Othello’s Black Handkerchief

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I

The cover of the 1997 Arden edition of Othello boasts a striking image: a single, white handkerchief suspended in mid-air, tilted at a downward angle against a smoky gray background. The cover art insists on the centrality of the play’s controversial piece of fabric and asserts as “ocular proof” (3.3.361) what everyone seems to know or take for granted—that the handkerchief is white. Among critics, this presumption of whiteness has been the rule, with the discussion of the white handkerchief centering on Desdemona, her sexuality, questions of virginity, and marriage as in Lynda Boose’s influential analysis: Shakespeare “insistently created for his audience a highly visual picture of a square piece of white linen spotted with strawberry-red fruit.” She continues, “What Shakespeare was representing was a visually recognizable reduction of Othello and Desdemona’s wedding-bed sheets, the visual proof of their consummated marriage.” Pursuing this reading of the white handkerchief as bed linen in miniature, Edward A. Snow claims that the “spotted” handkerchief “is potent as visible proof of Desdemona’s adultery largely because it subconsciously evokes for Othello the blood-stained sheets of the wedding-bed and his wife’s loss of virginity.

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2 All quotations from the play are taken from Othello, ed. Norman Sanders (Cambridge UP, 2003), cited in the text by act, scene, and line.
there." More recently, Janelle Jenstad reiterates what is now the established critical and pedagogical commonplace concerning "the metonymic connection between handkerchief, wedding sheets, and Desdemona's body." The neat correspondences between a white handkerchief and sheets, their shared morphology, and accompanying red emblems have assumed an unquestioned critical orthodoxy. The insistence on seeing or positing whiteness in the handkerchief has insinuated itself seamlessly in *Othello* criticism and raises questions about the interpretive and ideological bias at work among readers.

Consider the justification of identifying the handkerchief with the ritual of the stained, bloodied sheets of a virginity test. Boose concedes that although "we cannot absolutely document its practice in Elizabethan England, we can infer from several important clues that the notion was at least apprehended within ritual consciousness at that time." Elizabethans would have certainly been aware of such a test, Boose argues, given the biblical precedent in Deuteronomy, the "decidedly English" example of Henry VIII's divorce proceedings against Catherine of Aragon, and the theatrical evidence of the chastity tests in *The Changeling*; she maintains that the virginity test was "a wide-spread folk custom throughout Europe." Robert Burton notes the convention among Africans and Jews of displaying wedding sheets stained with blood in *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, but Boose dismisses Burton's claims as sheer xenophobia, as Burton "characteristically attributes any and all examples of extreme behavior to non-English, non-Protestant peoples." However, in his *Geographical Historie of Africa*, written in 1526, Leo Africanus, a converted Moor who grew up in Fez in North Africa, stipulates the practice as one with first-hand knowledge: immediately after the consummation of the marriage, a woman selected for the task takes the bridal "napkin stained with blood," shows it to the guests, "proclaiming with a loud voice that the bride was euer till that time an unspotted and pure virgine." Burton's alleged xenophobia gives way to Boose's strategic Eurocentrism. Boose's assertion of the handkerchief's whiteness is matched by her insistence on the specifically European nature of the wedding-night test in order to justify its appropriateness for Desdemona, the Venetian, so that "white-

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7 Boose, 363.
8 Boose, 364.
ness” and “European-ness” coincide to provide an overdetermined racial discourse for which the handkerchief stands.

Along with the handkerchief’s purported whiteness, the identification of the spotted or embroidered strawberry pattern suggests a home-grown tradition since the “strawberry plant—its fruit, flowers, and leaves considered—is among the most frequently occurring of such objects represented in English domestic embroidery surviving from the period.”

This domestication of the handkerchief is consistent with the color aesthetic that informs much current criticism. Not surprisingly, therefore, Farah Karim-Cooper, with an eye to cosmetics, identifies the red and white of the napkin as symbols of the “Anglo-European feminine ideal” found in Desdemona: “It is as red as roses and strawberries, and as white as the lily or as snow; it is as red as blood, and as white as flesh.”

Karim-Cooper’s analysis not only bears witness to the overwhelming critical tendency to associate the handkerchief with Desdemona, but also makes explicit the racial presupposition among scholars that identifies the redness of the embroidered pattern and the whiteness of the handkerchief with Desdemona’s body: capillary or virginal blood and white flesh. Race has, indeed, played a significant part in the critical unpacking of the handkerchief in the play, but it has been curiously annexed to Desdemona and, most visibly, the whiteness of her body.

This essay will focus instead on the handkerchief, its relation to Othello, and its role in constructing an idea of blackness and race that places severe constraints on black subjectivity. Defined by Jonathan Gil Harris and Natasha Korda as “all the moveable physical objects of the stage,” stage props have been generally neglected in scholarship and regarded as propping up or supporting the play text in an ancillary role. But stage properties have a “cultural biography”; beginning in the real world outside the theater, they assume different functions and manifest different identities at various stages in their social circulation up to and including their transition into the theater space. In the theater, the cultural biography of black cloth includes its function as a handkerchief within Othello—among the most famous of stage props—and its mimicry of a

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black body and the fashioning of an idea of race contingent on the thingness of black textile. This essay argues that among the techniques employed to imitate the black skin of Moors or Africans on the stage was the covering of the actor’s body with black cloth, its function being to materialize the imagined black bodies of real Africans existing in the world outside the theater. As a corporal supplement signifying black skin, black cloth functioned as an epidermal prosthesis in the theater of racial cross-dressing.

The editors of the volume Subject and Object in Renaissance Culture suggest that from Jacob Burckhardt’s notion of the autonomous individual emergent in the Renaissance to Marx’s theory of alienation that argues the rift between labor and the material world, subject and object appear to be separate and even opposed, the object being typically construed in the public consciousness as secondary and less important. A rebalancing perspective offered by some scholars of material culture ushered in a new perception about the active power of objects: contrary to expectation, objects not only confer meaning on subjects, but also “constitute subjects.”15 It is a theory argued in several places, often in the context of clothing and its shaping of subjects.16 However, in the theater of racial cross-dressing, claiming that the materials of staging confer meaning takes on a radically perverse sense. In such a theater of racial impersonation, black cloth does not reproduce the particular identity function of clothing as argued by critics but has a different relation to the actor’s body in its role as the theatrical simulacrum of skin. The prosthetic black cloth covers and masks the body beneath; its primary function is to materialize the imagined and absent real black subject and to give it meaning. Black cloth’s primary meaning does not reside in its constitutive relation to the actor’s body as clothing, but in the representational and semantic space of the theater, it is a body—a material or textile body. A peculiar, paradoxical, but racially powerful consequence attends the black body, imagined and contemplated in the theater, where black cloth—the material object—defines and determines a notion of racial subjectivity.

II

From the perspective of European cultural history, the handkerchief is first and foremost an expensive luxury item dating back to the medieval period.17

16 See for example, Will Fisher, Materializing Gender in Early Modern English Literature and Culture (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2006); and Ann Rosalind Jones and Peter Stallybrass, Renaissance Clothing and the Materials of Memory (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000).
17 On the definition and appeal of luxury goods, see Woodruff D. Smith, Consumption and the Making of Respectability, 1600–1800 (New York: Routledge, 2002), 63–86.
Identified several times in the wardrobe accounts of Richard II during the 1380s, orders for “small pieces of linen made to be given to the lord king for blowing and covering his nose” constitute some of the earliest English references to handkerchiefs. The generic notation concerning “small pieces of linen,” reasons George Stow, serves as an important clue as to the novelty of the item described at that time. Norbert Elias has famously argued that the introduction of the handkerchief to blow and wipe one’s nose, as opposed to using hands or clothing, marked a significant shift in a civilizing process that was aggressively aimed at shoring up class distinctions. “The ladies,” writes Elias, “hang the precious, richly embroidered cloth from their girdles. The young ‘snobs’ of the Renaissance offer it to others or carry it about in their mouths.” Richard’s great wardrobe accounts, therefore, initiate and cement the association of the handkerchief with aristocratic wealth and display, the costliness of the item granting a certain prestige to the owner. Among the wealthy, handkerchiefs were fashionable accessories during the Middle Ages, states Juana Green, “and although they came into more general use in England and on the Continent during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, especially during Elizabeth’s reign, handkerchiefs remained signifiers of wealth and status for both men and women during the early modern period.”

The court records of the New Year’s gifts presented to the queen by gentlewomen include seventy-two handkerchiefs for 1562, fifty-one for 1578, and forty-two for 1579, with the details of fabric, most often handkerchiefs made of silk and cambric edged with gold, silver or lace. A typical entry from 1562 itemizes six handkerchiefs “wrought with flowers of silk and gold, edged with gold.” Similar entries for 1589 identify two sets of six handkerchiefs of cambric “wroughte with black silk” and, highlighting the role of imported fabrics and goods in the luxury market, “two handkerchers of Holland wroughte with black silk.” Additional embellishments include jewels or buttons, such as the six handkerchiefs included among the queen’s gifts “edged with silver and buttoned.” Given the select mate-

19 Stow, 226–27, 233–34.
21 Elias, 126.
24 Nichols, 1:116.
25 Nichols, 3:12.
26 Nichols, 1:117.
rials utilized and the care expended in construction, the cost of handkerchiefs was considerable. In 1589, for example, according to Edward Whalley’s records in the Countess of Shrewsbury’s account book, the sum of twenty-six shillings was paid for two handkerchiefs. In 1599 after the death of Henry IV’s mistress, the inventory noted five handkerchiefs worth 100 crowns. Handkerchiefs evoked a gorgeous tapestry of rich, sensuous textiles, embroidery, and ornamentation, forming a portable symbolic treasury of the owner’s wealth and status. Importantly, despite the obvious familiarity of white handkerchiefs represented in paintings from the period, color added to the variety of sumptuous elements as in the following entry among the queen’s gifts: six handkerchiefs presented by Lady Lane, “four of them black silk and gold, and two of red silk.” Black handkerchiefs were not unknown.

Katherine Lester and Bess Oerke conclude that by 1600 handkerchiefs “had only recently come into general use, and one cannot be overcritical of the conspicuous place they were given in the dress of the period.” By the early seventeenth century, the availability of handkerchiefs in a wider variety and quality of textiles, both imported and locally manufactured for a more inexpensive product, met the growing demand of different consumer classes. “Differentiation in textile products,” Green affirms, “resulted not only from the increased availability of imported linens to meet the demands of those who could afford them, but also from the domestic production of differing qualities of textiles that could satisfy a demand for less costly textile products.” This demand for handkerchiefs, along with similar luxury items, must be set against the economic and cultural background of a new consumerism. Energized by new shopping opportunities and regimens, the royal promotion of English luxury trades and manufactures, the incitement to own and collect inspired by travel and print, and the impact of early modern science on consumption, the new consumerism resulted in the “reinvention of identities through new artifacts.” The profusion of goods inspired a culture of commodity consumption that celebrated individual own-

27 Green, 1086; she also notes that Henslowe’s diary records a loan of 10s. for the purchase of five handkerchiefs.
28 Elias, 145.
30 Katherine Lester and Bess Viola Oerke, Accessories of Dress (Peoria, IL: C. Bennett, 1940), 426.
31 Green, 1089.
ership and purchasing power. At the same time, “the culture’s new access to a superfluity of material possessions” would influence notions of early modern subjectivity. Thus, a considerable power or agency emerged in the abundance of objects that uniquely redefined early modern consumers resulting in the commodification of the subject.

Critics of early modern culture have found other instances of such commodified identity, understood as the interdependent relation between subject and object, and the apparent transformation of the subject by and into an object. Within the context of clothing and gender, Will Fisher states that “objects work to shape the identities that they help construct” and “that the material form of these items mediates the types of identity that are brought into being through them.” The theme of textiles and cloth is, of course, relevant to the product and manufacture of handkerchiefs. “Like the handkerchief” in Othello, Douglas Bruster writes, “clothing becomes the body, in both senses of the verb.” On the consumer side, while both men and women used, wore, and displayed handkerchiefs, women featured prominently in providing labor, through their clothwork and embroidery, in the local domestic markets. Susan Frye suggests that in the drama, “Women tend to become cloth rather than its producers and consumers” struggling under the alienating expectations of a masculinist culture. Similarily, Green contends that women in city comedies

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34 On the role of commodities and objects in shaping identities, see Arjun Appadurai, “Introduction: Commodities and the Politics of Value,” in The Social Life of Things, 3–63; and De Grazia et al.
35 Implicit in this reading of early modern material identity is Marx’s notion of commodification as defined by De Grazia et al.: “The object comes to overpower the subject, mysteriously incorporating the latter’s labor into itself—so that the subject’s activity looks like a property of the produced object itself” (3).
36 Fisher, 42.
37 Douglas Bruster, Drama and the Market in the Age of Shakespeare (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1992), 86.
who work in shops filled with goods “risk being commodified by the men who would conflate them with their ware.” These critics join a wider critical discourse that discerns the potential for objects to be more alive than living subjects in both early modern society and its theater.

While adhering to the concept of commodified identities, my argument departs from these critical interventions in significant ways. First, while the labor-intensive cloth market historically engaged women as integral participants and producers, the critical tendency to identify the handkerchief in Othello with Desdemona betrays the erroneous presumption that women were virtually the exclusive users and wearers of handkerchiefs. By contrast, this essay examines the handkerchief primarily in relation to Othello and will concentrate on Othello’s handkerchief speech in Act 3. Second, while the focus on women, handkerchiefs, and other goods allows an important examination of early modern gender politics, race in relation to the handkerchief has received short shrift. More specifically, the critical iterations of commodified identities cited above ignore race altogether. While Bruster writes that “the inscription of identity into objects is followed by an admission that the subjective then shares the properties of the material world,” my essay asks readers to contemplate the meaning and impact of such a claim in the context of racial subjectivity. Finally, in examining the staging of blackness in the early modern theater and its specific use of cloth among other related items, the essay argues that a radical reification of identity emerges, literal and concrete rather than rhetorical and metaphorical, to offer a material account of race.

III

First performed during the late Elizabethan and early Jacobean era, Othello (1604) emerges at a moment “that many commentators agree constituted a

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40 Green, 1094.
41 Thomas Rymer’s criticism from A Short View of Tragedy (London, 1693), regarding the inordinate plot status of the handkerchief, is revealing on this point: “So much ado, so much stress, so much passion and repetition about an Handkerchief! Why was not this call’d The Tragedy of the Handkerchief?” (sig. K6r). Rymer’s formulation imagines a substitution where Othello, the putative tragic subject, is displaced by the offending piece of cloth. Rymer unites Othello and the handkerchief rhetorically, reiterating the discourse of materiality, and in the process he relegates both Moor and textile product to the superfluous category of “trifle” (sig. K6v).
42 A notable exception is Natasha Korda, who in her discussion of the handkerchief in Shakespeare’s Domestic Economies: Gender and Property in Early Modern England (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 2002), observes that “women and Africans were linked, within the cultural imaginary, by their purportedly skewed relations to material objects” (113).
43 Bruster, 90.
signal transitional period in English history." The play not only registers changing notions of race, but also presents them simultaneously, holding them in tension for the audience to grasp the trending shifts and developments in racial thinking. Language, religion, geography, and color jostle in the semantic mixture of early modern racial discourse. Contingent on the changing ideas concerning race, however, are the multiple theatrical techniques of racial representation employed from the sixteenth to the early seventeenth centuries. As theatrical techniques changed and different materials were used for racial simulation, the visual spectacles of blackness took on new emphases and meanings that, in turn, had a direct impact on the audience’s perception of the black body. This essay’s investigation of Othello’s handkerchief is set against the changing early modern traditions of staging racial impersonation.

In the absence of Africans to play certain roles, how was blackness staged in the early modern English theater? This interrogation animates, in part, Dympna Callaghan’s contention that blackface was the most obvious and compelling “histrionic mechanisms of racial impersonation.” While she recognizes the use of “lamskin fur,” for example, to imitate Africans’ hair or costume as indicator of foreignness, she finds most pertinent the skin-blackening agents such as “charred cork mixed with a little oil.” “More striking than all other features and accoutrements of alterity, such as nakedness or sartorial splendor,” she maintains, “the definitive characteristic of the racial other both on and offstage remained skin color.” Othello’s well-known self-denigrating statements, such as his comparison of Desdemona’s ruined reputation to his “begrimed and black” face, would appear to endorse this focus on cosmetically altered skin coloration (3.3.388). “Othello’s darkness” is the play’s central concern, Karim-Cooper claims; “the actor’s painted black face is the material signifier that brings this issue literally to the forefront.” The considerable evidence concerning the roster of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century London stage performers in Shakespearean roles, specifically Othello—Spranger Barry, Edmund Kean, William Charles Macready, David Garrick, Edwin Booth, John Philip Kemble,
Henry Irving—along with their greater historical proximity, contributes to the narrowing of our contemporary perception of blackface as skin painting.⁴⁹

The early modern stage practices of blackface, the imitation of black skin, however, exceeded various concoctions of skin paint and cosmetics. They included the fabrication of blackness from textiles and leathers that conveyed a body less subtle from the point of view of verisimilitude, but more ideologically expressive in the representation of the black body in its stark materiality and tangible objecthood. The royal festivities at Whitehall in 1510 for a visiting group of foreign dignitaries highlighted an array of international characters that, like the dignitaries, represented “diverse realmes and countreis.”⁵⁰

Following the entry of a series of royal personages dressed in foreign attire, including Henry VIII and the Earl of Essex “apparelled after Turkey fashion,” were torchbearers “appareyled in Crymsoyn satyne and grene, lyke Moreskoes, their faces blacke.”⁵¹ The reader is unsure whether the torchbearers, belonging to a lower dramatic hierarchy, have their faces darkened by way of an unspecified skin-blackening substance. The remaining account, however, clarifies the specific use of black cloth to mimic skin for others. Immediately after the banquet show, “the kyng brought in a mommerye” that included six ladies in three pairs, each pair resplendently dressed in a manner befitting a royal personage, every shred of clothing and hair ornament recorded in sumptuous, gorgeous detail, but all described as appearing black, like Moors: “Their faces, neckes, armes and handes, covered with fyne plesaunce blacke: Some call it Lumberdynes, which is marveilous thinne, so that the same ladies semed to be nigrost or blacke Mores.”⁵² Blackness, or more accurately the imitation of black skin, was achieved through the use of cloth—pleasance, defined as “a fine gauzelike fabric”—covering the face, neck, and extremities.⁵³

Throughout the sixteenth century and accelerating into the next, this taste for showcasing foreigners in performance contexts persisted in court entertainments, masques, and plays. As an alternative to having very thin fabric covering the face, visors made of cloth or leather were in common usage as recorded in

⁵¹ Hall, 1:16.
⁵² Hall, 1:16, 17.
the payments for the 1542 masque: “for viij vizards for mores at 3s 4d piece.”

Also important were the performers’ arms that were frequently covered with black gloves made of leather or velvet. The royal entertainments for February 1548 featured a masque of Moors requiring eight pairs of “longe vellett gloues for moores.” Some actors wore dyed leather gloves made from goatskin, the court records noting a payment of four shillings “for makynge of vj peyre of gloves made of gottes skynes at viijd the payre.” In the 1559 coronation revels for Elizabeth I, thirty-four yards of black velvet were “imployed wholie into legges ffete Armes and handes for a maske of Moores,” indicating the care taken to replicate body parts. Cloth was not spared in the replication of legs, feet, arms, and hands. While clothing as costume covered the actor’s trunk, other exposed areas were the product of textile mimicry. The 1545–46 Christmas revels highlighted velvet as a suitably costly and luxurious fabric for royal entertainments, used to cover the performers’ arms, as records detail an order “for iiij p[er] gloves of black velvet for ij mores. 20s.”

By 1605, significant developments in cosmetic paint had occurred, and it is tempting to assume that by the early seventeenth century, advancements in cosmetic blackface had eclipsed the textile body and the audience’s routine association of cloth with blackness. But this was not the case. Ben Jonson’s Masque of Blackness (1605) with its twelve African daughters of Niger caused consternation among attendees at the sight of the Queen and her ladies “all paynted like Blackamores face and neck bare.” Jonson’s spectacular cosmetically painted black women form a dramatic counterpoint to their sister incarnations, almost one hundred years before, from the 1510 celebrations whose imitation of blackness was effected entirely with gauzy black pleasance. Dudley Carleton’s often-quoted report of the innovative masque at Whitehall is generally assumed to register shock at the sight of the painted blackness of royal ladies in character as Jonson’s Egyptians. I propose another reading in light of the stage practices of textile corporeality here described. Carleton’s observation might be more fully grasped in the theatrical context of racial imitation: “Instead of Vizzards, their Faces, and Arms up to the Elbows, were painted black, which

54 Folger Library MS L.b. 259, fol. 1r.
56 Folger Library MS L.b. 7, fol. 2r.
58 Folger Library MS L.b. 266, fol. 3v.
59 Jones, 121.
was Disguise sufficient, for they were hard to be known. Carleton exhibits surprise at the change in technique used on this occasion, with visors and cloth-covered extremities replaced by actual skin painting and blackface makeup, suggesting that the textile techniques had not been superseded but remained a part of audience memory or even performance practice, contemporaneous with Othello, into the early seventeenth century.

Moreover, while the available evidence of a textile theater I have presented is taken from the records of court entertainments, such an historical investigation into staging practices helps us understand the extent to which Shakespeare, at particular moments in his representation of race, creates a bridge between the court and the commercial theater. Shakespeare shows that the textile and animal skin tradition had migrated to become part of his dramatic vocabulary in the public theater. The result was that the explicitly material forms of racial impersonation derived from the court tradition significantly influenced his conceptualizations of race at specific moments. For example, the significant number of references to “devil” in Othello is directly related to the overdetermined racial identity of the title character, given that black was the conventional corporeal color used in the medieval and early modern representation of devils. Emilia summarizes this connection in her angry accusation of Othello, calling him “the blacker devil” (5.2.132). Still, the devil’s black color has a racializing function that permeates the play, extending beyond Othello to reiterate the profoundly racial ethos of the drama. The 1510 revels at Whitehall established the use of pleasance, a fine, gauze-like material, to cover the “faces, necks, armes, and handes” of performers, in the representation of black Moors. The use of this particular material would have continued throughout the century, along with the others discussed above, to consolidate the presence of the black textile body in performance. Cassio recalls this practice when, expressing regret over his untimely intoxication, he draws an analogue with a masque performance where the drunken man is like an actor transforming himself into a debased figure dressed in black pleasance to receive the audience’s applause: “O God, that men should put an enemy in their mouths to steal away their brains! That we should with joy, pleasance, revel and applause transform ourselves into beasts!” (2.3.265–67). The pun produced by juxtaposing “joy” and “pleasance”—seeming to operate synonymously to express delight in the revels—gives way to the primary material and textile meaning of “pleasance” and its somatic role in

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61 Herford and Simpson, eds., 10:448.
62 For a discussion of the phenomenon of the black devil, see Vaughan, 34–56, who details the progression of the devil from mystery cycles and court pageants to the racialized representations of Africans on the stage in the late sixteenth century.
masque culture. Putting the “enemy” in one’s mouth deploys the commonplace reference to the devil as adversary, culminating in the powerful image of the black devil inhabiting Cassio’s body. Cassio confirms this interpretation when he explains that as a drunken man exhibiting destructive behavior, he is infused with the devil and is, hence, a devil-man—“It hath pleased the devil drunkenness to give place to the devil wrath” (ll. 270–71)—whose embodiment is materialized through pleasance in the masque reference. Cassio envisions himself, drunken and disorderly, as a beastly black devil for whom Othello stands as the exemplary socially disruptive and animalistic alien figure according to the highly racialized language of Iago from the play’s opening scenes.63

Again, early in As You Like It, Celia heads to the forest in exile, away from the confines of the court, but not before she stains and darkens her skin: “I’ll put myself in poor and mean attire, / And with a kind of umber smirch my face” (1.3.111–12).64 The language of “smirching” or “besmirching” echoes the dirty, dark coloration of Othello’s “begrimed” face, while “umber,” a brown pigment, suggests a tawny color contrasting the pale beauty of the sheltered court with the suntanned skin Celia mimics of a lower-class, laboring woman of the gritty outdoors.65 Later in the play, however, in an exchange citing once again the laborer’s darker, sun-tanned skin, Rosalind says of Phebe, “she has a leathern hand, / A freestone-colored hand. I verily did think / That her old gloves were on, but ‘twas her hands” (4.3.24–26). Shakespeare humorously recalls the use of dyed leather gloves as a racializing stage device. For Shakespeare, in this example, the technique of the material body coexisted with that of skin painting. It remained alive in his creative consciousness as a further index of contemporary stage developments. Rather than posit a narrative of increasing technical improvements in racial impersonation, the evidence suggests simultaneous imitation practices where the textile body, whether as an immediately tangible stage presence or as an item remembered from earlier performances, reinforces and materializes blackness within the economy of early modern racial discourse.

As late as 1836, writing with the awareness of the role played by the British plantation economy on the intersection of blackness and slavery, Leman Thomas Rede surveys the various methods of racial impersonation, including

63 The many descriptions include “old black ram,” “you’ll have your daughter covered with a Barbary horse,” and “your daughter and the Moor are now making the beast with two backs” (1.1.89, 111–12, 115–16).
64 Except for Othello, all quotations from Shakespeare’s works are taken from G. Blakemore Evans, gen. ed., The Riverside Shakespeare, 2nd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997).
the addition of paints and ointments to the skin and the application of burnt cork blended with oil, the mixture that produced the most iconic form of blackface.\textsuperscript{66} Rede’s historical survey documenting the stage practice of racial imitation cites the textile corporeality of cloth dyed in nuanced shades of brown, covering the actors’ arms to mimic skin and more closely achieve verisimilar results.\textsuperscript{67} His account suggests that the use of dyed cloth to imitate skin was a technique familiar to him—not confined to the realm of private or court performance, but one that has been largely lost to or overlooked by modern scholars.\textsuperscript{68}

IV

When we first hear about the handkerchief in \textit{Othello}, it is presented as a portable version or extension of Othello that Desdemona keeps “evermore about her / To kiss and talk to” (3.3.297–98). Closely identified with Othello, the handkerchief is a substitute self, a metonymic memento, which he gives as a pledge of marital fidelity: the two shall become one flesh.\textsuperscript{69} Should this substitute self be separated or lost, it will signal the marriage’s dissolution (3.4.51–64). The handkerchief’s role as substitute for Othello is

\textsuperscript{66} Leman Thomas Rede, \textit{The Road to the Stage} (London: J. Onwhyn, 1836), 34. For Rede, the actor colored in the monochromatically darkened skin of blackface bears the specific social identity of the “Negro” or slave from the contemporaneous historical context of British plantation economy in the West Indies. Rede makes a distinction between the “Negro” and the purportedly lighter-skinned “Moor.”

\textsuperscript{67} In contrast to the contemporary, subtler uses of cloth dyed in brown colors, Rede observes, “Wearing black gloves is unnatural, for the colour is too intense to represent the skin” (34).

\textsuperscript{68} Known for its vituperative remarks on \textit{Othello}, Thomas Rymer’s \textit{Short View of Tragedy} also displays a familiarity with the multiple forms of racial impersonation that include textile blackface. “With us a Black-a-moor might rise to be a Trumpeter,” Rymer complains with racial animus, “but \textit{Shakespear} would not have him less than a Lieutenant-General. With us a Moor might marry some little drab, or Small-coal Wench: \textit{Shakespear}, would provide him the Daughter and Heir of some great Lord, or Privy-Councellor” (sigs. G6r–v). In Rymer’s cultural universe, Othello is fit only to marry either a prostitute (a “drab”) or seller of charcoal (a “small-coal wench”) whose sooty exterior, the result of her handling the black substance, makes her the perfect partner to the Moor who, in Brabantio’s unforgiving language, is himself denigrated as having a “sooty bosom” (1.2.70) and demeaned as being a mere “thing” (1.2.71). Because “drab” also refers to a kind of brown cloth, both of Rymer’s choices equate social unimportance with color and translate human identity into debased matter—deposits of soot and the coarse cut of cloth—where the logic of suitability implicates Othello in a demeaning discourse of human materiality. For the meaning of “drab” as a brown cloth, see \textit{OED Online}, http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/57357?rskey=otY7ek&result=2&isAdvanced=false (accessed 13 January 2013), s.v., “drab, n.”, adj., and n.”

reinforced by its African provenance, established by the Egyptian who gave it first to his mother; transmitted to the son, it was then passed to the wife, Desdemona being the only non-African in the sequence. The rules of ownership, safekeeping, and fidelity are established by the Egyptian woman, “a charmer” (l. 53). She is someone whose extraordinary powers have invested the handkerchief with its magical force, thereby linking the handkerchief to the discourse of race and witchcraft elaborated by Brabantio earlier in the play (1.2.62–81).

Given this connection, it is not surprising that Shakespeare includes an important description of the handkerchief’s fabrication or manufacture (3.4.66–71). A sibyl sewed it in a moment of “prophetic” and artistic “fury” (l. 68), at the height of creative and expressive energy. We imagine that the sewing encompassed both the construction of the actual square or rectangle of material with its finished edges and the embroidery of the strawberries that beautified and distinguished the work. We are also informed of the material used—silk made from the rarest or “hallowed” (l. 69) worms. The fixation among critics on a white handkerchief with red strawberries might suggest that Shakespeare made a significant departure from his source in Cinthio’s Gli Hecatommiti, which speaks only of “a handkerchief embroidered most delicately in the Moorish fashion.”70 Without a mention of strawberries in the source, the handkerchief is branded as foreign and unique in its exceptional Moorish design. Natasha Korda finds that Theobald’s translation—rendering the elaborate workmanship as “‘curiously wrought’”—“captures ... the period’s fascination with elaborate, exotic curiosities” and identifies “the handkerchief as precisely one of those foreign curiosities that were such sought-after commodities in England and about which the English were so ambivalent.”71 The play’s foreign silk handkerchief, so strongly identified with Othello, speaks directly to the ambivalence he experiences as the imported wartime general-for-hire, who is also a racially impugned, miscegenetic Moor. Shakespeare takes the reference to the handkerchief’s “Moorish fashion” more seriously than has been allowed, translating the racial and ethnic designation of the source in the presentation of a black handkerchief in the play.

Othello explains that this extraordinary, high-quality silk material was “dyed in mummy” (l. 70), and most editorial glosses point to the medicinal and magi-

cal properties implied by the term as a substance derived from mummified bodies. Since mummification implies Egypt specifically, the dye and dyeing techniques are consistent with the narrative of the handkerchief’s origins in the Egyptian charmer and strengthen its association with Othello, his African history, and heritage. What has not been sufficiently explored among scholars is the color of the cloth which, following the textual details given, would be dyed black: that is, a dark color resembling Othello’s skin and not the white so often presumed by commentators to point to a series of tropes connoting Desdemona’s sexuality. Moreover, Shakespeare’s text makes a salient point that should not be overlooked: in a series of references identifying the cloth industry especially in relation to handkerchief manufacture—sewing, embroidery, silk production, and dyeing—the designation “dyed” points directly to the addition of color, not the neutral or natural white of the cloth. “Dyed” does not simply mean something general like “soaked” but specifically refers to the process of dyeing cloth so that it appears other than white.

Most recent scholars locate mummy within the discourse of early modern medicine and, more specifically, medicinal cannibalism. That is, they trace the history of the widespread belief and practice of ingesting imported mummified flesh for its therapeutic value in addressing a spectrum of illnesses. Strange though this idea of eating desiccated human flesh might appear, its familiarity in England is registered by its frequent mention among authors,

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73 A. Rosalie David, “Mummification,” in *Ancient Egyptian Materials and Technology*, ed. Paul T. Nicholson and Ian Shaw (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000), 372–89. Late in the play, Othello speaks of the handkerchief as a gift, “an antique token / My father gave my mother” (5.2.215–16). While the exact lineage shifts from the charmer to his father as initiator of the gift, two important points remain consistent: the handkerchief’s African ancestry and its “antique” quality that links it not only to the earlier references of the sibyl, but also to Egyptian mummy highlighted in my current argument.


75 See Michael Neill, ed., *Othello* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2006). Neill notes that although mummy was “prescribed for a wide variety of ailments, it was (interestingly, in view of Othello’s fit in 4.1) celebrated for its anti-epileptic virtues” (appendix F, 466).
including Shakespeare.\textsuperscript{76} Richard Sugg enumerates the four types of mummy used in corpse medicine that in addition to the classic associations with embalmed Egyptian bodies remind us of the supply-side recourse to recently dead bodies in light of increasing European consumer demand: "One is mineral pitch; the second the matter derived from embalmed Egyptian corpses; the third, the relatively recent bodies of travellers, drowned by sandstorms in the Arabian deserts; and the fourth, flesh taken from fresh corpses (usually those of executed felons, and ideally within about three days) and then treated and dried by Paracelsian practitioners."\textsuperscript{77} While the latter two have caught the attention of contemporary critics—both dealing with the processed bodies of recently deceased persons, the last showcasing a seemingly macabre taste among early moderns—it is the first two, much older and connected to Egypt, that I find relevant for a discussion of Othello's handkerchief, dyed in mummy and steeped in the ancient lore of charmers, sibyls, and magic.\textsuperscript{78} Focusing only on mummy as an edible corpse product, moreover, obscures its full significance in relation to Othello's handkerchief. A. Rosalie David reminds us that the designation "mummy" referring to "the artificially preserved bodies of the ancient Egyptians" is a misnomer: "The use of this term for such bodies is in fact erroneous."\textsuperscript{79} Over time, confusion had arisen between the name of the active medicinal agent, called bitumen, the liquid extracted from mummmified corpses, and the actual dead flesh.\textsuperscript{80} However,

\textsuperscript{76} From \textit{Macbeth}, we learn of the weird sisters' brew containing "Witch's mummy" (4.1.23); in \textit{The Merry Wives of Windsor}, Falstaff speculates that drowning and subsequent swelling would turn him into "a mountain of mummy" (3.5.18).

\textsuperscript{77} Sugg, 15.

\textsuperscript{78} Where questions might arise concerning the color of recently harvested mummy, the Egyptian provenance of the handkerchief situates it within the tradition that associates mummmified bodies and their liquid exudate with blackness, as I show. The play's insistence on "dyed in mummy," as I argue, maintains a color other than white that is, in fact, dark or black. I am reminded here of Michael Neill's characterization of the critical energies expended over the precise nature of Othello's skin color as a "sterile and seemingly endless debate about the exact degree and significance of Othello's racial difference"; see "Unproper Beds: Race, Adultery, and the Hideous in \textit{Othello}," \textit{Shakespeare Quarterly} 40 (1989): 383–412, esp. 392. The exact hue or shade of the black handkerchief, so unfamiliar to our collective critical consciousness, might strike us too as interesting but unnecessary for establishing its undeniable connection to Othello's racialized body.

\textsuperscript{79} David, 372.

\textsuperscript{80} Per the \textit{Oxford English Dictionary}, "Belief in the medicinal powers of the bituminous liquid which could be extracted from the bodies of ancient Egyptian mummies app. arose because of its resemblance to pissasphalt. Later, similar powers were ascribed to mummmified flesh itself, which was often used in the form of a powder." See \textit{OED Online}, http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/123710?rskey=pezdRk&result=1&isAdvanced=false (accessed 13 January 2013), s.v. "mummy, n.1." 1a.
more is at stake in Othello, for what Karl H. Dannenfeldt describes as the “confusing process of transference and substitution” goes to the heart of the central issue of color. The specific confusion arose because of the similarity in appearance and texture between the black, bituminous substance coveted for its supposed medicinal virtues; the black liquid extracted from mummified corpses which was, in turn, alleged to have a similar therapeutic value; and the ubiquitous black color of mummified flesh.

“Mummy” or bitumen (mumia or mumiya in Arabic), also known as pissasphalt, is a natural mineral pitch found in the eastern Mediterranean and credited among medieval Arab scholars as having medicinal properties. While Pliny the Elder and the Greek physician Dioscorides had also asserted a similar set of claims, by the twelfth century, European scholars “discovered in the Qanun of Avicenna and in other Arabic medical treatises reference to a substance called mumia, effective in curing a range of disorders, notably internal bleeding and epilepsy.” The discovery generated interest that accelerated into the early modern period for a drug with an increased demand animating the quest for alternate sources of bitumen in mummified bodies. Regarding bitumen, Dominic Montserrat states that “the black, pitchy deposits found in ancient preserved bodies were equated with this substance, which became the designation for the body as a whole.” Writing in 1203, Arabian physician and historian Abd Allatif maintains that “the mummy found in the hollows of corpses in Egypt, differs but immaterially from the nature of mineral mummy;
and where any difficulty arises in procuring the latter, may be substituted in its stead.”

Arabian authorities thus legitimized this development, "advocating the therapeutic value of any part of a mummy, not just mumia; it is this understanding of mummy that came to prevail in Europe."

Over thousands of years until the seventh century AD, the Egyptian practice of mummification—dehydrating dead bodies; anointing them with resins and oil; embalming them with myrrh, aloes, and spices; and wrapping the bodies in linen—grew beyond the exclusive province of the Pharaohs and the privileged social elites to the broader society. The Ptolemaic period (332–30 BC) witnessed the rise in commercial mummification that led to a change in "standards" and techniques as eviscerated bodily cavities of obscure individuals were stuffed hastily with a range of available materials, including mud, molten resin, broken pottery, and the black, pitchy substance known as bitumen. With the growing European demand for and the limited supply of naturally occurring medicinal bitumen, one seemingly obvious solution was to reextract the bitumen that had been used in mummifying bodies in the first instance. Eventually, the logic of the market saw the expediency in medicinal metonymy, whereby the actual cadaverous flesh was alleged to have healing powers as well. Summarizing the brief history outlined here, Warren R. Dawson reports that the "medicinal value of bitumen was first derived from natural sources: the next stage was the pitch-like resinous substance obtained from mummified human bodies, and finally, it was forgotten that it was the properties of bitumen that were effective in medicine, and the virtue was transferred to the bodies themselves."

In Othello, Shakespeare calls attention to mummy as the fluid extracted from the preserved carcasses. Samuel Johnson, citing the “mummy” reference in Othello in his Dictionary, describes the “liquor” emanating from mummified bodies as “a thick, opake and viscous fluid, of a blackish and a strong but not disagreeable smell.” So characteristic was the black color of mummy that

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86 Quoted in Dannenfeldt, “Egyptian Antiquities,” 17.
87 Noble, 20.
88 Schwyzer, 156. See also David, 374.
89 The increased demand for mummy led to a raid on Egyptian tombs, restrictions imposed by the local authorities, the market for contraband mummy, and the growth of the industry in artificial mummy (that is, the manufacture of mummy from recently deceased bodies). Schwyzer notes that the "efforts of the Egyptian authorities to stamp out the mummy trade were long-standing and apparently sincere if, inevitably, ineffective. As early as 1424, a number of Egyptians were imprisoned for boiling mummies with the aim of selling the oil to European merchants" (162).
90 Dawson, 37.
Johnson’s linguistic slippage allows for the blackness of the odor as well. It is the extraction process and its exudate to which Othello refers in identifying the handkerchief’s bituminous black dye “which the skilful / Conserved of maidens’ hearts” (3.4.70–71). At the same time, the popularly circulated idea of mummy as black flesh injects Othello’s description with a self-referential power to enforce a connection in the audience’s mind between the handkerchief and Othello’s own black skin. In keeping with the handkerchief as a substitute self for Othello, its silk fabric takes on racial significance when read properly as dyed black, its dyeing agent having evolved over time into the black flesh that had become such a familiar part of European pharmacopeia. This arresting color is a graphic reminder of the handkerchief’s function as visible metonym for Othello, the portable object that Desdemona carries around as a constant reminder of her black African love. Not surprisingly, in formulating his plot to destroy Desdemona, Iago draws on the discourse of mummy, claiming, “So will I turn her virtue into pitch” (2.3.327). As the wife of Othello, Desdemona will share the same punitive fate of blackness, couched in the terms of pitchy bitumen that the play attaches to Othello and his black handkerchief “dyed in mummy.”

Medicinal mummy also raised the issue of cannibalism and as such was the subject of early modern debate. Sugg argues that the growing European claims of New World cannibalism coincided with the increased European consumption of human remains under the guise of medication; this deflection amounted to a strategic displacement that allowed the identity of “the real cannibals” to continue to be questioned. Ingesting human flesh had become such a staple of the pharmacological landscape that the inescapable accusation of cannibalism, so routinely imputed to others deemed uncivilized, compromised the European sense of cultural superiority. Regarding human mummy as “the bloody matter from the cadavers of humans mixed with aloes and myrrh flowing out of the tombs,” the sixteenth-century German physician Leonhart Fuchs sounded his objection: “For who, unless he approves of cannibalism, would not loathe this remedy.” But medicinal corpse, and hence the charge of cannibalism, was identified with Africans due to its Egyptian affiliation. Othello is implicated as the outsider who has journeyed among Anthropophagi and “the cannibals that

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92 Johnson might have been alluding to the reported unpleasant smell of some types of mummy. See Montserrat on the “repellent qualities” of mummy (169).
93 Noble, 32–33; and Himmelman, 196–97.
94 Sugg, 1–2.
95 Quoted in Dannenfeldt, “Egyptian Mumia,”176. Dannenfeldt reviews a range of English and continental objections to the use of human mummy, as opposed to pissasphalt.
each other eat” (1.3.142). Othello’s handkerchief narrative, culminating in his mummy reference, reinforces his cultural barbarity already implied in his blackness. The ambiguity attendant upon the European consumption of human flesh further mirrors the uncertainty of Othello’s status and acceptance within the ranks of Venetian society. The black handkerchief carries a conjoined set of meanings consistent with the racial logic Shakespeare explores: it materializes the ideology of race signified in blackness and the critique of barbarism embedded in the dialectic of cannibalism.

V

The black handkerchief is congruent with the theater’s textile black body. Its black silk identified with Othello’s flesh recalls the black cloth and other materials used in earlier performances to fabricate and reproduce black skin. Further, in a striking moment of metatheatrical citation, Othello’s mummy reference recalls the wrapping of an embalmed body in blackened linen that becomes the highly evocative and comparable image of the white actor’s body fitted in dyed black cloth established in theatrical practice over the course of the sixteenth century. Significantly bigger than a small lace embroidered item that a modern audience might expect, the early modern examples of the handkerchief have been described as “magnificent, often very large cloths.” While Cinthio’s evocation of ethnically coded needlework (“Moorish fashion”) is satisfactory for the scale of a narrative text, a sufficiently striking visual impact is required in the large viewing space of the early modern theater. A black handkerchief suitable in size and proportion would fulfill such a practical, effective stage translation. Such a large black handkerchief would also serve as a visual echo and reminder of the black textiles used to wrap the actors’ bodies in early modern performances of racial impersonation.

It is important that the sibyl’s sewing of the handkerchief is presented as a form of artistic creation, the “prophetic fury” or moment of exalted inspiration precipitating the material tasks of sewing and dyeing. Because the mummy

96 Schwyzer notes regarding the concern over mummy, “Often the blame is passed further off, to the Moors who so shamelessly sell the bodies of their own ancestors, and above all to the Jews, who both control the illicit mummy trade and flood the market with inferior imitations” (167–68).

97 Braun-Ronsdorf (see n. 29 above), 17; see also the discussion on the origins of larger handkerchiefs in the “orarium” of ancient Rome (6). A description of two handkerchiefs from the queen’s wardrobe reads, “two handkerchiefs like barbers aprons,” in Nichols, 3:511.

98 Although Othello dismisses Desdemona’s ministrations, claiming, “Your napkin is too little” (3.3.289), his comment can be read comparatively: the pain of suspected adultery is greater than any handkerchief or attempts at consolation that Desdemona has to offer.
extracted “from embalmed virgins was deemed especially effective and sold for a higher price,” the special dye for Othello’s handkerchief is consistent with the sibyl’s superior execution and high quality of the other materials used. The inserted details regarding the making of the handkerchief point to another artistic endeavor: the theater, where sewing and dyeing are constitutive labors of that particular craft. That the person directly identified with the sewing of the handkerchief—and with the making of the silk and the dyeing of the material, as the text suggests—is female is consistent with the historical reality of women’s roles in the early modern textile industry. Especially in the textile crafts, women contributed to the theatrical production, although as Natasha Korda reminds us, their labors often remained invisible to history. In Othello, Shakespeare rescues and makes visible this female labor, ensuring its important relation to the work of representing race on the early modern stage. Significantly, therefore, the handkerchief foregrounds theatrical practice as a reminder of the process of inventing and manufacturing the theatrical black body. The black body in the early modern theater is the product of artistic and artisanal creation—conceived, sewed, dyed, and fitted according to the body measurements of the actor and, more importantly, the ideological demands of race.

In addition to the metatheatrical evidence of cosmetic or skin-painting techniques discussed earlier, the black handkerchief in Othello functions as a stage property that memorializes an important practice in the tradition of representing Africans in the theater. While racial cosmetics emerged as a significant addition to the theatrical repertoire in the early seventeenth century, Shakespeare presented the different imitative traditions simultaneously, capitalizing on the overt materiality of the black body as textile to set a meaningful critical framework in relief. The handkerchief in Othello has been subjected to a series of semiotic and symbolic interpretations that have tended to overlook its physical presence and purpose. That presence may be usefully framed by the scholarship of material culture with its manifest interest in “objects, things, bodies, places.” While the emergence of

100 See Korda, Labors Lost. She writes fittingly, “Understanding the varied roles women played behind the scenes of theatrical production imbues early modern dramatic texts with new significance while offering a new perspective on the textures and textiles of plays in performance” (2). My attempt in this essay supplements her claims by providing a different perspective not only on the “textiles of plays in performance,” but also on the specifically racial purpose to which they were put.
material culture studies can be read as a disciplinary and methodological adjustment, promising historical and cultural analysis more reliably grounded in the empiricism of evidence excavated from the archive, this interest in the empiricism of cultural artifacts has clarified our perspective on objects as things. In the theater of cross-racial imitation, the application of such disciplinary reorientation to the handkerchief qua textile black body carries considerable ideological force. For the imitative textile practices of the theater of racial impersonation defamiliarize the black body, making us hyperaware of its reification while circulating the abject notion of a black man as a thing.

Such a material body finds its verbal echo and ideological grounding in Brabantio’s first confrontation with Othello. The incensed father expresses outrage over Desdemona’s rejection of eligible white men, “The wealthy curled darlings of our nation” (1.2.68), when she runs instead “to the sooty bosom/ Of such a thing as” a black man (ll. 70–71). For Brabantio, blackness is the self-evident contrast to whiteness, wealth, beauty, and national belonging. And yet there is more. Blackness is also the sign of denuded humanity and evacuated subjectivity—of man diminished as an inconsequential “thing.” Like the handkerchief, Othello is a mere “trifle” within the European racial economy (5.2.226). Admittedly, the powdery carbon deposit smeared onto the “sooty bosom,” a metatheatrical reference to blackening the skin with soot in performance, translates for an audience, by way of its materiality, the already existent ideology of racial objectification. Brabantio’s reference to soot, however, recalling the blackened faces of devils and damned souls in mystery plays, is intended to deploy religious discourse for racializing purposes. In a similar but more tangible and dramatic fashion, black cloth used to imitate skin in the theater materializes and reproduces this idea of the black man as “thing.”

While it is important to note that the use of soot belongs to folk and religious drama and that cloth and textiles figure largely in court entertainments and masques, Shakespeare dispenses with generic divisions and brings the

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104 On the use of soot to blacken the skin, see Eldred Jones, Othello’s Countrymen: The African in English Renaissance Drama (London: Oxford UP, 1965), 120. More recently, Vaughan has remarked “For over a century, actors in country folk dramas and mystery plays had resorted to coal or some form of charcoal,” in Performing Blackness, 11. The Drapers’ accounts for Coventry in the 1560s and 1570s document the practice of blackening the faces of the souls of the damned; see Annette Drew-Bear, Painted Faces on the Renaissance Stage: The Moral Significance of Face-Painting Conventions (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell UP, 1994), 33.
diverse forms of racial impersonation together in the public theater. His approach signals his awareness that different forms of racial representation in the theater accumulate force and meaning over time, providing meanings that intersect and build, tracing paths that constitute the historical evolutions in racial perception. Shakespeare’s simultaneous citation of the charcoal, cosmetic, and textile forms of racial representation registers complementary notions of race. Whereas the rhetoric of religion remained a powerful tool in the English racial and proto-colonial arsenal, Shakespeare’s deliberate return to textile, to a form that might have appeared as the less advanced than the newer racial cosmetics, produces an astute perception concerning the construction of blacks within a brutal materialist discourse. The black man as chattel, a nonhuman thing with the legal status of movable property on a colonial plantation estate, is familiar to modern audiences and readers as an historical image with a consequential legacy in the era of late capitalism. With the irony that only the full unfolding of history could reveal, the European market created around mummy rehearsed the commerce in black flesh that would be realized in the African slave trade economy. In Othello, with its attention to the stage practices related to the textile black body, Shakespeare provided the ideological frame within which we can appreciate the theater’s role in producing and circulating a material notion of race that would prove powerful for early modernity.

VI

A black handkerchief with strawberries, should we grant the latter’s affiliation with Desdemona, constitutes a fitting, virtually self-explanatory symbol of the play’s central but controversial interracial marriage. A sibyl’s prophetic utterance, portending destruction and social chaos, inspired the construction of the specially handcrafted handkerchief and anticipated in the textile’s color and design the tragic consequences attendant on the socially destabilizing interracial union. When spurred on by Iago to anger and jealousy over the missing handkerchief, Othello laments, “O it comes o’er my memory, / As doth the raven o’er the infected house” (4.1.20–21). Clearly, his raven comparison indicates that throughout the play Othello conceives of the handkerchief as black. By contrast, the seemingly unanimous view among critics regarding the presence of

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105 In Performing Blackness, Vaughan argues that for analytical purposes it is important to maintain a distinction among performance genres and their particular use of techniques for performing blackness that might be influenced by specific social matrices such as class (32–33).

106 On consumer demand and market expansion in relation to mummy, see Schywzer, 159–63.

107 On the harmful nature of sibylline prophecy, see Jessica L. Malay, Prophecy and Sibylline Imagery in the Renaissance: Shakespeare’s Sibyls (New York: Routledge, 2010), 96–120.
a white handkerchief should alert us to the habits that inform our reading practices. Such habits are made legible in their interpretive indebtedness to Desdemona’s body and a series of corporal and racial assertions embedded in the whiteness of the handkerchief. The critical misreading of the black handkerchief in *Othello* recalls Toni Morrison’s assessment in *Playing in the Dark* of the effects of cultural and ideological conditioning. “For reasons that should not need explanation here,” she writes, “until very recently, and regardless of the race of the author, the readers of virtually all of American fiction have been positioned as white. I am interested to know what that assumption has meant to the literary imagination.”108 Morrison’s point is that as readers we are subjected to and reproduce a dominant “white” ideology that defines what we see and how we read. Thus, in addition to situating the play within a performance history, positing the implications of the black handkerchief for material race in early modernity, this essay has tried to ask what reading whiteness in the handkerchief, despite evidence to the contrary, reveals about the habits and intellectual reflexes that inform our critical imagination. The essay asks whether this inveterate predisposition to see only a white handkerchief functions as an index to inherited critical frameworks that continue to circulate and shape the work of reading and producing knowledge in the field of early modern studies.