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Akasha Khalsa

Northern Michigan University, akkhalsa@nmu.edu

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Akasha Khalsa

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The Power of Modern *Othello*

Through the centuries since it was composed, Shakespeare's famous, perhaps infamous, play *Othello* has been making impressions on audiences for its intense plot and gruesome conclusion. As it was performed in 2019 in Canada's Stratford Festival, *Othello* differed significantly from the production that was likely envisioned by its author in 1603. Significant changes within this 2019 interpretation of the drama included a modern setting, the fact that Emilia is a soldier along with her husband Iago, and the theatre's innovative use of interpretive images projected as the background. The staging was not presented in the time period for which it was written. Instead, it was adapted to modernity and set in a time that was perhaps this year—perhaps today. The production was in fact molded for the modern audience, incorporating innovative visual elements and contemporary social commentary.

A traditional setting and interpretation certainly has its place in Shakespeare festivals. Often, playgoers want to see Shakespeare performed with the interesting and exotic archaism with which it is generally associated. However, the enjoyable diversion of a traditional rendering poses a significant drawback for an audience more than four centuries removed from the playwright. Traditional productions portray people living in a world that is essentially foreign, almost alien. The distance of time makes the actions and emotions of the characters less potent, as they are removed from the audience's understanding of reality in their own lives.

When audience members filed into their theater seats for the 2019 Stratford production of *Othello*, there was nothing to indicate that they were in for an experience anything other than the expected story set in medieval Italy. According to the playbill, *Othello* was originally recorded in *Gli Hecatommithi* or *The Hundred Tales*, a collection of tales written in Italian and published in 1565 (Prosser). As an audience, we expected to view a drama set nearly five centuries before us. The lights came down, and orchestral music began playing. Othello and Desdemona appeared on stage right, along with the priest who was to marry them. Suddenly, the orchestra ceased and was replaced by a cacophony of dubstep. Dancers rushed upstage and began an interpretive number full of violent displays of emotion. That evening, in my journal, I wrote, “When the Stratford performance of *Othello* began with traditional orchestral music, I settled in comfortably for a traditional, set-in-medieval-times performance. Then the modern techno music deafened me. I noticed the modern costumes on Othello and Desdemona and realized we were in for something very different from what I had imagined” (“Day 4”).

Othello and Desdemona—dressed how we might dress, in an Italy we might visit today—seemed poised to present a story that could conceivably be reported tomorrow in *The New York Times*. A jealous husband and soldier, poisoned by the words of a trusted underling, wrestles with doubts and thoughts of violent revenge, then takes the life of his innocent wife: “Italian General Strangles Wife,” the headline might run. This format reached us with a great deal more potency than other Shakespeare productions we viewed which were set in times far more removed from our own lives.

In contrast to modern *Othello*, the Stratford production of *Henry VIII* was set exquisitely in its traditional time period and therefore quite remote from the audience’s experience. Martha Henry, the director of *Henry VIII*, made admirable changes to the staging of the text, which duly

plucked at her audience's heartstrings. On these alterations I wrote, "Katherine's plight was presented with a great deal of sensitivity. For example, the added romantic physicality between her and Henry VIII at their opening; her handmaids' song for her where we were able to see her anger and helplessness against Anne Bullen; and her deathbed dance while she lay asleep. Her character was stunning" ("Day 3"). Yet the compassion her audience felt for Katherine was of a more distant kind than what we were able to feel for Desdemona. Katherine's time period, her alien costumery, and the archaic nature of her helplessness against her powerful husband made her plight difficult for her audience to fully empathize with.

The costumes for the production of *Henry VIII*, though beautiful, full of fantasy, and an integral part of the spectacle, also served to separate this production's characters from its audience. When the powerful antagonist Cardinal Wolsey fell from power, he meticulously removed his archaic, ruby-red robe which designated his power in the church. Grandeur fell away from him, and he was left standing on stage in the undergarments of a medieval priest. Regarding this process of disrobing I wrote, "As pretense and greed fell away from him before us, he removed his layers of costume, leaving him a bare ascetic. Several of my classmates commented that it was comedic to suddenly see him, an old man on stage in merely a tunic and 'ballet tights'" ("Day 3"). The fact that this scene was amusing to viewers of my generation is unsurprising, yet Wolsey's nakedness on stage symbolized his sudden vulnerability to the hardships that would soon overtake him in the world. He was to die as a result of his fall. In contrast, when Desdemona appeared in her cotton underwear to go to bed in the final, deadly scene of modern *Othello*, my throat constricted. The audience knew she was fated to die in this scene. I later wrote "Nothing could compare with the final scene, which was so powerful—and yet extremely relatable because of the modern costumery—that I was left uncomfortable and

stunned” (“Day 4”). My classmates and I commented on Desdemona’s sudden, disturbing vulnerability, symbolized by her familiar white undergarments, ones we ourselves might wear in a similar situation. We had the same presentiment of her death which should have hit us while viewing Wolsey’s nakedness in *Henry VIII*, yet Desdemona’s Fruit of the Loom tank top made us gulp. Wolsey’s linen tunic and tights managed only to make us laugh.

Fairy tales never feel as though they happen in nearby reality, and that is what *Henry VIII* felt like: a fairy tale. It felt far away, in time and space. The *Othello* production may have been set in Italy, but it was the Italy of here and now, the Italy of our globalized 2019 world, the Italy that is so nearby we can follow its politics in real time, video chat Italian relatives with only a moment of lag time, and share fashion and music. Because of this proximity to our own reality, the production of *Othello* was perhaps better positioned than it otherwise may have been to offer commentary on societal issues relevant now.

The interpretation we viewed offered some commentary on current events, and this commentary was a large piece of the strong impact of this new adaptation. Perhaps the most telling perspective on how the Stratford production sought to comment on current events can be found in the notes written by the play’s director, Nigel Shawn Williams. Williams expressed a distinct awareness of political dynamics in the play in his “Directors Notes: Their World is Our World.” He wrote in the playbill that “Love and peace and trust, which are the bonds that hold Othello and Desdemona together, are at frightful risk. Iago’s own jealousies, insecurities, and self-hatred are turned into a poison that is used to destroy these bonds. Iago’s racial and religious bigotry, his misogyny, his fear of losing place in a system, in the world, make him attack the love and peace that Desdemona and Othello share” (Williams). These concerns, brought to the fore by Williams’ director’s notes, are ones that have been recognized and focused on only recently in

the mainstream. Our 21st century awareness of the bigotry and misogyny that Williams sought to address through his production of *Othello* serves as a powerful lens through which the modern audience could not help but view the play. Williams' own awareness of this focus in both popular culture and academia seems to have guided his artistic influence on the Stratford production of *Othello*.

As a play, *Othello* could likely not have avoided this angle in 2019, even if such avoidance was desirable to the director. Simply because of the identities of its characters and the content of its central conflict, the play has long been viewed as a goldmine for modern social commentary. Having a black main character at its center, *Othello* offers unique opportunities of empowerment for actors of color. Professor of Renaissance and modern drama at the University of Toronto, Dr. Philippa Sheppard, took for granted that *Othello* is an essential reading due to its contribution to discussions of modern issues such as racial and sexual relations. In *Othello's* playbill, Sheppard observes that "Just by having a black hero at its center, Shakespeare's great domestic tragedy has been breaking boundaries (the theme for the Festival's season) for some time. Shakespeare tackles two significant issues, race and gender, in ways that are so prescient that it is entirely appropriate to set the play now." As this essay was presented in the Stratford playbill, it was clear that the production was intended to offer wisdom and insight into dynamics present in our world.

Williams clearly intended the production to take a stand. He explicitly dedicated his version of Shakespeare's work to victims of recent gun violence. He made sure to include in his director's notes for the audience's eyes, "I dedicate this production to the victims of Christchurch, New Zealand. I dedicate this production to all victims who have fallen at the hands of violence, both domestic and by acts of terrorism" (Williams). The Christchurch killings

referred to by Williams occurred in May of 2019, and were perpetrated on Muslim worshippers in New Zealand by an Australian white supremacist using semi-automatic weapons. The killer broadcasted the murders of 51 people online for the world to see and made available a digital white power manifesto. The complex contemporary issues brought to the fore by such internationally publicized, racially motivated gun violence are ideas William Shakespeare could never have foreseen or fully understood in his own time. Yet centuries later, *Othello*, as Williams staged it, addresses the violence and seeks to reduce its contributing factors.

The issues Williams highlights are emotionally relevant to the contemporary audience he seeks to move. In Shakespeare's time, gun violence was limited to the damage that could be done by early firearms such as cannons and muskets. Terrorism, as we are familiar with the term now, was not yet a recognizable concept despite the fact that racially and religiously motivated acts of mass violence were quite familiar. The Gunpowder Plot of 1605, which occurred one year after the completion of *Othello* in 1604, is merely one example of a religiously-motivated attempt at mass violence, with which Shakespeare would have been familiar in his time. Violence was no stranger. Lies were no stranger. Needless hatred was no stranger in Shakespeare's time.

Given these truths, reading through the original text as Shakespeare composed it, *Othello* does not seem to lend itself easily to contemporary social commentary. Its archaic language, which was preserved in the Stratford production for the most part, acts as a barrier to applying the author's words to current events. The characters' actions bear relevance only in so much as they do to any given time in human history. It is the angle that Williams chose to take with his production that imbued *Othello* as we saw it in Stratford with as much power to comment on the world now. The fact that he explicitly asked his audience to think of the Christchurch killings and of other current events makes the 2019 Stratford production what it is.

As Williams demonstrates, not only can *Othello* now be presented in such a way as to deal with incidences of disturbing mass violence, it is also a powerful tool to address racial issues. Othello is characterized by Shakespeare as a Moor, which is generally accepted to mean that his skin is dark. There are other possible implications of this description, however. In Shakespeare's time, the term "Moor," derived from the Latin "Maurus" could mean simply black, or it could mean Muslim, or both (Dobson). The word referred to invaders of the Iberian Peninsula who took over parts of Spain and Portugal. These invaders were Arab Muslims as well as Berbers from Africa, making it true that "The hero, described as 'an extravagant and wheeling stranger / Of here and every where,' is a product of what we would now term 'globalization'" (Sheppard). In fact, how Othello came to Italy is not explained, though he alludes to youthful adventures, enslavement, and war stories, which contribute to Desdemona's attraction to him (see Act 1, Scene 3). Even with this complexity in his background, his status as an achieving warrior maintains a perception of the Moors as warlike and apt at conquering. Certainly his roots are tied to Africa, with such hints as his precious strawberry-covered token he gives to Desdemona: "That handkerchief / Did an Egyptian to my mother give" (52). Was Othello, as a character, merely alienated by being dark-skinned, or was he also Muslim? His religion is not directly addressed in the play, but it may have contributed to his being seen as lower than other citizens.

To understand the ways in which a modern version of *Othello* interacts with racial issues past and present, it is interesting to compare Williams' interpretation in Stratford, Canada with another interpretation by the Royal Shakespeare Company, which included the first black Iago, played by Lucian Msamati. Iago, in Shakespeare's text, is not black. In fact, he is outwardly racist and derogatory towards Othello for his skin color. In the 2015 Royal Shakespeare

Company version of the play, Iago's outright racial slurs toward Othello become more noticeably complex, drawing forth reflections on the fact that the racially derogatory language may stem from self-hatred, leading to hatred of another. Though the 2015 play was not set in a modern time and retained the exotic medieval costumery for which it was intended, this experimental change in casting held a great deal of interest for its modern audience, conditioned to reflect at every opportunity on the subject of racial tensions.

Casting Iago as a black man, though criticized by some viewers as directly contradictory to the original text, leads to more clear questions of the empathy with which Iago relates to his superior, Othello. In the text, Iago uses his own understanding of jealousy, brought on by his fear that his own wife has been unfaithful, to control Othello's actions. In the Royal Shakespeare Company's interpretation, this manipulative empathy towards Othello could be said to be deepened by Iago's familiarity with the difficulty that comes from being an outsider due to one's race.

The experimental nature of this change is made clear in the Royal Shakespeare Company's *Exploring Act 1 Scene 1 / Othello / Royal Shakespeare Company*. The two actors in Act 1 Scene 1, Msamati as Iago and Corrigan as Roderigo, experiment with a variety of ways in which the scene can be presented. They add improvisational material to their memorized dialogue, in the form of their own exclamations, actions and reactions. In one experimental version of the scene, Iago holds Roderigo by the testes in response to an offence, compelling him to take action and call up warnings to Desdemona's father. In another improvised iteration, Iago spits water in the face of Roderigo for his racially derogatory reference to Othello's "thick lips." Each new version of the same scene is calculated for its impact on the existing text. This process reflects the power of the interpreter in presenting Shakespeare's words to the modern audience. It

also demonstrates how actors and directors must be aware of the social issues and awareness they are manipulating with their every creative action on the stage. In some ways, it also reflects the process Iago must adopt in improvising his own actions to elicit a specific response from each of his victims, as Greenblatt asserts in his essay, “The Improvisation of Power” (1980). Iago must judge the character of each of his victims: their desires, their fears, and their most pressing recent influences. He must act according to what he knows of their psyches because the content of their minds must shape the respective act he puts on for each of them. Similarly, the play *Othello* must be shaped uniquely to its every audience through time because the issues pressing on the minds of its viewers in 2019 or 2015 are far-removed from those pressing on the conscience of an audience in 1605.

In 2015, when the first black Iago was unveiled in Stratford, England, racial tensions were of great importance in the European Union due to anxieties aroused by the huge amount of immigration into European countries. According to the *World Report 2015*:

There were reports throughout the year of summary returns, including of Syrians, by Bulgaria, Greece, and Spain, and of excessive use of force by border guards of those three countries. There were almost 122,030 asylum applicants in EU member states in the first half of 2014, according to Eurostat, up 22 percent from the same period in 2013. People fleeing Syria enjoyed high protection rates, but also faced returns to the first EU country of entry under the EU’s Dublin regulation and under bilateral readmission agreements, without due regard to individual circumstances, including family reunification...Asylum seekers were held in substandard reception conditions in several countries, including Italy, Bulgaria, Greece, and Cyprus.

Refugees, racially separated from European residents of these countries, were met with violence and lack of compassion, prompting criticism from worldwide human rights activists. Many Europeans resisted this inpouring of non-white peoples. The alienation experienced by darker-skinned peoples in the West was highlighted by this crisis. Thus, the racial focus of the introduction of the first black Iago in the Royal Shakespeare Company's 2015 interpretation of *Othello*, reflected and sought to address this racial anxiety. In a similar manner, the 2019 *Othello* of Stratford, Ontario addressed issues relevant to the fast-changing minds of its 21st century audience.

The 2019 modern interpretation of *Othello*, as brought together by Williams, sought to address issues pertinent to the North American audience attending at the time. Thus, it provided commentary on political events on the minds of those citizens, many of whom came from the United States, and all of which were familiar with the politics of the worldwide superpower. Issues of hate (whether ideologically, racially, politically, or sexually motivated) certainly influenced the production. "Why do people hate; why does hate exist?" asks the mind of an aware 2019 citizen (Fricker). *Othello* offers a unique perspective on this question. It is positioned to address the question masterfully, given Iago's manipulations, his hatred toward the Moorish Othello, and his misogynistic behavior towards Desdemona and his own wife, Emilia.

Many of the issues addressed center around gender tensions, specifically the place of women in society, their power, and their presentation in modern media. In keeping with the modern awareness of and desire to bring forth the empowerment of women, the playbill for Williams' *Othello* asserts that "Desdemona here not only wants a wooer like Othello, she also wants to *be* a man like Othello. Despite the stage tradition of portraying Desdemona as submissive, the text offers other possibilities ... she boldly defends her right to join him even

while he is leading the Venetian military campaign. Is Desdemona's love a case of opposites attracting – the timid girl worshipping the warrior hero? Or a case of Desdemona recognizing a kindred spirit in the valiant Othello?" (Sheppard). The recognition of Desdemona as a warrior spirit in *Othello* is certainly refreshing. The sight of her walking among the soldiers in her modern blue pantsuit/jumper reinforces this sense of her androgyny. Yet, she does not need to be like a man to be powerful in this story. Her choice to subvert her father's will, perhaps representative of the patriarchal desires of her wider heritage, demonstrates her fighting spirit. This is strengthened given the fact that she not only marries outside of her social class, but also outside of racial lines. In a time when interracial marriage was deeply frowned upon, this partnership with Othello was a much more extreme choice. Today, Desdemona's elopement with a Moorish soldier against the will of her father can be seen with less shock and awe. She is just another strong female supporting character. In dealing with the reluctance of her father to relinquish patriarchal control of her as his daughter, with the racism inherent in his unwillingness to bless an interracial marriage, and even with Othello's violent reaction to the idea that she may have slept with another man, she is fighting antiquated issues. In fact, Othello's reaction to her perceived adulterousness fits with an antiquated view of ownership and obedience no longer quite as typical of marriages: "Othello responds [to Iago fueling his doubt in Desdemona] absolutely as a man of the seventeenth century in wanting to punish his wife and her 'lover' with death. Shakespeare's time is crammed with accounts of crimes like Othello's, both fictional and real" (Sheppard). The problems that various Desdemonas in Shakespeare's age would have fought valiantly are rarer now, in the time of Williams' *Othello*. The difficulties presented by Desdemona's character are just one example of the age-old conflict between the strong, principled woman and the patriarchal systems which seek to thwart her expression. How did

Williams' interpretation manage to keep this struggle relevant and interesting to viewers who've seen such a narrative hundreds of times before?

Historically, much of the important social commentary having to do with gender issues has been cut from performances of the play. According to Sheppard, "In the 'Willow' scene, Iago's wife, Emilia, reacts to Othello's treatment of Desdemona in surprisingly modern speeches where she asserts that women should have sexual equality with men. The willow scene was cut from performances for centuries, as male directors dismissed it as mere domestic prattle." This scene was intentionally not only included in the Stratford production, but lent a special gravity. Emilia, decked out in soldier gear, counseled the distraught Desdemona after we as the audience had watched both women experience what we could all collectively recognize as domestic abuse, because of modern awareness.

The willow scene, with Emilia's assertion of her right to claim sexual freedom within the bounds of her marriage, and Desdemona's traditional and obedient assertion that she would never find such a thing acceptable in herself, presents ideas wildly ahead of Shakespeare's time. The idea of sexual freedom as an expression of non-ownership in modern relationships has received more and more attention in recent decades as "Societal interest in consensually nonmonogamous relationships is growing, perhaps as a function of recent legal changes in the recognition of same-sex partnerships, which has brought an increased awareness of alternatives to the standard model of heterosexual monogamy" (Grunt-Meyer). The issue of subverting the traditional heteronormative relationship model is often linked with the freedom of women and their ability to live without becoming like chattel to their mate. The possessiveness which compels Othello to act so violently towards Desdemona stems from negation of a woman's freedom to share and to use her own body as she wishes. This right is frequently and vigorously

asserted by modern feminists and thus is present in the mind of every viewer in 2019. It remains a captivating topic of debate and anger for modern play-goers.

Williams' focus on the outright abuse both women experience at the hands of their mates lens the play's gender dynamics some special relevance to the current audience. Hyper-awareness regarding the abuse of women for perceived sexual infractions is still very much a current issue. It is one that has received increased discourse in the last several decades in an effort to increase awareness and thereby reduce its harmful effects. Likely a great portion of the mostly aging audience at Stratford could feel a personal connection to the abused wives. It is worth noting that, of those people, not all were women, as "1 in 4 women and 1 in 7 men will experience severe physical violence by an intimate partner in their lifetime... Nearly half of all women and men in the United States will experience psychological aggression by an intimate partner in their lifetime" ("Domestic Violence"). The attention paid to ensuring that the modern audience knew Othello's treatment of Desdemona was recognizably abusive became clear when Lodovico witnesses Othello's anger towards Desdemona. Lodovico's exclamation of "This would not be believed in Venice," is given special meaning (Act 4, Scene 1, line 232). Modern Venice would indeed not tolerate such an outwardly violent display of jealousy and bile. "This would not be believed in Venice," might also be construed to refer to the audience watching this hateful domestic situation unfold. Acting as the outside observer, the judge of right and wrong, along with working off of modern understandings, the audience does indeed not condone, or believe, Othello's sudden invective.

Similarly, we viewed Williams' rendering of Emilia's gift to Iago of the lifted handkerchief, which Othello let drop. Emilia's wretched line regarding Iago's desire for it, "I nothing but to please his fantasy" (Act 3, Scene 3, line 299) seems to have informed Williams'

interpretation of the scene. Iago appears on stage and begins to talk to Emilia in a scathing, disparaging manner. She fights this painful abuse by letting him know she has something he desires: the handkerchief he has asked for again and again. Only when she has something he wants does he give her affection. Only then does he attempt to seduce her. Her desperation to be touched, to be loved, to be cared for, demonstrated with painful clarity by actress Laura Condlin, is brought to the fore. Iago, played by Gordon S. Miller, caresses her until he can snatch away the prize, then revokes all affection from his wife. She is left deflated, hopeless, and manipulated. She desires his love and affection, and can only gain that by pleasing him, by giving him what he wants. So, she gives him the handkerchief. This addition to Iago and Emilia's relationship was an extremely powerful point of Williams' interpretation and increased the interest for the Stratford audience.

In addition to this deepened interpretation of Emilia's relationship with Iago, her basic character was updated. Now she is not merely a servant, but a soldier under Othello, just like Iago and Cassio. She is a warrior, not only in the metaphorical sense of her fighting through the polluted waters of her relationship, and her status as the heroine of Desdemona, but in reality. She fights alongside the men. This change brings her character into new ground in the present. Debates over the ability of females to engage in combat positions, especially on the front lines, still rage. Although women have been accepted into the military at this point in many Western countries, controversy remains to plague the subject. This subversive change to Emilia's role keeps Williams' interpretation on the edge of the acceptable, looking ahead to complete equality, much like Shakespeare did in his own time with his representation of Desdemona's choices.

The new world we inhabit requires a great deal of originality from its entertainment, and this requirement was assuredly a pressure that influenced the Stratford production. The use of

projected backgrounds, designed by Denise Karn, was extremely modern, as well as the first overpowering dance number during which Othello and Desdemona were married. The use of projections to reveal Iago's growing corruption is another artistic choice which must be looked at in more detail, as it catered very directly to its viewers in 2019.

The projections contribute to making the play visually interesting and enhancing the emotional material present. I noted some issues with their usage, however, when I wrote in my journal, "The most striking part of the modern interpretation for me was the projected set. It actually distracted me pretty badly from the action on stage to watch the changing images on the screen background. I found I didn't so much enjoy when the buildings in the first act were projected as sketches... However, the use of projection and lighting to portray Iago's soliloquies and his infected trains of thought was fairly moving" ("Day 4"). The usage of the projections to show the internal mindset of Iago was the most effective use of this modern artistic design. The visual interest added by the projections aided in occupying the shortened attention span of the contemporary audience.

Throughout the continued manipulations of Iago, we watched as each time he descended into his inner dialogue, the screen behind him changed to reflect the blight of his hateful intentions. When he entered a moment of meditation, it appeared that dark, dense slime began to run down the suddenly unreal buildings behind him. Other images used during his soliloquies were similarly chosen to reflect decay, illness, grime, and other things to provoke the emotional response of disgust. An explanation for this artistic choice in this production can be found in Williams' directors notes where he declares, "Hate and intolerance continue to spread throughout the world like a virus...over the last twenty-five to thirty years, this virus, the poison of racial and religious intolerance, has been slowly released again, and has been given permission to

spread by some of our political leaders” (Williams). The growing, spreading poison inside of Iago’s soul, projected onto the background of *Othello*’s universe to disturb the viewers, reflects the poison Williams identifies in the world outside the theater.

Audience members, however, were likely not aware of this intended likening to the world outside, only the way this spectacle made them see and feel. In fact, the backgrounds produced a strong emotional effect on me personally, especially when Iago was interrupted in his dark reveries, and the corruption spreading on the screens behind him retracted quickly while he re-entered the social reality with those.

In fact, the projections of Iago’s inner poison ended up being one of the most powerful characteristics of this interpretation. They also contributed somewhat to the political commentary which the play, according to Williams, sought to address. By emphasizing the evils of Iago, by making his inner process associated with disgusting imagery, the most hate-filled character is made in turn the most hated by the audience. Throughout *Othello*, Iago maintains a hateful rhetoric toward Othello for the fact that he is a Moor, and towards women. He is the classic bigoted, misogynistic bad guy for the largely liberal audience likely attending Stratford, Ontario’s *Othello*. He maintains rigid categories between people, as when he exclaims to Desdemona’s father to warn him of her choice to wed a black man, “you’ll / have your daughter covered with a Barbary horse; / you’ll have your nephews neigh to you; you’ll have / coursers for cousins and gennets for Germans” (Act 1, Scene 1, lines 109-12). Iago likens Othello to a beast and insists that because of this interracial marriage, Brabantio will now have to claim relation to foreigners, who Iago considers much like animals. Statements such as this make it quite accurate to say, as the playbill did, that “Shakespeare casts Iago as not only the most jealous character in the play but also the mouthpiece of his society’s racism. Aptly, he swears by

Janus the two-faced, a deity of doors and borders – structures that separate people” (Sheppard). Williams clearly feels hatred has recently divided and endangered the modern world. It incites violence, causes a lack of compassion for people who require assistance from privileged others, and draws boundaries in various forms of media. It seems Iago as a character represents the root of such problems to the director of this production. Iago’s manipulations, his selfishness, his destructive ends rooted in jealousy and insecurity, bring the worlds of each of *Othello*’s characters to dire straits. It is intriguing to note, in this light, that some critics have commented, “Amongst any number of bold moves, perhaps the production’s boldest is to paint the person responsible for stirring up and instrumentalizing this hatred as not an exaggerated, extremist figure but as someone perfectly banal” (Fricker). Perhaps this choice indicates an awareness that evil is not perpetrated by uncommon minds. Violence does not stem from rare psychological poisons. The gross imagery present to represent Iago’s scheming, his jealousy, and his willingness to corrupt the viewpoints of others, is not something unique to this horrifying character. Audience members, recognizing the slumped shoulders of a nobody and the balding but trimly-kept head of brown hair, can see innumerable familiar figures in Iago’s modern representation. His evil is mundane making him more disturbing, and thus more intriguing to those who can easily recognize him. If he were presented as a man in medieval garb, with the airs and grooming befitting his time, the audience would less readily recognize his disquieting ordinariness. Yet, it is true that “Iago is a descendent, like Richard III before him, of the Vice figure of morality plays, whose mission is to lead the hero into sin” (Sheppard). The special imagery made possible by the projections highlights his “corrupt genius” in a way that unites the modern import of the 2019 Stratford interpretation (Sheppard). The projections emphasize the

evil of Iago, the cause of all the world's violence in the view of director Williams. The modern setting makes this all a relevant and recognizable conflict.

Though unexpected, the modern adaptation of *Othello* as it was presented at the Stratford Festival for 2019, successfully produced a strong impact on its viewers. Likely, the change from a medieval story to a modern one was chosen for this reason. It was both necessary and expedient to adapt the original text so that it became something potent for viewers of today. Due to this decision, it could offer compelling commentary on current world dynamics and social problems, including issues related to racial tensions, instances of separation-based violence, and problems facing modern women. Would the final murder of Desdemona have left the viewers so chilled, wide-eyed, and, frankly, traumatized, had Desdemona appeared on stage in a medieval chemise nightgown to lay down and die? No, we would have laughed as we did at Wolsey. Would our attention have been riveted for nearly three hours if modern visual technology had not been used to full effect? No, we would have slept.

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