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Dyed in Mummy: The Stratford Festival's Modern Orientalist Approach to Shakespeare's
Othello

Modernized stagings of Shakespeare's plays are relatively commonplace. When I entered the Stratford Shakespeare Festival's main stage on August 22nd, 2019, I was unsurprised to see a minimalist, modern stage for its production of Shakespeare's tragedy *Othello*. However, as the play began, I realized these aesthetic choices affected more than simply props and costumes. The modern setting of this production, paired with Shakespeare's text, alluded to larger conflicts between world powers and their relationships with each other. Retaining the original geographical setting of *Othello*, the Stratford production takes place in Italy and Cyprus, and the stage easily transitions between these locations. Aside from a few spartan props, the only object on stage beside the actors is a backdrop of sheer gray fabric, on which various settings are projected. The ancient streets of Italian cities are stylistically sketched during the scenes taking place in town. On Cyprus, the cloth depicts the stone walls of a military fortress. At other times, abstract shapes take over the fabric surface, evoking the various emotions of the characters on stage. The simplistic set design depicts a futuristic style. However, the rough metal and Brutalistic cement elements show the audience that this design does not reflect the shiny, silver future we might fantasize about. It actually evokes a dystopian near-future. In addition, the costumery for the production is quite familiar. When in Italy, the characters wear modern civilian clothing, monochromatic suits and dresses. When in Cyprus, which Shakespeare's Venetians and Turks vie for, the soldiers dress in olive fatigues and red berets, looking as though they had walked straight out of a modern military conflict. These choices conjure a familiar future, similar to our present, in which the world's geopolitical situation is slightly different. These choices

further tap into the political anxieties we have inherited over the past several decades, and create a production projecting a tragedy of Shakespearean proportions onto the modern political stage. This play employs Shakespearean tragedy to paint a picture of our possible future political environment, a destructive battle of familiar Western forces against an exotic Eastern intruder. As predicted by certain hopeful Western political scientists, this battle ends in ruin for the intruder, destroyed by his inner flaws, while the Westerners look on, apologetic yet unsympathetic. This essay will first examine, in Part One, political philosophies that help situate the confrontation of the global East and West which will provide a solid discussion for analysis of Shakespeare's play. Part Two turns to a close reading of Shakespeare's text and the Stratford 2019 production to document its implications in the context of our time and place.

Part One

The anxieties involving the confrontation of East and West are perfectly displayed in Samuel P. Huntington's essay *The Clash of Civilizations* (1993). Huntington, an award-winning political scientist, suggests the world is entering a new stage, where differing "cultural identities" rather than differences in political and economic systems will cause discord between civilizations (23). Huntington lists those at play in the modern world as the "Western, Confucian, Japanese, Islamic, Hindu, Slavic-Orthodox, Latin American and possibly African civilization[s]". But his paper only discusses Western, Confucian, and Islamic civilization (25). While he briefly discusses the Japanese and Hindu civilizations, he does only in the context of their alliances or distances with Western civilization. Furthermore, he refuses to accept any African civilization as truly "civilization," revealing his lack of desire to even envision civilizations that do not cleanly fit into the East/West binary of his theories.

Huntington also takes the Western identity of the reader for granted, and assumes his readers wish for Western civilization to continue to thrive, due to their own Western identity. Huntington notes the central question of conflict has changed from “which side are you on?” to “what are you?” (27), implying the answer to the former question can be made mathematically discrete and imply the same loyalty as an answer to the latter question. Huntington denies anyone the right to belong to many identities, or to choose what side one is on.

Huntington proceeds to paint a violent picture of the Muslim world, particularly the “fault lines” along which he says Muslim and African identities clash.¹ He argues that the “modernization of Africa and the spread of Christianity are likely to enhance the probability of violence along this fault line” (33). Huntington next directly pits Christianity and Islam against one another, ignoring thousands of coexistent years between the two religions, particularly in Africa. Huntington illustrates similar ideas in Islam-related conflicts in Eastern Europe, Central Asia, and the South-east Asia (33-34). However, earlier in the paper, he divides Europe in half, with Protestant and Catholics on one side, and Orthodox Christians and Muslims on the other (30). In a few paragraphs, he switches from highlighting historical differences and conflicts in these religions to conglomerating non-Western religions into one group. Huntington cannot decide whether Eastern religions are essentially the same or different, he simply wants to say Islam is violent.

In the next section, Huntington details a short history of recent events in the Muslim world at the time of his writing. He explains the political context and alliance formation of the Gulf War, then compares it to actions taken by the West in Bosnian conflicts, and in Israel (36).

¹ Huntington neglects to address the obvious fact that one can be both Muslim and African at the same time, and to the same degree.

He agrees these actions taken by the West are hypocritical, but does not hold the West accountable, as he diagnoses civilizations with “kin-country syndrome,” where countries protect their own against threats from other civilizations (36). In Huntington’s world, no state is responsible for anything. All countries, and therefore civilizations, act directly from the id, and should not be held accountable for their actions.

In the final portion of his essay, Huntington admits to the dominance the West has on the world’s stage, saying, “Decisions made at the U.N. Security Council or in the International Monetary Fund that reflect the interests of the West are presented to the world as reflecting the desires of the world community” (39). Huntington recognizes the blatant way the West uses its global power to serve its own ends at the cost of the well-being of members of other civilizations. Huntington tries to justify this point by arguing the unique importance of the values of Western civilization he claims have “little resonance” with other civilizations (40). Fascinatingly, his list of values includes “human rights, equality, liberty, the rule of law, democracy, free markets, the separation of church and state,” implying no other civilizations had any of these values before Western intervention (40). He then argues the introduction of these ideas are causing a rebellion of youth activity towards more traditional ways of being (41). Huntington does not make it clear whether it is the simple values or the colonialist imposition of these values causing rebellion, but he does make it clear that he does not see much hope for the non-Western evolution of democracy and human rights (41).

Huntington opens the penultimate section of his essay ranking civilizations in their potential ability to “join the West”, listing Eastern and Muslim civilization as those facing the most obstacles (45). He then says that because those civilizations have so many barriers to

joining the west, they must compete with the West. Huntington's ideas exist in a westocentric, with-or-against binary, and, therefore, he cannot imagine a situation in which countries and civilizations could interact with each other without involving the monolithic Western bloc. Huntington argues in this section that "Confucian" and "Islamic" civilizations are linked in the growth of their military might, and this linkage is directly in response to Western actions (46-48). Again, he ignores any reasons these civilizations would grow their military power besides in direct reaction to the West.

Huntington finishes with a call to action describing a future in which the West loses its global power to rising non-Western powers. Huntington could have concluded that this was the natural rise and fall of civilizations (24). However, he chooses instead to give advice to the leaders of western civilization to ensure the continued dominance of the West. Huntington does not provide any argument as to why the West should stay in power. There is simply an implied "because it's us, not them," woven throughout this last section. While one could argue he supports Western power because of its emphasis on the application of human rights, as one reads Huntington's advice to Western powers, this thesis becomes difficult to justify. Huntington makes an appeal to "Western civilization" to do the following tasks:

- to limit the expansion of the military strength of Confucian and Islamic states; to moderate the reduction of Western military capabilities and maintain military superiority in East and Southwest Asia; to exploit differences and conflicts among Confucian and Islamic states; to support in other civilizations groups sympathetic to Western values and interests; to strengthen international institutions that reflect

and legitimate Western interests and values and to promote the involvement of non-Western states in those institutions. (49)

One cannot argue that Huntington's ideas for Western powers will benefit all of humanity, when they include limiting other nations' powers, exploiting divides, and providing support to institutions that further purely Western ideas.

Huntington works on an East/West binary, but he is not the only author to write on such a concept. Edward Saïd also wrote on this binary, but from a radically different perspective. Saïd's groundbreaking work, *Orientalism* (1978), creates a useful basis to discuss the East. In his introduction, Saïd defines Orientalism as "a style of thought based upon ontological and epistemological distinction made between 'the Orient' and (most of the time) 'the Occident'" (Saïd, 2-3). Orientalism is the way of thinking which purposefully differentiates the Orient and Occident due to their essential natures.

Saïd examines the interdependence of the global East and West, what he refers to as the Orient and the Occident. He declares that, while they are physical geographical entities, these two places are also ideas with "tradition[s] of thought, imagery, and vocabulary that have given it reality" (5). These locations have dual realities; their existences as real locations, and what they epistemologically mean in the mind of the viewer, presumably from the opposing 'hemisphere' (5). Saïd explains that the East has been 'Orientalized' through its submission to Western power. It was not Oriental before it was made that way (6). Interestingly, Saïd seems to disenfranchise the East in this section, saying it "submitted to being--*made* Oriental" (6). He implies the East had no power over the way it could be viewed by the West.

Saïd also explains, “the structure of Orientalism is nothing more than a structure of lies or myths which, were the truth about them to be told, would simply blow away” (6). Orientalism does not tell any truths about the East, but rather reveals how the East is viewed and used by the West. Orientalism fails to present real knowledge about the global East, but rather offers real knowledge about how the global West thinks about the global East. Orientalism includes “the idea of European identity as a superior one in comparison with all the non-European peoples and cultures...reiterating European superiority over Oriental backwardness” (7). Orientalism always puts Europe and the West on the top of the hierarchy of culture, even while examining and exploiting non-European culture.

In the third part of his introduction, Saïd explains Orientalism’s use by the West:

Orientalism is

a whole series of ‘interests’ which, by such means as scholarly discovery, philological reconstruction, psychological analysis, landscape and sociological description, it not only creates, but also maintains...a certain *will* or *intention* to understand, in some cases control, manipulate, even to incorporate, what is manifestly different (12).

According to Saïd, orientalism serves as a tool used by the West, which attempts to impose epistemological control on the East. Orientalism is not about knowing or understanding the East, but rather is about imposing control over the East through false understanding of its workings.

Saïd’s idea can be applied to English Renaissance drama, and especially to Shakespeare’s plays through Daniel Vitkus’ works. In Vitkus’ book, *Turning Turk: English Theater and the Multicultural Mediterranean* (2003), he refines Saïd’s thesis, providing the reader with historical

context for Shakespeare's works and insight into how his original audience viewed the East, the West, and the separation of the two. In his Introduction, Vitkus discusses the imposed binary of "self" and "other" often employed when discussing Western culture. He cites contemporary authors, such as Timothy Powell and Homi Bhabha, who attempt to create a more complex system to describe cultural identity, and applies it to the early modern identities of the residents of England and the Mediterranean. Vitkus explains that, contrary to the common understanding of the early modern world, the various cultures of England and the Mediterranean were not simply existing next to each other, but interacting as coexisting, fluid societies. He also explains that at this time England was not in the imperial position modern Westerners often assume it filled. Before 1600, England was struggling to establish itself as a world power to the same degree that nations all over the world were struggling to accomplish (3). Its residents had not yet gained confidence in the superiority of their nation, and their writings reflect that hesitation. Further, today's postcolonial identity politics cannot be applied to these writers or their audiences, according to Vitkus, as they have not yet been produced as a part of the colonization and post-colonial issues we discuss today (3). Of course, England had participated in colonizing actions before 1600, in Ireland and the New World. But these ventures always had mixed results, and were directly competing with their neighbors in Europe (3-5). The British empire of the Victorian Age still had yet to be established, and thus the English people were unsure of their place in the world. While they fantasized about an imperial future, and made many colonial attempts, they did not have confidence that England, and later Britain, would have a grip on the global stage (3-6).

Vitkus then describes how the interactions between England and Mediterranean powers like the Ottoman empire, differ in important ways from our modern understanding of colonial and imperial interaction. He says:

the Mediterranean world (including its Islamic and Ottoman components) was comprehended through residual history and contemporary cross-cultural encounter, not in terms of East-versus-West or colonizer-versus-colonized, but as a complex and unstable meeting ground for divergent cultural and religious groups. (8)

At this point in time, England had not yet “othered” the East through colonialism, and had not yet engaged in Orientalism, because it interacted with regional powers in the East as if they were peer nations, which they were. There was equivalent cross-cultural exchange between the East and the West; However, as England became self-aware of the possibility of its global dominance, such a culture of acceptance in England changed. As the English empire established itself, and contact with other cultures grew, racial and cultural identities became more rigid, and xenophobia in England increased (8-9). Vitkus explains, “the fear of becoming like ‘the Other’ — of ‘turning Turk,’ or being Judaized or taking on an Italianate identity, and the like— that generated the need for a rigidly defined discourse of racial alterity” (9). Race and culture swiftly became more important in English people’s minds. Exploration, travel, and colonialism became a way to transmit culture.

Part Two

Turning to Shakespeare’s works, the culture concepts addressed *The Clash of Civilizations?*, *Orientalism*, and *Turning Turk* are directly at issue in the Stratford 2019

production of *Othello*. They are perhaps most visible in Othello's monologues and soliloquies. In these speeches, Othello, the African outsider, explains himself to an audience he appears to assume to be Western, whether as fellow characters or within the audience. One of his first major monologues appears in 1.3.

Before this scene, Othello and Desdemona eloped, against her father, Brabantio's, wishes. Iago, one of Othello's subordinates, is jealous of Cassio, who Othello promoted. In a fit of jealous rage, Iago reveals Othello and Desdemona's marriage to Brabantio. Although Othello is a well-respected member of the community and a military general, racism still plays a key role in the play. Brabantio is horrified when Iago taunts him with visualizations of Othello's interracial relationship with his daughter, Desdemona. Iago says, "Even now, very, now, an old black ram is tupping your white ewe" (1.3. 87-88). Enraged and grief-stricken at this scandalous marriage, Brabantio proceeds to accuse Othello of witchcraft in front of the Senate, saying he must have put a curse on Desdemona to make her claim to love him. Othello explains to Brabantio and his peers that he did not curse Desdemona, but wooed her honestly. He tells them that Brabantio's requests for Othello to share his life as a soldier and traveler led him to recount those adventures in dramatic detail. Desdemona would listen in on these conversations, and would later ask Othello to tell her more. Othello's stories invoked great emotion from her, leading the two to fall in love. Othello explains, "This only is the witchcraft I have used" (1.3. 195). This story, plus Desdemona's testimony, is enough to convince the Italian Senate of their love.

On the Stratford Festival stage, the Senate was composed of sketches of its walls and windows projected onto the gray cloth background. Infantry guards the entrances, wearing green

camouflage uniforms, topped with red berets. The senators sport dark black and navy suits. Only two spots of brightness are seen on stage: Othello in a light gray suit, and Desdemona in a light blue dress. The suits and dresses are all cut in a nondescript modern style. The fast-paced line readings within this scene — particularly by Michelle Giroux, as the Duchess of Venice; David Collins, as a Senator; and Michael Blake as Othello — make the scene race by swiftly. The actors deliver their lines urgently and pace impatiently around the stage. Actors enter and exit swiftly, and their various servants and handmaids, appearing as infantry soldiers, move around them, creating a hurried flow of traffic. This dynamism fits, as in the same scene they discuss urgent matters relating to the war. But it is also effective at brushing off Brabantio's anxieties about Desdemona's marriage. The deliberately hasty execution of this scene turns the audience's attention off of Brabantio's fear of witchcraft and miscegenation, and on to the world summoned by Othello's speech.

Othello describes a world full of deserts and caves populated by slaves and cannibals, which serves a complex purpose in the plot. Despite hearing about these locations and events, the audience does not actually get to learn about them. They are only mentioned in relation to Othello's travels. This speech does not help us learn more about Othello's background either, as it does not give us any new information. Although we can learn from his status in the military and his identity as a foreigner that he has had many exciting travels, his speech does not go into detail about them, or help us understand his personal struggles. The sole purpose of this monologue is to show the audience a snapshot of the tales he told Desdemona, tales which cause her to fall in love with him. Robert B. Heilman, in his book *Magic in the Web*, observes: "Experience has been turned to adventure, glamor, romance; the narrator is not the lessoned

alumnus of suffering whose courage has been tempered into valor for the subtler and more nagging challenges of peace” (140). Othello uses his stories to exoticize himself, fitting Marta E. Savigliano’s definition of exotization: “Exoticism is a practice of representation through which identities are frivolously allocated. It is also a will to power over the unknown, an act of indiscriminately combining fragments, crumbs of knowledge and fantasy in disrespectful, sweeping gestures justified by harmless brutality” (189). To the audience, Othello gives none of his stories’ characters substantial identities, not even himself. As Savigliano describes, Othello’s monologue is a patchwork of phrases that act as shorthand for fantastical adventure, without actually deepening the audience’s understanding of the setting.

This distinction between “the Orient” and “the Occident” is clear in Othello’s monologue in 1.3. Here Othello stands before the Venetian Senate, a governmental system dating back 1,000 years before the time of Shakespeare’s writings, perched on the edge of Christendom (Vitkus 82). In this scene, Othello has the potential to act as a bridge between the West (Europe), and the East (North Africa, the Middle East, and Asia). This potential link could serve to humanize the East in the eyes of both the Senators and the audience, both of which are presumably Western. However, this scene instead serves to highlight the differences of Othello’s background. This is probably because Othello is a character written by an Elizabethan Englishman, with no ostensible desire to relate to foreigners like Othello. Although Shakespeare certainly consulted texts in order to inform his writing on North Africa and Asia, these texts come from travellers, like Othello, trying to excite their audiences with fanciful tales (Honigman 4-5). In fact, Othello’s exotic nature probably served to sell tickets for Shakespeare. His audience, in all likelihood, would not have enjoyed a play about racial and cultural reconciliation. This was a

time when Islam and Christianity were at odds, battling for control of the Mediterranean, and there was a large public anxiety about conversion to Islam and the adoption of non-European lifestyles (Vitkus, 80-84). Reconciliation would have been impossible on Shakespeare's stage.

However, on the 2019 Stratford stage, in this modern version of the play, it is certainly possible for the director, actors, and crew for this production to reimagine some lines or entire scenes, like 1.3, to stage *Othello* as less of an agent of Orientalism. However, this year, the Stratford production's director, Nigel Shawn Williams, chose not to do so ("Othello"). The scene, and Othello's speech, remained identical to Shakespeare's version. Stratford did not take the opportunity to reimagine this work so that Othello could act as a bridge to anything. In Shakespeare's plays, as in his cultural context, many marriages act as links and alliances between families. With some simple tweaks, the Stratford production could have pursued such a course by having Othello and Desdemona's marriage serve as a link between East and West. Yet Williams' chose to follow Shakespeare's text, in which Othello furthers the distinctions between the places he has been and the place he is now. In doing so, he distances himself from his Italian peers. This monologue emphasizes the difference in background, and by extension, culture, between Othello and the rest of the characters in the play.

These choices echo Huntington's fears of cultural clashes (Huntington 23). This 2019 Stratford production of *Othello* reflects this idea, particularly in Othello's monologue in 1.3. The conflict of the scene centers around Brabantio's accusation that Othello used witchcraft with Desdemona. Although this fear seems archaic and unreasonable to the modern viewer, it acts as a good stand in for the anxieties of many Westerners watching other civilizations rise. Brabantio is afraid that Othello, an outsider, is using mysterious and unholy methods to succeed in life, and

therefore must be punished by the Western world. One can compare this to a quote from *Clash of Civilizations?*:

Increasingly one hears references to trends toward a turning inward and "Asianization" in Japan, the end of the Nehru legacy and the "Hinduization" of India, the failure of Western ideas of socialism and nationalism and hence "re-Islamization" of the Middle East, and now a debate over Westernization versus Russianization in Boris Yeltsin's country. A West at the peak of its power confronts non Wests that increasingly have the desire, the will and the resources to shape the world in non-Western ways. (26)

Huntington sees non-Western countries growing in non-Western ways, while Brabantio sees a non-Western man acting in non-Western ways, and both assume the outsiders mean to have an explicitly non-Western effect on the world. Both Brabantio and Huntington see people like Othello using their own means to gain what they desire: in one case, a wife; in another, power on the world's stage. Both Brabantio and Huntington have power over the non-Westerner, Brabantio as a Senator, and Huntington as a political scientist of note in a Western civilization, which, as he admits, has great control over world policy (39). Huntington and Brabantio both have power over the outsiders within their worlds, yet still fear and demonize their differences.

As the play continues, Williams' direction and Shakespeare's writing continue to employ verbal and visual references to orientalism and exoticism in order to emphasize the East/West divide that is evident in this production of *Othello*. In 3.4, as Desdemona pleads to Othello on Cassio's behalf, Othello asks her about the handkerchief he once gave to her as a token of his affection, which he does not know has been stolen from her. Although this discussion ends

abruptly when Othello storms out of the room, he does offer several multi-line sections of dialogue, explaining the background of the handkerchief. Othello first claims the handkerchief came from a 200 year old “Egyptian”² with mystical powers, who gave it to Othello’s mother, to help her win the heart of his father. Othello says his mother gave it to him when she died, telling him to give it to his future wife. When Desdemona expresses her doubts, he explains “The worms were hallowed that did breed the silk; / And it was dyed in mummy which the skillful / Conserved of maidens’ hearts” (3.4. 73-75). The cloth gains its magical powers in the story because of its fabric. The cloth also has magic orientalist powers because of its identity as a foreign object, made of materials which are decidedly “oriental,” such as silk and mummy. Later in the play, however, 5.2, Othello contradicts himself, insisting the handkerchief was “an antique token / My father gave my mother”. While this assertion could just be a mistake in Shakespeare’s editions, this contradiction of the handkerchief’s origins also speaks to the unimportance of the handkerchief’s actual origins. The handkerchief could serve as a courting gift from his father to his mother, but that is unimportant if it can be made oriental, and charged thereby with additional power.

In Stratford, this scene was painfully intimate. Othello and Desdemona circle the stage, the only prop a single wood and metal bench. Desdemona’s ladies-in-waiting, dressed on the Stratford stage as her uniformed guards, stand at attention at the door, but appear to the audience more as scenery than characters. Amelia Sargisson plays a youthful, innocent Desdemona, completely at a loss as to where the beloved handkerchief has gone, while Blake’s Othello storms around the stage, both yelling and pleading with Desdemona to reveal the location of the

² What nationality Shakespeare meant with that term is uncertain (Neill 316n55).

handkerchief. This scene serves as an important point in the plot, when all the pieces come together in Othello's mind, and he falls into the trap Iago has made for him.

The handkerchief acts as an important device of the plot, as well as an important device of Orientalism. In his first story of its provenance, the handkerchief was made by a non-Western woman, and has been given to Othello's presumably non-Western mother with sufficient power to woo his non-Western father. Thus, it functions as an overdetermined Oriental object. Othello gives this heirloom to Desdemona, who, in many ways, symbolizes the West. Just as in his speech in 1.3, and his implied actions before the beginning of the play, Othello uses his non-Western background to win over Desdemona's heart. He specifically gives the handkerchief to Desdemona for her to exoticize it. Emilia, Iago's wife, steals it from Desdemona in the scene before Othello tells the audience of its importance. In that scene, Desdemona, concerned with Othello's health after he reports a headache, tries to mop his brow with the handkerchief, but it is knocked away. As a symbol of the West, she tries to use the exotimized non-Western material to care for Othello, but unknowingly, gives this exoticism to forces seeking to bring down the power of the non-Westerner. Iago sees the handkerchief not as a foreign object nor as a romantic piece of exoticism. He only sees it as a tool to exploit Othello's weaknesses. The handkerchief acts as an Orientalist device, dividing Othello from his peers and cementing his anxieties about trusting Westerners.

In Act 5, Othello succumbs fully to Iago's lies, and finally murders Desdemona. His crime is discovered by Emilia, and Othello's superiors arrest both him and Iago. Lodovico, another Senator, declares that their crimes will be brought before the Venetian Senate. But before they leave, Othello bids them to give him a chance to speak. He reminds the delegates from

Venice of the deeds he has done for the state, and tells them how he wishes to be remembered. He tells them to speak of him fairly, “Of one that loved not wisely, but too well; Of one not easily jealous, but, being wrought, Perplexed in the extreme” (5.2 344-46). He then begins to compare himself to a series of others. His first comparison varies according to different versions of the play. In the 1622 Quarto, Othello compares himself to a “base Indian”³. In the First Folio (1623) however, the script reads “base Judean”, which offers an allusion to the story of Christ, betrayed by Judas Iscariot, the only one of Christ’s disciples who was a Judean (Vitkus, 350n5). In this version of the script, Othello compares his betrayal of Desdemona to Judas’ betrayal of Christ. Both comparisons center upon strong themes of orientalism and exotism. Whether referring to India, or the Indies, (Shakespeare’s use of “Indian” could refer to either) or to the story of Christ’s betrayal, both options take place outside of Europe. As Othello’s sentence continues, he declares that he “threw a pearl away,” comparing Desdemona, and perhaps Christ, to a beautiful gemstone that is found in warm, oceanside climates, like those of the global East. In this speech, instead of using the East to exotize his identity as an adventuring soldier, and as a black man, as he did in 1.3, Othello uses the East to reduce Desdemona’s identity to something simply pure, beautiful, and white. He also declares that this pearl is “Richer than all his tribe,” making it clear that one beautiful white object is worth more than an entire group of non-Europeans.

Othello’s use of Orientalist imagery continues as he compares tears falling from his eyes to “Arabian trees” dropping “their medicinale gum” (5.2 411-12). Here, Othello objectifies himself. He is not a man, he is a tree, part of the scenery of an other-worldly adventure. Even his

³ Which, to Shakespeare’s audience, implied barbaric morals

tears are not allowed to be his own, they are “medicinal”, something to be used by mankind for healing.

As Othello prepares to commit suicide, he simultaneously believes he is killing himself to atone for his sins, and that he is martyring himself so his story can be told. In his final sentence, once again, he bids his audience to “Set you down this,” and he tells them “in Aleppo once, / Where a malignant and a turbaned Turk / Beat a Venetian and traduced the state, / I took him by th’ throat the circumcisèd dog / And smote him, thus” (5.2 352-356). This final sentence is filled with Orientalist imagery. Here, Othello tells a story from the days of the adventure he described in 1.3, where he acts as a noble hero in a foreign land. This story takes place in Aleppo, which at the time of Shakespeare’s writing, was under Turkish control (Vitkus 360n8). However, this location still resonates as an important non-Western location with the modern viewer, as Aleppo suffered significant destruction as a part of the Syrian Civil War. Aleppo, controlled by non-Western forces, sitting on, as Huntington would put it, a civilizational “fault line,” is the perfect setting for Othello’s tale. The villain of this one sentence story is interestingly described, as “a malignant and a turbaned Turk,” (5.2 414). Othello refers to this character’s foreign clothing, a turban, closely associated with Islam and other Eastern religions, weighing equally in the sentence with his malevolent nature. The two details about the man are equally important to Othello. When he reveals the Turk also betrayed the state, he emphasizes the untrustworthiness of this man, and by association the Turkish people in general, acting as the enemies of the Venetians. Using further derogatory terms, Othello describes how he killed the man for betraying the state. He demonstrates this by killing himself. Through the use of this

Orientalist speech and final story, Othello has assigned himself the identity of a betraying outsider.

In his chapter on Othello in *Turning Turk*, Vitkus explains the anxieties that fed into the writing of this final monologue. Vitkus shows that the English Protestants often conflated their political enemies with their spiritual enemies. Not only was England competing with Catholic empires on the continent and Muslim empires in the Middle East, but it was also competing for the souls of its denizens (77). Throughout the play, Othello identifies as a Christian, but, in his final moments, as he realizes how he has been tricked and taken advantage of, he identifies himself with a Muslim. In the battle for souls, Othello's has been lost to the other side.

Vitkus observes of the power of the Ottoman empire at the time of Shakespeare's writing. The Ottoman empire continued to expand into Europe, even while European powers were expanding elsewhere (78). The Protestant English had good reason to fear conversion, as many exploring English were being captured and put in to slavery by the Ottomans (79). As the Ottoman empire expanded further and further into Europe, the English interacted with their culture more, and the popular media of early modern England latched onto the most exciting, scary, and fantastical ideas brought home (79). The everyday Englishman suddenly became aware of a world of pirates and foreign religions, which crept closer and closer every day. *Othello* harnessed this realization and the anxieties that came with it.

At the time of its writing *Othello* was written to satisfy a public interest in the conflicts of the Mediterranean and the interactions between Christian and Muslim societies. In 2019, the same language and themes in *Othello* satisfy our interest in the clash of civilizations. However, it is obvious that a play written hundreds of years ago, in a time of fear caused by the encroaching

East, does not offer an unbiased or politically correct approach on the subject. Paired with our modern anxieties, this play becomes Orientalist, and effectively taps into modern xenophobic and westocentric ideas, as seen in *The Clash of Civilizations?*.

This year's Stratford season's theme was "Breaking Boundaries". In a season labelled such, it is very interesting that the festival would put on a play with such isolationist themes. These themes are further emphasized by the modern setting and stylistic choices of the director. Furthermore, there is an increasing movement to stop productions of certain problematic Shakespeare plays. Ayanna Thompson, a professor of English specializing in Shakespeare and Race at Arizona State University, recently commented on the subject, citing *Othello*, *The Merchant of Venice*, and *The Taming of the Shrew*, as "toxic plays, that resist rehabilitation and appropriation" (qtd. in *Codeswitch* 181). She says "For each of them there is a desire to recuperate them and make them progressive texts... But ultimately those three end up kind of circling us back to a really regressive and uncomfortable standpoint" (qtd in. *Codeswitch* 181).

The 2019 Stratford Festival production of *Othello* perfectly illustrates Thompson's point. It is commonly recognized by the audience, actors, and producers that the original text and setting of *Othello* implies racist and xenophobic ideas. In trying to combat such attitudes, this production of *Othello* is set in modern times, but no change has been made to the text or plot of the play. The result of these changes are effective in hiding the racism and fear present in Shakespeare's time, but takes advantage of the anxieties implanted in modern Western viewers. While a given audience member of the Stratford productions may not be racist, xenophobic, or islamophobic, the individual can still be familiar with those ideas, and have seen them be present in society. In watching this production, in modern dress, in a modern setting, these ideas are

illustrated in vivid, powerful, and relatable ways, which linger in the viewers mind long after they leave the theater. Instead of breaking boundaries, this production emphasizes boundaries. This production uses the racism of Shakespeare's time, in concert with the modern xenophobia and islamophobia found in *The Clash of Civilizations?*, to propagate orientalist themes and westocentric values.

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