

ENGL 3671: Race and Religion on the Early Modern Stage
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By submitting this essay, I attest that it is my own work, completed in accordance with University regulations. —Maisie Bilston

“I Am Not What I Am”: Race-Class Identity and Disruptive Inheritance in the *Tamburlaine* Plays and *Othello*
by Maisie Bilston ‘26

In their introduction to *Race in Early Modern England: A Documentary Companion*, Ania Loomba and Jonathan Burton outline a variety of often conflicting notions of race and racial difference that existed in the early modern period. Among these, they argue, was a notion of race as linked to a biologically fixed class hierarchy: they cite, for example, an Italian-English dictionary by seventeenth century linguist Jon Florio, which defines the term “razza” or “race” as “a kind, a brood, a blood, a stock, a pedigree.” So, they claim, the word “race” might indicate “a bloodline or heredity,” or it might mean what they call “a moral *hierarchy* between bloodlines.”¹ In this paper, I will draw from the claims Loomba and Burton make on this subject to read the racial narratives presented both by Christopher Marlowe’s *Tamburlaine* plays and by Shakespeare’s *Othello*. Firstly, I will use Loomba’s and Burton’s arguments to outline a concept of race I’ll call “horizontal racialisation,” because it describes hierarchies across members of different “races,” at a single moment in time. Horizontal racialisation, in accordance with the definitions suggested by Loomba and Burton, understands “race” as associated with immutable characteristics of superiority or inferiority that both define a person’s class standing and are not merely qualities belonging to him, but are actually rooted pseudo-racially in his flesh. According to such a view, I’ll argue, what it means for a character in either of these plays to belong to a ruling *class* is, inherently, for him to possess the immutable biological characteristics of

¹ Loomba, Ania and Burton, Jonathan, eds., *Race in Early Modern England: A Documentary Companion*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 14.

superiority extant in the ruling *race*. I will identify horizontal racialisation as the dominant racial mode of each play-world: at the opening of the *Tamburlaine* plays and *Othello*, I'll argue, this kind of racial thinking entails the status quo. I will then draw from Loomba's and Burton's arguments to introduce a second kind of racial thinking, which I'll call "vertical racialisation," because it describes hierarchies between different members of different races *through time*. This kind of racial thinking draws on questions of bloodlines and inheritances, as characters consider what kinds of qualities, both pseudo-biological and of class and status, are passed on over the generations. In this paper, I will argue that, although both of these plays open into static worlds dominated by the thinking of horizontal racialisation, which draws an identity between class superiority and racial or pseudo-racial genetic superiority, as each play moves through time questions of vertical racialisation are activated. In both the *Tamburlaine* plays and *Othello*, I'll argue, the anxieties surrounding racial and class inheritance threaten to disrupt the boundaries of horizontal racialisation and race-class identity.

In *Tamburlaine the Great, Parts I & II*, horizontal racialisation is established as the dominant racial narrative through Tamburlaine's repeated attempts to mobilise the race-class identity it provides to justify his social status and his rule. "Part of Tamburlaine's project as a social upstart," argues Mark Thornton Burnett in "'Tamburlaine' and the Body," "entails his defining himself in relation to established social orthodoxies."² Although in fact by birth a lowly shepherd, Tamburlaine regularly describes his strength and bravery as inherent in his body, in some way fundamentally characteristic of his physical self. A racial doctrine in which biological superiority entails class superiority helps legitimise his claims to power and status. "O Samarcanda, where I breathèd first / And joyed the fire of this martial flesh," he says

² Burnett, Mark Thornton. "'Tamburlaine' and the Body." *Criticism*, vol. 33, no. 1, 1991, pp. 31–47. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23113622>. Accessed 6 May 2025.

(*Tamburlaine the Great, Part II* IV.I.104-5). That “martial” is used here as an adjective modifying “flesh” is highly suggestive. His very flesh, he claims, is fundamentally soldierly; his strength and valor are inseparable from the physical matter of his body. His warlike character was present in his blood, he argues here, from his earliest years, even before he rose to power.

In the crucial scene in *Part I* in which he first appears, Tamburlaine similarly takes pains to cast his humble origins as separate from his biological self, which he describes as instead essentially belonging to the ruling class in terms once again in keeping with the narratives of horizontal racialisation. In that early scene, Tamburlaine ritualistically removes his shepherd’s “weeds,” which he “disdain[s] to wear” and identifies his new battle-garments, his “complete armour” and “curtle-axe” as “adjuncts more beseeming Tamburlaine” (*Tamburlaine the Great, Part I* 1.2.41-49). This unclothing is symbolic of more than a superficial change in status, according to Emily C. Bartels in “The Double Vision of the East: Imperialist Self-Construction in Marlowe's ‘Tamburlaine, Part One.’” By removing his shepherd’s weeds, Tamburlaine signals that they are, in fact, fundamentally removable, that his humble clothes – and so too his origins more generally – are not inherent in his body.³ They are, he claims here, no essential part of his physical self, but rather mere objects he might cast off as he chooses. It is instead his general’s armour that Tamburlaine identifies as essential to him, characterising his new garments as more “beseeming” him. There is, Tamburlaine implies, after some basic quality inherent in him, indicative of his social position. He merely uses the narrative of horizontal racialisation, which relates racial superiority to a kind of class superiority, to claim power and status as his birthright in spite of appearances.

³ Bartels, Emily C. “The Double Vision of the East: Imperialist Self-Construction in Marlowe’s Tamburlaine, ‘Part One.’” *Renaissance Drama*, vol. 23, 1992, pp. 3–24. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41917282>. Accessed 6 May 2025.

The world of *Othello* similarly operates within the bounds of horizontal racialisation and is characterised by the identity I have suggested between racial status and class position. Through his displacement and disempowerment of two white men in the play's opening act, Othello reveals the degree to which the construct of racial whiteness is from the beginning defined in terms of possession of wealth, status, and power. Firstly, of course, he refuses Iago the social advancement the latter feels he deserves by refusing to promote him, but secondly, his successful wooing of the wealthy Desdemona, and the class advancements that accompany their union, come at the expense of a second white male competitor, Roderigo. In both cases, the other characters' responses make plain that Othello has claimed for himself that wealth, power, and status that the play-world has associated inextricably with whiteness.

Othello opens with what initially appears a comparatively banal scene of social gripe, as Iago describes to Roderigo his anger at Othello's failure to promote him. "I know my price," he says. "I am worth no worse a place" (*Othello* 1.1.11). Iago in this scene both outlines what he understands as his essential social value and describes Othello as overstepping his own: "He, as loving his own pride and purposes... with a bombast circumstance / Horribly stuffed with epithets of war" (*Othello* 1.1.12-14). Iago describes Othello's transgression as, in fact, a challenge to race-class identity: just as Tamburlaine imagines his superiority to be rooted in his blood, so too Iago here describes his own worth as inherent in him, and also as superior to Othello's. Othello, he argues, has acted out of undue "pride," his description of his general as "stuffed" similarly casts Othello's behavior as pompous and above his social station. The famous line with which Iago concludes, "I am not what I am," can thus be read literally, as asserting his own deceitful character, but also a description of the profound disruption Othello's actions has caused in the identity politics that define the world of the play. Iago, I have argued, considers his

social superiority to be inherent in his blood, a fundamental aspect of his status as a white Venetian. For Othello, a Black man, to deny him political power essentially destabilizes this identity between his race and his status. Iago's response to Othello's slight makes plain that, in his mind and in the world of the play, *what it means* to be white is to be the Black Othello's social superior. Othello, however, has refused to promote him, and has thus displayed an unsettling social power. Iago as a white man *is no longer what he is* – in other words, he is no longer Othello's superior.

Not long after this comes a second scene of displacement, and again Othello's transgression is understood as disrupting the established race-class identity. The white Roderigo has desired Desdemona but has been thwarted by Othello; a revengeful Iago consoles him in language that conflates Othello's racial transgression with his transgression of class boundaries. He assures Roderigo that Desdemona must surely soon lose interest in her Black husband, but his language also implies that winning Desdemona back will confer to him advantages of wealth and status. "Make all the money thou canst," he tells Roderigo. "If sanctimony and a frail vow betwixt an erring barbarian and a supersubtle Venetian be not too hard for my wits and all the tribe of hell, thou shalt enjoy her. Therefore make money" (*Othello* II.I.353-56). Iago here points wryly to the absurdity of a union between a Black "barbarian" and a white Venetian noblewoman, but his repeated order to Roderigo "make money" also, and importantly, emphasises how essential class and wealth are to white self-conception. Literally, Iago is persuading Roderigo to sell his lands and give the money to Iago himself, who promises to use it to convince Desdemona to leave her husband. However, by implying that such an investment would in the long run benefit Rodrigo through marriage with the wealthy Desdemona, Iago highlights what, exactly, is so unsettling about Othello's marriage: the wealth and class

advantages conferred by a union with Desdemona ought to be Roderigo's purely by virtue of his whiteness.

I have demonstrated that both plays operate within play-worlds that understand race in terms I have defined as "horizontal racialisation," and imagine racial boundaries as existing horizontally, in the pseudo-biological hierarchy between individual members of different classes. However, the driving narrative tension of both plays, I will now argue, surrounds the second kind of racial thinking I outlined, as both plays grapple with how race and class boundaries are maintained or disrupted intergenerationally, or verticality. The racial boundaries that the conclusions of both plays reach towards, I will now argue, are ultimately borne of this anxiety of inheritance, which I termed "vertical racialisation": characters across these play struggle with questions of whether, and in what ways, qualities of race and class can be passed down through the generations. The *Tamburlaine* plays, confronted with the challenges vertical racialisation poses to horizontal race-class identity, ultimately reach for newer and possibly more rigid definitions of race. Othello's failure to consummate his relationship with Desdemona and produce an heir, by contrast, allows the horizontal racial boundaries of the play-world to go unchallenged, so that its conclusion upholds this original race-class identity.

In the *Tamburlaine* plays, vertical racialisation takes the form of Tamburlaine's anxiety surrounding the race and class inheritance of his wayward son Calyphas. Calyphas is totally uninterested in war and conquest, and, in light of the claims Tamburlaine has made throughout both plays that his strength is indicative of the fundamental superiority of his biological makeup, his son's weakness is profoundly destabilising. If Tamburlaine's flesh is, as he has repeatedly suggested, both genetically and socially superior, then according to narratives of horizontal racialisation this superiority ought to be inherited by his son. That it is evidently not so, that he is

in fact able to produce a child whose physical pseudo-racial makeup, in its weakness, more closely resembles that which the racial narratives of the time might expect to find in a Scythian shepherd's son, quite fundamentally challenges both Tamburlaine's claim to power and status and the racial order of the play more broadly.

First, Tamburlaine berates what he considers his son's weakness in language that both upholds horizontal racialisation and the narrative of superiority of bloodlines and attempts to force the facts of his case into a racially consistent vertical inheritance narrative. "Bastardly boy," he tells his son in outrage, "sprung from some coward's loins, / And not the issue of great Tamburlaine!" (*Tamburlaine the Great, Part II* 1.3.79-80). He here continues to insist on describing his own superiority as a quasi-racial characteristic of his flesh; however, he also understands Calyphas's cowardice as necessarily inherited. The only explanation he can conceive of, then, is that Calyphas is the son of another. Imagining the inheritance of his empire, Tamburlaine similarly continues to cling to a belief in a superiority that is passed down vertically. Since Calyphas has not inherited his father's biological strength, he argues, the boy cannot inherit his political status either; rather than abandoning belief in vertical racialisation altogether, Tamburlaine at this stage imagines a fictional successor who does inherit those physical traits Tamburlaine wishes to believe are biologically his. "Of all the provinces I have subdued," he tells his son, "Thou shalt not have a foot, unless thou bear / A mind courageous and invincible; / For he shall wear the crown of Persia / Whose head hath deepest scars, whose breast most wounds, / Which being wroth sends lightning from his eyes, / And in the furrows of his frowning brows / Harbours revenge, war, death, and cruelty" (*Tamburlaine the Great, Part II* 1.3.82-88). Tamburlaine here refuses to give his son "a foot" of his conquered lands unless he "bear[s] / A mind courageous and invincible," and describes instead another, imaginary

successor, whose physical body does conform to the inheritance narrative he desires: “revenge, war, death, and cruelty” seem to live in his hypothetical physiognomy, “in the furrows of his frowning brows.”

Tamburlaine’s attempts to make his situation conform to vertical racialisation narratives are repeatedly challenged by the facts of his case, however: he cannot escape the fact that he has borne a son who simply has not inherited his supposedly essential superior qualities. The shocking scene in which he stabs and kills Calyphas in a moment of rage ought, then, to be read as a final desperate attempt to cling to the vertical narrative of race-class inheritance, as Tamburlaine imagines himself to be putting an end to this physically weak offshoot of his flesh, thereby keeping the boy finally from any inherited status he might demand. Tamburlaine once again refuses to accept Calyphas’ physical body as a product of himself; however, he has by this time ceased to make these claims literally. Instead, he says, with some desperation, that Calyphas must simply have been “created of the massy dregs of earth, / The scum and tartar of the elements, / Wherein was neither courage, strength, or wit, / But folly, sloth, and damnèd idleness” (*Tamburlaine the Great, Part II* 4.1.121-5). He can no longer fight the fact that Calyphas is biologically his child, but in the very scene of the murder he nevertheless continues to insist that the boy must be metaphorically made of some lesser matter, the “scum and tartar of the elements.”

In *Othello*, too, the disruptive effects of vertical racialisation through racial inheritance is continually felt beneath the surface of the play. Various characters speak bawdily and with open disgust of the idea of sex between Othello and Desdemona: the ever-present image of the wedding-bed, far from mere vulgar wordplay, in fact suggests a deeper fear surrounding the disruption to the integrity of horizontal racialisation such a union might cause. What, these

characters wonder, would the child of a Black man and a white woman inherit? Iago in the very opening act introduces to Desdemona's father Brabantio, in coarsely racist language, the threat of intercourse between the two. Even at this early stage, furthermore, he gestures at the possibility of a child in terms that make plain the social transgression such an offspring would constitute: "Even now, now, very now," Iago urges Brabantio, "and old black ram / Is tugging your white ewe. Arise, arise! / Awake the snorting citizens with the bell / Or else the devil will make a grandsire of you." (*Othello* 1.1.87-90). The brutishness of the image is shocking, certainly, but Iago's description hints at the deeper distress his language animates: through his emphasis on the contrast between a "black ram" and a "white ewe," he indicates that a sexual act that makes Brabantio a grandfather would in the racial world of the play be so essentially transgressive that the devil himself must have had a hand in it.

The marriage-bed, furthermore, is also at the centre of Othello's own anxieties: when Iago invokes the image of Desdemona's supposed affair with Cassio, he situates the consummation of the relationship in Othello's bed. "Strangle her in her bed, even the bed she hath contaminated!" he urges (*Othello* 4.1.203-4). If, as Iago has suggested to Brabantio, the anxiety of reproduction and inheritance is central to the anxiety surrounding the marriage bed, then Othello's fury becomes legible: he has lost the opportunity to consummate their relationship and thus to produce an heir. Later, as he prepares to commit the murder, he says, "Thy bed, lust-stained, shall with lust's blood be spotted" (*Othello* 5.1.36). He vows to shed her blood through murder in imitation of the bloodshed of sex and, in doing so, to take the procreative rights back from the white Cassio. Sex, the marriage bed, and the promise of procreation are thus at the heart of the various anxieties these characters express; like in *Tamburlaine*, the uncertainty surrounding consummation and inheritance is disturbing to the racial order of the play.

The inhabitants of both play-worlds are ultimately unable to grapple with the challenges racial inheritance poses to the narrow boundaries of horizontal racialisation. In *Tamburlaine*, the uncertainty raised by Calyphas's failure to inherit the bodily strength his father characterised as essential ultimately causes the play to turn, through Tamburlaine's eventual death, away from its original racial narratives. Crucially, Tamburlaine dies, not dramatically or in battle, but merely of age and illness – through the weakness of his flesh. Mary Floyd-Wilson in *English Ethnicity and Race in Early Modern Drama* points to Tamburlaine's last words to his sons, in which he makes a final effort to pass on his warlike nature: "But sons," he tells them as he lies dying, "this subject, not of force enough / To hold the fiery spirit it contains / Must part, imparting its impressions / By equal portions into both your breasts; / My flesh divided in your precious shapes / Shall still retain my spirit, though I die, / And live in all your seeds immortally" (3.3.168-74). On his deathbed, Tamburlaine continues to wrestle, unsatisfactorily, with the conflict between what he tries to understand as biologically inherent characteristics, and his failure to reliably pass them down. His "subject" – or body – is, he admits, not strong enough to hold his "fiery spirit:" Tamburlaine seems here to acknowledge that his flesh may not be as essentially strong as he previously claimed, that vertical racial inheritance may be impossible. Having thus detached superiority from the body, and so from the earlier racial narratives of the play-world, he hopes instead for a different kind of inheritance. His "fiery spirit," he says, will instead "[impart] its impressions... into both your breasts"; "my flesh divided in your precious shapes / Shall still retain my spirit." Tamburlaine in these lines imagines a new kind of incorporeal, asexual inheritance, in which his spirit might leave his body and divide itself between his two sons. We may not be wholly persuaded by this inheritance, either – "an informed viewer," as Floyd-Wilson points out, "would know, of course, that Amyras and

Celebinus lose their father's empire" – but Floyd-Wilson nevertheless reads Tamburlaine's "obsession with transmitting his own intractability" as fundamentally "a nascent desire for the boundedness of [modern-day] race."⁴ In short, through Tamburlaine, Marlowe gestures at the fluidness and mutability of the early-modern construct of race-as-class, which understands biological inheritance as so closely related to wealth and status. Fortunes, in Tamburlaine's world, are changeable; empires are won and lost; and without some deeper, more clearly essentialist racial narrative, inheritance is unreliable. Through what I have termed vertical racialisation, then, the *Tamburlaine* plays expose their racial world to its own shortcomings.

In *Othello*, by contrast, Othello and Desdemona are denied the ability to consummate their relationship and no child is ever produced. As a result, the conclusion of the play upholds its own racial narratives, as white power structures are allowed to reassert themselves without challenge. That Othello and Desdemona never have sex is hinted at throughout the play; Harold Bloom in his chapter on *Othello* from *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*, argues concretely that intercourse never actually takes place.⁵ "The rites by which I love him are bereft me," says Desdemona, when Othello is called away on their wedding-night (*Othello* I.3.258). Throughout the rest of the play Shakespeare teases both Othello and the audience with the promise of the act, and yet Othello is always drawn away from the marriage bed at the crucial moment – for example, when Iago ignites a drunken fight between Roderigo and Cassio, and Othello and Desdemona are called away to make peace. Bloom also points out, furthermore, that Othello's susceptibility to Iago's questioning of Desdemona's virtue only makes sense if he does

⁴ Floyd-Wilson, Mary. *English ethnicity and race in early modern drama*. United Kingdom, Cambridge University Press, 2003, 108-9.

⁵ Bloom, Harold. *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*. Riverhead Books, 1998, 456.

not yet know whether she is a virgin or not: if the pair had consummated their relationship, he would have seen her virginity for himself.

Othello's murder of Desdemona is also imagined in terms of a kind of sexual consummation, but here once again he is unable to penetrate her. He previously pledged to spot the marriage bed "with lust's blood," and yet is ultimately unable to do so: "I'll not shed her blood," he now declares (*Othello* 5.1.36) The murder he actually commits is bloodless: he strangles rather than stabs her, and so once again is rendered impotent in his failure to penetrate her. Othello's despair at her death after learning of Iago's falsehood – "Cold, cold, my girl," he says, "Even like thy chastity" (*Othello* 5.2.273-4) – makes plain that he, too, now knows that she has died a virgin; he is thus denied the opportunity to pass the status he would gain through marriage with the white Desdemona to an heir. Unlike in *Tamburlaine*, then, neither he nor anyone else is ultimately forced to confront the issues of inheritance that have lurked beneath the play's surface since the first act: the Black Othello has engendered no son with claims to a white mother's wealth and status. In the absence of the challenge vertical racialisation poses to the horizontal racial hierarchies of the play-world, the narrative of race-class identity goes unchallenged, and so *Othello* concludes by ultimately upholding the racial structures it initially establishes. The white Cassio – though he does not father a son with Othello's wife – adopts his political and social position upon his death, and so once more unites class with race according to the demands of the horizontal racialisation of the play-world.

Although *Tamburlaine* certainly does not completely dismantle early modern racial narratives, then, the questions posed by vertical racialisation do identify some of the key issues that have continued to plague essentialist racial thinking over the intervening centuries. As *Tamburlaine* himself continues to grasp for even more rigid definitions of race, the play

nevertheless points to the crucial inconsistencies inherent in its racial narratives. The world of *Othello*, on the other hand, is granted through Othello's inability to father a child a temporary security over a deeper questioning of horizontal racialisation. The issue Iago identified in the first act, when in response to Othello's demonstration of social power over him he declared, "I am not what I am," is resolved, but not in a way that invites a reconfiguration of racial lines. Instead, *Othello* leaves audiences in a world in which power and status are conferred to a white man, permitting its racial and class hierarchies to endure.

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