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 Edited by Sarah Hatchuel and Nathalie Vienne-Guerrin
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CHAPTER I

*Introduction**Ensnared in Othello on screen*

Sarah Hatchuel and Nathalie Vienne-Guerrin

Othello kills Desdemona. At the end of Shakespeare's tragic play, a Moorish general murders his white Venetian bride after having been convinced of her unfaithfulness by Iago, a dissatisfied officer. The play, thereby, raises issues of race and gender, dramatizing the very processes in which stereotypes are culturally built, conveyed, questioned and internalized. One of Iago's efficient stratagems, as Stephen Buhler remarks, is 'to persuade Othello that his very blackness – as well as his older years, his lack of "gentility," and his status as foreigner – makes him an unnatural mate' for Desdemona.¹ Othello is led, in Frantz Fanon's words, to 'epidermalize' – i.e., accept at the level of his skin colour – his racial inferiority.² Iago's machinations depend on the prejudiced beliefs, shared by characters inside the play, that black men are monstrous Others and women are harlots; but for spectators too, the sight of the fair Desdemona with her black general has, through centuries of performance, motivated and challenged culturally conditioned responses to race and gender.

Othello's final scene is known for blurring the frontiers between illusion and 'reality', affecting the audience profoundly but also, in Lois Potter's words, making them 'feel less like spectators . . . than like bystanders at a traffic accident'.³ The power of that scene is evident in the alternative French and German translations that have offered happy endings, and in the numerous anecdotes of outraged spectators shouting in disgust or intervening to stop the action, as if it were inappropriate for a fictional murder to stir such powerfully real emotions. Actors themselves apparently did not escape the effects of this blurring between life and art. Stories abound of Othellos who actually killed their Desdemonas. For Potter, 'the history of playing Othello is the history of a desire for a degree of identification between hero and role that might almost seem to rule out the need to act at all'.⁴

Paradoxically, despite this constructed 'identification' between actor and role, the part of Othello was in the hands of white men for nearly three

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hundred years, starting with Richard Burbage at the Globe theatre (who, let's remember, faced a boy as Desdemona). Ira Aldridge was the first black actor to enact Othello in the nineteenth century. He was followed by Morgan Smith, Edward Sterling Wright and the famous, politically conscious Paul Robeson, who performed the part to great acclaim on the London stage in 1930, on Broadway in 1943 and in Stratford-upon-Avon in 1959. Decades of activism were necessary before black actors were cast in the part on a regular basis. The role of Othello bears the weight of a long (and ongoing) history of discrimination and racism, of years of struggle for equality of opportunity, which questions the very possibility of 'colour-blind' casting.

However, the praise for black actors as 'natural' choices for the part – as if they were good only because they did not have to act – is certainly double-edged, since it has denied them both artistry and intelligence.⁵ Moreover, casting a black man in the role may prolong a cultural practice that labels the black man as arch-villain, reinforcing the racial clichés. Hugh Quarshie from the Royal Shakespeare Company even stated in 1999 that Othello might be the one classical role an actor of colour should *not* perform.⁶

In the early modern period, the term 'black' was generally opposed to 'fair' – read 'beautiful', with a special moral resonance in the case of women, evoking innocence and virginity.⁷ 'White' skin was desirable in the (noble) English women, but not in men, whose complexion had to be 'ruddy' or 'brown' to be considered healthy.⁸ In practice, as Kim Hall points out, 'this means that the polarity of dark and light is most often worked out in representations of black men and white women'.⁹ As Othello embodies the enemy of the white race, he encapsulates what Arthur L. Little calls 'an iconographic truth', conjuring up, as he does, a prominent cultural picture of 'the dominant society's sexual, racial, national and imperial fears'.¹⁰ The myths about black men's sexual rapacity and the dangers of racial 'pollution' were used to ensure the control of white women – who might tarnish their own sexual or racial 'purity'. This recurrent fascination with narratives centred on a black male and a white female has been explored by Celia Daileader, who coined the term 'Othellophilia' to address the critical and artistic 'habit of casting black actors in "color-blind" roles that uncannily recalled the role of Othello' (pointing out, for example, that inter-racial productions of *Romeo and Juliet* almost inevitably cast Romeo – not Juliet – as black).¹¹ The practice of Othellophilia, she argues, should be considered in the context of Anglo-American culture: from the Renaissance onward, the 'canonical' narratives

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of inter-racial marriage and sex have told the story of black men and white women – not of black women and white men, thus suppressing its counterpart – ‘the more historically pertinent if more ideologically troubling story of white male sexual use of black females, the slave-holder’s secret’.¹² Casting a black actor as Othello may, therefore, contribute to exorcize the slave-master’s sexual guilt.¹³ Nevertheless, because of the fight to achieve recognition and legitimacy and to secure job opportunities for black actors, it has now become very problematic to cast a non-black performer, whether on stage or on screen.¹⁴ In silent films, black actors were limited to the eye-rolling-‘coon’ stereotypes established by D. W. Griffith in his *Birth of a Nation* (1915) and were not even allowed to touch the white heroine. Cinema employed white actors to play black protagonists for a very long time, until worldviews and acting codes started to change. As Pascale Aebischer contends, ‘A white actor blacking-up . . . is almost inevitably racist in his performance of racial Otherness and in his suggestion that these characters’ race, rather than the racist attitudes . . ., is the reason for their savage outbreaks of violence.’¹⁵ Similarly Neil Taylor observes: ‘now, blackface no longer convinces. The mask has ceased to be a convention and become an outrage.’¹⁶

How have films of *Othello* negotiated the delicate pitfalls of what – albeit anachronistically¹⁷ – seems to be the racist and sexist agenda of a play in which a foreign dark lord murders a weak white girl? In the short feature *Che Cosa Sono Le Nuvole?* (1967), Pier Paolo Pasolini appropriates *Othello* as an inset play performed by full-sized human puppets before a working-class audience. Increasingly upset by the plot, the audience invades the stage and changes the story. As the spectators reveal their lack of sophistication, seeming to mistake fiction for reality, they also heroically stand up against the patriarchal, racist and sexually masochistic subtext by saving Desdemona and killing Othello and Iago. By showing the string-pulling puppeteer and giving the human puppets (and the spectators) agency of their own, Pasolini dramatizes, as Sonia Massai argues, the tension between Shakespeare’s powerful authorial discourse and resistance against it.¹⁸ Forty-three years later, in the 2010 ‘Sassy Gay Friend: Othello’¹⁹ video on YouTube (which has been viewed more than 3.5 million times since its uploading),²⁰ Desdemona is saved by her hilarious ‘sassy gay friend’, who advises her to leave before Othello’s murderous arrival. He informs her of her husband’s suspicions by deconstructing the gender politics of the play: ‘What? Some guy ends up with your handkerchief, so your husband gets to murder you?! No!’, thus preempting the reactions that may (too often) be heard among spectators or students of the play – ‘her

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murder is so unfair – she was innocent and faithful to her husband’. But what if she had been ‘guilty’ of infidelity? Would she, then, have deserved to die? In both scenarios (Pasolini’s and the Sassy Gay Friend’s), opposing what the play seems to advocate ultimately implies changing its ending. Can productions of the tragedy that follow Shakespeare’s playtext or plotline escape a racist and sexist stance and denounce prejudiced responses? What are the challenges Shakespeare’s *Othello* raises when it is adapted, appropriated or cited on screen? And can there be such things as ‘post-racial’ films?²¹

Much has already been written on *Othello* screen adaptations and derivatives, as attested by José Ramón Díaz Fernández’s select film-bibliography at the end of this volume and its extended version in the online resource for this book; yet, this collection of essays offers analyses of new filmic objects as well as original critical stances to review older ones. By revisiting ‘canonical’ versions, their making-ofs and translations (including amateur clips posted on YouTube), by analysing free retellings in the Anglophone zones but also those beyond the US/UK axis, in Québec, Italy, Brazil or Mexico, and by examining ‘mirror’ metanarrative films, their genres and receptions through time, the essays all take part in the ceaseless investigation of what the play continues to say about ‘Shakespeare’, of the past and of our present time. The adaptations, appropriations, spin-offs, quotes and misquotes invite us to reflect upon what ‘Shakespeare on film’ signifies or engenders, and upon the way *Othello* has been circulating and received in our contemporary cultures. The exploration of racial issues in *Othello* has made it an enabling text for racially segregated cultures and more generally for colonial and postcolonial readers, adapters and performers of Shakespeare. Othello’s character has, indeed, provided a mouthpiece for the consciousness of denigrated²² peoples in their unequal and exploitive cultural encounters with Europe.²³

Whether one considers Shakespeare’s text as conveying or condemning racial segregation, *Othello* puts these issues to the fore, exploring the ways notions of Otherness are constructed and calling for adaptations to other contexts – which reflects Othello’s own traveller’s tales inside the play. Othello has journeyed to liminal exotic places and even encountered ‘the cannibals that each other eat,/ The Anthropophagi, and men whose heads/ Do grow beneath their shoulders’ (1.3.142–4). In the opening chapter to this collection, Victoria Bladen examines how eight screen adaptations, dating from 1952 to 2004, have inventively inserted motifs of peripheral places and figures. Bladen shows how the films have dealt with the intersections of race and gender with the marvellous and the

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Figure 1: Othello in Stuart Burge/Laurence Olivier's 1965 production.
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monstrous, showing how Othello the 'voyager' is in turn framed by, and entrapped within, narratives of Otherness.

As early as the pre-sound film era, films of *Othello* have sent mixed messages on racial issues. In Dimitri Buchowetzki's 1922 German adaptation (in which Othello heroically succeeds in killing Iago before committing suicide), Emil Jannings's Othello's very black make-up, marking him as a racial Other, is challenged by intertitles that present him as the noble son of an Egyptian prince and a Spanish princess. Yet his Otherness is reinforced by Krauss's Iago's use of the handkerchief to wipe himself in disgust after having touched Othello's brow.²⁴ However, the scene also emphasizes the artificiality of the mask. As Judith Buchanan notes, Iago's 'expression of interest in what comes off on the handkerchief cannot help but also register the fact that in their *performance* of this scene at least, it was very probably boot polish'.²⁵ The attempt of a white actor to 'racially' impersonate blackness peaked in Laurence Olivier's performance for the National Theatre in 1964, which was recorded by Stuart Burge in 1965 (see Figure 1).

This blacked-up, histrionic performance, which was probably more suited to the stage than to the 'realistic' medium of cinema, heavily emphasized Othello's Otherness through skin colour, exaggerated gesture and accent, and has often been received, especially in the light of the civil rights movement taking place at the time, as condescending and, to quote Aebischer, as 'the infamous key example of extreme racial stereotyping'.²⁶ But offensiveness may be precisely part of the performance's point. Peter Holland's chapter in this collection asks that we think again about Olivier's bravura performance, relocating it in its historical moment but also seeing it as the nearest we can now come to the ambiguities of early modern constructions and representations of Othello's blackness.

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To avoid addressing the issues raised when Othello is portrayed as a black African, some critics and directors have, as Buhler points out, ‘denied that race is a major factor in the play’ by claiming that ‘Othello is classified, after all, as a Moor, a term that could describe any number of peoples from the Mediterranean and beyond’.²⁷ In Jonathan Miller’s 1981 BBC version, Othello was played by a white man, Anthony Hopkins, against Bob Hoskins’s Iago; but, contrary to Olivier, Hopkins impersonated a hardly tanned-up North African. Kenneth S. Rothwell notes the coincidence that links the two names ‘Hopkins’ and ‘Hoskins’, suggesting that the production’s emphasis was less on racial Otherness than on volcanic macho jealousy, class conflict and ‘the *Doppelgänger* relationship between hero and villain’.²⁸ However, in a different cultural context, even the ‘North African’ option may bring the racial matter to the fore with a vengeance. This was the case in France with Claude Barma’s TV production, which was broadcast in January 1962,²⁹ just a few months before the end of what was called the ‘events’ (to avoid saying ‘war’) in Algeria – by that time a French colony. Daniel Sorano, who plays Othello, had a father who was born in Algeria; he experienced racism and, in his youth, was called a ‘nigger’, a word that actually often replaces the term ‘Moor’ in the French translation for this TV version. Sorano stated in an interview that *Othello* was definitely less a tragedy of jealousy than a racial tragedy,³⁰ before completely identifying himself with the role in the tradition highlighted by Potter (‘Yes, it’s true, admits Sorano, I am Othello’)³¹ and tragically dying at forty-one, just a few months after the film was made. Interestingly, Sorano’s North African origins did not prevent him from using make-up to darken his skin, making even more visible the difference and segregation that the actor felt throughout his life. Not considered white in France, Sorano was yet positioned, by a TV magazine at the time, in the line of blackface actors, from Orson Welles to Serge Bondartchouk.³²

In 1988, in the explosive context of apartheid South Africa, Janet Suzman filmed, for Channel Four (UK), a production of *Othello* performed at the Market Place Theatre (Johannesburg) that addressed racial politics frontally, challenging the South African audience with black actor John Kani embracing a white Desdemona. A year later, Trevor Nunn’s filmed stage production in Stratford-upon-Avon cast the black Jamaican opera singer Willard White as Othello. This casting choice may retrospectively be read in the light of opera’s ongoing tradition of casting white tenors in blackface in Verdi’s *Otello*, causing ‘considerable controversy in recent years’.³³ In Nunn’s production, the Moor is no longer isolated as the only Other on stage since Bianca, Cassio’s lover, is also black; however, Bianca’s blackness reinforces the idea of racial hierarchies since Cassio may worship the white Desdemona but ‘relieves’ himself with a ‘black harlot’.³⁴

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Oliver Parker's 1995 version is the first general-release film in which the title-role is played by an African American actor, Laurence Fishburne, whose body often becomes an eroticized spectacle. Buchanan notes how, on the night of the arrival in Cyprus, it is 'his undressing, not hers, upon which the camera lingers with the most intimate and detailed appreciation'.³⁵ The motif of the chessboard that pervades the film with its black-and-white colour pattern evokes colonial narratives in which Othello is envisaged as a servant owned and controlled by Venice. Mark Thornton Burnett also sees, in Iago's appropriation of the chess pieces, the sign of 'a position of political dominance or, at least, imperial power'.³⁶ If the film attracted African American audiences,³⁷ it also exploited stereotypes of the black man and black male sexuality, notably through Othello's slightly menacing, almost stalking, attitude during his first scene of lovemaking and through Fishburne's previous role as Tina Turner's brutal husband, Ike, in Brian Gibson's *What's Love Got to Do With It* (1993).³⁸

On screen, Desdemona has generally been framed by a patriarchal gaze she cannot escape. The Italian *Othello* filmed by Arturo Ambrosio and Arrigo Frusta in 1914 was sometimes refused exhibition because Desdemona was killed at the end,³⁹ but, paradoxically, this silent film is perhaps the less voyeuristic in its depiction of the murder: it takes place out of shot while the camera focuses on a candle that is extinguished, as a mere visual equivalent to Othello's line 'And then put out the light'. Other productions have, on the contrary, revelled in the sado-erotic cruelty of the murder. As Aebischer notes, the murder in Orson Welles's 1952 film takes place slowly with 'explicit eroticisation' and even 'panic-stricken collaboration' from Desdemona (Suzanne Cloutier).⁴⁰ What is first a fetishized, unsullied, passive 'white' icon becomes a lurid vision of expressionist shots in which she is monstrously fragmented and 'dis-membered'.⁴¹ Iago (Micheál MacLiammóir) turns, in Carol Rutter's words, a 'Madonna into [a] gargoyle'.⁴² Desdemona is the victim of both Othello and the montage constructed by the all-controlling male *auteur*. In this volume, Sebastien Lefait's chapter addresses this wish for absolute control and considers Welles's *Othello* making-of (*Filming Othello*, made in 1978) as the attempt to manipulate the spectators' reception (in a very Iago-like way), to modify his former film and rerelease it in an updated version. *Filming Othello* certainly proclaims 'the need for *Othello* to be remade over and over' but as long as Welles may have 'the final say in the field of *Othello* adaptations'.

As a rather light-skinned Othello, Welles does not put alterity to the fore but identifies the hero with himself, the powerful actor-director who

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rejects Otherness, like a prestidigitator, onto Cloutier.⁴³ Welles's fascination with magic and forgery, as Rothwell suggests, influenced his whole world view (one of his last filmic essays was *F for Fake* in 1973).⁴⁴ His *Othello*, which aesthetically influenced so many other adaptations, marked his turn away from the filmic long take and towards the 'magical' effects of juxtaposed, quick shots (the film includes some five hundred of them).⁴⁵ The rhythmic montage, the chiaroscuro lighting, the tilted camera angles offering differing perspectives and the recurring motifs of cages, bars and the mosaic reflect Iago's scheme of entrapment, of 'enmesh [ing] them all' (2.3.357), but also 'map female unknowability or perhaps male anxiety'⁴⁶ according to which women are aloof and deceitful.

Othello's misogynistic environment has spurred discussions about the relation between Othello and Iago. Do the film productions emphasize what could be read as a homoerotic relation? The debate peaked when reviewing Parker's 1995 film. While the story was meant to focus on the sexual union of Othello and Desdemona (the film was advertised as an 'erotic thriller'), the critics repeatedly commented on the interplay between Othello/Fishburne, who was labelled a newcomer to Shakespeare, and Iago/Branagh, whose experience with the language was emphasized. On homosexuality, critics and scholars alike were divided. For Rothwell, 'Parker pays no attention to the fashionable vogue for a homoerotic attraction between Iago and Othello.'⁴⁷ Hodgdon compares Othello and Iago's bloody handshake as they take their vow with the 'close-up of Desdemona's and Othello's hands against the flower-strewn wedding sheets' but eventually concludes that 'any suggestion of a homosexual coupling' is 'avoid[ed]' in favour of stressing a 'military code of honor' where 'justice' against women 'becomes the provenance of men'.⁴⁸ Douglas Lanier reads Branagh's Iago's motivations as stemming from 'homosocial jealousy, not racism', as made clear by the 'homoerotic joy' he seems to feel during their 'blood bond' embrace; violence against women is thus linked to the 'seductiveness of homosocial male bonding'.⁴⁹ This is in keeping with Richard Burt's observation that 'in Parker's 1995 Snoop-Doggy-Dog-style *Othello*, Branagh plays Iago as a gay man who loves Othello but cannot admit it and so destroys him and his wife'.⁵⁰ Burnett, too, perceives a homoerotic subtext in Iago's 'visual contemplation' of the Moor and in his lovemaking with his wife Emilia, which suggests 'a barely suppressed imaginary of male-on-male consummation'.⁵¹ Iago's fascination with Othello's body can also be found in his blackening of his own hand with charcoal, a gesture that Buchanan identifies as 'simultaneously of mock-derision and of intimate identification with the

black Other whom he professes to hate'.⁵² As regularly in *Othello* productions, identity is elusively hybridized and slides across and between racial categorizations.

In Parker's *Othello*, the tragedy explicitly happens through a gaze that is manipulated by Branagh's Iago, the master-director. As Iago catches a glimpse of Cassio and Desdemona (Irène Jacob) on the blade of his knife, he discloses his strategy to the spectators: he will 'interpose himself as a distorting mirror through which Othello may observe the world',⁵³ thereby identifying himself as the film's inset director who guides Othello's (and the audience's) gaze and acknowledging Branagh's own experience as a filmmaker. In his regular addresses to the spectators and his awareness that he is filmed and observed, Branagh's Iago uses the camera as the very net that 'enmesh[es] them all', since, as Buchanan remarks, the camera embodies the 'subjectivized gaze, and a failure to acknowledge the limits of one's own subjectivity'.⁵⁴

Films of *Othello* dramatize the power that words have to transform our gaze but also to engender mental images. Sergei Yutkevich's 1955 version shows visually how Desdemona imagines and romanticizes Othello's tales of adventure and captivity. In Buchowetzki's 1922 film, Othello's thoughts of his wife's unfaithfulness are projected, during his epileptic fit, onto the curtain behind his bed, turning verbal accusations into visual ones. Parker's 1995 film also literalizes Othello's fantasy as he imagines his wife in bed with Cassio. These literal, soft-porn visions are, for Buchanan, 'insidiously persuasive' since the slander 'assumes a degree of quasi-photographic truth'.⁵⁵ As the spectators see what Othello sees, Iago's innuendoes about Desdemona's infidelity are written onto Desdemona's body, which, according to Rutter, serves to 'validate the misogynistic stereotypes . . . that Shakespeare's play circulates'.⁵⁶ As the camera goes back to the epileptic Othello, his back is against the wall, his head shaking in pain, and his hands attached to heavy, handcuff-like chains (see Figure 2).

These shots prolong the sado-masochistic imagery as well as portray Othello as a tied-up slave. Moreover, Othello's suicide through self-strangulation at the end of the film evokes, for Burnett, 'photographic images of lynchings of blacks in the American Deep south'.⁵⁷ The chains and the strangulation may also suggest, as Buhler contends, that the character is 'enslaved not only by his jealousy but by the racist categories Iago has led him to internalize'.⁵⁸ Again, we witness, in the film's reception, the tensions that the play itself arouses. *Othello* productions can be explored as reflections, in various contexts, on the unstable processes leading to the construction of racial identities, documenting how the blackness of each



Figure 2: Iago and Othello in Oliver Parker's 1995 film.
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specific Othello is 'defined within and against white value systems and beliefs'.⁵⁹ Films may be best approached as sites of negotiation where stereotypes are at once created and challenged, reinforced and exploded.

Free adaptations that rewrite Shakespeare's text are also confronted with these tensions. In the ITV/PBS 2001 *Othello* directed by Geoffrey Sax (following a script by Andrew Davies), which takes place in London, with John Othello as a member of the Metropolitan Police Force, Iago (the production's equivalent of Iago) is not punished at the end and is even promoted to a position from where he can continue to endorse racist policies. The PBS website claims that 'Shakespeare's classic tale of jealousy, love and obsession enters the millennium'⁶⁰ but, for Barbara Hodgdon, this 'millennium' appears more as a 'memory of the past than a symptom of present-day hopes . . . for an equitable future of race (and gender) relations'.⁶¹ Davies/Sax's *Othello* would result 'in white blindness' and reflect on the fact that 'whiteness' is invisible, never has to be defined, while constituting a norm linked to masculinity and power, against which Otherness is created.⁶² In this volume, Peter Smith's chapter offers a reading of Davies/Sax's version within the context of current racial tensions in the UK – contemporary legal cases, instances of racist abuse by the police, and the Euro 2012 football tournament – and shows how 'the adaptation is preternaturally prophetic of the condition of the Met at the present time'. His critical approach is that of a presentism 'tethered'