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Shakespeare's Citizen-Subject: Distracting the Gaze, Contracting the City *A Response to Christopher Pye*

JULIA REINHARD LUPTON

In an essay whose expansive conceptual vistas are brought to earth by a series of exquisite and pointed close readings, Christopher Pye argues that in *Othello*, we witness the twin births of “aesthetic ideology” (above, 425)—an art that takes itself as its own ground, without reference to an authorizing reality or prior Scripture—and the state as a formal entity, constituted on the rational autonomy of law rather than on the sovereign body-politic, conceived in organic and substantial terms. Both the modern state and the modern work of art share “circumscribed and unbounded form” (440): they stake their claims on the borders between their own territories and the world outside, not in order to limit but rather to infinitize their self-referential, self-grounding energies. Such systems, argues Pye (building on his fine book, *The Vanishing*¹) require a vanishing point, a punctual “nothing” that generates whole worlds of visibility and meaning around its negative vortex. In *Othello*, that vanishing point is occupied by the Moor himself, who becomes in Pye’s brilliant reading of the disembarking at Cyprus “an indistinct regard” (*Othello*, 2.1.41), a figure who dissolves into the horizon anxiously scanned by those awaiting him on the shore, a vanishing repeated in the “bloody period” (5.2.356) that brings Othello’s life to a close.² Othello’s constitution as a subject depends on his simultaneous appearance within and eclipse by a grid of lateral relationships: ensign, lieutenant, and officer; senators and consuls; place and occupation, all “sequent messengers” (1.2.41) of citizenship’s procedural flatlands. The citizen-subject becomes universal, insofar as the particularities of his embodied and acculturated identity, the accreted insignia of kinship, cult, and culture, are translated into, and sometimes cancelled by, the protocols of legal belonging.

Rather than presenting Othello as the ethnic-racial Other / Outside, Pye addresses him as a crucible of subjective norms in modernity. Thus, Pye argues in a compact but compelling formulation, “Negation—subjectivity’s reduction to a vanishing point—is the very condition of its universalization. ‘Black Othello’—what universalism stakes itself against—simultaneously energizes the specular dialectic through which the universal subject fulfills itself as unqualified being.

¹ Christopher Pye, *The Vanishing: Shakespeare, the Subject, and Early Modern Culture* (Durham: Duke UP, 2000).

² Citations from *Othello* are taken from Michael Neill, ed., *Othello* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2006).

'Citizen Othello' is universal, precisely because he is at once determinately other and empty" (431). I take Pye to be arguing that Othello "vanishes" because his identification with blackness staples his being to a fixed category that harbors negation in its very color-coding, and eclipses Othello in the act of giving him a local habitation and a name. Insofar as some version of this vanishing is also suffered by every citizen-subject—by everyone who accedes to membership in an artificial group—Othello's blackness comes to name a universal dilemma, although one articulated differently, depending on one's prior relationship to the civic body one is joining. The specter of miscegenation, Pye argues, is displayed at the end of the play as the obscene "object" of tragic collective vision precisely in order to distract us from the vanishing that afflicts (but also constitutes) every citizen-subject. The mesmerizing scene of darkness visible with which the play (Iago-like) beguiles us serves to cover up—and is itself a symptom of—a more fundamental abstraction with which racial discourses, Pye suggests, are themselves formally complicit. Pye speaks here of the "forced phenomenalization" (447) that the play reveals race to be, insofar as Iago makes Othello *appear as black*, to himself as well as to others, a phantasmatic *Erscheinung* that leads to Othello's fundamental effacement from the scene of politics, as well as his exodus from life itself.

Pye is a truly gifted close reader of Shakespeare, and it is in his readings of *Othello* that his larger historical and theoretical claims find their purchase and produce their punch. Pye's opening discussion of the scene on the shores of Cyprus, his assiduous tracking of the sound of "puddle" in the drama (438, 443), his careful mapping of triangulated hearing in the scene of Desdemona's accidental seduction, his sharpshooter's eye for vanishing points in every cistern and vista of the play, his brilliant juxtaposition of early *Titus* with late *Othello* (the first "points" at race, the second "points" at "pointing" [446]), and, above all, his ability to channel as well as to theorize the poetics and phenomenology of distraction: all of these moments and impulses, alone and together, make this essay a series of revelations, of genuine reencounters with a text that I find I have loved not wisely, but too well.

Not every reader will be convinced. Sometimes Pye's deconstructive fascination with vanishing points and deictic indecision trumps the essay's professed concerns with citizenship, modern state formation, and the *phenomenalization* of race. Pye claims to be making an historical argument; he distinguishes his approach to the play from that of Joel Fineman in this way: "I suggest that Shakespeare *does* represent the emergence of the category of the literary in its modern meaning, but that category is bound up with a set of political and historical transformations of which Shakespeare is only a part. *Othello* figures that literariness in an especially acute way because its novel dimension as citizen tragedy brings

those transformations to the fore, indeed, to a kind of representational crisis point" (429). I support Pye's efforts to reanimate certain psychoanalytic and deconstructive insights in response to economic, juridical, and biopolitical change. Yet in this essay Pye tends to "point to" rather than specify those moments. In the spirit of supporting and extending his argument, I would like to attend to two discourses that might lend further ballast to Pye's conceptual claims.

The first concerns the Pauline elements of *Othello*. The existential dimensions of this discourse, always part of the Pauline legacy and thus a region of resonance in and for Shakespeare, have been newly manifested in writings on Paul by Giorgio Agamben and Alain Badiou, whose perspectives are now making their way into Shakespeare studies.³ As Catherine Winiarski has argued in a recent dissertation, *Othello* takes his place in the farthest verges of Paul's sublime catalogue in the Epistle to the Colossians, in that zone of indistinction "Where is nether Grecian nor Iewe, circumcision nor vncircumcision, Barbarian, Scythian, bonde, free: but Christ is all and in all things" (Colossians 3:11).⁴ At the same time, *Othello*, (re)circumcising himself through suicide at the end of the play, is also affiliated with the Peoples of the Book; if the figure of the Scythian materializes the "indistinct regard" of the play's most beguilingly distant horizons, the subtractive cut of circumcision offers the vanishing point that organizes through its sublime negation the system of representation that unfurls around it. At once Gentile outlier and base Judean, *Othello* is, in Jane Hwang Degenhardt's recent evaluation, the "essential Pauline subject," representing the promise of a universal, self-authorizing law, but only through a moment of fundamental binding, a knot that is also a cut, a signatory scar that maintains its enigmatic opacity even in its sublation and transmission (as Christianity, say, or as secular humanism).⁵

³ Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*, trans. Ray Brassier (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 2003); and Giorgio Agamben, *The Time That Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans*, trans. Patricia Dailey (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2005). For Renaissance applications, see Gregory Kneidel, *Rethinking the Religious Turn in Early Modern English Literature: The Poetics of All Believers* (Houndsmill, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008). See also Jonathan Gil Harris, *Untimely Matter in the Time of Shakespeare* (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 2009), on Messianic time in relation to other more normative forms of temporality in Shakespeare. I argue for the importance of Paul's letters to the "citizen tragedy" of *Othello* in *Citizen-Saints: Shakespeare and Political Theology* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2005). Finally, John S. Coolidge's *The Pauline Renaissance in England: Puritanism and the Bible* (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1970) bears rereading in the light of this recent work on Paul in the Renaissance.

⁴ *The Geneva Bible: A Facsimile of the 1560 Edition* (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1969). In her dissertation, "Adulterers, Idolaters, and Emperors: The Politics of Iconoclasm in English Renaissance Drama" (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Irvine, 2007), Catherine Winiarski analyzes the Pauline parameters of *Othello*'s limited inclusion in the Venetian body politic.

⁵ Jane Hwang Degenhardt argues that *Othello* maps "the essential Pauline subject" by testing the limits of universalism ("Seduction, Resistance, and Redemption: Staging the Threat of

In this play and elsewhere, Paul's restless meditations on these two dimensions of law—transparency and enigma, the infinite space of autonomy wheeling extravagantly around a persistent kernel of heteronomy, universal belonging existing in tension with the call of a people's concrete and embodied history—provide an exegetical framework, embracing the several moods and temporalities of Paul's vexed and probative relationship to the Hebrew Bible, that can help us grasp the dimensionality of Shakespeare's response to Scripture. Taken as autobiographical texts and discrete rhetorical acts, Paul's Epistles provide a set of case histories concerning identity and community, whose rich and pulsing lexicon might allow us to map from a more embedded and embodied angle the dynamics of modern subject formation that Pye delivers in this essay.⁶ Finally, recourse to Paul also allows us to think the political-theological dimensions of not only the premodern state (long associated with the king's two bodies), but also the universalization of law in republican and protoliberal polities such as Venice.

This brings me to a second frame: the role that the Republic of Venice plays in Shakespeare's juridical, as well as aesthetic, imagination. Pye might have chosen another play to make his argument—*Hamlet*, for example, whose self-referential moments of vertiginous subjectivity are intimately bound up with a passage into lateral relationships among foils and brothers who might be taken as early avatars of the citizen-subject. But *Hamlet* is in many ways less "modern" than *Othello*, insofar as *Hamlet* remains enthralled by the mysteries of monarchy (although a monarchy already displaced into its nominally "elective" forms). *Othello*, on the other hand, takes place in the Republic of Venice, Europe's favorite laboratory for the exchange and transmutation of religions and cultures into goods and values transferable across places and periods, dissolving particularities of birth into the "indistinct regard" of an expanding commercial empire sustained by the rule of law.

The Commonwealth and Government of Venice, written by Gasparo Contarini in 1543 and translated into English by Lewes Lewkenor in 1599, is often taken as an indicator of the kinds of political knowledge concerning Venice available in the London of the 1590s.⁷ Presenting Venice as a model of civil

Islamic Conversion," unpublished manuscript, chapter 1). Jurist Hans Kelsen's notion of the *Grundnorm*, which he conceptualized in specifically psychoanalytic terms during the period of his friendship with Freud, offers another way into the grounding of the infinite space of legal rationality on the opacity of its own internal limit. See Hans Kelsen, "The Conception of the State and Social Psychology—With Special Reference to Freud's Group Theory," *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis* 5 (1924): 1–38.

⁶ Randall Martin has emphasized the significance of Paul's rhetorical situations to Renaissance humanist readings of Paul and to Shakespearean drama; see "Shakespearian Biography, Biblical Allusion, and Early Modern Practices of Reading Scripture," *Shakespeare Survey* (forthcoming).

⁷ Gasparo Contarini, *The Commonwealth and Government of Venice*, trans. Lewes Lewkenor (1599; repr., New York: Da Capo Press, 1969).

justice, Contarini uses the language of consent to describe the founding of the republic. Citizens on the mainland, scattered by the invading Huns, took refuge in the lagoons, "seeking there a safe abode for their wiues and children, and as I may say for their houshold Gods. Afterwards in the time of the kings, *Charles* and *Pepin*, all such as scatteringly inhabited these places, by common consent retyred themselues vnto the *Ryalta*. . . . But our auncestors, from whome we haue receyued so flourishing a commonwealth, all in one did vnite themselues in a consenting desire to establish, honour, and amplifie their country."⁸ Lacking both an Aeneas and a Moses, Contarini's Venice leaps into republicanism through an act of constitutive self-assembly. The phrase "consenting desire," evoking an eros arising out of the marshes of diaspora, recalls for me Pye's powerful reading of the distracted grounds of Desdemona and Othello's courtship. In this scene of fragmentary and overheard storytelling, neither Desdemona nor Othello is the agent of seduction, although each is cast as cause by a Brabantio whose lurid suspicions figure the petrifying paranoia of the interpretive process. The fortuitous mutuality of Othello and Desdemona's love feeds on the leftovers of epic, with the crumbs of typological history and Virgilian narrative nourishing a more incipient and self-organizing desire from Venetian historiography.

It would be interesting indeed to reread Pye's diagnostics of distraction in *Othello* against the various figures of the citizen-subject that populate the Venetian political imaginary. Their teeming ranks include the Venetian prostitute, cunning figure of consensual sex and thus of a certain social contract;⁹ the naturalized *condottiere*, foreign masthead and imperfectly incorporated icon of Venice's mixed social and legal body;¹⁰ and the Jewish resident alien, at once a citizen in his own self-regulating community, a subject of the laws imposed by an often hostile host, and an agent of contractual bonds in an urban scene where the trust bred from social sameness is disintegrating under the pressures of pluralism.¹¹ These diverse figures of the citizen-subject invite

⁸ Lewkanor, 4, 6 (sigs. B2v, B3v).

⁹ On prostitution and urban space in Renaissance Italy, see Diane Yvonne Ghirardo, "The Topography of Prostitution in Renaissance Ferrara," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 60 (2001): 402–31. See also Dennis Romano, "Gender and the Urban Geography of Renaissance Venice," *Journal of Social History* 23 (1989): 339–53.

¹⁰ As Contarini notes, "yea and some forrain men and strangers haue beene adopted into this number of citizens, eyther in regard of their great nobility, or that they had beene dutifull towards the state, or els had done vnto them some notable seruice" (18; sig. D1v). If naturalization into the nobility was uncommon within the city proper, it was practiced freely in Venetian colonies: "our auncesters held it a better course to defend their dominions vppon the continent, with forreyne mercenarie souldiers, than with their homeborn citizens. . . . some of which haue attained to the higest degree of commandement in our army, & for the exceedingnes of their deserts been enabled, with the title of citizens & gentlemen of *Venice*" (131; sig. S2r).

¹¹ On the juridical situation of the Jews of Venice, see especially *The Jews of Early Modern Venice*, ed. Robert Davis and Benjamin Ravid (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2001).

us to play the distracted, spontaneous, and fundamentally mixed character of Othello and Desdemona's republic of two against more official accounts of legal personhood in the psychic economies of liberalism. The citizen-subject that would emerge from such an encounter just might generate a more flexible, more expansive, and more spontaneous vision of citizenship than that allowed in much contemporary writing. Such a citizenship would encompass not only the inscriptional cuts of castration and circumcision, but also those moments of underground economy, erotic experiment, and informal place-making that enabled new styles of association and assembly in the squares, piazzas, and liberties of the Renaissance, and that continue to offer chances for civic renewal today. Distracting our gaze from more official discourses of citizenship in order to recovenant the city via forms of social contract that open unto unexpected vistas of universality, Shakespeare's citizen-subject is not only a model of tragic eclipse, but also the bearer of comic potentiality.

Theory "After Theory": Christopher Pye's Reading of "Othello"

HUGH GRADY

Ten years ago, noted Shakespeare critic David Scott Kastan reported that the field of Shakespeare (and literary studies generally) had entered a "post-theoretical moment" and stated flatly that "the great age of theory is over." The field can only advance, he continued, "not by producing more theory but more facts, however value-laden they will necessarily be."¹

Kastan himself has always been careful to credit and indeed utilize many of the ideas and outcomes of critical theory—essentially calling for a historicizing continuation of theory's critique of positivist historicism and the New Criticism (or "liberal humanism") of the period from 1930 to 1970, rather than an outright return to the old days.² But others in the field have been less scrupulous, and it is evident that in some circles in Shakespeare studies there is a feeling that positivist scholarship has been vindicated and that the age of theory was an unaccountable and regrettable lapse in a now-restored, facts-laden tradition. Since Kastan's announcement of an imminent paradigm shift, a

¹ David Scott Kastan, *Shakespeare after Theory* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 31.

² Kastan, 28–42 *passim*. "Liberal humanism" is the term widely used in British cultural materialism of the 1980s to characterize the previously prevailing method of F. R. Leavis and associated British and American New Critics. For a discussion of the term and its associated concepts, see Peter Barry, *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*, 3d ed. (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2009), 11–37.