his post-Derridean meditation on subject performance in Shakespeare’s Macbeth, Bryan Reynolds expands upon his theory of ‘transversal poetics’ (which he has been developing over the past ten years) with an ‘investigative-expansive’ mode of analysis that he calls ‘fugitive explorations’, a politically and aesthetically empowering mode of critical analysis designed to challenge the disempowerment of subjects that, he argues, many forms of poststructuralist discourse have promoted. Although the three essays differ substantially in their theoretical and critical apparatus, they share two related claims: 1) the need for contemporary literary theory and criticism to attend more expansively to ideologies (both premodern and postmodern) of power, and to how those ideologies frame our discourse; and 2) the absolute need, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, for a theoretical methodology that is politically engaged and progressive.

Viviana Comensoli

Identifying Othello: Race and the Colonial (non)Subject

I offer the following brief inquiry into Shakespeare’s Othello as a preamble to a longer study of the insights that contemporary psychoanalytic theory can bring to political/postcolonial questions surrounding early modern conceptualizations of subjectivity and difference. My reading of Othello’s status as ‘(non)subject’ builds on the widely accepted view of the play as upholding the Subject/Other dichotomy that underwrites western epistemologies of difference. Bringing to this view a contemporary psychoanalytic lens clarifies the play’s implication in colonialist ideology. While the play coheres, on one hand, with the traditional Subject/Other split, a psychoanalytic reading reveals how the play ultimately excludes Othello from the Self/Other dynamic that in colonial cultures makes subjectivity possible. The question that underwrites my analysis is how, in the context of the early colonialist culture in which the English renaissance theatre operated, can characters identified as Other be represented as, in Maus’s terms, having a Self, or, in Montrose’s terms, as having a ‘consciousness’ and the capability for action?

According to a now widely accepted new-theoretical reading of the play, before Othello’s capitulation to Iago’s provocations, Othello, the familiar Moor of Venice, tragically deludes himself into believing that, despite his African ancestry, he is not an alien in the Venetian social hierarchy. Instead, Othello’s Otherness is masked by his supreme confidence and ability as a
military commander. Although the critic Eldred Jones subscribes to the view of the play as fashioning a tragically heroic Othello, he makes the important observation that in Othello’s first speech on stage (1.2.17–28) his duty to the Venetian state is ‘the one solid prop of his confidence’, indeed ‘the source of his security’ in Venice; Othello’s royal ancestry is not widely known, and after asserting that he descends ‘From men of royal siege’ (ll. 21–2) he never refers to his ancestry again. That Othello’s identity as a black man in the Venetian court is a marker of negativity is confirmed in the Duke’s aside to Brabantio following Othello’s defence of his and Desdemona’s elopement: ‘If virtue no delighted beauty lack, / Your son-in-law is far more fair than black’ (1.3.290–1). Kim Hall has pointed out that images of whiteness, fairness, beauty, and chastity are juxtaposed throughout the play with the ‘blackness’ that indicates Othello’s exclusion from élite Venetian male culture. When in act 3 Othello verbalizes his insecurity, negatively comparing himself with others on the status hierarchy, he articulates his insecurity in relation to his race and age: ‘Haply, for I am black, and have not those soft parts of conversation / That chamberers have, or for that I am declined / Into the vale of years’ (3.3.267–70). As I have argued elsewhere, Othello’s insecurity upholds the renaissance notion that a lack of ease and security distinguishes civilized from uncivilized subjects; Othello’s Otherness in Venice is also underscored by his lack of interest in the arts – especially music – which sets him apart not only from Venetians but also from his heroic counterparts in other plays by Shakespeare. In Castiglione’s Book of the Courtier, insecurity is indicative of ‘baseness’, whereas grace and ‘sprezzatura’ are the mark of the true courtier, whose ‘noblenesse of birth is (as it were) a clere lampe that sheweth forth and bringeth . . . into light, . . . and enflameth and provoketh unto vertue, with the hope of praise’. In colonialist Venice, ‘the color of virtue’, as James Calderwood asserts, ‘is not black but white’.

Pressing the political and ideological contexts of these readings of the play further, we see that the colonialist subtext not only defines the ideal subject as élite, white, and male, but also reveals the ways in which, in early colonialist cultures like early modern Venice and Shakespeare’s England, Otherness itself functions as a category of white male subjectivity. Contemporary non-European revisionist productions, re-writings, and readings of Othello provide important insights into the play’s colonialist structures. In her valuable study of responses to revisionist novels and plays, Jyotsna Singh writes that African and Turkish audiences, among others, perceive Shakespeare’s Othello as a figure in a recognizable ‘Orientalist landscape, both erotic and violent, a composite [European] fantasy’; they are compelled to make ‘both an identi-
ification with and disavowal of the Moor’, realizing that his ‘claims to any identity – either as a “savage” or as a Christian and a tragic hero – are tenuous and derivative’.20 And Thomas Cartelli, in his discussion of Tayeb Salih’s novel *Season of Migration* (originally published in Arabic in 1966), shows how Salih “writes back” to *Othello* by demystifying and rewriting the mythologies surrounding Shakespeare’s character, identifying Othello as a ‘construction and sentimental fantasy of the west: a noble mind undermined by a predictably primitive heart that remains cloyingly faithful to the colonizing interests that destroy him’.21

A psychoanalytic reading corroborates the claim for the play’s promotion of colonialist ideology. At the same time as Othello’s (self)identification accords with the conventional Subject/Other binary, his (self)representation upholds the colonialist construction of the Other as a non-subject. In his classic anti-colonialist treatise *Black Skin, White Masks* Frantz Fanon, whose work often invokes psychoanalytic discourse, emphasizes that in colonialist ideologies, ‘the real Other for the white man is and will continue to be the black man.... The Other is perceived on the level of the body image, absolutely as the not-self – that is, the unidentifiable, the unassimilable.’22 The signifier ‘white man’ in colonialist cultures thus monopolizes the category of the Other, securing access to subjectivity. In this process of racial othering, argues Fanon, ‘Ontology ... does not permit us to understand the being of the black man. For not only must the black man be black; he must be black in relation to the white man. . . . The black man has no ontological resistance in the eyes of the white man’.23 The contemporary psychoanalytic theorist Diana Fuss, in her book *Identification Papers*, draws on Fanon’s insights to suggest, ‘If psychoanalysis is right to claim that “I is an Other,” then otherness . . . constitutes the very entry into subjectivity; subjectivity names the detour through the Other that provides access to a fictive sense of self’.24 Through this process, colonialism excludes the black man from the very Self/Other dynamic that makes subjectivity possible. For Fanon, the black man in colonialist power structures is always endlessly fragmented. The concept of ‘moral consciousness’ is a case in point: ‘Moral consciousness’, he writes, ‘implies a kind of scission, a fracture of consciousness into a bright part and an opposing black part. In order to achieve morality, it is essential that the black, the dark [man] . . . vanish from consciousness’, so that the black man ‘is forever in combat with his own image’.25 For the white male subject, on the other hand, as Fuss points out, ‘the considerable cultural capital amassed by the colonization of subjectivity amounts to nothing less than the abrogation of universality . . .; the white man can be white without any relation to the
black man because the sign “white” exempts itself from a dialectical logic of negativity.26

In the early colonialist setting of Shakespeare’s play, Othello’s ‘subjectivity’, as measured by the visual signifiers ‘white’ and ‘black’, constitutes an Otherness that is internally chaotic and significant only in relation to what it is not. As a black man, Othello represents and upholds racial difference by becoming for the white man (embodied most fully by Iago) the repository of white male subjects’ suppressed fantasies and desires. Through Iago’s virulent racist attacks, together with the play’s insistence on Othello’s lack of the qualities that distinguish the true courtier, namely grace and sprezzatura, Othello is constructed as neither subject nor other, but, in Fanon’s words, ‘an object’ cut off from his ‘own presence’.27 Forced to represent (and uphold) the fantasy of the universal ‘primitive’ – ‘thicklips’ (1.1.65), ‘old black ram’ (l. 87); ‘Barbary horse’ (l. 110); ‘gross ... lascivious Moor’ (l. 124) – Othello is denied both ontological subject status and the Otherness that makes subjectivity possible. As a substitute-mechanism for real alterity, ‘objecthood’, writes Fuss, ‘blocks the migration through the Other necessary for subjectivity to take place’.28

In the final scene of the play the only surviving characters on stage are elite white men. Although the audience is invited to pity Othello for the suffering and calamity that have led to his death, we are also invited to accept Othello’s downfall as an inevitable function of his transgression, which is rooted in his exclusion from subjectivity altogether.

Viviana Comensoli

Notes

2 Sara Munson Deats, *Sex, Gender, and Desire in the Plays of Christopher Marlowe* (Newark and London, 1997), 219.

4 Butler, Bodies that Matter, 93–119.


8 The works that I cite in this overview are by no means exhaustive. They represent some of the major contributions to revisionist scholarship on subjectivity and early modern drama.


18 *The Book of The Courtier from the Italian of Count Baldassare Castiglione: Done into English by Sir Thomas Hoby, Anno 1561* (New York, 1967), 56–8 and 44.


‘The chick got in the way’, or The Woman is/as Queer: Feminism, Queer Theory, and the Unlocking of Female Subjectivity in Early Modern Drama

One of the most egregious comments to emerge from the recent US engagement in Iraq appeared in the press shortly after troops entered Baghdad. An Iraqi civilian woman was accidentally killed by a US soldier as he was preparing to kill someone else. When asked by reporters why he shot and killed the woman, he replied, ‘The chick got in the way.’ This statement has haunted me for many reasons and I want to use it to begin thinking about the intersections of feminist and queer theory.

Calling any woman a ‘chick’ is, of course, sexist. ‘Chick’ is a term we have all heard often, a term that is so much a part of the ordinary male vocabulary that it is ubiquitous and, therefore, often ‘unheard’. ‘Chicks’, ‘babes’, ‘broads’, (fully adult) ‘girls’ – not to mention their more obscene counterparts – are everyday markers of the Self/Other dichotomy that necessitates feminist criticism and feminist theory. A man in a heterosexual male/patriarchal culture defines himself as Self to the exclusion of Others – women, children, aliens, and homosexuals – through the use of derogatory terms to define those who are not as he is, for whatever reasons. The woman killed by the US soldier was a ‘chick’ because she was a woman to this male patriarch.

The fact that this ‘chick’ had the temerity to ‘get in the way’, therefore somehow eliminating the necessity of any remorse from her killer, provokes me to look more deeply into her situation. Picture, for a moment, this woman as target. She is identifiable as female or she would not have been labelled ‘chick’. But as an Iraqi, she may have been wearing a hijab or a burqa. Either of these two items of clothing would have clearly marked her as Muslim, Middle Eastern, non-western, non-Christian. To western eyes, the covering of these garments might also seem to make her invisible, to deny her humanity...