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Shakespeare's Blush, or "the Animal" in Othello

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This essay examines how the rhetoric of animalization in Shakespeare's *Othello* compels us to think early modern categories of race in connection with early modern discourses of "human" versus "animal." Beginning with Shakespeare's representation of Iago, I suggest that it is the potential for *sameness* conditioned by Iago's counterfactual statement ("Were I the Moor, I would not be Iago") that is most significant about his relation to Othello. From there I consider the overlap between the play's representations of animality and black skin. Read in the context of Jacques Derrida's reflections on animals, I consider the deconstructive value of linking the play's animalizing language to the affect of shame. With its focus on the blush, Shakespeare's *Othello* shows that the affect of shame cannot be countered with a simple return to the "human," since it is precisely the category of the human that the play's animal and racial bodies deconstruct. Read so, this essay examines not only the negative side of animalization, which mediates categories of "the other," but also the positive potential of cross-species relations for interrogating race in Shakespeare's play.

KEYWORDS William Shakespeare, Jacques Derrida, deconstruction, animal studies, race, affect, performance.

Following the animal, following the Moor

In the first scene of Shakespeare's *Othello*, Iago attempts to persuade Roderigo of his loyalty, stating: "For, sir, / It is as sure as you are Roderigo, / Were I the Moor, I would not be Iago. / In following him, I follow but myself" (1.1.55–58).[1] This exercise in coun-terfactual persuasion, expressing what has not in fact happened but might, or could, "would" that Iago "were" not himself but, instead, "the Moor," is, ironically enough, the subjunctive guarantee that Shakespeare's "honest Iago" gives to Roderigo as evidence of his contrivance against "the Moor" (5.2.156). Yet, despite Iago's negative insistence

("Were I … I would not"), we could consider the performative potential of "were" and "would" as expressions of a conditional, that is, a non-absolute mode of being rather than as statements of pure difference. Writing on the subject of potentiality, Giorgio Agamben defines its existence as "a potentiality that is not simply the potential to do this or that thing but potential to not-do, potential not to pass into actuality" (*Potentialities* 179–80). In this sense, potentiality is neither the power to do, that is, to convert potential into actuality, nor is it the power to not-do, to refuse. For Agamben, "To be potential means: to be one's own lack, *to be in relation to one's own incapacity*" (182; emphasis in original). Agamben continues:

> Beings that exist in the mode of potentiality *are capable of their own impotentiality*; and only in this way do they become potential. They *can be* because they are in relation to their own non-Being. In potentiality, sensation is in relation to anesthesia, knowledge to ignorance, vision to darkness. (182; emphasis in original)

In reference to Iago, we can say that his relation to Othello blends the capacity to be and to not be, potentiality and impotentiality, inasmuch as "being" for Iago is contingent upon the capacity to be other, "the other," which is prescribed in the verb "to follow."

At stake in this discussion of Iago's potentiality is his relation to "the Moor," a category of otherness figured throughout the play in terms of racial and animal characteristics. Building on Robert Altman's recent book-length study of *Othello*, I will argue that it is the potential for *sameness* conditioned by Iago's counterfactual statement ("Were I … I would not") that is most significant about Iago's relation to the Moor. As Altman observes: "While that 'would' contains a volitional element that ostensibly refers to the power differential between master and follower …, it may also connote the desire … to enjoy Othello's cultural condition — all that imaginatively accrues to his 'Moorishness'" (289). A loss of alterity is, in Iago's paradoxical turn of phrase, an ontological gain insofar as it allows Iago to enter into unexpected couplings with Othello. While "Were I the Moor" could be read as an expression of impotentiality — thus resolving the conditionals "were" and "would" and their potential for chiasmus into an opposition or mode of subtraction: "I would *not* be Iago" — it can also be read in light of the subsequent line, in which the conditional mood of "were" and "would" has everything to do with what it means "to follow" and, at the opposite semantic end of the infinitive, "to come after." This paper examines how Shakespeare's play establishes the act of following as a key operation in "the desire … to enjoy Othello's cultural condition." Whereas Altman focuses on the ontological couplings between self and other, my reading centers on the cross-species couplings that mediate categories of otherness in Shakespeare's play.

Indeed, if we consider closely the language of animality in Shakespeare's play we must ask who, or what, is the referent of "him," "the Moor." By sniffing out his/its various permutations, we find that he/it is in fact multiple. For example, Iago describes Othello to Brabantio as "an old black ram / … tupping your white ewe" (1.1.88–89). Picturing Desdemona and Othello's sexual coupling, he describes them as "making the beast with two backs" (1.1.116). To Brabantio again, Iago says, "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" (1.1.111–13). These images introduce animality as a

key optic through which the play visualizes and dehumanizes its black protagonist. My goal in retracing the play's dehumanizing language is to consider how the rhetoric of animalization compels us to think early modern categories of race in connection with early modern discourses of "human" versus "animal." Moreover, I hope to show that dehumanization cannot be countered with a simple return to the "human," since it is precisely the category of the human that the play's animal and racial bodies deconstruct.

To this effect, I will examine two aspects of Shakespeare's play that resist any clear opposition between self/other, European/Moor, white/black, and human/animal. First, I consider the preponderance of animal imagery used to denigrate Othello to ask how the positing of an animal "other" fails to maintain a strict ontological boundary between the racialized categories of human versus nonhuman. And second, I consider how the affect of shame might help us move beyond, or rather sideways to, a theory of racial difference and toward something more like the conditional mode of sameness suggested by Iago's "Were I the Moor."[2] Strangely (given its source), it is the potentiality of "Were I the Moor" that begs us to ask not only what it means that skin color is so utterly fungible, reversible, and confused in Shakespeare's play, but also what it means that the shame associated with black skin seems always to fold back on white skin as well, collapsing any absolute boundary between self and other.

Extending the analysis of racial difference — a frequent if highly contentious topic in Renaissance studies — to the differential structures between humans and animals, I show that there is critical value in following after "the animal" when we, like Iago, follow "the Moor."[3] In his essays on animals, Jacques Derrida aligns the action of following or coming after with the obligation to respond, asking about the consequences of limiting the power of response to humans. In an interview, Derrida explains that "when it comes to the relation to 'the Animal,' [the] Cartesian legacy determines all of modernity. The Cartesian theory assumes, for animal language, a system of signs without response: *reactions* but no *response* … [distinguishing] *reaction* from *response*, with everything that depends on this distinction, which is almost limitless" (Derrida and Roudinesco, "Violence" 65; emphasis in original). Contrary to those who assume that animals are incapable of intelligent response, Derrida asks what it might mean to respond (and to assume all of the actions and privileges contained in the word "respond," including: to promise, to pledge, to give an avowal, to give an account of, to answer, to present, to have a right, to take responsibility) to an animal, assuming therefore that one has already been responded to *in some way* by an animal who is capable of more than just a reaction. For Derrida, one is always following in response to something, whether human or nonhuman. *How* we respond matters in shaping the beings we become.

Following Derrida, I suggest that the crucial (temporal) relationship between being and following that he posits with regard to humans and animals ought to be considered in the context of recent studies on shame and race in the early modern period.[4] My particular focus, to which I attend presently, is the blush. Codified in the early modern period as a quintessential human response — one which distinguished truth from falsity, virtue from debasement, and more important, human from animal — the blush was a response restricted to and thus constitutive of "the human," understood as white, morally

transparent, and capable of response.[5] What complicates matters is the parallel bifurcation of human/animal and white/black. Because black skin was deemed recalcitrant to the blush and thus often associated with shamelessness and hyper-sexuality, the picture of black skin that emerged in the early modern period was one frequently associated with figures of animality. Edward Topsell's *The Historie of Fovre-Footed Beastes* (1607) makes this entanglement of shamelessness, lust, black skin, and animality explicit as he compares the physical and libidinal features of African primates (both real and fantastic) to black people. Accompanying Topsell's massive zoological descriptions are a series of engraved images, one of which depicts "The Satyre," a mythical creature part human and part beast, which Topsell (on the authority of Pliny) claims to be both from Ethiopia and also part Moor (13) (Figure 1). The satyr in question is visualized for the reader with "human shape, … rough-hayre," and erect penis fully visible — a sign of his (imagined) "lust to women" (12).[6]

This early modern hybridization of black skin and animality yields a number of implications for my argument. To note that the logic of the blush also extended to depictions of blackness in the early modern period is, on the one hand, to resist the tendency among

FIGURE 1 "The Satyre." From Edward Topsell's *The Historie of Fovre-Footed Beastes*, London, 1607. Photograph courtesy of the John Hay Library, Brown University Library.

early modern scholars to reduce racial categorization and its attendant violence to an anachronism of a much later historical period in which the logic of eugenics replaced the early modern logic of bloodlines.[7] How else are we to read the emphatic bestialization of Othello or these lines addressed to Aaron in *Titus Andronicus*?

GOTH: What, canst thou say all this and never blush?

AARON: Ay, like a black dog, as the saying is. (5.1.121–22)

These lines express a racial logic in *nascendus*, in which the threshold between human and animal is defined precisely by an inability to respond due to skin color. On the other hand, no one logic of racial difference operates in Shakespeare's play — singular and monolithic. Racial differences are cross-hatched by the differential articulations of human and animal, and any attempt to articulate the logics of animality and race will have to attend to their shared porousness and ligamentary structure — what we might effectively think of as their common skin.

This last comment raises the broader purpose of this essay, which is to assess what kind of animal Shakespeare studies has become after the deconstruction of the general category "the animal" begun by Derrida. For the turn to animal studies in Renaissance scholarship and Shakespeare scholarship in particular has marked a dramatic shift — what we might differentiate explicitly from a departure[8] — in the ways that "we," literary scholars, activists, species-companions, and humanists, read and write about "the animal" (that beastly singular nominal) as well as the so-called "human/animal divide." Connecting early modern attitudes toward animals with emerging discourses on slavery and class, Bruce Boehrer posits the common exploitability of humans and animals in early modern colonial frameworks (99–132). Similarly, Erica Fudge highlights the force and importance of rhetorical eloquence in defining the "human" apart from the "animal" in legal and political contexts. Even more recently, Laurie Shannon notes the wide variety of cross-species identifications in Shakespeare's *King Lear* in order to suggest alternative historiographic ways of describing humankind "within a larger cross-species milieu" ("Poor, Bare, Forked" 169).[9]

While these scholars have taken the "animal" as their direct concern, they have yet to consider the full implications of the "human/animal divide" for other figures of the nonhuman, including those racialized figures of animality that we see in Shakespeare's *Othello*. To echo Andreas Höfele, Shakespeare's "dramatis personae are infused with a degree of animality that a later anthropology, which could be labelled 'modern' or, more specifically, Cartesian, would categorically efface. Such an anthropology," Höfele remarks, "undergirds *even some readings that would overtly distance themselves from it*, readings which reduce Shakespeare's teeming multitude of animal references to a stable marker of moral, social, and ontological difference" (3, emphasis added).[10] While the racist and racializing discourse that we read in a play like Shakespeare's shares deep roots and deep connections with the history of brutalization and domination of animals in the West,[11] such connections have seldom been made in ways that mesh categories of race together with those of "human" and "animal" as ecological interdependents.[12]

This essay attempts to provoke that meeting, not with the intention of reducing difference to commonality but with the intention of thickening the differences internal to each category. This mode of thickening is what Derrida calls, in view of and in respect for what gathers and grows at the limit between human and animal, "the proliferating, transforming, and nourishing limit of *limitrophy*." He explains:

> *Limitrophy* is therefore my subject. Not just because it will concern what sprouts or grows at the limit, around the limit, by maintaining the limit, but also what *feeds the limit*, generates it, raises it, and complicates it. Everything I'll say will consist, certainly not in effacing the limit, but in multiplying its figures, in complicating, thickening, delinearizing, folding, and dividing the line precisely by making it increase and multiply. ("The Animal" 29, emphasis in original)

For Derrida, there is no one divide between humanness and animality, no one slippage or threshold; rather, the limit or *limitroph* between humans and animals is always fractured and more multiple than the notion of *a* limit allows us to think. Derrida writes:

> If I am unsatisfied with the notion of a border between two homogenous species … it is not in order to claim, stupidly, that there is no limit between "animals" and "man"; it is because I maintain that there is more than one limit, that there are many limits. There is not *one* opposition between man and non-man; there are, between different organizational structures of the living being, many fractures, heterogeneities, differential structures. ("Violence" 66; emphasis in original)

Othello provides a way of thinking through the "differential structures" that separate humans and nonhumans, including those racialized "nonhumans," and it does so in conjunction with shame.

Whereas early modern studies of shame have largely focused on the ways shame distances self from other,[13] Derrida upholds shame as vertiginously relational. He describes shame as an irrepressible "reflex" brought about by "the impropriety [*malséance*] that can come of finding oneself naked, one's sex exposed, stark naked before a cat." Derrida continues: "Ashamed of what and naked before whom? Why let oneself be overcome with shame? And why this shame that blushes for being ashamed?" ("The Animal" 4). By taking seriously the provocation of Derrida's questions about shame and animality, this essay seeks to understand how "black" and "white," "animal" and "human," emerged as (non)discrete signifiers in the early modern period and to situate their emergence in that vertiginous encounter that Derrida, following the gaze of "the animal," calls in a word, shame.

Shame, or re-dressing the animal

In his long essay, "The Animal That Therefore I Am," Derrida narrates a scene in which he is looked at, naked, by his cat, and describes it as an experience of "impropriety": "the single, incomparable and original experience of the impropriety that would come from appearing in truth naked" (4). Whence this impropriety and who is in truth naked? Derrida writes, "It is generally thought … that the property unique to animals, what in the last instance distinguishes them from man, is their being naked without knowing it"

(4–5). Without this knowledge animals could not be "in truth naked," as Derrida says he is, standing before his cat, since everything that would pertain to the truth of nudity or the nudity of truth would derive from an understanding of a fault, a *lapsus*, and therefore a need to cover over, in clothing or in discourse, this naked truth that the animal could not respond to, not knowing itself to be naked. The opposite is the case for humans. As Derrida writes, "Clothing would be proper to man, one of the 'properties' of man," alongside "speech or reason, the *logos*, history, laughing, mourning, burial, the gift. … [C]lothing derives from technics. We would therefore have to think shame and technicity together, as the same 'subject'" (5).

In thinking through the relations between shame, technicity, nudity, and clothing, Derrida revises the idea of *techne* that can be found, for example, in Martin Heidegger's definition of the work of art. In Heidegger's view, *techne* distinguishes art from other types of work. In "The Origin of the Work of Art," he writes:

> *Techne*, as knowledge experienced in the Greek manner, is a bringing forth of beings in that it *brings forth* present beings as such beings *out of* concealedness and specifically *into* the unconcealedness of their appearance; *techne* never signifies the action of making. (57; emphasis in original)

Heidegger turns to the *techne* of art, especially poetry, because this mode of knowing that brings things forth into their appearance has been neglected by philosophy. Like the animal, "it is what philosophy has … had to deprive itself of" (Derrida, "The Animal" 7). Rather than focus on what comes after the work — the "art" object — Heidegger focuses on what is originary in the work — what we might think of as its naked truth. Like Heidegger, Derrida wants to return to a time when knowing would be linked to unconcealedness — or to nudity — before the imposition of a metaphysics of good and evil. He begins his essay, "In the beginning, I would like to entrust myself to words that, were it possible, would be naked" (1). Derrida is trying, in short, to respond to this thing called "the animal" to which he himself is — to which we all are — linked.

Yet, when Derrida attempts to respond to a more originary sense of being-with-the-animal, he is immediately compelled to make clear that "the cat I am talking about is a real cat, truly, believe me, *a little cat*" (6; emphasis in original). The reason he gives for his insistence is that, in the vast zoographic literature about the animal, there is no discourse, philosophical or otherwise, which accounts for the responsive look of an animal who stares, "just *to see*" (4). Derrida writes that "since so long ago, hence since all of time and for what remains of it to come we would therefore be in passage toward surrendering to the promise of that animal at unease with itself" (3). The emphasis here is on a "passage toward" — not on something completed or final. The Latin etymology of "promise" is *pro-mittere*, which, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, means "to go forth, to send forth," as in an envoy or a missive (OED s.v. "promise" n. etym.). The promising animal which Derrida describes is one who is in passage. Toward what is unknown. But it would seem that the unknown future of the promise, the endpoint of its passage, is a cause of unease for the animal that, as Derrida says, I am, or I am after. It is the same unease that we find early on in the essay in Derrida's encounter with a seeing cat. What

makes this encounter so dizzying is precisely his not knowing how to respond to a cat that looks and that regards him. At the bottom of this cat's gaze is a provocation to respond. But the very understanding of how one responds — as oneself, as human — is called into question by the insistence of a look that troubles one's own self-definition. At the heart of autobiography there would have to be an insistent rejection of this look — a rejection bordering on a reflex, a reaction — which is performed each time through a knowledge coterminous with the knowledge of one's nudity — one's shame. In this way, Derrida writes, autobiography becomes, in the first instance, an act of confession.

As a cryptic sign of our being-with-animals, shame is a response indistinguishable from a reaction. Derrida calls it a reflex: "I have trouble repressing a reflex of shame. … Ashamed of what and naked before whom? Why let oneself be overcome with shame? And why this shame that blushes for being ashamed?" ("The Animal" 4). Derrida is unable to control his sense of shame, a shame which hides for being ashamed, and which produces a response identical to a reaction: blushing. The habitual, automatic, and in that sense, artificial nature of shame blurs the distinction between reaction and response, which, according Derrida, defines the Cartesian opposition between humans and animals. It is no longer a question, then, of knowing whether or not an animal has shame (and hence, all of the properties belonging to shame: from nudity to self-consciousness, desire and the *logos*), but of knowing to what extent a blush differs from a reaction. Shakespeare's *Othello* foregrounds this differing/*différance* at the heart of shame by putting under erasure the assumption that response is exclusive to humans. Indeed, if to have shame is to know oneself to be naked, then the animalization of Othello forces us to consider what it means to be "human" and to be denied one's nudity. "[N]aked without knowing it, animals would not be, in truth, naked" (5). By denying Othello's humanity due to an inability to blush, Shakespeare's play not only repeats the species logic that divides animal from human but also undoes this very logic by showing white skin to be as reactive, and therefore as animalistic, as its so-called racial "others."

White skin, black mask

Returning to this essay's opening question, let us consider what it means, in Iago's case, "to be" and to posit a "self" inasmuch as this "self" comes after "the Moor." By shaming Othello, Iago sets "the Moor" apart as abject, as bestial. And yet, "in following … the Moor," these same categories of self/other, white/black, and human/animal strangely and paradoxically meet. They do so not as discrete categories that would maintain their fixity but as entities that feed and grow otherwise than they were before their meeting.[14] This is not a matter of collapsing differences; it is about exploring the differences within the same, and the sameness within differences.[15] What, then, do we make of the overlap between Othello's supposed inability to feel shame and to respond in a blush, and Iago's compulsory need to hide, conceal, and re-dress his sense of shame? The question hinges on the decision regarding the cut between self and other. Who is Iago (becoming) "in following" after "the Moor"? Iago's positive negation, "I am not what I am," only serves to heighten the urgency of these questions, as does the performative potential of his speech:

Others there are
Who, trimmed in forms and visages of duty,
Keep yet their hearts attending on themselves
And, throwing but shows of service on their lords,
Do well thrive by them, and when they have lined their coats,
Do themselves homage. These fellows have some soul,
And such a one do I profess myself. (1.1.49–55)

Although Iago here calls attention to the differences between himself and Othello (the latter, for example, is assumed too credulous to uncover Iago's false "shows"), these lines also serve as evidence of what seems, ironically, and despite Iago's assurances to Roderigo, to reanimate the performative potential of "were" in "Were I the Moor." "Trimmed in forms and visages of duty," and offering "but shows of service," Iago portrays himself in a manner that not only highlights the theatricality of the play's performance but also calls on the conventions and connotations of blackface and black skin to mask himself in the "visages" and "forms" that Renaissance audiences would have associated with the Moor. As Virginia Mason Vaughan argues:

> The most obvious change [between *Othello* and Shakespeare's previous plays], one that has been noted by myriads of critics, is that the black character in Shakespeare's *Othello* is not the talking devil with a special relationship to the audience he was in the plays of the 1580s and 1590s. Iago, the white Venetian who feels betrayed by his general's promotion of Cassio, takes this role. … In crafting Iago, Shakespeare takes the convention of the stage Moor/devil that he had exploited so successfully in *Titus Andronicus* and turns it upside down. (95)

Vaughan underscores the play's counterintuitive mixture of conventions, or indeed, of skins: the role of the Moor is played by a white Venetian whereas, according to the play's title, *the Moor of Venice*, the role of the white Venetian is played by a black Moor. Vaughan's argument suggests that in its conditional form, Iago's musing, "Were I the Moor," functions as a real potential for racial transformation not simply as a statement of binary difference. In this highly paradoxical sense, Iago *is* black, even though he is not in blackface. Similarly, Othello *is* white, both because of and despite the fact that he is in blackface.

 The performative mixing of skin colors — black skin for white skin and, white skin for black — was of course nothing new to the Renaissance stage, much less to the staging of *Othello*. Blackface was common practice in the Middle Ages, and until very recently stagings of *Othello* routinely employed white actors in the lead role. As Vaughan reminds us, "nineteenth-century minstrel shows did not invent blackface impersonation. Nor did Shakespeare" (2). Rather, "the performance practice of 'blacking up' thrived in religious pageants of the middle ages as a simple way of discriminating evil from good" (2). Yet, with the shift to early modernity, "blackface had become more than a simple analogy — blackface equals damnation — and taken on multiple meanings, participating in several readily recognized codes at once" (2). According to Vaughan, these "codes" participated in various social, moral, and ideological systems which, "by the time Shakespeare wrote *Titus Andronicus*," "functioned … to create expectations and attitudes about black people" and to solidify those attitudes into a category of racial otherness (2). Blackface in

the English Renaissance went from being a generalizable attribution of evil — regardless of skin color — to a "code" (a binary code) written for whites about black "others." Vaughan concludes her chapter on *Othello* with the following:

> If the play is performed as written, I am not sure Othello's part should be portrayed by a black actor at all, and it should not be seen as the pinnacle of a black actor's career, as it so often is. After all, as Dympna Callaghan insists, "Othello was a white man," and Shakespeare's tragedy is not about Africanness, but the white man's *idea* of Africanness. (105–6; emphasis in original)

For Vaughan, the Moor is precisely who is being tracked, hunted, followed, and, as it were, put on stage for a white audience. Yet it is the "idea" of the Moor that we encounter, not the Moor himself. In following the Moor, we, like Iago, turn him into a concept, into an object for the gaze. One of Vaughan's key claims is that "whiteness" as a concept gets unified through the positing of a "black," racial other. This argument would not run counter to Iago's assertion that "Were I the Moor, I would not be Iago," in that this "self" is, in a Saussurean sense, dependent for its meaning on a relation of difference or opposition. But is this the only way to read Iago's statement?

While I agree with Vaughan's contention that in much Renaissance drama, the black Moor takes over some of the structural functions of the "other" left by certain religious identifications, I would point out that, in Shakespeare's *Othello*, some of the more complex figurations of blackness do not simply juxtapose black characters to white characters but situate both in a larger field of bodies that include, quite prominently, animals.

I have already established Iago's mixing of racial and animal imagery with regard to Othello. The animal imagery in the text extends further still. In addition to comparing Othello to a black ram and a horse, Iago confides to Rodrigo, "Ere I would say I would drown myself for the love of a guinea hen, I would change my humanity with a baboon" (1.3.314–16). And to Othello, he depicts Cassio and Desdemona "as prime as goats, as hot as monkeys, / As salt as wolves in pride, and fools as gross / As ignorance made drunk" (3.3.403–405). This proliferation of animal imagery does not issue from Iago alone, however. After being spurned and dismissed of his duties by Othello, Cassio laments: "O, I have / lost my reputation! I have lost the immortal part of / myself, and what remains is bestial" (2.3.262–64). Cassio queries deliriously, "Drunk? and speak parrot? and / squabble? Swagger? Swear? … O God, / … that we should with joy, / pleasance, revel, and applause transform ourselves into / beasts!" (2.3.279–80, 289–93). Othello then joins in this bestial refrain through the cuckold's metamorphic imagery: "I had rather be a toad / And live upon the vapor of a dungeon / Than keep a corner in the thing I love / For others' uses" (3.3.270–73). Othello repeats this negative gloss throughout the play, exclaiming at one point to Iago that "A hornèd man's a monster and a beast" and later projecting this beastly condition onto Desdemona: "O devil, devil! / If that the earth could teem with woman's tears, / Each drop she falls would prove a crocodile. / … Goats and monkeys!" (4.1.62, 238–40, 257).

The presence of animals in this passage reshapes the concerns about race that are most centrally articulated in *Othello*. While the preponderance of the play's beastly diatribes

center around the perceived transgression of Desdemona and Othello's union, and so would seem to support the racial opposition between "white" and "black" by grounding it in yet another perceived opposition between man and beast, I will argue that the play's animals offer no such touchstone of difference. Rather, the assertion of racial difference is precisely what comes undone when animals enter the scene. Tracing the language of animality used in *Othello* to characterize black skin as reactive, unresponsive, and lacking shame and by emphasizing the artificiality of shame, its essential Derridean *techne*, we discover that the shamelessness associated with black skin is precisely what *does not* resolve into an identity of racial "otherness." Instead it animates the very artifice of the skin (all skins) in Shakespeare's play. For example, Cassio first describes Desdemona as one that "excels the quirks of blazoning pens, / And in th' essential vesture of creation / Does tire the ingener" (2.1.63–65). Evoking the amorous blazon's red and white color scheme, Cassio foreshadows Othello's libidinally charged displacement of Desdemona's shame onto the red and white handkerchief, "Spotted with strawberries" (3.3.435). Not only does Desdemona exceed the artificiality of "blazoning pens," but she too becomes artificial, as the displacement of her rosy cheeks onto the red and white handkerchief (a textile infinitely reproducible: Emilia says she will "have the work ta'en out, / And give't Iago" [3.3.296–97]) evidences, and as the sartorial play on "tire" (i.e. *attire*) further confirms.

These essentially *parergonal* figures linking artifice and color, textile and skin, cut across racial identities in *Othello*, calling our attention to a series of cosmetic and sartorial technologies commonly used on the early modern stage.[16] Shame cannot be separated from animality, nor animality from race, nor race from *techne*. Rather, at precisely the moment these couplings of shame, *techne*, animality, and race are deployed, they give rise to a queer assemblage of relations (we can call it a common skin) not resolvable into discrete identities. As we shall see, there is more to following these figures (*the* animal, *the* Moor) than appears at first glance — or might we better say, first blush.

Signifying the blush

After having accused Desdemona of being "false," and after having received her incredulous reply, "Alas, what ignorant sin have I committed?," Othello responds:

> Was this fair paper, this most goodly book,
> Made to write "whore" upon? What committed?
> . . .
> I should make very forges of my cheeks
> That would to cinders burn up modesty
> Did I but speak thy deeds. (4.2.71–76)

These lines register at once the purity or transparency associated with "fair" skin as well as the irony of Othello's realization that "fair" skin, like "fair paper," is the most suitable means for announcing Desdemona's shame. And yet, the fact that "whore" should appear, like a blush, so readily inscribed on Desdemona's skin signifies more than social stigma; it signifies the early modern ideal that white skin should make transparent, and

thereby morally regulate, the deeds of its bearer.[17] The signifying protocols are altogether different in the case of Othello.

While we are meant to read Othello's "forges" as images of burning cheeks, we are also reminded of their forgery, of their artifice and fiction. As Sujata Iyengar reminds us, "shame" in the early modern period denotes a relational context in which "social and sexual difference" plays a catalytic role (107). Persons of African descent, for example, "were thought to be unable to blush and therefore to experience shame" (107). Such a notion would later be overturned by Charles Darwin.[18] But within the signifying economy of the Renaissance, it was still the case that blushing raised acute anxieties about the representational opacity of particular identities (most often female and/or of color) and about the concomitant "hermeneutic breakdown" of moral codes pertaining to the legibility of shame within early modern society (Iyengar 103). Blushing was a key focus of these anxieties. As a symbol of either "innocence or guilt, prurience or purity, Englishness or strangeness," the blush was a site of intense interest and vexation in the early modern period, especially when it aligned itself with forms of "dramatic illusion" (123). Because the blush could be hidden by either white or black cosmetics, "white" skin could also be deemed "blackened" if the blush were rendered invisible. Focusing on two types of dramatic illusion — make-up used to simulate a blush and make-up used to simulate black skin — Iyengar shows how the "tactics and purposes of theater" intersected with the moral semiotics of the face, creating "dubious" "connections between blushing," "blackening," and theatrical prosthetics (123).

Othello imagines such non-mimetic surfaces when he describes Desdemona's face as "fair paper" and his own flushed cheeks as "forges." He looks to Desdemona's cheeks for evidence of her shame. What he finds, however, is a blush that can either be written or unwritten upon the skin, without any necessary relation to its author. Here the propinquity of the blush to Desdemona's shame mixes with the language of printing, copying, and the typography of "goodly book[s]," bringing to the fore the technology of the blush as well as its potential for revision. The performance of shame thus signifies one of the many ways of inhabiting the all too sketchy lines of demarcation between shame/performance and the no less sketchy lines of demarcation between white/black and self/other.[19] It equally confounds the demarcation between reaction/response, with all that they entail for the division between humans and animals. We first saw this performative potential in Iago's assertion that "In following [the Moor], I follow but myself," and later in Derrida's analysis of the technicity of shame. These scenes lead us back to the dialogue with which this essay opened.

The language of animality used in Shakespeare's *Othello* to characterize black skin as unexpressive, unresponsive, lacking shame and, hence, reactive, programmed, and artificial, is precisely what does not resolve into an identity of racial "otherness" but which cuts across racial identities in Shakespeare's play. Rather than read Iago's statement in the negative ("Were I … I would not"), I would suggest that the performative nature of Iago's presentation, his artificial pose, highlights the play's central concern regarding not black skin per se or its supposed otherness, but the linkage between different skins — their shared opacity, artificiality, constructedness and interdependence — which the language

of shame and animality makes visible (or not) in the blush. In following the Moor, Iago hints at the essential ambiguity between truth and artifice, which causes Derrida to look twice at the animal that, it is presumed, cannot respond for a lack of shame. The shamelessness that is similarly attributed to black skin due to its supposed inability to respond in a blush is also made ambiguous by Iago's claim that, in following the Moor, "I follow but myself." The distinctions between response and reaction, white skin and black skin, human and animal, dissolve in this act of following and in the conditional, that is to say, performative nature of the blush. Indeed, if true hearts avail themselves most readily through the appearance and disappearance of the blush, linking blushing to that cultural logic of shame that, as Gail Kern Paster has shown, lexically marked the internal and external movements of the body through signs of embarrassment, Iago, by contrast, keeps his "shows" of heart purposively skin-deep: "For when my outward action doth demonstrate / The native act and figure of my heart / In complement extern, 'tis not long after / But I will wear my heart upon my sleeve / For daws to peck at" (1.1.61–65). The presence of animals in this passage, imagined as birds of prey, should remind us just how tenuous are the borders between animality and shame. Iago's next line, I believe, makes this tenuousness axiomatic for Shakespeare's play: "I am not what I am" (1.1.65).

By following the trajectory mapped out by Derrida, for whom "being" and "following" denote overlapping potentials of the "I am," we discover strange manifolds of differences-within-the-same and sameness-within-difference, which put being in relation to non-being, potentiality to impotentiality. Altman remarks, rightly, that Iago's relation to Othello makes visible the "[l]igatures of [s]elf and [s]tranger," whereby "[i]t is possible … that the self can harbor an unexpected stranger from a foreign land" (287). I would second Altman's assertion and have tried to foreground the co-composition of race and animality according to that ligamentary structure. And yet beyond the familiar strangers that concern Altman's study, strangers who, in the final analysis, remain all-too-human, by showing that the stranger within Shakespeare's play is also the radically inhuman stranger or *arrivant*,[20] and that no account of racial difference in *Othello* is complete without a consideration of this vertiginous animal supplement, however shameful. As Derrida remarks, the first and decisive question regarding animals concerns their impotentiality — that is, their ability to suffer. "The question is disturbed by a certain *passivity*," Derrida writes, for "'Can they suffer?' amounts to asking 'Can they *not be able*?'" ("The Animal" 27–28; emphasis in original). I have shown that the disabling force of shame and animality is inextricable from the categorization of race in Shakespeare's play. Yet I also want to suggest that the injunction posed to Shakespeare scholarship following the deconstruction of the general category "the animal" is to see impotentiality not as the opposite of potential, but as the potential simply to not-be. What are the possibilities of not-being? In the case of Iago, not-being entails exposure to what Agamben calls "the open," where human and animal, white and black, gather and meet (*The Open* 57–62, 68). In *Othello*, they do not meet peaceably: in this tragedy, the Moor's final words, "I took by th' throat the circumcisèd dog / And smote him — thus," remind us all too well that the potential to suffer is also the potential to die (5.2.355–56). And yet, death here should not be seen as opposed to life. "To live," Derrida writes, "is not something one

learns … it is not learned from life, taught by life. Only from the other and by death" (*Specters* xvii). Shakespeare studies should learn to welcome these others. And as to the animal that might be welcomed; yes, provided we know how to respond.

Acknowledgments

Notes

[1] All quotations are taken from *The Riverside Shakespeare*, 2nd ed., ed. G. Blakemore Evans and J. J. M. Tobin. Citations refer to line numbers of the play in question and appear parenthetically in the body of the essay.

[2] For an overview of the recent interest in shame within literary studies and queer studies in particular, see Halperin and Traub 3–46. For specific queer workings on the affect of shame, see Sedgwick 35–65. Finally, for an exploration of shame that mantles racial difference, see Stockton.

[3] See Loomba and Burton for a detailed account of the contentiousness of the category "race" in early modern studies (1–7).

[4] For studies devoted to race in the early modern period, see especially Hall 1–24, 62–122; Bovilsky 1–65; Smith 123–53; Bartels 1–20, 155–90; and Feerick 3–24. For studies devoted to the affect of shame in the early modern period, see Cluck 141–51; Fernie 41–108; Gundersheimer 34–56; and Paster 64–112.

[5] See Iyengar 103–39 and Hall 62–122.

[6] I have modernized the orthography from the 1607 edition of Topsell's book.

[7] As Loomba and Burton forcefully assert, "most theorists and historians of race still tend to exclude the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries from extended consideration. Often, they invoke premodern times only as a foil for later, more 'racialized' periods. Many early modernists concur, arguing that to speak of 'race' in the early modern period is to perpetuate an anachronism, because at that time 'race' connoted family, class, or lineage. … *But surely this complexity does not suggest that it is anachronistic to study race in the early modern period* [emphasis added]. After all, 'race' is, even today, a confusing word that does not carry a precise set of meanings" (1–2). For a representative account that treats race as anachronistic to the logic of skin color in the early modern period, see Floyd-Wilson (23–86). The latter disjoins race from skin color in order to account for climatological or "geohumoral" explanations of race and ethnicity. In her words, "There is no question that black skin *becomes* a scientific problem during this period. … But to attribute this conceptual shift either to bewilderment or empiricism is to underestimate the complexity … of geohumoral theories of complexion. We need to acknowledge that the racial stereotypes that facilitated the Atlantic slave trade were incompatible with geohumoral tenets" (5–6). While I fully acknowledge the complexity of early modern theories of complexion, I want to point out that it is precisely *how* "black skin *becomes* a scientific problem," that is, how geohumoralism can transform into "the racial stereotypes that facilitated the Atlantic slave trade," that Floyd-Wilson and many others who wish to guard against racial anachronism are unable to clarify. By addressing race and animality head-on, I want to underline that racial stereotypes such as those that link black skin to animality were not only widely available in the early modern period, they also provided the missing link between early modern conceptions of race and the histories of transatlantic slavery that would later ensue. For a suggestive reading that finds the Atlantic slave trade foreshadowed in early modern discussions of "livestock," see Shannon (*The Accommodated Animal* 270–83).

[8] I say "shift" instead of "departure" for the same reason that Derrida says "*There is nothing outside of the text*": not because everything is therefore language, but because "text" conceived of as a system of differences is without fixable boundaries (Derrida, *Of Grammatology* 158). Hence, the issue is not that of going "beyond" humanism or of blurring the boundaries between human and nonhuman. This is the mistake commonly made in defining "posthumanism." Rather, the "'posthumanist' point," as Karen Barad has recently argued, is "to understand the materializing effects of particular ways of drawing boundaries between 'humans' and 'nonhumans'" (123–24).

[9] I should note too, the rich efflorescence of medieval scholarship on animals. See in particular Steel and Crane.

[10] Notably, even Höfele neglects to make as much as passing reference to race in his study of early modern animality, and this despite many otherwise fascinating discussions of the part animality played in negotiating human self-definition in relation to various "New World" Others. See in particular Höfele 115–70 for more on the negotiations of human–animal difference in colonial environments.

[11] For an analysis of the linked histories between African subjects and animals in the West, see Mbembe. Mbembe is particularly sensitive to the ways these linkages surface in the history of Western philosophy, from Hegel to Bataille to our current state of "necropolitics."

[12] The is especially surprising given that two of the most far-reaching fields of critical inquiry to engage questions of the "human" and the "nonhuman" in recent decades have been critical race studies on the one hand, and animal studies on the other. In critical race studies, the displacement of the Western "subject" — defined here as white, able-bodied, autonomous, rationally endowed, and morally transparent — from the a priori position of legal, ethical, and political agent and cultural norm, has gone on in exact parallel to the displacement of the "human" by animal studies. See Wolfe 127.

[13] For a highly influential example, see Elias.

[14] Haraway uses the word "meeting" to connote this sense of becoming other. She writes, "To knot companion and species together in encounter, in regard and respect, is to enter the world of becoming with, where *who and what are* is precisely at stake" (19; emphasis in original). Rather than separate humans and animals due to shame into two discrete and ontologically opposed categories ("the Human" and "the Animal"), Haraway insists that we treat species differences as "entanglements" of matter and the materializing practices of becoming "worldly." "Species interdependence is the name of the worlding game on earth," where "worlding" implies for Haraway tying and retying the many knots of multi-species-being, "and that game must be one of response and respect" (19).

[15] Here I point to the difficulty of thinking sameness and difference at once, a difficulty which Goldberg, writing on the legacy of Lucretius, argues is essential to the very task of thinking (in) the Renaissance. See Goldberg 1–6.

[16] The *parergon*, according to Derrida (following Kant), separates the inside from the outside, the intrinsic from the extrinsic, and yet also serves to connect them. In this way, the *parergon* calls into question the boundary between nature (the body) and *techne* (the frame). See Derrida (*The Truth in Painting*) 37–82 for a discussion of the *parergon* in Kant, Hegel, and Heidegger. And for a discussion closer to the concerns of the present essay, see in the same volume Derrida's discussion of Kant's troublesome horse 83–118.

[17] As Hall argues, "Whiteness [in this period] is as much about a desire for a stable linguistic order as it is about physical beauty" (66). Illustrating the many obstacles to this desire, Iyengar shows how flush cheeks, when read as "the painted façade of modesty" rather than the clear signs of remorse, became rhetorically analogous to cosmetic surfaces — "tricks to deceive the eye" — which belied the blush's moral and semiotic "authority" (124). Iyengar links the early modern stage to the ambiguities pertaining to skin color, such that "permanent complexion" mixes with "painted color," just as real life mixes with art (139).

[18] As Darwin writes, "The facts now given are sufficient to show that blushing, whether or not there is any change of colour, is common to most, probably to all, of the races of man" (295). See Darwin 286–318.

[19] Sedgwick posits the intimate, relational dynamic between self and other as the defining aspect of shame. Far from being an obstacle to relationality, the emergence of shame depends on maintaining an already existing "interest" or "fascination" in the other (35–38). Similarly, Iyengar distinguishes between modern notions of shame, which presuppose an already internalized sense of self, and the relational dynamics of early modern shame, which entail a relational context wherein the self is exposed to others: "the early modern blush requires the physical presence of another to experience a sense of social shaming" (105–6).

[20] Morton translates Derrida's notion of *arrivant* as "strange stranger," a figure for the irreducible strangeness of beings who are strange not just for being "other" than human but, far more radically, for exposing the inhuman otherness intrinsic *within* humanicity. See Morton 41.

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