

INTRODUCTION

Over the last twenty years or so, *Othello* has leapt into focus as a play for our times. Its story of ‘us and them’ (or rather ‘him’), of brute racism and misogyny, of miscegenation, sexual anxiety and domestic violence – all this seems, with uncanny prescience, to speak directly to us now. At certain moments and places and with certain actors (e.g. in 1943 in the USA with Robeson; in apartheid South Africa with John Kani) the racism within the play has resonated so loudly with the racism outside, that the fit between the seventeenth and the twentieth centuries has seemed complete. ‘Well, I ask you’, wrote Janet Suzman, who directed John Kani, ‘is there a subject on earth which Shakespeare hasn’t thought of first? It is as if he is toying with the theory of apartheid four hundred years before the policy was cooked up.’¹

It is often maintained in this way that Shakespeare overturns the racist stereotypes of his day. It is pointed out that the stage Moors that preceded Othello² would have led audiences to expect a lecherous, crafty, cruel, vengeful braggart; that the opening ribaldry of Iago and Roderigo plays to these expectations, and that Othello undercuts them as soon as he appears.³ We are reminded that the play’s ‘demi-devil’ is not the black Othello, but the white Iago. Writing in 1987, the same year as Suzman’s production, the South African critic Martin Orkin was convinced that it was precisely because of this that the play was never taught in South African high schools – that Shakespeare was being censored as an anti-racist before his time.⁴

But on second thoughts, other resonances jangle. As Edward Pechter points out, *Othello* ‘remains . . . a strange play, lodged in a past whose beliefs and assumptions are not easily accommodated to our own’.⁵ Half-way across

1 Suzman, ‘Parables’, p. 279.

2 For example, Muly Hamet in George Peele’s *The Battle of Alcazar* (1588), Eleazar in the anonymous *Lust’s Dominion* (circa 1600), or Shakespeare’s own Aaron in *Titus Andronicus* (circa 1592).

3 I argued in this way in the first edition of this work.

4 Orkin, ‘Othello and the “Plain Face” of Racism’, p. 184. Suzman reports that there was no copy of the play at the University of the Witwatersrand bookshop: ‘“not a play often called for here”’, said the assistant (‘Parables’, p. 274).

5 Pechter, *Interpretive Traditions*, p. 3.

2 *Othello*

the world, also in 1987, Ben Okri was sitting in the Barbican Theatre in London, watching Ben Kingsley as Othello and David Suchet as Iago in Terry Hands's production for the Royal Shakespeare Company. He was, he tells us, 'practically the only black person in the audience', and he found himself overwhelmed by a lonely empathy with Othello, another black man isolated in a white world. 'It hurts', he wrote, 'to watch Othello as a black man.'

'As a black man' – that's the point. Okri's hurt was bound up with his conviction that none of the white people around him were hurting as much: 'two centuries of Othello committing murder and suicide on the stage has not produced any significant change in attitude towards black people.' And yet, he asks, how could it have been different: 'How can white people imagine themselves in Othello's predicament?' Okri's question comes from a political, post-colonial perspective. The 'predicament' he refers to is not personal or moral. It is the black man's place in history. Othello's 'colour, his otherness', Okri insists, 'must imply a specific history in white society.' But Shakespeare has made him into a creature who 'throws no shadows', whose 'colour is empty of history': 'Othello is a character with only one road leading out of him, but none lead into him.'

The reason that 'it hurts to watch Othello as a black man' lies in the man's political emasculation: 'There he is', writes Okri, 'a man of royal birth, taken as a slave, and he has no bitterness. He doesn't possess an ounce of anger, or even a sense of injustice.' Shakespeare has given him nobility, but even that is tainted, says Okri: 'When white people speak so highly of a black man's nobility they are usually referring to his impotence. It is Othello's neutrality and social impotence that really frightens me.'

Okri never quite accuses Shakespeare of racism, though he comes close: 'It is possible', he writes, 'that Shakespeare, as a white man, could not fully concede Othello an equal status of humanity.' He is torn between his pain at what is missing from the man, and a recognition that Othello is nevertheless a powerful, haunting presence: someone who 'will not vanish from our dreams'.⁶ A decade or so later the Ghanaian-born actor Hugh Quarshie was less circumspect. In September 1998, he gave a lecture at the University of Alabama in which he explained why, against the hopes of colleagues, he had no wish to play the role of Othello. He had come to feel that the play did not merely expose racism, but was itself racist.

Quarshie and Okri are in agreement on many points, but their perspectives are different. Okri is concerned with history, Quarshie – naturally, as an actor – with psychology. While Okri sees political displacement in Othello's

6 Okri, 'Meditations', *West Africa*, 23 and 30 March 1987.

furious jealousy, Quarshie sees racist theories of ‘character.’ He quotes from one of Shakespeare’s sources, the *Geographical Historie of Africa* by John Leo, known as Leo Africanus, published in London in 1600: ‘No nation in the world is so subject unto jealousy, for they will rather leese their lives, then put up any disgrace in the behalfe of their women.’ And he could have quoted further: ‘Most honest people they are, and destitute of fraud and guile’, ‘very proud and high-minded, and woonderfully addicted unto wrath . . . Their wits are but meane, and they are so credulous, that they will beleeve matters impossible, which are told them.’⁷

‘From a performance point of view’, writes Quarshie, ‘the main difficulty about playing Othello is getting plausibly from the magnanimous and dignified warrior of the first half to the obsessive, homicidal, gibbering wreck of the second half.’ It all happens too quickly, he feels, and is only credible within a culture that figures the black man as naturally gullible, jealous and emotionally extreme. Quarshie’s fear is that ‘that figure still occupies the same space in the imagination of modern theatre-goers as it did among Shakespeare’s contemporaries’.⁸

if a black actor plays Othello does he not risk making racial stereotypes seem legitimate and even true? . . . does he not encourage the white way . . . of looking at black men [as] . . . over-emotional, excitable and unstable, thereby vindicating Iago’s statement, ‘These Moors are changeable in their wills.’

At which point he concludes that ‘of all the parts in the canon, perhaps Othello is the one which should most definitely not be played by a black actor.’⁹

A whole library of criticism and a whole history of stage performance has laboured over the transition that Quarshie so briskly dismisses. From time to time, as we shall see, white actors in blackface have negotiated it without appearing to ‘explain’ the feat in terms of Othello’s blackness. But Quarshie has a point with black actors. In his essay, ‘Shakespeare and the Ethnic Question’, Sukanta Chaudhuri notes that ‘Othello’s jealousy bears a singular violence or aggression that, in performance, almost compulsively assimilates itself to his Moorish features.’¹⁰ Faced with ‘the real thing’, critics often slip into making false connections of that kind. Margaret Webster, for example, who directed Paul Robeson in 1943, said that ‘all the elements of the action fall automatically into place, as they do not when he is merely played in blackface . . . the simplicity of the noble Moor, caught in the toils of villainy, no

7 Quoted by Honigmann, *Othello*, p. 4.

8 Quarshie, ‘Second Thoughts’, pp. 7, 11.

9 *Ibid.*, p. 5. 10 Chaudhuri, ‘The Ethnic Question’, p. 180.

4 *Othello*

longer strains belief when Paul Robeson gives it the very image of nature'.¹¹ This 'image of nature' is not Robeson's acting, but his appearance. This on its own, it seems, signals 'simplicity' – a double-edged word, like 'innocence.' Olivier's 'image' was not 'of nature', of course, but to many at the time he was amazingly close ('unfurling pink palms and all' as Suzman drily put it)¹² – close enough to trigger the same racist assumptions. Quarshie quotes Norman Sanders and Ken Tynan, for example: Sanders approving Olivier for depicting 'a primitive man . . . relapsing into barbarism'; and Tynan, impressed by the actor's climactic moment of atavism (see commentary, 3.3.461–3).¹³

Is this 'primitivism' written into the play by Shakespeare? Acted into it by the performer? Or read into it by the viewer? Between these three, there is room for slippage. But for the modern black actor, the viewers are enough – never mind Shakespeare. In 1997, David Harewood, the Othello in a production directed by Sam Mendes, worried whether people would think "“Oh, he's just another crazy black man.”" His way through the problem, he said, was to show 'the how of Othello's downfall – what Iago's doing to this man, rather than what's happening to him'.¹⁴ As a strategy, this focuses attention on process, rather than on spectacle, and brings us closer to the long tradition, in both performance and criticism, of sympathy for Othello. Quarshie is certain that Othello's gullibility is the tragic flaw 'least likely to engage sympathetic understanding'.¹⁵ But there was a revealing moment during Sam Mendes's 'public dialogue' session on the play which took place in Salzburg where the production opened before moving to London's National Theatre. One of the participants asked with genuine concern in his decorous English: "“Tell me please, I am having more moments of sympathy for Othello than for Desdemona. Should I see a psychiatrist?”"¹⁶

Sympathy is precisely what marks most of the theatre history of *Othello*. Not, perhaps, the kind of sympathy that Ben Okri had in mind – a historical understanding of Othello's 'predicament', or as he expresses it elsewhere in his piece, of 'the nightmare that history has made real'.¹⁷ But something closer, narrower, more personal. In fact, so intense has been the sympathetic engagement of audiences, that it has spawned a mass of anecdotes about people fainting, calling out, warning the characters, and threatening Iago. It is as though *Othello* bursts the limit between reality and fiction more readily than Shakespeare's other tragedies. In 1825, when the American actor Edwin

11 Quoted by Cowhig, 'Blacks in English Renaissance Drama', p. 22.

12 Suzman, 'Parables', p. 276. 13 Quarshie, 'Second Thoughts', pp. 16, 17.

14 *I*, 16 September 1997. 15 Quarshie, 'Second Thoughts', p. 14.

16 *I*, 16 September 1997. 17 Okri, 'Meditations', *West Africa*, 23 March 1987.

Forrest played Iago to Edmund Kean's Othello, a man in the front row was heard to say, 'You damn'd lying scoundrel, I would like to get hold of you after this show is over and wring your infernal neck.'¹⁸ Margaret Webster heard a girl in the audience whispering to herself over and over again 'Oh God, don't let him kill her . . . don't let him kill her . . .'¹⁹ On the whole, it's the women who cry out for Desdemona and the men who offer to fight Iago. As for the soldier on guard duty at a Baltimore theatre in 1822, it was presumably some potent combination of his profession and his racism that made him shout, as Stendhal reported: "'It will never be said in my presence a confounded Negro has killed a white woman"'. Whereupon he shot the white actor of Othello and broke his arm.²⁰ Wife-murder, it seems, should at least observe the colour bar.

Othello during the early seventeenth century

The earliest recorded performance of *Othello* was on 1 November 1604, at the court of James I, but the first performance has usually been put between 1603 and 1604, with the Arden editor, E. A. J. Honigmann, arguing for somewhere between 1600 and 1601. No text of the play was printed in Shakespeare's life time. The first quarto (Q1) was published in 1622 and the first Folio in 1623. The most striking difference between the two, among many thousands of variant readings, is that only the Folio text contains Desdemona's willow song (4.3) and Emilia's later reference to it just before she dies. Emilia's 'feminist' speech (4.3.82–99), and Othello's Pontic Sea passage (3.3.454–61) are also absent from the quarto. These are generally assumed to be omissions in the quarto, rather than additions to the Folio, perhaps for the purposes of compression and speed – common theatrical reasons, as we shall see. But the omission of Desdemona's song remains puzzling, and it is in trying to explain it that Honigmann arrives at his earlier date.

He notices a similarity in casting patterns in *Twelfth Night* (1600–1) and *Othello*, particularly in the gulls Roderigo and Aguecheek and their gull-masters, Iago and Toby Belch ('Put money in thy purse' (1.3.330) and 'Send for money, knight' respectively (2.3.205)). He also sees a likeness between the heroines, Desdemona and Viola, and between these and Ophelia (1600) – all patient, gentle, ill-used women who can sing. Or rather, Viola seems to have been intended to sing: 'I can sing / And speak to him in many sorts of music' she says in 1.3, but she never does. Honigmann surmises that her

18 Alger, *Edwin Forrest*, 1, p. 477.

19 Quoted by Carroll from Webster, *Without Tears*, p. 66.

20 Quoted by Pechter in *Interpretive Traditions*, p. 12.

6 *Othello*

boy-actor's voice broke some time in 1600–1, and that this explains what appears to be an awkward transfer of the song 'Come away, come away, death' at 2.4 to Feste. Desdemona, so the argument goes, suffered the loss of her song for the same reason and therefore at about the same time.²¹

Either way, 1600–1 or 1603–4, it was a period when tragedies were being written about middle-class English husbands and wives, rather than kings and queens, about adultery and murder in the home rather than in castles. Dekker's *Patient Grissil* (1599–1600), Heywood's *A Woman Killed with Kindness* (1602–3), and the anonymous *A Warning for Fair Women* (1599) are among the plays of this kind, the last of which, according to Honigmann, had a direct influence on Shakespeare's *Othello*.²² It is true that neither the exotic Othello nor Desdemona quite fit the genre, but the whole movement of the play is away from the wide perspective of warring Turks and Christians, towards the tight focus of this particular marriage, narrowing at last to a few square feet of bed.

The play also owes much to comedy – how much, is evident from the kind of impatient snort that goes up when the tragedy fails: "And all that for a pocket- handkerchief!" (E tutto questo per un fazzoletto!) was the Italian lady's comment when she saw the play', wrote Herman Merivale in 1902.²³ If the Othello fails to convince, the handkerchief trick stands exposed as an essentially comic device, and the tragedy can quickly degenerate into farce. The trickster Iago, Honigmann thinks, is a descendant of the 'intriguing slave of classical comedy', the 'universal adviser, "friend", and joker' of Terence and Plautus.²⁴ He is also (like Richard III) a relative of the Vice²⁵ from the old morality plays, delighting in his own wickedness and that of his good friends, the audience. Iago's vernacular ('Blest fig's end . . . Blest pudding' (2.1.238–40)), his audience-addressing soliloquies, his cynical assumption of virtue, and his control over the plot – these are all attributes of the Vice.

As it happens, there is some evidence that the original Iago was played by a comedian. Writing in 1694, Charles Gildon says he had it 'from very good hands that the person that acted Iago was in much esteem for a comedian'.²⁶ If this actor was John Lowin, as has been conjectured,²⁷ then his other parts were Falstaff, Jonson's Sir Epicure Mammon, and a number of blunt-speaking, 'honest' soldier types. It seems therefore that Othello may always have been hard pressed to preserve his tragic dignity. The first actor to play

21 See Honigmann, *Othello*, Appendix 1. 22 *Ibid.*, p. 74.

23 Merivale, *Bar, Stage*, p. 148. 24 *Ibid.*, p. 75.

25 Bernard Spivak, *Allegory of Evil*, second chapter passim, esp. pp. 57–9.

26 Gildon, 'Some Reflections', p. 68.

27 Baldwin, *Organisation and Personnel*, p. 248.

him was the chief tragedian of his day, Richard Burbage, who according to Richard Flecknoe's epitaph on him, also excelled as Hamlet, Lear, 'and more beside.' Flecknoe describes Burbage's Othello only as 'the Greved Moor',²⁸ so there is little to go on. 'Greved' is a hint. 'Cruel' or 'noble' would have scanned just as well. Perhaps already pity was the point, rather than judgement either way.

Shakespeare's source and what he did with it

Shakespeare's main source for the play is a tale from *Gli Hecatommithi* by Giovanni Battista Giraldi Cinthio (1566),²⁹ about a Moor (never named), who is deceived by his Ensign (not named either) into believing that his wife, Disdemona (so spelt), has been unfaithful to him with his Corporal (also nameless). As Cinthio tells it, the narrative moves in a straight line. The Ensign plants suspicion in the Moor's mind and the Moor falls into a melancholy. He loses his temper with Disdemona once, but on the whole he holds himself in suspense, moving patiently from one piece of 'evidence' to the next, doggedly returning to Iago for more 'proof.' Only when he is convinced does he give way to murderous frenzy, after which he is never 'unprovided', as Othello is, by returning love. On the contrary, he eagerly accepts his Ensign's plan that together they should batter Disdemona to death with a sand-filled stocking, break her skull, and pull the ceiling down over her bed to make it look like an accident.

Shakespeare's Iago similarly offers reasons and 'evidence' for Desdemona's supposed adultery, but the effect on the Moor is much more chaotic than in Cinthio. 'Evidence' exacerbates rather than causes his crisis. It is disputable how long it takes him to feel the poison during Iago's first conversation with him in 3.3, but immediately after Iago's exit his imagination leaps ahead to the very worst: 'She's gone; I am abused, and my relief / Must be to loathe her . . .' (269–70). Before he even thinks of 'proof' in the next encounter with Iago, he feels himself betrayed, Cassio's kisses on her lips, his occupation gone. And the mere mention of the handkerchief is enough, without any further check, to make him formally swear vengeance and withdraw 'To furnish me with some swift means of death / For the fair devil' (478–9).

Iago's tale of Cassio's dream and his erotic insinuations before the epileptic fit in the next act do not occur in Cinthio. Each of these moments provoke Othello to his utmost pitch (the vow of vengeance, and the fit itself) and

28 For Flecknoe's elegy, see Nagler, *Source Book*, p. 127.

29 See Honigmann, *Othello*, Appendix 3.

8 *Othello*

each climax *precedes* the unfolding of what to Cinthio's Moor would be the deciding 'evidence': Desdemona's loss of the handkerchief, and the sight of it in the hands of Cassio's friend, Bianca. Both in themselves, and in their timing these Shakespearean additions reverse the overall tendency of Cinthio's narrative. Shakespeare's Othello cannot cope with evidence. In a curious moment before the fit, he even has to be reminded of the handkerchief. And, as if it scarcely mattered, Shakespeare omits one of Cinthio's most 'evidential' incidents, in which his Moor returns home unexpectedly one day, and surprises the Corporal (i.e. Cassio) at his back door trying to return Desdemona's handkerchief.

Of course it is not evidence that works on Othello in the first place. It has to do with his intense feeling for Desdemona, something that critics have struggled to define. Helen Gardner thought it was 'joy' and that it was intrinsically bewildering: 'great joy bewilders, leaving the heart apt to doubt the reality of its joy.' Great sex bewilders too. In Othello's speech of greeting to Desdemona on Cyprus (2.1.175ff., 'It gives me wonder great as my content . . .') Stephen Greenblatt hears an erotic intensity which 'may express gratified desire, but, as the repeated invocation of death suggests, may equally express the longing for a final release from desire, from the dangerous violence, the sense of extremes . . .' Michael Neill follows the idea further, into the murk of voyeuristic obsession – something, he argues, which Iago and the play both create and discover in us and in Othello: 'a technique that works close to the unstable ground of consciousness itself'.³⁰

Critics can argue, but actors must decide: how to make Othello's reversal plausible without time and evidence? Will a leap do it? Or a creep? Many actors have tried gradualism, but ultimately the precipice cannot be avoided. On the other hand, those who go for the leap have to convince an audience of certain paradoxes. *Othello* commentators find themselves reaching for the kind of extremes and opposites that, in 1621, Robert Burton described in lovers generally: 'though they be . . . rapt beyond themselves for joy; yet . . . love is a plague, a torture, a hell.' Take this, from the *Guardian* in 1713: 'The most extravagant love . . . is nearest the strongest hatred'; or this from Stendhal in 1824: 'all great passions are fearful and superstitious'.³¹ In a piece extolling the Othello of James Earl Jones in 1982, the reviewer Walter Kerr lamented that 'most productions, and most performances of the title role, are so entirely concerned with making us believe, step by step by step,

30 Gardner, 'The Noble Moor', p. 171; Greenblatt, *Self-Fashioning*, p. 243; Neill, 'Unproper Beds', p. 395.

31 Burton, *Anatomy*, Part 3, Sec. 2, Mem. 3; *The Guardian*, no. 37, 23 April 1713; Stendhal, *Rossini*, p. 228.

in the Moor's distrust of his wife that they quite forget his love for his wife. But these two co-exist.³²

This 'love' is a variable concept. It has moved sharply up and down the scale of idealism, both in literary criticism and in the theatre. The mid-to-late nineteenth-century American tragedian Edwin Booth, for example, at 'Damn her lewd minx! O, damn her, damn her!' (3.3.476), advised repeating 'damn her' four times, so as to say 'the first savagely, the second less so, melt with the third, and choke with tears at the fourth.' At 'O curse of marriage, / That we can call these delicate creatures ours / And not their appetites' (271–2), he laid his hand on his heart at the word 'appetites', so as to de-physicalise the word.³³ On the other hand, in a production at the Mermaid in 1971 which sought to demonstrate that the play was 'all about sex, about bed' (*T*, 8 September 1971) Bruce Purchase spoke the line 'The fountain from the which my current runs / Or else dries up' (4.2.58–9), looking straight at Desdemona's crotch (see commentary). Whatever the nature of Othello's love, Kerr's point is the futility of 'step by step by step' and (as he says in the same review) the 'enormous practical value' that Othello's instability and contradictions have for the play's performance: 'It's never very interesting just to watch a man become more and more gullible from 9 o'clock, say, till 11. If there's no yes-and-no, no tug-and-pull going on inside him, the single-minded advance of the narrative becomes monotonous; and he in turn turns into little more than a fool.'

Othello's colour and what it meant

There has been debate about the shade of Othello's skin: black or olive? north or west African? negroid or not? The objection to a black negroid Othello arose fairly late in the day with Lamb and Coleridge. As we shall see, it sprang from their own prejudices and, in Coleridge's case, from the mistaken assumption that Shakespeare knew of such men only as slaves.³⁴ It is true that the slaving voyages of Sir John Hawkins in the 1560s, and others, had brought increasing numbers of west African slaves to England – so much so that Elizabeth I issued two edicts of deportation on the grounds that they were consuming the provision intended for the English 'in these times of dearth'.³⁵ But, equally, the traveller's tales popular at the time described

³² *NYT*, 14 February 1982.

³³ One of the notes supplied by Booth to Furness, to be inserted among the annotations to his *New Variorum* edition of *Othello* (1886).

³⁴ Coleridge, *On Shakespeare*, see p. 187.

³⁵ See Jones, *Elizabethan Image*, p. 21, for a fuller extract from one of these edicts.

African societies and individuals of many colours and kinds, including kings and nobles, scholars and merchants. A man 'of royal seige' who was also black would have been nothing extraordinary, and on the stage, even less so. According to Eldred Jones, 'regardless of what the more informed writers may have said about the different colours of Africans, only their blackness seems to have registered firmly in the minds of audiences and playwrights alike'.³⁶

The theatre did have its 'tawney' or 'white' Moors, like the Prince of Morocco in the *Merchant of Venice*, and the light-skinned Abdilmalec, Muly Hamet's 'good' uncle in *The Battle of Alcazar*. But most stage Moors were devils, and their colour proclaimed them so. As G. K. Hunter's essay 'Othello and Colour Prejudice' has shown, in religious literature, in the medieval romances, in pictorial tradition, in mummers' plays, masques and processions, all the devils, infidels, Saracens, Turks, pagans and bogeymen, were black. The fact that there were white villains as well did not detract from the force of blackness as a symbol. Its prime significance was moral and religious rather than racial or geographical. The first *OED* meaning of 'Moor' is in fact 'Mahomedan', and terminology was so vague at the time that, in use, 'Moor' meant no more than someone living in 'that outer circuit of non-Christian lands where the saving grace of Jerusalem is weakest in its whitening power'.³⁷ The taking of Cyprus by the Turks (the dispersal of their fleet in *Othello* is Shakespeare's invention) led directly to the great battle of Lepanto in 1571, which was still regarded twenty years later (in the words of one contemporary) as 'the Halleluia of Christendom and the wellaway of Turkey'.³⁸ James I wrote a poem on the subject,³⁹ and in 1603 Richard Knolles published a vivid account of it in his *Generall Historie of the Turks*, a probable source for Shakespeare (if the 1603–4 date for *Othello* is right). Anyone in the early seventeenth century going to a play about a Moor which touched on the wars between Venice and the Turks would have expected no 'whitening power' at all.

Furthermore, Shakespeare, juggling with categories, makes a point of this colour coding. The Duke commends Othello to Brabantio in ironic terms: 'If virtue no delighted beauty lack / Your son-in-law is far more fair than black' (1.3.285–6). Desdemona 'saw Othello's visage in his mind' – meaning that there at least he was white. Othello himself is obsessed with Desdemona's whiteness ('that whiter skin of hers than snow . . .' (5.2.4)) and

36 Jones, *Othello's Countrymen*, p. 39.

37 Hunter, 'Othello and Colour Prejudice', p. 41.

38 Quoted by Hunter, 'Elizabethans and Foreigners', p. 25.

39 See Emrys Jones, 'Othello, Lepanto and the Cyprus Wars', *Sh.S* 21, pp. 47–52.