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***Othello* Circumcised: Shakespeare and the Pauline Discourse of Nations**

IN HIS ESSAY “IS THERE A NEO-RACISM?” Etienne Balibar proposes that we now live under a new ideology of the nations, a “racism-without-races” that promotes various forms of ethnic cleansing under the alibi of “cultural” identity, purity, or autonomy, a discourse that co-opts and neutralizes the postwar vocabulary of liberal humanism and pluralism. Balibar links this *neoracism* of the late modern to the *protoracism* of the early modern period:

A racism which does not have the pseudo-biological concept of race as its main driving force has always existed, and it has existed at exactly this level of secondary theoretical elaborations. Its prototype is anti-Semitism. Modern anti-Semitism—the form which begins to crystallize in the Europe of the Enlightenment, if not indeed from the period in which the Spain of the *Reconquista* and the Inquisition gave a statist, nationalistic inflexion to theological anti-Judaism—is *already* a “culturalist” racism. . . . in many respects the whole of current differentialist racism may be considered, from the formal point of view, as a *generalized anti-Semitism*. This consideration is particularly important for the interpretation of contemporary Arabaphobia, especially in France, since it carries with it an image of Islam as a “conception of the world” which is incompatible with Europeanness.¹

Mapping contemporary neo-racism onto the deep structures of anti-Semitism, Balibar derives the anti-Islamic strain in contemporary politics from the long tradition of anti-Jewish thought in Western historiography. Following Balibar’s diagnosis, I argue here that Shakespeare’s *Othello* provides a canonical articulation of this protoracism insofar as the play fashions the Muslim in the image of the Jew according to the protocols of Pauline exegesis; in Balibar’s terms, *Othello* stages a “culturalist” rather than biologicistic ordering of intergroup relations, a religiously grounded discourse barely visible from the vantage point of the modern racial theories that have since displaced it, yet intermittently readable in the strange light of the neoracism that has emerged in recent years.

A fundamental religious ambiguity vexes the racialization of Othello throughout the play; although his professed Christianity authorizes Othello’s place in Venice, the play never decisively determines whether he has converted from a pagan religion or from Islam. I argue that the black Gentile of a universal church undergirds *Othello*’s opening narrative of international romance, but that this divine comedy of pagan conversion is continually shadowed by the more troubling possibility of Othello’s entrance into Christianity via its disturbing neighbor, Islam. This secondary scenario, which subsumes Islam within what Balibar calls “a

generalized anti-Semitism,” situates the Moor in both greater proximity with and greater resistance to Christian Revelation than the pagan, who is conceived as a blank slate more open to a transformative Christian reinscription. These categories and their peculiar constellation in the play are inherited from Saint Paul’s division of humanity into Greek, Jew, and barbarian, national differences that are sublated in the ideal of the universal church. Yet this is an always-future universality, which is projected by the continued dialectic between the open embrace of the Christian message on the one hand and the residual ethnic exclusivism represented by the Jews on the other, a tension that provides a foundational mapping of the Western ethno-political field. In the typological schemes of the Renaissance, Islam represents a double scandal, the catastrophic bastardization of both Christian universalism—through the seductive danger of the Islamic world mission—and Jewish particularism, represented by Muslim allegiance to ritual laws and to an Abrahamic monotheism without Christ.

Disclosing the play’s reliance on the Pauline division of the nations necessarily reorients the current color-based approach to the play, in which the scandal of “monstrous” miscegenation inherited from the nineteenth-century racial Imaginary has come to govern *Othello*’s economy of differences.² Indeed, if we insist on grafting the typically modern question of Othello’s color onto the problem of Othello’s religion, the results might not fall where we expect them. Looking from Venice west and far to the south, toward pagan Africa and the New World, Othello would appear darker skinned, barbarian, and perhaps more capable of a full conversion because of his religious innocence. Looking east, toward Arabia and Turkey, and to the northern parts of Africa, Othello would become a Muslim-turned-Christian, probably lighter skinned than his Gentile version, inheritor of a monotheistic civilization already marked by frequent contacts with Christian Europe and hence more likely to go renegade. Whereas for the modern reader or viewer a black Othello is more subversive, “other,” or dangerous, in the Renaissance scene a paler Othello more closely resembling the Turks whom he fights might actually challenge more deeply the integrity of the Christian paradigms set up in the play as the measure of humanity. Critics have rightly decried the nineteenth-century movement to “whiten” or “orientalize” Othello.³ It is certainly not my intention to return to such a project but rather to insist that this move in the nineteenth century took place within an already racialized discourse, whereas in *Othello* religious difference is more powerfully felt than racial difference, which was only then beginning to surface in its virulent modern form. Rather than deciding what color Othello “really” is, I argue that the play initially draws moral and physiological “blackness” away from the diabolical and bestial imagery manipulated by Iago into the more positive circuit of the Gentile barbarian, a recuperation that in turn is undercut by the potential attraction between the “Moor” and the “Mohammedan.” Shakespeare does not use Christianity to rise above color-based racism so much as his play renders visible the blindspot of *ethnos* that

mortgages the inclusive vision of Christian humanism, a blindspot marked above all by the unerasable yet nongenetic scar of circumcision in Shakespeare's Venetian plays.

Entries into Covenant

Othello, one of Shakespeare's middle tragedies, has often been read as a rewriting of *The Merchant of Venice*: both are set in the mercantile city-state of Venice, both employ clearly marked "others," and both use the theme of conspicuous exogamy to heighten the conventional comedic situation of young lovers blocked by an old father. *Merchant* exhibits a comedic structure sharply typological in its countering of Jewish justice and Christian mercy, a set of scriptural coordinates more carefully submerged yet all the more powerfully at work in *Othello* as well. Iago's cry to Brabantio, "Look to your house, your daughter, and your bags," clearly recalls Shylock's wail, "'My daughter! O my ducats! O my daughter,'" and Brabantio, like Shylock, is promised "the bloody book of the law" in recompense for the loss of his daughter.⁴ Yet Brabantio of course is no Jew, but one of the "brothers of the state," a citizen and senator in this Christian maritime republic (*Othello* 1.2.98). The figure of Brabantio instantiates the type not so much of the Jew per se as of the *Jewish Christian* addressed by Saint Paul in his epistles to the Romans and the Galatians.

Paul opens the Epistle to the Romans by insisting on the inclusiveness of his message:

I am under obligation *both to Greeks and to barbarians*, both to the wise and to the foolish; so I am eager to preach the gospel *to you also who are in Rome*. For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to every one who has faith, *to the Jew first and also to the Greek*.⁵

In the first line, Paul expresses his obligation "to Greeks and to barbarians," taking up the Hellenistic division of the world between civilized Greek-speakers and inarticulate non-Greeks. Paul then extends his message to the Christian community in Rome, implicitly linked here to the Greeks as the modern inheritors of classical culture.⁶ The next verse moves from the Hellenistic opposition between Greeks and barbarians to the Hebraic division of peoples between Jews and Gentiles; Paul's judicious phrasing, "to the Jew first and also to the Greek," recognizes the historical priority of the Jews in the reception of Revelation, yet insists as well on the necessary dissemination of that message to the second, larger group of Greeks. The Hellenistic and Hebraic theories of the nations condensed in Paul's address to the Romans likely responds to the unhappy split of his audience between Gentile and Jewish converts to Christianity, the first group having no natural relation to the Hebrew Scriptures so central to Pauline hermeneutics, and the second circle still deeply invested in the laws of the Torah.⁷ Finally, these lines,

like the epistle in general, acknowledge and reconcile the claims of both groups in the new church by presenting faith as the common sign of righteousness for all Christians.

The legacy of Romans to the Western discourse of the nations is caught between Paul's urge to discount the legal observances of contemporary Jews on the one hand and to grant historical significance to the Jews as a people on the other, impulses that equally stem from Paul's sense of the Jews as an *ethnos*, a tribe or nation bound by a common language, law, and genealogy. Unlike Galatians, Romans does not forbid the observance of Jewish laws such as circumcision, but makes them *adiaphora*, matters of doctrinal indifference; put otherwise, such practices are (merely) *cultural*—belonging to the domain of communal custom, which, though not harmful and sometimes even positively good, nonetheless have no significance in the drama of salvation. In Daniel Boyarin's judgment, although Paul's project "is not anti-Semitic (or even anti-Judaic) in intent, it nevertheless has the effect of depriving continued Jewish existence of any reality or significance in the Christian economies of history."⁸ The triumph of the Gentile mission, by no means a given in Paul's historical moment, would eventually lead to the forthrightly anti-Jewish interpretation of Paul in the Church Fathers and Reformation theologians.⁹ Yet European modernity also owes to Paul the knitting of the Hebrew Bible, reconceived as the Old Testament, into the scriptural canon and exegetical consciousness of Gentile Christianity. As Hans Hübner has argued, Paul remained invested in "the theological relevance [of] the history of Israel";¹⁰ Paul's typological revaluation of the Torah, like his relativization of Jewish law, also springs from his cultural reading of Judaism, which, as the archetypal *ethnos*, coheres as a historical entity capable of modeling forth a comparable integrity for other nations and for the church in Christian historiography.¹¹

The Epistles divide the Jew between three basic types: those Jews who, like Paul, converted to Christianity; those Jews who remained Jewish, not accepting Jesus as the Messiah; and the ancient Israelites of the Hebrew Bible whose lives and words typologically predict the events of the new era. Whereas the Shylock of Shakespeare's earlier Venice is a figure of obdurate intransigence to Christian conversion in the typological tradition of Esau and Laban, Brabantio takes the rather different part of the Jewish Christians in Paul's epistle. Brabantio excludes Othello from the "nation of our wealthy, curled darlings" (*Othello* 1.2.69), implicitly equating "nation" with *natio* or birth; similarly, when Brabantio refers so confidently to his "brothers of the state," we are left with the religious question, "Who is my brother?"¹² Brabantio, like the Jewish Christians of Paul's Epistle to the Romans, would presumably restrict the circle of brothers to native Venetians, to those tied to him by blood and custom. Yet Brabantio, as a type of the Judaized Christian rather than a Jew proper, is not a villain; unlike Shylock or Barabas, Brabantio appears clannish but not evil, myopically wed to external appearances,

“to all things of sense” (1.2.65), but not without the Abrahamic virtue of hospitality that helped lead to the present crisis.

Othello, by extension, takes the roles of Gentile and barbarian in Paul’s divisions of the human kingdom. Othello’s entry into the play as a convert to Christianity initially stations him in the tradition of the three kings at the Epiphany, often represented as the European, African, and Asian recipients of Christianity’s world message in Renaissance iconography. Bearing exotic offerings of frankincense and myrrh to the manger of the Christ child, the African king Balthazar brings the gifts of his culture in the sense of *giving them up*, ceding a measure of cultural identity in the act of conversion.¹³ The three kings were typologically keyed to the three sons of Noah, taken as the forefathers of the world’s white, black, and yellow peoples; in such a scheme, Othello-as-Balthazar becomes the epochal negation of Ham, father of the black nations. In patristic and rabbinic traditions, Ham brought the curse of blackness onto his descendants by sleeping with his wife on the ark; Shakespeare, however, is careful to show Othello and Desdemona arriving from the “high-wrought flood” (*Othello* 2.1.2) and “enchafed flood” (2.1.17) on *separate ships*, redeeming rather than repeating Ham’s transgression.¹⁴ In these early scenes, the black Othello functions as the living symbol of Christian universalism, a social and spiritual vision that stands as the test of Brabantio’s “Judaizing” constructions of national brotherhood. Whereas in *Merchant*, Jessica’s elopement with Lorenzo from the house of Shylock stages the historic shift from Judaism to Christianity, in *Othello* the marriage of a barbarian groom to a Christian bride figures forth the extension of the Christian message from European Gentiles to all the nations of the world. From this typological perspective, the marriage of white and black, of Greek and barbarian, far from representing a monstrosity or scandal, assumes almost cosmic significance, its harmonies resonating with the exultant coloratura of the Song of Songs.

This epochal scene of Gentile conversion, I argue, initially controls the play of black-white imagery in the drama. Iago uses bestial and demonic images of blackness in order to deform and prejudice Brabantio’s—and by extension the audience’s—reception of the elopement. Iago in turn has his own strange links to the world of *Merchant*: his famous negation of the Jewish God’s unspeakable name, “I am not what I am” (*Othello* 1.1.67), flags him as the Devil of the play and roots him in a parodically Old Testament *ethos* of historical *ressentiment*, seasoned by the damaged pride and nurtured spite of all the Cains, Ishmaels, and Esaus passed over in the Bible for younger favored sons. It is Iago, for example, who warns Brabantio about “your house, your daughter, and your bags,” as if the character of Iago were responsible for raising the spirit of *The Merchant of Venice* into *Othello*. Even Iago’s infamous image of bestial cross-coupling, “an old black ram / Is tupping your white ewe” (1.1.90–91), echoes *Merchant*’s most egregious pun, that between “ewes” and “Iewes,”¹⁵ irradiating the play’s most cited example of color-

based racism with an animus of a different color. Iago's presentation of blackness as the sign of a savage, unredeemable nature is soon marked by the play as historically bankrupted through the epochal weight granted to Othello as a latter-day Balthazar (the name chosen by Portia in *Merchant's* trial scene), a Christian soldier who traces "his life and being / From men of royal siege" (*Othello* 1.2.21–22), an exegetical genealogy that derives his noble personage from the three kings of a global Epiphany.¹⁶

It would be easy enough, however, to love this vision of Christian humanism not wisely but too well. In Shakespeare's Venetian plays, Christian-humanist discourse always operates as a *universalism minus the circumcised*, a set that excludes not the unconverted pagans of the New World but rather the Jews and the Muslims, strict monotheisms existing not far away but close at hand. Judaism and Islam stem from the same Abrahamic lineage as Christianity; the three groups are, in the Muslim phrase, "people of the book," religions organized around revealed Scriptures that share many of the same prophets and patriarchs. Othello's role as defender of the faith against the Mohammedan Turks is faulted by the possibility that he has converted to Christianity from Islam, an entry into a covenant that would trace a different arc from that of the Gentile barbarian, locating the pre-Christian Othello not *ante legem*—before or outside the revealed law that singled out the Jews from the nations of the world—but *sub lege*, under a stringent monotheism untempered by Christ's love.¹⁷ John Pory's appendix to his 1600 translation of Leo Africanus's *History and Description of Africa* lists four religions on the dark continent, "Gentiles, Iewes, Mahumetans, and Christians,"¹⁸ a catalog that clearly distinguishes "Mahumetans" from "Gentiles." *The Policy of the Turkish Empire*, an anonymous tract from 1597, differentiates between Muslim monotheism and Gentile polytheism: "Touching the Godhead, [Muslims] acknowledge both with the Iews and Christians that there is one onely God: Wherein they differ from the Gentiles, who had their multiplicitie of Gods."¹⁹ Such passages separate Islam out from paganism and correlate it with Judaism based on the two religions' scriptural, legal, and monotheistic bases.

In Christian typology, the Muslim was bound to the Jew through the figure of Ishmael. For Saint Paul, Ishmael is the type of the carnal Israel or modern Jew:

For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by a slave and one by a free woman. But the son of the slave was born according to the flesh, the son of the free woman through promise. Now this is an allegory: these women are two covenants. One is from Mount Sinai, bearing children for slavery; she is Hagar. Now Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia; she corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children. (Gal. 4.22–25)

With the rise of Islam, the figure of Ishmael as a negative type of the Jew was transferred onto Mohammed, a translation already authorized by the Islamic appropriation of Ishmael for its own prophetic genealogy. Christian typologists also

used Esau, Pharaoh, and Herod to couple the Jew and the Muslim as carnal children of Abraham facing each other across the world-historic break effected by the Incarnation.²⁰ Islam, the youngest of the three Abrahamic religions, represented to Renaissance Christianity a kind of Judaism after the fact, a redoubling of Jewish intransigence in the face of Christian revelation. As such, Islam executed a second, even crueler affront to Christianity's historical vision of epochal succession, since modern Judaism (from the Christian perspective) is merely a residual carryover from an earlier moment, but Islam from its very inception carried out its proselytizing mission in full knowledge of Christian teachings. The rapid expansion of Islam, however, presented the inverse of Judaism's dispersed, sequestered, and inward-looking communities. The third Revelation announced by Islam rejected the particularism associated with Judaism in favor of the universalism pioneered by Christianity; like the rulers of European Christendom, the Arab and then Turkish empires used the theme of spiritual equality among the nations to support their religious and political projects.²¹

Brabantio's warning against "bondslaves and pagans" (*Othello* 1.2.101) acknowledges the two possible avenues of Othello's entry into Christianity. More than simply synonyms, the pointedly paired words represent distinct locations in the play's conceptual geography of the nations: the bondsman names the condition of Hagar, her offspring, and his Ishmaelite progeny, while the pagan identifies the state of the Gentile barbarian, potential recipient of the expanded Pauline mission. Whereas the first acts of the play establish Othello as Christian soldier and devoted husband, the middle movement of the tragedy instigates a crisis in both the marital and the religious covenants that bind Othello to Venice. If the remainder of the play charts Othello's increasing distance from the role of the African king established in act one, we must pay attention to the effects that these competing scripts for the entry into covenant have on Othello's tragic exit from it. As the play progresses, is Othello, as critics have frequently suggested, *paganized*—made exotic, savage, and barbaric—or is he also *Islamicized and Judaized*, brought back into contact with a law that should have been dissolved by the rite of baptism? In the play, paganization describes Othello's decline into gullibility, madness, and cruelty, a process emblemized by the infamous handkerchief, its subtile fabric woven out of the iconography of the Gentile gods. Even as Othello descends into pagan fury, however, he also begins to "turn Turk" (2.3.164), a phrase that names Islamicization as a tragic trajectory that runs alongside the path of barbarization, paralleling, elaborating, and deviating from it. This second path reverts not to anarchy *ante legem* but to a tyranny *sub lege*, a transformation embodied by Othello's increasing identification with a jealous justice that must be executed at any cost, a law driven by the fierce monogamy of an immoderate monotheism.

This process climaxes in Othello's anguished retort to Desdemona's denials:

Thou dost stone my heart,
And makes me call what I intend to do
A murder, which I thought a sacrifice.
(5.2.67–69)

Othello's "sacrifice" simultaneously identifies him with the old law, ruled by the Lord "whose name is Jealous" (Exod. 34.14), and indicates the law's epochal supersession by Desdemona's obedient love, insofar as her death resonates with (though by no means simply instantiates) that of Christ. Whereas studies of race in the play tend to emphasize the movement of paganization, feminist critics have noted Othello's increasing association with justice, usually understood as the masculinist tenets of Judeo-Christian patriarchy.²² My point is somewhat different: Othello's justice, like that of Shylock, serves to separate the Semitic strands out of the Judeo-Christian synthesis even while grotesquely reinforcing the authority of the husband; although Othello's increasing alliance with the law is indeed patriarchal, I would insist on the Abrahamic (Judeo-Islamic) connotations of the word *patriarch*.²³

Othello Circumcised

Othello's final autobiography stages his double placement in the narratives of paganization and Islamicization:

Then must you speak
Of one that loved not wisely but too well;
Of one not easily jealous but, being wrought,
Perplexed in the extreme; of one whose hand,
Like the base Indian [Iudean],²⁴ threw a pearl away
Richer than all his tribe; of one whose subdued eyes,
Albeit unused to the melting mood,
Drops tears as fast as the Arabian trees
Their medicinable gum. Set you down this:
And say besides that in Aleppo once,
Where a malignant and a turbaned Turk
Beat a Venetian and traduced the state,
I took by th'throat the circumcised dog
And smote him, thus.

(5.2.353–66)

In the exotic parable of the base Indian, the rejected pearl condenses the murder of Desdemona with Othello's departure from Christianity. The first simile is swiftly followed by the reference to tears that drop "as fast as the Arabian trees/ Their medicinable gum," an elaborate circumlocution for myrrh. As nativity gift (Matt. 2.11), myrrh manifests the economy of conversion, in which the Gentile

kings bring the precious distillations of their countries in exchange for a place in the Christian order. In the wake of Desdemona's murder, the myrrh also functions as a figure of Othello's regret and repentance for having reneged on that contract, becoming the medium of a "melting mood" that dissolves the universalist iconography of Epiphany into the scene of conversion's *reversion* back into the strange substances that distinguish the nations. As the symbol of the Epiphany and its dissolution, the myrrh tree situates Othello in a pagan scene, darkening his skin in its allusive shade.

Yet, as critics have pointed out, the Folio text's substitution of "Iudean" for "Indian" installs Othello's tragedy within another set of mytho-historical coordinates. Since Lewis Theobald's eighteenth-century edition, editors and critics have occasionally favored the Folio reading, referring it to Judas's betrayal of Christ and to the Herod-Mariam story of jealous murder, taken from Josephus's *Jewish War* and *Antiquities of the Jews* as the material for several neo-Senecan dramas.²⁵ Like Brabantio's restricted use of "nation," the "tribe" of the "base Iudean" implies a circumscribed and *circumcised* worldview in which the Christian pearl finds no proper place, a rejection that stems not from the ignorance of the Indian but from the knowledge of good and evil brought about by the law.²⁶ Moreover, if we read "base Iudean" in terms of the Herod and Mariam story, a now familiar typological scenario takes shape within the confines of the simile. Herod, an Iudmean descended from Esau, is a type of the latter-day Muslim as well as the inveterate Jew, and his maligned but faithful wife Mariam, a sacrificial victim in the Christological pattern shared with Desdemona, represents the righteous remnant who makes possible the historic transition into the new era.²⁷

Rather than selecting "Iudean" over "Indian," I follow Edward Snow in insisting instead that "each variant suggests a different side of Othello."²⁸ "Indian" describes the more broadly drawn, more theatrically powerful movement of the drama as the tragic breakdown of Gentile conversion, yet the almost effortless substitution of "Indian" by "Iudean" follows the path of Islamicization that falls out of the play's dominant turn toward barbarism, articulating both paganism and Islam as the starting points of two separate itineraries into and out of Christianity. Othello's recollection of the Turk in Aleppo flows out of this auxiliary reading. As critics have often argued, Othello's reenactment of his earlier heroics both identifies him with the Turk and kills off that identification in the act of suicide, reasserting Othello's allegiance to the Christian ethics whose standard he has borne. Yet these readings too often identify the Turk simply as a "barbaric enemy," "the Infidel," or one of a "proliferating series of exoticized others."²⁹ To the contrary, it is my project to distinguish the Judean from the Indian, the Jew and the Muslim from the Gentile pagan.

As Lynda Boose, one of the few critics to move beyond the pagan reading, has pointed out, circumcision rather than skin color is the trait that Othello "invokes as the final, inclusive sign of his radical Otherness."³⁰ Iago had already

evoked an epochal reading of circumcision when he advised Cassio to elect Desdemona as his petitioner:

And then for her
To win the Moor—were't to renounce his baptism,
All seals and symbols of redeemed sin—
His soul is so en fettered to her love
That she may make, unmake, do what she list.
(*Othello* 2.3.336–40)

The phrase “*seals and symbols of redeemed sin*” links baptism to Saint Paul’s reading of circumcision as “a *sign or seal*” of faith (Rom. 4.11).³¹ In Judaism, circumcision has a performative or constitutive function; it is a “seal” in the sense of an official imprimatur that validates and authenticates the contract between man and God.³² *Brit milah*, “the covenant of circumcision,” operates as a kind of signature, since it ratifies a contract and confers a Hebrew name; written on the body of the infant, this name at once identifies the child’s absolute uniqueness and situates him in a network of genealogical relations.

For Paul, however, circumcision becomes an outward mark designed to reflect an internal condition of faith, a “sign” in the sense of an external indication. In Paul’s words, “he is not a real Jew who is one outwardly, nor is true circumcision something external and physical. He is a Jew who is one inwardly, and real circumcision is a matter of the heart, spiritual and not literal” (Rom. 2.28–29). In the new era, circumcision is relegated to the status of a fallen sign (a mark that may or may not manifest a corresponding inner condition) and a merely legal seal (a bodily signature that establishes a purely formal covenant unmediated by spirit). In the dialectic of Christian history, circumcision gives way to baptism, a sacrament that leaves no bodily trace of its operation, its transparent and reflective waters dissolving the blood and erasing the scar of circumcision’s violently inscriptive cut.

In the judgment of James Shapiro, “More than anything else in the sixteenth century . . . Paul’s ideas about circumcision saturated what Shakespeare’s contemporaries thought, wrote, and heard about circumcision.”³³ I would add that it was above all the rite of circumcision in its Pauline articulation that emblemized the affiliation between the Jew and the Muslim in Christian typological thought. The author of the *Policy of the Turkish Empire* lays out the status of the law in the three religions:

For as the Iews had a particular lawe given unto them and published by God himselve in mount Sinai . . . So have the Turkes (in imitation of the same) certaine lawes and precepts or Commandements laide downe in their Alcoran . . . Which argueth that their confidence and hope of salvation consisteth chiefly in the pietie and merite of their vertuous life, and good deedes: And that they doe not much differ in that point from the opinion of some Christians, who do attribute their salvation unto their merites.³⁴

The passage sets up Islamic law as a belated version of the Torah and an alienating mirror of the Catholic Church. The author goes on to single out circumcision as a law that had once been “a most holy and sacred sacrament,” but “is now converted . . . to a most idle and vaine ceremony” among Jews and Muslims.³⁵ The tract, though strongly polemical, actually makes some progress in depicting basic Islamic tenets and practices, differing on many points from the fantastic accounts disseminated from medieval sources. If the typological perspective threatens to make Islam disappear into Judaism, reductively appropriating the one religion to the more familiar paradigms of the other, I would also insist that the special historical consciousness born of typology—the interest in coherent epochs or “cultures” fundamental to Western philosophies of history—also helps account for the tract’s relative success in depicting a foreign worldview. In the *Policy of the Turkish Empire*, the assimilative-reductionist and the descriptive-historiographical poles of typological consciousness exist in something of a balance; the same might be said for the mimetic successes of *The Merchant of Venice* and their further elaboration in *Othello*.

Christopher Marlowe’s *Jew of Malta*, on the other hand, with its more naked debts to medieval drama, lies toward the allegorical side of the typological continuum; in Marlowe’s play, the cut of circumcision equates Jew and Muslim with an exemplary if reductive clarity that Shakespeare transmits in more sublimated forms. The Jew Barabas chooses as his slave, partner-in-crime, and successor the Muslim Ithamore by acknowledging their affiliation: “Make account of me / As of thy fellow; we are villains both: / Both *circumcisèd*, we hate Christians both.”³⁷ The fellowship between the Jew and the Muslim has been signed and sealed in advance by the shared mark of circumcision, a permanent bodily sign that establishes membership in a group but, unlike racial traits such as skin color, is produced through the deliberate execution of ritual law. The name Ithamore is itself borrowed from the Old Testament, where “Ithamar” appears as the youngest son of Aaron (Exod. 6.23); by intensifying “-mar” into “-more,” Marlowe has effectively Islamicized this type of the Jewish priest, semantically flagging the link between Judaic and Muslim law according to the habits of Christian typology.³⁸

In appointing himself both confessor and executioner of Desdemona, Othello struggles to assume a priestly as well as a judicial function, becoming an “Ithamore,” a Moorish son of Aaron, but in a higher, more interiorized, mimetic register than that elaborated in Marlowe’s farcical morality play. In his suicide speech, Othello’s drawn sword at once points outward to circumcision as the trait identifying the object of his scorn, and reflexively *returns* it onto Othello’s own body as the very means of death, a final stroke that cuts off his life by turning the Turk into and onto himself. In one arc of its meaning, this cut redeems the Moor in death, restoring him to the history of Venice as one who has “done the state some service” and who, like Mary Magdalene, has “loved not wisely but too well.” From this perspective, circumcision functions as the emblem of Christian typology par

excellence, the vehicle of world-historical cancellation that allows for the reconversion of the Moor to Christianity. Othello's suicide, that is, functions as a martyrological baptism in blood, an act that completes and terminates the era of the law; through his suicide, Othello has become literally "circumcised in the heart," not unlike Antonio in Shakespeare's earlier Venetian play. At the same time, the cut that (re)circumcises Othello does not disappear into its typological sublations. Instead it reinstates the Hebraic function of the signature, the written letters of a legally ratifying and subjectively identifying mark that dislodges Othello from the Christian historical order by locating him in a different covenant. In this sense, the suicide effects a circumcision according to the Judeo-Islamic rather than the Pauline-internal paradigm, constituting a self-validating signature that separates out Islam as a historico-theological position distinct from paganism, a regime defined by the singular imprint of circumcision as the persistent "seal and symbol" of the law. With this ritual gesture, Othello signs his final autobiography, exacerbating and inflaming as much as redeeming that ancient scar in the Pauline discourse of nations. This momentary positing of Islam as its own dispensation both exceeds the typological vision (which would reduce Islam to its own categories of faith and nationhood) and is itself anticipated by the historiographical impulse of Christianity as a narrative of epochal relations.

Paul's ethno-political theology can accommodate the vast differences between the Greek and the barbarian, but not the very little difference between the circumcised and the uncircumcised. In *Othello*—Shakespeare's second letter to the Venetians—Christian universalism, circling around the black body of the Gentile convert, has the capacity to envision if not realize a world of *racial* equality. It is worth asserting here that Christianity, like Islam, is a world religion, not a race, and does not belong to any civilization as either its special heritage or its colonial weapon, to whatever degree it has been used as such. What Shakespeare's Pauline Christianity—and this is a paradox besetting all revealed religions—has more difficulty imagining is a world of *religious* equality among the people of the book, an equality in which circumcision, maintained as an external mark of covenant not erased through spiritualization, could be accounted for rather than discounted by Christianity's historical scheme. In *Othello*, the romance of Gentile conversion supports the dream of a universal brotherhood that allows Shakespeare to set up and see through the black-white opposition. Yet this Christian-humanist discourse always operates as a universalism minus the circumcised; the Jew and the Muslim are subtracted from the nations of the world ingathered by Christianity, singled out and cut off by the ritual stroke through which they continue to distinguish themselves. Odd as it may seem to contemporary readers caught up in the horizon of modern racism, it is Othello's religious rather than racial traits that prove more intractable in the Christian vision staged by Shakespeare's play, an obduracy that points in turn to the vicissitudes of Renaissance

protoracism in the shapes of *neoracism* that have emerged at the end of our bloody century.

Notes

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1. Etienne Balibar, "Is There a Neo-Racism?" in Etienne Balibar and Emmanuel Wallerstein, *Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities*, trans. Chris Turner (London, 1991), 23–24.
2. The groundwork for this orientation was laid by the historical criticism of Eldred Jones, *Othello's Countrymen: The African in English Renaissance Drama* (London, 1965), and G. K. Hunter, "Othello and Colour Prejudice," in *Dramatic Identities and Cultural Tradition: Studies in Shakespeare and His Contemporaries* (Liverpool, Eng., 1978), as well as the political and psychoanalytic myth criticism of Leslie A. Fiedler, *The Stranger in Shakespeare* (New York, 1972). In the recent wave of essays, the black-white opposition has been most fruitfully explored by Arthur Little, "'An essence that's not seen': The Primal Scene of Racism in *Othello*," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 44, no. 3 (Fall 1993): 304–24, and Jonathan Crewe, "Out of the Matrix: Shakespeare's Race-Writing," *Yale Journal of Criticism* 8, no. 2 (1995): 13–29. Karen Newman, "'And wash the Ethiop white': Femininity and the Monstrous in *Othello*," in *Shakespeare Reproduced: The Text in History and Ideology*, ed. Jean E. Howard and Marion F. O'Connor (New York, 1987); Patricia Parker, "Fantasies of 'Race' and 'Gender': Africa, *Othello*, and Bringing to Light," in Margo Hendricks and Patricia Parker, *Women, "Race," and Writing in the Early Modern Period* (London, 1994); and Michael Neill, "Unproper Beds: Race, Adultery, and the Hideous in *Othello*," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 40, no. 4 (Winter 1989), have focused on monstrosity and miscegenation. Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning from More to Shakespeare* (Chicago, 1980); Parker; Newman; and Emily Bartels, "Making More of the Moor: Aaron, Othello, and Renaissance Refashionings of Race," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 41, no. 4 (Winter 1990), have excavated travel narratives as sources and models of *Othello's* protocolonial practice, a dimension emphasized from a postcolonial angle in Ania Loomba, "The Color of Patriarchy: Critical Difference, Cultural Difference, and Renaissance Drama," in Hendricks and Parker, *Women, "Race," and Writing*; and Ania Loomba, *Gender, Race, Renaissance Drama* (Manchester, Eng., 1989). Bartels assumes that Othello was a Muslim, but does not develop the tensions between race and religion, a dynamic on which Lynda Boose, "'The Getting of a Lawful Race': Racial Discourse in Early Modern England and the Unrepresentable Black Woman," in Hendricks and Parker, *Women, "Race," and Writing*, has reflected suggestively.
3. See Neill, "Unproper Beds," 385.
4. *Othello*, ed. David Bevington (New York, 1980), 1.1.82; *The Merchant of Venice*, ed. John Russell Brown (London, 1955), 2.7.15; *Othello* 1.3.69–71. (All subsequent citations of these plays are from these editions.)

5. Rom. 1.14–16, in Wayne Meeks, ed., *The Writings of St. Paul* (New York, 1972). (All subsequent citations of Paul are from this edition; emphasis added.)
6. As Wayne Meeks comments, Paul “looks to Rome . . . as the center of the known world, and his visit there becomes a symbol for the universality of his mission ‘among all the Gentiles’ (Rom. 1.5)” ; Meeks, *Writings of St. Paul*, 66.
7. According to modern scholars of Paul, the Jewish community in Rome, including those who had converted to Christianity, had been exiled by Claudius around 49 c.e. and returned to the city with the accession of Nero in 54, a return that may have led to tensions between Gentile and Jewish Christians in the Roman church at the time of Paul’s letter; Meeks, *Writings of St. Paul*, 67. Hans Hübner summarizes and rejects this argument, taking what seems to be a minority position, namely that Paul’s more tolerant attitude toward Jewish law in Romans (as compared to Galatians) reflects a change of heart rather than of rhetorical situation; Hans Hübner, *Law in Paul’s Thought*, ed. John Riches, trans. James C. G. Greig (1978, reprint: Edinburgh, 1984), 5.
8. Daniel Boyarin, *A Radical Jew: Paul and the Politics of Identity* (Berkeley, 1994), 32.
9. The twentieth century has seen a more balanced look at Paul’s Jewish sources as well as a salutary extrication of Paul from the anti-Jewish exegetical traditions founded on his epistles by figures such as Martin Luther. On Paul and Judaism, see W. D. Davies, *Paul and Rabbinic Judaism: Some Rabbinic Elements in Pauline Theology* (1955, reprint: New York, 1967), and E. P. Sanders, *Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People* (Philadelphia, 1983); for examples of revisionist Christian readings of Paul in the wake of the Holocaust, see Alan Davies, ed., *Antisemitism and the Foundations of Christianity* (New York, 1979). For a brief history of Pauline scholarship in light of the Jewish question, see Boyarin, *Radical Jew*, 39–56.
10. Hübner, *Law*, 56.
11. Erich Auerbach, in his still definitive essay on typological interpretation, writes that this exegetical principle insured that the Old Testament became part of European civilization; Erich Auerbach, “Figura,” in *Scenes from the Drama of European Literature* (1959, reprint: Minneapolis, Minn., 1984), 52. See also Karl Löwith on the importance of the Biblical idea of the nation for Western historiography; Karl Löwith, *Meaning in History* (Chicago, 1949), 195–96.
12. The distinction between “brother” and “stranger” established in Deuteronomy is of course crucial to the intergroup economy of *The Merchant of Venice*; whereas the Jew distinguishes “brother” and “stranger,” not lending money to the one but permitting it to the other, the Christian is supposed to take all men as his brother; Marc Shell, *Money, Language, and Thought* (Baltimore, 1982), 51. Brabantio presumably concurs with Roderigo’s assessment that the Moor is “an extravagant and wheeling stranger” (*Othello* 1.1.139)—not included in the Venetian brotherhood.
13. Peter Erikson, “Representations of Blacks and Blackness in the Renaissance,” *Criticism* 34, no. 4 (Fall 1993): 499–527. Shakespeare uses epiphany imagery in his description of Morocco’s love of Portia: “‘Who chooseth me shall gain what many men desire./ Why, that’s the lady, all the world desires her./ From the four corners of the earth they come / To kiss this shrine, this mortal breathing saint” (*Merchant* 2.7.37–40). With the exception of Erikson, recent critics of *Othello* ignore this strand of racial iconography. Loomba, *Gender*, 42; Anthony Barthelemy, *Black Face, Maligned Race: The Representation of Blacks in English Drama from Shakespeare to Southerne* (Baton Rouge, La., 1987), 3–4; and Little, “Primal Scene,” 308, emphasize the equation of blackness with evil and devilishness in the Christian tradition but do not note the countertheme of Gentile conversion.

14. Hunter cites Bede's commentary on St. Matthew: "Mystice autem tres Magi tres partes mundi significant, Asiam, Africam, Europam, sive humanum genus, quod a tribus filiis Noe seminarium sumpsit"; Hunter, "Othello and Colour Prejudice," 50. For the patristic tradition on Ham, see Augustine *City of God*, ed. David Knowles, trans. Henry Bettenson (Harmondsworth, Eng., 1972), 16.11; for the rabbinic tradition, see *Genesis Rabbah*, in *Midrash Rabbah*, trans. H. Freedman (London, 1983), 1:36–37. For another Renaissance figure of the African king as a symbol of the universality of the Christian message, see Thomas Middleton's 1613 masque, *The Triumph of Truth*, in which the conversion to Christianity of a "king of the Moors" epitomizes the "triumph of truth" announced in the masque's title. His visit to England is a modern epiphany narrative: "Nor could our desires rest till we were led / Unto this place, where those good spirits were bred"; Thomas Middleton, *The Triumph of Truth*, in *The Works of Thomas Middleton*, ed. A. H. Bullen (New York, 1964), 7:248. Samuel Chew comments on the masque in *The Crescent and the Rose: Islam and England During the Renaissance* (1937, reprint: New York, 1965), 463–65. The Ham story has received much play in recent criticism of *Othello* as a primal scene of Renaissance racism in Newman, "Femininity and the Monstrous," 146–47; Barthelemy, *Black Face*, 3; and Little, "Primal Scene," 308. I have not seen mention, however, of the way that Shakespeare stages the "flood" near Cyprus as the typological antidote to the Old Testament story, effectively replacing Ham with Balthazar.
15. Shell, *Money*, 49.
16. The foundations of this humanist reading of race in *Othello* were laid by Eldred Jones, who argued that the first scenes of the play introduce us to Othello through the jaundiced eyes of Iago in order to correct his contaminating language with the figure cut by Othello himself, and by G. K. Hunter, who demonstrated that the universalist dream of a world Christianity is what makes possible act one's judicious weighing of Iago's conventional stereotypes against Othello's natural dignity; Jones, *Othello's Countrymen*, 87–93; Hunter, "Othello and Colour Prejudice," 49.
17. The period *ante legem* dates from Adam to Moses, *sub lege* from Moses to Christ, and *sub gratia* from Christ onward; Howard Hibbard, *Michelangelo*, 2d ed. (New York, 1974), 99–125.
18. John Pory, "A summarie discourse of the manifold Religions professed in Africa," appended to Leo Africanus, *The History & Description of Africa* (1600), trans. John Pory, ed. Robert Brown (London, 1896), 3:1001–50.
19. *The Policy of the Turkish Empire* (London, 1597), 15.
20. On Arab genealogy in Christian exegesis, see Norman Daniels, *Islam and the West: The Making of an Image* (Edinburgh, 1960), 128. On the reading of Pharaoh and Herod as Muslims, see Chew, *Crescent*, 390, 395.
21. Bernard Lewis, *Race and Color in Islam* (New York, 1970), 1–28.
22. See Lynda Boose, "Othello's Handkerchief: 'The Recognizance and Pledge of Love,'" *English Literary Renaissance* 5, no. 3 (Autumn 1975): 372–73.
23. For Othello's identification with an angry or untempered justice, see also *Othello* 2.3.69–72 and 5.1.1–3. In an unpublished lecture, Joseph Chaney has productively linked Othello's jealousy to that of the "Judeo-Christian God"; Joseph Chaney, "Othello's Jealousy and the Triangle of Desire" (lecture delivered at Indiana University, South Bend, Ind., March 1994). Monogamy and monotheism are firmly linked in the Jewish tradition, for example in the keying of the commandment against idolatry to the parallel commandment against adultery in the adjoining tablet; Avroham Chaim Feuer, *Aseres Hadibros/The Ten Commandments: A New Translation with Commentary Anthologized*

from *Talmudic, Midrashic, and Rabbinic Sources* (New York, 1981), 33. Boose notes the Deuteronomic sources for the “sacrifice” of an adulterous woman, but does not single out the specifically Old Testament provenance of the law (Deuteronomy being an especially charged text in the typological economy of *Merchant*); Boose, “Othello’s Handkerchief,” 372.

24. As editor David Bevington notes, the Quarto gives “Indian” (selected in most modern editions), but the Folio gives “Iudean,” chosen by some editors and critics; *Othello*, 126 n.
25. Critics who prefer “base Iudean” include Richard S. Veit, “‘Like the Base Judean’: A Defense of an Oft-Rejected Reading in *Othello*,” *English Literary Renaissance* 10, no. 3 (Autumn 1980), and Gordon Braden, who reads *Othello* in the context of Herod-Mariam dramas; Gordon Braden, *Renaissance Tragedy and the Senecan Tradition: Anger’s Privilege* (New Haven, Conn., 1985), 153–71. Edward Snow provides a powerful defense of retaining both readings; Edward Snow, “Sexual Anxiety and the Male Order of Things in *Othello*,” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 26 (1975): 412; citing Veit, he points out that “the word ‘tribe’ is never used in connection with Indians in Shakespeare. It primarily connotes ‘clan’ for him, often in connection with the ‘tribes of the world’” (412). Fiedler, *Stranger*, 195–96, makes a strong case for “Iudean,” but then chooses “Indian” instead. Josephus’s accounts of the Herod-Mariam romance are excerpted in Elizabeth Cary’s *The Tragedy of Mariam: The Fair Queen of Jewry*, ed. Barry Weller and Margaret W. Ferguson (Berkeley, 1994).
26. See St. Paul: “If it had not been for the law, I should not have known sin”; Rom. 7.7.
27. Dympna Callaghan provides a related reading of the Herod-Mariam story in her interpretation of Cary’s *Tragedie of Mariam*; Callaghan, however, emphasizes not the typological split between the intransigent modern Jew and the successful Jewish convert (the Esau-Jacob pair), but rather the “racialization” or blackening of Herod and the concomitant whitening of Mariam. Crudely put, in Callaghan’s reading, racial difference precedes and governs religious difference; Dympna Callaghan, “Re-reading Elizabeth Cary’s *The Tragedie of Mariam, Faire Queene of Jewry*,” in Hendricks and Parker, *Women, “Race,” and Writing*. In my reading, religious difference precedes and governs racial difference.
28. Snow, “Sexual Anxiety,” 412.
29. Braden, *Renaissance Tragedy*, 169; Loomba, *Gender, Race, Renaissance Drama*, 48; Parker, “Fantasies of ‘Race’ and ‘Gender,’” 98.
30. Boose, “Racial Discourse,” 40.
31. In Rom. 4, Paul notes that the declaration of Abraham’s faith in Genesis 15.6 (“And he believed the Lord; and he reckoned it to him as righteousness”) precedes by several chapters God’s institution of the rite of circumcision (Gen. 17.11). From this, Paul argues that Abraham “received circumcision as a sign or seal of the righteousness which he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised” (Rom. 4.11).
32. In a related argument, Boyarin, *Radical Jew*, 37, cites midrashim that depict circumcision as a writing of God’s name on the body.
33. James Shapiro, *Shakespeare and the Jews* (New York, 1996), 117.
34. *Policy of the Turkish Empire*, 15.
35. *Ibid.*, 23. In Islam, circumcision is a custom rather than a law, though I have not seen this point acknowledged in the Elizabethan literature on Islam, which generally assimilates the Moslem practice to the more familiar Jewish one.
36. Chew, *Crescent*, 443–44.
37. Christopher Marlowe, *The Jew of Malta*, in Russell A. Fraser and Norman C. Rabkin,

eds., *Drama of the English Renaissance*, vol. 1, *The Tudor Period* (New York, 1976), 225–27 (emphasis added).

38. Editors Fraser and Rabkin note the borrowing; *ibid.*, 276 n. In *Titus Andronicus*, Shakespeare would clarify Marlowe's allusive conflation of the two identities by simply naming his Moor "Aaron," substituting the familiar father for the obscure son.