a recognition of her betrayal. She is no longer merely stolen but has willfully and deceitfully made her “escape” (1.3.198). As Brabantio famously predicts saying, “Look to her, Moor, if thou hast eyes to see: / She has deceived her father, and may thee” (1.3.2921–13), Desdemona’s purported infidelity brings Othello to the same unbearable realization that social position does not secure behavior. Othello’s disquiet is clearly caused by the instability that her infidelity implies. He vacillates in doubt, saying “I think my wife be honest, and think she is not” (3.3.387), unequivocally disturbed by his inability to fix his sense of her. In fact this inability
threatens the basis both of Othello's previous conception of Desdemona and of his own masculinity. In his description of jealousy, Richard Burton writes that "'Tis full of fear, anxiety, doubt, care, peevishness, suspicion, it turns a man into a woman." The suspicion that Iago engenders in Othello effem- inates him, disrupting the stability of his identity.

This instability undermines his insistence on presenting an unified identity, ensured by violent acts that bring together social position and physical reality. Much as Brabantio represents Desdemona as possessing a comprehensive integrity, Othello originally presents himself as an integral whole. Rather than understanding himself as having an interiorized identity which could conflict with his behavior, he sees his identity as pervasive and undifferentiated. When discovered on his wedding night, he refuses to hide, insisting, "Not I, I must be found. My parts, my title and my perfect soul shall manifest me rightly" (1.2.30–32). Just as Desdemona's nature, years, country, and credit all dictate a single action that Brabantio cannot believe she did not take, Othello insists that his parts, title, and perfect soul must show his true nature. Even when invoking the term "blood," Othello presents his identity as both stable and outwardly manifest. He insists upon confessing "the vices of his blood" (1.3.125), bringing into line his identity and its corporeal source. This sense of integrity, implied in the early modern conception of blood, is precisely what begins to unravel because of Iago's treachery, pointing not to the stability of blood but to its variability.

Initially, Iago disturbs the stability of "blood" as the basis of identity, but more importantly, he offers biological determinism as a means of repairing that identity. By questioning Desdemona's fidelity, presenting her essential identity as hidden rather than visible in her public acts, Iago creates a fissure between social and personal identity, between what Iago calls in his criticism of Cassio's martial prowess "prattle" and "practice" (1.1.25–29). The very language of the exchange between Iago and Othello creates the kind of doubt Iago claims Othello should have. Iago's repetition of Othello's word, "hon- est," obscures Othello's view of Iago's interior thoughts (3.3.100–109). Rhetorically, he creates a question out of precisely what Othello felt was unquestionable, Cassio's honesty and Desdemona's fidelity.

Othello responds to this threat by attempting to stabilize both his own and Iago's identity within this new system. He demands of Iago "Show me thy thought" (1.3.3.119), seeking Iago's disclosure of his essential self as a way to stabilize Iago's identity. As he explains,

For I know thou'rt full of love and honesty
And weigh'st thy words before thou giv'st them breath
Therefore these stops of thine fright me the more.
For such things in a false disloyal knave
Are tricks of custom, but in a man that's just
They're close delations, working from the heart
That passion cannot rule.

At this moment, he pictures true meaning as interior and stable. Meaning, no longer externally visible in acts, must be discovered and uncovered. This quest to locate interior meaning produces the idea that a stable essence exists. Unless one is a false, disloyal knave, whose meaning and identity are never stable, one's essence lies in "close delations . . . that passion cannot rule." Othello fantasizes here about the stable essence hidden deep within a "just" man that is not at the whim of the fickle passions. To know this hidden essence, another man must be "shown" this man's thought. In this moment, the epistemology, which will drive Othello through much of the play, crystallizes in his mind. Not only does Othello proceed to search for hidden secrets inside the body of Desdemona, from this point forward he also shows Iago his thought, constructing himself as just the kind of just man he believes Iago to be. Like an anatomist, he attempts to locate the truth about Desdemona in her physical being and his repetition of the word "blood" in one sense suggests this strategy. "Blood," as ideas of biological determinism, would suggest, is a stable, interior essence—a physical guarantor of behavior. However, as we have seen, the notion of blood operating in the early modern period cautions us against a solitary reading of Othello's approach, urging us to explore the equally prevalent notion of "blood" as a unifying principle associated as much with the power of bloodshed as with biological essence.

IV

Rather than wholly accepting Iago's introduction of essentialism as a solution to the unstable meaning of Desdemona's identity, Othello uses violence not to uncover Desdemona's essential identity but in fact, to stabilize her identity. Drawing on his sense of "blood" as capable of unifying psychology and corporeality, he reconstructs Desdemona's integrity just as he constructs his own. Othello's consistent presentation of pervasive integrity is fundamentally grounded in physical acts of violence. Rather than these acts of violence being the performance which manifests some stable interior, as Iago would have it, Othello sees action and essence as one in the same. What the undoing of Othello reveals is that this integrity is produced for Othello not by "blood" in the sense of heredity but by "blood" in the sense of heroic, violent action.

Many scholars have noted the anatomical epistemology that Iago introduces, which seeks truth in fixed and interior physical evidence, understanding Othello's descent into murderous rage as a failure of Othello's interpretive capabilities, as I do above. This confrontation with a new episte-
mology grounds Othello's introduction to an individualized and interiorized notion of self. For instance, Mark Rose argues that Othello is caught between mercantile values and the absolute world of chivalry, Iago representing the former. As he explains it, "In the transitional culture of the early modern period the concept of the soul is also affected by the hegemonic principle of property. Now a soul is something a person has as well as something a person is." Identity thus becomes a possession as well as an all-encompassing being. Though I agree that Othello finds himself poised between two worlds, one based on martial might and the other based on securing private property, Rose's characterization of that previous world as superstitiously supernatural and one in which "the cosmos is a single vast text and [in which] knowledge is a form of interpretation, a matter of reading mystic signatures written in things" misunderstands the relationship between matter and meaning in the period, seeing the two as entirely separate. Rose continues claiming that "There is finally no difference between language and nature, authority and observation." Even as Rose sees no difference between language and nature, he also suggests a hidden meaning separate and apart from physical reality that must be uncovered. At the same time that Rose's notion of "reading" implies an analogy between word and deed, or "language and nature," it also implies a disjunction between the two. "Blood" in its multiplicity of meaning provides a far more fertile analogy for this relationship. In fact, in the period, it serves not as a mere analogy but as the mechanism whereby the relationship between things and ideas, identity and bodies, occurs and is perceived. In his self-assured defense before the Duke, Othello explicitly refuses the kind of interpretive process Rose claims marks his chivalric identity. Othello constructs his identity by valorizing the very interpretive lack characteristic of his martial identity, promising that because he is rude in his "speech, and little blest with the soft phrase of peace, . . . [he will] a round unvarnished tale deliver of [his] whole course of love" (1.3.82–91). He connects his "rude speech" both with his heroic identity and with the honesty of his "round unvarnished tale." His heroic identity, his martial prowess, is in direct opposition to perfidious speech, and his heroic actions make him incapable of uttering "the soft phrase of peace." Martial prowess, as much as barbarism, is associated with a lack of linguistic sophistication. He can only present a "round, unvarnished tale" that admits no distinction between surface and essence. By pointing to his martial identity, Othello authenticates the claim of individual and social integrity he made in insisting on being found, insisting on the integrity of his "parts," "titles," and "perfect soul." His social presentation and his individual identity must be one and the same, just as Desdemona's were. As a soldier he has little eloquence, and therefore, his tale must necessarily be without deception or inconsistency. His martial acts are necessary to maintain his integrity.
Moreover, he argues that he has no identity beyond that of a soldier, that nothing is hidden from view. His words cannot and do not require interpretation, though they do rely on physical acts for their significance. He presents Desdemona's love for him as based on his soldierly qualities. As he says before the Duke, "She loved me for the dangers I had passed" (1.3.168). He claims not that his eloquence wooed her but that the history itself did. Though Othello is actually quite linguistically sophisticated and gains access to Brabantio's house through his words, he insists upon a lack of verbal skill that implies plainness much as Henry V does in Shakespeare's depiction of his wooing of Katharine of Valois. Others agree with his self-perception. As Iago muses, "The Moor is of a free and open nature / That thinks men honest that but seem so" (1.3.398–99). Iago believes that Othello lacks the guile to suspect other men, precisely because he lacks the guile to be deceptive himself. His very guilelessness indicates his understanding of himself as an integrated whole.

The opposition between Othello's method of securing identity through martial violence and the biological determinism Iago propounds is perhaps best articulated in Iago's description of Cassio to Roderigo. He says:

Forsooth a great arithmetician,
One Michael Cassio, a Florentine
A fellow almost damned in a fair wife,
That never set a squadron in the field
Nor the division of battle knows
More than a spinster—unless the bookish theoric,
Wherein the togaed consuls can propose
As masterly as he. Mere prattle without practice
Is all his soldiership; but he, sir, had th'election,
And I of whom his eyes had seen the proof
At Rhodes, at Cyprus, and on other grounds
Christened and heathen—must be be lee'd and calmed.

(1.1.18–29)

Here Iago makes a distinction between practice and performance, essence and appearance, that defines early modern gender identity. Heroic deeds are set against theory that is no more related to military reality than the female work of the spinster. Martial action, which Iago calls "proof," is set against "bookish theoric," as Iago makes a gendered distinction between representation and actual practice. Practice, as the basis for identity, consists of deeds whose reality is unquestionable because of their bloodiness. Not only does Iago question Cassio's masculinity, comparing him to a spinster whose work is not only feminine but discontinuous, he implies that no substance underlies his military title. He is "mere prattle without practice" just as a spinster is dismissed as both female and lacking steady work. Soldiership, then, serves
as the ultimate basis of masculinity because it is a practice that unifies identity, connecting titles to prowess through corporeal acts of bodily damage.

Othello’s defense before the Duke does not acknowledge a distinction between his tales and the trials themselves. What Othello, then, represents is practice as essence. He does not allow the kind of difference Iago creates between “prattle” as a false performance, and “practice” as a true essence. As evident in Iago’s slander of Cassio, this kind of bounded integrity is central to masculine identity. As Robert Burton explains, love melancholy, of which jealousy is a type, effeminates because it is “immoderate, inordinate, and not to be comprehended in any bounds.” Having a bounded identity created by military feats is central to masculine identity. Othello’s acts of martial prowess fundamentally unify his identity by realizing his self-presentation, grounding his identity in physical reality—the physical reality of prowess rather than the physical reality of lineage or race.

V

Othello ultimately resorts to bloodshed because of the ability of blood to unify his fractured sense of himself in visible acts of prowess. Othello’s violent response to Desdemona’s purported infidelity is a strategy that partakes of both the recently accessible anatomical literature and the more pervasive fluid conception of the body, bolstering the faltering connection between self and self-presentation. Understood in the context of the polysemous utterance that marks Othello’s realization of betrayal, his ultimate actions restore the social significance of blood. Throughout the initial scenes of the play, “blood” comes to signify the coherence of physiology, action, and social position. In separating blood from will, Iago made manifest to Othello the possibility that these forms of selfhood might be at odds and that blood might not stably signify identity. However, rather than resorting to Iago’s essentialist model, seeking merely to uncover Desdemona’s lascivious nature, Othello ultimately embraces the unifying power of bloody action.

The solution Iago offers to blood’s instability is a notion of blood as conveying a physiological essence apart from will, an idea that becomes increasingly common in the seventeenth century as evidenced in early modern medical texts. Iago creates for Othello the necessity for firsthand knowledge as Othello searches for and demands “ocular proof” of Desdemona’s infidelity, indoctrinating Othello in an anatomical epistemology. The impact of this epistemology extends beyond inciting in Othello a need for visible evidence, however. It introduces an entire new conception of the body and its relationship to identity. Anatomical literature of the period, as Jonathan Sawday has explained, begins a process whereby “the body became objectified; a focus of intense curiosity but entirely divorced from the world of the speaking and
thinking subject. The division between the Cartesian subject and corporeal object, between an ‘I’ that thinks and an ‘it’ in which ‘we’ reside, had become absolute.” Though I question the absolute nature of this split, certainly before and even after Descartes, it is precisely the split that Iago introduces to Othello. The subject, once evenly dispersed throughout the body in the blood is now isolated in its interior, or better yet in the will as Iago would have it. Again, Iago calls love “merely a lust of the blood and a permission of the will,” invoking a guiding consciousness absolutely in control of the animal nature contained in the blood. Iago here anticipates William Harvey’s discovery of the circulation of the blood, which understood blood, not as the seat of identity or as the source of “animal spirits . . . brought up to the brain, and diffused by the nerves, to the subordinate members, giv[ing] sense and motion to them all” as Burton had, but as simply another part of the mechanical body.

This fundamentally different sense of the body creates an understanding of identity as hidden and in need of discovery and, according to many, is responsible for Othello’s tragic end. Both Michael Neill and Patricia Parker have noted the similarity of the epistemology Iago presents here to the project of anatomical texts of the period. However, the compromise that Othello develops between this system of meaning making and the chivalric one is more subtle than either these authors or Mark Rose would suggest, combining elements of both systems in a way similar to the one presented in early modern anatomies. Rose is representative of scholars who see Othello as tragically overtaken by a new system of meaning. Othello’s tragic demise, then, is a result of his inability to adapt to the development of a new form of heroism. As Rose explains, “The arts of the modern hero must be to govern and give laws . . .” not to engage in violent action. Ultimately, Rose feels that Othello’s death partakes of a chivalric nostalgia typical of Elizabethan tilts and that the play explores the playwright’s role in the demise of the chivalric world. Thus, Othello and Desdemona become the tragic victims of a shifting notion of the place of the body.

However, I would argue that Othello more or less successfully negotiates this shifting scenario, despite his death, by restoring the social significance of blood and providing a workable model for his Venetian comrades. This model uses violence to authenticate self-representation, actually repairing the split Iago has suggested to him between behavior and identity. Though Othello and Desdemona are indeed victims of the tensions the play invokes, we have every reason to believe that Othello’s compromise is adopted by the society around him, suggesting the ultimate triumph of his model even in the face of his death. Othello begs of Lodovico, “Speak of me as I am. / Nothing extenuate nor set down aught in malice” (5.2.340–41). Tellingly, his greatest concern is how he will be presented, betraying his preoccupation with unifying his body and his social identity. He authenticates the narrative that he
suggests—that he was one who loved "not wisely but too well" (5.2.342)—by stabbing himself to which Lodovico responds "O bloody period" (5.2.354) and Gratiano replies "All that's spoke is marred" (5.2.355). One could understand Gratiano as exclaiming that the deaths of Desdemona and Othello mar all the power of Othello's speech, but it seems at least as likely that Gratiano indicts speech in general here, especially given Othello's worries about the distortion of his story. The "bloody period" ensures that Othello's identity is fixed in his actions. He uses a bloody deed to tie the narrative of his identity to his physical person, just as he initially "confesses the vices of his blood" bringing action and identity in line through blood.

He demonstrates this notion of identity construction early on when he arbitrates the conflict between Montano and Cassio. Upon seeing the uproar, he admonishes Montano that, "My blood begins my safer guides to rule / And passion, having my best judgment collied, / Assays to lead the way" (2.3.201-3), suggesting precisely the split that Iago does between "blood" and will. However, his identity does not reside in these passions but in the ability to rule them. This ability, not an essentialized notion of the passions, separates Christians from barbarians. A hundred lines earlier he demands:

Are we turned Turks? And to ourselves do that
Which heaven hath forbid the Ottomites?
For Christian shame, put by this barbarous brawl;
He that stirs next, to carve his own rage,
Holds his soul light: he dies upon his motion.

What separates the Turk from the Christian is not racial essence but a lack of heroic values—allowing personal rage to interfere with social order. Moreover, in behaving like Turks, Cassio and Montano not only draw Othello's wrath jeopardizing their physical life, they place their souls in jeopardy. Again, Othello uses violence to make psychological truth—they will lose themselves in behaving like barbarians—into physical reality—they will lose their actual lives. His masculinity resides in his ability to govern the "blood" that attempts to behave treasonously and rule his "safer guides." Othello not only articulates his sense of identity but secures it by using violence to bring physical and psychological realities together.

His murder of Desdemona too speaks of the unifying properties of bloody action. Just before strangling Desdemona, Othello explains to himself the urgency and inevitability of what he must do saying,

It is the cause, it is the cause, my soul!
Let me not name it to you, you chaste stars,
It is the cause. Yet I'll not shed her blood
Nor scar that whiter skin of hers than snow
And smooth as monumental alabaster:
Yet she must die, else she’ll betray more men.

(5.2.1–6)

Here Othello refuses to cause a breach of Desdemona’s corporeal integrity, insisting on keeping her “blood” intact, yet the possibility of her betraying more men demands her death. He wants to freeze her in a state of corporeal integrity to prevent the unbearable fragmentation of identity implicit in her supposed sexual perfidy.

This sexual perfidy is intimately connected to the notion of blood. The blood that should serve as the basis of a coherent social identity, one in which Desdemona would never commit such an infidelity, has actually caused Desdemona, according to the fantasy that Iago creates, to behave in direct opposition to her essential nature as defined by her social position. In fact, it has been treasonous. The blood, then, rather than being the stable basis for social position, is the uncontrollable essence of nature, making nature and social structure unbearably incongruent and fractured. By keeping her blood contained, he does not, like the anatomist, search for a stable essence but keeps her body both intact and filled with unifying blood. Rather than choosing to reveal her essence, he uses her murder as a means of stabilizing her blood, containing it within her corporeal integrity.

Though Iago’s understanding may be more and more visible in seventeenth-century texts, the older conceptions persist, and early modern anatomists work out a compromise similar to the one Othello does. Perhaps no better example exists than Andreas Vesalius and his English “borrowers.” While little original anatomical work is published in England before the sixteenth century, several versions of Vesalius overseen by a Flemish engraver named Thomas Lambrit (who used the pseudonym Thomas Geminus) appear in 1544, 1553, and 1559 respectively. The text, when it is in English, is drawn not from Vesalius but from a fourteenth-century manuscript, itself a compilation of several medieval anatomists. These works and the works of English anatomists, such as Thomas Vicary whose *Anatomy of the Bodie of Man* draws from the same fourteenth-century manuscript, present a conception of the body and identity much like Othello’s. Geminus’s version of Vesalius describes blood in much the same way Burton did, saying, “And by hyt [the blood from the heart] are refreshed and quickened all the membres of the bodye syth the spirite that is receyued in them is the instmment and treasure of the virtue of the soule.” Again, the blood is the source of the spirit which not only nourishes the body but is “virtue of the soule” and thus, determines identity. As in both Burton and Othello’s conception, blood is responsible for keeping the different parts of identity in harmony.

Othello’s murder of Desdemona and his eventual suicide show blood serving a similar function, connecting the narrative of identity Othello produces
specifically to the body. Cassio immediately exclaims that but for the fact that he believed Othello to be weaponless he would have expected such a bloody end "For [Othello] was great of heart" (5.2.359). Cassio’s expectations construct Othello as a heroic figure, reinstating the integrity which is central to his masculine identity. Because Othello is “great of heart,” he prefers to proclaim his integrity through his suicide than to preserve his physical life. Cassio locates Othello’s heroism in his heart, situating his identity in the organ that purifies the blood with its unifying properties. Thus, Cassio extols Othello’s blood and remarks upon it as the source of a unified identity. Violence connects Othello’s narrative to his physical body, defining him as the proud and honorable individual he is. However, this body is neither the mechanistic body that Sawday locates in the work of William Harvey nor the essentialized racial body that Iago suggests but the body permeated by blood and the spirits it produces. As we have seen time and again, Othello uses violence to create an identity at once rooted in the body and non-essentialized. This conception of identity provides a sense of pervasive integrity but only through acts of violence.

Othello’s actions in the end of the play unify word, deed, and social status, knitting together the discrepancies which Iago revealed to him. They are neither, as some suggest, the last gasp of a romantic heroism soon to be replaced by a mercenary mercantilism, nor are they the projections of a racialist epistemology but a subtle negotiation between the two. Employing the early modern conception of blood, Othello uses action to cement his and Desdemona’s identities, repairing the integrity breached in Desdemona’s supposed actions, in her “treason of the blood.” Othello specifically describes Desdemona’s murder as a sacrifice (5.2.65), and I would suggest that his own suicide is a sacrifice as well. His death, as he suggests of Desdemona’s, will make the crucial and violent connection between body and identity. After Cassio’s encomium, Lodovico reorders the scattered Venetian state by proclaiming the social meaning of the dead bodies. He demands that Iago “Look on the tragic loading of this bed: / This is thy work” (5.2.361–62). unmistakably joining Iago’s deeds to the bodies themselves. He begs Gratiano to enforce justice against Iago, explicitly associating the bodies with Gratiano’s governing actions. The social order, disturbed by Desdemona’s “treason,” is restored using the model Othello enacts. In this model, violence connects social identity and the body. Unlike an essentialist model that understands the body as innately determining identity, Othello’s understanding connects social identity and the body through bloody action. Thus, Othello’s final actions, rather than revealing his innate barbarism and the play’s racialism, manifest one solution to the tension between a mechanistic and a fluid identity. In fact, these actions like the utterance that prefigures them are not atavistic but the basis for restoring social order. Othello’s anguished cry explains the necessity of the violent actions of the end of the play. Rather than following Iago’s
instruction, Othello uses martial violence and his polyvalent understanding of blood to unify physical, social, and psychological bases for identity.

Notes

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1. 3.3.454. All citations are taken from William Shakespeare, Othello, ed. E. A. J. Honigmann (New York: Arden, 2001).

2. For a discussion of various iterations of this argument, see Virginia Vaughn, Othello: A Contextual History (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), esp. 68.

3. This reading contends that the pressures of living as a cultural and social minority in Venetian society drive Othello to revert to the stereotypical behavior to which the Elizabethan mind thought he was predisposed. In other words, the strain of Desdemona’s infidelity causes his racial essence violently and visibly to emerge from underneath his composed exterior. Michael Neill has suggested that this type of reading is, indeed, the “most common twentieth-century strategy” to deal with the issue of race. Michael Neill, “Unproper Beds: Race, Adultery, and the Hideous in Othello,” in Critical Essays on Shakespeare’s Othello, ed. Anthony Gerard Barthélémy (New York: Macmillan, 1994), 216–38, esp. 191 first printed in Shakespeare Quarterly 40 (1989): 383–412, esp. 393. In rejecting this narrative, I follow the work of Natasha Korda who argues that such a conception “define[s] him as irremediably other.” Korda, “The Tragedy of the Handkerchief: Female Paraphernalia and the Properties of Jealousy in Othello,” in Shakespeare’s Domestic Economies (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2002), 129.

4. For the reliance of ideas of difference on humoral distinctions and the flexibility implicit in this system see Mary Floyd-Wilson, English Ethnicity and Race in Early Modern Drama (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003) and Daniel Vitkus, Turning Turk: English Theater and the Multicultural Mediterranean 1570–1630 (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003). Ania Loomba suggest that it was in fact the problem of conversion that “catalysed the development of ‘biological’ ideas of race,” suggesting that new, racialist discourses were created in response to the inadequacy and instability of existing racial discourse Shakespeare, Race, and Colonialism (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 26. For further evidence of a “climatological but non-essentializing discourse” of difference, see Carol Thomas Neely, “Hot Blood: Estranging Mediterranean Bodies in Early Modern Medical and Dramatic
5. See, for example, Lara Bovilsky, Barbarous Play: Race on the English Renaissance Stage (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008) and Sujata Iyengar, Shades of Difference (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005). While Bovilsky insists that an idea that we can understand as racialization that later becomes embedded in scientific racialism operates in the early modern period, Iyengar, following Raymond Williams, helpfully distinguishes between the residual, dominant, and emergent structures of feeling, arguing that a residual mythology of color competes with an emergent mythology of race over the course of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.


8. The Oxford English Dictionary cites multiple meanings of the word “blood” operating in the seventeenth century. Particularly frequent are references to blood as “taking of life, manslaughter, murder, death” (Def. 3a), “The vital fluid; hence, the vital principle, that upon which life depends; life” (Def. 4a), and “The supposed seat of emotion, passion;... Passion, temper, mood, disposition; emphatically, high temper, mettle; anger” (Def. 5). In addition, it bears the sense of familial kinship. However, the Oxford English Dictionary distinguishes between the definition of blood that is “popularly treated as the typical part of the body which children inherit from their parents and ancestors; hence that of parents and children, and of the members of a family or race, is spoken of as identical, and as being distinct from that of other families or races” (Def. 8) most popular in the nineteenth century and the notion of blood as “Blood-relationship, and esp. parentage, lineage, descent” (Def. 9a) more prevalent in the seventeenth century.


10. What follows is by no means an exhaustive list of discussions of race as calling on an increasingly fixed idea of biology in Othello. However, it should serve to offer some exemplary instances. Arthur A. Little, Jr., for instance, argues that “Blackness... is an individual body or soul that creates and gives meaning to already present cultural meanings.” He points back to the stability of the body as a foundation for cementing cultural meanings. Little, “‘An Essence that’s Not Seen’: The Primal Scene of Racism in Othello,” Shakespeare Quarterly 44, no. 3 (Autumn 1993): 304–24, esp. 322. Similarly, Karen Newman invokes the notion of “stock prejudices against blacks” implying the existence of a relatively stable racial discourse. Newman, “‘And wash the Ethiop white’: Femininity and the Monstrous in Othello,” Criti-
cal Essays in Shakespeare’s Othello, ed. Gerard Anthony Barthélémy (New York: G. K. Hall, 1994), 124–43, esp. 128. This discourse, which figures black men as overly preoccupied with sex, is one that Anthony Barthelemy argues even representations of non-villainous Moors confirms. Barthelemy, “Ethiops Washed White: Moors of the Nonvillainous Type,” Critical Essays in Shakespeare’s Othello, ed. Gerard Anthony Barthelemy, (New York: G. K. Hall, 1994), 92–104. Kim Hall argues that the use of the terminology of black and fair cannot be ignored as evidence of a racialized discourse. As Hall puts it, “The language of fairness and darkness is always potentially racialized.” Hall, Things of Darkness: Economies of Race and Gender in Early Modern England, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995), 261. In a similar vein, Dympna Callaghan argues that “black skin is at once immutable and superficial,” expressing a sense of racial essence, even if that essence is on the surface. Though these critics are right to point out the burgeoning racial discourse, to impute this sense to Othello himself or even to the broader Venetian community seems problematic.

11. See note 4.

12. For examples of the idea that Othello’s occupation drives him violently to restore a world of absolutes, see Vaughn, Othello, 50 and C.F. Burgess, Shakespeare Quarterly 26, no. 2 (Spring, 1975): 208–13.

13. Not all early modern medical texts operate with the same conception of the body. In addition to a burgeoning discourse of the mechanistic body, both Galenic and Paracelsian model compete in these texts. See Stephanie Moss, “Transformation and Degeneration: The Paracelsian/Galenic Body in Othello,” in Disease, Diagnosis, and Cure on the Early Modern Stage, eds. Stephanie Moss and Kaara L. Peterson (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2004), 55–68, esp. 58.

14. Andreas Vesalius, Compendios a totius anatomic delineation, aere exarata: per Thomam Geminum (London: 1553), 15r. The ascription of this text to Vesalius is somewhat misleading. Geminus copied plates from Vesalius’s De Humani Corporis Fabrica but appended a Fourteenth-century manuscript. See also page twenty six above.


18. Ibid., 129.

19. For further discussion of this distinction, see John Sutton, Philosophy and Memory Traces: Descartes to Connectionism (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), esp. 57.

20. Burton, Anatomy of Melancholy, 540. In early modern medicine, a “simple” is any medicine that is formed of a single constituent. See Oxford English Dictionary, “Simple” (Def. 6).

21. For a further discussion of the importance of miscegenation in the play see Newman, “And wash the Ethiop white.”

22. For further explication of the analogy between commonwealth, individual household, and individual health see Susan Dwyer Amussen, An Ordered Society: Gender and Class in Early Modern England (New York: Blackwell, 1988) and


24. Ibid., 728.


27. Ibid., 305.


30. “Spinster,” like blood, is a polyvalent term in early modern England, denoting alternately an occupation, a criminal category, or a sexual category. As an occupation, spinning could not be the sole means of support, and hence, Iago's invective disparages not only Cassio's masculinity but also his professional stature. See Fiona McNeill, *Poor Women in Shakespeare* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), esp. 31–34.


33. For a further discussion the split between mind and body circulating in early modern medical texts see Sugg, *Murder after Death*, 130–159.


40. Tellingly, Katharine Park points out the heart rather than the brain was the locus of selfhood until the eighteenth century. Katharine Park, *Secrets of Women: Gender, Generation, and the Origins of Human Dissection* (New York: Zone Books, 2006), 264. For the significance of the heart, see also William Slights, *The Heart in the Age of Shakespeare* (New York: Cambridge, 2008).