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Jewel, Purse, Trash: Reckoning and Reputation in *Othello*

**LAURA KOLB**

In a mocking list of moral lessons to be drawn from *Othello*, Thomas Rymer writes, “Thirdly, this may be a lesson to Husbands, that before their Jealousie be Tragical, the proofs may be Mathematical.” The double-meaning of “proofs”—both the demonstration of truth and the derivation of a mathematical theorem—underscores what will become Rymer’s major critique of Shakespeare’s play in *A Short View of Tragedy* (1693). The human calculations on display are, to Rymer, ridiculous: inexact to the point of improbability, based on hints and inferences rather than demonstrations systematically pursued. Despite his tone of ridicule, by contrasting Othello’s “Tragical” jealousy to “proofs . . . Mathematical,” Rymer makes a serious point: *Othello* is deeply concerned with evaluation, and evaluation, in *Othello*, opens onto the domain of mathematics. Throughout, language of calculation abounds, from Iago’s denigration of Cassio as a paltry account-keeper, calling him “debitor and creditor” and “counter-caster” (1.1.30), to Bianca’s “weary reckoning” (3.4.171) of her beloved’s “absent hours” (3.4.169). More centrally, Iago’s scheme to have Desdemona “undo her credit with the Moor” (2.3.344) involves a lesson in reckoning: he teaches Othello to evaluate his wife in a new way, reading her according to a hermeneutic of suspicion more appropriate to commercial credit (which he here invokes) than to marital trust. Following this linguistic and conceptual thread, what might it mean to push back against Rymer’s critique—to claim that reckoning in *Othello* is, in a very real sense, mathematical?

Critics from Rymer’s day to ours have called attention to the “improbable” suddenness and totality of Othello’s turn to jealousy. The most illuminating explanations center on the structures
of knowledge Iago instills (or awakens) in Othello: sexual anxiety, philosophical skepticism, a sense of the potentially arbitrary tie between word and thing, a rhetorized view of sociability and selfhood. Iago teaches Othello to know differently, critics argue, and his understanding of his wife, his world, and himself undergoes a swift and utter metamorphosis. Here, in contrast, I argue that the mechanism Iago makes available to Othello is primarily evaluative. That is, the ensign offers his general a new mode not simply of seeing and knowing the world, but of reckoning it, of calculating worth—in particular, his own, and his wife’s. In order to make this argument, this essay revisits Othello’s turn to jealousy and its corollary, his altered sense of self, in light of a little-remarked aspect of the play: the strain of economically charged language that runs from Iago’s sneering epithets for Cassio and plot against Desdemona’s “credit” to Othello’s comparison of his murdered wife to a discarded “pearl” (5.2.346). The evaluation of others and of the self are linked, in Othello, to acts of reckoning drawn from the world of trade. Othello’s re-evaluation of his wife and of himself is informed by practices and habits of mind from the domain of early modern commercial calculation.

In attending to Othello’s language of valuing, I draw on two recent strands of criticism on the play. Several new studies of Othello have characterized the play’s Venice as a site exemplifying the multi-cultural Mediterranean, a heterocosm brought into being by expanding networks of trade and cosmopolitanism. Both Emily Bartels and Daniel Vitkus treat Othello as a key text for historicist criticism that thinks, in Bartels’ words, “In terms of ‘worlds,’ charted . . . across bodies of waters and boundaries of nation-states, configured dynamically as transnational and international economies, and defined by mixed and ethnically mixed populations.” Vitkus argues that contact with strangers sometimes forced the solidifying of identities along oppositional, often binary lines, but at other times facilitated tolerance and cultural exchange. Similarly, Bartels calls attention to “how and where we draw the line on difference.” I am interested in that line—not only in how and where we draw it, but what tools we bring to bear on the act of drawing. As Joel Altman writes, by his final lines, Othello has discovered that “The self can harbor an unexpected stranger from a foreign land, who is introjected through the gaze of another.” In my account, the destabilizing gaze Iago makes available to Othello is not primarily Christian or European, as has been argued. It is instead a com-
mercial gaze, imported from the world of trade in which the play is set. It is, to borrow Rymer’s term, mathematical.

Patricia Parker has recently demonstrated the extent to which *Othello* is in dialogue with sixteenth-century mathematics and, further, the extent to which mathematics itself was a field of wide and varied associations.\(^{12}\) Arithmetic or “algorism,” Parker notes, spread through the heterogeneous trade-world that Vitkus and Bartels describe, entering Europe through “early contacts with the Muslim world” and remaining “identified with Arabs, Saracens, and Moors” even as Arabic numerals overtook Roman, and arithmetical calculation “with the pen” replaced older forms of reckoning “with the counters.”\(^{13}\) Parker’s interest lies in the dense web of associations whereby Shakespeare links numeracy to infidels, calculation to enchantment, and account-keeping to secrets, both economic and sexual. Here, I take a narrower focus, attending to Shakespeare’s dramatic portrayal of the act of reckoning. In so doing, I draw on recent work on commercial credit, one significant arena in which numerical or economic values come into contact with social value, virtue, public opinion, honor, and other less-quantifiable forms of worth. Historians of credit have suggested that economic credit seamlessly merged with other forms of social value—honor, reputation, opinion—in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.\(^{14}\) *Othello* registers a moment of greater complexity than this body of historical work might suggest, a moment when the terms *honor* and *credit* designated distinct forms of worth even as they at times overlapped. At its start, the play presents a world rife with multiple forms of evaluation, existing as choices within a broad and multiplicitous field. These choices are—tragically—organized into binary oppositions: between intrinsic and extrinsic values, for instance, and between honor and credit. Iago, I argue, promotes these binaries. Over the course of the play, he forces the tools of trade—the cognitive habits and the social practices of determining (and conferring) value in the marketplace—into conflict with other forms of valuation, in particular, military and marital honor.

In what follows, I will first lay out the play’s engagement with early modern arithmetics, following Parker’s suggestion that the spread of mathematics had important cultural ramifications. I will then turn to the play’s economic language and its presentation of reputation, credit, and honor, before concluding with a consideration of *Othello’s* engagement with the genre of Romance. Michael
Murrin has recently argued that expanding trade networks in the early modern period shaped the heterogeneous worlds and episodic structures of Renaissance Romance, a genre that critical tradition links to Shakespeare’s tragedy. Here, I suggest that Romance eclecticism offers a counterpoint to the tragic, binarizing logic promoted by Iago.

**Othello as partnership problem**

An *Introduction for to lerne to reckon with the pen or with the counters* (1536/7), the first printed arithmetic in English, contains a problem titled “The rule and questyon of zarasins for to cast them within the see.” It runs:

There is a galle[y] upon the see wherein be thyrty marchauntes, that is to wit 15 crysten men, and 15 sarazyns, ther falleth great tempest where upon it behoveth them to cast all the marchaundyse in to the see, and yet for all that they be not in surete from perysshynge, for the galle[y] is feble and weke, so that by ordynaunce made by the patrone, it is necessa-ry that there be caste into the see the halfe of the thyrty marchauntes, but the sarazyns wyll not be cast in, nor also the christiens: then by apoyntment made, they shall sette them down upon a rowe & then counte them unto 9 and he that sholde fall upon the 9 to be caste into the see, how wolde ye set them that none of the chrystyens shold be caste into the see[?] 16

Up to a point, the question is not so unusual. An *Introduction* consists largely of word problems that develop skills for calculation, measurement, and conversion. These problems invoke a range of situations from the mundane (calculating the price of everyday goods sold by weight or length) to the specialized (figuring the returns on an investment made by several merchants jointly). The majority deal with rate, proportion, and interest, and the “recken-ing” involved is rarely abstract. Scenarios involve retailers measuring cloth; women selling apples in a market; a householder sending a servant to buy pepper, sugar and “fine spyces.” Grounded in particular goods and situations, the problems in *An Introduction* present arithmetical calculation as a practice embedded in and instrumental to material and social life. 17

Many of these problems are about merchants, and the book probably would have been used primarily by members of the “business
community” of early modern England. As the genre flourished and branched out in later decades, printed arithmetics were touted as practically useful for a variety of disciplines, in addition to trade. These ranged from astronomy and surveying to medicine and warfare. One type of manual, the cheap and handy “ready reckoner,” appealed to a particularly broad audience. *The Treasurers Almanacke, or the Money-Master* (1627; an expanded version of the less auspiciously titled *The Money Monger, or the Usurers Almanacke* of 1626) bears on its title page a list of people for whom the pamphlet should prove “most necessary and helpful.” The list includes members of specific professions—Merchant, Grocer, Goldsmith, Scrivener, Mercer, Draper, Fishmonger, Usurer—broad social and professional groups—Artificer, Tradesman, Nobleman, Gentleman—situational types—Buyer, Lender, Seller, Borrower—and military men—General, Coronell, Knight, Commander. The list ends by broadening out even more inclusively: “And whosoever else. Also may fitly serve for the Sea.”

“The rule and questyon of zarasins” bears the situational and professional specificity of many early math problems, but its function within a program of practical education remains uncertain. What would a real merchant learn from the plight of these fictional ones? How would this puzzle “fitly serve for the sea”? It has been classified as “recreational” rather than “practical and real.” Indeed, it cannot be solved using the skills taught elsewhere in the book. The author does, however, provide a solution. To “set them that none of the chrystyens shold be caste into the see,” the merchants must be arranged as follows: “4 christiens 5 sarazins 2 christyens 1 sarazyn, 3 christyens 1 sarazin 1 christien 2 saraysns, 2 christiens 3 sarazyns, 1 chrystyen 2 sarazyns, 2 christiens 1 sarazyn.” There is no immediately discernible sequence to the numbers (indeed, until the nineteenth century, brute force “counting-out” remained the only way to solve the problem numerically). The visible pattern is, rather, the alternation of “christiens” with “sarasins.” The real reckoning involved seems to be social and religious, a stark division of the band into two groups: Saracens and Christians, the drowned and the saved. “The rule and questyon of zarasins” assumes and promotes a system of value not typically expressed in terms of numerical calculation, in which merchandise is worth less than lives and Muslim lives are worth less than Christian ones.

Yet perhaps this problem *is* useful for merchants. A sixteenth-
century reader unfamiliar with the puzzle might think at first glance that he was encountering a “partnership problem,” a genre that addressed profit-sharing in the age before corporations. Like “The rule and questyon of zarasins,” partnership problems open by specifying a number of merchants and continue through a brief narrative that culminates in a question—generally, sketching the merchants’ outlays in a venture and asking pupils to calculate the division of profits. A typical example from An Introduction runs:

Thre marchauntes put theyr monye togyther for to have gaynes, the whiche have boughte suche marchaundye as hath cost 125 francz, whereof the fyrste hath laide 15 francz. The seconde 64 [f]z. and the thyrde 36, fz. And they have goten 54 franc. of clere gaynes.

The text then addresses the reader: “I demaund how shall they devide it, so that eche man have gaines accordynge to the moneye that he hath layd downe.” “The rule and questyon of zarasins” asks a very different kind of question—“how wolde ye set them that none of the chrystyens shold be caste into the see[?]”—but the generic elements of partnership and shared enterprise remain in play. In fact, the problem’s mercantile setting seems to have been added by the book’s author. Notably, “The rule and questyon of zarasins” does not appear in any of recognized sources for An Introduction. Similar problems do show up in a number of Medieval and early modern texts. Other versions place different groups on board ship: students and “good-for-nothings,” Christians and Jews, Christians and Turks, friars and monks. Nowhere else, however, are the thirty travelers identified as merchants and nowhere else do they throw anything besides men overboard. These details alter the puzzle’s meaning. Behind the traditional riddle and its us/them logic, a world of commercial fellowship and shared endeavor opens up.

In early modern Europe, commercial relations increasingly brought strangers together “for mutual profit,” as another question in An Introduction puts it. The bonds that arose from shared ventures might be fragile and contingent, but they might also be lasting and firm. Gerard de Malynes writes of “sinceritie and Candor Animi amongst Merchants of all nations” and Hugh Oldcastle suggests that the “outwarde fayth or promise of a marchaunt” inspires inward trust. Even if the puzzle’s Saracens and Christians do not bear each other affection during their voyage, they do form a func-
tional, cooperative group. As “thirty marchauntes,” they travel together, throw away their goods together, and at last line up together. In the end, the Saracens are tricked because they trust. For them, the bonds of shared enterprise trump differences in race and religion. This must also to be the case for the Christians, at least up to a point; it is only when the storm arises that they “reckon” differently. And that is also a practical skill: knowing how to value human beings, according to what criteria, and when.

_Othello,_ too, contains a storm at sea with no Christian lives lost. “Our wars are done, the Turks are drowned” (2.1.197), the general declares as he comes ashore at Cyprus. Beyond this surface similarity, _Othello_ resembles the puzzle in a deeper sense. It is also a kind of partnership problem, where the boundary between Venetian and other shifts depending on the needs of the state, personal loyalties, and public opinion. “The rule and questyons of the zarasins” offers a schematic version of a problem at the heart of _Othello:_ the problem of assigning value to persons in a community at once predicated on and threatened by the absorption of difference. Like the band of merchants on the galley, Shakespeare’s Venice is a society in which incorporating strangers is both necessary and risky. The ship in the puzzle and the city in the play are both commercial enterprises that depend on cooperation and trust among members of different racial, national, and religious backgrounds. In both spaces, the boundary separating insider and outsider is fluid and shifting, at times obscure, at others sharply evident.

The center of a trading and military empire, Venice drew people from across the Mediterranean and beyond. Thomas Coryate wrote that Venice facilitated “concourse and meeting of so many distinct and sundry nations,” including “Polonians, Slavonians, Persians, Grecians, Turks, Iewes, Christians of all the famouset regions of Christendome” as well as “barbarous Ethnicks,” natives of Barbary, or North Africa. English readers of Lewis Lewkenor’s translation of Gasparo Contarini’s _Commonwealth and government of Venice_ (1599) would find mercantile enterprise linked to social heterogeneity on the first page: “so unmeasurable a quantity of all sorts of marchandise to be brought out of all realmes and countries into this Cittie” and “wonderful concourse of strange and forraine people” inspire “infinit marvaile” in the city’s visitors. Such “concourse” took many forms and entailed varying relations with the state. Especially in the arenas of trade, banking, and the military, aliens imported specific skills necessary to protect and fund Venice’s
commercial empire. War and commerce offered aliens “a legitimate, valued, and to some degree respected place within the social, economic, and political community.”

The figure of Othello embodies the ambiguous, insider-outsider status fostered by Venetian cosmopolitanism. Professionally, his “occupation” (3.3.359) depends both on his loyalty to the Venetian state and his foreignness. Contarini explains that Venetians prefer “forreyn mercenarie souldiers” in their armies; the “Captaine General of our Armie,” he reports, is “alwaies a straunger.” Some Venetians speak of Othello with racist epithets; most, however, esteem him highly. Few of the play’s characters seem either consistently concerned or consistently unconcerned with the question of Othello’s difference. No one, including Iago, conceives of him as an outsider all of the time, while even Desdemona acknowledges that his “visage” (1.3.250) sets him apart. Brabantio’s broken bond with Othello epitomizes the complexity of his position within Venetian society. Desdemona’s father “loved” Othello and “oft invited” (1.3.128) him into their home before accusing him of bewitching Desdemona to run to the “sooty bosom/ Of such a thing as thou—to fear, not to delight” (1.2.70–71).

The links that bind the Moor to Venice complicate his otherness, not only for the Venetians, but for himself. In his final speech, Othello separates himself into two opposed identities before committing suicide:

Set you down this;
And say besides that in Aleppo once,
Where a malignant and a turbaned Turk
Beat a Venetian and traduced the state,
I took by th’ throat the circumcised dog
And smote him—thus!

(5.2.350–55)

He appears to divide himself into that which is of Venice and that which is opposed to it—foreign, Turkish, Other—and casts the latter out. Othello’s stark self-division speaks to the success of Iago’s plot, which not only destroys his faith in his wife, but also corrodes his sense of self. But it also reveals something that existed dormant within him before that plot began: a multiple self-hood that reflects Venice’s heterogeneity and his own complex status as both insider and outsider. Like the group of merchants in the storm-tossed ship, Othello is both unified and divided. Or rather, he is unified until
he is divided. The action of the play resembles the storm at sea, revealing fault lines hidden within a symbiotic partnership. Instead of setting Christian against Saracen or even Venetian against Turk, it pits Othello against himself. The play is itself a kind of partnership problem, one in which rating people is always at issue. Through the stormy events of the middle acts, the complex multimodal judgments possible in the Venice of the play’s start re-emerge as a tragic binary. In what follows, I lay out the mechanics behind this shift; to do this, I turn to first to the play’s symbolic language of value, then to its presentation of good name.

**Economic language in Othello**

Unlike other English dramatic representations of Venice, such as Ben Jonson’s *Volpone* or Shakespeare’s *Merchant of Venice, Othello*’s plot does not hinge on economic issues. Throughout the text, however, money and property form a leitmotif, locating the play’s action in a society structured by the moment of cash, gifts, land, and other bearers of material value. Examples include Brabantio’s “bags” (1.1.80); Roderigo’s “purse” (1.1.2), the “land” (1.3.370) he incontinently sells; the “gold, and jewels” (5.1.16) he gives Iago to give Desdemona; Desdemona’s own “purse full of crusadoes” (3.4.23–24); the metaphorical “purchase” and “profit” between Othello and his bride and his literal “house” (5.2.364) and “fortunes” (5.2.365), which Gratiano inherits. Moreover, the “service” Othello has “done the state” (5.2.338) results from an economic arrangement. Like many historical Venetian officers, he is foreign; like all of them, he is a mercenary, and his mercenary status simultaneously depends on and mitigates his foreignness. At stake in the ongoing conflict against the Turks, and the raison d’être of the Venetian military, is control of a commercial empire within which Cyprus is an important trading post. At the broadest level, the play’s sea voyage, its Venetian-Cypriot setting, and the far-flung places to which it alludes (among them Barbary, Rhodes, Aleppo) locate its action within the criss-crossing trade routes of the Mediterranean.

If invocations of possessions and currency inflect the play with a sense of the commercial Mediterranean in which it is set, metaphors of value, exchange, and theft supply a symbolic vocabulary for concerns with human value and social evaluation. Two exam-
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Ples begin to illustrate the point: Desdemona, as we have seen, is likened to a pearl near the play’s end. Earlier, Othello compares her to a more hyperbolically precious object, a “world/ Of one entire and perfect chrysolite” (5.2.142–43). She is also figured, twice, as the profits of a mercantile voyage: she is “a land-carrack” (1.2.50) and “the riches of the ship” (2.1.83). On the other end of the play’s scale of value, Roderigo is conflated with his own money: “Thus do I ever make my fool my purse” (1.3.372), Iago comments. Later, Iago suggests that his patron-gull has no value at all, demoting him from “my purse” to “this poor trash of Venice” (2.1.294).

Taken individually, the play’s metaphors of value might seem to imply a straightforward symbolic logic: pearls and jewels symbolize inherent human value while purses symbolize more unstable, instrumental value, of the kind Roderigo has for Iago. A purse derives its value from the circulating money that fills it and so can be seen as worthless—or rather worth less—when compared to a jewel. The coins that fill a purse were sometimes denigrated on the grounds that they drew value less from intrinsic metallic content (which might be debased, clipped, or counterfeited) than from circulation. Bassanio’s characterization of silver money as the “pale and common drudge/ ‘Tween man and man” (3.2.103–4) in The Merchant of Venice follows this logic. Like coins, jewels also had “extrinsic” value, but, being rare and precious, they did symbolic duty as bearers of stable, inherent worth. By this logic, we might say that Roderigo is worth less than Desdemona, a judgment that the play at least to some extent endorses. Yet taken in aggregate, the web of symbolic equations linking objects to persons does more than figure merit or its absence, inherent or exchange value. Instead, the play’s rhetoric of value calls attention to varied modes of evaluation. Through the language of rich objects, money, and “trash,” Othello articulates competing strategies of assigning worth to persons, which represent amplified extremes drawn from a mixed, commercial world.

When we take into account that Othello speaks most of the play’s lines about jewels (and pearls) and Iago all of the lines about trash (and purses), the opposition developed through Othello’s rhetoric of value appears in a new light: not as symbolic of two forms of human value but rather as indexical of two modes of evaluating. Looked at in this way, the play seems to juxtapose an idealistic and a skeptical view of human value: the former somewhat rigidly essentialist in its ideological content, the other flexible, worldly,
and instrumentalizing. Such an opposition maps onto the powerful account of the play recently mounted by Joel Altman. Altman detects two forms of personhood in the play: Othello’s, which is, at the play’s outset, stable and self-consistent, and Iago’s, which is labile, shifting, and situationally constructed. In this account, Othello assumes meaningful correspondence between outward and inner qualities, his own and others’. His declaration that “my parts, my title and my perfect soul/ Shall manifest me rightly” (1.2.31–32) implies a model of the self in which intrinsic virtue aligns with outward behavior and both, in turn, with reputation, or social esteem. By contrast, Iago holds that only this last category truly counts. He operates from a sense of reputation as a slippery and manipulable signifier, with no definite link to inward worth. Iago assumes—and exploits—a gap between inward being and outward seeming, as well as a second gap, between seeming and social estimation, or “good name” (3.3.159). Altman argues that Iago teaches Othello to see himself as alien by effecting “a weakening in the tissue connecting the outer and inner self.”

An economic reading of the play that followed this logic might argue that Iago’s lesson—the poison he pours in Othello’s ears—is that human worth lies in the act of reckoning. What I want to show here, though, is that instead of adopting Iago’s own conception of evaluation (imagining all human value as externally conferred) Othello enters into what is arguably a more nightmarish cognitive space. Iago teaches him to see both ways at once—to understand human value as both inwardly rooted and outwardly conferred—while making him view these two modes of reckoning worth as fundamentally incompatible. In so doing, he amplifies and problematizes a key feature of the play’s commercial setting. As Shakespeare presents it, Venice requires that multiple modes of valuation work together. In the trial scene, for example, Othello prevails both because he is needed in the wars against the Turks and because the Duke and assembled nobles appreciate his innate merit. Iago reveals the fault line in this “both”/“and” position. He re-describes these modes of valuing people as ideologically opposed extremes, rather than options within a field of choices. In so doing, he organizes an eclectic, continuously negotiated suspension of divergent motives and ideals into a rigid binary: either Othello’s value is based on his intrinsic merit or it is externally constructed. Just as the storm in the puzzle forces a stark us/them logic on the merchants (whose initial partnership depended on the
suppression of such logic), Iago’s insinuations produce an opposition between two models of understanding the self hitherto not brought into conflict for Othello.

Nowhere is Iago’s binarizing logic so apparent or so subtly executed as in his speech on “good name” in Act Three:

Good name in man—and woman—dear my lord,  
Is the immediate jewel of their souls;  
Who steals my purse, steals trash: ’tis something, nothing;  
’Twas mine, ’tis his, and has been slave to thousands.  
But he that filches from me my good name  
Robbs me of that which not enriches him,  
And makes me poor indeed.  

(3.3.159–65)

In context, Cassio’s is the good name in danger of being filched. Iago has feigned reluctance to slander the Lieutenant, claiming a curious kind of self-knowledge: “oft my jealousy/ Shapes faults that are not” (3.3.151–52). Yet he speaks in such general terms that he might just as easily be referring to any number of good names: Desdemona’s, for instance, whose reputation he has already begun to ruin with the first hints of sexual slander, or Othello’s honor as a husband, predicated on his wife’s virtue. The speech both justifies Iago’s reticence to slander Cassio, and works to instill anxiety about reputation in Othello.

The speech’s generic quality, its applicability to multiple characters and situations, allows Iago to accomplish competing tasks. On the one hand, from its opening move, it assigns absolute value to Cassio’s reputation. On the other, as it unfolds, it calls attention to the constructed nature of good name. In effect, it makes two contradictory claims at once: first, that good name is above the marketplace where value derives from exchange and second that good name is constructed in that marketplace, by processes of social circulation. A skilled rhetorician, Iago can argue in utramque partem, as his commentary on “reputation” (2.3.253) to Cassio, a few scenes earlier, demonstrates. There, he dismisses it as “an idle and most false imposition, oft got without merit, and lost without deserving” (2.3.259–61) on the grounds that it is intangible: “As I am an honest man, I thought you had received some bodily wound; there is more of sense in that than in ‘reputation’” (2.3.256–59). Reputation, like Falstaff’s “honor,” is a “mere scutcheon” (1 Henry IV, 5.1.139). Iago goes on, asserting that reputation cannot be lost
without the individual loser’s admission of that loss: “You have lost no reputation at all, unless you repute yourself such a loser” (2.3.261–62). To Othello, by contrast, he argues two apparently contradictory positions at once: first claiming reputation’s essential reality, then pointing to its fragile externality. Good name, here, is both grounded in the self and an outward-facing possession that others may easily “filch.”

To take the former, simpler argument first. Iago’s topic is the proverbial notion that a good name is more precious than money. This line of thinking depends on symbolic contrast between the relatively stable, high value of a jewel and the comparatively variable, low value held by a purse. We might think, here, of Marlowe’s Barabas, tired of counting up “paltry silverlings” (1.1.6) and longing instead for “bags of fiery opals/ sapphires, amethysts/ Jacinths, hard topaz, grass-green emeralds” and “Beauteous rubies” (1.1.25–27). Indeed, in Iago’s speech, the terms “jewel” and “purse” are opposed, most obviously, on the worldly plane that Barabas, in his counting-house, inhabits. Though both had both exchange and intrinsic value—a point discussed more fully below—jewels could operate as a shorthand for intrinsic value in contrast to purses (and the coins in them), which derive their value primarily from exchange. Iago’s sneer, “‘Twas mine, ’tis his, and has been slave to thousands” (3.3.162), echoes Bassanio’s characterization of silver, the “pale and common drudge/ ’Tween man and man” (3.2.103–4). In these formulations, circulating money derives value from exchange and, because of this, lacks “real” value. In Iago’s extreme version of this paradox, true money resembles counterfeit. Seeming to be “something,” it is, in essence, “nothing.”

Iago’s chosen terms thereby invoke a second opposition: between things of the world and things of the soul. In the sixteenth century, the word “trash” often designated specifically temporal worthlessness; it was synonymous with “dross.” Countless warnings to worldlings figure money as trash, the epitome of the “frail and transitory things of this world” that tempt the soul from “constant and immortal treasures.” The term “jewel,” by contrast, often expressed the quality of being invaluable, beyond price. A jewel might represent a beloved child, health, virginity, learning, or piety. Even more than other precious stones, pearls in particular symbolized transcendent spiritual value, following the biblical comparison of the kingdom of heaven to “one pearl of great price,” for which a merchant sold all of his worldly possessions (which,
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beside the transcendent value of this spiritual “pearl” are mere dross). Following this culturally available logic, Iago’s speech posits a jewel-like “good name” as not only more valuable than a drossy “purse,” but as belonging to a completely different order of value: spiritual rather than material, “of the soul” rather than of the world. Moreover, the good name “jewel” is not just a precious possession but a constitutive one: the jewel that is a good name makes a person who he is. A purse’s contents can belong to anyone—“’twas mine, ’tis his”—but a jewel is immediate, unmediated, and “of the soul.” On the surface, then, Iago says the opposite of what he has just said to Cassio. In that exchange, he openly challenged the idea of meaningful correspondence between inner self and “reputation.” Here, he pretends to uphold it.

The model of reputation put forward by a surface reading of the speech is fairly clear: good name is the outwardly recognized reflection of the inward qualities that make a person fundamentally himself or herself. Yet the very materiality of Iago’s language works against such a reading. As the speech unfolds, it draws together a set of symbolically freighted object-nouns—adding “purse” and “trash” to “jewel”—and verbs that speak to the relationships of people to property: steals, filches, robs, enriches. In this discursive context, “good name” itself almost seems to materialize. It becomes yet another thing: of great worth to its possessor, but frighteningly alienable for a property “of the soul.” The simple fact that it can be “filched” brings the stability of good name’s value into question. After all, reputations do enter into circulation, as Othello himself knows. They can be devalued or inflated by external factors like slander or praise. The surface logic of the speech is that value that is currency bears a constructed kind of value, which is “nothing” in comparison to “real” or essential value. The problem is that good name—supposedly possessed of such real, essential value—is also closely akin to currency. Good name always in some sense belongs to others. “’Tis his,” as Iago says of the purse.

And what about that purse, and its supposed valuelessness? Even as a modern, commercialized understanding of money began to take shape, a traditional understanding of coins’ value as tied to their metal content remained firmly in place. The worth of coins was understood to be tied not only to their instrumental role in exchange but to myriad material factors, including weight, purity, wear, and clipping and the stamps that made them current. A purse is only “trash” if it is called trash. It may have contingent and
unstable value, but it only lacks value if described in a very specific, limited way. Later in *Othello*, Desdemona says that she would rather have lost her “purse/ Full of crusadoes” (3.4.23) than her handkerchief. Crucially, this moment does not illustrate how little she esteems money. Rather, it shows how highly she values the handkerchief. Her purse has real worth in the world, and this fact allows her to express the even greater worth she places on Othello’s gift.

Jewels are even harder to value than purses. Germano Maifreda documents a rising awareness in the Renaissance that precious metals and gemstones had exchange value that fluctuated according to market forces. Even outside of economic thought, their values could be understood as imputed rather than essential, contingent rather than stable, and at times deeply subjective. In common usage, a jewel was a wearable ornament, and the jewel-as-jewelry invited the gaze of others, drawing to itself the surplus value of admiration. Jewels were symbols of status and actual wealth, both cultural and actual capital. At the same time, as small, precious possessions frequently exchanged as gifts, they could be invested with idiosyncratic private value (not unlike Desdemona’s handkerchief, in fact). Think of Shylock’s turquoise. It is worth about as much as a pet monkey, but Shylock would not have traded it for “a wilderness of monkeys” (or, presumably, their cash value) because “I had it of Leah when I was a bachelor” (3.1.111). Brabantio invokes this model of private value when he addresses his daughter: “For your sake, jewel./ I am glad at soul I have no other child” (1.3.194–95). She is a jewel *to him*, and he feels her value most when he feels her loss.

All this is to say that, if we pay attention to the vehicles of the metaphors through which Iago describes “good name”—that is, if we think about jewels and purses in themselves as material objects, circulating and owned, rather than purely symbolic placeholders—the stark opposition between value and valuelessness falls apart. On the surface, Iago articulates a point of view close to Othello’s own at this point in the play: *some* value is real, essential, innate. Yet his subsidiary claim—that lesser forms of value are unstable, fluctuating, and externally constructed—ultimately undermines the notion of innate worth. Iago’s comparison (a good name is like a jewel, unlike a purse) dissolves, since good name actually resembles both. Yet because of the powerful, essentializing surface claim, it is difficult to imagine it as a composite. We are left with a seem-
ingly impossible choice: either to believe that human worth is innate and reputation bound to virtue or to believe that human worth is socially conferred and unrelated to the inmost self.

After he grows jealous, Othello begins viewing himself from a hostile outside perspective. He imagines himself “the fixed figure for the scorn of time, / To point his slow and moving finger at!” (4.2.54–55). The social gaze that he hitherto felt to recognize his innermost qualities now seems as though it must be fixed on externals alone. It is mocking rather than loving and destructive to his selfhood, rather than constitutive of it. He experiences Desdemona’s gaze differently as well. Taking to heart Iago’s suggestion that there are “foul disproportions” (3.3.237) in the match, he begins to feel Other in relation to his white, Venetian wife, protesting “she had eyes and chose me” (3.3.192) and later conjecturing that “Haply, for I am black” (267), she has turned from him to Cassio. The realization that the gazes upon him may not value him according to the criteria by which he values himself sets up the internal division between Venetian self and Turkish “other,” in the final speech. He once claimed that “my parts, my title, and my perfect soul/ Shall manifest me rightly” (1.2.31–32), and believed Desdemona when she claimed to see no contrast between his “visage” and “mind” (1.2.250). He now perceives a potential split between the way he sees himself, and the way others esteem him. Iago initiates this process by claiming that good name resembles a precious possession: simultaneously integral to its owner’s sense of self, and fragile, alienable, indeterminate. Using a rhetoric of value that interrogates the nature of value itself, Iago makes jewels look like purses, and purses look like trash.

Reckoning reputation: credit versus honor

As Iago uses it, the language of value promotes a destructive logic, organizing a plurality of evaluative habits of mind into stark opposition between idealism, on the one hand and skepticism, on the other.51 In itself, however, each object he names invites multiple modes of evaluation, reflecting in miniature the multifaceted kind of “reckoning” fostered by commercial cosmopolitanism. Good name, the subject of his speech, also invites competing evaluative strategies and is also subject to the kind of binarization Iago promotes. In Shakespeare’s day, economic conditions put new
pressures on the fit between outward-facing and inward-rooted models of good name. Reputation at once represented “society’s judgment of an individual’s worth” and referred to “internalized, personal, integrity.” The dominant form of currency in early modern England was credit, and credit, as economic historian Craig Muldrew tells us, consisted of communal estimation both of a person’s financial standing and his or her character. In what follows, I link the play’s concern with reputation, particularly martial and sexual reputation, with commercial credit. Reputation is Iago’s medium, the stuff of which he spins his plots. Over the course of the action, in addition to destroying Desdemona’s “credit with the Moor” (2.3.344), he gives Cassio a reputation for drunkenness, Othello a reputation for violence, and Emilia a reputation for shrewishness, while cultivating his own reputation as “honest Iago.” What I want to show here is how much this process, too, is inflected with habits of commercial reckoning.

Before turning back to the play, it is worthwhile to note just how complex early modern credit was. To “credit” someone was to reckon up his or her worth, and this worth was moral as well as monetary. In economic matters, “reputation,” “credit,” and “name” referred to what other people thought both about someone’s honesty and trustworthiness as much as to his or her access to resources. Despite its relation to character, though, credit did not always map cleanly onto other forms of social value. Even as reputation functioned as kind of “current money in [one’s] cash-chest” it remained possible to claim that a “good name” belonged to a different order of value from a “purse.” Muldrew’s work, which remains the most comprehensive account of early modern credit as an economic and social phenomenon, overlooks this complexity, suggesting that all forms of reputation—honor, name, public opinion—quietly became indistinguishable from commercial credit sometime in the mid-sixteenth century. Aaron Kitch offers a more direct version of Muldrew’s claim: “As credit and debt relations expanded in sixteenth-century England, traditional concepts of ‘honor’ were translated to the domain of every day transactions.” Yet the merging of various types of “name” was not so straightforward, especially when it came to the forms of reputation associated with “honor.” As recent studies of aristocratic, military, and gendered forms of social value demonstrate, the metamorphosis of honor into credit was an uneven and complex process. In a nutshell: “honor” seems to have remained associated with elite
values of birth, merit, public office, martial prowess, learning and civility—and, for women, with sexual chastity. Nevertheless, “honor” could also refer to the ability to keep faith in economic matters. “Credit” referred most frequently to economized forms of reputation; most broadly, though, it denoted communal belief in a person’s worth and word. Thus, commercial and non-commercial forms of reputation co-existed and could be conceived of separately. At the same time, they were described with partially overlapping vocabularies, signaling ideological overlap, as well. Othello takes place in the long composite moment when credit was both outward-facing and inwardly rooted, both a matter of money and one of morals, and both separate from honor and closely related to it.

Iago exploits the slipperiness of these terms. When he and Cassio discuss reputation, the two operate from different understandings of the same word. Their exchange captures two positions—one essentially chivalric, the other commercial—in which reputation is an equally central category, but has different ideological content. The same thing happens in a later exchange with Othello, when he calls Desdemona’s sexual honor, “an essence that’s not seen” (4.1.15), adding, “They have it very oft that have it not” (16). He derides honor as a matter of words and opinions, importing a meaning to the term that is at odds with Othello’s apparent sense of female sexual virtue as both real, rooted in the body, and an index of male virtue. Iago’s sense of honor-as-construct aligns with a commercial viewpoint, which understood “reputation, in the form of language” to be “produced and communicated for profit.” When Iago names Desdemona’s “credit with the Moor” (2.3.344) as the object of his attack, the word credit obviously does not mean “purchasing power” but rather Othello’s faith in her fidelity. Yet the term hints at fungibility and instrumentality, qualities adhering to commercial reputation and antithetical to sexual honor. Over and over, in Othello, “honor” and “credit” are shown to be separable but hard to keep apart. Iago’s plot depends on this dynamic. He relies on both honor and credit coming to equal conceptual weight in Othello’s mind. For Iago to succeed, his victim has to continue to believe that honor matters to identity (in a way that Iago himself does not believe), while at the same time accepting that it is constructed through language and social interpretation (in a way that Iago does believe).

The tension between these positions differed in different social
contexts. While in business matters honor and credit aligned closely, in other spheres they remained at odds. In what follows, I want to pay particular attention to honor and credit within the military troop and within marriage—non-market contexts nevertheless affected by economic modes of reckoning. Traditional, non-monetary concepts of honor seem to have been particularly durable in the spheres of sexual propriety and military life. Even as credit for men became increasingly tied to financial responsibility, women’s honor remained linked to sexual purity, and “the association of female honour and reputation with chastity was perhaps the least contested principle of social evaluation in early modern England.” Similarly, martial honor became more rather than less important to soldiers as England’s military structures developed in the seventeenth century. As a setting for Othello, Venice offered Shakespeare a site for exploring the ways in which commercial rhetoric, attitudes, and ideological structures put pressure on the traditional models of soldierly valor and marital virtue. In addition to its reputation for commercial cosmopolitanism, Venice was known for well-developed codes of courtship and marriage, on one hand, and military prowess, on the other.

To take the military first. In early modern Europe, an expanding economy gave rise to larger, more organized and technologically advanced armies. At the same time, the internal organization of military bodies resembled vertical feudal structures more than horizontal market relations. Military units replicated the hierarchical arrangements of “traditional social groupings—the very groupings that were everywhere dissolving or were at least called into question by the spread of impersonal market relations.” Within these units, a tiered system of offices replaced “customary hierarchies of prowess and status.” These hierarchies were not inflexible, however, and a certain degree of upward mobility operated as a stabilizing force. In his Theorike and practike of moderne warres (1598) Robert Barret describes how service is rewarded with rank, in a process “whereby many men of low degree and base linage” may rise to “great dignitie, credit, and fame.” In its ideal form, the military unit assigns office and honor to a captain according to “vertue, valour, magnanimitie, resolution, and [. . .] above all, loyalty.”

The dominant discourse of soldiership insisted on honor rather than profit as the true reward for military service. In practice, however, service could and did lead to material rewards, from ordi-
nary soldiers’ pay to the land, houses and monuments granted to the great Venetian condottieri. Thus, though martial honor and monetary rewards were frequently thought of in oppositional terms—in a way that commercial credit and money were not—in fact, the structuring tensions between good name and goods, and between outward estimation and inward worth, existed in the military context as well as in the commercial sphere. This complex situation is apparent in An arithmetical warlike treatise named Stratioticos (1579; repr. 1590), Shakespeare’s source for some of Othello’s military material. Begun by Tudor mathematician Leonard Digges and completed by his son, Thomas, Stratioticos is half primer on practical arithmetic and half conduct book. Books I and II provide lessons in military mathematics, many of which are recognizable descendants of those offered in the mercantile arithmetics of a generation before. Book III lays out the personal qualities and duties of soldiers and officers. Especially in this latter portion, Stratioticos stresses that the desire for money ought to be subordinate to the quest for honor. Under “The Office and duetie of a Captaine,” we find:

He ought not to be covetous or niggardly: never to keep backe his soldiers paye, but by al meanes to seeke to get them their pay, & to his abilitie rewarding them over and above, for by that meanes he gaineth honor, and maketh them assured to him in any perilous service. And contrariwise if he be a scraper and a spoiler of his souldiers, & bend his wits rather to pray on them & their pay, then [sic] to traine and teach them their dutie: Such a one ought to be disarmed and rejected as a baseminded mercenarie marchant, that shameth and soileth his profession.

The passage implies a complex internal economy: paying soldiers fairly leads to a captain’s increased honor among them and their increased loyalty towards him. Narrow self-interest, associated with “marchants,” ill befits a high-ranking officer. Even for common soldiers, honor trumps money: in the expanded 1590 edition of the work, Digges writes “If [a new soldier] be bare in apparell, [old soldiers] furnish him of their owne purses, because he should not be a dishonor to their Nation.” The collective outward-facing honor of the troop depends on the voluntary redistribution of private resources.

One of the math problems from Stratioticos’s first half, however, suggests a more direct relationship of honor to cash:
Admit there be a Praye or Bootie taken 300 Pounds sterling to be distrib-
uted to a Bande of 150 footemen, wherein there is 20 Souldiers wanting
of a Bande complet: I demaunde how much the Captaine and every sev-
erall Officer and Souldier of the Bande should have for their part or
share ratably made according to true auncient Discipline Militare.73

This is the traditional partnership problem, recontextualized, with
soldiers replacing merchants. Instead of calculating profit based on
outlay, Digges asks his reader to divide booty based on rank. Solv-
ing the problem requires knowing the rate of pay for persons of
each degree in a complete band, and then calculating the distribu-
tion of the booty, taking into account twenty missing soldiers. It
also requires tacit acknowledgement that the highest offices, which
bear the most honor, also deserve the most cash. The problem illus-
istrates a larger cultural dynamic in miniature: martial and monetary
values cannot be kept neatly separate, any more than military and
commercial enterprise could have been.

Iago’s methods (and to an extent, his motives) become clearer
when viewed against the backdrop of the early modern discourses
of military honor and profit. In the play’s opening scene, he
explains his hatred of Othello in terms of professional displace-
ment. He resents being “his Moorship’s ensign” (1.1.32) and envies
Othello’s choice of Cassio as his lieutenant. Iago casts his displace-
ment in commercial terms: “I know my price, I am worth no worse
a place” (10), he tells Roderigo. What he will later state to Cassio as
a basic fact about the world, he here expresses as a bitter realiza-
tion: innate merit and social value do not align. He is not honorable
except insofar as he is honored—or rather, dishonored, held at a
lower rate by Othello than that rate he “setteth on himself.”74

Worse, Iago feels that his “price” lacks reference to his qualities as
a soldier, which he tells Roderigo have been manifestly proven
in battle. Like the purse, his price comes from outside. It is a
“something-nothing,” and so is he: “I am not what I am” (65). It is
possible to paraphrase this statement as “I am not what I seem,”
but it also bears a secondary meaning: “I am not (intrinsically) what
I am (as an externally constructed reputation, a price, a quantity of
honor).”75

An analogue to Iago’s discovery of the misalignment of self with
world may be found in revenge tragedies. Katharine Maus has
argued that revengers are often motivated by the sense that their
place within a larger social order has been violated.76 The system
having failed him, the revenger comes to view it as a false construct, whose unreality only he can perceive. It is at this point, Maus argues, that victims become machiavels. The social roles they once carried out naturally they now perform self-consciously, concealing secret motives and veneful plots. Othello’s Iago follows a similar trajectory. His complaint that “Preferment goes by letter and affection/ And not by old gradation, where each second/ Stood heir to th’ first” (1.1.35–37) speaks to a sense of order violated. Feeling himself caught in a social structure where service, valor, and experience go unrewarded, Iago becomes that structure’s critic and manipulator. He acts the part of an “honest” soldier expertly: deferential to his Captain, hearty and bluff with fellow officers like Cassio, and cheerfully if crudely insulting towards women. In his soliloquies, he reveals himself to be a protean, actorly machiavel, to such an extent that there remains no core being left under all the seeming.

I suggest that Iago’s sense of violated worth is a new mode, roughly coincident with the start of the play, less to pinpoint his malignity’s elusive motive, than to excavate the remnants of another way of thinking that lodge in his speech. His outrage is particularly apparent in his denigration of Cassio, who has the place Iago covets. Iago describes Cassio as “a great arithmetician” (1.1.18), one “That never set a squadron in the field/ Nor the division of a battle knows/ More than a spinster” (1.1.21–23). As Paul Jorgensen suggests, the “bookish theoretic” Iago associates with Cassio is probably not dusty, antiquarian learning (like that possessed by Captain Fluellen in Henry V), but contemporary military science: “Cassio [. . .] was probably an ‘arithmetician’ in that he was studying gunnery, fortification, and the scientific marshalling of troops as presented in Digges’s [ . . . ] Stratioticos and Thomas Smith’s The Art of Gunnery.”77 Claiming that his own practical experience is worth more than Cassio’s academic background, Iago terms this kind of learning “mere prattle without practice” (1.1.25). Digges and other military theorists complained of exactly this line of attack from “old soldiers,” who regarded theoretical approaches with suspicion.78

Iago’s epithets for Cassio—“debitor and creditor,” “counter-caster”—seem strange in the context of the debate between martial “theorike” and “practike.” Cassio has, as Jorgensen notes, probably been reading books similar to Stratioticos. Though these descended from and still bore a family resemblance to early arithmetics like
An introduction for to lerne to recken, they articulated soldierly rather than mercantile values and bore little resemblance to contemporary works on bookkeeping, the activity to which Iago directly alludes with his “debitor and creditor,” the English name for double-entry accounting. Iago conflates all mathematical study first with “theorick” (“prattle without practice”) and then with the grubby “practick” of money matters. His epithets link the lieutenant to the ledger, and the ledger itself to petty worldliness: getting and spending, borrowing and lending, tracking the ebb and flow of money and debt. The logic behind this strange conflation has to do with the estimation of persons in military and commercial systems. Iago once felt himself within a system where human worth was correctly discerned and evaluated. That system is violated when it fails to reward his virtue and valor, which ought to produce both honor and office. The evaluative gaze of military ideology—which once determined Iago’s selfhood and fixed his place in the world—now seems fallible, subjective, determined by contingency and circumstance. It has become a gaze that assigns price without recognizing worth. Iago’s commercialized rhetoric and his insistence that reckoning itself is the only source of value in the world originate in this break. A soldier with a trader’s eye, Iago straddles martial and commercial understandings of value. He maintains a sense that he is above commerce, even as he draws on it to hollow out the martial order, rendering it useless as a meaning-making system for others.79

Iago’s martial office affords him a uniquely advantageous position from which to attack military ideology. Digges and Barret express concern with the relationship between inward honor and its external signs in multiple passages on the ensign, or ancient. The title derives from this officer’s primary duty, which is to bear the ensign, or standard, belonging to his troop. The standard symbolized the band’s collective honor. Digges wrote that “The losse of the Ensigne is not only to the Ensigne bearer, but also to the whole bande a perpetuall shame.”80 The symbolic function of the flag created an aura of equal importance around its bearer. “The value and vertue of the Ensigne,” Digges writes, “Setteth forthe the vertue and valour of the Captaine and the whole band.”81 Soldiers should fearlessly protect both the ensign and the flag he bears on the battlefield; the loss of either would court collective dishonor. As Barret put it, “The Ensigne is the verie foundation of the Companie, and therein consisteth the honour, & his, & his soildiers reputation.”82
To use Iago’s own terms, the ensign should be the “jewel” of the company: the external badge of collective, intrinsic worth. But Iago is more like a purse. He has face value—a reputation for honesty—but it bears no reference to his mettle.

The structures of martial honor are, in Othello, displaced onto marriage, another form of partnership corroded by Iago’s binaries.83 Within the context of Othello and Desdemona’s marriage, we again find the notion that inwardly-rooted virtue could be externalized, embodied in symbolic objects and persons. Desdemona’s handkerchief, for instance, functions as the external emblem of her honor. In a very real sense it is her honor: a domestic, miniature version of the ensign’s flag. Digges and Barret wrote that the loss of the standard brought dishonor not only on the Ensign but the whole company. Similarly, the loss of the handkerchief dishonors both Desdemona and her husband. Her virtue stands for his, just as “The value and vertue of the Ensigne setteth forth the vertue and valour of the Captaine.” This is why, when he believes his wife has been unfaithful, Othello feels he has lost his office as well, declaring, “Othello’s occupation’s gone” (3.3.359). Desdemona resembles the jewel-like form of Othello’s reputation: an external badge of honor, an adornment, a prize, but also a property of his deepest self, his soul.

Jewels are not just symbols of alienable and precarious reputations in the play. In a competing strain of rhetoric, they are part of a complex of symbols for that-which-lies-beyond-exchange. While Iago uses the language of precious objects to question the very possibility of ‘real’ value, both Desdemona and Othello employ metaphors of wealth and precious objects to express subjective perception of inestimable worth. Early in the play, Othello declares:

But that I love the gentle Desdemona,
I would not my unhoused free condition
Put into circumscription and confine
For the seas’ worth.

(1.2.25–28)

He figures his marriage as an exchange and freedom as the price for Desdemona. What he has lost is greater, to him, than all the treasures in the sea; his wife is worth more even than that. Similarly, Desdemona insists that she would not commit adultery for “the
world’s mass of vanity’ (4.2.164) or ‘for all the world’ (4.3.63), remaining firm in the face of Emilia’s very different reckoning: ‘The world’s a huge thing: it is a great price / For a small vice’ (4.3.64–65). In the most elaborate of these hypothetical, hyperbolic exchanges, Othello declares:

Nay, had she been true,
If heaven would make me such another world
Of one entire and perfect chrysolite,
I’d not have sold her for it.

(5.2.141–44)

A green gemstone, chrysolite bore specific associations with female chastity, according to early modern lapidaries and Francis Meres’ *Palladis Tamia, Wits Treasury* (1598). Meres notes that, “the Chrysolite being wore on the finger of an Adulteresse, so detesteth the crime, as it cracketh in peeces by meere instinct of nature.” By the speech’s logic, since she is in fact chaste, Desdemona’s worth exceeds the value of a jewel the size of a world, and her chastity surpasses that of a world as pure as the purest gem. Believing his wife false, Othello in fact offers a clear articulation of her true worth. Desdemona was so valuable that she lay beyond the realm of exchange.

In this conceit, as in Othello’s later image of the discarded pearl, Iago’s rhetoric of value asserts itself. To imagine a man or woman entirely outside of exchange is to imagine someone who cannot live in the world, structured as it is by shifting and composite partnerships. To imagine that all forms of reckoning and exchange devalue persons is to find worldly life sullying, compromised. In *Othello*, the rhetoric of value works according to a polarizing logic, which associates persons either with the purest gems or the drossiest trash. The rhetoric of value evacuates the middle ground, especially in Othello’s mind. Either Desdemona is a whore or she is too good to live. Either he himself is a noble Venetian who deserves to live immortally—“speak of me as I am” he tells the assembled company in his last speech, mindful of his reputation after death—or he is a “dog” who deserves to die nameless.

“For the seas’ worth”

Throughout, I have been arguing that *Othello* dramatizes the problems of social and commercial evaluation raised in “The rule
and question of the zarasins.” But the puzzle has another set of resonances, which, in closing, I would like to note as an important countercurrent to Iago’s relentless binarizing. “The rule and question of the zarasins” is about one group of merchants tricking another, but it is also a story of a voyage diverted, and of a tempest-driven vessel whose journeying passengers have lost their way. Their “feble galley” is a distant but recognizable relative of what David Quint identifies as “the boat of Romance,” the narrative trope of an errant vessel that “embodies an adventure principle that counterbalances an equally constitutive quest principle.”86 Othello’s own past is as much meandering Romance as a strongly teleological epic: his experiences prior to the play’s start were those of a storm-tossed wanderer more than those of a self-determining warrior. His course was shaped by “disastrous chances, / Of moving accidents by flood and field” (1.3.134–35), “hair-breadth scapes” (136) and being “sold to slavery” (138) and then redeemed. His story seems to have been recounted to Brabantio and Desdemona in episodic flashes: “the story of my life/ From year to year: the battles, sieges, fortunes/ That I have passed” (1.3.129–31). In a way, the episodes in Venice and Cyprus—where Othello ends up by virtue of his resourcefulness and valor, but also by chance—are simply the last of these narrative “islands.”87 Romance is the field in which commercial venturing and chivalric adventure meet. Typically, Romance suspends contradictions and enfolds variety; it resists the kind of binarizing thought—us/them, jewel/trash, white/black—that Iago promotes. The merchants in the boat of commerce are not driven by an adventure principle, but their journey becomes an adventure nonetheless.88 Othello does not buy and sell, but he traverses the trade routes of the early modern Mediterranean world.89

The possibility of Romance inflects Othello lightly, in Othello’s fantastical past and the off-stage action of the storm. Soon after Desdemona and Othello arrive in Cyprus, in their separate storm-tossed ships, the possibility of Romance quietly enters and then swiftly leaves the central story of their marriage. Having given order for the watch, Othello addresses his new wife, figuring the pair of them as merchants who ventured and succeeded jointly: “The purchase made, the fruits are to ensue: / That profit’s yet to come ’tween me and you” (2.3.9–10). In this momentary scenario, Desdemona is not a pearl, or a jewel, or even “the riches of the ship.” She is not “the purchase made.” Nor is she relegated, in this
conceit, to a realm of transcendent value beyond exchange. Othello’s conceit is that of a mercantile partnership. Both parties have invested, and both will reap the rewards. Venice’s martial, gendered, and commercial systems for “reckoning” human worth reassert themselves soon afterwards and are made destructive by Iago’s stark re-organization of their complexity. But for a moment, Othello envisions an alternate story.

Two lovers embark on a voyage. I demand of you how they shall share the profits.

Notes

1. Thomas Rymer, A Short View of Tragedy (London, 1693), 89. I would like to thank the anonymous reader and the editors of Shakespeare Studies for their rigorous engagement with this essay; Bradin Cormack, Josh Scodel, Richard Strier, and Matthew Harrison for insightful commentary on earlier drafts; and Megan Heffernan for generously sharing her bibliographic expertise.

2. See “proof,” n. 1 and 3. OED Online.


5. Rymer complains that “never was any Play fraught, like this of Othello, with improbabilities” (92) and remarks on the “wonderful scene, where Iago by shrugs, half words, and ambiguous reflections, works Othello up to be Jealous” (118). Later, more sympathetic critics have made similar observations. Stanley Cavell calls attention to the swiftness of Othello’s change: “One standing issue about the rhythm of Othello’s plot is that the progress from the completeness of Othello’s love to the perfection of his doubt is too precipitous for the fictional time of the play.” “Othello and the Stake of the Other,” in Disowning Knowledge in Seven Plays of Shakespeare (1987; updated, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 125–42, 128. Stephen Greenblatt notes the disparity between slender cause and totalizing effect: “All of the cheap tricks Iago plays seem somehow inadequate to produce the unshakable conviction of his wife’s defilement that seizes Othello’s soul and drives him mad.” “The Improvisation of Power,” Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 222–54, 247. Joel B. Altman locates Rymer’s complaint at the heart of the tragedy, arguing that the plot’s improbabilities are functions of the characters’ immersion in rhetorical forms of knowledge based on supposition, inference, and


10. Altman, *Improbability,* 287. Altman identifies Othello’s discovery of his audience with the discovery of his otherness. By contrast, Greenblatt argues that Othello’s identity is always oriented towards an audience that always potentially views him as alien: “His identity depends upon a constant performance, as we have seen, of his ‘story,’ a loss of his own origins, an embrace and perpetual reiteration of the norms of another culture. It is this dependence that gives Othello, the warrior and alien, a relation to Christian values that is the existential equivalent of a religious vocation; he cannot allow himself the moderately flexible adherence that most ordinary men have toward their own formal beliefs. Christianity is the alienating yet constitutive force in Othello’s identity . . .” (“The Improvisation of Power,” 254).

11. Vitkus writes, “Othello is not to be identified with a specific, historically accurate racial category; rather he is a hybrid who might be associated, in the minds of Shakespeare’s audience, with a whole set of related terms—Moor, Turk, Ottomite, Saracen, Mahometan, Egyptian, Judean, Indian—all constructed and positioned in opposition to Christian faith and virtue” (160). The flexible label “Moor” conjures myriad threatening others against which to construct a shared identity, an “us.” Altman likewise notes that that the figure of “the Moor had no stable identity” (*Improbability,* 293) in the English imagination, where it bore a “miscellany” of associations. In his account, however, what is at stake in the multiplicity of the Moor is not the construction of a clearly defined “us,” but rather the destabilization of identity *tout court.*


13. Parker, “Cassio,” 223. The phrases “with the pen” and “with the counters” appear in the title of the earliest arithmetic in English, *An introduction for to lerne to recken with the pen or with the counters* (1536/7; repr. London, 1546) and are stock phrases in later textbooks. As Parker notes, English arithmetics usually included “sections on counters” until “well into the seventeenth century,” perhaps due to resistance to unfamiliar “Arabyan” numerals (225).

Defoe assumes their fungibility; Muldrew, however, uses both authors as evidence for the seamless merging of good name with commercial credit.


20. The solution is given in Latin and English with a postscript: “Or for to know it more shortly ye may work by this verse following by the number of vowels: Populeam virgam matrem regina tenebat.” Eliot Oring explains this mnemonic: “Each vowel is accorded a numerical value (a = 1; e = 2; i = 3; o = 4; u = 5) and the thirty passengers are ordered according to the numerical value of the vowels of the verse beginning first with 4 Christians.” “On the Tradition and Mathematics of Counting-Out,” Western Folklore 56, no. 2 (1997): 139–52, 142.


22. Smith, Special Topics, 554–56. Rhetorically and in terms of its narrative set-up, if not in terms of its mathematical solution, “The rule and questyon of zarasins,” resembles this type of problem.

23. These numbers do not add up. The first merchant is probably meant to have put in 25 francs.

24. See for comparison the version from Nicola Tartaglia’s 1556 Venetian arithmetic (cited in Ball, Short Account, 196) and problem XXIII in Claude-Gaspard Bachet’s Problèmes plaisants & délectables (1612; repr., Paris: Gauthier-Villars, 1879), 118–21. An overview of this type of problem appears in Rudi Mathematici 75 (2003), 21–24: none of the surveyed examples identify the different groups on board ship specifically as merchants.


26. On this point, see Bartels, Speaking of the Moor, esp. 7, 13 and Vitkus, Turning Turk, 7–24.
27. Thomas Coryate, Coryats crudities (London, 1611), 171.
30. Contarini, Commonwealth, 131–32. Though not all soldiers or commanders were foreign, mercenaries were generally perceived and represented as non-Venetian. See Michael Mallet, Mercenaries and their Masters: Warfare in Renaissance Italy (Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Littlefield, 1974), 43–45, 209.
31. Bartels notes that in Shakespeare’s Venice “terms of prejudice seem hard to stand by, if not hard to come by.” Speaking of the Moor, 163.
33. Besides Parker, few critics have examined Othello’s commercial language. Those who do tend to locate it within a Christian contrast between worldly dross and spiritual treasure, or as evidence of Shakespeare’s moralizing stance on profit seeking. See, for example, Lawrence J. Ross, “World and Chrysolite in Othello,” Modern Language Notes 76, no. 9 (1961): 683–92, 688 and Robert B. Heilman, “The Economics of Iago and Others,” PMLA 68, no. 3 (1953): 555–71.
35. On social evaluation in Othello, see Altman, Improbability, throughout; Madeleine Doran, “Good Name in Othello,” SEL 7 (1967): 195–217; and Gross, “Slander and Skepticism.”
36. The word’s association with refuse did not become current until the 20th century. In early modern usage, it denoted “anything of little or no worth or value; worthless stuff; rubbish; dross.” “trash, n., 3.a.” OED online.
38. All quotations from The Merchant of Venice are from the Arden III edition, edited by John Drakakis (London: Bloomsbury, 2010).
39. The term “extrinsical” is from Rice Vaughan, A discourse of coin and coinage (London, 1675), 8.
40. Altman, Improbability, 72.
recognized the overlap of economic worth and human worth in that play; of particular use to me in writing this essay were C. C. Barfoot, "Troilus and Cressida: 'Praise us as we are tasted,' " Shakespeare Quarterly 39, no. 1 (1988): 45–57 and Baker, "Credit Risks."


43. Barabas concludes:

And thus methinks should men of judgment frame
Their means of traffic from the vulgar trade,
And as their wealth increaseth, so enclose
Infinite riches in a little room.

(34–37)

Each imagined gem is itself a compressed bearer of great value, "infinite riches in a little room." And a literal little room filled with such objects would be both a better, richer version of his counting house and a space where the wearying need to reckon-up would be, finally, done away with. Quotations are from Stephen J. Lynch's edition of The Jew of Malta (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 2009).


45. In the English translation to Plutarch's Table of Cebes (London, 1545), we find, "My sonne is dead . . . I haue loste a great iewell." In The precepts of the excellent clerke (London, 1543), health is a jewel; in Erasmus' Paraphrases (London, 1548), virginity is one. Learning is a jewel in Thomas Nashe's Almond for a Parrot (London, 1589).

46. Matt. 13:45–46. For an extended contemporary treatment of the passage, see Samuel Gardiner, A Pearle of Price or, the best Purchase (London, 1600). Gardiner emphasizes the distinction between goods of the world and goods of the soul in his prefatory letter to the reader: "The Apostle accounted all things but dung to gain Jesus Christ. This is better then the gold of Ophyr or India . . . Buy therefore this Pearl and Treasure of the soule, and lodge it in thy hart: it will be instead of all ritches unto thee" (sig. A7r).


48. This history is complex; see among others Deng, Coinage, 9–17, and Valenze, Social Life, throughout.

49. Malfreda, Oikonomia, 20–22.

50. "jewel, n." OED Online.

51. Cavell's "Othello and the Stake of the Other" remains the classical account of skepticism in the play; see also Gross, "Slander and Skepticism."

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53. Muldrew, Economy, 151.
54. Ibid., 148–51.
55. The quotation is from Daniel Defoe, The Complete English Tradesman (London, 1726), 225; cited in Muldrew, Economy, 155.
59. Doran, “Good Name,” 199.
60. Shepard, “Manhood,” 76.
62. See McPherson, Myth of Venice, 38–45.
65. Ibid., 132.
67. Ibid., 240
72. Digges, Stratricicos, 80.
73. Ibid., 72
74. The quoted phrase is from Thomas Hobbes, Leviathan (London, 1651), 42; cited in Muldrew, Economy, 148.
75. See Greenblatt, “The Improvisation of Power,” 238.
78. Ibid., 114–15.
79. As Neill points out, Iago’s dismissal of courtly Cassio as an accountant is ironic. It is Iago, not Cassio, who inhabits “the shadowy borderlands that marked the all-important boundary between the gentry and the great mass of people without ‘name or note’” (“Introduction,” 150), and it is Iago, not Cassio, who typically employs the language and calculus of accounting.

80. Digges, Stratioticos, 82.
81. Ibid., 94.
82. Barret, Theorike, 19.
83. On the slide of the martial into the marital, see both McBride, “Orotund,” and Genster, “Lieutenancy.”
87. Ibid., 249.
89. On the relation of trade routes to the form of literary Romance, see Murrin, Trade and Romance.
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