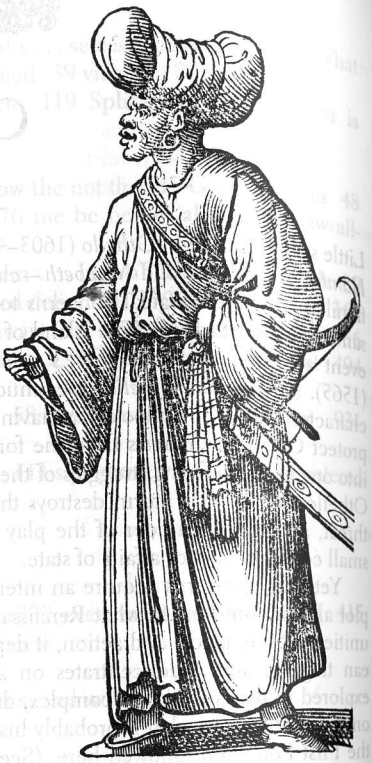
Othello

ittle seems at stake in *Othello* (1603–4). The tragedies with which it is often compared—*lamlet*, *King Lear*, and *Macbeth*—chronicle the fall of kings and princes, connecting nilial and psychological concerns to the fate of nations. And *Othello* does feint in the ame direction early on. The island of Cyprus is threatened by a Turkish fleet—a crucial vent absent from Shakespeare's primary source, Giraldi Cinthio's *Gli Hecatommithi* 1565). (In general, *Othello* owes much of its plot to Cinthio but little of its language, haracterization, or outlook.) By having the Venetian state send Othello to the island to rotect Christian interests from the forces of Islam, Shakespeare projects his protagonist nto one of the defining struggles of the age, particularly in the Mediterranean. But before)thello can arrive, a storm destroys the Turkish armada and temporarily eliminates the hreat, and the remainder of the play concentrates on domestic concerns seemingly of mall consequence for affairs of state.

Yet these concerns acquire an intensity rarely equaled in Shakespearean drama. The lot almost conforms to what Renaissance dramatic theorists considered the Aristotelian nities of time, place, and action; it deploys the smallest cast of characters in Shakespear-an tragedy; and it concentrates on a single theme, jealousy. Further, that theme is xplored in psychologically complex, disturbing racial and sexual terms that Shakespeare nly accentuates in what is probably his revised, expanded version of the play preserved in he First Folio and followed here. (See the Textual Note.) The development of the plot eems both to undermine and to validate racist and misogynist stereotypes. Not surpris-ngly, the play, always one of Shakespeare's most popular on the stage, has produced pow-rful contradictory reactions.

In the opening scene, Iago, Othello's ensign, warns Brabanzio, a Venetian senator, that an old black ram / Is tupping your white ewe" (1.1.88–89)—an allusion to the marriage f "black" Othello to Brabanzio's "white" daughter, Desdemona. Roderigo helpfully xplains to Brabanzio that his "fair daughter" has been "transported . . . / To the gross lasps of a lascivious Moor" (1.1.123, 125–27). The strategy of playing upon the old man's ear of miscegenation proves effective. Brabanzio cannot believe, he tells Othello, that his laughter would ever have "run . . . to the sooty bosom / Of such a thing as thou" (1.2.71–72). The Folio revisions of Act 1 expand the roles of Roderigo and Brabanzio and empha-ize the charge that Othello used magic to win Desdemona. The language of color here acks the full racist import it has since acquired, but it certainly draws on a long-standing thical association of blackness and evil, Elizabethan prejudice toward black Africans resi-lent in England, and the early stages of the slave trade. Yet Shakespeare also followed less rominent, more sympathetic traditions that highlighted aristocratic Moors. The play uickly undermines Brabanzio's claim: Desdemona's love for Othello has led *her* to woo im, and the Venetian Senate duly ratifies their marriage. At this point, against the cultural orms of both Shakespeare's time and subsequent centuries, *Othello* celebrates its protago-ist's grandeur, female assertiveness and autonomy, and their result: an interracial marriage etween Venetian and Moor.

But, of course, Othello murders Desdemona, convinced by Iago that his wife has taken is lieutenant and second-in-command, Cassio, as a lover. The meaning of the play pri-narily depends on how one understands Othello's movement from nobly loving husband o insanely jealous killer. Critics and audiences alike have often agreed with Brabanzio, eeing in the conclusion the triumph of Othello's homicidal, inferior African essence over is civilized, Christian, European surface. When they have defended Desdemona's and)thello's nobility, they have denied that Othello was black. Basically, those who consid-



Two views of "the Moor," suggesting the range of images Shakespeare may have had in mind. On left: Moroccan ambassador to Queen Elizabeth I (1600); on right: "a Moor," from Cesare Vecellio, *Degli habiti* (1590).

ered Othello beastly thought he was black; those who found him noble were sure he was white. The compromise resolution—at odds with the preponderance of the evidence—suggests the underlying racist agreement between these seemingly antithetical conclusions about Othello's skin color: "Othello was an Oriental, not a Negro: a stately Arab of the best caste." These interpretations, though indicative of cultural mores and inadvertently faithful to Shakespeare's source, say little about *Othello* itself. Yet the play does link Othello's behavior to his ethnicity by making him simultaneously exotic and representative: his degeneration results from his partly external relationship to Europe, a position that encourages him to go "native"—not by reverting to African primitivism but, ironically, by internalizing the destructive norms of Christian society.

The agent of this internalization, Iago, speaks over two hundred lines more than Othello, freely offering motives for his behavior. In the opening scene, he explains his desire for revenge: Othello has chosen Cassio, an unproven gentleman, as his lieutenant rather than Iago, the battle-tested common soldier,

> of whom his eyes had seen the proof
> At Rhodes, at Cyprus, and on other grounds
> Christened and heathen.
>
> (1.1.27–29)

His class-based resentment links him to other figures in Shakespearean tragedy who attack older men standing in the way of their social advancement—Edmund in *King Lear*, Octavius Caesar in *Antony and Cleopatra*, and Macbeth. Like them, he destroys his more archaic, chivalric foe by acting in a value-free fashion that turns others into mere instruments, mere means to his ends. But Iago, who in *Gli Hecatommithi* seeks revenge not on Othello but on Desdemona when she refuses to commit adultery with him, is also the resident misogynist of the play. He soon expresses the fear that Othello has made love to his own wife, Emilia:

I do suspect the lusty Moor
Hath leapt into my seat, the thought whereof
Doth, like a poisonous mineral, gnaw my inwards.
(2.1.282–84)

These assertions do not reveal the sole motivation, however. Iago also enjoys the sport of ruining Othello's life. In this respect, he descends from the Vice figure of the earlier morality plays—a semisecularized version of the devil who is colloquially intimate with the predominantly lower-class audience and who employs his comic verve to plot the downfall of his virtuous antagonists. (Richard III is Shakespeare's most extended earlier experiment in adapting this figure.) Iago's diabolism is emphasized throughout *Othello*. "'Swounds [By Christ's wounds], sir, you are one of those that will not serve God if the devil bid you" (1.1.110–11), he tells Brabanzio with the linguistic duplicity and dramatic irony that mark his character: it almost *is* the devil who invokes God to urge Brabanzio not to "serve God" but to commit an ungodly act. Similarly, he explains,

When devils will the blackest sins put on,
They do suggest at first with heavenly shows,
As I do now.
(2.3.325–27)

Iago's use of the word "devil" gradually seems to infect the other characters. Cassio finds the devil in wine (2.3.263–86); Othello equates the devil with Desdemona (3.4.40; 4.1.41, 235, 239); both fail to detect Iago. Emilia, who has a more disabused view of human behavior, guesses what is happening though not until too late the identity of the perpetrator. As she tells Othello, "If any wretch ha' put this in your head, / Let heaven requite it with the serpent's curse" (4.2.16–17). She suspects that "some eternal villain," in order "to get some office," has slandered Desdemona, an act for which she urges that "hell gnaw his bones" (4.2.134–40). After Othello admits killing Desdemona but before Iago's role emerges, she accuses Othello of being a devil (5.2.140, 142). But it is Othello who ultimately draws the appropriate inference.

OTHELLO I look down towards his feet, but that's a fable.
[*To* IAGO] If that thou beest a devil I cannot kill thee.
[*He wounds* IAGO]
. . . . . .
IAGO I bleed, sir, but not killed.
(5.2.292–94)

The "fable" is that the devil's feet are cloven hooves. If Iago is the devil, he cannot die, a point he mockingly makes by insisting he is "not killed."

This imagery of diabolism enables the play to offer incompatible accounts of both Iago and Othello. The Romantic critic Samuel Taylor Coleridge accurately described the villain's behavior, without fully recognizing its duality, when he saw in Iago the "motive-hunting of a motiveless malignity." In one view, Iago is plausibly driven by resentment—"I know my price, I am worth no worse a place" (1.1.11)—and by an obsessive jealousy that "doth . . . gnaw my inwards" (2.1.284). He is thus part of the psychological drama, afflicting Othello with what he himself feels. But this realistic treatment inevitably turns Othello into the "gull," "dolt," "dull Moor," "murderous coxcomb," and "fool" Emilia accuses him of being (5.2.170, 232, 240). Similarly, all the virtuous characters are "credulous fools . . . caught" (4.1.42) in the trap of a merely clever young man. Alternatively, however, Iago has no fixed essence at all: "I am not what I am" (1.1.65). Operating inside and outside the narrative movement of the play, Iago, like the Vice before him, sometimes seems more a dramatic function than a psychologically realized character. As a devilish figure, not only does he interact with the audience and display improvisationally manipulative acting skills; he also raises the stakes and thus gives the play a religious cast in which the fate of Othello's soul is in the balance and Othello's failure, in repudiating his good

"angel" (5.2.140) and succumbing to temptation, reenacts the Fall. Faced with a supernatural adversary, Othello's nobility is less tarnished. In short, the long-standing debate about the protagonist's character is partly inspired by the duality of Iago and hence cannot be resolved: Othello is both culpable dupe and noble victim.

His destruction is linked not only to Christian theology but also to Christian civilization's secular mores. Othello woos Desdemona by movingly narrating his adventures; Iago destroys Othello (and Desdemona) by persuading him to internalize different narratives of his life and her nature, composed out of the repugnant stereotypes of European society. Othello's degradation involves accepting the views of both Brabanzio and Iago. After failing to prevent Desdemona's marriage, Brabanzio warns Othello: "Look to her, Moor, if thou hast eyes to see. / She has deceived her father, and may thee" (1.3.291–92). Iago retrieves the thought:

> IAGO She did deceive her father, marrying you,
> And when she seemed to shake and fear your looks
> She loved them most.
> OTHELLO And so she did.
> (3.3.210–12)

Similarly, Brabanzio accuses Othello of being a "foul thief" who has stolen his "jewel" (1.2.63, 1.3.194). This patriarchal view of women as objects possessed by men then informs Othello's lament:

> O curse of marriage,
> That we can call these delicate creatures ours
> And not their appetites!
> (3.3.272–74)

Again, Brabanzio's denial that Desdemona could possibly love Othello "against all rules of nature" (1.3.101) is effectively recycled by Iago, who accuses her of "thoughts unnatural" (3.3.238). Othello agrees literally—"Haply for I am black" (3.3.267)—and metaphorically, in a passage added in the Folio revision: "My name . . . is now begrimed and black / As mine own face" (3.3.391–93). And when Iago describes Cassio and Desdemona in the play's recurrent animal imagery—"as prime as goats, as hot as monkeys" (3.3.408)—Othello dutifully echoes, "Goats and monkeys!" (4.1.260).

But Othello's sexual loathing is also inspired by Desdemona's directness:

> That I did love the Moor to live with him,
> My downright violence and storm of fortunes
> May trumpet to the world.
> (1.3.247–49)

This erotic boldness, though it makes Desdemona more appealing, seems to unnerve Othello, who wants his wife with him not "to comply with heat . . . / But to be free and bounteous to her mind" (1.3.262–64). Christian doctrine sometimes considered excessive marital sexual pleasure to be a form of adultery. Othello registers both the allure and the threat of such excess when he is reunited with Desdemona on Cyprus:

> If it were now to die
> 'Twere now to be most happy. . . .
> . . . . . .
> I cannot speak enough of this content.
> It stops me here, it is too much of joy.
> (2.1.186–94)

Earlier, Iago plots "after some time to abuse Othello's ears / That he is too familiar with his wife" (1.3.377–78). "He" is presumably Cassio, to whom Iago has referred two lines earlier. But the more proximate mention of Othello and the confusion of pronouns—since

"his" must refer to Othello—point toward the conclusion that Othello experiences his own sexual desire as adulterous, that immediately following what was presumably the initial sexual consummation of his marriage he projects this desire onto Cassio, and that he then punishes his feelings by punishing Desdemona.

The play offers various explanations for Othello's suggestibility. Most obviously, Iago expresses Othello's own unconscious racial and sexual anxieties. But Othello is also out of his element. A soldier since childhood, he knows little of peacetime urban existence. As a colonial possession of Venice and military outpost in what was for Christians the war between civilization and barbarism, Cyprus seems a place where Othello should feel at home. But when the Turkish threat fails to materialize, the island, though it remains the characteristic other world of Shakespearean drama in which fundamental change occurs, assumes several of the features of Venetian society. Othello thus has scant basis for challenging Iago's reductiveness: "In Venice they do let God see the pranks / They dare not show their husbands" (3.3.206–7). Such claims carry conviction partly because they are not entirely false.

> DESDEMONA Dost thou in conscience think—tell me, Emilia—
> That there be women do abuse their husbands
> In such gross kind?
> EMILIA There be some such, no question.
> (4.3.59–61)

But Emilia, unlike Iago, considers female adultery not a sign of the depravity of women but tit for tat: "Then let them use us well, else let them know / The ills we do, their ills instruct us so" (4.3.100–01). Shakespeare's Folio revisions enlarge Emilia's part, stressing not only her denunciation of sexual inequality and the sexual double standard but also her concluding heroic defiance of Othello and Iago, a defiance that leads to Iago's undoing. These changes, like others in the Folio, reduce the cynical disillusionment of the play and increase the efficacy of virtue while underscoring the defects of the culture in which Othello and Desdemona operate.

Iago's racial insinuations influence Othello in part not because they are true but because they are the norm in Venetian society. Brabanzio's ravings are unwittingly echoed in the Duke's ostensible repudiation of them: "Your son-in-law is far more fair than black" (1.3.289)—where the praise depends on the negative connotations of blackness. Finally, Othello's willingness to trust circumstantial evidence is also standard: " 'Tis probable, and palpable to thinking," Brabanzio argues, that Othello has used magic on Desdemona (1.2.77). "I know not if't be true" that Othello is Emilia's lover, Iago concedes, "but I, for mere suspicion in that kind, / Will do as if for surety" (1.3.370–72). Thus Iago can get away without "ocular proof" (3.3.365):

> But yet I say,
> If imputation, and strong circumstances
> Which lead directly to the door of truth,
> Will give you satisfaction, you might ha't.
> (3.3.410–13)

In short, with the passion of the recently converted, Othello is driven to murder not by reversion to African barbarism but by adherence to an extreme, perverse version of the logic of Christian society.

Why has Othello's failure been so deeply moving to audiences and readers since the seventeenth century? The answer is that *Othello*, unlike its source, emphasizes that Othello and Desdemona are special people who have done a special thing. Their unusual nobility of soul—supplemented in Shakespeare's reworking of his source by a comparable elevation in social status—leads most of the other characters to applaud a marriage that bridges gaps in age, nation, ethnicity, and culture. Especially when the central role is performed by actors of sub-Saharan descent, performances of *Othello*, despite the play's

apparent indifference to politics, have seemed to strike a blow for freedom—on the European continent following the revolutions of 1848, in czarist Russia on the eve of the liberation of the serfs, in World War II America, and in the final years of South African apartheid. The 1943 American *Othello*, which featured the American theater's first kiss between a black actor and a white actress, was the longest-running production of any Shakespearean play in the United States.

The couple's nobility, however, is grist for Iago's mill. Desdemona's boldness and generosity of spirit are evidence of her affair with Cassio. Othello's "free and open nature, / That thinks men honest that but seem to be so," causes him to "be led by th' nose / As asses are" (1.3.381–84) by the ironically titled "honest Iago" (1.3.293 and elsewhere). Moreover, before Othello becomes jealous, he has touchingly but ominously staked everything on Desdemona:

> My life upon her faith.
>
> (1.3.293)
>
> Perdition catch my soul
> But I do love thee, and when I love thee not,
> Chaos is come again.
>
> (3.3.91–93)

Iago can also count on Othello's military resoluteness:

> I'll see before I doubt; when I doubt, prove;
> And on the proof, there is no more but this:
> Away at once with love or jealousy.
>
> (3.3.194–96)

But Othello's precipitousness leaves room for neither love nor jealousy. The play's famous dual time schemes preclude either development. On the one hand, Othello asserts that Desdemona "with Cassio hath the act of shame / A thousand times committed" (5.2.218–19). On the other, he apparently murders Desdemona the day after they arrive on Cyprus. These incompatible chronologies function like Iago's duality. Allusions to the passage of time make it physically possible for Desdemona to have committed adultery but turn Othello into a fool. By contrast, the compressed dramatized concatenation of events makes it psychologically plausible, as it is not in Shakespeare's source, for Othello to act before Iago's plot unravels.

The intensity of the short chronology is sustained by Othello's eloquent evocation of his predicament, a predicament that Shakespeare especially stresses in his revised version: "I think my wife be honest, and think she is not. / I think that thou art just, and think thou art not" (3.3.389–90). More generally, Othello renders his pathos in an imaginative, idealizing poetry that contrasts with Iago's prose and that earlier won Desdemona:

> O, now for ever
> Farewell the tranquil mind, farewell content,
> Farewell the plumèd troops and the big wars
> That makes ambition virtue!
>
> (3.3.352–55)

As he carries a torch into his bedroom to kill his sleeping wife, his simple language captures the symbolic significance of his intentions: "Put out the light, and then put out the light" (5.2.7). Correspondingly, as Othello's suspicions of Desdemona grow, the play emphasizes her innocence by dramatizing her obedience to Othello. This pattern climaxes just before her death:

DESDEMONA O, falsely, falsely murdered!

. . . . . .

A guiltless death I die.

EMILIA O, who hath done this deed?

DESDEMONA Nobody, I myself. Farewell.

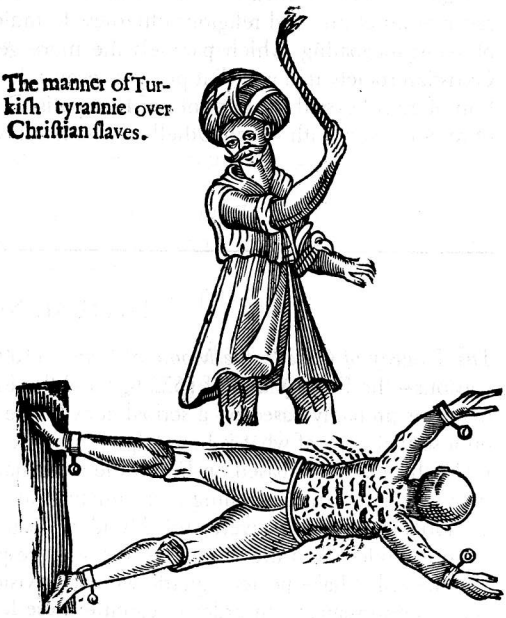
Commend me to my kind lord. O, farewell!

(5.2.126–34)

The meaning of her words is unclear, however. The Folio revisions increase Desdemona's part in Act 4 so as to emphasize her innocent victimization: a loyally subordinate Desdemona is more conventionally reassuring than the Desdemona who flouted convention to marry Othello. This diminution of female autonomy marks a retreat from the bolder position in the opening scenes of the play and arguably in the earlier version as a whole. On the other hand, Desdemona's final words may be seen as a masochistic submissiveness every bit as unsettling as her earlier, franker behavior.

A similar uncertainty characterizes the end of Othello's life. Othello believes that in killing Desdemona, he is administering secular justice or performing a religious ritual, but his rage forces him to "call what I intend to do / A murder, which I thought a sacrifice" (5.2.69–70). Faced with the truth about Desdemona, he again assumes the role of minister of justice, executing himself as he had earlier sought to execute his wife. The despairing bravery and moral scrupulousness of this act are antithetical to the morally furtive and anticlimactic behavior of the protagonist in *Gli Hecatommithi*. Yet if suicide conjures up disinterested justice or Roman heroism, it also suggests Christian despair and certainty of damnation. Similarly, one may or may not agree with Othello's concluding self-evaluation as "an honourable murderer" or as "one not easily jealous" (5.2.300, 354).

More striking still is the persistence of Othello's guilt about marital intercourse and the association of sex with death suggested by his earlier assertion "If it were now to die / 'Twere now to be most happy" (2.1.186–87). The fatal "napkin," or handkerchief, indicative of aristocratic privilege but important because of its very triviality, symbolically captures these inexpressible feelings. Presented, according to Othello, to his mother by "an Egyptian . . . charmer," the handkerchief combines the magic and ethnic exoticism that Othello earlier repudiates. It enabled his mother to "subdue my father / Entirely to her love" (3.4.54–58). Or perhaps it did not. At the end of the play, Othello offers a more prosaic, incompatible account: "It was a handkerchief, an antique token / My father gave my mother" (5.2.223–24). "Spotted with strawberries" (3.3.440) in *Othello* but not in Shakespeare's source, it evokes the blood Desdemona loses with her virginity on the marriage bed. Desdemona has Emilia "lay on my bed my wedding sheets" (4.2.108), a decision that inadvertently suggests Othello's underlying sexual loathing and self-loathing as



Compare Othello's last speech before killing himself (5.2.361–65). Woodcut, from F. Knight, *A Relation of Seaven Years Slaverie Under the Turkes of Argeire* (1640).

he comes to kill her: "Thy bed, lust-stained, shall with lust's blood be spotted" (5.1.37). This association between sexual pleasure and death is then grimly enacted. Overwhelmed by the attraction of his sleeping wife, Othello cannot resist kissing her: "Be thus when thou art dead, and I will kill thee / And love thee after" (5.2.18–19). He consciously echoes this necrophilic perversity at his own death: "I kissed thee ere I killed thee. No way but this: / Killing myself, to die upon a kiss" (5.2.368–69). In Renaissance English, to "die" could mean to "have an orgasm." Only in death can Othello guiltlessly experience the adulterous pleasure of marriage.

The alien connotations of the handkerchief are echoed by the ethnic rhetoric of Othello's last long speech, in which the conflict of civilizations reemerges in his identification with the exotic non-European, non-Christian world. He is "like the base Indian" who "threw a pearl away / Richer than all his tribe" (5.2.356–57). He "drops tears as fast as the Arabian trees / Their medicinable gum" (5.2.359–60). Most remarkably, he asks his listeners to remind the Venetian state

> that in Aleppo once,
> Where a malignant and a turbaned Turk
> Beat a Venetian and traduced the state,
> I took by th' throat the circumcisèd dog
> And smote him thus.
> *He stabs himself*
>
> (5.2.361–65)

In Act 1, Othello was asked to defend the Venetians from the Turks—that is, to defend Christianity against a Muslim people with whom Moors were traditionally linked on religious and military grounds. An orthodox Christian and loyal servant of the state, he readily agreed. Here, in Act 5, he recalls that he had also done so once before. But this recollection is the occasion for his suicide, a deed that splits him in two. Othello is both agent and object of justice, both servant and enemy of the Christian state. He is and is not the Turk. If Iago has always lacked a unitary inner essence, so too at the end does Othello. He half assumes an ethnic and religious otherness to indicate and exorcise his guilt. The gesture of self-scapegoating, which parallels the more general scapegoating of Iago, exonerates Christian society in a way that previous events do not justify. But his unwarranted projection of guilt beyond the confines of Europe is the precondition of that noble acceptance of responsibility with which Othello so memorably leaves the world, and the play.

Walter Cohen

TEXTUAL NOTE

The Tragedy of Othello the Moore of Venice (1603–4) survives in two early authoritative versions—the First Quarto of 1622 (Q) and the First Folio of the following year (F). The quarto is probably based on a scribal copy of the author's original manuscript, the Folio on a scribal copy of what is here hypothesized to be Shakespeare's own revision. Accordingly, this edition is based on F. On the other hand, Q more accurately preserves Shakespeare's characteristic spelling and punctuation, its stage directions are fuller and more authorial (though some were probably added by the scribe), and it contains more than fifty oaths excluded from the Folio presumably in response to the Profanity Act of 1606. (It is also the only Shakespearean quarto with act divisions—possibly indicative of court or university performance.) In order to capture these features, the version printed here uses Q for these details. But it adds the roughly 160 lines from F not found in Q, and it usually prefers F to Q in the over one thousand places where their wording differs. In general, then, F is the primary source for the language, whereas Q provides the spelling, punctuation, oaths, and to some extent stage directions. Act divisions are the same in the two