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Shakespeare's *Othello* and *The Romance of Antar*: The Politics of Racism and Self-Fashioning

Bilal Tawfiq Hamamra

Department of English Language and Literature, An-Najah National University, Nablus, Palestine

ABSTRACT

This article makes use of two approaches to examine the misogynist and racist discourses in Shakespeare's *Othello* (1604). I will read the play alongside a Palestinian intertext, the *Romance of Antar* (525–608), in order to illuminate the ways in which traditional Palestinian culture can be more liberal than that of early modern England. The racial discourse that the *Romance of Antar* embodies enables me to scrutinize this discourse in *Othello*. While Antar reiterates his otherness without self-contempt, I assert that Othello's internalisation of the racial discourse leads to his self-degradation which he projects onto Desdemona. In addition, I will present a psychoanalytic reading of *Othello* which, perhaps more than any other critical approach, can expose uncomfortable truths about the ways in which hidden same-sex desires and loyalties challenge the heterosexual marriage of Desdemona and Othello. I argue that Othello's projection of the racist and misogynist discourse that Iago breathes into his ears onto Desdemona and his eventual murder of her are signs of Othello's defeat and loss of self-respect. Likewise, many Palestinians project their verbal and physical humiliation by the Israeli occupation onto Palestinian women, playing the role of the colonial power in the domestic sphere.

摘要

这篇论文使用了两种不同的批评方法研究莎士比亚戏剧《奥赛罗》（1604）中的厌恶女人者和种族主义者话语。同时，为了说明在某些方面巴勒斯坦传统文化本可以比早期英格兰文化更加开明和自由，作者将巴勒斯坦作品《安塔罗曼史》（525–608）作为互文文本来阅读《奥赛罗》。作者根据《安塔罗曼史》中表现出的种族主义话语研究了《奥赛罗》中相同的种族主义话语。安塔反复言说他的其他地位而毫不自卑，奥赛罗却将他的种族主义话语内化，而这种内化最终导致了自我的自我贬低，进而将这种自我贬低投射到苔丝德蒙娜身上。此外，作者运用心理批评方法进一步分析《奥赛罗》，作者认为，这种心理批评式的阅读比任何其他批评方法都能揭示《奥赛罗》中隐藏的同性恋欲望以及忠诚对苔丝德蒙娜和奥赛罗的异性恋婚姻形成挑战的。作者认为，奥赛罗将伊阿古用以挑唆他的种族主义者和厌恶女人者话语投射到了苔丝德蒙娜身上，而剧末奥赛罗对苔丝德蒙娜的谋杀便是奥赛罗的失败和失去自尊的标志。同样地，许多巴勒斯坦人将以色列人的侵占带来的言语的和身体的耻辱投射到巴勒斯坦女性身上，进而在家庭领域扮演殖民国家的角色。

KEYWORDS

Othello; *the Romance of Antar*; love; racism; projection

关键词

《奥赛罗》;
《安塔罗曼史》; 爱;
种族主义; 投射

1. Introduction

There are illuminating connections between [Shakespeare's](#) Othello's racial insecurities and the story of Antar (525–608), the illegitimate son of Shadad, a well-respected member of the Arabian tribe of Bani Abss, and his mistress Zebeebah, an African slave of Ethiopian origin, who was captured during a tribal war. According to [Judith Fobis](#), “Antara exemplified in his life those traits most highly esteemed by the Bedouins. His deeds of valor as well as his love for his cousin Abba became a part of the literary heritage of the Arabic-speaking world” (62). Antar, whose name in Arabic means “courage in war,” is one of the most influential black poets in pre-Islamic Arabia. In my teaching of *Othello* as a part of Drama and Shakespeare courses to undergraduates at An-Najah National University, I always use the Romance of Antar as an intertext to discuss the role of language in winning female characters and the significance of female characters in constructing Othello's and Antar's heroic identities and their assimilation to the mother countries, and the internalization of, resistance to, racist discourse in both Eastern and Western texts. To pursue this line of enquiry, I commit myself to the critical methodology of presentism which analyses early modern texts from the perspectives and concerns of present contexts. As defined by [Ewan Fernie](#), presentism is ‘a strategy of interpreting texts in relation to current affairs which challenges the dominant fashion of reading Shakespeare historically’ (169). In addition to the methodology of presentism, drawing on the concepts of Jungian and Freudian psychoanalysis, I argue that Othello's deafness to the female voice is a defensive strategy in that he punishes Desdemona for the passions he strives to deny in himself. As Shakespeare yokes together the otherness of gender and race, Othello's loss of trust in Desdemona is a result of his inability to trust his racial identity. I read Iago's projection of his evil onto Othello as a verbal intercourse of homosexuality that leads to the destruction of Othello and Desdemona's heterosexual relationship. In contrast to Othello whose aural openness to Iago's racist and misogynist discourse leads to his loss of self-esteem and the dissolution of his relationship to Desdemona, the racist discourse to which Antar was subject was the impetus for his heroism and authorial identity.

2. Love and the power of language

The love and marriage of Othello and Desdemona and Antar and Abba show the triumphant power of language. Othello wins Desdemona by telling her his life story:

This to hear
Would Desdemona seriously incline
[...]
and with a greedy ear
Devour up my tale (1.3.146–47, 150–51).

As the words “greedy” and “devour” suggest, listening to Othello's stories spurs on Desdemona to rebel against the social norms of her “country, credit, everything” (1.3.98). Othello's story gives Desdemona “a world of sighs” (1.3.160) to communicate her erotic pains (1.3.161–62, 67) and to compensate him for his suffering. The Duke of Venice's confirmation, “I think this tale would win my daughter too” (1.3.172), implicitly approves of their marriage. Similarly, Antara won the heart of Abba by entertaining

her with astounding poems and narratives. The [Anonymous](#) author of *The Romance of Antar* points out that “Abla was deeply moved by Antar’s distress, for she loved him both for his courage and his eloquence” (22); “Antar was now become celebrated for his verses as well as for his remarkable strength and courage; and, as may be readily supposed, he was making considerable progress in winning the affection of his beloved Abla” (12). In both the Eastern and Western texts, love transcends racial prejudice. Abla disregarded Antar’s blackness in favour of his heroic deeds and poems, as did Desdemona with regard to Othello. Desdemona’s assertion that she “saw Othello’s visage in his mind” (1.3.252) shows that she overlooks his blackness in favour of his brilliant mind. While Abla (like Desdemona) was sought after by many, Abla wished to be his wife the same way that Desdemona wished to be Othello’s. Brabantio appeals to the distorted conviction that the black Moor must have seduced Desdemona through the black arts which drive her to forego “The wealthy curled darlings of our nation” (1.2.68) to be married to “such a thing as [Othello] – to fear, not to delight” (1.2.70–71). In a reminiscence of Brabantio’s charges that Othello employs charms to seduce Desdemona, Abla asserts that the charms of men will not avert her from her love to Antara: “O never will I surrender myself to another, were he to come with a thousand charms!” (60). In response to Antar’s assertion that “no one shall I marry but her whom my soul adores” (13), “‘May God accomplish thy wishes,’ whispered Abla; ‘and may he grant thee the woman thou lovest, and may thou live in peace and happiness!’” (13). While Othello’s marriage was opposed by male figures in Venice, Antar’s declaration of his love to Abla was challenged by the tribe of Bani Abss because he was a son of a slave (12). While Antar’s heroic deeds and poetry triumphed over the stigma of birth, class and racial prejudice and compelled his father to acknowledge him as his son and allow him to marry Abla (11, 133), the audience of Antar’s and Abla’s marriage articulate a racist discourse, praising Abla’s beauty and condemning Antar’s stigma of being black: “All present gave a shout [in praise of her beauty], while the malicious and ill-natured cried aloud, ‘What a pity that one so beautiful and fair should be wedded to one so black’” (394). Likewise, one can imagine Iago and Roderigo moaning that “one so beautiful and fair should be wedded to one so black.”

Both Antar and Othello identify themselves with their beloveds as the basis of their heroic identities. Antar carries the sword in the name of Abla who signifies his motherland. For example, in his fight against the tribe of Dibgan, he says, “‘Thou wretch! I will not be controlled! I am still the lover of Abla’” (24). Likewise, military imagery informs Othello’s relationship with Desdemona – he refers to her as “my fair warrior” (2.1.182) when he welcomes her to Cyprus. Desdemona is “[t]he fountain from the which my current runs” (4.2.60), as well as a shield from “chaos” (3.3.91–92). [Calbi](#) notes that:

To Othello, Desdemona unmistakably stands for a body that matters. It matters especially because it consolidates, or is supposed to consolidate, Othello’s transformation – what the play ambiguously calls ‘redemption’ (1.3.138) – from the monstrous black and Islamic ‘other’ to the valiant noble white Moor of Venice (76).

Othello’s and Antar’s identification with the female heroines undermines the phallogocentric system, for both Abla and Desdemona are father surrogates or mother surrogates symbolising the heroes’ adoption by the mother country. This comparative reading which suggests that Othello’s and Antar’s relation to Venice and the tribe of

Bani Abss depend on possessing female figures undermine the conventional representation of female figures as threats to male figures' identities.

3. Racist abuse

Both Othello and Antar were victims of the surrounding men who hurled racist abuse against them to reduce them from persons to objects. *Othello* is a play of, in [Edward Berry's](#) words, "overt and vicious racism" (319). Most characters address Othello with racial epithets, such as "the thick lips" (1.1.66), "an old black ram" (1.1.87), or "a lascivious Moor" (1.1.124). Iago correlates Othello's blackness with the "devil" (1.1.91) and a "Barbary horse" (1.1.113). Emilia asserts at the play's conclusion that Othello is a "blacker devil" (5.2.140). The elopement of Othello and Desdemona elicits the repugnance of Iago that the "old black ram" would soon be "tupping [the] white ewe" (1.1.91–92). Iago uses the rhetoric of racism to undermine Othello's security and problematise his marriage to Desdemona, "producing Othello's abduction of Desdemona as an act of racial adulteration" (399). Iago's diabolic rhetoric convinces Othello that Desdemona is unfaithful to him because of his race (3.3.209). Desdemona, who is initially perceived by Othello as "the fountain from which [his] current runs," is transformed into "a cistern for foul toads/To knot and gender in" (4.2.60–63). This transformation of Desdemona from being "perfection" and the ideal wife of chastity and devotion is linked to Othello's aural openness to, internalisation of, Iago's poisonous, bawdy speech.

Othello's and Desdemona's love is founded on sympathy and admiration. *Othello* suggests that the conventional association between woman's speech and sexuality is presented as a perverse projection of the evil male imagination. [Karen Newman](#) proposes that "Desdemona is presented in the play as a sexual subject who hears and desires, and that desire is punished because the nonspecular, or nonphallic sexuality it displays is frightening and dangerous" (86). Desdemona boldly voices her sexual desires. She is portrayed as "half the wooer" (1.3.176), declaring that she has married Othello of her own will (1.3.146–70). Although she asks the Duke to "lend [his] prosperous ear" (1.3.244–47) and his authoritative voice to support her, she is not afraid to "trumpet to the world" (1.3.251) her love for Othello. [Carol Thomas Neely](#) points out that "Desdemona's energy, assertiveness, and power are made possible by Othello's loving response to her" (127). Othello has responded to Desdemona's insistent voice with joyful pleasure (1.3.161–67), affirming that to be "free of speech," to sing, play or dance in public is a mark of virtue: "[w]here virtue is, these are more virtuous" (3.3.188–89). However, the association between Desdemona's speech and sexual looseness is constructed out of Iago's and Othello's oral marriage, which is a caricature of Othello and Desdemona's heterosexual relationship.

4. Iago's poisonous, homoerotic rhetoric

Iago's speech is associated with poison (3.3.452–53, 4.2.15–16). Othello's "manly language" becomes rude and abusive under Iago's influence ([Hawkes](#) 214). Greenblatt has identified storytelling as Othello's mode of "self-fashioning," and he argues that Othello's ability to make others submit to his narrative is reflected by Iago, who constructs the illusive narrative of Desdemona's adultery to which Othello submits (232–47). Othello submits to Iago's narrative as "[t]o Othello, Iago's is the absolute by which others' honesty is

measured” (Evans 118). Shakespeare shows that “honesty” is attached to an absolute villain and liar (2.3.330, 3.1.40–41, 3.3.262) to prove that words can lose reliability. Iago’s pretended honesty is conveyed through his speech (3.3.215–16) and facial expressions (2.3.173). Furthermore, while the narrative of Desdemona’s infidelity is based on lying (4.1.35, 5.2.176–77), Othello believes Iago because he is “the voice of society” and his lies represent the ideology of gender difference, as Leggatt notes (126). Because Iago’s voice is representative of the society’s construction of gender roles that Othello internalises, the superego, in Freudian term, is acting as an alienating force in the psyche of Othello’s character. Iago’s vow that he “will [...] turn her virtue into pitch” (2.3.355) gives way to his use of two overlapping discourses – misogyny and racism – that create poisonous magic in the web of language to enmesh and destroy them all. As Carol Chillington Rutter asserts, “Iago is the originator of discourse, then its wrecking; the first inventor of misogyny and racism” (147).

Desdemona’s adultery is conceived by verbal intercourse between Othello and Iago, whose tongue ravishes Othello’s ears and inseminates them with adulterous “noises, ears and lips” (4.1.41–43) to implant suspicion of Desdemona’s adultery. As John Wall notes:

Othello’s ear and Iago’s tongue become displaced organs of generation, and Iago is revealed as the Moor’s aural-sexual partner. Iago’s words thus become the seed which impregnates Othello’s mind through his ear so that it will produce the ‘monstrous birth’ of jealousy, the ‘green-eyed monster’ (361).

While Othello wins the heart of Desdemona by the ear, he turns against her by the ear. Othello shows aural openness to Iago’s insinuations, urging Iago not to make Othello’s “ear/A stranger to thy thoughts” (3.3.146–47). Iago exploits the openness of Othello’s ignorant ear, resolving “to abuse Othello’s ear” (1.3.394) and “pour this pestilence into his ear” (2.3.351). Wall notes that “Iago’s private language [...] confronts and subverts the power of official, public language to create a true marriage between Othello and Desdemona.” As Iago abuses Othello’s ear “in daylight,” this is, as Wall observes, “an inversion of Othello’s wedding night” (362–63).

Iago’s speech uses homoerotic rhetoric to ravish Othello’s ears. Iago’s account of his dream is replete with sexual overtones of homoeroticism and masturbation: the punning references to “hand” (masturbation) (3.3.165), “hard” (tumescence), “pluck” (coitus) and “root” (the phallus) (3.3.424–25) underscore a discourse of sodomy, as Mark Burnett notes (105). The real reason for Iago’s malevolence, according to Rogers, is that “he is a paranoid personality suffering from repressed homosexuality who unknowingly regards Desdemona as a rival for the love of Othello” (206). This reading explains why Iago has usurped Desdemona’s place (3.3.481–82), joining Othello in “exchanging the vow that blasphemously mocks marriage in perverted ‘service’” (Rutter 160) and in the ritual kneeling that guarantees his pledge (3.3.463–78), the fruit of which is Othello’s conception of Desdemona’s and Cassio’s deaths (3.3.480, 5.1.28, 31–33). Using the Jungian approach to *Othello*, Desdemona is to anima as Iago is to shadow and Othello’s ego attempts to mediate between these psychological imperatives. Othello’s tragedy emanates from the fact that his nonintegration of the shadow dooms his attempt to embrace the anima. Gregg Andrew Hurwitz notes that “Rather than integrating his shadow and wedding his anima, Othello weds his shadow and neglects his anima” (80). The oath is a powerful language that Iago

uses to convince Othello of the honesty of his words. John Hartley writes, “[t]he oath was the boldest approach a [...] person had to defend a claim to innocence [...]. [A]n oath raised a person’s [...] claim to evidence accepted as proof” (87). Othello, therefore, turns against Desdemona by engaging his ears to Iago’s tongue which speaks of adultery.

5. Projection: the otherness of black race and female gender

Othello projects Iago’s misogynist and racist discourses onto Desdemona (3.3.109–10), “replicating in Desdemona the contagion of projection itself” (Adelman 143). Desdemona becomes the whore of Venice because she gets married to Othello who projects his evil mind onto Desdemona: “Was this fair paper, this goodly book,/Made to write whore upon?” (4.2. 72–73). Othello is the one that writes the misogynist discourse onto the body of Desdemona. He reads what he writes (based on Iago’s lustful speech) in Desdemona’s body/book.

Desdemona escapes the position of the whore because she is not what she seems to be. Boy actors used to the play the roles of female figures on the public stage. Shakespeare suggests in his juxtaposition of the otherness of the black race and the female gender that “women accept the otherness of the actor in the men they love” while men project their otherness onto the female (Novy 267 264). While the boy actor impersonating Desdemona accepts the otherness of the actor playing Othello, Othello projects the racist and misogynist discourses onto Desdemona. Within this context, as Callaghan puts it:

Desdemona is a *tabula rasa* in a most curious sense. She is pure, white, and also blank; existing and not existing, and, since blank, open to any inscription, and therefore, in a sense, undecipherable. Othello’s judgement of her as whore is the inscription she must bear [...]. Condemned to silence, she is to be read and not to speak herself (78).

Desdemona is “condemned to silence” when Iago has impregnated Othello’s ears with glamorous pornographic word-pictures that make Othello perceive Desdemona as a cipher that he fills with his rank writings. However, Desdemona defeats his interpretation, for she is a *tabula rasa*, an absence and a negation of his inscription. Othello’s redefinition of Desdemona as a whore is a projection of his self-degradation that results from his aural openness to Iago’s insinuations. Othello perceives Desdemona as black because of her alleged sexual relationship with Cassio (3.3.391–393). However, “the concept of whore [is a] male-initiated inscription onto the female as scapegoat” (Stanton 95); it is Othello who is writing the misogynist discourse onto Desdemona’s body/book. As Emilia says, “[a]las, Iago, my Lord hath so bewhored her” (4.2.117). Emilia’s line, “[a]las, what does the gentleman conceive?” (4.2.97) suggests that “the brothel has been the construction of Othello’s mind” (Stanton 96).

Desdemona’s alleged sexual unfaithfulness is punctuated with Othello’s turning from Europeanised assimilation to Moorish self-abasement. Ian Smith points out that “Othello’s embarrassed confession of blackness as a stigmatised identity coincides with Iago’s growing control over his black victim’s self-perception, thus reinforcing the dynamic of power between white mastery and racialized blackness that degrades black persons at every level of social interaction” (110). Othello’s loss of his Venetian identity as a heroic soldier (3.3.351–53) is, therefore, caused by his listening to Iago’s racist and misogynist voice.

While Othello's marriage to Desdemona symbolises his integration into Venetian society, his murder of Desdemona signals the dissolution of his link to Venice.

Othello's murder of Desdemona thwarts his desire to secure a place in discourse after death: "[w]hen you shall these unlucky deeds relate,/Speak of me as I am" (5.2.339–40). While Othello (like Hamlet) is asking the audience on and offstage to tell his story and the events that lead to the tragic closure, he declares that he is "the base Indian," "a malignant and a turbanned Turk" and "the circumcised dog" (5.2.345, 351, 353). Commenting on these lines, T. S. Eliot asserts that "I have never read a more terrible exposure of human weakness – of universal human weakness – than the last great speech of Othello" (130). Othello's speech is terrible because it expresses his self-alienation and his internalization of the Venetian discourse of racial otherness. Desdemona defends her husband against the prevailing belief that Moors are inherently jealous. "My noble Moor," she argues, "Is true of mind, and made of no such baseness/As jealous creatures are" (3.4.24–26). However, Othello reaffirms that Moors are "made of [...] such baseness." Othello's last speech articulates his perception of the black, racial stereotype of being "easily jealous" (5.2.344) as the reason for his murderous behaviour. His reference to himself as "the base Indian" (5.2.346) or the embodied, tear-dropping "Arabian trees" (5.2.349) suggest how steeped Othello's language is in racial self-awareness. His act of self-slaughter, an attack on his own body, is designed to punish a racialized self who, like the "Turbaned Turk," has committed the heinous assault on Venice in the person of Desdemona. His perception of himself as both a Venetian hero and a treacherous Turk, who is killed by Othello the Venetian, denies him an authentic self. I, therefore, agree with T. S. Eliot's assertion that Othello's defensiveness and his need that others speak of him suggest that he is "*cheering himself up*" (original emphasis). Othello's speech is self-centered because "he has ceased to think about Desdemona, and is thinking about himself" (130). Lodovico's and Gratiano's responses to Othello's speech (5.2.354–55) suggest that Othello's suicide signifies destruction without catharsis.

6. Antar's resistance to racism

While Othello's listening to Iago's racist and misogynist discourses and his subsequent murder of Desdemona signal his transformation from a hero into a villain, Antar's heroism originates from his aural closure to others' racist discourse. Touria Khannous argues that "Generally, pre-Islamic and early Islamic Arabia was a mixed culture wherein differences in skin color did not seem to play a significant tool" (68). However, she contradicts the above-mentioned claim by asserting that "studying Arab representations of blackness offers a twist to Edward Said's Orientalism: that Arabs generated a hierarchical representational discourse themselves, one that was predicated as much as on a Self-Other binary as European Orientalism" (67). While Othello sheds light on the fusion of East and West, within his tribe Antar is a racialized outsider whose African heritage causes his purebred Arab fellow tribesmen to hold him in disdain. That Antar is subject to racist discourse is manifested in his glorification of his black skin. He said, "[m]y complexion is no injury to me, nor the name of Zebeebah, when I exercise my courage amongst the foe." He proceeded, "I will work wonders and marvels; and I will protect myself from the tongues of the wicked" (11). He also asserted that "Night is my complexion, but Day is my emblem: the sun is unquestionably the mirror of my deeds" (49). Touria Khannous asserts that "Antara was

discriminated against by his tribe because of his blackness, but was able to affirm his worth by his courage and heroism” (73). It is significant to point out that Othello’s aural openness to Iago’s speech leads to his loss of self-esteem, reducing himself to a filthy barbarian and Desdemona to the whore of Venice. In contrast, Antar’s poetic eloquence and heroism are the means through which he gains the respect of his tribe members.

Unlike Othello whose last speech does not receive a sympathetic audition from characters onstage (Neill 383), Antar’s speech outlived his silencing. As Antara says, “I am the well-known Antar, the chief of his tribe, and I shall die; but when I am gone, history shall tell of me” (19). When Antar is stabbed from behind during battle, an old man addresses his corpse and glorifies his heroic deeds, addressing to his body these words:

Glory to thee, brave warrior! Who, during thy life, hast been the defender of thy tribe, and who, even after thy death, hast saved thy brethren by the terror of thy corpse and of thy name! May thy soul live for ever! May the refreshing dews moisten the ground of this thy last exploit! (143).

Antar outlives his death as his heroic deeds are narrated through the tongues of others, the sites of immortality. As [Touria Khannous](#) points out, “Antara, the poet, the lover, and the warrior subsequently became the subject of professional storytellers in the Middle East who were fascinated by his story” (73). I think that this comparative reading can enable Palestinian students to recognize that Antar keeps his subjectivity because he shows deafness to the discourse of racism while Othello transforms from being a hero into a villain because of his aural openness to Iago’s racist and misogynist discourses. In my teaching of *Othello* alongside *The Romance of Antar*, the latter hero appeals to my students while the former does not receive sympathy from them. My students recognise that Othello is like many Palestinian men who listen to the voices of gossip and kill female figures unjustly, pondering that “Othello is a badge of shame for us.”

7. Racism, gender and the Israeli occupation

Within the context of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, I contend that anachronistically Othello is representative of Palestinian male figures who are emasculated and verbally and physically humiliated by the Israeli occupation incarnate in the figure of Iago. Desdemona is the weakest thread in this erotic triangle, signifying the double system of oppression – Israeli occupation and traditions of gender difference upheld by Palestinian men – to which Palestinian women are subject. While Antar’s resistance to the discourse of racism arouses the possibility of freedom in contemporary Palestine, the potential for freedom is doomed to failure because of the Israeli occupation that consolidates conventional gender roles and fuels Palestinian men’s verbal and physical violence against women. Shalhoub says, violence against Palestinian women “is closely linked to this dynamic of continuous oppression and political occupation” (*Militarization* 35). “[E]masculated men become additional agents in the process of gender oppression” (*Counter-Narratives* 31). Othello’s verbal castration and his projection of the racist and misogynist discourses onto Desdemona offer many Palestinian readers a point of focus to scrutinise the relationship between oppressing Palestinian women and the Israeli occupation. As Othello’s listening to Iago’s lascivious speech unleashes his verbal and physical violence against Desdemona,

Palestinian male shame about the occupation leads to greater violence towards women. Many Palestinians project their defeat by the Israeli occupation onto women, playing the role of the colonizing power in domestic relationships.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

Bilal Tawfiq Hamamra has a PhD in Early Modern Drama from the University of Lancaster, UK and works currently as an assistant professor of English Literature at the Department of English Language and Literature, An-Najah National University, Nablus, Palestine. His research interests are in Early Modern Drama, Shakespeare, Women's Writings and Gender Studies. He published articles on sacrifice, speech, silence and gender in *Early Modern Literary Studies*, *Critical Survey*, *ANQ*, *Journal for Cultural Research* and *Changing English*, among others.

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