When he recounts the story that won Desdemona's heart, Othello mentions having been “taken by the insolent foe / And sold to slavery.”¹ For readers today these lines, spoken by a character described as “black” on multiple occasions, immediately evoke the specter of the Atlantic triangle and the widespread enslavement of sub-Saharan Africans. In recent years, however, many critics have warned against such associations on the grounds that they are anachronistic. They argue that we lose sight of Othello's historical specificity if we read it in the context of racial categories that would only crystallize later in the century with the rise of a plantation economy.² Instead, scholars such as Jonathan Burton, Julia Reinhardt Lupton, and Daniel Vitkus have suggested that Othello's capture by the “insolent foe” should be read not in the context of the Atlantic slave trade but rather that of piracy and kidnapping in the Islamic Mediterranean. In this reading, the play becomes a “drama of conversion,” in which Othello's “Moorishness” associates him with Islam as much as it does with blackness.³ Placing Othello in this Mediterranean context thus avoids naturalizing—enshrining as timeless and essential—vocabularies of race that are in fact the product of a particular moment in the development of a global economy.

In his introduction to the most recent Oxford edition of Othello, Michael Neill ably sums up the significance of this Mediterranean-focused approach to our understanding of the play's engagement with slavery:

For modern audiences, Othello's story of enslavement will inevitably be colored by the horrors of that later history; but, as the work of Nabil Matar and Daniel Vitkus has demonstrated, “Moors” were, on balance, more likely to figure in the early seventeenth-century English imagination as
enslavers than as slaves; and Othello’s narrative of capture, enslavement, and “redemption thence” actually parallels the experience of many prisoners on both sides of a Muslim-Christian conflict that stretched back at least to the Crusades. As such it belongs not to the industrialized human market place of the Atlantic triangle, but to the same Mediterranean theatre of war as the Turkish invasion of Cyprus.4

Neill and the critics cited above propose that we read Othello as a Mediterranean “drama of conversion” instead of as an engagement with the rise of color-based slavery. In this essay, I draw on and develop their important insights, but argue that this “instead of” is unnecessary: it is not in fact anachronistic to read Othello in the context of both the Mediterranean and the enslavement of sub-Saharan Africans.

If we read Othello as participating in a nascent discourse that associates enslavement with blackness, we do not need to see that interpretation as looking forward in time, anticipating a global system of chattel slavery that is yet to be firmly entrenched. Instead, I argue that we can see Othello’s engagement with slavery by looking across space, and bringing the play into dialogue with early seventeenth-century Spanish representations of blackness. There were tens of thousands of enslaved black Africans in Spain and Portugal by the turn of the seventeenth century, and the Spanish comedia inscribes a relationship between blackness and slavery.5 Although the relationship between blackness and slavery is far more explicit in these Spanish plays than it is in Othello, a similar tension around blackness and service can be seen in English and Spanish texts alike.

I begin with a brief history of the Iberian slave trade and representations of blackness and slavery in the Spanish comedia before turning to a close reading of one Spanish play, Ximénez de Enciso’s Juan Latino. My reading demonstrates the ways in which representations of slavery and blackness were closely intertwined on the early modern Spanish stage. I conclude by reading Othello in the context of Juan Latino’s frequent and explicit references to the enslavement of black Africans.

I. Spain, Slavery, and Representations of Blackness

The significance of Spain to developing discourses of race in early modern Europe has been widely recognized in studies of both early modern literature and critical race theory. In the field of early modern English
literary studies in particular, critics have often referred to Spain as a site of origin for discourses of racial difference that have not yet developed in England. They have focused largely on either Spanish imperial ventures in the new world or on its heterogeneous religious history: the mix of Christians, Moors, and Jews prior to 1492 and the troubled status of Jewish and Moorish converts to Christianity in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. However, such studies at times overlook the fact that the Iberian Peninsula was also the first part of Europe to contain a substantial sub-Saharan African slave population.

In the fifteenth century Iberia’s slave population underwent a fundamental transformation. Slavery had existed in Iberia throughout the Al-Andalusi dynasty and continued on both sides throughout the Christian Reconquista; these slaves were largely obtained through a system of raids, called razzias, practiced by Christians and Muslims alike throughout the Mediterranean. Additionally, slaves came into Spain via trade from a number of locations, including North Africa, Eastern Europe, and the Ottoman Empire. Then, in 1444, Portuguese merchants brought 235 Guineans to Lisbon to be sold into slavery; the first permanent slave-trading post was established off of the coast of Mauritania in 1448. The expanding slave trade in black Africans transformed perceptions of slavery’s relationship to place of origin and phenotype. In fifteenth-century Valencia, for example, as Debra Blumenthal has documented, “the slaves directly captured in warfare progressively were outnumbered by shiploads of sub-Saharan Africans and Canary Islanders sent by Portuguese and Italian traders based in clearinghouses along the Atlantic coast.” As a result of this shift, “contemporaries increasingly were associating dark skin with slave status.”

The number of black slaves in Iberia increased over the course of the sixteenth century, concentrated in Southern Spain and in port cities. By 1565 a census taken in Seville recorded 6,327 slaves out of a total population of 85,538, making slaves roughly 13.5% of the total population. Drawing on censuses like this and on parish records, historian Manuel Fernández Álvarez calculates that there were approximately 44,000 slaves in Spain by the end of the sixteenth century; other historians place the number as high as 100,000. Of course, many of these slaves were not of sub-Saharan African origin; the enslavement of North African and Spanish
Moors and moriscos captured in battle or in raids continued throughout this period, as did the sale of slaves along established Mediterranean and trans-Saharan trade routes. Nonetheless, the trade in sub-Saharan Africans quickly became an important part of Spain’s slave economy. Extant records indicate that by the middle of the sixteenth century slave populations had become predominantly black in regions with ties to Portugal or the New World, such as Extremadura and Andalucía (particularly Seville). In Granada, black slaves made up the majority of the slave population in the sixteenth century until the morisco rebellion of 1568–71; at that time, tens of thousands of Spanish moriscos were enslaved, completely transforming the demographics of Granada’s slave population. In the years 1569–71, over 90% of the slaves sold in Granada were moriscos.

Although sub-Saharan Africans were not the only enslaved people in sixteenth century Spain, black slaves quickly became a visible part of Spanish—and particularly Andalusian—society. For example, one sixteenth-century visitor to Seville compared the city to a chessboard with an equal number of black and white pieces. Further, as the sub-Saharan slave trade continued to develop, the word negro began to appear in legal documents instead of esclavo or slave. In one particularly striking example, documentation from 1559 to 1576 regarding slaves working in silver mines in Guadalcanal (near Seville) repeatedly employs the term negros de su majestad (his majesty’s blacks), seemingly automatically substituting negro for esclavo. And in his 1569 Summa de tratos y contratos (manual of deals and contracts) Fray Tomás de Mercado observes: “cautivar, o vender negros, o otra qualquier gente es negocio lícito” (to capture or sell blacks or any other people is a lawful business).

A rhetoric linking blackness and slavery also appears in Spanish literature, and is particularly prominent in the comedia. Black characters first appeared on the Spanish stage in the early sixteenth century, most frequently as comic figures (often speaking a particular dialect, habla de negros); some later plays also feature mulata ladies-in-waiting, also enslaved, who speak in standard Castilian. In brief comic pieces such
as Simón Aguado’s *Entremés de los negros* (the interlude of the blacks) (1602) as well as in heroic dramas such as Andrés de Claramonte’s *El valiente negro en Flandes* (the valiant black man in Flanders) (ca. 1612–20), enslaved black characters (generally played by white actors in black-face makeup) made frequent appearances on the early modern Spanish stage.\(^{19}\) Indeed, despite the fact that English criticism has addressed blackness far more frequently than Spanish criticism has, black characters appear more frequently on Spanish than on English stages.

Whereas blackness on the Elizabethan and Jacobean stage is often linked to evil, in the Spanish *comedia* it is most frequently associated with slavery.\(^{20}\) An example drawn from the work of one of the best-known playwrights of the period illuminates this dynamic. Lope de Vega’s play *El negro del mejor amo* (the slave [lit. *black man*] of the greatest master) (written 1599–1603) demonstrates the ways that the word *negro* is already understood to imply enslavement in early modern Spain.\(^{21}\) The play’s protagonist, Antiobo, is the prince of Argel and the son of an Ethiopian princess; at no point is he taken captive or sold into slavery.\(^{22}\) However, as soon as he learns about Christianity and decides to convert, he begins to use a new vocabulary to describe himself, terming himself a humble slave to the greatest master—i.e. the Christian God. Tellingly, the word he uses to term himself a slave is *negro*: “Virgen María, / en vuestras manos me pongo. / Vuestro negro quiero ser” (Virgin Mary, I place myself in your hands. I want to be your slave/black man); he then asserts, “soy esclavo de María!” (I am Mary’s slave!) (473, 491).\(^{23}\) Blackness and slavery are so tightly linked in seventeenth-century Spain that Antiobo’s blackness provides an excuse to draw on the rhetoric of enslavement, though he himself is never a slave. Similarly, the protagonist of *El valiente negro en Flandés*, Juan de Mérida, must clarify after he wins his freedom: “aunque negro soy, no soy esclavo” (although I am black, I am not a slave); his statement indicates that most will assume he is a slave because he is black.\(^{24}\)

Although *Othello* predates *Juan Latino* by several years, the sub-genre of which *Juan Latino* is an example—plays with heroic black protagonists rather than black comedic characters—dates to the turn of the seventeenth century.\(^{25}\) These works differ from English plays with black characters of the same period in several ways. First, they are more comic than tragic, and end with their protagonist’s triumph rather than his downfall. Unlike
Othello, which ends with a vision that “poisons sight” and must “be hid” (5.2.364–65), these Spanish plays end with sainthood, knighthood, university awards, and even—in two cases—marriage with a white Spanish noblewoman for their protagonists; even in those cases when the play’s protagonist dies, it is because his saintliness has allowed him to ascend to heaven. Secondly, Spanish plays about blackness, despite dramatizing the social ascent of a few exceptional black characters, frequently and explicitly link blackness to enslavement. As I will show in the following section, even as a play like Juan Latino dramatizes the social ascent of its protagonist, that protagonist must always define himself in the context of the slave trade.

II. Blackness, Moorishness, and Slavery in Juan Latino

Ximénez de Enciso’s play Juan Latino, most likely written between 1610 and 1621, exemplifies the complicated representation of heroic black protagonists on the Spanish stage. The play is loosely based on the life of a real person: a celebrated scholar and former slave who wrote the Latin epic poem Austrias Carmen to commemorate the battle of Lepanto. In the play, the fictional Juan Latino uses his rhetorical prowess to attain first respect and then increasingly prominent university positions. While Juan initially faces insult and prejudice, both because he is black and because he is a slave, his eloquence and erudition win over the nobility of Granada. Ultimately, he becomes a celebrated professor and wins the love of a clever Spanish noblewoman, Doña Ana. By the end of the play, he has received high honors from the University of Granada and married Doña Ana; nonetheless, he remains enslaved throughout. The story of Juan’s social ascent and integration into the Spanish nobility is counterposed with the fall from prominence of Don Fernando, a nobleman of morisco origins and another suitor to Doña Ana. Don Fernando is persuaded to help lead the morisco uprising in the Alpujarras; he returns to Islam, and is ultimately killed. While Juan Latino’s exemplary Christian devotion and humanist learning win him the praise of the nobility and the love of a white Spanish woman, Don Fernando, who begins the play as a part of the Spanish aristocracy, ends it as a faithless Moor who has been killed in battle.
Baltasar Fra Molinero, whose 1995 chapter on *Juan Latino* remains the most sustained and authoritative reading of the play thus far, highlights the reactionary force of Juan and Fernando’s differing fates: “Al revés que Don Fernando, el rebelde, Juan nunca va a cuestionar el orden social y jurídico que le mantiene en perpetua situación de marginado” (In contrast to the rebel Don Fernando, Juan will never question the social and juridical order that perpetually situates him on the margins). Molinero argues that the play, by highlighting Juan’s unquestioning obedience in contrast to Fernando’s rebellion, reinforces existing social hierarchies: the obedient black slave can occupy a limited place in Spain contingent on his continued obedience; the rebellious *morisco*, however, is ultimately unassimilable. As we shall see, however, the play also questions this reactionary ideology—and particularly the logic of enslavement—even as it upholds it at the end.

The juxtaposition of Juan’s ascent with the fall of the *morisco* establishes blackness as a preferable alternative to an invisible difference of faith. Although some characters misread Juan’s blackness as a sign of inner perfidy, when they do they are swiftly corrected. Thus when Carlobal engages Juan to tutor his sister, he justifies his decision: “¿No es hombre? El alma que tiene, / por ser negro ¿ha de perder, / siendo pura, algo del ser / que a lo racional conviene? / Quien a los hombres informa, / es el alma solamente; / el color es accidente” (Isn’t he a man? Does his soul, as long as it is pure, lose anything that belongs to a rational being because he is black? That which shapes a man is only the soul; his color is an accident) (243). Juan’s color appears most clearly “accidental” or irrelevant to his character when it is contrasted with his “pure” soul. Interestingly, however, the purity of his soul is one of the things that makes his color, if not accidental, then far from incidental. This is so because Juan, as a black African, establishes his purity partly because his blackness distinguishes him from the *morisco*—a figure whose inner perfidy is threatening because it leaves no visible trace.

Despite the purity of Juan’s soul, the play places clear limits on his assimilation, most notably by drawing attention to his continued enslavement even as he becomes a valued professor (a particularly interesting choice given that the historical Juan Latino was most likely manumitted). Juan’s enslavement simultaneously enables and limits
his social ascent, as his owner, the Duke of Sesa, both creates a place of prestige for Juan and assigns definite limits to that place by refusing to manumit him.

The first time Juan pleads for his liberty, the Duke simply stonewalls him, offering him increasingly large gifts but refusing to engage his request. Juan asks, “¿soy libre?” (Am I free?). The duke responds by offering him four pages to accompany him wherever he goes. Juan asks once more, and the duke gives him four thousand ducats, promising that he will spend all he owns (“la hacienda mía”) on Juan’s behalf (227–28), but still ignores Juan’s request. At Juan’s repeated urging, the duke finally suggests that they revisit the issue if Juan wins a university position. We only learn the reason for the duke’s hesitation after Juan has won the position and petitions for his freedom once again. The duke replies:

```
no estimo en tanto el ser Duque
de Sesa y Conde de Cabra,
como el teneros por mío.
¿Qué príncipe, qué monarca
podrá decir lo que yo?
En vos vivirá mi fama
más verde que en las antiguas,
y prodigiosas hazañas
de mis ilustres abuelos!
No tratéis más desto, basta
que sepáis que no es mi gusto. (314)
```

(I do not value being Duke of Sesa and Count of Cabra as highly as I do having you for my own. What prince, what monarch, can say what I can? My fame will live on in you, staying greener than it would in the ancient and prodigious feats of my illustrious ancestors! Don’t broach this subject again; suffice it to say that it is not my pleasure.)

Juan is at once a high-status possession, for whose deeds the duke can claim credit, and an unexpected addition to the duke’s family tree, keeping his family’s name and fame alive. Juan’s achievements take the place of the Duke’s ancestors’ as proof of the latter’s honor and nobility. The duke simultaneously honors Juan, by describing him as his primary source of pride, and contains him, refusing to allow him to exceed the bounds of his status as a possession. This monologue places a significant limitation on the way Juan can be included in the Duke’s family, and by
extension in a white Spanish community. Juan's status as a member in this Spanish community is contingent on his continued enslavement. As long as he is a slave, Juan acts as an ornament to the Duke's honor. But he must remain a slave, and his accomplishments must demonstrate the Duke's honor rather than his own, for his status in Spain to remain secure.

The play never resolves this particular balancing act between Juan's achievements and his status as the Duke of Sesa's slave. Instead, circumstances push Ana and Juan into eloping, as Ana must choose between running away with Juan and becoming a nun. The final words Juan speaks in the play are a request to the duke that he be allowed to embrace his new brother-in-law, Carlobel, with whom he has just reconciled. The duke grants him permission and promises to give him six thousand ducats, but does not speak a word about his freedom. The play remains in a state of tension, questioning the limitations placed on Juan by his status as a slave without removing them.

This tension around Juan's status as a slave also appears in the rhetoric used to present Juan's position in the Duke's household. Vocabularies of chattel slavery, patronage, and chivalric service are conflated when Juan and other characters attempt to articulate how precisely Juan fits into the Spanish nobility. When asking for his freedom, Juan prefaces his request with a compliment: “Bien sé que es mi hidalguía y preeminencia / ser esclavos de esclavos desta casa” (I know well it is to my great ennoblement and preeminence / to be a slave of the slaves of this household) (223). Juan's new brother-in-law, Carlobel, employs similar rhetoric when he finally accepts his sister's marriage to Juan. Carlobel enthuses of Juan, “aún no soy / digno de ser su esclavo” (I am not even worthy to be his slave) as he embraces his new brother-in-law (355). In what is meant to be a comedic moment, the play superimposes an elaborate vocabulary of courtly service (“I am your humble slave!” “No, I am yours!”) on a reference to slavery as an economic practice; after all, Juan's status as a slave to the duke of Sesa is quite different from how Carlobel might envision himself as a slave to Juan. Thus the play repurposes older vocabularies of service in the context of chattel slavery; this dynamic, as we shall see, appears in Othello as well.

Indeed, representations of Juan's slavery as voluntary chivalric service are frequently (and uncomfortably) juxtaposed with repeated references to Juan's compromised position as a slave. When Ana first meets Juan, she is struck by his humility, charm and courtliness—and immediately
wishes to buy him: “Téngole de mercar para la silla / o para ser lacayo de mi hermano” (I must buy him to carry my litter, or to attend on my brother) (199). As charming as Ana finds Juan as a potential possession, when he begins to court her she immediately brings up his status as a slave, ordering him out of the room and evoking a notorious and brutal punishment for slaves: “agradeced que no os hice pringar” (be grateful that I did not have you burned with oil) (251); when he continues to court her, she threatens to beat him: “Estoy por daros mil palos, / ¿un negro me dice amores?” (I want to give you a thousand blows—a negro, speaking of love to me?) (263). Juan himself swears an oath that if he wins Ana’s heart he will adorn love’s walls by hanging a captive black man on them (“adornaré tus paredes, / colgando un negro captivo”) (210). The oath juxtaposes the medieval trope of the knight taken captive by love with an unsettling image that evokes the early modern sub-Saharan African slave trade. On multiple occasions the play reminds us that Juan can be bought and sold, and subjected to punishments at the will of his masters. In doing so, it further complicates an already tangled web of signification around questions of slavery: it is represented as at once a form of ennobling service and a concrete and oppressive institution.

As we have seen, Juan Latino emphasizes the difficulties of defining the nature of its heroic black protagonist’s service. Juan not only remains a slave throughout; the play also takes pains to stage his failed attempts to secure his freedom repeatedly. It is this tension around the nature of Juan’s service to Spain, I would suggest, that can be productively applied to Othello—a play which is also, as we shall see, preoccupied with service. Othello, like Juan Latino and a number of other characters in the Spanish comedia, is a servant to a predominantly white state. In Spanish plays with black protagonists, as we have seen with Juan Latino, this dramatization of service explicitly addresses (and attempts to contain anxieties about) the enslavement of blacks.³⁵ Tracing the ways that similar patterns emerge in Othello suggests that the English play, too—if only implicitly—may be addressing the nascent development of the sub-Saharan slave trade.

Before I turn to this similarity, however, it is important to register the significant differences between the two plays. The first is generic: Juan Latino is a festive comedy and Othello a tragedy. Why, then, should we be surprised that the first ends in a marriage and the second in a death?
Might this difference have less to do with how each canon represents blackness than with the generic constraints of comedy and tragedy? One might equally compare (as several critics have) *Othello* to Spanish tragedies of sexual honor, in which a noble husband kills his wife on the unfounded suspicion that she has been unfaithful; in that case, the focus of the comparison shifts from blackness and slavery to questions of gender, honor, and jealousy. There is also, though, a great deal to learn from a cross-generic comparison of *Othello* and *Juan Latino*, in large part because the generic difference between the two plays corresponds with a larger pattern in Spanish and English drama of the period. Black characters on the Spanish stage appear most often as heroic or saintly protagonists whose stories end in triumph or as comical servants; I know of no Spanish play from the period that portrays a black character as a tragic hero like Othello, nor as a scheming villain such as Eleazar from *Lust's Dominion* or Aaron from *Titus Andronicus*. Thus comparing the bloody dénouement of *Othello* with the festive conclusion to *Juan Latino* highlights an important and pervasive difference between Spanish and English representations of blackness in the period.

It is also important to note that there is simply no equivalent in English plays of the period to the clearly delineated identity categories in *Juan Latino*—the enslaved Christian negro and the perfidious morisco who is not marked by color—which are defined in contradistinction to each other in the Spanish comedia. Racialized difference in the Spanish comedia may be defined in terms of color or ancestry, but those two categories are distinct from each other. A character who is a moro is Muslim but not necessarily black; a character who is a negro is black, but not necessarily Muslim (and indeed in most cases is Christian).

In early modern English culture, by contrast, the word “Moor” may refer to black sub-Saharan Africans, North African Muslims, Muslims without dark skin (“white Moors”), or even occasionally New World natives. On the stage, “Moors” most frequently appear as villains; the actors who play Moors are generally in black-face makeup, and their dark coloring is often referred to as an outer sign of their inner villainy. Although some black Moors on the English stage are explicitly described as Muslim, the religion of others is never specified. Shakespeare does very little to indicate where in this hodge-podge of backgrounds and
beliefs we should situate his “Moor of Venice”; Othello, described in the play’s first scene as “an extravagant and wheeling stranger / of here and everywhere” offers very few clues as to his precise geographic origins and religious history, even as the play variously evokes Egypt, Barbary, Mauritania, Spain, Italy, Catholicism, Islam, paganism, piracy, and slavery when alluding to Othello’s past (1.1.133–34). The indeterminacy—or, more accurately, overdetermination—of Othello’s background has been the subject of critical debate for centuries, precisely because the play itself gestures towards multiple kinds of difference.

III. Othello Revisited

Othello’s “Moorishness” does not particularly overlap with any of the more clearly delineated racial identities presented in Juan Latino; his characterization does, however, combine attributes of both Juan the black slave and Fernando the noble white morisco. If we see Othello as a “noble Moor” characterized by extreme jealousy whose suicide evokes circumcision, we might align him with Fernando, the Spanish play’s treacherous morisco. On the other hand, as a black Christian whose position is consistently identified with “service to the state” we might see him as more nearly kin to Juan Latino himself. Indeed, as Ania Loomba has argued, much of Othello’s power comes precisely from the juxtaposition of these identities: “The portrayal of Othello, the ‘Moor of Venice,’ stands at the complicated crux of contemporary beliefs about black people and Muslims.”

In the remainder of this essay, I focus on Othello’s status as a black man in a position of service rather than on his connections to Islam. This argument does not contradict or minimize the play’s status as a “drama of conversion,” which has been demonstrated by numerous critics, as I discuss above. Instead, I argue that reading Othello as a Mediterranean “Moor” need not contradict readings of him as a sub-Saharan African who arrives in Venice via slavery. Part of my goal in reading Juan Latino alongside Othello is to show that both discourses of blackness and slavery and of threatening Moorish difference are present in the Spanish play; there is no reason that they cannot coexist in the English play as well. Othello, like Juan Latino, is simultaneously a “drama of conversion” and a “drama of service,” although the relationship between those two discourses
functions quite differently in the English play than it does in the Spanish. Thus Othello’s status as a black African in Venice and former slave is crucial to understanding the rhetoric of service that permeates Othello.

Although slavery was not institutionalized in early modern England as it was in Spain, Shakespeare and his audiences may well have come into contact with black Africans who had arrived in England via Spain and Portugal. The presence of a small population of blacks in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England, concentrated in London, many of whom were in positions of service, has been well documented. Most recently, Imtiaz Habib’s Black Lives in the English Archives painstakingly records all references to blacks, Indians, and Moors in legal documents, parish records and the like in early modern England. Habib discusses

an incremental if surreptitious influx of black people into England over the duration of [Elizabeth’s] reign and beyond. Illicitly seized, secretly traded, the passage to or arrival in England uncertainly recorded if at all, and its status unrecognized by law, this black population may have been missed in the great volume of studies of English maritime exploration and commercial expansion in the sixteenth century as well as by the formidable mass of English local history studies.\(^{41}\)

Further, historical records of sub-Saharan Africans in Elizabethan England show that many arrived in England via the Iberian slave trade. Gustav Ungerer’s recent monograph, The Mediterranean Apprenticeship of British Slavery, demonstrates that black slaves brought from Spain and Portugal were a visible presence in sixteenth-century England. Ungerer notes that unlike in Spain and Portugal, which had a regulated (and thus recorded) slave economy, the status of slaves in England was largely un-codified. However, the fact that England possessed no institutional apparatus to record the presence of slaves should not lead us to conclude that the Iberian slave trade did not leave its mark on England. Slave owners included English merchants working in, and then returning from, Andalusia. Additionally, Portuguese New Christians or conversos who migrated to London following Portugal’s establishment of an Inquisition and pure blood statutes in 1536 brought slaves with them from Portugal. These New Christians were recognizable both as Iberians and as the owners of black slaves.\(^{42}\) Thus those English people who came into contact with sub-Saharan Africans at the turn of the seventeenth century may have associated them with Spain.
The link between enslaved blacks and Spain in the early modern English imagination provides a framework for reading *Othello*, a play which has been shown to be haunted by “Spanish spirits.” Eric Griffin’s insightful reading of the play argues that the name Iago evokes the patron Saint of Spain, Santiago Matamoros or Saint James the Moor-slayer, while the villain Roderigo’s name evokes Spain’s great hero: “Rodrigo, the Christian name of ‘Ruy’ Diaz de Bivar, El Cid Campeador.” In Griffin’s reading, Othello becomes a converted Moor or *morisco* who is destroyed by the Machiavellian Christian Spaniard Iago; thus, Griffin suggests that the play obliquely criticizes Spanish racism against those of Moorish descent. But in drawing on Spain the play may evoke the enslavement of blacks as well as questions of purity of blood; Othello’s connections to Islam, after all, are quite tenuous, while the play explicitly informs us that he is black and that he has been a slave.

Taking the Iberian slave trade into account may shift how we read Othello’s description of his past: “Of being taken by the insolent foe / And sold to slavery, of my redemption thence / And portance in my traveler’s history” (1.3.136–38). As I mentioned above, in recent years these lines have often been read as evidence of Othello’s place in the complex culture of Barbary piracy, a site of shifting religious and national allegiances, as pirates and captives alike converted from Islam to Christianity depending on the demands of their personal circumstances and the possibility of social and economic advancement. However, the Mediterranean world of Venice is a site of slavery as well as of piracy in this period, as Shakespeare mentions in his other Venetian play, *The Merchant of Venice*. While Othello is certainly not a slave in Venice—as Juan Latino is in Granada—it is important to recognize that it is through the slave trade that he has arrived in Europe.

This observation can inform our reading of the play’s pervasive—and much discussed—allusions to service, particularly when we keep in mind the ways that discourses of service inform representations of slavery in *Juan Latino*. The English play is bookended by Othello’s allusions to the work he has done for the state. Othello begins the play by highlighting his usefulness: “My services, which I have done the signiory, / Shall out-tongue his complaints” (1.2.18–19). The Duke first addresses Othello: “Valiant Othello, we must straight employ you” (1.3.48). And finally, Othello’s
suicide speech begins with the reminder, “I have done the state some service, and they know’t” (5.2.344). Indeed, Othello’s primary relationship with Venice is one of service; one of the play’s enduring preoccupations is what the rewards of such service are or should be. (This is also, of course, in a different register, Iago’s preoccupation, particularly about Cassio’s promotion over him.) Both Juan Latino’s and Othello’s successes are articulated in the context of the service they perform, as outsiders, for a European community. Juan’s service is much different from Othello’s in that he offers cultural capital rather than military prowess, but in both cases their labor is presented as something that they offer to someone or something else (“the state,” the Duke of Sesa) rather than something that belongs to them. The relationship between both protagonists and the community to which they belong is predicated on their service; Othello and Juan both win membership in their communities through the work they perform for Venice and Spain respectively.

In Othello, as we have seen in Juan Latino, descriptions of service often yoke together older discourses of chivalry and patronage with newer discourses of chattel slavery. So, for example, when Iago declares of Othello’s feelings for Desdemona: “His soul is so enfettered to her love / That she may make, unmake, do what she list,” he draws on the language of chivalry; nonetheless, he also evokes an emergent discourse that links blackness with slavery in describing Othello’s soul as “enfettered” (2.3.333–34). In his essay “Othello and Venice: Discrimination and Projection,” Alessandro Serpieri observes of the play’s lexicon that “bondage, bondsman and, above all, bound significantly recur in crucial passages.”47 In Juan Latino the juxtaposition of imagery of the enslavement of blacks and more abstract forms of bondage is evident; when Juan vows to adorn love’s walls with a black man in chains, it is clear he is alluding to slavery because he is himself a black slave. While this connection is not quite so explicit in Othello, the play still presents us with a black man and a former slave whose presence in Venice is defined in terms of service, and draws on repeated imagery of bindings and fetters.

Nonetheless, as I discuss above, reading Othello in the context of slavery has often been understood to be a fundamentally anachronistic project, an imposition of later histories on an early modern text. Instead, it has been suggested that we should interpret the play’s repeated references
to service, mastery, and binding in the context of medieval discourses of vassalage and lordship rather than the later institution of race-based slavery. For example, Michael Neill’s essay “‘His Master’s Ass’: Slavery, Service and Subordination in Othello” usefully outlines the way that medieval discourses of service inform Othello and Iago’s relationship: “In fact, slavery bore little or no relation to discourses of ‘racial’ difference in early modern thought; rather, it was part of a much older construction of human difference in which the distinctions that mattered were not those between different ‘colors’ or ‘races,’ but those between master and servant, or between bond and free.”

It is important to register that this medieval discourse of service operates powerfully in the play, and might be classified as its dominant discourse in Raymond Williams’s sense of the term. Nonetheless, I want to suggest that part of the tension that drives Othello results from the conflict between that ideology and an emergent discourse that links blackness with slavery (and both blackness and slavery with Spain).

Indeed, there is no reason that Othello cannot be understood as drawing on both older discourses of service and an emergent discourse of slavery. Comparing uses of the word “slave” in Othello to those found in the rest of Shakespeare’s canon illustrates this particular tension. The words “slave,” “slaves,” “slavish,” and “slavery” appear a total of 178 times in all of Shakespeare’s plays and poems. Most uses of these words do not refer to enforced labor; rather, they most often appear as an insult implying baseness, servility, and villainy. In Othello, these variations on the word “slave” appear eleven times. Only two of Shakespeare’s other plays use the word more frequently: King Lear (fifteen instances) and Timon of Athens (fourteen instances). Both of these plays are preoccupied with the nature of service and mastery in the context of the “older construction of human difference” described by Neill above (as well as, in Timon’s case, referring to slaves in Roman households). “Slave” and its variants appear more often in Othello, however, than they do in The Tempest and The Comedy of Errors, both of which feature enslaved characters. And when the word is used in Othello, it takes on different connotations than it does in either King Lear or Timon of Athens.

In the final scene of Othello alone, the word “slave” appears four times. Two of those uses can be read as referring to Othello himself. Othello condemns himself as a “cursèd, cursèd slave,” which is echoed
by Lodovico’s admonition, “O thou Othello, that was once so good, / Fallen into the practice of a cursed slave” (5.2. 282, 296–97). If we read these lines in the context of an emergent discourse that links dark skin to slavery they seem to evoke the biblical curse of Ham, which condemned all of Ham’s descendants to slavery. In some versions of the story, the descendants of Ham populate Africa; it frequently appears as a justification for the enslavement of blacks well into the nineteenth century. The fact that the word “slave” is prefaced by “cursed” supports such a reading, especially because no other uses of the word “slave” in Shakespeare are prefaced by either “damned” or “cursed.”

However, it is equally possible to read these lines in the final scene of Othello as condemnations of Iago. Lodovico’s assertion that Othello has “fallen into the practice of a cursed slave” may refer to the fact that he has been hoodwinked by Iago’s trickery rather than suggesting that Othello himself has reverted to the behavior typical of one who suffers under the curse of Ham. Indeed, in the play’s final moments, just before Othello’s suicide, Lodovico explicitly calls Iago a slave as he strips Othello of all “[his] power and [his] command,” designates Cassio ruler in Cyprus, and then turns to Iago: “For this slave, / If there be any cunning cruelty / That can torment him much and hold him long / It shall be his” (5.2.337–40). To call Iago a slave is to represent his behavior as slavish; that is to say, his machinations expose him as villainous both in the sense that he is of a lower class—a villein or villain—and in the sense that he is evil. (It is also significant, in this context, that in the medieval period serfs, peasants, and villeins were often described as the offspring of Ham, cursed with servitude.)

Rather than privileging one of these readings over the other, we can register that Othello dramatizes precisely the conflict between these divergent notions of slavery. The frequent repetition of the word “slave” in the final scene both evokes the enslavement of blacks and, by being applied to Iago rather than to Othello, serves as one of the play’s many ironic reversals: it is not the black Moor “sold into slavery” in his youth but the white ensign with a Spanish name who is termed a slave in the play’s final scene. Here, too, comparing Othello with Juan Latino is useful; as we have seen, the Spanish play frequently turns to the vocabulary of slavery and service even when it is not explicitly discussing Juan’s slave status, because Juan’s presence makes that vocabulary resonate in a number of
different contexts. The same dynamic can be seen in the frequent uses of the word “slave” in *Othello*. Even when the term is applied to Iago, it still reflects on Othello’s condition as a black man who serves the state of Venice.

I hope that by reading *Othello* alongside *Juan Latino* I have shown that it is not anachronistic to read the play in the context of slavery; we do even not need to see such readings as looking forward in time. Instead, we can understand *Othello’s* engagement with slavery by looking across space, past the borders of England to a multicultural Mediterranean. By bringing *Othello* into dialogue with Spanish plays, we can begin to recognize the ways in which the play presents only one version among many of developing discourses of race in early modern literature.

Indeed, while the stated intention of this essay is to use a comparative reading of *Juan Latino* and *Othello* to bring discourses of slavery in the latter play to light, I also hope to suggest the importance of reading *Juan Latino* in its own right, as well as many other plays that engage with blackness and slavery in the Spanish *comedia*. There are relatively few critical studies of *Juan Latino*, especially in comparison to the hundreds of books and articles that have been devoted to *Othello*. And, as we have seen, its engagement with blackness, Moorishness, and slavery is more sustained and more explicit than comparable discussions in *Othello*. *Juan Latino* (not to mention a number of even less studied early modern Spanish plays with black characters) merits further sustained study. In order to better understand developing discourses of race in early modern literature we must cross more linguistic and disciplinary boundaries; turning to plays about blackness from the Spanish *comedia* can enrich our understanding of developing discourses of race not only in *Othello* but also in the history of early modern Europe and the Americas.

*University of Pennsylvania*

**Notes**

1 William Shakespeare, *Othello*, ed. Edward Pechter (New York: Norton, 2004), 1.3.136–7. All further citations are taken from this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the body of the text.

2 See, for example, Emily Bartels on literary criticism focused on race in early modern England: “In general this work tends to start with struggle and work backward—to read identity through conflict, cross-cultural encounters through conquest, race through racism. When the history of
Africa is brought into the picture, what gets prominence is the development of the Atlantic slave trade, which feeds neatly into a history of racism but which would not come to define England’s relation to Africa until the Restoration.” In “Othello and Africa: Postcolonialism Reconsidered,” William and Mary Quarterly 54 (1997): 45–64 (47).


9 Ibid., 2.

10 Cited in William D. Phillips, Historia de la esclavitud en España (Madrid: Editorial Playor, 1990), 236. José Luis Cortes López calculates that there were 57,582 slaves in Spain in the sixteenth century, of whom roughly 65% were black (although this latter calculation in particular seems to be quite speculative). See La esclavitud negra en la España Peninsular del siglo XVI (Salamanca: Universidad de Salamanca, 1989), 196–204. In his seminal 1952 essay, Antonio Domínguez Ortiz estimates 100,000. See La esclavitud en Castilla en la edad moderna y otros estudios de marginados (Granada: Editorial Comares, 2003), 9.
Slaves included Slavs, Circassians, and Tartars captured along the Black Sea who came through Italian markets into Spain; the conquest of the Canary Islands brought enslaved Guanches; later in the sixteenth century, thousands of Spanish moriscos were enslaved; and Portuguese imperial ventures brought slaves from as far afield as Goa and Kozhikode. Stella, *Histoires*, 58–74.

On the predominance of black African slaves in Extremadura see Rocío Periañez Gómez, whose analysis of records of sale shows that black slaves were the majority of those sold in every decade from 1550 to 1700, except for the years 1640–60, when Spain was at war with Portugal. *Negros, Mulatos y Blancos: Los esclavos en Extremadura durante la edad moderna* (Badajoz: Diputación de Badajoz, 2010), 91–3. In a detailed analysis of the slave trade in Seville from 1560 to 1580, Manuel F. Fernández Chaves and Rafael M. Pérez García remark on “El hecho de que la mayoría de esa población esclava fuese de procedencia (directa o en segunda generación) africana y de color negro” (the fact that the majority of this slave population was of African provenance [either directly or second-generation] and black in color). “Las redes de la trata negrera: mercaderes Portugueses y tráfico de esclavos en Sevilla (ca. 1560–1580),” in *La esclavitud negroafricana en la historia de España, siglos XVI y XVII*, ed. Aurelia Martín Casares and Margarita García Barranco (Granada: Editorial Comares, 2010), 9.


Casares observes, “Los términos ‘negro’ o ‘negra’ se empleaban habitualmente como sinónimo de esclavo y esclava en la España del siglo XVI. No me refiero únicamente al uso popular de estos vocablos, sino también, al lenguaje de la legislación y de los documentos notariales o eclesiásticos. Los casos son innumerables” (The terms negro or negra were habitually used as synonyms for slave in 16th century Spain. I do not only refer to popular usage of the term, but also to the language of legislation and of ecclesiastical and notarial documents. The cases are innumerable). Casares, *La esclavitud en Granada*, 145.

Alessandro Stella, “‘Negres de Sa Majeste’: A propos du rôle de l’esclavage en Andalousie au siècle d’or” in *Actas del II congreso de historia de Andalucía* (Cordoba: Publicaciones de la consejeria de cultura de Andalucía, 1995), 7: 617–35.


On black characters played by white actors John Beusterien, *An Eye on Race*, 104. To my knowledge, no complete list of plays with black characters on the early modern Spanish stage has been compiled. I surveyed one monograph and four articles on this topic and counted references to 39 different extant plays, autos sacramentales, and intervals (entremeses) from the sixteenth and first half of the seventeenth centuries that feature characters explicitly described as negros or mulatos in speaking parts. I did not include reference to non-black Moors or moros in this list, nor plays that only mention songs or dances by negros, nor plays with white characters who disguise themselves as black. Works surveyed: John Beusterien, “Talking Black”; Juan R. Castellano, “El negro esclavo”; Edmund de Chasca, “The Phonology of the Speech of Negroes in Early Spanish Drama,” *Hispanic Review* 14 (1946): 322–39; Molinero, *La imagen*; Kurlat, “Sobre el negro como tipo cómico.” This is by no means a complete list.

Lope de Vega’s *El negro del mejor amo* is not to be confused with Antonio Mira de Amescua’s play of the same title, which takes its plot from yet another Lope de Vega play with a black protagonist, *El santo negro Rosambuco* (the holy black man Rosambuco).

Antióbo inherits his blackness from his mother, who is an Ethiopian princess; in Spanish plays of the period, North Africans are not necessarily represented as black. See note 38 below.


Molinero describes a shift from the “abundante y repetida” (abundant and repeated) appearance of comical black figures in the sixteenth-century *comedia* to a more complex and developed black protagonist at the turn of the seventeenth century in *La imagen*, 20. In addition to the *El negro del mejor amo* (ca. 1599–1603), *El valiente negro en Flandes* (ca. 1612–20) and *Juan Latino* (ca. 1610–21), discussed in the body of the essay, plays with heroic black protagonists include Lope de Vega’s *El prodigio de Etiopia* (ca. 1600) and *El santo negro Rosambuco* (ca. 1604–7); and Luis Vélez Guevarás *Virtudes vencen señales* (ca. 1617–22). The protagonist of *El prodigio de Etiopia* differs from the others in that he begins the play as a villain before reforming and becoming an exemplary Christian. With the exception of *Virtudes vencen señales*, all of these plays’ protagonists are at some point enslaved.

Besides *Juan Latino*, the play that ends with marriage between its black protagonist and a white Spanish noblewoman is *El valiente negro en Flandes* (in one of two extant versions).

The play has proved difficult to date precisely. It was not published until 1652, though its author died in 1634. It is estimated to have been composed between 1610 and 1621. See Henry Louis Gates and Maria Wolff, “An Overview of Sources on the Life and Work of Juan Latino, the ‘Ethiopian Humanist,’” *Research in African Literatures* 29, no. 4 (1998): 14–51 (36).


Fernando, too, is based on a historical figure, the morisco nobleman Fernando de Valor who returned to Islam, took on the name Abenhumeya, and helped to lead the rebellion in the Alpujarras. See Spratlin, 207–8.

Molinero, 139.

See John Beusterien, who argues, “In this play Juan defines himself as Black, a category for him that excludes his possibility of being a Moor or having Moorish blood. In this society, the newest Christians are not New Christians [i.e. converts from Judaism and Islam and their descendants] since the mark of their Black skin grants them acceptance from the point of view of blood purity by the Old Christian.” In *An Eye on Race*, 112. See also Molinero, 125–62.

All citations are from Ximenez de Enciso, *El encubierto y Juan Latino*, ed. Eduardo Julia Martínez (Madrid: Aldus, 1951). Further citations appear parenthetically in the body of the text. As this edition does not list line numbers, I have cited by page number throughout. All translations are my own.

Compare this discussion of Juan’s “pure” soul, for example, to the Duke of Sesa’s dismissal of Fernando: “Leyéndolo estoy el alma. / En fin, moro” (I’m reading his soul. In short, he’s Moorish) (174). Similarly, Fernando is described in a prophecy about the man who will lead the morisco uprising: “Hereje de su ley será primero, / habido exteriormente por cristiano; / mas en lo interior y verdadero / será en linaje y fe mahometano” (First he must be a heretic from his religion; A Christian on the outside, in truth and on the inside he will be Mahometan, in lineage and in faith) (231).
Comparative Drama

34 See, for example, Gates and Wolff: “Latino’s marriage can allow us to infer that he gained his freedom at some point during this period, although no evidence is given as to the certainty of such an event” (19). Elizabeth Wright, in a later article, refers to Latino as a “freedman” without further elaboration. Elizabeth Wright, “Narrating the Ineffable Lepanto: The Austrias Carmen of Joannes Latinus (Juan Latino),” Hispanic Review 77, no. 1 (2009): 71–92.

35 Just as Juan Latino’s service burnishes his master’s reputation, Juan de Mérida, the protagonist of El valiente negro en Flandes, describes his military exploits as giving credit to his commander, referring to himself as “el perro de Alba” (Alba’s attack-dog) (2.1413). And in Lope de Vega’s El santo negro Rosambuco the play’s protagonist, Benito, literally gives his life for his former master. When he learns that his former master has just died, he prays to be allowed to offer his own life in his master’s place, and his prayer is granted; his most miraculous feat is also the ultimate act of service. See Molinero, 99–101.


37 There is one somewhat comparable connection between blackness and evil in Lope de Vega’s El prodigio de Etiopía, where the protagonist begins the play as a malcontent before reforming and becoming a saint. See Molinero, 54–76.

38 See John Beusterien in An Eye on Race, who notes, “The Moor is not necessarily associated with color. In turn, the negro is a set category” (109). Barbara Fuchs similarly argues, “Even if outside Spain skin color is enlisted to essentialize difference, blackness emphatically does not equal Moorishness within Spain. Instead, Spanish racial hysteria focused on covert cultural and religious practices.” Barbara Fuchs, “The Spanish Race,” in Rereading the Black Legend: The Discourses of Religious and Racial Difference in the Renaissance Empires, ed. Margaret R. Greer, Maureen Quilligan, and Walter D. Mignolo (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2007), 88–98 (95). There are characters on the Spanish stage, such as Cañeri in Juan Latino, who are explicitly described as moros negros or black Moors. Nonetheless, these two categories are neither automatically nor necessarily overlapping.

39 On the “notorious indeterminacy” of the term “Moor,” see Bartels, 3–4 and passim.


41 Imtiaz Habib, Black Lives in the English Archives, 1500–1677: Imprints of the Invisible (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2008), 70.


44 Othello is at no point in the text explicitly identified as a Muslim. There are, though, several moments in the play (most notably his comparison of his own suicide with his killing of “a malignant and a turbanned Turk”) that may activate associations with Islam (5.2.358).
See, for example, Vitkus: "When Othello tells 'Of being taken by the insolent foe / And sold to slavery; of my redemption thence' (1.3.136–37), are we to understand that he was a Christian Moor taken captive by Islamic corsairs, perhaps the renegades of Barbary, and then 'redeemed' by Christians? Or did his 'redemption' involve a conversion from Islam to Christianity?" (162).

Shylock defends his position in The Merchant of Venice's trial scene by arguing that Antonio's flesh is his property just as slaves are the property of many Venetians: "You have among you many a purchasd slave / Which like your asses, and your dogs and mules / You use in abject and in slavish parts, / Because you bought them" (4.1.90–93). Lars Engle suggests that these lines may be intended to resonate with the unnamed "Moor" in Portia's household whom Launcelot Gobbo is accused of impregnating: "Black servants in aristocratic Christian households in the Renaissance were often slaves.... One of the points of the suggestive exchange between Lorenzo and Launcelot may be to prepare us for the lack of any rebuttal to Shylock's comments about slavery in the next scene." Lars Engle, Shakespearean Pragmatism (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 101–02.


Raymond Williams, Marxism and Literature (Oxford University Press, 1977).


Ibid, 133.
Copyright of Comparative Drama is the property of Comparative Drama and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.