

Chapter 11

THE OTHER WOMAN THE GEOGRAPHY OF EXCLUSION IN *THE KNIGHT OF MALTA* (1618)

AMBEREEN DADABHOY

ABSTRACT

This essay explores the imperial designs depicted in Fletcher, Field, and Massinger's *The Knight of Malta*, through the discourses of gender and race, arguing that the play locates its anxieties about traffic, travel, and trade in the Mediterranean in racialized female bodies. Moreover, by examining the play's treatment of its black, Muslim, female character, Abdella, we can see how whiteness becomes a means through which social, political, and cultural belonging can be articulated.

Keywords: Gender, Travel, Race, Religion, Malta, Islam, Ottoman Empire

THE MEDITERRANEAN SEA connects the continents of Europe, Asia, and Africa, and as such it binds and cleaves distinct lands, peoples, cultures, and religions. In fact, as a geography that facilitated traffic and exchange, in goods, ideas, and people, the Mediterranean was perhaps the most important contact zone in the early modern period. Its fluid and often shifting borders circumscribed religious and imperial geographies, from Christian to Islamic, and Hapsburg to Ottoman. This fickle sea could make or mar the fortunes of all who ventured into its waters. Indeed, the many tales of Mediterranean piracy, captivity, and slavery that circulated in the early modern period expose the profits and dangers of life in this geography.¹

Moreover, narratives of border crossing and conversion reveal similar allures and fears associated with the Mediterranean, the freedoms and dangers it offered. Like all such zones that simultaneously intermingle and demarcate ideas and identities, the Mediterranean functions in English imaginative literature of the early modern period as

¹ See for example, Daniel Vitkus and Nabil Matar's collection of early modern travel narratives, *Piracy, Slavery, and Redemption: Barbary Captivity Narratives from Early Modern England* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), and Claire Jowett's edited volume *Pirates? The Politics of Plunder, 1550–1650* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

a site of interest and anxiety. Even though it was geographically distant from England, the middle sea, situated as it was, seemingly at the centre of the world, certainly at the centre of valuable trade routes, offered English travellers and writers a location through which they could negotiate various forms of cultural, religious, and racial differences. Such projects facilitated England's nascent imperial and growing mercantile ambitions, and created an imaginative geography on which to plot not only their anxieties about being latecomers to the markets of the Mediterranean but also imagined triumphs through which they could overcome those same deficits.

Looking at the representation of the Mediterranean in imaginative literature exposes the anxieties that it engenders because of the kinds of encounters that it facilitates. The Mediterranean contact zone puts pressure on identity. How can travellers, voyagers, and citizens of this geography preserve their identities in the face of the cultural exchanges that are inherent to borderlands? Moreover, the occupations of the Mediterranean—trade, traffic, and warfare—create opportunities for identity flux and change. This essay conceives of the theme of travel and movement in the Mediterranean in broad, expansive, and elastic ways.

The geographic position of Malta, an island that occupies a contested region in the eastern Mediterranean, elicits much anxiety in *The Knight of Malta* (1618) because the identities of its inhabitants expose the dangers of inter-religious and inter-racial contact, an obvious result of travel and the movement—voluntary and forced—of bodies in this locale.² The movement in bodies central, a central feature of travel, facilitates exchange in ideas and cultural understanding and even reciprocity, but such movement also necessitates the construction of stronger, less permeable and porous borders around identity and

2 Previous work on critical work on *The Knight of Malta* has focused on the religious and cultural threat of the Ottoman Empire or on the various meanings associated with “turning Turk.” Sandra Clark has examined the “trials and ordeals of continence” and their correspondence to female chastity. Grounding her inquiry in feminist and gender criticism, Clark finds that the discourse of female chastity masks patriarchal anxiety regarding control of women's bodies and sexualities. Sandra Clark, *The Plays of Beaumont and Fletcher: Sexual Themes and Dramatic Representation* (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1994), 25. Bindu Malieckal employs a post-colonial methodology in her critique by underscoring the role of race as the play's primary discursive strategy of cultural and ideological difference. She argues that the play's insistence on the difference inherent in blackness and Islam excludes the character of the Moorish woman from any possibility of goodness, faith, and redemption, constructing “the Islamic Other” as utterly beyond the pale of civilized, Christian society. Malieckal, “‘Hell's Perfect Character’: The Black Woman as Islamic Other in Fletcher's *The Knight of Malta*,” *Essays in Arts and Sciences* 28 (1999): 54. Using religion, particularly the nexus of Protestant and Catholic Christianity and Islam, as her primary hermeneutic, Jane Hwang Degenhardt examines the figure of the Knight as redeemed in the drama through a rehabilitation of his expressly Catholic vow of chastity. Degenhardt claims that by “recuperating the Order as an exemplary body of genteel, chaste, and honorable Christian men,” *The Knight of Malta* presents an “an embodied masculine ideal,” which models an appropriate method for cultural and imperial triumph. Jane Hwang Degenhardt, *Islamic Conversion and Christian Resistance on the Early Modern Stage* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), 153. Other selected studies on early modern

culture. The representation of the Mediterranean in English texts exposes the processes of constructing identity along racial and religious lines.

In many ways, *The Knight of Malta* investigates the situation after we have ceased travelling and asks what happens when we have opened our borders to the foreign influence. How can we maintain our culture in the face of both internal and external difference? *The Knight of Malta* animates and problematizes the threat of “turning Turk”—with its accompanied schematic of religious affiliation and betrayal—through the modalities of gender and race. Employing the generic architecture of Romance, the play imbricates categories of difference, such as gender, race, and religion in its construction of nation and community. In this chapter, I contend that *The Knight of Malta* offers an innovative optics through which questions of encounter and traffic—a capacious mode of envisioning travel—with Muslim regimes can be framed and answered. By tracing the circulation of women in the play, I uncover the affective and symbolic roles they occupy in addition to the suspicion they engender.³ Finally, I claim that the dramatization of the national and imperial triumph of Malta (and Christendom) over the Ottoman Empire (and Islam) is achieved through the simultaneous absorption and exclusion of radical difference. Thus, a critical reconsideration of *The Knight of Malta* subtended by the geometry of religion, race, and gender reveals the scope and limits of imperial projects in and beyond the early modern eastern Mediterranean.

Exploring the intertextual links between *The Knight of Malta* and other late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century Mediterranean plays topically engaged with Moors and Turks highlights the interest of English dramatists in that locale and the audience's cultural fascination with multiple forms of difference. Between 1579 and 1642 nearly fifty English plays featured characters that were religiously or racially different from their English audiences, out of which at least a dozen dramatized Muslim-Christian encounter, exchange, and desire and almost all featured a Mediterranean setting.⁴ From Robert Greene's *The Battle of Alcazar* (1591) to Philip Massinger's *The Renegado* (1630), a small fraction in the field of English drama incorporating such *topoi* includes Thomas Dekker's *The Fair Maid of the West* (1597), William Shakespeare's *Othello* (1604), and

English drama and the Mediterranean include Daniel Vitkus's *Turning Turk: English Theater and the Multicultural Mediterranean 1570–1630* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008); Jonathan Burton's *Traffic and Turning: Islam and English Drama 1579–1624* (Cranbury: Associated University Presses, 2005); Benedict Robinson's *Islam and Early Modern English Literature: The Politics of Romance from Spenser to Milton* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); and Bernadette Andrea's *Women and Islam in Early Modern English Literature* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

3 The feminist and material methodology I employ here is indebted to Jean Howard and her article on *The Fair Maid of the West*, “An English Lass amid the Moors: Gender, Race, Sexuality and Nationality in Heywood's ‘The Fair Maid of the West,’” in *Women, “Race,” and Writing in the Early Modern Period*, ed. Margo Hendricks and Patricia Parker (London: Routledge, 1994). My focus here is on the production of gendered whiteness and blackness within a particularly Mediterranean context, whereas Howard's argument relies on the legibility of a particularly English identity (101–14).

4 Louis Wann, “The Oriental in Elizabethan Drama,” *Modern Philology* 12 (1915): 166. Burton, *Traffic and Turning*, 92.

Robert Daborne's *A Christian Turned Turk* (1612). The enthusiasm for Mediterranean plays reflects burgeoning trade with the east during the Elizabethan period, which resulted in the founding of the Levant Company (1581) and the later antagonism toward Islamic traffic underscoring Jacobean foreign policy. Investigating the mercantile and theatrical exchanges between England and the Ottoman Empire, Daniel Vitkus points out that "commercial activity was accompanied by corresponding ideological changes: the culture and literature of the time were profoundly affected by the intensified international circulation of people, goods, and texts."⁵ Such nodal points of transmission both material and discursive encode the Mediterranean geography within multiple registers of signification: the Mediterranean as a site of traffic in goods and people, but also an imaginary geography where models of exchange initiate modes of subjective transformation and the Mediterranean as a surrogate arena of imperial contest, where English ambition and anxiety regarding its own quest for an empire and potential conflict with Spain can be transferred to an eastern geography replete with similar imperial and hegemonic concerns. Thus, the interpellation of the geography of the eastern Mediterranean in English drama instances a space for experimenting with both the imperial project and national subjectivity. Elizabeth's attempts at political alliance with Muslim powers found imaginative reconstruction in the danger of the other close at hand, while James's rapprochement with Spain and general disdain of Islam fostered representations of ideological and military conflicts.⁶

Before turning to the symbiotic instrumentalities of nation, gender, religion, and race as they are constructed through the prism of Muslim-Christian encounter in *The Knight of Malta*, I would like to excavate the discourses investing meaning to the geographic, political, and narrative structures of the play. The decisive historical event circumscribing the action is the failed Ottoman siege of Malta in 1565. The Order of St. John, vastly outnumbered by the forces of Sultan Süleyman the Magnificent, successfully defended, withheld, and ultimately repulsed the attack on the island. The triumph over Ottoman forces was celebrated across Europe, in Catholic and Protestant nations, as an united Christian defeat over the armies of Islam.⁷ The cultural and discursive displacement of imperial aggression onto a theologically mandated conflict, reminiscent of the crusades, was facilitated by the history of the Knights of St. John, who began

5 Daniel Vitkus, "The Common Market of All the World: English Theater, the Global System and the Ottoman Empire in the Early Modern Period," in *Global Traffic: Discourses and Practices of Trade in English Literature and Culture from 1550–1700*, ed. Barbara Sebek and Stephen Deng (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 27.

6 Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* and *Othello* both dramatize the insider/outsider dichotomy, illustrating its danger, and ultimately advocating a policy of distance and separation. However, *Othello*, like *A Christian Turned Turk*, *The Renegado*, and *The Knight of Malta*, suggests that the threat of Islam and the Ottoman Empire can only be managed militarily.

7 Helen Vella Bonavita notes that while Reformation polemicists minimized Hapsburg contributions and the Catholicism of the Order of St. John, they still celebrated the victory over the Ottomans in Manichean, Christian-Muslim terms. "Key to Christendom: the 1565 Siege of Malta, its Histories, and their Use in Reformation Polemic," *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 33 (2002): 1021–43.

their order as protectors of the Holy Land after the First Crusade. With the defeat of the Christian armies in Jerusalem, the Order moved its base of operations to Rhodes, where they continued to plague Muslim forces—the Ottomans this time.⁸ Rhodes's location in the eastern Mediterranean provided an ideal base from which the knights could disrupt Ottoman trade from Egypt. However, the Knights' engagement in acts of piracy and aggression against the empire made them obvious targets, and in 1522, fresh from his successful campaign in Belgrade, Süleyman set his sights on Rhodes. The siege of Rhodes lasted five months, after which the Knights surrendered and moved to Sicily before finally settling in Malta. The Knights' successful defeat of the Ottomans on Malta evoked tropes of religious contest and conflict echoing the affective power of the crusades. Moreover, it placed Malta in the European and, particularly, English imaginary as a "bastion" of Christian resistance to Islamic hegemony.⁹ Malta's or the Knights' political structure might also have provided English writers and dramatists with a multicultural, national model for the emergent British imperial identity, for the Knights formed a transnational community united by their commitment to Christianity. Thus, as native or ethnic identities are subsumed within the cultural and religious hegemony of Christendom so, too, might multiple national identities, such as English, Scottish, and Welsh be contained under the rubric of British. Malta oscillates, then, between an exotic geography far removed from England and a simulacrum of English national and imperial subjectivity.

The rise of Ottoman hegemony in the eastern Mediterranean facilitated the discursive renewal of crusade ideology. Such a resurrection compelled a return of medieval narratives, like romance, "which emerged during and after the crusades, in an effort to narrate contacts with Islam: the fictions of chivalric romance are a response to the failure of the crusades, acts of collective cultural fantasy that seek to take imaginative possession of the long and fluctuating border between Latin Christendom and Islam."¹⁰ A genre that "enabled new ways of thinking about identity and difference," and located itself in a border zone between cultures provides the quintessential structural model for a play like *The Knight of Malta*, which also deploys radical difference as a means through which to assert nationalistic unity and cultural superiority.¹¹ Crucial to this narrative project is a formulation of social, religious, and gender norms around which identity can coalesce. In fact, the construction and maintenance of identity in *The Knight of Malta* is

8 While many early modern writers do not make distinctions between Muslims of various regions, often identifying Arabs as Turks, I point this out in order to show how the Ottoman campaign against Rhodes manipulates the ideology of religious war to advance its national/imperial agenda. Indeed, Sultan Selim I, Süleyman's father, waged such a war on the Mamluks of Egypt, who were also Muslim. The Order of the Knights of St. John moved to Rhodes in the early fourteenth century and occupied that island until 1522. Ferdinand Braudel, *The Mediterranean: And the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, vol. 2 (New York: Harper Collins, 1973), 668–69.

9 Andrea, *Women and Islam*, 251–52.

10 Robinson, *Islam and Early Modern English Literature*, 4–5.

11 Robinson, *Islam and Early Modern English Literature*, 3.

fastened to the period's nascent nationalism, which manifests in the form of an "imagined community."¹² The normative values and identity promulgated by the play are observed in "an imagined political community" that is "limited" by the physical borders of the island and by the "deep horizontal comradeship" that characterizes the Order and the nation it mimetically represents, one that is Christian, pan-European, and masculine.¹³ The limiting agents of community—geography and fraternity—are, however, problematically elastic: simultaneously including, excluding, and necessitating certain kinds of identities within the nation. As we encounter in *The Knight of Malta*, the threat to national identity obtains from undesirable yet indispensable modes of difference. The play's occlusion of how these modes of difference have come to inhabit its island setting underscores the threat contact and encounter permeating its contested geography.

Even as radical difference becomes figured as deviant and unwanted in the play, lines of desire, whether imperial, martial, material, or sexual underscore the instances European-Muslim encounter prominent in early modern English drama set in the Mediterranean. I deploy the identity marker European here rather than Christian to stress that while religious markers blanketed Moorish and Ottoman identities, collapsing distinctions between them, Europeans were increasingly identified and characterized in nationalistic terms in drama.¹⁴ Moreover, it is through the trajectories of desire between self and other and the emerging discourse of nationalism that we can locate the constellations of difference in *The Knight of Malta*. Unlike the plays mentioned above, *The Knight of Malta's* intervention in the English cultural obsession with the Muslim-dominated eastern Mediterranean is to construct an episteme of difference that yokes race to religion as a strategy to mitigate the threat of "turning Turk,"—the *sine qua non* of contact with Islam—in order to effect a pure, European-Christian identity, which I will expose as a fraught, uneasy, and somewhat impossible effort.

The Knight of Malta coheres around symbols of purity and fidelity: the most notable of which are women and the knighthood of the Order of St. John. The drama's narrative, thematic, and ideological commitments foreground the religious and imperial antagonism between Christianity and Islam in an attempt to endow its exemplars with their symbolic signification. The religio-military conflict between Christians (pan-European members

12 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983), 15. Anderson's thesis takes as its starting point the nationalism of the Enlightenment, which created nations by "destroying the legitimacy of the divinely-ordained, hierarchical dynastic realm" (16). Nevertheless, I believe it is possible to project the notion of "imagined communities" into the early modern period because of the disparate ways in which emerging European nations and empires were coming to a recognition of their distinctness. In terms of English drama assertion of national boundaries and intra-island unity can be traced through all of Shakespeare's history plays, most especially in the two tetralogies. We can also observe anxieties about national v. imperial identity through James I's failed attempts at unification.

13 Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 15–16.

14 The tourney that inaugurates the action of Thomas Kyd's *Soliman and Perseda* features a cast of European and non-European characters, most of whom are identified and caricatured by and because of their nationalities.

of the Order) and Muslims ("Turks") in the eastern Mediterranean structures the binaries informing the play, emplotting an identity that falls in line with its preoccupations. Negotiating this arena of cultural competition in *The Knight of Malta* is the Moor, Abdella, an insider inhabiting the physical and cultural boundaries of the island yet a racial and religious outsider. Abdella's characterization reveals the play's investment in an epistemology of difference undergirded by its somatic and religious manifestations that signal an essential, ontological quality of otherness. Abdella's presence confirms and disturbs the valorized symbols of the play: her radical difference fashions her as a foil while her sex and the ideological and affective burden it carries aligns her with other women, proclaiming her sameness. Malta's geographic location in the contested space of the eastern Mediterranean demands the construction of a nation and identity with fixed religious, racial, and sexual boundaries, yet the circulation of women, European and other, destabilizes this effort. The play's setting is quite significant, for as Bernadette Andrea indicates Malta circulated in the European cultural imaginary as "an overdetermined geographical space," because of the Knights' success at fending off Ottoman invasion.¹⁵ The affective meanings loaded onto the island allowed for it to be a site where anxieties about imperial traffic and conquest could comfortably be executed. Thus English fears of encounter in the eastern Mediterranean could be domesticated within the island's imaginative and protective boundaries. The diffuse threat of Islam in *The Knight of Malta* is embodied by Abdella and made visible through her attacks on women, knighthood, and marriage, the foundations of Malta's cultural security; however, because of her allusive proximity with other women, the rigid boundaries that the play attempts to fix between Christianity and Islam prove permeable.

Although much dramatic attention in *The Knight of Malta* affects concern for the menacing Ottoman threat at its sea borders, the majority of the plot unfolds through various trials of virtue on the island. The main action centres on the desirability of Oriana, the sister of the grand master of the Order of St. John, and the schemes enacted by the villainous fallen knight, Mountferrat, and his conspirators, including Abdella, to facilitate her seduction. Obstacles to Mountferrat's possession of Oriana take the form of Gomera and Miranda, two men who are not knights yet fight with the Order against the Ottomans, and Oriana's own virtuous character, which succeeds in protecting her body from Mountferrat but not her reputation from his slander. The preliminary trial in the play is Oriana's, wherein she must answer the charge of treason (conspiracy with a Muslim ruler to betray her faith and Malta) with her life. Gomera acts as her champion while a disguised Miranda dupes Mountferrat into letting him fight as his proxy, thereby fixing the match, and assuring the preservation of Oriana's life and innocence. The end of the contest exposes Mountferrat's villainy and ends with Oriana given to Gomera as his bride, while Miranda, who also loves her, is offered a better prize: membership to the Order of St. John. The intermediary trial proves Miranda's commitment to chastity as he is courted

15 Bernadette Andrea, "From Invasion to Inquisition: Mapping Malta in Early Modern England," in *Remapping the Mediterranean World in Early Modern English Writings*, ed. Goran V. Stanivokovic (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 246.

by a figure of temptation *par excellence*, the Muslim woman. In this case it is not Abdella, but another Muslim woman, the Ottoman captive Lucinda. Taken in a sea raid by Maltese forces led by the Danish captain Norandine, Lucinda asks to be put into Miranda's service in order to protect her virtue. The potential seduction and eventual abnegation of sexual desire establishes both characters as ready for their respective destinies: Miranda's future knighthood and Lucinda's conversion to Christianity. The terminal trial reunites Oriana and Miranda in a test of love, whereby both must renounce their physical love for each other and accept the consolation of divine love. While *The Knight of Malta* drives towards its resolution through the accession of Miranda into the ranks of knighthood, the reunion of Oriana with her husband, the conversion of Lucinda, and the security of Malta through the expulsion of Mountferrat and Abdella, the reverberations of potential failure in its strategies of unification linger through the inability of the Order to absorb all of Malta's noble fighters, the vulnerability of women who are made to bear the ideological burden of culture, and the presence of Abdella as a challenge to the assimilative impulses informing the cultural and imperial hegemonies of the play.

The Knight of Malta's dramatic intervention within romance narrative and the discourse of nationalism is its triangulation of gender, religion, and race. Women bridge the self–other binary and become the means through which the playwrights experiment with multiple forms of difference and construct a racialized religious identity whereby the sign of religious affiliation becomes visible on the bodies of adherents. This teleology is predicated upon the construction of Oriana's symbolic, normative whiteness which signals her ontological similitude to the “imagined community”—at the same time that her sex problematizes her position—and upon the non-normative blackness embodied by Abdella. The introduction of these characters in a plot involving sexual desire emphasizes the distant moral poles from which they operate. The play introduces Oriana as the victim of Mountferrat's illicit desire: his confessions of love are disgraceful because he is a knight of the Order and has taken a vow of celibacy. Her rejection occasions the appearance of Abdella, who Mountferrat will manipulate into destroying his Oriana because “she doth love” him (1.1.90).

The negotiation of difference in the play linking the dyad of European-Christian and non-European-Muslim, is conceived via the complex and overdetermined figure of the Moor. In the early modern period, the term Moor carried varied, shifting, and indeterminate meanings. Moor indicated not only dark or black skin but also suggested a Muslim religious identity.¹⁶ Black skin, moreover, had its own set of negatively coded meanings. Black was evil and sinful: “whiteness is desired, blackness is condemned. White is the color of the regenerated, of the saved; black is the color of the damned, the lost.”¹⁷ Such stark opposition facilitated the very easy and prejudicial characterization of

16 *Oxford English Dictionary* definition for Moor, “Originally: a native or inhabitant of ancient Mauretania, a region of North Africa corresponding to parts of present-day Morocco and Algeria. Later usually: a member of a Muslim people of mixed Berber and Arab descent inhabiting north-western Africa (now mainly present-day Mauritania), who in the 8th cent. conquered Spain.”

17 Anthony Barthelemy, *Black Face Maligned Race: The Representation of Blacks in English Drama from Shakespeare to Southerne* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1987), 2–3.

dark peoples and was complicit with the emerging colour-coded colonial discourse of the period. However, as Jack D'Amico points out, the connection between Moor and Islam problematizes constructions of identity: "No longer a pagan in need of conversion, the Moor as Mohammedan became an aggressive threat, the frightening spiritual and political counterforce to European Christianity."¹⁸ The "Moor as Mohammedan," challenged the cultural and imperial hegemonies that Europe was attempting to establish both in the New World and in the Mediterranean: the Moor as Muslim was a rival on all fronts and perhaps less easily imaginatively contained than Moor as black man.¹⁹ *The Knight of Malta* conflates racial and religious difference in the designation of Moor to create a figure that elicits anxiety based on the Moor's blackness while simultaneously produced by the suggestion of Islamic traits. Thus, Abdella's blackness contains shifting and multiple meanings all of which signal her alterity and difference, just as her Muslim identity points to early modern fears of Islamic sexual and military aggression.²⁰ I do not intend to elide Abdella's position as a black woman in this play; rather I seek to excavate the sediments of meaning attached to her blackness, which should include a Muslim religious identity.

As the embodiment of the internalized threat of Muslim difference in *The Knight of Malta*, Abdella is the Moorish maidservant who conspires with Mountferrat to destroy her mistress Oriana. Fletcher, Field, and Massinger employ the common dramatic type of the black maidservant in their construction of Abdella. Her two most obvious antecedents are Zanthia, from John Marston's *The Tragedy of Sophonisba* (1606), and John Webster's Zanche in *The White Devil* (1611).²¹ Like Abdella, both women serve white women, but while Marston's Zanthia plots against her mistress, Zanche is a faithful accomplice to her mistress's murderous actions.²² Through her various plots against Oriana and the fetishization of her blackness Abdella follows in the tradition of both Zanthia and Zanche, functioning as both literal and metaphoric dark devil to her angelic, fair mistress.²³ The archetypal connection is furthered by the fact that Abdella's name, as indicated in the dialogue of Act 1 of the play text, is Zanthia, identical to Marston's

¹⁸ Jack D'Amico, *The Moor in English Renaissance Drama* (Tampa: University of Florida, 1991), 75.

¹⁹ I deliberately employ gendered classification here to indicate that most studies of blackness/Islam in the period have focused on the representation of men. I differ in my analysis by focusing on the triangulation of blackness, Islam, and gender.

²⁰ *The Knight of Malta* does not present Islam as a legitimate theology. It engages with the religion either as a heresy or as an ethnicity.

²¹ Malieckal points out "black maids are often portrayed as evil and promiscuous opposites to white heroines." ("Hell's Perfect Character," 53).

²² A fuller discussion of Marston and Webster's maidservants can be found in Barthelemy, *Black Face Maligned Race*, 72–146. Malieckal also calls attention to the characters from the two plays, in addition to the unseen Moorish maid, Barbary, in *Othello*. "Hell's Perfect Character," 53–68.

²³ Williams's textual notes point to a misprint in the Folio, at 1.3.1., where "Zanchia" stands for Zanthia. This mistake certainly shows that this character was fashioned from the type of the other two Moor maidservants. John Fletcher, Nathan Field, and Philip Massinger, *The Knight of Malta*, ed. Fredson Bowers, vol. 8 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 454.

character name. In fact, most editions of the play follow the 1647 Folio, which reads “Enter Zanthia alias Abdella,” by referring to the character as Zanthia throughout, even though in Acts 2–5 she is called Abdella in both the dialogue and stage directions.²⁴ The misprision in naming extends to the folio edition of the play, which substitutes Zanchia for Zanthia. In addition to indicating a stock character, the name Zanche / Zanthia has specific Turkish and Arabic roots: the Turkish word *zenci* comes from Arabic *zanj*, both of which are used to refer to black people. In the early modern Mediterranean, where the movement of language and people was as fluid as the sea, it seems likely that these character names had a linguistically Eastern, Islamic origin.²⁵

I deviate from the common critical tradition of naming her Zanthia and use Abdella for its aural and etymological closeness to the names of earlier Moorish stage characters.²⁶ George Peele’s *Battle of Alcazar* (1591) contains the Moorish characters Abd-el-Malik, the heroic “white Moor” and Abdelmunen, the villain Muly Mahamet’s uncle.²⁷ Although the playwrights may or may not have been aware of the name’s significance—Abdella is the feminine form of the Muslim name Abdullah, the name of the Prophet Muhammad’s father, which in Arabic means the servant of Allah—they must have been aware of the characters from Peele’s drama, who were quite obviously Muslim.²⁸ Indeed, if we posit

24 In the edition of the play I employ, edited by George Walton Williams (in Francis Beaumont, John Fletcher, and Fredson Bowers, *The Dramatic Works in the Beaumont and Fletcher Canon* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966)), the character is referred to as Abdella. Williams’s textual notes indicate that he favours the name Abdella because this name appears more frequently in “directions and prefixes throughout Acts II–V,” 455. He notes that this name change is a “reversal” with editorial tradition (455). References to quotes from this edition will be given parenthetically in the text.

25 In Turkish the letter C is pronounced like the English J. Additionally, in this period the Mediterranean island of Zante is controlled by the Ottoman Empire and was an important source of currants, a highly valued import to England. The island’s name is also aurally connected to Zanche / Zanthia, suggesting an Ottoman geographical sphere if not origin.

26 See Barthelemy, *Black Face, Maligned Race*; Malieckal, “‘Hell’s Perfect Character’”; Elliot Tokson, *The Popular Image of the Black Man in English Drama 1550–1688* (Boston: Hall, 1982); Nancy Cotton, *John Fletcher’s Chastity Plays: Mirrors of Modesty* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1973); and Carolyn Prager, “‘If I Be Devil’: English Renaissance Response to the Proverbial and Ecumenical Ethiopian,” *Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 17 (1987): 257–79.

27 Analyzing the naming discrepancy, Williams’s text cites an unidentified “Brock,” who claims that Fletcher saw the character simply as a Moor and gave her the “inevitable name of Abdella.” Williams remains skeptical, finding nothing “inevitable” about the choice of name. He points out that while there were no other Abdella’s on the early modern stage, there were, in Peele’s *Battle of Alcazar* “Abdil,” “Abdelmalec,” and Abdelmunen” (*The Knight of Malta*, ed. Williams, 454).

28 Peter Heylin’s *Cosmography* (1621) contains some biographical material about Muhammad that may have had greater circulation before publication. I do not know for certain if Fletcher was aware of the close connection between the name he chose for his Moor and its very close connection to Islam’s Prophet. Heylin writes, “By birth of Jathripp, an obscure village then, not far from Medina; his father called Abdalla, and Idolatrous Pagan; his mother named Hemina, as perverse a Jewess.” Quoted in Byron Porter Smith, *Islam in English Literature*, ed. S. B. Bushrui and Anahid Melikian, 2nd ed. (Delmar: Caravan Books, 1977), 4.

that Fletcher, Field, and Massinger and their audience were aware of the meaning of Abdella's name, then we find that her religious identity reiterates her racial one, for as a "servant of Allah," Abdella would certainly be seen as an agent of evil, if not evil itself.

Concomitant with Abdella's Muslim lineage, *The Knight of Malta* constructs an episteme of desire and sexuality that allows for the separation of characters into the play's moral dichotomy. Abdella's openly aggressive sexuality is presented as symptomatic of her race. Unlike Oriana, who rejects Mountferrat out of deference to his vow of celibacy and her own inherent modesty, Abdella flaunts her desirability and difference in an attempt at seduction. Cataloguing her extensive physical charms—all of which celebrate her blackness—Abdella appropriates the traditional blazon:

My tongue Sir, cannot lisse to meet you so,
 Nor my black Cheeke put on a feigned blush,
 To make me seeme more modest then I am.
 This ground-worke will not beare adulterate red,
 Nor artificiall white, to cozen love.
 These dark locks, are not purchas'd, nor these teeth,
 For every night, they are my bedfellows;
 No bath, no blanching water, smoothing oyles,
 Doth mend me up; and yet Mountferrat, know,
 I am as full of pleasure in the touch
 As ere a white fac'd puppet of 'em all
 Juicy, and firme; unfledged 'em of their tyres,
 Thir wyres, their partlets, pins, and periwigs,
 And they appeare like bald cootes, in the nest;
 I can as blithely work in my loves bed,
 And deck thy fair neck, with these Jetty chains,
 Sing thee asleep, being wearied, and, refresh'd,
 With the same organ, steale sleep off againe.

(1.1.172–189)

Abdella's anatomy of physical and erotic delights reverses the colour-coded binaries of the play, and her manipulation of genre vitiates the ascendancy of whiteness in constructions of beauty. Claiming that her blackness discloses a natural and undisguised truth, as opposed to whiteness that is subject to alteration in order to appear increasingly fair, Abdella problematizes the epistemological and ontological transparency of both terms. White, which should be transparent, becomes implicated in fraud, while the opaque black of her skin testifies to her authenticity. In fact, Abdella suggests that blackness denotes constancy by the simple fact that it cannot change—that she cannot "feign" a blush to appear "more modest" than she is. She proudly reconfigures the proverbial impossibility of whitening the Ethiop, emphasizing the indelibility of blackness, which cannot be cosmetically altered. Despite (or because) of her colour, she possesses the sexual power to enthrall men: her "jetty chains" can sooth and satiate Mountferrat's desire better than those of any "white faced puppet." Indeed, later in the play we see Abdella use similar language to convince Mountferrat of her desirability: "Am I not here / As lovely in my blacke to entertaine thee, / As high and full of heat, to meet thy

pleasures?" (2.3.11–13).²⁹ By forging a link between her external colour and internal sexual "heat," Abdella accepts the common early modern associations of blackness and proclaims her agency through her appropriation.³⁰

Abdella's subversive exaltation of her blackness and its attendant sexuality combined with her Muslim characterization corroborates early modern accounts of Moors that focused, with prurient interest, on their sexual practices.³¹ Most often, we find that African men were thought to have large, bestial genitals and, therefore, animalistic sexuality.³² Moorish women did not escape the sexualized gaze cast on them by European travellers and historians, who often remarked on their sexual availability and deviance. In *The Navigations Peregrinations and Voyages, made into Turkie*, Nicolas De Nicolay notes,

[A]ll along the river and the shore the Moorish women and maiden slaves of Algier do go to wash their linen, being commonly whole naked, saving that they wear a piece of cotton cloth of some strange colour to cover their secret parts, (which notwithstanding for a little piece of money they will willingly uncover).³³

Nicolay's casual observations present these women as nothing more than sexual objects. Once in Constantinople, Nicolay realizes that the women of the Sublime Porte have much more aggressive sexual proclivities. The common ritual particularly questionable for Nicolay was the *hamam* (public bath), where it seemed that the women

Do familiarly wash one another, whereby it cometh to pass [...] sometimes [they] become so fervently in love the one of the other as if it were with men, in such sort that perceiving some maiden, or woman of excellent beauty, they will

29 Abdella's erotic desire for Mountferrat conforms to the dramatic trope of the black woman's desire for a white man. As Ania Loomba indicates, "the marginality of black women, [...] is routinely expressed through the folly of their desire for white men. In play after play, black women, usually servants, are sexually but never romantically linked to white men." Ania Loomba, "'Delicious Traffick': Racial and Religious Difference on Early Modern Stages," in *Shakespeare and Race*, ed. Catherine M. S. Alexander and Stanley Wells (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 215.

30 While I read these moments as articulations of strength by Abdella, they can also, as Ania Loomba notes, expose strategies of containment for "deviant" feminine energy by foreclosing them within a racialized discourse. Ania Loomba, "The Color of Patriarchy: Critical Difference, Cultural Difference, and Renaissance Drama," in *Women, "Race" & Writing in the Early Modern Period*, ed. Margo Hendricks and Patricia A. Parker (New York: Routledge, 1994), 26.

31 Moors could be both Muslim and African or Africans who were not Muslim. The elasticity of the term makes it difficult to narrow the scope of its classification. Indeed, it seems that it was deployed with great liberality in the period. See Jack D'Amico, *The Moor in English Renaissance Drama*, and also Michael Neill, "'Mulattos,' 'Blacks,' and 'Indian Moors': *Othello* and Early Modern Constructions of Human Difference," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 49 (1998): 361–74.

32 Barthelemy, *Black Face Maligned Race*, 5–6.

33 Nicolas De Nicolay, *The Navigations, Peregrinations and Voyages, Made into Turkie*. Translated out of the French by T. Washington the younger (London: [At the cost of John Stell] by Thomas Dawson, 1585). STC (2nd ed.) / 18574. (B_{4v}).

not cease until they have found means to bathe with them, and to handle and grope them everywhere at their pleasures, so full are they of luxuriousness and feminine wantonness.³⁴

The erotic tableau of the *hamam* becomes a recurring and fetishized image of Muslim women's sexuality not just for Nicolay but for other early modern travellers as well. George Sandys, in *Relation of a Journey* (1615), writes: "Much unnatural and filthy lust is said to be committed daily in the remote closets of the darksome bannias: yea, women with women: a thing uncreditable, if former times had not given thereunto both detection and punishment."³⁵ Because of its communal nature, sex-segregated public bathing, a common practice for Ottoman men and women, became a site to fix Ottoman and Muslim permissiveness and immodesty. To be sure, neither of these men would have access to the women's section of the *hamam* to confirm their suspicions of lesbian behaviour; however, as a locale free from patriarchal surveillance, where loose clothing signalled loose morality, combined with the belief that Islam encouraged all pleasure and that "any sexual act at all is not only not forbidden but allowed and praised" the *hamam* sustained the construction of Muslim women's sexuality as liberal and unnatural.³⁶

While these examples provide pornographic scenes of titillation, they also reveal a concern about female sexual aggression and a resultant lack of masculine agency. As characterized in much early modern European writing, including *The Knight of Malta*, the sexual and social perversion of the Islamic world disrupts patriarchal authority and the natural order by making men irrelevant in the sex act.³⁷ In such formulations of Muslim societies, Muslim women's sexuality threatens Muslim masculinity and diminishes Islamic cultural and imperial potency, opening up a strategic space through which Europeans achieve discursive mastery over Islam and its peoples. Importantly, the root of such feminine degeneracy is naturalized in Muslim women. In the case of *The Knight of Malta*, we do not observe lesbianism in Abdella, but we do encounter her voracious and unbounded lust, which serves the same disruptive and socially damaging purposes. Abdella is ruled by her "mad affections" for Mountferrat, and will do anything—including betray her mistress, "for love of thee Mountferrat, (Oh! What Chaines / Of deity or duty can hold love?)" in order to "enjoy" him (3.2.7; 1.1. 215–16; 3.2.12). Like the earlier examples of sexually aggressive Muslim women, Abdella is demonized because she crosses racial and religious boundaries and because her desire threatens to destroy not only the social structure of Malta, but also a virtuous, Christian woman. Later in the play, when Mountferrat and Abdella's role in Oriana's destruction is at the point of

³⁴ De Nicolay, *The Navigations, Peregrinations and Voyages*, (I_{3r}).

³⁵ George Sandys, *A relation of a journey begun an: Dom: 1610 ... Containing a description of the Turkish Empire of Aegypt, and of the Holy Land* (London: Richard Field, 1615), STC: 21726 (1307).

³⁶ Norman Daniel, *Islam and the West* (Alva: Edinburgh University Press, 1960), 144.

³⁷ Further examples of Muslim women's sexual degeneracy and the general licentious behaviour promoted in Islamicate sexualities can be found in Leo Africanus's *General History of Africa* (1550; English translation 1600) and in Robert Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621), which locates the haram as a site for Muslim women's insatiable sexual appetites.

being revealed, Mountferrat fears fighting while Abdella eagerly takes charge in order to save herself and shoots Gomera: "I'll just do it, / All will goe wrong else" (4.4.18–19). Appropriating a masculine position, Abdella acts decisively with a brutal instinct for self-preservation. Mountferrat's repeated inability to overpower any of the men on Malta, even to subdue and control Abdella, is indicative of his disgrace and impotence. The relationship between Mountferrat and Abdella falls in line with the claims of the travel writers discussed above, that Muslim men are emasculated and Muslim women dangerously deviant.

Abdella's articulation of sexuality and the eroticism of her blackness place her in opposition to Oriana. However, the sexualized construction of both women, Oriana as the object of Mountferrat's desire and Abdella as the object of his feigned desire—and a desiring subject herself—devises a point of intersection. Indeed, Abdella's desire and Oriana's rejection prompt Mountferrat to consider the trajectory of his own desires and whether they can be neatly satisfied through substitution:

It is not love, but strong Libidinous will
That triumphs o're me, and to satiate that,
What difference twixt this Moore, and her faire Dame?
Night makes their hews alike, their use is so.

(1.1.219–25)

Sex and darkness render the two women coeval. The taxonomies of skin colour undergirding the construction of and distinction between Abdella and Oriana become irrelevant in their confrontation with sexual availability. While his later actions belie the hypothesis articulated here, Mountferrat exposes a fundamental anxiety of the play, the dissolution of difference: "What difference twixt this Moore, and her faire Dame?" The terrifying answer insinuated again and again is that there simply is none. Thus, the action that follows finds and attempts to rehearse and reinforce essential categories of distinction.³⁸

The play binds Oriana and Abdella not only as mistress and servant, nor simply through the influence of Mountferrat, but also in the chiaroscuro of their composition. As the figure to which all lines of desire (sexual and imperial) orient, Oriana occupies the representational frame as a primary figure; consequently, Abdella functions as Oriana's opposite and "negative space," like a background of no apparent consequence.³⁹ In drawing, a cursive figure "is one whose ground is merely an accidental by-product;" even as a supplement, this unintentional result maintains a connection to the product from which it derives.⁴⁰ Thus, while the ground may be different from the main figure, it retains resemblance to its origin. Abdella as the distorted reflection of Oriana is one way

38 The anxiety that women engender in their seeming changeability is remedied in this play and in other early modern drama through what Loomba calls "the linkage between deviant femininity and outsiders." "The Color of Patriarchy," 32.

39 Barbara Johnson, *The Feminist Difference: Literature, Psychoanalysis, Race, and Gender* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 17.

40 Johnson, *The Feminist Difference*, 18.

that the play simultaneously hides and exposes its fears of identity slippage. The play's most explicit articulation of this is when Abdella writes a letter in Oriana's hand. The aim of the counterfeit is to besmirch Oriana's reputation so that she will either succumb to Mountferrat's seduction or be killed. Knowing that the pasha of Tripoli has solicited Oriana to love, betrayal, and marriage, "Love unto him, and treachery to the Island, / Which will she undertake, by *Mahomet* / The Turke there vowes, on his blest *Alcharon*, / Marriage unto her," Mountferrat lays the foundation of his scheme upon Oriana's universal desirability (1.1.204–7). Abdella's forged letter "so like her hand / As if it had bin moulded of" not only implicates Oriana in a plot that would deliver the island into enemy, Muslim hands, but also attacks her modesty, virtue, and "faire soul" (1.1.212–13; 1.3.142). Her appropriation of Oriana's identity exposes not only her villainy but also her likeness to Oriana, at the same time that it uncovers another modality difference evoking anxiety in the play, that of gender.

The letter and its testimony of Oriana's guilt discloses the fraught position that women occupy as both idealized objects of desire and as potential agents of disruption, always carrying the possibility of being unworthy of the symbolic cultural values placed upon them. Indeed, expounding upon the dangers women pose, Mountferrat points out that "they lurke in our bosomes would subvert / This State, and us, presuming on their blood, / And partiall indulgence to their sex?" (1.3.131–37). Mountferrat's words are heavily ironic given that he represents the insidious danger to which he alludes, yet the success of his contretemps prove that women embody the fear of duplicity and infidelity. By securing his excoriation of Oriana in the special dispensation she receives as a woman, her "partial indulgence," Mountferrat exposes the affective dimension to which women are hewn: as symbols of the community's values and culture.⁴¹ Oriana's supposed collusion with the Muslim pasha sullies not only her "faire soul," and jeopardizes Malta, but also exposes women's symbolic function as the "boundary and metaphoric limit" of the nation.⁴²

A boundary must continually be patrolled and protected, and when women inhabit that liminal zone, it is their sexuality and sexual availability that requires patriarchal safeguard. The scandal of the epistle, beyond the fact that it is a clandestine, erotic communication, is that it renders both Malta and Oriana as offerings to Islamic hegemony:

Let your forces by the next even be ready, [...] the Keyes of the Castle, you shall receive at my hands: that possesst, you are Lord of *Malta*, and may soone destroy all be fire, then which I am hotter, till I embrace you, Farewell, *Your Wife*.
(1.3.156–60)

⁴¹ In different contexts both Anne McClintock, in *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Conquest* (New York: Routledge, 1995), and Geraldine Heng, in *Empire of Magic: Medieval Romance and the Politics of Cultural* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), indicate that nationalism and nation-building produces and represents women in metaphoric and symbolic ways, making them "carry the burden of culture," (Heng, *Empire of Magic*, 192). The result is that women's role in the community is limited at the same time that they are the limits of the community (McClintock, *Imperial Leather*, 354).

⁴² McClintock, *Imperial Leather*, 354.

Her appropriation of the instruments of access (knowledge of events, points of entry, and literal keys), illustrates the disruptive capacity of women, that they can use their position within the community to occasion its ruin. Moreover, the construction of her desire, its heat and illicit orientation reiterates the dangers of unbounded female sexuality. To manifest her own burning sexual needs Oriana will allow Malta to burn. Indeed, the conflation of island with woman furthers the metaphorical construction of women as a geographical space conquered and possessed by nations—men—locked in imperial contest. To be sure, the letter is counterfeit, yet the ease with which it testifies against her, challenging her “spotlesse” virtue, puts pressure on her symbolic fairness (2.5.89). Oriana’s apparent collusion with the pasha uncovers the sexual power of women, the mechanics of their agency, as well as the necessity of keeping them controlled, for, the play claims, if women are unfettered from the constraints of propriety and patriarchy, society as a whole is at risk.

Oriana’s ordeal and the repeated trials of virtue that follow rehabilitate her character through the generic conventions of romance, which stabilize Malta’s community by projecting and transferring the anxieties engendered by women onto a more appropriate figure of radical difference. The East–West, Muslim–Christian, and Ottoman–European contact zone of the play’s Mediterranean setting, creates a fluid and transformative geographical space within which romance *topoi*, such as the quest or travel motif and the “experience of the strange and remote,” operate.⁴³ These generic features contour Oriana’s role in the play: her quest and that of her protectors is to unequivocally prove her innocence and thereby reaffirm her cultural value and, consequently, that of the nation; her encounter with the strange is the ubiquitous danger of habitation in the eastern Mediterranean: contact with and potential conversion to Islam. Indeed, the pasha of Tripoli’s proposal encodes this exact possibility, as it, too, draws on romance tropes, like Saracen rulers’ ardent passion for Christian women and exogamous marriage.⁴⁴

While the generic conventions of romance may call for a journey through which characters encounter and overcome obstacles, Oriana’s travels and travails remain within the bounds of Malta even as her metaphorical ambit crosses the divide between life and death. Oriana’s itinerary proceeds from her elevated position as the sister of the grand master, to that of traitor for her apparent conspiracy with a Muslim enemy and, later, to unfaithful wife, and terminates with the restoration of her honour, reputation, and position. Theorizing the cultural and nationalistic nodes of hagiographic, domestic romances, Geraldine Heng collates them under the rubric of the “Constance Group,” since they all feature a woman (often called Constance) who is “repeatedly an object of sexual desire, the desire of men for her,” and “institutes a new kind of

⁴³ Robinson argues that romance “emerge[s] around moments of contact, moments of expansion, moments opening the possibility of new global or cosmopolitan identities, moments in which travel and the other place take on a renewed cultural and psychic resonance” (*Islam and Early Modern English Literature*, 3).

⁴⁴ Heng, *Empire of Magic*, on Christian women and Saracen rulers, 188–91; and Robinson, *Islam and Early Modern English Literature*, on exogamous romance, 60–61.

imperialism [and] cultural hegemony.”⁴⁵ Additional elements of the narrative include a journey or exile, assault on her virtue and faith, and somatic fairness that points to the transparency of body and soul.⁴⁶ Oriana operates as a Constance-type fundamentally because she is the locus of all desire on Malta; furthermore, both the destructive and constructive ends of that desire manifest the national and imperial goals of the play. Even as it deploys the conventional trope of Muslim rulers’ desire for Christian women, the pasha of Tripoli’s suit highlights the concern for cultural ascendancy within the eastern Mediterranean. Oriana’s rejection of the pasha’s proposal, the exposure of her innocence in the plot, and her restoration of status—to that of a chaste Christian woman—reveal not just her unstinting virtue but also metaphorically recast her as the bulwark of unyielding faith, a symbol not only of valorous womanhood, but also of Malta.⁴⁷

Oriana's innocence rests in the visibility of her virtue. In order to affect the materiality of such an intangible, the play mobilizes a racial and colour-coded discourse. Addressing the gathered assembly before her trial, Oriana defends her honour and reputation by accessing the symbolism common in the early modern tropes of whiteness and blackness:

Behold me in this spotlesse white I weare,
The Embleme of my life, of all my actions,
So ye shall find my story, though I perish:
[...]

had I been practis'd,
And known the way of mischiefe, travell'd in it,
And given my blood, and honour up to reach it,
Forgot religion, and the line I sprung on,
Oh heaven, I had been fit then for thy justice,
And then in black as dark as hell, I had howl'd here.

(2.5.35-48)

Oriana discursively produces her innocence through the instrumentality of colour, exposing the symbolic registers within which colour operates, and at the same time fixing colour upon bodies and allowing somatic colour, skin, to be transparent and legible. Since we are aware that the guilty party is not the fair Oriana but in fact the black Abdella, *The Knight of Malta* invites the equation of Abdella with “mischief” or evil that is “as dark as hell.” Kim F. Hall has argued that such moments point to the increased racialization of the early modern period, for the common association of blackness with negative, radical difference—both cultural and physical—produced a “racial

45 Heng, *Empire of Magic*, 181–83.

46 Heng, *Empire of Magic*, 181–239.

47 Oriana's rejection of Mountferrat accomplishes much the same thing. Indeed, if we consider him as a renegade or apostate figure, then we can say that she faces an Islamic threat on all sides, and is firm in her rejection of Muslim men's desire for her.

discourse.”⁴⁸ In fact, this point is reinforced throughout the play as various characters observe and point out the transparency of Oriana’s fairness, which signals her honour, modesty, and virtue, and Abdella’s blackness, which is persistently constructed in hellish and demonic terms. Norandine, the Danish captain of Malta’s sea forces, tells Oriana that she has nothing to fear from the trial because he can read her innocence in the whiteness of her hands: “Give me your fair hands [...] / As white as this I see your Innocence, / As spotlesse, and as pure” (2.5.68–70). When confirming Abdella’s guilt once all of the plots are revealed, Norandine’s vicious attack relies on the negative symbolic register in which her blackness circulates, “she fears not damning: hell fire cannot parch her blacker then [sic] she is” (5.2.153–54). The polarities of colour and morality supplement those of religion, so that Oriana’s fairness buttresses her purity and, consequently, her Christianity, just as Abdella’s blackness confirms her Muslim identity.

Oriana’s multiple trials mentioned above not only affirm the virtue and morality of the play’s protagonists, but also imbue whiteness with symbolic signification. Thus, its opposite must be similarly legible. I read the mobilization of the instrumentality of race or colour as forging a definite link between blackness and Islam. The connection rests on Abdella’s similarity to and difference from another woman, Lucinda, Norandine’s Ottoman captive, who is undeniably Muslim, yet, significantly, marked as appropriate for conversion. Just as Oriana’s journey illustrates the discursive and symbolic potential of hagiographic romance—wherein the heroine’s suffering manifests ideal feminine virtue and reinforces patriarchal order—Lucinda mimics the Saracen woman who is transformed by superior religious, cultural, and imperial values. *The Knight of Malta* presents multiple scenes where men express the hope that “she will be Christian” (3.4.132). While the erotic gaze and energies of Christian men can legitimately be directed at Lucinda—Norandine does express the desire to sleep with her and convert her through sex—Abdella is always, because of her blackness, beyond the economy of conversion and licit sexuality.⁴⁹ Abdella’s blackness serves two purposes at the end of the play: to emphasize her difference from Lucinda and to graft black firmly on to Muslim. Thus, Lucinda’s Muslim—but fair—body can be appropriated into Malta’s “imagined community,” even as her conversion problematizes such inclusion.

Mediating and transgressing the borders the play establishes between Oriana and Abdella, Lucinda embodies multiple registers of radical difference, which are successively eroded in order to reverse the motif of dissolution of self into other. She is introduced as an Ottoman captive of the Maltese captain, Norandine. As booty Lucinda is nothing more than a warm, sexually available body. She manages to escape gang rape, however, through her claims of chastity, and her articulation of nobility and virtue: “My liberty, I kneele not for; mine honour, / (If ever virtuous honour toucht your heart yet) / Make deere, and precious, sir” (2.1.169–71). Noting that she “speaks finely,” with a

⁴⁸ Kim F. Hall, *Things of Darkness Economies of Race and Gender in Early Modern England* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), 6.

⁴⁹ The exchange is between Miranda and Norandine, where the pirate tells Miranda that he should send her to him, if Miranda is unwilling to have sex with her. Lucinda is seen as an available and desirable sexual partner, and someone who can be converted (3.4.17–29). For a discussion of the assimilability of other women into European cultural hegemony see Loomba, “Delicious Traffick.”

“good” “tongue,” Norandine agrees to let her serve “the Noble Gentleman” Miranda (2.1.172; 182; 180). Lucinda’s desire to preserve her honour and her appeal to virtue presents an obvious distinction between her and Abdella. Lucinda’s acceptance into the Christian fold comes through the timely revelation that Collonna, another of Miranda’s servants, is actually Lucinda’s presumed-dead husband, Angelo. He had been captured by the Ottomans when they overran his island home, and as a slave in Constantinople, fell in love with Lucinda, convinced her to convert, and they both escaped the capital without consummating their marriage for fear of Ottoman laws regarding inter-religious sex, a capital offence only when it concerned Muslim women and men of different faiths.⁵⁰ The deadly fear of the consequences of their inter-religious—the inter-racial implication of their marriage is never mentioned—union is quite justified, yet, more importantly, as Bindu Malieckal has pointed out, the play characterizes Lucinda’s captivity and conversion to Christianity, not just as spiritual liberation, but also a literal one, for as she says “Turkish women” were often seen as “the victims of an Islamic tyrant.”⁵¹ The men of Malta, while uneasily representing the Islamic tyrant in their own erotic desire for Lucinda, free her from the oppressive Muslim society that only sees her as a sexual object.

The play consequently attempts to fix its ideological claim by advancing the ennobling effects of Christian virtue and chastity through Lucinda’s interaction with Miranda. During her service in Miranda’s household, Lucinda operates within the modalities of Romance, as the noble Saracen maiden already inclined toward Christianity.⁵² Indeed, she even says “I am half a Christian, / The other half, I’ll pray for” (3.4.159–60). However, in its acknowledgement of Lucinda’s split subjectivity, the play reveals that she is still, dangerously Muslim and as such she is also a seductive, Muslim temptress. Exposing the routine orientation of inter-religious sexual desire, Ania Loomba notes that:

The most common form of sexual transgression had in fact involved Christian men and Muslim women. In stories of Christians turning Turk that circulated in early modern times, Muslim women are temptresses who ensnare Christian men into a licentious faith [...] but such fears are theatrically allayed by either the destruction of such women or their own conversions to Christianity and marriages to Christian men.⁵³

50 We see a similar fear enacted in *The Renegado* when Donusa and Vitelli are sentenced to death for their liaison. Moreover, early modern travelogues are quite clear in warning readers about the dangers of having sex with Muslim women: that it is a lethal offence. See William Lithgow’s *The totall discourse of the rare adventures, and painful peregrinations...*, where he discusses the punishment of death given to women who engage in adultery and to Christian men who are caught having sex with Muslim women.

51 Malieckal, “‘Hell’s Perfect Character,’” 61.

52 Warren discusses the narrative of a Muslim princess who convert to Christianity under the guidance of French captives held by her father in his article on Orderic Vital’s *Historia Ecclesiastica*, Book 10. See F. M. Warren, “The Enamoured Moslem Princess in Orderic Vital and the French Epic,” *PMLA* 3 (1914): 341–58. for a fuller discussion. See also Heng, *Empire of Magic*.

53 Loomba, “Delicious Traffick,” 214.

When Miranda tests her virtue, there is an opaque moment in the text where his motives and desires, whether he will succumb to her allure, become difficult to determine. Indeed, during his trial of her virtue *he* comes perilously close to losing his own: "I'll try you a great deale further: prethee to bed; / I love thee, and so well: come kiss me once more; / Is a maidenhead ill bestow'd o' me?" (3.4.118–20). The modalities of difference animating *The Knight of Malta* require that women circulate within the erotic economy as objects of exchange and use; however, Lucinda complicates this telos because she represents the alluring but always dangerous other woman, who can prove fatal to the Christian man.⁵⁴ The sexuality that draws men to her exposes her connection with Abdella, yet her claims to honour, virtue, and pseudo-Christianity allow her to operate in a register congruent with the morality valorized by the Maltese and symbolized in Oriana.

Despite her Ottoman heritage and Islamic religion, Lucinda possesses a spiritual and literal fairness which Abdella lacks. In fact, after Miranda has assured himself of her chaste nature, he calls her his "fair, and vertuous maid" (3.4.156). I have, above, uncovered the multiple valences of the rhetoric of fairness, and I believe the play's ideological investment in the taxonomy of colour, its racial calculus, illustrates that Miranda's use of fair as a descriptor for Lucinda indicates not only her moral character but also her somatic whiteness, which contributes to isolate Abdella as the sole symbol of radical difference at the same time that it makes Lucinda a "sister in the skin" to Oriana.⁵⁵ The skin as a legible sign, confirms the appropriateness of the sexual desire that has been oriented toward Lucinda by the Christian defenders of Malta, since her whiteness makes her a worthy target of their erotic inclinations. The skin, simultaneously, belies her nature by proving her to be treacherous and disloyal to her *natural* religion and people. Lucinda's conversion validates the religious and cultural superiority of Malta/Christianity over the Ottoman Empire/Islam; however, it is problematized by her aggressive sexuality and defiance of patriarchal and cultural authority.⁵⁶ Unlike Oriana, whose white skin and spotless nature form a cultural mirror of transparency, Lucinda

54 Again, I see Lucinda being a character similar to Donusa, drawn to the shape and discourse of European manhood. Lucinda is warned by Collonna to not go to Miranda, but she does, because she wants to test herself and be close to him. While both parties remain innocent throughout the scene, the temptation to act and to experience sexual desire charges this scene with the dangers of close contact with the other and contains the threatening potential of Miranda "turning" Turk.

55 Citing the work of Jacqueline de Weever, Geraldine Heng notes that "the whitening of the Muslim beauties, who are often explicitly depicted as white- or light-skinned [...] aimed at reducing the other to the same," and reflected "one modality of colonization" in such narratives (*Empire of Magic*, 187).

56 On noting the distinction between the Constance figure and the renegade Saracen princesses, Heng writes: "Utterly inconstant to their religious and political communities, and often slyly treacherous to their families, these Saracen princesses tend to be written by cultural fantasy as desiring, sexually aggressive agent, whose religious conversion is part of their bold enactment of their erotic attraction to particular Christian men. Part of the fantasy of empire, as colonial and conquest literatures of later periods will amply teach us, is that the colonized, in the form of their women, desire the colonizers" (*Empire of Magic*, 187).

reflects a paradox that the play carefully conceals through the overdetermined discourse of colour. In other words, Lucinda's fair skin simultaneously belies and testifies to her nature. It hides her Muslim identity even as it positions her as available to Christian conversion. In many ways, then, Lucinda suggests a greater danger to the society of Malta, because she can freely move in it without her somatic difference calling attention to her real or imagined religious and cultural difference. I conceive of the function of colour here not to be unlike that of circumcision, the literal inscription of religious identity that marks the bodies of Muslim men but is absent from those of Muslim women.⁵⁷ Thus, the spotless and necessarily fair bodies of Muslim women can be baptized and their former religion washed away. I read Abdella's blackness as serving the same function as circumcision. Just as circumcision excludes Jewish and Muslim men—in early modern drama—from baptism, so, too, does Abdella's blackness imprint religious difference and inassimilability on to her. Consequently, at the end of *The Knight of Malta* we have a celebration of the marriage between Lucinda and Angelo (previously Collonna) and the condemnation of the monstrous alliance between Abdella and Mountferrat. The contrast exposes the play's ideological commitments while one woman is blessed because her union constructs a cultural and imperial victory over Islam, the other, despite her own union with a Christian man, is rejected and ousted from the community since her blackness circulates as a sign of the trenchant radical difference of a kind of Islam (militant and destructive) that cannot be transformed or converted.

The Knight of Malta concludes with the reunion of Oriana and Gomera, the revelation of Lucinda's conversion and marriage, and Miranda's ascension to knighthood as a member of the Order of St. John, in a triumphant assertion of Christian valour, virtue, morality, and chastity. In addition to negating the anxiety attached to the triangular relationship between Oriana, Gomera, and Miranda, the play preserves the symbols of the community, the chaste, white woman and the knighthood, through strategies of transfer, substitution, and obfuscation. The cohesive triumph of order is alternately marred and reinforced by Norandine's fixation on Abdella's blackness. The taxonomy of colour and its alignment with religious difference must become the issue upon which to terminate the multiple examinations of difference within the play because it creates the illusion of visible and stable cultural borders. The resolution requires the expulsion of the agents of disruption; thus, Abdella, is rewarded for her crimes by being given the object of her sexual desire—Mountferrat—and both are commanded to leave the island. By ending with an allusion to the possible monstrous miscegenated offspring of this union, "Away

57 Judaism and Islam share the ritual of circumcision; indeed, in other early modern plays, such as Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* and Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta*, where we find Jewish women converting, we observe that the absence of such a mark on the body facilitates the conversion. Loomba also points the absence of a physical marker on Muslim as Jewish women as a sign of their fitness for conversion, and the connection between the uncircumcised and fair of white body ("The Color of Patriarchy", 17–34). For a more complete discussion of circumcision and early modern drama, see Julia Reinhard Lupton, "Othello Circumcised: Shakespeare and the Pauline Discourse of Nations," *Representations* 57 (1997): 73–89.

French stallion, now you have a Barbary mare of your own, go leap her, and engender young devillings," the play sublimates the inter-racial and inter-religious anxieties contained in the marriage of Lucinda and Angelo (5.2.279–80), in addition to negating the anxiety attached to the triangular relationship between Oriana, Gomera, and Miranda. The simultaneous assimilation and expulsion of Muslims emplots a discursive trajectory that will construct Muslims who challenge and defy the cultural hegemonies asserted by the English and Europeans as racialized. The ambit of Islam's disruptive energies is, seemingly, contained within the figure of Abdella and her ejection from the "imagined community." Nevertheless, Malta remains at risk; the Ottoman Empire continues to threaten and trespass on its boundaries as is evidenced by the need for the Order of St. John. In 1618 it was certainly possible to imagine and stage the successful rout of Islamic aggression; however, that construction remained just that, a fantasy of victory in the eastern Mediterranean where the power of and force of the Ottoman Empire seemed virtually unstoppable. *The Knight of Malta* writes its imperial and cultural anxieties, its fears of the fluidity of the Mediterranean and its economy of traffic, travel, exchange, and conflict on the body of a black, Muslim woman, showing that managing the threat of Islamic hegemony requires strategies that will make it legible and thus racialized. The black body, because it is constructed as inassimilable, resists the episteme of conversion, movement, and translation that encode the cultural investments of English imaginative writing about the Mediterranean.