

# INTERRACIAL COURTSHIPS IN SHAKESPEARE'S PLAYS

Tim McCaffrey

---

Even now, now, very now, an old black ram  
is tupping your white ewe. (*Oth.* 1.1.90-91)  
...you'll have  
your daughter covered with a Barbary horse; you'll  
have your nephews neigh to you... (*Oth.* 1.i.113-5)

In Shakespeare's *Othello*, Iago repeatedly uses bestial imagery to warn Brabantio that Desdemona, in choosing Othello, has not only run off and married without permission, but has also married outside her race. The use of bestial imagery highlights the popular distaste for such a match during Shakespeare's time. The possibility of interracial marriage, in most cases accompanied by the disapproval of the woman's father, is a device used by Shakespeare in *The Tempest*, *The Merchant of Venice*, and, most centrally, in *Othello*, *the Moor of Venice*. This essay will explore the presentation of interracial and interfaith courtship and marriages in these plays.

Courtships in the Renaissance were a complex tapestry of rules and mores; the complications, politics, and financial obligations of marriage are a common theme in many of Shakespeare's plays. As Margaret Loftus Ranald writes in "As Marriage Binds, and Blood Breaks': English Marriage and Shakespeare," "In general, Shakespeare concerns himself with such obvious matrimonial topics as betrothals, contracting, premarital intercourse (antenuptial immorality), impediments to marriage, and the marriage ceremony itself" (69). In *The Tempest*, *The Merchant of Venice*, and *Othello*, Shakespeare adds the element of race to the already boiling matrimonial stew. In *The Tempest*, a deposed Duke named Prospero and his daughter Miranda have been stranded on an island for many years. Prospero and Miranda are served by Caliban, a man who is living on the island when Prospero and Miranda arrive. In the beginning, Prospero loves Caliban, yet ultimately Prospero enslaves him. Caliban, who could be perceived as representing the native inhabitants of islands being colonized by the European powers, believes that Prospero's island belongs to him and that Prospero stole the island from him, as evidenced by his speech:

This island's mine, by Sycorax my mother,  
Which thou tak'st from me. When thou cam'st first,  
Thou strok'st me and made much of me, wouldst give me  
Water with berries in't, and teach me how  
To name the bigger light, and how the less,  
That burn by day and night. And I loved thee  
And showed thee all the qualities o' th'isle,  
The fresh springs, brine pits, barren place and fertile.  
Cursed be I that did so! (1.ii.334-42)

From his perspective, Caliban not only welcomed Prospero, but also taught him how to survive in the wilderness, educating him on the strange and different features of the island. In return, Prospero, the benevolent colonizer, taught Caliban "civilized"

language and customs. On the surface, this exchange of ideas might seem to have been a fair trade, yet Caliban does not need Prospero's lessons in civilization in order to live successfully on the island. Prospero and Miranda, on the other hand, need Caliban's assistance. Prospero acknowledges this to Miranda: "But as 'tis, / We cannot miss him [Caliban]. He does make our fire, / Fetch in our wood, and serves in offices / That profit us" (I.ii.313-6).

Despite the imbalance in the information and services exchanged, Caliban and Prospero initially enjoy a good relationship; yet everything changes when Caliban does something that Prospero cannot forgive. In response to Caliban's claims of ownership, Prospero rebukes him:

Thou most lying slave,  
Whom stripes may move, not kindness! I have used thee,  
Filth as thou art, with humane care, and lodged thee  
In mine own cell, till thou didst seek to violate  
The honor of my child. (I.ii.346-51)

Caliban does not deny the incident, replying: "Oho, Oho! Would't had been done! / Thou didst prevent me; I had peopled else / This isle with Calibans" (I.ii.352-4). This reply is often read as Caliban's admission of attempted rape. For the purposes of this discussion, however, let us instead construe the incident as a legitimate attempt by Caliban to gain the sexual favors of Miranda. It is understood that Miranda does not welcome Caliban's advances, but it should also be understood that it would have been extremely unlikely for Caliban to be aware of the complex courting rituals that would be expected by Prospero and, by virtue of Prospero's teaching, Miranda.

Caliban's desire to gain sexual union with Miranda can be easily understood. There is no indication that anyone else will arrive on the island, so it is natural for Caliban to desire the only woman available. Julia Reinhard Lupton, in "Creature Caliban," writes:

Yet Caliban's desire to have "peopled.../This isle with Calibans" also evokes the Adamic dimensions of a more recuperative typological reading. After all, Caliban's turn to Miranda is not unlike Adam's desire for a mate. Having named "every living creature" – having brought into discourse the fullness of Creation – Adam nonetheless finds himself alone, the very copia of other creatures pointing to his own isolation. So, too, Caliban, unique in his ability to apprehend the island's beauties, is not only *at one* with the island, a part of Creation, but also, like Adam, *alone* on the island, apart from Creation. To "people" the island with Calibans is to find himself in another, to realize his potential humanity by entering into the sexual couple of man and woman. (18)

However, even though Caliban appears to be the only possible mate for Miranda, Prospero not only refuses to bless the coupling, but also casts Caliban out of his favor and into slavery. The reasons for Prospero's strong reaction to a union between Caliban and Miranda warrant deeper examination.

One possibility is that Prospero is acting in accordance with Miranda's heart, in

which she clearly has no desire for Caliban. However, as most European marriages of the time were arranged for political, financial, or other impersonal reasons, it is extremely unlikely that Miranda's desires would be taken into account. Yet why does Miranda dislike the only potential suitor on the island? Prospero has been Miranda's sole teacher, and as such he has taught her to idolize the European culture (and men who look like Prospero) and conversely to scorn those who do not conform to that ideal. Miranda, ever the obedient daughter, has taken Prospero's lessons to heart.

Caliban clearly does not have a European appearance; the Europeans in the play constantly signify this otherness by calling him a "monster" and a "beast." When Trinculo first encounters Caliban he describes him as "...an islander, that hath lately suffered by a thunderbolt" (II.ii.36-7). A man scorched by a thunderbolt would have dark skin like Caliban. Lupton writes about the origin of Caliban:

Almost all the geographical indicators of *The Tempest* mark Caliban as an Old World figure, born from an Algerian mother and an unnamed father on an unnamed island between Tunis and Naples, perhaps somewhere off the coast of Sicily. In this mapping Caliban might appear to be a sorry cousin of Othello, a young man of North African descent and Punic features who finds himself the unwilling inhabitant of a Mediterranean island newly under Italian control. (6-7)

It is not just the issue of race that poses a problem for Prospero; he feels that Caliban will never conform to the European ways, despite his lessons. Rather, Caliban is "A devil, a born devil, on whose nature / Nurture can never stick" (IV.i.188-89). This is compounded by the fear that allowing his daughter to couple with Caliban would ensure the dissolution of his European heritage. Elizabeth Nunez agrees:

And how could I ignore the significance of the real reason for Prospero's hatred of [Caliban]. Caliban, like Othello, had forgotten his place, his position in relation to Europeans. He wished to populate Setebos with the children of his intercourse with Prospero's daughter Miranda. (196)

Prospero would prefer to see his line end outright than to see it continue on in the image of Caliban, a bestial black worshiper of Setebos. This fear was common in Shakespeare's England, as Kim F. Hall notes:

Associations between marriage, kinship, property, and economics become increasingly anxiety-ridden as traditional social structures (such as marriage) are extended when England develops commercial ties across the globe. The multiple "joinings" ... mandated by imperialism coincide with the already-familiar notions of joining in marriage. Extolling the homogenizing influence of trade suggests that English trade will turn a world of difference into a world of Protestant similitude. However, it leaves unspoken the more threatening possibility: that English identity will be subsumed under foreign difference. (124)

Other European characters in the play offer the same misgivings about interracial marriage. Consider Alonso, the King of Naples, who allows his daughter to marry outside of her race and is therefore chided by Sebastian: "Sir, you may thank yourself

for this great loss, / That would not bless our Europe with your daughter, / But rather loose her to an African..." (II.i.125-7). Prospero is not willing to accept grandchildren in Caliban's image and therefore squashes any hope of Caliban and Miranda as a couple.

In *The Merchant of Venice*, a non-European black man is also eschewed as a potential mate. Portia's suitor, the Prince of Morocco, entreats her to treat him fairly despite the fact that he is of a different race and from a different land: "Mislike me not for my complexion, / The shadowed livery of the burnished sun, / To whom I am a neighbor and near bred" (II.i.1-3). As he is making his choice in the riddle of the caskets, the Prince says of Portia: "As much as I deserve? Why, that's the lady. / I do in birth deserve her, and in fortunes, / In graces, and in qualities of breeding; / But more than these, in love I do deserve" (II.vii.31-4). If we are to believe the Prince that his status and quality deem him worthy of Portia in the eyes of society, why would Portia wish him to choose the wrong casket? She does not have a disapproving father to discourage her from choosing a black husband; she can choose whoever she desires. We can look at Portia's words for the answer: "A gentle riddance. Draw the curtains, go. / Let all of his complexion choose me so" (II.vii.78-9). No reason other than racism is given for Portia's relief at Morocco's failure. She could have been turned off by what Michael J. Warren calls Morocco's "ostentatious display of his heroic nature," (105) or perhaps she might not want to live in faraway lands, but neither of these is given as a reason. Apparently, it is the color of Morocco's skin that repels the fair Portia.

However, Portia does accept a marriage that exceeds patriarchal boundaries in *The Merchant of Venice*. This marriage is an interfaith marriage, one that ignores the opinion of a disapproving father: the marriage of Jessica and Lorenzo. In Shakespeare's time, Jews were considered to be of a different race; indeed, because of his Jewish heritage, Jessica's father Shylock is considered an outsider in Venice. In *Shakespeare and the Jews*, James Shapiro quotes preacher Increase Mather's 1669 perspective on Jews:

The providence of God hath suffered other nations to have their blood mixed very much, as you know it is with our own nation: there is a mixture of British, Roman, Saxon, Danish, [and] Norman blood. But as for the body of the Jewish nation, it is far otherwise. Let an English family live in Spain five or six hundred years successively, and they will become Spaniards. But though a Jewish family live in Spain a thousand years, they do not degenerate into Spaniards (for the most part). (169)

Regardless of how long Shylock lives in Venice, he will always be considered an outsider, and he will probably never be accepted into "proper" society. Jessica's childhood, much like that of Miranda, has most likely been shaped by the lessons of her father and his attitudes toward people of other races and cultures. When Shylock says of Antonio, "I hate him for he is a Christian," (I.iii.39) there is no doubt in the reader's mind that this lesson of hatred toward Christians has been repeatedly delivered to Shylock's daughter.

Shylock's hatred is not without cause. As he explains to Antonio, who could represent Christians as a whole:

In the Rialto you have rated me  
About my moneys and my usances.  
Still I have borne it with a patient shrug,  
For sufferance is the badge of all of our tribe.  
You call me misbeliever, cutthroat dog,  
And spit upon my Jewish gabardine. (I.iii.105-10)

Antonio does not deny the charges. In fact, he replies: "I am as like to call thee so again, / To spit on thee again, to spurn thee too" (I.iii.128-9). Antonio's statement shows how Jews were treated by the predominantly Christian society. It might also explain Jessica's motivation; she is trying to escape the animosity and revulsion offered to the Jews.

Camille Slights suggests that Jessica's decision to leave her wealthy father and marry Lorenzo, a Christian man of limited means, is in part motivated by a desire to belong:

Her willingness to lose a father does not imply that she is pursuing personal happiness in preference to broader social and spiritual values. Her break with her past is precisely a decision to forfeit her isolated security as a rich Jew's daughter in order to become part of the familial, social, and divine harmonies that bind people together in Christian society. (364)

Leaving is not a simple task for Jessica; she must dress as a boy and escape while her father is away. She realizes that in leaving Shylock's house to marry a hated Christian, she will lose her father forever, which makes her act one of singular bravery. When she sees her father for the last time, Jessica says: "Farewell, and if my fortune be not crossed, / I have a father, you a daughter, lost" (II.v. 57-8). For all of her bravery, however, Jessica's character is blemished by her decision to provide a dowry for herself by stealing her father's ducats and precious stones. As his daughter, she must know that to steal his fortune is to double the sting of Shylock's loss. With this detail, Shakespeare questions the moral character of a woman who would so blatantly disobey her father. In this regard, the Jewish Jessica is put into direct contrast with the Christian Portia, who is so loyal to her father that she will abide by his wishes even after he has passed away.

Shylock's response to Jessica's treachery is a cry for vengeance: "I would my daughter were / dead at my foot, and the jewels in her ear! Would she / were hearsed at my foot, and the ducats in her coffin!" (III.i. 83-5). In *Power on Display*, Leonard Tennenhouse suggests that,

Shylock. . .represents the loss of his daughter as a form of castration. "A sealed bag, two sealed bags of ducats," Shylock is reported to have cried, "And jewels, two stones, two rich and precious stones, / Stol'n by my daughter." (57)

Not only has Jessica stolen Shylock's wealth, but she has also absconded with his bloodline. The descendants of Shylock will not be raised in his image, but rather as the hated Christians.

As a further example of her rebellion, and perhaps as a way to prove to her Christian friends that she is truly no longer a miserly Jew (unlike her father, who mourns the loss

of his ducats more than the loss of his daughter), Jessica casts off the lessons of her youth and spends her ill-gotten gains carelessly, including the frivolous trade of her mother's ring for a monkey. As a final blow to her father and to her heritage, Jessica agrees to convert to Christianity in order to marry Lorenzo. Surprisingly, unlike many of the characters in Shakespeare's plays who are confronted with interracial marriage, the Christians in *The Merchant of Venice* seem to readily accept this outsider who is marrying into their society. Gratiano, upon Jessica's escape, says that she is "Now, by my hood, a Gentile and no Jew" (II.vi.52).

Even Portia, who has previously shown her bias against non-Europeans, accepts Jessica immediately, allowing her to run things in Belmont while Portia is off saving Antonio. Portia tells Lorenzo: "My people do already know my mind, / And will acknowledge you and Jessica / In place of Lord Bassanio and myself" (III.iv.37-39). It is fairly astonishing that Jessica, so recently a Jew and an outsider, would be accepted so quickly as an equal member of society. There are only two sensible, but not mutually exclusive, explanations for her immediate acceptance, other than her eagerness to convert to Christianity and leave behind her Jewish roots.

The first possibility is that as a female of "foreign origin," marrying a European man is not as threatening to the patriarchal society of Shakespeare's time as a match between a foreign man and a European woman would be. As Karen Newman notes about the European culture of Shakespeare's time, "Women depend for their class status on their affiliation with men—fathers, husbands, sons..." (153).

The second possibility, and the one that may be the most probable given Portia's tendency to discriminate based upon complexion, is that Jessica's skin color matches that of her new Christian family. Without the constant reminder of a different skin tone, it is easier for Portia and Gratiano to put Jessica's Jewish roots out of their minds.

In the same way, it is almost impossible for the characters in *Othello* to ignore Othello's ethnicity once he is married to the white Desdemona. Their constant references to Othello by his race rather than his name help to build, as Robert Hornback calls it, "the perception of racism implicit in the play" (71). Iago sets the tone in the beginning of the play by referring to Othello as "the Moor" (I.i.59) and "His Moorship" (I.i.34), before painting Othello as a Barbary horse in his attempt to alarm Brabantio.

Once properly distressed, Brabantio plays the role of the disapproving father. Much like Prospero, but without Prospero's power to prevent it, Brabantio is faced with the fact that his descendants are likely to be Moors, in the image of Othello. At first he cannot comprehend how his daughter could fall in love with someone so inappropriate, and he immediately assumes that Othello must have used "...charms / By which the property of youth and maidhood / May be abused" (I.i.175-6). Patsy Hall writes of Brabantio:

[Desdemona's] father is no tyrant and has not forced her into marriage but trusted her. Her ability to deceive him therefore shocks him. But she is prepared for his wrath and the "general mock" of her class and culture

which result from her decision to marry the man Roderigo describes as "an extravagant and wheeling stranger / Of here and everywhere." (1)

Once Brabantio is convinced that his daughter has not only violated the patriarchal customs by choosing her own husband, but also compounded the sin by choosing to marry a black man, he imparts this warning to Othello, being careful not to address him by name: "Look to her, Moor, if thou hast eyes to see. / She has deceived her father, and may thee" (I.iii.295-6). Brabantio's warning plants a seed of doubt that, watered by Iago's rancor, achieves maturity in Desdemona's deathbed. The warning becomes a curse that dooms the marriage.

But why should Othello suspect the pure and white Desdemona? After all, as David Bevington suggests, "Whatever others may think, she never gives the slightest indication of regarding her husband as different because he is black" (1151). A closer look at Desdemona's words, however, reveals that she is not necessarily different from the other characters when it comes to viewing Othello as a Moor first and foremost. Her first reference to her new husband illustrates this: "That I did love the Moor to live with him" (I.iii.251). Desdemona's statement makes Iago's task much easier. Hornback asserts that:

Just as Portia was able to allude to Morocco's complexion, moreover, Iago is able to refer to Othello's black complexion to persuade Othello himself that Desdemona could not love a Moor, since he claims she will eventually desire a man "Of her own clime, complexion and degree, / Where to we see, in all things, nature tends." [iii.III.234-35] (75)

Edward A. Snow, in "Sexual Anxiety and the Male Order of Things in *Othello*," agrees:

What speaks here is a contempt latent in Othello himself, although it comes to consciousness through the voices of Iago and Brabantio: "How can you continue to idealize her, how can you deny she's a whore? She loves *you*, doesn't she? She was attracted to what she should have feared, and took pleasure in what should have disgusted her, didn't she?" (400)

When Desdemona repeatedly presses the case of the dismissed Cassio to her husband, she unwittingly confirms Iago's accusations and essentially signs her own death warrant. Othello fears that her appetite for the forbidden fruit (a Moor) will wane and that she will want to return to the socially accepted path of the European woman and bear children in the image of Cassio.

Othello's skin tone and heritage will not earn him respect in European society; his honor is the only virtue that can do so. Thus in his mind, to trust Desdemona is to risk losing the only quality for which he is revered, and he is reluctant to become a cuckolded laughingstock. As Elizabeth Nunez writes:

I conclude that Othello, before he met Desdemona, was *pre-disposed* to the temptation of an Iago by the fact of his experience as a Black man in a white world. I am triumphant in my conviction that Othello's tragic flaw was not his jealousy, but his inability to accept himself as an equal to the white man. (194)

At the end of the play, Shakespeare shows Othello unable to overcome his insecurities; he succumbs to Iago's will and strangles Desdemona in his marriage bed before taking his own life. What does the death of Desdemona signify? Karen Newman reports that "Thomas Rymer, a kind of critical Iago, claims the moral of *Othello* is first, 'a caution to all Maidens of Quality how, without their parents' consent, they run away with Blackamoors'" (qtd. in Newman 152). Elizabeth Nunez also addresses this topic, in a remark on a passage from James Boswell's *The Life of Samuel Johnson*:

Johnson, a man who would allow no quibble with his contention of the justice, correctness and practicality of the inequality [sic] of the social classes, comments gravely on the demise of Othello: "In the first place, Sir, we learn from Othello this very useful moral, not to make an unequal match." (194)

Perhaps Desdemona's death is Shakespeare's warning to women who would venture outside of patriarchal boundaries. If that is to be believed, then perhaps the tragic end to Othello and Desdemona's marriage should be viewed as what might have happened if Miranda and Portia had chosen their black suitors; perhaps it is also an omen of what the future holds for the marriage of Lorenzo and Jessica.

---

### Works Cited

- Hall, Kim F. *Things of Darkness: Economies of Race and Gender in Early Modern England*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1995.
- Hall, Patsy. "Loving Not Wisely but Too Well: Patsy Hall Explores the Contradictions in Shakespeare's Portrayal of Desdemona in *Othello*. Is She a Hero or a Victim?" *The English Review* 14.2 (2003): 18 (2).
- Hornback, Robert. "Emblems of Folly in the First Othello: Renaissance Blackface, Moor's Coat, and 'Muckender.'" *Comparative Drama* 35.1 (2001): 90-95.
- Lupton, Julia Reinhard. "Creature Caliban." *Shakespeare Quarterly* 51.1 (2000): 1-23.
- Newman, Karen. "'And Wash the Ethiop White': Femininity and the Monstrous in *Othello*." *Shakespeare Reproduced: The Text in History and Ideology*. Ed. Jean Howard and Marion F. O'Connor. New York: Methuen, 1987. 143-58.
- Nunez, Elizabeth. "Could Shakespeare Have Known." *The Journal of Negro Education* 45.2 (1976): 192-96.
- Ranald, Margaret Loftus. "'As Marriage Binds, and Blood Breaks': English Marriage and Shakespeare." *Shakespeare Quarterly* 30.1 (1979): 68-81.
- Shakespeare, William. *The Complete Works of Shakespeare*. Ed. David Bevington. New York: Pearson, 2004.
- Shapiro, James S. *Shakespeare and the Jews*. New York: Columbia UP, 1996.
- Slights, Camille. "In Defense of Jessica: The Runaway Daughter in *The Merchant of Venice*." *Shakespeare Quarterly* 31.3 (1980): 357-68.

- Snow, Edward A. "Sexual Anxiety and the Male Order of Things in Othello."  
*English Literary Renaissance* 10.2 (1980): 384-412.
- Tennenhouse, Leonard. *Power on Display: The Politics of Shakespeare's Genres*. New York:  
Methuen, 1986. 123-34.
- Warren, Michael J. "A Note on *The Merchant of Venice*, II.i.31." *Shakespeare Quarterly* 32.1  
(1981): 104-05.



Shakespeare's plays exploit that in all possible directions; I mean the boys are sometimes boys, they're sometimes girls, they're sometimes girls pretending to be boys, and it's all fun. It's all very engaging and exciting and charged. So, the modern term would probably be interested, rather than, [laughs] rather than gay. He doesn't portray homosexual relationships very clearly in his plays. The only one which is absolutely clear, I suppose, is the one between Patroclus and Achilles in *Troilus and Cressida*, and there that's authenticated by Greek legend, on which the play is based. He's not making that up. The sexuality of William Shakespeare has been the subject of recurring debate. It is known from public records that he married Anne Hathaway and had three children together; scholars have analysed their relationship through these documents, and particularly through the bequests to her in his will. Some historians have speculated Shakespeare had affairs with other women, based on contemporaries' written anecdotes of such affairs and sometimes on the "Dark Lady" figure in his sonnets. Some scholars have... Early editions of Shakespeare's plays sometimes ignored or censored slang and sexual language, but the First Folio is full of innuendo and rudeness. Here are some examples of slang or sexual language which were clearly understood by Shakespeare's original audiences, but may be less obvious to audiences today. These examples were put together by Heloise Senechal, from the *Complete Works of Shakespeare* (2008) published by the RSC and Macmillan. From *Henry IV, part II, act 2, scene 1*. MISTRESS QUICKLY: Alas the day. Take heed of him: he stabbed me in mine own house, and that most beastly. He cares not what mischief he doth, if his weapon be out. He will foin like any devil. In William Shakespeare's play, *Othello*, there are many questions that the reader would ask about the love that Othello has for Desdemona. During many aspects of the play, Othello's The Duke is one of the few characters in the play who trusts that the love affair is beyond the narrow lanes of racism and approves their marriage. When both the lovers are found to be in a state of complete bliss Iago remarks, "O, you are well tuned now! / But I'll set down the pegs that make this music, / As honest as I am." (2. 1, 199-201). Iago swears to loosen the pegs in order to bring about a disharmony in their relationship. Mussari rightly states, "From the opening scene the interracial marriage between Othello and Desdemona colors all aspects of the play. Courtships, Marriage Customs, and Shakespeare's Comedies (review). January 2011. *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 20(3):634-637." In 1612 William Shakespeare gave evidence in the Court of Requests at Westminster in the case of Stephen Belott versus Christopher Mountjoy; it is the only occasion on which Shakespeare's spoken words were actually written down. The case centered on whether Mountjoy had promised to give Belott, who was his apprentice, £60 on marrying his daughter (which he had done in 1604), with the further assurance of a legacy of £200. Shakespeare had been a lodger in the Mountjoy household at the time and had acceded to the request of Marie Mountjoy, Christopher's wife, to do what he could to persuade Belott to undertake the match.