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SAA: Marlowe and Shakespeare

The Queer of Malta: Barabas's Homoerotic

Desire In Light of Shakespeare's *Othello*

While many critics argue that Barabas the Jew, from Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta*, is a greedy, misanthropic ne'er-do-well, reading the character exclusively in these terms indicates only a cursory awareness of his actions. As Emily Bartels points out, "the discrepancy [between Barabas's multiple and opposing characterizations]...emerges as not textual problem, but a strategy of representation" (13). A true Marlovian hero, Barabas refuses to be limited by the strictures of the dominant society and epitomizes the early modern concept of self-fashioning. He purposefully embodies the Other, both ethnically and (perhaps) sexually. Although there is a natural basis for comparison between the Marlowe's protagonist and Shylock from Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, as many critics have noted, it proves just as valid to compare Barabas with another Shakespearean icon, Iago, from *Othello*, but on different grounds. Not only are the characters' motivations and demeanors remarkably similar, but the relationship that Barabas builds with his slave, Ithamore, parallels the one Iago develops with his commander, Othello. In this respect, though, the latter's roles are rhetorically inverted, with Othello, the Moor, being Iago's social and political better. By examining Barabas's relationship with his self-proclaimed "love...[and]...second self" in relation to Shakespeare's miscegenated pair, there is evidence not only to support a queer reading of the protagonists in both *The Jew of Malta* and *Othello*, but also that their similarities suggest the potential influence that Marlowe's work had on Shakespeare's, considering *The Jew of Malta* was first produced around 15 years before *Othello* circa 1589 (III.iv.14-15).

Despite its acceptance as a legitimate form of critical inquiry, some critics fail to recognize the merit of queer readings of early modern dramas. E.A.J. Honigmann, for instance, protests in his critical introduction to *The Arden Shakespeare Othello* that, "we must beware of making too much of Iago's supposed homosexuality," because "it exists entirely in the subconscious" of the reader and critic (51). In this, Honigmann underestimates the early modern need for subtlety regarding unconventional sexuality. As Alan Bray suggests, "the deep horror with which homosexuality was widely regarded" in the early modern period made it a difficult subject to broach in positive or even diplomatic terms (7). Here, the critic is referring to the cultural anxiety and populist opprobrium associated

with being accused of such an illicit act, since it is considered to be “part of an anarchy that threatened to engulf the established order, even the very stars in their courses” (62). Picking up on Bray’s sentiment, Jonathan Goldberg asserts, regarding early modern drama: “To read for sodomy—for sodomies—is to read relationally, and [to] focus on male-male sexual possibilities . . . has involved necessarily observations on sociopolitical formations” (23). As these critics establish, writing about homosexuality in the early modern period is an overtly political act, thus must be done with finesse and nuance in order to avoid incurring stentorian ire. With this in mind, it becomes clear why both Marlowe and Shakespeare might have cloaked the homosexual relationships of their characters in homosocial terms. However, a keen observer will still be able to recognize the similarities between the two pairs as of a more-than-homosocial nature. The first parallel we are able to draw between Barabas and Ithamore is their treatment of women.

Though the role of women in early modern England is certainly paradoxical, for although Elizabeth I reigned as a solitary queen, as Dympna Callaghan articulates: “The dominant ideology of [early modern] England is profoundly hierarchical. It affirms the legitimacy of a patriarchal society in which power emanates from God the Father down through king and lord, to every man whose domain is woman, beast and nature” (09). This popular mindset is pushed to its extremes in *Othello* and *The Jew of Malta*, as both Iago’s and Barabas’s misogynistic tendencies are noteworthy in their interactions with and treatments of women. From the opening acts of both plays, neither Iago nor Barabas demonstrates any positive regard for the fairer sex. Iago constantly denigrates women as nothing more than whores to be used for a man’s pleasure, while Barabas’s treatment of Abigail, his own daughter, provides action to accompany the sentiment that Iago voices, when he uses her to lure Mathius and Lodowick into deadly intrigue. In his exchange with Desdemona and Emilia, wherein Desdemona attempts to match wits with Iago, the latter remarks that women are “Bells in [their] parlors, wildcats in [their] kitchens, / Saints in [their] injuries, devils being offended, / Players in [their] housewifery, and housewives in [their] beds” (II.i.109-112). Here, we see a farcical mismatching of titles and locations to actions, which Iago uses to exemplify his distinctly low opinion of women. This outlook is further given credence by Barabas’s interactions with women in *The Jew of Malta* as well.

The relationships that Barabas has with all the women in Marlowe’s work certainly seems to recall an attitude similar to Iago’s, although Barabas may, in fact, be more loathsome. For, though Abigail is his own daughter, Barabas’s actions are more like those of a panderer than a father. On more than one occasion he objectifies her basely, saying, in one particular instance, to Lodowick: “The diamond that I speak of ne’er was foiled,” using

Abigail's virginity as a bargaining chip, and as a way to entice the governor's son into a premeditated trap (II.iii.57). This literal objectification of Abigail, on Barabas's part, takes place throughout the play as well. Earlier in the same act, the title character bellows: "O my girl, / My gold, my fortune, my felicity, / ...Oh, gold, Oh, girl, Oh, beauty, oh, my bliss!" The alliteration of these lines indicates that, in Barabas's mind, Abigail is indistinguishable from, and interchangeable with, all his other worldly goods, which he uses throughout the play to gain power and influence over others (II.i.46-7,53). This offers an insight into Barabas's sexuality, in that, like Iago, he recognizes the sexual appeal that women can possess and the Machiavellian utility therein, but also like the former, fails to ever express any desire for sexual congress with a woman within the confines of the play. Rather, both demonstrate a strong desire for intimacy with a powerful male figure in each of their lives, which seems to go far beyond homosociality and enters the realm of homosexuality. In regard to this, Alexandra Shepard offers that the lines between these two categories sometimes blurred in early modern England (115). Shepard's claims certainly help to elucidate the relationship between Iago and Othello. Not only does this help to explain Othello's willingness to trust Iago, but it also helps to explain Iago's simultaneous enmity/desire for Othello.

Though it is plausible, that in *Othello*, Iago's loveless marriage stems from his distrust of his wife, after rumors of an unfaithful act between her and Othello arise, it seems equally likely that he has no feeling for Emilia at all. In fact, as Shepard points out that the boundaries between true friends were so ill-defined that a true friend, an equal (and always a male), was sometimes considered closer than a wife, and "in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries such relationships came to hold an 'erotic charge' which competed with the expectations of companionate marriage" (124). This makes sense, when we consider that Iago's reaction seems more driven by jealousy over Othello's affections, than Emilia's possibly making him a cuckold. In Iago's first soliloquy after the title characters' arrival in Cyprus, he makes a claim regarding a wrong done to him by Othello that "Doth, like a poisonous mineral, gnaw [his] inwards; / And nothing can or shall content [his] soul / Till [he is] evened with [Othello], wife for wife" (II.i.291-293). Though he states "wife for wife," throughout the play, Iago is consumed with Othello's bedroom activities, and actually appears jealous that he is not involved in them. This can be inferred from the parallel construction of Iago's and Othello's jealousy patterns. Othello's jealousy and anger rest upon his wife, Desdemona; for Iago, both rest on Othello, which indicates a strong attachment. Iago's concern for Othello's bedroom activities is further evidenced by his habitual stymieing of Othello and Desdemona's connubial

consummation, which could be interpreted that if Iago cannot have Othello, no one can. In *The Jew of Malta*, the situations are reversed, for it is Ithamore who seems to have a fixation on Barabas's sexual prowess.

Throughout Marlowe's play, Ithamore expresses a fascination with Barabas's nose, which, though he refers to it in comically grotesque terms, the speaker obviously holds the oversized feature in a high degree of admiration for its prowess. In one particularly emphatic moment, Ithamore calls out: "Oh, brave, master! I worship your nose for this" (II.iii.177). Though this moment has comical connotations, relying on ethnic stereotyping is not the only way to understand what is going on. In the context of the carnivalesque elements of the play, Barabas's nose, with its "protuberant distention [and] disproportion" represents the grotesque body (Stallybrass and White 23). One of the prominent elements of the grotesque body is its emphasis on the genitals, or genital-like features. As Peter Burke points out, "it does not seem so far-fetched to interpret long-nosed masks or horned masks as phallic symbols" (187). As we can see, the nose acts as a phallic symbol, and external expression of Barabas's intrinsic potency. Ithamore compliments Barabas's nose after the latter has either already done something incredibly malicious, or is about to proceed with some nefarious deed. For Ithamore, it appears that Barabas's nose acts as a fetish. From it, he seems to derive pleasure that is almost sexual in nature, which he expresses to Barabas, by fervently making outlandish statements of praise. Rather than discouraging or inhibiting Ithamore's infatuation, though, Barabas seems to nurture the desire, by repeatedly expressing his own feelings to Ithamore, in a fashion similar to the way Iago does to Othello.

While there are several instances throughout *Othello* whereby Iago professes his hatred for the title character, *me thinks he doth protest too much*, because there are three significant instances in Act III, Scene iii, where Iago professes quite the opposite to Othello. In lines 116, 196 and 217, Iago clearly confesses his love to his commander. There are manifold interpretations for Iago's uttering of these lines, however: Iago could merely be attempting to maintain his place in Othello's good graces; historically, it could be argued that during this time men were more openly affectionate with brothers-in-arms; but the most plausible interpretation lies in Iago's sexual desire for Othello. The two are alone and Iago is already disparaging Desdemona in Othello's eyes. For Iago, this could be his opportunity to initiate an even more intimate relationship with Othello. Similarly, Barabas makes affectionate professions to Ithamore, but unlike Othello, the former accepts the offers and reciprocates these feelings in kind.

Throughout *The Jew of Malta*, we are privy to Barabas's asides and insights, many of which revolve around harboring profound ire against nearly every member of the play's *dramatis personae*. On two distinct occasions, however, Barabas openly professes his love for Ithamore and on one occasion, even more than that. Once Barabas has disinherited Abigail, and freed himself from his last bond to the traditional, he is able to act freely and connect with whomever he chooses on whatever level he chooses. Despite the fact that Barabas claims that Ithamore is his heir, Roger E. Moore observes that: "Barabas does not adopt [Ithamore] as a son, but as a friend;... a legal uniting of two adults of the same sex which... was performed less for financial and familial reasons than for personal emotional ones" (3). As Moore sees it, Barabas genuinely desires companionship with Ithamore. When looking at Moore's argument in light of Shepard's, we can see how deep and meaningful the bond that Barabas and Ithamore share really is. After twice stating that he loves Ithamore, Barabas makes a proclamation that he has made to no other in the text: "Assure thyself thou shalt have broth by the eye. / My purse, my coffer, and myself is thine" (III.iv.93-94). This is not only an act of generosity on Barabas's scale, but on the grand scale of humanity. While the financial support is obviously a beneficent act, with this statement Barabas attempts to transcend his miserly ways more by opening up his heart, more than his wallet, to the only person with whom he has connected on such a deep and meaningful level throughout the entire play. While this action may initially come as shocking, considering how generally miserly Barabas is, it is important also to remember that Ithamore reminds Barabas of himself, so that this love is really only the ultimate act of narcissism. Not only conceited, though Barabas, like Iago, also attempts to create a story that will appeal to the man he desires, by appealing to his obvious passions.

Invidious and conniving, Iago comes up with a way to disrepute both Cassio and Desdemona, by relaying to Othello the false image of Cassio and Iago lying together, wherein Cassio is asleep, but makes lewd sexual advances towards Iago, moaning about Desdemona. Iago relates that Cassio "would [...] gripe and wring [his] hand, / [...] then kiss [him] hard, / As if he plucked up kisses by the roots / That grew upon [his] lips; then laid [Cassio's] leg / Over [his] thigh, and sighed, and kissed" (III.iii.421-425). Not only does this statement discredit Cassio and Desdemona in Othello's estimation, but it also places the idea of same sex intimacy at the forefront of Iago and Othello's relationship. This passage subconsciously asks why Othello does not allow Iago to play the role of Desdemona for Othello, as Iago has for Cassio in the seductive narrative he invents. This passage also presages the further substitution of Iago for Desdemona later in the play. There is a similar passage in *The Jew of Malta*, wherein

Barabas attempts to impress Ithamore through the use of a catalogue of dastardly misdeeds, with the same hope of introducing a desire for Barabas into Ithamore's heart.

Barabas recognizes a kindred spirit in Ithamore, and immediately attempts to impress him by offering a list of stereotypically evil "Jewish" acts of cruelty and aggression, including poisoning a well, being a negligent doctor, a malicious engineer, and a money grubbing usurer (II.iii.178-205). Though Barabas utilizes these occupations, in part, because they play on the stereotype of the wicked Jew, they also fit perfectly with the performance of self that he is attempting to present. Not to be outdone, Ithamore responds in kind, but offering his own set of "Moorish" misdeeds, including setting fire to Christian villages and poisoning crippled pilgrims (II.iii.206-216). The comically farcical cruelty that both of these characters exhibit immediately draws them together. As Barabas suggests: "Why this is something! Make account of me / As of they fellow. We are villains both; / Both uncircumcised, we hate Christians both" (II.iii.217-9). Barabas states that they are kinsmen because of how their penises look. While there is a strong cultural connotation with regard to circumcision, Barabas's use of phallic imagery to relate himself and Ithamore suggests a connection even deeper than that. It is this initial encounter that sparks their interest in one another and ultimately, Barabas and Ithamore, like Iago and Othello, wed themselves to one another in an anti-wedding, or rather, an inversion of the typical early modern heterosexual marriage.

In order to get revenge on Abigail, and the nuns who have appropriated Barabas's former home, he disinherits his daughter and commits himself to Ithamore, who readily accepts. Barabas is upset by Abigail's conversion and is speaking harshly of her, when Ithamore says: "I'll do anything / for your sweet sake" (III.iii.40-41). This prompts Barabas to return in kind by saying:

Oh, trusty Ithamore! No servant, but my friend!

I here adopt thee for mine only heir.

All that I have is thine when I am dead,

And, whilst I live, use half. Spend as myself. (III.iv.42-45)

The kind of commitment that Barabas and Ithamore make to one another, on the surface appears to be an adoption of some kind, but there is more going on than a cursory glance would indicate. As with other interactions between the two, there seems to be a subtle layer of sexual chemistry that Moore has also picked up on. He further points out that: "same-sex desire is pursued by the protagonists because it suggests freedom from their body, the earth, the feminine. To foster an erotic relationship with another man was traditionally the ultimate means of transcending the

troublingly complex and filthy world of desire” (3). Though, Moore’s sentiment is commendable, the events of the plot do not support this claim. A driving force for the events bringing Barabas and Ithamore together is Abigail’s betrayal of her father, which seems to place the pair’s actions squarely in the tangible world. However, in this act of concomitant affection, Barabas and Ithamore bind themselves to one another, in a ceremony that helps them overcome their socially marginalized statuses, by centralizing each other in their own lives. In this respect, one can understand Moore’s argument. This kind of revenge driven coupling is popular in early modern drama; in fact, there is a similar set of passages in *Othello*, wherein Iago and Othello make commitments to each other.

In order to inextricably link themselves, Othello and Iago make a pledge to one another to rid the former of both Cassio and Desdemona. The words that each use are surprisingly similar to wedding vows: Othello states, “[...] Now, by yon marble heaven, / In the due reverence of a sacred vow / I here engage my words” (III.iii.460-462) and Iago replies:

[...] Witness that here Iago doth give up
 The execution of his wit, hands, heart,
 To wronged Othello's service. Let him command,
 And to obey shall be in me remorse,
 What bloody business ever. (III.iii.465-469)

The word choice and tone of this passage are more fitting for a wedding ceremony than for a revenge pact, but by using this matrimonial language, offers the possibility of something more. Similar to earlier, Iago stands as a substitute for Desdemona, this time as Othello’s helpmate in a perverse wedding of revenge. Mario DiGangi confirms this when he notes: “Iago’s oath of love to Othello permanently displaces Desdemona” (83). This ceremony binds the two together and for Iago provides a fruitful end for his quest to attain Othello’s love.

There is validity to reading the character of Iago as a jilted, would-be lover in Othello’s life. Similarly, Barabas calls out to Ithamore to become the one person that he can show genuine, and as far as Barabas is concerned, wholeheartedly generous affection towards. While Iago’s actions are ambiguous, investigating them in conjunction, rather than as several individual instances, sheds a definite dimension of homosociality, and I would argue homosexuality, to one of Shakespeare’s most memorable villains. Likewise, looking at Barabas’s interaction with Ithamore in a cluster reveals a multilayered attraction between the two that might not be so obvious if not observed in tandem, and in relation to Iago and Othello’s unconventional love. Further, in reading these key

moments of Marlowe's play and paralleling them with Shakespeare's, we can see that because of the nature and content of these parallels that Shakespeare did quite possibly look to Marlowe for the inspiration for at least aspects of *Othello*.

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