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Othello and the "plain face" Of Racism

MARTIN ORKIN

SOLOMON T. PLAATJE DID NOT COME TO SHAKESPEARE'S PLAYS with the same perspective as those held, no doubt, by most of his contemporary counterparts within the white ruling group of South Africa. But he responded to significant aspects of Shakespeare more reliably than they. Plaatje, who translated several of the works, including *Othello*, into Tswana, observed that "Shakespeare's dramas . . . show that nobility and valour, like depravity and cowardice, are not the monopoly of any colour."[1]

Before Plaatje's time, *Othello* had been, during the nineteenth century, one of the most popular plays at the Cape. But a personal advertisement taken out before an 1836 performance suggests the gulf that lay between Plaatje's sentiment and what is likely to have been the opinion of inhabitants in 1836:

> In frequenting the Theatre, do not professing Christians pointedly violate their baptismal vows? . . . In listening to Othello, do they not necessarily contract a horrible familiarity with passions and deeds of the most fiendish character . . . and give up their minds to be polluted by language so gross? Is not the guilt of such persons great, and their danger imminent?[2]

The absence or presence of racist attitudes inevitably determines one's response to *Othello*, as the difference between Plaatje's remark and the comment of the above writer demonstrates. In the following pages, after discussing attitudes to color in Shakespeare's England and in *Othello* (Sections I–V), I will examine instances in which racist mythology inscribes critical responses to the play (Section VI), focusing finally (Section VII) on how, in South Africa, silence about the prevailing racist tendencies in *Othello* criticism actually supports racist doctrine and practice.

I

The English encounter with Africans began from about the mid-sixteenth century. Native West Africans had probably first appeared in London in 1554; certainly, as Eldred Jones points out, by 1601 there were enough black men in London to prompt Elizabeth to express her discontent "at the great number of 'Negars and blackamoors' which are crept into the realm since the troubles

[1] From Solomon T. Plaatje in *A Book of Homage to Shakespeare*, ed. I. Gollancz (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1916), pp. 336–39, cited in *English in Africa*, 3 (1976), 8. Stephen Gray, "Plaatje's Shakespeare," *English in Africa*, 4 (1977), 4, gives an account of Plaatje's translations. Plaatje is also the author of *Native Life in South Africa*, 2nd ed. (London: P. S. King & Son, 1916).

[2] Cited by Eric Rosenthal, "Early Shakespearean Productions in South Africa," *English Studies in Africa*, 7 (1964), 210.

between her Highness and the King of Spain."[3] In turn, Englishmen visited Africa in significant numbers in the second half of the sixteenth century, primarily for reasons of trade.

As such scholars as Eldred Jones and Winthrop Jordan have taught us, there is ample evidence of the existence of color prejudice in the England of Shakespeare's day. This prejudice may be accounted for in a number of ways, including xenophobia—as one proverb first recorded in the early seventeenth century has it, "Three Moors to a Portuguese; three Portuguese to an Englishman"—as well as what V. G. Kiernan sees as a general tendency in the European encounter with Africa, namely, to see Africa as the barbarism against which European civilization defined itself:

> Revived memories of antiquity, the Turkish advance, the new horizons opening beyond, all encouraged Europe to see itself afresh as civilization confronting barbarism. . . . Colour, as well as culture, was coming to be a distinguishing feature of Europe.[4]

Furthermore, as Winthrop Jordan argues, the Protestant Reformation in England, with its emphasis upon personal piety and intense self-scrutiny and internalized control, facilitated the tendency evidenced in Englishmen to use people overseas as "social mirrors."[5] Referring to the "dark mood of strain and control in Elizabethan culture," Jordan highlights too the Elizabethan concern with the need for "external self discipline" in a context of social ferment and change. "Literate Englishmen . . . concerned with the apparent disintegration of social and moral controls at home" were on occasion inclined to project their own weaknesses onto outsiders, to discover attributes in others "which they found first, but could not speak of, in themselves" (Jordan, pp. 23–24).

These tendencies were coupled with a tradition of color prejudice that scholars identify in the literature and iconography of Shakespeare's day and earlier.[6] As the *OED* indicates, the meaning of the word "black" includes, before the sixteenth century, a whole range of negative associations.[7]

Such factors may help to account for the white impulse to regard black men in set ways. English ethnocentrism fastened upon differences in color, religion, and style of life. Eldred Jones has assembled material that shows that Elizabethan Englishmen saw the natives of Africa as barbarous, treacherous, libidinous, and jealous. An account of the inhabitants along "the coast of Guinea and the mydde partes of Africa," for example, observes that they

[3] *Othello's Countrymen* (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1965), pp. 12–13.

[4] "European attitudes to the outside world" in *'Race' in Britain—Continuity and Change*, ed. Charles Husband (London: Hutchinson, 1982), pp. 27, 29. The proverb is mentioned by G. K. Hunter, "Othello and Colour Prejudice," *Proceedings of the British Academy*, LIII (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1967), 139–63.

[5] *The White Man's Burden: Historical Origins of Racism in the United States* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1974), p. 22.

[6] G. K. Hunter's "Othello and Colour Prejudice" is excellent, as is Eldred Jones's highly informative *Othello's Countrymen*. See also Jones, *The Elizabethan Image of Africa* (Charlottesville: Univ. of Virginia Press, 1971).

[7] Doris Adler, "The Rhetoric of *Black* and *White* in *Othello*," *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 25 (1974), 248–57, has offered a highly sensitive account of the multiple resonances in the use of the words "black," "white," and "fair." Whilst I agree with almost everything in this valuable article, I intend to argue that although Othello does *intermittently* "describe himself in terms of (Iago's) racial stereotype" (p. 254), his primary dilemma in the play relates to Iago's refashioning of Desdemona's image. See also Harold Clarke Goddard, "*Othello* and the Race Problem," *Alphabet of the Imagination* (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press, 1974), pp. 74–84.

> were in oulde tyme called Ethiopes and Nigrite, which we nowe caule Moores, Moorens or Negros, a people of beastly lyvynge, without a god, lawe, religion or common welth, and so scorched and vexed with the heate of the soone, that in many places they curse it when it ryseth.[8]

The treachery of black men was popularized in George Peele's play, *The Battle of Alcazar* (1588); their libidinousness was exemplified in William Waterman's *Fardle of Facions* of 1555, which noted of the Ichthiophagi that, after their meals, "they falle uppon their women, even as they come to hande withoute any choyse . . ." (Jones, p. 8). And John Leo's *History and Description of Africa* (trans. 1600) presents the somewhat conflicting claim that black men are extremely jealous:

> [W]homsoever they finde but talking with their wives they presently go about to murther them . . . by reason of jealousie you may see them daily one to be the death and destruction of another, . . . they will by no means match themselves unto an harlot.
>
> (quoted by Jones, p. 22)

II

What evidence exists in *Othello* that Shakespeare shared the color prejudice apparent in his age? I would argue, first, that there is racist sentiment within the play, but that it is to an important degree confined to Iago, Roderigo, and Brabantio.[9] Both Iago and Roderigo use racist insinuation during their attempted *putsch* against Othello's position and reputation. Iago, as we know, calls up to Brabantio that "an old black ram / Is tupping your white ewe" (I.i.88–89)[10] and that

> . . . you'll have your daughter cover'd with a Barbary horse, you'll have your nephews neigh to you; you'll have coursers for cousins, and gennets for germans.
>
> (I.i.111–13)

Roderigo, too, is proficient at racist insult, referring to Othello as the "thick-lips" (I.i.66) and falling upon the racist stereotype of the lust-ridden black man when he calls to Brabantio that his daughter has given herself to the "gross clasps of a lascivious Moor" (I.i.126). Furthermore, the language of these two men ignites a similar tendency to racism lurking within the Brabantio who has in the past invited Othello to his home as a guest. Provoked, Brabantio laments

[8] Part of Richard Eden's own elaboration of the account of John Lok's voyages, first published by Eden in 1554–55 and reprinted in 1577 and 1589. Cited in Jones, *Othello's Countrymen*, p. 11.

[9] It might be argued that the term "color prejudice" is more appropriate for the sixteenth and seventeenth century than the term "racism." However, equally, it may be argued that from the perspective of the twentieth century the term "color prejudice" is not profitably to be distinguished from the modern sense of racist practice. The one implies, if it does not always lead to, the other. As early as the sixteenth century, active exploitation/persecution on the basis of color was, in any event, under way. Oliver Cromwell Cox, "Race and Exploitation: A Marxist View," *Race and Social Difference*, eds. Paul Baxter and Basil Sansom (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), pp. 205–20, describes Sepulveda, who in 1550 attempted to justify the right of the Spaniards to wage wars against the Indians as "among the first great racists; his argument was, in effect, that the Indians were inferior to the Spaniards, therefore they should be exploited" (p. 210). In the present article, the terms "color prejudice" and "racism" and their variants are used interchangeably.

[10] All references to *Othello* are from *The Riverside Shakespeare*, gen. ed. G. Blakemore Evans (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974), with square brackets deleted.

in anger that if Desdemona's bewitchment—as he construes it—is to be permitted, then "Bond-slaves and pagans shall our statesmen be" (I.ii.99). Othello is of course neither a slave (although, as he tells us, he had once been one) nor a pagan, but Brabantio projects both roles onto the general, referring also to the "sooty bosom / Of such a thing as thou" (I.ii.70–71).

This racism makes no impact upon the Venetian court as a whole. Even where Brabantio is concerned, although Iago and Roderigo successfully manage to expose an element of hidden racism, the father's grief is mixed. His problem is as much to come to an understanding of the fact of his daughter's disobedience as it is to cope with his misgivings about his son-in-law's color. The immense authority that parents claimed during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries explains at least a part of the father's rage. When he is told of his daughter's elopement, Brabantio's first cry is, "Fathers, from hence trust not your daughters' minds" (I.i.170), and his insistence that the marriage goes against nature at least includes the suggestion that the unnaturalness lies in part in the flouting of loyalty. Certainly, Desdemona, when called upon for an explanation, offers one that deals with the issue of parental authority (I.iii.180–89). Brabantio's final expression of grief communicates anger at her deception and betrayal rather than at the "inter-racial" nature of his daughter's marriage:

> Look to her, Moor, if thou hast eyes to see;
> She has deceiv'd her father, and may thee.
> (I.iii.292–93)

The Venetian court ignores the racism implicit or explicit in Brabantio's remarks; they have, after all, elected Othello general and he is, as we learn later in the play, esteemed by them as the "noble Moor" whom they consider "all in all sufficient" (IV.i.265). Certain critics argue that it is only the imminent crisis with the Turks that determines their restraint in the accusation brought against Othello. However, although the emergency clearly dominates their thinking, as would be the case for rulers of any state under threat, no evidence emerges in the detail of the language to suggest that they share a hidden racist disapprobation of Othello. Brabantio's initial accusation, with its racist asides, might well have been taken up by one with racist predilections; instead, the Duke asks only for concrete proof to replace the "thin habits and poor likelihoods / Of modern seeming" which "do prefer against him" (I.iii.108–9). The first senator attempts, it is true, to ascertain whether Othello did "by indirect and forced courses / Subdue and poison this young maid's affections" (I.iii.111–12), but, even before the evidence has been fully heard, he also acknowledges, in a way that negates any suggestion of racism, that the relationship between Othello and Desdemona might well be based upon "request, and such fair question / As soul to soul affordeth" (I.iii.113–14). When, finally, the truth has been heard, the Duke responds, "I think this tale would win my daughter too" (I.iii.171), and his ensuing attempt to console Brabantio—although it obviously suggests, in its platitudinous ring, a desire to move on to the emergency facing Venice—argues for reconciliation and acceptance.[11]

Furthermore, the racism displayed by Iago, Roderigo, and, in his uglier moments, Brabantio, contrasts with others in *Othello*. Cassio, the Florentine, clearly loves and respects his general; deprived of office by Othello, he does not resort

[11] The Duke's comment at I.iii.289–90 is discussed below.

to the resentment that characterizes the response of the ensign who considers he has been passed over. Yearning only to win again his superior's favor, Cassio blames himself:

> I will rather sue to be despis'd than to deceive so good a commander with so slight, so drunken, and so indiscreet an officer.
>
> (II.iii.277–79)

And Desdemona, also like Iago a Venetian, not only loves Othello but remains consistently in love with him throughout the play, never, despite that to which she is subjected, impugning either that love or her husband.[12]

Nevertheless, at times in the play speakers besides Iago, Roderigo, and Brabantio appear to refer to or to draw upon racist discourse. These include the Duke, Desdemona, and even Othello himself. Before examining such remarks, however, it is necessary for us to consider the overall presentation of Iago and Othello in the text.

III

Winthrop Jordan argues that *Othello* loses most of its power and several of its central points "if it is read with the assumption that because the black man was the hero English audiences were indifferent to his blackness. Shakespeare was writing both *about* and *to* his countrymen's feelings concerning physical distinctions between peoples. . . ."[13] The observation is an important one. Shakespeare is writing about color prejudice and, further, is working consciously against the color prejudice reflected in the language of Iago, Roderigo, and Brabantio. He in fact reverses the associations attached to the colors white and black that are the consequence of racist stereotyping. It is Iago, the white man, who is portrayed as amoral and anti-Christian, essentially savage towards that which he envies or resents, and cynical in his attitude to love—for him "merely a lust of the blood and a permission of the will" (I.iii.334–35).

Iago's tendencies are exposed to the audience from the start. In reacting to his own failure to secure promotion he attacks both the system that he serves and the man who has won the position he coveted. He voices the time-serving bureaucrat's objection that promotion goes not by the "old gradation, where each second / Stood heir to th' first" (I.i.37–38) and denigrates the abilities of his successful rival as "Mere prattle, without practice" (I.i.26). Moreover the viciousness in Iago's seething resentment at having to remain in a condition of subordination, his restless barrack-room malice, flashes out in his cynicism towards Cassio and in his dislike of the alien implicit in his reference to his rival as "a Florentine" (I.i.20). Iago's scorn for social bonds or any concept of duty, his assertion, "Not I for love and duty, / But seeming so, for my peculiar end" (I.i.59–60), identifies his ruthless hypocrisy and self-interest.

[12] This is not to claim an infallible Desdemona. Jane Adamson, *"Othello" as tragedy: some problems of judgment and feeling* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1980), pp. 214–63, identifies the extent to which Desdemona's own misunderstanding of her husband and her misjudgment of the situation helps to compound the errors in which all become embroiled. One of the best articles on the quality of the relationship between Desdemona and Othello, and lucid and helpful in many other ways too, is G. M. Matthews's, "*Othello* and the Dignity of Man," *Shakespeare in a Changing World*, ed. Arnold Kettle (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1964), pp. 123–45: "both lovers assert 'humane' values against the conventions that debase them" (p. 129).

[13] *The White Man's Burden*, p. 20.

When he asserts his intention to deceive (I.i.61–65), he describes society as predatory—ready to "peck at" any exposure of feeling. This negative projection onto society produces an overtly stated intention to be himself a predator. His picture of society as ready at the appropriate moment to cashier the "knee-crooking knave" (I.iii.45) is not borne out by the play in either Cassio's or indeed Othello's experience. Iago's projections result patently from a sense of failure and rejection, which, as Jane Adamson observes, he fails to acknowledge:

> Iago's significance . . . centres on his unremitting efforts to deny or suppress the feelings that consume him, and to transform them into other feelings that might at once allow and justify a course of retributive action, instead of his having impotently to suffer fear, loss and self-disgust and negation.[14]

Othello is about love and also about its absence. Iago, in rejecting a social conscience, eschews Christian values asserting the importance of a positive and loving commitment to one's fellows and one's society. Moreover, the consequences of Iago's rejection of communication and commitment extend beyond mere escape from the inevitable vulnerability and risk that the action of love to a degree always involves. Iago also loses the capacity to comprehend love. The irony in his racist brooding—especially in his soliloquies about Othello's alleged sexual license—is that his own mechanistic and cynical view of love (as he outlines it at the conclusion of Act I, and as he claims it for the Venetians), approximates closely the penchant for lust of which black men were accused in racist accounts. Perhaps nowhere else in drama is Jordan's point about the Elizabethan faculty for *projection* onto the other so well illustrated as in Iago's imaginings about Othello's alleged promiscuity.

On at least two occasions in the text, Iago's amoral and anti-Christian attitude appears to be directly indicated. William Elton has identified in I.iii.320–26 an instance of Pelagian heresy: in extolling man's complete freedom Iago propounds a philosophy that St. Augustine labored to eradicate.[15] Then, when Othello takes his terrible vow (III.iii.453–62), Iago pledges:

> Witness, you ever-burning lights above,
> You elements that clip us round about,
> Witness that here Iago doth give up
> The execution of his wit, hands, heart,
> To wrong'd Othello's service! Let him command,
> And to obey shall be in me remorse,
> What bloody business ever.
> (III.iii.463–69)

The text here echoes Desdemona's earlier language of love to Othello, but, in kneeling and twisting the sentiment into a promise to serve his general in "what bloody business ever," Iago perverts the First Commandment, thus desecrating his own morality. In terms of the Christian context of the play, destructiveness emanates from Iago: it is his savagery that, as the play unfolds, tears at the fabric of his society.

In his presentation of Othello as the antithesis of the stereotypical "Black-

[14] *Othello as Tragedy*, p. 96.
[15] *King Lear and the Gods* (San Marino, Calif.: The Huntington Library, 1966), p. 137.

amoor," Shakespeare runs counter not merely to Cinthio's treatment of the Moor in *Hecatommithi*, but also to the currents of color prejudice prevalent in his age. Shakespeare's Othello is invested with the prerequisites of nobility—he is born of "royal siege" (I.ii.22), he is a great soldier, he possesses a lofty vision, and Shakespeare gives to him the richest language in the play. Moreover, as Christian general best suited to defend Cyprus against the Turks, Othello would have had special heroic resonance for his Jacobean audience. Repeated battles over Cyprus occurred during the sixteenth century, with the famous and symbolically important battle of Lepanto occurring in 1571.

Othello's capacity for love is intimately bound up with his sense of honor, a sense that includes the public as well as the private being. His understanding of marriage does not admit infidelity. Nor is he unique in this. Certain commentators in the sixteenth and seventeenth century viewed adultery with extreme seriousness. As Stephen Greenblatt observes, it was held to be

> one of the most horrible of mortal sins, more detestable, in the words of the *Eruditorium penitentiale*, "than homicide or plunder," and hence formally deemed punishable, as several authorities remind us, by death. Early Protestantism did not soften this position. Indeed, in the mid-sixteenth century, Tyndale's erstwhile collaborator, George Joye, called for a return to the Old Testament penalty for adulterers. "God's law" he writes, "is to punish adultery with death for the tranquillity and commonwealth of His church." This is not an excessive or vindictive course; on the contrary, "to take away and to cut off putrified and corrupt members from the whole body, lest they poison and destroy the body, is the law of love." When Christian magistrates leave adultery unpunished, they invite more betrayals and risk the ruin of the realm. . . .[16]

The moral laxity at the court of King James, too, perturbed commentators, one of whom wrote of

> the holy state of matrimony perfidiously broken and amongst many made but a May-game . . . and even great personages prostituting their bodies to the intent to satisfy and consume their substance in lascivious appetites of all sorts.[17]

Othello's detestation of adultery sets him amongst the moralists, at the opposite pole from Iago's savage cynicism about sex and love.

Furthermore, Othello's sense of honor is intimately bound up with his belief in justice, evident in the first act not only in the context of his knowledge of the service he has done Venice, which will "out-tongue" Brabantio's complaints (I.ii.19), but also in his confidence that the evidence he offers will exonerate him. In Act II he dismisses his own appointee when the evidence convicts him, despite his personal love for Cassio, and in Acts III, IV, and V he applies judicial procedures in an attempt to handle the crisis into which he is plunged. His suicide is also for him an act of justice in which he provides for himself suitable punishment for what he now understands to have been the murder of his own wife.

In his presentation of Othello, then, Shakespeare appears concerned to separate his hero from the fiction that the racist associations attached to his color allege. We may recall here that Ernest Jones cites instances from Shakespeare's earlier work to maintain that, although Shakespeare may have begun with un-

[16] *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1980), pp. 246–47.

[17] Simonds D'Ewes, quoted in Lawrence Stone, *The Crisis of the Aristocracy, 1558–1641* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), p. 665.

thinking acceptance of the color prejudice of his age, he started to move beyond this before *Othello*. Whereas the portrayal of Aaron in *Titus Andronicus* largely conforms to the negative Elizabethan racial stereotype, by the time of *The Merchant of Venice* Shakespeare offers a more dignified Moor.[18] More important than this perhaps is the evidence that G. K. Hunter provides in order to identify a current of writing in the literature of the seventeenth century and earlier which endeavors to abandon the use of the colors black and white as reliable signs of personality and moral fiber. To illustrate this tendency Hunter quotes from Jerome's commentary on Ephesians 5.8 ("For ye were sometimes darkness, but now are ye light in the Lord: walk as the children of light") that "He that committeth sin is of the devil. . . . Born of such a parent first we are black by nature, and even after repentance, until we have climbed to Virtue's height. . . ." He then cites Bishop Hall, who, encountering a black man, opines:

> This is our colour spiritually; yet the eye of our gracious God and Saviour, can see that beauty in us wherewith he is delighted. The true Moses marries a Blackamoor; Christ, his church. It is not for us to regard the skin, but the soul. If that be innocent, pure, holy, the blots of an outside cannot set us off from the love of him who hath said, *Behold, thou art fair, my Sister, my Spouse*: if that be foul and black, it is not the power of an angelical brightness of our hide, to make us other than a loathsome eye-sore to the Almighty.[19]

There is, admittedly, residual racism in such writing: the color black still attaches to the concept of evil. Nevertheless a separation of the sign black from the essential goodness or evil of human beings also takes place.

IV

It is partly in such contexts that we need to consider certain remarks made by Desdemona, the Duke, and even Othello himself. In some lines, the characters speak in ways that appear to acknowledge the currents of racism in Shakespeare's day; further, they speak in ways that play off their actual responses towards each other against awareness—which it is impossible in terms of literary tradition easily to escape—of current or traditional attachment of (racist) values to these colors as signs. Thus Desdemona speaks of having seen Othello's visage "in his mind" (I.iii.252), the Duke tells Brabantio that

> If virtue no delighted beauty lack,
> Your son-in-law is far more fair than black
> (I.iii.289–90)

while Othello himself, in bitterness, is at least partly alluding to the patristic significance of his color when he cries out at what Desdemona's "adultery" has done to him:

[18] *Othello's Countrymen*, pp. 49–60, 68–71. We may note here a possible irony registered during the presentation of Portia's color prejudice. The *OED* cites for the word "complexion"—"4. The natural color, texture, and appearance of the skin esp. of the face"—Morocco's "Mislike me not for my complexion, / The shadowed livery of the burnish'd sun" (*The Merchant of Venice*, II.i.1–2). In view of this citation it is possible that there is hypocrisy in Portia's polite flattery of the Moor's appearance (II.i.20–22) when set against her privately stated opinion at I.ii.129–31.

[19] Hunter, "Othello and Colour Prejudice," p. 153.

Her name, that was as fresh
As Dian's visage, is now begrim'd and black
As mine own face.
(III.iii.386–88)

In contrast to these instances, Emilia, torn by grief and anger at the death of her mistress, cries

O, the more angel she,
And you the blacker devil!
(V.ii.130–31)

drawing directly upon the racist tendency in patristic and literary tradition. But earlier, when Emilia asks Desdemona whether she thinks her husband jealous, Desdemona's reply suggests an equally direct rejection of this tradition:

Who, he? I think the sun where he was born
Drew all such humors from him.
(III.iv.30–31)

Desdemona here takes the darkness of her husband's skin as a positive sign of virtue.

In addition, Othello, as his sense of betrayal intensifies, intermittently refers to the racism that, present in his world, must lurk at the edges of his consciousness or identity. Iago, aware of precisely this, attempts to penetrate the integrity of Othello's sense of self and encourage his acceptance of a version of himself and his interaction with others drawn from the discourse of racism. In Act I Shakespeare presents the love of Othello and Desdemona as extraordinary; the destructive wave that Iago, exploiting racist impulses, tries to bring against the two, fails. But in Act III, Iago tries again when he bears witness against the integrity of Desdemona.[20] After his first warning about Desdemona (III.iii.197), and after his deliberate reference to Venetian "pranks" that postulates a shared ethical system from which Othello is excluded, he makes a fleeting reference to the possibility of color prejudice—"And when she seem'd to shake and fear your looks, / She lov'd them most" (III.iii.207–8). Then, a few lines later, as Othello ponders Iago's remark—"And yet, how nature erring from itself" (III.iii.227)—Iago takes a direct step into the explosive subject of color:

Ay, there's the point; as (to be bold with you)
Not to affect many proposed matches
Of her own clime, complexion, and degree,
Whereto we see in all things nature tends—
Foh, one may smell in such, a will most rank,
Foul disproportions, thoughts unnatural.
(III.iii.228–33)

Othello's line prompting Iago's interruption may suggest that he entertains, in a fallen world, the prospect of the decline of his and Desdemona's exalted love from its true nature into an adulterous and ordinary plane. However, the line

[20] John Holloway, *The Story of the Night* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1961), pp. 155–65, offers what is still one of the most convincing refutations of the Leavis claim that Othello's response to Iago's suggestions in this scene is prompt and totally gullible.

echoes the phrasing of Brabantio's attack upon him at I.iii.60–64 and it encourages Iago to intervene with racist insinuations. But although Iago works for the substitution of Othello's view of himself by a narrative drawn from racist discourse, he treads on dangerous ground and must, when he goes in the present instance too far, withdraw:

> But (pardon me) I do not in position
> Distinctly speak of her, though I may fear
> Her will, recoiling to her better judgement,
> May fall to match you with her country forms,
> And happily repent.
> (III.iii.234–38)

The word "form" in the *OED* has as its sense not only "A body considered in respect to its outward shape and appearance" but also "manner, method, way, fashion (of doing anything)" (first citation 1297). Elsewhere Iago remains careful to keep his allegations within the bounds of differing social conventions, as when he exploits Othello's position as outsider to Venetian custom at III.iii.201–3. Moreover Othello himself comments on the fact that he is to an extent a stranger to the intimacies of Venetian social life. Attempting to understand the possible reason for Desdemona's supposed infidelity, he refers again to his color, indicating at once what this signifies for him:

> Haply, for I am black,
> And have not those soft parts of conversation
> That chamberers have, *or*. . . .
> (III.iii.263–65, my italics)

As soldier as well as "stranger" Othello is well aware of the difference in behavior between himself and the "wealthy curled darlings" (I.ii.68) of whom Brabantio speaks.

Nevertheless the possibility or danger of racism, which Iago in this exchange attempts to convert into "fact," occasionally surfaces elsewhere in the language of the Othello who was once a slave. Thus at III.iii.189 he reflects "For she had eyes, and chose me." Endeavoring to dismiss Iago's hints that he might have cause for jealousy, Othello recalls that as suitor he was one of presumably a number of wooers Desdemona might have chosen and sets against an assumed deficiency of merit the fact that Desdemona preferred him. However his words give at least partial credence to the racist fictions Iago attempts to encourage, to the possibility that Desdemona herself incorporates in her "revolt" an element of racism. Such anxiety about the possibility of racism, when it surfaces, remains occasional, inevitably ambiguous, and only one element in the unfolding of Othello's crisis.

V

Despite Shakespeare's separation of the "real" Othello from the racist fictions associated with his color, the fact remains that in Act V Othello smothers or strangles his wife. How are we to take this image of violence? Or, to put the question differently, what is the reality that lies behind his action, the appearance of which—in its collocation of violence with a certain color—has been so inviting to racist interpreters of the play?

The act of desperation presented in the text does not confirm in Othello a special form of "barbarism" from which, say, certain European peoples are immune, nor, indeed, does the partial corruption of the Othello-language by the Iago-language in Acts IV and V ever include complete acceptance of Iago's racist (as opposed to his socio-cultural) thrust against the general. The murder of Desdemona presents to the audience the most terrible version in the play of the tragedy of human action in its aspect of error. Moreover, the play does not trivialize this recognition by proposing that it is the consequence of a particular—and therefore avoidable—susceptibility to weak judgment. Towards the end of the play, Emilia, ironically in the presence of the husband whom the audience knows to be the very "villainous knave" of whom she complains, yearns for extra-human powers of perception:

> O heaven, that such companions thou'dst unfold,
> And put in every honest hand a whip
> To lash the rascals naked through the world
> Even from the east to th' west!
> (IV.ii.141–44)

Such powers, the play continually asseverates, are denied to human beings. The final image of a black man stifling or strangling a white woman, it might be argued, deliberately courts a racist impulse, which we know was likely to have been present in certain members of Shakespeare's first audiences. But it does so only to explode any such response. The play, before this moment, has presented multiple acknowledgments of the different factors that vitiate any hope of perfect perception or judgment in a postparadisal world. I have already noted that color, as surface indicator of identity, is shown to be totally inadequate. Again, from the start of the play, in the extended exposure he gives to Iago, together with his presentation of the ensign throughout, Shakespeare concentrates on the problem of the inevitable vulnerability of human judgment to hidden malice. Moreover, in the various "trial scenes" in the play, Shakespeare demonstrates the extent to which the judicial process itself is subject to abuse because of the unreliability of testimony. These issues underlie the portrayal of Othello's dilemma and they help to register a human problem that is most intensely and painfully presented in that final image of suffocation.

When Shakespeare makes the audience Iago's confidant at the play's beginning, he endows the audience with a position of omniscience that no member of that audience outside the theatre can possess—and that the members of the *Othello* world cannot possess either. The audience is invited to realize, accordingly, the danger of concealed antisocial behavior and, too, its power, for Shakespeare also bestows upon Iago the greatest reputation of anyone in the play for honesty. Paul A. Jorgensen has stressed the frequency with which the word "honest" is appended to Iago's name and he has also suggested that Iago's official function as ensign may have been to expose knaves.[21] Again, the fact that Cassio and Desdemona, as well as Othello, trust Iago cannot be overemphasized. None has the god-like vision—the lack of which Emilia laments—that would enable him or her to penetrate the surface honesty of Iago to discover the reality. Thus Cassio, dismissed from office largely as a result of Iago's skillfully devious manipulation, turns nevertheless to the "honest" ensign for advice. And Desdemona, in her hour of greatest need, which also results from

[21] *Redeeming Shakespeare's Words* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1962), pp. 3–21.

the work of Iago, kneels to the "honest" friend of her husband to beg for help. One of the most strident accusations against Othello has been that he is too gullible, but granted the care with which Shakespeare emphasizes, in his presentation of Iago, the potency as well as the effectiveness of concealed malice, Othello's only protection against his ensign would be extra-human powers of perception—an X-ray vision granted to no person.

Through his presentation of Iago, Shakespeare demonstrates that in an imperfect world human judgment can never penetrate beyond the opacity of deliberately deceptive discourse. Moreover, Shakespeare explores this problem in the specific context of the process of justice. The narrative fictions a man may weave about himself or others become in the legal context the testimony he offers. And it is most interesting that the vulnerability of testimony to distortion was a particular talking point in the legal discussions of Shakespeare's time and later. Amongst other commentators, Robert Boyle, for instance, stressed the crucial role of the witness:

> You may consider . . . that whereas it is as justly generally granted, that the better qualified a witness is in the capacity of a witness, the stronger assent his testimony deserves . . . for the two grand requisites . . . of a witness [are] the knowledge he has of the things he delivers, and his faithfulness in truly delivering what he knows.[22]

Barbara Shapiro, who argues that reliance upon testimony was increasing during this period because of the growing mobility and complexity of society, emphasizes that the issue was particularly crucial in the matter of witchcraft:

> The fact that witchcraft was a crime as well as a phenomenon and thus had to be proved to a learned judge and an unlearned jury, . . . provides an unusual opportunity to observe theories of evidence at work. For the courts, witchcraft was a matter of fact and, like all questions of fact, turned on the nature and sources of the testimony. . . . [Reginald] Scot's [*Discoverie of Witchcraft* (1584)] exposed one type of trickery and fraud after another and denounced Continental legal procedures which, in cases of witchcraft, permitted excommunicants, infants, and "infamous" and perjured persons to testify, and allowed "presumption and conjectures" to be taken as "sufficient proofes."[23]

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries prosecution for witchcraft increased rapidly throughout Europe and laws against it were passed in 1542 and 1563 and again in 1604, the probable date of *Othello*.[24] Side by side with the legal offensive against witchcraft, however, the debate about the credibility of witches intensified. In 1616 John Cotta wrote with extreme caution about the use of testimony:

> [I]f the witnesses of the manifest magicall and supernaturall act, be substantiall, sufficient, able to judge, free from exception of malice, partialitie, distraction,

[22] *The Works of Robert Boyle* (1690), V (London, 1772), 529, cited in Barbara J. Shapiro, *Probability and Certainty in Seventeenth-Century England* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1983), p. 179.

[23] *Probability and Certainty in Seventeenth Century England*, pp. 194, 198.

[24] *Witch Hunting and Witch Trials. The Indictments for Witchcraft from the Records of 1373 Assizes held for the Home Circuit A.D. 1559–1736*, ed. C. L'Estrange Ewen (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., 1929), pp. 13, 15, 19. In 1604 "[t]he Act of Elizabeth was repealed in 1 Jas. I by a statute of more severity but one which was not so harsh as that of 1541" (p. 13).

> folly, and if by conference and counsell with learned men, religiously and industriously exercised in judging those affairs, there bee justly deemed no deception of sense, mistaking of reason or imagination, I see no true cause, why it should deserve an Ignoramous, or not be reputed a True bill, worthy to be inquired, as a case fit and mature for the same due triall.[25]

The concern with justice in *Othello* clearly relates to these issues. It may be remarked that where doubt about any situation arises the only way in which society may attempt to ascertain the truth after the event is through the process of law. The series of "trial scenes" that, critics have noted, take place in *Othello* all depend in the main upon testimony. Moreover, the first of these "trial scenes" centers specifically upon the charge of witchcraft.

Brabantio maintains that Desdemona "Sans witchcraft" (I.iii.64) could not have chosen Othello—a fact of which Iago is not slow to remind his general (III.iii.211). Furthermore, Othello himself, during his account of the courtship, explicitly dismisses the charge of witchcraft (I.iii.169). Othello and Desdemona offer reliable testimony in this scene and the general is "acquitted." In this scene and those that follow, the debate about the judicial process and the complexities associated with reliance upon testimony must certainly have been evoked for those members of Shakespeare's first audiences interested in the law. In the two subsequent "trial scenes," Iago is chief witness against Cassio and then Desdemona; not only his false testimony but his opportunistic exploitation of various situations prove crucial. Shakespeare emphasizes too that the problem posed for the judicial system by the potential unreliability of testimony is not reducible to explanations of extra-human (satanic) propensities for evil. Thus Shakespeare lets Iago boast to his audience that his fabrication of evidence or his alert opportunism, which subverts the law, results from the application of intellect, partly from what Greenblatt has identified as his talent for "improvisation":

> Thou know'st we work by wit, and not witchcraft,
> And wit depends on dilatory time.
> Does't not go well?
>
> (II.iii.372–74)[26]

The final "trial scene" in Act V results from the successful abuse of justice which occurs in Acts II and III. The guilty man in that scene is Othello, the one who has cared most about morality and justice during the play. This posits a skeptical and troubled view of the efficacy of the process of justice as an instrument to achieve the ordered identification and administration of the right and the good. The implications about the inadequacy of the judicial system—the susceptibility of legal processes to deception and manipulation—remain at the close of the play.

What is Othello to do when his trusted friend, the Iago who also has an impeccable reputation for honesty in his society, tells him that his wife is an adulteress? In the increasing conflict that Othello experiences after Iago has alleged the adultery of Desdemona, Shakespeare presents in its most acute form

[25] *The Triall of Witchcraft* (London, 1616), pp. 80–81, cited in Shapiro, p. 201.

[26] According to Greenblatt, "improvisation" is "the ability both to capitalize on the unforeseen and to transform given materials into one's own scenario" (pp. 227 ff.). Ruth Cowhig, "The Importance of Othello's Race," *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 2 (1977), 153–61, argues that the audience witnesses in part "the baiting of an alien who cannot fight back on equal terms" (p. 157).

the problem of human perspicacity and its limitations—posed in both the personal and the public or legal contexts in the first two acts. For Othello, as Christian commander of Cyprus, the sanctity of his marriage, the defense of the island, and the maintenance of order are inextricably linked. Just as he will not earlier be seen to neglect his public role because of his private marriage to Desdemona, he cannot prevent the dishonor he imagines to exist in his private life from permeating his whole existence. Yet his most trusted source has identified Desdemona for him as an adulteress. Placed upon the wrack he continually struggles against what he cannot at the same time refute—without the power of omniscience Shakespeare has granted only to the audience.

For one thing, he demands evidence—

> Villain, be sure thou prove my love a whore;
> Be sure of it. Give me the ocular proof
> (III.iii.359–60)

—evidence that does not ease the struggle because of his love of Desdemona. Iago, we may recall, obliges. After offering him inflammatory images—"Would you, the supervisor, grossly gape on? / Behold her topp'd?" (III.iii.395–96)—he follows with his account of the dream, depending upon the traditional medieval and Renaissance authority of certain dreams as an index to reality. The handkerchief for Othello has similar importance not in itself but because of the vital "magic" Iago has wrought upon it as a piece of evidence. In the practice of justice such objects are vested with special significance precisely because man is unable to perceive perfectly either past events or present identities. Othello also seeks to communicate with Desdemona directly, but Shakespeare portrays not only how the manipulation of a hidden deceiver may further diminish the normally fallible powers of human perspicacity but also how accidental misunderstanding of the situation affects her powers of judgment so that in her advocacy of Cassio's cause she unwittingly exacerbates the situation and makes Othello's chances of reaching her even more difficult.

Winifred Nowottny, in what is still one of the most helpful essays on the play, describes the ways in which Act IV offers the "dreadful spectacle of Othello's attempts to escape" the tension within him between his own image of Desdemona and that which Iago has given him:

> The pitch rises as his ways of seeking relief draw, horribly, ever nearer to Desdemona and to the deepest intimacies of love. The falling in a fit is a temporary way of not bearing the tension. That, shocking as it is, affects only himself. The next way is the striking of Desdemona. His striking her in public (for in their private interview there is nothing of this) is a symbolic act: a calling the world's attention to the intolerableness of what he suffers by the intolerableness of what he does. The treating of Emilia as a brothel-keeper is an expression of the division in him at its deepest level: to go to his wife as to a prostitute is to try to act out what the situation means to him.[27]

The evidence Othello receives continually fails to satisfy him for, as Nowottny also points out, what he wishes to discover is Desdemona's *innocence*. Moreover, the great truth underlying Othello's violence in all this is clear: it has

[27] "Justice and Love in *Othello*," *University of Toronto Quarterly*, 21 (1952), 339. Ruth Cowhig observes: "*Othello* was very closely followed by *King Lear*, and in both plays Shakespeare seems to be exploring the basic nature of man, and especially the effect on that nature of the subservience of reason to the passions" (p. 159).

been precipitated not by any innate barbarism of his own but by the barbarism of Iago. The one thing his violence confirms is that if nobility and valor, like depravity and cowardice, are not the monopoly of any color, then neither is the angry destructiveness that is born of hurt and betrayal.

Othello, Desdemona, and Cassio seek only love and honor in the play. The horror of Act V results partly from the fact that, even as Othello kills Desdemona, he still loves her, whilst Desdemona's love, too, remains constant—in dying she blames no one but herself. Othello's language in that final scene, often commented on, shows, side by side with his agonized awareness of the light he is to extinguish, his concern for release, for justice and punishment, his painful, enduring sense of love which ensures that Desdemona, as Christian, be permitted to confess—not merely to confirm her guilt but also to ensure her salvation.

It may be true that *Othello* does acknowledge at its end that antisocial and destructive members of society such as Iago have no more control over their imperfect visions of the world and their actions than anyone else. Iago, despite his attempts at secrecy, finds himself exposed. But the justice of his undoing means far less than the errors of those who in the play are good. Their fates result from the danger of language which, because of its opacity, may lend itself to distortion. The inevitable limitations of human judgment, furthermore, make error possible, rendering the good and the just inescapably prey to the actively evil and malign.[28]

VI

South African critics generally avoid *Othello*; when they do write about it they hardly touch upon its concern with color, and seek refuge instead in a focus upon idealist abstractions or upon interiority. Thus one critic sees the play as a "tragedy of love overcome by cynicism"—Othello, only briefly referred to in this article, has a "magic" love whereas Desdemona's love is superior, suggesting something "more mature, a human grace humanly worn, not supernatural" and she manifests throughout the play "integrity" and "higher possession of self."[29] And another critic, claiming that the play offers a "demonstration of one of the frightening possibilities of human love" observes that "for Shakespeare, as for any literary artist, the story is clearly partly an artifice—not a realistic account of the way human events would be likely to turn out in everyday life, but a convincing image of the way things *might essentially be*: an image created in the process of distilling an insight into, or a revelation of, human nature."[30] Such emphases—upon the essence of love itself (with Othello inevitably coming out second best)—or upon the "truths" of human nature, in the South African situation, encourages, by a process of omission and avoidance, continuing submission to the prevailing social order. That in the play which challenges existing relations of domination and subordination—the play's concern with the unreliability of racist stereotyping, the

[28] The *natural* vulnerability of goodness to hidden malice is underlined as a central concern in the play in the account of Desdemona's escape from the storm, when Cassio speaks of "The gutter'd rocks and congregated sands, / Traitors ensteep'd to enclog the guiltless keel" (II.i.69–70).

[29] Geoffrey Hutchings, "Emilia: A Case History in Woman's Lib," *English Studies in Africa*, 21 (1978), 71–77.

[30] C. O. Gardner, "Tragic Fission in *Othello*," *English Studies in Africa*, 20 (1977), 11–25.

difficulties in human interaction, the limitations (rather than the essence) of justice and human judgment—remains ignored.[31]

It is important to recognize too that this practice in South African criticism of the play offers, inevitably, a narrow and attenuated version of certain European and American perspectives. Moreover, in these approaches as well dangerous ambiguities may be detected which perhaps ought not to be fleetingly noted in passing (with superior amusement) but more directly addressed.[32] Such approaches tend to ignore the play's concern with the tragic problems attendant upon human judgment and perception. They choose instead to focus, often obsessively, upon Othello himself. Whilst Bradleyan notions encourage this tendency, it is difficult in most cases to avoid the conclusion that, finally, the attribution to Othello of certain characteristics on the basis of his color provides the springboard for the ensuing interpretations. And such criticism often includes not only a series of personal attacks upon Othello's nature, it also infers or implies reservations about his adequacy.

F. R. Leavis's somewhat notorious essay on *Othello* provides an example.[33] In the course of presenting his case against Bradley's view of Othello as a "nearly faultless hero whose strength and virtue are turned against him" (p. 137), Leavis lets slip some singular observations. For instance, discussing Othello's marriage to Desdemona, he comments that "his *colour*, whether or not 'colour-feeling' existed among the Elizabethans, *we are certainly to take* as emphasizing the *disparity* of the match" (p. 142, my italics). This insistence on Othello's blackness as a sign of the "disparity" in the marriage is accompanied later by another, at best ambiguous, remark that, under Iago's pressure, "Othello's inner timbers begin to part at once, *the stuff of which he is made begins at once to deteriorate and show itself unfit*" (p. 144, my italics). Moreover, despite his apparently sarcastic reference to Othello's relatively mature age when he writes of the "trials facing him now that he has married this Venetian girl with whom he's 'in love' so imaginatively (we're told) as to outdo Romeo and who is so many years younger than himself" (p. 142), Leavis still manages, later in the argument, to find Othello guilty of "self-centered and self-regarding satisfactions—pride, sensual possessiveness, appetite," and "strong sensuality with ugly vindictive jealousy." These defects are compounded with a series of other telling weaknesses: "an obtuse and brutal egotism," "ferocious stupidity," and an "insane and self-deceiving passion" (pp. 145–47). Earlier in the century T. S. Eliot accused Othello of lack of insight when he asserted that he had "never read a more terrible exposure of human weakness . . . than the last great speech of Othello," where the hero could be seen to be "*cheering himself*

[31] I have explored another, equally important dimension to the play in "Civility and the English Colonial Enterprise: Notes on Shakespeare's *Othello*," *Literature in South Africa Today, Theoria Special Issue*, 68 (December 1986), 1–14.

[32] We may recall here the observation of Charles Husband, the social psychologist, that "it is the deterministic association of category of person with type of behaviour that is at the core of race thinking":

> [R]acism refers to a system of beliefs held by the members of one group which serve to identify and set apart the members of another group who are assigned to a "race" category on the basis of some biological or other invariable, "natural seeming" characteristic which they are believed to possess, membership of this category then being sufficient to attribute other fixed characteristics to all assigned to it.

(*'Race' in Britain—Continuity and Change*, pp. 18–19, cited in note 4)

[33] "Diabolic Intellect and the Noble Hero," in *The Common Pursuit* (1952; rpt. Harmondsworth: Peregrine, 1962), pp. 136–59.

up" and "endeavouring to escape reality."[34] Leavis develops this accusation in a somewhat tortuous observation that links up, no doubt, with the "unfitness" of his Moor's "inner timbers" when he concludes that Othello's last speech "conveys something like the full complexity of Othello's *simple nature*" (p. 151, my italics).

Small wonder perhaps that Sir Laurence Olivier's *tour de force* in the National Theatre's production of *Othello* during the mid-1960s (subsequently filmed) disappointed some—despite its disturbing popular appeal. The program notes accompanying the performance of the play offered liberal extracts from Leavis's essay, perpetuating the notion, already prevalent in Shakespeare's day, of the black man as savage, as sensual, and vindictively jealous, and also of course, as simple.[35]

To notice such peccant ambiguities (at best) in Leavis's writing is not to offer a gratuitous slur. Apart from the fact that the subject matter of *Othello* demands that we recognize the matter of color and the possibility of prejudice, this mode of regarding Othello stretches far back in English criticism. Thomas Rymer, one of the most famous of the play's detractors, is best known for his censure:

> So much ado, so much stress, so much passion and repetition about an Handkerchief! Why was not this call'd the *Tragedy of the Handkerchief*?[36]

But the quality of his criticism is perhaps better represented by another of his adjurations deserving as widespread notoriety:

> This may be a caution to all Maidens of Quality how, without their Parents consent, they run away with *Blackamoors*.
>
> (quoted in Vickers, p. 27)

No less a commentator than Coleridge had this to say:

> [I]t would be something monstrous to conceive this beautiful Venetian girl falling in love with a veritable negro. It would argue a disproportionateness, a want of balance, in Desdemona, which Shakespeare does not appear to have in the least contemplated.[37]

Thus, Coleridge shares a tendency noticeable in nineteenth-century criticism to make Othello an Arab rather than an African.[38] And A. C. Bradley, writing at the beginning of the twentieth century, reflects as follows on Othello's color:

[34] "Shakespeare and the Stoicism of Seneca," *Selected Essays*, 3rd ed. (London: Faber and Faber, 1958), p. 130.

[35] The program note to the National Theatre production of *Othello* (London: The National Theatre, 1964)—with Sir Laurence Olivier as Othello and Frank Finlay as Iago, production by John Dexter, performed at the Old Vic during the 1964–65 season—quotes extensively from Leavis's essay and includes most of the passages to which I refer in my discussion, together with many others, germane to the present point, which I do not quote.

[36] "A Short View of Tragedy" (1693), extracts reprinted in *Shakespeare; the critical heritage*, ed. Brian Vickers, II (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1974), 51.

[37] *Coleridge's Writings on Shakespeare*, ed. Terence Hawkes (New York: Capricorn Books, 1959), p. 169.

[38] The beginnings of the great debate about Othello's color go back to the late eighteenth century. In a letter to *The Gentleman's Magazine*, 61 (1791), Verbum Sat (pseud.) writes,

> Perhaps if we saw Othello coal-black with the bodily eye, the aversion of our blood, an aversion which comes as near to being merely physical as anything human can, would overpower our imagination and sink us below not Shakespeare only but the audiences of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.[39]

Even more shocking than the presence of such notions in the minds of earlier critics writing about the play is the fact that they appear to be shared by one of the most influential of the relatively recent editors of *Othello*. Tellingly, the Arden edition is still repeatedly set for the use of South African students. Its Introduction contributes to the particular strain of racism that accompanies so much of English writing about the play. M. I. Ridley, the editor, appears at one point to dismiss a typical nineteenth-century racist response manifest in the ruminations of "a lady from Maryland" quoted also in the New Variorum edi-

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> He is a *Moor*, and yet is always figured as a *Negro*. I need not tell that the *Moors*, or people of the North of Africa, are dusky, but with very agreeable features, and manly persons, and vigorous and ingenious minds; while the Negros have features remarkably unpleasant, mean persons, and little power of mind. I suspect that this ludicrous mistake proceeded from Shakespeare's speaking of the *blackness* of Othello's *complexion*, and indeed *face*, compared with the European: and I am convinced that is not older than the revival of the theatres in 1660.
>
> (pp. 225–26)

In "Some Notes on Othello," *Cornhill Magazine*, 18 (1868), 419–40, J. J. Elmes is one of the nineteenth-century writers who disagrees with Coleridge. Even so, he quotes Schlegel at one point—

> We recognize in Othello the wild nature of that glowing zone which generates the most ravenous beasts of prey and the most deadly poisons, tamed only in appearance by the desire of fame, by foreign laws of honour, and by nobler and milder manners.
>
> (p. 438)

—and he underlines later the "repugnance, more generally felt than expressed, to a Negro being the hero of a love story" (p. 438). See also Francis Jacox's opening remarks in *Shakespeare Diversions, Second Series: From Dogberry to Hamlet* (1877), pp. 73–75, and Cumberland Clark, *Shakespeare and national character. A study of Shakespeare's knowledge and dramatic and literary use of the distinctive racial characteristics of the different peoples of the world* (London: Hamlin, 1928):

> In spite, however, of his intercourse with the polite world which had produced that westernised veneer so easily assumed by the coloured races, Othello is still barbarian bred with instincts that suddenly break forth in ungovernable impulse.
>
> (p. 134)

The debate about a tawny or black Othello lingers on as recently as Philip Butcher, "Othello's Racial Identity," *SQ*, 3 (1952), 243–47, who argues: "Brabantio is not merely annoyed because his consent was not asked. Only a black Othello can serve as adequate motivation for his attitude towards his daughter's marriage to a man of exalted rank and reputation" (p. 244). Arthur Herman Wilson's letter to *SQ*, 4 (1953), 209 contests this. Ruth Cowhig, "Actors, Black and Tawny, in the Role of Othello—and their Critics," *Theatre Research International* (Glasgow), 4 (1979), 133–46, provides an historical survey of changing attitudes to the color of Othello from the late eighteenth century on. I am most grateful to the late Professor John Hazel Smith for alerting me to the writers mentioned in this footnote.

[39] *Shakespearean Tragedy* (London: Macmillan, 1961), p. 165. Sanford E. Marovitz, "Othello Unmasked: A Black Man's Conscience and a White Man's Fool," *Southern Review* (Adelaide), 6 (1973), 108–37, identifies a similar tendency towards racist innuendo in the writing of Harley Granville Barker. However, the article itself goes on to display ambiguity: the author identifies a conflict within Othello between a civilized self and a "savage consciousness" (p. 124): "The emotionalism and barbarity characteristic of the black stereotype at last wholly prevail over the cool, rational behaviour of the white Christian world which the alien Moor had adopted" (p. 125), "Othello's rational soldier's mind, the mind of a white Christian, is overwhelmed" (p. 130), etc.

tion of *Othello*. But a passage from Ridley's purported dismissal of her comments is enough to indicate the flavor of his own attitudes. He takes the lady to task in the following way:

> Now a good deal of trouble arises, I think, from a confusion of colour and contour. To a great many people the word "negro" suggests at once the picture of what they would call a "nigger," the woolly hair, thick lips, round skull, blunt features, and burnt-cork blackness of the traditional nigger minstrel. Their subconscious generalization is . . . silly. . . . There are more races than one in Africa, and that a man is black in colour is no reason why he should, even to European eyes, look sub-human. One of the finest heads I have ever seen on any human being was that of a negro conductor on an American Pullman car. He had lips slightly thicker than an ordinary European's, and he had somewhat curly hair; for the rest he had a long head, a magnificent forehead, a keenly chiselled nose, rather sunken cheeks, and his expression was grave, dignified and a trifle melancholy. He was coal-black, but he might have sat to a sculptor for a statue of Caesar, or, so far as appearance went, have played a superb Othello.[40]

The preference for the Ridley text in South African universities is unlikely to be purely coincidental. Interestingly, however, at secondary level, where South African students are exposed to little more than the text itself, *Othello* is rarely taught. The South African educative authorities clearly sense something in the play itself sufficiently inimical to racist ideology and practice to discourage its use in high schools.

More recently than Ridley, Laurence Lerner, in arguing that we should not "sentimentalise" Othello, participates in the tradition of criticism developed by Eliot and Leavis.[41] We may be certain that, as an ex-South African, Professor Lerner eschews racism of any kind and his article presumably attempts to avoid not merely overt racism but the covert inverted racism that might be detected in an unsubstantiated overeager defense of Othello. But having respectfully quoted both Eliot and Leavis, he cannot—whatever we may wish to speculate about his motives and however generous we need to be towards them—for long remain on the sidelines. Lerner presents Othello as an amalgam of the noble and the jealous, the soldier and the fool, the Christian and the barbarian who is reduced to "stammering bestiality" in the course of the play (p. 352). There is, however, no need to linger over the ambiguous comments that punctuate his article, for its tenor becomes clear towards the end—

> . . . Othello is a convert. Noble and upright as he is, he seems all the nobler *when you consider what he was*—a Negro, a barbarian. . . . Everyone remarks in the first act that Othello is black, that the environment he grew up in is one where passions rule. . . . When Othello falls there comes to the surface just this black savage that everyone in the first Act was so pleased that he wasn't. . . . I am afraid Shakespeare suffered from colour prejudice. *Othello* is seldom played in South Africa, where it is not thought proper for white women to marry black men. I am never sure that the South Africans are wise about this: for if one can put aside the hysterical reaction that any play depicting inter-marriage must be wicked, one should be able to see quite a lot of the South African attitude present
>
> (pp. 357–60, my italics)

—*Othello* as a public relations exercise for apartheid!

Equally distressing in much critical writing about the play is the fact that

[40] The Arden Shakespeare, *Othello* (London: Methuen, 1958), p. li. See also pp. liii–liv.
[41] "The Machiavel and the Moor," *Essays in Criticism*, 9 (1959), 339–60.

certain associations attached to the colors black and white in literary and iconographic tradition appear to have remained embedded in, and affected the attitudes of, twentieth-century critics towards the dramatic characters in *Othello*. Lerner's observation—

> Blackness is the symbol, in the imagery, not only for evil but for going beyond the bounds of civilisation: in the end, the primitive breaks out again in Othello. The two Othellos are one: the play is the story of a barbarian who (the pity of it) relapses . . .
>
> (p. 360)

—provides a clear instance of this. The dangerous insistence on blackness as the "heart" of "darkness," so pressingly present too in Conrad's famous story—blackness as strongly linked with the primitive, the savage, the simple—lurks within many ostensibly non-racist articles as well.[42] Thus, in a well-meaning article which is nevertheless of this kind, K. W. Evans is unable to shake off racist overtones in his use of the terms "blackness" and "whiteness."[43] He observes:

> Othello's blackness, the primary datum of the play, is correlated with a character which spans the range from the primitive to the civilised, and in falling partially under Iago's spell Othello yields to those elements in man that oppose civilised order.
>
> (p. 139)

Despite his recognition of "those elements in man that oppose civilised order," Evans fails to stress the fact that the destructive impulses in the play emanate primarily from Iago whilst earlier in the article appearing to confuse traditional literary color denotations with overt racial categorization. He describes Desdemona and Othello in this way:

> Desdemona dies . . . because of naivete that exceeds her own. . . . *Considering the factors of age, race and above all, the lovers' simplicity, ordinary realism suggests that this marriage was doomed from the start*. . . . For much of Othello's second phase, a picture of the violent, jealous, credulous, 'uncivilised' Moor reverting to type dominates the play. . . . The *darkness* in the bedroom is not complete but is broken by an enduring vision of Desdemona's *whiteness*.
>
> (pp. 135–36; p. 138, my italics)

As I suggested earlier, such interpretations of *Othello* result partly from the tendency to treat Othello as a character in isolation from the context in which Shakespeare sets him in the play, and in isolation from the problems identified by the language of all those who speak besides, as well as including, the general. Whenever this is done, something has to be found to explain the character and actions of the hero. Whilst Shakespeare himself sees the tragedy as primarily lying elsewhere than in Othello (as a "black" man), such analyses, ignoring this in their attempt to arraign the hero, recently appear to have become more and more desperate. One fairly new article, which quotes with apparent approbation both Lerner and Leavis, not only finds Othello to be strongly sensual, vindictively jealous, and ferociously stupid, but contorts the character at

[42] See Tim Couzens, "The Return of the Heart of Darkness," *The English Academy Review* (Johannesburg: The English Academy of Southern Africa, 1982), pp. 36–52.

[43] "The Racial Factor in *Othello*," *Shakespeare Studies*, 5 (1970), 124–40.

the same time into someone both sexually frustrated and sexually unsuccessful![44]

VII

None of these critics, it may be claimed, was necessarily desirous of being racist when he wrote. But the danger is that we leave unidentified, except perhaps in passing, these undercurrents and their implications in such work—as if to register them would be an exercise in bad taste. Whatever the case may be elsewhere, in South Africa, silence about so tenacious a tendency in *Othello* criticism has the effect of a not-too-covert expression of support for prevailing racist doctrines.

For those in South Africa who abhor the dominant apartheid ideology and its practice, *Othello* has special importance. Indeed, Othello's reference to his being "sold to slavery" and to his "redemption thence" (I.iii.138), during his account of his early life, cannot be taken by a South African audience as a purely incidental remark. Like the extensive concern with color in the play the brief mention of slavery directs us to that faculty in man for destruction and exploitation. And, in South Africa, slavery was one of the crucial factors contributing to the growth of racist ideology. The South African historians du Toit and Giliomee describe the impact of slavery upon Cape society in this way:

> As the number of slaves increased in the eighteenth century, the effects of slavery began to permeate the entire social order. The belief became entrenched that the proper role of the white inhabitants was to be a land- and slave-owning elite, and that manual or even skilled labour in the service of someone else did not befit anyone with the status of freeman. Slavery, then, came to inform the meaning of other status groups as well. Cardozo remarked that in a slave society freedom is defined by slavery; thus everyone aspired to have slaves. With respect to the Cape an observer remarked in 1743: "Having imported slaves, every common or ordinary European becomes a gentleman and prefers to be served than to serve. . . . The majority of farmers in the Cape are not farmers in the real sense of the word . . . and many of them consider it a shame to work with their hands.[45]

The quotation from a nineteenth-century South African response to *Othello*, with which I began this article, was actually published when the Great Trek, which was at least in part a response to the abolition of slavery, had just begun. Some of the Trekker leaders resisted the abolition precisely because it removed forms of social discrimination. Karel Trichardt, for instance, noting his people's reactions to the abolition, emphasizes that "the main objection to the new dispensation was the equalisation of coloured people with the whites," and Anna Steenkamp, the niece of another Voortrekker leader, protested that the emancipation of slaves involved

[44] T.G.A. Nelson and Charles Haines, "Othello's Unconsummated Marriage," *Essays in Criticism*, 33 (1983), 1–18. This is another attempt to pin on Othello a *personal* accusation to account for the tragedy. The authors base their claim that Othello is sexually frustrated and sexually unsuccessful on his having never consummated his marriage with Desdemona. Disregarding the double time issue, given the fact that Shakespeare deliberately allows already established intimacy between Othello and Desdemona within the time span of the play itself to be interrupted, and given most significantly of all Iago's acknowledgment in pointedly inflammatory language at the beginning of the play that their marriage and its consummation have already taken place, their argument becomes at best highly disputable.

[45] André du Toit and Hermann Giliomee, *Afrikaner Political Thought: Analysis and Documents, 1750–1850*, I (Cape Town: David Philip, 1979), 7.

> their equalization with the Christians, in conflict with the laws of God and the natural divisions of descent and faith, so that it became unbearable for any decent Christian to submit to such a burden; we therefore preferred to move in order to be able the better to uphold our faith and the Gospel in an unadulterated form.[46]

Such distasteful attitudes are likely to have resulted from the loss of that position of exploitation which du Toit and Giliomee identify. Indeed the theorist Harold Wolpe has stressed the importance of the connection between racism and the context in which it occurs:

> The failure to examine the changing, non-ideological conditions in which specific groups apply and therefore interpret and therefore modify their ideologies results in treating the latter as unchanging . . . entities. By simply ascribing all action to generalised racial beliefs, prejudices or ideologies, the specific content of changing social relations and the conditions of change become excluded from analysis.[47]

Many factors may have contributed to the growth of racism in South Africa, but the use of racist mythology to justify or mask exploitation seems to be one of the society's most consistent features. To take only one further instance: the exploitative classes who came to South Africa in the last years of the nineteenth and early twentieth century found racism convenient in a context from which they too were materially to benefit enormously. In an address to the South African Colonisation society, one Sir Matthew Nathan, for instance, had this to say on the subject of black nurses:

> Just as the natives had a peculiar exterior so they had a peculiar character, and it was obvious that the British colonist did not want his child imbued with the ideas of a lower civilisation.[48]

Other recorded observations, then and since, from those who stood most to profit from the "implications" of racism, communicate attitudes often almost identical to those Shakespeare gives to Iago.[49] To a degree, too, Iago's mode of operation anticipates what later social historians and theorists identify in racist behavior. Iago's and Roderigo's color prejudice is recognized as sordid, the resort of men who in one way or another feel mediocre and overlooked. Iago uses racism against an individual whose skills, ability, and success in crucial ways exceed his own. And he uses it as a *tactic*—when he believes it may afford him some material advantage over the man whom he wishes to control and if possible destroy.

Certain English and sometimes American responses that reflect color prejudice stand as a warning as to the ease with which many of the central concerns in *Othello* may be obscured. In South Africa, the so-called Immorality Act,

[46] Cited in Herribert Adam and Hermann Giliomee, *The Rise and Crisis of Afrikaner Power* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1979), p. 95.

[47] Cited in Dan O'Meara, *Volkskapitalisme* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1983), p. 9. A. Montague, *Man's Most Dangerous Myth* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1974), notes a related process during the abolition of slavery. Those members of society most opposed to emancipation began to exploit racism as a tactic against reform: "The idea of 'race' was in fact the deliberate creation of an exploiting class which was seeking to maintain and defend its privileges against what was profitably regarded as an inferior social caste" (p. 39). Montague illustrates "as an investment, the 'inferior caste' yielded a profit which on the average amounted to thirty percent" (p. 39).

[48] Cited in Charles van Onselen, *Studies in the Social and Economic History of the Witwatersrand 1886–1914*, II (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1982), 29.

[49] See "Housewife" in van Onselen, p. 29. See also Charles O'Hara, cited in van Onselen, p. 40.

which forbade relationships between people of different colors and which was only in 1985 apparently abandoned, was peripheral in its impact upon the majority of South Africans as compared with the many other more crucially destructive laws which have shaped the present socio-economic and political dispensation. Yet because of the attempt it made to interfere with, legislate upon, and exploit for purposes of control human desire and love, it retains a symbolic repugnance. For the South African audience, *Othello* must still be experienced within the shadow of this Act and the larger system of which it formed a part. Athol Fugard's *Statements* is one of the many attempts made in the literature of South Africa to portray the way in which racism utilizes the law in order to shatter the private relationship of two people in love. *Othello*, too, presents the destruction of a love relationship in which, in ways specific to its own context, racism and the abuse of the legal process play a terrible part. Nevertheless, in its fine scrutiny of the mechanisms underlying Iago's use of racism, and in its rejection of human pigmentation as a means of identifying worth, the play, as it always has done, continues to oppose racism.