

Introduction

O, who hath done this deed?
 Nobody; I myself.

(*Othello*, 5.2.124–25)

Othello has been a central focus of my thinking, research, and writing for the past decade. My obsession with Shakespeare's tragedy started in 1982 when I joined forces with Margaret Lael Mikesell to compile the Garland Annotated Bibliography on *Othello*. For the next eight years, I culled innumerable libraries, reading and annotating all the relevant books, articles, dissertations, reviews, and notes I could find. In the process I encountered a broader range of critical and methodological approaches than I had known existed. I also began to have my own ideas about *Othello*.

A side adventure was a temporary stint as Associate Editor of the New Variorum *Othello*, then under the direction of John Hazel Smith, a man bent on collecting everything ever written on "his" play. In my New Variorum hat, I worked on *Othello*'s complicated stage history, devoting a six-month fellowship at the Folger Shakespeare Library to reading traditional sources – promptbooks, actors' memoirs, reviews. But I soon realized that the world did not need another comprehensive stage history of *Othello*; scholars, actors, and students could already turn to works by Marvin Rosenberg, Gino J. Matteo, and Julie Hankey for masterful overviews of the play's stage history and analyses of the most famous productions and best known actors.¹ In 1986, however, John Hazel Smith, a scholar beloved by

¹ See Marvin Rosenberg, *The Masks of Othello* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1961); Gino J. Matteo, *Shakespeare's "Othello": The Study and the Stage, 1604–1904* (Salzburg: Institut für Englische Sprache und Literatur, 1974); and Julie Hankey, ed., *Othello* (Bristol: Bristol Classical Press, 1987). A more compact but no less helpful overview is provided by Carol Jones Carlisle in *Shakespeare from the Greenroom: Actors' Criticisms of Four Major Tragedies* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1969), pp. 172–263.

students and professional colleagues alike, suddenly and tragically succumbed to cancer. Since the partnership I had embarked on was not to be, I resigned from the New Variorum project with great sadness.

Othello was not done with me yet. In 1988 the Trustees of the Shakespeare Association of America asked me to organize a seminar on “*Othello: New Perspectives*” for its annual conference in Boston. That seminar soon ballooned into two sessions, each devoted to a variety of critical perspectives and methodologies. In collaboration with Kent Cartwright, I selected eleven of the essays for an anthology published under the same title.²

The collaborations with Margaret Lael Mikesell, John Hazel Smith, and Kent Cartwright had been immensely rewarding and stimulating, yet most of my work on this magnificent play had involved the processing of other scholars’ views. It was time to find my own voice. In 1989 I published an account of *Othello* on the Restoration stage in *Theatre History Studies*;³ the same year I wrote an essay on William Charles Macready’s *Othello* (not published until 1991) for the Japanese annual, *Shakespeare Worldwide*.⁴ By 1990 I realized that I was well on my way toward my own book on *Othello*. In particular, I had compiled broad-ranging sources in two categories: the first, contexts from the early seventeenth century that would have been available to Shakespeare; the second, materials about subsequent theatrical representations.

As a result, this book is divided in two complementary sections. The first four chapters focus on *Othello* at the moment of production; they historicize major elements that have, in turn, influenced subsequent interpretations, performances, and adaptations. They provide contexts – the sort of things Shakespeare might have incorporated deliberately or osmotically.⁵

Shakespeare’s sources for *Othello*’s plot, characterizations, and language are well known, particularly through the most widely used

² Virginia Mason Vaughan and Kent Cartwright, eds., *Othello: New Perspectives* (Cranbury, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1991). We added a twelfth essay by a ringier – Barbara Hodgdon’s discussion of *Othello* adaptations in opera and film.

³ “Politics and Plagiarism: *Othello* in the Restoration,” *Theatre History Studies*, 9 (1989): 1–21. This article has been revised and expanded in chapter 5.

⁴ “The Road to Astor Place: The English and American *Othellos* of William Charles Macready,” *Shakespeare Worldwide*, 13 (1991), pp. 99–115. Parts of this essay have been incorporated into chapter 7.

⁵ I borrow the latter term from Margaret Loftus Ranald, *Shakespeare and His Social Context: Essays in Osmotic Knowledge and Literary Interpretation* (New York: AMS Press, 1987).

compendium, Geoffrey Bullough's *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare*. Scholars generally agree that Shakespeare took his plot from Giraldi Cinthio's *Gli Hecatommithi* (1566), Decade 3, Story 7, perhaps adding some psychological analysis from Geoffrey Fenton's tale of an "Albanoyse Captain" in *Certain Tragicall Discourses* (1567). Details about Moors were lifted from John Pory's translation of John Leo's *Geographical Historie of Africa* (1600), about Venice from Lewes Lewkenor's translation of Gaspar Contarini's *The Commonwealth and Gouernment of Venice* (1599), and about Turks from Richard Knolles' *Generall Historie of the Turkes* (1603). Shakespeare adapted Cinthio's spare narrative to the theatre by speeding up the action, adding the double time scheme, and deepening the hero's and villain's characterizations.⁶

The tactics of traditional source study have been to trace specific words, phrases, characters, and events that the dramatist must have borrowed from another text and to estimate each text's overall influence on Shakespeare's play by measuring the frequency of such details. Source studies have demonstrated the eclectic quality of Shakespeare's mind and his use of various texts during the process of composition, but they are limited by a narrow conception of "source." To qualify as a source, a text must have elements that are replicated in Shakespeare's play.

New Historicism and Cultural Materialism propose broader, more flexible discursive influences. In Stephen Greenblatt's words, "the work of art is the product of a negotiation between a creator or class of creators, equipped with a complex, communally shared repertoire of conventions, and the institutions and practices of society."⁷ Greenblatt readily admits that it is impossible to identify such conventions and cultural practices in their entirety or with all certainty, yet cultural contexts are often as important as specific sources in the attempt to understand a particular work. They place the literary text – as closely as a late-twentieth-century reader can – within the cultural milieu of its production.

Despite some controversy over the authenticity of extant records,⁸

⁶ Geoffrey Bullough, *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1973), vol. VII, pp. 193–265.

⁷ Stephen Greenblatt, "Toward a Poetics of Culture," in *New Historicism*, ed. H. Aram Veeser (New York: Routledge, 1989), pp. 1–14; quote from p. 12.

⁸ Cf. Horace Howard Furness's discussion of *Othello's* date in *A New Variorum Edition of Shakespeare: Othello* (New York: Dover, 1963; repr. of J. B. Lippincott's edition, 1886), pp. 344–57. E. A. J. Honigmann disputes the accepted 1604 date, arguing instead for late 1601

scholars accept 1604 as the year of *Othello's* first performance and 1603–04 as the period of composition. Thus Shakespeare composed *Othello* during a crucial year for the British people and for his dramatic company. On 24 March 1603 Queen Elizabeth died; on 19 May, the Lord Chamberlain's Men were made into the King's Men; and on 3 August, James VI of Scotland was crowned King of England. Londoners were curious about their new king. Immediately after his accession, London presses began to publish panegyrics and descriptions of his journey south from Scotland; they also reissued his *Basilikon Doron*, *Daemonology*, and *Lepanto*. Shakespeare, presumably an avid reader of visual and verbal signs, was thus exposed to a host of new texts related to James and his interests. Some of these texts have been identified as direct sources for *Othello*; others are equally important as contexts. By examining sources and contexts together, we can learn about the contemporary concerns – domestic and global – that are refracted in the first tragedy Shakespeare wrote as a King's Man.

To bring some order out of this chaotic wealth of materials, I focus in the first half of my book on four discursive fields⁹ that resonate through many late sixteenth and early seventeenth-century texts, including *Othello*. I begin with a nexus of global discourses. First, we find repeated expressions of concern about the Turkish threat to Europe: Christian “civility” opposes Islamic “barbarism.” During the sixteenth century, Ottoman victories, including the 1572 capture of Cyprus from Venice, and travelers' tales of events “passing strange,” persuaded Europeans that Christian civilization in Europe was in jeopardy. Superimposed onto the conception of a world divided between “them” and “us” were the discourses of “Orientalism” and colonialism.¹⁰ The effort to maintain and expand European

or 1602. See “The First Quarto of *Hamlet* and the Date of *Othello*,” *Review of English Studies*, 44 (1993): 211–19.

⁹ By “discursive field,” I mean a subset of what Michel Foucault described as a “discursive formation,” defined by Annabel Patterson as “a horizontal system of interrelated institutions and the ‘codes,’ or discourses that made them work.” (See her essay, “Historical Scholarship,” in *Introduction to Scholarship in Modern Languages and Literatures*, ed. Joseph Gibaldi [New York: The Modern Language Association, 1992], pp. 183–200; quote from p. 185.) The discursive formation of Jacobean England circa 1604 would combine all of the institutions that existed and all discourses that were available at the time. A discursive field – tracts and treatises on marriage, for example – is but a small portion of a larger, complex web.

¹⁰ For a pathbreaking outline of the concept of “Orientalism,” see Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon, 1978), esp. chapters 1–2.

civilization was furthered by repeated assertions of Europe's superiority over alien peoples.

A second discursive field resonating through *Othello* focuses on the military and its role in society. During the Renaissance the medieval image of the "parfit, gentil knight" who fought against the Saracen to regain the holy sepulchre (Chaucer's description) was gradually superseded by a new sense of professionalism. Military theorists argued that the art of war be a science, yet the old chivalric ideal held its power. Venice, as a city-state that needed to protect a vast overseas trading network, was caught between the old ideal and the new science; like England under Elizabeth and James, Venice needed military prowess but feared its subversive potential, disbanding its armies at each war's end. This ambivalence resulted in the Venetian practice of employing "strangers," *condottiere*, as a professional, standing army. The status of non-Venetian captains was necessarily ambiguous – vital to the state's safety, but seldom a fully accepted part of it. Othello is caught between the old ideals and the new professionalism; his adherence to a chivalric code of honor defines his sense of "occupation" and makes him more vulnerable to the wiles of Iago, a perversion of the new military man.

The concept of racial difference is a third major discursive field in *Othello*, cutting across other discourses as well. With the exploration and exploitation of Africa begun by the Portuguese in the fifteenth century, race became a global concept, though not as rigid as it was to become in the nineteenth century: European whites argued about the origins and humanity of Moors and East and West Indians, resting their cases on the ethnocentric certainty that their own selves and ways were central and superior. Race also affects the microcosm in *Othello*, for the marriage of a black man and a white woman is the emotional core of Shakespeare's play. And as recent commentators have shown, race was (and is) integrally tied to concepts of gender and sexuality.¹¹

My fourth discursive field is therefore based on marital and sexual relations, the union of husband and wife, male and female.

¹¹ Cf. Ania Loomba's discussion of "Sexuality and Racial Difference" in *Gender, Race, Renaissance Drama* (Manchester: University of Manchester Press, 1989), pp. 38–64; Kim Hall's unpub. Ph.D. diss., "Acknowledging Things of Darkness" (University of Pennsylvania, 1990); and an anthology published too recently to be incorporated into my analysis, *Women, "Race," and Writing in the Early Modern Period*, ed. Patricia Parker and Margo Hendricks (London: Routledge, 1994).

Subjugation of the female Other is not simply a convenient domestic arrangement but a fundamental building block of the patriarchal state. Venice kept its aristocracy pure by rigid control over marriage; Desdemona's elopement is thus subversive of the state as well as the family.

Othello is, of course, multivocal, the issues it embodies complicated. Even the four fairly straightforward discursive fields I have selected here comprehend a wide array of views – some of them contradictory – that overlap and interpenetrate. To discuss them in terms of four categories is necessarily to oversimplify. At the same time, material so vast has to be focused if it is to be comprehended. Though the discussions that follow will show how these discursive fields resonate from global politics in the macrocosm to the microcosmic relations of husband and wife, for the sake of manageability, I will discuss them separately.

A not-so-hidden agenda in this study is to show that *Othello*, particularly when staged without drastic cuts in Act 1, can be a profoundly political drama. Too often the play has been dismissed as domestic tragedy, lesser in some sense than *Macbeth* or *King Lear* because its hero is not a king, and its major action, suspected adultery, has no dynastic repercussions.¹² But *Othello's* loss, as I shall demonstrate, does have frightening consequences for Venice, a city precariously balanced on the frontiers of Christian civilization. That precariousness was a crucial ingredient in the “myth of Venice,” a concept common in the texts published in 1603 and no less important to Shakespeare's drama. The first chapter begins, therefore, with sixteenth- and seventeenth-century global politics.

The book's second section traces *Othello's* history in England and the United States from the Restoration to the late 1980s. It is not meant to be a comprehensive stage history; the chapters are more detailed than a survey allows, focusing on particular *epistemes* (the Restoration), actors (Macready, Salvini, Robeson), or productions (Delaval, Welles, Nunn). Here the effort is also to historicize, to place the *Othello* of a particular generation and culture within its historical

¹² For discussion of *Othello* as domestic tragedy, see Coppelia Kahn, *Man's Estate: Masculine Identity in Shakespeare* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), pp. 140–50; Carol Thomas Neely, “Women and Men in *Othello*,” in *Broken Nuptials in Shakespeare's Plays* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), pp. 105–35; and Marianne L. Novy, “Marriage and Mutuality in *Othello*,” in *Love's Argument: Gender Relations in Shakespeare* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984), pp. 125–49.

framework and to demonstrate why elements from the original text(s) were emphasized or repressed. When I can, I try to show how the discursive fields outlined in Part I influenced, in turn, the thinking of actors and managers who presented *Othello* to public audiences. Sometimes one field will dominate: the Restoration, for example, was far more concerned with Othello's military prowess than his race, whereas some late twentieth-century productions emphasize the drama's racial overtones. My goal is to show *Othello* not simply as a product of a cultural milieu but also as a *maker* of cultural meanings, part of a complex negotiation between each episteme's cultural attitudes, its actors, and their audiences. Thus the second section of *Othello: A Contextual History* emphasizes decisions involved in production and tries, whenever possible, to assess what attitudes actors brought to performances and how audiences responded.

Such contextualization is important in understanding adaptations, productions that substantially alter Shakespeare's text. While *Othello* was not subject to the improvements of William Davenant or Nahum Tate, it has been adapted for opera and film.¹³ It would take another book to discuss such adaptations in comprehensive detail; here the focus is on one cinematic version that stays comparatively close to Shakespeare's original: Orson Welles's 1955 film, which has recently been reedited and reissued.

My selections are admittedly different from those of traditional historians who wanted to discover the "best" Othellos, the "most fully realized" Iagos. I concede that there is a significant difference between good acting and bad (though what might please a Victorian could offend someone in the 1990s), but I am not concerned here with qualitative judgments about performance. Such judgments, I believe, are often based on the "essentialist" assumption that dramatic character is discrete, knowable, and clearly defined. Instead, I see Shakespeare's texts and the characters inscribed therein as open to a multiplicity of interpretations, some of them contradictory. Unlike earlier twentieth-century critics, we no longer have to decide if Othello is noble *or* barbaric, a hero *or* a sentimental fool. Generations of critics have argued that he can be either or both

¹³ For an excellent discussion of Verdi's *Otello* and twentieth-century cinematic adaptations, see Barbara Hodgdon, "Kiss Me Deadly; or, the Des/demonized Spectacle," in *Othello: New Perspectives*, pp. 214–55. Film adaptations also include the western *Jubal* and the rock musical *Catch My Soul*.

– the text supports contradictory readings.¹⁴ But how an actor or a particular production deals with those contradictory signals tells us much about assumptions and values – beliefs that necessarily involve issues about nationalism, militarism, race, and gender.

Although a few of the texts and events described in these pages have not been considered before in any great detail or in relation to *Othello*, most of the contexts provided are already familiar to Shakespearean scholars. This book's contribution, I believe, is to bring a broad range of texts *together* in an intertextual framework. The result is an historical contextualization within which (and against which) *Othello* can be read.

This is risky business. During 1991 I participated in a panel, "Historicizing *Othello*," at the Columbia University Shakespeare Seminar. During the discussion that followed, a distinguished member of the audience asked, "Why historicize?" That question has nagged me ever since. Why indeed? Part of my justification is self-serving; I enjoy primary texts and the creative pleasure of trying to fit bits and pieces of historical evidence into a larger, coherent pattern. I also believe that historicizing provides ways in and out of the text, bridging the gap between Shakespeare's age and our own. If we didn't know anything about Jacobean attitudes towards women and marriage, for example, wouldn't Emilia's speech about the double standard strike us as common sense – what every woman knows but does not say – rather than a subversive declaration to an audience in 1604? Historical contexts can serve as a means to the end of understanding. They remind us that no truth is absolute, that our own readings and hearings take place within a discrete historical epoch and are therefore subject to qualification and even dismissal by future generations. Historical contexts also mitigate Western culture's tendency toward bardolatry by situating Shakespeare's texts within a particular time and place. While the dramatist may, indeed, prove to be what Ben Jonson claimed, a writer "for all time," his words are consistently reencoded by succeeding generations.

One might also ask, why especially historicize *Othello*? The answer to this hypothetical question seems more obvious, for in *Othello* Shakespeare wove an intricate web that we still struggle to unravel. Scholars and audiences have been aware for decades (certainly since

¹⁴ For a good overview of twentieth-century approaches to *Othello*'s character, see Margaret Lael Mikesell's introduction to *Othello: An Annotated Bibliography* (New York: Garland, 1990), pp. xi–xxv.

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Paul Robeson's performance in 1943) of *Othello* as a text about constructions of racial identity.¹⁵ In the 1990s we are beginning to connect constructions of gender with racial attitudes and to place both within the contexts of colonialism, postcolonialism, and military interventionism. *Othello*, written at the beginning of England's overseas colonial enterprise, now seems strangely prescient because it probes all of these connections, attaching the private story of a husband and wife to the larger concerns of the Venetian Empire and even larger issues of cultural exchange and conflict that still plague us.

We are also learning to historicize the text itself. My stint on the New Variorum *Othello* taught me that *Othello*'s several texts are highly problematic. Because this volume is not primarily concerned with textual issues, I rely on a modern edition of *Othello*, but, in keeping with current trends in analytic bibliography, the choice of edition has not been casual. Except for chapter 11 (where I use M. R. Ridley's Arden edition because it served as promptcopy for the Trevor Nunn 1989 Royal Shakespeare Company production), quotations from *Othello* in this book are taken from Norman Sanders' 1984 New Cambridge edition, which conflates Q1 and the First Folio. Sanders argues that both are authoritative, reflecting "two stages of composition for both of which Shakespeare himself was responsible."¹⁶ Sanders' recognition of both texts' validity makes his conflated version the best now available for my purposes.

¹⁵ See, for example, Winthrop D. Jordan, *White Over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550-1812* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1968), pp. 37-43, where Jordan uses *Othello* to demonstrate how entrenched color prejudice was in early modern English consciousness.

¹⁶ Norman Sanders, ed., *Othello* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p. 206.

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PART I

Jacobean contexts