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Published in the United States
by Oxford University Press Inc., New York

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First published 2006

First published as an Oxford World's Classics paperback 2006

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Data available

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Data available

ISBN 0-19-812920-3 (Hbk.) 978-0-19-812920-2
ISBN 0-19-281451-6 (Pbk.) 978-0-19-281451-7

Typeset by SNP Best-set Typesetter Ltd., Hong Kong

Printed in Great Britain by
Clays Ltd., St Ives plc., Suffolk

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Othello, the Moor of Venice

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

Edited by
MICHAEL NEILL

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THE OXFORD SHAKESPEARE

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MICHAEL NEILL, the editor of *Othello* in the Oxford Shakespeare, is Professor of English at the University of Auckland. He has also edited *Anthony and Cleopatra* for the Oxford Shakespeare.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

THE list of those who have helped me since I began work on this edition in 1997 has become a long one. I am indebted to the generosity of the Folger Shakespeare Library and of Trinity College, Cambridge, for visiting fellowships, to the New Zealand Marsden Foundation for a research award, and to the University of Auckland through grants of leave in 1997–8, 2002, and 2005. I received unstinting assistance from the staff of the libraries whose resources I have quarried, including the University of Auckland Library, the Auckland City Library, the Harvard Theatre Collection, the Library of Congress, the library of the Shakespeare Centre in Stratford-upon-Avon, the library of the London Theatre Museum, the archives of the Royal National Theatre of Great Britain, Cambridge University Library, and above all the Folger Shakespeare Library. My gratitude to the Folger includes the kindness of a long list of resident and visiting scholars, including Barbara Mowat, Gail Paster, Georgianna Ziegler, Peter Blayney, Leslie Thomson, Linda Levy Peck, the late Susan Snyder, Jeff Masten, Meredith Skura, Albert Braummüller, and Linda Austern. I am especially indebted to Professor Austern for her excellent appendix on the music in the play.

Elsewhere, Edward Pechter, Patricia Parker, Anne Barton, Jean Howard, Janet Adelman, John Kerrigan, Jocelyn Harris, Jyotsna Singh, and Graham Bradshaw have done their best to inform my critical judgement, while Paul Werstine, Tom Berger, and Mac Jackson have offered invaluable textual expertise. With exceptional consideration, Ernst Honigmann ensured that I received an advance copy of his new Arden edition; Louise Noble shared the fruits of her research into early modern medicine; and Charles Edelman was equally helpful in military matters. I am grateful above all to my colleague Bruno Ferraro for his meticulous translation of the source *novella* from Giraldo Cinthio's *Hecatommithi*.

I have learned a great deal from the insights of theatre professionals, among them Patricia Stewart, Lisa Harrow, and Bruce Purchase. I owe a particular debt to Jude Kelly and her cast from the Washington Shakespeare Company for allowing me to sit in on rehearsals for her 'photo-negative' production; and to the staff of the Brooklyn Academy of Music who made certain that I received tickets for Sam Mendes's National Theatre production when it reached Brooklyn.

Needless to say, I owe much to the patience and learning of the General Editor, Stanley Wells, as well as to the professionalism of staff at Oxford University Press, especially Frances Whistler, Sophie Goldsworthy, Tom Perridge, and my copy-editor, Christine Buckley, whose sharp eye and scholarly acumen have been invaluable. As always I am grateful to colleagues at the University of Auckland for numerous kindnesses—especially Sebastian Black, Judith Binney, Albert Wendt, Terry Sturm, Kersti Larsen, Sophie Tomlinson, and Margaret Edgcumbe. Finally, I must thank Kubé Jones-Neill, whose ungrudging support included more proofreading than any wife should be asked to undertake.

MICHAEL NEILL

For Sam Neill

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INTRODUCTION

Reception

'*Othello*', in the words of Edward Pechter, 'has become the tragedy of choice for the present generation.'¹ If the existential 'prison' of *Hamlet* was the place in which generations of post-Romantic intellectuals, following the example of Goethe and Coleridge, found the angst-ridden image of their own alienation; if, in the wake of World War II, it was the wasteland of *King Lear* that provided the mirror for humanity living under the shadow of holocaust and nuclear devastation; then, towards the close of the twentieth century, it was *Othello* that began to displace them both, as critics and directors alike began to trace in the cultural, religious, and ethnic animosities of its Mediterranean setting, the genealogy of the racial conflicts that fractured their own societies. *Othello*, the black protagonist of Murray Carlin's play *Not Now, Sweet Desdemona* had declared in 1969, '[was] the first play of the Age of Imperialism': written (as this 'Othello' reminds his white interlocutor) just ten years after the Portuguese consolidated their control of the East African littoral with the establishment of Fort Jesus in Mombasa, it necessarily also became a play about that most malign legacy of empire, colour—the first play about colour that ever was written. ... *Othello* is about colour, and nothing but colour. Carlin's reworking of Shakespeare's tragedy now has a prophetic look to it, for it is as a foundational document in the history of 'race' that much recent criticism has treated the play.

Yet *Othello* was not always approached in these terms: perhaps the most striking thing about the very earliest responses to the tragedy is that they pay no attention to what, from a modern perspective, seems its most conspicuous feature—the interracial love affair at the centre of the action. In his brief comments on the performance he saw at Oxford in 1610, the academic Henry Jackson did not even trouble to notice 'race' as an issue in the play; and his seeming indifference was shared by a mid-seventeenth century reader of plays, the clergyman Abraham Wright, whose notebooks praise the characterization of 'Iago for a rogue and Othello for a jealous husband', but make no mention of the protagonist's colour.¹ Indeed, the contention of Carlin's white antagonist that *Othello* is first and foremost a tragedy of jealousy would probably have caused little demur before the last third of the twentieth century—even if from the end of the seventeenth century, as we shall see, the hero's colour was capable of generating the most intense anxiety amongst viewers and critics alike.

However, although controversy over matters of race has played an increasingly significant role in the play's reception history, there are other, more strictly dramaturgical reasons why that history has been unusually vexed and contradictory. From the time of its first performance, somewhere between 1601 and 1604 (see [Appendix A](#)), the romantic cast of the story made *Othello* one of Shakespeare's most popular and frequently performed plays; yet its claim to rank amongst the greatest tragedies has been challenged by critics who have found its plot too strained, its characters too improbable, and its tale of marital jealousy and murder too meanly domestic to challenge comparison with *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, *Macbeth*, or even that saga of tragic infatuation, *Antony and Cleopatra*. In the theatre—despite its long dependence on the fundamentally implausible pretence that the white actor playing the hero was a black man—*Othello* has proved remarkable for its ability to overwhelm audience disbelief and

to compel extraordinary identification with the suffering of its central characters.

In the Jacobean and Caroline periods *Othello* seems to have enjoyed widespread popularity and admiration, inspiring numerous dramatic imitations, and attracting more contemporary allusions than any other Shakespeare tragedy.² It seems clear that it was equally well liked at the Globe, where it was probably first performed, and at the more exclusive Blackfriars, which Shakespeare's company used as a winter house from about 1609. We know of revivals in 1610 (at the Globe), in 1629 and in 1633 (at the Blackfriars); but in a period of scanty records, there are likely to have been many performances for which no documentation survives. *Othello*'s appearance at Oxford in 1610 indicates not only that it was popular enough to be taken on tour, but that it was expected to appeal to an elite university audience as well. Evidently it was just as highly regarded at Court, which was the site of its first recorded performance, at the Banqueting House in Whitehall on 1 November 1604. It was brought back as one of the entertainments for Princess Elizabeth's wedding to the Elector Palatine in the winter of 1612/13, and performed again for Charles I and Henrietta Maria in 1636. The play's frequent revivals may help to account for the fact that it has been preserved in two distinct versions, the Quarto of 1622 and the Folio of 1623, whose differences reflect the exceptional fluidity of performance texts in the early modern theatre (see [Appendix B](#)).

Othello's early popularity was maintained after the Interregnum, when it was probably the first of Shakespeare's tragedies to grace the re-established London stage; and it enjoyed continuing favour throughout the Restoration period. This was, however, also the period that witnessed the earliest systematic critique of the play—one that set the terms for a great deal of subsequent debate. In his *Short View of Tragedy* (1693), Thomas Rymer prefaced a blistering attack on Shakespearean dramaturgy by admitting the high esteem in which this work was held: noting that '[f]rom all the tragedies acted on our English stage, *Othello* is said to bear the bell away', he identified Iago's temptation of Othello (3.3) as 'the top scene, the scene that raises *Othello* above all other tragedies on our theatres' (pp. 86, 118). But he denounced the play for the rank implausibility of its characterization and plotting: '[n]othing', he wrote, 'is more odious in nature than an improbable lie, and, certainly, never was any play fraught, like this of *Othello*, with improbabilities' (p. 92). No sensible audience, Rymer believed, could possibly be taken in by the absurdities of its design: even were they to overlook the unlikelihood of the central relationship between a supposed 'blackamoo general and an aristocratic Venetian woman, and to ignore the gross indecorum of presenting a soldier as the conniving villain of the piece (pp. 91–4), the palpable inconsistencies of the time scheme meant that playgoers 'must deny their senses, to reconcile it to common sense'.¹ Moreover, in view of the ludicrous device chosen to trigger the hero's jealousy, he declared that the play had better have been 'called *The Tragedy of the Handkerchief*':



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1. 'The Tragedy of the Handkerchief': James Earl Jones as Othello, Christopher Plummer as Iago (Stratford, Connecticut, 1981).

Had it been Desdemona's garter, the sagacious Moor might have smelt a rat: but the handkerchief so remote a trifle, no booby on this side Mauretania could make any consequence of it.... Yet we find it entered our poet's head to make a tragedy of this trifle.²

Everywhere he looked, Rymer found monstrous breaches of tragic decorum in the treatment of fable and characters: arguing that Othello's 'love and ... jealousy are no part of a soldier's character, unless for comedy', he concluded that while 'There is in this play some burlesque, some humour, and rambles of comical wit, some show, and some *mimicry* to divert the spectators ... the tragical part is plain none other than a bloody farce, without salt or savour'; even the widely admired temptation scene reminded him of *commedia dell'arte*—'such scenes as this have made all the world run after *Harlequin* and *Scaramuccio*'.¹

Recent work examining the 'comic matrix' of the play's design,² like the long-running debate over its use of so-called 'double time',³ show that, however obtuse Rymer's overall response, his complaints about plot and decorum were not as foolish as they have often been made to appear. Shakespeare himself sometimes appears to draw deliberate attention to his juggling with comic convention: even in the tragic catastrophe, when Emilia denounces Othello as a 'murderous coxcomb' (5.2.234), her oxymoron makes scornful play with the traditionally ridiculous figure of the jealous cuckold. Nor is Rymer the only critic to have questioned the fundamental believability of *Othello*: many of his criticisms were to be echoed two centuries later by no less a critic than Bernard Shaw, who not only denounced the fable for its 'police-court morality and commonplace thought', but excoriated the plot for 'its farcical trick with a handkerchief'.⁴ Reviewing a production in 1897, he called *Othello* 'pure melodrama'; yet even Shaw found himself reluctantly moved by the power of its language, admitting that for all its 'superficiality and staginess, [*Othello*] remains magnificent by the volume of its passion and the splendor of its word-music, which sweep the scenes up to a plane on which sense is drowned in sound. The words do not convey ideas: they are streaming ensigns and tossing branches to make the tempest of passion visible.... Tested by the brain, it is ridiculous: tested by the ear, it is sublime.'¹

The force of Rymer's and Shaw's complaints about the plot is well illustrated by the fate of various attempts to rewrite the play in alternative genres. In the case of Verdi's *Otello*—as we might expect from Shaw's remarks about the opera-like qualities of *Othello* itself and the seductiveness of its word-music—the sheer power of the score is enough to overwhelm any reservations about the plausibility of the action. But in the case of two recent screen versions, the effect of translating the play into a contemporary idiom was to reduce it to banal risibility. Tim Blake Nelson's 2001 film turns Othello into 'Odin James' (Mekhi Phifer), the black star and captain of an otherwise white high school basketball team, who falls for the principal's beautiful daughter, Desi (Julia Stiles), only to be destroyed by the machinations of his envious friend Hugo (Josh Hartnett), the son of coach Duke Goulding; despite its knowing allusions to Shakespeare ('I thought he wrote movies,' says Hugo) and to Verdi's *Otello* (Nelson opens with the 'Ave Maria', and ends with the 'Credo' as Hugo is led away by the police), the unrelievedly pedestrian screenplay and the telescoping of the action to ninety-or-so minutes reduce the play to precisely the improbable melodrama described by Shaw. Little more can be said for Andrew Davies's television play, *Othello*, misleadingly subtitled, *A Modern Masterpiece*.

here Shakespeare's Moor becomes 'John Othello' (Eamonn Walker), London's first black Police Commissioner, whose promotion—together with his marriage to the upper-class Dessie Brabantio (Keeley Hawes)—provokes the bitter resentment of his deputy, Ben Jago (Christopher Eccleston), a closet racist whose pretence of loyal friendship is complicated by frustrated homosexual desire. Like *Othello*, Davies's play is full of self-conscious homages to the original, including a bed decorated in a Venetian Gothic, as well as an epilogue spoken by Jago in which he paraphrases a familiar critical debate about *Othello*: 'Don't talk to me about race, don't talk to me about politics: it was love—simple as that.' A perfect index to the banality of Davies's conception is the replacement of Desdemona's magically imbrued handkerchief with a falsified DNA test.

For Shaw's contemporary, the critic A. C. Bradley, *Othello* remained 'the most painfully exciting and the most terrible' of all Shakespeare's tragedies; yet he was forced to concede that for many readers the meanness of its subject, 'sexual jealousy', rendered the play 'not merely painful, but so repulsive that not even the intense tragic emotions which the story generates can overcome the repulsion'.¹ It may well be, however, that for most audiences it is precisely this combination of the mean and repulsive with the most tragic intensity that accounts for the play's exceptional power to move. This at least is what is suggested by the response of an anonymous Romantic critic to the play's yoking of opposites: on the one hand, its emotions seem almost painfully familiar:

Othello is a faithful portrait of the life with which we are daily and hourly conversant; love and jealousy are passions which all men, with few exceptions, have at some time felt; the imitation of them, therefore, finds an immediate sympathy in every mind; Othello has no feelings that we should not ourselves have in his situation.

On the other hand, it endows these feelings with an awful, superhuman sublimity:

it resembles a thunderstorm, which awes by its magnificence of terror; in fact it is grand beyond loveliness; the word beauty might as well be applied to the terrors of an earthquake, or the heights of the Andes.¹

The emotional force of Shakespeare's poetry, especially in the last three acts, can indeed be devastating: for the normally sober Dr Johnson, even the experience of editing the play was almost more than he could bear: 'I am glad I have ended my revisal of this dreadful scene,' he wrote of *Othello*'s ending, 'it is not to be endured';² while the Variorum editor H. H. Furness, reflecting on the 'unutterable agony' produced by the scene, wished 'that ... this tragedy had never been written'.³

The play's performance history provides ample testimony of its continuing power to move onlookers—sometimes to an extravagant degree. The French novelist Stendhal recorded an extraordinary event during an American performance in 1822: 'a soldier who was on guard duty inside the Baltimore theatre, seeing Othello ... was about to kill Desdemona', intervened to protect her: "'I will never be said that in my presence a confounded Negro has killed a white woman!'" he shouted, and then fired his gun ... breaking the arm of the actor who was playing Othello.'⁴ 'A year does not go by', Stendhal claimed, 'without the newspapers reporting similar stories.' Such absolute surrender to the power of Shakespeare's theatrical fiction would have astonished Rymer; yet the most conspicuous feature of the play's theatrical life has been precisely this extraordinary capacity to swamp aesthetic detachment—even to the point where (as in the case of the Baltimore guard) the boundary between fiction and reality has sometimes appeared to dissolve altogether.¹ This has reputedly been true not only for audiences, but for performers: according to a persistent theatrical legend, famously exploited in Marcel Carné's film *Les Enfants du Paradis*, as well as in George Cukor's *A Double Life*, actors

playing Othello and Iago are especially liable to carry over their roles into their offstage lives.² This is precisely what seems to have happened after a performance by British officers and their wives in Freetown, Sierra Leone, in 1857: the commanding officer, who played Othello, shot his Cassio in cold blood, provoking a public scandal over heavy drinking and sexual promiscuity amongst the garrison community. In 1942 Paul Robeson's adulterous affair with Uta Hagen, his second Desdemona and wife of his Iago, José Ferrer, made it seem as if 'the actors were taken over by their roles'.³

From the very beginning playgoers have recorded the emotional impact of *Othello*: in his note on the 1610 Oxford performance, Henry Jackson wrote of its power to move the onlookers to tears, especially in the scene where 'the celebrated Desdemona, slain in our presence by her husband ... entreated the pity of the spectators by her very countenance'.⁴ Numerous later anecdotes confirm Jackson's testimony to the work's disturbing emotional effect. Samuel Pepys remembered that when he saw it performed at the Cockpit in 1660 'a very pretty lady that sat by me cried out to see Desdemona smothered'.⁵ Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century audiences often wept openly during the performance; beginning in 1746, Spranger Barry's electrifying Othello 'invariably' caused 'the females ... to shriek' in the murder scene;¹ half a century later, the fierce pathos of Edmund Kean's Moor was enough to make even Byron cry, whilst 'old men leaned their heads upon their arms and fairly sobbed' at the catastrophe.² In revolutionary France such was the effect of Joseph Talma's 1793 performance that the killing of Desdemona provoked '[t]ears, groans, and menaces ... from all parts of the theatre', while 'several of the prettiest women in Paris fainted in the most conspicuous boxes and were publicly carried out of the house'. So alarmed was Talma's translator, Jean-François Ducis, that he feared 'for his tragedy, for his fame, and for his life', and felt bound to revise his version of the play, equipping it for several performances with a happy ending.³ In 1829 according to Alexandre Dumas père, Alfred de Vigny's translation was equally overwhelming in its impact on his Paris contemporaries, who 'shook [and] shuddered' at Othello's 'roars of African jealousy'.⁴ In mid-nineteenth-century London, even the relatively restrained oriental Moor of William Charles Macready produced so 'thrilling' an effect that when, after the murder, he thrust 'his dark, despairing face through the curtains of the bed', a female spectator is said to have 'hysterically fainted' at the sight. In another of his performances, at the point when Macready seized Iago by the throat in the temptation scene, a gentleman 'started up and exclaimed, loud enough for all around to hear, "Choke the devil! Choke him!"'⁶ The response of later nineteenth-century audiences to such notable Othellos as I. Aldridge and Tommaso Salvini was often equally intense.

Twentieth-century playgoers generally proved rather less suggestible: as early as 1905 we find a reviewer complaining that '[t]here have been many successful Hamlets, but no Othello seems to have satisfied critics in like degree';¹ and by 1948 Ruth Ellis recorded that '[t]his tragedy, so overwhelming to read, has lately proved one of the most difficult to stage to complete satisfaction'. But some performances could still produce extraordinary reactions: Laurence Olivier's 1965 Moscow season is said to have generated storms of emotion reminiscent of those that greeted Aldridge a century earlier;³ and in 1979 (more predictably perhaps) when the first black actor to play Othello in the southern United States kissed his Desdemona, it was enough to produce 'audible gasps' from the audience and a string of hate letters.⁴ A decade afterwards the reviewer John Peter confessed that the effect of Trevor Nunn's claustrophobic Stratford production was to make him 'want to reach out and stop Othello before it's too late'.⁵

Difficult as it may appear to reconcile this history of emotional surrender with the cool derision of the play's detractors, the two phenomena are related, for (as Bernard Shaw implicitly recognized) *Othello* is a play whose designs on the audience can only succeed when there is a collapse of aesthetic

distance. In its most extreme form, illustrated by the soldier's attack on the unfortunate Baltimore Othello, this absolute suspension of disbelief can express itself as an irrational compulsion intervene in the action of the play. But a more sophisticated version of the same response manifests itself in the aggressive rhetorical challenges to Shakespeare's protagonist issued in a number of twentieth-century reworkings of the play. So in Carlin's postcolonial drama, where two actors—white South African and a black West Indian—debate the significance of the tragedy for contemporary race politics, 'Desdemona' at one point attacks her fellow performer as though he were indeed Shakespeare's Moor:

You wouldn't let go of the colour problem—not if they gave you a million pounds and made you the King! Othello! The thicklips! As if you'd give them up. The colour of your skin's your most precious possession. That's your role.¹

In Charles Marowitz's agitprop drama *An Othello* (1974)—a rewriting of Shakespeare's play in the context of the Black Power movement—it is Iago (now cast as a black radical) who is made to challenge Othello as the model of all blacks who, by capitulating to the values of the white world, offer themselves as scapegoats to racial bigotry:

Do you feel it, General—that crazy little shiver in the blood—a little like speed—a little like cum—warm, spikey, liquid glow lightin' through all the back-alleys of the body? That's what a black man feels when he scourges the whiteness in him.... Now the best half of your work's done and they're nestlin' in the wings—cosy in the stalls—waitin' for their high; the joy of seein' the black man pay his dues, purge his soul, drive three inches of steel into his regret and his remorse, so's he makes his final bloody apology for risin', mixin', makin' it and thinkin' he could carry it off despite all the odds. Look at 'em all, General, sittin' cool and quietly pantin' for what they know's already theirs—you rich-red, routine-and-predictable blood. Pause brother ... and reflect before you feed those hyenas what four centuries of black generals have given them without reflection ... without one moment's pause.²

Similarly in Caryl Phillips's novel *The Nature of Blood* (1997), the narrative voice harangues Othello as a sexual and political sell-out:

And so you shadow her every move, attend to her every whim, like the black Uncle Tom that you are. Fighting the white man's war for him / Wide-receiver in the Venetian army / The republic's grinning Satchmo hoisting his sword like a trumpet / You tuck your black skin away beneath their epaulettes, uniform, appropriate their words (Rude am I in my speech), their manners, worry your nappy woolled head with anxiety about learning their ways.... O strong man, O strong arm, O valiant soldier, O weak man. You are a lost, a sad black man, first in a long line of so-called achievers who are too weak to yoke their past with their present; too naïve to insist on both; too foolish to realize that to supplant one with the other can only lead to catastrophe. Go ahead, revel in the delights of her wanton bed, but whom will you turn when she, too, is lost and a real storm breaks about your handkerchiefed head? My friend, the Yoruba have a saying: the river that does not know its own source will dry up. You will do well to remember this.... My friend, an African river bears no resemblance to a Venetian canal. Only the strongest spirit can hold both together.¹

The political implications of Othello's marriage to Desdemona are once again at issue in Djansezian and Sears's *Harlem Duet* (1998), which displaces the action of the play to Harlem in 1860, 1928, and 1998. The antebellum Othello's subservient passion is denounced by his black lover: 'O?O? Othello ... wh

you trying to please her? I'm so tired of pleasing her. I'm so tired of pleasing White folks.'²

The strident tone of these examples reflects the extent to which racial controversy dominated late twentieth-century responses to the play. From another point of view, however, they—like a number of other dramatic and novelistic reworkings³—merely give a contemporary political accent to a long established way of dealing with the imaginative challenge of this tragedy: for it is a testimony to the peculiar power of *Othello* that, of all the dramatist's works, it has been the most extensively interrogated, appropriated, and rewritten in other fictions. The habit of rewriting began early in the seventeenth century with the character of 'honest' De Flores in Thomas Middleton's and William Rowley's *The Changeling* (c.1622), a treacherous servant transparently indebted to Iago, and continued with John Ford's *Love's Sacrifice* (1632)—a drama that transforms the original plot by imagining a guilty Desdemona who bears the name of Shakespeare's courtesan, Bianca. Further imitations followed after the Restoration in the form of Thomas Porter's *The Villain* (1662), and Henry Nevil Payne's *The Fatal Jealousie* (1673);¹ and in the eighteenth century the play won the attention of European dramatists, producing German and French adaptations by Schröder (1776) and Ducis (1792), which gave the play a happy ending,² as well as Voltaire's tragedy *Zaïre* (1732), which the French *philosophe* attempted a neoclassical refurbishment of Shakespeare's 'barbarous work.

What most attracted these imitators and adaptors seems not to have been the dramatist's strikingly unconventional choice of tragic protagonist, so much as his pathos-laden treatment of jealousy and temptation, Desdemona's martyred goodness, and the splendid dignity of Othello. The persistence of the 'noble Moor' sobriquet indicates the extent to which Othello's heroic self-image tended to dominate responses to the play, helping to explain (among other things) its extraordinary popularity amongst military officers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.³ The imaginative power of the tragedy's romantic aspects continued to influence nineteenth-century stage versions, its emotive potential being exploited to particular effect in the operas by Gioachino Rossini (1816) and Giuseppe Verdi (1887), as well as in Salvatore Viganò's 1818 ballet, all of which played down the issue of racial *mésalliance* in order to concentrate on the pathos of jealous obsession and love destroyed.¹

As early as 1688, however, an alternative direction had been suggested by Aphra Behn's novel *Oroonoko*, subsequently dramatized by Thomas Southerne. Loosely influenced by Shakespeare's tragedy, and written as English participation in the slave trade moved towards its peak, Behn's fiction capitalized on *Othello*'s racial dimension by inventing a new history for the princely African hero whose enslavement now belonged not to the Mediterranean conflict with Islam, but to the horrors of the Atlantic triangle. Three decades later, Edward Young's *The Revenge* (1721), perhaps influenced by Rymer's strictures on Shakespeare's violations of decorum, would reverse the colour values of the original, by creating a black Iago in the swagger-part of Zanga, and making the victim of his temptation a white man.² In Behn's and Young's reworkings, as in Rymer's invective, we can see the beginnings of the process by which Othello's colour would come to be identified as the key to his tragedy; and by the beginning of the next century, the racial assumptions implicit in Young's transformation of the villain would reach their nadir in the succession of 'burlesques' and 'travesties' that brought Rymer's sneers at the 'blackamoor' general to vicious theatrical life. From this point on, although *Othello* would continue to be discussed primarily as a drama of sexual jealousy, its theatrical and critical history would be increasingly inflected by racial ideas—ideas to which pseudo-Darwinian theories in due course gave spurious intellectual support.

Until the last quarter of the twentieth century, understanding of the part played by colour in the play was fraught with contradiction. In so far as it appeared problematic, it was as an accident of plot

—something whose import needed to be minimized or explained away, just as in performance it was frequently diminished by the transformation of ‘black Othello’ into a light-skinned North African. At the same time it was generally assumed that ‘race’ and ‘colour’ were in themselves unproblematic categories whose significance remained constant through time. The advent of so-called ‘new historicist’ criticism in the 1980s challenged such anachronistic assumptions, by demonstrating the unstable nature of the categories that defined human difference in Shakespeare’s time—a period that had yet to evolve anything like a coherent language of ‘race’. Nevertheless, as critics have also become aware, it is impossible to read texts from the past in absolute isolation from intervening history, including the history of their own reception. In the case of *Othello*, the play as we read it today is inevitably marked by its long implication in the development of racial thought; and later sections of this introduction will examine the ways in which the critical and performance histories reflect changing responses to the tragedy’s racial dimension. It is important to recognize that Shakespeare’s role in this historical process has not been a purely passive matter: for good as well as ill, the play’s involvement in the white world’s construction of ‘blackness’ has been to some extent a formative one, and it has been so because of the dramatist’s own deep imaginative engagement with the meaning of ‘colour’. We can track this engagement through the striking way in which Shakespeare reshaped his principal source material, giving to the hero’s blackness a prominence and significance it had not had in the original.

Sources

Before discussing Shakespeare’s adaptation of his ‘sources’, some definitions need to be established since the term can be a dangerously elastic one: some modern editors, concerned to stress the importance of broader cultural contexts in the shaping of literary works, have sought to collapse the old distinction between ‘sources’ and ‘influences’, arguing that the latter can sometimes be just as important in determining the final shape of a work as the texts of which the writer can be shown to have made direct use. It is quite possible, for example, to think of *Othello* as a reworking of Christopher Marlowe’s tragedy of damnation, *Dr Faustus* (c.1589). Just before his death, confronted with the stupefying evidence of Iago’s treachery, Othello craves an explanation for his enigmatic and inexplicable malice: ‘Will you, I pray, demand that demi-devil | Why he hath thus ensnared my soul and body?’ (5.2.299–300). It is the moment at which, more explicitly than any other, we are made aware of the model upon which the fearful intimacy between the protagonist and his tempter has been based—the damnable symbiosis through which a literally demonic servant contrives to deliver his master ‘body and soul’ into Lucifer’s possession: ‘O what will I not do’, gloats Mephostophilis, as Faustus indites the fatal deed of gift, ‘to obtain his soul?’ (2.1.73).¹ Throughout Shakespeare’s tragedy, ‘honest’ Iago seems to be at the Moor’s side, pouring insinuations in his ear, just as ‘sweet’ Mephostophilis shadows the Wittenberg magician, confiding his diabolical persuasions: so close is their bond that some critics have seen them as aspects of a single personality, locked in a combat that, like Faustus’s, replays the *psychomachia* of the medieval Morality drama, in which the battle for possession of man’s soul was fought out by allegorical representations of vice and virtue.² Marlowe’s influence on *Othello* seems obvious enough; yet *Dr Faustus* is not in any exact sense a ‘source’ for the later tragedy: Shakespeare had a remarkably absorptive intelligence; and in *Othello* (as elsewhere) it is possible to trace numerous literary and dramatic influences: these include popular travel literature

Italian romance,³ and a whole range of plays—notably a group of turn-of-the-century domestic dramas featuring the suffering of abused wives, as well more exotic tragedies such as Peele’s *Battle of Alcazar* (c. 1588–9), the anonymous *Lust’s Dominion* (1598–9), and Shakespeare’s own *Titus Andronicus* (c. 1589–94) to whose conventionally villainous Moorish characters Othello and Iago provide a kind of riposte.

The problem with such an approach is that the number of ‘sources’ credited to a particular play becomes limited only by what we can conjecture about the extent of the author’s reading and theatrical experience; and because it is in principle almost impossible to set manageable boundaries to the influence of this kind, I have thought it better to confine the term ‘sources’ to material that Shakespeare appears certain—or at least likely—to have consulted in the course of writing the play.

Setting, Characters, and Plot

Scholars have uncovered extensive traces of Shakespeare’s contextual reading in *Othello*, especially in the play’s historical and geographical detail. For information about the political and social organization of the Venetian republic, he evidently turned to Sir Lewis Lewkenor’s translation of Cardinal Contarini’s *The Commonwealth and Government of Venice* (1599);¹ while (as indicated in my discussion of the play’s date in [Appendix A](#)) he may have derived information about the Venetian struggle to defend Cyprus against the Turks from Richard Knolles’s *Generall Historie of the Turkes* (1603), as well as from James I’s *Lepanto* (c. 1585), a poem celebrating the Christian naval victory that temporarily saved Cyprus from the Turks in 1571.

As we shall see, the choice of a Moorish hero was determined by the novella on which his plot was based; but the source makes no real effort to explore the nature or significance of the character difference. Shakespeare, by contrast, sought to flesh it out with ethnographical material garnered principally from Leo Africanus’ encyclopedic *Geographical Historie of Africa*—presumably in the translation by John Pory (1600).² Not only did Leo stress the ‘venery’ of African peoples and their propensity for jealousy; but his own biography, as a North African who was captured by Venetian pirates and enslaved before converting to Christianity and acquiring the patronage of Pope Leo X, had been proposed as a likely model for Othello’s ‘travailous history’ (1.3.129–45). In the introduction to his translation, Pory writes of Leo’s ‘exceeding great travels’ in terms that seem to anticipate the exotic wonders of Othello’s great speech to the Venetian Senate:

had he not at the first been a Moor and a Mahometan in religion.... I marvel much how ever he should have escaped so many thousands of imminent dangers.... For how many desolate cold mountains, and huge, dry and barren deserts passed he? How often was he in hazard to have been captived, or to have had his throat cut by the prowling Arabians and wild Moors. And how hardly many times escaped he the lion’s greedy mouth, and the devouring jaws of the crocodile.... But not to forget his conversion to Christianity, midst all these his busy and dangerous travels: it pleased the divine providence.... to deliver this author of ours ... into the hands of certain Italian pirates.... Being thus taken the pirates presented him and his book unto Pope Leo the tenth, who, esteeming of him as of a most rich and valuable prize, greatly rejoiced at his arrival, and gave him most kind entertainment and liberall maintenance, till such time as he had won him to be baptized. (Book 1, p. 6)¹

Leo himself exhibits a moving self-consciousness about his conflicted identity as a Christianized Moor, whose life resembled that of the strange fish-birds he calls *Amphibia* (1.41–3); and it was perhaps this that prompted Shakespeare to ponder the destructive double allegiance expressed in Othello's suicide, where he is at once the 'malignant' infidel, the 'circumcised dog' who 'beat the Venetian and traduced the state', and the heroic Christian avenger of that outrage (5.2.351–5).

In addition to what he may have gleaned from Leo, Shakespeare's knowledge of Africa was coloured with exotic details culled from one of the oldest of all geographies, Pliny's *Natural History* translated by Philemon Holland in 1601: Othello's response to the accusation that he has used magic charms on Desdemona is closely modelled on the protestation of a defiant former bondsman in Pliny and Othello's famous Pontic Sea trope, like his lyrical description of Arabian trees that were 'medicinal gum', derives from the same source.² Pliny was also the first to describe the monstrous people known as *Blemmyae* or *Acephali*, the 'men whose heads do grow beneath their shoulders' who feature in Othello's traveller's tales, along with the 'Anthropophagi' whom Pliny had located in Ethiopia (1.3.144–5). While he seems to have known Pliny at first hand, Shakespeare is likely also to have been acquainted with the *Travels of Sir John Mandeville*, a much reprinted fifteenth-century fantasy, in which numerous Plinian monsters appear, including eaters of human flesh and men whose eyes and mouths are in their shoulders. But Othello's reference to 'Cannibals' (l. 143) suggests that he had more recent travels in mind, since 'Cannibal' (a derivative of Carib) was used to designate particular peoples of the New World. Sir Walter Raleigh's *Discoverie of Guiana* (1595) contains an extended description of the headless '*Ewaipanoma*'—a people with 'eyes in their shoulders, and the mouths in the middle of their breasts, and ... a long train of hair ... backward between their shoulders' (p. 178), of whom he claimed to have heard reports along the Orinoco, and whose existence seemed to prove the truth of Mandeville's 'incredible' fables.¹ Among other tribes in the region, Raleigh encountered 'a great nation of *Canibals*';² and the appearance of the legend 'Canibales' close to an illustration of an acephalous warrior in Theodor de Bry's map for his 1599 edition of the *Discoverie of America pars VIII* suggests that the dramatist may even have seen de Bry's compendium (fig. 2).

Whilst his main plot closely follows Giraldi Cinthio's novella, Shakespeare's handling of the murder scene seems to have been influenced by a story from Geoffrey Fenton's *Certaine Tragical Discourses* (1567), a translation (via Belleforest's expanded French version) of a collection of Italian *novelle* by Bandello. Discourse 4 tells the story of an insanely jealous captain who murders his loving and obedient wife in order that no one shall enjoy her after his death. Although Don Spado is an Albanian rather than an African, he is credited with a 'rage and unnatural fire, far exceeding the savage and brutish manner of the tiger, lion, or leopard, bred in the deserts of Africa, the common nurse of monsters and creatures cruel without reason'.¹ Like Othello, Don Spado murders his wife in bed, and kisses her ('in such sort as Judas kissed our Lord') before he kills her; and like Othello too he stabs himself and falls dead on his wife's body. Like Desdemona she in turn revives long enough to 'pardon ... her husband with all her heart'.² Daniel Vitkus has also noted some parallels with the widely disseminated story of the Sultan and the Fair Greek, in which an Ottoman tyrant, in order to prove his manly resistance to intemperate desire, murders the Christian captive with whom he has become infatuated.³

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