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From *Mauri* to Shakespeare's Moor: Hybridity and the Construction of Moorish Identity

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Abstract

This paper examines the Moors' hybridity in historical and postcolonial contexts. Building on Homi Bhabha's concept of hybridity, this paper explores Moorish identity across three interrelated dimensions: racial, linguistic, and cultural, thus illustrating how the colonial experience and cultural dialogue have resulted in the creation of Moorish identity as a palimpsest of history. First, it revisits the historical meanings of the term "Moor" from Roman Mauretania to medieval and early modern Europe. Then it examines the Maghreb as a linguistic contact zone where local and colonial languages interacted. Finally, it analyzes Shakespeare's representation of the Moor on the early modern stage, focusing on Aaron in *Titus Andronicus*, The Prince of Morocco in *The Merchant of Venice*, and Othello in *Othello*. The article argues that Shakespeare's Moors not only reflect a long historical process in which Moorish identity emerged as a hybrid construct shaped by centuries of cross-cultural interaction in the Mediterranean world, but also serve as a literary embodiment of early modern Europe's anxieties about racial and cultural hybridity.

Keywords: Moors; hybridity; postcolonialism; race; Mediterranean; identity; Shakespeare

Introduction

The figure of the Moor holds an ambiguous place in European cultural history. It first originated from the Latin term *Mauri*, which referred to the inhabitants of Roman Mauretania in North Africa. Then the word "Moor" gradually expanded beyond its geographical meaning to acquire religious, cultural, and racial connotations in medieval and early modern Europe. By the sixteenth century, the term was used to refer to a North African, a Muslim, or a Black African, often without clear distinction. This ambiguity of meaning indicates that the figure of the Moor was less an actual category of people than a cultural signifier used by European cultures to express concerns about alterity, mobility, race, and empire. To shed light on this figure and understand how the Moorish hybrid identity emerged from the interaction of different cultures, languages, and histories, this research will build on postcolonial theory, particularly the concept of hybridity.

Hybridity is one of the main postcolonial concepts that helps in understanding identities formed through cultural contact and colonial encounters. Drawing on Homi K. Bhabha's ideas of hybridity, Moorish identity is understood to have originated not from a single source but from centuries of contact among Amazigh, Jewish, Arab, Andalusian, sub-Saharan, and European traditions. In this respect,

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hybridity is not just a product of mixture but a process of creating identity that challenges notions of race and language. So, how did the historical development of the term “Moor” affect Shakespeare’s representations of Moorish identity in his works, and what do the characters of Aaron, the Prince of Morocco, and Othello reveal about early modern notions of race and hybridity? This article argues that the figure of the Moor in Shakespeare’s drama emerges from a long historical process in which racial, linguistic, and cultural encounters across the Mediterranean produced a hybrid and unstable identity. Through the contrasting representations of Aaron, the Prince of Morocco, and Othello, Shakespeare dramatizes evolving early modern perceptions of the Moor as both feared outsider and assimilated yet precarious insider.

To achieve its purpose, the analysis is carried out in three stages. The first traces the etymology and historical evolution of the term “Moor,” showing how its meanings changed over time. The second explores how the Maghreb has long been a linguistic contact zone where multiple languages and cultures have coexisted and interacted. The third concerns Shakespeare’s plays, in which the Moor becomes a powerful literary figure through whom the tensions of hybridity, assimilation, and exclusion are dramatized. Read in this longue durée perspective, Shakespeare’s Moor is neither an isolated invention nor a transparent racial type, but the literary crystallization of a much longer history of Mediterranean exchange.

The Historical Moor: Etymology and Racial Fluidity

The word Moor has an unclear origin; it is probably of Phoenician origin, as it is connected with the Hebrew and Phoenician word “Mahur”, which means western. The ancient Greeks derived Mauro from Mahurin, from which Latin deduces Mauri (Skutsch 31). The Romans were the first to use Maurus to denote an inhabitant of the Roman province of Mauretania, located on the west side of North Africa on the shores of the Mediterranean Sea, Mauretania Tingitana (Morocco) and Mauretania Caesariensis (northwestern Algeria). So, in its earliest usage, the term “Moor” was geographical rather than racial. Yet as the word passed into medieval and early modern European languages, it expanded in scope and lost precision. During the Middle Ages, Christian Europeans were the first to use the term “Moor” as an exonym to designate Muslim populations in the Maghreb, Al-Andalus (the Iberian Peninsula), Sicily, and Malta.

For Leo Africanus (c. 1494–1554), the Moors (Mauri) are the original Berber occupants of the ancient Roman Africa Province known as Roman Africans (Africanus 21). The Berbers or the Imazighen (singular Amazigh) are the indigenous people of Northwest Africa, speakers of the Berber languages, which belong to the Afroasiatic family. Historically, it is not clear how the name Berber evolved. It was not a term that originated with the group itself. “Known to themselves as Amazigh, the Berbers take their more common name from the Latin *barbarus* (barbarian), a Roman effort to distinguish the less-developed tribal societies of much of Europe and Africa from their own Hellenic-derived civilization” (Wester-Ebbinghaus). As for the Arabs, the term Moor was seldom used to refer to the early non-Arab peoples of northwestern Africa; instead, they were called Berbers or by their own clan names (Brunson and Rashidi 7). The Arabs did not use the word El-Barbar negatively, as they were unaware of its history, and modern European languages likely borrowed this term from Arabic. The variety is French when spelled *Berbère* and English when spelled *Berber*.

But the populations designated by the term “Moor” were themselves ethnically and culturally diverse. North Africa’s inhabitants included not only Amazigh communities but also Jewish populations, Arab settlers, Andalusian refugees, sub-Saharan Africans, and others whose histories

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intersected through migration, intermarriage, trade, war, and conversion. Such diversity complicates any attempt to reduce the Moor to a stable racial type. Early modern European descriptions themselves reveal this ambiguity. Europeans often conflated Moors with sub-Saharan Africans. This is evident in terms such as “blackamoor,” a figure/visual trope in European decorative art, depicting a man of sub-Saharan African descent. Derivatives of the word Moor may be found even today, such as the Spanish word *mora*, which means blackberry, or the French *moricaud*, which means swarthy or tanned (Van Sertima 7). Concerning Muslims of any other skin tone, they were labeled as “white Moors” by Europeans, even though most of North Africa’s population resembles southern Europeans in terms of physical characteristics (Meakin 3).

Genetically speaking, data suggest that substantial segments of the Arabized Berber and Berber gene pools exhibit an amalgam of ancestral components (i.e., Maghrebi, Middle Eastern, European, and sub-Saharan) (Arauna et al.). This is evident in the interfaith and interethnic marriages that were common in both Christian and Muslim Spain during the Middle Ages (Barton 2). Moreover, it is worth mentioning that between 1500 and 1800, piracy in the Mediterranean played an important role in this ethnic mixture, as many Christians were taken captives and sold in Barbary (Morocco). Between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries, 1 and 1.25 million Europeans were captured by Barbary pirates and sold as slaves as a revenge for the Spanish Reconquista, which expelled the Moors from Spain (Davis xxv). So, though variously described as black, tawny, swarthy, or even white, the category remained fluid and internally contradictory.

To conclude, hybridity is inscribed in the very fabric of Moorish ethnicity, and therefore, Moorish identity must be understood historically as a composite formation shaped by the Mediterranean as a space of exchange where populations, languages, and beliefs met and interacted over centuries.

Linguistic Hybridity in the Maghreb

Language provides another important lens for understanding Moorish hybridity. North Africa has long been a linguistic contact zone where indigenous, imperial, and colonial languages overlapped. In fact, when a land is militarily conquered, its colonization not only affects its economy but also its “forms of knowledge” such as language (Young 163). Linguistic hybridity describes how several languages are blended within a single speech group, person, or document. This phenomenon occurs when linguistic elements from other languages combine to create new forms of speech, writing, or conceptual expression. “The first theorist to highlight the significance of hybridity was Mikhail Bakhtin” (Raine). For Bakhtin, hybridization is the process of fusing elements from two distinct social languages into a single statement or expression in speaking or writing. This blending of discrete language elements comes from different historical epochs, social classes, or other distinctive features, demonstrating the different attitudes, worldviews, and points of view embedded in language use (Bakhtin 358). Thus, hybridization shows well how flexible and dynamic language is. It illustrates the intricacy of interpersonal interactions and human communication by showing how language changes over time through the assimilation and fusion of many influences.

Over millennia, indigenous cultures, migrations, trade routes, and colonial powers have shaped the linguistic mosaic of North Africa. The region’s vibrant cultures and rich history are reflected in this diversified language legacy. Historically, languages such as Latin, Punic, and Greek have been spoken in western North Africa (Conant 37). The duration of African Romance’s usage is unknown, but its impact on Northwest African Arabic—especially in the language of northwest Morocco—suggests that it was widely spoken in the early years following the Arab conquest (Haspelmath 195). “[T]he

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borrowing of vocabulary between Amazigh, Punic, Latin (or Romance), and Arabic suggests that bilingualism was reasonably widespread in the premodern Maghrib, at least in zones where these languages were in contact” (Conant 55).

Linguistic hybridity might appear through features such as code-switching, borrowing, and the development of pidgins and creoles. After the Muslims conquered the Maghreb, Arabic was introduced; nonetheless, the language grew far more slowly than the religion. Amazigh languages were the norm in the countryside, while Arabic held sway only in towns, especially in the cities of the north. However, the expulsion of the Moriscos from Spain at the start of the seventeenth century altered this linguistic landscape. They carried with them their Andalusí Arabic, a language heavily influenced by the Romance languages, alongside Haketia, or Judaeo-Spanish, a Jewish Romance language historically used by the North African Sephardim and also spoken in northern Moroccan cities. Another example of linguistic hybridity that characterizes the region is Sabir, a contact language known as the Mediterranean Lingua Franca, developed in the Middle Ages by sailors and traders in the Mediterranean, notably along the Barbary Coast, which was influenced by Italian, Catalan, Occitan, Berber, Arabic, Spanish, and Portuguese (Operstein 89).

North African Arabic is characterized by linguistic mixing, as evidenced by the extensive use of loanwords, primarily Arabized Amazigh words. The Spanish lexicon is still present in the northern cities’ vernaculars more than in those of the center, yet some are common to all, such as ‘semana’ in Moroccan dialect, the Spanish word for ‘week’. Moroccan Arabic dialect has also been impacted by Spanish grammatical structures, such as the use of the indefinite article ‘a’ in ‘a man’ is wahed arrajel; wahed means ‘a’, and *arrajel* means ‘man’. In Arabic grammar, ‘a’ is not used, so this comes from Spanish *un hombre*. Code-switching is also common between Standard Arabic (the language of books, literature, ...) and Arabic dialects, or between Amazigh and either Arabic dialects or Standard Arabic.

Another prevalent linguistic feature of Morocco and other Maghreb countries is diglossia. At the same time, Youssi uses the term triglossia to describe the diglossic situation in Morocco, stating that it involves “the alternative use” of three varieties of Arabic rather than two (29). If we take into account Standard Arabic, Arabic vernaculars, and the three Amazigh dialects, we will have three languages rather than two. Berbers generally learn Arabic as a second language and use it as a lingua franca because, although the Berber dialects (Tashelhit, Tamazight, and Tarifit) are closely related, not all are mutually intelligible, which helps explain why most Berbers are native bilinguals.

Therefore, since languages carry histories of power, resistance, and adaptation, linguistic hybridity in Morocco is not merely a linguistic phenomenon but also a cultural one. In North Africa, the coexistence of multiple languages also reflects the layered historical encounters that have shaped the region.

Cultural Hybridity and the Mediterranean Contact Zone

In his book *Decolonising the Mind* (1986) the Kenyan novelist and post-colonial theorist Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o says, “Language carries culture, and culture carries, particularly through orature and literature, the entire body of values by which we come to perceive ourselves and our place in the world” (16). Language, then, is the carrier of people’s identities, ideologies, perceptions, attitudes, and cultures. When a people’s language has been affected and hybridized by different forms of colonialism, all its aspects are consequently hybridized. So cultural hybridity is inevitable when multiple distinct ethnic groups occupy a single area. If Bakhtin is the father of linguistic hybridity, Homi Bhabha is the father of the cultural one. Usually, “compared to Edward Said or Gayatri Spivak, Bhabha is perhaps

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best known for the theory of cultural hybridization he developed Bhabha argues that hybridization is the result of various forms of colonization, resulting in cultural collisions and exchanges” (Umar and Lawan 16).

Cultural identity does not emerge from isolated origins but from contact zones where meanings are negotiated and transformed. Homi Bhabha’s concept of the “third space” serves as a productive framework for interpreting these cultural encounters. He argues that the creative potential of the “Third Space” emerges from colonial and postcolonial contexts (Bhabha 38), which “provides valuable insight into the complexity of cultural dynamics and the potential for transformative change in a postcolonial world” (Umar and Lawan 19). In the same vein, Morocco’s cultural hybridity embodies the “third space” that Homi Bhabha identifies as the site where new cultural forms emerge out of historical encounters. The cultural history of North Africa demonstrates that hybridity lies at the heart of Moorish identity. Across antiquity, the medieval period, and the early modern era, the Maghreb was shaped by successive encounters among Amazigh, Phoenician, Roman, Jewish, Vandal, Byzantine, Arab, Andalusian, sub-Saharan, and European influences. Moorish identity has been shaped by successive layers of these indigenous and foreign influences, which continue to inflect its language and culture.

The indigenous people of Morocco are the Imazighen, whose culture, language, and traditions form the foundation of Moroccan identity. Berbers have a long history dating back to ancient times and have influenced various aspects of Moroccan culture. The first ethnic group to come and settle among them in all of North Africa was the Jews. According to Richard Gunther, “The history of Jewish settlement in Morocco could be traced back to 813 B.C. when Jews accompanied Phoenicians in their trade routes to North Africa.” After that, other waves of Jews sought refuge in Morocco and across North Africa during the periods of the destruction of the first and second temples in Jerusalem (Gunther 489). As a result, many Amazigh tribes adopted Judaism and its traditions. However, during the second century, as the Roman Empire converted to Christianity, the new faith took root in Roman Mauritania Tingitana and gradually spread to Berber rural communities. In the seventh century, Arab Muslims took control of all North Africa. As a result, Islam and the Arabic language were introduced to the area, greatly impacting regional laws, customs, and social structures. The spread of Islam introduced new educational systems, architectural trends, and religious customs.

So, with the coming of the Arabs and the adoption of Islam by Berbers and some Jewish families, three cultures would interact over the coming centuries. Between the eighth and the fifteenth centuries, the area witnessed a period of flourishing cultural exchange. Jewish populations contributed significantly to local culture by enriching the country’s diversity, thereby strengthening the region’s existing cultural hybridity. Because of the short distance separating Morocco from Al-Andalus, Moroccan cities, especially Fez, experienced a blending of Andalusian and local traditions. This mingling would increase during and after the Reconquista in Spain, as many Andalusian Muslims and Jews fled to Morocco, bringing with them Andalusian art and traditions, hence enriching Moroccan culture. This blending of many ethnic identities and religions added to the particular cultural hybridity that has characterized the area since antiquity. As for the sub-Saharan African influence, Morocco was a key player in trans-Saharan trade, facilitating exchanges between North Africa and sub-Saharan Africa. As a result, African goods, people, and cultural practices entered the country, prompting some African communities to settle in Morocco, particularly in southern regions, further contributing to the area’s cultural mosaic.

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This hybridization makes it impossible to reduce Morocco to a singularly Arab or Amazigh society, as most Moroccans trace their origins to both. At the same time, others also share Jewish or Christian ancestry through conversion or intermarriage. Many family names are held by both Muslims and Jews, which testify to the fluidity of belonging and the interweaving of religious and ethnic traditions. In this sense, Morocco's rich cultural tapestry can be considered a living proof that hybridity is not necessarily a loss of authenticity, but a dynamic process of negotiation, translation, and reinvention across centuries.

The Moor on the Early Modern Stage

The Orient has always been a source of curiosity for the Western world, as Edward Said states in his book *Orientalism* (1978): "The Orient...had been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences" (1). Nevertheless, during the mid-Seventeenth Century, this curiosity grew, especially after England had established diplomatic relations with Morocco and the two kingdoms exchanged ambassadors. The presence of Moroccan ambassadors in London increased English awareness of North Africa. Abd al-Wahid bin Mas'ud, the principal secretary to the Moroccan Emperor Mulay Ahmad al-Mansur Saadi, was the first ambassador to the court of Queen Elizabeth I of England in 1600, where he spent six months. It has been thought that Abd al-Wahid bin Mas'ud inspired the character of William Shakespeare's Moorish hero Othello. The ambassador's impact was so great that there is a painting of him at the Barber Institute at the University of Birmingham. While Morocco's second ambassador to London, Qaid Mohammed Ben Haddu Ottur [Al-Attar], made a particular impression and was invited to Oxford University and to become a Fellow of the Royal Society during his stay in the 1680s. "Ben Haddu impressed Londoners by his exotic dress and his horsemanship; this event was immortalized by a famous painting of the Moroccan Ambassador on his horse in Hyde Park by Sir Godfrey Kneller" (Laamiri 2). So, this Moorish presence in England will not go unnoticed and will spark an enthusiastic interest in writing about the Orient. This fascination and desire to know more about that "exotic" Orient will consequently influence Elizabethan literature, particularly Shakespeare's plays. Wann has found that between 1579 and 1642, eighteen of the forty-seven Renaissance plays that include Oriental and Orientalist subjects deal with Moors and Moorish themes (444).

It is also worth noting that the active piracy in the Mediterranean during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, following the expulsion of the Moors from Andalusia, was one reason for the introduction of Moorish themes in Elizabethan drama. "From Spanish hatred of the Moors, reinforced by the general Christian hatred of Mahomedans and the experiences of piratical depredations came the Elizabethan emphasis upon the cruelty of these people-and upon their blackness" (Chew 521). "Thus, the biased and unflattering representation of Moors in Elizabethan drama can be thought of as a process of revitalization of the traditions of conflict between the Christians and the Muslims in Spain" (Al-Abdullah 4).

In the Shakespearean canon, there are three Moors: Aaron in *Titus Andronicus*, the Prince of Morocco in *The Merchant of Venice*, and Othello in *Othello*, all of whom are presented as outsiders subjected to racial prejudice. "One theme consistently reemployed throughout Shakespeare's plays is that of the 'Other' who is usually characterized as a character that is somehow separated, or noted as being different from the 'Self'" (Seddiki 9). Additionally, in his attempt to depict Moors as "Others", Shakespeare combines alien ancestry with blackness, thus reinforcing Elizabethan racial preconceptions that dark skin denoted exoticism, danger, or evil, as stated by Bartels (434), "blackness and

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Mohammedism were stereotyped as evil; Renaissance representations of the Moor were vague, varied, inconsistent, and contradictory.”

The term “Moor” remained semantically unstable, encompassing religious, geographic, and racial meanings simultaneously, reflecting an ambiguity clearly reflected in Shakespeare’s drama, where the Moor was characterized either as brave, noble, and civil or as wicked, irreligious, and savage. In *Titus Andronicus*, Aaron is depicted as the devil in disguise. He is associated with deception, manipulation, violence, and moral transgression. “If one good deed in all my life I did, / I do repent it from my very soul” (Act 5, Scene 3). Aaron openly embraces the role of villain within Roman society. He is devoid of remorse or humanity, which reinforces the racialized stereotype of the Moor as morally corrupt in the early modern imagination. On the contrary, as in the following quote, “he proudly puts forward a catalogue of crimes. There has not been a day when he has not indulged in crime” (Dutta 928):

As kill a man, or else device his death;
Ravish a maid, or plot the way to do it;
Accuse some innocent and forswear myself;
Set deadly enmity between two friends...
(Act 5, Scene 1)

Aaron thus reflects an early dramatic mode in which the Moor functions as a demonized outsider. He is highly racialized, and his blackness is repeatedly highlighted as a marker of difference, corruption, and evil. Yet Aaron’s rhetorical power also complicates this portrayal. His defiant self-assertion challenges the social order that condemns him, suggesting that the Moor on stage already exceeds the meanings imposed upon him. When Tamora gave birth to a black baby fathered by Aaron, Tamora’s sons wanted to kill it, but Aaron prevented them and rescued his baby, saying, “Coal-black is better than another hue, / In that it scorns to bear another hue” (Act 4, Scene 2). This is an example where Aaron challenges racist assumptions and asserts the value of Blackness in a bold, defiant way.

If Aaron is presented as an irreligious person, rather a devilish atheist, the Prince of Morocco in *The Merchant of Venice* is shown to be moral, but not explicitly Muslim. By being called the Moor in the play, it is automatically implied that he is not Christian, since the term is used to refer to someone from North Africa and non-Christian, thus linking ethnicity with religion. “In fact, because of their lighter skin, the Arab Moors were often associated with certain cultural and religious traditions during the Elizabethan era, while Sub-Saharan Africans were thought of as low-born and lacking religion and culture (Loomba 81). Draper argues that “Shakespeare could hardly make him a Christian and the prejudices of the London audience would not allow him to portray so noble a prince as a damned infidel (134). The Prince is depicted as a proud, high-spirited nobleman; yet, despite being portrayed as dignified and wealthy, he faces the prospect of being regarded as an outsider because of racial prejudice. When he asks Portia not to judge him by his complexion, he shows that he is aware of the fact that he might be rejected because of his skin color:

Mislike me not for my complexion,
The shadow'd livery of the burnish'd sun,
To whom I am a neighbour and near bred.
(Act 2, Scene 1)

His ultimate rejection reinforces the limits of cross-cultural integration within the play’s social order. Shakespeare here demonstrates how the Prince of Morocco is cast as the Other, alienated from

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mainstream society because he is a Moor.

As for Othello, he is presented as a Christian convert. He is clearly the noblest of the Shakespearean Moors. In *Othello*, Shakespeare develops a far more complex representation of Moorish identity by presenting Othello as a respected Venetian general. He is admired for his military achievements and occupies a position of authority within Venetian society. Yet his belonging remains precarious. He is consistently identified as the Moor, and his racial difference is never forgotten. His marriage to Desdemona becomes the site where anxieties about racial mixture and cultural boundaries emerge. Despite being called by the duke “Valiant Othello,” Iago categorizes him as an animal, “An old black ram / Is tupping your white ewe” (Act 1, Scene 1). Alternatively, when Brabantio, Desdemona’s father, in anger upon learning his daughter married Othello, a black man, uses the dehumanizing racist expression “Sooty bosom” (Act I, Scene 2) to describe Othello’s chest or skin, implying his dark skin is dirty or shameful, contrasting it with Desdemona’s fairness. This discriminatory insult characterizes Othello as a “foul” outsider and an “other” rather than a noble human being. Othello, therefore, embodies hybridity. He is simultaneously an insider and an outsider, both integrated into and excluded from Venetian society. His tragedy arises from this unstable position. Unlike Aaron, who represents the demonized Moor of stereotype, Othello represents a hybrid figure whose identity is shaped by negotiation between cultures. Othello’s identity is shaped by a persistent tension between inclusion and exclusion, admiration and suspicion. His tragedy lies partly in the way racial discourse gradually destabilizes his sense of self: “Rude am I in my speech, / And little bless’d with the soft phrase of peace (Act 1, Scene 3). This passage shows Othello’s awareness of his outsider status in Venetian society. While the quote “Haply, for I am black...” (Act 3, Scene 3) reflects the internalization of racial discourse, a key theme in postcolonial readings.

Manipulated by the revengeful ensign Iago, who, like an Orientalist, seems to be well-aware of the nature of Moors, the noble and valiant Othello metamorphoses into a cruel Moor, destructive of self and others. In his credulity, Othello is like the Prince of Morocco, and during the fit of anger and blindness because of jealousy, his brutality comes to the surface, and he becomes like the wicked Aaron, although they are not driven by the same motives. The dramatic transformation of the noble and valiant Othello into the stereotyped image of the violent, cruel Moor is noted by Lodovico:

Is this the noble Moor, whom our full senate
Call all in all sufficient? This the noble nature,
Whom passion could not shake? Whose solid virtue
The shot of accident, nor dart of chance,
Could neither graze, nor pierce?
(Act 4, Scene 1)

There is no final agreement about Othello’s race; whether of North African origin, as in the generally accepted definition of Moor, or of Sub-Saharan African. “Othello’s oriental characteristics and physical aura have kindled manifold divisions among the doyennes of English Literature” (Toker and Karakuzu 110), which means Othello’s ethnic background is ambiguous. Another point that contributes to this ambiguity is Reitz-Wilson’s belief that Shakespeare’s representation of the Moor might have been shaped by early modern encounters with figures occupying liminal cultural positions between Africa and Europe, such as Leo Africanus:

Evidence for Shakespeare’s use of the text can be seen in the similarities between Leo’s life and Othello’s. Leo was a Moor of noble descent who converted to Christianity, was

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sold into slavery, and was eventually redeemed. Othello is a Moor of noble descent, a convert to Christianity, and was sold into slavery and redeemed. Another connection to Africanus's history is that his description of Moors emphasizes many of the attributes seen in Othello: extreme jealousy, courage in battle, and pride. (Reitz-Wilson 2)

In Othello, rather than presenting a clearly defined racial identity, Shakespeare constructs a character whose identity remains unstable and hybrid, exploiting this ambiguity by introducing the protagonist not by his personal name but as "the Moor," thus foregrounding difference. The term functions less as an exact ethnic identifier and more as an ambiguous signifier of alterity, in keeping with the broader early modern tradition of the Moor as an ambiguous term for Africans and Muslims. In this sense, Othello can be understood as a literary expression of Moorish hybridity, in line with travel literature, historical figures such as Leo Africanus, and the cultural exchanges between Africa and Europe in the Renaissance. "Shakespeare's idea of race presents an interesting development: it moves from the prejudiced picture of Aaron to a more sympathetic portrayal of the racial 'other' in the figures of Othello" (Dutta 922). The progression from Aaron to the Prince of Morocco and finally to Othello appears to indicate a development in Shakespeare's portrayal of the Moor from a racialized villain to a noble outsider, and finally to a multidimensional hero whose place in English society is both acknowledged and subverted. This development appears to indicate a broader shift in English Renaissance thought from the Moor as an outsider or foe to the Moor as a protector of Christendom against foreign invasion within European society.

Conclusion

The figure of the Moor resists any essentialism as it cannot be understood through a single racial or cultural definition. From the classical Mauri of Roman North Africa to the complex, dramatic figure of the Moor in Shakespeare's plays, the term has proved to be a dynamic, contested, and historically specific concept. Rather than being a fixed racial or cultural identity, the Moor seems to be a dynamic signifier, shaped by the complexities of centuries of contact, conflict, and exchange in the Mediterranean world. This research paper has shown that the Moorish identity should be approached through the prism of hybridity. Racially, the Moor is the outcome of centuries of ethnic mixing of the different peoples who inhabited the area and shifting European classifications that oscillate between inclusion and exclusion. This consequently gave rise to a linguistic mixing, as Morocco has always been a contact zone where multiple languages interacted and transformed one another. As a result, Morocco's culture developed through successive layers of exchange across the Mediterranean world, defying singular narratives of origin or belonging.

With this *longue durée* framework, Shakespeare's Moors do not appear as isolated dramatic inventions but reflect a literary crystallization of historical hybridity. Aaron, the Prince of Morocco, and Othello exemplify different kinds of hybridity, demonstrating the complex interplay of otherness and assimilation, fascination and fear, and admiration and exclusion that characterized early modern European engagements with the non-European world. The Moors created by Shakespeare have become dramatic figures in which early modern Europe expressed its anxieties about race, difference, and belonging. Shakespeare's dramatic works reveal an evolving representation of the Moor across different plays. Aaron is the quintessential demonized figure of the Moor in the early modern stereotype, while the Prince of Morocco is presented as a dignified yet ultimately excluded outsider. Othello appears to be a far more complex character whose identity reflects the tensions of cultural hybridity, assimilation,

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and alienation stemming from racial difference within Venetian society. Othello epitomizes centuries of Mediterranean interactions that have produced Moorish identity as a hybrid formation shaped by history itself.

Finally, reading the Moor through the lens of hybridity requires us to think of identity not as a fixed category but as a constantly dynamic movement beyond rigid binaries. In this way, the figure of the Moor reminds us that all identities are products of past encounters, negotiations, and transformations, rather than merely figures of alterity. As Bhabha argues, “entering this [...] in-between space allows for a new understanding of international culture—one that is not based on superficial multicultural diversity or exotic differences, but on the dynamic processes through which cultures interact, merge, and produce hybridity (38).

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