Religious conversion in early modern English drama

Stelling, L.J.

CHAPTER 8 'For Christian Shame:' Othello's Assimilation Into Venice

Othello (1604) lacks literal religious conversions and does not contain the word "conversion" or any of its derivatives. This play is nevertheless particularly relevant to the study of early modern dramatic representations of conversion. *Othello* suggests in several ways that its titular hero was not born a Christian but baptized before the action of the play begins. In this way, it presents Othello as a convert to Christianity. If we also take into account the events underlying the action of the tragedy, the threat of a Turkish invasion of Cyprus that must be warded off by the Christian army of Venice under the command of Othello, as well as the play's suggestion that Othello's original faith was probably Islamic, it is not surprising that Othello features prominently in a number of studies on representations of Islamic-Christian conversion in early modern drama.[1] These critical interpretations are important to our understanding of *Othello* in its historical context and inform our insight into the role of Othello as a convert and defender of Christianity against the Ottoman enemy. In his article "Turning Turk in *Othello*: The Conversion and Damnation of the Moor" (1997), that later became a chapter in his *Turning Turk: English Theater and the Multicultural Mediterranean, 1570-1630* (2003), Daniel Vitkus demonstrates that conversion is not only relevant to Othello's character, but is a dominant theme in the play as a whole, which becomes apparent through its rich use of "tropes of conversion – transformations from Christian to Turk, from virgin to whore, from good to evil, and from gracious virtue to black damnation."[2] Vitkus, moreover, explains how these meanings address early modern anxieties over sexuality, moral values and the stability of Protestantism that were provoked by conversions to the Church of Rome and the Ottoman Empire.[3]

Vitkus's work has sparked new interest in *Othello* as a play that addresses questions of Islamic, Christian and racial identity in conversion. A central issue

---

[1] See Daniel Vitkus, "Turning Turk in *Othello*: The Conversion and Damnation of the Moor," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 48.2 (1997): 145-176, and his *Turning Turk: English Theater and the Multicultural Mediterranean, 1570-1630* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003); Jonathan Burton, *Traffic and Turning: Islam and English Drama, 1579-1624* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2005); Matthew Dimmock, *New Turkes: Dramatizing Islam and the Ottomans in Early Modern England* (Aldershot, Hampshire: Ashgate, 2005); and Jane Hwang Degenhardt, *Islamic Conversion and Christian Resistance on the Early Modern Stage* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010).

[2] Vitkus, *Turning Turk* 78.

[3] Vitkus, *Turning Turk* 78.

in critical readings following Vitkus's article is why Othello's social integration into Venice as a convert ultimately breaks down. Jonathan Burton addresses this question by comparing Othello's adoption of Christian culture and discourse to that of Leo Africanus (1497-1554?), a historical convert from Islam to Christianity and best known for his *Geographical History of Africa,* that first appeared in English in 1600.[4] Although both Othello and Africanus incorporate in their reasoning the culture and language of their fellow Christians, Burton notes that Othello, unlike Africanus, eventually fails to recognize Christian racism and misogyny and does not use this knowledge strategically to define himself as a noble convert against "women and dark-skinned Africans as […] 'more other'."[5] According to Julia Reinhard Lupton, it is the possibility that Othello has converted from Islam, rather than paganism, that renders problematic his integration into the Christian community. As opposed to Muslims, Pagans "were conceived as a blank slate more open to a transformative Christian reinscripton."[6] Nevertheless, Othello's status as a former Muslim also renders him closer to Christianity, because according to early modern Christians, Muslims, like Jews, could be "brought back into contact with a law that should have been both historically and personally dissolved by the rite of baptism."[7] Lupton concludes that Othello's death must in fact be seen as a successful reconversion to Christianity, where he "becomes both saint and citizen, both true Christian and acknowledged member of the Venetian republic."[8] In addition, by means of his suicide Othello nullifies his "circumcision" because his self-murder "is itself a kind of circumcision, a gesture that constitutes at once a means of

---

[4] Burton, *Traffic and Turning*, 233-56.

[5] Burton, *Traffic and Turning,* 256.

[6] Julia Reinhard Lupton, *Citizen-Saints: Shakespeare and Political Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005) 105. See also Gil Anidjar, "The Enemy's Two Bodies (Political Theology Too)" in ed. Vincent W. Lloyd, *Race and Political Theology* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012) 156-173, and Daniel Boyarin, "The Double Mark of the Male Muslim: Eracing Othello," in ed. Lloyd, 174-87, who point to the significance of Othello's former Muslim identity.

[7] Lupton, *Citizen-Saints,* 113.

[8] Lupton, *Citizen-Saints,* 121. I find this reading problematic, in part because Othello commits suicide after he has realized the enormity of his crime, killing an innocent person. It is highly unlikely, therefore, that early modern audiences associated Othello with the exceptional virtuousness of saints. Othello, moreover, does not undergo a process of penance or purification as we have seen in, for instance, *The Virgin Martyr* and its portrayal of the pagan sinner-turned saint Theophilus, nor are there any indications of Othello's supposed sainthood after his death.

social reinscription and a subjectivizing signature."[9] Dennis Austin Britton points to the crucial role "of storytelling to the construction of Othello's identity." [10] He suggests that in so doing, both Othello and Iago rely on the genre of romance but with two different purposes. Othello appropriates it as part of the tradition of the Christianized Muslim, and thus as a transformation of identity, whereas Iago deploys it to "restore" his identity as a racial and religious other. Contrary to Lupton, Britton argues that Iago largely succeeds in reconverting Othello back to Islam. Jane Hwang Degenhardt focuses on Othello's racial difference, and argues that *Othello* "raises the question of whether a Moor can be converted and assimilated into Christianity."[11] She comes to the conclusion that this is not the case, arguing that the play presents the problematic "deeper claims of Pauline universalism."[12] Paul's theological embrace of Christianization clashes with "the physical badges [that] persist and continue to hold sway for specific communities and epochs," including Shakespeare's.[13] Shakespeare thus "shows us how the historically contingent impossibility that threatens Pauline universalism in his own time was an embodied distinction caught in the process of becoming racialized."[14]

It is striking that none of the above readings (or indeed other interpretations of Othello as a convert) refer to *Othello* in the broad context of early modern conversion drama. As I will demonstrate, it is precisely this approach which allows us to apprehend the unique position *Othello* takes up in early modern dramatic portrayals of conversion. That is, *Othello* is the only play that revolves entirely around the fortunes of a character *after* his radical interfaith conversion. The play thus offers answers to the questions raised by the interfaith conversion plays of the period, where the new Christian identity of stage converts and their entrance into their new religious society in particular is left to the imagination of the spectators. Treating the play as part of a rich body of early modern conversion drama also shows us that the reason why Othello's conversion is ultimately unsuccessful is not in the first place his failure to

---

[9] Lupton, *Citizen-Saints,* 121. I am not convinced by Lupton's reading of Othello's suicide as "kind of circumcision." Instead of performing a "social reinscription" or a "subjectivizing signature," Othello, in killing himself, removes himself permanently from society and terminates his role as a subject.

[10] Dennis Austin Britton, "Re-'turning' Othello: Transformative and Restorative Romance," *English Literary History* (2011) 78.1: 27-50, 43.

[11] Degenhardt, *Islamic Conversion*, 49.

[12] Degenhardt, *Islamic Conversion,* 71.

[13] Degenhardt, *Islamic Conversion*, 71.

[14] Degenhardt, *Islamic Conversion*, 71.

strategically deploy racist and misogynist ideology, his perceived Islamic origin or even his racial difference, but the fact that, as part of his integration into Venice, he adopts Venetian prejudices against women and Moors that render his marriage and conversion untenable. Indeed, it is precisely Othello's success in assimilating into Venice that causes his downfall, since, ironically enough, his adoption of Christianity also means that he will come to see religious identity as fixed and inalienable.

As I have shown throughout this study, this idea manifests itself in all early modern English interfaith conversion plays. Significantly, Othello's utter absorption of Venetian prejudices is presented as a spiritual lapse and thus reminiscent of the spiritual conversion drama that I have discussed in chapters three and four. In this way, Shakespeare emphasizes the problematic difference between on the one hand early modern conceptions of religious identity that are largely determined by ideas of gender, race and culture and, on the other, the notion of religion as spiritual truth thematized in spiritual conversion plays.

A key factor in Othello's destructive integration is the arrangement of his marriage, the very institution that is deployed in other interfaith conversion drama to consolidate a woman's submission to her husband and to celebrate (a husband's) Christian constancy. In contrast to all other cases of marriage-cum-conversion, where it is the woman who turns Christian and weds a Christian husband, it is Othello himself who converts and marries a Christian spouse. This enables Iago to instill in Othello misogynist thinking and provoke anxieties over Desdemona's fidelity that eventually result in Othello's intense self-hatred and suicide. At the end of the play, Othello has fully adopted the Venetian prejudices against Moors and women and believes it is his duty to kill Desdemona. "With the passion of the recently converted," as Walter Cohen reminds us, "Othello is driven to murder not by reversion to African barbarism but by adherence to an extreme, perverse version of the logic of Christian society."[15] This "perverse version of the logic of Christian society" not only includes the misogyny that motivates Othello to kill Desdemona, but, crucially, also the very notion that Christianization is impossible as a radical, genuine and lasting transformation. It is this twisted logic that Othello assumes and that causes his life to end in a tragic and schizophrenic relapse into otherness.

---

[15] Walter Cohen, "Othello," *The Norton Shakespeare*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt et. al. (New York and London: W.W. Norton and Company, 1997) 2091-99, 2095.

Othello the Convert

Othello is never described as a convert, but that he is one can be deduced from various passages.[16] The most obvious clue is Iago's reference to Othello's baptism. This is when Iago describes the great power Desdemona has over Othello: she is able to make him "renounce his baptism" as "His soul is so enfettered to her love" (2.3.338, 340). It is significant that Iago associates Othello's conversion with their marriage, because it is reminiscent of the six theatrical conversion-cum-marriages that I have discussed in the previous chapter. Yet as opposed to these fortunate couplings, Iago presents Othello's marriage not as a confirmation of conversion but as a menace to it. In this way, Iago anticipates the tragic violation of their marital bond.

Further indications of Othello's conversion can be found in his own and other characters' remarks about his exotic origin.[17] Just as the precise nature of Othello's race and ethnicity remains unspecified, so is his original faith vague and mysterious. The term "Moor" is suggestive of Othello's African descent, but the word was used to refer to sub-Saharan black Moors as well as to north-African Arabs.[18] Whether Othello's original religion was a form of African paganism or Islam is therefore also left undetermined.[19] Other references to Othello's African past are equally cryptic as clues to the precise nature of his previous religion – the handkerchief that was given to his mother by an *Egyptian*, the landscape of his "travailous history" that features "cannibals" and

---

[16] Many critics agree that Othello must be seen as a convert to Christianity. See, for instance, Graham Bradshaw, *Misrepresentations: Shakespeare and the Materialists* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1993) 174-75; Vitkus, *Turning Turk* 89-90; Britton, *Traffic and Turning*, 27-28; Lupton, *Citizen-Saints*, 108; and Degenhardt, *Islamic Conversion*, 49. E. A. J. Honigmann asserts that "we cannot prove Othello to be a Christian convert, but the play prompts us to speculate about his mysterious past and its effect on his multilayered personality," in E. A. J. Honigmann, Introduction, *Othello*, ed. E. A. J. Honigmann (London: Thomson Learning, 1997) 1-111, 23.

[17] Britton reminds us of a completely different indication of Othello's conversion to Christianity; "Othello is patterned after Ariosto's Ruggiero [in *Orlando Furioso*], a fellow convert to Christianity who also marries an Italian Heroine," "Re-'turning' Othello," 28. The first English translation of the epic poem *Orlando Furioso* appeared in 1591.

[18] See for an extensive analysis of early modern conceptions of Moors and of Othello as a Moor, Emily C. Bartels, *Speaking of the Moor: From* Alcazar *to* Othello (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008). It is somewhat surprising that in her discussion of Othello's his identity as a Moor, Bartels does not consider the idea of Othello as a convert.

[19] As Lupton notes, "the play never decisively determines whether he has converted from a pagan religion or from Islam," *Citizen-Saints*, 105. See also Vitkus, *Turning Turk*, 90.

"magicians," Iago's epithets of "erring Barbarian," and "Barbarian horse" for Othello, and perhaps even Brabantio's oblique reference to Othello as a "pagan" (1.2.99).[20] The point is that Othello's previous faith is different and *radically* different from Christianity. This is in line with the argument of this thesis that important theatrical choices regarding the depiction of conversion are not made on the basis of denominational particularities, but rest on a basic distinction between Christianity and any other faith. This other religion was often simply labeled paganism and could in some cases even refer to Catholicism. Othello uses this same rough contrast himself to condemn the brawl between his officers: "Are we turned Turks? And to ourselves do that / Which heaven hath forbid the Ottomites? / For Christian shame, put by this barbarous brawl'" (2.3.166-168). In so doing, Othello moreover emphasizes his Christian disposition, or in the words of E. A. J. Honigmann: "[Othello] adopts a militantly Christian tone as if to forestall criticism of him as an outsider, or even a pagan."[21] Finally, the remark proves that Othello has internalized Venetian binary thinking about Christians and non-Christian others.

It is important to note that the tragedy's strong emphasis on Othello's race as the object of xenophobic discourse does not cancel out the importance of his status as a religious convert.[22] As has been shown in chapter five and six, in early modern England, religion and what we would describe today as ethnicity or race were intimately, often inextricably, linked.[23] Thus, the word "Moor," used more than forty times to denote Othello, also carried the meaning of Muslim. In fact, it was not uncommon to refer to conversion to Islam with the expression "to turn Moor."[24]

---

[20] In this way Brabantio, of course, denies Othello's baptism. See for a discussion of this passage Boyarin, who argues that it is illustrative of "a deep anxiety in the play about the ability of the Turk to turn Christian and back to Turk as he wills, to hide, as it were, his true (or always false) identity," "The Double Mark of the Male Muslim," 183, 184.

[21] Honigmann, *Othello*, 22.

[22] According to Lupton, "in *Othello*, religious difference is more powerfully felt, or at least more deeply theorized, than racial difference, which was only then beginning to surface in its virulent modern form," *Citizen-Saints*, 106. Jonathan Burton writes that "somatic markers often functioned as indicators of religious difference in the early modern period," *Traffic and Turning*, 252.

[23] See for a useful analysis of the relationship between race and religion in early modern England and *Othello*, Ania Loomba, *Shakespeare, Race and Colonialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002) 2-74, 106-107.

[24] In his account of his experiences as a galley slave in Algeria, the captain Richard Hasleton, for instance, frequently uses the expression "to turn Moor" when writing about the attempts of a group of Berber Muslims to convert him to Islam. *Strange and wonderfull things. Happened*

Othello the Convert-Groom

The fact that before the action of the play the Venetians have promoted the convert Othello to the rank of army general intimates that they consider him a loyal and trustworthy member of society who is, moreover, willing to defend Christianity against the Turkish enemy with his life. However, Othello's status as a convert does turn into a problem when he becomes part of the Christian community at its most intimate level, by marrying one of its women. Indeed, Othello's marriage is presented as the trigger and focal point of his ruin. This sudden change in the Christian Venetians' appreciation of Othello as a member of their community is powerfully illustrated in Brabantio's remark which immediately follows Roderigo's xenophobic allusion to Othello and Desdemona's wedding: "This accident is not unlike my dream, / Belief of it oppresses me already" (1.1.140-41).

The Christians' most conspicuous reason for objecting to Othello's marriage with Desdemona is concern over miscegenation. By means of bestial imagery, Iago portrays Desdemona and Othello's marriage as a form of interbreeding, which touches a raw nerve in the Christian society. Of course, this fear of miscegenation also rests on the presupposition that Othello has never become a full member of society and will never be able to change his status as an other. Thus, when Iago, at the beginning of the play, kicks up a disturbance and wakes up Desdemona's father Brabantio, he tells Brabantio that "an old black ram / Is tupping [his] white ewe" and he should take action "Or else the devil will make a grandsire of [him]" (1.1.87-90). When this message does not seem to register with Brabantio, Iago repeats this argument in equally vulgar and racist terms: "you'll have your daughter covered with a Barbary horse; you'll have your nephews neigh to you, you'll have coursers for cousins and jennets for germans!"(1.1.109-112). Brabantio's above remark about his dream follows closely upon Iago and Roderigo's offensive depictions of his daughter's sex life, suggesting that these were precisely the content of his dream. This illustrates the deep-seatedness of Brabantio's fear over miscegenation, as well as the disturbing effect it has on the content of his thoughts.

---

to Richard Hasleton, borne at Braintree in Essex, in his ten yeares trauailes in many forraine countries. Penned as he deliuered it from his ovvne mouth (London: Abel Jeffes, 1595). Another example is the cleric Edward Topsell, who wrote that he had "heard a story of an Englishman in Barbary which turned Moore," in *The historie of foure-footed beastes* (London: William Iaggard, 1607) 462.

Miscegenation is not the only issue that renders Othello's marriage problematic for the Venetians. The fact that his marriage involves a perverted gender hierarchy (from a Venetian viewpoint) enables Iago to manipulate Othello into adopting a Venetian bias against religious others and women. In the previous chapter we have seen that a bride converting to Christianity and marrying her Christian husband is presented as a "natural" situation: the bride submits herself to her spouse as well as his God and, in some cases, serves as a "prize" for her husband's heroic constancy. In addition, early moderns identified women less closely with religious otherness than men. It is for these reasons that marriage as a confirmation of a woman's Christianization proved a particularly suitable comedic ending for interfaith conversion plays. By the same token, the Venetians perceive Othello and Desdemona's marriage as "unnatural."

In manoeuvring Othello into questioning his wife's fidelity, Iago draws on broad racial stereotypes of male religious others. As Walter Cohen observes, "Iago's racial insinuations influence Othello in part not because they are true but because they are the norm in Venetian society."[25] However, no less influential than the "racial insinuations" are Iago's misogynistic remarks. For instance, Iago tells Othello that the women of Venice are inherently unchaste because they have no qualms about adultery and are inclined to hide their sins from their husbands rather than avoid wrongdoing:

> I know her country disposition well –
> In Venice they do let God see the pranks
> They dare not show their husbands; their best conscience
> Is not to leave't undone, but keep't unknown. (3.3.204-7)

Moments later, these ideas have become part of Othello's thinking. He describes his marriage as a "curse" because men "can call these delicate creatures ours" but "not their appetites" (3.3.272-74). That is to say, Othello believes that marriage renders women the property of their husbands, and subject to their wills. In addition, he claims that this institution is undermined by these very women because they are essentially inconstant. These Venetian prejudices against women are poignantly criticized by Emilia in a way that clearly echoes Shylock's "Hath not a Jew eyes?" speech from *The Merchant of Venice* (5.1.85-102). The principles underlying Shylock's forceful arguments to attack Venetian bigotry against Jews are used by Emilia to denounce Venetian sexism. She argues that if women cheat on their husbands, they are driven by the same passions and

[25] Cohen, "Othello," 2095.

desires, and suffer from the same weaknesses. Moreover, women model their behaviour on men's (4.3.85-102).

At another moment, Iago reverts to xenophobia to undermine Othello's confidence in Desdemona, suggesting that it is not so much female unfaithfulness but Othello's exotic origin that renders Desdemona's love for him unnatural:

> Not to affect many proposed matches
> Of her own clime, complexion and degree,
> Whereto we see, in all things, nature tends –
> Foh! One may smell in such a will most rank,
> Foul disproportion, thoughts unnatural. (3.3.232-236)

Iago bluntly states that Desdemona's reason for marrying Othello is lust, because it is inconceivable that a woman native to Christian Venice wishes to wed someone who is not of her own "clime, complexion and degree." Iago's use of the first person plural and "one" in line 232 reveal that he is relying on existing values and convictions that are shared by members of Venetian society. Realizing that he has overstepped his bounds, Iago hastens to add that he is not referring to Desdemona in particular, but this is immediately followed by his feigned concern that Desdemona might "recoil to her better judgement" and reject Othello in favour of a white Christian:

> But pardon me, I do not in position
> Distinctly speak of her, though I may fear
> Her will, recoiling to her better judgement,
> May fall to match you with her country forms,
> And happily repent. (3.3.237-242)

Iago's manipulations almost immediately have the desired effect and become manifest when Othello begins to believe that his complexion and exotic origin may be the reason for Desdemona's adultery: "Haply for I am black / And have not those soft parts of conversation / That chamberers have" (3.3.275).

Othello's adoption of Venetian double standards and bigotry leads him to believe that he has been "abused" by Desdemona and therefore "must […] loathe" her (3.3.271-72). This happens even before Desdemona has dropped the handkerchief that Iago will later use as proof of Desdemona's infidelity. In the last part of the play, Othello acts on his misogynistic views when he decides that Desdemona "must die, else she'll betray more men" (5.2.6). Significantly, this glimpse into Othello's mind, his desire to protect the men of Venice against his

wife, reveals the "extreme, perverse version of the logic of Christian society," as Cohen puts it, that Othello has adopted as part of an intemperate embrace of his new social environment.

In fact, Shakespeare toys with the idea that Othello trades his marital bond with a Christian for a metaphorical marriage to a person who can make him even more "Venetian" than he already is. The way in which Othello puts his trust in Iago is presented in terms reminiscent of a marriage vow, albeit a deeply ironic and perverted one. Iago promises Othello that he will give him proof of Desdemona's infidelity: "now I shall have reason / To show the love and duty that I bear you / With franker spirit: therefore, as I am bound, Receive it from me" (3.3.196-9), and moments later Othello returns this vow of loyalty in similar terms: "I am bound to thee for ever" (3.3.214). The end of this long scene, after Iago has subtly presented the handkerchief to Othello, is concluded with a cynical inversion of a solemnization of marriage. Othello responds to Iago's warning that his mind "perhaps may change" by swearing that it will never do so, adding "Now by yond marble heaven / In the due reverence of a sacred vow / I here engage my words (3.3.455, 463-65). Iago answers this with an equally sinister pledge:

> Witness, you ever-burning lights above […]
> that here Iago doth give up
> The execution of his wit, hands, heart,
> To wronged Othello's service. Let him command
> And to obey shall be in me remorse
> What bloody business ever. (3.3.466-72)

The mock rite culminates in Othello appointing Iago his lieutenant, and Iago feigning full submission to his general: "I am your own for ever" (3.3.482). The resemblance to an actual marriage ceremony is enhanced by the fact that Othello and Iago exchange these vows in a kneeling position.

Othello the Spiritual Apostate

Although *Othello* revolves around an interfaith convert's integration into his new social environment, spiritual conversion, too, plays an essential role in this tragedy. Shakespeare employs the language of spiritual conversion to intensify the poignant paradoxes of interfaith conversion in this play. A case in point is when Iago suggests to Othello that Desdemona might change her mind about Othello and make the "better" decision to marry a white Christian. In this passage, also quoted above, Iago tells Othello: "Her will, recoiling to her better

judgement, / May fall to match you with her country forms / And happily repent" (3.3.240-242). Iago uses the vocabulary of spiritual conversion, "to repent," to describe Desdemona's rejection of Othello and falling in love with native Venetian men. More importantly, Shakespeare draws attention to the bitter irony of Othello's integration as a Christian convert by portraying his embrace of Venetian prejudice largely in terms of a spiritual fall, and by presenting the success of this embrace as inversely proportional to the fall. That is to say, the more Othello thinks and acts according to Venetian culture, the further he drifts away from true Christianity. This notion is supported in particular by the play's portrayal of Desdemona as a paragon of constancy and Christian values who suffers and dies at the hands of her convert-husband.

Desdemona's steadfastness is contrasted with and called attention to by the barrage of false accusations made against her precisely of unfaithfulness and inconstancy. The hurling of allegations against Desdemona already begins in the first scene of the play, where Iago and Roderigo convince Brabantio that Desdemona has deceived her father by marrying Othello. Two scenes later this idea is repeated by Brabantio, who warns Othello that Desdemona may therefore also betray her husband. Othello swears on his life that Desdemona is faithful, but when Iago reiterates Brabantio's warning in 3.3.209, Othello affirms it. This anger culminates in a tirade in which Othello describes Desdemona's infidelity to Lodovico. It is significant that his language of marital infidelity echoes that of religious apostasy: "Ay, you wish that I would make her turn. / Sir, she can turn, and turn, and yet go on / And turn again" (4.1.252-54). In addition to suggesting that Desdemona's craving for sex can never be satisfied, Othello conveys the important early modern concern over interfaith conversion, explained throughout this thesis, that one turn will inevitably lead to another. This idea of Desdemona as an essentially changeable character is prefigured by Iago when he asserts to Roderigo that Desdemona will exchange Othello for a younger lover: Desdemona "must change" (1.3.350) and she "must have change" (352). As various scholars have pointed out, the other way in which *Othello* portrays Desdemona as a blameless Christian is by depicting her as a Christ-like figure.[26] The idea that she is a Christ-like victim who is killed after a betrayal is sustained in a number of allusions to the Passion. Desdemona prays for mercy for her murderer (5.2.58). Besides, as Robert Watson points out,

---

[26] See, for instance, Anthony Hecht, *Melodies Unheard: Essays on the Mysteries of Poetry* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003) 12; Lupton, *Citizen-Saints*, 117; Paul N. Siegel, *Shakespearean Tragedy and the Elizabethan Compromise* (New York: New York University Press, 1957) 132.

> Othello's assertion that Desdemona's death should be accompanied by 'a great eclipse of sun and moon, / And earth should yawn at alteration' (5.2.101-4) recalls the report in Luke 23:45 that 'the sun was darkened, and the vaile of the Temple rent through the middes' at the moment of Christ's death.[27]

In its treatment of spiritual conversion, *Othello* bears some resemblances with *Doctor Faustus* (1592).[28]In the words of Paul Siegel, "Iago becomes Othello's Mephistopheles, and in making the devil his servant, Othello gives himself up into his power."[29] Siegel continues to argue that Othello, like Faustus, fails to follow the "good angel" Desdemona and eventually calls down damnation on himself as a consequence of his "pact with the devil."[30] Degenhardt, too, argues that Othello is damned. She writes, for instance, "Othello is damned not directly because of his outer blackness but because of his inability to sustain faith in Desdemona's intangible faith, or, in other words, for his reliance on outward markers that would in fact attach significance to his own blackness."[31] The interpretations of Othello as a "damned character" seem to be confirmed when Othello becomes aware of the dreadful mistake he has committed. At this moment his self-accusation recalls that of Faustus and other Elizabethan damned characters, such as William Wager's Moros or Worldly Man: "Whip me, ye devils, / From the possession of this heavenly sight! / Blow me about in winds, roast me in sulphur, / Wash me in steep-down gulfs of liquid fire!" (5.2.275-78). The most elaborate discussion of Othello's spiritual lapse comes from Robert Watson, who deploys the similarities between *Othello* and the Protestant morality play to contend that *Othello* is a form of Protestant propaganda. He concludes:

> A Jacobean audience convinced to value spontaneous love above Venetian traditions, to condemn Othello for letting the dubious evidence of his senses distract him from the certain devotion of his

---

[27] Robert Watson, "*Othello* as Protestant Propaganda," in *Religion and Culture in Renaissance England* ed. Claire McEachern and Debora Shuger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997) 234-57, 235.

[28] Vitkus makes a similar point: Othello is a "morality play […] (like that of Doctor Faustus), and "a tragedy of damnation, not a divine comedy, and it ends with the triumph of the Vice, that 'demi-devil' Iago, who has won another soul for Satan," *Turning Turk*, 97.

[29] Siegel, *Shakespearean Tragedy*, 127.

[30] Siegel, *Shakespearean Tragedy*, 128.

[31] Degenhardt, *Islamic Conversion*, 65.

> heart, and to hate Iago for deluding Christians into believing in reward and retaliation rather than love, would have found itself endorsing the protestant Reformation.[32]

Yet the problem with these interpretations of Othello as a *damned* character is that Othello's spiritual lapse is not brought about by divine intervention but by a Christian society that refuses to accept a new Christian as a fully-fledged member of its community. Although Othello suffers spiritual agony over an interfaith conversion, like Woodes's Philologus, and Daborne and Massinger's renegade pirates Ward and Grimaldi, Othello pays a spiritual price precisely for turning Christian. Indeed, while Woodes, Daborne and Massinger use the vocabulary of spiritual conversion to condemn and warn against apostasy, Shakespeare employs it to expose the bitter and paradoxical fate of a convert who does what is desired of him and internalizes the values and moral standards of his new Christian community. In this way, Shakespeare draws attention to the troubling absence of spiritual conversion in Othello's interfaith conversion, of actual Christian truth and morality in Othello's integration into Venetian Christianity.

The Convert Who Cannot Be

A striking Venetian prejudice that Othello comes to internalize is the idea that his non-Christian background makes him inconstant and unreliable. This idea manifested itself not only in regard to historical converts, as I have shown in chapter five, but also in interfaith conversion plays, as has been demonstrated in chapter seven. Othello's perceived inconstancy is not explicitly associated with his status as a convert, but with his exotic roots. Yet the purport of the intimations that Othello is unreliable is essentially the same: converts to Christianity cannot rid themselves of their inherent otherness which also renders them inherently unreliable. Spurred by Iago, Roderigo, for instance, inspires fear in Brabantio over Othello's trustworthiness: Othello cannot be trusted because he is "an extravagant and wheeling stranger / Of here and everywhere" (1.1.134-35). Iago repeats this point to Roderigo, turning it into a broad stereotype about all moors: "These Moors are changeable in their wills" (1.3.347). It is important to remember that remarks like these draw on Venetian stereotypes and divulge little about Iago's personal views of Othello; in a soliloquy Iago asserts that he

---

[32] Watson, "*Othello* as Protestant Propaganda," 250.

believes Othello to be quite the opposite of how he describes him to others: "The Moor, howbeit that I endure him not, / Is of a constant, loving noble nature" (2.1.286-87).

Othello anticipates the perception of his identity as changeable and of his conversion as impossible in his own bold challenge in the third act: "Exchange me for a goat / When I shall turn the business of my soul / To such exsufflicate and blown surmises, / Matching thy inference" (3.3.183-86). Othello makes the point that he will not lose his head over false or exaggerated speculations about his wife's conjugal fidelity. The word goat is apposite because it is a "horned animal" and thus reminiscent of the cuckold, and the animal was seen as "highly sexed, spend[ing] too much time in lustful activity."[33] However, the goat may also be appropriate in the sense that it evokes the idea of capriciousness or changeability. The word "capricious" is derived from the Latin term for goat, *caper.* Shakespeare evidences an awareness of this connection in *As You Like It* (1599), where Touchstone says to Audrey: "I am here with thee and thy goats as the most capricious poet honest Ovid was among the Goths" (3.3.5-6). It is, moreover, worth noting that Shakespeare uses the verb "to caper" in connection with Moors who had converted to Christianity in *2 Henry VI*. In this play, the Duke of the Gloucester notes about John Mortimer "I have seen /Him caper upright like a wild Morisco" (3.1.364-65). Thus, the phrase "Exchange me for a goat / When I shall turn the business of my soul," is not simply part of an assertion about jealousy and infidelity; it also points to the supposed changeability of converts. In addition, this moment anticipates Othello's identification with another animal, the "circumcised dog," just before he commits suicide. It is, finally, important that Othello uses the word "exchange." As this thesis has shown, on the early modern stage, turning the business of one's soul had come to signify first and foremost the exchange of religious identities and only secondly seeing the error of one's ways.

When, after Othello has killed Desdemona, he realizes that she is innocent, Othello begins to conceive of himself through a Christian Venetian lens as an ignoble and savage other. He first compares himself to the "base Indian" who "threw a pearl away / Richer than all his tribe" (5.2.345-46).[34] This is followed by his famous projection of himself onto a Muslim he once killed:

---

[33] Honigmann, *Othello*, 219.

[34] In my interpretation of "Indian" instead of "Iudean" in the First Folio (1623) is based on Richard's Levin's "The Indian/ Iudean Crux in Othello," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 33 (1982): 60-67. Adopting Levin's conclusion, the editor of the Arden edition, E. A. J. Honigmann, provides an overview of the arguments for and against the interpretations of "Indian" and "Iudean" (342).

> […] in Aleppo once,
> Where a malignant and turbaned Turk
> Beat a Venetian and traduced the state,
> I took by th' throat the circumcised dog
> And smote him – thus! *He stabs himself* (5.2.350-54)

Othello places himself in the position of the perceived malignant Muslim and enemy of Christianity. In the words of Daniel Vitkus, Othello "turns Turk and becomes the enemy within. He has 'traduced' the state of Venice and converted to a black, Muslim identity, and embodiment of the Europeans' phobic fantasy: Othello has become the ugly stereotype."[35] Yet this interpretation obscures the fact that in this scene Othello is *also* portrayed as the ultimate insider in Venice, protector of the Venetian state and Christianity, who kills "the ugly stereotype." This view is advocated by Julia Reinhard Lupton who concludes that Othello therefore dies "into citizenship," his suicide marking "his entry into the archives of state memory as a citizen-soldier."[36] Lupton even goes as far as to argue that Othello here becomes a "saint" and a "true Christian."[37] This conclusion, in turn, disregards the depiction of Othello as a lapsed Christian. Indeed, the way in which Vitkus and Lupton's interpretations of Othello's self-murder relate to each other are reminiscent of Ludwig Wittgenstein's well-known optical illusion of the duck-rabbit, where one sees the heads of a duck and a rabbit but never at the same time.[38] The point is that there is no resolution at this moment. As Kiernan Ryan has observed, Othello "correctly perceives himself to have been both the alien victim of Venetian society and the active, though unwitting, accomplice of its destruction of him."[39] I also agree with Matthew Dimmock, who notes that Othello both substantiates and subverts the menace of the Turk, but rather than inferring that Othello's capacity as a convert rules out his loyalty to Venice and *vice versa*,[40] I argue that Shakespeare here illustrates the inherent problem of interfaith conversion: the fact that the early moderns could not conceive of the concept of conversion as a radical transformation of religious identity. Othello is the convert who has assimilated himself into the community to the point that he believes religious identities are inalienable. In this way, Othello's conversion

---

[35] Vitkus, *Turning Turk* 106.
[36] Lupton, *Citizen-Saints,* 121.
[37] Lupton, *Citizen-Saints,* 121.
[38] See his *Philosophical Investigations* that was first published in its original German in 1953.
[39] Kiernan Ryan, *Shakespeare*, 3rd ed., (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002) 89.
[40] Dimmock, *New Turkes*, 206.

generates an insoluble contradiction: he is *both* a Christian warrior *and* a religious enemy. Realizing that this identity cannot be sustained, Othello ends it.

Conclusion

Othello complies with the unwritten rule that radical and conclusive transformations of religious identity are not shown on the early modern stage. Othello's Christianization takes place before the action of the play, and we do not learn anything, therefore, about the precise features of his pre-conversion identity that were erased upon his adoption of Christianity. In this way, *Othello* seems yet another illustration of the incapability of the early modern theatre to portray religious identity as something that can be shed or assumed in conversion.

Yet by devoting an entire play to the post-conversion life of a new-Christian, Shakespeare is unique in exploring the limits of what is conceivable in interfaith conversion on the early modern stage. In addition, he uses marriage, the very tool other playwrights employ to contain conversion or celebrate constancy, to examine this convert's integration into a Christian society, and to explore how this society, including Othello himself, and with Iago as an evil instigator, fashions the identity of its convert. *Othello*, then, shows us what happens if a convert assimilates fully into a new culture, which is precisely what his new cultural and religious environment desires of him. His assimilation paradoxically involves absorbing the racism and misogyny endemic to his environment. Moreover, it involves adopting the understanding of religious identity as an inherent part of one's self, which renders interfaith conversion essentially impossible. The inevitable result is a schizophrenic situation in which the convert can no longer maintain his self-identity.

What makes *Othello* even more interesting as a conversion play is that it captures Othello's assimilation in terms of a spiritual drift away from the Christian truth and constancy that is embodied by Desdemona. In this way, Shakespeare exposes the alarming divergence between on the one hand religion as an identity, constituted by secular and inherited components such as race, gender, culture and social customs, and,
on the other, Christianity as a spiritual mindset.