

In Good Faith: Religion, Race, and Identity in Tudor England

BY AMY ARDEN



Photo by Chris Hartlove



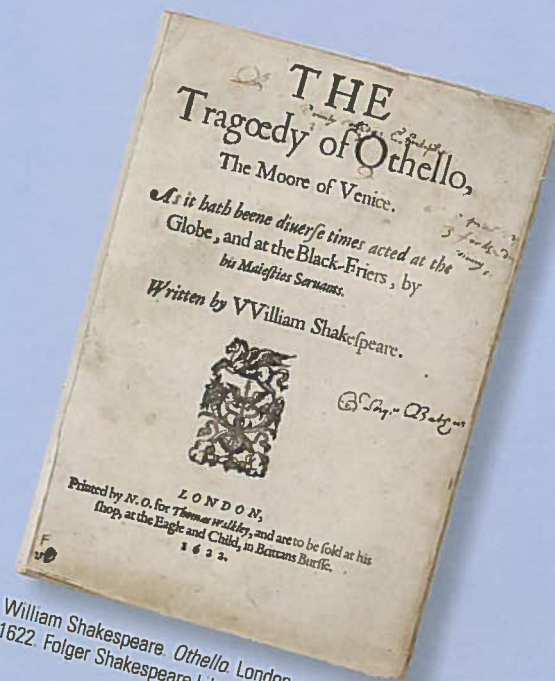
Alexandre Bida. *Othello, Act I, Scene 3*. Watercolor, 19th Century. Folger Shakespeare Library.

What role did the Reformation have in formation of racial identity? I see literature showing a way we have not thought about race and theology, and race and the Reformation.

Many people familiar with the play *Othello* see the drama's central conflict in terms of race: Othello, a native of Africa, must navigate through the complex world of Venetian power and politics, a world that is dominated by individuals of a different ethnicity. However, for Dennis Britton, an NEH fellow at the Folger, the real struggle may be for Othello's soul—literally.

In the medieval period, there are legends of an African Christian knight who fights against Saracens. For example, in the story of *Otuel and Roland*, Otuel converts to Christianity, battles infidels, and eventually marries the emperor's daughter. There is that kind of tradition, but it isn't how things work in *Othello*," Britton says. Instead, the play ends tragically with Othello wrongly believing his wife has committed adultery, murdering her, and then committing suicide after realizing his mistake.

For Britton, Assistant Professor of English at the University of New Hampshire, the issue that precipitates the deaths of Othello and Desdemona may not be the difference in their skin color, but a difference in religious identity, a difference that may not be immediately apparent.

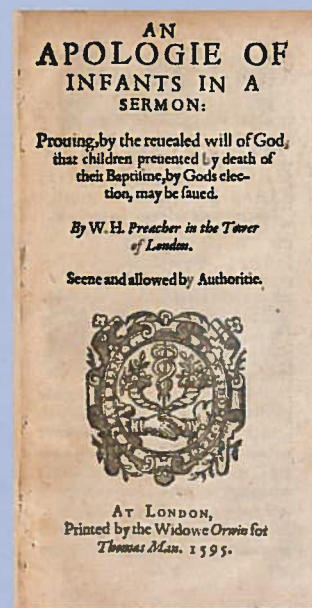


William Shakespeare *Othello* London, 1622. Folger Shakespeare Library.

“We know Othello is a Christian because Iago mentions in passing that Othello has been baptized. I don’t think it’s a throwaway line. That’s a moment of radical readjustment for an early modern audience. The moment you hear that line, the play is asking you to adjust how you view Othello,” Britton explains.

During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Britton observes a significant shift in theology surrounding the idea of salvation and what it meant to be a Christian. Part of the issue stems from changing religious practices, as England and other parts of Europe moved away from the formal rituals of Catholicism and towards Protestantism, which emphasized the role of personal belief over outward behaviors.

“There’s the idea that Christian identity is one that is passed from parent to child, so race and genealogy are connected. Consequently, the church created a ‘race’ of Christians. The ambiguity I’m seeing in literature of the period, about whether a Jew or Muslim can ever truly become Christian, seems related to the Protestant doctrine of being saved by faith. But how do you prove your faith?” Britton asks. “Once we



William Hubbock. *An apologie of infants in a sermon*. London, 1595. Folger Shakespeare Library.

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no longer believe that things like the Catholic sacraments have miraculous power, how do we know that that person is saved? In other words, how do we get at the invisible?”

During the medieval period, when Europe was more or less monolithically Catholic, religious affiliation was comparatively easier to demonstrate. However, as the Protestant Reformation challenged Catholic hegemony, matters of faith became more complicated. Britton observes that sermons of the period address such thorny issues as infant baptism; some, like William Hubbock’s *An apologie of infants in a sermon*, suggest that children born of Christian parents who die before they are baptized “may be saved,” a stance at odds with the Protestant belief that it is an individual’s professed faith that brings salvation, not a faith inherited from their parents. Other writers investigate the history of Christianity outside of Europe; Ephraim Pagitt, a British clergyman, used the example of non-European Christians as a means to affirm England’s independence from papal authority. His work culminated in the publication of *Christianographie*, which mentions Ethiopia’s ancient Christian heritage as well as other Christian groups scattered across North Africa.

Taken collectively, these works and others in the Folger collection raise questions that are shaping Britton’s research into how Protestant theology influenced sixteenth- and seventeenth-century dramatic and literary texts.

“What role did the Reformation have in formation of racial identity? I see literature showing a way we have not thought about race and theology, and race and the Reformation. The Protestant questions about conversion and baptism show ideas about an unalterable racial difference, that Christians are fundamentally different from Jews, fundamentally different from Muslims, in a way that one cannot become the other. I see that idea being played with, even if Christian doctrine can’t say that explicitly. But literature is trying to take that idea to its extreme.”



Thomas Vernon. *Othello*, Act I, Scene 3. Engraving, 19th Century. Folger Shakespeare Library.

The result is a tragedy like *Othello*, whose original audiences may not have seen a man undone by lies and jealousy, but by his inherent destiny. Othello’s failure is not that he falls for Iago’s ruse, but that, by virtue of his birth, he is predestined to fail in his assimilation to Christian culture.

“We don’t know what he is at the end of the play, and he doesn’t know who he is at the end of the play,” Britton points out. Today, as it did 400 years ago, the play’s devastating ending leaves audiences wondering just what went wrong.

Amy Arden has been a contributing writer to *Folger Magazine* for over five years. She most recently wrote about Danny Scheie and his research on Shakespeare’s clown roles in the Fall 2012 issue.



Ephraim Pagitt. *Christianographie, or The description of the multitude and sundry sorts of Christians in the world not subject to the Pope*. London, 1635. Folger Shakespeare Library.