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# Three Green-Eyed Monsters: Acting as Applied Criticism in Shakespeare's *Othello*

BY GEOFFREY BENT

"O, beware, my lord, of jealousy;  
It is the green-ey'd monster which doth mock  
The meat it feeds on. That cuckold lives in bliss  
Who, certain of his fate, loves not his wronger;  
But, O, what damned minutes tells he o'er  
Who dotes, yet doubts, suspects, yet strongly loves!"

Although the end result of an actor's labor is called an "interpretation," the scholarly dimensions of that word are rarely intended. If someone wants to know what a Shakespearean play is "about," they turn to heavily footnoted dissertations in university journals. Scholars seem sage, while actors are compromised by their greasepaint and fright wigs.

But, as a hermeneutic, acting shares many of the virtues of scholarship and even adds a few to the pile. While the academic critic can occasionally bolster an outlandish interpretation with a few quotes taken out of context, an actor is forced to make his case to a live audience through the bulk of the text. While illuminating a work as clearly as any scholar, the actor also transcends this ancillary function: a play can easily do without critics, but a play without actors is incomplete, a blueprint lacking plaster and lumber. The cohesiveness

and consistency of an actor's interpretation must sway the audience; it must edify as well as clarify. This is particularly true with the theatrical texts of Shakespeare, who never collected his plays in his lifetime and rarely included stage directions. One could make a case from this that the Bard of Avon viewed his plays as experiences restricted to the domain of performance.

If, then, the actor has the job of critically interpreting a text (and the tougher the text, the greater the interpretive challenge), there can be no greater challenge than Shakespeare's *Othello*. Of all his tragedies, *Othello* is Shakespeare's most relentless and excruciating, in part because the focus is the most narrow and sustained. *King Lear* leaves the entire world in ashes; *Othello*, on the other hand, concentrates on the systematic immolation of one man. Iago attaches himself to his general with the single-mindedness of a lamprey. Even at the very end when the truth is finally revealed, Iago can't resist stoking his victim's pain with frustrating silence: "Demand me nothing. What you know, you know. From this time forth I never will speak word." At some deep level, Shakespeare seemed to recognize that torture is essential to the play because jealousy is a very sado-masochistic emotion. In contrast to *Macbeth*, where the witches directly influence their prey only in two brief scenes, Iago is constantly at Othello's side, unsettling him with his hints and barbs. Even after the general has resolved to kill his wife, his tormentor can't resist the coy flippancy of describing Cassio lying "with her, on her; what you will," as if Desdemona's infidelity has been so broad as to cover any specific. The overall language of the play is unusually coarse, both in its racial slurs and salacious euphemisms, which adds to the general discomfort. The audience partakes of this masochistic dynamic as if it is helplessly watching some protracted nature special that shows a lion killing a water buffalo for hours.

*Othello* is as unorthodox as it is elemental. Like a great general who defies strategic convention, Shakespeare populates his play with not one but two main characters, thus running the risk of confusing the allegiance of the audience. Richmond is as distinctly secondary in a play about a villain as Claudius is in a play about a tragic hero. When the character with the most lines in *Othello* isn't Othello but Iago, the latter can easily dominate the play. Conversely, an Othello who spends most of the play as Iago's dupe could end with the pity of Aristotle's famous recipe, but none of the terror. To switch the focus from Iago to Othello in the brief span of a few hours is dangerous unless the two are clearly linked, and Shakespeare does this by presenting them as cause

and effect. The two lead actors in any production of *Othello* must achieve a mano a mano parity for this precarious dramatic balance to hold.

As an acting vehicle, *Othello* gives the strongest cards to Iago. Not only does Iago have more lines than almost any other character in Shakespeare's oeuvre, he is also the most intriguing. As A.C. Bradley succinctly put it in *Othello: Critical Essays*, "This question Why is the question about Iago, just as the question Why did Hamlet delay? is the question about Hamlet." The motivation of any villain is usually the most obvious and mechanical part of a work of fiction because it is tied to the plot; it supplies the impetus for everything that follows. Shakespeare himself showed an appreciation for this in all his other plays: from Richard's hump to Edmund's heredity, he reveals what makes his villains tick as clearly as if they were bell jar clocks. For someone with such facility to produce "the motive-hunting of motiveless malignity," as Samuel Taylor Coleridge wrote, can only be a deliberate deviation. Even in the original source for Shakespeare's play, a novel by Giraldi Cinthio, Iago's motivation is clear and simple: he lusts after Desdemona, and when she spurns him he turns Othello against her for revenge. Only after the murder do Iago and Othello have a falling out.

The multitude of motives that Iago offers can only throw them all into question. Does he act out of hatred for the Moor, jealousy of Cassio's rank, the rumor that Othello cuckolded him, or to further the romantic ambitions of his patron Roderigo? Add to this Iago's assertion that he also suspects Cassio of sleeping with his wife and that he partially lusts for Desdemona himself, and you have enough possible scenarios to baffle the Warren Commission.

To complicate the veracity of any of these motives is Iago's view of his own actions: in this evil ensign Shakespeare created the first self-delusional villain in literature. As Robert Heilman has noted in his book on *Othello*, *Magic in the Web*, "The self-revelatory technique of the soliloquy is uniquely used: Iago reveals himself as he gradually slides away from the initial revelation." Often Iago is as candid in assessing his contemptible behavior as Richard III. At other times, however, Iago seems to believe his own lies. In an interesting exchange in which Shakespeare adds yet another motive, class resentment, to the equation, the common Florentine's attempts at humor are met with disdain by the two Venetian nobles. Desdemona rails, "These are old fond paradoxes to make fools laugh in th' alehouse" and "O most lame and impotent

conclusion!” while Cassio tells her, “You may relish him more in the soldier than in the scholar.” Within fifty lines of these put-downs, Iago is telling Roderigo, “Desdemona is directly in love with” Cassio. And while he goes on to manufacture the proof of this liaison, he seems to believe in its intent. For someone so adept at fabricating rumors, one would expect Iago to question the rumors of his own’s wife’s infidelity. “Yet I, for mere suspicion in that kind, will do as if for surety” shows Iago as capable of inflating the significance of an absent handkerchief as is his general.

What Iago hopes to achieve is as muddled as why he hopes to achieve it. For almost every other villain in Shakespeare, treachery is a form of career advancement; Iago, however, attains Cassio’s lieutenantancy relatively early in the play. At first, his revenge requires nothing more than annoying Othello and possibly disrupting his marriage. Success, however, escalates this goal to murder. The stakes become so high that Iago cannot hope to extricate himself from the fate of the others, yet he persists in playing the game. Iago frequently characterizes his own machinations as “sport,” and indeed he has a genius for intrigue, which, like all genius, can produce virtuosity for its own sake. This, however, creates a challenge for actor and audience. As Alfred Harbage has observed in *Shakespeare without Words and Other Essays*, “The most obvious objection to intrigue in tragedy . . . is that it amuses us, makes us wish momentarily for its success, and creates in us a certain admiration for the intriguer and tolerance for his aims.” The performer must relish this trait even while he tempers it, because Iago appalls as much as he delights. The performance must have opacity as well as transparency; when Iago famously asserts, “I am not what I am,” the audience must perceive both factors in the equation.

The role of Othello presents its own unique challenges to any performer who tackles it. Murderer as victim is a difficult plea in any courtroom, and many critics have voted to convict. Scholars as diverse as Eliot, Hirsh, and Catterson have all expressed doubts about Othello’s innocence in the proceedings. As F.R. Leavis has noted, “Othello yields with extraordinary promptness to suggestion, with such promptness as to make it plain that the mind that undoes him is not Iago’s but his own. . . .” If “honest” Iago is anything but, is the “noble” Moor no better? Iago incites Othello to murder, but some of the cruelest confrontations in all of Shakespeare occur in Acts IV and V when Othello is flying solo. Othello’s culpability need not destroy an audience’s sympathy: bad things that happen to virtuous people produce only melodrama. Bad

things that happen to flawed people because of their flaws produce tragedy. Tragedy doesn't excuse the failings it reveals; rather it punishes them, and the capital sentence Othello executes through his suicide is an admission of guilt. When he speaks "of one whose hand, like the base Indian, threw a pearl away richer than all his tribe," he is describing not Iago but himself. To produce genuine sympathy for a man who so cruelly murders his wife is one of the chief challenges for any actor.

There is also the dilemma of Othello's race. Almost from the first performance on, critical debate has raged over whether a Moor is Arab or African. Those who prefer their Othello as a knight in ebony armor tend to lighten his origins. As Emlyn Williams once observed about such a performance, "I suppose the day will come when they'll have a black Iago and a white Othello!" Race is too singular a feature in the play to ignore, and any attempt to diminish it is only another form of avoidance. All the characters seem to view Othello's color as a physical liability: Brabantio and Roderigo are horrified by it; Iago views it as unappealing; the Duke of Venice can offer Brabantio only, "If virtue no delighted beauty lack, your son-in-law is far more fair than black," which isn't exactly saying "Black is beautiful." Even Desdemona defends her choice with "I saw Othello's visage in his mind," which privileges who he is at the expense of what he is. Othello's racial separateness is essential to his marital insecurity. Othello's race is clearly a case where less is not Moor.

While Othello is the most famous black in Shakespeare's work, he is not the only one; other Moors appear in other plays, and the way he uses them may resolve the role he intended race to play in *Othello*. In *The Merchant of Venice*, the first line of the Prince of Morocco, one of Portia's suitors, is, "Mislike me not for my complexion," and when his suit fails, Portia strains the quality of her mercy with "Let all of his complexion choose me so." Aaron the Moor in *Titus Andronicus* is presented as someone whose physical darkness reflects an inner darkness. His illicit affair with the degenerate Tamora produces a bastard who is so physically threatened because of his color that Aaron rhetorically asks, "Is black so base a hue?" Earlier in the play, he echoes a line that Othello will use "Aaron will have his soul black like his face." The echo is apt; close examination of this character reveals him to be a conflation of Iago and Othello. While scholars continue to argue over how much of *Titus Andronicus* Shakespeare wrote, there can be no doubt about the influence it had later on in the forming of Iago. A

summary of Aaron's actions should make the relation to Iago clear: a villain in a secondary position of power who delights in the sport of his schemes; several of his victims don't perceive this and call him "gentle Aaron"; he counsils the rape of Lavinia, engineers the mutilation of Andronicus, and stabs a nurse to keep her quiet; when he is captured he threatens to speak no more, and at the end of a play notorious for its carnage, Aaron is still alive but under sentence of torture. Aaron has only one redeeming feature: the love he develops for his illegitimate son. Shakespeare later resolved what appears an anomaly in Aaron by dividing his traits between two characters: the warlike black with a streak of noble love on the one hand and the conniving villain on the other. Only when Othello and Iago are plotting Desdemona's murder are the two halves reunited.

The racial stereotypes of Shakespeare's day are more problematic in our own. Even though the slurs in the text are uttered by angry characters, the actor portraying Othello must distance himself from anything that might corroborate the underlying prejudices.

The release of another filmed version of the play, starring Laurence Fishburne and Kenneth Branagh, and the recent refurbishing of Orson Welles's 1952 production afford the opportunity to compare, with Laurence Olivier's 1964 filmed performance, several different interpretations. The only enduring reality most stage performances have is in the judgmental summaries found in reviews. Filmed versions, on the other hand, preserve the performance and offer anyone the objective opportunity to "see for themselves."

As a detached preface to his film, Orson Welles once explained, "In *Othello* I felt I had to choose between filming the play or continuing my own line of experimentation in adapting Shakespeare quite freely to the cinema form. . . . *Othello* the movie, I hope, is first and foremost a motion picture." Even though he trimmed the play to just over an hour and a half, enough of the text is here for our purposes. Welles's presence as director as well as actor expands his opportunities to reveal his interpretation through the production. Financial straits may have contributed to some of the interpretation as well: in discussing the four-year struggle to finish the film, Charles Higham wryly observes, "Welles is known to have engaged—and dismissed—three Desdemonas, four Iagos, two Lodovicos, three Cassios, and countless bit players" (*The Films of Orson Welles*). The finished product, however, is marked by an unusually consistent visual style, and it won the Golden Palm Award at the Cannes Film Festival of 1952.

Welles compensated for the cuts in the text with the condensation of visual images, and this is nowhere more effective than at the beginning of the film. The camera tracks up from the back of Welles's head to reveal the rigid figure of the dead Othello on a bier, as austere as an ebony icon except for the fact that he is upside down. Visually, Welles immediately establishes the tragic inversion of jealousy. The funeral procession appears again briefly at the end of the film, a framing device also used in Laurence Olivier's *Hamlet*. But the effect in the two films is entirely different: in the Olivier movie the procession is stately, dignified, and as British as the changing of the guards at Buckingham Palace; in Welles's film the procession resembles a Spanish religious festival, with the bodies of Othello and Desdemona bobbing on a sea of cowed monks like so many sacred relics, accompanied by a dirge-like wailing of voices (which was much more effectively shrill in the original soundtrack). Iago, in chains, is pulled in the opposite direction of the procession and hoisted high above the proceedings in a cage, thus establishing two recurring motifs: confinement and an aerial perspective.

The confining patterns that are repeatedly stressed give the play the inexorable, claustrophobic feel of fate. Desdemona often views her husband through the interlocking pattern of an iron grille. Othello locks himself in his bedroom after killing Desdemona and converses with the other characters through barred windows. The redundancies of the architectural facades amplify the impression of implacable patterns by overwhelming the small human figures scurrying before them in long shots. Othello and Desdemona frequently view each other from opposite ends of a room cluttered with pillars, the supports transformed into visual obstacles. Even Iago is not exempt from this visual coercion: several times after furthering his scheme with Roderigo, he is seen walking down an alley with the iron cage he will ultimately be confined in hanging ominously over his head.

The aerial perspective creates an odd emotional distance that corresponds to the physical distance and makes the human struggle against fate seem puny and ineffectual. The skirmish that costs Cassio his rank in the third scene of act 2 takes place in an underground canal witnessed from above by impassive spectators. Similarly, when Othello has his seizure, the camera suddenly takes on Othello's perspective and veers up to the sky as the general collapses, taking in the edge of the ramparts where soldiers idly stare down at him. Othello's final mo-

ments as he falls on the bed with Desdemona are viewed by the remaining members of the cast from a hole in the ceiling.

Welles's peculiar preference for the melodrama of fate dilutes the tragedy of the play. Personal flaws or virtues can offer little resistance to such an overwhelming cosmic design; the devastation of personal responsibility is consequently belittled. At the same time, this ploy achieves one of the difficult goals we initially identified: with Othello the victim of impersonal fate rather than of personal failing, he comes across as far more sympathetic. Welles opts for a heroic Othello, and consequently he plays down the racial aspect of the character. The audience's first sustained look at him occurs when Brabantio refers to Othello as "such a thing as thou." The camera shifts to a dashing and exotic Arab in a turban. The old man's racism seems the byproduct of his wounded vanity, and the audience gives it as little credence as does the Venetian Senate. For the rest of the movie, Welles uses Othello's blackness less as race than as an opportunity for visual contrast, a contrast only enhanced by the black and white film used in the shooting. As murderous doubt crowds his mind, Othello is no longer seen in the bright, Cyprian sunlight; more and more he becomes a creature of the castle's shadows, blending in with the darkness, with only his large, pleading eyes the last distinctly human feature discernible.

Welles tempers his Moor's rage with regret; he is more anguished than angry when eavesdropping on Iago and Cassio in act 4, scene 1 (Welles brilliantly obscures their words under the galling squall of the sea gulls overhead) or the frightened look of resolve when he says "Get me some poison, Iago—this night." As Jack Jorgens wrote, "Though Welles' usual effect is of stoically contained passion, he has moments of great pathos, when, for instance, imagining his 'fountain' Desdemona as a cistern of foul toads, he runs his hand slowly down her body with a look of profound sorrow" (*Shakespeare on Film*). Here is an Othello that visibly continues to doubt even while he acts, and a divided Othello retains some vestige of his frequently mentioned nobility.

Welles's choice of a Iago supports his sympathetic view of the general. With his pudgy, sullen face and his spindly arms and legs, with his lank Florentine curls and his purring, mincing Irish brogue, Michael MacLiammoir creates a Iago as obscenely voluptuous as an angora cat in heat, the last man in the world on whom anyone would waste the adjective "honest" (indeed, Welles cuts most of the appearances of this mantra in the film). Here is a Iago who would do well to replace his

famous self-distancing remark from act 1, scene 1 with a quote from Popeye: "I yam what I yam." By excising Iago's soliloquies, Welles also excises his complexity; Iago in this production is a standard villain, a tempter as archly portrayed as any in a medieval morality play. While exaggeration diminishes the play's subtlety, it is the subtlety that creates equivocation in the audience. By making Iago a standard villain, Welles makes Othello a standard victim. Many of the play's potential problems are flattened out through broad characterization.

Although the text of the play clearly identifies Iago's age ("I have looked upon the world for four times seven years"), Welles chooses to make both the ensign and his wife, Emilia, much older than that, and the shift gives veracity to a number of disparate traits. An ancient Ancient is distanced from passion by more than cynicism. The jaundiced, belittling views of sex and women he utters aren't the sage posturings of a Mercutio who is only slightly older than his audience, they come steeped in the bitterness of one who has outlived his own desires; the passivity of spite is the only form of ardor he can muster. Emilia's own cynical remarks to her mistress about men proceed less from anger than weariness. When Iago and Emilia are seen together they show nothing more than a depthless familiarity; theirs is a union of habit rather than sentiment. With Welles's sensitivity to visual balances, he creates the perfect foil for the young newlyweds: the misunderstandings of excessive passion flanked by the entropy of spent desire.

With his extensive search for the perfect Desdemona, one would think Welles would have found one who was at least adequate, but Suzanne Cloutier does little more than read her lines. It is one of the peculiar things a performance adds to a theatrical text, but Cloutier's presence (performance might be too strong a word here) makes one realize a weak Desdemona is not only a negligible fault, it can even unintentionally add something to a production. Particularly with an uncertain Othello like Welles's, Desdemona's lack of affect increases her ambiguity and facilitates the Moor's confusion. The confrontation between the two in act 4, scene 2 is a case in point. Here is a clash so acrimonious it makes Hamlet's behavior with his mother seem like coddling in comparison. Welles is all bellowing brimstone, while Cloutier remains as passive as a plaster Madonna in a hail storm. Her unconvincing avowals of innocence are more than a specimen of bad acting; they deepen the doubts they are meant to banish.

At the expense of some of the means, Welles achieves Shakespeare's end and creates a genuinely sympathetic Othello. Iago and Desdemona

may come up short, but there can be no question that *Othello* is clearly a play centered on Othello. F.R. Leavis might even have considered modifying his opposition to the character if he had seen this production.

The most famous and controversial traversal of Othello in this century would have to be Laurence Olivier's 1964 performance with the National Theatre of Great Britain. Luckily, a film record of the performance exists. Although at the time it was considered an overwhelming success, critical response ran from hailing to railing: John Osborne found it "dreadful" and "unspeakably vulgar," while Franco Zeffirelli called it "an anthology of everything that has been discovered about acting in the last three centuries."

What, exactly, is the bone that produced so much contention? Olivier took Othello's most distinctive aspect, his blackness, and made it the most distinctive aspect of his interpretation. No Arabic evasions here, no Victorian gentleman in cocoa butter declaiming pretty verse while holding a silken pillow inertly over his wife; Olivier's Othello is as African as Lake Tanganyika. Othello represents one of the notoriously external actor Olivier's most elaborately burnished surfaces. If God lies in the details, Olivier's singular worship of this deity qualifies him as pope. Extensive voice coaching enabled him to lower his voice a good six notes below his normal range. His makeup took two and a half hours to apply. The mannerisms Olivier employed were as elaborate as his appearance as he leered and swaggered, rolled his hips, and occasionally lapsed into the cadence of tribal ritual as when he shrieked "O Desdemona! Dead! Desdemona! Dead! O! O!" Such extensive attention to surface runs the risk of preventing an audience from going any deeper than the surface. By making race the salient feature of the interpretation, much that would be legitimately Othello is taken as a characterization of blacks in general. As an impersonation of a race, this Othello could easily seem a travesty; as an interpretation of a specific personality, however, the performance reveals great depth, variety, and pace. It is therefore important to identify what in the interpretation is aimed at Othello's character by justifying it with the text.

The outstanding characteristic of this Othello is the emotional scale: Olivier suffers spectacularly. As Christopher Fry remembered, "The rage was elemental, the pain so private that it seemed an intrusion to overhear it. . . . 'But yet the pity of it, Iago! O Iago, the pity of it. Iago!,' was whispered, face to the wall; and yet it was as large as torment itself" (quoted in Logan Gourlay's *Olivier*). There is a pragmatic reason for presenting so high-strung an Othello, which has nothing to do with

racial stereotyping or ham acting: it explains the murderous shift from loving to loathing within a single scene (act 3, scene 3). A volatile Othello would require only a few insinuating sparks to explode in the opposite direction. Othello's occupation is violent and his emotions correspond to that occupation. When he attacks Iago ("Villain, be sure thou prove my love a whore"), it is with as much violence as he later directs against his wife. Olivier's performance brings out all the emotional extravagance in the character; the act 4, scene 1 epileptic fit for once seems a natural consequence of the exhausting upheaval that precedes it. The sheer volume of this performance is frightening, yet it also makes the quiet moments that much more effective, as when Othello pitifully gasps, "If she be false, O, then heaven mocks itself! I'll not believe it," or in the bleak stillness of his final speech.

These outbursts come from wounded pride as much as damaged love. Unlike Welles, who presented the Moor as a melodramatic hero, Olivier sees the character rife with all the flaws of tragedy. As he said of Othello in an interview, ". . . when he says 'Not easily jealous' it's the most appalling bit of self-deception. He's the most easily jealous man that anybody's ever written about. The minute he suspects, or thinks he has the smallest grounds for suspecting, Desdemona, he wishes to think her guilty, he wishes to" (quoted in Kenneth Tynan, *Great Acting*). There is something willful in Othello's emotional excess, and Olivier wanted the audience to see it. Even while the character is writhing in pain, a part of him is also luxuriating in it. There's a narcissistic sheen to the poetic platinum that seems suddenly appropriate; the soaring abandon and bitter exaltation with which Olivier delivers the "Farewell the tranquil mind!" speech presages his whole course of revenge. Olivier avoids the romantic victim to reveal a far more ambivalent, culpable Othello. Little glimpses of the complacency and vanity of his interpretation are there from the start: the easy, chuckling delivery of the "Most potent, grave, and reverend signiors" testimony before the Senate, the obsequious fussing over the Duke's train as the latter leaves at the end of the scene that shows the ostentatious deference only a vain man indulges in. The odd sequence where Othello produces his "sword of Spain" and elaborately threatens Gratiano with it, only to abandon it, suddenly makes sense with this Othello: even though Iago has escaped and Desdemona's innocence has been established, the general's pride is galled at the thought of being confined to his room, and he has to make a gesture of independence to his guard. This critical distance accounts for much of the interpretation's

controversy: a flawed Othello who is so flagrantly projected as black makes the flaws appear racial. Like his Othello, Olivier could blame only himself for the resulting uproar.

But there is more than bile and bluster to this performance. Othello's infatuation with his young bride is palpable. The fair warrior was never more lovingly and lingeringly greeted by her general in act 2, scene 1. Olivier is significantly older than his Desdemona and this gap is borne out in the text. Othello says, "I am declin'd into the vale of years—yet that's not much": the decline is enough to make the telling of his life story an extensive courtship. An older Othello gives an added inequality to the relationship; it also accounts for the smitten quality of this Othello, of someone who can't believe his amorous luck. Like most May/December romances, there is more than lust at work here. The old soldier seems to find something redemptive in the love of this young woman, and there is a mellow tenderness in his reading of the line, "She lov'd me for the dangers I had pass'd; and I lov'd her that she did pity them," a fatherly doting as he clucks and chortles while Desdemona pushes Cassio's suit for the first time in act 3, scene 3. All this amplifies the devastation of the young woman's imagined infidelity when it comes. Olivier was accused of overpowering the rest of the cast, but his scenes with Iago reveal what a marvelous straight man he could be. In the great give-and-take of act 3, scene 3, Iago seems all the more masterful in setting down the pegs for the responsive music his Moorish instrument produces.

Frank Finlay's performance provides an interesting gambit for bridging the split in Iago's character: here is a rough, unadorned commoner, his "honesty" coming less from excessive sincerity than from an unvarnished frankness. Finlay narrows the extremes between Iago's two halves and reveals their connections. Iago's sarcastic remarks to the other characters on love and honor are but a half step from contempt; he sneers at these subjects with Cassio and Roderigo, only to sneer at Cassio and Roderigo later. By not seeming to ingratiate himself, he ingratiates himself without detection. The contrast in acting styles between the two leads also contributes to the effectiveness of their relationship: as Jack Jorgens has shrewdly noted about this performance, "The measure of Iago's inroads on Othello's integrity, faith, and sanity is the degree to which his dry, mundane, 'modern' style triumphs over Othello's archaic, grand, heroic one."

This National Theatre production uniformly demonstrates what first rate performances can add to a theatrical text. Maggie Smith gives

depth to a role that normally requires little beyond innocence. She is just flirtatious enough in her pleading for Cassio to substantiate aroused suspicion. Her handling of act 4, scene 3 reveals how much these one hundred lines add to the total effect of the play: the inert foreboding that shows from her large eyes as she sings her willow song and asks Emilia to shroud her in her wedding sheets if she should die creates a drop of pity that emulsifies all the surrounding terror. Joyce Redman's Emilia is an earthy, blunt woman, what would later be termed "a tough cookie," every bit a match for her husband Iago, but someone whom inexperience rouses to sympathy. This makes the bond between maid and mistress feel surprisingly genuine. Many critics faulted Derek Jacobi's Cassio because his effete, slightly effeminate, white noble seemed no match for Olivier's virile Moor. But by playing the character as Othello's exact opposite, Jacobi created the perfect imaginary rival (how can one compete with someone who is everything he is not?). Even Michael Rothwell contributes a wonderfully comic Roderigo by playing the part not with the usual buffoonery, but rather as a figure of grave ineptitude. The tiara of this cast is no less precious for the ostentatious jewel it supports.

Which brings us to the most recent filmed version of *Othello*. While it might not equal the brilliance of its distinguished predecessors, the production displays much insight, novelty, and conviction. If the interpretive input of actors is as vital as I maintain, a good production can add to our understanding of a play as well as of a great production. The most striking feature of this rendition is that Othello is played by a black actor. When a nonblack actor attempts the role, race becomes a self-conscious ingredient, something that falls short or exceeds the mark, but either way gives the subject an exaggerated and distracting prominence. As in the case of a female impersonator, success is achieved not in the suspension of disbelief but in an appreciation of the extent to which the original is transcended. In a peculiar way, a black Othello deemphasizes the subject by putting it in perspective. The Moor's race no longer needs to be established; it becomes an obvious factor an audience assumes. Marital relations can now take precedence over race relations; the who of Othello can be stressed over the what.

The film begins promisingly with a glimpse of Othello in a gondola gliding to his clandestine marriage while holding a porcelain Venetian mask before his face. The prominent black hand holding the white mask in place negates its capacity to disguise and implies that only Othello believes in his ability to evade detection. Laurence Fishburne's Moor

is a commanding presence, a tall, good-looking man who exudes confidence and seems to take his difference as a distinction rather than a disability. He is completely uncowed in act 1, scene 2 when challenged by Brabantio and his men; indeed, he holds his sword within inches of his former host's throat as if perfectly willing to resolve their dispute in combat. This is an Othello who does not take a slight, either verbal or sexual, passively. In his defense before the Senate, he shows none of Welles's modesty or Olivier's humbug; he states his case without the slightest fear of misapprehension. This is confidence that goes beyond hubris; courting Desdemona was his right, and he acknowledges no impropriety. With Fishburne, what you see is what you get, which positions him as the exact opposite of Iago.

Othello's attraction to Desdemona is obviously physical: the act 2, scene 1 meeting of the couple in Cyprus contains much unabashed groping as everyone else waits patiently to be noticed; these are not only newlyweds but individuals who haven't spent much time together. This limitation gives the misunderstanding that will follow a certain credence: such a misreading would be impossible with a couple who have become familiar with each other over years. We see Othello and his wife naked together in bed, and this suddenly gives Desdemona a new dimension: a sexual Desdemona can create sexual worries. When Othello is deep in the throes of jealousy, we once again see a naked Desdemona, but now frolicking with Cassio. Emphasizing the carnal connection between these two makes jealousy no longer dependent exclusively on plot twists; but there is a down side. Despite the obvious attraction, Fishburne shows little fondness for his bride. He wears a handful of rings, only one of which signifies marriage. Sour lust is not enough to produce the awful ache of tragedy.

Iago's innuendos produce nothing but anger in Fishburne; again this approach is both consistent with his interpretation and believable (how can an Othello who is only infatuated with his wife feel more than rage at her betrayal?), but it achieves consistency at the expense of simplifying the character. Fishburne's Moor is not the type to doubt any doubt he entertains, consequently he plays down the role's suffering—but suffering is what makes Othello a figure ambivalent enough to be tragic. A performance that only shifts between a haughty smile and a hateful glare may pass for the figure of a jealous man, but a tragedy, even a tragedy about jealousy, requires more. The audience must see the flaws in Othello that Iago manipulates, otherwise the Moor is reduced to a hulking beast who responds to a hankie as if it were a matador's

cape. Occasionally Fishburne's aloof approach can capture moments of real poignancy, as when he strangles Desdemona: the audience hears the muffled struggle while it sees Othello's head held at a proud angle, the impassive features compromised only by the tear tracks that reflect the room's candle light. But moments like this are rare. Even a lapse in a performance can help an audience appreciate the elements that must be stressed in the text.

Fishburne's monolithic Moor is counterbalanced by a Iago of irreconciled pieces. Kenneth Branagh completely separates the public and private sides of Othello's ensign, which more fully enables the audience to appreciate the artifice of that public side. As Harley Granville-Barker once observed in his preface to *Othello*, "The medium in which Iago works is the actor's; and in the crude sense of pretending to be what he is not, and in his chameleonlike ability to adapt himself to change of company and circumstance, we find him an accomplished actor from the beginning." Branagh projects a guileless, even sunny disposition: one can see why Cassio would waver in his abstinence under such friendly urging, or how the pleading concern in Iago's eyes as he says "O, beware, my lord, of jealousy" might sway a more dubious Othello. Branagh is ingratiating even in his chiding: in the "Put money in thy purse" speech to Roderigo, the racial slurs against Othello are delivered without heat, as if to comfort a friend by insulting his enemy. Even the sarcasm he uses seems no more than a medicinal attempt to rouse the young man's spirits. Thus, Branagh heightens the treachery by heightening the hypocrisy: the poison of this Iago is more deadly because of his protective coloring. A more seductive Iago also takes on more of the responsibility for what transpires, which is important when he is playing against an unresponsive Othello. A tragic hero who hides his tragic flaws can be led astray only against his will: if the prey has no weaknesses then the predator must be twice as strong.

Another aspect of Iago's character that Branagh catches nicely is the impromptu nature of much of his chicanery. Most of the time Iago is winging it, and this is borne out in the text: at the end of act 1 he is sorting through his options, in act 2 he says of his plan, "'Tis here, but yet confus'd," and in the last act he is still undecided if either Cassio or Roderigo must be killed. Branagh conveys this with a fleeting look of suppressed panic when confronted by the unexpected, as when Bianca storms in with Othello's handkerchief; and when Iago swears his allegiance to Othello's revenge, Branagh embraces the general and we

the audience see he has tears in his eyes—only an improviser could be so moved by his own improvisation.

But the more one separates the elements of Iago's personality the more he must justify them individually. By such a convincing portrayal of the convivial exterior, Branagh only makes the misanthropic interior appear unrelated and unconvincing. He abruptly looks sullen before beginning the soliloquies, but this transformation is a poor substitute for characterization. Branagh's Iago is a mask without a face behind it, and the lack brings up all the old questions about motivation from Coleridge and company. While an actor can no more "explain" Iago than a critic, he must at least imply enough of a rationale to make the character plausible; Iago should be a paradox but never a mystery.

The film ends as strongly as it began. Instead of ending with the couple dead in bed, the locale switches back to Venice. A gondola makes its way to the middle of a canal. The two bodies in it are wrapped in white sheets that completely obscure the troublesome distinctions of race and sex that have plagued the course of the drama. The bodies are slipped over the side, and we see the two forms sinking together yet forever separated, in an ending that seems infinitely sad and oddly appropriate.

All three productions we have studied attempt to make sense out of one of the most daunting plays in world literature. Although the approaches were often radically different, all confronted the problematic aspects of the text and sought to validate their interpretations by consistently matching the details with an overall grasp of the part and the play. Literary critics have attempted to do much the same thing through the remote medium of print. While this is perfectly fine in dealing with other genres, theatrical texts present a unique challenge to the procedure. Performance is the true medium of a play, just as performance is the true medium of a musical score, an element so essential to the end result that eliminating it renders the experience incomplete. Actors are the living tissue of a theatrical text, making connections literary critics can only guess at, as they argue their cases before the arbitration of a live audience. Critics can do more than judge a performance, they can learn from it. It's enough to make those of us who are confined to print justifiably jealous.